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Responses to Information Requests

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Mexico: Actions of the government and of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) regarding street children; treatment of people who provide assistance to street children in Mexico City, Federal District
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

The National System for the Comprehensive Development of the Family (Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia, DIF Nacional) defines street children as infants, children and teenagers who live on the streets, do not have family ties, and are a high-risk group; or who work on the streets but have a family relationship and possibly attend school (Mexico 17 Nov. 2010).

Situation of Street Children

In 2006, the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child "expressed [its] concern at the still high number of street children" in Mexico (UN 8 June 2006, para. 68). *Sintesis*, a regional Spanish-language daily newspaper published in Puebla, Tlaxcala and Hidalgo states (n.d.), reports that street children between 10 and 18 years old are exposed to drugs, sexual and labour exploitation, and illness (1 Jan. 2010). In 2008, the Mexican newspaper *El Economista* reported that networks of prostitution, pornography and child-sex tourism in Mexico were increasing (10 July 2008). Street children are also exposed to street groups that may provide children with basic resources, often resulting in street children becoming loyal to these groups and risking their lives (*Sintesis* 1 Jan. 2010).

Government Services

DIF Nacional's mandate is to formulate and implement public policies related to social assistance (Mexico 27 Sept. 2010). Although it does not specialize in services for street children (Casa Alianza 21 June 2011), DIF Nacional's work includes programs that address street children (CRIN 10 Feb. 2009).

The Federal District's Institute of Social Assistance and Integration (Instituto de Asistencia e Integración Social, IASIS) offers social assistance services for people living on the street, the indigent, and other vulnerable groups in 10 Centres for Social Assistance and Integration (Centros de Asistencia e Integración Social, CAIS) (Federal District n.d.b). According to the IASIS website, services in these centres include the provision of food and accommodation, medical attention, psychological and psychiatric support, employment and educational training workshops, and recreational, sport, and cultural activities (ibid.). Each centre provides a different service to a specific demographic group (ibid.).

In addition, the System for the Comprehensive Development of the Family in the Federal District (Sistema para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia del Distrito Federal, DIF-DF) provides social services in the Federal District in support of families and the community (Federal District n.d.c). Among the services it is mandated to provide is a social assistance care facility for abandoned children, the elderly and the disabled (ibid.).

Specific initiatives carried out by these government organizations include DIF Nacional's program "From the Street to Life" ("De la Calle a la Vida"), which started in 2000 (*The Christian Science Monitor* 1 June 2009). This program was initiated by the President of Mexico to address the needs of government agencies and civil society organizations working with street children and families (Mexico 17 Nov. 2010). The program aims to bring government and civil society organizations together to coordinate the provision of health care, education, food, training and family reintegration (ibid.). This is carried out through specialized technical advice, research and

development of intervention models, and staff training at the state and municipal level and within the civil society organizations participating in the program (ibid.). Program staff have conducted workshops and consultations with public and private-sector service organizations, and visited the state DIF system to advise and monitor on initiatives (ibid.).

At the Federal District level, the IASIS provides services to street children through the Assistance to Children and Youth in Street Situations (Atención a niños y jóvenes en situación de calle) program conducted through the CAIS (Federal District n.d.a). This program focuses on the development of knowledge and skills through job training, and encourages independent living (ibid.). According to the DIF-DF website, it has a program for street children called the "Sons and Daughters of the City" ("Hijos e Hijas de la Ciudad") that provides the children sports, educational and cultural activities and encourages them to leave the streets (Federal District n.d.d).

External Evaluation of Government Actions

The Director of Casa Alianza, a non-governmental organization (NGO) providing assistance to street children through programs, training and residential services (n.d.a), told the Research Directorate in a telephone interview that although the government provides services to street children, its efforts are mostly targeted towards transferring cases involving street children over to the NGOs (Casa Alianza 21 June 2011). Two sources have also stated that there is no public policy at the national or Federal District level regarding street children: the President of Thais Social Development, a Mexico City-based aid organization that is committed to solving the social problems of people whose rights have been violated (Thais Desarrollo Social n.d.); and, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, a National Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM) political and social sciences professor who is also the Coordinator of the Program for Infants, Women, People with Disabilities and the Elderly (Coordinadora del Programa de Infancia, Mujeres y Personas con Discapacidad y de la Tercera edad) (11 Noticias 11 June 2008; Professor 23 June 2011).

In what supporters described as a means of turning attention to the plight of street children, the government of Mexico tried in 2009 to ban street children from the streets of the country's cities and towns by modifying a federal child protection law (*The Christian Science Monitor* 1 June 2009). The proposed ban requires state and municipal authorities to place all street children under the age of 14 into government social service agencies or pay a per-child fine of 5,500 pesos [1.00 Mexican peso = 0.08 Canadian dollars (Canada 30 June 2011)] (ibid.). However, the proposal was met with criticism from 60 children's rights organizations that complained that the ban "criminalizes poverty" (ibid.). The ban is legally in effect, according to the Casa Alianza director, but it is not being implemented (21 June 2011). Information on whether any organizations have been fined was not found among the sources consulted within the time constraints of this Response.

The UNAM professor compared the proposed ban to other failed attempts in Mexico and other Latin American countries to "clean the city of a social problem" (qtd. in *The Christian Science Monitor* 1 June 2009). She added that the federal government programs addressing street children, including the "From the Street to Life" program, have also failed (Professor 23 June 2011). The professor explained that the government's initiatives failed because they lack the resources for dealing with the issue and they do not address the root causes of why children are living on the streets (*The Christian Science Monitor* 1 June 2009). As she said, over time, "many children" are on the streets because they got involved in "organized crime webs," developed drug addictions, or engaged in prostitution (ibid.). Some do not believe that there is any benefit to attending school (ibid.). Although these children are sent to social service agencies, "many" often leave the organizations immediately upon arrival (ibid.).

According to the UNAM professor, after the federal government programs failed, the Federal District government in Mexico City proposed various programs and projects for the street children (Professor 23 June 2011). She stated that these projects did not stem from a commitment to improve the lives of the street children, but from a desire to refurbish and make the streets safe by removing the children from public spaces and getting them out of tourist areas and neighbourhoods (ibid.). Uche Ewelukwa, an associate professor of law at the University of Arkansas, explains that in the 1990s, these "'sweep the streets'" initiatives were used across Latin America by governments to "hide or deny the problem" of street children (qtd. in *The Christian Science Monitor* 1 June 2009). According to the UNAM professor, such actions can be seen when political delegations are scheduled to arrive in Mexico (Professor 23 June 2011). At such times, the children are [translation] "violently" removed from the streets through a process of [translation] "social cleansing" (ibid.). The street makeover acts continue to the present day, and have been criticized as ineffective, repressive, and in violation of the rights of children (ibid.).

Treatment of Street Children by Government Authorities

In 2006, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child pointed out "the violence to which [street] children are subjected by the police and others" (UN 8 June 2006, para. 68). In 2011, the UNAM professor stated that the authorities use violence when dealing with the children while they are on the street and also when the children report crimes to which they have been subjected (23 June 2011). The UNAM professor added that the judicial authorities lack sensitivity in dealing with complaints that the rights of street children have been violated (23 June 2011).

UN Recommendations to Government

When in 2006 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted its concern for the street children in Mexico, it also spoke about the "insufficient measures" taken by the government "to prevent this phenomenon and to protect these children" (UN 8 June 2006, [para. 68](#)). The UN Committee recommended that

the State party strengthen its efforts to provide assistance to street children, including health care; reintegration services for victims of physical, sexual and substance abuse and those with mental health problems; services for reconciliation with families; as well as education, including vocational and life-skills training. The Committee also recommends that the State party take measures to prevent violence against street children and to protect their rights. The Committee further recommends that the State party cooperate and coordinate its efforts with civil society and undertake regularly comparative studies on the nature and extent of the problem. The State party is also encouraged to strengthen technical assistance with, among others, UNICEF. (UN 8 June 2006, [para. 69](#))

In March 2009, a UN Human Rights Council (HRC) report also recommended that Mexico "address the problems of street children by providing them State protection and vocational training" (UN 3 Mar. 2009, [para. 37](#)). The Mexican government reportedly accepted this and all the other recommendations proposed by the HRC's Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (CRIN 10 Feb. 2009). Information regarding actions taken by the government to address the HRC report's recommendations could not be found within the time constraints of this Response.

Actions of NGOs

There are different types of NGOs working with street children in Mexico City with different visions, approaches and services (Casa Alianza 21 June 2011). One such organization is Casa Alianza, an aid organization in the Colonia Guerrero neighbourhood that works with street children aged 12 to 18 (*ibid.* [n.d.a](#)) to provide educational, medical, psychological, and employment services along with the option of residential services (*ibid.* 21 June 2011). Specifically, Casa Alianza offers the following programs:

- A prevention and treatment program for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS;
- Activities aimed at strengthening spirituality;
- Social work to provide emotional stability and the promotion of other options;
- Family reintegration;
- A free crisis telephone helpline;
- Assistance in preventing drug addictions;
- Psychological help and psychiatric treatment;
- Preparation for independent living through enrolment in school, courses, and employment training workshops;
- Advocacy for the human rights of children;
- Therapeutic activities that are dedicated to personal recovery; and
- First aid and basic medical care (*ibid.* [n.d.b](#)).

The Interdisciplinary Centre for Social Development (Centro Interdisciplinario Para el Desarrollo Social, CIDES), in the Cuauhtemec borough of Mexico City ([n.d.b](#)), is another NGO, this one focusing on educational activities (CIDES *n.d*). It does this by providing children, families and indigenous migrant street youth with training and vocational instruction programs to improve their capacities and abilities to work (CIDES [n.d.a](#)). In addition, the Pro Children of the Street Foundation (Fundación Pro Niños de la Calle), located in the Colonia Guerrero neighbourhood, provides a day centre to develop the skills and abilities of street children through games and activities (Fundación Pro Niños de la Calle *n.d*).

Another organization helping street children is the Casa de las Mercedes, which offers services to female children, adolescents and their babies who are living on the street (Casa de las Mercedes, [n.d.b](#)). The organization provides shelter, food, clothing, basic education, psychological treatment, medical attention and training to reintegrate into society (*ibid.*). The girls who stay at the Casa de las Mercedes come from all over Mexico and are usually referred by the DIF (*ibid.* [n.d.a](#)). Other civil society actors, such as religious institutions, often provide some assistance to street children (Casa Alianza 21 June 2011). These efforts are usually small and consist of hand-outs of clothing and food or some training initiatives (*ibid.*).

Overall, the various organizations working to help street children offer specific services, but rarely provide housing (*ibid.*). According to the Director of Casa Alianza, the services these organizations offer need more impact (Casa Alianza 21 June 2011). She also states that more coordination is necessary since NGOs have different priorities and send out contrary and often confusing messages to the street children (*ibid.*).

Treatment of People Who Provide Assistance to Street Children

According to the Casa Alianza director, the people working on the street with the street children do not feel safe (Casa Alianza 21 June 2011). She explained that there is a great deal of violence in Mexico, and that some

street children are part of violent groups (ibid.). These groups are often organized and engaged in money-making activities to gain resources (ibid.). Sometimes, these groups do not want the children to leave, even if it is to seek assistance or services (ibid.). Instead, they want to keep the street children working on the street for them (ibid.). This may pose a danger to the aid workers who are on the street providing assistance and services to the street children (ibid.).

According to the Chairman of the House of Representatives (la Cámara de Diputados) Special Commission for Children, Adolescents and Families (La Comisión Especial de la Niñez, Adolescencia y Familia), the street children [translation] "population is defenceless" against organized "mafias" (*El Economista* 10 July 2008). In the same *El Economista* article about child exploitation, the Commission of Tourism (la Comisión de Turismo) also mentions that poverty leads many street children to fall into the hands of [translation] "mafias" (ibid.).

An additional source of danger, according to the Director of Casa Alianza, can come from the government authorities themselves (21 June 2011). Aid workers can put themselves in danger when, for example, they file complaints about the inappropriate conduct of a public service employee against a street child, or they find out too much information about the corruption of some government public ministries (Casa Alianza 30 June 2011). The danger to which the aid workers then become exposed includes threats made against their lives and their personal security (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

The professor at UNAM indicates that when an individual protects street children, he or she immediately encounters [translation] "discrimination, bad treatment and rejection" (Professor 23 June 2011). They also face many challenging situations that they are not trained or prepared to handle (ibid.), which may require them to make difficult decisions (Casa Alianza 21 June 2011). There are few resources allocated to people working with street children, resulting in a lack of training, financial gain, and care for their well-being (ibid.). There is often a very high emotional cost involved in assisting street children, which is often not addressed (Professor 23 June 2011).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact representatives of the Instituto de Asistencia e Integración Social del D.F. and the Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response. Representatives from Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia, DF (DIF DF), Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, and Fundación Pro Niños de la Calle were unable to provide information for this Response.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International USA, Ayuda y Solidaridad con las Niñas de la Calle, Casa Alianza UK, Center for Justice and International Law, Cimacnoticias, Comisión de Derechos Humanos of Mexico City, Human Rights Watch, Inter-American Children's Institute, Inter Press Service, Latinamerica Press, LatinNews.com, Matraca - Movimiento de Apoyo a Niños Trabajadores y de la Calle, Mexico - Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, PANGAEA Street Children, Community Children Worldwide Resource Library, Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México, Save the Children Mexico.

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