



**BOLETÍN:
COVID**
**Mis, dis, and mal
information**



BOLETÍN: COVID mis, dis, and mal information

Esperanza United believes that knowledge is power and that everyone should have access to information and resources to make the best decisions for themselves. From our research and advocacy, we know that social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp spread mis and disinformation at high volumes. This became more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, many Latin@s¹ experienced fear, isolation, depression, financial hardship, violence, and life-threatening injuries.

In this Boletin, we provide:

1. Definitions for mis, dis, and mal information
2. Descriptions of how mis, dis, and malinformation impacted Latin@ communities and prevented access to life-saving services during the COVID-19 pandemic
3. Tips for what individuals can do when they come across mis, dis, and malinformation in their networks.

Misinformation: Sharing fake or misleading information without knowing it²

Disinformation: Sharing fake or misleading information on purpose

Malinformation: Fake information to make a scheme sound more believable³

At Esperanza United, we are very concerned about mis, dis, and malinformation because it perpetuates isolation, erodes trust, is an example of power and control, and prevents individuals, like victims of gender-based violence from getting the resources and support they need to heal.

Esperanza United has chosen to use “@” in place of the masculine “o” when referring to people or things that are either gender neutral or both masculine and feminine in make-up. This decision reflects our commitment to gender inclusion and recognizes the important contributions that both men and women make to our communities.

What we know about Latin@s and social media

The Latin@ online community uses Facebook and its digital products as destinations to foster and sustain connections with family and friends, plus a place to celebrate and express diverse aspects of life.⁴ Bilingual Latin@s share information on Facebook and 80% of US Hispanics prefer ads to incorporate Spanish messaging.⁵

However, we know that misinformation spreads on platforms that don't fact-check or dissuade individuals from posting outrageous or wrong content. Platforms actually profit from outrageous content because it increases engagement.⁶ We also know that Latin@ people are 57% more likely to use social media as a primary source of information.⁷ Additionally, Facebook's vaccine-misinformation posts in Spanish tended to remain posted much longer or were never flagged despite being factually incorrect and harmful.⁸

According to Univision, Latin@s⁹ in the US have smartphones and the time and the desire to be well-informed, but they use and believe (too much) what they see on social networks. Bad actors have been trying to capitalize on this for at least the last two years, sending waves of false messages and disinformation that attack our communities.¹⁰

The problem with our use of social media is that it relies on the individual user to differentiate between quality and reputable information versus false narratives.

In 2020, there was much confusion about misinformation. Social media platforms were overfilled with mis, dis, and malinformation, particularly around COVID-19 pandemic best practices like masks and vaccines and then around the 2020 presidential election.¹¹ Groups disseminating misinformation focused heavily on YouTube and WhatsApp — two digital spaces Latinos frequent the most.¹²

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Latin@s experienced an increase in obstacles to obtaining help with domestic and sexual violence

COVID-19 brought so many issues to the forefront. For frontline workers, many of whom are Latin@s, they were at higher risk for contracting COVID-19 because they had to work during the pandemic.¹³ Latin@s also lost their jobs and had to stay home, which meant they were further isolated from social networks. Financial stress can exacerbate unhealthy relationships and certainly we saw an increase in domestic violence. Lastly messaging about immigrant communities in the media further fueled isolation and had a chilling effect on individuals reaching out for help. With these conditions, abusive intimate partners then



used the COVID-19 pandemic as a tool for isolation, financial abuse, and the perpetuation of dis, mis, and malinformation.¹⁴

“During the COVID-19 crisis, it may be even more difficult for an abused immigrant to leave the home and find shelter elsewhere, and even under the best of conditions, it is difficult to find linguistically and culturally appropriate¹⁵ shelters and assistance,” according to researchers Professor Carol Cleaveland and Michele Waslin.¹⁶

Esperanza United also heard from advocates and survivors that one of the control mechanisms used by their intimate partners was the perpetuation of misinformation about the virus to create fear and increase control of survivors.¹⁷

Latin@s who sought help for domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced:

- Lack of language access services in hospitals, legal systems, and from service agencies
- Changes in protection orders court dates
- Delayed immigration court dates with little to no public notice
- Long wait times in emergency rooms and urgent care centers
- Inability to get to service agencies because of stay-at-home orders
- Denial of access to COVID-19 vaccines, (due to misinformation from an intimate partner)
- Inability to hide abuse from children because schools moved to virtual options
- Fear of deportation
- Fear of contracting COVID-19 if the person doing harm was jailed
- Confusion about public charge and if obtaining the vaccine would impact immigration applications
- Lack of health insurance
- Many other obstacles

These obstacles made safety planning and getting services incredibly difficult.

Types of misinformation for Latin@s and the COVID-19 pandemic

Latin@s heard all sorts of misinformation through social networks and social media. Some of the common myths as outlined by Salud America include:

- COVID-19 is no worse than the flu
- Masks don't protect from COVID-19

- Only elderly people or those with underlying health conditions will get seriously ill and require hospitalization for COVID-19
- The vaccine alters DNA
- The vaccine was rushed and may have unknown consequences.

For a full list of myths and facts, see this [Salud America's factsheet](#).

From a survey from UnidosUS, Puerto Rican and Mexican respondents were less likely to get the vaccine and one reason is because they did not trust the Trump administration. Furthermore, Latinas express higher levels of concern across all of the above issues compared to Latino men.¹⁸

There was so much fear, mis, dis, and malinformation that it was difficult for Latin@ families and communities to make the best decisions for themselves while at the same time managing all of the other stresses they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The problem with misinformation

The COVID-19 pandemic was an incredibly confusing time because families were trying to navigate their exposure to the virus as well as deal with all of the other stressors that were brought to light – like economic injustice, how many Latin@s are frontline workers, the digital divide, and domestic and sexual violence situations.

Latin@ families and communities received confusing and misleading information about COVID-19, such as:

- “Don’t get vaccinated because a chip will be inserted into your DNA and the government will track you”
- “The COVID-19 vaccines will make you sterile”
- “COVID-19 is just like a bad flu and you can survive it”

Forced sterilization within the Latin@ community is not new and many relatives and community members may remember state-sanctioned forced sterilization between 1907 – 1981 in both Puerto Rico and the mainland United States.¹⁹ It is important to acknowledge this history and work towards building trust, respect, and integrity within communities of color.

There is also concern about whether Latin@s can trust healthcare professionals. According to the Pew Research Center, Hispanic adults hold largely trusting views of both medical scientists and scientists to act in the public’s interests. However, it is worth mentioning that Hispanics are glaringly underrepresented as scientists. Latin@s see scientific professions as potentially “unwelcoming” to Latin@ people and depending on language and nativity, some Latin@s may prefer Spanish-speaking healthcare practitioners.²⁰ Moreover, some Latin@s may have a preference for Spanish language and may also not find practitioners with whom they identify which creates another barrier for access to healthcare. There is room for improvement in terms of diversifying



scientists and medical professionals, so they are more inclusive and representative of Latin@s.

The messages during the COVID-19 pandemic were confusing and some used that confusion to cause harm (malinformation). Some additional messages that added to Latin@ community confusion during COVID-19, include whether a citizenship question would be added to the U.S. Census and whether migrants could utilize public charge programs or if this would impact their immigration applications.²¹ Misinformation was and is a social problem for Latin@s.

Best practices for clarifying mis, dis, and malinformation

Because mis, dis, and malinformation are not going away as long as social media is vastly unregulated, it is helpful for everyone to learn how to spot them and know what to do with it.

Think about:

- Who is posting the information?
- What information are they sharing?
- What is their intent by sharing this information?

What to do:

- Educate yourself and those around you - Telemundo launched an initiative that includes a crash course on identifying misleading information sent through WhatsApp. The course is accessible [here](#) as is available in English and Spanish.
- Have conversations with your social networks like your friends, families, and co-workers. A strength of Latin@s is our connections within our communities. Having conversations with individuals we trust sharing accurate information is one of the best ways to address mis, dis, and malinformation.
- Look for additional resources like our [Enhancing Court Access Promising Practices](#) for survivors of domestic and sexual violence who may have to navigate healing and justice in a COVID-19 environment.

For further information contact

Olivia Garcia, Ph.D., Director of Public Policy
ogarcia@esperanzaunited.org

Yasmin Campos-Mendez, MSW, Public Policy Manager
ycamposmendez@esperanzaunited.org

This factsheet was made possible by 90EV0556 from the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Its contents are solely the responsibility of Esperanza United and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

Endnotes

- 1 Esperanza United has chosen to use “@” in place of the masculine “o” when referring to people or groups that are gender neutral or both masculine and feminine. This decision reflects our commitment to gender inclusion and recognizes the important contributions that women, men, and gender-nonconforming people make to our communities. For more information, go to our webpage at: <https://esperanzaunited.org/en/>
- 2 Gabriella Trujillo. (September 20, 2022). Latino Voters are being flooded with even more misinformation in 2022. Vox.com. (<https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/23329139/latino-voters-misinformation-2022>).
- 3 Also known as propaganda. See also. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Malinformation>.
- 4 Meta. (December 4, 2014). Digital Diversity: A Closer Look at US Hispanics. Facebook.com. <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/insights/digital-diversity-a-closer-look-at-us-hispanics>
- 5 Meta. (December 4, 2014). Digital Diversity: A Closer Look at US Hispanics. Facebook.com. <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/insights/digital-diversity-a-closer-look-at-us-hispanics>
- 6 Peter Suci. (August 2, 2021). Spotting Misinformation On Social Media Is Increasingly. Forbes.com. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuci/2021/08/02/spotting-misinformation-on-social-media-is-increasingly-challenging/?sh=675271662771>
- 7 Graciela Mochkofsky. (January 14, 2021). The Latinx Community and COVID disinformation campaigns. NewYorker.com. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-latinx-community-and-covid-disinformation-campaigns>
- 8 We also acknowledge that Meta uses the same machine learning model approaches in Spanish as we do in English to remove misinformation and there are more than a dozen global fact-checking partners who review and rate content in Spanish.
- 9 We use Latin@s and Hispanics interchangeably. Univision used the term Hispanics in this report.
- 10 Cristina Tardáguila. (September 30, 2021). Pandemia, elecciones y censo: ¿por qué los hispanos de EEUU son la víctima perfecta de la desinformación?. Univision.com. <https://www.univision.com/noticias/latinos-eeuu-victima-perfecta-desinformacion-redes> and <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/latinos-rely-more-social-media-coronavirus-lifeline-nielsen-report-finds-n1235968>
- 11 Gabriella, Trujillo. (September 20th, 2022). Latino voters are being flooded with even more misinformation in 2022. Vox.com. <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/23329139/latino-voters-misinformation-2022>
- 12 Alex McCammond & Russell Contreras. (August 18th, 2022). Democrats target Latino misinformation. Axios.com. <https://www.axios.com/2022/08/18/democrats-target-latino-misinformation>
- 13 Lorena Roque & Ryan Zamarrípa. (March 5, 2021). Latinos Face Disproportionate Health and Economic Impacts from COVID-19. Americanprogress.org. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/latinos-face-disproportionate-health-economic-impacts-covid-19/>
- 14 See Mental Health Technology Transfer Center. (April 30, 2020). Increased Risks for IPV in Latinas During the COVID-19 Pandemic. MHTTCnetwork.org. <https://mhttcnetwork.org/centers/national-hispanic-and-latino-mhttc/news/increased-risks-ipv-latinas-during-covid-19> for more information. See also Azcue, X., D’Agostino, J., Gonzalez, O., Millán, I., Noel, N., Pérez, L., Pulido, A., Ramirez, M.J., Rivera, R. (2020, September). US Hispanic and Latino lives and livelihoods in the recovery from COVID-19. McKinsey & Company. <https://daca.iu.edu/doc/covid-19/US-Hispanic-and-Latino-lives-and-livelihoods-in-the-recovery-from-COVID-19-v3.pdf>
- 15 Esperanza United uses the terms culturally response rather than culturally appropriate.
- 16 Carol Cleaveland & Michele Waslin. (February 1, 2021). COVID-19: Threat and Vulnerability Among Latina Immigrants. Affilia: Feminist Inquiry in Social Work, 36(3), 272-281. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0886109920985232>
- 17 This is also confirmed what was expressed by the National Hispanic and Latino Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network. Mental Health Technology Transfer Center. (April 30, 2020). Increased Risks for IPV in Latinas During the COVID-19 Pandemic. MHTTCnetwork.org. <https://mhttcnetwork.org/centers/national-hispanic-and-latino-mhttc/news/increased-risks-ipv-latinas-during-covid-19>
- 18 Juan M. Peña & Gabriel R. Sanchez. (January 25th, 2021). Skepticism and mistrust challenge COVID vaccine uptake for Latinos. Brookings.edu. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2021/01/25/skepticism-and-mistrust-challenge-covid-vaccine-uptake-for-latinos/>
- 19 Julissa Arce. (December 16, 2021). The long history of forced sterilization of Latinas. Unidosus.org. <https://www.unidosus.org/blog/2021/12/16/the-long-history-of-forced-sterilization-of-latinas/>
- 20 Cary Funk and Mark Hugo Lopez. (June 14, 2022). Hispanic Americans’ Trust in and Engagement With Science. Pewresearch.org. <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2022/06/14/hispanic-americans-trust-in-and-engagement-with-science/>
- 21 See Andrew Prokop. (July 11, 2019). Trump’s census citizenship question fiasco, explained. Vox.com. <https://www.vox.com/2019/7/11/20689015/census-citizenship-question-trump-executive-order> and Jennifer M. Haley, Genevieve M. Kenney, Hamutal Bernstein, & Dulce Gonzalez. (June 18, 2020). One in Five Adults in Immigrant Families with Children Reported Chilling Effects on Public Benefit Receipt in 2019. Urban.org. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/one-five-adults-immigrant-families-children-reported-chilling-effects-public-benefit-receipt-2019> for more information.