The red flag of urban poverty
and the working children of Guadalajara

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****DRAFT: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION****
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Part One: Introduction

Sometimes we hear the words “children living in poverty” and our eyes glaze over as we think, “I can’t possibly do anything about such a large world problem.” Pick a city on the planet—according to a 2008 United Nations report, half the world’s population now lives in cities—and you can witness children growing up in conditions of extreme deprivation. One cannot escape witnessing the devastating effects of globalization, racism, neoliberalism, sexism, and social injustice in Guadalajara, Jalisco, a thriving Mexican metropolis of over 4 million people, where small children work in the streets selling chewing gum, washing windshields, and worse (Aguayo Quezada 2008). The Colectivo Pro Derechos de la Niñez (CODENI) formed to do something about it.

CODENI is a non-governmental agency, founded in Guadalajara in 2004 as a collective that “strives to promote a critical and participative consciousness among marginalized youth; generate understanding of the reality of youth in Jalisco; influence public policies; and promote a culture of respect towards youth and their rights” (www.codeni.org.mx). Research by founding members studying “The Rights and Needs of Youth,” at the Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO), identified the conditions of impoverished neighborhoods in the metropolitan zone of Guadalajara (Zona Metropolitana de Guadalajara) (ZMG) as one of ten most significant “red flag issues” affecting Jaliscan youth (see table 1). This report is the result of local qualitative research directed by CODENI’s research team whose objective is to generate and disseminate information about the reality of children’s rights in Jalisco.

Table 1  CODENI’s Ten Red Flag Issues

* Child labor
* Homeless youth
* Children impacted by commercial sexual exploitation in Guadalajara
* Commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth in Puerto Vallarta
* Child abuse by public officials
* Abuse in child rehabilitative services
* Child farm laborers in southern Jalisco
* Premature death in the Sierra Huichola
* Abuse and violence in school systems
* Extreme poverty in marginalized communities in and around metropolitan Guadalajara
This report is intended to flesh out how poverty in a marginalized urban neighborhood “looks and feels” by comparing life there to a more comfortably-appointed colonia. This introductory section acquaints the reader with an overview of how poverty is defined and measured, and locates Mexico in rankings of poverty in Latin America. We are also introduced to CODENI and the work they do with Guadalajaran children who labor in the streets. We do not wonder if life is difficult for poor families—we know that in Mexico the urban poor have more children, worse housing conditions, and less education than the non-poor (The World Bank 2005). We do not argue that rich people are bad or that poor people are powerless victims. The intention in presenting this project is to invite the reader to notice poverty in Guadalajara, here and now, and to reinvigorate actions that we could take to improve the situation of injustice in which we all live, but hits hardest in the lives of the children who depend on the streets of Guadalajara for survival.

**Defining and Measuring “Poverties”**

The idea of poverty is relatively new, in the sense that the accumulation of capital wealth is a function of an economic system barely 200 years old. That is not to say that, historically, most people lived on the planet in luxury, but ruling elites did not characterize the condition of feudal serfs as “poor”—laborers were told that it was “their lot in life.” Working people were forced to be persuaded by the divine right of kings for many centuries. Today, euphemisms and definitions for poverty abound. Poor nations are referred to as Third World, developing, Southern, or subaltern. Measuring poverty in various ways results in a variety of standards, such as absolute poverty, extreme poverty, rural/urban poverty, childhood poverty, the working poor, relative poverty, and more (see Minujin et al 2006; Sen 1997; see also Diaz Betancourt 2006). Terms such as “economic inequality”, “income inequality”, and “unequal distribution of wealth” indicate varied forms of attention to a laborer’s or family’s relative socioeconomic status (Jencks 2002). Thus, it would be more accurate to refer to different kinds of poverties. For our purposes, we use the idea of urban poverty as our starting point. But however one defines being poor, much of the research, rhetoric, and response to global poverty has served to normalize it into our daily common perception of the world.

Poverty is measured in several ways. In its 2005 report on childhood poverty in Latin America, UNICEF defined the relative poverty index as the percentage of children who live in homes with incomes that were 50 percent below the national median income (2005). By that definition, 23 percent—almost one in four—of Mexican children under the age of 18 years lived below the poverty line (UNICEF 2005). A 2007 UNICEF report regarding socioeconomic factors in Mexico in general estimated that about 49 million Mexicans were living in poverty. Of this group, approximately 23 million were children, meaning that poverty, by a different definition perhaps, affected about 58 percent of Mexican youth. That report further noted that nearly one out of five Mexicans (almost 19 million people) lived in extreme poverty (UNICEF 2007).

The slogan of the World Bank, an international financial and development institution headed by the United
States, is “Working for a World Free of Poverty.” The World Bank uses the working indicator for poverty as “people who live on less than $1.00 US a day.” Some of the World Bank’s key indicators include income per capita, life expectancy, the under-five mortality rate, and national coverage of primary education. The World Bank reported the following data for Mexico on its website www.worldbank.org (accessed 28 March 2008):

* Average annual income per capita is $7,310.00 US.
* Life expectancy at birth is 75 years.
* The under-five mortality rate is 27 per 1,000.
* Coverage of primary education is universal.

The World Bank described Mexico as an “advanced middle-income country.” According to the figures it presents, one might be persuaded by the World Bank that Mexico is “not so bad off.” But what is hidden in these numbers is the incredulous unequal distribution of Mexican’s wealth.

In 2001, the government of Mexico released three new definitions of poverty:

* **poverty of alimentation:** the lack of access to basic nutrition
* **poverty of ability:** obstacles in access to health and education that prohibit citizens from meeting their potential
* **inherited poverty:** circumstances related to previous generations, such as inheriting debts, or other forms of intergenerational poverty that prohibit families from access to basic resources such as shelter (SEDESOL 2002).

According to the Mexican government definitions, in 2006, of the total Mexican population (approximately 108 million inhabitants), there were 14 million in poverty of alimentation, 22 million in poverty of ability, and 45 million living in inherited poverty. The Mexican government also sets the minimum wage by dividing the nation into three geographical regions. The state of Jalisco is in Region B, with a daily minimum wage of $50.96 MP (approximately $4.76 US) (www.sat.gob.mx, accessed March 30, 2008).

According to United Nations human development reports, Iceland, Norway, Australia, Canada, and Ireland are the top five nations with the highest levels of human development. The United States is in 12th place, and Mexico is rated 52 (out of a total of 177 nations). The Latin American nations that occupy places higher than Mexico are Argentina (38), Chile (40), Uruguay (46), Costa Rica (48), and Cuba (51) (see UNDP 2008).

Table 2, reproduced from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), reports the percentages of each of 18 nations’ populations that lived in poverty in Latin America around 2002, 2005, and 2006. According to table 1.2, the proportion of Mexico’s population that lived in poverty declined from 39.4 percent in 2002 to 31.7 percent in 2006.
Table 2. Poverty Levels in Latin America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Poverty</th>
<th>Indigence</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Poverty</th>
<th>Indigence</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Poverty</th>
<th>Indigence</th>
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<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
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<td>45.4</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>21.0</td>
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<td>62.4</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>...</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
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<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
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<td>28.3</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>7.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ecuador a/</td>
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<td>19.4</td>
<td>2005</td>
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<td>2006</td>
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<td>22.1</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>19.0</td>
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<td>...</td>
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<td>Mexico</td>
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<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
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<td>...</td>
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<td>Panama</td>
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<td>33.0</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>15.2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>...</td>
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<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>2001 b/</td>
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<td>24.4</td>
<td>2005 b/</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>2006 b/</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>44.0</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay a/</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>4.1</td>
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<td>Venezuela (Bolivarian Rep. of)</td>
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<td>37.1</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of special tabulations of data from household surveys conducted in the relevant countries.

a/ Urban areas.
b/ Figures compiled by the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI) of Peru. These values are not comparable with those of previous years owing to changes in the sample framework used in the household survey. In addition, the figures given for 2001 correspond to the fourth quarter, whereas those shown for 2004 and 2006 correspond to the entire year.

Of the nations in table 2 in rank order (from lowest to highest proportions of citizens living in poverty around 2002), Mexico ranked 6 out of the 18 nations considered. According to the table, the five nations with lower proportions of their populations living in poverty were Brazil, Panama, Costa Rica, Chile, and Uruguay.

In terms of childhood poverty levels, the figures are even more stark. Table 3 presents data from UNICEF, 2005. The graph imparts a visual image of the proportions of boys and girls who live below the line of relative poverty, as well as the proportions of children who do not have sufficient income to be able to access adequate alimentation.
According to the data in table 3, slightly less than 25 percent of children in Mexico live below the level of relative poverty, but slightly over 16 percent live in families without adequate resources to obtain food. These data indicate that only Paraguay, Bolivia, and Ecuador have smaller proportions of children living in poverty, with Brazil as the nation with the worst childhood poverty levels of the 17 nations examined.

In May of 2008, the Secretary General of the National Council on Population (Consejo Nacional de la Poblacion) (CONAPO) released a report that found that one third of Mexico’s poor live in cities (CONAPO 2008). The problems developing at crisis levels from this increasing and unplanned urbanization include a severe lack of water, work, and insufficient public transportation (Martinez 2008).

The city of Guadalajara proper, which covers about 200 square kilometers, is home to over 1,600,000 people—of whom over 50 percent are below the age of 25—and one in four are below the age of 15 (Ayuntamiento 2002). In 2005 report on poverty in Guadalajara, authors’ calculated that approximately 23 percent of the population of the municipal zone of Guadalajara live in conditions of poverty (Medina Nunez y Florida Alejo 2005). As of this writing, we could not locate a poverty level for the city of Guadalajara from INEGI or the
municipal government (el Ayuntamiento).

The primary focus of CODENI’s work is on child labor: one of the effects of urban poverty. According to the United Nations, 16 percent of the children in Mexico aged 6-14 years old are working (2007). The metropolitan zone of Guadalajara hosts some 1,500 children working in the streets (Torres 2007). The city Department of Family Services (Desarrollo Integral de la Familia) (DIF Guadalajara) estimates that over 300 children labor daily to load and unload crates and merchandise in markets around the city for approximately two minimum salaries per day (about 100 pesos or US $10.00) (Saavedra Ponce 2008).

Located on a busy street in downtown, CODENI employs 5 street educators and, on average, ten volunteers at any given time. Projects include street outreach, psychological attention, social work, and educational support. The organization currently aids approximately 120 children from 60 families, all of whom rely on the informal economy in the downtown area for survival. Limited social and economic opportunities have forced them to seek work in the streets, selling potato chips or candy, shining shoes, cleaning windshields or juggling in major intersections.

Every evening at 5:30 PM, CODENI’s team of street educators set out for a 10-block stroll from their offices to Plaza Universidad, where volunteers from local universities and child laborers await them, clutching plastic grocery bags filled with notebooks and pencils. The educators and volunteers split up the evening activities ranging from basic literacy, homework tutoring, pedagogical workshops, recreational games, individual counseling, meetings with parents, and the integration of new children to the program. The team of young, passionate social activists and educators share the common vision of eliminating these children’s dependence on the streets through education and mentoring, while helping to bring them a brighter childhood complete with education, recreation, healthcare, and other support services. CODENI in Guadalajara, Mexico, like its counterparts in dozens of cities throughout the world, faces the extraordinary task of addressing the current crisis of poverty, corruption, and injustice experienced by children at the hands of such distant and seemingly insurmountable forces such as globalization and neoliberal free market reforms.

This report was conceived as a modern tale of two cities in order to emphasize the current effects of poverty in the lives of children in Guadalajara. Tapatios (the nickname of folks born in Guadalajara) even have a term for this socioeconomic divide: “el otro lado de la Calzada,” which refers, ironically, to Independence
Boulevard as a dividing line between the rich and poor in Guadalajara. What follows is a comparison of life for children in these two distinct neighborhoods in Guadalajara: Providencia and San Juan de Dios. First we travel through the relatively posh neighborhood of Providencia, one of Guadalajara's comfortable areas for the well-to-do and their families. Then we walk—literally, we did—to the down-trodden section of Guadalajara where many of the “CODENI families” work and live—San Juan de Dios. Drawing from interviews, observations, and photographs we want to bring to the reader how it “feels” to be there, to grow up in these disparate neighborhoods. We conclude with recommendations for addressing the plight of children who labor in the streets of Guadalajara.

Part Two: Providencia

During the initial planning of the research project, in the fall of 2007, we explained to a variety of folks such as students, friends, neighbors and storekeepers, and fellow scholars and activists, that we intended to conduct a research project exploring what it is like to grow up in a wealthy neighborhood, compared to a less privileged barrio. Almost everyone said, “Oh, you are going to study Providencia!” Providencia, while it was no longer the most well-off neighborhood in Guadalajara, still carried the prestige in its name alone.
The largest Ford Motors automotive sales franchise in the area marked the entrance to the colonia from the corner of Calle Pablo Neruda and Avenida Americas: Welcome to Ford Country. Opposite that sat a statue of Pablo Neruda, with a plaque proclaiming brotherly identification. A wide, tree-lined boulevard welcomed visitors to the neighborhood. The four lane avenue was separated by a commons of grass and trees, with an ample sidewalk for strolling and jogging. Surprisingly beautiful, clean, and expansive, this was a privileged use of public space so precious and rare to come by in Guadalajara (see also Coronado, 2009). The neighborhood served as a pleasant place to come just for a nice stroll through wooded pathways.

Our study participants did explain how Providencia was not considered the most prestigious neighborhood any more:

“Well, it was the best neighborhood in the city, where the most well-to-do, —‘the beautiful people’—the most well-off, lived. But then they started developing new neighborhoods like Colinas [de San Xavier], and now half the world lives over in Valle Real—I mean, they have some beautiful mansions there, but, really! The whole area on the way there is surrounded, by, well, it is really ugly around there! The gated communities are beautiful, because there are some gorgeous homes there, but outside of Valle Real, I don’t know...These days all the really wealthy people live there now.”  (Participant who grew up in Providencia)
Even if many of the “beautiful people” had moved away, one could see that much of the geographical capital remained in the colonia Providencia. Because the foundation of the neighborhood was well-planned to begin with—to be a livable, comfortable neighborhood—homes were set back from the streets on spacious lots, the public throughways were wide and lined with what were now 40 year old trees.

Homes and grounds in Providencia were well-cared for, no grafitti, manicured gardens. The streets running roughly east and west were named for Canadian provinces: Alberta, Ottowa, Toronto, or cities in Latin America: Bogota, Montevideo, and Sao Paolo. Those running north-south were named for famous poets (Ruben Dario, Pablo Neruda). Examples of the fetishizing of everything foreign or European abound: shops proudly advertised their productos importados, a swanky cocktail bar named “Amsterdam,” even a drycleaners named “EuroClean.”

There were almost no buses on the streets and hardly any foot traffic during the weekday save a few male laborers. The shops and businesses included art galleries, high-end “modern” furniture stores, cafes and restaurants. International franchises signaled a certain cosmopolitanism: Aero México had a large office at the corner of Pablo Neruda and Avenida Montevideo, the Berlitz Language School, Goodrich tire outlet, and lots and lots of references to Europe (stores named “La Europea; “Ravioles, Lasagnas, y Delicatessan”) were available for residents of tony Providencia.

Informants agreed about the history of this commercialization of Providencia: people moved out because of the incursion of local business. To many citizens, it would be desirable to have a Bancomer, Soriana (supermarket), Laboratorios Julio (photo developer shop), and Farmacia Guadalajara within walking distance, but upperclass Guadalajarans were generally not “the kind of people” who ran errands by walking to the corner.

The strip malls of Providencia
One resident explained the trend. She commented that she loved living in Providencia but “everybody” goes for the
latest thing and many left Providencia because of the invasion of commercial establishments in the neighborhood. “Twenty years ago, the neighborhood was completely residential, but it started to change about 10 years ago.” She continued,

“What happened was that there are people who live in such an inflated way—they always want to be into whatever is the best. So, then, if the “best” neighborhood is Puerta de Hierro—they move to Puerta de Hierro! If, now, say, the best neighborhood is Valle Real, they move to Valle Real. That’s why people move around. But really, Providencia used to be such a beautiful neighborhood—really tranquil and totally residential. What has happened is all these businesses ended it. On Avenida Rubén Darío, did you see? Businesses, businesses, businesses! Before there were trees and beautiful homes, and now they threw all that out and built ugly stores and highrise buildings. Yes, it has changed in the last ten years, Providencia has changed a lot.”

(Participant who grew up in Providencia)

Crowding and the pollution that comes with commercialization of a gentrified neighborhood—noise, air contaminaton, lower social status of neighbors—motivated the wealthy to move on to more private, quieter settings.

Transportation. Automobiles lined every street in Providencia—beautiful shiny new cars—makes and models such as Camry, Voyager, Sonora, Hummer, Renault—lots of SUVs and not just any: BMW and Mercedes Benz SUVs appeared to be popular choices. Sometimes they overflowed from multi-car garages to the curbsides. One interviewee, when asked about issues, concerns, problems in Providencia, replied, “Parking is one of our biggest challenges.” Participants explained how, in the past, most families had one or two cars. But as the children grew, families acquired more and more cars. “Now, everyone in the house has a car,” another informant recounted. “I remember, in this house, the garage is for two cars, and all my brothers and sisters have their cars, so we had, like, six cars in the street, all ours! And then, there were all the cars of the neighbors. At certain times, it is a huge problem—parking.”

Education. On nearly every other block, Providencia hosted bilingual pre-schools or kindergartens. Schools featured gaily colored inviting signs, the children had little uniforms (white golf shirts with school name and
logo and blue pants) and the childcare workers wore bright orange T-shirts. Every school offered “internationality” as one of its features.

Education was clearly given primacy in this neighborhood. Providencia sat adjacent to the colonia that hosts the most prestigious school in Guadalajara, The American School Foundation of Guadalajara, A.C. (known as The American School). With 1,426 students in pre-school through twelfth grade, The American School was the only U.S. accredited school in Guadalajara. According to their website:

“We recruit our credentialed English language faculty from the U.S. and from other overseas American Schools worldwide to give our students the best education available from experienced U.S. trained teachers.

“We are one of two schools in Mexico to offer an extensive program of honors and Advanced Placement courses in the high school, and were recently elected to voting membership on the College Board, one of a select group of international schools so honored.

“The American School Foundation of Guadalajara is a bicultural institution that is second among American Schools in Mexico to receive scholarships granted to students by U.S. universities, and has the necessary facilities (two libraries, four computer labs, multipurpose gymnasium, semi-Olympic size swimming pool, soccer field, multi-use courts, etc.), to enable it to offer activities during and after the school day that help provide a complete education. Some examples are: music, band, choir, art, photography, swimming, soccer, basketball, volleyball, dance team.”


The American School offered a beautiful campus, with large grassy green areas, and comfortable facilities. Students who graduate from the American School speak fluent English and were exposed to a wide range of opportunities vital to dreaming a large productive future. One of the young people we interviewed who grew up in Providencia and attended The American School told us a little bit about what it was like.

“Every morning we sang both of the national anthems of the United States and Mexico. The buildings were real nice and there were about 15 students per class. We did college-level work and all our credits transferred to US schools. The only classes in Spanish were Spanish and History. The school
provided transportation, they sent buses to come pick us up at home in the morning and drop us back off in the afternoon. We had tons of homework but my parents couldn’t help because it was all in English.” (American School alum)

The 2008-2009 monthly tuition for The American School could range from $4,804.00 MP ($460.00 USD) for nursery school to $7,149.00 ($680.00 USD) for high school. The additional fees for new admission, inscription, after school sports, extracurricular programs, child care, and medical insurance could add up to over $12,000.00 MP (approximately $1,140.00 USD) per student. Education for families raising their children in Providencia was costly but considered well-worth the investment by these privileged residents.

**Parks and green areas.** Green areas in most urban centers around the world today are at a premium and provide a common measure to determine the desirability of any neighborhood (Lawrence 1993). Providencia hosted several lovely large parks, some with European names, such as the French Garden, located at Calle Bogota and Avenida Montevideo. A bronze sculpture of French President and Army General Charles DeGaulle (famous for fighting Nazi Germany and for granting independence to Algeria) graced the park entrance.

The French Garden park also offered a new, safe, fun-looking playground for children featuring brightly colored climbing structures. These large green areas in the middle of the neighborhood provided a space for relief, relaxation, and rest for residents, but were never crowded. The freshly-painted white park benches looked so inviting, the lawns so soft and expansive, lovely, sprinklers running to make sure the grass stayed green and the trees continued to flourish.

Strolling down Avenida Montevideo really offered a great sense of what Providencia was all about. Beautiful, quiet, well-maintained neighborhood, nobody out of place, very calm listening to the birds chatter and the occasional hammering signaling “improvement under way.” Noise and air pollution factor as determinants of comfort and luxury when assessing urban areas, and
Providencia certainly earned its high ratings. Providencia was just beginning to participate in one of the newest architectural developments in Guadalajara—large high-rise apartment buildings. Informants talked about this idea—of building large luxury loft condominiums—always with the same refrain, “Who is going to buy them?” The realtor informed me that the whole tower was sold out except for one apartment and the penthouse. The apartment had 3 bedrooms, 3 and ½ baths, 24 hour security, two luxury elevators and one service elevator, pool, gym, spa, and garden areas—basically, the works. The price? $9,970,00 MP (approx $944,000 USD). He added that he had less expensive apartments in a new tower in Puerta de Hierro.

Avenida de las Americas bordered Providencia to the east and featured one of the most pricey hotels in Guadalajara, Fiesta Americana. Rates at the Fiesta Americana began at $2,105.00 pesos (about US $202.00) per night. (They would not rent rooms by the hour). Informants recounted the community outcry when the city announced it was building the big hotel complex. It was not insignificant that Providencia was bordered by this ritzy area, but it was especially interesting when compared to the Calle Javier Mina and the flophouse hotels that lined San Juan Dios.

Security. At the corner of Avenida Pablo Neruda and Avenida Ruben Dario sat a little booth marked Police Station. The police department placed these kiosks around the city in the different districts as an innovative means for a new kind of public security, one that the current administration viewed as a failed method for crime control. One top administrator of public security for the municipality of Guadalajara, contradicting the data we received from the municipal government, explained the use of these modules.
“There are many of those little modules around the city but we have found that they are not effective in fighting crime. Why have un mono [a monkey] sitting there waiting for someone to come make a police report? Police should be in the streets, moving around! We don’t use the modules because they don’t produce results...We give them to the neighborhood associations—so they can use them. If there is a big problem in a neighborhood, we send a head guy out there and the people can come and meet with him in the module...But in Providencia we have five modules now, and the people complain if we don’t have a guy sitting there. They feel safer when they see someone sitting there. They insist on having a special guard, they want more police protection, but we aren’t a private security force for the ‘beautiful people.’”

(Police official)

Unlike in San Juan de Díos, in Providencia we never saw any police on patrol—or any evidence of street-level illegal activity, despite various visits off and on, day and night for months.

But the concern over public security came through the interviews loud and clear. Participants longed for the “olden days” when children could just run out the door and play with neighbors without having to worry about being kidnapped or executed by “narco traficantes,” the latest boogey-man in Mexico. Their best memories were full of “just running out the door and playing with the other kids...”

“...and we could run into the house of the neighbor, and the families were good families, they knew each other and there was a lot of sharing of life. This was really beautiful. I remember we were really close to the Rodriguez family who lived on the corner of this block. We played, went roller skating on the sidewalk, we rode bikes all over—they were like eight brothers and sisters and we were four, it was so much fun growing up here! Now the people have sold their homes or rent them out, we have no idea who our neighbors are. Before, everybody knew everybody—so and so lived here in this house, so and so lived there. And during the Christmas holidays we even exchanged little gifts. Now, no way—because you don’t even know who they are.” (Resident of Providencia)

Lamenting the good old days, this participant concurred with many current residents and people who grew up in Providencia—that it “used to be” the safest place in Guadalajara to grow up.

“For all these years with one car in the garage and, like, five on the street—nobody ever stole our car! I mean, we never had any problems. For us, Providencia has been very safe. I mean, I know people who have said to me, ‘Outside my house! They stole the car!’ It’s probably just luck, we’ve had a lot of luck. I really do consider this a very safe neighborhood. If it’s like 9:00 pm or something, and I need to go to the store, I would go walking. But my parents always said, ‘Hey, where are you going? It’s dark out—blah, blah, blah.’ OK, so I would take the car, but I’ve always felt really safe around here. But it’s probably because I really haven’t ever had a bad experience.” (Woman who grew up in Providencia)

Notice the incongruence between the perception that Providencia was a safe, crime-free neighborhood with the actions of not allowing children to play in the streets or daughters to walk to the corner, or being afraid of your neighbors because they could be narcos. Ironically, families with the most resources actually reported feeling quite vulnerable.
Community organization. Scholars theorize that increased neighborhood organization through public participation in civic matters produces a certain solidarity among neighbors, thus creating a stronger and safer neighborhood (Simrell King et al 1998; Marschall 2004). Declines in public participation are bemoaned as a loss of civic commitment (Putnam 1995). In Guadalajara, the Ayuntamiento holds Miércoles Ciudadano (“Citizens’ Wednesdays”) in various locations in the seven zones so that residents can participate, ask questions, bring complaints, or meet with officials to discuss concerns (see Image 4.2 Citizens’ Wednesdays, Zone 1: the Center). We attended this event held in the patio of a local church in the Central zone. Tables were set up from various city bureaus and representatives sat waiting and available to answer individual questions. The longest line was for the man who was answering questions about criminal legal matters. This particular Wednesday was sparsely attended, but many neighborhoods organized formal and informal organizations called colonos that provided neighborhood watches and other rules and regulations regarding living in that neighborhood.

Flyers announce services from a wide array of city bureaus, such as Permits and Licensing, Department of Integrated Family Development Services, and police and court officials. Providencia had a history of a strong and active neighborhood association. Evidence of this could be seen in that signs were posted throughout the neighborhood urging residents to abide by city regulations and other concerns. The neighborhood association provided a sense of security and vigilance for the residents. Having a strong and visible public presence of a neighborhood association may convey the impression of safety: that a housing tract seems more suitable for a good, safe life for the families and children who live there.

In this advisory, residents were warned that Providencia was chiefly a residential area and that, before buying, selling, renting, or remodeling real estate, residents should seek permission from the offices of the neighborhood association. The warning featured a map outlining the principle streets in Providencia and a phone number, that nobody
Neighborhood vigilance
Arguing that the neighborhood should be mainly residential, clearly the neighborhood association wanted to prevent or at least control the incursion of the commercial market into Providencia.

answered when we called.

At the corner of Avenida Montevideo and Avenida Pablo Neruda sat another community marker—a sign placed strategically at a large and important intersection, urging newcomers or people planning to make changes on their property to consult the “neighborhood association” in much the same message as the warning sign. It wasn’t exactly clear how much authority the association actually had, but their presence was certainly notable.

Neighborhood ambience. Avenida Montevideo offered yet more wide commons, providing access to nature and a sense of breathing room to the residents. More wide beautiful sidewalks, less business on Montevideo, cutting off south were wide, tree-lined streets featuring residences full of multi-car garages and male laborers attending to the properties.

At one corner of Avenida Montevideo, several young men were working at a plant nursery, and I later realized that it was one of the sites where youth could complete the “social service” requirement for local (privileged) high schoolers—where they learn “what it is like” to work as a laborer for a week.

In the early mornings and late evenings, the ride on the bus Route 27 with the day laborers—the women who cleaned the houses and the men who took care of the grounds—was always stuffed, packed, totally full. If you were lucky and the bus even stopped for you, you often would have to squeeze on through the back door and pass the fare forward. It carried a lot of students too—many Guadalajaran families wanted to send their children to the Providencia schools if they could afford it. The loop from Providencia to the far-flung dirt roads of the barrio Alamedas de Zanatitlan in Tonala took two hours—packed with people standing the entire journey. In the mornings, workers poured out at Calle Ruben Dario and Avenida Providencia to begin their (long) walks to their individual workplaces.

In addition to gardeners, car washers, and women sweeping sidewalks and watering lawns, residents were walking around their homes at this early time as well. One retiree was using the hose to clean the sidewalk, even though recent headlines blared, “Mexico will have 50 percent less water than in 2007” (Publico 2008a). Professionally dressed folks wearing little black glasses and clutching briefcases/laptops and stainless steel coffee thermos mugs rushed off to bleep the alarms to their shiny cars before getting in for their commute through the impossibly horrible traffic that Guadalajara offers.

The use of public space in Providencia appeared very different from other, less privileged neighborhoods. In
general, everybody was in their cars. Very few folks walked around besides the laborers. Hardly anybody “hung out” in the streets, on the corners or out their windows. No conversation, televisions or music could be heard when you walked around. The streets did fill a little bit with laborers going to get lunch and nannies picking up children from the schools, but on the whole there was very little foot traffic during the weekdays in this sleepy private residential space, especially compared to the bustling dirty crowded streets of the *barrio* San Juan de Díos, where you were never alone on the street. On the weekends in Providencia, the streets filled up a little bit more, mostly with young sandy-haired boys on skateboards.

One learns to see what is and isn’t there in order to outline evidence of privilege in a neighborhood. It was the random odd “working class” things that really began to stick out—a rare abandoned car, a small nail parlor advertising long, fake-gem studded nails. The laborers who walked around in dirty clothes from working on building structures did not even smile or say, “*Buenos días*,” when they passed, generally a common custom in Guadalajara. Probably, they were so used to being invisible to the residents that the custom changed for them in Providencia. Months later, in the newspaper there was a photograph of the abandoned car, with the caption deploring, “*Even in Providencia*” (emphasis mine). Lacking from Providencia was graffiti. It was the only non-gated neighborhood we had seen in Guadalajara that wasn’t plagued by scribbles and tags on every available vertical surface.

What is the significance in the fact that the statues of Pablo Neruda, General DeGaulle, and Mahatma Gandhi grace the corners of the *colonia*? They send a message that values such as honoring the humanities (a poet) and internationalism are important.

**The Talisman**

I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest person whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to them? Will they gain anything by it? Will it restore them to a control over their own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to freedom for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away.

*Mahatma Gandhi, 1948, poem inscribed in a stone circle at the intersection of Avenida Montevideo and Avenida Pablo Neruda.*
The idea of noticing the suffering of the poor, as described in “The Talisman” by Mahatma Gandhi etched in stone at one entrance to the wealthy quarters, seemed at odds with the incredible abundance, comfort, and safety that residents in this neighborhood enjoyed. Maybe just having the sayings and images of poets and statesman in sight calmed the guilt of the comfortable.

Leisure time and travel.
Residents shared the details of their lives revealing what it was like to grow up in Providencia. One participant talked about glorious vacations that she experienced with her family saying, “We were very lucky to be able to travel a lot. We always, always, always went on vacation to the beach, to Mexico City, or to the United States.” Her father had studied in the United States and he loved to organize trips there. For special birthdays, like the sisters’ 15th birthdays, the whole family took trips to places like California, New York, or Canada.

“Yeah, those were special trips, but we often went to Houston or San Antonio to go shopping, or Disneyland, which of course was the classic vacation…It was how they inculcated us with the value of travel. I have continued to travel on my own, going with my brothers and sisters, or a friend to Vancouver, a Caribbean cruise, also very beautiful places…” (Participant who grew up in Providencia)

Another participant explained that he had cousins living in Los Angeles and he and his siblings used to go stay with them every summer. Obviously, providing opportunities to one’s children in this form of kinship networking is a strategy more easily deployed if financial resources were available.

Clearly these families were able to enjoy the comfort of home and the joy of traveling, getting to know the world, and to feel a part of it. Every single person we interviewed who grew up in Providencia had been to the United States at least once. One grandmother told me, “We like to take the children to the [United] States every summer so they can practice their English.”

Challenges. We asked participants what they thought the biggest challenges that youth face today in Providencia. Besides complaints about limited parking, the following comment was typical of what participants
“We don’t have gangs, and we don’t have kids putting graffiti on everything. Really, we just don’t—it’s a very quiet neighborhood. It’s because we aren’t near any neighborhoods that are…how can I say it?—poor. See, someone could live in a nice neighborhood, but if all the neighborhoods nearby are sort of poor, they produce a lot of the problems. We are surrounded by only really nice neighborhoods, so I think that is the difference. I don’t think the kids here confront these kinds of problems [gangs, graffiti, poverty].”  (Providencia study participant)

“But let me tell you something, this now is not a neighborhood for young people. Now the only people who live here are from a certain age and up. Young people don’t like Providencia. These days, young people are looking for gated communities and Providencia does not have them. What’s more, Providencia continues to be a very expensive zone. For a lot of young people who just get married and starting out and everything—they can’t buy anything here, they can’t even rent here in Providencia.”  (Providencia study participant)

Aging out of pricey neighborhoods, marrying and planning to live in gated communities: these are the major challenges that young people in Providencia face?

Because of all the creature comforts that material and symbolic wealth have to offer, growing up in Providencia was almost a sure bet for having access to myriad opportunities in life. One could say you could barely go wrong having all this privilege. Next we turn to an area of Guadalajara where growing up positions you to barely be able to go right.

***III. San Juan de Dios***
San Juan de Dios was one of the oldest barrios in Guadalajara. Actually, Guadalajara itself sort of grew up around the site of one of the largest markets in Mexico, situated downtown near the city’s Cathedral which was completed in 1618. Consisting of narrow, crowded streets full of businesses, houses, small hotels, bars, and corner stores, San Juan de Dios was a bustling but jarring neighborhood in central Guadalajara. Many, many friends and informants warned us against walking around alone in San Juan de Dios, especially at night.

Entering San Juan de Dios from behind the church of San Juan de Dios revealed a vibrant, active and very poor community. The side streets were narrow and dusty with boxy houses side by side, sharing walls. The front doors of houses were right on the broken sidewalks, no wide 4-car garages and landscaped gardens and lawns to separate the noise and dust of traffic from the front room of the houses.

The first day we walked through San Juan de Dios was a beautiful warm sunny morning in September 2007. We came to a corner without street signs and the pavement of the street was all torn up due to construction—bare dirt, with boxes and tools laying around. A señora opened her door and peered out at the goings on in the street. She had a beautiful wrinkle-lined face, long black hair streaked with gray in a braid at the back, and was wearing traditional señora garb: an old flowery dress covered by a shawl. We greeted her, begged her pardon, and asked her for the name of this street. She greeted us back (“¡Buenos días!”) and told us we were on Calle Matamoros. We thanked her and she blessed us—“Que Díos les bendiga.” I remember thinking it was an auspicious beginning for a project.

**Business areas.** Calle Javier Mina in San Juan de Dios can sort of hit you in the face—cars and trucks bumper to bumper and every few minutes loud buses trundle by, crossing it. They seem louder because the streets are so narrow causing the decibel level to rise. Stores selling such merchandise as hardware supplies, plastic goods, lingerie, and children's clothes sit side by side, sharing walls and crowding each other with merchandise spilling onto the sidewalk. Many of the stores sold only wholesale for customers to sell at tianguis. Often, storekeepers
or the youth who worked there stood out in front at the street to enjoy fresh air and chat with each other. The sidewalks were always crowded—dodging deliveries, baby strollers, and shoppers sometimes forced one into the street only to have to dodge the cars, motorcycles, and trucks (see photos) (see also Ayuntamiento 2007). Music blared from each store, as vendors attempt to out do their neighbors. In a single block one can hear banda, reggaeton, and mariachi, competing outside storefronts. As we walked down the street, it was like someone was constantly changing the dial on the radio every few steps. It was a very upbeat noisy atmosphere—but one where it would be difficult to live (eat, sleep).

The streets of San Juan de Dios never sleep. At the esquina of Calle Vincente Guerrero y Calle Gigantes, there was a sign for servicio de baños (“W.C.”) for 3 pesos (about 25 cents)—an offering for workers in the neighborhood or the indigent. The bathroom for rent was in a small corner diner, serving hot lunches, tacos, and the like; the sign on the actual bathroom door said “for clients only.” One way of thinking about this is that there was some acknowledgement by humble folks who live and do business in poorer neighborhoods that their fellow humans have necessities that must be attended to. Like the fact that you can buy a half a carrot or just a small section of fruit in the markets, shows that some citizens were willing to admit and attend to the needs of the very poor. Of course, another way of seeing it is to think, “anything to make a dime.” At any rate, we just could not imagine a sign like that in a window in Providencia—for any reason.

**Residences.** The streets we walked on were narrow and offered a mix of residences from abandoned houses to hotels, dappled with small retailers selling plumbing supplies or cheap housewares. One street had two hotels facing each other—one blue and the other orange and green. Here lived several of the families with whom CODENI works. The streets were full of potholes and trash, lots of cars and noise. We went to one hotel called Hotel Salud (Hotel Health) where several of CODENI’s families lived all in one room. Our informant pointed out the irony of the
hotel’s name. In general, the streets in this area were deteriorated, there were abandoned buildings that looked like they were about to cave in and fall apart, and there were no trash cans to deposit trash (see also Gomez Naredo 2008).

We entered another building that was originally a single-family, large, three story house. Now it was kind of a dwelling that rented out former bedrooms on every floor to families, who shared the bathrooms at the ends of the halls. It could be called single-room occupancy housing.

There was no sign saying hotel, but there was a sign inside that said, “Under no circumstances may the police be called.” From the street, there was simply a wooden door that opened up to a large empty “lobby” that was just a huge passageway with tile floors and cement walls. It was pitch dark except for a little light coming from half-open doors to rooms and some random lights on an altar set up to Our Lady of Guadalupe in a corner. In the entryway, we had to step over a manhole cover with a garden hose coming out of it, going up a wall, and disappearing into a small hole. We went in and climbed up a couple flights of stairs, asked for someone, and retreated. Way at the end of one hall I could see an opening to a patio with a man in the doorway—our guide turned to go back downstairs, saying, “It is very dangerous back there.”

The sounds of a television and children talking emanated from a room at which we stopped and knocked at the door. “Come on in—who is it?” says a little voice and we sort of cracked open the door wider to reveal a little girl in a bed watching cartoons on a black and white TV with fuzzy reception and a little boy standing getting ready to go out. It was now about 12:15 p.m. “¿Está Doña Sanchez?” our informant asked. The boy explained that their mother now worked at a stall in the market of San Juan de Dios, near the huaraches, and only had Sundays free. The floor of this family’s room was covered with blankets; cardboard boxes. Clothes were just kind of piled up around the walls. The whole room was lit by a bare light bulb and the TV—and smelled kind of dank and stale. After chatting and asking to find out who had been going to what school or CODENI, we were off to another site, but as we walked down the street the little boy caught up
and fell in step with us. He told us that the next street over was “too dangerous”—that he preferred to walk the way we were going, and also we would pass his big brother who was working at a main intersection a few blocks away on Calle Niños Heroes. As we were walking down the street, a man called out to the little boy from atop a truck, laughing. The little boy stopped chatting with us, yelled back, “¡Chinga la tuya, guey!” (roughly translated, “Fuck yours, asshole!”) and returned to his conversation with us as if he weren’t a little boy yelling expletives to adult friends in the street.

That particular area (the northern section of Analco) was known among residents and citizens as “the zone of tolerance:” meaning that some of the work of the informal economy—prostitution (of both children and adults), drug dealing, robbery—was overlooked or even protected by local city police. There were lots of little hotels where sex workers (some of them children) hung out in the doorways, so they could take their clients right up to a room, or run/disappear when the police rolled up. Police presence was usually not to arrest anyone, but rather to collect some form of payoff, as was explained at a community meeting between sexiservidores (sex workers) and officials from the municipality.

Turning off the busy commercial streets, the crowded side streets featured housefronts covered with graffiti and abandoned doorways, and gutters littered with trash and discarded household items. When I spoke with one of our interviewees about how the streets in Providencia were named after famous poets, she joked, “Oh well, then, the names of the streets around here should be like, “Chancla Vieja” (Old Shoe). There were no garages here; old dirty cars parked up on the cracked and dangerously dilapidated sidewalks to permit busses and trucks to pass on the narrow, pot-holed streets.

In a 2007 report derived from qualitative data collected by the
Ayuntamiento of Guadalajara, San Juan de Díos was described as follows:

“The majority of residential housing in this “colonia” are old large homes and hotels converted into single-room occupancies with shared baths (above all in the central part of the neighborhood and towards the east). The principal economic activity consists of formal and informal business. The social background of the inhabitants is very diverse, including workers such as sandal makers, shoe makers, wood-workers, laborers, and store employees. There are also unemployed, retired, and criminals. In general, the people who live in this area are of scarce resources.

“At first glance, it appears that the neighborhood has all basic services, even though it is immediately apparent that the streets and sidewalks are in need of cleaning and repair. The district lacks trees and green areas. Many of the large old homes are abandoned and appear to house criminals. That given, the residents’ chief complaint is feeling unsafe in certain zones where drugs are sold and prostitution takes place even during the day. (Residents do recognize that police presence has improved in some places).” (Ayuntamiento 2007).

The report continues noting that “the sidewalks are badly in need of repair,” the pavement “is in terrible condition,” that, one street (Valentin Gomez Farias), hosts “about 10 bus routes,” that the schools have “huge potholes,” “a lack of discipline,” “accumulated trash,” and “the bathrooms seem closed,” “many of the old homes are in a deplorable state, abandoned, and falling down.” Even though the garbage was collected twice a day in San Juan de Díos, people tended to leave their bags of garbage out before the trucks arrive so that the streets of the neighborhood were full of garbage bags. There was also a terrible problem with “noise contamination” (Ayuntamiento 2007).

On one visit, we stopped to stare up at an old cement house with a balcony at the corner of Calle Aldama and Calle Insurgentes when a slim guy in his early forties approached us and began a conversation. We asked him if he lived around here and if he knew anything about this house. He said he did live here, but he didn't know anything about the house. Then he said to us, “Are you guys lost? The Church of San Juan de Díos is about three blocks that way, see?” He thought we were lost
tourists—what possible interest could we have walking around San Juan de Díos? On Calle Gigantes sat what looked like a huge housing project, although the Mexican government subsidizes no such housing. The sign on the front read, “PHP Multifamiliar Presidente Madero,” folks were coming and going, young women pushing baby strollers, guys standing around at the entrance. A few blocks from there, the Hotel Gallo Rubio, generally considered upscale for the neighborhood, rented a room for two persons for $110.00 pesos per night (about US $10.50). For a room with a television, they wanted $130.00 pesos (approximately US $12.80). A few blocks from there on Calle Analco was the Hotel La Salud where small, unfurnished rooms with communal baths rent for $70 a night. The penthouse (with living area, kitchenette and bedroom) costs one family enrolled in CODENI $180.00 pesos a night (totaling approximately US $537.00 a month). This is more than one would pay for a newly renovated two bedroom apartment in Providencia. However, due to cultural norms of discrimination, and the impoverished consciousness of these families who are accustomed to living from hand to mouth, many migrant families continue to spend offensive amounts for shelter at the cost of education, healthcare, and generally overcoming poverty.

These hotels, ubiquitous throughout this neighborhood and similar barrios en el ZMG, sometimes housed impoverished families, weary working class travelers, and/or provided a place for a commercial sexual exchange (Chavez Gutierrez 2006; Ramirez 2007).

Public security was a serious problematic in this neighborhood. Street crime is a complex urban issue. People were assaulted in broad daylight, according to a recent report from the Ayuntamiento and study participants (Ayuntamiento 2007).

“Some time ago, people could go to Plaza Mariachi with their families to have fun, but this is no longer possible because all these lowlifes come up and ask you, ‘What are you looking for? Cocaine, marijuana? White or dark meat?’ From Calzada Independencia and Javier Mina all the way to the Hospicio Cabanas. In the plain light of day they assault people” (Ayuntamiento 2007).

We actually witnessed quite a bit of police action during fieldwork in San Juan de Díos. One day in May 2008, one researcher turned the corner to find an “operativo” underway—rousting adult women street sex workers. One woman sitting on the sidewalk looked down as she was being questioned by two uniformed men. About four other women were standing in a small group off to the side, surrounded by about five officers. Two police vehicles blocked
traffic. While attempting to get photographs of the situation, one officer asked the researcher what she was doing, and in the process of explaining almost got hauled in with everybody else. Police patrolled on bicycle and in patrol cars. On the one hand, of course, visibility of law enforcement was considered by many as an “improvement” because citizens felt unsafe and requested more police protection. On the other hand, as discussed previously, the consistent concentration on street crime, as opposed to elite or business suite crime, reinforces a vicious cycle of continued and exclusive attention to daily violence and individual-level criminality instead of working towards system change, challenging the corruption in business, law, and government that sets this process of inequity into action.

**Schools** in San Juan de Dios were scarce, run-down, and covered with graffiti. We were informed that school districts were not organized by neighborhood, so the civic workers at the office of the Secretary of Public Education were not able to tell us exactly how many schools were located in San Juan de Dios. *Ayuntamiento* reported that there were between 8 and 14 schools in the neighborhoods of San Juan de Dios and Analco (see table 3.4). Evening schools were available for children with “conduct disorders,” also common for CODENI children who worked during the day. The public school system ran these sessions from 8:00 pm to 10:00 pm during week nights at several locations in San Juan de Dios.

The school district faxed CODENI a list of schools that held evening sessions so we visited one such primary school on a hot night in May. While walking along dark, deserted, trash-filled streets looking for the school, we talked about how it must be for the young indigenous migrant mothers walking their children to these sessions. When we finally arrived at the address that the Secretary of Public Education faxed over, which was about 8:00 p.m., there were no classes, no lights on at the school, not even anyone around. It wasn’t a holiday, it wasn’t any special day, just a regular Tuesday evening. If we could not find the evening school, we tried to imagine how much more difficult it must be for the tired families of children who work in the streets to keep their children in school.

**Community organization.** The only evidence of a sort of formal neighborhood organization we saw was a kind of sad, handprinted sign on the wall at a corner intersection in San Juan de Dios. The orange paper taped to the wall on the street tells readers that “Jesus loves you…Come with us to share God’s love.” According to the *Ayuntamiento* (2007), it had been six years since there was a neighborhood committee in San Juan de Dios.

**Residents.** The families that CODENI worked with in San Juan de Dios came to Guadalajara in search of food and money. They came in to the city from places like Queretero, Nayarit, Michoacan, Oaxaca, and Puebla. They arrived from small deserted *pueblos* en Jalisco. They generally arrived during certain times of the year—such as the Christmas
season. Many came to work in the large intersections—selling fruit, water or chicles, washing windshields or performing tricks like blowing fire or juggling. Some occasionally participated in the exploitative sexual market.

The indigenous families most common in San Juan de Díos were Nauhuas from the state of Michoacan and Mixtecos from Oaxaca. The downtown area filled up during the Christmas season, as migrant vendors arrived to stay in the hotels in San Juan de Dios. One street educator explained how they eventually end up staying.

“In their villages, they are very very poor. Their priority is to search for food for the children—even before school. With so much migration, it’s as if the children aren’t from there and they aren’t from here. This is the life of the migrant. They are villagers—they are very humble. They arrive in Guadalajara desperate to eat.” (CODENI street educator)

One boy who CODENI worked with lived in the streets, sold flowers, washed car windows—and sold sex. CODENI assisted getting him off the streets at his weary behest. One of the CODENI street educators explained about children and sexuality:

“So much of what goes on here has to do with sexuality. Mexico is a very conservative nation, we don’t talk about sex here. For example, just recently they removed some book from schools because of their sexual content.

“Either because of sexual assault or sexual abuse, the young children become very aware of sexuality. They have sexual relations with each other in the shelters. We know that, and we don’t have easy solutions to help guide them.” (CODENI street educator)

This candid acknowledgement points to one of the reasons for CODENI’s success with the children in San Juan de Dios and other disadvantaged neighborhoods. Being willing to admit and face all the challenges that the child laborer confronts, not just the easy or socially acceptable ones, builds immense trust in CODENI on the part of the youth and their families.

Children from San Juan de Díos. According to her mother, Maria Elena “was never quite right.” At the age of eight, Maria Elena was found in the communal bathroom of the vivienda where she lived in San Juan de Dios after having been sexually molested by a neighbor. “From then on, she craved sex like an addict does crack” was how her
mother talked about Maria Elena.

At the time of this writing, Maria Elena was the mother of six, all of whom had been raised by Maria Elena’s mother, except the youngest two: Chabela, 13, and Barbara, 11. They lived with Maria Elena and their father, Arnulfo, in a hotel room the family rented in San Juan de Dios for $80.00 pesos a day (approximately US $7.00). The family had been forced to move from several different hotels, as Arnulfo was caught stealing underwear from and spying on other women residents.

Every day the girls accompanied their mother to beg for change in the downtown plazas, while their father guarded parked cars nearby. The girls had no birth certificates and had thus never been able to attend school. They did attend basic literacy classes with CODENI twice a week and talked about the dream of being able to someday go to a regular school like other kids and switch to CODENI’s homework help club. Both girls struggled to interact with other children due to the lack of socialization through school. “At one point we had convinced the family that a group home would be the best option for the girls,” explained a CODENI educator.

CODENI contacted over twenty places, every single option for girls in Guadalajara that was registered with IJAS, but not a single one would accept them. Some said they didn’t accept ‘street’ children, some wouldn’t accept children over age ten, and others would only accept older girls if they were in the grade they should be for school. Thus, Chabela and Barbara continued to survive off the streets of San Juan de Dios and the downtown plazas, slowly losing hope of a brighter future.

Sergio, age 14, another resident in San Juan de Dios also participated in CODENI’s basic literacy program in 2008. He and his grandmother shared a hotel room with private bath for 120 pesos a day (approximately US $11.00). Abandoned by his mother as a baby, Sergio also lacked a birth certificate, but always worked hard in his classes and quickly learned to read and write. During the day, he cleaned windshields at the intersection of Calle Revolución and la Calzada Independencia, but he dreamed of one day having a job that required him to wear a coat and tie.

Sergio’s aunt and uncle also occasionally rented rooms in the same hotel. His aunt worked in the informal sex economy and a drug addict who regularly caused problems for Sergio and his grandmother, skipping town and leaving debts behind. His uncle was also an addict and regularly beat up Sergio when using his substances of choice.

After one such incident, at the beginning of April, Sergio’s grandmother reported that he had run away. Other residents from San Juan de Dios reported seeing him working in different intersections around downtown, and rumors circulated that he was staying with an older prostitute who, according to his grandmother, “always wanted to be his mom.” As of the end of May 2008, CODENI had been unable to located Sergio. They were also unable to file a missing persons report with the police, due to the fact that Sergio was not a registered citizen with a birth certificate and his grandmother was not his legal guardian.

One of CODENI’s street educators explained how he works with kids in San Juan de Dios:

“First, you meet with them. I just show up at the intersection at the same time each week with a
Chinese yo-yo. The same day of the week at the same time so they begin to expect me. I just start hanging out and playing with the yo-yo. Slowly kids will come up to me and ask me what it is. I tell them and ask them their names. Then they ask me if they can play with it and I tell them, ‘yes,’ but only if they call me by my name, not buey (dude), my name is not buey. I begin slowly, in small steps, setting boundaries and limits.

“Once I’ve gained their confidence, I ask to meet the family. This way we can interview them and [our social worker] can visit them. After about a month or so, we can propose intervention with the kid and his family, based on everything we’ve found out about them.” (CODENI street educator)

Another educator explained the difficulty in reaching with kids who work in intersections with adults.

“The adults are very skeptical of anyone new who shows up on their turf. They think we’re going to take the kid away because he shouldn’t be working or should be in school. A lot of times the adult windshield cleaners are stoned and will easily resort to violence to defend their territory and ‘their’ kids.” (CODENI street educator)

The young residents of San Juan de Díos who work in its streets and intersections face extraordinary challenges. Between struggling to stay safe in their families and in the streets, to go to school, or to find enough to eat, these youngsters’ human rights were clearly being violated every day.

San Juan de Díos is a vibrant and struggling barrio in a state of constant movement and transformation. One of the oldest and one of the most infamous in Guadalajara, San Juan de Díos is prime for “urban renewal.” Even though Guadalajara will host the Pan American Games in 2011, it is unlikely that this neighborhood will be gentrified into a Disneyland barrio for it. Families with working children find refuge from the elements in the rooms they rent there. These families spend their days scrambling for pesos to buy food to feed themselves—and running with cardboard potato chip stands in hand from city inspectors who chase them from corner to corner.

This completes our tour and tale of two cities. After taking a good look at the part of the city “on the other side of Independence Boulevard” (al otro lado de la Calzada), as so many tapatios refer to the divide between the rich and poor in Guadalajara, we now conclude with concrete recommendations for ways to address some of the inequities uncovered in the data presented here.
IV. Recommendations

The CODENI office is indistinguishable from the other doors on the block. CODENI is not a shelter so there really is no need for a sign. Despite the lack of a sign, the majority of families and children working in the streets of the downtown area know exactly where to find the mairos of CODENI (street educator/companion/social worker). Children and their parents come to the offices for family violence seminars, psychological counseling and other support services. Behind these doors, CODENI’s team strives for social justice and better living conditions for the families enrolled in their programs. Aside from direct services for these families, CODENI works to influence public policy and bring about social awareness of children’s rights violations in Jalisco.

With a staff of 5 fulltime and 2 parttime workers and approximately 10 volunteers at any given time, the collective serves about 115 children from 60 families a month. Extreme poverty in marginalized neighborhoods as a “red flag issue” (foco rojo) emphasizes CODENI’s commitment to framing the crisis of children dependent on the streets for survival instead of going to school, as essentially a social and political problem, as opposed to an individual, “bad parenting,” or psychological problem of each child. Growing up in these barrios truly limits the possibilities of their overcoming poverty. We produced this report in the spirit of the defense of the basic human rights of children to a dignified, safe, loving, creative childhood that sets them up to meet their potential as productive adults.

The data, observations, and accounts presented in this report regarding life for poor children in terms of housing, health, education, access to parks, public safety and the like point to a central contradiction of the postindustrial global city: that, more than ever before, in the midst of privilege and comfort (in this case, in the second-largest city in Mexico) reside children who live at a subsistence level and go to bed unwashed and hungry. How can the well-off in this city live with themselves knowing this? We tell ourselves stories: “I can’t do anything about that,” “it’s not my fault,” “I already made a donation,” “I’ve got my own problems,” or “they live like animals,” (all quotes from interviews with Providencia residents, referring to the people in San Juan de Dios). What do the poor say? “I’m not doing that bad—I know somebody who didn’t even [eat today] [sleep inside last
night], or “pinches ricos cabrones” (loosely translated: “fucking rich assholes”) (from various accounts of informants from San Juan de Dios) (see also Gonzalez 2005). These are all valid and reasonable assessments, each in their own way, but we need a larger vision to guide us to a more equitable future.

According to Chapter 1, Article 4 of the Constitution of the United States of Mexico, all children have the right to have their nutritional, health, and educational needs met. Furthermore, Mexico ratified the United Nations International Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990. That is to say, we do not need to reinvent the wheel or create new legal mandates. What we need to do is to enforce those that we have (see also Salina Beristain 2005; see also Chavez Gutierrez et al 2007) and reinvigorate our efforts to do so. Unfortunately, we know that solutions are not easy, cheap, fast, efficient, or necessarily profitable.

We would like to conclude with a set of concrete recommendations (see also Volpi 2002; Scanlon et al 1998):

Government and NGOs must work together with those in need to stimulate change. No single organization can tackle the problem of poverty in Guadalajara, or even in San Juan de Dios. So often, NGOs position themselves against the government, blaming the system for the people’s struggles. Among themselves, NGOs also tend to be competitive, blocking the possibility of collaborating with other like-minded actors. Only through combining forces, will conscious parties be able to provoke real change communities such as San Juan de Dios, with assistance from communities such as Providencia.

The plan of action for NGOs and government entities concerned with issues of urban poverty must be directed towards stimulating individual change. We’ve all heard the Chinese proverb “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” Food stamps and welfare checks only feed poverty, as opposed to addressing the root causes of such problems. Community planning that directly involves neighborhood residents increases the probability of project success, especially since social workers and other external aids do move on. The key is to promote a consciousness of power and responsibility among all citizens in the fight against urban poverty.
With respect to government responsibility, a primary concern should be unemployment. According to the Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económico (OCDE), the national unemployment rate for Mexico at the beginning of 2008 was 3.7 percent. However, the definition for unemployment excludes those forced to sell flowers or candy in the streets and even those cleaning windshields in intersections. Considering the number of Mexicans who receive benefits such as healthcare and social security, required by law in all formal employment positions, we find that only 13 million of the nearly 60 million adults in the nation (approximately 20 percent) were registered with the Instituto Mexicano de Seguro Social (IMSS) (INEGI). By providing job training programs and increasing employment opportunities as alternatives to working the streets, we would stimulate a more democratic society. Better employment would diminish the daily concern of the urban poor struggling to feed their families and enable them to become more socially and politically active.

Education is key to stimulating social and political activism among the urban poor. In the terms of Paulo Freire, education should strive to develop a “critical consciousness” (see Freire 1981). Such a consciousness enables one to challenge realities and achieve change in his or her world. Without a conscious decision by the urban poor to “better” their lives, external efforts will continue to be made in vain.

External efforts should also consider cases of poverty on a personal level, rather than attempting to implement mass plans of attack against poverty. For example, one common principle poverty indicator around the world is dirt floors within a home. Over the years, Mexico has experienced several campaigns to reduce poverty by putting concrete floors in homes. While we do not deny that a concrete floor is a step up from a dirt floor, it does not really increase a family’s quality of life, as families benefiting from this poverty reduction project continue to lack food, water, health care, education, decent work at a living wage, and more. The personalization of public resources in their application, considering the primary needs of each family, creates a greater impact in their struggle against poverty.
up in Providencia. But the aim of this report is not to restate the obvious, but rather to stimulate reflection in the readers regarding these disparities. Guadalajara, Mexico is by no means an impoverished city by international standards. Especially when taking a step back and comparing it to other Latin American cities, Guadalajara enjoys a relatively high rate of comfort on many indicators. It is easy to conclude that, according to many of the statistical indicators that the city government provides to the public about Guadalajara that, ‘they’re not that bad off—almost all the homes have running water and cement or clay floors, and there are plenty of schools in the area.’ As street educators who frequent the area, we feel that the government-reported findings can be deceiving. Our purpose was to paint a clear picture of how desperately different San Juan Díos is from Providencia.

The week prior to writing this, in July of 2008, we witnessed three dead bodies in the streets of San Juan de Díos, two related to gang violence. Drug dealers and gangs rule the streets of San Juan de Díos, along with corrupt law enforcement officers. Classes are regularly canceled at neighborhood schools and teachers generally lack hope that their students will overcome the poverty into which they were born, and that the youth will be able to make it out of the neighborhood. Physical, psychological, sexual, and drug abuse is the norm throughout cheap hotels inhabited by CODENI families.

Daily, seemingly “normal” occurrences in the urban poverty of San Juan de Díos would be unfathomable in Providencia—a mother working into the night cleaning windshields at an intersection to buy her son rubbing alcohol to drink, explaining that at least she can keep him in the hotel and know that he’s still alive this way; another mother working just as hard to cover the deposit to change hotels, after her husband has been caught stealing other women’s underwear off the communal clothesline; illiterate migrants from southern Mexico, completely helpless as to how to enroll their children in school, never mind how they will cover the expenses of uniforms, enrollment fees and supplies totaling around $2,000.00 Mexican pesos (approximately $200.00 US dollars) per child.

Childhood is the stage when consciousness and understanding about the surrounding world outside the family begins to develop. Considering the lifestyle of violence, misery, and injustice in San Juan de Díos, as Freireist street educators, we believe it is important to help children develop a critical consciousness about these experiences. Without an analysis of their surroundings, we fear that these young people will not only be mired in these inequities, but doomed to reproduce them.


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