The Impact of 9/11 Border Security on Youthful Cross-Border Drinking

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Abstract: Background/Introduction: Mexican border towns have for many years been attractive locales for young Americans to get drunk and let off steam; because of the lower drinking age and inexpensive drinks south of the border. The extent of this cross-border binging is generally unrecognized. On a typical weekend night, as many as 7,000 youths aged 24 and younger, cross the border at San Diego to patronize Tijuana bars. Community enforcement programs directed at discouraging such cross-border drinking have shown some impact on the number of crossers. However, the impact of the increased security resulting from the events of 9/11 had a much greater impact.

Objectives: This paper describes the impact of the new security measures and measures their impact on the number of crossers and the bars they patronize.

Methods: Data on the number and BACs of youths returning from Mexico after a night of drinking in Tijuana was gathered through a survey of crossers from July 1997 to January 2002. Time series analysis was used to evaluate changes beginning in September 2001.

Results: In October, following the events of 9/11, the total number of youths crossing the border to drink declined by 64%, whereas the number returning to the United States with an illegal BAC of .08 or higher declined by 80%. By December, however, the reduction in total pedestrian crossers had declined from 64% to 34%, and the number of drivers with BACs of .08 or higher had declined from 80% to 50%.

Discussion: This paper describes the changes that took place in the clientele of the Mexican bars that catered to youthful Americans, the impact of those youthful drinkers on border security as reported by INS, Customs Service, Border Patrol, and General Services Administration officers, and the concerns of the youthful crossers with the delays at the border and the risks of drinking outside the country following 9/11. The lessons from this naturally occurring experiment are discussed.

Conclusion: The initial increase in security discouraged crossing by underage drinkers, but the effect is wearing off.