



# Seeking Integration in a City Lacking Economic Resources

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns  
San Jose, Costa Rica

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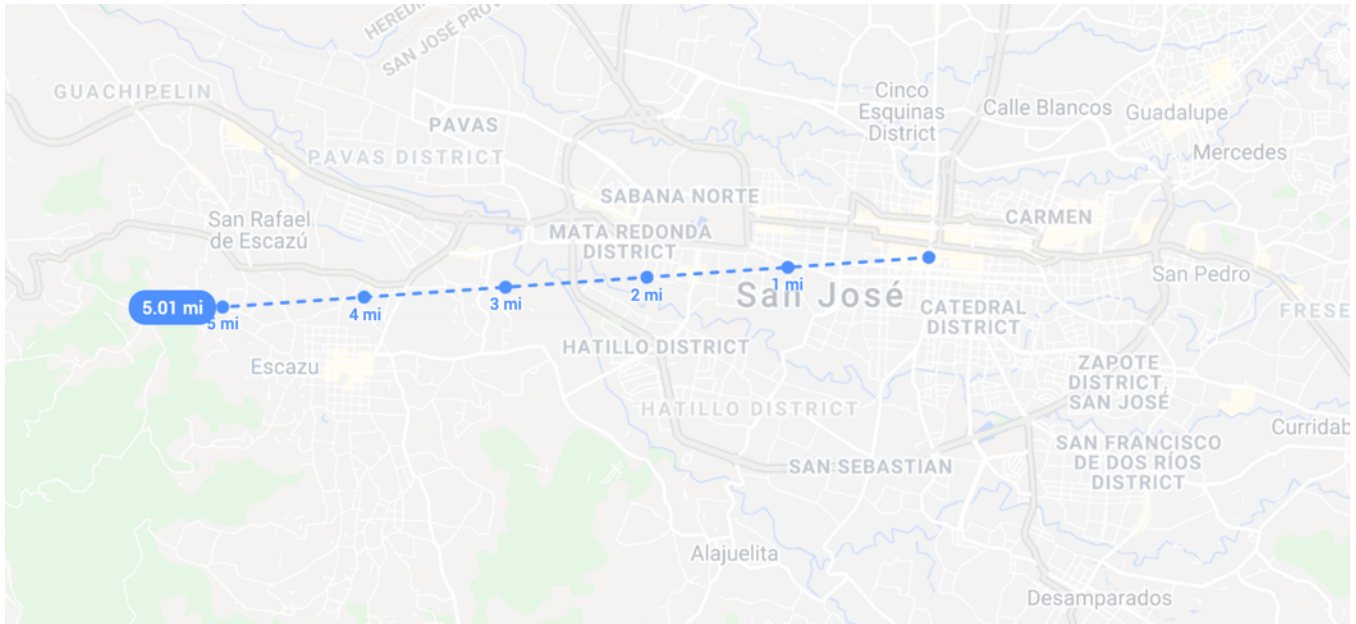
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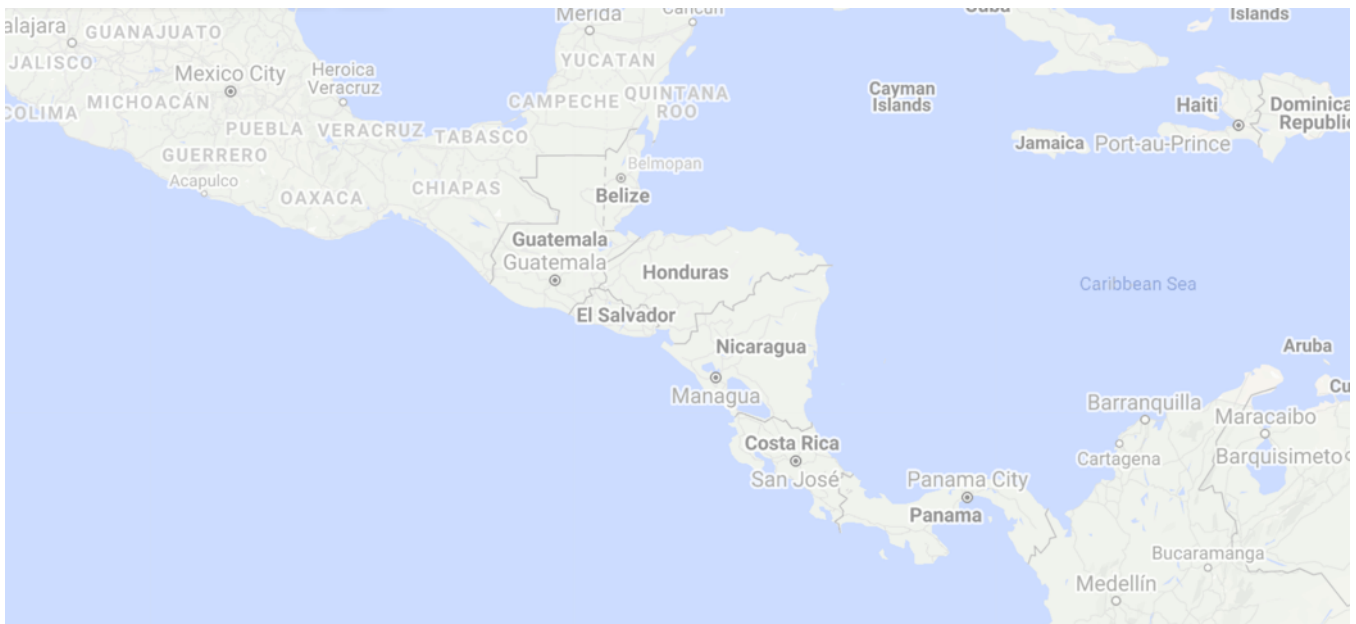
**Cover photo, Figure 1:** San José, close to Central Avenue. This area has an informal sector where immigrants survive by selling any goods they can. Asylum seekers sometimes sell food and clothes given by humanitarian organizations to pay their rent. All report photos by author.

**Acknowledgments:** The RIT project is grateful to Fernanda Escobar for her help with translation and Madison Chapman for her assistance with mapping and revising this report.

# Location



San Jose is a sprawling city with rapid informal growth in the peripheries. Most asylum seekers and refugees find low cost housing on the outskirts of the city, then travel into the city’s main economic hubs to find informal labor like selling goods on the streets or as ride share drivers.



San Jose is a destination for those fleeing insecurity in the “Northern Triangle” of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Base map imagery © Google 2019.

**For more background on refugees in San Jose and Costa Rica, continue to the appendices.**

# Introduction

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This case report looks at migration to Costa Rica and explores the main opportunities for and obstacles to integration in terms of migratory status, access to public health, jobs, education, and recreation. It shares which organizations refugees find supportive, what kind of aid is available or not, which areas of the city they find desirable and why (“Mapping the Migrant Population” section), how migrants and hosts feel socially excluded (“Obstacles to Integration” section), and what kinds of work are available in the city (“Opportunities for Integration” section).

“Costa Rica is a host country to asylum-seekers primarily from Latin America and the Caribbean, and is a transit point for others. Over the past five years, the country has experienced an upward trend in the number of asylum applications received as a result of political unrest and violence in the region.”

- UNHCR, 2019

The report is based on my experiences as a resident of San José and a volunteer with a refugee collective, “[Rumbo Seguro](#).”<sup>1</sup> I supplement my own experiences with interviews with asylum seekers from Venezuela, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, as well as with activists, reporters, and government officials.

## The Author's Position in San Jose and Experiences Researching this Case

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I grew up in rural Costa Rica and moved to the capital eight years ago to start my career in sociology. I volunteered for two years in a squatter community on the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, and then with refugees in Germany, where I lived with refugee minors from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq for eight months. Observing refugees and experiencing for myself what it was like to become settled in Germany was the first time I experienced what is required to integrate into a new society.

In my experience, one of the greatest challenges in building close connections with refugees in Costa Rica is the lack of community outreach aimed at helping migrants. Refugees in San José are disconnected from Costa Ricans’ daily lives. The work of integration falls to non-

<sup>1</sup> Rumbo Seguro is male refugee collective for supporting refugees and migrant integration.

governmental organizations (NGOs), whose employees are already overworked. Refugees themselves do not have much free time to improve their situations.

My main interactions with migrants have been through my volunteer work with Rumbo Seguro and its project “Perchero Comunitario,” which consists of gathering clothes for new arrivals and providing refugees with free high school exam preparatory classes. This experience was deeply meaningful and connected me to a range of Costa Ricans and migrants involved in the integration process.

My research for this report has reinforced my desire to better understand the ways in which “development” policies in Central and South America are causing migration and what it means to live in a city where migrants’ rights depend on their immigration status.

**For more on the methods used for this case report, continue to Appendix A.**

## Mapping the Migrant Population

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Most refugees in Costa Rica live in cities. The majority reside in the capital, San José, while a significant number live in the urban areas of Alajuela, Cartago, and Heredia.<sup>2</sup> With a deficit in both municipal and national resources, San José relies on the work of NGOs to advance refugee integration.<sup>3</sup>

Most refugees come to San José because it offers more job opportunities than rural areas of the country. The rural areas are perceived as having poor living conditions, which can make for a difficult life. As Costa Rican Subdirector Daguer Hernández of the Migration Ministry explained to me, “Economic migrants are usually established in productive areas.”<sup>4</sup>

It is hard to know exactly where refugees are living in the capital because official institutions do not make this information publicly available. Refugees’ areas of residence are also obscured by the fact that most homes in San José are built with walls around them, and few neighborhoods count as true communities. In San José, people seldom know their neighbors. Houses are built to protect from crime like armed robberies. Increased violence in the city has made people live indoors, locked in, with

<sup>2</sup> Residential data for refugees and asylum seekers within Costa Rica are not publicly available. The areas they reside in reported here are based on expert interviews including Quesada, A. of the Migration Ministry.

<sup>3</sup> Organizations such as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), RET, Cenderos, “Fundación Mujer,” and “Servicio Jesuita para la atención migrante” are the highest-profile actors for migrant protection.

<sup>4</sup> Personal interview with Daguer Hernández, Subdirector General de Migración y Extranjería.

mistrust of the unknown that makes it difficult for community-building or friendly interactions with foreigners to take place.

As a result, there is no “refugee community” in a specific neighborhood of San José, and most migrants are spread out across different areas where rent is affordable. Where refugees live has more to do with economic status than nationality: migrants from Nicaragua, the Northern Triangle,<sup>5</sup> and Venezuela all vary in their economic situations, so some settle in wealthier neighborhoods while others settle in neighborhoods with low housing costs. Migrants from Venezuela, for example, have a reputation for being wealthier than other national groups, but many of them are also dependent on the limited savings they came with and the economic help of nonprofit organizations. Some neighborhoods, such as Desamparados, are associated with low costs of living and higher crime rates (see Figures 2 and 3).

During interviews, I asked refugees about their preferences for where they wanted to live in the city. Some were drawn by access to NGOs, and others wanted to be near friends and family who had arrived before them. However, most were not trying to cluster near their co-nationals, and instead simply looked for places that were affordable and close to the city’s transportation hubs. They looked for places where they could easily access jobs and government offices like the Migration Ministry and receive services from NGOs:

When I arrived [in Costa Rica], I lived in Santa Ana [a wealthy neighborhood], and people used to say, “Ay! Venezuelans are very lavish,” but I didn’t [move there] with that intention, not at all. That is all I could obtain; I stayed there until I realized it was too expensive, then I moved to Moravia, Moravia Centro. It was then that I found a nicer house [in Desamparados] that was cheaper, that is why I moved here (Female Venezuelan migrant, 58 years old).

For many migrants, such as this young asylum seeker from Venezuela, affordability is very important in deciding which neighborhoods to live in:

San José, San Pedro is where I work, I’ve gone to the Sabana, [a wealthy area], I’m going to look for a place here in Guadalupe because several people told me that it is cheaper and central, and Guadalupe is the place that I’ve liked the most (Female Venezuelan asylum seeker, 21 years old).

Young refugees from Nicaragua prefer to settle close to universities, where they find more empathy and solidarity from students and academics and maintain an active social life. These areas also provide them with greater access to jobs to scrape by during the limbo of getting recognized status.

<sup>5</sup> A region of Central America encompassing Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

For older male refugees, it is hard to move to a desirable place in the center of the city because they are not able to find work, so they tend to look for the cheapest housing option. One elderly man who could not find work due to his age told me, “I had to move to Santa Barbara [in Heredia city] because it is cheaper than here in San José and I have family [to support].”

Regardless of their nationality, refugees do not seem to have much contact with neighbors due to the long hours they spend outside their homes working or searching for jobs. For most refugees, housing is only a place to rest, not a place to build a home or a community: “I don’t spend much time [in the house], I practically just go to sleep,” said a 54-year-old female Venezuelan.

Many new arrivals from poor backgrounds live in “solidarity houses,” temporary housing units organized by local NGOs, which rely on families to volunteer to host migrants in their homes for short-term stays (see the “Rumbo Seguro Collective” section).

## Opportunities for Integration

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Opportunities for integration are limited in Costa Rica. Migrants look for jobs and personal connections online, in spaces created by NGOs to facilitate integration, in anchor communities of co-nationals, and in other informal spaces.

### Online Integration

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Many migrants rely on social media for general information about Costa Rica’s migration policies and the services available to them in San José. Venezuelans use a Facebook platform called “Venezolanos en Costa Rica,” (Venezuelans in Costa Rica). There are also Facebook groups for Salvadorans and Hondurans. Social media help migrants find information about

### Desamparados Central Park



Figure 2: Public parks provide safe meet up spaces and places for informal work like selling goods.

### “Desamparados”



Figure 3: This is an area called “Desamparados,” well known for affordable rent prices but also stigmatized as insecure.

apartment rentals, job opportunities, migratory conditions, and the cost of living. Job opportunities are offered by established Venezuelans and are usually related to entrepreneurship, positions in Venezuelan restaurants, or informal cash-based jobs, such as “someone to work assembling furniture.”

One migrant mentioned that the use of technology restricted in-person interactions: “What happens is that each [interaction] is on WhatsApp. Because you live here with a lot of limitations, you can only work and work,” said a 54-year-old female Venezuelan, explaining how her entire social life takes place through her cellphone.

## Places for Integration

Refugee agencies work to create cross-cultural experiences between migrants and hosts in San José’s public spaces. An example is the “Integrarte Festival” organized by UNHCR, which has taken place annually since 2017. It is designed to build a foothold for refugees and to enrich the local Costa Rican culture through arts and food. “We are going to celebrate with a community festival with the motto that has stood out at a global level, which is ‘join and take a step with refugees.’ We want to promote solidarity,” said Jean Pierre Mora, head of communications at UNHCR (González, 2019) (See photo of World Refugee Day booth).

RET International, a Swiss NGO operating in Costa Rica, is frequently mentioned by refugees as an important integration resource. It supports refugees with cash assistance, language courses, entrepreneurship courses, and cultural activities, and advocates for the Costa Rican government to take more responsibility for refugees’ wellbeing.

Some NGOs develop entrepreneurship projects where refugees learn to make homemade goods in classes, and then they sell these goods through the NGO. Other NGOs help migrants sell food native to their home countries to Costa Rican locals and other migrants. Usually these events occur in parks to encourage encounters between the host population and refugees through music and children playing together on playgrounds.

## Facebook: A Catalyst to Integration



Figure 4: A Facebook post requests information about job opportunities related to the poster’s studies and job experience. Translation: “Hello, good morning to all, I am a newcomer and I am looking for a job. I can be employed in the administrative area, hairdresser, aesthetics, eyebrows. I would appreciate it if someone can help me with any job in the same way I am willing to work for now on what comes out as long as it is a decent job.”

## World Refugee Day



Figure 5: Salvadoran national food entrepreneurship project at the June 29, 2019, World Refugee Day, organized by UNHCR.



## Rumbo Seguro Collective

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The Rumbo Seguro Collective is a network of male refugees and migrants whose main goal is to support and facilitate integration. It is also open to Costa Ricans in vulnerable situations, like the homeless. The Collective is supported by RET International, which provides financial support for refugees and the opportunity for them to build their economic independence. Refugees can get assistance in the form of lunches, clothing, or cash for public transport (see Figure 6). The Rumbo Seguro Collective tries to help refugees take charge of their own integration process. One male member of the collective told me:

Working with people who are from different nationalities and cultures, from different points of view and education made me a smarter man with other people, and it is wonderful to be able to share with others, and that there is respect for each one of us...Every day that I've been in Rumbo Seguro I've learned different things. Rumbo Seguro is responsible for having a "solidarity rack" that we take to many towns in Costa Rica. We can take it to vulnerable people in need, both immigrants and people from Costa Rica who are in an unfavorable position. This work has also affected my feelings, the goodness in my charity to be better every day and to be in solidarity with people.

The collective represents an important network of friends that lifts some of the weight of integration because it gives migrants the opportunity to share similar experiences with migrants of different nationalities. The collective is a source of resilience, giving migrants tools to create, learn, and heal. "The group has been very important. Practically all of my friends are from there, all from different nationalities. The group has kept me distracted [from the difficulties of life]," said a Salvadoran asylum seeker, 61 years old.

RET states on its website, "RET International promotes integration processes, while 'Rumbo Seguro' fulfills its purpose of contributing to the improvement of living conditions, not only for the migrant and refugee population, but also for [Costa Rican] nationals through cultural and socio-educational initiatives" (RET, 2018). These multi-pronged approaches to support have been among the most useful for migrants.

### Rumbo Seguro



Figure 6: A Rumbo Seguro project in the countryside, distributing clothes to migrants and other people in vulnerable conditions. Photo used with permission from Rumbo Seguro.

## Anchor Communities

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Nicaraguan migrants seem to have an easier time than other nationalities when it comes to finding a place to live or work because of strong connections with informal networks of co-nationals. As a result, Nicaraguans are generally less reliant on NGO support than other

nationalities.<sup>6</sup> Nicaraguans have a long history of immigrating to Costa Rica even before recent political crises or violence.<sup>7</sup> There is now a wide network of family, friends, and Nicaraguan employers who are longtime residents, are financially and socially secure, and who act as an anchor for new Nicaraguan arrivals to connect with when they move to the city. On the other hand, migrants from Nicaragua experience more xenophobia compared with other nationalities, perhaps because these anchor communities create enclaves rather than fostering integration.

## Other Spaces Conducive to Integration

In San José City, it is difficult for people to find recreation. Public spaces cater to wealthy residents, and public transit areas are occupied by street peddlers subject to constant police harassment. Every day you see migrant peddlers hiding their products and running from municipal police to prevent their goods from being confiscated. It is common to see migrants selling chewing gum, condoms, or water outside bars. Migrants also work in upscale areas as guards for Costa Ricans' expensive cars, a good option for migrants who can earn a real living from this work. These jobs are most often held by Nicaraguan and Venezuelan migrants.

### Public Spaces

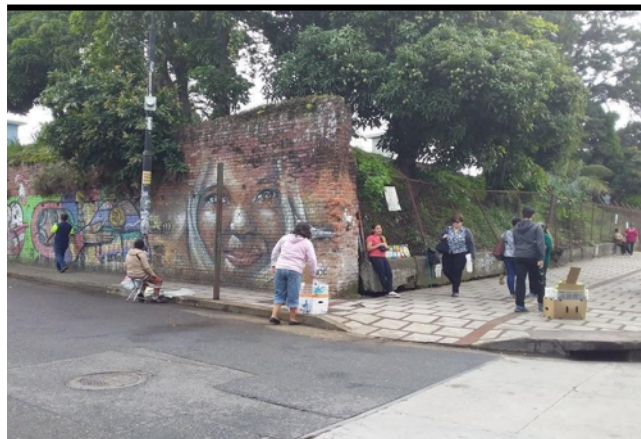


Figure 7: A street near a hospital, where both migrants and Costa Rican nationals sell goods. Photo by author.

There are numerous public areas where refugees sell goods on the street (see Figure 1). Buyers pay in cash, thereby supporting the city's grey economy (see Figure 7).

Churches are one of the first places where migrants begin integrating because they often provide humanitarian assistance. Churches take the lead in holding talks between asylum seekers and Costa Ricans within their constituencies. As a result, churches represent one of the first points of entry for building community cohesion. Cathedrals and parks are common gathering places for migrants (see Figure 9). Among Nicaraguans, for example, the cathedral "La Merced" is situated in front of a public park and serves as a meeting point (see Figure 8). However, this has created a social stigma around the space. In 2018, about 400 Costa Ricans violently took over the park, asking police officers to deport Nicaraguans. Since this incident, it is common to find police officers around the park. From my perspective, placing police around the park is a prejudiced reaction to the presence of migrants and a way of controlling the area, as it can be dangerous.

<sup>6</sup> One exception to this general trend is a wave of young refugees who arrived from January 2017 to mid-2017 who received a huge amount of emergency support from solidarity groups and NGOs.

<sup>7</sup> After anti-government protests began in April 2018, the government has instigated a brutal crackdown against protestors, disrupting the opposition movement.

Beyond these examples, there are few places in San José where migrants can share daily encounters with Costa Ricans. Most of the city's cultural activities come from for-profit commercial enterprises, cater to citizens with money to spend, and take place in higher income areas, restricting access mostly to affluent Costa Ricans. Many of the migrants I spoke with said that they could not afford and did not have enough time off work to enjoy social activities.

**La Merced Park**



Figure 8: La Merced Park, a space where migrants gather to spend time and sell goods.

# Obstacles to Integration

## Status Determination

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On paper, Costa Rica is well known for offering migrants protection as a signatory of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees. However, the reality for many migrants is more ambiguous. Many forced migrants from Venezuela and Nicaragua, for example, do not have official refugee status and therefore lack legal protections. Daguer Hernández, Subdirector of the Migration Ministry, said:

The president [of Costa Rica], from the beginning, said we are fine, wholly committed to the human rights issue, the regularization of immigrants is the only way. If we don't regularize the immigrant population, we won't know who is here, how many of them are in the country, and who are going to stay, and we will continue promoting irregularity in the workplaces, in the immigrant hiring process, etc. Therefore, the best option for Costa Rica's government is regularization.

Many migrants have been living for several years without regularization. "Many of these applicants are not necessarily Nicaraguans of the current conflict. Many of them are actually illegal residents who are taking advantage of the political situation to formalize their status," said Andrea Quesada, official spokesperson for the Migration Ministry, in an interview in July 2018. This situation is not limited to Nicaraguans but applies to many other migrants whose national profiles do not precisely fit with the refugee label but who still need regularization and support. From my conversations, I found public servants in the relevant ministries are usually not sensitive to these grey zones and are not empathetic with migrants who are struggling to regularize their status.

Asylum seekers wait in anguish and confusion for their status determination, which can take up to two years. While waiting, employers ignore migrants' job requests or take advantage of them by paying

unfair wages. Asylum seekers are turned away from public services, including healthcare. In Costa Rica, children and pregnant women are legally covered by social welfare insurance regardless of their status, but in practice, unprotected migrants face discrimination. One NGO worker described mistreatment of pregnant asylum seekers by doctors who denied them attention even though they are legally required to provide these women with care.

The most extreme example of this exclusion is a settlement on the outskirts of Costa Rica known as “Little Alajuelita,” where some 12,500 Nicaraguan refugees live alongside low-income Costa Ricans without access to medical services (FIMRC, 2019). While the Foundation for International Medical Relief of Children is playing a vital role in supplying healthcare to Little Alajuelita, the relief provided by this NGO is not a sustainable solution to the long-term problem. None of the migrants I interviewed in San José had access to public health services. In 2018, when I asked Anabel—who had been waiting two years for her asylum status determination—about her healthcare access, she said, “We don’t enjoy any of that. Supposedly UNHCR is working on that, but here we don’t enjoy any of those benefits. Here you get sick and God help us.”

## Churches and Parks



Figure 9: Migrants from the Northern Triangle gather in this area where many buses from Central American countries arrive and depart. It is also connected to a church and a park where migrants can sell goods.

## Information Gaps

During my conversations with migrants, it became clear that most of them did not know their rights. One female Venezuelan migrant, aged 21, was hired by a call center company and worked for them for an entire month but was not paid. She told me that she and another asylum seeker were amazed that no one could do anything to claim their payment: “We couldn’t do anything because we are refugees. We couldn’t work legally because they [employers]...would ask if we have work permits.”

Deputy Director of the Migration Ministry Daguer Hernández told me that there are plans to invest in a public information campaign so that Costa Rican national employers and official functionaries can get informed about refugee IDs and work permits, but at the moment both migrant workers and Costa Rican employers are generally ignorant about their rights and responsibilities.

Law and reality contradict one another, as this observation from a Venezuelan female asylum seeker demonstrates:

They give you the job, but they take advantage of it. They don’t insure you. They want to treat you however they feel like...I’ve lived it and I’ve seen it with close friends, then people “*se lo cala*” as we say, they put up with it because they don’t have another option due to the fear of losing the job they need [to survive].

## Xenophobia

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Generally speaking, Costa Ricans harbor a lot of xenophobia against Nicaraguan migrants. Costa Ricans see their country as a democracy that hosts migrants from barbarous neighbors, yet at the same time most turn a blind eye to the conditions of migrants in Costa Rica and ignore a history of exclusion and hostility toward immigrants. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for example, Chinese, Africans, Arabs, Turks, and Armenians were prohibited from immigrating to Costa Rica by law.<sup>8</sup>

Costa Rican media often portray migrants as a cancer on Costa Rica. This has gradually led many Costa Ricans to think about migrants negatively. Media often include headlines with violent imagery—mostly [pointing the finger at Nicaraguans—attributing crime to the “massive arrivals” of “irregulars.” One headline warned that “Nicaraguan hitmen are sent to Costa Rica,”](#) as just one example of how migrants are presented in the media.

In online correspondence, Costa Ricans attack the Migration Minister for letting in too many migrants and providing too much support, making sarcastic comments that there have not been enough deportations.

In my conversations with Salvadorans, they said they feel socially excluded by Costa Ricans due to widespread stigmas about Maras gangs in El Salvador. Many said that job interviewers assumed they were criminals or associated with gangs. Generally, Costa Ricans believe foreigners are increasing criminal activity in San José. On the other hand, Venezuelans receive preferential treatment in the media and generally do not experience the same xenophobia as Nicaraguans or other migrants from Northern Triangle countries. My sense is that this is because of the influence of the United States, where Venezuelan migrants are portrayed as victims of a socialist government who require help from benevolent capitalist states like Costa Rica and the U.S.

## Limits to Economic Integration

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On top of xenophobia, Costa Ricans fear poor migrants because of social welfare concerns surrounding perceived scarcity of resources in the country. Costa Ricans are often concerned that migrants' access to social welfare will drain limited welfare resources and regularly demand that migrants pay for their own healthcare.

Refugees mostly take jobs in informal, low-skilled sectors because they are waiting for their refugee status and cannot work formally. Even migrants with higher-level degrees frequently work in low-skilled, irregular jobs out of legal necessity. Many other migrants are restricted from formal employment due to their age or gender. The large public sector (government work) is reserved for Costa Rican nationals.

Migrants work as rideshare Uber drivers (most of them renting cars); as waiters, cleaning staff, or cooks in restaurants; in construction; in barbershops; as plumbers; or as street vendors and traders. There

<sup>8</sup> Sarceño-Barquero, 2017, p. 120.

are some government programs and NGOs that direct refugees toward entrepreneurial activities, but these opportunities rarely, if ever, represent real stability or the ability to cover their living expenses. UNHCR has tried to address this problem by offering “ferias de trabajo” (job fairs) where they look for companies who will offer employment opportunities to refugees. Most of the companies that are interested are multinational corporations, such as Taco Bell, McDonalds, Pizza Hut, and call centers.

Yolanda Fernández, president of the Chamber of Commerce, affirmed the positive effects hiring migrants can have, saying, “[W]e find in these people special capacities and skills that can be a support for the economy and society and even more, they enrich the cultural diversity of our country” (Sarceño-Barquero, 2017). However, in spite of these efforts, all of the refugees and NGO representatives I spoke with said they were not contacted after sending several resumes to the companies mentioned above. Marketing from businesses in Costa Rica asserts support for refugees, but this does not seem to translate into action here in San José.

## Conclusion

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Costa Rica hosts the most asylum-seekers of any country in Latin America, and official figures only represent a fraction of the total number of migrants living in Costa Rica. Government officials I spoke with believed that the country is not responsible for hosting or providing services to people who are not strictly legal refugees.

Asylum seekers I talked to in San José have struggled, waiting years for their status determination. No one in this situation who I spoke to had insurance or access to healthcare. They all depended on NGOs for services and worked irregularly. This limbo has created widespread grey employment and a large informal market in San José. This grey economy allows migrants to get by but also exposes them to abuses like not being paid for work or being forced to work overtime hours without pay. Both migrant workers and employers have little awareness of their labor rights and responsibilities.

Integration for refugees in San José depends on their nationality and socioeconomic class. Wealthy Venezuelans seem to have the easiest time: their social class and economic independence make it easy to fit in. Even low-income Venezuelans do not face the same social stigmas as, say, Salvadoran migrants who are widely prejudiced against and seen as violent criminals. Nicaraguans have an easier time integrating economically by finding jobs with long-staying Nicaraguans, but they face more difficulty receiving refugee status than, say, Venezuelans due to the ambiguous political climate in their country.

NGOs in San José are key to integration but can only do so much. Almost all of the migrants I spoke with had been waiting for months or years for status determination and are worried about the possibility of never getting permission to stay in the country. Despite Costa Rica’s national policy of being welcoming and inclusive in a city of walled houses, xenophobia, and public spaces that cater only to wealthy residents, integration in San José is limited.

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# Appendix A: Methods

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The bulk of my findings come from interviews with migrants, host population members, and key informants. I spoke with eleven forced migrants: five Venezuelans (three women from 21–53 years old and two men 48–67 years old), two Salvadorans (one man and one woman, both middle-aged), and four Nicaraguans (two women 17–23 years old and two men 25–35 years old). For key informants, I spoke with two functionaries from the Migration Ministry, the subdirector and a representative from the communications department, one functionary from the Health Ministry, and one representative each from two NGOs: the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and Cenderos. I also had informal talks with people in my neighborhood, talks with Uber drivers (most of whom are migrants), and NGO volunteers.

I also included in my report participant observation in public spaces like parks, specifically La Merced Park, La Paz Park, Desamparados Central Park, La Sabana Park, and areas around the city's Central Avenue. In my role as a volunteer, I assisted with aid projects and planning a conference for NGOs and artist collectives.

I supplemented my findings with a literature review, most importantly work from the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, and grey literature including news on forced migration from Crhoy and La República, reports from UNHCR Costa Rica, and reports from Costa Rican and international NGOs. Finally, I was provided with quantitative data on immigration from the Migration Ministry and analyzed migration trends using R statistical software.



# Appendix B: Refugees in Costa Rica

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Historically, Costa Rican migrants are predominantly from Central America, mostly from Nicaragua, who are more than 75% of the total immigrant population.<sup>9</sup> In the past few decades, the number of migrants from Latin American countries has increased in proportion to the growth of violence in Colombia and more recently Venezuela, and the Northern Triangle of Central America. These tens of thousands of migrants arrive for a mixture of reasons, some due to displacement from armed violence, others seeking economic opportunity, but most for a complex combination of these reasons. [According to a national study in 2017](#), the main reasons identified for migration were “from Colombia due to the effects of the internal war; from the Northern Triangle, extreme insecurity and extortion and direct threats from gangs; from Venezuela, the lack of medicines and food, as well as threats and the violation of fundamental rights, alongside these main causes have begun to appear, such as persecution for sexual diversity or gender violence.”

Since the 1990s, Nicaraguans rarely have received official refugee status and are living irregularly in Costa Rica, suffering exclusion and marginalization. This policy was based on the idea that these “economic migrants” are not protected by the Costa Rican labor code (Migration EU eXpertise, 2017). According to 2015 Costa Rican migration data,<sup>10</sup> of the 2,198 applicants for asylum in that year, only 188 were approved (95 were female and 93 were male, of which 59 were minors). The highest proportion of refugees were from El Salvador, Colombia, and Venezuela. In 2016, there were 4,363 applications and only 564 were officially recognized as refugees. The highest proportion of applicants were from El Salvador, with 1,436 and Venezuela, with 1,398. In 2017, 6,337 applications were received, and only 194 approved. Data up to August 2018 (the most recent available) show there have been 13,373 applications, including intercontinental applicants, from which only 81 people have been approved for refugee status, with the remaining cases still being processed.

<sup>9</sup> Statistics from conversation with Quesada, A. of the Migration Ministry, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Statistics from conversation with Quesada, A. of the Migration Ministry, 2018.

# About the RIT Project

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The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

## Our goals are twofold

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Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

## Why now?

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The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

## For more on RIT

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On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

[www.refugeesintowns.org](http://www.refugeesintowns.org)

# About the Author

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

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