

COVID-19 AND VENEZUELAN MIGRANTS IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO



On March 12th, 2020, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago reported its detected first case of covid-19 and acted swiftly to adopt public health regulations which comprised the strict application of social distancing measures, the closure of places of business, the halting of all non-essential activities, the restriction of civil liberties and border closures. To date Trinidad and Tobago has registered a total of 130¹ covid-19 cases, at the date of writing.

Trinidad and Tobago has 16 523 registered Venezuelan migrants and an unknown number of unregistered migrants within its jurisdiction with UNHCR and other sources estimate the total figure can be anywhere between 24 000² and 34 000³ migrants.

In its fight against covid-19 the state was keen to ensure that all medical services on the island were accessible to locals and migrants alike, warning that discriminatory practices against migrants at health centres and hospitals would result in a public health catastrophe should cases within the migrant population go undetected and untreated. ⁴

While government action no doubt saved countless lives and ensured that the public hospital system was not overwhelmed by covid-19 patients. The state's strict public response had a disproportionately adverse effect on the most vulnerable persons in Trinidad and Tobago, and more particularly migrants and asylum seekers, leaving them in dire economic straits.

¹ Since this piece was first written Trinidad and Tobago has recorded an additional 18 covid-19 cases bring the total from 130 to 148. Of these 18 cases 4 are pending epidemiological investigation meaning that their source is unknown and this may be the first signs of local/community spread occurring within the population.

² <https://r4v.info/en/situations/platform>

³ <https://r4v.info/en/documents/download/73810>

⁴ On Saturday 24th of July the situation with respect to Venezuelan migrants changed dramatically with the Minister of National Security announcing new measures which criminalize the presence of irregular migrants on Trinidad and Tobago soil during the pandemic labelling them undesirables and declaring that persons who provide assistance to these persons or have rental agreements with them as accomplices to human trafficking or guilty of committing the crime of harbouring an illegal migrant which is punishable with a fine and/or imprisonment.

Migrants and asylum seekers, in their majority work in the informal, hospitality and retail sectors which were among the most affected by the government-mandated economic shut down in an attempt to contain the spread. This left migrants with fewer opportunities to earn an income. Furthermore, their status as non-nationals made them ineligible to receive assistance from state funded food and shelter programmes.

The sudden loss of income coupled with the lack of national social assistance programmes specific to their needs resulted in an increased risk of eviction and food insecurity for migrant households, with many migrants reported being unable to stay at home as per the public health regulations unless they received some measure of food or cash assistance.

In some instances, the loss of regular income coupled with the absence of a social safety net for migrants led to an upsurge of risky coping mechanisms and behaviours being adopted migrant women in particular, with reports of Venezuelan women being arrested at “covid parties”⁵ across the island. Irregular migrants also reported being afraid of being detained at roadblocks or police check points during the 3-month shut down period while on their way to work.

These migrant stories reinforce the need for Trinidad and Tobago to adopt a more comprehensive migrant and refugee protection legislative framework which will allow migrants to access and benefit from much needed protections. Until such reforms take place migrants and refugees will continue to be invisibilised and forced to undertake unnecessary risks especially in the event of natural and public health disasters such as the one currently being experienced.

⁵ https://trinidadexpress.com/newsextra/50-businessmen-were-planning-to-attend-covid-party/article_d130ffc2-7b3d-11ea-95ea-7bdbcf28d83b.html