



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 of six share a simple two-room house made of concrete blocks and scraps of wood and cardboard taken from the dump. There is no glass in the windows, and there is no running water. The Romeros must walk to a water tap they share with their neighbors.

Six days a week, Anna travels by bus to her job as a maid for the Alba family. The Albas live on the other side of Mexico City in a beautiful 15-room house with a large garden and swimming pool. To Anna, the Alba home seems like a castle. The Albas pay Anna \$6 for a 12-hour day of cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry. 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.

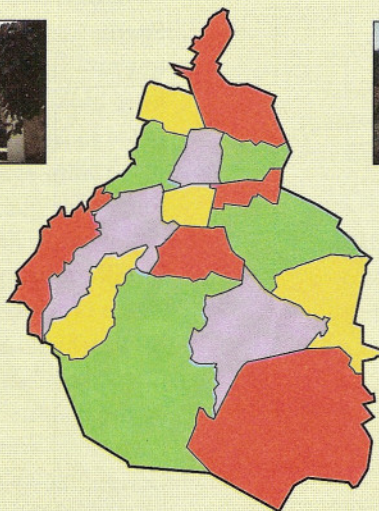
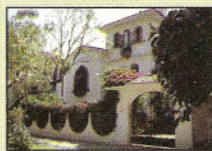
The Albas and Romeros live just 15 miles apart in the same city, but in some ways they live in different worlds. The contrast between their two ways of life is an example of **spatial inequality**. This is an unequal distribution of wealth or resources over a geographic area. It means that some places 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** called the Valley of Mexico at about 7,000 feet above sea level. The valley is surrounded by mountains and 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 and founded a city called Tenochtitlán. The Aztecs were great warriors, and by conquering other groups they created a mighty empire with Tenochtitlán as its capital. By the time the Spanish arrived in 1519, Tenochtitlán had become one of the greatest cities in the world, with a population of around 250,000 people. Up to a million people lived in the Valley of Mexico.

Tenochtitlán was a city of wonders. 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, and three causeways, or raised roads, connected the island to the shore. A huge market sold exotic goods from around the Aztec Empire.

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

A Bustling National Capital: Mexico City In 1521, Spain conquered the Aztec Empire, destroying Tenochtitlán and building a new city called Mexico City in its place. Over time, Mexico City became one of the most beautiful cities in the Americas.

Some 300 years later, in 1821, Mexico won its independence from Spain. Mexico City became the capital of the new country and 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 more than 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**, which includes the city and its **suburbs**.

A key factor in Mexico City's growth is migration from **rural** parts of the country to the city. Many people have relocated 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.

▶ Geoterms

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

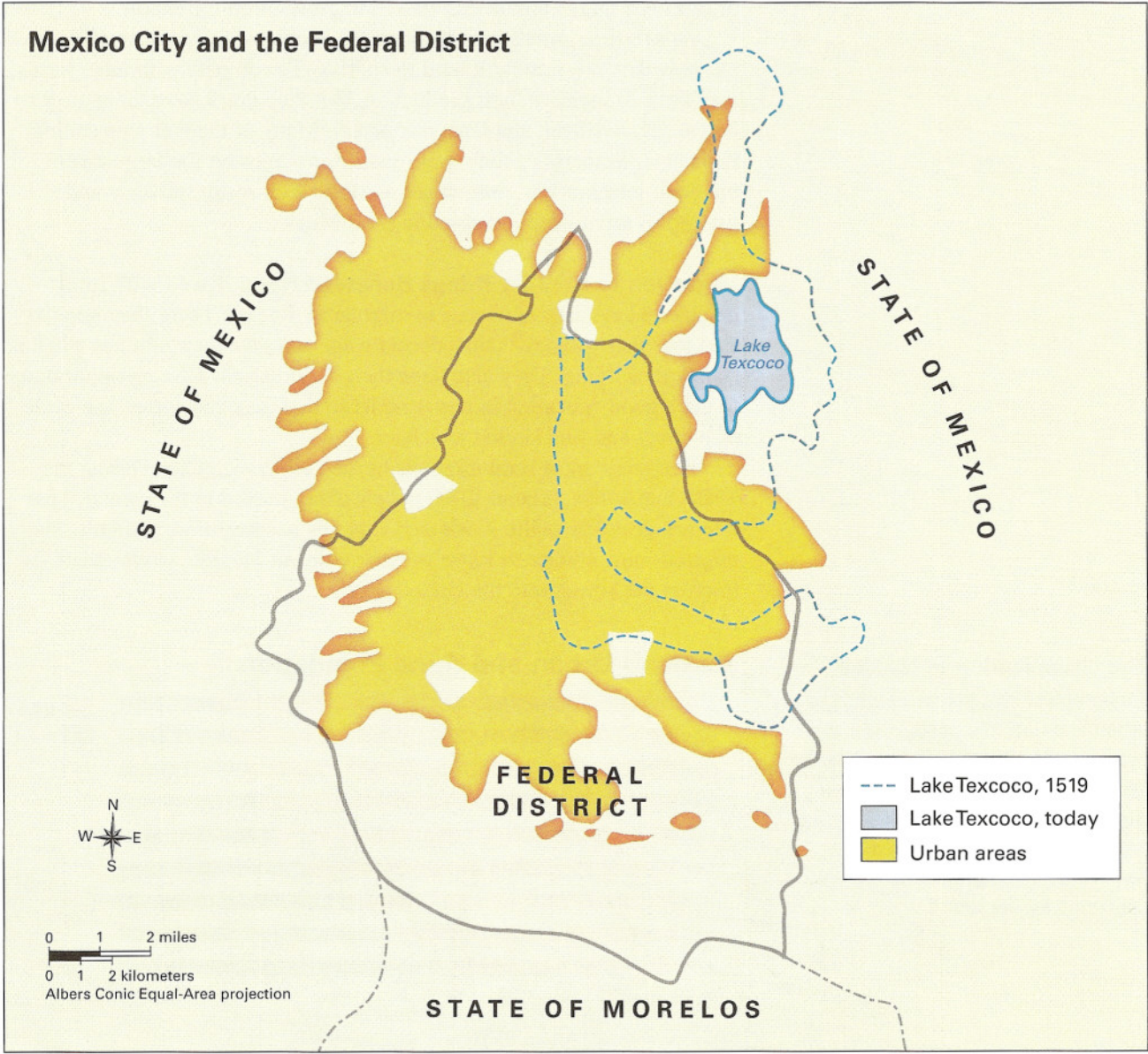
spatial inequality the unequal distribution of wealth or resources in a geographic area, so that some places are richer than others

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 that his family owns. But conditions have declined in the countryside. Juan can no longer support his family by farming, and now he is forced to seek other work. Like many farmers, Juan plans to leave his village and move to the city, making him a 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, while the rest is too dry, rocky, or mountainous to grow crops. In addition, a small number of wealthy landowners own most of the best farmland in Mexico.

There are several types of farms in Mexico. One type is the small, privately owned farm. Another type is the larger farm 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, but 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.

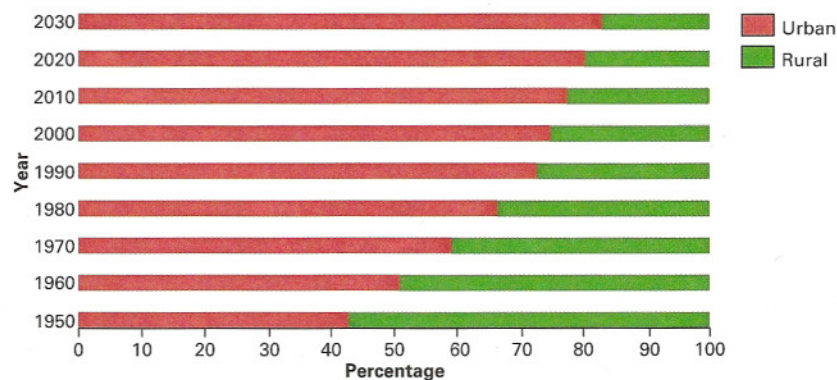
Migration to the City Brings Renewed Hope Faced with rural decline, many farmers choose to migrate to the city. There they hope to find jobs that will pay them a decent wage and give their families a higher standard of living. They also hope their children will have an opportunity to get a good education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

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, while others try to cross the border into the United States.

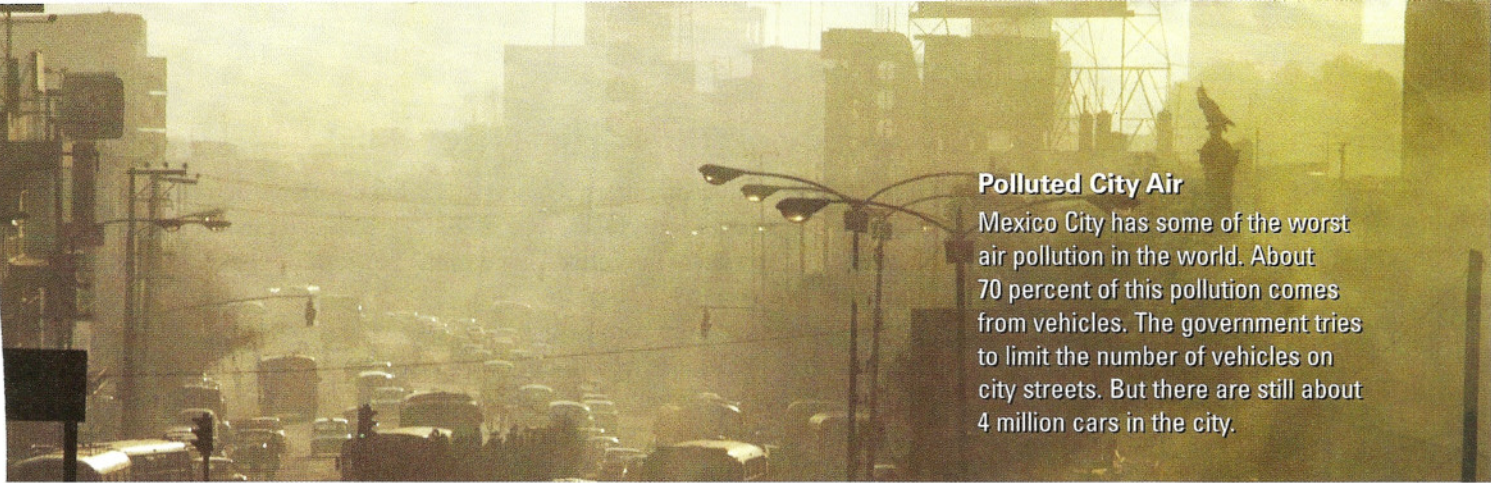
The Urbanization of Mexico

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.

Mexico's Urban and Rural Population



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 workdays, 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.

In spite of this decreased growth rate, Mexico City is continuing to expand. Its suburbs are spreading up the sides of the mountains that surround the Valley of Mexico. Newcomers are also filling in areas that were once covered by the valley's lakes, which were drained long ago to allow for expansion. But there is still not enough land or housing for the city's growing population.

Urbanization and overcrowding have caused problems in Mexico City. Clean water is in short supply, making sanitation difficult and aiding the spread of disease. Roads are clogged with traffic, polluting the air and making it difficult for people to get from one place to another. Buses and subways are also packed. Mexico City is bursting at the seams.

Pollution, Poverty, and Crime Rapid growth has had a negative 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 making it hard just to see across the street.

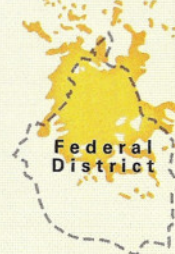
Because of poor **air quality**, many city residents suffer from asthma and other illnesses. On some days the air is so bad that schools are closed and people are warned to stay inside. Recent laws to limit pollution have helped, but the problem persists.

Social problems have also grown with urbanization. There are not enough jobs in the city to keep everyone employed, so poverty has increased. When poverty rises, so, too, does crime. Mexico City was once a relatively safe place to live, but 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 comfortable lives. The differences between these two groups reflect 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 who often live in **slums** on the edge of town. Most houses in these slums are one-room shacks made of cardboard and other junk. Many of these houses lack electricity and running water. The streets of the slums 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, often working as maids, dishwashers, cooks, construction workers, street vendors, or bus drivers. Still, even migrants who have found a job end up working long hours for little pay. To make things worse, they may have to travel for hours by public transportation to get to their jobs.

Recent arrivals are not the only people in Mexico City who are poor. Many city residents are “working poor,” which means that they have jobs that are too low-paying to lift them out of poverty. Most working poor live in working-class neighborhoods that are usually closer to the center of the city than the slums. Some live in cinder-block homes with metal or tar-covered roofs, while others live in large **tenements**, or run-down apartment buildings.

Houses in working-class neighborhoods generally have electricity, but some lack running water. The streets are usually paved, though often in poor repair. While their lives are better than those of recent migrants, the working poor of Mexico City still face many struggles and uncertainties as they try to stay employed and provide for their families.

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 approximately one fourth of the city’s residents.

A very small percentage of the “haves” belong to the upper class. These extremely wealthy people are large landowners or leaders in business or government. They enjoy a luxurious standard of living, many living 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 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 because the Mexican economy has suffered hard times. Some middle-class families can no longer save money for the future 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 learned about spatial inequality in Mexico City. You read how rural decline has increased migration to the city and 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 are clear in housing, transportation, and many other aspects of city life.

Spatial inequality does not exist only in large cities, but also in any area where differences in wealth affect how people live. You can observe such differences in standard of living in small towns as well as in suburbs and cities.

Spatial inequality also exists on a global scale. Think about global spatial inequality as you examine the map on the following two pages. The map compares the standard of living—measured by **life expectancy**, level of education, and **per capita GDP**—of people 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 standards of living 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—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 indicate countries that rank higher in the HDI than their GDP alone might lead you to think. In these cases, other factors reflected in the HDI—life expectancy and education—might push their HDI rank higher. Often in these 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. While 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 as living standards in these countries improve. At the same time, other nations drop in rank. Often such changes reflect government policies. In Zimbabwe, for example, decisions by the government have hurt the economy, and as a result living standards have declined. In Malaysia, government policies have helped raise living standards.

Standard of Living Around the World

