



# **GLOBAL Pathways**

## **to Becoming New Americans**

**Ernesto Castañeda, Marshall Plane,  
Katheryn Olmos, Tabby Ford,  
Caryalyn Jean, Quinn Pierson,  
Amanda Vincent, Anjini Patel, Olivia  
Salamone, and Maggie McMahon**

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## DEDICATIONS

I dedicate this book to all the contributors and coauthors of this book.

– Ernesto Castañeda

Thank you to everyone who made this project possible, especially the migrants who shared their stories.

– Marshall Plane

To Janet and Alvaro for being inspiring and supportive parents. Thank you to the Immigration Lab members. And, thank you to the migrants who inspire this work.

– Katheryn Olmos

Thank you to all my friends and family who have supported me along the way.

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– Maggie McMahan



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book draws all its data from a large project based at the Immigration Lab at American University (AU), Directed by Ernesto Castañeda, which started interviewing Afghans after the Taliban took back power and then expanded to include people escaping conflict in Ukraine and Ethiopia, and then used basically the same questionnaire to document the experiences of immigrants, asylum seekers, and a few refugees during and after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lifting of Title 42 on May 11, 2023, which temporarily closed the country to asylum seekers. Some interviews were taken during the second Trump administration, and in a future volume, we will explore the social effects of border, asylum, and immigration policies. Supported first by the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of International Service to interview Afghans and then by American University's Strategic Research Initiatives. We thank the co-PIs and researchers in those grants, including Tazreena Sajjad, Mubbashir Rizvi, Bashir Mobasher, Daniel Jenks, Shrija Shrestha, as well as Lauren Carruth, Susanna Campbell, Joe

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Ernesto Castañeda, Director of the Center of Latin American and Latino Studies and the Immigration Lab, oversaw all the data collection and study design from the very beginning of the project in 2022. Castañeda also oversaw the writing, editing, and publication processes and was the contents of the final version. Katheryn Olmos and Marshall Plane have been overseeing data collection, transcription, and translation for the Washington, DC, and New York City metro data, respectively. They both conducted dozens of interviews themselves. The rest of the coauthors were responsible for drafting a whole chapter each and provided feedback on the remaining chapters. Most coauthors were students in American University's Master's in Sociology, Research, and Practice at the time of publication and while writing the book. They learned how to conduct research by analyzing already-collected qualitative data and communicating its findings to a public seeking humanizing yet anonymized profiles of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. We thank our colleagues in the Sociology Department at American University. Marshall Plane and Maggie McMahon were extraordinary university students majoring in economics and international relations, respectively. Very strong writers and already impressive social science researchers.

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This is a product of public scholarship. It is aimed at a wider public, which is why we keep discussions about existing academic literature and theories to a minimum. It is produced by scholars and social scientists. We have incorporated feedback from conferences and experts. It has not undergone the single-blind review process in order to get the data and narratives faster to the public, given the urgency of the topic

and the novelty of the number of people, close to 450, who were willing to talk to us at length and trusted us to share their stories. All names are pseudonyms. We did not collect any identifying data, and some details have been changed to further anonymize the data.

The data is presented largely thematically, but we hope you get to meet some of our protagonists throughout their book. As you will see, their stories are unique, but the opportunities and challenges faced by many are strikingly similar, and some of them are not different from yours or those of U.S.-born citizens.



# 1

## VENEZUELANS IN NEW YORK CITY

The arrival of migrants has been a near-constant process throughout New York City's history. Yet rarely has it received so much attention as it did from 2022 to 2024, when the presence of new arrivals from the United States-Mexico border in city-run shelters became a political lightning rod. For three years, images of Latino and African men lined up outside Manhattan hotels appeared repeatedly on national television, becoming the face of a “migrant crisis” that critics alleged was created by President Biden’s immigration policies. The plurality of shelter residents hailed from a country that had never before been well-represented among New York’s pantheon of immigrant communities: Venezuela.

Today, news outlets are more likely to show Venezuelans in handcuffs, crammed together in the back of ICE vehicles. The Trump administration has used an alleged “invasion” of the US by Venezuelan gangs to justify large-scale detentions and deportations of Venezuelan immigrants without due process, as well as military actions against Venezuela itself. Meanwhile, the last of New York’s emergency shelters were emptying out to little fanfare by early 2025. This chapter in the city’s immigration history has seemingly been forgotten as quickly as it began.

The sidewalk in front of the Roosevelt Hotel is indeed strikingly empty. Yet just a train ride away, in working-class sections of Brooklyn and Queens, attentive listeners may notice that Venezuelan Spanish can now regularly be heard alongside the familiar dialects of Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic. Arepa vendors have set up shop next to purveyors of tamales and *salchipapas*, while money transfer services have added Venezuela to their list of advertised destinations. Venezuelans have quietly joined New York’s workforce of toiling immigrants, lining up at construction sites early in the morning and hauling DoorDash orders across the boroughs late at night. Many of the children who survived the traumatic journey through the Darien Gap are now in their fourth year of American school, discovering the passions and friendships that give meaning to their

turbulent young lives. In short, they are becoming New Yorkers.

This story deserves a more thorough examination—not only because Venezuelan immigration has been covered in a highly sensationalized way, but also because it represents a unique chapter in US immigration history. Few immigrant populations’ experiences have been shaped so extensively by the power of the state: first as welcomer, then as persecutor.

As large numbers of Venezuelans sought asylum at the US-Mexico border in the early 2020s, the Biden administration sought to “regularize” this migration flow by making them eligible for both Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and its newly created humanitarian parole program. This created legal migration pathways for Venezuelans that were not available to most other nationalities. A visible subset of Venezuelan migrants (though not the majority) received shelter and aid from cities like Denver, Chicago, and New York. In these cities, government and nonprofit services filled the supportive role typically played by migrants’ personal and family networks. The legal assistance they provided was particularly crucial, allowing migrants to apply for asylum and thus obtain the work permits they needed to become self-sustaining.

Then, virtually overnight, these budding Venezuelan communities became targets of Trump’s draconian mass deportation program. In spring 2025, the new administration abruptly ended humanitarian parole and TPS for Venezuelans,

rendering hundreds of thousands of people undocumented. Baselessly claiming that the US was facing an invasion by the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua, Trump invoked the Alien Enemies of 1798 Act to deport Venezuelans without due process. Thousands have been detained without trial and placed in facilities where numerous violations of human rights have been documented.

Over the winter of 2024-25 and the summer of 2025, several other students working for The Immigration Lab at American University and I interviewed nearly 250 recently arrived immigrants in New York City, including thirty Venezuelans. Many interviewees expressed a sense of whiplash at the recent about-face in federal policy. In addition to the tragedies, triumphs, fears, hopes, and dreams that characterize most immigrant journeys, the stories we heard capture several distinct patterns: the emergence of new Venezuelan communities in New York and across the US; their persistence in the face of Trump's targeted crackdown; the unique role of social networks, government services, and shifting job markets in shaping these migration patterns; and the seemingly never-ending odyssey that Venezuela's 34 million people have gone through in the decade since the country's economic collapse.

...

Ask an exiled Venezuelan what their homeland is like, and you'll likely hear a poignant tribute, like someone

reminiscing over a lost loved one. Above all, Venezuelans take pride in their country's diversity. Its people are a fusion of numerous Arawakan and Cariban peoples; descendants of enslaved Africans and Spanish settlers; and more recent immigrants, including Chinese, Italians, Portuguese, and Levantine Arabs. Culturally, Venezuela is closely linked to neighboring Colombia and shares a love of baseball, salsa, merengue, plantains, and rum with the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. The Texas-sized country is home to white-sand Caribbean beaches and cool, rugged Andean mountains; lush Amazonian rainforests and open-sky rolling grasslands; the deserts of Coro and the swampy Orinoco Delta, beneath which lie the world's largest oil reserves.

For much of the 20th century, oil exports gave Venezuela the highest per-capita income in Latin America—a figure that belied persistent inequality and instability. Resource dependence prevented the country from developing a domestic industry, leaving its ability to import goods at the mercy of ever-changing oil prices. During the 2000s, a booming global oil market enabled the charismatic socialist Hugo Chavez to finance social welfare programs that improved living standards for many poor Venezuelans, while also nationalizing many industries and building a powerful party-state apparatus down to the neighborhood level.

Starting in 2008, a confluence of factors—declining oil prices, mismanagement of state-owned enterprises, disastrous

policies of price controls and money printing—began eroding these gains. By the time Chavez died in 2013 (to be succeeded by Nicolas Maduro, his decidedly less charismatic foreign minister), the country was already suffering from widespread shortages and the world's highest inflation rate at 39%.<sup>1</sup>

A further plunge in oil prices in the mid-2010s sent Venezuela spiraling into crisis. By 2016, Human Rights Watch was reporting dire images of empty grocery stores and crowds of people searching for garbage to eat.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, the US imposed sanctions on Venezuela's state-owned oil company with the goal of accelerating the seemingly imminent collapse of the Maduro regime. Instead, Maduro clung to power by violently repressing protests while the economic collapse accelerated due to sanctions. Venezuela's inflation rate peaked in 2018 at a stunning 226,000%.<sup>3</sup> Cases of preventable diseases like malaria and tuberculosis, once effectively eradicated in Venezuela, surged due to shortages of medical supplies.<sup>4</sup> In Venezuela's 2017 Annual Survey of Living Conditions, three-quarters of the population reported weight loss of twenty pounds or more due to food shortages.<sup>5</sup>

To survive, people took desperate measures. One was fight: many police and civilians alike resorted to criminal activity, giving Venezuela the world's highest murder rate for four consecutive years (2015-18).<sup>6</sup> Another was flight: over six million Venezuelans had fled their homeland by 2021, primarily to other South American countries. The remittances

sent by these economic refugees helped mitigate the crisis back home, as the US dollar became Venezuela's de facto currency.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, when the Venezuelan exodus to the US began in 2021, over 76% of the population was living in extreme poverty<sup>8</sup>—up from just 10% in 2012.<sup>9</sup>

...

I received a firsthand account of this catastrophe on a breezy August evening in Corona, a Latino enclave in northern Queens. My colleague Diana interviewed Nairuby Gómez, 33, while I spoke to Nairuby's husband, Carlos, 41. Across from the park bench where we sat, their 11-year-old son, Alejandro, was playing soccer for a local youth league, while their daughter, 8-year-old Alexa, chatted with friends on the playground behind us.

Carlos, a tall and gregarious man with a gentle smile, grew increasingly animated as he recounted the decline of living standards in his native Venezuela. As manager of an auto parts store, he had spent most of his life as a member of Venezuela's sizable middle class. By 2017, the store had closed, and the Gómezes were subsisting only on yuca. Carlos told me that the situation remained abysmal when his family left Venezuela in 2022:

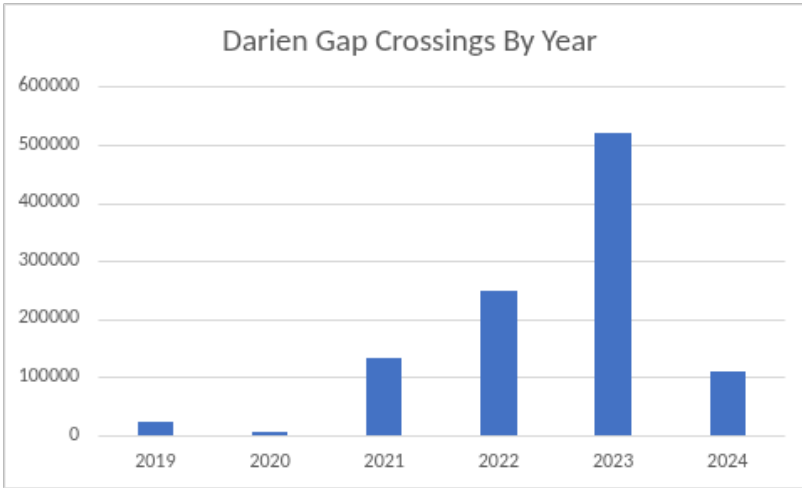
It's horrible. The extortion by the police . . . If you're working, they come and take your money . . . It wears you out, man. So many things. The schools. There were people who you knew they never studied, and they

were giving classes to your kids . . . I thought, ‘What are my kids going to learn if this guy never studied and he’s teaching classes?’ The food was terrible. The food disappeared . . . We lost electricity almost every day . . . I thought, ‘My God, what future can my children have here?’ . . . If you have a vehicle, you can’t put gas in it because there is none. So many things . . . It was so horrible that we put ourselves in a jungle! My friend, imagine the magnitude of the circumstances and the psychology you’ve gotta have to decide, ‘Hey, we’re going to put ourselves through a jungle with our two children.’

To reach North America, Venezuelans must traverse the Darién Gap, a stretch of mountainous jungle in Colombia and Panama with no paved roads. The Gómezes spent five days walking in the jungle, each parent carrying a child on their shoulders. “At first, I played with my son in the river . . . You know, I tried to make him feel like we were on an adventure,” said Carlos. “But after the third day, there was no more food.” They had severely underestimated how long and tiring the trek would be. Seeing people lying dead in the jungle, Alexa and Alejandro began crying, saying they didn’t want to die.

Luckily, the family encountered an enterprising group of Indigenous people who, for a fee, transported passing migrants downriver by canoe and sold them food and drinks. “When I saw Coca Cola and Pepsi, I thought, ‘Thank God,

we’ve arrived at civilization,” recalled Carlos with a laugh. After another day of walking, the Gómezes emerged from the jungle intact.



Source: Created by Marshall Plane using Panamanian government figures via The New Humanitarian.

The number of people attempting this titanic feat increased significantly during the early 2020s. Some 530,000 people traversed the Darien Gap in 2023, and 68% of them were from Venezuela.<sup>9</sup>

Our interviews indicate that this was largely a result of people realizing they could now legally enter the US by seeking asylum, a form of protection granted to those who cannot safely return to their country of origin due to targeted persecution. Anyone who has been on US soil for under a year has the right to apply for asylum. People awaiting their asylum

hearings, which are usually delayed several years due to a backlog in immigration courts, can receive a work permit 180 days after filing their case.

“I came under the administration of the previous president because that’s what he said to do, to come to the United States to seek asylum,” said Emilio, a soft-spoken 28-year-old who talked to me on a busy street corner in Brooklyn while taking a break from his Uber Eats deliveries. Raised on a farm in the Venezuelan Andes, Emilio had been a first-generation college student when the economy imploded in 2017. After organizing a student protest calling for Maduro’s ouster, he was detained and beaten by a pro-government paramilitary, or *colectivo*. Fearing for his life, Emilio fled to Ecuador.

“It wasn’t what I hoped for. The crime was intolerable,” said Emilio. There he witnessed an explosion of gang violence that, by 2022, had turned Ecuador into Latin America’s most violent country. He was also unable to find stable work, often being explicitly rejected from jobs for being Venezuelan. So, in mid-2022, together with a friend and a cousin, Emilio headed northward. In the Darién Gap, they joined a multinational group of migrants—Colombians, Ecuadorians, Haitians, Venezuelans—who walked and slept together in encampments, keeping the women in the middle to protect them from sexual violence.

Emilio was one of several twice-migrants we interviewed: people who had taken part in the late 2010s exodus from Venezuela, only to uproot themselves once again in the early 2020s. Unable to feed their two children, Simón and Carla had emigrated to Peru in 2017. Five years later, struggling to make ends meet amid Peru's own economic turmoil, they emigrated to the US. "At the time, there was the whole topic of migration to the United States, and we decided we should take advantage of the moment," said Simón. He emphasized that this was no small decision:

Listen, the journey of the Latino who comes here is a journey for the brave. Because in every moment, above all, when you go through the Darien Gap, there's a danger of death. You don't know when you might trip and fall and hit your head on a rock, or the river could flood and take you, or if there's a wild animal . . . I thank God for protecting us, but we saw so many ugly things along the way. Like seeing a couple fall into a huge ravine and die. Hearing that there was kidnapping, murder, rape, and other things. There's a constant fear when you're traveling. When you get to Mexico, there's also a constant fear because of the cartels, because you don't know if they're going to kidnap you and what they might do.

Despite the horrors they witnessed in the Darien Gap, many interviewees said that Mexico was the most harrowing stretch

of the journey. Most Ecuadorian and Mexican migrants we interviewed took out loans of \$10,000 or more to finance their journeys, often hiring coyotes to take them to or across the border. In contrast, Venezuelans typically borrowed \$1,500 to \$5,000, only enough to get them through the Darien Gap and some of Central America. From there, they paid for bus fares and food with their labor: cleaning houses, selling candy, collecting cardboard. “Sometimes I went to a restaurant and said, ‘Hey, I can clean if you give me food,’” said Emilio.

As a result, traversing Mexico could be a weeks-long process. “It’s not easy working, going hungry, going without sleep just to put the money together,” said Raúl, a 33-year-old Venezuelan who lived in Colombia for seven years before migrating to the US in 2024. “Because everywhere we stopped, they extorted us, they took our money.” Our interviews suggest that extortion was extremely common and came from both law enforcement and organized crime. While no interviewees shared a direct experience of sexual violence during such encounters, several witnessed it, and all were aware of the threat it posed. Simón, who was extorted eighteen times in Guatemala and Mexico, recalls:

Unfortunately, the police were in cahoots with the bus drivers. The drivers called them, and when they showed up, the police extorted us and robbed us . . . They would take \$50, \$30 . . . I saw how some people didn’t have money and they sent them back. In fact, I

saw them strip down women who said they didn't have money.

When the Gómezes were kidnapped in northern Mexico, their captors demanded \$2,000 for their release, forcing the family to sell their remaining property in Venezuela. Said Carlos:

For someone who comes from Venezuela, earning 10 or 15 dollars a week, 40 dollars a month, that was a ton of money. When those people asked us for two thousand dollars, I felt like they were taking a finger off my hand . . . There were people who didn't have anything to sell, and I don't know what those people did.

For many interviewees, such cruel opportunism by the powerful was contrasted with the displays of solidarity they received from ordinary people along the way. "Brother, I can tell you that I went through seven countries, and just like I saw the bad in people, I also saw the good," said Carlos. "There are also lots of people who help you, who give you a glass of water, who give you bread."

Wilson, 27, immigrated alone from Venezuela in 2022 and joined a group of other migrants in the Darien Gap. He was separated from his group in Honduras and had his phone stolen, leaving him stranded and penniless. He reached the US thanks only to the unsolicited kindness of strangers: a family in rural Guatemala who sheltered and fed him when he got sick; a young Guatemalan who drove him for six hours during

a fierce rainstorm; Mexican drivers who stopped to give money and food as they saw him walking alone beside the highway. Wilson recalled how people noticed that he was a foreigner and got excited to help him. “I never realized there were so many good people in this world,” he said.

Emilio entered the US in September 2022, just a few days after Wilson. Three years later, amid the noise of a bustling summer afternoon in Bed-Stuy, he recounted the extreme range of emotions he had felt while passing through Mexico:

The narcos wanted you to pay if you passed through there. They were going to kidnap us. The children cried. There were little children. It was unbearable. But when we crossed the Rio Grande, which is between Mexico and the United States, we felt a joy that brought us all to tears. After everything we'd been through ... For example, I'll represent myself as a Venezuelan. I wanted to study, build my career, live with my family, and enjoy life. But that's not how things turned out. I immigrated to Ecuador. It wasn't what I expected. The crime was unbearable. Then my dad died and I went through the jungle and all that, and it just makes you cry from all the emotion. You know? Arriving to a country where you feel like human rights can be respected.

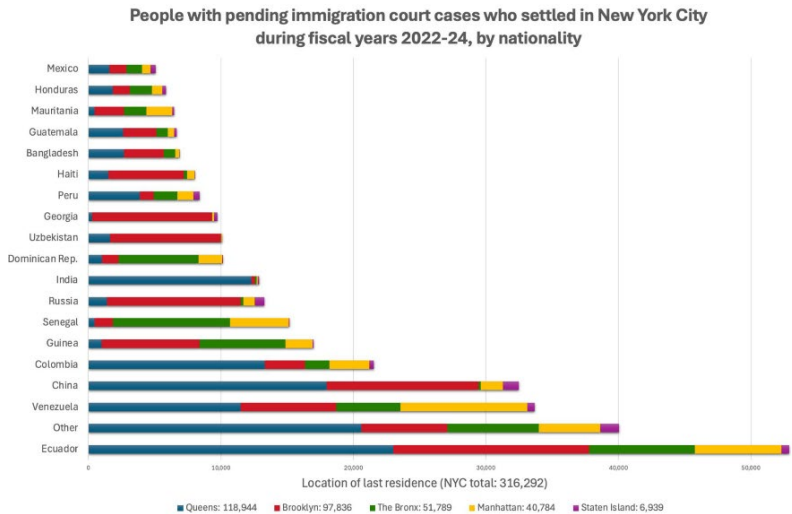
After crossing the river, Emilio presented himself to the authorities as an asylum seeker. He spent fifteen days in a Customs and Border Patrol detention facility—sometimes called *la nevera* (the freezer) by Spanish speakers due to its frigid temperatures—while awaiting his screening appointment. To alleviate pressure on these detention facilities, the Biden administration created the CBP One app in January 2023 for asylum seekers to schedule their screenings before entering the US. Most Venezuelan interviewees who migrated from that point onward used CBP One—likely because of their eligibility for humanitarian parole—while virtually nobody from other countries reported doing so. CBP One quickly developed a backlog due to the number of applicants, and most interviewees who used the app spent 2-3 months working in Mexico while awaiting their appointments.

...

Wilson recalled being struck by the range of nationalities he encountered in CBP detention—not only Latin Americans, but also people from Africa, South Asia, China, and the former Soviet Union. One by one, they were called for their appointments, given background checks, DNA-tested to verify that any children with them were indeed their own, and asked for the address of someone who would receive them in the United States. After being released, most went in predictable directions: Brazilians to Massachusetts, Chinese to

California and New York, Cubans and Haitians to Florida. There, they would find the contacts and community networks that had helped prior generations find their footing in an unfamiliar country. Where could Venezuelans find such a haven?

Despite the outsized attention they received, Venezuelans were never the largest group of asylum seekers arriving in New York City. While 34,000 Venezuelans with pending immigration court cases settled in the city from 2022 to 2024, court data shows that over 52,000 Ecuadorians in similar legal limbo arrived during the same period.<sup>10</sup> These figures do not include people who crossed the border undetected, which our interviews indicate was common among Ecuadorians but extremely rare among Venezuelans. Despite this, Venezuelans outnumbered Ecuadorians nearly 4 to 1 in city shelters.



Source: Created by Marshall Plane using figures from Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, “New Proceedings Filed in Immigration Court.”

The reason for this is simple: Ecuadorian migration was *normal*. In 2021, New York City was already home to over 200,000 Ecuadorian immigrants—the fifth-largest immigrant population in the city—and most of those who came in subsequent years were in some way connected to these established residents. Upon arriving in New York, they found “shelter” on the couches of friends and relatives in Ecuadorian strongholds like Bushwick and Corona. These contacts often helped them find jobs and housing for which language and paperwork would not pose an obstacle. This is how migration typically works.

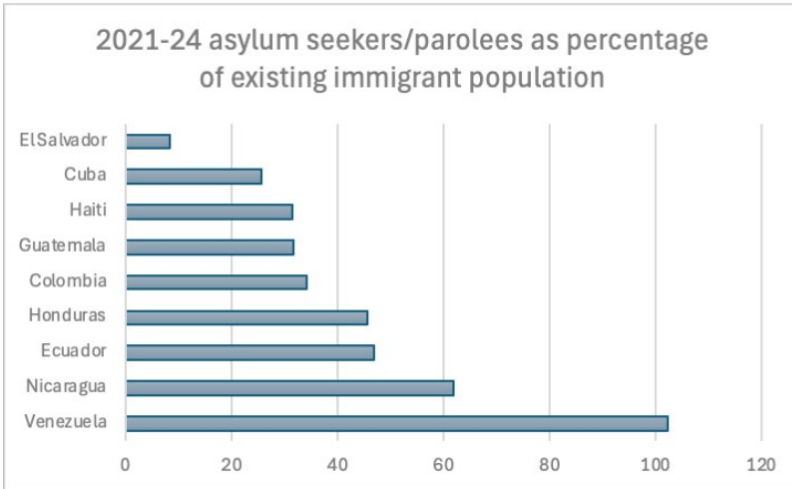
In contrast, Venezuelan migration to New York was highly *abnormal*. It began with a political stunt: in the spring of 2022, the Republican governors of Texas and Arizona began busing migrants to Democrat-run cities, saying they were “shifting the burden” of caring for new arrivals. Many of the migrants who arrived in New York as part of this “Operation Lone Star” had no contacts to assist them, and the city’s leaders were faced with a choice: provide them with shelter or let them sleep on the street. They chose the more humane option. So, while thousands of Chinese, Ecuadorians, Indians, and others continued to arrive in their outer-borough enclaves with little attention, this smaller group of migrants began receiving an unusual degree of support from the city government.

It's unsurprising that the latter group was composed largely of Venezuelans. Some have speculated that, coming from twenty-eight years of socialist rule, Venezuelans arrived with higher expectations of state support. Most Venezuelan migrants also came from cities, perhaps making them savvier and more assertive in their new urban environment than, for example, predominantly rural migrants arriving from Ecuador's central highlands.

These hypotheses are certainly worth investigating, but there's also a simpler explanation: existing Venezuelan networks in the US were underdeveloped compared to those of other Latino diasporas. Until recently, the Venezuelan American population was relatively small, primarily middle- or upper-class in origins, and concentrated in South Florida. Most ordinary Venezuelans had no legal pathway to immigrate to the US.

Under the Biden administration, when it became clear that seeking asylum was now a viable method of entry, Venezuelans suffering from poverty in both their homeland and neighboring countries had every incentive to take advantage. Unlike previous cohorts of Venezuelan immigrants, the newcomers came primarily from working-class backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> The number of Venezuelan asylum seekers and parolees who entered from 2021 to 2024 may have represented a twofold increase in the Venezuelan-born population of the US.<sup>12</sup> (According to the Pew Research

Center, the overall Venezuelan-American population increased 119% from 2019 to 2024.<sup>13</sup>). As shown by the figure below, this was unparalleled among other major Latin American groups.



Created by Marshall Plane. Existing immigrant population figures from 2019-23 American Community Survey, accessed via Migration Policy Institute. Asylum seeker and parolee figures from Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, "New Proceedings Filed in Immigration Court."

As a result, Venezuelans arriving at the border were much more likely than other migrants to lack contacts in the US and therefore require help from authorities. This is what allowed Texas Governor Greg Abbot to launch Operation Lone Star. By busing the neediest subset of migrants to Democrat-run cities with acute housing shortages, Abbot and his allies created visuals and headlines that appeared to substantiate the empirically false narrative that immigrants are a burden on the United States. Whenever footage of migrants arriving at the border was juxtaposed with images of overflowing shelters in

New York City, the implication was clear: each new arrival is someone you, the taxpayer, must care for.

This is untrue, of course: numerous studies show that immigrants of all statuses pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits. Venezuelans in New York were unique in that they received initial support from the government, rather than their personal networks, before becoming self-sufficient. This arrangement is unusual, but not unprecedented: for decades, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) has collaborated with nonprofits to help refugees establish themselves in communities across the US, where evidence suggests they contribute significantly to local economies.

Yet whereas refugee admissions are routine, the arrival of Venezuelans in Chicago, Denver, and New York was unexpected. City governments were unprepared, the federal government was unsupportive, and destination cities faced severe housing shortages. (There's a reason the ORR rarely places refugees in New York City.) The migrant busing scheme resulted from *conflict*, rather than coordination, between different levels of government. Cities had to improvise their responses with limited outside support.

Given the circumstances, it's unsurprising that policy responses were flawed and that the influx may indeed have felt like a crisis to some city officials. Eric Adams unabashedly voiced these frustrations, warning in September 2023 that "this issue will destroy New York City." Such statements, combined

with the visuals of migrants lined up outside shelters, were ideal fodder for anti-immigrant narratives during the 2024 election.

So how did migrants fare under these highly unusual circumstances? This was the primary question our interviews sought to address.

...

Carlos and Nairuby were among the very first Venezuelans to arrive in New York—those for whom coming to the city was a genuine surprise. While in CBP detention at the Texas border, the Gómezes discovered that the person who had promised to receive them in the US would not return their calls. This meant they wouldn't have an address to give CBP once it was time for their appointment. Carlos hesitantly explained the situation to an immigration official, who asked if he still wanted to enter the country—a question Carlos clearly found amusing. “Look, man, I came here crossing a jungle, I came here escaping from Maduro, you must know who that is,” he recalled telling the officer. “I crossed a jungle, I crossed seven countries. Listen, man, of course I still wanna go.”

No problem, Carlos was told, there's a church nearby that can buy you tickets to New York. “They told us we were going to a shelter,” recalled Nairuby. “I didn't think it would be like that. I expected less. I was accustomed to decay, you know?”

Upon arriving at a Queens shelter, the family was vaccinated and enrolled in New York State's Medicaid program. They received help filing their asylum applications, initiating the 180-day waiting period for a work permit. In the meantime, Nairuby and Carlos looked for odd jobs with limited success. Unable to stomach the frozen food provided by the shelter, the Gómezes began volunteering at a nearby church's food pantry, which allowed them to use its kitchen for cooking.

One morning, a church employee asked Carlos if he wanted a job. He grinned. "Ma'am, you'll have to excuse me, but that's why we came to this country." She gave Carlos the address of a wholesale distributor of Greek products in Astoria, Queens. After speaking to the manager through Google Translate, he was hired to package food. Carlos was initially paid \$11 per hour, well below New York's minimum wage. Once his work permit arrived, his pay was raised to \$21 per hour. Her husband's income allowed Nairuby to enroll in paid courses and become a home attendant.

The Gómezes began looking for apartments. Struggling to find a place within their budget, they asked shelter staff for advice. The staff told them they knew a landlord in Monroe, a mid-sized town three hours northwest of Queens by transit, who would rent to them. But Carlos was reluctant to give up a stable job. His boss, equally reluctant to lose a hardworking employee, told Carlos he knew a landlord

in Corona who was looking for a super. “I asked, ‘What’s a super?’ Because for me all this is new,” said Carlos. After the arrangement was explained to him, he eagerly accepted.

Smiling as he watched Alejandro play soccer across from us, Carlos reflected on his family’s progress since arriving in New York:

And well, brother, today I can tell you that today, where we live, we’ve evolved, we’ve adapted a bit to the circumstances here in New York. There are things that are difficult, but there are also things that, if you really put your heart into it, show it some love, and believe, you can move forward. Even though I have to pay rent, you know, I’m a superintendent, so my rent is low. I have a good job. My wife also works. We feel like we’re becoming part of the society of New York, and it seems good to us . . . I have my son here playing football, which is accessible, thank God, because otherwise I couldn’t afford it. And look, my daughter speaks English. Listen, man, that’s tremendous.

Seeing little Alejandro hug his teammate after a goal, I remembered how he had cried on his father’s shoulders as he saw children his age lying dead in the Darien Gap. Many other kids playing on that field had doubtless experienced similar traumas along the winding paths that brought them to this corner of Queens from their previous homes across the Western hemisphere. It is unconscionably cruel that our

government seeks to rip these children away from the lives they are building in the United States.

Sitting next to Carlos and I, Nairuby told Diana that her hopes for her children's future in the US were indeed clouded by the current immigration climate. "We can be deported at any moment. Ever since they got rid of TPS, we're in the eye of the hurricane," she said. "Like everyone, I'm afraid, I feel angst . . . I've seen how they treat people super badly, as if they were criminals."

Despite this, Nairuby said she had maintained her routine, continuing to take her children to the park and volunteer at the same church's food pantry. Her fear of Trump's policies contrasted with her gratitude for the support she had received since arriving in New York:

I'm very grateful to this country because they helped us a lot with the shelter. They fed us, they took care of us, they protected us, and most importantly, they helped us legally. Anyone who doesn't take advantage and doesn't appreciate the support that this government gives us, I honestly consider them an idiot . . . Because you really have a lot of opportunities living in a shelter. Even if it doesn't seem that way, you can achieve lots of things. The humanitarian aid is really good, they consult you legally, and since it's a shelter, it's free.

Again, in these scenarios, the shelter system provided the initial support typically provided by migrants' personal

networks. But Nairuby's comment hints at a crucial difference: the state wields resources that people's aunts and cousins usually cannot offer. From the beginning, New York City and its nonprofit partners helped connect migrants living in its shelter system to an array of services: health insurance, state IDs, reduced-fare MetroCards, job placement, school enrollment, cash assistance applications, and immigration legal support. The availability and utilization of many of these services were clearly limited: for example, no interviewees reported receiving city cash assistance or finding jobs through official placement programs.

One service, however, proved transformative. Nairuby was not alone in viewing free legal counsel as the most important service she received in the shelter system: in fact, many Venezuelan interviewees said it was their primary reason for coming to New York. By helping them navigate the asylum process—something private lawyers charge thousands for—for free, the city allowed migrants to establish a temporary legal foothold in the US and a chance at long-term status if they were granted asylum. This may have been particularly valuable to Venezuelans: many had fled political persecution, and they generally appeared more likely to want to remain in the US long-term than other Latinos we spoke to.

More immediately, however, gaining some form of legal status was critical for migrants to fulfill their basic material needs. As mentioned, people are eligible for a work

permit 180 days after applying for asylum and 90 days after applying for TPS; in practice, waiting times are often much longer. For the Venezuelan migrant who survives the Darien Gap and the violence in Mexico, obtaining this little plastic card is the next great struggle.

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Our first interviews took place on a frigid December evening outside the Roosevelt Hotel, a stately building nestled between the backside of Grand Central Terminal and the throngs of holiday shoppers on Madison Avenue. The crowd of migrant residents had clearly diminished since the summer, and the anxiety was palpable among those who remained. Donald Trump would be taking office in a month, and New York City was moving to close its remaining migrant shelters.

Every conversation here seemed to circle back, again and again, to the topic of work permits. The various dreams that interviewees had come to the US to pursue remained on hold pending their arrival, as most found that their lack of documentation prevented them from finding stable, formal employment. This, in turn, made it impossible to leave the shelters.

Despite the difficulties he was facing in New York, Ricardo, a 47-year-old father of six, remained upbeat throughout our hour-long conversation beneath the scaffolding. He had survived far worse. In 2018, a dispute with the local *junta comunal*—powerful neighborhood-level

government institutions in Venezuela—resulted in Ricardo’s house being burned down, forcing the family to flee to Peru. Because the Venezuelan authorities had taken his passport, Ricardo couldn’t apply for documents in Peru, forcing him to work illegally as a cab driver.

When the police confiscated his vehicle in 2023, he was left without income. The whole family—two parents, four children, two adult daughters, and two sons-in-law—decided to head northward. With no money to finance the journey, they had to work and beg their way through seven countries. “We spent nine months living on the street, sleeping on the street like dogs, eating whatever food people gave us,” said Ricardo. In Mexico, they often walked twenty miles per day, stopping to sleep in parks and plazas, while Ricardo stayed up all night to keep watch over his sleeping family.

When we spoke, the ten of them had been living in Manhattan shelters for six months while awaiting their work permits. “If I had job stability since I entered, I can tell you that first of all, I wouldn’t be living in this hotel,” said Ricardo. He had worked a series of temporary construction jobs outside the city—fifteen days in Charlotte, twenty-one days in Ohio, a month upstate near the Canadian border—but could not find anything stable. He told me he had gone fifteen days without work despite waking up early each morning to look for jobs, with language and paperwork posing major obstacles. “I need

to be recommended, for someone to recommend me for jobs,” he said.

Ricardo understood the dynamic well: connections are of paramount importance in most immigrants’ job searches, especially for those who lack documentation and/or English skills. Most other migrants we interviewed found work, formal or otherwise, through their communities’ established networks—Ecuadorians in construction, Mexicans in restaurants, Ukrainians and Georgians in elder care. When they first arrived, many Venezuelans had neither the necessary connections to find informal jobs nor the required paperwork for formal ones.

For this reason, obtaining a work permit came to be seen by many Venezuelans as a prerequisite for achieving economic stability in the US. New York City, which provided both initial housing *and* legal assistance, clearly developed a reputation as a reliable place to do so. Once the first busloads of Venezuelans had settled in, it didn’t take long for information about these services to spread. After a while, Texas’s busing scheme seems to have become largely consensual: everyone we interviewed except the Gómezes had *requested* transportation to New York City after crossing the border.

Simón’s family was the first among our interviewees to do so. “We came to New York because people we knew who were already here told us it was a sanctuary city, that you can

make a life here. Because in reality, yes, you can make a life in New York,” said Simón. After crossing the border in September 2022, the family of four boarded a Texas-chartered bus to New York City, where they were placed in the Roosevelt Hotel. “We got orientation about where we can go to get health insurance, where to look for housing, also legal support if we needed legal advice about migration, all those things,” said Simón. Simón and Carla were advised to apply for TPS, which had just been extended to more recently arrived Venezuelans, because they lacked a valid asylum case. After submitting their application, it took seven months for Simón’s work permit to arrive. Our interviews suggest that such delays frustrated many migrants’ efforts to find work and prolonged their time in the shelters. “At the time, lots of permits were delayed,” said Simón. “I obviously couldn’t work, except for going out to sell food, to help clean up garbage . . . you know, odd jobs, *trabajitos*.”

After their work permits arrived, the couple found work relatively quickly: Carla as a manicurist, Simón as a cook at Burger King. Because landlords asked for four pay stubs as proof of stable employment, it took the family another month to leave their shelter before moving into an apartment in Corona in February 2023. When we spoke in July 2025, Simón was working seventy hours a week to support his growing family. The two children had now received the majority of

their education in the US, and a third child was expected in December. Said Simón:

The experience has been pretty tough. New York is expensive. You have to work, have money to rent, to pay bills, to pay taxes, and all that. But overall, with my wife, we've achieved some objectives we had. We're established here now. She's a manicurist by profession. She got her license, and now she's working at a salon. I'm still working at Burger King . . . We help our family in Venezuela. The education of the children seems good . . . We had some debts, and we paid them off. You have to follow the laws here. I have a vehicle, and I also do deliveries in my free time. And my wife too, she's a hardworking lady, she goes out in the summer to sell ice cream. So here we are, little by little.

The support of New York's shelter system had been crucial in helping Simón and Carla establish themselves in their new country, but the city's housing crisis was clearly making it difficult for them to live comfortably. Partly for this reason, many Venezuelans who used New York as a base to apply for asylum headed elsewhere once their permits arrived. Simón told me most of the friends he'd made while living in the Roosevelt had since departed for Florida and Texas. Likewise, several shelter residents we spoke to in December said their long-term plans lay elsewhere. "Here you can get your papers

and all that, and then you can go to another state and start progressing,” one explained.

In this way, the initial support that New York, Chicago, and Denver provided to shelter residents nurtured the growth not only of their own Venezuelan communities but also of others across the country. These cities spent billions on sheltering people while they awaited their work permits—a cost artificially imposed by federal immigration law's six-month waiting period. Once they had papers, those migrants headed wherever they could find work, helping address nationwide labor shortages across many industries in the early 2020s.

Venezuelans followed the jobs and their contacts all over the country: thirty-two states and the District of Columbia received at least 1,000 Venezuelan migrants from 2021 to 2024 in a population.<sup>15</sup> Communities of several thousand emerged in metro areas as diverse as Indianapolis, Nashville, and Seattle. Texas, whose government started the busing saga, ironically ended up being the most popular destination for Venezuelans—some 136,000 of them—and thus the largest beneficiary of their labor.

The settlement patterns of Venezuelan migrants in the 2020s looked quite different from those of the more affluent set who had immigrated in previous decades. Florida, which in 2020 had been home to 47% of Venezuelan Americans, received just 15% of Biden-era asylum seekers and parolees.



Metropolitan area	Venezuelan-born population, 2020 census	Metropolitan area	Venezuelan asylum seekers/parolees, 2021-24 (% increase)
Miami	178,700	Dallas-FW*	62,300 (+326%)
Orlando	77,500	Chicago	52,400 (+385%)
Houston	60,300	New York	48,500 (+116%)
New York	41,900	Miami	33,400 (+19%)
Atlanta	24,200	Denver	31,600 (+510%)
Dallas*	19,100	Orlando	30,300 (+39%)
Tampa Bay	18,500	Houston	29,700 (+49%)
Washington, D.C.	14,500	Salt Lake City	25,200 (+646%)
Chicago	13,600	Atlanta	21,600 (+89%)

\*Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area. Table prepared by Marshall Plane.

The leading destinations for Venezuelan immigrants during the 2020s fell into two main categories. The first includes Atlanta, Houston, Miami, and Orlando, where large established communities supported new arrivals. The influxes they received were proportional to their existing populations.

The other metros on the list saw their Venezuelan populations more than double. Chicago, Denver, and New York all initially received migrants due to the busing scheme; the social services they provided made them magnets for new arrivals who lacked contacts. Venezuelans established themselves in these cities with the help of the state and

subsequently helped their own friends and relatives get settled. In Utah, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints likely played a similar role in assisting migrants from Venezuela's substantial Mormon community, who in turn may have welcomed their non-church friends and relatives.<sup>16</sup> Dallas-Fort Worth, the leading destination, is an outlier: it had neither public policies that supported migrants nor a large existing Venezuelan population relative to the influx it received. The strong labor demand in the booming metroplex may have simply attracted a critical mass of Venezuelans.

The absurd cost of living in New York clearly deterred many people from putting down roots there. Though Chicago had a much smaller existing Venezuelan population than New York and received fewer migrants during Operation Lone Star, its metro area was home to 52,400 Venezuelans by 2025, compared to 48,500 in the New York area.<sup>17</sup> Chicago's lower housing costs likely allowed more shelter residents to settle there once their work permits arrived. Remaining in New York, by contrast, required a degree of luck: the Gómezes, for instance, may have had to leave the city had they not found affordable housing through Carlos's employer.

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Indeed, you might find it astonishing that so many low-income immigrants could settle in New York during such an acute housing crisis, when apartment-hunting in the city can be a daunting process even for English-speaking professionals.

Here, too, the role of networks was crucial. Most migrants relied on connections for both an initial couch to sleep on and, once they found work, someone willing to sublet to them informally. Interviewees of all backgrounds overwhelmingly lived in shared apartments, usually with people of the same nationality.

Venezuelans arriving in New York could not count on such networks. Even if they lacked direct contacts, migrants from more established groups would often ask around until they found a sympathetic compatriot who would rent them a room. In contrast, Venezuelans arrived in New York's Latino enclaves as outsiders whose nationality was frequently a source of stigma rather than sympathy. (More on this later.) "You know, for Venezuelans it's hard to find a room because, often, we're maybe painted as bad people," one interviewee explained. Another Venezuelan, who had lived in the Dominican Republic before coming to the US in 2022, said he was only able to find a landlord willing to rent to him by pretending to be Dominican over the phone.

For most Venezuelans, then, housing would have to be found through formal channels. This was likely an even greater factor than the obstacles to employment in keeping people without work permits reliant on the shelter system. Even if they found informal employment, their income would likely be insufficient to rent an apartment formally. Even if such a job *did* pay enough, its informality meant they still wouldn't have

several documents required by landlords: a social security number, a credit check, and proof of stable employment (e.g. pay stubs).

For example, Ricardo's situation—working a series of weeklong construction jobs and day-to-day furniture moving gigs—was not dissimilar to many of the Ecuadorians we interviewed in Corona. They, too, often spent extended periods without work. Unlike them, however, Ricardo had no connections to help him find affordable housing. Browsing apartment listings online from his shelter bed, he found everything prohibitively expensive and far too cramped for his large family. He told me he had given up searching in New York and was instead looking at apartments in Dallas with the help of a friend who had recently settled there.

Emilio's first residence in the U.S. was a men's shelter in Brooklyn, where he slept in a bunk bed surrounded by forty other men. He was uniquely lucky in his job search: just a week after arriving in New York, he found informal but steady work as a driver for a Hasidic Jewish business in Williamsburg. However, it took him eight months to exit the shelter system. "You had to really save to rent because they asked for a credit check and up to three deposits," said Emilio. "I spent eight months searching up and down, since I was alone, until I found a guy who liked me. He gave me a room that didn't have a kitchen, only to sleep."

Eventually, the cousin who had come to New York with Emilio found a place with kitchen access they could share in central Brooklyn. Once Emilio's work permit arrived, he began delivering for UberEats on his e-bike and invited his brother to come live with him and take his driver job. Emilio said the contacts he had made in Williamsburg's Hasidic community frequently called him for short-term gigs, allowing him to earn a steady income. "I'm always busy," he told me. He leveraged those same contacts to find periodic work for his brother, cousin, and friends.

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As Emilio's story demonstrates, it didn't take long for Venezuelans to begin building the same kind of networks that had long sustained migration in New York's other communities. In fact, nearly half of our Venezuelan interviewees had never lived in shelters: arriving in 2024 or 2025, they instead stayed with contacts who had come to the city in previous years. Many of these contacts, like Emilio, had likely established themselves with the help of the shelters; once independent, they took responsibility for assisting friends and relatives who followed them to New York. In this way, the shelter system may have created a multiplier effect, serving as the first link in countless chains of migration.

Ángelo, a fashionable 19-year-old who spoke to me on a hot August afternoon in Bed-Stuy after finishing his UberEats shift, exemplifies this pattern. Shortly after

graduating high school in June 2024, the teenager left his family's small home in the foothills of the Venezuelan Andes to join his aunt Rosalina in New York. His three-month journey to the border, which was financed through a \$3,000 loan and several weeks working as a barista in Mexico City, was blessedly free of violence or extortion. The worst part was the six weeks he spent in CBP detention (the longest of anyone we interviewed), subsisting on two stale meals per day while sleeping in a frigid room with over 100 other men. "I wouldn't wish it upon anyone," said Ángelo of this experience. "The officials see you like you're, like, just a simple thing."

After Ángelo was released, his aunt bought him a ticket to New York and welcomed him to her apartment in Brooklyn. Within a week, he found work at a restaurant through a family friend. Rosalina, who had previously lived in a shelter, directed her nephew to the nonprofit that had helped her apply for TPS. With Trump about to take office, he was advised to instead apply for Special Immigrant Juvenile status.

Ángelo said the arrival of his work permit had been repeatedly delayed, and its status remained uncertain. Nonetheless, Ángelo was able to buy a motorbike using his restaurant earnings and begin delivering for Uber Eats using his aunt's SSN. Pulling in around \$3,800 a month while paying \$600 for his shared room, Ángelo could now send weekly remittances to his mother and siblings in Venezuela—his original goal in emigrating.

The young man told me his sights were now set on greater things: he was attending free English classes (recommended by a friend of Rosalina) and hoped to eventually attend college in the US. “I have the opportunity to be here young, and I want to take full advantage,” Ángelo said. “Every moment, every minute, be a better person every day.” Unlike his older coworkers, he expressed no desire to return permanently to Venezuela: “I want to get married here, have my children here. This country is a powerhouse. My country, I love and respect and appreciate it a lot, but you have to think about the future.”

In this case, New York City had given Rosalina a place to stay and the legal support she needed to obtain her work permit. After leaving the shelter system, she provided the same support to her nephew. Thanks to his aunt’s connections and her familiarity with social services, Ángelo was able to apply for legal status *and* sustain himself while his work permit remained pending.

By the time of our summer interviews, it was clear that New York’s Venezuelan community had matured immensely since the spring of 2022, when the first disoriented and weary migrants disembarked at the Port Authority Bus Terminal to the sight of television cameras. It had outgrown its reliance on the state: by 2024, many new arrivals were avoiding the shelter system and finding jobs and housing entirely through contacts, just like other populations.

Crucially, however, Venezuelans who had lived in the shelters had also been familiarized with an array of government and nonprofit services. People like Emilio or Rosalina could help their newly arrived kin not only find jobs and housing, but also tell them where to get free legal counsel, enroll in health insurance, or take free English classes.

In contrast, many other Latinos we interviewed had had little or no interaction with the state since arriving in New York. Mexicans and Guatemalans, who crossed the border undetected, were trying to remain under the radar. Many Ecuadorians entered the US as asylum seekers, but never ended up filing their applications. Some felt it unnecessary since they had found jobs without papers, others were afraid to put themselves in government records, and others still simply could not find affordable legal support. Several Ecuadorian women we interviewed during the winter told us that every lawyer they sought help from in applying for asylum charged upwards of \$3,000—a prohibitively expensive sum.

Thus, migrants who relied entirely on networks might be able to count on connections to find informal jobs and housing, but knowledge of social services appeared far thinner in these communities. Compared to Venezuelans, other Latinos we interviewed appeared much likelier to lack health insurance. Furthermore, those who miss their one-year window to apply for asylum due to lack of legal access risk becoming permanently undocumented. They would remain

stuck in the informal economy, where countless interviewees complained of exploitation and where immigrants working without papers suffer a well-documented wage penalty.

Perhaps because information about how to get work permits had spread widely in their networks, Venezuelans appeared less willing to tolerate such indignities than other Latinos. “You can find it, but they mistreat you, they humiliate you, they pay you miserably. So it’s better to get away from that,” said Francisco, 44, of informal work. Living in a men’s shelter in Midtown, he had worked a series of construction and moving gigs while awaiting his work permit. In his most recent job, Francisco told me he was paid three-quarters the wage of his documented coworkers and often put to work unexpected shifts. A cousin in Oklahoma had recently arranged him a job in trucking, his profession in Venezuela; Francisco said he planned to move there the moment his work permit arrived.

Paradoxically, then, Venezuelans’ initial reliance on shelters ultimately gave them an advantage in service access and legal status compared to other Latinos. Their work permits gave them more flexibility: rather than being tied to labor networks in the city’s informal economy, they could head to places with better job prospects and cheaper housing. Many of those who remained in New York supplemented their earnings from cleaning, construction, or restaurant jobs with food delivery for UberEats, GrubHub, or Doordash. This was possible because they (or people they knew) had social

security numbers. Simultaneously, by building networks and developing a reputation as hard workers, many were able to find odd jobs on a regular basis.

“The Venezuelan is known for his charisma,” said Jonathan, a 24-year-old from Caracas. “You tell him, ‘Paint this wall,’ and he’ll paint the wall. The Venezuelan works in everything.” After arriving in New York in February 2024, he found an immigration lawyer and an apartment in Crown Heights through a friend. He told us he was earning \$3,000 weekly by working eighteen-hour days six days a week—food delivery plus two different construction jobs—while his wife remained home caring for their newborn son, a US citizen. “My goal is for my son to have a better education, that one day he can be a professional here in this country, that he achieves all his dreams here, since in our country we couldn’t have that,” said Jonathan.

...

As they steadily integrated, Venezuelans were following in the footsteps of previous waves of Latino migrants to New York. Puerto Ricans, who began coming in large numbers during the 1920s, were the pioneers, creating predominantly Spanish-speaking neighborhoods across the five boroughs. These same neighborhoods became havens for Colombians and Dominicans in the 1960s and Ecuadorians and Mexicans in the 1980s.

Being a newcomer often carries a certain stigma, especially for those who are poorer, darker-skinned, or speak less English than established immigrants. Uniquely, however, Venezuelans arrived in New York's Latino neighborhoods bearing a *pre-existing* stigma, one that had followed them across the Western Hemisphere since their exodus began in the mid-2010s. Throughout South America, Venezuelan refugees have been blamed for crime, something many of the twice-migrants we interviewed reported experiencing. "[I left] because it was dangerous. And also the xenophobia towards Venezuelans," said Emilio of his departure from Ecuador. "What happened? Maybe three or four of us did bad things and then they saw us all as bad."

Though not supported by data, perceptions of Venezuelans as criminals have persisted and spread northward. By the time of our interviews, it was clear that this prejudice had taken root in New York. Simón, who was no stranger to xenophobia due to his five years in Peru, explained:

There are people who come from Venezuela who, unfortunately for those of us who want to work and help our families move forward, are doing bad things, using their stay here in a bad way. So what happens is people also look at us with rejection, or, 'Hey, he's Venezuelan, he must be a thug.' So yeah. Actually, once I went to a store where there were Dominicans, and as I was buying, they asked me, 'Hey, what

nationality are you?’ I told them, ‘I’m Venezuelan.’ And when I said that, they all went quiet and started talking among themselves. I thought, ‘What’s wrong with these people? Do they think I’m going to rob them because I’m Venezuelan?’

This sentiment was on full display during a conversation I had on a sunny July afternoon in Sunset Park, overlooking the New York harbor and the Statue of Liberty. Iván, a 54-year-old father of two from Colombia, had overstayed a tourist visa in 2018 and was now working as a truck driver. “I am Hispanic. I am undocumented,” he acknowledged. However, Iván felt that the behavior of other immigrants, specifically Venezuelans, was creating “collateral damage” for law-abiding, tax-paying people like himself:

Under the previous government, there was no control of the entry of people. And because of that, a lot of people entered who don’t deserve to be here . . . We in Colombia were the first to experience it, that is, the exodus of the Venezuelans. The first country they arrived to was ours, Colombia. And it was the same thing that happened here in the United States, here in New York. They came here to demand lots of things, but they didn’t behave . . . Hitting the police, entering shopping centers to steal, robbing people on the train . . . Everywhere you went they were disrespectful. They got drunk in the streets, made excessive noise.

They weren't respectful in the laundromats. They didn't follow the hygiene rules . . . We went through this in Colombia, everyone in South America went through this with them. I don't understand why they have that mentality, and there are very few of them who aren't like that. They aren't grateful for the opportunities and the help that a government or a person gives them, but they want to demand from every other country what they don't get or what they can't demand over there.

This narrative, which neatly aligns with right-wing media portrayals of New York's "migrant crisis", is a far cry from the attitudes of every Venezuelan I spoke to. Most interviewees said that the antisocial behavior of a small subset of their compatriots had created this bad reputation. Simón recalled feeling deeply embarrassed when he saw other residents of the Roosevelt Hotel drinking and fighting on the street. Sometimes I probed: "Aren't there people of all backgrounds who act that way?" Most agreed, blaming social media for spreading negative stereotypes by amplifying examples of bad behavior by Venezuelans.

The support New York City's government provided to Venezuelan migrants seems to have added to resentments. From 2022 to 2024, I heard countless people complain about the amount of money being spent to support new arrivals. Many native New Yorkers said the money should be instead

used to help longtime residents who were struggling, and immigrants often felt it unfair that others were getting government support while they had established themselves in America “the hard way”.

I spoke to Yolanda, who immigrated from Ecuador in 2024 and rented a room from a contact in Brooklyn, on a windy January afternoon outside the Roosevelt Hotel. Although she lacked stable work at the moment and was keeping afloat by selling hot meals to shelter residents, she clearly saw herself as different from her customers:

They told me I have the option to go to a shelter. But no, I want to work, I don't want to be a burden on the state . . . I see here so many people who don't work, who aren't responsible because they have everything for free. I come from a hardworking family, I like to earn my own way, like we say in my country, and not depend on anyone.

What Yolanda, and many others, got wrong is that shelter residents viewed their time in government care as a transitional phase, the same way other migrants used their initial stays with family. While many expressed gratitude for the support the state provided them, they felt that living in a shelter provided neither adequate comfort nor a sense of fulfillment.

Due to the stigma they faced, many Venezuelan interviewees took pains to defend the character of their people. Said Jonathan: “You know, we're not all bad. The majority

work, they fight for their families. The ones who do bad things, it's because they don't have family, or I don't know, I don't know what they're thinking. But 90% of Venezuelans are hardworking.”

...

Such comments, of course, were also made in response to the actions of a government that appears determined to upend the lives our interviewees, and millions of other immigrants, fought to build in the US. While the Trump administration's venomous language and brutal policies have been directed at immigrants and people of color in general, Venezuelans have frequently been singled out in both rhetoric and actions.

During the 2024 election, Trump and his allies began peddling an unproven narrative that the Maduro regime “emptied its prisons” to send the very worst of its criminals to the United States. This narrative was used to justify the invoking of the Alien Enemies Act to deport Venezuelans without due process. Most notoriously, this included sending 238 Venezuelan men—many of them alleged to be members of Tren de Aragua simply for having unrelated tattoos—to El Salvador's Terrorism Confinement Center, where numerous detainees reported experiencing extreme overcrowding, withholding of food, beatings, and sexual abuse.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, the cancellation of humanitarian parole and TPS for Venezuelans—the latter policy was approved by

the Supreme Court in October 2025, after our last interviews were conducted—stripped some 600,000 people of their legal status, which Venezuelan American activist Adelys Ferro called “the largest mass illegalization of a group in this country’s history.”<sup>19</sup> In total, 1.6 million people have lost TPS under the Trump administration, exposing them to the US government’s well-publicized brutality towards the undocumented.

Deporting every undocumented immigrant in the US is an impossible task. Casting a shadow of fear over the lives of all immigrants—documented and undocumented alike—is a much easier one. All the populations we spoke to, from undocumented Mexicans in Corona to Senegalese asylum seekers in Harlem to Ukrainian refugees in Brighton Beach, expressed anxiety over their ability to remain in the US. Venezuelans had particular reason to be afraid. They face a perfect storm of factors: the abrupt loss of legal status, the Trump administration’s public posturing against them, the well-documented suffering of their compatriots in CECOT, and the continued misery in their homeland that makes returning still feel unthinkable to most.

“In reality, I think all immigrants who are here are afraid because we came here to move forward, to look for a change in a free country, in comparison to the country where we came from, where the situation is really tough,” said Simón. Without an asylum case, his family would be left

undocumented once TPS officially ended, and the life they had fought to build in New York could now be shattered at any moment. “Nowadays I don’t go out much,” said Simón. “I think for now I’ll just be going to work and back home. I take my kids for a walk during the day once in a while. But we live in fear of ICE coming and saying, ‘Oh, you’re a migrant, let’s go.’”

Countless interviewees reported similar changes in behavior, often only leaving home for their jobs and trying to avoid being in groups in public. The combination of fear and isolation was clearly damaging the mental health of many of the adult migrants we interviewed; imagining its impact on their children’s social and emotional development is even more depressing. Limiting immigrants’ ability to go out and socialize might have another pernicious effect: it makes it harder to develop the social networks that, as mentioned, are critical for immigrants’ material as well as mental wellbeing.

During our winter interviews, we asked people how they felt about the incoming Trump administration. Many expressed anxiety, but most maintained faith that they would be okay as long as they kept their heads down and respected the law. By the summer, many had no such illusions.

The realization that good behavior offered no guarantee of safety could be a painful one. “They want to kick you out when you’re just working, doing things right, trying to help your family back home,” complained Anderson, a 26-

year-old from Caracas. Anderson had arrived in New York with his girlfriend in October 2024 and joined her family in a large Brooklyn apartment, where twelve people split a rent of \$6,000. He applied for asylum through USCIS in December 2024, but shortly after Trump took office he was denied his work permit for reasons he did not understand.

By this point, Venezuelan networks were developed enough for Anderson to sustain himself without a permit, consistently finding informal jobs and using a friend's SSN to deliver for Doordash. Nonetheless, being stuck in the informal economy was clearly limiting. "I'm always looking for something, but I've never found a steady job," he said. "It's always an odd job. Moving, construction for a week, something like that."

Anderson's inability to obtain legal status under the new administration, despite following the same steps as those who came before him, was obviously frustrating. Based on the recent experience of a cousin in Texas, he had no faith that ICE would respect his rights in an encounter. "He had his asylum application, work permit, everything," he said. "They arrested him anyway, and now he's in Venezuela."

When we spoke, Anderson told me he was working seventy-hour weeks to support his daughter in Venezuela and build the necessary savings to return home within a couple of years. He said he regretted coming to the US because, in his words, "I want economic stability. I want stability with my

legal issues, my papers. I don't want to walk the streets as if I were a criminal or someone who was being persecuted.”

Anderson’s words represent a triumph of Trump’s immigration strategy: his officials have explicitly stated that they hope to make immigrants’ lives so difficult that they will decide to “self-deport.”<sup>20</sup> Our interviews suggest that this strategy has been very successful, but only for a specific demographic: immigrants who planned to return home anyway. This was the case for most of the Ecuadorian, Guatemalan, and Mexican men we interviewed—they viewed their time in the US as a temporary hardship which they endured for the sake of a better life for their families back home. With the Trump-era climate making it both more dangerous and less lucrative to live and work in the US, many said they planned to return sooner than they might have otherwise.

While we spoke to some Venezuelans, like Anderson, who had similar goals in immigrating, most were not prepared to return anytime soon. After all, their homeland remained in worse shape than anywhere else in the hemisphere except Cuba and Haiti. Many remained resolute in their desire to return, but said that doing so would require political change in Venezuela.

“Of course, I want to return to my country. It’s my origin, you know, I love it completely. It runs through my veins,” said Nairuby. “What I don’t want is to return to an

imprisoned country. I want to return to a free country.” She and her husband both wanted their children to be educated in the US, but could not imagine retiring anywhere but Venezuela. Said Carlos: “It’s not that the culture here is bad, it’s just not ours.”

Other interviewees, especially those with children, wanted to settle permanently in the US. “We feel like here in the US we can do new and different things,” said Simon. “Our children can grow up with freedom, they can study, among other things.” He hoped to eventually become a US citizen and, once relations between the two countries were normalized, visit his family in Venezuela. “We hope that one day those doors will open too, because we left mothers, fathers, siblings, family that we hope to see someday,” he said.

Unfortunately, Simon’s prospects for achieving these dreams appeared limited. Since his motives for leaving Venezuela were purely economic, he never applied for asylum, leaving him without legal status after TPS officially ended in October 2025. “I’m nervous every time I leave my house,” he said. “You never know when they might suddenly grab you.”

Most Venezuelans we interviewed were in a somewhat better position: having applied for asylum, they can remain in the country until their hearings, which for most were scheduled in 2027 or 2028. When they entered, seeking asylum appeared to be a plausible path to long-term residency. As recently as fiscal year 2024, 49.2% of all asylum cases and 66.7% of

asylum cases involving Venezuelans resulted in applicants being allowed to remain in the US.<sup>21</sup>

In mid-2024, however, the Biden administration began tightening eligibility requirements, and this process accelerated under Trump. In fiscal year 2025 (beginning in July 2024), the nationwide asylum grant rate fell to 26.7% for all applicants and 33.8% for Venezuelans. By August 2025, just one in five applicants were being granted asylum.<sup>22</sup> Those who lose their cases can usually expect a speedy deportation.

An asylum seeker's ability to stay in the US comes down largely to the dumb luck of who makes the decision. For example, New York's most generous immigration judge granted asylum to 92% of applicants in fiscal year 2025, while its stingiest did so for just 4%.<sup>23</sup> And, in another twist of fate, the shift in federal policy under Trump has placed those migrants who remained in New York in a better position than those who settled in states with less pro-immigrant policies. New York's immigration judges tend to be more generous than those elsewhere, and around 70% of people with pending immigration court cases in New York will be represented by attorneys compared to 41% nationwide.<sup>24</sup> ICE activity, meanwhile, has been somewhat more concentrated in states like Florida and Texas that collaborate with the federal government. New York, home to an estimated 6% of undocumented immigrants in the US, was the site of just 3% of ICE arrests in the first nine months of 2025.<sup>25</sup>

Consequently, the flow of migrants out of New York and into Sun Belt states may have partially reversed under the Trump administration. We spoke to several people who, after initially settling in Florida, came to New York in 2025 in hopes of getting their papers and finding formal work.

“I came to seek refuge in Florida and it was going badly. I didn’t have work. I never had opportunities to get my work papers, there were just times where I made money doing odd jobs,” said Stiven, a 27-year-old who spoke to us while relaxing with a pair of friends in a Queens park. The trio was sharing an apartment in the Bronx, where one friend had invited the other two to come join him when they complained about their struggles down in Florida. He told them he knew a nonprofit that could help them apply for asylum and get their papers.

With his friend’s help, Stiven found work selling kitchenware, allowing him to send remittances to his family in Venezuela. Applying for asylum, he felt, gave him both more work opportunities and protection from the looming threat of deportation. “There are people, friends of mine, who they’ve taken just to take them,” said Stiven. “I mean, they deported them like it was a cleanup, violating their rights, without them committing any crime.”

Despite this fear, Stiven said he felt safer than he did in Venezuela, where he had been the victim of frequent police extortion. “Since we’re people of low resources, we lived in

uncertainty because the government doesn't let you advance, doesn't let you prosper," he said. "Here I see another perspective on life. More self-confidence, more satisfaction. Emotionally I feel calmer." He hoped to return to Venezuela, but only after political change: "When the current government is no longer there, I can feel safe. That's basically the hope of all my compatriots."

...

This hope was suddenly given life in the wee morning hours of January 3, 2026, when President Maduro and his wife were captured by US forces and whisked away to New York to stand trial for drug trafficking. This operation, the culmination of months of warlike actions towards Venezuela, was blatantly illegal under both US and international law and echoed a painful history of imperialist interventions in Latin America. The outrage was immediate.

For many long-suffering Venezuelans, however, seeing the man responsible for years of poverty, hunger, and displacement suddenly brought low was a cause for euphoria. In Midtown Manhattan the following day, leftists protesting the US intervention were heckled by Venezuelan delivery workers shouting "fuck Maduro." That night, Times Square was filled with people waving Venezuelan flags, singing, and honking horns. Similar scenes could be found among the Venezuelan diaspora in cities from Bogotá to Santiago to Madrid.<sup>26</sup>

Yet by January 5, when I went to check in with some previous interviewees on the Brooklyn corner where they congregated, reality had clearly set in. They told me their families in Venezuela were hiding at home, having seen how those who went out to celebrate Maduro's capture were met with a brutal response by the *colectivos*. Jonathan was upset by Trump's public snub of opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, and speculated that Vice President Delcy Rodriguez had already cut a deal with the US to remain in power in exchange for access to Venezuelan oil. (Some evidence supporting this view has since emerged.)<sup>27</sup>

It was nice, of course, to see the dictator in handcuffs. "I won't lie to you, part of us is grateful," said Jonathan with a slight smile. "So, grateful, but not really hopeful?" I asked. He nodded wearily. Emilio offered to sit down in a nearby cafe for a "second interview" so he could catch up with me and let off some steam. (Again, he refused to accept the \$20 incentive.) He told me the mix of emotions he felt was hard to describe. When the news of Maduro's capture broke, Emilio and his brother cracked open some beers and called their mother to celebrate. "She told me to be quiet, not to talk about that, because the government might be listening to her phone," said Emilio.

Just as his family in Venezuela stayed home to avoid the wrath of the *colectivos*, Emilio avoided the public celebrations in New York for fear of ICE. In both the US and

Venezuela, he said, the specter of repression prevented people from celebrating a moment they had been praying for for years. He shared new details of his detention by a *colectivo* in 2017, describing how the officers took turns kicking him in the face and tore off his fingernail. “That’s what they do,” he said matter-of-factly after seeing me wince.

At the very least, Emilio hoped that replacing Cuba and Russia with the US as a trading partner might improve a desperate economic situation. “The most important thing is for there to be employment and for the currency not to devalue,” he said. “If they’re really going to Venezuela to take the oil and all the other products, okay, take it, but it has to be beneficial for the people, so that there can be more schools, more education, so that we don’t have to leave our country, because we Venezuelans love our country.”

As long as the regime apparatus remained in place, however, Emilio felt he could not return to his homeland. “Yes, I do want to return to my country, but not with this regime,” he said. “Because if I go back to Venezuela, it’s gonna be the same. They’ll beat me, they’ll lock me up.”

I asked Emilio if he was worried that Trump would use the supposed regime change in Venezuela as a justification to deport asylum seekers like himself. “Yes, very worried,” he replied. He said seeing instances of ICE’s brutality kept him in a state of anxiety:

When I watch a lot of TikTok, when I see videos, I feel like it affects me because I sometimes think, ‘That could happen to me.’ You don’t know if, when you go out to work, they could arrest you. You feel unsafe, like they might grab you . . . Right here where we currently live, in front of our building, they grabbed a young man, they put him on the ground, they yelled “fuck you”, told him to shut up. They mistreated him right there.

Living with this fear was especially painful for Emilio because, although he wanted to return to Venezuela, another part of him was beginning to imagine New York as a long-term home, somewhere he would like to fall in love and raise children. “The thing is, I’ve already gotten accustomed to New York,” he told me. The abundance of activities in the city, he said, was good for his mental health: “For example, I work until Saturday and take Sunday off. So on Sundays, I go out to parks, go to museums, sometimes go to see the history that’s taken place here. You know, to distract myself.”

As he prepared to depart for his 5pm delivery shift, Emilio asked me if we had begun writing our book about the interviews. I said yes, and he asked what the book’s message about immigration would be. I told him his closing statement from our first conversation encapsulated it pretty well.

Every human being has potential in this life. We have the right to be, as a person, to live in freedom. But

unfortunately, we come from countries where, for example, we come from persecutions, or from poverty. And we see this as a valuable country. We came here to follow the law, to do things the right way. But sometimes this country doesn't see the potential we have as people or our value as immigrants.

Together, Emilio and I walked out of the cafe into the frigid January air. We exchanged thanks for the conversation and blessings for each other's families as he strapped on his helmet and backpack. When Venezuela is free, he told me, I should visit. He would show me around the mountains where he grew up.

“Hopefully that day comes soon,” I said.

“God willing,” he replied as he mounted his motorbike. I stood there for a minute after saying goodbye, watching Emilio carefully integrate himself into traffic before speeding off into the frosty New York City night.

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## 2

### **VENEZUELAN ASYLUM SEEKERS AS VICTIMS OF PERPETUAL VIOLENCE**

During the Fall and Winter of 2024, our team conducted 50 interviews with Venezuelans in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. These months were cold, and they grew colder as we approached the 2024 presidential election. Tensions were high as we were unsure who would come into office. Most of the Venezuelans interviewed were a part of the gig economy as delivery drivers for popular apps, such as Uber Eats and DoorDash.

The last Venezuelan we interviewed was Diego, a 19-year-old Venezuelan, who decided to migrate at the age of 17. I remember thinking, ‘he is so young.’ Political and economic instability drove him to migrate, as he had his whole future ahead of him. His half-brother, whom he had only met online,

offered to help him migrate. Many Venezuelans we spoke to were informally sponsored to migrate by family members they had never met or friends of friends and family. Migrating through any route or path is financially inaccessible for many.

The migration route Diego took was a dangerous one. He spoke about moving through the Darien Gap, up through Mexico, and eventually to the U.S. border. He crossed the Darién Gap with strangers, enduring hunger and exhaustion. Armed groups extorted them at gunpoint; those unable to pay sometimes never returned. In Mexico, as he awaited his appointment on the CBP One app, he worked wherever he could, including supermarkets and restaurants. The temporary home where he felt most at home was with a woman and her family in Mexico. The woman owned a nut-processing factory and offered Diego a job, a place to sleep and eat, and a temporary family.

In November 2023, almost a year after leaving Venezuela, Diego received his appointment on the CBP One to enter the United States. From Mexico City, Diego took a flight from Mexico City to the closest airport to the San Ysidro border port, the Tijuana Airport. Diego explained to us that he had to pay a cartel for him to travel safely to the border:

I had to go to other people, like the same cartel that I paid a lot of money to, because they let me pass quietly and everything. I paid them and they were there for us

the two days that we flew, two days before and from there they brought us themselves.

Once the cartel members released Diego at the border, he recalled, “the happiness of being here was everything and more.” Everything Diego’s dreams and aspirations for a better future seemed like reality. He finally felt safe.

After being processed at the border, Diego’s brother helped him pay for a flight to Washington, D.C., where a cousin received him. He works long hours in food delivery, using his cousin’s motorcycle to support himself and send remittances to his mom and siblings still in Venezuela. He insists he would never let his younger siblings endure the journey he faced: “Never in my life would I let my brothers go through the jungle.” He hopes to bring his family to the United States if Venezuela does not improve. Despite starting from the bottom in the United States, he envisions a future with stability and education, a future he was denied in Venezuela but still believes possible here.

Diego’s interview was conducted in November 2024. In the early months of 2025, the Trump administration deployed the National Guard and additional ICE agents to Washington, D.C. Delivery drivers and restaurant workers, many of whom were Venezuelan recent arrivals, were targeted. We have lost contact with the Venezuelans interviewed and no longer see as many drivers on their motorcycles delivering

food. We only hope that they are safe and have not been deported, detained, or sent to a third-party country. Diego's story, while inspirational, demonstrates the devastating and traumatizing continuum of violence that many migrants endure while running from violence.

...

Since 2015, over eight million individuals have fled the country, constituting one of the largest mass displacements in the Western Hemisphere (UNHCR, 2023). This displacement has been due to widespread political repression, economic collapse, and violence. As Venezuelans seek asylum across the Americas and elsewhere, their bodies have become deeply politicized. In the United States, the legal status of Venezuelans has been jeopardized. Since the end of CBP One, an application used to apply for asylum, at the beginning of President Trump's 2025 term, and the termination of the Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (CHNV) parole program and Temporary Protected Status (TPS), immigration enforcement across the United States has heightened.

Migration should not be understood as a linear process from danger to safety, but as a series of encounters with violence that shift in form while remaining constant in their structural origins. Venezuelans described fleeing state repression and economic collapse, only to face dangers in the

Darien Gap, extortion and kidnappings by transnational cartels, detention in U.S. facilities, policing and surveillance, and difficulty attaining housing, employment, and education in the U.S. This analysis challenges the assumption that migrating ends vulnerability, instead demonstrating how immigration policy itself becomes a mechanism for perpetuating inequality. By focusing on the motivations and experiences of Venezuelans seeking asylum in the United States, this paper aims to illuminate the omnipresence of violence in their lives—before departure, during their treacherous journey, and within the very systems meant to provide protection.

## **Historical Context**

Beginning in the late 1990s, President Hugo Chávez brought a new era of populist governance under the Bolivarian Revolution, which aimed to redistribute wealth and nationalize key industries, particularly oil (Imbusch et al., 2011). Initially, these policies were popular among Venezuela's working class; however, the collapse of the oil industry, along with political corruption, gradually destabilized the economy, eroded institutional checks and balances, and concentrated power in the executive branch. In 2013, Chávez died of cancer, ultimately marking the end of his term.

Following Chávez's death, Nicolás Maduro stepped

into office and inherited a country already facing significant economic strain. Under Maduro's administration, conditions only worsened for Venezuelans. Hyperinflation, severe food and medicine shortages, declining oil production, and widespread government repression contributed to a severe and complex humanitarian crisis (UNHCR, 2024). Additionally, the collapse of democratic institutions and the violent suppression of political dissent created an environment that allowed human rights violations to increase and become systemic (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Those who speak up about the injustices and human rights violations in Venezuela risk being victim of death or detention: Venezuela has the highest number of political prisoners in Latin America (Ellis, 2025).

By 2024, over 7.7 million Venezuelans had fled the country, seeking refuge across Latin America, the Caribbean, and beyond (UNHCR, 2024). Many Venezuelans have migrated to neighboring countries such as Colombia, Peru, and Brazil, to not stray too far from home, however, many have moved toward the United States, often facing dangerous transit conditions in route. As evidenced from this history, this mass displacement is not merely a result of economic insecurity but deeply rooted in political and state violence.

## **Competing Theories of Violence**

This paper rejects the widely accepted framing that violence operates in a cycle. The notion of “cycle of violence” implies that violence a repetitive, non-stop process that is inevitable to human life. Such framing neglects and normalizes the underlying structural and political conditions that produce and sustain violence. This individualizes systemic experiences and places the blame on victims of violence for their exposure to harm and ignoring the real forces at play. Instead, this paper is grounded in the notion of violence as a continuum, a theoretical framework developed by Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004), who conceptualize violence as an ever-changing, nonlinear process that is simultaneously “productive, destructive, and reproductive.” According to their model, violence is not confined to episodic acts of brutality, but is an ongoing condition embedded in everyday life and shaped by historical, political, and cultural structures. Using this framework, this study explores the experiences of Venezuelan migrants across three distinct yet interconnected stages (life in Venezuela, the migration journey, and resettlement in the United States). This approach enables a multi-dimensional analysis of violence, highlighting how it presents in different forms. It also emphasizes that violence acts as a compulsive process that evolves and adapts, challenging any simplistic or linear understanding of

victimization and harm.

It is important to note that violence is not simply something that occurs physically. Instead, it can be perpetuated systemically by structural forces. Drawing from various scholars (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004; Farmer, 2004), this paper highlights how has migrants flee violence, they encounter new and reproduced forms of violence through the migration journey and settlement in host countries. In this framing, the displacement of Venezuelans occurs as a response to an accumulation of violent acts perpetuated by systemic forces, rather than isolated events. By homing in on personal interviews within this broader context, this paper aims to highlight how violence is deeply rooted and shaped by structural conditions on a national and global scale.

## **Past Literature**

The Venezuelan displacement crisis is one of the most significant in contemporary global migration and has increasingly drawn scholarly attention in recent years. However, much of the information available on Venezuelan migration comes from reports from think tanks, non-profit organizations, and media outlets. Additionally, much of the existing literature has focused either on the geopolitical drivers of displacement (or on policy responses in receiving countries, particularly in Latin America. Few studies have been grounded

on a qualitative analysis of Venezuelan migrants lived experiences across the full migration journey, from what pushed them to migrate, their full migration journey, and finally, their experiences upon settling in the United States. This study seeks to bridge that gap by examining Venezuelan migration through a continuum of violence framework and a qualitative analysis.

## Violence in Venezuela

Several scholars have documented the push factors that have driven mass Venezuelan migration, with an emphasis on socioeconomic and political factors (Pirovino & Papyrakis, 2023; Mazuera-Arias et al., 2020). Poverty and political persecution have eroded everyday life, leaving many with no viable option but to leave their home country. However, many studies related to violence in Venezuela focus on homicide rates, economic instability, and political persecution as separate entities, instead of looking at them as factors that are produced and reproduced by each other (Tremaria, 2016). Furthermore, these studies tend to focus on macro-level data and policy analysis rather than the micro-level narratives of migrants themselves, which provide a more nuanced understanding of the impact of systemic violence.

## Violence on the Journey

Research on violence during the migration journey has

primarily focused on Central American migrants, with growing attention to the dangers posed by the Darién Gap (Obinna, 2024) and organized crime in Mexico (Fernández-Ortega, 2024; París-Pombo, 2016). While these findings are highly relevant, Venezuelans' specific experiences remain under-represented. Several existing reports from non-government organizations (Amnesty International, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2023) and journalists highlight incidents of kidnapping, extortion, and abuse, but academic literature on Venezuelans in transit through these countries is still emerging.

### Violence in the U.S.

In the United States context, scholars have extensively studied the criminalization of migrants and the exploitative nature of the immigration system (Hernández, 2021; Ahn et al., 2013). These studies capture how migrants are systematically imprisoned and criminalized through a series of laws implemented in the United States. For example, Menjívar (2006) examined how immigration law produces “legal liminality.” Legal liminality occurs when migrants experience an unstable legal status, exposure to detention, and social exclusion due to state-imposed policies. These conditions mirror the repression many migrants flee, creating what Abrego and Menjívar (2012) call “legal violence.” Legal violence is perpetuated by state practices that systematically

harm migrants through laws, enforcement, and denial of rights.

The past literature surrounding the experiences of migrants in the United States has helped understand the new experiences of Venezuelan migrants. However, there is little to no academic research regarding the experience of Venezuelans in the United States. While we can draw from the experiences of other migrants when it comes to detention, discrimination, and social exclusion, Venezuelan migrants face unique challenges shaped by the shifting political discourse surrounding their status, the uneven application of Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and the politicization of their bodies. This research aims to add to emerging research on Venezuelan asylum seekers and parolees.

## **Findings**

There is a consistent finding of perpetual violence experienced by Venezuelan asylum seekers and humanitarian parolees. Violence, in this context, is not simply singular incidents of brutality, nor is it simply repetitive or circular. Instead, it is fluid, pervasive, and embedded in everyday life. The narratives of Venezuelan migrants reveal how violence is destructive, productive, and reproductive across borders, yet remains a constant in their lives. Venezuelan participants described a layered experience of displacement. Asylum seekers and parole holders flee persecution in their home countries, only to

encounter similar forms of violence in the host country.

## Violence in Venezuela

In Venezuela, structural and political violence were constant and powerful forces that shaped daily existence through human rights violations, economic insecurity, government impunity and corruption. Participants did not describe violence merely in terms of general street crime or isolated incidents, but as a condition rooted in a collapsing state system marked by financial instability, food scarcity, hyperinflation, deteriorating public health services, militarized policing and profiling. When the state becomes both absent, in healthcare and economic support, and violently present, through extreme law enforcement, it produces what Paul Farmer (2004) describes as structural violence. This structural violence creates such an extreme system of oppression that compels individuals to seek migration as an attempt at survival.

When participants were asked to describe their homes and neighborhoods in Venezuela, many spoke with deep affection and nostalgia, often portraying them as irreplaceable spaces of personal significance. Despite this profound attachment to their homes, all participants eventually made the difficult decision to leave their homes. Their stories reveal that this decision was not made lightly but was driven by intersecting forms of structural and political violence that made everyday life in Venezuela increasingly unviable.

Several interconnected sub-themes emerged in this study that help explain this forced displacement. All participants reported economic instability as a key motive for migration. This instability was closely linked to hyperinflation, which rendered salaries practically worthless and made even basic goods unaffordable. Gabriel, a 28-year-old Venezuelan man, reflected on the unsustainable economic situation his family faced in Venezuela:

“No hay trabajo. [Cuando] hay trabajo y te quieren pagar, son 20 dólares [semanal]. Sí, y eso es muy poco dinero para los consumos de mi mamá, mis hijas. Nada más un bote de leche son 10 dólares. ¿Y me quedan 10 dólares para qué?”

“There’s no work. When there is work and they want to pay you, it’s 20 dollars a week. Yes, and that’s very little money for my mom and daughters’ basic needs. Just one gallon of milk costs 10 dollars. That leaves me 10 dollars for what?”

— Gabriel, Venezuelan Man, 28

In addition to unlivable wages and the high costs of living for basic necessities, participants reported the scarcity of food as a reason for migrating. Persistent food insecurity led many participants to leave Venezuela. Anthony, a 25-year-old Venezuelan man, explained:

*“Pues primero por la escasez de comida, y segundo, el barrio donde yo vivía era uno de los barrios más peligrosos de Venezuela... No tanto por parte de la, de los que te roban sino más que todo por la policía. A la policía no importa si eres sano, si eres delincuente, igualito te extorsionaban, te sembraban drogas, de todo... nada más por el hecho de que uno perteneciera a La Cota 905 pensaban que ya uno estaba relacionado con [la pandilla]. Sí a todo el mundo que agarraron o sembraron le daban golpe, lo metieron preso, lo desaparecía... Te mataban y te ponían un arma, y ponían carajo de la banda de La Cota 905, cuando no es así. Entonces esa fue uno de los principales motivos porque me vine: La policía.”*

“Well first, because of the scarcity of food, and second, the neighborhood where I lived was one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Venezuela... Not so much by people who rob you, but mostly by the police. It doesn't matter to the police if you're normal or if you're a criminal; they still extorted you, planted drugs, everything. Just because you belonged to La Cota 905 neighborhood, they thought you were part of the gang. Everyone they grabbed or planted on was beaten, imprisoned, disappeared... They'd kill you and put a gun on you, and they'd say you were from La Cota 905 gang, when that's not true. So that was one of the main reasons why I left: The police.”

— Andres, Venezuelan Man, 25

Anthony's account reflects another key theme in the data: political persecution and state violence. While some participants described the government's direct targeting of political dissidents, others emphasized the role of corrupt and militarized policing in criminalizing entire neighborhoods. Being associated with marginalized areas like La Cota 905 was enough to provoke lethal state violence, regardless of one's actual involvement in criminal activity. Like Andres, many Venezuelans expressed greater fear towards their government and police than towards organized crime.

When asked whether impunity or corruption played a role in their decision to leave Venezuela, every participant responded, without hesitation, "yes." Corruption and impunity were described as constants of daily life. Many Venezuelans described their fear and mistrust of the police in Venezuela. If one were to speak badly about their government or police, then they would "disappear" or be killed.

Another form of structural violence identified by participants was the collapse of the healthcare system. Many recounted the near-total absence of medicine and medical facilities, leading to avoidable deaths and deteriorating public health. Alison, a 32-year-old Venezuelan woman, explained:

*"No hay un hospital o una clínica digna para—muchas*

*personas mueren porque no hay, no hay buenos doctores o no hay medicina en el país.”*

“There isn’t a proper hospital or clinic—many people die because there aren’t good doctors or there is no medicine in the country.”

— Alison, Venezuelan Woman, 32

Together, these testimonies show us that the violence Venezuelan migrants experienced in their home country was not isolated. It was structural, cumulative, and rooted in the political and economic systems that governed their lives. Migration occurs as a pursuit of safety and a response to the collapse of state protection and everyday limitations.

## **Violence on the Journey**

During the migration journey, particularly through the Darién Gap and through Mexico, violence shifts and adopts new forms. It is important to note that Venezuelans don’t make a dangerous journey to the United States for no reason. Instead, their journey is driven by a myriad of factors rooted in the systemic and structural violence that has made their home country unlivable. On the journey to the United States, migrants encounter extralegal violence inflicted by organized crime organizations, including drug cartels and smugglers. These criminal organizations exploit the vulnerability of migrants through extortion, kidnapping, and even trafficking.

The terror encountered in these spaces, including being held captive in inhuman conditions or witnessing physical violence along dangerous paths.

Organized criminals will deliberately target, even profile, migrants on their journey and demand thousands of dollars as ransom, in exchange for them to continue their journeys safely. Those who do not become victims to kidnapping and trafficking directly, tread with hypervigilance and fear of becoming victims to these inhumane conditions. These acts of violence are not random by systematic as they reflect the neglect or lack of adequate action from numerous states across borders, beginning with their homeland, and through their migration journey.

Those interviewed mentioned multiple types of migration methods, including by foot or by plane. Most Venezuelans interviewed expressed migrating to the United States through multiple borders and rough terrain on foot. For many, the United States became a possible place of refuge by word of mouth from family members and friends already residing there. The two places Venezuelans who came to the U.S. by foot always recall the most when asked about their migration journey are: the Darien Gap and Mexico.

*“Mi viaje hacia aquí fue muy duro. En México, la selva— eso fue muy duro. Veía cosas, muertos, personas ser humanos, muertos, tirados. No quería, casi no pasar por*

*ahí, En México, el secuestro, agarran a uno—los carteles. Una parte nos tuvimos que caminar hasta 4 o 5 horas—para poder llegar.”*

"My journey here was very hard. In Mexico, the jungle—that was very hard. I saw things, dead people, human beings, dead, lying there. I didn't want to go through there. In Mexico, the kidnapping—the cartels grab people. At one point, we had to walk for 4 or 5 hours."

— Simón, Venezuelan man, 37

The Darién Gap, a dense and unregulated jungle between Colombia and Panama, was frequently described as a site of profound psychological and physical duress. Those who traversed it recounted scenes of human remains, life-threatening injuries, dehydration, and exhaustion. Nearly all participants who traveled through Mexico described experiences with or fear of kidnapping, extortion, and abuse by drug cartels. Organized criminal groups were perceived as powerful forces that controlled migrant routes for profit. In this context, migrants were commodified, held for ransom, threatened, or killed, with little to no chance of protection or justice. Cartels had checkpoints where they knew migrants crossed, asking them for money.

*“Como que en un desierto y nos agarraron y ellos nos decían que nos iban a matar. Que querían \$3,000 dólares*

*por cabeza y yo, Dios mío, 3000 dólares, ¿Amigo, pero cómo? Llamen a su familia y los que tenían teléfono y veían que tenían contacto de familia ahí extorsionados”*

“It was like a desert, and [the gang members] grabbed us and told us they were going to kill us. They wanted 3,000 dollars per head,”

— David, Venezuelan man, 28

Isabella, a 22-year-old Venezuelan woman explains how a cartel held her in a *gallinero*, or “chicken coop,” which are inhumane, human holding spaces used by cartels. In return for her, her sister and her son’s freedom, the cartel requested \$3,000 U.S. dollars and if she didn’t have the money they would take her child.

*“Ah, también cómo de un cartel ellos nos tuvieron eso, se le dice gallinero, algo así se llama. Costa, ellos nos estuvieron ahí y para salir mi hermana tenía que tener 1500 mi hermana y 1500 yo. Si no teníamos que darle el niño... Dios mío, pero el niño está pequeño y ellos querían era quedarse con el niño.”*

"Oh, also, like from a cartel—they held us in one of those, it’s called a chicken coop, something like that. They had us there, but to get out, my sister had to have 1,500, my sister and 1,500 me. If not, we had to give them the child... My god, but the child is young, and they wanted to keep the

child."

— Isabella, Venezuelan woman, 23

While not all participants experienced this part of the journey, those who did often framed it as one of the most dehumanizing and dangerous experiences of their lives. Sofia, a 32-year-old Venezuelan woman, expressed her fear of the cartels as she traversed through Mexico:

*“¿Lo que pasa es que en México hay muchos—cómo le llaman, narcotraficantes? Algo así. Así que ellos se creen dueños... del pueblo, entonces si, si tú te arriesgabas o equis y cosas o ellos te agarraban, pues tú, este, te podían matar, te podrían lastimar, incluso cortar una parte del cuerpo—cosas así.”*

“The thing is that in Mexico, there are many—what do they call it, drug traffickers? Something like that. They think they own the town, so if... they grabbed you, then you could be killed. They could even cut off a part of your body—things like that.”

— Sofia, Venezuelan woman, 32

## Violence in the U.S.

Venezuelans who migrate to the United States seeking refuge soon find that their arrival in the United States does not mean an escape from violence. Instead, they encounter additional

forms of systemic and structural violence. Participants reported aggressive enforcement tactics, verbal abuse, and the humiliation of detention that reflected the political persecution they experienced back home. Outside of their experiences with detention and law enforcement, participants expressed discrimination in their everyday, including seeking employment, accessing healthcare, and housing. Much of this discrimination was due to a lack of English language ability and their Hispanic identity.

While many of the Venezuelans interviewed expressed deep gratitude and relief upon arriving in the United States, their experiences soon revealed the presence of systemic, structural, and interpersonal violence. Due to the short time many of our participants have had in the United States, most did not delve into long-term experiences. However, many themes emerged across interviews, particularly related to law enforcement practices, racial and ethnic profiling, and the trauma of detention.

One prominent theme was the aggressive and abusive behavior encountered during border crossings. Participants described being subjected to both physical and verbal mistreatment by authorities. Jonathon, a 21-year-old Venezuelan man, recalled his experience at the Texas border:

*“Pero de golpearlos eso fue en Texas. Ahí en El Paso, Texas ahí. En puente entre piedras negras y Estados Unidos*

*esa fue... Más que todo era las palabras que utilizaban ellos, 'cabrones,' este 'muévete,' muchas cosas le decían de todo."*

“But the time someone beat us, that was in El Paso, Texas. On the bridge between Piedras Negras and the United States — that was it... More than anything, it was the words they used, ‘bastards, move it,’ they said all kinds of things.”

— Jonathon, Venezuelan man, 21

Detention also emerged as a key source of trauma. Several participants recounted the psychological toll of prolonged confinement in immigration detention centers. Esteban, 23, reflected on how the stress of prolonged incarceration led to severe emotional distress and physical symptoms, including hair loss:

*“Hubo un momento en que, prácticamente de tanto encierro, se me caía el cabello del estrés y de tanto pensar. A veces quería pedir la deportación, y a veces me decía: ‘Yo no estoy aquí, ya no estoy aquí’... Luego aguanté, y cuando salí, me rapé la cabeza porque se me estaba cayendo el pelo.”*

“There was a moment when, practically from so much confinement, my hair was falling out from the stress and the thinking. Sometimes I wanted to ask for deportation, and sometimes I said [to myself], ‘I’m not here, I’m not

already here’... Then I held on, and when I came out, I shaved my head because my hair was falling out.”

— Esteban, Venezuelan Man, 23

Participants do not go in depth into their experiences in the United States outside of their experiences with employment, healthcare access, and belonging. However, they mention the challenges of living within the United States as a Venezuelan asylum seeker or parolee. Participants described experiences of subtle, everyday discrimination that shaped their sense of belonging in the United States. Much of this discrimination was expressed as due to their identity and lack of ability to speak English. Yasmin, a 33-year-old woman, detailed her experiences of exclusion and racial bias in her apartment building and in public spaces:

*“Pues en el edificio donde vivimos... había una recepcionista que siempre ponía, Siempre ponía muchos, muchos peros, pero era exclusivamente como con los latinos porque vivimos varias familias latinas. Este, y en la calle hay muchas personas que como que uno pide algún favor o algo así como que te miran mal.”*

"Well, in the building where we live... there was a receptionist who always made a lot of excuses, but it was exclusively with the Latinos, since several Latino families live here. Out on the street, there are a lot of people who,

when you ask for a favor or something, kind of look at you badly."

— Yasmin, Venezuelan woman, 33

These testimonies illustrate that violence is not a one-time event but an evolving and continuous process that Venezuelans face at every stage of their migration. The experiences of structural collapse in their home country, the brutalities of the migration journey, and the institutionalized violence in the United States are intertwined.

## **Conclusion**

Venezuelans do not risk their lives to make a dangerous journey to the United States without reason. Venezuelan displacement is driven by a myriad of structural and state-sponsored violence. As this study shows, violence continues for migrants, particularly for the 50 Venezuelans interviewed in Washington, D.C. Violence continues in new forms, from fleeing violence, to the dangers of the journey itself, to the systemic neglect, discrimination, and exclusion they face in the United States. These overlapping forms of violence experienced display the concept of violence as a continuum, as a process that is constantly evolving, embedded in daily life, and shaped by political and historical structures across many borders.

The violence this paper exposes requires immediate

political action. Immigration policies in the United States must shift away from criminalization and move toward a more humanizing approach. That means expanding legal pathways, increasing access to social and legal services, and addressing the root causes of displacement. Venezuelan migrants are navigating systems of violence that reflect global inequality and domestic injustice. Their testimonies serve as a wake-up call to policymakers, advocates, and society at large to recognize their humanity, abolish systems that cause harm, and fight for justice for all displaced people.

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### 3

## **“WE KNEW WE WERE GOING WITH GOD:” RELIGION, HOPE, AND PERSEVERANCE**

### **Arturo**

For Arturo, “wealth is not money,” it is “[his] boy.” “It doesn't matter if [he doesn't] die rich or [he doesn't] die leaving [his son] properties,” what matters is his “love [as] a father.” Despite this strong father-son bond, Arturo was forced to leave Venezuela, and hence his twenty-four-year-old son, because of the country's economic situation, corruption, and forced disappearances. As he notes, in Venezuela, “you can't speak ill of the government” because “you'll be jailed.”

The economic and political situation in Venezuela is so dire that Arturo migrated “first by bus, then by boat, and then through the jungle on foot,” traveling through Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. During his journey

on the boat, he recalled experiencing dangerous waters, remembering a moment when “the boat lasted about 15 seconds in the air when a wave [hit],” causing fear that the wooden boat would break, but thanks to “the Glory of God nothing happened to [them].” In the jungle, he remembered being surrounded by “danger all [of] the time,” whether that be “the snakes” or the fear of getting “stabbed, shot, or falling.” When he arrived in Guatemala and Mexico, he described his surroundings as “murky,” reporting “so many things were seen” but “thanks to God,” he “passed [through] calmly.”

Despite being separated by over 2,000 miles after arriving in the United States on April 3, 2024, Arturo does all he can to continue to support his son. As a former machinery and truck operator, he currently works for a delivery service seven days a week, proclaiming “every day for me is Monday.” Arturo hopes he can bring his son to the United States for a better quality of life, but in the meantime, he sends remittances back to his son to support him. Reflecting on his migration journey and his motivations, he insisted he did not come to the United States to “depend on the government.” He did not come to the United States “to get money.” He came to the United States so that he could support his son with the hope of one day freeing him from the economic and political crises that control daily life in Venezuela.

## Silvia

Silvia, a 64-year old woman from La Union, El Salvador, migrated due to war and violence. She has only a 6th-grade education and was unsure of her parents' education level because "they didn't talk about it." She believes her mom never attended school because she didn't know how to read, while her dad may have attended some school. Silvia comes from a family of agricultural workers. Silvia's work in agriculture was tough, but it made ends meet. She says, "the job is good. The important thing is that you can at least sustain yourself, because we get paid very little money and do a lot of work. Too much work."

Silvia states that violence was the biggest reason many leave El Salvador. She speaks of the civil war in the 1980s that led to her migration,

Because at that time, the war was starting. Yes, the war was already starting. Yeah, yeah. You were scared, without security. You didn't see security in anything. And you woke up dead in the alleys. You couldn't sleep, because you were afraid they'd knock on your door. I remember that. You suffered quite a bit.

Silvia explains that during the war, civilians were targeted in their homes. The fear of being killed kept her up at night. She also notes that corruption and impunity played a role

in her decision to leave El Salvador. Poverty was second to violence as a reason to migrate. She thanks God for being able to migrate to the U.S.: “And thanks to God, then, we were able to come to this country. And we were able to cross them, because the trip is very hard, life, the passage.”

As a single mother of a daughter (39) and a son (42), she notes that she also migrated to allow her children to have better opportunities. She migrated by herself, and later her children joined her once they each turned 18. Silvia migrated to the U.S. on foot. She crossed through the Darien Gap, a 60-mile stretch of dense rainforest on the Colombia-Panama border, and through Mexico, where they walked “day and night.” Through the entire migration journey, she felt she was in danger, noting the fear she carried. Silvia had to leave her home in El Salvador because of the compounding factors of war and poverty. Her journey to the United States was largely on foot through multiple countries, but when asked if she witnessed any violence, she said, “No, thank God the trip was very good.” She thanks God for having a “good trip” and not encountering any violence.

Silvia feels she was lucky to meet a woman who sold pupusas, who provided her with her first job in the U.S. Now she works as a custodian. As for her health, she states that she has diabetes and has to take medicine in the form of pills. She has high blood pressure, cholesterol, depression, anxiety, and

arthritis. She appears to have extensive experience with the U.S. healthcare system, but does not have insurance. She says that if she feels unwell, she will go to a hospital to get help. Silvia never mentions her immigration status but does speak on receiving retirement benefits: "I already went to talk, and they told me that if I were to retire right now, they would only give me \$1,300 [a month] after 34 years of work." Both of these accounts describe migrants who left their homes due to political unrest and poverty, to live there impossible. Arturo's journey to the United States was a necessity for him. He did not want to leave, especially since he would be leaving his family behind, but it was not safe for him to live in Venezuela anymore. However, the journey was also extremely unsafe, meaning that he was in constant danger until he crossed the United States border. Throughout his perilous travels through multiple countries, Arturo felt that God was keeping him safe. As a practicing Catholic, his faith helped him to keep going. He credits God for helping him through multiple near-death experiences. Arturo's faith has long been a crucial aspect of his life. He considers his ability to provide for his family before he left, as well as his access to a passport that allowed him to cross borders easily when he first migrated, blessings from God. He spent roughly six years in Peru. He says, "Thank God, I was in Peru, and it went well. I lived peacefully. I left that country clean, too. Thank God, as always."

After arriving in the United States, Arturo's faith has helped him adjust to his new life and feel a sense of belonging. He does not feel any different from the people in his community or that he has been discriminated against for his ethnicity, culture, or immigrant status. This can likely be attributed to an optimistic attitude about interpersonal relationships that Arturo gets from his faith. As he states, "We are all equal as the children of God, we are all equal." Although it is taking him time to learn English, Arturo also thanks God for his ability to pick up enough English to get by in his work as a delivery driver and for his work permit, allowing him to make money to send home:

Right now at this moment thank God at least I have the work permit, I have my partner and I am about to find a way to get my papers together, because here in the United States I have no problem, no matter what I have to pay, I have no problem with that, only that they give you the opportunity to be calm, nothing more.

He implies that the process of finalizing his immigration papers will involve lots of time, money, and effort, but is hopeful and thankful to God for where he is and that he at least has a work permit. Similarly, Silvia implies that God's work helped her in finding a job when she first arrived in the United States, saying, "It was almost not difficult for me, thank God, because a lady gave me a job who had a business selling

pupusas.” Arturo and Silvia both thank God for where they are in life now and have trust in their faith to carry them where they need to be.

## **Analysis**

Migration is often a difficult process for those who leave their home country, both physically and emotionally. Whether their migration was motivated by finances, safety, or better career and educational opportunities elsewhere, leaving is not easy. The dangerous conditions of the journey and uncertainty about what lies ahead deter many and can be overwhelming for those who proceed. For some migrants, faith gives them courage and strength to push forwards, despite the stressful and hazardous obstacles they may encounter.

Many migrants and asylum seekers recount dangerous conditions they faced on their journey to the United States but attribute their safety and the safety of others in their group to prayer and “God’s blessing.” Especially for those who emigrate from Central and South America, the journey to the United States may require travel through multiple countries, often on foot or by car, and obstacles such as rough terrain, gangs, and hostile immigration agents. In some cases, migrants’ faith protects them from the emotional toll of potential danger. As one migrant from Venezuela states when asked if he felt like he was in danger during his journey north,

“No, we weren't afraid. I mean, we knew we were going with God.” His faith kept him afloat through the long journey.

Migrants who encountered dangerous obstacles also attribute their successful journey to God. For Arturo, also from Venezuela, the journey was incredibly dangerous. He crossed the Darién Gap with strangers, enduring hunger and exhaustion. Armed groups are known to extort migrants at gunpoint in this remote area, and those unable to pay sometimes never return. “We saw other people being kidnapped... thank God, they didn't catch us,” he recounted, describing the terror of running through the forest with a child in his arms and the relief of making it through.

Eduardo, a Salvadoran man, was in a group being pursued and shot at by immigration authorities at one point of his journey, and said that he and many members of his group survived due to their prayer and through the work of God: “Thank God, praying to God and the Virgin Mary, we hid [from] them ... God already performed the miracle.” For one Honduran immigrant, Alma, her migration journey was shaped largely by religion. While she was born in Honduras, she was brought to El Salvador by missionaries as a teen to attend a religious high school, so her religion, education, and geography have long been intertwined. Although she has needed to move a lot and now must adjust to living in yet another new country, she says, “things happen for a reason. I

always say, sometimes you feel lost, but God is showing you something... You gotta, you know, go forward.” She feels that her prayers and God’s plan have shaped her path, especially in her education and career. For many immigrants exposed to life-threatening conditions and challenging circumstances, their faith fueled their courage guiding them along the way.

Places of worship often play an integral part in assisting migrants, especially in the first few months after arrival, by providing a space for community building and cultural events. They also become sources of mutual aid. For instance, in local Mosques and Ukrainian churches, Afghan and Ukrainian refugees utilize resources. For example, Oleg, from Ukraine, reports a lack of restaurants serving Ukrainian food in the region where he settled. Despite this lack of Ukrainian dining, he says that “usually, [he] can get something from the church.” Although he can make Ukrainian food at home, the local Ukrainian church is Oleg’s only option for connecting with the wider Ukrainian community over a meal. Latif, a refugee from Afghanistan, also utilized resources from local churches and mosques. In his efforts to develop his education in the United States, he learned that a local mosque “had some funds to help some refugees get an education.” He used these funds to enroll in an IT certificate program, which helped him find a job that aligned with his career goals.

In addition to obtaining resources from local religious

groups and congregations, many also rely on faith in God's plan to get them through the difficult transition and settling process. Once in the United States, migrants with deep-rooted beliefs also use these belief systems as motivation to create a new life in their new community. Leveraging their belief systems for community engagement helps to establish a sense of belonging. Many migrants also report celebrating religious holidays in local congregations and communities with similar cultural backgrounds or with other immigrants from their home country. Faith, in tandem with culture, forms the lens through which people see the world. As one Mexican woman states, "I practice my faith, [...] I'm Catholic, so I ground myself a lot in just the human dignity coming from something beyond me." Arturo, an immigrant from Venezuela embodies this mindset well, as his faith has helped him in adjusting to his new life and feeling a sense of belonging. He states, "We are all equal as the children of God, we are all equal." His belief system has given him an optimistic attitude about his new home and how he has been received.

For many who undertake the process of immigration to the United States, their faith and religious beliefs are essential to their journey and adaptation to a new environment. Religion plays an important role in maintaining hope and resilience throughout dangerous situations as well as in the uncertainty of moving to a country where they may have limited personal connections.



# 4

## THE IMPACT OF SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND ON IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION

### Gael

Born in Lima, Peru, in 2004, Gael came to the US in 2022 to obtain his bachelor's degree. His mother is highly educated; with two master's degrees and a PhD she earned in Peru. After spending several years battling illness, she no longer works a job. After attending the naval academy, his father joined the Peruvian military and worked as a submariner. Later on, Gael's father owned a business in Peru importing technology from China. Gael's parents financially supported him and his siblings' education. At the time of the interview, Gael was studying international relations with a concentration in international development and poverty. Gael's siblings have

lived and studied in a variety of countries. His older brother studied business administration in Lima, Peru and his younger sister studied art history in Manchester, United Kingdom.

Gael described Santiago de Surco, the neighborhood he grew up in, as safe and filled with green space. He described the several parks in his neighborhood as “special” since Lima is a desert. Gael’s parents came from the outer provinces of Peru and grew their wealth once they were established in Lima. Having little money, Gael’s family lacked connections within the fairly small upper middle-class. Regardless, his family lived a comfortable life. In his words, “I never lacked anything. Every time I asked for something, [my parents] gave it to me. [I] was never so spoiled because I didn't like to ask for a lot, but anyway, if I [told my] dad, ‘I want this’, my dad would give it to me.” Gael often observed those struggling without means, saying:

And from my house, you can look because you can see the hill, and there you see houses, and it was so close, people who have practically nothing, and I who have everything. So, from a very young age, I decided that I couldn't live with myself if I [thought of only] myself.

As he grew older, his awareness of the harsh Peruvian experience expanded.

[my] bubble burst, and basically, I began to realize the

Peruvian reality, and that was when I realized how wow, there is no way I can dedicate myself to working for myself when my compatriots live like this, you know?

His parents urged him to live and study abroad. They maintained the rhetoric that “Latin America is not going to go anywhere. Latin America is going to go down, and nothing, nothing is going to happen. Someday, it's going to implode, and everyone is going to want to leave.” He specifically said that his father opposed his desire to return to Peru for work after obtaining his education abroad. He suggested that his father’s attitude may have grown out of the corruption in Peru, saying, “My country has never given [my father] anything, and I have given everything.”

## **Akbar**

Akbar is a Syrian man, born in Saudi Arabia in 1982. When he was 8 years old, his family moved to Syria but returned to Saudi Arabia after the Syrian revolution. His opposition to the Syrian government has been shaped by his upbringing in a politically volatile environment. He states that he is no longer welcome in Saudi Arabia due to his beliefs. Akbar is proud of his American identity, especially since the countries he had lived in previously treated him so poorly.

Akbar comes from an educated family. Both of his

parents have obtained bachelor's degrees. Akbar himself has two bachelor's degrees (marketing management and international policy) and a master's degree in peace-making. He has two sisters, one of whom lives in Lebanon, the other in Saudi Arabia, along with his parents. He met his wife while living in Turkey. At the time, she was working as a humanitarian. She urged him to move to the U.S., saying it would allow him to have a greater impact on the world. During the immigration process, they spent some time in California before moving to Washington, DC. In the move to DC, Akbar's papers got lost. He highlights this event as a fault in the underfunded immigration system. Two years later, after hiring a lawyer, his papers were retrieved. When he first arrived in DC, he interviewed for several contracting positions. He was offered an internship at the United Nations but felt overqualified for the position and ultimately declined. At the time of his interview, he worked as a general manager for a restaurant in DC.

## **Janet**

Janet was born in Queretaro, Mexico, in 1995 and came to the United States in 2007. She lived in San Antonio, Texas, until she moved to Washington, DC in 2020. Like Gael and Akbar, Janet came from a well-educated family. Her mother lives in Texas, working as a university professor and has her PhD, and her father has a master's degree and works for an international

IT company in Mexico. Janet has a master's degree and is multilingual, speaking Spanish, English, and French. She also has two brothers and one sister. At the time of her interview, one brother worked as an engineer in Texas, another worked toward his bachelor's degree, and her sister worked internationally, composing and producing music. Her brothers still lived in Texas, while her sister frequently moved for work. Maintaining legal status was a stressor for her family throughout her life and has created an unstable sense of belonging in the United States. She states:

Even with the correct visas to be here and live here, it was very difficult because, especially for my younger siblings, they were younger when they moved. I feel like they feel more American than Mexican, even though we're still not citizens or permanent residents...my little brother, he speaks way better English than he does Spanish, and he's not a citizen, even though we've been living here legally, like, for the past 14 years or so. So, it's like a big question about feeling at home but not having necessarily all the rights to do things like not being able to work has been a big thing.

Despite this hardship, she made a point of reflecting on the privilege of maintaining her status throughout her time in the United States. She credited this privilege to her parents' sacrifices throughout her life, stating, "It hasn't always been a

great situation financially, and if we were able to work anywhere, that could have made a difference, I think.”

## **Svetlana**

Svetlana was born in Russia in 1987, immigrated to the US in 2007, and moved to the DC area in 2017. She lived in her hometown in Russia until she was 16, then moved to another town for four years of college. Afterwards, she moved to the United States to pursue her PhD. She completed her PhD in the Midwest and worked as an economist for the United States Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) at the time of her interview. Her mother completed an associate’s degree in Russia, and her dad graduated from high school. Both of her parents still lived in Russia and had retired. She also has a brother who remained in Russia and works as an electrician. She does not have a partner or children, although she was previously married. Svetlana sends remittances to her family on occasion and celebrates Russian traditions with friends.

She compared her ability to receive support for her education in Russia to what she received in the United States. She explained how it was difficult in Russia to finance an education because the system does not support people who do not have financial support from their parents or male partners. Keeping up with her studies left little time for work, so she had to work at night which often left her tired for classes. In the US she was able to apply for grants to help pay for her education

and crafted her schedule to fit with her working hours. Although she has a PhD, she says that education is not important in the US. Svetlana explains:

I think, like in America, it's not important. Maybe in other countries, it's very important because, like I, for example, even in Russia, like to be a salesclerk at the store, they ask for higher education. So, because there is a lot of, like, I guess, education inflation and so on. But here, I think you can be successful without any education if you want to.

At the time of the interview, Svetlana was satisfied with her job but expressed wanting to start her own business or practice. Most of her leisure time was dedicated to getting a venture started. She described a work culture of laziness and unproductivity in Russia. When describing the customer service, she says, "It's kind of, I think, feels like they're doing a favor to you, like, especially with the government jobs." She felt that in the U.S., people are held accountable for their work. Regarding discrimination, she describes a male-dominated finance field which can perpetuate gender bias. She expresses that her office maintains a decent gender-balance. When compared to her PhD program in the Midwest, Svetlana states that her office offers more exposure to immigrants. Gender discrimination was another consideration of Svetlana's. A lack of respect for women was a driving factor in her decision to

leave Russia. She felt that she was “not respected as an individual.”

Lastly, she mentioned how her immigration journey was different than most Russian immigrants. According to her, most Russian immigrants who she knows came to the United States with student visas and are upper class. However, she received her citizenship through marriage after living in the U.S. for three months and meeting her now ex-husband. She described this as a non-traditional path. She described the class divide between these types of immigration pathways: “I think Russians, because they're like a big divide, between people who have the means to come here on a student visa, just to study, versus people who, like, you know, come here, you know, like me.” She felt that paternal support was also a barrier for many attempting to migrate.

## **Ginette**

Ginette is a 33-year-old Haitian woman who immigrated to the United States in September 2008. In Haiti, her father was a medical doctor, and her mother stayed at home to help run her father's various businesses. At the time of her interview, Ginette had a bachelor's degree in science and biochemistry and was working as a pharmacy technician. She also shared that she was working towards a second bachelor's degree. She felt that obtaining a degree meant making a better living but

also believed that people could do the same without a higher education. With her mother, grandmother, and several close family members still living in Haiti, she sends remittances as needed. She grew up in Cabret, a coastal town on the west side of Haiti known for fishing and farming. Ginette describes living in Haiti positively, stating:

I felt like I belonged because it was home, and everybody pretty much accepted me. Everybody looks and talks like you, and you feel like you belong. You feel like it was a community. Everybody knows everybody. You can go to a neighbor's place, and you will feel at home. It's not like [the U.S].

Ginette's sense of belonging in Haiti contrasted with her sense of belonging at her workplace in the U.S. She described feeling included by her coworkers but felt there was a lack of genuine inclusivity at the institutional level.

Between coworkers you feel included because, hey, most of us [have a] immigrant background, some of us are black, most of us are women. So, you feel included in that part, but not in whatever the institution is talking about or portraying in the media or whatnot.

## **Fabiola**

Fabiola is a 34-year-old Haitian immigrant who came to the United States in 2004 and obtained her citizenship through her

mother. Fabiola's parents and most of her siblings also live in the United States, and she has one sibling who still lives in Haiti. Her father was a retired doctor, and her mother was a Geriatric Nursing Assistant (GNA). She has one brother in the United States who works as a software engineer and a sister who works as a junior accountant. Fabiola is also highly educated, holding a master's degree in business administration with prior experience working for an international electronics corporation. At the time of the interview, her spouse worked for the military, and they shared a son.

Throughout the interview, Fabiola highlighted how her role as a mother impacted her career aspirations. She felt the need to create financial stability for her son so he would not feel the same financial burden she did when pursuing an education. She states:

Honestly, with the amount of loans—no, seriously, this is financial bondage. Honestly, for me, I mean, my husband and I have actually taken steps to make that possible for my child to do that [so] he doesn't have to bear the burden of the loans that we've had.

Motherhood also influenced her decision to leave her job as district manager for the international electronic corporation. She felt this role did not provide the work-life balance needed to be present for her family. "My mom practically became my son's mom. She was the one who was

there for him because I couldn't.” Fabiola’s primary goal was to create financial stability and prosperity for her family. When asked what her top five priorities were for earning an income, she simply said, “Financial freedom.”

## **Jeovany**

Jeovany was born in El Salvador in 1996 and was a teacher there before migrating to the United States in 2021. His parents had a basic education, but he and his siblings have gone on to higher education. He has a degree from the University of El Salvador, and his five siblings either have a degree or were in school at the time of the interview.

Growing up, he wanted to be an architect, but the university program was too lengthy and expensive, so he got a teaching degree instead, since it was more manageable for him. Despite feeling a sense of belonging in El Salvador, he decided to migrate because of social issues and gang violence. He passed through Guatemala and Mexico on his journey to the United States and said that the 2-3 months he spent in Mexico were the most stressful part of his journey. There was a significant presence of cartels, and he also witnessed extortion by Mexican immigration agents. Eventually, he made it through the US-Mexico border and applied for asylum as a refugee. Although El Salvador still felt like home, he had been adjusting well to living in the United States. He felt accepted

by his community and started to feel like he belonged here: “From my country, I only miss my family, so it’s starting to feel like a home here.”

When Jeovany first came to the United States, it took him about a week to find his first job: He stated, “The experience of looking for a job here is like when you get here, this is the first thing you get the first opportunity, so the first opportunity that came to me was like working in construction.” When interviewed, Jeovany worked as an asset manager and found that job through his brother, who also lived in the United States. He liked his job because many of his coworkers were from El Salvador and spoke Spanish. However, he did feel overqualified for his job. His teaching degree from El Salvador did not apply in the US, so he plans to have it validated.

## **Class Differences**

Although these interviewees have varying experiences and immigrated at different time periods, social class was a common factor affecting each of the migration stories as well as life in the United States. Economic status can influence an individual’s motives for migration and their journey to the United States. Gael is a Peruvian immigrant who arrived in the United States in 2022. He came from an upper-middle-class background and described having a comfortable life. At the time of the interview, his mother was a doctoral candidate, and

his father had prior military experience and had owned his own business in Peru, importing technology from China. He immigrated to the US because he had the opportunity to study political science at an American university. He traveled from Peru by plane and had no financial difficulties making the journey. He also did not experience feelings of danger during his journey. While Gael's social status allowed for a relatively smooth migration journey, this has not been the case for many others.

Santiago is a 32-year-old Venezuelan man who came to the United States in 2023. Growing up, his mother worked as a cook, and his deceased father worked as a merchant. Santiago's highest level of education was high school, and he worked as a merchant in Venezuela. The limited job opportunities in Venezuela motivated him to leave. Before arriving in Washington, DC, he and his wife traveled from Venezuela through multiple countries until he was able to surrender himself to immigration enforcement at the U.S.-Mexico border. From there, he sought assistance from local organizations to travel to Denver and then to Washington, D.C. Unlike Gael, Santiago encountered difficulties, including running out of food and facing danger throughout his journey. When asked about the danger he experienced, Santiago states, "a lot, a lot of danger. First, the fear of the jungle, many more dead people, and many ugly things were seen."

Class also plays a role in participants' ability to obtain and maintain legal status. Participants who noted factors such as having, or their parents having, post-secondary education, or employment that requires post-secondary education, were often able to obtain some form of immigration status. For instance, Yasamin is a woman from Afghanistan who immigrated to the United States in 2018. At the time of her interview, she had a bachelor's degree that she obtained in Afghanistan, and was previously employed with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Due to her work history, she was able to immigrate to the United States with a special immigrant visa. There is an apparent financial cost in maintaining documentation. When Akbar elaborated on his immigration papers being lost during his move from California to DC, he stated,

And at the end of the interview, [my wife] asked the officer who was interviewing us, oh, you guys mind if you send our papers to Washington, DC?... Two years later, a year and a half later, nothing arrived. My papers just got lost. And it's a file. It's like they genuinely lost between mail and COVID-19. And you have changed. The Trump administration is cutting a lot of funding... [I hired] a lawyer, a private lawyer, on my expenses, which cost me between \$10,000 only to find my papers, where I have no idea, and to get my credentials after a year and eight months, almost.

Janet's parents' jobs allowed them to have the finances to maintain their family's legal status. She states, "Thankfully, we have been able to maintain a legal status throughout...thankfully, we were able to get what we needed. But it has been like financial costs in getting the visas all these years...". Svetlana, who gained status through marriage, explicitly stated in her interview how class impacts the ability to obtain status when she compares herself with other wealthier Russians, who got "investor" visas.

The class standing of participants who have been in the United States for a substantial amount of time was consistent with their class standing prior to immigrating. Ginette immigrated to the United States as a child. Her father was a doctor, and her mother stayed at home to help run her father's various businesses. At the time of her interview, Ginette had a Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry and worked as a pharmacy technician while working towards a second bachelor's degree. Fabiola also immigrated to the United States as a child. Her mother was a registered nurse, and her father was a medical doctor. At the time of her interview, she had a master's in business administration and previously held a managerial role before becoming a stay-at-home mother. Likewise, Ximena, a woman who immigrated from Mexico to the United States in 2000, holds a bachelor's degree and a master's degree. Her mother and father both pursued higher education in Mexico, earning a master's degree and a

bachelor's degree, respectively. Ximena is working towards becoming a program manager.

This pattern varies with recent arrivals. Jeovany had hopes of having the teaching degree he received in El Salvador validated so that he could teach in the United States. Adrian migrated from Venezuela and has been in the United States for 7 years, has similar aspirations. Prior to migrating, he studied computer science and worked in the technical support department at the Agricultural Bank of Venezuela. At the time of his interview, he worked as a delivery driver but expressed a desire to be able to use his education here in America, a process that is both a time and financial commitment. Alvaro migrated from Colombia and arrived in the U.S. in 2023. He described his hometown, Tarazá, Antioquia, Colombia, as a "*zona roja, peligroso*," or "dangerous, red zone." He lost his parents and his two brothers to armed gangs, leaving him with four sisters. Like his parents, Alvaro obtained limited schooling. In Colombia, he worked in construction, but the work was unstable and did not pay well. At the time of the interview, he was awaiting his asylum decision and was making \$600 a week as a delivery driver. His skills in construction still defined his professional goals, and he hoped to return to that work once he secured legal status. Although all three participants were in similar situations at the time of their interviews, they require additional support and resources to achieve their professional and life goals.

## **Conclusion**

These findings highlight the significant role of class in the migrant experience. Class impacts how immigrants arrive, their ability to maintain their legal status, and their socioeconomic class once they are in the United States. Incorporating a class analysis into immigration policy and advocacy will allow the public to understand who we are talking about and policymakers to create a more viable path to immigration and provide new arrivals with the resources they need to integrate into American society.



## 5

### ADAPTING TO A NEW CULTURE

Adapting to a new culture is a large aspect of life for migrants and asylum seekers who have recently arrived in the United States. Some migrants adjust to American culture quickly. This happens in a variety of ways. Some migrants adapt over time. It is worth noting that many migrants may be forced to adapt to American culture due to the lack of opportunity to celebrate that of their home. For others they work hard to maintain their cultural traditions and resist American culture by eating food from their country of origin and speaking their native language, an approach that can pose challenges of its own.

#### **Mohib**

Mohib came to the United States in 2022. He has several siblings, many of which lost their jobs in the collapse of the Afghan government. Two of his brothers are currently in the

United States. He lives with his wife and his three children. He and his wife are both currently unemployed, but he is actively looking for work. As a member of the Hazarah minority, he says he never felt like he belonged in Afghanistan.

We are somehow the second-rate human in Afghanistan. We are—the Hazarahs are being faced with a lot of discrimination and difficulties. Finding a job for me, as a Hazarah, it was very difficult, in comparison to my classmates who were belonging to another place or ethnicity because we are, Hazarah, count as a minority, and this is the difficulty we are facing. So, in some areas, that I was not... That my ethnicity, while not living over there, I was feeling uncomfortable.

Ultimately, he had to flee Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover. One day, he got a call from his office that the Taliban were taking over Kabul. He was in imminent danger and stuck hiding in his house avoiding Taliban checkpoints and protecting his children. He explains, “I had been working with the U.S. Government, and so I was an enemy of the Taliban. They were calling us spies. They killed people that they found out were working with the U.S. government.” Mohib and his immediate family were able to make it to Pakistan where the U.S. Embassy put them on a flight to Qatar, where they stayed for a few months before travelling to California. Reflecting on

his experience, he says:

It was really like a horror movie in real life. Every day we were in fear of being kidnapped or tortured by the Taliban. That was the situation. Unfortunately, those who are still in Afghanistan are facing the same thing. I'm happy that I was able to save my family and come here. It is a fortunate thing for my family. At least I am safe here, and no one tells me who I am or threatens me. I will find my way. I will find a job, I will study here, and I will make my life here for myself and my family and my kids. That is the best thing that I have found.

In Sacramento, California, where he lives now, he states that there is a significant Afghan population, with superstores and bakeries catering to Afghan tastes. He also celebrates many Afghan holidays. He appreciates being in the United States and says,

The nice thing that has impressed me is that no one asks about who you are. I'm new here, I'm an immigrant, I've spent three months here, but I've never faced this situation in any area. No one asks me where I'm from or if I'm new. The U.S. is the whole world. You can see so many races, so many ethnicities, and they don't have a problem with each other.

After being unsafe in Afghanistan first because of his ethnicity and then because of the Taliban, he has been able to find relief in the United States. However, despite the trauma he experienced in Afghanistan and the respite he found in the United States he still identifies as simply Afghan. He was asked, “how would you define your identity? Are you Afghan? Afghan American?” Mohib simply replied, “I’m Afghan. Only Afghan.”

## **Akbar**

Contrarily, Akbar and Natalia reject their original identities because of the discrimination and isolation felt in their country of origin. Akbar was born in Al Dammam, Saudi Arabia and came to the United States in 2017. His first language was Arabic, but he also speaks English, Turkish, and Pashtu. While he was born in Saudi Arabia he moved to Syria when he was 8 years old and was 35 when he arrived in the United States. Although he was already 35, he explains, “I’d like to be identified more as an American than being a Syrian. And I’m loud. I’m confident. I couldn’t be more American than that.” Akbar identified cultural characteristics of Americans and aligned himself with them. He also decided specifically not to celebrate any national Syrian holidays or traditions as they were associated with a government which he disapproved of. His discomfort with Syrian traditions is grounded in his experience of growing up in a country with volatile political

situation, warfare, and never feeling welcomed in Syria because of his opposition to the political regime.

## **Natalia**

Born in 1959, Natalia fled persecution in Russian and left in 1989. She does not identify as Russian at all despite being born in modern day St. Petersburg and instead simply identifies as Jewish. She explains,

I don't feel that I belong to the Russian community. I'm identifying as a Jewish person. So, we came to this country as political refugees because we were persecuted in Russia for being Jewish. So, we do celebrate Jewish holidays here.

She makes clear that she does not like to eat Russian food, celebrate Russian traditions, or speak Russian, unless she has to.

## **Gulab**

Similarly, Gulab prioritizes aligning with American work culture over maintaining Afghan traditions.

You know when I came to here, everything is changing. It's changing the life, too, in here. And after that I'm not looking to the community

of Afghanistan, any holiday, what this is national holiday, or this is our holiday from our country, or this is religious holiday! And always we should be at work work work, and it's just no time for that, you know, like, yeah. And not too much, but sometimes we join of the friends and not always, sometime. And like 95, 99% working in sometime going out for that.

Despite his prioritization of American culture, Gulab does enjoy eating Afghan food frequently. When asked about how often he is able to eat Afghan food, Gulab states:

Always, always cooking at home. Always cooking at home, but sometime, and the, my off days and other days with friends and here's many Afghan restaurant in this area and Maryland in Virginia and DC. We are looking for that, and we taste Afghan food. And I really like it. Afghan food is delicious and many times when I go out with friends and we're trying the Afghan food.

Despite prioritizing fitting in with American work culture he continues to find time to cook and eat Afghan food.

## **Yasamin**

Yasamin presents an interesting case of balancing between embracing American culture, struggling to fit in, and maintaining respect for her roots. Born in 1986 in Afghanistan,

Yasamin moved to the United States in 2019. Some of her family, including her mom and brother, still live in Afghanistan, she has a couple of sisters in Canada, and another in the Netherlands. However, she personally identifies as Afghan American. She explains,

I identified myself as an Afghan before, but recently, I am also identifying as an American just because I feel at home now here and I work here, and my life is here. But also like I have my Afghan roots. So now it's kind of Afghan-American I would call myself.

This hyphenated identity was born out of her life experiences, relationships, and personal point of view.

Yasamin's cultural identity has posed some issues in finding a partner and her personal life. She explains she had a boyfriend but,

...he was an American, you know who never went abroad. So, we have cultural differences. And it just it was a few months and it didn't work out. So, after that I didn't have like a long-term boyfriend. I think it's hard for me, you know, as being an immigrant to find a suitable person.

On the other hand, her American boyfriend guided her transition to American culture. She explains,

In the beginning there was a lot to pick up and learn and adopt here because of being different country. So I didn't have a really good relationship with my boyfriend, but he actually helped me, you know. A lot being with him, you know, learn a lot about, you know, the culture and like the systems here because he was really raised and grown up here. He was older than me and it wasn't a very successful relationship, but I think it helped me to kind of assimilate.

While she does continue to cook Afghan food for herself and speak her native language with her friends and family, she states that she never felt at home in Afghanistan. When asked if she felt like she belonged in her neighborhood in Afghanistan, she said, "Actually, no." She goes on to explain that she had always longed to be part of American culture, even while she was still living in Afghanistan.

I liked my country, but I didn't love it like I love the US. For some reason, you know, I was the kind of girl who always studied and read about other countries, other cultures, like the Western world. I was never—it was hard for me to fit in. Like a lot of people like the customs there, like going—sitting, like traditional clothes, sitting

in a wedding. It was kind of boring for me. And big parties—it was good, I mean, it was good as a memory. But I'm happy that I'm now in the U.S. because that wasn't for me, you know. Just from childhood, I was studying English at home, like I just liked the most— I wanted to see the world and life there is very traditional. Women are very limited, like they're being judged very harshly. A lot of times, I remember I went shopping, you know, just shopping even, like fully clothed in hijab, and I would be like disturbed or like kind of, you know, not feeling very comfortable like going out because of, you know, how much men or boys, even, try to take advantage of you over there. So it's, it's not a good place overall for women. That's my roots. I accept that, but, you know, personally for myself, I'm not like regretting that I'm coming to the US and like I chose this way of life and a different culture.

Because of her identity as a woman and her beliefs, Yasamin never felt welcomed or safe in Afghanistan. She actively longed for American culture and eagerly adopted it upon arrival. Additionally, she used her relationships to learn about cultures and traditions and fit in more easily.

## Afia

Like for many of our interviews, an established community in the U.S. helps bring the culture of origin and how to succeed in America. Afia formed a dual identity based in the Afghan community she has found within the United States. Afia moved to the United States in 2016. When she first arrived, she stayed in Portland, Oregon, but later moved to Virginia.

So, I came first to Portland, Oregon, and I feel lonely over there because I didn't know much people, and then I had contacted my friends. So, they told me, like, 'Come. In Virginia, we have a big community. Afghan community in Virginia.' And they recommended me to go over here. And then I made a decision to come in Virginia. When I came here, I feel better because it's more diverse environment, and I like better, so I decided to stay here.

In Virginia, she often attends Afghan events whenever she can but also attends Pakistani or Iranian events as well since they have similar festivals. She expresses her appreciation for Afghan food and restaurants in the DMV area as she did not have access to it in Oregon. Afia explains how this experience with her community and culture has led her to a blend of identities. She explains, "I'm not totally American, and I am

not a typical Afghan. I am in between.”

## Gael

While Akbar, Gulab, and Yasamin *choose* to align themselves with American culture. Gael started learning English in first grade in school in Lima, Peru. Gael does not practice or celebrate Peruvian traditions in the U.S. because he does not have Peruvian friends in the U.S. This is more out of a lack of opportunity than a deliberate choice to reject Peruvian culture. He notes that he did attend an event at the Peruvian embassy that he enjoyed, where he got to dance to Peruvian music and eat Peruvian food. Additionally, he appreciates speaking Spanish with his friends. He explains, “Oh yes, happily I have Latin friends at my university, and I speak Spanish with them. I speak Spanish with my parents when I call them or when I text my friends in Peru.”

## Juli

Juli also maintains a neutral relationship with her Panamanian origins. Juli was born in David, Panama, in 1971 and came to the United States in 1992, after having her daughter in 1990. Spanish is her first language, but she also speaks English and Arabic. She identifies as “just American.” She doesn’t particularly celebrate any traditions or holidays. When asked if she did, she explained,

No, not really. Because to me, I'm like, when the Panamanian holidays come around, celebrate them, but don't celebrate. Just like with Christmas. I celebrate it, but I don't celebrate it. I say Merry Christmas and give gifts and stuff like that, but there's not one big thing that I'm like, oh, I must do this.

She maintains a level of indifference to Panamanian holidays. Juli explains, “My daughter does not like to speak Spanish when talking to me. And she's like, " Well, you speak very good English, Mom. Like Americans.” Her daughter explicitly encourages her to speak English to fit in.

## **Aster**

Conversely, for some, celebrating holidays, speaking native languages, and eating traditional foods is an important way to maintain a connection to their cultures of origin. However, this can appear as a blend of American cultural identity and their culture of origin. For example, Aster was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1980. She came to the United States in 1987. Her first language is Amharic, but she also speaks English and Spanish. She is a doctor here. Aster explains how she identifies,

I do identify as Ethiopian American because I've spent most of my time here. So, I definitely have American

culture ingrained as well. But I do still maintain my Ethiopian culture with family, religion, holidays, and things like that. So, a blend of both.

Both of her parents and all her siblings also live in the US. Aster explains she celebrates Ethiopian New Year's.

So the Ethiopian calendar is off. So, we don't celebrate Christmas and New Year's on the same dates. So, it's doable. What else? And there's a lot of other religious holidays and things like that from the Ethiopian Orthodox community.

She also emphasizes how important it is to her to eat Ethiopian food regularly, even if she isn't able to do so all the time. While Aster identifies as American due to the time she's spent in the US, she still makes a concerted effort to maintain her Ethiopian traditions.

## **Abdul**

Similarly, Abdul makes a great effort to eat Afghan food and speak his native language. Abdul was born in the northern part of Afghanistan called Mazar-I Sharif in 1981. He explains he came to the United States in August of 2021; he notes, "I came last year at the same day when the Afghan government collapsed." Abdul's wife likes to cook Afghan foods at home for him and their kids. He explains, "She is good [at cooking]. And we are not eating too much Western foods." Additionally,

he explains the importance of speaking Dari with his kids at home. His kids have started learning English at school and have since begun speaking to one another in English, but Abdul makes sure they continue to speak and practice Dari. He explains,

My kids are speaking English among themselves. But I will let them do so for another year. Maybe after that [stop them] because I don't want them to lose our native language. And they should start speaking our native language at home. When they're going out to the community. They can go ahead and speak English.”

Abdul has created a hyphenated identity while still prioritizing his culture of origin.

## **Mario**

Some migrants simply do not feel at home here in the United States; they are facing obstacles assimilating into American cultural traditions and do not identify as American. But that is normal for the first couple of years. The main factor and solution here is time.

Mario was born in El Salvador in La Unión in 1982 and came to the United States in 2024. His first and only language is Spanish. Mario affirms El Salvador is his true home, but is grateful to the U.S. for the opportunities it has given him. However, he feels that the language barrier prevents him from

fully integrating. He finds a sense of belonging in the church he attends, where he says, “*I feel at home.*” Similarly, Javier was born in Mérida, Venezuela, in 1994 and came to the United States in 2024. Before arriving in the US, he spent about 10 years in Colombia. While he admires the U.S. as “a country of opportunities,” he admits he does not feel fully at home without his family: “My family is not with me. So, the truth is that I wouldn’t let myself stay in this country. If I were to return, I would return to Colombia.” While he doesn’t have the opportunity to celebrate any Venezuelan traditions or holidays here, he does eat Venezuelan food. Javier explains:

Well at home, well, yes, obviously we are Venezuelans, we have a different culture. Yes, we consume some food from here. But most of the food at home is from our country and here there are people who also sell food like this from Venezuela.”

So, he keeps some traditions while he develops new ones. As all transplants do.



# 6

## IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES WITH EDUCATION AND OPPORTUNITY IN THE U.S.

### **Invalid Degree from Abroad**

Many of the participants in this study referenced obtaining degrees in their home countries before coming to the United States. For many, these degrees are not recognized in the US, landing them in careers for which they are overqualified or have no interest in pursuing.

#### **Abdul**

Abdul, born in northern Afghanistan, believes education is important because it provides more career opportunities and allows one to be “more aware of everything”. He recounted a story about his dad encouraging him to learn how to use computers in the early 2000s because, at the time, it was

commonly accepted that such knowledge could bring him great wealth. Transportation and finances have both proved challenging in Abdul's pursuit of an education. His mom did not have an education and was a housewife. His father had a high school certificate and held a position with the Afghan government until just before the collapse. He mentioned how his father retired from his government position, but since the Taliban took over, he has not received his retirement fund to support his family.

After he received his bachelor's degree, Abdul worked as a Project Management Specialist for the US Embassy, in the same field as his degree. In the United States, he works both a full-time job as a Senior Project Coordinator and as an Uber driver. He uses this income to help support his immediate family abroad. He enjoys his full-time job but feels overqualified since it is a smaller role than what he had in Afghanistan. Abdul also discussed how referrals are a big part of American work culture and that it is more difficult for people who do not have a referral to find a job. Additionally, he has observed that most Afghan immigrants who are in the US do not know English well enough to get a high-paying job.

## Akbar

Akbar has a similar story regarding his career trajectory before and after coming to the United States. Akbar is a Syrian man born in Saudi Arabia in 1982 who speaks six languages. He

has two bachelor's degrees, one in marketing management and one in international policy, and a master's degree in peace-making. He has two sisters, one of whom lives in Lebanon and one in Saudi Arabia, along with his parents. He met his now-wife when he lived in Turkey. She worked in the humanitarian field and wanted to move to the US to do more for the world. From Turkey, the two came to California, where they lived during the immigration process. They later moved to DC, where Akbar currently works as a general manager for a restaurant. When he first moved here, he interviewed for contracting positions. He was offered an internship with the UN but declined the offer because he felt overqualified for the position. He enjoys the life that he has created and is passionate about his job. He describes the differences between the work culture in Syria vs the US, saying that in Syria, they are more appreciative of leisure time. As he stated, "In the US, you live to work. On the other side of the world, you work to live."

## Nastya

Nastya spoke about a similar experience. She is a Ukrainian woman born in 1990 who migrated to the US in 2022, and later that year came to the DMV area. She speaks Ukrainian, Russian, and English. She lived in Russia until she was 10 years old before moving to Ukraine. Although she was born in Russia, she identifies as Ukrainian and views Kyiv, Ukraine, as her home. Around 2020, she moved to Hungary, where she

lived for a couple of years. She planned on moving back to Ukraine, but the war started, so she sought refugee status in the US. Her family members still live in the combatting countries, Russia and Ukraine. Her mother lives in Kyiv and works as a psychotherapist and psychoanalyst. Her father lives in Russia, but she has lost contact with him. Although she only has her husband in the US with her, she has found that the Ukrainian community is large in the DMV area, so she is still able to maintain traditions.

Education is very important to her. Growing up, her goal was to obtain higher education because of her cultural values. She states that a “master's for Ukrainians, and I think for a lot of people from the Soviet Union, I think, um, the bachelor's is not a completed education. So in our countries, it is not seen as full. So you have to get a master's.” However, finances have been an obstacle to education since her current priorities are rent and remittances. She has a master's degree in law studies, which she completed abroad, and worked as a lawyer for a year and an IT consultant back home. Despite having a higher education, she finds it difficult to find a job within her expertise in the US.

## **Job Satisfaction**

The previous participants reported being unsatisfied with their current careers and found it difficult to secure a job in their

fields due to having an invalid degree. Others had a different perspective, describing being able to advance in their careers and feeling satisfied with their jobs despite these careers not reflecting the positions they held in their home countries.

## Yasamin

This sentiment is reflected through Yasamin from Afghanistan, who completed her bachelor's degree at a college in Afghanistan, where she studied accounting. Both of her parents' highest level of education was high school. She grew up in western Kabul alongside her four sisters and two brothers. She worked for USAID as a project specialist. She described how being a career-driven woman in Afghanistan was difficult because of widespread corruption in government and businesses and a heavy reliance on male relationships in the dominant culture.

Yasamin immigrated to the United States in late 2018. She went directly to the DMV area and has stayed since. Because of her previous employment with USAID while in Afghanistan, she was able to immigrate to the U.S. with a Special Immigrant Visa. She applied for the visa and waited 2 years for approval. Once she was approved, she quickly booked her flight to the US. She shared that she wishes she had given herself more time to get prepare before coming to the U.S., “like maybe more plans and preparation before coming.” She reflected that moving to a new country without family

support and struggling to secure housing and employment made her integration especially challenging.

Yasamin works as a financial analyst and is happy in her current role. She would like to make more money and hopes to receive a raise in the next year or so. She sends occasional remittances to her mother in Afghanistan. It was relatively easy for her to secure this job, although she had a hard time getting her first job when she immigrated: “The only thing that was hard here was my first job. I was jobless for six months, actually, when I came here and all my savings were gone, I was kind of being stressed.” She feels she is qualified for her role even though her current job does not entirely reflect her degree or previous project management skills. She stated,

It’s not totally relevant... I did this type of work like I work in finance now, I did accounting in college. I did some financial management tasks before that led me here. But I did a lot of other different things too, which is not very much useful in this role, but that’s ok.

Although she has some experience in finance, not all of her skills are being used.

## Oman

Oman had a similar experience. He is a 42-year-old man born in rural Afghanistan who immigrated to the United States in 2018. Omar moved around frequently during his childhood to

escape conflict and Taliban rule. He identifies as a Hazara, a minority ethnic group in Afghanistan from the Bamiyan province. Omar worked as an interpreter for the United States, as well as for the UN and USAID. After receiving his master's degree in business administration, he migrated to the United States with his wife and four children. Omar is currently working as an operations analyst at an international financial institution in DC. He is satisfied with this job because it allows him to work from home, allowing him to better manage his chronic health issues. However, Omar wishes to have a more ambitious job if his health improves, as he feels overqualified in his current position. He explains, "I would be doing something, uh... of a higher milestone that I would set and a higher goal that I would set for myself, and I want to achieve more."

## Cesar

Cesar is a 49-year-old man from Honduras. When he first arrived in the United States, he lived in Wisconsin and attended private school on a student visa for seven months. From Wisconsin, he moved to Washington, D.C. in 2000, where he attended school for five years. He says this education helped him learn English, find a good job, and connect with people. Cesar's father worked as a farmer, and his mother stayed at home. He noted that he came from a large family and had 11 siblings, two of whom live in Michigan and Louisiana. His

siblings who remained in Honduras work as farmers. His brother in the US works as a construction worker and his sister in the US works as a nurse. He also noted having a son who lives in Honduras. Prior to immigrating to the United States, he completed a bachelor's degree in education and worked as a teacher. Despite being a teacher in his home country, Cesar now works as a cook in a restaurant. He noted that he enjoys training others at work and is satisfied with his work-life balance.

These stories showcase how immigrants who cannot directly utilize their education have found ways to pursue careers they enjoy. Although these may not have been their first choice, they have found a sense of gratitude for their work.

## **Pursuing Education in the US**

Many participants expressed the desire to return to school for a higher degree or the equivalent of what they studied back home. However, this dream was not possible for all of them as financial struggles, family responsibilities, and everyday life often got in the way.

### **Saabir**

Saabir's story reflects this theme. He was born in the Northern Province of Afghanistan in 1982 and came to Maryland in 2017, where he has lived since. He speaks Farsi and English and has a bachelor's degree in journalism and communication

from Kabul University in Afghanistan. While in school, he often worried about finances and a lack of transportation. His mother, three brothers, and two sisters live in Afghanistan. He tries to send remittances to them “every three months, six months, five months, two months,” depending on his work. He is a father to four young children, and his wife is a stay-at-home mom.

His very first job was working as a monthly magazine reporter; he later worked for the U.S. Army as an interpreter. Because of this, the US government helped him and his family leave Afghanistan. He currently drives for Uber and Lyft and is the only working member of his household. Saabir described feeling satisfied with this position and not overqualified. He works a lot of nights and doesn't have a lot of downtime, but makes time for his family. Because he worked for the US Army, he was given a Special Immigration Visa, which allowed him to get a green card upon arrival and did not require him to have a work permit.

After graduating with his bachelor's, he had to start working immediately to support his family, so there was no time to pursue a higher degree. He was interested in looking at other jobs when arriving in the US, using a resettlement company. Unfortunately, most of these required a master's degree or a PhD. He would like to get another degree because “education from Afghanistan is not valid here,” but does not

have the time or finances to do so. He described life in the US as “slow” since he cannot use his education, compared to Afghanistan, where he was able to work in his profession. He is hopeful that his kids can go to college in the US and sees a brighter future for them here. However, he is concerned about saving enough money for their education.

## Natasha

Similarly, Natasha discussed her desire to return to higher education. She was born in St. Petersburg, Russia (formerly Leningrad) in 1959. She arrived in New York in 1989 and came to DC in 1990. She previously lived in Vienna, Austria, and Rome. She identifies as Jewish and speaks Russian and English. She came to the US as a political refugee after being persecuted in Russia for being Jewish. She holds a master’s degree in speech therapy, which she completed in Russia, and took out loans to finance this education. Her first job after completing this degree was working as a speech therapist at an orphanage in St. Petersburg. She originally wanted to attend medical school but was denied because of her Jewish faith. She has not been able to use her speech therapy degree in the US. The American Speech and Hearing Association required her to get another master’s and complete additional education, which was not feasible at the time she immigrated. Her husband has two master’s degrees and works for the US government.

She has one sister who lives nearby with her family,

and a daughter who lives nearby with her family and works as an attorney. It took her about 4-5 months to find a job when she first arrived in the US. Now she works as a store manager in a high-end women's boutique once or twice a week and is satisfied with this position. She said the job was easy to find and that her background in speech therapy translates well. Natasha reported not feeling discrimination at work, but mentioned that she only speaks Russian around Russian customers in case someone else were to be offended because "people might feel that we're talking about them."

She has a good work-life balance and can take care of her family. Being a manager and having the freedom to make her own schedule allowed her to take care of her daughter when she was growing up. She was able to obtain a green card and work permit shortly after arriving in the US and has benefits and private insurance through her husband's employer.

## Maria

Maria has a similar story. She was born in Krasnodar, Russia, and speaks Russian and English. She moved to the US in 2016, when she was 17, and later moved to DC in 2021. Before moving to the US, she lived in England for two years. She received her bachelor's degree in the US and was pursuing her master's degree here at the time of the interview. Both her mother and father completed their formal education in Russia.

Her mother is from Ukraine, and her brother had recently moved to the US from Ukraine, where he had been serving in the Ukrainian military. He had to leave Ukraine due to the war.

Maria felt a sense of belonging in Russia and still has pleasant memories and feelings of the Russia she lived in; however, she does not “favor [Russia’s] government or the country's economic state” and would not like to go back. She does not send remittances to family in Russia or celebrate Russian holidays; however, she does often cook Russian cuisine and speak Russian with her son and others. She believes education is extremely important because it gives “much more opportunity to develop your career and develop as a person”. When navigating educational opportunities, she found that there was a financial burden due to a lack of scholarships and childcare costs. She has not had a job yet due to being in school and taking care of her and her husband’s child. She described a lack of support from her family because they don’t know English and are not aware of what’s happening in the United States.

The desire to pursue more education in the States was highly prevalent; however, impractical for many. These participants reflected on time, family responsibilities, and finances as barriers to further education. While Maria was able to return to school even with these challenges, Saabir described his life as “slow” since he is currently unable to do the same.

In contrast, Natasha was never able to return to school but was still able to have a fulfilling career.

## **Valid Degree from Abroad**

A few participants were able to utilize the degrees they completed abroad without needing to pursue further education.

### **Aster**

Aster immigrated to the US in 1987 from Ethiopia, at six years old. She works as a physician after receiving her MD abroad. Her father has a pharmaceutical degree, and her mother has an associate's degree. Both of her parents are retired and live nearby. She has four siblings, one sister, and three brothers. She is married, and her spouse works at a nonprofit organization. Although her immediate family is in the US, she occasionally sends remittances to her grandmother's sister in Ethiopia. She speaks Amharic often with her family, including her siblings' children, and celebrates Ethiopian Orthodox holidays. Growing up, she used to eat Ethiopian food more often, but now, not as much. As a child, her parents were overprotective, so she didn't have much social activity. In college was where she first experienced racism. In her adult working life, she experiences forms of discrimination as a Black woman. She often has to assure people she is not as young as she looks, is in fact a physician and not a nurse, and does have the proper qualifications for the role. She mentioned

how being able to speak multiple languages offers ease and trust in the medical profession. Although she enjoys her job, she described feeling conflicted about whether or not she is truly reaching her goal to provide the care that people really need in life. She stated,

I still feel like I'm struggling to meet that goal [of providing service] because of the frustrations that I'm dealing with— in terms of societal challenges and not really feeling like I'm providing the care that people really need in life. And, so, my goal is to be involved in a way that really will impact the community that I live in and not just put a band-aid on it.

She continued saying, “Yeah, the job is great. I feel like medicine, again, doesn't really directly address the real social issues. In that sense, I don't feel satisfied because I don't really think I'm making a big dent on people's real issues.”

While Aster was able to continue practicing medicine in the States, this career did not satisfy her desire to help people by directly addressing societal issues. Her story shows that one's ability to use their degree does not ensure job satisfaction. Her degree is also more advanced than many other participants mentioned previously, which may impact her ability to use it in the US.

## **Unconventional Use of a Degree**

A similar theme is participants who do not have valid degrees finding ways to transfer skills from one profession to another. One interviewee spoke about doing so to advance in his career.

### **Latif**

Latif was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1989. He came to the US in 2021 when the government in Afghanistan collapsed, but his wife and two kids (an 8 year 8-year-old son and a 3-year-old daughter) are still in Afghanistan. Since he sees education in Afghanistan under the Taliban as inadequate at best, his wife is homeschooling their son until they are all able to come to the United States. He plans on bringing his family over once his asylum status is approved. In the meantime, Latif sends money back home, since “they are not able to do all the things that they are depending on me for.

He is highly educated, with two BAs in economics and business administration that he completed in India, an MBA from Kabul University, and an IT certification from the United States. This high level of education landed him a business administration job in the Presidential Office in Kabul, which, while prestigious, put a target on his back when the Taliban overthrew the government. He stated that getting an education and a job was accessible to most people before the fall of the government:

Everyone was able to go to school to get a job, especially women, but it was not safe for me because... I was working at a presidential office, so it was always a threat to me specifically.

At the time of the interview, he was still waiting to be granted asylum and said that it was taking much longer than he was told it would. This has been problematic for his job prospects because his work permit has a time limit, and his lack of permanent residency impacts which companies are willing to hire him:

“Most companies, thinking that you might need a visa sponsorship in the future, they are not selecting you or giving you a chance for an interview.”

When he arrived in the United States, Latif got help with settling and finding work from a Lutheran refugee resettlement organization and a local mosque that paid for his IT certification. He had a temporary job in refugee case management through one of these organizations and has enjoyed that work. He is looking for a higher-paying, permanent career in his previous field, business administration, and sought assistance from an employment agency. However, this has been hard to find a higher-paying job with his educational level through this agency. Latif currently has a different temporary position with a refugee resettlement organization.

His educational background has helped him advance in this job since his manager was open to giving him more responsibilities. Since his cost of living is so high and his family in Afghanistan relies on money from him, Latif cannot save much, which has motivated him to spend most of his free time job hunting: “sending some money to the family, it can sometimes be really difficult to have savings for future plans.” Latif is hopeful for his asylum status to go through so that he can bring his family, get a good job, and fully settle in America. He stated, “I’m just waiting to be accepted in this country based on my education, my background, and the services that I deliver,” and that he has “a really good feeling” about adjusting to America and fitting in.

Although Latif is unable to directly use his education to get a job, he reflects on utilizing his previous training to advance in his career. However, this is still not satisfactory, and he still hopes to secure a higher-paying position.

## **Degree from the US**

Some of the participants completed their higher education in the United States and had an easier time finding a job they felt content with and qualified for.

### **Ximena**

Ximena’s story highlights this theme. Ximena migrated to the United States in 2000 and moved to the DMV area in 2016.

Her parents and two brothers live in Mexico. Her mother has a master's degree, and her father has a bachelor's degree, and are both now retired. Ximena is well-established and speaks both Spanish and English. It is important to note that her interview was conducted entirely in English, showing her fluency in English. Her longevity in the US is also reflected in her immediate response to identify herself as Latina, an American construct. However, she maintains traditions and states that being close to the Mexican Cultural Institute allows her to maintain tradition. Ximena received her bachelor's in psychology from a university in Mexico. She later received a master's degree in international relations in the US. She makes it clear that education is highly important for perspective and opportunities. However, the obstacles she encounters in seeking education are language and finances. Ximena is currently working as a program manager and was able to find her job through colleagues from her master's program. Through networking and friends, she was able to easily find a fulfilling job that allows her to have 35 hours of leisure time per week. From her perspective, "Washington, DC is a city that gathers people from all over the world. But other than that, sometimes it's hard to feel like welcomed in certain places in certain regions or by certain groups."

## Svetlana

Svetlana's story provides a similar example. She was born in

Russia in 1987. She immigrated to the US in 2007 and moved to the DC area in 2017 (as mentioned in Chapter 4). She completed her PhD in the Midwest and currently works as an economist for the SEC. Her mother completed an associate's degree in Russia, and her dad is a high school graduate. Both of her parents are now retired and live in Russia. She has one brother who works as an electrician in Russia. She does not have a partner or children, although she was previously married. She sends remittances to her family occasionally and celebrates Russian traditions with friends.

Svetlana lived in her hometown in Russia until she was 16 years old, then moved to a different town in Russia for 4 years of college. Afterwards, she moved to the United States to pursue her PhD. She explained how it was financially difficult in Russia to pursue education because the system is not made to support people who do not have financial support from their parents or male partners. Because the timing of classes is strict, you cannot work and study. During her undergraduate experience in Russia, she had to work at night, which often left her tired for classes. In the US, she was able to apply for grants to help pay for her education and crafted her schedule to fit with her working hours. Although she has a PhD, she doesn't think education is important in the US. As she explains,

I think, like in America, it's not important. Maybe in

other countries, it's very important because, like I, for example, even in Russia, like to be a salesclerk at the store, they ask for higher education. So, because there is a lot of, like, I guess, education inflation and so on. But here I think you can be successful without any education if you want to.

This mindset encouraged Svetlana to pursue a PhD, believing that it would help her to get farther in life. She is satisfied with her remote job but would like to start her own business or practice soon. Most of her leisure time right now is dedicated to getting that venture started. Compared to her PhD program in the Midwest, people at her office are more exposed to immigrants. She mentioned that lack of respect due to her gender was one reason she left Russia: “But that was one of the reasons I wanted to leave Russia because I was never really respected as an individual there...”

## Oleg

Oleg is in a slightly different position. Born in 1987 in Nikopol, Ukraine, Oleg grew up mostly in the Bucha region near Kyiv. He is an only child, and his family is scattered. His mother lives with him in the United States, his father resides in Poland, and other relatives remain in Ukraine. He is single, has never been married, and has no children. He first came to the United States in 2007 as a student through a work-and-travel program. In October 2022, he returned under a special

two-year program for Ukrainians fleeing the war. Living with type 1 diabetes meant he was exempt from mandatory military service, giving him the legal opportunity to leave. Friends in the US sponsored his arrival, while refugee organizations helped him with paperwork. Oleg's journey was not physically dangerous but marked by bureaucratic navigation and transition. Education has always been central to his identity.

Oleg earned a master's degree in engineering in Ukraine and was pursuing IT certifications in the US at the time of the interview. "Education develops your brain. Even if you don't work in your field, you can always see who is educated and who is not," he explained. Rather than taking the first job available, he is deliberately investing in further training: "Sometimes you need to do a step back before you make the huge step forward." Having held jobs with both Ukrainian and international companies, including Procter & Gamble, he recognizes differences in work culture. In Ukraine, he observed, "people work harder... you have to struggle, you have to fight. In the United States, you can be average and still find an average job that lets you live a normal life." For now, he is relying on savings and government support while completing his certifications, hoping that he will soon find employment.

## Zahra

Zahra, a 40-year-old Afghan American woman who

immigrated to the United States in 2015, received a bachelor's degree in the United States and a master's degree in business management in the United Kingdom. Zahra worked with Deloitte and USAID, where she discovered that she values a work-life balance. She works in DC at a research center think tank that specializes in public opinion research. Zahra's job is temporary and, at the time of the interview, was to last for three months. While she expressed enjoyment in this job and the free time and flexibility it allows, she hopes to find a new job that gives her more challenging and ambitious work. One factor that Zahra is concerned about during her job search is her name. She worries that employers will assume from her Muslim name that she practices Islam, which will then be associated with a restrictive attitude and lower cultural fit with the company.

## Anya

Anya is a 26-year-old woman from Chelyabinsk, Russia, who comes from a well-educated background. Her mother received a doctorate degree, and her father received a master's degree, both in Moscow. Her mother now works as an economist's assistant in Florida, and Anya received her Bachelor of Arts in Economics at a Florida University in 2021. She completed her first internship at 19 at an investment banking organization in Miami. Upon moving to DC in 2022, Anya found a job in two months, working as a senior associate at a nonprofit focused

on philanthropy efforts. She explained that the job “Makes me feel more accomplished and that I’m able to improve the socioeconomic side of our world.” While she is content with her salary and the nature of the work, Anya feels a bit overqualified as she has considerable skills in economics, finance, and business development.

Those who had the opportunity to complete a degree in the States seemed to have an easier time finding a job that lined up with their career goals and had a decent work-life balance. In her case, Sveta came to the United States specifically for their education and did not report having many time-consuming obligations, allowing for education to be her main priority. This is a stark contrast from those who came for other reasons and either pursued education later or have not had the opportunity to do so.

## **Importance of Education**

Many participants highlighted the importance of education for themselves and their children to live a prosperous life. There are various reasons this belief is held. Many immigrants believe that education is the clearest path for people to understand their rights and become contributing members of society.

### **Jessenia**

Jessenia, a 28-year-old woman from Nicaragua, experienced

educational inequality while growing up. Her mother completed secondary education, while her father never completed primary education. She explained that it was common for women to not attend school and that “there are no equal rights in a country where the politicians will murder you for opposing them.” Her own family did not want her to attend college for this reason, and the cost of attendance. This led Jessenia to feel like she did not belong in her home country or amongst her family. She described feeling different from her family because she did not want anyone to decide her future for her or limit her opportunities. Despite these setbacks, Jessenia attended college in Nicaragua and received a bachelor’s degree in diplomacy and international relations. She wanted to attend college to “make women aware that we have the right to get education.” Jessenia now works as a community liaison for an organization in Maryland, although her primary goal is to work in advocacy for human rights and justice for Nicaraguans.

## Haji

Haji, a 37-year-old man born in Afghanistan, is also passionate about education. He worked in Kabul, Afghanistan, at the government’s energy department as a finance manager in 2012, before the Taliban overtook the government. Haji then moved to New Delhi, India in 2016 to receive his master’s degree in public administration and migrated to the United

States in 2021. Haji works at a food processing company in a public administration role but hopes to receive a PhD soon. Haji's partner and three young children are living in Afghanistan, where their future is uncertain. This forces him to work overtime to support his family. Haji hopes that despite his concerns over his children and the Taliban's rule over Afghanistan, his children will be able to get the highest level of education possible. He explains that "Without an education, we cannot live, we cannot continue our lives, we cannot be a good person in society."

## Valentina

Valentina is the owner of an online bookstore that she opened in 2020. She explained that she is very happy with this work and loves doing it. Education is very important to Valentina, a woman who was born in Venezuela in 1994 and came to the US at 3 years old with her family. She comes from a highly educated background. Valentina's father has a law degree that he received in Venezuela, and her mother has a master's degree from Venezuela. Valentina attended the University of Miami for her bachelor's degree and completed her master's degree in DC. She explained:

[My parents] always raised all of us to prioritize education, the inherent belief that more education opportunities open just more opportunities in general.

However, Valentina has experienced difficulties with the American education system, due to the high tuition costs at college and lack of know-how. Her parents did not go to school in the US, and she shared, “It was a lot of trial and error with heavy on the error part.”

### Dariush

A similar sentiment was felt by Dariush, a 36-year-old man from the Ghazni province of Afghanistan. Dariush’s father only completed informal religious studies while in Afghanistan, and Dariush’s mother cannot read or write. His parents currently live in Pakistan after fleeing the Taliban but are trying to migrate to Canada. Dariush migrated to Minnesota in 2021 to get his master’s degree through the Fulbright program. He lives in the United States with his wife and two daughters but is currently unemployed. He receives a minimal stipend to support his family, as his wife is unable to work legally. This financial situation inhibits Dariush from being able to send remittances to his other family members living abroad. Dariush believes that education is very important and hopes his children are able to receive higher education. In his view, education allows people to “know who you are, you know the value of...you know how you connect with others, you know how to ask for your rights, everything.”

## Muse

For Muse, a 23-year-old Ethiopian man, education is also extremely important. Muse attended high school in the U.S. and was enrolled in community college for a degree in computer science. Muse believes that “[education] is the best way to move up the social ladder, especially for...a lot of immigrants.” Muse began working at 16 years old to save up money to attend college. His goal for the future is to continue his education, have a stable life, and bring his mother to the United States.

## GEDs and ESL Classes

Some participants were pursuing their GEDs or taking English as a second language (ESL) classes.

## Roberto

Roberto was born in Morazán, El Salvador, in 2005 and came to the United States in 2022. At the time of his interview, he was studying for the GED and taking ESL classes. He explained why he decided to come to the United States, saying,

The desire to make my dream come true. I wanted to be a writer, so I saw the opportunity, and nothing, he didn't tell me. But then I had the opportunity, and I said, well, if not now in my youth, when will it be? And that's no reason to come here.

Roberto currently works a construction job on the weekends that he found through a friend, but he says, “The blessing is that I am studying.”

His journey to the United States was guided by a coyote and filled with danger and violence. He felt in danger because of the gunshots he heard along the way and the violence committed against him.

Well, as one might say. With what happened when I told you that he put illegal things on me, I think that this is violence against me. Sometimes, also with food that they didn't go two days without eating and things like that. And they treated them badly. But thank God we are here.

Despite the journey he emphasized his gratitude for making it here safely and being able to pursue the opportunities he was hoping for.

## Diego

Diego has a similar story. He was born in 2005 in Mérida, Venezuela, and grew up in a modest town. His mother worked as a preschool secretary, and his father worked as a police officer until the economic crisis and corruption caused them to quit their jobs. His father left the police force rather than turn to corruption, later driving buses to keep the family afloat, while his mother cared for his two younger siblings. At 18, he

made the difficult decision to leave. “Yo quiero estudiar un futuro y allá no se puede [I want to study a future and you can’t over there],” he said. Political instability also weighed heavily on him:

*Era mejor salir antes de que ganara o perdiera Maduro.*

It was better to get out before Maduro won or lost.

His half-brother, whom he had only met online, offered to help him migrate. With little hesitation, he accepted, knowing it was his best chance at a decent life. The journey was dangerous. He crossed the Darién Gap with strangers, enduring hunger and exhaustion. Armed groups extorted them at gunpoint; those unable to pay sometimes never returned. “Vimos cómo secuestraban a otra gente... gracias a Dios no nos agarraron [We saw how they kidnapped other people...Thank God they did not catch us],” he recounted, describing the terror of running through the forest with a child in his arms. In Mexico, he worked wherever he could: supermarkets, restaurants, a nut-processing warehouse, while waiting nearly a year for a CBP One appointment. Loneliness and depression weighed on him during those months, though he also found unexpected kindness when a local family took him in. In November 2023, almost a year after leaving Venezuela, he entered the United States legally through San Ysidro. He flew to Washington, DC, where a cousin received him. For now, he works long hours in food delivery, using his

cousin's motorcycle. "Es la misma rutina todos los días... trabajo, llevo, como, y duermo [Its the same routine every day...work, wake up, eat, sleep]" he explained. Yet he still manages to send money back home:

"Yo trabajo para mi mamá, mis hermanos, que estén bien [I work for my mother, my siblings, they're okay]."

Adjusting to life in the US has not been easy. "Aquí todo es con las reglas, uno se tiene que adaptar [Here with all of the rules, one has to adapt]," he reflected. He misses the sense of belonging from his hometown, though he knows he cannot return to Venezuela unless the situation changes. For now, he is enrolled in English classes at the Washington English Center and dreams of pursuing higher education, possibly in medicine. He is certain that he wants a professional future:

*Siempre pensé ejercer una profesión, bien sea doctor...  
lo que quiero es estudiar donde lo pueda ejercer*

I always thought of practicing some profession, either a doctor...I wanted to do one of those two professions

He insisted he would never let his younger siblings endure the journey he faced: "Jamás en la vida haría que mis hermanos pasaran por la selva [Never in my life would I make my brothers go through the jungle]." Despite the long way, he envisions a future with stability and education, a future he was denied in Venezuela but still believes possible here.

## **Conclusion**

All of these stories illustrate the diversity of immigrants' experiences with education. They also put into perspective the value of education and the consequences of it being stripped away. While being a source of frustration for some, education is a powerful motivator and source of hope for others.

# 7

## ILLUMINATING THE THOUGHT PROCESSES BEHIND REMITTANCES

### Introduction

Remittances are defined as sending money and resources and to remit is the act of sending or transferring money across distances. Policy discussions of remittances tend to lack awareness about the individuals giving and receiving them.

A frequently made assumption is that all migrants remit, and that these remittances aid in the development of the migrants' country of origin. Emphasizing the outcomes of remittances without consideration for the personal thought processes migrants go through when navigating their ability to do so may lead to harmful assumptions (Delgado, 2024). The participants in the Immigration to the DMV study illuminate that the personal situations causing individuals to remit are

diverse. This chapter will share the stories of multiple migrants and how their experiences shape their approach to remittances.

## Exploration of Themes

### Personal Survival in the US

While participants expressed their desire to remit, many described extremely limited ability to do so because of job instability and increased costs in the US. These participants did not have consistent means of remitting and instead had to focus on their personal survival. This section of the chapter will share the stories of Victor from Venezuela, Eduardo from El Salvador, and Saabir from Afghanistan.

#### *Victor*

Victor embodies this theme. Born in 2005, Victor is a young man from Caracas, Venezuela. When describing his neighborhood back in Venezuela, Victor says that he felt a sense of belonging, “Me sentía bien ahí, todo el mundo me conocía, todo era alegre [I felt good there, the whole world knew me. Everything was joyful].” Still, Victor and his partner had to leave due to rising gang violence beginning in 2021:

*Era bien, aunque nos fuimos por un problema de que una banda de malandros, así como que le decimos nosotros, se querían adueñar en nuestro barrio y por eso fue que tuvimos que irnos... querían tomar ese*

*territorio donde nosotros vivíamos y a cada niño que veían por allí y el chamito lo querían poner a trabajar hacia él, si me entiendes? Y eso es lo que no querían. Nosotros somos jóvenes y por eso fue que nos fuimos de ahí.*

It was good, even though we left due to a problem with a gang, like we tell it ourselves, they wanted to own our neighborhood and that's why we left... they wanted to take that territory where we lived and each child they saw there. And, they wanted to make every Young person work for them, you know? And, that's now what we wanted. We were Young and that's why we left there.

He also states that corruption and impunity in the government played a role in his decision to migrate. Victor migrated to the United States in 2023, stating that it is a “long trip” that lasted “more or less 7 months.” He says he went through “7 countries to get here,” including Colombia, the Darien Gap to Panama, then Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Mexico, and finally the United States. When asked if he felt like he was in danger through any point of the migration journey, Victor states: “*No, no teníamos miedo. O sea, nosotros sabemos que íbamos con Dios.* [No, we weren't scared. We knew we were with God.]” His faith kept him afloat throughout the long journey.

Despite his training and experience as a motorcycle

repair mechanic in Venezuela, Victor worked in construction as a day laborer upon arriving in the U.S. He found this job through the church. He worked with other migrants and refugees and was often able to speak Spanish with them. At the time of the interview, Victor was attending a course so that he could get a high school equivalent education. He states that it benefits him in immigration court hearings: “*Bueno, los estudios ayudan mucho porque cuando a la hora que nos toque la cita inmigratoria nosotros la corte decimos que nosotros estamos estudiando si estamos haciendo las cosas bien, eso nos ayuda mucho.* [Well, my education helped a lot because once we receive our immigration hearing, we will tell the court that we are studying and we are doing things right, that helps a lot.]” Due to the lengthy process, Victor was unsure of his immigration status at the time of the interview, but notes that he will be receiving a work permit, health insurance, and an ID.

Victor still has family in Venezuela but does not consistently remit due to employment instability. Since he works in construction in the US, Victor describes going through “cold seasons” or slow seasons where construction work is not as desired. During these times, he faces temporary unemployment which lessens his ability to send money back to his family in Venezuela. Victor has had to focus on his personal survival while also establishing himself in the United States through gaining education, going through immigration

court hearings, having to constantly network to find work. With such important things to consider, such as him taking action to do the “right things” so that he looks attractive to the immigration hearing board, Victor has to prioritize establishing himself or else he may not secure the ability to stay in the US. As Victor stated earlier in his interview, he had to leave Venezuela for his personal safety from the gang violence; therefore, solidifying himself in the US is a matter of life or death. If Victor were to prioritize sending money to his country of origin, he would likely limit his ability to sustain himself in the US which could have grave consequences.

### *Eduardo*

The inability to remit due to financial instability and a focus on personal survival is again reflected in the life of Eduardo, a Salvadoran man from San Vicente. He was born in 1978 and migrated to the U.S. in 2002. His highest level of education is the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and his parents similarly did not complete a high school education. Although his father passed away when he was two years old, Eduardo mentions how both his mother and father made a living selling tools to butcher animals from home. Eduardo’s existing family lives in El Salvador as well as in the U.S. He identifies as a father; he has two adult children and three young children. His wife and children, at the time of the interview, still live in El Salvador. When speaking about the opportunities for work in the US, he states that the

environment is similar to that of El Salvador:

Pobreza también por la extorsión y la violencia de maras y pandillas. Esto ya jodió, pero ahora el presidente está terminando de joder con las leyes. Ese presidente ha puesto unas leyes bien tremendas. Ah, también aquí está el mismo. Porque aquí no hay trabajo.

[[There was] poverty, extortion, and gang violence. This is all fucked up, but now the president is still screwing up the laws. This [U.S.] president has implemented some terrible laws. Ah, here is the same. Because there is no work.]

He notes that there is no work in El Salvador or the U.S. However, in El Salvador's case, the president has implemented laws that have heightened the issues in El Salvador along with gang violence and poverty.

When asked about life back in El Salvador, he speaks briefly about his job as a motorist but does not delve deeper. When asked about his dreams and aspirations when he was a child, he responded, "Pues como les digo, la pobreza no deseara hacer mucho. [Well, how do I tell you, poverty does not allow us to do a lot]." In reference to migrating, he noted that some stay in El Salvador "pues porque como no hay a veces algo más económico para para poderse mudar a otro

lado, como obligación tiene que estar uno en su cantón. [because like there isn't something more economic to be able to move elsewhere, like the obligation is that one has to stay in their own province.]” In his view, poverty limits people’s future goals and ability to migrate. Even so, he notes that he left due to “la pobreza en el país” [poverty in the country] and that, similar to Victor, impunity and corruption played a role in his decision to migrate.

Eduardo paid a coyote \$7000 to take him with a group of Salvadorans he did not know to migrate “by foot.” This was a dangerous migration pathway. When asked if he ever felt in danger while migrating he tells the story about running through the desert for 4 days:

When asked if he remits to family back home, he states:

*“La verdad le digo que a veces uno quisiera ir así, pero no tiene la oportunidad. Por sueldo. Lo que ganamos acá casi solamente es como para la renta.”*

“Honestly, I’ll tell you that sometimes I want to, but I don’t have the opportunity due to wage. What we earn is barely enough for rent”.

This lack of opportunities and work conditions has left Eduardo in a tight financial situation, necessitating a focus on his own survival. It is also important to recognize that Eduardo had to pay around \$7,000 to get to the US, which is a lot of

money, especially considering he came from a country with limited job opportunities. This is reflected in his earlier statement in his interview, where he expresses that the job opportunity in the US is very similar to that of El Salvador, which is extremely limited. The fact that he leapt from one area of low job opportunity to another further illustrates why Eduardo has to focus on his personal survival in the United States and is limited in his ability to send money to his loved ones in El Salvador. He has to focus on what he can afford, which is only his basic needs, or else he would be unable to afford his life in the US.

### *Saabir*

Saabir expands this theme from personal survival to familial survival in the United States. Saabir, born in a Northern Province of Afghanistan, describes 6<sup>th</sup> grade as his parents' highest level of education and explains that his father was a teacher in his town. At the time of the interview, his mother, three brothers, and two sisters lived in Afghanistan. He explained that one of his sisters worked as a kindergarten teacher, but now is unable to work because of the Taliban.

Saabir is a father to four young children, and his wife does not work. He speaks Farsi with his children and eats Afghan food regularly, though "the quality is different." Further, he feels like he belongs in the United States as an American citizen.

While his first job was working as a monthly magazine reporter, he also worked for the U.S. Army as an interpreter in Afghanistan. Because of these connections, the U.S. government helped him and his family get out of Afghanistan after the Taliban took over. He was granted a Special Immigration Visa (SIV), which allowed him to obtain a green card upon arrival in the U.S. and did not require a work permit. In the U.S., Saabir works as an Uber and Lyft driver. He is the only member of his household working, but he says that the job pays the bills. He stated that he feels satisfied with his position and does not feel overqualified. He works many nights and has little downtime but still makes time for his family. He reported not feeling discriminated against at work.

While in school, he had to worry about finances and a lack of transportation. Once he graduated with his bachelor's, he had to start working immediately to support his family, so there was no time to go for a higher degree. He was interested in looking at other jobs when arriving in the U.S. through a resettlement company. Unfortunately, most of these required a master's degree or a PhD. He would like to get another degree because "education from Afghanistan is not valid here," but does not have the time or finances to do so. He says that life in the U.S. is slow because he cannot use his education, unlike in Afghanistan, where he could work in his profession.

He is hopeful that his kids can go to college in the U.S.

and sees a brighter future for them here. However, he is concerned about saving enough money for their education. He receives benefits via food stamps and Medicaid.

Sometimes he is able to remit to his family but does not always make enough money to do so, “every three months, six months, five months, two months? It depends on my work.” He is a father to four young children, and his wife does not work. Being the sole worker in his family shows that he must focus on his family’s survival and does not have the ability to expand his budget to include remitting to his family in Afghanistan. Saabir works multiple jobs to support his family in the United States, highlighting that his income cannot be stretched any thinner to cover other expenses. Saabir specifically mentions that to expand job opportunities in the United States, he would need to pursue higher education, which would be financially burdensome, a burden he already had to face to get his bachelor’s degree. He expresses that he must use his time to work so that he can afford to support his family in the United States; therefore, time is crucial money for his family, and he must focus on using his time specifically for his family’s support here in the US so that he can secure a bright, burden-free future for his children. If he were to stretch his time more thinly or rearrange his financial priorities, he would most likely be less able to secure this future for his children.

### *Conclusion*

Moving from another country to the United States is not the end of a migrant's migration story. Some migrants do not have the more seamless transition that other migrants do. Establishing oneself to be able to afford to live in the US can be a daunting task. So much so that in the pursuit of establishing oneself, that is all one can afford to do. What is often forgotten is that as families and connections grow, expenses do as well (Mahmud, 2025, p. 107). Personal survival is extremely important because if a person cannot afford their own survival, how can they afford to remit? Understanding the participants' stories and all that they need to consider in their daily lives sheds light on the internal thought processes that surround whether migrants can remit.

### **Taking on Extra Jobs**

As expressed in the previous section, establishing oneself in the US can be costly. Paying for the cost of living in the US while also budgeting for remittances can be an immense challenge, and for some participants, it requires taking on additional jobs to make it all possible. This section will share the stories of Abdul and Gulab from Afghanistan to illustrate this common situation.

#### *Abdul*

Abdul expresses the weight of supporting so many people's

livelihoods and survival, and the personal sacrifice required of this endeavor. He believes education is important because it provides more opportunities. He recounts a story of his father encouraging him to learn how to use computers in the early 2000s because they were told it could bring great wealth to have that knowledge. He says that finances are always a challenge to education. If you are studying, you cannot work. Transportation was also a challenge to his education. His mother had no education and worked as a housewife. His father had a high school certificate and held a position with the Afghan government until just before the collapse. He mentions how his father retired from his government position, but since the Taliban took over, he has not received his retirement fund to support his family.

After receiving his bachelor's degree, he also worked in a related field in Afghanistan as a Project Management Specialist for the US Embassy. Due to the high-profile nature of his job in Afghanistan, he faced many security threats and had to keep a low profile to avoid being targeted. In one instance, he was followed by an unknown vehicle that was likely the Taliban. He mentions how for two and a half years living in Kabul, none of his neighbors knew his name because he could not allow them to know who he was. He had to flee Afghanistan quickly after the Taliban took over and a few of his siblings and parents relocated to Pakistan. He now lives in DC with his wife and children. He has six kids from the ages

of 3 to 12 years old. His wife currently works at a department store and is taking English language courses. She previously worked as a high school teacher in Afghanistan with her associates degree. He has a smaller Afghan community here, so they celebrate traditions less. However, he does make it a point to speak Dari at home with his kids. He excitedly shared the names of certain Afghan foods that he eats with his family. He describes how he is waiting for his brother who currently lives in Pakistan to get his visa to come to the US, saying,

And other than that, I'm waiting for my brother. I hope they will approve the special immigration visa. And he should be able to come because I don't know how long he will survive with current situation in Afghanistan. The Taliban has searched his house three or four times, I think. But he was able to manage, I mean, managed to escape.

He says he enjoys his full-time job, but it is definitely a smaller role than his previous job in Afghanistan, and he feels somewhat overqualified. He says in the US work culture, if you have a referral, you can easily find a job, but it is more difficult for people without one. For most Afghan immigrants who are in the US, the biggest issue is that many do not know English well, so it is difficult to get a high-paying job.

This participant immigrated to the United States the day that the Afghan government collapsed. He was able to do

so because of his project management position at the U.S. embassy. When asked if he remitted to his family in Afghanistan, he went on to describe his and his wife's situation surrounding sending money back to Afghanistan,

...there is severe poverty in Afghanistan, and there is no type of assistance...lots of people are jobless. That is why I have to send money to not only to my parents, I'm sending money to my siblings, I'm sending money to my father-in-law and his family, and I sent money to my brother-in-law who is living in Pakistan. And I was helping his family and colleagues, that is not only me [helping], two of my sisters are living here in the U.S. as well [are helping]. The three of us were contributing. Also, I supported my sister's family for a while, but it was difficult for me to support a couple of families. And I was really under pressure here. And both physically and mentally. Because I was seeing that my parents were living with poverty. My brother's living, and then my sister is in Pakistan, she's also living with poverty. And fourth, she was also pregnant. And it was difficult to manage all of those, my father-in-law's family, and all of those. That was like a type of pressure on me, one person sending money almost every day to different people saying that we've run out of food. We've run out of heat. We've run out of all of these. And then, like two days ago, I sent money. Now my

wife is working [at a department store], and she's sending money to her family. That's what she does, and she covers at least that part, and I have to cover my part. We are sending too much money; we are sending it so they can survive. That is the only thing we can do because we are not rich and we are still immigrants. And we came like a year ago. And in a quite short time, I was able to at least have a job, or hunt a job and also doing like supplementary jobs sometime recently, because my job makes me more tired, I have too many things to do.

When discussing his financial priorities, he states that it is “difficult to sacrifice for others, because if I start education, then I cannot support my family”; therefore, he says that his top priority is rent, and his second priority is sending money to his family in Afghanistan. He remits to his family as often as he can. To help support his immediate family and increase the support he can send abroad, he works both a full-time job as a Senior Project Coordinator and as an Uber driver. This shows the sacrifice of personal aspirations to prioritize caring for family and remitting.

Abdul and his family were not planning on immigrating to the US. They had their life planned in Afghanistan until it was ripped away by the Taliban takeover. The fact that Abdul and his family were able to quickly flee

the Taliban and become displaced in the US for their own safety highlights several important points. First, the fact that his immigration was swift and surprising illuminates the sudden need to establish a new life in the United States, which, as expressed in the previous section of this chapter, can present extreme financial challenges. Second, Abdul so crucially highlights the hardships in his home country of Afghanistan as a reason he and his wife feel responsible for doing what they can to aid their community. Despite being given an immediate pathway to immigrate to the US, Abdul has made it clear that he is not able to shed the pressure of supporting his community in Afghanistan. From the list of the number of people he and his wife are supporting, it is evident that if he were not taking on extra jobs, his loved ones in Afghanistan would be even more affected by the hardships they are currently facing. This illuminates the pressure Abdul and his wife are under while still facing the financial burdens of supporting their family here in the US. Abdul expresses his dreams of pursuing higher education, but he is not in a position to sacrifice his ability to aid those in Afghanistan for his own dreams. Remitting while navigating personal and family survival in the US can present unique challenges. Abdul's experiences demonstrate the complex thought processes surrounding why taking on extra jobs is necessary to make remitting possible.

*Gulab*

Gulab reflects this theme and explains why he needs to work multiple jobs to support his family in Afghanistan. Born in Paktika, a province in southeast Afghanistan, a province in southeast Afghanistan. He immigrated to the United States in 2021 and currently lives in Virginia. He speaks Farsi, Dari (Persian), Pashto, and English. He and his wife have one daughter together. He has three sisters and three brothers, all of whom live in Afghanistan. His parents came to Afghanistan as Pakistani refugees; his mother was educated at home, and his father completed school up to 10th grade. His mother is a housewife, and his father worked as a contract supervisor for the army and a teacher. He completed high school in Afghanistan and immediately joined the army, so there was no time to continue his education. He dreamed of becoming a doctor or a professor, but his family could not support further education.

He left Afghanistan to get away from the Taliban; it was not his dream to come to the U.S., but he never plans on returning home. At the time of the interview, he was awaiting the start of the asylum process, and his status was that of a parolee. He does not spend time on Afghan cultural traditions because he is in the U.S., saying that work is the most important aspect to focus on.

He does, however, cook and eat a lot of Afghan food and speaks Persian with his family. When he served in the

army, he enjoyed serving his people and felt very satisfied with that work. After immigrating to the U.S., he found a job at a grocery store, which was difficult to navigate without knowing much English. He currently works for a security company and drives Lyft on the side. Many of his coworkers at the security company are also Afghan refugees or immigrants, so he speaks his first language with them. He still considers Afghanistan his home and feels like his ethnicity prevents him from being accepted by Americans.

He has 3 sisters and 3 brothers who all live in Afghanistan; he remits to them each month, along with other family members and a few friends. He states that he remits because:

There is no work, nobody is gonna doing anything. And here's a lot of opportunity, and there's an opportunity that is zero, so no one is working in my family. I support all of them, all of them. I support them. So, every month, I'm sending money to them. I support them and my uncle, and some of my friends sometimes, too. Yeah. And I support them

Gulab's emphasis on remitting funds due to the ongoing hardships in Afghanistan closely aligns with Abdul's experiences.

Also, in a similar vein to Abdul's story, Gulab was not planning to immigrate to the US and ultimately had to for his

personal safety and the safety of his wife and daughters. This, again, shows that he and his family were unexpectedly and suddenly faced with the need to establish themselves in a new country while also considering how they could help with the ongoing struggles of their loved ones in Afghanistan. With the dire lack of opportunities and aid in Afghanistan, receiving remittances is key to survival. Balancing the reality that so many people rely on a migrant's ability to send money and the fact that the migrant themselves have to find a way to afford their personal survival shows the immense pressure a migrant can face regarding remittances. With so much weight on his shoulders to support his family in the US and his loved ones still in Afghanistan, he works two jobs to make this possible.

Certain low-wage jobs are often made available through migrant networks, which can benefit a migrant's income (Mahmud, 2025). However, these jobs often do not yield enough income for a migrant to make significant additional money beyond their survival. From our participants' testimonies, we understand that they are under immense pressure to support their communities and loved ones facing hardships. With such responsibility on their shoulders, these participants have taken on additional jobs so that they can secure additional money to be sent to their communities and loved ones.

## Not Needing to Remit Because Their Family Immigrated

Numerous participants mentioned that they did not need to remit due to their families migrating to other countries and establishing financial stability. This ultimately challenges the assumption that all migrants send money to their loved ones and/or communities in their country of origin. This section of the chapter shares the stories of Amina from Afghanistan, Hawi from Ethiopia, and Jennifer from Venezuela.

### *Amina*

Amina exemplifies this theme. The participant is from Bamyan, Afghanistan. She speaks Persian and English and identifies as a female Hazara (ethnic Shia Muslim group) from Afghanistan. She first came to the US on a Fulbright scholarship in 2018; after completing it, she returned to Afghanistan. In 2021, she evacuated because “Afghanistan fell,” and because she was working for an American organization, she was able to go through a “US evacuation process” known as “humanitarian parole.” She does express that she “felt really in danger” during her migration journey because she was traveling with only women and her younger brother, so they could have been more easily targeted by the Taliban. She was stranded in the airport for four days, facing bomb threats, and was physically beaten by the Taliban, and she did not feel safe until she landed in the United States. She

was able to get a job as a project director within 3 months of moving to the US by connecting with the company's CEO during her temporary stay at the Fort Lee military base upon arrival in the United States.

When asked if she remits, she very directly ties that because her family has migrated to the United States that she no longer needs to remit. She states that she “was sending money,” but because her “family just came to the United States,” she has mostly stopped. She does mention that she occasionally will send money to relatives, but not much. As seen with the other Afghan migrants within this chapter, many send money to their loved ones in Afghanistan due to the ongoing hardships they are facing; however, Amina expresses that because her loved ones are no longer facing those hardships due to migrating to the US, she no longer has a reason to send money to them.

### *Hawi*

Hawi was born in 1977 in the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa and came to the United States at 28, in 2005. She first came to Texas and then moved to Washington, DC, in her first year in the United States. Before coming to the United States, the participant lived briefly in Lebanon. Because of her time in the Middle East, she speaks Arabic (her first language is Amharic) and English. The participant's parents both passed away in Ethiopia during the Eritrean war, along with one of her

brothers. However, her seven other sisters and one other brother are all alive, living across the world (the US, Canada, France, and Ethiopia). She explains,

My sisters live in Toronto, Canada. And France. They are French citizens. They grew up in France because when my mom and my father died early... they take them as refugees. They like what they call refugees. Four of them. They go over there while my brother died over there.

Once she arrived in the United States, she had a daughter who dreams of being a doctor. She explains why she came to the United States, “I came here to work for myself, to support myself, and to support my daughter. That's, I believe, that's why I came here.” She now owns her own restaurant and works for herself. When she does have some free time, she spends it with her daughter, taking her swimming and playing with her. Although she strongly identifies as Ethiopian, she loves living in the United States.

Her siblings are all living in Canada and France and have stable incomes; therefore, she does not often send money to them. She characterizes her sibling’s financial wellbeing with stating that “they come to visit [her] all the time” and that they are “good”. Hawi, as aforementioned, became a refugee when she and her siblings were younger due to the tragic passing of her parents in the Eritrean war. The fact that Hawi

and her siblings were able to grow up outside the unique hardships in Ethiopia, specifically surrounding the ongoing war, has influenced her family's ability to establish financial independence. This connection is important because it helps explain why not all migration journeys involve the relationship between sending money to loved ones and the communities in the migrant's country of origin.

### *Jennifer*

Jennifer also expresses this theme. This participant was born in Maracaibo, Venezuela. She moved to the U.S. in December 2004 and moved to DC in 2020. She has previously lived in Maracaibo, Valencia, and Caracas (Venezuela), and in Cambodia for an internship during grad school. She speaks Spanish and English. She holds a master's degree, earned in the U.S. in 2015. She also attended the New York Film Academy and earned a degree in film. Her dad and one of her friends helped with financing her different degrees. She said she also utilized loans and her savings.

Both of her parents have bachelor's degrees from Venezuela. Her mom works for point of service machines, and her dad works in a chemistry lab making artificial scents. She has no siblings, children, or spouse. She has family in Spain, Panama, Venezuela, Chile, Costa Rica, and the United States.

While in the U.S., she has been able to participate in cultural traditions, eat cultural foods, and speak Spanish with

others in her community. In terms of her identity, she said, “I always think I’m more Venezuelan than American.”

When she immigrated to the U.S., she was 16 and had to learn an entirely different education system in the middle of high school. Her first job was at 16, working in a bakery to help her parents with finances. She is currently a senior communication specialist with Encompass. Within this role, she is working on a project with USAID. She is able to work remotely and receives benefits from the company. Alongside this, she operates a business on the weekends. Her business is a fair-trade, sustainable project to promote slow fashion, and she works with artisans in Vietnam. She said that speaking Spanish has allowed her to work with teams in other countries and learn skills she would not otherwise have.

She has family in Spain, Panama, Venezuela, Chile, Costa Rica, and the U.S. She does not remit, but said her dad may do so instead. Her reason for not remitting is that “a lot of them[her family] are here [US]”. This dynamic is interesting because it introduces a generational dimension to remittances. Jennifer was considerably young when she immigrated with her family to the US, which could explain why her father took on the role of remitting. This dynamic is seen through many of the interviews, where parents exclaim that they remit and do not mention their children contributing to remittances. Jennifer, not sending money to family outside of the US,

continues to expand the knowledge surrounding remittances by showing that there are generational aspects to remittances and that not all migrants engage in remitting.

In contrast to the leading assumptions surrounding remittances, our participants show that not all migrants send money to their communities or loved ones in their country of origin. Particularly in this section, the main reason for not remitting was because the migrant's family had also migrated. Jennifer's testimony particularly illuminates a generational aspect to remittances that extends our knowledge on why some immigrants do not remit.

## Commitment Rather Than Choice

Several participants illuminate the commitment to sending money to their loved ones and communities in their country of origin. Our participants show how sometimes it is an expectation that once you migrate, you are now expected to remit to your community. Beyond communal expectations, our participants show how they themselves find alternative ways to be able to remit, despite facing financial burdens that limit their ability to remit. This section of the chapter will share the stories of Fabiola from Hati, Anastasia from Ukraine, and Valentina from Venezuela.

### *Fabiola*

Fabiola emphasizes the commitment and how it influences her

priorities and her feelings towards finances. This participant is a 34-year-old Haitian immigrant who came to the United States in 2004. Her parents and several of her siblings also live in the United States with one sibling still residing in Haiti. She came to the United States and obtained her citizenship through her mother. Throughout the interview, the participant highlighted how her role as a mother impacted her career aspirations. She felt the need to create financial stability for her son so he would not feel the same financial burden she did when pursuing an education. It also impacted her decision to leave her job as district manager for an international electronics corporation. She felt this role did not provide the work-life balance needed to be present for her family.

Fabiola expressed remitting home as a commitment rather than a choice due to the current circumstances back in Haiti. She states, “You don’t have a choice, unfortunately, many people depend on what you send them to leave because life is so hard back there. Right, no choice. Commitment you made when you left home”. Despite facing financial burdens in the US, she shifted her role from a working mother to a stay-at-home mother to ensure she was present for her family. When discussing financial priorities, she prioritizes remitting despite her overall goal of financial freedom and the financial burdens she and her family have faced in the United States. This exemplifies her feeling towards remittances, mentioned earlier, and shows that the commitment to remit remains at the

forefront of her mind, even through significant career changes and financial burdens. When asked what her top financial priority is, she responds, “financial freedom, I’m so serious. Pay off all my debts. In financial freedom, in peace”. The fact that she is balancing being a mother, a major career change, and maintaining the goal to be able to remit to her community in Haiti shows that remitting is a commitment she knew she was making when she migrated to the US, and that she continues to uphold that commitment.

### *Anastasia*

Anastasia shows this theme in an interesting perspective of finding alternative ways to flow aid into her home country. This participant is a Russian woman born in 1990 who migrated to the U.S. in 2022. She arrived in the U.S. in 2022, and in the same year, she arrived in the DMV area. She speaks Ukrainian, Russian, and English. She lived in Russia until she was 10, when she moved to Ukraine. Although she was born in Russia, she identifies as Ukrainian. To her, Kyiv, Ukraine, is her home. Around 2020, she moved to Hungary, where she lived for a couple of years. She was planning on moving back to Ukraine, but the war started, and so she sought refuge in the U.S.

Her family still resides in the combatting countries, Russia and Ukraine. Her mom lives in Kyiv, Ukraine, and currently works as a psychotherapist and psychoanalyst. Her

dad lives in Russia, but she has lost connection with him. Although she has only her husband in the U.S. with her, she finds that the Ukrainian community is large in the DMV. She is still able to maintain traditions from Ukraine.

To her, education is highly important. She states that growing up, it was a goal to obtain higher education because of cultural values. She states that a “master's for Ukrainians, and I think for a lot of people from the Soviet Union, I think, um, the bachelor's is not a completed education. So, in our countries, it is not seen as full. So, you have to get a master's.” However, she finds finances to be an obstacle to education. Despite having a higher education, she finds it difficult to find a job within her expertise in the U.S.

She has a master's degree in law studies and worked as a lawyer for a year back home but pivoted to being an IT consultant. Her mom has a master's degree, and her dad only has a high school level education. It is interesting that she self-diagnosed herself with depression, anxiety, and PTSD. She states no physical conditions other than asthma when she was a child. She has medical insurance through Aetna.

With family in both Russia and Ukraine, she remits to her family members in Ukraine. She mostly sends money to her grandmother because her mother is more financially stable. Remitting to those who need it is one of her top financial priorities, which also includes saving for rent and for

education. She notes that her current financial situation poses an obstacle to receiving an education, and she has had to apply for “tuition waivers” to lighten the burden. Despite having personal financial struggles, she remains committed to finding ways to remit to those in need. Beyond remittances to her family in Ukraine, she attends Ukrainian socials that aim to gain donations to help other Ukrainians have financial support due to the ongoing war in Ukraine. Considering that she faces financial burdens, specifically with education, and that she still finds a way to remit to her grandmother, it already shows that she is committed to remitting. However, the fact that she finds alternative ways to encourage donations and aid to her community in Ukraine shows that she is committed to remittances in her country of origin.

### *Valentina*

Valentina exemplifies the commitment to remitting by showing the community aspect of remittances. Both of her parents now live in Miami, FL. Her father has a law degree from Venezuela and a bachelor’s degree that he completed in the United States. Her mother has a master’s degree she completed in Venezuela. She has one younger sibling who lives in New York City and studies animation. She has a long-term partner who is a high school history teacher. On a scale of 1-5 she values education at a 5. Valentina explains the value of education for her because she was raised to “prioritize

education, the inherent belief that more education opportunities open just more opportunities in general.”

However, she had some challenges in school as an immigrant

And so, figuring out how to pay for school was honestly it was such a stressful thing for me and my parents to try to figure out together because I didn't know what to do, and they didn't know what to do, and no one in my family knew what to do. I think just like the lack of the benefit of going through the American education system, my parents didn't have that to offer. So, it was a lot of trial and error, with a heavy emphasis on the error part. Also, when I entered my undergraduate in Miami at a private institute, I honestly just didn't, I didn't know how to navigate it. Like no one really helps you understand like, oh, you know, you need to go to your advisor, your advisor gives you, you know, certain guidance...

Valentina came to the United States when she was 3 years old:

“My family and I immigrated when I was very young, so I only lived there for about three years and then went back and forth a bit and then just kind of stayed here full-time, eventually.”

She identifies as Venezuelan American and has dual citizenship. She never felt like she belonged in Venezuela because she was primarily raised in the United States, so there were many cultural differences that made it hard to be accepted as a Venezuelan there.

Valentina remits to her parents, who live in Miami, and her parents “then go and redistribute accordingly depending on who you know is asking who needs it most and whatnot.” She does it this way because she says her parents “have more of a handle on that than [she does].” Sending money back home to relatives used to be a financial priority for her; however, she no longer has relatives in Venezuela to send money to. This is similar to the theme in the previous section of the chapter that acknowledges that some migrants decrease their frequency of remitting due to family members migrating to other countries. This does introduce an interesting exchange of remittances. Despite her not having someone to remit to in Venezuela, Valentina still gives money to her father so that he can distribute the remittances to members of their community who need it. This emphasizes the community aspect of remittances and the fact that she does not know exactly who the remittances are going to shows her commitment to remitting. Overall, Valentina’s story shows a commitment to giving back to the community of Venezuela, beyond giving money to specifically family.

## **Conclusion**

As seen throughout our participants’ testimonies, there is a recurring theme of feeling responsible for sending money to their country of origin, whether that be to loved ones or to aid the community as a whole. With the mass atrocities occurring

in numerous countries, there is an assumption that if someone has migrated to the US, they are going to be capable of sending money (Mahmud, 2025). However, as we examined in previous sections and as echoed by the participants in this section, establishing financial stability for personal survival presents a challenge, and balancing budgeting for remittances can instill financial challenges for migrants.

Remitting is not a one-size-fits-all. Emphasizing the outcomes of remittances leaves out the personal thought processes migrants go through as they navigate their relationship to remittances. Remitting is an extremely personal exchange that requires various thought processes to explain whether a migrant remits, and whether they are even able to do so, given considerations of survival. Overgeneralizations of migrant experiences lead to stereotypes that can harm the perceptions and treatment of migrants, as mentioned by our participants. Our participants' personal accounts provide important information and introduce thought processes largely missing from the current literature and discourse.

The hardships of establishing financial stability in the US are often not considered in current discourse, which has led to assumptions that migrants are instantly able to afford expenses beyond basic personal survival. Even among migrants who can afford remittances, this does not mean they are not facing financial hardships. Illuminated by our participants, we find that being able to afford remittances can

sometimes require multiple jobs and can come with immense pressure placed on the migrant. Ultimately, these migrants' experiences provide important insights into the social and cognitive processes surrounding remittances.

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# 8

## **WORK AND BELONGING: IMMIGRANT ENCOUNTERS WITH U.S. WORK CULTURE**

Whether arriving as economic migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers, many immigrants enter the United States workforce with unique understandings of labor and professionalism shaped by their home countries. Their assimilation into the American labor market offers insight into how U.S. work culture is experienced, interpreted, and navigated across cultural lines.

This chapter explores how immigrants living and working in the DMV region describe and make sense of U.S. work culture. Participants contrast U.S. work culture with that of their native countries, highlighting how the working environment in the U.S. is fast-paced, values hard work, and prioritizes employment. Participants also describe the challenges of workplace integration, including difficulty leveraging networks, language barriers, and discrimination.

Through their experiences, we gain a nuanced picture of how immigrants both adapt to and critique the culture of work in the United States.

The following sections draw on the voices of participants from diverse national backgrounds, including Ethiopia, Syria, Haiti, Afghanistan, Russia, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Colombia, and Mexico. Each story offers a window into the complex realities of working life in the United States.

## **Contrasting Work Cultures**

Across participants' responses, a recurring theme is the observed contrast between U.S. work culture and that of participants' countries of origin. Many describe the U.S. work culture as demanding and heavily centered on employment, while recalling a greater emphasis on leisure and professional relationships abroad. We begin this chapter with Haile's story.

### **Haile**

Born in Ethiopia in 1956, Haile immigrated to the United States in 1981. His first language is Amharic; he also speaks English and Spanish. Although his parents did not attend college, he himself completed three years of a college program. As a child, he lived with his mom, who was a stay-at-home mom, and his dad, who worked in trade. He enjoyed his childhood in Ethiopia but came to feel he did not belong in the country at large because of government corruption. Most

of his family still lives in Ethiopia, except for some cousins living abroad and a brother, a sister, and his mother living in the United States.

Haile highly values education, and states that “the world is changing,” so “without education, you can’t survive.” He wanted to get a PhD or direct documentaries as a young person, but he says that when he met his wife, he did not continue on with his education. He got his first job in Ethiopia when he was 20 or 21 at a drilling company, which he took because it was in a rural area of Ethiopia where the government had less overreach. Currently, he works in community building in the DMV and loves it. He attributes getting this position to a mix of luck and hard work and feels qualified but not overqualified for his position. His work does not provide many benefits, but he does have health insurance and a decent work-life balance.

When he first came to the United States, Haile received help from an organization to find his first job, and it took two to three months to find a position. He says that work culture in the United States and Ethiopia is “night versus day,” and that here, the kind of work you get does not matter as much as the pay and benefits you receive since in the United States, if “you don't work, you are out. In a few months you will be homeless.” He has enjoyed living in the United States and refers to it as a great country for immigrants, comparing it to

life for immigrants in Canada and Europe, where he previously lived.

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As Haile describes, there are some important differences in the work culture of the U.S. as compared to Ethiopia. As he points out, U.S. work culture prioritizes employment to such a great extent that the consequences of joblessness are severe. Without consistent pay and benefits from a job, whatever that job may be, Haile identifies homelessness as an unfortunate outcome.

## Akbar

Akbar, a Syrian man, describes how work culture in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Syria is slower-paced; workers are more appreciative of leisure time. As he states, “In the U.S., you live

to work. On the other side of the world, you work to live.” He goes on to say that, unlike these other countries in which he has resided, the culture of U.S. society focuses less on who you are as long as you are a hard worker:

[In] Turkey, it doesn't matter. You're Syrian— we hate you immediately. Saudi is the same. You're Syrian? Oh, you're displaced—you're internally displaced? Or like you're a refugee? Yeah, we feel pity, but we don't trust you. We don't support you. U.S.A., zero. Forgiven. You're a hard worker. You're ethical. Keep your head down. You say the right thing, you respect everyone around you, and you are rewarded. Very simple.

His emphasis on hard work being a tenet of U.S. culture and an important aspect of being “rewarded” with a positive reception by others in the U.S. speaks volumes about the perception of U.S. working culture. Moreover, it exemplifies how migrants perceive their value in U.S. culture as closely tied to their ability to “work hard” and “keep your head down.” Ginette similarly observed that U.S. culture emphasizes work. As she states,

I think one thing here [in the U.S.] is that they make work a priority. You have to be all about work and working. In Haiti, I don't think it's like that. People can

call out, and it can take a few days. It's more laid back in Haiti, I would say. But here I feel like it's, like work is—you have to make work the most important thing in your life.

## Ginette

Ginette highlights her understanding that “work and working” is extraordinarily valued in the United States. In comparison, aligned with Akbar’s claim, she characterizes the working culture abroad as more “laid back” or leisurely.

Ginette joined the U.S. workforce as a pharmacy technician after immigrating from Haiti to the U.S. in 2008. Although she does not elaborate much on her migration journey other than originally settling in Homestead, Florida, Ginette describes her hometown of Cabaret, Haiti, positively and gives no indication of leaving due to distressing circumstances. She has several siblings who also live in the United States as well as a family residing in Haiti to whom she remits “as needed.” At the time of the interview, Ginette had a bachelor’s degree in science and biochemistry and noted working on a second bachelor’s degree. She felt that obtaining a degree translated to making a better living but still believed that people could do the same without a higher education. Ginette describes feeling qualified for her job, having a decent work-life balance, and being met with opportunities to grow at work in the United States.

## Natalia

Ginette's overall satisfaction with U.S. working life is echoed by Russian immigrant Natalia, a high-end boutique manager. For Natalia, being a manager and having the freedom to make her own schedule allows her to take care of her daughter. From her perspective, in Russia there were little opportunities for investment and advancement in the workplace. When contrasting work cultures from Russia to the U.S., she says she feels like the U.S. has a better system in this regard.

## Carlos

For immigrants like Carlos, the U.S. working environment provides greater opportunities for financial advancement as compared to his country of origin, Guatemala.

Born in San Miguel, Guatemala in 1985, Carlos came to the US in 2021 and currently lives in Maryland. Both he and his parents completed primary education in San Miguel, and his parents still live and work as day laborers there. His wife works as a housewife, caring for their three elementary school-aged children. As he says,

In Guatemala, you do work, but you don't earn enough. It was very difficult to live there to support the 3 children, it's always hard, so that's why I decided to come here to this country.

Carlos imagines his children pursuing higher education, maybe as high as a doctorate. He says, "I want to fight for them to get

ahead.” In pursuit of this goal, Carlos moved to the U.S. to make more money and have access to more financial opportunities. He currently works in construction in the U.S. and is satisfied with this job since it makes him enough money to support his family.

## Yasamin

Comparing Afghan work culture to the U.S., Yasamin conveys how being a career-driven woman in Afghanistan was difficult because of widespread corruption in the government and businesses, and a heavy reliance on male relationships in the dominant culture. She explains that in her experience, work culture in the U.S. is much more performance-based. Whereas in Afghanistan, relationships are more valued. She describes,

Being a woman, it was really tough for me...even before Taliban, the government was very corrupt. So, the people who are deserving of a promotion, they wouldn't be promoted in the job market. So, it was a lot of corruption based on relationships... Overall, it was tough on women...[For] everything, you're dependent on men. If you did anything, the men would kind of want to take advantage of you, unfortunately. If you want to get promoted, you have to really please [the] men in power.

Yasamin completed her bachelor's degree in

Afghanistan. Both of her parents' highest levels of education were high school diplomas. She grew up in western Kabul alongside her four sisters and two brothers. She describes Western Kabul as an underdeveloped area where a large population of minority Shia Muslims resides. She explains that she does not feel like she belonged in Afghanistan, even as a child:

I like my country, but I didn't love it like I love the U.S. For some reason, I was the kind of girl who always studied about other countries, other cultures [in] the Western world. [...] I wanted to see the world, and life [in Afghanistan] is very traditional. Women are very limited. They're being judged very harshly. [...] I feel like I wasn't built for that culture.

Even so, she identifies as Afghan American and expresses that “because I feel at home now here [in the U.S.] and I work here, and my life is here. But also like I have my Afghan roots.” She also feels her role as a sister, aunt, and daughter are important since she has such a large family. At the time of the interview, her oldest brother lived in the U.S. working as a technician. He arrived in the U.S. after she immigrated. Her second-oldest brother lives in Afghanistan with his family. He previously worked in the Afghan government, but no longer has a job since the Taliban took over. One of her sisters just finished her higher education

studies in Toronto, Canada. Another sister works in Toronto as a social worker focused on aiding women in shelters. Her third sister lives in Holland, where she went for her higher education. And her youngest sister lives in Afghanistan with her mother and is not working. This sister had attended college in India but returned to be with their mother after their father passed away. Her mother works as a housewife and often cares for her grandchildren.

Yasamin came directly to the DMV area. Because of her previous employment with USAID while in Afghanistan, she was able to immigrate with a special immigrant visa. She applied for the visa and waited two years to get approved. Once she found out she was approved, she quickly booked her flight to the United States. She explains how she now wishes she had taken more time to get set up in the U.S., with “maybe more plans and preparation before coming.” She attributes this specifically to it being difficult to move to a new country without any family and having a hard time securing housing and a job right away.

Although Yasamin now works as a financial analyst, is happy in her role, and says that it was relatively easy for her to secure this job, she had a hard time getting her first job when she initially moved to the United States. As she describes, “I was jobless for six months, actually, when I came here, and all my savings were gone. I was kind of [getting] stressed.” She

feels she is qualified for her role, even though her current job does not fully reflect her degree or prior project management experience. She drives 30 minutes to work one to two times a week and works the rest of the time remotely. She occasionally remits to her mother in Afghanistan.

When asked about her health, she described having chronic asthma. Although she has not been diagnosed with PTSD, she says with a wry laugh that “I think all our Afghans have PTSD.” In light of this, she would like to see more mental health support systems for Afghan immigrants, especially in the first few years of migration when individuals have yet to establish social connections.

## Svetlana

Svetlana, an economist working for the SEC, speaks on the differences in Russian work culture and goes on to describe Russian workers as lazy and unproductive, saying people are generally not nice. She elaborates on her opinion, saying specifically Russian workers in government positions feel they are doing you a favor and thus act with entitlement. Contrarily, in her view, workers in the U.S. are held accountable for being lazy. Regarding schooling and employment training, she points out that education is less important to success in the U.S. as compared to other countries. As she explains,

I think, like in America, [education is] not important.

Maybe in other countries, it's very important because,

like I, for example, even in Russia, like to be a sales clerk at the store, they ask for higher education. So, because there is a lot of, like, I guess, education inflation and so on. But here I think you can be successful without any education if you want to.

## Shereen

Shereen, an Afghan woman who immigrated from Pakistan, affirms this experience, saying that in the U.S., if “you don't have a degree or certificate [you can work] in stores as a sales—as a cashier, but not in my country [Pakistan]. We have to have a degree, like four years or maybe a master's degree or something.”

## Ekaterina

Another Russian woman, Ekaterina, describes how work culture in Russia tends to look down on jobs that do not require education, but that she has not experienced this mindset in the United States. Instead, she notes that it is much more respectable to work in a restaurant in the U.S. than in Russia and that many of her Russian friends and family disapprove of her work as a bartender, even though she is attending classes to obtain a higher degree while supporting herself with this job.

Ekaterina was born in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1993. She immigrated to the U.S. in 2012, initially moving from place to place before she eventually settled in the DMV area.

She came on a work visa, so she already had a job arranged when she arrived. While in the United States she attended university, first earning an associate's degree in Community Studies from a local community college before transferring to a larger four-year university. At the time of the interview, she was just finishing up her bachelor's degree in political communication.

Ekaterina states that she is “usually proudly Russian, [however] not in the past eight or nine months.” She was referencing the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. She loves her home city of St. Petersburg and says that it has more soul than any city she's been to in the United States, but that politicians have been “coming in and ruining everything.” Most of her family still lives in Russia, including her retired parents and her brother. She does also mention one cousin of hers who is fleeing Russia to the United States through the Mexican border. While living in the U.S., she has not explicitly sought out community with other Russians, and usually only speaks Russian while on the phone with her family.

She has really enjoyed being in school and highly values education. She is satisfied with her BA but is willing to go back to school for a master's or PhD if it is paid for by an employer. Ekaterina wants a career in advocacy “to make this place, this world, a little better,” but has been working as a bartender throughout school. She has been working full-time as a bartender along with being a full-time student in order to

cover her rent as well as pay for medical expenses, since she has Type I Diabetes. She notes that she enjoys her job somewhat and plans to continue bartending on weekends once starting her goal career. However, this is primarily due to a need for secondary income to help manage her diabetes while maintaining a comfortable lifestyle.

Despite her intention to continue bartending, Ekaterina discusses her issues with the restaurant industry in the United States. She describes her experience of work culture in the U.S. as “more toxic and demanding” than what she experienced as a barista in Russia, and complains of inadequate work benefits. Her job only provides PTO and basic medical insurance with no retirement benefits.

Although U.S. culture prioritizes work and working, some participants, like Ekaterina, described receiving inadequate support from U.S. systems to maintain healthy and sustained employment, such as comprehensive benefits and a manageable work-life balance. Amir, an Afghan man working as a delivery driver, reports working 70 hours a week and often not having time to see his friends. Shereen, the Afghan woman from Pakistan, describes difficulties with her work-life balance because everything she needs to access is closed by the time work is done. If she needed to make a health care appointment, she would have to take off work.

## Fabiola

Fabiola, a 34-year-old Haitian woman who migrated to the U.S. in 2004, cited a lack of work-life balance as the reason for her recent resignation. Working as a district manager for an international electronics corporation, Fabiola did not feel she had adequate time to be present with her family. Although she was a stay-at-home mom at the time of the interview, her overall goal is financial freedom. As a mother, she wants to create financial stability for her son so he will not feel the same financial burden she did when pursuing an education:

I want him to be a decent citizen, respectful, and contribute to his nation and the community. Yes, I do want that. Absolutely. I expect greatness out of him, but I don't expect him to go and rack up loans. I want him to do it in a very—I want a mature manner, and that's what makes sense.

Overall, participants recount meaningful differences in work culture between the U.S. and their countries of origin stemming from their lived experiences and cultural perceptions. While some describe the increased availability of economic opportunities and advancement in the U.S., others situate the U.S. work culture as fast-paced and demanding, with limited support systems. Unique to these participants is their ability to speak from a place of experience, having worked in other countries or grown up in and around the

working culture of other countries. They have knowledge of work expectations in their countries of origin and have the unique ability to compare that experience and those observations with their own in the United States.

## **Workplace Integration Challenges**

This chapter would be remiss without describing the unique challenges that immigrants in the United States face when integrating into U.S. work culture. Namely, interviewees highlight the importance of and difficulties with networking to securing employment, hardship navigating language barriers, and the impact of discrimination or exploitation faced as immigrants or persons with marginalized identities.

### **Jessenia**

Born in Nicaragua in 1997 and raised alongside seven siblings, Jessenia immigrated to the United States after completing her bachelor's degree, working with a refugee resettlement organization to make migration possible. As Jessenia conveys, the work culture in the United States, as compared to Nicaragua, "is 100% different...you have to network here [in the U.S.] most of the time to get a job. A decent job." She shares that "the immigration system in the U.S. is nonsense, unfair, really bad, disorganized, broken." It was very difficult for her to find a job in the United States.

It took her three years to secure a job as a community

liaison in Maryland. Over those three years, she used her networking skills to meet many people at the organization, who eventually helped her secure the job. In her occupation, she feels that her identity negatively impacts her wage. She also shared how she feels excluded in the workplace despite working with other immigrants and refugees.

Jessenia describes that in order to get “a decent job” in the United States, you need to rely on a professional network. For many immigrants, building and leveraging a network for employment is difficult because they have limited connections in a new country. For many participants, connections were the main way they found their current employment. Ximena, a woman from Mexico, found her current job working as a program manager through colleagues in her master’s program.

## Gino

Gino, a young man from El Salvador, similarly relied on personal connections to secure both of his current jobs. He works long hours as a cook at two different restaurants. Yet even after finding work, language barriers affect his work, particularly in his interactions with co-workers.

Well, no, I don't speak, I mean, you learn English here, I mean, but it's not like you understand everything at work, because sometimes there are people who have another language, for example. In my job, there are quite a few people who are from Asia, right? So,

therefore, they speak English, but their English is different from the English we can learn, so there are many words that I don't understand, even though I know [what] they are, but I don't understand them, apart from the fact that my level of English is quite low.

## Jaah

Jaah, an Afghan immigrant, describes how, when he arrived in the United States, he had trouble finding a job because he did not speak much English and stayed in a hotel for three months:

My English at that time was not good. Now I speak a little better. My English is not good, nobody helped me. I lived for three months in the hotel. It's very depressing for me, it's a very [big] problem.

After some time spent growing his network, he asked someone he knew for help finding a job and ended up in a low-paying position at a pizza place. After working there for a bit, he was able to find work at a construction company before landing his current job at the airport.

## Abdul

Abdul, also an immigrant from Afghanistan, succinctly describes Jaah's experience, suggesting that in the U.S., if you have a referral, you can easily find a job, but it is more difficult for people without connections. He further says that for most Afghan immigrants in the U.S., the biggest issue is that many

do not know English well, making it difficult to get a high-paying job.

Abdul immigrated to DC from Afghanistan with a special immigration visa on the day the Afghan government collapsed, and the Taliban took over in 2021. Abdul grew up in a large family. He has three brothers and three sisters, all of whom are educated or have attempted to pursue education. He believes education is important because it provides more opportunities for one's future endeavors. He recounts a story of his dad encouraging him to learn how to use computers in the early 2000s because they were told it could bring great wealth to have that knowledge. He says that finances are always a challenge to education; if you are studying, you cannot work. Transportation was also a challenge to his education. His mom did not have an education and worked as a housewife. His father had a high school certificate and held a position with the Afghan government until just before the collapse. Abdul mentions how his father retired from his government position, but since the Taliban took over, he has not received his retirement fund to support his family.

After he received his bachelor's degree, Abdul also worked in a related field in Afghanistan as a Project Management Specialist for the U.S. Embassy. Due to the high-profile nature of his job in Afghanistan, he faced many security threats and had to keep a low profile to avoid being targeted. In one instance, he was followed by an unknown vehicle that

was likely the Taliban. He mentions how, for two and a half years living in Kabul, none of his neighbors knew his name because he could not allow them to know who he was. He had to flee Afghanistan quickly after the Taliban took over and a few of his siblings and parents relocated to Pakistan.

Abdul now lives in DC with his wife and children. He has six kids from the ages of 3 to 12 years old. His wife currently works at a department store and is taking English language courses. She previously worked as a high school teacher in Afghanistan with her associates degree. He has a smaller Afghan community in DC, so he and his family celebrate traditions less often. However, he speaks Dari at home with his kids. He excitedly shared the names of certain Afghani foods that he eats with his family. He is waiting for his brother, who currently lives in Pakistan, to get his visa to come to the United States.

He remits to his family as often as he can. To help support his immediate family and increase the support he can send abroad, he works both a full-time job as a Senior Project Coordinator and an uber driver. He says he enjoys his full-time job, but it is a smaller role than his previous one in Afghanistan, and he feels somewhat overqualified. However, he is thankful to have secured his employment through a referral from a previous co-worker from the U.S. embassy in Afghanistan.

Abdul was lucky enough to have made professional

connections in the U.S. prior to seeking refuge in the country. This expedited his job search and allowed him to secure a stable form of employment upon arriving in the United States.

## Manuel

Manuel, a Colombian immigrant working as a machinery operator, also found his current role through his network. He would like to own his own business eventually, but first, he says “I have to master English perfectly to be able to get a higher position.” He offers his own perspective on the differences between work culture in the U.S. as compared to Colombia, noting that skill expectations are different; in Columbia you are trained for a single, specific function, but having a variety of skills is more valuable in the United States. He also mentions how he felt he had more of a voice to speak up in Columbia because it was his own country.

For migrants or asylum seekers who do not have connections prior to immigrating or have not been able to immediately leverage their network, securing employment can be difficult. Some participants mentioned how they were forced to take low paying jobs that did not match their qualifications because they needed the income. For example, Victor, an immigrant from Venezuela, describes how he worked in construction as a day laborer upon arriving in the U.S. despite having a background as a mechanic. Manuel, although having gotten his current job through a connection,

did not have this same opportunity when he first arrived in the United States. Six days after immigrating to the U.S., Manuel took a job at a mechanic's shop. He felt he had to take the job because he had just arrived and did not have papers, but says "practically like they exploited me, if you understand what I mean, they exploited me and paid me very cheap."

## Ignacio

Ignacio, a Colombian man who works in construction during the day and at a restaurant in the evenings, also conveys his feelings of being undervalued and discriminated against due to his age and legal status. Born in 1962, Ignacio migrated to the U.S. when he was 30 years old. He has three adult children, one of whom is serving in the U.S. Navy. He also has a wife and 7-year-old son who live in the Dominican Republic. He typically travels to visit them for two months out of the year but lives in Maryland himself, working to support his family abroad. Ignacio shares that his frustrations with his employers stem from their willingness to exploit migrants who do not have legal status and pay them lower wages. Manuel and Ignacio's experiences are unfortunately not unique. As Margarita similarly describes her identity as an immigrant, which led to her being taken advantage of in the workplace.

## Margarita

Margarita is a 21-year-old woman who immigrated to the U.S.

from Colombia in 2023. At the time of her interview, her highest level of education was high school, which she completed in Colombia. She lives in DC with her mother and her younger brother. Margarita noted her mother was an industrial engineer in Colombia but now works at a daycare in the United States. Her brother works at a metal structure workshop, and she also has a half-brother who lives in Costa Rica and works as a veterinarian.

According to Margarita, the threat of violence was her family's driving force for migrating. She states, "although we really love our country...it was not the best thing to live there." She recounted threats from "armed groups of the leftist law in Colombia" and the murder of her father several years prior. She also described deep-seated corruption as a factor for leaving Colombia. Margarita described how her mother first arrived in the United States with a travel visa, followed by her younger brother, and lastly herself. They all traveled to the United States by plane. She states, "[my mother] made a stopover in Miami and then arrived here in Washington...and then finally I came 3 months ago on the same route as my mother from Cartagena, Miami.... Miami [to] here, Washington."

Like many immigrants, Margarita noted wanting to come to the United States for better opportunities. However, she felt her immigrant status led to her being discriminated against at work. When describing her treatment at a prom dress

boutique, she recounts, “[My boss] didn't let me use the bathroom, and I didn't have a lunch break. I mean, I could eat, but yes, but I had to be quick, and if you brought a client, you couldn't eat.” She also noted being denied minimum wage and being told it was because she’s not “native.”

This feeling of being exploited or discriminated against at work is further echoed by other participants. Ekaterina, a Russian woman attending school and working as a bartender, described the role that gender and appearance play in the U.S. restaurant industry, saying that “most bars and restaurants are looking for girls.” She also describes how, as the only Russian speaker in the establishment, she is instructed to take all Russian parties. This is problematic for her because she has experienced sexual harassment with some of her repeat Russian clients and is forced to take them anyway because of the language barrier. Vania, a woman from El Salvador, who currently works as a cashier, says that she feels discriminated against by some people, specifically non-Spanish-speaking people. Silvia, also from El Salvador, similarly feels discriminated against at work as a school custodian, saying that the students in her workplace often ignore her, though “there are good students too.”

According to some participants, the experience of discrimination is felt on a larger level. Ginette, the Haitian woman working as a pharmacy technician, describes how she feels that inclusivity on an institutional level is lacking:

If [you are asking me if I am feeling] included in the institution, feeling like you're a part, you count, you matter—not really. But between coworkers...you feel included because, hey, most of us are immigrant background, some of us are Black, most of us are women. So you feel included in that part, but not in whatever the institution is talking about or portraying in the media or whatnot.

For Aster, discrimination is inherent to her identity as a young Black woman working in the medical field.

## Aster

Aster is an immigrant from Ethiopia. Both of her parents are retired and live nearby. She has four siblings, one sister, and three brothers. Although her immediate family is in the U.S., she does occasionally send remittances to her grandmother's sister in Ethiopia. She speaks Amharic often with her family, including her sibling's children and celebrates Ethiopian Orthodox holidays. Growing up she used to eat Ethiopian food more often but now does not eat it as much.

She is married and her spouse works at a nonprofit. She works as a physician and received her MD abroad. Although she enjoys her job, she feels conflicted about whether or not she is truly reaching her goal of providing the care that people really need in life. She says,

I still feel like I'm struggling to meet that goal [of

providing service] because of the frustrations that I'm dealing with— in terms of societal challenges and not really feeling like I'm providing the care that people really need in life. And so my goal is to be involved in a way that really will impact the community that I live in and not just put a band aid on it.

As a child, her parents were overprotective, so she did not have much social activity. She attended a culturally diverse high school and went to a non-culturally diverse undergraduate college where she first experienced racism. In her adult working life, she experiences forms of discrimination as a Black woman. She often has to assure people she is not as young as she looks, is in fact a physician and not a nurse, and does have the proper qualifications for the role. On a positive note, she mentions how being able to speak multiple languages offers ease and trust in the medical profession.

Aster's experience with discrimination originates less from her status as an immigrant since she grew up in and around U.S. culture from a young age. Instead, she deals with racism and sexism in her identity as a Black woman in the United States. Importantly, other Black women who migrated to the U.S. at a later stage in life similarly experience discrimination based on their identity. Muna an Ethiopian nurse practitioner explains how although her marginalized background can sometimes help her patients who are of similar

background feel more comfortable, she also notices other patients perceive her as less capable because she, as a Black woman, physically does not meet the typical “perception of like, a medical provider.” She similarly describes feeling dissatisfied as a nurse practitioner in the U.S. because she often observes the brutal reality of social determinants of health inequality that affects her patients.

## Genet

Genet, an Ethiopian woman, remembers when she started working, she got a job in fast food and later learned that the person who hired her did so because they thought she would draw in more Black customers. She also mentions in her more recent professional experiences as a global health consultant, she has found some discomfort in navigating adverse experiences attributed to her gender, race, and language. These experiences reveal the pervasive nature of Blackness in the United States. Although these women are immigrants who did not grow up in the U.S. racial environment, they are still acutely aware of the prevalent racial perceptions.

Although a few participants said they did not perceive discrimination at work, most described significant challenges. For some, it was the frustration of trying to find a job without an established network; for others, it was the isolation created by language barriers or the inability to move into higher-paying positions. Other participants faced overt exploitation or

discrimination connected to their immigration status or other marginalized identities. Overall, these experiences reveal the complex and enduring barriers immigrants confront in navigating U.S. workplaces.

## **Conclusion**

The stories described in this chapter illustrate how work culture in the United States is perceived and altered by migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. Approaching the labor market with a unique lens, immigrants carry valuable global perspectives regarding the benefits, inconsistencies, pitfalls, and priorities of U.S. working culture. Immigrants must learn to navigate an environment that values relentless productivity while balancing their own cultural understandings of rest, family, and dignity in labor.

Additionally, for many immigrants, the U.S. represents the promise of stability, fair pay, and professional growth. Yet this promise is altered by barriers such as language, credential recognition, exploitation, and systemic discrimination. Ultimately, these narratives remind us that work culture is not monolithic. Instead, it is continually shaped and reshaped by those who participate in it. Immigrants bring with them resilience, adaptability, and new visions of what meaningful work can look like. Their perspectives challenge the notion of a singular “American” work ethic, instead revealing a mosaic of experiences that define what it means to work, live, and

belong in the United States.



## 9

### **MIGRATION JOURNEYS: THE EXTREME COST FOR SOME**

This chapter explores the complex migration pathways undertaken by a group of 233 individuals who arrived in the Washington D.C. Metropolitan (DMV) area, utilizing a qualitative analysis of in-depth interview data. The findings reveal a clear distinction between formalized, legal migration routes and highly dangerous, irregular journeys, yet both are fundamentally unified by a shared experience of instability and a proactive desire for a more viable future. The research identifies three critical themes: 1) The primacy of existential threats—where political collapse, chronic economic insecurity, and targeted violence act as root causes; 2) Systemic vulnerability and danger—demonstrated through widespread corruption, extortion, and life-threatening

environments; and 3) The psychological burden—including direct trauma and a significant prevalence of community trauma. This study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the choice, logistics, and human cost involved in contemporary migration to the United States.

## **Introduction**

The scale of global displacement and migration has reached historic highs, presenting significant policy, humanitarian, and sociological challenges. While media coverage often focuses on moments of arrival and border crises, the decision-making process, the journey, and the lived experience of vulnerability remain less understood. This analysis offers a detailed assessment of the factors that triggered their movement, the logistical challenges of their journeys, and the intense perceptions of danger and trauma they carried with them.

Traditional migration theory often focuses on "push" and "pull" factors, suggesting that migrants are either pushed out by adverse conditions in their home country or pulled in by perceived opportunities elsewhere. The evidence presented here suggests a more nuanced reality. For many migrants, the decision is not an economic calculation, but rather an urgent existential matter. It is a choice forced by conditions, such as political collapse, targeted violence, or complete economic destabilization, that render continued life in the country of

origin unsafe. This shift from a voluntary, opportunity-seeking model to a survival-driven, forced-choice model offers a closer look at the movement's actual experiences.

These interviews provide an opportunity to examine migration not as a single event, but as a complex, multi-stage process characterized by instability, corruption, and resilience. The analysis is organized around four comprehensive and interwoven themes, which delineate the experience from departure to arrival: 1) the root causes and initial triggers; 2) the diverse pathways and the logistics of travel; 3) the perceptions of danger and the associated psychological trauma; and 4) the lasting impacts of the migration journey. By highlighting the voices of the participants, we aim to deliver a professional yet accessible account that highlights the necessity of the journey and the deep human cost required to achieve stability.

The findings from the interviews demonstrate that migration journeys are rarely linear or predictable. Instead, they are defined by a mix of external pressures, forced choices, and overwhelming danger. The analysis is structured across the four core themes identified in the data.

## **Root Causes and Triggers**

For over half of the participants, the decision to migrate was not precipitated by a slow decline in quality of life but by a

rapid erosion of safety and opportunity, rendering life in their home country impossible. This represents an existential threat—a situation where survival, rather than prosperity, becomes the driving force.

## Political Collapse and Targeted Violence

For participants from Afghanistan, the root cause was unambiguous and acute. The Taliban takeover in 2021 immediately triggered a mass exodus, particularly among those with prior affiliations to U.S. or Western entities. One highly educated Afghan male Emad, who undertook a grueling journey through ten countries, stated that his primary motivation was the future and education of his children. The sudden shift in political control meant not only a loss of status or opportunity but a direct threat to the family's security and worldview.

Similarly, in non-conflict zones, political instability and widespread civil insecurity played a central role. Participants from South American nations, particularly Venezuela, cited systemic governmental dysfunction and economic collapse as the primary drivers. For Santiago, a Venezuelan male who arrived with his wife and 8-year-old son, the decision was driven by a situation that could not be resolved: "the [driving factors were] economic and social situation, including a lack of work, insufficient income, and issues with government and corruption." When the social contract breaks down to this

degree, the country ceases to offer the basic scaffolding required for family survival, forcing a relocation decision.

## Localized Gang and Social Violence

Localized, targeted violence, often perpetrated by non-state actors like gangs, was cited as a powerful displacement agent, particularly for Central American participants. The threat of gang recruitment, extortion, and inter-gang warfare created micro-security zones that were impossible to navigate safely. One Salvadoran female interviewee, Isabella, described the severe, almost impossible geographical division and danger within her childhood neighborhood, where identity was linked to territorial control. She explained the high-stakes environment, "where I lived, I was from one gang, and [my neighbor] was from the other... so there it became dangerous." This scenario illustrates how local violence can be as effective as war in forcing a family to flee. The simple act of traversing one's own neighborhood could become a life-threatening boundary crossing, making long-term stability an unreachable goal. The decision to migrate, in this context, is simply a desperate attempt to move from a known, constant battlefield to an unknown, potentially safer territory.

## Journey Duration and Pathways

The logistics of migration were highly heterogeneous, falling into two broad categories: official, planned migration routes

(often relying on legal visas or parole programs) and irregular, unplanned routes that relied on dangerous overland transit. This division highlights a deep disparity in access and privilege within migration.

### The Privilege of Legal Pathways

For a select group of participants, legal pathways—such as parole programs or existing family/professional ties leading to official visas—provided a mechanism to avoid the most acute physical dangers. Mario arrived in the U.S. through a parole program and expressed immense gratitude for this legal route, contrasting his experience sharply with those forced to cross without authorization. He noted that while his journey avoided the physical dangers of the irregular route, adaptation and the post-arrival struggle were still profound: "Coming to this country and not having anyone to support you is not easy; you suffer because there are not many opportunities when we arrive." This demonstrates that the trauma of migration is decoupled from the physical danger of the journey, the struggle of uprooting remains regardless of the pathway. The narratives reveal that the distinction between "legal" and "irregular" primarily dictates the type of hardship faced, not the absence of hardship.

### The Irregular and Treacherous Routes

For the majority of participants, the journey took place over

many months, through many countries, and defined by a lack of resources, extreme environmental conditions, and systemic vulnerability to criminals and corrupt officials. Journeys often lasted months, with migrants traversing entire continents. The Darién Gap: This passage, connecting South America to Central America, emerged as a universal symbol of danger and physical endurance for those traveling overland. A Venezuelan male, Adrian, detailed his seven-day ordeal through the jungle, which followed a three-year multi-stage journey through Peru and Chile. He recounted, "the jungle is not for everyone," describing a week of walking "from 5 a.m. to dusk, for seven days," enduring hunger and cold, and surviving only with help from NGOs and indigenous groups in Panama. The Darién Gap is not merely a difficult hike, but a zone of legal and humanitarian void where organized crime and environmental hazards come together to create a life-or-death gauntlet.

The Northern Passage: Even after the Darién, the route through Central America and Mexico presented continuing dangers, including the notorious freight train, known as La Bestia (The Beast). Santiago noted that his treacherous trip involved a "dangerous passage through the jungle and riding atop a train to cross parts of Mexico." Throughout the journey, he and his family ran out of food and were exposed to multiple life-threatening risks over the course of the migration.

## **Perceptions of Systemic and Environmental Dangers**

The danger perceived and experienced by the migrants was multi-faceted, stemming equally from the natural environment, criminal organizations, and state agents. These dangers were often interconnected, creating a state of vulnerability.

### **The Reality of Violence and Kidnapping**

Direct violence was a constant threat, often carried out by criminal groups operating with impunity along known migration corridors. One male participant, Eduardo, vividly recalled his group being targeted by armed individuals. He detailed running through the desert, day and night, in order to escape being shot at, and hiding there for days. This episode illustrates the unpredictable nature of events in the journey.

Kidnapping and extortion are also particularly prevalent during the journey for many migrants. Mauricio, a male participant from Venezuela, explained that during his journey, “There was a moment when I was going to be kidnapped, and they asked me for a certain amount of money.” However, Mauricio did not have the exact amount the kidnappers demanded; he was able to give them what he had to be freed. However, he recounts, “they told me that if I returned to Mexico, they were going to kill me.”

Javier's journey was distinctly traumatic as he also faced threats of kidnapping and witnessed violence and death. A group of people that Javier was with was kidnapped; only some of them were able to hand over the ransom. He explained,

We were kidnapped by a group. They demanded money from us to release us. Most of us didn't have the money to pay, so they weren't released. I don't really know. I mean, I don't know what happened to those people...We were released because we paid what they demanded. But the others, I don't know, I honestly don't know what happened to them.

Javier worries about what happened to those who didn't have the money to pay the ransom. He described,

Whoever had money were the ones who got out. They ones who didn't, well, I don't know. Because, I mean, there were places where, literally, you'd see dead bodies lying on the ground.

While he explains how some of those deaths were due to lack of water and food some of them were "being killed for money." Javier emphasized how intense this experience was to feel as if you could be killed at any moment all while seeing others suffering. He recounts, "many people were raped in the jungle, along the trail: women, children." Eduardo, Mauricio, and Javier's experiences all demonstrate the role of violence

and force as normalized and highly organized risks of the irregular route.

## Extortion and Corruption in State Actors

Critically, the danger was not confined to external criminals; state actors frequently contributed to the systemic vulnerability. Multiple participants reported experiences of corruption and extortion by police and immigration officials across multiple countries. After successfully navigating the Darién Gap, Adrian reported that, in "Nicaragua...officials extorted us a lot," an example of how state systems actively prey on vulnerable migrants. Another young male, Roberto, reported alleged police corruption in Guatemala, where officers attempted to "plant illegal items in his backpack" during the journey, essentially manufacturing grounds for arrest or extortion.

This phenomenon of corruption was so pervasive that it sometimes started before the migrants even left their home country. Sonia, a Venezuelan migrant, described systemic corruption and extortion at airports in her home country, illustrating that danger begins even before crossing a border, "the guards asked you for money to get on the plane." This kind of incident was so widely recognized that local service providers advised travelers to conceal their international status. She recounted the warning, "the taxis said, if they stop us, say that you are going on a domestic flight because if you say you

are on an international flight, the guards will inspect everything and ask us for money." Most alarmingly, this participant also noted the belief that robbers were "connected with people who work in customs, in migration," suggesting that state corruption and organized crime are not separate entities but are frequently integrated into migration. This blurring of lines fundamentally undermines the migrant's ability to seek protection from any authority.

## **Lasting Impacts of the Migration Journey**

Beyond the immediate physical dangers, the psychological toll of the migration journey leaves a lasting impact, manifesting both as direct trauma and a unique form of vicarious community trauma.

### **Direct Trauma and Enduring Effects**

The sheer endurance required for the journey—including starvation, cold, extreme physical exertion, and constant fear—resulted in significant direct trauma. Santiago and his family running out of food while traversing a dangerous route is a classic example of this acute stress. Mario, who arrived via the legal parole program, related how his brother "nearly died locked in a truck" during his migration journey through an irregular route. Even though Mario was physically safe, the constant awareness of his brother's near-death experience exemplifies how direct trauma is often extended to the

immediate family, creating a shared burden of anxiety. The two months Adrian spent in ICE detention after surrender to U.S. authorities also highlight the official, bureaucratic mechanisms that contribute to post-arrival psychological strain, prolonging the vulnerability experienced on the journey.

### Vicarious Community Trauma

One of the most profound and unique psychological findings is the concept of vicarious community trauma, where the collective narrative of migration danger heavily influences the psychological experience of those who may have had a safer transit. The Salvadoran female, Isabella, who arrived legally and safely, expressed feeling the "trauma of other Salvadorians' journeys." This suggests that for communities sharing similar origins or migration routes, the stories of violence, death, and disappearance are not merely news reports; they become integrated into the individual's psychological landscape. The migrant internalizes the potential fate they avoided, or the suffering of their peers, which becomes a vicariously lived experience of collective trauma. This phenomenon requires a broadened understanding of trauma assessment and care, recognizing that a "safe" passage does not negate the psychological baggage carried by the migrant from the shared community narrative.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study examine the complexity and costs of contemporary migration to the United States in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. For most participants, migration is an existential choice driven by an unresolvable collection of political chaos, economic collapse, and targeted violence, particularly perpetuated by gangs. The dichotomy between legal and irregular pathways highlights a fundamental global equity issue: access to safe, predictable migration is a privilege reserved for a minority.

Many migrants are left to navigate zones of extreme danger, such as the Darién Gap, and systemic vulnerability to corruption and criminal exploitation. The findings related to systemic corruption are particularly alarming. When state agents participate in extortion alongside criminal networks, the distinction between licit and illicit actors collapses, and migrants are left with no viable avenue for safety. This suggests that border policies must be created with anti-corruption measures in transit countries to dismantle the criminal infrastructure that profits from migration.

Finally, the prevalence of direct and vicarious trauma demands a shift in post-arrival services. Settlement programs must move beyond simply providing economic integration assistance to offering adequate mental health and trauma-

informed care that acknowledges the individual's direct experiences as well as the burden of their collective community narrative. Further research is needed to explore the long-term adaptation and integration of these diverse migrant groups in the DMV region.

# 10

## THE MIGRANT EXPERIENCE

Migrant experiences are unique. Common situations are demonstrated through interviews with people who migrated from around the world to the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area (DMV), conducted by the Immigration Lab at American University. Shared sentiments among these interviewees include frustration with the current US job market, pride in their home country, passion for advancing education, and a dangerous migration journey. It is important to highlight these experiences, as migrants' personal narratives are often overlooked in discussions of politics and migration policy.

### **Frustration with the Job Market**

A common struggle faced by immigrants to the United States is feeling overqualified or underchallenged in their careers. Many report that their current US-based careers do not align with the skills they acquired from their undergraduate or graduate degrees. Those interviewed for the study hope to find

a job that is related to their degree and that challenges their intellectual nature.

## Antonio

Antonio, a Salvadoran man born in 1993, immigrated to the DMV area in 2024. He immigrated to the United States after facing difficulties finding an adequate job in San Salvador. While living in San Salvador, Antonio worked as a call center representative, which helped him to develop his English.

Upon migrating to the United States, Antonio was unemployed for the first month and a half but was able to find temporary work in construction and remodeling, but he is not satisfied with these opportunities. Antonio explains:

I want to do a job where I can apply some of the knowledge that I acquired...like the language or some of the other type of work that does not require so much physical labor, but a little more intellectual.

While at work, Antonio expressed feeling that their race and ethnicity could affect how he is treated by others, even though he works with other Spanish-speaking migrants. At the time of the interview, Antonio was continuing his studies online, which helped him feel connected again to his country of birth.

## Zahra

This attitude is shared by other immigrants who have come to

the US to seek higher-quality professional opportunities. Zahra, a 40-year-old Afghan American, faces similar frustrations. Zahra received a bachelor's degree in the United States and a master's degree in business management in the United Kingdom. Zahra worked with Deloitte and USAID, where she discovered that she values a work-life balance.

She works in DC at a research center think tank that specializes in public opinion research. Zahra's job is temporary and, at the time of the interview, was scheduled to end in 3 months. She expressed enjoyment in this job as it affords her free time and flexibility. But she hopes to find a new job that gives her more challenging work and allows her to pursue higher ambitions. One factor that concerns her when finding a new job is her Muslim name. Zahra worries that employers will think she is restrictive and not a good fit for the company, even though she does not practice Islam.

## Omar

Omar, a 42-year-old man born in rural Afghanistan, immigrated to the United States in 2018. Omar moved around frequently during his childhood to escape conflict and Taliban rule. He identifies as a Hazara, a minority ethnic group in Afghanistan, from the Bamiyan province. Omar worked as an interpreter for the United States, the UN, and USAID.

After receiving his master's degree in business

administration, he migrated to the United States with his wife and four children. Omar is currently working as an operations analyst at an international financial institution in DC. He is satisfied with this job because it allows him to work from home amidst the chronic health issues they experience. But Omar wishes to have a more ambitious job if they can get their health issues worked out, as he does feel overqualified in his current position. He explains, “I would be, I would be doing something, uh... of a higher milestone that I would set and a higher goal that I would set for myself, and I want to achieve more.”

## Anyia

Anyia, from Russia, works as a senior associate at a nonprofit focused on philanthropy efforts. Although it took her two months to find this job. She explains that the job “Makes me feel more accomplished and that I’m able to improve the socioeconomic side of our world.” While she is content with her salary and the nature of the work, Anyia feels a bit overqualified as she has considerable skills in economics, finance, and business development.

## Muna

Muna is a 34-year-old woman from Ethiopia who arrived in the United States with her family at 15. Muna had a passion for healthcare since high school and worked as a nurse in their

early 20s, but did not find this job satisfactory due to the low pay and the required amount of work. After this, she received a master's degree at John Hopkins University to be a nurse practitioner. Muna feels happier in this job, but still has feelings of dissatisfaction. She explains that this is due to the brutal reality of working in healthcare. Muna shares, “the barriers our patients have can be challenging, and you become the person who's sort of trying to figure out how to navigate all those challenges with limited resources.” But she believes that her visible identity as a black woman helps other minorities feel more comfortable in medical spaces.

## Aster

Aster was 6 years old when she migrated to the United States from Ethiopia, arriving with her parents and four siblings. She grew up in a household where education was modelled and expected. Her father has a degree in pharmacy, and her mother has an associate's degree.

Aster's foundation carried her into medicine. She earned her Doctor of Medicine from a university abroad and now works as a physician. As a black woman, Aster feels that she experiences forms of discrimination at her workplace. She shares that she often has to correct people who think she is a nurse rather than a physician. Despite setbacks, she does find enjoyment in this job. Aster explains, “my goal is to be involved in a way that really will impact the community that I

live in and not just put a band aid on it.” There are societal and systemic barriers that prevent Aster from doing the work she feels she is meant to do. She reflects, “I don’t feel satisfied because I don’t really think I’m making a big dent in people’s real issues.”

## Ignacio

Ignacio, a 60-year-old Colombian man, earned a high school diploma and completed four years of medical school in Colombia. Political turmoil prevented him from finishing his degree and pursuing a medical career. As a result, his professional trajectory in the United States has diverged sharply from his early aspirations.

Ignacio holds multiple physically demanding jobs to make ends meet. During the day, Ignacio works in construction, and during the evenings, he works at a restaurant. Despite his educational background and decades of labor, he feels undervalued in these roles and believes that both his age and citizenship status shape how employers perceive and treat him. Ignacio’s main goal is to financially support his wife and children. Ultimately, Ignacios’s main priority is maintaining financial stability for his wife and children and fulfilling his role as a provider.

Frustration with the American job market is a very common problem for migrants in the United States, regardless

of their professional and educational background. Migrants like Antonio are continuing their studies while working in jobs that they are unhappy with. While migrants like Zahra, Omar, and Anya have completed higher levels of education and work in somewhat satisfying jobs, they still want to see themselves advancing in the near future. For Muna and Aster, their dissatisfaction with their job comes from common frustrations about healthcare access in the US. Ignacio's frustration with the job market stems from employers' willingness to exploit migrants for cheap labor. Together, these experiences demonstrate that employment challenges for migrants are often rooted in systemic barriers, labor inequities, and limited pathways to career advancement.

## **Pride for Home Country**

Many immigrants continue to carry a deep sense of pride and emotional attachment to their countries of birth, even after leaving in pursuit of greater economic opportunity, safety, or refuge from conflict.

### **Valeriia**

Valeriia, a 34-year-old woman born in Ukraine, feels a tremendous amount of pride for her hometown. She describes it with love, "very beautiful and cozy." Valeriia even expressed that she never wanted to leave her city, but knew that was what was best for her safety and education. In 2023,

she migrated to the United States to attend university, making a decision shaped partly by necessity. Life in Ukraine had become increasingly difficult. In 2022, Russian missile strikes hit her city, leaving her without electricity and internet. Beyond the immediate dangers of war, she also faced broader structural challenges, including economic instability, limited educational opportunities, and gaps in healthcare access. Despite these hardships, Valeriia has found a home in Washington, D.C., drawing many similarities between the city and her hometown in Ukraine. That was one of the reasons she was drawn to attending American University, where she hopes to obtain a higher-quality education while carrying with her the enduring connection she feels to the place she still considers home.

## Olena

Olena feels a similar attachment to her hometown, Ovruch, in Ukraine. Olena is a 30-year-old woman who migrated to the United States to escape the conflict in Ukraine. She lives with her spouse and newborn child, and her main responsibility is being a mother. But her main passion is to be a police officer, following in the footsteps of her late father. In Ukraine, she spent four years attending the police academy. In the United States, however, she is unemployed and feels her prior training was not easily transferable.

Before the war, Olena describes her life as “really,

really good.” She had a job, hobbies, friends, and an overall normal life. Olena recognizes how different the United States is culturally, even though both countries share the same weather. She says, “I miss my country...and I hope soon I can come back to my country.” At the same time, Olena recognizes the safety and stability she has found in the United States. Here, she is able to protect her child while preserving parts of her identity, including Ukrainian traditions and cuisine, even as she rebuilds her life.

## Daniela

Daniela, a 25-year-old woman from Mexico, also has complex feelings towards her hometown. She grew up in Mexico City where she recalls that she “had a very happy childhood and a very healthy environment in the form of family and friends.” Yet Daniela faced many insecurities that shaped her daily life in Mexico. Inflation, limited job opportunities, and rising insecurity, such as robberies and kidnappings, created an atmosphere of uncertainty for her and her family. As she explains, “the opportunities [in Mexico] are not equal due to corruption.” In 2020, she made the difficult decision to migrate to the United States in search of stability and opportunity.

In the U.S., Daniela is pursuing her undergraduate degree while working as a front desk receptionist at a high school, where she is the only Mexican employee. Despite this, she doesn't feel that her race or ethnicity prevents her from

being seen as fully American and has never had to conceal any parts of her identity to fit in. With financial support from her family to help cover tuition and supplementary income, she continues to invest in her education and future.

Valeriia, Olena, and Daniela's stories demonstrate that many migrants are reluctant to leave their home countries. But they are often forced to do so to find safety from conflict and to seek better professional and educational opportunities.

## **Importance of Education**

A large majority of migrants highlight the importance of education for themselves and their children to live a successful and prosperous life. While their motivations vary, many describe education as more than a pathway to economic stability. For them, education equips individuals not only with professional opportunities, but also with the knowledge to understand their rights and to participate meaningfully as contributing members of society.

### **Jessenia**

Jessenia, a 28-year-old woman from Nicaragua, experienced significant educational inequality growing up. Her mother completed her secondary education, while her father never completed primary education. She explains that it was common for women to not attend school altogether, noting that “there are no equal rights in a country where the politicians

will murder you for opposing them.”

Due to political repression and limited opportunity, Jessenia’s family did not want her to attend college, and there was also the barrier of the high financial cost of attendance. This made Jessenia feel she did not belong in her home country or amongst her family. She recalls always feeling different from her family, determined that no one would decide her future or restrict her possibilities.

Despite these barriers, Jessenia pursued higher education in Nicaragua, earning a bachelor’s degree in diplomacy and international relations. For her, attending college was both a personal and a symbolic triumph. Through her educational accomplishments, she wanted to “make women aware that we have the right to get an education.” As of 2022, Jessenia works as a community liaison for an organization in Maryland. Yet her long-term goal is closely tied to the values that guided her educational journey. She hopes to work in human rights advocacy, fighting for justice for Nicaraguans.

## Haji

Haji, a 37-year-old man born in Afghanistan, also feels especially passionate about education. In 2012, Haji worked in Kabul, Afghanistan, as a finance manager at the government’s energy department, building a stable professional life before

the Taliban took power and upended the country's political landscape. Seeking safety and mobility, he moved to New Delhi, India, in 2016 to pursue a master's degree in public administration. In 2021, Haji migrated to the United States.

In 2023, Haji worked at a food processing company in a public administration role and hopes to pursue a PhD in the near future. Haji's partner and three young children are living in Afghanistan, where their future is uncertain. This forces Haji to work overtime to support his family from afar. Haji is hoping that despite his concerns over his children and the Taliban's rule over Afghanistan, his children will be able to get the highest level of education possible. "Without an education," he explains, "we cannot live, we cannot continue our lives, we cannot be a good person in society." For Haji, education is not simply a credential; it is dignity, stability, and hope for a better future.

## Dariush

Dariush is a 36-year-old man from the Ghazni province of Afghanistan. Dariush's father only completed informal religious studies in Afghanistan, and Dariush's mother cannot read or write. His parents currently live in Pakistan after fleeing the Taliban but are trying to migrate to Canada. Dariush migrated to Minnesota in 2021 to get his master's degree through the Fulbright program. He lives in the United States with his wife and two daughters but is not currently employed

and receives a minimal stipend to support his family, as his wife is unable to work legally. This financial situation inhibits Dariush from being able to send remittances to his other family members living abroad. Dariush believes that education is very important, and hopes his children are able to receive high levels of education. He says that education allows people to “know who you are, you know the value of...you know how you connect with others, you know how to ask for your rights, everything.”

## Muse

Muse, 23, from Addis Ababa, received money from his father to attend a good school in Ethiopia, where he also received a religious education. Muse attended high school in the US and was enrolled in community college for a degree in computer science. Muse believes that “[education] is the best way to move up the social ladder, especially for...a lot of immigrants.” Muse began working at 16 to save up money to attend college. His goal for the future is to continue his education, have a stable life, and bring his mother to the United States.

## Nastya

Education has been key to Nastya’s sense of purpose and identity. Born in Russia in 1990, she moved to Ukraine at the age of ten and now identifies as Ukrainian. When she migrated

to the United States in 2022, she brought not only her professional experience but also a value placed on higher education. While growing up in Ukraine, it was always her goal to obtain higher education because many Ukrainians held higher education as an important cultural value. Nastya explains that “for Ukrainians, and I think a lot of people from the Soviet Union...the bachelor’s is not a completed education...so you have to get a masters.”

Nastya holds a master’s degree in law studies from back in Ukraine and worked as a lawyer back home but pivoted to be an IT consultant. Despite this high level of education, she finds it difficult to find a job within her expertise in the U.S. Her financial situation has proved to be an obstacle in pursuing additional education, as she balances paying for rent and remittances.

## **Dangerous Migration Journeys**

### **Mauricio**

A common occurrence for many migrants during their immigration journey is to experience perilous and deadly situations. Mauricio, a 23-year-old Venezuelan man, experienced many of these. Mauricio was born in Venezuela in 2002 and grew up in Colombia. They returned to Caracas, Venezuela at 12 years old. Here, he completed all their studies in Venezuela, although it is unclear his highest level of

education completed. Mauricio worked in construction while in Venezuela. His parents still live in Venezuela, but Mauricio left because of the risk of extortion from police, the unfavorable economic situation, and to pursue an opportunity to give their parents more stability. He also expressed that there was a lack of health services and high food prices in Venezuela.

Mauricio left Venezuela in 2023 when he was 21. His journey to the US was not easy and they often felt unsafe. He found himself riding animals and carrying children during his migration. Several times during his journey, people attempted to rob Mauricio and the people he was traveling with. At one instance, he was almost kidnapped while traveling through Mexico. He was told by the kidnappers to never return to Mexico, or else he would be murdered. When Mauricio arrived in the US, he turned himself in to immigration authorities and requested asylum. He was jailed for a month and a half and felt he was treated well but explained that “there was a moment when practically from so much confinement my hair was falling out.”

Mauricio started working at a restaurant in Miami after being released but quit because it was a “rough job,” and he was not being paid well. Once in the DMV, he began working in construction again after being referred by a friend. Mauricio sends money back to his parents in Venezuela with the goal of

getting his mother out of her current living situation. Despite his constant challenges and the dangerous journey to the US, Mauricio feels as though Venezuela is his true home because his family still resides there.

## Fernando

Fernando, a 44-year-old Mestizo Mexican man, faced a similar situation at the Mexican border. Fernando was struggling economically in Mexico, so he decided to migrate to California in 2002 to live with his mother. Once he reached the border cities, Fernando shares, “that was the very first time in my life that I felt fear, authentic fear.” He was assaulted and robbed by a Salvadoran gang during his journey. He explains, “I found it to be very cruel because you had to walk through the desert, and they took away your shoes.” Fernando also witnessed many other abuses along the way.

Upon arrival in the US, Fernando faced discrimination and racial profiling in getting employment, education, and healthcare. He faced many barriers and explained, “I couldn’t get the GED...I could not get a mortgage...even if I have the money. I couldn’t buy a house, right?” These struggles prompted Fernando to move back to Mexico in 2006 to further his education and then return again to the US in 2022. At the time of the interview, Fernando was in the process of getting his PhD in DC and working as a professor at a private university in Mexico. Despite his economic and migration

challenges, Fernando has found prosperity in the United States.

## Artur

Artur, a 31-year-old man born in Stavropol, Russia, migrated to the US on a J1 visa at 22. He later applied for asylum upon moving to the DC area at the end of 2016. Artur's immediate family was still living in Russia at the time of the interview. His hometown was the "average city" in Russia, where he felt like he belonged as a child. As a teenager, he started to feel that he did not fit in because of his sexuality. Artur identifies as a gay man. Artur shares that his primary reason for leaving Russia was "persecution...and political views." There are little to no protections against discrimination and violence for the LGBTQ+ community in Russia. Prior to Artur's migration, the Russian government passed a law to criminalize the 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships' in 2013. Artur feels that he would not have been accepted into Russia due to his sexuality and these current events. Living in DC, he works as a software engineer, one of his professional aspirations. Artur also reports that he has not experienced any negative interactions due to his personal identities.

## Akbar

Another common occurrence for migrants is to face targeting by their home country's government. This is a situation that occurred with Akbar. He describes the Syrian dictatorship this

way: “Major killings of their own people caused millions to flee to the country and millions to live outside the country.” But Akbar has been able to create a good life for himself in the United States. He works as a general manager for a restaurant in DC. He feels proud to be an American because the countries he had lived in previously, like Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, treated him so poorly.

## Abdul

Abdul worked in Afghanistan as a Project Management Specialist for the U.S. Embassy. But due to his affiliation with the United States, he was often targeted by whom he thought were members of the Taliban. Abdul recalls facing security threats and being followed by an unknown vehicle whilst employed at the embassy. Due to these threats, Abdul kept a low profile and explained, “But I never shared my name. Even with my neighbors.” Once the Afghan government collapsed and the Taliban took over in 2021, Abdul migrated to the DC on a special immigration visa. He lives in DC with his wife and 6 children. Abdul works as a Senior Project Coordinator as well as an Uber driver to send financial support to his family still living in Afghanistan. Abdul is hoping to have his brother receive a special immigration visa, as he is also being targeted by the Taliban.

## Mohib

Mohib was also targeted by the Taliban. He worked with US agencies but was very scared as the Taliban were targeting people who worked with the US government, thinking they were spies. He stayed home from work for a few days after the overtaking and tried to figure out what his and his family's next steps would be. The U.S. Embassy was able to provide Mohib and his immediate family a flight to Qatar, where they stayed for a few months and then migrated to California. He shares,

It was really like a horror movie in real life. Every day we were in fear of being kidnapped or tortured by the Taliban. That was the situation. Unfortunately, those who are still in Afghanistan are facing the same thing. I'm happy that I was able to save my family and come here. It is a fortunate thing, and for my family. At least I am safe here, and no one tells me who I am or threatens me. I will find my way. I will find a job, I will study here, and I will make my life here for myself, my family, and my kids. That is the best thing that I have found.

Many migrants experience dangerous journeys to the United States. This could be due to a multitude of factors, such as persecution from their home country's government, gang violence, and other types of conflict.

## **Conclusion**

Migrants like Antonio, Zahra, Omar, Anya, Muna, Aster, and Ignacio demonstrate that it is common for some to experience frustration with the job market and its limited opportunities for advancement. Valeriia, Olena, Daniela, Jessenia, and others share their passion for advancing their education, as well as that of their children and other family members. Migrants like Mauricio, Fernando, Artur, Akbar, Abdul, Mohib, and others in this book share common experiences of feeling endangered or targeted before and during their journeys to the United States. Personal narratives are an important perspective to share when examining migration patterns and politics. They are often overlooked despite the valuable context they can provide about migration journeys.



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## The Immigration Lab

**The immigrant experience is often talked about but rarely understood. This book presents narratives and common themes from immigrants with and without visas, asylum seekers, and refugees. It draws on hundreds of interviews carried out by the Immigration Lab at American University with people in New York City and the Washington, D.C. metropolitan areas.**

“I would like to congratulate the authors on the clarity of their language and the vivid way they bring people’s voices to the fore. Books like this, written with clarity and accessibility, enriched by personal stories and grounded in precise data without becoming dry and detached, play an essential role in humanizing the immigrant experience for a broader audience.

We should all familiarize ourselves with immigrants' experiences. They live among us, and we will inevitably meet them in our daily lives and at work. Knowing some of their histories, voices, and concerns can help us put negative stereotypes into perspective and prepare us to encounter them, first and foremost, as human beings. The vignettes in this book are authentic, nuanced, and deeply informative. They offer both insight and emotional resonance, making complex experiences accessible without oversimplifying them. I am very glad this book has been written.” Leide Borcu, author of “Neither Here Nor There: A Guide for Immigrants and the Therapists Who Walk with Them.”

**The Immigration Lab**