

Evaluating Healthcare Access in Tarija: A Comparison of Public and Private Care under Bolivia's Sistema Único De Salud

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To meet the goal of providing free healthcare to all citizens, Bolivia implemented the “Sistema Único De Salud” (SUS) in February of 2019. Although this was an important step in the right direction, SUS is facing challenges in areas such as Tarija, where the resources are limited. My goal for this project was to evaluate the accessibility of healthcare in Tarija, Bolivia, comparing the quality and accessibility of care between SUS and private healthcare services. To address this research question, I synthesized quantitative public health data with qualitative observations made during my three week stay in Tarija in the Summer of 2024. I rotated and shadowed healthcare providers in primary level and tertiary level healthcare facilities. The findings suggested that SUS has increased access to healthcare to its citizens, however, the free healthcare system is still struggling with overcrowding, wait times, and insufficient resources and staff. Private healthcare is available and has faster wait times and better facilities with no limitation in resources, but often out of reach for many of the residents due to its higher cost. While SUS has expanded healthcare access, it can use improvements to its resource allocation, patient management and staff training, in order to face the system's challenges and be able to improve how effective it is in Tarija.