

## An Unprecedented Health Challenge Working with Border Communities

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The Paso del Norte Health Foundation (PdNHF) is one of the largest private foundations on the U.S.-Mexico border. Established in 1995 from the sale of a nonprofit hospital, PdNHF's mission is to promote health and prevent disease through leadership in health education, research, and advocacy. With its office 10 blocks from the border, the foundation's service region includes far western Texas, southern New Mexico, and northern Chihuahua, Mexico. El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico are the two largest cities in the region with a combined population surpassing two million. Contiguous with each other, the two cities have a symbiotic relationship and interdependent economies. Residents frequently cross the border from one city to the other to work, shop, see a physician, and visit family.

The Paso del Norte region is experiencing an unprecedented public health challenge – over the past three years, more than 8,000 individuals were murdered in Ciudad Juárez. The images of this drug war are shocking. Beheadings, bodies hung from bridges, mass graves, and execution-style massacres have been documented. Extortion and kidnapping are common. Businesses receive demands to pay *cuotas* to have “security” provided. If they fail to pay, buildings may be burned and, in some cases, proprietors assassinated. Extortion is so common that many businesses do not answer the phone when called in order to avoid receiving threats. The violence and associated crimes, however, are not limited to Ciudad Juárez. While violent crime in El Paso has not increased, hundreds of similar murders have been committed across Mexico's northernmost states.

### STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS

PdNHF staff have conducted multiple interviews with community members, grantees, and other partners in Ciudad Juárez in order to better understand the broader implications of the cartel violence and to formulate a foundation strategy. Stakeholders identified three primary concerns: long-term consequences of violence upon the current generation of youth; mental health needs of trauma survivors; and the climate of fear in Ciudad Juárez.

Repeatedly, foundation partners expressed concern that the current climate is not healthy for the city's youth. With increasing unemployment in the city, multiple anecdotal

reports suggest that some youth are beginning to view cartel *sicarios* (hitmen) as role models and to perceive drug trafficking as a reasonable option to garner income. When combined with poverty, unemployment, and active recruitment on the part of cartels, it is feared that these powerful environmental factors will influence youth to become gang or cartel members.

Beyond cartel participation, there is also concern that substance abuse is increasing among youth. Recent data are not available, but there is evidence that the cartels are increasingly targeting the Mexican populace as a consumer market for drugs. Again, the environmental conditions make youth and young adults particularly vulnerable to these solicitations.

There is less public dialogue about the mental health implications of the violence. Nonetheless, social service providers and therapists on both sides of the border report an increase in clients with trauma-related symptoms. Cathy Gaytan, clinical director at the El Paso Child Guidance Center, explains that her organization is serving more than 40 children affected by the violence. These children have witnessed shootings and murder in horrific situations, such as a child held by a parent as the parent was killed. These reports are consistent with the only known study of cartel violence and its effects on the Ciudad Juárez/El Paso population. In 2009, Taylor (2011) surveyed 121 students at the University of Texas-El Paso, all of whom reported frequent travel to or living in Ciudad Juárez. The students completed on-line reports of their location in and travel to Ciudad Juárez, their degree of exposure to traumatic events, daily stress symptoms, and overall stress. About half of the students (49 percent) exhibited scores indicative of acute post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for civilians. Over the seven days of the study, students reported a median of four traumatic events that “they learned of happening to others” and a median of one “objectively traumatic event that they witnessed” (Taylor 2011). While the binational student population is unique in many respects, the study's findings offer some perspective on the extent to which the violence in Ciudad Juárez affects the mental well-being of the city's population overall.

Another concern expressed is residents' general fear and mistrust of others. One woman shared a powerful example about sitting in a park one afternoon. While sitting with some

friends, a black sport utility vehicle (SUV) with shaded windows drove past. The SUV stopped and began to back up toward the interviewee and her friends. She explained that the group all “choked on their food” until they realized that the SUV was merely trying to park. Her point was that people have become so accustomed to fear that they assume the worst and do not consider that others are doing simple tasks like parking a vehicle. Community organizers consistently express concern that fear will negatively affect relationships between community members at a time when community building is essential.

## **PDNHF'S RESPONSE**

Roots of the current crisis are found in the demand, production, and distribution of illegal drugs. Ciudad Juárez and other northern Mexican cities have the misfortune of being key gateways between Mexico and the U.S. marketplace. The Mexican government, in collaboration with the U.S. government, is confronting the drug cartels with a military interdiction strategy. Mexican army soldiers have been deployed to Ciudad Juárez and other cities in order to combat the drug cartels directly. The United States supports these efforts through the Mérida Initiative, which provides \$400 million to Mexico to train and equip the country's law enforcement operations. While these efforts may impair cartel operations, PdNHF recognizes that in order to reduce the destructive influence of transnational drug trafficking, both the United States and Mexico need to pursue comprehensive, nationwide efforts to curtail usage and the consequent demand for illegal drugs.

From a grantmaking standpoint, PdNHF funds two efforts to address the initial concerns of stakeholders. The foundation's Safe Places initiative provides grants to five organizations, all of whom are working to provide secure places for youth to socialize and to participate in recreational or service activities. The initiative intends to mitigate the idle time that youth are reported to have and to build developmental assets, consistent with the Search Institute model. For example, one grantee is developing a multi-site service learning program in which 320 youth receive conflict resolution and civic engagement training. The training is paired with funding and a structured process to enable the youth to plan and implement their own service projects. In a pilot project, the youth planned, raised funds, and purchased kitchen appliances for a neighborhood school. The school kitchen is now a major asset to mitigate malnutrition in the surrounding neighborhood.

The foundation is also working with community partners to ensure that therapists have specialized training to treat individuals who have experienced trauma. The foundation brought the Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Humanitarian Assistance Programs (EMDR HAP) (<http://www.emdrhap.org/home/index.php>) to El Paso to provide EMDR training for therapists on both sides of the border. EMDR is a recognized, effective treatment for trauma. Self-reports from attendees indicate satisfaction with the training and increased capacity to treat clients with trauma-related diagnoses. As an outgrowth of this training, the El Paso Child Guidance Center has also provided training for El Paso area schools to prepare school personnel to

identify children exhibiting trauma-related symptoms. Over the last few years, a large number of Juarenses (approximately 50,000) have moved to El Paso (Velasquez and Martinez 2010). Accurate assessment of these symptoms is particularly important for children with PTSD whose symptoms (such as difficulty concentrating, irritability or outbursts, hypersensitivity) can resemble symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Allen 2011). If misdiagnosed, the treatments for ADHD can exacerbate PTSD.

Beyond programmatic strategy, the violence and related social disorder have affected the foundation's basic operations in Ciudad Juárez. The foundation's board made it a policy that staff no longer travel into Ciudad Juárez, primarily due to the risk of kidnapping and extortion. Site visits are conducted by reliable contractors who live there. PdNHF also does not publicize the names of Ciudad Juárez-based organizations that receive grants. In the spirit of the medical ethic to “first do no harm,” the foundation does not want to bring undesirable attention to our partners. Grantees affirm this policy and report to PdNHF that they are conscientious about large equipment purchases and the prospect of creating the impression that they have sizable financial resources.

## **CONCLUSION**

In 1911, Mexican federal military and rebel forces led by Francisco Madero fought for control of Ciudad Juárez. As a result of a rebel victory, long-time dictator Porfirio Díaz signed the Treaty of Ciudad Juárez and resigned the presidency. Díaz' defeat marked the beginning of a new stage in the Mexican Revolution. A hundred years later, a second battle is being fought to control the same city. Like the first Battle of Ciudad Juárez, the repercussions of the conflict are likely to reverberate across region for several decades. Leaders and community organizers on both sides of the border continue to work together to identify strategies to rebuild relationships, community institutions, and the social/cultural norms of our region. PdNHF welcomes dialogue and partnership with peer foundations, both to consider community-building strategies for the border community and to move forward national dialogue on comprehensive approaches to reduce the use of and demand for illegal drugs.

## **SOURCES**

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Gaytan, C., Clinical Director, El Paso Child Guidance Center, personal communications to Jon Law, June 6, 2011.

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Velasquez, M., and W. Martinez, *Migracion y Violencia*, <<http://www.observatoriodejuarez.org/Portals/12/Boletin%204%20Obs.pdf>>, October 2010.