

MONITORING REPORT ASSISTED VOLUNTARY RETURN PROGRAMS

October–December 2020



Programs in Mexico and North of Central America countries | No. 5

This fifth monitoring report presents the findings from the collection and review of 45 surveys that IOM conducted from October 2020 to December 2020 to capture the experiences of participants in the IOM Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programs¹ in El Salvador, Guatemala–Belize, Honduras and Mexico.

The primary purpose of these surveys is to gain a deeper understanding of how beneficiaries reintegrate upon return to their origin countries. Each migrant was asked between 24 and 33 questions, which encompass feedback on IOM's assistance during returns, migrants' experiences during travel and transit, on reception, as well as post-arrival assistance and life upon return.²

These survey results play an important role in checking AVR beneficiaries' safety, physical and psychological health status, as well as determining the challenges they face upon return. Such challenges are particularly important to understand, as these AVR programs currently do not include a reintegration component. As such, IOM refers beneficiaries to local authorities, development colleagues and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) when possible.³ The survey findings help inform IOM program teams, stakeholders and other partners on the ground of any gaps in support after beneficiaries return to origin countries through AVR programs.

This monitoring exercise is relatively new to AVR programs in Mexico and the four North of Central America countries. Although AVR programs in Guatemala and Mexico have assisted more than 4,000 migrants since November 2018,⁴ there were no monitoring practices, and no contact was made with beneficiaries upon their return. In response, this monitoring exercise became an important feature of the AVR Guatemala/Belize, El Salvador and Honduras programs from March 2020 and informed the four subsequent monitoring reports in [June](#), [August](#), [September](#) and [November](#). AVR Mexico started its monitoring exercise in October 2020.

¹ These AVR programs support the orderly and humane return of migrants by providing administrative, logistics and financial support to individuals who are unable or unwilling to remain in host or transit countries and wish to return voluntarily to their countries of origin.

² Out of 45 respondents, 41 answered all 33 questions. AVR Mexico program interviewed one adult per family group.

³ In eligibility interviews prior to return, the primary needs and conditions of beneficiaries' vulnerability are determined. Then diplomatic missions representing countries of destination are contacted in origin countries to identify reintegration mechanisms for referrals or IOM missions in countries of origin coordinate referrals from other IOM programs or counterparts.

⁴ The AVR program in Belize started in October 2019. AVR programs in El Salvador and Honduras commenced from March 2020.

Key takeaways

This fifth monitoring report delivers three key takeaways.

1

The first takeaway is half of the respondents had plans to remigrate or return abroad in the future. Despite the relatively small sample size and different motivations for originally leaving origin countries or seeking help when abroad (49% were stranded, 24% were subject to Migration Protection Protocol (MPP), while others were driven by economic reasons or to flee violence), the financial concerns, lack of sustainable employment opportunities and struggle to re-establish lives were primary reasons cited to remigrate or return abroad.

To offset this motivation to remigrate or return abroad, the vast majority of respondents also emphasized the need for support to re-establish their lives upon return. Such respondents reported receiving no assistance, from respective home governments or other actors, once back in their countries of origin. They faced challenges in accessing employment, financial support or skills to gain jobs. These challenges were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and hurricanes that hit the region in late 2020.

Despite sustained efforts by AVR teams to refer beneficiaries to entities with the potential of supporting returned migrants with reintegration, the survey revealed that most respondents had not received reintegration assistance.

From October 2020 to December 2020, thousands of Central Americans formed migrant caravans that attempted to reach North America. In response, there is a need to explore the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the region's economies, as well as the devastation caused by hurricanes late last year as push factors for migration. At the same time, it is essential that returnees are given the necessary support to rebuild their lives.

2

The second takeaway is respondents expressed a need for psychosocial support upon return. More than one third (36%) of the respondents reported not being in good condition – physically and mentally. Many went through difficult and stressful times before joining AVR programs. Additionally, after their return to the origin countries, they struggled to re-establish their lives – with fewer jobs available and many only temporary. This forced returnees to adopt a mindset of day-by-day survival. This type of psychosocial support can be effective if done together with reintegration support. The monitoring team believes in-depth studies are necessary to highlight the main socioeconomic and psychosocial needs of the beneficiary population and collect evidence-based information on the best ways to address such needs.

3

The third takeaway is that while reintegration support was absent at this stage, respondents highlighted the value of IOM's post-arrival assistance. Food and accommodation support proved invaluable for returnees undergoing quarantine and during their first days back in communities. Many respondents requested this assistance be extended, considering the challenges posed by the pandemic and hurricanes. As such, the monitoring team suggests this post-arrival assistance could be expanded to help the most vulnerable AVR beneficiaries with short-term post-arrival assistance targeted to individual needs that encompass health, education, accommodation and livelihoods.

Methodology

From October to December 2020, monitoring staff stationed in El Salvador, Guatemala (covering Belize), Honduras and Mexico reached out to 45 beneficiaries after return. Earlier during the AVR process, these beneficiaries agreed to be contacted upon their return to participate in a survey.

The AVR monitoring exercise is conducted one to three months after the beneficiaries' return. With a total of 33 questions (24 multiple choice and 9 open questions), the survey assessed program performance throughout different phases (outreach, pre-departure, travel and reception) and how beneficiaries reintegrated upon return. The survey is applied to all beneficiaries who agreed, through a signed consent form, to be contacted upon return.

To adhere to COVID-19 safety protocols and minimize risks to respondents and interviewers, all surveys were conducted over the phone or using social media apps depending on the beneficiaries' preferences. Each AVR program reached out to its respective beneficiaries. AVR Mexico contacted 23 beneficiaries (3 Brazilians, 4 Salvadorans and 16 Hondurans); AVR Honduras reached 3 Belizeans; AVR Belize notified 2 Costa Ricans; AVR Guatemala engaged 3 Belizeans; and AVR El Salvador reached 14 beneficiaries (6 Belizeans, 7 Costa Ricans and 1 Panamanian).

It should be noted that interviewers contacted respondents prior to departure to their home countries to ensure they were available for contacting after return.

Figure 1. Number of respondents from October 2020 to December 2020



Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM.

Survey results:

Profile of respondents

From October to December 2020, 45 beneficiaries participated in the survey. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting reduced number of AVR beneficiaries is reflected in the smaller number of survey results.

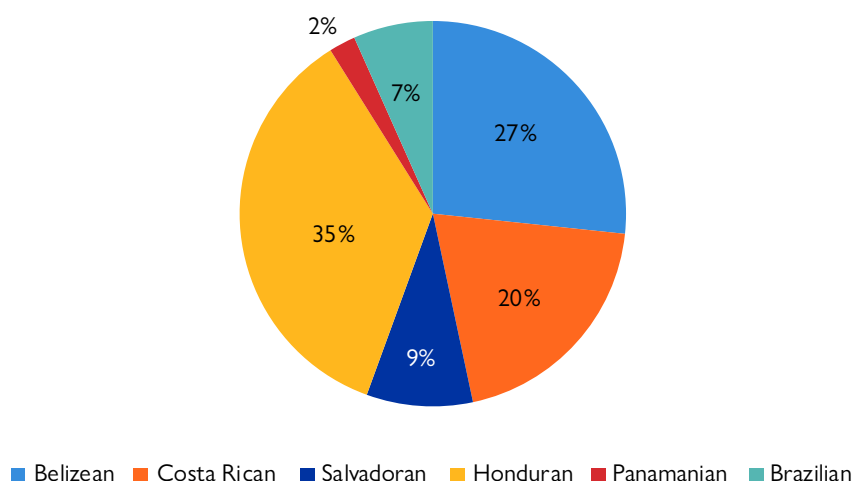
Table 1. Respondents' return to origin countries by program

Program	Number of respondents	October–December 2020	Before October	Respondent rate since March (in case of Mexico, August 2020)
AVR Belize	2	0	2 Costa Ricans (August 2020)	3%
AVR El Salvador	14	1 Panamanian (October 2020) 6 Belizeans (September 2020)	7 Costa Ricans (July 2020)	50%
AVR Guatemala	3	0	3 Belizeans (September 2020)	74%
AVR Honduras	3	3 Belizeans (December 2020)	0	80%
AVR Mexico	23	2 Brazilians (October 2020) 1 Brazilian (November 2020) 2 Salvadorans (November 2020) 2 Salvadorans (December 2020)	16 Hondurans (August 2020)	74%*

* From August to December 2020, IOM Mexico assisted 59 beneficiaries (39 adults and 20 children) and consented to be contacted after return. To interview one representative per family from 39 potential candidates, 31 were contacted and 23 interviews were completed.

The majority of respondents were Hondurans (35%), followed by Belizeans (27%) and Costa Ricans (20%). The gender ratio of respondents was 60 per cent (female) and 40 per cent (male), including four children aged below 13 years (1 male and 3 female).⁵

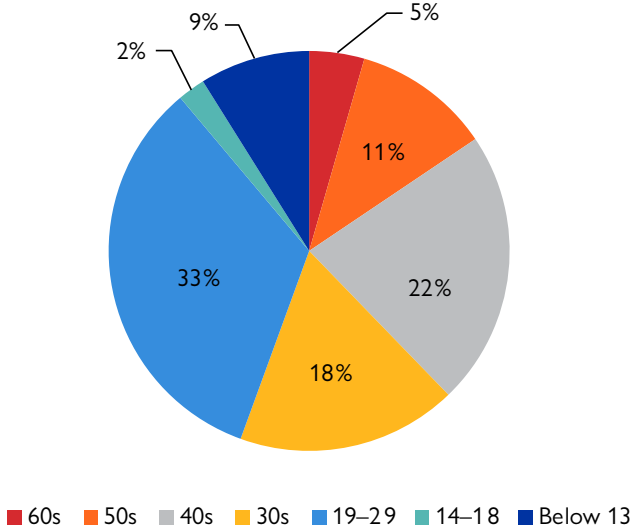
Figure 2. Nationalities of respondents



⁵ Questions on employment status, financial situation and future plans were not asked of four minors.

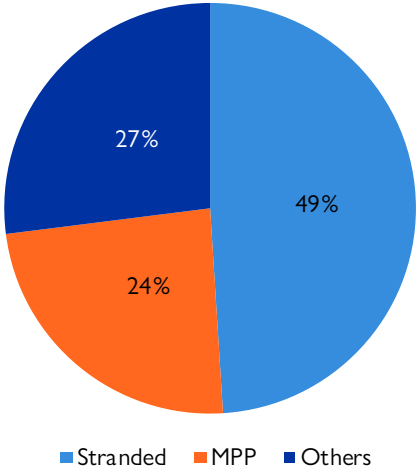
The most common respondent age group was 19–29 years old (33%), followed by those in their 40s and 30s (22% and 18%, respectively), as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Age group of respondents by percentage



Nearly half (49%) of the respondents were categorized as stranded migrants, with (MPP) beneficiaries accounting for 24 per cent and “others” 27 per cent of the overall total.⁶ It should be noted that respondents categorized under MPP and “others” returned from Mexico, the only two categories available to AVR Mexico. As such, this program will synergize its classifications with other AVR programs featured in this report. All respondents classified as “stranded” returned from Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

Figure 4. Migration category of respondents



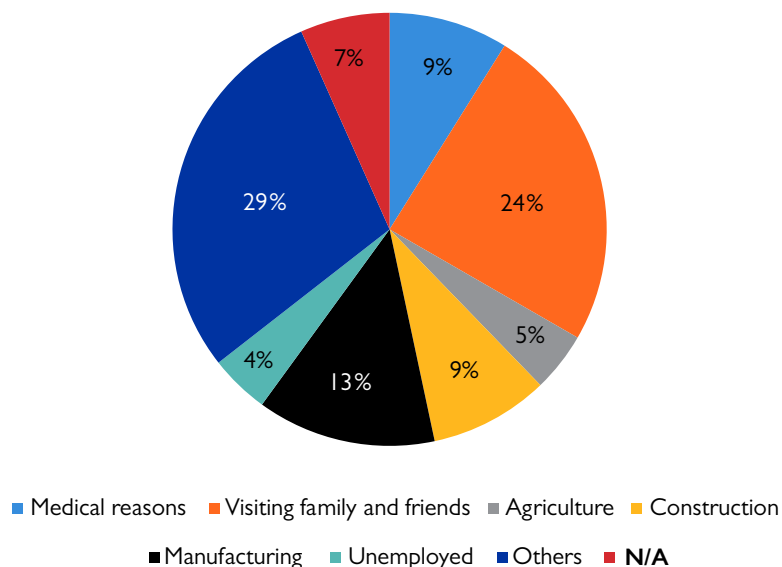
There was little difference between the percentage of respondents who returned alone (51%) or with family members (49%).

⁶ U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) stopped adding new individuals to the MPP program as of 21 January 2021.

Jobs and activities of respondents in destination countries

Just under one third (31%) reported they worked in destination countries, with the majority engaged in manufacturing, construction and agriculture. Eleven persons (6 Costa Ricans, 4 Belizeans and 1 Panamanian) were visiting family and friends, before being left stranded and in vulnerable situations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other categories included sports coach, teleservice, housewife, student, teacher, security guard and trader.

Figure 5. Jobs and activities of respondents in destination countries



Post-return: Survey results

Half of the respondents plan to remigrate or return abroad

Of the 45 respondents, monitoring teams discovered that half had plans to remigrate or return abroad in the future.

A higher percentage of Honduran respondents wished to remigrate or return abroad, as was the case for 14 out of 16 Honduran respondents who returned from Mexico wanting to do so. Security and economic pressures in Honduras were reported as key drivers of this trend.

Most such Hondurans worked in agriculture, construction or manufacturing industries in Mexico and are of working age, 18–56 years old (9 male, 5 female).



“Yes, I want to join my mother who is living in the United States and find a job.” – 18-year-old Honduran woman returned from Mexico

“Yes, I will try it again, but I’m afraid because of the insecurity.”
– 45-year-old Honduran man returned from Mexico



“I will return to Guatemala because Belize is not industrialized. I wish to be able to come back when I get out of college and find a job.” – 30-year-old Belizean man returned from Guatemala

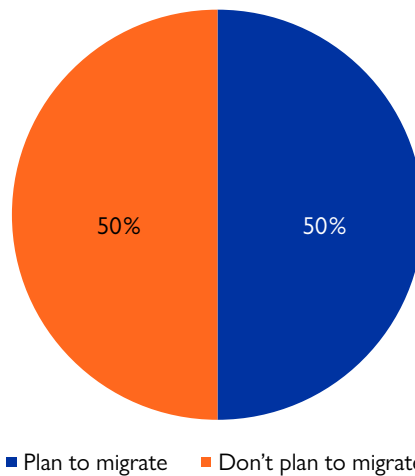
For those with no plans to remigrate or return abroad, many were stranded migrants who were temporarily in destination countries and could not return due to the pandemic.

“No, I wouldn’t migrate again. I want my son to study and take him to the school.” – 48-year-old Salvadoran woman returned from Mexico



“No, definitely not.” – 35-year-old Brazilian man returned from Mexico

Figure 6. Respondents’ plan to remigrate or return abroad



Returnees struggle to gain employment after return

Out of the 41 respondents eligible to answer whether they had a job upon return to origin countries, 49 per cent were unemployed. Of the 36 per cent employed, most were engaged in low-skilled work, such as in agriculture or informal sectors (domestic work, street vendors or construction). Many of those employed were in temporary positions, while 15 per cent were children, housewives or elderly persons.

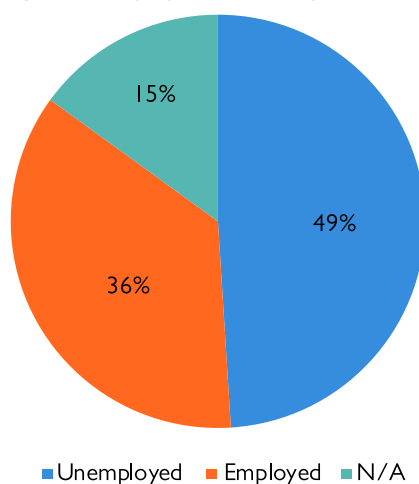


“I don’t have a job yet; I only make clothes and with the little money I earned, I managed to buy some food.” – **29-year-old Salvadoran woman returned from Mexico**



“I work in telemarketing [via internet calls].” – **29-year-old Costa Rican man returned from Belize**

Figure 7. Employment status post-return



“I have not been able to work because here in the country, many businesses are not open.” – **55-year-old Belizean woman returned from Honduras**

Two thirds of respondents had financial concerns

Of the 41 respondents⁷ who revealed whether they were worried about their financial situation, 74 per cent expressed such concerns, with many struggling to gain employment to sustain themselves amid depressed job markets due to the pandemic. In addition, these pressures were compounded by Hurricanes Eta and Lota that struck Central America in November 2020. These storms damaged and destroyed crops and harvests that were critical sources of livelihood and food security for many families already facing economic hardships as a result of the pandemic.⁸ While this report – published by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – did not state whether members of these hard-hit communities joined migrant caravans, various media reports claimed damage from these storms could become push factors to join migrant caravans.⁹ Particularly, and most Honduran respondents, underlined the challenges posed by the hurricanes upon return.

⁷ With 4 children among the 45 respondents, this question applied to 41 adults.

⁸ See <https://reliefweb.int/report/honduras/central-america-tropical-storm-eta-hurricane-iota-six-weeks-later-22-december-2020>.

⁹ See www.climatechangenews.com/2021/01/29/blocked-migrant-caravan-leaves-thousands-trapped-hurricane-hit-honduras/ and <https://apnews.com/article/honduras-hurricane-iota-mexico-storms-immigration-3cf340e556ee767d1dd3dce351c934b5>.

“Very bad; I’m lacking a lot, and I don’t have a stable job.”
– **22-year-old Honduran man returned from Mexico**



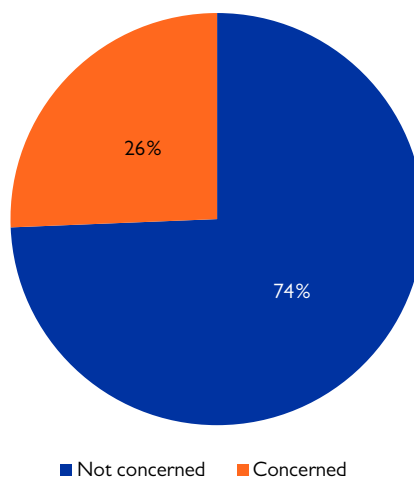
“I feel very pressured because I don’t have enough money.”
– **29-year-old Salvadoran woman returned from Mexico**

“No, I was affected by the quarantine because I could not grow agricultural products and sell. Also, being stranded in El Salvador for a long time due to the pandemic affected me economically.”
– **69-year-old Belizean man returned from El Salvador**



“I am working, and I managed to pay all my debts. However, the pandemic has brought with it some economic limitations.”
– **35-year-old Brazilian man returned from Mexico**

Figure 8. Returnees’ financial concerns



Of the quarter of respondents who were not concerned about their financial situation, some were employed and others received family support. While underlining the challenging situation, these respondents said they were coping.

Most respondents received positive reactions from host communities

The vast majority (96%) of the respondents reported positive welcome from communities and family members. This differed from the fourth monitoring report covering March to October 2020, with 44 per cent of respondents documenting discrimination for being a perceived COVID-19 infection risk or returning without achieving the intended migration goal(s). In contrast, interviewees featured in this report said family members were generally supportive of their decisions to return, especially those with no means to return without AVR support.



“Very good. I even encountered another beneficiary of the program on the street. We were very happy to see each other.”
– **35-year-old Brazilian man returned from Mexico**

Although the majority had positive experiences with family members and host communities, some respondents were not welcomed or worried about being discriminated against by communities due to COVID-19 infection risks. A Belizean beneficiary who returned from Honduras had negative encounters with her neighbor.

“One of my neighbors reported me to the community out of fear I was going to infect them after arriving, as they knew I had been out of the country. But after showing the negative COVID-19 test result, there were no more problems from the host community.”
– **55-year-old Belizean woman returned from Honduras**



“I was afraid they would think I was infected with COVID-19, and they would disrespect me.” – **48-year-old Belizean female returned from El Salvador**

All AVR programs conducted medical assessments and provided migrants with COVID-19 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests. All beneficiaries were given personal protective equipment (PPE) kits in line with government and COVID-19 Aviation Health Safety protocols. Upon return, most beneficiaries went through a 14-day quarantine period imposed by countries of origin.

However, potential and reported negative reactions from communities to new arrivals means there is scope for AVR programs to explore ways of informing communities about the extra precautions to protect beneficiaries from COVID-19 and the reduced infection risks.

Respondents felt safe upon return

Most respondents felt secure upon return, with just 3 reporting safety fears due to violence or COVID-19. It should be noted that all AVR beneficiaries, to be eligible, were screened to ensure they would be safe upon return. As monitoring surveys commenced in March 2020, majority of the respondents were stranded migrants due to the global pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, a mixture of beneficiaries left origin countries driven by economic situations, fleeing from violence or seeking a better life abroad. Many of these beneficiaries from Honduras were part of migrant caravans or transferees of the Asylum Cooperative Agreement (ACA) in Guatemala, which is not operational since March 2020 and closed in January 2021. While noting these differences, the pandemic’s economic damage has resulted in rising regional unemployment. As a result, threats of violence and economic drivers to search for employment abroad are still very real and could come to the fore at any time.



“No, I don’t feel secure. I want to return to Mexico.” – **Honduran man returned from Mexico**

Stress-induced physiological issues have emerged upon return

More than one third (36%) of the respondents reported not being in good condition physically and mentally. Of those, many said they were worried, stressed or depressed due to COVID-19 and their economic situation. This is underlined by the 34 per cent who reported being psychologically and mentally distressed. Regarding the economic drivers, the lack of employment opportunities and financial problems were the key stressors, particularly for returnees who lost jobs in destination countries.

A quarter (27%) of respondents reported being in physically good yet mentally bad shape upon return, in contrast to 64 per cent who were physically and mentally good.



“I have felt very sad about not being able to work.” – **48-year-old Belizean woman returned from Honduras**

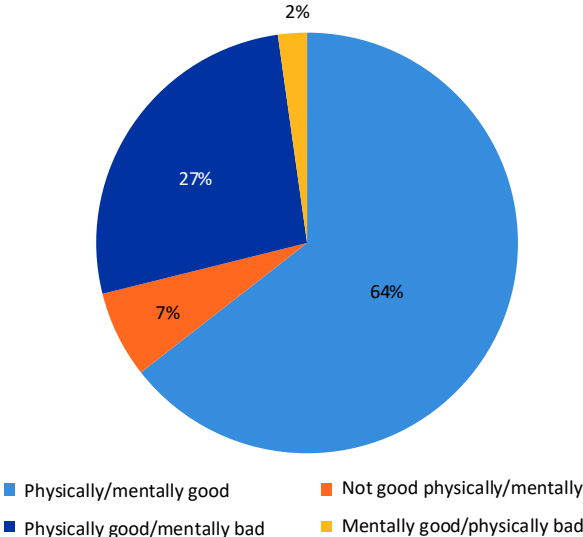


“I am physically well, but mentally, I am worried about the future.” – **42-year-old Costa Rican man returned from El Salvador**



“I have felt a lot of stress, and that has affected my blood pressure. I had to be checked by the doctor with the stress of not being able to go out without a mask, and it is difficult for me to breathe, especially because of the heat here. I have had to wear a mask all day to be able to go out to look for a job.” – **55-year-old Belizean woman returned from Honduras**

Figure 9. Health status after return (percentage of respondents)



Negligible long-term reintegration support, an opportunity for action

The survey also obtained data on whether respondents had received post-arrival, reintegration or psychosocial support. Post-arrival assistance is provided by AVR programs to meet the beneficiaries' immediate needs during the 14-day quarantine upon arrival in home countries. This assistance includes medicine, baskets of basic food and cards redeemable for food. Reintegration support aims to enable individuals in re-establishing the socioeconomic and psychosocial relationships needed to maintain life, livelihoods and dignity, as well as inclusion in civil life.¹⁰ The surveyed AVR programs currently have no reintegration component. However, the intention of this survey question is to understand whether respondents received reintegration support from national and local governments, local or international NGOs or community-based organizations in supporting collective upstream advocacy to promote reintegration programs at the national level.

Post-arrival assistance

Half of the 45 respondents said they received post-arrival assistance from AVR programs.¹¹ Costa Rican respondents who returned from El Salvador received cards to purchase food, and Belizeans from El Salvador and Guatemala were provided with food baskets, PPE and accommodation by other IOM programs. Importantly, recipients of this post-arrival assistance underlined its critical value, especially during the COVID-19 crisis.

Each AVR program consults with IOM offices in countries of origin to determine the needs and vulnerabilities of the returnees, as well as appropriate support. For instance, some missions prefer to provide supermarket gift cards, especially in countries with limited personnel to provide assistance at reception and post-arrival, as in the case of Costa Rica.

Reintegration assistance

Reintegration support for respondents was negligible, aside from two Salvadorans who returned from Mexico and referred to vocational training centers to obtain skills to work as a beautician and a tailor. While surveyed AVR programs currently have no reintegration component, IOM El Salvador is partnering local NGOs to provide counseling and help meet individual needs. These NGOs then refer to local government, development partners or NGOs with resources to provide reintegration needs. Overall, origin countries and host communities have key roles to play in supporting returnees to reset their lives.

¹⁰ IOM, 2019. *Glossary on Migration*. International Migration Law no. 34. IOM, Geneva. Available at <https://publications.iom.int/books/international-migration-law-ndeg34-glossary-migration>.

¹¹ Post-arrival assistance and criteria differs according to each program. For example, AVR Mexico's support is limited to lodging in cases of overnight stays, as well as providing medicines to cover the first few days after arrival.

For previous issues of AVR monitoring reports, please see [June 2020](#), [August 2020](#), [September 2020](#) and [November 2020](#).

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