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Costa Rica as a Destination for Migrants in Need of International Protection: IMR Country Report

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Abstract

In this IMR Country Report, we draw attention to Costa Rica as a strategic location for expanding research and theory on migrants in need of protection (MNP), who have migrated abroad primarily to evade an imminent threat to their survival. MNP constitute an increasing share of all international migrants in Costa Rica and worldwide, yet research on these migrants and their migration dynamics remains comparatively underdeveloped relative to research on migrants who relocate abroad primarily in pursuit of material gains, social status, or family reunification. As we highlight, Costa Rica is an instrumental site to deepen understandings of MNP populations and migration dynamics because its large and rapidly growing MNP population is incredibly diverse with respect to national origins, demographic characteristics, and underlying motivations for migration. This diversity presents ample opportunities to better understand heterogeneity in the different types of threats MNP seek to evade; how and why MNP incorporation is shaped by individuals' demographic attributes and pre-migration threats; and how the social networks of various MNP subpopulations develop and overlap with time. Moreover, the geographic concentration of MNP in two regions in Costa Rica lends itself to primary data collection among this population and generates opportunities for estimating local MNPs' demographic characterization, even in the absence of a reliable sampling frame.

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Introduction

Migrants “in need of international protection” (MNP)—refugees and internationally displaced migrants in “refugee-like situations” who move abroad to evade imminent threats to their survival—account for an increasing share of all international migrants worldwide (United Nations 2017; UNHCR 2018c). Although there is no universally held definition of MNP, we conceive of this population as including refugees under UNHCR’s mandate, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, Palestinian refugees under UNRWA’s mandate, Venezuelans and Syrians displaced abroad, and others whom the UNHCR deems “persons of concern.” Defined this way, international MNP more than doubled during the 2010s, from 20.8 to 46.8 million (UNHCR 2021).¹ Despite this growth, most demographic and sociological studies of migrants continue to overlook MNP, whose migration is primarily motivated by threat evasion, or “the desire to escape an immediate threat to emotional or physical wellbeing” (Massey 2018, p. 4; see also Davenport, Moore and Poe 2003; Holland and Peters 2020). Instead, past literature tends to focus on migration motivated by material gains, economic risk diversification, social connections, or social status (for reviews, see Massey et al. 1999; Delgado-Wise 2014; Lee, Carling and Orrenius 2014). Consequently, much remains unknown about MNPs’ push and pull factors, living conditions, societal incorporation, family dynamics, and health outcomes.

In this *JMR* Country Report, we draw attention to Costa Rica—a small, politically stable, middle-income country in southern Central America—as a strategic locale to expand research and theory on threat evasion and MNP. Our perspective is informed by our ongoing research in the country, including focus groups, in-depth interviews, surveys with MNP, and informal conversations with local MNP service providers, conducted since 2019. Costa Rica, we suggest, is illustrative of the global explosion of MNP because its estimated MNP population grew from approximately 8,000 in 2016 to 122,000 in 2020 (UNHCR 2021), alongside worsening gang and drug violence, economic crises, and political turmoil in Latin America (UNHCR 2018a). Today, Costa Rica receives a combination of northbound and southbound MNP, most of whom originate from Nicaragua, Venezuela, Colombia, or elsewhere in Central America (Figure 1, UNHCR Data Finder 2021). Costa Rica, thus, provides a unique opportunity to study a diverse and rapidly growing MNP population in a middle-income country, with notable implications for migration scholars’ understanding of South-South migration, of the different threats MNP seek to evade and their impacts on MNPs’ incorporation, of the development of social networks among different MNP subpopulations, and of the implications of MNP population growth for receiving contexts.

Costa Rica as a Destination

Starting in the 1960s and continuing through the 1990s, Costa Rica received thousands of migrants evading civil and political conflicts in Nicaragua, Colombia, Cuba, Argentina, and Chile (OECD and Fundación de la Universidad de Costa Rica para la Investigación 2017). For many MNP, Costa Rica’s political stability and lack of military have been appealing pull factors (Walker Gates 2019), as has been its free public education, which

¹Our estimates of MNP globally and in Costa Rica come from UNHCR’s Refugee Data Finder: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>.

is available to migrant children, including those with irregular status (Walker Gates 2019). While Nicaraguans need a visa to enter the country, most other nationalities do not (DGME 2021), although Costa Rica did begin requiring visas for Venezuelans in February 2022 (Murillo 2022).²

Although technically legal in Costa Rica, the detention of immigrants with irregular status is rare and treated as a last resort, with only 1,637 migrants deported in 2019 (DGME 2019) and only one small detention center with a total capacity of 50 people (Global Detention Project 2020). Those who are denied asylum in Costa Rica are typically encouraged to appeal their cases or to find alternative means to remain in the country legally, such as through employment (Walker Gates 2019).³

Alongside its increasing number of MNP, Costa Rica continually hosts a large number of economic migrants, despite higher unemployment levels than most other Latin American countries (World Bank 2021). Most economic migrants in Costa Rica originate from Nicaragua or Panama (Voorend and Rivera 2012; Groh and José 2017) and work seasonally in agriculture or tourism or work longer term in domestic services (Otterstrom 2008; Vandegrift 2008; Groh and José 2017). Beyond economic migrants and MNP, Costa Rica continually receives migrant entrepreneurs and retirees from high-income countries (Morales-Gamboa 2008; Groh and José 2017; Chaves González and Mora 2021).

Studying Threat Evasion and MNP in Costa Rica

While Costa Rica receives both economic migrants *and* MNP, research on migration to Costa Rica tends to focus more on the former than on the latter (Groh and José 2017), paralleling global trends in the study of migration (as outlined by Delgado-Wise 2014; Lee, Carling and Orrenius 2014; and Massey et al. 1999). That is, the vast majority of scholarship on migration to Costa Rica investigates economic migration from Panama or Nicaragua, transnational families straddling these countries, or policies regarding them (Borge 2006; Morales-Gamboa 2008; Brenes-Camacho 2010; Sandoval García 2010; Fouratt 2014; Winters 2014; Groh and José 2017).

The handful of studies explicitly examining MNP in Costa Rica tend to focus on MNP who arrived 20 to 40 years ago. Specifically, these studies track when and where Nicaraguan refugees resettled in Costa Rica in the 1980s (Larson 1993); examine the government's policy responses to MNP inflows from Nicaragua and El Salvador in the 1980s and early 2000s (Basok 1990; Larson 1992; Fouratt 2014); and investigate how the Costa Rican government's immigration policy affected Cuban MNP in the 1980s (Fernández and Narváez 1987). Together, this small body of work documents the evolution of Costa Rican immigration policy between the 1980s and early 2000s and these policies' implications for select MNP populations in the country. What these studies leave open, however, are pivotal questions about the *current* numbers and organization of MNP, the different precipitating

²To enter Costa Rica, foreigners need a passport that is valid for at least three months after arrival (Embajada de Costa Rica en Washington D.C. 2022).

³Transcontinental MNP also increasingly pass through Costa Rica in transit to the United States (Selee et al. 2021). In contrast to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, Costa Rica has not signed an "Asylum Cooperative Agreement" with the United States (Blinken 2021).

threats of distinct MNP subpopulations, and the implications of various threats for MNPs' health and wellbeing, family dynamics, and incorporation into Costa Rica. For instance, it remains unclear which MNP are most likely to apply for asylum in the country and what determines whether they stay, return, or migrate elsewhere if their asylum claim is denied. Likewise, little is understood about the linkages between prior and successive waves of MNP in Costa Rica or whether social networks of MNP from diverse backgrounds overlap.

Answering these questions in Costa Rica and elsewhere is complicated by several factors. First, no reliable sampling frame for MNP exists, both because there is no universally agreed-upon definition of MNP (FitzGerald and Arar 2018) and because some MNP avoid immigration institutions altogether (Larson 1993). For instance, drawing on a list of asylum applications from the Ministry of Migration or UNHCR risks excluding MNP who do not apply for asylum, even if eligible (Figure 2). Drawing on a list of all visa applicants may similarly miss MNP who never register in the country or who overstay their visa. Moreover, drawing on a list of *all* visa applicants would be inefficient, given that many visa-holders may migrate for reasons not related to threat evasion.

Second, in most reception contexts, including in Costa Rica, MNP's socioeconomic conditions can make them hard to reach. Some may be too poor to access the Internet or keep a cellphone connected regularly, which impedes initiating and maintaining contact with them (Jauhiainen, Özçürümez and Tursun 2021). Others may be mistrusting of strangers or socially isolated, particularly if they did not arrive in Costa Rica through social network connections (Turner 1995; Arar 2016; Greene 2019). Third, even when MNP can be reached, they can be difficult to follow over time because their liminal legality and low economic status exacerbate their risk of eviction, homelessness, and housing instability (Kissoon 2010). Likewise, being in an economically vulnerable position can lead MNP to prioritize income opportunities above all else (Verwiebe et al. 2019), thereby impeding their research participation.

Given these challenges, few representative studies of MNP exist anywhere in the world (for a description of notable exceptions, see Enticott et al. 2017).⁴ Moreover, only a handful of studies follow MNP longitudinally, including the Indochinese Health and Adaptation Research Project (IHARP), which surveyed a sample of Southeast Asian refugee households in San Diego twice in the 1980s (Rumbaut and Weeks 1989); the Somali Youth Longitudinal Study, which surveyed a panel of adolescent Somali refugees across five major North American cities (Salhi et al. 2021); and the Building a New Life in Australia Study, which surveyed a diverse sample of humanitarian visa applicants four times between 2013 and 2018 (Wu et al. 2021). Two other recent studies collected multiple rounds of data in refugee camps in Bangladesh and Kenya (Egger et al. 2021; Lopez-Pena et al. 2021).

Overall, these panel studies offer new insights into the health challenges and gradual, yet limited, incorporation of (documented) refugees. At the same time, they stem from data collected on select MNP populations in only a few cities in Australia, Canada, and the United States and in refugee camps in Bangladesh and Kenya. The vast majority of

⁴For two more recent exceptions, see Koning et al. (2021) and Lopez-Pena et al. (2021).

MNP, however, do not reside in camps or wealthy countries (UNHCR 2021), and MNP resettlement patterns may differ widely as a function of social safety net accessibility, employment and educational opportunities, language barriers, and racial and ethnic discrimination (UNHCR 2018b; Blair, Grossman and Weinstein 2021). Diversifying the study contexts of MNP to be more inclusive of migrants living outside refugee camps and relocating to lower-and middle-income countries like Costa Rica is, therefore, crucial to expanding understandings of the lived realities of millions of MNP worldwide.

Opportunities for Studying Threat Evasion and MNP in Costa Rica

By many metrics, Costa Rica's socioeconomic conditions are similar to those encountered by MNP in various other middle-income countries like Chile and Panama in Latin America or Malaysia and Thailand in Southeast Asia. Anecdotal evidence from our fieldwork suggests that most MNP in Costa Rica resettle either in San José and the surrounding Central Valley or along the Nicaraguan border. In both cases, MNP's geographic concentration makes it easier to collect plausibly representative samples using methods like respondent-driven sampling (Tyldum and Johnston 2014) because this concentration indicates that MNP social networks are already taking shape. Moreover, MNP's geographic concentration should reduce barriers to their retention in longitudinal studies by making it easier for most participants to access strategically located study offices.

Costa Rica's large and growing MNP population, which is diverse in its national origins (Figure 1), encompasses a wide range of precipitating threats, ranging from gang and drug violence to civil conflict, persecution, and natural disasters. It also includes both established and more recently arrived MNP (OECD and Fundación de la Universidad de Costa Rica para la Investigación 2017). This diversity presents unique opportunities to understand how different types of precipitating threats and background characteristics affect MNP's incorporation, network development, and familial and health trajectories, while holding their reception context constant. What is more, much of the research on MNP focuses on sub-populations originating from sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, or Southeast Asia and resettling in the United States, Europe, or Australia (e.g., Porter and Haslam 2005; Ellis et al. 2008; Fazel et al. 2012; Reed et al. 2012). Given Costa Rica's location in Latin America and given its reception of predominantly Latin American MNP, it is well suited for developing a foundational understanding of the causes and consequences of threat evasion as a process of South-South migration.

Studying MNP in Costa Rica also offers theoretical advancements for research on contemporary international migration more broadly. What long-term consequences does forced international migration have on people's identity formation, aspirations, and patterns of behavior (see Pugh 2018)? How does the arrival of MNP alter the social dynamics of receiving countries like Costa Rica and sending countries like Venezuela and Nicaragua (see Zhou and Shaver 2021)? Are the uncertainty and instability that MNP experience comparable to that experienced during other traumatic events, including violent conflict, political alienation, and community disintegration (see Betancourt et al. 2015)? More broadly, how do answers to these questions differ between MNP who are politically recognized as refugees or asylees and MNP who are not?

Beyond these theoretical insights, the study of MNP in Costa Rica offers methodological contributions for research on hard-to-reach migrant populations, including adapting sophisticated chain referral methods (like respondent-driven sampling) to estimate population parameters in the absence of a reliable sampling frame; characterizing the network linkages between current and earlier MNP arrivals and between MNP and other types of migrants; and developing strategies for successfully retaining vulnerable and highly mobile migrants such as MNP in longitudinal surveys.

Concluding Thoughts

Costa Rica's geographic, political, and infrastructural characteristics make it ideally suited to develop new data sources on a large and growing MNP population. Such data sources are pivotal to making inferences about MNP population parameters and dynamics, to understanding a fuller range of MNP threat profiles, and to tracking how MNPs' incorporation unfolds over time. Studies of Costa Rica's growing and diverse MNP population can, thus, enhance migration scholars' understanding of threat evasion and its personal and societal implications, in comparison to economically and socially motivated migration more traditionally explored in migration studies (Massey et al. 1999; Delgado-Wise 2014; Lee, Carling and Orrenius 2014). Ultimately, expanding data on threat evasion and MNP in Costa Rica promises to bolster knowledge of the migration dynamics and experiences of people who become uprooted because of targeted or pervasive violence, political turmoil, disasters, and other pressing threats. Each year, such migrants account for a growing percentage of all migrants worldwide, most of whom resettle in low- or middle-income countries like Costa Rica (UNPD 2017). Our understandings of this expanding migrant population can be enhanced by developing new, comprehensive data sources that track the experiences and growth of MNP populations in Costa Rica, which subsequently can inform research in other countries in the Global South, where MNP inflows are steadily increasing.

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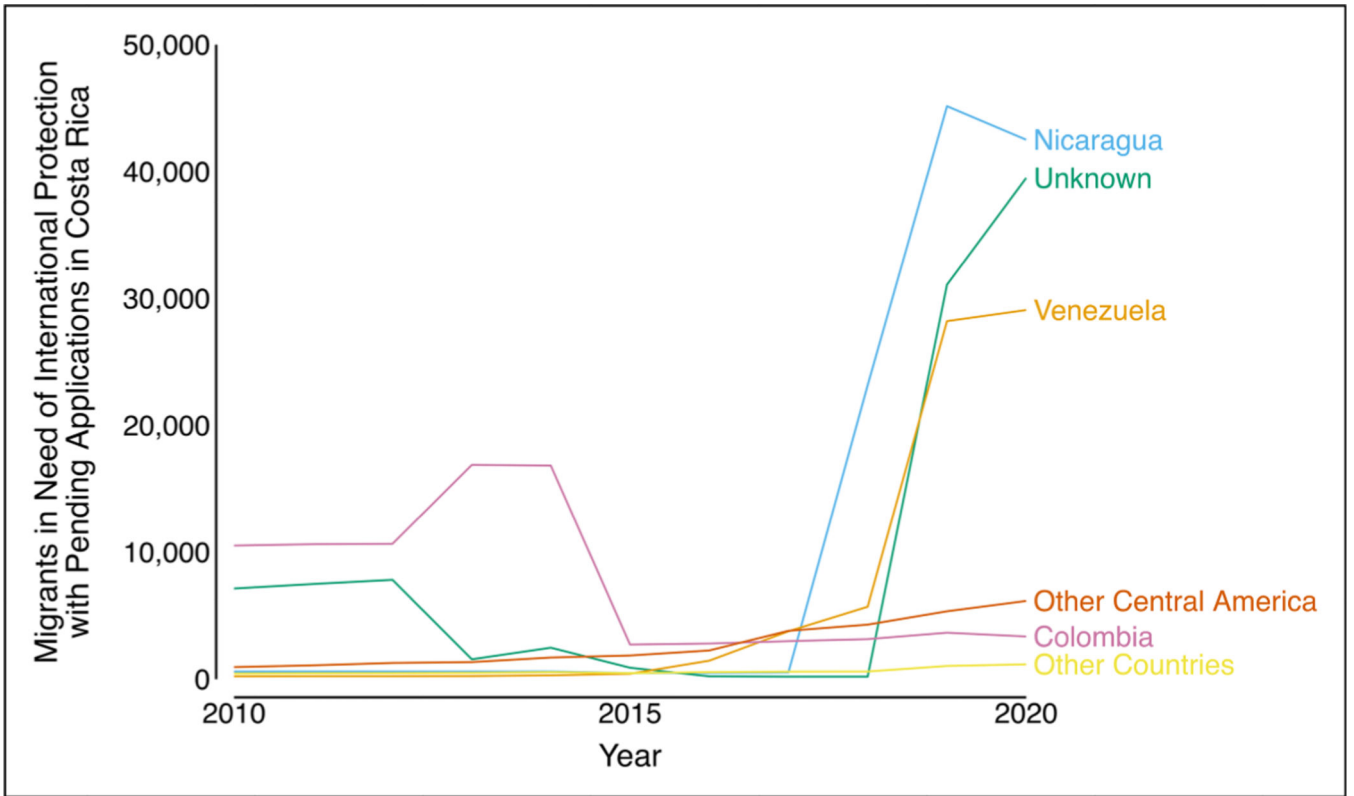


Figure 1. Migrants in need of international protection with pending applications in Costa Rica, by country of origin. Note: We calculate these estimates with data from the UNHCR’s Refugee Data Finder: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>. See Footnote 1 for further information.

| | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------|---|---|
| Asylum seeking | Seeks | Doesn't qualify for asylum, but seeks asylum | Qualifies for asylum and seeks asylum |
| | Doesn't seek | Doesn't qualify for asylum, and doesn't seek asylum | Qualifies for asylum, but doesn't seek asylum |
| | | Doesn't qualify | Qualifies |
| | | Asylum qualification | |

Figure 2. Asylum qualification and seeking Among migrants in need of international protection.