

The Feasibility of Conducting Panel Surveys with Migrant Populations: The Case of Venezuelans in Uruguay

Abstract

This paper analyzes the feasibility of conducting panel surveys with migrant populations in the Latin American region, characterized by increasingly vulnerable migration flows and complex migration trajectories. Since the migration event is an attrition factor in panel surveys, we make some methodological reflections on minimizing its degree and recommendations on how our applied method could be widely adopted. To this end, we made three steps. First, we analyzed the sociodemographic profiles of the participants of Venezuelan origin who participated in the Ethno-Recent Immigration Survey (ENIR) held in 2018 in Uruguay and were recontacted and agreed to participate in the second round of the ENIR held in 2021. Second, we carried out descriptive bivariate analysis and multivariate analysis by estimating logistic regression models that seek to predict the probability of being contacted in the second round of the ENIR. Finally, we systematized a set of observations made during the fieldwork that ensured the recontact and implementation of the second round and other actions taken to be able to recontact them in the future.

Introduction

The Latin American and Caribbean region has experienced a set of significant changes in terms of international migration occurring within its borders. These are seen in an increase in intraregional migration flows (Bengochea, 2018; Bengochea & Pellegrino, 2023; Prieto et al., 2022), structural economic and political-institutional crises, changes in the sociodemographic profiles of migrants, an increase in control measures and restrictions in migration policies, modifications in the implementation of regional governance such as the Mercosur Residency Agreement (Ceja et al., 2021), and militarization of borders under the pretext of mobility restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic (Vera Espinoza et al., 2021), to mention a few. In this context, where Venezuelan migration is constituted as an exodus mainly directed toward other South American countries (Ceja et al., 2021), the restrictions imposed by the states on migration have not been innocuous. Among its most notorious effects are the growth of irregular flows, the complexity of migratory trajectories, and an increase in the vulnerability of migrants (Álvarez Velasco, 2021; Ceja et al., 2021). This has broken the static notion of a migration characterized by a single origin and a single destination for a new reality where mobility is characterized by super-complex migratory itineraries with multiple destinations and means of transportation that combine land, air, and water routes (Ceja et al., 2021). Two social expressions of the current context can be found in the phenomenon of migrant caravans that cross the Latin American continent intending to reach the northern Mexican border (Ceja et al., 2021) or in the state of "permanent wandering back and forth" (Álvarez Velasco, 2021, p. 35) by a significant group of migrants of Venezuelan origin through the South Latin American territory.

This is relevant for this paper since it makes us reflect on the extent to which interest in the processes of social inclusion of migrants should be circumscribed to the limits of a nation-state and on the importance of pursuit and innovation of new ways of measuring the phenomenon and its characteristics. To this end, we analyze the feasibility of conducting panel surveys with migrant populations in the Latin American region. Since the migration event is an attrition factor in panel surveys, we make some methodological reflections on minimizing its degree and recommendations on how our applied method could be widely adopted. With this purpose, we made three steps. First, we analyze the sociodemographic profiles of the participants of Venezuelan origin who participated in the Ethno-Recent Immigration Survey (ENIR) held in 2018 in Uruguay and were recontacted and agreed to participate in the second round of the ENIR held in 2021. Second, we carried out descriptive bivariate analysis and multivariate analysis by estimating logistic regression models that seek to predict the probability of being contacted in the second round of the ENIR. Finally, we systematized a set of observations made during the fieldwork that ensured the recontact and implementation of the second round and other actions taken to be able to recontact them in the future.

One out of every three foreign-born persons came to live in Uruguay in the last five years; of these, three of every four came from a country in the Andean region or the Caribbean (Prieto et al., 2020). In particular, the population of Venezuelan origin, together with nationals of Cuba, was the one that starred in the most remarkable growth if one observes the balance of passengers through border posts and the number of residences granted by nationality between 2015 and 2019 (Prieto et al., 2020; Montiel & Prieto Rosas, 2019). In this framework of transformations in the Uruguayan migration scenario, situations of socioeconomic vulnerability for migrants have become evident (Prieto Rosas et al., 2022; Márquez et al., 2020; Prieto et al., 2019). For example, the results of the first Ethno-Survey of Recent Immigration in Montevideo (ENIR r1)¹, conducted in 2018, indicate that access to adequate housing and labor inclusion represent the most significant challenges for the social inclusion of migrants of Peruvian, Dominican, Cuban, and Venezuelan origin. At the time of the second round of ENIR (ENIR r2) in October 2021, more than 24 months had passed since the end of the first fieldwork phase. Since then, a series of transformations in the national social and economic scenario occurred, succeeded by the beginning of the COVID-19

¹ The first round of the ENIR consisted of applying an ethno-survey questionnaire to migrants of Venezuelan, Cuban, Peruvian, and Dominican origin in 2018. The sample for this first round was Respondent Driven Sampling (RDS). RDS is a type of sampling that replicates the logic of "snowball" selection strategies but, in its case, incorporates controls for selection bias towards the most popular type of population, given that those with more contacts are more likely to be referred and thus may be overrepresented in the sample. As its name indicates, this sampling builds the population frame from the information provided by the informants (Prieto Rosas et al., 2022).

health emergency in March 2020.^{2 3} In a scenario marked by economic recession and increased poverty (Brum & De Rosa, 2020), a panel survey was designed to recontact the population that was surveyed in the first wave of the ENIR to continue the study of labor, residential and family trajectories and plans three years after the first survey. Considering that at the time of the first phase, most of the informants surveyed had been living in the country for less than a year, developing a survey of this type was of great interest. The ENIR r2 was directed to 371 informants of Venezuelan origin who had participated in the first edition of the ethno-survey. A panel of 236 informants was obtained at the end of the fieldwork.

To respond to our research objectives, we analyzed the status of each informant at the end of the fieldwork, considering whether it was possible to contact them. This categorization allowed us to carry out an analysis that describes the sociodemographic profiles of those participants who were contacted and those who could not be contacted or whose current residence was unknown. Specifically, the informant could have assumed one of the following four statuses: a) contacted and survey completed, b) contacted but refuses to participate in the second round, c) unreachable with unrecoverable telephone number, d) living abroad, not contacted but current place of residence known. The data analysis indicates that, in addition to these attributes of the individuals, it is also necessary to consider some characteristics of their social networks.

Data and Methods

For this study, we used information from 371 migrants of Venezuelan origin from ENIR r1 and r2. The field strategy for ENIR r2 was based on recontacting the 371 people born in Venezuela who participated in the first edition of the ethno-survey (ENIR r1) through cell phone numbers registered in 2018. However, given that some of the informants no longer maintained their active line, a series of strategies were developed to recover their contact numbers at the time of the ENIR r2. First, the dissemination of an ethno-survey information by one of the referents of Manos Veneguayas - a civil society organization that brings together the population of Venezuelan origin in Montevideo; second, the recontact of people who were referred in the first wave of the ENIR but who did not participate in the study on that occasion; and third the consultation of other informants who participated in the second round and were part of the same reference chain⁴ As the person who could not be contacted, likewise, considering the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic, we must distance ourselves from how the ethno-surveys of the Mexican and Latin American Migration Project (Massey, 1987) are traditionally conducted, implementing a telephone

² Among the changes that have taken place is the reduction of GDP, stagnation of employment, slight growth of informality in employment, an increase of one percentage point in hourly underemployment, implementation of the Urgent Consideration Law in parallel to the change of national government (ECLAC and ILO, 2020; Central Bank of Uruguay, 2020).

³ It should be noted that, due to the country's health situation, the National Statistics Institute began to conduct the Continuous Household Survey with a reduced form and by telephone, and among the questions that were eliminated are those that allow the identification of migrants residing in the country.

⁴ The reference chain refers to the links generated through the recruitment of informants in constructing the non-probabilistic sample (Prieto Rosas et al., 2022).

survey with an online questionnaire. That said, it is essential to point out that during the ENIR r2, it was possible to corroborate that 290 (78%) participants from round 1 who were born in Venezuela continued to reside in Uruguay in the last quarter of 2021, 33 (9%) re-emigrated or returned and 48 (13%) were not possible to contact or know their current place of residence. A bivariate analysis of the sociodemographic characteristics of the cases according to their contact status in the ENIR r2 was performed, and a binomial logistic model was estimated that seeks to predict the probability of having been contacted in the ENIR r2 (1=contacted⁵, 0=not contacted⁶). The independent variables selected were gender, age, arrival cohort in Uruguay, the presence of children and adolescents in the household reported in 2018, and the number of surveys done in the reference chain close to the informant in 2021 (Table 1). Based on this, we seek to know the profile of the people contacted to make some methodological reflections on the feasibility of constructing panel data for populations in a mobility situation.

Table 1. Specification of the variables used in the estimated model

Variable	Specification
Contact (dependent variable)	0=not contacted/1=contacted
Sex	0=male/1=female
Age	0=18-29/1=30-49/2=50-64
Cohort of arrival	0=2000-2017/1=2018
The presence of children and adolescents in the household	0=No/1=Yes
Surveys done in the referral chain	Continuous

Source: own elaboration.

Results

As previously mentioned, the informants assumed one of the following four statuses once the ENIR r2 fieldwork was completed: a) contacted and with the survey completed, that is, they were part of the panel; b) contacted but refused to participate in the second round, c) unreachable with an unrecoverable telephone number, d) residing abroad. As Table 1 shows, the panel comprises 236 informants who are 63.6% of the informants of Venezuelan origin from round 1. If we wanted to venture a profile of those who were contacted again and agreed to participate based on these data, it could be said that women have a slightly higher propensity to participate, as well as those in the middle age group (30 to 49 years old as of 2018), those with more time of residence in the country and with persons under 18 years old in the household. On the other hand, among

⁵ Includes those who could be contacted (some took the survey, and others refused to participate). This does not include those whose current residence was known through another ENIR informant and who were not interviewed because they were not residing in Uruguay.

⁶ Refers to the category of untraceable informants.

those who were contacted but did not want to participate in the study, there was slightly more presence of males. They are the youngest and, on average, have a longer time of residence in the country and have fewer children and adolescents in their households. Those who could not be contacted because their telephone numbers proved unrecoverable through various network members have as a salient characteristic that, on average, they had arrived more recently in the country and consequently had higher unemployment levels in 2018. In addition, they have the lowest presence of children in their households. Finally, there are 33 informants from ENIR r1 of whom we learned from third parties that they had returned or re-emigrated, so they were discarded as they are not candidates to be part of the panel. Many variables associated with having been recontacted are related to a specific notion of stability in the migrant's country, as observed in characteristics such as the presence of children at home or a more extended period in the destination country (Table 1). This leads us to think that the individual's network also shares this stability, increasing the chances of contacting that person. That is to say, someone with less time in the country will have a network of contacts mostly made up of acquaintances, while those with more time in the country will have a closer and more permanent network of contacts. This latter characteristic is associated with a greater possibility of recovering these contacts, which leads us to include a variable that attempts to denote this network characteristic in the analysis.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of ENIR r1 informants of Venezuelan origin by selected variables according to their status at the end of the ENIR r2 fieldwork. Montevideo, 2021

	Done	Rejected	Unrecoverable contact number	Outside the country
Sex				
Male	45,2	51,3	46,8	47,4*
Female	54,8	48,7	53,2	52,6*
Age group (2018)				
18-29	35,2	81,3	54,4	43,6*
30-49	58,8	18,5*	43,1	41,2*
50-64	6,0*	0,3*	2,5*	15,2*
Cohort of arrival				
2000-2017	75,0	77,9	35,0	66,3
2018	25,0	22,1*	65,0	32,7*
Activity status (2018)				
Unemployed	5,3*	4,0*	23,6*	7,5*
Inactive	2,4*	7,1*	0,0	1,9*
Occupied	92,3	88,8	76,4	90,6
Presence of children and adolescents in the household (2018)				
No	70,2	80,8	95,3	82,9
Yes	29,8	19,2*	4,7*	17,1*
N total	236	54	48	33

* N<20 /// Source: own elaboration based on ENIR r2.

Additionally, the binomial logistic regression model reinforces some of the differences found in the bivariate analysis by highlighting the effect of the arrival cohort and the number of surveys done in the reference chain close to the informant, which are the only independent variables statistically significant in explaining the probability of being contacted in the ENIR r2 (Table 2). In particular, the results achieved show that migrants who arrived in 2018 have a reduced probability of being contacted in the second wave of the ENIR compared to previous cohorts, while the same increases for each additional survey made to those in their immediately nearby reference chain, controlling for the remaining selected attributes (Table 2). Therefore, it is possible to identify that what explains the fact of being contacted in the ENIR r2 is the stability of social networks and specific attributes associated with the process of settling in the host society, which is expected to change at a higher rate during the first year of residence in the country, such as cell phone number. However, it should be noted that the relevance of contact networks is explained mainly by constructing the non-probabilistic sample associated with round 1, which, as mentioned, was based on the RDS strategy.

Table 2. Exponentiated coefficients of the logistic regression model on the probability of contact in the ENIR r2. Montevideo, 2021

Probability of contact in 2021	
<i>Cohort of arrival 2018</i> (ref.: 2000-17)	0,366** (0,12)
<i>Sex: female</i> (ref.: male)	0,934 (0,31)
<i>Age group</i> (ref.:18-29 years)	
30-49 years	0,758 (0,27)
50-64 years	2,024 (2,22)
<i>Presence of children and adolescents in the household</i> (ref.: No)	1,846 (0,87)
<i>Number of surveys carried out in reference chains</i> (continuous)	1,939** (0,42)

<i>Constant</i>	5,021** (3,12)
N	338

(standard error)

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Source: own elaboration based on ENIR r2.

Discussion

Considering the fieldwork experience and the results obtained, we can make the following methodological reflections on the feasibility of conducting panel studies with a mobile population. First, the ENIR r1 sampling was carried out through reference chains, specifically Respond Driven Sampling. It required careful safeguarding of the information of those involved in the process. It was an essential resource during the second round to contact some informants who had changed their cell phone numbers. Concomitantly, the descriptive and multivariate analysis highlights the importance of having stable contact networks over time to be successful in terms of contacting respondents during a panel survey with migrant populations, and another of the findings refers to the fact that the cell phone number for a large part of the mobile population is not a lasting attribute, at least during the first period of settlement in the place of destination. Therefore, two suggestions can be made regarding future implementations of the RDS methodology: i) when registering a contact number for participants, it is essential to have complementary connection alternatives such as e-mail since mobile telephone numbers can have high turnover rates; ii) when constructing reference chains, it is essential to remember the importance of referring to people with whom there is a close relationship and with a certain degree of permanence over time. Second, it should be noted that migrants of Venezuelan origin are, on average, less vulnerable than other communities living in Uruguay, such as Cubans or Dominicans (Prieto Rosas et al., 2022). However, these data show that even within this subpopulation, there may be at least three situations that represent limitations to being contacted and which may be interrelated: i) the non-establishment of close ties because of being a newcomer, ii) the possession of a temporary cell phone number during the first period of residence, iii) or the completion of a new migratory journey. In this sense, it is considered that the implementation of panel surveys with migrant populations is successful in cases where there is a cohesive community of origin and strong interpersonal contact networks. Finally, the data presented here show the presence of a proportion of Venezuelan migrants (9%) who have remigrated or returned after 36 months of their contact in Uruguay. Undoubtedly, there is an important finding here. We conducted in-depth interviews with these informants to understand the factors that influenced the realization of a new migratory journey and to learn about the experiences of (re)incorporation in their country of origin or a third host society.

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