

# Cities in a Complex World: Problems, Challenges and Prospects



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## Spaces of Poverty and Social Disadvantages in Mexico City

**Abstract:** Residential segregation in the urban space establishes a geographic concentration of urban poverty. Poor neighbourhoods tend to group in specific locations and integrate, “clusters” or fringes of poverty characterized for situations of social exclusion. These spaces of poverty are part of the new urban order in megacities in developing countries and they represent grave material restrictions, low hopes of integration in the productive structure, and increasing precarious conditions. Therefore the opportunities to overcome these situations are really remote or non-existent.

This study reports the results of questionnaires applied to poor neighbourhoods in different locations in Mexico City, with the aim to analyse the main functional and structural characteristics of the poor families that live in these spaces. The level of poverty is measured with particular attention to: access to basic social goods such as health, education, work; social homogeneity within each neighbourhood; housing quality, purchasing power; social cohesion; or surviving strategies. And these variables are related to the spatial dimension. Data reveals that population in poverty conditions has been increasing in Mexico City; poverty spaces do not show a sensible improvement; disadvantages in those neighbourhoods are multiple and represent real situations of social exclusion; and spatial location seems a determinant factor for the presence of multiple needs.

**Key Words:** urban poverty, poor neighbourhoods, social exclusion, Mexico City, social disadvantages

### The Urban Poor Neighbourhoods

The aim of this study is to characterize the urban spaces that represent the new poverty spaces within cities., the new urban ghettos according to the recent literature. The work of Marcuse y van Kempen (2000: 1–4) points out the existence of a new spatial order where one of the new spatial formations is the so called ghettos in situation of exclusion that are inhabited by the the new urban poor; for Great Britain (see Gough, Eisenschitz and McCulloch, 2006: 116), and for Latin America see Katzman (2001: 181) that confirm the existence of this type of set-

lements showing serious material deprivation, low hopes of stable insertion in the productive structure, and more and more precarious conditions.

This type of urban spaces have been called spatial poverty traps (Bird, Higgins and Harris, 2010) that corresponds to the poorest neighbourhoods in the city. These spatial poverty traps (SPT) exists where the geographical and human capital (physical, natural, social, political and human) of an area is low and in contrast poverty is very high as a result of disadvantages of that place. The central notion of this concept is that the attributes of an area explain the substantial proportion of the population poverty in that place, in relation to individual and family characteristics such as, age, family structure, etc.; this basically indicates that *location* to a great extent can explain *why* population that lives in that place is poor. (op. cit. page 2).

In an attempt to identify the main factors that more contribute to the emergence of these SPT, Bird et. al. (2010) have identified the following three elements:

Government faults in the application of institutional and policy objectives.- These faults at national and local level contribute to the formation of these areas; there is a lack of political will to look after the marginal population, and also a provision of bad quality services.

Stigma and social exclusion.- The application of stereotypes based on ethnicity, language, religion or culture can lead to social exclusion, to labour discrimination, or to deny housing loans to population that lives in specific poor neighbourhoods.

The physical isolation and inadequate infrastructure.- Far away and low density locations increase the cost of services, additionally to a very ineffective lobbying.

In addition to these factors we can add situation of high incidence of criminality and violence, and a high presence of corruption in government structures.

It is important to emphasize the heterogeneity of these SPT. Of ones in comparison to others, which means that they require differential political strategies, either between areas or within each area. With reference to the internal dynamic of the SPT, Bird, Higgins and Harris (2010: 4) emphasize two essential aspects: first, the poverty that population experiences at the interior of a SPT is characterized by *combined or accumulated disadvantages*; this means, low return rates in all forms of investment; partial integration in labour fragmented markets; social and political exclusion; and inadequate access to public services. Second, the “negative neighbourhood effect”, that combine with the mentioned factors in the SPT, limits more the opportunities of the population that live in the place to overcome poverty conditions; this negative effect essentially refers to how poor groups live and interact with other poor people in areas poorly provided with infrastructure, where the possibilities of this population to have opportunities to improve or mitigate the disadvantages situations are scarce, remote or non-existent (see Fuller and Gough, 2001: 265). Bayon (2008: 128) has argued that in Mexico diverse processes converge to explain the concentration of poverty in space and to block socio-economic and residential mobility of poor groups; among these processes the main are: low educational level; precarious labour condition; un-

employment; lack of social protection; inadequate infrastructure; lack of access to social services; and non-existent or little effective social networks; all these disadvantages have a concentrated and accumulative character.

Poor neighbourhoods should be seen at two scales: first, the internal conditions of these areas that show the concentration of poor groups with the accumulation of a high level of disadvantages; and second, their location pattern at city level that indicates a peripherization of poverty; the combination of these two aspects reflect very well the conditions of the poor neighbourhoods.

About the first aspect, the precarious internal condition of poor neighbourhoods, there is a clear relation between residential segregation and social exclusion, as in these areas there is a marked level of material deprivation. According to Katzman (2001: 181) precariousness is reinforced by several ways. First, social networks are ineffective to get a job or opportunities of qualification; second, difficulties to maintain a basic community organization; third, boys and young people lack models of exposition to successful roles; and fourth, chronic unemployment situations increase predisposition to explore illegitimate income sources. There are arguments that indicate that poor neighbourhoods are becoming areas social and economically more isolated than in the past; trips to work, shopping or entertain are more difficult than before (Roberts, 2010. 5–7). In this sense Katzman (2001: 182) has pointed out an important hypothesis to analyse urban poverty, that the recent social and economic scenario has created conditions that favour the emergence of neighbourhoods that are much closer to the typical features of the urban ghetto. So, poverty is not an essential part of a place, it is a product of the history of that urban place and the power relations and actions of several actors in specific moments, that contributed to legitimize a political solution at that scale and in that location ( Gough, Eisenschitz and McCulloch, 2006: 40).

In the relation to the second aspect, the peripherization of poverty, poor groups can be found in any urban location but there is an increasing tendency to find them in urban peripheries, at least in metropolis of developing countries (Janoschka, 2005: 101–104; Winchester, 2008: 35; Ariza y Solis, 2009: 200–203; Aguilar y Mateos, 2010). Frequently these are recent settlements with an informal conditions and with marked deficits of public services. These poor spaces are distributed in the farer periphery with great needs and in may occasions are in the worst locations forming clusters or pockets, and in other occasions it is easy to identify poor urban fringes under conditions of marked social exclusion. Although there is a tendency to find a general social homogeneity within these poverty enclaves, there is analysis that point out that in recent years there are more possibilities to find an increasing social mixture where poorer groups are found together with low middle classes, a situation still to be confirmed.

## **Peripheral Expansion and Poverty Spaces in Mexico City**

In the last 20 years there has been a progressive deterioration of general life conditions for urban poor in Mexico City as a result of processes such as, low insertion possibilities in the labour market, low access to a house due to high

increases in land costs, lack of social protection in the health and educational system etc. This situation has had negative consequences in two main aspects, the scale of the peripheralization of poverty, and in the magnitude of poverty within the city ( see Enriquez Rosas, 2003)

The measurement of poverty present different results according to the source that is consulted. However data tend to show a progressive increase in the number of poor groups in Mexico City, and a predominance of these groups in the peripheral areas with serious social needs.

To give a good idea about the magnitude of poverty we can refer the estimations of the *Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política Social* (National Council of the Social Policy Evaluation) (CONEVAL). Data shows that in 2010 the Federal District<sup>1</sup> was ranked among the five entities (of a total of 32) with less poverty in the country, even so results from the poverty evolution show that in the period 2008–2010 poverty passed from 28.0 to 28.7 per cent, which meant an increase of 72,226 persons; for the same period the population in the level of extreme poverty also increased from 2.1 to 2.2 percent wich meant an increase of 3,620 persons<sup>2</sup> (CONEVAL, 2012: 17).

The main contradictions is that the Federal District is one of the entities with the less number of poor groups, but still it contains around 2.7 million inhabitants with that category. Within the Federal District the delegations that presented the highest percentage of poor groups are: Milpa Alta (48.6), Tláhuac (35.8), Iztapalapa (37.4), Álvaro Obregón (31.3) y Gustavo A. Madero (30.7). In summary, in these delegations more tan 30 percent of the population are in a poverty condition which represents 60 percent of all the population in a poverty condition in this entity (CONEVAL, 2012: 14–15). It is worth to emphasize that delegations such as Milpa Alta, Tlahuac and Iztapalapa are in the group with the highest percentage of population in poverty, and extreme poverty condition.

## Magnitude and Intensity of Poverty in Selected Neighbourhoods

This section presents results of a questionnaire applied in seven poor neighbourhoods trying to relate their condition to their location and to their needs in terms of basic social needs. The criteria to select these neighbourhoods were, in the first place their socioeconomic condition as a poverty space, following a clasification of socioeconomic levels in the Federal District; secondly, most of them are located in a suburban or peripheral locations; the spaces selected are the following: in an internal suburbia the Delegation of Iztapalapa was chosen with the neighbourhoods of Desarrollo Urbano Quetzalcoatl and San Juan Buenavista; to the south of the city the peripheral Delegation of Milpa Alta was selected with the neighbourhoods of San Juan y Nustla; and as an external peripheral zone we

<sup>1</sup> This is the entity where Mexico City was originally located before expanding to the State of Mexico, nowadays contains almost 50 percent of the whole city.

<sup>2</sup> Total numbers are: 2, 453,566 in 2008 to 2,525,792 in 2010 in poverty level; and 188,028 to 191,648 in extreme poverty.

have the municipality of Chimalhuacan, with the neighbourhoods of Tlatelxochitenco, Tepalcates, y 4 de Febrero. A total of 329 questionnaires were applied in the seven neighbourhoods.

### Poverty due to unsatisfied basic needs

The methodology for this measurement is based on the index for the measurement of poverty due to unsatisfied basic needs, which integrates diverse variables that have been identified as needs, such as water, drainage, electricity supply, the number of rooms per person, housing, health and education.

In order to calculate the index, the variables had first to be divided and ordered into five groups. The first group is composed of urban services; the second constitutes housing quality including the walls, floor and roof; the third addresses the problem of overcrowding or the number of persons per room; the fourth consists of the presence of water provision; and the fifth deals with education and health variables (for the construction of the Index see Boltvinik 1997). At a later stage a simplified index was arrived at whereby each of the variables in the groups was assigned a value according to its characteristics. The values for each group were added up and divided by the norm, which is the optimum or ideal value for each need. In this way, the values that were far from the norm represented the highest degrees of poverty. The next step was to obtain a multiple index which is the result of the sum of the variables from each group divided by the number of variables that integrate each group. Finally, a global index was developed that is the average of each multiple index divided by the total number of groups, that is five, and the result is used as the norm (Aguilar y Lopez, 2013: 12).

The results were stratified according to the global index in order to classify the degrees of poverty between absolute poverty with values between 0 and 49; followed by extreme poverty with values between 0.50 to 0.89; and finally the population whose minimum basic needs are satisfied with values of 0.90 to 1.

Table 1. Poverty by Unsatisfied Basic Needs

Delegation/Municipality	Over-crowding	Poverty Level	Urban Services	Poverty Level	Social Services	Poverty Level
<b>Iztapalapa</b>						
Desarrollo Urbano Quetzalcoatl	0.25	Absolute Poverty	0.88	SBN	0.56	Extreme Poverty
San Jose Buenavista	0.39	Absolute Poverty	0.90	SBN	0.90	Absolute Poverty
<b>Milpa Alta</b>						
San Juan	0.34	Absolute Poverty	0.88	SBN	0.55	Extreme Poverty
Nushtla	0.40	Absolute Poverty	0.76	SBN	0.47	Absolute Poverty
<b>Chimalhuacan</b>						
4 de Febrero	0.49	Absolute Poverty	0.89	SBN	0.55	Extreme Poverty
Tepalcates	0.35	Absolute Poverty	0.94	SBN	0.53	Extreme Poverty
Tlatelxochitenco	0.24	Absolute Poverty	0.93	Middle Class	0.63	Extreme Poverty

Source: Own calculations from Questionnaires.  
SBN=Satisfied Basic needs.



Table 2. Poverty by Unsatisfied Basic Needs

Delegation/Municipality	Water	Level Poverty	Housing Quality	Poverty Level
<b>Iztapalapa</b>				
Desarrollo Urbano Quetzalcoatl	0.18	Absolute Poverty	0.80	Moderate Poverty
San Jose Buenavista	0.49	Absolute Poverty	0.79	Moderate Poverty
<b>Milpa Alta</b>				
San Juan	0.48	Absolute Poverty	0.75	Moderate Poverty
Nushtla	0.58	Extreme Poverty	0.63	Extreme Poverty
<b>Chimalhuacan</b>				
4 de Febrero	0.89	NBS	0.52	Extreme Poverty
Tepalcates	0.87	Moderate Poverty	0.66	Extreme Poverty
Tlatelxochitenco	0.89	NBS	0.67	Extreme Poverty

Source: Own Calculations from Questionnaires.

According to the values, the variables that registered the more precarious condition were overcrowding and social services, mainly education and health that classified in the strata of extreme and absolute poverty in all the settlements. The educational level registered an average of 46 per cent with incomplete primary (only until the third grade).

All these results reflect a general situation of dire social exclusion. This is not only due to the lack of access to a secure home, but also for the deficient provision of basic services and social services. Taken together, the situation can be described as a marked accumulation of disadvantages that aggravate poverty; they also point to a tendency for impoverishment.

### Income and Type of Occupation

Income is directly related to the type of occupation and labour contract and all these determine the level of poverty in a long term. A low qualified occupation prevents workers to overcome a poverty situation, forces them to remain in that condition, and this combination represents a *rigidity in labour mobility* (Bayon, 2009: 174); and this influences the emergence of informal conditions.

From all the interviewed population only 38.1 per cent of them were occupied; the main occupation was that of manual jobs with 34.0 per cent, followed

Table 3. Type of Occupation by Neighbourhood

Delegation/Municipality	Employee %	Manual Work %	Commercial Activity %	Blue Collar Worker %	Services %
Desarrollo Urbano Q	44.1	7.8	27.5	14.7	5.9
Sn Juan Buenavista	35.1	14.9	20.3	18.9	10.8
4 de Febrero	28.9	10.8	39.8	12.0	8.4
Tlatelxochitenco	56.3	3.1	25.0	9.4	6.3
Tepalcates	51.7	3.4	13.8	31.0	0.0
Nushtla	15.9	68.2	0.00	5.7	10.2
San Juan	14.4	66.0	7.20	4.6	7.8

Table 4. Income by Neighbourhood

Delagation/Municipality	Less than 1 MS %	From 1 to 2 MS %	From 2 to 3 MS %	From 3 to 5 MS %	More than 5 MS %
Desarrollo Urbano Q	4.9	37.3	45.1	11.8	1.0
Sn Juan Buenavista	31.1	39.2	21.6	6.8	1.4
4 de Febrero	26.5	32.5	38.6	2.4	0.0
Tlatelxochitenco	9.4	43.8	40.6	3.1	3.1
Tepalcates	6.9	37.9	41.4	13.8	0.0
Nushtla	13.6	53.4	29.5	3.4	0.0
San Juan	12.4	53.6	29.4	4.6	0.0

MS=Minimum Salary

by low qualified employees with 29.2 per cent; then the commercial activities with 17.6 and; in fourth place blue collar workers with 11.2 per cent; and finally service activities with 7.8 per cent.

Income levels show an important concentration between one to two minimum salaries (44.2 in average for all settlements), but if we sum up this category plus those earning less than one minimum salary the proportion of occupied population earning less than two minimum salaries can go from 50 to 70 per cent in several settlements, for example in San Juan Buenavista and Nushtla. On the other hand it has to be emphasized that there are households that earn income in medium levels (from three to five minimum salaries) that in strict terms do not correspond to a poverty level.

### **Labour Insecurity**

Labour insecurity refers to the vulnerability that workers experience because they do not have a permanent jobs, and much of them are involved in partial and temporal jobs, they do temporal manual jobs, or sell any product informally.

The results of questionnaires identify four types of labour contracts: first, permanent jobs, that represented 33 per cent of occupied population, these jobs are those with more labour security; second, temporal or contracted by specific work registered 25.8 per cent, although workers have a job they are quite vulnerable to loose it; third, workers without contract that represented 25.6 per cent; and fourth, self-employment that registered 14.6 per cent. In short, 60 per cent of occupied population are the most vulnerable and are in the informal market.

### **Household Expenditure on Basic Needs**

The distribution of income expenditure on basic needs shows the main priorities for poor population. Data reports that the main percentage of income, 54 per cent, is used for food; in second place, 13 per cent is used for health; and thirdly, education consumes 13 per cent of income. As it is shown in Table 5, 25 per cent of neighbourhoods of Iztapalapa are those that more income use for food, until 60 per cent of income; even more, settlements of Chimalhuacan can use between 60 and 90 per cent of household income.

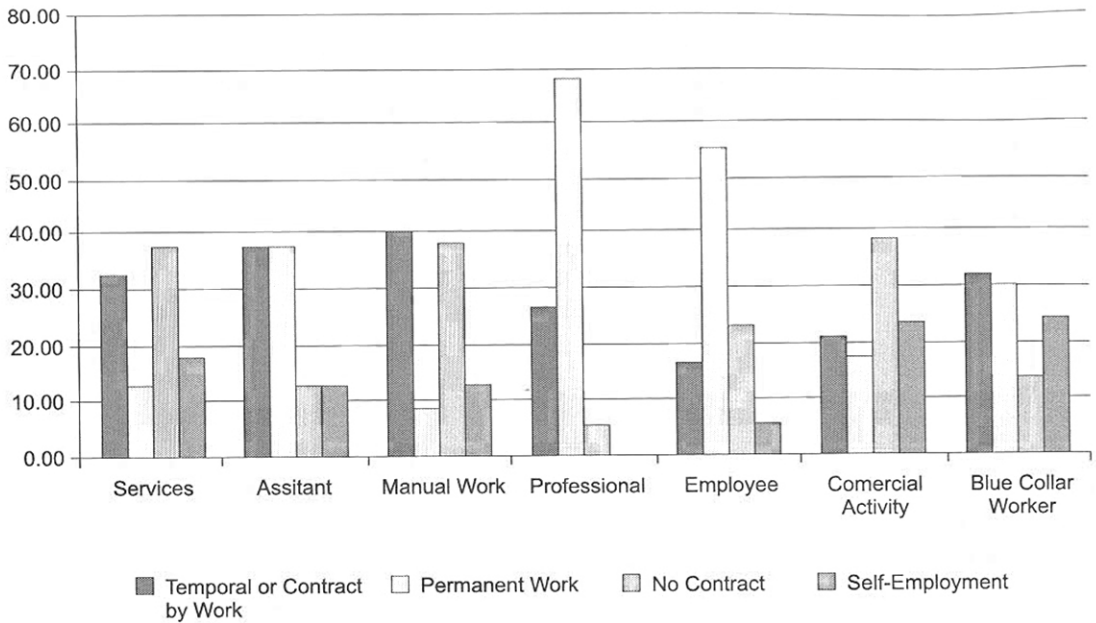


Fig. 1. Type Occupation by Labour Contract in the Settlements

Table 5. Household Expenditure on Basic Needs

Basic needs	0-30	31-60	60-90
Food	24.01	54.71	21.28
Health	13.58	0	0
Education	13.70	0	0
Housing	96.96	03.04	0

## Poverty and Lack of Social Cohesion

The analysis is based in the definition of social cohesion formulated by Gordon y Millan (2009: 9), “it is the form and notion that rule social links and practices that can facilitate the application of normative, organizational or cultural resources to coordinate actions and attend common problems without risking social unity”.

In the interviewed settlements we can conclude a deterioration of social networks and a weakness of social support; these factors accumulate and contribute to a process of impoverishment in periurban spaces. For example, people were asked to whom they turn to: (i) to get a job or; (ii) to get medical attention or enter to a school. In general there is a nonexistent social relation for these variables, most of the population reported that they do not resort to relatives, friends or neighbours to solve their immediate needs.

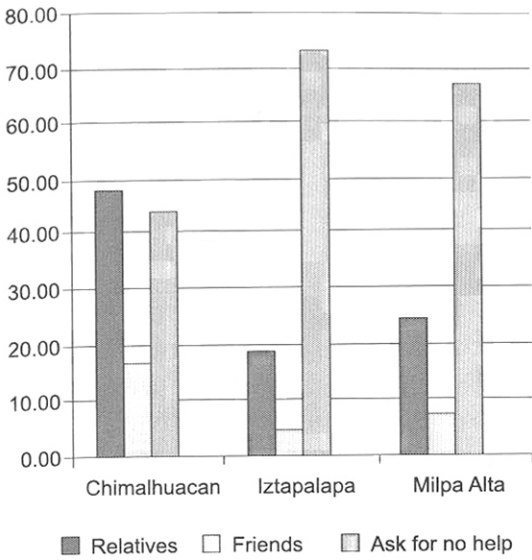


Fig. 2. To Resort to Ask for a Job

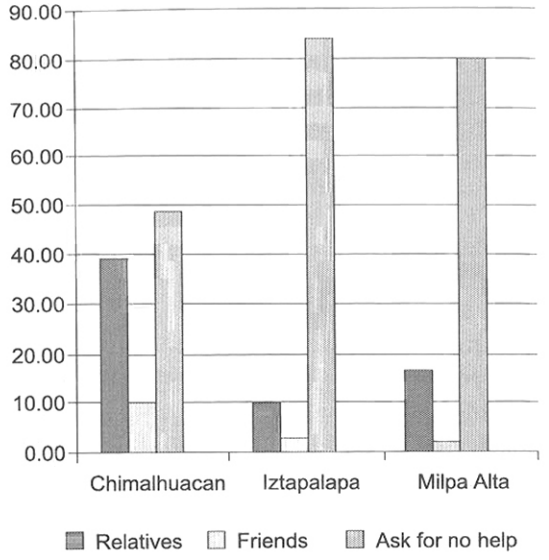


Fig. 3. To Resort to Get Medical Attention or Enter Into a School

### Poverty and Loans

One important aspect that contribute to the disadvantages of poor groups is the application for credits or loans to any institution. This “extra money” can aggravate the poverty condition because the population has to destiny an important proportion of the household expenditure to solve the debt acquired. To identify

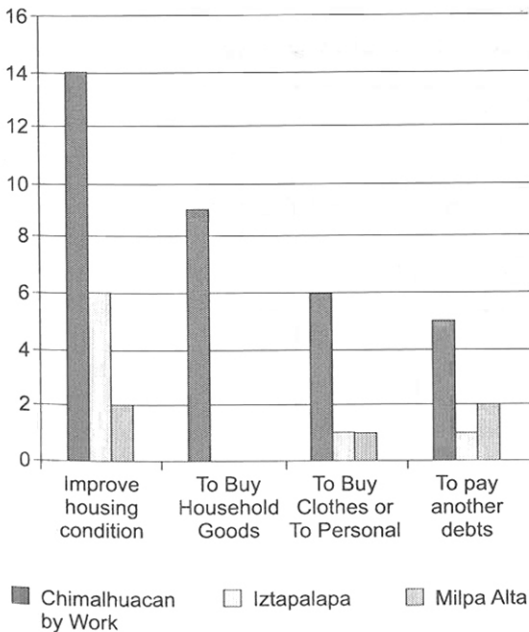


Fig. 4. Destiny of the loan

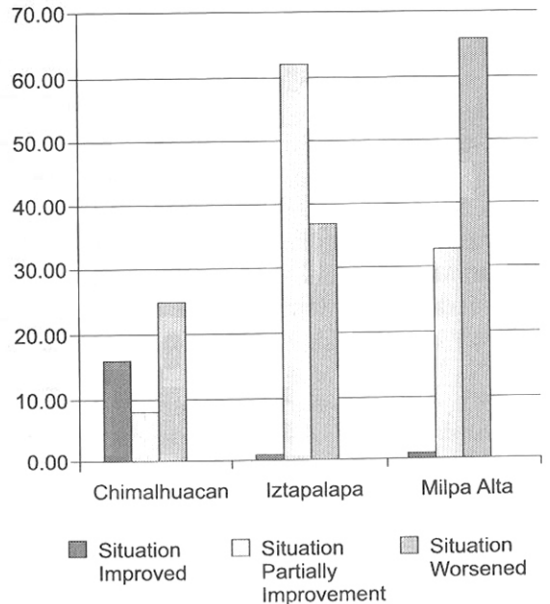


Fig. 5. Improvement of the Socioeconomic Situation with the Loan  
Source: Own calculations

this situation of impoverishment two aspects were explored: the destiny of the loan; and to know if with the loan their socioeconomic conditions improved. Figures show that most of the loan was used to improve housing conditions, and to buy household goods; and that in most of the cases their socioeconomic situation either worsened or only partially improved.

## Conclusions

Poor settlements comprise a very heterogeneous universe, both in terms of housing quality and the presence of public and social services. Fundamentally, it was shown that a high percentage of housing in all the settlements is precarious.

We found serious issues related to the poverty and precarious living conditions that affect this population. In general terms extreme poverty is found in all the settlements included in the study. This is because of the accumulation of disadvantages related to services, installations, the low level of consolidation of housing, and health or education services, and having or not water provision, the situation is so serious that the degree of need drops to absolute poverty. But the majority the population are found in the extreme poverty category.

This, we understand, could be a direct consequence of the general deterioration in the economic conditions in the city since the mid 1990s. Poverty spaces do not show a sensible improvement; disadvantages in those neighbourhoods are multiple and represent real situations of social exclusion; and spatial location seems a determinant factor for the presence of multiple needs.

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