

Venezuelan Migration, Crime, and Misperceptions

A Review of Data from Colombia, Peru, and Chile

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Executive Summary

The sudden, large-scale movement of nearly 5.2 million Venezuelans out of their country, most since 2014, with more than 4.2 million of them settling in other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, has raised concerns about how this is affecting receiving communities, with some politicians and pundits claiming that these new arrivals are leading to a rise in crime. Yet few studies have been conducted in the region that examine whether and what type of link may exist between immigration and crime, in part because immigration at this scale is a relatively new phenomenon in most Latin American countries, and this particular mass migration is so recent.¹

This issue brief explores data in the three countries with the largest number of Venezuelan migrants and refugees as of 2020—Colombia, Peru, and Chile, which together host more than 2 million Venezuelan nationals—to better understand whether and what sort of relationship exists between this immigration and crime rates. Some of the datasets used are publicly available, while others were obtained by the authors through direct requests to government agencies. For each country, this study analyzes crime data, when possible disaggregated by nationality, and data on the presence of Venezuelans at the subnational level (though the available data do not

allow for this to be done in exactly the same way in all three countries).

For the most part, analysis of data from 2019 suggests that Venezuelan immigrants commit substantially fewer crimes than the native born, relative to their share in the overall population, signaling that public perceptions on newcomers driving up crime rates are misleading.

In Chile, for example, only 0.7 percent of people indicted for crimes in 2019 were Venezuelan nationals, even though Venezuelans made up 2.4 percent of the population. Similarly, in Peru, where this analysis uses imprisonment data as a proxy for crime rates, 1.3 percent of those in prison were foreign born—of any nationality—as of 2019, whereas Venezuelan nationals make up 2.9 percent of the country's overall population.

For the most part, analysis of data from 2019 suggests that Venezuelan immigrants commit substantially fewer crimes than the native born.

In Colombia this relationship holds true for violent crimes, as Venezuelan nationals comprised 2.3 percent of arrests for violent crimes in 2019, while they represent 3.2 percent of the population. For crimes

overall, however, the picture is more mixed, as 5.4 percent of all arrests were of Venezuelans, a rate higher than their share of the population. Most of these crimes were reported in border regions, perhaps a reflection of the illicit smuggling networks that operate across the Colombian-Venezuelan border. In exploring plausible explanations for crime rates in different parts of the country, it appears that the regions in which Venezuelans were responsible for higher shares of crimes are also those where Venezuelans face higher rates of unemployment. This finding is consistent with the literature that suggests granting migrants and refugees formal labor market access can reduce the incidence of crime among this population.

The data in this study provide strong evidence that the presence of Venezuelan immigrants is not leading to increased crime in the region—certainly not in the three countries that have received the largest number of Venezuelan migrants and refugees. Indeed, in most cases they tend to commit a smaller share of crimes than their proportion of the population. Even in the one case where the results are more ambiguous—Colombia—they are more involved in minor crimes and far less involved in major crimes than their population share. These results suggest that fears about Venezuelan newcomers driving up crime are simply misplaced. Sudden mass migration certainly presents challenges to receiving societies, but, at least in this case, a major crime wave is not one of them.

1 Introduction

As of July 2020, more than 5 million Venezuelans had fled their country—most since 2014—with the majority residing in neighboring countries such as Colombia (1.8 million), Peru (830,000), Chile (455,000), and Ecuador (363,000).² Almost every Latin American country hosts several tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of Venezuelans, while

several Caribbean countries host large numbers compared to their overall population size. Venezuelans account for more than 10 percent of people in Curaçao and Aruba, for example. With international financial support to address this crisis limited compared to that for similar displacement crises around the world,³ rising skepticism of immigration and xenophobia in the region is testing governments' resolve to keep their doors open to those fleeing the economic collapse and political turmoil in Venezuela.⁴

One of the increasingly common narratives about these migrants and refugees is that they drive up crime rates in the communities where they live. In polls, native-born residents of Colombia and Peru have regularly cited crime as one of the reasons they are most uncomfortable with migration from Venezuela, and in early 2020 the Peruvian Interior Ministry announced the creation of a special security unit dedicated to crimes committed by migrants.⁵ This perception reduces the political capital governments have when designing and putting forward programs to assist newcomers and to promote their economic and social integration. This is particularly problematic because efforts to promote integration hold the potential to benefit receiving communities as well as migrants themselves.⁶

This analysis attempts to investigate whether these views are borne out by evidence, looking at patterns in the data on migration inflows and crime rates in three receiving countries: Colombia, Peru, and Chile. As of April 2020, these three countries hosted more than 60 percent of all Venezuelans living abroad.⁷

Research from other countries has shown an ambiguous relationship between immigration and crime. In the United States, which tends to have a highly flexible labor market, almost all studies show that immigrants (including unauthorized immigrants) have far lower crime rates than the native born, and that communities generally become safer as immi-

grants move in.⁸ In Europe, where labor markets are more highly regulated, studies have tended to find that there is a more variable relationship between immigration and crime, sometimes positive, sometimes negative, and often negligible. When these correlations are positive, it is often due to poor labor market insertion, often as a result of migrants' lack of legal status.⁹ In Latin America and the Caribbean, there are few studies that have addressed this question explicitly, in part because large-scale immigration is a relatively new phenomenon in most countries in the region. A 2019 study from Chile, however, does note crime declined in that country in precisely the same period that immigration increased the most, while a second study from 2019 in Colombia found that migrants were less represented in the prison population than their share of the overall population would suggest and that there were no apparent variations in crime rates associated with the influx of Venezuelan migrants over time.¹⁰

There are few studies that have addressed this question explicitly, in part because large-scale immigration is a relatively new phenomenon in most countries in the region.

This issue brief takes another step toward understanding the relationship between immigration and crime in Latin America by examining the share of crimes committed by Venezuelans in Chile, Peru, and Colombia, against the Venezuelan share of each country's overall population. The publicly available data do not allow for this to be done in exactly the same way across the three countries. In Chile, this analysis looks at rates for indictments, processing in court, and convictions, which are available by nationality. In Peru, the available data only show the native- versus foreign-born percentage of inmates in prisons, without breaking out specific nationalities; these data are far more limited but still provide useful results. In Colombia, the National Police began

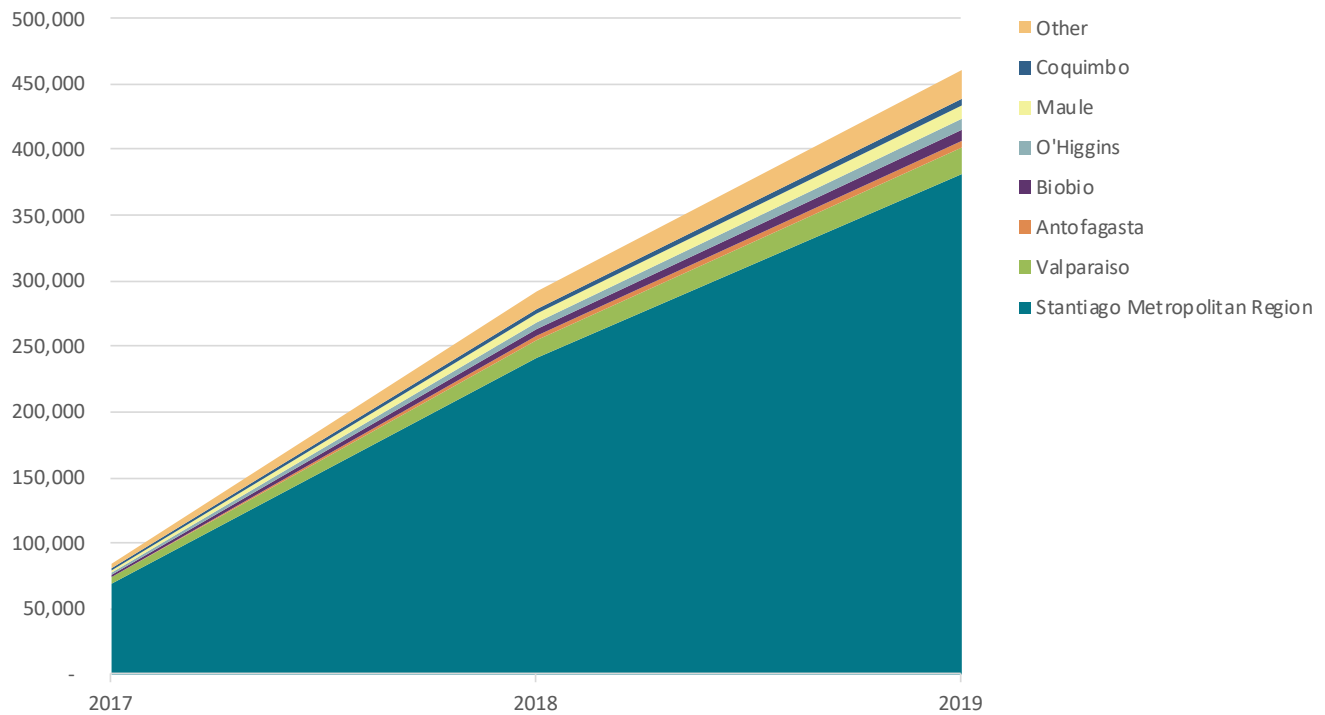
publishing arrest data broken down by nationality in 2019, allowing for the comparison of arrests involving Venezuelan migrants against their population share. In all three countries, subnational data make it possible to identify regional variations in addition to national trends.

2 Chile

Chile is the third largest recipient of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, hosting 455,000 as of July 2020.¹¹ Chile requires all Venezuelans to enter the country on a valid visa and passport, though the government has agreed to recognize expired travel documents.¹² This means that migrants and refugees must apply for a visa ahead of time at a Chilean consulate, rather than simply arriving at an airport or border crossing and asking for asylum. These hurdles may mean that those Venezuelans who are able to obtain a visa and enter Chile legally are already better off than some of their fellow emigrants. Thus, they may be less likely to commit crimes if they are in less dire circumstances. However, these strict requirements may also push some Venezuelans without other options to pursue irregular migration. This limits their access to social services and public support, which may increase their desperation and, hence, propensity to commit crimes.

For this analysis, the authors obtained data from the National Institute of Statistics (INE) through a request made under the *Law on Access to Public Information (Ley de Acceso a la Información Pública)*. The data include total Venezuelan population estimates for 2017–19 at a national level, as well as regional totals for 2017. The authors used the overall Venezuelan population growth rate from 2017–18 and 2017–19 to impute regional totals for 2018 and 2019 (thus, a limitation of this analysis is that it assumes the proportional distribution of Venezuelans across the country remains constant). Then, the authors used the population estimates based on INE data to

FIGURE 1
Venezuelans in Chile, by Region, 2017–19



Source: Author analysis of data obtained from the Chilean National Institute of Statistics (INE) through a *Law on Access to Public Information* request in 2020.

calculate the Venezuelan share of the population nationwide and region by region.

The number of Venezuelans in Chile grew from 83,000 in 2017 to 289,000 in 2018, and further to 455,000 in 2019 (see Figure 1). The majority of Venezuelans (84 percent) live in the Santiago metropolitan region, followed by Valparaíso (5 percent). Venezuelans made up 2.4 percent of the Chilean population in 2019. While they account for 4.8 percent of the population in Santiago metro area and 1.1 percent in Valparaíso, Venezuelans make up less than 1 percent of the population in all other regions.

Using data provided to the authors by Gendarmería de Chile (the national prison service), again through a *Law on Access to Public Information* request, it is possible to look at the correlation between foreign-born population shares and crime. The data obtained include the number of people indicted,

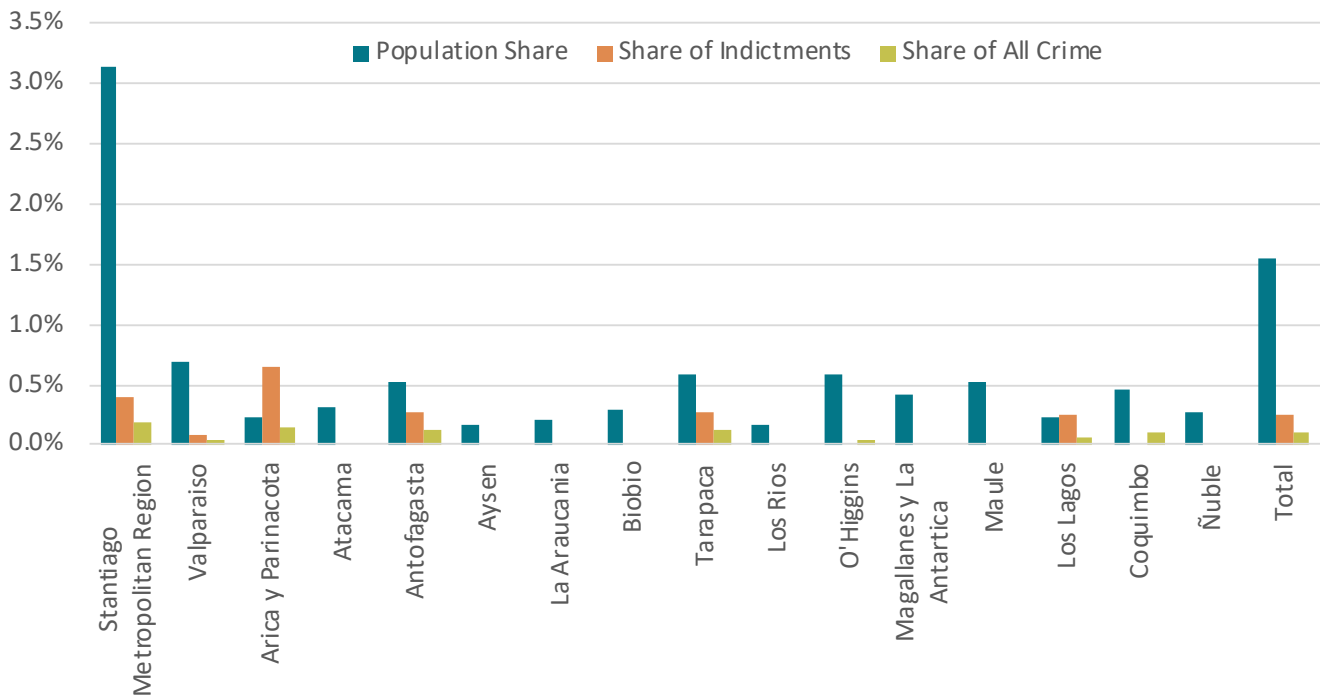
processed, and convicted (mutually exclusive categories) in the Chilean penal system by region for 2018 and 2019, broken down by nationality of the offender. Given the low number of Venezuelan offenders in the sample, this analysis looks at both the total number of people who committed crimes each year (condemned, indicted, and processed individuals) as well as the number of people indicted (the category most Venezuelans fall within).

The number of Venezuelans in Chile grew from 83,000 in 2017 to 289,000 in 2018, and further to 455,000 in 2019.

At the national level, 41,500 people were condemned, indicted, and processed in 2018 in Chile. Of these, only 43 were Venezuelan (0.1 percent). In 2019, this figure rose very slightly, with Venezuelans

FIGURE 2

Venezuelan Share of the Population and of Criminal Cases in Chile, by Region, 2018



Source: Author analysis of data obtained from INE and the Gendarmería de Chile through a *Law on Access to Public Information* request in 2020.

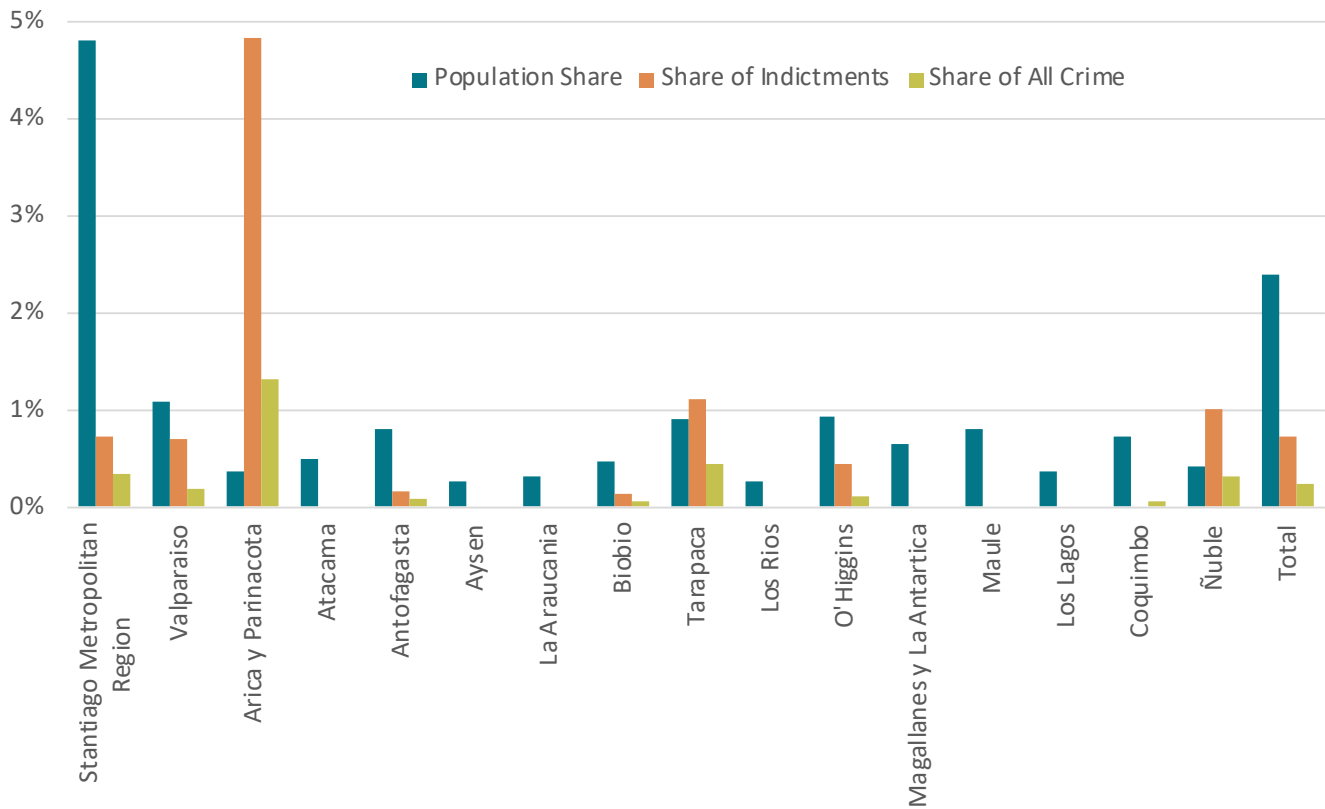
making up 107 of 43,700 individuals condemned, indicted, and processed (0.2 percent). Even looking at indictments alone, where the majority of cases involving Venezuelans lie, Venezuelans made up just 0.3 percent of total indictments in 2018 and 0.7 percent in 2019. These data do not show evidence of excess crime, defined here as Venezuelans committing crimes at higher rates than their share of the population in a given geographical area. In short, Venezuelans are less likely to be condemned, indicted, or processed than others in Chile, given they

make up 2.4 of the country’s population and much smaller shares of criminal cases.

Similar trends exist at the subnational level. Venezuelans committed crimes at lower rates than their population share in all regions in 2018 (see Figure 2), and in 15 out of 16 regions in 2019 (see Figure 3). Venezuelans committed no crimes in eight regions in 2018 and in seven regions in 2019. Looking specifically at indictments, on the whole, Venezuelans commit crimes at lower rates than their population share in most regions.

FIGURE 3

Venezuelan Share of the Population and of Criminal Cases in Chile, by Region, 2019



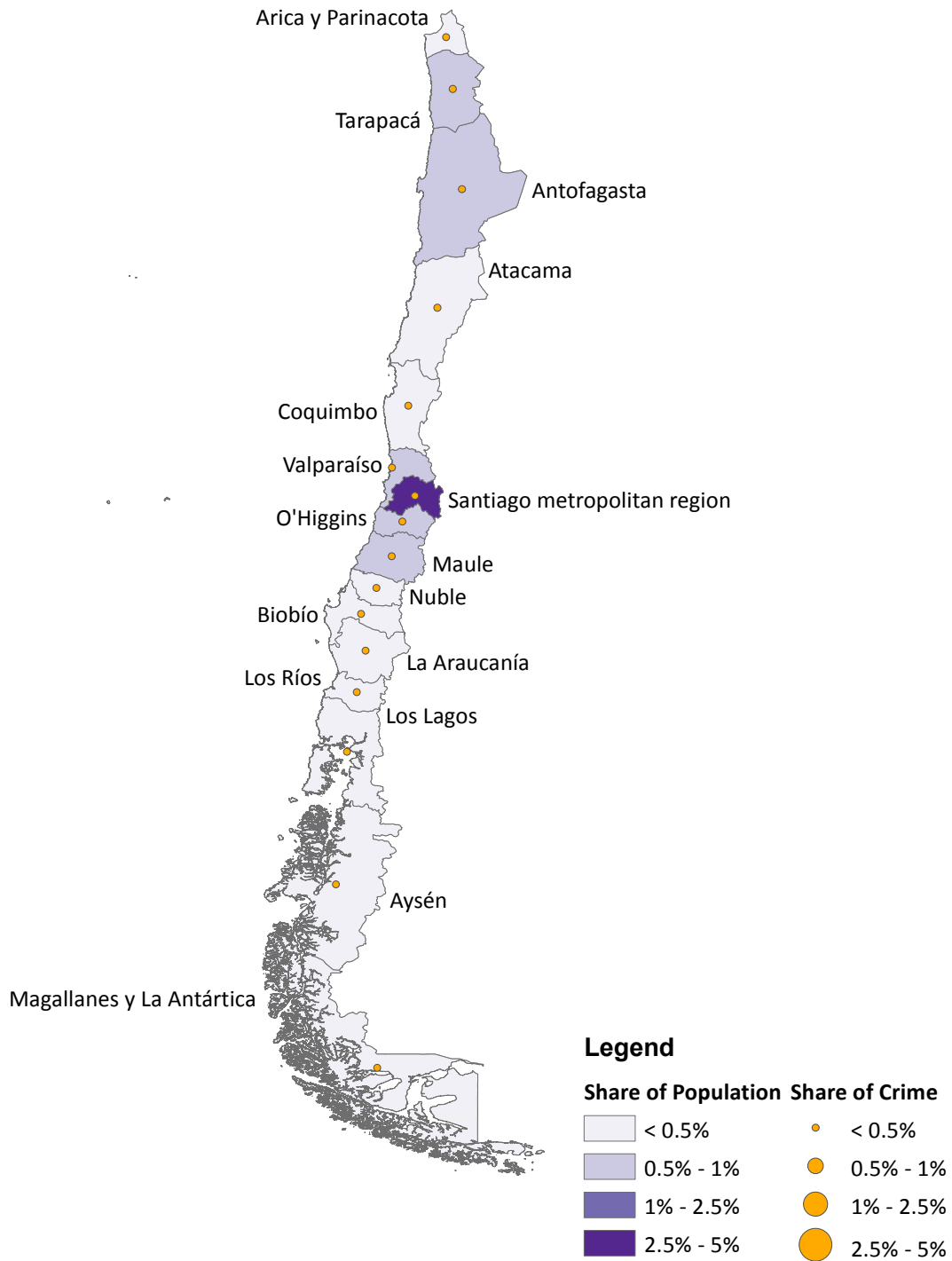
Source: Author analysis of data obtained from INE and the Gendarmería de Chile through a *Law on Access to Public Information* request in 2020.

Arica y Parinacota is the only Chilean region that shows higher crime rates than population shares for Venezuelans in both years, though only for indictments in 2018. However, the numbers behind this pattern are small: Venezuelans were condemned, indicted, or processed for just three crimes in the region in 2018 and for 25 crimes in 2019. Arica y Parinacota is also a border region, where many Venezuelans enter Chile after crossing through Peru. Thus, these higher crime rates (albeit with small ab-

solute numbers) could to some extent be linked to proximity to the border (see Figure 4 and 5) and the specific dynamics of smuggling operations in border communities. In the Santiago metropolitan region where, as noted above, 84 percent of Venezuelans reside, Venezuelans accounted for less than 0.5 percent of all crime in 2019, well below their population share of 4.8 percent. Thus, overall, Venezuelans do not seem to be contributing to higher crime rates in the country.

FIGURE 4

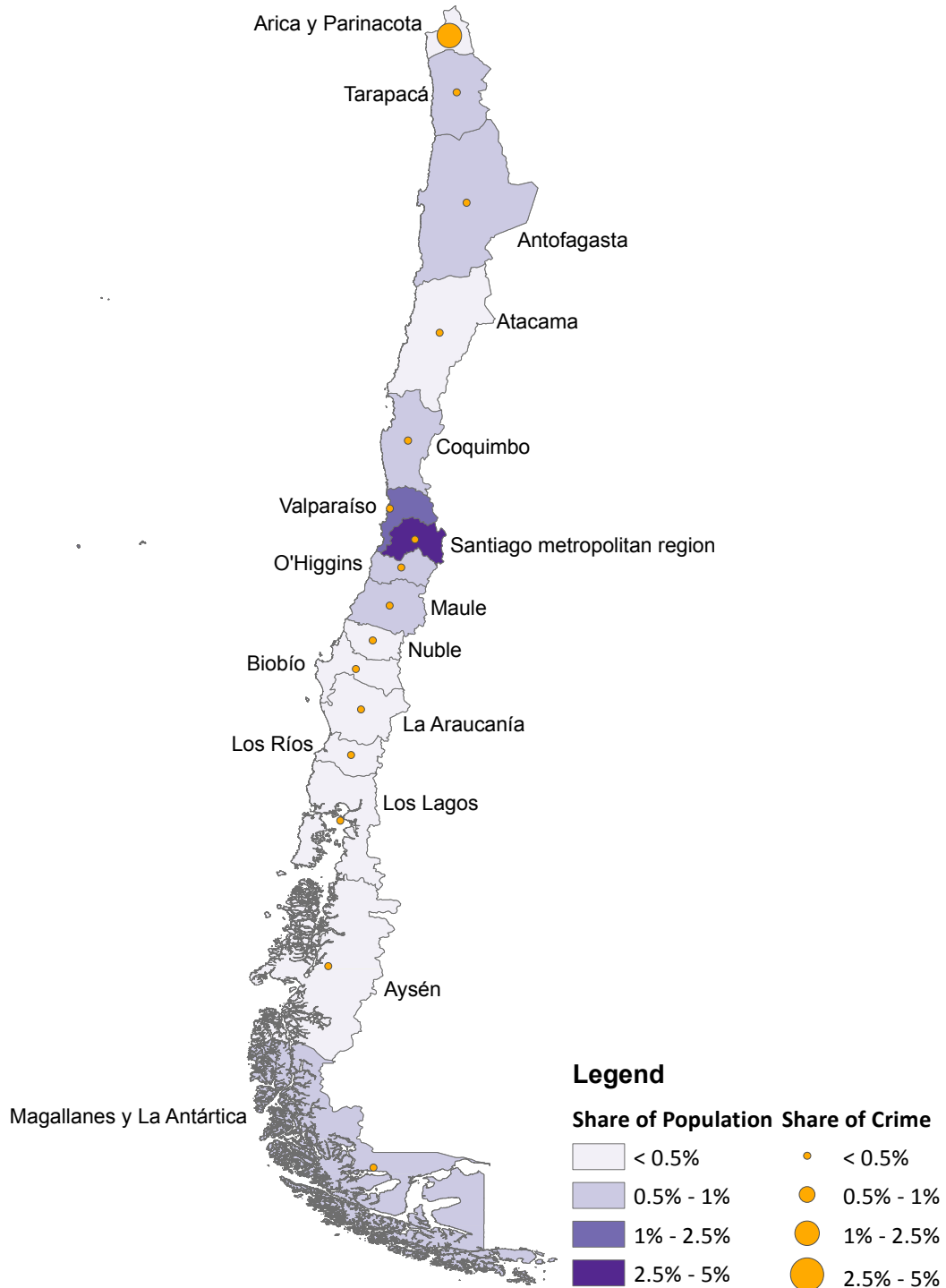
Venezuelan Share of the Population and of Criminal Cases in Chile, by Region, 2018



Source: Author analysis of data obtained from INE and the Gendarmería de Chile through a *Law on Access to Public Information* request in 2020.

FIGURE 5

Venezuelan Share of the Population and of Criminal Cases in Chile, by Region, 2019



Source: Author analysis of data from INE and the Gendarmería de Chile through a *Law on Access to Public Information* request in 2020.

3 Peru

Peru is the recipient of the second largest number of Venezuelan migrants and refugees, hosting 830,000 as of July 2020.¹³ Since June 2019, Peru has required all Venezuelans to have a passport and a visa to enter the country.¹⁴ In addition, more than 420,000 Venezuelans in Peru have been granted some form of residency or special stay permit as of June 2020.¹⁵ Offering Venezuelans a form of semi-permanent status in the country allows them to have a sense of stability and normalcy, as well as to access social services. This may decrease the likelihood that migrants engage in crime. However, as discussed in the case of Chile, the strict admissions criteria may also push some Venezuelans to turn to irregular migration if they have no other options, which restricts their access to public support and, hence, may increase feelings of desperation that can lead to crime.

To examine the Venezuelan population in Peru, this analysis uses data from the “Encuesta dirigida a la población venezolana que reside en el país” (ENPOVE) household survey, administered by the Institute of National Statistics (INEI) in 2018 to Venezuelans living in six of the 25 departments in Peru.¹⁶ It is estimated that 85 percent of Venezuelans in the country live in these departments. Thus, this representative survey of approximately 630,000 people captures the bulk of the Venezuelan population in Peru.

The majority of Venezuelans in the survey (90 percent) lived in Lima in 2018, accounting for 6 percent of the population there. Another 40,000 lived in neighboring Callao, where Venezuelans were 4 percent of residents. In all other surveyed regions (Arequipa, Cusco, La Libertad, and Tumbes), Venezuelans made up less than 1 percent of the population. Across all six departments, the Venezuelan share of the population was 4.2 percent. Nationwide, however, the Venezuelan population share is closer to 2.9

TABLE 1
Venezuelans in Peru, by Department, 2018

Department	Venezuelans	Population Share
Arequipa	7,083	0.5%
Callao	40,368	4.1%
Cusco	1,743	0.1%
La Libertad	11,440	0.6%
Lima	568,573	6.0%
Tumbes	1,340	0.6%
SURVEY TOTAL	630,547	4.2%

Source: Author analysis of data from the Peruvian Institute of National Statistics (INEI), “Encuesta dirigida a la población venezolana que reside en el país – ENPOVE (2018),” updated November 2018.

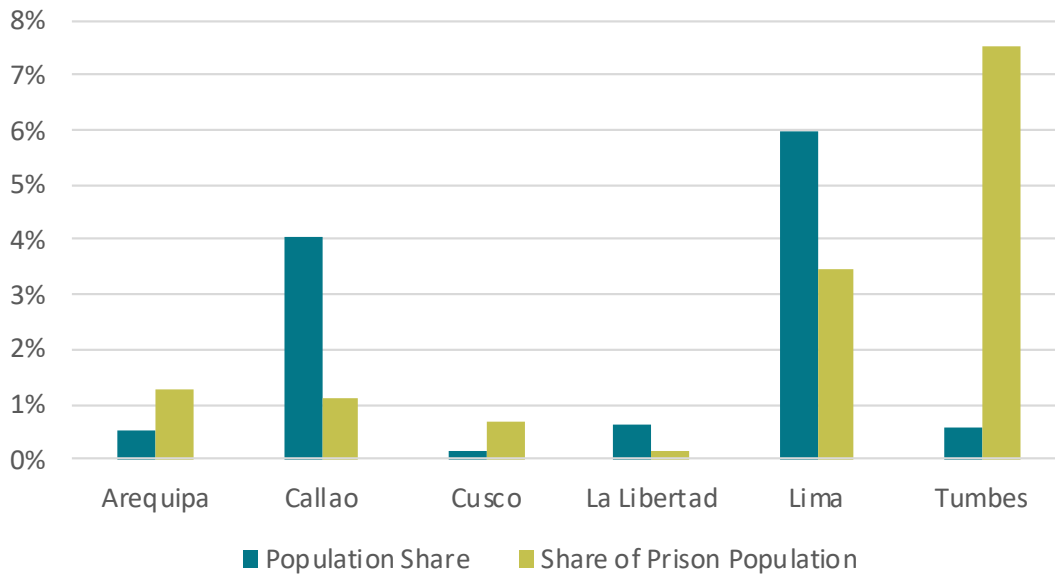
percent, looking at total Venezuelan population estimates over the total population in Peru.¹⁷

In January 2020, the Peruvian government announced the creation of a special security unit to address crime committed by foreigners, ostensibly to target Venezuelans.¹⁸ Using data from the National Penitentiary Institute (INPE), this section looks at the correlation between Venezuelan population shares and crime. The available data are for a snapshot in time (January 2020), thus this analysis cannot look at change over time. The data are for prison populations by department, along with the number of foreigners arrested and processed. Because the data are not disaggregated by nationality, this analysis uses data for all immigrants as a proxy for Venezuelans (thus, the results overestimate Venezuelan crime rates). For comparability, this analysis calculates the share of crimes involving immigrants as the number of foreigners sentenced over the total prison population in that region.

At the national level, crime rates in Peru have grown slightly in recent years. In 2017, there were 7.8 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, up from 5.4 in 2011. While most regions have low homicide rates, Madre de Dios (which borders Brazil) and Tumbes (which borders Ecuador) stand out, with homicide rates of 46.6 and 28.8 per 100,000 people, respectively.¹⁹

FIGURE 6

Venezuelan Share of the Overall Population and Foreign-Born Share of the Prison Population in Peru, by Department*



* Data on the Venezuelan share of the population are from 2018. Those on the prison population are from 2020.

Source: Author analysis of data provided upon request by the Peruvian National Penitentiary Institute (INPE), January 2020, and from INEI, “ENPOVE 2018.”

Turning to the INPE data, there were 1,061 immigrants in prison as of January 2020, making up 1.3 percent of the Peruvian prison population. Venezuelans make up 4.2 percent of the overall population in the six regions surveyed in the ENPOVE (and an estimated 2.9 percent of the population nationwide); thus, the foreign-born share of inmates is far lower than the Venezuelan share of the total population—less than half.

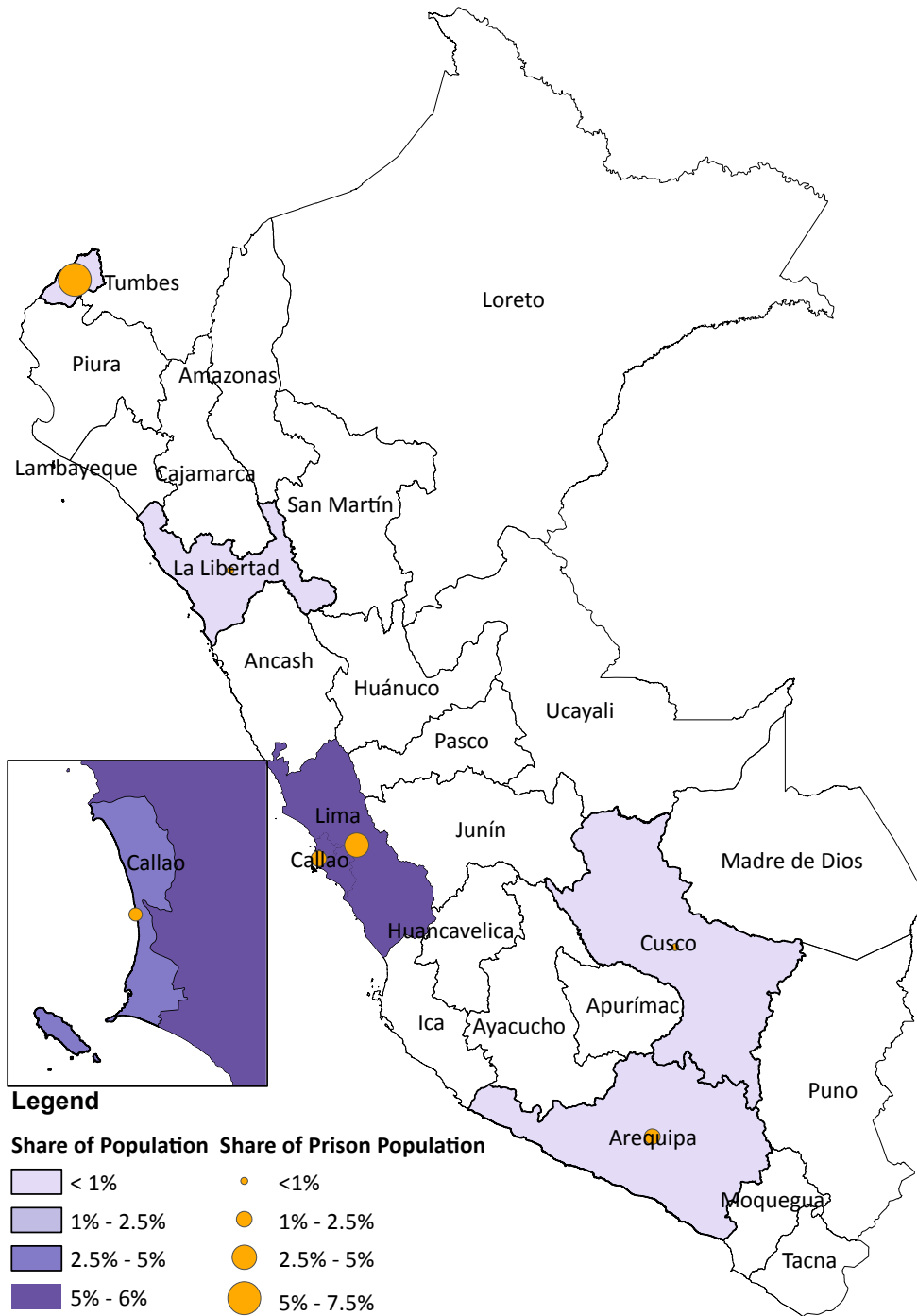
At the subnational level, this analysis did not find evidence of excess crime rates in Lima, Callao, and La Libertad, the three regions with the largest number of Venezuelans, as the immigrant share of inmates was well below the Venezuelan share of residents (see Figure 6). In Arequipa, Cusco, and Tumbes, by contrast, the foreign-born share of inmates was higher. These three regions had a small absolute number of foreigners in prison (36, 23, and 89 people, respectively), thus these rates are driven by a small sample size. Tumbes is also a border region,

so due to regular cross-border flow of goods and workers between Peru and neighboring Ecuador, the higher foreign-born share of the prison population there may not be driven by Venezuelan migrants. And, as in the case for border regions in Colombia, it is possible that crimes related to smuggling may explain the comparatively high number of foreign-born inmates in these areas. Machu Pichu, the major tourist destination in the country, is located in Cusco, so some of the foreigners in prisons there may be tourists.

Thus, crime rates in most of the major metropolitan regions where Venezuelans are concentrated are fairly low, a finding that runs counter to the narrative advanced by the government’s new security unit that the country has a problem with crimes committed by foreign nationals. While the foreign-born prison population is an imperfect proxy for overall crime, these findings suggest that the presence of Venezuelans is not linked to higher crime rates.

FIGURE 7

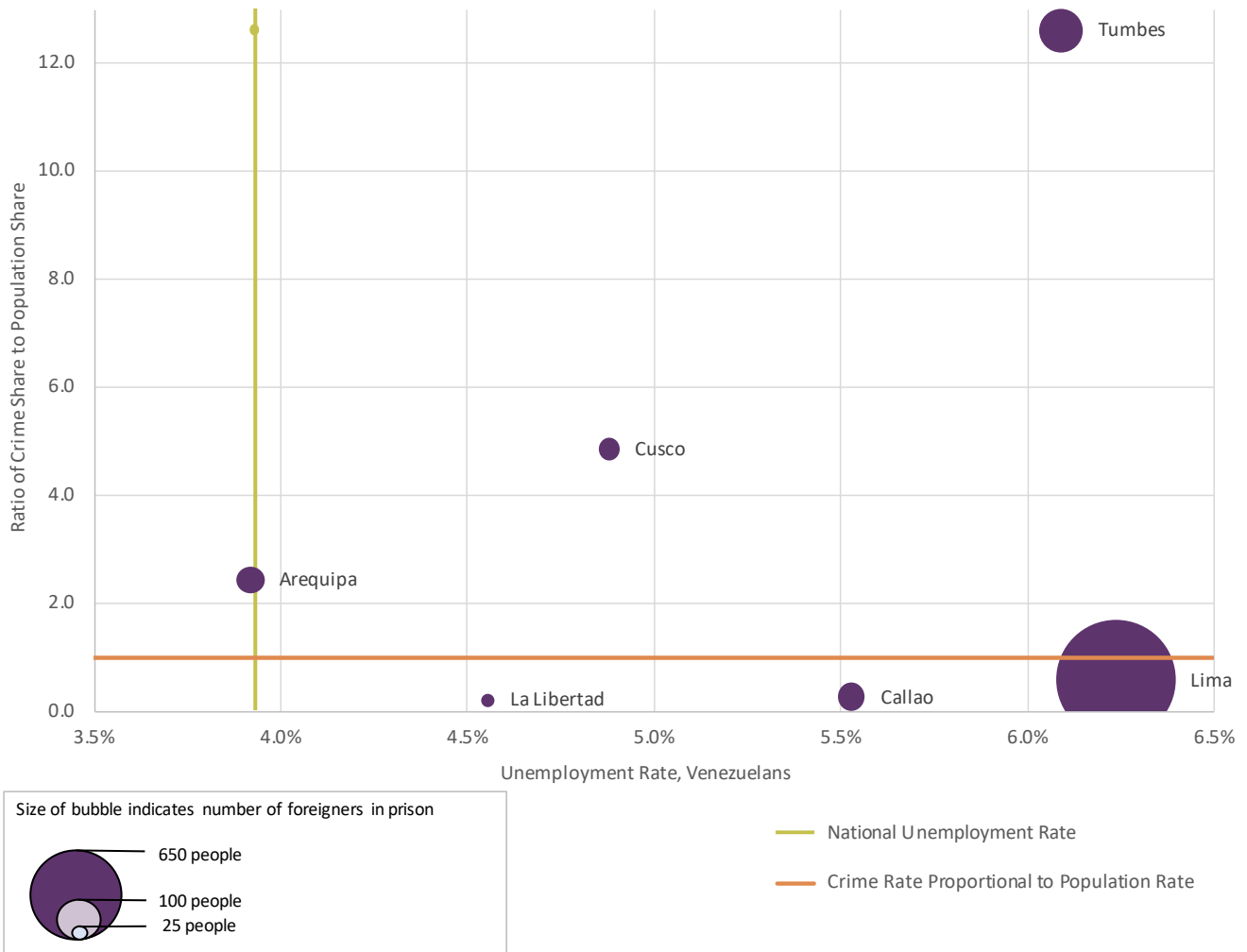
Venezuelan Share of the Overall Population and Foreign-Born Share of the Prison Population in Peru, by Department*



* Data on the Venezuelan share of the population are from 2018. Those on the prison population are from 2020. Source: Author analysis of data provided upon request by INPE, January 2020, and from INEI, "ENPOVE 2018."

FIGURE 8

Venezuelan Unemployment Rate and Excess Crime* Rate in Peru, by Department**



* "Excess crime" is defined in this analysis as Venezuelans committing crimes at higher rates than their share of the population. Thus, in departments below the red line at 1.0, the foreign-born share of the prison population was less than the Venezuelan population share. In departments above the red line, the foreign-born share of the prison population is greater than the Venezuelan population share.
 ** Data on the Venezuelan share of the population are from 2018. Those on the prison population are from 2020.
 Source: Author analysis of data provided upon request by INPE, January 2020, and from INEI, "ENPOVE 2018."

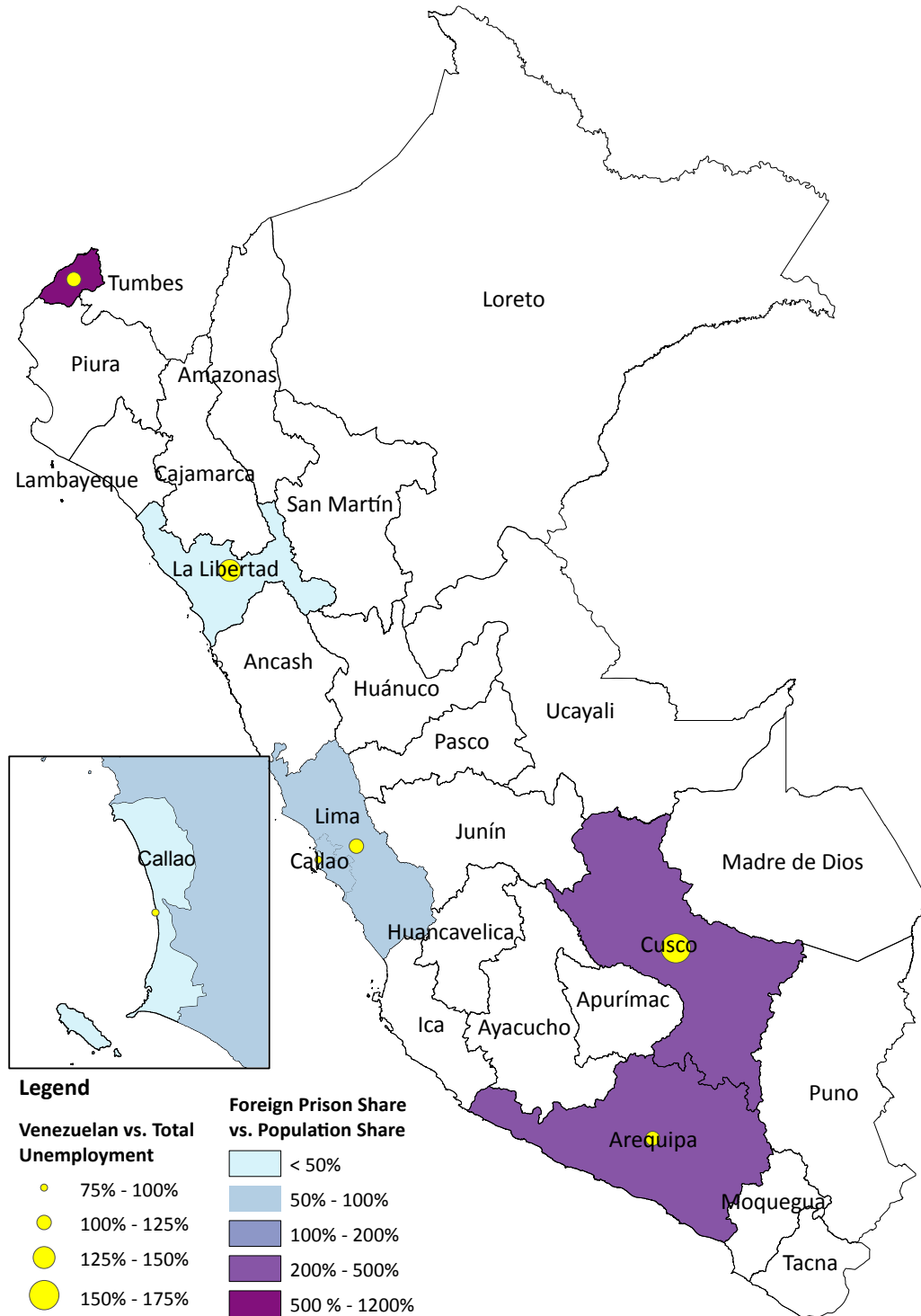
One potential driver of high crime rates might be high unemployment rates. ENPOVE data show that the unemployment rate for Venezuelans in Tumbes and Lima, the two regions with the highest absolute number of crimes, was more than 6 percent in 2018, much higher than the Peruvian national unemployment rate of 3.9 percent (see Figure 8).

It is also possible to look at relative unemployment rates at the subnational level—that is, how Venezue-

lans compare to unemployed nationals—using INEI data. Venezuelans were unemployed at higher rates than the population as a whole in every department surveyed except Callao (see Figure 9). The relative ratio was largest in Cusco, where Venezuelan unemployment stood at 4.9 percent, compared with the department average of 2.9 percent. This could potentially help explain the higher foreign-born share of prisoners there, although this may just as easily be related to the variety of other foreigners who

FIGURE 9

Venezuelan Excess Crime* Rate and Unemployment Rate in Peru, by Department**



* "Excess crime" is defined in this analysis as Venezuelans committing crimes at higher rates than their share of the population.

** Data on the Venezuelan share of the population are from 2018. Those on the prison population are from 2020.

Source: Author analysis of data provided upon request by INPE, January 2020, and from INEI, "ENPOVE 2018."

visit the city as tourists. The unemployment rate for Venezuelan nationals appears to have little influence on the crime rate of foreign nationals in Lima and La Libertad, where immigrants were imprisoned at far lower rates than the Venezuelan population share would suggest.

4 Colombia

Colombia hosts the largest number of Venezuelans—1.8 million—and has been a leader in the region on migrant and refugee integration, offering more than 690,000 Venezuelans some sort of regularized status in the country as of July 2020.²⁰ This important step not only gives Venezuelans access to social services, but also to job opportunities. In past work, the authors have looked at the demographic characteristics and geographical distribution of Venezuelans who registered upon entering Colombia (Registro Administrativo de Migrantes Venezolanos, or RAMV), as well as those who have received Special Stay Permits (Permiso Especial de Permanencia, or PEP), finding that Venezuelan migrants are on average younger and more educated than their Colombian counterparts.²¹ This represents a key opportunity for Colombia: If properly integrated, Venezuelans can be an engine for growth, increasing productivity by bringing new skills and work experience to the country.

Most Venezuelans live in major cities such as Bogotá ... along with the border regions Norte de Santander and La Guajira.

This analysis uses data from the Colombian monthly household survey, Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares (GEIH), collected by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) in January 2017 through November 2019.²² The survey collects data from 23 out of 33 departments in Colombia. In ana-

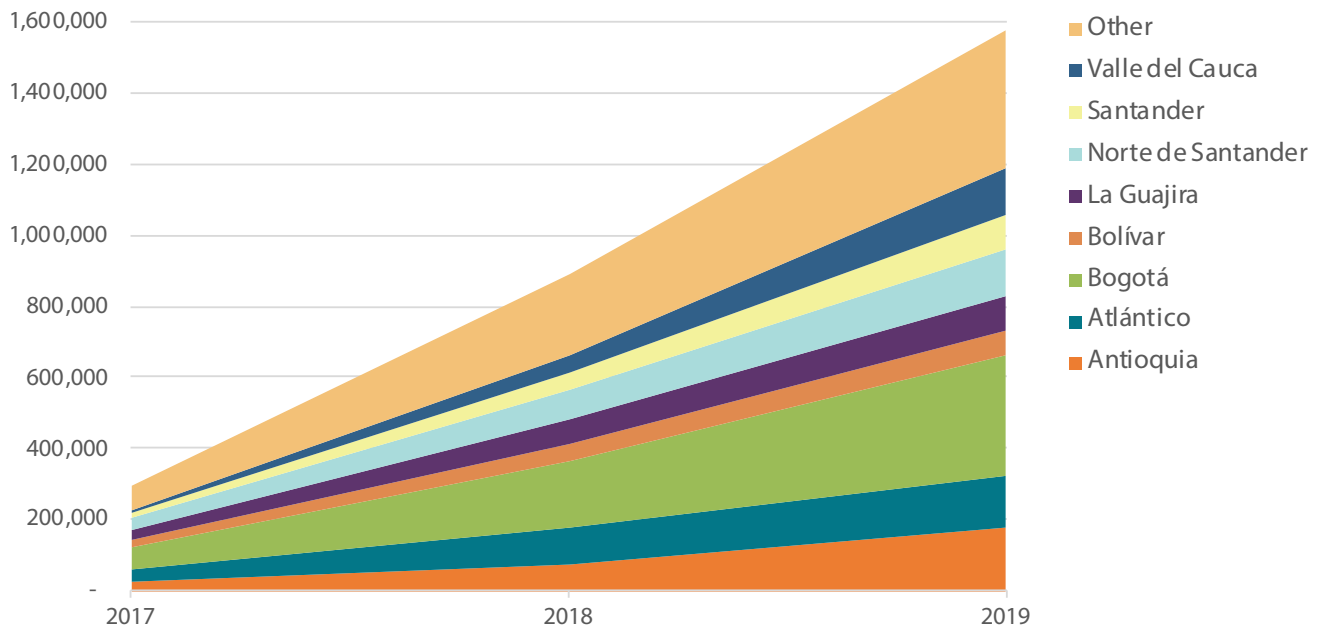
lyzing these data, this study defines Venezuelans as those who were born in Venezuela and were living in Venezuela five years prior to the survey.²³ While the GEIH is not the official government source for estimates of the foreign-born population,²⁴ it has the advantage that it is nationally representative and conducted each month, making it possible to see how the number of Venezuelans in the survey changes over time; however, because sampling is not done by nationality, the numbers may not be fully accurate.

Even with these caveats in mind, estimates of the Venezuelan population in Colombia based on GEIH data largely mirror official numbers. Looking at the household survey, the number of Venezuelans in Colombia grew from 290,000 in 2017 to 890,000 in 2018, and further to 1.6 million in 2019 (see Figure 10). Most Venezuelans live in major cities such as Bogotá, Medellín (in the department of Antioquia), Barranquilla (in Atlántico), and Cali (in Valle del Cauca), along with the border regions Norte de Santander and La Guajira.

While these regions host large numbers of Venezuelans in absolute terms, it is important to put these numbers in context. Venezuelans represented just 3.2 percent of the total population in Colombia in 2019. Population shares were also quite modest in many of the major departments; Venezuelans accounted for about 4 percent of the population in Bogotá, 3 percent in Antioquia, 5.6 percent in Atlántico, and 3 percent in Valle del Cauca. Venezuelans made up a larger share of the population in the less populous border regions; they were roughly 8.2 percent of the population in Norte de Santander and 8.9 percent in La Guajira.

This section next uses data from the Colombian National Police to see if there is any identifiable relationship between crime rates in Colombia and Venezuelan migrants. The Colombian government began disaggregating arrest data by nationality of the

FIGURE 10
Venezuelans in Colombia, by Department, 2017–19



Source: Author analysis of 2017–19 data from the Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), “Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares (GEIH) Microdata,” accessed January 2019.

perpetrator in 2019; thus, only one year of disaggregated data are available. Using these data, this section looks for evidence of excess crime. The available crime data contain all arrests from January to August 2019. As a result, the remainder of this section re-weights the Venezuelan population shares for the first eight months of 2019 for comparable statistics (thus, population totals discussed in the rest of this section will vary slightly those in Figure 10).

At the national level, crime rates have fallen dramatically since the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) signed a peace treaty in 2016. Homicide rates and kidnappings have fallen to record lows, though the drug trade has rebounded in recent years.²⁵

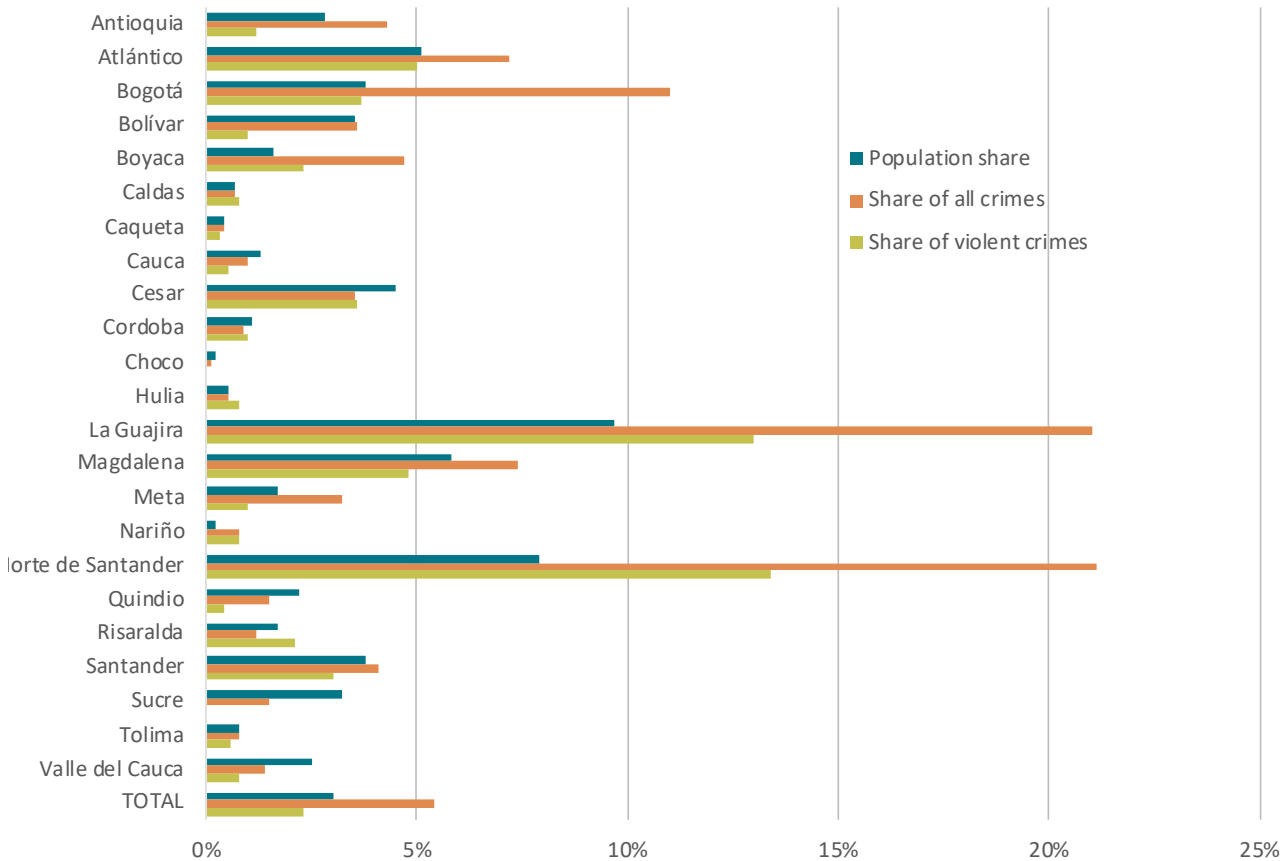
Data from the Colombian National Police show that in the first eight months of 2019, there were 168,000 arrests nationwide. Of these, 9,000 were of Vene-

zuelans; thus, Venezuelans made up a higher share of arrests (5.4 percent) than the Venezuelan share of the population (3 percent). A similar trend exists at the subnational level. Venezuelans committed crimes at higher rates than their population share in 15 out of the 23 departments for which data are available (see Figure 11). These figures include all arrests, for crimes ranging from petty theft to homicide and kidnapping.

When looking specifically at violent crimes,²⁶ by contrast, Venezuelans were responsible for a smaller share of crimes (2.3 percent) than their nationwide population share. Their violent crime rates only outpaced their population share in seven of the 23 departments (see Figure 12), but in five of those seven, Venezuelans committed fewer than 20 violent crimes; thus, these higher rates are driven by small total numbers of crimes. In the two border departments of Norte de Santander and La Guajira

FIGURE 11

Venezuelan Share of the Population and of Crimes in Colombia, by Department, January–August 2019



Source: Author analysis of 2019 data provided upon request by the Colombian National Police and GEIH.

the correlation is much more robust, which suggests that border regions have different dynamics than other parts of the country. That could be due to high unemployment in these areas or to the presence of smuggling operations along the border that create a different pattern of crime.

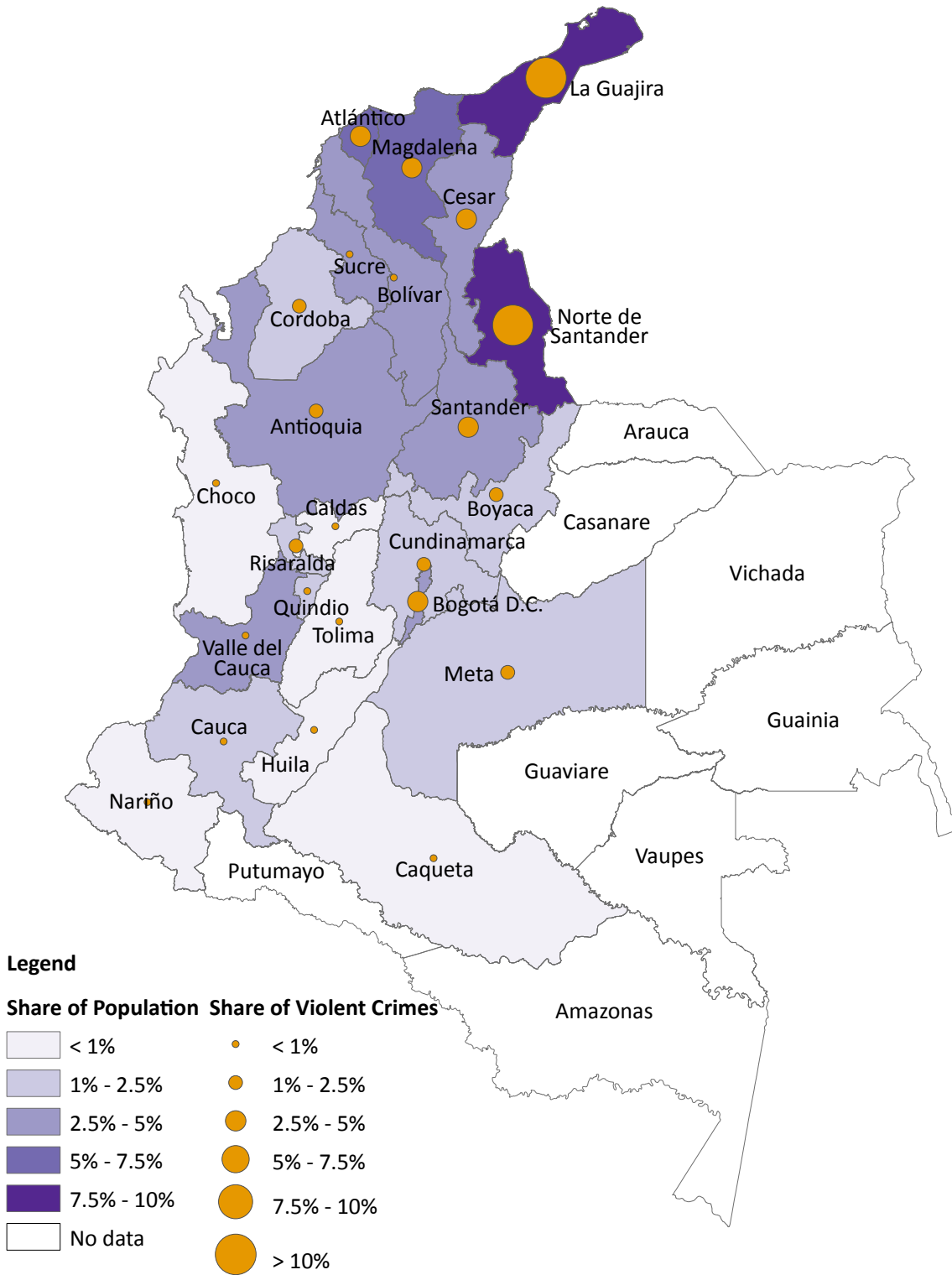
Overall, the data show higher Venezuelan crime rates than their population share would predict, specifically in regions with high concentrations of Venezuelan migrants and refugees such as Bogotá and the border regions of Norte de Santander and La Guajira. While the higher than expected crime rates are concerning, when looking only at violent crimes, Venezuelans commit crimes at a lower rate than their population share in most regions (with Norte de Santander and La Guajira being notable

exceptions). This suggests that Venezuelans may be committing crimes such as theft and larceny at higher rates, but that they are largely not creating a surge in violent crimes.

One possible explanation for these higher crime rates may be high unemployment rates, as theft may go up when migrants and refugees have no other means to provide for their families. While this analysis is suggestive only—it cannot establish a causal relationship between crime and unemployment—it does yield some interesting patterns that may provide further areas of exploration for policymakers. GEIH data can be used to look at the unemployment rate among Venezuelans in each surveyed department compared to the excess crime rate (ratio of Venezuelan crime rate to the Venezuelan population

FIGURE 12

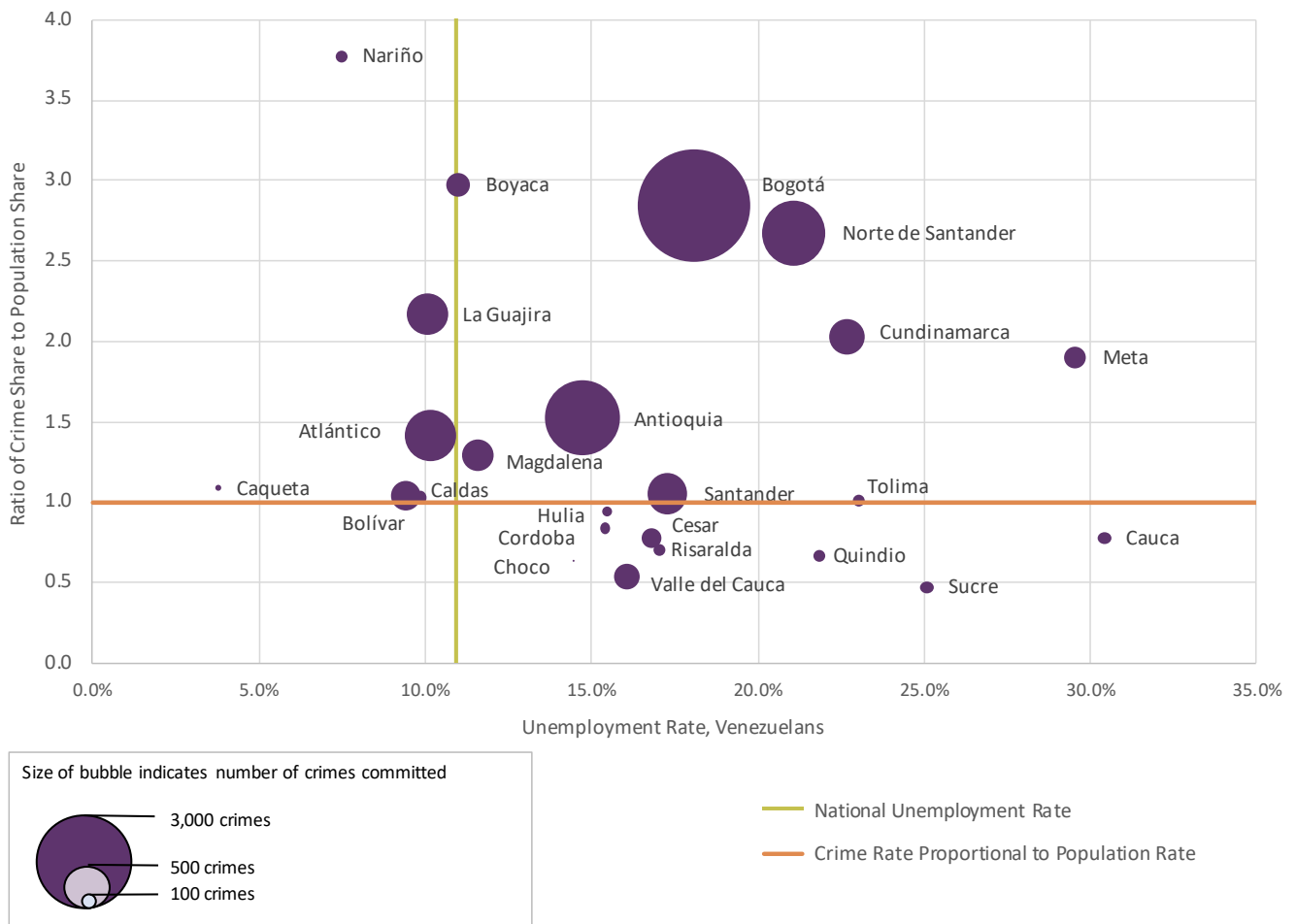
Venezuelan Share of the Population and of Violent Crimes in Colombia, by Department, January–August 2019



Source: Author analysis of 2019 data provided upon request by the Colombian National Police and GEIH.

FIGURE 13

Venezuelan Unemployment Rate and Excess Crime* Rate in Colombia, by Department, January–August 2019



*“Excess crime” in this figure is defined as Venezuelans committing crimes at higher rates than their share of the population. Source: Author analysis of 2019 data provided upon request by the Colombian National Police and GEIH.

share). Many of the departments that have higher than expected crime rates and high absolute numbers of crimes have unemployment rates above the national rate of 10.9 percent (see Figure 13).

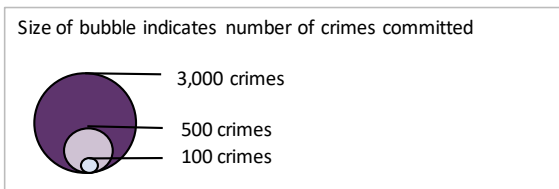
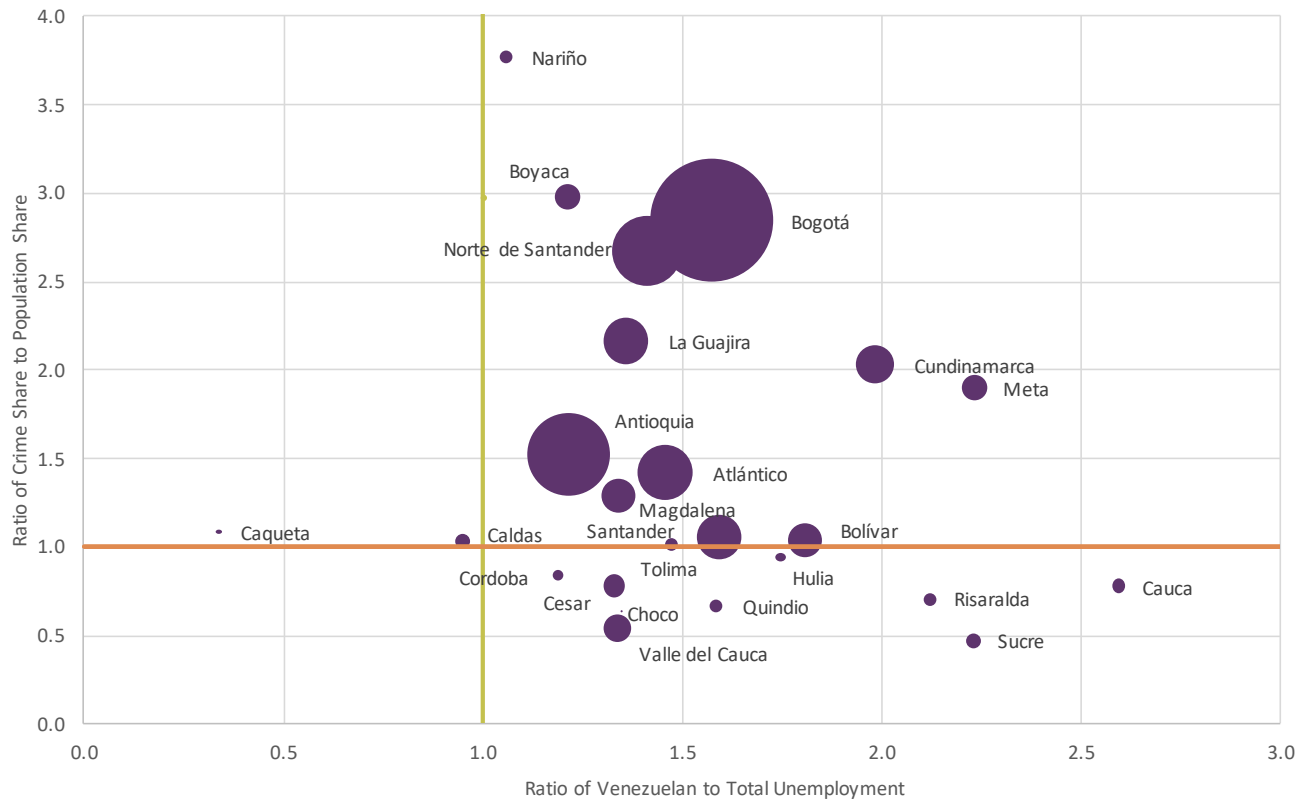
Looking at the subnational level, where unemployment rates tend to show greater variation, can shed further light on the relationship between unemployment and crime. As one might expect, in almost every department, Venezuelan unemployment rates were higher than the department average in 2019. In many of the places with high crime rates, Venezuelans had much higher than average unemploy-

ment; for instance, in Cundinamarca, the region surrounding Bogotá, Venezuelan unemployment stood at 23 percent, compared to the department average of 11 percent (see Figure 14). This could help explain the region’s higher than expected Venezuelan crime rate of 3.4 percent, compared with its Venezuelan population share of 1.7 percent.

While unemployment could potentially help explain excess crime rates—especially in regions with the highest absolute number of crimes, such as Bogotá and Antioquia—this is not to say that unemployment is the only explanation, as there are regions

FIGURE 14

Venezuelan Relative Unemployment Rate and Excess Crime* Rate in Colombia, by Department, January–August 2019



— Venezuelan Unemployment Rate Equal to Colombian
 — Crime Rate Proportional to Population Rate

*“Excess crime” in this figure is defined as Venezuelans committing crimes at higher rates than their share of the population.
 Source: Author analysis of 2019 data provided upon request by the Colombian National Police and GEIH.

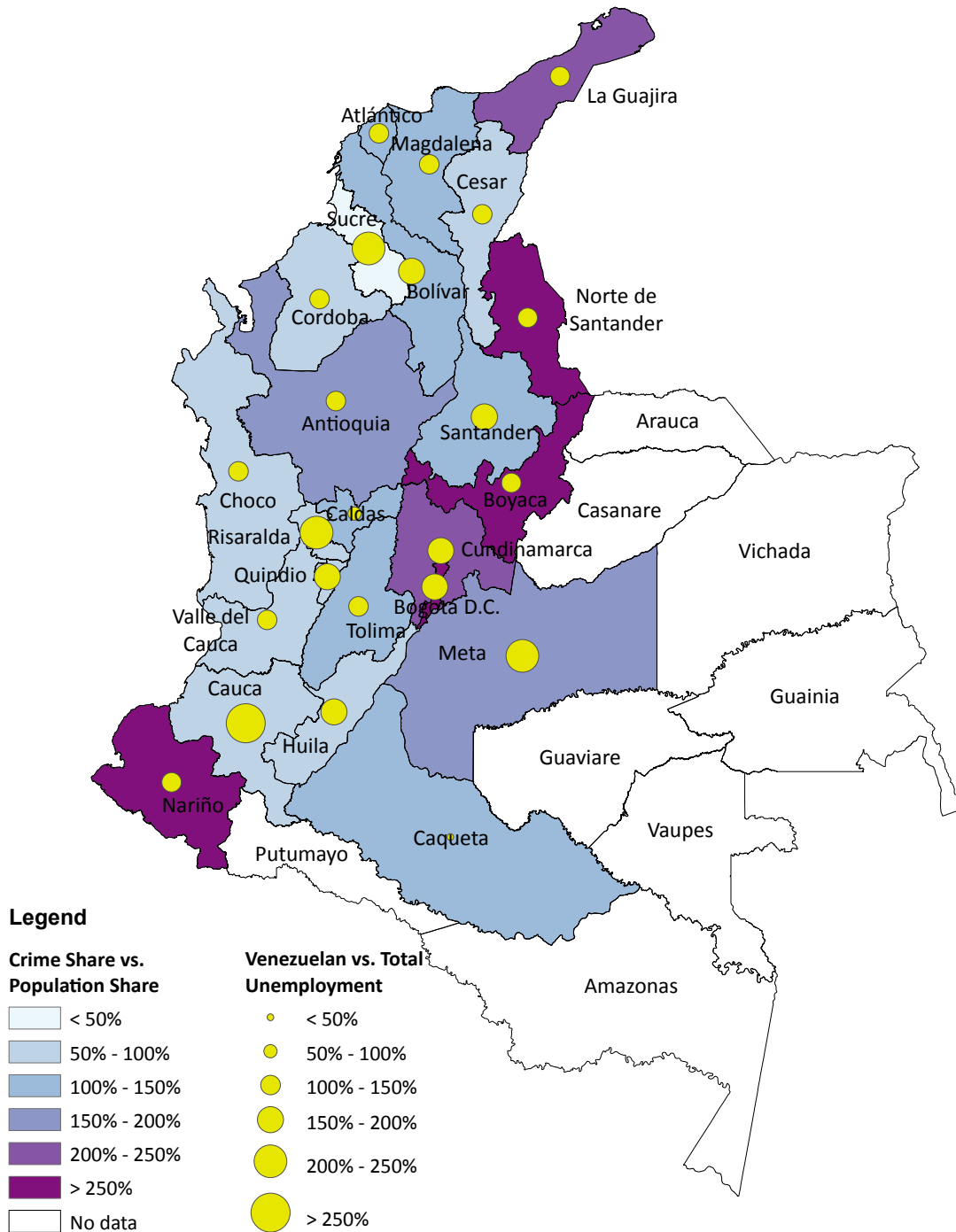
that do not fit the pattern. In Sucre, for instance, Venezuelans had a very high relative unemployment rate, but committed crimes at a rate equivalent to roughly half of their share of the department population. It is also worth noting that many of the regions that do not fit the pattern linking high unemployment and higher excess crime, like Sucre, had very low absolute numbers of crimes, as represented by the size of the bubbles in Figure 13 and 14.

In addition, there could be a third variable not accounted for in this analysis that explains both higher

unemployment and higher crime. However, for the Colombian regions in which most Venezuelans live and that account for the majority of crimes, this analysis does find that crime and unemployment seem to move in the same direction, consistent with the economic literature. For example, a 2013 empirical study of the link between crime and immigration to the United Kingdom found small effects that correspond to the labor market opportunities available to different migrants.²⁷ Along the same lines, a 2017 study in Italy of the effect of immigrant legalization on crime found that migrants who received

FIGURE 15

Venezuelan Excess Crime* Rate and Relative Unemployment Rate in Colombia, by Department, January–August 2019



*“Excess crime” in this figure is defined as Venezuelans committing crimes at higher rates than their share of the population. Source: Author analysis of 2019 data provided upon request by the Colombian National Police and GEIH.

work permits subsequently had less involvement in criminal activities, with a reduction of more than 50 percent.²⁸

5 Conclusions and Implications for Policy

Concerns have been rising across Latin America that the current wave of migration, mostly from Venezuela, is leading to an outbreak of crime in countries across the region. However, this connection is not consistently borne out by analysis of population and crime data from the three countries with the largest populations of Venezuelan migrants and refugees—Colombia, Peru, and Chile.

On the contrary, Venezuelan immigrants appear to have far lower rates of involvement in the criminal justice systems in both Peru and Chile than their share of the population would warrant. In other words, immigrants appear far less likely to commit crimes in those countries than the native born. This is consistent with most of the literature on crime and immigration, which shows in a number of countries that immigrants tend to commit fewer crimes than the native born.²⁹

In Colombia the relationship is somewhat more complex. Venezuelan nationals have lower arrest rates for violent crimes than their population share would warrant, but slightly higher rates of arrest for crimes overall. At a minimum, it is clear that the influx of Venezuelans into Colombia has not led to a resurgence of violence, since these newcomers are less likely than native-born Colombians to be arrested for violent crimes. However, Venezuelan nationals do commit a greater share of nonviolent crimes than their share of the population would suggest. This is especially the case in regions bordering Venezuela, and to a lesser extent, this appears to correlate with areas of the country where Venezuelans face high unemployment rates.

Colombia has received the largest number of forced migrants from Venezuela, and it hosts at least three different kinds of migrants: (1) those who are settling in Colombia; (2) those who are passing through on their way to other countries (though often residing temporarily in Colombia); and (3) those who move back and forth across the Colombia-Venezuela border frequently (sometimes daily) for work, access to consumer goods, school, health care, and other reasons. The data analyzed here do not make it possible to disaggregate which types of migrants may be more likely to commit crimes, but it is worth noting that there may well be different patterns among these groups that require further research.

Overall, analysis of data from these three countries suggests that migration does not appear to lead to crime—and certainly not to violent crime—in Latin America; however, there may be real issues around nonviolent crime and migration to address in some border communities, where smuggling is prevalent, and in areas of Colombia where the unemployment rate of recent immigrants is particularly high.

Far more research is needed to establish definitively the relationship between crime and immigration in Latin America and the Caribbean, at a time when many countries are experiencing rapid, large-scale arrivals for the first time. But the current study, even with its data limitations, offers the first systematic attempt to understand this relationship across several countries in the region.

These findings have significant implications for policy in Latin America. First and foremost, they argue that policymakers and opinion leaders should not fall prey to facile but almost always incorrect assumptions about immigration leading to crime. Attempts to blame immigrants for increases in crime and to target specific public-security campaigns against them almost always backfire.³⁰ These are likely to have the perverse effect of driving migrants into the shadows, making them less likely to report

crimes they witness or are victims of and less likely to cooperate with public authorities in addressing insecurity—to the detriment of societies as a whole.

Second, border regions across Latin America deserve special and separate attention because they often serve as nodes of organized crime activity. This is most visible in Colombia, but there is fragmentary evidence in Peru and Chile that suggests this as well. However, when designing policies to address crime in border regions, it is important to note that these activities often involve both foreign- and native-born criminals, so the attention should be on the criminal activities themselves—and the networks that facilitate them—rather than the nationality of those involved.

Finally, the relationships between unemployment among Venezuelans and nonviolent crime in Colombia is perhaps one more argument for actively addressing the legal status and labor market integration issues facing recent arrivals from Venezuela,

particularly as the conditions driving the massive displacement crisis persist. In particular, the results of this analysis suggest that policies that improve the integration of migrants and refugees into receiving-country labor markets could play an important role in reducing the already-low crime rates seen in these data, a topic that needs further study.

While the residents of any country are certainly right to be concerned about the safety and security of their communities, this study offers further evidence that immigrants in Latin America are not the principal drivers of crime, and indeed in many contexts are less likely to commit crimes than the native born. Therefore, it would make sense to focus attention broadly on citizen security—that is, addressing criminal networks and strengthening institutions for the rule of law—rather than on immigrants. In fact, focusing on immigrants as a source of crime is likely to distract from the many real security and safety challenges countries in Latin America face.

Focusing on immigrants as a source of crime is likely to distract from the many real security and safety challenges countries in Latin America face.

Endnotes

- 1 There have been other mass migrations to some Latin American and Caribbean countries in other time periods, but there had not been a flow on this scale since the early twentieth century.
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- 24 Migración Colombia is the official government source for Venezuelan refugee data. They obtain population estimates using administrative data from the Sistema de Información de Registro de Extranjeros (SIRE), Permiso Especial de Permanencia (PEP), immigration entry data, and 2018 National Population and Housing Census data from DANE. See Migración Colombia, “Estadísticas,” accessed July 20, 2020.
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- 30 There is a long literature on how the level of trust between law enforcement and immigrant communities shapes the ability of law enforcement actors to count on immigrants to report crimes and identify perpetrators. See, for example, Sylwia J. Piatkowska, “Immigrants’ Confidence in Police: Do Country-Level Characteristics Matter?” *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 39, no. 1 (2015): 1–30.

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