

WORKING PAPERS

The Challenges of Settlement and Integration: Exploring Canada's Response to Venezuelan Migration

Berti Olinto

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Abstract

The Venezuelan migrant crisis has brought major socioeconomic challenges for countries in South America, and it has sparked public debates on immigration policies, xenophobia, and discrimination. Venezuelan migration to Central and North America has considerably increased over the last 5 years. Since 2017, the community of Venezuelan migrants, refugees, and asylum claimants has notably grown in Canada's major and medium-size cities. Although Canada's response has focused more on providing financial support to host countries in South America and less on providing culturally focused settlement alternatives in Canada, these communities have found ways to promote Venezuelan migrants' social and economic integration through the creation of nonprofit and community-based initiatives. In this article, we explore perspectives and opinions from 35 Venezuelan community leaders and nonprofit representatives regarding the needs and challenges of the Venezuelan newcomer and refugee population in five Canadian cities as well as their struggle for community engagement and political participation in the domestic context. The analysis sheds light on how Venezuelan immigrants have navigated the complexities of migration in North America and how they have faced the difficulties of coming from a country with an immigration rather than an emigration history.

Keywords: Venezuela, Venezuelan migration, settlement, integration

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Introduction

Over the last 7 years, Venezuela has experienced an exodus of more than 6,000,000 people. International organizations have referred to this exodus as a humanitarian and refugee crisis with serious social and economic implications for many countries in Latin America. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), seventeen countries host around 80% of Venezuelans throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, triggering the largest external displacement crisis in Latin America's recent history (International Organization for Migration, 2021).

Contrary to other South American countries, Venezuela does not have a history of emigration. Rather, the country had experienced several waves of immigration, especially after the 1940s, when it became the world's biggest oil exporter (Sassen-Koob 1979; Fånes-Sætermo, 2016)

This unprecedented crisis has mostly affected Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, and Chile, and it has triggered conversations, research, and public debates on migration, refugees, and settlement policies in Latin America, including Caribbean nations with very limited immigration infrastructures, such as Trinidad and Tobago, Curacao, Aruba, and Guyana.

Venezuelan migration to North America has also increased significantly during the last decade. In the United States, the Venezuelan immigrant population increased from 184,000 in 2010 to 394,000 in 2019 (Hassan-Gallardo & Batalova, 2020). By 2021, U.S. officials estimated 323,000 Venezuelans living in the United States without legal status were eligible to apply for Temporary Protected Status (TPS), more than any other nation designated for TPS (Miroff, 2021).

A less traditional destination for Venezuelan migrants, Canada has also received a share of Venezuelan migrants. According to the 2016 census, Canada's Venezuelan immigrant population reached 26,345; however, nonprofit and diasporic organizations claim the number could be significantly higher in 2022, considering the number of refugee claims processed during the last 5 years, the number of Venezuelans accessing federally funded settlement services between 2016 and 2020, and the irregular immigrant population.

Although the Venezuelan refugee and migration phenomena have been widely explored in Latin America and the United States, knowledge about these communities in Canada remains scarce.

Facing the lack of migration background and experience as well as the limited culturally focused settlement services in Canada, these communities have created their own initiatives and organizations to foster socioeconomic integration, political participation, and community engagement with Canadian society while promoting their cultural values and supporting their communities back home and in other countries in Latin America.

In this paper, we analyze the ways these organizations have become an alternative for the Venezuelan immigrant communities and how some of these initiatives have helped Venezuelan nationals navigate the immigration and settlement systems in Canada's major and medium-size cities.

We aim to explore the social dynamics of Venezuelan migrants in Canada, with a focus on access to services and service provision, by analyzing the perspectives of Venezuelan nonprofits and community-based organizations' representatives and the perspectives of Hispanic/Latinx associations and settlement organizations with Venezuelan clients and service users.

On the other hand, by exploring government-based settlement service access rates during the humanitarian crisis, we provide data on Canada's response to the migration crisis, focusing on the domestic/national context.

Therefore, we aim to answering the following questions:

- What are the strengths and limitations of local, diasporic, and community-based initiatives in providing reception, assistance, and socioeconomic integration services to Venezuelan immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees?
- What needs/challenges have Venezuelan immigrants faced when accessing settlement services in major and medium-size cities in Canada?

Background

The massive migration of Venezuelans is the result of a complex crisis that involves wrong public policies, governmental mismanagement, international sanctions, political turmoil, and human rights violations (The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019; Roht-Arriaza & Martínez, 2019) all of which led to the progressive deterioration of the health care system, increasing crime rates, and a chronic shortage of food and medicine (Ochab, 2020; Doocy et al., 2020).

Recent migration literature have focused on the driving forces that have led more than six million Venezuelans (around 18% of the country's population) to leave their country over the last 10 years, including hunger and concerns for personal safety (Van Rooke & De Theije, 2020; Salas-Wright et al., 2019); labour conditions (Barrios, Caraballo-Arias & Madrid, 2019, Gomez Ramirez, 2018) and precarious access to health and other public services (Bellorin-Font & Carlini, 2021; Paniz-Mondolfi et al., 2019).

For many, the Bolivarian Revolution of late president Hugo Chavez and its ideological platform, *Socialismo del Siglo XXI* (Socialism of the 21st Century) are key factors to analyze the crisis that sparked the massive migration of Venezuelans.

Chávez—a former military officer who launched a failed coup d'état against Carlos Andres Pérez in 1992—was elected President of Venezuela in 1998 with the support of the *Movimiento Quinta República* (Fifth Republic Movement), a socialist platform that had 56 percent of the electorate preference. Chávez railed against the country's elites for widespread corruption and pledged to use Venezuela's vast oil wealth (the largest reserve in the world) to reduce poverty and inequality. He remained President until his death in March 2013 and “was praised by other socialist governments in Latin America for expropriating millions of acres of land and nationalizing hundreds of private businesses and foreign-owned assets, including oil projects run by ExxonMobil and ConocoPhillips” (Cheatham, Roy & Labrador, 2021). The socialist party founded by Chávez in 2006 (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* - PSUV) gained control of many key institutions including much of the judiciary and the electoral council.

Nicolas Maduro, a former bus driver and trade union negotiator, is Chavez's political heir. Maduro won the April 2013 presidential election with a margin of 1.6 percentage points (the closest vote in the country's recent history) amidst opposition demands for a vote-by-vote audit (Lopez and Watts, 2013). Maduro continued with PSUV's socialist agenda but without Chavez's charismatic presence. Under his presidency, oil prices plummeted, and Venezuela's oil-dependent economy collapsed; the value of money depreciated at a dizzying pace while hyperinflation became unstoppable (Botia, 2019). Shortages of basic supplies became widespread, prompting more than 5.2 million Venezuelans to leave the country between 2015 and 2020 (IOM, 2021).

In December 2016, opposition parties won a majority in the National Assembly, and the legislature became a thorn for President Maduro's. The political crisis escalated since March 2017, when Venezuela's Supreme Court, controlled by Maduro, took over the legislative powers of the opposition-led National Assembly. Four months later, the President's call for a Constituent Assembly resulted in the election of 545 representatives (all of them pro-government), who were endowed with supra-constitutional powers and authority over all existing institutions. Anti-

government demonstrators staged daily protests across Venezuela that continued to evolve into violent clashes with police, leaving thousands arrested, hundreds injured, and more than 60 dead (Taylor, 2017), which ultimately increased migration levels, particularly to Colombia and other countries in South America.

Maduro was re-elected in 2018 but the poll was widely dismissed as rigged (Phillips, 2018; Neuman & Casey, 2018). National Assembly leader Juan Guaidó labelled Maduro a "usurper" and declared himself interim president in January 2019, and the U.S. government immediately recognized his mandate, followed by Canada, France, Spain, Germany, Greece, Panama, Peru, Chile, and the United Kingdom, among others (Botia, 2019; Jones & Wintour, 2019). Since 2019, Venezuela has dealt with the complexities of this 'presidential crisis' (Hernandez, 2019; Pascus, 2019) which has made more difficult the situation of Venezuelan migrants and their embassies and consular offices across the globe. While the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 have implied new mobilization challenges to both regular and irregular migrants (many of which have left for Colombia by foot), the Venezuelan migration has continued to grow reaching an estimated 6.1 million migrants in 2022 (Mixed Migration Centre, 2022).

The refugee crisis

The nature of the Venezuelan migration phenomenon matches the concept of the so-called mixed migrations. The term refers to a complex population movement including refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, and other migrants (IOM, 2008; Kiseleva & Markin, 2017) whose principal characteristics include the differentiated kind of movement among those who move as either regular or irregular migrants (Migration Data Portal, 2022). The 'mixed' component of the Venezuelan migration crisis is characterized by migrants and refugees fleeing political persecution and conflict and people seeking better lives, access to public services and employment opportunities.

Recent migration literature accounts to four waves of Venezuelan migration. Starting in the early 2000s, the first wave was comprised by Venezuelan entrepreneurs and politicians threatened by Hugo Chavez's regime. It included people from the state-run oil company *Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)* who were expelled by Chavez government; people with favorable economic conditions and high education levels, and people with the possibility of processing their residence in countries such as Spain, Italy, Portugal and the United States as a result of personal patrimony or family ties (Fatas, Hughes & Thompson, 2019; Muñoz-Pogossian, 2018).

A second wave took place between 2004 and 2013. During this period Chavez expropriated private corporations, suspended media concessions, and won a referendum that allowed him to be elected indefinitely, which prompted a massive capital outflow and the migration of a new group of entrepreneurs, and high- and middle-class professionals to Europe and the United States (Genatios & La Fuente, 2021; Paez, Vivas & Pulido, 2014)

The passing of Hugo Chavez in 2013 left the country sharply divided. His handpicked successor, Nicolas Maduro, took over the presidency after a snap election, which gave Chavez's party six more years in power. The instability that followed, the deterioration of the country's economy and the economic sanctions imposed by the United States intensified the migration of Venezuelans. Between 2013 and 2016, a greater number of young and middle-class professionals and people from different social strata left the country, which is commonly referred as the third wave of Venezuelan migration (Mijares & Rojas-Silva, 2018; Genatios & La Fuente, 2021). It is estimated that more than 3 million Venezuelans left the country during this period (The World Bank, 2019), mostly to Colombia, the United States, Spain, Chile, Argentina, Italy, Ecuador, and Panama.

From 2016, the massive migration of Venezuelans due to the escalation of the economic crisis, the collapse of public services and food shortages has been labelled as the 'fourth wave'

(Huber, 2021; Linares, 2020) which is referred to as one of the largest refugee and humanitarian crises in the western hemisphere in the 21st Century (UNCHR, 2021; Bahar & Dooley, 2019). The movement of people in this period is characterized by the presence of lower-class citizens migrating to neighbour countries fleeing hunger and the economic collapse; these groups included the *caminantes*, who are Venezuelans migrating on foot to Colombia and other South American and Central American destinations (ACAPS, 2021). While the *caminantes* phenomenon had been observed since 2018, their vulnerability increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic because of additional health risks and less assistance being available. By 2021, an estimated 162,000 *caminantes* passed through Colombia, 90,300 through Ecuador, 75,600 through Peru, and 2,900 through Central America and Mexico (R4V, 2021; ACAPS, 2021) towards the United States (Miroff, 2021).

Impact on neighbouring countries

Venezuelan migration has raised questions about how countries in Latin America manage new arrivals, particularly in neighbouring countries such as Colombia, which historically has been a country of emigration rather than immigration. By 2021, it is estimated that Colombia had received more than 1.800.000 Venezuelan migrants (Migración Colombia, 2021). Its response has been generally regarded as one of the most innovative and generous of those involving mass reception and regularization programs created to provide legal status to Venezuelans (Buschschlüter, 2021; Seele & Bolter, 2020; Gutierrez-Palma, 2021).

Colombia began issuing a Special Stay Permit (*Permiso Especial de Permanencia-PEP*) in August 2017 to Venezuelans who had entered legally (Padilla, Frydenlund & Palacio, 2021). The first round of PEP covered any Venezuelan who had entered Colombia with a passport before July 28, 2017 (Seele & Bolter, 2020). In 2020, two new Special Stay Permits announced by Colombia benefited Venezuelans who entered Colombia before 29 November 2019 with stamped passports as well as “those currently in an irregular situation but holding an offer of employment for a period of at least two months up to a maximum of two years” (UNCHR, 2020). Between 2017 and 2021, there have been nine versions of PEP with different qualification criteria, renewable for two years at a time.

Peru and Ecuador, the other two countries with the largest Venezuelan migrant population, have developed their own immigration policies to deal with the recent influx of migrants. Peru's initial policy response was characterized by an active leadership position towards the reception and protection of Venezuelans, particularly in regard to access to residence and legal support (Aron-Said and Castillo-Jara, 2022). More recently, the response has shifted to an increased closure and securitization of immigration policies, which has pushed Venezuelans into irregularity (Freier and Perez, 2021), a shift motivated by negative public opinions and criminalizing media discourses towards Venezuelans (Amnesty International 2020; Pecho-Gonzales, 2019). By 2022, it is estimated that more than 1.200.000 Venezuelan migrants live in Peru.

Ecuador announced in 2021 the implementation of a "normalization process" for the 430,000 Venezuelan migrants living in the country (Cohen, 2021). As Peru, Ecuador's response has been labelled as inconsistent or fragile, reflecting the complex political tensions and institutional challenges it faces (Miller and Panayotatos, 2019; Guerra, 2020). While the country maintained paths to regularization for Venezuelans based on its Human Mobility Law, which enshrines a strongly principled approach to regularizing the status of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, some policies have undermined the intent of the law, preventing Venezuelans from accessing justice, public services and programs. These policy changes appear “politically motivated, coming in response to surges in arrivals, shifts in public opinion, [and] a spike in xenophobia” (Miller and Panayotatos, 2019)

Venezuelan migrants have also crowded into Aruba and Curaçao off Venezuela's north coast or headed east, to Trinidad and Tobago. The migration crisis has posed a bigger challenge for these tiny islands, where the response has been subject to controversy. In Trinidad, since 2020 arrivals have limited access to asylum, and face intense monitoring by border patrols as well as stop, search and arrest practices leading to detention in one of the two detention centres in the country (Chami & Seemungal, 2021; Rodriguez & Collins). Human Rights and International organizations had accused the Trinidadian government of criminalizing the irregular entry of migrants and refugees, contrary to international standards (Amnesty International, 2020)

Trinidad had implemented a visa system for Venezuelans and embarked on a registration process to document people with a legal status and grant amnesty to those who entered irregularly, which would allow them to live and work for fixed periods (Chami & Seemungal, 2021). Between May and June 2019, Trinidad registered approximately 16,500 Venezuelans and extended their stay until December 2020. By May 2019 there were more than 60,000 Venezuelans in Trinidad (Otis, 2019), a country of 1.300.000 people.

Heading North

Although the majority of migrants initially migrate and try to settle in neighboring countries, there has also been a significant increase of Venezuelans in transit through Central America and Mexico. In 2021, Venezuelans came fifth in terms of irregular entries into Panama (2% of the total number of irregular entries to Panama through the Darien Gap, detected and registered by immigration authorities). "In 2022, they became the top nationality, making up 26% of the total number of irregular entries in January 2022 [...] This change has created new migration routes between Colombia and Panama" (Mixed Migration Centre, 2022). Media reported that the 6.000 migrant caravan leaving Tapachula in Mexico in June 2022 included people mostly from Central America, Cuba and Venezuela (Perlmutter, 2022; US-bound migrant caravan leaves southern Mexico, 2022; Clemente & Pesce, 2022).

Record numbers of Venezuelan migrants had been crossing from Mexico into the United States, which was described as a new border challenge for the Joe Biden administration, raising concerns that more Venezuelans could be heading north (Miroff, 2021). U.S. authorities had intercepted almost 14.000 Venezuelan migrants along the Mexico border in October 2021, the highest one-month total ever and more than double the number taken into custody in August that year. The group of migrants included Venezuelans who left their homes years ago for Colombia and other countries in the region.

Venezuelans had been among the top asylum seekers in the United States, accounting for one-fifth of all applicants in 2016 (Gedan, 2017; Krogstad & Lopez, 2017). In 2018, Venezuela was the second country with more people granted either affirmative or defensive asylum in the United States (16 percent), only after China (18 percent) and followed by El Salvador (7.7 percent) (US Department of Homeland Security, 2019). Venezuela experienced the largest increase, eleven-fold since 2017 and eighteen-fold since 2016, driven mainly by affirmative asylum grants (Mosaad, 2019).

In 2021, the country granted a 18-month Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Venezuelans 'physically present' in the United States, excluding those summarily expelled at the US border and the nearly 2.700 asylum seekers stranded in Mexico that year (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Trac Immigration, 2021), which was criticized by international organizations that called for an end of summary expulsions and a waiver to the TPS physical presence requirement (Reliefweb, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021). By 2019, Venezuelan population had grown to 394,000, making it the fifth-largest South American immigrant population in the United States (Hassan-Gallardo & Batalova, 2020)

Although Venezuelan migration to Canada is still relatively incipient if compared to the United States, the migrant communities have considerably grown over the last 15 years, including economic migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. From 2006 to 2015, it is estimated that 12,367 Venezuelans migrated to Canada, most of them as permanent residents from the federal skilled worker program (The Canadian Magazine of Immigration, 2019). In the 2016 national census, people who reported Venezuela as their country of origin in Canada was 26,345 (Statistics Canada, 2021) and it was the eighth Latin American community in the country after Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, Chile, Peru, Brazil, and Guatemala. Between 2014 and 2019 refugee protection claims referred to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada increased from 31 to 1334 (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2021). By 2019, 1329 refugee claims had been accepted by the Canadian government. Between 2020 and the first trimester of 2022, IRB processed an average of 1180 refugee claims from Venezuelan citizens, 822 of which remained 'pending' as of March 2022 (IRB, 2021).

In 2019, The federal government eased immigration and refugee rules for Venezuelans allowing failed asylum claimants have the ability to challenge deportation orders by arguing that they will face risk if they are sent home. The measure applied only to Venezuelan citizens whose claims were rejected prior to August 2019, "as the government says changes to conditions in that country will be taken into account on all future refugee claims" (Canada eases rules for Venezuelan refugees and immigrants, 2019). That same year, Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the federal government's department that facilitates the arrival of immigrants to Canada and provides protection to refugees, stated that Venezuelan passport holders wanting to travel to, study or stay in Canada would be able to continue using their passport if it would soon expire or if it expired in the previous 5 years (Government of Canada, 2019). With this measure Canada recognized the decree published by the Venezuelan opposition-led National Assembly on June 7, 2019, regarding the validity of expired Venezuelan passports for a five-year period due to the country's deepening economic crisis and the challenges Venezuelans faced to renew expired passports. Canadian Government representatives stated the opportunities granted to Venezuelan citizens "acknowledge the country's situation and calls for assistance from Venezuelan citizens and the ex-pat community in Canada" (Government of Canada, 2019).

The response from the Canadian government, however, has focused less on the needs of Venezuelan communities in Canada's cities and more on providing monetary assistance to mitigate the impact of the migration crisis on hosts countries, particularly in South America and the Caribbean region. The government has provided monetary assistance of more than \$55 million in humanitarian aid since 2017 (Government of Canada, 2022). These funds are being provided to NGOs, primarily in Colombia and Brazil, to guarantee emergency food assistance, health care, water, sanitation, education, and protection services.

In 2021, Canada hosted the International Donor's Conference in Solidarity with Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants, in collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), co-leads of the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V). It has been reported that the conference raised more than \$1.5 billion in pledges and loans from governments, the World Bank, and other international organizations (Government of Canada, 2021).

With its participation in the Lima Group, Canada's response aligns with its preference to remain as a "middle power" for diplomatic and multilateral solutions (Grenier, 2021). Established on August 8, 2017, the Lima Group focused on coordinating countries' efforts and apply international pressure on the Venezuelan government. The initiative brought together 35 Latin American countries as well as 69 permanent observers and was considered "an important forum of political dialogue in the Western Hemisphere" (Ochab, 2020). Moreover, Canada promoted the "Joint Declaration of Support for the Democratic Transition in Venezuela," made public in a press release in August 2020, by which 31 countries called upon all Venezuelans, their institutions, and

their political parties to put the interests of Venezuela above politics (Government of Canada, 2020).

Notwithstanding, the Lima Group has been widely regarded as a failure in regard to the migration crisis and its intentions to address the Venezuelan situation (Dyer, 2022, Kirk, 2022). The Group had the “clear intent of regime change in the country by imposing Juan Guaido as president. Three years later, the strategy has failed [...] Nicolas Maduro remains in charge, international support for Guaido has virtually disappeared, and the Biden administration now allows U.S. oil companies to operate in Venezuela” (Kirk, 2022). By 2022, Migration from Venezuela is still considered a pressing issue in the continent’s political agendas.

On the other hand, Canada’s response to Venezuelan communities in Canadian soil has been regarded as ‘indifferent’ (Larratt-Smith & Saldias, 2019) and ‘discriminatory’ (Harris & Parry, 2018). At the peak of the humanitarian crisis, Canadian media and Venezuelan-Canadian associations reported that the Canadian government made travel more difficult for Venezuelans, which was regarded as “a stain on Canada’s otherwise positive humanitarian record” (Larratt-Smith & Saldias, 2019). In 2019, leaders in the Venezuelan communities urged the Federal Government to ease entry requirements for Venezuelans instead of creating new obstacles for Venezuelan migrants seeking refuge in Canada. By that year, the number of visa applications from Venezuelans had remained steady, but the rejection rate had increased more than 54 per cent (Harris & Parry, 2019).

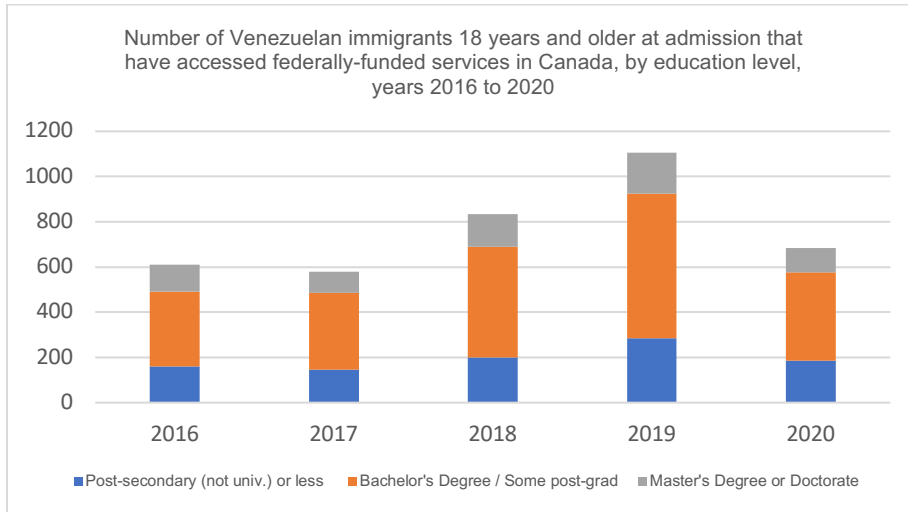
The Venezuelan immigrant community in Canada: an overview

During the first two Venezuelan migration waves (2000 – 2013), many university-educated migrants with experience in the oil industry settled in Calgary and surrounding areas, which became an important hub for Venezuelan migration (Millman, 2008). Over the last 15 years, Montreal and Toronto have become the most traditional destination for Venezuelan newcomers and refugees. Other cities such as Vancouver and Hamilton have also attracted Venezuelan newcomers.

According to the 2016 census, the largest Venezuelan population are based in the Greater Toronto Area (8,260 Venezuelan immigrants), Montreal (4,385), Calgary (2,215) and Vancouver (1,110). The Venezuelan diaspora in cities such as Edmonton, Hamilton and Quebec City have experienced a relatively steady growth over the last 10 years.

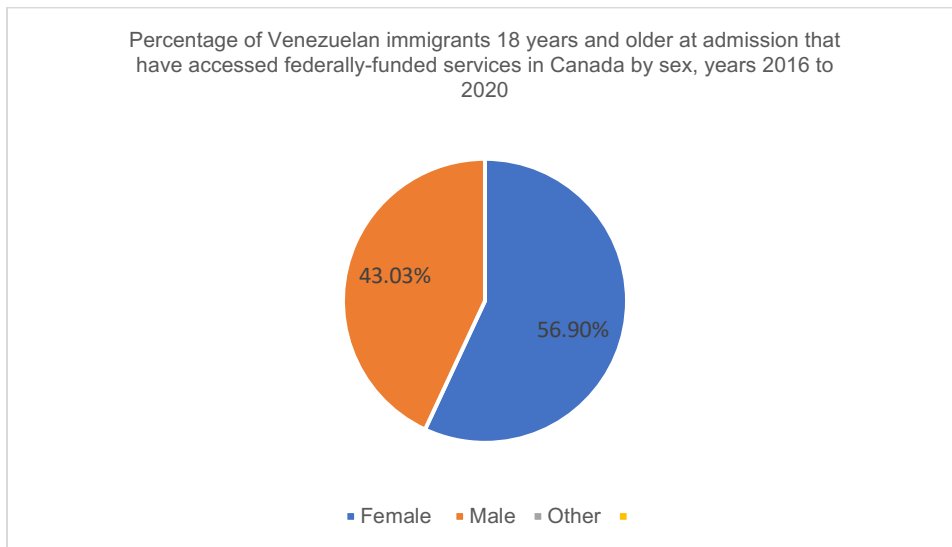
It is estimated that more than 70% Venezuelans who migrated between 2000 and 2014 held university degrees (Paez, 2015). In Canada, between 2016 and 2020, 65.5% of the Venezuelans who accessed government-based services and programs held university degrees (Figure 1), and 56.9% identified themselves as female (Figure 2).

Figure 1



Source: Statistics Canada, 2020 Longitudinal Immigration Database settlement services module.
 Note: Quebec is not included, as settlement services in Quebec are administered by the provincial government.

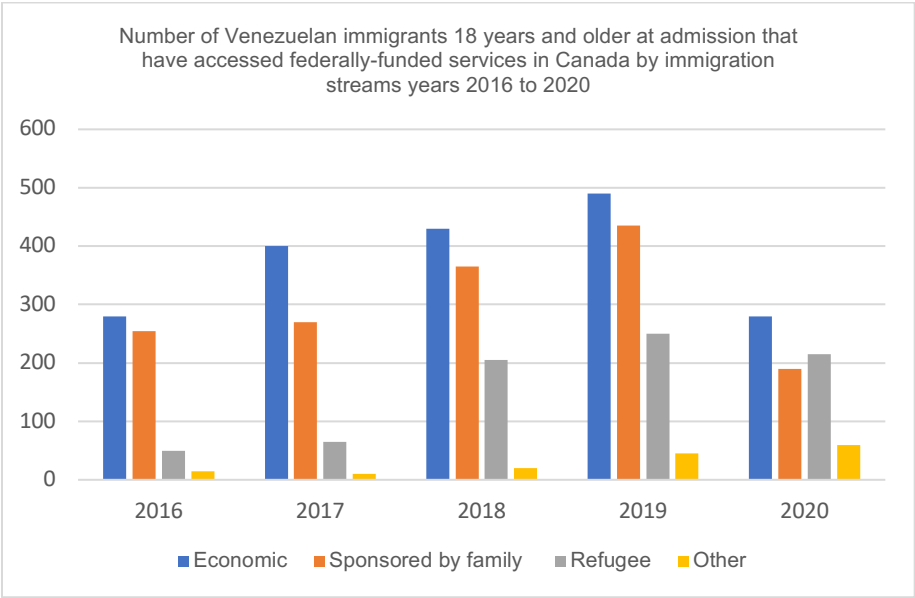
Figure 2



Source: Statistics Canada, 2020 Longitudinal Immigration Database settlement services module.
 Note: Quebec is not included, as settlement services in Quebec are administered by the provincial government.

During the same period, 1880 (43.3%) of the 4335 Venezuelan immigrants who accessed federally-funded services came to Canada under the economic classes which include Federal Skilled Workers, Provincial Nominees and their dependents. 1515 (34.9%) were sponsored by family members, and only 785 (18.1%) had refugee status (Figure 3).

Figure 3



Source: Statistics Canada, 2020 Longitudinal Immigration Database settlement services module.
Note: Quebec is not included, as settlement services in Quebec are administered by the provincial government
Note: Economic stream data include spouses and dependents.

Between 2001 and 2022, at least 15 community-based, charities, and non-profit organizations have been created all across Canada to provide additional support to Venezuelan migrants, and to promote Venezuelan culture while fostering socioeconomic integration within the Canadian society. Their services include English and French classes, seminars on settlement issues for newcomers and refugees, health, mental health, and nutrition.

Although the sociopolitical impact of some of these initiatives are still incipient, these associations have opened spaces for discussions regarding Venezuelan migration to Canada and promoted conversations with different levels of the Canadian government to address the situation of Venezuelan newcomers in Canada’s major and medium-size cities.

There is little research on these organizations, hence the knowledge about Venezuelan newcomers and refugees searching for institutional support and navigating Canada’s immigration and settlement systems is still very limited. As we will explore further, Venezuelan nonprofits have developed their own initiatives to address the obstacles and the needs of this new community with no immigration background in North America and no political lobby in Ottawa.

Methods

We conducted 35 semistructured interviews with representatives from Venezuelan–Canadian associations and nonprofits, settlement organizations, and Hispanic/Latinx organizations with Venezuelan service users. The purpose of this study is neither to provide a comparative study of the Venezuelan immigrant population in Canada’s cities nor to explore patterns in the Venezuelan migrant community and its behaviour in terms of settlement, but rather to analyze the ways these organizations have developed their own narratives on the Venezuelan migrant community based on its needs and aspirations, particularly during the Venezuelan refugee crisis.

We considered five cities for the interviews: Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary, and Hamilton. The questions addressed the following topics: (a) major needs from the Venezuelan migrant population according to service requests, (b) challenges in the response and service

provision for Venezuelan migrants and refugees, and (c) the types of community-based and/or government-funded services and programs the Venezuelan population has accessed during the humanitarian crisis.

Whereas the qualitative component of the study focused on analyzing the testimonies and narratives on service provision and challenges, in the quantitative aspect, we aimed to provide data on the needs of Venezuelan communities in terms of socioeconomic integration, community engagement, and political participation.

Of the 35 interviews, we conducted 12 in the Greater Toronto Area, eight in Vancouver, seven in Calgary, six in Montreal, and two in Hamilton. Of the participants, 17 were representatives of Venezuelan–Canadian nonprofits, groups, and associations; 11 were settlement workers from community centres and newcomer agencies; and seven came from Hispanic/Latinx organizations with Venezuelan members/service users.

The organizations

This study considered three types of organizations (See Methods). In this section, we describe some of their main characteristics and commonalities.

Venezuelan-Canadian nonprofits and NGOs

All of the Venezuelan-Canadian organizations we considered for this study were nonprofit, volunteer-based, and funded by private donors. Their work focused on supporting Venezuelans' cultural and socioeconomic integration through humanitarian programs and raising awareness through initiatives and education activities.

In general, their mandates focus on connecting and interacting with the Venezuelan and the Latinx communities in major Canadian cities, including collaborating with other Latinx and Canadian associations. All of their representatives stated that one of the key aspects of the organizations' work is developing fundraising activities to respond to the needs of Venezuelan citizens in Venezuela and other Latin American countries (i.e., Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil and Chile).

In addition, these organizations promoted Venezuelan arts and culture in Canada. Some even conducted annual events to showcase Venezuelan cultural traits and connect with the Canadian-born population.

Another common aspect was their interactions with other associations via partnerships and collaboration. Some organizations have developed well-structured platforms by cooperating with other diasporic organizations not only from Latin America but also from other immigrant communities in Ontario, British Columbia, Quebec, and Alberta.

In terms of services, they offer English and Spanish classes, scholarships, mentorship programs, informative sessions, settlement and immigration workshops, Venezuelan seniors' programs, and cultural festivals.

Settlement and community organizations

The settlement and community organizations we included in this study had Venezuelan service users and had developed some knowledge of and experience with delivering services to meet the needs of newcomers in Venezuelan communities in Canada.

They helped Venezuelan immigrants and refugees find employment, assisted Venezuelan families with navigating school systems, and provided youth with necessary skills to integrate into Canadian society. Most of these organizations had a wide range of settlement and community programs, from children to seniors, for different ethnic communities. They delivered these

programs directly through schools, libraries, community centres, and partners and volunteers throughout the cities included in this study.

They are all nonprofit, funded by organizations such as Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), Human Resource and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), and United Way.

Hispanic-Latinx organizations

These organizations have a common objective to support and integrate Latin American and/or Spanish-speaking newcomers. Their mandates focus on civic engagement and developing programs aimed at empowering new immigrants to live independently and develop a sense of belonging as Latin American immigrants in Canada.

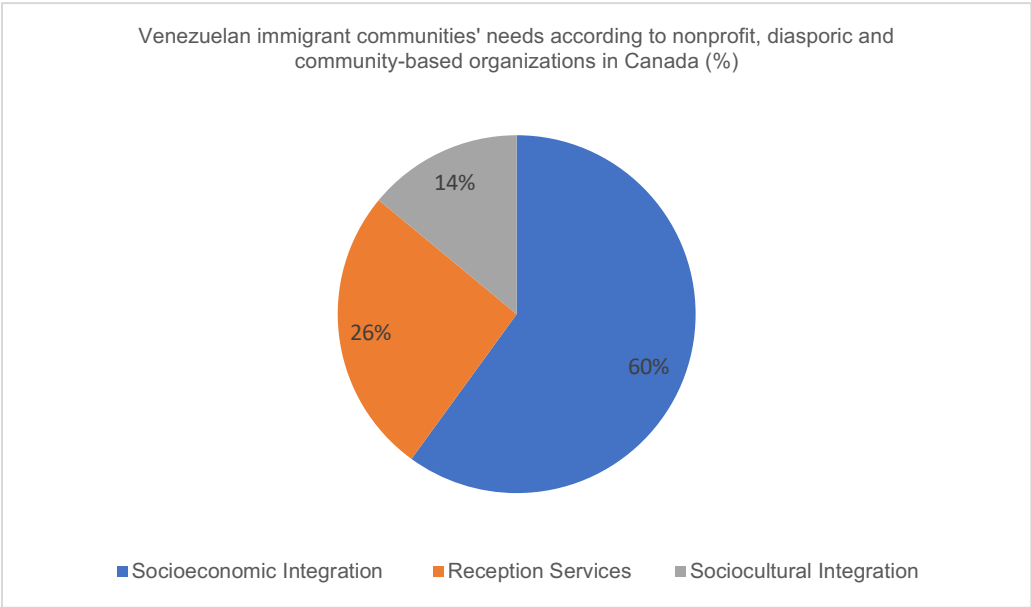
They address the social, economic, and political barriers and obstacles the Latinx population faces when integrating into Canadian society. They also offer social assistance and orientations and support access to health care, community, employment and job search resources, ESL classes, and government services information.

They support Venezuelans by offering settlement support, orientations, and referrals to 'mainstream' settlement organizations. Some of these organizations have contributed or participated in events and activities organized by Venezuelan communities. In general, their purpose is to highlight and promote the contributions of Hispanic culture to the fabric of Canadian heritage.

Findings

According to 60% of the participants, socioeconomic integration (Figure 4) is the most prevalent need among Venezuelan migrants in Canada, followed by reception programs/services (26%) and sociopolitical participation (14%). For the socioeconomic integration aspect, we considered the following variables: (a) status regularization, (b) employment, (c) language support/training (c) education, (d) housing, and (e) access to health and mental health services and programs.

Figure 4

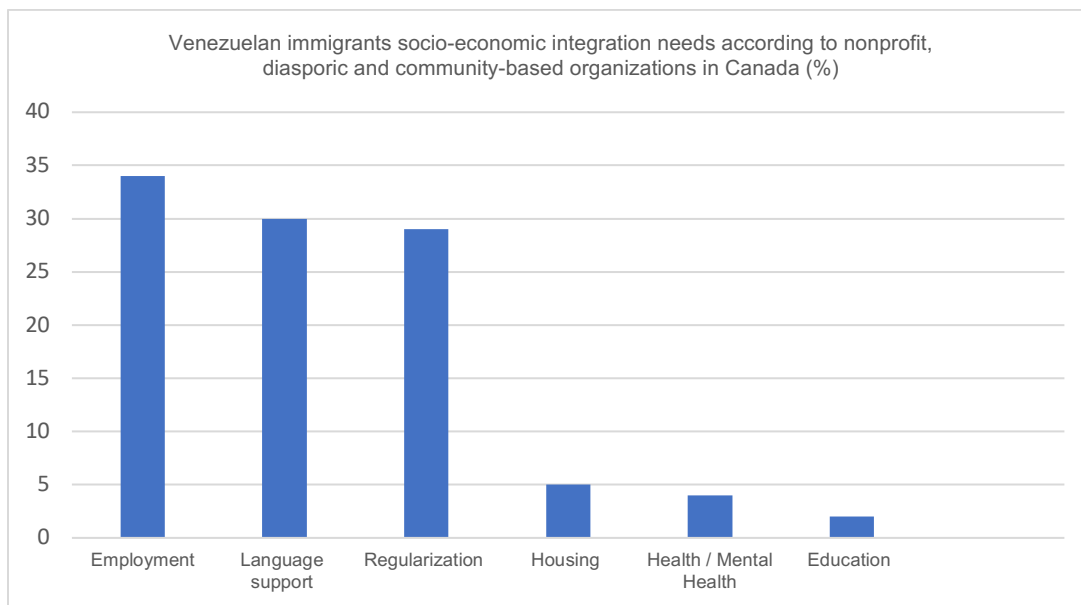


As we will explore in the following chapters, for both the socioeconomic integration and reception/programs and services variables, the prevalent issues included the lack of programs and services particularly focused on or easily accessible by the Venezuelan community and the discriminatory practices regarding visas and status regularization, which has had an impact on other immigration streams such as family reunification.

Socioeconomic integration

In terms of socioeconomic integration, 34% of the participants considered that access to employment programs, training, and opportunities is the most pressing need for the Venezuelan community in Canada (Figure 5). All participants agreed that Canada has a well-developed platform of employment programs and training compared to other countries in the Global North. The issue, according to them, is that any one of these initiatives provides Venezuelans with additional tools to help them secure decent jobs and overcome the employment challenges they have experienced during the humanitarian crisis.

Figure 5



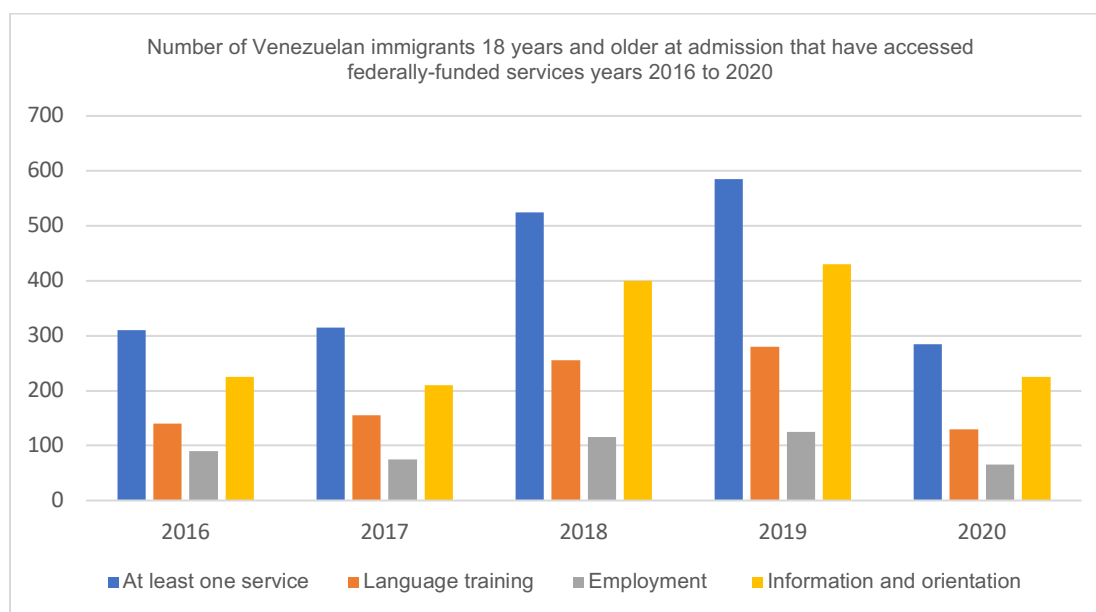
Of the 4,335 Venezuelan newcomers who accessed federally funded services between 2016 and 2020, 10.8% applied to employment-related programs (Figure 6). According to 80% of the settlement workers interviewed for this study, this does not necessarily mean that Venezuelans do not need employment training opportunities but that many of them do not think these programs are for them or do not know they exist. One settlement worker in Hamilton argued that there is an obvious disconnection between the services provided and the Venezuelan population:

The programs exist, but many Venezuelans do not apply. There is a lot of misinformation in the community. I think the failure has been the inability to design a strategy that reaches the Venezuelan community in a more effective manner. Many government-based organizations and programs do not have any strategies to reach immigrant communities such as the Venezuelans.

A representative from a Venezuelan nonprofit organization in Toronto agreed:

Most of the government programs with Spanish-speaking or Hispanic settlement workers do not have Venezuelan personnel, or the employees do not know the community or the crisis in depth, and that makes our employment transition difficult. Some organizations may have settlement workers of Colombian or Central American origin, but the needs of our communities in terms of employment may be different in many cases.

Figure 6



Source: Statistics Canada, 2020 Longitudinal Immigration Database settlement services module.

Note: Quebec is not included, as settlement services in Quebec are administered by the provincial government.

Although only 4% of the participants selected education as the most pressing need, the majority of the interviewees agreed that the community needs academic bridging programs that help them transition to the Canadian job market. In this sense, whereas more than 60% of Venezuelans who accessed federally funded services between 2016 and 2020 were university educated (see Figure 1), all participants in this study claimed that Venezuelans' work experiences and educational credentials are not directly transferrable to those obtained in Canada. Thus, most Venezuelan migrants and refugees experience occupational downgrading in the short run following their arrival.

On the other hand, nonprofit representatives in Calgary and Toronto argued that most of their clients do not understand how the system of professional credentials in Canada works. The interviewees stated that many Venezuelans come with apostilled documents and without further knowledge about the process to validate their credentials: "Some are frustrated and depressed when they realize they spent so much money on something that will be useless" (Settlement worker in Calgary).

Language Support

Thirty percent claimed there is a major need for language training and support for the community, particularly in accessing health and mental health services or during the job search and transition process. Participants declared that Venezuelans are often well aware of how important English is

in accessing settlement services in Canada, and they tend to be very proactive in finding government-funded alternatives, including language assessments, courses, and services provided by organizations such as Mosaic (Vancouver), Skills for Change (Toronto), the Immigrants Working Centre (Hamilton), and the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society.

Access to some of these language services remains a challenge for Venezuelan seniors, those with no status in the country, and those who cannot attend regular classes. To overcome some of these issues, many Venezuelan organizations have designed their own language support services for seniors and other members in the community. The challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic caused these organizations to rethink these initiatives and start offering services and support exclusively online, creating new communities of online service users within the Venezuelan community:

It is too early to evaluate how successful these programs are, but the COVID-19 crisis has prompted this need to connect with the diaspora in different, more creative ways. We have designed our own strategies to provide the support in those aspects that we consider essential during the migration experience, and language support is at the top of our list (Community worker in Toronto).

In Montreal, the French language adds another component to the challenges faced by Venezuelans. One Venezuelan community worker argued that many Venezuelans who migrate to the province of Quebec have previous knowledge of English but are not able to speak or write in French, which in many cases is considered an essential element in terms of securing better jobs or a more successful employment transition: “Many of them can live their life talking in English. Montreal is very bilingual in that sense, but the problem is when they want to have access to better employment conditions” (Settlement worker in Montreal)

Regularization

Twenty nine percent of the participants claimed their Venezuelan clients and service users feel discriminated by Canada’s immigration policies, particularly in regard to tourist visas and refugee claims. Hence, the community and its organizations have constantly pleaded for a more inclusive policy regarding Venezuelan migrants’ family members and Venezuelan asylum claimants.

Canada’s government had only accepted 388 refugee claims in 2017 and turned down 106 cases. Between 2018 and 2021, the government rejected 553 cases and accepted 2,651 refugee claims, which, according to Venezuelan community leaders, is a tiny number compared to the number of Syrian or Afghan refugees who have been approved or resettled since 2015. On the other hand, the rejection rate of temporary visas, including student visas, reached 54% in 2019 (Harris & Parry, 2019). A representative from a Venezuelan organization in Calgary claimed:

It looks like there is a policy that is not written in IRCC, but it exists in practice: it is the policy to refuse visas to Venezuelans. No matter if the family of the applicant has been living here in Canada for 20 years, or if the applicant has an American visa, the possibility of having a refused visa is still high.

All NGO representatives argued that the scale of migration from Venezuela reached a point where Canada needed to do more to help mitigate the humanitarian crisis. They claimed that their organizations did not necessarily ask for immigration benefits exclusive for Venezuelan citizens but, at the very least, a more inclusive policy that provides Venezuelan refugees the possibility of resettling in Canada or that allows more family members to visit their relatives:

We do not ask for an exclusive program for Venezuelans. That is a very complicated request for any country. What we are doing is searching for which options are the best to get more benefits for our community. But there is nothing; there is not much that we can do (Nonprofit representative in Toronto)

A nonprofit organization representative in Montreal added the following:

We are not asking for guarantees that [the government] will give them work or money. We, as a community, can help them with the settlement process. We ask for help admitting them into the country, especially those politically persecuted

Participants of the five cities mentioned the case of the Syrian and Afghan refugees in Canada as a point of contrast with the Venezuelans' reality. Even though they point out the contextual differences between both crises and praise the Canadian government's response of giving refuge to almost 64,000 Syrians since 2015, including the more recent plans to resettle at least 40,000 Afghan nationals, 80% of all our interviewees considered that the Venezuelan community could get a stronger response from the federal government. Participants in Montreal, Hamilton, and Toronto indicated that there have been cases where it is impossible to bring Venezuelan political prisoners' families to Canada, much less give them refuge.

Housing and Access to Health Services

Ninety percent of the interviewees considered that issues such as access to affordable housing and access to health and mental health services, equally affect other minorities and even the Canadian-born population. Those who opted for housing as a major need for the Venezuelan community were participants from Vancouver and Toronto, where nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations have constantly reported issues concerning temporary housing capacity for racialized migrants (see Reception Services and Policies).

Participants from Toronto and Montreal mentioned the relevance of providing more information and support to Venezuelan migrants and refugees navigating the health system in Canada, particularly to women, members of the LGBT+ communities, Venezuelans living with HIV, and those with no regular status in the country:

Having that information available is the most important. Some clients with 2 or 3 years in Canada have reported they recently found there are health programs they can access, and they did not know. The most important thing for them is to find someone who can guide them on how to access certain services, particularly health and mental health programs (Settlement worker in Toronto).

Seventy-five percent of all participants argued that the COVID-19 pandemic considerably intensified issues surrounding Venezuelan newcomers trying to access federally funded and community-based health services. Aspects such as a lack of language training and culturally focused services were mentioned as determinants for the obstacles related to Venezuelan communities' access to health, particularly in Calgary, Vancouver, and Montreal (see COVID-19 section).

Reception Services and Policies

The reception of people under the condition of human mobility refers to a set of policies, measures, and decisions in the short term to bring primary care on their arrival to the territory, satisfy their basic needs, guarantee their reference to the appropriate processes and access, and exercise their human rights according to the international standards. The reception service may include shelters, feeding, financial help programs, movement inside the territory, health measures and orientation for regularization, and other social policies.

Twenty-four percent of the participants stated that the Venezuelan migrant community in Canada needs support, particularly in terms of temporary housing at the moment they arrive in the country. Fourteen respondents (40%) agreed that Venezuelans normally find accommodation support among their own communities or by using the multiple social media platforms that have

been created by Venezuelan and Latinx associations and groups to support Venezuelan migrant communities. Knowledge about government- or community-based support regarding migrant temporary accommodation is scarce or is perceived as “complicated/difficult to access” (mostly because of language barriers), or, in other cases, some migrants perceived this type of accommodation as “stigmatizing.” The representative of a diasporic organization in Hamilton claimed that:

Many Venezuelan migrants come without any knowledge about support plans in services such as shelters or temporary housing for migrants. Many of them assume that is a service only for Canadian citizens or other racialized migrants.

In this sense, 48% claimed that the work that must be done is related to the infrastructure (e.g., create more spaces for certain communities and facilitate access to new migrant groups such as Venezuelans), but it is important to connect with these communities in their languages and through their networks, groups, and associations.

Cities such as Toronto have faced a transitional housing crisis over the last 5 years. According to city data, Toronto’s family shelters had only two of 655 rooms available by the end of 2021, and individuals have filled 96% of the beds at single-person shelters. Organizations offering respite and drop-in services were at 99% occupancy. The media have reported an increase in refugees arriving in Toronto in need of emergency housing “and that without more help from the federal and provincial governments, it is struggling to support them” (Beattie, 2021).

The situation is not that different in cities such as Montreal. By March 2022, shelters for asylum seekers in the Montreal area were running out of space. Diasporic organizations and NGOs reported that since the reopening of Quebec’s Roxham Road in November 2021, the unauthorized border point has seen the highest number of irregular border crossers in nearly 5 years, which has impacted the transitional housing and administrative capacity of most of these organizations (CBC News, 2022).

According to diasporic organizations in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, many Venezuelans are aware of the transitional housing crisis and how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the services and programs offered to refugee claimants. They argued that some members in the community associate transitional housing support to other communities that have more access to those services such as the Afghans or Haitians.

In terms of financial/economic support, only two participants stressed this need as relevant for the Venezuelan community, particularly for refugee claimants. Most of the interviewees agreed that Venezuelans tend to be “independent” or “economically productive in a short time.” A diasporic organization representative in Vancouver added that:

It’s not that the Venezuelans do not need economic support; they do. But, for the most part, the priorities of the community focus on status regularization first. On the other hand, relying on financial support from the government is something that many Venezuelan migrants consider a part of the stigma of migration. They think it will have a negative repercussion in their immigration process.

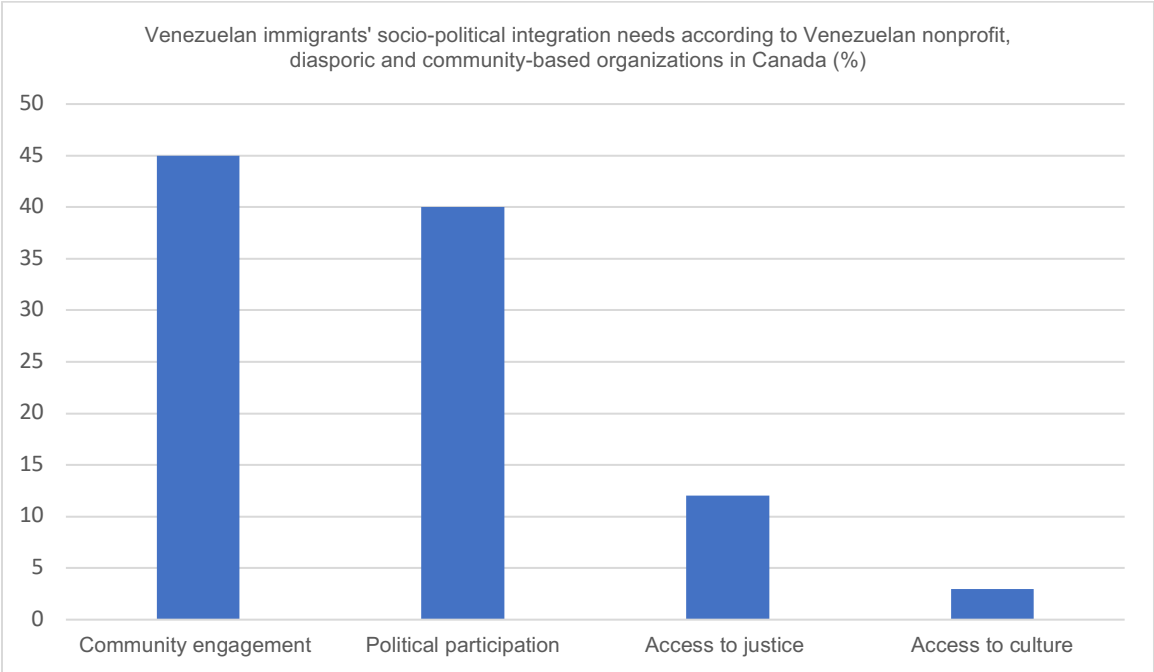
Sociopolitical Integration

Immigrants’ sociopolitical integration encompasses different factors related to building up the social capital that is deemed necessary by the host country’s institutions. Sociopolitical integration is only feasible once immigrants are accepted as members of the society. This recognition leads to better social cohesion and has considerable economic implications, from the provision of public goods and redistribution to teamwork and productivity (IOM, 2019; Laurensyeva & Venturini, 2017).

In this study, we considered four key aspects that may lead to Venezuelans' sociopolitical integration into the Canadian context: community engagement, political participation, access to justice, and access to culture.

Of the total participants who highlighted sociopolitical integration as the main need of Venezuelan migrants, 40% argued that the Venezuelan community needs more effective community engagement programs and policies (Figure 7). Venezuelan settlement workers in Toronto and Calgary claimed that building a Venezuelan immigrant and refugee community that is engaged with Canadian society is relevant because these communities play a crucial role in the early stages of settlement. Many of these communities and networks have the capacity to support new arrivals navigating the complex challenges of finding their way in the country. They help newcomers and refugees relate to and learn from people with similar experiences while learning how to access government-funded services, including language training, housing, mental health, and education.

Figure 7



For a NGO representative in Montreal, the link between migration, community building, and settlement is key:

The fact that many Venezuelans see themselves or imagine themselves as part of a local community is a powerful influence on settlement [...] the successful transition from 'migrant status' to be a part of a group with more or less the same interests is a significant step towards social integration.

Community engagement has been one of the key tasks that many of these organizations have been addressing even before the Venezuelan migration crisis. Venezuelan organizations in Vancouver have been working in community engagement as early as 2000:

We started working with a database in which the only thing we had were names and emails, but it was important for us to know who we were and how we could strengthen our community in British Columbia; we communicated with emails, we spread information, provided orientation to the newcomers. Then we started using social networks and

websites, but we still keep that list of emails, and we still communicate that way (Nonprofit representative in Vancouver)

Seventy percent of all participants confirmed that because the migration is a very recent phenomenon with very little political support, community engagement between the community and Canadian society is still an “ideal”. They stated that the migrants’ community engagement and participation in the design of policies, which affect the Venezuelan community in Canada, should also be the responsibility of the migrant community, assuming that this is a pending task for the Venezuelans.

The Venezuelan community understood political participation, on the other hand, to be relevant in terms of visibility. Members of the community stated that the possibility of having more spaces for political discussion on the issues surrounding Venezuelans in Canada will help them not only exercise institutional power but also make themselves visible as a real political community in the country. According to 40% of all interviewees, these spaces should be promoted not only at the federal but at the provincial and, more importantly, municipal levels because it is in the cities that immigrant communities create their support networks, interact, and develop their own diaspora initiatives.

A community worker in Toronto stated that the federal government and the Venezuelan community in Canada had a “short-lived interaction” during the constitutional crisis that started in 2017. The issues of the Venezuelan community became a discussion topic in Ottawa; however, some participants claimed this interest was more the result of the international pressure over Nicolas Maduro (particularly from the United States) and less a positive consequence of the Venezuelan political lobby or a real interest in the Venezuelans’ issues in Canada. A settlement worker in Toronto added the following:

The momentum that generated the confrontation between Juan Guaidó and Nicolás Maduro, the constitutional crisis, and, therefore, the Venezuela refugee crisis were key points in this rapprochement between the government and the Venezuelan community [...] the government met with the diaspora, we had political participation, there were conversations, but the international pressure has disappeared, and we have never had enough power or political influence for the conversations to achieve specific actions that benefited our immigrants in Canada.

Much like the issues surrounding housing and health, participants considered access to justice and culture to be concerns pertaining to all immigrant communities and not necessarily exclusive to the Venezuelan community.

Access to justice and culture

Access to justice means obtaining a fair result, having the ability to invoke and effectively participate in justice processes, and having their unique circumstances and needs recognized and respected by the justice system (The Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre, 2022). This applies not only to court processes but also to the entire justice system through which law and legal institutions are designed, implemented, and activated.

Participants in the five cities claimed that Venezuelans may experience greater barriers to accessing the justice system due to their disadvantaged economic and social conditions, including their own traumatic migration experiences, language barriers, legal status, and lower income levels. An NGO representative in Calgary claimed that

There is information that we still have not deeply analyzed related to the barriers of Venezuelans accessing the legal system in Canada, especially those Venezuelan under the humanitarian stream, but we are sure there is a lot of inequality, precisely because of our limited capacity in terms of political and organizational power. It affects the ways in which we access settlement services but also how we look for legal representation; there

can't be fair access to justice when there's not recognition of the issues we are experiencing as a community in Canada.

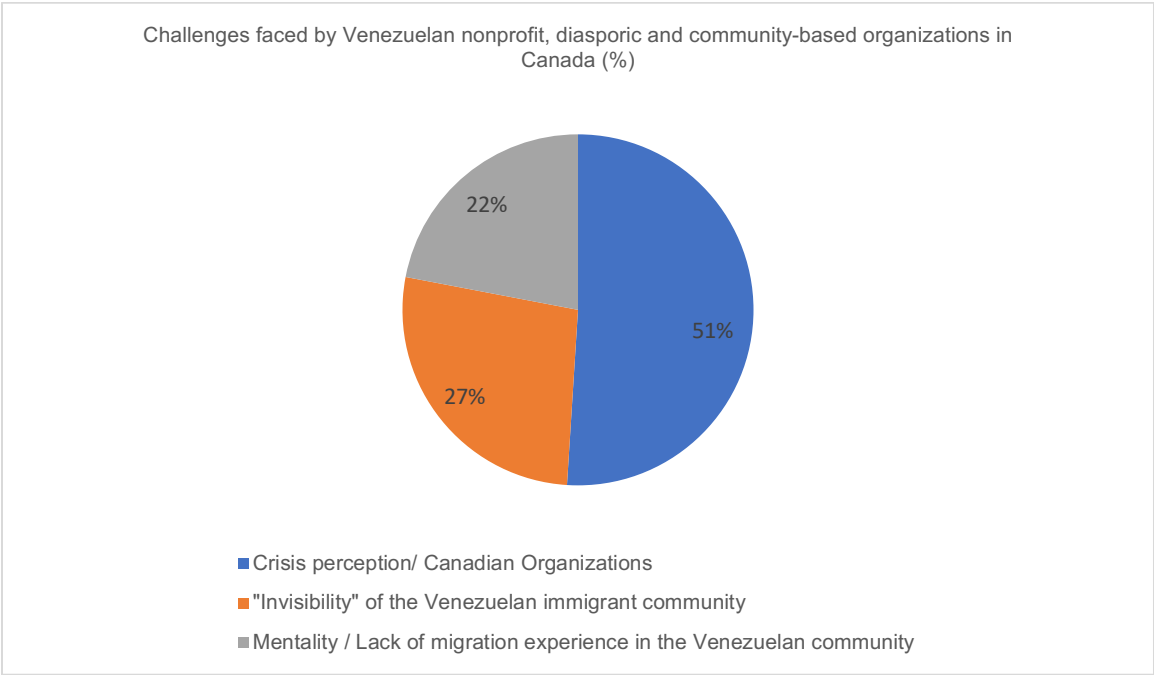
Rights and equal access to arts, culture, and cultural wealth were considered relevant in terms of providing Venezuelans the opportunity to develop spaces where they can strengthen their cultural identity as immigrants and new Canadians, and to promote a positive interaction with Canadian society at large. Answers related to these issues were always connected to community engagement, language, and education factors. Participants who mentioned the access to culture issues considered that immigrants should fight for more inclusive policies and programs regarding cultural identity, language, and education, as well as for their rights to promote their own culture while accessing Canadian cultural policies and programs.

Challenges

When the participants were asked about the challenges their organizations faced in providing services to the Venezuelan communities, their answers focused on three main aspects: (a) the ways in which Canadian society perceives the Venezuelan migration crisis, (b) the Venezuelan community's lack of visibility in Canada, and (c) their lack of migration experiences or immigration background in North America.

Regarding the crisis perception, 51% of the participants said the Canadian government and policy makers have not necessarily treated the Venezuelan refugee crisis as a forced migration phenomenon (Figure 8), at least not in regard to the refugee resettlement programs, services, and opportunities provided to other communities affected by migration crises, such as the Syrians and Afghans.

Figure 8



All the interviewees agreed that although Venezuela is not enduring war or massive political persecution, the scale of its migration is comparable to or even worse than that of other countries undergoing such calamities. In this sense, the participants claimed that the factors

behind Venezuelans' forced migration go beyond physical threats and actual harm, but this does not mean it should not be treated as a forced migration phenomenon. A participant in Vancouver put it this way:

Our situation is not clear for Canada. We are not at war. When there is a war, you know there is a catastrophic situation, that people want to get out of the country, then you do not have any excuse for not helping. For a lot of people here in Canada, Venezuela is still a democratic country with economic problems, nothing else. Like many other Latin American countries.

A settlement worker in Montreal added:

I think it is important to consider how the Canadian government manages the information. Many people consider that Venezuelans are in a position of privilege if they are compared to Syrians or Afghans. We have 6 million migrants, but we are not at war.

Other participants claimed the crisis is not relevant because the Venezuelan diaspora is "unimportant" in terms of electoral politics. They agreed that the diaspora is not "big enough" and thus does not have a significant impact on any election in Canada, whether at the federal, provincial, or municipal level. Representatives from community-based initiatives in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver stated that the whole Latinx/Hispanic community in Canada shares the same issues in terms of "electoral relevance." Moreover, a participant in Calgary claimed that:

In the last federal elections, there were several debates between the leaders of every party. There was a simultaneous translation in Tagalog, Farsi, Hindu... But there was no translation to Spanish. That tells me that the Latino community in Canada is not numerically important for any electoral process [...] Until the Latin community is electorally important, our issues won't be important.

From this perspective, the migration crises in North America are generally perceived as an "investment opportunity" in terms of electoral politics:

How many Venezuelans can vote here? Only a few. Then, how many Arabs, Indians and Chinese can vote here? Which ethnic community is worth investing in? Some of those communities have investments, companies, and very good relationships with Canada, there is an important flow of capital. The Venezuelans and Latinos, in general, do not have any of that in this country, at least not on that scale (Nonprofit representative in Calgary)

In/visibility

Community leaders argued that Venezuelan immigrants are generally considered part of the Hispanic/Latinx umbrella, which means they receive the same kinds of services or programs, regardless of the differences between their native countries and the sociopolitical contexts. In this sense, these leaders claimed the immigrants are not "visible" to Canadians.

Part of their work as leaders of nonprofit, community-based organizations focuses on making their organizations relevant to public opinion. Some participants believed gathering information about the community is the key. In this sense, one community worker in Toronto stated that the biggest obstacle has been collecting information on the Venezuelan community's real needs and aspirations. Online platforms and social media have been useful for developing knowledge about the community and their behaviour as immigrants in Canada, but awareness within the community about their own issues and the ways they navigate the migration process is still scarce. The participants in Montreal and Hamilton asserted that this obstacle is also connected to how some Venezuelan immigrants "disappear" within the community by using other nationalities' passports:

We don't know how often this happens, but we know about Venezuelans that do not use their passports or prefer not to identify as Venezuelans in certain contexts, be it for fear of being stigmatized or to facilitate migration processes (Settlement worker in Hamilton).

According to a settlement worker in Toronto, this makes the Venezuelan community more complex and difficult to categorize:

I think our disorganization is based on the fact that there is not even one 'Venezuelan diaspora', I think there are 'little Venezuelas' inside every group, with different interests and backgrounds, and everyone fights to survive the experience of the migration in diverse ways, and we haven't known how to agree with each other. The government should not have the entire responsibility to contact us or help us organize

Mentality/Lack of migrant experience in the Venezuelan community

Regarding the mentality of Venezuelan migrants and their behaviour as community members, 60% of all participants claimed it is important to distinguish recent from earlier arrivals, because the attitudes and sociocultural characteristics may differ drastically based on when a particular group arrived in the country.

According to settlement workers, providing services or orientation may be more challenging if the migrants struggle with their own social locations or their realities as newcomers or refugees. This was a common characteristic for those who came to Canada at the beginning of the refugee crisis. Until 2017, "refugee" was not a term associated with Venezuelans. Many Venezuelans have had to adapt to this new reality, which has implied not only learning to deal with discrimination but also learning to use settlement services in the best way and to navigate complex migration systems that are not common to Venezuelan citizens. This has caused the Venezuelans to undergo a mentality shift from citizen to migrant, refugee, or service user. A participant in Calgary put it this way:

It was difficult for many of them to be effective service users, in part because there is a lot of misinformation in the community, or they may not know how to access certain services [...] but also because it was hard to admit they need social and economic support from the government.

Settlement workers in Montreal and Toronto said this situation has changed considerably over the last 5 years. The Venezuelan community in North America is growing, and more Venezuelan migrants are appearing in migration corridors normally associated with Central Americans, with record numbers crossing into the United States: "It is now a more complex and diverse group that includes people who have more experience in terms of being a migrant in different countries" (Settlement worker in Montreal)

Although many Venezuelans have opted to search for support within their own networks in the past, they are now more experienced in navigating Canada's refugee and immigration systems. A nonprofit representative in Toronto agreed:

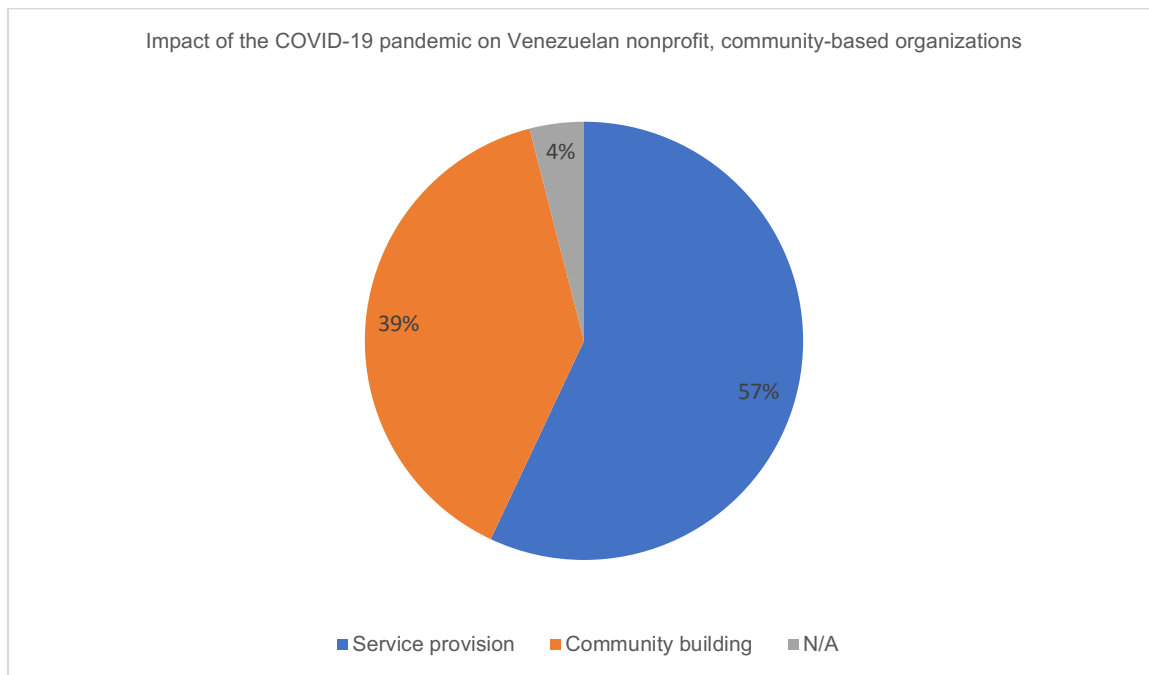
We are learning little by little to form part of a community of refugees and migrants in the entire continent, and to use the services in the best way. Maybe in Canada, this is less evident because the community is smaller, but it is a reality that we are not that privileged community that left the country 20 or 15 years ago, and we need more help. That was another historical reality and another community of migrants, different than the current one.

COVID-Related Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic affected Venezuelan Canadian organizations in two aspects: obstacles in service provision and limitations in community engagement (Figure 9). 57% said the pandemic made service provision more difficult due to the new barriers and issues imposed upon Venezuelan migrants, particularly those with no regular status in Canada. According to the

participants, providing orientation and support online or over the phone was less efficient in aspects such as providing information on health and mental health or senior-related programs and offering support in preparation for the citizenship test.

Figure 9



Others argued the main issue was related to the waiting periods the immigration process entails. Service providers in Toronto and Calgary said that some cases had experienced significant delays even before the pandemic. During the COVID-19 crisis, the situation became more difficult for people awaiting decisions regarding their refugee claims or the immigration process:

They are people in vulnerable situations, and many do not have status. Some are visitors looking for refuge. In some cases, communicating with government agencies to help these people was a really big challenge. Requesting interpretation for migrants that do not speak English or French was complicated, which left many users with a very vulnerable status and delayed many requests (Community worker in Toronto)

To 39% of the participants, the barriers surrounding lockdowns and physical distancing negatively affected community building. Most of their organizations provide in-person services and programs, including job fairs and cultural events. For their representatives, being physically “there” is the best way to create a real community, especially in the case of a diaspora with no immigration background, such as that of Venezuela.

However, the crisis also had positive implications. The interviewees agreed that the alternative ways they had to employ to provide services not only opened new spaces and opportunities for interacting with younger Venezuelans but also strengthened the organizations’ platforms for connecting with community members and service users who live in cities and towns where the participants previously did not have opportunities to reach out.

In this sense, the participants in Toronto and Vancouver claimed the pandemic forced them to design and implement online programs for teaching English and French, sharing information on health and well-being, and promoting their own cultural values, which has allowed

them to strengthen their presence on social media and other platforms and also to reach an unprecedented number of Venezuelan and Latin American communities in all of Canada.

Conclusion

Understanding the needs and challenges of the organizations working with Venezuelan communities in Canada is key to analyzing the ways Venezuelan migrants have struggled to engage with the Canadian society and government, not only at the federal level but also at the provincial and, perhaps more importantly, municipal levels.

Since the intensification of the Venezuelan migration crisis began in 2017, Venezuelans in Canada have strengthened their strategies for integrating immigrants into the country's fabric and created new ones to promote their cultural values and identities and support migrants and refugees in Canada and other countries. However, as this study shows, a more inclusive approach—particularly regarding regularization, settlement services, community engagement, and political participation—remains a major challenge for the Venezuelan migrant and refugee communities in Canada's major and medium-sized cities.

The response from the federal government has focused on providing financial support to South American host countries and promoting diplomatic initiatives such as the International Donors' Conference in Solidarity with Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants with the support of the UNHCR and IOM, but Venezuelan associations and political groups are pleading for more locally based solutions that respond to the needs of the Venezuelans communities in Canada.

Because Venezuelans comprise a relatively small community with no significant representation or political ties in Ottawa, diaspora and community leaders have dealt with what they call the indifference of Canada's political actors, which is part of the rationale for why the country has not promoted a more inclusive approach to solving the issues surrounding the Venezuelan Canadian community.

For some community leaders, this response means not necessarily the creation of new immigration and settlement programs focused on the Venezuelan migrants but at least the provision of more opportunities that facilitate access to programs and services and the revision of discriminatory practices regarding visas and family reunification policies.

In contrast, statistics on access to federally funded settlement services showed that although language assessment, language training, and information or orientation are the three main services Venezuelans immigrants request upon arrival, fewer immigrants have applied for employment-related programs and services. This shows a disconnection between the offer of government-promoted services and the settlement necessities of the Venezuelan migrants. According to the participants in this study, Canada needs more policies focused on the work necessities of some of society's inconspicuous communities, which until now have remained relegated by policy makers.

Moreover, no evidence has yet been uncovered on how the language, orientation, employment, or community connections, services, and programs in place have provided real solutions or met the socioeconomic and political aspirations of the Venezuelan migrant and refugee communities.

Although reception and settlement services are still needed for recently arrived migrants from Venezuela, planning for the long term is also important. For community members, the most important question in the postpandemic era will be how to support inclusive development that helps Venezuelan migrant communities build connections and improve their livelihoods in Canada.

Promoting more evidence-based knowledge on the Venezuelan and Latin American communities is key to empowering these communities, creating human connections between migrants and the native-born, and fostering more inclusive immigration policies. Further

exploration of issues surrounding service access and Venezuelan refugees' political participation will help strengthen the knowledge on Canada's responses to humanitarian crises in a contemporary context, particularly regarding diasporas that remain unexplored.

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