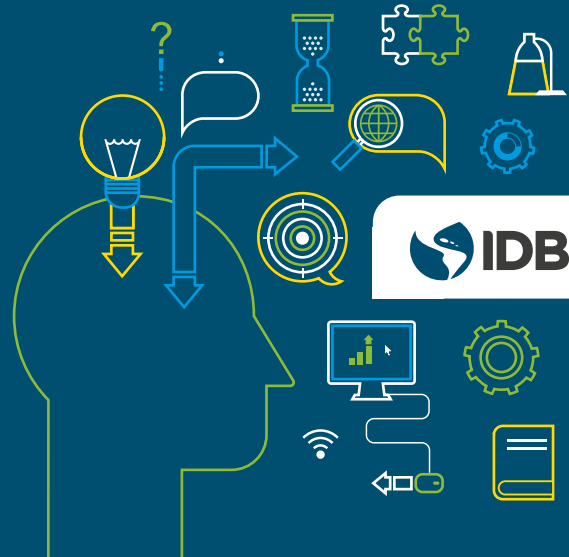


# How Does Internal Migration Shape Urban Growth in Latin America and the Caribbean?

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- ➔ While international migration in Latin America and the Caribbean surged over 80% between 2015 and 2020, internal migration remains the key driver of urban growth.
- ➔ Internal migrants choose a variety of urban areas, not only major cities. The share of internal migrants in the local population is relatively even across cities of varying sizes.
- ➔ Because institutional capacity to implement effective policies in response to migrant inflows varies across cities, some local governments may require additional support from other levels of government to seize the opportunities and address the challenges of urban migration.



## CONTEXT

**International migration has attracted much attention in recent years.** The period between 2015 and 2020 saw international migration numbers soar by over 80 percent, from 5.7 million to 10.7 million, largely due to the Venezuelan economic crisis and Haiti's 2010 earthquake. This surge transformed the region from a source of emigration to a destination for international immigrants. However, cities also receive a significant number of internal migrants from other urban and rural areas. Given the unlikely recurrence of migration waves like Venezuela's, it is important to better understand the impact of internal migration on urban growth in the region.



## PROJECT

In developing the 2023 Microeconomic Report, *Rethinking Urban Migration: Policy Options for Cities in Latin America and the Caribbean*, we constructed a dataset that combines census and survey microdata with geospatial satellite data, delineating cities based on nightlights and daytime imagery. This enabled us to distinguish between people moving within the same functional city and those migrating between different urban areas, producing a more precise understanding of urban migration. Additionally, we integrated recent statistics on international migration in Latin America and the Caribbean. This provides an enhanced perspective on urban migration, including both internal and international migrants.



## RESULTS

**Internal migration remains a pivotal force in urban expansion across Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).** Prior to the recent Venezuelan migration episode, city populations in the region predominantly grew due to internal migration. In most countries, internal migrants comprised between 5 to 12 percent of city residents, forming the majority of newcomers in urban areas (averaging 5.8 percent). While international migration significantly influenced city demographics in nations like Chile and Costa Rica, its impact was relatively modest elsewhere. Typically, barring major shocks, the majority of urban migrants are from within the country.

**The study also provides a rich portrayal of the destinations chosen by urban migrants,** the vast majority of which are internal. [Figure 1](#) depicts net flows of internal migration across two LAC countries. In this figure, the size of each dot represents the share of internal migrants relative to the city’s population, and the arrows indicate the direction of net migration flow. It reveals that internal migrants not only go to large cities, such as San Jose, Montevideo, and Lima, but also to medium and small cities. This is the case not only in Brazil and Mexico, as shown in [Figure 1](#), but in virtually all countries in the region.

### Key Concept

#### NET MIGRATION FLOW



The difference in the number of people entering and leaving a geographical area during a specific period, indicating overall population movement.

At first glance, it may seem surprising that internal migrants are not concentrated predominantly in the largest cities. While bigger cities do attract more migrants in absolute numbers, their larger population means that the proportional effect of migrants on their demographic composition closely resembles that of smaller cities.



## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

**Urban migration brings a number of opportunities for receiving cities.** Because urban migrants tend to be younger and more educated, they can rejuvenate and raise the productivity of the local labor force. They can also increase the agglomeration of economic activity, making local firms more productive. The fact that a substantial portion of urban migrants are internal means that their potential impact on local labor markets is large. Unlike international migrants, internal migrants often face no legal or language barriers, facilitating their integration into the workforce. This availability of ready-to-work individuals can provide a boost to urban economies.

That said, a key message from “Rethinking Urban Migration” is that these opportunities may not materialize if adequate local policies are not in place. The fact that urban migrants do not only go to large urban centers but also to small and medium-sized cities means that local governments of all sizes should be equipped to intervene effectively.

In this regard, a key concern is that the capacity of cities to respond to migration varies, especially between large and small urban centers. Effective policy implementation requires several key elements: a robust legal framework, comprehensive data infrastructure, skilled personnel such as urban planners and GIS specialists, and inter-agency coordination at local, state, and national levels. Many local governments, especially in smaller cities, face challenges in these areas. Therefore, support from higher-level government bodies and international institutions plays an important role in enabling local policymakers to effectively harness the potential of urban migration.

### Key Concept

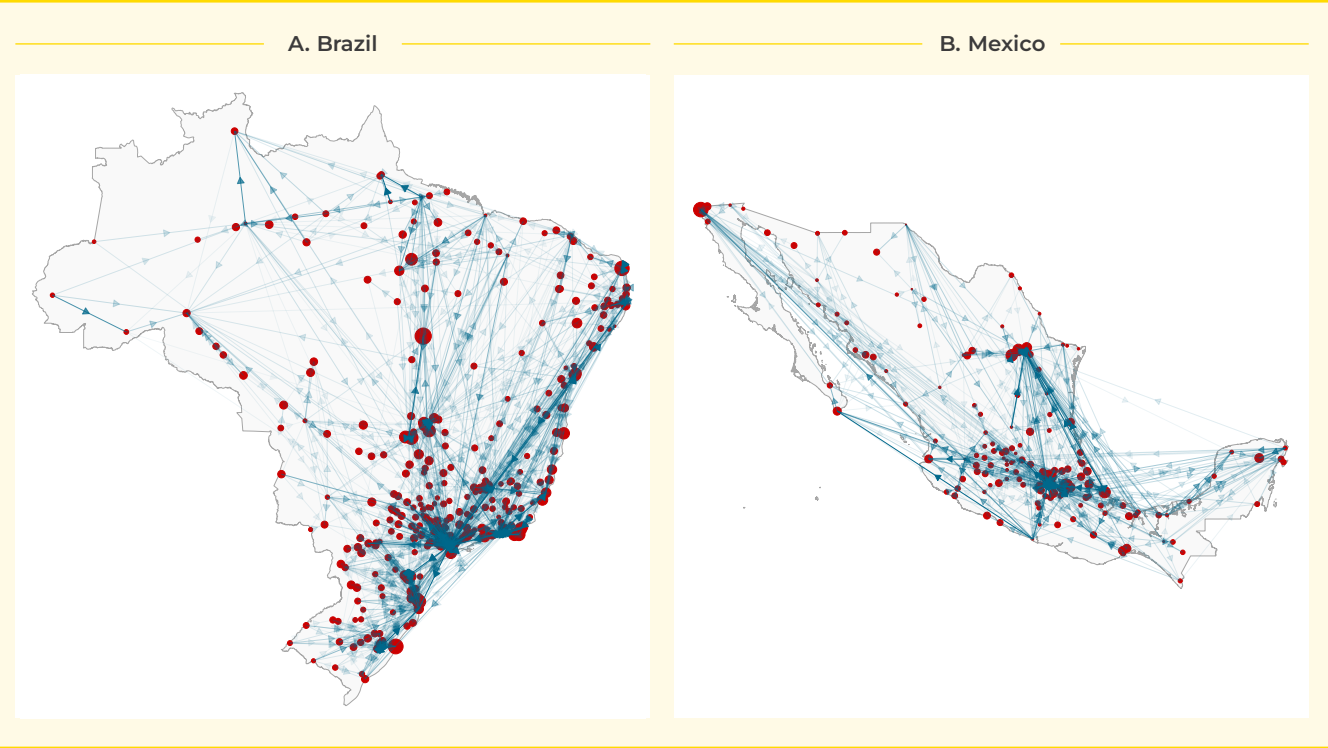
#### INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS



Individuals who move across national borders, relocating from their home country to a different country.



**FIGURE 1. Net Flows of Internal Migration**



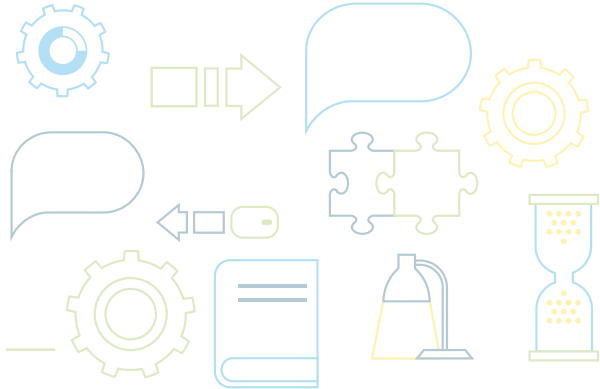
Source: Authors' calculations, based on the GHS Urban Centre Database and microdata from the latest population censuses.  
 Notes: These maps depict net internal migration flows, indicating the movement of migrants from city A to city B (subtracting migrants from city B to city A). If the number of migrants from city A to city B is higher than from city B to city A, an arrow points in that direction. If the number from city B to city A is higher, the arrow points in the opposite direction. The width of the line represents the magnitude of the net migration number, while the size of the dots represents the proportion of migrants in destination cities as a percentage of the 2015 city population. Only flows with a total of more than 30 people are included.

**Key Concept**

**INTERNAL MIGRANTS**



Individuals who relocate within the boundaries of their own country, typically moving from one city, region, or district to another.

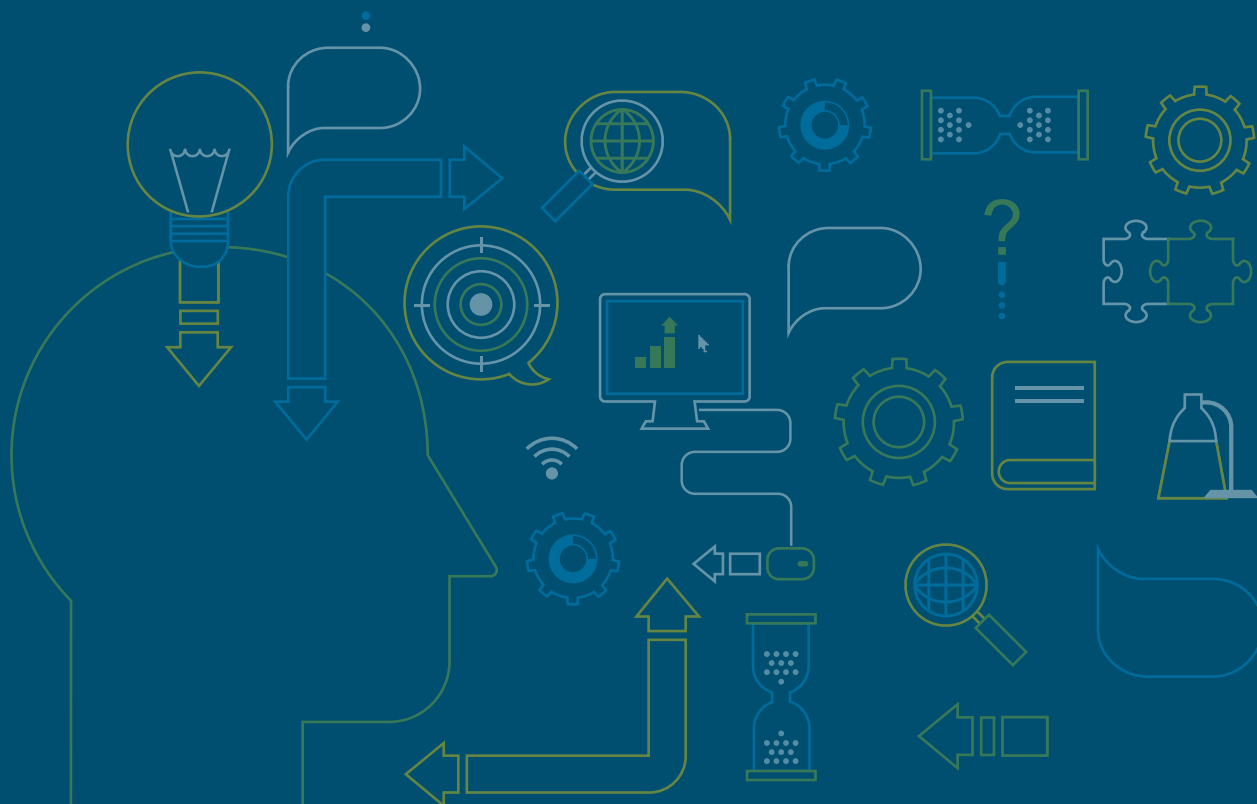


**FULL STUDY**

**Busso, Matías, Paul E. Carrillo, and Juan Pablo Chauvin. 2023. *Rethinking Urban Migration: Policy Options for Cities in Latin America and the Caribbean*. 2023 Latin American and Caribbean Microeconomic Report. Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank.**

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