



Regular Research Article

The short-term effects of visa restrictions on migrants' legal status and well-being: A difference-in-differences approach on Venezuelan displacement

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ABSTRACT

Most countries across the globe introduce visa restrictions to regulate immigration, yet little is known about their effect on migrants' decision to migrate and their well-being. I study the mass displacement of Venezuelan nationals, and through a difference-in-differences research design, I compare the effectiveness of introducing visa restrictions in reducing overall migration flows in certain countries across South America. I use a data set of 85,000 migrants and refugees – mostly Venezuelans – surveyed by the UNHCR. Findings suggest that visa restrictions increased the likelihood of irregular entry and irregular visa status for migrants while also leading to changes in their priorities. Unexpectedly, I do not find evidence of increased violence suffered by migrants who switch towards irregular entry channels in specific countries. This research contributes to the academic and policy debate on the effectiveness of visa restrictions on migratory flows, as well the literature on the effects of migration policies on migrants' well-being.

1. Introduction

Despite their widespread use across the world, very few studies so far have been able to empirically assess the effects of migratory restrictions, such as visa restrictions, on migrants' legal status or their well-being (Czaika and Hobolth, 2016; Thielemann, 2006). Visa restrictions refer to the requirement to hold a passport and often meet additional criteria to be eligible to enter a country's borders. Instead, the academic discussion on migration policies has often focused on how migratory policies develop (Beine et al., 2016; Blair, Grossman, and Weinstein, 2022b; Fernandez-Rodriguez, Freier, and Hammoud-Gallego, 2020; Haas, Natter, and Vezzoli, 2015; 2016; Hammoud-Gallego and Freier, 2023; Helbling and Kalkum, 2018), their controversial effectiveness in reducing migration flows (Czaika, Haas, and Villares-Varela, 2018; Salter, 2003), or on institutional constraints set on various types of politics (Freeman, 2006; 2011; Hollifield, 2004; Joppke, 1998), among

others. Although some studies have variously assessed the effects of visa restrictions on migration and asylum numbers (Czaika and Haas, 2017; Czaika and Hobolth, 2016; Neumayer, 2010; Thielemann, 2006), due to a lack of reliable empirical cross-country data and overreliance on proxy estimates, more detailed assessments on the effects of migration policies on migrants themselves – especially in developing countries – are long overdue.¹

This article aims to fill this gap in the literature by focusing on the effectiveness of introducing visa restrictions – within a context of mass migration and porous borders – in reducing overall regular and irregular migrant entries as well as on the effects of these restrictions on migrants' well-being, including their priorities. The intent is thus to answer seminal research and policy questions such as: Do visa restrictions deter migrants from crossing borders at all, or do they simply shift their mode of entry? If that is the case, what are the negative externalities for migrants who switch from a regular to an irregular

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¹ All the replication code for this article is available from the Supplementary Data section. The data used on this article can be accessed upon request directly to the UNHCR at <https://microdata.unhcr.org/index.php/home>, as well as the questionnaires used to collect the data.

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migration channel? And finally, how does the irregular status of migrants affect their priorities once in the host country? These are highly relevant research questions both for contemporary migration-related policy debates, as well as for academic discussions on the effectiveness of visa restrictions in reducing migratory flows, and on the effects of such policies on migrants' well-being and their priorities. To the best of my knowledge, this study makes a substantial contribution to existing scholarship as it represents the first-ever attempt to undertake a comparative examination of the ramifications of the introduction of visa restrictions across various nations within a designated region of the Global South, by using microdata on migrants' conditions, including those of individuals in a situation of migratory irregularity.

To answer the research questions mentioned above, I focus on one of the biggest displacement crises in the developing world: the Venezuelan displacement crisis across South America. Since 2015, it is estimated that around seven million Venezuelans – or a quarter of the population – have left their country, six million of whom have moved to other Latin American nations (R4V, 2022). The vast majority have moved within South America into four geographically and culturally close countries: Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Chile, followed with some distance by Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay (Acosta, Blouin, and Freier, 2019; Chavez Gonzales and Echeverria Estrada, 2020; R4V, 2022). This displacement was due to the increasingly dire social, economic and political conditions in Venezuela, compounded by hyperinflation and political repression (International Crisis Group, 2020).

Beyond the scale of the displacement of Venezuelan nationals, the countries mentioned above represent important cases to study the effectiveness of introducing visa restrictions because despite being eligible for asylum, Venezuelans have been unable to get recognised as refugees in most Latin American countries bar Brazil and Mexico (Berganza, Blouin, and Freier, 2020; Chavez Gonzales and Echeverria Estrada, 2020; Selee and Bolter, 2020). Thus their only realistic options have been either to cross borders regularly by using any reasonable excuse, e.g. as tourists, or irregularly, through unpatrolled crossing points.² Most Venezuelans' options to enter regularly narrowed down in 2019 as visa restrictions were imposed across South American countries. In this study, I compare the effects of the introduction of these visa restrictions – in the form of passport and visa requirements – in Chile, Ecuador and Peru with the situation of Venezuelan migrants in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Uruguay where such visa requirements were not introduced.³

The variation in migration policies in these four countries allows for a difference-in-differences (DID) research design, where the former are considered the treatment group, with Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Uruguay being the control cases. As this research makes use of cross-sectional data, I can only estimate the short-term effects of such visa restrictions. The focus of this research is on four dependent variables: irregular entry, lack of a regular visa, having suffered some form of violence, as well as migrants' priorities once in the host country.

The findings from this article show that that introducing visa restrictions within a context of mass displacement and porous borders increases the likelihood of irregular entry and lack of a regular visa once in the host country, that is, that visa restrictions are ineffective in deterring migrants from crossing frontiers and merely change their mode

of entry. This situation of irregularity in turn negatively affects migrants' priorities, shifting them away from seeking employment toward having to invest resources in trying to regularise their legal status, thus spending valuable resources that could have been used in a more productive way, had they been allowed to enter the country regularly. Last, I do not find evidence to suggest that Venezuelan migrants and refugees switching towards irregular migration channels are more likely to suffer episodes of violence. However, this is likely due to the fact that violence against migrants is widespread in the region and that around a quarter of migrants report having suffered some form of violence regardless of mode of entry into the host country. Further empirical research will need to confirm these findings.

Moreover, the findings of this research are of high significance not only for current scholarship, but also for public policy. While scholarship so far had only been able to theorise about the effects of introducing visa restriction in such contexts, and only estimate the effects of visa restrictions using regular migration channels (Czaika and Neumayer, 2017; Neumayer, 2010), I provide an estimate of the probability of individuals switching towards irregular crossing channels once regular migration becomes unviable. Additionally, I show how – as a consequence of their irregular migratory status – migrants need to spend scarce time and resources trying to regularise their legal status, rather than being able to focus on working soon after having reached the host country. Finally, the micro-data used in this research does not allow to make direct inferences about the effects of imposing visa restrictions on the absolute numbers of people deciding to migrate, but rather on how these influence the likelihood of entering the host country regularly, or not. Still, the findings of this research suggest that the effect on absolute numbers – if any – was marginal. Yet, these findings hold important lessons to be learned when dealing with situations of mass displacement and porous borders across the globe.

The article is structured as follows. In the first part I specify a few concepts and the scope conditions of this research, discuss the academic literature, formulate hypotheses to test, and recount the changes in the legislative frameworks on migration in the cases under study. Second, I present the data and methodology. Third, I estimate the general *OLS* model and discuss its assumptions. Fourth, I present the results, and run a battery of robustness tests. Finally, I discuss these results before concluding with a summary of the findings, their limitations and possible paths for further research.

2. Visa restrictions policy

2.1. Definitions and scope conditions

In this research, I focus on four dependent variables, which I here define: *Regular entry* is migration through official border crossings holding the required paperwork, while *irregular entry* is the opposite. *Regular visa status* means having any form of legal migratory permit to remain in the host country. *Irregular visa status* differs from *irregular entry* in that, the migrant might as well have entered the host country regularly, but then overstayed their visa, or could have entered through irregular border crossings and then applied for asylum or some form of regularisation. These two outcome variables allow us to study the effectiveness of visa restrictions in deterring migrants from entering a country. On the other hand, *violence suffered* is a proxy for migrants' well-being, and how this is affected by the introduction of visa restrictions and a likely switch towards irregular migration channels. Violence suffered includes different types of violence, from extortion by public officials to threats and sexual assault. Finally, I focus on how migrants' priorities were affected by the introduction of visa restrictions. Priorities are an indicator for migrants' needs.

Moreover, the analysis of this study focuses on a situation of mass displacement and porous borders. By mass displacement I define a situation in which an exogenous shock – be it a rapid economic collapse (as in the case of Venezuela), or a natural disaster – leads a numerous

² According to legislation on asylum in place across most of Latin America, a refugee's definition extends beyond the 1951 Geneva Convention definition to include: "persons who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order." Scholars and the UNHCR widely agree that most of these circumstances apply to the current Venezuelan crisis. (Acosta et al., 2019; UNHCR, 1984, 2019).

³ As discussed below in more detail, Colombia is a peculiar control case in that it already required passports for Venezuelans from before 2016.

amount of individuals and families to decide to leave their country of origin. Borders between countries are considered porous if they cannot be efficiently patrolled either because of their geographical characteristics (e.g. borders are too wide) as in the case of the United States, or because of low state capacity, or in both, as in the case of Chile, Ecuador and Peru.⁴ Either of these last two conditions is sufficient for the findings of this research to hold, that is, the introduction of visa restrictions between countries with *either* low state capacity *or* wide borders leads migrants to change their migratory channel towards irregularity, and not necessarily to change their decision to migrate. Either low state capacity or porous borders characterise the situation of the countries under study.⁵

2.2. Theoretical expectations and context

The first concern of this research is ‘visa restrictions’: these are the most important policy tools on which governments rely to ‘monitor, control and limit the cross-border flow of people’ (Neumayer, 2010). These allow governments to pre-screen and therefore keep out ‘undesirable’ or ‘risky’ profiles who might pose a threat to the country, or as Neumayer summarises: ‘visa restrictions are likely to deter both welcome and unwelcome travellers’ (Czaika and Neumayer, 2017; Neumayer, 2010, 172).

Many scholars have critically evaluated the effectiveness of visa restrictions and other policy instruments in decreasing the inflow of migrants (Blair, Grossman, and Weinstein 2022b; 2022a; Czaika and de Haas, 2013; Czaika et al., 2018; Fitzgerald, Leblang, and Teets, 2014; Salter, 2003; Thielemann, 2006). As Czaika and Haas (2017) and Haas et al. (2019) summarise, this latter group of scholars suggests that it is mainly structural – as opposed to “push-pull” – factors that drive people’s willingness to travel, and therefore migration policies only change ‘the way’ people travel, rather than influencing the actual decision to do so, regardless of how sophisticated such policies have become (Bonjour, 2011; Broeders and Engbersen, 2007). Additionally, due to a lack of data, many scholars have decided to focus on migration and asylum policy development, with little focus on the effects of such policies (Beine et al., 2016; Blair, Grossman, and Weinstein, 2022b; Haas et al., 2015; Hammoud-Gallego, 2022).

Yet, while most of the empirical literature has focused on the quantifiable effects of visa restrictions using data on official entries (Barthel and Neumayer, 2015; Bertoli, Fernández-Huertas Moraga, and Ortega, 2011; Czaika and Haas, 2017; Neumayer, 2004), academics have so far not been able to estimate the effectiveness of these visa restrictions in lowering the number of migrants in a context of mass displacement and porous borders, where data on entries might be difficult to collect. Some studies have investigated several aspects of irregular migration, including the role of individual preferences in the self-selection of migrants as well as the effects of policies on migrants and their likelihood of travelling (Andersson, 2016; Arcand and Mbaye, 2013; Bazzi et al., 2021; Czaika and Hobolth, 2016; Deiana, Maheshri, and Mastrobuoni, 2021; Durand and Massey, 2019; Echeverría, 2020; Haas, 2008; Pastore, Monzini, and Sciortino, 2006). However, to my knowledge no microdata has yet been used based on surveyed migrants who claim to have crossed borders irregularly, thus making this a first-of-its-kind contribution to the literature on the effects of migration policies on actual migration flows, both regular and not, in a South-

South migratory context.⁶ To conclude this first part, in this research I will therefore test the hypothesis that within a context of mass displacement and porous borders, the introduction of visa restrictions will not considerably lower the number of migrants, but simply make them change their migratory channel into an irregular one. This choice can be explained by the fact that migrants fleeing from an exogenous shock will often perceive they have no alternative but to migrate – regardless of the availability of legal options to do so.⁷

The second concern of this research is migrants’ well-being and how shifts in migration policies affect it. Particularly important is the issue of how much more likely it is that switching towards an irregular migration channel will affect migrants’ likelihood of suffering some type of violence, as widely documented (Andersson, 2014; Pugh, 2021; Vogt, 2018; Wolf, 2021). While this likelihood depends on the context within which irregular migration takes place, it is beyond any doubt that this ‘invisibility’ towards the host country’s authorities, leaves migrants heavily vulnerable to violence of all sorts, especially from those on which they rely to safely enter their destination country and to access housing and employment once there, among others (Gottwald, 2004; Pugh, 2018). Consequently, following on the earlier hypothesis, I hypothesise that switching from a regular to an irregular migration channel increases the chances of suffering an episode of violence, a proxy for their well-being.⁸

The last focus of this research is on the priorities of migrants and refugees and how these might affect their labour market integration (Aggarwal, La China, and Vaculova, 2016; Clemens, Huang, and Graham, 2018; Farré and Bosch, 2014). While the conditions under which labour market integration takes place in developed and developing economies are widely different, both in terms of higher informality rates in the latter, as well as different degrees of support from governmental institutions, scholarship agrees that accessing employment is crucial for both migrants and their host country, which might reap the benefits of an improved economy with cheaper labour and higher consumption, as well as a wider tax base. Even under conditions of informality, being regularly resident in the host country – as opposed to being there irregularly – decreases the risk of lower salaries and labour exploitation, as well as likely harassment from authorities (Ceritoglu et al., 2017; Sak et al., 2018; Stave and Hillesund, 2015).

Such conditions of high informality are a common feature of labour markets across many Latin American countries, where around half of all jobs are informal (Salazar-Xirinachs and Chacaltana, 2018, 22). However, whereas in certain countries of South America such as Ecuador and Colombia around half of the native population works informally, informality rates reach almost 70 % of native workers in Peru. In all these countries, informality rates for Venezuelan migrants are

⁶ In their study, Czaika and Hobolth (2016) conclude that restrictive asylum and visa policies increase irregular migration. However, their operationalisation for irregular migration is based on EUROSTAT estimates of persons refused entry at the border or apprehended without the proper documentation, not surveyed migrants. The main issue in using the EUROSTAT estimates is that the number of people apprehended and refused entry often depends on authorities’ shifting interest in conducting such controls, thus producing only a partial picture of overall irregular entries.

⁷ Alternatively, as Hammoud-Gallego and Freier (2023) argue, it could also be argued that governments – specifically in the Latin American region – develop largely symbolic migration policies, meaning policies adopted legally but often not with the capacity or the intention of implementing them, but rather with a look at the electorate or international audiences. In this study, we assume that governments introduced visa restrictions with the aim of effectively stopping the inflow of migrants.

⁸ The choice of violence suffered as an indicator for well-being is dictated by two main issues: first, data availability, and second, the fact that suffering some form of violence has repercussions on the physical and mental health of any individual over time. These are the two main reasons for focusing on the indicator on violence suffered as a proxy for well-being in this article.

⁴ As low state capacity, I define a situation in which the state lacks the necessary resources to implement its policies fully. In this specific case, states often do not have enough personnel or infrastructure in place to efficiently patrol their own borders.

⁵ For a thorough discussion on the conceptualisation of borders and migration management see Bauder (2016), Czaika and de Haas (2013) and Geddes et al. (2019).

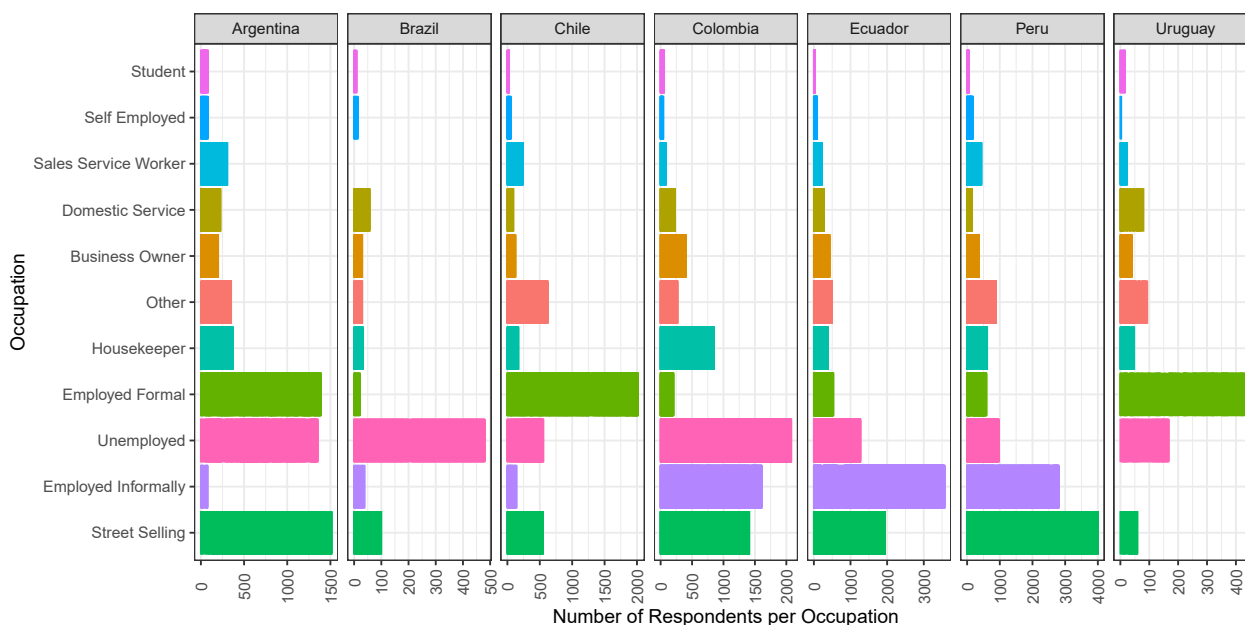


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by occupation. .
Source: UNHCR Microdata

considerably higher (Selee and Bolter, 2020, 43). To further confirm this fact, Figure 1 depicts the occupation of the respondents in the dataset used in this research. Unsurprisingly, it shows that street selling and informal employment are the most common occupations, except for the case of Chile and Uruguay. In Argentina both formal and informal employment (i.e., street selling) are comparably distributed among the surveyed population. These last three countries have more developed economies that are much more favourable to the formal labour market integration of migrants. Moreover, as discussed in more detail further below, Venezuelan migrants in these countries have higher educational levels compared to those in the other countries under study (Aldunate et al., 2019).⁹

Under these conditions of high labour market informality, having entered irregularly, or being regularly resident in the host country might not significantly affect migrants' likelihood of working formally, as shown by research on the Venezuelan displacement crisis. For instance, evidence from Colombia, found that following a migrant amnesty in 2018, formality rates for Venezuelans increased, but only limitedly (Bahar, Ibáñez, and Rozo, 2021). Still, regularisation helps contributing to migrants' societal integration and personal well-being as by being regular residents migrants can avoid possible abuses from authorities, middlemen and employers, as well as accessing – or have confidence accessing – social services.

Based on this assumption, I hypothesise that being irregularly in the host country is highly likely to shift migrants' priorities from seeking employment as soon as they reach the host country, to seeking to regularise their migratory status. To clarify, I am suggesting that while regular migrants' likely first priority would be seeking employment, irregular migrants' first priority – all else equal – would be to be able to regularise their migratory status. Regularisation would take precedence over any alternative priority, as migrants would see regularisation as the necessary condition to be able to access any health or education-related social service. Moreover, regularising would allow migrants to guarantee their and their families' stability and long-term integration, thus taking precedence over seeking employment following their arrival in the host country.

2.3. Hypotheses

To summarise, the main idea underlying this research is that in a situation of porous borders and mass displacement the imposition of visa restrictions does not substantially reduce the inflow of migrants. What these restrictions do instead, is that they lead to an increase in irregular entries, and consequently to an increase in the negative externalities usually associated with irregular migratory status. In this study I focus on two such externalities: the likelihood of suffering episodes of violence, and the shift in the priorities of migrants without a legal migratory status.¹⁰

I therefore formulate three hypotheses: first, that the introduction of visa restrictions does not substantially reduce the number of migrant entries, and instead simply changes the way migrants enter the country. This hypothesis is tested using two dependent variables: Irregular entry and lack of a regular visa. This hypothesis applies within a context of mass displacement and porous borders. Second, an increase in irregular status leads to increases in episodes of violence suffered by migrants either in the host or transit country, due to their 'invisibility' in the face of authorities, as well as because of their reliance on smuggling and other illegal – often armed – groups to bring them across the border. Last, migrants without a regular residence permit have different priorities than those legally resident, so that when the former reach their new host country, they will seek to regularise their situation first, compared to migrants who are able to enter regularly, and who are therefore able to focus on integrating straight away into the labour market, and thus into society at large, even if they work informally.

By testing the hypotheses above, this article seeks to answer some fundamental questions in migration research that have often been neglected due to the unavailability of micro-data on irregular migrants. Beyond the academic relevance of this topic, this research aims to answer a fundamental policy question of high relevance for contemporary policymaking on migration, especially within contexts of mass displacement and porous borders in developing countries: Do visa restrictions work in lowering overall migration numbers? How do these policies affect migrants' well-being, including their priorities?

⁹ From now onwards, I will refer to Venezuelan migrants and refugees as 'migrants' for brevity's sake.

¹⁰ A possible complementary indicator would be to focus on mental health as well, however, unfortunately such data is not available as part of this dataset.

2.4. Legislative framework

To understand the effects of the introduction of visa restrictions on Venezuelans, first I need to clarify the political and legislative context in which these changes took place. As [Selee and Bolter \(2020\)](#) report, until 2015, when Venezuelan emigration took off as a result of the worsening political and economic crisis Venezuelan nationals had had visa-free access to many countries in Latin America, and in most of South America an ID card was enough for Venezuelans to be able to travel across borders ([Freier and Doña-Reveco, 2022](#)).¹¹

This was possible as a result of regional integration efforts – especially in South America – that had taken place over the previous two decades through institutions such as MERCOSUR, CAN, CARICOM and UNASUR, as well as through a series of multilateral agreements facilitated by a temporary ideological convergence of governments in the region, among other factors, which led to the development of an overall quite liberal legal framework on migration and asylum ([Cantor, Freier, and Gauci, 2015](#); [Ceriani and Freier, 2015](#); [Hammoud-Gallego, 2022](#); [Hammoud-Gallego and Freier, 2023](#)).

As hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans left their country, heading mostly towards countries in geographical proximity to Venezuela that could be reached via land, in September 2018 11 countries of the region – including the seven countries under study – signed the ‘Quito Declaration,’ a non-binding agreement where the signatories pledged to keep their frontiers open to Venezuelans fleeing chaos back home, and to accept even expired passports as documents for entry ([MREMH, 2018](#)). However, faced with backlash from public opinion, as hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans crossed into their countries, several countries imposed restrictions in the months following the declaration ([Acosta et al., 2019](#)). [Table 1](#) shows the number of Venezuelan migrants according to category in each country.

As this trend accelerated, by the end of 2019, except for Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, all the other top receiving countries had introduced passport requirements for Venezuelans, where earlier an ID might have been sufficient. The introduction of passport requirements should not be underestimated as they were very difficult to obtain for most Venezuelans, due to the high costs involved ([Selee and Bolter, 2020, 8](#)). In addition to that, in 2018 Chile, which already required Venezuelans to have a passport to enter the country, stopped its policy that allowed tourists to transition to work visas once in the country, which had been widely done by Venezuelans until then. Chile also introduced a new visa of ‘Democratic Responsibility’ for Venezuelans that allowed them to travel directly from Venezuela, but had various disadvantages, its cost, waiting period, need of a passport and criminal history certificate being the most prominent ones ([Selee et al., 2019](#); [Selee and Bolter, 2020, 9](#)).

Finally, between June and July 2019, with a few weeks’ difference between them, Chile, Ecuador and Peru imposed more limiting visa requirements. With no prior warning, from June 22nd Chile stopped allowing Venezuelans into the country as tourists without a visa, while Ecuador announced on July 25th that from August 26th Venezuelans would require a visa to enter the country. Similarly, Peru announced on June 6th that from June 15th Venezuelans would need a visa to enter the country ([Selee and Bolter, 2020, 10](#)). It should be pointed out that in all the three cases above, Venezuelans were allowed to apply for the required visas while in a transit country. Still, costs, waiting period, the lack of a passport and employment, made this a non-viable option for most migrants. Regarding the other countries, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay did not require a passport for entry, whereas Colombia decided not to introduce a visa requirement, although it has required passports for entry for Venezuelans since before 2016, even if it allowed

Table 1

Official estimates of Venezuelan migrants and refugees as of April 2024. Source: [r4v.info](#), [Migracioncolombia.gov.co](#).

Country	Residence permits	Asylum seekers	Recognised refugees	Total estimate including irregular
Chile	226,100	8,300	33	444,400
Colombia	2,200,000	23,400	1,200	2,900,000
Ecuador	202,500	4,900	1800	474,900
Peru	468,200	532,700	4,900	1,500,000
Argentina	381,500	5,500	316	217,700
Brazil	402,600	50,300	89,300	510,500
Uruguay	23,200	3,100	720	32,900

Venezuelans who live in the border region to apply for a Border Mobility Card ([El Mercurio, 2019](#)). This explains why Venezuelans have mostly crossed into Colombia irregularly (see below).

Additionally, one issue worth pointing out are the reasons behind the choice of some countries to introduce visa restrictions, while others kept allowing Venezuelans only with their ID cards. A combination of two factors explains this difference in policy response to Venezuelan migration. The first is that – as data in [Table 1](#) shows – the number of Venezuelans entering Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay was somewhat lower than in the rest of the region. This is due mostly to the considerable higher costs for reaching Argentina and Uruguay, where eventually mostly wealthier Venezuelans settled (see [Appendix 1](#)), whereas the only land route from Venezuela to Brazil reaches the Amazonian city of Manaus, with no road links to the rest of the country. A second factor, no less important, is the strong ideological opposition that right-wing governments in Argentina and Brazil displayed against the Maduro regime in Venezuela ([Heath and Laing, 2018](#); [Phillips, 2019](#)), which translated into open reception policies, such as Brazil’s ‘Operação Acolhida’ ([Gov.br, 2023](#)), with only Uruguay holding a somewhat more ambivalent position ([Fernandez, 2018](#)).

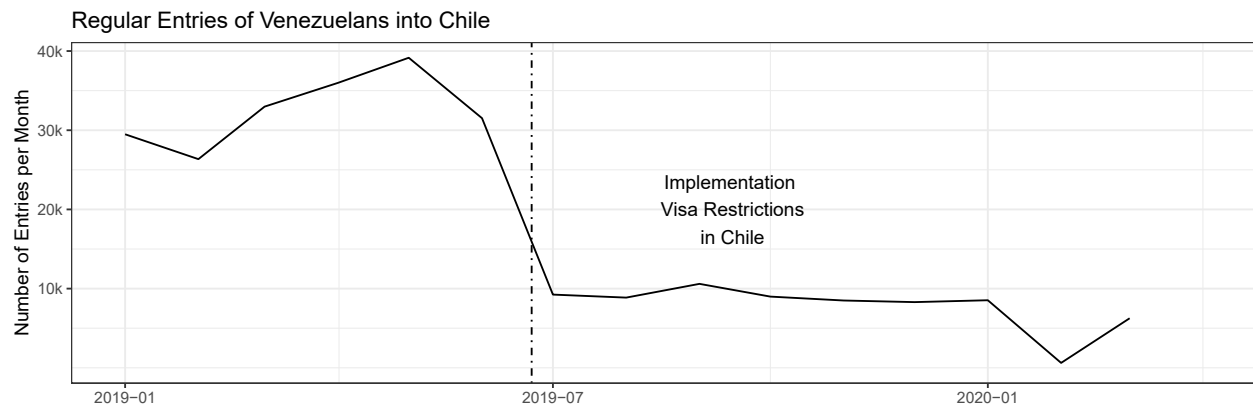
As official data in [Fig. 2](#) shows ([INE, 2023](#); [INEC, 2023](#)), the introduction of visa restrictions drastically cut the numbers of regular border crossings in Ecuador, Chile and Peru. Moreover, the chart for Ecuador shows how many Venezuelans hurried to cross through the country to get into Peru by the deadline when restrictions were imposed, as nine days separated the announcement of the restrictions from the implementation in the latter.

A similar drop in entries by Venezuelan nationals is not observed in the countries that did not introduce visa restrictions, such as Colombia, Uruguay and Brazil, as shown in [Fig. 3](#) ([DNM, 2023](#); [MigCol, 2023](#); [PortMig, 2023](#)).¹² In Colombia, the slight one-off increase in entries in the days from the 9th to the 11th of June 2019 of Venezuelan nationals for transit purposes – a few days following the announcement of the upcoming restrictions in Peru, suggests that many Venezuelans who entered Colombia in those days used it as a transit to reach the other countries in the region, most likely both Ecuador and Peru. Finally, it is worth noticing that these restrictions do not seem to have led to a switch in destination countries, as the numbers of entries did not substantially increase in those countries that did not introduce restrictions, as evident in [Fig. 3](#).

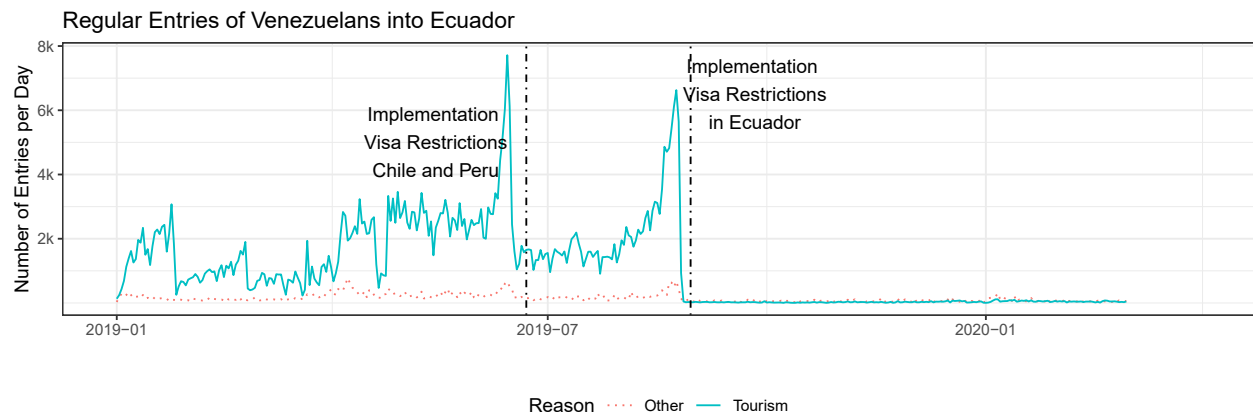
Willing to tackle irregular migration, countries in the region had stepped up programmes to regularise irregular migrants with ad-hoc migratory permits already in 2017. While Colombia introduced the PEP (Permiso Especial de Permanencia, *Special Residency Permit*), Peru developed the PTP (Permiso Temporal de Permanencia, *Temporary Residency Permit*), while Ecuador introduced the ‘*Exceptional Visa for Humanitarian Reasons*.’ While these permits have regularised hundreds of thousands of individuals, all have serious short-comings, such as the

¹¹ For more on Latin American migration governance and policy responses to the inflow of Venezuelans, see [Acosta \(2018\)](#), [Acosta et al. \(2019\)](#), [Finn and de Reguero \(2020\)](#), [Freier and Doña-Reveco \(2022\)](#), [Geddes, Vera Espinoza, Hadj Abdou, and Brumat \(2019\)](#).

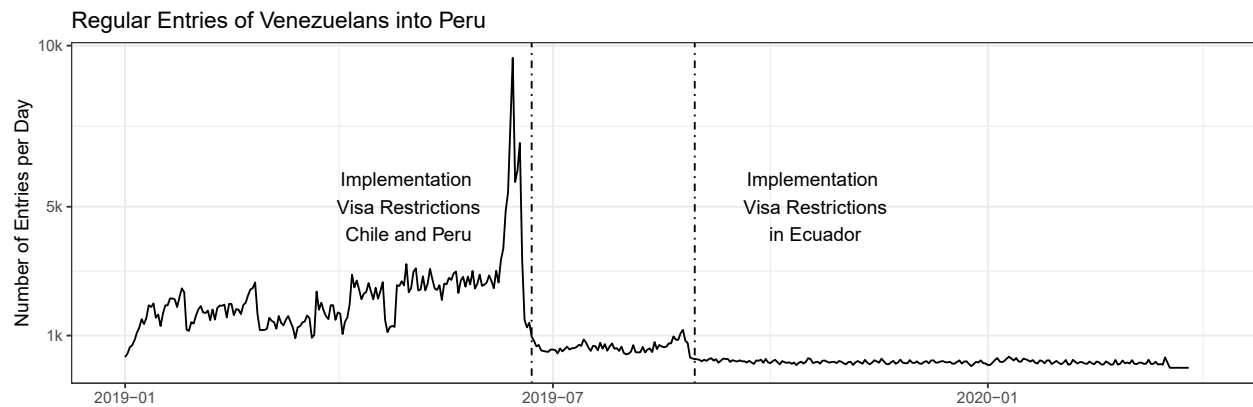
¹² Daily or monthly data on migration flows by nationality for Argentina is not publicly available, and has not been provided upon request. The data for Peru was provided by the Ministry of Interior following a request for data.



Source: National Statistical Institute of Chile (INE)



Source: Ecuador Statistical Institute



Source: Ministry of Interior of Peru, Superintendencia de Migraciones

Figure 2. Regular entries of venezuelans with introduction of visa restrictions.

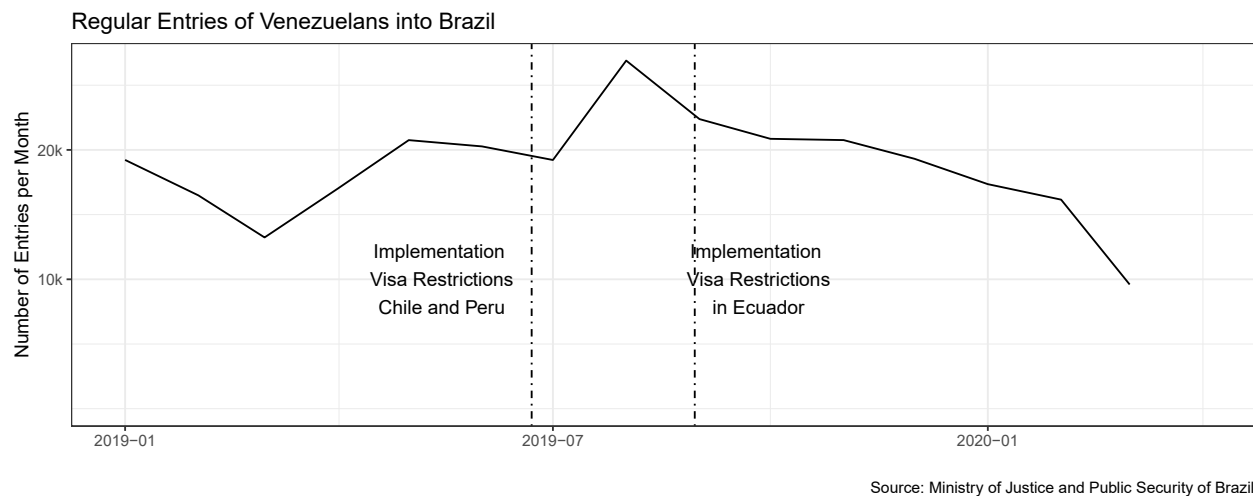
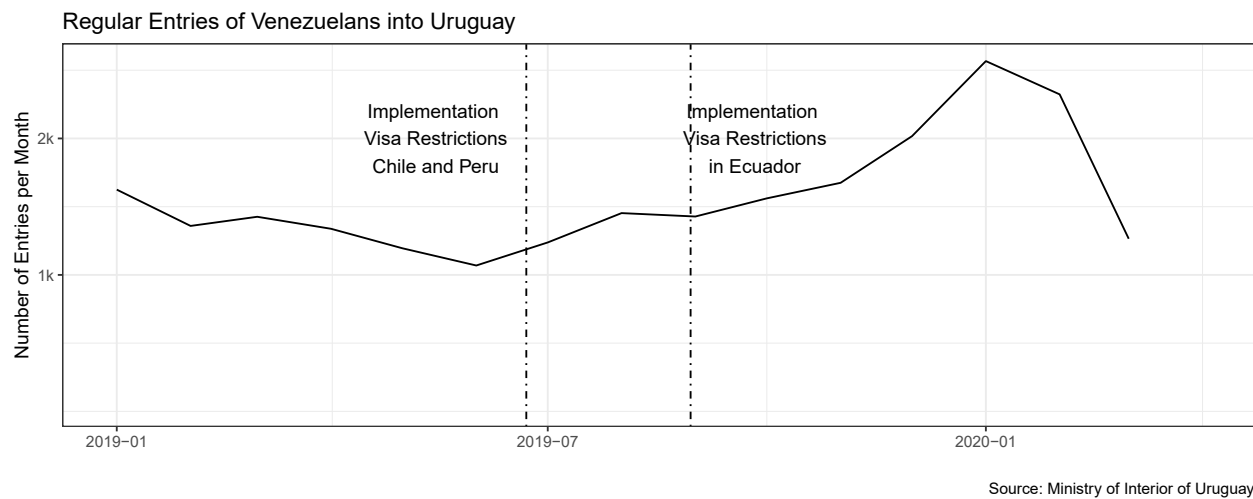
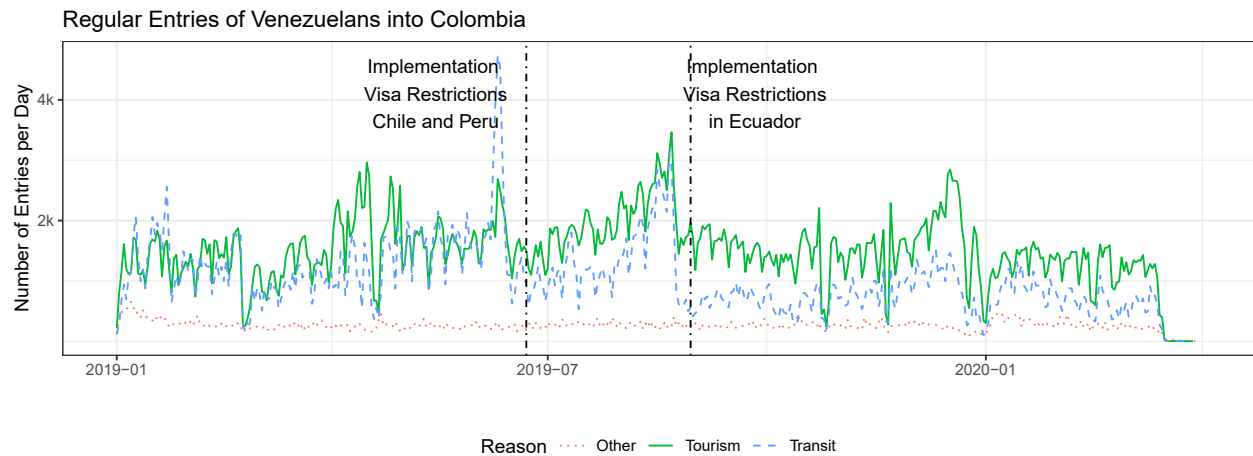


Figure 3. Regular entries of venezuelans in countries with no introduction of visa restrictions.

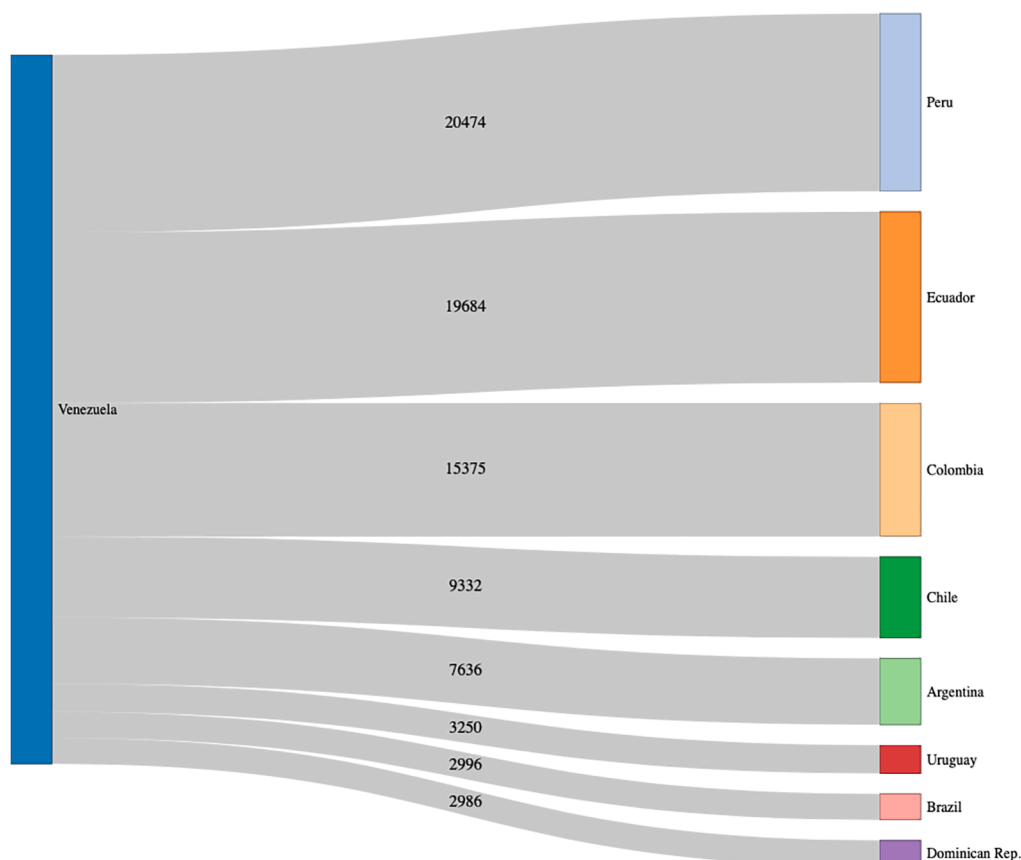


Figure 4. Destination of Venezuelan Migrants surveyed by the UNHCR. Source: UNHCR Microdata.

Colombian PEP that did not allow Venezuelans a path to permanent residency (R4V, 2022; Selee and Bolter, 2020)¹³. The Peruvian PTP on the other hand, allowed transition to permanent residency after a year, but application was limited in October 2019 (El Peruano, 2019). Last, Ecuador's Exceptional Visa granted applicants a two year residency permit, however regular entry was a pre-condition for application, which limited it as an option for many Venezuelans (Selee and Bolter 2020, 18).

3. Data

The dataset used for this analysis comprises approximately 85,000 observations of migrants surveyed by UNHCR and NGOs across 10 Latin American countries as part of their monitoring activities, 83,000 of whom are Venezuelans. The first pilot survey was conducted in March 2018, and systematic data collection began in January 2019. Data has been made available under request up to March 2020. As confirmed by UNHCR and NGO officials involved in the data collection, all the interviews were conducted in person, both in border areas as well as in urban areas where migrants were known to have clustered. In the majority of cases migrants approached the UNHCR and the NGOs seeking advice and support as soon as they arrived in the country, and the survey was immediately administered. However, there is no evidence of self-selection of specific groups of migrants answering the survey, nor any

difference before and after the introduction of visa restrictions, as further discussed below. Thus, this data can be used as a form of 'noisy' measure of effective migration inflows, which provide a more reliable picture on the actual arrival of Venezuelan citizens, compared the impression provided by official border data. The data was collected using a survey software developed by the UNHCR. Once filtered for the categories of interest, and removing respondents in and from other countries, the final dataset comprises 44,302 observations.

In Fig. 4, the chord diagram shows where most migrants from Venezuela were interviewed.¹⁴ Panama and Guatemala were excluded from this diagram, as they face different migratory conditions: Panama has a small but diverse set of migrants, whereas all migrants interviewed in Guatemala come from Honduras. Other less common nationalities such as Colombian, Haitian or Salvadorian are excluded from this plot to ease its readability.

Based on the data collection – and due to the anonymisation of the data then conducted by the UNHCR before publication – this micro data reports the month and year of interview, but gives only three broad ranges of the time of arrival in the country (0–6, 7–12, or 13 months or more). This makes it more difficult to trace the exact date of entry of each respondent.

However, based on the dynamics of the data collection mentioned above, further confirmed by the UNHCR and NGOs staff involved – including a visit to a migrant reception centre in Lima in September

¹³ As of October 2020, Colombia had introduced a fourth round of PEP regularisation for all Venezuelans who had entered the country before the 31st of August 2020 (Migración Colombia, 2020). In February 2021 the Colombian government also announced the full regularisation of all Venezuelans in the country (NYT, 2021), which as of February 2022 had regularised around 2.5 million Venezuelans (R4V, 2022).

¹⁴ In the dataset the nationality is sometimes missing. However, a UNHCR officer in the region confirmed that officers filling in the survey often skip the nationality question because of time constraints, as in most cases migrants are Venezuelans (UNHCR Officer, interviewed via Zoom on 03/03/2022).

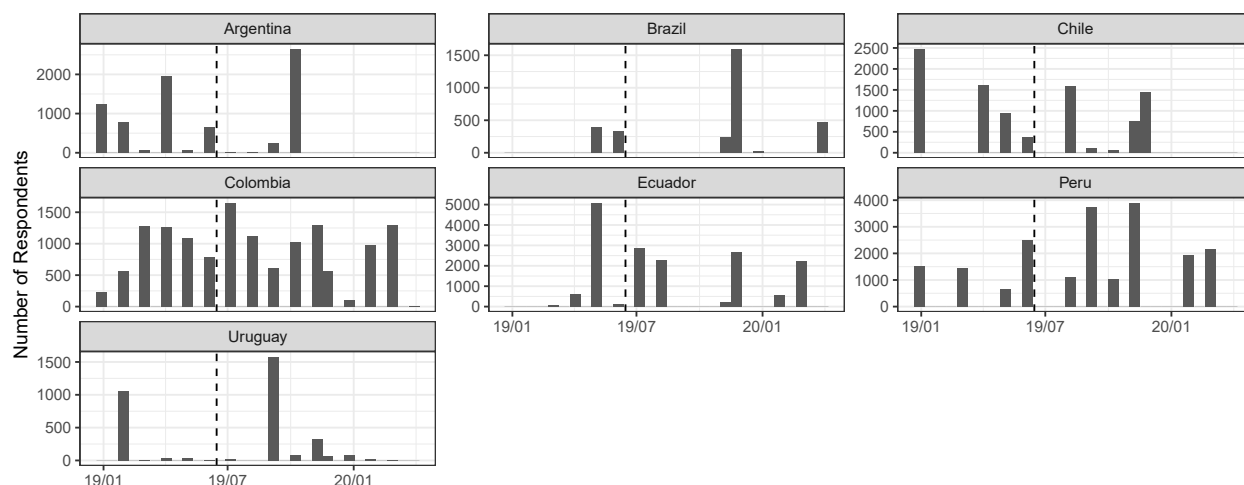


Figure 5. Interviews per country each month. Source: UNHCR Microdata.

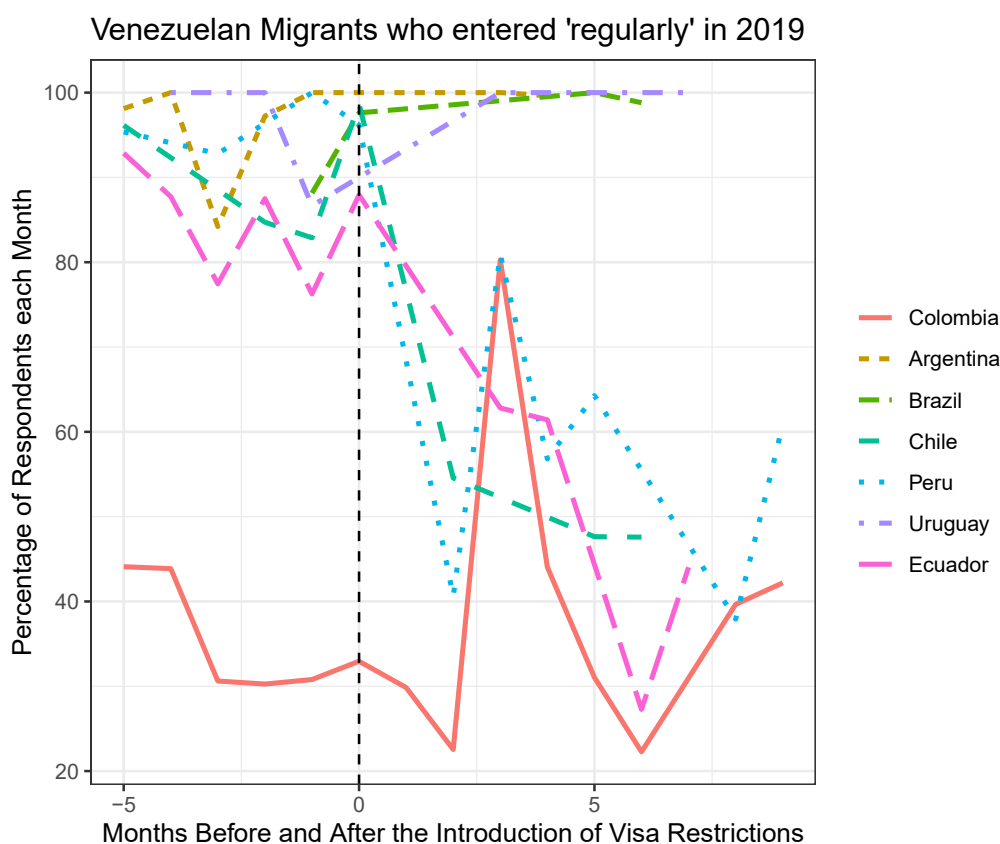


Figure 6. Percentage of Respondents who reported entering the Country Irregularly. Source: UNHCR Microdata.

2019 –, I can confirm that the majority of interviews took place within a month of arrival in the host country.¹⁵ This is because migrants approached the UNHCR and NGOs to seek support with food, housing, and legal advice as soon as they arrived into the country. Additionally, even if it were the case that a consistent error exists, i.e. that some people were interviewed before and after a month from reaching their host country, that error would be similar both in the pre- and post-treatment period, thus not substantially affecting the results.

Therefore, based on the above, in this analysis I assume that month

and year of interview equal the month and year of arrival. I further strengthen this assumption, by filtering only for those migrants who reported having arrived within six months in the host country. However, the need to make such an assumption reflects a limitation in the data, and therefore of this study. The UNHCR did not respond to multiple requests to access non-anonymised data to further test this assumption. By accepting this assumption, the data can be leveraged to study the effects of the introduction of visa requirement on the Venezuelan migrant population.

Finally, one note on the representativeness of the data. As data missingness for educational level is high (see [Appendix](#)), the representativeness of this data for the whole Venezuelan migrant population cannot be confirmed (INEI, 2019; Oviedo Arango, 2021). The only

¹⁵ A doughnut hole RDD test is conducted in the robustness section to test this assumption population.

country for which representative survey data is available is Peru with the ENPOVE 2022 survey, and using that as a measure of representativeness the UNHCR micro data for that country is representative for age, sex and educational level.¹⁶ Moreover, the data collection strategy of the UNHCR micro data and the considerable size of the dataset allow us to make reasonable inferences on the effects of policies on migrants. The unconfirmed representativeness of this dataset for all countries is a limitation of this study that should be acknowledged, together with the fact that data is not available for all months in each country (Fig. 5).

4. Methods

To test the hypotheses formulated above, I use a difference-in-differences (DID) research design, as these visa restrictions were announced and introduced in the same month (June 2019) for Chile and Peru, and only slightly later in Ecuador (announced at the end of July and introduced one month later). Three of the control cases did not introduce passport or visa requirements for Venezuelans in that same period, while Colombia already required a passport prior to 2016. After having specified the general model, in the following section I discuss the parallel trends assumption and conduct a balance test of the covariates between the pre- and post-treatment period to justify the suitability of the DID approach. The OLS general model for each of the four dependent variables is:

$$Y_{i,t} = \alpha + \gamma TM_i + \lambda T_t + \delta(TM_i * T_t) + \epsilon_{i,t} \quad (1)$$

Where $Y_{i,t}$ is the dependent variable for individual respondent i in period t , where period t is either $t = 0$ for before, and $t = 1$ for the period after the introduction of visa restrictions. The dependent variables are binary, coded as either 1 or 0, where 1 stands, respectively, for: irregular entry, irregular visa status, having suffered an episode of violence, and having legal documents or finding employment as a first, second or third priority. TM_i is a dummy variable that is 1 for the treatment, and 0 for the control group, T_t is the time dummy, which is 0 for before and 1 after the introduction of visa restrictions, while $TM_i * T_t$ is the interaction term between time and treatment. α is the constant, and $\epsilon_{i,t}$ the error term. The standard errors are clustered at the country level, although I recognise that the number of clusters in this case is very limited. Country fixed effects are not included to avoid possible collinearity with the treatment variable. Alternative model specifications are discussed in the results section. I estimate the δ coefficient via OLS, which eases the interpretability of the coefficients. In the regression, the 'treatment' period for Chile and Peru is June, while for Ecuador is August 2019. A battery of additional tests is conducted in the robustness section to confirm the findings, with more available in the Appendix.

4.1. Parallel trends assumption

As with any DID design, in this article I identify the introduction of visa restrictions as the causal effect by assuming that had these restrictions not been introduced, the distributions of our dependent variables in the untreated cases (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Uruguay) and the treated cases (Chile, Ecuador, and Peru) would have followed parallel trends. Therefore, while there is no direct way to test the parallel trends assumption over a longer period than the data provided, I plot the percentages of irregular entries in Fig. 6, to check its plausibility. The plot shows that trends in regular entry were similar in both 'treated' and 'untreated' countries in the pre-treatment period, except for Colombia (this issue is addressed below). The percentage of migrants who reported entering the host country regularly decreased in Chile, Ecuador and Peru in the months following the introduction of visa restrictions. For Colombia – that has constantly high numbers of irregular entries – no

such change is visible. In fact there is a one-off increase in regular entries in Colombia around September 2019, while regular entries are constant in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay.

Some fluctuations in this dataset are inevitable, as groups of similar migrants were often interviewed in person in the same locations, thus leading to group differences depending on where they were being interviewed each month. Still, despite the presence of in-country fluctuations in irregular entries and residence permits, the trend in Fig. 6 seems to suggest that the parallel trends assumption might be justified. Yet would the results of this analysis hold, if violations of the parallel trends assumption were substantial? To confirm the results of the DID approach, further below in the robustness section I conduct an *event study analysis* and another analysis using a regression discontinuity design (RDD) to address any concerns relating to parallel trends. Finally, it is important to point out that no other major migration policy changes took place in the pre- or post-treatment period and that there are therefore no further exogenous factors that are likely to confound the final results (Selee and Bolter, 2020).

However, as Kahn-Lang and Lang (2020) and McKenzie (2020) discuss, DID is more plausible not only if the treatment and control groups have similar *trends* but also similar *levels*. Clearly, this is not the case for Colombia, where the percentage of irregular entries and lack of regular visas is substantially higher than in the other countries. To control for this difference in levels, in the Appendix I re-run the models without Colombia. The results confirm the findings discussed below.¹⁷ Levels of regular entry are roughly similar in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay in the pre-treatment period to those of the 'treated' countries.

Fig. 7 further explains these migratory trends by comparing the development over time of the various legal migratory statuses held by migrants. For instance, not only do irregular visa statuses increase in Chile, Ecuador and Peru, but the data clearly shows also how 'tourist' visas were the most used in Chile, Ecuador and Peru before the introduction of restrictions. Focusing on tourist visas seems justified within the context of widespread informal employment, especially in Peru and Ecuador. As mentioned earlier, until June 2019 in Chile Venezuelans could switch from a tourist to a work visa once in the country. Likewise, in Ecuador and Peru few migrants realistically expected to work in formal sectors of the economy, thus making entering as a tourist a viable option to enter the host country safely and regularly. For these reasons, entering as a tourist – whilst not necessarily allowing access to formal work – ensured at least some form of temporary legal residency, and the use of safe access routes into the host country. Also, the event study analysis conducted further below confirms the lack of pre-intervention divergence between the treatment and control cases.

Finally, as mentioned above, the difference between the announcement and implementation of the visa restriction policies were minimal (none for Chile, 9 days for Peru), thus avoiding the issue of self-selection prior to the introduction of the restrictions, with the only exception of Ecuador, where there was a two months gap between announcement and implementation.¹⁸ Moreover, as Freier and Luzes (2021) shows through extensive interviews at the border between Ecuador and Peru, not only Venezuelan migrants did not predict the introduction of restrictions, but were often unaware of changes in policy after their introduction.

¹⁷ I suggest that Colombia might as well be considered a control case, but it is in fact a case that has already been treated in a period prior to the one considered in this study, and that the new 'treated' cases might in fact be just catching up with Colombia, where the trends in irregular entry and irregular visa status were stable in 2019. This reflection merely acknowledges one of the main limitations of the DID approach, in that the period chosen for the analysis inevitably influences the coefficients of interest in the OLS models.

¹⁸ Further regressions (see Appendix 6) confirm the results of all models to be discussed below, even excluding Ecuador.

¹⁶ ENPOVE II data can be accessed directly at <https://iinei.inei.gob.pe/microdatos/>.

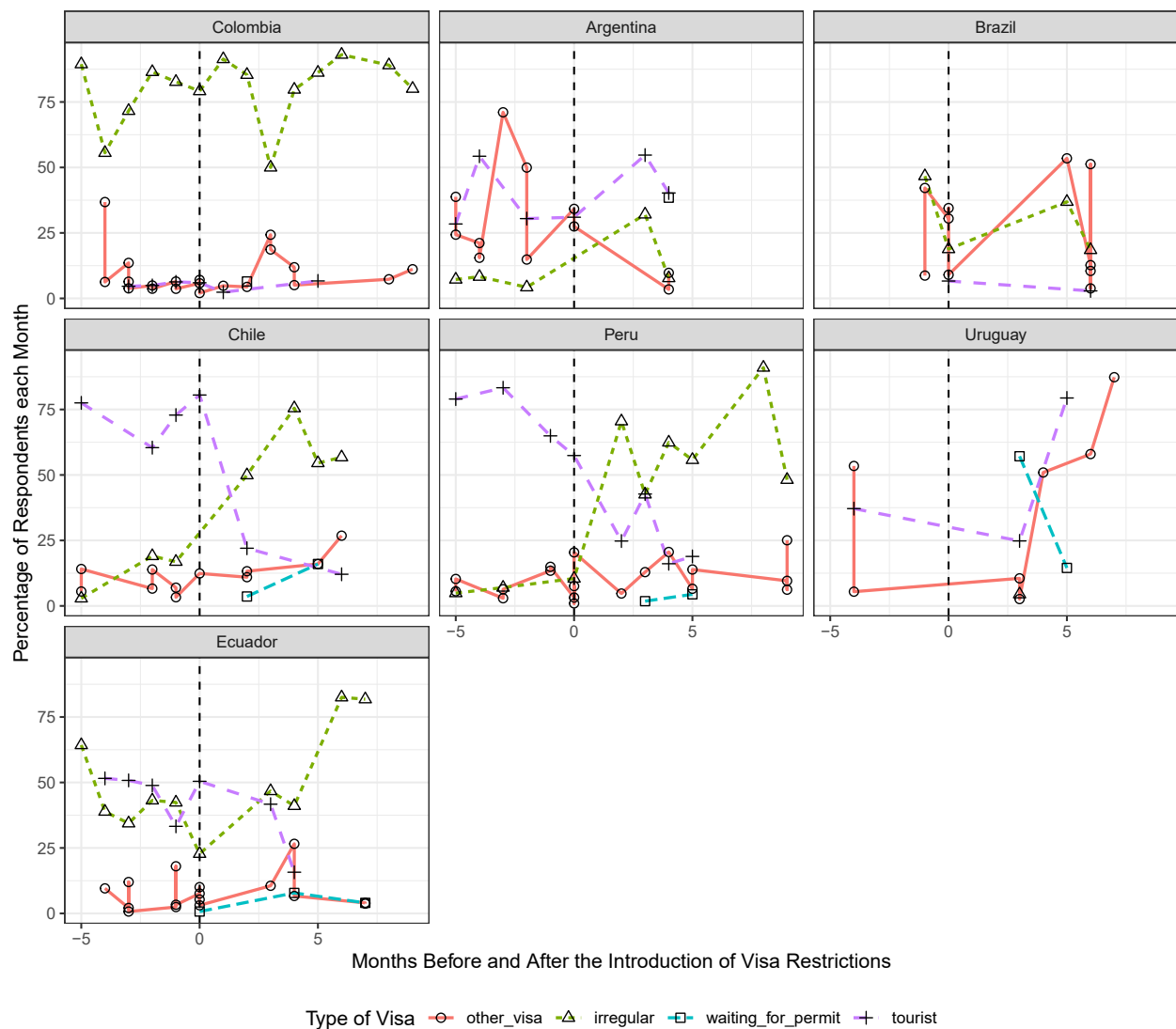


Figure 7. Percentage of Respondents by Type of Visa. Only months with more than 20 respondents are included, to avoid fluctuations due to small sampling. Source: UNHCR Microdata.

4.2. Covariates distribution and data representativity

Additionally, to test for any differences in the pre- and post-treatment covariates, I conduct a covariate balance test as reported in Table 2. The table shows how the frequency of selected key characteristics (age, education and sex) of respondents over time does not change substantially between the pre- and post-treatment period (Hartman and Hidalgo, 2018; Kahn-Lang and Lang, 2020). Overall, the composition of respondents in the ‘treated’ countries does not seem to have been affected by the introduction of the visa restrictions. The stability of these key categories suggests that there was no difference in terms of sampling bias before and after the introduction of restrictions, or that specific categories of migrants are more likely to enter irregularly a country than others. An additional covariate balance test comparing migrants who had an irregular and regular migratory status post-intervention, shows no meaningful differences (Appendix 9).

Finally, it is worth noting that Venezuelans in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay have higher educational levels than those in the other countries under study (see Appendix). This difference can be explained by a series

of factors. One of them is that financing the journey to Argentina, Chile and Uruguay is more expensive – especially for families – than travelling to countries closer to Venezuela, or with easier access routes, thus making it unaffordable to the poorest Venezuelans – who have often lower educational levels.¹⁹

Having shown that there is no difference in terms of the composition of respondents over the year 2019, ideally I would need to ensure that the surveyed population is representative of the overall Venezuelan population in each host country. Unfortunately, nationwide censuses of the Venezuelan population in the different countries in South America is not available for the year 2019, even if the main characteristics (age, sex and education) of the Venezuelan population in the region in a report by the Migration Policy Institute (Chavez Gonzales and Echeverria Estrada, 2020) mirror closely those of the UNHCR micro data. However, as this analysis focuses on the effects of visa restrictions, the issue of representativity is of secondary importance as long as the distribution of respondents’ characteristics remains similar in the pre- and post-intervention periods, which they do.

¹⁹ The covariate balance was assessed using the MatchIt and cobalt packages, both in R.

Table 2

Covariate balance before and after the introduction of restrictions.

Covariate	Type	Diff. Un	Diff.Adj	M. Threshold	
2	Age 12 to 17	Binary	−0.001	0	Balanced, <0.1
3	Age 18 to 24	Binary	0.011	−0.001	Balanced, <0.1
4	Age 25 to 49	Binary	−0.007	0	Balanced, <0.1
5	Age 50 to 66	Binary	−0.004	0	Balanced, <0.1
6	Age 67 or more	Binary	0.0004	0.001	Balanced, <0.1
7	Sex Male	Binary	−0.083	0	Balanced, <0.1
8	No Education	Binary	0.003	0	Balanced, <0.1
9	Primary Education	Binary	−0.019	0	Balanced, <0.1
10	Secondary Education	Binary	0.034	0	Balanced, <0.1
11	Vocational Education	Binary	−0.004	0	Balanced, <0.1
12	Technical Studies	Binary	0.071	0	Balanced, <0.1
13	University Education	Binary	−0.086	0	Balanced, <0.1

The table compares the distribution of age, sex and university level between the migrants who arrived before and after the introduction of restrictions in the countries that introduced restrictions (Chile, Ecuador, Peru). The results suggest that the characteristics of migrants having arrived before and after the introduction of restrictions are similar, meaning that the introduction of visa restrictions caused no change in the composition of the migrant population.

5. Results

Based on the modelling formulated above, here below I show the results of the OLS regressions for the four dependent variables. Similar models to the ones reported below – with additional covariates – are shown in the [Appendix](#). Those models confirm the findings presented here.²⁰ In [Table 3](#) I show the results for the first three dependent variables: irregular entry, lack of a regular visa, and having suffered violence, where δ (Diff-in-Diff) is the main coefficient of interest. The coefficient in the models below estimate the changes in the probability of the respective dependent variables (i.e., irregular entry, irregular visa, having suffered an episode of violence) from the period $t = 0$ to the period after the introduction of visa requirements ($t = 1$) for the treated compared to the control group.

The first two results confirm theoretical expectations: the δ coefficient estimates the introduction of visa restrictions increased the likelihood of *irregular entry* (first column) by around 38 percentage points, compared to the countries where this had not happened. Similarly, in the second column, the *DID* coefficient confirms that the introduction of visa restrictions led to an increase in migrants without a *regular visa* of 41 percentage points over the same period in the treatment cases, compared to the control cases. The similarity in magnitude suggests that these results are indeed robust and the magnitude credible. These results confirm previous findings by [Czaika and Hobolth \(2016\)](#), but with far

Table 3

Regression results – Difference-in-differences.

	Dependent variable:		
	Irregular Entry	Irregular Visa	Suffered Violence
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treatment Time	−0.24 (0.22)	−0.27 (0.24)	−0.08 (0.15)
Diff-in-Diff	−0.07 (0.08)	−0.03 (0.10)	−0.04 (0.09)
	0.38***	0.41***	0.03
	(0.08)	(0.12)	(0.10)
Country-Level Clustered SE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Treated Countries Pre-Visa	14.4	22	26.6
Mean Treated Countries Post-Visa	42.8	56.6	26
Observations	44,021	44,302	44,021
R ²	0.08	0.10	0.01
Adjusted R ²	0.08	0.10	0.01

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

The table reports the effect of introducing visa restrictions on three dependent variables: irregular entry, irregular visa status, and violence suffered. The results report that the introduction of visa restrictions increased irregular entry by 38 and irregular visa status by 41 percentage points. The introduction of restrictions did not increase the likelihood of reporting having suffered violence. However, both pre- and post-intervention more than a quarter of all respondents in the treated countries report having suffered violence, suggesting that possibly most of the violence does not take place at border crossings, but in other areas. All standard errors are clustered at the country level.

higher estimates than their 2 to 4 point increases in irregular migrants following a 10 point increase in asylum rejections for 29 European states.²¹ In the case of Venezuelan displacement, in the *treated* countries (those with restrictions) the mean of irregular entries went from 14.4 to 42.8 in the post-treatment period, whereas for irregular visa status the mean increased from 22 to 56.6.

The δ coefficient model in the third column instead, does not seem to validate the hypothesis that the introduction of these restrictions – and therefore the higher likelihood of entering and being irregularly in the country – leads to an increase in *suffering violence* as reported by migrants themselves. Even controlling for the country in which migrants reported suffering violence does not change the results (see the discussion section below). Also, the type of violence and percentage of individuals reporting having been victims of violence does not change substantially after the introduction of restrictions (*ibid.*).

There are two reasons that could explain these results: first, it might as well be that this is indeed the case, and that following irregular channels does not substantially increase the levels of violence suffered by migrants in the context of Venezuelan displacement because violence does not take place mostly in border areas, but rather in the urban areas and transport hubs used by migrants during their journeys. Alternatively, it could be the case that many vulnerable migrants prefer not to report certain types of episodes of violence suffered, either because many forms of harassment in that context might be considered ‘normal,’ or out of a generalised fear of retaliation or disillusionment, especially if they are in an irregular migratory situation. However, as is discussed further in the robustness section, these results *do not* mean that migrants did not suffer violence (as reported in [Table 3](#), over a quarter of

²⁰ In the appendix, I show the results of running the same models with both country and year-specific month fixed effects. Results are unaffected. Also, running the same models using a wild cluster bootstrap algorithm (see replication code online), as suggested by [Roodman et al. \(2019\)](#) to take into account the limited number of clusters, confirms again these findings.

²¹ Two reasons can explain the far higher estimations of the magnitude in this study than in that of [Czaika and Hobolth \(2016\)](#). First, the fact that while they use EUROSTAT aggregate estimates, this study is based on microdata, increasing the precision of the analysis. Second, the context of Europe – on which their research focuses – and that of Latin America, are completely different, both in terms of geography and state capacity to patrol borders, meaning that in Latin America visa restrictions will inevitably have less of a deterrent effect than in Europe, thus the difference in the magnitude of these findings.

migrants, both pre- and post-treatment, have suffered violence), but only that most of the violence might not have taken place in border areas. Because of these two reasons, I suggest caution in drawing any hasty conclusion from these results, as further research is needed. Additionally, running these same DID models excluding the months between the announcement and implementation of visa restrictions (only applies for Ecuador) confirms again both the magnitude and significance of these results (not shown).

The lack of any meaningful changes in the compositional distribution of migrants – as shown in the earlier section – might also suggest that the number of migrants was not significantly reduced by the introduction of visa restrictions. If that had been the case, it would have been likely that some form of self-selection of migrants would have changed their composition. However, there is not enough evidence to draw any definitive conclusion in this regard.

5.1. Priority models for legal documents and employment

Using the same *DID* approach as above, I run the models to test if the priorities of Venezuelan migrants changed after the introduction of visa requirements. Also in this case, the dependent variable is binary, with $Y_{it} = 1$ when getting hold of legal documents is – respectively – the first, second or third priority identified by the migrant, and $Y_{it} = 0$ for any other priority. The results shown in Table 4 are robust for the three priorities, that is, the introduction of visa restrictions changed the self-reported priorities of Venezuelan migrants, whose first priority overwhelmingly became accessing legal documents – an indicator of their need to regularise their migratory status. In the first column the δ coefficient shows an increase in 21 percentage points in self-reported need of legal documents as a first priority. The same is true for legal documents as a second and third priority, compared to the control cases. This shift suggests that introducing visa restrictions changed migrants' priorities from seeking employment as soon as they arrive, to seeking to regularise their migratory situation, thus investing in these activities time and resources that could have been used otherwise, for instance to seek employment.

To confirm the meaning of the results in the models above, I repeat a similar analysis for self-reported priorities, this time using "Access to Employment" as a dependent variable. The results in Table 5 seem to confirm the interpretation of the previous regression results, that is, that after the introduction of visa requirements, and the consequent higher

Table 4
Regression results – Difference-in-differences. Legal documents as priority.

	Legal documents as priority		Third priority
	First priority	Second priority	
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treatment	–0.11*** (0.04)	–0.01 (0.02)	–0.002 (0.02)
Time	–0.18*** (0.005)	–0.06*** (0.02)	–0.06*** (0.01)
Diff-in-Diff	0.21*** (0.03)	0.06** (0.03)	0.04* (0.02)
Country-Level Clustered SE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Treated Countries Pre-Visa	17.5	11.5	11
Mean Treated Countries Post-Visa	19.7	9.8	6.6
Observations	44,302	44,302	44,302
R ²	0.02	0.01	0.01
Adjusted R ²	0.02	0.01	0.01

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

The table reports the effect of introducing visa restrictions on the dependent variable Legal Documents as a first, second and third priority. The results suggest that the introduction of restrictions increased accessing legal documents, a proxy for the need to regularise one's own migratory situation, as first, second and third priority. All standard errors are clustered at the country level.

Table 5
Regression results – Difference-in-differences. Access to employment as priority.

	Access to employment as priority	Access to employment as priority	Access to employment as priority
	First Priority	Second Priority	Third Priority
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treatment	–0.001 (0.06)	–0.05*** (0.01)	–0.04*** (0.02)
Time	–0.22*** (0.04)	–0.17*** (0.02)	–0.09*** (0.02)
Diff-in-Diff	0.03 (0.09)	0.06** (0.03)	0.05* (0.03)
Country-Level Clustered SE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Treated Countries Pre-Visa	38.2	21.8	14.9
Mean Treated Countries Post-Visa	12	9	7.7
Observations	44,302	44,302	44,302
R ²	0.06	0.03	0.01
Adjusted R ²	0.06	0.03	0.01

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

The table reports the effect of introducing visa restrictions on the dependent variable accessing employment as a first, second and third priority. The results show that the introduction of restrictions increased the need for employment as second and third priority, suggesting that the introduction of restrictions shifted the priorities of migrants, away from employment (now a second or third priority) towards seeking to regularise their migratory situation (As shown in Table 4 and Fig. 15). All standard errors are clustered at the country level.

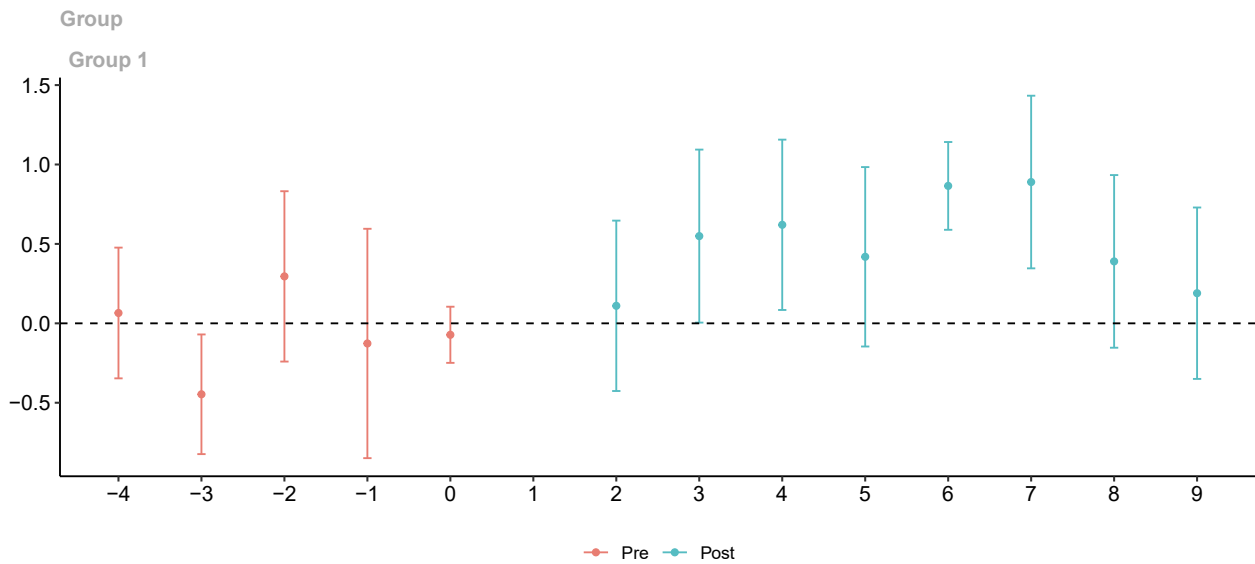
likelihood of being irregularly in the country, seeking employment increased as a second and third priority, suggesting some form of substitution effects in that Venezuelans' top priority shifted from employment to the need to regularise their migratory status. These results are more evident by looking at the mean difference between the pre- and post-restriction period, where employment as a first priority decreased substantially from a mean of 38.2 to just 12.

6. Robustness

To confirm the results of the models above, I run two series of robustness tests. First, I first conduct an event study analysis which provides estimates of group-time average treatment effects for the treated countries in each month of the period under study. Then, I show the results of an RDD, confirmed by a doughnut hole RDD for the months furthest away to control for the assumption about the equivalence between month of interview and entry. Additionally, in the Appendix, I conduct a battery of robustness checks, including the outcome of a Survival Analysis, which also confirms the previous findings. First, I estimate the average treatment effect on the treated over time of introducing visa restrictions on the four main outcome variables of interest following Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021), clustering the standard errors at the country level.

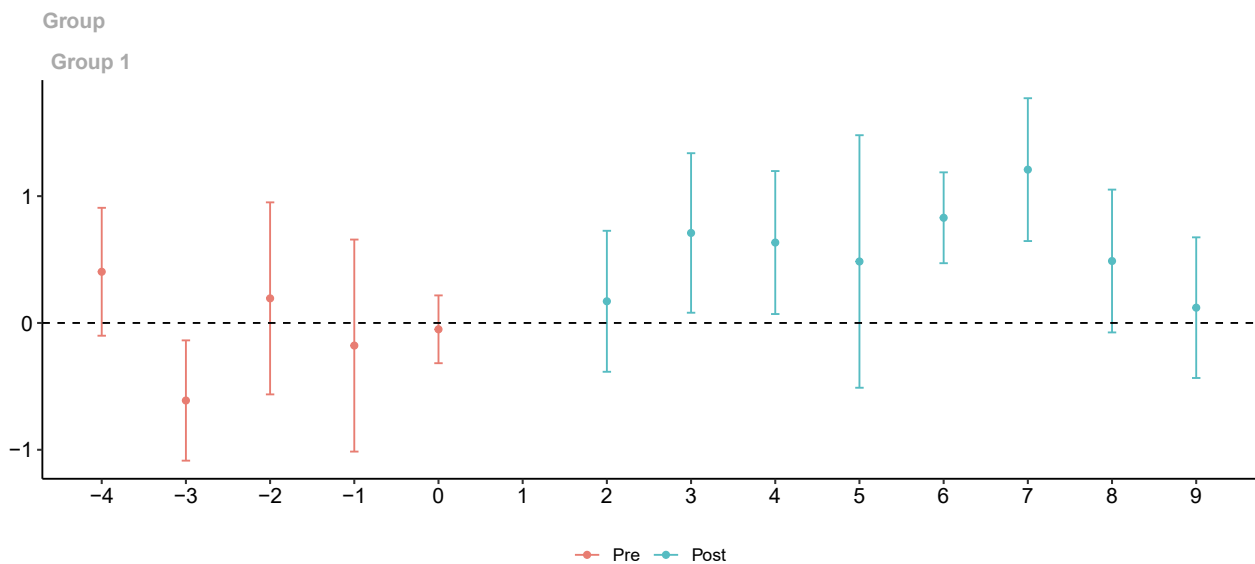
Results are shown in Figs. 8–11. In the first and second plot, the average treatment effects over the nine months following the introduction of restrictions is stable over time, as expected, meaning that – not only there is a sizeable effect – but that it also lasts over several months following the introduction of visa restrictions. The coefficient for the ninth month (March 2020) is understandably lower as less data was collected that month due to the beginning of the Covid pandemic.

In the third plot, the point estimate for the variable 'violence suffered' does not show any change in trends between the pre- and post-treatment period, confirming earlier findings. Additionally, the estimate for the fourth outcome variable does show a positive average



The figure reports the average treatment effect on irregular entry in the four months leading to and the nine months following the introduction of visa restrictions. The error bars show the 95 percent confidence intervals. The standards errors clustered at the country level.

Figure 8. Average Treatment Effect of the introduction of visa restrictions on irregular entry. Source: UNHCR Microdata.



The figure reports the average treatment effect on irregular visa status in the four months leading to and the nine months following the introduction of visa restrictions. The error bars show the 95 percent confidence intervals. The standards errors clustered at the country level.

Figure 9. Average Treatment Effect of the introduction of visa restrictions on irregular visa Status. Source: UNHCR Microdata.

treatment effect on legal documents as a first priority, but this is not statistically significant.²² Finally, replicating this analysis by excluding two pre-treatment time periods, as suggested by [Sun and Abraham \(2021\)](#) and [Borusyak, Jaravel, and Spiess \(2024\)](#) again confirms these findings (See [Appendix 6](#)).

²² In month -3 results statistically significant from zero in a few cases, against expectations. This is partially likely due to the fact that in one country – Argentina – the type of migrants categorised with visa status ‘other’ jumped substantially in that month only, an overwhelmingly female cohort (see [Appendix 7](#)), suggesting that a very specific cohort of Venezuelans might have been surveyed that month.

6.1. Regression discontinuity analysis

Last, to confirm the previous findings and rule out any forms of endogeneity, I run a series of RDD OLS regressions on the outcome variables at both sides of the cut-off. The x-axis in all the plots below shows the running variable, the months preceding and following the introduction of visa restrictions in both the treated and untreated countries. These RDD estimates confirm the findings of earlier difference-in-differences estimates. An RDD doughnut hole test including only five or more months after the introduction of restrictions, to account for the assumption relating to month of interviews equalling the month of entry – confirms these results. The introduction of visa restrictions did increase the entry into these three countries by irregular routes of Venezuelan nationals, instead of actually stopping them migrating altogether. The use of irregular visa status as a second

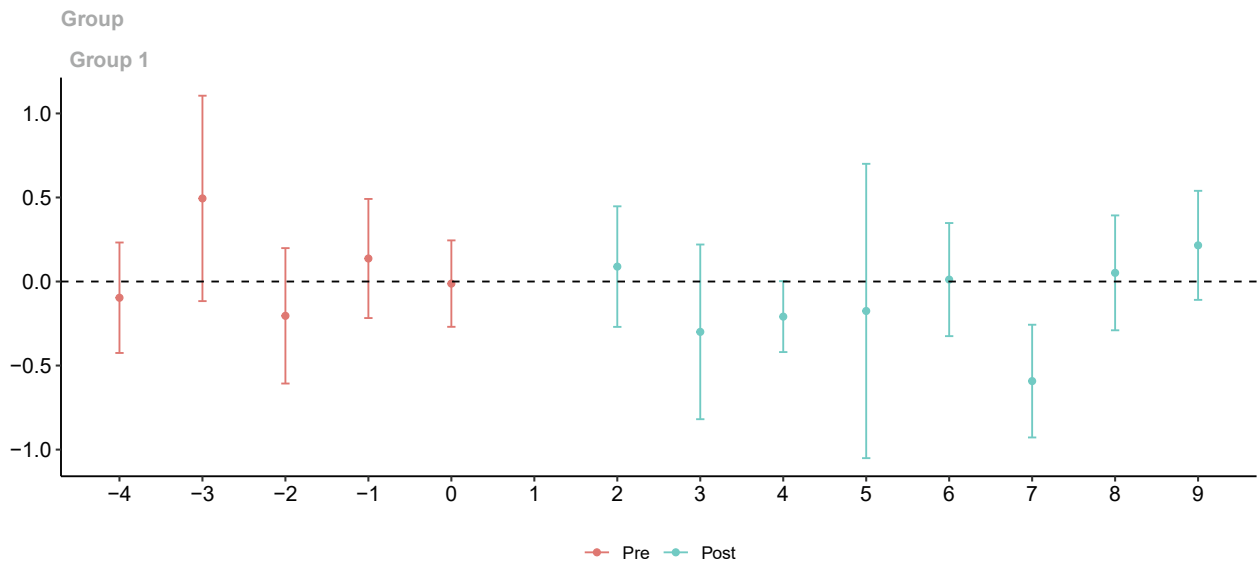


Figure 10. Average Treatment Effect of the introduction of visa restrictions on violence suffered. Source: UNHCR Microdata.

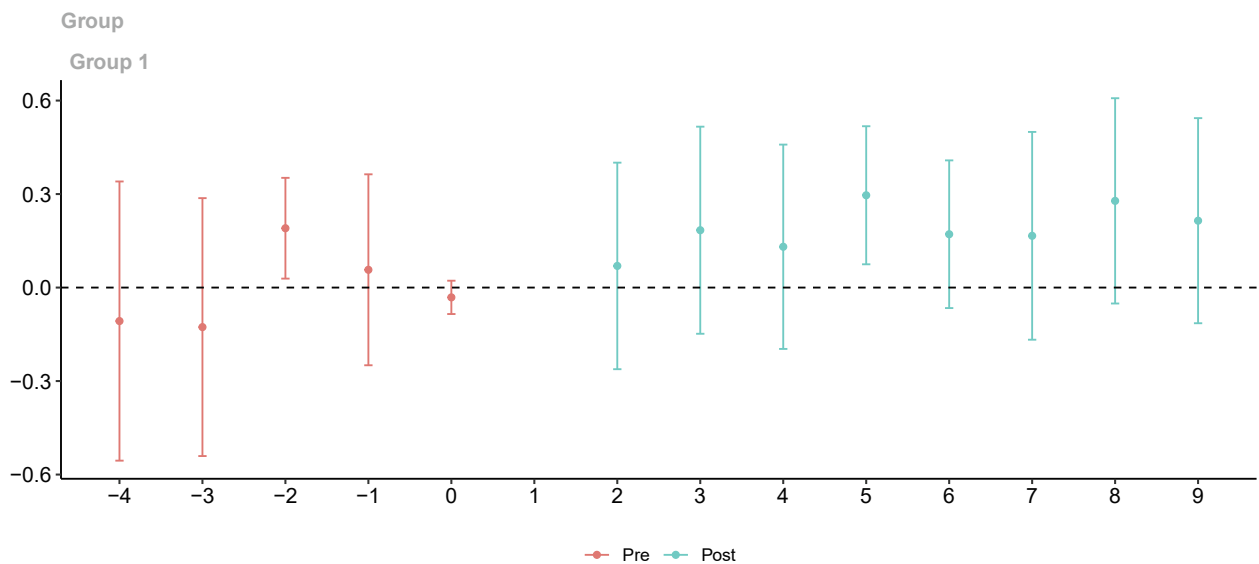


Figure 11. Average Treatment Effect of the introduction of visa restrictions on legal documents as first priority. Source: UNHCR Microdata.

dependent variable confirms such hypothesis (Fig. 12).

As summarised in the equation below, as a robustness test we run a linear model with two periods for the treated countries: where $Y_{i,t}$ is the dependent variable and $T \in \{0, 1\}$, where 0 represents the period before treatment, and 1 the one after. χ_i are the country fixed effects.

$$Y_{i,t} = \alpha + \delta T_{i,t} + \chi_i + \epsilon_{i,t} \quad (2)$$

Finally, the RDD estimates confirm the lack of the effect of visa restrictions on violence suffered. While results for legal documents do not seem to confirm the previous findings from the DID estimates, the doughnut hole RDDs in Fig. 13 do seem to show a difference between the treated and non-treated countries for the months furthest apart. The regression outputs based on the RDDs are available in the Appendix.

7. Discussion

The results from the regression models confirm the first hypothesis: both irregular entry and irregular visa status increased as a consequence of the introduction of visa restrictions. The models estimate an increase of 38 and 41 percentage points respectively. Having confirmed that introducing visa restrictions caused an increase in the likelihood of irregular entries and lack of a regular visa status in Chile, Ecuador and Peru, I then turn to confirm the unexpected finding that the introduction of these restrictions had no impact on migrants reporting having suffered episodes of violence. To further check these results, in Fig. 14. I show how violence reported over time changed in the countries under study. Contrary to the assumptions from the literature – and contrary to the formulated hypothesis – in this case it seems that the increase in irregularity does not correlate with increases in violence suffered by

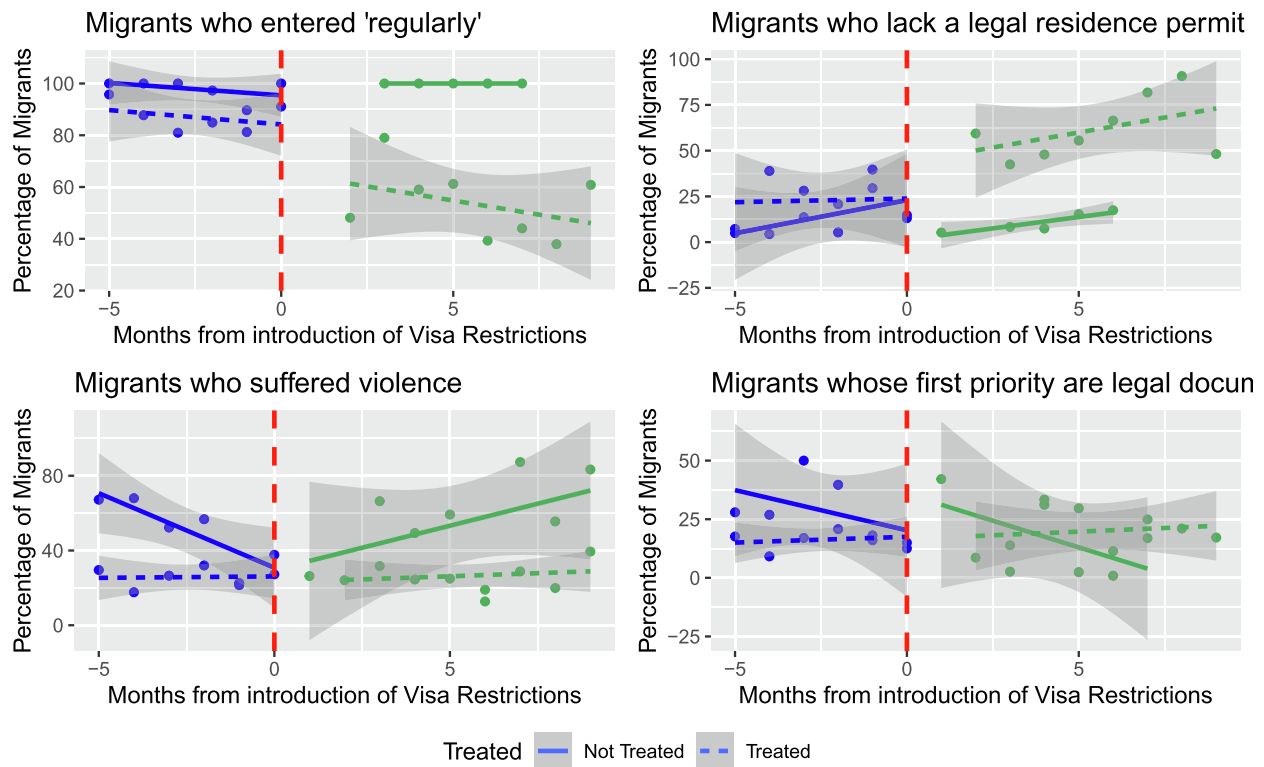


Figure 12. Regression Discontinuity Analysis on Dependent Variables: irregular entry, irregular visa status, violence suffered, legal documents as first priority. Colombia is excluded from these plots as irregular entry levels are higher than in the other control cases. In the first plot, only months with more than 20 respondents are considered. Grey bands represent the 95 % confidence interval bands. Source: UNHCR Microdata.

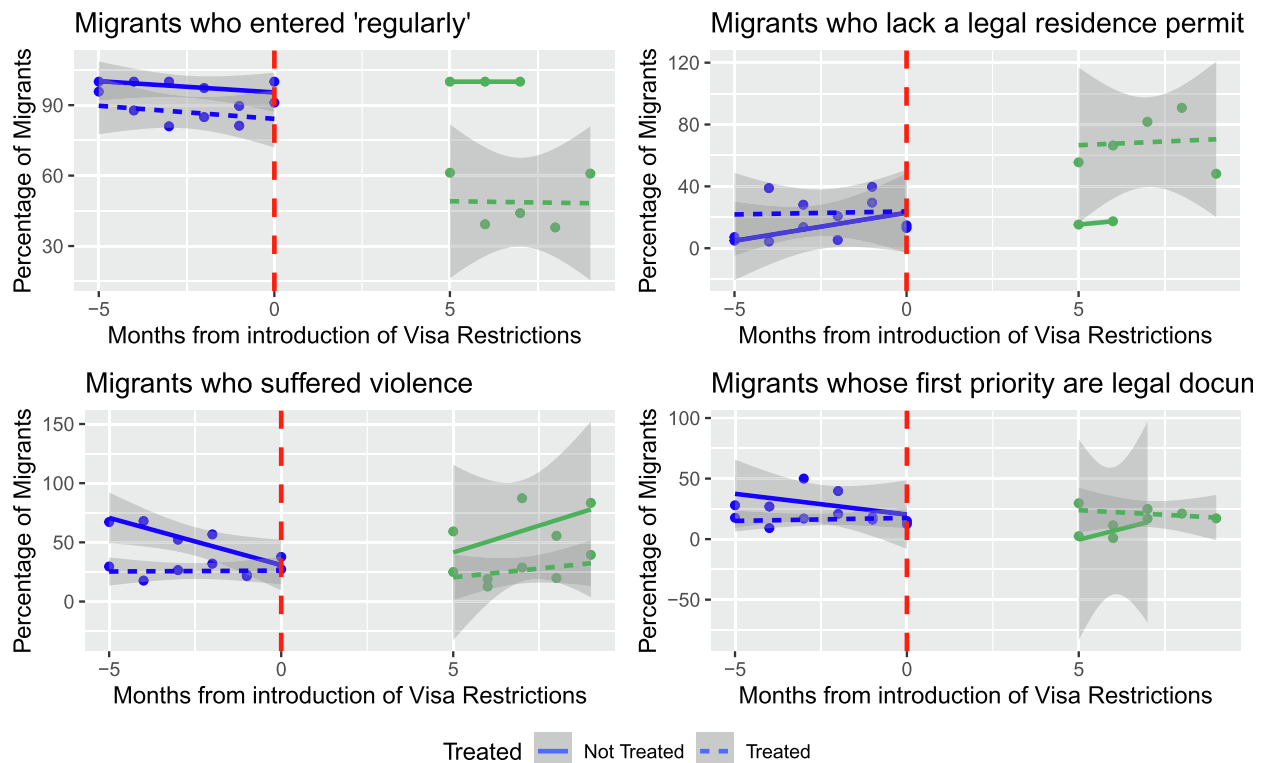


Figure 13. Regression Discontinuity Analysis on Dependent Variables: irregular entry, irregular visa status, violence suffered, legal documents as first priority, only including five or more months after the introduction of visa restrictions. Colombia is excluded from these plots as irregular entry levels are higher than in the other control cases. Month of August in Argentina is excluded as it included only 20 asylum seekers. Grey bands represent the 95 % confidence interval bands. Source: UNHCR Microdata.

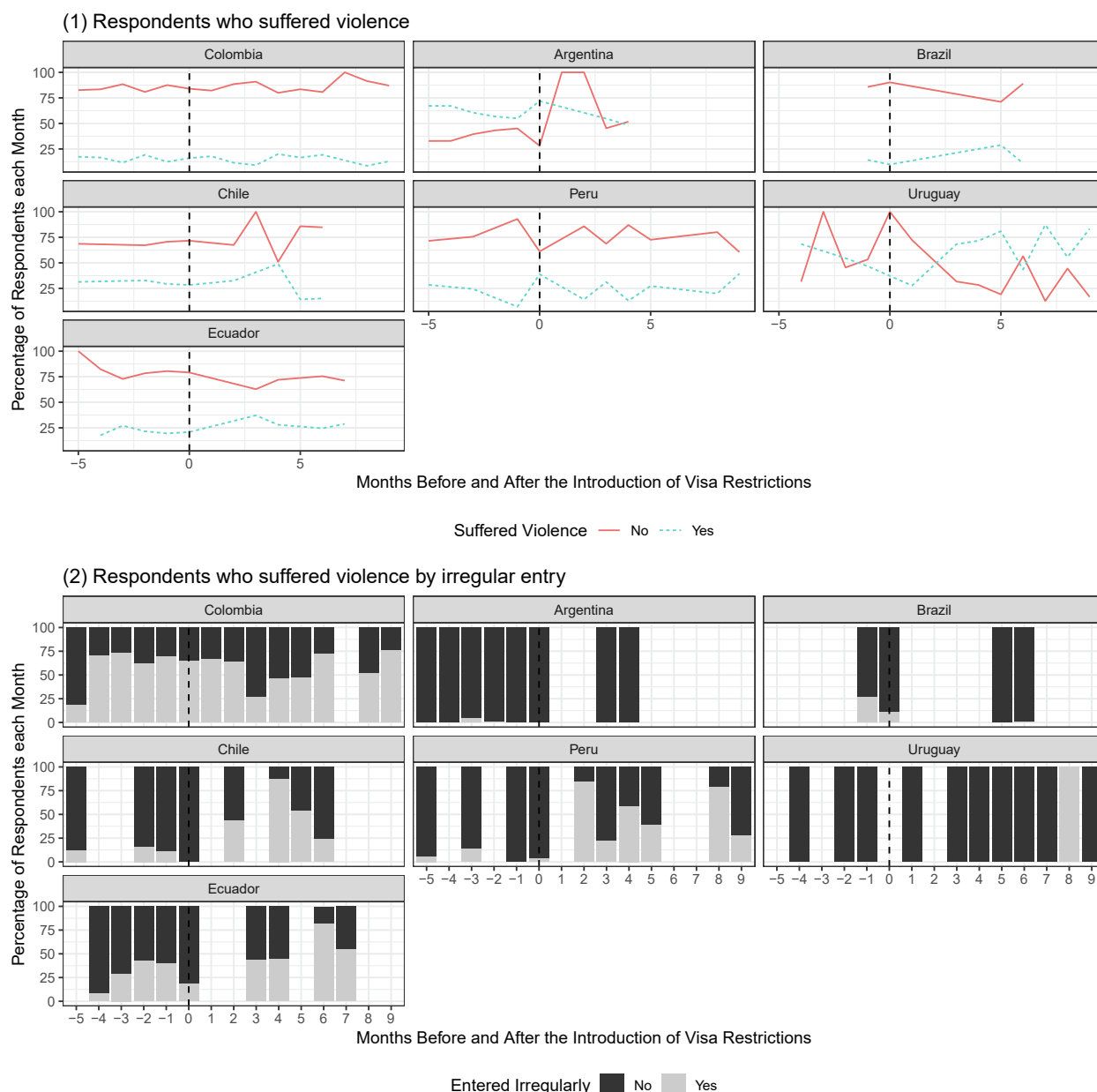


Figure 14. Respondents who suffered an incident of violence. Source: UNHCR Microdata.

Venezuelan migrants, although some migrants have always suffered some form of violence in all of the countries under study. Various reasons might explain these results, not limited to the fact that violence might be taking place overwhelmingly away from border areas. Still, it could as well be the case that some form of reporting bias exists, which might account for these results. However, chart n.2 in Fig. 4 does show an increase in violence suffered by those who entered irregularly in Chile and Peru, although not in Ecuador. Thus, I cannot conclude that these introductions led to more or less violence suffered by migrants. Further research will need to confirm these findings.²³

Finally, to confirm findings that the irregular status of Venezuelan migrants led to a shift in their priorities towards the need to find legal documents and negatively affected their job search, I plot below in Fig. 14 the change in first priorities between the first half of 2019 and

the following nine months. The plots show how – compared to the first half of the year, i.e., before the introduction of restrictions – the percentage of respondents whose first need became the acquisition of legal papers increased by roughly 20 percentage points in Ecuador and Peru, and by 30 percentage points in Chile

A similar increase took place in Uruguay, and – a much smaller one – in Argentina. The increase in Uruguay seems to be rather due to Venezuelans who had applied for permits, and were waiting for the outcome, as shown in Fig. 7. The case of Argentina seems to follow a different dynamic, possibly because of a one-off interview round.²⁴ Future research will need to focus on understanding the migration dynamics in those two countries. To conclude, these trends seem to support the hypothesis that an increase in irregular entries, led migrants to prioritise the acquisition of legal documents to ensure their long-term

²³ For a discussion on the significance and patterns of missing data see Appendix.

²⁴ It should be pointed out that I focus on access to employment as a priority instead of actual employment, because of high data missingness for the latter (occupation_coa), as shown in the missing data section in the Appendix.

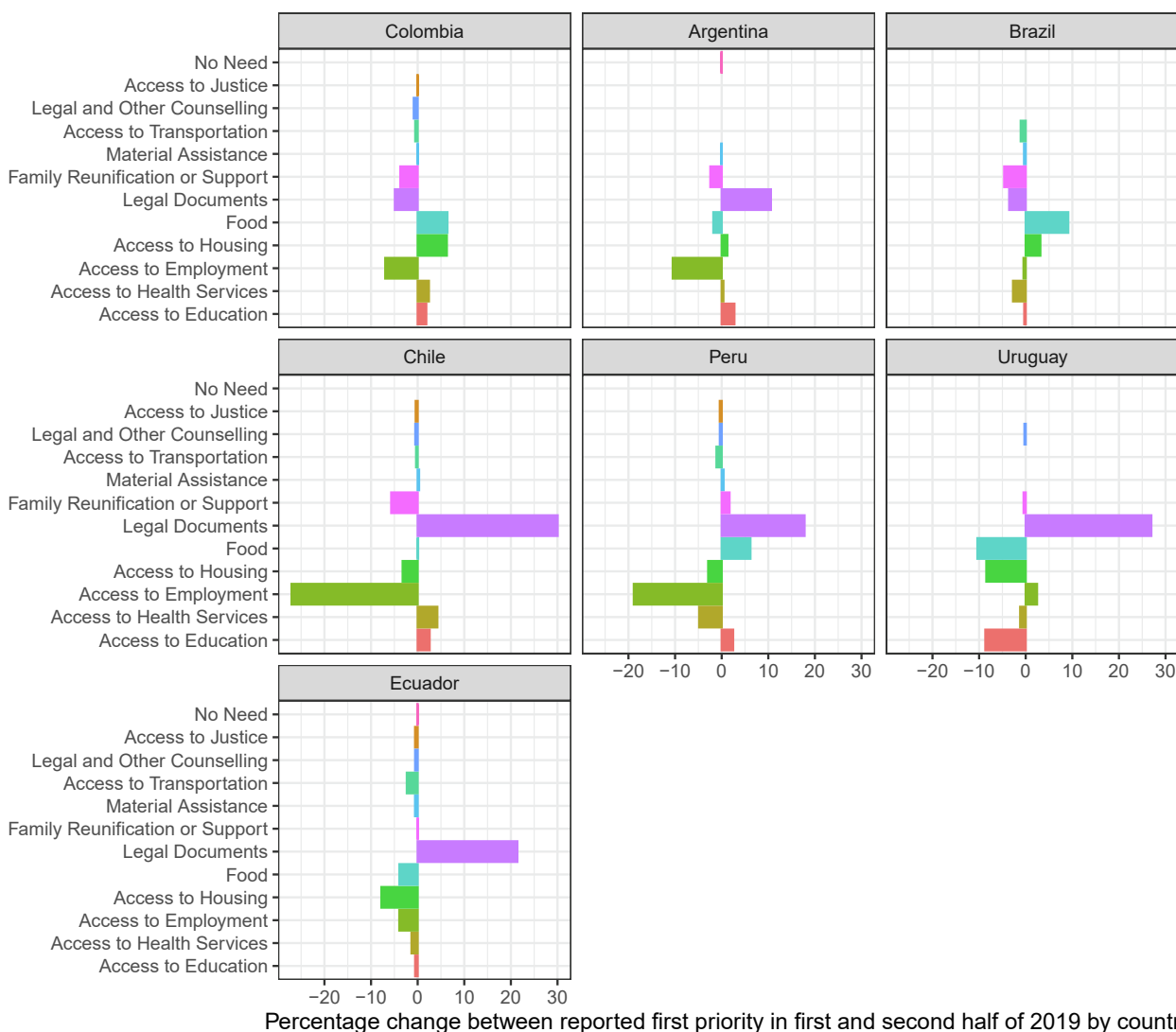


Figure 15. This table shows the difference in percentage points of respondents' reported first priority between the first half of 2019 – before the introduction of visa restrictions – and the following nine months. Source: UNHCR Microdata.

residency in the country, while sacrificing the job search as their first priority, which is especially evident for the cases of Peru and Chile.²⁵

8. Conclusion

This research has asked several fundamental questions on the effectiveness of introducing visa restrictions in reducing migratory flows, as well as on the effects of migration policies on migrants' well-being and priorities, in a context of mass displacement and porous borders. This study concludes that the introduction of visa restrictions led to a significant increase in the likelihood of irregular entry and irregular visa status in Chile, Ecuador and Peru, compared to the control countries where such restrictions were not introduced. While I am not able to infer that the introduction of these visa restrictions had no effect on the absolute numbers of entries, I can conclude that Venezuelan migrants – whose composition did not change from the pre-treatment group – decided to cross borders despite the lack of available legal entry channels. This suggests that imposing visa restrictions within a context of mass displacement and porous borders has limited effects, as migrants cross borders anyway. Again, the lack of change in the

composition of individuals by some main characteristics, such as age, sex and education, shows no self-selection of people into irregularity, i.e. all categories of surveyed Venezuelan migrants were as likely to migrate regularly than irregularly.

Surprisingly, the findings of this article do not confirm the hypothesis that increased irregularity led to more violence suffered by migrants. This conclusion is unexpected. A series of reasons might elucidate these results, including the fact that violence might be taking place mostly away from border areas, possibly in urban areas and transport hubs. Still, further research is needed before drawing any policy conclusions from these results. Last, this article also found that being irregularly in the country shifts migrants' priorities away from seeking employment towards the need to first regularise their migratory status, thus wasting valuable resources and time in the effort to secure their future in the host country. This research thus contributes both to the literature on the effectiveness of visa restrictions in stopping actual migratory flows, as well as on the effects of migration policies on migrants' well-being, including their priorities.

However, it is also fundamental to recognise the limitations of this study. First, these results hold in this specific context: that of mass displacement and porous borders, as experienced by Venezuelans across South America. It is likely that in other contexts this would not be the case, as the example of migrants and refugees seeking to reach Europe

²⁵ Plots with absolute values are available in the [Appendix](#).

from the shores of North Africa shows, or even the case of Venezuelan migrants crossing the Darien Gap aiming to reach the United States. In those cases, while the availability of regular entry channels might not be a fundamental issue in the decision to travel for many migrants, surely the irregular channel leads them to suffer dramatic episodes of violence. Second, under different geographical circumstances, the introduction of visa restrictions might indeed be effective, especially for countries far apart from each other, or with borders easier to patrol, as widely studied in the literature (Czaika and Neumayer 2017; Neumayer, 2010). Still, this article offers further proof in favour of the ‘structural factors’ argument as the main drivers of migration, as opposed to the more politicised ‘push-pull’ framework, in that structural issues such as labour market demand and conflict in the origin country, among others, create migratory movements that governments are often unable to stop (Haas et al., 2019). Thus, discussions on ‘push-pull’ factors should be avoided, especially in cases of mass displacement and porous borders such as the one studied in this research.

Third, due to the cross-sectional nature of the data used in this study, the only effects that can be reliably analysed are the short-term ones. This research does not make any claims about the consequences of being irregularly in a host country for migrants in the long term. Fourth, the assumption in this study is that the introduction of such visa restrictions was done with the objective of stopping the inflow of migrants. Yet, it might also be the case that these visa restrictions were introduced mostly as a symbolic effort by governments eager to show to the electorate that they were ‘doing something’ about the continuous inflow of migrants from Venezuela. The regularisation effort, especially from part of the Ecuadorian government, just after the introduction of visa restrictions, could suggest that indeed that was the case, at least for the latter (Selee and Bolter, 2020). Finally, as the sample used in this research is not necessarily representative of the Venezuelan migrant population – at least not in all countries –, these findings need to be contextualised, until the publication of reliable census data of Venezuelan migrants across all the countries under study.

Future research will need to confirm these findings, possibly in the same or a similar context, but also extending this type of study across other areas of the globe, especially the Global South. Indeed, that will be possible only through extensive data collection by international institutions and national governments, given the considerable amount of resources necessary to collect enough representative data. In fact, research confirming or disproving the findings from this study will be fundamental in understanding the effects of policy making decisions on migrants’ likelihood of travelling regardless of the legal means to do so, and the effects of migration policies not only on their legal status, but also on their well-being and priorities. The sometimes ‘symbolic’ character of migration policy interventions – as discussed by Hammoud-Gallego and Freier (2023) – will also need to be further considered in future research.

Finally, the findings of this research are highly relevant for policy making, especially given the momentous decision taken by the Colombian government to grant temporary protection to Venezuelan nationals for the next ten years (Grandi, 2021). This decision recognised the drawbacks to both migrants and their host societies of leaving people in irregularity in the long term. While such regularisation policies are shunned by governments who believe they will act as ‘pull factors’ for future migrants, they also offer the only viable option for a stable life for most migrants who are likely to migrate anyway, and for a safer society for the native population. Another policy option that governments should consider in cases of mass displacement are humanitarian visas that allow holders to enter a country with some form of ID, but not necessarily a passport or the need to hold a visa, while guaranteeing the right to live and work. The humanitarian visa option would work best if undertaken in a coordinated manner by all the countries who are likely to receive migrants given some shock such as a war, thus pushing them towards safer migratory routes, and avoiding them falling into the pitfalls that come with being an irregular migrant in a country, as was done

in the EU following the displacement of Ukrainian nationals.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Omar Hammoud-Gallego: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The replication data for this manuscript is available upon request to the UNHCR Microdata repository (as explained in footnote 1 in the manuscript).

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2024.106709>.

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