Introduction

Anna Romero lives in a poor part of Mexico City. She and her family of six share a simple two-room house made of concrete blocks, corrugated metal, and scraps of wood. There is no glass in the windows, and there is no running water. The Romeros must walk to a water tap they share with their neighbors.

Six days a week, Anna travels by bus to her job as a maid for the Alba family. The Albas live on the other side of Mexico City in a beautiful 15-room house with a large garden and swimming pool. To Anna, the Alba home seems like a castle. The Albas pay Anna less than $15 for a 12-hour day of cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry. At 7:00 P.M., as the Albas sit down to a big meal of chicken, meat, or fish, Anna begins her journey home to cook rice and beans for her family.

The Albas and Romeros live just 15 miles apart in the same city, but in some ways they live in different worlds. The contrast between their two ways of life is an example of spatial inequality, or an unequal distribution of wealth or resources over a geographic area. It means that some places within that area are richer or poorer than others. Mexico City offers many examples of spatial inequality.

In this lesson, you will learn about the growth of Mexico City as an urban area. You will read about the causes and effects of the city’s rapid growth. You will also learn about the spatial inequality that has resulted from the city’s expansion.
1. The Geographic Setting

A Blend of Old and New

The Plaza of Three Cultures shows the mix of cultures that makes up Mexico City today. The stone platforms in this photograph are Aztec ruins. The church was built by the Spanish. The office buildings represent modern Mexico.

Mexico City, one of the world’s largest cities in population, is located in a highland basin called the Valley of Mexico at about 7,000 feet above sea level. The valley is surrounded by mountains and has a mild climate and rich soil. The Valley of Mexico has been an important place of settlement since ancient times.

A City of Wonders: The Aztec Capital of Tenochtitlán

The first settlers in the Valley of Mexico arrived thousands of years ago. At the time, several large, shallow lakes covered the valley floor. Small cities eventually grew up around these lakes.

In 1325, a group known as the Aztecs settled on an island in Lake Texcoco and founded a city called Tenochtitlán. The Aztecs were great warriors, and by conquering other groups, they created a mighty empire with Tenochtitlán as its capital. By the time the Spanish arrived in 1519, Tenochtitlán had become one of the greatest cities in the world, with an estimated population of around 200,000 people. Up to 1 million people lived in the Valley of Mexico.

Tenochtitlán was a city of wonders. One Spaniard said it was like an “enchanted vision” from a fairy tale. Great pyramids and temples towered above the city, and fine palaces and homes lined its streets and plazas. Many canals crossed the island, and three causeways, or raised roads, connected the island to the shore. A huge market sold exotic goods from throughout the Aztec Empire.

The people of Tenochtitlán enjoyed a high standard of living, a term that refers to people’s overall level of comfort and well-being. City residents had plenty of food from farming, fishing, and trade, and an aqueduct brought fresh water into the city from the surrounding hills. The houses in Tenochtitlán were well built, and people lived in clean, orderly neighborhoods.

A Bustling National Capital: Mexico City

In 1521, Spain conquered the Aztec Empire, destroying Tenochtitlán and building a new city called Mexico City in its place. Over time, Mexico City became one of the most beautiful cities in the Americas.

Some 300 years later, in 1821, Mexico won its independence from Spain. Mexico City became the capital of the new country and continued to grow slowly. By the 1950s, the city was a blend of modern and historic buildings, and its broad avenues and tree-filled parks made it a pleasant place to live.
Today, Mexico City remains the center of Mexican life, but it is no longer the graceful city of old. In the past 50 years, urbanization, or city growth, has increased at a rapid rate. In 1970, the city had more than 8 million people. Ten years later, it had almost doubled in population. There are now more than 21 million people in Mexico City's metropolitan area, which includes the city and its suburbs.

A key factor in Mexico City’s growth is migration from rural parts of the country to the city. Many people have relocated to the capital because of rural decline, or increasing poverty in the countryside. Life in rural areas is hard, but for many people, the city has become a difficult place to live, too, as you will see.

▶ Geoterms

rural decline worsening economic conditions in the countryside, including rising unemployment and growing poverty. Rural decline drives migration to cities.

spatial inequality the unequal distribution of wealth or resources in a geographic area so that some places are richer than others

standard of living the overall level of comfort and wellbeing of a group or a country. People in developed countries generally have a higher standard of living than people in developing countries.

urbanization the movement of people from rural to urban areas, resulting in the growth of urban areas
2. Rural Decline Causes Urban Migration

Juan Ortiz and his family live in a small village in central Mexico, and like his father and grandfather before him, he is a farmer. He grows corn, beans, and other vegetables on a few acres of land that his family owns, but conditions have declined in the countryside. Juan can no longer support his family by farming, and now he is forced to seek other work. Like many farmers, Juan plans to leave his village and move to the city, making him a part of the large urban migration caused by rural decline in Mexico.

Farmers Struggle in the Countryside Life for most Mexican farmers is tough. Only about 15 percent of the land in Mexico is suitable for farming, while the rest is too dry, rocky, or mountainous to grow crops. In addition, a small number of wealthy landowners own most of the best farmland in Mexico.

There are several types of farms in Mexico. One type is the small, privately owned farm. Another type is the larger farm on communal land, or ejido, which is owned by a community of farmers who work the land. A third type of farm is a large commercial farm that grows food for export.

At one time, small farmers were the backbone of Mexican society, but now they are finding it difficult to survive. To compete with large farms, they have to increase their production. However, they lack the money to buy seeds, fertilizer, and farm machinery, so many ultimately end up selling their land. Sometimes they go to work for wages on the large farms, but such jobs are few and offer low wages. As a result, poverty and unemployment have increased in rural Mexico.

Migration to the City Brings Renewed Hope Faced with rural decline, many farmers choose to migrate to the city. There they hope to find jobs that will pay them a decent wage and provide their families with a higher standard of living. They also hope their children will have an opportunity to get a good education in city schools so that they can escape the cycle of poverty and find skilled jobs later.

For years, most rural migrants headed to Mexico City, with migration rates peaking during the 1970s and 1980s. Since then, that rate has declined as life in Mexico City has become more difficult. Many migrants now choose to move to other cities in Mexico, while some try to cross the border into the United States.
The Urbanization of Mexico

This graph shows the percentage of urban and rural residents in Mexico over time. In 1950, more
Mexicans lived in rural areas than in cities, but that had changed by 1960. Today, around 80 percent of all Mexicans live in cities. The graph also shows estimates for the future.

**The Growing City**

These maps show the growth of Mexico City from 1950 to 2014. About one-sixth of Mexicans live in Mexico City. The urban area once lay entirely within the borders of the city itself, but it has since spread well beyond those boundaries. Much of this growth consists of poor neighborhoods.

**3. Urbanization Creates New Problems**

Julio César Cu is a professional diver, but he does not go diving in the ocean. Instead, he dives under the streets of Mexico City. On workdays, Julio puts on a special diving suit and swims into the city’s giant sewer system to remove trash and other objects from sewer pipes. Once he even found half a car. It’s a nasty job, but someone has to do it. Mexico City’s sewers are overloaded, and this is just one of the problems caused by rapid urbanization.

**Too Many People, Too Little Land**

You have read that rural migration is a key factor in Mexico City’s growth. Large families have likewise played a part. Since the 1990s, however, both migration from rural areas and the number of children in the average family have declined. As a result, the city is growing slower than it once did.

In spite of this decreased growth rate, Mexico City is continuing to expand, with its suburbs spreading up the sides of the mountains that surround the Valley of Mexico. Newcomers are also filling in areas that were once covered by the valley’s lakes, which were drained long ago to enable expansion. However, there is still not enough land or housing for the city’s growing population.

Urbanization and overcrowding have caused problems in Mexico City. Clean water is in short supply, making sanitation difficult and aiding the spread of disease. Roads are clogged with traffic, polluting the air and making it difficult for people to travel from one place to another. Buses and subways are also packed. Mexico City is bursting at the seams.

**Pollution, Poverty, and Crime**

Rapid growth has negatively affected Mexico City’s environment. One of the city’s worst problems is air pollution. Years ago, residents had a clear view of two great, snowcapped volcanoes that are located just east of the city, but now the mountains are rarely visible. A thick blanket of smog often hangs over the city, sometimes making it difficult just to see across the street.
Because of poor **air quality**, many city residents suffer from asthma and other illnesses. On some days, the air is so bad that schools are closed and people are warned to avoid going outside. Although recent laws to limit pollution have helped, the problem persists.

Social problems have also grown with urbanization. There are not enough jobs in the city to keep everyone employed, so poverty has increased. When poverty rises, crime does as well. Mexico City was once a relatively safe place to live, but now many residents fear for their safety.

**Polluted City Air**
Mexico City has some of the worst air pollution in the Western Hemisphere. The city is surrounded by mountains that trap polluted air. The government has tried to reduce vehicle pollution and limit the number of vehicles on city streets, but there are still more than 5 million cars in the city.

4. **A City of “Haves” and “Have-Not”**

Sylvia Martinez lives in one of Mexico City’s huge garbage dumps. She sorts through piles of trash to find bits of glass, metal, and other materials that she can recycle for cash. She is one of the millions of “have-nots” in Mexico City.

The “have-nots,” poor people who have little money and few possessions, make up the majority of the city’s population. In contrast, the “haves” are people with money and comfortable lives. The differences between these two groups reflect the spatial inequalities of Mexico City.

**The “Have-Not” Struggle to Survive** The poorest of the “havenots” are typically recent migrants to the city who often live in **slums** on the edge of town. Most houses in these slums are small shacks made of scrap metal and other refuse. Some of these houses lack
electricity and running water. The streets of the slums are often unpaved and littered with trash, and many people who live in these slum areas have little or no work.

Migrants who have been in the city for a while may live in somewhat better conditions. Most have some kind of work, and many have multiple jobs, often working as maids, dishwashers, cooks, construction workers, street vendors, or bus drivers. Still, even migrants who have found a job end up working long hours for little pay. To make things worse, they may have to travel for hours by public transportation to get to their jobs.

Recent arrivals are not the only people in Mexico City who are poor. Many city residents are “working poor,” which means that they have jobs that are too low-paying to lift them out of poverty. Most working poor live in working-class neighborhoods that are usually closer to the center of the city than the slums. Some live in cinder-block homes with metal or tar-covered roofs, while others live in large tenements, or run-down apartment buildings.

**Housing for “Have-Nots”**

Shacks like the ones seen here are located in slums on the outskirts of Mexico City. Houses are made of scrap wood and metal and sometimes use tarps for a roof. The people who live in these areas are often recent migrants to the city. Many end up selling cheap goods on the street or begging for a living.
Houses in working-class neighborhoods generally have electricity, but some lack running water. The streets are usually paved, though they are often in poor repair. While their lives are better than those of recent migrants, the working poor of Mexico City still face many struggles and uncertainties as they try to stay employed and provide for their families.

The “Haves” Live Well The “haves” are members of Mexico City’s middle and upper classes. They make up approximately one-fourth of the city’s residents.

A very small percentage of the “haves” belong to the upper class. These extremely wealthy people are large landowners or leaders in business or government. They enjoy a luxurious standard of living, many living on large castle-like estates with high walls and security systems. They often hire the working poor as their maids, gardeners, and drivers.

Members of the middle class live in houses or apartment buildings near the center of the city or in modern suburbs farther away. Many work in business, education, or government. They can usually afford some luxuries, such as smartphones. Moreover, many middle-class families have enough income that they can afford to pay for meals out, entertainment, and education.

In recent years, the Mexican middle class has expanded, and it is expected to continue to grow. Although around 47 percent of the nation’s households are middle class, falling back into poverty is a risk for many. In the first half of the 2010s, Mexico’s poverty rate actually increased. Moreover, wealth inequality remains, with around 10 percent of the population holding 65 percent of the wealth.
Summary

The Good Life
This home is located in a wealthy area of Mexico City. Homes like this often have large gardens and many rooms. They may also have security systems to guard against crime. Only a tiny portion of the city’s population can afford to live like this.

In this lesson, you learned about spatial inequality in Mexico City. You read how rural decline has increased migration to cities and learned about problems that have come with rapid urbanization. You have also seen how rich and poor have very different standards of living. These differences are clear in housing, transportation, and many other aspects of city life.

Spatial inequality does not exist only in large cities, but also in any area where differences in wealth affect how people live. You can observe such differences in standard of living in small towns as well as in suburbs and cities.

Spatial inequality also exists on a global scale. Think about global spatial inequality as you examine the map in the next section. The map compares the standard of living—measured by life expectancy, level of education, and per capita GDP—of people in countries around the world.
Global Connections

This map compares how well people live around the world. The rankings are based on a measure of living standards known as the Human Development Index (HDI). The HDI looks at how countries are doing in terms of their economies, societies, and basic living standards. The HDI encompasses data on life expectancy, education levels, and per capita GDP, among other things.

Why do some countries have a higher HDI rank than might be expected? The blue circles on the map indicate countries that rank higher in the HDI than their GDP alone might lead you to think. In these cases, other factors reflected in the HDI—life expectancy and education—might push their HDI rank higher. Often in these countries, the differences between rich and poor are not great. Also, many of these countries provide education and health care to all of their citizens.

Why do some countries have a lower HDI rank than might be expected? The countries marked by a red square rank lower in the HDI than you might expect based on their GDP. In such countries, there is likely to be a large gap between rich and poor. While the rich live well, the poor have limited access to education and health care.

How do patterns of spatial inequality change over time? Each year, the HDI ranks of some countries increase as living standards in these countries improve. At the same time, the ranks of other nations decline. Often such changes reflect government policies. In Zimbabwe, for example, decisions by the government have harmed the economy, and, as a result, living standards have declined. In Malaysia, government policies have helped raise living standards.

Standard of Living Around the World, 2016