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# Recent developments in urban marginality along Mexico's northern border

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes recent developments in urban marginality along Mexico's northern border. The northern border in the last two decades has undergone a significant economic transformation as well as an explosive population growth. The paper emphasizes that in spite of impressive economic indicators border cities in Mexico urban marginality continue; that is, economic gains have not trickled down as it would be expected. Urban marginality is defined here based on access to basic public services such as water, sewer and electricity. A discussion of market failures and government failures is presented to evaluate to what extent or degree marginality can be attributed to one or the other. The main finding of this paper is that although there has been some quantitative improvement in delivery of services, access and distribution have been uneven; therefore, marginality among lower-income groups continues. The key conclusion in the paper points towards the need of strengthening and developing planning institutions that would give local governments the tools to manage urban growth such as asserting their eminent domain power to improve land markets and accessibility to poor people to formal housing; fiscal powers as well as professionalizing city managers.

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## 1. Introduction

The idea for this paper emerged from a simple question: What has been said about urban marginality in Mexico's northern border cities and what has changed in the last decade? The timing of the question is appropriate given the fact that data from the 2000 census in Mexico has been made available by the National Institute of Statistic and Geographical Information (INEGI,

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2000), and this allows us to evaluate the changes in urban marginality in the last decade. The paper uses data from the Mexican 1990 and 1995 population censuses; it also reviews the previous work of authors such as Guillén (1990), and Pick and Butler (1990) as benchmarks to evaluate the changes in some marginality indicators.

Perhaps the most intriguing work on the topic of urban marginality along Mexico's northern border is that of Guillén (1990, p. 106), who found that in spite of very impressive economic indicators for border cities for such things as unemployment, salaries, and productivity these cities also presented high levels of marginality. Marginality in Guillén's work is conceptualized as access to basic utility services such as piped water, sewer and electricity. Another work on the subject by Pick and Butler (1990, p. 32) who defined it based on 19 indicators divided into six categories: economic, nutrition, education, health, housing and others such as access to electronic goods like TV and radio. Marginality as it is employed in this paper will be discussed more fully below in more detail.

The two works cited above agree on a key issue—which is that there exists a paradox between economic and urban development indicators. The paradox is that border cities, in spite of experiencing an economic boom since mid-1980s, also experience high levels of urban marginality understood as lack of access to key urban services that are important to people to improve their quality of life. The economic boom has not trickled down since people, although they are employed, earn relatively higher salaries, and have higher levels of productivity, have been marginalized from accessing basic urban amenities. This paper explores the validity of the paradox described and also analyzes the arguments concerning why the paradox continues or has been reversed. The main finding of this paper is that although there has been some quantitative improvement in delivery of services, their accessibility and distribution have been uneven; therefore, marginality among lower-income groups continues.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first section offers background about Mexico's northern border over the last three decades in order to help the reader situate the area in its proper historical and spatial context. The second section presents a conceptual framework to understand the meaning of urban marginality. The third section presents the methodology and a discussion of the main findings. The fourth section discusses the extent to which urban marginality is the result of market failures or government failures with respect to urban planning policies. The last section presents the conclusions related to policy implications regarding urban marginality.

## 2. Changes on the US–Mexican border since 1970

In recent decades, the US–Mexico border has experienced a dramatic change in every aspect—social, political and economic. These changes are the result of two intertwined processes. On the one hand, the loss of competitiveness of the United States has resulted in the transformation of the production process from a *fordist* industrial organization into a flexible *post-fordist* model. A key feature of this model is the relocation of manufacturing to locations that offer cost savings in the production of labor-intensive products. The other process was Mexico's shift in its development model from an import-substitution strategy to an export-oriented model; the new model became an alternative to deal with the macroeconomic imbalances, such as the foreign debt

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