

ASSISTED VOLUNTARY RETURN PROGRAMS MONITORING REPORT OCTOBER – DECEMBER 2020



PROGRAMS IN MEXICO AND NORTH OF CENTRAL AMERICA COUNTRIES

No. 5

This fifth monitoring report presents the findings from the collection and review of 45 surveys that IOM conducted from October 2020 to December 2020 to capture the experiences of participants in the IOM Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programs¹ in El Salvador, Guatemala/Belize, Honduras and Mexico.

The primary purpose of these surveys is to gain a deeper understanding of how beneficiaries reintegrate upon return to their origin countries by asking each migrant between 24 and 33 questions that encompass 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.²

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 these AVR programs currently do not include a reintegration component. As such, IOM refers beneficiaries to local authorities, development colleagues and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) when possible.³ The survey findings help inform IOM program teams, stakeholders and other partners on the ground of any gaps in support after beneficiaries return to origin countries through AVR programs.

This monitoring exercise is relatively new to AVR programs in Mexico and the four North of Central America countries. Although AVR programs in Guatemala and Mexico have assisted more than 4,000 migrants since November 2018⁴, there were no monitoring practices and no contact was made with beneficiaries upon their return. In response, this monitoring exercise became an important feature of the AVR Guatemala/Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras programs from March 2020 and informed the four subsequent monitoring reports in [June](#), [August](#), [September](#) and [November](#). AVR Mexico started its monitoring exercise in October 2020.

¹ These AVR programs support the orderly and humane return of migrants by providing administrative, logistics 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 Out of 45 respondents, 41 answered all 33 questions. AVR Mexico program interviewed one adult per family group.

³ In eligibility interviews prior to return, the main needs and conditions of vulnerability of beneficiaries 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 coordinate referrals from other IOM programs or counterparts.

⁴ The AVR program in Belize started in October 2019. AVR programs in El Salvador and Honduras commenced from March 2020.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

This fifth monitoring report delivers three key takeaways.

1 The *first takeaway* is half of respondents had plans to re-migrate or return abroad in the future. Despite the relatively small sample size and different motivations for originally leaving origin countries or seeking help when abroad (49% were stranded, 24% were subject to Migration Protection Protocol (MPP), while others were driven by economic reasons or to flee violence), the financial concerns, lack of sustainable employment opportunities and struggle to re-establish lives were primary reasons cited to re-migrate or return abroad.

To offset this motivation to re-migrate or return abroad, the vast majority of respondents also emphasized the need for support to re-establish their lives upon return. Such respondents reported receiving no assistance, from respective home governments or other actors, once back in countries of origin. They faced challenges in accessing employment, financial support or skills to gain jobs. These challenges were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and hurricanes that hit the region late in 2020.

Despite sustained efforts by AVR teams to refer beneficiaries to entities with potential to support returned migrants with reintegration, the survey revealed that most respondents had not received reintegration assistance.

From October 2020 to December 2020, thousands of Central Americans formed migrant caravans that attempted to reach North America. In response, there is a need to explore the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the region's economies as well as the devastation caused by hurricanes late last year as push factors for migration. At the same time, it is essential that returnees are given the necessary support to rebuild their lives.

2 The *second takeaway* is respondents expressed a need for psychosocial support upon return. More than one-third (36%) of respondents reported not being in good condition: physically and mentally. Many went through difficult and stressful times before joining AVR programs. Additionally, after return to origin countries, they struggled to re-establish their lives – with fewer jobs available and many only temporary. This forced returnees to adopt a mindset of day-by-day survival. This type of psychosocial support can be effective if done together with reintegration support. The monitoring team believes in-depth studies are necessary to highlight the main socio-economic and psychosocial needs of the beneficiary population and collect evidence-based information on the best ways to address such needs.

3 The *third takeaway* is that while reintegration support was absent at this stage, respondents highlighted the value of IOM's post-arrival assistance. Food and accommodation support proved invaluable for returnees undergoing quarantine and during their first days back in communities. Many respondents requested this assistance be extended considering the challenges posed by the pandemic and hurricanes. As such, the monitoring team suggests this post-arrival assistance could be expanded to help the most vulnerable AVR beneficiaries with short-term post-arrival assistance targeted to individual needs that encompass health, education, accommodation, and livelihoods.

METHODOLOGY

From October to December 2020, monitoring staff stationed in El Salvador, Guatemala (covering Belize), Honduras and Mexico reached out to 45 beneficiaries after return. These beneficiaries, earlier during the AVR process, agreed to be contacted upon their return to participate in a survey.

The AVR monitoring exercise is conducted one to three months after beneficiaries return. With a total of 33 questions (24 multiple choice and nine open questions), the survey assessed program performance throughout different phases (outreach, pre-departure, travel and reception) and how beneficiaries reintegrated upon return. The survey is applied to all beneficiaries who agreed, through a signed consent form, to be contacted upon return.

To adhere to COVID-19 safety protocols and minimize risks to respondents and interviewers, all surveys were conducted over the phone or using social media apps depending on the beneficiaries' preferences. Each AVR program reached out to its respective beneficiaries. AVR Mexico contacted 23 beneficiaries (3 Brazilians, 4 Salvadorans, and 16 Hondurans), AVR Honduras reached three Belizeans, AVR Belize notified two Costa Ricans, AVR Guatemala engaged three Belizeans, and AVR El Salvador reached 14 beneficiaries (6 Belizeans, 7 Costa Ricans and 1 Panamanian).

It should be noted that interviewers contacted respondents prior to departure to home countries to ensure they were available to be contacted after return.

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS FROM OCTOBER 2020 TO DECEMBER 2020



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.

SURVEY RESULTS:

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

From October to December 2020, 45 beneficiaries participated in the survey. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting reduced number of AVR beneficiaries is reflected in the smaller number of survey results.

TABLE 1: WHEN DID RESPONDENTS RETURN TO ORIGIN COUNTRIES BY PROGRAM

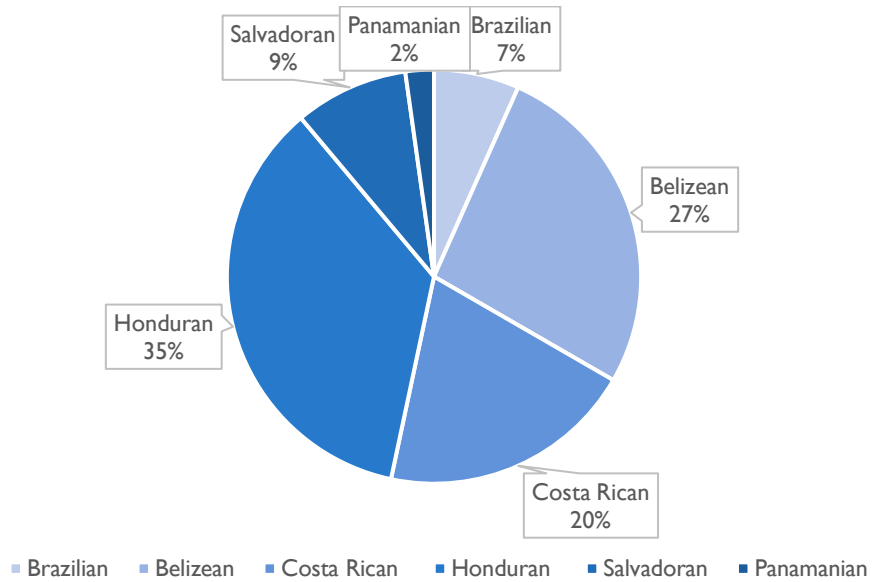
| Program | Number of respondents | October-December 2020 | Before October | Respondent rate since March (in case of Mexico, August 2020) |
|-----------------|-----------------------|--|---|--|
| AVR Belize | 2 | 0 | 2 Costa Ricans in August 2020 | 3% |
| AVR El Salvador | 14 | 1 Panamanian in October 2020 | 7 Costa Ricans in July 6 Belizeans in September 2020 | 50% |
| AVR Guatemala | 3 | 0 | 3 Belizeans in September 2020 | 74% |
| AVR Honduras | 3 | 3 Belizeans in December 2020 | 0 | 80% |
| AVR Mexico | 23 | 2 Brazilians in October 1 Brazilian in November 2 Salvadorans in November 2 Salvadorans in December | 16 Hondurans in August 2020 | 74%* |

**Note: From August to December 2020, IOM Mexico assisted 59 beneficiaries (39 adults and 20 children) and consented to be contacted after return. To interview one representative per family, from 39 potential candidates, 31 were contacted and 23 interviews completed.*

The majority of respondents were Honduran (35%), followed by Belizeans (27%) and Costa Ricans (20%). The gender ratio of respondents was 60 per cent (female) and 40 per cent (male), including four children aged below 13 years⁵ (1 male and 3 females).

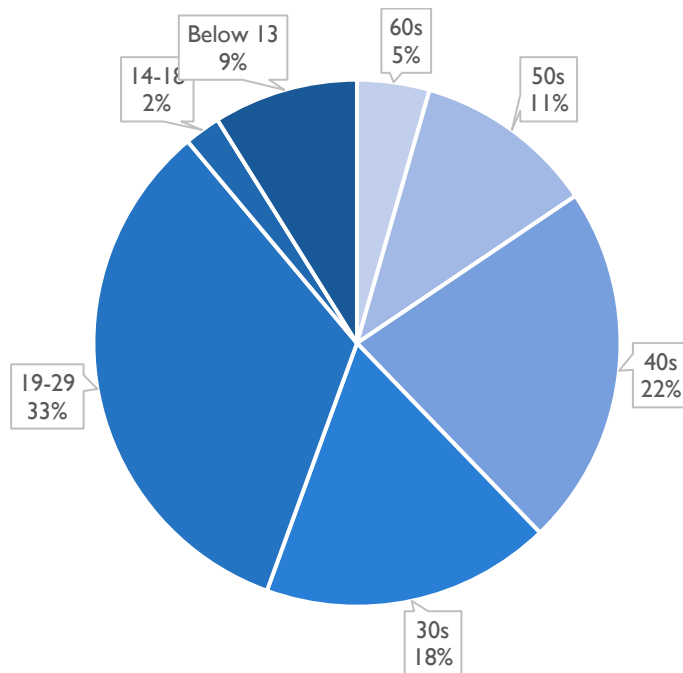
⁵ Questions on employment status, financial situation and future plans were not asked of four minors.

FIGURE 2: NATIONALITIES OF RESPONDENTS



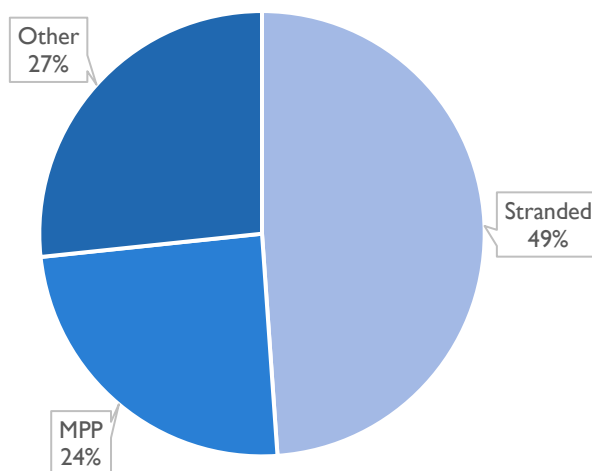
The most common respondent age group was 19–29 years old (33%), followed by those in their 40s and 30s (22 and 18%, respectively) as described in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3: AGE GROUP OF RESPONDENTS BY PERCENTAGE



Nearly half (49%) of respondents were categorized as stranded migrants, with Migration Protection Protocol (MPP)⁶ beneficiaries accounting for 24 per cent and “others” 27 per cent of the overall total. It should be noted that respondents categorized under MPP and “others” returned from Mexico, the only two categories available to AVR Mexico. As such, this program will synergize its classifications with other AVR programs featured in this report. All respondents classified as “stranded” returned from Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

FIGURE 4: MIGRATION CATEGORY OF RESPONDENTS



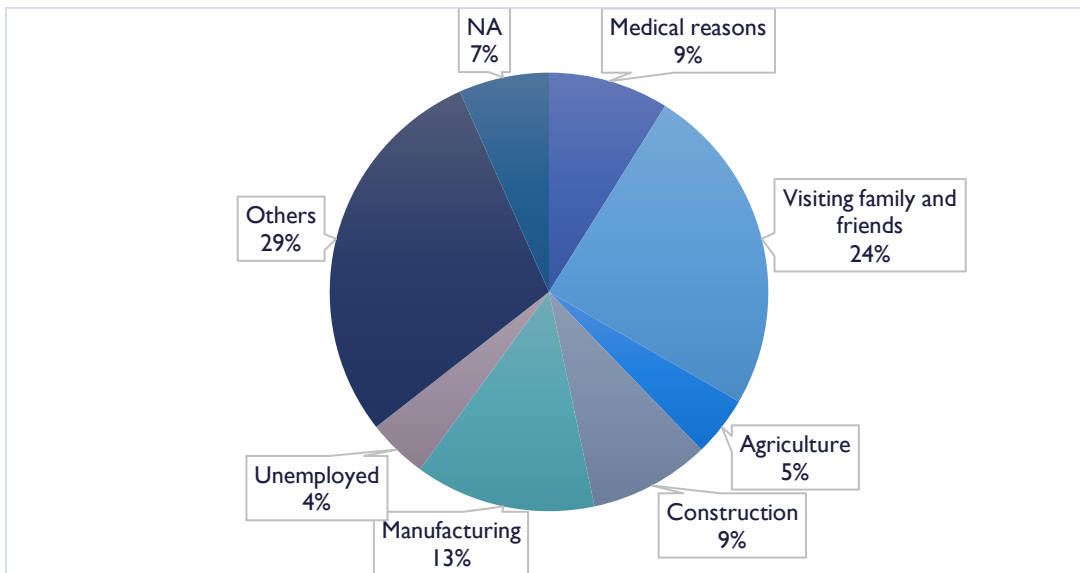
There was little difference between the percentage of respondents who returned alone (51%) or with family members (49%).

WHAT DID YOU DO IN DESTINATION COUNTRIES?

Just under one-third (31%) reported they worked in destination countries, with the majority engaged in manufacturing, construction and agriculture. Eleven persons (6 Costa Ricans, 4 Belizeans and 1 Panamanian) were visiting family and friends, before being left stranded and in vulnerable situations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other categories included sports coach, teleservice, housewife, student, teacher, security guard and trader.

⁶ US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) stopped adding new individuals to the MPP program as of January 21, 2021.

FIGURE 5: WHAT DID YOU DO IN DESTINATION COUNTRIES?



POST RETURN: SURVEY RESULTS

HALF OF RESPONDENTS PLAN TO RE-MIGRATE OR RETURN ABROAD

Of the 45 respondents, monitoring teams discovered that half had plans to re-migrate or return abroad in the future.

A higher percentage of Honduran respondents wished to re-migrate or return abroad, as was the case for 14 out of 16 Honduran respondents who returned from Mexico wanting. Security and economic pressures in Honduras were reported as key drivers of this trend.

Most such Hondurans worked in agriculture, construction or manufacturing industries in Mexico and are of working age 18–56 years old (9 males, 5 females).



"Yes, I want to join my mother who is living in the United States and find a job." Honduran woman returned from Mexico (18 years old)

"Yes, I will try it again, but I'm afraid because of the insecurity."
Honduran man returned from Mexico (45 years old)



"I will return to Guatemala because Belize is not industrialized. I wish to be able to come back when I get out of college and find a job." Belizean man returned from Guatemala (30 years old)

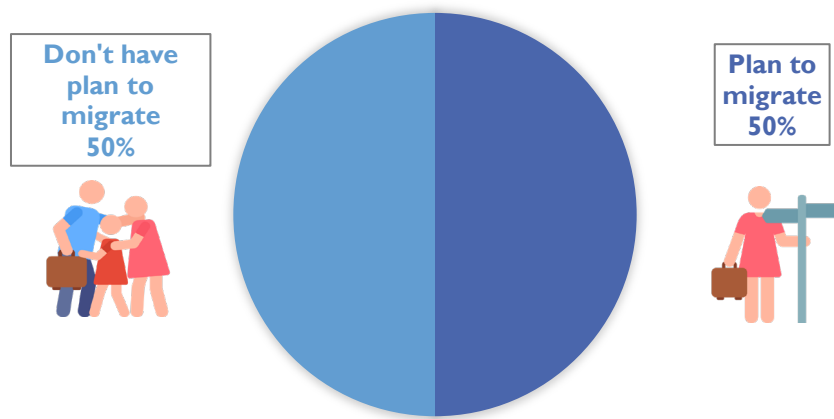
For those with no plans to re-migrate or return abroad, many were stranded migrants who were temporarily in destination countries and could not return due to the pandemic.

"No, I wouldn't migrate again. I want my son to study and take him to the school."
Salvadoran woman returned from Mexico (48 years old)



"No, definitely not." Brazilian man returned from Mexico (35 years old)

FIGURE 6: DO YOU PLAN TO RE-MIGRATE OR RETURN ABROAD?



RETURNEES STRUGGLE TO GAIN EMPLOYMENT AFTER RETURN

Out of the 41 respondents eligible to answer whether they had a job upon return to origin countries, 49 per cent were unemployed. Of the 36 per cent employed, most were engaged in low-skilled work, such as in agriculture or informal sectors (domestic work, street vendors or construction). Many of those employed were in temporary positions, while 15 per cent were children, housewives or elderly persons.

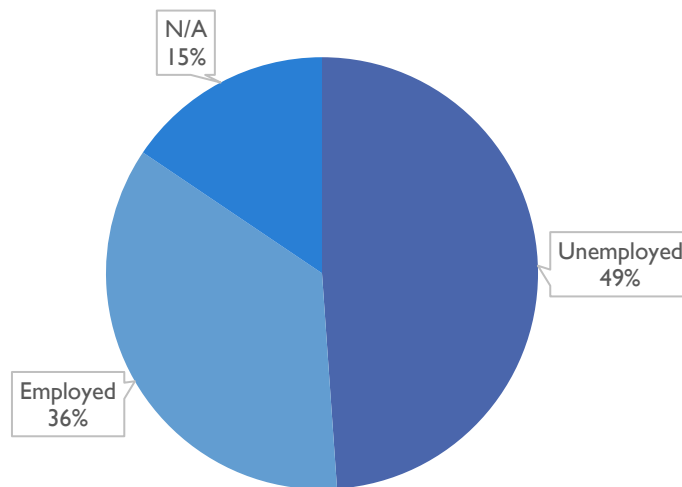


"I don't have a job yet, I only make clothes and with the little money I earned, I managed to buy some food." Salvadoran woman returned from Mexico (29 years old)

"I work in telemarketing [via internet calls]." Costa Rican man returned from Belize (29 years old)



FIGURE 7: EMPLOYMENT STATUS POST-RETURN



"I have not been able to work because here, in the country, many businesses are not open." Belizean woman returned from Honduras (55 years old)

TWO-THIRDS OF RESPONDENTS HAD FINANCIAL CONCERNS

Of the 41 respondents⁷ who revealed whether they were worried about their financial situation, 74 per cent expressed such concerns with many struggling to gain employment to sustain themselves amid depressed job markets due to the pandemic. In addition, these pressures were compounded by Hurricanes Eta and Iota that struck Central America in November 2020. These storms damaged or destroyed crops and harvests that were critical sources of livelihoods and food security for many families already facing economic hardships as a result of the pandemic.⁸ While this report, published by UNOCHA did not state whether members of these hard-hit communities joined migrant caravans, various media reports claimed damage from these storms could become push factors to join migrant caravans.⁹ In particular, Honduran respondents in general, underlined the challenges posed by the hurricanes upon return.



"Very bad, I'm lacking a lot and I don't have a stable job." Honduran man returned from Mexico (22 years old)

"I feel very pressured because I don't have enough money." Salvadoran woman returned from Mexico (29 years old)



"No, I was affected by the quarantine because I could not grow agricultural products and sell. Also, being stranded in El Salvador for a long time due to pandemic affected me economically." Belizean man returned from El Salvador (69 years old)

"I am working, and I managed to pay all my debts. However, the pandemic has brought with it some economic limitations." Brazilian man returned from Mexico (35 years old)

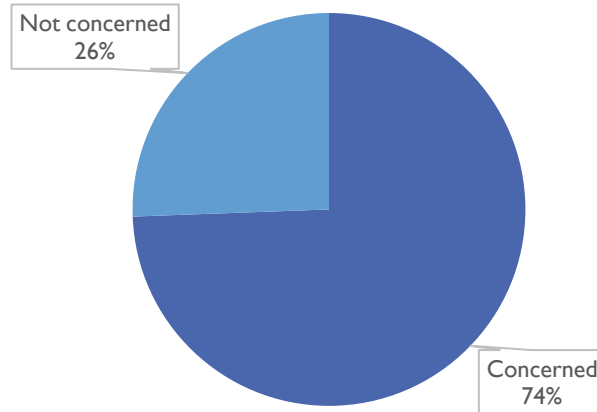


⁷ With four children among the 45 respondents, this question applied to 41 adults.

⁸ <https://reliefweb.int/report/honduras/central-america-tropical-storm-eta-hurricane-iota-six-weeks-later-22-december-2020>

⁹ <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2021/01/29/blocked-migrant-caravan-leaves-thousands-trapped-hurricane-hit-honduras/> and <https://apnews.com/article/honduras-hurricane-iota-mexico-storms-immigration-3cf340e556ee767d1dd3dce351c934b5>

FIGURE 8: RETURNEES' FINANCIAL CONCERNS



Of the quarter of respondents who were 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.

MOST RESPONDENTS RECEIVED POSITIVE REACTIONS FROM HOST COMMUNITIES

The vast majority (96%) of respondents reported positive welcomes from communities and family members. This differed from the fourth monitoring report covering March to October 2020, with 44 per cent of respondents documenting discrimination for being a perceived COVID-19 infection risk or returning without achieving the intended migration goal(s). In contrast, interviewees featured in this report said family members were generally supportive of their decisions to return, especially those with no means to return without AVR support.

“Very good, I even encountered another beneficiary of the program in the street. We were very happy to see each other.” Brazilian man returned from Mexico (35 years old)



Although the majority had positive experiences with family members and host communities, some respondents were not welcomed or worried about being discriminated against by communities due

to COVID-19 infection risks. A Belizean beneficiary, who returned from Honduras, had negative encounters with her neighbor.



"One of my neighbors reported me to the community out of fear I was going to infect them after arriving, as they knew I had been out of the country. But after showing the negative COVID-19 test result, there were no more problems from the host community." Belizean woman returned from Honduras (55 years old)

"I was afraid they would think I was infected with COVID-19 and they would disrespect me." Belizean female returned from El Salvador (48 years old)



All AVR programs conducted medical assessments and provided migrants with COVID-19 (PCR) tests. 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 the reduced infection risks.

RESPONDENTS FELT SAFE UPON RETURN

Most respondents felt secure upon return, with just three reporting safety fears due to violence or COVID-19. It should be noted that all AVR beneficiaries, to be eligible, were screened to ensure they would be safe upon return. As monitoring surveys commenced in March 2020, the majority of respondents were stranded migrants due to the global pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, a mixture of beneficiaries left origin countries driven by economic situations, fleeing from violence or seeking a better life abroad. Many of these beneficiaries from Honduras were part of migrant caravans or transferees of the Asylum Cooperative Agreement (ACA) in Guatemala, not operational since March 2020 and closed in January 2021. While noting these differences, the pandemic's economic damage has resulted in rising regional unemployment. As a result, threats of violence and economic drivers to search for employment abroad are still very real and could come to the fore at any time.



"No, I don't feel secure. I want to return to Mexico." Honduran man returned from Mexico (27 years old)

STRESS-INDUCED PHYSIOLOGICAL ISSUES HAVE EMERGED UPON RETURN

More than one-third (36%) of respondents reported not being in good condition: physically and mentally. Of those, many said they were worried, stressed or depressed due to COVID-19 and their economic situation. This is underlined by the 34 per cent of all respondents who reported being psychologically and mentally distressed. Regarding the economic drivers, the lack of employment opportunities and financial problems were the key stressors, particularly for returnees who lost jobs in destination countries.

A quarter (27%) of respondents reported being in physically good, yet mentally bad shape upon return in contrast to 64 per cent who were physically and mentally good.



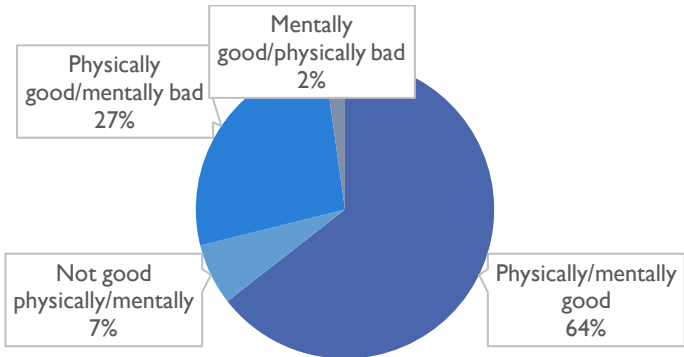
"I have felt very sad about not being able to work." Belizean woman returned from Honduras (48 years old)

"I am physically well, but mentally I am worried about the future." Costa Rican man returned from El Salvador (42 years old)



"I have felt a lot of stress and that has affected my blood pressure, I had to check with the doctor. With the stress of not being able to go out without a mask and it is difficult for me to breathe, especially because of the heat here. I have had to wear a mask all day, to be able to go out to look for a job." Belizean woman returned from Honduras (55 years old)

Figure 9: Health status after return (percentage of respondents)



NEGLIGIBLE LONG-TERM REINTEGRATION SUPPORT, AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ACTION

The survey also obtained data on whether respondents had received post-arrival, reintegration or psychosocial support. Post-arrival assistance is provided by AVR programs to meet the immediate needs of beneficiaries during the 14-day quarantine upon arrival in home countries. This assistance includes medicine, baskets of basic food and cards redeemable for food. Reintegration support aims to enable individuals to re-establish the economic, social and psychosocial relationships needed to maintain life, livelihoods and dignity, and inclusion in civil life.¹⁰ The surveyed AVR programs do not currently have a reintegration component. However, the intention of this survey question is 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 to promote reintegration programs at national level.

Post-arrival assistance

Half of the 45 respondents said they received post-arrival assistance from AVR programs.¹¹ Costa Rican respondents who returned from El Salvador received cards to purchase food, Belizeans from El Salvador and Guatemala were provided with food baskets, PPE 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 the returnees as well as appropriate support. For instance, some missions prefer to provide supermarket gift cards, especially in countries with limited personnel to provide assistance at reception and post-arrival, as in the case of Costa Rica.

Reintegration assistance

Reintegration support for respondents was negligible, aside for two Salvadorans returned from Mexico who were referred to vocational training centers to obtain skills to work as a beautician and a tailor. While surveyed AVR programs do not currently have a reintegration component, IOM El Salvador is partnering local NGOs to provide counseling and help meet individual needs. These NGOs then refer to local government, development partners or NGOs that have resources to provide reintegration needs. Overall, origin countries and host communities have key roles to play in supporting returnees to reset their lives.

¹⁰ <https://www.iom.int/glossary-migration-2019>.

¹¹ 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.

For previous issues of AVR monitoring reports, please see [June 2020](#), [August 2020](#), [September 2020](#) and [November 2020](#).

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