

## Colonia residents remain 'forgotten'.

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Along the dusty roads of unpaved streets in some of this country's poorest neighborhoods, children play, do their chores, attend school, and dream of improving their lot in life. Simply ask ten-year-old Maria Luisa, whose family lives in an unincorporated development along the Texas-Mexico border, what she wants to be when she grows up, and the dark-eyed girl replies that she'd like to be an architect someday. "So I can build my father a home," she added.

Maria Luisa is one of thousands of children mainly from Mexican American families living in colonias, quasi-legal developments in unincorporated rural areas, often lacking basic utility services. Hundreds of colonias exist, primarily along the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border. Despite media attention and appropriations targeted to assist colonia residents, few changes have actually come through, because of bureaucratic entanglements from a number of agencies.

Texas has more than 1,526 colonias. These developments are also found along the New Mexico, Arizona, and California borders, but Texas has both the largest number of colonias and the largest colonia population.

"Colonias are the only housing choice for thousands of poor families facing housing costs in border cities well beyond their economic means," said Jorge Chapa, associate professor at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs and associate dean in the Office of Graduate Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. "They are a market response to a number of economic and political changes in the border region which have resulted in an acute shortage of housing and building lots for low-income working families," Chapa explained.

Not surprisingly, many colonias experience severe public health problems, low educational attainment, and dismal living conditions. A study by UT-Austin, however, indicates that most live in traditional two-parent families, are employed, and receive almost no federal entitlements such as food stamps. Contrary to public perception, the great majority (85 percent) of residents are U.S. citizens, not illegal immigrants.

In Texas a number of government entities have focused on the problem, including the Texas Water Development Board, the Texas Department of Commerce, Health and Human Services, Housing and Community Affairs, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the University of Texas, Texas A&M University, and others. At last count, at least six

different official definitions of colonia existed among the various governmental agencies. In 1995 the Texas Legislature approved \$300 million for water and sewage projects in colonias. To date, however, most colonias have yet to benefit from all the scrutiny, said Ronda Tiffin, planning director for Webb County in South Texas.

"They've all been out here: the politicians, the media, the universities," said Don Jesus, president of Union de Colonias Olvidadas, an organization of twelve entities in South Texas around Laredo. "But nothing has been done. The most that has gotten done is they have done surveys for their studies."

In New Mexico's Dona Ana County, the frustration of residents attempting to obtain government assistance echoes that of Texas residents. "They've all been here--people from the county, from Santa Fe, from Channel 4 and Channel 9, but nothing ever happens," said a resident of Las Palmeras, a colonia near Las Cruces. Similar frustrations are found in Arizona and California.

"There [are] money and programs, but the problem is in the process," said Rose Garcia, director of Tierra del Sol Housing in El Paso. "There are lots of boondoggle conferences about poverty in the colonias that don't involve the people of the colonias. Resources are being used for meetings, assessments, and study, but nothing is being done yet."

"The problem is that until colonia lots are legally platted, they may not receive aid. And state model-subdivision rules now require paved streets, street lighting, and other improvements before they qualify for platting, trapping poor colonia residents in a catch-22 situation," said Tiffin.

Sometimes residents take matters into their own hands. In Colonia Arroyo Colorado Estates, east of Harlingen, Texas, residents built their own neighborhood waste water system at a cost of \$150,000 instead of the \$800,000 to \$1 million estimated by state and county officials. "Our lives are hard, but this property is for our children, so they don't have to struggle like we did," said Maria Molina, a colonia resident.

PHOTO (COLOR): Despite appropriations in 1995 to help the plight of colonias, little of the money has reached the residents.

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