

Alcohol and HIV

California/Baja California Border Region

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The border region presents an excellent opportunity to demonstrate how binational collaboration can significantly affect major public health issues for the region as a whole.

U.S. health officials have made the connections between HIV and alcohol a high priority. Studies note that people with HIV are at higher risk for alcohol abuse and those who abuse alcohol have higher rates of HIV.¹ Recent surveillance shows an increase in the rate of HIV diagnoses. Of particular concern are those subgroups with less access to treatment and prevention services: Hispanic and non-Hispanic black populations and men who have sex with men (MSM) who are members of ethnic/racial minorities.² Similarly, HIV/AIDS is a major public health concern in Mexico. Mexico has the third highest number of reported AIDS cases in the Americas, after the U.S. and Brazil.³

AIDS in the California - Baja California Border Region

- Baja California's cumulative AIDS incidence rate, reported in 2003, of 136.60/100,000 population is the 4th highest in Mexico.³
- As of April 30, 2004, San Diego's cumulative AIDS incidence is 434.14/100,000, the 3rd highest in California.⁴
- Cumulatively, whites make up 64 percent of all San Diego County AIDS cases (as of 12/31/02); 21 percent were Hispanic; 12 percent African American.⁵
- The majority of AIDS cases diagnosed in San Diego County were among individuals born in the United States.⁵
- However, among Hispanic males the percent of AIDS cases for those born in the U.S. has decreased from 53 percent in the period 1988-1992 to 31 percent in the 1998-2002 time period while the percent for those who were foreign born has increased from 44 percent to 68 percent.⁵

- Most of the foreign-born Hispanics (87 percent) were born in Mexico.⁵
- Similarly, among U.S.-born Hispanic females, AIDS cases have decreased from 50 percent (1968-1992) to 33 percent while the percent of those foreign born has increased from 46 percent to 67 percent.⁵
- In both Mexico and the U.S., men who have sex with men (MSM) account for the largest number of AIDS cases (50 percent and 75 percent respectively).^{3,5}

Alcohol use and risky behavior

Alcohol abuse is associated with risky sexual behavior and injection drug use, both major means of transmitting AIDS. Studies have correlated alcohol abuse with high-risk sexual behaviors, including multiple sex partners, anonymous sex partners, unprotected sex, sex with high-risk partners such as injection drug users and prostitutes, and the exchange of money for sex or drugs.¹

While not strictly comparable, surveys conducted on both sides of the border indicate alcohol use as a major risk factor for youth.

A Mexican national survey of alcohol use reports that the consumption of alcohol among urban adolescents (age 12-17) in the last two months increased from 27 percent in 1998 to 35 percent in 2002 among males and 18 percent to 25 percent among females. Among males there was an increase in the number of minors who reported they drank five drinks or more on one occasion from 6.3 percent to 7.8 percent.⁶

The California Healthy Kids Survey (7th, 9th and 11th grades) reports that in 2001, 27.4 percent of students in

the San Diego school district reporting drinking in the last 30 days. Although this number is down from the previous survey of 1999, still is too high. When broken down by race/ethnic group, the two-survey average for 1999 and 2001, Native Americans and Hispanics reported the highest rates of alcohol use for all grades (36.3 and 35.3 percent respectively).⁷ These results are consistent with U.S. national data reporting that young adult minorities have emerged as high-risk subgroups.⁸

High Consumption Alcohol Settings and Populations at Risk

There are certain settings or locales that encourage high-risk drinking and subsequently less vigilance regarding safer sex practices such as bars, bordellos, gay circuit parties, and Spring Break destinations. The border region is a particularly attractive area for those seeking excitement and perhaps more sexual freedom. Baja California and San Diego are Spring Break destinations. Moreover, Baja California and San Diego have several bar districts that draw large crowds of young people year round. Underage U.S. youth also frequent bars in Baja California where the drinking age is 18.

The major group at risk for HIV along the northern border of Mexico is MSM. MSM frequent gay bars on both sides of the border. Issues of stigma and discrimination regarding homosexuality make this population particularly vulnerable to substance abuse.

In addition, the border area draws large numbers of migrants seeking to move to the U.S. While most are migrating to improve their lives economically, some are looking for more freedom of sexual expression referred to as "sexual migration." This group includes both heterosexual women and men who are sexually attracted to other men.⁹

Commercial sex workers and their clients are another group at high risk for both alcohol abuse and HIV. Many sex workers have migrated from Central America, working in bordellos at various spots along the migration route through Mexico and into the border region.³

Tourism, commerce, and a large military presence in the area are other factors contributing to a higher risk for substance abuse and HIV/AIDS transmission.

Recommendations for a Healthier Community

Cross-border groups such as the Binational Policy Council and other health and citizen organizations can work together to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS among high-risk populations in the border region by implementing alcohol and HIV prevention and control strategies in high alcohol consumption settings.



This fact sheet was produced by the Institute for Public Strategies, a nonprofit organization advancing public health through changes in policy and community norms. For more information, call (619) 296-3311, e-mail info@publicstrategies.org or visit www.publicstrategies.org

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