

# The Challenges of Producing Migration-related Information in the Context of COVID-19 from a Human Rights Approach: The Case of the First National Migration Survey in Argentina

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## Introduction

Argentina is a country with a long history of receiving migrants, but there is an important gap in the production of updated data on the situation and characteristics of this population. This article presents the National Migrant Survey of Argentina, a survey conducted from a practical human rights approach in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Argentina comprises about 2.2 million migrants, positioning it as the country with the highest net number of migrants in Latin America. In comparison to the total population, the proportion of migrants is 4.9% (according to projections of ONU), a value that has increased slightly in the last two decades from 4.2% in 2001; nonetheless, this projected proportion is still far from 29.9% in 1914 (INDEC, 2011). The historical migration from Europe, mainly from Spain and Italy, was joined during the last century by regional border migration, mainly from Paraguay, Bolivia and Chile. In the last decades—in line with the current situation in the region—a diversification has taken place in terms of migration origin, incorporating Latin American countries such as Colombia, Peru, Cuba, Venezuela, and extra-regional countries such as Haiti, Senegal, China, and others.

On the other hand, Argentina was a pioneer both in Latin America and worldwide in renewing its migration policy in 2004 (Argentine Law 25.871), incorporating the right to migrate as a human right (García & Nejamkis, 2018). Argentine migration policy includes a number of universal guarantees for migrants, such as healthcare and education, regardless of their migration status. Despite these advances in the regulatory sphere, there are numerous studies and research papers reporting breaches in the actual access to these rights, resulting in the emergence of problems in several fields, such as access to healthcare, personal documentation, recourse to the law, regular education, and the persistence of discrimination, among many others (Ceriani, 2016; Penchaszadeh, Nicolao, & Debandi, 2022).

Although academic studies on international migration in Argentina are numerous and growing in number (Domenech & Pereira, 2017), but most of them are of a qualitative nature and, if quantitative, they focus on a particular nationality, e.g., Bolivians or Venezuelans. The main reason is the lack of good quality, up-to-date, official data sources. The National Census is the only survey providing comprehensive information on the migrant population, but it was last fielded in 2010 before several important transformations in migration flows of the last decade. The second representative statistics source is the Permanent Household Survey (Encuesta Permanente de Hogares or EPH), fielded only at the level of the country's urban nodes; therefore the EPH does not provide data for rural migration patterns. The only time a complementary survey was carried out was 2001 with the Complementary Survey on International Migrations (Encuesta

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Complementaria de Migraciones Internacionales or ECMI), which was fielded as part of the National Census on Population, Households and Housing of that same year.

### **The starting point of the National Migrant Survey**

However, having further disaggregated data is particularly important in Argentina. Argentina, being a federal country, has policies that are heterogeneous by province. This produces a wide range of information systems that are often incompatible with each other and that i) fail to accurately record enough the variables associated to nationality and/or country of origin and ii) exhibit serious quality issues (Ribotta et al., 2019).

Thus, there has historically a lack of quantitative data available for academics, organizations, and activist groups, and even State agencies in charge of designing public policy for the migration population; nonetheless, this data scarcity became even more evident after the Covid-19 pandemic. When the Covid-19 pandemic began around March 2020, Argentina was in the midst of a deep economic crisis, with overwhelming poverty rates and severe hardship within the migrant population who, conditioned by restrictive and xenophobic policies implemented in the previous years, found it increasingly difficult to access documentation, healthcare or education (Debandi & Penchaszadeh, 2020; Gavazzo & Penchaszadeh, 2020). Mobility restrictions and strict border closure, along with the exclusion of a vast majority of the migrant population from social welfare policies and programs implemented in the first year of the pandemic, worsened the situation of many migrants even further. In this context, it became crucial to respond to the need for data that would produce reliable information and facilitate practicable policy.

Further, with the pandemic, there were greater opportunities and pressures for digital and technological changes that encouraged some groups to use devices who had not before. The pressing need for data and the virtualization of a great deal of social life promoted the development of the first National Migration Survey in Argentina (Encuesta Nacional Migrante de Argentina, or ENMA). This survey was carried out by the migration and shelter branch of the research group Red de investigaciones en Derechos Humanos, belonging to the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET), and called RIOSP-CONICET, with the participation, throughout all its stages, of a wide spectrum of social organization, activists and researchers.

Below, I briefly present three core aspects of the ENMA proposal—namely, the human rights approach, the collective construction and the methodological design.

### **Human Rights Approach and Collective Production of Knowledge**

A human rights approach argues for the addressees of public policy to be positioned as subjects of rights, i.e., actors who can demand certain provisions and conducts from the State and of society (Abramovich & Pautassi, 2009). In addition, a human rights approach includes as founding principles, social participation and production of information. The rights-based approach seeks to move from a focus on assistance to placing the subject, in this case migrants, as bearers of their own life stories and rights vis-à-vis the State. However, one might ask, what is the meaning of producing information and knowledge on migrant populations from a human rights approach? And more specifically, in terms of methodology, what is the meaning of carrying out a survey from a human rights perspective?

Although this would require systematic development, the starting point in ENMA was the collective construction of information and knowledge: The basic principle was to consider that migrants were not—and are not, still—circumstantial or secondary participants at a given stage but rather active promoters and authors of such knowledge. In that sense, migrants were not only indispensable as driving forces for the project but also active participants—in equivalent conditions to researchers and academics—in the design of instruments (the survey), their dissemination, implementation and resulting analysis.

In the design of the questionnaire and the initial conceptual debates around it, there were 32 people involved; among them, there were researchers from the aforementioned Red de Derechos Humanos (RIOSP-CONICET), representatives of migrant groups and social organization advocates. In practical terms, the exchanges resulted in the inclusion in the questionnaire of the main interests of migrant communities, and the exclusion or some “classic” sociodemographic questions, affecting as well the ways in which certain were asked and framed. At the implementation stage, some new migrant organizations, which played a key role at making the questionnaire reach out to certain districts and provinces, were incorporated.

### **Methodological Design and Results**

As previously mentioned, the pandemic made it particularly important for data collection and deepened the collaborative ties between academic and social organizations and made many people more acquainted with the use of digital communication technologies. In the case of ENMA, this was a key factor for its implementation. In the first place, due to costs, it would have been impossible for ENMA to be carried out in a context of “normality” (without the conditions given by the pandemic, including mobility restriction). Secondly, a virtualization strategy for a survey such as this one would probably have never been effective in other circumstances, such as the previous to the pandemic, due to the lack of use of technology by the migrant population, among other factors.

The goal of ENMA was to obtain information on the access to rights (health, labor, education, housing, among others) of migrant population throughout the country. Along the same lines, ENMA aimed to obtain representative data for certain nationalities on which there was no updated information due to their being more recent, less numerous or less accessible, among them Venezuelans, Senegalese, Haitian, and Chinese. Based on these two propositions, a quota sampling design was developed, considering the following variables: nationality, age, gender, and place of residence during the last Census (2010), and the quotas were adjusted according to more recent data extracted from the Permanent Household Survey (2019). An initial scope of 2000 cases was stipulated, and it was later exceeded, obtaining 3114 valid responses, in which the aforementioned groups became overrepresented.

The survey was carried out by means of an online self-administered questionnaire, translated into three languages apart from Spanish (Haitian Creole, Wolof, and Chinese). It remained active for a month and a half. The distance to the quotas was monitored weekly, and specific strategies were developed for further dissemination of the questionnaire, mainly on social media and WhatsApp groups. In some cases, there were phone calls made by the migrant organizations in order to support migrants at completing the survey.

The first ENMA result to be published was the Statistical Migration Yearbook (*Anuario Estadístico Migratorio: Debandi, Nicolao, and Penchaszadeh, 2021*), also developed in a collaborative manner among different researchers and representatives of migrant groups. The data

collected by ENMA, once tidied and adjusted (an example of this is ensuring all records remained anonymous) is available in an open format at the website of the aforementioned Red de derechos humanos. So far, data access has been requested by over 30 people (researchers and activists) or institutions (State organisms, international agencies and social organizations).

The ENMA data is currently the best up-to-date information on the situation of migrants in the country. It incorporated questions that had never been asked before, such as languages, ethnicity, difficulties in accessing health care and discrimination, among others. The ENMA is also proposed as a specific methodology, based on a rights-based approach. This methodological proposal seeks to promote research respecting the experience and knowledge of migrants themselves as subjects of rights.

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