

Megatrends and Families in Latin America & the Caribbean: Migration and Families

by

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1. Introduction

The Latin America-Caribbean region (LAC) includes a wide range of countries; therefore, this paper will focus on one subregion - the Caribbean - with reference made to the broader regional context for comparison. The characteristics of families and the dominant types of migration will be briefly outlined to provide background to the section which follows on the implications of migration trends for families in terms of both structure and wellbeing.

2. Background

2.1. Latin America and the Caribbean Sub-region

The countries of Latin America vary greatly in terms of physical size and population. The Caribbean sub-region is distinct from the rest of the wider region in that it is comprised primarily of island states, most of which are very small both in size of land area and population. Yet even within the subregion there is significant diversity of economic and social development. A further difference between the Caribbean and the wider Latin American region is that the Caribbean is more racially and ethnically heterogeneous and, in turn, this is associated with the range of family structures and lifecycle dynamics that occur. While the Hispanic Caribbean countries – Cuba and the Dominican Republic - are culturally more like the Latin American mainland, the mainland countries of Belize, Guyana, and Suriname, fall within the Caribbean sub-region based on their colonial legacies. Accordingly, their identification as Caribbean states was formalised in the mid-20th Century by their inclusion in the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM).

2.2 The Family in Latin America and the Caribbean

The family in the Caribbean subregion includes varying types: nuclear and male headed, matrifocal and female headed. The head may be single, or in a legal marriage union or common-law partnership. In ethnically mixed societies such as Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana, and Suriname, multi-generation families are common among the Indo-Caribbean populations. An older man is usually the head of the household which adheres to roles and relationships based on patriarchal traditions. Elsewhere, the matrifocal family largely dominates in the subregion with the female as the head of a single-parent family, consisting of a mother and her children or a single woman living alone.

World Bank data recorded the average percentage of households with a female head in LAC (excluding high-income countries) as 27.8% in 2021. In seven Latin American countries – Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, 24.6% of the persons in a survey indicated that they lived in households headed by a female. Similar percentages of female-headed households also occur in some countries of the Caribbean, but others have a much higher percentage. For example, in the Dominican Republic 40%; Antigua and Barbuda, 42%; Barbados 44%; and in Haiti 46% of households are female headed.¹ Whether recognized as the head of household or not, the lower-class woman in the Caribbean frequently assumes a large share, if not the sole responsibility for the welfare and economic support of the household. There are also large numbers of older single person households consistent with the trend in demographic ageing of the populations. It is a trend which appears likely to continue.

Throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, many families across race and class, and especially poor families, have been disrupted due to the fact that breadwinners have had little choice but to explore opportunities of seeking work overseas. In Guyana, some communities have been reported as experiencing an increased absence of active fathers due to migration. In Amerindian communities of the hinterland, for example, fathers travelling for long periods to work in the growing mining and logging areas create *de facto* female-headed, single-parent families in a traditionally patriarchal culture. Among other ethnic groups of the region, where matrifocal families predominate and where female labour migration is prevalent – the impact

of migration on the family is different but not without its negative emotional and social consequences. These are invariably due to absent parents unable to ensure the wellbeing of children. This also affects care of the aged as it is chiefly woman who take responsibility for the elderly in the family. Widespread migration from, and movement around, the Caribbean has dispersed the traditional extended family support networks, while alternative support systems are either absent or underdeveloped.

3. Migration Trends in Latin America and the Caribbean

3.1 Immigration and Emigration Trends

World Bank data for 2021 (the most recent year available) recorded that the annual net migration was greater than -52,650 in Mexico, -30,000 in Guatemala, -10,000 in Nicaragua, -27,000 in El Salvador; and approximately -5,000 in Honduras, Panama and Belize. The net migration for Venezuela was particularly acute at -525,116 on account of the political situation in that country. Although smaller in absolute size, levels of emigration relative to immigration from some Caribbean countries were greater than those observed in Central American countries. The combination of low economic growth with extreme political instability is also reflected in the trend of emigration from Haiti (-32,977). Additionally, the average annual net migration experienced in the Dominican Republic (-14,966), Cuba (-7,068), and Jamaica (-5,664), surpassed that of the countries of Central America, except for Mexico and Guatemala.

The general trend has been for countries in the region with highest economic levels to be those with an excess of immigrants over emigrants. An additional factor has been the arrival of refugees from Venezuela which has greatly increased the flow of immigrants in recent years. Recipient countries of refugees on the Latin American mainland included Colombia with a net migration of 211,980, Chile 113,709, and Brazil 20,376. In the Caribbean sub-region, recent recipients of refugees have been the Bahamas and Trinidad & Tobago.

3.2 Trends in the Pattern of Migration Corridors

The requirements of labour markets in the 1950s and early 1960s in the Western European former Colonial Metropolises and, more recently, in North America, determined the trend in the direction of labour migration flows from LAC. At times the demand has been for unskilled or semi-skilled labour, at other times for professionals and the highly skilled. The United States is currently the principal extra-regional destination for migrants from LAC. An estimated 20 million Latin American immigrants were living in the USA in 2021.² The number from the Caribbean was approximately 4.5 million in 2019, representing 10% of the 44.9 million total foreign-born population in the USA. Around 90% of immigrants in the USA from the Caribbean subregion are from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Haiti. Since the 1970s, Canada became the second most important destination of migrants originating in both Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean countries. Additionally, there has always been a long history of intra-regional migration within LAC associated with subregional Treaties. The increased trend in labour mobility within the Caribbean is due to policies agreed by the Caricom Single Market & Economy (CSME) Members States.³

3.3 Characteristics of the migrants

Migration behaviours and roles within the family in LAC are differentiated by both ethnicity and socio-economic status. People in different socioeconomic sectors have had different migration opportunities and constraints based mainly on their educational and occupational backgrounds. There has been a predominance of family migration among the middle and upper classes, except among students and other young persons, whereas individual migration is more typical of the lower classes. The pattern of male and female migration also reflects the wider institutional structures of each class. There has evolved a much greater mutual sense of social and economic independence of men and women in the lower classes as compared with upper classes. The lower-class family and household accommodates the periodic and even long-term absence of either a male or female household head as an acceptable situation. The practice of children being looked after by female kin was also an early accommodation of the family to the migration of Caribbean women, including those who were heads of households. The relative proportion by sex in any

migration phase chiefly depends on the immigration selectivity based on the gendered nature of labour force needs.

Although there has been a continuing trend of reduced long term or permanent emigration in recent decades, young and working age cohorts have continued to dominate the flows. Students at different levels of secondary and tertiary education and tertiary-educated professionals have been important components of the movements.

4. Migration Types and the Family

To examine the impact of migration trends on families, it is important to consider a typology of migrants as different types of migration and characteristics of the migrants impact the family in different ways. There are five major categories of persons engaged in movement across national boundaries. These include: 1) Migrants admitted legally in host countries as long-term or permanent, or temporary residents; 2) Temporary migration based on contractual agreements; 3) Undocumented or irregular migration; 4) Return migration – voluntary and involuntary; 5) Refugees and Asylum-seekers.

4.1 Long term/permanent legal emigration

There has been a decline in flows of permanent or long-stay low-skilled labour migration to Western Europe since the 1960s, and the USA and Canada since the 1970s. At the same time, a trend in professional and highly skilled labour migration to the USA from the English-speaking Caribbean which became evident in the 1990s has continued and increased in recent years. Recruitment targets teachers, health care workers and engineers. For example, between January and September 2022, 1,538 teachers were recruited in Jamaica to emigrate to the USA; and for the same period in 2023, the total was 854. In each case, this amounted to approximately 10% of the total number of teachers in the Jamaican Education system at the time.⁴ In the case of the teachers, and similarly, nurses and other health care professionals, most persons in the migration streams are females. Recruitment is usually for 3-year initial contract periods which are subject to renewal. Given the short-term character of initial contracts and the social challenges - including disruption to children's education - associated with the relocation of family members, some migrants have opted to establish a temporary home in the host country while sustaining efforts to support their immediate familial homes in the Caribbean.

While the drain on the national education system is very great, at the individual level such migration for overseas employment enhances the capacity of young professionals to earn competitive incomes, and to make investments that provide a basis for the sustenance of their families in the long term. However, although such arrangements may have positive economic effects upon the wellbeing of migrants' families through enhanced remuneration packages, at the same time, they also contribute to some amount of social disruption and absentee parenting, as family members live apart until permanent residence is obtained and reunification of the family can take place.

4.2 Short-term Seasonal Migration

Despite the overall downward trend in long-term or permanent emigration, there has been an increasing trend in the migration of short-term seasonal labour which is not included in country net migration data. The contracts are negotiated and managed through bilateral agreements between the participating source Governments in LAC and the host governments of the United States and Canada. Contracts are issued to workers recruited by the Government in the participating countries, which are Mexico and eleven English-speaking Caribbean countries. The Seasonal Agricultural Workers Programme (SAWP) allows labour migration permits for a maximum of 8-month duration in any year.⁵ Mexicans and Jamaicans constitute most of the 40,000 temporary workers who are currently recruited on Canadian fruit, vegetable, and tobacco farms annually. Since 2014, the programme has been expanded and in 2016 the 8,565 Jamaicans employed in Canada was twice that of the US farm programme in that year. In the USA, the numbers of agricultural workers recruited in seasonal labour migration programme have been augmented, since 2010, by a trend of increasing employment of English-speaking migrants for the hospitality industry and factories. This change in occupational focus brought about a significant rise in female participation.

The short-term seasonal work programmes have allowed the inclusion of persons without high educational credentials, but who are 18 years or over, and able to work abroad. This provides a basis for improving the wellbeing of poor families through the transfer of money and goods resulting from the migrants' earnings while on contract. But to reduce the prospects of temporary workers seeking permanent residence, the programmes have only allowed individual workers (with no accompanying family members). This implies that, even though only temporarily, there would be disruption to roles and responsibilities in the families.

4.3 Undocumented or Irregular migration

Irregular or undocumented migration will continue where the immigration requirements at destinations are out of the reach of unskilled, poorly educated persons with little financial capital. This also applies to persons who are smuggled or trafficked across national borders. Although in **trafficking**, the entry into the host country is usually through legal channels, the activity itself is illegal and precludes normal migrant freedoms. Consequently, the economic and socio-psychological effects on the victims, as also their families, are usually devastating. At present there are negligible signs of positive outcomes.

Wherever any kind of irregular entry to the host country occurs, the migrants' illegal status inhibits the extent of support they can provide to their dependent family members through remittances. The illegal status of migrant household heads also has the potential for adverse effects upon family stability given that the prospect of family reunification in the destination country is remote. There are also the greater likelihood of family disintegration which can be exacerbated by minimal or irregular communication between the migrant and his/her family members in the origin country.

4.4 Return Migration

Voluntary return migration

There has been a significant return of long-term migrants to the Caribbean subregion, especially when they reach retirement age. For example, this movement back to countries of the Anglophone Caribbean from the UK peaked in the 1990s, with a declining trend in recent years.

The return consolidates the transnational family at its lifecycle stage when the migrant's children, who were born abroad or migrated as children to join parents, have become adults, and are usually still residing abroad. The return migrants re-settle in their country of origin resourced by funds remitted during their working life abroad, together with Social Security and pension payments transferred to them after retirement.

Involuntary return migration or deportation

The numbers of involuntary return migrants arriving in LAC countries trended upwards through the past two decades to be more than the number of voluntary returnees arriving annually. Around half the number of deported persons have a criminal record and the rest are returned for civil offences – including overstay of time permitted by their visa.

The persons who are deported from the migration destination arrive in their LAC country of birth with no cash or belongings. Returning without any financial or material resources leaves the returnee virtually destitute. This evidence of personal "failed migration" carries a stigma which inhibits family re-unification in the origin country in LAC to which they have been returned. For many deportees their immediate family resides in the migration destination abroad to which they no longer have physical access. The trauma associated with deportation is intensified by the stress of family separation and the resulting experience of isolation. A study showed that this was the factor chiefly affecting the poor mental status of involuntary returnees, inhibiting their rehabilitation in the LAC country to which they had been deported.⁶

4.5 Refugees and Asylum-Seeking Migration

In 2021, there were an estimated 269,213 refugees and asylum seekers in LAC increasing by 2022 to 296,962.⁷ Trinidad & Tobago is the Caribbean country which is currently host to the largest number of

refugees. There was a 62% increase in numbers in 2016, followed by a continuing upward trend to 3,424 in 2022, 86% of whom have their origin in Venezuela.⁸

A Case of Good Practice

Refugees and the Family in Trinidad & Tobago

UNHCR reported that in 2021, over 80% of the refugees in Trinidad and Tobago were making efforts to seek asylum and to obtain temporary legal status. Almost 6,000 asylum seekers received UNHCR documentation for the first time in 2021. It was further recorded by the IOM that in 2019, the demographic composition of the Venezuelan population in Trinidad & Tobago was comprised of 35% married/in partnerships; 62% were single; and 3% were separated, widowed, or divorced. Levels of education showed 41% secondary educated and 29% technical, tertiary or university. By 2020, those married had increased to 46% of the total number. These figures suggested a trend towards a more stable demographic profile of the Venezuelan refugees.

UNHCR supported the Government of Trinidad & Tobago in collaboration with the local non-governmental organization (NGO) - Living Waters Community - in assisting refugees to obtain permits to stay, authorization to work and access to public assistance and protection as needed. Since 1989, this NGO identified and referred persons of concern to UNHCR and ensured their access to protection. Coordination with other agencies working to support forcibly displaced persons was also enhanced with the launch of joint planning exercises for 2022. The enrolment of refugee and asylum-seeking children in schools took place and provided English-language training opportunities. More than 1,744 children were enrolled in the Equal Place (EP) programme, which delivered accredited education and tailored learning via two globally recognized platforms (in Spanish). Access to these platforms was provided at no cost to students or their families. By 2020, less than a quarter of the respondents were still in irregular situations. Further, there was a notable shift of immigrants away from the informal work sector, which may have been encouraged by the government's provision of allowing legal job options for registered migrants.

Despite many challenges due to deficiencies in services which had to be overcome, by 2020 there was a focus on family migration and family reunification in Trinidad and Tobago. To this end, efforts were made to address the immediate housing and food requirements of the immigrants as well as the specific needs and education of the children. Also, starting in the 2019–2020 school year, Venezuelan children gained access to education through the Equal Place programme developed by some of the Response for Venezuelans partners.

5. Migrant Remittances: Focus on Families

Migrant remittances are generally regarded to be the chief benefit of migration. In the case of Jamaica, despite the decrease in permanent or long-term emigration there has been evidence of an upward trend in remittances, rising to USD3,500 million in 2021. Additionally, there are ongoing informal monetary transfers, and Social Security and direct Pension transfers, which are not officially recorded by the national bank.

Since the countries with the highest levels of net emigration are the relatively poor, the impacts of remittances on families are chiefly to support their livelihood coping mechanisms. In the Caribbean, as elsewhere in LAC, poverty, and inadequate means to sustain livelihoods cause economically active household members to migrate with the hope of improving individual and family wellbeing chiefly through the return of remittances. Members of the household or wider family traditionally facilitate the migration of a member by providing financial assistance or undertaking the family responsibilities of the migrants including the care of their children. Economic support or gifts, depending on the level of obligation deemed appropriate, are expected of the migrant in return.

Nevertheless, despite the large amounts of remittances to the country overall, the assumed social equalization of remittances has not occurred because of the uneven distribution of remittance receipts, both

by geographical location of families (in terms of rural versus urban) and, more significantly, by socioeconomic sector. For example, data for Jamaica showed that approximately 76% of households in receipt of remittances were urban and 24% were rural.⁹ In terms of the economic status of recipients, households in the upper economic brackets dominated remittance receipts. In 2005, for example, only 21% of households in the lowest income quintile received remittances, compared to 43% in the upper income quintile. However, there was a shift in the recent trend in remittance receipts, with the poorest quintile receiving almost 40% by 2015. This could be explained by the increase in the number of unskilled workers participating in the seasonal migration contracts which increased the employment among the low-skilled.

A Case for Policy Concern¹⁰

Remittances and Food Security as a Proxy for Family Wellbeing in Jamaica

Taking food security as a proxy for family wellbeing, a study conducted in Kingston, Jamaica was based on a survey of a representative sample of households across the city. Cash remittances from migrants were the second most important income source overall (after formal and informal work), involving nearly one quarter of all households in the study sample. One-quarter of all households also reported receiving in-kind food transfers from relatives in rural areas of Jamaica. Some received food at least once per year, others at least once per month and a small number, weekly. Additionally, 25% of households received food remittances from overseas, though these tended to be less frequent, with most transfers occurring once or twice per year.

Measures were made of the recognized components of food security: Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS), Household Food Insecurity Access Prevalence (HFIAP), Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS), and Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning (MAHFP). The results of the average HFIAS showed that more than one-third (37%) of the households were severely food insecure and more than one quarter (28%) were moderately food insecure. Only 26% of households proved to be completely food secure. Although the mean MAHFP was relatively good (11.12) suggesting that most households had 'adequate' access to food throughout the year, the measure of dietary diversity (HDDS) was very low, with a mean of 4.51 out of a possible score of 12. This meant that the average household had consumed food from less than five food groups in the day prior to the survey. This low level of food security occurred despite the extent to which they were generally in receipt of remittances.

The main question regarding remittances in the context of the impact of migration trends relates to the extent to which the receipt of remittances has a positive impact on food security among poor families. To answer this question, the first step was to examine the difference in the food security indicators between households that received remittances and those that did not. The data showed that there were only minor differences, and households not receiving remittances were slightly less food secure and had lower dietary diversity as compared to households receiving remittances. However, these differences were not significant. When the relationship between food security and remittance receipt was further explored for households with high Lived Poverty Index (LPI) scores, even among the poorest households in the survey, there was no significant relationship between receipt of remittances and improved food security.

Despite the high expectations placed on migrant remittances to compensate for any negative effects of migration on families, the relationships between remittances and family wellbeing, in this case by relieving food insecurity, is cause for concern.

6. Conclusion

The experiences of migration indicate the significant variability in life cycle experiences linked to cultural diversity and determinants of immigration regulations based on race, social class, gender, education levels and skill sets. Additionally, in some, though not all cases family reunification is permitted by the immigration regulations. Migration affects both the structure of the family as well as the functions and, therefore, its wellbeing. The impacts on family structure occur through the impact of migration on other demographic trends, including fertility, changes in household size, as well as single parenthood, demographic ageing, and the numbers of elderly as single person households because adult children have migrated. In relation to function, migration directly impacts the roles and responsibilities of household members and thereby the security, parenting, care of children and the aged, and family wellbeing.

END NOTES

¹ World Bank 2023. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.HOU.FEMA.ZS?locations=XJ&name_desc=true.

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³ This was based on the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas, July 1973.

⁴ Education Minister Provides Update on Teacher Resignations – Ministry of Education and Youth. <http://moey.gov.jm/>

⁵ Hire a temporary worker through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program - Overview - Canada.ca

⁶ Thomas-Hope, Elizabeth (2014). *Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Forced Returnees to Jamaica*, IOM, Kingston, Jamaica.

⁷ [Refugee population by country or territory of asylum - Latin America & Caribbean, Dominica | Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)

⁸ Thomas-Hope, Elizabeth (2022). *Migration in Trinidad and Tobago: Current Trends and Policies*. UNDP LAC PDS N^o. 37.

⁹ Government of Jamaica, Statistical Institute (STATIN), 2014.

¹⁰ Thomas-Hope, Elizabeth. (2023). *The SDGs, Migrant Remittances and Food Security in Jamaica*. MiFood Paper No. 7, Waterloo.