

To: America's Voice  
From: BSP Research  
Re: Survey of Central Americans

## ABOUT THE POLL

On behalf of America's Voice, BSP Research conducted a survey of 600 Central Americans to better understand the permeability of disinformation about the U.S. southern border and factors behind migration to the U.S. Respondents surveyed currently reside in the Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. The poll specifically focused on respondents aged 16 to 39 as this represents the primary migration age cohort, and the survey confirmed that 65% had friends/family who had attempted to migrate and obtained asylum and 67% speak with friends/family in the U.S. monthly or more frequently. Interviews were conducted using a blended mode, via live telephone and online exclusively in Spanish language. The poll was conducted from July 21-31, 2023, and carries a margin of error of + 4.0%. Below is a summary of key findings.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Central American residents in target countries are highly attuned to information about the situation in the U.S.-Mexico border as well as U.S. immigration and asylum policies. While they are highly attuned to information, the veracity of that information varies.
- Both traditional media such as television and radio and also social media remain highly used and trusted sources of information about the US border.
- Disinformation about the U.S.-Mexico border is widespread with over 1 in 4 Central American respondents hearing and 1 in 5 believing rhetoric that the "border is open."
- Politicians' rhetoric about "open borders" is encouraging some Central Americans to make the journey to the U.S.-Mexico border.

### **1. Central American residents in target countries are highly attuned to information about the situation in the U.S.-Mexico border as well as U.S. immigration and asylum policies while they are highly attuned to information, the veracity of that information varies.**

Overall, 79% of Central American residents report having heard, read, or seen what is happening at the U.S.-Mexico border. In addition, 66% say they have heard or read about U.S. asylum policies. However, when it comes to specifics on policy at the U.S.-Mexico border, respondents report mixed accounts about what is accurate information and what is false, due to the prevalence of disinformation. Nearly 1 in 5 Central American residents believe that the U.S. has an "open border" policy, and most migrants can apply for asylum if they make the trip.

Awareness and information about the U.S. southern border are likely to spread via relatives and acquaintances in the United States, as 43% respondents report speaking with family or friends in the U.S. once per week or more. Moreover, two-thirds of Central American residents personally know someone who has

attempted to migrate to the U.S. and obtained asylum. Similarly, 53% say they or someone they know (acquaintance, close friend, or someone in their family) has attempted to migrate to the U.S. but was stuck in border towns waiting to be processed. These personal interconnections weave streams of communication about U.S. border policies that are then filtered throughout Central America, regardless of whether the information be accurate, misleading, or outright false.

**2. Both traditional media such as television and radio and also social media remain highly used and trusted sources of information about the US border.**

When asked to recall news and information they have heard, 27% of respondents recall having heard or seen a U.S. official or politician say “the border is open” within the last 6 months. A majority who heard a U.S. official or politician say “the border is open” report hearing or seeing this narrative on television or radio (55%), followed by social media like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tiktok (51%). The disinformation also spreads person-to-person with 22% reporting they heard it from friends or people they know, and 9% on WhatsApp or Telegram. Social media is by far the most used source of information about the border among the youngest age cohort (16-24), as 71% report having heard U.S. officials or politicians say the border is open through social media.

A majority of people surveyed in Central America trust and believe the information they see in television, radio, and social media sources. Overall, 87% of Central American respondents said they are likely to believe what they see on television or radio and 51% believe what they see on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and other social media sources as trusted sources of information. For younger Central Americans who rely more heavily on social media, over two-thirds say they believe what they see on their social media channels and feeds.

**3. Disinformation about the U.S.-Mexico border is widespread with over 1 in 4 Central American respondents hearing and 1 in 5 believing rhetoric that the “border is open.”**

When asked about current U.S. border policy, 18% of Central Americans overall believe that the border is open and that most migrants can apply for asylum if they make the trip to the border. Younger respondents were also much more likely to believe this is true, as one-quarter of Central Americans ages 16-24 reported this as an official policy (25%), far higher than other age cohorts.

False statements about the border have continued to spread throughout Central American countries, as again, overall, 27% of respondents say they have heard U.S. officials or politicians say the border is open within the last 6 months. Respondents were asked about two competing statements made by actual U.S. politicians - one statement claiming that the border is wide open, and migrants are coming, and a second statement from officials stating clearly the border is not open, and warning of the dangers of traveling to the U.S.-Mexico border.

- o Central Americans who say they *have heard a U.S. politician say that the border is open* are significantly more likely to *believe* the border is open. Among people who report they have heard politicians say the border is open, 35% state they believe with *Title 42 ending, the Biden administration is cheering people on who cross the border*, compared to only 17% among people who have not heard this false information.
- o Likewise, 40% of people who report prior exposure to politicians saying the border is open believe that *Biden is laying down a welcome mat saying the border is wide open*, compared to only 18% among people who were not exposed to the false information.

In both instances, our poll found that people who remember hearing American politicians saying the border is open are over twice as likely to report believing the border is open, establishing a clear link to the negative effects of disinformation.

#### **4. Politicians' rhetoric about "open borders" is encouraging some Central Americans to make the journey to the U.S.-Mexico border.**

Central Americans are much more likely to say they would consider making the trip to the U.S. southern border or advise someone to make the trip after hearing statements from U.S. officials that specifically reference an "open border."

- o When presented with the "open border" message: *With the Biden administration ending Title 42, President Biden is laying down a welcome mat to people across the entire world saying the United States border is wide open* – 35% of respondents indicated they were more likely to consider migrating to the U.S., and 36% more likely to advise friends or family to do the same.

These effects are strongest among the 16-24 age cohort, who are at the age most likely to consider migrating. First, over 1 in 3 respondents in this age group report having heard a politician say the border is open and 71% of this group heard the information on social media. Second, 59% state they would personally consider making the trip to the U.S. border when exposed to the message that "Biden is laying down a welcome mat for people to cross," however the desire to migrate drops by 23 points when exposed to an opposing message that the border is not open and people who attempt to enter will be subject to steep consequences.

All statements presented to respondents were real quotes from American politicians and officials that have been made publicly, and several have become regular talking points regarding the southern border and are widely shared on social media. Central American residents are well aware about the dangers of a journey, and many do not feel welcome by the United States, as respondents directly mention they feel

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unwelcome due to potential discrimination, racism, and very strict laws they might face. However, the top pull factors that make potential migrants consider making the journey to the United States – such as fear over violence and the safety of their family in Central America - along with “open border” disinformation from politicians and officials, and a lack of safe alternatives are strong enough motivators that encourage some migrants to leave their home countries.

In particular, this 600-respondent poll has documented a clear correlation between exposure to false statements about “open borders” and desire to migrate, or encourage friends/family to migrate to the U.S.