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Border Commuters Pay Toll with their Health

It's almost 6 a.m., and Ruiz has to be at work in half an hour. The way the traffic is moving, he won't make it on time – again.

Ruiz lights up a cigarette, constantly changes radio stations and begins to worry he might lose his job.

He wishes he were at the front of the line of cars.

"I've been in line for almost two hours, and I'm nervous," says the 43-year-old auto mechanic in San Diego. "I've already gotten two warnings for being late to work."

Ruiz is one of thousands of U.S. citizens or permanent legal residents who live in Tijuana, and work or go to school in San Diego County simply because this arrangement is a lot less expensive.

He's one of thousands of commuters that make the daily exodus crossing the border through the two ports of entry in the area –San Ysidro and Otay Mesa. The wait time at the ports averages two hours during peak hours, according to Vince Bond, public affairs officer of U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

Others say the wait can sometimes be four hours.

The economic effects of the border wait times have been well documented: lost hours of workers' productivity, wasted gasoline.

But what is less well documented is the toll it takes on the physical and mental health of the commuters.

Waiting at the border in your car can cause all kinds of pain: neck, wrist hip, knee, foot and back.

And just as serious is the threat to health from inhaling pollutants.

Dr. P.J.E. Quintana, associate professor at the Graduate School of Public Health at **San Diego State University**, is researching the subject. Her study, "Air Quality Inside Cars Crossing U.S.-Mexico Border," is an attempt to "quantify exposures to toxic air pollutants" by commuters such as Ruiz.

"Exposure to traffic-related air pollution is increasingly being associated with adverse health effects, including asthma, heart disease and even adverse reproductive outcomes," Quintana says. "In-vehicle levels of particulate matter and other pollutants, including carbon monoxide and benzene, can be high in slow or stopped

traffic, such as at the ports of entry.”

Quintana is working with researchers at the Universidad Autonoma de Baja California to place monitors in participant vehicles to take sample measurements. The study is scheduled to be released later this year.

Exposure to fine particulates can affect lung and heart function in the long run: Quintana says there’s an increased risk of heart attack one hour after traffic exposure.

Mayra Ortega is a border commuter who has been dividing her life between both sides of the border for nearly 10 years. She says that after being in line for half an hour, she starts to have trouble breathing.

“I don’t know if it’s because I hate waiting in line, but I always find it hard to breath at the port of entry,” Ortega says.

Tijuana psychologist Lourdes Mariscal, who has many patients who are border commuters, says that waiting in line at the border also creates a lot of frustration.

“That frustration, in turn, creates impotence,” Mariscal says, “a feeling of not being in control of your time, a feeling that makes you feel like you’re not in charge of your life anymore.”

Commuter Luisa Perez is familiar with this feeling of helplessness. “Sometimes, I can’t take it anymore,” she says. “I feel like screaming in my car.

Clinical psychologist Paul Randolph, who is a governing board member at the San Ysidro School District in San Ysidro, the closest community to the U.S.-Mexico border in San Diego County, says the stress felt by commuters at the border often “carries throughout the day.”

Randolph says the stress “affects their job performance, their life at home.... The mental toll is very great.”

Francisco Bustos, a 33-year-old English professor at Southwestern College in San Diego County, grew up commuting between Tijuana and San Diego.

As a child, he remembers waking up at 5 a.m. to make it to school on the other side of the border. As an adult, he commuted for nine years so that he could save money to buy a house in San Diego.

Bustos says he was always stressed out, tired of waiting in line at the border. The waits, he says, cut into quality time with his family.

A few months ago, he finally moved his family to San Diego, a decision that has helped his mental well being.

“I feel so relaxed now,” says a smiling Bustos. “I’m less stressed now. I have more time for work.”

Best of all, he says, “I have more time to be with my family. I can even drive my children to school now.”