

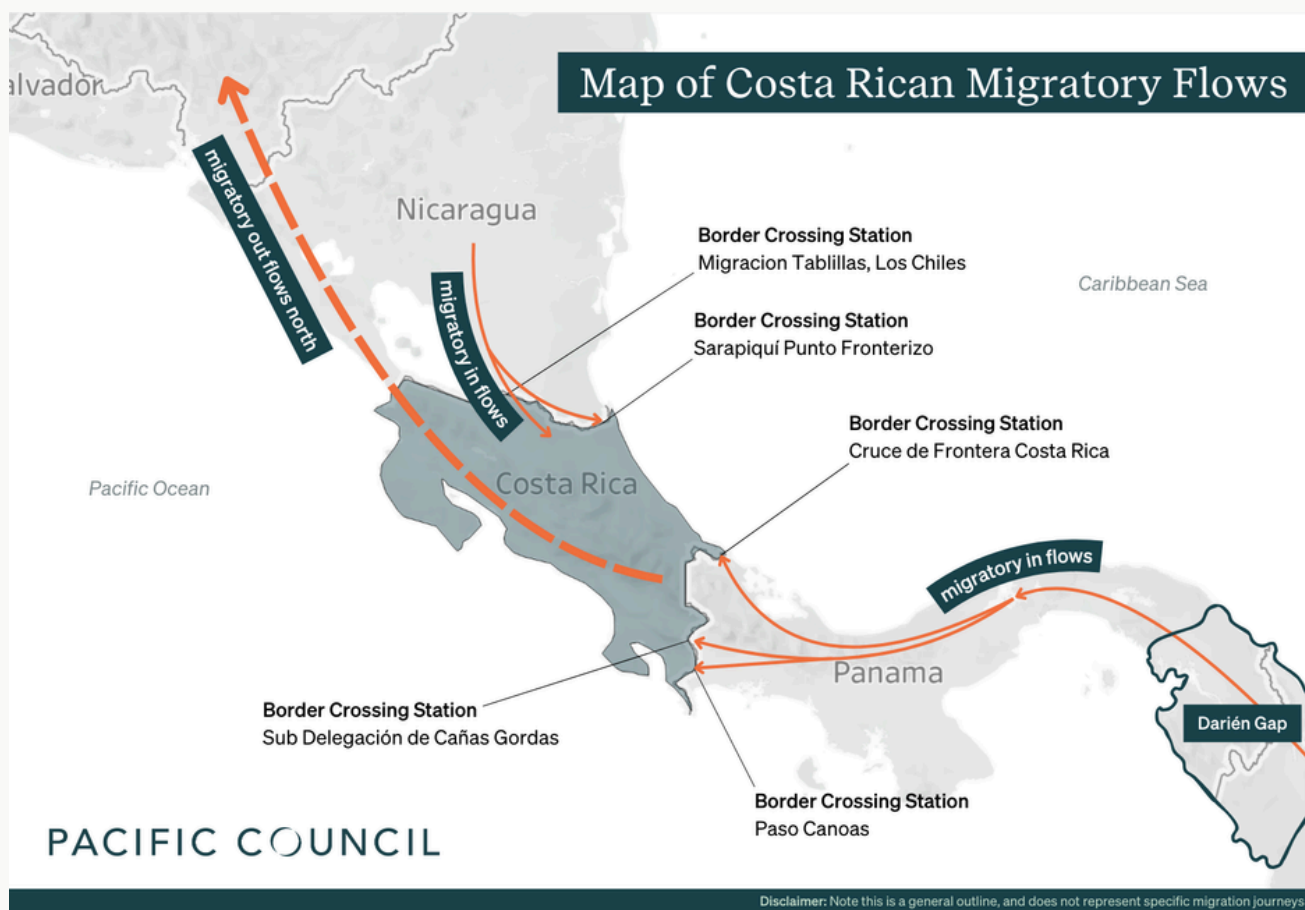
Costa Rica: An essential partner for the U.S. on migration

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Costa Rica, a small biodiverse country in Central America, is known for its wildlife, expansive jungles, and dual coastlines along the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean. The country borders Panama to the south, directly connecting Costa Rica to migrant flows emerging from the Darién Gap, a largely lawless stretch of jungle connecting North and South America. The Darién Gap, a major route for migration, is used by migratory groups from across the globe. Those crossing the jungle include Venezuelans, Chinese, Haitians, Cubans, and Ecuadoreans, among others.

Costa Rica's location along the Central American migratory corridor positions it as a key transitory location for migrants and refugees traveling north to Mexico and the United States, and as a receiving country for those leaving unstable nations within the region, notably refugees and migrants from neighboring Nicaragua. Migration policies in Costa Rica are generally welcoming and allow for flexibility of passage for transitory migrants and seasonal economic migration.



Understanding Mixed Migration Patterns in Costa Rica

Migratory patterns are in constant flux resulting from administration transitions, climate change, economic opportunities, policy implementation, etc. As such, migration flows through Costa Rica increasingly reflect mixed migration patterns. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines mixed migration (or mixed movements) as flows of people traveling along the same routes, using the same means of transport, but migrating under varying circumstances [1]. Mixed migration flows present particular challenges for migrants and receiving countries, as these flows can include asylum-seekers, refugees, economic migrants, environmental migrants, etc. each with their own needs and protection concerns. Challenges facing countries receiving mixed migration flows include the creation of pathways to assist irregular migrants who do not qualify for asylum, ensuring local infrastructure supports proper integration including housing, healthcare, and economic needs, as well as guaranteeing that the human rights of refugees and migrants are upheld to the standard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the right to asylum.

[1] "Asylum and Migration," UNHCR US, accessed September 19, 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/what-we-do/protect-human-rights/asylum-and-migration>.

Costa Rica is one of the world’s largest recipients of refugees and asylum-seekers per capita [2]. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), migrants and refugees comprise approximately 10% of Costa Rica’s population, with 497,350 individuals requiring international protection [3]. *Table 1* breaks down the migrant and refugee population according to international protection status in Costa Rica.

Table 1. Costa Rica Non-native Population International Protection Status (2024)	
Number of People	Status
458,773	Asylum-seekers
17,996	Refugees
255	Stateless
20,304	Others needing international protection
22	Others of concern
497,350	Total requiring international protection

This table highlights asylum-seekers as the primary group in need of international protection; however, there is representation across status which requires more complex methods of addressing migrant and refugee needs in the country. According to UNHCR, between 2023 and 2024, the number of asylum-seekers, refugees, and those needing international protection who decided to remain in Costa Rica increased. This increase puts pressure on the country’s national response system including social protections, legal assistance, and systems to determine refugee status.

[2] “The Implications of the Biden Asylum Rule in Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, and the Northern Triangle Nations,” National Immigration Forum, May 10, 2023, <https://immigrationforum.org/article/the-implications-of-the-biden-asylum-rule-in-mexico-costa-rica-colombia-and-the-northern-triangle-nations/>.

[3] International Monetary Fund Western Hemisphere Dept, “Characteristics and Economic Impact of Migrants and Refugees in Costa Rica,” December 22, 2023, <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/002/2023/443/article-A003-en.xml>.

To reduce backlogs in the asylum system specifically, Costa Rica implemented a temporary complimentary protection program from 2021 to 2022, and a Special Temporary Category in 2023 for asylum seekers from Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. However, in 2022, Costa Rica updated its refugee policies, following a statement by Costa Rican President Rodrigo Chaves, that the asylum system was being “abused” by economic migrants. These changes presented additional barriers to those in the process of applying for asylum. Some changes included removing the ability of asylum-seekers to automatically obtain work permits, updating admissibility criteria to limit the number of people eligible to apply for asylum, resulting delays in the adjudication of asylum applications, and challenges in processing documentation.

Costa Rica’s Migratory Relationship with Nicaragua

Current migratory pathways between Costa Rica and Nicaragua began as routes for seasonal economic and labor migration for jobs in agriculture, construction, and domestic services [4]. In the 1990s, industry demands steadily increased, in turn driving the flow of migrants across the border. Today, approximately 437,747 refugees in Costa Rica are from Nicaragua, the largest country of origin for migrants in the region. Migration rates initially declined due to COVID-19, however, in 2021 approximately 23,200 Nicaraguans sought asylum in Costa Rica between January and September, making this one of Central America’s most significant inter-regional migratory flows [5].

Under President Daniel Ortega, Nicaraguans face persecution for dissenting against the government, limited freedom of speech, restrictions to their right to education, and attacks on minority groups and women [6]. NGOs, universities, and media outlets have all been subject to criticism and closure by the Ortega administration, and Nicaraguan citizens at large face the risk of human rights violations at the hands of their government.

Given Costa Rica’s relative stability in Central America, it is an appealing receiving country for migrants and refugees, notably those from Nicaragua. While there are few instances of conflict between native Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans, existing tensions were exacerbated by an influx of Nicaraguan asylum-seekers in 2018 leading to the first anti-immigration protest in Costa Rica’s modern history in August of that year. However, since 2018, over 300,000 Nicaraguans have been granted asylum in Costa Rica [7]. Underlying racial tensio-

[4] María Jesús Mora María Jesús Mora, “Costa Rica Has Welcoming Policies for Migrants, but Nicaraguans Face Subtle Barriers,” migrationpolicy.org, November 4, 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/costa-rica-nicaragua-migrants-subtle-barriers>.

[5] Mora.

[6] Human Rights Watch, “Nicaragua: Events of 2023,” in World Report 2024, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/nicaragua>.

[7] “Costa Rica,” Global Focus, accessed September 19, 2024, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/operations/costa-rica>.

ns also exist within the anti-immigration rhetoric displayed by some Costa Ricans. Stereotypes regarding skin color, socio-economic status, cultural differences, etc. all contribute to an “othering” of the Nicaraguan population, leading to instances of isolation and mistreatment. Already facing a degree of social seclusion in Costa Rican society, Nicaraguans are more prone to becoming victims of forced labor, abusive working conditions, unemployment, food insecurity, and homelessness [8].

U.S. Immigration Policy & Costa Rica

Costa Rica and the United States launched the Safe Mobility Initiative in June 2023 to create secure pathways to the United States for a limited number of Venezuelans, Nicaraguans, and Ecuatorians of the then 240,000 asylum-seekers awaiting a decision in Costa Rica. At the time of the announcement it had not yet been determined how many of those asylum seekers would have their cases processed, but AP News said that it would be about 1,000 per month [9]. At present, about 3,000 individuals have resettled in the United States through the program [10].

In 2022, during the 9th Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles, Costa Rica endorsed the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, committing itself to, “protecting the safety and dignity of all migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons, regardless of their migratory status, and acknowledge[s] that addressing irregular migration requires a concerted regional approach.” This framework, among others, also informs the U.S. diplomatic approach to managing the causes of migration in Central America. Since 2018, the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) has provided approximately \$90 million in humanitarian aid through international organizations and NGOs. This assistance increased access to potable water, emergency health services, and child protection for migrants, refugees, and other vulnerable populations in Costa Rica.



Photo by [Elianna Gill](#) on [Unsplash](#)

[8] Mora, “Costa Rica Has Welcoming Policies for Migrants, but Nicaraguans Face Subtle Barriers.”

[9] “Costa Rica-US Immigration Agreement Aims to Manage Region’s Flows | AP News,” accessed September 19, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/costa-rica-united-states-asylum-migrants-c45378f9ddc0740916f251fa08b97c48>.

[10] “U.S. Relations With Costa Rica,” United States Department of State (blog), accessed September 19, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-costa-rica/>.

Despite the benefits of humanitarian assistance, the status of migrants and refugees in Costa Rica, and Central America more broadly is impacted by U.S. migration policymaking. For example, the Biden Administration’s asylum rule, or “Circumvention of Lawful Pathways”, places increased pressure on national systems in Central America, Colombia, and Mexico, struggling alongside the United States to appropriately respond to influxes of migrants and refugees [11]. Costa Rica specifically struggles to fund its asylum processing system, and it can take up to seven months to get an appointment to apply for asylum, and up to a decade for an asylum claim to be resolved. Biden’s asylum rule requires asylum-seekers hoping to apply in the United States to apply and be denied elsewhere, which will increase backlogs in other countries. This rule is similar to the Trump-era transit rules barring people from entering the United States between ports of entry and marking migrants ineligible for asylum if they travel through another country without applying for asylum there first.



Ultimately, collaboration between the United States and Costa Rica on humanitarian approaches is essential to addressing the core causes of migration in Latin America. However, improvements can be made to create regional ecosystems of governing and legislative bodies, international organizations, and NGOs. An effective ecosystem approach could work to streamline the administrative processes required to process claims and applications, provide support for changes in migratory patterns, and assist in the integration of migrants and refugees. Additionally, migration is a global issue, requiring global solutions. Increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers are interconnected with problems of climate change, international conflict, and exploitative industries. Addressing the root causes of migration will require increased cooperation between governments on a broad scale.

[11] “How New Biden Asylum Rule Affects Immigration, Compared to Trump | PBS News,” accessed September 19, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/how-new-biden-asylum-rule-affects-immigration-compares-to-trump>.