

# Tourism may lead to health risk for industry workers, new study finds

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Touristic escapism is a term FIU researchers have developed to refer to the time when tourists—away from their homes, cultural norms and daily life—take a break from their reality, which may lead to behaviors beyond their daily routines or lives. This could be anything from windsurfing, hiking or skydiving for the first time to engaging in risky behaviors like taking drugs or having unsafe sex.

Researchers from FIU's Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC), Steven J. Green School of International & Public Affairs and Robert Stempel College of Public Health & Social Work recently conducted an [ethnographic study](#) on how touristic escapism affected the health vulnerability of male [tourism](#) workers in the Dominican Republic (DR), which has one of the largest tourism industries in the Caribbean.

The study found that there is a link between the tourist's risk [behavior](#) and the health risks that local industry workers face.

In destinations where the GDP relies heavily on tourism, the tourism industry can have a dangerous effect on the local population, particularly when tourists bring sexually transmitted diseases or engage in risk behavior while on vacation. Studies have reported significantly higher levels of sexual risk behaviors among tourists while they are on vacation in comparison to their home communities and a lower use of risk reduction behaviors, such as condom use.

Overall, their findings highlighted the fact that these workers may accrue greater [health risks](#) because of what their work exposes them to, including drugs and sexual encounters. Men who engage in informal solicited sex with male tourists, known as "bugarrones" in the DR, report tourists request unprotected sex in exchange for higher pay; workers may accept out of economic need.

"One of our participants, a taxi driver, explained that he puts himself at risk every time a [tourist](#) uses his services to buy drugs as he is, obviously, the one driving them to a drug dealer," said Jose Colón Burgos, one of the researchers in the study who is postdoctoral associate at the Center for Research on U.S. Latino HIV/AIDS and Drug Abuse (CRUSADA) in Stempel College. "Another participant explained how extended-stay tourists, who visit the island for several months, will sometimes form

relationships and after a short time, the "couple" no longer uses condoms, and this can be a very risky behavior for both members of the relationship."

The study found that the tourists' perception of lawlessness encouraged risky behaviors that are putting workers in the tourism industry at risk legally as well. Asymmetrical policing in tourism destinations, where tourists can get away with behaviors that are illegal while locals face legal persecution, can lead to stark disparities that directly affect the local population.

"The research is a significant contribution to the public health literature because it helps to define more precisely what touristic escapism is—from the perspective of local industry workers themselves," added Mark Padilla, principal investigator and professor at the Green School.

**More information:** José Félix Colón Burgos et al. An ethnographic study of 'touristic escapism' and health vulnerability among Dominican male tourism workers, *Global Public Health* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/17441692.2019.1651370](https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2019.1651370)

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