



Migration Profile

PANAMA

A. Executive Summary

Despite being small in area and population, Panama is a country with considerable migration issues, although data on migration is scanty compared to other countries in the region. Two leading factors contributing to the country's migration patterns are its geographical position as a bridge between the three Americas, and its thriving economy based on finance, real estate and tourism. In addition, the Panama Canal, a unique feature with worldwide recognition, has given the country economic sustainability in recent years thanks to the growing international maritime traffic.

Panama's geographical position makes it both a place of transit and a source of migration. Its economic growth attracts immigrants. Its proximity to countries in the northern triangle (Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador) has led to a progressive increase in immigration, especially transit immigration of highly vulnerable people; human trafficking is also a concern, which the Panamanian government has yet to manage efficiently.

On the other hand, Panama is a country of great contrasts: while its capital is recognized as the "New York of Latin America", 82% of its population is under the poverty line.

Panama is demographically diverse, culturally rich, economically active, and geographically strategic. Nevertheless, immigration is seen as essential for development due to the increasingly aging population: in 2000 there were 25.3 older adults for every 100 young people, in 2010 it was 33.4, and in 2050 it is estimated that the country will have 129.3 older adults for every 100 young people. This will be a slow process, given that immigration only represents 4.5% of Panama's population, a lower rate than countries like Argentina. In addition, emigration from Panama is sizable; it is especially significant that almost 10% of its higher education graduates leave the country.

Without a doubt, the country's immigration policy in the coming years will have a very significant impact - along with other factors - on its future.

B. Country Profile

I. Basic Information

Panama is a country in Central America, territorially small - 75,420 km² / 29,120 mi² - compared to other Latin American countries. It borders the Caribbean Sea to the North, the Pacific Ocean to the South, Colombia to the East, and Costa Rica to the West.

It has a population of approximately 4,200,000 inhabitants. It has considerable ethnic diversity, since 67% of the population are mixed-race (mostly either Amerindian and white

or black and white), while 14% are black, 10% white, 6% indigenous, and 3% of other origins. Catholicism is the dominant religion, represented by 85% of the population, while 10% are Evangelical Christians, and 5% belong to other religions such as Judaism, Buddhism, etc.

The GDP is \$66,801 million in 2019, being one of the most stable economies of the region. The most important activities are financial, tourist, and logistic services, which constitute 75% of the GDP. A relevant fact is that the country has been rated Investment Grade by ratings institutions Standard and Poors, Moody's, and Fitch Ratings.

One cannot speak of Panama's economy without mentioning its Canal. At the close of fiscal year 2019, 450 million tons of cargo had circulated through it, generating a profit of \$3,365 million for the country.

Another important observation is the country's economic contradictions. Although the economy has been growing at 7 points of GDP per year, fully 82% of the population is in poverty, while extreme poverty touches 6 out of 10 Panamanians.

II. International and Internal Migrants

Due to its geographical position, Panama has historically been a transit country, being the link between South and North America. On the other hand, it has also become a destination country owing to the economic growth from the Canal, as well as the real estate boom and other economic developments. In 2019 - according to United Nations data - there were 185,072 immigrants into the country (4.5% of the population), 51% of whom were men and 49% women. It is interesting to note that in 1990 there were just 62,744 immigrants, so the increase over the last thirty years is significant. Immigrants come mainly from Colombia (44,952); China (19,876); the United States (14,949); Nicaragua (13,752); Venezuela (13,474); Dominican Republic (8,606); Costa Rica (8,260); Mexico (5,141); India (4,770); Peru (4,568); Spain (3,941); and El Salvador (3,674).

Unlike many other Central American countries, Panama has a positive migration rate; for example, in 2017, immigrants outnumbered emigrants by 31,448 people.

According to WorldData.info, in 2017 Panama was one of the top 50 countries in the world receiving refugees. In recent times, most of the people seeking refugee status in Panama were from Colombia (for example, in 2015, 890 of the 1,800 asylum requests in Panama were from Colombia). However, in 2017, Venezuela became the main source as 4,430 of the 5,557 refugee asylum requests in Panama were from Venezuela, 10 times more than from Colombia (442 Colombia, 263 Nicaragua, 356 El Salvador, 65 other).

A significant amount in remittances leaves Panama--\$531 million in 2018, according to the World Bank, equal to a third of what the Canal generated that year.

III. Emigration and Skilled Migration

Emigrants from Panama generally leave the region, going mostly to the United States. According to a 2006 ECLAC report, in the year 2000 there were 145,975 Panamanians in the United States, while in Canada there were 2,555 and in Spain 2,252.

More recently, 161,107 Panamanians emigrated in 2019, almost 4% of its population; 51.45% of them were women. The United States receives 77.79% of the emigrants, followed by Costa Rica with 7.20% and Spain with 2.73%.

The highly skilled emigration rate is 9.8%. That is, almost 10% of the people with higher education in the country emigrate. Highly qualified people make up 38.1% of all emigrants.

IV. Forced Migration (IDPs, asylum seekers and refugees)

With regard to refugees, by the end of 2019 the country had 17,000 refugees and asylum seekers, mostly from Colombia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and El Salvador. It should be noted that some 3,000 of these are children and adolescents. Panama hosts a large number of those who escape from the northern triangle, that is, from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, who leave their countries due to the violence of armed militias and criminal gangs. A reason for numerous children to flee to Panama may be recruitment of children by many of these gangs, for example, Mara Salvatrucha and M-18. In 2017, the number of asylum seekers in Panama exceeded 2,500, an increase of 60% over the previous year.

Refugee processing is done through the ONPAR (National Office for the Attention of Refugees), while the final decision depends on the CONARE (National Commission for the Protection of Refugees). Despite the existence of legal tools and the ratification of international treaties, irregular situations have occurred in the country. For example, in mid-2020, tension peaked in a refugee camp in Southern Panama that housed 1,500 irregular migrants from Haiti, Cuba, Bangladesh, and Cameroon. These people were in a desperately precarious situation for half a year, affecting the local population of La Peñita itself, a village of only 200 indigenous inhabitants. On the positive side, Panama has participated in the process of creating the Regional Integral Framework for Protection and Solutions (MIRPS) since 2017. This seven-country process contributes to the Comprehensive Response Framework for Refugees (CRRF).

The geographical and demographic characteristics of Panama are such that it does not have a noticeable number Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

V. Victims of human trafficking

According to the U.S. State Department's "2019 Trafficking in Persons Report: Panama", the majority of trafficking victims in Panama are foreign adults exploited in sex trafficking (mostly women) from South and Central America, although Panamanians are also exploited. The report also points out that traffickers exploit indigenous women in forced labour in rural and impoverished border areas of the country, as well as men from Central and South America, China, and Vietnam in forced labour in construction, agriculture, mining, restaurants, street vending, etc. A positive observation is that Panama has increased investigations into human trafficking as well as convictions, and has made sustained efforts to protect potential victims of trafficking. On the negative side, the report places the country in "tier 2", that is, the government does not fully comply with the minimum standards to eliminate trafficking.

As is the case in much of the region, the cases detected are few. For example, in 2019, 61 cases of human trafficking were identified in the country, of which 41 were women. These are very low numbers for a country of origin, transit, and destination of human trafficking.

VI. National Legal Framework

Refugee: Panama ratified the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. Executive Decree No.23 of February 10, 1998 establishes the process for the assignment of refugee status. Executive Decree 23 of 10 October 1998 on refuge and temporary protection for humanitarian reasons (Chapter XVI on Changes in Immigration Status and Naturalization of Refugees, Articles 65 and 66) provides for the right to local integration and naturalization of refugees.

Migrants: Legal Decree No.16 of June 30, 1960, was the first immigration law in Panama. The law provided legal security to immigrants, in addition to establishing concepts and categories. It also created the Department of Immigration and Naturalization, which is part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Human Trafficking: Panama's Law 79 of 2011 on Human Trafficking and Related Activities provides a regulatory framework for preventing human trafficking and for assistance to victims.

VII. Main Actors

The State

The National Immigration Service has the primary responsibility; its mission is to "Control the migration of nationals and foreigners and the stay of the latter in the national territory". The National Office for the Care of Refugees (ONPAR), which carries out the procedures for applying for refugee status, works jointly with the National Commission for the Protection of Refugees (CONARE) with which the final decision rests on whether or not to assign refugee status.

International Organizations

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are present in the country and operate with their own teams. Other organizations with more limited roles include UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) and its chapters; their focus is on migrant children. This organization prepared a report during 2020 that shows how the COVID-19 pandemic stranded hundreds of transiting migrant children in the country due to the closing of borders. Another international organization, UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), fights organized crime, especially human trafficking, at the local, regional and global level. Its regional office for Central America and the Caribbean is in Panama.

Catholic Church

In 2010, the Panamanian Episcopal Conference (CEP) created the Council of Social Ministry. Among the dimensions of the Church's charity with which it deals are the Pastoral of Human Mobility and the Apostleship of the Sea.

Another past and continuing important actor is Caritas Panama. Linked to the CEP, it was established in 1970. Many of the more than 10,000 vulnerable people it reaches each year are migrants.

The Jesuit Network with Migrants (RJM) and the Jesuit Service for Migrants of Panama stand out among the many Church-connected organizations and congregations present in Panama.

Other organisations

There are numerous Non-Governmental Organizations that work with migrants and refugees in Panama. For example:

- HIAS Panama has directly helped more than 6,000 families of refugees and 12,000 asylum seekers since 2010;
- the Panamanian Red Cross provides psychological and social care, humanitarian assistance;
- among the services of RET International are its technical assistance for separated and unaccompanied children and adolescents in the refugee process;
- the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) provides legal advice to asylum seekers.

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