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## Uncertainty over Venezuelans' Migration to the Dominican Republic

by Crosby Girón

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Although most immigrants to the Dominican Republic come from neighboring Haiti ([NotiCen, April 3, 2014](#), [March 19, 2015](#), [Sept. 10, 2015](#)), a growing number of people from other countries are choosing the Dominican Republic as their new home.

Since 2016, the press has been reporting on a growing number of Venezuelans arriving in the Dominican Republic as tourists or in transit to other destinations. Some media reports have described this as a part of "mass exodus" due to continuing financial and political problems in Venezuela ([NotiSur, March 17, 2017](#), [May 5, 2017](#), [Jan. 12, 2018](#)).

The reports suggest that Venezuelan immigrants are arriving by the hundreds and staying in the Dominican Republic, mostly working in the informal economy as a means of earning some money. But Dominican authorities say that although many Venezuelans enter the country as tourists, in some cases the real purpose of their trip is to use ATMs to make cash withdrawals in dollars.

The statistics on Venezuelan immigration to the Dominican Republic vary from one media outlet to another, which has led to ambiguity and confusion, as media reports often quote official sources but present different numbers.

For example, in an article published by the Chilean website *LaTercera.com*, the Dominican writer Alberto G. Palomo notes, "Many of the 142,540 Venezuelans who arrived in the Dominican Republic, according to figures recorded by the Dominican Central Bank in 2016, headed for cities such as Santiago de los Caballeros or Punta Cana." He said the number represented a 40% year-on-year increase in Venezuelan visitors. It is unclear, he added, "how many Venezuelans have entered the country as tourists and how many have extended their stay." He also quotes Pedro José Barazarte, president of a support group for Venezuelan immigrants in the Dominican Republic (*Fundación de Ayuda a Inmigrantes Venezolanos*), who estimates that around 200,000 Venezuelans are living in the country, legally or illegally.

However, Pedro Cano, coordinator of the Jesuit refugee service office at the Haiti-Dominican border, estimated that the number of Venezuelans in the Dominican Republic is closer to 40,000. And on Aug. 22, 2017, the Spanish news agency EFE published a far more conservative estimate, setting the number of Venezuelans who have moved to the Dominican Republic over the past few years between 18,000 and 20,000, most of them lacking proper documentation.

"These Venezuelans are transient; they are constantly entering and leaving the country," Interior Minister Carlos Amarante Baret told EFE.

Another article, published on May 29, 2017, by the Dominican website *NoticiasSIN.com*, reported that 165,176 Venezuelans had entered the Dominican Republic in 2015. By 2016, the number had increased to 170,713, it said, while the figure recorded for the first three months of 2017 was 24,227.

## *Dire conditions in Venezuela*

In October 2017, a group calling itself “the Venezuelan diaspora” published a letter addressed to the Interior Ministry of the Dominican Republic in which they said that Venezuelans are choosing to leave home as a result of the “social, political, and economic crisis” in the country, which has had a deep impact on citizen security, food security, and healthcare.

The group quoted Amnesty International to point out that the Venezuelan government is detaining and prosecuting political opponents. And it quoted World Bank figures to say that almost 19,000 Venezuelans have chosen to relocate to the Dominican Republic. The group argued that these Venezuelans should be granted “refugee status” based on the Geneva Convention on Refugees.

The group sought support from the website Change.org, which defines itself as a company that provides a variety of services, such as sending out mass emails and creating mailing lists. Change.org also publishes a blog and its site runs online petitions.

Using the Change.org platform, this group has asked the Dominican government to grant legal status to the Venezuelans who have emigrated to Santo Domingo in recent years “to escape from Venezuela’s social and political crisis.” Around 1,800 people had signed the online petition by mid-January.

Amarante says the petition hasn’t been formally presented to the ministry. He explained that “all immigrants, regardless of where they come from,” must abide by Law 285-04, which covers all aspects of immigration.

Under this law, Venezuelans can travel to the Dominican Republic without a visa and are allowed to stay in the country for two months. According to Amarante, 249,950 foreign nationals, mostly Haitians, have applied for such treatment under the Plan Nacional de Regularización de Extranjeros (National Plan for the Legalization of Aliens) that the Dominican government implemented in 2014-2015 ([NotiCen, June 26, 2014](#), and [Aug. 28, 2014](#)). “Those who have failed to submit the necessary paperwork will unfortunately face deportation back to their country of origin,” he said.

## *Two migration stages*

There have been two stages in the Venezuelan immigration story. What some have called “the first wave” of Venezuelan immigrants involved businessmen and investors who left Venezuela shortly after the death of former president Hugo Chávez in 2013. That first wave raised no concern or alarm. Román Briceño, president of the Association of Venezuelans in the Dominican Republic, said this group included many Venezuelans who left their country under advantageous conditions and set up corporations and boosted their investments in the construction sector, shopping malls, hotels, infrastructure, and industry.

The “second wave” of immigrants includes those who left Venezuela out of desperation and are seeking to take advantage of the favorable conditions offered by the Dominican Republic to those who settle there. These are the immigrants usually interviewed in media reports, who describe a devastated Venezuela, where living conditions have become unbearable.

In an article published in November in the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) website, Mark Weisbrot, CEPR co-director writes that the Venezuelan government clearly needs to implement economic reforms if it wishes to put the country on the path to recovery, such as unifying

the exchange rate and other measures that can reduce inflation, which has already exceeded 1,000% per year.

“Trump and his allies in the European Union, Brazil and Argentina’s right wing governments, and the OAS’ fanatical secretary-general wish to make the country’s economic recovery impossible,” he wrote. “Despite all of their talk about peace and human rights and democracy, they don’t really have a peaceful agenda, because they’re taking measures to ensure that Venezuelans continue to suffer and thus ensure the current government is ousted. This is not ‘promoting democracy.’ This is regime change without taking collateral damage into account—as Trump made clear, with his usual tactlessness, when he threatened Venezuela with a military intervention” ([NotiSur, Aug. 25, 2017](#)).

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