

# Assessing the Socioeconomic Impact of COVID-19 on Forcibly Displaced Populations

Thematic Brief No. 4: the case of Costa Rica\*

## Key Insights

- Costa Rica has experienced a deep economic downturn as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet continues to welcome those in need of international protection from around the region. Since 2017, the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and other persons of concern – mainly from Nicaragua, but also Venezuela and Cuba, among others – has increased considerably putting strain on national systems.
- Data from two rounds of a phone survey conducted by UNHCR and IPA between March and August 2021 – comparable to a similar survey by the World Bank on nationals – provides insight on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the health, livelihoods and general vulnerability of these populations who are Persons of Concern (PoC) to UNHCR.<sup>1</sup>
- The survey finds that by August 2021 around one in five PoC households has experienced a COVID-19 diagnosis. In addition, 36% of respondents report having been vaccinated, and some 80% believe the vaccines are safe and effective.
- The economic impact of the pandemic has been severe for PoC households, with nearly 3 in 4 respondents reporting lower family income in round 1 compared to pre-COVID times. Further, financial insecurity among PoC remains pronounced, with 70% of respondents saying they were forced to deplete assets or rely on others to meet daily needs and half reporting they have no bank or mobile savings accounts.
- Food insecurity remains high – despite having fallen across survey rounds – with 61% of PoC respondents in round 2 reporting an adult skipping a meal in the last week compared to just 12% of nationals in the final round of the World Bank survey. The Nicaraguan population in particular faces high levels of food-related vulnerability as 4 in 10 Nicaraguan respondents report a child going hungry in the past 30 days.
- Despite these prevalent needs, food- and cash-based support to PoC fell between March and August 2021. Similarly, requests for government support are less common in round 2, and about 40% of assistance requests are rejected.
- The Venezuelan population are notably better off compared to Nicaraguan and Cuban households on nearly all measures, which likely reflects their pre-existing better socioeconomic profile and associated ability to integrate into Costa Rican society.

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<sup>1</sup> [Persons of Concern \(PoC\) to UNHCR](#) typically include refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced person, stateless people and others including those in refugee-like situations such as Venezuelans displaced abroad.

The COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted devastating consequences across the globe. In low- and middle-income countries where most refugees live, the pandemic has increased burdens on host governments and stakeholders who work with them to address record levels of forced displacement.<sup>2</sup> While the virus itself does not discriminate, recent work shows its socioeconomic impacts disproportionately affect forcibly displaced persons (FDPs) due to their pre-existing vulnerabilities and often precarious circumstances.

Studies by the World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement (JDC), Center for Global Development and Norwegian Refugee Council highlight the exacerbated effects of the pandemic on FDPs, many of whom work in sectors more vulnerable to economic shocks with limited access to formal labor markets, health and education services and social protection systems.<sup>3</sup> Despite these efforts, there is still relatively little empirical evidence on how refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR have been affected by the pandemic, particularly in diverse settings across the Americas. This is especially relevant as the Latin America and the Caribbean region has arguably been the hardest hit in the world, with 18.5% of COVID-19 cases and 30.3% of deaths globally as of October 2021, despite representing just 8.4% of the total world population.<sup>4</sup>

This brief – [adding to others in the series](#) – takes advantage of newly available socioeconomic data originating from a high-frequency phone survey to examine the impact of COVID-19 on persons of concern to UNHCR in Costa Rica. While not exhaustive, the aim is to provide evidence of how this population is coping with the crisis compared to the national population and how their conditions evolve over time, where possible. We focus attention primarily on topics identified as priorities by UNHCR’s regional and country operations, including the impact of the pandemic on access to essential services, livelihoods, and food insecurity. First, however, we provide a brief contextual background on the displacement trends in Costa Rica over recent years, as well as the country’s general experience with the pandemic and the operational response by UNHCR.

## Displacement, COVID-19 and UNHCR’s response in Costa Rica

Costa Rica has welcomed asylum-seekers from Latin America and other parts of the world for decades, providing documentation and offering freedom of movement, right to work and access to basic services. In line with its framework for the protection and integration of asylum-seekers and refugees, the country adopted the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework – locally known as MINARE – as a national application of the Global Compact on Refugees. The MINARE enables Costa Rica to participate in the regional process known as the MIRPS.<sup>5</sup> It also actively participates in the R4V, a platform co-led by UNHCR and the International Organization of Migration (IOM) to respond to the situation of displaced Venezuelans living in Costa Rica. As of end 2021, Costa Rica hosts 184,895 persons of concern – representing around 3% of the national population – including 10,242 refugees, 152,525 asylum-seekers and 21,766 Venezuelans displaced abroad (Figure 1).

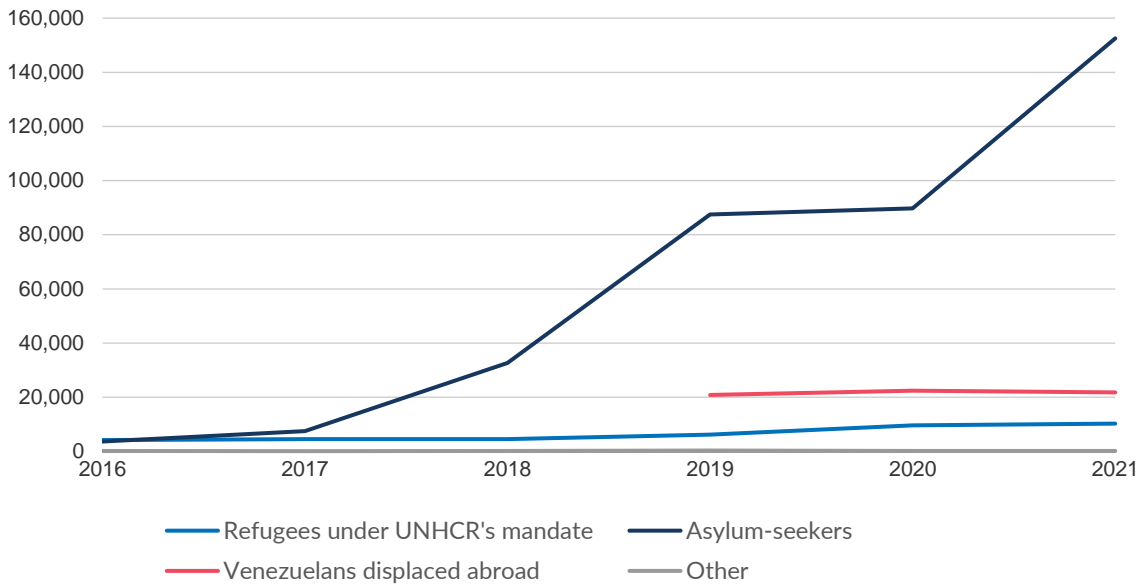
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<sup>2</sup> UNHCR (2021). [Mid-Year Trends. Forced Displacement in 2021](#).

<sup>3</sup> Tanner, J., et al. (2021). [Answering the Call: Forcibly Displaced during the Pandemic](#); Dempster, H., et al. (2020). [Locked Down and Left Behind: The Impact of COVID-19 on Refugees’ Economic Inclusion](#) and; Gorevan, D. (2020). [Downward Spiral: the economic impact of COVID-19 on refugees and displaced people](#).

<sup>4</sup> CEPAL and UNICEF (2021). [The COVID-19 pandemic: the right to education of children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean](#).

<sup>5</sup> See the [Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework \(MIRPS\)](#) for more detail.

**Figure 1 Persons of Concern in Costa Rica**


Source: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder PopData  
 © UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency

The influx of asylum-seekers and refugees in recent years – mainly from Nicaragua (86%), but also Venezuela and elsewhere from the region including Cuba – has strained Costa Rica's national systems in sectors such as education, health, social protection and legal assistance. The high flow of arrivals has exceeded the capacity of the government to receive and process cases causing significant delays in the delivery of documentation and work permits for asylum-seekers, particularly in the Northern zone along the border with Nicaragua. As of November 2021, 32,759 asylum claims were pending formalization. This has prevented PoC from fully integrating into the labor market and meeting their basic needs and has made necessary an area-based approach to bring about humanitarian and development-oriented solutions.

UNHCR supports PoC through targeted livelihoods initiatives and multipurpose cash assistance. The livelihoods initiatives support individuals' desire for self-reliance and economic inclusion by removing barriers to income-generating activities through vocational or technical capacity building. The Living Integration Program, through initiatives such as the Living Integration Seal and different employment and entrepreneurship actions – developed by the Costa Rican government with UNHCR and partner agencies – supports asylum-seekers and refugees in their local integration through facilitations with skills training, access to job fairs, and assistance to start businesses. Nearly 2,000 individuals have benefitted from this initiative since 2014.

In parallel, UNHCR provides immediate assistance to the most vulnerable PoC through multipurpose cash-based interventions. These non-conditional, unrestricted cash grants allow prioritized individuals and families to address their most critical needs. Between June and August 2020, socioeconomic evaluations were conducted throughout San Jose's metropolitan region as well as in the northern cantons of Upala and Los Chiles, resulting in 2,238 households receiving a monthly cash grant. For three months, families received

USD 450 in San Jose and USD 200 in the northern region. In addition to the grant, families received financial training courses and access to legal advice and other services from implementing partners.

In addition, as part of its pandemic response, UNHCR signed an agreement with Costa Rica's government to provide access to public healthcare through a comprehensive medical insurance scheme for asylum-seekers and refugees. This agreement plays an important role in early integration as new arrivals often show to have unattended chronic conditions or health situations resulting from their journey. To date this agreement has assisted more than 10,000 persons, most of them Nicaraguans. UNHCR also advocates for and contributes to the inclusion of asylum-seekers and refugees in national COVID-19 vaccination campaigns.

### Data sources

The analysis presented in this note relies primarily on household-level microdata from a survey conducted by UNHCR and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA). Data collection was conducted across two survey rounds between March and August 2021 using UNHCR's registration data – proGres – as a sampling frame. As such, the sample can be considered representative of PoC registered with UNHCR, though not necessarily representative of the entire displaced population in Costa Rica. Considering vulnerable households are more likely to seek out assistance and therefore be registered, our sample likely produces lower bound estimates as it relates to socioeconomic wellbeing and therefore helps inform policies targeting those most in need.

In round 1 of the phone survey, 1,163 households were interviewed across four distinct strata pre-identified by UNHCR country operations covering the Greater Metropolitan Area (GAM, acronym in Spanish) and the Northern border area. In round 2, 761 households were successfully re-contacted providing a panel dataset to explore the impact of the pandemic on this vulnerable population over time.<sup>6</sup> Among the PoC originally surveyed: 604 are Nicaraguan, 333 are Venezuelan, and 226 are Cuban which serves as the basis of the comparative analysis across groups.

The survey tool was designed in line with the World Bank's questionnaire for their [High-Frequency Phone Surveys](#) (HFPS) among national populations in the Latin American and Caribbean region. In Costa Rica, the World Bank conducted a first phase of the HFPS across three rounds between May and August 2020<sup>7</sup>, and the World Bank and UNDP together conducted a second phase of surveys between May and July 2021.<sup>8</sup> While direct comparisons are limited due to the time lapse and associated restrictions, general trends over time between the HFPS national sample and our PoC sample are informative and included where relevant.

<sup>6</sup> All round 2 estimates include post-stratification weights to adjust for differential attrition.

<sup>7</sup> See the [World Bank Microdata Library](#) for more detail.

<sup>8</sup> UNDP (2021). [An uneven recovery: Take the pulse of the Latin America and Caribbean Region following the pandemic.](#)

## Health-related experiences and access to services

Like all countries across the region, the pandemic has led to serious disruptions to everyday life in Costa Rica. As of December 2021, the cumulative number of officially confirmed cases is over half a million, which represents around 10% of the total population.<sup>9</sup> In our phone survey of PoC, around 20% of respondent households have had at least one COVID-19 diagnosis. Moreover, 41% of households received at least one COVID-19 test in the past year, which the majority – 3 in 4 respondents – indicating it was easy to receive. Among those who found it difficult to get a test, the most common issues reported are wait times and cost. Across the three groups in our sample – Venezuelans, Nicaraguans and Cubans – Nicaraguan PoC are 16 percentage points (pp) less likely to say they got diagnosed from a test, which likely reflects their relatively higher degree of marginalization from health services.



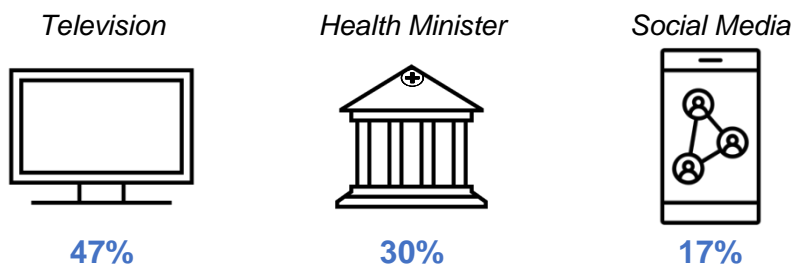
### COVID-19 behavior, knowledge and vaccination

In March of 2021, nearly all respondents report that they had always worn a mask when leaving home and in public places in the 7 days prior to enumeration. In addition, 83% say they avoided large gatherings and crowds altogether. For comparison, 95% of World Bank HFPS 2020 survey national respondents reported engaging in at least some mitigation practices, highlighting how there are no fundamental differences between PoC and nationals with respect to preventative behaviors.

Moreover, respondents' knowledge of different mitigation measures is consistent across the three groups of PoC. There are also no significant differences across urban (GAM) and rural (Northern border) areas, reflecting widespread efforts to promote understanding of the pandemic. Ultimately, roughly half of all PoC respondents say they do not feel COVID-19 is a risk to their household, primarily because they follow preventive measures.

Figure 2 illustrates how the three most trusted sources of information on COVID-19 among PoC respondents are television, the health ministry, and social media. Other sources of information include: UNHCR (15%), national government (10%), radio (6%), friends/relatives (6%), and WHO (3%). Across the three groups, the Venezuelan population is more likely to follow social media and official sources such as the health minister or national government relative to the other two groups. Alternatively, Cuban respondents report UNHCR as a trusted source of information at a higher rate than Nicaraguans and Venezuelans.

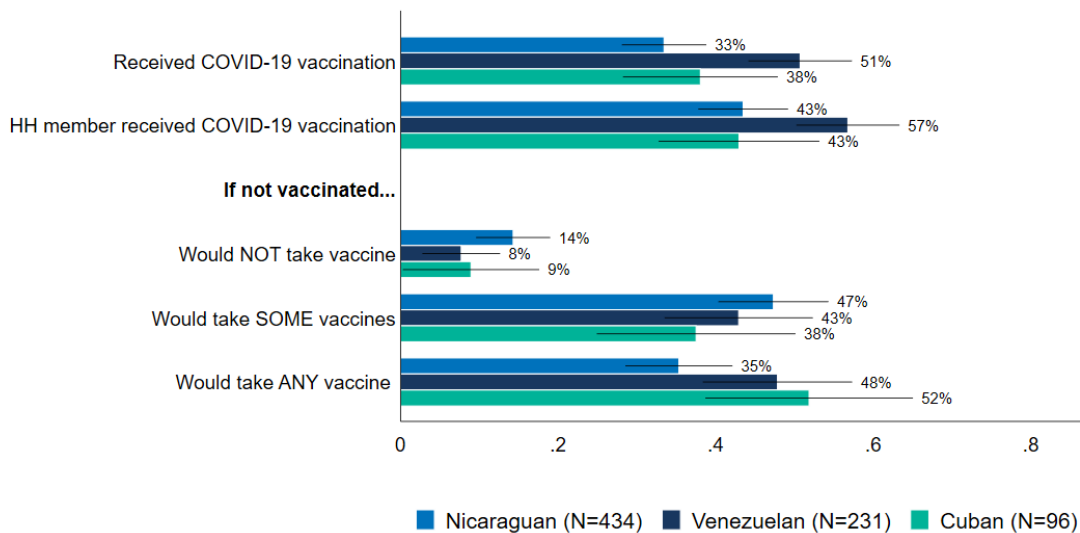
**Figure 2** Trusted sources of information on COVID-19



<sup>9</sup> Roser, M., et al. (2021). "[Coronavirus Pandemic \(COVID-19\)](#)". Retrieved on December 16, 2021. NB: Limited testing and challenges in the attribution of the cause of death means that the number of confirmed cases and deaths is likely lower than the true number of cases and deaths from COVID-19.

By August of 2021, 36% of all PoC respondents had received a COVID-19 vaccination, and 78% report being eligible for one. More than 80% of respondents believe the vaccines are both safe and effective, and among respondents who intend to get vaccinated 71% say they would do so to protect themselves. Figure 3 shows how across the three PoC groups, reported vaccination rates are 13-18pp higher for Venezuelan respondents. Attitudes towards the COVID-19 vaccine do not vary greatly by national origin, even though Nicaraguans report being slightly more reluctant to get vaccinated. Respondents who report not wanting to take any COVID-19 vaccine cite a variety of concerns, but the most common relate to safety and efficacy of the vaccine itself. In consideration for cost as a main barrier, 13% of unvaccinated respondents say they would not take a COVID-19 vaccine even if free of charge.

**Figure 3 Vaccination (round 2)**



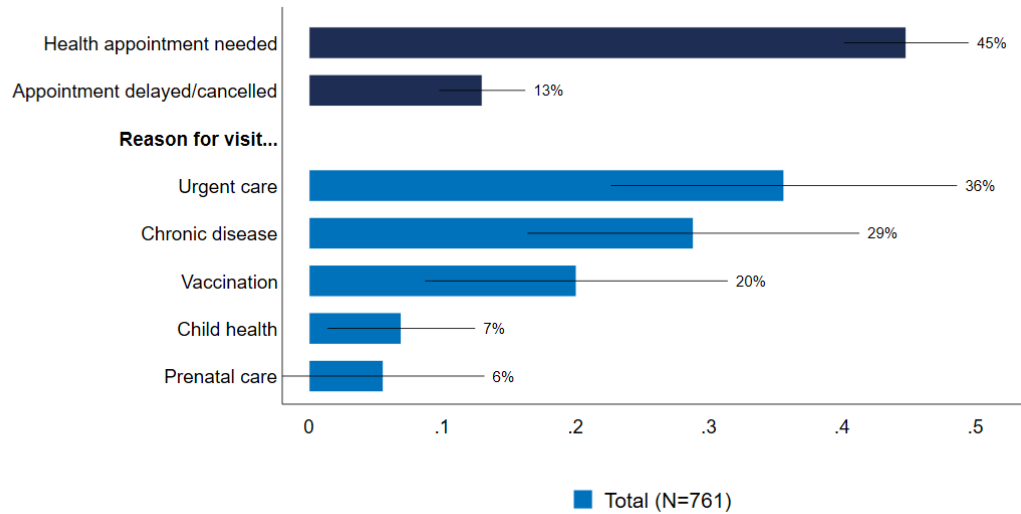
**Access to healthcare and education**

A principle concern of the pandemic and subsequent restrictions has been limited access to basic services. For PoC, 45% of respondents say their household needed a medical appointment between June and August, and of those 13% had to delay or cancel the appointment. This figure is slightly higher than the 5% of national households that were unable to get an appointment found by the World Bank in 2020, potentially reflecting PoC households relatively lower access to health services. While there are no clear differences in access to healthcare across the three PoC groups, Venezuelan respondents are less likely than the other two groups to believe the government provides healthcare without discrimination.

Figure 4 illustrates how the majority of these medical appointments were for health emergencies or chronic disease indicating the severity of the delay or cancellation, and to a lesser extent other more routine but equally essential appointments for vaccinations, child-specific health and prenatal care. Alternatively, access to medication among PoC households reporting the need for such medication remains steady over the two rounds at 80%. Still, this is 10pp lower than the 90% reported by national households in the World Bank survey in 2020. Across the three PoC groups, there is no significant difference in access to medication.

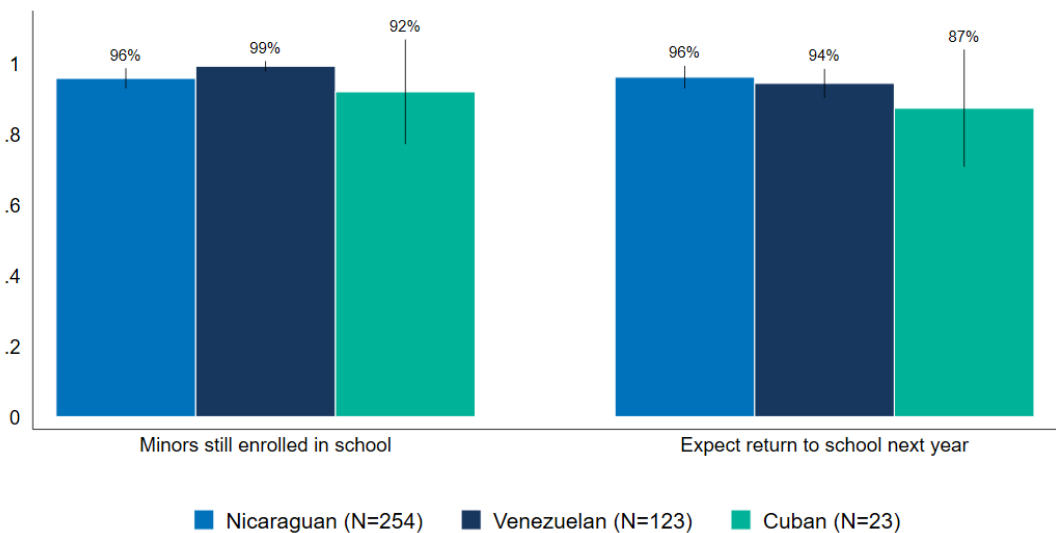


**Figure 4 Access to healthcare (round 2)**



Turning to education, school closures represented a major disruption for households with school-aged children. Still, for those children enrolled in March 2020 there is little evidence of extensive dropouts. Figure 5 shows how nearly all minors across the 3 separate PoC groups are still enrolled and participating in school by August 2021, and of those that have not physically returned the expectation is that they will do so in the coming year. Nevertheless, the quality of school is perceived to be worse since the pandemic began and school closures were enforced. Nearly half of all respondents assess the quality of school to be poor or very poor in August 2021, compared to only 15% prior to March 2020. Challenges around remote learning are likely the main reason, especially for Nicaraguan households who report less access to internet and other computer resources such as laptops. As a result, Nicaraguan households prefer communication with schools and teachers through other means such as WhatsApp, whereas Venezuelan households are more likely to prefer online teaching applications typically accessed through a computer.

**Figure 5 School enrollment (round 2)**



## Livelihoods and financial insecurity

While the health impacts of the pandemic are of first-order importance, the pandemic has also taken a heavy economic toll. According to Costa Rica's national statistics office, nearly one in four workers was unemployed by mid-2020 with poverty increasing among the most vulnerable.<sup>10</sup> The most recent figures show how the unemployment rate has recovered modestly, currently estimated at 14.4%, but is still yet to reach pre-pandemic levels.<sup>11</sup> Against this backdrop, the two rounds of phone survey shed light on how UNHCR's PoC have been impacted by the pandemic with respect to livelihoods and financial insecurity.



### Employment and sources of income

Around 68% of all PoC respondents report being employed in round 2, a modest improvement from round 1 and which is consistent across urban (GAM) and rural (Northern border) areas.<sup>12</sup> This is also on par with the employment rate found for Costa Ricans in the 3rd round of the World Bank's HFPS in August 2020, 73%. Still, the labor market conditions were notably worse throughout 2020 in comparison to when both rounds of this survey were implemented, as illustrated by official unemployment statistics previously cited, meaning at present there is likely a wider gap between PoC and nationals if one assumes an uneven recovery. Additionally, even though a considerable share of PoC respondents say they are employed, 3 in 4 also report in round 1 that a household member had lost a job since pandemic-related restrictions were first put into place in March 2020, which reflects the fragility of most household's livelihood situation during the crisis.

Looking across the three sub-groups of PoC, Venezuelans have only slightly higher rates of employment compared to Nicaraguans and Cubans. More striking, however, Venezuelans are far more likely to be involved in formal employment providing access to social security, with a nearly 20pp difference between Venezuelans and Nicaraguans (Figure 6). In addition, Nicaraguan households are far more likely than the other two groups to have had their employment situation disrupted between rounds which includes a household member losing a job, having a formal contract suspended or seeing a reduction in the number of hours.

This general difference between Venezuelans, Cubans and Nicaraguans holds when looking at various measures in our data, and likely reflects the better socioeconomic profile of the Venezuelan population that has managed to integrate into Costa Rican society. For instance, a far greater share of Venezuelan respondents has completed high school or university-level education (62%) relative to both Cubans (45%) and Nicaraguans (15%). And rates of employment disruption are generally higher for those with lower levels of completed education.

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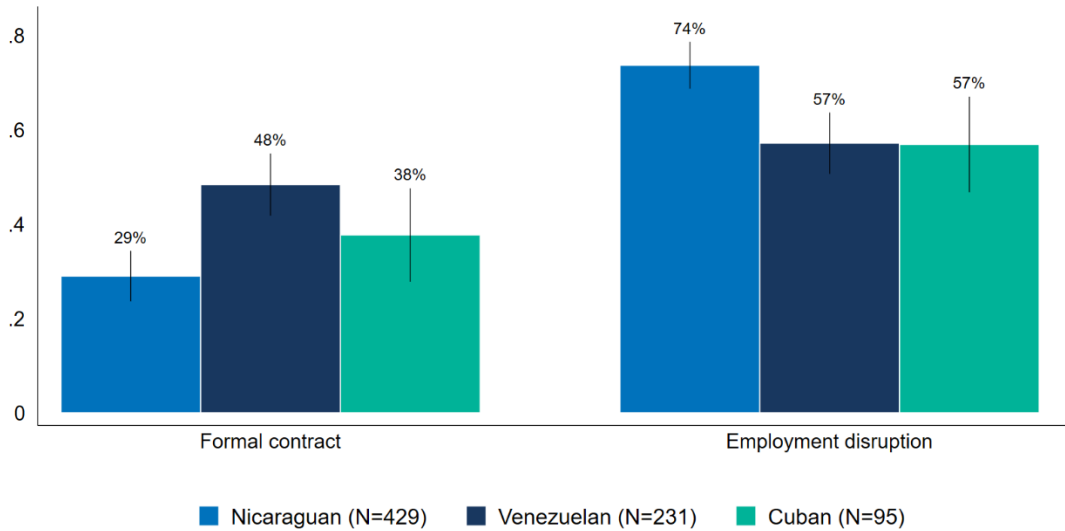
<sup>10</sup> INEC (2020). [ECE. II Trimestre 2020. Comparación interanual. Población nacional según indicadores generales de la condición de actividad.](#)

<sup>11</sup> INEC (2021). [ECE. SON Trimestre 2021. Comparación interanual. Población nacional según indicadores generales de la condición de actividad.](#)

<sup>12</sup> Employed comprise persons working in the week prior to the interview, including persons who are gainfully employed or self-employed, who did not work in the reference week, but are guaranteed to return to work.

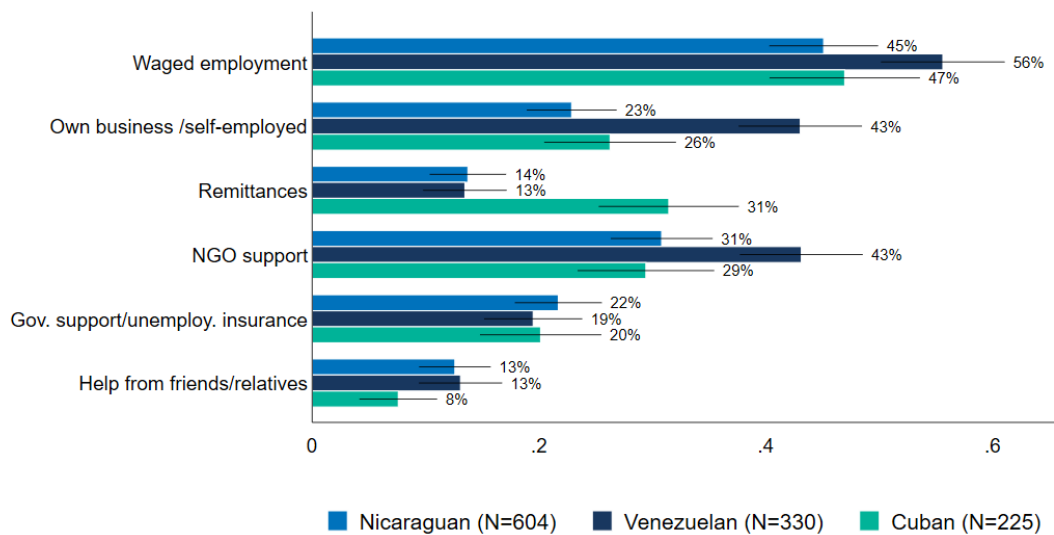


**Figure 6 Formal employment and contract disruption (round 2)**



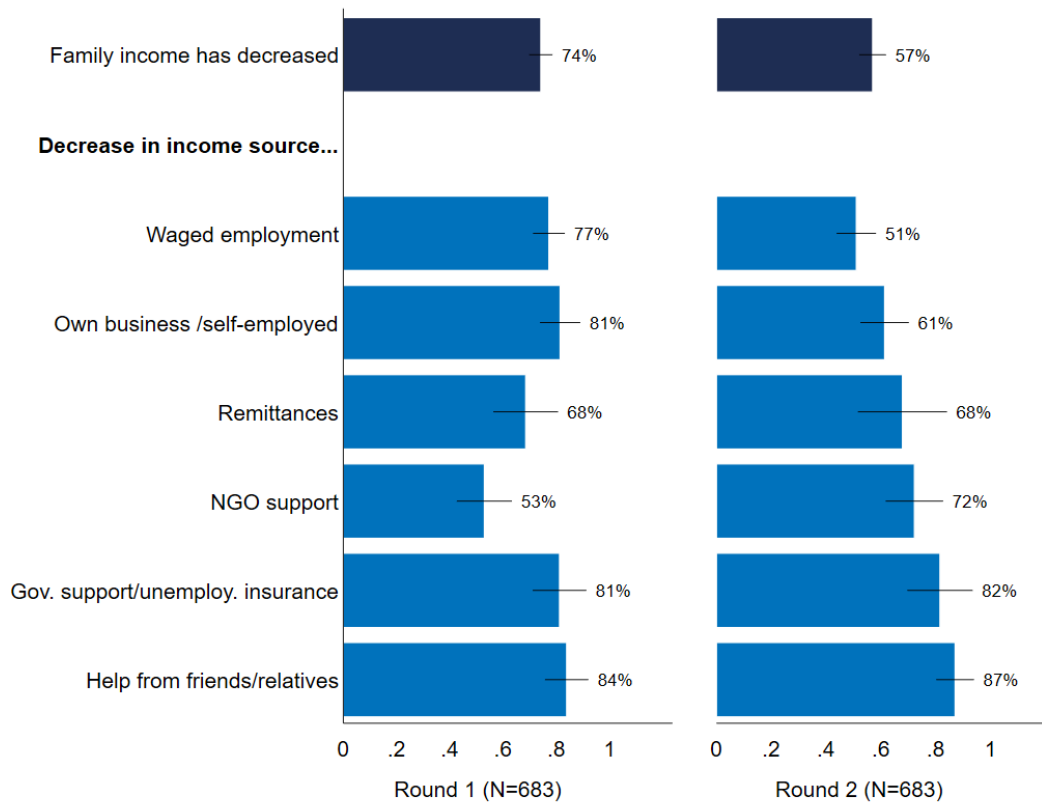
Most respondents, 60%, indicate their household relies on multiple sources of income which helps to cushion against an unexpected job loss. Yet again there are significant differences across sub-groups when it comes to the type of income sources. Figure 7 shows that Venezuelan PoC are considerably more likely to receive wages and business income compared to Nicaraguan and to a lesser extent Cuban PoC, which is consistent with the earlier employment-related findings. Venezuelan households are also far more likely to count on support from NGOs, foundations or the church, which may indicate a strong response to the Venezuelan situation in Costa Rica. On the other hand, Cuban households are two times as likely to receive remittances compared to the other two groups, which suggests strong ties with family members back home or in a third country such as the USA, and perhaps migration as a household strategy to diversify income sources.

**Figure 7 Income source over the last 12 months (round 1)**



Going beyond source of income, Figure 8 highlights loss of income since pandemic-related measures were first put into place in March 2020. Nearly 3 in 4 respondents report a reduction in total family income in round 1 compared to pre-COVID times, whereas another 57% report a reduction in round 2 compared to the previous round. The former is comparable but slightly higher than the World Bank’s HFPS finding that 63% of national household cite a reduction in total income in the early months of the pandemic. More interesting perhaps are the precise sources of income that have declined for PoC households. Respondents are 20-25pp more likely to report a decline in income from family business or self-employment and wage employment in round 1 relative to round 2. Conversely in round 2, a decline in income from NGOs, foundations or churches is much more likely compared to round 1. This shift across time appears to reflect business closures and job loss in the early stages of the pandemic, which support from NGOs and other social networks helped mitigate up until the labor market began to recover.

**Figure 8 Decrease in income since pandemic began/previous round**



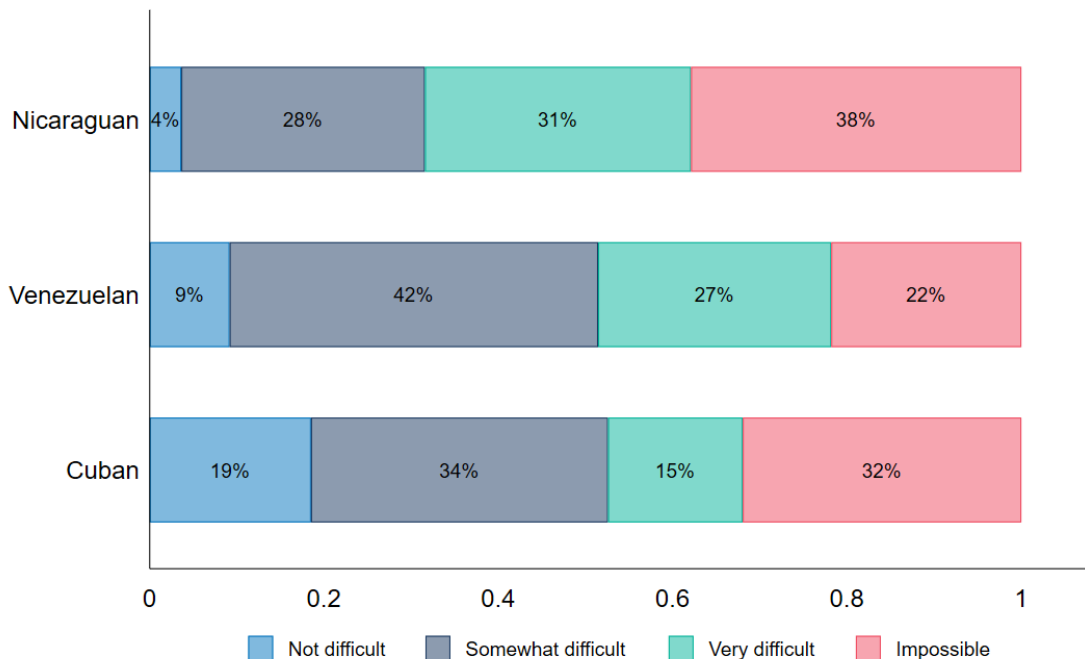
### Financial insecurity

The data illustrates how the level of concern for the economic impact of the pandemic remains high. Over half of all PoC respondents say they feel their household economic circumstances are “very threatened” by the crisis. This is not substantively different from the 39-47% of Costa Ricans from the World Bank’s HFPS survey in 2020 stating they were very worried about the financial threat of the pandemic, but the fact that anxiety remains high over time reflects the long-run impacts on mental health.

Part of this concern is due to the level of financial insecurity PoC households face, often in light of the risk of job loss illustrated prior. Half of all respondents report having no bank or mobile savings account, including 59 percent of PoC households in rural areas. Across the three sub-groups, Nicaraguan PoC are by far the least likely to have an account. Not surprisingly, nearly everyone without an account say they would like one, with 15% reporting they lack the needed documentation.

Financial insecurity from a household is most salient when faced with an emergency. Asking respondents if they would be able to come up with ₡50,000 (~\$80) in emergency funds within the next 30 days, around two-thirds say it would be “very difficult” or “impossible”. Across sub-groups, Nicaraguan PoC are considerably more likely to say it would be “very difficult” or “impossible” relative to the other two groups (Figure 9). Social networks including family, relative or friends are the most common expected sources of emergency funds when necessary, however those with more access to emergency funds are also less likely to need to rely on social connections and more likely to indicate money from working and savings. As to be expected, Nicaraguan PoC are more likely to rely on social connections when faced with an emergency, and less likely to use wages and savings.

**Figure 9 Ability to come up with emergency funds in 30 days (round 2)**



Beyond the hypothetical emergency, 70% of all PoC respondents report being forced to deplete assets or rely on others to meet basic daily needs such as food and healthcare between the two survey rounds. Cuban PoC are the least likely to report difficulty compared to Venezuelans and Nicaraguans (55% vs 66% and 72%, respectively). The most common coping method when faced with such a challenge include borrowing money (29%), seeking help from friends and relatives (23%) and depleting savings (16%). Nicaraguan respondents are particularly more likely to have gone into debt because of not being able to meet basic daily needs, as well as to have sought support by friends and relatives.

## Food insecurity and assistance

As to be expected considering the economic impact of the pandemic, the loss of income-generating activities has placed many households in a precarious situation. For displaced populations who are already largely reliant on the informal economy, measures to curb the spread of the disease have had a disproportionate impact on livelihoods and led to severe challenges in meeting basic needs necessitating targeted assistance.



### Food insecurity

Asking PoC respondents about three food items essential for their household, Table 1 shows that access to those foods has increased around 8pp across rounds reflecting a modest improvement to the local marketplace. The most common food items mentioned are grains (e.g. rice), legumes (e.g. beans) and protein (e.g. chicken). However, considerable differences across groups remain with Nicaraguans and Cubans around 20pp more likely to report difficulties in buying or stocking up on those essential items compared to Venezuelans. Considering the vast majority of respondents say lack of money is the main reason for limited access, this is a clear reflection of the Venezuelans better socio-economic profile compared to the other two groups.

**Table 1** Able to buy/stock up on three essential food items (%)

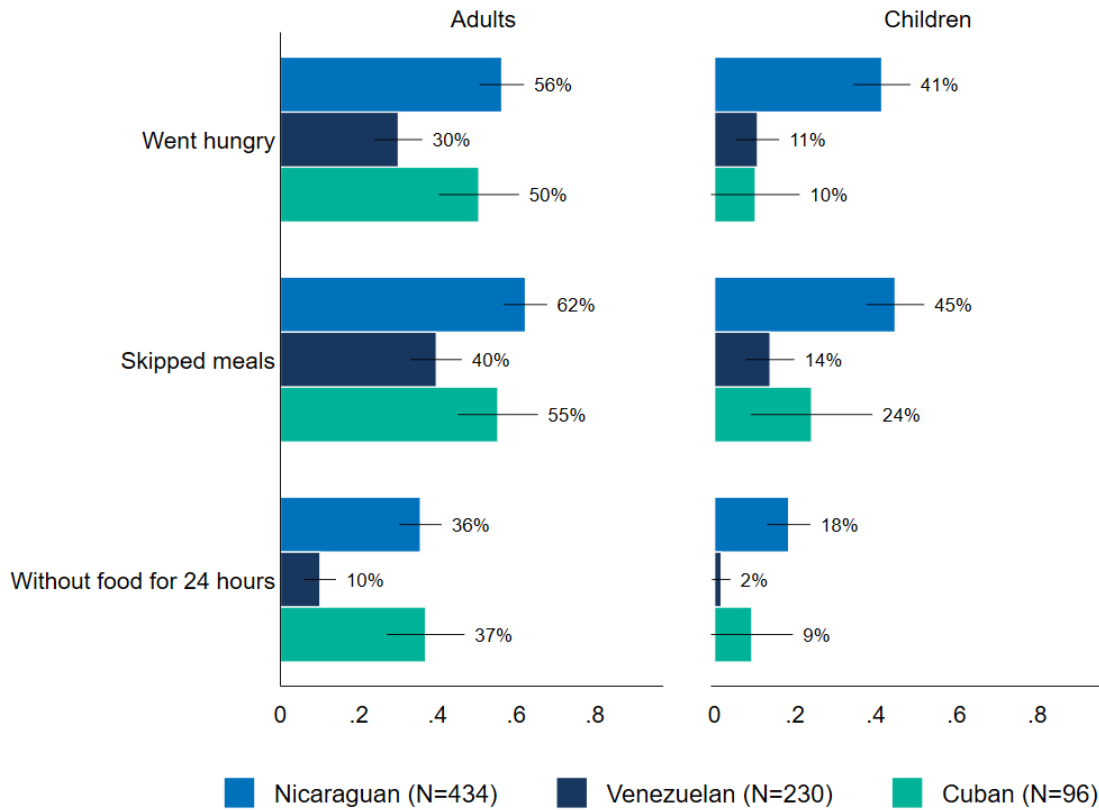
	Round 1	Round 2
Nicaragua	57.9	64.3
Venezuela	65.0	83.7
Cuba	59.1	66.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>58.9</b>	<b>66.9</b>

Considering the relatively limited access to essential food items, it follows that food insecurity among PoC remains high. Even though again there is improvement between survey rounds, more than half of all respondents still report their household running out of food in August. Nicaraguan households in particular are 17pp and 27pp more likely than Cuban and Venezuelan households, respectively, to report running out of food in the 30 days prior to enumeration (69% vs 52% vs 42%). Figure 10 illustrates how Venezuelans appear to be better off along nearly all measures of food insecurity, including notably adults going without food within the last 24 hours. In 2020, the World Bank's survey among Costa Ricans found far lower rates of adult food insecurity highlighting the disparity between PoC and nationals: 23% ran out of food, 17% skipped a meal, and 5% went a full day without food.

Figure 10 also shows food insecurity among children is a serious problem particularly among the Nicaraguan population. Around 4 in 10 Nicaraguan respondents report a child going hungry in the 30 days prior to enumeration because of lack of money or other resources, compared to only around 1 in 10 of both Venezuelan and Cuban respondents. More striking still, nearly 20% of Nicaraguan respondents report a child going without food for 24 hours in the last 30 days compared to half as many Cubans and only 2% of

Venezuelans. Importantly, children receiving food in school jumps from 1% to 39% between rounds, reflecting the re-opening of schools as well as the importance of school meals to meet basic needs.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 10 Food insecurity (round 2)**



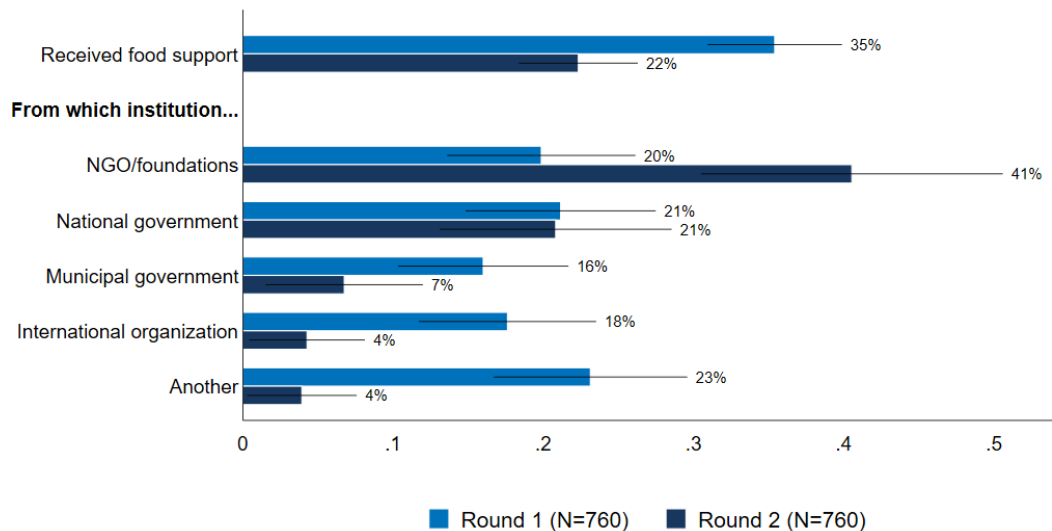
 **Assistance**

As illustrated by the relevance of school meals, food assistance is essential for those vulnerable to food insecurity. Yet Figure 11 shows how food-based support for PoC – for instance, a free meal or voucher to exchange for meals – declines 13pp between rounds. While that decrease may reflect an improved situation over time and therefore lower need, the results prior highlight how more than half of all PoC respondents still report their households running out of food in August 2021 supporting the argument that broad assistance remains necessary. Figure 11 also indicates that by round 2 NGOs and foundations are filling a gap due to cutbacks by municipal governments, international organizations and other sources, whereas support from the national government remains steady over time. Across groups, Venezuelan PoC are shown to have received a relatively greater share of food support in the first round of the survey, but also experience the

<sup>13</sup> See Borkowski et al. (2021). [“COVID-19: Missing More Than a Classroom. The impact of school closures on children’s nutrition”](#) for more information on how school feeding programs have been disrupted during the pandemic.

largest drop between rounds. By August Venezuelans are receiving similar levels as Nicaraguan and Cuban households. Across locations, Nicaraguan households located in the northern region receive 9pp less food support than Nicaraguans in GAM, reflecting geographic disparities in assistance.

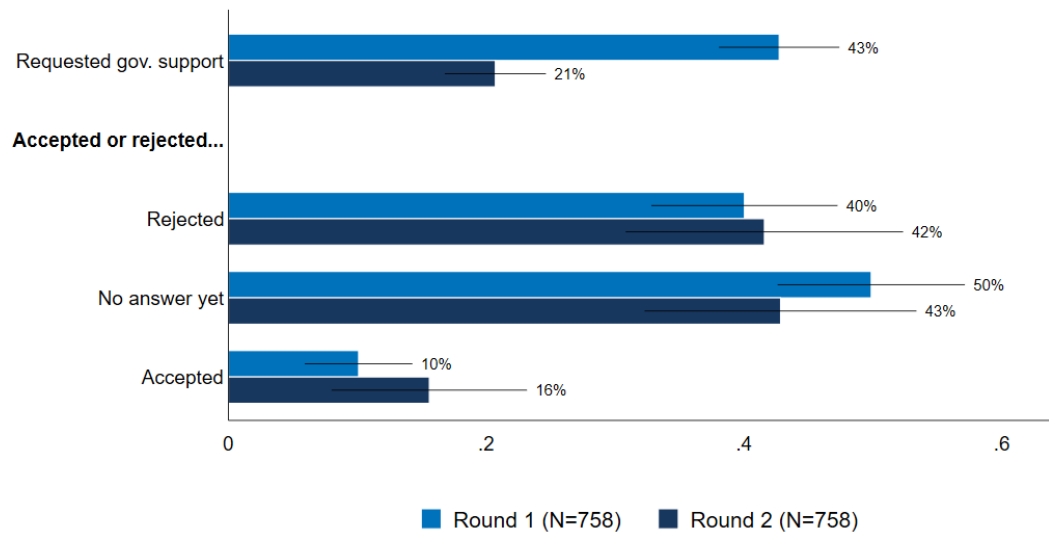
**Figure 11 Food assistance (across rounds)**



Beyond food assistance, in round 1 nearly 1 in 3 respondents report their households receiving direct financial support in the form of either cash, check or electronic transfer. However again there is a noticeable drop in assistance from March to August, with only 12% of PoC receiving monetary support in round 2. There is little difference across the three groups. The median amount received is around ₡260,000 (~\$400), and mainly comes from international organization and NGOs. In comparison, the World Bank survey in 2020 found that 33% of national households had recently received some form of government assistance.

Figure 12 illustrates how in round 2 fewer PoC respondents report having requested government support since the first round compared to the six months prior to round 1. About 40% of requests for government support are rejected with the vast majority of others still pending, and there is little difference of acceptance rates across the three PoC groups. In 2020, the World Bank’s survey found that 37% of Costa Rican households requested government support, of which only 13% were rejected.



**Figure 12 Government support (across rounds)**


## Final reflections

The COVID-19 crisis has complicated the displacement situation in Costa Rica. In Central America more generally, the difficulties associated with insecurity and extensive internal displacement require the continued engagement and support of humanitarian and development partners. Similarly, the rapidly increasing arrivals of Nicaraguans, Venezuelans and more recently Haitians, among other groups, calls for a multi-year vision in the search for sustainable solutions.

The health and economic impacts of the pandemic, along with the effects of mitigation measures, have placed a significant burden on the entire population, including those persons of concern to UNHCR. Shocks to demand, movement restrictions and closures have contributed to a significant loss in economic well-being and reduced the resilience of many already vulnerable groups. While UNHCR continues to transition away from in-kind support towards cash-based assistance and economic inclusion, the pandemic shock, rising food prices and fewer jobs make that transition more and more difficult. Mixed approaches, such as cash plus livelihoods assistance are necessary to ensure immediate basic needs are met while building greater self-reliance.

Beyond the targeted responses of UNHCR and partners, the global recovery continues, but with significant uncertainty tied to vaccine access, continued disease spread and supply disruptions. Market prospects for low-skilled workers and youth are relatively bleak compared to other demographic groups, pointing to increasing inequality and a higher risk of households falling below extreme poverty thresholds.<sup>14</sup> In Costa Rica, the negative impacts of the pandemic continue to ripple through the economy despite the fact that the labor market has partially recovered from the worst of 2020. Nonetheless, the country has continued to offer asylum to those in need welcoming the highest number of asylum seekers, refugees and other persons in need of international protection in 30 years. This rapid increase in the number of persons of concern to UNHCR – today equivalent to some 3% of the total population – underlines the importance of area-based

<sup>14</sup> International Monetary Fund (2021). [World Economic Outlook, October 2021](#).

approaches benefiting both host communities and displaced populations to bring about humanitarian and development-oriented solutions.

An essential component of any robust recovery strategy will need to include vaccinations across countries and for all parts of society. Currently, around 120 countries have pledged to include displaced populations in their national vaccination plans. Increasing that number to ensure all of UNHCR's PoC have the option to receive a safe vaccine will help slow down the spread of the virus, and minimize the socioeconomic damage already inflicted on some of the world's most vulnerable. Similarly, greater efforts to systematically include refugees and other PoC groups into strengthened national social protection systems will help support vulnerable households during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as well as future crises to come.

Finally, the pandemic has underscored the fundamental need for timely socioeconomic data in displaced settings to fully understand the conditions of those under UNHCR protection and inform appropriate programmatic and policy responses. Where National Statistics Offices do not systematically include refugees, asylum-seekers and other persons of concern in national data systems, separate data collection exercises are necessary. The World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement was established to address such data gaps – as well as promote the inclusion of displaced populations in national statistical systems more broadly – and its substantial investment in household surveys during the pandemic has helped to shed light on the deteriorating conditions of both the forcibly displaced and host populations. The findings presented in this note build the knowledge base, providing further evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on displaced populations in a region previously not covered, and help to ensure that no one gets left behind.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Tanner, J., et al. (2021). [Answering the Call: Forcibly Displaced during the Pandemic.](#)