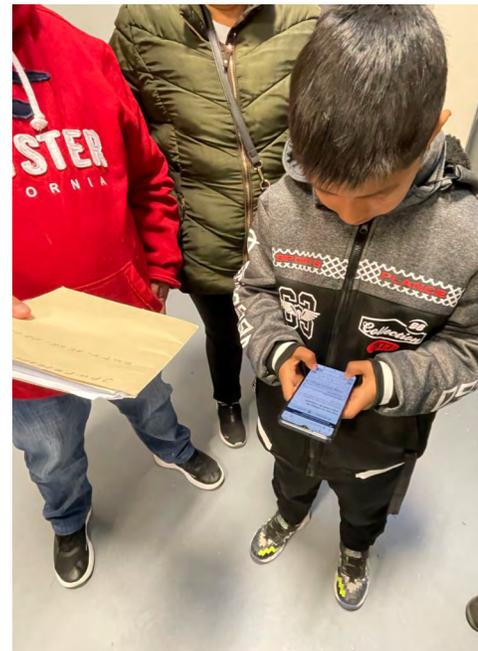


# Navigating the U.S. - Mexico Border

Digital Practices of Migrants  
and Their Psychosocial Needs



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School of Social Work

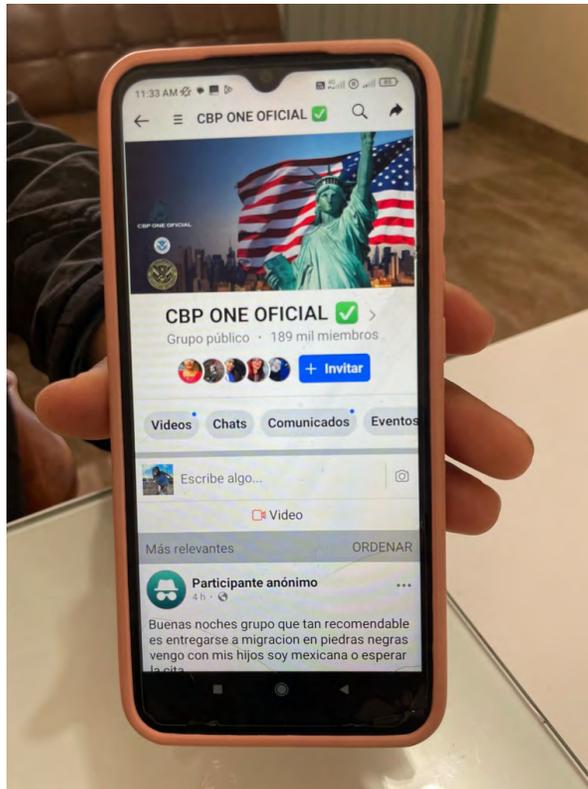
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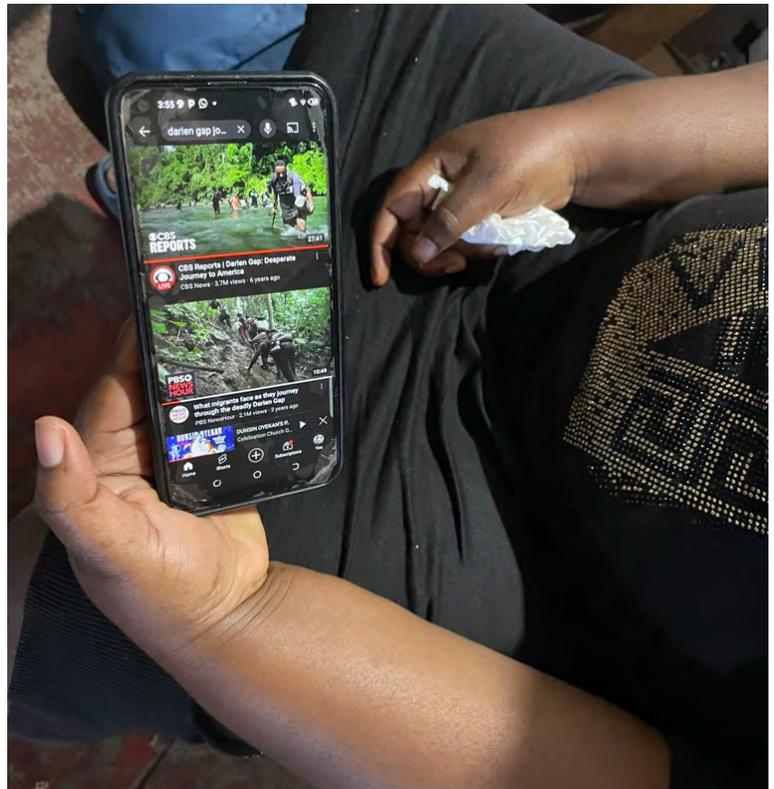
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**Asylum-seekers receive emails from CBP regarding their appointments. However, sometimes people are unable to access their applications due to their phone's capabilities.**



**One of many “CBP ONE OFICIAL” groups on Facebook.**



**Migrant looking for information about crossing the Darien Gap on YouTube.**

# Introduction

The number of people arriving at the southwest U.S. land border has increased significantly, prompting a humanitarian response at the border to meet the needs of those seeking entry.<sup>1</sup> U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reports that it encountered 2,475,669 persons in fiscal year 2023, setting a record for the number of encounters at the southwest border. Coming from Venezuela, Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Haiti, and other countries, many of those arriving in northern Mexico are seeking protection from conflict, persecution, discrimination, violence, and other challenging conditions in their countries of origin and intend to apply for asylum in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

In October 2020, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) launched the CBP One™ mobile application. CBP One™ serves as a single portal to a variety of CBP services. Using a series of guided questions, CBP One™ directs users to the appropriate services based on their needs. On January 12, 2023, the application became available for asylum-seekers to submit biographical information in advance, request and schedule an appointment at an eligible port of entry in the southwest U.S. border, and begin the asylum process. Currently, the eligible ports of entry are: Calexico and San Ysidro, CA; Nogales, AZ; Brownsville, Eagle Pass, Hidalgo, Laredo, and El Paso, TX. Since the rollout of CBP One™, the U.S. government has made changes to the app, responding to technical glitches and other problems reported by users and advocates.

The U.S. government strongly encourages noncitizens without prior authorization to use CBP One™ to request an appointment to present themselves at a land port of entry. Under the Circumvention of Lawful Pathways rule, this is the only way individuals can be admitted into the U.S. at a designated port of entry and be eligible for asylum.<sup>3</sup> There is some discretion to admit people in vulnerable conditions without an appointment when they meet certain exemptions.

Currently, there are 1,450 CBP One™ appointments available everyday, spread across each eligible port of entry. Appointments are available 21 days in advance, but due to the application's utilization of geolocation software, vulnerable migrants hoping to file for asylum in the U.S. can only schedule an appointment once they have reached central and northern Mexico.<sup>4</sup>

Information, mobile phones, and access to the internet have become vital necessities for those waiting in Mexico now that CBP One™ is the main way to enter the U.S. at the southwest border. Frequent changes in federal immigration policy and processing, as well as evolving migration patterns, have also forced vulnerable migrants to look for information from multiple sources to better understand the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border. At the same time, the small number of appointments results in long periods of time people have to wait in Mexico in precarious conditions, often without opportunities to earn income while they wait. This situation forces people to seek out smugglers or cross irregularly through dangerous pathways along the southwestern border of the U.S.

Digital migration studies focus on the complex factors influencing the ways that migrants, internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, and asylum-seekers use digital information technologies like smartphones and various social media platforms.<sup>6</sup> Researchers suggest the smartphone is a common and valuable technological tool that helps migrants overcome information deficits while on the migration route, serves as a lifeline when they become stranded, keeps them connected to people in their countries of origin and destination, and facilitates connection to critical resources during prolonged periods of uncertainty.<sup>7</sup> Throughout this report, we occasionally use the term ‘migrant’ as an umbrella term that includes migrants, internally displaced persons (IPDs), refugees, and asylum-seekers and those who will be eligible for other forms of legal protection under international law.



**Number of CBP One™ appointments per day at the eligible ports of entry.**

**Source: The University of Texas Strauss Center for International Security and Law.<sup>5</sup>**

However, the need for smartphones at the U.S.-Mexico border places a burden on vulnerable migrants who cannot acquire a smartphone with the capacity to handle certain digital platforms like CBP One™ and also forces them to look for spaces that may offer free internet access. This need for a smartphone at the border also highlights literacy and digital literacy issues, which are required to navigate CBP One™.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, using smartphones along the migration route is not without risk. Their use is also associated with misinformation, loss of digital information due to robbery, unreliable internet access, and the risk of providing information to criminal groups to request ransom for migrants in cases of kidnapping. Furthermore, mobile phones can leave digital footprints within state surveillance and border control systems, risking exposure of locations and identities.<sup>9</sup>

Understanding how people on the move use information technology during migration and while waiting in border towns is critical. Comprehending migrants’ digital practices includes inquiring about what type of information they find helpful, the barriers and challenges people face to access and understand that information, and the connections between their digital practices and perceived needs, especially regarding health, safety, and mental health. For example, how do migrant people use technology to locate and support basic needs for safety, shelter, food, water, and access to health and mental health care services?

This report shares the initial findings of an ongoing research project investigating migrant’s digital practices, digital tools as forms of risk and protection, the issues surrounding CBP One™, and migrants’ perceived needs along the U.S.-Mexico border and migration routes in Mexico. Using a convenience sample of migrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking adults, the research project builds upon prior research in the field of digital migration studies and is grounded within a health and mental health disciplinary framework. The research project explores two themes: First, the role of information technology and social media for migrants, refugees, IDPs, and asylum-seekers along the migration routes in Mexico, and, second, migrants’ perceived needs (including mental health), social supports, challenges, resistance and resilience practices, and coping skills.

# Research Methods

The project uses a mixed-methods approach using standardized measurements on well-being (WHO-5)<sup>10</sup> and perceived needs in humanitarian settings (HESPER)<sup>11</sup>, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and qualitative coding.

From January 2023 through March 2024, Dr. Alejandro Olayo-Méndez, S.J., Assistant Professor at Boston College School of Social Work, and the research team, conducted 58 interviews with migrants in all the corresponding Mexican cities to the eight ports of entry with the infrastructure to admit people through CBP One™. Four of those interviews were conducted in San Diego, CA and El Paso, TX with migrants who obtained an appointment through CBP One™.

## Interview Sites at U.S. - Mexico Border

U.S. City	Mexican City	Site of Interview
San Ysidro	Tijuana	3 shelters
Calexico	Mexicali	3 shelters
Nogales	Nogales	1 shelter
El Paso	Ciudad Juárez	3 shelters
Eagle Pass	Piedras Negras	1 shelter
Laredo	Nuevo Laredo	1 camp
Hidalgo	Reynosa	1 shelter
Brownsville	Matamoros	1 camp

Every port of entry was visited at least twice during the project. Dr. Olayo-Méndez collected data at 12 shelters and two informal camps in Mexico. He also conducted 10 interviews with shelter directors and staff. Additional ongoing research will complement these findings by collecting further data at additional research sites along the border. In Mexico, Dr. Olayo-Méndez conducted interviews at nine migrant shelters run by faith-based organizations and three at migrant shelters run by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Residents in the camp in Nuevo Laredo were served by a faith-based organization and residents in the camp in Matamoros were served by multiple faith-based actors and some international organizations. Interviews in the U.S. were conducted at faith-based migrant shelters. These organizations agreed to allow Dr. Olayo-Méndez access to shelter guests and facilitated recruitment of participants.

Dr. Olayo-Méndez and the research team conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with migrants who were staying at the shelters and were using CBP One™ to obtain an appointment. During the recruitment process migrants received information about the nature and purpose of the research. Dr. Olayo-Méndez obtained verbal consent and their identities were anonymized. The names of the interviewees have been changed in this report to preserve their privacy. Interviews were conducted in Spanish.<sup>12</sup>



Dr. Olayo-Méndez having a conversation with an individual waiting in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico.

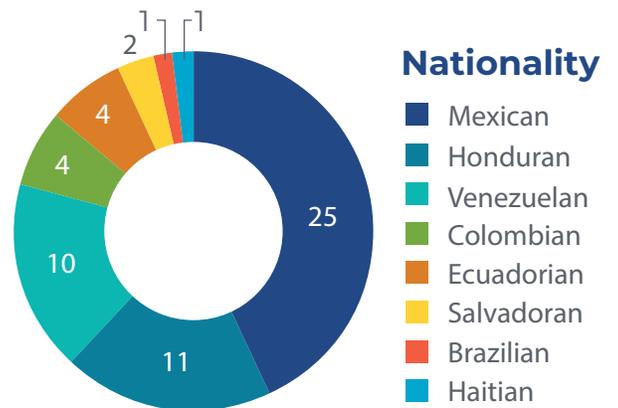
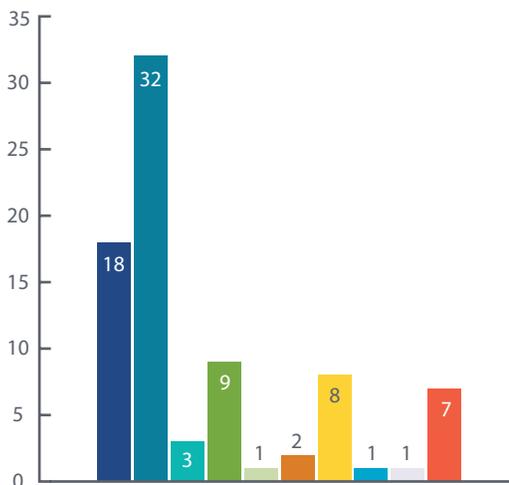
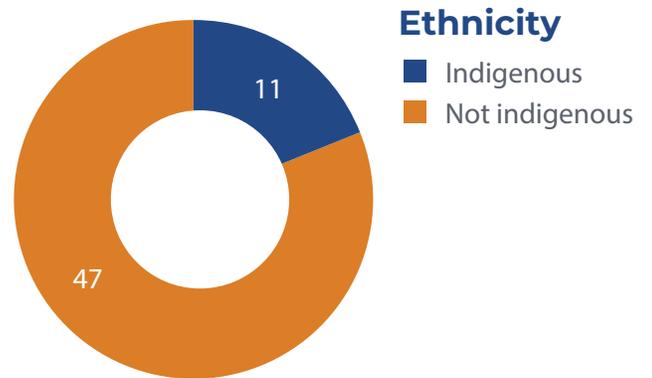
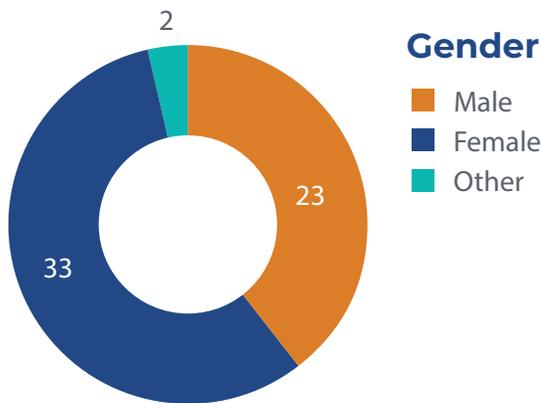
Present at the U.S.-Mexico border in Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, **Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)** was one of the organizations that supported this research project by connecting Dr. Olayo-Méndez with migrant shelters in Ciudad Juárez and assisted in identifying and recruiting individuals for interviews. As JRS works to meet the mental health and psychosocial needs of migrants at the border, the organization is witness to many of the realities presented throughout this report.

## Sociodemographics

Individuals waiting for an appointment through CBP One™ at migrant shelters represent a variety of identities. The interviewees as a whole represented different nationalities, ethnicities, genders, and ages. Most interviewees were traveling with children. There are some migrants including those from China, Middle Eastern, and other Asian nations who have the financial means to hire smugglers, so they are not typically found waiting in shelters.<sup>13</sup> For the most part, the migrant population stranded and waiting for an appointment through CBP One™ are those who have limited resources.

### Age in years

Median: **33**    Highest: **51**    Lowest: **20**



### Family

Frequency of response per interviewee (Participants could have multiple responses)

- Partner
- Child
- Parent
- Sibling
- Uncle/Aunt
- Grandparent
- Grandchild
- Cousin
- Brother or sister-in-law
- Other



Mealtime at a shelter in Tijuana, Mexico.

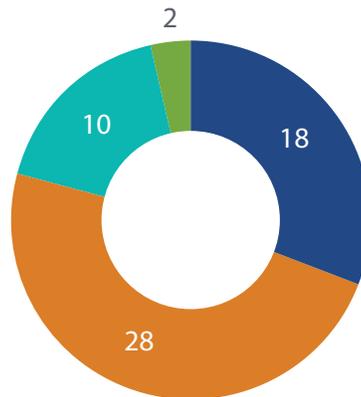


Families waiting at a shelter in Reynosa, Mexico.

Migrant shelters are always buzzing with the voices of children. The images of children running around in playgrounds or gathering for activities at common spaces in shelters correspond with the reports from migrants indicating that many of them travel with young children, usually parents traveling with their children, but occasionally it is the grandparents traveling with grandchildren.

**10% of interviewees**  
reported difficulty with reading

**14% of interviewees**  
reported difficulty with writing



#### Level of education

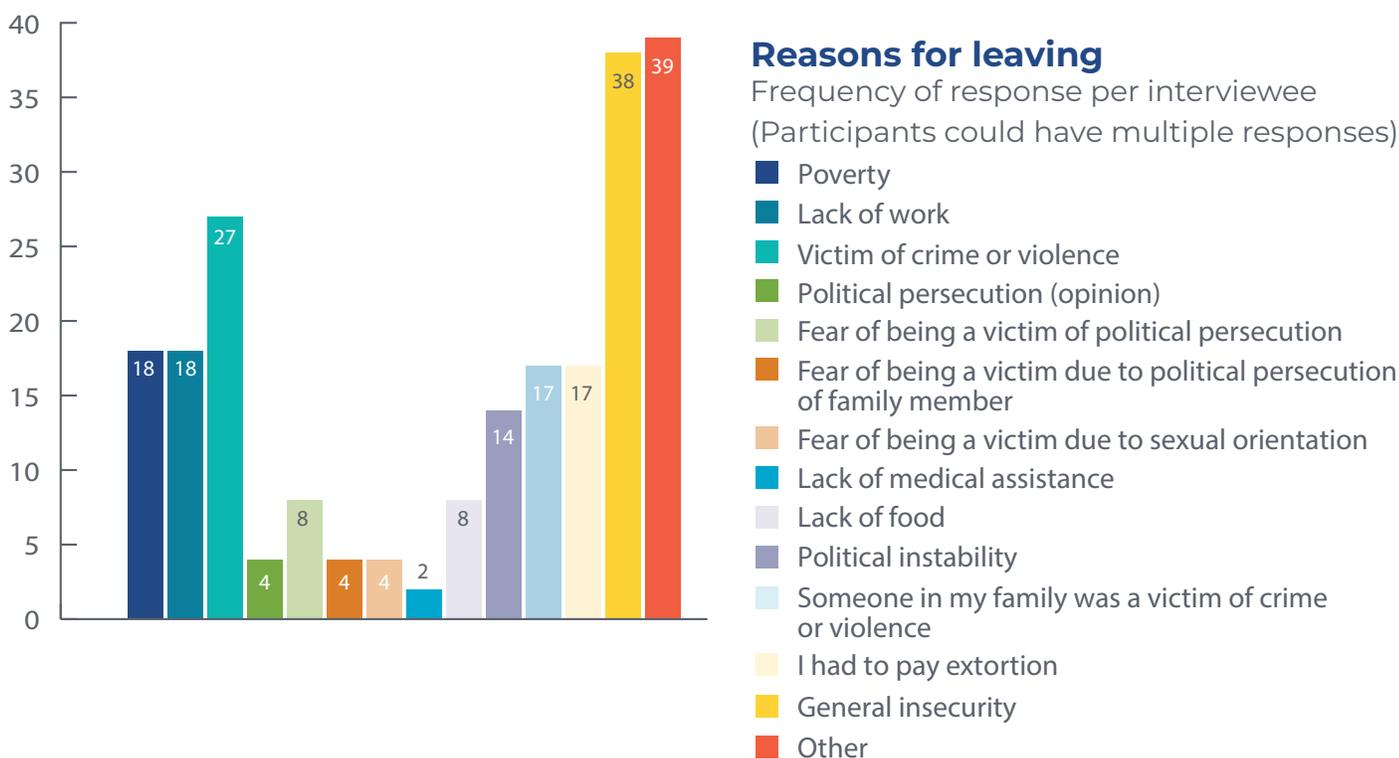
- Primary
- Secondary
- University or more
- No School

Level of education and ability to read and write are key indicators that go hand in hand with digital literacy and other kinds of literacy.<sup>14</sup> **Levels of literacy, both regular and digital, are one of the least visible barriers in the use of information technologies.** Even when migrants report an ability to read and write, navigating a digital world and applications presents another significant barrier when seeking asylum.

# Reasons for Leaving Country of Origin

Statistics from CBP indicate an increasing number of encounters with migrants at the U.S. southwest border. The main questions that accompany these increasing numbers are why do people leave? And why do they embark on difficult journeys risking their lives and the lives of their children?

Decisions to migrate are often based on mixed motives and seldom for one single reason. In the case of migrants waiting for an appointment through CBP One™, violence is one of the main reasons that forced them to leave their home. Often they report harassment by cartel organizations, criminal gangs, or generalized violence. In some cases, criminal organizations harass people until the payment of “taxes” or extortion becomes unbearable or there is a violent event that threatens their lives and forces them to flee in search of safety. For several, relocating within their country of origin is not a viable option.



Violence is not limited to the home country or the moment of fleeing. Several migrants report experiencing violence during their journey to the U.S.-Mexico border. Extortions and kidnapping at the hands of criminal groups are common, harassment from all levels of government authorities occur regularly, and paying extortions to diverse actors is a frequent experience. In short, **violence is both a reason to seek safety elsewhere and a barrier to seek asylum in the United States.**

## The Omnipresence of Violence

Migrants and asylum-seekers experience violence in their home countries in different ways. For some, there is a history of repeated violence, harassment or persecution against people by cartels or criminal gangs that force people to flee in search of safety. Others may be persecuted for being activists, fighting for ecological causes or community needs. In several cases, they are kidnapped, disappeared, and ultimately killed.

In El Paso, TX, Andrea, a 37-year-old woman from Colombia and health promoter, left because cartel groups threatened her and her partner to the point that she had to stop visiting rural communities. She recalled that **“people from Cartel del Golfo started to harass us. They detained my husband for three or four hours and questioned him about our work in the communities... It was a large group of men that took him apart to question him... One day they asked us to stop coming to the community and told us to be careful... and days later someone showed us pictures of other health promoters that were killed in a community nearby. We knew we had to leave.”**

Camila, a 33-year-old Mexican national fleeing with her five children and other family members, arrived at the port of entry in Nogales. There she shared, **“First they kidnapped my husband, after five years, we have not heard anything. Then, in February [2023] they kidnapped my sister. They sent us pictures of her tied up and naked. They asked for \$6,000 for ransom. We could only gather \$3,000 and she was freed. We have with us all the videos and messages to prove that the threats were real... but we are still fearful and concerned that later they could take the children away... Then we thought that this is the second time that something like this has happened to us. We did not want to wait until something else happened to us. We did not want to keep on living in fear and like this.”**

**One of the most troubling and recurring trends in these patterns of violence is the threat to recruit or take away families’ young children and adolescents. This trend resembles the recruitment of child soldiers where coercion is common.<sup>15</sup> In these cases families flee to protect the safety of their children.**

In Piedras Negras, Mexico. Gabriela, a Honduran mother of four children said, **“I had the necessary things to live in my country. I had a piece of land, a little house, and a way of living. It was simple but enough. Then the maras threatened to take away or recruit my 15-year-old... [One day] a man with a black jacket showed up at my house... I did not know him and I thought that he was going to kill me, but why? I have not done anything. He asked me to go and talk to his boss. ‘We are not going to do anything to you,’ he said. ‘But, we want you to work with us [selling drugs].’ I told them I could not join them because I had four children. After some months, they started surveilling my house. I saw them around more frequently until one day they approached me and told me, ‘since you could not work with us, maybe your son can work with us. He is a boy, so maybe he will understand better. You have one week to think about it.’ I did not wait a week, I left everything and fled to protect my child. I do not want them to take him away or that something may happen to him.”**

Sometimes, people who are barely making a living, usually making money from informal employment, small business ventures (like selling clothes, small convenience stores, fruit stands) or precarious jobs, are targeted and extorted by criminal groups. These groups ask people to pay money for “safety.” These requests and payments go on until it becomes unsustainable to do, because people end up working to pay those extortions. Unable or unwilling to pay, people receive death threats and are forced to flee leaving everything behind.

In Piedras Negras, Mexico, Marcela, a 36-year-old traveling with her partner and an eight-year-old disabled girl, narrated a history of violence in her hometown that led her to move to La Paz [a small town between Quito and Pasto]. There she was able to acquire a small motorcycle that her partner used to provide transportation services. Then, criminal gangs started extorting her to the point that it was impossible to pay. **“At first they asked us to pay \$2 every day for protection. They said, ‘this payment is like a vaccine. It will protect you from harm.’ If you do not pay, something may happen to you.’ Then, they asked us to pay \$5 every day. With all the expenses we had, paying the credit for the motorcycle, gas, and on top of that paying them, we were left with nothing, not even something to buy food for us. We paid for a month and a half. Then, we decided to leave.”**

At other times, there is a single event that threatens people’s lives. The event has such force or brutality that people feel forced to leave. It could have been a violent event such as a shooting to the house, a death threat with violence at home, or the accumulation of threats that forces people to flee in search of safety.

In Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Julieta, a 26-year-old woman from Honduras traveling with her daughter, mentioned that **“gangs extorted my mother for a long time... [They asked her for \$160 every other week.] My mother worked hard in her small business until she could not pay anymore. The gang continued harassing us, there was a**

**shooting in the neighborhood and we relocated... but you know they [the gangs] have contacts everywhere and they found us... the death threats continued... until one day they entered my house before I arrived. They were waiting for me and they sexually assaulted me. Since then I am really afraid of going out... They also battered my mother. I knew I needed to leave my country."**

Many of these events are related to criminal gangs or cartels. Sometimes, people described sophisticated surveillance situations in their home countries like the use of drones, armored cars, and radio communications.

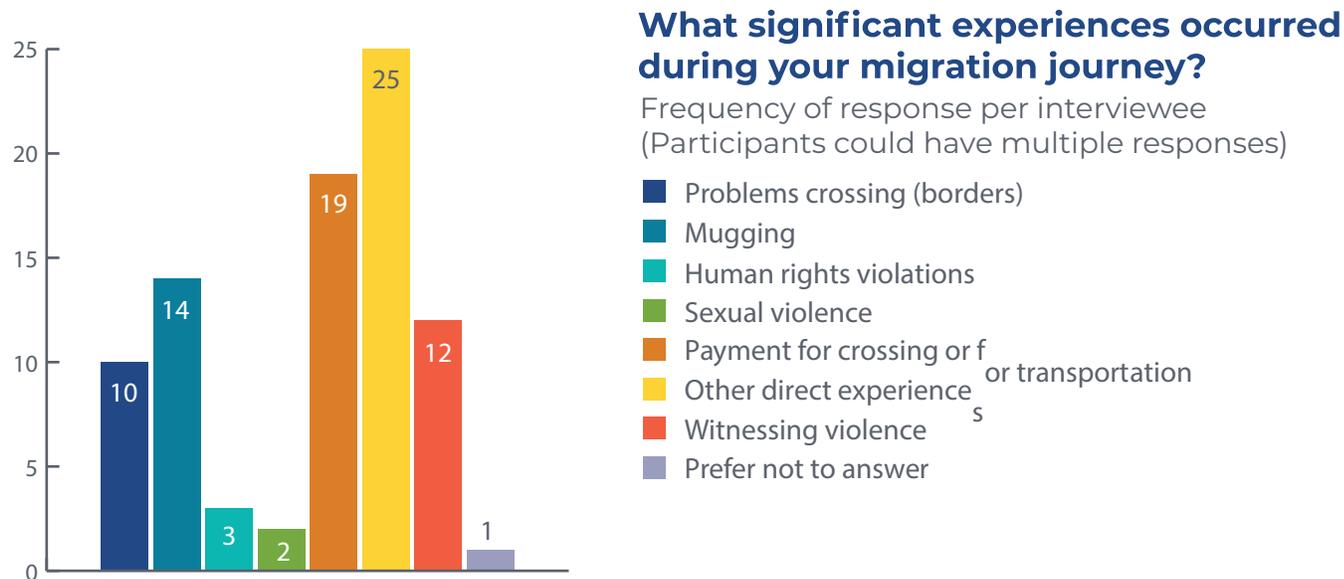
In Ciudad Juárez, Karla, a 50-year-old woman from Mexico fleeing from her home town with her daughter and her granddaughter, explained that **"Two men arrived at our house looking for another individual that we did not know. They were armed and asked if they could look inside. I told them to look around. After they left, they stood outside the house calling other people through radios and discussing if they needed to kill us because 'we did not want to cooperate,' they said. In my town in the state of Mexico, they burn cars and threaten people. It has been in the news. In the mountains where we live there are multiple camps where these men stay. But, surveillance has been going on for a long time. We started to pay attention and we realized that the region was surveilled with drones. In my town, we do not have internet or phone service. The fact that these men have drones and phones tells you how powerful they are. I am a widow and live with my daughter and grandchild. After these men threatened us, we decided to leave. We left everything, everything, everything."**

Many migrants move to other places as a temporary measure or as a transit space while weighing their options. Some of the interviewees explained that relocation is almost impossible, either because cartels or criminal gangs are able to track them or because the cities or towns where they could relocate are still unsafe and dominated by crime.

Adriana, a 31-year-old indigenous woman from Guerrero at a camp in Matamos with her four children, said that her first partner who has ties to cartels started looking for her, **"A couple of men came asking for my daughter. They were asking around the camp if someone knew about my whereabouts and the girls... I am fearful he [the former partner] can track me down and take away my children or even kill me as he promised."**

Even in cases when people have relocated within their country of origin, this seems to be only a temporary measure as they started to feel pressure and threats that ultimately led them to leave those places too.

# Experiences Along the Migration Journey



Violence along migration routes through Mexico has been well documented.<sup>16</sup> However, in recent years those migration routes have extended to include the Darien Gap that must be crossed on foot. Transiting migration routes has become increasingly difficult, so many migrants resort to walking long distances. Along the way, they suffer or witness many abuses and harassment at the hands of multiple actors.

In Piedras Negras, Anel, a 40-year-old Venezuelan woman traveling with her sister, her cousin, and two nephews recalled different incidents on her journey, **“before arriving at the town of Buenavista [55 miles from Piedras Negras], some men with masks, black uniforms, and guns jumped into the bus. In the bus there were Hondurans, Mexicans, and Venezuelans. They told us ‘you know how it is in this [the situation]. To continue your journey, you have to pay. They asked for 1,000 Mexican pesos (\$60) per person. We told them that we only had \$30 for all of us and asked them to be considerate for the children. They screamed at us. Then, we offered them \$45. They threaten to search my sister. So, she took out what was left and hidden in her shirt. We gave them all the money we had and still it was not enough for all of us. So, we stayed there. They did not let us board the bus again. We had to walk from there to Piedras Negras. People were moved and helped a lot.”**

The abuse is so frequent and in so many places that migrants are unable to distinguish who are the perpetrators. As one of the interviewees at a shelter in Mexicali recalled, **“the only way I can differentiate them is those who ask for money and those who do not.”**

In 2024, the research team identified a recent trend in the increase in kidnapping in the cities of Matamoros and Reynosa compared to what they heard from migrants during interviews in 2023. In Reynosa, five out of the six people interviewed in 2024 had been kidnapped by drug cartels. The level of violence ranges from forced labor, gender based violence, and psychological torture.

**Horacio, a 34-year-old Guatemalan male, who is illiterate, was kidnapped by the cartel and forced to work for them surveilling a geographical area.** He described being trained for three weeks to withstand the challenges of being outdoors for long periods of time and to handle guns and equipment to defend the territory. He was held against his will for an additional two months after a grenade injured him. He was able to escape from the hospital and found refuge at a shelter.

**Agata, a 32-year-old woman from Venezuela, was kidnapped by a drug cartel along with her husband and two children.** She and her husband were beaten and the whole family was tortured along with more people. Through speakers, the drug cartel blasted recordings of voices crying for help, people crying and screaming, and sounds of women being raped. Even after her family paid the ransom, her husband was held by the cartel another 10 days before being let go.

What is staggering in this situation is not only the practice of kidnapping, but the level of violence and cruelty involved. Also, interviewees described a high level of technological tools including drones, armor vehicles, radio technology, and communication systems being used. These situations and practices resemble war-like conditions and paramilitary activity, where no one is safe. Families with children, women, men and humanitarian workers are at constant risk.

The research team’s visits to Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros showed the highest levels of risk, violence, and cruelty at the hands of the cartel, often in collusion with governmental and other actors (army, national guard, local police, transportation companies). **These levels of violence and cruelty resemble war-like conditions.** In Nuevo Laredo, Dr. Olayo-Méndez could only have short conversations with migrants staying at the camp. Individual interviews could not be conducted due to security concerns.

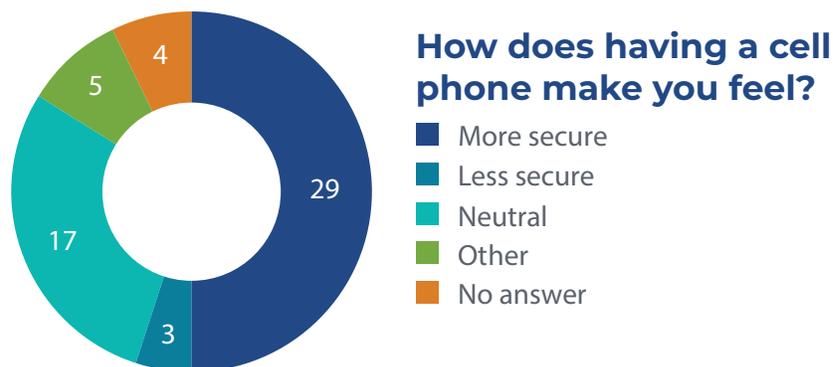
# Digital Practices Along the U.S.- Mexico Border

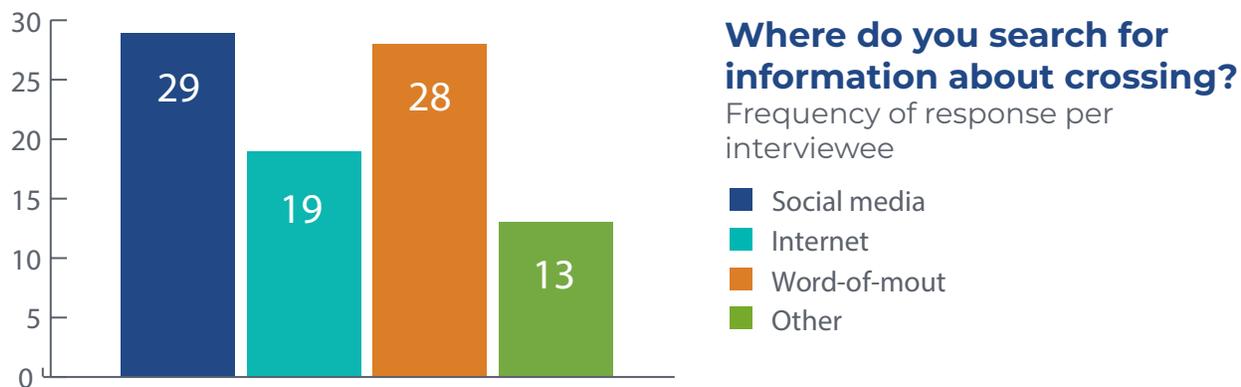
Migration studies have brought to the fore the crucial role that information and communication technologies (ICTs) have in migration trajectories. At the same time border, surveillance and security studies have underlined the significant part played by technology intertwined with migration management.

Digital practices refer to the ‘assemblages’ of actions involving tools associated with digital technologies. These tools are not limited to software, websites, or social media platforms, but includes hardware, physical objects like computers and mobile phones, which have become recognized by specific groups of people as necessities or ways of attaining particular social goals, enacting particular social identities, and reproducing particular sets of social relationships. “Digital practices always transverse boundaries between the physical and the virtual, and between technological systems and social systems.”<sup>17</sup>

In the context of the U.S.-Mexico border, digital practices merge the use of mobile phones, social media platforms, and other sources of information, including personal communications through social network services, and the use of specific mobile applications, like CBP One™, for the purpose of migration management.<sup>18</sup>

The impact of digital practices and communication technologies cannot be underestimated. They pose various challenges and unintended consequences that affect our everyday lives. While in years past mobile phones were a rarity or a luxury among migrants reaching the U.S.-Mexico border,<sup>19</sup> mobile phones (smartphones) have become an essential for people fleeing violence in search of refuge in the U.S. But the need of a smartphone has other consequences that puts a burden on people seeking asylum and those humanitarian organizations that support them when they are in vulnerable positions.





With the requirement of requesting an appointment through CBP One™, people are forced to have a mobile phone capable of handling the latest update of the app to schedule their appointment, and for migrants' purposes, a mobile phone capable of handling different social media platforms. Among the people we interviewed, a good number of them had a mobile phone with capabilities enough to handle the application. However, we also found a variety of other problems. **In Nogales, Esteban had a phone that was not even capable of handling high-speed internet, so he was unable to connect to any free network (WiFi).**

Some people have phones so old or damaged that they have significant problems connecting to the internet or the phone has no capacity to handle constant updates from the application. Furthermore, occasionally some adults in family units may not have a phone for themselves. In Nogales, Rodrigo, who is also an indigenous man, said, **“We are nine in the family and we only have two mobile phones. I do not have a phone. I have not been able to buy one... [What do you do? Who manages the application?] I use my father’s phone... My younger brother is the one who manages the application.”**

Miguel, a 22-year-old male, narrated, **“We do not have a phone... La Migra [migration authorities] in Mexico City robbed us all our money and the phone. I am not sure what we are going to do... without a phone we cannot download the application.”**

**Another challenge is to find places to charge the phone, which puts a burden on migrant shelters because it requires setting up systems and outlets to allow a large number of people to charge their phones.** This has added increasing costs in electricity and mechanisms to have charging stations.

Internet access and unreliable connections are problematic for people aiming to get an appointment through CBP One™. While the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has stepped in to provide internet access at several shelters along the U.S.-Mexico border, with shelters being overcrowded, access to reliable connections are limited. This was a more acute situation in 2023. Furthermore, people prefer to have their own data

plans, but getting credit on mobile phones or even a data plan becomes difficult without income. This leaves migrants without many options other than relying on free internet access provided at migrant shelters. Occasionally, we found a few migrants that have no mobile phones which creates an insurmountable barrier to access asylum.

Teresa, in Tijuana, recalled, **“I look for free internet connections... sometimes I use the internet data that comes with the credit I put on the phone... I prefer the internet connection here at the shelter, but it is problematic.... Sometimes my battery runs out, the internet is not too strong, because we are so many, sometimes the internet does not work.”**

Anel, in Piedras Negras, said, **“I put some credit on my phone to have internet access... I put like \$ 100.00 Mexican pesos (\$6) every week... I look for places with free WiFi... I prefer free internet connections because we do not have money... I have difficulties connecting to the internet because my phone does not have a great battery... also because with so many people here [the shelter] we cannot connect.”**

**The purpose of a mobile phone is to remain connected to family members and friends.** Consistently, interviewees report that they use the mobile phones to remain connected to family members and to request the appointment. Being connected to family members and friends, and to have access to certain information, makes people feel more ‘secure.’ Overwhelmingly, interviewees repeat over and over that **“For me the most important purpose of the phone is to stay in touch with my family, just in case;” “I use the phone to receive phone calls from my son and my family...messages from my partner;” “I use the phone to communicate with the people that are far away [those left behind]... to talk to my husband.”** Others emphasize that the phone is also important to use CBP One™. **“I use the phone to stay in touch with my family... and now to use the application.”**

## WhatsApp has become the medium for communication.

Traditional mobile phone capabilities (texting, calls, voicemail) are not the tools migrants use to make calls or communicate. Instead, WhatsApp is used for text messaging, sending voice messages, making calls or video conferences. Even for those illiterate or with low levels of literacy and digital literacy, WhatsApp is an easy-to-use mobile application that allows voice messaging and exchanging messages with ease. People show no concerns about privacy issues since it is a cost effective and reliable source. However, the fact that a large amount of sensitive information is exchanged through social media raises ethical concerns about the information’s management and storage.

To gather information about the journey and CBP One™, people use Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Google, TikTok, YouTube, and online affinity groups to search or corroborate information. People recognize many different sources of information. Sometimes migrants weigh all the information they receive. Others use ‘tunnel vision’ to focus on the information that may be useful through their contacts, while some simply make their decisions hoping for the best. Juan, a 22-year-old Honduran man, waiting in Piedras

Negras, said, **“I have used Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, GPS, Google... But, we do not know if this information is true. We believe in it 50/50... In this case, we made decisions to see what could happen... What can we do?”**

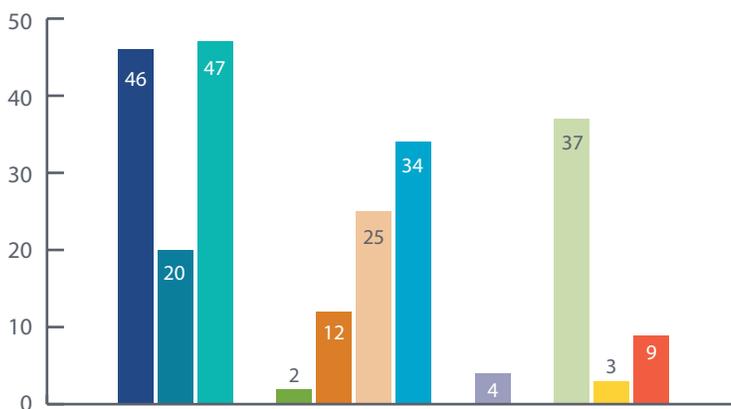
**Migrants rely on people, close contacts, or other sources they trust to confirm information, which is usually someone who was able to enter into the U.S. successfully using the CBP One™ app.**

In Nogales, Pedro, a 30-year-old man from Haiti shared, **“I learned about the journey through the news, TikTok, and Facebook... I learned a lot about Mexico... I learned that you can request an appointment everyday and that way you can cross the border legally... [How do you end up here in Nogales?] I heard that to get to Reynosa it was too difficult. My original destination was Reynosa... But, I changed because my brother told me that my godmother suggested I take another route. She said that it was difficult to enter into Reynosa because migration checkpoints were too strong... Another friend that is already in Tijuana told me that it was very dangerous to try entering through Reynosa... Then, I planned to go to Tijuana... but when we took the bus, migration authorities and other people extorted us. Money, money, money, money... until we had none. That is how I ended up here... I had three friends I trust and talked to them about how to proceed.”**

Access to reliable information is paramount. Mutual aid networks (migrant-to-migrant support) are a key element to gather information or to overcome digital literacy limitations and deficiencies. People learn about CBP One™ and the asylum process on their migration journeys. Often, a migrant who has already filled out the application in CBP One™ will offer support to help a migrant filling the application for the first time.

Valentina, a 41-year-old indigenous woman from Mexico stated, **“[Who helped you to fill out the application?] The migrants. People who arrived some days before us. They were the ones who helped us to complete everything in the application.”**

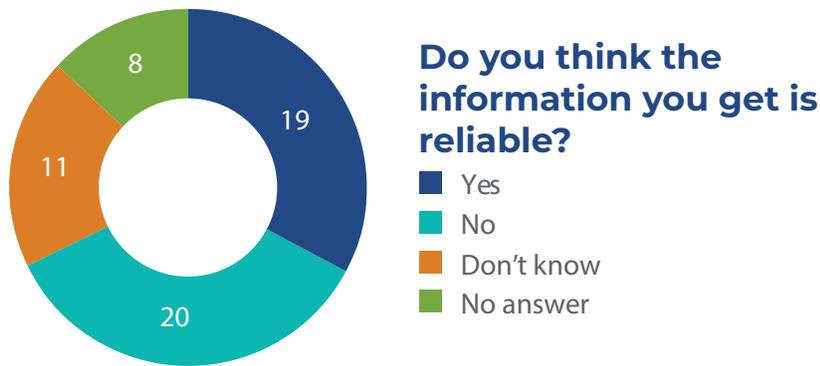
Camila, waiting in Nogales for an appointment, explained, **“Another migrant here taught us how to fill out the application.”**



### What platforms have you used in the past 3 months?

Response per interviewee

- Facebook
- TikTok
- WhatsApp
- Signal
- Telegram
- Instagram
- YouTube
- Google
- Pinterest
- Snapchat
- LinkedIn
- Facebook Messenger
- Twitter
- Other



Limited literacy and digital literacy may be limiting factors when going through the process of submitting one’s information through CBP One™. Furthermore, educational attainment does not guarantee proficiency in processing information. These factors lead to dynamics where minors or teenagers manage the application process on their parents’ mobile phones or a young adult in the group with more familiarity with the digital world takes over the process. This creates dependency patterns on certain members in the groups or unfair expectations on minors.

Occasionally people are dropped from CBP One™ registrations without their knowledge and have to start the process all over again even when they have been waiting for an appointment for several months. This is due to the lack of official, accessible, and reliable sources of information. Thus, access to reliable and appropriate information about the process of entering the United States through the application and the process once people have entered is urgent and necessary. This information needs to be accessible to a migrant audience with multiple levels of literacy and limited digital skills.

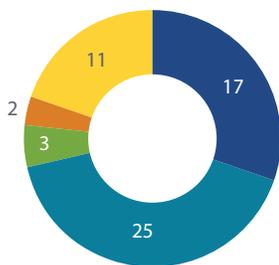
## CBP One™

Since the initial rollout in January 2023, CBP One™ has improved over time. The application has improved the scope of languages, fixed the issues of facial recognition, and provided better options for scheduling an appointment. However CBP One™ was in its 21st version when it was first used to provide advanced information and request an appointment with CBP. In March 2024, the application was in its 58th version, which means that the application has had 37 updates in slightly over a year, which translates to three updates per month.

Presently, the main issue is not the application itself, but the process of presenting oneself at the border and the lack of accessible information available to people. As mentioned, people are fleeing dire situations of violence, and often people get to know what CBP One™ is along the way through news or through word of mouth. But, they only know that there is an application that provides an appointment to enter the United States. Little is known about the asylum process and who can qualify. Knowledge about CBP One™ and the process of asylum is gained when migrants stay at shelters, but understanding the process they are beginning is often limited.

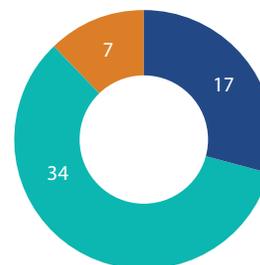
Furthermore, while CBP One™ and the process of submitting information in advance have been refined, there is still significant confusion among users. The registration guidelines have changed over time, but complications arise due to the lack of accessible and understandable information on how the registration process works. Sometimes, people erase original registrations in the app with the hope to get an appointment sooner. Other times they duplicate registrations as there is a need to split registrations. There is also no process to address any unforeseen circumstances such as tragically being kidnapped or being detained by Mexican migration authorities, that may lead to missing scheduled appointments at the port of entry. In these cases, it is the role of NGOs on the ground to advocate on behalf of migrants and work with CBP to address these issues.

The limited number of appointments places also significant stress on the stranded population along the U.S.-Mexico border. **The long waiting periods and the lack of clarity of how long people need to wait encourages people to make the decision to cross irregularly into the U.S. This dynamic defeats the purpose of the application itself and the purpose of providing advanced information to CBP.** Increasing the number of appointments may reduce the number of people entering into the U.S. irregularly. However, an increase in the number of available appointments needs to be complemented by enough U.S. government personnel to process people.



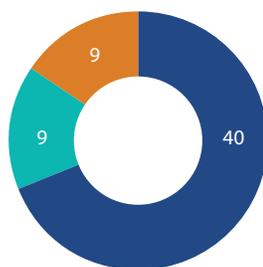
**How much did you know about CBP One™ before starting your journey?**

- Nothing
- A little
- More than a little
- A lot
- I was an expert
- No answer



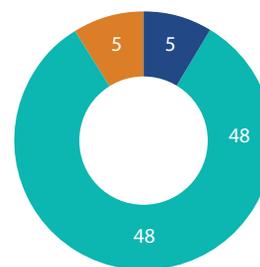
**Have you had problems with facial recognition software?**

- Yes
- No
- No answer



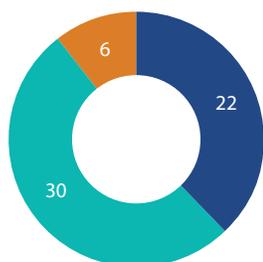
**Was there someone who helped you fill out the application?**

- Yes
- No
- No answer



**Have you been able to get an appointment?**

- Yes
- No
- No answer



**Did you have to erase the application to re-install it?**

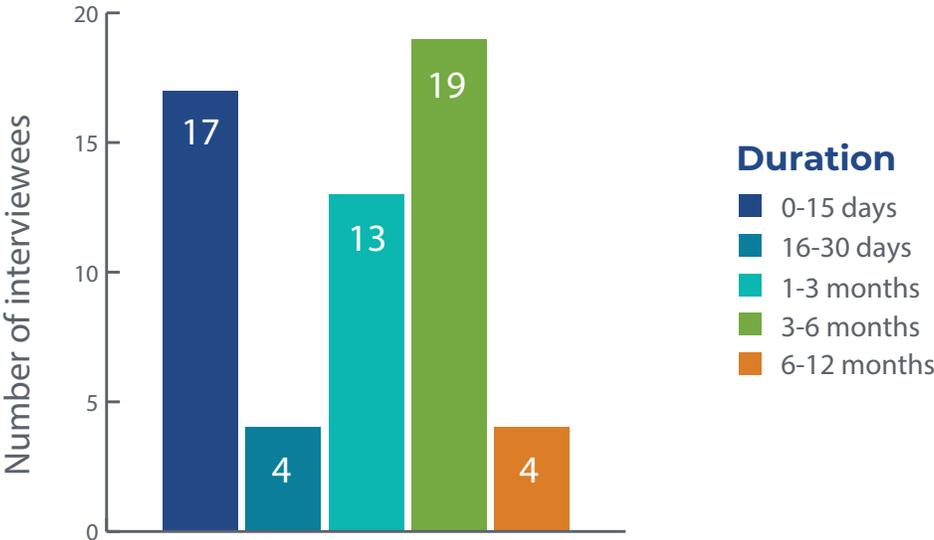
- Yes
- No
- No answer

# Stranded at the Border

Waiting for an appointment is one of the main challenges created by the implementation of CBP One™. Among the migrants interviewed in migrant shelters across the U.S.-Mexico border, the research team found that some individuals have been waiting between one and six months, while others have been waiting between six and eight months or even longer. Being stranded and frequently idle as they await a CBP One™ appointment impacts the overall health of individuals, including their mental health. Depending on the port of entry, migrants may or may not be able to work while waiting in Mexico. However, several of the border cities in Mexico are too dangerous to seek regular jobs. Also, if a migrant lacks documentation to work in Mexico, they cannot make a living. Furthermore, migrant shelters in Mexico are not designed for longer stays, making living conditions precarious for migrants while waiting.

The research team collected data since the initial rollout of CBP One™ and throughout the year 2023 and 2024. That is why they cannot provide an average of how long people wait at each port of entry to get an appointment. However, among the interviewees, the research team found that 22% of them have been waiting between one and six months, and 16% have been waiting between six to twelve months to obtain an interview. People are willing to wait if that allows them to enter the U.S. “legally”. However, precarious living conditions in shelters combined with long periods of waiting have an impact on people’s well-being and mental health.

**Time Spent Waiting for CBP One™ Appointment at Time of Interview**



## Assessing Well-Being

Interviews included two standardized instruments to assess the well-being of migrants (WHO-5) and their perceived humanitarian needs (HESPER). The research team integrated the instruments during the interview, read the questions to the participants, and scored the results.

## Mental Health

**29% of interviewees**  
showed symptoms of depression

**53% of interviewees**  
showed signs of poor well-being

The results of the WHO-5 reflect that 29% of interviewees showed symptoms of depression,<sup>22</sup> which is more prevalent among women and indigenous people. While not statistically significant due to the sample size, these results remain consistent with what is reported from other contexts of displacement.<sup>23</sup> The results also indicated higher rates of poor well-being.

Women and indigenous people remain with the highest percentages of prevalence among migrants interviewed but men showed an increase of 30% prevalence when comparing the threshold indicating symptoms of depression and the one for considering someone with poor wellbeing. This means that while many men may not show signs of depression, they still experience poor well-being. Mental health and well-being attention for men could be one latent issue that needs to be addressed in humanitarian settings. While the threshold for poor well-being is 50 or below, stretching a bit that scoring leads us to see that 74% of interviewees score 60 or below. These results reveal that humanitarian organizations must continue to respond to the mental health and well-being needs of those stranded at the border.

Araceli, a 33-year old-woman from Guerrero, interviewed in Nogales, said, **“Sometimes I feel desperate... Sometimes I feel unsettled, angry, and I feel I am up to my limit. I try to relax but I keep thinking about my husband and what happened to him [her husband was kidnapped by criminal groups and disappeared]... In those moments I used to tell my mother, ‘I want to get out of here, walk so far away, walk, walk, and walk to where none will know anything about me. Nobody, nobody...’ but now I think about my children and that they need me... if I fail or something happens to me, what are they going to do without their mother?”**

Arturo, a 33-year-old man also from Mexico and traveling with his wife and child, arrived in Nogales because he was being extorted by criminal gangs in his hometown. He explained how he felt at the moment of the interview, **“Sometimes there are moments in which one has no desire to continue. You know one thinks about quitting because I feel like a failure. One says, ‘we are men’ but it is hard for us too...”**

**At times, I feel like inside I am defeated. Do you understand?... Here, I have seen people in cars with guns. Imagine, here nobody knows who you are. They could kill you and make you disappear. Maybe that could be the end of one's life, but my children? So, I put myself together and continue with more energy."**

Teresa, in Tijuana, mentioned having enormous difficulties to sleep because of children crying and because the shelter was crowded. **"At night, here there are a lot of people, a lot of noise and children crying. I feel desperate. I would like to leave the shelter and rent a small room outside, but we have no money."**

## **Perceived Needs**

The results from the HESPER regarding the perceived needs of people in humanitarian settings complement the results shown by the WHO-5 regarding mental health and well-being. The results from the HESPER indicated that the interviewees' main concerns are: income, being displaced and mental health in their current community, and their individual mental health. Among men, the only change was considering family separation more critical than the personal mental health, but amongst women, access to information also became significant.

### **Top 3 needs:**

- 1. Income**
- 2. Displacement and General Mental Health (communal)**
- 3. Personal Mental Health**

### **Women - Top 3:**

- 1. Income, General Mental Health (communal), and Personal Mental Health**
- 2. Displacement**
- 3. Access to information**

### **Men - Top 3:**

- 1. Income and General Mental Health (communal)**
- 2. Displacement**
- 3. Family separation**

## Income

Migrant shelters in Mexico are not facilities designed for long term stays. Some have better infrastructure than others. While many are run by faith-based organizations and are free of charge, there are others where people have to pay a fee to remain there. Also, there are few that are run either by the federal or local government. The government shelters may have a particular process for admitting migrants or asylum-seekers. This makes having access to these kind of shelters more difficult.

Overcrowding in shelters, inability to go out and find work, uncertainty, long periods of waiting, and violence are some factors that influence the interviewees' needs for a source of income. Income becomes a way to freedom and better conditions while waiting. Arturo in Nogales, Sonora, expressed his frustration recalling that **“[a family I know here] was telling us that along the journey they robbed them of everything. I am concerned because I am here with my wife and child. I do not know anyone, and I have no money. So, yes not having an income is a big problem.”**

As mentioned, those migrants, staying at shelters and waiting for a CBP One™ appointment, are there because of a lack of resources. The fact that many of them beg for money on their way to the border between Mexico and the U.S. reveals the critical need of income and money for people.

Carolina, a 26-year-old woman from Venezuela traveled with her five children to the town of Matamoros. She had been in the camp for three days when the research team spoke with her. She recalled having to beg on the streets along her journey to make ends meet. **“When my husband left. I had to beg... Even when I worked a little with a lady in her house, I begged a lot... Mexico has been worse than crossing the Darien Gap. Migration authorities made us get off the bus and walk... Several times we walk alone at night... I rode the cargo train [known as la bestia]... I always slept on the street with the children because we had no money for a hotel... People were generous, maybe because of the children.”**

## Mental Health (personal and communal)

The results of the WHO-5 provided an insight into the well-being of migrants, especially into the mental health challenges they face. The HESPER confirmed those insights indicating that mental health is perceived as a problem, not only at the individual level, but also at the communal level. Waiting in shelters and camps along the border for an appointment from CBP One™ is challenging due to the conditions. Uncertainty, waiting, and precarious living conditions converge at shelters and camps to create an added layer of stress for individuals and people.



**Living conditions at a migrant shelter in Reynosa, Mexico.**



**Entrance of a Migrant Shelter in Mexicali, Mexico.**



**Asylum-seekers have to live in tents for months at a migrant shelter in Tijuana, Mexico.**



**Living conditions at a government run shelter in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.**

In Matamoros, Matias, a 40-year-old man from Venezuela, described the challenges of living in a camp by saying, **“Everybody is in a bad mood. We are stressed because of the application, because of our living conditions... This leads to many problems. We fight among ourselves. You did not get up early, you did not do this, you did not contribute to this other thing. Contributing to our well-being is something that needs to be a common cause. If we could work together as a group we could be in better conditions. But, we can’t.”**

In Tijuana, Ana, a 24-year-old woman from Mexico, described the effects of the limitations of living in shelters, **“The food is limited and a lot of children get sick. Hygiene is bad because access to bathrooms is limited. Everything is broken... Safety around the shelter, the place is not safe. You can see how bad it is. Because there are many men, you do not feel safe... We have too much free time and nothing to do. We do not have anything in which we can use our time. We are thinking all the time, we are depressed, we harass one another because we are stressed... Everything affects how we feel here.”**

## **Displacement and Family Separation**

Unsurprisingly, displacement and family separation appear as some of the most significant issues people perceive as a problem. Displacement here is understood as the need to leave one’s hometown to seek safety somewhere else.<sup>24</sup> As we have seen, some people we interviewed have traveled long distances and suffered tremendously along the way. These experiences and their precarious conditions while waiting accentuate the experience of displacement.

In Tijuana, Francisco, a 22-year-old male and member of the LGBTQI+ community, shared some of the experiences he went through and how they affected his sense of displacement, **“[Crossing the Darien Gap and the journey itself] are extremely difficult. We did not have food, we had to sleep on the street, safety and hygiene are serious problems. In the Darien Gap we saw a six year-old girl from Venezuela die... in that jungle a lot of people get lost or die... then in Mexico they robbed us, they took my money, my mobile phone... riding the [cargo] train in Mexico and passing through many towns is complicated... all these situations makes us feel even more that we had to flee our hometowns.”**

When a person or a family is displaced, it is not uncommon that family members are left behind or even some family members have moved ahead on the journey. In interviews and through the HESPER, family separation was a significant issue. It is not surprising that people emphasize that the primary use of their mobile phones during their journeys and while waiting has been to remain in contact with relatives and friends.

In Tijuana, Claudia, a 27-year-old Honduran mother traveling with a two-year-old child, said: **“I have another two children. An eight-year-old that I left in Honduras, and another one that is in the United States with his father. I brought the younger child with me because he does not ask questions about the journey... I have to manage remaining connected to my family and my other children.”**



**Individual using WhatsApp at a camp in Matamoros, Mexico.**



**Using TikTok to find information in Reynosa, Mexico.**

## Access to Information

Diverse sources of information about reaching the U.S.-Mexico border and how to enter the United States abound. Information practices are shaped by social context. They could reinforce privilege, but also exacerbate marginalization. Information practices refer to the ways people locate, use, share, and evaluate information. Hence, information practices refer not only to access to information, but also to use of information resources.<sup>25</sup>

Access to reliable information is one of the most critical elements for migrants stranded along the U.S.-Mexico border. Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Google, and, most importantly, WhatsApp have become the main sources of information for migrants seeking admission into the United States. The challenge for migrants and humanitarian workers is how to discern which sources of information are reliable and which ones are not.

There is a general sense among interviewees that the reliable information they have access to is limited, as there is little knowledge of CBP One™, the asylum process, and the next steps if one is admitted into the United States.

Arturo, waiting for a CBP One™ appointment in Nogales, said, **“I see some information on Facebook, but I have a friend that told me to come here [Nogales]...[How do you know that information is reliable]... He already crossed, so that is a sign that you can enter the U.S. here.”** Similarly, in Matamoros, Matias said, **“[How do you know the information you receive is reliable?] Before sharing anything, I check if everything is true... I ask my contacts if things are true or not and if I am not satisfied, I check the internet because sometimes people exaggerate things... I analyze everything... I tell my friends not to believe everything they receive...People can put online anything they want.”**

However, literacy and digital literacy are big limitations to access and assess information. In practice, we found that migrants do not know where to find official information, what are reliable sources of information, or how to assess or interpret them. Hence, the need to give preference and rely on personal networks and trusted social ties, as well as comparing and combining different sources of information, as well as migrants' personal experience.<sup>26</sup>

# Humanitarian Response



**JRS Staff at the border wall in Ciudad Juárez.**

For JRS and other humanitarian organizations assisting migrants at the border, the task of providing support faces significant challenges as various needs emerge as individuals and families wait for CBP One™ appointments. As mentioned throughout this report, these needs include basic services (shelter, food, water, etc.), safety and protection measures, medical attention, psychosocial and trauma interventions, education for children, legal services, and orientation to navigate life in the U.S. upon entry.

In response to those needs, the JRS/USA and JRS Mexico teams have developed a binational border response program called “Caminar Contigo” that offers basic legal services and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) in the Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. The goal of the program is to reduce suffering, improve mental health and psychosocial well-being, and to decrease violations to the legal rights of refugees, asylum-seekers, and other displaced people in the Ciudad Juárez and El Paso region through the provision of information, support, and other legal and MHPSS services.

As individuals and families continue to arrive at the border, the pressure falls on humanitarian organizations in U.S. and Mexican border cities to prevent further hardship for these vulnerable populations. To reduce the harm, these organizations rely on coordination with Mexican and U.S. officials to recognize gaps in services and immigration processing. Along with government coordination, there is an urgent need to continue providing support to these organizations that offer respite and help during the long wait in Mexico and the moment of entry to the U.S.

# Role of the U.S. Government

The U.S. Congress has failed to pass comprehensive immigration reform in the 21st century. Despite the number of challenges highlighted throughout this report, and the increasing number of people seeking safety, proposed solutions in Congress tend to focus on deterrence instead of expanding legal pathways. With limited and restrictive legal pathways, alternative and irregular routes for entry exacerbate the challenges faced by the U.S. government in handling the humanitarian situation at the border, as well as the challenges facing border and interior communities as they respond to the needs of those seeking safety and better opportunities in the U.S.

CBP One™ is one tool used by the U.S. government to provide a narrow legal pathway for those seeking safety at U.S. ports of entry and manage the situation at the border. The app has several concerning limitations that must be improved, but it has proven to be a lifesaving mechanism for those fortunate enough to have an appointment scheduled and be approved for entry. We urge the Administration and Congress to work together to make the necessary improvements, increase the number of appointments available, and provide the needed transparency and oversight to ensure that the app does not become a way to further prevent individuals and families from accessing their right to seek asylum in the U.S.

CBP One™ should not be the only pathway for individuals and families at U.S. ports of entry. U.S. law states that any individual on U.S. soil has a right to seek asylum.<sup>27</sup> Those who arrive at a port of entry without a CBP One™ appointment should be able to put forward their claim without having to overcome significant obstacles, such as having the right smartphone to utilize the software, traveling between Mexican border cities in order to reach an appointment at a moment's notice, being literate in a foreign language due to the app's limited language accessibility, and having the needed skills to navigate a digital platform.

By working with partners in the Latin America and Caribbean region, the U.S. government should also prioritize policies that manage human mobility through coordination with NGOs and civil society, guaranteeing that humanitarian needs are met, protection concerns along migration routes are mitigated, and misinformation is rebutted.

Through the strengthening and diversification of legal pathways, as well as coordination between the U.S. government, NGOs, and regional partners, many of the digital obstacles and harms to well-being highlighted in this report can be remedied, further reducing the gravity of the humanitarian situation at the U.S.-Mexico border.

# Policy Recommendations

No longer just a physical barrier, U.S. policy has now transformed the border into a digital obstacle to overcome. In its current form, CBP One™ is a narrow pathway to entry in the U.S. for individuals and families seeking safety. For those fortunate enough to have an appointment and be approved for entry, it provides much needed relief from threats to security and overall well-being. To address the digital restrictions and humanitarian concerns at the U.S.-Mexico border, JRS and the research team offer the following recommendations to the U.S. government to improve the digital landscape navigated by migrants and support their overall well-being.

**01**

Ensure access to reliable and accurate information on the asylum process, border processing, and how to use CBP One™.

**02**

Guarantee transparency by providing timely and relevant information about the CBP One™ process and outcomes.

**03**

Increase the number of CBP One™ appointments available to at least 5,000 per day along the U.S.-Mexico border to reduce the number of irregular crossings.

**04**

Relocate CBP One™ appointments at the Laredo port of entry to other ports of entry due to dangerous conditions that prevent humanitarian organizations from operating shelters.

**05**

Robustly fund the CBP Office of Field Operations to keep processing efficient and consistent at U.S. ports of entry.

**06**

Address and eliminate the asylum backlog through the hiring of more asylum officers and immigration judges, and by funding case management programs that support asylum-seekers as they navigate the legal process.

# Conclusion

## 07

Continue to fund U.S. government programs, such as the Shelter and Services Program, that support border and destination communities receiving migrants released by CBP.

## 08

Coordinate with regional partners, NGOs, and civil society in Latin America and the Caribbean to mitigate protection concerns and eliminate misinformation along migration routes.

As indicated by the research in this report, the journey taken by people seeking safety in the U.S. comes at a great cost. Not only leaving behind their homes, livelihoods, and social connections, migrants and asylum-seekers risk dangerous conditions and the threat of violence in order to arrive at a place of refuge and opportunity. These challenges are only exacerbated when digital obstacles and misinformation complicate entry and the right to seek asylum in the U.S. The U.S. government must continue to improve CBP One™, while addressing the accessibility issues for those who have limited digital literacy. These changes will play a critical role in alleviating humanitarian concerns and improving well-being at the U.S.-Mexico border by reducing the time one must wait in limbo to obtain refuge.

For questions regarding the data and interviews highlighted in this report, please contact **Dr. Olayo-Méndez** at [alejandrolayomendez@bc.edu](mailto:alejandrolayomendez@bc.edu).

**Barriers put in place to prevent migrant crossings in Eagle Pass, Texas.**



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6. Alencar, 2020.
7. Gillespie, 2016.
8. Hodges & Calvo, 2023; Tour et al. 2023.
9. Mancini et al., 2019; Newell, Gomez, & Guajardo, 2016.
10. The WHO-5 is a short, self-administered measure of well-being over the last two weeks. It consists of five positively worded items that are rated on 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time). For this research project, the research team read the questions to the participant and scored the instrument.
11. The Humanitarian Emergency Settings Perceived Needs Scale (HESPER) provides a quick and scientific method of assessing the perceived needs of people affected by large-scale humanitarian emergencies, such as war, conflict, or major natural disaster. The HESPER consists of 26 items covering physical, psychological, and social determinants of health and well-being and provides a picture of the perceived needs from the perspective of the affected population. The research team integrated the questionnaire
12. All interviews were recorded, and all were transcribed. Daily field notes and peer debriefings by the research team were also used to inform the analysis. After fieldwork, data was transcribed for analysis. We developed a coding manual based on the main categories of the interview guides, refined through an iterative process for additional concepts as they emerged in the data. The Institutional Review Board from Boston College (IRB) approved the conduction of this research project and the measures established to care for participants. Discrepancies with total of interviews are due to missing values or unclear information from the interview. during the interview.
13. Media outlets have reported many irregular crossings and CBP has indicated that they have processed migrants from over 170 nationalities. One of the fastest growing groups lately are migrants from China and other Asian countries. Many of these migrants hire smugglers to enter into the United States. These migrants never set foot at migrant shelters and do not seem to use the CBP One™ app.
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20. Hugelius, 2022; World Health Organization & King's College London, 2011.
21. Topp et al., 2015
22. The WHO-5 raw scores are transformed to a score from 0 to 100, with lower scores indicating worse well-being. A score of  $\leq 50$  indicates poor wellbeing and suggests further investigation into possible symptoms of depression. A score of 28 or below is indicative of depression.
23. Ellis, Winer, Murray, & Barrett, 2019, 256-257; Charlson et al., 2019.
24. International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2019.
25. Lingel and Boyd, 2013.
26. Nedelcu & Soysüren, 2022.
27. Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1158 (2024).

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