

## **Preliminary Results Of Study On Guatemala City's Street Children**

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*Category/Department: General*

*Published: Friday, November 30, 1990*

On Nov. 27, Silvia del Cid Avalos, a political scientist at the University of San Carlos in Guatemala City, presented preliminary results of a recent study on Guatemalan street children to an audience at the University of New Mexico's Latin American Institute. Her results, contained in a report titled, "Obstaculos para el desarrollo: los menores dentro de la crisis," were based on interviews with 94 children residing on the streets of Guatemala City. According to Del Cid's estimates, of 3.4 million Guatemalan children and adolescents (18 years of age and under), 1.2 million reside in urban areas. Of the latter, about 1% live on the streets, and in Guatemala City, the number is estimated at 3,000. The study's 94 respondents included 84 boys, and 10 girls, ranging in age from 7 to 17. Forty percent of the informants were illiterate. Of those who could read, just 4% had finished primary school. A large majority of the respondents were born in urban areas, and over half had lived in Guatemala City since birth. Seven respondents were born outside the country, most in El Salvador. Del Cid emphasized that the main reason children live in the streets is hunger. Sixty-six of the interviewees said adults had asked them to seek work, or they decided on their own to find work. The remainder said they left home due to neglect, or physical and/or sexual abuse. Del Cid said that children who leave their homes in search of work in the informal sector usually discover there is little they can do to earn a living. They are quickly socialized by street children they come into contact with, and within a few months stop spending time at home, opting to spend all their time on the streets. Ninety percent of the interviewees had been on the streets for over a month, and 16 of the boys for over a year. Del Cid said that 34% of the respondents do not maintain contact with family members, nor do they wish to. Another 42% regularly visit home, and 28% see family members on an occasional basis. Del Cid said that very few street children are of indigenous origin, which she attributed to the indigenous communities' traditional, "strict" family structure which produces stability as well as loyalty to the family unit. She said when indigenous parents send their children to the cities to work they usually arrange the employment themselves (often domestic service). The children later return to their home villages. Over 75% of the respondents said they survived by stealing and begging. Del Cid said that overall, 20% of girls who live on the streets admit to occasional prostitution. She added that while boys are also involved in prostitution, no one of the boys interviewed in her study admitted such activity. A few of the 94 respondents worked on an irregular basis in marginal informal sector activities, such as watching and washing cars, sweeping or taking out garbage for shops or restaurants, and carrying groceries or packages. Del Cid presented macro-level statistics on underemployment and poverty among Guatemalan workers, rural-urban migration, malnutrition, infant mortality and illiteracy. She said that 65.4% of the urban population and 73.5% of rural population lives in poverty. Guatemala's infant mortality in 1988 was 46.55 per thousand. Del Cid pointed out that an estimated 73% of children under five years of age suffer from malnutrition. Of the 60% of all children who begin primary schooling, 73% drop out before they finish. Forty-two percent of all Guatemalans over age 7 are illiterate. Del Cid asserted that the circumstances which drive children into the streets are rooted in the extreme poverty experienced by the vast majority of Guatemalans. She concluded that solutions to the

"street children phenomenon" lie not in better education or in reducing the crime rate, but rather in social structural change. Social change is necessary in order to create conditions in which a majority of Guatemalans' basic material needs are met.

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