

Border health surveillance

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CATEGORY: **Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity (ELC)**

The Texas Department of State Health Services implemented an assessment of healthcare utilization and COVID-19 knowledge among populations crossing the international border from Mexico to the United States. Results have helped tailor public health interventions specific to this population to limit the spread of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases.



The “What”

In October 2021, COVID-19 restrictions of non-essential travelers crossing north from Mexico into the United States were suspended. This allowed some normalization for travelers until the end of the COVID-19 emergency on May 11, 2023. During this time, the Texas Department of State Health Services Border Infectious Disease Surveillance (BIDS) in Public Health Region (PHR) 9/10, which receives funding through the Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for the Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases (ELC) cooperative agreement implemented a mobility project to assess healthcare utilization and COVID-19 knowledge among northward crossing populations in the region.

BIDS in PHR 9/10 developed a protocol to work with the Office of Border Public Health (OBPH) in the regional offices in Presidio, TX and El Paso, TX to develop and conduct surveys near the ports of entry. Community Health Workers (CHWs) employed by OBPH in PHR 9/10 conducted approximately 200 surveys between March and June 2023. Preliminary results show travelers crossed north primarily to visit family and friends and also to shop. Most of the travelers were born in Mexico and sought healthcare in Mexico usually in the form of primary care. In terms of COVID-19 competence, the majority of travelers correctly identified gathering in large groups as having the highest risk of transmitting COVID-19 and practicing good hygiene such as hand washing and covering mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing as the most effective ways of preventing the spread of COVID-19 regardless of vaccination status.



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The “So What”

Understanding mobility patterns of travelers crossing north from Mexico is valuable when developing and deploying public health interventions. From the data collected, the majority of those who crossed the port of entry in El Paso or Presidio remained close to those cities. Most travelers received health information from their doctors. Working directly with health providers and other relevant stakeholders in these cities may help disseminate information on infectious disease prevention to these populations.



The “Now What”

Despite the ending of the COVID-19 public health emergency, the mobility project model of utilizing CHWs to provide surveys and collect data from underserved populations has provided BIDS in PHR 9/10 with valuable information. PHR 9/10 will utilize the data to tailor public health interventions such as influenza or COVID-19 and influenza co-infection among populations crossing north from Mexico.

Key contributors to this project include Community Health Workers in Public Health Region 9/10; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Border Infectious Disease Surveillance; Texas Department of State Health Services; U.S. Department of Homeland Security; City of El Paso, TX; and City of Presidio, TX.