

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

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AUTHOR (S): Berti Olinto

ORGANIZATION: Toronto Metropolitan Centre for Immigration and Settlement (TMCIS) and the CERC in Migration

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REVIEWED BY: Amin Sadiqi and Sezgi Karacan, Refugee Hub Research Team

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

Executive Summary

- Over the last seven years, Venezuela has experienced an exodus of more than 6,000,000 people. 17 countries host around 80% of Venezuelans throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, triggering the largest external displacement crisis in Latin America's recent history.
- Venezuelans in Canada have strengthened their strategies for integrating immigrants into the country's fabric and created new organizations to promote their cultural values and identities and support migrants and refugees in Canada and other countries.
- Through a mix of qualitative and quantitative interviews in five Canadian cities, the paper analyzes the perspectives of Venezuelan and Hispanic/Latinx non-profits as well as other community-based organizations with Venezuelan clients and service users in relation to the social dynamics of Venezuelan migrants in Canada, focusing on access to services and service provision. The paper asks:
 - "What are the strengths and limitations of local, diasporic, and community-based initiatives in providing reception, assistance, and socioeconomic integration services to Venezuelan immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees?"
 - What needs/challenges have Venezuelan immigrants faced when accessing settlement services in major and medium-size cities in Canada?"
- The paper argues that socioeconomic integration is the most prevalent need among Venezuelan migrants in Canada (60%), followed by reception programs/services (26%) and sociopolitical participation (14%).
- Based on the Venezuelan community's relatively small population with no significant ties to Ottawa, there is an indifference among Canada's political actors in relation to the Venezuelan forced migration crisis.
- The Federal government's focus has been on international support to displaced Venezuelans, but Venezuelan associations and political groups ask for domestic support for Venezuelan communities inside Canada.
- The call is not necessarily for the creation of new immigration and settlement programs but rather for creating more opportunities that facilitate access to programs and services and the revision of discriminatory practices regarding visas and family reunification policies.

Introduction and Background

- This unprecedented Venezuelan crisis has triggered conversations, research, and public debates on migration, refugees, and settlement policies in Latin America, including Caribbean nations with very limited immigration infrastructures.

- Venezuelan migration to North America has also increased significantly during the last decade. By 2021, U.S. officials estimated that 323,000 Venezuelans living in the United States without legal status were eligible to apply for Temporary Protected Status (TPS), more than any other nation designated for TPS.
- According to the 2016 census, Canada's Venezuelan immigrant population reached 26,345; however, the number could be significantly higher in 2022, considering the number of refugee claims processed during the last five years and the irregular immigrant population.
- Facing the lack of migration background and experience and the limited culturally focused settlement services in Canada, Venezuelan communities have created their own initiatives and organizations to foster socioeconomic integration, political participation, and community engagement with Canadian society.
- The paper aims to understand the strengths and limitations of local, diasporic, and community-based initiatives in providing reception, assistance, and socioeconomic integration services to Venezuelan immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees.
- Venezuelan-Canadians non-profits and NGOs are volunteer-based entities funded privately to support Venezuelan and Latinx communities through services such as providing English and Spanish scholarships, mentorship programs, information sessions and others.

Findings

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

Socioeconomic integration

- 34% of respondents considered employment the most pressing need for integration, followed by language support 30%, and regularization 29%.
- However, only 10% used employment services because they thought those services as irrelevant or were not aware of them. The lack of Venezuelan Spanish-speaking settlement workers could be another contributing factor.
- More than 60% of Venezuelans with university education who received settlement services (2016-2020) believed their work experiences and education credentials were not directly transferrable to those obtained in Canada.

Language support

- 30% of respondents indicated the need for language support, particularly in accessing health and mental health services.

- Challenges remain in accessing language services for seniors, those with no status and those who cannot attend regular classes. To respond, many Venezuelan organizations developed their own language programs.
- Venezuelans in Montreal faced the additional challenge of learning the French language to access better employment opportunities.

Regularization

- 29% of respondents felt discriminated against by Canada's immigration policies, particularly regarding tourist visas and refugee claims. The rejection rate of temporary visas, including student visas, reached 54% in 2019
- Between 2018 and 2021, the government rejected 553 cases and accepted 2,651 refugee claims, which, according to Venezuelan community leaders, is a tiny number compared to the number of Syrian or Afghan refugees who have been approved or resettled since 2015.

Housing and access to health services

- 90% of participants agreed that access to health and housing service is also a challenge for other minorities and Canadian-born populations. They indicated gaps in information and access to community services and Covid-19 as intensifying factors.

Reception services and policies

- Shelters are at capacity in cities like Toronto and Montreal. After reopening Roxham road in November 2021 and the entry of asylum claimants from the U.S., the situation became even worse.
- Some members of the Venezuelan community associate transitional housing support with other communities that have more access to those services, such as the Afghans or Haitians.

Sociopolitical integration

- The basic condition for sociopolitical integration is to be accepted as part of society, which opens the door for benefits and participation.
- In this study, we considered four key aspects that may lead to Venezuelans' sociopolitical integration into the Canadian context: community engagement, political participation, access to justice, and access to culture.
- Venezuelan settlement workers in Toronto and Calgary claimed that building a Venezuelan immigrant and refugee community that is engaged with Canadian society is relevant because these communities play a crucial role in the early stages of settlement.
- The Venezuelan community understood political participation, on the other hand, to be relevant in terms of visibility.

Access to justice and culture

- participants considered access to justice and culture to be of concern pertaining to all immigrant communities and not necessarily exclusive to the Venezuelan community.
- Venezuelans may experience greater barriers to accessing the justice system due to their disadvantaged economic and social conditions, including their own traumatic migration experiences, language barriers, legal status, and lower income levels.

- Participants who mentioned the access to culture issues considered that immigrants should fight for more inclusive policies and programs regarding cultural identity, language, and education, as well as for their rights to promote their own culture while accessing Canadian cultural policies and programs.

Challenges

- Three main challenges identified by the organizations providing services to the Venezuelan communities: (1) perception of the Venezuelan crisis, (2) the Venezuelan community's lack of visibility, (3) The Venezuelan community's lack of migration experiences.
- 51% of the participants believed that the Canadian government did not necessarily treat the Venezuelan crisis as a forced migration phenomenon, at least regarding refugee resettlement and access to services provided to other communities affected by migrant crises, such as Syrians and Afghans.
- Venezuelans are invisible as part of the larger Hispanic communities. These organizations try to make their works known and relevant to Canadians.
- It is particularly important when it comes to using national passports – many Venezuelans do not use or identify as Venezuelan for fear of being stigmatized or to facilitate the migration process.
- Providing services online is considered less effective, particularly in relation to providing mental health services and senior-related programs.
- Most of the organizations' in-person services and programs, including job fairs and cultural events, were interrupted by Covid-19. For their representatives, being physically "there" is the best way to create a real community, especially in the case of a diaspora with no immigration background, such as that of Venezuela.
- Covid-19 restrictions also provided the opportunity to provide online services to groups that traditionally were out of reach, such as the younger generation and communities outside the city of service provision.

Conclusion

- Understanding the needs and challenges of organizations working with Venezuelan communities is important in understanding how Venezuelan migrants have struggled to engage with Canadian society and government.
- Fewer Venezuelans applied for employment services upon arrival compared to language assessment and programs and information and orientation, showing a disconnection between government-promoted services and the settlement necessities of the Venezuelan migrants.
- No evidence has yet been uncovered on how the language, orientation, employment, or community connections, services, and programs in place have provided real solutions or met the socioeconomic and political aspirations of the Venezuelan migrants and refugee communities.

- Although the provision of reception services is important, the most important issue for the Venezuelan migrant community is how to provide long-term inclusive support to build connections and improve their livelihoods in Canada.
- Promoting more evidence-based knowledge on the Venezuelan and Latin American communities is key to empowering these communities, creating human connections between migrants and the native-born, and fostering more inclusive immigration policies.
- Further exploration of issues surrounding service access and Venezuelan refugees' political participation will help strengthen the knowledge of Canada's responses to humanitarian crises in a contemporary context, particularly regarding diasporas that remain unexplored.