

Extortion is a common and harmful experience among Latinx immigrants traveling to the US, researchers find

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Latinx immigrant adults traveling to the United States are extorted—on average—\$804 per research participant throughout the journey,

according to a study [appearing](#) in *Injury Epidemiology*.

"This study is rooted in research into newly arrived [immigrant](#) exposure to trauma, using an adapted version of the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire to gauge the various traumas encountered throughout migration," says Laura Vargas, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus and corresponding author. "So many respondents answered with various instances of extortion that we needed to study this experience on its own."

Researchers spoke with 85 new immigrants arriving at the southern U.S. border with Mexico in Texas, asking if they were extorted, by what type of person, where it happened and for how much money.

The study finds that the most common perpetrators were [police officers](#) (80.6%) and [immigration officials](#) (37.3%), followed by narcotraffickers or gangs (25.4%) and the military (20.9%). Most extortion experiences occurred in Mexico (77.6%) and Guatemala (67.2%), followed by other transit countries such as Colombia (22.4%) and Nicaragua (20.9%). Using a conversion rate to U.S. dollars, experts found that the average rate of money taken from migrants is \$804, and adults traveling with children were more likely to be extorted.

Additionally, survey responses indicate significantly higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) compared to those who were not extorted, but no significant difference in rates of depression or anxiety. Researchers say extortion should be considered an extreme stressor, and study results can help better inform [mental health treatment](#) for newly arrived immigrants.

"Extortion is hard for Americans to conceptualize, but it's common in Latin America—it's almost a part of life, albeit a very traumatic one,"

says Vargas.

"It's important to shed light on it and understand it from their lived experience. And even though we have a small sample here, a vast majority of respondents experienced extortion; ultimately, we clinicians need to think very actively about how to engage with new immigrant populations through the lens of traumatization that may differ from what we observe here in the U.S., aiming to care for the various health effects that stem from PTSD and allow newly arrived immigrants a chance at a dignified life."

More information: Laura Vargas et al, Extortion experiences of recent adult immigrants from Latin America: self-reported prevalence, associated costs, and current mental health, *Injury Epidemiology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1186/s40621-024-00524-2](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40621-024-00524-2)

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