

# Circular movement of Nicaraguans in La Cruz, Los Chiles, San Carlos, and Sarapiquí, Costa Rica.

## MAIN FINDINGS

### Border crossings through official checkpoints:



The movement of Nicaraguans through official checkpoints has remained relatively stable, with no significant changes from August to October. The perception of migratory flow has maintained a trend, initially low in early September and then increasing the movement of Nicaraguan people through Peñas Blancas and Las Tablillas. One of the main reasons for this behavior in the flow is attributed to the approaching harvest seasons of crops, such as coffee in the Central Valley and sugarcane in Guanacaste.

### Border crossings through unofficial checkpoint



In September, an increase in the movement of Miskito indigenous people (an indigenous Nicaraguan population) to Costa Rica through unofficial border crossings was observed. The Miskito people's movement through unofficial checkpoints also typically occurs at nighttime, making it difficult to register their movement in more detail.



There is a distinction between irregular land crossings and river crossings (across the San Juan River). The most common land crossings are located from Cabalceta Bridge (in La Cruz district, La Cruz canton) to Las Mercedes Estate (Pocosol de San Carlos). On the other hand, river crossings along the border marked by the San Juan River, from Las Mercedes to Punta Castilla on the Caribbean side (Colorado district, Pococí canton), are less frequent because they depend mainly on boat availability and are dependent on the state of the river for navigation. A short-term circular movement of students crossing the river to attend classes in Costa Rican schools was identified.



There was an increase in the number of people moving to engage in agricultural activities related to coffee harvesting in Costa Rica. Groups composed of families, including minors (between two and three years old), and other groups composed only of adults have been identified. These groups travel with large luggage that includes basic appliances such as rice cookers or pans.



A rise in police controls near Naranjal (Los Chiles district, Los Chiles canton) has been reported, which could affect movement through unofficial crossings. Police officers mention that the process of returning someone they have detained is not simple, and often, people re-enter through other points.



Four new key routes have been highlighted since the last report, where there is irregular transit, albeit with complex mobility conditions due to the river: from Tirecia to Boca San Carlos, from Boca San Carlos to Delta Costa Rica, Agua Azul, and Tortuguero. On the other hand, the main routes for engaging in agricultural activities are from La Cruz to the Greater Metropolitan Area (GAM), from Los Chiles to the GAM, and from Los Chiles to Ciudad Quesada and then to the GAM. In terms of departures, the route along the Medio Queso River used by people heading to San Carlos and El Castillo, both in Nicaragua, to visit family or participate in festive activities in the mentioned locations, has been highlighted.

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**MAP 1. SITES AND ROUTES FOR OFFICIAL AND IRREGULAR BORDER CROSSINGS**


Note: This map is solely for illustrative purposes. The boundaries, names, and designations used do not imply endorsement or official acceptance by the IOM.

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## METHODOLOGY

The objective of this Baseline Report is to explore possible changes in the sociodemographic characteristics and migration motivations Nicaraguans at the northern border of Costa Rica who migrate in a circular movement. This serves to continue monitoring migratory trends and update the data on this population that the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has been collecting from 2021 to 2022.

To achieve this objective, 22 interviews were conducted with key actors in Los Chiles, La Cruz, San Carlos, and Sarapiquí who provided important information about migratory trends in the cantons. Key informants include individuals involved in the management of migration trend information: migration officials and personnel from non-governmental organizations associated with border and migrant population issues. In addition, field visits were carried out to conduct observation exercises in the mentioned areas, and the systematization of official migration movement records provided by the General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners (DGME) was carried out.

Interviews with key informants were structured using a questionnaire designed to quantify all relevant observations related to the migrant population: mobility, sociodemographic characteristics, types of migration movements, migration categories, approximate percentage of the total perceived flow that crosses through the corresponding border point. This data was segmented according to the crossing points, whether official or unofficial, and the direction of movement, either incoming or outgoing. In addition to its quantitative value, the interviews provided qualitative information that enriched direct observation in the field.

The systematization of official migration movement records provided by the DGME allowed for an understanding of the dynamics of entries and exits through the two official border crossings of Las Tablillas and Peñas Blancas.

The non-participant observation approach during field visits allowed for the triangulation of information obtained from the interviews. This strategy facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the migratory phenomenon of interest.

In addition to using the data generated from this Baseline Exercise to explore possible changes in the profiling of the circular migratory movement of Nicaraguans at the northern border, comparative resources included data from past Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) studies. The current baseline data, obtained from interviews with key informants, is presented in a blue box, contrasting with information extracted from previous monitoring or public databases of the DGME.

## LIMITATIONS

Some methodological limitations that may arise in the preparation of this report are associated with the fact that the sample may not be representative of the entire flow, potentially leaving out characteristic details of the migrant population. Additionally, the availability and location of key informants also pose a challenge because they may not always be accessible to the consultants.

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<sup>1</sup> Circular migratory flow is understood as the form of migration in which individuals repeatedly move between two or more countries in both directions (IOM, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.migracion.go.cr/Paginas/Centro%20de%20Documentaci%C3%B3n/Estad%C3%ADsticas.aspx>

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## CONTEXT

The IOM, as the United Nations agency on migration in Costa Rica, has implemented two rounds DTM as part of its strategy to monitor the circular migratory movement of individuals of Nicaraguan nationality at unofficial border points in different cantons in the northern part of the country since 2021. Currently, a report is being implemented that includes official border crossings.

According to the records of the DGME on regular entries and exits through official border crossings in Los Chiles and Peñas Blancas, in 2022, there were **394,730 regular migratory movements**, with 50% entries and 50% exits. Regarding regular migratory movements **from January to October 2023, a total of 419,925 were recorded**, with 52% being entries and 48% exits (Graph 1). The data indicates that in 2023, regular migratory movements have already exceeded those of the entire 2022 by six percent, with still the months of November and December to be recorded.

Regarding irregular migratory movements, according to the two rounds of DTM conducted in 2021 and 2022 at three unofficial entry points on the border with Nicaragua, a total of 60,697 migratory movements were counted, with 59% being exits and 41% entries.

Furthermore, based on the results of these two DTM rounds, out of 2,506 surveyed individuals, 2,168 (87% of the total) indicated that their last entry point into Costa Rica was through an unofficial border crossing. Of this figure, 47% cited entering through the unofficial point of Los Portones in Santa Elena, La Cruz canton.

Thus, the two previous rounds of DTM allowed for the characterization of the circular migration of Nicaraguan individuals through unofficial border crossings. However, as a fundamental part of IOM's mission is to provide key advice on migration policies and practices, it becomes necessary to update the data on this circular migratory movement of Nicaraguans who cross both regularly and irregularly across the northern border of Costa Rica. To achieve this, it is necessary to refer to the DTM.

**Map 2. Migratory movement in Peñas Blancas and las Tablillas Costa Rica<sup>4</sup>**



Based on this DTM report, an approximation of the migratory movement of interest will be conducted through the analysis of information obtained from key stakeholders in the border cantons of Los Chiles, La Cruz, San Carlos, and Sarapiquí. The objective is to profile demographically, characterize, identify the main needs and vulnerabilities of migrant individuals, and identify other relevant and secure monitoring sites for more comprehensive fieldwork.

This report presents the results of the baseline monitoring during the months of September and October 2023, during which 22 key stakeholders were interviewed (providing information on various border crossing points in the mentioned four cantons), and 14 field observations were conducted at key sites.

<sup>3</sup> <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/monitoreo-de-flujo-migratorios-irregulares-en-la-zona-norte-de-costa-rica-la-cruz-upala-8?close=true>

<sup>4</sup> The maps in this report are for illustrative purposes. The names and borders indicated on this map, as well as the designations used on it, do not imply recognition or official acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

## DATA ON CIRCULAR MOVEMENT IN THE AREA

Record of Movements at Official Border Crossings | Interviews with key actors: 22 |

Direct observatoin: **La Cruz y Los Chiles**

This baseline allowed for an exploration of the profile of Nicaraguan individuals who are part of the circular flow (both regular and irregular) in the border cantons of La Cruz and Los Chiles. This was achieved through direct observation and individual interviews with 22 key actors linked to non-governmental organizations, migration police, local government, community members, and societal organizations.

### COMPOSITION OF THE FLOW AT OFFICIAL BORDER CROSSINGS

ALL DATA PRESENTED IN BLUE BOXES DERIVE FROM INFORMANTS' PERCEPTIONS



According to the DGME, in 2023, 419,925 migratory movements have been registered through the official border crossings of Peñas Blancas and Las Tablillas (data until October 31).

- **90 %** of all migratory movements in 2023, they occurred through the official border crossing at Peñas Blancas..
- **52 %** were entries and **48 %** were exits.

The perception of the informant individuals at the official border crossings:

- Individuals traveling to Peñas Blancas by bus(**50 %**), walking (**40 %**) in taxi or car(**10 %**).
- Individuals traveling to Las Tablillas on foot.(**73 %**), by bus (**20 %**) in taxi or car(**7 %**).
- There are no significant demographic differences between the inflow and outflow flows.



- Peñas Blancas: **40 %** women and **60 %** men
- Las Tablillas: **50 %** women and **50 %** men



- Peñas Blancas: **20 %** under 18 years old
- Las Tablillas: **23 %** under 18 years old



- Peñas Blancas: no information on elderly adults
- Las Tablillas: **23 %** elderly adults

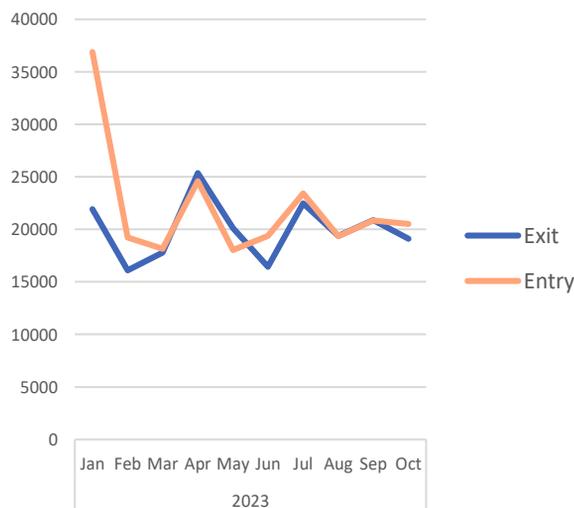


- Peñas Blancas: Pregnant or lactating women are not reported.
- Las Tablillas: **3 %** were pregnant or lactating women



- Peñas Blancas: Individuals with apparent disabilities were not reported.
- Las Tablillas: **5%** had an apparent disability.

Figure 1. Regular entries and exits to Costa Rica through official border crossings in the northern border 2022-2023<sup>5</sup>



<sup>5</sup> Data taken from the migration statistics of the General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners (DGME). Website: [www.migracion.go.cr/Paginas/Centro%20de%20Documentaci%C3%B3n/Estad%C3%ADsticas.aspx](http://www.migracion.go.cr/Paginas/Centro%20de%20Documentaci%C3%B3n/Estad%C3%ADsticas.aspx)

## COMPOSITION OF THE FLOW AT UNOFFICIAL BORDER CROSSINGS

ALL DATA PRESENTED IN BLUE BOXES DERIVE FROM INFORMANTS' PERCEPTIONS



According to the data from the two most recent rounds of the flow monitoring survey conducted on Nicaraguan migrants over the age of 18 at the northern border, out of the 2,506 surveyed individuals, a total of 2,168 (87%) entered Costa Rica through unofficial border points.

- The following unofficial border crossings were identified:
  - "El Naranjal de Los Chiles (equal proportion of men and women).
  - Section from Tirecia to Boca San Carlos (mainly family transit).
  - Section from Boca San Carlos to Delta Costa Rica (mainly men).
  - Tortuguero (mainly for tourism purposes)."



Entries: **54 %** men and **46 %** women  
Exits: **55 %** men and **45 %** women



Entries: **22 %** under 18 years old  
Exits: **23 %** under 18 years old



Entries: **6 %** elderly adults  
Exits: **5 %** elderly adults



Entries: **5 %** pregnant or lactating women  
Exits: **5 %** pregnant or lactating women



Entries: **1 %** had an apparent disability  
Exits: **1 %** had an apparent disability

## INTENSITY OF THE FLOW AT UNOFFICIAL BORDER CROSSINGS

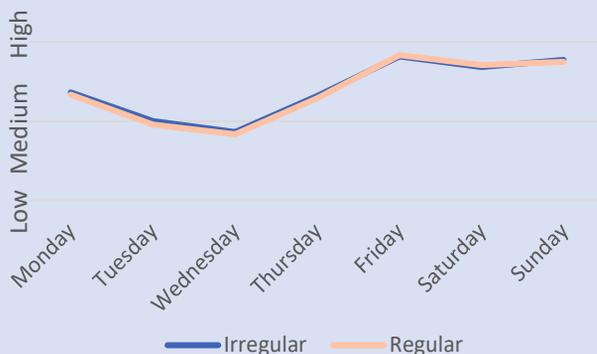
ALL DATA PRESENTED IN BLUE BOXES DERIVE FROM INFORMANTS' PERceptions



According to key informants, the trends of regular and irregular movements are:

- Both irregular and regular movements tend to increase from Thursday to Friday, maintaining some stability from Friday to Sunday.
- The intensity of both flows decreases from Monday to Wednesday.
- Regular movement is perceived as more intense from Friday to Sunday.
- Overall, the movement trend is perceived as moderate to high during the week.

Figure 2. Perceived Movement Intensity by Day of the Week



## NEEDS AND REASONS FOR MIGRATION AND MIGRATORY STATUS

ALL DATA PRESENTED IN BLUE BOXES DERIVE FROM INFORMANTS' PERCEPTIONS

### DETECTED NEEDS

The work with informant individuals has allowed identifying a set of reasons why migrants are moving through different official crossings or irregular points. The primary highlights include the search for employment and economic income, improved quality of life, protection, and health.



Economic income/employment



Protection and security



Food and nutrition



Medical attention

### REASONS FOR MIGRATORY MOVEMENTS

The reasons for migration are very similar among those who cross the border at official points and those who do so at unofficial points. However, differences are found between the inflow and outflow: the main reason for entering is for economic needs (medium to long term), followed by forced movement due to sociopolitical conflicts (mainly among Misquito people), and finally, for temporary work (hiring for the coffee and sugar cane harvest season, mainly). The reasons for people leaving Costa Rica are the completion of temporary work in agricultural harvests, short-term local movement, and visiting relatives in Nicaragua.

### REASONS FOR ENTERING COSTA RICA



Movement for economic reasons



Movement forced by conflict



Movement for temporary work



Short-term local movement

### MIGRATORY CONDITIONS

It was determined that the main migratory categories differ between regular and irregular flows only when these are flows entering from Nicaragua to Costa Rica: regular inflows are mainly residents or regular status applicants other than asylum seekers, while irregular inflows have the same proportion of irregular migratory category, residents, and applicants for regular status other than asylum.

### MAIN MIGRATORY CATEGORIES OF INDIVIDUALS ENTERING COSTA RICA IRREGULARLY



Resident



Applicant for regular status other than asylum



Without regular migration status

<sup>6</sup> It refers to the return after carrying out very specific activities such as attending school or purchasing essential products

## CONCLUSIONS



This baseline report reveals the notable porosity and dynamism that characterize the entire northern border of Costa Rica. The detection of new unofficial access routes along the San Juan River from Tirecia to Boca San Carlos, from Boca San Carlos to Delta Costa Rica, Agua Azul, and Tortuguero, indicates a migratory flow closely related to everyday life on the border. As mentioned, some of the reasons people migrate are associated with attending an educational center or making purchases in stores.



The migratory phenomenon on the northern border of Costa Rica is not limited solely to crossing the border to move to other places within Costa Rica, such as GAM, but also involves an integral part of cross-border life, as evidenced in the case of students crossing the river to attend classes in Costa Rican schools.



The needs and reasons for migratory flow are similar to those reported in the previous report; however, it is important to highlight the prominence of the Misquito movement during the monitoring months, which responds to changes in their environment that force them to mobilize in search of safer conditions.



Based on the dynamics of the season, a significant increase in both inflow and outflow is expected in the final months of the year due to agricultural activities, mainly the coffee harvest, and also outflow as people return to Nicaragua to visit their families during the holidays.



The intensity of both regular and irregular flows is perceived similarly; it is worth noting that both flows for September and October share the same trend regarding their intensity throughout the days of the week, with not very marked differences. This is explained precisely because in these months, most coffee plantations in Costa Rica are in the harvesting period, which encourages labor migration.

For more information about this study, follow the [enlace](#) or scan the QR code.



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