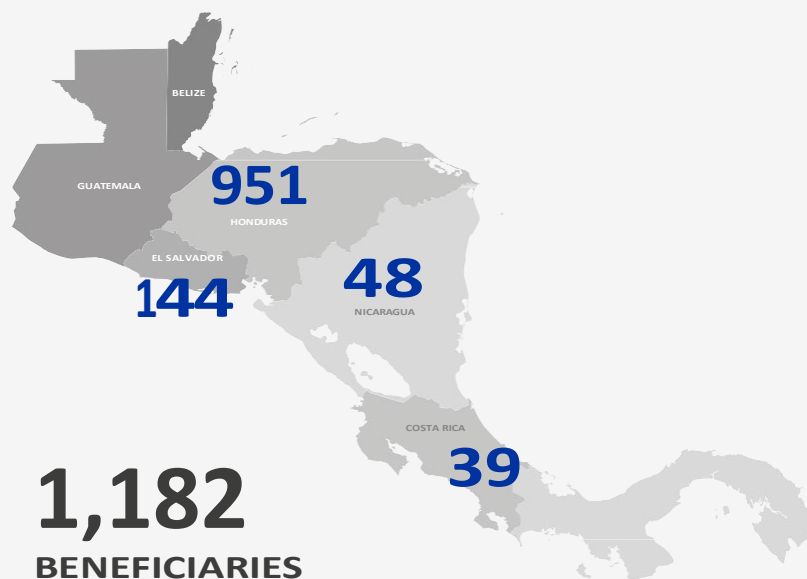


IOM monitoring reports present a summary of surveys and interviews conducted with returned migrants, since March 2020, as participants in IOM’s Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programs¹ in North of Central America Countries² (Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). The objective of these surveys and interviews is to gain a deeper understanding of how migrants reintegrate upon return to their origin countries. This report focuses on returnees to Nicaragua interviewed in June and July 2020.³

Since migration mobility in this region through the use of caravans in the last two years has increased,⁴ various media reports and human rights advocates have expressed concern about the safety and wellbeing of returned migrants. For example, Refugee International criticized the lack of monitoring of returned Asylum Cooperative Agreement (ACA)⁵ transferees from Guatemala in its report published in May 2020.⁶ Associated Press reported Honduran migrants feared for their safety in their home country.⁷

Migrants leave their countries due to various push factors. Often, migrants in the region flee from violence and poverty. Depending on where they return, the security and livelihood prospects of returned migrants are not guaranteed. Considering these factors, IOM’s AVR programs seek consent from all returned migrants to be contacted one month after their voluntary return to the country of origin to participate in a phone-based survey with IOM staff to assess their reintegration.

MOBILITY FLOW OF AVR BENEFICIARIES SINCE NOVEMBER 2018 TO JUNE 2020



RETURNED TO/ RETURNED FROM	COSTA RICA (STRANDED MIGRANTS)	EL SALVADOR (ACA: 12, CARAVAN:1)	HONDURAS (ACA: 34 CARAVAN:194)	NICARAGUA (STRANDED MIGRANTS)	TOTAL
BELIZE	3	0	0	0	3
GUATEMALA	24	144	951	0	1,119
EL SALVADOR	12	0	0	48	60
TOTAL	39	144	951	48	1,182

SOURCE: IOM SITUATION REPORT JUNE 28, 2020

1 AVR Guatemala/Belize and AVR El Salvador programs.

2 These AVR programs support the orderly and humane return of migrants by providing administrative, logistics and financial support to individuals who are unable or unwilling to remain in host or transit countries and wish to return voluntarily to their countries of origin.

3 The monitoring exercise is an activity integrated under the AVR El Salvador Program, which started in March 2020.

4 The Central American migrant caravans, also known as the *Via Crucis del Migrante* ("Migrant's Way of the Cross"), travel from the Guatemala–Mexico border to the Mexico–United States border.

5 The agreement allows migrants to seek protection within the region through cooperation between the United States and host nation governments or international organizations to expand their systems offering humanitarian protection.

6 <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2020/4/26/expelling-asylum-seekers-is-not-the-answer-us-border-policy-in-the-time-of-covid-19>

7 <https://apnews.com/de5424d5e97e2bf769ce53aea791dfd3>

Overview of AVR operations in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala

Since November 2018, IOM AVR programs have supported 1,182 migrants to return to their countries of origin in a voluntary, safe, and dignified manner.

More than 80 percent were Honduran, followed by Salvadorans (9.6 percent).

More stranded migrants request AVR support due to COVID-19 pandemic

From March 2020 to June 2020, 60 stranded migrants in the region have reached out to IOM for AVR support directly and through diplomatic missions in destinations. This was due to border closures, mobility and travel restrictions as well as airport shutdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The ACA process between the United States and Guatemala was suspended from mid-March due to the pandemic, while the ACA process between the United States and El Salvador/Honduras is not operational yet. Concurrently, as of June, there were no ACA and caravan cases since March 2020, commonly the most significant migration categories requiring IOM AVR support before the pandemic.

The IOM El Salvador AVR Program assisted 60 stranded migrants from Costa Rica (4 males,

8 females) and Nicaragua (43 males, 5 females) from April to June, 2020. Most of the 48 Nicaraguan beneficiaries were temporary migrant workers in informal sectors, including agriculture, catering, domestic work and salt production (*salinera* in Spanish) that had lost their jobs due to COVID-19 and were then referred for AVR support.

Costa Rican migrants, on the other hand, were in El Salvador for a variety of purposes, including visiting relatives. One Costa Rican was working in engineering, but his contract was terminated due to the pandemic. Despite having a medical condition that required attention, he was unable to pay for treatment as his medical insurance was also terminated.

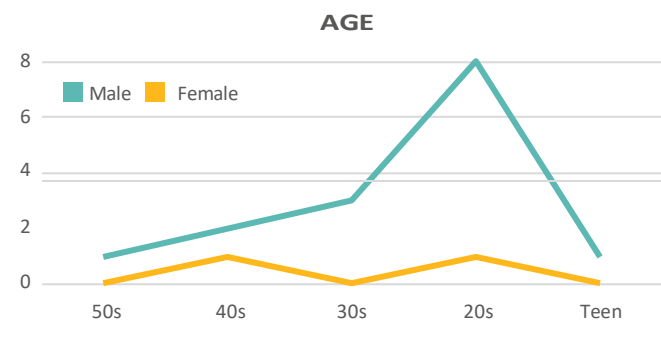
Nicaraguan returnees in focus

This report is focused on stranded migrants who returned from El Salvador to Nicaragua throughout the month of April 2020 under the AVR program in El Salvador. In June and July, the IOM field team surveyed 17 Nicaraguans, thereby completing 28

surveys⁸ from the 48 returned Nicaraguans. In addition, the field team also conducted in-depth interviews with two Nicaraguans among the 17 survey respondents who agreed to participate on the condition of anonymity.

Profile of respondents

Most survey respondents were male with ages between 20 and 50 years. More than half returned with family members. Seven respondents said they learned about the AVR program through the El Salvadoran Government, such as immigration and police.



⁸ Survey results of 11 Nicaraguans were reported in June 2020.

WHAT DID YOU DO IN EL SALVADOR?

"I was working as a farmworker producing corn." (male, 19 years old)

"I was working with a local company specialized in painting commercial buildings." (male, 26 years old)

"I was working in the construction industry." (male, 26 years old)

"I was self-employed selling stew pots." (male, 47 years old)

"I was a manager at a coffee shop." (male, 26 years old)

"I was a domestic helper." (female, 42 years old)

Returned migrants faced challenging employment and financial situations

The vast majority of returned migrants struggled to gain employment in Nicaragua due to the challenging economic situation. Eight out of 17 returnees said they were unemployed due to the pandemic and the deteriorating economic situation in the country. For those employed with full-time and part-time jobs,

most worked in the informal sector, such as in construction, selling food or on farms. One respondent, who successfully opened a business selling food, reportedly acquired his business skills while in El Salvador managing a coffee shop.



8
Unemployed



2
Employed



2 Employed part-time



5
No response

"I was a heavy machinery operator. I was working in construction and rural road maintenance in El Salvador before I came back. Two months after I returned, I couldn't get a job. Luckily, I got a job today; it's a road construction company. Financial situation? I am not happy with my financial situation now. Because aside from debts, I have a son. Since I came from El Salvador, the money I have needed to spend means I'm practically underwater, beginning from zero."

Nicaraguan returned migrant (male, aged in his 30s)

The majority of respondents faced acute financial challenges. One respondent even struggled to buy food. Although he initially received immediate post-arrival assistance from IOM Nicaragua, he has

not re-established his life upon return. Only one respondent, who reported he ran a business, said his financial situation was manageable.

⁹ The Gross Domestic Product per capita in Nicaragua was last recorded at USD 5,407 in 2019, while the country's unemployment rate was expected to be 7 percent by the end of this quarter, according to Trading Economics global macro models and analyst expectations. The challenging economic situation in Nicaragua, as with other countries in the region, has been compounded by COVID-19.

No respondents were found to have received reintegration support from the government, communities, NGOs or other stakeholders (as also reported in the June Monitoring report). In addition to the lack of government resources channeled into the social and welfare sector, these returned migrants did not reach out for help out of fear the

authorities would know they had crossed borders illegally. This is despite our survey team having discovered some returnees had medical conditions, such as high blood pressure, that required check-ups and medication. These beneficiaries had also struggled to access suitable medical treatment in El Salvador.



NO
RESPONDENTS

RECEIVED REINTEGRATION SUPPORT FROM THE GOVERNMENT, COMMUNITIES, NGOS OR INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Fear and temptation to re-cross the border

Returned Nicaraguan migrants expressed fear of being arrested if they re-crossed the border. Nicaraguan immigration closed the border without notice in April, stranding the 48 Nicaraguan migrants

who subsequently received IOM AVR support (food and personal hygiene items). After four days, the migrants returned via unofficial crossing points between Honduras and Nicaragua.

Question: "Upon arrival in your home country, were you assisted in the reception process?"

"No, because the immigration authorities did not allow us to cross the border. But, I am aware that IOM sent us food to the bridge where we were."

Nicaraguan returned migrant (male, 38 years old)

IOM, through its office in Nicaragua, was able to confirm all its beneficiaries arrived at their communities of origin safely. The AVR program also provided post-arrival assistance (non-perishable food and hygiene kits for a 14-day COVID-19 quarantine period) to 11 out of the 48 returnees.

Most respondents said they wanted to return to El Salvador or other countries to search for work. El

Salvador's labor market attracts Nicaraguan migrants to work in the low-skilled and informal sector. Although the unemployment rate in El Salvador was 6.30 percent¹⁰ in 2019, wages and job opportunities are more attractive. In addition, the unemployment rate in Nicaragua has worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic. Most returned Nicaraguans struggled to gain employment and make ends meet.

"If my migratory records were cleaned, I have plans to leave the country. My plan is to work and find a way to move forward."

Nicaraguan returned migrant (male, aged in his 30s)

¹⁰ <https://tradingeconomics.com/el-salvador/gdp-per-capita-ppp>

Any decision to cross the border illegally has become an extra burden to their already stressful situation in Nicaragua. The respondents feared arrest during an illegal crossing or through the official border gate as

well as upon return to Nicaragua. Many believed they were in a vicious cycle, where their only option was to leave the country illegally.

Welcomed warmly, but worried about the future

All 17 returnees reported being warmly welcomed back by family members and their communities, but some had mixed feelings. One respondent said she was worried about her life in Nicaragua due to COVID-19 and wished she had stayed in El Salvador longer. Various media and human rights organizations reported concerns about how the

Nicaraguan Government was handling the COVID-19 pandemic. Human Rights Watch¹¹ wrote that more than 700 Nicaraguan health practitioners had urged the government to acknowledge the spread of COVID-19 and appealed for immediate preventive measures to reduce its spread.

"I feel well with regards to health, no illness. But mentally, I am depressed. I always think that I don't have a job, about how I can help my family survive. I think about that every day and it makes me feel powerless."

Nicaraguan returned migrant (female, 28 years old)

No safety concerns

No respondents expressed safety concerns within their home communities. Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. According to Opportunity International, approximately 30 percent of its population lived on less than USD2 per day.¹² In rural areas, poverty rates were exceptionally high, where 50 percent of

households lived in extreme poverty. Despite this situation, Nicaragua is known as a relatively safer country than other Latin American countries. Unlike many migrants from North of Central America countries, the push factor for migration from Nicaragua was not to escape violence, but instead to seek improved job prospects and income.

Where did Nicaraguan beneficiaries end up?

Most respondents returned to Chinandega (5 people) and Achuapa, León (8 people). Chinandega and León are known to be the origin of most migration from Nicaragua.¹³

Achuapa is a municipality in the department of León, consisting of 20 counties and 44 communities, with the La San Marqueña community home to many of the beneficiaries and a destination for many returnees. Commerce is mostly carried out in the city center and rarely in the communities where the beneficiaries belong. Hence, many struggle to access better jobs, resulting in high numbers of households in poverty. For the residents of Chinandega, EL Viejo and Chichigalpa are small cities that survive on trade - yet provide few employment opportunities. As a result, most families choose to emigrate to improve their financial prospects.



¹¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/23/nicaragua-doctors-fired-covid-19-comments>

¹² <https://opportunity.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/nicaragua-facts-about-poverty>

¹³ According to the IOM Nicaragua Migration Profile in 2012, the department of Chinandega was the second most common place of origin for Nicaraguan migrants (11.5 percent), followed by León (10.9 percent). Chinandega is the main point of origin for migrants to El Salvador, followed by Managua and León.

Plans for the future

Most returnees expressed concern about their future. Some had also developed psychological

problems due to stress associated with this uncertainty.

"I feel safe here. I came back to another community. I'm in Villanueva in the neighborhood of Nueva Jerusalem now. I was well-received thanks to God, without fear of being contagious due to the pandemic."

Nicaraguan returned migrant (female, 28 years old)

"My plan is to continue ahead while God allows, but this situation without a job is tough, without an income to support my family. At the moment, I don't think about migrating, But I could change my mind further ahead."

"If my migratory records were cleaned, I have plans to leave the country. My plan is to work and find a way to move forward."

Nicaraguan returned migrant (male, aged in his 30s)

While economic instability exists, people will continue to seek options for a better future. While the AVR program supported stranded Nicaraguans,

as illustrated in this monitoring report, these returns are more likely to be temporary stays until the COVID-19 pandemic is brought under control.

DISCLAIMERS

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This project is funded by the U.S.
Department of State Bureau of
Population, Refugees, and Migration.

