

3-7-2012

Spike in Cases of AH1N1 Virus Not Yet Affecting Tourism

Carlos Navarro

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex>

Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Spike in Cases of AH1N1 Virus Not Yet Affecting Tourism." (2012). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5869>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Spike in Cases of AH1N1 Virus Not Yet Affecting Tourism

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2012-03-07

In mid-February, just as Mexico was celebrating robust tourism numbers in 2011, reports started filtering out about a spike in the number of cases of infections of the AH1N1 virus, earlier known as the swine flu. The situation put the Secretaría de Turismo (SECTUR) and the Secretaría de Salud on alert, although the problem is not severe enough for authorities to hit the panic button. A severe outbreak of the H1N1 virus in Mexico in 2009 caused economic activity to come to a standstill for several weeks, contributing to a sharp decline in the country's GDP ([SourceMex, May 6, 2009](#)).

The outbreak especially damaged the tourism sector, as foreign visitors stayed away in droves ([SourceMex, Aug. 5, 2009](#), and [April 14, 2010](#)).

The AH1N1 outbreak in 2009 also weakened domestic tourism that year, with many Mexicans avoiding some of the hardest-hit areas in central Mexico, including Veracruz and Mexico City. The outbreak so far has not been too severe in the capital, and health experts say this is because residents of Mexico City have developed immunity. More than 150 people have died from the AH1N1 virus thus far in 2012, but authorities said there is not yet a reason for worry.

Tourism has recovered gradually in the past couple of years ([SourceMex, Sept. 28, 2011](#)). In 2011, nearly 22.6 million foreigners visited Mexico, an increase of 2% from 2010. But, despite the overall increase in foreign visitors, the number of tourists from the US was down about 3% last year relative to 2010. SECTUR attributed this decline to the economic slowdown in the US, although drug-related violence in some parts of the country might have discouraged some US tourists ([SourceMex, March 2, 2011](#)).

Violence prompts US to issue travel advisories

In early February, the US State Department issued an advisory to US citizens to avoid traveling to 14 states in Mexico because of drug-related violence. The advisory, which was an extension of a similar warning issued in April 2011 for Tamaulipas and Michoacán, expanded the warning to 12 other states.

Among the states added to the State Department list are Chihuahua, Durango, Coahuila, Guerrero, and Zacatecas. For some states, like Aguascalientes, the US only warned citizens to avoid areas bordering neighboring states on the list. "The security situation along the Zacatecas border continues to be unstable and gun battles between criminal groups and authorities occur," said the advisory. "Concerns include roadblocks placed by individuals posing as police or military personnel and recent gun battles between rival [transnational criminal organizations] involving automatic weapons."

Mexican officials immediately denounced the US warning as an exaggeration. "We are a state that is welcoming to tourists," said Durango government secretary Jaime Fernández Saracho. "I believe that [the warning] was made on false perceptions."

On top of that, the Texas state government issued a warning for the third consecutive year urging university students not to travel to Mexico during their spring break. The advisory included warnings against travel to the resort cities of Cancún, Playa del Carmen, and Los Cabos.

"The Mexican government has made great strides battling the cartels, and we commend their continued commitment to making Mexico a safer place to live and visit," Texas Department of Public Safety Director Steve McCraw said. "However, drug-cartel violence and other criminal activity represent a significant safety threat, even in some resort areas."

The Mexican governors association (Conferencia Nacional de Gobernadores, Conago) immediately criticized the Texas government's warning. "We reject this advisory, not only because the Yucatán Peninsula and Quintana Roo are among the safest areas of Mexico, but because no US tourist has been the victim of crime in our region," said Quintana Roo Gov. Roberto Borge Angulo, who chairs Conago's tourism committee."

Foreign Relations Secretary Patricia Espinosa earlier defended the right of the US State Department to issue the warning and said it was important for Mexico to continue to try to ensure the safety of everyone. Mexico is making a "gigantic" effort to ensure that anyone on Mexican territory remains safe, said the foreign relations secretary.

Still, Espinosa emphasized that tourism is important to Mexico's economy. "We are making a very big effort to promote the tourism sector because it represents a major source of earnings for many people," she said.

At the start of last year, Mexico declared 2011 as the "year of tourism," launching a major promotional campaign in the US and other countries. The campaign, in part, is an effort to counter the perception that Mexico is a dangerous country. Some of the promotional efforts have included President Felipe Calderón ([SourceMex, Sept. 28, 2011](#)).

Some officials like Tourism Secretary Gloria Guevara insist that the slump in US tourism is more the result of the economic slowdown north of the border and that Mexico should continue working to ensure that the country remains attractive for US visitors. "We need to continue working to ensure that the industry keeps growing," said Guevara.

SECTUR attempted to put a positive spin on the decline in US visitors, pointing out that nearly 17% of the US citizens who traveled overseas went to Mexico, compared with 15% in 2010. "Mexico continues to be the top destination for US citizens," said SECTUR official Alonso Sumano.

SECTUR also pointed out that the economic crisis in Europe has not deterred tourists from that continent from traveling to Mexico. For example, increases were reported in the number of visitors from Italy, France, Great Britain, and Russia. South Americans—particularly Argentines and Colombians—also found Mexico an appealing destination in 2011.

In Mexico, a stable economy helped boost domestic tourism. The Banco de México (central bank) said more than 167 million Mexicans visited sites inside the country last year, an increase of 4% from 2011. That number was up 2.6% from 2008, the year before the AH1N1 outbreak hit the country.

The recovery in domestic tourism is good news, since it offers a picture of the Mexican economy. The country's GDP grew by 3.9% in 2011, even though the growth rate was lower than expected and below the increase of 5.5% recorded in 2010.

AH1N1 infections vary across the country

The appearance of some AH1N1 cases in Mexico has caused authorities to keep a close eye on the situation, but as of now there is not any strong concern. For the most part, officials are attributing the outbreak to "normal conditions" during the flu season. A total of 166 people died of the AH1N1 flu virus in Mexico from Jan. 1 to Feb. 23, although many victims also suffered from other diseases that weakened their immune system.

Of all the people who have died from influenza this year in the country, 89% were not vaccinated, and 73% were suffering from another illness, most frequently diabetes mellitus, obesity, or arterial hypertension, health authorities said.

Authorities said three seasonal flu viruses are currently active in Mexico—AH1N1, AH3N2, and influenza B—but authorities said the available flu vaccine provides effective protection against all of them.

The total number of deaths on its face is not overly alarming. Still, some patterns should cause authorities to worry. Nearly 80 deaths occurred during one week in February. The Secretaría de Salud (SSA) reported 5,544 cases of influenza in the first eight weeks of the year, but more than 90% were confirmed to be caused by a variety of AH1N1.

The number of infections thus far is very small when compared with the total of 70,000 reported in 2009. But the outbreak that year occurred in April and May, resulting in 1,300 total deaths, which means that a spike in flu cases is still possible in the next few weeks.

Remarkably, Mexico City—which was one of the areas hardest hit in 2009—has seen fewer cases than other states this year. A study by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) found that many residents in the capital developed a level of immunity after the 2009 outbreak.

Malaquías López, a faculty member of the UNAM Medical School, said the studies indicate that many residents who are exposed to the virus are showing only mild symptoms of the flu. "We found that there are very few people with grave symptoms such as fever," said López. "Very few are requiring hospitalization."

Researchers said 40% of the participants in the clinical study had antibodies that evidenced their contact with the virus. In 2011, this ratio increased to 60%. "It is not easy to extrapolate these statistics and apply to the entire Valley of Mexico," said López. "But it is a good indicator that the level of immunity among the population is increasing."

Studies indicate that 30 million people might have had contact with the virus in 2009.

While the level of severe cases of AH1N1 is small in the capital and surrounding areas, an increase has been reported in outer areas in México state as well as Puebla.

Calderón, sought to reassure Mexicans that this year's outbreak did not put Mexico in a risky situation. "We are not overly worried, but we are taking the situation seriously," the president said during an event in Aguascalientes in mid-February. "There is always a risk of exposure."

"The cases of [AH1N1] that have appeared in our country are within the expected parameters and within the seasonal trends that occur every winter," said the president. "I want to urge the population to continue following the measures needed to prevent infections."

Health Secretary Salomón Chertorivski acknowledged that seasonal trends could indicate that the cases of AH1N1 would increase in the next two or three weeks, followed by a sharp decline. "There is no reason for alarm, no cause for worry," said Chertorivski. "But there are reasons for us to take preventative measures."

The Mexican government got caught unprepared for the last crisis, and the SSA has offered assurances that it is ready this time. But some critics suggest the government is not taking the threat seriously enough.

"In Mexico, the cases of flu caused by this virus are higher than anywhere else in the world," columnist Javier Flores wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. "Our country's health authorities are obligated to keep us fully informed about the situation, but so far they have really said nothing. If you look at this problem from simply a medical standpoint, one can see that this is an extremely complex and even serious situation."

-- End --