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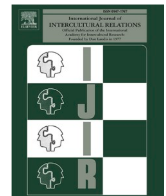

Between dreams and disillusionment: Multinational comparisons in venezuelan experiences of reception and integration in Denver, Colorado, USA

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, socioeconomic collapse in Venezuela has provoked the largest displacement crisis in the Americas, sending millions across borders in search of stability and opportunities. This research investigated the experiences of twelve Venezuelan migrant families who recently arrived in Denver, Colorado—an emerging and understudied site of large-scale migrant reception. Drawing on semi-formal interviews with these twelve migrant families and ten weeks of participant observation, the study foregrounds migrant perspectives to illuminate the material, emotional, and interpretive contours of early integration. Contrary to dominant assumptions about migration trajectories in the Americas, most participants spent extended time in other Latin American countries before turning north. These onward trajectories furnished what we consider an accumulated cosmopolitan knowledge, shaping how newcomers interpreted opportunities and constraints. Findings reveal a persistent gap between migrants' expectations – rooted in experiences elsewhere and imaginaries of the "American Dream"–- and the structural barriers they encountered in Denver, including formal labor exclusion, limited informal work, and widespread housing precarity. These tensions contributed to cycles of aspiration, disappointment, and renewed hope that reflect what Pettit and Ruijtenberg call a 'continuous existential oscillation.' In turn, the contradictions of their life transitions were reinforced by the complexities of Denver's broader reception context, whose reputation as a 'sanctuary' site was frequently challenged by policy shortcomings and structural constraints beyond its control.

Introduction

Since 2015, the deterioration of living conditions in Venezuela has produced one of the largest displacement crises today. As of May 2024, over 7.7 million Venezuelans have emigrated from their homeland, including upwards of one million migrants residing in the United States (Amaya & Batalova, 2025). "Sanctuary"[1]; cities like New York, Chicago, and Denver experienced a historic influx of arrivals from the southern border over a remarkably short time span, spurred in part by mass bussing programs launched in Texas and Florida. Denver felt the phenomenon more than most, receiving more migrants per capita than any other U.S. city. From October 2022

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[1] This is not an official designation, as the city does employ it in any proclamations or ordinances. However, it is regularly applied descriptively, in large part, due to Denver's refusal to use public funds to aid in the enforcement of federal immigration laws (Alejo, 2025).

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to June 2024, the Mile High City, with a population of over 700,000, welcomed about 43,000 newcomers (Jordan, 2024). Predominantly Venezuelan, most arrived in this new environment with significant material needs.

This qualitative research aims to deepen understanding of Venezuelan newcomers' reception in the United States by situating our analysis within Denver's migration context and foregrounding migrants' expertise. Contrary to popular assumptions that the United States represents migrants' preferred or intended destination from the outset, most participants in this study described prolonged periods of residence in various South American countries – contexts they initially regarded as stable, long-term destinations rather than transitory stops. Instead of treating these earlier relocations as peripheral or secondary, we propose that multi-sited movements form a central part of the Venezuelan migration trajectory. This project underscores how prior experiences in other host contexts furnish Venezuelan newcomers with cumulated, cosmopolitan knowledge that informs how they interpret and navigate social, economic, and institutional landscapes in the United States. Migrants' consistent tendency to draw cross country comparisons – unsolicited by the researchers – shines a rare spotlight on the ways migrants may mediate experiences in U.S. host contexts through the lens of relocation experiences elsewhere.

The study reveals the complex experiences of newcomers at the reception site, highlighting the gap between migrants' expectations and realities in Denver. Many arrived with hopes for economic opportunity and upward mobility, shaped by dreams and past experiences in Latin American cities. However, structural barriers like labor market exclusion and housing issues hindered progress, leading to feelings of stagnation and struggles to find purpose. Respondents appear to experience what Pettit and Ruijtenberg (2019) describe as a *continuous existential oscillation* between possibility and despair – a dynamic that captures the emotional rhythms of migrants' lives and the dual, often paradoxical nature of Denver's broader reception context. Throughout the paper, we also see how Denver's reception landscape is tied to the national policy framework that shapes it. Federal policies define the city's migrant response, creating conditions cities must handle, while also restricting supportive local policies and amplifying punitive ones.

Our work contributes to the limited scholarship on the initial experiences of Venezuelans upon arrival in the United States, where little scholarship exists – and none examining Denver's role as an emergent recipient context (Alpysbekova et al., 2024; Salas-Wright et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2018). Rather than analyzing the Venezuelan migrant experience as monolithic across reception sites, we contend that the contextual factors shaping a community's experiences should be understood as fundamental influences on interpreting the migration experience. Our work builds on literature on multinational and onward migration, challenging the assumption that migration is linear between a single origin and destination—a view still common in the Americas (Ahrens & King, 2023). By centering migrants' own comparative reflections across host contexts, this study underscores the often iterative and self-reflective nature of migration, while illuminating dimensions of Denver's social and economic landscape that become visible in relation to other sites of relocation.

Next, we review literature on relocation, integration challenges, and Venezuelan migration influencing our study, then describe Denver as a Venezuelan migrant reception area. We outline our qualitative data collection and analysis, discuss key themes, and conclude with reflections on the importance of multinational migration for understanding migrant experiences and future research directions.

Literature review

Since the 1990s, sociologists have considered communities as *contexts of reception* to assess how favorable they are to the integration of newcomers (Bösch & Su, 2021; Portes & MacLeod, 1996). The product of an amalgamation of legal, material, and social factors, contexts of reception can range from positive (or welcoming) to negative (or hostile) (Bösch & Su, 2021). They vary across national, state, and local spaces, often contain contradictions, and exist in constant flux (McDaniel et al., 2019; Perez, 2021). Recent studies approximate knowledge of reception contexts by centering immigrants' perceptions (Jensen, 2021; Salas-Wright et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2018). Schwartz et al. utilize the term *perceived context of reception* to refer to "an immigrant's perception of welcomeness, opportunity structures, and availability of social support in recipient communities" (p. 2). Jensen (2021) argues that immigrant perspectives are crucial in understanding how reception contexts are shaped, as migrants interpret and negotiate their situations.

Much academic work examines the challenges migrants face in integrating and rebuilding their lives in new contexts, including material (e.g. housing, employment, healthcare), legal (e.g. lack of citizenship protections, lengthy court processes, fear of deportation), and sociocultural challenges (culture shock, family separation, racism/xenophobia, social isolation) (Betancourt et al., 2015; Davis et al., 2021; Jensen, 2023; Koyama, 2017). Insufficient local language skills hinder effective social integration (Segal & Mayadas, 2005) and are even a major predictor of depression (Chandler & Miller, 2002). Due to such obstacles, depression, anxiety, trauma, and other mental health issues are disproportionately experienced among immigrant communities. (Berry, 2005; Chandler & Miller, 2002; Derr, 2015; Rousseau & Frounfelker, 2019; Saechao et al., 2012).

Similarly, studies show that the absence of permanent legal status can significantly impact migrants' mental well-being. All the participants in this study were found to be experiencing varying states of "legal liminality" (Menjivar 2006) or "existential limbo" (Haas, 2023). Policy experts Chishti and Bush-Joseph (2023) describe legal limbo as marked by endless waiting, lack of basic rights, and vulnerability to external forces. It compels migrants to indefinitely delay vital decisions about housing, healthcare, education, and employment, which, combined with removal fears, seriously affects their mental and physical health (Grace et al., 2018; Jensen, 2023).

Previous studies show how the gap between expectations and post-migration realities affects psychological well-being (Covington-Ward, 2017; Fozdar, 2009; Murphy & Mahalingam, 2006). Covington-Ward (2017) illustrates how Liberian migrants' unmet expectations of opportunity in America contribute to depression. These expectations are often imposed externally and

internally, as many migrants bear financial responsibilities to loved ones in struggling communities back home (King et al., 2013).

Our findings complicate earlier analyses, revealing a decidedly nuanced picture of disillusionment. Subjects' hopes persist despite setbacks, giving way to a complex psychological dynamic where migrants oscillate between "a sense of purposeful waiting to a purposeless inertia and back again," between hope as new possibilities emerge and frustration as new blockages impede (Jeffrey, 2018, xiv). Pettit and Ruijtenberg (2019) described their Egyptian migrant subjects' experiences as a "continuous existential oscillation" between hope and dejection, marked by doubt, fear, joy, and distraction (p.730). They view this emotional back-and-forth as stemming from the competing potentials in migration, which can both reproduce and overcome a sense of existential immobility. The concept of continuous existential oscillation enriches our analysis by depicting the fluid emotional pendulum of subjects' experiences, reflecting migration's dual possibilities. Whereas earlier frameworks might have organized around "waiting" or "stuckness," this concept conveys emotional movement within and in response to stagnation. Existential oscillation also helps reveal the connection between personal emotional experiences and structural forces, as the constant whirlwind of extreme promises and extreme disappointments are a byproduct of the 'cruel' migrant regimes that feature prominently in the domestic and foreign policies of modern neoliberal states (Berlant, 2011; Pettit & Ruijtenberg, 2019). At the same time, this study extends Pettit and Ruijtenberg's formulation by relocating oscillation within a specific North American context reception, and by tracing how previous migratory experiences in Latin America feed into these rhythms of expectation and disappointment.

Despite the fact that an ever-larger proportion of migrants worldwide are estimated to participate in onward migration, such multi-sited migration trajectories remain relatively underexplored (Ahrens & King, 2023). As such, a growing body of research urges scholars to recognize "fluidity and non-linearity" of migration processes, accounting for alternating periods of movement and mobility, as simple origin-destination models prove increasingly inadequate for capturing the complexity of migrants' trajectories (Jung, 2023). Various studies focus on secondary migration, which involves relocating to a different city or region within the host country (Boese & Moran, 2023; Marks, 2014; Weine et al., 2011), and return migration, when migrants return to their countries of origin and navigate reintegration challenges (Fernández-Sánchez et al., 2022). Boese et al. (2020) provide insight into the multiple movements and settlements that are, for many, a defining feature of human migration in the contemporary moment, which is closely connected to a phenomenon Paul (2011) describes as stepwise international migration: a deliberate strategy of moving up a hierarchy of destinations, spending time in transitive contexts in order to build the material and legal capital necessary to secure eventual entry into preferred destination countries. Unlike stepwise migration, however, *onward migration,* which appears to characterize better the journeys undertaken by most of our Venezuelan subjects, tends to be more contingent and open-ended; the line between destination and transit space blurs, as the former may suddenly become the latter, while unforeseen options materialize or circumstances change elsewhere (Erdal et al., 2023; Jung, 2023).

Recent scholarship has shown that repeated relocation also generates distinctive forms of knowledge and competence. Challenging popular notions of cosmopolitan knowledge as the exclusive domain of highly mobile elites, Paul (2017) shows how working-class migrants develop a sophisticated cosmopolitan knowledge through repeated border crossings. Migrants' knowledge – of labor markets, bureaucracies, and urban survival, for instance – accumulates across sites to help them interpret and navigate unfamiliar contexts. Similarly, our Venezuelan respondents drew on their experiences in cities like Bogotá, Lima, and Santiago to understand Denver's opportunities and constraints. We posit that, rather than peripheral and coincidental, multi-site migration provides a crucial interpretive framework through which newcomers understand their reception experiences and chart possible paths to integration.

Most studies of largely undocumented migrations in the Americas examine populations whose mobility is embedded in well-established diasporic infrastructures. By contrast, the abrupt and massive scale of Venezuelan displacement has produced nascent diasporic communities across the hemisphere. As a result, many recent Venezuelan arrivals, including those interviewed in this study, lack the dense social networks that scholars widely consider foundational to migrant incorporation (Massey, 1990). The Venezuelan case, therefore, offers a rare opportunity to observe how newcomers navigate resettlement in the near absence of pre-existing networks, which, in turn, amplifies the importance of the local ecosystem we assess.

We read these insights alongside the extant literature specific to Venezuelan migration. Research on Venezuelan migrants remains limited due to the recency of the large-scale displacement. Most studies focus on experiences in South American countries like Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, and Chile, where migration began intensifying in 2014 (e.g. Agudelo-Suárez et al., 2022; Bartels et al., 2023; Doña-Reveco & Gouveia, 2022). These works examine perceptions of shelter, economic opportunity, and mental health, and frequently document worsening conditions in Latin American host countries – a trend that also motivated our participants' relocations to the United States.

An estimated one million Venezuelans live in the U.S., most arriving after the COVID-19 pandemic (Amaya & Batalova, 2025). Nevertheless, the bulk of the U.S.-based studies use interview data collected from earlier migrations, typically from immigrants living in South and Central Florida in or before 2017 (e.g. Alpysbekova et al., 2024; Salas-Wright et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2018). The gap in recency matters, in part, because Venezuelan migrants arriving before COVID-19 were generally younger, more educated, with greater English proficiency, and better economic resources in the United States, while settling predominantly in a reception landscape in Florida that varies drastically from emerging destinations like Denver (Amaya & Batalova, 2025). A few recent studies depart from this trend (Perrazo, 2023; Salas-Wright et al., 2024). However, they only partially address these themes, offering limited consideration of reception context, migrant expectations, multisite trajectories, and material challenges. Recent in-depth scholarship on Venezuelan integration in Denver and other U.S. contexts outside Florida remains scarce. Here, we provide relevant context for migrant reception dynamics in Denver for our participants.

Context

Between late 2022 and mid-2024, more than 43,000 migrants arrived in Denver, most bused from Texas with no coordination or advance notice (Dias, 2024). At the peak of the arrivals, buses were dropping 300 people a day outside the State Capitol. News reports described most of the arrivals as "penniless Venezuelans without the typical informal social support systems" for finding housing or under-the-table jobs (Hughes & Villagran, 2024; Tauber, 2023). Many newcomers can only get work permits through asylum, which involves a complex, costly legal process and requires assistance. Federal law also mandates a six-month wait before work authorization is granted. Migrants who entered through CBP One appointment[2] or who qualified for Temporary Protection Status (TPS)[3] could theoretically bypass this delay, yet most still faced long bureaucratic backlogs (Tabor, 2025). Although no statistics exist, the vast majority of arrivals are believed to have come without documentation; three-fourths of our participants, at least several months in, still lacked any form of legal paperwork. In short, thousands of newly arrived Spanish-speaking migrants entered the city in a state of enforced economic paralysis, without legal means to provide for themselves and their families.

In response to this abrupt surge in human need, the city spent approximately $76 million on direct assistance during the first 18 months of the influx – supportive services that included food, transportation, extended shelter stays, and deposit/first month's rent assistance (Brown, 2024; Damon, 2024). The municipality also collaborated with local groups to conduct legal aid workshops to help migrants apply for work permits and TPS protections (Catholic Charities of Denver, 2024). To offset these expenses, the city cut or modified many existing services, including DMV hours, recreation programs, and youth summer camps (Hughes & Villagran, 2024). Resource strains worsened due to federal inaction; a bipartisan immigration deal to expedite work authorization, provide billions to cities, and enforce coordinated resettlement failed in Congress. Denver lacked support from state and local levels, with neighboring cities rejecting migrants and passing non-sanctuary ordinances (Dias, 2024). For his part, Colorado Governor Jared Polis was criticized for "leaving Denver to shoulder an unfair load" (Kenney, 2024).

Despite these challenges, Mayor Mike Johnston continued with pro-migrant discourse and policies. Framing the city's response in a long tradition of welcome, he declared: "I want to be clear to Denverites [that] who is *not* responsible for the crisis we're in [are] the folks who have walked 3000 miles to get here" (Dias, 2024). Local nonprofits, faith communities, and mutual aid groups, like Denver's Migrant Support Network, mobilized to facilitate supply drives, housing navigation, transitional job programs, legal workshops, and family sponsorships, among other services designed to assist newcomers' transition (Denver Migrant Support Network, 2024; Jordan, 2024; McCall, 2024). From city hall to church basements, Denver earned national recognition as a leader in large-scale migrant support. In 2024, Johnston and Denver were recognized at the Migration Policy Institute Annual Conference for the city's "innovative" and community-oriented approach to migrant integration. (Migration Policy Institute, 2024).

As both resources and migrant arrival rates had begun to wane by April 2024, the city announced the Denver Asylum Seeker Program, which would dispense with this "emergency response" to a wrap-around program of longer-term supportive services, including six months of rental assistance, specialized job training, language classes, resettlement workshops, and case management – albeit for a much smaller portion of the migrant community (Arenas, 2024; Tabor, 2025). According to Jacob Harbinger, a law professor at Marquette University, this program was *sui generis*, "the most comprehensive [model] by far" for migrant reception nationally (Tabor, 2025). The 1000 migrant participants eligible excluded most newcomers, including the twelve families interviewed, none of whom qualified.

Despite this extensive mobilization of municipal resources, nonprofits, and volunteer networks, the city's official narrative of welcome captures only a part of the lived reality. Migrant subjects encountered barriers and contradictions that remained largely invisible in policy briefings or public accolades. To understand these disparities from the ground up, we now turn to the methodological approach used to document and analyze newcomer perspectives.

Methods

This study's data includes twelve semi-structured interviews and ten weeks of participant observation with Venezuelan migrants in Denver, conducted by the first author. The second author advised on data collection and took a more active role during data analysis. The first author's interviews focused on a communication-centered approach, viewing participants as experts of their own lives, needs, and experiences (Tracy, 2019). Migrant and refugee subjects are often seen as non-speaking of their experiences (McKinnon, 2008). Qualitative research that centers their voices and sense-making can counteract their silencing and objectification.

The first author selected participants from family units of at least three people, residing in the city for three to twelve months. These criteria ensured participants had recent experiences with the study's themes. Interviews took place from June to August 2024. The sample group included eight women and four men, with a median age of 28, who had lived in Denver for an average of 7.2 months by the time of the interview. Participants were recruited through formal and informal service encounters, including TPS workshops, migrant food banks, and the White Rock trailer park where the researcher observed. The researcher used convenience and snowball sampling to identify participants (Tracy, 2019). Interviews occurred in private or semi-private locations chosen by participants, such as apartments, mobile homes, diners, or cafes. Each interview, funded by the project, paid $20 for time and expertise. The twelve

[2] Under the Biden administration, CBP One was a mobile app where migrants could schedule advance appointments at ports of entry and apply for the CHNV humanitarian parole program. By 2023, the administration issued a ruling that deemed anyone *not* entering by way of the CBP One app as ineligible for asylum (American Immigration Council, 2025).

[3] A migrant needed to arrive prior to July 31, 2023 to be TPS eligible (USCIS, 2025).

interviews averaged 1 h and 20 min. The first third of the interview focused on narrative elements, exploring participants' backstories: their lives in Venezuela, motivations for migration, and their journey to Denver. The next two-thirds examined their experiences in Denver, highlighting significant challenges, perceptions of Denver as a reception place, and future goals. The interviews were audio recorded and totaled over 15 h in Spanish, generating nearly 88,000 words of transcript.

While findings mainly come from the twelve interviews, fieldwork participant observation served as secondary data collection, providing valuable contextual information to enrich subjects' testimonies about their experiences in Denver (Tracy, 2019). Fieldwork participation included migrant street outreach in collaboration with community organizations like House Keys Action Network Denver, Papagayo, and ViviWellness. The first author used prior experience as a human services provider in Denver to assist migrant families with housing, employment, legal, and medical processes. Services occurred at the White Motel and RV Park in North Denver, home to many Venezuelan migrants. The first author also volunteered weekly at AllSouls, a migrant-focused food bank, and as a translator with Denver Catholic Charities at three Temporary Protected Status (TPS) application workshops. These volunteer settings also connected with potential participants: six subjects were approached at the trailer park, five at the food bank, and one at a TPS workshop.

As a participant observer and service provider, the first author occupied a dual role that inevitably shaped the research process. His positionality as a white, bilingual (English/Spanish), U.S.-born resident of Denver, coupled with his role in providing outreach services to migrant families, likely influenced both the dynamics of the interviews and participants' representations of their experiences. While his service role and language abilities may have helped establish trust and encourage openness, it may also have introduced courtesy or social desirability biases – particularly when participants shared their perceptions of Denver's reception climate, local institutions, or residences.

To address these concerns, the researcher took various steps to minimize power asymmetries and reduce potential bias. Explicit language in both the consent form and pre-interview script underscored that interviews were entirely independent of any services provided and that participation would in no way affect access to resources or support. During interviews, the researcher emphasized respondents' expertise, using open-ended questions to let their interpretations and priorities guide the discussion. At the end of each interview, the researcher would summarize the key points and invite participants to clarify, amend, or expand on any part of their account. The researcher also solicited feedback on the overall interview experience. After each field encounter or interview, reflexive field notes were written to document what happened in the field and to note instances in which the researcher's role, emotions, or assumptions might have shaped interactions or interpretations. During data analysis, these notes were revisited alongside transcripts and audio recordings to identify and account for possible influence of positionality on the emerging themes.

After fieldwork and transcribing interviews, the research team organized the data and engaged in a phronetic iterative process of qualitative analysis (Tracy, 2019). The process is phronetic because it focuses on participants' expert knowledge within a context related to a practical question. It is iterative because it involves moving between data and existing literature to address the question. Our phronetic question centered on how effective Denver's migrant-welcoming efforts were in addressing the needs of Venezuelan newcomers. We began with several rounds of open coding of data and observations, creating shorthand notations of what happened or was shared (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). We then alternated several times between literature and data to develop categories that offered a tentative answer to our question. We used a blended coding structure, combining codes from the literature and participants' expressions.

Our study was informed by in vivo codes (Tracy, 2019), which represent ideas expressed in the participants' own words, *emergent* codes (Elliott, 2018) that arise directly from participants' expressions and topics of interest, and *a priori* codes derived from existing literature (Elliott, 2018). The blended coding structure kept our study firmly rooted in the literature while prioritizing our participants' voices. We would have missed the codes reflecting the comparisons participants drew between the various locations they had relocated to had we only relied on a priori codes. Conversely, without interacting with the literature, we might not have acknowledged the *continuous existential oscillation* experienced by our participants (Pettit & Ruijtenberg, 2019).

After multiple coding rounds and merging redundant codes, we organized our codes into nested themes and categories. The most prominent themes included: life descriptions in Denver; details about Denver's integration programs; comparisons of relocation sites; housing challenges; employment struggles; and the psycho-emotional impact of migration and relocation. Quotations were translated from Spanish to English, and all participants were given pseudonyms. Notably, all processes and materials underwent review and approval by the authors' university review board.

Analysis

Migrant motivations: a series of deteriorating conditions in Venezuela and the neighboring host contexts

> Our salary wasn't enough to feed our family. Even *when* we had money, there often wouldn't be food in the supermarket…in the end, the kids suffered the most. They were sick from not eating enough. So we had to go. – Anika, 29

Respondents cited acute financial hardship as the reason for leaving Venezuela, making it difficult to meet basic needs. Two participants linked economic instability to targeted persecution by the Venezuelan government or armed groups.

But rarely was the United States, let alone Denver, part of their original relocation plan. Ten of the twelve respondents first relocated to other Latin American countries, living there for an average of 3.78 years before crossing the U.S. border. Five of them spent extended time in multiple host countries before heading north. In all ten of these cases, participants portrayed the United States as only emerging on their horizon of possibilities well into their residence elsewhere, when forward momentum in new host contexts gave way

to perceived stagnation and a reported inability to achieve the objectives of their resettlement.

Subjects initially described improved outcomes in Latin American host countries, but later lamented a decline in quality of life. This downturn was attributed to the economic fallout from COVID-19, rising living costs, and intensified competition for limited jobs and resources due to Venezuelan migration. As Mili recalled of her time in Colombia, "when we first arrived, you could work and earn enough for rent and food, but as more Venezuelans got there, jobs became a lot harder to come by." She also noted how as "the price of the dollar rose, suddenly any wages you did make didn't cut it." Similar dynamics were reported in Peru, where Ronaldo explained that "with the pandemic, everything in Peru went to shit…there practically wasn't any work available by the time we left." Even those who remained financially afloat often faced difficult trade-offs, unable to send critical remittances to loved ones who remained in Venezuela. Wistfully, Valentino remarked, "We were so happy in Medellin, but life was just becoming very expensive, fast. There wasn't enough money to send back home. My people in Caracas were barely surviving." Valentino's statement reflects the broader importance of remittance expectations in shaping migrants' decisions to leave Venezuela in the first place and their centrality in people's life projects ever since. Every interviewee expressed a strong duty to support family or friends elsewhere. In this way, financial setbacks experienced in every host context reverberated beyond their households, affecting wider community circles.

As the economic situation worsened in Venezuela and other Latin American host countries, late 2021 and early 2022 saw the start of "el boom," a term often used by Venezuelan expats to describe the rise in Venezuelans migrating to the U.S. during that period. Juanita explained, "word started spreading across the community – through social media and elsewhere – that there were opportunities available in the United States…[and] that they were letting people in." Accordingly, these twelve subjects and their families joined at least 764,000 Venezuelan nationals who migrated to the United States from 2021 to 2024 alone (according to U.S. CBP encounters; Amaya & Batalova, 2025).

This adaptive pivot northward resembles what the literature describes as an *onward migration* trajectory, a form of re-migration in response to evolving conditions in migrants' internal and external circumstances. Participants often framed their decision as part of a broader moment within the Venezuelan diaspora, a kind of collective zeitgeist in which the U.S. emerged as newly imaginable after experiments elsewhere had stalled. Such trajectories upend common assumptions that the United States is migrants' natural or preferred destination. They also complicate linear origin-destination models that remain dominant in accounts of migration throughout the Americas, despite the fact that South-South, intraregional mobility is the far more prevalent trend (Ahrens & King, 2023; Artuc & Ozden, 2018; Economist, 2025).

While an in-depth discussion of migrants' journeys from South America to the United States exceeds the scope of this paper, every interviewee spoke at length about the fear, uncertainty, and brutality that defined the migration, lasting on average 3 months (excluding the outlier case of Ronaldo, whose trip was stretched over two years as a result of multiple kidnappings, detentions, and failed border crossings). Participants reported negotiating their way into Panama through the notoriously dangerous Darien Gap, before enduring the myriad forms of violence and extortion that pervade the trajectory for migrants in Central America and Mexico (which Juanita termed the "Kidnap Corridor"). Yet such were the risks these participants were willing to take. As Yuma stated, "we heard the horror stories and were very scared," but "we made the decision to come to the United States for the American Dream…[for] possibilities of a good quality of life, of building a future." Across the sample, the alleged promise of a viable life in the United States therefore served as a sort of lodestar, motivating subjects to make the journey, the dangers notwithstanding. Thus, consistent with findings by Schapendonk and Steel (2014) among their Sub-Saharan African interlocutors, Venezuelan participants described a mounting sense of existential immobility in their initial host contexts – an impasse that ultimately guided renewed movement. In turn, the experiences in initial host contexts did not fade once participants reached Denver; rather, they actively structured how newcomers interpreted the city's reception climate. This became evident in the 44 cross-context comparisons coded across the interviews—spontaneous references to life in Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, and Texas that surfaced without prompting and that we incorporate selectively in the subsections that follow.

Subjects' perceptions and (lack of) relationship with Denver before migrating

Migrants' own accounts of how they ended up in Denver, as opposed to any other U.S. location, can be summarized as resulting from a combination of (1) recommendations and/or offers of support from contacts or family members already in Denver, (2) perceptions via word-of-mouth about relatively better opportunities for migrants there – often framed in terms of Denver's reputation as a 'welcoming' or 'sanctuary' city – and/or (3) convenience relative to other destinations, as the majority arrived from Texas where free bus tickets to Denver, the nearest allegedly migrant-friendly metropolis, were available).

Anika, who came with her mother, husband, and two toddlers, mentioned that people she knew in Denver described the city as teeming with opportunities – a place where "you could find work *muy rápido* " – while cautioning her against places like New York or Miami, which were reportedly "already too crowded with migrants." Yuma and her family had made plans to move to Washington State, where they knew someone, before opting for Denver because, in addition to hearing "good things" about the work opportunities, "there was a free ticket for Denver."

Meanwhile, five interviewees had at least one on-site contact in Denver who offered temporary lodging and support in advance. These prior relationships were peripheral and tenuous, with other migrants who had only recently landed in the city. Likely in consequence, both Maria Paola and Camila reported being devastated when their families were stranded at the airport by hosts who had promised support (in each case, a friend of a friend who neither had met previously) and reneged at the eleventh hour. For Camila, this also meant being "swindled out of most of the money we had left."

Participants' accounts supported the notion of Denver as a hub of nascent Venezuelan relocation in which newcomers lacked social networks and support for settlement, in contrast to other established diasporas with longer migration histories in the site. In Jennifer's

words, they arrived "like paratroopers dropped from the sky," without knowing anyone or anything, or whether they were "going to sleep in a shelter or on the street." Gonzalo highlighted key differences between the Venezuelan arrival experience and that of other migrant groups, stating that:

We are the first generation of Venezuelans arriving here in the United States…we're not like Mexicans or Hondurans or Dominicans who already have family here, that have years here already established…[for whom] people will reach out a hand and say, hey, I got a room for you, or a car, or a church…so we arrive without anyone, without that foundation.

Sociologist Douglas Massey has called this foundation of social networks "probably the most important" resource for international migrants (Massey, 1990, p. 60). Acknowledging the absence of social networks is crucial for understanding these subjects' experiences in Denver and their previous Latin American contexts. It bears noting that, before the 2010s, there were arguably no significant, large-scale Venezuelan diaspora communities elsewhere in South America (Garcia Arias, 2024). That is, the social infrastructure in these places likewise had to be built from scratch. Anika emphasized how her reception in Denver was not unlike the reception in Lima, Peru, where she and her two kids were also "completely alone" when they arrived. Indeed, much of this community already had practice in "doing it alone." This provides insight into the exhaustion many subjects felt at the outset in Denver, after long periods of trials, successes, and disappointments elsewhere, with minimal support, but also the resilience and hope they expressed about the future. Their experiences negotiating previous foreign contexts likely informed their survival strategies, constituting the kind of *cosmopolitan knowledge* that Paul (2017) identified as a crucial, cumulative resource produced through the repeated navigation of multiple host sites by Filipino domestic workers across South Asia.

Scraping together an income on the margins

Without exception, every interviewee reported that finding and maintaining stable employment was one of their greatest challenges in Denver. At the time of our interviews, eight of the twelve subjects had some form of employment, though jobs were typically informal, irregular, and insecure. Most pieced together income from house cleaning, construction, and street vending.

Two key sites of labor negotiation and opportunity emerged: the city's four Home Depot parking lots and traffic lights at any of the many busy intersections. All four men and two women interviewed reported frequently leaving at four or five in the morning for a Home Depot, often only to join other migrants waiting in line and return home empty-handed. In other instances, they might successfully secure a job yet only be paid half the promised rate at day's end, with little recourse. Gonzalo says, "When you get to the Home Depot at the crack of dawn, there are already crowds of people. It feels like every Venezuelan in the city is there…it can be very disappointing."

The competitive migrant labor market notwithstanding, all six of these subjects reported securing a well-paid construction gig of extended duration on at least one occasion (ranging from two weeks to five months) thanks to the "Home Depot method." Nonetheless, even the best temporary jobs offered no guarantees or basic protections. Two of the four men were dealing with a broken arm (Julio) or a broken wrist (Gonzalo), sustained on a worksite. This injury put Julio out of work entirely (and later out of his home), whereas Gonzalo was attempting to toil on, shattered limb and all. This meant incurring a level of pain he said "made it almost impossible to sleep," while admittedly risking permanent damage. But, as he asked, "what else can I do? Who's going to pay my rent?"

Similarly, traffic lights throughout the city were also important nodes of economic activity. During the summer of 2024, it was rare to pass through any major crossroad in Denver that did not feature migrants washing windshields *(limpiando vidrio)*, selling flowers, or performing live street acts. Seven of the twelve interviewees reported turning to at least one of these activities as a form of income since arriving. According to Jennifer, a full day of *limpiando vidrio* meant 10–12 hours straight, whether in sweltering heat or blistering cold, and could yield anywhere from $50 ("on a bad day") to $150 ("on a great day"), the collective return for a 3-person household working together jointly.

Subjects expressed frustration about Denver, a city they expected to offer job opportunities and entrepreneurial spirit given its policies and rhetoric about migrant welcome. They often compared it to Latin American contexts known for their prominent informal economies. Yuma found Denver's lack of informal job access exasperating, especially since in Medellín, she easily sold coffee on the street after buying a thermos. But "here, it doesn't work like that." Meanwhile, depicting a hustle-friendly climate in Chile, Jennifer proclaimed:

Free, free, free. Chile is free! There are street vendors everywhere, you put up a table, and sell shirts, hats, sandals, hot dogs, arepa, anything! It was easy to find a job in that city….Here you need papers for everything. So much paperwork…still, I can earn more [in Denver], enough to live and send some money home to my family.

Interestingly, several respondents drew parallels to their experiences in Latin America and other places like Texas or Florida, where informal jobs were also seen as more abundant, albeit often more exploitative. According to Ronaldo, in Texas, "any business would hire you without a work permit…*shit* work, but work," yet in Denver, "without a job permit, you're screwed." Relatedly, Juanita noted that "there is something contradictory about…[how] people go to Miami or Texas, places that supposedly aren't friendly to migrants, and get a job super quick."

Although Denver's informal job market was smaller, the quality of work was viewed as an improvement over past experiences. Many respondents felt that greater economic opportunities existed in Denver. Julio, for instance, remarked how, before his costly injury, "I had a gig here for several months that paid $600 a week. Do you know how much money that is in Colombia, in Venezuela? *Mano,* that's more money than I'd ever made in my life…we were able to buy our first car and everything." Unfortunately, Julio's broken arm abruptly cut off that income stream and soon led to his family's eviction. We acknowledge the material gains reported in Denver; however, Julio's case highlights the need to view these gains within the context of economic instability and limited agency linked to informality. Even as Denver worked to stabilize newcomers' early experiences, federal policy curtailed the city's capacity to

provide a truly comprehensive reception system. Two-thirds of participants lacked work permits due to the federally mandated six-month wait or arriving after the TPS cut-off date, or not arriving with parole through the CBP One app, leaving them structurally excluded from formal employment. These findings show how expectations of informal opportunities clashed with limited options, resulting in disappointment heightened by contradictory experiences in previous host contexts.

In Latin America, weak regulatory enforcement and cultural acceptance of street vending fostered inclusion absent in Denver. Likewise, states like Texas and Florida rely on undocumented labor, enhancing access to the informal labor market. However, this easier access to precarious, low-paying jobs often led participants to leave for better opportunities. Participants' experiences reflect what Matias et al. (2020, p.19) call the "ambivalent nature" of informal work: while sub-optimal, its absence or scarcity may deepen marginalization when formal channels are blocked.

These contradictions were further sharpened by developments within Denver's regulatory environment, amid an increasingly punitive response to informal work. Although none of the participants had themselves been arrested for their economic activities, the threat of apprehension escalated sharply in mid-summer when the city intensified enforcement of low-level municipal ordinances. According to a staff member in the Denver Municipal Public Defender's Office, citations for quality-of-life offenses, commonly window-washing, "excessive panhandling," trespass, and minor shoplifting, resulted in a major uptick in migrant arrests in the latter half of 2024. The police department's "doubling down" on these violations disproportionately ensnared newly arrived Venezuelans and exposed them to potential deportation (Sherry, 2025). This shifting enforcement climate underscores how the already limited informal opportunities available in Denver could, at any moment, become a source of heightened precarity. Moreover, the potentially existential implications of such police enforcement capture, writ large, the inescapable links between the city's reception climate and the national one.

The work permit: promise vs. practice

In the context of limited, unreliable, and legally precarious options, the notion of a work permit held almost mythical status for many participants. Gustavo's belief that "you gotta have a work permit if you want to advance or build much of anything" was widely shared. All subjects without permits spoke longingly about a near future in which they might possess this elusive document and finally access the formal job market on equal footing with other job seekers. The permit was imagined as a key to stability and social mobility in the city.

However, the realities of those possessing work permits suggested a different story. Of the four interviewees *with* legal work authorization, all were unemployed at the time of our conversation, and two had yet to find any formal employment since obtaining their papers. Yuma expressed her disillusionment about the gap between promise and practice plainly: "they tell us that if you come here with [authorization], everything is going to be *fino* because there are jobs everywhere. Lies." Similarly discouraged, Anika decried how, "even with my papers, I can't find work…what more papers do you need?" Nowhere she had ever lived was applying for a job ever such a lengthy and "complicated" procedure.

Respondents simultaneously attributed the problem to a lack of social capital and English proficiency. Carmen lamented how every employer in the city "wants somebody to recommend you." Yet, "who's going to recommend me if I just got here?" she asked pointedly. Anika recalled employers asking if she spoke English, hanging up when she said no. She believed these were "jobs she could do perfectly well" without English. Testimonies like hers support Julio's conclusion that English is "the most important thing for opening the door to new opportunities."

Work-authorized respondents expressed disappointment about work permits' transformative power, revealing a gap between the perceived value of legal documentation and real economic integration. Even with these documents, newcomers often struggle against structural and cultural barriers. Lacking U.S. credentials, local networks, language fluency, or employer goodwill, a work permit offers limited value in the job market.

In this way, the work permit may participate in what Berlant (2011) calls "cruel optimism," an "object of desire" that, for desperate people, embodies bundles of capitalistic promises of "the good life," yet often only deepens despair (p. 1). Pettit and Ruijtenberg (2019) extend this concept to migration regimes, which sustain faith in such objects, especially when *some* migrants enjoy tangible success after obtaining them. Yet, objects like the work permit may fail to deliver for the majority, producing widespread frustration and demoralization. In the final analysis section, we examine how the gap between expectations for these documents and their practical dysfunction contributed to profound psychological distress for those who possessed them.

Upward and downward mobility: the street-trailer-apartment continuum

Housing instability, tied to income instability, was rampant; most subjects were moving along a continuum of precarious living situations. At the interview time, four participants lived in trailers, six in scattered apartments (two having "graduated" from trailers), and two experienced homelessness in makeshift quarters. Four respondents reported experiencing homelessness since arriving in Denver. Julio stayed temporarily with his wife and child in a friend's living room, while Ronaldo lived in a 2001 Toyota Sienna with his family of four, soon to be five as his partner was eight months pregnant. Their experiences of homelessness significantly differed from their expectations and past experiences. According to Jennifer, who herself had spent several months in a tent with her 17-year-old daughter: "We were never on the street in Venezuela, in Colombia, or Peru. But suddenly here in Denver – in the United States of America! – we didn't even know where to shower."

Five of six families secured apartment units through the city's migrant voucher program, covering their deposit and first month's rent. Two of four families at White Rock trailer park obtained an apartment voucher. Still, they could not redeem it due to a lack of

available units and, according to Jennifer, “way too many [housing application] requirements we couldn’t meet.” They opted to buy RVs, a common strategy among Venezuelan newcomers, with at least half of the 80 lots at White Rock occupied by Venezuelan families, and many more at nearby trailer parks.

Despite markedly inferior living conditions in the trailer park compared to apartments, housing costs could be equally expensive. Participants reported paying $1,000–2000 for a dilapidated, non-drivable RV from a previous owner, often spending several hundred more to clean and repair it. Each designated lot, a narrow space of grass, gravel, and broken concrete with reportedly “very unreliable” electricity and water hookups, cost $1100 a month, exceeding many one-bedroom apartments in the area. Olga recounted how: “We are here in this small trailer, eight people sleeping on top of one another. *Coño*, with two or three of these monthly payments, we could buy a house in Venezuela or Colombia! Maybe dying of hunger inside it, of course. But a house!”

Additionally, there were no formal lease agreements, which apparently violated state laws regarding mobile housing (Colorado Department of Local Affairs, n.d.). So, the landlord raised the rent at will (the rate was $100 lower two months prior), meaning Venezuelans in the trailer park could also be evicted at any time. Several trailer occupants reported regular threats of eviction, purportedly on account of things like “our kids running around doing kid things,” or “putting our trash in the wrong place.” Complicating this situation further, the property manager did not speak Spanish, so unless an outreach worker was onsite to assist, language barriers made it so families often struggled to defend themselves in disputes where their basic housing needs were hanging in the balance. One of these families reported receiving multiple notices to cease activity. Gonzalo complained the “the *gringa* [trailer park owner] here is *racista*…she has her set of rules for the Venezuelans, and then a set of rules for everyone else…[she’s] watching us on her cameras, always searching for any reason to get rid of us.”

Amid these shaky conditions, every interviewee at the trailer park viewed the trailer as a temporary fix until a rental unit became possible. Jennifer said, “we’re just doing this for now, until we can purchase an apartment.” The notion of the trailer as a waystation on the journey of upward mobility was borne out in the experiences of two subjects presently residing in apartments. Both Camila and Mili had previously occupied trailers for three and five months, respectively, before moving to apartment units. Mili described the transition she made after selling her trailer just three weeks before our interview as “a big move up for us,” and emphasized just how much “more comfortable” the whole family had felt since.

Even renters faced a significant risk of losing their units, with the consequences of losing an apartment much greater than losing a trailer. Julio and Ronaldo, now homeless, had previously secured apartments. Julio lost his after the injury, while Ronaldo lost his when his construction project ended. Both faced formal eviction, which significantly reduced their chances of future rental approval, even after their finances improved. Ronaldo bemoaned the seeming impossibility of his present situation, post-eviction: “now they won’t rent to me *por ningún lado.*”

The six participants in apartments were acutely aware of their still precarious situation, each a missed payment away from potential free fall. Five described creating interdependent housing support systems like others they had employed in previous host contexts, sharing units with other migrants (usually another family) they’d met during their journey. Although splitting a two-bedroom apartment with seven people could be uncomfortable, it was a discomfort they knew how to navigate. It also allowed cost burdens to be distributed among more wage earners on a rotating basis, with earning and caregiving shifting fluidly as people’s work situations changed – an arrangement familiar from other resettlement contexts but less common in Venezuela, where such roles tended to follow more conventional gender lines prior to the country’s economic downturn. According to Maria Paola, when she and her partner lost their jobs, her friend and housemate (whom she had met back in Peru) became the sole provider for both their families. As a result, she explains, “I’m looking for jobs everywhere *como una loca* because it might not last like this too much longer…if she loses her job too, we’ll all be in trouble.”

While various subjects reported that it was far easier to access certain basic needs like clothes and foodstuff in Denver – especially given the prevalence of local food banks and donation drives – housing instability intensified to a degree that exceeded experiences in Latin American contexts. Housing insecurity mirrored income volatility and compounded everyday uncertainty. Even after moving into apartments, the threat of eviction persisted and, in some cases, occurred. Participants oscillated among various living arrangements, including homelessness, trailer parks, and apartments, with precarity a constant backdrop.

The psychological toll of work and housing instability

The most devastating consequences of economic exclusion and housing precarity often lie just as much in the psychological domain as the material one. Across this sample, hardship contributed to deep disappointment, anxiety, indignity, and lost purpose. Consistent with scholarship on migration’s psychological toll, many participants described feeling disheartened and ashamed by the mismatch between the work available to them and their prior experiences, skills, or expectations (Covington-Ward, 2017; Menjívar, 2006).

Selling flowers or washing windows, while a means of survival, often symbolized a fall from imagined trajectories of professional or personal success in the United States. Valentino, who earned a degree in business administration in Colombia – where his skills were more readily recognized and higher education more accessible to migrants than in the U.S. – described the process of coming to terms with a type of work he once perceived as “lowly,” desperate, and/or never expected to be doing: “at times I feel really ashamed [washing windows]…so I try to keep reminding myself what it’s all for.” Meanwhile, Carmen and Juanita – a former nurse and a skilled carpenter, respectively – were applying for fast-food service jobs, and so far, to no avail. For Juanita, “it feels like everything I learned back home isn’t worth anything now. It sucks.”

For three participants, the situation grew so desperate that they had, at least once, resorted to panhandling. Mili described that experience as “humiliating…people look at you with contempt, as if you were a criminal, or someone who *wants* to be asking for money, when I’d rather be doing anything but.” Those who had obtained work permits but found no new opportunities felt spiritually

exhausted by unmet expectations. Anika stated, "believing in God is the only thing that keeps me alive sometimes." Yuma shared similar feelings of dejection:

> In Venezuela, they tell us about the American Dream, about having certain luxuries and opportunities here. But it's not like that. I live a sad life here…with a work permit that doesn't work…[and] we're so far from our culture, our traditions, our people.

Participants emphasized the emotional distress and identity crises triggered by prolonged periods of idleness. Gonzalo bluntly said, "Here, without work, you aren't anything. It's different." For Yuma, physical and emotional stagnation went hand-in-hand: "Stuck in my house without work, not doing anything, the depression hits hard sometimes." Camila described how economic precarity gave rise to regular distress, saying, "when you're without a fixed job, you go about the world in a constant state of fear and desperation… because here everything needs to be paid, the state isn't going to cover it for you."

Distress was magnified by participants' deep sense of duty to support both children and loved ones back home. Feeling like she was "sinking" under the weight of familial expectations, Anika asked, "how are you *not* going to get depressed when you're unemployed and you know you have family here and back at home who need your help?" While Julio explained that it was "so important" to send money back home, "because my mom, dad, my uncle, people who are sick are depending on me…so they can buy their medicine." In other words, economic success was not just about supporting people's households, but about fulfilling transnational responsibilities and justifying their profound sacrifices to get here.

Participants reported that unstable employment, alongside factors like cultural isolation and fear of persecution – which were far more intense in the U.S. than in previous host contexts – imposed immense strain on mental health. We won't elaborate on these challenges, as they are well documented in migration studies scholarship. However, it's important to note that many expressed recurring loneliness and a deep longing for home, exacerbated by a comparatively socially isolating American cultural context. In Juanita's words, "it feels like the pandemic [lockdown] here, but four years later!…*los gringos* just don't socialize here like people do in Venezuela or Colombia." Gonzalo, expressed, with a heavy look in his eyes, a familiar sense of helplessness and guilt: "*Imagínate,* my grandmother is in bed with cancer right now [in Venezuela], getting ready to die. And I'm here with my hands tied, powerless, thousands of miles away, way farther than before…These are things that would depress anyone, *sabes*?" Altogether, income and housing instability, paired with other displacement challenges, caused significant psychological harm. Nine of the twelve subjects depicted their time in Denver as punctuated with recurrent – if often fleeting – bouts of "*depresión*." While material shortcomings could be even more severe in Latin American host contexts, participants emphasized that these places at least offered a familiar cultural world – "people who talked like us, who danced like us…all a lot closer to home" – circumstances that could cushion the emotional lows confronted now in Denver.

Conclusion

In this paper, we traced the early experiences of reception for Venezuelan newcomers settling in Denver, an emergent site of large-scale reception that has received little if any academic consideration until now. The work calls attention to the onward migration trajectories of ten of the twelve participants in the study – an increasingly common but still understudied pattern of mobility. Our article builds on growing scholarship by mapping these trajectories onto recent movements of Venezuelans in the Americas, where U.S.-bound, origin-destination models tend to dominate expectations. The consistency with which participants drew unsolicited comparisons to prior host contexts signaled the critical role of these past experiences in mediating their encounters with Denver. We argue that such experiences generate a form of accumulated cosmopolitan knowledge that migrants deploy to interpret and navigate the local terrain – especially in the absence of strong kin networks or established diasporic infrastructure.

Migrants' experiences navigating jobs, housing, and social life unfolded against dueling visions drawn from both past relocation contexts and expectations of life in the United States. When Denver failed to match either vision, participants described a pronounced existential oscillation between their hopes and feelings of disillusionment (Pettit & Ruijtenberg, 2019). Our work demonstrates the continuous psychological dynamic experienced as participants shift between optimism and despair in response to material breakthroughs or setbacks. Any small victory or misfortune could momentarily shift subjects' concepts of past, present, and future along a continuum of purpose and purposelessness: past decisions are alternatively recast as incoherent mistakes or worthwhile sacrifices, present challenges as unjust cruelty or formative growth opportunities, and future prospects as nebulous sources of dread or bright skylines of possibility.

The emotional volatility within these testimonies also reflects the contradictory reception landscape of Denver itself: a city celebrated as welcoming yet often experienced as exclusionary. City services like shelters and one-time rental vouchers were vital for early stabilization, yet uneven access and variable quality produced both relief and profound disappointment. Participants described the shelters as at once "god-sent" and "hellish." Some could not redeem vouchers due to application barriers or limited housing supply, while others were evicted soon after placement when tenuous income streams collapsed. Meanwhile, economic opportunities were depicted as more meaningful in Denver yet also harder to come by than in previous host contexts with more permissive and widespread informal economies. Given limited informal work and delays in obtaining work permits, housing instability magnified everyday uncertainty, even among families who had achieved the most stable footholds.

Prior host-country experiences could intensify emotional oscillation, but also equip migrants with strategies to navigate it. Despite reports of frequent despair, nearly all interviewees expressed a sustained commitment to build a life for their families in Denver – grounded in spiritual faith, familial obligation (both near and far), emerging social networks, tentative progress, and a basic reluctance to start over again. As migrants continue to navigate this complex terrain, we expect existential oscillation to persist, though perhaps

with diminishing intensity as integration deepens – or with sharper swings to the extent that local and national policies exacerbate precarity. Should a sense of existential immobility set in again, some newcomers may ultimately respond as they have in past contexts – by relocating once more in search of renewed possibility – revealing how onward migration can itself become part of the emotional oscillation that links hope, disappointment, and renewed movement.

Denver's contradictory reception climate was shaped not only by local dynamics but also by deeper structural forces operating well beyond the city's control. Throughout this study, we observed how federal policy fundamentally circumscribed the city's actions: the denial of federal assistance, work restrictions, and the looming threat of ICE involvement, for example, set sharp limits on what Denver could meaningfully offer. On the one hand, resource shortages driven by federal inaction constrained municipal budgets and restricted the reach of support initiatives, illustrated by the very limited capacity of the city's Asylum Seeker's Program (DASP), as well as the prolonged (if not indefinite) formal workplace exclusion for many migrants, creating a need for programs like DASP in the first place. The Mayor's Office even explored hiring migrants directly for city jobs, using a loophole in the 1986 immigration law to circumvent work restrictions, only to abandon the idea for fear of federal reprisal (Salinger, 2024). At the same time, targeting of migrants adds a grave layer of existential consequence to the enforcement of municipal laws. Intensified policing of low-level offenses attached deportation risks to survival strategies in the informal economy. In this way, external constraints cascade downward, putting even more severe limits on migrants' opportunities to subsist, let alone advance, within Denver's complex urban landscape. Ultimately, the overlapping federal and local landscapes reveal a certain cruel optimism in the city's reception system: many migrants were urged to succeed yet simultaneously denied lawful means to do so most effectively.

In conclusion, we suggest that recent Venezuelan migration to the United States is unique because of several factors that should be considered together, with particular focus on the accumulation of cosmopolitan knowledge from prior multi-year efforts to settle in other countries and an understanding of the specific features of a city or community that influence reception. The most recent Venezuelans arriving in Denver and other cities did so without extensive kin networks in those areas. This made the expert knowledge they gained from previous relocations increasingly valuable in helping them navigate life in Denver. As shown, participants drew on their past experiences to interpret the opportunities and challenges in Denver, shaped by its distinctive approach to migrant reception and constraints imposed by the U.S. Federal government. Experience in other countries not only helped participants make sense of their options for housing, employment, and social services but also served as crucial tools to mediate the perpetual emotional oscillations participants experienced—between hope and despair, optimism and regret, confidence in their decision to move, and deep questioning. If current geopolitics are any indication, displaced Venezuelans living in many countries will likely face more voluntary and forced international moves in their lifetimes as they seek a place to settle permanently. As scholars continue to study and interpret the Venezuelan experiences of displacement and movement, we must seriously consider how their accumulation of expert knowledge shapes their journeys. Each new move and experience in different contexts further develops their positionalities as bearers of invaluable, experience-based expertise, shaping their paths forward.

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McKinnon Sara Lynn: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology. **Jacob Sorrells:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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