

## **Student Use of Services on both Sides of the U.S.-Mexico Border**

Leticia Fernandez, Cheryl Howard and Jon Amastae

Over 18 million persons live in the communities located on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border; most of them concentrated in sister cities such as El Paso-Juarez. With a population of over two million, these two cities form one of the most dynamic and populated regions located along an international border. Overlapping economic and social forces that cut across the border include economic recessions, changes in immigration laws, and public health threats such as air and water pollution.

The study of border populations poses particular challenges. Inhabitants do not always live, work, pay taxes and use services in the same country. Where they carry out each of these activities depends on several factors, including cultural identity and location of social networks. Previous studies of border culture indicate that the continuum of cultural identities found in the region ranges from area residents who have little or no contact with the culture across the border to those who seize every opportunity to be part of binational activities that promote and maintain networks spanning both sides. However, the association between cultural identity, social networks and cross-border activities has not been adequately studied. In particular, there is a gap in terms of what this diversity implies for differential use of cross border services and resources, which must be taken into account in the design of public policy.

In this paper we explore the association between race/ethnicity, cultural identity, social networks and cross-border use of health-related services (dental and medical services and purchase of prescription glasses and medicine) among students enrolled in a university in El Paso (n=650). The data include not only information about the extent of social networks on both sides of the border, but also about attitudes regarding a variety of issues. An important objective of the paper is to correlate the more “objective” characteristics of the use of resources by border populations with their “subjective” understanding of cultural membership.

Preliminary analysis indicates that 55 percent of the students identify themselves as Mexican American or Chicano, 19 percent as Mexican (with 1 in 5 reporting birth in El Paso), 10 percent as White and 6 percent as Black. The remainder is divided between other Hispanic (6.3%) and other non-Hispanic (2.3%). A substantial proportion of the students (43%) said they have relatives in Juarez, and over 50 percent visit Juarez at least once a month.

In terms of use of health related services, nearly 40 percent of students reported purchasing medicines in Juarez in the last 12 months, and 28 percent received dental services in Juarez. There are significant differences in use of services in Juarez associated with race/ethnicity, presence of relatives, and attitudes toward work and marriage.