

Examining the Information and Health Needs of **CHINESE MIGRANTS** Crossing the Darién Gap

Executive Summary:

RATIONALE:

There has been a surge in the number of Chinese migrants in 2023. However, due to language barriers and lack of targeted research, there is a significant lack of understanding of their experiences and needs.

METHODOLOGY:

Interviews, participant observation in Necoclí, social media research, and desktop research between September and December 2023.

KEY FINDINGS:



Migrants leave China mainly due to economic hardship and desire for greater freedom, both exacerbated by China's stringent COVID-19 policies.



Migrants face numerous challenges including extortion by authorities, discrimination, difficulty accessing funds, and a lack of awareness of and access to humanitarian services.



Migrants largely rely on migration brokers, informal networks, and social media for information. Despite this, they often have very limited knowledge about their route. Language barriers exacerbate the information gap and add mental stress.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Local organizations should offer information in Mandarin Chinese and employ Mandarin-speaking personnel to assist migrants directly.
- NGOs should collaborate with influential Chinese social media content creators to facilitate dissemination of accurate and timely information.

INTRODUCTION:

In 2023, [over half a million migrants](#) passed through the Darién Gap in hopes of reaching the United States. Historically, the largest number of migrants traversing this route have originated in Latin American countries; however, [the number of Chinese migrants has increased dramatically](#) since the end of 2022. Given this context, existing research predominantly focuses on migrants of Latin American origins, leaving a gap in understanding surrounding the experiences of their Chinese counterparts. This project seeks to address this gap by studying Chinese individuals' migratory experiences and needs surrounding public health services and information access. This investiga-

tion, conducted from September to December 2023, incorporated virtual and in-person interviews with Chinese migrants in Necoclí, Colombia to build off prior social media analysis and desk research. The following report presents the investigation's key findings to shed light on some of the unique challenges and needs of a sample of Chinese migrants crossing the Darién Gap. Gaining insight into some of the experiences of this migrant population is vital to develop more effective communication strategies that reflect Chinese migrants' specific needs and cultural norms so that they will be better prepared to face health issues and emergencies throughout their migration process.

US immigration

🕒 This article is more than 2 months old

Record half million people crossed the treacherous Darién Gap in 2023

Jungle between Colombia and Panama marks the start of the dangerous trek north from South America to the United States



📍 Haitian migrants wade through water as they cross the Darién Gap from Colombia to Panama in hopes of reaching the US on 9 May 2023. Photograph: Iván Valencia/AP

CONTEXT:

The Darién Gap is a region between Panama's Darién Province and Colombia's northern Chocó Department.

This area is [the only land-based pathway](#) connecting South America to Central America, characterized by its extensive watershed, dense rainforest, and mountainous terrain. Notably, the Darién Gap [lacks any form of transportation infrastructure](#). Individuals crossing this region generally must navigate by boat or through trails. However, these trails present considerable physical risks due to [criminal activities](#) and prevalent natural disasters, which [have exacerbated due to climate change](#).



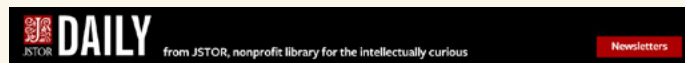
World ▶ Europe US Americas Asia Australia



Global development

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Rapists and kidnappers increasingly targeting migrants crossing Darién Gap



POLITICS & HISTORY

The Pan-American Highway and the Darién Gap

The Pan-American Highway began a century ago with a vision of unfettered motor-vehicle access between Alaska and Tierra del Fuego. What happened to the dream?



Historical Map of the Americas: Coasting Following the Pan American Highway, c. 1910. via Wikimedia Commons

As a crucial migration pathway from South America to the Mexico-United States border, the Darién Gap attracts a diverse group of migrants originating from neighboring South and Central American countries, the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa. Recent trends have indicated a shift in the demographics of migrants traveling this route. By February 2023, China became the fourth-largest migrant origin country. [Migración Panamá](#) reported a persistent increase of Chinese migrants from 900 migrants per month in January to over 4,000 by November 2023. Despite this increase, there remains a lack of Mandarin language information available for Chinese migrants, and public understanding regarding the specific needs and experiences of the Chinese migrant community continues to be minimal.

METHODOLOGY:

Between September and December 2023, a student researcher currently pursuing a master's degree conducted an investigation with the support of Internews on the information needs and gaps of Chinese migrants in the Darien Gap. The investigation included four components:

1. **Desk Research:** The researcher investigated over four months and conducted a review of news articles and databases created by the Panamanian and Colombian governments to gain important context and statistical data.
2. **Social Media Research:** The researcher gathered information over numerous social media platforms, including Douyin (Chinese TikTok), where migrants share their experiences along their journey. He supplemented this analysis through active participation and observation in migrant group chats on WeChat and Telegram.
3. **Participant Observation:** The researcher traveled in person to Necoclí, Colombia for four days and spent time with a group of migrants. This experience provided a deeper understanding of the experiences and emotions that some migrants felt marked their journey.
4. **Interviews:**
 - *Semi-Structured Interviews with Migrants:* The researcher identified interview participants on-site in Necoclí and over the Internet. Interviews took place in person, through voice calls, and via text message. Of the eight interviews conducted in total:¹
 - Six were with individuals, and two were group interviews.
 - Four were in person, one was over voice call, and three were over text message.
 - *Interviews with Organizations:* The researcher conducted interviews with three organizations (Migración Colombia, SentARTE, and a local church).

¹ The researcher did not ask participants to identify their genders due to security concerns.



FINDINGS:

Reasons for Leaving China:

In response to COVID-19, China implemented [stringent measures](#) around public health protocol from 2020 to 2022. Requirements included mandatory quarantine for suspected COVID-19 cases and close contacts, as well as abrupt lockdowns impacting neighborhoods and entire cities in China. These measures had far-reaching economic implications, contributing to [a significant economic downturn](#), with the youth unemployment rate [reaching a record high of 21.3%](#) in June 2023.

The responses from all eight interviewees and supplemental [media coverage](#) suggest economic difficulties as a primary factor driving Chinese migration to the U.S. Media sources such as [The Reporter](#) and [The Economist](#) highlight additional motivators such as the pursuit of freedom of expression and the desire to escape discrimination. In line with the reporting by [The Economist](#), three out of eight interviewees also highlighted concerns over disruptions to their freedom and livelihood due to COVID-19 policies as significant influencers behind their decision to migrate. Prior to the pandemic, Chinese citizens faced [cases of injustice](#), such as forced evictions, but this issue primarily impacted sporadic communities and smaller cities. COVID-19 raised injustices to a much broader scale. People grew unable to voice their anger [when they had no food](#), when their loved ones were [refused medical care](#), or when they were [assaulted by government COVID workers](#). This desperation eventually led to [wide-spread protests](#), a first since 1989, and contributed to an unparalleled increase in out-migration.

Multiple sources (including [Migración Panamá](#), [Migración Colombia](#), and [New York Times](#)) documented a surge in Chinese migration passing through Necoclí and crossing the Darién Gap starting in early 2023. This uptick in migration coincides with the lifting of COVID-19 lockdowns in China, suggesting that dissatisfaction with the strict pandemic policies currently acts as a driving factor for this movement.

The New York Times

Growing Numbers of Chinese Migrants Are Crossing the Southern Border

More than 24,000 Chinese citizens have been apprehended crossing into the United States from Mexico in the past year. That is more than in the preceding 10 years combined.

Share full article



A family of migrants from China in Texas after surrendering to Border Patrol in April. Reuters

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Route:

As interviewees shared, many migrants often choose to take an indirect route to enter Latin America through Ecuador [because the country does not require an entry visa for Chinese citizens](#). Nonetheless, it is important to note [the escalating safety concerns in Ecuador](#) due to intensifying gang-related conflicts, which pose significant additional risk for migrants. While this migration path is currently popular, it is subject to change over time, as migrants may select different routes based on personal circumstances.

Interviewees mentioned that they choose to travel through the Darién Gap due to the challenges they face in legally entering the United States. Many have faced U.S. visa rejections, while others do not begin applications because of the high rejection rate. Despite the route’s perceived danger, extensive social media coverage, including videos sharing personal experiences on Douyin and YouTube, has bolstered the popularity of the Darién Gap. As three interviewees mentioned, individuals with support from family or friends often opt for this route based on personal recommendations from members of their close networks who have traveled the path themselves.



EXPERIENCES:



Blackmailing by Authorities Minimizes Migrants' Trust.

All interviewees reported an awareness of the risks posed by police, including instances of blackmail and robbery. Individuals have also widely discussed this phenomenon across Douyin, WeChat and Telegram group chats. According to the testimonies of migrants interviewed through this research, a typical scenario allegedly [involves](#) police boarding buses on migrant routes, ostensibly to check documents, and subsequently demanding money with threats of deportation if migrants do not comply. In addition, four interviewees reported that they faced extortion by airport border patrols. These experiences contribute to a pervasive distrust of local authorities among those migrating. The mistrust is likely to challenge authorities' abilities to cooperate with migrants to implement any intervention.



Discrimination Along the Migration Route Leads to Humiliation and Alienation.

In addition to grappling with the unfamiliarity of local cultures and languages, Chinese migrants often encounter discrimination. Four migrants, recruited in-person and online, said Chinese travelers faced additional requirements and extortion in the Quito airport. Six mentioned being refused bus tickets despite showing proper documentation. Four believed that police targeted them for additional extortion due to their race. Such experiences contribute to feelings of humiliation, fear, and alienation, intensifying Chinese migrants' sense of vulnerability.



"We are only refugees, second-class citizens! Foreigners can bully us however they want. From where we can possibly seek justice?"

(Hui,² Interviewee, November 1, 2023, Necoclí)



Chinese Migrants Lack Knowledge of and Trust in Humanitarian Organizations.

Chinese migrants have no awareness and lack access to humanitarian services, which stems from two main factors. First, many lack an understanding of the concept of humanitarian work, leading to misconceptions about the roles and intentions of humanitarian organizations. Individuals share a [deep-rooted mistrust towards such organizations in China](#), where many perceive them as government-run and corrupt, in turn hindering their trust in similar organizations abroad. Second, Chinese migrants often lack awareness about available services. None of the eight interviewees in this investigation knew about facilities like migrant clinics or potable water sources. This is due in part to the absence of information about available services in Mandarin Chinese and the fact that most services exclusively operate in Spanish.

² Some names used in this report have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.



Health Preparedness Includes Vaccination and Basic Medications but Overlooks Mental Health.

This investigation's findings suggest a degree of health preparedness among the migrants studied. All eight interviewees reported receiving a yellow fever vaccine, either while in China or in Ecuador. Additionally, most carried or purchased basic medications in Necoclí, including fever reducers, diarrhea treatments, and allergy medications. However, they were unaware of any medical services in Necoclí or in other cities they passed through.

"If I have medicine, or other people give me the medicine, I will take it. Otherwise, what can you do? Just endure through it, hoping it goes away eventually."

(Zhou, Interviewee, November 2, 2023, Necoclí)

However, mental health received less attention among those interviewed, likely due in part to [the stigma and limited discourse on this topic in China](#), despite its significant influence throughout the migration process. Four interviewees described experiencing "tremendous stress" and feeling "exhausted mentally." Some migrants, especially those traveling alone, have developed mechanisms to cope with stress and find support by sharing their experiences on social media, engaging with followers, or venting frustrations in group chats.



Migrants Identify Obstacles in Accessing Funds.

Two groups of migrants interviewed emphasized their need to withdraw funds as a top priority, having exhausted their cash reserves or encountered theft. This topic has also received attention in social media discourse in which migrants frequently participate before travelling. A primary challenge that emerged is the lack of compatibility with the Chinese UnionPay card network in banks in Necoclí. This incompatibility significantly impedes migrants' ability to access their funds through bank cards, thus exacerbating their financial difficulties during the migration process.





INFORMATION NEEDS AND COLLECTION PRACTICES



Information Sources:

Responses from migrants interviewed indicate that many primarily receive information from service providers, peers (families and friends, Internet friends, or other Chinese migrants they met along the way), and online platforms (Douyin, WeChat and Telegram group chats). No interviewee mentioned traditional media, non-governmental organizations, or governments as information sources.

Migrants keep themselves updated and stay connected through smartphones on the road, and all Chinese migrants interviewed had access to personal smartphones. As interviewees shared, some purchase SIM cards along their journey to access the internet. The prevalence of smartphones is exemplified by the experience of one migrant interviewed who, upon losing her phone, quickly searched for and acquired a new smartphone, indicating its perceived critical role in the migratory journey.

1. Service Providers Act as Crucial Sources of Information.

Service providers are people who facilitate portions of migrants' journeys. These individuals include professional guides and those who engage in unofficial work organizing travel logistics for migrants. Hotel owners assumed the role of service providers for some of the interviewees in this investigation. In addition to providing accommodation, they arranged transportation (to and from Necoclí), provided food, and assisted migrants in accessing financial resources from China.

Many migrants heavily rely on these individuals and have little knowledge themselves about their journey or potential alternative plans. Three interview respondents conducted minimal independent research, lacking basic knowledge like the name of their destination or the expected length of time necessary to cross the Darien Gap. Even those with some information generally lacked details about departure times, routes, or contingency plans. None of the eight interviewees in Necoclí had information about current events affecting their route, such as changes in immigration policies or migration-related incidents.

2. Migrants Have Diverse Information Sources and Varied Access to Resources.

Access to information sources among migrants varies, with personal connections like family and friends not universally available. These connections served as primary information sources for two research participants; however, others lacked such access. Some did not inform their families and friends about their journey, either due to anticipated lack of support or concerns for their safety. Notably, one respondent relied on a friend they met over the Internet, a fellow migrant they got to know through a group chat, as a key source of information about their route.

3. Group Chats Serve as Notable Information Hubs.

WeChat and Telegram group chats connect migrants, offer instant responses should one face obstacles or questions, and enable individuals to share updates on evolving security or political situations. These resources are particularly valuable in areas with strict and fluctuating immigration controls, such as Mexico. However, accessing these groups can be challenging, as migrants often hesitate to share them to protect group members' identities. While this caution reflects solidarity, it also contributes to unequal information access among migrants.

4. Language Barrier Allows for Only Basic Communication and Adds Stress for Migrants.

The Chinese migrants interviewed did not consider language a significant barrier, as they use translation software and body language for basic communication. However, officials from Migración Colombia mentioned that they faced challenges in obtaining detailed information about Chinese migrants due to language constraints, limiting their interactions to basic document checks without deeper inquiries into their origins or journeys. Furthermore, participant observation in Necoclí

indicated that language barriers add stress in situations where migrants cannot understand information shared in announcements or are unable to efficiently express their concerns, leaving issues unresolved. One example of this challenge took place at a port, where transportation staff separated Chinese migrants from their luggage prior boarding and were unable to communicate with them to explain why. This situation caused the migrants to grow anxious that their belongings would become lost or sent to the wrong destination.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NGOS:

Enhancing Language Accessibility:

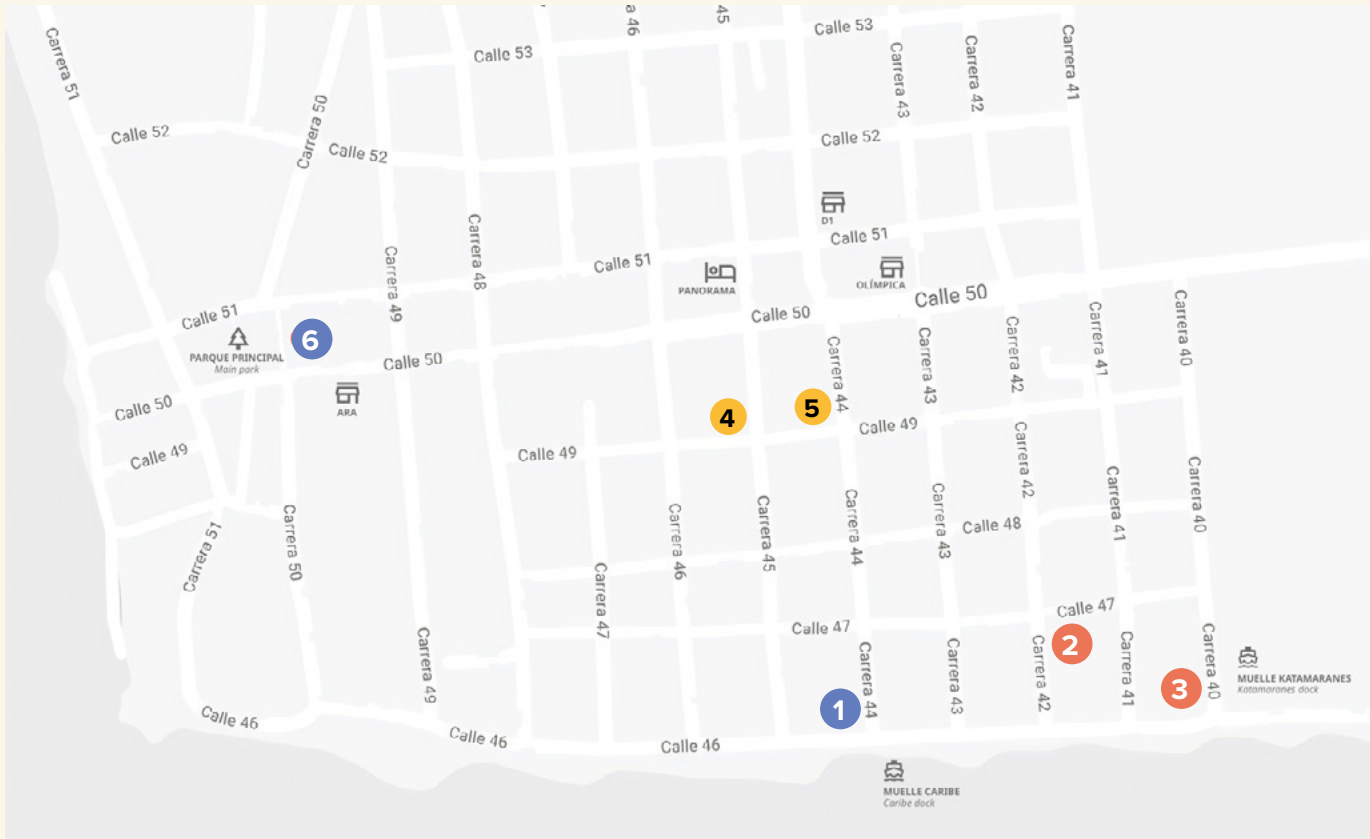
- a. To mitigate language barriers, it is essential to translate existing migrant-related information into Mandarin. This step will ensure that Chinese-speaking migrants can readily access the information they need.
- b. While translation apps can facilitate basic communication, the presence of a Mandarin speaker would not only facilitate in-depth inquiries, but also enable NGOs to build trust with the Chinese migrant community.

Improving Information Dissemination:

As mentioned, given that most migrants rely on limited and unofficial sources for information, which may be unreliable or outdated, there is a critical need to streamline information dissemination. Humanitarian organizations should identify and collaborate with influential Chinese social media content creators now outside of China who focus on migration issues and together provide accurate information tailored to the needs of Chinese migrants. This approach has been successfully implemented in other contexts, such as in initiatives by [UN-HCR in Chile](#). Engaging with trusted figures can significantly enhance the reach and impact of critical information, as well as foster trust between NGOs and the migrant community.

Annex 1. Organizations and Resources in Necoclí

Chinese Migrants can find the following services in Necoclí.



Hygiene Products

1 Tienda Humanitaria /
Humanitarian Store (UNICEF)

Cra 44 #46-107

8°25'16.7"N 76°46'55.6"W

**Monday - Friday: 7:30AM -
12:30PM**

6 Service point (NRC)

Calle 50 #50A-06

(Second floor - Parque principal)

**Monday - Friday: 8:00am-
12:00pm / 2:00pm-6:00pm
Saturday: 8:00am-12:00pm**



Basic Health Care

2 Service point
(Cruz Rojo / Red Cross)

Cra 42 #46-107

8°25'18.0"N 76°46'50.1"W

**Monday - Friday: 7:00am-5:30pm
Saturday: 7:30am-11:30 am**

3 Healthcare mobile unit (OIM)

Calle 50 #50A-06 (Next to
KATAMARANES Dock)

**Monday-Friday: 7:30am-5:00pm
Saturday: 7:30am-12:00pm**



Food

4 Cafeteria - Lunch
(Pastoral Movilidad Humana)

Cra 45

Monday-Friday: 12:00am-2:00pm

5 Cafeteria – Breakfast,
Dinner (Samaritan's purse)

Cra 44 #49-17 (Cristiana
Cuadrangular central church)

**Monday-Friday: 7:00am-9am /
5:00pm-7:00pm**