Latin America and the Caribbean on the Demographic Chessboard: Ageing, Migration and Regional Power

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Abstract:

This chapter examines the processes of demographic and migratory transformation in Latin America and the Caribbean during the 21st century, framed in a context of transition characterised by population ageing, declining fertility rates and the emergence of new socio-economic tensions. The impact of migratory flows on regional reconfiguration is analysed, both in terms of large forced movements - such as the Venezuelan exodus - and the internal and external migratory dynamics that alter the population structure. It also studies the expansion of mega-cities and their impact on new urban and social configurations. Finally, it addresses the phenomena of expulsion, return and self-deportation, as well as their impact on the restructuring of regional demographic balances, in a scenario conditioned by restrictive migration policies and systemic crises.

Keywords:

Demography, Migration, Latin America, Caribbean, Strategy, Development, Crisis.

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"When we had all the answers, they changed the questions."
Mario Benedetti

Introduction

Throughout history, population movements have shaped societies, reconfigured territories and defined the course of political and economic events. However, at no other time than in the 21ST century have demographic patterns taken on such a strategic dimension for the development and stability of countries.

In the vast and diverse territory of Latin America and the Caribbean, where ancient rural rhythms coexist with the frenzy of megacities, demographic transformations are advancing with an intensity that challenges old paradigms. The passage of time is no longer measured solely in decades of growth or development, but in the silent changes in the population structure: who is born, who migrates, who ages... and how these increasingly interdependent flows are reshaping the region.

Today, more than ever, demographic issues are ceasing to be mere statistical indicators and becoming key elements of the political, economic and social agenda. Understanding the evolution of the population—its size, distribution, age composition and mobility—is essential for projecting the future of work, designing public policies, relations between states and even new forms of power in the international system.

Far from being a uniform process, the region is undergoing a demographic transition marked by the coexistence of different stages. While some nations have reached advanced levels of ageing, others maintain young and dynamic population structures. According to the ECLAC Demographic Observatory (2024), birth and death rates have declined more rapidly than projected at the beginning of the century, except during the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a temporary increase in mortality (ECLAC, 2022). These changes have altered population growth projections and given rise to new and complex scenarios. Notably, net migration has also been more negative than expected, revealing the growing weight of migration in regional population dynamics.

This change is profound: in 2023, 13.8% of the Latin American population was aged 60 or over, and it is estimated that by 2030 this percentage will rise to 16.5% (ECLAC, 2023). Population ageing is no longer a distant prospect and is beginning to feature on the

health, pensions and care agendas, all in a context of high inequality, informal employment and institutional weakness. In many ways, it is a challenge that has been anticipated but not yet resolved.

At the same time, a demographic dividend persists in several parts of the continent, a window of opportunity where the majority of the population is of working age. But that potential does not activate itself: it requires robust education policies, investment in youth, formal employment and social cohesion strategies. Without these conditions, the dividend can become a trigger for frustration and conflict, rather than a lever for development.

Migration, both internal and cross-border, runs through this entire process. Latin America has gone from being a predominantly sending region to also becoming a transit area and, in certain cases, a destination, especially in recent years. Humanitarian and political crises in countries such as Venezuela, Haiti and Nicaragua have generated increasingly complex and numerous intraregional migration flows, while migratory pressure towards the United States, Mexico and some European countries remains structural. These migrations are driven by economic and security factors and, in many cases, demographic factors, as they involve young people and adults of working age who are seeking opportunities in the face of a lack of prospects in their countries of origin.

In this context, the new migration policies promoted by Donald Trump since his return to power in 2025—more restrictive, securitised and with a renewed emphasis on deterrence—are beginning to redefine both migration flows and narratives in the Western Hemisphere. These actions have drawn strong criticism from human rights organisations and reflect a geopolitical shift in migration management from Washington. It is important to note that the political response to migration in the global north has a direct impact on the structure and population mobility in the south, and that these decisions are not only administrative, but also deeply strategic and geopolitical.

Population dynamics not only affect internal governance, but also have an impact on countries' international integration, economic flows, security and inter-state relations. The population thus becomes a structural variable of contemporary power: a source of opportunity or vulnerability, depending on how it is managed.

We are obliged to open our eyes to a phenomenon that goes beyond statistics to lie at the very heart of the tensions and possibilities of 21ST-CENTURY Latin America, because talking about demography today also means talking about the future, strategy and power.

Demography and strategy: The population reconfiguration of Latin America in the 21ST century

At the beginning of THE 21ST century, Latin America and the Caribbean ceased to be a region defined by rapid population growth and high birth rates. In just a few decades, the demographic face of the continent has changed rapidly. This shift has transformed the region into a mosaic of multiple, overlapping and often contradictory demographic transitions. What in the past was interpreted as a natural evolution of the population must now be analysed as an important factor in the definition of national power, sustainable development and political stability.
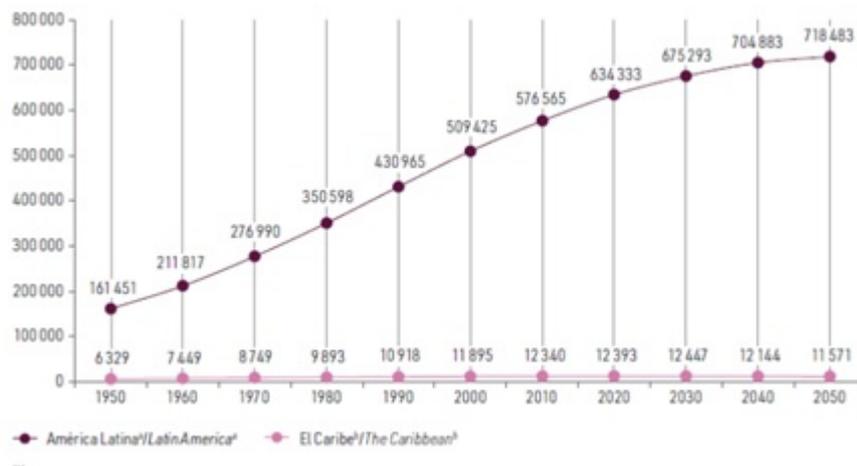
Figure 1: Latin America and the Caribbean: estimates and projections of total population, by decade, 1950-2050 (In thousands of people, at mid-year). Source: ECLAC, Population Database. Revision 2024, and DPNU, World Population Prospects. Revision 2024 [online] https://population.un.org/wpp/.

The region reached 663 million inhabitants in 2024, representing 8.1% of the world's population. However, this figure is 3.8% lower than the initial projection made in 2000, which estimated 689 million for the same period.

The total fertility rate has fallen dramatically, from 5.9 children per woman in 1950 to 1.85 in 2023, below the replacement level in most Latin American countries, although there is heterogeneity within the region, with Argentina and Chile experiencing significantly low fertility rates (1.5 children per woman), while Bolivia still maintains figures above the replacement level (2.5 children per woman). These differences reflect inequalities in access to health services, education and employment opportunities (ECLAC, 2024).

This decline is accompanied by an increase in life expectancy—which already exceeds 75 years on average in the region—and a slowdown in population growth. According to the United Nations World Population Prospects 2022, Latin America will experience its turning point towards negative growth before 2070, although some countries such as Cuba and Uruguay could reach that threshold much earlier (UN DESA, 2022).

According to estimates by the United Nations Population Division (2022), Cuba has had fertility rates below replacement level for more than two decades, combined with high life expectancy and persistent emigration, which has led to accelerated ageing and a gradual contraction of its total population.

The Cuban case represents the most extreme example of a widespread trend in Latin America. In 2020, the population of the largest island in the Antilles was around 11 million. Today, following a mass exodus that has drained the country of part of its labour force, there are barely nine million people left, of whom nearly a third are over the age of sixty. This population includes around one million political leaders, civil servants and military personnel, and approximately 1.5 million un s under the age of fifteen. As a result, Cuba's economically active population does not exceed three million people.

Uruguay, for its part, reflects demographic patterns similar to those of European countries in
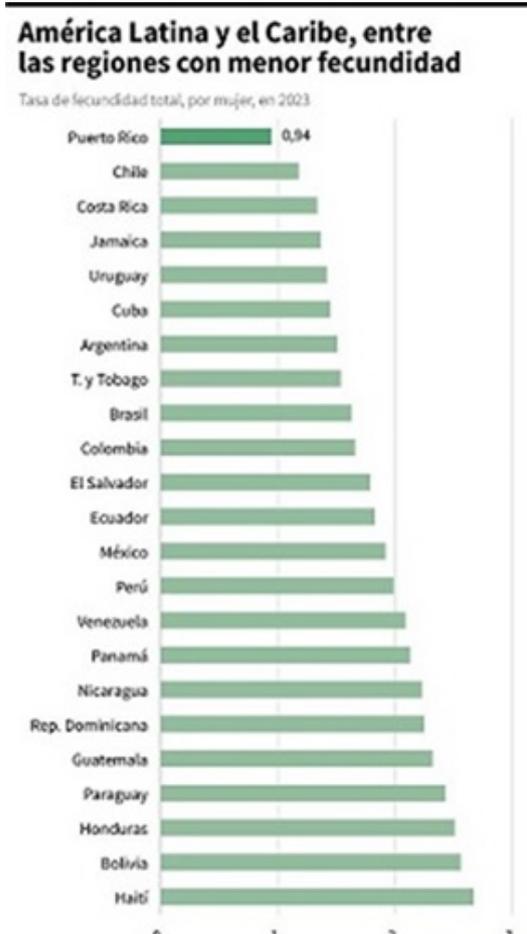

Figure 2: Source: World population estimates and projections (2024 revision) United Nations Population Fund/AFP

terms of fertility and age structure, also projecting a population decline in the short and medium term (ECLAC, 2023). Furthermore, the relative loss of population weight of these countries within Latin America could reduce their regional influence, while forcing them to redefine their international integration strategies in the face of an increasingly demographically disparate region (Rosero-Bixby, 2021; López and Lustig, 2020).

These transformations cannot be analysed in isolation from the global context. Population ageing and declining natural growth have direct effects on the labour force, fiscal sustainability and consumption patterns. Beyond the statistics, these are processes that impact the projection of state power. As Emmanuel Todd (2011) suggests, population structure is a key indicator for understanding both the evolution of social mentalities and emerging geopolitical tensions. In regions where the demographic dividend has been exhausted without translating into substantive improvements in productivity or equity, as is the case in several Latin American countries, fertile ground is being prepared for social unrest and institutional weakening.

From a strategic perspective, Latin America runs the risk of entering what some analysts call the "premature ageing trap": a phase in which the population structure begins to age before economies have consolidated robust social protection systems or adequate levels of labour formality (OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2020). The region is ageing faster than Europe did at the time, but without having resolved the major gaps in labour informality, inequality in access to pensions and universal health coverage. More than 55% of workers are still employed in the informal sector (ILO, 2023), which seriously

compromises the future income of the pension system and the fiscal sustainability of states.

On the other hand, the demographic dividend, understood as the window of opportunity derived from a higher proportion of the population of working age, is still present in some countries, such as Bolivia, Guatemala, and Honduras. However, taking advantage of it requires massive investments in education, employment, and health, without which young people become a factor of migratory pressure or a potential source of instability. At this point, the connection between demography and migration is inescapable: the lack of prospects for young people in their countries of origin explains much of the migratory movements towards the United States and other receiving areas. Migration flows, both within the region and abroad, have begun to have a direct impact on the age composition, population redistribution and urban dynamics of the region, an issue that we will address later.

In addition, population ageing and the transformation of family structures are reshaping social demands. By 2050, more than 25% of the population in countries such as Chile and Costa Rica is expected to be over 60 years of age, implying a growing need for care systems, urban adaptation and new intergenerational policies (HelpAge International, 2023).

The reduction in average household size, the increase in older people living alone and the feminisation of ageing—that is, the longer life expectancy of women—are generating new forms of vulnerability that require specific policies for care, inclusion and social protection (Aranco *et al.*, 2020). In Chile, for example, the proportion of single-person households has grown significantly in the last decade, while in Costa Rica there has been a sustained expansion of health coverage for older adults, but with marked territorial and socioeconomic differences (OECD, 2021).

Furthermore, the transformation of the role of families as the primary care network is placing increasing pressure on the state and the labour market. As the working population shrinks proportionally, the so-called "dependency burden" increases, forcing us to rethink models of productivity, employment and social cohesion in increasingly ageing environments.

This situation is not politically neutral: the electoral weight of older adults is increasing and beginning to alter party priorities, budgets and public policies.

In Chile, where votes were held for the Constitutional Convention and the 2023 plebiscite, the vote of older adults was decisive in rejecting proposals perceived as too disruptive or uncertain. Various analyses indicated that older voters showed a preference for options that offered institutional stability and sustainability of pension systems, compared to younger sectors, which called for more daring structural reforms (Barozet and Espinoza, 2023). This generational divide highlights the growing political weight of older people in electoral processes.

In Argentina, which held presidential elections in 2023, the older electorate was a strategic focus for all candidates. Javier Milei, despite representing a break with the traditional economic order, moderated his discourse on pensions during the second round, aware of the impact that any adjustment would have on an ageing electorate that is very sensitive to cuts in social security (Clarín, 2023). In fact, during the electoral debate, proposals on pension mobility, free medicines and the sustainability of the pension system took centre stage.

In Costa Rica, in the 2022 elections, ageing has also had an impact on the political debate. President Rodrigo Chaves focused part of his campaign on reforming social security management, particularly the Costa Rican Social Security Fund, in a context where ageing is putting pressure on the system's resources and increasing the demand for specialised services. The National Council for Older Persons (CONAPAM) itself warned of the need to prioritise public policies in response to the growth of this age group (CONAPAM, 2023).

In Uruguay, where general elections were held in 2024, population ageing was one of the central issues in the electoral debate. With more than 20% of its population over the age of 60, the country had approved a reform of the pension system in 2023, which generated intense discussions both in Parliament and among the public. During the campaign, several candidates were forced to take a clear stance on the sustainability of the pension system, the rights of retirees, and the expansion of services for older people. The election results reflected, in part, the electorate's sensitivity to these issues, with a marked mobilisation of older voters, who historically have high turnout rates (SER, 2023).

This new demographic profile also has an impact on the international projection of countries, beginning to act as a strategic variable for the integration of states. Latin America and the Caribbean, with their contrasts between countries that are still young and others that are ageing, are an illustrative case of how population structure directly affects a nation's economic, diplomatic and geopolitical positioning.

Countries with young populations tend to have a renewed capacity for economic integration through an abundant labour force, productive migration and dynamic domestic markets, as is the case in Guatemala, Bolivia and Honduras, which still have a high proportion of the population under the age of 30, provided that there are adequate policies in place to channel this demographic dividend towards productive development and social cohesion. In the case of Guatemala, for example, 33% of the population is under the age of 15, and almost 60% is under the age of 30 (UNFPA, 2023).

Countries with ageing populations, such as Uruguay, Cuba and Chile, on the other hand, require innovation policies, human capital attraction and structural reforms to maintain their competitiveness. Chile, for example, has begun to explore policies to attract foreign talent and technological innovation as part of its strategy to maintain regional competitiveness (OECD, 2023). The country has signed agreements with innovation centres in Asia and Europe to promote technological transfer and innovation, understanding that human capital can be replaced—at least in part—by adaptive innovation mechanisms.

Therefore, the decisions taken today on demographic issues will influence the region's position vis-à-vis emerging powers such as India and Nigeria, which are capitalising on their population dynamism to project global influence. "Young India" has integrated its population into global diplomatic and economic discourse: the country promotes itself as the "workshop of the world" in contrast to an ageing China, and has increased its investments in Africa, Central Asia and Latin America precisely with this demographic narrative (Goldstone *et al.*, 2022). Nigeria, for its part, presents itself as the most populous country in Africa with sustained growth, which gives it a growing voice in international forums such as the African Union and the WTO (United Nations, 2023).

Latin America, therefore, faces a strategic dilemma. Although it does not have the demographic weight of those countries, it can make decisions that enhance its relative

advantages: countries with abundant youth can bet on productive regional integration with a value chain logic, while ageing countries must strengthen their ties with technological powers and invest in job retraining, artificial intelligence and skilled migration.

The region's future international positioning, its influence in trade negotiations and its ability to attract foreign direct investment will depend, to a large extent, on how the regional demographic map is interpreted today.

Similarly, in terms of soft power, demographic dynamics can serve as levers of cultural, scientific and technological influence. Urban youth, digitally connected and with transnational aspirations, represent an asset that can be channelled through training, entrepreneurship and international cooperation policies. However, if these young people become trapped in cycles of exclusion, unemployment or violence, they can become a factor of internal destabilisation and forced migration. The strategic potential of the population structure is therefore directly linked to the public policies that accompany these transformations.

In this context, several Latin American governments have begun to recognise the strategic dimension of demographic planning. Investment in young human capital is becoming a central focus of public policies that seek to integrate economic growth, social cohesion and global competitiveness.

Mexico, for example, has included in its 2019-2024 National Development Plan a series of objectives focused on strengthening education, reducing inequality and promoting the inclusion of young people in the labour market and public life. One of the most notable programmes is Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro (Young People Building the Future), which seeks to train young people who are neither studying nor working (known as ninis) through internships in companies, social organisations and government entities. By 2023, more than 2.5 million young people had participated in the programme, with mixed results in terms of employability, but with a clear impact on reducing youth unemployment (Secretariat of Labour and Social Welfare, 2023). This approach has been interpreted as an attempt to reduce social vulnerability and also as a preventive measure against the recruitment of young people by organised crime (Bargent, 2021).

In Uruguay, Plan Ceibal has been a continental benchmark in the use of educational technology since its implementation in 2007. Originally conceived as a digital inclusion

policy through the provision of laptops to students and teachers, the plan has evolved into a comprehensive strategy linking technology, pedagogy and social innovation. Today, Ceibal includes adaptive learning platforms, programming from an early age, artificial intelligence tools and continuous teacher training. Its success has led to Uruguay being repeatedly invited to international forums on digital education and has reinforced its image as an innovative country in the region (Cobo, 2021; Unesco, 2022).

Colombia, for its part, launched the National Youth Strategy in 2022 as part of an effort to coordinate inter-institutional policies aimed at the population between the ages of 14 and 28. This strategy seeks to integrate educational, employment, mental health, political participation and cultural dimensions, and places young people as key actors in development. In addition, Colombia has strengthened its National Innovation System through partnerships with universities, research centres and the private sector, with programmes such as Colciencias Young Researchers, which promote scientific and technological leadership among young people ( ). According to a World Bank report (2023), Colombia has made notable improvements in retaining young talent in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields, which has had a positive impact on its international integration.

However, new demographic realities also open up opportunities. The decline in the number of pupils in schools will make it possible to improve the teacher-student ratio, extend teaching hours and strengthen teacher training, rather than allocating the education budget to the construction of new schools. In Costa Rica, for example, where education spending accounts for 6% of GDP, it is estimated that by 2075 there will be only 320,000 students in primary and secondary education, compared to 1 million in 2002 (Política Exterior, 2025).

These initiatives, although diverse in scale and ambition, share a common strategic horizon: to prepare new generations for a globalised and competitive environment, where knowledge, innovation and adaptability will be decisive. In this context, young people are not only seen as a vulnerable age group, but as a strategic national resource, whose potential can make a difference in terms of sustainable development, democratic stability and geopolitical positioning.

At the same time, the growing interest of foreign powers such as China and the United States in Latin America's labour markets and human resources shows that the region is not only a space for flows, but also an arena for geostrategic competition linked to population (ECLAC, 2023; Brookings Institution, 2022).

In short, what in past decades was understood as a natural evolution of demographic dynamics is now a central component of strategic analysis in Latin America and the Caribbean. The transformation of its population structure is reshaping the political, economic and geopolitical landscape of the continent and needs to be addressed with a multidimensional approach that transcends a purely statistical or welfare-based approach.

From a strategic perspective, what we are seeing in Latin America and the Caribbean is not simply a natural evolution of the population structure, but a process that raises growing tensions between potential and vulnerability. The coexistence of countries with accelerated ageing and oth s still marked by large youth populations reveals not only regional heterogeneity, but also a lack of coordination of common policies. In many cases, states have failed to transform their demographic advantages into effective capacities to project themselves internationally, or to anticipate the challenges of social sustainability posed by ageing. This dissonance between demographic and political rhythms conditions the region's strategic room for manoeuvre, particularly in a global scenario where power balances are also being reconfigured in terms of population.

Transformative displacements: the other side of regional change

Migration in Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the most complex and decisive phenomena in the regional landscape today. Far from representing a peripheral or marginal movement, human displacement has taken on a central role in the transformation of the continent's countries, not only as a response to local or regional crises, but also as part of a broader process of reorganising territories, economies and societies. Human mobility has come to occupy a strategic place on the public agenda, challenging both states and regional and international organisations.

In a global context marked by uncertainty, conflict, inequality and climate change, the region has become the point of origin, transit, destination and return of multiple migratory

flows that no longer follow exclusively linear patterns (UNHCR and R4V, 2024). Migration trajectories are increasingly complex, multi-causal and prolonged over time, with a growing feminisation and diversification of socio-demographic profiles (IOM, 2022; UN Women, 2021). This new reality poses unprecedented challenges in terms of governance, integration and even international cooperation, which has been recognised in initiatives such as the 2022 Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection[1] , promoted by multiple governments in the hemisphere.

Mobility is intertwined with other ongoing structural processes, such as the exhaustion of certain development models, the erosion of social cohesion and the transformation of employment, as warned by ECLAC in its analysis of post-pandemic trends (ECLAC, 2023). In many countries, internal migration from rural areas to medium-sized cities or national capitals is changing land use patterns, accelerating urbanisation and putting pressure on already saturated infrastructure (UN-Habitat, 2022). At the same time, cross-border flows, whether voluntary or forced, challenge institutional capacities and force a rethinking of public policies from a regional and intersectoral perspective.

This is not just a matter of flows across borders, but a phenomenon that redefines belonging, reactivates old historical links between countries and communities, and raises new ways of understanding citizenship, rights and identity in the 21ST century (Castles, Haas and Miller, 2020). Migration has gone from being a social variable to becoming a geostrategic factor that impacts political stability, labour markets, and continental integration and cooperation processes (Goldstone *et al.*, 2022; IDB, 2023).

Understanding migration as a structural component rather than simply a reactive one allows it to be placed at the centre of the discussion on the region's future. Beyond its immediate effects, human displacement is having a decisive impact on population configurations, the relationship between the state and society, and the way Latin America positions itself on the international stage. We aim to address this transformative dimension from a demographic and strategic perspective, with the goal of better

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[1] Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, signed in June 2022 during the IX Summit of the Americas. Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/10/declaration-of-los-angeles-on-migration-and-protection/

understanding how population movements are shaping—and will continue to shape—the region in the coming decades.

Today, Latin America is experiencing an unprecedented wave of migration that transcends the classic narrative of economic migrants to the United States and forms a much more complex and regionalised network. The case of the Venezuelan exodus remains paradigmatic: with more than 7.7 million people displaced by 2024 according to the R4V Platform, it is the largest forced movement in the region's recent history. Nearly 80% remain in Latin America, with Colombia, Peru and Ecuador as the main receiving countries (R4V, 2024). This phenomenon has had a profound impact on the demographic profiles of the receiving cities, modifying the population pyramid, increasing the proportion of young people in ageing contexts and forcing a reorganisation of social services.

Colombia, with nearly 2.9 million Venezuelans, is the main receiving country. According to data from Migración Colombia, the Venezuelan migrant population in the country is mainly composed of people of working age, with 51% women and 49% men. This group contributes positively to the demographic dividend, as most are between 18 and 39 years old (IOM, 2024).

Economically, in 2022, Venezuelans generated $529 million in taxes, contributing significantly to public finances. Most are employed in sectors such as food, commerce and construction, offsetting the labour deficit in operational and seasonal jobs (Vanegas, 2024).

A similar situation occurs in Peru, with approximately 1.5 million Venezuelans, and in Ecuador, with more than half a million. Most migrants are young people of working age, which has led to a rejuvenation of the workforce in these countries. However, it has also created challenges in terms of integration, access to services and social cohesion.

Despite the demographic and economic benefits, Venezuelan migrants face significant challenges. According to the Refugee and Migrant Needs Analysis (RMNA) 2024, many migrants and refugees in an irregular situation, whether newly arrived or in transit, are unable to access the basic rights and services necessary to lead a dignified life. This underscores the need for coordinated and comprehensive support to ensure their safety, well-being and opportunities for a stable future.

In parallel with the Venezuelan exodus, migration originating in the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America—Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—continues to shape one of the most complex cross-border dynamics on the continent. This phenomenon, fuelled by structural factors such as criminal violence, persistent poverty, the effects of climate change and institutional fragility, constitutes a sustained pattern of displacement that has had profound demographic implications in both the countries of origin and those of destination.

Added to this is a growing diversification in the migratory profiles crossing the Central American isthmus. Cubans, Haitians, Ecuadorians, Venezuelans and a growing number of people from Africa and Asia travel the most dangerous routes on the continent—including the perilous Darien Gap, the natural border between Colombia and Panama—on their way to North America. This cross-flow not only strains the state capacities of transit and destination countries, but also redefines local demographic patterns, creating new challenges in terms of planning and institutional response.

During 2023, the figures reached record levels: on the southwestern border of the United States alone, the Border Patrol reported more than 562,000 arrests of migrants from the Northern Triangle, of which more than 250,000 were from Honduras and Guatemala (*The Washington Post*, 2024).

In Mexico, meanwhile, more than 224,000 Central Americans were apprehended in transit to the north, reflecting the magnitude of the migratory pressure on both receiving countries (Mera, 2023).

This migration corridor has become a key geopolitical space, where humanitarian, security and foreign policy interests intersect.

However, the most recent data show a significant change: in 2024, total apprehensions of migrants from the Northern Triangle fell by 38% compared to the previous year, with a total of 486,343 registrations between the United States and Mexico. Arrests at the US border fell to 288,337 (a decrease of 48.7%), while in Mexico the reduction was more modest, with 198,006 apprehensions (11.78% less than the previous year) (Infobae, 2025). Despite this decline, deportations of citizens from these countries increased, exceeding 102,000 in 2024, with El Salvador leading the increase (35.8%), followed by Guatemala (12.8%), while Honduras experienced a 13.2% drop (Infobae. 2025b).

From a demographic perspective, this flow is characterised by a markedly youthful profile. Most migrants are between 15 and 35 years old (ICCA, 2021), making this group a strategic component of the labour force, especially in economies with increasing ageing rates. The increase in the number of children, adolescents and unaccompanied minors— more than 13,000 deported in 2024 (Sagastume, 2025)— poses specific challenges in terms of protection and institutional capacity in receiving countries.

Overall, this youth migration from the Northern Triangle not only implies a loss of human capital for the countries of origin—many of which already face demographic stagnation or declining birth rates—but also alters the population balance in medium-sized cities and border areas of Mexico and the United States, where these communities tend to settle. Their integration, therefore, becomes a critical variable within the continental demographic landscape.

Demographically, the effect of these movements is not uniform. In the Dominican Republic, the sustained increase in the Haitian population—which represents about 5% of the national total—has had a dual effect: on the one hand, it has contributed to the rejuvenation of key labour sectors such as construction, agriculture and domestic work; on the other, it has generated accumulated tensions in basic social services such as health, education and housing, especially in border provinces such as Dajabón and Elías Piña (El País, 2024c). Structural discrimination, restrictions on access to fundamental rights and difficulties in registering children born in Dominican territory amplify these tensions, with long-term implications for social cohesion and population structure. UNICEF (2022) has also warned of the growing presence of Haitian children and adolescents in vulnerable situations, many of them in irregular circumstances or without schooling.

In the case of Chile, the transformation has been remarkable. The arrival of more than one million migrants in less than a decade has not only altered the proportion of foreigners in the total population, but has also had an impact on the age and sex composition in specific regions.

Between 2017 and 2020, the country experienced an explosive increase in its migrant population, especially from Haiti and Venezuela. This influx raised the percentage of foreigners from 2.7% in 2014 to nearly 10% in 2023, with more than 1.9 million people

officially registered (National Institute of Statistics of Chile, 2024). The geographical concentration in urban communes with low natural growth—such as Santiago Centro, Estación Central, and Antofagasta—has changed the local demographic and local , introducing new linguistic, cultural, and age dynamics. In areas with high ageing rates, migrants—mostly young people—fill labour shortages in sectors such as construction, informal trade and care services, but they also face institutional barriers to integration: the validation of qualifications, healthcare and access to secure rentals. These challenges, if not addressed with robust public policies, could crystallise into ethno-demographic social segmentations.

Both cases show how recent migration flows are reshaping the population structure of receiving states, not as a threat, but as a strategic variable that requires updated regulatory frameworks and agile institutional responses. Instead of viewing migration as a one-off demographic *shock*, a long-term vision is needed that integrates it as a structural factor in regional development.

Furthermore, internal migration in Latin America, often overshadowed by large international movements, represents a demographic dynamic of great significance. In Andean countries such as Peru and Bolivia, movements from rural areas of the highlands to the inter-Andean valleys and departmental capitals have become structural in nature. This phenomenon is not only a response to the search for employment or access to services, but also to the deterioration of climatic and agricultural conditions in high-altitude regions, where climate variability has severely affected subsistence crops.

DIMENSIÓN	TENDENCIAS OBSERVADAS	IMPACTOS EN LA REGION
Origen de los migrante	• Crisis humanitaria – Venezuela, Haiti • Violencia y pobreza (Centroamérica)	• Éxodo masivo • Presión sobre paises receptores
Destino de los migrantes	• Politica del Cono Sur (Argentina, Chilé, Brasil) • EE. UU., México, Canadá	• Nuevos patrones migratorios intra-regionales • Reconfiguración del paisaje demografico
Migración Sur-Sur	• Predominancia de flujos dentro la región • Redes familiares y comunitarias	• Oportunidad de para redefinir odos de desarrollo regional • Necesidad de cooperación sostenida
Respuestas institucuionales	• Politicas de coordinación regional • Falta de coordinación eficaz • Rápel crecimiento de cooperacion	• Oportunidad para redefinir modelos de desarróllo regional • Necesidad de cooperación sostenida
Implicaciones		• Desafios para la integración y estabilidad regional

Figure 3: Displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean. Own elaboration

From a demographic point of view, the impact of this migration is twofold. On the one hand, it is leading to a progressive exodus of young people from rural areas, with direct consequences for the population pyramid in these territories. In several provinces of the Bolivian highlands, such as Potosí and Oruro, more than 40% of the rural population is now over 40 years old, and fertility has declined significantly in the last two decades (INE Bolivia, 2023). This dynamic accelerates ageing and reduces the active base that sustains the local economy, jeopardising the sustainability of educational and health services that still remain in these areas.

On the other hand, destination centres are receiving an influx of young people that is changing their internal structure. Although this age renewal may represent an advantage in terms of economic dynamism, it also introduces regional tensions: recent censuses show growing inequality in the distribution of the young population between rural and urban departments, which deepens regional gaps in access to opportunities, services and political representation (INEI, 2024). In regions such as the Peruvian Central Highlands, departments such as Huancavelica and Apurímac have lost between 10% and 15% of their young population in the last decade, while Lima now accounts for more than 35% of the country's young people (INEI, 2022).

Thus, far from being mere territorial adjustments, these internal displacements are silently reshaping the demographic profile of the Andean world. Public planning continues to lag behind this reality, and few territorial strategies address in a coordinated manner the ageing of the areas of expulsion and the pressure on social systems in the receiving areas.

We cannot fail to mention the case of Mexico, as it constitutes a demographic hub in the regional migration system, playing a simultaneous role as a country of origin, transit, destination and return. This condition makes it a true "complete migration system", with multiple and complex demographic implications.

From the point of view of international emigration, the demographic profile most affected continues to be that of young adults, mainly between the ages of 20 and 39, with medium and high levels of education. According to the National Survey of Demographic Dynamics (ENADID), between 2018 and 2023, nearly 1.2 million people emigrated, 87.9% to the United States and 6% to Canada (Paz, 2024). This loss of working-age population particularly affects regions that have traditionally been sources of emigration, such as Guerrero, Oaxaca, Zacatecas and Michoacán, where the generational gap exacerbates rural ageing processes and reduces local economic dynamism.

Internally, Mexico experiences sustained interregional migration, with movements from states with high fertility and low labour supply (Chiapas, Veracruz, Hidalgo) to more industrialised areas such as Nuevo León, Querétaro and Mexico City. This process produces a partial rebalancing of the population pyramid in recipient areas ( ), rejuvenating their age base, while leaving the states of origin with a growing proportion of elderly and dependent people.

In the medium term, this demographic redistribution may put pressure on health and pension systems in rural regions that are losing their young and active workforce.

On the other hand, transit migration to the United States has also had unexpected effects. During 2023, more than 782,000 incidents involving people in an irregular migratory situation were recorded in Mexico (IOM, 2024). Although many seek to continue northward, a growing number of them have become stranded or have chosen to settle in the country, especially in southern and northern border cities. This migrant population—mostly young people from Central America, the Caribbean, South America, and even Africa—is significantly altering the age and cultural composition of cities such as Tapachula, Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, and Monterrey.

In addition, return processes—and especially deportations from the United States—also have a notable demographic effect. In 2023 alone, the Mexican government recorded more than 190,000 returnees, many of them unaccompanied minors (Government of Mexico, 2024). The reintegration of these returnees represents a challenge in terms of schooling, labour market integration and access to services, especially in poor municipalities that already face institutional overload.

Mexico, therefore, illustrates how migration flows not only affect human mobility but also profoundly transform regional and national demographic balances, from age structure to spatial distribution of the population. Managing this process requires intersectoral public policies that recognise the importance of the demographic dimension in strategic decision-making.

A complementary dimension to be taken into account is climate migration, which is already emerging as a growing reality, beginning to alter population patterns in vulnerable areas of the Caribbean, Central America and southern Mexico. ECLAC and the IOM have warned that phenomena such as sea level rise, droughts and hurricanes could generate millions of new displaced persons in the coming decades (IOM, 2023; ECLAC, 2024). Anticipating these dynamics is crucial for planning public adaptation policies that not only address displacement but also integrate it into demographic and territorial strategies.

Finally, it is worth briefly mentioning the sustained increase in migration to non-traditional destinations such as Southern Europe (Spain, Italy, Portugal) and certain emerging Asian economies, such as Japan and South Korea. Unlike the forced or precarious movements

that characterise much of regional migration, these flows are largely composed of skilled professionals, young people with higher education, digital skills, and language proficiency, which gives them a specific demographic profile: highly skilled, between 25 and 45 years of age, and with a low propensity to return.

According to recent data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the number of Latin Americans with university degrees residing in Europe has grown by more than 30% since 2015, with a particular increase in the health, technology and education services sectors (OECD, 2023). In countries such as Spain, Venezuelans, Colombians, and Argentinians have entered the skilled labour market en masse, reshaping the balance in certain professional sectors and demographically revitalising urban areas in population decline, especially in regions with low birth rates and rapid ageing (El País, 2024a).

The Asian case presents a more incipient but significant dynamic. Japan, for example, has facilitated the entry of Latin American workers of *Nikkei* descent[2] (especially Peruvians and Brazilians) since 2019, which has helped to alleviate its demographic deficit, but has also posed challenges for cultural and social integration, given the different migratory experience of this new generation (Nippon.com, 2024).

For the countries of origin, however, this phenomenon also entails significant demographic costs: the 'brain drain' affects strategic sectors such as public health, education and technological innovation, where domestic demand far exceeds supply. Although remittances represent a key source of income—in 2023 alone, Latin American countries received more than $150 billion in remittances, led by Mexico, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic (*BBC*, 2024)—they do not always offset the long-term impact of the loss of skilled human capital.

Demographically, this trend expands the Latin American migration map, revealing a structural divide between those who can move for resources and skills, and those who do so out of necessity or desperation. Thus, the demographic landscape of Latin America is being redefined not only from within, but also through its diasporas, scattered across increasingly diverse and competitive circuits.

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[2] People who are of Japanese descent but were born or raised outside Japan.

Current migratory flows should therefore be understood not only as social phenomena, but also as drivers of demographic change that affect the reconfiguration of the labour force, the age structure of the population and the balance between sending and receiving regions. In a scenario of progressive ageing, these migrations can represent—if managed properly—an opportunity to boost economies, diversify demographic profiles, and rethink the strategic positioning of Latin America and the Caribbean in the global context.

The urban face of demographic change: megacities and new social frontiers

The demographic dynamics of Latin America and the Caribbean cannot be understood without observing its growing urbanisation. While the previous sections have shown how population ageing, migration and internal displacement are reshaping demographic balances, it is in cities—and particularly in megacities—where these processes take visible form and have tangible consequences. The concentration of population in urban environments not only responds to the search for economic opportunities or services, but also reflects historical patterns of inequality, rural abandonment and structural changes in social composition. This new urban face poses unprecedented challenges for social cohesion, public policy design and territorial sustainability, making megacities true laboratories of regional demographic change.

The 21ST century has consolidated Latin America and the Caribbean as one of the most urbanised regions in the world. More than 80% of its population now lives in cities, and a growing number do so in large urban agglomerations with more than five million inhabitants. These megacities—such as Mexico City, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Lima, and Bogotá—are not only economic and political centres; they have become privileged settings where the main vectors of demographic change converge: ageing, migration, unequal growth, and internal mobility (UN-Habitat, 2022).

The expansion of these cities has not been uniform or without tensions. In many of them, population growth has been driven both by internal migration—particularly from declining rural regions—and by the arrival of foreign populations, especially young people of working age from countries such as Venezuela, Haiti, and the Northern Triangle of Central America (CELADE, 2023). This influx has significantly altered the age structure of the receiving cities, rejuvenating urban areas marked by low birth rates or the progressive

ageing of the local population. Thus, Latin American megacities are becoming not only centres of attraction, but also areas of rapid demographic transformation.

However, this population concentration also poses structural challenges. The pressure on urban infrastructure, health and education systems, housing and transport has tested the capacity of local governments. In addition, the growth of peripheral belts and informal settlements, often linked to the arrival of migrants or internally displaced persons, has given rise to new social frontiers where urban inequality is acutely expressed. The demographic distribution within cities themselves reflects territorial disparities: while some areas show indicators similar to those of ageing countries, others remain markedly young and dynamic (Rodríguez, 2021).

These transformations affect not only urban planning, but also the projection of power and representation within states. In political systems that still suffer from deficits in decentralisation and territorial equity, megacities concentrate not only population, but also political and economic influence. This reality forces us to rethink the link between territory, citizenship and the state from a demographic and strategic perspective (Bello, 2022).

Lima, for example, has established itself as one of the largest metropolises in South America, with more than 11 million inhabitants and growth marked by migration from the Andean highlands and, more recently, by the massive arrival of Venezuelan population. By 2024, it is estimated that more than one million people of this nationality will be residing in the Peruvian capital (*El Comercio*, 2024). This influx has rejuvenated the demographic composition of peripheral districts, where young people of working age predominate, while intensifying pressure on public services and accentuating the informal expansion of urban space. According to recent studies, more than 60% of Lima's urban growth has occurred outside formal planning schemes (Revilla and Ramírez, 2021), creating a city that is fragmented both physically and socially.

A similar dynamic can be observed in Bogotá, which has undergone a significant demographic transformation since 2017 with the arrival of more than 500,000 Venezuelan migrants, many of them under the age of 30 (Migración Colombia, 2024). This influx has reshaped certain areas of the city, especially in the south and south-west, where demand for housing, education and informal employment has skyrocketed. At the same time, deep territorial inequalities persist: according to DANE (2023), gaps in indicators such as life

expectancy, access to health care and educational attainment between the north and south of the city have widened, generating demographic polarisation that reinforces historical patterns of urban segregation.

Santiago de Chile, for its part, presents a particular case of simultaneous urbanisation and ageing. While traditional communes such as Providencia and Ñuñoa show advanced signs of population ageing, others such as Quilicura, Independencia and Estación Central have experienced a notable increase in young foreign populations. Between 2016 and 2020, immigration from Haiti and Venezuela transformed the age structure of these areas, accounting for up to 25% of the local population (La Tercera, 2024). This demographic redistribution has posed significant challenges in terms of access to services, transport and housing, while also changing the socio-cultural profile of neighbourhoods. Although the Catholic University's City Observatory has documented progress in institutional integration (UC City Observatory, 2023), the gap between wealthy and vulnerable communities remains one of the most pronounced in the region.

In the case of São Paulo, the most populous city in the southern hemisphere, recent demographic dynamics are explained not so much by the arrival of international migrants as by a complex web of internal flows, natural growth and regional mobility. Unlike other Latin American capitals, where international migrants have profoundly altered the population pyramid, in São Paulo the dominant phenomenon continues to be the uninterrupted urbanisation of populations from the interior of Brazil, especially from the Northeast, who for decades have been feeding the urban periphery in search of better opportunities. However, in recent years there has been a growing number of Haitian, Bolivian, Venezuelan and Senegalese migrants, many of whom are entering precarious labour markets—such as textile manufacturing, delivery or domestic work—which accentuate the socio-spatial fragmentation of the city (Folha de S. Paulo, 2024). This heterogeneity has created a demographic landscape where areas of progressive ageing coexist with markedly young and multicultural districts, such as Brás or Pari, posing an additional challenge in terms of urban planning, differentiated public policies and equitable access to rights.

Mexico City, for its part, continues to function as a demographic magnet on a national and regional scale. Although it has seen a slight slowdown in growth over the last decade, the migratory dynamism of the centre of the country, combined with the economic and administrative weight of the capital, maintains its status as a strategic hub of the Latin American urban system. Unlike receiving cities such as Bogotá or Santiago, where recent migration inflows have had a proportionally higher impact, Mexico City has a pattern of historical population concentration that reflects both long-term internal migration processes and sustained settlements of foreign communities—mainly Central American, South American and, to a lesser extent, Asian—integrated into complex urban structures (El País, 2024b).

Beyond their local specificities, the large metropolises of Latin America and the Caribbean share a series of structural features that link them as demographic protagonists of the 21ST century. Firstly, most of these megacities exhibit marked territorial polarisation: the peripheries—younger, more vulnerable and rapidly growing—contrast with the consolidated urban centres, where an older population with better living conditions and access to services is concentrated. This internal segmentation reproduces and amplifies inequalities that are not only economic, but also generational and territorial (Cano, 2022).

Secondly, constant pressure on health, education, housing and transport systems represents one of the main challenges for urban governance. The ability of these systems to adapt to a changing population—in terms of age, geographical origin, migratory status, or family structure—is key to avoiding major social fractures. The growing presence of international migrants, internally displaced persons, or returnees only further complicates this scenario, requiring coordinated responses across levels of government, planning, and public policy.

Finally, these megacities are not just large concentrations of people: they are increasingly becoming hubs of regional power. They concentrate population, production, knowledge and decision-making capacity, becoming arenas where development models, sustainability strategies and narratives about the continent's demographic future are debated. What happens in São Paulo, Bogotá or Mexico City will have repercussions that transcend national borders and will condition the life opportunities of millions of people in the coming decades (UNDP, 2023).

Back to the beginning: expulsions, returns and new population balances

Although this chapter has focused on the internal and regional processes that shape the Latin American demographic landscape, it is impossible to conclude the analysis without addressing a dynamic whose magnitude and urgency have intensified since the beginning of 2025: that of forced returns and mass deportations. Although this phenomenon is not new, it has taken on a new dimension under the presidency of Donald Trump, who has returned to power with an even more aggressive immigration agenda than in his first term.

Since his return to the presidency in January 2025, Trump has reinstated a markedly restrictive immigration agenda, strengthening border control and accelerating the deportation of tens of thousands of people, many of them young, economically active and with established family ties in the United States.

Measures marking this new phase include the suspension of refugee and asylum admission programmes, the expansion of the power of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to carry out raids and mass deportations (*The New York Times*, 2024), and a drastic cut in legal avenues for seeking asylum. Added to this were openly xenophobic speeches from the presidency, which fostered a climate of hostility towards migrants, especially Latin Americans.

Measures such as the reactivation of the "Remain in Mexico" programme[3] and the tightening of asylum procedures have led to a significant increase in forced returns, especially to Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean.

Among the most controversial measures is the use of *the Alien Enemies Act* of 1798 to justify the deportation of migrants accused of having links to gangs, without the need for conclusive judicial evidence. These individuals are being transferred to detention centres in their countries of origin, such as the Terrorism Confinement Centre (CECOT) in El Salvador, the mega-prison promoted by President Nayib Bukele as a symbol of his heavy-handed policy (Villafranca, 2024). Although presented as a security strategy, this practice has been harshly criticised by human rights organisations, which consider that it

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[3] This protocol came into force in January 2019, during Trump's first term (2017-2021). It requires migrants and asylum seekers to wait in Mexico until their right is authorised, in order to curb illegal immigration.

encourages arbitrary detentions and can profoundly alter the social fabric of the receiving communities (HRW, 2024).

At the same time, deportation flights to Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean have increased, operating from Texas, Arizona and Florida on an almost daily basis. According to figures from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), more than 120,000 people were deported to the region in the first quarter of 2025 alone (DHS, 2025). This volume includes both adults and unaccompanied minors and reflects a systematic policy of emptying migrant populations considered "undesirable."

In this context, the phenomenon of self-deportation has also become visible—and is now actively promoted—a term that refers to the voluntary departure of migrants pressured by the institutional environment, threats of imprisonment, or the impossibility of renewing permits. Under the new administration, this practice has ceased to be a marginal phenomenon and has become an official strategy. The Donald Trump administration has begun to offer financial incentives, forgiveness of immigration penalties, and preferential access to certain assisted repatriation programmes for migrants who agree to leave the country voluntarily.
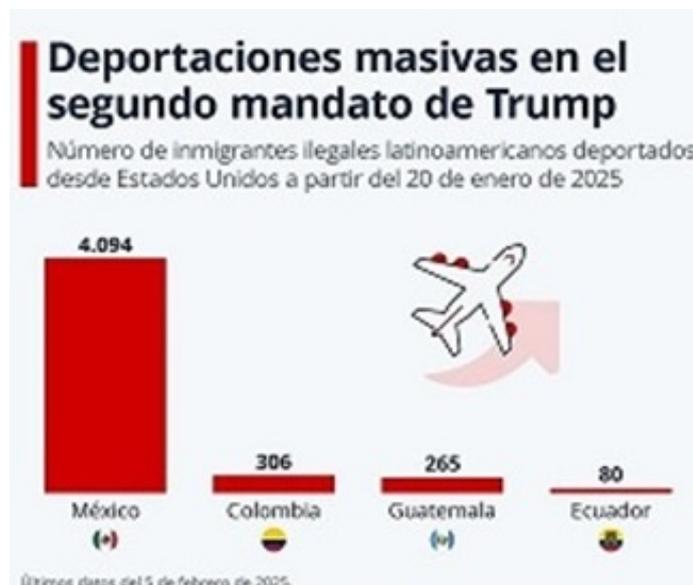

Figure 4. Source: United States Department of Homeland Security/Migración Colombia/Statista

Through the "Safe Departure" programme, launched in March 2025, the Department of Homeland Security offers undocumented migrants the possibility of leaving the country

without being detained, provided they cooperate with the departure process and waive future applications for residency. According to preliminary figures, more than 30,000 people have taken advantage of the programme during its first two months of operation (U.S. CIS, 2025). This mechanism, although apparently voluntary, has been harshly criticised by human rights organisations, which consider it a form of structural coercion, in which the threat of punishment drives decisions that are not technically free (AIC, 2025).

Although these are not deportations in the legal sense, these departures have the same impact on the population structure of the sending countries. Those who self-deport are usually young adults of working age with work experience in sectors such as construction, agriculture or domestic services. Their forced return, although voluntary in legal terms, represents a personal, economic and community- . Furthermore, as they are not recognised as expelled by the legal system, they fall outside the traditional frameworks of assistance and reintegration offered by some countries of origin.

It should also be noted that these initiatives have encountered legal limitations. In April 2025, the United States Supreme Court temporarily suspended the implementation of certain measures of the mass deportation programme, considering that they violated procedural guarantees and fundamental rights. This decision, although provisional, opens up a new legal scenario that could slow down — or at least qualify — the impact of the new government's more aggressive policies (*The New York Times*, 2025).

In this context, since October 2024, under the presidency of Luis Abinader, the Dominican Republic has intensified the deportation of Haitian migrants in an irregular situation, reaching rates of up to 10,000 expulsions per week. According to official figures, more than 276,000 foreigners, mostly Haitian citizens, were deported in 2024, and in January 2025 alone, more than 31,200 deportations were recorded (Hasbun, 2025). This policy has raised concerns among human rights organisations and international agencies due to the lack of procedural safeguards and the humanitarian impact on vulnerable groups such as pregnant women and minors.

Beyond the political or humanitarian sphere, these movements have lasting implications for the regional demographic map. By altering patterns of residence, labour cycles and age distribution, they are influencing the very future of sending countries: from their labour

market and education system to their fiscal capacities and international representation. What is ultimately at stake is the construction of new forms of citizenship, rootedness and belonging in a region marked by mobility, inequality and unwanted return.

Conclusion

Thinking about demography in Latin America and the Caribbean can no longer be limited to counting inhabitants or observing birth or ageing curves. The population transformation that the region is undergoing challenges power structures, development models and social pacts that were believed to be stable. What is at stake is not only a quantitative transition, but a profound reordering of the relationships between generations, territories and states. The figures alone do not explain the social fracture that opens up when a country ages before becoming rich, when a city grows without integration, or when millions of people are expelled or returned to contexts they no longer recognise as their own.

One of the great paradoxes that this chapter has attempted to highlight is that, in the midst of an era of mobility, Latin America faces multiple forms of immobility. The immobility of the state in designing long-term demographic policies. The immobility of social sectors trapped between informality and exclusion. The immobility of returnees who arrive in countries without real reintegration mechanisms. This tension between constant displacement and immobile structures is one of the main sources of imbalance on the continent.

Migration—which should be seen as an opportunity rather than a threat—continues to be managed, to a large extent, from a security perspective imposed by powers such as the United States. Migration policy has become an instrument of geopolitical pressure, where border control is negotiated as a bargaining chip and migrants become tools in electoral disputes. The case of mass deportations under Donald Trump's new mandate not only illustrates this logic, but also starkly reveals how the decisions of one power can abruptly change the demographic dynamics of its neighbours.

Another fundamental lesson from this journey is that demographic processes are not neutral. They do not affect men and women, young and old, rich and poor equally. Social gaps tend to crystallise at the margins: in urban peripheries where births are

concentrated, in rural communities that are losing their working population, in neighbourhoods that receive flows of migrants without resources. Where public policy does not reach or arrives late, demography becomes destiny, and the territory becomes a trap.

But the future is not written in stone. Latin America and the Caribbean still have a demographic window of opportunity—albeit a narrow one—to transform their present. It is not just a question of managing ageing or containing migration, but of building a new territorial and generational pact that articulates the rights of those who stay, the dreams of those who leave and the dignity of those who return. This requires a change of approach: to stop treating demography as data and start understanding it as a tool for democratising development, redistributing power and projecting a strategic vision for the region.

Ultimately, the challenge is not only to adapt to demographic trends, but to challenge their meaning. Do we want cities that concentrate opportunities or reproduce inequalities? Do we want migration policies that expel or integrate? Do we want reactive states or states capable of anticipating change? The answers to these questions do not depend on demography, but on politics. And this is precisely where Latin America and the Caribbean face their most complex test: that of building a strategic vision that is not limited to crisis management, but dares to think long term, anticipating scenarios, articulating coherent public policies and understanding that every decision—in health, housing, mobility or education—has profound demographic effects.

The region does not lack resources or talent, but it does lack sustained political will and a common project. Committing to demographically conscious development means rethinking the role of states, but also strengthening local capacities, recognising the centrality of cities, integrating diasporas as agents of change, and turning data into decision-making compasses. Only in this way can a region marked by inequality and displacement be transformed into a region capable of offering a future, because demography does not determine the destiny of peoples, but it does define the terrain on which that destiny is played out.

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