

Short-Term Effects of Cash Assistance for Migrants and Refugees in Colombia

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I. Introduction

The Venezuelan humanitarian crisis is one of the largest displacement crises, affecting about 6.1 million people because of the country's collapse and worsened by COVID-19 (UNHCR 2022). This has challenged Colombia, hosting more than 2.9 million Venezuelans (R4V 2025), many without access to public services. Humanitarian programs are crucial for supporting displaced individuals, yet few studies assess their effectiveness (see Berretta et al. 2023). This paper focuses on ADN Dignidad, a program that provided 6 months of unconditional multipurpose cash assistance to 77,600 mixed-migrant households to improve access to basic necessities.¹

To estimate the effect of ADN Dignidad, we use a regression discontinuity design (RDD) based on the program's eligibility criteria, which score applicants according to household characteristics. The program targets specific neighborhoods

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¹ "Mixed migrants" refers to individuals who move for various reasons, including economic, social, and political factors, and may include migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. The program we study targets Venezuelan immigrants but also Colombian returnees from Venezuela.

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and computes two socioeconomic scores for each household. Those exceeding a threshold for either score qualify for assistance. We employ a multi-cutoff approach to select our analytical sample for the RDD. Data on short-term outcomes were collected from households 1–3 months after program graduation (7–9 months after application).

Our results show that the program has nearly universal take-up. One to three months after program completion, we find that it increases income by 12% and household expenses by a similar amount. Additionally, participants experience increased savings and a reduced debt burden. The intervention also has substantial and statistically significant effects on reducing food insecurity and improving coping strategies. Finally, ADN Dignidad positively affects participants' subjective well-being by decreasing insecurity and enhancing life satisfaction.

Cash transfers, both conditional and unconditional, are recognized as effective tools for improving human capital outcomes among poor and vulnerable households.² However, there is limited evidence from evaluations in fragile contexts (see Aker 2017; Alloush et al. 2017; Ahrens et al. 2024), particularly concerning the Venezuelan migration crisis. Our study's main contribution to this literature is examining the short-term effects of humanitarian assistance for Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Colombia, a country experiencing one of the largest flows of immigration due to the Venezuelan crisis.

Our paper is similar to that of Londoño-Vélez and Querubin (2022), which examines Colombia's *Compensación del IVA* program, an unconditional cash transfer implemented during the COVID-19 crisis. The authors find modest improvements in financial health and parental investment in education but no significant reduction in food insecurity despite increased food access. Our case study of the ADN Dignidad program also focuses on cash transfers in a humanitarian context but differs by addressing a migrant population facing unique challenges related to displacement and social integration. This distinction allows us to explore the program's effects on a vulnerable demographic not thoroughly addressed in existing literature.

This paper is organized as follows. In section II we describe the ADN Dignidad program and details of our data. Section III explains the methods used in our analysis; section IV shows the results; and section V concludes.

² This literature includes several studies, such as Hoddinott and Skoufias (2004), Schultz (2004), Attanasio and Mesnard (2006), Lagarde, Haines, and Palmer (2007), Attanasio et al. (2010), Baez and Camacho (2011), Baird et al. (2014), Kabeer and Waddington (2015), Fisher et al. (2017), Asfaw and Davis (2018), and Daidone et al. (2019).

II. Context, Data, and Empirical Design

The initial phase of the ADN Dignidad program ran from September 2019 to September 2022, led by Action Against Hunger and executed by the Cash for Urban Assistance Consortium in partnership with the Danish Refugee Council and the Norwegian Refugee Council, with funding from the US Agency for International Development's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance. The centerpiece of the program was Multipurpose Cash Assistance (MPCA), providing recipients with monthly transfers averaging 77.20 USD for 6 months.³

ADN Dignidad allocates transfers on the basis of two vulnerability indexes: a scorecard model and a proxy means test. Assistance is provided to families scoring 90 or higher on the scorecard or with monthly expenses below 53,168 COP. See appendix B.4 (apps. A and B are available online) for details. To create these indexes, ADN surveys individuals facing social vulnerability in low-income communities of Barranquilla, Bogotá, and Nariño, Colombia, collecting data on income, expenditures, household demographics, and food security coping strategies.

Our study uses microdata from individuals targeted by the program between November 2021 and April 2022, focusing on short-term effects measured 1–3 months after intervention. Cash transfers begin within the first month of eligibility and continue for 6 months. The evaluation survey was conducted from July to October 2022 in Barranquilla, Bogotá, and Nariño, where local nongovernmental organizations ensured adherence to the eligibility cutoff.

We conducted a comprehensive survey of 4,317 individuals, covering topics such as demographics, education, health, employment, migration, food insecurity, housing, savings, credit, income and expenses, coping strategies, and emotional well-being. Administered from July 15 to October 23, 2022, the survey achieved a response rate of 73.89%.

Table A.1 (tables A.1–A.15 are available online) shows that the sample is predominantly composed of women, who represent approximately 70% of the total and have an average age of 36. In 97% of cases, the survey respondent is the head of the household, and more than 80% of participants are Venezuelan. On average, households have four members and have lived in Colombia for more than 3 years. Additionally, 7% of households include at least one person with a disability, and 26.7% have a member with a chronic illness.

³ The cash transfer from ADN Dignidad per household amounted to 77 USD (approximately 375,000 COP), while the baseline income for households was 181,720 COP (around 37.3 USD). The ADN Dignidad program targets households ineligible for social programs such as Familias en Acción, which imposes conditionalities such as school attendance (see Attanasio and Mesnard 2006). Although the program provides a similar subsidy amount, ADN Dignidad does not require recipients to meet specific conditions for support.

Regarding employment and income, fewer than 4% of respondents work in the formal sector, and fewer than 7% report stable income. Among the participants, 11% report displacement from their home country, more than 25% have experienced violence, and 39% have faced discrimination.

In terms of food security, while households have an acceptable food consumption score, the reduced coping strategies index (see WFP 2008) reveals significant challenges. On average, 5 days a week they consume cheaper food; more than 4 days a week they reduce portion sizes; and with similar frequency they resort to borrowing food. Additionally, adults eat less nearly 3 days a week so that children can eat, and households skip meals approximately 3 days a week. The average monthly per capita income of households in the sample is 105,120 COP, with an average number of four household members. To give context, the official per capita poverty line in 2021 was 354,031 COP, and the per extreme poverty line was 161,099 COP. By use of these poverty thresholds, all households in our sample would be considered in extreme poverty.

III. Empirical Strategy

We apply a multi-cutoff RDD to combine the two eligibility scores, standardizing them for simultaneous use. Our main regression model estimates the local effect of eligibility, with the outcome for household i represented as

$$y_i = \alpha + f(Z_i) + \tau \cdot 1(Z_i \geq 0) + X_i + \varepsilon_i, \quad (1)$$

where y_i is the outcome, X_i includes household control variables, and τ quantifies the average local program effect.

Validity checks of the RDD. We implemented multiple validity checks of our design. Our results do not show a significant evidence of score manipulation affecting eligibility, as shown by the nonparametric relationship between combined scores and sample density in figure 1.⁴

To address potential survey attrition, we estimated regression (1) using a binary indicator for survey completion. We find a 10 percentage point (14.7%) increase in response probability for the treatment group. No significant differences were noted near the eligibility cutoff. We tested for discontinuities in baseline characteristics and found no significant differences in both the full sample and the respondent subsample. Robustness checks showed no imbalances at the analysis threshold, and our primary results remained consistent against sample selection bias (see table A.1). To further address attrition bias, we follow the method

⁴ Figure A.1 (figs. A.1–A.6 are available online) presents the same analysis but applied to both scores separately. We find no evidence of manipulation.

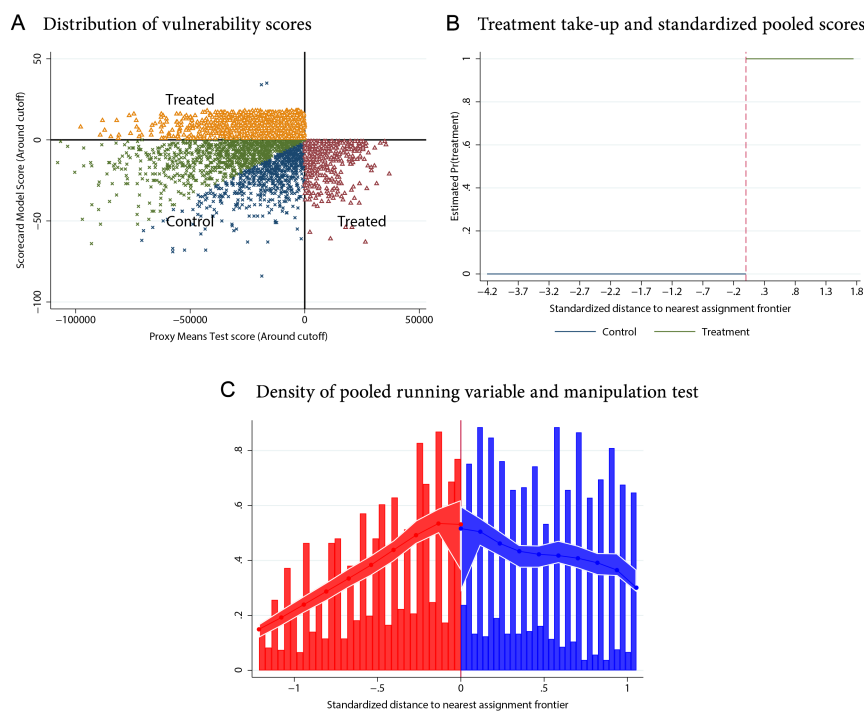


Figure 1. Graphical representation of the RDD. A, Distribution of vulnerability scores. Scatter plot of the sample used according to its distance to the smallest absolute value between the standardized, zero-centered proxy mean test score and the standardized, zero-centered scorecard model score. B, Treatment take-up and standardized pooled scores. There is a large discontinuity in the probability of receiving the treatment at the threshold. In fact, treatment compliance is such that we have what is known as a “sharp RDD,” where the probability of receiving treatment changes discretely from 0 to 1 at the threshold. C, Density of pooled running variable and manipulation test. Plotted is the density of individuals within bandwidths of the running variable, together with confidence intervals. The analysis shows no significant changes in the number of individuals on either side of our pooled threshold as evidence of no manipulation.

proposed by Molina-Millán and Macours (2025) using inverse probability weighting (IPW) based on the likelihood of respondents being reached during tracking. We consider individuals needing more than five phone calls to respond as the “hard-to-reach” group and apply inverse probability weights in our regressions to adjust for potential nonrandom attrition bias. In addition, to account for multiple testing, we apply the false discovery rate correction proposed by Anderson (2008).

IV. Results

Effects of program receipt on income and expenditures. In table 1, we show that while 19.2% of households that do not meet the eligibility criteria reported participation in any cash assistance program in the past 12 months, becoming

TABLE 1
EFFECT OF ADN DIGNIDAD ON INCOME AND EXPENDITURES

	Transfer Programs and Household Income			Remittances, Income Stability, and Household Expenses			
	Transfer Programs Enrolled	Number of Transfers Received	Log per Capita Household Income ^a	Received Remittances (= 1)	Send Remittances (= 1) ^a	Income Stability (= 1) ^a	Log Household Monthly Expenses ^a
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Effect	.768	4.287	.119	-.027	.032	.118	.104
Standard error	.026	.730	.051	.020	.025	.026	.045
MHT <i>p</i> -value	.001	.001	.030	.087	.087	.001	.030
Control mean	.192	.931	12.381	.129	.214	.173	12.431
Observations	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189
Bandwidth	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]

Note. Reported are estimates of the effects of the ADN Dignidad program on income and expenditures.

^a These models include the baseline value of the outcome variable as an additional control variable. For a graphical representation of these results, see fig. A.2.

eligible for the ADN Dignidad program results in a 77 percentage point increase in the likelihood of reporting participation, reaching universal participation among eligible households. Eligible households reported receiving approximately 4.3 additional transfers compared with the control group, which contributed to an 11.9% increase in per capita household income in the month prior to the survey. Consistent with these findings, we observe that program beneficiaries are more likely to be net senders of remittances. Specifically, there is a decrease in the probability of receiving remittances, alongside an increase in the likelihood of having sent remittances in the past month. When asked about stability of their income, beneficiaries reported a 11.8 percentage point (67%) higher likelihood of having a stable income. Additionally, eligible households showed a 10.4% increase in expenditures.

Financial behaviors and employment outcomes. In table 2, we show that the program had a positive effect on beneficiary savings, with an average increase of 6.1 percentage points (33%) in the likelihood of having savings, while the probability of having debt decreased by 5.1 percentage points (19%) compared with the control group. The increase in savings is driven by informal savings products, which rise by 6.5 percentage points. Similarly, the reduction in debt is primarily linked to informal debt, such as loans from family or friends and pawnshop loans. Columns 5–9 show the program's effect on various employment indicators. Our findings suggest that the program does not significantly affect employment outcomes.

Reduction in coping strategies and food insecurity. Table 3 presents findings related to survival strategies and food insecurity. Columns 1–10 focus on the

TABLE 2
EFFECT OF ADN DIGNIDAD ON FINANCIAL AND EMPLOYMENT ACTIVITY

	Savings and Debt					Employment			
	Has Savings	Informal Savings	Has Debt	Informal Debt	Owens a Business ^a	Worked during Past Week	Worked in Past 3 Months	Average Working Hours in a Week	Average Number of Months Employed
	(= 1) (1)	(= 1) (2)	(= 1) (3)	(= 1) (4)	(5)	(= 1) (6)	(= 1) (7)	(8)	(9)
Effect	.061	.065	-.051	-.047	.022	.009	.011	2.534	.041
Standard error	.026	.026	.027	.026	.031	.027	.014	1.522	.219
MHT <i>p</i> -value	.038	.038	.038	.038	1.000	1.000	1.000	.924	1.000
Control mean	.188	.178	.278	.254	.435	.709	.942	26.677	7.506
Observations	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189
Bandwidth	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]

Note. Reported are estimates of the effects of the ADN Dignidad program on savings, debt, and employment. The models in this table correspond to a linear relationship between the dependent and independent variables, covariates, and the standardized distance to the nearest assignment frontier as a running variable. Control covariates included are sex, age in years, whether the head of the household is the one who applied, nationality, how much time they have been in Colombia, the proportion of women in the household, food consumption index (baseline), household expenses per capita (log at baseline), household income per capita (log at baseline), and average education level in the household. The *RDropust* command was used to make the estimations. Columns 1–4 illustrate the results of the program on savings and debt. Columns 1 and 2 indicate whether the person has savings, while cols. 3 and 4 show whether the individual has debt. Columns 5–9 exhibit the results of the program on employment. Column 5 shows whether the person owns a business. Columns 6 and 7 are dummies reflecting whether he or she worked during the past week and the past 3 months. Column 8 indicates the number of hours the person reports working in the past week, and col. 9 shows the number of months the person reports having had a job in the past year.

^a These models include the baseline value of the outcome variable as an additional control variable. For a graphical representation of these results, see fig. A.3.

program's effect on survival coping strategies. The results indicate that ADN Dignidad effectively reduced the likelihood of households resorting to family borrowing by 8.8 percentage points (12%), dependence on savings by 14 percentage points (17%), child labor by 4.5 percentage points (35%), selling belongings by 6.7 percentage points (22%), and selling household assets by 6.7 percentage points (15%). While not statistically significant, other strategies show a trend toward reduced usage. When combining these outcomes into a standardized index, the results show an overall reduction of 0.151 standard deviations in the use of coping survival strategies.

Columns 11–16 show that the program mitigates the severity of food insecurity among participant households. Compared with the control group, ADN Dignidad participants show a significant reduction in dependence on cheaper or less preferred meals by 0.394 days a week (7%), meals donated by family and/or friends by 0.428 days (30%), reduced meal sizes by 0.769 days (21%),

TABLE 3
EFFECT OF ADN DIGNIDAD ON REDUCING COPING STRATEGIES AND FOOD INSECURITY

	Use of Coping Strategies										Coping Mechanisms for Food Insecurity					
											Days Depending on:					
	Depend on Family Borrowing ^a (1)	Depend on Savings ^a (2)	Reduce Essential Expenses ^a (3)	Depend on Child Labor (4)	Sell Belongings ^a (5)	Sell Household Assets ^a (6)	Work for Food ^a (7)	Migrate ^a (8)	Accept Risky or Forced Labor ^a (9)	Use of Survival Methods Index (Standardized) ^a (10)	Cheaper Meals ^a (11)	Family or Friends ^a (12)	Reduced Meal Size ^a (13)	Fewer Meals for Adults ^a (14)	Fewer Meals a Day ^a (15)	Food Insecurity Index (rCSI) (Standardized) ^a (16)
Effect	-.088	-.141	-.015	-.045	-.067	-.067	-.054	.010	-.023	-.151	-.394	-.428	-.769	-.567	-.671	-.370
Standard error	.030	.055	.030	.022	.029	.035	.031	.025	.028	.066	.143	.108	.171	.122	.167	.058
MHT p-value	.030	.047	.288	.064	.053	.078	.094	.288	.210	—	.002	.001	.001	.001	.001	—
Control mean	.736	.832	.733	.132	.303	.455	.584	.167	.282	.000	4.890	1.412	3.470	1.026	2.622	-.000
Observations	3,124	703	3,046	2,342	3,156	2,417	3,185	3,145	3,180	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189
Bandwidth	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]

Note. Reported are estimates of the effects of the ADN Dignidad program on coping strategies and food insecurity. The models in this table correspond to a linear relationship between the dependent and independent variables, covariates, and the standardized distance to the nearest assignment frontier as a running variable. Control covariates included are sex, age in years, whether the head of the household is the one who applied, nationality, how much time they have been in Colombia, the proportion of women in the household, food consumption index (baseline), household expenses per capita (log at baseline), household income per capita (log at baseline), and average education level in the household. The *R*-robust command was used to make the estimations. Columns 1–10 show dependence in the past year on borrowing from relatives, spending on savings, reducing essential expenses, child labor, selling personal and household belongings, working exclusively for food, migrating, and taking risky jobs. Column 10 is an index constructed from the previous columns, disregarding child labor dependence because it does not exist in the baseline survey. Columns 11–16 show the week in which individuals had to buy cheap meals, order food from family or friends, reduce portion sizes, have adults eat less, and eat fewer meals per day. Column 16 is an index constructed from cols. 11–15.

^a These models include the baseline value of the outcome variable as an additional control variable. For a graphical representation of these results, see fig. A.4 and fig. A.5.

adults' meals sacrificed for children's feeding by 0.567 days (54%), and the overall number of meals in the household by 0.671 days (25%). Combining these into one standardized index, the results in column 16 indicate that the program reduces food insecurity by 0.37 standard deviations. To contextualize the size of our estimates, Özler et al. (2021) report effects between 0.15 and 0.25 standard deviations (SD) on the revised coping strategies index (rCSI) in the short term, while Aygün et al. (2021) find a 23% drop in short-term rCSI. The effect of ADN Dignidad is 0.37 SD, which translates to an approximate 25% reduction.

Subjective well-being and broader effects. Finally, the program had positive effects on participants' subjective well-being, with noticeable decreases in experiences of violence and discrimination among households involved in the program (table 4). There was a reported 30.5% reduction in the likelihood that any household member experienced violence or insecurity in the month prior to the survey, as well as a 23.8% decrease in reported instances of discrimination when compared with the control group. Additionally, participants indicated higher levels of life satisfaction, reporting an increase of 0.499 points regarding their satisfaction with life compared with others and a 0.563 point increase in life satisfaction relative to their own experiences. These improvements are likely connected to enhanced economic stability and a sense of security. Overall, the findings suggest that providing unconditional cash assistance to highly vulnerable populations not only enhances their purchasing power for essential goods

TABLE 4
EFFECT OF ADN DIGNIDAD ON INSECURITY AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

	Any Victim of Violence in the Household ^a (1)	Felt Discrimi- nated Against ^a (2)	Satisfaction with Own Life (3)	Satisfaction with Own Life Relative to Others (4)
Effect	-.040	-.038	.499	.563
Standard error	.021	.022	.139	.144
MHT <i>p</i> -value	.038	.046	.001	.001
Control mean	.131	.160	7.014	7.135
Observations	3,189	3,189	3,189	3,189
Bandwidth	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]	[-4.21, 1.75]

Note. Reported are estimates of the effects of the ADN Dignity program on insecurity and subjective well-being outcomes. The models in this table correspond to a linear relationship between the dependent and independent variables, covariates, and the standardized distance to the nearest assignment frontier as a running variable. Control covariates included are sex, age in years, whether the head of the household is the one who applied, nationality, how much time they have been in Colombia, the proportion of women in the household, food consumption index (baseline), household expenses per capita (log at baseline), household income per capita (log at baseline), and average education level in the household. The *RDrobust* command was used to make the estimations. Shown is whether any household member was a victim of violence, felt discriminated against, had satisfaction with own life, and had satisfaction with own life relative to others.

^a These models include the baseline value of the outcome variable as an additional control variable. For a graphical representation of these results, see fig. A.6.

but also significantly reduces reliance on harmful coping strategies. The program promotes greater stability, improves subjective well-being, and contributes to long-term resilience and integration among migrant and returnee populations, reflecting its important social benefits.

Robustness checks. We conducted several robustness tests to validate our main findings, as detailed in appendix B.3. First, we halved the bandwidth selection, and our results remained consistent, indicating stable treatment effects. Second, we changed the polynomial specification of the running variable to the second degree, following Gelman and Imbens (2019), without affecting our results. To address potential biases due to significant attrition rates between treated and control groups, we applied IPW methodology (Wooldridge 2002), calculating response probabilities using baseline covariates. The results remained similar after accounting for differential attrition. In addition, we implemented the methods proposed in Molina-Millán and Macours (2025), who argue that standard IPW methods can be sensitive to the model's specification, and we follow their method, which utilizes IPW based on the likelihood of being reached during an intensive tracking phase. The results remain similar.

Finally, we examine whether the effects decay for individuals who respond to the survey 1 month after receiving the transfer compared with those who respond 3 months later. To facilitate this analysis, we utilize the data from the survey, which includes both the interview date and the transfer date for participants who received the transfer. For the control group, we consider the enrollment date in the program, because transfers typically occur 1 month after enrollment. Therefore, participants who did not receive the transfer would have been expected to receive it 1 month after their enrollment. We do not find any evidence of differential effects by the timing of the transfer receipt (see tables A.14 and A.15).

V. Discussion

This paper examines the effect of unconditional cash transfers on short-term economic outcomes and well-being for immigrant refugees by utilizing data from the ADN Dignidad program. This program provides MPCA and social services information to displaced Venezuelan migrants and Colombian returnees for 6 months. Using an RDD based on the program's eligibility criteria, we find that the program effectively raises and sustains income and expenditures for recipients 1–3 months after benefits end. Additionally, it significantly reduces food insecurity and reliance on survival strategies while enhancing participants' self-reported life satisfaction. Our analysis by nationality, detailed in the appendix B.2, suggests that both Venezuelan migrants and Colombian returnees experience short-term benefits from the intervention, which is supported by qualitative evidence provided by Gómez and Gordillo (2023).

However, our study has limitations, particularly the inability to assess the long-term outcomes of MPCA, which restricts insights into the sustainability of the identified effects and their potential to foster lasting changes in participants' lives. This limitation is crucial for informing the design of effective cash transfer programs aimed at improving the well-being of refugees. Overall, the findings underscore the effectiveness of ADN Dignidad as a vital social protection intervention for vulnerable mixed-migrant populations in Colombia. While the analysis focuses on short-term effects, improvements in savings, working hours, and coping strategies suggest the possibility of sustained benefits. Thus, short-term effects of cash transfers may underestimate the program's potential long-term effects. This highlights the importance of considering both immediate and enduring outcomes in future research and policy evaluations.

Finally, while the cash component of the program is essential, its effectiveness can be enhanced by complementary features, such as educational workshops and targeted messaging, which can improve financial management and encourage savings behaviors. Future evaluations should focus on collecting detailed data to further explore these combined effects.

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