

Alcohol and Economic Impact in the San Diego-Tijuana Border Region

The Border Project • June 2004

With more than 54 million crossers annually, the San Diego-Tijuana border is the most heavily traveled port in the world. Communities along the U.S.- Mexico border are closely connected in many ways, including the factors that influence quality of life in both countries.

Problems related to alcohol and other drugs such as violence, crime, neighborhood deterioration and economic stagnation have become a significant barrier to economic development in the San Diego – Tijuana border region. But emerging binational and localized collaborations are presenting opportunities for residents to reduce and prevent these problems. By proactively advancing sound policies on both sides of the border, individuals and organizations in the region are improving their quality of life.

This issue briefing describes the ways in which inadequate control policies and lack of enforcement of alcohol policies inhibit economic development in border communities. The briefing also proposes solutions that can be implemented to create a healthier environment for both economic growth and public safety. With support from local, state and federal governments, the San Diego-Tijuana border region continues to build on its success as a national model for U.S.-Mexico alcohol policy development.

A Barrier to Health and Safety

The effect of alcohol outlets on public health and safety is regional, affecting not only the patrons visiting the bars and discos along Avenida Revolución in Tijuana, but also residents from Baja California to San Diego County and beyond. Tijuana attracts underage and young adults from the United States seeking cheap alcohol and an all-night party atmosphere. Problems stemming from this cross-



border youth binge-drinking culture include crime, violence and car crashes that result in numerous injuries and economic costs to people on both sides of the border.

Studies conducted at the San Ysidro Port of Entry by the nonprofit agency Institute for Public



OUR PRESTIGIOUS, DISTINGUISHED AND FINE "TOURISM"
by Ramsés II, published in El Mexicano of Tijuana (9/9/98, Pag.2, Sección C)

- **A community agreement** between Tijuana City Hall, the Tijuana Law and Regulations Department (Reglamentos), the Secretary of Tourism and bar owners and other business owners designed to jointly improve the quality of service at bars and discos along Avenida Revolución. Similar agreements exist in Rosarito and Puerto Nuevo.
- **A ban on all-you-can-drink and “ladies night” specials** that promote excessive alcohol consumption for a flat fee, enacted by the Tijuana City Council. In addition, Tijuana city officials removed alcohol advertisements, promotions, banners and signs from Avenida Revolución; they also limited the area in which “barkers” from bars can operate. In California, State Assemblymember Juan Vargas authored a bill to prohibit alcohol advertisements geared toward those under age 21.

Coupled with a strong media component, the above measures resulted in a 51-percent reduction in BAC levels of crossers aged 18-to-20 years old. In addition, the number of late-night partiers crossing decreased by more than 25 percent, and BAC levels higher than .08 declined by one-third.¹

New Policies to Keep Momentum

Significant reductions in alcohol-related problems have been made along the border due to policy advancement.



“Supported by local, state and federal governments, the San Diego-Tijuana border region has become a national model for U.S.-Mexico alcohol policy development.”



Now, it is imperative that existing policies be enforced and new policies be implemented in order to continue to reduce alcohol-related problems for both U.S. and Mexican citizens. This will improve public health and safety in the border region and increase the potential of a diverse cross-border tourist economy. New policies include:

those occurring during the early morning. Mexican cities along the border that now close bars at 2:00 a.m., including Mexicali, Ciudad Juarez and Reynosa, have seen significant reductions in alcohol-related problems. For example, Ciudad Juarez experienced an 89-percent reduction in people returning to the U.S.

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- **Close bars at 2:00 a.m. in Tijuana.** Limiting the hours of operation will reduce the amount of alcohol consumed and reduce related problems, especially

The Binational Policy Council

Several years ago, IPS Border Project formed the Binational Policy Council (BPC). The BPC is composed of community organizations, government, law enforcement and businesses from both sides of the border. Its purpose is to make policy recommendations on alcohol and other drug issues, as well a variety of public health and safety issues that arise throughout the San Diego-Tijuana border region. Specific recommendations by this group have included:

In the U.S.

1. Increased DUI checkpoints and roving DUI patrols in the San Diego/Tijuana Border Region.
2. Proactive police intervention with intoxicated pedestrians.
3. Enforcement of ban on alcohol advertising that targets minors.

In Mexico

1. Bar closure at 2:00 a.m. and the elimination of after-hours permits by city governments.
2. The implementation as mandated by the Baja California State Congress of an advisory board in each municipality comprised of a majority of members/groups from the community to make recommendations on alcohol related problems.
3. The creation of a community notification system when an application for a liquor license is filed.

legally intoxicated¹. Closing bars earlier in Mexico not only reduces crime, violence and DUIs, but also saves lives on both sides of the border.

- **Include public health and safety considerations in economic development projects.** A stronger public health and safety infrastructure should be created between the U.S. and Mexico. As the border region develops, so will tourism – which can either cater to young people looking to engage in risky drinking behavior in Tijuana, such as it has along Avenida Revolución and in Rosarito, or to adults with families from around the world seeking safe, comfortable and diverse tourism opportunities across the Baja California region. Carefully planned alcohol policy can create a healthier and safer community and a more prosperous business climate.

- **Create a binational development zone along the entire U.S.-Mexico border region.** Within such a zone, changes to the alcohol and other drug environment could be made to promote public health and safety, and incentives could be established for U.S. and Mexican companies to invest more money in the border region.
- **Restrict the number of alcohol outlets and problem businesses while cleaning up existing ones.** Evidence in the U.S. shows as more alcohol outlets are established in a community, crime and alcohol-related problems increase. In addition, problem alcohol outlets that repeatedly violate state and local laws and attract problems cause communities to deteriorate. Restricting or removing these problem businesses will encourage new businesses that provide needed services and healthy tourist activities to locate in the communities.
- **Promote public safety.** In an environment that places a high value on public safety, business development and quality of life will flourish. In San Juan, Puerto Rico, businesses and residents of the historic colonial section of the city had problems with an over-concentration of bars. The once-quiet tourist attraction swelled with violence, vandalism and crime. Tourists stopped visiting the area, and residents' quality of life deteriorated. In 1997, the mayor of San Juan, community residents and merchants in the area implemented a series of public safety policies designed to limit the amount of alcohol served and the hours of operation, as well to as promote police enforcement. Crime rates were reduced by half and litter and noise diminished.

Changing the image of Baja California and the entire border region will take strong binational leadership. Stronger enforcement and policy implementation in the U.S. is needed to prevent American youths from engaging in risky drinking behavior. Economic development projects in the U.S., as in San Ysidro, should adopt alcohol-control policies such as limiting the number of alcohol outlets and providing sufficient law enforcement.

In Mexico, businesses catering to “negative economies” should be replaced. These include business environments

that support high density of alcohol outlets and lawless operations. An alternative emphasis should be placed on businesses that attract family-oriented tourists, improve the image of the region and provide needed services to the community.

Next Steps

Tijuana is the gateway to Mexico for most Southern Californians. The entire region is affected by problems linked to drinking. Policies should be put in place to make the lives of residents in this binational community safer, healthier and stronger.

IPS, a nonprofit organization operating in the San Diego-Tijuana region, has worked with local and state government officials and community groups in Baja California to implement policies that not only address the issue of American youth and binge drinking in Mexico, but also help groups reduce other alcohol-related problems in their respective communities. IPS is committed to continue working with such groups on both sides of the border to implement policies addressing the economic consequences of alcohol and youth drinking.

References

- 1 The Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation PIRE
- 2 Data are available on the San Diego Convention and Visitors Bureau Web site: http://www.sandiego.org/restrav_data.asp

This Issue Briefing 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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