

Undocumented Migrants in Venezuela Have More Rights than US Citizens in the US

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Krosbi Quintero, a Venezuelan, spent 60 days in a migrant prison in Spain, he told [Clarín](#) last year. Before that, he had been detained ten other times for not having identity documents. In prison he and other inmates were given Alprazolam, normally prescribed for panic attacks, so they wouldn't "create problems". Quintero said migrants were blamed for "stealing jobs", and police hunted for undocumented migrants in the train stations, stepping the hunt up when Spain's economic situation got worse. Quintero claimed the police focused on darker skinned people such as himself.

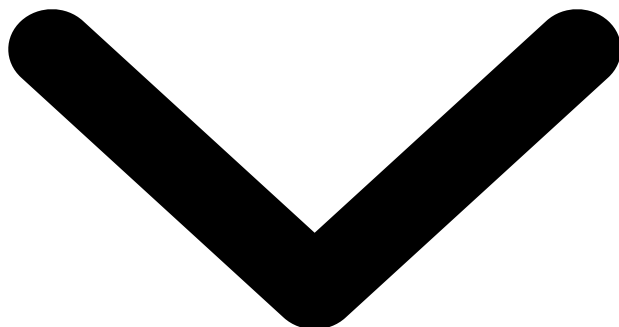
While most first world and imperialist countries criminalise refugees and undocumented migrants, scapegoating them, promoting racism, and mistreating them, Venezuela welcomes migrants; and provides them with the same rights as Venezuelan citizens. The Chavez and Maduro governments have never blamed the millions of migrants here for any of the problems the country is facing; rather, migrants -documented or not- are welcomed and receive health care, education, and other benefits.

Meanwhile, Venezuelans and other Latin Americans, as well as migrants from Africa and Asia, are locked up, shot at, and demonised, when they try to migrate to and even vacation in first world countries. Every year the US expels almost 400,000 people who don't have migration documents. According to a [Telesur report](#), border patrol agents even teach children near the border with Mexico to fire at cut outs of dark skinned migrants. The Oaxacan Institute of Migrant Attention said that in the January this year ten people were killed when trying to cross the border to the US, and in 2013 a total of 214 people were killed.

Spanish security forces have fired rubber bullets at migrants trying to swim to Spanish soil, seeing [nine people](#) from African countries drown in the attempt in February, according to rights groups and migrants. In Italy, undocumented migrants are needed for the cheap labour they provide to the agriculture industry (super exploitation the government turns a blind eye to), but are also demonised and degraded, with some forced to live in sewers. In England, the Home Office gives its workers vouchers to expensive clothing shops as an incentive when to meet the target of rejecting 70% of asylum seekers.

And in Australia, a wealthy country with one of the lowest population densities and migration rates, refugees (heroes) are locked up and regularly commit suicide, while British backpackers who overstay visas are usually left alone. The Australian government's immigration [page](#) says in huge bold red text, "No way, you will not make Australia home". There, it announces that the Australian government will not process any temporary or permanent protection visas to anyone arriving by boat without a visa.

Every household “has at least one Colombian in it” – Venezuela’s migration history



Flor Gomez (Tamara Pearson /Venezuelanalysis.com)

Flor Alba Gomez Yepez migrated to Venezuela from Colombia nearly forty years ago, but only recently received citizenship. She described how the treatment of migrants has changed over time in Venezuela to Venezuelanalysis.

“I came here in 1973 after one of my brothers came here looking for a better quality of life. In Colombia the economic situation is always difficult. When we arrived here we started to work in a jumper factory – it’s still there, on the Avenue Americas, it’s called Azil, owned by some Italians. The housing situation back then was very bad. No one wanted to rent to Colombians, there was a lot of discrimination and racism because back then Colombians had a bad reputation. One woman would say that Colombians are thieves and prostitutes – they’d generalise like that about us, but then they’d get to know us. Now things have changed, Colombians are seen well. We’ve shown that we work hard, as time has passed we’ve become known for that,” Gomez said.

“This country is characterised by having people from all over the world; the biggest percentage [of migrants] are from Colombia, but there are also Italians, who often own bread shops, people from the Middle East, who often own clothing shops, many shops are owned by foreigners, and the Venezuelans are often professionals; doctors, teachers,” she said.

“Venezuelans and Colombians get married, and I’d say most households have at least one Colombian in them,” Gomez added.

Venezuela has the third highest number of migrants in Latin America, according to El Carabobeno. A 2011 World Bank study also put Venezuela in second place in the region for number of refugees, though the line between migrants and refugees is sometimes hard to draw, as many Colombians flee a range of factors, from violence to political repression, to economic hardship.

Venezuela also has more migrants than emigrants. A 2011 study by Ivan de la Vega for the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) estimated the number of Venezuelans living overseas to be 1.2 million, while the World Bank in 2010 only registered 521,620. Either way, the number is well below the number of foreigners living in Venezuela, with an estimated 4.5 million Colombians.

Venezuelans who move to the US tend to be young, with 55.26% under the age of 34, according to the US Homeland Security Department. The UCV study claimed that most people migrating to the US do so because of the crime levels in Venezuela, though perhaps the Hollywood myth of the US lifestyle is to blame, as crime rights in the US are not much better than Venezuela, and Latinos, migrants, and African-Americans are most frequently the victims. Further, historically in Venezuela, as in most third world countries, those who are educated here as professionals often end up working overseas – for lack of employment opportunities, or seeking a higher wage. According to Carlos Lage, of the Cuban state council, by 1999 one million scientists and professionals educated in Latin America “at a cost of some 30 billion dollars moved to developed countries, and now we have to pay in order to benefit from their scientific contributions”.

In the other direction, many Colombians migrate to Venezuela, or visit it in order to benefit from the free health care and higher education. Women crossing the border in order to give birth is very common.

“My first child was born in the HULA (University of Los Andes Hospital), and the care was very good; three doctors, two nurses, cleaners three times a day, we got towels. That was very different to when I had one of my boys, Cesar, in 1989, the second period of CAP (Venezuelan president Carlos Andres Perez). That same hospital was a disaster, it was totally deteriorated, and then the prices of things tripled. They said in the newspaper that the petroleum had run out- I saved a copy. There was a lot of poverty,” Gomez said.

“The year I migrated here, Carlos Andres Perez was a candidate. I remember that there was a lot of wasteful spending on the campaign. They handed out hats, cups; it was a very dishonest campaign. That first period of CAP things were quite affordable. It was known that there was a lot of petroleum, but people weren’t educated or informed about how it was sold, we weren’t told anything, and they held those beauty contests to distract people,” she explained.

Under the dictatorship of Marcos Perez Jimenez, until 1958, Venezuela had an open door policy, which was then revoked by the Punto Fijo government which followed. However, with the development of the oil industry from 1963, South Americans, especially Colombians, began to migrate to Venezuela. In the next few decades, others came here fleeing military dictatorships in Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia and Chile. As petroleum prices rose, investment and employment was concentrated in the main cities. Then, in the 1980s the prices dropped, and with IMF adjustment packages, unemployment increased, seeing more people emigrating out.

In Venezuela all human beings have the same rights

Under the Bolivarian government, migrants' rights have significantly improved. "Foreigners in the territory of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela will have the same rights as nationals, without any limitations," reads article 13 of the [migration law](#), passed by the Chavez government in 2003.

Further, in February 2004, Chavez issued Presidential Decree 2,823, which began a national campaign to pay what he called "Venezuela's historical debt to migrants". Foreigners residing in Venezuela without documents could legalise their stay and become "indefinite residents". They had to obtain a certificate of legalisation and an ID card, and were then granted the resident visa for five years. A few people had bureaucratic problems though with the process and in 2009 the identification and migration office, SAIME, renewed the process, seeing many of those last people finally able to get their visa. That year, every Monday- the day assigned to the process-, hundreds of people were seen queuing up outside the various SAIME offices.

"I married a Venezuelan after five years here, and that's how I eventually got citizenship. But I didn't get it until 2004, when I was naturalised, thanks to Chavez. I'd been living here 31 years. Before that it was very complicated, they didn't give out citizenship," Gomez said.

"Colombians are now attended to in hospitals, schools, there's no problems studying. A lot of Colombians also work on farms; in the Sur del Lago area, in Caño Amarillo, and things have improved for them since Chavez came to power, especially as the land relationships have changed. Colombians without documents were exploited; they lived in informal housing and were paid badly. It used to be common, now it still happens, but not as much. I recently met a young woman who was working on a farm, she was treated very well and she was happy. She was paid Bs 4,000 every fortnight," she explained.

"Before, the police would harass the youth, and if they didn't have documents, they were sent to jail. It was very repressive, but now with Chavez it's not like that," Gomez added.

Now, having documentation and identification is a right, with the SAIME holding mobile *cedulacion* (ID card) stalls around the country, and police obliged to help children without documents to get identification. The few cases of undocumented or documented migrants being expelled from Venezuela over the last decade involve US diplomats allegedly conspiring against the government, people wanted with red alerts by Interpol, and in 2009, some people who were illegally [extracting national resources](#), specifically gold and coltan.

Venezuelanalysis also talked to Alejandro Carrizo, an Argentinean who came to Venezuela 4.5 years ago.



Alejandro Carrizo (Tamara Pearson /Venezuelanalysis.com)

"I first came here for a cultural activity, and now I'm doing expositions. I fell in love here and I wanted to live and work here and also do research with rural workers and their organisations, ones aimed at re-taking land. There are some important laws for rural workers that don't exist anywhere else on the continent - there are a lot of Ecuadorian and Colombian farmers, and the Chavez policies favour legality for them and provide them with lots of possibilities for work, credits, financing," Carrizo explained.

"I came here on a tourist visa, and then just stayed on. I thought we all talked the same, but I discovered that I don't talk very well and some of the words are different. That's about all the difficulty I've had really, and it has been interesting to discover the new language. As a foreigner without documents, I have everything, I even have a bank account. I've got work, I've studied. I've worked in institutions and sometimes I've faced some obstacles with the payment, but with studying I haven't had any problems. The bureaucracy is a bit annoying but it's also natural in changing processes, there's always some disorder. I've never really felt like a foreigner, I've been accepted by this society," he said.

Gomez argued that Colombians were better off in Venezuela, even without documents, than in Colombia, "There's no freedom in Colombia and the people don't count, aren't taken into account in politics. The transnationals there...one in Putamayo, near the Pacific sea, destroyed the rivers for gold and didn't ask the people there. There's lots of exploitation, the wages are barely liveable, water, gas and electricity are all privatised, and education is almost totally privatised too, it's very expensive. If a family has five children, two at the most will study. Here on the other hand, the gas is given away basically, studying is free, anyone who needs a medical exam, an x-ray, can just get one," Gomez said.

Even people migrating here from non Latin American countries tend to face few problems. Venezuelanalysis talked to Carlos Furtado, who works in a shop owned by Chinese people. As the owners spoke little Spanish, they preferred that I talk to Furtado. He explained, "For

cultural and language reasons, sometimes it can be difficult, sometimes there's some rejection, but it's easier for their children who are born here and speak Spanish. Sometimes laws aren't applied, but entering the country is normal. There's no discrimination here, no exploitation because someone was born somewhere else. That's why there's a saying, 'Venezuela is the mother of all the countries'".

Venezuela's new police university, the UNES, which is focused on human rights, is currently running courses in migration, "to promote ethics in public attention and respect for human rights". Forty SAIME workers started a course called the National Program for Training Civil Servants in the Area of Migration last September.

Ruben Dario, a general director at the UNES, told press during the start of the course that Venezuela's migration policy "is distinguished for being tolerant, without any kind of discrimination, solidarious, with complete respect for all migrant human rights, and for not criminalising migration".

The UN agency for refugees, [Acnur](#), has also been able to work in Venezuela, saying it has trained around 10,000 people in ten years, among them military, police, civil servants, students, and NGOs attending to refugees. Acnur states that one of its aims in Venezuela is to strengthen refugees' self sufficiency, and that while it started by handing out micro credits, now the state "has taken the reigns of this strategy of protection for many families who find it hard to earn a living".

Institutional bureaucracy is the main difficulty for migrants in Venezuela

Despite the passing of the Law for the Simplification of Administration (2008), which declares that all bureaucratic processes should be free or affordable (they are) and as simple as possible, there are still serious bureaucratic problems here- of inconsistent requirements, unnecessary paperwork, insufficient information about requirements, and processing of requests can take too long. These problems affect all people here, but they disproportionately affect migrants, at times leaving them vulnerable.

Though having legal documents like a visa is not a prerequisite for any social services such as health, subsidised food, political participation, education, and so on, visas help with leaving and returning to Venezuela. Not having a working visa can also leave people more susceptible to work place abuse, exploitation, and to having their worker rights, such as to pensioner savings, denied. The work law states that foreigners have the same rights as citizens, but employers can use the lack of a visa to intimidate workers anyway. Psychologically, people without visas may feel insecure, and they can also be more vulnerable to police harassment and extortion, though instances of such cases have drastically reduced over the last seven years.

While obtaining a working visa, a business visa, or a family visa, and eventually residency, is much easier and affordable here than in Australia or the US, for example, the requirements for a working visa are still next to impossible; applicants have to obtain the work in Venezuela, have the ministry of labour approve the visa (one of the hardest things), then return to their country of birth to apply for the visa. Over the last seven years there have been serious improvements, with more SAIME offices around the country, processing time drastically reduced, and more consistent information about requirements.

I remember first trying to get a legal visa in 2008. I had to travel to Caracas (16 hours in a

bus). Then, literally dozens of people were swarming outside the SAIME building (then known as Onidex) trying to sell “stamps” that no one actually needed. Inside the building I tried to find out the requirements for a visa, and was sent from one office to another, to the point where I came full circle, still with no information. Now, there is a huge office in Merida. It takes just a morning to get a cedula (ID card), instead of a few weeks, and there are signs everywhere warning people that they do not have to pay for forms, and that stamps can only be obtained from certain registered shops. There is an information desk, and the national guard at SAIME are really helpful. Nevertheless, the process for becoming “documented” could be simplified much more.

“I haven’t witnessed much discrimination, though yes, there are bureaucratic obstacles,” Carrizo said. “Some Colombians have been here for twenty years, and they [the government] should make it easier to process all the paperwork much more quickly”.

Latin America rejects borders

“My family are indigenous, the Comechingones people, and I feel like I identify more with that. Our borders are different, we’re all brothers; Spain divided up the territory, such bureaucratic things aren’t part of our language. Mercosur is an advance towards a single and free territory, free of imperialism. We’d save a lot of paper,” Carrizo said. People from member countries of Mercosur don’t need a passport to visit other member countries as tourists.

“Latin America is one country, you see that when you travel,” Gomez concluded.

Leading and pushing regional blocs such as ALBA, Petrocaribe, and the CELAC, Venezuela has been taking concrete, though slow and small steps, towards a united Latin America based on cooperation between regions, and where borders either don’t exist, or are less prohibitive, and where no one is “illegal”.

A CELAC statement coming out of a meeting for the protection of migrants held in June 2011 reaffirmed the member countries’ concerns “for the vulnerable situation of migrants and their families facing human rights violations and a lack of protection, something which urges states to increase their efforts ... to continue advancing in strengthening full economic and social development in our region, free of all the factors that force international migration, as that should be a free decision”.

In this sense, the CELAC and Venezuela are setting an example for first world countries: showing that humane treatment of all migrants, documented or not, is easy and possible. Further, that the most important thing is to not force migration: to remove borders, to have cooperative trade policies (rather than the US’s trade policies which impoverish people in Mexico, Haiti, and so on), and to not support the invasion and destruction of other countries, such as Iraq, thereby creating the refugees that countries like Australia and the US refuse to look after.

“How lovely that you and I are two immigrants talking about this,” Carrizo said as the interview concluded.

“Between your town and mine, there’s a dot and a dash. The dash says, “You can’t get through” and the dot says, “Closed road”. Like that... with so many dots and dashes, the map is a telegram. Walking in the world one sees rivers and mountains, one sees deserts

and jungles, but not dots or dashes. Because these things don't exist, rather they were imposed so that my hunger and yours would always be separated," – Aguiles Nazoa, 20th century Venezuelan writer.

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