Venezuelan migrations in Colombia: Transformations in urban spaces in two major Colombian metropolises, Bogota and Cali

Gloria Ramirez (Universidad Pantheon-Sorbonne Paris 1, INED)

International migration has long played a pivotal role in shaping Latin America. However, over the last decade, the migratory landscape of the region has undergone significant transformations. Between 2010 and 2019, the number of immigrants in Latin America surged by 66%, while the number of emigrants rose by 26%. These shifts are largely attributable to the population movements precipitated by the Venezuelan crisis (Acuña and Khoudour, 2020). Recent census data from the region confirm a marked increase or acceleration in intra-regional migration (Stefoni, 2018).

Colombia, historically characterized by emigration and internal population movement (Dureau et al., 2015), notably to Venezuela (Cárdenas and Mejía, 2006), experienced a profound shift in its migration dynamics during the mid-2010s. Venezuela's multidimensional crisis spurred an unprecedented exodus of its population. This reversal in migration patterns between Colombia and Venezuela is starkly illustrated by the fact that, as of November 2023, over six million Venezuelans had fled their country, with nearly five million settling in Latin America, primarily in Colombia (2.8 million, out of a national population of 50.3 million) (International Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants [R4V], 2023). This influx grew substantially from 53,000 Venezuelans residing in Colombia in 2016 to 1.8 million by the end of 2019 (Migración Colombia, 2020).

This research seeks to analyze the demographic shifts and urban transformations resulting from this Venezuelan migratory flow, focusing specifically on two Colombian cities: Bogotá and Cali. Through a metropolitan-scale lens, this study interrogates the spatial distribution and resultant territorial transformations associated with these demographic changes. Drawing on the conceptual framework of spatial demography (Voss, 2007; Mathews & Parker, 2013), the analysis aims to interpret how the spatial integration of Venezuelan migrants in urban areas has evolved over the last decade, and what factors enable the identification of differences in these urban distributions across the two cities.

To address this objective, a mixed-methods approach was employed. First, quantitative data from the 2018 Colombian Census and the 2023 "Pulse of Migration" survey were analyzed to establish a Geographic Information System (GIS) that incorporated various geographical scales. This analysis allowed for the identification of the spatial distribution of Venezuelan migrants and returnees, categorized by sociodemographic variables such as education, occupation, age, gender, health system access, living conditions, and overcrowding. Nineteen typologies of geographic trajectories were developed, with corresponding analyses of the sociodemographic profiles of Venezuelan migrants.

In the second stage, a qualitative approach was adopted through 35 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Venezuelan immigrants and returnees. These interviews examined the spatial transformations in urban areas by exploring biographical trajectories, prior urban experiences, residential practices, networks, and interactions with the environment. This qualitative analysis provides key insights into how international migration contributes to urban transformation.

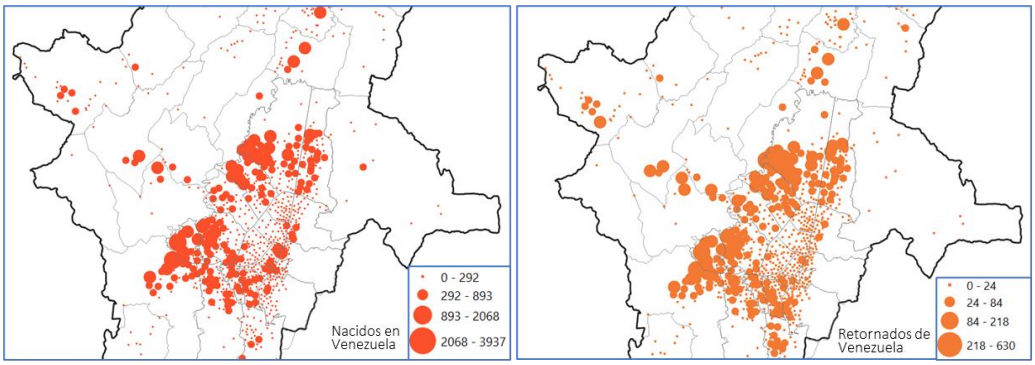
Spatial Transformations in Colombian Metropolises

Urban transformation in Colombia has progressed through various migratory phases. Initially driven by rural migration, this process evolved into rural-to-urban migration (Cuervo et al., 2018). While internal migration has historically been the principal driver of spatial transformations, international migration has taken on an increasingly prominent role in urban change in recent years.

Data from the 2005 and 2018 censuses reveal the growing importance of international migration. In 2005, the foreign-born population was 107,613, accounting for 0.26% of the total population. By 2018, this number had risen to 963,492, or 2.18% of the total population, representing an 18.4% growth. This trend is evident in two key Colombian cities: Bogotá, with a population growth rate of 15.5%, and Valle del Cauca (home to Cali), with a growth rate of 13%.

Venezuela is the predominant country of origin for this foreign-born population. In 2005, Venezuelans made up 34.35% of the foreign-born population, a figure that rose to 87% by 2018. Both Bogotá and Cali have experienced significant growth in their foreign populations in the last decade. Bogotá has welcomed 248,313 foreign-born residents (22% of the city's population), while Cali has received 49,806 (6% of its population). Of the returnee population, which predominantly originates from Venezuela, Bogotá has absorbed 16% and Cali 9%.

Figure 1. Bogota: population coming from Venezuela (Immigration and return)



Source: Own elaboration based on the data of the Census of Colombia, Dane 2018.

For this study of the nexus between international migration and urban dynamics, Bogotá and Cali were selected as focal points. The spatial integration of international migrants, particularly those from Venezuela, is analyzed in these two metropolitan areas.

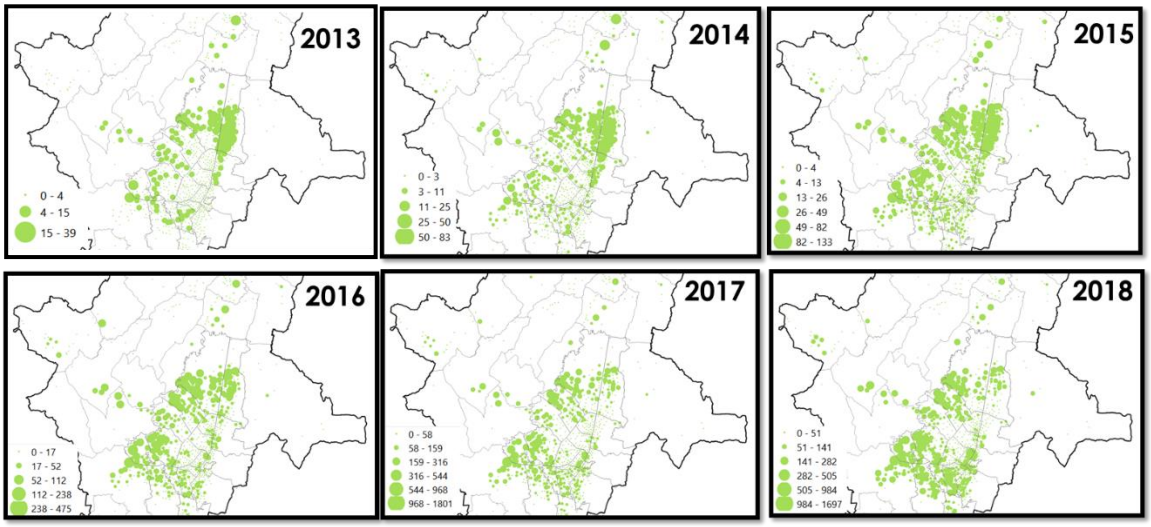
An initial analysis of data from the 2018 Census (Figure 1) highlights variations in the residential patterns of Venezuelan migrants in Bogotá. Venezuelans tend to concentrate in the western part of the city, a pattern closely linked to the socio-economic divisions of Bogotá, where wealthier populations are traditionally concentrated in the north, and economically disadvantaged populations in the south. Venezuelan returnees, mostly Colombians born in Venezuela, show a similar spatial distribution, further clustering in the western regions of the capital.

Spatial Distribution of Venezuelan Migration

This pattern of territorial distribution has evolved over time. Between 2013 and 2014, Venezuelan migrants were predominantly concentrated in the northern areas of Bogotá, particularly in Chapinero and Usaquén (Figure 2). This pattern began to shift between 2015 and 2016, and by 2017-2018, the southwestern part of the city emerged as the primary area of settlement for Venezuelan migrants.

This shift in spatial distribution corresponds to different waves of Venezuelan migration. Earlier migrants, who arrived between 2013 and 2014, were generally from wealthier segments of the population, including entrepreneurs and politicians (Aldana, 2016; Moutin, 2012). As Venezuela's political and economic situation deteriorated, subsequent migration waves included the middle class, followed by the most vulnerable populations, contributing to what is now recognized as the Venezuelan exodus.

Figure 2. Year declared of arrival in Colombia of the Venezuelan population registered in Bogota



Source: Own elaboration based on the data of the Census of Colombia, Dane 2018.

According to the 2018 colombian Census, the Venezuelan migrant population in the Colombian capital was primarily concentrated along the southwestern axis of the city. However, it is noteworthy to examine the heterogeneity of this group and how its spatial distribution has evolved since 2013. This distribution is closely tied to variables such as socio-economic status and transnational connections, particularly among Colombian-Venezuelan families.

This study examines how these patterns of spatial distribution intersect with variables such as arrival year, socio-economic status, access to healthcare, and overcrowding. The findings reveal the increasingly precarious conditions faced by Venezuelan migrants in Bogotá and Cali, particularly those arriving after 2016.

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