

Substance Use on the Texas-Mexico Border and in Colonias

The aims of this study were:

1. To describe the prevalence of drug problems and their correlates in urban and rural border sites
2. To investigate the relationship between acculturation and drug use
3. To examine utilization of drug treatment services

Sampling and interviewing were carried out between March 2002 and June 2003. A sample of 1,200 respondents 18 years of age and over was interviewed in 3 sites on the Texas-Mexico border: 400 in the El Paso metropolitan area, 400 in the Rio Grande Valley metropolitan area (Brownsville, McAllen, Edinburg, Harlingen, and other urban areas in Hidalgo and Cameron counties), and 400 in colonias from Hidalgo and Cameron counties. In each of the 2 urban sites (El Paso and the Valley urban area), sampling utilized a multistage cluster design; in colonias, the sample was stratified by size and density and a random sample was drawn from each stratum.

The main findings are presented below:

Prevalence of Alcohol and Drug Use

- Slightly more than half of all respondents had consumed alcohol in the past year, ranging from 54% in the Valley to 61% in El Paso (not a statistically significant difference). About 7% of respondents were heavy drinkers (5 or more drinks at least 5 times in the past month), and 23% were heavy episodic drinkers (5 or more drinks at least once in the past month).
- While the overall prevalence of alcohol and heavy alcohol use was

similar in all 3 survey sites, heavy episodic drinking was significantly higher in the colonias (33%) than either of the urban sites (23%).

- About one-third of all border respondents had ever used an illicit drug, and about 9% had used drugs in the past year.
- Marijuana was the most commonly used illicit drug in the past year, with 5% of all respondents having used it, followed by cocaine and uppers, at about 3% each. In El Paso, past-year use of opiates other than heroin was also seen in 3% of residents. Past-year use of other drugs was low.
- There were no significant differences in overall lifetime or past-year illicit drug use across the 3 sites. However, respondents in the urban Valley had a significantly lower prevalence of lifetime use of cocaine and crack than respondents in El Paso or in colonias; and respondents in El Paso had a significantly higher lifetime use of hallucinogens than respondents in the other 2 sites.
- About 9% of lifetime drug users in El Paso and almost 5% in colonias said they had ever injected a drug; however, injection drug use was very low in the Valley, with less than 1% of drug users reporting it.

Substance Abuse and Dependence

- About 12% of all respondents (21% of those who had drunk alcohol in the past year) had a past-year problem of alcohol abuse or dependence, based on Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition™ (DSM-IV) criteria.

- Heavy alcohol use and problems of abuse and dependence were significantly more likely to occur among men than women and among younger respondents. Neither education nor income was significantly related to heavy alcohol use, abuse, or dependence.
- Alcohol dependence was significantly higher in the colonias (12%) than in the adjacent urban Valley (6%), and marginally higher in colonias than in El Paso (7.5%).
- About 4% of respondents had problems of drug abuse or dependence. (Among past-year drug users, 46% percent had problems of abuse or dependence.) There was no significant difference in drug abuse or dependence across the 3 sites.

Other Factors Related to Drug Use

- About 57% of border adults said that it would be easy or very easy for them to acquire marijuana if they wanted to get some, and 47% said it would be easy to get other drugs like cocaine, crack, or heroin. Residents of the colonias were more likely (57%) than residents of the adjacent Valley urban area (44%) to say that drugs other than marijuana were easy to get. Some 37% of all respondents said it would be easy for grade-school children in their community to get some beer, wine, or liquor if they wanted.
- The most important reason border residents gave for not using drugs or alcohol was concern over the health effects. Many also cited the potential for substance use to cause problems with family or friends.
- About 10% of border adults admitted to having driven while intoxicated in

the past year, although only 1% had gotten in trouble with the law in the past year because of it. During their lifetime, 14% of respondents had ever gotten in trouble with the law for driving while intoxicated.

- About 2% of Valley residents, 6% of El Paso residents, and 7% of colonia residents had gotten into trouble with the law at some time in their lives for possession or sale of drugs. About 5% of all respondents had gotten into trouble for an act committed while drinking or while using drugs.

Comparison with Statewide and National Prevalence Levels

- Using comparative data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, border residents were found to be less likely than adults in Texas statewide to drink alcohol, binge drink, or use illicit drugs, but were more likely to report substance dependence. When compared with Hispanics nationwide, again border Hispanics were less likely to drink, binge drink, or use illicit drugs, but slightly more likely to report heavy alcohol use and substance abuse or dependence. When compared to survey data from the northern region of Mexico, illicit drug use was 4 times higher on the Texas side of the border, and substance abuse or dependence was over twice as high. However, Mexicans were more likely to be heavy drinkers. Due to relatively high standard errors for some of the comparisons, not all of these differences were statistically significant, but the patterns appeared consistent.

Comparison with Historical Border Data

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- The findings from this survey were compared with those from the same 3 sites in the 1996 survey, which was carried out by the same investigators.¹ In El Paso, lifetime alcohol use declined slightly but significantly, and in the urban Valley, lifetime drug use increased by 50%. There were no other noteworthy differences in those 2 sites. The colonias showed more changes: past-year illicit drug use rose significantly, from 6% to 11%, as did lifetime drug use, from 25% to 32%. The prevalence of alcohol- and drug-related problems rose significantly in colonias as well: alcohol abuse/dependence increased from 12% to 23% and drug abuse/dependence doubled from 3% to 6%. This appears to represent a “catching-up” effect in colonias, from rates about half as high as those in the urban areas in 1996 to rates similar to or slightly higher than urban areas in 2002.

Service Needs, Motivation, and Utilization

- Border residents were asked what they would do if they experienced physical problems, mental or emotional problems, or substance-related problems that interfered with their day-to-day activities. For each of these 3 kinds of problems, medical or professional help was the source most often cited. Respondents were the most likely to say they would seek professional help for physical problems (81%) or for psychological problems (75%), and least likely to say they would do so for drug or alcohol problems (59%).
- Colonia residents were the most likely to say they would seek medical or professional help for

substance abuse problems.

Residents of El Paso were the most likely to mention using self-help groups as well. Family and friends, religious sources of support, and “curanderos” (faith or magic healers) were rated very low as potential sources of help with substance problems.

- When respondents who were in potential need of services were considered (those who had DSM-IV symptoms or who self-reported alcohol or drug problems), about 29% in El Paso, 19% in the urban Valley, and 24% in colonias had ever “sought” services (defined as having received or having wanted but failed to get services, or were motivated now to seek them). While these differences among sites were not statistically significant, probably because the number in potential need was relatively small, they are intriguing in that colonia residents showed high motivation and were intermediate among the 3 sites in the likelihood of ever having actually received services (14% in El Paso, 3% in the Valley and 7% in the colonias, among those in potential need).
- About one-quarter (26%) of respondents who had a past-year substance problem of abuse or dependence said that they would be interested in receiving treatment at this time, “if they did not have to worry about the cost and it was reasonably convenient to get to.” The percentage of those motivated was highest in the colonias (39%).
- About 3% of border residents who had ever used alcohol or drugs said they had wanted treatment at some point, but ended up not getting it. Barriers cited included cost, location,

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embarrassment, lack of childcare or transportation, and believing it would not help. Worry about not finding anyone who spoke their language or who was from the same ethnic background was not reported as a barrier to getting services.

Acculturation Effects

- Acculturation (as measured by the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans-II, or ARSMA-II) was related to lower rates of alcohol use disorders among men and a higher frequency of heavy episodic drinking among women. Acculturation was also related to higher rates of drug use for both men and women. Generation in the United States, sometimes used as a proxy for acculturation in other studies, was found to be not strictly collinear with acculturation and showed some different relationships with substance use. Additionally, the effects of generation appeared to differ by site.

This study contributes to our hitherto limited knowledge of alcohol and drug use behaviors among the general population living on the border and especially in colonias. Given the existence there of multiple risk factors for drug use, as well as potential disparities in access to and utilization of treatment, it was important to assess levels and correlates of drug abuse and the need for and perceived barriers to treatment. The findings are expected to lead to a better understanding of service needs in this population and on how to provide them in a culturally appropriate way.

Acknowledgement

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Further details about this study are available in the following publications:

Wallisch LS, Spence RT. Alcohol and drug use, abuse, and dependence in urban areas and colonias of the Texas-Mexico border. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 2006; 28: 286-307.

Wallisch L. Methamphetamine use in the 2003 survey of adult substance use on the Texas-Mexico border. *Proceedings of the Border Epidemiology Work Group, September 2004*. 2004. Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Spence RT, Wallisch LS. Alcohol and drug use in rural colonias and adjacent urban areas of the Texas border. *Journal of Rural Health* [in press].

Spence RT, Wallisch LS, Smith S. Treatment seeking in Hispanic populations in urban and rural settings on the border. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* [in press].

Caetano R, Ramisetty-Mikler S, et al. Acculturation, drinking, and alcohol abuse and dependence among Hispanics in the Texas-Mexico border. *American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse* [in press].

Reference

¹ Wallisch, LS. 1996 Survey of Substance Use on the Texas-Mexico Border and in Colonias. 1996. Austin, TX. Texas Commission on Alcohol and Substance Abuse.

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