



PORTAL

A Different Kind of Border Wall

by LYND A M. GONZALEZ

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SIX GRANDCHILDREN. Six different breakfasts.

Every morning, 69-year-old Teresa de Lozoya cooks what she can manage from food bank supplies and leftovers from church meal programs: a bowl of ramen noodle soup, hot dogs scrambled with eggs, reheated plain hamburgers. Her deteriorating mobile home in Indian Hills, Texas, will have already reached the high 90s well before noon in the summer heat.

“I’ve been trying to save money for years to get the supplies to fix the walls and floor, but it always ends up going to something else that’s more important at the time,” she said.

Teresa’s daily struggles illustrate the common problems of low-income families along the Texas–Mexico border. Several of the 2019 federal budget cuts proposed by President Donald Trump would erect a different kind of wall, making it even harder for these families to escape the cycle of poverty.

Approximately half a million low-income Mexican immigrants like Teresa live along the Texas–Mexico border in almost 3,000 *colonias*—informal settlements built on cheap plots of land that tend to flood easily and lack a combination of electricity, paved roads, water and sewage systems.

President Trump released his 2019 federal budget proposal in early February, outlining cuts to the kind of anti-poverty programs that help the families living in *colonias* make ends meet. Meanwhile, the proposal reserves \$1.6 billion to construct 65 miles of a border wall in South Texas.

Near the Border, on the Margins

Forty percent of colonia residents live below the poverty line, and the median household income in these communities falls just under \$29,000, according to a 2015 report by the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas. Programs like Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition

Assistance Program (food stamps) are sometimes the only safety net for these families, in which adults often work multiple minimum-wage jobs and still do not make enough money to get by.

While the national average of people who rely on government assistance programs is 11 percent, it is nearly four times that amount in *colonias*, at 40 percent. Most colonia residents work low-income jobs in agriculture, construction, and the service industry, so they need the assistance to survive.

Teresa’s adult daughter lives with her and works as a full-time medical assistant, relying on her mother to watch her four children during the summer since they cannot afford childcare. Two additional grandchildren live with Teresa after their mother was jailed.



Teresa de Lozoya, 69, feeds her six grandchildren meals prepared with food bank supplies or church meal program leftovers. Teresa’s adult daughter works as a medical assistant and is the only financial provider for the home while Teresa watches her grandchildren.

Teresa quit her usual job as a home care provider to care for the children, but she and her daughter consequently struggle to pay the bills—her monthly electricity bill can creep upwards of \$240 and she pays up to \$130 for water services. After paying bills, Teresa usually devotes the remaining family income to things like secondhand clothes for her grandchildren, diapers for a disabled grandchild, or repairs for constant damage to her truck sustained by massive neighborhood potholes.

“On top of all of that, my daughter’s food stamps amount was lowered to \$63,” Teresa said in Spanish, attributing the reduction to the slightly higher pay rate at her daughter’s new job. “What can you do with \$63?”

Teresa’s family additionally relies on Medicaid to pay for doctor’s visits for her eight-year-old grandson with cognitive and physical disabilities. Without the program, her family wouldn’t be able to afford insurance coverage to pay for specialists and physical therapy.

“They teach him how to be more independent and how to do better in school,” Teresa said. “And it helps me because I wouldn’t be able to give him that on my own, especially when there are five other grandchildren I am taking care of.”

Services Shrink as Talk of the Wall Expands

Hidalgo County, where Teresa lives, has the highest concentration of colonias in Texas. One of the poorest counties in the state, it is home to the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, where the Trump administration has sought to begin constructing a border wall. The diversion of federal funds from government assistance programs to fund the border wall sends a clear message to some local advocates.

“The whole conglomeration of ‘colonia,’ and ‘unauthorized people,’ is obviously not something that is a priority,” said Ann Cass, executive director of the affordable housing nonprofit organization Proyecto Azteca. The nonprofit relies on a combination of foundation funding and state and federal grants to build and provide affordable housing to families in colonias. Less federal funding translates to building fewer houses and an increasing waitlist that already has almost 4,000 families on it, Cass said.

In February, the US Department of Agriculture’s Rural Economic Development Program awarded a housing assistance grant of almost \$294,000 to Proyecto Azteca, allowing for the construction of fifteen new homes over a two-year period.

But Trump’s proposal seeks to cut this development program. It also seeks the elimination of the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s community development block grants. Reductions to these programs would impact efforts to pave roads, establish and expand wastewater treatment facilities, and provide affordable housing options to colonia families, according to local advocates.

As the summer months approach anew, another pressing concern for colonia residents is public health. Because colonias often lack drainage systems, standing water and piles of debris become a breeding ground for pests and rodents. The Zika virus and other mosquito-borne illnesses are also concerns.

“The mosquitos carrying all sorts of viruses won’t just stay in the unincorporated areas if we don’t do something to take care of the stormwater and drainage,” Cass said. “This is a public health issue for everybody.”



Ashlee, four, is the youngest of Teresa’s grandchildren living with her. She loves to play barefoot outside on the dusty grounds around Teresa’s mobile home.



Teresa and Ashlee rest for a moment by one of three fans used to keep the triple-digit summer heat at bay in their poorly insulated mobile home.



Teresa looks out the back door of her mobile home in the colonia of Indian Hills, Texas.

PRESIDENT TRUMP'S PROPOSED BUDGET CUTS WOULD ERECT
AN INSURMOUNTABLE BARRIER FOR LOW-INCOME FAMILIES TRYING TO
ESCAPE THE CYCLE OF POVERTY ALONG THE TEXAS-MEXICO BORDER.



Jennifer, 13, is the oldest of the grandchildren living with Teresa after their mother was jailed. She is quick to help Teresa with laundry and other chores but says the move to the colonia has been difficult. She shares an air mattress with her younger sister on the living room floor.

Proyecto Azteca collaborates with a coalition of other nonprofits to address the various economic and infrastructural factors that deteriorate the physical quality of colonia houses like Teresa's. Repeated flooding each year has completely damaged the foundation and floors of the home Teresa bought 18 years ago for \$8,000. She said she wouldn't be able to afford monthly payments for a new house, even if Proyecto Azteca could offer one at a low monthly rate.

"I also wouldn't have another place to go while they build a new house," Teresa said. "Besides, they wouldn't even be able to lift up my current house for me to repair because it will fall apart, so it'll stay there until it does just that."

Still, Teresa's home is filled with the aroma of home-cooked meals and the chatter of children playing video games indoors or chasing each other as cops and robbers outside. She hopes the faraway politicians in charge keep families like hers in mind.

"Though we have great company in our communities, the reality is that the people living here can work very hard and still be very poor," Teresa said. "We have very little. For the government to take even that away will make it impossible for things to ever get any better." 🌻

Lynda M. Gonzalez is a bilingual documentary multimedia journalist in Austin, Texas, with primary interests related to immigration, education, and public health. Before moving to Austin, she taught high school journalism in the Rio Grande Valley as a Teach For America 2012 Corps Member. She is currently pursuing a dual master's degree in journalism and Latin American studies at The University of Texas at Austin and works as a photography intern at the Austin American-Statesman. Her published work has appeared in The Atlantic, the Austin American-Statesman, ¡Ahora Sí!, KUT News Radio, KUTX Music Radio, Reporting Texas, and other publications.



Teresa does laundry for the 8 people living in her 3-bedroom, 2-bathroom mobile home.