

# The struggle for income (and shelter): a photo-essay of a Mexican migrant family

Photos and text by Janet Jarman

**SUMMARY:** *This photo-essay illustrates the way in which a low-income household's struggle for shelter is conditioned by their search for an adequate income. It centres on the life of one Mexican family from Matamoros.*

*First, it describes and illustrates the life of the mother and her eight children in August 1996, when the husband and the eldest son are in the United States working as migrant farm labourers. The mother and three of the children sort garbage at the city's municipal dump and the family lives in a home they have constructed nearby. The paper then describes how the mother and the children travelled to Florida to work with her husband and eldest son, where all but the youngest could work picking strawberries, and describes and illustrates their life there.*



Children play in Nueva Era, a low income *colonia* on the outskirts of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, a sprawling industrial city on the Mexico-United States border.

*Janet Jarman is a photo-journalist based in London. She formerly worked as a photographer at The Miami Herald newspaper in Florida and is now working on an MSc in Environmental Issues in Latin America at the Institute of Latin American Studies, University of London. Her most recent project explores the environmental consequences of rapid urbanization and industrializa-*

## I. INTRODUCTION

**THIS PHOTO-ESSAY** centres on the life of one Mexican family from Matamoros. The author came to know this family while conducting research in Matamoros and Nuevo Laredo - and the first part of the text and eight of the photos come from the time she spent with the family in August 1996. The second part of the text and eight further photos come from a second visit to the family in January 1997 - by which time the whole family was in Florida, living in a small mobile home on a farm, with all but the youngest working on the farm. They only have work guaranteed up to June 1997. They hope one day to have their own home in Matamoros, built of permanent materials although, in the im-

tion along the Mexico/US border.

**Address: 54 Leamington Road  
Villas, London W11 1HT, UK;  
fax: (44) 171 221-7995; e-mail:  
jjarman@gn.apc.org**

1. UNCHS (Habitat) (1996), *An Urbanizing World: Global Report on Human Settlements 1996*, Oxford University Press:Oxford and New York.

2. See reference 1.

mediate future, the father and his two eldest sons hope to find more work in the US.

Matamoros is a medium sized industrial city on the Mexico/US border in the state of Tamaulipas. Like most other cities on this border, Matamoros has grown rapidly in recent decades, largely as a result of the *maquiladora* programme. Beginning in 1965, this initiative allowed Mexican and foreign owned factories close to the border to import machinery, materials and components for assembly by Mexican workers duty free, as long as the finished products were exported. More recently, the *maquiladoras* have been allowed to sell in the domestic market too.<sup>(1)</sup>

Since the programme's inception, over 2,000 *maquiladoras* have grown up along the border and these have helped attract migrants from all over Mexico. City governments have been unwilling or unable to provide the infrastructure needed to support this rapid industrialization and continuous population growth. As a result, serious pollution problems and their health consequences are notable in Matamoros and in almost every border city. Matamoros's population was 50,000 in 1950 and had grown to more than 300,000 by 1990.<sup>(2)</sup> Current estimates range from 500,000 to 750,000 inhabitants. There are over 100 *maquiladoras* in the city, many of which lack treatment facilities for their waste water. In addition, open sewage canals run through several residential neighbourhoods. The city's piped water supply is also known to be contaminated so, as a precaution, most residents of Matamoros (both rich and poor) buy purified water for drinking.

## II. AUGUST 1996

**ELOISA, 39 YEARS** of age, two of her daughters, Marisol, 8, and Nanci, 13, and one of her sons, Pedro, 10, sort through the garbage that is deposited at the garbage dump in Matamoros, Mexico. Eloisa and her older children are among the city's lowest paid residents. Along with around 50 other families, they make a living from sorting through garbage at the city dump to find items they can re-use or sell. The temperature in August is often over 38 degrees centigrade (100 degrees Fahrenheit) and the air is full of smoke from burning garbage and dust, partly as a result of constant winds and the lack of paved roads in this area. There is no water supply at the dump. In August 1996, water was scarce throughout the region because it was suffering from a prolonged drought.

One afternoon at the dump, Marisol appeared happy after finding a large doll she could share with her sisters. Nanci discovered several sets of earrings and some clothing. Pedro and his mother gathered a kilo of tin cans which would earn them seven pesos or roughly US\$1. They also gathered some waste food for the family's chickens and pigs.

On most days, Eloisa, Pedro, Marisol and Nanci arrive at the dump early in the morning, before the temperature gets too hot. Their elder brother Vinicio (aged 15) sometimes helps them. The eldest daughter, Sandra, stays at home to cook and care for the



**A boy manoeuvres his bicycle behind his house in Nueva Era. Residents there have long been pressing the municipal government to provide them with sanitation, drainage, electricity and a more adequate police presence to reduce crime.**

family's youngest children. Eloisa and the three children return home for a few hours in the middle of the day before returning in the late afternoon to take advantage of the steady stream of trucks which arrive at the dump to off-load garbage. Their work finishes around 8 p.m. and they walk or catch a ride some two kilometres back to their home, passing over an open sewage canal which separates the dump from their neighbourhood, *Colonia de Cambio*.

*Colonia de Cambio* is on the outskirts of Matamoros, between the city airport and the municipal dump. It first developed in 1986 when around

40 squatters moved onto land in and around the municipal dump; the land had previously been *ejido* land. In 1988, the government formally recognized the community and issued "possession" papers to the original squatters. This allowed the residents to legally occupy the land although they did not own it. At some point in the future, a government housing agency will come to the *Colonia* to value each lot and offer the residents official titles if they pay a fee (which can be paid in instalments). Many of the lots have already been purchased by a Texas based religious organization whose volunteers have helped residents such as Eloisa and her family to build homes. The organization is one of the only support networks for residents in the *Colonia*, as the residents have been unable to get government support for electricity, sanitation and drainage, adequate water supplies and health care.

At present, some of the residents pay to get access to the piped water system - but the supply is erratic (as it is in other parts of the city). Like many other neighbourhoods in Matamoros, *Colonia de Cambio* has no provision for sanitation and drainage and lacks paved roads. The settlement is at risk from flooding especially during the late summer and autumn when heavy rains frequently flood many parts of the city. Furthermore, although poles for electricity cables were installed in 1995, there are still no cables. Most residents use coal fired burners for cooking although some use gas. The absence of street lights and the *Colonia's* remote location help explain the high levels of violence at night which the residents attribute to drug trafficking in the area.

Working at the dump also poses many dangers. Some of the greatest risks include accidents from trucks hitting young children and injuries from sharp objects on the ground and in the garbage, including glass and tins. There are also cans of combustible substances which may explode in the burning garbage.

Many of the garbage pickers complain of respiratory problems and severe headaches linked to the burning garbage and the high levels of dust in the air. Other health threats arise from the swarms of flies and the pigs and rats which inhabit the dump. Residents have also reported cases of polio, tuberculosis and hepatitis. Children suffer especially from diarrhoeal diseases. Mosquitoes pose another problem - and dengue fever (which is transmitted by mosquitoes) has become a problem throughout the city.

*Maquiladora* factories have also been known to dispose of toxic wastes at the dump which adds another potential danger to the work of the garbage pickers. People working at the dump and local environmentalists have often seen trucks discharging liquid chemicals and solid wastes. Barrels marked with the symbol of hazardous wastes (the skull and crossbones) have also been found at the dump.

For Eloisa, these risks are outweighed by the necessity of feeding eight children every day. The job is worth the severe headaches she suffers. For her, working at the dump is a way of survival, especially since her husband is away working as a migrant farm worker in the United States with their eldest son, Juan. She commented in August 1996 that "One day, I hope we all can live together and find a better life in the United States."

### III. JANUARY 1997

**FIVE MONTHS LATER**, the temperature in Matamoros is uncommonly cold with ice and rain. In *Colonia de Cambio*, residents stand around coal fires inside their homes wearing all the clothing they can find. The air is cold and damp and only five people are working at the dump.

Eloisa and her children are no longer there. Although the family's two dogs still greet visitors at the gate, their house is occupied by another family.<sup>(3)</sup> None of the neighbours know exactly where they have gone except that they have crossed the Mexico/US border. Even Ben Butler, a close friend from the Texas ministries, seems perplexed. He and other volunteers had visited them a few days before Christmas. A week later, they had gone. Ben commented that this was an example of how quickly things can change along the border and he thought that they would come back and that they were probably working on a farm in the US for a season or two. Other neighbours seemed less convinced of their imminent return as, this time, they had left with the entire family and had sold their chickens and pigs.

Only a few close relatives of the family, living in the *Colonia*, knew where the family had gone. The husband, Vinicio, and the eldest son, Juan, had returned to Matamoros in November to rest between harvest seasons. In mid-December, the father had received a telephone message through a friend. One of his former field bosses had enough work for the whole family on a strawberry farm in Florida.

Vinicio had always wanted to bring his family to the United States but the risks and costs had seemed too high. Although

3. Families who lack official title to land are loath to leave their houses unoccupied. Since Eloisa still does not have official title, she had to find other people to occupy her home so neither the government nor other squatters could take it over.

he had a residence card and work permit, and the two youngest children were US citizens since they had been born on the US side of the border, residence petitions for Eloisa and the other children were still pending. They would still be at the mercy of border officials if they tried to cross. "They can make up any reason not to let you through..." Vinicio explained. "...the ones you really have to watch out for are the Mexican agents hired by the US government. They're the ones who will stab you in the back."

Nevertheless, December had seemed like an opportune time to bring the whole family into the US, especially since they had guaranteed work until June 1997. Juan and his father had worked quickly to prepare the family's broken-down van for the two-day journey to Florida. For this, they replaced the van's engine with one from an old car.

They packed few personal belongings so that, at the border, it would not appear as if they were moving to the US. They also planned for the three oldest children to walk across the international bridge to limit the number of family members crossing at one time. Most Matamoros residents are permitted to enter the US to shop within a 25-mile radius but US patrols are quick to interrogate drivers of overcrowded or otherwise suspect vehicles.

The family also had to get past a second immigration station which is outside this radius - and this can be more difficult. For this, the family waited until 10 p.m. when they knew there was a change in shift in the border patrol. It is said that during this changeover, officials let many vehicles through without checking them. Their strategy worked. Once safely across, the different family members waited at a designated restaurant for Vinicio's cousin who had driven from Florida to lend them money for the trip and lead them back to the farm.<sup>(4)</sup>

#### IV. A NEW LIFE

**DRIVING SOUTH ON** Florida's Interstate 75, most vehicles are full of tourists, predominantly from the mid-Western United States and Canada who seek respite from harsh winter conditions in the north. Interstate 75 cuts through the state's west coast as if to separate two different worlds: the beach resorts and major cities on one side and the rich farmland on the other. The tourists who will exit to the right off the highway, towards the beaches, may never see the other world to the east where the Mexicans and Central Americans work, ensuring them their supply of fresh fruit. But this is where Eloisa, Vinicio and their family have come, to Florida's agricultural core which supplies much of the United States and parts of Europe with fresh produce all year round.

Upon first impressions, it appears that the family is much better off in their new surroundings. The small community where they live has many other Mexican farm workers from Matamoros and from as far away as Guadalajara and Oaxaca. Most of the workers, including Vinicio's family, live in small mobile homes called trailers.<sup>(5)</sup> Vicinio's cousin and family live nearby, provid-

4. It is estimated that between 5-7 million Mexicans are working in the United States - both legally and illegally. According to Schlosser (1995), over 1 million farm workers gained legal status in 1986 when the Federal government offered an amnesty to workers who could prove they had worked in farm labour during the previous year. They had expected to grant legal status to 350,000 but more than 1.3 million applied - see Schlosser, Eric (1995), "In the strawberry fields", *Atlantic Monthly*, November.



5. Trailers are long, thin "mobile home" structures made of light metal and are a common form of low-income housing in the United States as they can be hooked up to running water and sewers, and supplied with electricity.

ing a convenient social and family support network. Another important community feature is the church founded by a Puerto Rican pastor who moved to rural Florida to dedicate his work to migrant communities. The church is often the first stopping point for newly arrived migrants and it routinely hands out food, clothing and other household necessities.

The surrounding community has schools that the children can attend and classic American stores such as Wal-Mart and Dollar General where every staple item can be bought at discount prices. Grocery stores throughout the area cater to the region's inhabitants, including selling a wide range of Mexican foods.

Although their three-room trailer is considered small for a group of 11 people, family members never complain. There are other advantages such as an electric stove, a functioning bathroom and a television with the computer game Nintendo left behind by previous renters. More exciting for the children is the football field-sized yard surrounding the house where the younger children can run and explore. In addition, despite the skin rashes that Eloisa and her oldest daughter suffer from through brushing against the plants which have been treated with pesticides, they all agree that working as farm labourers is "cleaner" than working at the dump, although physically much harder. Another advantage is that the younger children, who do not work in the fields, have the opportunity to attend nearby schools where bilingual classes enable them to continue their education and learn English.

Above all, the most important advantage for Vinicio and Eloisa is that they have work at the moment and that they are all together in one place. "We struggled enough in Mexico," Eloisa said, constantly referring to *el dolor* (literally "the pain", in this sense anguish) she experienced trying to survive at the dump. "If we keep working together like this, one day we can have something" said Vinicio. "We could save enough money to build a house out of *bloque* (cinder blocks or other permanent materials) in Mexico.

Come June, Vinicio would like his family to stay in the United States even if it means moving the family to other locations where there is work on another farm. Over the years, he has worked as a labourer in New York, North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia and Texas. His dream remains uncertain, however, since maintaining a large family in the United States is more difficult than it appears. One the one hand, work is easier to find and the cost of food is lower. As Vinicio says, "In the US, I can always find work and the money goes further... Here, with one dollar, I can buy two cokes. With one peso, I can buy nothing." However, the cost of living is also higher in the US. The monthly rent for their three-room trailer was US\$400 and in March, the landlord suddenly increased the price to US\$500. Weekly food costs are around US\$150. The cost of health care for the children is minimal due to federal grants which cover costs for low-income families. However, this benefit may cease in April 1997 when a controversial new US law could deny such benefits to both legal and illegal immigrants. Other expenses include school books, gasoline and household items. In one exceptional week, the five work-



**Collecting water from a public tap in Nueva Era. Residents complain that water there is of poor quality and supplies are erratic; the service was particularly poor during a severe regional drought during the summer of 1996.**

ing family members grossed US\$800. Yet such wages depend on good weather and may last only a few weeks when strawberries are abundant. Now that the middle children are attending school, Eloisa must stay at home to look after her 3-year old daughter (also called Eloisa) and nine-month old Cintia. With one less worker, the family now grosses between US\$500 and US\$650 a week. In addition, Vinicio has a debt of US\$1,500 that has to be paid off.

Meanwhile, the children are being exposed to American materialism through television and by observing the community around them. In Wal-Mart on Sunday, Sandra bought a Walkman cassette stereo for US\$10, a luxury she could not have afforded in Matamoros. Having her own money gives her independence for the first time, a freedom she would like to extend by owning her own car. "One day, I would like to have a beautiful car..." she said "...then, I could keep all of my things in it and drive it to and from my job." Most of all though, she misses her friends in Mexico and she

wants to finish school. At the moment, however, she recognizes that helping her family is more important.

Sandra's brother, Vinicio, also wants a car but is more particular than her and wants a Ford Mustang. He is not as keen on staying at school after twice being expelled in Matamoros. He would rather stay in the United States and work with his father and elder brother, Juan. As the father says, "I tell them all that education should be their highest priority but I cannot force them to go to school." He also worries about his second son (Vinicio) who "...is very restless... I have to teach him how to deal with people since he will have to do that in any job."

In general, the younger children appear to have adapted to their new life. They seem indifferent to the changes and complain only about the American school lunches they have to eat. There is constant laughter in the trailer. Their mother is not so care-free. She sometimes feels very isolated since people are

much more dispersed in rural Florida than they were in Matamoros. She also worries about money and where the family will end up next. It seems as if the only constant in her life is uncertainty.

Back in the fields, the family and their new colleagues begin work at 7:30 in the morning and end around five in the afternoon, weather permitting. They are fortunate in having a crew leader who treats them considerately. He was once a labourer and recognizes the monotony and pain that the work entails. After finishing another row of strawberries, Sandra stands up to straighten her body and relax her muscles. A worker nearby reminds her, "There is no time to rest now... we can rest all we want when we die."





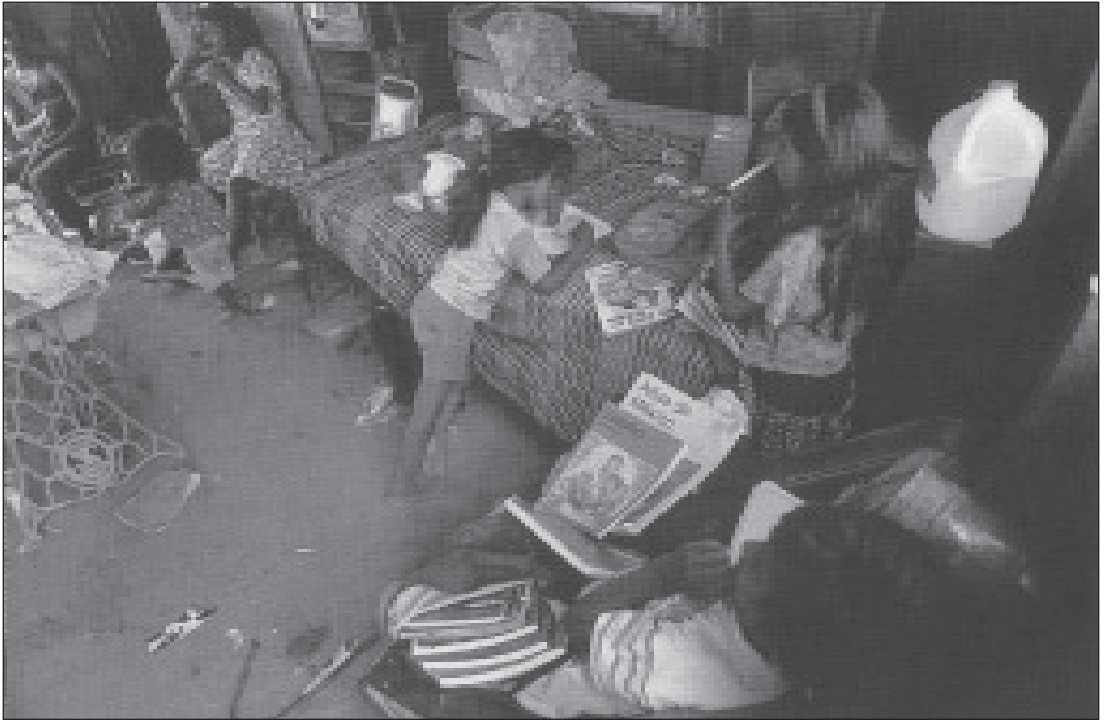
This photograph and all those that follow centre on Eloisa and her family whose life is described in the text above. Garbage pickers converge on a load of garbage deposited in the Matamoros municipal dump. Eloisa is second from the right. Around 100 pickers work in the dump, collecting metals, tins, and other recyclable and reusable items. Sharp objects, disease vectors, fires and high levels of smoke and dust are among the main hazards they face working here.



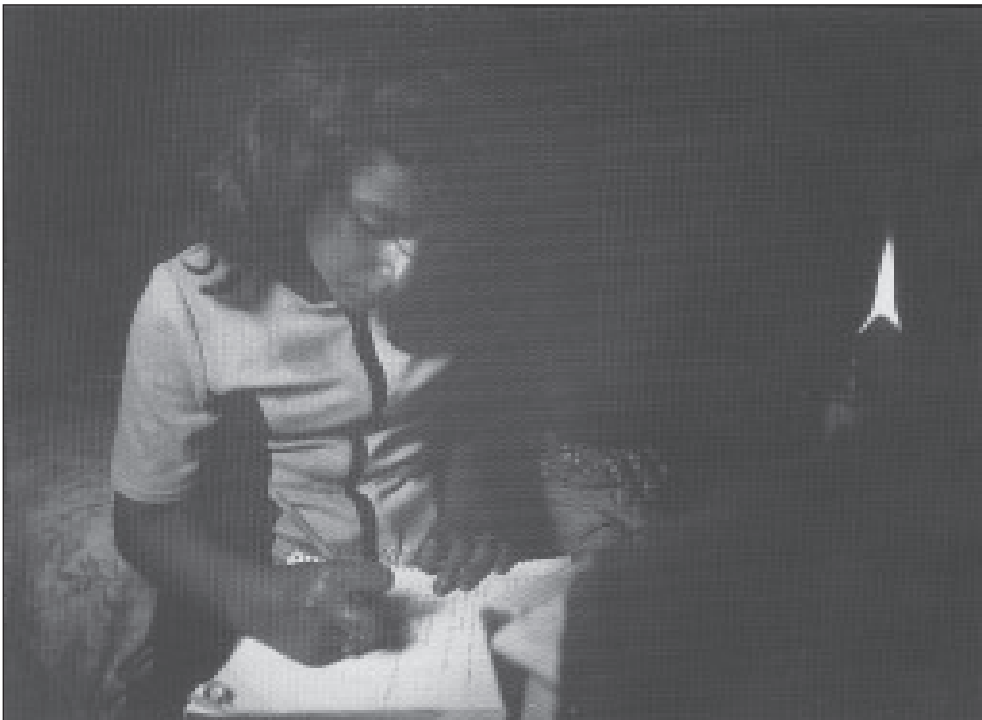
Using their hands, Marisol and her mother Eloisa collect tins from the garbage.



(from left to right) Kristina and her sisters, Eloisa and Marisol, bathe outside the home that their family built in *Colonia de Cambio*, close to the municipal dump. Through a hose, they access the piped water supply near their house. The supply is erratic and of poor quality, so they often buy the water they need for drinking.



The children crowd into the main room of their house which consists of three small rooms made of plywood and particle board on a plot of roughly 9 by 21 metres (30 by 70 foot).



Nanci does her homework by candle lantern. The electricity poles were installed in the colonia many months ago but the cables have not yet arrived.



Marisol fans her four-month-old sister on a summer day when temperatures in Matamoros exceeded 38 degrees centigrade (100 degrees fahrenheit).





Marisol and Kristina walk through mud on their way to school. Whenever it rains, their road fares better than most, since it is surfaced with 'caliche', a byproduct from a local chemical plant. The plant donates this waste product to the city which in turn sells it to *colonias* by the ton. Officials say the *caliche* should be paved over for health and safety reasons, but *colonias* cannot afford this. Residents have long complained about eye, skin and throat irritations linked to the white chalky substance which circulates freely on windy days.



Marisol daydreams during Sunday school as the teacher warns children that if they do not follow God, they will end up like delinquents in the US who bring guns to school and disrespect their parents.



Vinicio, aged 43, picks strawberries in Florida. Strawberries are one of the highest value crops for farmers but also one of the most risky. For migrants, they have long been known as *frutas del diablo* (fruits of the devil) since picking them is one of the lowest paid and most labour intensive jobs. Labourers must bend at the waist for hours on end. They must concentrate on picking berries only of a certain size, firmness, shape and colour and arrange them neatly into baskets to attract the shoppers' eye (Schlosser 1995 - see note 4).

Kristina, Marisol and Pedro race through the yard surrounding their new trailer home in Florida. Here, they have much more space to play than they did in Mexico. In addition, the ground is soft and sandy rather than muddy and full of broken glass as it was near the dump in Matamoros.





Mealtimes in the family home can be chaotic with 11 family members waiting for food.



Sandra seems pleased as she and other family members try on American clothing donated to them by a local church.





Eloisa is exhausted after working in the fields all day. Although the fields are much 'cleaner' than the dump, she says that the work is physically much harder. For the first few weeks, she suffered painful skin rashes on her face from the pesticides used on the strawberry plants.



By law, all the children had to be immunized before attending US schools. Although Eloisa 'chico', aged three, will not attend school yet, she came with the rest of the family where the shots were given free. She and her younger sister, Cintia (10 months), are considered US citizens since Eloisa crossed the river into the US to give birth to them.



**Marisol waits outside with other classmates on her first day of school in the United States. She and siblings Pedro and Kristina seemed nervous yet excited on this day. This particular school caters to migrant children and will offer them the chance to continue their education and learn English at the same time.**



During a school field trip, students observe their new classmate, Marisol, on her first day attending an American school in January 1997.