

Protection risks for Venezuelan refugees and migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia

This snapshot offers an analysis of the protection risks reported amid the COVID-19 pandemic by Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Colombia. It aims to contribute towards a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses on the ground, as well as advocacy efforts related to the situation of refugees and migrants during the coronavirus pandemic.

In the 4Mi COVID-19 survey, respondents were asked about the role of COVID-19 in increasing various protection risks. This snapshot will focus on the four protection risks contemplated in the survey that have been more frequently reported by respondents as having increased during the pandemic: theft, labor exploitation, domestic violence and bribery / extortion.

Data concerning the other risks will not be explored in detail. COVID-19 seems to have played a more limited role as a threat multiplier for the risks of arbitrary arrest and detention, denial of entry / pushback across borders, deportation and sexual exploitation, as less than 50% of respondents indicated that these risks had increased during the pandemic.

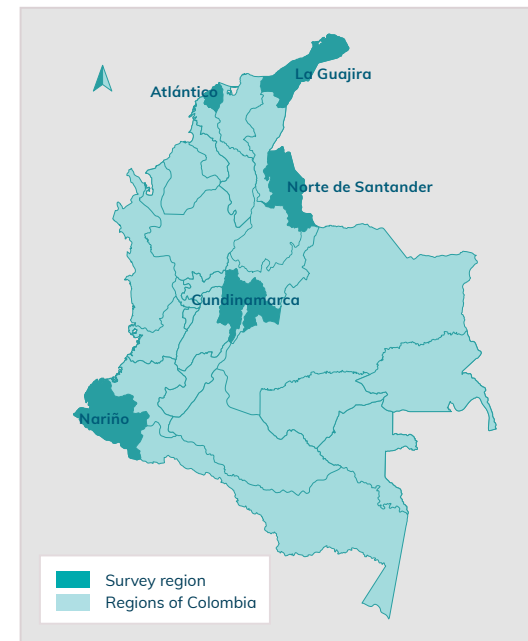
Key findings

- The vast majority of respondents (83%) perceived that the risk of theft has increased during the pandemic.
- 68% of respondents perceived an increase in the risk of labor exploitation. Restrictions to economic activities imposed in connection with the pandemic caused an increase in unemployment and job insecurity, leading many refugees and migrants to accept exploitative conditions out of desperation.
- The perception of an increase in the risks of labor exploitation among respondents was higher in data collection locations where refugees and migrants most frequently decide to settle as a final destination, compared to data collection locations near the border and with a higher proportion of respondents who are in transit.
- 62% of all respondents reported an increase in the risk of domestic violence.
- The perception of an increase in the risks of bribery and extortion is higher in and around irregular border crossings between Venezuela and Colombia and in urban areas.

Profiles

The analysis is based on 1615 surveys implemented between July 2020 and January 2021, partially by face-to-face interviews and partially remotely, by phone. 23% of refugees and migrants surveyed were located in the Cundinamarca region, 22% in La Guajira, 20% in Nariño, 16% in Atlántico and 18% in Norte de Santander.¹

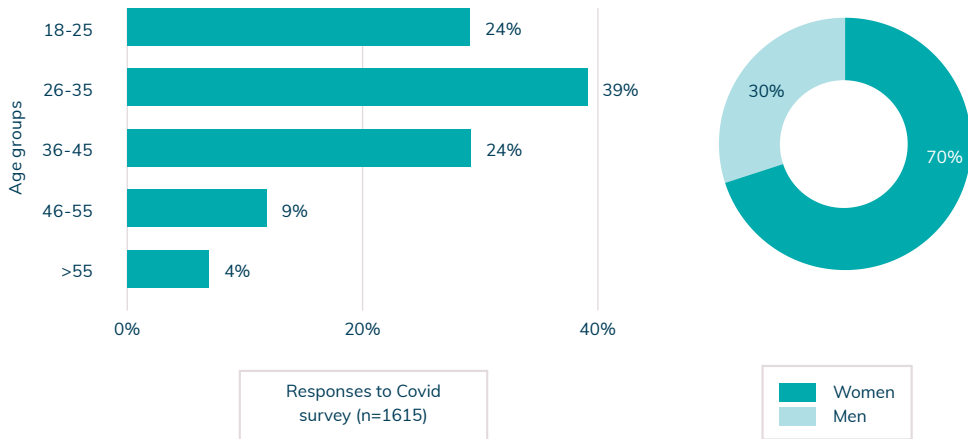
Map 1. Survey regions



70% of all respondents were women and 30% were men. The average age among respondents was 33.4 years. Note that findings are indicative as sampling is non-probabilistic: sample composition varied somewhat for each month and has not been weighted and may therefore account for some of the differences in findings. In particular, there are slight differences by month for age and sex, and larger differences for survey location.

¹ 98% of the people surveyed in Atlántico were in Barranquilla and the remaining 2% in Soledad. 99% of the people surveyed in Cundinamarca were in Bogotá, the remaining 1% in Soacha. 97% of respondents in La Guajira were in Rioacha, the remaining 3% in Maicao and Albania. 57% of the people surveyed in Norte de Santander were in Cúcuta, the remaining 43% in Villa Del Rosario, Pamplona and Chinácota. 100% of the respondents in Nariño were in Ipiales.

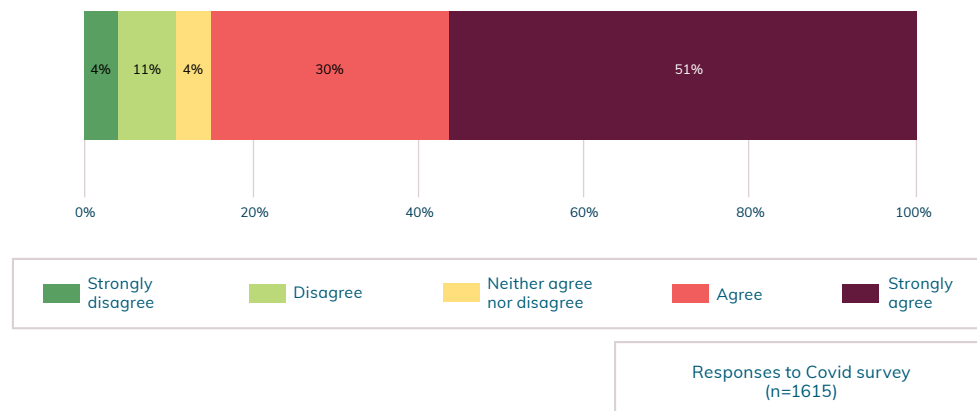
Figure 1. Age range and sex



Theft is the risk perceived to have increased the most during the pandemic

Of all the protection risks considered in the survey, theft was the risk that was most frequently reported as having increased during the COVID-19 pandemic: 83% of all respondents stated agreeing or strongly agreeing that the risk of theft had increased (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. “There is an increased risk of theft since the COVID-19 pandemic began”



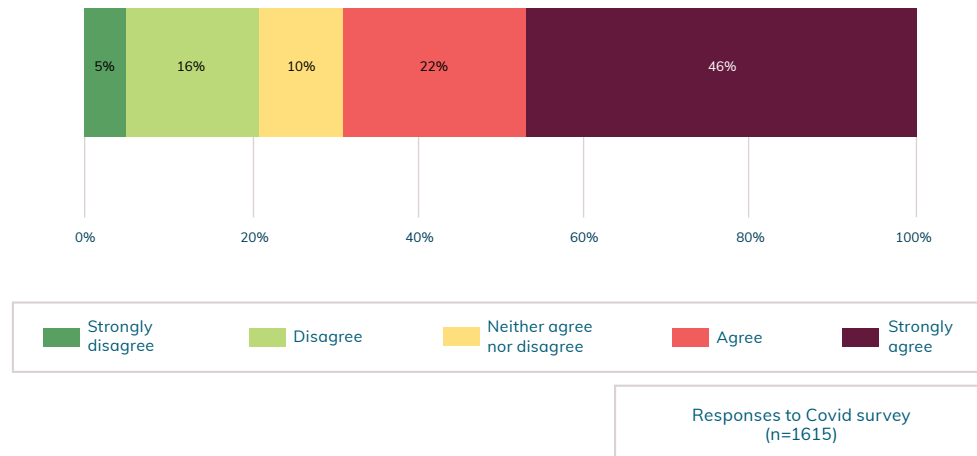
According to 4Mi monitors, respondents mention that the risk of theft heavily increased mainly in two parts of the migration journey. Firstly, in the irregular border crossings between Venezuela and Colombia, controlled by illegal armed groups: as borders closed at the beginning of the pandemic, migration flows through irregular crossings increased, exposing refugees and migrants to violence at the hands of armed groups. Secondly, in cities of destination: respondents reported an increase in insecurity in urban areas of Colombia, due to the dire economic impact of pandemic-related restrictions.

“Before the pandemic, everything was much easier. With this pandemic, it’s now impossible to pass the irregular border crossing without risk. There are always people with weapons in the trail. I almost lost my life the last time I crossed the trail when I was 3 months pregnant. Two men came out of the mountains and hit me very hard on the forehead with some metal tool. I was very ill and dizzy... I almost died. Maicao is also very dangerous: people steal too much in this place”.
21-year-old woman in La Guajira (Colombia)

Increased labor exploitation reported more frequently in big cities

The second protection risk that respondents most frequently reported as having increased during the pandemic was labor exploitation: 68% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that this risk increased during the pandemic (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. “There is an increased risk of labor exploitation since the COVID-19 pandemic began”



Cundinamarca and Atlántico were the regions where the highest share of respondents strongly agreed that this risk increased since the COVID-19 pandemic began, with 55% and 54% of the surveyed population respectively.

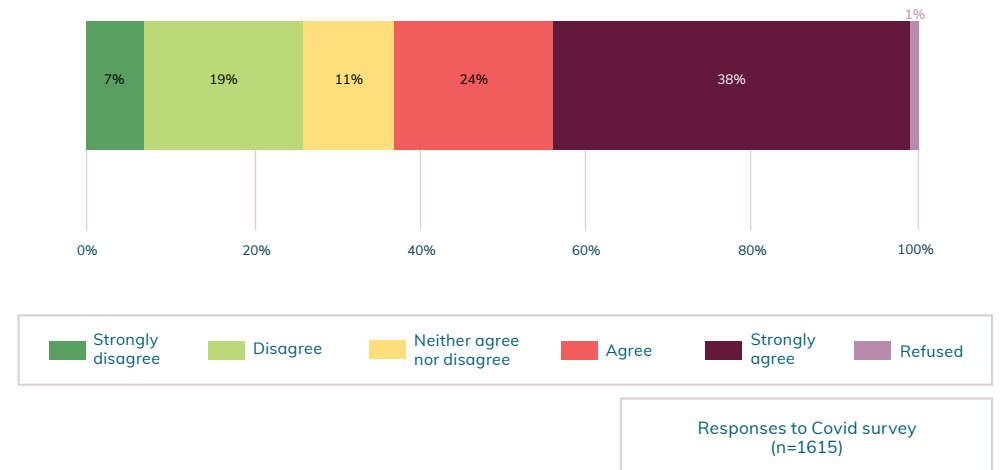
A characteristic of these two regions which may at least partly explain the high perception of increased labor exploitation is that the capitals of Cundinamarca and Atlántico – Bogotá and Barranquilla, respectively - are among the main destinations where Venezuelan refugees and migrants decide to settle, meaning that more respondents look for work in these locations compared to cities that are mainly places of transit. These cities offer greater employment opportunities, but not necessarily with good labor conditions.

“Being a migrant is not easy and especially being undocumented. We do not have the right to decent work. They lower our salaries for having an irregular status”.
31-year-old man in Cundinamarca (Colombia)

Domestic violence as the third risk most frequently reported as having increased in the pandemic

The third protection risk that respondents most frequently mentioned as having increased amid the pandemic was domestic violence, indicated by 62% of all respondents (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. “There has been an increase in incidents of domestic violence since the COVID-19 pandemic began”

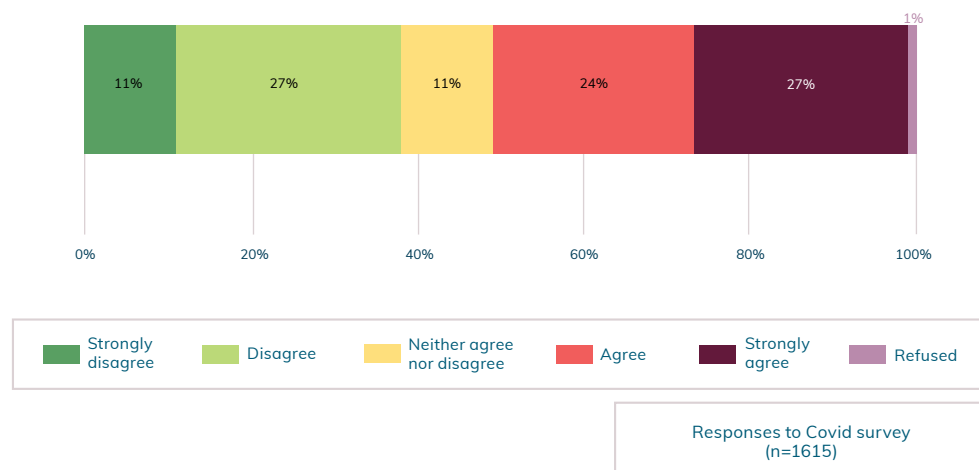


As with labor exploitation, the region in which respondents most frequently agreed that this risk increased during the pandemic were Atlántico (70%) and Cundinamarca (71%).

Increase in bribery and extortion, especially in/ around irregular border crossings

The fourth protection risk that respondents most frequently mentioned as having increased during the pandemic was bribery and extortion (51% - see Figure 5 in the following page).

Figure 5. “There is an increased risk of bribery and extortion since the COVID-19 pandemic began”



According to 4Mi monitors, the main locations in which the risk of bribery and extortion has increased are the irregular border crossings between Venezuela and Colombia, both in La Guajira and Norte de Santander. These areas are characterized by an important presence of illegal armed groups and, almost by definition, people on the move must pay these actors to be allowed to cross through trails under their control. In particular, the risk of bribery and extortion appears to be especially frequent in Norte de Santander, where armed groups participating in the Colombian armed conflict and other criminal groups contend for control over the area.

Bribery and extortion were also reported in big cities, such as Barranquilla and Bogotá. Several respondents mentioned extortion by law enforcement authorities against street vendors, who had to pay bribes to continue selling their products in public spaces during the months of mandatory self-isolation.

“They threatened me in the trail near Cúcuta, because I did not have the documents of my grandchildren. They forced me to pay 100,000 pesos to cross, it is very dangerous because they are all armed... That place is horrible”.

44-year-old woman in Norte de Santander (Colombia)

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4Mi & COVID-19

The [Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative \(4Mi\)](#) is the Mixed Migration Centre’s flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements. Normally, the recruitment of respondents and interviews take place face-to-face. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face recruitment and data collection has been suspended in all countries.

MMC has responded to the COVID-19 crisis by changing the data it collects and the way it collects it. Respondents are recruited through a number of remote or third-party mechanisms; sampling is through a mixture of purposive and snowball approaches. A new survey focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants, and the surveys are administered by telephone, by the 4Mi monitors in West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Asia and Latin America. Findings derived from the surveyed sample should not be used to make inferences about the total population of refugees and migrants, as the sample is not representative. The switch to remote recruitment and data collection results in additional potential bias and risks, which cannot be completely avoided. Further measures have been put in place to check and – to the extent possible – control for bias and to protect personal data. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at www.mixedmigration.org/4mi

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