**Desinformation narratives and information gaps in spanish that affect latino communities in the United States:**

A report on the effects of verification

**factchequeado**

# INDEX

# PROLOGUE

In the United States, disinformation in Spanish is still an insufficiently studied and addressed issue. This is Factchequeado's first report, which was only possible thanks to the support of our ally media outlets and collaborative work, and aims at creating knowledge to develop better strategies against disinformation. Producing evidence is key to support our efforts, measure how useful our work is, and adjust our interventions.

"Does fact-checking work?," we are often asked. "Why do you put so much effort into debunking disinformation in Spanish in the US?"
Before launching Factchequeado a year ago, we had hypotheses and case studies that allowed us to answer these questions and persevere in our task.
But just like we demand it from leaders and media outlets, we wanted to produce evidence to evaluate ourselves. Data and evidence collected by our ally media outlets give us enough strength to know that, from Factchequeado, we have to keep focusing on debunking the most spread disinformation narratives in Spanish in the United States. They give us the calm and confidence to know that what we do, works.

Factchequeado is also a rich database for academics to have resources and do more research on this phenomenon. The more we know about disinformation that affects Latino communities, the more we can produce more effective strategies to tackle it. We want to create evidence to measure whether what we do works or not and adjust our interventions.

Now, we can confirm it: fact-checking, or verification, does work.

**THE FACTCHEQUEADO TEAM**

# 01.
# INTRODUCTION

Latin American communities are the largest minority in the United States. As a whole, they are hard to define as they comprise groups of very different origins that still have strong ties with dozens of different countries and yet maintain certain features that create a common identity. One of them is language. **Spanish is the most common non-English language spoken in the United States**, with over 41 million people speaking it at home, according to the US Census Bureau. This number is 12 times greater than the following most-important language, Chinese. In addition, **the United States is the fifth country in the world with the biggest Spanish-speaking population**, only behind Mexico, Colombia, Argentina and Spain.

However, the importance of the Spanish language in US society often clashes with the treatment it is given in public and private institutions, as well as media outlets. This carelessness is evident when it comes to disinformation. While disinformers target Hispanic communities and create narratives and disinformation specifically for them, efforts to stop them are late and have been, so far, too dispersed and insufficient.

This common language is not the only thing that disinformers use to manipulate Latinos and Latinas. The social media platforms they use, the way in which they communicate and relate to each other online and with their families and friends abroad, the topics that concern them the most, and their fears and suspicions regarding certain institutions are also taken in consideration when creating specific disinformation for them. This skill, used by disinformation to adapt to the characteristics of Latino groups in the US, is less clear to those who have to fight it. At least, in the volume required to spot it and provide reliable information in Spanish where it is needed. The number of media outlets currently fact-checking in Spanish and/or that specifically work for Latino communities is small when compared to the Latino population as a whole.

This report analyzes the situation of Hispanic communities regarding disinformation and evaluates the efficiency of some of the tools already being used to tackle it. Our analysis has two main parts. First, a survey to media outlets in direct contact with Latino communities. We surveyed a group of FactChequeado's ally journalists, who have detected information voids in Latino groups and are trying to fill them. They represent the points of view and opinions of those who are in the front line fighting disinformation targeted to Latino communities in the United States. The study ends with an experiment to measure the efficiency of verifications shared by FactChequeado on Instagram.

Data collected in both cases show that some topics are particularly problematic for Latinos and Latinas, as they include a lot of disinformation and lack reliable information, like migration processes. Participants also reported the difficulties that arise from the language barrier. Many Latino people do not feel comfortable speaking in English, and cannot find the reliable information they need in Spanish. Besides, instant messaging apps like WhatsApp constitute another entry gate for disinformation in Spanish that is coming from their home countries, which the rest of the US population does not share. The experiment on

verifications proves that disinformation is widely spread - a very high percentage of participants had already seen or heard the fake claims before the experiment was conducted. What is even more concerning is that very few of them knew they were false. Most had doubts, and a very high percentage was not aware that the claims were fake and actually thought they were true. However, verifications did have a positive effect in most cases, although sometimes we observed counterproductive effects. Analyzing these cases helps to adjust verification processes and increase their efficiency.

# 02.
# CONTEXT

## 2.1 Latin American Communities in Data

In 2003, the US' demographic structure registered a key change: **Latino communities** became the largest minority group in the country. Since then, they have been growing steadily. They are now over 60 million people, and **during the 2020 elections, they represented the largest minority group in the electorate**. The Census Bureau projects that this growth will no slow down and estimates that **by 2060 there will be 111 million Hispanics living in the US**.

However, Latino communities are not a consistent group. It is hard to define them because, even though they share common characteristics, they are formed by smaller groups divided, mostly, by their own home countries. **According to data from Pew Research,** the largest group has ties with Mexico and includes over 37 million people, over half of all the Hispanics living in the US. But there are also large groups tied to other countries. Seven of them consist of over 1 million people, and 19 of them have more than 50,000.

**Data from Pew Research** also show how the Latino population is distributed throughout the country. States with the higher Hispanic populations are California, Texas and Florida. In California and Texas, there are over 10 million Latinos and Latinas, who now represent the most important ethnic group. New Mexico has the largest percentage of Latinos, and Hispanics make up for half of the state's population. But Latino communities are increasingly expanding to other states. North and South Dakota are the states where they have grown the most since 2010.

As we have mentioned before, Hispanic communities are connected to many different countries, but they all have something in common: Spanish as their mother language. **According to the Census Bureau**, out of the 62 million people identified as Hispanic in the United States, 41 million speak Spanish at home.

**The number of Latinos speaking English competently in the United States is growing** - from 59% in 1980 to 72% in 2019. Even so, language is still a problem for millions of Latinos and Latinas because they do not feel comfortable speaking in English. However, disinforma-

### Hispanic origin groups in the U.S.. 2021

| Origin group | Population | % among all U.S. Hispanics | % change 2010-2021 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **U.S. total** | 62.530.000 | 100% | 23% |
| Mexican | 37.235.000 | 59,5 | 13 |
| Puerto Rican | 5.800.000 | 9,3 | 24 |
| Salvadoran | 2.475.000 | 4,0 | 35 |
| Cuban | 2.400.000 | 3,8 | 28 |
| Dominican | 2.395.000 | 3,8 | 59 |
| Guatemalan | 1.770.000 | 2,8 | 53 |
| Colombian | 1.400.000 | 2,2 | 46 |
| Honduran | 1.150.000 | 1,8 | 57 |
| Spaniard | 995.000 | 1,6 | 43 |
| Ecuadorian | 815.000 | 1,3 | 25 |
| Peruvian | 720.000 | 1,2 | 20 |
| Venezuelan | 660.000 | 1,1 | 172 |
| Nicaraguan | 455.000 | 0,7 | 19 |
| Argentinean | 295.000 | 0,5 | 26 |
| Panamanian | 240.000 | 0,4 | 37 |
| Costa Rican | 190.000 | 0,3 | 44 |
| Chilean | 190.000 | 0,3 | 35 |
| Bolivian | 130.000 | 0,2 | 15 |
| Uruguayan | 65.000 | 0,1 | 9 |
| Paraguayan | 30.000 | 0,0 | 42 |
| Other South American | 40.000 | 0,1 | 62 |
| Other Central American | 30.000 | 0,0 | 1 |
| All other Latinos | 3.050.000 | 4,9 | 96 |

**Notes:** Hispanic origin is based on self-described ancestry, lineage, heritage, nationality group or country of birth. Population rounded to nearest 5.000. Listed in descending order of population size; differences between ranks may not be statistically significant. Rankings and percentages based on unrounded populations.
Source: Pew Research Center calculations based on the 2010 and 2021 American Community Surveys (U.S. Census Bureau).

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tion in Spanish does not only affect them; it also reaches those who speak English fluently but use Spanish on a daily basis to stay in touch with their friends and family.

There are more socio-demographic features about Latino communities that make them more vulnerable than other sectors of the US population. For example, their economic situation is below the country's average. According to the **Census Bureau's 2021 Survey of Income**, about 1 in 3 (34.8%) Hispanic people in the United States live in a household that experienced material hardship in 2020, against 1 in 4 (24.3%) non-Hispanic people.

**Table 1**

**Five Most Frequently Spoken Languages Other Than English (LOTE) in U.S. Homes: 2019**

| Language | Estimate | Percent of LOTE population |
|---|---|---|
| Spanish or Spanish Creole | 41.757.391 | 61,6 |
| Chinese | 3.494.544 | 5,2 |
| Tagalog | 1.763.585 | 2,6 |
| Vietnamese | 1.570.526 | 2,3 |
| Arabic | 1.260.437 | 1,9 |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.

These economic hardships are partly linked to their immigration status. **The Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS)** estimates that approximately 21 million immigrants of Hispanic origin live in the United States, of which almost 7.5 million are undocumented. **Other studies suggest that the total number is closer to 11 million**. Undocumented Hispanic immigrants have high labor force participation and employment rates, especially in essential occupations. Nevertheless, lack of legal status still serves as a barrier for many, who face wage gaps and are excluded from social safety nets despite their economic contribution.

Hispanic adults **are less likely than other US citizens to have health insurance and receive preventive medical care**. A study conducted by Pew Research shows that 44% of Latinos believe that these numbers are the result of language or cultural differences. Problems when accessing the health system were also evident during the **COVID-19 pandemic**: Hispanics were less likely than white US citizens to be hospitalized and more likely to die from coronavirus.

Another important topic among Hispanic communities in the US is religion, which is very important to them. **Almost 60% of Latinos and Latinas say that religion is very important in their lives** and only 15% say that it is not too important, or not important at all. In regards to religious beliefs, 77% identify as Christian. Among them, the largest group is Catholics, which represent almost half of the total number.

## 2.2 Specific Vulnerabilities to Disinformation

Each one of the characteristics shared by Latinos that are present in statistics can become vulnerabilities, of which disinformers take advantage. The first thing to consider is that this is a huge group, of over 60 million people. Disinformers want their messages to become viral and reach a very broad audience, which Hispanic communities are. In addition, Hispanics are the largest group in several states, so their votes are decisive. Therefore, they are a very clear target for people that want to manipulate others and gain political benefit.

An **investigation from The Washington Post** proved this when analyzing waves of disinformation in Spanish aimed at Latinos and Latinas ahead of the 2022 midterm elections. Authors of this report reached the conclusion that "Latinos are affected by a different disinformation environment than reaches the U.S. population at large, and are often targeted in ways specific to their national backgrounds."

One of these specific ways used by disinformers preys on the distrust of authority in the Latino community. This skepticism is exploited to discourage Hispanics from voting and getting vaccinated. Both processes involve bureaucratic procedures that can be complicated, especially if you do not speak the language in which they are performed: English. Both processes also require identification, and a large part of the immigrant Hispanic community is not sure if that will lead to problems with immigration authorities. **Some studies** link this with the low vaccination rates for COVID-19. And **a study from First Draft** claims that mistrust of authorities is also closely linked to a higher belief in disinformation. **The study** shows that "community members also express concerns about the safety and side effects of Covid-19 vaccines — concerns exacerbated in large part by mistrust in official institutions and health authorities."

An **analysis carried out by Político** highlights that ties with their home countries makes Latinos and Latinas a clear target for conspiracy theories. **The Washington Post** agrees with this statement, and adds that "places where Latinos get their information play a large role in whether they believe conspiracy theories." WhatsApp groups specifically, used to stay in touch with their families in Latin America, present a very important focus for spreading disinformation. Their investigation concluded that "more social media use is associated with a greater likelihood of belief in conspiracy theories."

WhatsApp use clearly differentiates Latinos from the rest of the US population. **Data from Pew Research** shows that Hispanic Americans (46%) are far more likely to say they use WhatsApp than Black (23%) or White Americans (16%).

High WhatsApp use can become problematic because it is an app that **has been proved to spread disinformation widely**. Besides, because it works with private and encrypted messages, it is very hard to track. This private setting influences the nature of conversations held in these apps. While in public social media platforms comments are mostly aimed at strangers, messaging apps are for people from our immediate social circles, like family and friends. This determines the users' behavior. People often speak more freely in these spaces because they trust the people involved in the conversation.

Some studies analyzed how people with extreme ideological opinions take advantage of this. Disin-

formers and radical thinkers do not want to communicate with the overall population; they mainly try **to create networks of people and groups with similar beliefs to express themselves more comfortably**. These groups present alternative spaces for public debate. They know their opinions can be rejected if shared on open platforms, so they prefer more intimate and close spaces, where they can control who receives their messages. **This feeling of closeness to their audience and the difficulties to moderate their content** makes messaging apps an important resource for extremists and defenders of conspiracy theories.

In addition, Hispanic communities **use WhatsApp groups as one of their main tools to stay connected with friends and family from their countries of origin**. This allows the same disinformation that spreads in Latin America to reach these groups in the US, and it is often different to the disinformation aimed at the rest of the American population. In other words, certain disinformation in Spanish reaches these diaspora communities through a channel that is difficult to monitor, like WhatsApp, and that flies under the radar of institutions and organizations that focus on fighting disinformation shared in English. Also, these conversations between Latinos and Latinas are centered around specific groups among the US population, and are therefore multiple and dispersed. They may not be viral, from the platforms' perspective, but disinformers use them to reach targeted groups.

Even when disinformation is spread in public spaces, more effort is put to control it when it is in English. For example, **some studies claim** that in certain platforms, like Facebook, content moderation policies are performed less efficiently in languages that are not English. More disinformation has also been observed in media outlets used by the Hispanic population. **A Nielsen study** analyzed news websites in the US. 12% of the sites where Latinos made up for 10% or more of the audience were flagged as biased, conspiracy or pseudoscience. When they looked at sites where Latinos were even more present and made up 20% of the audience or more, that number went up to 28%.

There is another reliable source for Hispanic communities that can be problematic. According to **a report from First Draft**, during the pandemic certain religious figures became a vehicle for the spread of disinformation. The study shows that there were religious figures who had considerable influence amongst a large part of Latinos and "played a pivotal role in the spread of Covid-19 vaccine misinformation in Spanish, leveraging their positions of power and authority in these communities."

# 2.3 Narratives Targeting Latin Americans

Problems with disinformation are not only caused by the language. Some research suggests that the circumstances surrounding Hispanic communities and the ways with which they consume information are also important. In addition, when it comes to big debate topics that usually feature disinformation, like politics or health, disinformers use specific narratives to reach Latinos and Latinas more efficiently.

Regarding politics, it is important to highlight that in many states, particularly in the south, the Latino vote is decisive to win an election. Thus Hispanics became a key target for people seeking to gain electoral benefit through disinformation. Several studies analyzed this phenomenon. They claim that a big chunk of disinformation is trying to move the Latino vote away from the Democratic Party. One of their usual tactics is accusing democrats of being communists. This way they bet on **the rejection of those who arrived in America while fleeing regimes like Cuba, Venezuela or Nicaragua's**. However, there are other narratives spreading that can have an impact on the Latino vote and that try to **encourage mistrust in authorities** or **prejudice Latinos against Black Americans**.

Academic literature also analyzed why Latino communities have been more impacted by COVID-19, **especially at the beginning of the pandemic**, and their vaccination patterns are different than the rest of Americans. For instance, they make up **the ethnic group with the lowest percentage of booster vaccines**. Some studies claim that disinformation has played a major role in these issues. Among Latinos and Latinas there are many narratives questioning the efficiency of vaccines. Unlike their mistrust of medication approved by science, Hispanic communities have **several references to magical remedies**, presented as effective to prevent or cure COVID-19. In addition, the feeling of mistrust grows when considering the idea that vaccination slots **are traps to deport them**. Some data indicate that by mid-2021, a third of the Latino population that had not been vaccinated **believed that getting the COVID-19 vaccine could complicate their or their families' immigration status**.

For this report, we wanted to go in depth into the disinformation issues, vulnerabilities and tendencies that affect Hispanic communities, as well as the tools being used to fight them. We have reached out to journalists and organizations in direct contact with these groups who, on a daily basis, see the problems created by disinformation first-hand, and checked how effective verifications are to debunk it.

# 03.
# SURVEY RESULTS

## 3.1 General Data

This survey was aimed at media outlets and organizations that belong to Factchequeado's ally network. We registered 17 answers from 15 different organizations. The survey asked for the main 8 topics detected by previous studies as focus of disinformation or information gaps in Latino communities. Specifically, we asked them to evaluate information problems regarding COVID-19, health issues, administrative or immigration procedures, politics, voting processes in the elections, climate change, feminism and gender policies and LGTBIQ+ rights. In addition, we asked their opinion on other issues related to how and why disinformation affects Hispanic communities.

Presence of disinformation
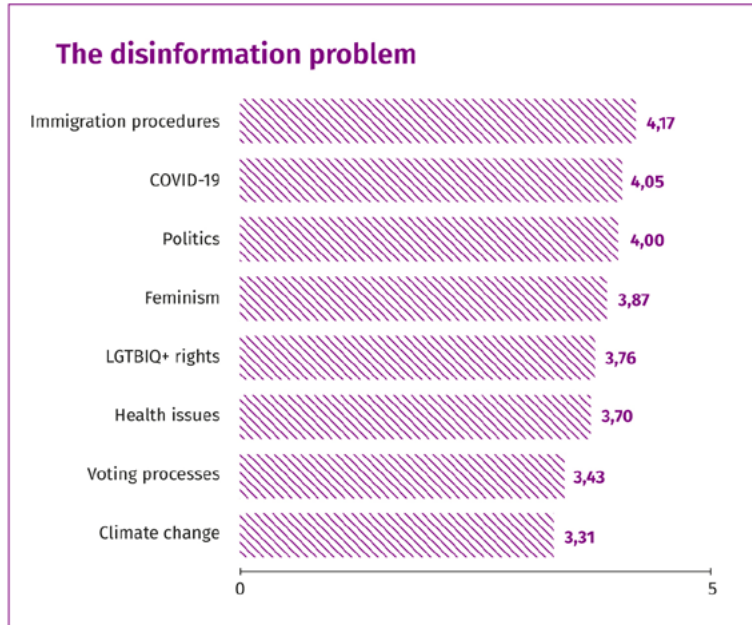**3,71**

Lack of information
**3,78**
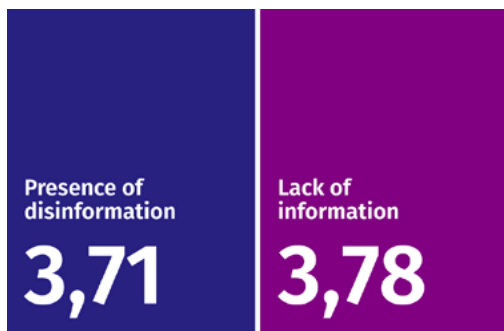
For each one of the main 8 topics, we asked them to assess the amount of reliable information available for these groups, as well as how many disinformative claims they had found. Participants rated each issue between 1 (no problems) and 5 (huge problems). The first conclusion is that, according to them, there is not a lot of reliable information about these topics, but there is a big amount of disinformation. The average score, when combining all topics, is 3.71 for lack of trustworthy information, and 3.78 for disinformative content.
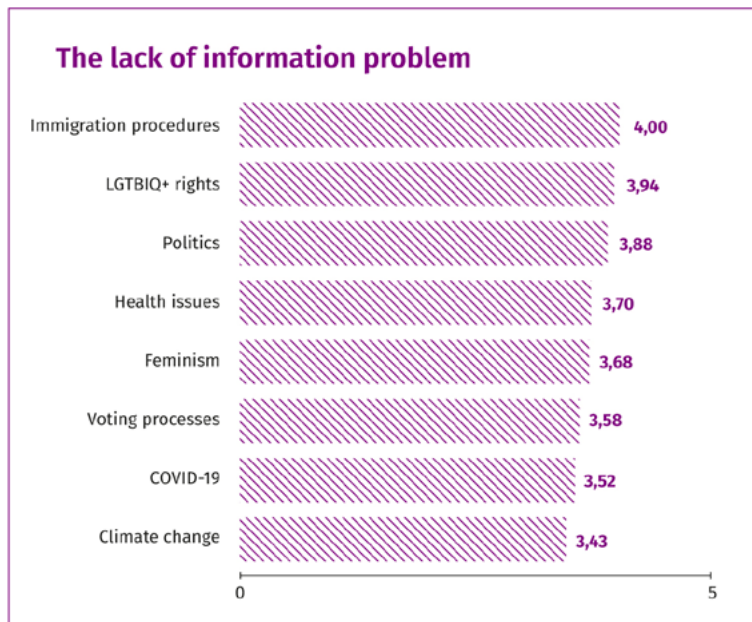
Journalists in contact with Latinos and Latinas are not worried about all topics to the same degree. One topic arises above the others: administrative procedures or immigration processes.

This was the top issue in both categories. Whether it was for lack of information or the presence of disinformation, the grade given for both issues reached 4 out of 5. In fact, references to the problems created by lack of information about immigration are repeated throughout the survey, including reports of people that try to deceive Latinos and Latinas by spreading false information on the topic. On the other end of the scale is disinformation on climate change. This was the last topic in both categories. Therefore, it is the issue with the least amount of disinformation and the highest amount of reliable information available. However, it is important to mention that the scores are not low: 3.43 and 3.31 out of 5. That means that climate change is less problematic than the other issues, not that there are no information gaps on it.

When looking at rankings of issues with more disinformation, there are two, besides immigration processes, that got 4 points or more. Disinformation about COVID-19 and politics is also very high.

**The disinformation problem**

| Category | Score |
|---|---|
| Immigration procedures | 4,17 |
| COVID-19 | 4,05 |
| Politics | 4,00 |
| Feminism | 3,87 |
| LGTBIQ+ rights | 3,76 |
| Health issues | 3,70 |
| Voting processes | 3,43 |
| Climate change | 3,31 |

When analyzing the lack of reliable information, LGTBIQ+ rights and COVID-19 presented significant results. The former has a very high score. Respondents wish more reliable information had been available, when in the previous classification, disinformation was not as much, in comparison to the rest. With the latter, is the opposite. It is placed within the first positions when it comes to disinformation, but participants do not think reliable information is lacking, and it is second-to-last in that ranking.

**The lack of information problem**

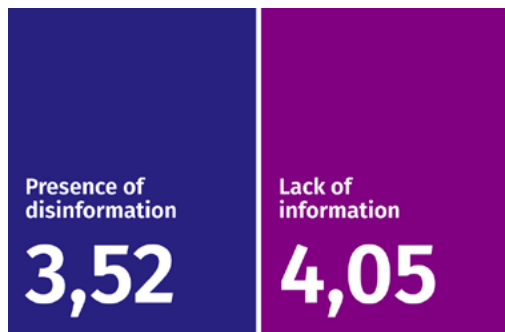| Category | Score |
|---|---|
| Immigration procedures | 4,00 |
| LGTBIQ+ rights | 3,94 |
| Politics | 3,88 |
| Health issues | 3,70 |
| Feminism | 3,68 |
| Voting processes | 3,58 |
| COVID-19 | 3,52 |
| Climate change | 3,43 |

# 3.2 Main Topics in Disinformation

For each issue, we asked participants to, besides scoring them, provide specific examples or opinions of information problems they face during their daily work with Hispanic communities.

## COVID-19 Disinformation

This topic has a very high score when it comes to disinformation, but for "lack of reliable information" is the second-to-last issue in the survey. This means that the problem is the amount of disinformation. Most of that disinformation refers to the vaccination process. The general idea that disinformers try to convey is that vaccines are not safe. So, they turn to old and fake narratives that were already being used before the pandemic, like those linking vaccines to autism. But there are also more specific ones, like the ones that claim that COVID-19 vaccines harm the DNA and can transmit diseases to descendants. Another example is the narrative that claims that vaccines can magnetize people or that they include a chip for the Government to localize citizens at all times.

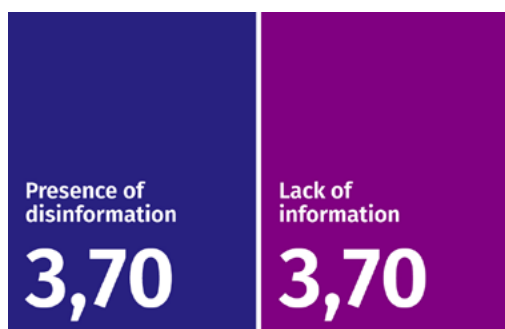| Presence of disinformation | Lack of information |
|---|---|
| 3,52 | 4,05 |

These conspiracy theories go beyond vaccines; some of them completely deny the existence of coronavirus. Another type of disinformation describes magical treatments for coronavirus. Participants highlighted that "the most common one is that chlorine dioxide kills the virus," but they also mentioned narratives about drinking bleach or acetaminophen, or even coffee, to prevent coronavirus.

Disinformation has consequences, and one participant of the survey emphasized one of them. "Underage Latinos have the lowest vaccination rate in Kansas, and booster vaccination coverage is the lowest among adults." **CDC data** show that only 9% of the Latino population has received booster vaccines, which makes it the ethnic group with the lowest percentage. The survey participants also demanded more information, for example, on the end of the COVID-19 emergency declaration.

## Health Disinformation Apart From COVID-19

This issue is very closely related to the previous one, information on COVID-19. When looking at the scores, we noticed that, when it comes to general health issues, there is less reliable information on coronavirus, but also less disinformation. In other words, data shows that the pandemic brought along a lot of disinformation, but also a lot of information that tried to explain distressing and unprecedented situations for citizens. Apart from coronavirus, health issues have a different dynamic. There is not as much disinformation; probably because these issues are not as heavy in the public debate as COVID-19, but information resources to clarify doubts are also less frequent.

| Presence of disinformation | Lack of information |
|---|---|
| 3,70 | 3,70 |

When it comes to health, one of the main guidelines followed by disinformers is shearing home-made remedies that, without any kind of scientific basis, are presented as solutions for severe health problems. One of the participants assures that: "I see many posts about different treatments or home-made remedies to cure serious diseases, including cancer" and another one mentioned an example on TikTok that promotes a remedy with plants to treat norovirus (a virus that causes gastroenteritis). Disinformation on vaccines also goes beyond COVID-19. One of the participants mentioned that he has noticed disinformation on "everything related to vaccines."

Although scores for lack of reliable information are not very high, participants did point out specific health issues where there is simply not enough information for Hispanic communities. "We know Latinos and Latinas are at the top of statistics related to heart issues and diabetes. There is not enough information about prevention programs, especially when so many people in our communities do not have health insurance," explains one participant. There are also a lot of complaints about mental health information. Another participant believes that health problems in Hispanic communities are bigger: "I think that, in addition to not enough information, there are not enough health services."

## Administrative Procedures or Immigration Processes

This is the main topic observed in the survey. Administrative procedures or immigration processes present the highest amount of disinformation, according to our participants, and lack reliable information the most. The main issues concern asylum procedures and immigration applications specifically. Being

Presence of disinformation
**4,00**

Lack of information
**4,17**
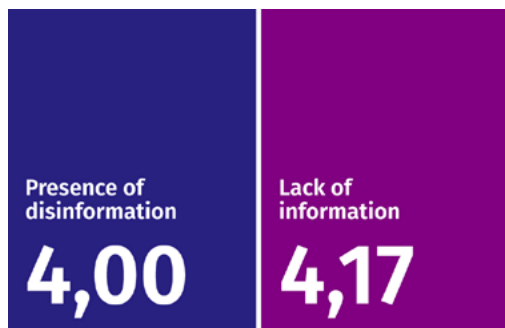
exposed to disinformation and not having enough trustworthy information has consequences. In the survey, participants reported that some immigrants choose to enter the United States illegally because they think they can request asylum quickly. In this case, besides disinformation spread by people trying to manipulate them, there is also disinformation spread unwillingly. "I think a lot of disinformation is shared by families that do not fully understand the immigration process," says one of the respondents.

Unscrupulous people who try to deceive Hispanic communities take advantage of the confusion around immigration procedures and the uncertainty that many Latinos face. Several respondents reported that there are lawyers and entire organizations trying to take advantage of Latinos and Latinas that are not familiar with their rights and obligations when it comes to immigration, or do not know the administrative procedures they need to follow. Participants also reported "public notaries" that offer services for which they are not certified. One of the participants said that "often, changes in immigration policies are only explained in broad terms in national news networks, without any context." This lack of specific information for Latino immigrants makes scammers' work easier.

Some narratives have political goals. One of the participants claimed that "it is normal to hear that the borders are or were open as part of a 'socialist' policy to allow criminals in."

## Political Issues

This topic is also a considerable focus of problems. In the two variables analyzed, the score for both issues is around 4 out of 5. Participants assert that political disinformation focuses more on the Latino and Spanish-speaking population compared to the general American population, especially regarding very politicized topics.

| Presence of disinformation | Lack of information |
|---|---|
| 3,88 | 4,00 |
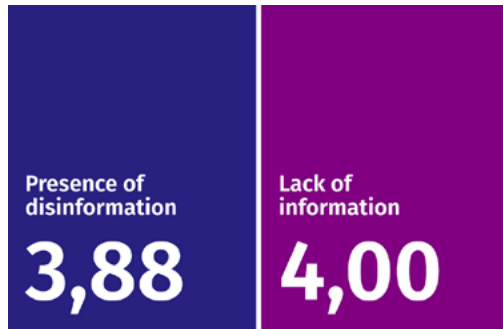
One of the main disinformative narratives claims that there was voter fraud during the 2020 general elections. One participant said that "voters were not sure about how to vote by mail, which lead to many people spreading disinformation and assuring that vote by mail would result in voter fraud." To tackle this kind of disinformation, precise information is required, as well as permanent and active political participation, not only when elections are close.

There is another narrative that says that President Joe Biden wants to turn the US into a socialist country. One of the participants explained this in further detail: "There is a Republican narrative, believed by the Venezuelan community in Florida, about Biden being a socialist, and thus an ally of authoritarian regimes in Latin America." Another participant focuses on a different kind of political disinformation: "Specially on Facebook, I have noticed a lot of disinformation about Russia."

Another journalist insists that the problem is that disinformation in Spanish is not tackled in the same way as in English: "During the elections, disinformation shared by politicians in English was the same as in Spanish. However, unlike the English-speaking community, there are not that many media outlets in Spanish verifying these comments and information."

## Voting Process

This topic is closely linked to the previous one, political disinformation. Although when asking specifically about the voting process, scores for both categories are lower. More complete information is missing on how to vote by mail, the severity of voting without a proper ID, how electoral processes work and the date of elections.

| Presence of disinformation | Lack of information |
|---|---|
| 3,58 | 3,43 |
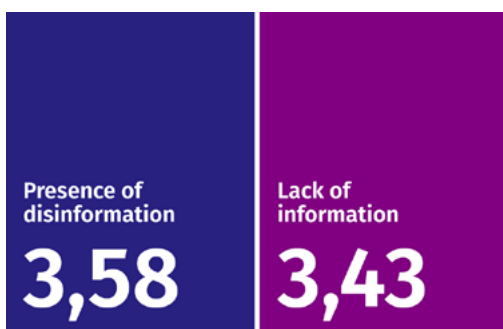
One participant highlighted how important local news outlets are to inform the Hispanic population so they can increase their participation in politics: "Here in the Midwest there are not enough local news outlets in Spanish. Only a few cover local news with real journalism. Our Latino community does not even know how local governments work, and in elections they do not vote because they do not understand the systems or the processes."

## Climate Change

This topic showed the least problems in the whole survey. It has the lowest scores for both "lacking of

| Presence of disinformation | Lack of information |
|---|---|
| **3,43** | **3,31** |

truthful information" and "containing disinformation." But this does not mean that participants did not point out certain information gaps and opportunities for improvement. One of them believes that "apart from disinformation, the main issue is that there is not a lot of information in Spanish about climate change." Another one suggests to "take advantage of certain tendencies in our countries of origin to care for the environment.

## Feminism and Gender Policies

| Presence of disinformation | Lack of information |
|---|---|
| **3,68** | **3,87** |
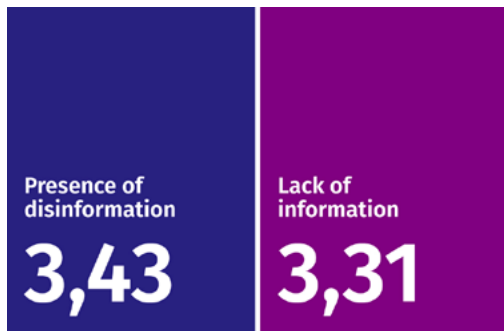
Feminism has a bigger presence of disinformation than lack of reliable information. One of the main narratives identified "links feminism and gender policies to a 'socialist' conspiracy to attack governments." But other than this type of fake political linkage, participants also reported direct insults, like calling feminists "feminazis." One respondent also talked about some of the most severe information voids. "Information about visas available for victims is almost non-existent."
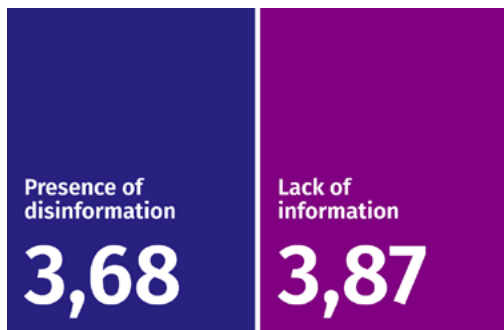
## LGTBIQ+ Rights

Regarding LGTBIQ+ rights, what is most concerning is the lack of reliable information. In fact, this is the second topic in the ranking concerning a lack of sources and references that properly explain Latinos and Latinas the problems they face. One of the most troubling narratives claims that "sexual orientation can be reverted with religion or spiritual retreats."

| Presence of disinformation | Lack of information |
|---|---|
| **3,94** | **3,76** |
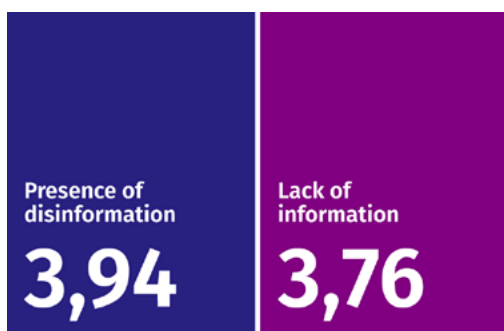
Participants mentioned the role of "fundamentalist politicians" when spreading disinformation on this topic and the previous one, feminism. It was also reported that some media outlets take into consideration that the Latino audience is older and more conservative than the average population in America, and therefore have less coverage for gender policies or issues regarding LGTBIQ+ groups, as it is believed to be a topic that is normally rejected by this audience.

## 3.3 Other Topics with Disinformation

In addition to the topics already mentioned, participants also reported lack of reliable information on economic issues, like government financial assistance for small businesses, taxes or the purchase of properties or vehicles. They claim this makes the Latino community vulnerable to scammers that want to take advantage of them.

They also mentioned other more generic topics about how the government functions to be able to clearly differentiate all three levels of government (local, state or federal). Participants demanded better information about social issues, like abortions or assistance for mothers with kids born in the US. The need for better reliable information is much more compelling in some cases. "Here, in the Midwest, we need everything," said one participant.

## 3.4 Disinformation Tendencies that Affect Latin Americans

When it comes to tendencies, most participants agree that disinformation is increasing. The topic that concerns them the most is immigration, which is also at the top of the ranking about most concerning topics.

One of the respondents stressed that 2024 is an election year both in the US and Mexico, and expects disinformation to increase; especially regarding migration flows between both countries and immigrants' right to vote.

Some people perceive political disinformation to be increasing, while health disinformation decreases. One participant explained it: "We see less and less disinformation on vaccines, and more fake narratives related to 'anti-woke' policies."

However, there are also more pessimistic opinions that claim that disinformation on all topics is increasing. One participant assures that the two topics with the least amount of reliable information are LGTBIQ+ issues and climate change.

## 3.5 Main Narratives

The most active narratives in the last couple of months, according to the survey respondents, refer to the two main topics: immigration and politics. For the former, they highlighted fake narratives about asylum processes in the United States. For the latter, it was electoral fraud.

But when asked about how dangerous this disinformation is, instead of how much they have observed,

participants did not reference politics as much, but kept immigration at the top. For example, one participant mentioned "videos without context of immigrants in New York that criticize the support the city has given to immigrants arriving in buses." Respondents also mentioned disinformation on Title 42 or Advance Parole.

When evaluating the danger they represent, health disinformation, particularly about COVID-19, was also highlighted. And participants also included other fake narratives that may cause direct harm on people like "information on causes of gender violence and disinformation about the trans community." Among the most dangerous kinds are the fake claims that want to "damage the credibility of institutions and democracy."

Another way to harm people is to manipulate what is happening in the home countries of Latinos and Latinas. "For example, we receive videos of a 'flooded beach in Ecuador,' which causes concern among family members here," when the video is actually about old recordings, or different locations, and is shared out of context.

## 3.6 What Sets the Latin Community Apart when it Comes to Disinformation

When considering specific characteristics of the kind of disinformation that affects Hispanic communities the most, immigration is also the most raised topic. One participant found differences in the languages: "There is a lot of disinformation about immigration in English, but it usually focuses on immigration policies in general. In Spanish, they focus more on immigration legal processes."

The second topic is health. "Medical disinformation is more common in Latino groups than in the rest of the US," says one participant, while another one adds: "Another issue that affects our Latino population more than we think is mental health."

Moving forward with comparisons. When asked about what cases have good information in English, but no translations in Spanish, several respondents reported health issues. One participant specifically mentioned the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and explained that: "Governments, especially local governments, did not have the infrastructure to publish information in Spanish." They also made remarks on access to health insurance. "There is an assistance for children of undocumented immigrants, and many times it is not used because the information is not shared correctly," explained one of the participants.

However, they also clarified that for two of the main issues, immigration and elections, there is reliable information in English, but not in Spanish.

# 3.7 The Language Barrier

Most respondents chose language barriers as the main reason that makes Latino communities vulnerable to disinformation. Lack of English skills has several consequences. "They do not trust the media and they question everything they say; on the other hand, they do not verify information," explained a participant. Another one added more nuances: "They do not read English, so all the news they consume come from the same source. They may be new in the United States and not be familiar with laws and policies, they could be living in communities with preconceived ideas and prejudice."

Respondents found information gaps in the news offered in Spanish and the ability of Latino media outlets to reach the population that requires information in that language. Among the answers they point out, for example, is the lack of Latino media outlets in North Carolina. This problem is replicated in locations far from big cities. "Local information is insufficient for Spanish-speakers that do not live in metropolitan cities," claimed a participant.

The problem is not only the reach of media outlets in Spanish, but also their low numbers. Several participants insisted that there are not enough media outlets for Latino communities. One participant claimed that: "although there are platforms like Factchequeado, we need more platforms and organizations alike."

But they also mentioned that current media outlets are facing other economical problems, which is more evident in those informing in Spanish. One respondent explained that, when media companies have to make cuts by firing heads of department or reducing the number of employees, they prioritize media outlets in English and sacrifice information in Spanish. They also mentioned other problems, like the difficulty in finding authorized sources in Spanish, lack of digital skills for some Latino media outlets or impossibility of media outlets to access one of the main hubs of disinformation that affect Latinos and Latinas, WhatsApp conversations.

Another problem is the lack of time to verify what is shared on social media, and even when they do find disinformation, it is not that simple because "in Latino communities, we fear correcting our family members when they are wrong." Besides the language barrier, there are also education issues that make it hard for Latinos and Latinas to notice when the content they see online is true and when it is false. **Census data** show that, although the education level of the Latino population has increased considerably in the last ten years, it is still behind other groups'. For example, in 2022, 75.2% of Latinos and Latinas had finished high school. Those are 10 points above 2012, but among the white population, the percentage is 95.2%, and for the black population, 90.1%

# 3.8 How Does Disinformation Reach Latin Americans?

When asked about the main disinformation channel, many respondents pointed to WhatsApp, as it is very easy to share disinformation with friends and family. Other social media platforms were also reported, but one participant went into further details and explained how different kinds of disinformation predominate in each platform. "The type of disinformation is determined by the format. Me-

dical disinformation is on Facebook, in groups like "organic medicine," "natural medicine" or "healthy movements." TikTok and YouTube have more political disinformation, especially concerning López Obrador's reforms."

There is another disinformation channel mentioned several times: different leaders that are references for some Latino groups. Participants described different kinds of leaders: political leaders who, often, have public roles, but also social and religious leaders or even social media influencers. It was also reported that disinformation can reach them through "the powerful word to mouth" or traditional media outlets, especially radio shows in Spanish.

# 04.
# RESULTS OF THE EXPERIMENT ON VERIFICATIONS

## 4.1 Proposal and General Data

The second part of this investigation is an experiment conducted with 1000 Latinos and Latinas representative of the United States[1]. They were asked questions before and after watching verification videos from Factchequeado published on Instagram between August 10, 2022 and January 30, 2023. Videos reported five disinformative claims.

1. "Men will be allowed into girls' restrooms because of laws that allow open sexual identities."
2. "Undocumented immigrants are voting."
3. "The IRS is imposing new taxes for the middle-class and is an oppressive branch of the Government."
4. "REAL ID will only be available for those with 'permanent legal status'."
5. "After hurricane Ian, you could see sharks on the streets."

The survey asked participants if they had heard these claims before, how truthful they thought them to be, whether they felt motivated to vote in the upcoming elections and which candidate they were supporting.

They were also asked to evaluate Factchequeado's journalist in all five videos, Rafael Olavarría, based on his reliability and sympathy, on a scale from 0 to 100. Rafael got good scores from the respondents. For both reliability and sympathy, he was scored between high 60s and low 70s. These good scores are consistent and do not change significantly per age group, gender or political affiliation.

Most participants were already familiar with the fake claims. There was only one case in which less than half of the group had heard the fake claim before. It is also the case that encompasses the least amount of political implications, because it is about sharks on streets.

Although these narratives were familiar for most of the respondents, they still represent a high level of uncertainty. In all five cases, a very high percentage of participants, over 55%, did not know if the claim was true or false before seeing the verification. For four out of the five cases, people with doubts made up over 60% of the total.

[1] Investigation for the third claim was done in specific states, not with a national sample.

In addition, those who were sure also illustrated concerning data. The percentage of people that believed that the fake claim was true was very high. In 3 out of the 5 cases, there were more people that considered the claims to be true than those who thought they were false.

Watching the fact-checking videos had important effects. For most cases, participants showed more considerable improvements in their judgment than the control group, even though some data showed effects that can be quite concerning. We will analyze them case by case next.

**Narrative 1 Verification**: "Men will use girls' restrooms"
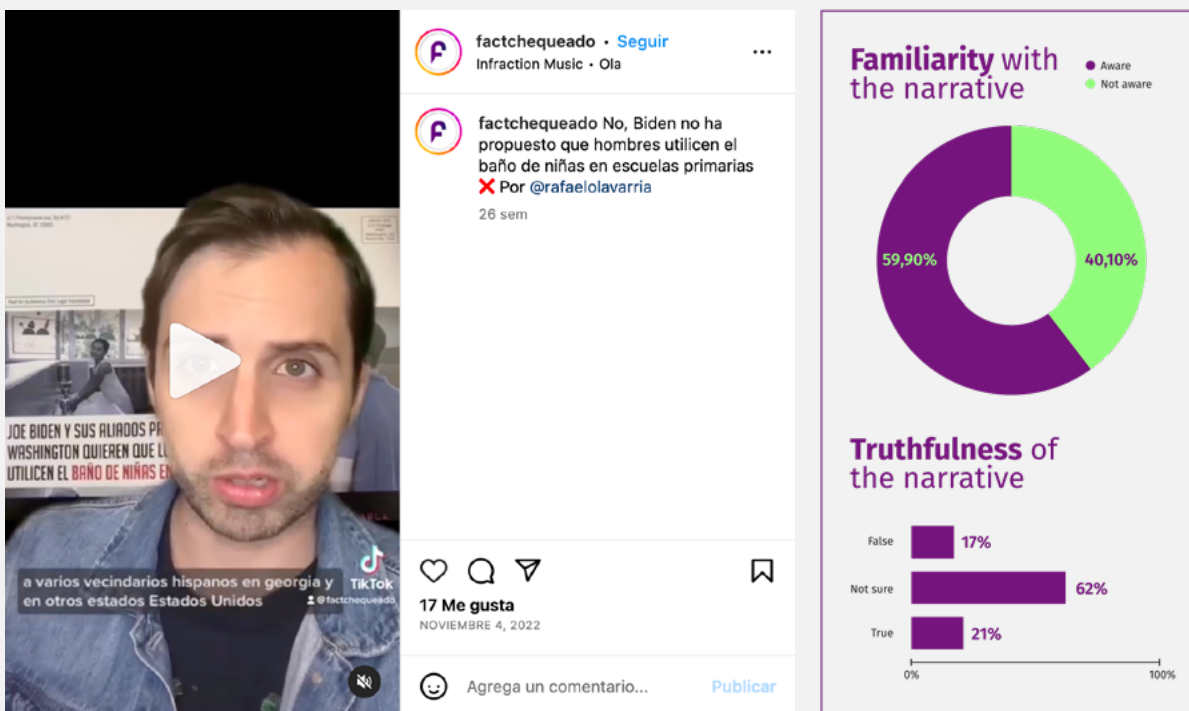


Before seeing the verification, almost 60% of Latinos and Latinas had heard this claim. Disinformation had been effective: 62% of the group did not know if this narrative was true, and 21% thought it was. Only 17% knew it was false. The main effects of the verification video were the following:

Out of the 62% who was not sure about the fake claim before seeing the verification:
- 26% went from "unsure" to "very sure" or "extremely sure" that the narrative was false after watching the video.
- 65% were still unsure.
- Only 9% went from "unsure" to "true."

Out of the 21% who thought the claim was true before watching the video:
- 40% went from thinking that it was true to "unsure" (compared to 21% in the control group).
- 15% went from "true" to "false" (compared to 5% in the control group).

**Narrative 2 Verification:** "Undocumented immigrants are voting".
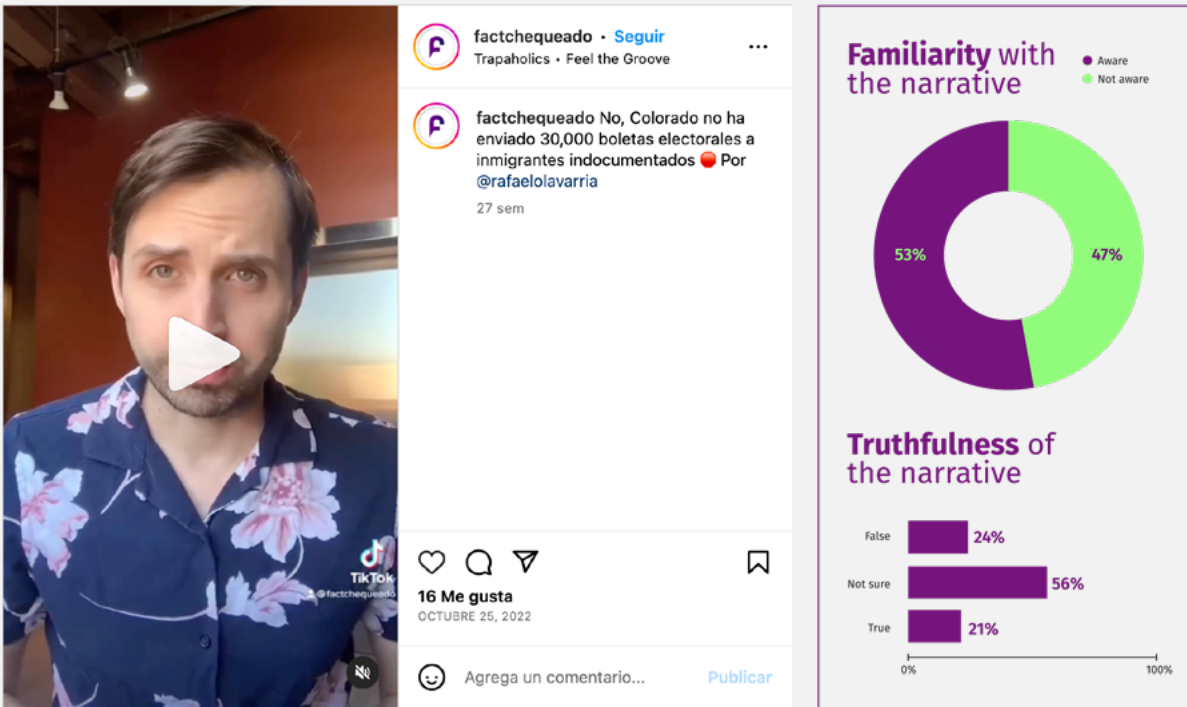


In this case too, over half of Latinos and Latinas had already heard this narrative and more than half did not know if it was true or false. The amount of people that knew it was disinformation before watching the video was higher than in the other cases, but even so, only about one quarter of the participants knew it was false. The verification video had the following results:

Out of the 56% of people that were unsure about the fake claim before watching the video:
- 15% went from "unsure" to "very sure" or "extremely sure" that the narrative is false after watching the video (4% in the control group).
- 76% remained unsure.
- 9% went from "unsure" to "true."

Out of the 21% of the people that believed the disinformation to be true before watching the video:
- 110% went from "true" to "false" (compared to 2% in the control group).

**Narrative 3 Verification:** "The IRS is imposing new taxes for the middle-class and is an oppressive branch of the Government."
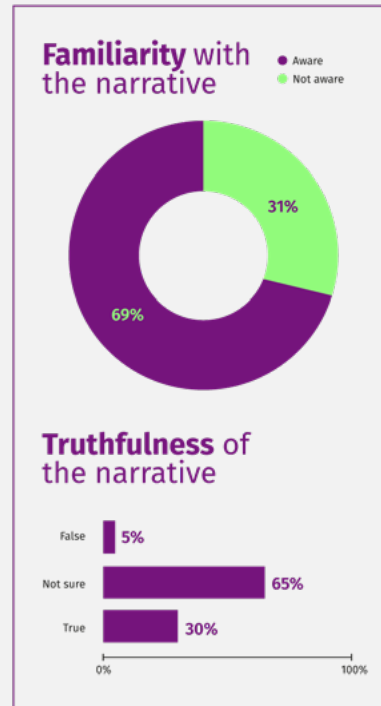


This was the claim most known by the respondents, almost 70% had already heard it. Besides, it was one of the disinformative claims with the highest impact as only 5% thought it was false. 65% were unsure and almost a third thought it was true. For this case, there is one issue that may have impacted the results. It is the only video that does not rate the analyzed content as "false," but with the tag "needs context." As explained in Factchequeado's methodology, the tag "needs context" is used when part of the content matches with some reliable data, but - intentionally or not - was manipulated to create a specific message. This is a possible explanation for the backfire effect observed in this case. In other words, for some participants, watching the verification had a negative effect on their judgment. The main results after watching the verification video were the following:

Out of the 65% of people that were unsure before watching the video:
- 14% went from "unsure" to "very sure" or "extremely sure" that the claim was true (in comparison to 8% in the control group).
- 82% remained unsure (compared to 90% in the control group).

Out of the 30% of the people that believed the disinformation to be true before watching the video:
- 19% went from "true" to "false" (13% in the control group).

Out of the 5% that thought the claim was FALSE before watching the video:
- 29% went from "false" to "unsure" (compared to 13% in the control group).

**Narrative 4 Verification:** "REAL ID will only be available for those with 'permanent legal status'"



In this case as well, more than 60% was already familiar with this narrative, and the negative impact also had a high effect: only 4% knew it was disinformation before watching the verification. The format of the verification was slightly different in this case as three different claims were debunked in one video, so their explanations were shorter than the rest of the examples used in this experiment. The main changes produced after watching the verification were the following:

Out of the 62% that was unsure before watching the video:
- 14% went from "unsure" to "very sure" or "extremely sure" that the claim was false.
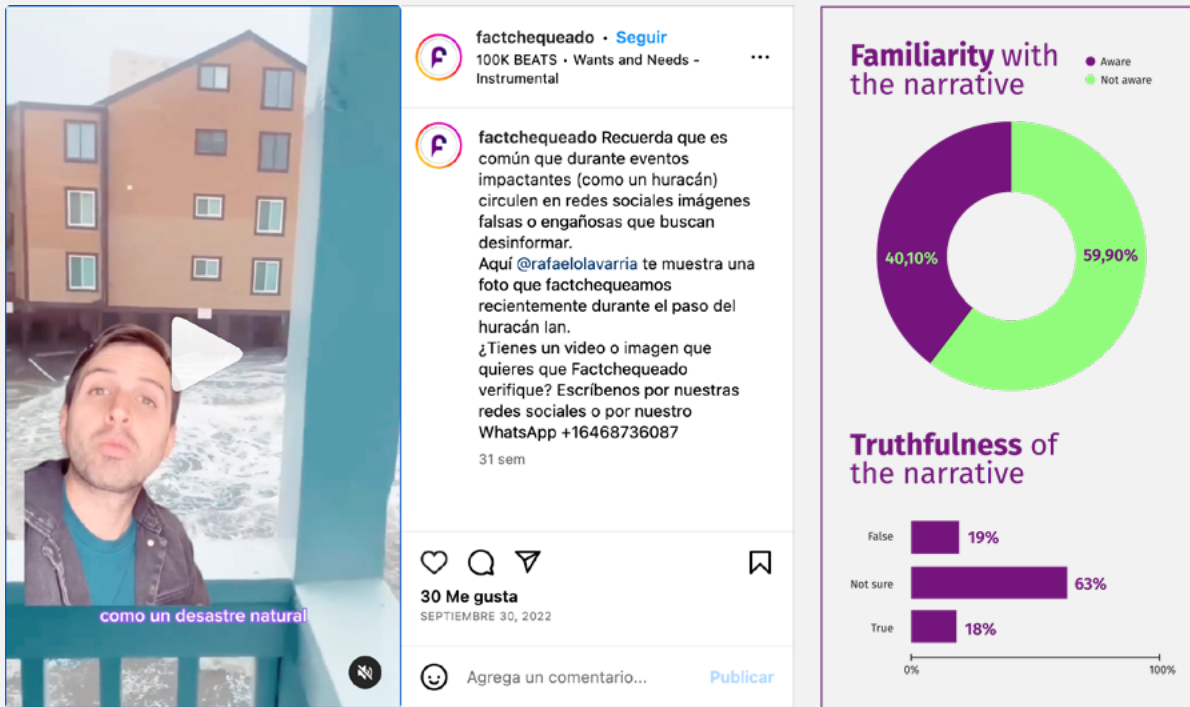- But 15% went from "unsure" to "true."

Out of the 34% of the people that believed the disinformation to be true before watching the video:
- 34% went from "true" to "unsure" (compared to 21% in the control group).

Out of the 4% that thought the disinformative claim was false before watching the video:
- 27% went from "false" to "true" (compared to 6% in the control group).

Narrative 5 Verification: "After hurricane Ian, you could see sharks on the streets."



factchequeado · Seguir
100K BEATS · Wants and Needs - Instrumental

factchequeado Recuerda que es común que durante eventos impactantes (como un huracán) circulen en redes sociales imágenes falsas o engañosas que buscan desinformar.
Aquí @rafaelolavarria te muestra una foto que factchequeamos recientemente durante el paso del huracán Ian.
¿Tienes un video o imagen que quieres que Factchequeado verifique? Escríbenos por nuestras redes sociales o por nuestro WhatsApp +16468736087

31 sem

30 Me gusta
SEPTIEMBRE 30, 2022

Agrega un comentario...          Publicar

**Familiarity** with the narrative

- Aware
- Not aware

40,10%    59,90%

**Truthfulness** of the narrative

| | |
|---|---|
| False | 19% |
| Not sure | 63% |
| True | 18% |

0%          100%

It was the disinformative claim less known by participants, and it is one of the two examples in which more people thought it was false (19%) than true (18%), although for a very thin margin. The most important effects observed after the verification were the following:

Out of the 63% that was unsure before watching the video:
- 30% went from "unsure" to "very sure" or "extremely sure" that the claim was false (compared to 5% in the control group).

Out of the 18% of the people that believed the disinformation to be true before watching the video:
- 41% went from "true" to "unsure" (higher than the 33% in the control group).

# 4.2 General Observations and Hypothesis of the Experiment

Data from the experiment prove the importance of verifications in Latino communities. A very high percentage of the Latino population had seen the fake claims presented before the experiment, and most of them either considered them to be true or were unsure. For most cases, seeing the videos with verifications helped people improve their levels of judgment. Data show that verifications helped unsure participants to confirm it was disinformation and even made people that thought the

claims were true to realize they were not.

There were two important exceptions: the claim about the IRS and the claim about Real ID. For these cases, we observed a backfire effect: for some people, the verification increased the legitimacy of the disinformation. This could be due to the fact that they referred to topics particularly sensitive for the population, like public administration. It is likely that some participants had deeply rooted preconceived ideas that are hard to change with a video.

Another thing to consider is how much influence the format of verifications has. Verifications with the most positive effects were videos exclusively dedicated to prove that one claim was false. Both examples that presented backfire effects were different. One of them, about REAL ID, explained that the claim was false along with two other claims, so it was explained in less detail. This is why it is possible that the effect of the REAL ID verification itself was not perceived as strongly.

The IRS claim was not tagged as "false," but "needs context." There was no direct denial of the claim, but added context was provided to a real purchase of ammunition done by the IRS. The journalist explained it was a misleading claim, but it was not as clearly false as the other cases. The explanation was not specifically labeled in terms of "true or false," but participants were asked after watching the video if they were sure that the claim was false. This may explain why respondents were unsure.

# 05.
# CONCLUSIONS

This report addresses the disinformation problem affecting Latino communities from two points of view. On the one hand, we contacted news media and organizations that are in close contact with them and have a very clear perspective on their needs and vulnerabilities. On the other hand, we measured the effects of verifications published on social media platforms, which represent one of the tools that are currently being used to tackle disinformation to which the Latino population in the United States is exposed, along with other strategies such as education or listening, empowerment and community building activities.

The survey conducted to media outlets and news organizations shows some of the main concerns of Hispanic communities when it comes to disinformation. The topic that worries them the most is immigration processes. There is a lot of confusion because there is a lot of content that tries to mislead Latinos and Latinas, and there is not enough reliable information available, especially in Spanish. This information chaos is affecting millions of people who are not familiar with their rights and duties in the US, and are constantly worried about their legal status. It also has an impact on immigrants who are about to arrive unaware of the dangers and problems they will have to face. Sometimes, disinformation encouraging them to move comes from their own family members who are already in the US, but do not know the immigration process very well. Among the beneficiaries of this confusion are lawyers and unscrupulous organizations that deceive immigrants by offering services that they cannot provide, but bring them economical gains.

Regarding health issues, scores showed the effects of the high amount of disinformation brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, usually **called "infodemic".** When asked about the pandemic, participants agreed that there is a lot of disinformation, but not too many information gaps. When asked about other health issues, it is the opposite: there is not a lot of disinformation spreading, but there is less information available.

This mirrors the situation lived during the pandemic, when almost all of the public's attention was drawn to COVID-19. There was a constant flow of content, as well as a lot of disinformation. Therefore, people do not perceive a lack of information. But the situation is different for other health issues. Because the public is not paying attention, disinformers are not as interested, and there is less disinformation. Yet there is not enough reliable information either because media outlets do not usually cover these topics. Participants of this survey reported that we need more and better information about diseases that affect Latino communities more, like diabetes. For both cases, however, it was observed that Latinos and Latinas are heavily affected by disinformation that proposes, without any sort of scientific foundation, home-made remedies for serious diseases.

When reporting their vulnerabilities, language was a topic repeated multiple times. Many Latinos and Latinas are not comfortable speaking in English and that can have negative consequences for them. It

makes them distrust the authorities and media outlets in English, and rely on very few information sources. Also, platforms and big media outlets are barely paying attention to disinformation in Spanish. So only a handful of organizations and media outlets in Spanish are in charge of providing quality information and protecting Latino communities from disinformation, and there are currently not enough, nor are they large enough. There are some exceptions, like Univision or Telemundo, which are big media outlets, although their fact-checking units are not big enough to face the problem of disinformation in Spanish.

The Hispanic population demands information created in Spanish, not translations from English, but content created specifically for them (with the topics they care about in the formats and channels they use). In addition, according to our respondents, these information gaps are mostly observed at a local level. For issues of national interest, even though there is not plenty, one can find information in Spanish. But when it comes to local issues, it is much more complicated, and that can result in Latinos and Latinas not understanding how institutions work, and giving up their rights to participate in political activities.

In regards to the ways in which disinformation reaches Latinos and Latinas, WhatsApp is clearly at the top. They use it to stay in touch with their families and friends for free, not only in the United States, but also their home countries. This creates a circuit where disinformation in Spanish is shared in encrypted messages and it is therefore very hard to track. This disinformation hub goes unnoticed by institutions, media outlets and organizations that work in English and directly impacts Latinos and Latinas.

As participants from this survey explain, Latino communities have problems with disinformation that are specific to them. The issues that concern them, reasons why they are vulnerable and narratives used against them are different from the rest of the American population. This is why it is necessary to work on specific solutions for these particular issues that affect the largest minority group in the United States.

The experiment on verifications analyzed the efficiency of one of the solutions being used to reduce these vulnerabilities. Data shows that Latino communities are very exposed to disinformative narratives. In four out of the five cases, over half of the respondents were familiar with the fake claim. Besides, the claim had been effective, and had consequences. Most respondents, over half of them in some cases, were unsure about these topics. Besides, among those who were sure, a very high percentage, between 18% and 34%, thought that the fake claim was true. This data is clear evidence of the need for reliable information for Latinos and Latinas in America.

Results from the experiment on the effects of verification videos show that, generally, the respondents improved their level of judgment. A high number of people that were originally unsure or had believed that the disinformation was true started to doubt its veracity after seeing the videos. These results are consistent with conclusions from other reports completed by doctors **Ernesto Calvo (Universidad de Maryland) and Natalia Aruguete (Universidad de Quilmes) with Chequeado** or the one presented by **Africa Check, Chequeado and Full Fact**.

Two cases experienced some backfire effect, and the videos had a negative impact on the participants' judgment. There are two reasons that may clarify this behavior: the topics these videos covered and the format of the verifications. Regarding topics, the claim that presented a backfire effect was about issues related to US civil service, which is a particularly problematic topic for a majority of the Latino popula-

tion. This could explain why some verifications do not work with certain people. The other reason is the format used in these verifications, which did not express clearly that the claim was fake. The claim which had a negative effect on the participants' judgment is the one that used the tag "needs context" instead of "false." This fact helps to understand better how the audience reacts to verifications, and will be very useful for future interventions that should be designed to neutralize the effects of disinformation more effectively.

Overall, the report presents a general view of the situation of disinformation and Latino communities in the United States. It is clear that there are specific problems that affect them differently than the rest of the population. That is why the solutions should also be designed to respond to Latinos and Latinas' vulnerabilities in particular. There is another characteristic mentioned in this report that is important. Latino communities are formed by dozens of different groups, and when trying to fill their information gaps, it is important to take this into consideration.

# 06.
# METHODOLOGIES

## 6.1 Survey with Ally Media Network

For the survey with Factchequeado's ally media outlets and organizations, we redacted 33 questions and divided them in two sections. In the first section, we asked participants to report their concerns over the presence of disinformation or the lack of reliable information in Latino communities concerning eight main topics that frequently include disinformation: COVID-19, health issues, administrative procedures or immigration processes, political issues, voting in elections, climate change, feminism and gender politics and LGTBIQ+ rights. We also asked them to provide specific examples of problems caused by fake claims they had found.

The second section included questions about other topics with disinformation, the main narratives used by disinformers, vulnerabilities of Latino communities and the main channels in which disinformation reaches them.

The survey was sent to Factchequeado's ally media network, which includes a group of media outlets and news organizations in direct contact with these communities that identifies daily information problems. Seventeen professionals from 16 media outlets and organizations responded. 2PuntosPodcast, 2Puntos-Platform, News Literacy Project, Conexión Migrante, APEVEX, 9 Millones, Enlace Latino NC, MediaWise, Cuba Trendings, Televisa Univision, PolitiFact, New Hampshire Public Radio, Planeta Venus, La Esquina, El Tiempo Latino and City Limits.

## 6.2 Experiment on the Efficacy of Verifications

In this experiment participated a national sample of Spanish speakers (except for narrative #3, showed only in specific states). Because of this, samples are small (around 1000 people by test). In addition, samples for several subgroups are very small (less than 100 in some cases), which has to be considered when evaluating results.

We tried to measure the efficiency of five verification videos about the following narratives:
- **Verification 1**: "Men will use girls' restrooms."
- **Verification 2**: "Undocumented immigrants are voting."
- **Verification 3**: "The IRS is imposing new taxes for the middle-class and is an oppressive branch of the Government."
- **Verification 4**: "REAL ID will only be available for those with 'permanent legal status.'"

- **Verification 5**: "After hurricane Ian, you could see sharks on the streets."

Participants were asked to score the reliability and sympathy of the journalist presenting in all five videos, and they were asked the following questions about each narrative (in the example we are providing the content of narrative 1) before and after watching them.

## Familiarity with the narrative:
Some people say that "men will be allowed into girls' restrooms because of laws that allow open sexual identities." Have you heard this before?

- Yes
- No

## Truthfulness of the narrative:
Even if you have not heard it before, how sure are you that the following claim is true or false? "Men will be allowed into girls' restrooms because of laws that allow open sexual identities."

- Extremely sure that it is true
- Pretty sure that it is true
- I think it could be true
- I am not sure if it is true or false
- I think it could be false
- I am sure it if false

## Motivation for the upcoming elections:
How motivated are you to vote in the next elections?

- Not very motivated
- A little motivated
- Very motivated

## Voting preference:
Thinking about the future, if the US presidential elections were tomorrow, would you vote Republican or Democrat?

- Democrat
- Republican
- Somebody else
- I do not know

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# 08.
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We will continue to produce knowledge collaboratively to tackle disinformation.

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