

MV Transportation woes go beyond Tahoe

Publisher's note: *MV Transportation is the company that used to run BlueGo on the South Shore. MV has sued STATA, the organization that ran BlueGo before it filed for bankruptcy. All parties are working on finding a mediator to help find a resolution to their differences.*

By Zusha Elinson, California Watch

Cash-strapped cities embracing private contractors as saviors of their public transportation systems may find a cautionary tale in Fairfield.

The suburban city halfway between Sacramento and San Francisco was the headquarters of MV Transportation, a rising star in public transit outsourcing. But the company failed to deliver the bus service it promised its hometown, emails, documents and interviews show.



Between 2008 and 2010, the company was fined 295 times by local transit officials for poor performance, including too many accidents, missed bus runs and late buses.

The use of private contractors has grown dramatically in California. Contractors ran 223 million miles of bus and train service in the state in 2011, a 42 percent increase in a decade, according to the National Transit Database. Last year, they picked up 166 million riders in California, up 29 percent. Government-run public transit systems still carried far more riders last year with 1.2 billion, a slight dip from

a decade ago.

Even in the Bay Area, a stronghold of public employee unions, officials are more eagerly considering outsourcing public transit to save money. Alameda County is mulling contracting out bus routes in the growing suburbs of Fremont and Newark, managed for decades by AC Transit. Last summer, Marin County officials considered outsourcing bus service to a private company, deciding against it only when the public agency cut its price to compete.

But the arrangements are not all unmitigated successes. Some fall short of heralded savings. Others bring lower wages and less bus service. In Fairfield, then-Transit Manager George Fink said he couldn't hold politically connected MV Transportation to the contract, calling it a wake-up call to transit agencies thinking about outsourcing.

Riders like retiree Albert Sanchez are the collateral damage. One sunny afternoon, Sanchez and his wife waited for a bus from the mall in Fairfield to their home a few miles away, in Suisun City. Sanchez said the outsourced Fairfield and Suisun Transit – known as FAST – has failed to live up to its optimistic acronym.

"The bus is always late. It's always late," said Sanchez, an inveterate public transit user who moved from San Francisco eight years ago.

Sanchez said that the previous week, he'd waited at the stop for two hours. One Friday, he walked four miles home because buses stop running at 8:30pm.

Documents and interviews reinforce Fink's allegations that the Fairfield City Council and his bosses frequently intervened. Once, Fink said, he clocked the time between his criticism of MV Transportation and a call from his boss, Assistant Public Works Director Wayne Lewis, at 32 minutes.

Lewis, who now leads FAST, said Fink was a rigid manager who always stuck to the “letter of the law.” Lewis added, however, that he understood the frustration city employees feel when contractors “have access to elected officials and staff doesn’t.”

MV Transportation has been a generous donor to local charities and pumped tens of thousands into low-dollar Fairfield City Council races.

“Anything that was critical, 89 percent of the time, it would circle back to us,” Fink said. “They would engage the City Council, and they would call the city manager and then he would talk to me and tell me to back off.”

During Fink’s five-year tenure in Fairfield, which ended in 2010, records and interviews show he was ordered not to issue an audit critical of MV Transportation and to stop penalizing the company for poor performance, and his staff was ordered to halt regular bus inspections.

Chuck Timm, a city councilman until 2011, said the company gained no special access to city leaders and praised its performance.

“As a councilmember and as a citizen, they were great community partners, and they did an excellent job,” Timm said.

Timm prefaced his comments by noting that he was “friends with the boss,” former MV Transportation CEO Jon Monson. Timm also received a \$10,000 campaign donation from the company in 2007, according to state campaign finance filings.

Cristina Russell, an MV Transportation spokeswoman, declined to comment, saying, “A response would unnecessarily cast a negative light on a positive relationship.”

Friction with transit staff

With public transportation in the suburbs, some problems are

embedded in city planning, or lack thereof. Cities like Fairfield are built for cars and often are too spread out to justify extended hours or more regular service. But problems such as late buses and accidents are more closely related to management and oversight.

When Fink arrived in Fairfield in 2005, MV Transportation already was running the bus system, which carries about 1 million passengers a year. When the city put the contract out to bid again, he and other city officials added penalties for poor service. MV won an \$18.2 million, four-year contract. Soon after, the fines started rolling in.

Over a two-year period beginning in 2008, the company was fined 295 times for a total of \$164,000, according to a 2010 city audit, released in place of the one Fink sought to issue. MV was fined for the 14 months when the preventable accident rate exceeded the allowed 1 per 100,000 miles. FAST officials fined MV nine times for not meeting the agreed-upon 90 percent on-time arrival rate and 18 times for buses that never showed at all. The company was penalized twice for drivers using cellphones while driving, six times for drivers speeding and 13 times for drivers being out of uniform.

MV executives were furious about the fines. In meetings with the FAST staff, they complained they were “losing money” and the deal they signed was too punitive, according to meeting notes and internal memos.

As the friction between Fink and the company peaked in the summer of 2009, Monson, then MV’s board chairman, made \$10,000 campaign donations to City Councilman John Mraz and City Councilwoman Catherine Moy. Those were hefty sums, even in a city with no campaign contribution limits. When contacted for comment, Mraz called Fink an expletive and hung up the phone. Moy did not return emails or phone calls.

Fines, inspections put aside

Monson and other executives began to meet directly with the City Council instead of city transit staff. In a 2010 memo, Lewis – the assistant public works director – complained that the “city has allowed MV to circumvent the normal management chain. Often, local issues are discussed and resolved without the input of transit staff by the City Manager’s office, City Council, and MV executives.”

Fines against MV were halted by the city for months, and old ones weren’t paid as the city manager overruled some on appeal. Bus inspections that had been yielding fines also were stopped.

In an interview, Lewis said he killed an audit of MV ordered by Fink because it was too punitive. He said that while many of the fines were valid, “there were enough of them that ... would seem like they were frivolous,” such as one for a bus driver’s untucked shirttail.

Lewis added that Fairfield and Suisun Transit and MV Transportation are “in a good place now.”

But problems persisted after Fink left in 2010. The bus service performance “exhibited mostly negative trends in all areas” related to efficiency and productivity, according to a 2010 audit by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, which oversees transit funding in the Bay Area. An MV spokeswoman declined to comment, and Lewis did not return calls seeking comment on the audit.

And in June 2011, an MV Transportation bus operator was involved in a fatal collision. The bus driver, identified as Dale Lee Karuza in multiple lawsuits, was turning left across a Suisun City street when he collided with an oncoming car, killing a passenger. Police cited the primary cause of the collision as the bus failing to yield right of way, according to the California Highway Patrol’s summary. Investigators also concluded that the car was speeding.

Fink now works at the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission in Stockton. Reflecting back on his time in Fairfield, he said it taught him a lesson about outsourcing public transit.

“If you had a contractor that wanted to run the business and not maximize their profit at every turn, then it would be fine,” Fink said. “As it tends to work out, you’re spending 85 percent of the time making sure that they’re doing everything in the contract instead of doing the things you need to be doing, like getting grant money doing transit planning.”

Global temps highest in 4,000 years

By Justin Gillis, New York Times

Global temperatures are warmer than at any time in at least 4,000 years, scientists reported Thursday, and over the coming decades are likely to surpass levels not seen on the planet since before the last ice age.

Previous research had extended back roughly 1,500 years, and suggested that the rapid temperature spike of the past century, believed to be a consequence of human activity, exceeded any warming episode during those years. The new work confirms that result while suggesting the modern warming is unique over a longer period.



Lake Tahoe has had record highs this winter. Photo/LTN file

Even if the temperature increase from human activity that is projected for later this century comes out on the low end of estimates, scientists said, the planet will be at least as warm as it was during the warmest periods of the modern geological era, known as the Holocene, and probably warmer than that.

That epoch began about 12,000 years ago, after changes in incoming sunshine caused vast ice sheets to melt across the Northern Hemisphere. Scientists believe the moderate climate of the Holocene set the stage for the rise of human civilization roughly 8,000 years ago and continues to sustain it by, for example, permitting a high level of food production.

In the new research, scheduled for publication on Friday in the journal *Science*, Shaun Marcott, an earth scientist at Oregon State University, and his colleagues compiled the most meticulous reconstruction yet of global temperatures over the past 11,300 years, virtually the entire Holocene. They used indicators like the distribution of microscopic, temperature-sensitive ocean creatures to determine past climate.

Like previous such efforts, the method gives only an approximation. Michael E. Mann, a researcher at Pennsylvania State University who is an expert in the relevant techniques

but was not involved in the new research, said the authors had made conservative data choices in their analysis.

“It’s another important achievement and significant result as we continue to refine our knowledge and understanding of climate change,” Mann said.

Though the paper is the most complete reconstruction of global temperature, it is roughly consistent with previous work on a regional scale. It suggests that changes in the amount and distribution of incoming sunlight, caused by wobbles in the earth’s orbit, contributed to a sharp temperature rise in the early Holocene.

The climate then stabilized at relatively warm temperatures about 10,000 years ago, hitting a plateau that lasted for roughly 5,000 years, the paper shows. After that, shifts of incoming sunshine prompted a long, slow cooling trend.

The cooling was interrupted, at least in the Northern Hemisphere, by a fairly brief spike during the Middle Ages, known as the Medieval Warm Period. (It was then that the Vikings settled Greenland, dying out there when the climate cooled again.)

Scientists say that if natural factors were still governing the climate, the Northern Hemisphere would probably be destined to freeze over again in several thousand years. “We were on this downward slope, presumably going back toward another ice age,” Marcott said.

Instead, scientists believe the enormous increase in greenhouse gases caused by industrialization will almost certainly prevent that.

During the long climatic plateau of the early Holocene, global temperatures were roughly the same as those of today, at least within the uncertainty of the estimates, the new paper shows. This is consistent with a large body of past research focused

on the Northern Hemisphere, which showed a distribution of ice and vegetation suggestive of a relatively warm climate.

The modern rise that has recreated the temperatures of 5,000 years ago is occurring at an exceedingly rapid clip on a geological time scale, appearing in graphs in the new paper as a sharp vertical spike. If the rise continues apace, early Holocene temperatures are likely to be surpassed within this century, Marcott said.

Mann pointed out that the early Holocene temperature increase was almost certainly slow, giving plants and creatures time to adjust. But he said the modern spike would probably threaten the survival of many species, in addition to putting severe stresses on human civilization.

“We and other living things can adapt to slower changes,” Mann said. “It’s the unprecedented speed with which we’re changing the climate that is so worrisome.”

Tahoe drug agents busy with heroin, pot

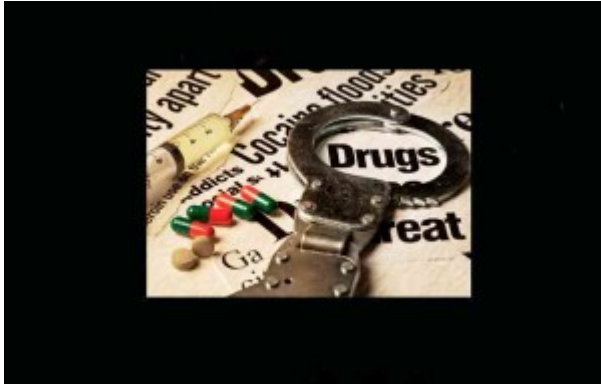
By Kathryn Reed

Bad guys don’t like to commit too many crimes in the winter. Not the obvious ones, any way. Still, narcotics officers on the South Shore are plenty busy.

Indoor grows is one activity that increases in winter. And it’s not for medicinal purposes. People are shipping marijuana back and forth from Tahoe.

“We pick off packages full of weed or money,” Jeff Catchings

told *Lake Tahoe News*.



Catchings is the commander of the South Lake Tahoe El Dorado Narcotics Task Force – or SLEDNET for short.

Working on finding the big dealers is SLEDNET's goal – no matter the drug.

Heroin use is back up after declining for a spell. On the California side of the South Shore there were 26 heroin overdose deaths in an 18-month period starting in November 2010.

"Heroin deaths are higher than vehicle, homicide ... it beats everything," Catchings said. "We do have a drug problem, that is obvious."

SLEDNET has been operating since 1988. It was threatened with being shutdown a little more than a year ago because of funding. And, still, the agency that is run by the state and staffed with mostly local law enforcement officers remains on unstable ground.

El Dorado County Sheriff John D'Agostini told *Lake Tahoe News* he sees value in the task force and is doing what he can to keep it going.

The state Department of Justice is weighing whether to keep the 27 task forces in California going. June is the latest a decision is expected.

South Lake Tahoe Police Department has two officers in SLEDNET, EDSO one. Catchings is with DOJ.

While the California Highway Patrol is supposed to be part of SLEDNET, it does not currently have an officer assigned to the group. This could change as people go through upcoming academy classes.

Douglas County used to be part of SLEDNET, but with standards between the states changing, those deputies could no longer participate. Alpine County had a member in the past who was funded via a grant.

While those counties are not part of SLEDNET, the agencies still work together in other ways.

D'Agostini would like a member of probation to be part of the team. Probation can't do forced searches, Catchings said, so some details with that agency need to be worked out.

"It's not just narcotics. We are doing everything," Catchings said of his workload.

SLEDNET was integral in tracking down the phone use of the girl who died following SnowGlobe, and eventually locating the last friend to see her alive.

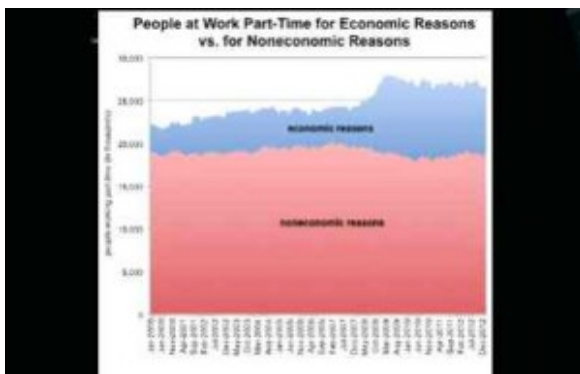
Part-time workers increasing during economic recovery

By Catherine Rampell, New York Times

One of the more unsettling trends in this recovery has been the rise of part-time work.

We are nowhere near recovering the jobs lost in the recession, and the track record looks even worse when you consider that so many of the jobs lost were full time, whereas so many of those gained have been part time.

When the recession began, 16.9 percent of those working usually worked part time. That share rose sharply in 2008 and 2009 and has not fallen much since then. Today the share of workers with part-time jobs is 19.2 percent.



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, via Haver Analytics. Graph/New York Times

This would not be so troubling if people were electing to work fewer hours. But that is not the case.

Basically all of the growth in part-time workers has been among people reluctantly working few hours because of either slack business conditions or an inability to find a full-time job. Together these people are considered to be working part time “for economic reasons.” Their numbers have grown by 3.4 million since the downturn began.

The number of people working part time “for noneconomic reasons,” on the other hand, has fallen by 639,000 since the

recession began.

These trends are part of the reason that many people believe the standard unemployment rate of 7.7 percent understates the extent of underemployment. If you include both part-time workers who want full-time work and people who have stopped looking for jobs but still want to work, the unemployment rate is actually 14.3 percent.

It's not clear what's behind the growth in part-time work. It probably has to do mostly with companies' not having as much need for labor today as they did when the economy was strong. The Affordable Care Act also has incentives for employers to keep their count of full-time workers below 50, but that has probably affected only a few companies at the margin at this point.

USFS rethinking fire policy

By KABC-TV

SAN FRANCISCO – After coming in \$400 million over budget following last year's busy fire season, the Forest Service is altering its approach and may let more fires burn instead of attacking every one.

The move, quietly made in a letter last month by Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell, brings the agency more in line with the National Parks Service and back to what it had done until last year.

Tidwell described the change as simply an "evolution of the science and the expertise" with more emphasis on pre-fire planning and managed burns, which involve purposely setting

fires to eliminate dead trees and other fuels that could help a wildfire quickly spread.

It also answers critics who said the agency wasted money and endangered firefighters by battling fires in remote areas that posed little or no danger.

The more aggressive “kill all fires” approach instituted last year was prompted by fears that fires left unchecked would quickly devour large swaths of the drought-stricken West, Tidwell said. New Mexico and Colorado reported record fire seasons in 2012, and with dry conditions remaining in much of the region 2013 could be another bad year in the West.

This approach, however, angered environmentalists, who said it was expensive and ignored fire’s natural ability to rid the landscape of dangerous fuels and bolster forest ecology.

But letting fires burn also has its dangers, even in remote areas.

Last year, the Parks Service allowed a fire to burn that started as a half-acre blaze in remote Lassen Volcanic National Park in Northern California. What became the Reading Fire eventually required firefighters and ended up charring 42 square miles of forestlands as it spread outside the park’s boundaries to lands managed by the Forest Service and California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

The fire damaged the region’s timber industry and cost an estimated \$15 million to suppress. No structures were harmed.

State money to help fix Highway 89

The South Shore is getting a chunk of the \$333 million in California Transportation Commission money that was awarded Tuesday.

El Dorado County is getting \$12.4 million for a water quality collection and treatment facility project on Highway 89 from one-tenth mile north of the Eagle Falls sidehill viaduct to Meeks Creek Bridge.

This is one of 91 projects funded in part with \$233 million from Proposition 1B, a transportation bond approved by voters in 2006. Another \$100 million is from assorted transportation accounts funded by state and federal dollars.

The county is also getting money for improvements on Highway 50 east of Camp Sacramento.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

January not good for Nevada casinos

Lack of snow and the Chinese New Year falling in February contributed to Nevada's drop in gaming revenue in January.

The numbers were off 12.44 percent compared to a year ago, with \$909.2 million collected, according to the state Gaming

Control Board on March 8.

Plus, the Super Bowl is now in February, too, which is often a cash cow for the sportbooks.

Stateline casinos were down, but not nearly to the state level. They were off 2.62 percent compared to the prior year. North Lake Tahoe casinos, though, were up by 0.62 percent.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

T.J. Maxx caught in middle of water issue

By Kathryn Reed

A potential \$409,907 water problem is beginning to simmer and could reach boiling stage if a solution is not found by the end of the month.

When T.J. Maxx opened last fall in South Lake Tahoe it did so with a temporary agreement in place between Lukins Water District and South Tahoe Public Utility District. The building is a Lukins customer.



T.J. Maxx opened in November without a definitive source of water for fire suppression. Photo/LTN

Days before the store was to open the fire marshal said there was not adequate water pressure to suppress a fire. This had to do with the store putting in a whole new sprinkler system.

An agreement was quickly reached that if there were a fire, the intertie between the water companies would be opened so the fire could be extinguished. The agreement expires June 1 and Lukins has until April 1 to present STPUD with a permanent solution.

Jennifer Lukins, who runs the 956-customer company, was at the STPUD meeting March 7, where the board directed staff to continue working on the issue. Cass Amacker was there representing the Garfinkle family. The Garfinkles, who are from the Bay Area, are the longtime owners of the building.

As a small private water company regulated by the California Public Utilities Commission, Lukins' job is to provide domestic water, not water for fire protection. That is part of the conundrum.

This issue could have been completely avoided a handful of years ago when the Garfinkles were approached by STPUD when the district was doing a project on Highway 50. The district wanted an easement across the property and in turn offered the Garfinkles a free water connection. The Garfinkles never

responded to the district's offer.

That water connection has a six-figure value.

One of the alternatives outlined in Thursday's STPUD board packet is the \$409,907 one-time capacity charge fee for the 8-inch intertie.

Lukins told *Lake Tahoe News* she did not know about that option and the cost until she read the agenda.

"We have an existing connection and they want to charge us," Lukins said.

Of the six options presented by South Tahoe PUD, Lukins likes No. 5.

It says in part, "Leave the intertie open, with or without the 'loop' restriction, and install a pressure trip valve at the intertie which would only operate if the pressure dropped to a preselected figure in the Lukins water system. ... If the board desires to entertain a fire only option for the intertie, and assume that the trip valve would only register during a fire event, the charge would be \$147,566.52 for an 8-inch fire only connection."

Lukins said her research shows that the trip valve should cost \$40,000. That's the route she would really like to go.

Lukins, even if the company wanted to, would need CPUC approval to spend money on the upgrades and the state would determine how and which ratepayers would be affected.

Ultimately, though, whatever route the water districts determine is the best course will likely be the financial responsibility of the landlord and/or tenant.

"I think what is best is for better fire protection," Lukins said, even if that means that property ultimately ends up becoming a South Tahoe PUD customer. That is part of last

year's agreement, that if a resolution is not found, STPUD gets the Garfinkle building as a customer without having to compensate Lukins.

Medical condition may have led to crash at Denny's

Updated: March 7 10pm:

Police believe it's possible Todd Jackson, 28, suffered a medical emergency Thursday that resulted in his vehicle landing at the entrance of Denny's restaurant.

He was driving his sons to Tahoe Valley Elementary. The 11- and 8-year-old were treated and released from Barton Memorial Hospital.

Jackson suffered moderate injuries and was transported to Renown Medical Center in Reno for trauma care.

Jackson's vehicle was swerving across multiple lanes of traffic before crashing into the northeast corner of Denny's.

The cause of the accident is still under investigation.

It was a grand slam breakfast of a different kind at Denny's in South Lake Tahoe on Thursday morning.

An SUV slammed into the building at the corner of Highway 50 and Al Tahoe Boulevard just after 8:30am.

Sgt. Shannon Laney, who is handling the incident, was not immediately available to provide details as he was still working the scene at 9am.



A vehicle took out the front of Denny's in South Lake Tahoe on March 7. Photo/Provided

Paul Schmidt, who owns the restaurant, told *Lake Tahoe News*, "It just happened so we are trying to figure out our next step."

He is waiting to hear what the fire department has to say as to whether the restaurant will be able to stay open.

This is not the first time Schmidt has had an incident beyond his control adversely affect his restaurant.

"I was just joking with my wife that my luck is not very good with that store," Schmidt said.

Schmidt bought the franchise in December 2007. Two weeks later a natural gas explosion closed the restaurant for several months. A couple people sustained minor injuries in that incident, whereas three people were taken to Barton Memorial Hospital with unknown injuries in the March 7 accident.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Study: U.S. shines in cancer treatment

By Michaelleen Doucleff, NPR

When it comes to the state of the nation's health, the U.S. seems to get one poor grade after another. Despite spending more on health care, we've been slipping behind other high-income countries for life expectancy and healthy living.

But when you drill down into the data and look at some specific diseases, there are areas where the U.S. isn't doing too badly, scientists from the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation reported Monday.

The U.S. tops the list at treating brain cancers and ranks third for colorectal cancer when compared to 18 other high-income countries. We're also doing better than average for strokes, falls, stomach cancer and breast cancer.

"Start with the simplest metric of health – death rates – and the U.S. does rather poorly compared to Western Europe, Canada, New Zealand and Australia," says Christopher Murray, director of IHME and a professor at the University of Washington. "But we've made a lot of progress in some of the cancers because of the aggressive treatments we do here," he tells NPR.

For many other diseases, though, the U.S. still has a lot of catching up to do.

When compared with European countries that spend quite a bit on health care, the U.S. fares worse than average for domestic violence, drug abuse and self-harm. And Greece is the only

place in Western Europe with more deaths from road crashes than the U.S.

We rank nearly at the bottom for stopping heart and lung diseases, diabetes and kidney problems. This cluster of illnesses, Murray says, is largely the consequence of Americans' biggest risk factors: poor diet, smoking and high blood pressure.

Last December, Murray and his team compiled a mammoth analysis of 235 causes of deaths worldwide and 67 risk factors for various illnesses in 2010. Their latest report, published Monday, takes a look country by country.

To help make sense of all these numbers, they've built some nifty tools for visualizing the data. You can compare disease prevalence and risk factors for each country and region. You can even zero in on dietary choices, such as average salt intake and omega-3 consumption, for each country.

"When you put all components of diet together, the U.S. is worse than all countries in Europe," Murray says. "But the U.K. comes close to us."

High blood pressure is still a major problem here, he says, but it's not dramatically worse than in many parts of Europe, including those countries that we associate with the Mediterranean diet.

"Take a place like Spain. Its burden of high blood pressure is about equal to that in the U.S. for women," Murray says. "That's probably because of their high consumption of processed meat."

Europe also shares the U.S.'s biggest cause of disability: back pain.

In fact, lower back pain was the leading cause of disability globally in 2010, with depression coming in second. Anxiety

ranks in the top 10 everywhere in the world, except Eastern Europe and East Asia, while Alzheimer's disease and dementia have surged across high-income countries in the past decade.

"The medical profession hasn't been very successful at coming up with solutions and treatments for mental disorders and musculoskeletal disorders," Murray says. "We haven't had any major breakthroughs for these, like we have for cardiovascular disease."

This IHME work was sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which also supports NPR.

Other interesting patterns emerge when you look at regional levels, Murray says. For instance, there's a "homicide belt" that runs from Guatemala down to Brazil, in which murder is the dominant cause of death for men, and a "suicide belt" cuts through Southeast Asia to China, which primarily involves woman.

"There's always all these twists and turns to public health," Murray says. "That's why it's so important to have the risks and causes of deaths at the country level."