



Human Displacement in the Caribbean During COVID-19

A Discussion Paper by Shiva S. Mohan, Wilfrid Laurier University

Translated into English from the original Spanish version

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused stoppages and shutdowns in Caribbean states. Administrations have focused primarily on domestic responses to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus and its impacts, prioritizing their nationals. These circumstances have amplified the vulnerabilities of asylum seekers, refugees, migrants, and other mobile populations in the region. The socioeconomic implications have negatively impacted migrants' daily lives. Access to resources and COVID-19 testing have been limited among these vulnerable populations, including children. Caribbean governments should allow migrants immediate and full access to health services and social supports, articulate a coordinated regional response to the situation, and engage in research programs to determine impacts on migrant communities.

Context

As a public health issue, Caribbean governments have sought to first contain and mitigate the spread of COVID-19, and second, curb its financial and economic impacts in their respective countries. There have been commonalities in nations' responses thus far: the total shutdown of countries' borders, allowing only essential businesses and services to remain open, and in some jurisdictions, curfew enforcement. These measures have had substantial impacts on the daily lives of migrant populations, heightening their vulnerabilities in a time of immobility and limited access.

Migration and Border Closures

- There are increased return-migration flows of Haitians in the Dominican Republic back to Haiti. The Dominican Republic has suspended the temporary legal status of Haitian migrant workers. Little or no screening and testing is being done at border crossings, increasing the risk of importation of COVID-19-positive cases into Haiti.

- There is a continued inflow of Venezuelans to island nations through unofficial entry points. Venezuelan migrations persist via precarious boat journeys to islands such as Trinidad and Tobago, Aruba, and Curacao.
- In Trinidad, newly arrived migrants are being detained at police stations. The readiness and capacity of community police stations to quarantine migrants is uncertain. This gives rise to questions about hygiene and sanitization at these institutions.
- Deportations of Venezuelans have been put on pause by the Trinidad and Tobago government until July.¹ However, hygiene and sanitization conditions at the Immigration Detention Center is of concern. Migrants remain in close proximity to each other, while there has been no COVID-19 testing at the center.
- Deportations continue from the United States to the Caribbean. This has heightened geopolitical anxieties and concerns about the spread of the virus through imported cases. There are reports of Jamaican and Haitian deportees having tested positive at their destinations.

Access to Resources: Nonessential Workplace and Service Shutdowns

- Caribbean governments have prioritized relief funding and social supports to their nationals. In particular, there is much anti-immigrant rhetoric alleging that migrants are "illegally" accessing government aid.
- Jobs held by migrants are largely in the informal economy and service sectors—businesses and services that have been



deemed nonessential. With no income streams or monetary supports from the state, migrants are having difficulties meeting rent commitments, and landlords have been threatening evictions. Documented and undocumented Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic are forced to return to Haiti in these circumstances.

- Recommended physical distancing is not practical for migrants, increasing their health risks. Migrants often reside in large numbers in confined settings.
- Migrant children with already limited access to the school system now have little or no access to instruction. With the shift to online classes, migrant families are hard pressed to purchase the necessary technologies to facilitate continued learning.
- Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have reported an increase in gender-based and domestic violence cases, however, victims are hesitant to make official reports for fear of being stigmatized.
- In Trinidad, law court hearings have moved online. Whereas in-person hearings may be furnished with an interpreter, interpretation is not available in virtual hearings, disadvantaging migrant cases.

Recommendations

Establish clear domestic and international regulatory frameworks, noting NGOs and aid groups at work in each Caribbean country to (1) assist in identifying vulnerable migrant communities and direct resources to them, and (2) facilitate civil society recommendations to improve protections to these populations.

Short term

- Allow migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers immediate and full access to health care and social services, including monetary supports, streamlined through NGO frameworks.
- Release detained migrants charged with immigration infractions to focus policing resources elsewhere, akin to the discharge of “low-risk” prisoners in other jurisdictions.
- Streamline the reception infrastructure and quarantine frameworks for all new migrant arrivals to ensure best practice is adhered to according to Pan American Health Organization and World Health Organization standards.
- Supply technologies and other supports required for continued learning to all migrant children.
- Develop a comprehensive COVID-19 response plan for Haiti and the Dominican Republic, given their physical proximity.
- Coordinate a regional lobby through the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) to request that the United States

suspend all deportations to Caribbean nations until the COVID-19 pandemic has ended.

- Coordinate a regional effort to lobby for the suspension of debt servicing and apply for emergency funding from multilateral organizations to facilitate short-term needs, such as ramping up quarantine facilities and COVID-19 testing.

Medium to Long Term

- Prioritize migrant populations in considerations of post-pandemic economic recovery plans. States should harness migrants’ physical and technical capacities in restoring economies.
- Articulate a long-term and coordinated regional response plan to “crisis” eventualities—health related and otherwise—ensuring that Caribbean states have the resource capacities to respond.
- Engage in robust and ongoing data collection and research specific to the impact of COVID-19 on human displacement, with focus on disaggregated data to enable targeted responses, and emphasize research on migrant children and youth to identify how they are affected by urgent changes in such circumstances.

Endnotes

- ¹ Trinidad and Tobago’s government recently repatriated a number of Venezuelans intercepted at sea who were attempting to make entry during the pandemic-response border shutdown.



The author wishes to thank Professor Jessica Byron, Dr. Natalie Dietrich-Jones, Gina Maharaj, Jason Nathu, Dr. Claudia Vargas-Ribas, Iván Ogando, Saúl Baños, and Jacqueline Laguardia Martínez for their invaluable comments and suggestions at the virtual workshop of the Latin American and Caribbean Civil Society Network for the Prevention of Mass Atrocities organized by CRIES (Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales) and the Stanley Center.



About Us

The Stanley Center for Peace and Security partners with people, organizations, and the greater global community to drive policy progress in three issue areas—mitigating climate change, avoiding the use of nuclear weapons, and preventing mass violence and atrocities. The center was created in 1956 and maintains its independence while developing forums for diverse perspectives and ideas. To learn more about our recent publications and upcoming events, please visit stanleycenter.org.



CRIES

The Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales (CRIES) is a network of research centers and non-governmental organizations that acts as a regional think tank, promoting analysis, debate, and policy creation about topics of regional, hemispheric, and global relevance, from the perspective of civil society. CRIES is an independent nonprofit institution that promotes pluralism and citizen participation. It is not affiliated with any political or religious organization. For more information about its activities and its virtual publications, please visit www.cries.org.

