THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

“QUIERO VIVIR EN MI FANTASÍA:” THE SOCIAL WORLD OF YOUTH IN STREET SITUATIONS IN MEXICO CITY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is the product of the love and support that I have received from many people throughout my graduate school career. It would not have been possible without the true experts on the lives of youth in street situations—the youth themselves. I will forever be grateful to the many youth in street situations that I met in Mexico City, and I am particularly grateful to my key informants who invited me into their lives. These young people who have been let down, disrespected, and forgotten so many times before, were brave enough to trust a complete stranger with their intimate stories and with the innerworkings of their world. I am thankful to them for having faith that I would do justice to their lives. In those moments when I doubted my ability to finish this dissertation, they were my motivation; their stories and their trust kept me going. This is particularly for those who have left us too soon, the victims of the reality of the street—Alexis, Eduardo, Jordi, Zury, Pamela. These youth were not just a statistic; they were youth who loved, who laughed, and who sought ways to live their lives to the fullest despite the difficult situations they found themselves in. They will not be forgotten. They live on in the pages that follow and in the hearts of the numerous people they touched across Mexico City.

I am grateful to the outreach workers and staff at Casa Alianza and across the city, without their help this dissertation would never have been possible. These individuals—Moises Salazar, Rosa Jimenez, Jorge Mejia, Karla Rodriguez, Leonardo Flores, Viry Ramos, Laura Rodriguez, Ezequiel Amador, and David Franco—were invaluable in my understanding of the social world of youth in street situations in Mexico City. These outreach workers put their own relationships with these youth on the line as they vouched for me on

the street. They shared their collective almost-100 years of experience working with youth in street situations, stories that helped me understand the larger phenomenon and helped me gain more insight into the world of these youth. They taught me about the culture of Mexico City and oriented me to the slang on the street. These outreach workers were the ones that opened doors to closed meetings so that I could really understand what was happening behind the scenes, and they were the ones that protected me on the street when we went into the housing settlements. Their many lessons, and the thousands of hours of conversations we had on the metro, on buses, walking around the city streets looking for youth, and in the Precomunidad were invaluable for me to understand the phenomenon. More than that, however, they were great friends and sources of support as we processed the reality of the street together.

These individuals have become my heroes. I was and will always be impressed by the love and passion of these outreach workers. They have a great ability to show unconditional kindness and compassion to these youth despite the disappointments they face or the frustration and overwhelming emotional weight of this work. They do it because they truly care and are truly committed to the wellbeing of the thousands of people who live and slowly lose their lives on the sidewalks of Mexico City every day. While others view these individuals as lost causes, these outreach workers treat them with the dignity they deserve. I watched as many of them risked and lost their jobs fighting to protect these youth from what they believed to be an unjust city and an unjust organizational model, and I now watch as many of them continue this work with youth despite working 50 hours a week at their day jobs to support their families. They are an inspiration and their commitment to youth in street situations was a motivation for me to finish this project.

I particularly want to thank Ezequiel Amador who in the later stages of this project has become a constant source of support and motivation. His knowledge of the population, the city, and the culture was important as I started to really work through my data and make sense of the social world of these youth. But more than that, his calming presence (even at a distance), undying patience, and constant reassurance helped me push through those days of self-doubt when I felt like I could never complete the dissertation. And it was his reminder "*que las cosas se hacen con paciencia y amor"* that became my mantra and that helped me fight back the overwhelming anxiety I felt everyday as I sat down in front of my computer to write.

I am also thankful to my committee who made this dissertation possible. Each of my committee members has been critical at different points in my graduate school career, but each has added in their own way to this chapter of my life and in helping me to complete this project. For me, graduate school has been a long journey. As a first-generation student I didn't really know what to expect and to say that the experience has been overwhelming is an understatement. When I arrived at Chicago, I quickly found myself lost as I was thrown into a world I was unprepared for and felt like I didn't belong. Omar McRoberts was my advisor early on and my experiences with him in Urban Structure and Process and Ethnographic Methods helped give me the confidence not only that my ideas were worth pursuing, but that I could be an ethnographer. He helped me understand that doing things differently could be an advantage in my work, and that being an outsider in academia means I have a unique perspective to offer in my sociological analyses.

I started to work with Marco Garrido when he first arrived at the University of Chicago. I was particularly lost in the program (and life in general) at that point, and he had

the patience to work with me as I found my way. He has shown unwavering faith in this project and in my abilities to complete it from the early days of working together. When I doubted myself and questioned whether I wanted to complete the program, it was his belief in me and excitement about the project that kept me going. I am grateful for his guidance throughout the dissertation process, helping me to understand the framing that made sense for this project, and always being patient as I worked through different ideas. I am also grateful for his empathy, his openness in sharing his own stories, and his willingness to make time no matter how overwhelmingly busy he was. He helped me feel like I wasn't alone in this process.

Jenny Trinitapoli showed me kindness at a point in this project when I needed it most. She validated that my idea, and especially the population that interested me, was worth studying. She also helped me understand what it is to create a project that is informed by various threads of knowledge in order to create a unique way of understanding a phenomenon. This was invaluable to me as it not only helped me gain a better understanding of what I wanted to do in this dissertation, but also who I am as a sociologist.

Yanilda María González has also shown unwavering support for this project, and she helped me believe in myself. When I began to question my way of knowing and the way I was seeing the world of these youth, she was there to reassure me that I was on the right track. She has shown me that there are other ways of *doing* sociology. I am grateful that she gave me the opportunity to teach her Human Rights: Policy and Practice course as this course gave me the language to better understand the world of these youth, and the exposure to different literature that allowed me to understand that my interests are real things to be studied. She

has encouraged me to be true to myself and my ideas in my work, and her encouragement and support helped me believe that I could finish this project.

This dissertation would not have been possible without my Chicago family. Jerry Kaufman, Amber Kaufman, Katie Hendricks, and Eric Knapp. I would not have made it this far without them. When my life fell apart in graduate school, they were there to help me pick up the pieces and keep moving forward. They opened their homes to me, and as I was writing the dissertation, they were there to help me work through the constant whirlwind of frustration, excitement, curiosity, and pain that is the writing process. I could never have written this without their kind words, unending support, anxiety-crushing pep-talks, and wellness checks.

I particularly want to thank Jerry. It has been a long road together from visit day to today and this last almost-decade has been nothing short of a wild ride with many ups and downs. We made it through course work, prelims, SSR, qualifying papers, special fields that took longer than expected, and now the dissertation together, and I could not have made it through this program without him. Our innumerable conversations throughout the years about school, sociology, and life have helped me navigate my way through the program, but they have also shaped me into the person I am today. This dissertation is a representation of my interests and who I am thanks to Jerry's constant reminder that this project should be no less than exactly what I want it to be. I am and will forever be grateful for the honest, open, and unconditional relationship that we have.

I could not have completed this project nor made it through graduate school without my family. I don't think they fully grasp how much of a motivation, inspiration, and support they are for me, but they are truly indispensable. While my family has always encouraged

me to study, it is their strength and their examples of overcoming adversity that have been true motivators for me. My family has always ensured that I understand where I come from and has always made sure to keep me grounded. I am the granddaughter of a *panadero* with less than an elementary school education who was repatriated to Mexico as a baby during the Great Depression. I am the daughter of an immigrant bodyman who did not finish high school, but who pushed himself to start his own business in order to give his children a better life than was available to him. Their sacrifices have laid the foundation for where I am today, in this privileged position, and they have been my motivation to keep going. More than motivation, it is their examples of hard work, of digging deep, and overcoming that I have used to push myself throughout graduate school and especially in the last few months of the dissertation writing process.

The final weeks of this dissertation process were marked by the unexpected challenges of the COVID pandemic and quarantine. While I returned to California to support my family during the pandemic, I definitely reaped greater benefits than they did. I am thankful all of their support as I sat down to write every day, for the Sunday afternoon distractions they offered, for the love they showed me, for all of the baby hugs, and for their patience in dealing with my frustration of writing. Their encouragement, their reminders of what matters, and their belief that I could finish were invaluable as I tried to weather the last few weeks of writing.

ABSTRACT

Today it is estimated that there are over 150 million youth living and/or working on the streets worldwide, with the majority of them in cities of the Global South. We know very little about their lives. Urban sociological literature tends to overlook these youth by considering them part of the larger urban poor. Research that does examine these youth tends to take a social problems approach that focuses at the individual or peer level and extracts them from the larger context they call home. This dissertation draws on 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork to fill this gap by placing these youth within the larger ecology of the city and mapping their social world. I find that when youth in street situations enter the street, they seek to create their *fantasías* or fantasies where they find not only food, shelter, and protection but where they also find the love, sense of belonging, and autonomy that they didn't find in their homes. They build relationships with their peers, the adult urban poor, middle-class residents, and numerous institutions in the city to make these fantasies come to life. They are drawn to specific relationships with mother figures and fictive kin to create family bonds that offer them protection but also fulfill their various emotional needs. They strategically perform their youthfulness and misery in ways that allow them to elicit sympathy from middle class residents and help them to maintain a positive sense of self by resisting the stigma of the street. They strategically use the multiple civil society resources available to them in ways that maximize their benefits while avoiding spaces of care where they lose their sense of autonomy, a complicated balance as they are willing to cede autonomy for the emotional support that employees of these organizations offer. This dissertation emphasizes the need to understand the community of youth in street situations

as part of the urban landscape in order to understand social dynamics of cities of the Global South, where the majority of urbanization will occur in the next 30 years, and to understand how to best support these youth.

PREFACE

My interest in the topic of homelessness and understanding the experience of unhoused people goes back many years. My qualifying paper, written in 2014, was focused on understanding the ways in which a community of unhoused adults in Chicago performed their identity on the street through their interactions with middle-class passersby. In this paper I also explored the ways these men and women understood themselves to be a part of the social fabric of the neighborhood they had called home for most of their lives. But my interest in the larger topic of homelessness predates my qualifying paper and goes well beyond my academic interests. For me, this is much more personal.

I have always been unsatisfied with existing academic literature on the topic of homelessness. While there are many exemplars of great sociological examinations of the topic that date back to Nels Anderson's (1940) *The Hobo*, there is also a lot of work that fails to capture the complexity of this world. Much of this literature focuses on individual or peer level dynamics that does not show the ways these individuals are connected to the city around them. This literature tends to overlook the reality that while housing status is important in shaping the lives of the individuals who experience homelessness, it is not the only thing. I know this because my brother has struggled with homelessness the majority of his 43-year life.

My brother found himself precariously housed as a teenager, when abuse drove him out of the home. His precariously housed teenage years have led to adult homelessness. Over the years I have seen the ways my brother's world is not just about his peers on the street, but how he is also very much connected to other communities around him. From a young

age, I have watched first-hand as he has navigated relationships with different people—with family members, with partners, with institutions (both state and non-state), and even middle-class strangers—to build his life. I have seen the way his life is not just lived on the street, but is also lived in hotel rooms, homes, jails and prisons, half-way houses, and sober living communities. I understand that he is not just a homeless peer, but also a son, a brother, a partner, and a father. I understand that the way my brother navigates his relationships are greatly impacted by the trauma of his past and present.

My life experience has been my motivation to work on the academic study of homelessness over the years, and it now pushes me to shed light on the social world of youth in street situations in Mexico City because this is a largely overlooked population that will likely continue to grow in cities across the Global South. Mexico City is a very different context from that which shaped my brother's life as a youth on the street in Los Angeles of the 1990s. The lives of the youth I met are vastly different from my brother's life, their experiences shaped by the very different political, economic, and social landscape of the city. While this life experience did not help me fully understand the lives of youth in street situations in Mexico City, it oriented me to the dynamism and complexity of the lives of these youth. It has led me to focus on the myriad ways the lives of these youth are shaped by the larger context that they call home. My past also gave me a closeness to their experiences that helped me understand their lives a little better, understand that these are still youth with hopes and dreams for the future who seek to fulfill their needs, wants, and desires despite being on the street.

In the final days in the field I disclosed my brother's unhoused status to a handful of key informants. The majority of them said it helped them understand why I was so interested

in learning about their lives when no one else seemed to care, but a few were also quick to point out that I still could never understand what it is to live on the street or what my brother's life is really like. This is undoubtedly true, and it was not the goal of my dissertation. The goal of this work is to shed light on the fullness and complexity of the lives of youth in street situations, to show that they form a unique community in the city, and to help create an understanding for the ways that they are integrally tied to the city around them.

Introduction

The metropolitan area of Mexico City spreads over almost 3,700 square miles in what is known as the Valley of Mexico and is home to nearly 22 million people. It is a megacity and also a global city—an important hub in international economic, political, and cultural networks. Popular imaginations of this urban conglomeration vary widely. To some, Mexico City is an urban leviathan whose overwhelming size, density, and hustle threaten to consume those who walk its streets. To many, it is a dangerous place overrun by organized crime and corruption. For the last two decades, the city itself has been marketing itself as a city of the future, a city in motion, and the cultural capital of Latin America. The reality is that Mexico City is a vibrant, complex urban center that is all of these things and much more.

There are many characteristics that make Mexico City stand out among cities around the world. Aside from its mega-city status, Mexico City is a city of extremes. It is home to some of the richest people in the world, housing executives of multimillion-dollar transnational companies while also being home to millions of the urban poor, who survive on less than two dollars a day. These residents, despite coming from very distinct backgrounds, coexist in the city and navigate their lives side by side, in many ways depending on each other for survival. Despite their differences, these residents form part of the larger human ecology of Mexico City as they interact, negotiate, and renegotiate the physical and social landscape of the urban environment they inhabit.

A drive down one of the city's busiest and most emblematic thoroughfares, Paseo de la Reforma, gives a small glimpse of the diversity and complexity that is the ecology of the city. If we start at the southern end of Reforma, driving north, we pass approximately three

miles of residential neighborhoods that house some of the wealthiest people in the city. A drive through this area will transport some to Beverly Hills, where tree-lined streets are flanked by US-style mansions that stand behind tall, fortress-like gates. This residential area flows into a small corporate district, where tall skyscrapers house international finance companies, real estate firms, and law offices. Here, we find that the well-kept roads are used to transport suit-clad workers in their Mercedes Benzes and Land Rovers from one office building to another.

Passing through this corporate district leads to the gates of the Bosque de Chapultepec, one of the largest city parks in the Western hemisphere. This park is the green heart of the city, measuring approximately 1700 acres. It is home to the city zoo and some of the most visited museums in the country (el Museo de Antropología, el Castillo de Chapultepec, el Museo Nacional de Historia, Museo Tamayo, and the Museo de Arte Moderno). On any given Sunday, residents from all over the city (regardless of class or background) can be found enjoying a boat ride on the man-made lake, visiting a museum, or having a picnic with their families. Passing the Bosque de Chapultepec, Paseo de la Reforma leads into the *colonia* or neighborhood Juarez, where the wide, well-kept, boulevard is usually backed up with traffic as thousands of residents head to their office jobs in one of the city's skyscrapers and tourists take taxis or Ubers from their hotels to some of the city's historic sites. Peering out the car window on this stretch of Reforma will have us gazing at the tall towers housing international businesses and hotels that overlook this two-mile stretch of boulevard. Along this wide street, we see the occasional woman dressed in traditional indigenous clothing sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk selling her artisanal weaving or jewelry or with her children asking passersby for a few pesos in exchange for a

mazapan, a small crumbly candy made from crushed peanuts. Some days we can also find young adults and children juggling balls at red lights hoping that a generous handout from one of the passing cars will help them meet their needs for the day. But this is rare along this part of Reforma. The more common scene is that of tourists standing at the base of the famous *Ángel de la Independencia*, taking selfies to post to their Instagram and Facebook accounts. While this area is mostly known for housing businesses, embassies (the US embassy included), government offices, and international hotels, we can also find gentrified flats that today make Juarez a hotspot for Airbnb guests.

A short drive past the *Ángel de la Independencia* and it becomes clear to drivers that they are approaching a new *colonia*. The traffic worsens, the sound of honking gets louder, and the tall buildings of the Colonia Juarez turn into historic colonial architecture, old churches, and deteriorating *vecindades* (housing complexes) that date back to the end of the nineteenth century. Stopping at a red light almost guarantees that someone will come up to the window selling a newspaper or gum or offering to wash your windshield. This is the Centro Histórico, the historic city center of Mexico City, and the area that once housed the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan. Millions from around the world traverse its streets every day. It is the cultural, governmental, and tourist center of Mexico City and the country. On the streets of the Centro Histórico, we can see the true diversity of the city come to life. It is where indigenous artisans sell their wares, where European, Asian, and North American tourists take pictures of the city's colonial architecture, where young adults grab a drink at one of the many *anthros* (clubs), and where federal, state, and municipal government officials conduct their business.

The Centro Histórico of Mexico City is also where many residents make a living working in the informal sector. Entering this part of the city, we quickly note the increase in street vendors selling newspapers, clothes, candies, and loose cigarettes and the many *puestos* (market stalls) selling traditional street food. Some of these informal workers call the Centro Histórico home, but many take multiple forms of public transportation in what is for some a two-hour commute from the outskirts of the city to earn a small wage each day. And it is here in the Centro Histórico where we begin to see the number of unhoused men and women increase. Flanking the streets of Reforma in this part of the city are communities of unhoused people sleeping or squatting on sidewalks and center dividers, we can see the tarps that provide their makeshift homes, and the residents of these encampments approach passersby for money.

Exiting the Centro Histórico, we enter the first of three *colonias populares* or working-class residential neighborhoods in Mexico City, the Colonia Guerrero. Before getting too far into this residential area, Paseo de la Reforma ends at its intersection with Eje 1. This large intersection is known not only for its traffic but also for what stands in the center divider. Just seven miles from where the journey started in a neighborhood reminiscent of Beverly Hills stands a large informal housing settlement known to its residents as "*casitas"* (simply, little houses).

The settlement consists of a large house-like structure and multiple smaller structures surrounding it. The large housing structure is constructed from multiple yellow, red, and orange tarps hung with rope attached to nearby trees and streetlights. On one end, there are two large flaps that act as doors and two old, dirty, torn couches sitting out front. At any given time you can find numerous residents of this settlement cleaning windshields

in the intersection for money, waiting along nearby streets to be picked up by clients who will pay for their sexual services, or laying in front of the settlement with their hand up to their mouth and nose, consuming what is known in Mexico City as *activo*—an inhalant commonly used by individuals in street situations to get high. This settlement is home to anywhere between 50 and 70 individuals in street situations at any given time and is a well-known point of sale for drugs and prostitution.

This is one of the largest of many settlements of its type around the Delegación Cuauhtémoc,[1] the central area of Mexico City. Communities and settlements of unhoused individuals have become a common sight in cities across the world. These housing settlements in the Global South differ from their counterparts in the Global North, however. The settlements and makeshift shelters that line the streets of the Global South don't only house adults or families. These housing settlements are also home to young people who live and work on the street alone, independent of their parents or guardians. These are youth in street situations.

Youth in street situations are part of a larger global phenomenon. It has been estimated that there are more than 150 million youth living and/or working on the streets worldwide, with the majority living in cities of the Global South (Black 1993). These youth constitute a community that is distinct from their unhoused adult counterparts. Their youthfulness makes their situation unique because it impacts the way they navigate the city

[1] At the time that I was conducting fieldwork, Mexico City was split into 16 *delegaciones* or boroughs, which were second-level administrative divisions in the city. Since then, Mexico City has become an autonomous federal entity and these delegaciones have been turned into *alcaldías* or municipalities. I will continue to refer to the local-level governing districts as delegaciones because this is consistent with the Mexico City I encountered while conducting fieldwork.

to secure their right to survival. Despite their large and growing presence in these cities, we know very little about their lives. We know little about the unique reality that these communities face and their place in the human ecology of the cities they call home. Scholars examining the urban landscape of cities in the Global South have overlooked the distinctiveness and importance of these communities. Research that does focus its attention on this population tends to focus on individual characteristics or peer relationships, largely extracting them from the complexity and dynamism of the larger urban environment.

This dissertation fills this gap by examining youth in street situations as a distinct community and explores the way this community is structured by its relationships with other communities in the city. The community of these youth is part of the constant negotiation and renegotiation of urban space that constitutes the city. For us to better understand the social dynamics of cities of the Global South, we need to begin to understand the social world of youth in street situations. We need to understand how their unique social location as youth within the urban poor structures their lives and shapes the way they navigate the city as they seek to build their lives on the street. This involves an understanding of the connections and relationships that they create with other youth in street situations, with adults on the street, with the middle-class residents they interact with on a daily basis, and with the numerous government and nongovernment organizations that both police their lifestyle and offer support.

The Urban Poor in the Global South City

Urban poverty is a pervasive issue in the Global South and has been a topic of interest among scholars examining these cities from the onset of their growth. Rapid industrialization in the 1960s brought many rural migrants to cities that lacked the

employment opportunities and infrastructure to support such population growth. Many new residents found themselves without formal employment or housing and turned to informal means for survival—both an informal labor market and informal housing—creating growth in the informal economy and so-called slum housing settlements. While early scholars examining urban poverty believed that it was temporary, the result of industrialization and the rapid urbanization that it brought about, urban poverty has proven to be a lasting issue (Rakowski 1994). In 2008, for example, almost 1 billion people, or 32% of the world's urban population, lived in slums, with the majority of these living in cities of the Global South (United Nations Human Settlements Program 2008). Consequently, urban poverty and the urban poor have continued to be a topic of interest among social scientists examining these cities.

Research examining the urban poor has focused on various aspects of the lives of these residents. More than just understanding the economic and political causes of urban poverty (Portes 1989), this research has examined the social world of the urban poor and how they relate to the city around them. With the population of urban poor residents growing in these cities in the 1960s, early scholars were concerned with the different lifestyles that these residents had. They sought to understand the culture of urban poverty and the urban poor. Research during this period was focused on the values, behaviors, and norms of the population (Lewis 1959; Lewis 1966). These scholars believed that there was a "culture of poverty," meaning that the values and behaviors of these new urban poor residents led them to their situation and that the transmission of these values and behaviors within families led to the intergenerational reproduction of poverty. More recent work examining the social world of the urban poor focuses less on understanding how the culture

of this particular group causes poverty and more on the ways individuals respond to the constraints placed by the macroeconomic and political contexts in which they live.

This research has focused on the livelihoods of the urban poor or their participation in unregulated, informal work for survival. Informal or casual work refers to a broad range of activities and can include anything from retail distribution, small-scale transport, personal and security services to gambling services, recuperation (recycling), prostitution, begging, or property crime (Bromley 1988). It is estimated that nearly 60 percent of the population in many cities of the Global South participates in the informal sector (International Labour Organization 2014). While early scholars believed the informal sector to be marginal from the formal economic sector, it is now widely accepted that the informal sector is far from marginal to or independent of formal, regulated activities, and instead, these sectors are highly interdependent. The formal sector relies on cheap labor from the informal sector for survival (Birkbeck 1979; Bromley and Gerry 1979; Castells and Portes 1989; Gilbert 2004; Sassen 2006). This research examines more than just the macroeconomic context that brings about the informal sector (Sassen 2006); it also examines the way individuals working in the informal sector navigate their everyday lives.

Much research has focused on the various strategies used by individuals working in the informal sector and the type of work they engage in (street vending, bottle buying, begging, sewing, and so on) (Jellinek 1988; Bromley 1988; Ruiz-Perez 1979; Bromley and Gerry 1979), the way they maneuver the formal government institutions that challenge their right to this type of work (Crossa 2009), and even the way they make sense of their lives as individuals who make a career participating in the informal sector (Bromley 1979). This research has also examined the way the informalization of labor changes family life,

investigating the changing roles of children and women as they are forced into the labor market to help support their families (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2013; Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia 1989; Drakakis-Smith 2000). While some scholars view informal work as a means of survival, others champion the spirit of enterprise, hard work, and inventiveness of these urban poor residents, viewing this work as resistance to neoliberal macroeconomic forces that exclude these communities (Seabrook 1996; de Soto 2000; Roy 2011; Amin 2013).

Scholars examining the urban poor in these cities have also shown great interest in the housing situations of the urban poor—the slums, favelas, and shantytowns that the urban poor call home (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 2014). Early research focused on the lack of housing in these cities and the poor housing conditions that these residents faced, exploring the health implications of these situations (namely, the lack of access to running water, sanitation, education, overcrowding, and so on) (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 2014; Gilbert and Gugler 1992; Roberts 1978). Scholars have since turned their gaze to the family bonds and social networks that residents create in these communities to show not only the strength and importance of family to the daily life of these residents but also that these communities are far from marginal and are instead integrated into the daily life of the rest of the city (Perlman 1976; Perlman 2010). Moreover, the organizations that residents form within these settlements have been shown to empower the urban poor through bottom-up political activism (Bayat 2004).

The urban poor make up a substantial proportion of cities of the Global South, so it is no surprise that much scholarly attention has been placed on this population during the last 50 years. We cannot understand the social dynamics of these cities without understanding the urban poor and how they relate to other groups in the city. Excluded from previous

examinations of the urban poor, however, is an explicit examination of youth in street situations. While undoubtedly part of the urban poor, lumping youth in street situations into a category with these adults fails to consider the ways the particularities of the social location that these youth occupy shape their experiences in the city very differently from those of their adult counterparts.

The youthfulness and physical size of these individuals shape the way they navigate the city to survive. Their physical size makes them more vulnerable to robbery, rape, and trafficking than adults, but their youthfulness (both in age and appearance) also opens up various formal and informal resources that are not available to their adult counterparts. As young people, they are a protected population with rights granted to them under international conventions (primarily, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) and in many places national law. There are various state programs, international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and nonprofit organizations established to protect the rights of these youth, to provide aid, and to shelter this specific population, resources that in many places are not available to adults. Despite opening up more resources in the city, their youthfulness also constrains the way they navigate them. Their paths for recourse when their rights are violated is limited due to a lack of education of their rights and legal processes. Those youth who have not reached the age of 18 are also under the guardianship of the state and can be forced back to their homes or into group homes by authorities, which means that their autonomy is threatened in a way not faced by adults.

These youth form a distinct and growing community in cities of the Global South with its own norms, values, and ways of being. Subsuming these youth within the larger group of urban poor adults overlooks the distinct relationships that these youth build with other

communities in the city and the unique role that the community of youth in street situations plays in shaping the social landscape of these cities. To understand the social dynamics of these cities, it is necessary to understand the way youth in street situations relate to other groups in the city, the way they navigate the city's various institutions, and their role in the overall structure of the urban landscape.

Existing Research with Youth in Street Situations

Though urban sociologists examining cities in the Global South overlook these youth by considering them part of the broader category of the urban poor, these youth have not gone completely unnoticed. Youth living independently on the street, working, and consuming drugs challenge accepted Western standards of childhood—the idea that children are vulnerable and need to be continuously nurtured in order to grow into healthy adults (Glauser 2015; Aptekar 1988; Boyden 2003). This break from accepted standards in many ways increases their visibility in these cities. During the 1980s, for example, these youth were the subject of various media exposés throughout Latin America and were used as an example by many activist groups calling for a reduction in inequality (Boyden 2003). More than just media, these youth have caught the attention of various social science and social service researchers.

Existing research with this population tends to fall within three veins: (1) understanding the population and why they are on the street, (2) examining the socialization processes into street culture, and (3) uncovering the consequences of living on the street. The first vein is research that is concerned with identifying youth in street situations and understanding their reasons for being there. Much of the early research with the population falls into this category. This research asks the questions, "Who are youth in street

situations?" and "Why did they leave their homes?" (Aderinto 2000; Baker et al. 1997; Dube 2014; Kudrati et al. 2008; Veale et al. 1993). These scholars have offered thorough breakdowns of the demographic characteristics of the population by exploring gender and age, finding that the majority of youth on the street tend to be boys. They have helped to gain an understanding of family characteristics of these youth, finding that they are usually from large families, their parents tend to be divorced or deceased, and they are from families with few financial resources. These scholars have asked these youth why they left their homes, with the most commonly cited reasons being neglect, violence, and sexual abuse. This research helps to paint a picture of who these youth are.

The second vein of research is focused on understanding the socialization process of the street. Existing research within this vein examines the ways these youth begin to integrate or become socialized into street life. These scholars trace what is known as the "career" of the street child or youth in street situation (Beazley 2003; Conticini 2008; Evans 2006; Invernizzi 2003; Visano 1990; Lucchini 1996). This career describes the process that a youth experiences after leaving their home and entering the street, where their individual identity begins to shift as they first join the community of youth in street situations, become more connected to members of the community, and eventually resign to living their lives on the street. This work focuses on the peer relationships that youth create with other young people in street situations to survive and build a new identity.

The last major vein of research highlights the consequences of the behaviors and lifestyle choices that these youth make. This research examines the health and psychological consequences as well as the general risks youth in street situations run living their life on the street. This type of research tends to focus on the youths' drug consumption, their sexual

habits, the prevalence of violence on the street, and other risk factors that make youth vulnerable to contracting illness, disease, or dying on the streets (Woan et al. 2013).

This existing research tends to approach the phenomenon of youth in street situations as a social problem. As Berger (1963) explains, a social problem approach focuses on phenomena because they break from norms of the world of middle-class, respectable, publicly approved values. This research focuses on "fixing" or finding solutions to aberrant phenomena by finding ways to make them conform to norms. As he explains, divorce has been constructed as a social problem, but there is nothing inherently problematic about divorce. It is simply a social phenomenon that breaks with the norms of marriage moralists. In research focused on youth in street situations, there is an inherent fear that children left without parental supervision pose a threat to society, that they will be psychologically damaged, that they will be unable to care for themselves, and that they will begin to participate in antisocial behaviors (committing crime, doing drugs, and so on). Much existing research views these youth as breaking with normative, approved ways of life and especially Western ideas of childhood and seeks a "solution" to return to these youth to the norm (Berger 1963). In understanding the ways these youth are different from the norm, much of this research is aimed at generating strategies for intervention and prevention, or how to "reintegrate" these youth into society.

Research that takes this social problem approach to examining youth in street situations also tends to extract these youth from their larger context. The focus of this research is on understanding individual characteristics and behaviors or peer-level dynamics. This individual-level focus ignores the reality that these youth are part of a larger, distinct community that is embedded in a larger city. Research that focuses on peer

relationships largely ignores the ways these relationships or peer groups are connected to and shaped by their relationships with other communities in the city. This community of youth in street situations is not sealed off or disconnected from the rest of the city. In fact, the opposite is true. The social dynamics of the groups of youth in street situations are largely shaped by the connections they have with communities around them.

While urban sociologists examining cities in the Global South tend to overlook this population by considering them part of the larger urban poor, existing research focusing on youth in street situation tends to extract then from the city—the place where they are concentrated. As Aoki (2008) argues, the phenomenon has historically been concentrated in cities of the Global South precisely because the particularities of these cities provide the environment necessary for the emergence of the population. The increased job opportunities in street occupations (such as scavengers, carriers, cleaners, sandwich men, car watchers, errand boys, and so on), the instability in formal employment, and a lack of housing opportunities simultaneously pull and push many adults and youth alike onto the streets. It is the particular contexts of these cities that shape the lives of these youth. To fully understand the phenomenon of youth in street situations, we need an in-depth understanding of the unique community that these youth form *within* the particular context of the cities they call home. This calls for a move from research that takes a social problem approach to research that takes a sociological problem approach to the phenomenon.

Rather than starting with the assumption that there is something inherently wrong with youth in street situations and focusing on how to reintegrate these youth to society, a sociological problem approach focuses on understanding the institutions, causes, and sociological reality of the phenomenon. Using the example of divorce given above, rather

than focus on it as a problem because it is a break from the social norms of marriage, the task is to examine the institution of marriage and the social realities that lead to divorce. A sociological approach focuses on *understanding* the social reality that a phenomenon is embedded in as a social reality, not as a problem.

A sociological problem approach to understanding the phenomenon of youth in street situations means examining the interactions that these youth have with their peers and other social actors in the city, the systems they exist within, and how these systems are held together (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This involves understanding the social world of these youth. Doing this allows us to understand the norms, mores, and history of the community and illuminating the ways they are connected to the larger city. More than just an understanding of the relationships that these youth have with each other, a sociological approach facilitates an understanding of the relationships that they have with other actors in the city. This involves mapping the unique relationships this community has with communities around them and understanding the ways their relationships structure the community of youth in street situations. In doing so, we recognize that these youth form a unique community within the larger human ecology of the city.

The Ecology of the Global South City

Ecological understandings of the city stem from the early twentieth-century work of Chicago School urban sociologists, most notably Robert Park and Ernest Burgess. These scholars established what became known as the study of human ecology, a theoretical framework that borrowed from plant ecology to argue that the city is a social organism with distinct parts—individuals, communities, and institutions—that play a role in its survival. This ecological approach to urban sociology was especially popular during the period

between World War I and World War II, when studies using this theoretical framework actively sought the parallels between natural and social systems, believing that social structures could be viewed as a complex web of dynamic processes, like components of an ecosystem. They focused on "the spatial and temporal relations of human beings as affected by the selective, distributive, and accommodative forces of the environment," like any other natural ecosystem (Park et al. 1925, 63-64). These scholars presumed that there are forces at work within the limits of the urban environment that tend to bring about an orderly and typical grouping of communities and sought "to isolate these factors and to describe the typical constellations of persons and institutions which the cooperation of these forces produce" (Park 1925, 2).

There were various themes used throughout research employing this framework, one of which was the development of ecological models to describe social relations in urban space. One of the most well-known of these ecological models was first published in Park and Burgess's *The City* (1925). In *The City*, the authors lay out the concentric zone model to explain urban land use in Chicago through competition between social groups, arguing that the "invasion" and "succession" of groups create five concentric circles in physical space around the city, as follows: (1) the central business district, (2) the zone of transition, (3) the zone of independent workers' homes, (4) the zone of better residences, and (5) the commuter's zone. This early work inspired research that sought to map "natural areas" of the city to understand why certain areas attracted specific populations. These scholars examined various communities like the ghetto (Wirth 1929), the Black Belt (Drake and Cayton, 1945), hobohemia (N. Anderson 1923 and 1973), and the Gold Coast (Zorbaugh 1929) to try to understand how the relationship between various communities led to the

creation of these "natural areas." These scholars believed that these natural areas were built through a process of competition between groups and communities that structured the social systems as well as the physical space of the city.

To understand these natural areas, scholars used qualitative methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the social worlds of the various groups in the city. The human ecology framework is built around the idea that the complex web of interactions that social groups have within the city creates the mosaic that is the urban experience. To understand the city, then, these authors argued that it is important to begin with an understanding of the social world of the groups that constitute the urban area. Studies within this tradition are marked by their exceptional qualitative examinations of the social organization of social groups. One example of this is Cressey's (1932) examination of taxi dance halls, in which the author pinpointed the unique attributes of this particular social world by examining the language, norms, codes of conduct, standards, and mores that existed within that social world. Wirth's (1929) examination of an immigrant Jewish community in *The Ghetto* is another example of how scholars in this tradition traced the social group's natural history and its connections with other groups in the city to show how the interactions between various communities help shape not only the communities themselves but the larger city they form. This has continued into more recent scholarship that examines the relationships between the city's various neighborhoods. These neighborhood studies examine not only the social organization within the boundaries of a neighborhood, but as Pattillo (1999) and E. Anderson (1999) show, they also examine the way the relationships between neighborhood residents with other communities in the city shape their lives and their outcomes.

The Chicago School tradition and human ecology have been criticized for their focus on a "typical" structure of the city that reflects and is very particular to Chicago. Scholars (Dear and Dahmann 2008) argue that this model is too Chicago-specific and is not helpful in examining the social dynamics of other urban spaces. Critics of this model have also argued that it fails to consider the ways the larger macroeconomic and political context shape the city in very real ways that impact the social and physical landscape of the city. While these criticisms are valid, they overlook the real and lasting contribution of the theoretical framework that human ecology offers. As Abbott (2002, 34) argues, the heart of this theoretical framework is the idea that the city is "a mass of interwoven processes and peoples, a complex ecology of groups and spaces, continually under renegotiation." Human ecology is less about creating a generalizable topography of cities and more about thinking about cities as the sum of their parts. Understanding the city is about understanding the communities and social groups in the city and the complex interplay between them as they negotiate physical and social space in an urban context.

In the twenty-first century, cities are linked through international economic and political networks that play a role in shaping their physical and social space (Sassen 2006). An ecological approach to the city must also take these extra-urban players into consideration when examining the factors that shape the larger context in which city communities are embedded. A twenty-first–century examination of the city, then, must consider the connections between groups as they constantly negotiate the physical and social spaces in the city while also considering transnational connections. This allows for the consideration of the impact of actors outside the physical bounds of the city and the way they

shape the larger macroeconomic and political context in which micronegotiations between social actors in the city are taking place.

To place youth in street situations within the ecology of the city, we need to begin by examining the social world of these youth in much the same way classic Chicago School sociologists working in the tradition of human ecology did. This involves understanding individuals as nested within social groups and examining the way the connections within and between social groups and/or communities structure these groups and ultimately work to structure the city. Where most previous examinations of social worlds are bounded to particular neighborhoods, the social world of youth in street situations is not bounded to a particular place. Their social world exists with the youth as they traverse the city, as they move from one housing settlement to another, as they interact with other residents going about their daily lives, and as they move from organization to organization seeking the best option of aid for their particular needs. An understanding of their social world also involves exploring the community these youth form and their relationships with other actors, communities, and organizations throughout the city while considering the way the larger macroeconomic and political context impacts these relationships.

The Social World of Youth in Street Situations

As previously mentioned, youth in street situations form a unique community in the city that is distinct from that of their adult counterparts in the urban poor. Their youthfulness means that they have more entitlements and resources available to them, but it also makes them more vulnerable to violations of their rights. Understanding the social world of this community is about understanding the way their youthfulness shapes their experiences, but it is also about exploring the values, natural history, norms, and codes of conduct of the

group. When youth enter the street, they seek things that are different from their adult counterparts, and they navigate relationships on the street in unique ways as a result of their unique characteristics and life histories.

When youth enter the street, they seek to create what one of my informants referred to as a "fantasy." When Cristobal, a 17-year-old boy, was offered a chance to go back to a rehabilitation clinic he had just "escaped" from, he declined the offer. The boy very clearly stated, "*quiero vivir en mi fantasía*" ("I want to live in my fantasy"). He was referring to living on the street with other youth in street situations. Cristobal was alluding to a world where he could not only attain the things necessary for survival (food, clothes, shelter), but where he felt loved, where he felt companionship, where he felt that people cared for him, and where he felt a sense of belonging. Youth build relationships with their peers, the adult urban poor, middle-class residents, and numerous institutions in the city to make their fantasy worlds come to life, but these relationships are shaped by the realities that these youth have experienced in their young lives.

Before entering the street, many youth in street situations experience abuse, others abandonment, and/or neglect by their families of origin. Many more youth experience trauma while on the street from abusive partners, friends, and/or strangers. This trauma can have a serious impact on the youths' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional regulation (De Bellis and Zisk 2014). These experiences can make them more likely to struggle with building healthy relationships, with expressing their emotions, with depression and anxiety, and with anger (Springer et al. 2007; Cashel et al. 2000). This shapes the form and meanings of the relationships that youth in street situations have on the street in very particular ways as they seek closeness and love but struggle with trusting others and expressing their emotions.

This past trauma can also make many youth feel as though their lives are out of control (Springer et al. 2007; Moore et al. 2013). To combat this feeling, it becomes important for them to maintain autonomy in their relationships. When asked what they liked or valued about living on the street, the majority of my informants responded, *"libertad"* (freedom), "*libertinaje*," referring to an excessive or hedonistic freedom with disregard for rules or social conventions, or they would say, *"puedo hacer lo que quiero,*" explaining that they liked that they could do whatever they wanted. Feeling a sense of freedom helps these youth feel like they are in control of their lives. They navigate relationships on the street, trying to feel close to others, wanting love and companionship while struggling to maintain their autonomy in these relationships.

The relationships that youth create structure their social world, but these relationships are complex. They are impacted by the youths' unique characteristics (especially their youthfulness), their life histories, the particularities of the other communities they come into contact with, and the larger social, economic, and political landscape. This dissertation explores the social world of youth in street situations by exploring the form and meanings of the complex relationships that they build with their peers, urban poor adults, the middle class, and the various organizations in the city as they work to build their fantasies. Moreover, it explores the various ways these relationships are impacted by the larger context that these youth call home. The rest of this chapter will outline how I went about doing this. The next sections highlight the design of the project, the methods used to gather an in-depth understanding of the social world of these youth, and the chapters to follow.

Methods and Design

> Walking up to the *Monumento a la Revolución* you can see the grand arch of the landmark commemorating the Mexican Revolution. Today, like most days, there are groups of tourists holding up their cameras taking photos of the impressive monument and men in suits walking through the arch with briefcases, presumably headed to their office jobs. There's a group of about fifty school-aged girls in uniform who look to be on a field trip. Policemen in full uniform stand in rows with large guns around the perimeter of the monument; they must be performing some sort of exercise. If you look down instead of up, focusing at the base of the monument, below the ground level, you can see that next to the wall of the monument there are a group of youth, there's a settlement covered in flattened cardboard boxes, thick blankets, and a tarp for protection from the rain. There looks to be about fourteen youth—eleven boys and three girls sitting and laying on the benches and the floor. As I near this youth settlement, walking down the stairs, the odor of sweat, urine, solvent, and feces becomes more pungent. Juan Jose comes over, he offers me his hand to do the ritual handshake of the *banda* or group which includes slapping hands and going into a fist bump. He says good morning. His hair is matted, his face and arms are covered in dirt, he's wearing a torn T-shirt that reveals part of his bony torso, and jeans that are torn at the knees and crotch. The rest of the youth continue what they're doing, most holding solvent-soaked gauze up to their noses, holding up two fingers in a peace sign to greet me. I ask Juan Jose if they want to play a pick-up game of soccer. He turns to the rest of the group and four of the boys agree. We walk over to start setting up the field. Juan Jose and Juan Carlos stop abruptly. I continue setting up the goals and I watch them looking up to the ground level of the street while talking, they're both looking at a man who is staring at the youth encampment. This man is in a white button-down shirt and slacks. He looks like a businessman. Juan Jose comes over to tell me that he can't play, but that Sergio will take his place. He calls Sergio over, Sergio quickly jogs over from where he was sitting. They talk for a few seconds, Sergio shakes his head, Juan Jose whispers something in his ear, Sergio looks up to the man at ground level, they shake hands as in some sort of agreement, and Juan Jose walks up the stairs to where the man is. Juan Jose says a few words to him and the youth walks off with the man. (Fieldnote excerpt, September 2017)

The scene in the above fieldnote took place early on in my fieldwork period. I remember questioning who that man on the ground level was, why Juan Jose went with him, and why he so easily convinced Sergio to fill in for him on the football pitch despite the boy's initial

reluctance to play. These youth have their own rules, they have their own language, and the relationships they form carry very particular meanings. When I first arrived in Mexico City to conduct preliminary fieldwork in July 2016, there was no denying that I was an outsider. I would find myself in situations like the one in the above excerpt without fully understanding why things around me were taking place. Despite speaking Spanish and understanding the words these youth were using, I didn't understand the meaning of their slang, I didn't understand their body language, and I didn't understand the motivations of their actions. Understanding these nuances is necessary to understanding their social world. The only way to gain this sort of insight is through immersion. As such, I employed ethnographic methods to uncover the realities of their social world.

Methods

Action is intersubjectively constructed and experienced, guided by rules, norms, and mandates that are partially embedded in social structures and that are negotiated in everyday life (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Tavory and Timmermans 2009). Interviews help us understand the discursive dimension or narrative of social interaction but don't allow for an understanding of the nondiscursive or the unexplicated, which underlies these interactions. Most existing research with youth in street situations uses surveys or structured interviews. These give us insight into the discursive narrative of youth's actions and interactions, but these methods don't allow for an understanding of the nondiscursive elements that underlie their interactions. To understand these nondiscursive components as well as the way they are negotiated and reconstructed within the worlds of these youth, a deeper analysis is needed to complement these interviews. Ethnographic methods, like participant observation in which the researcher accompanies the informants in their

everyday lives, offers the in-depth understanding that allows for the examination not only of the experiences of these youth in the city but also of these nondiscursive components shaping their social worlds—the shared ideational systems (beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, values, and mental dispositions), preferred behaviors and norms, and the significance of social relationships (Whitehead 2005).

This project is based on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork with youth in street situations in Mexico City. I first arrived in Mexico City in July 2016 to conduct one month of preliminary fieldwork. During this period I made connections with organizations and youth in the city, and it was at this point that it became clear to me that this is a unique urban community that is embedded within the larger ecology of the city—something that previous research had failed to convey.

I went back to Mexico City and conducted the long-term fieldwork for this project between August 2017 and November 2018. During this time, I conducted participant observation as well as informal and formal in-depth interviews with youth in street situations and the social service providers or aid workers at youth-serving organizations in the city. On a normal day I would go into the living settlements of the youth and accompany them as they went about their daily activities. Sometimes this meant going with them as they earned money. I would stand at busy intersections waiting for green lights that offered the opportunity to talk to the youth while they washed windshields at red lights. At other times it meant joining in their recreational activities, such as soccer pick-up games and in the customary *chesco* or refreshment circle afterward or being dealt into their UNO games. Many times this meant accompanying them on more formal matters, such as going to doctor appointments or appointments with government offices and NGOs. Most of the time,

however, it just meant sitting around while the youth relaxed with their peers and talked about their lives. Spending time with these youth in their spaces as they went about their daily lives allowed me to see first hand the social world of the 144 youth informants that I met throughout my time in Mexico City. This led to countless hours of informal interviews and ethnographic conversations with the youth as they talked about their past (experiences with their families, their time in school, their friends, how they got to the street), their present lives on the street (their relationships with their peers and sexual partners, their drug consumption, their livelihoods), and their future aspirations and plans for leaving the street.

This type of participant observation gave me the opportunity to understand the ways youth in street situations make sense of their lives, their norms, their beliefs, and the ways they interact with their peers. More than that, accompanying them in their everyday lives beyond their settlement spaces and groups, engaging in what Duneier and Carter (1999) refer to as "extended place ethnography," allowed me to see the connections that these youth have with the larger city. It gave me insight into the ways they are connected to police, to passersby, to government institutions, and to NGO workers and institutions as well as the roles that these larger city actors play in structuring the lives of these youth.

A normal day in the field started at 8:30 a.m. and would usually end between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m., although the days could go well into the late afternoon or night depending on the situation that arose. On one occasion, I was in the field as late as 9 p.m. Giovanni, a 22-year-old informant, woke up one morning having decided that he was ready to enter a rehabilitation clinic for his drug addiction. I accompanied him and an aid worker as he

jumped through the hoops of various government and civil society institutions until finally getting settled into his rehabilitation clinic that night.

While conducting fieldwork, it was important to ensure that the youth didn't feel as though they were being studied. I wanted them to go about their daily lives as they normally would, and I didn't want to further stigmatize them by having them feel as though they were something to be studied under a microscope. To avoid this, I discreetly jotted myself quick notes on pieces of paper or typed them into my phone pretending to be sending a Whatsapp message while in the field. This allowed me to remember key details of conversations and interactions that I was witnessing without distracting from the normal flow of the youths' lives. I would go back to these notes later in the evenings at home to write fieldnotes of the day's happenings.

During the fieldwork period I also conducted in-depth formal interviews with 37 of my main informants. The bulk of these interviews were conducted in a space away from the youths' settlements to further protect the identity of the youth. Most of these interviews were conducted in the office of a trusted service-providing organization while others were conducted in the metro or while walking around the city. I used these formal interviews to dig deeper into the experiences of their past, the relationships they had with their families, the social group, and other actors in the city (police, government and nongovernment institutions, and so on). Formal interviews also allowed me to understand the true complexity of the situation that these youth lived in and allowed me to dig further into how these youth made sense of all aspects of their lives, including how they viewed the experiences of their past as being connected to their current situations.

While I had strong rapport with the youth after being in the field a few months, I waited until the halfway point in my fieldwork period to conduct these formal, in-depth interviews. Two issues led me to wait: first, the culture of these youth and, second, trust. These youth are embedded in a very particular social milieu, they employ a very distinct language, and they are used to utilizing scripted narratives that they learn from one another to engage an audience while keeping these strangers at arm's length (to be discussed further in chapter 3). I needed to ensure that I was able to understand the nuances of the language they were using and the topics they were referencing, and I needed to be able to recognize when I was being given a scripted response before I could comfortably say that these interviews were giving me insights into their lives. Furthermore, because of the sensitive nature of the topics I would be discussing, touching on very emotional experiences that were also sensitive from a legal perspective, given that much of the youth's lives lie in a gray area between the legal and the not-so-legal, I wanted to ensure that the youth trusted me enough to open up and confide in me with an audio-recorder between us. This strategy proved to be effective. Having a foundation of knowledge about the lives of these youth and building trust allowed me to probe the conversation in more productive directions and allowed me to recognize and push back on the youth if they began to give scripted responses. With the exception of one youth, those who agreed to participate in formal recorded interviews were all open and explicit about their participation in activities that lie in the gray area between the legal and the not-so-legal. The youth who was less open was turned off by the audio-recorder but had been willing to frankly discuss their life with me in informal conversations.

In addition to participant observation and interviews with youth in street situations, I also conducted participant observation with an NGO that works with socially abandoned

youth in Mexico City. This involved accompanying outreach workers on their daily runs around the city. I accompanied them as they went to various points of congregation to educate the youth, did therapeutic work in the street, gave workshops to teach the youth about the harmful nature of drugs, and invited youth to the day center so that they could reduce their drug consumption, eat (something that usually gets skipped when a youth is consuming drugs), shower, and participate in activities. I conducted formal and informal interviews with four outreach workers, the program director, and the organization's national director to gain a sense of the organization's work, their personal relationships with these youth, their perception of the phenomenon of youth in street situations, and the relationship between the institution and the youth.

Gaining Access

Gaining access to these youth is complicated given that their vulnerability and the trauma that they have experienced in their past makes them understandably wary of accepting strangers. As I spent more time on the street with the youth and heard more of their stories, the vulnerability of this population became increasingly apparent. Just in my time in the field, numerous events occurred that brought their vulnerability to life. For example, two children, a seven-year-old boy and his five-year-old sister, who formed part of the larger group at one of the settlements went missing. These children were taken off the street by a woman they believed they could trust. One of my own informants, a 17-year-old boy named Judah, was taken and held against his will in February 2018. Not all threats to these youth are threats of bodily harm, either. They also come from people trying to extract information from the youth for their own benefit with little concern for the privacy and well-being of the youth.

The lack of concern and respect for the privacy of these youth became evident when I accompanied a reporter into the field. He was conducting research for a news story examining the labor exploitation of young children on the street. The organization that facilitated my access to the community agreed to help this reporter by showing him where the youth lived on the condition that he not record any of the interactions he had with the youth that day. He agreed. As we went out and began approaching and talking to youth around the city, it became clear that something was strange. The reporter kept positioning himself in very particular ways when we would strike up conversations with the youth. At one point, a very sharp and always suspicious youth turned his back to us completely and started yelling at the man. It wasn't until then that the outreach worker and I realized that this reporter, who was carrying a messenger bag, had a hidden camera and was surreptitiously taping the outing and all of the interactions we had with the youth.

These types of interactions with outsiders are a common occurrence in the lives of these youth. This, in addition to the lack of trust they feel as a result of past experiences with abuse and abandonment, make them less willing to open up and trust strangers. This makes it difficult for researchers to gain access to the population. When first arriving in Mexico City for preliminary fieldwork I decided that I would have to find an organization that worked with the population to facilitate my entry into their world. The green light from an organization with an existing presence on the street would help me gain the youth's trust. This would also give me a first-hand look at the interactions between youth in street situations and the organizations that work to get them off the street. Finally, it would allow me the opportunity to reciprocate with these youth in some way. Given the situation that these youth live in, monetary incentives did not feel like a viable option. Many of the

strategies that the youth employ for earning money involve some type of performance—this is vital to their survival on the street. I was not looking for a narrative or a performance, however. I wanted insights into their lives. By connecting with an organization, I could offer

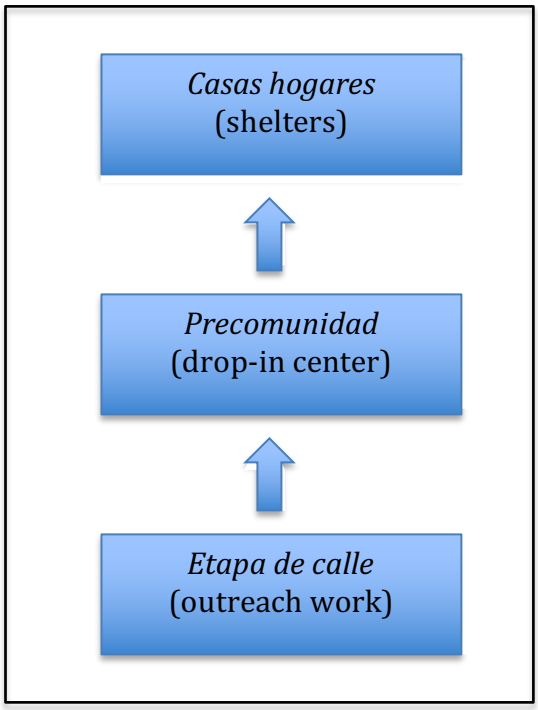

Figure 1. Casa Alianza organizational model

these youth connections to services that they may need without being coercive and without the youth feeling like they needed to perform for me. In deciding which organization to approach, I chose one of the oldest and most established organizations in the city that works with the population—Casa Alianza.

Casa Alianza

Casa Alianza was founded in 1988 and is part of a larger international organization called Covenant House, based in New York City. When the organization was initially founded it focused its attention on providing services (showers, food, clothing, and so on) and housing children and youth who lived in the street. Today, Casa Alianza works with a broader profile of youth, namely, "children and adolescents from 12 to 18 years of age that live in a situation

of social abandonment, where their basic needs were neglected or violated, that have suffered mistreatment, violence, trafficking, sexual and labor exploitation, unaccompanied migrants, and youth who have for some reason had to survive on the streets" ("Quienes Somos" 2020). The organization's goal is to give youth a safe place to live, give them the opportunity to attend school, and care for their medical, dental, and psychological needs as they grow and achieve their life goals.

More than just their reputation, however, I chose this organization because they are one of the few organizations in the city that has a complete model of care (Figure 1). They have an outreach team of street educators that goes into the street where the youth live and works with them in their environment. This outreach team does therapeutic work with the youth in the street, sex and drug education, and connects youth to the resources they need throughout the city. These youth are then invited to the *precomunidad* (precommunity), which is the second level of care that Casa Alianza provides. This is a drop-in center where the youth can stay from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Youth come to the drop-in center to receive services (shower, clothes, food, and so on) and participate in therapeutic activities with staff and peers. The only requirements for entering the precommunity is that youth not consume drugs during their time at the center and that they show an interest in going to rehabilitation for their drug addictions and getting off the street. Once a youth has shown a commitment to their "process" (to abstaining from drug use and getting off the street), they are eligible to enter a drug rehabilitation program through another organization or Casa Alianza's own residential program. At the time of my fieldwork, Casa Alianza had five homes for youth—

two for boys and three for girls.[2] They had capacity to house a total of 120 youth. The goal of the residential program is to reintegrate these youth into society. Aside from shelter and food, the residential program offers youth the opportunity to enroll in school or a vocational course, assists them as they look for jobs, and provides the opportunity for the youth to learn life skills that can help them successfully transition to adulthood.

Connecting with Casa Alianza allowed me to conduct "extended place ethnography." I was able to gain insight into the way youth interacted with the various spheres that make up their world. More than just getting to know them as part of the larger social group of adults and youth in street situations, I got a first-hand view of their interactions with civil society actors who offered services to the youth in the street and their experiences in the day center when they are removed from their normal context and interacting with youth from other parts of the city, interacting with the state while accompanying youth to meetings (namely, *Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia* [DIF, child protective services], the Institute for the Attention and Prevention of Addictions [IAPA], and Coruña, the government-run shelter for youth), embarking on the frightening process of drug rehabilitation, and entering and living in a group home.

When first arriving to the street, members of the outreach team introduced me to the youth and adults in the encampments as a researcher from the United States volunteering with the organization. I explained to everyone that my goal was to gain an understanding of the life experiences of youth living on the street and the issues they face in their daily lives.

[2] The organization was in the process of building a large central home that would house all of the youth on the outskirts of Mexico City. The project was originally scheduled to open in December 2017 but has been delayed three years due to complications with the construction.

Most youth were open to my presence, although some would turn their backs while speaking to the outreach worker because they didn't feel comfortable letting a stranger into their personal lives. Many of the youth were curious about the United States and asked me questions about me and my life or wanted me to teach them a few words of English (usually phrases that they could use to panhandle with English-speaking tourists), but it was clear they weren't comfortable talking to me about themselves or broaching any personal subjects. Contrary to what I had hoped, the thumbs-up from the organization was not enough for the youth to accept me into their world.

Building trust was a longer process, and the key to this process was playing soccer with the youth. These youth love soccer. It's what they do to fill their time. They play soccer when they take breaks from working, when they want to let off steam, or when they're just bored. Many youth play multiple times a week. I was able to participate in their pick-up games because I played soccer growing up. At first they were hesitant to let me play, worried that I would cost them bragging rights or that they would hurt me, but I quickly gained their respect as a young woman who played soccer just as well as any of them.

> We were talking to Juan Carlos, Juan Jose, Yesenia, Jose, Giovanni, and Jesus. The educator Carlos asked them if they wanted to play soccer. He said that he had brought a professional footballer from the US, motioning toward me. He said this as a joke, but the youth looked over to me, "neta? [really?] Noooo." And Carlos continued with the joke, "Yes, neta." Carlos didn't know that I actually do know how to play soccer. The boys from the point say that they don't believe him, but that they're up for a game. Carlos explains the rules, "you guys know the rules. No consuming while we play." The boys choose teams, and nobody wants me on their team. I'm the last picked. Juan Jose, my new teammate, says "don't worry, they'll be careful not to hurt you." I respond, "I may be small, but I'm a lot tougher than I look." I can feel how nervous I am in my stomach. Part of me wants to say that I would rather not play. I want them to accept me as a player. I want to play well, but I know that my lack of fitness is going to be exaggerated at this altitude. And more than anything, I want to make sure I don't hurt anybody. I know they all play regularly, but I'm afraid

> to knock into one of their frail bodies and injure someone. We start playing. I start off in midfield. Nobody is passing me the ball. I'm annoyed, but I understand how this works. It's not my first time joining a pick-up game with boys or men that aren't used to playing with girls or women on the field. I need to make my own opportunities and show them that I can play. I intercept a pass between two players on the other team. I can hear the murmurs, "ohhhhhh," from the youth. I take the ball down the sideline and dribble around one of the boys on the opposing team; again I can hear the boys, "ohhhh she does know how to play." I cross the ball to Jose who's standing in front of the goal. He shoots and scores. The boys all come over to give me a high-five, acknowledge that I play well, and some begin to ask me if it's true that I'm a professional soccer player in the US. I tell them no, just a researcher that's played football since she was young. After this play, there's a noticeable change. The youth look to pass me the ball when they're on my side. They begin to listen to my directions on the field. It's like a switch flipped. (Fieldnote excerpt, September 2017)

I eventually became known around the groups as *"la güera que juega fútbol"* or "the white girl (in reference to my lighter complexion) who plays soccer," even among youth and adults in the settlement that I had not played with. As the youth trusted me more on the field, they began to trust me more with their life stories and with accompanying them in their daily activities. Eventually, they would come up to me whenever they saw me and would just begin talking about their lives and all of the things they were going through.

On being an outsider

When I arrived in Mexico City to conduct fieldwork it quickly became evident that I was an outsider. When I would begin to speak to a youth or to NGO personnel, I noticed that they would get a puzzled look on their face and ask me, "Where are you from?" I speak Spanish, and I blend in physically given that both of my parents are from Mexico, but it was obvious that I was not from there. I was born and raised in the United States and had just arrived from living a year in Spain, which had a serious impact on my accent. At the beginning of the fieldwork period I was concerned that this would be an issue. I was worried that being

an outsider would negatively affect my ability to form a connection with the youth and conduct research. In the end, rather than being an issue, I believe it helped me gain a better understanding of the lives of these youth.

The youth live in a very distinct world. They have a very distinct slang, very different norms, and their experiences in the city are different from their middle-class counterparts. It quickly became clear to me that most everyone is an outsider to the social world of youth in street situations—even people who were born and raised in Mexico City. I would observe the initial interactions that new volunteers and employees with Casa Alianza had with the youth, and they were just as lost as I was upon arriving to the field. They didn't understand the slang or the norms of the social milieu of the street either. In fact, not being from Mexico helped to ensure that I didn't take anything for granted—I didn't just assume that the cultural meanings of actions and words used by these youth were in line with my own.

Furthermore, once anyone realized that I was not from Mexico, they began to go out of their way to ensure that I understood everything about the culture and life in Mexico and Mexico City. For aid workers, this meant explaining all aspects of the culture and history of civil society organizations in the city as well as explaining the phenomenon of youth in street situations. For youth, this meant ensuring that I understood what was going on as it was happening, explaining to me the meaning of their slang (even telling a joke and repeating it in nonslang Spanish to ensure that I would find it funny), explaining some of their actions, and explaining their understanding of their situation and the city at large. These explanations helped me better grasp the social world of the youth and through them the perspectives of the individuals that I interacted with.

Chapter Breakdown

In the following chapters, I will explore the social world of youth in street situations in Mexico City by examining the relationships that youth create with their peers, with adults on the street, with middle class residents, and with government and nongovernmental organizations as they seek to create their fantasies. I will show how these relationships are shaped by the particularities of the youth and their past experiences with trauma, their entitlements as rights-bearers in the city, and by the particularities of the larger social, political, and economic context of Mexico City. These relationships take on very particular forms and meanings given the needs of the youth and the context.

The community of youth in street situations is intricately tied to the city around them. The phenomenon of youth in street situations is tied to the larger macroeconomic, political, and social context of the city they call home. This context shapes the relationships that youth build with other communities in the city. To understand the social world of this community, it is important to understand the context in which these relationships are being constructed. In the next chapter I will give a brief historical and cultural background of Mexico and Mexico City to illuminate the social, economic, and political context in which these youth live. I will then introduce youth in street situations in Mexico City—my informants—and give a brief background of who they are and where in the city they live.

Chapter 2 offers an examination of the community that these youth form on the street. This chapter shows the ways the vulnerability of these youth and their need for protection and love influences the relationships they seek with their peers and with the adult urban poor. Specifically, the age of these youth, their physical size, and their visibility make them particularly vulnerable to the dangers of the street. These youth are at risk of being robbed,

raped, pushed out of public space by police, trafficked (a growing phenomenon throughout the city), and even killed. They are acutely aware of the dangers they face, many having had a negative experience or a close call with at least one of the aforementioned dangers. They seek protection by joining already existing groups but are particularly drawn to groups formed around the sale of drugs that are headed by women. These women become maternal figures that offer youth protection while showing them the parental love that many of them seek. These mother figures welcome these youth, taking responsibility for their safety because they want to help them but also because they use them for profit as customers and assistants in the drug trade. While the youth stay close to these groups for the protection they offer and for a place to feel cared for, their fear of the dangers of the street, their lack of trust of adults, and their need to maintain autonomy and a positive sense of self keep them from fully integrating.

Youth claim to live not with these groups, but alongside them, as they create loose satellite groups of various dyads and triads. These smaller groups allow the youth to create the families that they never had. They adopt street siblings and constantly seek out relationships with "husbands" and "wives" that, while fleeting, offer them a sense of comfort, love, companionship, and belonging. Youth enjoy the emotional benefits of these relationships but push back against them when they feel that they exert control over their lives.

Chapter 3 explores the relationships between youth and the city's middle-class residents. These youth's lives are lived in public, open to the constant scrutiny of the middle class. While they struggle with the negative emotional consequences of discrimination that stems from the stigma associated with their position as youth in street situations—the

stigma of being perceived as criminals or as the cause for their situation—these youth are not passive receptors of this discrimination. They resist the stigma of their position by strategically emphasizing their identity as youth. They understand that the dominant social construction of the child and childhood is one of innocence and dependence on the family. By emphasizing their youthfulness, they are interpreted not as criminals, but as helpless victims. This helps them combat the negative sense of self from the stigma of the *street* label, but it also helps the youth navigate their individual interactions with middle-class passersby to elicit sympathy rather than hate.

The relationships with middle-class residents is more than one of stigma. These relationships are key for youth's survival on the street. Like 60 percent of the population in Mexico City, these youth make money working in the informal sector. In these jobs, they rely on the direct aid of middle-class passersby. They understand that the key to earning money is to distance themselves from the stigma of their *street* identity and to elicit sympathy from the middle-class passerby. They do this by performing their youthfulness and their misery: by emphasizing their emaciated bodies, how dirty they are, their youthful appearance, and their "honesty" in their discourse with passersby and by participating in work that involves performative danger—like eating fire or rolling their bodies on shards of broken glass. By maximizing the sympathy they elicit from the middle-class passerby, they increase the aid they earn from them.

In the last data chapter, I explore the youth's relationship with state and nonstate institutions and their employees. It is easy to assume that these youth are abandoned by the state and civil society and have few institutional resources at their disposable, but the reality is much more complicated. As youth under the age of 18, they are under the responsibility of

DIF, the organization tasked with their well-being. Moreover, these youth have become a high-priority population in the city. The city's focus on protecting the rights of vulnerable populations, and particularly youth rights, has led to an increase in resources available to these youth and expanded the work of government institutions in the city. Like other cities across Latin America, Mexico City has a large civil society sector that has traditionally filled the gap in social welfare programs left by a dearth in public expenditures. This means that there is a large civil society network of nonprofit and charity organizations that offer these youth services—organizations with outreach workers that work with youth in the street, operate day centers and soup kitchens, and have residential programs to offer these youth housing across the city. While their age is the reason they have access to so many resources, their age also means that they can be forced to go back to their homes or into a group home for youth by DIF. The fear of losing autonomy and being forced off the street shapes the way these youth interact with the larger web of institutions in the city.

This chapter shows how these youth strategically use the multiple resources available to them in ways that maximize their benefits but avoid systems of care within the web of institutions where they may lose autonomy. To gain access to these resources, youth learn the missions of each organization, the services offered, and even the discourse needed to be a client. They employ what Carr (2010) refers to as flipping the script; they use their knowledge of the organization to portray themselves as a committed client, despite never intending to make the commitments or the life changes that the organizations seek in the youth. In the process of learning these missions and interacting with these various organizations, youth learn more about what it is to be a youth in street situations and begin to build a narrative to help them understand their own trauma.

Balancing resources and autonomy becomes complicated as these workers offer the youth important emotional and instrumental support that draws youth into organizational spaces. These organization employees care for these youth and genuinely want to help them. Youth are willing to cede some of their autonomy to gain access to the support offered by the employees of these organizations.

The conclusion explores the implications of placing youth in street situations within the larger ecology of cities in the Global South. Specifically, the way a sociological approach that places these youth within the human ecology of these cities offers an understanding of the distinct urban experience of these youth, gives an in-depth understanding of their communities, and allows for an understanding of the way this community plays a role in shaping the larger urban context. As the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic threatens to worsen many of the factors that push and pull youth to the street in the Global South, it can be expected that this population will continue to grow. An understanding of the community of these youth within the context of the city is necessary not only for an understanding of the social dynamics of these cities, but for an urban sociology of the twenty-first century. Although not specifically focused on creating solutions to get these youth off the street, a sociological approach also helps service providers be more effective when working with these youth. The second half of this conclusion offers interventions to better support these youth in cities in Mexico City and around the Global South.

Chapter 1
Youth in the City: Background and Context

To understand the social world of youth in street situations in Mexico City, it is crucial to understand the context in which these youth live—the political, economic, social, and cultural landscape of Mexico City. This context not only pushes and pulls many youth to the streets, as mentioned in the previous chapter, but also shapes their life when they get there. The context of the city shapes their needs, their entitlements, their general interactions with other actors and communities in the city, and the meanings of these interactions. As Geertz (1973) explains in *The Interpretation of Cultures,* without an understanding of the cultural codes of the context, it is difficult to understand the meaning of action. An eye twitch and a wink, for example, are indistinguishable—both being a contraction of the eye—unless we understand the cultural context in which the eye contraction is taking place. As Geertz (1973, 6) writes, "contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which doing so counts as a conspiratorial signal is winking," but an understanding of this cultural code is necessary to understand the difference between a twitch and a wink. The same is true of the actions and relationships that make up the social world of these youth. Without an understanding of the social, cultural, economic, and political context in which these youth live, it is difficult to understand the significance of their actions and the meanings of the relationships they build.

In this chapter, I will give the context of Mexico City to set the backdrop for the social world of youth in street situations that call the city home. I will begin by offering a brief history of Mexico, highlighting the numerous social, political, and economic changes that have occurred since World War II and showing how these changes have impacted the lives

of Mexico City's urban poor residents. I will then explore the Mexico City that these youth interact with, a city that both protects them as a vulnerable population and punishes them as a nuisance. I will finish by introducing my informants, giving a brief description of who they are, how they arrived to the street, and the settlements in the city that they call home.

History of Mexico: Politics, Economy, and Society After World War II

Mexico has undergone numerous changes over the last eighty years that have shaped the social, economic, and political landscape of the country today. In the post–World War II period, Mexico's social revolution of the 1920s and 1930s took a backseat to the country's new industrial revolution. World War II's global shortages of goods meant less global goods were available for import, spurring industry and production within the country. This continued past the end of the war when, like many Latin American countries between the 1940s and 1970s, Mexico undertook policies of import substitution industrialization to ensure further economic growth. These policies involved promoting domestic products over imported goods from abroad by placing high tariffs on imports and enacting direct subsidies, tax incentives, and infrastructure development to spur manufacturing within the country (especially clothing, small appliances, and canned goods). This economic strategy also involved the nationalization of various industries, such as oil, energy, and telecommunications.

Import substitution industrialization was moderately successful. Mexico saw three decades of unprecedented economic growth, which came to be known as the era of the Mexican Miracle. This period was characterized by rapid industrialization, economic growth, and urban expansion. Unfortunately, this economic model was unsustainable. Import substitution industrialization was expensive, and the production of goods was financed

through international loans that Mexico was paying off with oil revenue. When oil prices began to fall in the 1980s, the government was unable to make payments on its loans and was forced to default.

Mexico's 1982 default rang in what became known as the *Decada Perdida* or the lost decade. Mexico turned to the United States and the International Monetary Fund for help, but the economic shock was hard hitting. The terms of the loans led to the implementation of a series of austerity programs in an attempt to stabilize the economy. The government imposed stringent controls on wage increases (which lagged severely behind the rate of inflation), reduced or eliminated many subsidies and price supports, and closed or privatized hundreds of money-losing public enterprises. There were 1,155 state-owned firms, public trusts, and decentralized agencies at the beginning of the de la Madrid administration in 1982, but there were just 412 by its end in 1988 (Haber 2008; Hanson 2010). In terms of US dollars, wages in Mexico's manufacturing sector collapsed during the 1980s, falling from $2.52 per hour in 1981 to $0.57 per hour in 1986. As Haber (2008, 65) notes, "the government [was] simultaneously trying to fight an inflation rate that sometimes exceeded 100 percent, growing unemployment, and the national private sector's fundamental lack of confidence in the PRI [Institutional Revolutionary Party]." The economic stabilization strategies of the 1980s included free-market reforms to attract foreign investment, which eventually culminated in Mexico's 1992 signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). NAFTA offered more protections for foreign investments, allowing foreign ownership of companies, and guaranteed international oversight to protect businesses, spurring international investment.

While the post–World War II era growth was characterized by a nationalist vision, the period from the 1980s to the present has been characterized by free-market, liberal economic policies focused on the privatization of publicly owned enterprises and the prioritization of foreign investment. This move can be understood as the adoption of a larger neoliberal package of values that, as Levitt and Merry (2009, 447) note, "promotes democracy, capitalism, human rights, the rule of law, transparency, [and] accountability." This move has led to a great shift in the political and social life of Mexico as well. The 1990s, for example, saw the decentralization of the federal government and the end of seventy years of PRI rule with the 2000 election of conservative National Action Party (PAN) candidate Vicente Fox, representing a move away from oligarchic rule by a party known to engage in political repression and clientelism. Today, the Mexican Congress is independent, the Supreme Court is autonomous, and federalism has become a reality. When leaders behave "undemocratically" or turn corrupt and locally unaccountable, they now run the risk of being exposed by a free press or by their political adversaries, important political checks on power that didn't exist for most of the twentieth century.

The shift to the neoliberal state has also seen the overall "thinning" of the state, where "the operations of government have increasingly been transferred to nonstate entities" (Humphrey and Valverde 2008, 87). In this process, many state activities are "organized as enterprises and state social and regulatory activities are being 'de-statized' and taken over by semi-autonomous or non-governmental organizations (NGOs)" (ibid., 87). This has meant a shrinking of the social safety net and an overall increase in inequality. Low taxes that attract multinational companies and foreign investors and the adoption of policies that have favored private-sector industries have led to little revenue for human capital investment. This has

led to low government expenditures in social programming like education, social welfare programming, and health care and has exacerbated inequality. Today Mexico is one of the most unequal countries in the world. In fact, in 2019 Mexico's Gini coefficient of 45 made it the most unequal of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries (World Bank 2019).

Contemporary Mexico City in Context

These changes at the national level have had a great impact on the nation as a whole but have had a particularly strong impact on the economic, political, and social landscape of Mexico City. Import substitution industrialization's success in the post–World War II years led to the rapid urbanization of Mexico City. It quickly became a primate city, by far the most populous and the most economically important city in the country (Portes and Roberts 2005). It was the hub of manufacturing in the era of import substitution industrialization. The pull of industrialization and the push of agricultural advances that created surplus labor in the fields led millions of rural workers to move to the city in search of job opportunities. Beyond the boom of industrialization after World War II, growth continued in Mexico City as a result of high birth rates and decreasing mortality.

Mexico's privatization of once-public industry and the adoption of free-market policies along with the related economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s led to serious shifts in the economic landscape of Mexico City. The city experienced a breakdown in the local manufacturing sector, which had been central to its economy throughout most of the twentieth century, and lost its national importance as the center of economic decision-making. Between 1982 and 1989 alone, the number of top 500 companies located in the city declined from 287 to 145 (Parnreiter 2002). Many of these manufacturing jobs were moving

to the nearby state of Mexico or to border towns where maquiladora-style production began to concentrate (Parnreiter 2002; Portes and Roberts 2005). In the 1990s, there was a strong push to fill the hole left by this loss of manufacturing, to create jobs, and to meet the social needs of Mexico City residents. This coincided with the decentralization of the federal government and Mexico City's first elected mayor.

For most of the twentieth century, Mexico City was governed by a *Jefe de Gobierno*, or mayor, who was directly appointed by the president. Given the PRI's unilateral control of the federal government, the city was also under the control of PRI leadership. This changed in the mid 1990s, when the decentralization of the federal government finally came to fruition, and the first independent election for mayor of Mexico City took place in 1997. The city's first elected mayor, liberal Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) candidate Cuauhtémoc Cardenas, proposed a new social paradigm centered around a rights-based approach with the specific aim of building social citizenship. Although Cardenas served less than half a term, his successor, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador or AMLO, came to office in 2000 and continued this liberal, social citizenship approach to governing the city. As Hudson and Medrano (2013, 7) summarize, AMLO's social policy was focused on "a rights-based approach; the introduction of legally bonded benefits that aim[ed] to build social citizenship; and the implementation of multiple and essentially independent social programs." From the start, however, these liberal mayors were caught between their political promises of spending for much-needed social services and the need for economic growth to fund them. Mexico's federal system was set up in such a way that many of the city's spending priorities and fiscal transfers were determined, frequently on a discretionary basis, by politicians at the federal level. As Müller (2016, 21) explains, "these national actors, out of political reasoning, had

little interest in improving the local mayor's economic and political performance—and financial resources—as they were fearful that such a success could be converted into political capital." As a result, the local Mexico City administration became dependent on its ability to generate revenue. To do so, the local administration adopted a more neoliberal approach to attract foreign business and investment.

This strategy has been successful; today Mexico City is a global city. This has led to many changes in economic policies in the city and the establishment of companies with practices focused on the maintenance of profits. This has meant not only a decrease in regulations to incentivize business in the city but the establishment of businesses looking to subcontract to small producers to circumvent regulations, benefits, and taxes (Castells and Portes 1989; Gilbert 2004). In Mexico City, as in other global cities around the world, these policies have led to an increase in casual, deregulated, and unstable work, an expansion of the informal sector, and an overall increase in social and spatial fragmentation (Sassen 2006; Gilbert 2004). There has been a bifurcation of the economy, with growth in the high-wage service sector—the FIRE (finance, insurance, and real estate) industries—and a growth in the low-wage service sector that supports the work of the FIRE industries and their employees—house cleaning, low-wage retail, and so on—and a decrease in opportunities for formal, middle-income employment. While the actual size of the city's informal economy is difficult to assess, it is widely assumed that around 60 percent of all jobs in the city are in the informal sector (International Labour Organization 2014). This shift has also led to an absolute and relative growth in poverty. For example, in 2000, 11 million people, or 61% of the metropolitan zone of Mexico City, lived in poverty, an increase of 3.5 million people from 1984, when 27% of the metropolitan zone lived in poverty. Extreme poverty also grew in

this period. In 2000, the number of those considered living in extreme poverty was 7 million, a drastic growth from the 2.7 million living in extreme poverty in the Mexico City metropolitan area in 1984 (Parnreiter 2002).

In attempting to attract foreign investment, business, and tourism, the city has also undertaken measures to clean up the city's image. This has led to continued urban renewal projects or the investment in the beautification of the city, which includes not only the remodeling of public space and buildings but also changing the use of this public space. In 2001, for example, Mexico City officially launched the *Programa Rescate* (Rescue Program), which was an entrepreneurial strategy of public–private alliances with the goal of redeveloping the city's historic center to attract business and tourism. In the same year, "a group of influential businessmen, many of them members of the CCE [the Business Coordination Council] and among them Carlos Slim, invited New York's former mayor Rudy Giuliani to Mexico City to develop a proposal for a Mexican version of his crime-control 'success story'" (Becker and Müller 2013, 83). The local administration fully embraced this initiative and has continued to employ social strategies that aim to "clean up" the city to attract foreign business and tourism. As Mitchell and Beckett (2008, 94) explain, "[the] desperate desire to maintain strong relations with U.S.-dominated [rating] agencies frequently leads to municipal policies at odds with their stated mandates of poverty alleviation, including new 'security measures' intended to drive drug-smugglers and sidewalk merchants out of particular neighborhoods." The city is now punishing the poor for living and working in public space, a punitive turn that is at odds with the push toward social citizenship.

While the economy during the era of import substitution industrialization was not equal, the broad consensus is that the distribution of income improved significantly between the early 1960s and the early 1980s and then deteriorated over the next two decades (Haber 2008). Today, Mexico City is characterized by great inequality and fragmentation or social and spatial polarization (Landman 2011; Bayón et al. 2013). Today, there are a large number of workers in the informal sector without guaranteed wages and no access to government protections, such as unemployment insurance, pensions, and health care, and with little access to low-cost housing. Those who do work in formal employment face the reality of extremely low wages as a surplus labor supply offers companies the opportunity to lower wages to save money.

This economic and political environment has led to serious social shifts in the city that tell a larger story of the weakening of the traditional family in Mexico. Although Mexicans overwhelmingly continue to live within family units (in 2005, families constituted 92 percent of all households in Mexico), the characteristics of the family unit have changed, with men and women both delaying marriage and child bearing. There has also been a substantial rise over time in family instability. One measure of this phenomenon is the growth in female-headed households, which as a proportion of all households, increased from 13.5 percent in 1976 to 15.3 percent in 1990 then to 20.6 percent in 2000 and 23.1 percent in 2005 (Haber 2008, 164-170). Between 1990 and 2000, the proportion of all family households defined as "extended," in which adults live with their parents, rose from 20.7 percent to 26.3 percent. In the year 2000, some 60 percent of single mothers and 28 percent of female divorcees with children lived in "extended families" (that is, with their parents). This family instability is

directly related to the larger economic and political changes that have occurred in Mexico over the last forty years.

Together, as Aoki (2000) makes clear, these larger political, economic, and social shifts provide the environment that both push and pull more adults and youth to the street. More than just drawing them to the street, however, the changes outlined above have shaped the city in very particular ways. These changes have given rise to the unique economic, political, and social landscape of the city that youth in street situations navigate to build their lives on the street.

Youth in street situations in Mexico City

The exact number of youth in street situations in Mexico City is unknown. The population is difficult to enumerate for various reasons, including issues of definition (the definitions used to categorize these youth vary greatly), the fact that the population is highly mobile and in many cases these youth are strategically hidden, and it is widely accepted that the counts are skewed for political or financial reasons (deBenitez 2011). Like much research examining the population in cities across the Global South, research examining youth in street situations in Mexico City tends to examine these youth as extracted from the context in which they live. This research focuses on *why* youth enter the street, the relationships they have with other youth in street situations that leads them to stay there (Saucedo and Taracena 2011), their drug use (Vega and Gutierrez 1998), their mental health (Lanz et al. 2007), and understanding the work of organizations to help improve efficacy (Velazquez and Penagos 2000). Exceptions to this trend are studies that examine the relationship between these youth and the impoverished neighborhoods they live near and in (Pérez López 2012).

The reality is that youth in street situations are a community within the larger vibrant city that is Mexico City, and like other communities in the city, they are greatly impacted by the social, economic, and political context that is outlined above. In fact, these youth are impacted by many of the changes that have occurred and are currently occurring in Mexico City, particularly by the sometimes-contradictory values within the neoliberal package (Levitt and Merry 2009). They lie at the center of the city's push for social citizenship and particularly the city's expansion of rights to vulnerable populations.

Youth in street situations are a protected population. Youth rights in Mexico City have been a large part of the process of social liberalization and the process of expanding social citizenship. Mexico became a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990. The CRC is a document with fifty-four articles that sets out the civil, political, economic, health, and cultural rights of children around the world. The rights in this document can be split into four main categories—the guiding principles, survival and development rights, protection rights, and participation rights. Table 1 offers a summary of the rights covered under the CRC.

The Mexican government has undertaken significant amendments to the constitution to advance the process of adapting internal legislation to the CRC. Examples of these changes include amendments to incorporate the concept of children as rights holders and recognizing that children are entitled to nourishment, health care, education, and play in order to develop to the fullest. This constitutional amendment paved the way for the Law on the Protection of the Rights of the Child in 2000, whose purpose was to ensure the entitlement and respect of basic child rights recognized under the constitution and to establish guiding principles under which Mexican law must protect and guarantee these rights. As the Federal District has

moved to become a federal entity (Mexico City), the government of Mexico City has adopted these child rights and protections of the CRC into its own constitution.

Table 1. Summary of the CRC	
Guiding principles	These represent the underlying requirements for any and all rights to be realized. The guiding principles of the CRC include who is a holder of rights: all youth under the age of 18, regardless of race, religion, ability, language spoken, place of birth, culture, and so on. They state that no child should be treated unfairly or discriminated against. Here we also find an adherence to the best interests of the child and their right to participate in any decisions made on their behalf. The best interest of the child must be the primary concern when adults make decisions that affect the child, and youth have a right to participate in that decision process.
Survival and development rights	These rights state that governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily. They also state that youth have the right to be registered and officially recognized by the government; they have the right to an identity or official document of who they are; and they have a right to have a nationality. Youth have a right to live with their families if this is in the best interest of the youth, and if it is not, youth have the right to special care where they must be looked after properly by people who respect their ethnic group, religion, culture, and language. This care should also be reviewed regularly to determine whether this care is appropriate for the youth, paying special attention to the youth's best interest. These rights also state that youth should have access to the resources, skills, and various contributing elements that are necessary for their survival and full

Table 1. Summary of the CRC (Continued)	
Survival and development rights (cont.)	development. These rights include the right to nutritious food, shelter, clean water, and primary health care. Thinking about development as not just physical but emotional as well, youth have the right to a formal education that helps them use and develop their talents, and youth with disabilities have a right to specialized care to ensure their healthy development. Youth have the right to leisure and recreation. Lastly, youth have the right to information about their rights so that they can learn how to best exercise their rights and become active citizens.
Protection rights	These rights include protection from all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and cruelty, including the right to protection from cruel punishment in the criminal justice system. Children who have been neglected, abused, or exploited have the right to receive special help to physically and psychologically recover and reintegrate into society. This recovery should be focused on restoring the health, self-respect, and dignity of the child.
Participation rights	These rights state that youth are entitled to the freedom to express opinions and to have a say in matters affecting their social, economic, religious, cultural, and political life. Participation rights include the right to be heard and taken seriously and the right to information and freedom of association. Engaging these rights as they mature helps children realize all their rights and prepares them for an active role in society.

Despite having these rights, youth in street situations face various challenges to exercising them. For example, the city's urban renewal schemes and revanchist policies—put in place to attract foreign investment and tourism—have led to greater policing of the

population, pushing them out of city-center spaces. The previously mentioned thinning of the government that resulted in a dearth of social programming and government oversight means that the government lacks the real ability to protect the rights and entitlements they grant youth. That being said, the subsequent growth in the civil society sector to fill this gap has meant that these youth do have resources available to them through NGOs and other organizations.

These youth also find themselves in a social and cultural context that is ambivalent to their situation. These youth live in a city that is socially fragmented, with high levels of classism and mistrust (Bayón et al. 2013). This makes youth the target of negative stigma. On the other hand, this context is also one where a high level of religiosity and traditional family values continue to shape the image of youthfulness in particular ways to elicit sympathy.

This is the context in which youth in street situations in Mexico City navigate their day-to-day lives. The relationships that youth in street situations build with other actors in the city as they find a way to live in their fantasies are formed within this context. This social, political, and economic landscape shapes these relationships. It is this context that begins to give meaning to the relationships that youth make, the norms of their groups, the way these youth understand their situation, how these youth come to understand who they are, and the way they move around the social and physical space of the city.

Youth in Street Situations: Defining and Identifying Informants

In this dissertation I use the term "youth in street situations" to refer to those adolescents and young adults aged 12 to 24 years who live and/or work in the street or in other public space (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2017).

Since the 1980s, the most common term used to identify children, adolescents, or youth on the street was "street children" with two subcategories—children *of* the street and children *on* the street. Children *of* the street is a term that refers to those children and adolescents who have not reached adulthood and who work and sleep on the street at night. Children *on* the street is a term that refers to children and adolescents who work on the street to support their families during the day but go home at night to sleep. Despite their wide acceptance in the literature, these definitions don't capture the true complexity of the situation that these youth find themselves in.

Using place of sleep is unhelpful and, in many ways, creates a false dichotomy that does not accurately reflect the reality for youth who are connected to the street. Place of sleep is not constant. Even those youth who are highly embedded in street life do not spend every night of the year on the street. Many youth spend various nights in hotels when they save enough money to rent a room, some seek refuge from the street for a few days with a family member with whom they continue to have contact, and others can spend up to a few months at a time in a local shelter or rehabilitation clinic as they recuperate from the physiological damages of the street. Youth who work on the street but usually return home at night also tend to spend some nights on the street. These so-called children *on* the street exist in the same spaces as the youth who sleep on the street and, in most cases, are embedded in the same social groups and the same street culture. Many of these youth spend some nights on the street "partying" or consuming drugs with "children *of* the street" while others spend some nights on the street if for no other reason than circumstance—whether they missed the last bus or metro home or they got caught selling goods at an all-night event.

In this dissertation I do not use the *on/of* distinction but instead employ the term "in street situations" because it more accurately reflects what I've seen during my time with these youth in Mexico City. "Youth in street situations" are youth who depend on the streets to live and/or work, whether alone, with peers or with family and a wider population of youth who have formed strong connections with public spaces and for whom the street plays a vital role in their everyday lives and identities. This population includes youth who periodically, but not always, live and/or work on the streets and youth who do not live or work on the streets but who regularly accompany their peers, siblings, or family in the streets. Included in this are youth who spend a significant amount of time on streets or in street markets, public parks, community spaces, squares, and bus or train stations whether they do or do not live there. This broader term allows us to include all street-connected youth, all youth who are part of the street milieu whether or not they sleep there.

In this dissertation I also steer away from use of the term "children" despite its usage in accepted terminology. Given that the terms "children" and "child" refer to people 10 years old and younger, these terms do not accurately reflect the age range of young people who are independently embedded in the street life of Mexico City. While there are children on the streets in Mexico City, these children tend to be on the street with their parents and are not independently navigating their lives. In this project I use the term "youth" to more accurately reflect the young people who form the heart of this project, namely, young people 12 to 24 years old.

I also extend my focus to include young adults over the age of 18. I do this for three main reasons. First, it more accurately reflects the age of young people in street situations in Mexico City. Second, in this context adolescence has begun to extend into young adulthood,

and this needs to be taken into consideration when studying youth populations (Arnett and Taber 1994), and finally, while technical adulthood (18 years old) has very real consequences for the way these youth navigate the governmental and nongovernmental institutions in the city, there is very little difference for the youth themselves between people on either side of 18 years old. These young adults continue to form part of the same social groups and are seen as peers. I include both adolescents and young adults in the term "youth in street situations" because both groups form integral parts of the community of youth in street situations.

Who exactly are youth in street situations in Mexico City? These youth are the youth who are connected to the street in very meaningful ways. These youth have built their lives in housing settlements in city sewers, under public monuments, in the city's most iconic plazas, and along busy highways all over the vast, seemingly chaotic expanse that is Mexico City. A walk around the city will quickly confront visitors with the reality of the lives of these youth as they struggle to secure their livelihoods. They can be found standing with dirty faces and torn clothes at busy intersections washing windshields, in the metro laying their emaciated bodies on shards of broken glass in the hopes that the visceral reaction produced by the image moves strangers to offer them money, or standing outside the city center's various metro exits waiting for customers as they participate in sex work in exchange for the money and goods they need to survive. Despite living every aspect of their life in public spaces—for most literally sleeping and bathing on the same streets that millions of residents, tourists, and city leaders traverse every day—these youth go largely ignored and invisible until they are seen as a nuisance or criminal threat.

Existing research has shown that most youth in street situations tend to be boys. It is widely accepted that this gender difference is due to visibility: girls in street situations tend to be made invisible on the street, hidden by the jobs that they participate in (domestic work, restaurant help, and so on) and staying in shelters at night because of their vulnerability on the street. These youth cite various reasons when discussing their decision to leave their homes. Many leave their homes because they've lost a mother, a father, or both; because they feel like they are not loved or recognized by their families; because they have been the victims of sexual abuse; or because they are fleeing the violence and mistreatment that they find in their homes. These youth tend to go to the street because the street offers them a space where they find less violence than their homes, where they find somewhere to belong, where they find an identity, and where they find the financial means to care for themselves without relying on an abusive or neglectful family (Taracena Ruiz 2010).

For youth who live on the street, the process of leaving the home and entering the street depends on the context. For some youth, the process is a quick break from the home to the street (Aptekar 1988; Conticini 2008; Davies, 2008). One day they are at home with their families, and the next, either preplanned or due to a particular catalyst, they become part of the phenomenon of youth that call the street home. For others, the break from the home is a longer process (Invernizzi 2003; Rizzini and Butler 2003). This gradual entrance to the street occurs as youth slowly become familiar with groups of youth already on the street—the lifestyle, the work, the drug use. Slowly, they spend more time with the groups of youth already on the street, they hang out with these youth after school for an hour, they spend one night after a street party and go home the next day, they progressively spend more time on the street until they get sucked into the vortex that is street life and stop going home.

The majority of youth on the street consume drugs, everything from marijuana to crystal meth. Drug use is central to their lives. The most commonly used drugs among youth in street situations in Mexico City are inhalants. They consume what they call *activo*, which is an acetone and tuolene solution marketed as pipe cleaner. This solution can be bought cheaply in hardware stores throughout the city, where a small bottle will run US $3. Drug dealers also sell *activo* on the street where it can be acquired at less cost and, I am told, in a more effective mixture. These inhalants are consumed to help the youth numb the pain of their situation: the pangs of hunger, the bitter bite of the cold, or the ghosts of depression and trauma that follow them to the street. The youth soak gauze, paper, or rags in the solvent; they call this drug-soaked gauze a *mona* and hold it to their nose until the solution dries. Youth refer to the act of inhaling in Mexico City as *monear,* and the youth can be found throughout the city *moneando* or inhaling activo.

Many of the youth that I met started consuming inhalants shortly before or when they arrived to the street, while some youth started consuming as young as eight years old with friends or family members. The long-term effects of inhalant abuse are understudied, but they have been shown to cause serious neurological issues (Woan et al. 2013). Many of the youth that I met already suffered from the long-term effects of inhalant abuse. More than just slurred speech and hallucinations, inhalants eventually cause neurological damage that leads to a serious lack of coordination—in some cases this means the inability to walk, twitching eyes, lack of control of bodily functions, and shaking limbs.

Delegación Cuauhtémoc

My informants lived in the Delegación Cuauhtémoc. Youth in street situations can be found living in all parts of the metropolitan area of Mexico City, an area that is home to 21.3

million people. The city itself, the Ciudad de Mexico (CDMX), is home to 8.8 million, and at the time of conducting fieldwork was divided into 16 *delegaciones* or local administrative units. To understand how youth in street situations fit within the ecology of the city, it was necessary to focus this research on an area where these youth most commonly come into contact with other social actors and institutions—especially government officials, civil society organizations, and middle-class residents. The Delegación Cuauhtémoc is the ideal area of the city for observing the relationships youth build and the interactions they have with other communities in the city.

The Delegación Cuauhtémoc was once the heart of Aztec Tenochtitlan and today acts as the city's political and cultural center (Figure 2). It is home to the federal and state government offices, the Mexican Stock Exchange, and numerous libraries, museums, parks, and historic sites that attract millions of tourists every year. This is where Mexico City's true

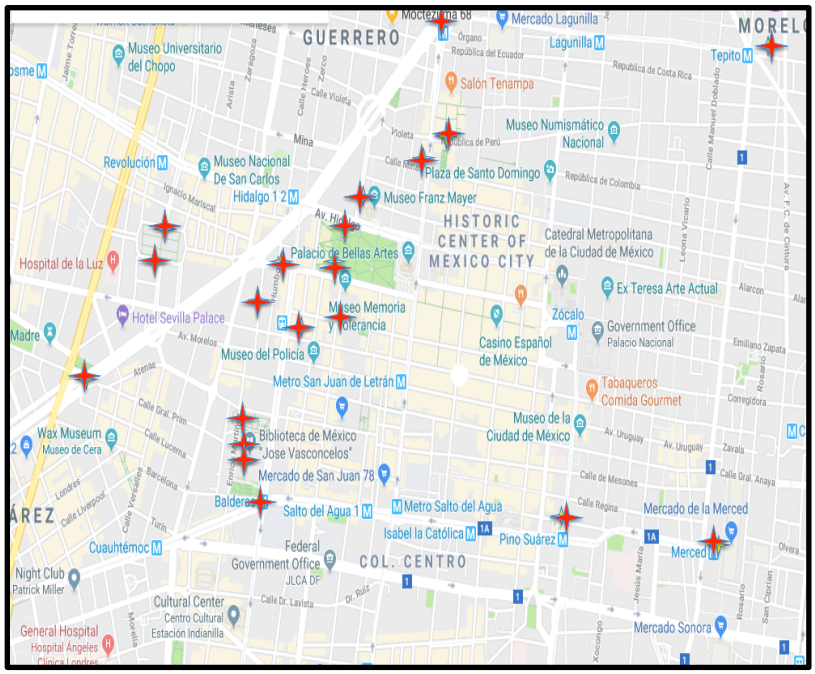

Figure 2. Map historic center of Mexico City
Source: Google Maps

diversity comes to life; the area where business people and politicians traverse the same streets as men who sell tacos out of wicker baskets, where indigenous women selling their artisanal blouses and purses come into contact with European camera-wielding tourists, where residents who live in all parts of the vast 4,000 square miles that is the larger metropolitan area of Mexico City come day in and day out to make their living.

There is a concentration of youth in street situations in the Delegación Cuauhtémoc because the resources youth need to survive are concentrated there. This is the area of the city where there are more government offices and civil society resources geared toward assisting this population—everything from hospitals to soup kitchens, religious charities to NGO outreach workers, and NGO day centers that offer youth a meal and refuge from the street. Being the bustling center of the city and the meeting place for people from around the world, the Delegación Cuauhtémoc also offers youth in street situations the opportunity to make money for survival through the informal economy—something that will be discussed further in chapter 4.

Focusing attention on the Delegación Cuauhtémoc also offers a glimpse at how changes in the larger city are actively shaping the lives of these youth. The Delegación Cuauhtémoc has been the focus of the city's effort at remaking itself into a global city of the future, a *Captial en Moviemiento* (capital in movement), over the last two decades. As a result, this is where the city is being privatized and urban renewal schemes are being adopted. It is here that efforts are actively underway to attract tourists and foreign business and to clean up the image of the city by pushing out the poor. Part of the youth's daily lives involves a constant interaction with these changes—not only the infrastructural changes and the people in the city that enforce these changes (like the police), but also the changes in the

meaning of the city and public space as the city aims to reimagine itself as a "clean and safe " city of the future.

Informants

Over the course of my sixteen months in Mexico City I had contact with hundreds of children, youth, and adults in street situations all around the greater Mexico City metropolitan area. While all of the conversations and experiences that I had during my fieldwork period undoubtedly shaped this project and my understanding of the phenomenon, the heart of my findings come from thirty-seven key informants. These were youth between the ages twelve and twenty-four who lived and worked on the street in the Delegación Cuauhtémoc. Given the instability of the lives of these youth, especially their physical movement across the city or from street to home and rehabilitation clinics, not all of my relationships with these youth were constant during my fieldwork period. Even so, my key informants were the youth that I would see and talk to multiple times a week or even daily for some period during fieldwork. These are the youth I spent the most time with, those I built a trusting relationship with, and who opened up the most to me.

My key informants varied in age and tenure on the street (Table 2). The average age of my informants was seventeen, with the mode age also being seventeen years old. My youngest key informants were thirteen years old, a boy named Diego who lived with his family under the overhang of a metro exit and a boy named Johnny who lived in the settlement that was notorious for being the "toughest" because it was located in the infamous Tepito neighborhood. The oldest of my informants were twenty-two years old. These were two young men who lived in the Revolución settlement. One of these boys, Giovanni, had

been on the street for six years, and the other, Jesus, had been on the street for fourteen years.

Among my key informants, the average time spent living on the street was four and a half years, but this varied widely. My key informants included youth who were new to the street—youth whom I met over the course of the fieldwork who were just entering the street—and those like Brenda who had lived on the street their entire lives (in her case, seventeen years). The gender breakdown of my informants was roughly 60% boys and 40% girls—closely reflecting the larger population of youth in street situations that I encountered in the Delegación Cuauhtémoc area of Mexico City. With the exception of those few youth who were born to families on the street, the majority of these youth once lived at home in a family. The vast majority have stories of lives before entering the street and of families who are not on the street; all have their own reason for being on the street.

One of the key questions guiding much research regarding youth in street situations is, "Why are these youth on the street?" These scholars, working from a social problems approach, examine the home lives, family ties, and childhood experiences of these youth in an attempt to understand the reasons that lead them to enter the street. While this is not the purpose of my research, it would be impossible to understand their social world without understanding where these youth come from, the experiences they had in their homes, and the relationships they have with their families of origin.

Table 2. List of Informants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Time on the street
Maria	15	F	2 years
Pablo	15	M	3 years
Daniel	16	M	9 years
Yamileth	21	F	10 years
Ariana	16	F	4 years
Juan Carlos	16	M	3 years
Alma	16	F	11 months
Alexander	19	M	1 years
Isabella	15	F	1 year
Brenda	17	F	17 years
Yesenia	15	F	4 months
Manuel	18	M	4 years
Luna	16	F	4 years
Jesus	22	M	14 years
Antonio	17	M	6 years
Giovanni	22	M	6 years
Marcos	16	M	3 years
Diego	13	M	4 years
Marisol	19	F	3 years
Andres	19	M	5 years
Xochitl	19	F	4 years
Jorge	16	M	2 years
Viridiana	17	F	4 years
Alejandro	17	M	1 year
Marcos	16	M	2 years
Agustus	15	M	1 year
Jose	19	M	8 months
Victoria	19	F	4 years
Marianna	19	F	10 years
Juan Jose	19	M	4 years
Jose Marcos	17	M	5 years
Cristobal	17	M	2 weeks
Mario	17	M	9 years
Johnny	14	M	1 year
Lucero	16	F	3 years
Roberto	18	M	3 years
Judah	18	M	2 years

Most of my informants and other youth I met on the street come from families that struggle with poverty—their parents work in the informal sector as cleaning ladies or informal street vendors or are unemployed. The majority of the youth that I came to know are from families that experienced some sort of breakdown—either through the dissolution of marriage, abandonment by one or both parents, or death of one or both parents. For some of the youth, the move from home to life on the street and drug consumption was a smaller step than others. Some of the youth have family members (parents, siblings, or uncles) who had spent time on the street, and for some, drugs had always been a part of their lives because they had family members who actively consumed and/or dealt drugs around them.

As much of the existing literature states, the move to the street for my informants was not straightforward. For some, it was a gradual process that began with experimentation with drugs and partying that eventually led youth into street life, but for others there was an event that took place in their homes that led the youth to make the decision to go to the street. Many youth explain that they "escaped" abuse in their home by moving to the street. Others cite depression (usually caused by an unhappy home life) and the need to self-medicate with drugs as what led them to become consumed by the world of the street. In the case of my informants who identified as queer, they mentioned this as a factor, saying that their sexuality was not accepted in their home and that the street offered a refuge where they could express their true selves. For many of the youth, their home situation was complicated, and their reasons for leaving the home and entering the street were just as complicated.

Although these youth led independent lives on the street, proud of having escaped their abusive home context, many youth were still connected to their families. Connection

and relationships with families varied depending on the youth's home situation, the relationship they had with their families before leaving the home, and the involvement of their families in their reason for leaving. Despite the complicated home situations, however, most of my informants still had contact with at least one family member—some called their mothers on a weekly basis, others would go home every few weeks for a respite from the street, and others had parents who would go out into the street looking for them.

To convey the complexity of the situation that many of these youth find themselves in, I will introduce three informants—Isabella, Alexander, and Johnny—to give a sense of who these youth are, their relationships with their families, and their understanding of why they found themselves on the street.

Isabella

Isabella is a small, slight girl with brown hair that flows down to her waist. Upon meeting her two things stand out—her accent and her eyes. Despite being born and raised in Mexico, Isabella speaks with the classic lisp of a Spanish accent. She spends most of the time with her eyes closed or looking off to her left, but when you finally get a glimpse you realize that a white glaze obscures the brilliance of her large, brown eyes (Figure 3). Isabella was born blind. When I met Isabella she was fifteen years old and had spent five months on the street. Early on I asked her about her reason for being on the street, and the story she told me revolved around abandonment. After getting to know her, I realized that her situation was complex.

Isabella was born in Mexico City to parents whom she identifies as "Spanish gypsies from Sevilla, Spain." She said that prior to her birth her mother, father, aunt, and maternal grandparents had come to Mexico on vacation, fell in love with the country, and decided to

Figure 3. Picture of Isabella and Alexander
Photo Credit: Rosa Maria Jimenez Soto

stay. Shortly after their arrival, her mother gave birth to her older brother, Alejandro. A year after the birth of Alejandro she became pregnant with Isabella. Her father returned to Spain when Isabella was four years old, but her mother and grandparents stayed in Mexico. They moved around the city to different apartments and hotels, earning what they could each day by selling jackets on the street. Isabella never attended school. She was told that her disability and her citizenship status—the child of Spanish citizens living in the country illegally—meant that she would never be able to.

When Isabella's father left for Spain, her mother began dating another man. When Isabella was fourteen years old, this man began making sexual advances. Isabella's cousin recognized what was going on and notified her mother and grandparents. According to Isabella, her mother "chose to believe her partner over her own daughter" and, rather than

break off the relationship with her partner, decided to leave Isabella in the care of her grandparents. After being with them for a few months, Isabella's grandparents made the decision to move back to Spain. They left Isabella with her mother and the man who had made the sexual advances. This relationship ended soon after Isabella moved back in with her mother, but with the breakdown of this relationship the family found themselves without a home and stable security net. They were living day to day in hotels around the city again.

It was not long before Isabella's mother found a new partner. Within weeks of meeting this man, she announced that she would be leaving the city and going with him to Zacatecas, a state in northern Mexico. Isabella and her brother were sent to live with their aunt. According to Isabella, this aunt was reluctant to take them in. At this time, Isabella's brother began to consume drugs and started to spend more time with a group of youth on the street. Their aunt, disapproving of this behavior, began to treat the siblings poorly. It was not long before this aunt accused Alejandro of stealing from her and kicked both youth out of her home. With their mother in Zacatecas and their grandparents in Spain, the youth had nowhere to turn. The only place they had was to Alejandro's new friends—the youth who lived on the street.

Their mother eventually returned to Mexico City, but the bitterness and resentment from feeling abandoned led the siblings to decide that they would rather stay on the street. As Isabella confided, "on the street I find the love that didn't exist in my house." In January 2018, Isabella's aunt sought out the siblings because she was moving to a nearby state and convinced them to accompany her. The siblings stayed with these family members for three months before Alejandro escaped and returned to the streets of Mexico City. Feeling as though she needed to protect her brother from falling too deep into his drug addiction and

also afraid to lose the only family protection she had ever known, Isabella followed Alejandro back to the streets.

While Isabella explains the narrative of why she's on the street as a result of abandonment, a more in-depth understanding of her situation makes it clear that there were other things that led her to her current situation. Her mother abandoned the siblings to move with her partner and then later to move to Spain, but a lack of social network to support the family, her mother's struggle with poverty, and the structural
failures that allowed Isabella to reach age fifteen without setting foot in a school are also factors that led to her current situation.

Alexander

When I met Alexander, he was seventeen years old and had only been on the street two months. Alexander is about five feet seven inches tall, thin, with his hair styled in a fashionable undercut. He had two small tattoos on his hands: one is his mother's name and the other the name of an ex-boyfriend. He walks with a bounce in his gait and speaks with a contagious enthusiasm. Alexander is gay, and it's one of the first things he tells anyone when he starts a conversation. I initially asked Alexander why he was on the street, and he told me that he was on the street because he was not accepted in his home. As a gay teen, his mother and his grandparents disapproved of his lifestyle. This was his reason for entering the street, but as time went on and we created a deeper bond, it became clear that this was not the only reason he was on the street. The larger context of his family home led him to the street.

During an interview with Alexander, he revealed that two years before leaving his home a family member raped him. When Alexander told his family what had occurred, no one believed him. Alexander did not know what to do; he felt betrayed by this family

member, and he felt betrayed by his family. While Alexander was trying to process what happened to him without the support of his family, he found solace in the arms of a neighbor. Not long after this relationship started, his family caught him in an intimate moment with this boy, and they kicked Alexander out of the house. According to Alexander, their Catholic background made his sexuality unacceptable.

Alexander left his home and lived with this boyfriend for more than a year. When the relationship came to an end, he moved back with his family. By this point he had mended the relationship with his family; they were on speaking terms, and the family member who had sexually assaulted him had confessed to what he had done. After spending a few weeks with his family, Alexander received the news that his brother in Los Angeles was killed. Alexander explained this event as sending him into a depression that he had never experienced before, bringing back feelings of being alone, of not being accepted by his family, and of not being loved. Alexander had consumed drugs recreationally with his father, but when he fell into this depression he turned to drugs to numb the pain. He soon found himself consumed by feelings of loneliness, and the constant need to consume drugs to numb the pain led him to the street.

Alexander was one of the youth who had a very close relationship with his family despite living on the street. He spoke to his mother on the phone at least once a week, and he would visit his family home for a meal at least once a month. This monthly meal was well known around the groups of youth. It was common for Alexander to invite his friends from the street to join him in this family gathering. For those youth who were lucky enough to get an invite, the lunch with Alexander's family was always the topic of conversation for weeks after the affair.

While the lack of acceptance of his sexuality played a large role in why he entered the street, to understand Alexander's move to the street, it is important to understand the larger situation: his struggle with abandonment and depression, his relationship with his father, his previous exposure to drugs, and later his drug addiction that kept him on the street despite having mended the relationship with his family.

Figure 4. Boys in Revolución
Photo credit: Leonardo Flores

Johnny

I met Johnny while I was nearing the end of my time in the field. Johnny was thirteen years old and was about to reach his one-year anniversary of being on the street. Johnny lived in one of the housing settlements that I spent the least amount time at and had the fewest relationships in. He lived in Tepito, which is notorious among the youth, among the broader population of people in street situations, and more generally across the city as the center of the drug trade and violence in the city. When asked why he left his home, Johnny's response was that his mother abandoned him. Like many of the other youth, his story was much more complicated.

Johnny lived with his mother, and he didn't have a relationship with his father. Two years before I met Johnny, his mother coupled with a new partner. According to Johnny, she abandoned him. She left him with his aunt, and he didn't hear from her after that—as he put it, he "didn't know if she was alive or dead." When his mother returned, his older sister decided to move into the house as well. Johnny couldn't forgive his mother; not only was he angry with his mother for leaving, but he was now angry that he had to get used to living with a sibling that he previously had limited contact with.

His sister consumed drugs, and she began explaining to him what it felt like to be high. She told him that consuming drugs would help him deal with his anger, but at that point, he wasn't sure he wanted to try. He soon met a boy from the neighborhood named Isaac. He was one year older than Johnny and smoked marijuana and inhaled activo (Figure 4). After having asked both his sister and Isaac about the effects of drugs and how they would make him feel, Johnny decided to try marijuana. He smoked for the first time with Isaac and soon started consuming activo with Isaac as well. They gradually began consuming more, and they

would accompany each other to Tepito to buy drugs. Isaac knew about Tepito and knew where to buy drugs because his mother was a consumer and she had taken Isaac along with her to purchase her own drugs. One day Isaac decided he didn't want to return to his home; he decided that he would stay on the street. Johnny didn't want to leave his friend alone, so he made the decision to stay with him, figuring that his mother didn't care about him anyway—as he explained, "she had abandoned me, so now I abandoned her."

The boys still lived on the street a year later, when I met them both. Johnny sees his mother quite frequently and says that their relationship is "*a veces bonito. A veces feo. Como toda familia*" (Sometimes beautiful. Sometimes ugly. Like all families), but his addiction keeps him from going home and living with his mother. Both Johnny and Isaac have escalated their drug consumption from marijuana and activo to a serious crack addiction. While Johnny's narrative for leaving his family home is abandonment, the reality of the situation is more complex and involves not only abandonment but also drugs and the influence of another boy who pulled him to the street. Johnny recognizes the role of this other youth. When I asked him about the worst influence that he's had in his life, he thought for a minute and replied, "*Isaac. He salido a la calle por él*." (Isaac. I left to the street because of him.)

Entering the Street

Ahora qué (now what)? This was a common phrase that the youth used to describe that moment when the full weight of their decision to go to the street hit them. For most, this was a moment of terror and panic. This was a moment of feeling lost and not knowing what to do. For almost all youth, this was the first time they were on their own; the first time they slept on the ground and not in a bed; the first time they had to deal with the cold and the rain; and the first time they faced the risk of being robbed, raped, or kidnapped in their sleep.

For many, going to the street involved leaving an abusive home, and they knew that no matter how scary that "now what" moment was, turning back was not an option.

As previously mentioned, some youth slowly transition to the street. These are youth who have connections to existing groups on the street even before they leave their home. In the case of Alejandro and Isabella, they were kicked out of their aunt's home when Alejandro was accused of stealing. Alejandro, himself a crack user, had already built connections with the youth at the *Espejos* settlement, consuming and partying with these youth in the months before being kicked out of his aunt's home. As Isabella explains it, "we had been going to the fountains everyday, so I already knew Antonio and Maria, and when my aunt started blaming Alejandro for everything, she would leave us outside in the rain with no food, so we just decided we were better off on the street." While Alejandro and Isabella still had to adjust to life on the street, the moment of entering the street was not as daunting because they knew where to go and who to turn to.

Other youth, however, enter the street not knowing what to do or where to go. This was the case for Alexander, who decided one day that he wouldn't be going home. He described the situation to me, explaining that he was sitting in the Alameda Central panicking, not knowing what he would do, where he would go, and how he would survive. He knew he couldn't go home, but he didn't know what his other options were. Alexander explained that "out of nowhere" a youth named Martín stopped to talk to him. Martín approached Alexander to make sexual advances, but he noticed that the youth looked lost. Martín was a twenty-one–year-old boy who had lived on the street for four years. Alexander explained to Martín that he had decided that he wasn't going home that night, but that he didn't know what he was going to do. Martín told Alexander that he slept with a group of

friends in front of *los Espejos* and invited Alexander to stay with them that night. Alexander did, and he eventually became an integral part of the Espejos settlement.

While Alexander was lucky to have run into a youth who invited him into his group, most youth are not as fortunate. They must seek out already existing settlements on their own. Most of my informants were from Mexico City, so they had some previous awareness that informal housing settlements existed in the Centro Histórico, and they had some idea of where these settlements were because they had passed them in their daily lives or had heard of them in the news. When they found themselves on the street for the first time, the youth headed toward these settlements. This was the case for Juan Carlos and Pablo, two siblings who entered the street when they were twelve and eleven years old, respectively.

According to the siblings, their mother abandoned them. Their parents separated after Pablo was born, and Juan Carlos recalls very little about who his mother was or what she did. The only thing he mentions when talking about her is that the boys used to accompany her to the Alameda Central everyday where she would give them a box of lollipops and have them approach strangers to make money. Juan Carlos said he would take his brother by the hand and they would spend the day in the park trying to sell their lollipops. Their mother would disappear and return in the late afternoon to pick them up. He later learned that their mother was involved in sex work, and that the box of lollipops that they had to sell was both their babysitter and their way to help support the household.

Their mother was unable to care for the two boys and eventually left them with their father when Juan Carlos was five and Pablo was four. Their father was a federal police officer who traveled for work. When their father was stationed in the north of the country, he left the boys in the care of their grandparents and their aunt. Pablo is a rambunctious youth who,

as he explains, "has always had trouble with authority." Pablo is known on the street and around the various institutions as being a youth who pushes back and questions everything he is told. This has caused a lot of trouble for the boys over the years, and it was ultimately the reason the boys left their aunt's home.

Pablo and his aunt butted heads on numerous occasions, and Juan Carlos would step in to defend his little brother. Their aunt began punishing the boys for misbehaving. What started as taking away privileges soon escalated to physical punishment. According to Juan Carlos, the boys' aunt began to hit them and, on various occasions, even burned their hands on the stove. Juan Carlos recalls the day they left: "that day she had hit us really bad. And, well, we had already planned…[pause] every time she hit us, she would send us to the store and I would always say '*yo ya me voy*' [I'm leaving]. Well that day she hit us and when they opened the door to let us out, we took off running." The two boys had initially planned to head to the local delegación office, but they ended up in a park near metro Balderas instead. Juan Carlos explained,

> We got on the first bus we saw, and we ended up in the State of Mexico. So, going back to the city we—I've always been a good liar—so we got on another bus and I told the driver, "we don't know where we are, they left us here," and he told us to get on. We had seen a program on TV about youth in street situations in Hidalgo, so we headed that direction and I told my brother "let's go that way." When we got to Bellas Artes, we just sat on a bench. We didn't know what to do. We saw someone who was really high so we asked them "where can we stay?" *Traía toda la cara de violador* [he had the look of a rapist], but he told us "follow me," and so we did." (Interview excerpt, May 2018)

Without knowing exactly where they were going, they followed this adult who looked to be unhoused. This stranger took the youth to one of the many housing settlements in the city center, to a park near metro Balderas, just blocks away from the settlement at Hidalgo the boys had seen in a news exposé.

There are two main types of housing settlements that these youth call home—structures, which are covered by tarps, and nonstructures, where youth sleep on the ground with blankets, open to the elements. The differences depend on the tenure of the settlement as well as the willingness of city officials to let these unhoused individuals stay in the area—this usually depends on where the settlement is located but also on the connections between the settlement residents and city officials. To understand the social world of these youth, it is important to understand the contours of the housing settlements they call home. While it would be difficult to describe all of the settlements across the delegación, the following are the four main areas where my informants lived.

Juarez

Juarez is a housing settlement just blocks from the Alameda Central, the large park in the historic city center. This is a long-standing housing settlement on Articulo 123, just off of Balderas, one of the city's main roads. This portion of Balderas, just two blocks from the Alameda Central and a short walk from the Zocalo, is lined by street vendors selling food, clothes, and sunglasses and is just down the street from the historic center's largest artisan market and one of its largest libraries. This area of the city attracts a lot of foot and car traffic on a daily basis.

When I arrived in Mexico City for preliminary fieldwork, this housing settlement was about a city block long and housed around fifty individuals, both adults and youth. The sidewalk along the south side of Articulo 123 was covered by tarps to create a house-like structure. The entrance to this housing structure was in the middle of the block, with the shelter opening to the left and right, which is where its residents slept on thin mattress pads or blankets. More individuals slept outside on the sidewalk on both sides of this portion of

Articulo 123. As I noted from my first time in the Juarez settlement, this was a prominent congregation point for many unhoused adults and youth, and it is not always easy to enter these settlements as an outsider:

> From there we went to Juarez where there was a long encampment along the side the road. It was a mix of adult men, women, and children. We went inside one of the tarp "houses." There were people and dogs all over, sleeping on *colchonetas* [mats] or blankets. A man was by the door, wrapped in a blanket. We had to greet him before we could go inside. Iris introduced me as a volunteer from the U.S. who's getting to know the population. He greeted me with the customary handshake without breaking eye contact. I was nervous as Iris had just told me how important it was that we guard our back at every move here. Iris asked the man if it were okay if we go inside to talk to Brenda. He nodded, with his gaze still fixed on me. A lady named Brenda was laying under a blanket. All you could see was her face. She looked like she was in her late 30s. There was a man on the left side of her sharing her colchoneta, completely covered by a blanket—I could tell it was a man by the size of his shoes that were poking out from under the blanket. Next to him was a dog sleeping. In the back there was a young girl and boy sharing the same colchoneta. They were asleep, hugging each other. Strewn across the floor were random shoes, trash, styrofoam stuffing that looked to come from a mattress pad that had been torn up, and clothes everywhere. You couldn't really move around. There were beds and bundles of blankets everywhere, not really in any sort of order. The smell was pretty strong—when you walked in you could smell the sweat of bodies (normal for an enclosed tent housing numerous unhoused folks) mixed with activo. (Fieldnote excerpt, July 2016)

The Juarez settlement underwent many changes during my fieldwork period, but the biggest occurred between when I conducted preliminary fieldwork and when I returned for long-term fieldwork. This part of the historic city center was a central focus of Mexico City's Plan for Development 2017-2022, and in early 2017, city officials took down this housing settlement. As my informants explained, there was an *operativo* (police operation) that included about fifty police officers closing off that portion of Articulo 123 and entering the street with garbage trucks. As can be seen in the photo in Figure 5, the police and city

Figure 5. News article about *operativo* in Juarez
Source:* *https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulo/metropoli/cdmx/2017/02/8/retiran-campamento-de-indigentes-en-articulo-123

workers tore down the housing structure (Suarez, 2017). The Casa Alianza workers explained that, as a result of this operativo, some settlement residents were arrested, some were taken to rehabilitation clinics, and some of the youth were taken under state custody and put into group homes. In its place, the city created a "public art gallery" where they placed photographs on the wall and policed how individuals used the sidewalk, prohibiting anyone from loitering along this stretch of Articulo 123.

Many of the residents of this housing settlement dispersed across the city, while twenty others stayed in the vicinity of the old settlement, moving just one block down along the other cross street from Articulo 123 to Humboldt. They did not reconstruct the housing structure because the residents knew that it would bring too much attention to them.

Instead, they began sleeping on the ground at night and hiding their belongings in trees or planters during the day.

In February 2018, a year after the initial move, police arrived in the middle of the night and forcefully moved people from this settlement area again, this time off of the Humboldt sidewalks, dispersing this nonstructural housing settlement. After this second move, the settlement became a loosely tied group of adults and youth. Some moved to streets farther south in the city center and about ten of my informants moved to the other side of Balderas. Despite the difficulties that the youth and adults living at the Juarez settlement faced to continue occupying space on the streets in this area, the settlement persisted in some form throughout my fieldwork period.

Espejos/Plaza de la Solidaridad

Espejos (mirrors) is a housing settlement that can be found under the alcove of the first-floor windows of an abandoned ten-story office building that sits near the intersection of Paseo de la Reforma and Avenida Juarez, two blocks west of the Alameda Central. The youth refer to this settlement as Espejos because the windows that they call home are reflective, and they often use them to groom themselves as though they were mirrors. Within these alcoves you can usually find twenty adults and youth wrapped in blankets sleeping on the ground. This is a mobile settlement of adults and youth. They do not have a housing structure. At times they sleep within these alcoves and at other times they can be found sleeping in the Plaza de la Solidaridad, a plaza nearby at the southwest corner of Alameda Central. Despite having reached an agreement to sleep in these public areas, the police continue to move them back and forth between the abandoned building and public plaza. Regardless of where they sleep, they tend to spend their days sitting within the alcoves of

the espejos, drinking, smoking, and moneando. This housing settlement is a well-known point of sale for drugs and prostitution.

Revolución

Revolución is a housing settlement under one of the city's famous monuments, *El Monumento a la Revolución* (Figure 6). Hundreds of tourists and residents pass by this monument every day. It is a large, dome-like structure slightly raised above the ground.

Figure 6. Monumento a la Revolución
Photo credit: Jessica Carmen Villaseñor

Fountains are on either side of the monument. Most of the time, these fountains are turned off, and you can usually find a group of unhoused individuals taking shelter in the alcove of these fountains. It's hard to see from afar but walking up to the fountain on any given morning you can see bundles of blankets lined up one next to the other—youth and adults sleeping side by side. This housing settlement also extends beyond these fountains. In front of the fountain is a large flat area leading to the stairs to the ground level of the monument. On this flat area, you can usually find youth and adults congregating, playing games like cards and soccer, or dancing with their friends to the newest Reggaeton hit.

On the other side of this large flat area, opposite the fountains, is a planter with trees. Here too, you can find adults and youth sleeping on the ground and in tents seeking shelter from the elements (Figure 7). This housing settlement is home to approximately forty adults and youth and extends to both sides of the monument, with adults and youth sleeping in the fountains and planters on either side.

Figure 7. Revolución housing encampment
Photo credit: Jessica Carmen Villaseñor

This housing settlement is a point of sale for drugs and prostitution, and its drug dealer is one of the main competitors of the dealer who lives in the Espejos housing settlement. The location of this settlement makes it very visible to residents and tourists and, as a result, becomes the point of entry for many youth in street situations. For some youth, this is where they were first introduced to drugs or street life and began to spend more time here until they stayed. Others, as the following fieldnote excerpt shows, are guided here by those in the city who know that the settlement exists.

> We head to Revolución and find a new youth. He's sitting on the bench in front the encampment. He's an eighteen-year-old boy from Puebla. He's sitting there with a blanket wrapped around him, and he looks nervous or scared. His left hand is full of dry blood, and as we have him walk over to sit by the fountain, it becomes obvious he's limping as though he's hurt. His name is Gabriel. He began to explain his situation. He said he was on the street in Puebla and went to the beach in Oaxaca to have a good time, but when he got there he found himself in a bad situation. He met an older man who introduced himself as a

> Christian and offered him housing. Gabriel said he went with the man because he said he would take care of him and because the man bought him "all the crack he wanted." After consuming about a gram of crack at this man's house, Gabriel said that he began to make sexual advances but clarified to us that he was not interested in having a sexual relationship with the man, so he began to fight him off. He said that the man hit him, so Gabriel stabbed him and took off running. He said he went to the street but had nowhere else to go. After two days in Oaxaca he raised 200 pesos to take the bus to come to the CDMX. He's worried that the police in Oaxaca are looking for him and kept repeating "but it was in self-defense." He said that he took the teacher's bus from the center of Oaxaca to Revolución but that he's never been to the CDMX before. He explained that he arrived at 6 a.m. but had nowhere to go and no money to buy food. He was confused and scared, so someone that was outside the bus stop told him to go to the housing settlement at Revolución. The man told him that there are a lot of *chavos* that hang out at the settlement next to the monument, so he should go down there, that they would be able to help him. (Fieldnote excerpt, March 2018)

Casitas

Casitas (little houses) is the housing settlement that was mentioned in the introduction. This is a large housing structure surrounded by other, smaller structures at the center of the intersection of Paseo de la Reforma and Eje 1. This housing settlement is home to approximately fifty to seventy adults and youth. It is a point of sale for drugs and prostitution. It is very common for the residents of Casitas to be outside of the housing structure moneando, washing windows, or just hanging out with their friends. This housing settlement is one of the largest and most well-known in the Delegación Cuauhtémoc. It is made up of one large housing structure in the center divider on the south side of the Eje 1 and smaller structures in the center divider on the north side. The large housing structure is made of numerous tarps connected to nearby trees, and residents have even connected to nearby electrical poles, meaning that they can have a TV inside. This housing settlement is at the edge of the Colonia Guerrero, a notorious barrio bravo, but is just a ten-minute walk from the Centro Historico's Alameda Central. This housing settlement is also located just down the

street from Casa Alianza's day center, allowing me to come into contact with this housing settlement and its residents almost daily as I would walk by the settlement on the way to the metro or the youth would come to the center for services.

Speaking to outreach workers at Casa Alianza, I learned that this settlement was not always in its current location. Not long before I arrived for preliminary fieldwork, this settlement was moved from an area a few blocks south, down Paseo de la Reforma, closer to the Centro Histórico. One day as I was walking with Israel, the coordinator of the Casa Alianza outreach team, we passed a small plaza with garden planters and a large mural billboard between apartment buildings. Israel explained, "You know, Casitas wasn't always where it's at now. It used to be here. They had their whole shelter, and everyone lived here. This is where Rosana used to live when she was still a *chava* [girl]." Rosana was one of the street-

Figure 8. Casitas housing settlement
Photo credit: Jessica Carmen Villaseñor

connected adults I had come to know quite well. I asked him what happened, how the settlement was moved, and he continued, "The city was getting ready for the Pope's visit a few years ago [in 2016] and they wanted to clean the city up, so they came in with water

hoses and just tore everything down. After that, all of the people who lived here moved down to where Casitas is today and built that structure."

Given its visibility and its size, this housing settlement was seen as dangerous by neighborhood residents. Many would cross the street to avoid the large housing structure or avoid this intersection completely for fear that they would be assaulted by one of the unhoused individuals in the housing settlement. While in the field, this settlement became increasingly policed. Early in my fieldwork period, the police closed the lane of the Eje 1 adjacent to the large housing structure and had at least one *patrulla* (police car) there all day. By April 2018, this police surveillance led to a police operation where numerous police cars arrived at the settlement accompanied by a dump truck, and they began to take down parts of the large housing structure while its residents stood by watching (Figure 8). During this operation, the police took down the smaller housing structures around the settlement's main shelter leaving only a smaller version of the large housing structure in this settlement. Casitas residents persisted in this space and continued to call the settlement home despite this operation, eventually rebuilding the large housing structure and the smaller houses around it.

Conclusion

To understand the meanings of the actions of a group and to understand their social world, it is crucial to understand the context in which the group is embedded (Geertz 1973). Youth in street situations in Mexico City live in a very particular context that impacts the way they understand and make sense of their world. This context shapes the contours of their everyday lives, it gives meaning to their relationships, and it gives meaning to their actions.

As explained in this chapter, these youth live in a Mexico that has experienced a large growth in the informal sector and a related bifurcation of the service economy that both pushes and pulls youth to the street. More locally, these youth live in a Mexico City with a large urban poor community. They live in a Mexico City that is at once expanding and protecting their rights but is also pushing them out of the city. They live in a Mexico City that deems them a protected population, but whose thinning over the years has left little public expenditure for social services, a gap that the large civil society sector must fill. These youth live in a Mexico City whose historic class tensions have only grown over the last two decades, impacting the way these youth and their communities are understood in the city. It is within this context that youth in street situations make their way to the street, and it is within this context that their social world takes shape.

Chapter 2
"Together but Apart": The Community of Youth in Street Situations

> Carlos answers the doorbell, even though he can see Juan Carlos on the screen he asks, "Who is it?" Juan Carlos is not alone. He's with a group of five others—his brother Pablo, Daniel, Ariana, Isabella, and Alexander. They start making jokes in the background and Juan Carlos, laughing, calls back to the camera, "It's me!! We're here, we're on time. Let us in." Carlos lets them in, and the group strolls into the waiting room. You can hear them joking and laughing from the office. I walk out to the waiting room with Josefina, and the pungent smell of the activo hits me. It's clear that they either consumed all night or are already high. I greet all of them with the customary hand-slide–fist bump combination, and Josefina gives them all a kiss on the cheek. Josefina excuses herself to turn on the water heaters upstairs so that the youth can take showers. I'm left alone in the waiting room with the youth, and they begin to talk amongst themselves, joking about the party they had the night before. Juan Carlos jokes with Daniel, "Man, I can't believe Jose got so high last night, and did you see Yesenia dancing? [He shakes his head] She completely lost control." Ariana jumps in, "I can't believe we're here right now." She turns to me, "We should get a prize for showing up." I ask her, "How did you all wake up if you were partying all night?" Juan Carlos responds, in a tone that makes it clear he is proud of himself, "I woke up early and looked at the Torre Latino and saw that there was time to make it before 8:30, so I started waking everyone up. Jose and Yesenia said that they didn't want to come, they were still in bad shape, but everyone else woke up." Ariana adds, "Yeah, and since Isabella wanted to come, we [referring to herself and her "husband" Daniel] came to help her." (Fieldnote excerpt, January 2018)

Friends and peers are central to the lives of youth in street situations. The youth in the above fieldnote form part of a group of youth that range from fifteen to eighteen years old who live together and spend the majority of their time together. Juan Carlos and Pablo are biological brothers, Ariana and Daniel are romantic partners who refer to each other as "husband" and "wife," and Isabella and Alexander are best friends who are frequently seen together. As mentioned in the last chapter, Isabella is blind, so she relies heavily on other youth to help her navigate the city. Alexander has taken her under his wing as his *hermanita* or little sister and helps guide her around the city.

Peers and the adult urban poor are the individuals whom these youth spend the most time with; these are the relationships that they build to help them secure their survival and some of the most important relationships that they turn to for emotional support. The relationships that they have with peers and other urban poor residents are the building blocks of the communities that they form on the street. As mentioned previously, much of the existing research that examines the lives of youth in street situations focuses its attention on describing the characteristics or factors that make youth more susceptible to being on the street and staying there. Relationships that youth have with their peers and the adult urban poor tend to be examined primarily as a key influence in this process, as a key driver in the socialization process of youth into street life, and one of the main reasons youth stay on the street.

Scholars argue that peers help these youth begin to develop individual and collective identities as a youth in street situations (Conticini 2008). This process of socialization into the life of street culture is known as the "career" of the street child or youth in street situation and involves a dynamic process of acceptance, adaptation, accustomation, and dependence on the street (Beazley 2003; Conticini 2008; Evans 2006; Invernizzi 2003; Visano 1990; Lucchini 1996). This research argues that peer relationships are key to this process. Acceptance, for example, is the stage associated with entrance to the street, and it is at this stage that youth learn how to survive, the dangers to avoid, and the role of the different street actors. Scholars find that youth in street situations learn this information from sympathetic youth already on the street—from their peers. The second stage, adaptation, is characterized by an increased adaptation to the rules and norms of the street. This happens as the youth begin to build reciprocal relationships with peers on the street and gain access to income-

generating activities. Accustomation, the third stage, is when youth become a respected member of the street group, gaining an influential position within the group and even acting as a role model for newcomers. The last stage, dependence, only occurs for the most well-established youth in street situations. At this stage, the youth is so embedded in the life of the street and in peer relationships that they cannot imagine themselves leaving. As Conticini (2008, 427) argues, the last stage—dependence—"is mainly due to a chronic dependence on the network of relationships and routine activities, and their regression from coping to survival strategies."

While the influence of peers and the adult urban poor in the socialization process is important to understand, these relationships play a larger role than socialization to the street. Focusing solely on the role of these relationships in the socialization process does not allow us to *understand* these relationships in all of their complexity and does not allow us to fully understand the role they play in shaping the community of youth in street situations. It is important to understand why youth are drawn to particular relationships, these relationships' meaning and purpose, and the various ways these youth participate in the building of their distinctive communities through these relationships.

In many ways, these youth are similar to any other youth around the world—housed or unhoused. They have many needs, and they have a right to the fulfillment of many of these needs, especially those that pertain to their survival, development, and protection. In addition, these youth want the love and belonging that are key to their mental health and emotional wellbeing (Cabezas 2016). The difference between these youth and their housed peers is that they don't look to their biological families or to their homes to meet these needs and help them exercise these rights but instead must do so in the context of the street and

the larger city—a city where a violent street culture already exists, where local government and police are actively pushing unhoused populations off the street, and where youth fear being sent back to their homes, the places that they've experienced abandonment, neglect, and abuse, if they are found by DIF.

These youth are acutely aware of their vulnerability in this context and navigate this vulnerability by building unique relationships with the adult urban poor and their peers to help them live their lives. More than just factors in the process of socialization, the relationships that youth build with unhoused adults and youth on the street are about creating and recreating families through fictive kin relationships to help them meet their needs and exercise their rights in the city. These relationships allow youth to create spaces in their lives where they can "live in their own fantasy," a fantasy that includes love, security, and hope for a future free from the pain of the present and the past.

This chapter moves beyond viewing these relationships as factors in the process of socialization to *understand* the relationships these youth have with their peers and the larger urban poor. In this chapter, I will detail the way youths' awareness of their vulnerability in the city and their emotional needs draw them to very particular relationships when they enter the street, specifically relationships with women drug dealers who offer them protection and become their street *mamás*. I show the way these youth form youth satellite groups, drawing symbolic boundaries between themselves and adults in street situations who they see as *drogadictos* (drug addicts) not only to maintain their safety but also to maintain a positive self-image. I then explore the complicated dynamics of the disposable ties that make up these smaller youth satellite groups as the youth use these ties for

protection, love, and a sense of belonging but rebel against them in an attempt to maintain their own autonomy.

Relationships with the Urban Poor

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the existing informal housing settlements that these youth encounter as they enter the street are found throughout the city and are home to adults, youth, and children. They are well-known points of drug sale and prostitution. Youth seek these settlements because they offer them protection. As with all unhoused people around the world, being on the street alone leaves one vulnerable to being robbed, raped, killed, or arrested. In the case of youth, there is also the risk that they will be found on the street and sent back to their homes. These youth seek out existing settlements because there is safety in numbers, and housing settlements offer some protection from these dangers.

Despite the safety they offer these youth, youth are not always accepted at these existing settlements. The adults in these settlements can be hesitant to let youth stay for various reasons. Many adults in street situations believe that youth should not be on the street, and they hope that not letting the youth stay will deter them from entering the street. Adults on the street hope that they can save these youth from one day finding themselves in their position—an unhoused adult with drug addiction—so they turn them away. Adults are also reluctant to accept youth into these groups because they believe youth are a burden and do not want to take on the responsibility of having to watch over and care for them. There is also a fear that youth living in the settlement will attract unwanted attention from the police or DIF, placing the whole housing settlement at risk.

Juan Carlos and Pablo ran into this reluctance when they sought shelter at the Balderas housing settlement. Juan Carlos recalled,

> They didn't want to let us stay there. They were going to turn us away until Brenda came out and said, "I'll be responsible for them," and she gave us something to eat. She came out with a banana, and I remember it tasted like it was spoiled. It tasted bad. That night, I couldn't sleep.

The brothers were almost turned away by the group within the housing settlement but were allowed to stay because Brenda vouched for them. She took responsibility for the well-being of these youth, and she eventually became Juan Carlos and Pablo's street mamá, a role she played for many of the youth in street situations I met in Mexico City. As will be explained below, these street mamás facilitate youth in street situations' access to the safety that these shelters provide.

Despite the protection that these settlements offer, there are some youth who prefer to be alone. These are the youth who stay at arm's length from these housing settlements and the adults who live in them. This is not common. These are the youth who tend to have more serious mental health issues or tend to have trouble getting along with the other youth. One such youth was David. David was a tall boy who was twenty-two years-old. He had light skin and light brown hair. Despite the fact that David was around the area of Revolución, I had never really engaged with him because he kept his distance. My first real interaction with David was when he joined a pickup soccer game that started on the *plancha* below the monument.

> David got up and started kicking the ball around with us today. I had heard the youth refer to him as "*el loco*" (the crazy one), but I didn't really understand why. When he approached to play soccer, I noticed that he was missing a patch of hair–it looked as though he had pulled it out himself. He actually played really well, but when we were playing he would start to talk to himself and began to get angry and get distracted very easily. It seemed like he was being

> distracted and angry by things that weren't happening on the field. The other youth would try to keep him engaged with the game, but they just shrugged off his behavior as normal because as they reminded me, "It's ok, he's just loco." I later asked him why he stayed by himself and he said, "I don't know. I like being alone." (Fieldnote excerpt, April 2018)

Because these youth are seen as "crazy," they tend to be left alone by the rest of the youth because their perceived mental health issues make youth believe their behavior is unpredictable, and therefore, they are dangerous. Even so, these youth who stay alone tend to stay somewhere near the larger group to reap the benefits of the protection in numbers. This was the case for Francisco. Francisco was a young boy who would come into my field sites for a few days and then disappear. He was from an agricultural community outside the city. He would spend most of his time at his home until he got into a fight with one of his parents or his grandmother and he would head back out on the streets for a few days or weeks at a time. Francisco usually stayed with a boy named Alexis Manuel who was from his hometown. One day, Francisco showed up to the Precomunidad. It was clear he hadn't showered in a few days and he hadn't been eating. I asked him where he was staying, and he mentioned two cross streets that were near the Espejos settlement, so I asked him if he meant Espejos. He said, "no," and clarified:

> F: Not with the whole group. I stay in front, where the Kentucky is.
> J: Alone?
> F: Yes, but they're watching me from the other side to make sure nothing happens to me.
> J: From the other side?
> F: Yes.
> J: Do you get along with the other youth?
> F: Yes. With Alexander and Martín, yes.
> J: And the rest?
> F: Meh.
> J: Do you have trouble with them?
> F: With everyone.
> J: What did you do?

F: I fight.
J: What do you mean? Did you rob someone or something?
F: No. I get really crazy. It's just better if I'm alone.

As Francisco makes clear, even when not living within the settlement, having connections with individuals within the settlement can offer protection.

When these youth find themselves on the street, they seek out existing shelters for protection. They seek out people they can trust, individuals who can protect them and show them how to survive on the street. The protection of these settlements even extends to youth who don't live within the group, as the connections they make with youth and adults ensure that they take care of them from afar. More than protection, the individuals in these settlements show youth in street situations the love and belonging that are key for their mental and emotional well-being. These connections are facilitated by the street mamás who help youth gain access to existing settlements.

Street Mamás

Each settlement has their own leaders who perform various roles for the groups that they head. While youth can be found in all groups, they are both pushed and pulled toward groups that are headed by women drug dealers. These women offer youth a place to live when other adults don't want the burden of taking in youth in street situations. These relationships offer youth protection from violence, food, and a makeshift shelter, and they provide a sense of love, belonging, and family. More than that, given the larger context of Mexico City, these street mamás offer youth in street situations much needed protection from the police that in many ways allows youth to exercise their right to be in public space.

Brenda was the woman who took responsibility for Juan Carlos and his brother Pablo when they were going to be turned away by the adults at the Balderas settlement. When I

met Brenda in 2016, she was thirty-three years old and had spent the last sixteen years of her life on the street. She is about five feet three inches tall and, like many of the youth and adults in street situations, extremely thin. Her hair is usually cut to just past her shoulders, her teeth are crooked and noticeably bleached by activo use, and her skin is prematurely aged from a mix of drug consumption, the sun, and the lack of self-care that comes with living on the street. Brenda is a mom of two—Joan, a young man who was seventeen years old when I met him in 2016, and his younger sister Brenda or Brendita, who was fifteen years old when I first met her.

Brenda was born in the United States, in a small town in Colorado, but moved to the state of Veracruz, Mexico, as a young girl when her parents moved back to their hometown. Brenda still remembers enough English to hold a very basic conversation and is known for teaching the youth on the street the English necessary to panhandle from foreign tourists. She was in an abusive relationship in Veracruz with the father of Joan and Brendita and came to Mexico City looking to escape her husband. Brenda is a well-known dealer of activo and can usually be found sitting in the settlement waiting for customers. She was one of the leaders in the Balderas settlement that Juan Carlos and Pablo arrived to, a leader in the Juarez settlement (before the police operativo tore it down in 2017), and later the leader of the Revolución settlement.

Brenda took responsibility for many youth in street situations despite the fact that she was already caring for her own children. The youth whom she would take in would become part of her street family. In fact, to many youth around the settlements, she was known as "Mamá Brenda." Mamá Brenda was not the only street mother. Priscilla, another woman on the street, was also a mother to many youth in street situations. Mamá Priscilla is

a woman in her forties. She is about five feet five inches tall. Her hair is cut into a short pixie style, and her skin looks leathery and burned from the sun. Priscilla is HIV positive. She has spent more than twenty years of her life on the street. Like Brenda, she is an activo dealer. Priscilla is the leader of the Espejos settlement, and while the two women were friends at one point, today they are rivals competing for business.

In conversation, many youth referred to these street mothers as though they were their biological mothers, not making the distinction when they switched between talking about their biological mother and their street mother. When I asked Isabella about her relationship with Priscilla, for example, she made it clear that Priscilla was her mother.

> J: How do you get along with Priscilla?
> I: Good. In fact, she's my mother. She's everyone's mother.
> J: And what does she do?
> I: I don't know. She gets mad at us if we don't pick up after ourselves or if we leave our things thrown around. She's the one that makes the rules.

The mamás help orient youth to the street and protect them once they are there. They gift them food when they are hungry and buy them clothes when their clothes get ruined, worn out, or too small. They provide them blankets or a tent to sleep under. They even provide the drugs that are such an integral part of the youths' everyday lives. The street mamás help the youth survive on the street, but more than just goods, these mamás offer youth in street situations protection.

Street mamás set the norms of the group and protect youth from other youth and adults within the housing settlement. As the leaders and mothers of the settlement, these women police the behavior of the group and enforce the norms. They provide the social control that keeps everyone in line. As Isabella mentioned, the street mamás "make the rules." This was made clear at various points while in the field when I would see the mamá

would step in to break up an argument or send a youth or adult away from the group so that an argument would not escalate into a physical fight. One day when arriving to Revolución, for example, Mamá Brenda sent away a youth before a fight broke out.

> Hector and I were walking to Revolución. We go up to the center of the monument and look down before walking down the stairs. Nobody sees us. There are about fifteen people standing around. They are in two small groups on the plancha in front of the planter where Brenda sleeps. We start heading down the stairs but see that Brenda is yelling at one of the boys. She's holding a long wooden pole that's about a foot longer than she is tall. As we get closer, Brenda gets louder. She's trying to get the boy to leave. Hector stops me and tells me to wait before getting any closer. Brenda continues yelling and this boy doesn't seem to be leaving. She swings the wooden pole and hits the boy in the arm. Brenda screams louder "*YA!!*" [now] and the boy turns around. He starts walking toward the staircase that Hector and I are standing on, so we start backing up the stairs. Brenda throws the wooden pole in the boy's direction. We ask him what happened as he walks by us, and he just says, with disdain, "Agustin is a *cabrón* [asshole], and Brenda's protecting him." (Fieldnote excerpt, November 2017)

Not only do these youth in street situations feel the pressure placed by these mamás as they set and enforce the norms of the group, but they actively call on these women to enforce the norms to protect them. Cristobal, a seventeen-year-old boy, explained calling on Mamá Brenda to protect him when he first got to the street.

> I met Jesus … He's gay [whispers] … and he says, "You have no place to sleep, so come and sleep with me," and I said yes. Well he wanted [makes sexual motions] but no, I said, "Look for someone else, *carnal* [street brother]," and he said, "It's that I like you, I think you're handsome." I said, 'But no no no, leave me alone." And I took off with his blanket, and I slept outside on the third day. But he started to insist, "I want to talk to you … I like you … I want something with you." And then I got angry. I said, 'What the hell?' so I talked to Brenda and I said, "Look, Jesus is bothering me, he's telling me that he likes me and blah blah blah but I don't like men," and so Brenda scolded him really badly. Since she scolded him, he left and started telling people that he only wanted to mess around with me. So I went back to Brenda, and I told her what he was saying because everyone started making fun of me. Later I got angry and again I told Brenda at night and she scolded him even worse and told him that the next time he does that he was going to lose his space [he lived in a tent next to

> her makeshift home] and he was going to have to go to the other side of the point.

These mamás also help orient youth to the dangers outside the group and signal to these youth the places that are safe to navigate in the city. Given the real and perceived dangers of the street and the fear that comes with a youth's first nights on the street, youth rely on these mothers for cues to navigate their lives—learning whom to trust, where to go, and what is dangerous. They encourage youth in street situations to go to the local shelters or NGOs to shower and receive aid. When Hector and I met Yesenia, for example, she looked not only to her peers, but to Mamá Brenda for approval.

> Hector and I were sent to Revolución today. We noticed a girl that we had never seen before. She was smoking weed with an older man and hanging around Jose and Judah. We greeted Mamá Brenda and went over to the group. We greeted Jose and Judah with the normal fist bump and introduced ourselves to this girl. She looked scared and was hesitant to talk to us. She said her name was Yesenia. Hector explained that he was an outreach worker from Casa Alianza and explained the different things that the organization's Precomunidad offers. Yesenia looked to Judah, without saying anything more to us, and he told her that it was "*chido*" [cool]. He said, "Casa Alianza is chido, I wish I would have stayed." And told her to come with us. She then went to Mamá Brenda and told her she was thinking of going with Hector and I back to the Precomunidad. Mamá Brenda told her, "Good, go. You'll get a chance to shower, get dressed, and eat." With the approval from Mamá Brenda, Yesenia came with us. (Fieldnote excerpt, October 2017)

More than just goods and resources or cues to how to navigate the city, these youth are drawn to these street mamás for the emotional support that they provide.

These youth, many of them feeling as though they have been neglected, abused, and abandoned by their families, turn to these women to meet their emotional needs. They seek to fill the void that they feel from not having parents by turning to these street mamás who show youth in street situations love, care, and attention. These mothers offer these youth a sense of family, a sense of support, and a sense of belonging that is key to their mental health

and well-being. For many youth, in fact, the relationships with these street mamas is the first time they feel loved and cared for. As Isabella explained,

> I: Well, there are good things and bad things. But on the street I find the love that didn't exist in my house.
> J: How?
> I: Well there are people that love you, that support you, I don't know. My mom was never there for me. She was never there to support me. And in the street … I know that at times it's bad. I know there are a lot of bad things that happen, but I like it.
> J: What is it that you like?
> I: I don't know. Being with my friends. Being with Mamá Priscilla. Feeling that love that my family didn't show me.

As mother figures, these women give the youth the sense that someone cares for them and that someone is looking after their well-being. They offer these youth a place to feel like they belong. For Juan Carlos, even something as small as a scolding from Mamá Brenda helped him feel love and like he had a mother. When I asked him about his experience with sex work, he explained that he had stopped because Mamá Brenda expressed concern and scolded him.

> JC: Right now, I haven't done it because I was scolded.
> J: Who scolded you?
> JC: Brenda.
> J: She scolded you?
> JC: Yeah, she found out and she got mad at me. She told me that I didn't know who I had been with, all of the infections, and all of that stuff. But it's okay, I know she just worries about me. That's what mamás are for.

For Juan Carlos, Brenda's concern for his safety and well-being was how Brenda showed she cared for him and helped him feel like he was loved.

While youth seek this type of love, it is a complicated balance, as the youth also want to feel independent and maintain their autonomy. At times the youth push back on the idea that the mamá is the carer and protector. This was the case for Amanda. Amanda was a small, fifteen-year-old girl, no taller than four feet eleven inches, who weighed around eighty

pounds. Amanda consumed activo, marijuana, and crack. The drugs slowly took over her life. She stopped showering. She stopped eating. Her whole world revolved around consuming drugs—the fear and sad reality for many of the youth in street situations. Amanda was very quickly getting visibly weaker. Mamá Brenda began to scold her, telling her that she was consuming too many drugs and began forcing her to eat. Mamá Brenda reached the point where she refused to sell Amanda activo because, as Mamá Brenda said, "She was sick." Upset with Mamá Brenda, Amanda left the housing settlement to find another place in the city where she could *conseguir una mona* (buy activo). The next day, Amanda died from heart failure. Ariana was with her when she passed away and recalled what happened to me the next morning, unable to hold back her tears she explained:

> [Amanda] was sitting down and wanted some of my soda. I told her to get up and get it. She said she couldn't. I teased her because she was sure able to get up to get the mona not long before. I told her, "What happened?" Then all of a sudden she put her head down and started to convulse. The group started to laugh at her, and we told her, "Stop playing sick so that someone will take you the soda." We all thought she was just messing around. But then I went to lift up her head because she stopped moving, and all you could see were the whites of her eyes.

As previously mentioned, these youth live in the context of a city that is at once granting them rights and increasing protections for the youth population while at the same time policing them and trying to push them out of the city center. This means that for these youth, their right to the city is at once guaranteed and constantly challenged. The relationship between youth in street situations and the police is complicated: there are officers who respect their right to be in public space and there are officers who view these youth as a nuisance. As Brendita describes,

> It's just that they can be bad. There are some that help you out, but there are others that are just like "don't do this" and "don't do that," "we're going to clear

> you out of here." Or just because you're listening to music they tell you, "don't make noise." And I know that maybe we're in a space where people pass by, but we're not hurting anyone by listening to music or because someone doesn't have their shirt on. The boys like to go around without shirts because it gets so hot under the sun, and the police get stupid with them. So there are some that get stupid with us, and there are others that just tell us to make sure that we keep everything clean.

For youth who live alone on the street, they are at the whim of these police officers and are vulnerable to police operativos that "clean" the streets. For youth like Jesus Marcos, who stays on the street with just one other youth, this means that a run-in with a police officer can turn into a violent affair. He explains,

> The day before yesterday there were problems with the police because they put an officer in the doorway of where I usually stay on the sidewalk, and he didn't want to let us stay there. And the police officer started pushing my carnal [street brother] and my carnal started hitting him, and I had to calm my carnal down. Then all of a sudden three, four police officers showed up on the corner just to watch us all night.

Aware of their vulnerability at the hands of these police officers, the youth gravitate toward groups because the leaders, in many cases the mamás, can offer them protection.

Through their involvement in the sale of drugs, the leaders of these groups have the resources to broker deals with the local government that guarantee their right to public space. Discussing the relationship between the police and Brenda's group, Juan Carlos describes what he refers to as "power" with the delegación or local government.

> There in Revolución, they don't really tell us anything. When there's conflict, they tell us we have to stop. The worst that's happened is one police officer who's really rude to us, and he threatens to burn us and things like that. But since we have power in the delegación, well, they can't do anything. The government tells us "you know there's no problem with you being here," and they record us to show that we keep everything clean. They record us sweeping. And when there is a problem with the police the guy from the delegación shows up and tells the police that we can stay there. Nothing ever happens to us.

Brendita also mentioned this "power" coming through the support of Miguel from the delegación:

> B: Well there's one, Miguel, he's the one that supports us. He takes us things, he supports us. It's because of him that we're allowed to be there and they don't move us out. In fact, two days ago, there was gonna be an operativo where the police were going to move us. But they didn't, they just told us to clean.
> J: And what did they tell you?
> B: They show up really aggressive.
> J: Like two police officers or …?
> B: No, a lot. Like twenty or more. Some get really aggressive and then the rest of them have to be there to calm down the ones who get aggressive. What happens is that they think they can do whatever they want to us, to treat us like we're less than, and they show up and they speak to us badly, and they start to argue with us.
> J: And when that happens, Miguel helps?
> B: Yes.
> J: So he shows up to the point?
> B: No. He wasn't there. But he sends his son or someone else to check up on the situation … how we are. He's the one that helps make sure that we don't get kicked out or moved.

As Jose later explained, Miguel's interest in protecting the population was more complicated than just a concern for protecting the settlement. He insinuated that Miguel from the delegación was also involved with the sale of drugs taking place at these settlements, meaning that he had a stake in ensuring that the settlement was able to continue at their spot and continue with their sale of drugs.

> Jose: Well let's suppose we don't count the night. You get up whenever you want, you fold your blankets. Where I stay they put us to do chores.
> J: Who makes you do chores?
> Jose: The ones from there. Because the one in charge goes to see us.
> J: Who's in charge?
> Jose: A man from the delegación, the one in charge…. [whispers] of the monas.
> J: He's in charge of the monas?
> Jose: Yeah, he's the one that sells to Brenda.
> J: And he's the one that tells you that your spot has to be clean?
> Jose: Yeah, so that they don't move us out of the spot.

While I cannot speak to his involvement in the drug sale, I did witness the exchange of money between Mamá Priscilla and this local government official, Miguel, as though they had an agreement.

> Hector and I walk up to the plaza when the police officers are waking up the youth. We stand to the side observing. Today there are two police officers, but they aren't the only ones waking up the youth; the man from the delegación is also there. The youth are folding their blankets and sweeping the area. Priscilla is off sitting by the statue at the back of the plaza. The police officers are yelling at the youth to hurry with their sweeping and cleaning up their space. The man from the delegación is recording the youth on his phone. He then moves over to where Priscilla is. Martín, one of the youth from the point, comes over to talk to Hector and I, and this gives us an excuse to be around. Martín is standing in front of me and looking over his shoulder I can see that the man from the delegación is talking to Priscilla. She's sitting cross-legged at the foot of the statue with her bag of money from her drug account in her lap, and Miguel is standing over her. After they talk for a minute, Priscilla pulls a wad of money out of her bag and gives it to the man from the delegación. He puts it in his bag, walks back to where the police officers are, takes one more picture and leaves. (Fieldnote excerpt, November 2017)

These mamás broker deals to protect themselves and the settlements from police officers and from the larger push in the city to clear these populations from public space. In the process, they protect these youth's right to the street. They have the power to broker the youths' rights to the city. Youth know that if they leave the group, in many ways they lose their right to the city.

The relationship between youth and their street mamás can be considered symbiotic. Youth build these relationships with these women because they show them love, belonging, family, and protection, but in return, these street mothers also feel love, connection, and purpose, which are very difficult to find on the street. Youth love these women, caring for and protecting them as though they were their biological mothers. More than just these emotional benefits, however, these youth serve a purpose for these street mamás. These

mothers sell activo to the youths who are her street children, giving these mamás a constant customer base. Second, there is a sense of loyalty and trust between youth and the mamás, so much so that street mamás rely on youth in street situations when they need someone to watch their drugs or their money. Those youth who have gained the most trust from these mothers are given the most responsibility and are assigned to sell drugs when the mamá is not at the settlement. The mamás know that youth are less likely to be stopped by the police, and they know that there are fewer legal repercussions for youth if they do get caught with drugs. As a result, they tend to have youth transport or sell activo outside the settlement.

Drawing Boundaries: Together but Separate

Youth are attracted by the attention, love, and protection these street mamás offer, but they are not fully embedded in the adult groups at these informal settlements. Youth in street situations form satellite groups that are created by drawing symbolic boundaries to distance themselves from the adults at these settlements. Establishing these boundaries offers youth protection and helps them retain a positive self-image, something difficult to do given the stigma they encounter on a daily basis as they navigate their everyday lives as individuals in street situations.

As Lamont and Molnar (2002) explain, "symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time" (168). These symbolic boundaries separate people into groups, and within these groups, there are feelings of similarity and group membership (Epstein 1992). The urban poor tend to draw symbolic boundaries to make distinctions between the "deserving" and "nondeserving poor" or the "respectable" and "unrespectable" poor (Katz 1989; Morris 1994). Elijah Anderson's (1999) examination of the distinctions drawn in a poor black

neighborhood of Philadelphia, for example, illuminates the way symbolic markers are used to make distinctions between "street" and "decent" people. Similarly, in *Black Picket Fences*, Mary Pattillo (1999) describes the way symbolic physical markers, such as maintained lawns, block club posters, and antilittering signs, along with various behavioral markers were used by residents in Groveland to draw boundaries between their respectable black middle-class neighborhood and the surrounding impoverished, unrespectable neighborhoods of the south side of Chicago. In Julienne Corboz's (2013) examination of Uruguayan squatter settlements, she notes the way the downwardly mobile "new-poor" in these settlements drew symbolic boundaries to distinguish themselves from the "old poor," whom they framed as "dirty," "value-less," and "apathetic."

Youth in street situations draw boundaries between themselves and unhoused adults in the city. The unhoused adult population in Mexico City is stigmatized, looked down upon, and vilified by middle-class residents. Youth in street situations draw boundaries between themselves and the adults as a way to evaluate their own group positively when compared to these stigmatized adults—the out group—in order to maintain a positive sense of self (Tajfel and Turner 1985). While these youth are drawn to each other because they have shared interests as youth and they have a mutual fear of adults, they also actively set themselves apart from adults whom they see has having failed to meet their social responsibilities and are therefore seen as morally inferior.

It is not uncommon for youth to move to different settlements as they get into fights with other settlement residents or start new relationships. In fact, it is so common that part of Casa Alianza's protocol was to ask youth where they slept each night. The youth would usually say that they stayed in a particular part of the city, naming a housing settlement, but

would also say that they were alone or would give the name of one or two peers. At first, I did not understand this mixed response. I knew from my interactions with these youth that they lived with many adults, youth, and children in these settlements, so it seemed contradictory that they would claim to live alone or say that they lived with one or two people. The reality, however, is that these youth not only see themselves as being separate from the larger adult settlement but also actively try to distance themselves from the adults in the group. As my conversation with Jose clarified, these youth see themselves as living with the adults but having separate lives with a small group of friends who are other youth in street situations—being "together but separate."

> J: Where do you stay?
> Jose: In Revolución.
> J: Who do you stay with?
> Jose: I stay by myself.
> J: … You stay by yourself?
> Jose: Yes. … Well more like we stay four together like this [draws a line in the air], behind sleeps Jesus, Juan Carlos, Agustin, you know how there are the tarps in the back—a couple sleeps there, Brenda, and you know how there's a small blue tent on the other side in the corner, that's where Brendita sleeps. And on the floor is where I sleep with Rene, his brother, and Danny.
> J: It's interesting because you say that you stay alone, but there are a lot of people that stay there. How do you understand that?
> Jose: Well like that. [using his hands to motion to sleeping positions] I sleep here and everyone else has their space. But at the end of the day everyone has their *rumbo* [direction]. Everyone is into their own thing.
> J: So, you're independent, but you live together?
> Jose: Yeah. It's like together but separate. I get along and talk to Danny and Juan Carlos. They're really the only ones I talk to. But I know everyone else too.

These satellite groups of youth are the spaces in which most of the youths' interactions occur. Youth form these satellite groups by building relationships with their peers—other youth in street situations. They are drawn together because they share affinities, they understand each other, and they share an inherent fear of adults. Despite being on the street, their

interests and hobbies are similar to any other youth in the city. They listen to music, watch movies, and play games like other youth their age. These youth form relationships with other youth in street situations to be able to participate in this type of youthful recreation—they bond with their peers over the latest Reggaeton hit, they watch movies, and they go to the "freaky plaza" to play video games with their peers. These are also the spaces where youth find the escape that they're looking for. With their peers they spend their days and nights *en la fiesta* (in the party) where they consume drugs and drink, listen to music and dance, and, in the euphoria of the party, partake in free and fluid sexual activities. It is here in the party with other youth in street situations that youth fulfill part of their need for what Cristobal described as "living in my fantasy," where the party numbs the pain of the past and present and allows them to forget all their troubles.

More than interests, however, these youth keep their distance from the adults in the larger settlement out of fear. Despite the fact that they can rely on the mamá to enforce the social norms of the group, they know that they are still at risk. One day at the Precomunidad the youth were sharing stories about what they considered crazy experiences that they had on the street. Most of the youth were talking about getting into fights and having things stolen from them. The youth were going around the table sharing stories, each sharing something a little more shocking than the last. Daniel, a sixteen-year-old boy who had been on the street since the death of his parents when he was seven, described an experience where he was almost raped in his sleep by an adult man.

> Daniel says that he has a story that will top Alexander's. He is leaning back in the chair, relaxed, his tone is light and joking, and he starts, "One day I was sleeping at Juarez, but I wasn't all the way asleep yet. I was lying there dozing off. All of a sudden I felt someone unbutton my pants and start pulling them down. At first I thought, 'hmm, this could be nice.'" He laughs, "but then I was

> like 'nah, what the hell?! No one is gonna do that to me.' I grabbed my pants. Man, I got up quick and hit him in the face. It was a drunk. He didn't even know what hit 'em.'" (Fieldnote excerpt, May 2018)

The three other youth who were in the Precomunidad that day, listening and sharing stories with Daniel, nodded in solidarity. For them, Daniel's story was a normal part of life in the settlement. The fear of adults and the need to protect themselves is another factor that leads youth to stay at arm's length from adults in the settlement and draws them to relationships with other youth in street situations.

In addition to shared interests and vulnerability, however, these groups are formed through the moral symbolic boundaries that youth in street situations draw between themselves and adults in order to maintain a positive sense of self-worth. Youth draw boundaries between "us"—referring to the youth in street situations—and "them"—the adults in street situations. As Cristobal described his situation to me, he mentioned he was on the street because he liked to consume but that he was not like "them," the old people on the street. He explained, "Right now I'm … well, I haven't had the opportunity to shower or eat well until now. But I still consume drugs because I like it. I like it. I don't like being thrown on the ground *como ellos, como los ancianos* [like them, like the old people], I don't like to be hit, but I like to get high."

Symbolic boundary drawing between themselves and adults became most evident when Casa Alianza outreach workers would question the youth's lifestyles and point to an adult in the group, asking the youth if that was the life that they wanted for themselves. These youth made it clear that they were different from the adults in the settlements. They viewed adults in the group as *drogadictos* (drug addicts) and were convinced that they themselves were not. These youth used their youthfulness to protect themselves from being *drogadictos,*

arguing that they were not addicts but that their drug consumption was just part of their partying lifestyle. Jorge, a sixteen-year-old boy with an alcohol consumption problem that Casa Alianza outreach workers feared was getting out of control, made it clear that he did not see himself as a *drogadicto*. Hector tried to convince Jorge that he had an alcohol consumption problem by comparing him to an adult, Jaime. Jorge didn't just deny his problem, but actively distanced himself from this drogadicto, explaining that he doesn't have a problem because unlike this adult, he's "just having fun."

> H: You really have to step back and look at where you are. You need to start working on your consumption. Do you see Jaime? Do you see how Jaime can barely walk? How he doesn't take care of himself? How he hasn't showered? Is that what you want to be like?
> Jorge: No, I don't want to be like Jaime. But I'm not like Jaime. Jaime is a drogadicto. I'm just having fun. It's a good time. I'm fine.

For these youth, drogadictos were adults who were on the street as a result of their drug use, while they themselves were on the street because they were abandoned and/or the victims of abuse and just used drugs to numb the pain, escape, or have fun.

More than just drug users, for youth in street situations, drogadictos are also individuals whose habits keep them from fulfilling their responsibilities to their families and from being productive members of society. This sentiment was expressed by many youth who referenced adults at their settlement. When Hector asked Sarahi about a man who looked to be thirty years old, her response was no different. Hector asked her to recount the man's story and Sarahi replied, "He's a drogadicto. He has a family that he's abandoned. He can't hold a job even though he's fully capable. [pause] It's just sad. He shouldn't be on the street." Relatedly, one of the biggest differences that youth in street situations see between themselves and the adults is their prospect for future productivity and social integration.

Most of my informants made reference to their youthfulness and the time that they had before they were expected to fulfill social responsibilities as a means to distance themselves from the idea that they were drogadictos.

Almost all of the youth on the street have future plans. The majority of youth in street situations believe that once they turn eighteen or twenty-one years old, they will stop consuming drugs, get a job or finish school, rent an apartment, and start a family. They also use the prospect of these future plans as a way to draw boundaries between themselves and the adults in the group, whom they see as wasting their lives and failing to fulfill their responsibilities of adulthood. These youth reference this future hope by saying that they "still have lots of time" before they become adults. They don't see themselves as "drogadictos wasting their lives" because they are currently not expected to be responsible, they are "just kids having fun." As Jorge made clear later in his conversation with Hector, "I'm fine. I'm only sixteen. I don't need to go into a home. I'm gonna stay here in the party another two years

Figure 9. Skin burns from activo
Photo credit: Jessica Carmen Villaseñor

until I'm eighteen, then I'll get a job and an apartment and get my life together. I'm not going to be like Jaime. I have plans."

Youth would also make reference to the physical markers of addiction to further distance themselves from these drogadictos. As people become heavier users, they tend to let things like hygiene and eating fall by the wayside, they tend to stop showering, and they can be seen to have dry dark scales on their hands and arms from the activo burning their skin as it drips from the mona (Figure 9). The youth would see these as the markers of a true addict, something usually reserved for adults. They would use their lack of these markers as a way to prove that they were not drogadictos. When a youth did fall into this drogadicto category, showing the physical and behavioral markers of addiction—especially the thinness, lack of self-care, and burned skin—they, along with the other youth, would point to their youthfulness, suggesting that they had time to recover and reintegrate into society.

In many cases, my informants expressed sentiments of pity toward adults in street situations or drogadictos. They saw the health of these adults deteriorating on the street from drug use, illness, and street life and lamented the fact that these adults had wasted their lives. One day the youth were sitting around the table at the Precomunidad and Josefina asked them about a young woman who lived in their settlement. This woman was twenty-nine years old, and Josefina had worked with her when she was a girl in the residential program of Casa Alianza. Ariana answered, "Noooo, well, she's really bad. *La pobrecita está malita* [the poor thing is sick]. She can barely walk. All she does is sit there all day. It's just so sad. She's probably going to die … and she's wasted her whole life."

The exception to this boundary drawing was in situations when there was pride in being part of the larger community of people in street situations, when something united the

community. One of those unifiers was *San Juditas,* or St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes and desperate cases. Marginalized populations that have been stigmatized, including addicts, sex workers, delinquents, and youth in street situations, have embraced St. Jude as their patron saint (Ortiz Castro et al. 2015). Many pray to this patron saint to take care of them on the street and bring them health, money, or food. The twenty-eighth of each month marks a celebration for St. Jude that takes place in a plaza outside of San Hipolito church on the border of the Colonia Guerrero and the Centro Histórico, with the principal celebration taking place on October 28 each year. On this day, hundreds of poor and sick gather outside the church carrying large statues or pictures of St. Jude or with bracelets and pendants of this saint. Among those celebrating this day are the youth that, as Ortiz Castro et al. (2015, 430) note, have become part of the social imaginary of followers of St. Jude: "In groups, in pairs or alone, some go inhaling activo and others don't, but in the social imaginary the image of the young devotee as 'drug user' or '*monoso*' has been set.[1] Here, the youth gather with adults and take pride in their situation, in their drug use, in their lifestyle; they take pride in being a "lost cause," which, in other situations, would cause them to distance themselves from the adults in street situation. This celebration is less about religion for these youth, and more about the image and meaning that San Juditas has come to occupy in the community. They take part in these celebrations and adopt them because they offer a sense of pride, of belonging, and of freedom.

[1] Text original: "En grupos, en parejas o solos, unos van inhalando el activo y otros no, pero en el imaginario social se ha configurado la imagen del joven devoto 'vicioso' o 'monoso.'"

Interpersonal Relationships

Being on the street can be lonely, and many of these youth feel depressed; they feel like no one understands their situation and they feel a deep sense of despair. This only amplifies the mental and emotional struggles that they face as a result of their past trauma. This was made clear when Hector and I ran into Jorge while walking through the Alameda Central. It was 10 o'clock in the morning, and Jorge had already been consuming activo or was still consuming from the night before. He stopped us, wanting to say hello. It had been a while since we had seen the boy because he had had an argument with a youth at the Espejos settlement and was staying at another settlement on the other side of the city. He was thrilled to see Hector and I, being brought to tears claiming that we were his only friends and the only people who cared about him.

> Jorge comes over with his empty bottle of activo in his hand. He gets really excited to see us. He starts hugging us and asks me how I've been and what I've been up to. He says that he's not welcome in the Precomunidad because they closed with him. Hector stops him and says, "You know you're welcome, you just have to make the decision to stop using. And the last time you came in you were high, so they couldn't let you in." Hector continues by telling him we care about him and hope that he decides he wants to make a change in his lifestyle. Hector signals to me that we have to leave, and as we start to leave, Jorge starts to cry. He says that we're his only friends and that he loves us. He says we're the only ones that actually care about him. As we're leaving he says, "I love you guys, I'm probably gonna die soon … but remember that I love you." (Fieldnote excerpt, November 2017)

To combat this loneliness and this sense of despair on the street, most youth seek out relationships with other youth in street situations. These relationships are the core of the youth satellite groups where youth spend most of their time.

These satellite groups are loose, unstable conglomerates of dyads and triads. All youth within the group are connected, but their lack of trust and need to protect themselves

lead them to have strong, trusting relationships with just one or two other youth within the group who become their fictive kin. Within these youth satellite groups, youth build relationships with other youth in street situations to meet their emotional needs for love and belonging as well as their survival needs for money and resources. These relationships also structure the lives of youth on the street by acting as social control, keeping youth in line with the norms of the group. Together, the emotional support as well as the social control aspects of these relationships means that they can ultimately play a role in youth in street situations choosing the street over their other options for housing.

As youth in street situations are looking to fill the void left by the absence of their families, they build relationships with other youth in street situations to create family bonds or fictive kin relationships. These youth become siblings—hermanos and hermanas or *carnales* and *carnalas* [brothers and sisters]—and in the case of romantic relationships, *esposos* and *esposas* [husbands and wives]. It is through these relationships that youth in street situations give and receive the love and companionship that they are searching for as well as the escape that they need from their lives, from the pain of their past, and from the pain they currently experience on the street.

Rather than strong, long-lasting relationships, the relationships that youth in street situations construct with their peers can be better described as what Desmond (2012) refers to as disposable ties. Disposable ties are those "relations between new acquaintances characterized by accelerated and simulated intimacy, a high amount of physical copresence (time spent together), reciprocal or semireciprocal resource exchange, and (usually) a relatively short life span" (ibid., 1311). In his examination of survival strategies of urban poor tenants after eviction, Desmond found that they relied on disposable ties, rather than reliable

kin, for survival. Desmond's (2012, 1296) informants "established new ties quickly and accelerated their intimacy. Virtual strangers became roommates and 'sisters.'… But these bonds often were brittle and fleeting, lasting only for short bursts." Similarly, youth in street situations form very intimate relationships with peers who meet their various emotional and physical needs, but these tend to be short-lived because the complications of street life inhibit long-term, stable relationships. These youth fight with each other, their friendships break down, they steal from each other and are kicked out of their groups, and when the mix of teenage hormones and lowered inhibitions caused by drug use leads youth to sleep with a new partner, they find themselves falling out of love as quickly as they fell in love.

Marriages

Finding a romantic relationship becomes one of the youths' main concerns on the street. When I asked Isabella why she was seeking a partner on the street she clarified, "So that they take care of me and I have someone who understands me." This was a common sentiment that youth expressed when they talked about relationships and the need for a partner. They wanted companionship, they wanted someone to care for them, and they wanted to feel like someone understood them—like they had a place to belong.

Once youths are in relationships, they tended to move quickly. Within days of expressing shared interest in one another, which usually takes the form of dedicating the latest romantic Reggaeton hit to their new love interest, these youth proclaim that they are married to their partners and begin referring to them as "husband" and "wife." Adopting the language of marriage allows the youth to feel as though they are loved and that they can count on someone. It offers them a sense of security that is not easy to come by on the street and something that many of these youth never experienced in their homes. These marriages

also help youth feel a sense of belonging and in many cases are their attempt to form the family that they never had.

The youth's little exposure to romantic relationships means that they approach these marriages by structuring them around their ideas of what marriage is, engaging in behaviors that they think are in line with the gendered norms of a marriage. For boys, this usually means that they take on the role of protector and breadwinner. For the girls, this usually means that they take on the role of mother and carer, emotionally caring for their partner while their partner supports them financially or at least lowers their financial burden by providing for them. This was the case for Lucero and Roberto.

When I met Lucero she was sixteen years old and pregnant. She was consuming large amounts of activo while pregnant, making her a high-priority case for the Casa Alianza outreach workers. The outreach team was trying to convince her to lower her consumption and enter the residential program so that she could care for herself and would not have her baby on the street—something that is very common for girls and women in street situations. Despite their consistent efforts, she refused. Fortunately, she was able to give birth in the hospital. Without an address, however, the social workers at the hospital would not release her baby to her or Roberto, her street husband. Unsure of what to do, Roberto turned to Casa Alianza for help. The outreach coordinator at the time, Jaime, worked with the social workers at the hospital and DIF to get Lucero into a rehab clinic where she would eventually be able to live with her baby. I accompanied Teresa, an outreach worker, to take Lucero to this rehab clinic. In her initial screening with the clinic, the staff asked Lucero basic questions about her life, one of which was her occupation or how she made money on the street. Lucero laughed at this question, and with a shy but proud look on her face, she replied, "Nothing. My husband

works so I don't have to do anything." I later asked her about this, asking her if she had ever worked. She laughed, "No. I wouldn't even know what to do or how to make money." It was common for girls within street marriages to rely on their partner for their financial needs or at least to lower their financial burden.

Gendered ideas of marriage roles were not reserved to heterosexual relationships. Alexander was in various relationships with other boys in which he identified himself as the *esposa* or wife. For him, this meant that he took on the role of carer. As he explained his daily routine to me, every morning after he would wake up, he would go out to look for food for himself and his husband to ensure that his "husband is cared for and to show him he loves him."

These gendered marriage roles are even more complicated when a child is involved. When youth have children, these marriages can involve the adoption of a partner's child as their own. For boys, this means a sense of responsibility as they must care and support not only their partner but also their new child. For Judah and Cora, this meant that Judah worked not only to support Cora but also to support Cora's child, whom he was raising as his own. The realness of this marriage and this family for Judah was seen when the relationship ended. Judah felt a betrayal and a sadness that could not only be understood as the loss of a family, not only losing his "wife"—the person who acted as his emotional support on the street—but also a very real loss of the child.

> When it was Judah's turn for the morning *encuentro* or check-in, he looked sad. I could tell he was in a bad mood earlier, but he wouldn't tell me why. He said he would tell me during the *encuentro* with the group. When it comes to his turn, Judah mentions to the group that he's hurt. He said that yesterday he woke up early to make money for his "wife," referring to his girlfriend Cora. She had told him she needed diapers and milk for the baby. (Cora, Judah's "wife" has a baby by another youth on the street, but Judah has raised the baby

> as his own since they coupled up last year.) Judah said that yesterday he made 500 pesos telling riddles and then met up with Cora after. While they were out, she told him that she was pregnant and that it wasn't his. He said he felt betrayed and heartbroken, that he's done everything to support their family and now she's with someone else. And the worst part, he said, is that he's going to lose his child—who he's raised since he was a baby. Judah starts crying and the other youth just look down. (Fieldnote excerpt, February 2018)

It was common for these relationships to result in children. In an attempt to both complete their families and to fulfill their role as mother and carer within these street families, girls tended to be quick to want to have children once they formed a romantic relationship. Ariana and Daniel, both sixteen years old, had been in a relationship for about nine months when Ariana began talking about how great it would be to have children with Daniel. Casa Alianza workers had accompanied Ariana to the sexual health clinic, Condesa, the year before to have a birth control implant placed in her arm. Months before leaving the field, however, Ariana confided that she was pregnant. She went on to tell me that Daniel accompanied her to the clinic to have the implant taken out but was embarrassed to tell Casa Alianza workers for fear that they would be disappointed in her. Despite this embarrassment, she did not hide her excitement that her "family would be complete."

These street pregnancies take on other dimensions for these girls. In much the same way that Edin and Kefalas (2005) have documented the importance of children for low-income single mothers in the United States, these youth viewed children on the street as sources of love. Given their histories with abuse and trauma, their feelings of abandonment, and the tenuousness of their current relationships on the street, children offer these girls a source of love. This runs even deeper, however. In Mexico it is common to refer to children as *bendiciones* or blessings, and the youth echo this sentiment. They view their children and their pregnancies as God's wish, as God's blessing in their life. When outreach workers

accompanied Alejandra to Condesa for a pregnancy test, the doctors revealed that she was not pregnant but encouraged her to think about contraception. She scoffed at the idea. “No, I don’t want that.” The doctors pressed her, explaining the risks and challenges of having a baby on the street, and she responded, “And if I get pregnant that’s what God wants for me. Of course I’m going to have the baby.” As will be discussed in the next chapter, in addition to the emotional and sentimental benefits of having children in these relationships, children can also be beneficial in the youth’s quest to earning money on the street.

Despite the excitement for these children, youth in street situations fail to fully grasp the responsibilities of parenthood and the difficulties mothers on the street face. Their youthfulness, their vulnerability, and their own trauma make it difficult for them to separate their needs from those of their children. They give in to their need to live in their fantasy—to escape their past and their present. Most girls continue to consume drugs while pregnant and while raising their children on the street. Many youth have children who live with their parents, others have had children taken into custody by DIF, and some have had children who have died on the street.

Sexual relationships on the street are intense and deep, but they do not last long. They turn over quickly. It is more common for relationships to last days or weeks than months or years. This was exemplified in the relationship history of Brendita. Being Brenda’s daughter made Brendita’s love life the topic of much gossip around the youth groups and made Brendita a “catch” among the boys. Brendita was placed into Casa Alianza’s residential program by DIF after the operativo conducted at the Juarez settlement in 2017. In early March 2018, she left the residential program and returned to live with her mother at the Revolución settlement. During the first week she was back at the settlement, she took three

different husbands. Daniel, her ex before going into the residential program, broke up with Ariana because he was still in love with Brendita. After a few days, however, Brendita showed up to the *Mundialito* (little World Cup) presenting Agustin as her new husband. She even jokingly asked Israel, the outreach team coordinator, to be a *padrino* (godfather) at the wedding. Two days after the Mundialito, Agustin was with Cora, and Brendita was with her new husband, Ismael. Most of the relationships end because the youth fall out of love with their partner or find a new partner. Many of these relationships end in infidelity as youth act on their feelings for their peers, especially when partying and drug use lead youth to overstep boundaries and act on feelings of attraction and curiosity.

Youth's understanding of gender norms in marriage makes girls in street situations particularly vulnerable to losing autonomy and to experiencing abuse as youth model unequal gendered relationships that they have witnessed in their own families, on the street, or within the larger cultural milieu of Mexico City. Boys assert dominance over their partners and limit the movement of their "wives" in the city for fear that they will lose them to another suitor or that they will decide to leave the street—either go home, into a residential program, or a rehab clinic. This was the case for Estrella and Paco's relationship. This was one of the longest lasting relationships that I encountered in the field. Estrella was a sixteen-year-old girl who had been with Paco, a twenty-two–year-old boy, for two years. Paco did not let Estrella navigate the city freely; he always wanted to know where she was. Paco allowed Estrella to work with Casa Alianza outreach workers at the Revolución settlement, but she was not allowed to go to the Precomunidad. When Estrella found out she was pregnant, she went to Casa Alianza for help navigating the health system. She did not have any identification documents, which meant that she couldn't gain access to a medical clinic for

prenatal care. Israel, the coordinator of the Casa Alianza outreach team, agreed to help Estrella and Paco. Casa Alianza would help, but under the condition that Estrella would go to the Precomunidad to receive services daily. Paco did not like the deal but agreed on the condition that he would be allowed to accompany Estrella despite being older than eighteen. Israel agreed, and Paco accompanied Estrella to the Precomunidad a few times until they disappeared from the settlement two weeks later.

Even within the limits imposed upon them, girls manage to make room for their own autonomy by pushing back on their partners' rules. Even small things like going to the Precomunidad became victories in their claims to autonomy. Like Estrella, limitations were also placed on Yesenia when she started dating Kike. After about six months on the street, Yesenia fell in love with Kike, an eighteen-year-old boy who had been on and off the street since he was a child. Yesenia had spent her time with the youth at the Revolución settlement and was a regular at the Precomunidad, joining the youth in receiving services at the center. When she started a relationship with Kike of the Juarez settlement, she moved settlements to be with him and she slowly stopped going to the day center. One day Israel and I found her asleep near the Juarez settlement, and he invited her to the center to have a meal and get cleaned up. She agreed and started picking up her things. When Kike noticed what was happening, he came over to tell her she was not allowed to go to the Precomunidad.

> As we approached Yesenia, Kike came up from behind us. He greeted Israel, and he pulled Yesenia off in his direction. Israel and I move on to greet some of the other youth in the Juarez settlement. She came back and asks if we could take her to the Precomunidad. Israel sends me with her, and on the way to the Precomunidad she says that Kike didn't want her to go to. She says that she's madly in love with him, but he doesn't let her do anything by herself and that he always wants to know where she is. When we get to the Precomunidad Josefina greets her and Yesenia proudly proclaims that she "escaped from

> Kike to show up at the Precomunidad even though he didn't want her to come." (Fieldnote excerpt, May 2018)

Despite Kike's disapproval, Yesenia went to the Precomunidad and wore this small act of disobedience of her husband as a badge of honor and independence. This was her way of maintaining her autonomy in the relationship.

Fictive siblings

Youth in street situations are extremely welcoming. Given their lived experiences, many of these youth know what it is like to be excluded and to feel like an outsider. As a result, they welcome youth regardless of gender, sexuality, size, race and ethnicity, and/or ability. More than that, these youth understand that there is protection in numbers. They understand that there are real and perceived benefits to there being more youth on the street. This makes them more willing to accept newcomers and quick to befriend young strangers who look like they may be interested in consuming or joining their partying lifestyle. As previously mentioned, these relationships can become very intense very quickly, as these youth quickly become brothers and sisters on the street.

These fictive sibling relationships play a similar role as the marriages that these youth seek out. They offer the youth a sense of love and belonging, giving the youth the sense of family that they seek. These sibling relationships, however, tend to be longer lasting or less disposable than street marriages. Youth continue bonds with their fictive siblings over the course of their time on the street. These bonds are closely tied to their residential choices, however. If a youth must move to a different settlement as a result of an argument or stealing, it is not uncommon for them to leave their siblings behind and make new friends at their

new settlement. Similar to street marriages, these fictive sibling relationships can act as social control mechanisms but can also enforce positive social norms of the group.

Social control within marriages is rooted in the fear of being abandoned or left on the street. Social control within fictive sibling relationships stems from the same fear—they fear losing friends and being abandoned by the youth that they have come to see as family when their peers go to residential programs, rehab clinics, and even their familial homes. This usually involves youth on the street trying to get their friends to stay, warning them of the dangers of leaving the street. This was evident when watching the youth interact in the face of outreach workers' attempts to convince them that they should enter the residential program. One youth would step in and tell the youth being tempted by the organization horror stories of being locked away in residential programs, explaining what their experience would be like if they left the street, or making sure that they felt the love and friendship that they would be missing in these homes. This happened when Yesenia and Johnny were thinking about entering Casa Alianza's residential program.

Yesenia had only been on the street a few months, a period that outreach workers explained was a key time for them to intervene in the socialization process. They had been spending a lot of time working with her in the hopes that they could convince her to get off the street and enter the residential program. They had taken her to the house for girls so that she could get an idea of what the house looked like, they introduced her to the girls she would be living with, they took her to parties within the residential program so that she could see the fun she could have if she entered the program, and they constantly made sure she knew that Casa Alianza was always an option for her if she wanted to change her lifestyle. She was a regular at the Precomunidad during her first months on the street, where Josefina along

with the other outreach team members would work with her one-on-one trying to convince her to make a change in her life. Yesenia was receptive to their message and on various occasions seemed to get close to agreeing to enter the residential program. She confided in me that she wanted to go to the program but was afraid that her drug cravings would get the better of her and she would let everyone down.

As Yesenia was talking to Josefina one day at the Precomunidad, her friend Cora noticed that she seemed to be leaning toward entering the program. Cora began to get closer to Yesenia, scooting her chair over to where Yesenia was and grabbed Yesenia's hand, holding it on her lap. Cora then began to whisper things into Yesenia's ear. Yesenia looked confused; she looked like she didn't know what to do. Yesenia had made a deal with Josefina to stay at the Precomunidad all day, but after Cora finished whispering in her ear, Yesenia said that she would be leaving after the morning session. I asked Yesenia about breaking the deal that she had made with Josefina, and Cora pressed her again. Cora grabbed Yesenia's hand again and this time continued loud enough for everyone to hear, ''They can't make you stay; you're not obligated. You can leave whenever you want.'' Yesenia got really quiet. She left that afternoon and didn't come back the next day. After this day, Yesenia stopped discussing the possibility of entering the residential program.

A similar scenario occurred when Johnny was deciding to enter the Casa Alianza residential program. As the fieldnote below shows, his friend Alberto went out of his way to ensure that Johnny did not leave the street. Alberto had not been to the Precomunidad in years but accompanied Johnny that day to counter the work of the FCAM outreach team, warning Johnny that the residential program was like a prison.

> I was in the office working on the computer when the doorbell rang. On the screen I could see that it was Carlos, Israel, and two youth. I buzzed them in, and I could hear Alberto as the group walked in. I thought it was strange because Alberto never comes to the Precomunidad. He is very clear about not wanting anything from Casa Alianza. The office door was cracked open, and I could hear Israel telling Johnny that he should go in the office to talk to me. Johnny walked into the office with Israel and came in my direction. Johnny was ready to enter the residential program. Carlos was escorting Alberto up the stairs to take a shower, but when he realized that Johnny was going into the office he started to call after him. Alberto started yelling through the door for Johnny. Calling him to go outside into the reception area. He started screaming "Johnny, come. Johnny *no te vayas* [don't go]. *No te vayas*, they're gonna lock you up." He starts opening the door to the office and stuck his head in: "Johnny, come. *No te vayas*." Carlos pulled him out of the office, and I could hear him warning Alberto that he needed to follow the rules or he would be kicked out. (Fieldnote excerpt, May 2018)

In this case Johnny maintained his autonomy by entering the residential program despite the pressure he received from his peer.

While these peer relationships can be negative influences that keep youth on the street, they can also provide positive social support and enforce positive norms within the group. For example, Juan Carlos and Augusto's relationship helped to support their process of rehabilitation. Juan Carlos and Augusto were good friends. They were both sixteen years old, and they had formed a deep bond during the year Augusto had been on the street. When Juan Carlos went to a rehab clinic, I would accompany an outreach worker to visit him every week, and every week Juan Carlos would ask how his hermano was doing. Although Juan Carlos's biological brother Pablo was on the street, he was not referring to Pablo but instead asking about Augusto. Juan Carlos was worried for Augusto's well-being on the street alone and hoped that he would make the decision to go to rehab as well, telling the outreach workers to keep trying to convince Augusto so that he would get clean and they could live in the residential program together. With the positive influence of his street brother's decision

to go to a rehabilitation clinic, Augusto eventually decided to enter rehab as well. When I would visit Augusto in the clinic, he also frequently asked how his brother was doing, referring to Juan Carlos. These street brothers would use the knowledge that the other brother was doing well in rehab, *echandole ganas* (putting in an effort), as motivation to continue with their own rehabilitation process.

These peer relationships were also positive when they helped to enforce the norms of the group, specifically norms about stealing, fighting, and mistreatment of girls. In one instance, this policing by peers was enough to stop a soccer pick-up game in its tracks. FCAM outreach workers took the youth from the Revolución settlement to play soccer at the Delegación Cuauhtémoc's field a few blocks away. On this particular day they were able to get a group of seven youth and four outreach workers together. Paco wanted to play, so Estrella, his street wife, accompanied the group despite saying that she didn't feel well enough to join the game. Estrella sat on the sidelines as a spectator. While we were playing, Paco would run over to the sidelines to take a break, his conditioning suffering from his drug consumption. In one of these trips to the sideline, Paco started yelling at Estrella. He raised his fist to hit her but was stopped when another youth from the settlement, Juan, stepped in and pushed him. Paco punched Juan in the face, and the two boys got into a fistfight. The outreach workers and the other youth stepped in before it escalated. Despite being visibly upset, Estrella went over to calm Paco down, and the two left the field.

Leaders

These youth groups tend to be headed by a youth leader. While youth in street situations tend to attach themselves to mother figures within the housing settlement, these smaller satellite youth groups tend to be led by the boy who presents himself as the most

macho. This is usually the boy who performs his masculinity through violence, picking fights with other youth and adults who challenge him and his superiority. These are usually the boys who have gained the most trust and respect from the street mama, as their ability to defend themselves means that the mamá grows to trust them enough to leave them in charge of her drugs or watching over her money.

While the mother figure is able to control the whole group, the leaders of the youth groups also have the ability to enforce norms and control the behaviors of the youth. The youth are usually free to do what they want, but at certain times, these leaders attempt to regulate their behavior. At times they would be the ones to decide whether youth would go to the Precomunidad to receive services or participate in certain activities. In these cases, the leadership role of this youth is so established that enforcing norms could come through something so small as a certain look from the leader or a particular tone that would let the youth know that their behavior was unacceptable. I saw the power of this social control when I accompanied the outreach team to look for youth who would like to participate in the Delegación Cuauhtémoc's Mundialito for unhoused populations. The outreach workers were trying to get youth from the Espejos group to participate. On this particular day, the Espejos point was going through a chaotic moment. Priscilla, the street mamá of the settlement, was in the hospital due to complications of her HIV diagnosis, and Pablo, the fifteen-year-old youth leader, was left in charge of the youth and the drugs. Without protection from Priscilla, the police were giving the group a hard time, pushing them from one spot to another. I accompanied the outreach workers to the street to look for these youth, and we found them staying on the loading docks of a newspaper distributor a few blocks from their usual spot.

As we walked up, we could see about twelve bundles of blankets and a couch turned over on its side with two pairs of feet sticking out from behind. We knew we had found the youth.

Upon arriving, the outreach workers began waking the youth up, asking them if they wanted to join us in heading to the football fields. Marcos, a fifteen-year-old boy was there. He was known around the groups as one of the more passive youth, and he tends to be picked on because the other boys see him as weak—he is younger, he is not a fighter, and he still gets excited about being a kid in ways that the more street-hardened boys see as a weakness. When the outreach workers asked Marcos if he wanted to play football at the Delegación, he nodded, and his face lit up with his characteristic big smile, but as the following fieldnote shows, Pablo stepped in to make sure that nobody participated in the activity. Pablo made it clear to Marcos that he should not play, and he sent Carlos and the other outreach workers away.

> Carlos gets close to Marcos and starts asking him questions. Pablo walks out from behind the couch, and he stares at Marcos intensely from up on the loading platform. Pablo answers for Marcos, telling Carlos that Marcos doesn't want to go to the Mundialito. Marcos puts his head down and tells Carlos, "No, I don't want to go." We stay around and start asking other youth if they want to join in the Mundialito. Pablo tells us, "No, nobody wants to go to the Mundialito." Carlos asks Pablo why he didn't greet him, and Pablo responds, "Because I didn't want to greet you. And I don't want you here. I want you to leave. Nobody wants to go to the Mundialito so just leave." Carlos gives the sign to Josefina and I that we should get going. He stops by Marcos one more time and tells him, "Are you sure you don't want to come to play?" Marcos looks up at Pablo, who is staring at him intensely, and lifts one eyebrow. Marcos just looks down with a sad look on his face, shakes his head, and tells Carlos "no." (Fieldnote excerpt, March 2018)

The ability to get youth to do as they are told is characteristic of all youth leaders. At times, youth would rebel against these leaders in an attempt to maintain their autonomy, making their own decision to go to the Precomunidad, but the thought of losing peers and acceptance

at their homes on the street meant that these leaders were usually quite powerful in influencing the decision of the youth.

Loyalty despite lack of trust

These youth have to worry about being picked up by DIF and being sent into residential programs or to their homes, they have to worry about adults from within and from outside their settlement trying to harm them, and as much as they find some comfort in the companionship of the other youth in their group, they don't feel as though they can completely trust all of their peers. This is the result of their past trauma, but also the reality of the street. The relationships between youth in street situations is complicated. Most of the youth have had things stolen from them in their sleep or while they were too high to realize that someone was stealing from them, and many youth have been in fights with peers in their groups. This lack of trust is only made worse because they know that their peers' behavior becomes difficult to predict when they are intoxicated. Despite this lack of trust, there is still a sense of loyalty within the group as these peers try to look out for each other and care for one another. These youth know that their peers are all that they have on the street. Their peers are their family, so they are loyal to them in their time of need.

When Jorge had his finger almost cut off by gardening shears in a fight, his peers helped him by wrapping it in a banana peel. They believed that on the street something organic was the closest thing to being clean, and they wanted to care for their friend. When Judah went missing, his peers were the ones to alert Casa Alianza outreach workers because they didn't know who else they could turn to. They were worried about him. When Jose saw that two boys were trying to steal from Pablo, he jumped in to defend his friend.

When I met Jose, he lived at Revolución in the settlement run by Mamá Brenda, but in the final few weeks of his time on the street, he had some trouble at that settlement and moved over to Priscilla's Espejos settlement. At this time Priscilla was in the hospital, so Pablo was in charge of selling activo. Pablo was in the Alameda Central selling activo with a group of youth when someone came to attack him. Jose stepped in to protect Pablo and in the process was severely burned. As he recalls,

> There was a housed boy that arrived, and he was bothering my buddy and I went in to defend him. And that's when we started to fight. But I was wearing my blue vest, and I went to take it off so I turned my back to take it off. The chavo threw activo on me when I had my back turned, and he lit me on fire. And he took off running. Ismael and Brendita were walking through the Alameda and Ismael chased the guys off, but he didn't get them.

When Ismael saw that the boys had burned Jose he chased after him trying to protect his

Figure 10. Jose's burned body
Photo credit: Jessica Carmen Villaseñor

friend. When Jose was released from the hospital, his peers were the ones who tried to help him care for his wound (Figure 10). They tried to help him by smearing egg on his severely

burned chest, a Mexican remedy for sunburn. This was not proper care for the type of burn that Jose had suffered, and between fear of infection and fear that the next fight would take his life, Jose made the decision to enter a rehabilitation clinic.

Given the context and the importance of these relationships to youth in street situations' survival, they take care of each other, and they rely on each other, despite not fully trusting each other. They take care of others because they become family. They look after each other because they hope that one day someone will look after them.

Conclusion

On first glance, it can be difficult to see that youth in street situations form their own unique communities in the city. These youth are usually seen alone or in pairs when they wash windshields or perform in the metro. When they are not alone they usually seem to be part of the larger unhoused community, blending into existing informal housing settlements that contain both youth and adults. When they are considered part of groups, they are usually seen as being part of a criminal gang or as negative influences, encouraging each other to stay on the street. These relationships are much more than that, however. Youth form bonds that allow them not only to survive but also to create their own a fantasy, a world where they feel loved, cared for, and protected.

The reality is that youth in street situations form unique communities through the relationships they have with their peers, and these communities are facilitated by adults in street situations. They build these relationships in ways to not only secure their survival, but meet their emotional needs. Many of these youth have suffered trauma and abuse and feel abandoned or neglected by their families. When they turn to the street, they are looking to fill the emotional voids that they feel. They want to meet their needs for protection, love,

belonging, and escape. They create fictive families on the street, seeking out mothers, a spouse, and siblings. They want to recreate the families that they never had. These bonds don't mask the pain of the past or present, however. They don't erase the years of trauma that they have experienced, so these youth participate in behaviors that allow them to escape the pain of their past and present situations (particularly drug use and sexual promiscuity). The relationships that they build with their peers and with adults on the street tend to form quickly and are intense, but they are also short-lived, as the vulnerability of these youth makes them more likely to fight and lose interest in one another. While these relationships help the youth meet their needs, they also act as social control mechanisms that structure the lives of these youth in very particular ways—limiting their movement across the city or ensuring that the youth conform to the norms of the group.

The relationship that these communities of youth have with other actors in the city plays a role in shaping the larger social landscape of Mexico City. In the next chapter, I'll explore the complex relationships that youth have with a community that is omnipresent in their lives—the middle class. These youth are in constant contact with middle-class residents, and the way they navigate the interactions with these residents is vital to securing their survival. These relationships further structure the way youth in street situation understand their situation and shape the way youth navigate the city around them.

Chapter 3
The Economics of Sympathy: Youth in Street Situations and the Middle Class

> Israel and I are walking back to the Precomunidad on Reforma when we see Rosana and Enrique near the monument. They're with the *banda* that they used to stay with. Rosana has been in rehab and doing well for over a year, so this is definitely a surprise. We walk up, and she tells Israel to go away. "I'm not moneando," she calls out as she takes the mona to her nose. She's slurring her speech. It's clear she's pretty intoxicated. Israel and I walk up, and Israel asks her how she's doing. Rosana just starts to cry. We greet Enrique, and he goes off behind the tree. Little Enrique is pretending to be playing behind the tree, but it's clear that he is putting a mona up to his nose. He walks back over with his hand in his pocket hiding the mona and begins to hug and hold his mother. Rosana explains that the rehab center where she was staying wants to send her to a new location but that she doesn't want to go. She says that they treat her badly there. As she's talking I can hear the disappointment in the voice of Israel. Israel has worked with her since she was a young girl on the street. He tries to explain to her that it's just her fear of change, that she has to try to stay clean for Enrique's sake, and he invites her to the Precomunidad to clean herself up and talk more about her options. As we're standing by the monument talking to Rosana a car drives by. A man in his late fifties to mid-sixties sticks his head out the window and yells, "You're a waste to society!! Do something with your lives!!" Rosana looked over at the car but just kept talking like nothing had happened. The couple laying on the floor next to Rosana listening to our conversation didn't even turn their heads. It was as though this was a normal occurrence. Their reaction was as though they had heard something as normal as a car horn on that busy stretch of Reforma, a dog barking from one of the nearby *vecindades*, or a bird chirping in the tree above. (Fieldnote excerpt, February 2018)

Middle-class residents are constant and vital figures in the lives of youth in street situations in Mexico City. They are around the youth at all times: walking the same busy streets, using the same public transportation, eating at the same food stands, and frequenting the same popular attractions. Even when not directly interacting, these residents greatly impact the lives of these youth. As the fieldnote excerpt above shows, the public nature of the lives of these youth—living every part of their lives on the street and in the open—leaves them vulnerable to the constant gaze of the middle class.

Much previous research examining the lives of youth in street situations has documented the stigma that middle-class residents attach to these youth and the resulting discrimination they face as they are labeled criminals and deviants (Baron and Hartnagel 1998; Berstein and Foster 2008; Hermer and Mosher 2002; Mayock 2008). In some places, the stigmatization of these youth is so intense that it leads to the systematic targeting of youth in street situations by middle-class residents. In Brazil, for example, the 1990s saw a string of highly publicized attacks and murders of youth in street situations by local vigilante groups and "death squads" of police (Iniciardi and Surrat 1998; Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1998). Today, this stigmatization continues, but the relationship that youth in street situations have with middle-class residents is much more complicated than simply one of stigma and stigmatized.

More than just a source of discrimination, middle-class residents play an important role in the everyday survival of youth in street situations. As previously mentioned, the large informal economy in the city creates opportunities and a need for the type of work in which these youth engage (Aoki 2008). Within this informal economy, however, these youth depend on the willingness of middle-class residents to give them money for the various types of work that they perform. Middle-class residents provide the financial and tangible resources necessary for youth in street situations to exercise their right to life in the city, helping youth meet their everyday needs for food, shelter, and clothing.

The relationships that youth have with middle-class residents is complicated and complex because these relationships are built in an environment with various social constructions describing who these youth are. Moreover, the youth themselves have various identities. Youth navigate their identities and the varying ideas of who they are in ways that

ensure they earn money for their survival. This involves participating in very specific types of work and presenting themselves in very specific ways to combat stigma and to elicit sympathy from middle-class passersby. Youth do all of this while ensuring their own safety, protecting themselves from the dangers that the middle-class stranger poses to their well-being given the larger urban environment where they have increasingly become the targets of *trata* or human trafficking (CNDHMX 2019).

In this chapter I will explore the very complicated relationships that youth in street situations have with middle-class residents and the way these relationships structure the lives of these youth not only by impacting the way youth in street situations make sense of their situation but also by shaping the way they exercise their right to survival. I will begin by exploring the stigma that youth in street situations face in Mexico City and the ways youth resist and navigate this stigma in their various interactions with middle-class residents. I will then explore the way youth use their knowledge of stereotypes of *chavos de la calle* (street children) and the social construction of childhood to their advantage as they shape the work they do to elicit sympathy rather than hate from middle-class passersby. Specifically, these youth present themselves as youthful victims who are worthy of aid as opposed to the criminals and delinquents that youth in street situations are thought to be. I will finish by exploring the consequences of youth in street situations playing to middle-class ideas of childhood in this way, as they reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate the image of the passive, helpless child. Ultimately, the relationships that youth in street situations have with middle-class residents help to shape the way that these youth make sense of their situation, the way they perform and present themselves on the street while earning money, and the way they navigate their everyday lives.

Stigma and Resistance

Stigma is an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" and that reduces the bearer "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman 2009, 3). Stigma has been a major topic of sociological research since Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity,* and the concept has been applied to numerous circumstances to understand how people construct categories and attach stereotypes to these categories, usually to those in lower social positions, including individuals with mental illness (Angermeyer and Matschinger 1994; Gonzalez-Torres et al. 2007), those living in poverty and receiving welfare (Walsgrove 1987; Page 1984), and unhoused individuals (Phelan et al, 1997). As Link and Phelan (2001, 370) clarify, stigma involves various components that include distinguishing and labeling differences, associating human differences or previously mentioned labeled differences with negative stereotypes, separating "us" from "them" where "the linking of labels to undesirable attributes becomes the rationale for believing that negatively labeled persons are fundamentally different from those who don't share the label," and status loss and discrimination for those who are stigmatized.

Youth in street situations encounter stigma on a daily basis around the world (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004). This is no different for youth in street situations in Mexico City. Stigma is a constant part of their everyday lives. As Roschelle and Kaufman (2004) argue, the discourse surrounding poverty and homelessness has a long history of blaming individuals for their predicament, and rather than being seen with sympathy, youth are increasingly being seen this way. Middle-class residents hold various ideas, stereotypes, and opinions of who youth in street situations are and their reason for being on the street, and they discriminate against youth for being part of this stigmatized group.

In Mexico City, this means that middle-class residents label youth on the street *chavos de la calle* (street kids) or *chavos en situación de calle* (youth in street situations), terms that they then associate with negative stereotypes. The stereotypes that are associated with being a chavo de la calle are similar to those of the population of unhoused adults—lazy, drug using, criminal, dirty, and even sick or contagious (Vazquez et al. 2017).[1] Middle-class residents distance themselves from these youth by blaming them for their situation. They view the youths' current situation as a direct result of the youths' own poor choices and delinquent behaviors. These youth are seen as having behavioral problems, as having problems with authority, or as being delinquents.

When speaking to youth about their experiences on the street, most mentioned that the worst part about being on the street was the way middle class residents looked down on them. *Nos ven feo,* translated literally as "they look at us ugly," was a common refrain from youth explaining what it was like to live on the street and more specifically what it was like to interact with middle-class residents. This stigma leads youth in street situations to experience discrimination on a regular basis as they go about their daily lives. Youth commonly reference the stigma that middle-class residents attach to youth in street situations and the way this impacts their interactions. These youth are yelled at or told that

[1] These stereotypes of youth are widespread. It was common to hear these stereotypes come out in conversation with middle-class residents in the city. Not even scholars are exempt. Walsh (2013) noted the difficulty of overcoming these stereotypes in planning her own project with youth in street situations, explaining that she changed the design of her investigation to focus on youth in shelters after accompanying outreach workers to youth settlements a total of six times. As she writes, "I would worry, could HIV, or hepatitis, or some other horrible communicable disease pass from their scabbed hands to my cracked, dry, bleeding knuckles?… I decided that I had enough first-hand experience 'on the street' and would rather conduct my research in the clean and orderly shelters" (90).

they are a "waste to society," as in the opening vignette. People move away from them on the metro and make comments about their "dirtiness" or the way they smell as they pass them on the street. The youth note that people view them as delinquents and make reference to the way middle-class residents cross the street when they see them approaching and watch them like they are criminals when they enter a store.

Many who hold these beliefs of youth in street situations blame these youth for being in the position that they find themselves in. They believe that the youth's drug consumption, their personal choices, or their "rebellious personalities" have led them to the street. As Martín described his interactions with middle-class residents, he noted that many viewed him as lazy for needing a handout: "Yeah, sometimes when I ask people for money they tell me 'get a job' or 'I work, you should to.'"

Mario, a seventeen-year-old boy who had been on the street for nine years, was able to clearly call out the "discrimination" he faced on a daily basis. As he explained to me in an interview:

> J: Are there things that you don't like about the street?
> M: Yeah. That they discriminate against you.
> J: Who discriminates against you?
> M: The people. For example, yesterday I went to ask for a taco and the daughter of the puesto owner told me, "No, move over there. You smell so bad. Like activo." [As he came to the end of the sentence the sadness in his voice was palpable, he lowered his head]
> J: How does that make you feel?
> M: Mal. [Bad; head down, nodding slowly]

For Mario, as for many youth, the stigma and discrimination faced on the street is the worst part of their situation. As was made clear by Mario's tone and body language when he described the discrimination he faced, this takes a toll on their emotional state. These youth internalize the stigma attached to their social position. They begin to have negative feelings

about themselves, leading to a negative sense of self that can contribute to and worsen many of the youths' struggles with depression. While they know that they are not "wastes to society" or criminals, these youth begin to lose sight of the positive qualities that they have when they are constantly reminded of the stigma attached to their situation.

In the face of these negative feelings and stigma, youth in street situations are not passive. They recognize that they have multiple identities. They actively resist these images of youth in street situations as criminals to mitigate the discrimination against them and to maintain a positive self-image. They do this by adopting strategies to minimize and manage stigma (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004; Shih 2004). Specifically, these youth employ what Shih (2004, 180) refers to as identity switching, where they "strategically emphasize identities that are valued and de-emphasize identities that are not in any given context." In the case of youth in street situations, this involves emphasizing their youthfulness over their unhousedness.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, youth make reference to their youthfulness to draw boundaries between themselves and their adult counterparts on the street to feel better about themselves and their situation. Emphasizing their identity as youth and their youthfulness also helps them resist the negative stigma attached to their unhousedness when interacting with middle-class residents. In doing so they resist being seen as criminals, as dirty, as lazy, and as drug addicts and are instead seen in a more positive light. Given the cultural context that these youth live in, their youthfulness helps them be seen as the victims rather than the cause of their situation. Instead of feeling blamed for their position, they feel sympathy.

Childhood is socially constructed (Ariès 1965; Shanahan 2007; Corsaro 2017; James and Prout 2003; Zelizer 1994). There are many childhoods because childhood looks different in different places and in different times. It is a social form that is produced by the specific social, political, and cultural institutions of a particular context (Ariès 1965). What is understood as childhood in the United States today, with children viewed as persons who should be cared for but who are capable of some level of independence from their parents, is much different from what was understood as childhood in Britain during industrialization, for example, with children seen as the property of their parents and expected to work (Lee 1982; Buckingham 2013). In the context of Mexico City, the traditional social construction of childhood is strongly shaped by the nation's widespread religiosity.

In 2010, 82% of the population identified as Catholic and another 7% as Christian (Protestant or evangelical) (Instituto Nacional de Estadistica y Geografia 2010). While there is little literature exploring the Christian construction of children or childhood, McEvoy (2019, 126) argues that the Christian tradition sees childhood as a time of great value, as being "both encompassed by original grace and situated in the long history of human brokenness" or sin, representing openness to God and a time of mystery. The Catholic religion also has a strong dependence on the kinship system, which stresses the obedience of the child and the role of the parents in shaping the child's development (Frabutt 2001; Alwin 1986). In this tradition, childhood is a time of innocence, nurturing, and moral education, and it is the responsibility of the parents to provide for the physical needs as well as to socialize and guide children away from sin (Frabutt 2001). In this context, a child's unmet physical needs are a direct shortcoming of the parents, and the moral transgressions of the child are a direct result of the failures of their parents to educate them.

This traditional construction of childhood means that youth in street situations in Mexico City lie in a unique social location. Despite the stigma attached to their "street" status and the discrimination they face because of it, their falling within the social category of youth leads many middle-class residents to interpret them as victims. On a daily basis, these youth find themselves interacting with many sympathetic middle-class residents who view them as the victims of their situation. Youth make the connection between this aid and the religious undercurrent in the construction of their youthfulness. Many youth refer to middle-class residents who are generous with them as *Cristianos* or Christians. Sometimes these middle-class residents do come from churches doing outreach or missionary work, but more often than not they are just individuals who want to help these youth because they are sympathetic to their situation. These middle-class residents give youth money, offer them shelter by inviting youth them into their homes, and provide other resources that these youth may need (such as food, blankets, tents, clothes, and so on).

Many of these middle-class residents also invoke the language of salvation when discussing the importance of providing aid to youth in street situations, further highlighting the connection between this construction of youthfulness and religiosity. They talk about "saving" youth in street situations from the street and the bad influences they find there. They hope that their aid can help to save the youth by convincing them to change their ways. They believe that these youth need help, aid, and education and that adults should offer it to them. This offers youth a hopeful understanding of their situation as one that they can one day overcome. The idea is that they are young and that they can make up for their moral deviations. This language is not employed when middle-class residents talk about aiding adults in street situations.

Youth learn about this general construction of childhood and youthfulness from their socialization experiences before entering the street and in their everyday interactions with middle-class residents while on the street—specifically, taking cues from the language that middle-class residents use when they offer them aid. These middle-class residents use language that stresses the youthfulness and victim status of the population. They use terms like *pobrecitos* (poor little things) to refer to youth in street situations. In doing so they highlight that youth in street situations are small victims whose situation should be viewed with sympathy or pity. They also use language that stresses the youthfulness of youth in street situations by referring to them as *niños* or *chamacos*, meaning kids. They even highlight their own adultness to contrast the youth's youthfulness, making references to parent-child relationships. They do this by using terms of affection like *mijo* and *mija* when interacting with youth in street situations.

This type of interaction was common between youth and middle-class residents, both those with whom they had a long-lasting, trusting relationship as well as those who were strangers. Carolina is a nine-year-old girl who is very accustomed to receiving aid from random middle-class passersby. She is small for her age and thin. She is usually dressed in mismatched, dirty clothing—which is to be expected given that she lives with her family under the awning of a metro entrance. Her hair is usually in a knotted ponytail because she never bothers to comb it. The first thing she does after waking up is play with her brothers or find some other way to entertain herself. Her playfulness usually means that she has some scrapes or scratches on her arms or legs from falling off of a post or trying to perform a new gymnastics tumble. Casa Alianza outreach workers spent a month trying to convince the girl's mother to let her stay in a group home. Her mother was eight months pregnant and

wouldn't be able to care for the girl while she was recuperating from birth. During this period outreach workers played with Carolina at her settlement and took her to the Precoumnidad where she would shower, eat, and participate in activities that were suited to her age. One day, while Hector and I accompanied the girl to the Precomunidad we witnessed the way middle-class residents sympathized with her situation.

> Carolina and I talked throughout the metro ride about a friend she played cards with at her settlement. She was leaning on me and holding my hand through the ride. As we were exiting the metro, a man dressed in a suit called the girl over by waving his hand. She let go of my hand and walked over to this stranger. He looked down at her and gave her his breakfast and smiled. It was a plate wrapped in plastic that contained a a torta, a piece of fruit, and a jello. He told the girl, "*Cuidate mucho, mija*" [take care of yourself, mija], and he walked away. (Fieldnote excerpt, October 2017)

Carolina had not asked this man for anything, she had not talked to him, and she had hardly even made eye contact with him during the metro ride. This middle-class resident was moved by her appearance, and he took pity on her. Without knowing her situation, this man viewed her as a child that needed help, and he offered it to her. This was common for Carolina because she was young, but it was a common type of interaction for many youth. One day, when accompanying a few youth to the Precoumindad with one of the outreach workers, we lost sight of one of the girls, Lucero. I went back to look for her, and I found her talking to a puesto owner. The puesto owner was handing her a Styrofoam container and told her, *"Aqui está, mija. Cuidate mucho.*" ("Here it is, *mija*. Take care of yourself.") When I asked Lucero what happened, she explained that the puesto owner knows her and that she always gives her free chilaquiles because she "feels sorry for me."

"Mijo" and "mija" are colloquially used as terms of affection, like sweetie or honey. They are the conjunction of "mi" and "hijo" or "hija" meaning my son (hijo) or my daughter

(hija). The use of this language points to the child status of these youth and the adultness of the middle-class passerby. It also invokes a child-parent dynamic, which leads to feelings of sympathy for the youth and feelings of responsibility from the adults—responsibility for the protection, aid, nurturing, and education of the youth. Through this type of interaction, youth in street situations learn that youth and their youthfulness as children, *chamacos*, sons, and daughters make them worthy of aid because they are the victims.

When the youth interact with middle-class residents who focus on their youthfulness and see them as kids, as niños or chamacos and sons and daughters, they feel like they are looked on with sympathy rather than being blamed for their situation. Emphasizing the identity of their youthfulness bolsters these youths' sense of self. These interactions help youth in street situations feel that they are worthy of being taken care of and are worthy of saving, rather than feeling blamed for their situation and perceived as a lost cause. This construction of youthfulness helps to shape the way youth understand their situation. They come to embrace the idea that they are victims. They see themselves as the victims of families that did not properly care for them and did not provide the home life they deserved, and it adds to their understanding of their situation as one of abandonment—they view themselves as the victims of abandonment and abuse.

Through their interactions with middle-class residents, youth in street situations not only learn that it is better for their sense of self to emphasize their youthfulness but also that it is strategically beneficial. Middle-class residents are more likely to be sympathetic to those youth they view as children, as victims, as helpless and in need. Youth quickly learn that the more sympathetic a middle-class passerby is to their situation, the more willing they are to give aid or a handout to these youth. Youth in street situations use this knowledge when they

present themselves on the street by trying to signal their youthfulness. They use their knowledge of youthfulness and their knowledge of what elicits sympathy as a tool to navigate their relationships with middle-class residents, specifically in ways that distance themselves from the stigma attached to the label of youth in street situations (and "street" more broadly) and that elicit more sympathy to receive more aid from middle-class residents. This type of maneuvering can be seen most when youth in street situations *do* work.

The labels and the socially constructed meanings surrounding childhood, youthfulness, and youth in street situation impact the way middle-class residents interpret who these youth are and the way they treat them. These interpretations impact which youth these residents view as worthy of sympathy and therefore worthy of aid. Middle-class residents are less willing to give aid to youth who are read as criminals or whose own behaviors have led them to the street. They are more willing to aid those who are seen as helpless or victims, but the interpretation of youthfulness is complicated by the various identities and situations of these youth.

Youth in street situations know that children, especially those who are small and who present themselves as helpless, are looked upon with sympathy. These youth are also aware that there are other identities that help to elicit even more sympathy from middle-class passersby. Middle-class residents tend to be more willing to give aid to youth who are or appear to be disabled, girls, and girls who are pregnant or caring for small children. These categories tend to be seen as more helpless and more in need of aid. Boys who are small and appear to be young elicit sympathy, but boys whose bodies lead them to be coded as men tend to be associated with criminal behavior and are more likely to be blamed for their situation than to elicit sympathy (Aptekar 1988). Youth use this knowledge to learn how to

present themselves on the street as youth in street situations because emphasizing their youthfulness, their helplessness, their victimhood, or their misery has real tangible benefits over being viewed as an unhoused criminal. They emphasize or perform specific parts of their identities in their interactions with middle-class residents or align themselves with specific youth in an attempt to maximize the amount of sympathy they can elicit.

Work and Doing Work

Youth in street situations need money to exercise their right to survival and dignity and to cover their basic needs of food, clothes, and shelter. While most youth in the city have parents or guardians to cover the expenses for their survival, youth in street situations must find a way to do so on their own. It is the middle-class residents' financial support, the money they give youth in street situations, that makes their survival possible.

This need to make money for survival is part of the "now what?" moment youth experience when they first enter the street—the moment of panic youth have when they enter the street and realize that they have no one to turn to, that they must rely on themselves to survive. Along with securing a place to live and a group that offers protection from the dangers of the street, earning money is high on the list of priorities for these youth. Youth in street situations rely on their peers and adults already on the street to explain their options for work and teach them how to do this work. As previous scholars examining the population have noted, this process of learning the work available to these youth in order to survive is part of the socialization process or the career of the street child. But this process is about much more than knowing what jobs are available to them. It is also about knowing *how* to make the most money while doing these jobs. This involves learning how to navigate the stereotypes that middle-class residents hold and the social construction of youthfulness

and learning to be aware of the dangers that strangers in the city pose. Youth in street situations learn how to do this from their peers as well as from the interactions that they have with middle-class residents themselves.

Most youth engage in various money-generating activities, many times shifting the work they engage in from day to day, depending on the amount of money they need to earn on that specific day. The amount necessary for survival depends on the expenses that the youth have. The expenses of each youth depend on the type and amount of drugs they consume, whether the youth has children (as those with children need to earn more money for diapers and formula), whether they plan to rent a hotel room to seek refuge from the street, and whether there is a special expense that they anticipate, such as gifts, clothing, or an outing among friends.

The act of generating money on the street is referred to as *charolear*. For most youth, charolear is the umbrella term used to describe various informal money-generating activities that they take part in. When asking youth "what did you do today?" for example, various youth can give the same response of "charolear" but be referring to very different work activities. These activities range from panhandling to washing windshields, performing at stoplights, sex work, or even stealing.

Many youth don't enter the street knowing what it is to charolear and even fewer know how to *do* that work. This leads some to feel lost and out of place. When I asked Alexander about his first day on the street, he commented on the process of entering the street without knowing how to earn money. He noted the embarrassment of not knowing how to work and the type of work he could do on the street but, more than that, the

embarrassment of not even knowing that the youth on the street called the work they engage in—charolear.

> What do I remember? I saw my friends, how they charoleaban [earned money]. I didn't know what it was to charolear. When they told me, "We're going to go and charolear," I thought that you actually take your charola [tray], and so I told them that I didn't bring my tray and they told me, "Well no, charolear is to tell people riddles where you ask for money or sing, you know like Isabella." And I asked them to teach me. The first one to take me was my friend Tony. And it was like, "What?! How do they give you money? What is it that you tell them?" And he took me and he told me, "You just listen," and I did. I would just watch him. And that's how I learned.

As Alexander mentions, he had no idea what he was doing, and it was the other youth on the street who taught him what it was to charolear. When asked about his transition to the street, Cristobal described a similar experience of feeling lost and not knowing how to make money.

> When I arrived they asked me, "Well, do you know how to charolear?" And I told them, "Well no, what's that?" And they told me, "We're gonna go and ask the people for money and from that we eat," and I told them "Oh, yeah" because I was embarrassed to say that I didn't know what they were talking about, so I told them, "Let's go charolear." And we started talking, and they told me, "Why aren't you saying anything to the people?" And I had to tell them, "Well, the truth is that I don't know how to charolear."

In both of these situations, the youth already on the street taught the boys what it was to charolear, explaining what the word meant and showing the youth what their options were for making money but, more than that, showing them the strategies that go into the work.

Youth in street situations tend to engage in a few popular types of activities: telling riddles, singing, washing windshields, selling goods, and performing tricks (Table 3). Although less common, youth also steal, sell drugs, and participate in sex work to make ends meet. At the heart of these exchanges is reciprocity. In most cases, youth frame the work that

Table 3. Charolear Activities and Frequency	
Charolear activity	**Frequency of ever engaging in activity**
Panhandling, telling riddles, or singing	Common (majority of youth)
Lavando parabrisas (washing windshields)	Common (majority of youth)
Tricks*, malabares, fariquear,* or *los vidrios*	Uncommon (less than the majority)
Street vending and adjacent work	Common (majority of youth)
Stealing	Very uncommon (few youth)
Selling drugs	Very uncommon (few youth)
Sex work	Common (majority of youth)

they do as giving middle-class passersby something in return. In doing so, they frame their charolear activities as work or as offering a needed service, helping bolster their positive self-image by pushing back on stigma against youth in street situations as lazy criminals. The exception to this idea of reciprocity is stealing, but this is not a common way for youth to make a living.

Youth learn how to perform while they work or *do* their work both from their peers and from the interactions that they have with middle-class residents themselves. Youth learn to adjust their work strategies by reading the context and at times manipulating the

presentation of who they are to elicit specific feelings of sympathy from middle-class residents. This means that youth not only present themselves as children but stress their need by performing and sometimes exaggerating the misery that middle-class residents believe youth in street situations would experience. This involves various tactics or strategies for performing work, and it means that they take part in very particular types of work.

When asking for money from middle-class residents, boys and girls present themselves as young by making themselves seem smaller, hunching down, and changing the language that they use. They know that the street slang and profanity that they use in their everyday lives with their peers is associated with street culture or adulthood, so they speak to passersby with respect and in language that invokes the innocence of their childhood state. They employ diminutives, they use *usted* or the formal "you" when directing statements to passersby, and they draw on slight lisps to make themselves seem younger. They also perform their misery while they work, frowning, holding their stomachs, wearing dirty clothes, and, in some cases, even purposefully avoiding showering. As Juan Carlos said one day in the Precomunidad, "I don't want to change my clothes. Do I really have to? It's just that when I leave like this nobody believes I'm on the street, so they don't give me any money. They all tell me to go home and ask my parents or get a job. I can't be too clean." Youth also know that there are benefits to looking emaciated, and it leads youth to joke about not eating too much or else no one will believe that they are in need.

To be seen as worthy on the street, youth must actively distance themselves from the stereotypes of youth in street situations while they *do* work. Particularly, they understand that they cannot be seen as drug addicts or delinquents. They must do their best to counter

these images, to show that they are not only young but also hard workers who will use whatever money they earn on food and not drugs. This means that youth in street situations try to refrain from consuming while they are trying to make money. As Francisco told me,

> You can't let them see you consume. You have to hide it. If they see you consuming, they'll just think you're a drug addict and they won't give you any money. They have to see you working hard and like you deserve the money. Sometimes I buy these flavored monas—they have different flavors like strawberry, guava, you know—so that nobody can tell I'm using because it doesn't smell like mona.

These tactics are particularly common when youth participate in panhandling, washing windshields, and performing tricks.

Panhandling, riddles, and singing

It is very common for youth in street situations to earn money by asking middle-class passersby for spare change. At times they will sit on a street corner or go from metro car to metro car asking riders for money, but this is not common. In most cases, this type of work involves telling riddles (what the youth call *cuestiones capciosas)* or singing. Youth explain that engaging in this type of work involves earning money in exchange for making middle-class passersby "feel good," that is, making passersby laugh, or allowing passersby to "enjoy a pretty song."

This type of work usually involves sharing a discourse or narrative about who youth in street situations are, and it is here that youth can push back against the stigma associated with youth in street situations and perform their youthfulness and their worthiness of aid. As was the case for *el Chavo* and Juan Carlos in the fieldnote excerpt below, youth explain to passersby that they are chavos de la calle, stress that they don't steal, and make it clear that they are just trying to be decent or honest people who *earn* their money to eat.

> As Hector and I are heading to Revolución and we see el Chavo and Juan Carlos going up to a couple. We get close enough to overhear them. They're charoleando. They play off of each other to tell them a cuestion capsioca. El Chavo tells Juan Carlos, "you know … there were two soldiers. They were good friends. One of them was sent to Japan and the other to China. How do you call the soldier in Japan?" He turns to Juan Carlos, who turns to the couple, "Do you know?" They pause for a few seconds to let the couple think. After the pause they both respond, "by phone," and start to laugh. The couple laughs at the joke. The boys then explain that they are youth in street situations, that they don't steal, that they're looking to make an honest living, and that they're just looking for a little help from them today so that they can eat. The couple give the youth what looks to be 10 pesos, and the boys walk away, headed in the direction of another couple that is standing along the monument wall. (Fieldnote excerpt, March 2018)

Youth are usually able to make ends meet through these strategies, although they do not tend to be very lucrative. These strategies help youth cover their daily needs for food and activo. In rare cases, youth can make considerably more money participating in this kind of work. As Roberto, a youth who made a living singing in the metro explained to me, "I can make up to 500 pesos in a couple of hours singing in the metro. I'm pretty good." This allowed Roberto to care for his pregnant girlfriend Lucero and even allowed them to frequently stay in a shared room with other youth in street situations. Maya, the street educator, who was also part of the conversation with Roberto, later explained with resentment in her voice that this was more than she made in three days' work at Casa Alianza.

Lavando parabrisas

Washing windshields is a very common way for these youth to make money. This type of work is ubiquitous across the city. At stoplights from the north to the south of the city, youth can be found alongside adults washing windshields. The youth stay at corners or in the center dividers at intersections, and when the light turns red, they go out into the lanes with their bottles of soapy water and rags to wash the windshields of the stopped cars. They

earn whatever tips drivers offer them for their service. When the light turns green, the youth make their way back to the sidewalk or center divider and chat while they wait for the light to turn red again. They repeat the same process until they are ready to call it a day.

Given the way this work is structured, youth don't get the chance to offer a narrative of who they are, so they must perform their need and stress visibly to drivers. While washing windshields, youth perform their dirtiness, their smallness, and their neediness in asking drivers for money. They hold their stomachs and look sad. This work provides youth in street situations enough money for survival, but it can also be dangerous. The youth run the risk of being hit by motorcycles that are splitting lanes, being hit or run over by cars that don't see them, or twisting ankles or breaking bones if they fall off of large trucks, and they spend their days inhaling exhaust fumes. In addition to these dangers, youth must also face the drivers, who tend to get angry and aggressive, yelling at them to stay away from their cars and telling them that they should get real jobs.

"Tricks": *malabares* and *fariquear* (or *los vidrios*)

> The boy walks into the metro car with his shirt hanging over his shoulder, shaking a sheet that's folded in his hands like a bag. The riders can hear clinking and clanking coming from inside the sheet. The boy opens the sheet onto the floor of the metro revealing remnants of glass bottles that have been broken into pieces. He tells the riders that he's a chavo de la calle and that he's trying to make a living like everyone else. That he's a decent boy that doesn't want to steal. He lays his bare back on the shards of broken glass and lets out a scream every time he moves his body on the glass. Most of the metro riders avert their eyes, wincing at the sound of the boy screaming. After about 30 seconds, the boy gets up, bleeding, small pieces of glass still stuck in his back. He picks up the sheet with the glass and makes his way around the train car reiterating that he is just a boy trying to make ends meet without stealing. He collects a few pesos from metro riders, but most look the other way. The train approaches the next stop, and the boy exits, turning to make his way to the next metro car to do the same performance for a new set of riders. (Fieldnote excerpt, July 2016).

Related to the youth's idea of reciprocal panhandling, offering a laugh in exchange for pesos, youth put on performances or showcase their talents in exchange for monetary aid. These tricks can include anything from juggling and hula hooping to breathing or eating fire and *fariqueando* or *haciendo los vidrios* (doing the glass), when youth lay on broken glass as described in the fieldnote excerpt above. Tricks are usually done at stoplights. When the light turns red, youth go into the crosswalk to show off their skills and go up to car windows before the light turns green to ask for money. Youth present themselves to passersby before engaging in the trick. They highlight their youthfulness and their misery by coming out into the crosswalk looking sad, small, and dirty. When they go to car windows they also say things

Figure 11. Youth *fariqueando* in the metro
Photo credit: Jessica Carmen Villaseñor

like "*me regala unos pesitos?*" ("would you gift me a few small pesos") or "*hola doñita, me ayuda a conseguir algo pa'comer?*" ("hello ma'am, can you help me get something to eat"), employing diminutives and language of respect.

Fariqueando or *los vidrios* is something that not all youth partake in. It involves youth and adults laying on and rolling their bodies on shards of broken glass at stoplights or in the metro. If done in the metro, the youth explain that they are a chavo de la calle or youth in street situations and that they are just looking for a decent way to make money. Similar to other charolear strategies, they explain that they don't want to steal from anyone but instead prefer to earn their money the "decent" way. As described in the vignette above, they then open up a sheet full of shards of glass and roll their shirtless bodies (for boys) or sleeveless bodies (for girls) on top of the broken glass. This work activity is aimed at creating a sense of sympathy or pity in the audience in return for a few pesos. Youth perform the misery of their experience as the glass breaks their skin, letting out shrieks from the pain. They elicit sympathy from passersby. In many cases, seeing and hearing a youth shriek out in pain is enough to bring many middle-class passersby to feel sympathy and give money, like the metro rider in the above photo who covers her eyes before the youth lays down the glass (Figure 11).

Street vending and street vending–adjacent work

Given the large informal sector in Mexico City, street vending is the way millions of residents make a living. These youth are no different. Many youth in street situations sell things to make a living, most commonly candies, newspapers, bracelets, and palm leaf creations (roses, boxes, and so on). Candies, bracelets, and palm leaf creations are usually sold in the busy streets of the Centro Histórico, next to the most popular monuments, or in

the metro. Youth claim that this type of vending is not profitable and that they usually just earn enough for that day. Selling newspapers takes place on the main streets of the city—Paseo de la Reforma, Insurgentes, or Eje Central. Youth help adults who sell newspapers for a small cut of the wages that these adults make. Again, newspaper vending is not very lucrative, but it is enough for food and covers their need for solvent.

For youth who do not sell directly, there are still ways to benefit from the widespread street vending in the city. These youth participate in street vending–adjacent work. Many street vendors set up their puestos along Mexico City's busy sidewalks. These stands are usually made of tarps attached to metal rods and tables where merchandise is placed or food is made. Each day these puesto owners set up and take down these metal tents, and they transport and store their merchandise in warehouses or apartments somewhere near their puesto. Youth in street situations help these puesto owners set up and take down the puestos and haul merchandise and the metal structure. These youth push around heavy dollies early in the morning when the puestos are getting set up and late at night when the owner is ready to go home. After a youth and a puesto owner have built trust, this also leads to other opportunities for the youth as they are trusted to run errands for the puesto owner or are enlisted to watch the puesto while the owner runs errands.

This was the case for Mariana, a nineteen-year-old girl who had been on the street for ten years and made her money running errands or taking care of puestos. She explained that since she's been on the street for a long time, a lot of puesto owners have gotten to know her and "want to help her."

J: How do you make money?
M: *Hago mandados.* [I run errands]
J: What do you mean?

> M: Well I know a lady who makes fruit cocktails, and she sends me to buy things for her.
> J: For her puesto?
> M: Aha. Then I know different puestos and I tell them, "What do you need?" and they send me to buy their things.
> J: How did you start with that work?
> M: Because I've spent a lot of time on the street a lot of them already know me and they want to help me.

She later noted that she had gained the trust of many of the puesto owners, so much so that they would leave her in charge of the puestos while they had to run errands. She explained that many youth, including her boyfriend, have tried to convince her to make money by inflating the prices while the puesto owner is away and keeping the difference for her own profit. She values the trust that these puesto owners have in her, and her sense of loyalty and gratitude doesn't allow her to break that trust. She explained,

> You have to understand that the people who help me end up having a lot of trust in me and they leave me taking care of their puestos. I receive the money. Then there's a man who sells tenis [sneakers] for 200. You go recoding and you can sell them at 700, 800, 1000. And there are a lot of people who make money like that. And my boyfriend tells me, "They trust you, cheat them. Cheat them." But, no. I'm not going to do that.

Youth can earn anywhere from ten to fifty pesos a day and added food depending on the type of work they engage in, and the relationship with the puesto owner is an added bonus. Building a trusting relationship with a puesto owner can lead to a more stable informal job at the puesto, gifted merchandise, free food, and protection (puesto owners are willing to vouch for the youth when they are in trouble) and can even lead to shelter if a puesto owner is willing to open their doors to these youth.

Not all work involved performing youthfulness and misery, however. Some of the less common work that the youth participated in involved playing into the stigma of youth in

street situations. It involved acting tough, hardened, and engaging in illicit activities. At other times it was about performing their sexuality—in a youthful way.

Stealing

> Yesenia came into the Precomunidad, and I could tell something was wrong. Her demeanor seemed different. I thought it had something to do with Kike, her boyfriend. They're always fighting. I asked her, "Hey, I feel like you're a little different today. Is anything wrong?" A nervous smile came across her face. She put her fist up to her mouth and laughed nervously. "I feel bad," she said. "Last night Kike and I stole an old man's backpack. I feel bad. I don't steal. It was just some man walking around Juarez. He was drunk, so it was easy. We just figured, why not. Well, it was mostly Kike. Uggg I just feel so bad though." "Was this your first time stealing?" I ask. She shakes her head. "No, this was my third time. The first time I got caught and was put in holding, but they let me go with a warning. The second time I got away with it. And then yesterday. The man was so drunk he didn't even notice, but still…[pause] I feel bad." (Fieldnote excerpt, May 2018)

Despite the widespread belief that youth in street situations are delinquents or criminals who survive by stealing from middle-class residents, the reality is much different. Youth in street situations rarely participate in stealing from middle-class passersby. Most youths' fear of being caught by the police and subsequently being sent to DIF or to a detention center keeps them from stealing. More than that, youth share the feelings expressed by Yesenia in the fieldnote excerpt above—those of guilt. These youth understand the norms of society and feel the guilt and the emotional weight of breaking those norms. Most of the stealing that occurs among youth in street situations tends to take place within the social group. This type of stealing is less about work and making ends meet and more about taking advantage of other youth, getting back at youth for something that they did, or acting on impulse when they are intoxicated.

Those youth who do participate in stealing from middle-class passersby to earn money tend to be those with strong addictions or a high level of drug consumption who need

more money for survival or those whose prestreet lifestyles already involved a higher level of criminal behaviors. This was the case for Jose Marcos, the only one of my 144 informants who admitted to frequently stealing from middle-class residents. Jose Marcos was a small seventeen-year-old boy who was from Acapulco, Guerrero. He was not shy about sharing that his father was a *mafioso* and *sicario* (hitman) in Acapulco who was killed in his home when Jose Marcos was only seven years old. He recounted that after the death of his father, he sought to avenge his father's death. At just ten years old, Jose Marcos joined the same group of *narcos* his father was involved with and began to work as a *sicario* himself. Today he continues his involvement with a group of youth who assassinate or kidnap rivals, but he came to Mexico City about four years before we met because a rival group tried to kill him. Jose Marcos claims to frequently rob passersby in the Centro Histórico at gunpoint if they refuse to give him money while he's charoleando. He explained to me that he is not afraid to steal because he knows he can get away with it, he regular bribes police officers for protection, and ultimately, he "doesn't care what happens" to him—a sentiment that only echoes the depression and hopelessness he commonly mentioned in our interactions.

Selling drugs

Despite being central to the lifestyle of youth in street situations—the way they escape their reality, the way they party, and even the way they structure their daily lives—drugs play a small role in the way youth in street situations go about making money. Selling drugs is not common for these youth. As Juan Carlos explained, "It's not worth the trouble. You only make money if you invest a lot. I don't have enough to invest. And then you have to worry about what happens if you smoke the stash yourself or something and then you have the real dealers after you. Naw, I don't do that." Youth decrease the direct risk to themselves

by assisting others selling drugs and get a small fee in return. Many youth help their street mamá or the leader of their group sell drugs—they watch over the stash or sell when the leader is not at the settlement—but few sell drugs on their own to make money.

Youth who do sell drugs tend to be those who feel that they can protect themselves. They identify less with being youth and more with the adults on the street. They are the youth who have been on the street longer, and they are those who are not afraid that something will happen to them. This was the case for Jose Marcos who, in addition to stealing from middle-class residents, also dedicated himself to selling crack on the street.

Sex work

> As Israel and I walk around the Alameda, nearing the Hidalgo metro entrance, he stops. "Look, look." He was pointing to a man and a teenager. The man seemed to be in his forties and the boy was a thin boy who looked to be about sixteen. I didn't recognize the boy. They looked to be meeting each other for the first time. The boy looked a bit timid. They started walking; they crossed the street. They looked to be talking. Israel said, "Let's see where they go." We followed far behind. The man and the boy were talking, they walked past a hotel and back to the Alameda. They sat on a bench and talked for a bit longer. Israel and I watched from behind. After about fifteen minutes of talking, the man got up to leave, heading across the street, and the boy went the other direction into the park. Israel explained, "Either the boy decided not to take the client, or they set something up for later. The hotel they walked past is a common hotel for sex workers at Hidalgo. Let's keep our eye out for that boy." (Fieldnote excerpt, April 2018)

Many of the youth—boys and girls—engage in some form of sex work or survival sex to make ends meet. These youth are hired by clients from various backgrounds, but middle-class residents form part of their clientele. Girls are usually sought after by men, and boys are sought after by both women and *patos*—the word used by the youth to describe men who seek sex from these boys. Youth in street situations refer to this work as *servicio* (service). Middle-class residents solicit services from these youth in two ways: they either go directly

to the housing settlements of youth they know participate in sex work, or they meet youth at points in the city where youth wait to be picked up (so-called red zones), including various metro stations in the Centro Histórico).

This type of work tends to be quite profitable. For youth who struggle with strong drug addictions and especially those who consume drugs that are more expensive than *activo,* participating in sex work is a good option to make ends meet. For most, this work is not constant. They participate in sex work when their drug consumption increases and their financial needs increase. This was the case for Juan Jose. Juan Jose was a nineteen-year-old boy who had been on the street for four years. Juan Jose had a strong crack addiction. To keep pace with his drug needs, Juan Jose participated in sex work. He explained that not only does sex work pay much more than other informal work strategies, but clients also offer goods in exchange for services.

> J: Like how much?
> JJ: In a servicio you can make like 1,000 pesos, 1,500 pesos, and then they also take you to eat or they buy you clothes.
> J: Really? Can you explain how that works?
> JJ: Nooooo, it's like [giggles] how do I explain it to you?? It's just that you meet someone and well they ask you how much you charge or things like that.
> J: But those people show up at the settlement?
> JJ: Aahum. They already know that there are youth there that are sex workers.
> J: So they arrive to the settlement?
> JJ: Yeah, and they arrive where all of the sex workers get together, and they choose the one that they like and if they like you they take you. If they don't like you, they don't take you. They take you and they pay for the hotel and there you perform your service and apart from what they pay you they still buy you the vice and they gift you the room.
> J: They buy you vice? *Piedra* [crack]?
> JJ: Yeah, piedra, marijuana, activo. Then sometimes they give you shoes, clothes, food.
> J: And that's apart from what they pay you?
> JJ: Yes, apart. I charge a minimum of 500 pesos, but everyone charges what they charge—300, 400—it depends.
> J: And how often do you perform services?

JJ: Everyday… [laughs]
J: Then that's how you generate income?
JJ: Mhm

Despite the tangible benefits of sex work, many youth try to limit their participation in this type of work. They know that this work comes with various risks. As Alexander explained, he stopped engaging in sex work because of the physical danger and emotional toll this work took on him.

> J: Do you still do that type of work?
> A: No, not anymore. I stopped like three months ago because they killed one of my friends. It's like that, you know. You never know whose car you're getting into or where they're taking you. You don't know if you're going to come back.
> J: And did you like that work?
> A: At first, yeah. Now, no because my ex-partner or … well, myself … I feel like you lose respect. I believe we should all have self-respect, and I believe you start to lose that when you do that kind of work.

Alexander's comments highlight the danger that this type of work poses to youth in street situations and the fear that these youth feel every time they get into a stranger's car. More than that, he also describes the shame that many of these youth feel while participating in this type of work. Sex work is stigmatized. Youth who participate in sex work understand that this work is stigmatized, and they internalize this stigma in much the same way that Alexander explained above. This can add to the negative sense of self that these youth already feel for living on the street.

While sex work is not legal in Mexico City, it is widely and openly practiced across the city. This type of work can be dangerous for anyone but is particularly dangerous for these youth. Their age, size, and the precarity of their situation makes it easy for them to be taken advantage of, forced to perform sexual acts that they did not consent to, and trafficked. Some youth can be picked up to perform a service and can be held for days against their will. Most,

like Alexander, have known or heard of youth participating in this work who have been killed. Not least, all youth who participate in sex work run the risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection.

Challenges to eliciting sympathy and other strategies

As discussed in the previous chapter, girls in street situation want to have children for the emotional and sentimental benefits they provide, but it is also well known among the youth that pregnant girls and girls with children elicit more sympathy. As Lucero explained, she "gets whatever food that [she] wants because [she's] pregnant." Those who are pregnant highlight their pregnancy when working by wearing short tank tops that expose their pregnant stomachs. In some cases, girls try to present themselves as pregnant or tell the public that they are pregnant and in need of aid even when they are not. This is either purposeful or unintended, as some girls think they are pregnant because their lifestyles have left them amenorrhoeic and their menstrual periods have stopped. If youth themselves are not pregnant, it is not uncommon for them to work with a girl who is pregnant to benefit from her ability to elicit sympathy and get more aid.

Working together offers protection from the dangers of the street, as will be described below, but it can also be strategic. Youth partner with those who can elicit more sympathy. This was the case for Isabella and the youth that worked with her. Isabella was known by all of the youth for her singing abilities but, more than that, for her ability to use her singing and her disability to elicit sympathy and earn generous amounts of money on a daily basis. Youth work with younger youth or children, pregnant girls, and the visibly disabled to increase the amount of money they can earn in a day. For example, various youth would accompany Isabella to sing in the Alameda Central or in the metro even though she really only needed

one person to accompany her. They knew that middle-class residents gave her money because they looked on her sympathetically, and they knew that by accompanying her they would split her larger earnings.

When Cristobal was learning what it was to charolear, for example, another youth accompanied him to teach him how to *do* work—in this case washing windshields. In his description of the process of learning how to do the work of washing windshields, Cristobal makes it clear that *doing* work is much more than just the mechanics of washing windshields. Doing work is also about learning how to work together. As he notes from his own learning process,

> And they ask me, "Then what do you know how to do?" Well, I know how to wash a car, wash windshields … and he says, "Aaah, wash windshields, in a little bit at night we're going to wash windshields. At night I'll wait for you." It was already like eight, and I thought, "Well, he's not coming anymore," but he did show up, and he said, "Let's go," and I asked him where, and he tells me "Well, to wash windshields. Isn't that what we agreed on?" And I told him, "Yeah, let's go." I got up and I started to wash windshields. He taught me how, but I kind of already knew. I made fifty pesos in fifteen minutes…. And well, after making fifty I said, "Well I'm gonna go buy myself something to eat." And he told me "No, make a little more, and we'll put it together." And I told him okay. It made sense. I made seventy and I gave him twenty. He put in thirty to eat. Then I had money, I had fifty pesos. I had eaten and so I thought, "What should I buy?" And I said, "I'm going to buy myself a shirt."

In some cases, this led to some youth taking advantage of other youth. This was also the case for Isabella. Isabella would work with various youth from her settlement. She was usually accompanied by Alexander, Ariana, Daniel, and, for a short time, Jorge. Jorge explained that it made sense to help Isabella sing because she was able to make a lot of money, but he also shared that her disability made it easier for the other youth to take advantage of her. As he laughed, "Sometimes we take more than our cut, we leave her with less. Sometimes we'll take part of it, and we'll go buy a rotisserie chicken without telling her

and without giving her any." Isabel was aware that the youth took advantage of her. She explained to me that "it hurts. I can smell when they get food and don't invite me, but they're my friends. They're all I have."

For the older youth and especially the older boys, eliciting sympathy is not always easy. Their bodies make it difficult to hide the fact that they are not children. In this case, these boys partner with others. When this is not possible, they rely on provoking a different emotion in the middle-class passerby—fear. They present themselves as the delinquent and dangerous criminal, playing into middle-class stereotypes of youth in street situations, in hopes of scaring middle-class residents into giving them money. This was the case for many of the boys from Tepito.

As previously mentioned, in the cognitive maps of Mexico City residents, Tepito is coded as a neighborhood with high crime. It is the *barrio bravo*. Youth who live in this area are read within the context of the environment in which they live, and the boys who live in Tepito are usually read by passersby as dangerous. Instead of trying to appear as the innocent youth or to perform their misery, these youth play into the image of delinquency to intimidate middle-class residents into giving them money. They puff out their chests and try to act older, harder, and bigger—the opposite of the innocent victim—because it is the performance that works for them. As Johnny explained, these boys go up to middle-class residents or up to cars and threaten them: "Are you going to help me or am I going to have to make you help me?"

While this section described the common informal work strategies that youth in street situations participate in to make money for their survival, it does not fully explain the complexity of this work, considering that youth must take into consideration the larger

context when navigating the work they do and the way they go about doing that work. The work that these youth do takes place within the larger context of the city. This larger context includes not only the middle-class stigma against youth in street situations but also includes interactions with police, larger city policy, and the general dangers that interactions with middle-class residents pose to youth in street situations. Youth must take this whole environment into consideration when making decisions regarding the type of work they do and the way they perform that work.

Navigating the City While Working

Youth in street situations are trying to earn money on the streets of Mexico City at a time when the city is cracking down on informal work. As previously mentioned, following recommendations offered by advisors in the early 2000s, the city has worked to decrease so-called quality-of-life crimes and the type of work that signals disorder on the streets, for fear that this could lead to more crime (Davis 2006; Müller 2016). This has led to a crackdown on the work that youth in street situations engage in and has actively been pushing these youth and other informal workers out of the city center (Crossa 2009).

This punitive turn not only increases policing of this type of work but also increases policing of the youth who engage in this work to earn a living. For youth in street situations, an increase in policing means higher risk of being arrested, a higher risk of appearing on the radar of DIF, and a greater threat of being placed in a group home. As many youth noted, the police push them around the city when they are working. The police will tell them to move from one area to another and then tell them to move from that area to another. Youth learn to navigate the risk of police by making sure they don't stay in one place too long, or they learn different tactics that are relevant for the type of work that they engage in.

Youth learn how to navigate the police directly from other youth and adults already on the street as well as their individual interactions with police. When I asked Cristobal whether the police stop him while washing windshields, he mentioned that he doesn't worry about police because, in his interactions with police while working, he has learned how to avoid them. He notes,

> While you're washing windshields the police do stop you. They tell you, "The next time I pass by here I don't want to see you." So each time we see a police officer you have to hide between the cars. But really it's the yellow police [the traffic police] that stop you, they come by two times a day. Let's say they pass by at 3, they won't be back until 4 to give another run through the area, and then you know the rest of the night should be clear. You have to watch out, but you just have to know what to do so they don't see you.

The police are a common concern for youth who work in the metro and must interact with metro police at stations. Youth learn how to navigate the police from their peers. They gain access to this type of work by working with youth who already have deals with police in these areas, and they learn from these peers how to make deals with other police officers. They do this by watching the various deals that their peers negotiate with individual police officers—they learn who is willing to make deals and who can help them when they do find themselves in a situation with a police officer.

This is the case for many of the youth at the Tepito settlement. During my fieldwork period, a police officer was stationed in the park where these youth live in order to limit crime and watch over the group. The group leader bribed the police officers who patrolled the park so that the group could continue their drug sales. The youth at the settlement watched the leader broker deals with these police officers and, in this process, learned how to broker deals themselves. For the youth at Tepito, this involved bribing the police officer with money. However, for Antonio, this meant striking a different deal with the police

officers. Antonio noted that he offered assistance to the police officers in the Alameda, so they would let him charolear there. As he put it, "I'll help [the police officers] keep things quiet by telling kids to calm down or I'll tell them what I know if there is any trouble so they'll let me work there."

For those youth who work in the metro, this is about learning who you need to talk to to do this type of work. A lot of workers in the informal sector make a living selling candies, food, and random electronic accessories in the metro. This work is technically prohibited, but it is widespread. To do this work, not only do youth have to be careful while on the metro platforms—waiting until they are safely in the car to begin their call to action to entice metro riders to buy their goods—but they must also learn how to enter this world of work. Despite appearing to be a job open to anyone, this work is facilitated by bosses. There is the group the youth refer to as a *mafia* that plays gatekeeper. These bosses ask for a cut from those who sell in the metro in exchange for space on the train and protection from the metro police. Youth learn about this process from their peers. As Roberto explained, "You have to know who to talk to. It's not free. I know I can make a lot in the metro, so it's important for me to have the protection. You don't want the police bothering you, stopping you, and kicking you out, and then you lose the money for that day. Or then the bosses kick you out. It's just better that you play by the rules and you get the protection."

In addition to the danger of being arrested, the constant gaze of the middle-class residents and the daily interactions they have with them pose a threat to the safety of these youth. Whether they are telling riddles in the metro or juggling at a busy intersection, middle-class residents are always a threat. Most, if not all, youth in street situations have heard stories of youth being taken off the street and trafficked, raped, or murdered. As these

youth navigate the city, they do so with the fear that they will be next. Many of the girls recounted stories of rape or close-call experiences when left in one-on-one situations with strangers. One informant explained that this fear was so great from her past experiences that it even led her to jump out of a moving taxi. As she explained, the taxi driver called someone after she got into the taxi.

> He started to talk and he said, "I'm headed that way. I'll explain what we're going to do." And he wouldn't let me out of the taxi. He was going fast. And I started to think, "Uyyyy no, I don't want to get to wherever they're going to take me, and what if they do something to me slowly. It's now or never." So I opened the door and threw myself out.

To mitigate the risk that middle-class residents pose to the safety of youth in street situations, they try to work together. Not only does working together help youth pool their money and help them reap the benefits of working with those who can elicit more sympathy but sticking together allows them to stay safe. There is safety in numbers, so working together provides safety from the dangers the city holds. They never know what may happen—whether the police will try to pick them up if they are found working alone, whether they will be robbed by someone who sees a youth and thinks that they can be easily taken advantage of, or even whether a middle-class resident picking them up off of the street intends to traffic them. Youth navigate the physical space of the city together to avoid the dangers that middle-class residents pose.

Consequences of Playing into Youthfulness

While there are very real benefits to performing their youthfulness to elicit sympathy, there are also downsides. At the foundation of this social construction of youthfulness is the idea that youth are the responsibility of their families and they are the victims of their situation. This image constructs youth as passive actors who are unable to care for

themselves and to make their own decisions. This takes away their agency and is disempowering. Rather than being viewed as youth who made the decision to leave their home to look for spaces where they feel better and where they feel the freedom to create their own lives, the dominant image of youth continues to be that of the young child who is small, helpless, and miserable when left to their own devices. In playing into this image of youthfulness, youth perpetuate this idea, and the middle class continues to view them in this way.

Performing youthfulness in the way that these youth do—trying to be seen as the most vulnerable and most miserable—to elicit sympathy also strips these youth of their dignity and reinforces the idea that some youth are more worthy than others. Perpetuating this image obscures the fact that these youth are all worthy of aid and care and of having their right to life secured—regardless of their ability, gender, and parent status. Protection of youth in street situation should not be based on their performance of worthiness.

As the middle class have a great say in policies regarding the population and aid for these youth, their ideas of who youth in street situations are and the construction of youthfulness is important. Their continued belief that youth in street situations are either criminals or passive, helpless victims means that there is a risk that this will impact policy. This could lead to the continuation of policies that either criminalize these youth or ignore their agency and their ability to make decisions over their lives.

Conclusion

The relationship between youth in street situations and middle-class residents in the city is complex. The reality of the lives of these youth, the fact that they live every aspect of their lives on the street and in the open, leaves them constantly vulnerable to the middle-

class gaze. Usually these relationships are thought of as one of stigmatized and stigmatizer, but they are more complex.

Youth in street situations face discrimination based on the stigma of the construction of youth in street situations as criminals or delinquent youth, and this negatively impacts their sense of self. They resist this stigma by emphasizing their youthfulness, a social category that leads them to be interpreted by middle-class passersby as victims of their situation rather than criminals. This plays a role in shaping the way youth in street situations understand their own situations, as they come to see themselves as victims as well. The positive framing of their situation also helps to bolster their sense of self.

Their knowledge of the difference between the construction of a youth in street situation and that of childhood leads them to perform this youthful identity while they work in order to elicit sympathy from middle-class passersby. They understand that eliciting sympathy has benefits because middle-class residents are more likely to provide aid to those they think are victims rather than those they see as delinquents and therefore unworthy of aid. They accentuate and perform their youthfulness and misery—exaggerating their small size, their helplessness, their dirtiness, and even their hunger—while working. When this doesn't work, they play into the fear that they can elicit from being coded as dangerous delinquents.

Youth in street situations do this work and navigate their relationships with middle-class residents in a city that is trying to push them out and in a context in which middle-class residents pose a threat to their safety. Youth learn how to navigate this context to survive. In the process, these interactions shape their social world. Their understanding of their situation, the work they do to earn money, the way they perform that work, the relationships

they make with their peers to elicit more sympathy, and even the way they navigate the physical space of the city are structured by their relationships with middle-class residents.

The social world of these youth is not only structured by the relationships they build with their peers or with middle-class residents, but they are also shaped by their relationships with aid organizations, both state and nonstate, and the employees at these organizations. The next chapter will explore the ways these relationships help to further shape these youths' understanding of their situation and how they navigate the city for their survival. It will also explore the way their relationships with these organizations impacts the larger community of aid in Mexico City.

Chapter 4
Navigating Precarious Autonomy: Youth in Street Situations and the Institutions They Encounter

> Brendita: I was in a boarding school with nuns in Toluca from four to eight years old.
> J: And why did you get out?
> B: Because my mom. I was there, but they hit me a lot. When I turned eight, my mom took me out. I got out of there, and my mom took me to Puebla because they brought a suit against her. See, the nuns didn't let my mom take me out. When I turned eight my mom took me to the park, but I was sick and told her that I didn't want to go back the school. Well, my mom took me to Puebla, and she didn't tell the nuns. Then they charged my mom with kidnapping. She basically stole me because she didn't tell them she was taking me out. And I was in there through DIF, so they knew where my mom was living, so we went to Puebla and stayed there for two years. After that, my mom had some problems in Puebla, and we returned to Mexico City.
> J: And have you been in any other organizations?
> Brendita: Yes, but I would leave. You see, I was in Casa Alianza and I escaped. At Casa Alianza I had *mi fiesta de quince años* [my fifteenth birthday party]. Then when I turned fifteen I escaped, and I no longer went back. It had been two years of not being at Casa Alianza, but they did the operativo, just a year ago they did an operativo [in Juarez] and they took me to Agency 59, and from there, they transferred me to the rehab clinic where I was. I was there in the rehab clinic for six months. After that I was put in contact with Casa Alianza again, and they took me to the residential program. I was studying there. I was housed and everything, but because of my drug consumption I left again.

In the interview excerpt above, Brendita describes her experiences with residential programs. As mentioned earlier, Brendita is a young girl who has spent her whole life on the street. She identifies strongly with street life, making no apologies for being *from* the street, as she puts it. Despite this connection to the street, however, Brendita has been in various residential programs and has built relationships with numerous organizations and their employees since childhood. This is not uncommon. These organizations and their employees are an important part of everyday life for these youth.

The dominant image of youth in street situations is that of the lone child, abandoned by their family and left to fend for themselves on the street with no one to help them. These images were initially disseminated in the 1970s by organizations that were problematizing the phenomenon of youth in street situations and denouncing inequality in Latin America more broadly (Butler and Rizzini 2003). They told stories of youth who had no connection to their families, to their peers, to the middle class, or to aid. However, the image of the isolated child only works to perpetuate the extraction of these youth from their communities and from the larger city they live in.

As has been shown in previous chapters, youth in street situations build numerous relationships with other communities throughout the city to help them not only meet their physical needs to survive but also fulfill their emotional needs through a network of support. Part of these networks are the organizations and aid workers that work with these youth on a daily basis to support the youths' physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

As previously mentioned, in Latin America many care and developmental aspects of the state were taken over by civil society organizations as governments thinned with the shift to more neoliberal state models in the 1980s. Mexico is not an exception. In 2014, the Federal Registry of Civil Society Organizations had 25,534 organizations registered in the country (Cemefi, n.d.). In Mexico City, there are numerous international and domestic civil society organizations and charities—both religious and secular—throughout the city that work with this population. Youth in street situations also have access to various government resources. Given the city's move to protect its most vulnerable populations, youth in street situations have become one of these high-priority groups. This has meant an increase in the number of government resources available to these youth, an explicit government plan for

working with the population, and an expansion of the work that government organizations do to aid the population (Comisión de Derechos Humanos de la Ciudad de México 2016). Taken together, youth in street situations have access to resources that range from outreach programs and charities, in which individuals work directly with the youth in the street, to day centers that provide services at a drop-in center, rehabilitation clinics where youth can work to overcome their drug addictions, overnight shelters, and residential programs that provide long-term housing options for these youth.

The various resources in the city form a large web of government and civil-society organizations that coexist to work with youth in street situations. Each organization working with these youth in Mexico City has a different goal and mission, offers different types of support, and works with different populations. Youth are very aware of these organizations and the aid available to them. They build relationships with these organizations and their employees in ways that help the youth survive, and in doing so, these relationships impact the way youth go about their everyday lives, navigate the physical space of the city to access and avoid these resources, and even shape the way they understand their own situation. In turn, these youth also affect the larger landscape of organizations by shaping these organizations' work.

To understand the relationships between these youth and the community of organizations established to aid them, it is important to have a sense of the landscape of aid available to them. In this chapter, I will give a brief description of the organizations and resources available to youth in street situations in Mexico City. I will focus on those organizations that my informants most frequented, given that they are the organizations that directly shaped their social world. I will then describe the way youth navigated the resources

of these organizations to maximize the benefits available to them while balancing their need to feel a sense of autonomy. This balance between the benefits of aid and the feeling of autonomy is complicated by the importance of these relationships, considering that youth are willing to cede some of their autonomy for the social support that employees at these organizations offer them. I will then discuss the way the relationships that youth build with these organizations structure their access to other resources in the city and structure youth's own understanding of their situation. I will finish this chapter by exploring the bidirectionality of these relationships. Not only do these organizations impact the social world of youth in street situations, but the youth in turn impact the structure and work of the organizations, as employees and the organizations themselves shift their practices in an attempt to attract more youth and have a greater impact.

Organizational Landscape

To understand the shape and significance of the relationships between youth in street situations and the organizations that work with them, it is important to understand the landscape of these organizations in the city. I will offer a brief description of the organizations and the type of aid they offer youth in street situations. Table 4 offers a breakdown of the most common organizations that my informants came into contact with, a description of the population that they work with, and the type of aid they offer.

Table 4. Main Organizations Informants Had Contact With				
Organization	**Type**	**Population**	**Description**	**Type of Aid**
Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DIF)	Government	All youth under 18	Strengthening and developing the welfare of Mexican families	Administrative
IASIS–Coruña Jovenes	Government	Boys and girls, 12-21 years old, who have problems with addiction but without psychiatric pathologies	Working with socially abandoned youth in the city	Outreach, day center, residential program
IASIS–Coruña Hombres	Government	Men older than 18 with personality disorders, organic disability, or mild-to-moderate psychosocial disability, in street situation and/or in social abandonment	Working with men in street situations in the city	Day center, overnight shelter
Fundación Casa Alianza Mexico (FCAM)	Civil society	Youth between 12 and 17 years old who have been socially abandoned	Getting youth off the street and providing youth a dignified place to live and education for eventual social reintegration.	Outreach, day center, residential program
Pro Niños de la Calle	Civil society	Boys 10-21 years old who live or have lived in the street	Getting youth off the street, reuniting families, and reintegrating youth in society	Outreach, day center, residential program

Table 4. Main Organizations Informants Had Contact With (Continued)				
Carcol	Civil society	Youth and adults in street situations, regardless of gender	Advocating for human rights	Outreach, day center
Ednica	Civil society	Youth younger than 18 who live and/or work on the street or are connected to the street	Taking a human rights approach to promoting initiatives that work with street-connected and at-risk youth, those youth working in public spaces, and their families	Outreach, day centers
Fundación Renacimiento	Civil society	Youth younger than 18, boys and girls experiencing social abandonment	Providing a place to live and working toward family reunification or social reintegration	Residential program
Various religious organizations and charities	Civil society	Youth and adults in street situations	Providing goods and food to youth and adults in the street	Outreach, day center, soup kitchen
Rehabilitation clinics	Civil society	Youth and adults in street situations	Various clinics and Alcoholics Anonymous programs that offer residential drug rehabilitation services	Rehabilitation, residential programs

Administrative aid

Administrative work with these youth is about overseeing their care. The main government organization in the city that took on this administrative role was the DIF, the public child welfare institution that is tasked with the protection and care of youth in the

city. According to its mission statement, "DIF-CDMX is committed to strengthening and satisfying the needs of social assistance and provision of assistance services, providing efficient solutions of great impact that benefit the most vulnerable population, and contribut[ing] to the better development of the families of Mexico City" (CDMX DIF 2020)

DIF is responsible for the well-being of youth in street situations under the age of 18, doing what I refer to here as administrative work. When a child or youth comes under the care of DIF—whether they are taken out of their home, turn to DIF for help, or are taken off the street—DIF places these youth into homes of family members, group homes, or residential programs run by civil society organizations throughout the city. DIF caseworkers follow up with youth to oversee their progress. DIF does not have group homes of their own.

Outreach aid

Outreach programs are those that engage youth in the street. Organizations send employees to work with the youth in their environment—whether at their settlements, walking around the city, or at intersections while youth are working. There are various organizations in the city that have outreach programs and outreach workers, including IASIS, FCAM, Pro Niños, Ednica, and Caracol as well as various religious organizations and charities. Outreach work looks different for each organization because the work they do depends on their various missions.

For example, IASIS is the government organization tasked with outreach work with these youth. IASIS runs the city's homeless day center and youth shelter, Coruña Jovenes. Their outreach work is focused primarily on convincing youth to seek services—to shower, eat, and get medical attention—at the Coruña shelter. The organization drives an

institutional van around the city and offers to take youth and adults to the shelter if they agree to receive this aid.

Casa Alianza, Pro Niños, and Caracol, on the other hand, focus their outreach work on education, although the educational message shifts depending on the organization. Given the missions of Casa Alianza and Pro Niños, this education is focused on raising awareness of the dangers of their street lifestyle—including violent street culture, drug consumption, and partaking in risky sexual behaviors. This education is usually ludic; the outreach workers play card or board games with the youth and talk to them during game play. For these organizations, the goal is to get youth in street situations to engage in a more comprehensive educational program at a day center, where goods and resources are provided. Aid on the street is limited to candy rewards for youth who participate in the day's activity because there is a fear that providing aid directly on the street will disincentivize youth from changing their lifestyle and will create a stronger connection with the street.

For Caracol, the educational component of outreach work is not focused on raising awareness of the risks of the street or convincing youth to make a lifestyle change but is instead focused on educating the population on the street of their rights. The organization is focused on protecting rights and advocating for all populations on the street. Given this mission, the goal of Caracol's outreach program is to prepare youth and adults to defend themselves in the face of various types of discrimination as they navigate the city and to help them exercise their rights by giving them access to legal aid. Caracol's outreach education is also accomplished through game play, and they too provide few tangible resources on the street.

There are various sources of religious aid that are also available to the youth through outreach work. While individual charity from middle-class passersby and especially religious middle-class passersby was mentioned in the previous chapter, there are also more formalized forms of religious charity. Unlike other civil society organizations, religious aid is more focused on helping youth in street situations meet their immediate needs. This outreach work involves providing religious education and offering the youth food, blankets, and/or clothes.

Outreach work offers youth in street situations aid and resources with little to no commitment in return. Most of this outreach work only asks youth to refrain from consuming drugs or *activo* while participating in the activity. Moreover, outreach workers go to youth settlements to provide this aid, which means that youth don't need to leave their makeshift homes or their comfort zones to receive this aid. As will be explained below, this makes outreach work attractive for many youth in street situations, and youth are usually more willing to engage these outreach workers than other forms of organizational aid.

Day centers

Various organizations in the city have day or drop-in centers for youth in street situations. Here, youth can receive resources at a site away from their settlements. This was the case for IASIS–Coruña, Casa Alianza, Pro Niños, Caracol, Ednica, and various religious organizations in the city. Some organizations run their day center everyday, like Casa Alianza, Pro Niños, and Coruña, and others, like Caracol and various religious organizations, offer services certain days of the week. The model of these day centers varies. Some are structured around a comprehensive educational model, while others are more limited and resemble a soup or community kitchen. Regardless of the model, the day centers offer youth

in street situations more resources than outreach programs. They are spaces where youth can receive food and in some cases a shower, where they can wash or change their clothes, and where they can receive some type of counseling. In most cases, they also provide some sort of educational programming to help youth understand the dangers of their current lifestyle.

This type of aid tends to ask youth to make a bigger commitment than outreach work. Not only do youth have to leave their settlements to travel to these centers, but these centers have rules that youth need to follow in order to receive aid. For Casa Alianza, for example, in order to be admitted into the day center, youth have to arrive at a certain time and commit to participating in activities for the entire morning or afternoon shift, abstain from drug consumption while in the center, follow the rules dictating how they treat their peers, follow the day center's activity model, which included chores or cleaning after breakfast and lunch, and show a commitment to changing their lifestyle—which includes a commitment to getting sober and getting off the street. The rules and amount of commitment asked of youth depends on the organization.

Shelters and residential programs

There are three main organizational options for youth who are looking to exit or find refuge from the street: overnight shelters, residential programs, and rehabilitation clinics. Overnight shelters are where youth and adults can arrive at night, sleep, and be let out in the morning. For youth in street situations in Mexico City, the most common option for an overnight shelter is IASIS's Coruña shelter. This aid is on a first-come first-serve basis, and is usually limited to shelter, food, and a shower.

Longer-term refuge from the street is offered through residential rehabilitation clinics and residential programs. Residential rehabilitation clinics are spaces where youth can live while they work to get sober. To access this care, youth tend to go to *Instituto Para la Atencion y Prevencion de Addiciones* (IAPA; Institute for the Attention and Prevention of Addictions) to receive a grant for their residential process and be assigned to a clinic somewhere in Mexico City. There are various drug rehabilitation clinics throughout the city; they offer the youth a place to live, eat, and work with various psychologists and psychiatrists as they battle their addictions. These clinics usually employ a classic twelve-step model and tend to be religious in nature. A "process" in the clinic usually takes anywhere from three months to a year, depending on the needs of the youth.

If a youth finishes their process successfully or does not have a strong addiction, they can go directly to a group home with a residential program run by a civil society organization in the city. My informants tended to interact with four main residential programs—Jovenes Coruña, Casa Alianza, Pro Niños, and Renacimiento. These residential programs offer youth a place to live, food, access to education, access to mental and physical health resources, and recreational opportunities.

Of the aid available to youth in street situations, these residential programs ask the greatest commitment. To be eligible for these programs, the youth must show a commitment to changing their lifestyle—to abstaining from drugs, to wanting to go to school, and to following the rules of the organization. In most cases, this also includes limits on the movement of the youth. For rehabilitation clinics, for example, youth are not allowed to leave the clinic while they are undergoing their process, and for youth in group homes or residential programs, it is common for youth to be prohibited from leaving the house for the

first few weeks of residence. After these first few weeks, their movement is limited by the house rules of the organization.

Maneuvering Aid and Structuring Identity

Through government and nongovernmental organizations, youth in street situations have access to food, showers, clothes, education, and even shelter. Youth are aware of many of the options for aid available to them, and they use various resources around the city in their daily lives. Youth maneuver their way around this aid to maximize their access to resources, and in the process, these interactions shape the way youth structure their daily schedules, the way they move across the physical space of the city, and the way they present themselves to aid workers. In learning how to present themselves as a client at each organization, youth also structure an understanding of who they are. Through this process, youth learn a language that helps them build a narrative around who they are that allows them to begin to understand and process their past and present trauma while also shaping the way they understand who they are on the street.

Youth in street situations frequently reference not only the government and civil society organizations in the Delegación Cuauhtémoc that they frequently access but also the religious outreach work and charity that arrives at their settlement. Youth in street situations structure their days around the aid schedule of these organizations, knowing the day and time that aid will arrive. When there is no aid arriving, youth in street situations know where and when they can receive aid at a day center or soup kitchen. When I asked Jose to describe a usual day in the street, for example, he mentioned the time he woke up and the work he participated in to pay for his food and *monas,* but he also described the usual aid

he received at the settlement and the schedule of days and times he usually had access to the aid.

> Jose: On Tuesdays a sister goes, she gives us talks.
> J: About what?
> Jose: About the Bible. She has a foundation for children with cancer. And she gives us a talk. You sit half an hour listening to the talks. After that they give a meal. You eat two or three times, water, gelatin, desserts … like that. That's every Tuesday. On Thursdays, another sister goes to the other patio.
> J: From the same organization?
> Jose: No. Another sister of a church. And she also gives us talks, and they also take us food to eat.
> J: And you like that?
> Jose: Yes. I get along with them. In fact, last Tuesday I was sitting there very dirty, everything stained I don't know from what, and she scolded me. She says, "I don't want to see you like that again. For the other Tuesday I want to see you very handsome," she says, "little by little you are not taking care of yourself, you are starting to lose yourself in the drugs. I want to see you very handsome." And she has a foundation for children with cancer.
> J: And there are other foundations that pass through there?
> Jose: Coruña will come by to see us. Then the Delegación, when it is very cold, some people go from the Delegación to leave coffee and bread, dinner, blankets. Then from other places … there is a 350-truck van and they take out two or three tables, and they take us pozole and they feed us. With cream. Your soda. Your candy. Your dessert.
> J: And where are they from?
> Jose: They come from Tlatelolco. They are from a shelter for unhoused people. Then there are some transvestis [*sic*]. They are three transvestite sisters. And they go in a van with their dad and mom, and they give us chicken and cakes. They always ask what we need. Every once in a while, people say [speaks in a questioning voice] "What's up with the transvestites?" But they are cool. They take us whole chickens, soda, sweets, everything. Then there is a lady from near the Monumento Revolución who goes almost every week, her daughter takes dog food and pure water to drink. And they take for the dogs at the settlement to eat.
> J: And Casa Alianza?
> Jose: They go like three times a week. They give talks and do activities.
> J: What kind of activities?
> Jose: Super UNO. They give talks. They help reintegrate us. They're cool.

Youth learn about the aid available to them through direct contact with organizations and from their peers on the street. In some cases, they learn about aid through referrals from

other organizations. Organizations give youth referrals to other organizations when they do not fit the profile of the population they work with. Casa Alianza employees, for example, commonly refer youth older than 18 to Coruña because Casa Alianza does not work with adults. Pro Niños employees, on the other hand, commonly referred girls to Casa Alianza because they only work with boys.

More than just a sense of what they receive from each organization, youth in street situations have a keen awareness of the nature of the aid that they are receiving, as exemplified of Jose's description of the organizations. These youth have a good sense of the type of work the organizations do, their different missions, and the profile of youth that they work with. Much like Jose, they are capable of describing the origin of the aid they receive clearly, explaining whether they come from churches or organizations in the area or are independent. The youth use the cues that they pick up from the aid itself and their knowledge of its origins to understand how to interact with the outreach workers or aid providers.

Different types of aid have different expectations of the youth they are serving. Youth in street situations are very aware of those expectations. When working with religious organizations, for example, youth know that they must pray or pretend to be open to learning about religion to receive aid. When working with an organization like Casa Alianza, on the other hand, they know they must present themselves as willing to make a lifestyle change. This awareness was shown in the way youth described their interactions with the organizations. One day in the dining room at the Precomunidad, Pablo was complaining about the food offered at Casa Alianza. He was upset that he was denied a second serving of food before everyone had finished eating. He began to describe the different and—as he described them—"better" meal options at Pro Niños and Mefi. He made it known to Casa

Alianza staff that he "should have gone to one of those organizations instead of going to Casa Alianza" that day. When Pablo mentioned Mefi, Josefina stopped him. She had never heard of the organization and asked the youth what Mefi was. Pablo explained,

> Mefi is an organization over by La Raza. It's like all the others where you have to do an activity to get food, but they're Christians so it's usually religious. They make you read the bible or pray and stuff, so you just pretend like you're praying or whatever [laughs while he puts his hands together in front of him to pretend to be praying] and then they give you your food. [Glaring at Josefina] And there you can eat as many times as you want. (Fieldnote excerpt, October 2017)

Pablo not only explained that it was a religious organization but explained what was necessary to gain access to aid at a religious organization—"pretend like you're praying or whatever." Youth use their knowledge of the expectations for different types of aid along with their knowledge of the target profile and missions of the organizations to shape the way they interact with them. They do so to maximize the number of resources they have access to.

Youth pick up cues from their peers or from the outreach workers themselves to try to present themselves as fitting within the profile of the organizations that they come into contact with. When interacting with Casa Alianza, for example, it was common for youth to have a sense of the age limit (eighteen years old) and lie about their age to receive benefits—claiming that they were sixteen or seventeen years old when they were actually eighteen or older. This was the case when Israel and I went to the Casitas settlement one day and met a girl who looked to be about fifteen years old. We had never seen her before at this settlement, so we approached her to introduce ourselves. Israel introduced the work that Casa Alianza does, mentioning to the girl, "We work with *banda* in the street from twelve to seventeen years old. We have a day center right down that street [points toward the Precomunidad].

We open at 8:30 in the morning, and you can participate in activities, wash your clothes, get a meal. It's a nice place." He then asked the girl how old she was, and she replied that she was sixteen and that she was interested in learning more about the center. Israel, who had been pressured by the executive director to bring youth into the day center told the girl, "We can take you right now so that you can get to know the place and the people." The girl agreed, and as she got up to accompany us, a boy who was standing in the distance watching our conversation began to laugh loudly. He walked over and asked Israel, "Is she going with you?" Israel nodded his head and joked with the boy, "Yeah … Because some people want help." The boy started laughing, "Well, if she's going, then I'm going too." Israel gave the boy a hard look, "You know you can't; you're already eighteen." The boy responded, "Well, so is she. Don't let her fool you. How old did she say she was?" Israel responded, "sixteen" and looked at the girl. She was smiling, and the boy interjected, "You told him you were sixteen?" and started laughing. The girl was still smiling, "No, I'm sixteen. What are you talking about?" The boy responded, "Yeah, yeah. Show him your ID." The girl shook her head and stared at the boy, then at Israel. She eventually conceded with a laugh, "Fine, I'm eighteen." Israel paused for a moment, "*Chale* [dang], then you can't come." He turned to tell me we were leaving, and the disappointment was visible on his face.

In other cases, youth told their peers to lie about their ages to receive aid at the Precomunidad. When Alexander took his boyfriend Rolando to the Precomunidad for the first time, he instructed him to lie about his age to gain access to the day center. Rolando was a shy and quiet young man. When he first arrived at the Precomunidad, he spent most of the time looking down at the floor and only speaking when asked a direct question. As part of the intake process, Josefina asked Rolando his age. The boy said he was seventeen years old.

Given the youth's appearance, she doubted the truthfulness of this statement but still let him in. Later in the day, she asked the boy for his birthday and he answered with his actual birth year—a year that made him twenty-one and not seventeen. Rolando explained, "Sorry. It's that Alexander told me I had to say that I was seventeen so that I could come in with him."

Each organization has their own mission and their own perspective and theories on how to work with youth in street situations. This means that they each have their own discourse and expectations of the youth. Youth learn the various discourses used by the organizations to present themselves in a way that makes them able to access aid. These youth have a sense of the questions that they will be asked by organizations and a sense of the answers that these organizations want to hear. As Manuel explained to me, these questions become "the usual questions." Manuel was a seventeen-year-old boy who was chosen by Casa Alianza outreach workers to be a representative in the Parliament for Youth in Street Situations, a city-wide event. As part of his participation, he needed to do an interview with another organization in the city. He had lived on the street with his mother and his younger sister for fourteen years and had extensive experience working with organizations. When asked about the interview, his response made it clear that he was accustomed to fielding questions from organizations.

> We took Manuel to the *Parlamento*. He was dressed nicely. He kept looking in the mirror with a big smile and asking us if he looked okay. Everyone just kept telling him he looked handsome, and he was smiling. He had a special hop in his step. I asked him if he was going to dress like that every day, and he laughed and said no. Then he turned to Teresa and said, "She thinks I should dress like this every day." Teresa replied, "You should. Don't you think so?" Manuel got shy and kept walking. As we were walking, Teresa asked him what they had been doing in the Parlamento. He said that the day before they had been interviewed by people from Renacimiento. Teresa asked what kind of things they had asked—if they were fixed questions or if they flowed from the

> conversation. He said they asked how old they were, about their consumption, when they started living on the street, what they do for money, etc. He finished by saying, "you know, the usual questions" and laughed a little. (Fieldnote excerpt, July 2016)

Many youth use this knowledge of "the usual questions" and expected answers to engage in what E. Summerson Carr (2010) refers to as flipping the script. In this process, youth act as linguistic ethnographers to understand the organizations' expectations and maneuver within them to be viewed positively. This involves "formally replicating prescribed ways of speaking about themselves and their problems without investing in the content of those scripts" (Carr 2010, 3). It is the anticipatory practice of telling people what they want to hear.

For youth interacting with Casa Alianza, this was particularly evident when youth were asked to show a commitment to making a lifestyle change. Youths' access to resources at Casa Alianza was dependent on outreach workers' evaluation of their commitment to the process of leaving the street, and youth were well aware of this. They understood that in order to access resources, they needed to "show commitment." To do so, then, they would listen to outreach workers as they spoke to them about the dangers of the street, the dangers of risky sexual behaviors, the importance of lowering their drug consumption, the importance of education, and the importance of making a general lifestyle change. The youth would echo back many of the concerns that outreach workers warned them about—many times using the exact language of the outreach worker. Youth would qualify their commitments to making a lifestyle change by saying that they just needed a little more time. It was extremely common for youth to claim that "on Monday, I'll be ready to go to rehab," always claiming that the next week would be the week they would make a lifestyle change. Many youth were able to get continued access to the Precomunidad by continuing to show

this type of concern about the consequences of their street lifestyle. The reality, however, is that most of these youth did not have real plans to make a lifestyle change, and they would not arrive to the Precomunidad the day of their planned lifestyle change—whether that was entering a rehab clinic or a residential program. The script that these youth were using to gain access to aid did not match their inner contents (that is, thoughts, feelings, intentions).

Adopting the language of the organization to show commitment has a very important limit. Youth will adopt the discourse of the organization to prove their commitment, but they draw the line at saying that they are *addicts*. While organizations are determined to get youth to understand that their consumption is a problem and that they are addicts, youth are reluctant to see themselves in that way. As previously mentioned, youth draw boundaries between themselves and the adults in the settlements by claiming that they themselves are not addicts, instead referring to their drug use as partying. Youth adopt the language of having a problem or participating in dangerous drug use to access aid, saying that they recognize they have a problem with drugs when speaking to aid workers, but they do not adopt the language or framing of the situation that paints them as *addicts*. Admitting to being an addict challenges the boundary they draw between themselves and the adults in street situations and therefore challenges their idea of who they are and their positive sense of self.

While youth learn the discourse at these various organizations to gain access to valuable resources, this language also helps youth make sense of their situation and their lives. In mastering the language necessary to be a client, learning how to present themselves at each organization, and participating in activities at these organizations, youth understand more about what it is to be a youth in street situation and learn a language that helps them understand what they have experienced. Many youth in street situations have experienced

trauma in the past and present but do not fully know how to talk about it or how to explain what it is they have experienced. This is common for those who have experienced trauma. After a review of the literature on individuals who suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder van der Kolk and Fisler (1995) found that for many individuals who have experienced trauma, memories are retrieved in the form of sensory imprints: visual, olfactory, affective, auditory, and kinesthetic. These individuals eventually build a linguistic narrative to explain the memory, usually with the help of psychotherapy. Most youth in street situations have never been to therapy. For many, learning the language used by these organizations helps them build a narrative about their past and present trauma experiences. These interactions facilitate a process that Kaminer (2006) refers to as the creation of linguistic representations of trauma and helps these youth build a narrative of their experiences. The interactions they have with these organizations gives them a language to express their memories, understand their experiences, and build a narrative around their trauma—an important tool that has been found to be helpful in posttraumatic healing (Kaminer 2006).

This is most clear in the youth's adoption of the language of abandonment. When youth first arrive to the street and are asked to explain why they are there, they focus on an event that was the catalyst for leaving their home—usually a fight or a particular example of physical or sexual abuse. After being on the street and interacting with organizations and other youth, they begin to present their story in a different way and give these particular events a different meaning. Specifically, they adopt the language that these organizations use to understand the population and their reason for being on the street.

Most of these youth come into contact with organizations whose official mission is to work with youth who find themselves in situations of "social abandonment." This is a term that is commonly used by civil society and government organizations in the city. Youth begin to adopt the language of abandonment to present themselves as candidates for aid to organizations, but in adopting this language, they soon come to understand themselves and their past experiences as abandonment. For Juan Carlos, this meant coming to understand his mother leaving him with his biological father as *abandonment*. He explained that he was *abandoned* by both his parents when his father then left him with his grandparents and his aunt to work in the north. For Johnny and Isabella, both youth began to explain their mothers' coupling with a new partner as *abandonment* because they felt their mothers were paying more attention to their new partners than to them. While the language of the organizations helps youth structure their understanding of their situation and gives them a language to make sense of their lives, it also helps youth make sense of who they are as youth in street situations.

In participating in street education activities with Caracol, for example, youth in street situations learn that they are rights-bearers and begin to understand themselves as rights-bearers on the street. As Gervais's (2010) examination of a rights education program for girls in Bolivia found, these programs helped girls realize their human rights, empowered girls to exercise these rights, and created a readiness to resist violations of their rights. Organizational rights education for youth in street situations had a similar impact on the lives of the youth.

When youth first find themselves on the street, they are scared, they don't know what they can and can't do, and they are worried about being taken back to their homes. They do not see themselves as rights-bearers. Most do not have previous exposure to the concept of youth rights and are unaware that they themselves have rights. This changes after a few months of interacting with aid organizations, especially those like Caracol, whose main focus is rights education. By working with aid workers from these organizations and participating in organization activities, youth learn that they have a right to be on the street, and more broadly speaking, they learn that they are rights-bearers. Youth begin to talk very clearly about their rights and begin to advocate for themselves when they feel that their rights are being violated. One day in the waiting room at the Precomunidad I asked Ariana how her night was; she explained that it was difficult. She said, "The police kept bothering us, they kept moving us. When we were in the Alameda, they kept telling us that we couldn't be here, and then we would move, and they would tell us we couldn't be there. But I told them, I have a right to be in the city. I have a right to be here and you can't keep moving me." This was also the case for Guadalupe, who asserted herself in the face of what she saw as discrimination.

> We walk down the stairs of the monument and up to the encampment. We see Yesenia sitting on the cement bench to the left of the encampment with a man who looks to be in his forties. As we were walking up the man had passed her a *porro* or marijuana cigarette and she took a puff, but as soon as her eyes locked onto us she pulled it away from her mouth, quickly gave the porro to the man and got up. She turned her back to us, facing the man, as though she were embarrassed and hoping that we didn't go over to talk to her. We went directly over to the little shelter built against the wall, and Hector greeted Brenda to ensure that we were welcomed in their space, something that the org workers do every time we come visit. Brenda gave us the okay to talk to the group. We went over to Yesenia to see how she was doing. She didn't want to talk to us. She was embarrassed that we had seen her smoking. We could

> tell she was really high. We had never seen her high before because she had always told us that she didn't consume drugs. She was slurring her words and giggling. She had walked over to another girl. I had only been very briefly introduced to this girl; she doesn't usually stay at the monument. Her name is Guadalupe. Today she seemed to be talking to the group from the monument. While Hector was talking to Yesenia, I talked to Guadalupe and asked her what she was doing at the Monument. She began to recount a fight that she had gotten into the night before with her group, and as she was recounting the story, she pulled a *mona*, a gauze doused in active, to her nose. She would say a few words and pull the mona up again. The effects of the solvent became clear. She was slurring her words and speaking increasingly more slowly. Hector cut us off, interrupting our conversation. He pulled me aside to tell me that he had convinced Yesenia to go to the day center. I told Guadalupe that we were leaving because Yesenia wanted to go to the day center, and Guadalupe said that she wanted to go too. Hector overheard this, and he told her, "No, you can't." He quickly pulled me away from her so that we could start walking with Yesenia before she changed her mind. Guadalupe began calling after us as we were walking up the stairs of the monument. Hector turned and again reiterated, "No, you can't come. You know the policy at the day center. You can't go if you're consuming drugs or you're high." She yelled back at him, "That's discrimination!! You're discriminating against me because I have an addiction. You can't do that. I have rights. I have the same rights as everyone else. You can't discriminate against me because I use drugs!!" Hector coldly responded, shrugging, "You know how this works," turned around, and walked away with Yesenia. (Fieldnote excerpt, November 2017)

Balancing Autonomy and Aid

Accessing aid is more than just knowing what is available and understanding how to maximize resources. Youth in street situations make calculated decisions when they choose which type of aid to receive and which organizations to seek out. They are drawn to certain types of aid and avoid others to maintain as much autonomy and control over their lives as possible while receiving the benefits of aid.

For youth in street situations, receiving aid and interacting with the various organizations in the city is not just about receiving goods. They understand that this aid comes at a cost. Youth in street situations are aware that working with different organizations calls for varying levels of commitment in return. For these youth, commitment

means a loss of autonomy as they are asked to follow the rules of the organizations or charity and must participate in the organization's activities. Youth in street situations seek to maximize the goods they can receive while still maximizing their autonomy. Different types of aid call on the youth to make different types of commitments—both because of the nature of the aid and the models employed by each organization. Outreach aid tends to be the lowest commitment for the youth. This aid arrives at the youths' settlement, so they get to stay in their own environment. In most cases, youth are asked to abstain from consuming drugs while the aid worker is present or to actively participate in the day's activities (games, prayer, and so on). Many provide food, blankets, and other goods without any commitment in return. Most youth have no problem engaging with outreach workers in their settlements. For them, the benefits of playing UNO or soccer, chatting, and getting a candy outweigh the loss of autonomy caused by not being able to consume drugs and having to listen to the educators speak on the dangers of the street. For a few, this is enough to tip the scales, and they prefer not to participate. In these cases, youth turn down outreach workers and at times refuse to interact with them by running away or covering their heads with blankets when they see outreach workers arriving at the settlement.

Day centers are a medium-level commitment, given that the youth must leave their settlements, follow the rules of the day center while there, and, in many cases, show some commitment to changing their current lifestyles. Youth who frequented the Precomunidad, for example, had to show up at the center at a certain time, commit to participating in activities and completing their chores, and make progress on their "life plan." The latter activity usually entailed showing a commitment to reducing their drug consumption and

entering rehab. When a youth was not willing to make this commitment, they were asked not to return to the Precomunidad and lost their access to resources. Many youth are willing to engage with day centers because they know they can leave at the end of the day, session, or activities. Most youth are willing to engage with organizations as far and as long as they are free to leave whenever they feel uncomfortable or no longer want to participate. It was common for youth to refer to the organization's *puertas abiertas* (open door) policy when they were frustrated or overwhelmed, felt pressured, and wanted to leave. That being said, not all youth on the street are interested in engaging in this type of aid. When Casa Alianza outreach workers would ask youth to go the Precomunidad, there were many who were wary of leaving their settlement because they would lose the freedom that they felt being in their own environment, and knowing that they would have to follow rules, not consume drugs, and participate in activities was a major deterrent.

Residential programs are a high-level commitment because they ask youth for a complete change of lifestyle—leaving the street, participating in drug rehabilitation, going to school, participating in therapy, and so on. For youth in street situations, being in a home or residential program signals the ultimate loss of autonomy—they view it as being *encerrado* or locked away. They believe these residential programs limit their physical movement and personal decision-making. Very few youth enter residential programs or rehabilitation clinics. When Casa Alianza workers would approach youth about making a bigger commitment and entering the residential program most youth would say no and mention that they did not want to be "locked away," even when it meant that they would lose access to day center resources.

Most youth receive as much aid as they can while making as little commitment as possible, strategically using the resources of each organization only to the point at which they feel that they are losing control over their lives. This was the case for Daniel, who was forced to make the decision between committing to getting off the street and losing access to aid at the Precomunidad. Daniel had been going to the Precomunidad on a regular basis with his "wife" Ariana for a few months. One day, Carlos and Hector pulled Daniel into the office to talk to him about his commitment, and they explained to him that he could no longer receive aid until he made a real commitment:

> Hector calls him into the office. Carlos is there on the couch. He passes him the Rubik's cube and begins to talk to Daniel about how to solve the cube. Daniel is really attentive and focused on what Carlos tells him and the ways to solve the cube. Hector comes back and opens with, "We've talked to you and asked you what we can do for you. What we can help you with. At the beginning it was giving you another life option, and now you only want an appointment at Condesa. Is there anything else that we can help you with?" Daniel shakes his head and says no. They explain to him that the function of the Precomunidad is not just to feed people and let them shower. Carlos explains that "it's supposed to be a bridge to a different life." They give him a month to think about whether he wants to make a commitment, but in that month he isn't allowed to use the Precomunidad resources. (Fieldnote excerpt, September 2017)

Daniel preferred to lose the resources offered by the organization over showing a commitment to making a life change, going to rehab, or entering the residential program. When I later asked Daniel about the situation he just shrugged his shoulder and said, "Meh, I'll go somewhere else."

Fear of losing autonomy most greatly impacts the youth's relationship with government organizations. Youth in street situations fear government organizations, especially DIF. DIF does very little outreach work with youth in street situations, meaning

that youth do not come into regular contact with the organization while on the street. Despite this lack of contact, however, all of the youth know what DIF is, they all have an idea of what DIF does, and most have had experiences dealing with DIF. For them, DIF is the organization that has the power to force them to do things against their will. Where other aid organizations ask the youth if they want to participate and give them some sense of autonomy in their relationship, youth see DIF as an organization that can take them off the street regardless of their wishes. There is always a buzz around youth settlements that DIF could possibly plan a raid or an operativo and the youth could be picked up and put into a home against their will. This fear was particularly palpable for the young mothers who feared that their children would both draw the attention of DIF and that DIF would take their children away and force them off the street. For Rosa this was a constant fear. Rosa was a seventeen-year-old girl on the street with her toddler son Angel. As she said,

> It's hard raising a kid on the street. You're always afraid that something will happen to them, that someone is going to take them away. I'm always worried that DIF will do an operativo and they'll take him away and then force me into rehab if I want to be with him.

This fear, real or imagined, means that DIF constantly looms over the youths' imagination of the city. This fear shapes the way they navigate the physical space of the city, as they make decisions about their lives, and as they weigh the parts of an organization to interact with. They avoid government organizations that will alert DIF to the youth's whereabouts as well as nongovernment organizational spaces where this may also occur.

This fear of DIF makes youth particularly wary of interacting with residential programs and rehabilitation clinics that are assigned through the government organization IAPA. Youth understand that residential programs are required by law to share the names of

their residents with the government organization. At times civil society outreach workers capitalize on youths' fear of DIF, using it to motivate them to get off of the street. Casa Alianza outreach workers often explained to youth that if DIF found them on the street, the youth would have no say over their lives and be put into a dilapidated home where no one respected them. They would explain that "if they [youth] *chose* to go to Casa Alianza's group home, they could participate in various activities, go to school, and be sure to live in a nice environment where the counselors respected them."

Dignity and Social Support

Balancing aid and autonomy is complicated by the emotional benefits that these organizations and their employees offer youth in street situations. As mentioned in the previous chapters, youth can find ways to support themselves financially and provide goods for themselves without the help of organizations and without having to make any commitments that cause them to lose autonomy. One might ask why these youth seek services at organizations if they are not being forced to interact with them, if they do not *need* them to survive? They can survive without giving up any autonomy to these organizations, so why do they? What these organizations offer youth is something that is harder to find on the street and is much more than just physical goods and services like food, showers, or clothing. These organizations offer youth the emotional benefits of experiencing youthfulness in a dignified way, and their employees offer positive social support that many youth in street situations don't find on the street.

The street forces youth in street situations to constantly have their guard up, to constantly watch their backs, and to constantly be exposed to the stigma of their situation. If

they are thought to be weak, there is a chance that someone will take advantage of them. As Antonio, a seventeen-year-old boy who had been on the street for six years explained, "When you wake up, you don't think of anything other than getting high and you just do whatever to try to save yourself." When I asked him what he meant by "saving himself," he continued: "Yeah, in the street … when you're really in the street, if they don't get you and start hitting you, then they want to get you to lower you down. You have to do things so that you're okay. So that you don't let yourself." Here Antonio is referring to what he later called the "hardening" of the street, where youth have to constantly be on guard to avoid being blindsided when someone wants to start a fight with them, take advantage of them, or make them feel small. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the street also means that the youth are constantly vulnerable to the stigma of their situation. Aid organizations and their outreach workers offer youth a space where they don't have to be hard or alert and where they don't have to feel stigmatized. While interacting with organizations, these youth have the ability to be youth, to be young, and to enjoy life in a carefree, dignified way that is rarely available to them.

For most youth, being pulled away from the group to play UNO by an outreach worker or joining an organization-led pickup soccer game or sitting around a table sharing a meal and discussing their feelings is the only part of their day where they can be the teenagers that they are—where they can laugh and be silly, where they can be free to express their feelings, and where they can let their guard down. For many, organizational spaces allow them to feel like any other youth in the city. Many of my informants expressed this sentiment when reflecting on a Casa Alianza outing to the zoo in April 2018. Casa Alianza sponsored five boys to visit the Chapultepec Zoo. While there, these youth openly showed excitement

in ways I had seen only a few times before. They were excited by the experience and the trivia they were learning from the signs posted within the zoo. They wanted their pictures taken with every animal they saw and stared in awe at the movements and size of the animals. During the day's wrap-up session after getting back to the Precomunidad, the boys took turns reflecting on their favorite part of the experience. All five boys mentioned how nice it felt to be able to be kids again, to just enjoy being together without being rude to each other and without drugs, and to be able to do so in a dignified way. One boy, Agustin, mentioned that it was "the most fun he had probably ever had" and that "between the experience, the food, and the company, it was a great day. What was especially nice was being able to walk around and not having people treat you badly." He turned and looked at the other youth and asked them, "How many times do we walk down the street to have people walk to the other side? Treat us badly? Avoid us? Tell us things? Just because we look dirty or smell bad or we're high. It was really nice to have people treat us normally. To be treated like all the other youth at the zoo." The other boys around the table nodded in agreement.

Emotional support

More than just spaces where these youth can be youth and can experience their youthfulness in dignified ways, the employees at these organizations provide positive social support and particularly emotional support. Social support has been defined and categorized in various ways by various scholars depending on the field of study. According to Shumaker and Brownell (1984, 13) social support is "an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the wellbeing of the recipient." It can usually be understood to consist of various (sometimes

three, sometimes four) main categories that can be summarized as emotional, instrumental, and informational. Emotional support refers to "behaviors that foster feelings of comfort and leads an individual to believe that he or she is admired, respected, and loved, and that others are available to provide caring and security" (ibid., 13); instrumental support refers to the various types of tangible help that others provide an individual (money, transportation, and so on) and can also include the information an individual may need to solve a problem (advice, suggestions, guidance) (Shumaker and Brownell 1984; Seeman 2008). Positive social support has been associated directly with better mental and physical health (Thoits 1995; Shumaker and Brownell 1984; House et al. 1988), and specifically has been linked to lower rates of depression (Lakey and Cronin 2008) and fewer posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms (Brewin et al. 2000). Employees at aid organizations offer youth in street situations the positive emotional and instrumental support they need to bolster their emotional and physical well-being.

Employees at aid organizations provide important emotional support to youth in street situations. Youth interpret, usually rightly so, many of the interactions they have with aid workers as those aid workers caring for them. These employees show youth that they care by providing a space for youth to express themselves freely, by actively listening to youth discuss their lives and their concerns, and by actively showing an investment in the youth's future and overall wellbeing. When aid workers warn youth about the dangers of the street and try to convince them to make a lifestyle change—to lower their drug consumption, avoid risky sexual behaviors—explain the importance of healthy eating habits, and push them to focus on their education, youth feel cared for. For youth, these employees are among

the few people in their lives who currently take or have ever taken an interest in them and their well-being. As many youth would explain, the employees at organizations throughout the city were the only ones who cared about them. Feeling cared for helps youth feel that they can trust these employees, and they become emotionally attached to these organizational spaces through their relationships with these employees.

Given that many youth are looking to create or recreate the families that they never had, for many youth, outreach workers become parental or sibling figures. In the case of Casa Alianza, Josefina became a mother for many youth. Josefina acted as the strong matriarch of the Precomunidad, calling the youth "son" and "daughter," showing them love through hugs and kisses, while still holding them accountable for their actions and to the rules of the day center. Many of the youth came to call Josefina "Mamá Josefina." The emotional connection that youth had with Josefina, viewing her as a mother, was exemplified in the way they treated her. When Ariana became pregnant, for example, she had not been to the Precomunidad for months. As previously mentioned, her "husband" Daniel had been asked to leave the center until he was ready to make a commitment to his life plan. Rather than making a commitment to changing his life, the couple stopped attending the day center. In May 2018, however, the doorbell rang while the Precomunidad staff were at lunch upstairs in the dining room. One of the outreach workers looked out from the second-floor balcony to find Ariana and Daniel standing at the front door. The outreach worker called down to greet her, saying "Hi!" and turned back to us to tell us that it was Ariana and that she was visibly pregnant. There had been rumors on the street of her pregnancy, but this was everyone's first confirmation. Ariana called up to the second story balcony—everyone in the

dining room could hear—"Is Mamá Josefina there? Tell her I have an ultrasound, and I want her to meet her grandchild." Josefina was not just any other day center worker for Ariana; she was a mother to her. This was made clear in Ariana not only wanting to share the good news of her growing family with the outreach team but specifically wanting Josefina to meet her grandchild.

More than just helping youth feel cared for, these relationships help enforce positive social norms on the street, specifically not consuming drugs and practicing nonviolent conflict resolution. Because youth value their freedom and autonomy, it is common for them to go around the city smoking marijuana freely or *activando* wherever they see fit. The presence of an outreach worker, however, is enough to lead youth to feel ashamed of their behavior and attempt to hide what they are doing. This was the case when Hector and I found Yesenia consuming at Revolución, for example.

> When we do go talk to her Hector asks her who she was smoking with. She starts laughing, "What do you mean? I don't smoke." Hector gave her a stern look. She shrugged her shoulders, looking down at the floor, "I don't know, some man." (Fieldnote excerpt, November 2017)

Youth's inexperience with healthy relationships leads them to fear letting the people that care about them down. They fear losing this emotional support or love that they feel. This leads them to be embarrassed when outreach workers "catch them" engaging in behaviors that the youth think would be disappointing to them—like consuming drugs or performing risky behaviors. They avoid being seen like Yesenia in the above fieldnote or pretend that they were not engaging in that behavior by hiding the *monas* or stashing their drugs as an outreach worker nears the settlement.

The emotional support that these aid workers provide is particularly important when youth are ready to make the big commitment of a lifestyle change. Youth in street situations access residential programs (drug rehabilitation clinics or group homes) when they feel they are tipping into serious addiction or when they need refuge from the street—usually when they feel sick (weak, overly emaciated, tired), fear retaliation for something they did (stealing or hitting a peer), or when the reality of the street sets in—as was the case for Jose, when he decided to seek rehabilitation after being burned, or Xochitl, who decided to go to rehab after finding out she tested HIV positive. These other circumstances are key catalysts in helping youth decide to seek care in a residential program, but they are rarely sufficient to get youth to commit to entering a residential program. Furthermore, they are not sufficient to keep youth in street situations in these residential programs.

The emotional support of aid workers at these organizations makes the difference in helping youth decide to enter residential programs. This support helps the youth navigate these unknown spaces in which they lose their autonomy, and ultimately, it is this emotional support that keeps them in these programs to successfully finish their process. Youth in street situations are willing to give up their autonomy, to leave the street, and to enter a home where their physical movement and actions are limited because they feel that they are receiving not only physical goods but also emotional support from employees at these organizations. These employees help them feel cared for, help them feel like they are not alone as they are working through their processes, and help them feel like they are making someone proud, which helps to boost their self-esteem.

The importance of this emotional support is illuminated when youth feel like they have lost this support and connection. Before making the final decision to enter a residential

program, one of the most common things that youth ask outreach workers is "but you're going to come to visit me, right?" These youth look for reassurance that they will not be abandoned by outreach workers, that they could continue to count on their emotional support. When youth feel that they lose this emotional support, sacrificing their autonomy is no longer worth it—they are overwhelmed, afraid, and feel alone, and they feel like once again they have been abandoned. Feeling abandoned by these aid workers pushes these youth to look for emotional support in the only other place they have felt it—the street. They leave their programs. This is the case for many youth who enter residential programs.

Youth rely on the emotional support of outreach workers in their decision to enter the residential programs, but once in these programs, there is a break in support. They are no longer in contact with outreach workers and are now working with residential aid workers. Youth feel a real loss in this emotional support. This was the case for Johnny when he agreed to go to the residential program after being assured by outreach workers that he would be accompanied and supported throughout the process. He went into the program on a Friday, and Israel reassured him that we would be back early the next week to check in on him. Once in the residential program, the counselors in the home told Johnny he had to cut his hair. Johnny did not want to cut his hair and asked to talk to Israel. The counselors called Israel over the weekend to talk to Johnny about cutting his hair, and Israel made a deal with the boy. Johnny would cut his hair if he was accompanied by Israel and me early the next week. The counselors did not wait. They took Johnny to the barber and forced him to cut his hair. Johnny left the home before Israel and I could do a follow-up visit with the boy on Monday. When Israel and I found Johnny on the street Tuesday he said he left because "the counselors in the home were liars." Johnny felt a loss of autonomy and a break in the

emotional support he had from outreach workers when he moved to the residential program.

Many youth within residential programs lose hope without the emotional support that organization employees offer. This pushes many youth to feel abandoned by the organizations, turn away from them, and fully embrace street life. This was the case for Cristobal. Cristobal had approached Casa Alianza hoping to stay at the residential program, but when employees realized his dependence on marijuana was higher than expected, the residential program sent him to a rehabilitation clinic. Unfortunately, the youth felt a loss of emotional support in the move. He felt alone. Cristobal felt as though there was nobody who cared for him. He felt that staying locked away with no autonomy was no longer worth it because he no longer had the emotional support that the organization's employees offered him. In the face of abandonment and loss of emotional support, Cristobal said he preferred to go back to the street. As he described the situation,

> Well, they hadn't visited me. I said to myself, "They just brought me here to get rid of me." I told the priest, "You can't call the people from Casa Alianza to have them send my clothes," and he told me that he had already called them. So I got excited because they were going to come and they were going to bring all of the things I needed. But they never arrived. I got sad; everyone else had their families and me, upstairs watching movies. So I said to myself, "what's up with this?! I don't have family, and I'm alone here." Then I cried when nobody showed up for two weeks. I cried because I felt bad. I said, "Nobody is coming for me. Nobody is coming to visit me." I said to myself, "Why am I going to stay locked up here if they won't even come visit me. Not my mom, not those from Casa Alianza." I got mad, and I said to myself, "Why am I going to stay here if I know that nobody is coming for me?" I asked the priest again and he told me that shortly they would be coming from Casa Alianza. Then Israel showed up to sign a paper. I told Israel, "Israel, can you bring me my things? Can you do me that favor?" And Israel told me, "Yes, in a little bit I'll bring your things." And I thought to myself that now he's coming because I had told him in person. And well that Cora girl was also in the clinic, and she also asked for things and at night they call all of the people whose parents took them food that day. They start calling people, and they call Cora. And I asked her, "Who brought you

> stuff?" And she said, "Well, those from Casa Alianza." And I said to myself, "Ahh, those from Casa Alianza," so I asked the first counselor I saw if they had taken me anything. And he told me no, so I told him to check again and he told me, "No, nothing." And he told me he would check downstairs just to be sure, and he said there was nothing for me. I got mad. With that I became depressed and I said, "They're not coming for me," and I escaped.

When outreach workers found Cristobal at the settlement the next day and invited him to the Precomunidad, he went, but when they tried to convince him to return to the clinic, he declined. He said he would rather be on the street; he said he would rather "live in his fantasy" where he could numb himself to his pain and his loneliness and where he felt that people cared for him.

Instrumental support

The relationships that youth have with aid workers also provide instrumental support. More than just food and shelter at their particular organizations, the relationships with aid workers help youth gain access to much-needed information and resources throughout the city. Aid workers demystify legal processes for youth in street situations, connect youth to government resources that they are entitled to, and advocate for their well-being as youth try to navigate the larger web of institutions.

Youth in street situations struggle to navigate the labyrinth of bureaucracy necessary to access resources in the city. As youth in street situations are a priority population in the city, there are a number of resources available to them, but many remain unknown to the youth, or youth don't understand how to access them. Given their age and lack of education, these youth aren't aware of social programs, and even if they did know where in the city to go to access resources, many don't understand how to fill out paperwork. Furthermore, dealing with government bureaucracy is a scary and overwhelming challenge for these

youth. Youth in street situations fear that they can be forced into a home or taken off the street if they attempt to access these resources. It is the relationships that youth build with aid workers that offer them the instrumental support necessary to access these resources.

Despite youths' overall reluctance to engage with government organizations, at times it is necessary and beneficial for them to do so. In these cases, youth turn to employees at civil society organizations to help them navigate these institutions. This is especially the case for interactions with DIF. Aid workers help youth not only understand the process of dealing with DIF, advocating for them and helping them navigate the organization's bureaucracy, but also help youth feel supported and comfortable through the process. Without this support, many would not have access to the crucial resources that they are entitled to.

For Kike, for example, accompaniment by outreach workers was the only way he was able to access 2200 pesos that he was owed. Kike was a quiet eighteen-year-old man who had been in and out of institutions since he was a young child. He had spent the last three years on the street. He rarely spoke to anyone and showed very little interest in speaking to outreach workers. The exception to this was Israel. Israel had known Kike since the boy first entered the Casa Alianza residential program at twelve. They had built a connection in the residential program because Israel was coordinator of the boys' shelters. Six years later, Israel was one of the few aid workers whom Kike trusted. He looked up to him like a father.

Kike was kicked out of Casa Alianza's residential program for fighting with another youth. After being kicked out of Casa Alianza, Kike's last paycheck of 2200 pesos went to the organization. When he returned to the central offices of Casa Alianza for his money, they informed him that they had sent the money to DIF, which at that point was his legal guardian.

Kike said he didn't know where to go or what to do to get this money, so he turned to Israel for help. Israel accompanied Kike and his "wife" Yesenia to the DIF office to help him retrieve the money he had earned.

I accompanied them to the DIF office. While we waited for someone to help us, Kike and Yesenia cuddled and fell asleep together on the benches while Israel and I did a few crossword puzzles. After an hour, Kike was finally called back by DIF staff. Israel accompanied Kike to a back office where they closed the door. Israel stayed with Kike through the whole procedure, talking to the DIF caseworker in his closed office and helping Kike navigate the bureaucracy necessary to retrieve his paycheck. After three hours at the DIF office Kike left with his check. The excitement of having successfully navigated the system and having 2200 pesos in hand was quickly extinguished when he realized that he had no identification to cash the check. While Israel made it clear that it was against the rules of the organization for him to help him cash the check, he pointed Kike to someone who could help.

Casa Alianza aid workers also helped youth access rehabilitation clinics by helping them navigate IAPA, which runs a program specifically for adults and youth in street situations, offering grants to cover the cost of their treatment in residential rehabilitation clinics. Once in a clinic, IAPA caseworkers follow up with individuals to see that the youth and adults are following their treatment process. To get one of these grants, a youth has to go to the office and undergo an interview with a caseworker. For many youth, this resource is unknown: they do not know that this is an option for them, they do not know where this office is, and they do not know what they have to do to be eligible for a grant. The

relationships that youth have with aid workers help them navigate the bureaucracy of IAPA and gain access to this grant program.

During my fieldwork period I accompanied aid workers and nine different youth to the IAPA office. For most, this involved a stop at the Precomunidad where the youth would have a chance to eat, shower, and change into clean clothes. On the way to the IAPA office, outreach workers would demystify the process of getting a grant for the youth. They would explain what IAPA does and what the process of getting a grant looked like. As Hector explained to Juan Carlos on our way to IAPA,

> Look, we're going to get there, and we're going to have to go upstairs. I'll go to the back and talk to the caseworker to explain your situation and tell them that you're ready and committed to making a change in your life. They'll pull you into another room to do an interview. They'll ask you questions about your life, your consumption—the kinds of drugs you consume, how much, how often—and if drugs have started to impact your life. Just be honest with them. Tell them that you consume, you've consumed for a while now, but that you want to get healthy and off the street. Explain that after you finish your process you plan to go into Casa Alianza's residential program. (Fieldnote excerpt, November 2017)

In addition to explaining the process, aid workers also gave youth cues to help ensure that they would be eligible for IAPA grants. They did this by teaching youth that IAPA was concerned with the youth's commitment to a life change and that they had a plan for their life after rehabilitation. They also cued youth to tell IAPA interviewers that they had not consumed drugs that day. As Hector went on to explain to Juan Carlos, "They'll also ask you if you've consumed today. I don't care if you have, just say you haven't. This is really important. It's happened before; they'll make you come back tomorrow, or they'll make you go to a detox clinic before they give you the grant. It's just easier this way." In doing this,

Hector was helping limit bureaucratic steps for Juan Carlos, but this was not always successful.

When bureaucratic hurdles did come up for youth, these outreach workers were also the ones to accompany youth through the whole process. When Giovanni faced a more complicated bureaucratic challenge to accessing a residential clinic, for example, Hector accompanied the youth through a twelve-hour process to get him into rehabilitation. Giovanni was a twenty-two–year-old young man who struggled with addiction and wanted to make a change in his life. He had built a connection with Casa Alianza outreach workers despite no longer falling within the profile of the organization. Giovanni approached outreach workers early one morning to explain that he was ready to go to a rehabilitation clinic. He explained his concern to outreach workers, "I just don't how to do it alone, without someone's support," and he turned to the Casa Alianza outreach workers for the support he felt he needed. The outreach workers agreed to accompany the youth to IAPA. During the interview process the youth confessed that he had consumed activo that morning, and the IAPA caseworker sent him to the detox clinic before he would give him the grant for the clinic. Giovanni, Hector, and I left the IAPA office to head to the other side of the city to the detox clinic. Once there, we waited three hours for Giovanni to be seen by the doctor. After being given a round of IV fluids, Giovanni was released, and we went back to the IAPA office. When we arrived at the office, the youth's caseworker had just stepped out to lunch, so we waited two more hours for the youth to be able to pick up his grant and clinic assignment. With this assignment in hand, we traveled an hour and a half to the west part of the city to

accompany Giovanni through the intake process at the clinic. While in the office waiting for the clinic staff to begin the intake process, Giovanni turned to us and expressed his gratitude,

> Thank you so much. Today has been a long day. I couldn't have done this without you two. When we left IAPA and were going to the detox clinic, I almost ran away. I was scared. I didn't know what I was doing at that point, and I just wanted to consume. You guys helped me understand this whole process and feel less scared. Thanks. I know I can make the most of this. (Fieldnote excerpt, November 2017)

As Giovanni so clearly stated, without the accompaniment of an outreach worker he would not have known how to successfully navigate the bureaucracy necessary to access the rehabilitation care that he needed and that was available to him.

Civil society organizations and their employees also work together to help connect youth to various resources in the city and help youth exercise their rights. This is especially the case for medical care, identity, and housing. When Estrella found out she was pregnant, for example, she turned to the Casa Alianza outreach team for help. She wanted to gain access to medical care during her pregnancy but knew that this would be difficult without her identification documents (birth certificate and Clave Única de Registro de Población or CURP). When asked where these documents were, she said her parents had never registered her. To the Mexican government, Estrella did not exist and would not be able to obtain medical care. Estrella, like all youth in street situations, had a right to an identity and to health care. In this case, the Casa Alianza outreach team helped by working with another organization to strategize a plan for Estrella's pregnancy. They wanted to guarantee that she would have access to her rights—both to identity and to the medical care she needed.

> Jose from the cultural center showed up with a colleague to the Precomunidad to talk to Israel. They went into Israel's office, and Israel called me in to listen in on the meeting. Israel explained what he knew about the case and Jose

> explained his version of the case. They both came to the meeting with ideas of what they thought would be best for the young girl. Israel was hoping that Jose could help get the girl registered so that she would have a birth certificate and a right to use the medical system in Mexico City. Together they decided that they had a contact at the local hospital who would be able to facilitate the girl's entry into hospital care despite her current lack of identity. They called this social worker that they knew in common, explaining Estrella's situation on the street, her lack of identity, and current pregnancy. They asked the social worker if they thought there was anything she could do to help the girl while they go through the process of getting her registered. The woman on the line said that she thought she would be able to pull some strings and made Estrella an appointment to meet with her for the following week. Upon getting off the phone, Jose and Israel agreed that FCAM outreach workers would tell Estrella about her appointment the next day and they would accompany her the day of her appointment. (Fieldnote excerpt, April 2018)

It was not official policy of Casa Alianza to work with other organizations in the city, but the outreach team built connections with various groups to ensure that they could best support all of the youth in the street. Through these connections, aid workers were able to help youth gain access to various types of resources.

These organizations also help youth navigate the very complex legal system. Given the reality that these youth in street situations face, it is not uncommon for them to have legal trouble. When faced with legal issues these youth find themselves confused, overwhelmed, and scared. They don't know what to do and the only place they know to turn to for help is the outreach workers with whom they already have relationships—people who are more knowledgeable than they and people who care about their well-being. Juan Jose, for example, showed up to the Precomunidad one day with a look on his face that made it clear he was scared. At the time, Juan Jose was a nineteen-year-old boy who had a long relationship with Casa Alianza because he had been on the street for the last four years. Despite no longer falling within the profile of the organizations, he still regularly participated in football pick-up games with outreach workers and still felt a close connection with the

organization. When Carlos opened the door that day, Juan Jose asked if he could talk to Israel. Israel called him into his office but left the door open so the rest of the team could hear their conversation. Juan Jose explained:

> I was arrested two days ago and locked up. I just got out yesterday. I was sitting at Revolución, and all of a sudden, police and someone came over and pointed me out. I had never seen the guy. Then the police took me in a police car and I was in holding for two nights. (Fieldnote excerpt, May 2018)

He showed Israel the papers the police released him with and continued, "I didn't even do anything this time." The worry and disappointment were unmistakable in his voice. Israel later explained to the team that they were charging him with aggravated assault in a gang and that there was a possibility that they were going to send him to prison. Although it is not part of the formal model of the organization and Israel is not a lawyer, he cared too much for the youth to send him away. Israel helped the youth understand the paperwork and the situation he was in. He explained to Juan Jose that he needed to present himself by 3 p.m. that day, but he also let the youth know that he may think about telling the court that he is a youth in street situation and that he would be willing to go to rehab instead of prison. Despite being too old for the Precomunidad, Israel allowed the youth to shower, eat, and get ready for his court appointment.

As can be seen in the above examples, the relationships that youth create with aid workers offer vital instrumental support that help youth in street situations navigate government organizations and city bureaucracy. This allows these youth to access various resources that they are entitled to but that they have little knowledge of how to access. Employees at these organizations go beyond the official stance of their organizations to build connections with other organizations to be able to best support youth in street situations.

Furthermore, the emotional and instrumental support provided by these workers through these processes help youth feel comforted and empowered while navigating bureaucracy and dealing with various government institutions. Youth in street situations build trusting relationships with aid workers, and they turn to them as the individuals who are knowledgeable but, more than that, as those they trust to look out for their best interests when interacting with strange and, from their perspective, dangerous bureaucracies. Youth trust that aid workers would not lead them into situations where they were forced to do things against their will.

Youth Shaping Organizations

The relationships that youth have with the organizations that aid them are complex. As has been shown, these relationships impact the lives of youth in very important ways. However, these relationships are not one way. Youth in street situations also affect the landscape of aid by impacting the work and structure of these organizations as aid workers and organizations respond to what they see as the needs of the youth.

Employees of these organizations are placed in a difficult position. They are embedded within an organization and therefore beholden to the rules of the organization and its model, but they also have very real emotional connections with the youth they serve and are genuinely committed to the youths' wellbeing. Employees must balance the organizations' interests with their own personal interest in helping youth in street situations. Specifically, these employees must meet the interests of the organization, which include adhering to a model with strict rules and proving one's efficacy by bringing in clients, with their personal interests of wanting to help youth meet their basic needs, exercise their

rights, reduce their risk of harm, and lead healthier lives. At times, these interests lead to coherent ends, as is the case when youth willingly follow the model of care that the organization employs, but in most cases, the interests are at odds with one another. What does an aid worker do, for example, when they are asked for help by a youth that they truly care about and whom they have seen deteriorate on the street over the last year, but who no longer fits the profile of the organization for which they work? What do they do when their job depends on their ability to get youth into a day center or residential program, but the youth don't want to follow the organization's formal rules for commitment?

The complexity of the situation that these employees find themselves in works to empower youth to play a role in shaping the day-to-day work of aid organizations. As youth navigate aid to balance the benefits they receive with the autonomy they need, they call on employees of aid organizations, using the real emotional bonds that they create with these employees, to make concessions and lower the bar of commitment to receive aid or bend the rules to help them. Employees, then, must make difficult decisions when they are placed between the organization's formal model and rules, the pressure of bringing in numbers, and their very real interest in the well-being of these youth. In some cases, employees decline and stick with the formal rules of the organization, but in other cases, employees are amenable to pushing the boundaries of the organization and shifting the work they do. In the case of Casa Alianza, this shifting of rules was only made greater by an increased pressure by the administration on employees of the outreach team to prove their efficacy.

Casa Alianza's outreach team had hit a point of panic. This team was tasked with a monthly goal that included a particular number of youth at the Precomunidad and entering

the residential program. The team was struggling to hit its monthly targets. They could not get youth to show interest in making the commitment to coming to the Precomunidad. For those youth who did make the decision to seek resources at the Precomunidad, their interest in participating usually ended when they were asked to prove their commitment—as when Daniel stopped attending the day center after being asked to make a life change. During this time, outreach workers would go into the various youth settlements early to wake youth and try to convince them to go to the day center before the Precomunidad's morning session began. They would stress the benefits of going to the day center: the "good" food, the opportunity to shower, the benefits of not consuming for a few hours, and even seeing a particular counselor with whom the youth had a close relationship. Many youth would decline, just rolling over and ignoring outreach workers; some would agree and say that they would go after fully waking up and never arrive; and others would bargain with outreach workers. In bargaining, many youth would ask if they could show up after the Precomunidad's strict start time, if they could go to the Precomunidad even though they were above the age cutoff, if they could go to the Precomunidad with their babies even though that was not permitted, or if they could go to the Precomunidad even though they had no interest in changing their lives.

At the beginning of my fieldwork period, outreach workers were not usually willing to make concessions. They would say "you know the rules" or point the youth to another organization or resource better suited to what the youth was looking for. On some occasions, the emotional connection with the youth would bring outreach workers to break the rules and make exceptions. This was the case for difficult situations like that of Rosana and her

children, Enrique and Franco. Rosana was a young woman in her early thirties. She was about five feet, five inches tall, with black hair that was usually cut to shoulder length. She had been on the street since she was fourteen years old and had given birth to seven children. Two died on the street, two were taken away by DIF and given up for adoption, one was taken by their father, and two were with her. The reality of her five lost children continued to pain Rosana. Although Rosana was too old and her children too young to qualify for aid through Casa Alianza, the emotional connection that she had with outreach workers—having worked with the outreach coordinators (Jaime and Israel) since she was a young girl—as well as the emotional pull for outreach workers of seeing a child living on the street with a mother with a drug addiction made it difficult for outreach workers to say no. At the beginning of my fieldwork period, however, it was common for outreach workers to say no to Rosana. As the administration put more pressure on them, this became less common. On various occasions, outreach workers would make exceptions to the rules to let particularly difficult cases that did not fit the profile of the organization, like that of Rosana and her children, into the Precomunidad so that they could eat, shower, and rest while asking for no commitment in return.

The frequency of the exceptions that outreach workers were willing to make began to increase after months of not hitting their target numbers. The program director and executive director of the organization began questioning the work of the outreach team, wondering why they only had one or two youth in the Precomunidad each day. Feeling this pressure to bring in numbers and feeling that they should be helping more youth, outreach workers began shifting the work they did to motivate youth to participate in the program and to help meet the needs of more youth in street situations. To increase participation, for

example, outreach workers lowered the amount of commitment that youth had to show in order to participate. In lowering the commitment needed, they were able to get more youth to participate. This meant that they gave access to youth who were not interested in making a commitment to change their life or entering the residential program. This was also exemplified in outreach workers letting adults into the Precomunidad—youth who did not have to worry about entering the residential program because they were not within the organization's target population. This was the case when Israel made the exception for Mamá Priscilla to go to the Precomunidad so the youth at her settlement could seek services there. This also occurred when Israel invited boys who were eighteen to twenty-four years old from *Revolución* to the Precomunidad to increase participation numbers and to help this group of boys he felt needed the aid.

In seeing the nature of the day-to-day work of the organizations change as the administration made more demands on outreach workers, youth in street situations began to feel empowered in these relationships. They began to push outreach workers further, seeing how much they could receive with making as little commitment as possible. In the case of Casa Alianza, the youth began asking for specific foods, candies, and movie days. They began to complain when things were not good enough and threatened to seek services elsewhere. This entitlement was palpable. Josefina, for example, grew frustrated by the new entitlement she saw in the youth. As she explained to me, "Now that Israel is out trying to get as many people as he can, letting whoever wants come in here … well, they think they're doing us a favor now." When a youth made a comment about not wanting to participate in the scheduled activity, Josefina made this same sentiment clear as she explained, "We're here to help you if you're ready to change your lifestyle. You're not doing us a favor by coming. If

you don't want to make a commitment, then don't come." She was later reprimanded by Israel, who told her that she needed to go easier on the youth.

Changes in the day-to-day work of the organization can lead to further changes in the structure of the organization, given that they signal a change in the needs of the youth and a need for the organization to analyze the work they are doing and the structure of the program. In the case of Casa Alianza, the constant low numbers reported at the Precomunidad eventually gave way to higher numbers of users or clients who were not within the profile of the organization. This raised a red flag for the organization's executive director. As she explained to me,

> I don't know what they're doing over there, and it's hard because my office is so far away. They can do whatever they want. But Israel is over there using the resources of the organization to help whoever he wants. He has twenty-five– and thirty-year-olds in the Precomunidad?! He has babies in the Precomunidad?! What if someone gets hurt? That's on us. No. That's not the population we work with and he doesn't care. He's undermining me.

The executive director and program director eventually held a meeting with the outreach team to understand why they were breaking the rules and being ineffective. Israel brought up the need to work with youth over the age of seventeen, stating that there was a lack of resources available for these youth and that working with these older youth would facilitate a connection with youth under seventeen. Carlos mentioned an important need to shift the resources and commitment structure for youth who work on the street, as they are less inclined to come to the day center during the hours that they can earn money and less inclined to enter the residential program. Youth's lack of participation in the program eventually led to the end of the outreach and Precomunidad programs altogether. Casa Alianza fired the existing team, and the organization brought in US-based consultants in the

hopes of increasing participation. These consultants worked with a new team to do diagnostics and create a restructured program that would both better fit the needs of the youth as well as (hopefully) be more engaging. In effect, the youths' reluctance to engage with Casa Alianza's aid, their unwillingness to make a commitment to a life plan and lifestyle change and participate in the organizations' activities, encouraged the restructuring of the entire outreach and Precomunidad stages of the Casa Alianza organization.

Conclusion

As has been shown in this chapter, the relationships that youth build with aid organizations are extremely important. They help provide youth with much needed aid both on and off the street, but they do more than just provide goods and services. The relationships youth in street situations have with the various organizations and their employees across the city work to shape the way youth navigate the physical space of the city, the way these youth understand their situation, and the way they make sense of who they are.

Youth navigate these organizations to maximize the resources available to them. This involves youth understanding the expectations of each organization and playing into what the organization and their employees expect of these youth. At times this means lying about one's age, while at others it means adopting the language employed by these organizations to present oneself as ready and willing to commit to changing one's lifestyle. This process of navigating organizations helps youth make sense of their past and present experiences by giving youth the language with which to understand their trauma and understand themselves as rights-bearers.

Despite the very real benefits offered by these organizations, youth do not access them equally. Youth make calculated decisions about what organizations and what type of aid they will access. They do this to maximize their autonomy, accessing aid when they have to make little commitment or little sacrifice to their way of life. This means that they are more willing to access outreach aid than residential programs. This is complicated by the social support that the employees at these organizations offer. Youth value this emotional and instrumental support and are willing to give up more autonomy and access different resources, because they trust aid workers and benefit from the care and love that they show them.

While these relationships shape the way youth in street situations navigate the city, youth also have an impact on the organizations themselves. These organizations and their employees respond to the youths' interest and needs. This empowers youth to shape the way the work of these organizations is realized and the way the organizations are structured.

Conclusion

Today, the highest proportion of young people in the world lives in regions of the Global South. According to the UN State of the World Population (2014), 89 percent of the world's ten- to twenty-four–year-olds live in the Global South, and in some countries, as much as half the population is under the age of 18. Aside from being more youthful, cities in these regions are also different from their counterparts in the Global North because they are more populous, more economically unequal, and more socially and spatially fragmented. It is here, in cities in the Global South, that youth in street situations are concentrated.

Youth in street situations are pushed and pulled to the streets because of the unique economic, political, and social landscape of cities of the Global South. The conditions that have led to the advent and growth of the phenomenon of youth in street situations worldwide are expected to persist and, given the current COVID-19 pandemic, worsen in many ways. The key factors pushing and pulling these youth to the streets include poverty, inequality, informality, an insufficient social safety net, and family dissolution. The current COVID-19 pandemic is expected to exacerbate all of these things. The World Bank (Mahler 2020) has estimated that this situation may push as many as 60 million people into extreme poverty, with countries in the Global South expected to be hit the hardest. This crisis will lead to more poverty, more informality, and more family dissolution as families are torn apart as a result of death and the pressures of economic instability. In this context, we can only expect that many more youth will be pushed and pulled to the streets of cities in the Global South, cities that were already struggling to educate, provide resources for, and employ their youth populations.

As the communities of these youth continue to grow, they will play an even greater role in shaping the city around them. To understand these cities, we need to understand the social world of the communities that negotiate the physical and social space of these cities. Now more than ever, it is necessary to understand the social world of youth in street situations and the various ways they fit within the ecology of the cities they call home. This will offer a clearer understanding of the social dynamics of urban space in the Global South.

This dissertation has begun to fill this gap by placing the community of youth in street situations in Mexico City within the larger urban ecology to allow for an understanding of the social world of these youth. The various relationships that these youth build across the city shape the way they understand their situations, the way they give meaning to what it is to be a youth in street situations, the norms of their community, and the everyday lived experience of these youth as they navigate their daily lives. Focusing solely on individual youth characteristics and behaviors or focusing on the socialization aspects of peer relationships, as in a social problems approach, does not allow for an understanding of the meanings of their actions, of their relationships, or of how the norms and mores of their community are shaped by the larger context in which they are embedded. The ecological approach that this dissertation took offers this depth and understanding of the social world of the community of youth in street situations.

As shown in previous chapters, the age, youthfulness, and life histories of youth in street situations shape their experiences on the street to be very different from their adult counterparts. When youth enter the street, they are seeking to build their "fantasy" world, a world where they not only have food, shelter, and protection but where they also find the love, care, sense of belonging, and sense of autonomy that many did not have in their homes.

They build relationships with their peers, with the urban poor, with middle-class residents, and with the various institutions in the city to make this fantasy world a reality. These relationships shape the social world of their community, and it is through these relationships that youth in street situations have an impact on the larger city around them.

The relationships that youth in street situations build with their peers are some of the most important relationships that they have. These relationships help youth in street situations make sense of their situation when they are overwhelmed by the disorienting whirlwind of the first few days on the street. These connections help youth understand what it is to be a youth in street situation. They quickly become fictive kin—brothers and sisters or husbands and wives—who offer not only protection from adults on the street but also a space to experience youthfulness. It is in these relationships that these youth can be youth. These relationships create a space to be silly, to listen to music, and to enjoy other recreational activities, but these fictive kin bonds also help fill the emotional voids that have resulted from the trauma that many of these youth have experienced. These relationships offer youth in street situations love, companionship, and a sense of belonging.

Their past trauma also shapes peer relationships in unique ways. They keep their peers close enough to feel the love and find the companionships that they seek, but their fear of being let down or abandoned—as they have so many times before—leads them to never fully trust these peers. The fear that these youth have of being abandoned or rejected by a loved one also means that these relationships become limiting. Youth try to control their peers' movements out of fear of losing them, but their peers push back against this control to exert their autonomy, one of the things youth in street situations value most. This autonomy allows them to feel a sense of control when their lives have led them to feel out of

control so many times before, and they take great pride in navigating their lives independently and being autonomous, despite living together.

The adult urban poor, specifically unhoused adults, form a community that is proximal to and vital for the survival of youth in street situations in Mexico City. These adults provide shelter and protection for youth in street situations. When youth leave their homes and have nowhere to turn, they make their way to existing informal shelters that house adults. These adults offer them protection from the unknown dangers of the street and from the police who are actively pushing the poor out of the historic center of Mexico City. Youth are pushed and pulled to groups that are headed by women who become their street mamás. These women offer youth in street situations the parental love that they yearn for, they comfort them when they feel that they have no one to turn to, and they help youth in street situations feel cared for in ways that many of these youth have never experienced—not even in their own biological families. These relationships can also act as social control for youth in street situations because they limit the actions of the youth and police the norms of the group.

The close connection with adults on the street can be a source of stigma and discrimination for the youth. This stigma of the *street* identity threatens youths' sense of self. To combat this, youth in street situations symbolically distance themselves from the adults on the street by labeling these adults drogadictos, blaming them for their situations, and using their own youthfulness and lack of social responsibilities as protection from being like "them." For adults on the street, the relationships they have with youth in street situations give them a sense of purpose and belonging as they become guardians to nonbiological

children. These adults also reap the benefits of these youths' free labor when they use them to sell and transport drugs.

Middle-class residents in the city provide the material resources necessary for the youth to exercise their basic rights to survival. Youth understand the stigma surrounding their street situation. They know that the street identity means that they are blamed for being in their situation, criminalized, and labeled as addicts. It is in interactions with middle-class residents that youth in street situations feel the weight of this stigma, and they combat it by emphasizing identities that are viewed more positively, especially their youthfulness, to elicit sympathy from passersby. These understandings inform the way youth in street situations present themselves on the street. Youth perform their youthfulness and their misery while they work to compel passersby to offer them help by eliciting sympathy rather than hate.

In the process of navigating the images of their situations, these youth internalize ideas about what it is to be a youth in street situations, about who they are, and about their own self-worth. Their performances of being a youth in street situations while they work also impact the middle-class community's ideas of who they are. While there are monetary benefits to presenting themselves as the helpless child or the vulnerable, suffering victim, these performances also perpetuate ideas of youth in street situations as passive victims who are incapable of making decisions about their own lives. These shape middle class residents' understandings of youth's ability to exercise their rights and youth's ability to decide what is best for them in any given situation.

The relationship that these youth build with the various governmental and nongovernmental institutions and, more specifically, their employees is complicated. Youth

navigate these spaces in ways to maximize the benefits they can receive while maintaining as much autonomy as possible. They avoid spaces where they may be forced to do things against their will and are sure to avoid spaces where they may come into contact with DIF—the government organization that can force them to leave the street.

Youth in street situations are savvy, and they navigate the different missions of the various organizations in the city in ways that allow them to receive the organizations' benefits without truly committing to change their lives. They "flip the script" on the employees of the organizations in the city, using the language of the organization to portray themselves as the perfect candidate without having a real commitment to what they are saying. In this process, however, youth learn more about themselves and their situations. They are offered a language to begin building a narrative around their experiences of trauma and come to see themselves as rights-bearers on the street.

Employees of these organizations become very important sources of social support for these youth, offering them the emotional support they desire and the instrumental support they need to access various resources that they are entitled to throughout the city. For many of these youth, these employees offer them the love and hope that they don't receive in other places. When the youth feel hopelessness on the street because they face an uncertain future or struggle with discrimination and stigma, these employees show them compassion, acceptance, and dignity and truly believe that they can have something more in life. This complicates the way youth in street situations navigate these organizations because they are willing to cede some autonomy in order to access this love and this acceptance. Aid workers also become a very important source of instrumental support. Through these

relationships, youth are able to exercise various rights in the city by gaining access to education, health care, and other resources.

These aid workers find themselves in a difficult position because the relationships between the institutions and their employees is complicated by the larger context in which they work. Most, if not all aid workers, are genuinely interested in helping these youth improve their situations—get off the street, lower their drug consumption, and participate in less risky behaviors. Organization administrators, while also interested in the well-being of the youth, are beholden to donors who want to see that these organizations are having an impact with the specific population in their profile. To show impact, administrators need to show numbers. They pressure aid workers to work with as many youth as possible to prove their efficacy. Understanding that their jobs are on the line, aid workers then shape the work that they do to attract youth. Youth in street situations are empowered in this process because it creates space for them to make deals with aid workers about activities, resources, and commitments in exchange for their participation. This bartering ultimately shapes the work of aid workers and the larger organizations.

As highlighted throughout this dissertation, an ecological approach also allows us to understand the ways youth in street situations impact the other communities within the social landscape of the city. These youth become a source of cheap labor for urban poor adults but also help them feel a sense of responsibility and offer them love. Youth in street situations play a part in shaping middle-class ideas of who youth are and what they are capable of, something that has the potential to impact the resources and aid available to youth in the city. Organizations that work with these youth shape their programs and the work they do to fit the interests of these youth because their own success depends on youth

participation. Without placing these youth within the larger landscape of the city, we cannot truly appreciate the role that they play in negotiating the physical and social space of the city. As the population of these youth continues to grow in the Global South, an understanding of their role in the city will be vital for an urban sociology of the twenty-first century.

Ecology and Interventions

This sociological approach, *understanding* the social world of these youth as a distinct community in the city, is also more useful for building interventions than the traditional social problem approach to studying the population. This in-depth study allows us to understand the meaning behind what these youth do, where in the city they go, and what they are looking for in the relationships that they build. Understanding the dynamic meanings of their relationships is a crucial piece in understanding the needs of the population and understanding how to best support these youth on the street and off. Programs for youth in street situations should be built around the unique experiences of the population, focusing on the trauma they have experienced and their emotional needs for love, care, support, and autonomy while keeping in mind the ways in which these youth are connected to other actors in the city.

Relatedly, youth in street situations cannot be viewed as existing outside, extracted from, or independent of society. As this dissertation has shown, these youth are very much a part of society. They form their own distinct group within the vibrant social landscape of the city. Many civil society and government organizations focus on the "reintegration" of these youth into society. They state that their goal is to teach youth in street situations how to become active and productive members of society. This perspective overlooks the reality: these youth are already members of society, forming part of the city, following norms, and

having guaranteed rights. The sociological approach this dissertation took allows us to understand that interventions for these youth should not focus on *reintegrating* them but rather protecting them as equal, rights-bearing members of society.

The following sections offer a brief sketch of the challenges youth in street situations face as they attempt to exit the street as well as recommendations for more effectively supporting youth in street situations.

Youth leaving the street in Mexico City

Currently, these youth do not choose to live on the street. Over the last twenty years, there has been a shift from viewing youth in street situations as passive, that is, as not having a say in their decisions, to viewing youth as individuals with agency (Suavé 2003). In emphasizing the agency of these youth, some of this literature has framed the phenomenon of youth on the street as a choice (Ennew and Swart-Kruger 2003; Suavé 2003). While youth do have agency and are fully capable of making decisions about their lives, the current reality in Mexico City does not give these youth the opportunity to choose. The "choice" that these youth make is between an abusive or neglectful home and the street. There are few real options other than the street if these youth want to escape abuse. The only other real option is to go into a group home that limits their autonomy and, in many cases, can also put the youth at risk for abuse. For the street to be a real choice, youth need more options available to them to be safe, fed, and loved and to feel a sense of belonging.

As it is today, the Mexican government leaves the brunt of work with these youth in the hands of the city's large civil society sector. While these organizations work to aid the population, it is not enough. Leaving the responsibility of protecting these youth to nonprofit organizations and NGOs leaves these youth vulnerable to donor interests, to changing

organizational missions, and to the negative consequences of the push for quantifiable impact.

Funding for nonprofit organizations comes from donor agencies that look to help to fill the gap in public expenditure and to improve the situation for vulnerable populations. How these donor agencies decide who to fund has a great impact on the way these organizations work. Donor monitoring and accounting systems require NGOs and nonprofit organizations to implement certain types of social and economic projects that show a particular type of efficiency and effectiveness, pushing organizations to package certain types of projects, work with the easiest populations, and seek the easiest attainable outcome (Krause 2014; Kamat 2004). In the case of youth in street situations in Mexico City, this has meant a shift in the type of work organizations do and the type of youth they seek to help.

After months of observing evaluation meetings between youth in street situations and the director of programs at Casa Alianza, listening to him speak about the criteria for the residential program—specifically what he looked for in deciding whom to accept—and in listening to the national director of the organization discuss the cases that they were most proud of, it became clear that the organization was looking for a particular type of youth. They wanted to help youth who, as the national director explained, could "successfully integrate into society." For the national director and the director of programs, this meant youth who would be able to finish school, get jobs, and successfully transition to adulthood. These were the youth who, as Krause (2014) explains, are the easiest to work with, those whom the organization could package as success stories to their donors, those who could be used to show efficacy, and those who could bring in more revenue. This focus on outcomes had a serious impact on the way organizations go about deciding who could enter the

residential program. Ultimately, these criteria meant that the most vulnerable youth, those who needed the most care, were usually disqualified.

For Casa Alianza, the focus on outcomes and success stories has meant a decrease in the options available for youth in street situations looking to get off the street. The residential program at Casa Alianza began working with housed and at-risk populations referred through DIF and moving away from their work with the more difficult-to-serve youth on the street. Many organizations in Mexico City that have residential programs for youth in street situations have opened their doors to working with youth referred through DIF. Because the government organization does not have its own residential shelters, it refers youth to these already-existing organizations. These youth tend to have been taken out of their homes because of abuse or maltreatment. In this process, both organizations win: DIF is able to house youth that need housing, and NGOs and nonprofit organizations get funding for the youth in their care while also increasing the number of youth they work with and therefore increasing the impact they show to prospective donors. This has changed the work of organizations, however, by changing the population with whom they work.

For Casa Alianza, this has meant slowly limiting their work with youth in street situations. They have done this by raising the bar of whom they would accept in their program, framing the issue as a lack of resources and rights. After various youth in street situations were denied entry to the residential program, the director of programs and the outreach team held a meeting to discuss the parameters for entry into the residential program. The outreach team went down a list of different characteristics that a youth in street situations would likely have and that they had encountered as an issue with acceptance into the residential program. Carlos, for example, asked about drug addiction and

consumption (a reality that virtually all youth in street situations in Mexico City struggle with) and the director of programs responded that the youth could no longer be struggling with addiction because the organization did not have nurses on staff 24/7 in the residential program. Carlos then asked about some form of deformity, either from birth or from an accident on the street (something quite common among the population), and the director of programs responded that it depended on the severity of the situation. In this case, the doctor would have to make the decision. He mentioned that youth have the right to receive care for their conditions and, if Casa Alianza lacks the resources to provide that medical attention, then they would not be accepted into the residential program. When asked about youth who may have a learning disability, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or a so-called behavioral problem—common consequences of the trauma that results from the abuse that these youth have encountered in their lives (Moore et al. 2013; Cashel et al. 2000)—the director of programs said that they have to evaluate the particular case because they need to be sure that they have the resources to attend to the youth's problem and they must consider the safety of the youth already in the residential program. These new criteria led many youth in street situations to be denied entry into Casa Alianza's program while I was in the field, but this was not the only organization that shifted their focus. This shift also occurred in the Por Niños organization, whose day center was once dedicated to working with youth in street situations but later focused its attention on providing activities for youth from the Coruña Jovenes program.

Organizations throughout the city that were originally set up to work with youth in street situations have started to close the doors to this population. They say that the youth have behavioral issues, that they do not fit within the profile of the organization for various

health or physical reasons, or that their addictions are too strong and they pose a risk to the organization. For those youth in street situations who are accepted into these organizations' residential programs, many struggle when they get there. They struggle with the stigma of being one of the few youth in the program who has come directly from the street, and they struggle with residential program employees who do not understand the challenges faced by youth in street situations because they are accustomed to working with housed youth. As a result, many youth in street situations who do enter the residential program end up leaving, giving up on their process, and eventually resigning themselves to the reality that their only option is the street.

For many youth, the reality of their future is enough to lead them to resign themselves to the street. Youth know that they are going to be kicked out of residential programs when they turn eighteen. Some get frustrated and desperate when faced with this reality and leave groups homes because they think a return to the street is inevitable. Those who make it to 18 years are let out of their programs, but most have nowhere to go and no social support to turn to. In the absence of other support, they turn to the only one they have and the only life they know—the street.

To create a system that supports these youth to the fullest, there need to be many changes made to the way we understand their situation, the way the government and civil society organizations work with these youth, and the way these youth are understood by society at large. In the next section I will outline recommendations that could help improve the situation for these youth.

Recommendations

Rights

The only way to describe the hundreds of youth I met on the streets of Mexico City is to say that they are resilient. These youth leave their homes and enter a world that they know nothing about. They create their community and live their lives despite the trauma, danger, and various challenges that they face every day. However, the resilience and strength of these youth should not overshadow the reality that they put their lives at risk to procure the protections and entitlements that should be guaranteed to them.

These youth are rights-bearers. The fact that they have to build relationships with various actors in the city to exercise their rights is a shortcoming of the state. In a country that is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and in a state that has written the protection of youth rights into its constitution, the state is responsible for ensuring that the rights of these youth are protected. The state is supposed to ensure that youth are safe, that they have shelter, that they are not working in the street, that they are not participating in sex work, and that they have access to adequate nutrition, education, and health care.

In line with Berthold's (2014) rights-based approach to social work, it is important to focus prevention and intervention programs with these youth on protecting and restoring their rights as youth in the city. The focus of this work is not on fulfilling needs that are dictated by organizations but on empowering youth, engaging them in the intervention process, and calling for systemic changes to the institutions that currently lead to the violation of the rights of these youth as youth in street situations. In shifting to a rights-based approach, we can better understand the role that organizations should play and the focus

they should take as they build programs to work for these youth. Further, in framing the issue as an issue of rights, the work of government and civil society actors should not be focused on those youth who are "worthy" of aid or who fit specific profiles. The focus of interventions then becomes the restitution of rights to the entire population because the rights of all of these youth have been violated.

Government intervention

As mentioned above, the protection of the rights of these youth is the responsibility of the state. Currently there are too few resources dedicated to protecting this population: there is one government-run shelter for the population and little to no government outreach work with these youth. The government needs to increase the number of resources devoted to protecting their rights. The first and most immediate response should be offering these youth safe options for leaving their homes because these youth need alternatives to the street. These options should be accessible spaces that respect the agency and autonomy of the youth.

Despite being charged with protecting the rights of the population, DIF and IASIS currently do very little outreach or intervention work with youth in street situations. These organizations need dedicated outreach teams that go into the street and interact with informal settlements to identify these youth when they first leave their homes. Working with youth at this key stage can show them that the street is not the only alternative to their homes and to the abuse and/or to neglect that they have faced in the past.

The government should also create programs aimed at preventing youth from entering the street. This could include creating school programs with trained professionals who can identify youth who are at risk. These trained professionals can also help to educate

children and youth about the alternatives available to them if they do not feel safe in their homes and act as an advocate in helping them navigate organizational bureaucracy.

Mental health services

Many of these youth have had traumatic experiences in or around their homes, and they have not been given the space or the resources to process this trauma. In the absence of professional therapeutic help, these youth turn to drugs to numb the pain they feel and to the street to live in their own fantasy. There is a great need for affordable mental health resources for these youth. In addition, there is a need for a widespread cultural campaign that diminishes the stigma against mental health issues and therapy so that parents are able and more willing to allow their children to receive this type of help.

Models of care

Currently models of care—who is cared for, by whom, and how—are not adequately structured to work with the community of youth in street situations and do not take their unique situations into consideration. Changes need to be made to the way the sector understands and defines the population. Most resources in Mexico City that are only available for the population under the age of eighteen. There are few resources available for youth who have reached majority age. This is too narrow a definition and fails to consider the reality of the situation that these youth find themselves in.

On their eighteenth birthdays, these youth go from being teenagers who are worthy and must be "saved" to being just one of the many faceless unhoused adults who are left to spend their lives on the street, blamed for their situation. In Mexico City, adulthood is being delayed, as it is in many places across the globe. Young people are spending more time in school, spending more time living with their parents, and delaying marriage. The UN

considers “youth” to include young people up to age twenty-four years old to account for this. Programs and organizations working with youth in street situations should also begin to extend their work beyond the age of eighteen to include young people up to twenty-four years old as well. Relatedly, to prepare youth to enter the workforce at twenty-four, the work of these organizations should focus not solely on education but also on job preparation, therapy, and life skills education to prepare young people to enter the world on their own.

Moreover, it is important to understand the larger social phenomenon and situation of these youth. In the current system, a youth finishes a rehabilitation process or turns eighteen and the clinic or residential program opens their doors to let them out. The organization throws them a party, and the youth are sent off into the world. The organization views this as a success for their program, and they continue with their work as usual. But these youth are pushed out into a scary world where they must find a place to live, a way to support themselves, and a way to make it on their own. When they look around for guidance, they have no one to turn to, they have no social support because they have been separated from the support of the organizations. While other eighteen-year-old youth have family to rely on, these youth don’t. When these youth are faced with this scary situation, they do what anyone in their position would do: they fall back on the support networks they do have and on the world that they already know—the street. It is important for youth workers and organizations to understand the social reality of the lives of these youth. Not only do they need to work with youth older than eighteen to better prepare them for adulthood, but they need to build support systems that are available to the youth after they finish their programs.

As for outreach work, it is important for to consider the whole community. Outreach workers and organizations dismiss adults in street situations because they do not fit the

profile of the organization. The organizations that they work with even reprimand outreach workers for wasting resources on individuals who are outside the mission of the organization. They blame adults at these settlements for offering youth a place to live, and they dismiss them as bad influences. The reality is much different. These organizations and outreach workers need to engage the adults at these settlements. They are a valuable resource for working with these youth. As was shown in chapter 2, youth build trusting relationships, even fictive kin relationships, with some adults in their housing settlements. Many times, these adults commented about how much they did not want the youth in street situations to follow in their footsteps. If outreach workers build relationships with the adults on the street and educate them about the resources available to youth, these adults can help guide youth who are arriving to the street toward these alternative resources.

Lastly, these youth should be allowed to receive resources on the street—mental health, physical health, education, and day center resources. Many organizations, like Casa Alianza, want to see a commitment to a lifestyle change before these resources are made available. They believe offering youth resources on the street will only create a stronger bond with the street, but receiving resources is beneficial to youth's well-being and provides necessary aid. More than that, if organizations are working to restore the rights of youth on the street, it is vital that these young people have access to the resources that they are entitled to regardless of their "worthiness" or the commitment that they show.

Empathy and empowerment, not just numbers

It is important for organizations that work with youth in street situations to focus less attention on the number of youth that they attend to and pay more attention to the holistic impact they have on the youth that they do work with. The focus on numbers has a tendency

to push administrators to focus on youth who can have the most success. There are more ways to measure impact than how many youth are in beds at an organization's residential program, however. The employees at these organizations have an impact on the lives of these youth that goes beyond quantifiable statistics. As shown in chapter 4, they show them love, compassion, and that they are worthy. The work of these employees—the qualitative ways in which they impact the lives of these youth—are what help youth engage with organizations and decide to make a change in their lives. This qualitative impact should be valued and should be a major goal of the work of these employees. Rather than bureaucratic models and cold workers, those individuals who work with these youth should be focusing on showing them that they care and that they are there to support the youth.

Looking to the future

Youth in street situations will be a reality in Mexico City unless there are great changes to the economic, social, and political landscape—a stronger social safety net, more low-cost housing, more formal employment with wages that allow individuals to make ends meet, and greater investment in human capital. Over the last twenty years, Mexico City has sought to invizibilize the poverty that exists in the city, pushing to clear informal housing settlements and punishing those who engage in informal work across the city. This strategy has been used to beautify the city and attract tourism and investment from abroad. By clearing these settlements and policing informal jobs, however, these policies only criminalize poverty and further disadvantage the already disadvantaged.

These youth are pushed out of the city center, and they risk being pushed into parts of the city where they have even fewer resources. This makes youth targets for traffickers who prey on their vulnerability or for adults who offer youth shelter in exchange for sex.

Rather than push youth in street situations out of the city or invizibilize the phenomenon, it is important to draw attention to them. As the country and the city face the deleterious effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the population of these youth will likely continue to grow. It will be vital to create systems and programs focused on supporting and restoring the rights of these individuals and creating more social programs and opportunities aimed at the poor rather than criminalizing their situation and punishing them for their poverty.

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