

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

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BACKGROUND

The U.S.-Mexico border is one of the largest hubs of migrants travelling to the U.S. It is well-known to be a dangerous site where migrants face the risk of being extorted, abused, kidnapped, or killed. Migrants travelling from South America by foot also must cross hundreds of kilometers through Darién Gap to reach Central America. Nearly a quarter million people crossed the Darién Jungle in 2022.¹ In addition to the same risks migrants face in Mexico, those crossing the Darién Jungle must also hike through treacherous terrain and evade wildlife (**Figure 1**).

Studies have demonstrated reproductive, obstetric, and mental health needs of Latinx immigrants.^{2,3,4,5} Little research is available that describes the experience of **recently-arrived** migrants traversing through Central and South America using a qualitative approach. This study will address this gap of knowledge in hopes of addressing the specific mental health needs of this population.



Figure 1: Family crossing a River in the Darién Gap.¹

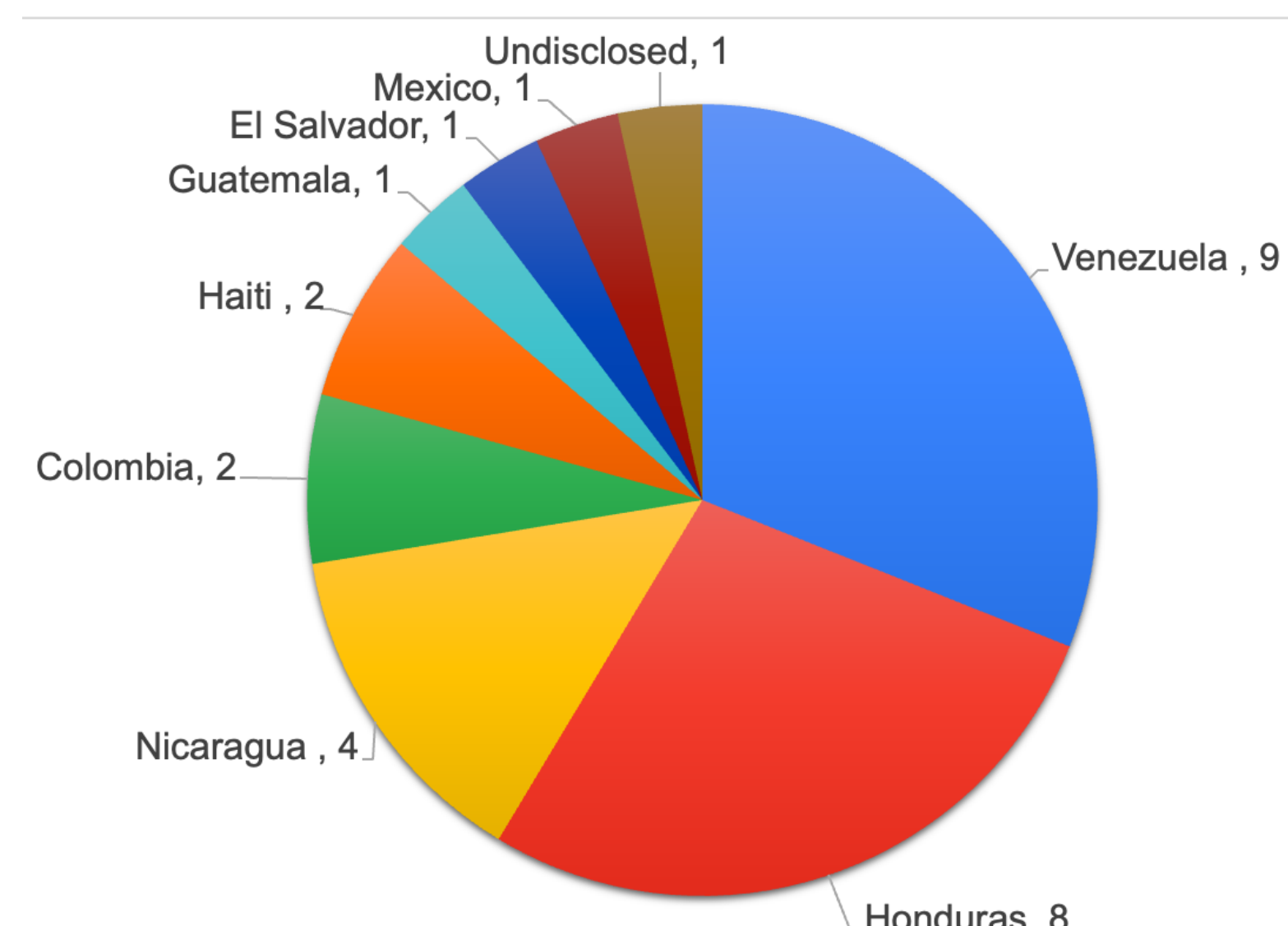


Figure 2: Country of Origin of Study Participants (n=29).

METHODS

Newly arrived Latinx immigrants (n=29) were interviewed between March 2022 and November 2024 at a respite center in US-Mexico Border town of McAllen, Texas. The countries of origin of participants are demonstrated in **Figure 2**. Interviews lasted 20 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of asking about basic demographic information, their experiences during their journey to the US, and overall reflections. Recorded interviews were transcribed in Spanish and translated to English. The experiences of participants in the Darién Gap and traveling through Mexico were consolidated and further assessed for thematic similarities. Participants travelling from South America and the Caribbean (n=14) discussed their experiences in the Darién Gap. All participants discussed their experiences in Mexico.

This study has received IRB approval (COMIRB#21-4175).

RESULTS

Theme 1: Physical Difficulty of Crossing the Darién

“The jungle is dangerous... There was only one trunk, one branch, and one by one we’d pass it so it didn’t break.... The mountain is slippery. We had to hold onto a rope. It was extremely dangerous. Lots of people die there.”

The Darién Forest was crossed by all participants with national origins from Haiti, Colombia, and Venezuela (n=14). The Darién Jungle contains many rivers that would flood surrounding areas where travelers would often camp. Participants noted that they were advised to camp at higher ground as the rivers could rise and were known to take people as they slept. Others mention the steep mountains and sharp cliffs they needed to pass in the forest. Two separate participants stated they had seen or heard of a young child falling down the mountain and parents would chase after them, falling to their deaths. Participants spent 2-6 days crossing the Darién Gap by foot and rafts.

Theme 2: Safety Concerns in The Darién

“If they say take out your money, and if you say you don’t have any, they will search you. If you don’t have any, you have a chance of leaving. If you have money and you said you didn’t...they’ll kill you right there.”

Robbery and extortion were commonly experienced by many participants traveling through the Darién Jungle (n=11). Some were threatened with firearms while they were being robbed and/or extorted. The amount taken from the participants ranged from \$20-350 USD. Female participants had not experienced any sexual violence in the jungle but only heard of these experiences from others in the groups ahead or behind them. None of the study participants were kidnapped here, however, they had heard of stories of others being kidnapped or children being taken from families. Only three participants said they were not robbed or assaulted while crossing the Darién.

Theme 3: Danger and Insecurity Faced in Mexico

“What was the most difficult part of your journey?”
“Being in Mexico.”

A range of issues were faced by immigrants crossing Mexico: hunger, homelessness, discrimination, kidnappings, assault. Three female participants were sexually assaulted. Five participants were kidnapped and had to rely on family to pay their ransom. One of those five was able to escape. Another eight participants stated they were nearly kidnapped. They were warned by others, noticed they were being stalked, or were able to escape to safety (e.g. an airport, shelter, church). Immigrants were often discriminated against and tried hiding their accents or avoided speaking altogether.

Theme 4: Supportive People During Challenging Times

“Thank God, a man with a good heart fell from heaven. He said ‘Yes, over here, there’s a shelter. If you’d like, I can take you so you can stay there.’”

While discussing the bad people they had encountered on their journey, some participants were quick to point out they had also met kind, helpful people. Immigrants were often discriminated against in Mexico and denied rides, jobs, etc. Many participants commented that they received food, rides, and shelter from complete strangers. Some were able to rely on their community in their home country or in the U.S. to help pay for food, shelter and even large amounts of ransom money.

Theme 5: Finding Strength Through Religion

“I leave it all up to God. I pray to God; it brings me peace. And those things have helped keep me from shattering.”

Most participants (n=19) spoke about religion or their connection with God as a source of strength during their journey. One participant spoke about 2 separate dangerous events in which her prayers were answered immediately. Many participants spoke of how they left their fate in God’s hands and prayed for safety.

DISCUSSION

- ❖ Experiencing traumatic events was not uncommon in this cohort of recently-arrived Latinx immigrants, which raises a potential gap in delivering comprehensive care to them once they arrive to the U.S.
- ❖ Several study participants also noted they were grateful to speak about their experiences through the interview process because they otherwise would not have spoken about it. Mental health and primary care providers are well-suited to explore these aspects of immigrant health.
- ❖ Sources of resilience (i.e. religion, community) can potentially serve as protective factors in strengthening the mental health of immigrant populations.
- ❖ Limitations of this study include not being able to explore all themes with all participants as some interviews did not directly discuss all themes. Future studies could ensure these topics are discussed.
- ❖ A survey-based quantitative study was done in tandem with this qualitative study to evaluate mental health and trauma exposure. Future directions include comparing these datasets

References:

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