



Research paper

Mexicans' use of illicit drugs in an era of drug reform: National comparative analysis by migrant status



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ABSTRACT

Background: Although rates of illicit drug use are considerably lower in Mexico than in the United States, rates in Mexico have risen significantly. This increase has particular implications for Mexican women and US migrants, who are considered at increased risk of drug use. Due to drug reforms enacted in Mexico in 2008, it is critical to evaluate patterns of drug use among migrants who reside in both regions.

Methods: We analysed a sample of Mexicans ($N = 16,249$) surveyed during a national household survey in 2011, the Encuesta Nacional de Adicciones (National Survey of Addictions). Comparative analyses based on Mexicans' migrant status – (1) never in the United States, (2) visited the United States, or (3) lived in the United States (transnationals) – featured analysis of variance and Chi-square global tests. Two multilevel regressions were conducted to determine the relationships among migrant status, women, and illicit drug use.

Results: Comparative findings showed significant differences in type and number of drugs used among Mexicans by migrant status. The regression models showed that compared with Mexicans who had never visited the United States, Mexican transnationals were more likely to report having used drugs ($OR = 2.453$, 95% $CI = 1.933, 3.113$) and using more illicit drugs ($IRR = 2.061$, 95% $CI = 1.626, 2.613$). Women were less likely than men to report having used drugs ($OR = 0.187$, 95% $CI = 0.146, 0.239$) and using more illicit drugs ($IRR = 0.153$, 95% $CI = 0.116, 0.202$).

Conclusions: Overall, the findings support further exploration of risk factors for illicit drug use among Mexican transnationals, who exhibit greater drug use behaviours than Mexicans never in the United States. Because drug reform mandates referrals to treatment for those with recurrent issues of drug use, it is critical for the Mexican government and civic society to develop the capacity to offer evidence-based substance abuse treatment for returning migrants with high-risk drug behaviours.

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Introduction

Recent statistics have shown that rates of illicit drug use in Mexico increased 87% between 2002 and 2011, from 0.8% to 1.5% (Villatoro et al., 2012). In particular, women reported significant increases from 2008 to 2011 in the use of illicit drugs (cannabis and

cocaine; Villatoro et al., 2012). Drug trafficking, violence and political turmoil have contributed to greater availability of drugs and increased drug-related illicit activities, placing transnational communities (Mexican migrants residing in both the United States and Mexico) at higher risk (Alegría, Sribney, Woo, Torres, & Guarnaccia, 2007; Borges et al., 2009; Rhodes, 2002; Strathdee et al., 2010). Because an estimated 22% of Mexicans are considered transnational, their drug use risk behaviours directly affect US communities (Borges, Medina-Mora, Breslau, & Aguilar-Gaxiola, 2007; Garcia, 2007). Yet there is limited understanding of this elusive population's drug use patterns and drugs of choice.

Emerging evidence has suggested that Mexican migrants to the United States increase their drug use while in the country, and returning migrants have greater rates of drug use than

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the nonmigrant population (Borges et al., 2007, 2011). Returning migrants, referred as transnationals in this study, accounted for 1.4 million adults and children between 2005 and 2010 (Passel, Cohn, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2012). Their significant population size, exposure to Mexican and American drug policies, and potential risk of illegal drug use underscore the importance of examining their drug use patterns.

Although Mexican drug policies do not consider drug use as an offense, drug reforms enacted in 2008 defined threshold amounts for personal use and mandated treatment referral for those in possession of larger amounts (Comisión Nacional contra las Adicciones, 2009). It is therefore critical to identify the US migrant population's risk of using illegal drugs using data collected in 2011 to inform evidence-based policies that reduce the effect of drug use in Mexico–US communities. The current study used national household data from Mexico on drug use to investigate differences in drug use among Mexicans by migration status and understand consumption patterns. As such, this paper is designed to inform comprehensive Mexico–US health care policies to develop interventions that reduce the effect of drug use on migrant populations.

Transnational Mexicans at a high risk of drug use are highly mobile across the Mexico–US border and have significant potential to negatively affect the health and well-being of Mexico–US communities. This risk is particularly significant among transnationals living in Mexico. Illicit substance abuse in Mexico increased 87% between 2002 and 2011, whereas in the United States, where abuse was 45% higher, it remained stable during the same period (Villagran, 2013). Furthermore, Mexican migration to the United States has been associated with the transformation of substance-use norms and pathology, particularly in border towns and northern metropolitan areas such as Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Monterrey (Borges et al., 2009). It has been established that migration patterns predict drug use and abuse among Latinos (Alegria et al., 2007). Yet there is limited knowledge about national drug use patterns among Mexicans with varying degrees of residence in or exposure to the United States. Considering changes in drug policy in Mexico and the United States during the past 5 years (Babor et al., 2010; Shirk, 2010), this knowledge is critical for public health policy.

Drug use in Mexico and the United States has become a critical binational public health concern. The significant level of return migration to Mexico from the United States between 2009 and 2013 and the current flow of more than 670,000 migrants between the two countries every year (Passel et al., 2012) highlight the need for enhanced understanding of this elusive population's substance-use patterns. Mexico and the United States have reported significant social and economic costs related to drug use. Yearly substance abuse costs the United States \$8.7 billion in federal spending for treatment and research, whereas in Mexico this cost has been estimated at \$4.3 billion (US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Previous research has identified individual factors associated with illicit drug use in Mexico. These factors include age, gender, marital status, educational level, employment history, and income (Borges et al., 2009; Garcia, 2007). These individual factors also correlate to predisposing factors for abuse of illicit drugs, such as a history of drug use and mental health issues (Borges et al., 2011). The current study is unique because it relies on recent data from 2011 and a comprehensive conceptualization of migrant status that includes Mexicans experiencing the United States as travellers. Although policies governing illicit drug use in the United States differ across regions, these policies for the most part mandate abstinence from the majority of illicit drugs (Friedman et al., 2007). This is in contrast with policies in Mexico, which generally endorse nonproblematic use (Comisión Nacional contra las Adicciones, 2009). The different enforcement of these drug policies in the United States and Mexico may have a differential effect

on transnational Mexicans who are exposed to policies in both countries.

Emerging research has identified drug-use risk factors associated with Mexican migrants, including migrant status, poverty, social isolation, and living situation (Mora, 2002; Valdez, Kaplan, & Cepeda, 2000). Transnational migrants spend years away from home, resulting in a lack of ties with either US or Mexican communities. Therefore, these individuals experience social isolation that may lead to drug use, especially alcohol abuse (Ojeda et al., 2009). As a result, their status as migrants may place them at a higher risk of substance abuse and social isolation. The presence of kin-based authority figures helps protect migrants against potential drug use (Mora, 2002). When Mexican migrants return home, studies have reported that greater exposure to the United States is related to greater transformation of drug use norms and increased pathology influencing their original community networks (Borges et al., 2007). In Mexico, community norms regarding drug use and the availability of drugs are also factors associated with substance abuse problems. Although drug use is not pardoned, in some communities in Mexico it is tolerated as long as it does not significantly disrupt community norms (Borges et al., 2007).

Conceptual framework

The underlying framework that best characterizes our perspective on the intersection between Mexicans' substance use and their migration context is that of risk environments (Rhodes & Simic, 2005). Risk environment is conceptualized as “the space – whether social or physical – in which a variety of factors interact to increase the chances of drug-related harm” (Rhodes, 2002, p. 88). These exogenous factors can be categorized in terms of type (i.e., physical, social, economic, policy) and interact at the micro and macro levels of environmental influence (Strathdee et al., 2010). Hence, illegal substance use is a function of individual and community factors that act as risk regulators to present constraints or opportunities that shape individual behaviour (Strathdee et al., 2010). As these constraints or opportunities are experienced by certain subpopulations (e.g., women, transnationals) in certain regions (e.g., Mexico–US border), they may elevate or reduce individual risk of substance use and spread within a network (Strathdee et al., 2012). The migratory pattern of transnational Mexicans may place them at high risk of substance abuse due to social isolation related to spending years away from home and not developing roots in either US or Mexican communities once the migration pattern starts (Garcia, 2007).

Drug use among Mexicans

Mexicans may have differential risk factors for drug use, in part related to their geographic mobility. Emerging evidence has suggested that Mexican migrants to the United States are at higher risk of drug use (Borges et al., 2007, 2009, 2011). Disconnection with their local communities, a lack of supervisory figures, and distance from their families may predispose Mexican migrants to increase the quantity and frequency of alcohol and illicit drug use or experimentation. Migrants are more likely to experience emotional and physical vulnerabilities related to separation from their families and extended social networks, potentially leading to increased substance abuse and sexual risk behaviours (Ojeda et al., 2009). These behaviours among migrant men have been strongly correlated with the absence of traditional living arrangements and normative community patterns of socialising (Garcia, 2007). Migration is associated with high stress and exposure to drug-using environments.

Mexicans travelling to the United States for temporary visits (e.g., vacation, short educational courses, etc.) may have a reduced

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