

Migration and Health: From Research to Public Policy and Practice

OVERVIEW

Since 2003, the Research Program on Migration and Health (PIMSA for its Spanish acronym) has funded binational teams to conduct research on migration and health between Mexico and the U.S. PIMSA aims to create linkages between researchers to generate scientific knowledge and promote its use for improving the health of migrant populations. PIMSA also provides support for community health and public action through the creation of health education and prevention materials based on research. This document aims to serve as a road map for moving PIMSA research towards these objectives. It provides a basic framework for considering the practical implications of research and translating research findings into changes that will improve public health practice and public policy for migrant populations.

FROM PUBLICATION TO *PUBLIC ACTION...*

Academic journal publications and conference presentations are the most effective tools for communicating knowledge of migrant health in the academic world, but for research to have a practical impact, specific tools must be employed to communicate and interact with those who are in a position to use research to influence public policy. In the migrant health arena, this includes a wide range of

stakeholders, from grassroots movements and non-government organizations, to health practitioners, state health institutions and legislators. All of these actors can play a determinant role in the public policy process.

Knowledge translation (KT) is the process of translating the results of research on migration and health into practical information that can be used by the key decision makers to bring about long-term improvements in the health of migrant populations. In the arena of migrant health, many aspects of research will have an implication for public policy. For example, the areas of research that concern access to care, health seeking behaviours, and health service effectiveness touch directly on questions of public policy, and researchers must therefore pay attention the policy process and take it into account in their research design. Without Knowledge Translation, research findings in migrant health will not be likely to have the intended impact.

FIVE STEPS TO TRANSLATE SCIENTIFIC/ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE OF MIGRANT HEALTH ISSUES INTO PUBLIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Identify your Target Public Policy and Decision Making Audience*

Before embarking on a Knowledge Translation plan it is important to identify your target audience: key institutions and individuals who need to know about your findings. Consider the many factors at play in the area of migration and health; consider the individuals, NGO's, service providers, institutions, and legislators with the capacity to implement change. Who in Mexico City, in Washington, D.C., at the state or at the local levels has a reason to be interested in your migrant health research? Which health service providers or Latino/immigrant advocates might make up your intended audience? There is a wide range of organizations and institutions you might want to target, and your message will vary depending on which groups you focus.

2. *Frame the Issue and Select Key Messages*

Regardless of your audience, it is likely that there are many different issues competing for attention. For example, legislators and their staff are not necessarily experts in health and there are numerous issues constantly being brought to their attention. Other stakeholders will also want to know what relevance your research findings have for their particular priorities. Getting the attention of your target audience requires framing the issue in terms that are important to them.

Selecting the right timing and language for your key messages depends on the existing political and social agenda. To get your issue on the "radar screen" of decision makers, you must carefully select the most important research findings you want to convey and frame them in the context of current political, social and economic events. For example, public uproar over immigrant access to public health programs during the negotiations of

the 2010 national health reform in the U.S. set the stage for disseminating important research findings on migration and health. On the other hand, migration and health issues may be a sensitive topic to be addressed before the 2012 Presidential elections, both in Mexico and in the U.S.

3. *Communicate with Public Policy Makers in their own Language*

Public policy and other decision makers inform themselves through various media outlets, their staff and executive summaries of full reports, also called policy briefs, that lay out the most brief and essential information concerning an issue. Research findings must be communicated in a concise framework in order to receive decision makers' attention. A policy brief should be short, accessible and should make clear the implications of your research findings.

A typical policy briefs contains several components:

- **Executive summary:** The first section of the brief (sometimes as short as an extended paragraph or as long as page) should summarize the entire study report. Usually decision makers may not have time to read the full report, so this is a good opportunity to highlight key messages. For example, Promoting financial aid for nursing education for Latino students can both help respond to California's nursing shortage and expand the availability of culturally competent care.
- **Description of the policy issue or problem:** In providing your audience with background information and a description of the policy issue at hand you will have the opportunity to frame your issue and lay the groundwork for relating your research to the political context. For example, California is grappling with a serious shortage of nurses that reflects a lack of involvement

of minority stakeholders and may result in substandard care for minorities. Latinos make up 38% of California's population, but are less than 8% of nurses. As the nursing workforce ages and as the demand for skilled nursing care increases, California's shortage is expected to worsen by 2020.

- **Evidence (ie; your research findings):** Research findings comprise the evidence of the brief. For example, Some of the major industries that provide significant employment opportunities for the U.S. Latino labor force include agricultural, manufacturing, construction, and service sectors which are not only low-paid industries, but also less likely to provide health insurance coverage and other employer sponsored benefits to their employees.
- **Analysis:** Analysis allows you to discuss the policy issue at hand and relate research findings to possible resolutions to the problem. Often in this section it is worthwhile to consider various alternative approaches and discuss the benefits and challenges of each. For example, *The Latino immigrant population faces many educational challenges. Language barriers, economic struggles, and unresolved documentation issues can result in Latino students either dropping out of school or simply never enrolling. This initial struggle culminates in a comparatively uneducated workforce that faces a future on the outside of the professional sphere. In order to improve Latino representation in higher education, students must be targeted with effective strategies to graduate from high school, attend and graduate from university, and attain a professional career. Census data shows that only 11% of Latino immigrants age 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher as compared with 48% of Asians.*
- **Policy recommendations:** A policy brief should have no less than three policy recommendations, based on the evidence and analysis presented. They should be concise and advise decision makers exactly what is needed. If you can attach an economic cost to your recommendations,

your brief may be more effective. For example, Develop and pilot test new cost-effective models for improving access to health care for all migrant workers, regardless of documentation status.

Support immigration reform that includes specific provisions for contracting and protecting migrant workers. Reform should allow guest workers to change employers, giving them more bargaining power, and should also include provisions to help resolve many of the exclusions that serve as barriers to coverage for currently undocumented workers.

4. **When and How to Present Research Findings**

Writing a policy brief that summarizes research findings is only the first step in getting your migrant health issue on the agenda. Once you have translated research findings into relevant materials for public policy, you must find the appropriate outlet and timing for dissemination. Sending your brief to the target audience is no guarantee that anyone will read it. Often it is helpful to hold specific events like policy briefings and round-table workshops and invite a diverse and relevant audience. Legislators may be much more likely to attend if the event is held in his/her district, particularly if constituents (voters) will be present. Consider partnering with stakeholder and advocacy organizations that often have the know-how to mobilize people around the issue. Don't forget that for decision makers, timing is everything. Your event will attract more attention if current events favor debate around your migrant health issue.

5. **After the Policy Briefing**

While research findings may play a role in tipping a public policy issue one way or the other, they are rarely the most important factor in public policy change. Change is a deliberative process that requires the efforts of a wide range of stakeholders and institutions. Decision makers will likely need to be informed on a continual

¹ Insure the Uninsured Project. Section by Section Guide to Health Reform, available on <http://www.itup.org/>

² National Immigration Law Center. How are Immigrants Included in Health Care Reform? April 2010.

basis about current research and changes that should be made to public policy and public health practice. Thus, it can be helpful to seek out support from institutions, organizations and individuals committed to migration and health issues that can use research findings in their work for change. These groups can help give your research findings the attention they deserve. In addition, they can also provide insight into future research and other related health needs of migrant populations.

REFERENCES SUPPORTING THIS DOCUMENT

- Using Evidence: How research can inform public services, by Sandra M. Nutley, Isabel Walter and Huy T.O. Davis. The Policy Press. UK. 2007.
- A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving. Third Ed. By Eugene Bardach. CQ Press. 2009.
- How to Increase Latino Participation in the Nursing Workforce: Best Practices at California Nursing Schools. Haley Buchbinder. Policy Brief. The Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, 2007.
- Best Practice Strategies for the Development of Policies to Improve Migrant Health in California. Prepared by Harder and Co for the California Endowment, 2008.
- Dangerous and Essential: Migration, Work, and Health. Xochitl Castañeda. Policy Brief. Health Initiative of the Americas, Washington DC, June 2010
- Research Program on Migration and Health (PIMSA), UC Berkeley School of Public Health, Health Initiative of the Americas. 2011.
- Translating Research into Policy: How to Make Your Voice Heard in State Legislatures, Presentation prepared by Megan Foreman, National Conference of State Legislatures, September 2007.