



Cuban Migration as A Transnational Vulnerability Dispersion

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the concept of *Transnational Vulnerability Dispersion* to clarify the migration patterns of Cubans to the Latin American South. This concept is essential for advancing the Migration and Development dialogue as it addresses the complex array of migration causes and impacts by integrating insights and conceptual parallels that are frequently overlooked by existing theories. This theoretical framework effectively bridges the perspectives of agency and structure, although it does not fully capture the subjective experiences of migrants facing disadvantages. By moving beyond one-directional explanations, this framework enriches the understanding of South-South migration. The article accomplishes this through a review of existing literature, which highlights the risks, exclusions, and cultural stigmas that contribute to the perpetuation of vulnerability throughout the migratory cycle.

RESUMEN

Este artículo introduce el concepto de *Dispersión Transnacional de la Vulnerabilidad* para comprender los patrones migratorios cubanos hacia el sur de América Latina. Este concepto es importante para ampliar el diálogo teórico y académico sobre migración y desarrollo, ya que aborda la compleja variedad de causas e impactos de la migración al integrar perspectivas y paralelismos conceptuales que las teorías existentes suelen pasar por alto. Así, este marco teórico tiende un puente entre las perspectivas de la agencia y de estructura, aunque no capta plenamente las experiencias subjetivas de los migrantes que enfrentan desventajas. Al ir más allá de las explicaciones unidireccionales, este marco enriquece la comprensión de la migración Sur-Sur. El artículo logra esto a través de una revisión de la literatura existente, que destaca los riesgos, las exclusiones y los estigmas culturales que contribuyen a la perpetuación de la vulnerabilidad a lo largo del ciclo migratorio.

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INTRODUCTION

Transnational Vulnerability Dispersion (TVD) examines how vulnerability is perpetuated throughout the migratory cycle. This theoretical framework explores how migrants encounter various risks and multiple forms of exclusion in new societies, which constrain their access to resources and structures. This perspective highlights a critical gap: the assumption that migration is successful merely because migrants enter labor markets with low incomes. Instead, TVD acknowledges the ongoing transnational reproduction of vulnerabilities similar to those faced in the migrants' countries of origin.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of migration—encompassing stages such as origin, transit, settlement, and return—it is essential to consider factors beyond income and labor market access. Vulnerability persists due to inefficient protection and care policies, social and cultural stigmas, the undervaluation of job qualifications, inadequate consular or legal support, and exposure to risks such as gender violence, organized crime, and rights violations (Busso 2011). Thinking on migration and development, this approach suggests analyzing how transnational vulnerability manifests across different stages of migration. It suggests a relationship between: (a) endogenous development that yields negative socioeconomic outcomes for migrant populations seeking new opportunities, and (b) the challenges and inequities migrants face during transit and in destination societies.

A key thesis is that vulnerability dispersion occurs when transnational movements and relocations fail to facilitate satisfactory social reproduction, perpetuating cycles of marginalization. This thesis also holds when migrants do not achieve new “accesses to structures and assets” (Esping-Andersen 2008). The persistence of adverse social, political, and economic experiences throughout migrants' journeys underscores the need for effective reintegration strategies.

Theoretically, evaluating the quality and robustness of migrants' reintegration into labor markets is crucial. However, it is equally important to assess other risks, exclusions, and cultural and political barriers that are often overlooked when income and employment are prioritized as indicators of social mobility. Emphasizing the deprived social and economic connections experienced during transit and in destination countries can reveal patterns of disadvantage related to dysfunction and marginalization in new environments. This focus is necessary because disparities in wages and labor markets, often cited as migration causes, are rooted in deep-seated endogenous inequalities that perpetuate marginalization even in new contexts.

Endogenous inequalities in peripheral Latin America, as discussed by Sunkel (1970, 1971) and Nun (2010), explain the dysfunctions in these regions through the inability of segments of the population to access

opportunity structures. These conditions of exclusion and marginalization are often not fully overcome through population mobility or overseas settlement. This perspective is crucial for a comprehensive approach to migration studies, particularly those focusing on labor migration, skilled migration, and South-South migration.

Methodologically, this perspective introduces five analytical scopes for examining the migratory cycle. These scopes are designed to elucidate the interplay between agency and structure in migration causality and to identify the socio-spatial inequalities systematically reproduced during migration. The five scopes are: (a) degree of dysfunction, (b) types of exclusion, (c) intensity of exclusion, (d) strength of assets, and (e) consequences of vulnerability in migrants' lives. Notably, while this framework does not directly encompass migrants' subjective experiences of structural distortions or transnational reintegration, these are indirectly included through empirical studies reviewed in this article.

This analysis theorizes that migration between peripheral nations can be understood through these scopes, focusing on inequalities reproduced due to: (a) the failure of unbalanced labor markets to integrate migrant flows, and (b) cultural and political asymmetries that exacerbate rejection and hostility towards migrants. These scopes are also relevant for assessing migration to industrialized countries, albeit in different proportions, as vulnerability reproduction often occurs due to labor market segmentation based on cultural or political factors or ineffective reintegration policies.

Consequently, this article highlights two substantive points: First, the reproduction of vulnerability in peripheral Latin American countries results from heterogeneous structural conditions and recessive economic policies that have had minimal impact on socio-economic transformation. This leads to inherited exclusions not reflected in prevailing democratic discourses. Second, in non-peripheral countries—often seen as ideal destinations for migrants—the reproduction of vulnerability arises from restrictive migration policies that fail to manage migrant flows effectively, sometimes fostering hostility and stigma.

Cuban migration serves as a case study of these heterogeneous structural conditions. Despite the apparent Cuban socialist regime's commitment to human development (Fresneda and Delgado, 2013), vulnerability persists due to relative consumption limitations, characterized by low incomes and high inflation despite state-provided subsidies and access to education and healthcare. This scenario creates a paradox where state policies ensure some access opportunities to different social structures while simultaneously limiting social mobility through low incomes, provoking a reliance on low-innovation service and production sectors, and a dependency on external trade that constrains state savings and investments due to rising international debt.

In this context, migration becomes a partial alleviation for these cycles of marginalization. Cuban migration can be categorized into two modalities: (a) emigration of marginalized populations seeking social mobility and (b) temporary migration of skilled professionals through the export of intensive services. Both modalities reflect endogenous economic policies that have failed to balance growth with social development, diminishing the socialist ideal of equity, and exposing migrants to political conflicts and further marginalization in new settlements and transit countries in Latin America. According to Aja et al. (2017), by 2016, approximately 20 percent of the Cuban population had emigrated, totaling over 2.4 million individuals.

Then, this article aims to analyze the transnational spread of vulnerability among Cuban migrants in Latin American countries. It also examines how restrictive migration policies and economic and social imbalances in the region create a growingly dysfunctional environment for migrants. Due to various obstacles in accessing resources and support structures, these conditions make it increasingly difficult for migrants to mitigate their vulnerability.

UNDERSTANDING THE TDV

Before delving into the Cuban case, it is necessary to better explain the TVD theoretical approach. According to this method, migration is viewed as a result of the inability of nation-states to effectively address the social reproduction challenges faced by vulnerable segments of the population, which struggle with inadequate integration into the socio-economic environment. This results in a form of marginalization that obstructs the social reproduction of historically deprived populations.

When migration stems from this particular “development nature” (Sunkel 1971), it becomes a transnational phenomenon because vulnerability is not overcome by mobility and can be reproduced later during the migratory cycle. This means that, in the stages of transit, settlement, and return, migrants often encounter similar limitations in accessing resources and structures (Esping-Andersen 2008), which constitutes a disadvantageous transnational integration.

Thus, direct, partial, or relative marginalization experienced by migrants challenges the notion of “migration success” (Portes 2009), especially when other forms of exclusion persist despite higher incomes in new labor markets. Methodologically, this multidimensional outlook suggests evaluating structural factors such as development, state policies, and labor markets, as well as the migrant’s subjectivity and their understanding of living conditions and mobility-related achievements.

Hypothetically, this approach addresses the apparent contradictions between established theoretical

perspectives. On one hand, it contextualizes notions that emphasize spontaneity in individual or family decisions (Stark and You 2003; Portes 2007) by exploring the social imaginary that views migration as a strategy. On the other hand, it acknowledges the influence of historical and economic disadvantages on these interpretations (Delgado-Wise 2018). This approach aims to reconcile these perspectives by highlighting the heterogeneity of migration impacts, integrating often overlooked conceptual parallels, and incorporating agency and structure perspectives as proposed by Haas (2010).

The critical question is whether migration effectively eliminates difficulties in achieving well-adjusted social reproduction in transit or host societies. This is regardless of documented access to labor markets or higher incomes when other cultural stigmas, political constraints, or social prejudices persist as obstacles throughout migrants’ trajectories (Faist and Gerdes 2006). Higher incomes in settlement and transit societies do not necessarily indicate the eradication of individual, family, or group vulnerability.

The TVD approach can describe negative interdependencies between origin, transit, and settlement societies, as well as migrants’ strategies for reintegration into bi-national structures to avoid obstacles to social reproduction. This critical reassessment focuses on multiple dimensions, including labor markets, salary differences, family and individual decisions, and social and political scenarios in which migration unfolds.

This broader perspective on migratory processes allows for drawing analogies and noting differences among prior disadvantage conditions and migrants’ reintegration into receiving or transit societies. It involves considering underlying negative forces, exposure to risks, and exclusions that persist throughout the migratory cycle.

The TVD framework is eclectic, incorporating insights and conceptual parallels from previous theoretical approaches used to explain migration complexity and heterogeneity, considering the interplay between agency and structural conditions. Concepts such as “rational choice” (Stark and You 2003), “relative deprivation” (Stark and You, 2003; Portes 2007), “migrant trajectory” (Faist and Gerdes 2006), “transnationalism” (Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Szanton 1995), and “forced migration” (Castles 2003; Delgado Wise 2018) form the basis of this “holistic analysis” (Portes 2009). This analysis seeks to: a) address subjective problems related to migrants’ understanding of their immediate reality and their past and future references, and b) examine prevailing socio-economic and political inequalities in their reality and history. For migrants, it is often more logical to explain their decisions based on daily life obstacles rather than through international relations.

However, migration scholars can and should trace the origin of this subjectivity to the structural problems

faced by individuals in their daily lives. This helps avoid an argumentative deficit, especially in cases where migration is explained by individual decisions without considering the context of historical disadvantages and ongoing vulnerability. Hence, this approach views the migratory process as a result of socio-spatial inequalities that are systematically reproduced, where the flows and counter-flows of people, along with the political scenarios interacting with them, determine the migratory system (Martínez-Pizarro, Maldonado, and Martínez 2018).

Still, the reproduction of transnational vulnerability indicates the interdependencies within a migratory system, linked to the failure of labor markets to assimilate certain population segments due to deteriorating local economic conditions. Sassen (2016) argues that migratory patterns cannot be solely explained by the search for well-being, as they result from development strategies that did not address disadvantageous conditions.

Then, addressing these interdependencies strengthens the scope of the “transnational” concept (Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Szanton 1995), relating social reproduction to international survival strategies, alike to the transnational extension of family functions and roles seeking self-insurance, better income, and improved working conditions. When these transnational strategies fail to prevent negative situations during transit and settlement, similar to those faced in origin societies, the transnational definition encompasses not only cultural and social ties but also the restatement of disadvantageous circumstances.

This disadvantaged reintegration of migrants into other societies is a topic insufficiently explored in migration theories, although it is well-documented in empirical research. If destination societies manifest other adverse factors, such as restrictive migration policies, ethnic and social stigmas, gender discrimination, and undervaluation of qualifications, these factors exacerbate the perception of relative deprivation among migrants. Consequently, this diminishes the explanatory power of traditional definitions of migration success and highlights the cyclical nature of vulnerability in Latin American migration patterns.

The TVD approach also incorporates Martínez-Pizarro, Maldonado, and Martínez (2018) emphasis on the various forms of “vulnerabilities” faced by marginalized populations, who participate in migration to alleviate pressure on local economies and job markets. Migration-related inequalities are tied to the positive or negative externalities in agglomeration economies, influencing spatial hierarchies and affecting human mobility. When externalities are negative, populations tend to move towards more dynamic areas. This migration reflects the diffusion of development, impacting employment concentration, regional incomes, and population relocations (Hirschman 1970). Thus, the term “dispersion” refers to displacements and resettlements influenced by

territorial organization, which in turn affects population concentration (Hierro 2005). It also highlights limits to the social reproduction of population segments due to the strength of negative externalities from unequal development diffusion.

Subsequently, it is crucial to recognize how unequal development diffusion can distort discriminatory hierarchies, stigmas, various forms of violence (including gender violence), rights violations, and limited access to structures. These problems are part of migrants’ social experiences and may contribute to understand migration while they being reproduced in transit and settlement societies.

Within the TVD framework, these negative social experiences undermine the opportunities for migrants to access resources and structures both endogenously and throughout the migratory cycle, as they encounter further imbalances due to unequal development. Wage and labor market differences between economies are not mere dissimilarities but reflect ongoing socioeconomic conflicts and tensions that cannot be measured solely by income.

Methodologically, the arguments presented can be used to establish a comparative analysis of the magnitude and interconnections of vulnerability reproduction throughout the migratory cycle. This broader analytical scheme is useful for studying various types of migration—labor, skilled, South-South—focusing on the dysfunction of population segments whose alternative is migration when vulnerability persists. It includes the subjective understanding of migrants regarding their past and current social interactions and reproductions, allowing for an examination of similar negative experiences throughout the migratory cycle stages.

This analysis involves assessing the degree of dysfunction by considering: a) the quality of employment access; b) access to care, education, and health structures; c) per capita and family income and its uses; and d) shortages or deprivations of basic goods.

Consequently, the intensity of exclusion can be determined by the history of assimilation, inclusion, or reintegration into dynamic labor markets and public policies. A greater number of experiences of disconnection, infrequent or irregular inclusion in labor markets, and public policy receipt represent relative or acute limitations on social reproduction capacity and inadequate consumption, which may condition further mobility.

In examining previous and current disadvantage experiences, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness and stability of public policies in changing vulnerability situations and opening access to opportunity structures. Additionally, the migrant’s ability to leverage social capital and support networks, political representation alternatives, and generational perceptions of persistent vulnerability are significant factors (Castles 2003). Contextualizing these experiences regionally

(socioeconomic development level) and environmentally (types of imbalances) is also crucial.

In this view, the types of exclusion in previous and current vulnerability situations are also important for determining the persistence of these problems in migrants' trajectories. Key factors to observe include access to formal or informal employment, unemployment among family members, family schooling, employment training received, and any marginalization or exclusion due to beliefs, religion, ethnicity, nationality, or race. Gender violence, discrimination based on sexual orientation, adolescent maternity or paternity, and decision-making capacity are also relevant. Moreover, the occurrence of political conflict and violence, household deficits, healthy nutrition, and access to city services are indicators of vulnerability.

Migrants often use their social capital to avoid disadvantaged situations. The TVD perspective thus considers the strength of these assets as an indicator of migrant's responses to ensure mobility-related actions and reintegration into other societies. This means considering not only economic capital but also social capital and networks used to reinforce interpersonal, familial, or community relationships.

Methodologically, this information can be gathered through sociological or anthropological approaches, exploring migrants' subjectivity and their perceptions of vulnerability's impact on their lives. The study should examine the motivations for emigration, actions taken to avoid disadvantages, and perceived obstacles to achieving goals. This approach allows for comparison between migrants' subjectivity and the researcher's findings.

Finally, within the TVD perspective, the concept of vulnerability is crucial for understanding migration as it provides a theoretical structure to encompass the degree of dysfunction and damage to migrants' relational structures and agency capability. This particular vulnerability arises from weak assets and the exhaustion of access to opportunity structures (Sánchez & Sauma 2011; Kaztman 2001), and is rooted in a context of unequal and heterogeneous development. Marginalization in this context represents systemic exclusion, with social vulnerability extending beyond economic factors to include cultural and social elements.

FROM SOCIALISM TO CAPITALISM: THE POPULATION DISPERSION

When analyzing the case of Cuban migration, a crucial question arises: why does this emigration flow persist despite the country's socialist development strategy? Simplistic answers often attribute this contemporary exodus to political or economic causes without acknowledging the underlying complexity of recent migration trends (Table 1).

YEAR	TOTAL	U.S. BORN	FOREIGN BORN
2000	1,200,000	390,000	850,000
2010	1,900,000	780,000	1,100,000
2021	2,400,000	1,100,000	1,300,000

Table 1 Cuban-origin population in the U.S.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of the 2000 census (5% IPUMS) and the 2010 and 2021 American Community Surveys (1% IPUMS).

On one hand, historical perspectives on Cuban migration during the socialist era, from 1961 to the present, suggest that political conflicts were mitigated through emigration. Those opposed to socialism, deemed enemies of the state, primarily settled in the United States. On the other hand, the perception of economic factors as the primary drivers of migration gained prominence after the collapse of so-called *real socialism* and the subsequent loss of financial support and subsidies from the socialist exchange system.

However, these explanations fall short by not addressing the complex realities behind current Cuban emigration. The migration today is influenced by a unique form of marginalization, exacerbated by a structural heterogeneity that predates socialism in Cuba. This marginalization, which was initially masked by the socialist trade system, became more apparent with its end. It exposed the Cuban economy's inability to integrate highly educated and qualified human resources into its dynamic sectors, leaving them with limited consumption opportunities due to low incomes and, consequently, a distinctive vulnerability.

This complexity is often overlooked when Cuban migration is framed as merely a facet of the U.S.-Cuba conflict. Understanding this complexity is crucial for comprehending why current migration routes extend to various destinations, driven by long-standing stress and dysfunction experienced by marginalized population segments within an imbalanced endogenous development.

It is important to highlight that the "marginal and dysfunctional character" of these population segments is unique, arising from low incomes despite receiving indirect support through social policies. This form of vulnerability, characterized by a *Relative Limitation of Consumption* (Fresneda and Delgado 2013; Fresneda, 2014; Fresneda, 2023), is a result of the full-employment policy in socialism. Low incomes among qualified workers contribute to social differentiation when international goods prices influence family and local consumption (Nova 2008).

Subsidies for social assistance failed to address underlying structural distortions. The Cuban economy's structural heterogeneity, with a prevalence of low international competitiveness in production, undermined

the ability to sustain high social expenses (Vidal and Pons, 2008, 92). Social policies based on this structural heterogeneity gradually increased poverty and vulnerability (Espina-Prieto 2009), despite continued access to healthcare, education, and nutritional subsidies. The emergence of new and more profitable markets with higher prices, compared to the incomes of the majority of state employees, exacerbated this issue.

Dynamic sectors like tourism are still unable to absorb the vast vulnerable work labor, while recent economic reforms regarding self-employment face constraints due to negative and official perceptions of private ventures under socialism. As a result, since the nineties of XX century, many Cubans find themselves nearly unable to afford anything beyond basic necessities (Togores 2003). Migration has thus come to play a compensatory role, mitigating some of the socio-structural effects of the Cuban economic system's distortions and its interactions in the global context (Fresneda & Delgado 2013). Additionally, migration alleviates pressure on the socialist labor market and social policy expenses, as evidenced by the impact of remittances on the Cuban economy (Orozco 2019).

Viewing Cuban migration solely as a result of politically incorrect or anomic behaviors fails to acknowledge the risks exacerbated by limited assets and restricted consumption. It also overlooks the daily dysfunctional uncertainties faced by a population whose labor market cannot provide adequate incomes. This narrow perspective results in inadequate consular and legal protections for parts of this diaspora during transit and settlement, amplifying vulnerabilities such as limited access to resources, underestimation of job qualifications, and exposure to risks like gender violence, organized crime, or rights violations.

Moreover, this politicized view has historically favored Cuban migration's settlement in the United States, reinforcing a migration trajectory often fraught with risks, including undocumented and irregular mobility, makeshift sea transportation, and human trafficking networks.

However, it is crucial to analyze this diaspora's lesser-known path because migrants encounter various risks and exclusions as they attempt to reintegrate into new opportunities. They struggle to overcome the unique vulnerabilities they faced in their countries of origin.

These transnational, disadvantageous, and unbalanced reintegration represent a continuation of the previous and domestic ineffective incorporation of these segments into the socio-economic environment. This signifies a widening of their dysfunction whenever limitations in social reproduction confront low-quality access to employment, care, health, and educational structures, or result in precarious incomes and other deprivations. This also illustrates an increase in exclusion intensity if the expansion of disconnections from labor markets and

public policies leads to different restrictions on immigrants' social reproduction. The prevalence of social and cultural stigmas, gender violence, exposure to organized crime, rights violations, and non-recognition of job qualifications are critical issues within this diaspora.

Thus, Cuban migration to peripheral Latin American countries exemplifies south-south migration between nations with heterogeneous structural conditions. In some of these countries, recessive economic policies have had unsatisfactory effects on socio-economic transformation processes. In these contexts, immigration exacerbates the problem of assimilating population groups into labor markets and social policies. This problem often demands migration management based on a national perspective, with restrictive policies at borders or ineffective opening of access to opportunity structures for migrants. The primary destinations for Cuban migration in the region include Mexico, Ecuador, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic (Aja et al. 2017; Martínez 2016), though undocumented migration also occurs throughout Brazil, Colombia, Panama, and other Central American countries (Polo, Serrano & Manrique 2019). According to OIM, in 2023, Cuba ranked as one of the leading countries of migrations in the Caribbean, second only to Haiti, with a total of 1,753,300 migrants (OIM, 2023).

It is noteworthy that, in the Cuban case, the irregular status later experienced by migrants in other countries, is right related to a border regime turned towards its own population within Cuba. This is due to the reinforcement of a historical conflict against migration, driven by political tensions. According to Pérez-García (2020), this represents an evolution from confrontation to restrictive migration management —aimed at retaining qualified human resources (Aja et al. 2017)—, with later subsequent recognitions of migrants and their rights but with active constraints and evident evasion on their economic and social contributions. Mostly because the current legal framework is based on outdated laws that diminish Cubans' transnational citizenship rights and suggest political classifications towards migrants (Brismat, 2016). This complexity results in a lack of political representation often experienced by undocumented migrants, as well as outdated immigration policies that fail to address current population changes and needs in Cuba (Odriozola, Lopez & Cano 2020).

Pérez-García (2020) mentions the cyclical fluxes within Cuban migration, including the periodic reintegration of Cuban professionals into other economies. Government agreements and the appeal of this strategy for many medical professionals relieve some stress on the Cuban labor market but also supports a reintegration into transnational labor structures (Siqueira & Gomes 2019; Solano 2019). This process involves changes in family roles and functions and new paths to social reproduction for these professionals. Ramirez and Lozano (2017) note

the increase in qualified migration to Mexico after 2010, driven by governmental agreements. However, not all reintegration is balanced or successful due to prevailing cultural and racial prejudices beyond Cuban boundaries (Gutiérrez 2017).

This last is happening while undocumented migration shows an overrepresentation of transit through various Latin American countries, challenging migration policies and sometimes leading to restrictive responses. This irregular transit was exacerbated by migration exemptions in countries such as Ecuador in 2008–2014, Nicaragua in 2008, and Panama in 2018, which were later replaced by restrictive policies (2012, 2013, 2019) (Kudeyárova 2017; Orozco 2019; Hernández & Ramos 2021). This irregular migration, coupled with failed attempts at economic and social reintegration, extended the migratory cycle through countries like Costa Rica, Brazil, Panama, Central America, and Mexico in an effort to reach the United States. In addition, following the removal of historical privileges for Cuban migration to the U.S. in 2017, Mexico became a forced settlement for some of this irregular migration (Nájera 2016). At the same time, new Cuban settlements emerged in Latin America as other countries increased their border and immigration controls.

The closure of Nicaraguan borders to Cuban migrants in November 2015 triggered a migratory crisis managed by various Central American nations with security and sovereignty policies (Kudeyárova 2017). This situation heightened the vulnerability of Cuban migrants through humanitarian measures that paradoxically reinforced exclusion and expulsion, such as provisional visas and limited humanitarian aid in Costa Rica, mass transportation from Panama and Costa Rica to Mexico as “humanitarian deportations,” and numerous detentions in Turbo, Colombia (Villafuerte & García 2016; Villalobos 2017; Weck 2021).

In Colombia, the rise in Cuban irregular migration created conflicts with endogenous immigration policies, as migrants could not be fully recognized as refugees. The lack of efficient legal tools to manage this migration, including routes from Guyana (Almeida 2018) and across the Amazonas, further complicated the situation. Colombian authorities also faced challenges from human trafficking networks.

This conflict was particularly evident in Ecuador, where Cuban immigration increased due to migration exemptions later replaced by restrictive policies. The resulting Cuban community faced informal access to labor markets, low incomes, and adverse working conditions (Correa 2013). They encountered difficulties legalizing their migration status, resulting in irregular situations, extortion, and arbitrary detentions and deportation threats. Changes in migration policy led to exclusions and the use of deportation, as seen in the “Identidad Operation” (Correa 2013; 2020). Additional issues included denial of notarial services, unnecessary

document requirements for regulation, and refusal to register professional titles with the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (Ágreda 2015). Public and media stigmatization, especially in cities like Quito and Guayaquil, further reinforced vulnerability (Defensoría del Pueblo 2010). The Cuban official policy of no return after the legislated period also contributed to this situation.

These difficulties shifted the initial perception of Ecuador as a settlement country to a view of this territory as a transit country, primarily due to rejections and xenophobic practices (Defensoría del Pueblo 2010; Feline, Correa & Aron 2018), and Cubans being relegated to specific neighborhoods like La Florida in Quito.

A similar regional problem is seen in Chile, where long-standing migration management based on national perspectives results in arbitrary denial of entry and refugee status (Liberona, Piñones & Dilla 2021). Consequently, there irregular migration was a common status, and Chile was often viewed as a transit country by Cuban migrants (Riquelme & Tapia 2020).

The vulnerability of undocumented Cuban transit has been particularly evident in Central America (Cordero & Jara 2021). Human trafficking and human rights violations were prevalent between Panama and Colombia, especially in the Darien Jungle, where Cuban women and families face robbery, rape, and death due to diseases and environmental conditions (Weck 2021). Despite occasional humanitarian programs in Panama (González & Hernández 2017), immigration policies tend to be restrictive (Macías 2022), using deportation to reduce irregular migration while paradoxically allowing temporary commercial visits by Cubans. Panama eliminated migration exemptions to avoid further crises.

Costa Rica, crucial in the undocumented transit of Cuban migration, experienced a migratory crisis in 2015 due to Nicaragua's border closure and its position in migration corridors. With eight thousand Cuban nationals in their territory (Moreno 2019; Villalobos 2017), Costa Rica attempted to address the crisis through the “Central American Integration System,” but this failed due to a lack of acceptance for free transit of Cubans through Central America (Stein 2020). Humanitarian flights to Mexico were arranged when Belize and Guatemala denied entry, but Cubans faced prolonged uncertainty and overcrowded camps despite Costa Rica's efforts. A second crisis in 2016 saw the Costa Rican government close borders again, citing an inability to provide adequate support (Villalobos 2017).

In Mexico, the increase in Cuban migration over the past decade stems from at least three different trajectories: qualified migration (García 2019), temporary migration related to commercial travels mainly to Cancun, Quintana Roo, and Mexico City—restrained during the COVID-19 epidemic—, and undocumented migration from other Latin American countries (Table 2).

YEAR	TOTAL
2018	492
2019	7105
2020	1179
2021	7059
2022	41771
2023	26832

Table 2 Cubans in irregular status presented to immigration authorities in Mexico between 2018 and 2023.

Source: Statistical Bulletins <https://portales.segob.gob.mx/es/PoliticaMigratoria/CuadrosBOLETIN?Anual=2022&Secc=3>.

The undocumented migrants face heightened vulnerability due to lack of political representation, extortion by organized crime and human trafficking networks, and coercion from officials threatening deportation. Clot and Martinez (2018) describe this group as facing vulnerable socioeconomic conditions due to debt and lack of assets from financing their migration. Despite these challenges, they become active agents of their own trajectory, adopting new survival strategies in the informal labor market in Tapachula, Mexico, with significant information exchange among Cuban social networks.

After 2018, with the exposure of the migration crisis by migrant caravans (Cuevas & Aguiluz 2022), Cuban undocumented migration in Mexico faced restrictive immigration policies focused on securitization (Basurto 2021). This included immigration containment and deportation strategies, and exposure to Mexican drug cartels with high smuggling fees and violence (Sprauer 2018). Consequently, migrants experience a variety of risks, including lack of protection, meager official contacts, and inadequate access to resources, leading to incidents of rape, kidnapping, and extortion (Carrasco 2013).

Mexico has become the final stage of Cuban irregular migration due to reinforced restrictions in the United States under the Trump administration. This restrictive policy aligns with earlier attempts at Cuban migration regularization proposed in 2017 by President Obama and has regional implications for restrictive management towards migration.

Then, the so-called Cuban “irregular migration” results in defenseless, illegal, and disadvantaged experiences during enforced settlement, shaped by the migration policies of three countries: a) the lack of political representation and isolation due to non-recognition by Cuban policy and regional negative procedures; b) restrictive policies in Mexico involving deportation and limited integration into labor markets; and c) the U.S. border closures with migrant regulation.

Finally, Cubans encounter a precarious situation in Mexico, experiencing diminished opportunities and increased vulnerability. This systemic failure in socioeconomic reinsertion processes further perpetuates their socioeconomic marginalization and exacerbates their social and economic vulnerability. Also, this is due to their expectations, based on the continued validity of U. S. migratory regulations such as CBP-1, which maintains the possibility of accessing the U.S. while simultaneously postponing the settlement of these migrants in long-wait territories in Mexico (Miranda 2022; Vázquez & Morales 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

Transnational Vulnerability Dispersion (TVD) provides a crucial theoretical framework for analyzing how vulnerabilities experienced by migrants are not resolved but rather replicated or even intensified throughout the migration cycle. TVD focuses on how vulnerabilities, which may originate in migrants’ home countries, are carried and transformed through various stages of migration, including transit, settlement, and return.

One of TVD’s key contributions is its ability to highlight that vulnerabilities are not merely displaced by migration but are often reproduced or exacerbated in new contexts. Migrants may face new forms of exclusion or risks that mirror or amplify the challenges they previously encountered in their countries of origin. Moreover, TVD broadens the traditional migration studies focus, which often centers on income levels and labor market access. Instead, TVD suggests that a comprehensive analysis should consider factors such as protection policies, social and cultural stigmas, undervaluation of job qualifications, lack of legal support, and exposure to risks like violence and rights violations.

In its application, TVD examines the migratory process from multiple perspectives. It analyzes how systemic failures in both origin and destination contexts affect migrants, identifies various forms of exclusion (economic, social, and cultural), assesses the severity of these exclusions, and considers the resources and opportunities available to migrants. Additionally, TVD studies the consequences of these vulnerabilities on migrants’ lives. This approach allows for an understanding of how vulnerabilities are not just a result of migration but are perpetuated or worsened throughout the different stages of the migratory process.

Regarding Cuban migration, this phenomenon clearly illustrates the issues of transnational vulnerability described by TVD. Cuban migrants face significant challenges as they transit through various Latin American countries. Their migration experience is marked by transnational vulnerability, manifesting as systemic risks

and exclusions while attempting to integrate into new socio-economic environments, which exacerbates their pre-existing vulnerabilities. Cubans experience varied reception in countries like Mexico, Ecuador, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic, encountering challenges ranging from integration difficulties to outright exclusion due to restrictive immigration policies and socio-economic prejudices.

Furthermore, many Cubans migrate irregularly, encountering dangerous conditions such as human trafficking and exploitation. Fluctuating immigration policies in countries like Nicaragua and Panama affect their journey, while economic and social exclusion translates into informal employment, low wages, and socio-cultural stigmatization, particularly impacting women and skilled professionals. Political and legal challenges, such as outdated policies and lack of political representation, further exacerbate their marginalization and vulnerability in host countries. The shift in U.S. migration policies, with the end of special privileges for Cubans, has redirected migration flows with Mexico emerging as a primary destination where migrants face restrictive and securitized immigration policies.

In summary, Cuban migration reflects broader issues of transnational vulnerability, characterized by systemic exclusion and socio-economic marginalization across various host countries. TVD provides a deeper and more nuanced understanding of this migration by focusing on the persistence and transformation of vulnerabilities, suggesting the need for policies that address these issues comprehensively rather than solely focusing on economic integration or labor market access.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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