SECURITY FORCES IMPROVE TOURISTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE DESTINATION

According to previous research as many as 100,000 winter migrants, mostly retired seniors from the northern United States and Canada routinely travel during the winter to south Texas (Rio Grande Valley or RGV) to escape the harsh, cold weather. While in the RGV, these Winter Texans spend more than $710 million so are an important part of the region’s economy (Simpson 2014). However, in summer of 2014, the RGV was ground zero for as many as 35,000 undocumented immigrants surging into the U.S. each month. As a strategic response to manage the border immigration crisis, in summer 2014, the state of Texas deployed 1,000 National Guard troops to the region to help secure its border with Mexico.

“People in Texas are concerned about the border... not just illegal immigration, but drugs coming in, human trafficking.”
Lt. Gov. of Texas David Dewhurst (2014)

This unique situation inspired Oliver Cruz-Milan—UTRGV PhD candidate in marketing and now Assistant Professor at the College of Business and Social Sciences at West Virginia State University — and his colleagues at UTRGV to ask, “Would Winter Texans consider the troop surge a signal of reassurance that the destination is safer? Or would they view the added troops as a signal for concern about deteriorating conditions in the destination?”
Results indicated that the deployment of security forces in response to the security crisis is a useful policy tool to improve perceptions of frequent visitors about the destination. More specifically, the highly publicized deployment created awareness among the public, including the destination's winter migrants, who then formed a perception of the effectiveness of the forces. The perceived effectiveness of the security forces in providing a safe environment was important in determining the impact of the forces on the destination's wellbeing. The winter migrants who believed the security forces to be effective were likely to strongly believe that they improve community security and positively affect the economy of the region. Each of these factors led to higher life satisfaction at the destination and a greater likelihood of returning to and recommending the destination to others.

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