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## Neighborhood Organizations, Local Accountability, and the Rule of Law in Two Mexican Municipalities

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### **ABSTRACT:**

This paper focuses on the role of neighborhood associations as the primary intermediaries between residents and municipal government. Drawing from fieldwork in two metropolitan municipalities of the State of México, it identifies the ways that residents interact with local government authorities as they express their concerns about public safety and policing, as well as their ideas and demands for responses to these issues. The research has important implications for all three aspects of the rule of law discussed in this volume. It touches on the ways that leaders of neighborhood associations perceive and respond to issues of public order within their jurisdictions; it considers the accountability of municipal officials to their constituents; and, by comparing conditions and patterns in two sharply contrasting localities (Huixquilucan and Nezahualcóyotl), it encompasses questions of access to justice on both individual and neighborhood bases. However, the paper concludes that the principal problem facing residents concerned about public security is not systematic discrimination based on socioeconomic status, but rather, the obstacles that typical neighborhood councils face in prompting municipal governments to take action.

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# Neighborhood Organizations, Local Accountability, and the Rule of Law in Two Mexican Municipalities

Allison M. Rowland\*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Little is known about the way that residents interact with local government authorities in Mexico to express their concerns about public safety and policing in their neighborhoods, as well as their ideas and demands for responses to these issues. This paper draws from fieldwork in two metropolitan municipalities of the State of México to help understand these processes. It focuses in particular on the role of neighborhood councils<sup>1</sup> as the primary intermediaries between residents and the municipality, including its department of public security.

The argument that arises from this research in twenty-one neighborhood councils is that, with few exceptions, changes in the functions of these councils in the State of México have not kept pace with other processes of democratization under way in the country. Instead, to the extent that councils are relevant at all to the processes and practices of local governments, they tend to operate as a convenience for governments and political parties rather than serving residents. Few have evolved into functioning mechanisms of two-way communication between municipal government and local communities. In addition, the most dynamic and autonomous neighborhood councils found in this study are located

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\* CIDE, División de Administración Pública.

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I use the term “neighborhood council” to refer generally to all types of sub-municipal organizations that are recognized as having special roles in the relationship between local governments and neighborhoods or communities. Some of the differences among these in the State of México are discussed later on.

precisely in areas where high incomes (and everything else associated with them) are most heavily concentrated. In this sense, an individual's access to many of the recent improvements in accountability of Mexican local governments, as well as the benefits of the rule of law, depends on socioeconomic status.

The implications of these patterns for issues of public security arise from the ways that problems are perceived by residents and how these concerns are communicated to municipal government in each case. To a greater degree than other municipal public services, like street lighting or wastewater service, for which objective information on service coverage and quality are fairly readily available, the perception of public security problems in particular neighborhoods affects both the demands made by councils and the amount of attention that local authorities pay to them. Since few municipal police departments gather and analyze data on crime incidence at the neighborhood level (Rowland 2003), authorities tend to simply react to the demands for action of the most vocal residents, or they design strategies that do not consider sub-municipal variations in crime and fear at all.

This means that neighborhood councils that are better organized and more autonomous from local government are more likely to benefit from police or other government actions. However, the level of council capacity has little to do with the incidence of crime in the neighborhood or the probability of victimization; in fact, social “disorganization” in certain neighborhoods may contribute to both higher crime rates and less effective councils. This type of difficulty, through which the disadvantaged neighborhoods fall further behind as the result of public security strategies that depend to some extent on neighborhood capacities, has been observed in other countries as well (Bursik 1988; Lyons 1999; Reiss 1986).

From the outset it should be understood that this paper focuses on the perceptions of residents—in particular, neighborhood council leaders—about conditions and circumstances in the places where they live. Those interviewed are not government officials,

nor do they necessarily have any detailed knowledge about government programs. For that reason, the information that they offer about certain matters varies substantially from some of the information we received from municipal government officials. Most striking was the relatively low level of familiarity with several programs that municipal officials insisted were in place and operating.

Thus, while local officials may be surprised at the apparent lack of impact of their programs, it should be emphasized that it was not the goal of this research to measure or evaluate the impact of any particular municipal government program. Given the broad range of questions considered, the perceptions of neighborhood leaders and their personal experiences with government programs were the only kinds of information that we sought. Council leaders are clearly more informed than average residents; nevertheless, the information that they provide may not reflect the efforts and accomplishments of local government.

The next section of the paper sets the context for this kind of neighborhood-level research in Mexico and explains the institutional structure for neighborhood representation in local government. It also introduces the methodology and the cases examined in this study. The third section begins the analysis of survey data, examining the patterns and differences in the organization and activities of neighborhood councils in the two municipalities. Section IV continues with the analysis of survey responses, concentrating on the perception of crime problems and policing in the neighborhoods. The concluding section returns to the issues of accountability, access to justice, and the rule of law, to consider the implications of the findings of this research for these issues.

## II. THE CONTEXT

The literature on diverse aspects of public security in Mexico has expanded rapidly in recent years (Alvarado and Davis 2004; Alvarado et al. 2004; Arango Durán and Lara Medina 2004; Azaola 1996; Bailey and Dammert 2006; Bergman et al. 2003; González Placencia 2002; Sarre 2001; Shirk and Cornelius 2006; Yañez Romero 2003). Nevertheless, little work has been done on the impacts of crime on neighborhoods and communities. Nor has there been any systematic exploration of the relationship between residents and their representatives in government in the context of public security policies. (Rowland 2006 touches on this issue only indirectly.)

Indeed, few studies about the political organization of urban neighborhoods in Mexico go beyond case studies of remarkable episodes of local organization in any sphere of public service provision. This is particularly true since the rise of electoral competition at this level and the corresponding increase in local government autonomy in certain matters of public policy. A fairly large number of municipal case studies has been published recently, but these tend to focus on local government as the unit of analysis, rather than the neighborhood group and its institutions, even when the cases involve neighborhood movements. We simply do not have much systematic information on the ways that residents interact—or do not interact—with municipal authorities regarding day-to-day issues of concern to them.

It is important to consider these questions because—like water provision, garbage collection, and other urban neighborhood issues—crime and public security are highly local issues. While it may be interesting and useful for some purposes to consider nationwide, statewide, or citywide indicators of the frequency or types of crimes, this does not tell us much about the impacts of crime and fear of crime on the lives of ordinary citizens, especially in large cities, where neighborhoods and their problems can vary widely. This kind of study of neighborhood issues of crime has been undertaken in other parts of the world,

especially the United States and England (Merry 1981; Sánchez Jankowski 1995; Skogan 1990; Taylor and Gottfredson 1986). Another aspect of the spatial components of crime forms the basis of a well-established strategy of policing, known as “hotspots,” or situational crime prevention, that starts from the premise that a large proportion of crimes in any jurisdiction take place in a small number of physical locations (Clarke 1997; Clarke and Felson 1993; Sherman, Gartin, and Buerger 1989). In spite of the importance of these theories in other parts of the world, in Mexico few municipal police departments have systematically adopted policies that consider neighborhood-level aspects of public security in their efforts to prevent and control crime.

A. *Representation of Neighborhoods and Their Residents in the Ayuntamiento*

In the literature on development, local government is commonly hailed as the level “closest” to residents. However, in urban Mexican municipalities, large populations combine with underdeveloped local institutions of administration and government,<sup>2</sup> to result in myriad difficulties for residents to express their preferences to government, let alone have these taken into account in local policy making. Indeed, it is questionable whether local jurisdictions that encompass over 100,000 residents—and more than 150 of these existed in Mexico in 2000 (INEGI 2000)—are able to enjoy many of the purported benefits of decentralized government.

The structure of municipal government in this country is problematic as well. As I have argued in more detail elsewhere (Rowland 2005), the municipal council (*cabildo*) is poorly suited to the task of representation of residents, since council members (principally, *regidores*) are elected at-large, as part of party slates. This means that their loyalties are

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<sup>2</sup> For key discussions of municipal governance in Mexico, see Cabrero Mendoza 1996, 1998; Guillén 1996; Merino 2004.

rarely tied to specific neighborhoods or groups of residents, but rather to the political party that placed them on the slate. In addition, voters tend to cast their votes for the municipal president, who is leader of the party slate and featured in campaigns, paying little attention to the rest of the list. This is one reason that the representation of particular neighborhood interests tends not to be contemplated or carried out by *cabildo* members, except under very unusual circumstances.

Even when council members are more oriented toward serving residents than their own political parties, their formal and informal powers to do so are not entirely clear. In general, they may bring matters to the attention of the council as a whole, they may attempt to convince the municipal president or directors of local government agencies to act on a matter, and, increasingly, they air any outstanding grievances in the local press. But they enjoy no power to force action regarding the problems that residents may face. For this reason, residents often make little use of their “representatives” in municipal government, except as occasional conduits of information or specific requests to the municipal president and agency staff.

There are exceptions to this general pattern, particularly when an issue or problem is serious enough to provoke residents to “mobilize” in the form of sustained public protests. Often, a representative of one or another political party (sometimes *cabildo* members, sometimes other political intermediaries) will become associated with these kinds of movements and ride them to some prominence, either as part of the municipal government or to catalyze and take advantage of any opposition to it. But these cases are extraordinary, rather than typical of daily neighborhood life. In most urban municipalities, it appears difficult for public issues of concern at the neighborhood level to gain the attention of municipal authorities.

## B. *Sub-municipal Governance*

As noted previously, there is a good deal of diversity in the forms of neighborhood organization nationwide, and these have been subject to change over time. During the era of one-party dominance, urban local governments designed neighborhood councils as a mechanism of communication between public officials and loyal party members to help inform them of neighborhood situations and events.<sup>3</sup> Patronage could be distributed through these channels, and information about any pressing problems or demands could be brought to the attention of local authorities before they escalated. Some notable exceptions existed (including the Satélite neighborhood of Naucalpan, State of México, in the 1960s), but in general, sub-municipal organizations were tied tightly into the structure of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), if not from the outset then after a process of co-optation.

With the advent of increased plurality in the political parties in power at the local level since the 1990s, the structure of neighborhood councils has taken on greater variety. Often, incoming municipal administrations of the National Action Party (PAN) or Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) were faced with recalcitrant neighborhood leaders left over from the single-party era, since these groups did not always follow the same electoral cycle as municipal governments. In some states, certain types of neighborhood leaders were not elected at all but were named by municipal authorities. For these reasons, many municipal administrations from parties other than the PRI attempted to establish new institutions of neighborhood representation, either as a substitute for the same patronage and control functions of the previous groups or as a replacement, with more plural and democratic forms of resident representation.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in the *Ley Orgánica Municipal del Estado de México*, Articles 72 and 73, the “Citizen Participation Councils” are designed simply as mechanisms or channels of communication and collaboration between neighborhoods and municipal government; their role is to propose and discuss public service provision and to “promote participation” in public life. Their use today in Nezhualcōyotl is discussed at length below.

In either case, it proved difficult for neighborhood groups to avoid becoming enmeshed in partisan politics. Savvy neighborhood leaders may confess to changing their nominal party affiliations to suit the preferences of the government in power at the local level. This appears particularly common where a single party has come to dominate the political sphere and where leaders see neighborhood residents as dependent on government largesse for things like public service provision or low-interest loans to help improve housing. In addition, state governments have been known to use their own resources in attempts to manipulate neighborhood groups, whether to the advantage or detriment of the party in power in the corresponding municipal government.

These issues are important to keep in mind during an examination of neighborhood councils, since it is easy to idealize their role in urban government and tempting to try to generalize across jurisdictions without taking account of the variations across space and time. In effect, the legal framework that governs these groups is weak, vague, or nonexistent in many states. In nearly all cases, their sphere of influence is restricted to lobbying for neighborhood-level improvements, because the municipal president (or municipal council) is under no obligation to act on the information or preferences of these groups. Neighborhood councils should be understood more as administrative conveniences for municipal government than as organs of representation for residents. They are rarely used to determine municipal public policy; rather, they play a role in the distribution of local public services. Understanding this context may help explain some of the experiences reported in the following sections.

### C. *The Research Design*

Despite its attractions, the use of the neighborhood council as a unit of analysis presents a number of conceptual and practical difficulties. In the first place, there is no

homogeneity in the organization and composition of neighborhood groups in Mexico. In each state, traditional practices combine with multiple and overlapping legal structures to impose a varying degree of control over neighborhood organization.<sup>4</sup> Differences exist in the levels of detail of state framework laws (*leyes orgánicas*) as well as the degree to which actual practices conform with law. As a result, municipalities tend to vary both in the practices and the terminology used to describe neighborhood groups. To complicate things further, in recent years, ambitious municipal presidents have often attempted major reorganization of the system as part of an effort to improve government or to strengthen their political party's control. For these reasons, research at this level must take into account a number of highly local variations; as in the present research, it is not always possible to avoid comparing somewhat dissimilar neighborhood groups in the course of inter-municipal comparisons. In fact, in one of the municipal cases used here, three distinct types of neighborhood groups were encountered, each with substantially different forms of organization and practices, as well as varying degrees of power relative to municipal government.

Given the complexity of this panorama, a fundamental question also arises: whom, precisely, do the leaders of neighborhood councils represent? Elections are held, at least nominally, for leadership in these organizations, but a number of limitations combine to create a less-than-ideal form of local democracy. Electoral alternatives are not always present, in part because it can be difficult to find individuals who are willing to serve in what are mostly unpaid positions. Competition is not always fair, since extra-official support for certain candidates sometimes comes through local government or political parties. The elections are not monitored by any agency external to the municipality, and abstention rates are generally very high. Indeed, the irrelevance of neighborhood groups to the resolution of

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that the Federal District, which is neither a state nor a municipality, has the most detailed legal framework for neighborhood organization. Nevertheless, neighborhood politics there are not uniform nor are their institutions free of controversy (Alvarado and Davis 2004).

daily problems in many areas means that individuals may choose to interact directly with municipal authorities, rather than through neighborhood groups.

The research reported here could not overcome these difficulties related to the object of study, but we did attempt to identify particularly problematic issues of representation and take these into account in our findings. The methodology consisted essentially of selecting a representative sample of neighborhood councils in each of two municipalities of the State of México—Huixquilucan and Nezahualcóyotl—and applying in-depth surveys with the leaders of each of the groups selected.<sup>5</sup> The survey interviews, which lasted approximately 90 to 120 minutes each, consisted of a standardized list of questions regarding the composition and operation of the neighborhood organization, the personal political history of the respondent, and the group's relationship with other neighborhood residents and with the municipal authorities, as well as issues related to crime, crime prevention, and interactions with police.<sup>6</sup> This survey design allows us to arrive at conclusions not only about public security but also about the political organization of sub-municipal areas and the ways that local governments interact with them on a variety of issues.

The selection of the two case municipalities, Huixquilucan and Nezahualcóyotl, responds in part to the needs of a wider research project of which this survey was only one component.<sup>7</sup> Among other things, that project aims to compare survey responses from the State of México with those from neighborhoods within the Federal District (DF), where the institutional frameworks for both neighborhood organization and policing are different. The

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<sup>5</sup> In Nezahualcóyotl, twelve "Citizen Participation Councils" (Copacis) were selected at random from the municipality's list of eighty; in Huixquilucan, because of the wider variety in existing neighborhood organizations, three cases were selected at random from each of three groups (the rural towns, the low-income areas, and the high-income areas), resulting in a stratified sample of nine from the municipal government's list of sixty-three neighborhoods.

<sup>6</sup> These interviews were carried out by Diana Hurtado and Alejandro Navarro during the second half of 2005.

<sup>7</sup> The project "Democratization, Citizen Empowerment and Police Reform in Mexico," was directed by Arturo Alvarado, Department of Sociology, El Colegio de México, from January to December 2005, with funding from the Tinker Foundation and the European Community.

studies were carried out in the two “metropolitan” municipalities of Mexico City (that is, parts of the urban area outside of the DF) for the purpose of comparing the impact of these institutional differences within an area where patterns of criminality were suspected to be relatively similar. In this sense, the present document is a first attempt to analyze a large quantity of complex information.

#### *D. The Cases*

In spite of the institutional similarities derived from their location in the State of México, Huixquilucan and Nezahualcóyotl could hardly be more different from one another (figure 1). The latter is relatively well known, since from its beginnings in the 1950s it was a notable example of sudden and massive urbanization. It grew from about 2,000 residents to over 1.3 million in just thirty years. Today it is still one of the largest municipalities in Mexico in terms of population. It is primarily residential in character, although a number of large boulevards are lined with commercial establishments, and there are several massive (even by Mexico City standards) open-air markets, where everything from fresh produce to used automobiles are bought and sold.

Nezahualcóyotl’s demographics have changed substantially since its formation. Population has been falling since about 1980 because little land is available for new settlement and many of the original “invaders” have aged in place, reaching more or less the middle class, thanks to the stability afforded by mostly self-built housing. Still, some sections of the large swath of low-lying land within Nezahualcóyotl are especially problematic, including the area in and around the massive Borda de Xochiaca garbage dump (which serves most of the metropolitan area) and several of the last neighborhoods to be urbanized, which are particularly precarious. In addition, the municipality must be

crossed by residents of neighboring municipalities—tens of thousands daily—in order to reach the Federal District, so through-traffic is constant.

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**Figure 1**  
**Comparisons of Huixquilucan and Nezahualcóyotl**

|   | Huixquilucan        | Nezahualcóyotl     |
|---|---------------------|--------------------|
| Population 2005 (est.)                                | 226,088             | 1,182,285          |
| Population 2000                                       | 193,468             | 1,225,972          |
| Population 1980                                       | 78,149              | 1,341,230          |
| Size of territory                                     | 143 km <sup>2</sup> | 63 km <sup>2</sup> |
| Gross municipal product per capita (US\$)             | \$15,120            | \$8,019            |
| Population that earns more than five minimum salaries | 7%                  | 4%                 |

*Sources:* INEGI 2000; SIMBAD, <http://sc.inegi.gob.mx/simbad>, 2006; SIGEM, <http://www.premiomunicipal.org.mx/Premio2004/sigem/index.htm>, 2006.

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In contrast, Huixquilucan has a fraction of the population of Nezahualcóyotl, distributed somewhat lopsidedly over a much larger territory. Located on the west side of the Valley of Mexico, nearly half of Huixquilucan's territory is mountainous and forested, and another 20 percent is dedicated to agriculture and dotted with small, traditional villages. Still, Huixquilucan is known nationally for a strikingly different side: the Interlomas commercial district and neighboring luxury residential zones, which abut similarly wealthy

areas of the Federal District along the east side of the municipality. In these neighborhoods, urban public services are more readily and regularly available than elsewhere, and even the presence of police and security cameras is notably greater than in other neighborhoods of the same municipality. Rapid growth in these luxury zones in the 1990s has helped spur growth of the “popular” (low-income) neighborhoods nearby, on hillsides and in canyons where it is often difficult to provide urban services. But rising land prices in Interlomas proper, and the proximity of Huixquilucan to the newer Santa Fe commercial and business district, have generated pressure in some of these low-income neighborhoods to gentrify. Thus large luxury apartment buildings and their residents may coexist uneasily alongside more traditional single-family dwellings, which often also house small businesses, such as convenience stores or auto repair shops. Although little through-traffic affects the municipality (except via a high-speed toll road just west of Interlomas), the rugged terrain and fast growth of automobile ownership provoke severe and recurrent traffic bottlenecks in many areas of the municipality.

### III. THE PROFILE OF NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS IN HUIXQUILUCAN AND NEZAHUALCÓYOTL

There is greater diversity among neighborhoods in Huixquilucan—where distinct village, low-income, and high-income zones are evident—than in Nezahualcóyotl, where neighborhoods are more homogeneous. As befits these contrasts, the variety of officially recognized neighborhood organizations is also greater in Huixquilucan: in low-income neighborhoods and villages, the municipal government uses the title of delegate (*delegado*) for the officially recognized neighborhood leader in each territorial unit (*delegación*). But in the high-income neighborhoods, efforts by local government to exert greater authority over local organizations met resistance from some of the long-established resident associations

(*asociaciones de residentes or colonos*). It is a testament to their power and autonomy that the municipality allowed these groups to persist with their own forms of organization.

The PRD's municipal administrations in Nezahualcóyotl have attempted to adapt the previous system of neighborhood councils since the party's first victory in 1997, taking advantage of existing figures in state law. The principal type of organization, known as the Copacis (Consejos de Participación Ciudadana, or Citizen Participation Councils), corresponds roughly to traditional neighborhood boundaries and was designed to work with the municipal Department of Citizen Participation.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the Copacis, other government-organized mechanisms of communication with neighborhoods have been activated, including a system meant to work through the municipal Department of Public Security. This appears to operate in parallel to the Copacis but is designed to specialize in a single sector, rather than treating the wide range of issues of neighborhood well-being. A substantial variety of other local nongovernmental organizations exists in the neighborhoods of Nezahualcóyotl as well, but the Copacis are the principal official mechanism of communication between the municipal government and neighborhood residents.

In this section, the objective is to assemble a clearer picture of the composition of neighborhood councils in the two case municipalities, as well as their operations, including their relations with other residents, with governments, and with political parties. The fundamental questions driving this analysis concern the extent to which neighborhood councils serve residents or whether, instead, they serve the needs of government or political parties. To this end, we begin by examining the profile of council leaders to see whether they are representative of their neighbors. Then we consider the actions of the councils to understand their relevance and utility to residents.

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<sup>8</sup> During the 2003-2006 administration, however, the Copacis came to be more closely associated directly with the municipal president and his staff, rather than this department, according to its director. Interview conducted by the author and others with Gerardo Salazar, Director of the Citizen Participation Section of the Nezahualcóyotl municipal government, January 19, 2005, in his office.

A. *The Profile of Neighborhood Leaders*

In all twenty-one of the neighborhood councils surveyed, the organizations' leaders appeared to be typical of their neighbors, at least in broad demographic terms. About the same number of women (11) and men (10) hold the top post in neighborhood councils, and they range in age from 22 to 84, with most concentrated in the 45-to-65-year age group. They are nearly all long-term residents of their neighborhoods, and those in Nezahualcóyotl include some of the original settlers of the municipality.

In the low- and middle-income zones of both Huixquilucan and Nezahualcóyotl, representatives generally have primary or secondary education levels, nonprofessional occupations, and large household sizes (mostly of four to nine residents). In the villages of Huixquilucan, these characteristics are similar, but some elements of traditional rural life are also evident. For example, representatives report much greater activity in the Catholic Church, and both they and their parents tend to have been born in the village where they now reside.

The characteristics of these groups contrast markedly with those of the neighborhood leaders in the high-income zone of Huixquilucan. Among these three women, education levels are higher, and two characterize themselves as primarily housewives. The other leader is a professional administrator for a neighborhood association that does not, in fact, include any residents at all; rather, the association members all operate businesses in the Interlomas zone. Among these three neighborhood leaders, religious diversity is greater than elsewhere; the group of three includes an Evangelical Christian and a self-described non-churchgoer. Household size is smaller, consisting of three to five residents, in two cases including a live-in domestic employee. These differences echo the characteristics of

neighborhood residents in the high-income zone of Huixquilucan and underline the dramatic socioeconomic polarization of the municipality.

*B. Relations between Neighborhood Councils and Neighborhood Residents*

The internal structure of neighborhood councils—including the role of leaders, the forms of decision making, and the issues of concern and action—varies considerably in the cases studied here. The majority of councils surveyed are governed only by the corresponding municipal code (*bando municipal*), which is not considered by many of the leaders to offer sufficient guidance for their activities. The exceptions to this rule are in the high-income associations in Huixquilucan, each of which has its own governing statute. This difference can probably be explained both by the fact that the associations predate much of the municipality's involvement in these neighborhoods, and by the salience of higher land values here. Residents of these neighborhoods are accustomed to using legal and other professional services for issues regarding their homes and other assets. They are likely to have more interest in defining the organs of neighborhood government, along with the personal abilities needed to do so.

Given the lack of formal guidance for the organization of the councils in other neighborhoods, traditional practices and improvisation are the norm. Of course, lack of guidance could be understood as offering autonomy and flexibility, which may be appropriate characteristics for an institution meant to serve the highly varied conditions in which these councils operate. But there appear to be some costs as well, visible in the centralized forms of decision making within the councils and the lack of contact between most councils and neighborhood residents.

The most common scenario reported regarding decision making is that the council leader (*delegado* or *presidente*) dominates this process, either alone or in consultation with one or two other council authorities (secretaries, treasurers, and so on). This seems to reflect both expedience and certain beliefs about the role of leadership. In some neighborhoods it appears to be difficult to attract the attention of other residents to council issues: leaders interviewed cited the time involved in council activities and the lack of monetary compensation for this time as the principal reasons for this lack of participation.

Nevertheless, a non-negligible number of councils (one-third of the total) claim to make decisions through consensus with residents. These include all three village councils in Huixquilucan, two of the three high-income neighborhood councils in Huixquilucan, and three councils in Nezahualc6yotl. In the villages, this practice is consistent with traditional rural forms of decision making in Mexico, and these have apparently transcended the municipality's efforts to standardize council practices. It also is unsurprising in the high-income neighborhoods, in the sense that councils were established with the mandate of serving their members, rather than for other purposes. The use of consensus in decision making in three of the twelve councils surveyed in Nezahualc6yotl is a bit more surprising, because the councils appear to play a different role in this municipality than those in the rural or high-income areas of Huixquilucan. The survey does not give us much additional information on this issue; it may reflect the presence and strength of nongovernmental organizations at the neighborhood level that insist on playing a part in any local decision making.

If neighborhood residents are not involved in decision making by most councils, what is their role? Over one-third of the council leaders in each municipality say they hold meetings with residents on a monthly basis or more frequently. Not surprisingly, these are generally the councils that rely on consensus in decision making. The majority, in contrast,

rarely or never meet formally with neighbors, and decision making is dominated by a small number of council members.

A wider variety of other practices that directly involve residents is reported in Huixquilucan than in Nezahualcóyotl. In the villages and one of the low-income neighborhoods, residents commonly provide labor in public service projects; this practice does not appear to be used elsewhere. In the high-income neighborhoods, residents pay quotas to support the activities of the associations and take part in protests by hanging signs in homes and cars, and signing petitions. In Nezahualcóyotl, none of these practices were mentioned by respondents. It is difficult to untangle cause and effect, but the overall pattern of low involvement may reflect a lack of interest of residents in council affairs or doubts about the efficacy of councils, especially relative to other forms of political action. Fully half of the council leaders in both municipalities report that neighbors rarely or never interact at all with the councils.

In both municipalities, when residents do seek out the councils, it is primarily to petition for help in resolving problems related to public service provision and, less frequently, for issues of public security. The former are precisely the types of duties and decisions that the neighborhood leaders report that they are responsible for: the identification of needs for minor public works and repairs. In a sense, they function as intermediaries, communicating residents' requests to municipal government or informing residents of opportunities offered by the municipality. In Nezahualcóyotl their focus is principally on drainage, pavement, and lighting, while in Huixquilucan it includes water service, street repair, and physical improvements to schools and churches. In the high-income areas of Huixquilucan, council actions also include requests for the application of law by relevant authorities, such as the removal of ambulant vendors from commercial areas, the defense of federal open space that is being "invaded" by illicit construction, and the presence of more police officers. Again, these differences in the interests and duties of

councils are consistent with the profile of these neighborhoods, since basic public services are already in place and relatively well maintained in the high-income zones of Huixquilucan.

The importance of the neighborhood councils as conduits for information about sub-municipal public services is underlined by the fact that more than three-quarters of the leaders surveyed in both municipalities cite problems related to public service provision as the most pressing issues facing them. Strikingly, in both municipalities, public security is also named as a top concern, with almost the same frequency as public service provision. The fact that neighborhood leaders identify public security as a problem but do not necessarily see it as part of their mandate for decision making or communication suggests that this issue is not addressed in a systematic way in the councils. In particular, in Nezahualcóyotl, as noted previously, there has been some effort to integrate a parallel system of sub-municipal committees to specialize in public security and deal directly with the municipal Department of Public Security. Nevertheless, as we see in Section IV below, in practice the Copacis do play roles in neighborhood public security. This confusing panorama points up the uncertainties created by the parallel structures of neighborhood representation provided for by state law.

### *C. Relations between Neighborhood Councils, Governments, and Political Parties*

In both municipalities, three-quarters of neighborhood leaders are, or have been, members of political parties, contrasting with membership rates estimated to be below 50 percent for the general population (Levy and Bruhn 2006: 100). This high prevalence of party membership among leaders is consistent with the fact that these posts are essentially political positions; the apathetic are unlikely to seek election. In Huixquilucan, where the PRI ruled at the municipal level and ties to the PRI-dominated state level were tight, all six of the neighborhood leaders who self-identified as party members belonged to the PRI and had

entered the party at least twenty-five years previously. Again, though, the contrasts within the municipality are sharp: in the low-income neighborhoods, all three leaders were party members, and in the villages, two of three were active in party organizations. But in the high-income zone, only one of the leaders was a party member. This pattern reflects, to some extent, the persistence of the PRI's organization and integration into rural and low-income areas of the State of México and other central and southern states.

In Nezahualcóyotl, the importance of the PRD is striking, in comparison both to Huixquilucan and to other municipalities in the Mexico City Metropolitan Zone. In general, the level of politicization is high, with nine of twelve neighborhood leaders identifying as members of a political party. The two *priístas* there joined the party twenty-eight and forty years ago, respectively, while the seven *perredistas* are more recent, of course, since their party was only founded in 1989. Three of these members entered around that time, while the others joined between two and ten years ago—that is, since the local government was won by the PRD for the first time.

In contrast to Huixquilucan, the parties themselves in Nezahualcóyotl appear to have played greater roles in both proposing candidates for neighborhood leadership and supporting the campaigns of their loyalists. Indeed, municipal officials argued that these are highly politicized because of the form of state law for Copacis.<sup>9</sup> In addition, six leaders in Nezahualcóyotl report having been asked to organize support for gubernatorial or other candidates of their parties in 2005, and to have complied with these requests by summoning neighbors to attend political rallies. Only one leader in Huixquilucan reports this kind of activity. In sum, then, partisan struggles appear to manifest themselves in the neighborhood organizations to a much greater degree in Nezahualcóyotl than in

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Gerardo Salazar, January 19, 2005.

Huixquilucan. This may be due in part to the specific framework of state law under which the Copacis of Nezahualcóyotl are organized.

In addition, the general level of local political mobilization seems to have been especially intense in Nezahualcóyotl for a number of years. For example, our surveys suggest that the presence of politically oriented, nongovernmental, neighborhood-level organizations is much higher in Nezahualcóyotl; in Huixquilucan, far fewer neighborhood groups of any kind were reported. The much larger population size of Nezahualcóyotl also makes it very important to political parties at the state and national levels. In particular, the PRD appeared to be basing its strategy within the State of México for the 2006 presidential election on its dominance of politics in Nezahualcóyotl.

Still, it is not clear to what extent political parties may be manipulating either the composition or the activities of the neighborhood councils to facilitate the distribution of patronage, and thus increase their electoral support, in the way that the PRI reportedly did under the one-party-dominant regime. Some contact between local government and neighborhood councils is certainly legitimate and is, indeed, the very objective of these councils. Still, in Nezahualcóyotl at least, neighborhood leaders appear to seek and receive greater benefits from local government if they are of the same political party. Seven of the twelve councils report that they receive support from the municipal government to carry out their activities (this support comes mostly in the form of office supplies), and all of these are affiliated with the PRD. The two *priísta* neighborhood leaders complained bitterly about the difficulties of their work with the PRD-controlled municipality, but they reported receiving “*despensas*” (essentially, packages of basic food and household supplies) from their own party to distribute among neighborhood residents. A direct comparison with Huixquilucan is difficult, given that the only party clearly represented in any of the municipal councils is the PRI and because of the relative autonomy of the councils in the high-income zone.

#### *D. General Conclusions about Neighborhood Councils*

The neighborhood councils in the two municipalities studied do appear to provide some services of identification of neighborhood priorities and communication of these to local government. In this sense, they may serve a useful and democratic function, rather than being mere façades for government control over neighborhoods or for party patronage and recruitment. However, in many instances councils appear to be simply substituting for the municipal government in tasks that it is charged with providing. The reliance on councils for the function of reconciling resident preferences at the neighborhood level to the practices and policies of local government appears overly elaborate and not particularly efficient. In both these municipalities, it may reflect weakness in certain aspects of administration and governance, particularly regarding relations with residents. This weakness at the local level is consistent with much of the research on municipal government in Mexico, especially in the State of México.

Still, the fact that municipal governments choose to keep these systems alive suggests that municipalities find it either unnecessary or undesirable to develop these skills within the local administration. Indeed, using informal, nongovernmental, and, frequently, party-affiliated organizations as intermediaries between residents and their local governments provides other sorts of benefits to local politicians. Unfortunately, since there is very little consistent difference among political parties on issues of municipal government—it is difficult to formulate a partisan position on property taxes or water provision, for example—the high degree of involvement of parties seems only to distract from the formulation and representation of neighborhood preferences.<sup>10</sup> Legitimate issues can be suppressed or ignored in the name of party unity, and leaders may become distracted from

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, researchers for this project were asked repeatedly by several respondents to identify the party that was sponsoring the research, in spite of our description of this project from the outset as an academic and nonpartisan research initiative.

the primary objective of improving local conditions. To the extent that this is the case, the impact of these neighborhood council systems on the accountability of local government is ambiguous, to say the least.

#### **IV. HANDLING ISSUES OF PUBLIC SECURITY, CRIME, AND RULE OF LAW AT THE NEIGHBORHOOD LEVEL**

While the original intent of the neighborhood councils in these municipalities did not include attention to issues of crime and rule of law, the growing importance of these for residents, at least in the urban areas, has made public security and interactions with police a growing concern. There is a wide variety of actions that may be taken at the neighborhood level to prevent or control crime, or at least to make residents feel more safe. Still, the lack of clear leadership by local governments on this issue makes for a broad and rather incoherent tangle of initiatives. In sum, it is precisely in the neighborhoods that least need government assistance in public security where this is most forthcoming. The vicious circle of neighborhood disorganization and higher levels of fear and crime is apparently present in Mexican neighborhoods, just as it is elsewhere.

##### *A. Identification of Neighborhood Public Security Problems*

The surveys carried out for this research were not designed to estimate the frequency of different types of crime in the neighborhoods considered. It is worth noting, too, that in none of the neighborhoods surveyed were there any systematic attempts to identify problems of crime, fear, or public order. Still, the leaders' descriptions of the types of problems in their neighborhoods that are related to public security do offer a glimpse into the challenges faced in different parts of the metropolitan area. They also offer some insight

into how other aspects of each neighborhood may affect the kinds of crime committed there.

In this sense, the stereotype of Nezahualcóyotl as a more dangerous and violent place than Huixquilucan appears to have some basis in fact, or at least in the perceptions of neighborhood leaders. Robbery in public places, with or without violence, violent home burglary, and the theft of automobiles or parts were reported as frequent problems far more often in Nezahualcóyotl than in Huixquilucan. In contrast, burglary without violence and theft in commercial establishments were cited as frequent problems in Huixquilucan. This does not mean that these crimes are exclusive to one place or another, only that leaders consider them the most common.

Interestingly, sales and use of illegal drugs and illicit alcohol were listed as problematic more frequently in the low-income areas of Huixquilucan and its villages than in the high-income neighborhoods. In fact, there is little reason to believe that significant differences in usage exist in different neighborhoods. Presumably, the absence of concern about these problems in the high-income areas is related to urban form and the practices of different socioeconomic groups. To the extent that these activities occur, they are probably done on private property and out of the view of neighbors, rather than on the streets. The absence of mention of drug and alcohol sales as frequent crimes in Nezahualcóyotl may reflect a very different phenomenon: in these neighborhoods, residents' concerns over public sales and use of drugs and alcohol are overshadowed by more violent and fear-provoking activities, like assaults on the streets and home-invasion robberies.

Another indication of the higher level of danger in Nezahualcóyotl than in Huixquilucan is in the victimization of neighborhood leaders themselves in the past year. In the former, three of twelve had been victims of serious crime (two assaults and one car theft), while in Huixquilucan, only one had been victimized (burglary), and it was considered by the victim to be politically motivated rather than a random street crime. While our small

sample is insufficient for any broad generalizations, it does provide some concrete evidence of the relative danger from crime that residents face in the two municipalities.

A different sort of insight on the crime problem arises from a review of the strategies that the leaders of neighborhood councils as individuals chose to try to minimize their risk of victimization. These data are relatively more difficult to interpret, given that some of the choices may correspond to budget constraints more than other factors. For example, only in the three high-income neighborhoods of Huixquilucan are private police forces used by neighborhood leaders, though they are reported to exist in new luxury buildings in one Huixquilucan low-income neighborhood, and unarmed night watchmen are used in one Nezahualcóyotl neighborhood. Still, it is worth noting that similar proportions of neighborhood leaders in both municipalities report taking actions like reinforcing the security of their homes (just over 50 percent in each); accompanying family members in the streets (33 percent in Huixquilucan, 42 percent in Nezahualcóyotl); and being more cautious about showing valuable items, like jewelry or wallets, in public (25 percent in Nezahualcóyotl, 33 percent in Huixquilucan).

#### *B. Neighborhood Council Actions and Initiatives in Public Security*

As mentioned in the preceding section, since the precise powers and responsibilities of the neighborhood councils regarding issues of public security are not spelled out, their actions are varied. In this regard, the councils in Huixquilucan appear to be more active and creative than those in Nezahualcóyotl. In Huixquilucan, the low-income urban neighborhoods report having pressured successfully for more frequent “rounds” or “patrols” by police officers, and one low-income neighborhood managed to be incorporated into the municipal system of “panic buttons” (*botones de enlace*), which connect households or businesses directly to the municipal Department of Public Security. Public meetings with police officers

assigned to the neighborhood were held in one low-income area, and emergency telephone numbers were distributed to attendees. In one of these neighborhoods, a neighborhood watch (*comité de vigilancia*) was established, and in another, the neighborhood leader began to participate in “ride-alongs” in squad cars as police did their rounds. As a result of these efforts, the leader reported that “the officers no longer get drunk in the squad cars.”

The councils in Huixquilucan’s high-income neighborhoods were far more active in issues of public security. With residents’ contributions, one bought a squad car and radios for the officers of the semi-private State Auxiliary Police who work in the area. One neighborhood installed a private system of security cameras, and one closed some streets to through traffic. Another oversaw the installation of “panic buttons” in local businesses, and the leader of the council was connected to this system in another neighborhood. Lobbying for greater presence of police officers in these neighborhoods seems to have been successful as well. Leaders also tried to exert more oversight over the actions of police officers in their neighborhoods, both by developing closer relationships with officers and by reporting problems or misbehavior to the authorities.

The villages in Huixquilucan were different: two of the three surveyed reported having carried out no actions at all. The other mentioned only the incorporation of the council leader into the “panic button” system. However, this lower level of activity in public security makes sense given that these leaders also reported that street crime is relatively rare in their villages.

In Nezahualcóyotl, however, the lack of dynamism among neighborhood councils is a bit more puzzling. Of course, if the municipal Department of Public Security does make use of a parallel system of neighborhood committees, this issue may be handled through other channels. This might explain why half of the Copaci leaders who were surveyed report having taken no action related to public security. But others did act, and half of them cite the dissemination of telephone numbers of the authorities and other neighborhood residents, as

well as the distribution of other information related to the prevention of crime. Several also held neighborhood meetings, with or without police officers, and attempted to develop closer relationships with local police in general.

Still, none of the Copacis appears to have the organizational or financial resources needed to undertake the variety of neighborhood-specific actions attempted in the urbanized areas of Huixquilucan. Furthermore, if ad hoc public security committees indeed operate, they clearly are not integrated into neighborhood life through the official organs of neighborhood representation.

Of course, we cannot say with certainty whether the greater activism by neighborhood councils in Huixquilucan is effective. Their work might be the cause of their apparently lower rates of crime, or these may be due to other factors. The points to keep in mind from these observations are, first, that problems of public security at the neighborhood level appear to be confronted in at least two distinct ways in the municipalities studied here. Second, where neighborhood councils are involved in this issue, it appears to be as a consequence of their own initiative rather than the policies of police departments or municipal governments to work with them. Third, to the extent that the councils are meant as mechanisms to approach neighborhoods as integrated wholes, rather than according to sectoral divisions imposed by government administration, any parallel structure of committees dedicated to public security would presumably undermine the relevance of the Copacis, without clearly offering anything in return.

### *C. Interaction with Police*

The survey responses suggest that municipal police are the element of the justice system with which neighborhood groups have the most contact. Of the twenty-one councils

studied, all but one reported having some relationship with municipal police, and the vast majority in Huixquilucan (90 percent), as well as two-thirds of the leaders in Nezahualcóyotl, reported good relationships with them. About two-thirds of the total report that this relationship has remained the same or improved since last year, while one-third report deterioration.

Contact with the state police was much less frequent in Huixquilucan, while in Nezahualcóyotl it was about as common as for municipal police. There was also a noticeable difference in the evaluations of state police in each municipality: in Nezahualcóyotl, 42 percent reported only mediocre (*“regular”*) or poor relationships with these, while in Huixquilucan, the 33 percent who reported any relationship at all with state police all evaluated them as good. While certainly not definitive, this finding is consistent with widespread complaints by residents of Nezahualcóyotl, in the press and during the course of this research project, about the problems caused by state police in this municipality. The relatively greater frequency of contact and the more common reports of negative experiences by Nezahualcóyotl’s neighborhood leaders in comparison to those in Huixquilucan may indicate contrasting patterns of behavior by state police officers in the two jurisdictions. The reasons behind any differential behavior are not obvious. However, it may be related either to the socioeconomic profile of residents or to the partisan political profile of the municipal government.

Other questions in the survey were oriented toward providing a better understanding of the relations between neighborhood groups and municipal police in particular. Part of the challenge is to figure out what police officers actually do in neighborhoods, at least from the point of view of residents. This is important, in part, because the literature on policing from other countries recognizes that there is often substantial difference between the policies or practices adopted by the directors of police forces and the behavior of officers on the streets, away from direct supervision. Nearly all of the neighborhood leaders in this study

mentioned that local police carry out patrols (*patrullaje*) or rounds (*rondines*), though police apparently are not present at all in one neighborhood in each of the two municipalities. Two-thirds of leaders in Huixquilucan and one-half in Nezahualcóyotl also reported that police regularly conduct special actions or sweeps (*operativos*) in their neighborhoods.

Other patterns are more divergent between the two municipalities. Nearly 80 percent of neighborhood leaders report that they know the officers assigned to their neighborhoods in Huixquilucan, while only 33 percent say this in Nezahualcóyotl. This may simply reflect the greater absolute size of the police force and population in the latter, or it may be the result of deliberate attempts in Nezahualcóyotl to rotate police officers assigned to particular neighborhoods. This is a tactic commonly employed in Mexico to lessen the risks of extortion and other problematic relationships between police officers and residents.

Police were more frequently reported to respond to residents' requests for presence in particular zones, like schools or commercial areas, in Huixquilucan (67 percent) than in Nezahualcóyotl (33 percent). Paradoxically, they were more commonly reported to attend neighborhood meetings in Nezahualcóyotl (50 percent) than in Huixquilucan (33 percent). This pattern has no obvious interpretation. It may reflect a simple substitution of activities as a result of deliberate policing strategies. For example, in Nezahualcóyotl, police may be taking a "neighborhood policing" approach (consistent with recently implemented municipal policy), prioritizing the development of relationships with neighborhood organizations. In Huixquilucan, police may be concentrating on crime "hotspots" identified by residents. However, even if these patterns of police actions are a result of deliberate strategy, their effectiveness in each case would have to be questioned. In Nezahualcóyotl, as noted previously, only about one-third of neighborhood leaders know their local police officers. In Huixquilucan, it is questionable whether a "hotspots" strategy could be effective if based on the perceptions of danger of residents rather than on crime data collected by police forces.

More likely, these differences simply reflect high levels of improvisation, arbitrariness and inconsistency in police behaviors and in the strategies of both municipal forces. This possibility is supported by the observation that, in the high-income neighborhoods of Huixquilucan, police appear to be much more attentive to neighborhood organizations than they do in the other two zones of the municipality. In other words, access to police protection in Huixquilucan—to the extent that local police truly serve as dissuasion to crime (more on this below)—appears to be highly unequal among neighborhoods and to correlate with socioeconomic variables. In Nezahualcóyotl, police protection is inconsistent but not clearly related to socioeconomic differences, in part because such differences are simply less apparent in this municipality.

Nevertheless, if the problem is improvisation, then systematic discrimination by municipalities and police forces might not in fact be the rule. Rather, the neighborhoods that complain the loudest and pressure local government in ways that it finds difficult to resist may be more likely to be attended to. For example, all three high-income neighborhood leaders report “special public security programs” in their neighborhoods, including security cameras and private police, but these programs were proposed and lobbied for by the neighborhood groups themselves. In contrast, all the special programs reported in Nezahualcóyotl were designed and implemented by the municipality rather than resulting from autonomous proposals or demands for action by residents.

Finally, it is worth considering whether municipal police are perceived by neighborhood leaders to pose any deterrent to crime at all, or whether their presence is considered irrelevant or even counterproductive. There appears to be some ambivalence about this question. On the one hand, as noted previously, some leaders do petition local government for more police presence in their neighborhoods, and a not insignificant number think that police actions are sufficient to fight crime in their neighborhoods—44 percent in Huixquilucan and 17 percent in Nezahualcóyotl. Indeed, even the majority of leaders in each

municipality, who do not consider that police action is sufficient, may believe that more police presence would help dissuade some criminal acts. On the other hand, residents are not sanguine about the behaviors of some police officers: extortion and corruption were cited as problems by 67 percent in Huixquilucan and 25 percent in Nezahualcóyotl. In addition, diverse forms of simple ineffectiveness in response to crime and public order issues were cited by 22 percent and 42 percent, respectively.

#### *D. Interaction with Local Government*

Beyond policing and the actions of the local Department of Public Security, a variety of other actions by municipal government may contribute to the prevention of crime or to improving residents' perceptions of security in their neighborhoods. The kinds of supplementary actions that neighborhood leaders reported in response to our survey varied somewhat according to the neighborhood and the municipality (figure 2).

With one exception (the repair and construction of green spaces), all of these actions were reported more frequently by council leaders in Huixquilucan than in Nezahualcóyotl. The reasons for this variation are not always obvious, but they likely are related to the different strategies adopted by local governments, both to improve public security and to make other sorts of impacts on local areas. For whatever reason, the Huixquilucan municipal government appears to have been much more active in repairing or installing public lighting (reported in 100 percent of the Huixquilucan neighborhoods), pruning trees in public spaces, installing neighborhood alarm systems, and organizing recreational and cultural activities.

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Figure 2

Neighborhood-level actions by municipalities:

Percent of council leaders who report that these actions have been taken in their neighborhoods

|  | Huixquilucan<br>(n=9) | Nezahualc6yotl<br>(n=12) |
|--|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Repairing or improving public lighting                             | 100%                  | 67%                      |
| Tree pruning and trimming  | 89%                   | 58%                      |
| Installation of neighborhood alarms ( <i>botones</i> )             | 78%                   | 33%                      |
| Organization of recreational or cultural activities                | 78%                   | 25%                      |
| Installation of lights outside private houses                      | 78%                   | 25%                      |
| Repair or construction of green spaces (parks, gardens, and so on) | 67%                   | 75%                      |
| Construction of police substations                                 | 56%                   | 17%                      |
| Repair or construction of space for council activities             | 56%                   | 0%                       |
| Courses on crime prevention  | 33%                   | 17%                      |
| Closure of streets or walkways                                     | 22%                   | 0%                       |
| Closure of dangerous places (vacant lots, businesses)              | 11%                   | 0%                       |

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Some of the differences in these actions are likely related to municipal scale; the number of people and places to be attended to by local government is simply much greater in Nezahualcóyotl, so impacts of municipal actions might not be as apparent. The degree to which previous administrations have neglected certain neighborhood issues surely also plays a role, since the need for action by local government may be greater or lesser, depending on what was done previously. Finally, it should be remembered that the actual impact of any of these actions on crime rates, or even on perceptions of public security, is subject to some debate and very difficult to estimate with precision. Nevertheless, these data suggest much more neighborhood-level activity by the government of Huixquilucan than by that of Nezahualcóyotl.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The findings presented in this paper should be considered tentative. The complexity and volatility of sub-municipal governments in Mexico mean that additional research, designed to specifically test the hypotheses derived from this research project and others, could shed more light on the issues discussed. For example, in different states or municipalities, during different times, or regarding the treatment of different public issues, the role of neighborhood councils may vary substantially from what was found generally in Huixquilucan and Nezahualcóyotl. The councils may go beyond simple communication with local government to include the determination of municipal policy priorities. Political parties may work through channels other than neighborhood councils to attract and keep supporters. Local governments may try to be as accountable to poor neighborhoods as to rich ones, and they may even succeed. Unfortunately, the research reported here does not coincide with any of these scenarios.

In broad terms, local governments have made notable improvements in Mexico during recent decades. Still, this research indicates that where a person lives exerts a strong influence on the degree to which she or he may benefit from any improvements in government, particularly within the metropolitan area of Mexico City. Given the high correlation between residential location and other socioeconomic variables, this finding suggests that government accountability is limited and access to justice is biased, especially for the poor.

That life is better in many senses for the rich than for the poor is not a novel conclusion. However, the lesson from the study of these neighborhood councils is that it is not only personal wealth that determines accountability and access to justice at the local level, but also the structures of neighborhood governance and the willingness of politicians to take advantage of institutional weakness for partisan advantage.

Variation across local areas in neighborhood organizations and their functions is not in itself problematic. Indeed, it could represent the possibility for flexible adaptation to local conditions, for example, among the diverse sub-municipal communities in Huixquilucan. However, flexibility is not the same as improvisation and lack of policy effectiveness altogether. And it is precisely these latter two problems that appear to plague the municipalities studied here. In this sense, the bias in favor of those with higher incomes is not necessarily a matter of deliberate discrimination. Indeed, the difficulties in accountability and access to justice may be due more to the fact that little municipal policy action of any kind is apparent in many neighborhoods. This is a matter, then, of government effectiveness as well as institutional design.

Neighborhood councils have not evolved into functioning mechanisms for the communication of preferences and demands of sub-local areas. Instead, they continue to exist as a mix of old-style urban patronage (albeit for a greater variety of political parties than previously) and a new style of irrelevance to local government actions. Here, it is not

clear to what extent the problem can be traced to simple local government incompetence and to what extent political interests, including political parties, deliberately prefer to keep these institutions weak to maximize their own flexibility in action.

One of the obstacles to making elected municipal officials accountable for neighborhood performance is that very few municipalities develop and publicize credible indicators of neighborhood performance. In addition, many politicians prefer to ridicule public perceptions of danger in their surroundings, rather than to view them as signals of a need for government action. At the same time, the range of problems in typical neighborhoods of both municipalities studied here is so wide, and there are so many “urgent” problems of public services for low-income residents, that it is difficult and perhaps inappropriate for neighborhood councils to focus their very limited wherewithal only on public security.

The dependence of neighborhood councils on municipal governments or political parties for their operating resources combines with the lack of any power to demand attention and action for pressing neighborhood problems. The result is to render most neighborhood councils passive and cooperative. Local governments and political parties appear to take advantage of this situation for short-term electoral gains, rather than working to establish more effective forms of neighborhood representation.

The contrast with the neighborhood associations in the high-income areas of Huixquilucan sheds light on just how different the response of local government is to groups that raise their own operating funds, integrate their demands coherently and systematically, and are oriented toward serving residents rather than pleasing government or party officials. These neighborhoods are not free from problems, and many of their advantages stem from the preexisting ability of residents to use their personal wealth and professional abilities to resolve or minimize community problems. Still, the differences between them and the other councils in their relationships with local government are glaring enough to merit

consideration in any conversation about accountability and access to justice in Mexico. As in so many other spheres in Mexico, the state and the political parties appear disinterested in improving the lives of the majority of residents. There is little opportunity for any neighborhood leaders except the most wealthy to address issues of security and the rule of law with local elected officials, let alone hold them accountable for neighborhood conditions.

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