Spatial Stratification of House Infestation by Triatoma infestans in La Rioja, Argentina

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Abstract. Vectorial transmission of Chagas disease has been decreasing over the past few decades because of effective vector control programs in the southern cone countries of South America. However, the disease is still actively transmitted within the Gran Chaco region. In this area, vector populations are abundant and highly prevalent in poor rural houses. This study analyses the spatial pattern of rural house infestation by *Triatoma infestans* in a 56,000 km² area in the province of La Rioja, Argentina, before the re-initiation of systematic activity on vector control intervention. Data on 5,045 rural houses show that infestation has high spatial heterogeneity, with highly infested localities concentrated in a few areas. House infestation has a negative significant relationship with locality size. Rural houses in the region are highly dispersed and this feature has been and will remain a challenge for any vigilance system to be installed in the region.

INTRODUCTION

Control of vectorial transmission of Chagas disease is recognized as a major success in the southern cone countries of South America. Uruguay interrupted vectorial transmission by 1997, Chile in 1999, and Brazil in 2006. In Argentina, five provinces outside the Gran Chaco region (of 19 initially endemic for this disease) certified interruption of vectorial transmission in 2001, but the disease is still actively transmitted in the Gran Chaco region. The epidemiology of Chagas disease in the Gran Chaco is complex, and combines a number of environmental, socioeconomic, and political factors that contribute to the persistence of vectorial transmission of Chagas disease. 1

The Gran Chaco occupies approximately one million km² and is the second largest biome in the Americas after the Amazon region. An east-west rainfall gradient characterizes the three subregions, with the humid chaco to the east, a dry chaco in the middle, and an arid chaco to the southwest, with annual rainfalls of 1,000, 600, and 350 mm, respectively (worldclim.org data, annual average for 1950–2000). The Gran Chaco of Argentina is occupied by 9.1 million persons (according to the last national census of 2001), 20% of whom are established in dispersed rural settlements, with an average human population density of less than 0.5 persons/km². 2

Towards the southern tip of the Gran Chaco, the region of Los Llanos in the province of La Rioja, Argentina, has historically been shown to be a hyper-endemic region for Chagas disease. The area has a subsistence economy based on domestic animals (mainly goats, cows, and chickens) and wild fauna. A few communities in the eastern part of this region occupy an area with sufficient rainfall that enables cattle grazing all year round, but most of the Los Llanos region has rainfall that only allows the raising of goats because the rainy season is from November through February.

Control activities against Chagas disease vectors in La Rioja have a long history, starting with the first evaluation of vector control techniques by insecticide spraying of houses in Villa Mazán (north of La Rioja). 3 Until the beginning of the 1980s, vector control activities were organized as a disciplined vertical program coordinated by the federal government. In 1983, the national government began decentralization of the national program, a process that progressively reduced the resources and personnel available for Chagas disease control. However, from the beginning of the 1990s, vector control activities were strengthened in disease-endemic provinces through resource allocation for personnel, infrastructure, and supplies. Although this program produced in La Rioja some reactivation of vector control activities, it lasted only a few months. Since 1994, the provincial program progressively stopped systematic vector control activities in the rural areas of the Los Llanos region 4,5 and interviews of technical staff working for the provincial program since 1986). In 1999, a vector control intervention was carried out in the department of Belgrano and part of Chamical, promoted by the national program, as part of a research project that finished by the end of 2000. 6 No epidemiologic surveillance was sustained in the area.

After a long period with no systematic control interventions against *Triatoma infestans* in La Rioja, the provincial government approved in 2005 a five-year program to interrupt vectorial transmission in the region of Los Llanos. Initial activities of the new provincial program on Chagas disease began in 2004, with an insecticide spray program to cover all rural and peri-urban houses of cities in the provincial departments located in the region of Los Llanos. We conducted a study in association with the vector control activities carried out by the Chagas disease control program of La Rioja. The purpose of this study was to analyze the spatial distribution of rural house infestation by *T. infestans* in the region of Los Llanos, and characterize the situation before the large-scale insecticide application that started in 2004.

METHODS

Study area. This study was carried out in the provincial departments of Los Llanos (Belgrano, Chamical, Independencia, Ocampo, Quiroga, AV Peñaloza, San Martín, R Vera) and the departments of Felipe Varela (west) and Capital (north) of La Rioja, Argentina (Figure 1).

The region studied included 7,212 houses in localities with less than 2,000 persons, and 4,662 houses in the rural area. Among these 11,874 houses, 5,456 were built of adobe walls and roofs made with a multi-layer structure of mud and local vegetation. 7 Some houses had walls made of hollow cement blocks. All rural houses had some peridomestic structure to

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results

A total of 5,045 houses were identified during this study. These houses were distributed in 827 localities, with a frequency distribution of houses per locality strongly biased to low values (Figure 1). Localities with four or less houses represented 71.1% of all localities and included 22% of all rural houses.

Of these houses, 318 were infested exclusively in the ID, 759 exclusively in the PD, and 806 in both ecotopes, giving a total of 1,883 (37.3%) houses with ID and/or PD infestations. The 1,124 houses infested in the ID (22.3%) were distributed in 464 localities, and the 1,565 houses infested in the PD (31%) were distributed in 552 localities. These figures give dispersion indexes of house infestation of 56.1% for ID and 66.7% for PD infestation (73.9% localities infested in the ID and/or PD). All ID infestation corresponded to *T. infestans*. Other triatomine species were rarely found (< 0.1%) in the PD structures (*T. platensis* and *T. guasayana*).

The proportion of house infestation was inversely correlated with the number of houses in each locality (Figure 2). Among the localities with four or fewer houses, 40% of them had ID infestation and 50% had PD infestation. The fraction

![Figure 1](image1.png)

![Figure 2](image2.png)
of infested houses in a locality decreases as the size of the locality increases. The fraction of houses with PD infestation remained approximately 10% higher than the fraction of houses infested in the ID. Of the 1,124 houses infested in the ID, 39.8% belonged to localities with four or fewer houses (57.8% to localities with eight or fewer houses). Of the 1,565 houses infested in the PD, 33.7% belonged to localities with four or fewer houses (48.6% in localities with 8 or fewer houses).

Of the 5,045 houses evaluated, the information database of the Programa Chagas La Rioja currently has 4,032 georeferenced houses. Of these houses, 188 were infested only in ID structures, 596 were infested only in PD structures, and 541 were infested in both ecotopes (IDPD), giving a total of 1,325 (32.9%) houses infested in the ID and/or PD in 427 localities. House infestation was not homogeneously or randomly distributed in the study area. The spatial scan statistics showed strong spatial heterogeneity in house infestation. Two geographic clusters showed significantly higher house infestation of ID structures. One cluster had a radius of 33.2 km centered at 66.58°S, 31.81°W, and included 171 houses in 25 localities, where ID infestation was 61.5%. This cluster comprised the localities of the departments of San Martín and Rosario V Peñaloza. The other cluster had a radius of 57.7 km centered at 67.50°S, 30.06°W, and included 411 houses in 97 localities, where ID infestation was 79.2%.

When we analyzed the 611 infested localities, a positive linear relationship was detected between the number of houses infested in ID and/or PD in a locality (slope = 1.11, adjusted R² = 0.58), indicating a significant association between ID and PD infestation. The slope value did not differ significantly from 1, suggesting that in the absence of vector control intervention during long periods, ID and PD would be occupied by T. infestans. The number of houses with ID infestation and the number with PD infestation in a locality also showed strong spatial heterogeneity. When this relationship was measured within the high infestation cluster, the association was much stronger than the association within the low infestation cluster; the association in localities outside high and low infestation clusters showed intermediate association strength (Figure 4).

DISCUSSION

Transmission of Chagas disease has been strongly reduced in the southern cone countries of South America mainly on the basis of successful vector control programs and screening coverage of blood banks. However, the situation for Chagas disease in the region of the Gran Chaco has shown a markedly different trend compared with the rest of the southern cone region.

This study shows infestation by T. infestans in dispersed houses in the rural area of Los Llanos (La Rioja, Argentina) during 2004–2007 after almost a 15-year period with virtual absence of systematic activities of the provincial vector control program. The high house infestation values (37% of ID and/or PD infestation) and the dispersal of infestation (74% of localities with ID and/or PD infestation) over a large area (56,000 km²) demonstrate the risk under which these human
communities lived in the absence of a sustained vector control program.

The only previously well-recorded data within the region of Los Llanos was reported by Gurtler and others for the departments of Belgrano and (partially) Chamical, where a research team with the national program for Chagas disease evaluated the performance of different formulations and spraying techniques on the infestation of PD structures. According to their report, 70.5% of households were infested by *T. infestans* by December 2000 (one year after the insecticide spraying), which was much higher than the 20.6% (of 462) of infested PD structures recorded during September–October 2005 in this study in the department of Belgrano and 25.3% (of 641 houses) recorded during February–May 2007. This three-fold decrease in a 5–7 year period is remarkable because no systematic vector control intervention was carried out during this period. However, the area where the interventions reported by Gurtler and others took place is shown to correspond to where one of the cold spots of infestation is located, suggesting that the 2004 interventions had a prolonged impact. In addition, the higher vegetation cover of the eastern region, and slightly improved socioeconomic status of the rural population of this area during the last years through cattle exploitation may have also contributed to lower infestation rates.

The data recorded during this study show that high infestation of houses by *T. infestans* after a long period without systematic vector control is concentrated in the more isolated rural houses or small settlements with eight or fewer houses. Infestation is on average 10% higher in the PD structures and shows significant linear association between ID and PD structures, particularly in areas of highest infestation levels. Rural houses in the region are highly dispersed, and this feature has been and will remain as a challenge for any epidemiologic surveillance system. Many recommendations for the installation of a sustainable surveillance system depend heavily on community involvement, by providing information on infestation to visiting health agents, or communicating the infestation to a community leader trained to spray the house. However, such ideas are difficult to sustain in regions such as Los Llanos, which has many isolated houses or settlements with fewer than eight houses. In the case of the high infestation cluster to the southwest of Los Llanos (including part of the departments of San Martin and Vera), the 411 houses are spread over 89 localities, suggesting a need for 89 community representatives (one for every four houses). An alternative approach would involve health agents making regular evaluation rounds, but this would involve travel of 450–500 km to visit the 411 houses located within the cluster of houses with high infestation southwest of Los Llanos. Currently, there is no system in the area with the appropriate mobility to travel these distances to evaluate the houses with a reasonable frequency.

The spatial analysis of house infestation showed highly infested areas southwest (Departments of San Martin and RV Peñalol) and west (Department of Independencia) of the province. The strength of the PD and ID infestation is higher in localities within the high infestation cluster, suggesting that local causes synergize the infestation and its persistence. These areas represent the extreme situation of house infestation, and unless the quality of the houses and culture of the people change, house infestation by *T. infestans* will remain high in the absence of perpetual vector control interventions. Clusters of houses with high infestation are associated with low income areas, with rural populations living under a subsistence economy, especially in southwestern Los Llanos. In this area, rainfall is scarce (less than 400 mm/year), pastures (if any) are poor, and goats are the only domestic animals people can raise.

*Triatoma infestans* can be eliminated as an epidemiologically important vector. This status was obtained for 80% of the original geographic distribution of this species. Studies carried out especially during the past decade strongly suggest that the remaining 20% will be more difficult to eliminate. A long-term study carried out in the Argentine Chaco region of Santiago del Estero showed that after 20 years of scientifically supervised community participation in an area including approximately 200 rural houses, interruption of the vectorial transmission of *T. cruzi* by *T. infestans* can be attained. However, other approaches independent of scientifically supervised surveillance have to be considered to interrupt vectorial transmission throughout the Gran Chaco, where approximately 200,000 rural houses are still included in the disease-endemic area. Available evidence suggests that surveillance this will be expensive and heavily dependent on national and/or provincial resources, rather than the local communities themselves. The vector control scheme will need the community to inform about the presence of triatomines in the houses, but vector control activities will have to be carried out by professional staff.

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