

## **Experiences of Latinx Immigrants Traveling Through the Darién Gap and Mexico: Stories of Challenges and Hope**

Jennifer Romero<sup>1</sup>, Laura Vargas, PhD. LMSW, MPA<sup>2</sup>

1. University of Colorado, School of Medicine, Aurora, CO

2. University of Colorado, School of Medicine – Department of Psychiatry, Aurora, CO

### **Background:**

Mexico is one of the largest centers for immigrants to travel through on their journey to the United States. Latinx Immigrants from South America may also need to navigate through the Darién Jungle, where they may face extortion, violence, and hunger as they travel hundreds of kilometers through the jungle. This study aims to further characterize the journey of Latinx immigrants and highlight their challenges as well as their resources to better support their mental health needs.

### **Methods:**

Between March 2022 and November 2024, recently arrived Latinx immigrants (n=29) were interviewed at a respite center in the border town of McAllen, Texas. Interviews were semi-structured and focused on their experiences as they traveled from their home country to the United States, their motivations for making the journey, and general lessons and reflections. Interviews were transcribed from Spanish, translated to English, and analyzed for thematic similarities.

### **Results:**

Participants came from a diverse range of countries from the Caribbean, South and Central America. Five themes were present in many interviews: (1) The physical challenges of travelling through the Darién Gap, (2) Insecurity within the Darién Gap, (3) Insecurity within Mexico (4) Finding supportive individuals during their journey, and (5) Relying on religion/God as a form of resilience.

### **Discussion:**

Exposure to violence and experiencing traumatic events were common in this cohort and highlight a potential area to address in treating the mental health needs of immigrant populations here in the U.S. Providers can assess their mental health needs through asking about an individual's experience migrating to the U.S. Harnessing the strength that stems from religion and community can potentially serve as a form of resilience in caring for this patient population.