

CRISIS WATCH: Venezuela

Background:


Venezuela is home to a great diversity of people, landscapes, climates, and animals and is known as one of the ten most biodiverse countries on the planet. Home to the world's largest known oil reserves, the territory of Venezuela was colonized by Spain in the early 1500s and became one of the first Spanish-American territories to declare independence in 1811, becoming a full sovereign country in 1830. Venezuela's recent political history is colored with dictatorship, military occupation, coups, and corruption. In the 1970's the country benefited from an oil boom; however, in 1998 President Hugo Chavez came into power and began the concentration of economic and political power through the 'Bolivarian Revolution'. Devaluing the country's currency to boost oil revenue and cutting spending in public services resulted in an economic and social downward spiral. In 2013, President Hugo Chavez was succeeded by Nicolas Maduro. In 2019 after concerns of the legitimacy of the 2018 election, Juan Guaidó was declared interim president and is recognized as such by the United States, European Union and most Latin American countries.ⁱ However, Maduro remains in power as President despite many calling for his removal.

Current Crisis:

Today's crisis in Venezuela is a result of economic collapse, governmental corruption and lack of essential social services. According to the World Food Program, more than half of households (59%) in the country do not have enough income to buy food.ⁱⁱ Millions of Venezuelans have limited access to potable water and basic health care.ⁱⁱⁱ Protests and demonstrations against an illegitimate political administration are met with violent retaliation. To date, the situation in Venezuela has caused nearly one in four Venezuelans to leave their homes in search of safety and stability^{iv}. More than 7 million people have fled the country in the largest migration crisis the Western Hemisphere has seen in recent years, with more than 80% of those who have fled residing in Latin American and Caribbean countries.^v Given the economic impact of the pandemic and worsening conditions in some Latin American and Caribbean countries, some have determined that the U.S. is the only viable option for a safe future.

Those fleeing Venezuela for North America by land must pass through the Darién Gap, one of the deadliest routes for refugees and migrants in the world. According to a report by the UNHCR, Panamanian authorities recorded that in the first two months of 2022, nearly 2,500 Venezuelans crossed the Darién Gap, almost the total number of crossings in 2021. This route is not only physically demanding but also puts vulnerable populations at great risk of health issues, violence and abuse.^{vi}

U.S. Context:

The Biden Administration recently announced a [new process](#) for Venezuelans seeking refuge in the US and their immediate family members. Venezuelan nationals may qualify for [Humanitarian Parole](#), a legal process that allows someone to enter and stay in the United States for a temporary period of time for urgent humanitarian or significant public benefit reasons. Parolees may apply for employment authorization (the grant of authorization is discretionary) but are generally not eligible for other benefits. 

Welcome (OAW) and to those fleeing Ukraine through United for Ukraine (U4U). Eligibility for Venezuelan nationals is dependent on several factors and grants of parole under the program will be capped at 24,000 individuals^{vii}. Venezuelans must be outside the U.S. to apply for parole under the new program; those who are permitted to enter the U.S. through the Parole Process for Venezuelans will be eligible to apply for a temporary Employment Authorization Document (EAD) as well as a Social Security number and may remain in the U.S. for up to two years.

Humanitarian Parole does not offer a direct pathway to permanent residency in the U.S. Parolees who have experienced persecution, or fear persecution upon return to Venezuela, must apply for asylum, or pursue another pathway to permanent residence such as a family-based green card, if they are seeking to remain permanently. It is important to note that asylum decisions take many years and there is already a significant backlog of asylum cases waiting to be processed, including 140,000+ Venezuelan asylum cases.^{viii}

In addition to the roll out of the Parole Process for Venezuelans, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced in October 2022 a joint action plan with Mexico to create a more “orderly and safe” process for those fleeing Venezuela^{ix}. The policy requires Venezuelans arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border without prior authorization through land crossings to be returned to Mexico and barred from entrance into the U.S. making them ineligible for the Humanitarian Parole pathway. This invocation of Title 42, a Trump era policy [originally rolled out in the name of public health](#)^x, has left tens of thousands of Venezuelan migrants throughout Central America and Mexico stranded in dire conditions with little to no options^{xi} and has been widely criticized by immigrant rights groups who assert that the new policy is preventing Venezuelans from their right to claim asylum. In addition to the pain, suffering and uncertainty faced by Venezuelans outside of the U.S. who have been impacted by the new parole process, many Venezuelans in the U.S. have significant fear about being forcibly returned home once parole ends or if they are not granted asylum.

What’s Important for Mental Health Agencies and Practitioners to Know?

Mental health practitioners working with people from Venezuela should keep in mind:

- **Variety of immigration types** - People from the Venezuela will have a wide variety of immigration types, including but not limited to U.S. citizen, immigrant, asylum seeker, asylee (granted asylum), and parolee. Each of these immigration types has varying degrees of protection and allows varying access to benefits. Families may have members with multiple immigration types. It is helpful for practitioners to know a person’s immigration type if they are seeking to refer them to certain services or resources as this may determine their eligibility. Because people may feel understandably confused or concerned if a practitioner asks about their immigration type, it is important for practitioners to explain why they are asking and reinforce confidentiality. For example, “I always ask clients about their type of immigration because this helps me find out what resources may be available to them. I know this is sensitive information, so I reassure everyone I work with that I do not record this information anywhere

and I do not share it with anyone unless someone says that I have permission to do so.”

- **Separation from loved ones** – Many people from Venezuela are separated from their loved ones who may remain in Venezuela and face significant deprivation or danger. They may also be in other countries with or without protection, and thus have significant vulnerabilities. Practitioners should not only assess local support systems, but also support systems in other countries and how separation may be impacting the client.
- **Possibility of complex trauma** - People who have recently arrived from Venezuela, particularly those who travelled by land to cross at the southern U.S. border, may have endured significant traumatic events in their home country as well as on the journey to seeking safety. After crossing the border into the U.S., they may have also been imprisoned in detention facilities for many months or forcibly returned to Mexico where they were forced to live in unsafe conditions. As part of a complete biopsychosocial history, practitioners should assess the context that prompted leaving their country of origin, as well as primary events during the journey, crossing the U.S. border, and now in their new communities.
- **Priority on legal support** – For people from Venezuela who have parole status or are seeking asylum, the path to achieving safety runs through the immigration system. This means that finding legal representation to pursue a protection claim is likely to be a priority and could also be a major cause of client stress. If possible, practitioners should have referrals pathways to low- or pro-bono immigration legal providers.

Recommendations:

Mental health practitioners and agencies working with people from Venezuela should be prepared to address needs in multiple areas. To do so, they may need to understand what type of immigration the person has and, if they are not eligible for state or federal supports, be able to refer clients to faith-based institutions or ethnic community self-help organizations to help with critical needs. Where needed, practitioners should also support their clients in trying to secure legal representation and be aware of the agencies in their geographic area that may offer pro-bono or low bono services or provide workshops on pro-se representation. Individuals separated from loved ones who are in danger or facing significant deprivation face particular mental health stressors and are likely to benefit from enhanced coping and distress tolerance skills. People may not be ready to process trauma or engage in trauma focused treatment until they have achieved a measure of permanency and, if they have family in danger, until they know their family is also safe. As always, when a client is from another culture, ensuring linguistic access and culturally responsive services that incorporate a client’s beliefs around distress and healing is key to providing meaningful and impactful care.

ⁱ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19652436>

ⁱⁱ <https://2017-2021.state.gov/a-democratic-crisis-in-venezuela/index.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/venezuela>

^{iv} <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/24/world/americas/venezuela-migrants-biden-mexico.html>

^v

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/10/1129482#:~:text=More%20than%207.1%20million%20refugees,Latin%20America%20and%20the%20Caribbean>

^{vi} <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2022/3/6243298f4/number-venezuelans-crossing-darien-gap-soars.html>

^{vii} <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/venezuelan-expulsions-policy-biden>

^{viii} <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/venezuelan-expulsions-policy-biden>

^{ix} <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2022/10/12/dhs-announces-new-migration-enforcement-process-venezuelans>

^x <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/venezuelan-expulsions-policy-biden>

^{xi} <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/24/world/americas/venezuela-migrants-biden-mexico.html>