

AVR PROGRAMS IN THE NORTH OF CENTRAL AMERICA COUNTRIES  
November 2020

This fourth monitoring report summarizes 116 surveys that IOM conducted since March 2020 to capture the experiences of participants in the IOM Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programs<sup>1</sup> in El Salvador, Guatemala/Belize, and Honduras. The primary purpose of these surveys is to gain a deeper understanding of how beneficiaries reintegrate upon return to their origin countries by asking each migrant 24 to 32 questions that 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.<sup>2</sup> The results of these surveys, as presented in [June](#), [August](#) and [September](#) monitoring reports and compiled to produce this fourth monitoring report, play an important role in checking AVR beneficiaries’ safety, physical and mental health status, as well as understanding the challenges they face upon return. Such challenges are particularly important to understand as these AVR programs do not currently include a reintegration component. Despite the emergence of stranded migrants from the COVID-19 pandemic as recent AVR recipients, the surveys are also designed to increase the understanding of drivers that resulted in the decisions by program beneficiaries to migrate and factors influencing their ability to reintegrate back into origin countries and communities. The findings help inform IOM program teams and stakeholders of any gaps in support after beneficiaries return to origin countries through AVR programs.

Figure 1: Number of respondents since March 2020



This report has four sections:

- 1) Key results
- 2) Mobility trend analysis
- 3) Survey results: profile of respondents
- 4) Post-return: survey results from March 2020 to September 2020.

Returnees from Mexico are not included in this report as surveys under the Mexico AVR Program only commenced in October 2020. Thus, there are no data available at this stage.

*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 the International Organization for Migration.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Out of 116 respondents, 98 responded to all 32 questions.

# KEY RESULTS

Three key findings are highlighted in this report:

## Stranded migrants emerged due to the pandemic

Due to travel restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of AVR beneficiaries in the North of the Central America region has decreased since March 2020, while stranded migrants have emerged. As a result, stranded migrants have become the main beneficiaries of AVRs during the pandemic.

## Migrants faced financial concerns after return

Most survey respondents reported financial concerns, compounded by an inability to gain employment and rebuild their lives in their home countries. These economic burdens reportedly caused psychological stress, while the lack of reintegration support given to respondents was also a concerning issue, as highlighted in previous monitoring reports. This questions the sustainability of beneficiaries' reintegration. In response, there is an urgent need to further build partnerships with origin countries, communities, and local organizations to extend support to returned migrants. IOM continues to advocate the need for reintegration programming, including through the continued cooperation and support offered by other stakeholders.

## Some migrants were stigmatized upon return

Some respondents encountered negative sentiments from communities upon return, primarily related to fears connected to COVID-19. While AVR programs ensure preventive measures to protect migrants from COVID-19 infection, there is a need to destigmatize their arrival in host communities.

# MOBILITY TREND ANALYSIS

## TOTAL NUMBER OF AVR BENEFICIARIES

Since October 2018, IOM has assisted 1,341 migrants through AVR programs in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.<sup>3</sup> Seventy percent of AVR beneficiaries are Hondurans, followed by Salvadorans (15%).

**Figure 2: Number of beneficiaries by nationality/program since October 2018**



Returned from under the AVR program / Return to	Argentina	Belize	Costa Rica	El Salvador	Nicaragua	Honduras	Total
Belize	0	0	7	55	0	15	77
Guatemala	0	6	46	147	0	951	1150
El Salvador	4	22	21	0	48	0	95
Honduras	0	19	0	0	0	0	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>966</b>	<b>1341</b>

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<sup>3</sup> AVR programs in El Salvador and Honduras are relatively new having started from March 2020.

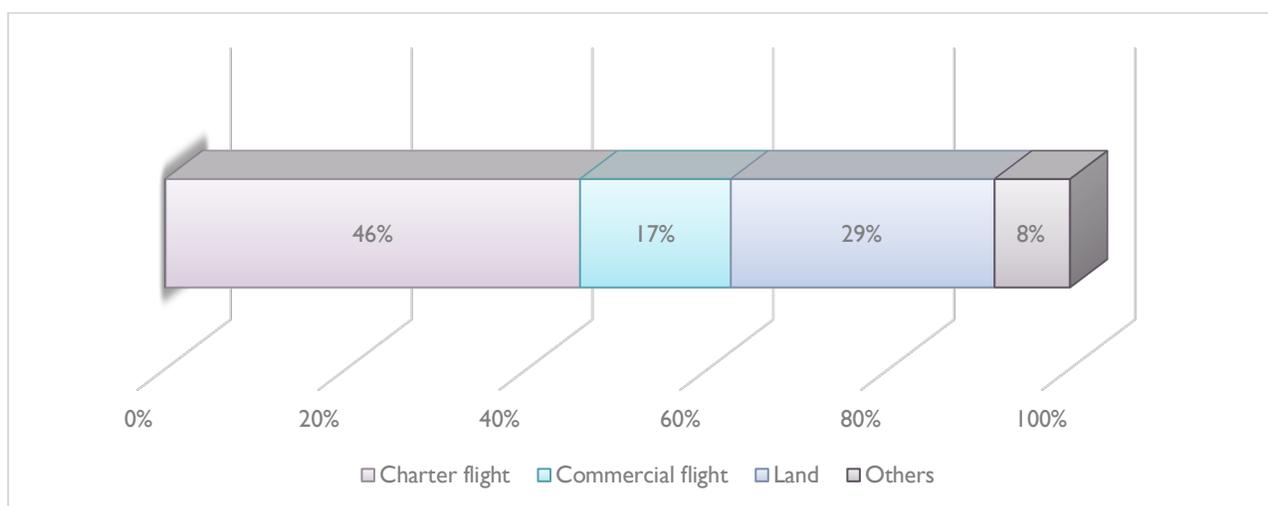
## MOBILITY FLOWS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the AVR response. Borders have closed and flights were cancelled. According to IOM's report, "IOM COVID-19 Impact on Points of Entry, biweekly analysis", 424 points of entry in Central and North America and the Caribbean had closed by August 20, 2020. These closures included 132 airports (31%), 258 land border crossing points (61%) and 34 blue border crossing points (8%).<sup>4</sup>

Working within these restrictions, IOM missions collaborated with governments and partners to make voluntary returns of vulnerable migrants possible. IOM held various virtual briefing and information sessions with diplomatic missions in Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras to share information about the AVR programs, how they operate and the results delivered despite the unprecedented and rapid onset of challenges as a result of the pandemic. Field offices introduced a pre-registration system for AVR beneficiaries referred by embassies, consulates and other partners which directly alerted IOM to process AVR candidates towards eventual repatriation. Due to travel and mobility restrictions, returns were not always immediately possible. However, pre-departure and humanitarian assistance<sup>5</sup> was provided to most pre-registered cases. Field offices conducted virtual interviews with those who pre-registered with AVR programs. When program staff met beneficiaries, IOM ensured the former wore personal protective equipment (PPE) and took protective measures to safeguard both parties against COVID-19.

Since March 2020, AVR programs have conducted 24 movements, including 11 charter flights, four commercial flights and seven repatriations by land. Some beneficiaries joined a humanitarian flight organized by the Government of Costa Rica. Figure 3 highlights the operations conducted by the programs.

**Figure 3: Types of AVR program operations from March 2020**

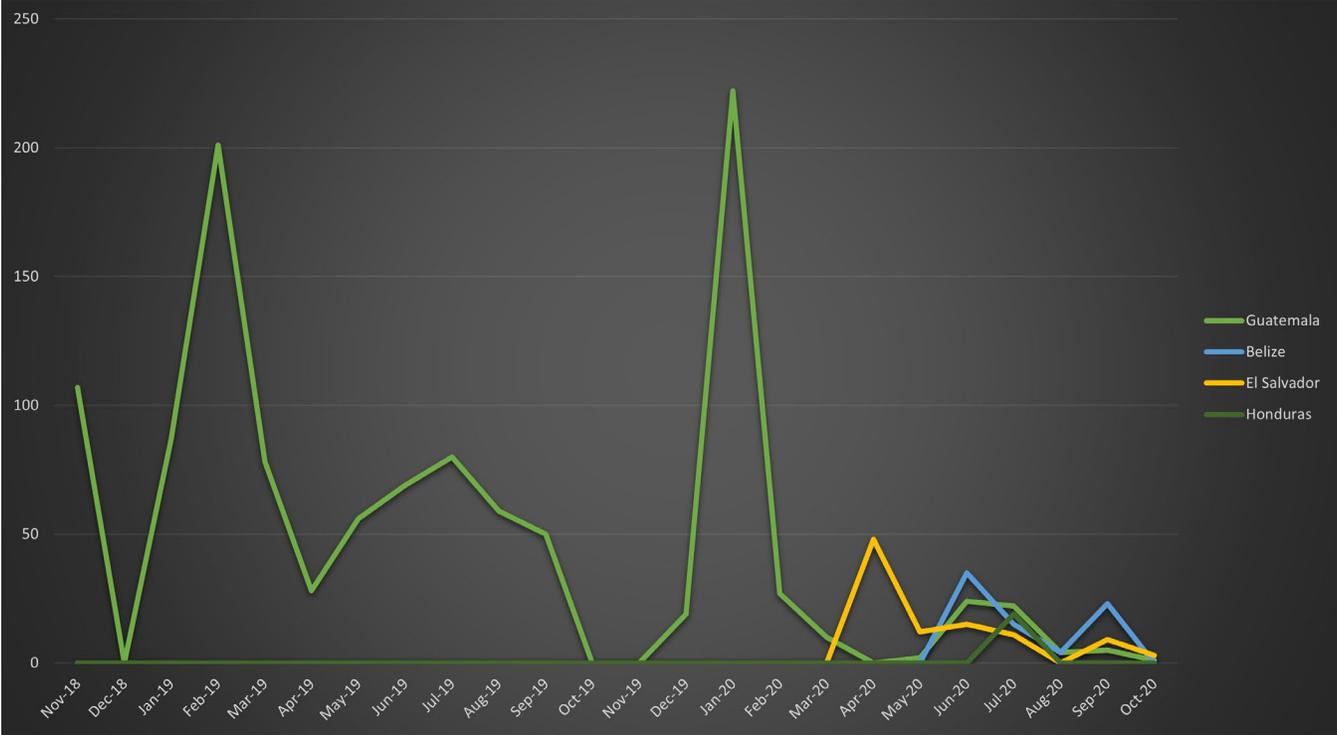


<sup>4</sup> <https://migration.iom.int/reports/iom-covid-19-impact-points-entry-bi-weekly-analysis-26-august-2020?close=true&covid-page=1>

<sup>5</sup> Pre-departure and humanitarian assistance included provision of transportation, lodging, food and non-food items, such as hygiene, PPE, medical and baby care products.

AVR programs have helped 258 migrants since March 2020. Guatemala AVR Program data shows it witnessed a big drop in beneficiaries since the pandemic. While the Belize AVR Program started in October 2019, assistance was only first requested in June 2020. The remainder of AVR programs commenced from March 2020. Figure 4 shows the numbers of beneficiaries supported by the AVR Guatemala/Belize, El Salvador and Honduras programs.

**Figure 4: Monthly mobility flows since November 2018 by numbers of beneficiaries**



Stranded migrants have emerged across AVR programs in Guatemala/Belize, El Salvador and Honduras since March 2020. Before that date, no stranded migrants were recorded by the Guatemala AVR Program. From March to September 2020, there were 247 stranded migrants from Belize, El Salvador and Honduras, and 11 Asylum Cooperative Agreement (ACA) transferees from Guatemala.

Since March 2020, the Guatemala AVR Program reported a decreased number of beneficiaries with intentions to travel to North America, such as those who formed caravans or were ACA transferees,<sup>6</sup> in contrast to stranded migrants who were referred to IOM for assistance.

This reflects a global mobility trend. IOM's COVID-19 response issue brief reported that the pandemic had most affected migrants with pre-existing vulnerabilities, lack of access to services, or irregular legal status.<sup>7</sup> Due to lockdown measures in many countries, migrants have either lost their jobs, had their wages withheld, or are otherwise unable to find employment. This leaves them in challenging situations, including homelessness, and also affects remittances needed by families in countries of origin.

Stranded migrants also had different nationalities – Argentinians, Belizeans and Costa Ricans – not supported by AVR programs before. The largest numbers of AVR beneficiaries since March 2020 were Costa Ricans (29%), followed by Salvadorans (23%) and Nicaraguans (19%). A small number of Argentinians received AVR assistance while in El Salvador. All such beneficiaries were referred by partner organizations or embassies/consulates. Partners screened candidates to determine their vulnerability, before only referring migrants without other means to be repatriated. In the case of embassies and consulates, they sought IOM's help when they had exhausted other avenues for return. Each beneficiary, following referral, was first interviewed by IOM AVR staff as part of a vulnerability assessment.<sup>8</sup>

### **IOM CATEGORIZED MIGRANTS IN PRECARIOUS SITUATIONS, AS A RESULT OF COVID-19, AS:**

- Stranded migrants: people outside of their country of habitual residence and unable to return as a result of mobility restrictions related to COVID-19;
- Destitute migrants: who have lost their means of support and are unable to meet their basic needs;
- Evicted migrants: those who lost access to safe shelter as a result of COVID-19.

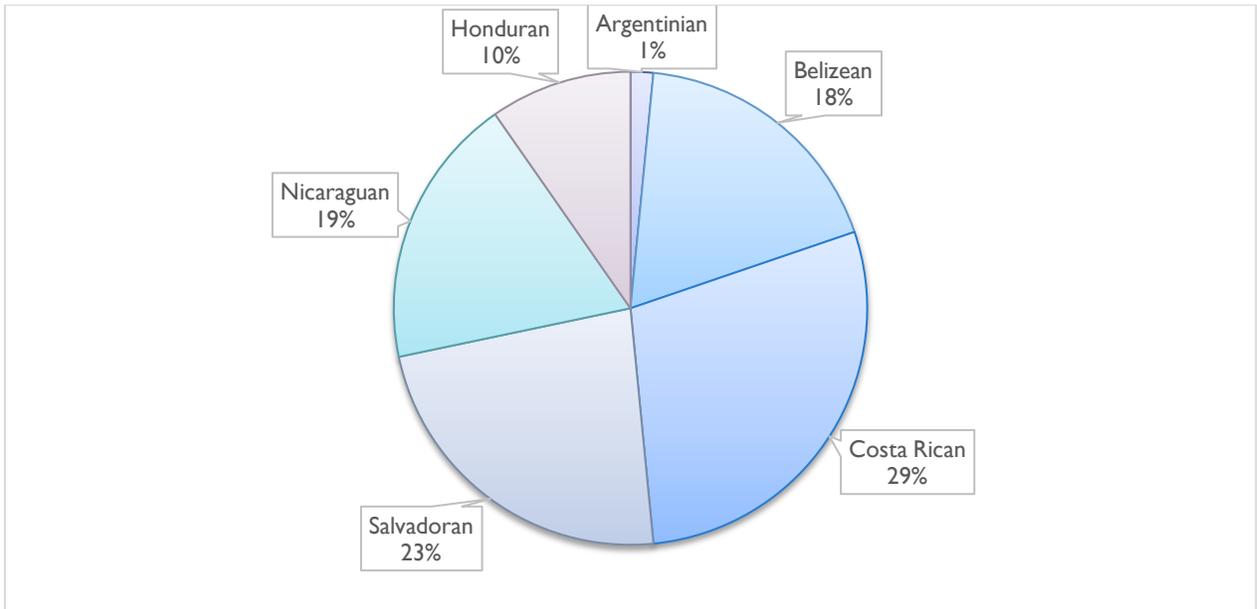
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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/19-1115-Migration-and-Refugees-Guatemala-ACA.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/issue\\_brief\\_stranded\\_migrants.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/issue_brief_stranded_migrants.pdf)

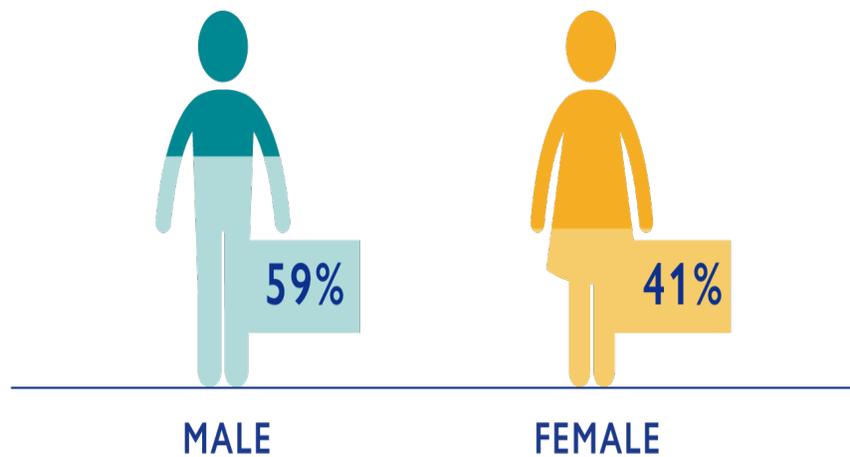
<sup>8</sup> “Migrants in vulnerable situations means migrants who are unable to effectively enjoy their human rights, are at increased risk of violations and abuse and who, accordingly, are entitled to call on a duty bearer’s heightened duty of care.” *Source:* Adapted from High Commissioner for Human Rights, Principles and Practical Guidance on the Protection of the Human Rights of Migrants in Vulnerable Situations, Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to the Human Rights Council (3 January 2018) UN Doc. A/HRC/37/34, para. 12.

**Figure 5: Nationality of beneficiaries by the programs since March 2020**



More males (59%) were beneficiaries of AVR programs than females (41%) since March 2020 and AVR Guatemala from October 2018. Two unaccompanied children and 27 children who accompanied adults were AVR beneficiaries.

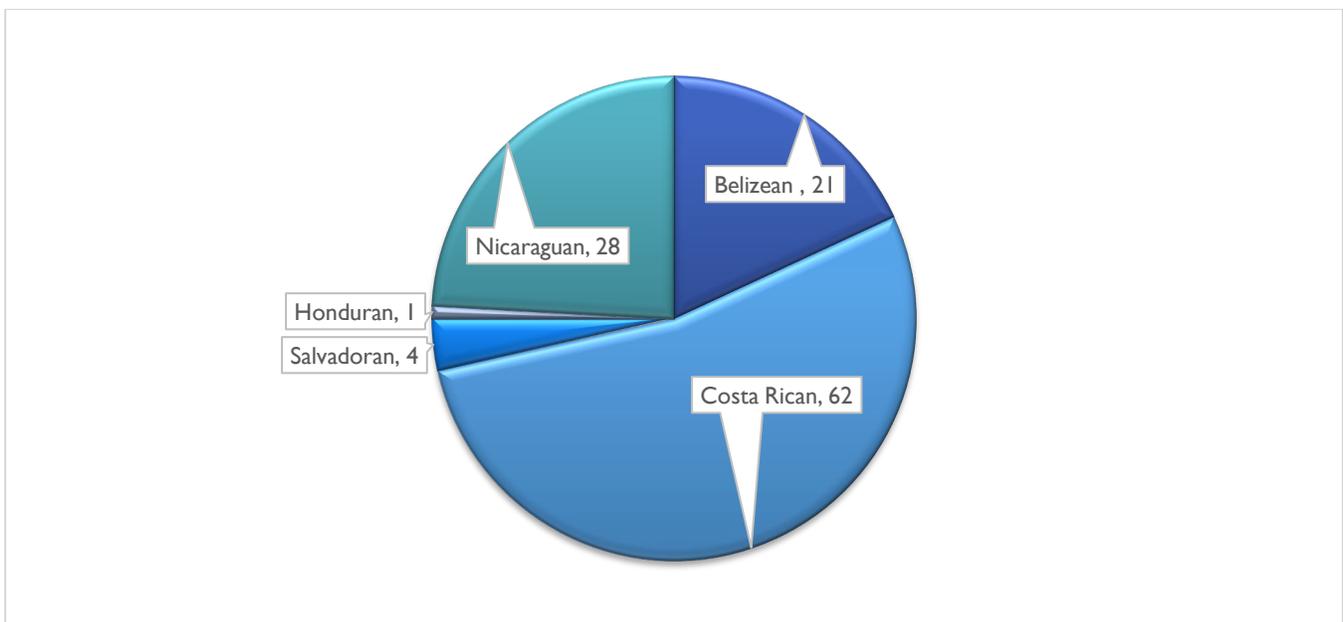
**Figure 6: Gender ratio of AVR beneficiaries (since March 2020)**



# SURVEY RESULTS: PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

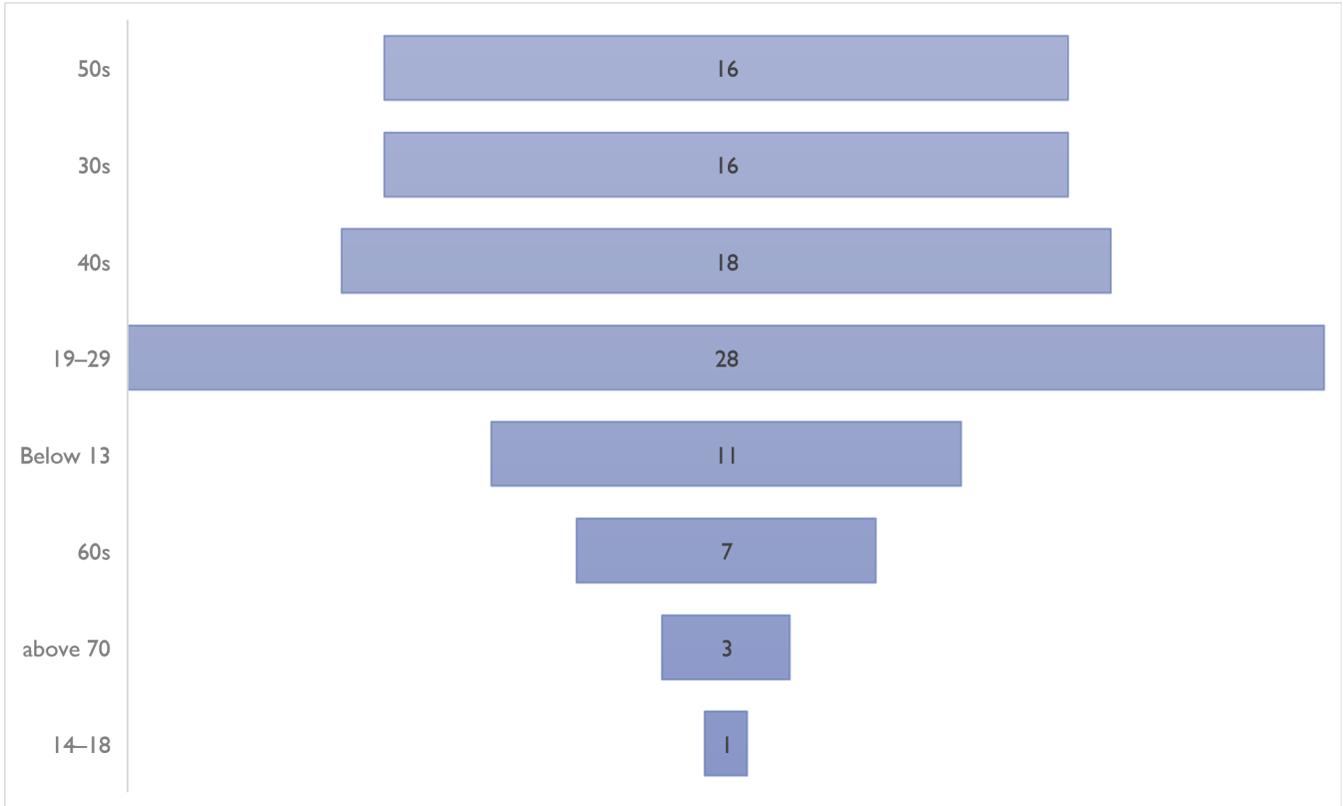
From March to September 2020, 116 beneficiaries participated in the survey – a 45 percent response rate. The majority of respondents were Costa Ricans (54%), followed by Nicaraguans (24%) and Belizeans (18%). The gender ratio of respondents was equally split. Surveys are conducted virtually within two months of return, and are both voluntary and confidential in as much as answers are not attributed to an individual by name.

**Figure 7: Nationalities of respondents**



The most common respondent age group was 19–29 years old (28%), followed by those in their 40s and 30s (18% and 16%, respectively). Beneficiaries older than 60 years represented 10 percent. Stranded migrants were found to be older than caravan or ACA transferee beneficiaries.

**Figure 8: Age group of respondents by percentage**



All respondents were categorized as stranded migrants, aside from two ACA transferees. These figures reflect the pandemic-driven mobility flows since the monitoring exercise commenced in March 2020.

There was little difference between the percentage of respondents who returned alone (56%) or with family members (44%). More than half (52%) of respondents who returned alone were Costa Ricans, followed by Belizeans (25%) and Nicaraguans (23%). Aside from Costa Ricans, the majority of those who returned alone were labor migrants, especially in the case of returnees from El Salvador (61%) and Guatemala (57%).

## WHAT DID YOU DO IN DESTINATION COUNTRIES?

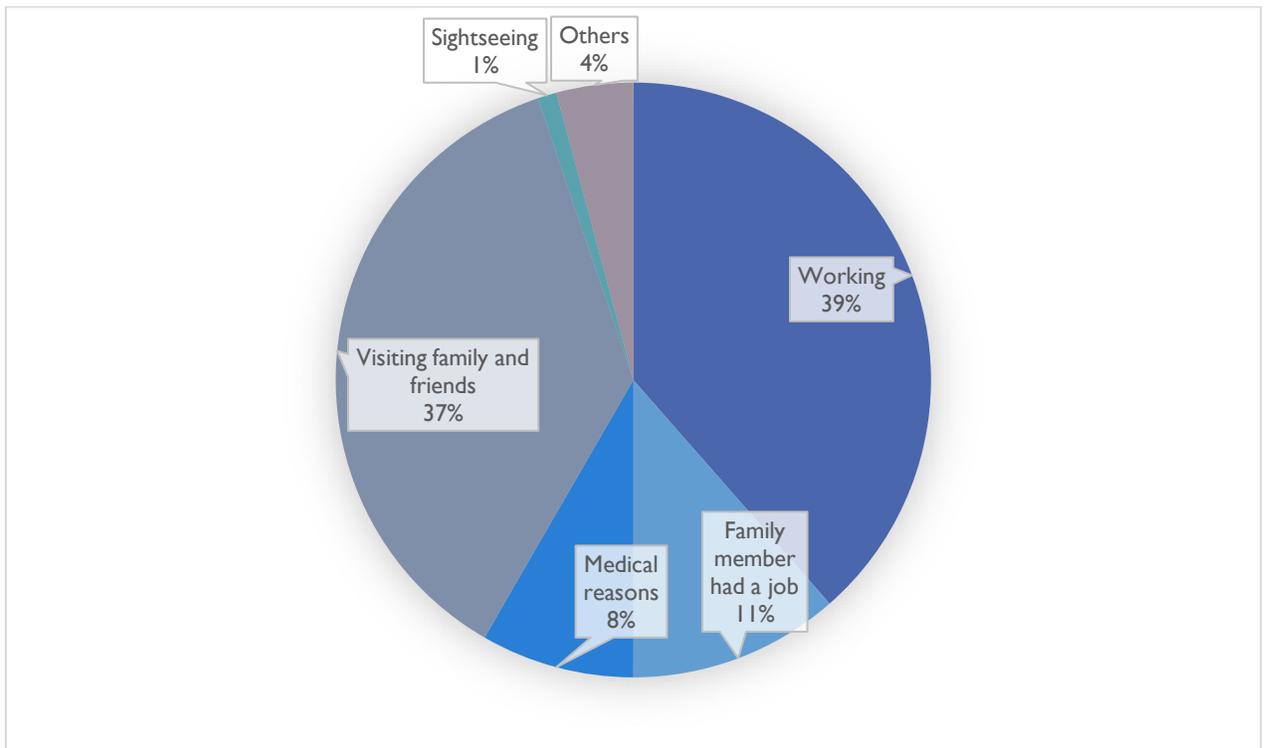
Thirty-nine percent reported they had lost their jobs in destination countries due to the pandemic-induced economic downturn and returned to their origin countries, while 37 percent of respondents were visiting family members or friends.

*"Yes, I was working in a hotel as a cook."*

Belizean woman returned from Honduras (46 years old)



**Figure 9: What did you do in destination countries?**



# POST RETURN: SURVEY RESULTS

## 44 PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS RECEIVED NEGATIVE REACTIONS FROM HOST COMMUNITIES

Monitoring surveys explored whether respondents were positively received by communities. While 56 percent of respondents stated this was the case, many returnees reported discrimination for being a perceived COVID-19 infection risk or returning without achieving the intended migration goals. Many respondents said family members were supportive of their decisions to return, especially those with no means to return without AVR support.

All AVR programs conducted medical assessments, with the Guatemala/Belize and El Salvador programs providing migrants with COVID-19 tests (PCR tests). All beneficiaries were given PPE kits in line with government protocols and COVID-19 Aviation Health Safety Protocols. Upon return, most beneficiaries went through a 14-day quarantine period imposed by countries of origin.

*"I returned to my home community. I was insulted and disrespected because people from my community thought I was a COVID-19 carrier only because I was a returnee."* Nicaraguan man returned from El Salvador (46 years old)



*"The community that I returned [to] was fearful. Some neighbors did not speak to me. Others were more considerate and gave her [the child] food."* Costa Rican woman and a child returned from Belize

## RETURNEES STRUGGLE TO GAIN EMPLOYMENT

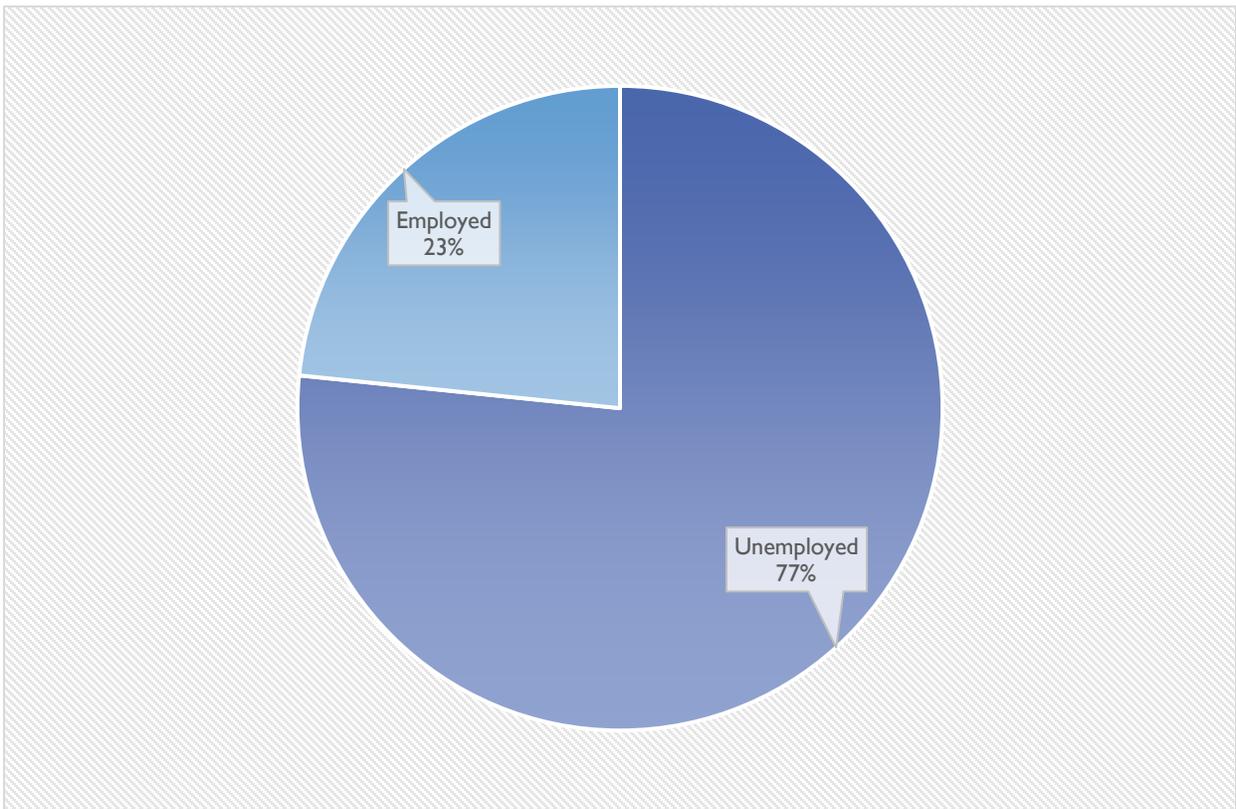
Survey results revealed that 77 percent of respondents were unemployed, while 23 percent were employed. Out of those employed, 44 percent were engaged in low-skilled work, such as in agriculture or informal sectors (street vendors or construction). Many of those employed were in temporary positions.

*"I was working in a car workshop. But right now, it is really difficult to find a job."*

Belizean man returned from Honduras (67 years old)



**Figure 10: Employment status post-return**



*"I had a beauty salon in Guatemala, but I had to close it as a result of the pandemic."* Costa Rican woman who returned from Guatemala (39 years old)

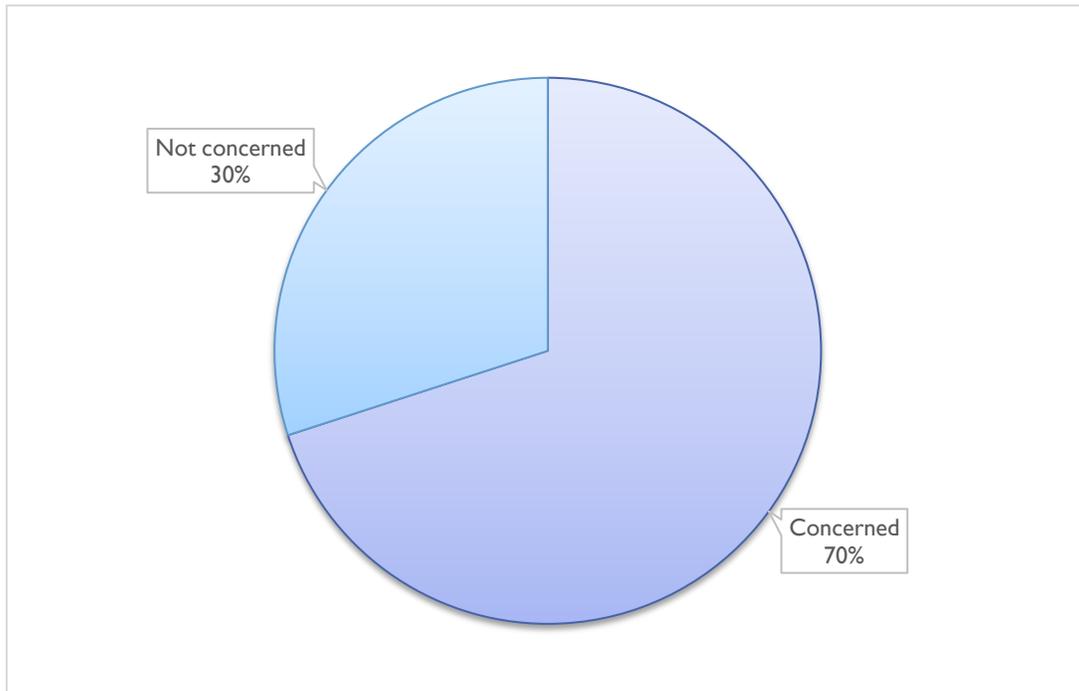
## 70 PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS HAVE FINANCIAL CONCERNS

Seventy percent of respondents expressed concern about their financial status upon return, largely Costa Ricans followed by Nicaraguans and Belizeans. Some respondents with financial concerns revealed high levels of stress due to an inability to find employment.

*"This situation is getting more and more complicated. I am even having trouble buying food, so I am not happy with my financial situation."* Nicaraguan male who returned from El Salvador (35 years old)



**Figure 11: Returnee financial concerns**



*"I am very worried because there is no income. At the same time, I depend on my mother for food and basic services."*  
Costa Rican woman returned from Guatemala (39 years old)



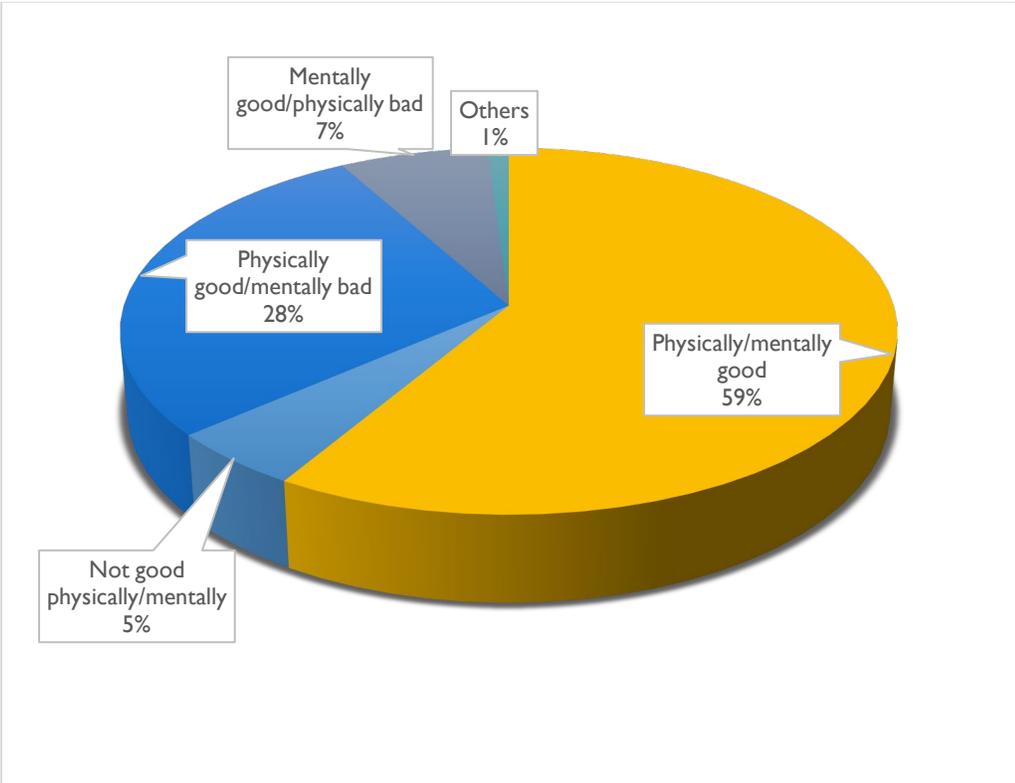
## RESPONDENTS FELT SAFE UPON RETURN

Most respondents felt secure upon return, with just three reporting safety fears due to violence or COVID-19. As monitoring surveys only started in March 2020, they have yet to cover AVR returnees who fled home countries due to violence as is commonly the case with those in migrant caravans or ACA transferees.

## STRESS-INDUCED PHYSIOLOGICAL ISSUES HAVE EMERGED UPON RETURN

More than half (59%) of respondents reported not being in good condition: physically and mentally. Of those, many respondents expressed concerns about COVID-19 infection. In particular, respondents who returned to Honduras and Nicaragua were especially fearful of COVID-19, in contrast to those who returned to Costa Rica. Among those struggling mentally, the lack of employment opportunities and financial problems were the key stressors, particularly returnees who lost jobs in destination countries.

**Figure 12: Health status after return (percentage of respondents)**



## **POST-ARRIVAL ASSISTANCE, BUT NO LONG-TERM REINTEGRATION SUPPORT**

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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 immediate needs of beneficiaries during the 14-day quarantine period upon arrival in home countries. This assistance includes medicine, baskets of basic food and cards redeemable for food. Reintegration support aims to enable individuals to re-establish the economic, social and psychosocial relationships needed to maintain life, livelihoods and dignity, and inclusion in civil life.<sup>9</sup> The surveyed AVR programs do not currently have a 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 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or community-based organizations to support collective upstream advocacy to promote reintegration programs at national level.

### **Post-arrival assistance**

More than 80 percent of respondents received post-arrival assistance from AVR programs. Costa Rican respondents from El Salvador and Guatemala received cards to purchase food, Nicaraguan returnees from El Salvador were given food baskets and Belizeans from Honduras were provided with PPE and accommodation by other IOM programs. Importantly, recipients of this post-arrival assistance underlined its critical value, especially during the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Reintegration assistance**

Reintegration support for respondents was negligible, aside for one beneficiary (Belizean national who received assistance from the Unemployment Relief Program, a collaboration between the ministries of Investment and Commerce as well as Labor). To address these gaps, AVR programs are exploring the potential to refer AVR beneficiaries to development partners, local government or NGOs able to provide reintegration assistance. In addition to the initiative in Belize, IOM in El Salvador is partnering with local NGOs to provide counseling and help meet individual needs. Overall, origin countries and host communities have key roles to play in supporting returnees to reset their lives.

## **MOST RESPONDENTS DO NOT HAVE IMMEDIATE PLANS TO RE-MIGRATE OR RETURN ABROAD**

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When monitoring teams asked respondents about their plans, most said they did not have immediate plans to re-migrate or return abroad. However, 29 percent of respondents planned to do so once the pandemic was over. Among those, 75 percent of Nicaraguan respondents reported they wanted to return to El Salvador to explore employment opportunities. On the other hand, only 32 percent of Costa Rican respondents intended to re-migrate or return abroad, with the majority to visit family members. Respondents with family members abroad also expressed a willingness to return overseas for a period of time when the pandemic

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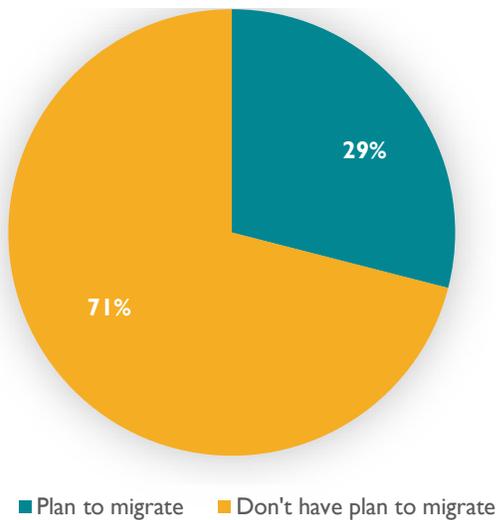
<sup>9</sup> <https://www.iom.int/glossary-migration-2019>.

was over. Some stranded migrants, who were also labor migrants, revealed a wish to return to host or other countries to seek employment when the pandemic was over. In general, uncertainty due to the pandemic has also stopped many respondents from making long-term plans.

*“I would like to be able to migrate to Europe to learn a second language.”*  
Costa Rican man returned from Guatemala (26 years old)



**Figure 13: Do you plan to re-migrate or return abroad?**



While 71 percent of respondents did not have immediate plans to re-migrate or return abroad, with limited or no reintegration support delivered to respondents to sustainably rebuild their lives, the option to re-migrate or return abroad will remain – especially as impacts from the pandemic begin to subside.

*“I do not have plans to migrate. Belize is my home, and my family lives here.”* Belizean woman returned from Honduras (57 years old)



*“I do not have a job, I used to sell coconut water. Because of the lack of public transport, I cannot go back to what I used to do. My plan is to go back to Mexico. I have a Mexican visa I obtained in Chiapas.”* Honduran woman returned from Guatemala (ACA transferee)



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

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This project is funded by the U.S.  
Department of State Bureau of  
Population, Refugees, and Migration.

