

Spatial Inequality in Mexico City: From Cardboard to Castles

9.1 Introduction

Anna Romero lives in a poor part of Mexico City. She and her family share a simple two-room house. The house is made of concrete bricks and scraps of wood and cardboard taken from the dump. There is no glass in the windows, and there is no running water.

Six days a week, Anna travels by bus to her job on the other side of the city. She works as a maid in the Alba household. The Albas live in a beautiful 15-room house with a large garden and swimming pool. To Anna, it seems like a castle. Anna earns \$6 for working a 12-hour day. At 7:00 P.M., as the Albas sit down to a big meal of chicken, meat, or fish, Anna heads home to cook rice and beans for her family.

The Albas and Romeros live just 15 miles apart. But they live in very different worlds. The contrast in their lives is an example of **spatial inequality**. This is an unequal distribution of wealth or resources over a geographic area. It means that some places within that area are richer or poorer than others. Mexico City offers many examples of spatial inequality.

In this chapter, you will learn about the growth of Mexico City as an urban area. You will read about the causes and effects of the city's rapid growth. You will also learn about the spatial inequality that has resulted from the city's expansion.

Essential Question

Why does spatial inequality exist in urban areas?

This map shows the Federal District of Mexico. This district is the capital of Mexico. Most of Mexico City is located here. The district is divided into areas called *delegaciones*. (shown here in different colors). Some neighborhoods are wealthy. Others are very poor. Keep this spatial inequality in mind as you try to answer the Essential Question.



Graphic Organizer



A Blend of Old and New

The Plaza of Three Cultures shows the mix of cultures that make up Mexico City today. The stone platforms in this photograph are Aztec ruins. The church was built by the Spanish. The office buildings represent modern Mexico.

9.2 The Geographic Setting

Mexico City is one of the world's largest cities in population. It sits in a highland **basin** at about 7,000 feet above sea level. This basin is called the Valley of Mexico. The valley is surrounded by mountains. It has a mild climate and rich soil. The Valley of Mexico has been an important place of settlement since ancient times.

A City of Wonders: The Aztec Capital of Tenochtitlán The first settlers in the Valley of Mexico arrived thousands of years ago. At the time, several large, shallow lakes covered the valley floor. Small cities later grew up around these lakes.

In 1325, a group known as the Aztecs settled on an island in Lake Texcoco. There they founded a city called Tenochtitlán. The Aztecs were great warriors. They soon built a mighty empire. Their city grew too. By the time the Spanish arrived in 1519, Tenochtitlán was one of the greatest cities in the world. Around 250,000 people lived in the Aztec capital. Up to a million lived in the Valley of Mexico.

Tenochtitlán was a marvelous place. One Spaniard said it was like an "enchanted vision" from a fairy tale. Great pyramids and temples towered above the city. Fine palaces and homes lined its streets and **plazas**. Many canals crossed the island. Three causeways, or raised roads, connected it to the shore. A huge market sold exotic goods from around the empire.

The people of Tenochtitlán enjoyed a high **standard of living**. This term refers to people's overall level of comfort and well-being. City residents had plenty of food from farming, fishing, and trade. An **aqueduct** brought in fresh water from the surrounding hills. The houses were well built. People lived in clean, orderly neighborhoods.

A Bustling National Capital: Mexico City In 1521, Spain conquered the Aztec Empire. The Spanish destroyed the Aztec capital. They built a new city in its place. Over time, Mexico City became one of the most beautiful cities in the Americas.

In 1821, Mexico won its independence from Spain. Mexico City became the capital of the new country. It continued to grow slowly. By the 1950s, the city was a blend of modern and historic buildings. Broad avenues and tree-filled parks made it a pleasant place to live.

Today, Mexico City remains the center of Mexican life. But it is no longer the graceful city of old. In the past 50 years, **urbanization**, or city growth, has increased at a rapid rate. In 1970, the city had over 8 million people. Ten years later, it had almost doubled in population. There are now at least 18 million people in Mexico City's **metropolitan area**. This area includes the city and its **suburbs**.

A key factor in Mexico City's growth is migration from **rural** parts of the country. Many people have moved to the capital because of **rural decline**, or increasing poverty in the countryside. Life in rural areas is hard. But for many people, the city has become a difficult place to live too, as you will see.

► Geotermis

rural decline worsening economic conditions in the countryside, including rising unemployment and growing poverty. Rural decline drives migration to cities.

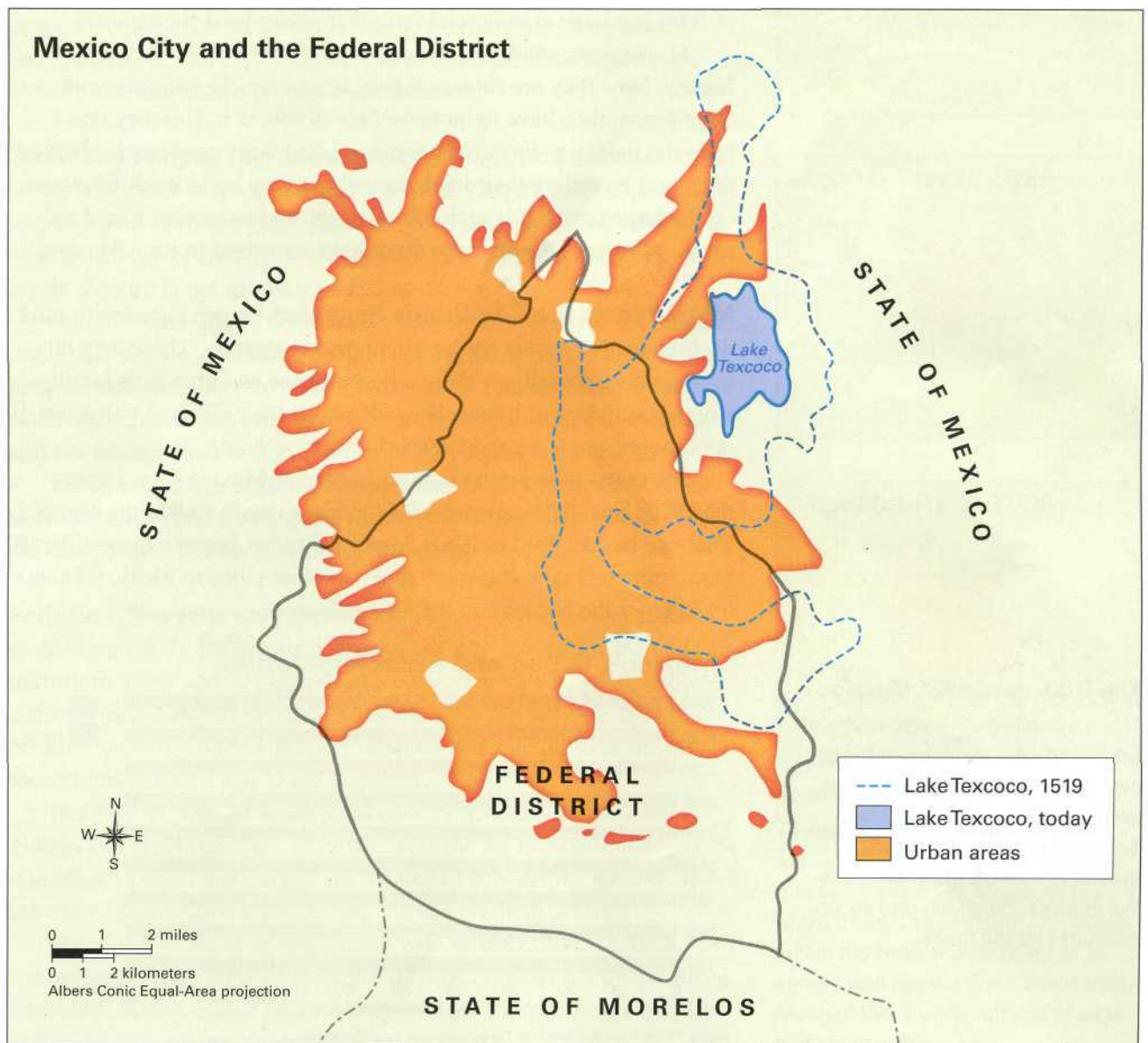
spatial inequality the unequal distribution of wealth or resources in a geographic area, so that some places are richer than others

standard of living the overall level of comfort and well-being of a group or a country. People in developed countries generally have a higher standard of living than people in developing countries.

urbanization the movement of people from rural to urban areas, resulting in the growth of urban areas

District, City, State

The Federal District is the capital of Mexico. Like the District of Columbia, where the U.S. national capital is located, it is not part of any state. You can see below how Mexico City has spread from the Federal District into the state of Mexico.



9.3 Rural Decline Causes Urban Migration

Juan Ortiz and his family live in a small village in central Mexico. Like his father and grandfather before him, Juan is a farmer. He grows corn, beans, and other vegetables on a few acres of land. But conditions have declined in the countryside. Juan can no longer support his family by farming. He has to find other work. Like many farmers, Juan plans to leave his village and move to the city. He is part of the large urban migration caused by rural decline in Mexico.

Farmers Struggle in the Countryside Life for most Mexican farmers is tough. Only about 15 percent of the land in Mexico is suitable for farming. The rest is too dry, rocky, or mountainous. Most of the best land is held by a small number of wealthy owners.

There are several types of farms in Mexico. Some are small private farms. Others are larger farms held in common by groups of farmers. These **communal lands** are called *ejidos*. A third type of farm is a large commercial farm that grows food for export.

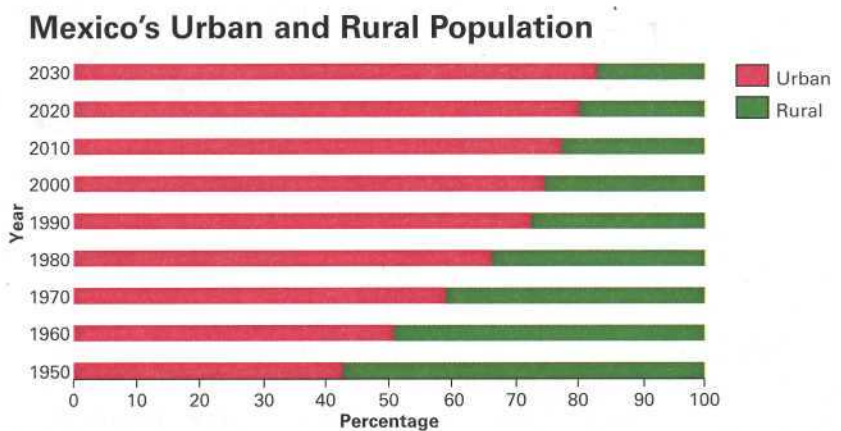
At one time, small farmers were the backbone of Mexican society. Now they are finding it hard to survive. To compete with large farms, they have to increase their production. But they don't have the money to buy seeds, fertilizer, and farm machinery. Many of them end up selling their land. Sometimes they go to work for wages on the large farms. But such jobs are few, and wages are low. As a result, poverty and **unemployment** have increased in rural Mexico.

Migration to the City Brings Renewed Hope Faced with rural decline, many farmers choose to migrate to the city. There they hope to find jobs that will pay them a decent wage and give their families a higher standard of living. They also hope their children will have an opportunity to get a good education in city schools.

For years, most rural migrants headed to Mexico City. During the 1970s and 1980s, around 1,000 people a day moved to the capital. That rate has declined as life in Mexico City has become more difficult. Many migrants now choose to move to other cities in Mexico. Others try to cross the border into the United States.

The Urbanization of Mexico

This graph shows the percentage of urban and rural residents in Mexico over time. In 1950, more Mexicans lived in rural areas than in cities. But that had changed by 1960. Today, around 75 percent of all Mexicans live in cities. The graph also shows estimates for the future.



Source: "World Population Prospects: The 2002 Revision Population Database," United Nations Population Division, esa.un.org/unpp/.



Polluted City Air

Mexico City has some of the worst air pollution in the world. About 70 percent of this pollution comes from vehicles. The government tries to limit the number of vehicles on city streets. But there are still about 4 million cars in the city.

9.4 Urbanization Creates New Problems

Julio Cu is a professional diver. But he doesn't go diving in the ocean. Instead, he dives under the streets of Mexico City. On work-days, Julio puts on a special diving suit and swims into the city's giant sewer system. He clears trash and other objects from sewer pipes. Once he even found half a car! It's a nasty job, but someone has to do it. Mexico City's sewers are overloaded. This is just one of the problems caused by rapid urbanization.

Too Many People, Too Little Land You have read that rural migration is a key factor in Mexico City's growth. Large families have also played a part. In recent years, however, both migration from rural areas and the number of children in the average family have gone down. As a result, the city is not growing as fast as it once did.

Still, Mexico City is continuing to expand. Its suburbs are spreading up the sides of the Valley of Mexico. Newcomers are also filling in areas that were once covered by the valley's lakes. Most of the lake water was drained out long ago to allow for expansion. But there is still not enough land or housing for the city's growing population.

Urbanization has caused other problems, too. Clean water is in short supply. Roads are clogged with traffic. Buses and subways are packed. Mexico City is bursting at the seams.

Pollution, Poverty, and Crime Rapid growth has had an impact on Mexico City's environment. One of the city's worst problems is air pollution. Years ago, residents had a clear view of two great, snow-capped volcanoes that lie just east of the city. But now the mountains are rarely visible. A thick blanket of smog often hangs over the city. Sometimes it's hard just to see across the street.

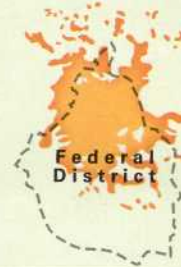
Because of poor air quality, many city residents suffer from asthma and other illnesses. On some days the air is so bad that schools are closed and people are warned to stay inside. Recent laws to limit pollution have helped, but the problem persists.

Social problems have also grown with urbanization. There are not enough jobs in the city to keep everyone employed. Poverty has increased. So has crime. Mexico City was once a relatively safe place to live. Now many residents fear for their safety.

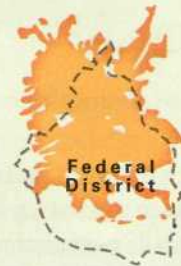
Mexico City in 1950



Mexico City in 1980



Mexico City in 2000



The Growing City

These maps show the growth of Mexico City from 1950 to 2000. About one out of every five Mexicans lives in Mexico City. The city once lay entirely within the Federal District. It has since spread well beyond those boundaries. Much of this growth consists of poor neighborhoods.

9.5 A City of “Haves” and “Have Nots”

Sylvia Martinez lives in one of Mexico City’s huge garbage dumps. She sorts through piles of trash to find bits of glass, metal, and other materials that she can recycle for cash. She is one of the millions of “have nots” in Mexico City.

The “have nots” are poor people who have little money and few possessions. They make up the majority of the city’s population. In contrast, the “haves” are people with money and more comfortable lives. The differences between these two groups are reflected in the spatial inequalities of Mexico City.

The “Have Nots” Struggle to Survive The poorest of the “have nots” are typically recent migrants to the city. They often live in slums on the edge of the city. Most houses in these **slums** are one-room shacks made of cardboard and other junk. Many of these houses lack electricity. They also lack running water. The streets are seldom paved and are often littered with trash. Many of the people who live in these slum areas have little or no work.

Migrants who have been in the city for a while may live in somewhat better conditions. Most have some kind of work. Many hold more than one job. They may work as maids, dishwashers, cooks, construction workers, street vendors, or bus drivers. Most of them work long hours for little pay. They may have to travel for hours by public transportation to get to their jobs.

It’s not just recent arrivals who are poor. Many of Mexico City’s people are “working poor.” They have jobs that are too low-paying to lift them out of poverty. Most live in working-class neighborhoods that are usually closer to the center of the city than the slums. Some of the working poor live in cinder-block homes with metal or tar-covered roofs. Others live in large **tenements**, or rundown apartment buildings. Houses in these neighborhoods generally have electricity, though some may lack water. The streets are usually paved. Even so, life for the working poor of Mexico City is a struggle.

Cardboard Housing for “Have Nots”

Shacks like this one are located in slums on the outskirts of Mexico City. Houses are made of scrap materials like cardboard boxes and bits of wood and metal. The people who live in these slums are often recent migrants to the city. Many end up selling cheap goods on the street or begging for a living.



The “Haves” Live Well The “haves” are members of Mexico City’s middle and upper classes. They make up around one fourth of the city’s residents.

A very small number of “haves” belong to the upper class. These very wealthy people are large landowners or leaders in business or government. They enjoy a luxurious standard of living. Many live on large castle-like **estates** with high walls and security systems. They often hire the working poor to serve as their maids, gardeners, and drivers.

Members of the middle class live in houses or apartment buildings near the center of the city. Or they live in modern suburbs farther away. Many work in business, education, or government. They can usually afford some luxuries, such as a telephone at home.

Life has become harder in recent years for many middle-class Mexicans. The Mexican economy has suffered from hard times. Some middle-class families can no longer save money or send their children to good private schools. They are struggling just to maintain their middle-class standard of living.

9.6 Beginning to Think Globally

In this chapter, you have learned about spatial inequality in Mexico City. You read how rural decline has increased migration to the city. You learned about problems that have come with rapid urbanization. You have also seen how rich and poor have very different standards of living. These differences can be seen in their housing and transportation, and in many other aspects of city life.

Spatial inequality doesn’t exist only in large cities. It can be found in any area where differences in wealth affect how people live. Such differences can be found in small towns as well as in suburbs and cities.

Spatial inequality also exists on a global scale. Think about this as you look at the map on the next two pages. It compares the standard of living in countries around the world.



The Good Life

This home is located in a wealthy area of Mexico City. Homes like this often have large gardens and many rooms. They may also have security systems to guard against crime. Only a tiny portion of the city’s population can afford to live like this.

9.7 Global Connections

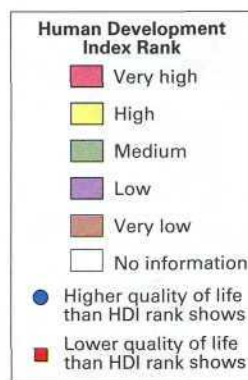
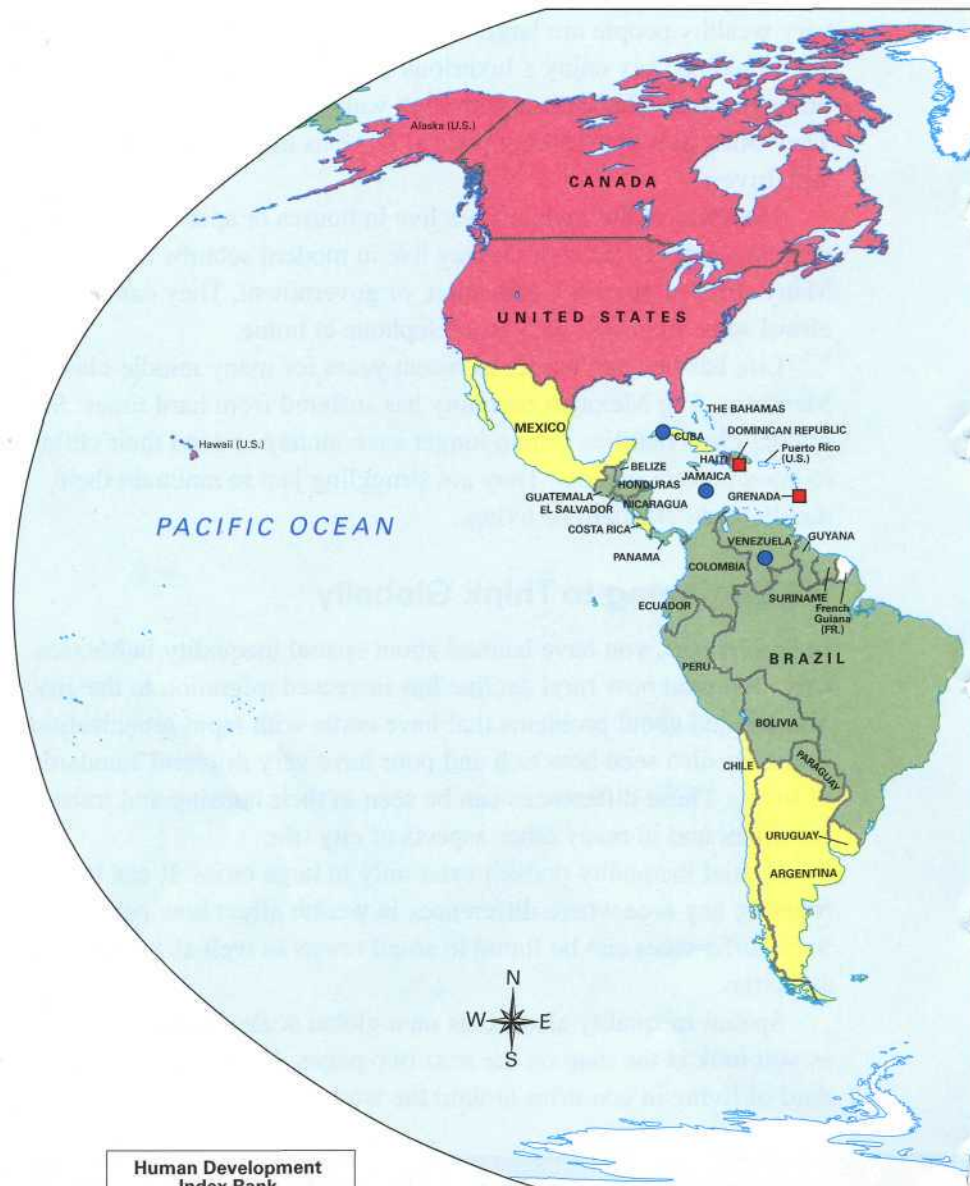
This map compares how well people live around the world. The rankings are based on a measure of living standards known as the Human Development Index. The HDI looks at how well countries are doing in three areas. These areas are **life expectancy**, education, and **per capita GDP**. You may recall that GDP is a measure of a country's economic production.

Why do some countries have a higher HDI rank than might be expected? The blue circles on the map show countries that rank higher in the HDI than their GDP might lead you to think. In such countries, the differences between rich and poor are not great. Also, many of these countries provide education and health care to all of their citizens.

Why do some countries have a lower HDI rank than might be expected? The countries marked by a red square rank lower in the HDI than you might expect from their GDP. In such countries, there is likely to be a large gap between rich and poor. The rich live well. The poor have limited access to schools and health care.

How do patterns of spatial inequality change over time? Each year, the HDI ranks of some countries rise. Living standards in these countries are improving. Other nations drop in rank. Often such changes reflect government policies. In Zimbabwe, for example, decisions by the government have hurt the economy. Living standards have declined as a result. In Malaysia, government policies have helped raise living standards.

Standard of Living Around the World





Source: United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Index Report 2004.

