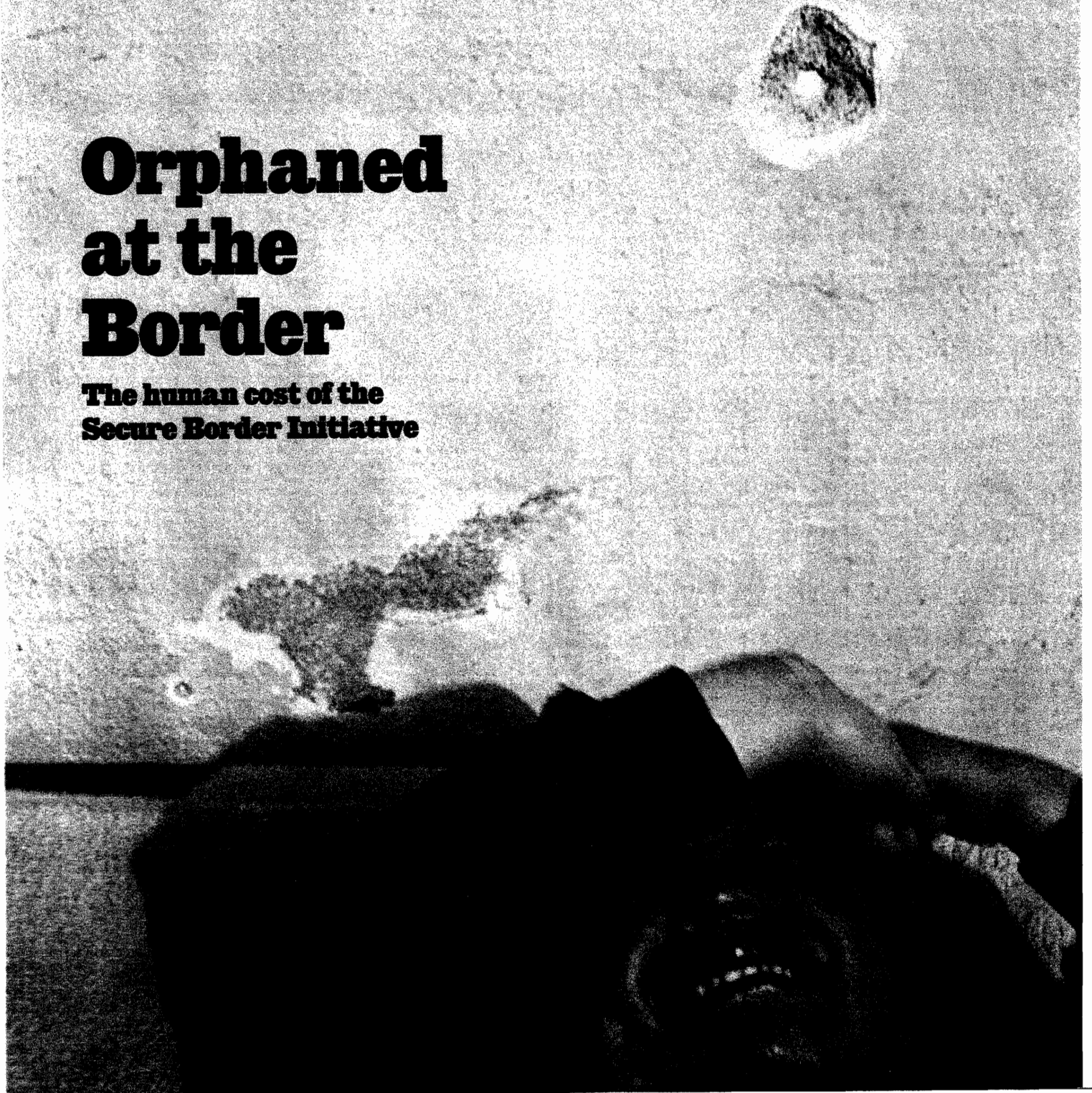


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## **Orphaned at the Border**

**The human cost of the  
Secure Border Initiative**



>> The border fence between Agua Prieta, Mexico and Douglas, Arizona. Crosses on the fence signify people who have died attempting to enter the United States.



# Orphaned at the

**The Secure Border Initiative is causing a humanitarian crisis in Mexican border towns. What happens to the children left behind?**





# Border

"If the orphanages did not exist, kids would die...it is, that simple."

A pair of wire cutters in one hand, a long strand of barbed wire in the other, Armando Bermudez sat on the roof of Casa Pepito, an orphanage in Agua Prieta, Mexico. "You know what this means to me?" he asked. "Oppression," he said as he tucked the wire into a holding notch. Barbed wire is usually used to keep unwelcome guests out. Here, the wire keeps the residents in.

The barbed wire is put in place for the benefit of the children. Often, confused and scared, they try and escape in the night by scaling the walls into the streets.

Casa Pepito serves the youngest of clients in Agua Prieta, a border town across the line from Douglas, Arizona. Children, some of whom have witnessed their parents' death from exposure in crushing desert heat while trying to enter into the United States, call this place home. The Desarrollo Integral de la Familia, a Mexican social services government organization that runs orphanages throughout Mexico, searches for possible relatives and placement.



» Settling arguments is part of the daily routine. One of the tías, or "aunts" who work at the orphanage



said children placed there are "agresivo, pelenciero y ambicioso," - aggressive, contentious, and stingy.



“What happens to the kids when they get out depends in part on which orphanage they were in, and a zillion other factors.”



» Jose Hernandez, 8, and Rigo Montaño, 9, show off their “guns.” Most children have been at the orphanage less than a year, although Montaño has been there since he was two.

### Failed Policy

The Secure Border Initiative has locked down many passages across the border that used to be safer than the current desert routes. According to a policy brief by The American Immigration Law Foundation, “the U.S. government implemented a ‘prevention through deterrence’ approach to immigration control that has resulted in the militarization of the border and a quintupling of border-enforcement expenditures. However, the new border barriers, fortified checkpoints, high-tech forms of surveillance, and thousands of additional Border Patrol agents stationed along the southwest border have not decreased the number of unauthorized migrants crossing into the United States. Rather, the new strategy has closed off major urban points of unauthorized migration in Texas and California and

funneled hundreds of thousands of unauthorized migrants through southern Arizona’s remote and notoriously inhospitable deserts and mountains.”

Recruitment of Border Patrol officers has increased, as well as a supplement of National Guard troops. This has forced immigrants to travel farther into the desert at the risk of their and their children’s lives. On one hand, employers demand these workers’ services because they claim Americans are not willing to do the same job at the wages they can offer. On the other hand, policy does its best to control the influx of immigrants.

According to Mark Weisbrot with the Center for Economic and Policy Research, a Washington, D.C., think tank, Mexico’s current economic policies “tend to sacrifice growth and employment in the fight against inflation.” He said, “over the 25 years since 1980, income per person in Mexico has grown by just 17 percent. To see how bad this is, one need only look at the 20 years from 1960-1980, when the country’s per capita income grew by 99 percent. If the Mexican economy had simply continued to grow at its pre-1980 rate, average income in Mexico would be at the level of Spain today. There would be far fewer Mexicans looking to emigrate illegally to the United States.”

Often overlooked are the children. Their parents die in the desert from exposure attempting to cross, giving the last of their water to their children before they expire themselves. Other children are abandoned when Border Patrol swoops in and illegal immigrants scatter, separating children from their parents. These children are moved into orphanages along the border until they can be reunited with other family members, or in some cases, adopted into American families. This process is difficult, however, as the government of Mexico “makes every effort to place children with relatives or Mexican citizens living in Mexico before placing children for inter-country adoption,” according to the U. S. Department of State.

### Raymundo: No Place Else to Go

With a lack of alternative facilities for children with developmental disabilities, children like Raymundo are placed where there is no specialized care.

Raymundo, 9, has expressive brown eyes, short cropped black hair and dark caramel skin. At first he was thought to be autistic. "Copan? Copan?" is a phrase the nine year-old often repeats as he tries to hand over whatever random object he has just picked up from the ground. The words seem like nonsense to the uninitiated. It's actually a local supermarket he likes to visit during shopping trips. Raymundo's parents, who come by to visit at least once a week, bring candy and affection.

Raymundo's father, Omar Luna, was raised in Los Angeles. He came with his parents to the United States when he was very young, but never became a naturalized citizen. He was deported back to Mexico after committing a felony. Raymundo's mother, Alicia Alvila, never comes near Luna while they are making simultaneous visits. Neither are on speaking terms. Raymundo doesn't seem to know the difference; only that someone is giving him candy and attention.

The other kids accept him, although at times he is the brunt of their teasing.

#### A Typical Day

Most days are like any other at the orphanage. With a total of 14 children in late January of 2007 (32 children at once is the current record), they spend their time going to school, playing and watching television.

The children awake at 6 am in rooms with multiple bunk beds - girls in one, boys in the other. The children get dressed and ready for school. The tias, or aunts, who take care of the children's basic needs, serve breakfast.

Children who have birth certificates go to local public schools. Those who do not, like Jose, 9, his sister Jenny, 6, and brother J. J., 18 months, stay at Casa Pepito. Jose and Jenny spend their weekdays quietly during the afternoon. Later that afternoon, they leave for a school that will allow them to attend. J. J. stays with the other toddlers at the orphanage.

During visiting days, the parents of the three kids come over to visit. They come during the time Jose and Jenny are in school. In this way, the children's father, Ron Rye, is only able to visit with J. J. By visiting during a time when Jenny and Jose are at school, the parents by default

avoid questions by their older children. When will J. J. get to go home? Rye mumbled when "she gets a job," referring to his girlfriend and mother of J. J.

The tias are not fond of J. J.'s parents. Tia Ana Rosales said they have to keep an eye on them during their visits because they are "rude" in the way they treat their kids. J. J., a gentle toddler with large black eyes and impossibly long eyelashes, becomes aggressive during his parents' short visit. Both Rye and his girlfriend



» "Tia" Ana Rosales carries Hector Galvez, 2, and J. J. Hernandez, 19 months, to bed. The number of children can fluctuate, depending on the time of year.

reach and grab for his shirt when they want him to come closer. They hold him carelessly upside-down, and are generally gruff in their interactions.

When the children return from school after lunchtime they attend classes at the orphanage for another four hours. Class is generally low-key, with the teacher giving one-on-one instruction with each student, checking their progress frequently. Often, the students get distracted. One student practices writing his signature in loops and curls. He has filled other pages with drawings of popular cartoon characters.

When school is out, the kids usually watch Spanish-dubbed cartoons. Other times they skip rope outside. Dinner is served around 6 pm. After, the kids watch more television as well as fight over toys. According to one of the child care workers, many of the children behave

“Poverty, even if abject, is not a reason to break up the family, especially in Mexican culture.”



» Hector Galvez, 21 months, learns to walk. Galvez will be adopted by an American couple within two months.

aggressively, fight and hoard toys.

Before the kids are sent to bed, they shower. Dirty clothes are piled in a mix on the floor except for underwear, which is worn in the shower out of modesty. The boys shower en masse. Everyone is in bed before nine o'clock. When the day starts again, these children wake up in beds that aren't theirs, in a room surrounded by children who aren't their family, and are taken care of by people who aren't their parents.

#### The System

Tim Heinan isn't pleased about the barbed wire. Nonetheless, Heinan, the director of the Blessed Nuno Society, said the walls and auxiliary policeman are in place for the safety of the children. The society he directs plans to build their own orphanage next door. According to Heinan, it'll have none of the problems

the current orphanage has.

"The orphanages are funded in part by the government, directly or indirectly, and to a great extent by American non-profits such as the Blessed Nuno Society. There are three orphanages in Agua Prieta and in my opinion none meet the total needs of the children and there is a need for more orphanage space. I am beginning construction of a new orphanage that is designed to address both of those issues," Heinan said.

It is a social system that puts more faith in the family than in the individual. According to Heinan, "Poverty, even if abject, is not a reason to break up the family, especially in Mexican culture."

Because Casa Pepito is a municipal entity it has a high turnover of staff and directors. Every three years following a local election, virtually all of the municipal government and anyone holding a position, from director to maintenance man, leave their positions. Every three years, people come into their new vocations and must relearn how the system works. Regardless, the orphanages are a necessity.

Queta Ibarrola, a volunteer with DIF, told harrowing stories about kids being physically and sexually abused and a mother trying to sell her kids in front of a supermarket. Some people live in absolute, abject poverty: living in whatever they can nail together, scraping by selling cotton candy and whatever else they can hustle. Sometimes they have nothing to eat and don't have enough blankets to keep warm.

There are other residents at the orphanage as well - children who have been removed from their homes because their parents are drug addicts or are abusive. In Agua Prieta, crack cocaine is one-fifth the price it is in the United States. Addiction is not uncommon. Neither is neglect. Neighbors are usually the first to notice that children have been neglected for hours or days at a time. Inspectors bring in children that have been neglected or abused. Of one former orphan Heinan said, "[Seline] came to us abused and covered with cigarette burns hidden under her shirt." Since adopted, she is now the "best adjusted kid I have ever met today and a whiz at learning English and an honors student."

"If the orphanages did not exist, kids



would die...It is that simple," Heinan said.

"Kids arrive several ways. Some are brought by the Border Patrol (via the Agua Prieta police), some are literally dropped off at the gates, some are referred by social workers, churches, and police. Some are kids who have seen their parents die in the desert trying to cross. The kids often make it even when the women do not, in part because the parents give them the last of the water. Families also get separated in the chaos of the border, especially if the Border Patrol swoops in with a helicopter. Some kids are trafficked, some run away, infants may be brought by a mom who has no way to feed them or who has decided to cross but can't take them along. Many are abused physically and or sexually. We see it all," said Heinan.

### Stemming the Tide

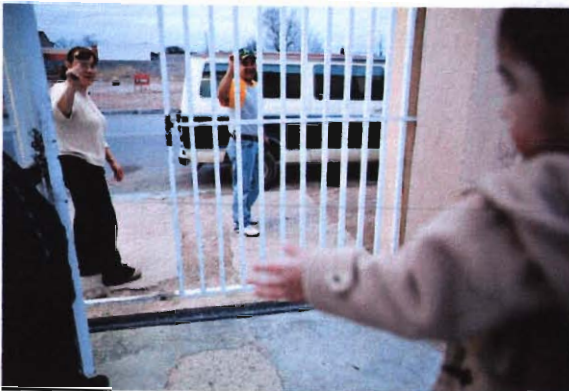
There is outreach to help slow the arrival of new children at the orphanage. Unlike children placed there by circumstances of drug-abusing parents or family members who have died crossing the desert, there are children who are placed because of basic needs that aren't being met by their families.

The farther one travels from the border, the more scarce services become. To the south of Agua Prieta, in the colonias, or colonies, seven miles from the line, there is no bus service, water or sewage. A television is often powered by electricity from a car battery. It is here that people like Rosa Acosta attempt to diminish the flow of children brought to the orphanage by desperate mothers. She and others deliver food as often as they can or set up food distribution at the civic auditorium just east of downtown.

One family in particular exemplifies some of the challenges of life in the colonias. With 10 children, and another child on the way, Antonio Perez and his family stay in a shack built of wooden shipping pallets and whatever other materials can be hammered together. Their dwelling has no electricity, and heat comes from a small wood-burning stove inside a dark room with three beds and a couch piled high with clothing. In the courtyard sits a dilapidated van. Perez is busy on a weekday mixing concrete and

slathering it between cinder blocks. He is building a new structure in hopes of giving his family a better place to live. His first three children are mentally retarded because of poor prenatal care. The oldest, Ana Perez, 17, looks to be about 12. Nonetheless, the children play happily around the compound, surrounded by the desolation of the Sonoran desert and neighbors in the same depressed conditions.

The most recent problems of Agua



Prieta and other towns along the United States and Mexico border progressed in the mid-1990's when maquiladoras rapidly expanded as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The agreement eased trade restrictions between the two countries. The maquiladoras produced parts and supplies at cheaper rates than if made domestically in the United States. They also offered opportunity and economic gain. As a result, the population of Agua Prieta has grown over 50 percent since that time. Now, maquiladoras have "off-shored" to more affordable labor in China and Vietnam. The infrastructure, stressed by new residents attracted to higher wages, is now under a heavier burden. Additionally, many people leave Mexico to cross into the United States, using Agua Prieta as a way station on their journey north.

» Miriam and Jose Herrera wave goodbye to Hector Galez, 21 months, who they are in the process of adopting. The adoption process can take up to two years.



» Fernando Figueroa, 10, Sergio Valesquez, 8, Rigo Montaño, 9, and Eulogio Félix, 9, watch Lucha Libre, or Mexican-style wrestling on television.

### Adoption and Hope

Jose and Miriam Herrea live in Douglas, just across the border. They are adopting Hector, a toddler left as a ward of the state by drug-addicted parents. The process is moving smoothly for the couple, but there is still the wait and the complicated paperwork. They hope to take Hector home within two months.

"Adoption into the United States is complicated," said Heinan. "This is due in part to a treaty that was passed but never ratified [and] also because of Mexico's position on family unity and on the permanency of Mexican citizenship."

"Ages run from one day-old to age 18.

Not all are adoptable. Some due to lack of proof that there is no family in Mexico, some because they have parents but for various reasons [like abuse], can not live at home," he said.

"It is important to understand that around the world, and even in the United States before orphanages were widely replaced with foster care, many, many kids in orphanages are not 'orphans' in the sense of having two dead parents...or one dead parent as the term was applied a century ago. What happens to the kids when they get out depends in part on which orphanage they were in, and a zillion other factors," said Heinan. ●



» Orphan Raymundo Avila, 9, Lorena Rios, son Nathanael, seven months, and Evan Rios watch their son Sergio, 7, play during a visitation day. The Rios family has been separated because of parental drug use.