

## The *Caminantes*: needs and vulnerabilities of Venezuelan refugees and migrants travelling on foot

The humanitarian crisis in Venezuela continues to drive refugee and migration flows into Latin American countries. Because of a loss of economic resources – in some cases caused or aggravated by COVID-19-related restrictions – an increasing number of refugees and migrants are travelling in part or entirely on foot (so-called ‘caminantes’). During their journey, they are exposed to a series of protection risks and are in need of basic goods and services such as food, water, and shelter. While the phenomenon of *caminantes* has been observed since 2018, their vulnerability is increased in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic because of additional health risks and less assistance being available. As conditions in Venezuela worsen, the number of *caminantes* is increasing. In 2021, an estimated 162,000 *caminantes* will pass through Colombia, 90,300 through Ecuador, 75,600 through Peru, and 2,900 through Central America and Mexico (R4V 10/12/2020). Estimating the number of *caminantes* is highly challenging, as the figure can vary drastically if the situation in Venezuela or access to transportation changes.



### KEY ISSUES

- **Caminantes** face significant protection risks including exposure to extortion, exploitation, physical and sexual violence, and lack of access to support systems.
- Humanitarian access constraints, especially in Venezuela and in areas of Colombia affected by conflict, limit humanitarian operations and *caminantes*' access to aid.

### TERMINOLOGY

- **'Caminantes'** (Spanish for 'walkers') refers to migrants and refugees who make their journey in part or entirely on foot. The term began to be used in 2018 when the phenomenon was first seen.
- **'People in transit'** refers to migrants and refugees on the move – from Venezuela to their final destination in a host country, from one location to another within a host country, or from one host country to another. People in transit includes *caminantes*, but also people who travel by private or public transport (R4V 10/12/2020).
- **Regular status** refers to the status of a migrant or refugee who entered a country through

### KEY PRIORITIES

- The availability of low-cost transport, financial support or vouchers that can be redeemed with bus companies, or special transport provided by humanitarian organisations would greatly reduce the number of people travelling on foot and their exposure to associated risks and needs.
- **Caminantes** need access to safe and adequate shelter, food, water for consumption and personal hygiene, and healthcare

regular border crossings and who remains in the country in accordance with his or her admission criteria (IOM 2011).

- **Irregular status** refers to a migrant or refugee who entered a host country through irregular crossings and was not granted a regular status in the host country, or who overstayed the duration of a regular permit (IOM 2011).
- **Unofficial or irregular crossings (known as 'trochas')** refer to areas of a border between countries that lack migration control. They usually lack any type of infrastructure for people to cross safely (IRB Canada 2020; Infobae 28/02/2019).

# The journey of the Caminantes

Accross Venezuela & through Colombia

VENEZUELA



Checkpoints inside Venezuela



Unfamiliar conditions & climate



Dangerous border crossings



Injuries from walking



Armed Conflict in Colombia



COLOMBIA



Road safety concerns



Exposure to extortion, exploitation & violence



+ Other Latin American countries

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is based on a secondary data review, supplemented by interviews with members of civil society, INGOs, and UN agencies. Because of a lack of representative data on *caminantes*, much of the analysis is based on indicative data and anecdotal qualitative information. Although the issue of *caminantes* is understood to be a regional phenomenon that affects multiple countries, because of the availability of information **the focus of this report is on Colombia and Venezuela**. ACAPS acknowledges the support of NRC, Coalición por Venezuela, GIFMM, REACH and VZAT in providing additional information and reviewing the report.

## CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

### Situation in Latin America

Throughout Latin America, COVID-19 has triggered an economic crisis and increased unemployment rates. Latin America is likely to have a deep recession as a result of the 7.7% reduction in regional GDP in 2020 (ECLAC 12/2020). The poverty rate rose 37.3% in 2020, equivalent to 231 million people living in poverty – some 45.4 million more than in 2019. This is attributed to the more than 34 million jobs lost as a result of COVID-19 and the 2.7 million businesses that were forced to close.

Latin America's average unemployment rate was 8.1% at the end of 2019, and it was projected to be around 10.7% at the end of 2020 (ILO 09/2020; ECLAC 12/2020). This increase means that there is a historical record of 41 million people unemployed (ILO 01/10/2020). The economic crisis is also affecting Venezuelan refugees and migrants in the region, because of a loss of employment and difficulties in finding income-generating activities.

According to the 2021 Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (RMRP), the population projection of Venezuelan refugees, migrants, and Colombian returnees in Latin America in 2021 is 8.13 million, of which 5.28 million are Venezuelans in destination (people who have left their usual place of residence with the intention to remain in a host country), 1.87 million are pendular Venezuelans (temporary and usually repeated population movements from Venezuela to another country), and 980,000 are Colombian returnees. It is also projected that 331,000 Venezuelan refugees and migrants will be in transit in 2021 (R4V 12/2020).

Many countries closed their borders as a COVID-19 prevention measure, and land and river borders remain closed in several countries such as Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, and Chile

(AS/COA 16/12/2020). This has led to Venezuelan migrants and refugees resorting to unofficial crossing points – so-called '*trochas*' – to cross borders.

### Situation in Venezuela

The humanitarian crisis in Venezuela – resulting from a political and socioeconomic crisis – continues. Access to basic goods and services, including food, water, and healthcare, is limited. Rampant hyperinflation is driving price increases. Household purchasing power is low, as illustrated by the monthly minimum wage, which could buy less than 1% of the monthly basic food basket in October 2020 (CENDA 10/2020). According to the National Survey of Living Conditions' (ENCOVI) study on living conditions in Venezuela, in 2019 65% of the population was considered poor, up from 51% in 2018 (ENCOVI's 'multidimensional poverty' index includes factors such as housing, employment, and living standards) (ENCOVI 2019). There was no updated ENCOVI data for 2020. In 2019, the WFP found that 2.3 million people (7.9% of the population) were severely food insecure, 7 million (24.4% of the population) were moderately food insecure, and 17 million were marginally food insecure (WFP 23/02/2020). The Venezuelan health system, which has been weakened by shortages of medical supplies, staff, water, and electricity over the past years, is at the verge of collapse because of the added pressure of the COVID-19 outbreak (ACAPS 27/05/2020). A nationwide fuel crisis is further reducing access to food and healthcare. At the same time, the political crisis in Venezuela is protracted, with a political resolution to the situation looking highly unlikely over the coming months. Humanitarian organisations face severe access challenges and will likely be unable to significantly alleviate humanitarian needs in the country. Beyond lack of access to food, employment, education, and basic services, drivers of migration and refugee movements also include insecurity, violence, and persecution (GIFMM 12/2020).

While some Venezuelan refugees and migrants returned to Venezuela during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, largely prompted by loss of employment and housing, the lifting of most restrictions on economic activity in Colombia in September 2020 led to increased arrivals of Venezuelans in Colombia. Migration and refugee movements from Venezuela to other countries in the region is likely to increase in the coming months.

### Situation in Colombia

In October 2020 unemployment in Colombia stood at 14.7%, an increase of 4.9% compared to the same month in 2019 (9.8%) (DANE 10/2020). Colombia lifted most COVID-19-related restrictions having an impact on the economy on 1 September. As a result, many Venezuelan refugees and migrants decided to return to Colombia or migrate for the first time. The



Colombian border with Venezuela has remained closed since March 2020 however, and Colombian borders with Ecuador, Venezuela, Peru, and Brazil will remain closed until at least 1 March 2021 (Infobae 16/01/2021).

Despite the border closure, worsening conditions in Venezuela continue to drive migration and refugee flows. Venezuelan migrants and refugees cross the borders through unofficial crossings – *trochas* – taking on significant protection risks. There are at least 250 known unofficial crossings on the 249km border between La Guajira in Colombia and Venezuela (El Espectador 15/10/2020). According to the Colombian government, as at October 2020 there were 1.7 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Colombia; of these, an estimated 947,000 were without regular status (Migración Colombia accessed 18/12/2020). The border closures also lead to an increase in Venezuelan migrants and refugees with irregular status who are left with no access to basic services in Colombia and other countries in the region.

### Caminantes in Venezuela

Before 2020, Venezuelans travelling within Venezuela to reach the country's borders were usually able to rely on different transportation methods such as buses. Since September/October 2020 however, **a rising number of Venezuelans are travelling on foot within Venezuela for part or the entirety of their journey from their point of origin to the border**, sometimes for hundreds of kilometres.

#### This is primarily because of three reasons:

1. Venezuela is experiencing a severe fuel crisis, with gasoline shortages severely reducing the availability of private and public transport (El Diario 12/09/2020).
2. Government measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 have further restricted mobility (Crónica Uno 13/11/2020). As at January 2021, government restrictions have been lifted, with inter-municipal transport reactivated (El Nacional 11/01/2021). Fuel shortages and rationing are likely to reduce the transport options available, however.
3. People with the intention to leave Venezuela increasingly have less means to pay for the transport that is available (El Pitazo 12/10/2020). Hyperinflation and the informal dollarisation of the Venezuelan economy have led to unofficial high prices for tickets on inter-urban transport, with the cost likely being too high for low-income households (La Verdad 30/10/2020).

The number of *caminantes* in Venezuela will probably increase over the next months as the fuel crisis is unlikely to see significant improvements and the humanitarian crisis is likely to worsen.

## HUMANITARIAN NEEDS OF CAMINANTES

### Transport

Access to safe and affordable transport options is crucial for migrants and refugees to safely arrive at their destination. They opt to walk primarily if they cannot afford public transport such as intermunicipal buses, and if public transport is not available (for example because of COVID-19 restrictions on mobility) (key informant interview 10/12/2020).

Transport was the second-most identified need after food in the Grupo Interagencial sobre Flujos Migratorios Mixtos' (GIFMM) and REACH's non-representative surveys of people in transit (the surveys did not include enough respondents to be statistically representative) (REACH 24/10/2020; GIFMM 11/2020). The availability of low-cost transport, financial support or vouchers that can be redeemed with bus companies, or special transport provided by humanitarian organisations would greatly reduce the number of people travelling on foot and reduce their exposure to the associated risks and needs.

Crucially, many *caminantes* rely on hitchhiking for parts of their journey. This implies a series of protection concerns, especially for *caminantes* who travel alone and for women and girls. Many migrants and refugees who travel in groups hitchhike in trucks or other larger vehicles. Anecdotal reports mention that many vehicles used for transport in Venezuela are old and in a bad state (Infobae 08/11/2020). Refugees and migrants using hitchhiking for transport do not necessarily have control over where they are taken (RCN 23/10/2020).

### Food security, nutrition, and livelihoods

*Caminantes* have little access to regular and diverse diets during their journey. Along the road they receive food from host communities and civil society, as well as from assistance points in host countries run by UN agencies and NGOs, where they are given food, multipurpose vouchers, and energy kits, though access to aid is limited (GIFMM 09/10/2020). Although not representative, in Colombia 85% of people in transit (which includes *caminantes*) surveyed by GIFMM said that their principal need was food (GIFMM last accessed 22/12/2020). 33% of people in transit surveyed for a REACH rapid needs assessment said they had to skip one meal a day, 35% responded that they skipped two, and 10% said they had less than one meal a day (REACH 24/10/2020).

Many *caminantes* have limited or no economic resources, and many lack a regular status. For these reasons, they resort to different activities such as informal jobs or working in illicit economies. They often live hand-to-mouth. In some cases, they resort to negative coping mechanisms such as scavenging and begging (Caracol 20/10/2020), using minors to carry out this activity.

## Protection

### Checkpoints inside Venezuela:

Because of the pandemic and government restrictions such as curfews, especially in the departments bordering Colombia, the number of police and military checkpoints regulating compliance with government measures has increased (key informant interview 10/12/2020). The high level of corruption and lack of accountability among Venezuelan state forces means that *caminantes* passing through these checkpoints are at risk of being extorted, robbed, and of experiencing physical violence (key informant interview 10/12/2020; FundaRedes 14/10/2020; Efecto Cocuyo 12/10/2020). Some communities who are helping *caminantes* – for example by offering food and water – have been threatened by armed groups (FundaRedes 14/10/2020). According to anecdotal evidence, some *caminantes* are trying to avoid checkpoints by taking less travelled, potentially more dangerous routes that are likely to be controlled by Colombian armed groups (El País 18/10/2020; CNN 22/10/2020).



The number of *caminantes* arriving at the border with Colombia is likely to increase, as many will have lost their financial resources during their journey within Venezuela, because of extortion and robbery at checkpoints and along the *trochas* – forcing many to continue their journey to Colombia on foot.



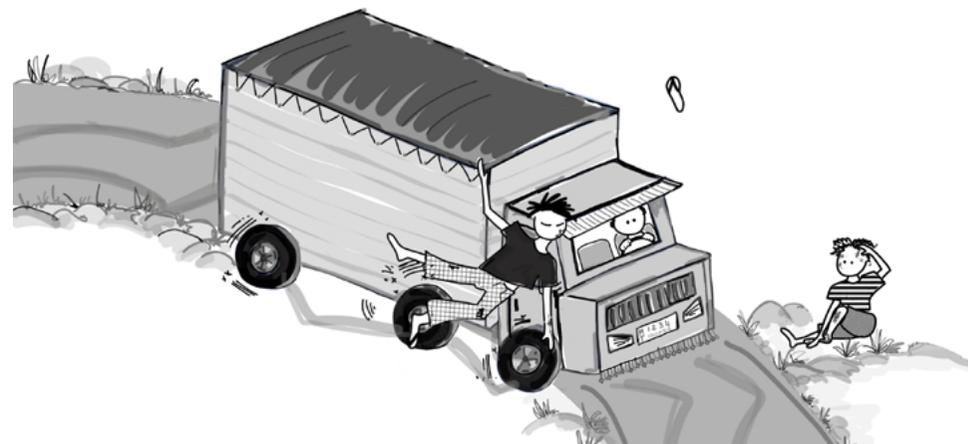
**Armed conflict in Colombia:** The border between Colombia and Venezuela has been characterised by high levels of insecurity. As a consequence of the armed conflict, a large part of the border – specifically the unofficial crossings – is controlled by different armed groups which charge a fee for people crossing into Colombia (FundaRedes 14/10/2020).

The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in the closure of the Colombian border since March 2020, which has led to the appearance of new irregular crossings, making migration control difficult and increasing protection risks for *caminantes*. The risks include forced labour and sexual exploitation, forced recruitment, theft, extortion, and human trafficking and smuggling. Colombian armed forces have been deployed to prevent irregular entries at border crossings – both official and unofficial crossings that are frequented by *caminantes* (Vanguardia 17/10/2020). This has pushed refugees and migrants to take new unofficial and more dangerous crossings where armed

forces have not been deployed and where they are less likely to be detected (RCN 23/10/2020).

The pandemic has also had an impact on the dynamics of the armed conflict. Armed groups and criminal organisations took advantage of COVID-19 containment measures to expand their territorial and social control, often by exploiting and inflicting violence on local communities (ACAPS 09/09/2020). The armed conflict not only affects members of Colombian host communities but also Venezuelan migrants and refugees. *Caminantes* are not always familiar with the dynamics and presence of the armed conflict in Colombia and the existence of antipersonnel mines and unexploded ordnance in areas of conflict, putting them at risk (El Universal 23/09/2020). Clashes between armed groups over territorial disputes generate displacement; while this mostly affects Colombian communities, Venezuelan refugees and migrants have also been victims of displacement. For example, on 21 November 2020, at least 278 Venezuelan refugees and migrants were displaced in Argelia, Cauca department, following threats received by the armed group National Liberation Army (ELN) (W Radio 25/11/2020).

**Road safety:** As *caminantes* travel alongside major highways in Colombia, they often encounter heavy cargo vehicles or roads with high traffic, exposing them to traffic accidents (key informant interview 10/12/2020). Many *caminantes* also hitchhike parts of their journey in trucks, often riding in the back where there are no safety measures.



**Legal status:** One of the biggest challenges that *caminantes* face in Colombia and other host countries is the lack of regular status. According to a non-representative REACH rapid needs assessment in Colombia, 86% of the people in transit surveyed did not have any migration

documents (REACH 24/10/2020). A lack of regular status means they cannot access formal employment and many basic services. This increases the risk of exposure to exploitative and abusive working conditions as well as recruitment by armed groups or into illicit economies. Not having a regular status likely leads them to avoid reporting to the authorities the exploitation and abuse they might be subjected to, for fear of being detained or deported (key informant interview 10/11/2020).

**Child protection and family separation:** Child *caminantes* are exposed to forced labour and begging, and girls in particular may be victims of sexual exploitation or human trafficking (Reuters 01/10/2020). Sometimes the journey is very demanding for children and, according to anecdotal evidence, some get sick or die along the way. There have also been isolated cases of children being abandoned by their parents along the way because they have no means to support them (Infobae 04/11/2020).



**Sexual and gender-based violence:** According to the 2021 RMRP and to a non-representative CARE Rapid Gender Analysis of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela, women *caminantes* travelling alone are at risk of experiencing sexual exploitation, harassment or extortion, and there are accounts of some women having been forced into sex for survival or becoming victims of trafficking (R4V 12/2020; CARE 06/2020). Throughout their journeys, women are at risk of being harassed, abused, and subjected to xenophobia by members of armed groups and criminal gangs, as well as by police officers or members of host communities (GIFMM, R4V 26/10/2020). Even when travelling with male partners or other male travel companions, women are at risk of experiencing physical or sexual violence, with very limited access to support. *Caminantes* who are part of the LGBTIQ+ community are also vulnerable to discrimination, xenophobia, violence, abuse, and exploitation during their journey. They are often subjected to harassment because of their sexual orientation (Clamor, UNHCR 06/11/2020). Gender-based violence (GBV) is also a high risk for women, girls, and LGBTIQ+ individuals during the journey. Many GBV survivors lack access to assistance because of shame, fear, or lack of information about the system (CARE 06/2020).

**Corruption:** In Venezuela, over the past months the number of checkpoints has increased to enforce COVID-19-related movement restrictions. According to anecdotal reports, members of the Venezuelan armed forces extort money from *caminantes* to allow them to pass in order to cross the border or they conduct searches where they take their belongings. In some cases, members of the armed forces have asked *caminantes* for proof of a negative PCR test result – the availability and accessibility of which are highly limited in Venezuela. If *caminantes* do not have such proof, officers at checkpoints have pressured them for money

or valuable items to let them pass (FundaRedes 14/10/2020). In Colombia, reported fraud around the issuing of false Colombian identity documents could lead refugees and migrants to falsely believe that they have a regular status in Colombia (Proyecto Migración Venezuela 09/11/2020).

## Shelter

*Caminantes* have acute shelter needs. *Caminantes* who cannot afford accommodation are forced to sleep outdoors. Many sleep under bridges, on sidewalks, on the side of the road, in public squares, and in makeshift shelters where they are exposed to weather conditions and traffic. This puts them at high risk of suffering from hypothermia or being injured by passing vehicles (CNN 22/10/2020). The lack of access to shelter makes *caminantes* vulnerable to the effects of adverse weather and leaves them exposed to heavy rains and weather changes during the journey. Natural disasters such as landslides and floods increase risks for Venezuelan migrants and refugees. Many have tried to cross the river between Táchira and Norte de Santander, regardless of how strong the current is, and have been injured (Efecto Cocuyo 16/11/2020).



Women and children are particularly exposed to exploitation, abuse, and violence while sleeping on the streets, especially when travelling alone (Clamor, UNHCR 06/11/2020). In certain transit points frequented by many *caminantes*, such as city squares in key cities along main routes, overcrowding is an issue as many *caminantes* have to share tents or places not designed for large crowds. These spaces also do not have public sanitary services like toilets, sinks, or showers – a situation that increases the possibility of disease transmission for *caminantes* (Proyecto Migración Venezuela 24/07/2020).

Many roadside assistance points that offered shelter, hydration, food, counselling, and information were closed as part of COVID-19 containment measures (GIFMM 23/10/2020). Many people who before the pandemic provided shelter or a place to sleep as a means of community support no longer do so for fear of becoming infected (CNN 22/10/2020).

## WASH

Access to safe water, adequate sanitation, and hygiene is a major challenge for *caminantes* while travelling on the road as well as in transit points.

### Water:

While on the move, *caminantes* do not have reliable access to safe drinking water and to water to bathe or wash clothes. Especially when travelling through rural areas, *caminantes* might rely on water from rivers and streams, which could lead to health risks as the water might be contaminated and not safe for consumption (Clamor, UNHCR 06/11/2020; key informant interview 10/12/2020).

### Sanitation:

Access to sanitation facilities during the journey is highly limited. While migrant shelters or support spaces at key stops along the main routes might offer some intermittent access, *caminantes* otherwise often need to resort to open defecation. In REACH's non-representative October 2020 survey of people in transit in Colombia, over half of respondents listed the lack of access to bathrooms as being among the biggest difficulties encountered during their journey (REACH 24/10/2020).

### Hygiene:

*Caminantes* lack access to personal hygiene products – such as soap and hand sanitisers – as well as facilities for handwashing which are crucial for COVID-19 prevention (Ministerio de Salud accessed 11/12/2020). Female hygiene is challenging for female *caminantes*, given the lack of access to sanitation facilities and female hygiene products (FLM 24/09/2020).

## Health

Colombia remains one of the countries in Latin America that is most affected by COVID-19, with around 1.8 million confirmed cases as at 14 January 2021 (Ministerio de Salud accessed 14/01/2021). This has left an already weak health system even more overwhelmed. Access to the healthcare system for *caminantes* is limited as many do not have a regular status.

## Lack of access to healthcare:

*Caminantes* have very limited access to healthcare. Everyone in Colombia is allowed emergency assistance, but this is the only health service that people without a regular status have access to. Access to health is further limited for Venezuelan refugees and migrants because they are on the move and pass through areas where limited or no medical assistance or services are available. They might also not receive the healthcare they need because health facilities in some of the host communities are overwhelmed as a result of COVID-19 (Solidar 23/10/2020). For example, intensive care units in Norte de Santander department (Colombia) were 97% occupied on 11 December (El Espectador 11/12/2020).

## Diseases and medical conditions:

Venezuelan migrants and refugees are exposed to different types of diseases during their journey. They are exposed to COVID-19, as it is difficult to maintain social distancing and they do not have easy access to gloves, masks, rubbing alcohol, or antibacterial gel. Many *caminantes* have to reuse facemasks for several days (key informant interview 10/12/2020). Some *caminantes* lack information about the prevention measures they should take (key informant interview 09/12/2020).

During the journey, *caminantes* are exposed to other types of diseases, such as waterborne and insect-borne diseases, STDs, and other types of infections. Being exposed to changing weather conditions also has detrimental effects on their health. One of the most critical points during the trip is the Páramo de Berlin, where temperatures can drop to -5°C due to the altitude of more than 3,200 metres above sea level (Proyecto Migración Venezuela 20/10/2020). Many Venezuelan refugees and migrants do not have appropriate clothing and can suffer from respiratory diseases, altitude-related diseases, hypothermia, and even death (Proyecto





Migración Venezuela 20/10/2020). They are also exposed to high temperatures like those in Chile's Atacama Desert, increasing the risk of dehydration (Caracas Chronicles 06/10/2020).

Travel-related injuries and illnesses are also common, such as foot injuries from walking, fractures, injuries resulting from accidents on the road, malnutrition, dehydration, or respiratory

diseases (Efecto Cocuyo 12/10/2020).

### People with disabilities or chronic diseases:

For *caminantes* with chronic diseases, the journey is even more challenging since they do not have access to healthcare and therefore do not have access to the medications or treatments they require. *Caminantes* with disabilities also face many obstacles and difficulties, since they must travel long distances and cross difficult terrain. According to the non-representative REACH rapid needs assessment of people in transit in Colombia, 25% of the people surveyed had some type of disability (REACH 24/10/2020).

### Maternal health:

Not having access to healthcare and the physical demands of the journey can impact maternal health, leading to malnourishment and high-risk pregnancies (El Impulso 25/11/2020). Women in advanced stages of pregnancy may give birth part way through the journey without access to the necessary sanitation and medical facilities, exposing both mother and infant to health risks. The NGO CARE reported that there has been an increase of maternal mortality along the Colombia-Venezuelan border (Devex 03/11/2020).

### Mental health:

Several factors affect the mental health of *caminantes*. Having to leave their country can generate distress and constant concern and worry for the wellbeing of the families they have left behind. Traumatic experiences during the journey such as violence can cause post-traumatic stress or generate other psychological issues. Anxiety and depression are reported as the main mental health issues, according to a study by the Javeriana University in Bogotá on the mental health needs of the Venezuelan migrant population (Universidad Javeriana 02/10/2020).

### Education

There is a significant information gap regarding access to education for children who are *caminantes*. During the journey their access to education is reduced or non-existent, as parents have limited or no access to the internet or to equipment such as smartphones or tablets.

*Caminantes* are also on the move on foot, so it is difficult to find time and quiet space to read and study even if they do have a smartphone or tablet (key informant interview 09/12/2020). *Caminantes* who have newly arrived in host countries will not have had the opportunity to enrol their children in schools. As many *caminantes* do not have a regular status, it is also very difficult for them to access any type of formal education in host countries (UNHCR 01/2020).

## PROFILES OF CAMINANTES

The phenomenon of the *caminantes* is not new, and there are differences in the profiles of those who make the journey on foot. According to a 2018 OCHA needs assessment and a 2019 iMMAP needs assessment, between 2018 and 2019 there was an increase in the proportion of women, nursing and pregnant mothers, and adults over 34 years of age who were *caminantes* (OCHA and iMMAP 2018, 2019). According to OCHA's needs assessment, during 2018 90% of *caminantes* left Venezuela because of economic reasons, 88% were in search of labour opportunities in Colombia and other countries in the region, and 58% left because of unmet basic needs (OCHA and iMMAP 2018, 2019). According to iMMAP's needs assessment, in 2019 74% of *caminantes* left Venezuela because of economic reasons, 68% were in search of labour opportunities in Colombia and other countries in the region, and 73% left because of unmet basic needs (OCHA and iMMAP 2018, 2019). According to a non-representative survey of people in transit carried out by GIFMM in Colombia, in 2020 88% of people surveyed left Venezuela because they lacked employment and economic resources and 78% left because they had difficulties accessing food (GIFMM accessed 05/01/2021). According to a non-representative REACH survey carried out in Colombia, 69% of *caminantes* left their residence of origin because of loss of their employment or income-generating activity, while 38% left because of uncertainty about the future or because they did not know what would happen after the health emergency (REACH 24/10/2020).

Both non-representative surveys carried out by REACH and GIFMM show that *caminantes* in 2020 varied in age (GIFMM accessed 05/01/2021; REACH 24/10/2020).

### Of the people surveyed who travelled in a group:

- around **42%** were men between **18–59** years old
- **24%** were women between **18–59** years old
- **16%** were children between **7–17** years old
- around **18%** were children between **0–6** years old

According to the REACH rapid needs assessment (REACH 24/10/2020), 73% of people surveyed travelled in a group and 27% travelled alone.





### Of those who travelled in a group:\*

- 66% travelled with family
- 22% travelled with people they had met before the journey
- 11% travelled with people they met along the way



\*The recipients could choose various options, so the figures do not always add up to 100%.

Some *caminantes* are returning to Colombia and others are making the journey for the first time. The most at-risk groups of *caminantes* are single and/or pregnant mothers, children and adolescents, people travelling alone (especially if they are women), people with disabilities, the elderly, members of the LGBTIQ+ community, people belonging to indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, and refugees and migrants with an irregular status (Clamor, UNHCR 06/11/2020).

According to an analysis of Displacement Tracking Matrix data collected in 2019 of Venezuelan refugees and migrants carried out by the Migration Policy Institute and IOM, Venezuelan refugees and migrants who travel to Brazil, Colombia, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago tend to have a lower educational level and are more likely to be young and single. Venezuelan refugees and migrants who travel to Ecuador and Peru also tend to be young, but more than one-third hold a technical degree or higher. Those moving to Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Paraguay, and Uruguay are older on average and reported higher levels of education, and half or more had a bachelor's or master's degree (IOM 27/08/2020).

### Origins, routes and destinations

For people travelling to Colombia, San Cristóbal del Táchira – the capital of Táchira state – is one of the main stops for *caminantes* before they continue on towards San Antonio del Táchira, which borders Colombia (Efecto Cocuyo 12/10/2020). According to FundaRedes, *caminantes* are coming to Colombia via routes from Zulia, Táchira, and Apure and from Central-Western areas of Venezuela, like Carabobo, Lara, and Caracas (key informant interview 10/12/2020). They walk from border areas towards several cities in Colombia and other countries such as Ecuador, Peru, and Chile (Proyecto Migración Venezuela 24/07/2020).

## AGGRAVATING FACTORS

The humanitarian needs of and access to support systems for *caminantes* are worsened by additional factors such as:

### Xenophobia:

The pandemic has increased xenophobia in Colombia. Many host communities have shown

their discomfort at the presence of *caminantes* in their municipalities or cities through various types of rejection actions such as protests, physical and psychological violence, hate speech, and discrimination (Clamor, UNHCR 06/11/2020). The rejection sentiment is caused by a perception that *caminantes* are carriers of COVID-19. Some members of host communities, including public figures, also believe that Venezuelan refugees and migrants, including *caminantes*, are responsible for rising levels of insecurity in their host countries (R4V 12/10/2020).

### Fraud and misinformation:

Misinformation among *caminantes* circulates about the dynamics of the armed conflict in Colombia, routes to travel, weather conditions, points of assistance, or the organisations *caminantes* can turn to when they need help (key informant interview 09/12/2020). They have been subject to humanitarian aid scams where they are charged for assistance, or are provided with false identity documents (Proyecto Migración Venezuela 06/11/2020). Many Venezuelan migrants and refugees are not aware of the processes required to issue migration documents in host countries.

## RESPONSE CAPACITY

In the region, there are 73 civil society organisations giving aid to Venezuelan refugees and migrants, including *caminantes* (key informant interview 09/12/2020).

**In Venezuela**, the response for *caminantes* is extremely limited. There are significant limitations on the delivery of assistance from humanitarian organisations (ACAPS 14/12/2020). Those who provide assistance to *caminantes* within Venezuela are churches or religious organisations, and community members. They usually give water, food, and sometimes clothes and shoes. This limited access to support within Venezuela means that *caminantes* arrive at the border with Colombia in a vulnerable state, in urgent need of assistance (key informant interviews 08/12/2020, 10/12/2020).

**In Colombia**, although response capacity has been limited, several organisations are providing assistance in different regions. The Catholic Church in Cúcuta has increased its coverage, and is now delivering food kits to *caminantes*, prioritising pregnant women and children (Caracol 23/10/2020).

The GIFMM in Arauca, Santander, and Nariño is distributing hygiene kits and personal protection items, as well as multipurpose vouchers, food rations, and energy kits. Handwashing facilities are available at the José Antonio Páez International Bridge in Arauca.

GIFMM is also providing information to Venezuelan refugees and migrants regarding protec-

tion risks on the route, access to rights, dissemination of child protection messages, socialisation and legal orientation for access to health, and information on applications for refugee status. There are primary healthcare services in temporary accommodation and hotels throughout Colombia, as well as sexual and reproductive health and mental health services in the Ipiales Transport Terminal in Nariño (GIFMM 09/10/2020). The GIFMM Local Emergency Group has reactivated the response to the transit population in Bogotá, with healthcare, delivery of non-food items, and psychosocial care for *caminantes* provided on the route that passes through the municipalities of Chia and Tocancipá (GIFMM 09/10/2020).

As at December 2020, there were 567 face-to-face service points active in the departments of Antioquia, Arauca, Atlántico, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Santander, Valle del Cauca, Bolívar, César, and La Guajira and in the capital city of Bogotá (GIFMM accessed 21/12/2020).

## HUMANITARIAN AND OPERATIONAL CONSTRAINTS

In Colombia, the response capacity has been highly affected by the pandemic. Several roadside assistance points were closed because of restrictions, and although some have begun to reopen since early September 2020, reopening is slow because additional biosecurity measures are required (key informant interview 10/12/2020).

The response capacity varies across municipalities and departments. The limited coordination between humanitarian organisations and government entities could hinder the humanitarian response (key informant interviews 10/12/2020–18/12/2020).

The armed conflict also hinders humanitarian assistance. UNHCR reported that the capacity to assist and monitor *caminantes* on the south-eastern border between Colombia and Venezuela is limited by the presence of armed groups and restricted access to the territory (UNHCR 15/11/2020).

While humanitarian operations in Venezuela are generally permitted, bureaucratic obstacles and security challenges limit an effective humanitarian response. A new legal framework for the registration of INGOs was approved in October 2020, though it is unclear whether its implementation will improve or hinder the operability of INGOs in the country (UN News 18/12/2020; ACAPS 14/12/2020).

## INFORMATION GAPS

- Lack of representative data on *caminantes*. Most data on people in transit is collected in key points along main travel routes, such as Cúcuta and Bucaramanga. There is no quantitative and little qualitative information available on less-frequented routes.
- There is an information gap regarding WASH. There is little information on how *caminantes* have access to WASH.
- There is an information gap on education. Little is known about education during the journey and about access to education when *caminantes* arrive at their final destination.
- There is limited information about the re-opening of assistance points along different travel routes that were forced to close because of COVID-19 restrictions.
- There is limited information about humanitarian assistance for *caminantes* in Boyacá, Guajira, along the Atlantic and Pacific coast, Cundinamarca, and Llanos Orientales.
- There are significant information gaps on the situation of *caminantes* inside Venezuela.

