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Why do people in the U.S. cross the border into Mexico for health care?

[Grace Hauck](#) and [Ken Alltucker](#) USA TODAY

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Two Americans have been found dead and two alive after they were abducted while traveling to Mexico in an incident that is raising questions about whether people in the U.S. are at risk when they cross the border to access health care.

The four U.S. citizens vanished Friday in an attack carried out by multiple gunmen in the northern Mexico border city of Matamoros, the FBI said. The city in Tamaulipas state is just south of Brownsville, Texas, across the Rio Grande. It's one of many places along the U.S.-Mexico border where Americans flock to save money on medical care.

Details about the four Americans' trip remained sparse Tuesday, but one relative told The Associated Press they had traveled to Mexico for tummy tuck surgery. Travel for medical treatment and even surgery is not uncommon along the border.

"Medical tourism has been a very big part of the border communities for many, many, many years," said Ricardo Ainslie, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin and director of research and education at the health care partnership AMPATH Mexico. "It's primarily driven by the fact that it's easy to get appointments and that it's much less expensive."

Why do people in the U.S. cross into Mexico for health care?

About 1.2 million people in the U.S. traveled to Mexico for medical, dental or other health care services each year before the COVID-19 pandemic, said Josef Woodman, CEO of Chapel Hill, North Carolina-based Patients Beyond Borders, citing another consultant's estimates.

Woodman estimates U.S. residents getting medical care in Mexico can save 40% to 60% off the cost of similar procedures or operations at U.S. hospitals or clinics.

"People in the United States need access to cost-effective medical care," Woodman said. "The U.S. has priced itself out of the market."

People who are not insured can access cheap care in Mexico, said Kathleen Staudt, a professor emeritus at the University of Texas at El Paso. She noted that some people living in the U.S. may already have insurance coverage in Mexico. Meanwhile, some nonprofits in Mexico offer low-cost private insurance, she said.

Consumers often travel to Mexico to seek elective care such as weight loss or cosmetic surgery that might not be covered by their health insurance, said Irving **Stackpole**, a Newport, Rhode Island-based medical tourism consultant.

Others choose services like purchasing eyeglasses or getting prescriptions filled at pharmacies, **Stackpole** said.

"As soon as you cross the border, there are all kinds of pharmacies on the main streets," Staudt said. Many of those pharmacies have doctors on staff, she said.

Ainslie pointed to the ease of access to prescription drugs, including pain medications and antibiotics.

"You can get things in Mexico just by going into a pharmacy. You don't need a doctor's prescription," said Ainslie, whose friends in California have been getting dental care in Tijuana for years.

Why the American group went to Mexico

Information about the four kidnapped Americans was limited Tuesday. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said Monday that the group was in the country for medicine.

Zalandria Brown of Florence, South Carolina, told The Associated Press she was in contact with the FBI after learning her younger brother, Zindell Brown, is one of the four victims. She said her brother, who lives in Myrtle Beach, and two friends had accompanied a third friend who was going to Mexico for a tummy tuck.

Brown said the group was extremely close and they all made the trip in part to help split up the driving duties. They were aware of the dangers in Mexico, she added, and her brother had expressed some misgivings, the Associated Press reported. "Zindell kept saying, 'We shouldn't go down,'" Brown said.

What U.S. officials say about safety in the region

The State Department advises Americans not to travel to Tamaulipas, citing organized crime activity, including gunbattles, murder, armed robbery, carjacking, kidnapping, forced disappearances, extortion and sexual assault.

"Criminal groups target public and private passenger buses, as well as private automobiles traveling through Tamaulipas, often taking passengers and demanding ransom payments," the department says.

Woodman said Matamoros is "not on our radar screen as a medical travel destination" but added people might seek less expensive prescription drugs there. "It's a horrible tragedy," Woodman said. "But it's also a cautionary tale."

Do your research before traveling to Mexico for health care

U.S. consumers should do their homework before choosing a doctor or clinic in Mexico, Woodman said. People should ask for a clinic's credentials as well as avoid choosing the lowest-cost provider.

Consumers should also ask clinics or doctors how often they have done particular procedures and ask to speak with patients who have used the clinic before, **Stackpole** said.

Researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, found single pills sold as oxycodone and Adderall at pharmacies in four northern Mexico cities often had illicit fentanyl, methamphetamine or heroin.

Though the researchers declined to name the cities or the pharmacies, they were located in tourist areas with English advertisements for erectile dysfunction medications and painkillers. Researchers tested only single pills, not prescriptions sold in bottles. Researchers said consumers should be aware these single pills might be spiked with drugs that can be harmful.

"The risk is that someone who doesn't have an opioid tolerance is really at risk of having an overdose which can be fatal," said Chelsea Shover, an assistant professor-in-residence at UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine.

Woodman said the tragedy should not discourage others from seeking care in Mexico.

"Everybody is really saddened by it," Woodman said. "It's something that's really, really given us a lot of pause. How do we keep our patients safe? And the answer is, for something like that, it's such a freak (occurrence) that you just can't."

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