

The 51st state

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Earlier this year, two New Mexico State University researchers and their graduate student published an article in The Health Education Monograph Series "Obesity Issues in the 51st State."

The researchers, Drs. Rebecca Palacios and Mark Kittleson, along with Master of Public Health graduate student Jessica Rodriguez-Herrera, identified how this region of the country is at high risk for obesity-related problems.

The U.S.-Mexico border region encompasses 100 kilometers north and south of the 2,000-mile-long international boundary dividing the two countries. On the U.S. side, the border region intersects four states: California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Within these four states, 24 counties line the border. Scholars who study the health of the border often refer to the area north of the border as the 51st state, because it has its own unique set of challenges.

In this 51st state, the following health indices exist:

- 92 percent of border counties experience a significantly higher proportion of individuals living below the poverty level when compared to the entire U.S.
- Factors contributing to high poverty on the border include low education levels and an abundance of low-skill jobs that pay poorly. According to the 2000 Census, 34 percent of border residents 25 years or older living along the Texas and New Mexico border have less than a high school diploma. This is more than twice as high as the national average of residents without high school degrees – 15.4 percent.
- According to the 2000 Census, approximately 26 percent of the border population lacks health insurance. This rate is significantly higher than the 15.3 percent found in the U.S. as a whole.
- The 51st state ranks last in per capita income.
- It ranks last in access to health care.
- It ranks first in the number of children living in poverty.
- It ranks first in the number of uninsured children.
- It ranks third in diabetes-related deaths.
- Certain pockets along this region have unique risks such as the southern New Mexico border having one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the country.

Moreover, while the percentage of individuals classified as "obese" is about the same between the general U.S. population and the 51st state (34 percent), the

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51st state has a significantly higher number of “overweight” individuals when compared to the rest of the country.

(Note that “obesity” is classified as 40 percent above normal weight while “overweight” is 20 percent over normal weight.)

According to the National Institute of Health, obesity and being overweight are risk factors for various chronic diseases and problems, such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis, kidney and liver problems, sleep apnea and respiratory problems. Furthermore, there also is evidence suggesting that obesity is strongly associated with an increased risk of developing cancer, including cancers of

the breast, cervix, prostate and pancreas.

So how is obesity being fought along the border? While there is no simple single solution to the problem, one of the critical answers is Americans need to eat more fresh fruit and vegetables.

Palacios, an assistant professor of public health, is working with marketing researchers Collin Payne and Mihai Niculescu on a grocery store health intervention. Their goal is to persuade Mexican-Americans in the Paso del Norte region to buy and eat more fruits and vegetables. There still is a long way to go, but the work by these professors is one step toward reducing obesity in the “51st state.”

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