

San Diego—Tijuana Border Project: A binational effort to address cross-border alcohol problems

The Border Project • August 2008

The San Diego—Tijuana border is the world's busiest border crossing. Each weekend thousands of U.S. youth under age 25 travel to Mexico to take part in the nightlife where the legal drinking age is 18.

Many youth go to Mexico to take advantage of the lower drinking age, the low cost of alcohol, and bars that stay open all night. Binge drinking is common among these youth and they are often still intoxicated when they return to the U.S. Many drive home, increasing the threat to public safety throughout San Diego County and beyond. Along with the threat to public safety, the economy in the Border Region is also compromised. The perceived lack of safety caused by binge drinking keeps other tourists, such as families, away. Binge drinking can lead to significant increases in crime including violence, sexual assault, property damage and drunken driving injuries and fatalities.

The Solution

The San Diego—Tijuana Border Project was established in 1997 to address cross-border drinking. As part of this project, the Binational Policy Council (BPC) was formed to identify binational solutions to the problem (see BPC sidebar.) The BPC is a coalition of community groups, prevention and treatment professionals, law enforcement agencies and businesses from both sides of the San Diego-Tijuana border who make policy recommendations and support the work of the Border Project.

The Border Project is a program of the Institute for Public Strategies (IPS), a nonprofit organization that utilizes a community based prevention approach called Environmental

Prevention that aims to change social norms and behavior by addressing the community conditions that sustain alcohol-related problems (see Environmental Prevention sidebar below.) Several solutions based in the community environment have been identified and implemented as a result of the Border Project:

- **Operation Safe Crossings (OSC).** High visibility multiagency enforcement operations designed to prevent minors from crossing into Mexico to drink. In the first three years of the project, OSC reduced the number of late night crossers by 26 percent.¹
- **Hospitality Covenants.** A formal agreement signed by Tijuana city government, Tijuana Law and Regulations Department, Tijuana Secretary of Tourism, bar owners and other business owners. The intent was to improve business and service practices in bars and

nightclubs along Avenida Revolución to minimize negative public health and safety threats. As part of this, city officials removed alcohol advertisements, promotions, banners and signs from Avenida Revolución and limited the area in which “barkers” soliciting bar patrons could operate. Similar agreements were also signed in other Mexican tourist destinations frequented by U.S. youth, including Rosarito and Puerto Nuevo.

- **Responsible Beverage Sales and Service Trainings (RBSS).** RBSS training was provided to bar managers, bartenders and service staff in Baja California. RBSS training provides techniques designed to prevent the sale of alcohol to minors and the over-consumption of alcohol by adults. The training includes instruction on how to recognize the signs of intoxication, decline service to intoxicated patrons, and detect

Environmental Prevention: Focuses on changing the physical, social, economic, political and cultural conditions in the community environment

that contribute to unhealthy and unsafe behaviors. The Environmental Prevention Model (seen to the right) is the methodology used by the Border Project to implement environmental prevention campaigns. The model consists of five interacting components that include applied data and research, intentional community organizing, policy initiatives, media advocacy, and enforcement. This model embodies the strategies necessary to promote community based policy solutions to change community norms and behaviors.



The Binational Policy Council

The Binational Policy Council (BPC) is a coalition of community groups, prevention and treatment professionals, law enforcement agencies and businesses from both sides of the border. The council supports the work of the Border Project and makes policy recommendations related to public health, safety and economic development throughout the San Diego-Tijuana Border Region.

The BPC meets quarterly, alternating from locations in Tijuana and San Diego. Individual BPC members and representatives from member organizations work closely with Border Project staff to support and provide guidance in the implementation of prevention campaigns.

false identification cards. The City of Tijuana provided funds for the RBSS trainings in 2007. Discussion is currently underway to continue the program.

- **Alcohol Promotion Restrictions.** The City of Tijuana banned all-you-can-drink and “ladies night” specials that promote excessive alcohol consumption for a flat fee. North of the border, California state legislators banned alcohol advertisements targeted to those under age 21.
- **Military Restrictions.** Military bases in San Diego began requiring enlisted service members to receive written permission to cross the border. Following this action, research showed an 84-percent reduction in the number of underage Marines returning intoxicated from Mexican bars (i.e. with blood alcohol levels at least .08 percent or higher).²
- Coupled with a strong media campaign, these measures resulted in a 51-percent reduction in the number of underage pedestrians

with alcohol in their system, while underage and adult crossers with blood alcohol contents (BAC) higher than .08 declined by one-third.¹

- In 2001, the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration formally recognized the Border Project’s accomplishments by designating it a National Model Program.

Current Efforts

The Border Project has been successful in framing alcohol policies as a critical component of economic revitalization, making it appealing to key partners in Tijuana who are interested in achieving sustainable economic development. They support the strengthening of alcohol policies as a critical component of economic revitalization.

Improving tourism is key to economic revitalization in the Border Region. Instead of catering to young tourists who come to Tijuana to consume excessive amounts of alcohol, various community sectors recognize the need to attract families and visitors interested in a cultural experience. This requires solutions that improve public health and safety in the Border Region. Tourists will be more likely to visit border communities if they view them as safe.

Recently, stronger alcohol policies have been integrated into Tijuana’s revitalization efforts. The city has intensified efforts to change its image with an ongoing crackdown on entertainment venues that sell alcohol to minors, and a trial suspension of “extra hours,” a move that required alcohol sales to cease at 3 a.m. Several new policies are being supported by the BPC, including:

In Mexico, supported policies include:

- The elimination of permits that allow entertainment venues to extend the hours in which alcohol is sold;
- The implementation of an advisory council on alcohol-related issues in each municipality of Baja California to include a majority of members/groups from the community;
- Mandatory training for those who sell and serve alcohol.

In San Diego County similar policies are being supported, such as:

- Increased DUI checkpoints and roving DUI patrols near the border;
- Proactive police intervention with intoxicated pedestrians crossing the border;
- Enforcement of the state ban on alcohol advertising targeting underage drinkers;
- Mandatory training for those who sell and serve alcohol.

References

- 1 Voas, R.B., Lange, J., Trippetts, A.S., Johnson, M., *Operations Safe Crossing: Using science within a community intervention*. The Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation.
- 2 Voas, R. B., Johnson, M., and Lange, J. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. New Brunswick: Nov. 2002, Vol. 63, Iss. 6; pg. 645.

To learn more about becoming a BPC member or member organization, contact the Institute for Public Strategies at (619) 476-9100 or info@publicstrategies.org.



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