

# DISPLACED AND DISCONNECTED

The experience of asylum seekers and migrants in New York City 2023



**HESTER ST**



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# Introduction

## Displacement across the globe has forced millions of individuals and families to seek asylum in foreign countries.

New York has become a significant destination for asylum seekers arriving in the United States in recent years. About 110,000<sup>1</sup> asylum seekers have arrived in New York City since the spring of 2022.

The recent influx of immigrants in New York City is a direct consequence of politicians utilizing asylum seekers as political pawns and callously subjecting them to days-long bus rides, often without knowledge or insight into where they're going.

Despite New York City's reputation as a beacon of hope and opportunity, many asylum seekers face immense challenges due to the lack of access to basic resources. This report summarizes survey responses from asylum seekers and highlights the challenges they face as they settle into the city.

A shorter version of this report was published in June 2023. This longer report presents the full extent of findings from a comprehensive survey conducted to understand the experiences asylum seekers have had and the resource gaps they face in New York.

Administered in conjunction with Make the Road New York's (MRNY) asylee aid phone distribution program, the survey is meant to provide additional information and a fuller perspective around asylum seekers' experiences — assessing their needs, identifying how they're navigating the process, and highlighting areas that can

be improved within the existing network of support services, programs, and processes available.

This survey is a continuation of MRNY's 2022 connectivity program, which aims to provide help through improving communication and connection to services for new migrants, including basic support and essentials.

Responses for over 800 surveys were collected and synthesized to shed light on specific challenges faced by asylum seekers in accessing healthcare, education, work, and basic resources in New York. Exit interviews with volunteers who administered the surveys provided additional insight that was not captured by the survey questions.

By systematically examining the data collected from the survey, as well as insight from those who interacted directly with the asylees, we aim to identify the extent of the problem and propose solutions to address these resource gaps.

<sup>1</sup> "Adams: Surge of Migrants Crossing Border Expected to Impact NYC", The New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/07/nyregion/adams-migrants-destroy-nyc.html#:~:text=The%20surge%20of%20migrants%20crossing,were%20expected%20to%20join%20them.>

# Methodology

**To reach migrants and asylum seekers where they are, we designed the survey to be administered alongside Make the Road New York's (MRNY) asylee aid phone distribution program.**

The phone distribution program lasted from February to May of 2023. In that time, 840 survey responses were collected. During in-person appointments to receive a cell phone, trained staff and volunteers conducted one-on-one interviews with migrants using the survey. Appointments were conducted in Spanish and English, with the majority of appointments being in Spanish.

2022	2023										
Aug-Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	
		Phone distribution program									
		Surveys conducted			Exit interviews	Interim report				Final report	

## Survey design

In collaboration with Hester Street, survey questions were developed with the goal of understanding various aspects of the migration and asylum-seeking process — including migrants' country of origin, experience with legal services, current living conditions, and experience with immigration court. The survey was designed to take 15–20 minutes (to fit into a 30 minute allotted time for the appointment) and was designed in English then translated into Spanish.

## Phone distribution program

Asylum seekers were referred to MRNY's phone distribution program through word of mouth, referrals from support organizations, and organizational outreach. The programs were offered at intake centers in Manhattan as well as in MRNY's offices in Jackson Heights and Bushwick.

## Exit interviews

To get a fuller profile of the program participants, exit interviews with the survey administrators were conducted. These interviews provided clarity and insight on the functionality of the survey, as well as qualitative feedback on the participants' experience navigating the survey itself.

## Data analysis and synthesis

Once all the data was collected and the interviews were completed, it underwent a process of synthesis and analysis. Quantitative and qualitative data were reviewed, and themes and trends were extracted. MRNY used these insights to develop the policy recommendations highlighted in this report.

**A total of 840 migrants and asylum seekers answered this survey.**

# Respondent profile



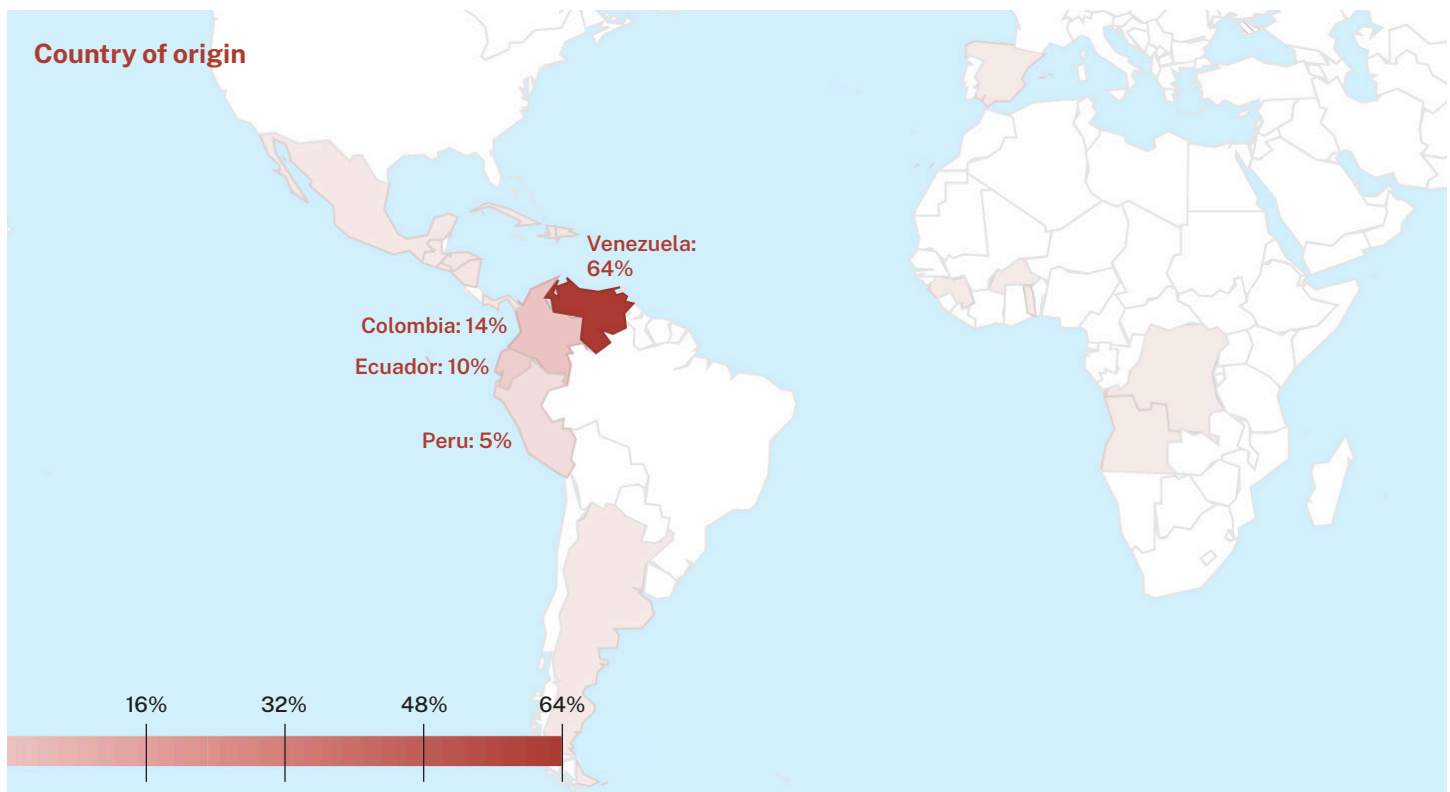
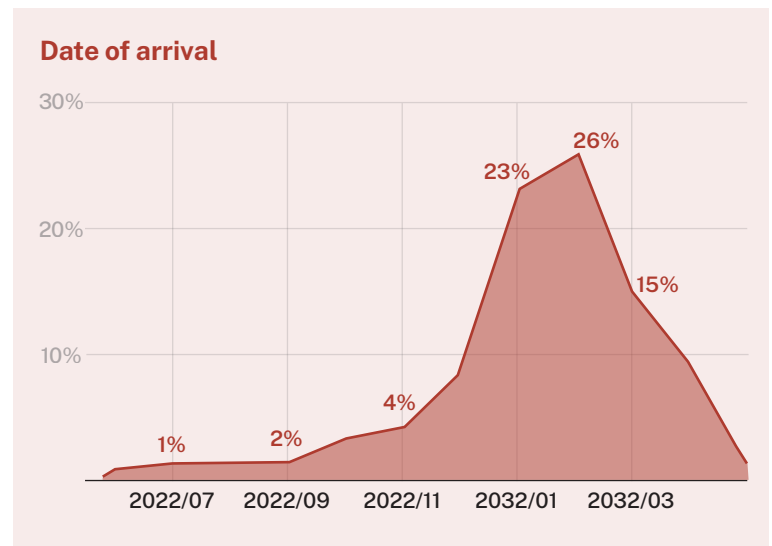
## Respondent profile

# Country of origin

**74% percent of migrants surveyed arrived between January and April of 2023. They are mostly from Venezuela, between the ages of 20–40, and traveling with children.**

**64% of migrants were originally from Venezuela**, reflecting the reality of the ongoing political crisis in Venezuela that has led to mass displacement and migration. 14% came from Colombia, 10% from Ecuador, and 5% from Peru. 7% are from other countries with less than 2% of responses.

The majority of migrants and asylum seekers came from South America. 6% came from the Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico combined. 1% came from Africa, Europe, and Asia combined.



**Note:** After the survey was completed, MRNY saw evidence of increased migration from other regions — especially West Africa. Further research that includes this population will be helpful for shaping appropriate and culturally competent policy responses.

## Respondent profile

# Race, age, and gender

The majority of respondents surveyed identify as Latina(o)/Latinx.

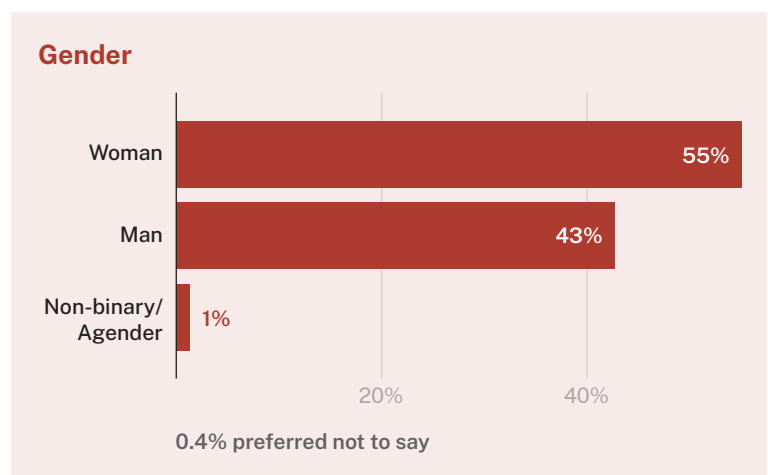
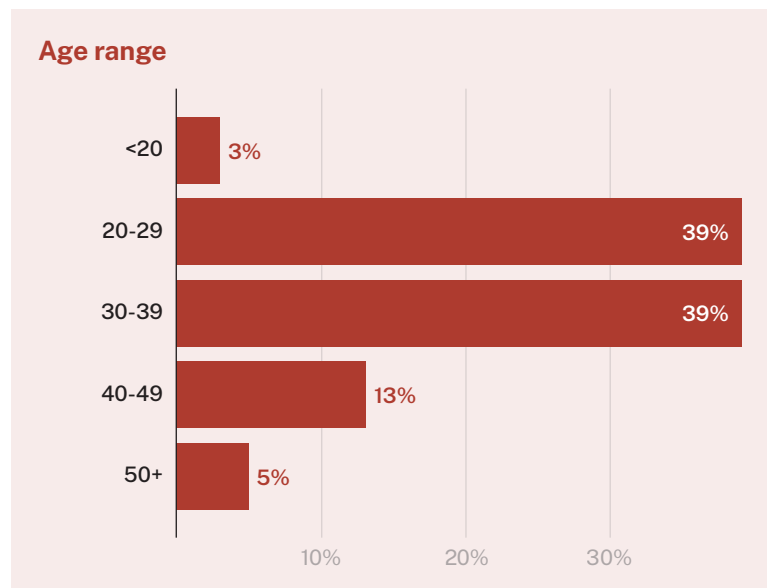
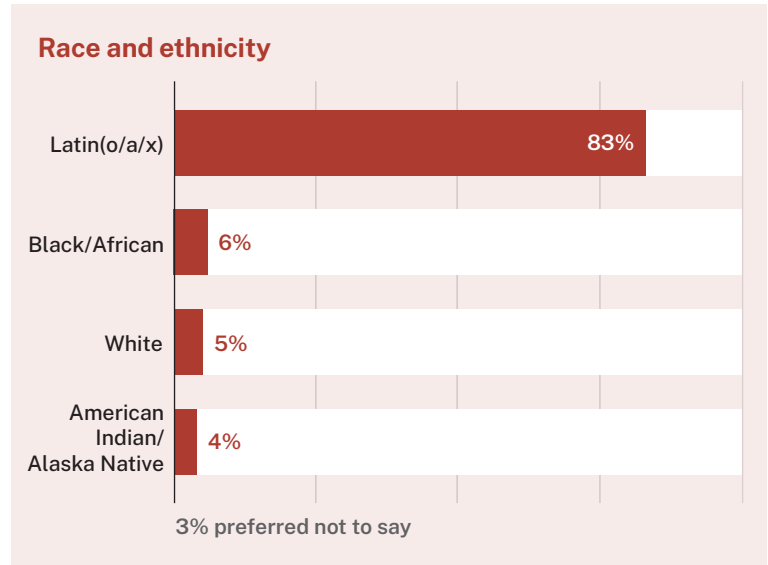
Most migrants and asylum seekers surveyed are between ages of 20–40, with an even ratio between 20–29 and 30–39.

71% of migrants were traveling with family members. For those traveling with family, 86% said their traveling party included children under 18. This makes for a total of 61% who were traveling with minors.

55% identify as women. 1% identify as trans or non-binary — those migrants shared that feeling “safe to express my sexuality” and “avoiding transphobia” were reasons for leaving their country.

As a side note: all survey administrators found the gender question challenging to ask. Many respondents felt uncomfortable answering questions about gender because the question itself brought attention to non-heteronormative gender identities and was perceived as questioning the gender of survey respondents. However, one survey administrator shared that a trans woman appreciated the question.

18% of migrants have family or loved ones in New York. This is a notably lower percentage compared to previous waves of immigration, where the migrants who have family in New York City make up a higher percentage.

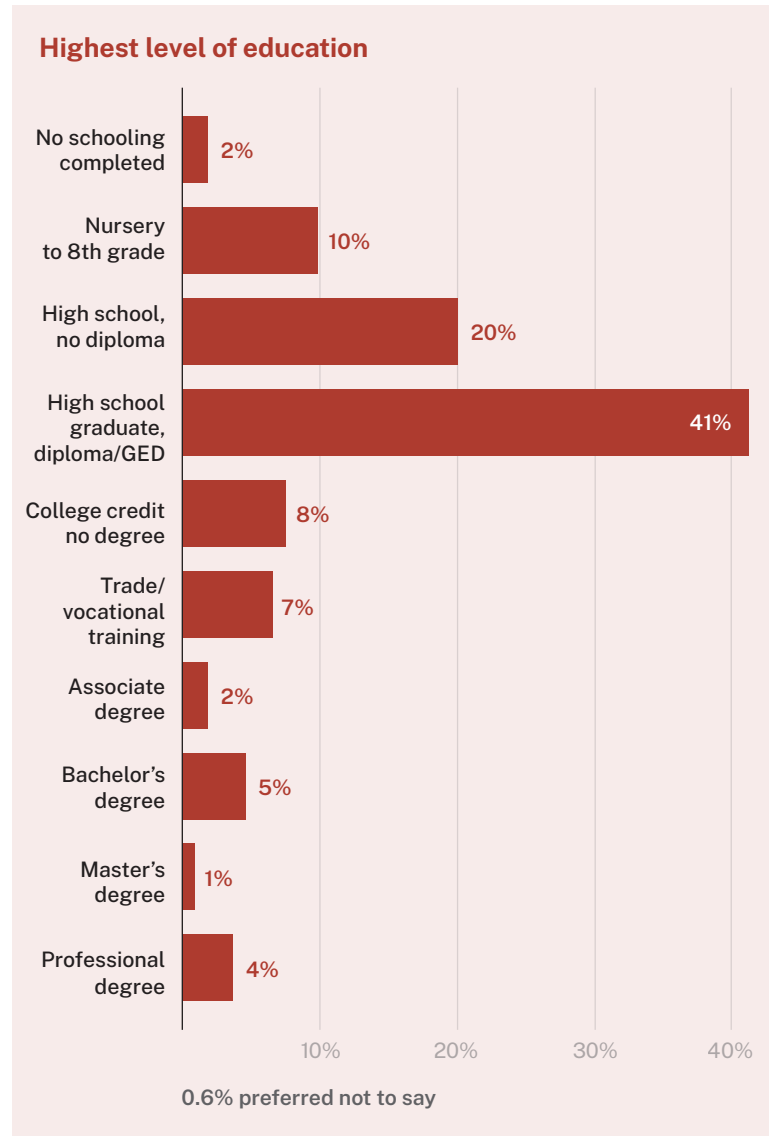


## Respondent profile

# Education

67% of migrants had a high school diploma or higher level of education.

18% went on to complete a vocational training or college degree.





# Lacking access to basic resources



# Lacking access to basic resources

**Our survey revealed that the majority of migrants struggle day-to-day, including paying for their basic living expenses and being able to get medical care.**

**Some don't have access to three full meals a day or warm clothing for the winter.**

**73% say that they are having trouble paying for basic living expenses. 60% don't have reliable access to transportation in order to make important appointments such as court hearing dates.** Survey administrators indicated that lack of transportation access for migrants includes not knowing how to use the subway.

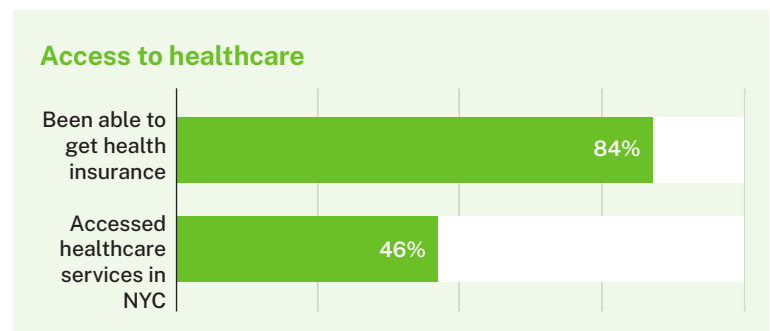
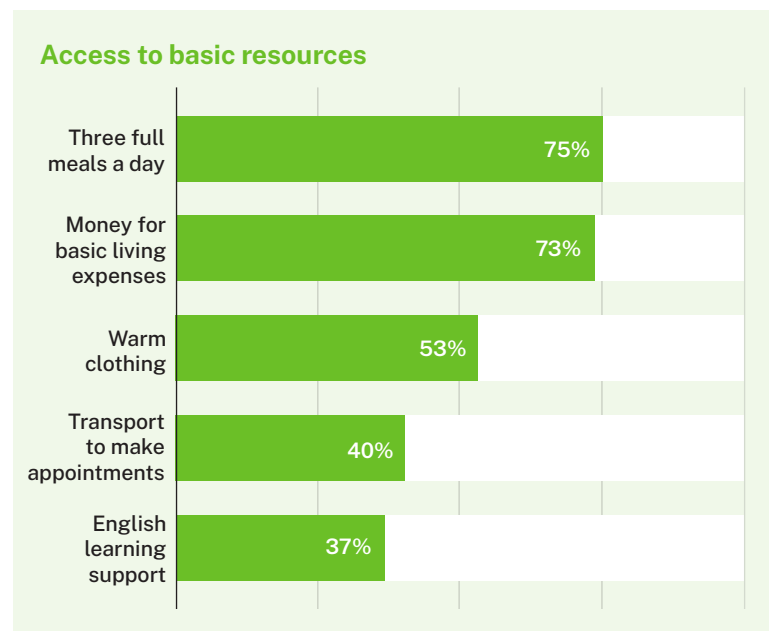
Concerningly, **25% don't have access to three full meals a day and 47% don't have access to warm clothing.**

In Make the Road New York's ongoing work with the migrant and asylum-seeking population, migrants have anecdotally reported to organizers that shelter-provided meals have caused illness that resulted in seeking urgent medical care.

**84% of those surveyed have health insurance. Less than half (46%) have accessed healthcare services.** Based on exit interviews with survey administrators (see Page 4 on our Methodology), the number of people who have seen a healthcare provider may be higher than reported due to some respondents not understanding the question (and what is considered "accessing healthcare").

The most common healthcare challenge experienced is not being able to pay for healthcare services (or otherwise get free healthcare services).

Other challenges migrants report include: not having or being unable to use insurance; not being able to get to appointments, and not being able to find a provider.



# Barriers to employment and financial wellbeing



# Barriers to employment and financial wellbeing

**The vast majority of migrants are still looking for steady work in New York City.**

**Not having work authorization is the most reported challenge in finding a steady job.**

**93% of migrants say they are looking for work. Of that group, 98% say it has been hard to find work.**

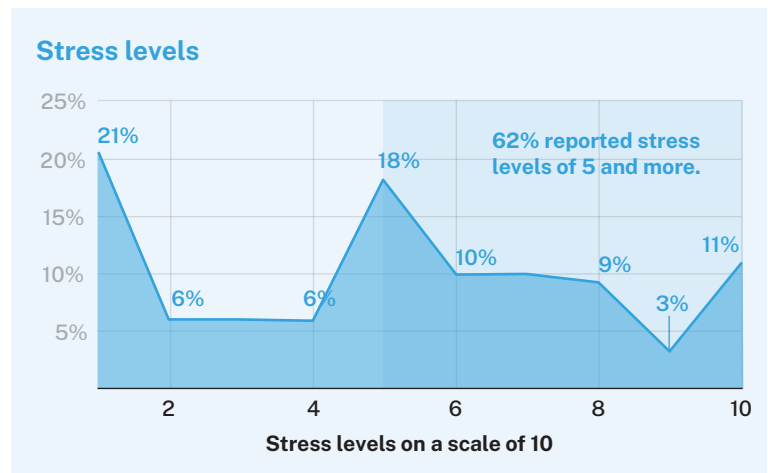
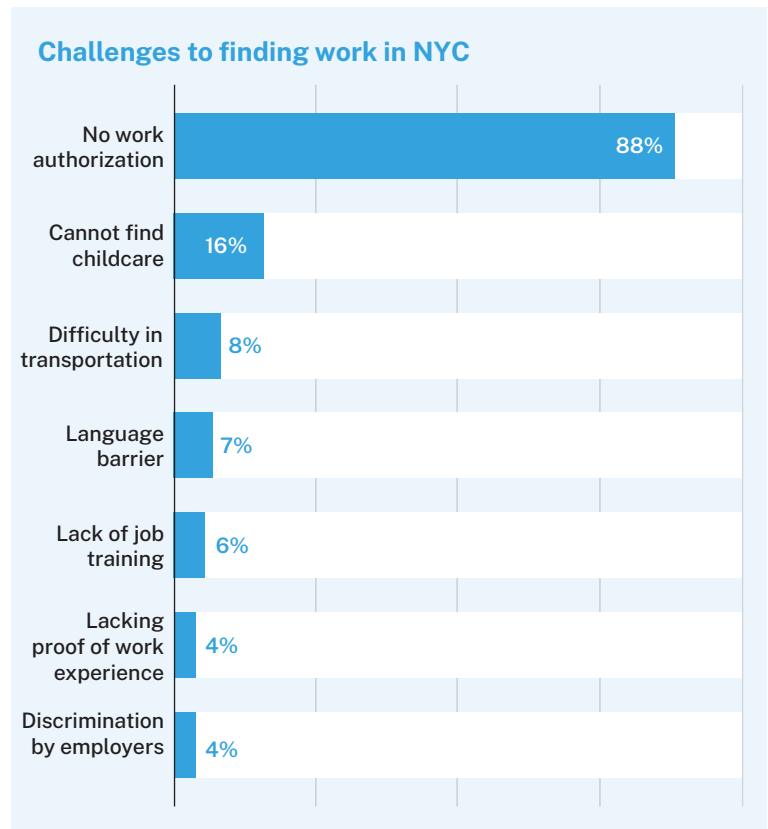
**Of all migrants surveyed, 98% have not received authorization to work in the United States.**

While lack of work authorization is the top reason it's hard to find work, migrants cited other reasons too, such as inability to find childcare.

Although our survey asked questions about working conditions, we received so few responses (20 in total) to those questions that the data is not considered to be statistically significant.

When asked about stress levels, the majority of migrants reported experiencing moderate to high (5 out of 10 or higher) levels of stress. Most survey administrators said that the question about stress level often generated an emotional reaction in respondents — they became noticeably sad or stressed by the question. The question would also prompt people to further share their experience, the most common story being that they are unable to find work despite their

efforts. Comparing different potential sources of stress, the most common for migrants is finding steady work or income (“Sources of stress”).



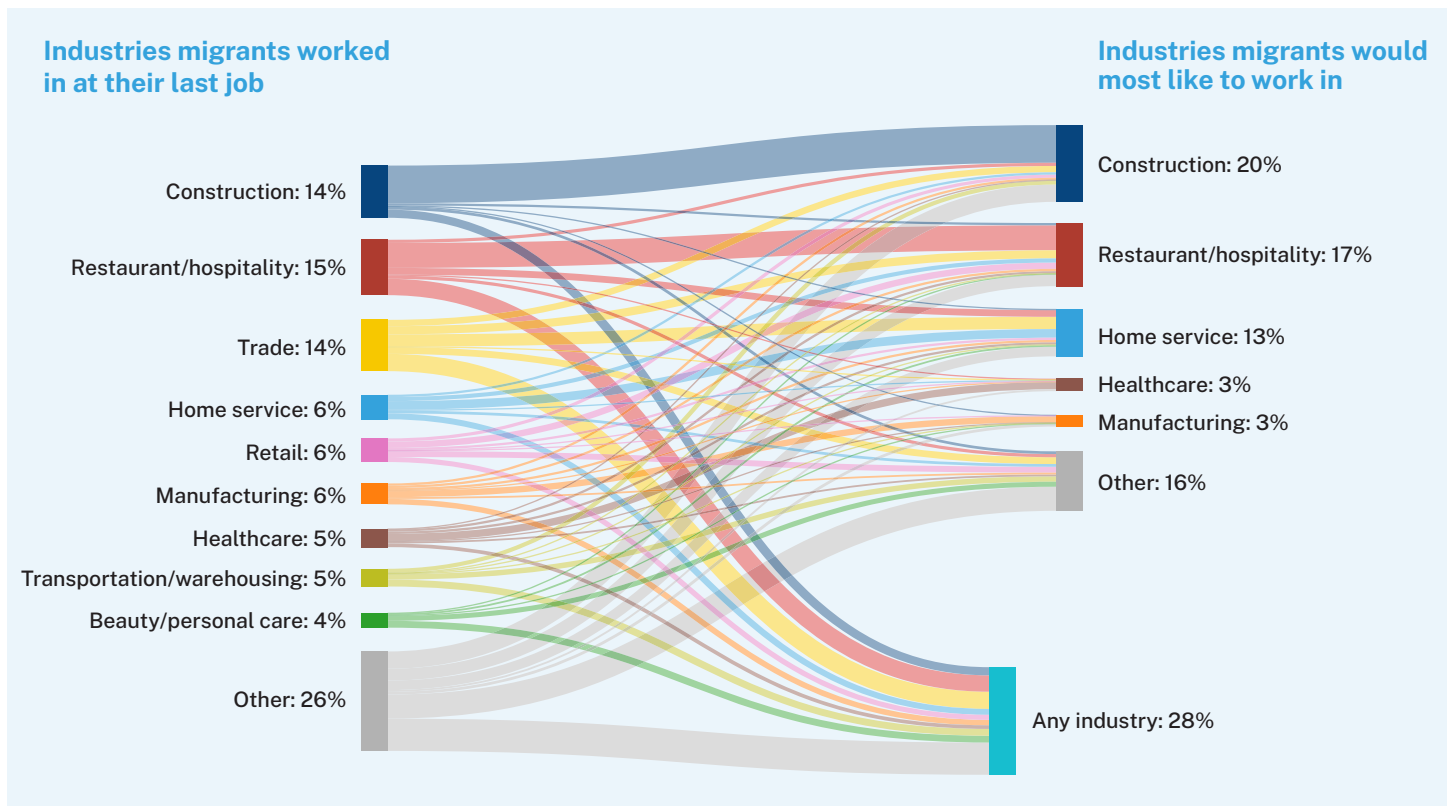
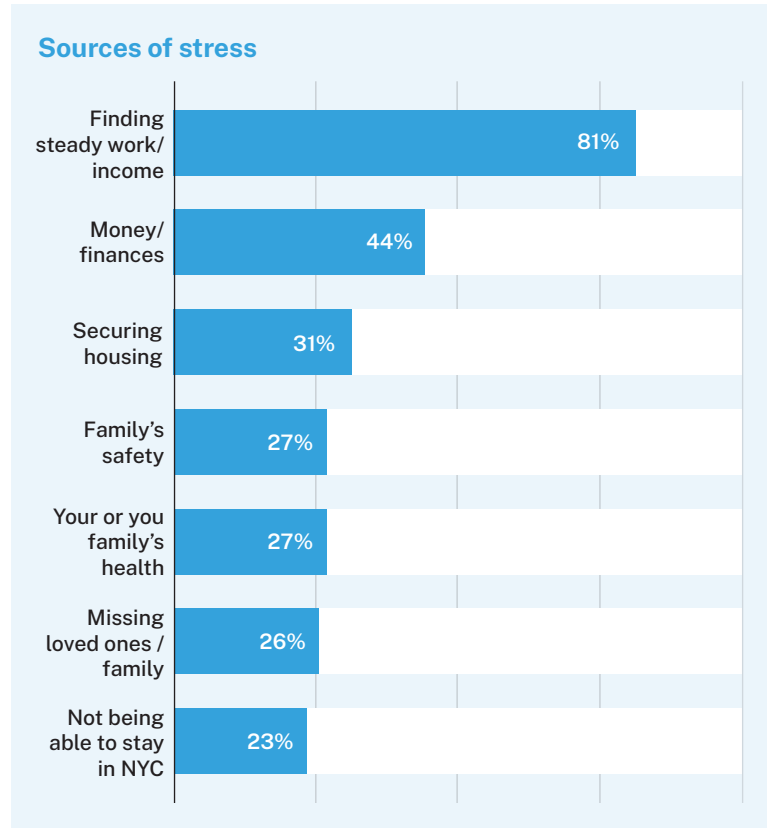
# Barriers to employment and financial wellbeing

## Difficulty in finding steady work

**46% of migrants report having migrated with financial debt.** Survey administrators reported that migrants had discomfort when answering questions about whether or not they had debt.

Our survey also asked migrants what industry they worked in before migrating and what industry they'd like to work in now. Before migrating, the most common jobs were in restaurant/hospitality, construction, and trade. These three industries make up a total of 43% of jobs held by migrants before migrating.

Now after migrating, 28% said they would work in any industry in which they could get a job. 20% say they want to work in construction, 17% say food / hospitality, 13% say home services (including cleaning and general contractor work).



# Struggle to seek asylum



## Struggle to seek asylum

# A difficult legal process

**Our survey revealed that migrants don't fully understand the legal support needed to move through the process of obtaining asylum status, which is necessary in order to apply for work authorization.**

**Getting that support, in the form of an immigration attorney, is an added challenge for asylum seekers.**

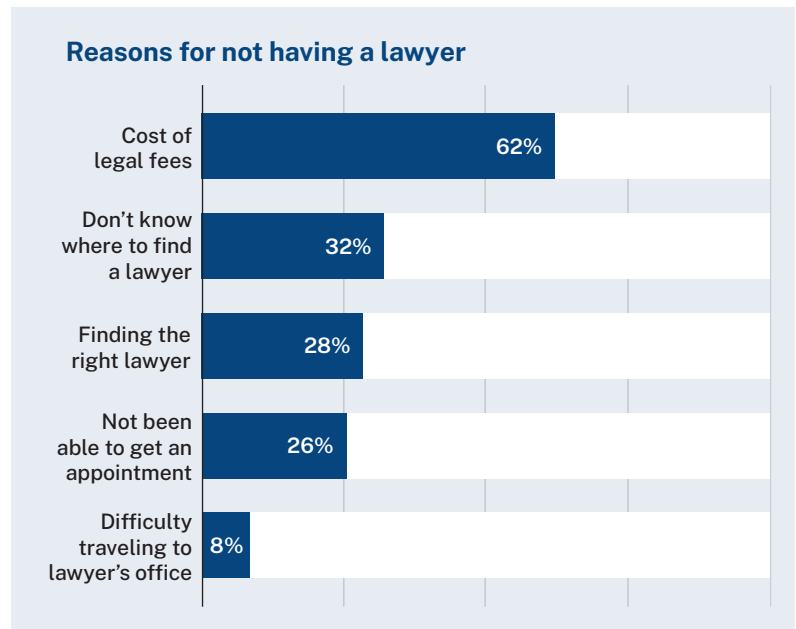
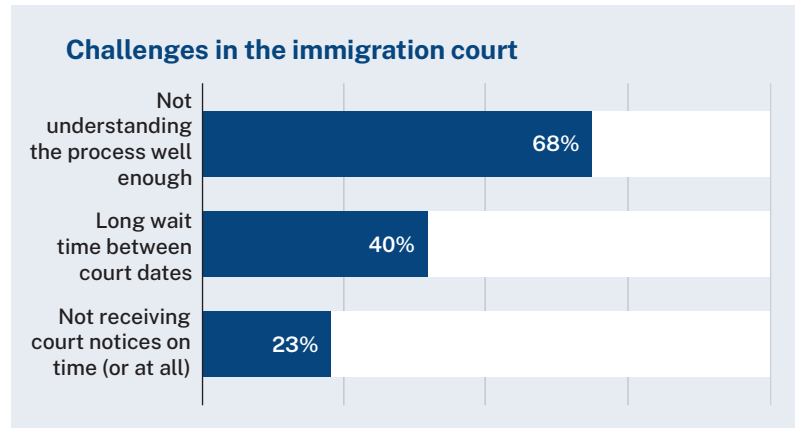
One survey administrator said that “nobody seemed to understand the full scope of the asylum process” and another said that asylum seekers asked “why do I need a lawyer and where do I find one?”

While 96% of migrants are seeking asylum, only 6% have found an attorney to support them.

62% say that the cost of legal fees is a reason they do not have legal representation. This suggests a vicious cycle where, without authorization to work, asylum seekers are unable to secure the resources and support needed to navigate a complex legal process.

For those who have begun the asylum process with the support of a lawyer, long wait times between court hearing dates create the same experience of being stalled in the asylum process. One respondent shared that their court date was set for 2027, and another has a

court date set for 2030. Our survey was administered in spring of 2023.



## Struggle to seek asylum

# Stuck in the shelter system

**Almost all migrants surveyed are living in shelters and most say that, without the ability to work and earn income, they are unable to move out.**

**This obstacle and other findings in this report provide a picture of the compounding factors that feed into the same cycle.**

**Without the legal authorization to work, asylum seekers are unable to seek better options for housing (or gain asylum status).**

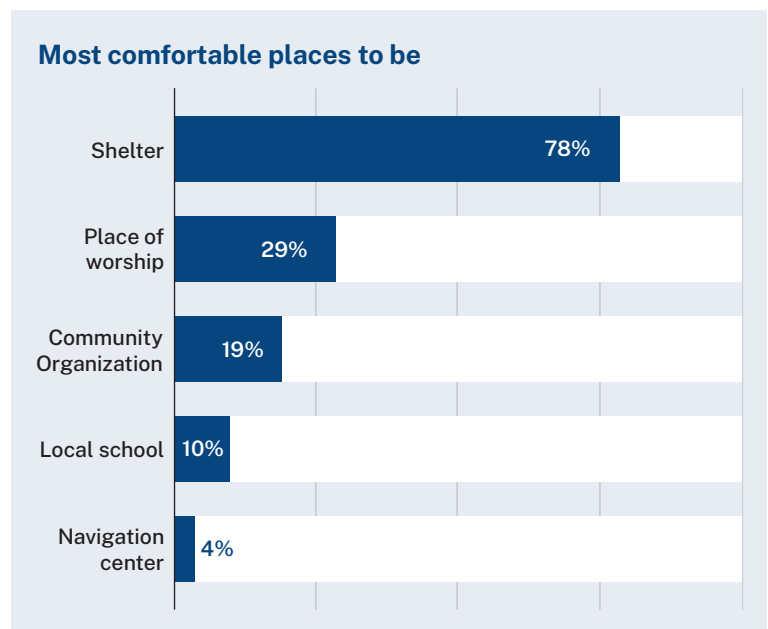
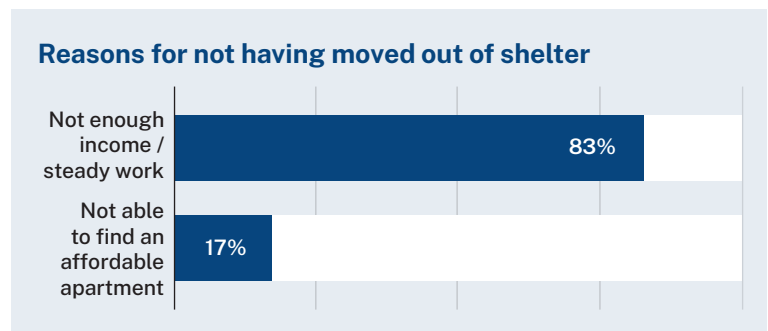
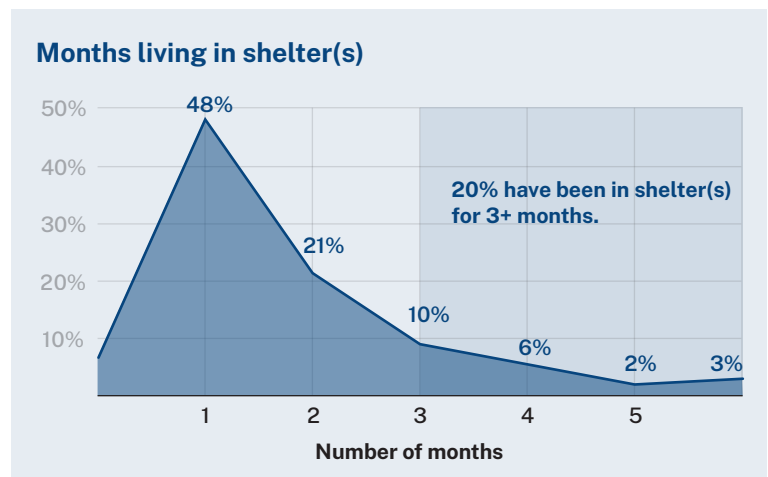
**97% of migrants surveyed are currently living in a shelter.** Our survey defines “Shelters” as buildings used as temporary shelters as well as Humanitarian Emergency Response and Relief Centers (also known as HERRCs).

While 54% of respondents had been living in shelters for one month or less at the time of survey collection, 20% have been in shelter(s) for three months or longer. We also learned that 23% of participants had stayed in more than one shelter.

When asked about reasons for not moving out of shelter, 83% of migrants said that not having enough income or work was a reason.

**When it comes to shelter living conditions, we learned that 52% don't**

**have access to lockable storage spaces, but almost all have access to heat and hot water, and most have access to strong internet or broadband services.**





# Conclusion and policy recommendations



# Conclusion

**This survey data sheds light on significant resource gaps faced by this vulnerable population.**

**City, state, and federal leaders must continue to take action to address these challenges and ensure that asylum seekers receive the support they need.**

The findings clearly indicate that asylum seekers are not getting the work authorization, legal services, education, healthcare, and basic resources they need to thrive. This puts them and their families at risk and creates significant barriers to their successful integration into the city.

Policymakers and stakeholders must prioritize the needs of asylum seekers and work collectively to ensure they have the freedom to work and the freedom to thrive. By addressing the gaps in resources highlighted in this report, New York can live up to its core values as a place of refuge and opportunity, providing a supportive environment where asylum seekers can rebuild their lives and become full members of communities.

By taking federal action to expedite work authorization for asylum seekers and devoting city resources to provide adequate legal services, English language classes, healthcare, and other baseline resources, we can ensure that asylum seekers in New York receive the support they desperately need. That is the best way to make certain that they can embark on a new chapter with dignity, resilience, and hope.

## Conclusion

# NYC policy recommendations

### Legal services funding

#### ✓ Invest at least \$140M in immigration legal services for migrants

Legal service providers work around the clock to assist NYC's newest migrants, often with little to no additional funding and while maintaining representation of thousands of existing clients. The City must substantially increase funding for immigration legal representation to better protect immigrant communities now and in the future.

### Housing

#### ✓ Extend CityFHEPS to shelter residents regardless of immigration status

CityFHEPS, a voucher that helps New Yorkers move from homeless shelters to apartments, is limited to a very small number of people. To help more people obtain stable housing, the City must improve CityFHEPS by eliminating unnecessary rules and expanding eligibility to more households, including families where everyone is undocumented.

### Health

#### ✓ Address health access disparities

The City must expand funding for the Access Health Initiative to \$4M and allocate \$2.3M in funding for the Managed Care Consumer Assistance Program (MCCAP). Additionally, the City must maintain funding for Ending the Epidemic at \$7.7M and the Immigrant Health Initiative at \$2M. These programs enable CBOs to provide immigrant families with information about their rights and available resources.

#### ✓ Expand funding for the NYC Care Program

Operated by NYC Health + Hospitals, NYC Care guarantees low-cost and no-cost services to New Yorkers who do not qualify for, or cannot afford, health insurance. NYC Care must receive \$100M per year to continue to implement the program and fund CBOs to conduct outreach, education and direct enrollment. They should also receive additional funding to be able to expand the program to Federally Qualified Health Centers, which was approved under Local Law 107.

## Conclusion

# NYC policy recommendations

### Workers

#### ✓ **Renew and expand the Low-Wage Worker Support**

Renew and expand the Low-Wage Worker Support (LWWS) initiative to \$3M, including \$1.4M for the City-wide Immigrant Legal Empowerment Collaborative (CILEC) coalition of legal services providers and community-based organizations. The LWWS initiative enables legal service providers and community-based organizations to represent hundreds of workers on wage theft, discrimination, and other claims, and conduct comprehensive, multilingual worker outreach and education programs.

#### ✓ **Renew funding for job training and placement**

The Job Training and Placement Initiative supports classes for members of unions, CBOs, and providers serving immigrants. Funding must include \$5.255M for the Consortium for Worker Education “Jobs to Build On” program and \$2.375M for Worker Service Centers.

### Education

#### ✓ **Reject and reverse any cuts to public education and public libraries**

The Adams administration has already cut more than \$500 million from public school funding, in addition to cutting other vital services. This funding must be restored and the new budget must not include any additional cuts.

#### ✓ **Expand funding to community schools**

Restore \$9.16 million in funding to the 52 community schools bracing for significant budget cuts so they can continue to provide wraparound services to students and families.

#### ✓ **Fully fund adult literacy programs**

Restore and baseline \$20.4M for DYCD RFP-contracted adult literacy programs (\$5.7M in established baseline funding, \$8M in expansion funding baselined in FY22, and \$6.7M added for additional expansion in FY23.) Renew the \$4M City Council Discretionary Adult Literacy Initiative which added flexibility to program rates, and renew and expand the City Council Discretionary Adult Literacy Pilot Project to \$5M under the new title “Adult Literacy Program Enhancement.”

## Conclusion

# State policy recommendations

### ✓ **Coordination and resources**

Actual statewide coordination of shelter needs and apply

### ✓ **Right to Shelter statewide**

### ✓ **State work authorization for state agency jobs**

New York State should explore every legal avenue available to maximize access to employment opportunities for immigrants

### ✓ **Pass housing protections**

Good Cause eviction, Housing Access, Voucher Program (HAVP), social housing

### ✓ **Fair taxation on ultra-wealthy and large corporations**

### ✓ **Major expansion of funding for immigration legal services**

### ✓ **Major expansion of funding for adult literacy**

## Conclusion

# Federal policy recommendations

✓ **Expedite work authorization for asylum seekers**

✓ **Send more resources to NY to support asylum seekers**

✓ **Reverse efforts to undermine the asylum system**

These efforts makes refugees ineligible for asylum based on how they enter the United States and whether they applied for protection in a country they transited through on their way to the United States.

✓ **Expand and renew Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) for countries affected by political unrest and natural disasters**

# Appendix

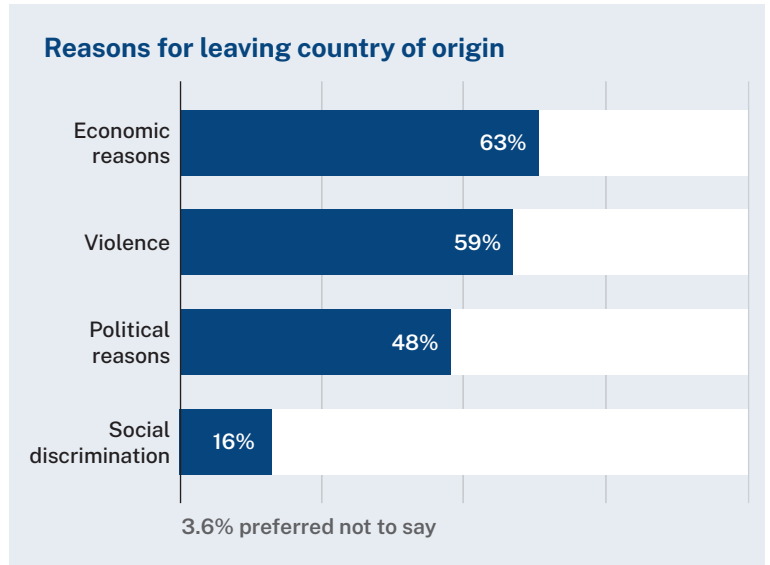


## Appendix

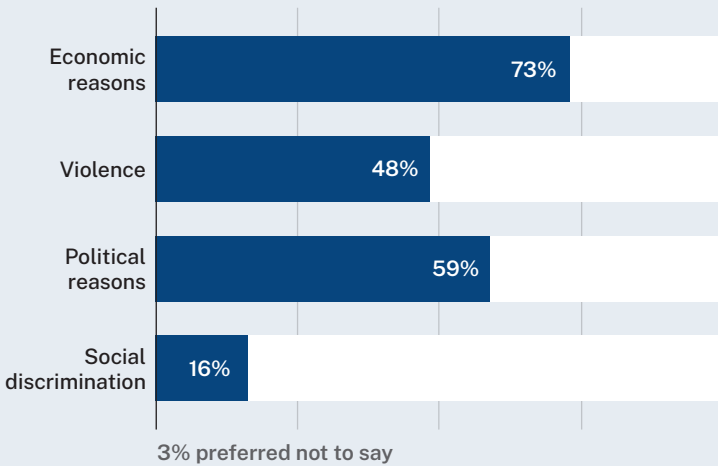
# Reasons for migrating

When asked for all the reasons why they left their country of origin, **63% said they left because of economic reasons, 59% because of violence, and 48% because of political reasons.**

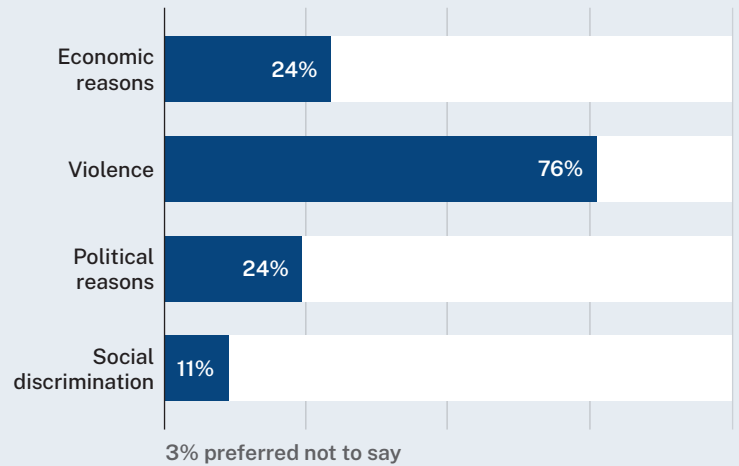
**Note:** Many respondents gave more than one reason for leaving their country. For instance, many people left for both political and economic reasons.



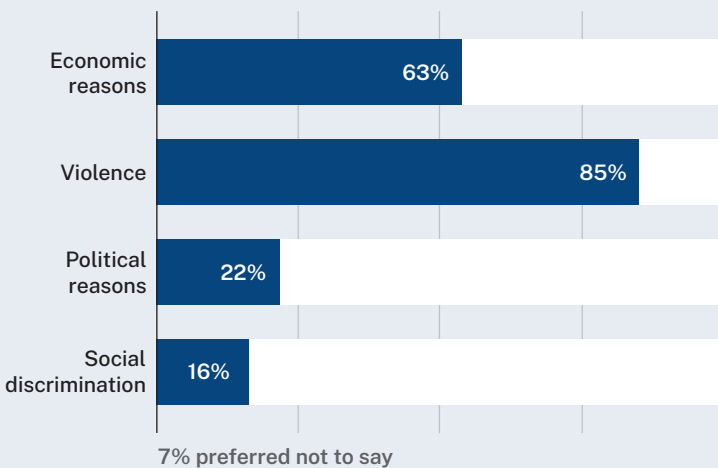
### Reasons for leaving Venezuela



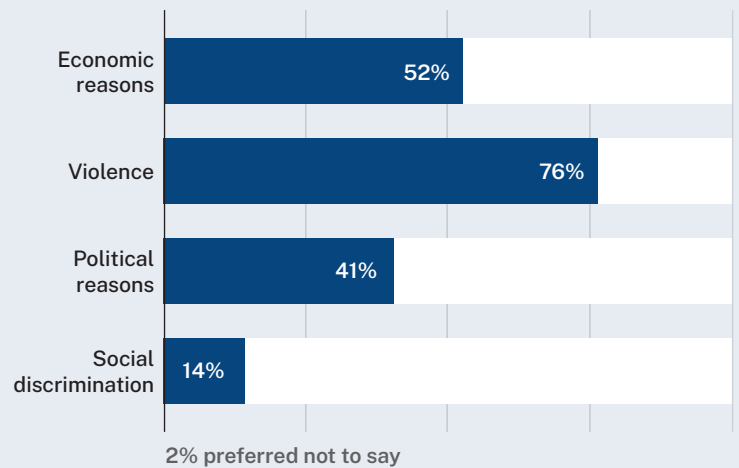
### Reasons for leaving Colombia



### Reasons for leaving Ecuador



### Reasons for leaving Peru



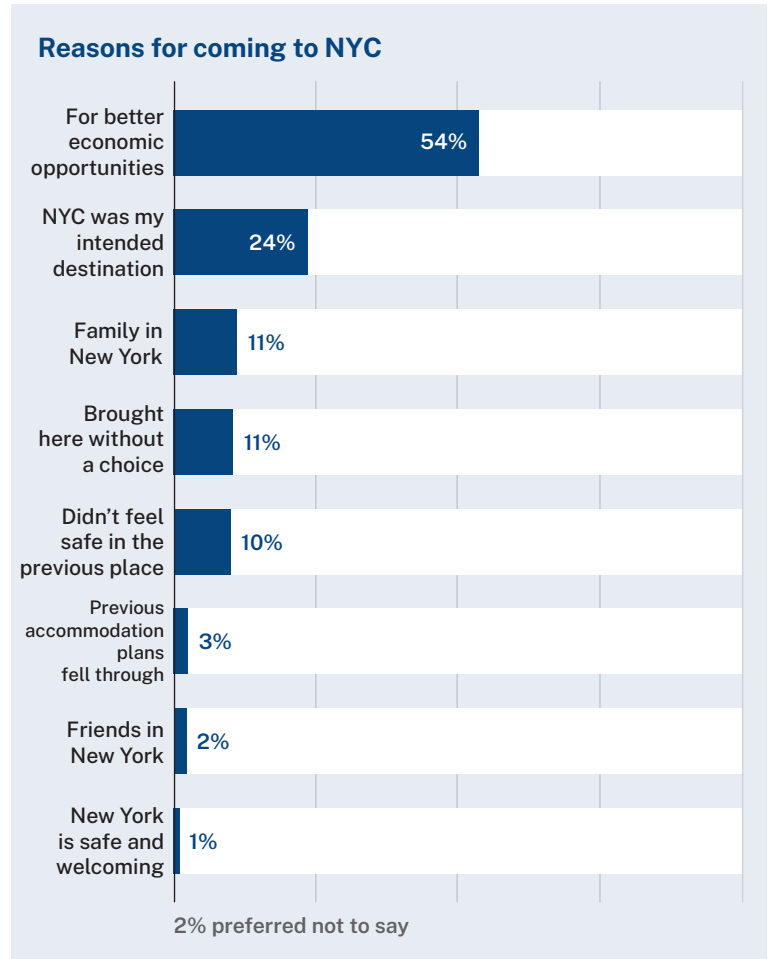


## Appendix

# Reasons for coming to New York City

When asked why they came to NYC over other migration destinations, **54% of the migrants surveyed came to NYC because they believed that they would have better economic opportunities here.** These migrants expressed optimism in their reasons for moving to NYC: that New York “provides better opportunities for immigrants,” “is very welcoming to immigrants,” that NYC is a “sanctuary city.”

13% say that they had no other option or that their other options (plans to migrate to another city) fell through.





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