

Annual Monitoring Report

Assisted Voluntary Return Programs

Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM)—
Funded Programs in Mexico and North of Central America Countries



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This project is funded by the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

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Cover photo: On June 2021, IOM supported a charter flight for 44 Guatemalan beneficiaries at Abraham Gonzalez International Airport in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. © IOM 2021/Miguel TEJADA

Required citation: International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2021. *Annual Monitoring Report: Assisted Voluntary Return Programs* (March 2020–April 2021). IOM, Geneva.

ISBN 978-92-9268-087-9 (PDF)

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Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM)–
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March 2020–April 2021



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editorial team thanks IOM staff who interviewed the respondents, namely Alejandra Serrato Valenzuela, José Deodato Bobadilla Benítez, Liliam Monserrat Martínez, Miriam Susana González Castañeda, Maria Dolores Herrera Martínez and Jonhatan Reyes Bautista. Appreciation also goes to those who reviewed and provided valuable comments to improve the document namely Aida Zecevic, Alexandra Amaya Ramos, Ana Catalina Picado, Denisse Velázquez, Ivonne del Carmen Aguirre, Jorge Peraza, Luca Dall'Oglio, Rosilyne Borland, Salvador Gutierrez, Martin Schmit and Valerie Hagger. Appreciation also goes to Simon Drought and Melissa Borlaza, who did extensive language editing, as well as Paola Castaneda and Ramir Recinto for the layout and graphic design.

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HIGHLIGHTS

This annual monitoring report of the IOM Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) Programs in Mexico and North of Central America countries presents key migration trends and insights regarding the migration cycle experiences of beneficiaries in countries of origin and destination in the five program countries. Key highlights include the following:

1

Almost 4 in 10 of surveyed beneficiaries had plans to remigrate abroad. This finding poses questions and challenges. There is a need for an in-depth study of the drivers to remigrate and how these compare or contrast with the original motivations to leave countries of origin. Despite beneficiaries making informed decisions to return, often due to vulnerable situations and insufficient means to return on their own, the answers of a significant proportion of the surveyed migrants indicated their return was potentially only temporary, with many planning to remigrate. One main challenge is AVR programs do not currently include a reintegration component that could help ensure beneficiaries fully assimilate back into their communities of origin. Only 3 of all respondents (out of a total of 209) received assistance from other entities upon return, limiting the sustainability of beneficiaries' reintegration.

2

Of those who responded, 64 per cent are unemployed. Employment for returnees is scarce and when available, the income tends to be insufficient to cover basic living needs. Respondents were contacted during the first months of their return amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which has devastated regional economies and sparked high unemployment rates. Returnees were mainly employed in the agriculture and informal sectors, with jobs often temporary, low-waged and without any social security benefits. In particular, two hurricanes (Eta and Iota) that hit the region during the reporting period also worsened the situation of returnees working in the agricultural sector. The lack of employment opportunities also likely explains why 64 per cent of the respondents had financial concerns.

3

The majority of respondents were men, but female participation was significant. While a minority voice, the surveys provide an important platform to listen further, reflect and respond to women and girls' reintegration needs. The information shared offers a unique opportunity to analyze returnees' experiences from a gender perspective. AVR monitoring reports will examine ways to further capture women and girls' voices and analyze the findings.

4

Mental and physical health are concerns for the respondents. It is noteworthy that 30 per cent of respondents considered themselves to be in a poor state of mental health. The provision of reintegration assistance could help address these health concerns.

1. INTRODUCTION

This first annual monitoring report of the IOM Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) Programs in Mexico and North of Central America countries, informed by five earlier summary reports, has two primary objectives. The first goal is to present mobility flow trends of AVR program beneficiaries to and from El Salvador, Guatemala–Belize, Honduras and Mexico since March 2020, with direct linkages to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Overall, AVR programs in Guatemala and Mexico have assisted more than 4,700 migrants since November 2018.² Since the pandemic emerged in March 2020, AVR programs have seen a sharp decrease in the number of people seeking support to return to their countries of origin. However, it is important to note that the numbers have started to increase since March 2021.

The second objective is to present the findings of monitoring surveys of AVR beneficiaries from March 2020 to April 2021. The purpose of this monitoring exercise is to capture the experiences of participants of IOM AVR programs in El Salvador, Guatemala–Belize, Honduras and Mexico.³ As such, this exercise and the resulting insights are new and important features of the AVR programs in Mexico and the four North of Central America countries and informed monitoring reports in [June 2020](#), [August 2020](#), [September 2020](#), [November 2020](#) and [March 2021](#). AVR Mexico started its monitoring exercise in October 2020.

¹ The program is jointly implemented in Guatemala and Belize.

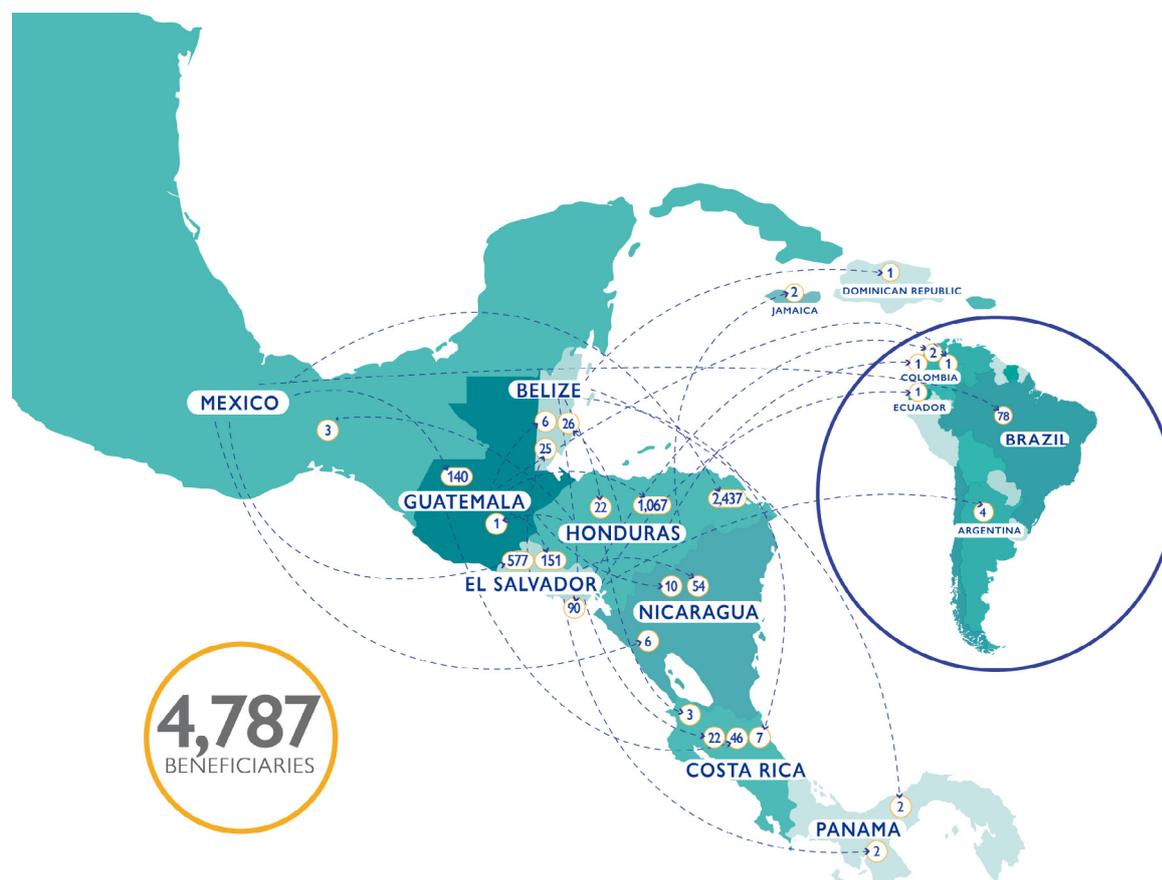
² The AVR program in Belize started in October 2019. AVR programs in El Salvador and Honduras commenced from March 2020.

³ These AVR programs support the orderly and humane return of migrants by providing administrative, logistical and financial support to individuals who are unable or unwilling to remain in host or transit countries and wish to return voluntarily to their countries of origin.

2. MOBILITY TRENDS

Since October 2018, IOM has assisted 4,787 migrants through the AVR programs in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico as shown in Figure 2.⁴ The AVR Mexico program supported 3,238 migrants (68% of total beneficiaries) from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil and Nicaragua. The AVR Guatemala program assisted 1,281 migrants (27% of total beneficiaries).

Figure 1. Map of assisted voluntary return program beneficiaries

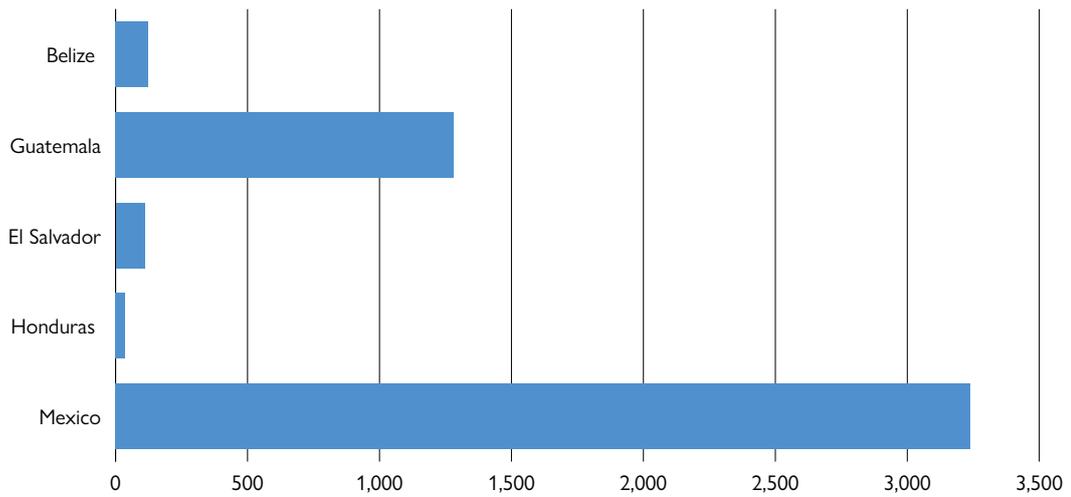


Source: IOM mission in Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Mexico.

Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

⁴ AVR programs in El Salvador and Honduras started in March 2020.

Figure 2. Number of migrants assisted by assisted voluntary return programs in Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Mexico

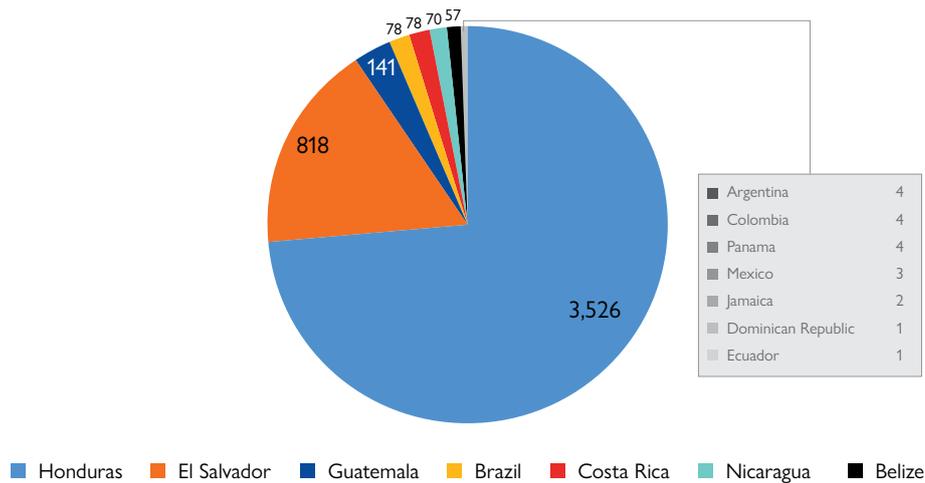


These AVR programs assisted 14 nationalities – largely from North of Central America countries, and also other nations in the Western Hemisphere. Of the AVR beneficiaries, 74 per cent were Hondurans, followed by Salvadorans (17%).



IOM Guatemala verifies beneficiaries' documents and accompanies them through migration procedures before boarding for departure at La Aurora International Airport in Guatemala in April 2020. © IOM 2020

Figure 3. Assisted voluntary return beneficiaries since 2018 by nationality



As Figure 3 shows, the most common nationalities of AVR beneficiaries were Honduran, Salvadoran and Guatemalan.

2.1. Drivers of migration

Mixed migration in the Central American region takes place in a context marked by various migration push factors.⁵ These factors include deep historical, political, economic and social ties between countries. They also feature significant internal, regional and global socioeconomic disparities, political instability, insecurity and violence in some nations, as well as severe and frequent natural hazards compounded by slow-onset environmental changes.

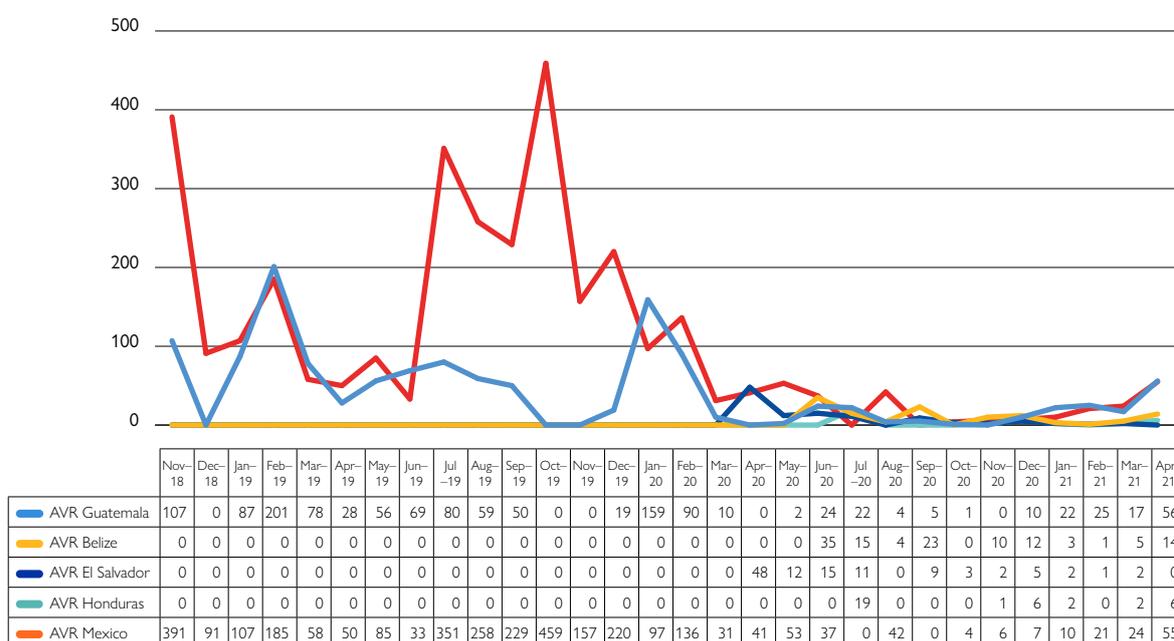
There are many factors compelling people – especially youth and increasing numbers of children – to leave their countries of origin in Central America in search of safety, stability and improved opportunities in North America. These factors include the lack of decent employment opportunities, low income, significant wage gaps and a disparity in opportunities compared with what may be available in countries of destination. Additional factors include poor or informal working conditions and violence, including gender-based violence, organized crime, persecution, insecurity combined with poverty and the adverse impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. These underlying drivers intersect and are exacerbated by the lack of access to adequate social services, such as education and health, including mental health and psychosocial support. In addition, internal displacement is widespread in countries regionally and often a precursor to moving abroad, as well as the lack of effective protection, in many cases. All these factors have been compounded by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and Hurricanes Eta and Iota.

⁵ IOM defines mixed migration as: “The principal characteristics of mixed migration flows include the irregular nature of and the multiplicity of factors driving such movements, and the differentiated needs and profiles of the persons involved.” Mixed flows have been defined as “complex population movements including refugees, asylum-seekers, economic migrants and other migrants” (IOM, Challenges of Irregular Migration: Addressing Mixed Migration Flows. International Dialogue on Migration 2008, Discussion Note (MC/INF/294) (2008). Available at www.iom.int/resources/mc/inf/294-international-dialogue-migration-2008-challenges-irregular-migration-addressing-mixed-migration-flows-discussion-note-2008).

2.2. Returns increasing after a sharp drop due to the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the flow of AVR beneficiaries with a sharp drop, as illustrated by Figure 4. This global health crisis also resulted in stranded migrants reaching out to AVR programs for support, largely through local embassies and consulates. Importantly, this figure also reveals a rebound in AVR beneficiaries since March 2021, with AVR Guatemala (30% increase) and Mexico (44% increase) recording significant numbers due to a gradual lifting of pandemic restrictions in the region, allowing migrants to return to their countries of origin. The monitoring teams of IOM were in a position to gain insights into the reasons reported for this recent spike in AVR returns. Some returnees reported being victims of insecurity in Mexico, such as kidnapping and extortion. Others cited long processing times, as well as contacts in the United States of America no longer offering secure places to arrive, which prompted decisions to return.

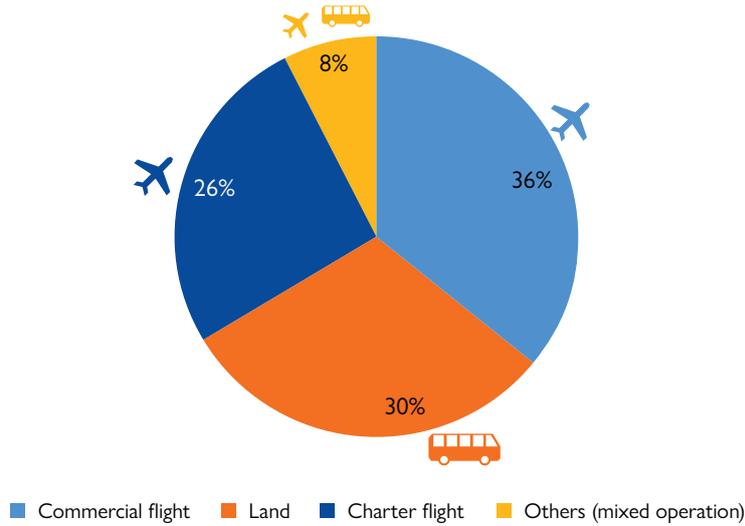
Figure 4. Number of assisted voluntary return beneficiaries by month per program, November 2018–April 2021



2.3. Operations during the pandemic

Since March 2020, AVR programs have conducted 122 movements, including 32 by charter flight, 44 by commercial flight, 37 by land and the remainder by mixed methods, such as by land and flight. Charter flights were arranged when no other options were available. Out of 666 AVR beneficiaries assisted between March 2020 and April 2021, 26 per cent were repatriated by charter flight, as shown in Figure 5. Many of these beneficiaries were in vulnerable situations, and all lacked options to return to their countries of origin without assistance. AVR program teams also collaborated with the governments of Brazil and Costa Rica to arrange humanitarian flights when no other options were available.

Figure 5. Operations during the pandemic, March 2020–April 2021



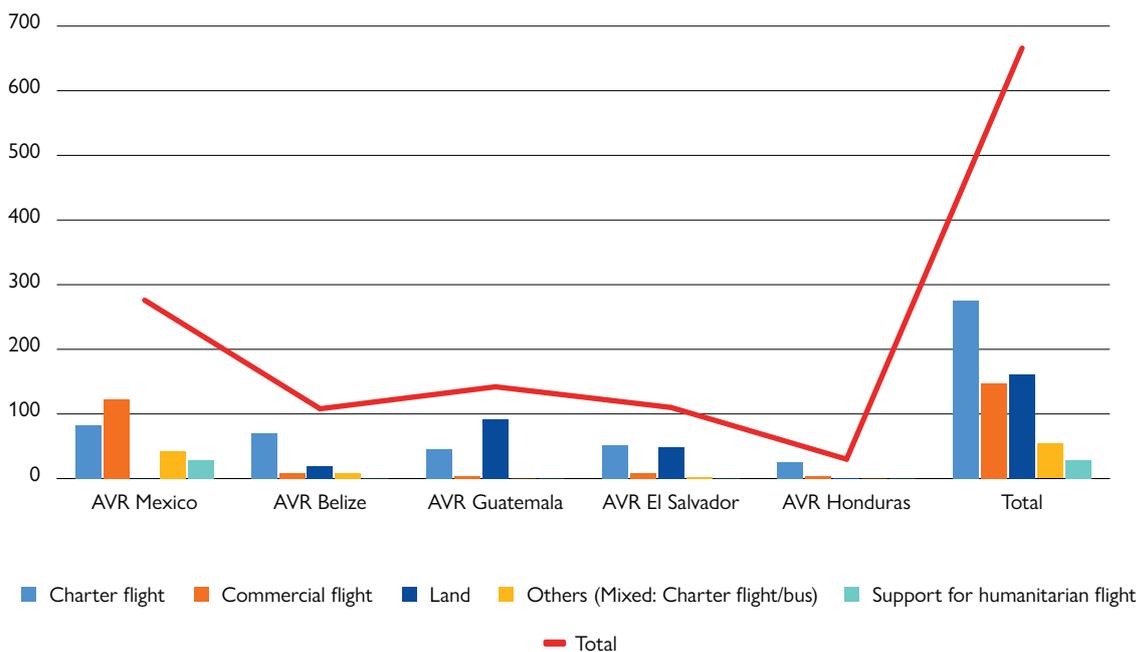
Guatemala AVR program data indicated a significant drop in beneficiaries since the pandemic. While the Belize AVR program started in October 2019, its assistance was only first requested in June 2020. The remainder of AVR programs commenced in March 2020.



Figure 6 shows the numbers of beneficiaries by transportation mode.

IOM Belize accompanies beneficiaries during boarding and ensures that returns are well-coordinated and safe at Philip S.W. Goldson International Airport in Belize in July 2020. © IOM 2020

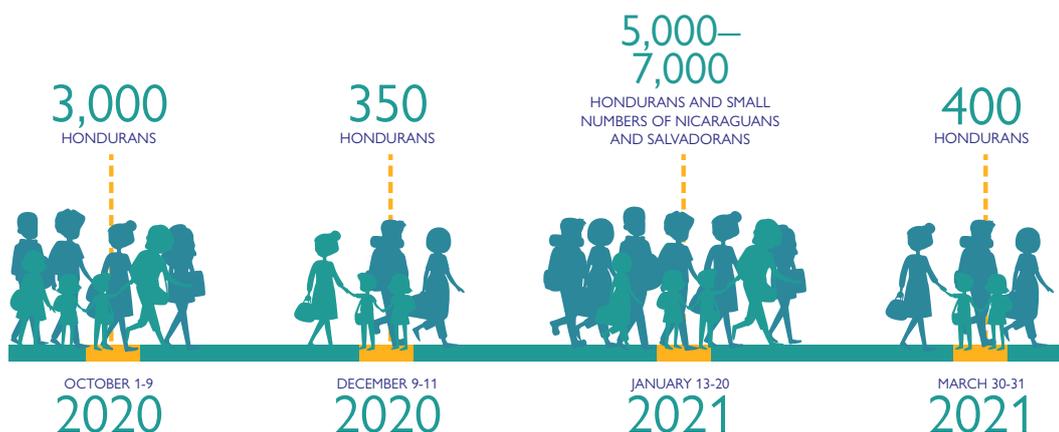
Figure 6. Number of beneficiaries by transportation mode (since March 2020)



2.4. Assisted voluntary returnees as part of migrant caravans

From March 2020 to April 2021, migrant caravans became a frequent phenomenon in mixed migration flows mainly from North of Central America countries orientated to North America. Monitoring teams recorded four key migrant caravans as shown in Table 1, which illustrates the duration, numbers of participants and main nationalities. Of the AVR beneficiaries, 6 per cent reported having been part of migrant caravans from March 2020 to the end of April 2021 or during the reporting period. However, this percentage is likely to be much higher, given that this category was not used by AVR Mexico during this monitoring period.

Figure 7. Summary of key migrant caravan movements, March 2020–April 2021



Sources: Guatemalan Migration Institute, IOM-Northern Triangle Migration Information Initiative, Ayuda en Acción, Telemundo.

AVR monitoring teams played a critical role in closely observing migrant caravans and engaging local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government counterparts to connect caravan participants with AVR assistance. The AVR Guatemala program helped 55 Hondurans who were part of migrant caravans during this period.

3. MONITORING OF BENEFICIARIES AFTER RETURN

3.1. Purpose of monitoring exercise

The primary purpose of the monitoring exercise is to gain a deeper understanding of how AVR beneficiaries reintegrate after returning to their countries of origin. These survey results play an important role in checking AVR beneficiaries' safety, physical and psychological health status, as well as determining the challenges they face upon return. Such challenges are particularly important to understand, as AVR programs in the region currently do not include a reintegration component. As such, IOM refers returnees to local authorities, development partners and local NGOs in origin countries whenever possible.⁶ As the majority of North of Central America countries do not currently have formal mechanisms for reintegration in place, few migrants had been approached regarding reintegration programs at the time of the interview. In place of formal programs, AVR personnel referred cases to organizations capable of providing post-arrival assistance, although few beneficiaries reported these referrals during the surveys. The survey findings help inform IOM program teams, stakeholders and other partners on the ground of any gaps in support upon AVR beneficiaries' return to countries of origin.

3.2. Methodology

From March 2020 to April 2021, monitoring staff stationed in El Salvador, Guatemala (covering Belize), Honduras and Mexico reached out to 209 beneficiaries after return to conduct interviews. Earlier during the AVR process, these beneficiaries agreed to be contacted upon return to participate in a survey through a signed consent form. Not all beneficiaries agreed to be contacted upon return on privacy grounds, while other returnees may have moved or changed their contact information since consenting to be interviewed.

The AVR monitoring exercise is conducted one to three months after beneficiaries return. No personal information is retained to ensure anonymity. With a total of 33 questions (24 multiple choice and 9 open ones), the survey assesses program performance throughout different phases (outreach, pre-departure, travel and reception) and how beneficiaries had reintegrated. The questions encompassed feedback on IOM's assistance during returns, migrants' experiences during travel and transit, on reception, as well as post-arrival assistance and life upon return.⁷

To adhere to COVID-19 safety protocols and minimize risks to respondents and interviewers, all surveys were conducted over the phone or via social media applications depending on beneficiaries' preferences. However, patchy telephone and Internet connections posed challenges for monitoring teams to complete a number of surveys.

A total of 209 migrants participated in this survey (adults: 104 men, 89 women; children: 9 girls and 7 boys). The AVR Mexico program only engaged representatives of family unit beneficiaries due to insufficient resources in interviewing all consenting respondents. As men were the primary respondents, some of the findings may not accurately reflect the situations of women or children. In response, all

⁶ In eligibility interviews prior to return, the primary needs and conditions of beneficiaries' vulnerability are determined. Then, diplomatic missions representing countries of destination are contacted in origin countries to identify reintegration mechanisms for referrals or IOM missions in countries of origin to coordinate referrals from other IOM programs or counterparts.

⁷ Out of 209 respondents, 167 answered all 33 questions (AVR Belize had 20 out of 21 respondents answer all 33 questions; AVR Guatemala 44 out of 63; AVR El Salvador 38 out of 58; AVR Honduras 25 out of 27; and Mexico 40 out of 40). AVR Mexico program interviewed one adult per family group.

survey teams plan to continue contacting all returnees who consented to being interviewed, rather than household representatives, to achieve a more even gender split of respondents during the next phase of the project.

AVR Belize, Guatemala and Honduras teams surveyed children if they and legal guardians agreed to participate in surveys. Small children, under the age of 10 years, were accompanied by parents during the questioning. Topics included employment status in destination countries if engaged in the informal sector, information about community, physical and mental status, and safety. While surveys primarily focus on adult migrants, monitoring teams are committed to understanding the unique needs and characteristics of migrant children after return. IOM does not support child labor. However, there may be cases of migrant children engaging in the informal sector to assist parents in destination countries, as well as upon return to countries of origin. Like adult migrants, children can face severe challenges, such as child abuse, gang violence and limited access to education systems.

4. SURVEY RESULTS

The survey questions were structured to deliver important insights into AVR beneficiaries' experiences in countries of destination, their safety, physical and psychological health status, as well as determine the challenges they face upon return. The following section explores some of the key findings presented through the migration cycle.

4.1. Profile of respondents

From March 2020 to April 2021, 209 beneficiaries participated in surveys. The highest number of respondents returned from Guatemala (63 migrants), followed by El Salvador (58) and Mexico (40).

Figure 8. Number of respondents, March 2020–April 2021

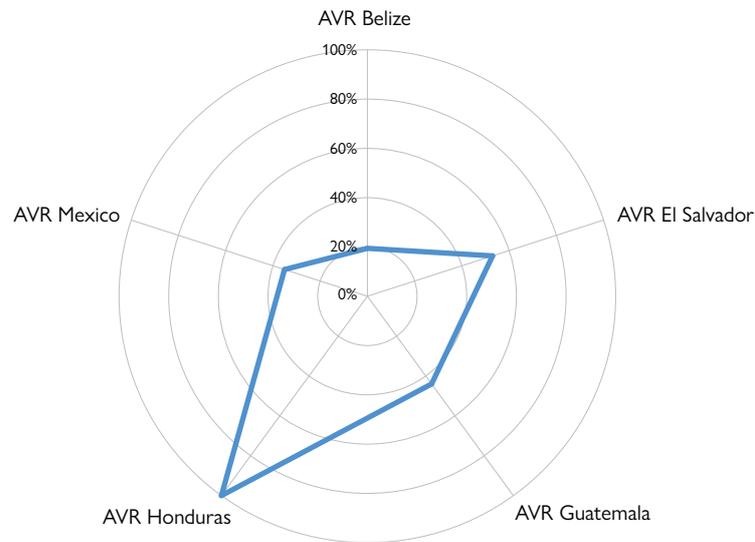


Source: IOM missions in Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Mexico.

Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM.

The response rate was highest among migrants who returned from Honduras (90% response rate), followed by migrants who returned from El Salvador (53%) and Guatemala (44%).

Figure 9. Response rates by program, March 2020–April 2021

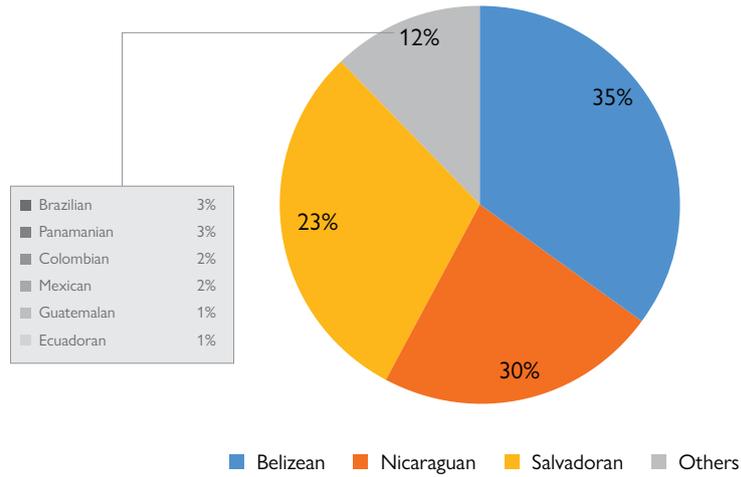


Note: AVR Mexico interviewed one person per family and individuals who return by themselves, while other programs interviewed whoever agreed to be contacted.



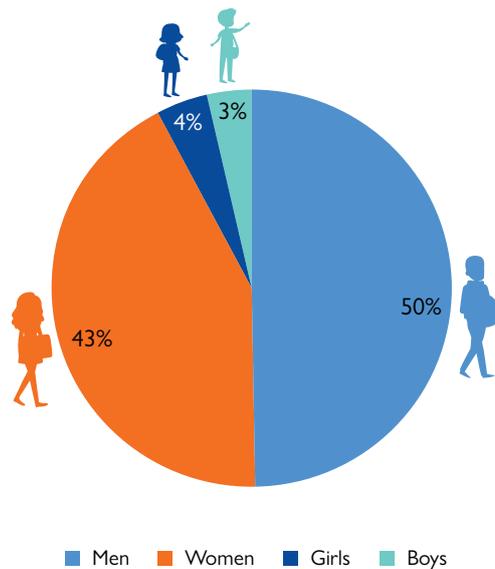
IOM El Salvador accompanies Costa Rican beneficiaries in processing before boarding at the Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero International Airport in El Salvador in July 2020. © IOM 2020

Figure 10. Nationalities of respondents by percentage, March 2020–April 2021



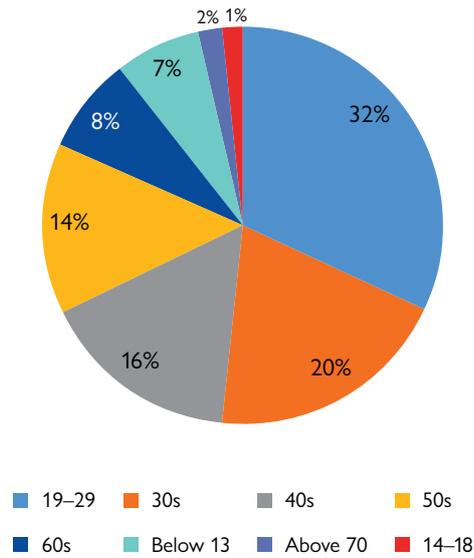
The gender ratio of respondents was 50 per cent (men) and 43 per cent (women), with 4 per cent (girls) and 3 per cent (boys) below 13 years. Children respondents returned from Belize (1 Costa Rican), El Salvador (4 Costa Ricans), Guatemala (8 Costa Ricans and 1 Salvadoran) and Honduras (2 Belizeans).

Figure 11. Gender ratio of respondents by percentage, March 2020–April 2021



The most common respondent age group was 19–29 years old (32%), followed by those in their 30s and 40s (20% and 16%, respectively), as illustrated in Figure 12. Higher portions of Hondurans, Nicaraguans and Salvadorans than other nationalities were represented in the 19–29 age bracket.

Figure 12. Age groups of respondents by percentage, March 2020–April 2021



4.2. Migration type of respondents



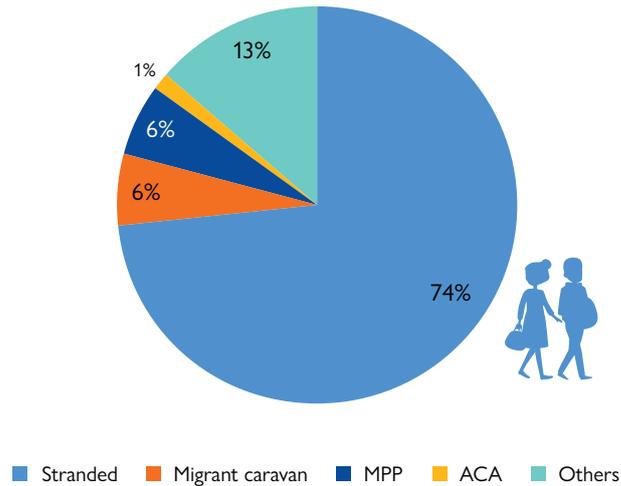
In May 2021, IOM El Salvador provides humanitarian assistance to stranded migrants in the municipality of La Unión. © IOM 2020

This report covers migrants subject to the Migration Protection Protocols (MPP, relevant to AVR Mexico)⁸ and Asylum Cooperative Agreement (ACA, relevant to AVR Guatemala)⁹ until these agreements were suspended and terminated by the new administration of the Government of the United States. During the reporting period, 74 per cent of respondents were categorized as “stranded migrants”, with MPP beneficiaries accounting for 6 per cent and “others” 13 per cent of the overall total. Respondents categorized under MPP and “others” returned from Mexico are the only two categories available to AVR Mexico. As such, in future reporting, AVR Mexico will synergize its classifications with other AVR programs featured in this report. AVR Guatemala only had limited cases of migrants under ACA, as movements under this agreement were suspended from March 2020 due to pandemic measures taken by governments.

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⁸ United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) stopped adding new individuals to the MPP program as of 21 January 2021.
⁹ ACAs were suspended and terminated in February 2021.

Figure 13. Migration category of respondents by percentage, March 2020–April 2021

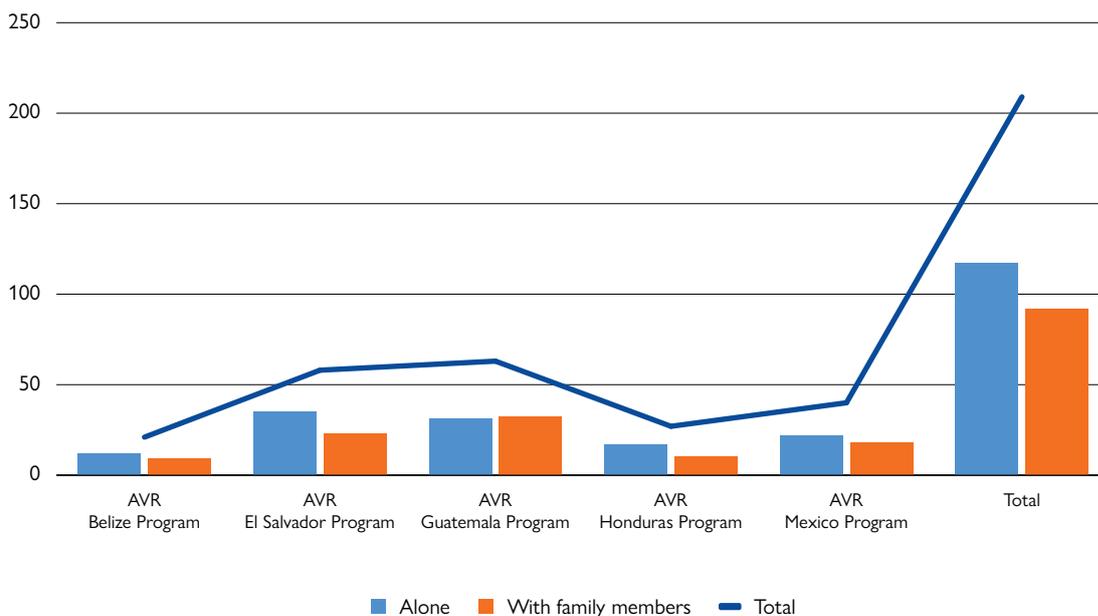


All respondents classified as “stranded” returned from Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, but not from Mexico (again due to the classifications used).¹⁰ Some 6 per cent of respondents were categorized as coming from migrant caravans; however, this percentage is likely to be much higher given this category was not used in Mexico during this monitoring period.

4.3. Returning alone or with family

There was little difference between the percentage of respondents who returned alone (56%) or with family members (44%). More migrants who returned from Belize, El Salvador and Honduras did so alone than with family. More than half of the respondents from AVR Guatemala returned with family members (51%), while fewer did from AVR Honduras (37%). AVR Mexico reported that 45 per cent returned with family members.

Figure 14. Number of respondents who returned alone or with family

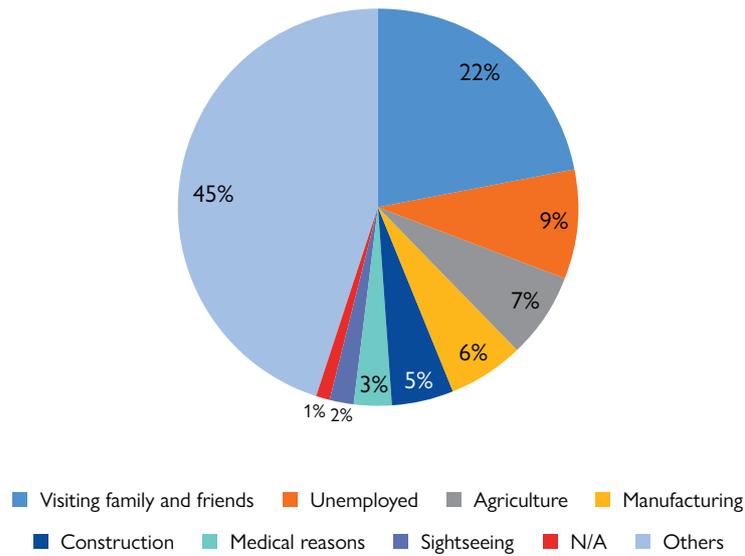


¹⁰ Stranded migrants could not return to origin countries due to lack of financial resources and pandemic mobility restrictions established by governments. Some were economic migrants who became unemployed due to the pandemic and preferred to return, given they could not support themselves abroad.

4.4. What respondents did in destination countries

Some 184 respondents provided insights into what they did in destination countries. Around one fifth (18%) of the respondents reported they worked in destination countries, with the majority engaged in manufacturing, construction and agriculture, exceeded by the 22 per cent who visited family or friends. Of the latter, the majority were Costa Ricans left stranded and in vulnerable situations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the respondents, 9 per cent were unemployed, although they were constantly seeking employment. Other categories included seeking medical treatment, tourism, studying, as well as those who were engaged in paid work, such as sports coaches, teachers, security guards and traders.

Figure 15. What respondents did in destination countries



5. POST-RETURN: SURVEY RESULTS

5.1. Respondents' intention to remigrate

Out of 209 respondents, 180 revealed whether they had plans to remigrate overseas or return abroad. Of these 180 respondents, 39 per cent stated they intended to leave their country of origin again for mostly economic and also personal reasons, while 61 per cent said they did not have plans to migrate overseas again. All Nicaraguan respondents and 55 per cent of Hondurans said they wanted to migrate. All these respondents were labor migrants engaged in low-skilled and informal jobs.



“To continue working. I see no future in my country; there are no job opportunities. I plan to migrate for this reason.” – **19-year-old Honduran man returned from Guatemala**



“Yes, I have always considered migrating to the United States.” – **56-year-old Belizean woman returned from El Salvador**



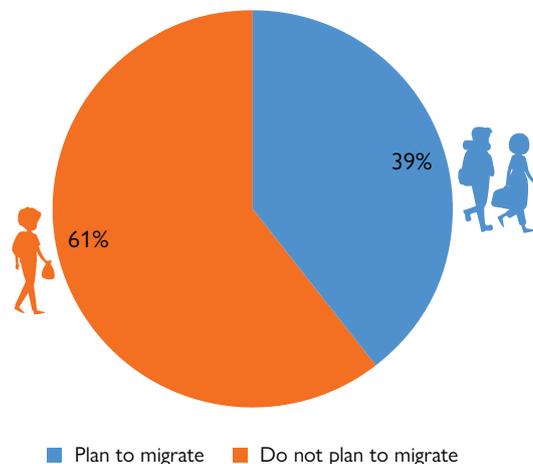
“My plans are to return to Mexico. If I do not get into the United States, I [will] stay working in Mexico in any job that I can find, because the crime situation is the same. If I do not enter the United States, I [will] stay in a border state like Tijuana.” – **26-year-old Salvadoran woman returned from Mexico**



“My plan is to get a place to live and get into the coast guard. I would keep visiting my sister and parents who live in Honduras.” – **21-year-old Belizean man returned from Honduras**

As reported in the [fifth monitoring report](#), for those with no plans to remigrate overseas or return abroad, many were stranded migrants who were temporarily in destination countries and could not return due to the pandemic.

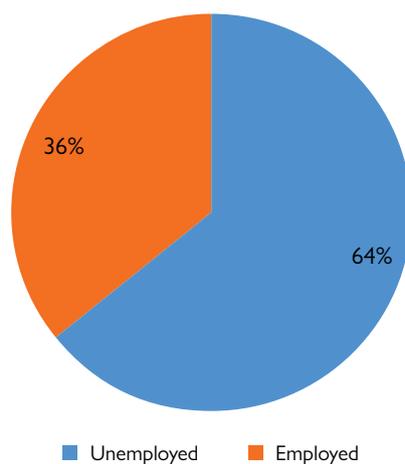
Figure 16. Respondents' plan to remigrate or return abroad



5.2. Returnees struggle to gain employment after return

Out of 167 respondents asked whether they had a job in their countries of origin, only 36 per cent responded affirmatively. Recognizing that it takes months for returnees to find a job, respondents expressed frustration at not finding employment. Most respondents were engaged in low-skilled work such as in agriculture (16%) or informal sectors (14%), such as domestic work, street vendors or construction. In addition, many of those employed were in temporary positions. These percentages illustrate the challenges in finding job opportunities without reintegration support. In general, unemployment rates in respondents' origin countries are relatively high. Also, depending on how long migrants were abroad, it takes time to re-establish their networks.

Figure 17. Employment status post-return by percentage



Some women respondents stated they were not employed, but took care of their families and households instead. Under the gender division of labor,¹¹ women are traditionally assigned unpaid domestic and care work;¹² despite the lack of remuneration of these activities, they contribute to the wellness and financial conditions of households.¹³ Also, some beneficiaries were retired.



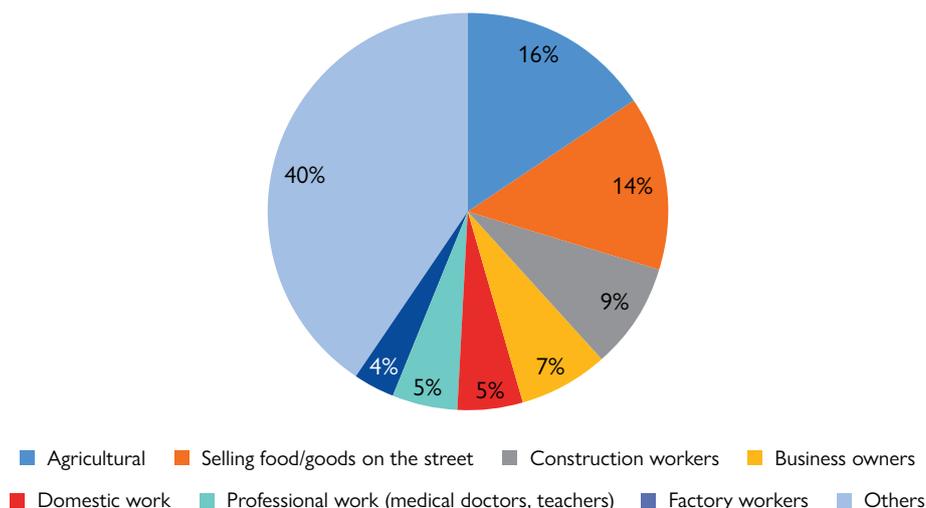
“Yes, I continue working in agriculture, but only on certain days.”
– 37-year-old Nicaraguan man returned from El Salvador

¹¹ For UN-Women, “The division of labor refers to the way each society divides work among men and women, boys and girls, according to socially-established gender roles or what is considered suitable and valuable for each sex.” (UN-Women, Gender equality glossary (n.d.). Available at <https://trainingcentre.unwomen.org/mod/glossary/view.php?id=36&mode=letter&hook=G&sortkey=&sortorder=>)

¹² As stated by the International Labour Organization (ILO), although women participate in the labour market, they are primarily seen as responsible for housework and the care of dependants (ILO, *Mujeres en el mundo del trabajo. Retos pendientes hacia una efectiva equidad en América Latina y el Caribe*. Panorama Laboral Temático 5 [Women in the World of Work. Pending Challenges for Achieving Effective Equality in Latin America and the Caribbean. Thematic Labour Overview] (ILO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, Lima, 2019). Available at https://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/documents/publication/wcms_715183.pdf (in Spanish)).

¹³ “Unpaid care work is both an important aspect of economic activity and an indispensable factor contributing to the well-being of individuals, their families and societies.” (Gaëlle Ferrant, Luca Maria Pesando and Keiko Nowacka, Unpaid care work: The missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Centre, December 2014). Available at https://oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid_care_work.pdf)

Figure 18. Type of employment by percentage



Note: Other types of jobs include butchers, drivers, gardeners, handicraft sellers, janitors, manicurists and teleworkers.

It is important to note that Hurricanes Eta and Iota, which struck Central America in November 2020, severely affected crops in AVR returnees' countries. Consequently, many households lost incomes, were forcibly displaced and are at risk of becoming food insecure.

Even though this report does not contain specific information on the direct impacts of these storms on AVR returnees, it is remarkable that respondents work in agriculture, since the hurricanes affected more than 80 per cent of the productive agricultural areas in this country.¹⁴

In many cases, the employment opportunities available to returnees did not offer financial stability or any means to sustainably improve their quality of life.



“I work in construction and home repairs once or twice a week. My wife cannot work because she is pregnant. I do not feel good because I do not earn enough to support my family.” – **28-year-old Salvadorean man returned from Guatemala**

5.3. Financial concerns of respondents

The lack of jobs with incomes to cover the basic needs of returnees and their families sparked deep concerns about their financial situation, as reported by 64 per cent of adult respondents.

“Sometimes, we feel desperate because we do not have a steady job and a secure income. We rent and have a hard time paying for housing.” – **41-year-old Salvadorean man returned from Belize**



¹⁴ Oscar Ortiz, *Honduras registra pérdidas agrícolas por los recientes huracanes* [Honduras registers agricultural losses from the recent hurricanes]. Voice of America, 30 November 2020. Available at <https://vozdeamerica.com/centroamerica/honduras-perdidas-agricolas-huracanes> (in Spanish).

A primary concern was that returnees were unable to assure sufficient food for themselves and their families. In July 2020, the Central American Integration System (SICA) reported that 4.4 million people in the region lived in a food emergency, equivalent to 7.7 per cent of its population, either for malnutrition or obesity. SICA also forecast that the situation would intensify due to the pandemic, climate events and plagues that affect plants used for food.¹⁵



“This situation is getting more and more complicated. I am even having trouble buying food, so I am not happy with my financial situation.” – **35-year-old Nicaraguan man returned from El Salvador**

According to the United Nations World Food Programme, the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and years of extreme climate events have left almost 8 million people in Central America chronically hungry in 2021 to date.¹⁶ This is a critical situation that will have long-term severe health effects.

For example, research examining food insecurity found that children experience increased risks of some birth defects, anemia, lower nutrient intakes, cognitive problems, aggression and anxiety. As for non-senior adults, it is associated with decreased nutrient intake and increased mental health problems and depression, diabetes, hypertension and hyperlipidemia.¹⁷

“We are surviving. The only thing we eat is eggs with salt.” – **26-year-old Honduran man returned from Guatemala**



In contrast, 36 per cent were not worried about their financial situation, despite referencing the limited or lost income due to the pandemic and restrictions imposed.



“Right now, I am fine. My husband has not been suspended from his job. Before the pandemic, we sold vegetables and fruits in the central market of Belize City, and now with this, we can no longer sell.” – **48-year-old Belizean woman returned from El Salvador**

“I am satisfied. However, I resent the lack of additional income and the limited pay.” – **64-year-old Costa Rican man returned from Guatemala**

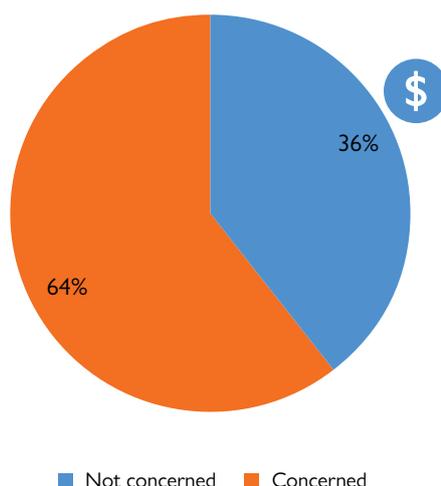


¹⁵ SICA, *SICA: El 7% de la población en Centroamérica vive en crisis alimentaria* [SICA: 7% of the population in Central America lives in a food crisis]. 23 July 2020. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/sica-el-7-de-la-poblaci-n-en-centroam-rica-vive-en-crisis-alimentaria> (in Spanish).

¹⁶ United Nations, Climate crisis and economic shocks leave millions food insecure across Central America. UN News, 23 February 2021. Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1085512>.

¹⁷ Craig Gundersen and James Ziliak, Food insecurity and health outcomes. *Health Affairs*, 34(11):1830–1839 (2015). Available at [https://healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthaff.2015.0645#:~:text=Food%20insecurity%2C%20a%20condition%20in,14.3%20percent\)%20were%20food%20insecure.](https://healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthaff.2015.0645#:~:text=Food%20insecurity%2C%20a%20condition%20in,14.3%20percent)%20were%20food%20insecure.)

Figure 19. Returnees' financial concerns by percentage



Of the respondents not concerned about their financial situation, some were employed, and others received family support. While underlining the challenging situation, these respondents said they were coping.

5.4. Respondents' positive reception from host communities

Of the total respondents, 68 per cent reported a positive reception from their respective communities and family members upon return. However, despite the positive experiences, many referred to wariness due to the pandemic, with 24 per cent of respondents pointing to negative reactions from host communities.

Since the characterization of COVID-19 as a pandemic,¹⁸ some returnees have experienced discrimination and exclusion in their communities.¹⁹ For children, stigmatization adds up to the weakening of national systems for their protection.²⁰ For women experiencing domestic violence, they might be forced to live with potential perpetrators and not be able to leave abusive relationships due to travel restrictions, quarantine measures or job loss.²¹

All AVR programs conducted medical fit-to-travel assessments and provided migrants with COVID-19 (polymerase chain reaction (PCR)) tests. In addition, all beneficiaries were given personal protective equipment (PPE) kits in line with government and COVID-19 Aviation Health Safety protocols. Upon return, most beneficiaries went through a 14-day quarantine period imposed by countries of origin. However, potential and reported negative reactions from communities to new arrivals means there is scope for AVR programs to explore ways of informing communities about the extra precautions taken to protect beneficiaries from COVID-19 and prevent infection risks.

¹⁸ World Health Organization (WHO), WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19, 11 March 2020. Available at <https://who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>.

¹⁹ United Nations, *San Marcos, en Guatemala, y su lucha por proteger a los migrantes retornados del estigma del coronavirus* [Struggle to protect returnees from coronavirus stigma in San Marcos, Guatemala]. UN News, 14 May 2020. Available at <https://news.un.org/es/story/2020/05/1474292> (in Spanish); Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *The impact of COVID-19: An opportunity to reaffirm the central role of migrants' human rights in sustainable development*. November 2020. Available at <https://cepal.org/en/publications/46354-impact-covid-19-opportunity-reaffirm-central-role-migrants-human-rights>.

²⁰ United Nations, *Los niños retornados de Estados Unidos a Centroamérica y México corren un doble peligro* [Child returnees from the United States to Central America and Mexico face double risks]. UN News, 21 May 2020. Available at <https://news.un.org/es/story/2020/05/1474832>.

²¹ UN-Women, *Addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women migrant workers*. Guidance note (2020). Available at <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/guidance-note-impacts-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-women-migrant-workers-en.pdf>.



IOM Honduras staff provides medical assistance to a Costa Rican beneficiary prior to his return in Tegucigalpa, Honduras in May 2020. © IOM 2020



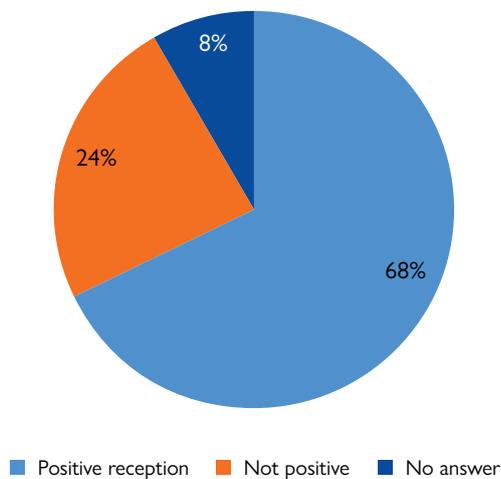
“My community received us with joy. However, my relatives were a bit hermetic because of the quarantine that my daughters and I had to do, so we kept ourselves distanced away until this interview.” – **39-year-old Costa Rican woman returned from Guatemala**

“Although the community has not shown a warm reception and neighbors kept [their] distance, they have given me food.” – **43-year-old Costa Rican woman returned from Guatemala**



“I returned to my home community. I was insulted and disrespected because people from my community thought I was a COVID-19 carrier only because I was a returnee.” – **46-year-old Nicaraguan man returned from El Salvador**

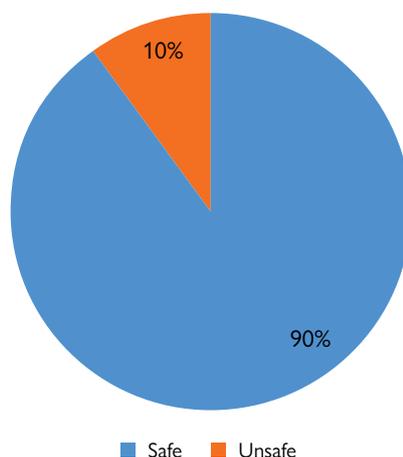
Figure 20. Receptions upon return by percentage



5.5. Most beneficiaries felt safe upon return

Of the 184 respondents who commented on the level of safety upon return, just 10 per cent felt unsafe due to violence or COVID-19. Of this group, 61 per cent had concerns due to violence, while 11 per cent had health fears – particularly of COVID-19 infection – and 28 per cent were concerned about other factors such as the national political situation. For instance, a Colombian respondent underlined safety fears due to protests and rioters.

Figure 21. Level of safety upon return by percentage



To become eligible for AVRs, candidates were screened to identify and mitigate any risk factors and ensure safety upon return. However, various elements can trigger an unsafe environment, and in some cases, this was also an initial driver for migration. As monitoring surveys commenced in March 2020, most respondents were stranded migrants due to the pandemic, which was confirmed during interviews. These stranded migrants could not meet travel costs nor requirements (such as PCR testing) to reach and enter their countries of origin.

Prior to the pandemic, many beneficiaries left origin countries driven by economic situations, fleeing violence or seeking a better life abroad. Many of these beneficiaries from Honduras were part of migrant caravans and a small number of ACA transferees. While noting these differences, the pandemic's economic impacts have resulted in rising regional unemployment.²² As a result, threats of crime that increased due to unemployment and economic drivers to search for employment abroad are still very real and could come to the fore at any time.



“I do not like to go out because there are a lot of protests on the streets these days, and it is not safe to go out for a walk. There are incidents of looting businesses and burning cars.” – **24-year-old Colombian man returned from Honduras**

²² ECLAC estimates that the total number of poor people in Latin America rose to 209 million by the end of 2020, 22 million more people than in the previous year. In addition, the regional unemployment rate ended 2020 at 10.7 per cent, which represents an increase of 2.6 percentage points versus the figure recorded in 2019. The overall drop in employment and withdrawal from the workforce have intensified impacts on women, informal workers, young people and migrants. (ECLAC, Pandemic prompts rise in poverty to levels unprecedented in recent decades and sharply affects inequality and employment. Press release, 4 March 2021. Available at <https://cepal.org/en/pressreleases/pandemic-prompts-rise-poverty-levels-unprecedented-recent-decades-and-sharply-affects>.)

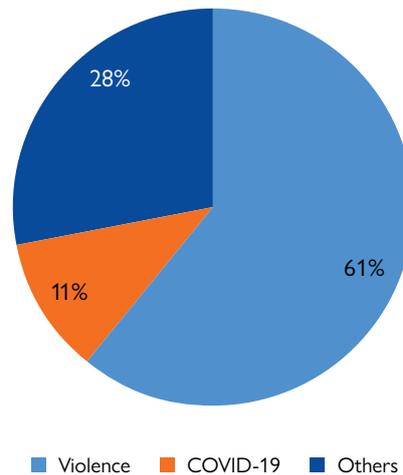


“I do not feel safe, but things are calm. There are gangs here, and sometimes it feels dangerous. It feels a little scary.” – **23-year-old Salvadoran man returned from Mexico**



“Not so safe because of thieves and troublemakers.” – **21-year-old Honduran woman returned from Guatemala**

Figure 22. Reasons for feeling unsafe by percentage



Note: Among the category “Others”, respondents mentioned insecurity, either gang-related or from criminals. One woman reported that due to her sexual orientation, she was discriminated against by her community.

5.6. Stress-induced physiological issues emerged upon return

Some 182 respondents answered questions about their mental and physical status. Of the respondents, 57 per cent considered their physical and mental condition to be good, while 30 per cent reported they were in physically good shape but under mental stress. Five (5) per cent revealed they were not well physically, but mentally well; 8 per cent reported being physically and mentally unwell.

For those who revealed mental health challenges, lack of employment opportunities and financial problems were the key stressors, particularly for returnees who lost jobs in destination countries. Although the respondents did not all share specific reasons, various studies have highlighted factors, such as social exclusion, discrimination and negative perceptions within the communities.²³ In addition, the return itself can be self-perceived as a sign of failure related to expectations of money or profits. All these can spur feelings of frustration, restlessness, shame, fear, anxiety and stress, which are often addressed through the psychosocial dimension of reintegration when support is offered.²⁴

²³ Magdalena Szaflarski and Shawn Bauldry, The effects of perceived discrimination on immigrant and refugee physical and mental health. *Advances in Medical Sociology*, 29:173–204 (2019). Available at <https://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6553658/>; and Brigitte Davis, Discrimination: A social determinant of health inequities. *Health Affairs* blog, 23 February 2020. Available at <https://healthaffairs.org/do/10.1377/hblog20200220.518458/full/>.

²⁴ Karen Carpio, Coming home can be harder than leaving: the psychosocial challenges of being a returnee. IOM Regional Office for Central America, North America and the Caribbean (n.d.). Available at <https://rosanjose.iom.int/site/en/blog/coming-home-can-be-harder-leaving-psychosocial-challenges-being-returnee>.

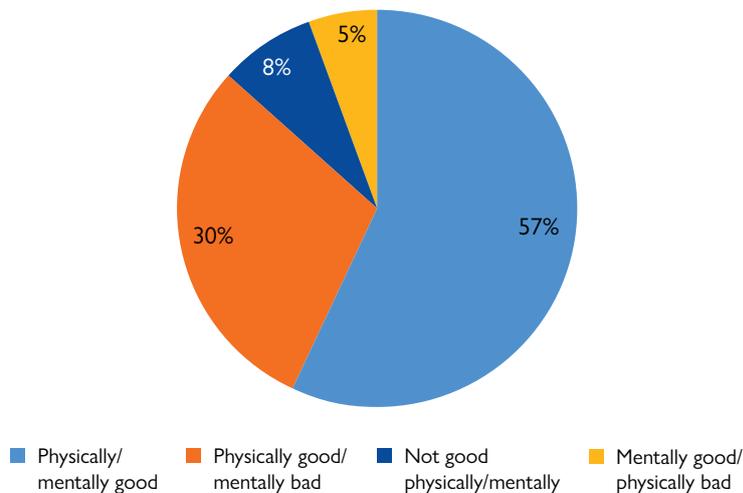


“I am in good health, but worried about the job.” – **50-year-old Honduran woman returned from Belize**

“I have been very nervous because of the quarantine, and I have gone for a medical check-up and I am having problems with my blood pressure. Now I am on medication because of the stress that I have been under since I could not return to my country in the past months.” – **48-year-old Belizean woman returned from El Salvador**



Figure 23. Health status after return (percentage of respondents)



5.7. Negligible long-term reintegration support, an opportunity for action



IOM Belize provides reception assistance to Belizean returnees in Belize City. © IOM 2020

The survey also obtained data on whether respondents had received post-arrival and reintegration or psychosocial support. Post-arrival assistance is provided by AVR programs and in the current context, it helps to meet beneficiaries’ immediate needs during the 14-day quarantine upon arrival in their home countries. This assistance includes medicine, baskets of basic food and cards redeemable for food. Reintegration support aims to enable individuals in re-establishing the socioeconomic and psychosocial relationships needed to maintain life, livelihoods and dignity, as well as inclusion in civil life.²⁵ AVR programs currently have no reintegration component. However, this survey question aims to understand whether respondents received reintegration support from national and local governments, local or international NGOs or community-based organizations to support collective upstream advocacy in promoting reintegration programs at the national level.

²⁵ IOM, *Glossary on Migration*. International Migration Law No. 34. Geneva, 2019. Available at <https://publications.iom.int/books/international-migration-law-ndeg34-glossary-migration>.

5.7.1. Post-arrival assistance

Some 84 respondents said they received post-arrival assistance from AVR programs, given when beneficiaries have no or little means to find food and set up a foundation for the first few weeks.²⁶ Costa Rican respondents who returned from El Salvador received cards to purchase food, and Belizeans from El Salvador and Guatemala were provided with food baskets, PPE kits and accommodation by other IOM programs. Importantly, recipients of this post-arrival assistance underlined its critical value, especially during the COVID-19 crisis.

Each AVR program consults with IOM offices in countries of origin to determine the needs and vulnerabilities of returnees, as well as identify any appropriate support. For instance, some missions provide supermarket gift cards, especially in countries with limited personnel to provide assistance at reception and post-arrival, as in Costa Rica.

5.7.2. Reintegration assistance

Reintegration support for respondents was negligible, aside from two Salvadorans and one Belizean who returned from Mexico and Honduras. Salvadorans were referred to vocational training centers to obtain skills to work as beauticians and tailors. The Belizean respondent received assistance from the Unemployment Relief Program, a collaboration between the Ministry of Investment, Trade and Commerce and Ministry of Labour, Local Government and Rural Development. While surveyed AVR programs currently have no reintegration component, IOM El Salvador is partnering with local NGOs to provide counselling and help meet individual needs. These NGOs then refer to local government, development partners or NGOs with resources to provide reintegration needs. Despite the fact that reintegration support is negligible, origin countries and host communities have key roles to play in supporting returnees as much as possible.



“Yes, thanks to the program, when I returned here, I was sent to the Unemployment Relief Program, and I am waiting for help from the Government.” – **55-year-old Belizean woman returned from Honduras**

²⁶ Post-arrival assistance and criteria differs according to each program. For example, AVR Mexico's support is limited to lodging in cases of overnight stays, as well as providing medicines to cover the first few days after arrival.

6. CONCLUSION

This annual monitoring report of IOM's AVR program in Mexico and North of Central America countries presented information about migrants assisted since 2018 and the results of surveys conducted from March 2020 with those who agreed to be contacted upon arrival. The majority of beneficiaries are regional migrants in a context of mixed migration driven by various and primarily negative migration push factors. The AVR programs assisted migrants from 14 countries, most Central Americans, although some nationals from South America were also supported.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced the flow of AVR beneficiaries and produced stranded migrants. AVR teams in El Salvador and Honduras started operations in March 2020 to address the needs of this population as well. With the gradual lifting of pandemic restrictions in the region allowing migrants to return to countries of origin, AVR programs have been experiencing an increase in beneficiaries since March 2021, particularly from Mexico and Guatemala. This could be driven by various factors such as difficulties faced in destination countries, with some losing contact with relatives and friends in the United States as described on section 2.2 and the general socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic on the region.

In addition to the challenges caused by the pandemic, Hurricanes Eta and Iota contributed to the creation of migrant caravans, mainly composed of mixed migration flows of North of Central America countries. Their members comprised 6 per cent of AVR returns. AVR monitoring teams observed the caravans and worked closely with NGOs and governments to offer assistance for participants.

Lack of employment and precarious incomes are negative drivers of migration in the region. Hence, the situation that returnees encounter in their communities upon return, especially when such programs do not include reintegration support, is likely to influence their future decisions on mobility. Strikingly, 39 per cent of respondents revealed to AVR monitoring teams their intentions to remigrate or return abroad, mainly for economic motivations, in the search for jobs or better income. Without sustainable reintegration, returnees often face the same negative root causes that caused them to migrate irregularly in the first place.²⁷

The monitoring surveys of AVR beneficiaries and the experiences of AVR teams in program countries have generated important insights into the experiences, needs and well-being of beneficiaries and how best to support them during the migration cycle. These findings inform the following recommendations for consideration by AVR teams and stakeholders.

6.1. Robust referral mechanisms and extended post-arrival assistance

The lack of an AVR program reintegration component in countries encompassed by this report underlines the necessity for AVR program teams to continue strengthening referrals of migrants to local authorities, NGOs and international organizations, as well as ensuring quality control. Numerous NGOs and development agencies in the region are increasing sustainable development-related programs, which could unlock fresh livelihood opportunities.

Respondents highlighted the importance of post-arrival assistance considering the economic hurdles posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the hurricanes that struck the region late in 2020. IOM AVR

²⁷ IOM defines as "Reintegration can be considered sustainable when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers. Having achieved sustainable reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity." See IOM, *Towards an Integrated Approach to Reintegration in the Context of Return* (Geneva, 2017). Available at https://iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/DMM/AVRR/Towards-an-Integrated-Approach-to-Reintegration.pdf.

teams could intensify efforts to form partnerships with NGOs in providing niche and extended post-arrival assistance in countries of origin. The relief they offer beneficiaries confirms the importance of enhancing this critical support, while also highlighting its current insufficient delivery for sustainable reintegration.

6.2. Repeated monitoring surveys of individual beneficiaries

There is a need to revisit respondents at later stages of their returns, such as six months after the first interview, with current monitoring surveys limited to within three months of returns. As returnees' situations change over time, there is a critical need to understand the full transition of resettlement and the likelihood of remigration. The ability to offer further post-arrival assistance following reception would enhance the ability of AVR teams to stay in touch with beneficiaries for monitoring their reintegration.

In addition, comparing practices between monitoring teams, there is a need to homogenize the criteria when selecting beneficiaries to be surveyed/interviewed. For example, some teams surveyed each member of family units, including minors, while others just interviewed one representative per family. However, this latter method of selection could lead to the exclusion of the voices and experiences of migrant women due to gender bias within the families. This may result in future program assistance not being tailored to their specific needs, limiting their chances of sustainable reintegration. To incorporate gender analysis, AVR teams will survey all family members of consenting beneficiaries, establishing particular criteria on sex distribution and data protection of children and adolescents.

6.3. Need for further research

The findings of this monitoring report spotlight the need for future research on returning migrants in this region, such as the conditions that influence migrants' decisions to return, drivers for potential remigration, key challenges upon return and interventions to address them. Although the gender ratio difference was small (men 50% and women 43%, boys 3% and girls 4%), these studies could incorporate gender-focused questions to understanding the hierarchical sociocultural relations related to gender experienced by migrants on their return and reintegration that shape their decisions, opportunities and challenges. In addition, these studies must shift from an adult-centered focus to include the perspectives and experiences of children, adolescents and elderly migrants. IOM AVR programs could explore opportunities for research, with findings to inform the donor and IOM on future AVR programming. Ideally, such studies could explore comprehensive reintegration options based on good practices.



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