



LEWIS CENTER TOPIC BRIEFS



Travel Advisories, Violence and Medical Tourism in Mexico: FAQ

As any person residing in Mexico can confirm, organized crime is now rampant throughout the country. Our northern neighbor's appetite for psychotropics, coupled with structural and rampant wealth distribution problems in Mexico, have produced an enormous underground economy. This new economy is basically designed to meet drug demand in the US; its size is comparable to the entire annual income of many Central American countries. With increasing frequency, during the last fifteen years, Mexican citizens wake up to new and televised violent news related to drug cartel rivalries. With some frequency acts of violence occur in the vicinity of hospitals, medical clusters or cities that subsist on American medical tourists. The transitory migration across borders, to purchase medical care, receives the name of "medical tourism." (Adams et al 2018). Data obtained before the pandemic, showed that nearly 400,000 individuals had crossed from the US to Mexico in pursuit of medical attention. Some sources estimate that medical tourism from the US to Mexico may be worth about three billion dollars (Bustamante 2023). At the Center for Medical Tourism Research at the University of the Incarnate Word, we often receive questions from colleagues in the Mexican medical industry regarding the impact of this violence on the flow of tourists from the United States to Mexico, particularly when travel alerts issued by the U.S. State Department emphasize the dangers that Mexican narcoviolence could pose for travelers. The answer to these questions is not as straightforward as one might guess.

Are travel warnings and alerts issued in bad faith?

We must accept that this question may only be answered on a case-by-case basis; however, some regularities have been identified. For instance, Deep & Johnston (2020) have produced data that

suggest that travel advisories are basically tools that are employed to destabilize developing nations. These authors suggest that travel advisories are "diplomacy in disguise." This point of view is shared by Mylonopoulos & Papagrigorou (2016), Freedman (2005) and other scholars. Perhaps a less extreme point of view was discussed by Babey (2017). This author suggested that the problem with travel advisories issued by the Canadian government is not intentional, but rather uninformed or issued based on flawed guidelines. Another interesting idea was developed by Larsen (2016). This author suggested that "a country" is not an objective entity, rather it may be conceived as a cultural construction. More interesting still, Larsen demonstrates that a high correlation exists between a "negative cultural construction" and the number of travel advisories the country receives. For instance, after the incidents of the eleventh of September of 2003 in the US, television coverage of the events lead to a strong religion biased distrust. A negative cultural construction developed against countries with Islamic majorities. This in turn increased travel alerts towards countries regardless of their involvement on the incidents. Criticisms aside, travel advisories are a reality and we must learn to live with them. Additionally, it becomes a relevant issue to value their true effects on the economy of targeted countries. This last issue gives rise to the next question.

How will a travel advisory affect my business?

This question may have different answers in different countries. Data consistently show that the effects of travel advisories may be more dramatic for poor countries with economies strongly linked with tourism activities. Advisories issued for developed and rich countries frequently have negligible effects (Baker,

2014). Statistical analyses have shown that the combination of travel advisories and the number of tourist casualties interact to predict tourist flow. Usually, a higher number of travel advisories and visitor casualties will negatively correlate with tourist flow (Buigut, 2017). The correlation between these variables is weak and would be much higher if not for the data obtained from Mexico. Yes, Mexico is the great “outlier” in the economic analyses of travel advisories and tourism. No other country in the world has received a higher number of travel advisories than Mexico (Beshay, 2017). Additionally, few countries (even those at war with the US) report a higher number of American casualties on their soil. It is estimated that 598 Americans were killed in Mexico from 2009 to 2016. This number is higher than the number of American soldiers that were killed during Operation Desert Storm (299). And still, except for the worst year of the pandemic (2020), the number of American tourists visiting Mexico remains stable (and with a continuous and significant increasing trend). Granted, available quantitative data give little information regarding the effects of travel advisories on specific locations of the country. However, studies conducted by Monterrubio (2010; 2013) suggest advisories may have severe (but brief and located effects) on businesses that depend on tourism. Given that no dramatic effects have been observed in the overall number of American individuals visiting Mexico, it may be hypothesized that American tourists may temporally abandon one location in favor of others. In other words, a travel advisory on Acapulco may mean that tourists will temporarily shift to Cancún. More data and research could support (or discard) the hypothesis. However, it is difficult to reconcile the number of travel advisories with the ever-growing number of American tourists visiting Mexico with a different explanation. Thus, to offer an answer to those interested in the subject, we could suggest that unless a travel advisory is issued directly to your “zip code,” you will probably be unaffected (actually, you could end up benefiting from your neighbor’s misfortune).

Should the Mexican tourism industry worry about the current situation?

The answer is both “yes” and “no.” Unless a travel advisory is specifically targeted in “your direction,” it is likely your business will not suffer. However, the current security crisis in Mexico has no comparable precedents. It is difficult to predict the impact of the ever-increasing violence (and billionaire underground illicit economy) on the social and political foundations of the country. It is even harder to predict what this situation will have on a society where economic inequities have become so severe. Mexico ranks .45 in the Gini inequity index. The Gini may be interpreted as a correlation coefficient; values nearing zero imply more equity and wealth distribution. As the index approaches one, wealth distribution becomes more polarized. With a Gini coefficient of .45 Mexico ranks amongst the “worst” 25 countries in the world. Almost 80% of the country’s wealth belongs to less than 10% of the total population. The stark reality in Mexico is that most adults work multiple jobs under precarious labor conditions (only to find that they cannot make ends meet, save money, or escape crippling debt). The young, old, and infirm have little

support from governmental or private agencies. Many young men and women migrate from schools to fill the ranks of crime, desperation, or starvation. The old and the infirm frequently succumb to preventable health challenges (or malnutrition). The country is at a crossroads. As we are very far up the mountain, it is anybody’s guess where (and how) the cards will fall. We should all worry about the latter situation.

References

- Adams, K., Snyder, J., Crooks, V. A., & Berry, N. S. (2018). A critical examination of empowerment discourse in medical tourism: the case of the dental tourism industry in Los Algodones, Mexico. *Globalization and health*, 14, 1-10.
- Babey, N. G. (2019). The politics of travel advisories: foreign policy and error in Canada’s traveller information program. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 2(1), 15-33.
- Baker, D. M. A. (2014). The effects of terrorism on the travel and tourism industry. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and pilgrimage*, 2(1), 9.
- Beshay, A. N. (2017). Travel Warnings Versus Actual Travel Danger; An Analysis Of US Department Of State Travel Warnings To Egypt And Other Countries. *Journal of Tourism Research*, 18, 5-20.
- Buigut, S., Braendle, U., & Sajeewani, D. (2017). Terrorism and travel advisory effects on international tourism. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 22(10), 991-1004.
- Bustamante, A. (2023). Medical Tourism in the US-Mexico Border: California-Mexico Cooperation after COVID-19.
- Deep, A., & Johnston, C. S. (2020). Travel advisories-destabilising diplomacy in disguise. In *Instability and Tourism* (pp. 82-99). Routledge.
- Freedman, L. (2005). The politics of warning: terrorism and risk communication. *Intelligence and National Security*, 20(3), 379-418.
- Monterrubio, J. C. (2010). Short-term economic impacts of influenza A (H1N1) and government reaction on the Mexican tourism industry: an analysis of the media. *International journal of tourism policy*, 3(1), 1-15.
- Monterrubio, J. C. (2013). Destination image and crime in Mexico: An analysis of foreign government travel advice. *PASOS Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural*, 11(3), 33-45.
- Mylonopoulos, D., Moira, P., & Papagrigoriou, A. (2016). The Travel Advisory as an Obstacle to Travel and Tourism. Case Study-The Greek Economic Crisis. *International Journal of Research in Tourism and Hospitality*, 2(2), 1-13.

About the Author



Dr. Marco Antonio Pulido Rull completed his undergraduate and graduate studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). As a graduate student, he specialized in experimental design, statistics, and the experimental analysis of behavior. With support of the university, he traveled on a yearly basis to the US and Canada to share his research with peers.

Professor Pulido Rull's years of service at the University of the Incarnate Word include his dedicated teaching at the Centro Universitario Incarnate Word campus in Mexico City, and his collaboration with UIW Center for Medical Tourism Research as a researcher and data analyst. **Contact: mpulidor100@gmail.com**