



Fall 2019

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Recommended Citation

Flores, Gisselle, "An Examination of Housing Along the U.S.-Mexico Border: Colonias in Texas and its Impact on Children" (2019). *Student Publications*. 860.
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Abstract

Colonias in Texas have been constructed over the past 65 years, and many of these housing units started off as temporary solutions for the lack of affordable public housing for migrant farmworkers. Children in colonias are one of the most vulnerable residents in an already vulnerable population, and the obstacles that residents in colonias face have a severe impact on children. One of the most prominent challenges that impact children living in Texas colonias is food insecurity. These challenges that these communities face in food security is also contributing to the rise in health issues especially for these children.

Keywords

Children in Colonias, U.S.-Mexico Border, Food Insecurity

Disciplines

Chicana/o Studies | Food Security | Inequality and Stratification

Comments

Written for AFS 250: Housing & Race

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The U.S.-Mexico border is about 2,000 miles long with Texas having the largest section on the U.S. side, and other U.S. states that form the border are California, Arizona, and New Mexico (Ward, 1999, p. 13). In Mexico, the border goes along the Mexican states of Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas (Ward, 1999, p. 13). In terms of the population along the U.S.-Mexico border, there has been an increase throughout the years; between 1983 and 2010, the population along the border went from 6.9 million people to over 14 million people (Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], 2016, p. 5). Given the rise in population along the border, this increase has also affected the region's environmental quality and health since a larger population means a higher demand for services that guarantee adequate living environments (EPA, 2016, p. 5). Population growth also contributes to challenges to give services to specific types of communities along the border, including isolated populations, indigenous communities, and colonias (EPA, 2016, p. 5).

The meaning behind the creation of a border can have many interpretations, and in the case of the border along the United States and Mexico, the intentions of borders have been to keep certain outsiders from entering the United States because they have been portrayed as dangerous or as threats. However, the significance of the border is more complex and could even be considered paradoxical (Brown, 2010, p. 20). The purpose of building walls could be interpreted as a way to demonstrate state dominance but having these walls may also indicate that there exists the "ungovernability by law

and politics” that forces certain people or groups in power to compensate for this ungovernability (Brown, 2010, p. 24). Walls can even be considered “theatrical” because they cannot actually exercise the power that they represent, but they exist as an exaggerated symbol to establish a certain power dynamic between two regions or states, which in this case would be the United States and Central/Latin America (Brown, 2010, p. 25).

The reason that states or regions have wanted to install these walls can be traced to anxieties about “sovereign impotence” (Brown, 2010, p. 26), which those who want these walls in the United States would never admit because it would dismantle their appearance as the dominant group. In fact, today there continues to be an increasingly overt push to have heavier policing and to build an impassable wall along the border even though there already exists a border fence structure. This push was especially vocalized during the 2016 Presidential Election, and even though the country’s xenophobia existed long before then, one of Donald Trump’s promises that led to him being elected during his campaign was to have the wall built (Johnson, 2016). The United States’ continued xenophobic attitude and actions have made living in the country a difficult experience for many migrants and their families, and some of the many challenges they can face include those related to housing issues.

Colonias can be defined as low-income housing areas on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border that may not have adequate infrastructure including “potable water, septic or sewer systems, electricity, paved roads or safe and sanitary housing” (Barton, Perlmeter, Blum, & Marquez, 2015, p. 1; Ward, 1999, p. 1). In the past, people who lived in colonias have had to endure dreadful environmental conditions, which has also

led to a rise in diseases among other issues that these communities have faced (Ward, 1999, p. 3). Texas has the largest colonias population and the largest amount of colonias along the border, which indicates that a significant amount of research conducted on colonias focuses on the ones in Texas (Barton et al., 2015, p. 1). The Texas counties that have the largest amounts of colonias are El Paso, Maverick, Webb, Starr, Hidalgo, and Cameron, and the colonias in these regions house about 369,500 people (Barton et al., 2015, p. 1). Colonias in Texas have been constructed over the past 65 years, and many of these housing units started off as temporary solutions for the lack of affordable public housing for migrant farmworkers (Barton et al., 2015, p. 2). Texas colonias have been located in regions that are beyond the city or in the Extra Territorial Jurisdiction (ETJ), and the locations of these colonias are not a coincidence because having the colonias built in these areas meant that the cities were not required to respond or aid these communities (Ward, 1999, p. 6).

There have been efforts to improve the quality of colonias in Texas, especially between 2006 to 2014 when Texas devoted tens of millions of dollars towards infrastructure projects in certain counties containing colonias (Barton et al., 2015, p. 3). Within these six counties that the state invested in, there was a decrease during this time period of the number of colonias with no basic infrastructure, which could indicate that there have been improvements that have made it easier for families to live in these areas (Barton et al., 2015, p. 3). However, improvement in infrastructure does not equate to improvement in housing; the price of these residential lots has increased since the infrastructure has been upgraded, and this means that families may not have the money to pay for utilities or can even be fined if their housing is not up to code,

which is reminiscent of the U.S.'s pattern of criminalizing poverty (Barton et al., 2015, p. 5).

In colonias, there are high rates of poverty that have been prevalent since they were formed, but despite the high poverty rates in colonias, networks of solidarity ensures that there is not a high rate of homelessness; community members in these areas tend to support each other by sharing resources and housing extended family members and working multiple jobs (Barton et al., 2015, p. 2). More than 40 percent of colonia residents in Texas live below the poverty line and 20 percent of residents live at or just above the poverty line, which is significantly higher compared to other residents in the United States or even just other residents in Texas (Barton et al., 2015, p. 2). In 2010, 96 percent of colonia residents identified as Hispanic/Latinx with most of them being of Mexican American descent and 35 percent of residents were born outside of the United States and over 40 percent stated that they spoke English less than very well (Barton et al., 2015, p. 2); one of the misconceptions of colonia residents is that a majority of them are first-generation immigrants, but the census data from 2010 dispels that argument because 60 percent of adults in colonias are U.S. citizens and 94 percent of those under 18 years old are also citizens (Barton et al., 2015, p. 3). These demographics in Texas colonias may be different today, but unfortunately, updated information on colonia demographics are not available or are difficult to find.

People may wonder why people living in colonias or along the border stop there and do not move further up north especially since wages tends to be higher in the north. Some reasons for this may include families wanting to stay near each other if some reside on the other side of the border, migrants wanting to stay within a certain level of

comfort in terms of language and culture with the border being considered a “binational region”, and people not having a familial network to rely on further up north (Barton et al., 2015, p. 3). Taking this information into consideration when thinking about the context of colonias is essential because it demonstrates that residents are able to find some resources within their communities, which has a major role in why they chose to stay in these housing units, but there are still many challenges that come with colonias that need to be addressed in order to provide adequate housing for these residents.

Children in colonias are one of the most vulnerable residents in an already vulnerable population, and the obstacles that residents in colonias face have a severe impact on children. One of the most prominent challenges that impact children living in Texas colonias is food insecurity. A study focused on food access revealed that just over 60% of households with children were categorized under the most severe section of food insecurity, which is child insecure (Sharkey, Nalty, Johnson, & Dean, 2012, p. 2). According to another study on Mexican and/or Mexican American children between the ages of six and eleven, at least one third of the children reported skipping meals, going hungry, and/or not eating for at least a whole day due to lack of food at home (Sharkey et al., 2012, p. 5). Children who participated in this study did not meet the recommended amount of key nutrients in the food they consumed, and those who reported very low food security were also the ones to have consumed higher intakes of energy, fat, and added sugars (Sharkey et al., 2012, p. 10). Given that a significant amount of families in colonias live at or below the poverty line, this data on nutrient and dietary intakes in children makes sense because what tends to appear as most affordable for low-income families is junk food, and while there is some common

knowledge on what type of food falls into this category, this information does not change that fast food is made to be more convenient and cheap for families with little access to resources.

These challenges that these communities face in food security is also contributing to the rise in health issues especially for these children. A lack of food security can lead to poor physiologic and psychological health and an increase in being overweight and obese, and these issues are then also linked to problems in academic, social, and behavioral tendencies (Nalty, Sharkey, & Dean, 2013, p. 709). When food insecurity impacts many sectors of these children's lives, it is evident that this is one of the primary issues that needs to be addressed and resolved immediately. There are other challenges that the communities in colonias face but cannot be addressed because something as basic and necessary as access to healthy food resources is missing for them.

There are many approaches that could be taken to address food insecurity in colonias, and one of them should be increasing the implementation of nutrition programs in schools in colonias. A study examined how school-based nutrition programs impact child food insecurity in families living in colonias during the summer and throughout the school year, and the results demonstrated that at least within the sample families of the study, there was improvement in food security in the school year (Nalty et al, 2013, p. 712). The nutrition programs were offered by the School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program, and what is interesting is that food insecurity was more prevalent during the summer than it was in the school year. This indicates that the Summer Food Service Program and the National School Lunch

Program, since they provided summer funding, did not have enough success to reduce food insecurity (Nalty et al, 2013, p. 711). The programs' resources during the summer did help improve some of the effects of food security that was worsening in households, but there could have been obstacles that may have prevented them from aiding families address this issue. Some of these difficulties could include inconvenient location, language barrier, and the need yet lack of private transportation to reach families (Nalty et al, 2013, p. 711). The season may also make it difficult for children to access these programs since parents in colonias may not always have time or resources to take their children to these program sites during the summer, but there needs to be more effort to make the benefits of these federally funded programs accessible for children even during the summer (Nalty et al, 2013, p. 711). Having these types of studies are imperative in terms of making legislative change, especially because the study managed to gather perspectives from mothers and children in colonias, and having this data will allow policy makers and advocates to become aware of the prevalence of food insecurity in these communities and hopefully be encouraged to implement and improve on nutrition programs (Nalty et al, 2013, p. 712).

An essential factor to consider when looking at health risks for youth as a result of food insecurity is their access to opportunities for physical activities. Participation in physical activity has been proven to lower the risk for diabetes, obesity/overweight, hypertension, and high cholesterol for different communities containing various age groups (Umstatted Meyer, Sharkey, Patterson, & Dean, 2013, p. 2), which means that this could lead to a path towards good health and proper mental and social development while also being enjoyable for children. However, as was mentioned

previously, the infrastructure and physical environment in colonias is not considered safe especially for children, and this means that physical environmental features, including street design, network connectivity, site design, safety, lighting, and even aesthetic appeal, need to be carefully thought about and the link between these features and participation in physical activity need to be officially recognized (Umstatted Meyer et al., 2013, p. 3). The poor environmental features of colonias can lead to a lack of playgrounds, parks, yards or even just safe open spaces for children (Umstatted Meyer et al., 2013, p. 3). When children who live in colonias were asked where they go to exercise or to play, 75.5 percent of children's responses were schools, and schools include school grounds, physical education, and school gyms (Umstatted Meyer et al., 2013, p. 8).

This study also concluded that there are several physical environmental features deemed as unsupportive for physical activities in colonias, which includes few parks, open spaces, recreation buildings, and traffic lights even though there is a large amount of traffic in these regions (Umstatted Meyer et al., 2013, p. 9). In addition to traffic, other barriers that families and children face in having access to opportunities for physical activities are unleashed dogs and kidnappings of U.S.-born children (Umstatted Meyer et al., 2013, p. 9), and these serious risks push families to have children confined within the house in order to keep them safe. However, this is not to say that children in colonias simply do not look for other creative ways to seek ways to participate in physical activity; driveways could also be seen as areas for potential physical activities, but they are not usually considered as traditional options for these types of activities. Conducting research in colonias means recognizing the context of these spaces and in

this case, looking at non-traditional options for physical activities. However, only about 15 percent of the driveways were actually paved in the study, and this means that the safety of these spaces needs to be assessed in order to ensure that children are not placing themselves in risk of injuries (Umstatted Meyer et al., 2013, p. 10). This information demonstrates the different levels of impact that food insecurity has on families living in colonias, and if these issues are properly addressed, the benefits would also affect different aspects of the residents' lives.

Although there are numerous ways to tackle the effects of food insecurity and other problems that residents encounter in colonias, many of these methods do not necessarily aim to address the structural or fundamental problems that caused the establishment of colonias. Poverty and a lack of adequate and affordable housing for low-income people led to colonias becoming the “solutions” for migrant farmworkers when they were first created. However, poverty and the lack of acceptable and affordable housing are still prevalent problems today for people living in colonias, and this is why food insecurity is a problem especially for children in colonias today (Ward, 1999, p. 113). When thinking beyond nutrition programs and opportunities for physical activity, it then becomes clear that the goal should not be to “fix” colonias but should instead be to remedy what caused colonias to exist in the first place. Improving access to physical activities and healthy food options have obvious benefits for youth and families in colonias, but they can also be considered “Band-Aid solutions” to the challenges they face because they do not actually get families out of the situations that caused them to be food insecure in the first place (Ward, 1999, p. 260). In fact, they can even encourage families to rely on these programs which can be a problem if federal

funding for these nutrition programs or plans for improvement in infrastructure suddenly go away in these regions.

There is not one single way to find solutions for the issues that communities in colonias face, which is why it is important to consider the different types of resources that these communities need to help resolve the underlying causes which are poverty and lack of affordable housing. As an approach towards addressing structural problems can begin by requiring industries and establishments in these regions to grant housing bonuses or services to their employees that live in colonias (Ward, 1999, p. 129). Another recommendation is to not simply pay their employees minimum wage but instead a “livable wage” (Ward, 1999, p. 129).

Even though the information on colonias are not necessarily up to date, there is still frustration among members of these communities because they are still facing many problems similar to the ones that they faced in the 90s and early 2000s. In fact, in 2018, there was outrage because the government cut funding for health care, water, and other types of services in colonias (Sacchetti & Geoges, 2018). The current administration today keeps pushing to build a wall along the border, which would require \$25 billion, even though “illegal border crossings are low and colonias could use a federal boost” (Sacchetti & Geoges, 2018). This information is a demonstration of how far the United States’ xenophobia would go to continue ostracizing vulnerable and marginalized groups.

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