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At Least One-Fifth of Mexican Children Live in Poverty

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Extreme poverty, a lack of access to education, poor health, and crime are among the factors afflicting a significantly large percentage of children in Mexico. A recent study by the Innocenti Research Center, an affiliate of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), indicates that at least one-fifth of Mexican children live below the national poverty line. A separate report published by UNICEF in early March said Mexico's poverty rate compared poorly with other member countries of the Organization for Cooperation and Development (OECD).

In that report, Mexico had the lowest ranking of the 31 countries, with 28 out of every 100 children (28%) living in poverty. This was a stark contrast to Spain with 13% and Denmark with 2.4%. The most striking trend, say UNICEF and other international organizations, is that one in three children in Mexico live in poverty from a very early age.

An index created by UNICEF especially for Mexico (Indice de los Derechos de los Ninos en Mexico) gives the country a rating of 5.71 of a possible 10. In a companion report released in mid-April, UNICEF said this index measures opportunities and development from birth to age 5.

The rating, which considered statistics collected in 2003, was based on a scale that measures health, education, nutrition, and other values needed for a healthy childhood. UNICEF is in the process of compiling data for two other age groups of children: 6 to 12, and 13 to 18. Even though the data for those age groups is not yet available, UNICEF and other organizations, as well as several government agencies, have released data suggesting that Mexico has made very little progress over the years in alleviating the plight of poor children.

"The Mexican government is doing practically nothing to reduce child poverty," said UNICEF researcher Ann Wright. President Vicente Fox's government acknowledges that child poverty remains a major problem in Mexico, but administration sources say they are attempting to tackle the problem through programs like Oportunidades and other federal anti-poverty initiatives.

The Fox government created the Oportunidades program in 2002 as a vehicle to help poor families in urban and rural communities. The program provides direct assistance to households to spend on health care, child nutrition, and education. "We have reduced the number of Mexicans living in extreme poverty by 62%," Social Development Secretary Josefina Vazquez Mota said in mid-April.

According to the World Bank and the UN, anyone making the equivalent of US$1 a day or less is living in "extreme poverty." Fox government faulted for minimal efforts Critics say the administration's anti-poverty efforts have had a minimal effect on the well-being of the country. "It is a great lie to say that extreme poverty is down 62%. Poverty has not fallen," said Colegio de Mexico social scientist Julio Boltvinik, also a federal deputy for the center-left Partido de la
Revolucion Democratica (PRD). "If anything, we have a more unequal distribution of wealth." Social
scientists say childhood poverty can often be measured by poor health. A recent census discovered
that 1.4 million children under age 5 suffered from malnutrition in Mexico.

**Government programs fall short**

In particular, the trend affects children who live in indigenous communities in southern Mexico.
Many critics fault the administration for taking only token actions to improve the well-being of
children in Mexico. For example, they say the Oportunidades program, while giving more families
access to food, often does not provide adequate nutrition to young children. The program has failed
to reduce the incidence of anemia among young children, especially those two years of age or
younger, said experts from the Instituto Nacional de Salud Publica (INSP). The most recent nutrition
census (Encuesta Nacional de Nutricion), conducted in 1999 before Fox took office, found that 27% of
children in Mexico suffered from anemia. Among indigenous children, the rate was 35%.

Experts say anemia rates have changed little during the past four years. The Mexico City daily
newspaper El Universal reports that some families in the states of Oaxaca, Puebla, Hidalgo, and
Veracruz feed baby food distributed through Oportunidades to their hogs because the children find
it repugnant. "We hope that the animals get some benefit from this food," one mother in Hidalgo
state told the newspaper. Poor nutrition also afflicts poor children in urban areas, particularly those
who live on the streets.

Advocates for the rights of street children say many of these youngsters survive on junk food. This
pattern, combined with frequent drug use, contributes to many premature deaths among this
population, said Veronica Esparza Ochoa, director of the nongovernmental organization Artistas
por la Calle. Heladio Ramirez, head of the Confederacion Nacional Campesina (CNC), estimates
that 50% of the children who live in rural areas are malnourished, a large majority of whom live in
indigenous communities.

Some members of Congress have also joined in the criticism against the administration for its lack
of commitment to improving the health of Mexican children. In early March, the Partido Verde
Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) held a protest in Mexico City after the Secretaria de Salud (SSA)
delayed implementation of a reform to Article 36 of Mexico's Health Law (Ley General de Salud).
The reform proposed by the PVEM, and approved by the Senate in December 2004, would make
health care entirely free for poor children at all hospitals in Mexico.

**Infant mortality remains high**

The administration finally published the decree in late May, effectively agreeing to implement
the law. Another sign of the poor health of many children in Mexico is the still-high rate of infant
mortality. Infant deaths have fallen dramatically from 134 per 1,000 live births in the early 1960s
to about 28 per 1,000 in 2003. Since then, UNICEF has set a goal for Mexico to reduce its infant-
mortality rate by half by 2010.

Critics say the infant-mortality rate could have declined further if the Fox government had devoted
more attention and resources to promoting nutrition among women, infants, and children. "More
than 200,000 young children have lost their lives during the four years that Fox has held office," said
actress Ofelia Medina, an anti-poverty advocate. Many children leave school early to enter work force. For generations, childhood poverty in Mexico has translated to limited schooling and early entry into the work force.

UNICEF estimates that at least 2 million children in Mexico do not receive any formal schooling. Furthermore, a study by the Centro Nacional de Evaluacion para la Educacion Superior (CENEVAL) found that one in three children do not complete the equivalent of a junior high school education. Those children who do not go to school invariably end up in the work force in one way or another, whether at home or outside the home.

The government statistics agency (Instituto Nacional de Estadisticas, Geografia e Informatica, INEGI) reported that 3.3 million children ages 6 to 14 were working in 2002, or about 15.7% of all children in that age range. This is a small decline from 3.9 million working children in 1995, which was nearly one in five children. INEGI's statistics may be low, however. A separate set of data from UNICEF indicates that 4 million children in Mexico are members of the work force, of whom 2 million are under 12 years of age.

Child labor a problem in urban, rural areas

Regardless of total numbers, child labor is common both in rural and urban areas. In many cases, children in rural and indigenous communities leave school to help tend the family crops or perform other tasks related to subsistence agriculture. In some cases, the father and older brothers have left the family to seek employment in the US. Rural children are also employed by farm cooperatives to help pick crops. "They receive only about 20 pesos (US$1.83) for eight hours of work," said the CNC's Heladio Ramirez.

Labor exploitation is also a problem for children in Mexico who are able to obtain a formal job in the city. In a recent case that made the headlines, labor organizations accused the toy company Rubie of employing 13- to 15-year-old children to produce clothing for dolls at the company's plant in Tepeji del Rio in Hidalgo state. The children labored at the plant for nine hours a day, said the Federacion de Trabajadores de Vanguardia Obrera (FTVO).

The public sector is also guilty of using child labor for daily work tasks. The Mexico City daily newspaper La Crisis reported that authorities in Mexico City employed several children ages 10 to 12 to be part of a clean-up crew along Avenida de la Reforma, one of the largest and busiest avenues in the city. "[This action] is an abuse of the rights of children and a violation of the provision in the Mexican Constitution that prohibits employment of children under 14 years of age," said the article in La Crisis. "These youngsters are also exposed to dangerous conditions by working on Avenida de la Reforma."

One of the most evident byproducts of childhood poverty is the increase in the number of street children in urban areas, particularly in Mexico City. There are no accurate statistics on the number of youngsters who live on the streets in Mexico, but authorities indicate the numbers appear to have increased in recent years. Conservative estimates place the number of street children in Mexico in the tens of thousands.
"During the day they beg or work in the streets juggling, washing car windows, selling candy, shining shoes, etc. to collect money for basic needs like food and clothing," said reporter Siti Sarah Halim, who wrote a feature on street children in Mexico for the Malaysia-based New Straits Times. "Many fall victim to abuse and exploitation by the police, sex and drug merchants, petty criminals, and even relatives."

**Girls victims of human trafficking**

Many girls are kidnapped or lured by false promises of employment to cities along the US-Mexico border or even smuggled into the US and then forced into prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation. More than 80% of the girls reported missing by their parents during a given year are between the 10 and 14 years of age, said a report compiled by the private Fundacion Nacional de Investigacion de Ninos Robados y Desaparecidos.

The report said the total number of "disappeared" children over the past six years is close to 130,000, or an average of more than 20,000 per year. "This is a very worrisome trend," said the report. In many instances, the girls end up in places like Tijuana, where prostitution has become a flourishing business. Child prostitution has thrived in Mexico in part because of a lack of legal codes to punish those who sexually exploit children, said Jorge Bedoya, director of the Bilateral Safety Corridor Coalition, a US-Mexican organization that is attempting to address the problem in Tijuana.

Some of the kidnappers smuggle the girls into the US, where they are forced into prostitution in major US cities. In California, Assemblywoman Sally Lieber and San Francisco District Attorney Kamala Harris have teamed up to sponsor legislation in the state to outlaw activities promoting forced labor. "Shockingly, California law does not make human trafficking a crime," Lieber and Harris said in an opinion piece in The San Francisco Chronicle.

Lieber and Harris used the example of Mexican girls who were smuggled into the US to work at a brothel in New Jersey. "The girls were all from different parts of Mexico, but they shared the common link of poverty, minimal education, and limited prospects," they said in the piece. These girls, they said, were lured to the US with promises of marriage or employment. "Instead, the girls ranging in age from 14 to 18 became modern- day slaves, victims of the growing epidemic of exploitation known as human trafficking," said Lieber and Harris. "They were smuggled into the United States and forced to work as prostitutes in a brothel in Plainfield, NJ."

**Many youngsters cross US-Mexico border on their own**

Some Mexican youngsters do not have to be kidnapped or lured with favors to cross the US-Mexico border. A study by the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB) showed that 150,000 Mexican youngsters attempted to cross into the US without papers last year. Roughly, one-third of those children made the trip by themselves rather than as part of a family unit. Sometimes the children cross the border with smugglers who are paid by parents or relatives to bring them into the US. SEGOB said more than half of these minors reached their destination without being caught by the US Border Patrol or other authorities. "Of the 150,000 minors who crossed...only 60,000 were deported," said the SEGOB report.
The minors who are deported often do not travel back to their home communities but linger near the US-Mexico border to seek another opportunity to cross into the US. This has prompted authorities in border communities and states to create programs to provide deported minors with shelter and other services. In some instances, this means attempting to reunite the minors with relatives. "In the past, some of these children were lost and ended up homeless," said Lourdes Laborin de Bours, president of Desarrollo Integral de la Familia in Sonora, a state family social services agency. Bours said Sonora state is in the process of creating shelters for deported minors in three cities that border Arizona: San Luis Rio Colorado, Nogales, and Agua Prieta. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on June 8, reported at 10.88 pesos per US$1.00] (Sources: CIA World Factbook; http://www.unicef.org; Spanish news service EFE, 02/10/05, 03/31/05; The Arizona Republic, 04/05/05; Associated Press, 01/19/05, 04/13/05; New Straits Times-Malaysia, 04/25/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 03/09/05, 04/21/05, 04/29/05; La Crisis, 05/03/05; El Financiero, 03/15/05, 03/17/05, 04/28/05, 05/10/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 01/03/05, 01/31/05, 03/08/05, 03/26/05, 03/28/05, 04/01/05, 05/20/05; Notimex, 01/26/05, 03/31/05, 04/13/05, 04/15/05, 05/23/05; The San Francisco Chronicle, 05/24/05; El Universal, 03/01/05, 02/03/05, 03/07/05, 03/26/05, 03/31/05, 04/04/05, 04/13/05, 04/29/05, 05/23/05, 05/25/05; Los Angeles Times, 05/25/05; La Jornada, 03/02/05, 03/26/05, 04/14/05, 04/27/05, 05/02/05, 05/05/05, 05/24/05, 05/26/05, 05/27/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 03/01/05, 03/11/05, 04/04/05, 04/14/05, 06/02/05)