

# A SNAPSHOT OF CHILDREN ON THE TEXAS BORDER



Historically, communities along the Texas/Mexico border have endured extreme deprivation and the neglect of federal and state government. But recently, attention has turned. Culturally, socially, and economically, the border has emerged as one of the most vibrant and dynamic regions of Texas. And Texas plays a significant role in national border developments overall. The Texas/Mexico border is vast, running more than 1,250 miles from El Paso in the west to Brownsville on the Gulf. Of 32 border counties represented in the Border Kids Count report, 20 are Texan.

For all its significance, the Texas/Mexico border remains enigmatic and marked by contradiction. The border is a region of contrasts, exhibiting differences of language, culture, tradition, economy, and politics. Yet the interconnectedness of communities on both sides of the international boundary also gives the region a distinct sense of place. Longstanding and severe problems still confront Texas border counties. At the same time, border demographic and economic trends reveal the area's great potential, foreshadowing the future not only for Texas, but for the United States as a whole.

## Enduring border issues

Essentially, the border between Texas and Mexico is a political boundary. Many of the region's most persistent social and economic problems, however, are mutually shared, affecting fundamental aspects of daily life in Texas border counties.

- **Persistent poverty and economic insecurity.** Texas counties along the Mexican border are among the very poorest in the United States. Child poverty in Texas border counties approaches, and in some cases exceeds 50%, and is highest among Hispanic children.
- **Housing.** Extreme poverty along the Texas border makes affordable housing almost impossible for thousands of its residents. As a result, border counties are home to more than 1,400 *colonias*, unincorporated and undeveloped housing settlements characterized by unpaved roads, substandard housing, unsanitary water supply, and open sewage disposal.
- **Environment.** Environmental conditions in many border counties include a deficient infrastructure for fresh water and waste disposal. Presence of toxic contaminants, chiefly lead, is widespread. Elevated levels of carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, ozone, and particulates, along with manufacturing byproducts from the region's *maquiladoras* factories compromise air and water quality in counties along the border.
- **Health.** Economic and environmental distress have serious consequences for the health of border residents. The region reports elevated incidence of infectious diseases such as gastroenteritis, hepatitis, and tuberculosis, as well as chronic health conditions including diabetes, gall bladder disease, obesity, and hypertension. A severe shortage of health care professionals also confronts the region.

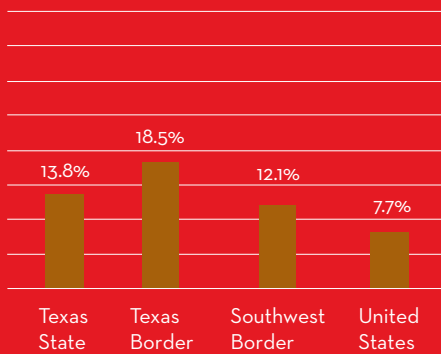
## Border promise and opportunity

In recent decades, racial and ethnic diversification has dominated the nation's population change. Children, especially, are increasingly likely to belong to non-white population groups, and in particular to identify as Hispanic or Latino. This means that the future has become progressively more interconnected with the prospects of a young, non-white (especially Hispanic) population. Texas' population is younger than the nation's, and its border counties are younger than the state population overall—both correlates of Hispanic ethnic identity. With a majority of Hispanic Texans of Mexican origin, border population dynamics reveal the future today.

Historic inequities continue to challenge Texas border communities. Unaddressed, these inevitably will lead to a less-educated, poorer population more in need of social services and with fewer resources to provide them. On the other hand, we have the opportunity now to implement public policies to fortify the physical, social, emotional, and educational development of Texas border residents. This choice almost certainly will yield a better-prepared, more competitive workforce, increased private- and public-sector resources, and an enhanced quality of life for Texans in the next century.

# The Texas Border Region: Indicators of Child Well-Being

**Median Household Income**  
Percentage Change 1989 - 1999



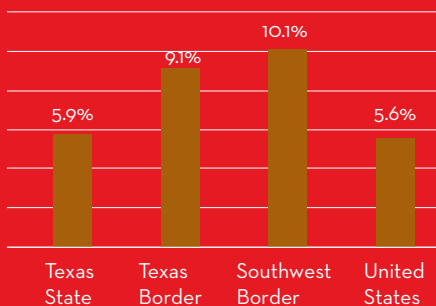
**Median Household Income**

Percentage Change 1989 - 1999

Illustrating change in median household income between 1989 and 1999, this chart shows the important role of Texas border counties as fuel for economic growth. Median household income in Texas border counties exceeded income growth both for the state of Texas and the entire border region. This demonstrates the wage effects of commercial expansion due to the freer movement of goods and people through Texas border cities.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000

**Annual Unemployment 2004**

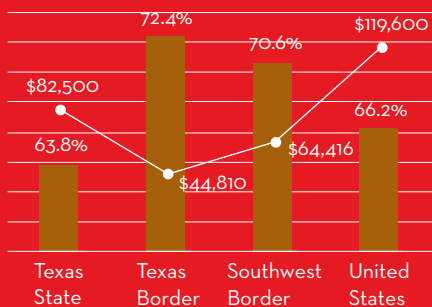


**Annual Unemployment 2004**

Unemployment in Texas border counties remains significantly higher than the unemployment rate for Texas and the nation. Since the unemployment measure is defined in terms of people seeking work, and given expanding population and economic growth, this level of joblessness may reflect deficient education and training of workers in Texas' border counties. Along with income data, it suggests that some border workers are doing well, while the human potential of many others remains untapped. High unemployment in Texas appears to drive up the rate for the entire border region.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004

**Home Ownership and Median Home Value 1999**

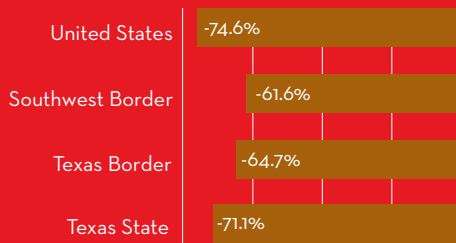


**Homeownership & Median Home Value 1999**

Homeownership among residents of the Texas border counties exceeds the level of homeownership among any of the other geographic regions represented in the chart. At the same time, the median value of homes in these same border counties in Texas is the lowest among regions - about two-thirds lower than the median home value nationwide. Although the homeownership rate for Texas border counties may seem high, the very low value of these homes means that Texas border families have far less opportunity to accumulate financial equity through this common means of middle-class asset development.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000

**Public Assistance Income  
Percentage Change 1989 - 1999**



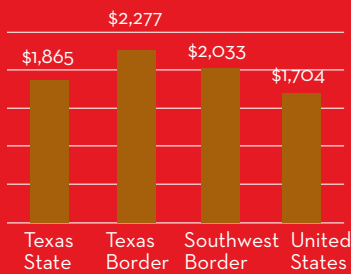
**Public Assistance Income**

*Percentage Change 1989 - 1999*

Household income from public cash assistance programs—called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in 1989, renamed Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) as part of the 1996 welfare reform law—dropped throughout the United States during the 1990s. Primarily, this steep decline reflects falling caseloads in the wake of welfare reform law and a strong 1990s economy. The drop in cash assistance income among Texas border counties—somewhat less pronounced than for the state of Texas overall—resembled the rate of change across the entire four-state border region.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000

**Average EITC Refund, Tax Year 2001**



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The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is a special tax program intended to reduce tax burden and bolster income among low-income families. Workers who qualify can get back part or all of the federal income taxes they paid during the prior year. The EITC is “refundable,” which means that some workers with incomes too low to owe taxes still may receive the credit. Texas border counties reported higher average EITC refunds than in the four-state border region, and than for the state or nation. This outcome probably reflects lower median incomes and higher poverty rates among Texas border counties, which persist in spite of income improvement there during the 1990s.

Source: Internal Revenue Service, 2002 and Brookings Institution

**Note:** All data contained in the charts on pages 2 and 3 of this document were compiled by Barbara Robles, Ph. D. University of Texas at Austin.

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## Voices from the Border



**Alicia** “I feel that it is good to have both nationalities, it is an advantage. I take it as an asset, and I take advantage of it in every way that I need to so that it [living on the border] has become a good thing for me.”

Alicia, 41, is a dual US/Mexican citizen originally from Mexico City. Her mother is a Mexican citizen and her father had dual citizenship, Polish and Mexican. She moved to Laredo with her American husband to join her sister who also married an American. She arrived in Laredo not speaking English and studied several years in junior college becoming English proficient before earning a psychology degree. She is a divorced single parent with one son, who she frequently takes home to Mexico City. She maintains contacts with her mother and brother in Mexico City and her sister in Connecticut. Alicia’s socio-economic status was high middle-income, though it was lowered by her recent divorce. She identifies as a Chilango and Mexicana, and practices both Mexican and American cultures and speaks Spanish, English, Yiddish, and Hebrew. Alicia earns her living as a ‘special ed’ teacher, but says her students are not ‘special ed,’ but new immigrants. She regularly crosses to Nuevo Laredo to go to doctors, dentists, and grocery stores. She misses Mexico, though would not move back there.



**Valeria** “I guess my more personal side is Mexican.”

Valeria, 36, was born on the Laredo, Texas side of the river, but raised on the Nuevo Laredo side. She has dual US/Mexican citizenship and was educated through junior high school on the Nuevo Laredo side and through high school on the Laredo side. Her parents, who live on the Nuevo Laredo side of the river, are Mexican citizens and naturalized, while she and her siblings are American citizens. Her brother lives and owns a restaurant on the Mexican side, while her sister lives and is raising a family on the Laredo side. Valeria is a divorced single parent who lives on the Laredo side of the river and whose Mexican son lives on the Nuevo Laredo side with his father. Though she has spent the majority of her life on the Mexican side, she recently moved to Laredo to save time and money crossing the international bridge everyday to her insurance business in Laredo. She sells insurance on both the American and Mexican sides of the river and coordinates her Nuevo Laredo family visits, shopping trips, and doctor’s appointments with her insurance sales calls.

### Portraits based on:

Marquez, Raquel R. 2003 Principal Investigator for *Borderland Families - Transnational Communities in Texas and Mexico*. Research funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

### Photo credit:

Tamara Casso, Visual Sociologist, 2003

### The Center for Public Policy Priorities

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This KIDS COUNT Snapshot was produced for the Annie E. Casey Foundation by the Center for Public Policy Priorities.

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