

The Rubbish Pickers

Mexico City has many problems associated with unchecked growth including severe pollution, inadequate housing, and a generally poor quality of life for most residents.



The air quality in Mexico City is acceptable only a few days out of the year as millions of vehicles and tens of thousands of factories pump over 12,000 tons of gases, pollutants and particulates into the air each day. Because Mexico City is surrounded by mountains, cold air sinks into the city, trapping the pollutants at ground level. Air pollution in Mexico City causes millions of people to suffer from diseases. It is estimated that most of the population suffers from nasal passage deformation and inflammation.

Mexico City produces almost half of all of Mexico's hazardous waste. There are few recyclers and no legal landfill sites for this waste, so much of it is dumped in any available open space. This not only adds to the air pollution, but also causes water pollution.



Additionally there is a desperate shortage of dwellings - hundreds of thousands are needed. Out of desperation, many people (including entire families) move into the landfills around Mexico City to find materials they can use to survive. These rubbish pickers (known as *pepenadores*) also construct makeshift homes at the landfills to live in, using whatever resources they can salvage.

Side-effects from pollution in the landfills itself is even worse, where severe skin rashes are common year round and are blamed on toxins and gases from the refuse. It is normal for people living in the landfills to suffer from dysentery and tuberculosis. Illegal drug use is often widespread.

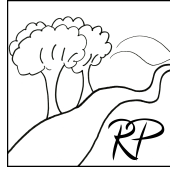


In Nezahualcoyotl dump (Mexico City's largest dump), leaders of mafia-style organized crime families charge the *pepenadores* a fee to sift through the trash. In exchange, they threaten city officials with threats of a violent backlash if they meddle with the system. In other dumps near the US border, people must purchase the lots for the rights to build shanties there.

Pepeñadores search through trash that can contain medical debris and septic sewage waste, looking for decent clothing, curios and building material (pallets, heavy cardboard and discarded plywood). They also collect recyclable materials like glass and scrap metal such as aluminum to sell at market value. Most importantly, *pepeñadores* search for restaurant debris. Trash from restaurants is the most common and the most useful of all the trash that is dumped.



- _____ It is believed that most of the population of Mexico City suffers from what? a. tuberculosis b. dysentery c. nasal passage deformation and inflammation d. malnutrition
- _____ Air quality in Mexico City is usually: a. acceptable b. acceptable approximately 35% of the time c. acceptable only a few days out of the year.
- _____ What are *pepenadores*? a. people who pick through the garbage at dumps to survive b. officials of the Mexican government c. organized crime families d. Mexican border patrol officers
- _____ Which of the following is not considered a major threat to people living in the landfills? a. malaria b. dysentery c. tuberculosis d. illegal drug use
- _____ Mexico City produces approximately how much of all of Mexico's hazardous waste? a. 25% b. 50% c. 65% d. 80%
- _____ Which of the following is considered one of the most useful types of garbage by the rubbish pickers? a. building materials b. curios c. clothing d. restaurant trash
- _____ Which of the following is not considered a result of unchecked growth in Mexico City? a. generally poor quality of life b. severe pollution c. inadequate housing d. none of the above
- _____ Which of the following adds to Mexico City's air pollution problem? a. the fact that there is little vegetation b. the fact that it is surrounded by mountains c. the fact that most citizens own vehicles d. the fact that most vehicles in Mexico City do not meet the recommended emission control standards recognized by the U.S.
- _____ There is usually no cost associated with living in a dump in Mexico. a. true b. false
- _____ The negative side-effects of the pollution in Mexico City is worse for the people who live in the landfills than it is for other residents. a. true b. false



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