

# MIDDLE-CLASS RETIREES AT THE FRONTIER OF HEALTH CARE: AN EXAMPLE FROM THE *FRONTERA de SALUD* PROJECT IN WEST TEXAS

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## Introduction

- The purpose of this study is to explore ethnographically the health concerns and health care availability among largely middle-class retirees in the far west Texas frontier.
- The *Frontera de Salud* project at UTMB has focused on assessing and ameliorating health care concerns among working-class and indigenous residents in the Big Bend area, but students and faculty have also begun mapping the shifting demographic and socio-cultural contours of health and health care in the entire population.

## Methods

- Data for this ongoing exploratory study have been derived from graduate students' initial mission experience in Presidio and Brewster Counties, serving as participant-observation. More formal ethnographic work is conducted by the first author, conducted in the Texas communities of Alpine, Terlingua, Marfa, and Candelaria.
- All ethnographic methods are designed to produce practical/clinical implications for improving health care delivery, as well as scholarly understanding of understudied populations.



**Haroon Mirza, Stone Circle, Marfa Texas**



**Air Ambulance Helicopter**

## Findings

- A concern among the elderly during retirement is accessing quality health care, often restricted by financial and mobility issues.
- The increasing number of retirees, across ethnicities, in generally rural and isolated West Texas face another barrier: *distance* both cultural and logistic/geographical.
- A common activity among them is the management of relationships to support access to distant cities (e.g. El Paso and Lubbock) for specialized care.
- Adults maintain unrealistic assumptions about medical specialties, e.g., the need for an obstetrician for safe delivery when a general practitioner trained in obstetrics is available.

## Problems and Solutions

- General lack of prior understanding of the contours of health care in small-town and post-rural West Texas;
- The promise of enticing children and other family members to relocate to West Texas to help with health care activities and logistics;
- Gaining an understanding of the complex roles played by paramedical services; and
- The value of subscribing to expensive, yet valuable health care services such as emergency helicopter services.

## Conclusions

- Retirees soon learn that health care in frontier West Texas involves the acceptance and integration of a range of practices, ranging from the spiritual sounds emanating from the Stone Circle and Curandero to modern organizational medicine.
- Retirees come to perceive health care problems and services situationally, not ideologically, in terms of what social philosopher Alfred Schutz referred to as "zones of relevance."
- Future research in the West Texas frontier will involve comparative research by ethnicity, social class, and gender.