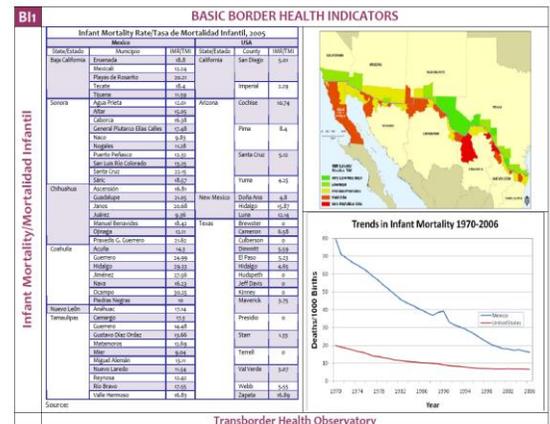


Building a Transborder Observatory for Health at the U.S.-Mexico Border: A Case Study of Access to Health Services

POLICY BRIEF

The Transborder Observatory Project has provided the opportunity to both conceptualize and operationalize information related to access to care and prevention of chronic disease in Ambos Nogales at the U.S. Mexico Border. It is clear from the analysis of the data collected in this project that the vulnerable populations in each of the Nogales communities have different access to prevention services. Conceptually, in Nogales, Sonora prevention services are an important part of the overall health care system, yet issues arise in terms of the ability of the overall system to provide the services. In Nogales, Arizona, operationally there are very important and creative prevention services within individual institutions, but there lacks an overall framework of a system for prevention. As is characteristic of most border regions, there are important efforts for sharing information, ideas, and programs regarding prevention of

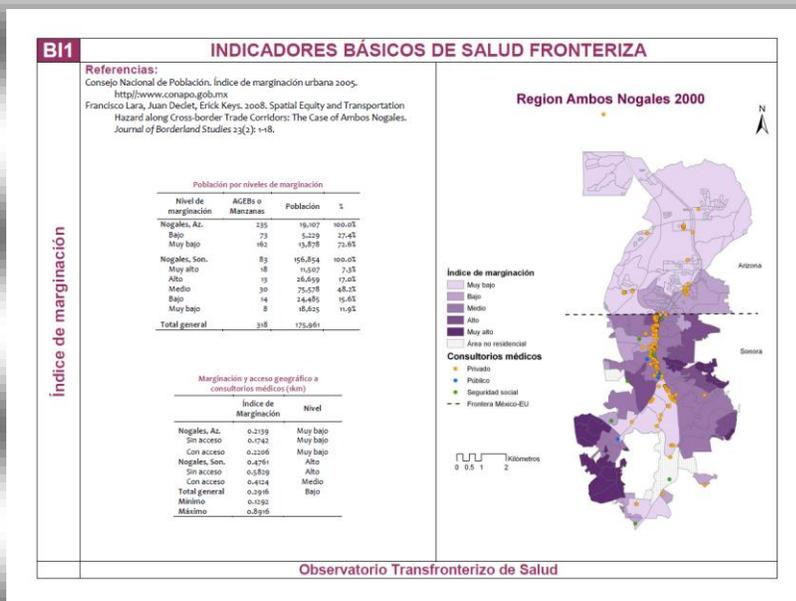


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chronic disease. There is a need, however, for a more systematic mechanism to define parameters and resources that could serve as foundation for collaboration.

In the United States Department of Health and Human Services, regional offices have been established for the purpose of the distribution of funding for, among other things, health services which include health promotion and prevention services. Currently there are 10 regions and the four border states are divided among two different regions which creates fragmentation of programs, resources and efforts. The establishment of a region which included all four border states that would be considered as one epidemiological unit could potentially facilitate better resource allocation and collaboration. A similar region of the six border states in Mexico could also potentially facilitate better resource allocation and collaboration.



The basic task of an observatory is to collect data and after processing and statistical transformation, would become the foundation of policy recommendations. In the context of any research project, getting the

right data is always a complicated assignment but it is an even bigger challenge when the purpose is to create comparative indicators in the context of the U.S.-Mexico border. Moreover, availability of data is limited in the region and the conceptual and operational definitions of the few data available tend to be different because of national differences in the systems created to produce social, demographic and health related statistics. Another related problem is the periodicity and timeliness of the data available, which also impose serious limitations to the comparability of information across the border. Finally, there is the issue of scale, that especially in the case of census data creates another set of technical problems.

The utilization and integration of geographic information systems in primary health care research has gained momentum in recent years given the technical improvements, accessibility, and user friendliness of the technology. Spatial analysis through GIS mapping is an extremely useful tool not only for healthcare decision-makers, but community members concerned about issues related to health care access and information. Specific applications of spatial analysis include strategic planning related to expansion of services, disease surveillance, identification of disease clusters, and community outreach and health promotion efforts by service providers. Service maps, such as those developed by this Project, can immediately pinpoint and reveal shortage areas as well as identify vulnerable populations based on sociodemographic profiles. It is critical, however, that in order to advance these tools, that particular

attention be paid to providing training both in the utilization of these tools and the resulting interpretation of the data provided through this type of analysis and its connection to policy development and action.

One of the main concerns of the research group is ensuring the long term viability of the observatory. Launched as a pilot project involving researchers and students from six universities and staff of two health organizations, the observatory proved to be a mutually beneficial project. During the two years of continued work we were able to define roles for all the participant organizations and articulate the goals of each organization within the vision of the observatory. As we move to the next step, which is the establishment of a long term system monitoring and documenting the progress of the border toward a healthier region, we need to evaluate alternatives to sustain the effort. One of those alternatives is the embedding of the observatory within the urban observatory of the city of Nogales. The Nogales Urban Observatory has the support of SEDESOL and will be managed and maintained by the Nogales Planning Institute. The city of Nogales has already created a website and bought server space to host the website. They are in the process of developing the 20 basic indicators and some of the extended indicators suggested by the Nogales Urban Observatory. Because of the close collaboration between the Nogales Planning Institute and some members of our project team, we are exploring the convenience and feasibility of nesting the transborder observatory in the City of Nogales observatory as a way to leverage existing resources and

ensure the long term sustainability of the project. Simultaneously, we have asked the PAHO Field Office at El Paso to support our effort to secure additional funding for the continuation of the project. Another option under consideration is the funding that might be available through the Inter-American Development Bank, the Bank has expressed interest in supporting the creation of local observatories with a focus on development issues from a broad perspective.

Specific Policy Recommendations

- Promotion of the Observatory at the local level with state representatives from both Arizona and Sonora as a viable and feasible tool for strategic planning purposes.
- Promotion of the Observatory and use of the technology as an instrument for discussion around policy with various entities including the Health Initiative of the America's Programa de Investigación en Migración y Salud, the U.S. Mexico Border Health Commission, the Border Governors Conference, the U.S. Mexico Border Health Association, and the Arizona Sonora Commission/Comisión Sonora Arizona.
- Discussion and dialogue with appropriate governmental entities on the establishment of a Region 11 Office for the four U.S. border states and a comparable and complementary Regional Office for the six sister states in Mexico to facilitate resource allocation and collaboration within a transborder region.
- Discussion with appropriate entities about creating comparative indicators in the context of the U.S.-Mexico border. Begin to negotiate availability of data, periodicity and timeliness of data. Establish common operational definitions in order to produce comparable social, demographic, and health related statistics.
- Promote the use of spatial analysis tools by providing easy access and affordability of software and training of workforce at all levels from field personnel to decision makers.

In summary, the transborder observatory will contribute to the development and implementation of policies that can impact the health of the communities in the border region. At the same time, it is clear that there are numerous challenges related to building comparable data sets and the necessary capacity for utilization and interpretation for policy. All of the researchers and institutions that have participated in this pilot project are committed to continuing to refine the framework of a transborder observatory with relevant information that allows stakeholders to make informed decisions related to the transborder region.