

Out All Day or Stay at Home: Mobility Patterns of the Urban Poor in Mexico City

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Dauernd unterwegs oder immer daheim - Mobilitätsmuster in Armenvierteln von Mexiko-Stadt
In Mexiko-Stadt leben heutzutage mehr als die Hälfte der Bewohner_innen in ehemals irregulären bzw. informellen Siedlungen. Da der Zugang zum Wohnungsmarkt für Haushalte mit geringem sozio-ökonomischen Status begrenzt war (und es bis heute ist), stellte der informelle Landerwerb die einzige Möglichkeit zur Befriedigung des Bedürfnisses nach einer Unterkunft. Das Ergebnis dieses Prozesses, die so genannten *colonias populares*, zeichnen sich u.a. durch ihre sehr geringe Ausstattung mit öffentlicher Verkehrsinfrastruktur und ein stark eingeschränktes Mobilitätsangebot aus. Aber auch die spezifische Situation der Bewohner_innen, ein sehr geringes Einkommen sowie die hohe Eigentumsquote wirken sich einschränkend auf alltägliche und auch längerfristige Mobilitätsentscheidungen aus. Die Autorin beschreibt in ihrem Beitrag auf der Basis von Interviews, wie der sozio-ökonomische Status die täglichen Mobilitätsentscheidungen und -muster von Frauen in einer *colonia popular* im Stadtteil Iztapalapa prägt. Sie hinterfragt dabei auch die Rolle der Stadt- und Verkehrsplanung.

Introduction

In Latin America, rapid urban growth based on informal urbanisation may not be a trend proceeding at the same scale as it did two or three decades ago, but the continent's cities of today are the product of these historical processes: today, over half of Mexico City's inhabitants live in former irregular settlements.

As access to housing markets was (and often still is) limited for residents of the lower socio-economic strata, informal purchase of land was their means to meet the need. In Mexico City, this type of housing is referred to as *colonias populares*¹, neighbourhoods which, by nature of their development, have limited access to public infrastructure, including transportation (Ward 1998).

Moreover, self-constructed housing in Mexico creates high rates of homeownership in particular amongst the lower class. This has strong implications for the population's mobility in the long- and short-term, affecting both their daily travel and their residential mobility. Focussing on the mobility patterns of the urban poor, especially women, this study addresses the ways in which everyday mobility is influenced by social status in Mexico City.

This paper draws attention to the ways women with low socio-economic status in urban areas of Mexico experience everyday mobility. It also highlights the importance of everyday mobility patterns in research on social inequalities as well as in urban and transport planning. In order to achieve this, I draw on semi-structured household interviews with 14 female residents of a *colonia popular* in the district of Iztapalapa to explore how social status and mobility interplay in a relatively poor neighbourhood in Mexico City (Schwarz 2009).

Mobility and social status

Understanding mobility as the "actual social practice of moving through space-time" (Jirón 2010: 66), it can be

termed one of the most crucial everyday experiences of city dwellers, as it relates to the provision of basic needs within or outside their neighbourhood. Thus, the place of residence is linked to several other locations within the city: the places of productive work, education, consumption, culture, leisure and health services, amongst others. As it is precisely the concept of everyday life which links individual practices to social structures (Salazar Cruz 1999), studying everyday mobility implies handling two scales of mobility. The place of residence (as a kind of spatial frame) has the effect of strongly shaping the residents' everyday mobility on the individual scale.

As research has shown, urban mobility – in the sense of residential as well as everyday mobility – is an issue strongly influenced by differences along categories of class and gender (Jirón 2007; Ward et al. 2007). In the Latin American context, persistent patterns of social polarisation and considerable processes of urban socio-spatial differentiation highlight a particular need to relate research on mobility to social questions.

Jirón (2007) found, for instance, that the female urban poor of Santiago de Chile were subject to a dual type of exclusion: simultaneously being confined to the urban periphery, and being excluded from many benefits cities have to offer. As gender still makes a huge difference in Mexico, and roughly 50% of all Mexican women (vs. 20% of men) are not involved in the formal labour market (CEPAL 2008), female residents and their specific mobility patterns are of particular interest.

The residential immobility of self-builders

There were two main drivers of informal urbanisation in 20th century Mexico: the hegemonic model of economic development and a lack of appropriate housing policies for the urban poor (Ward 1998; Connolly 2004). On the backdrop of import-substituting industrialisation, Mexican development policies triggered rural-urban migration and led to a rapid urban growth in the capital of Mexico,

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Colonia popular is the Mexican term for an informal or initially informal lower-class settlement. These neighbourhoods are typically informalised through the extra-legal sale of plots in protected areas and on *ejidal* land, but there have also been cases of land occupation by settlers' movements. However, the conversion of agricultural land with collective, unmarketable land titles (*ejido* – a Mexican peculiarity dating back to the 1910 revolution) into building ground has been the main source for informal urban development in the last 50 years. In order to avoid social tensions due to lacking housing policies especially for the urban poor, Mexican authorities have tolerated this type of housing provision via self-help, implementing an institution for their ex-post legalisation. In 1992, the Mexican government finally legalised the conversion of *ejidal* land through a major legal reform, thus opening it up for formal urban development.

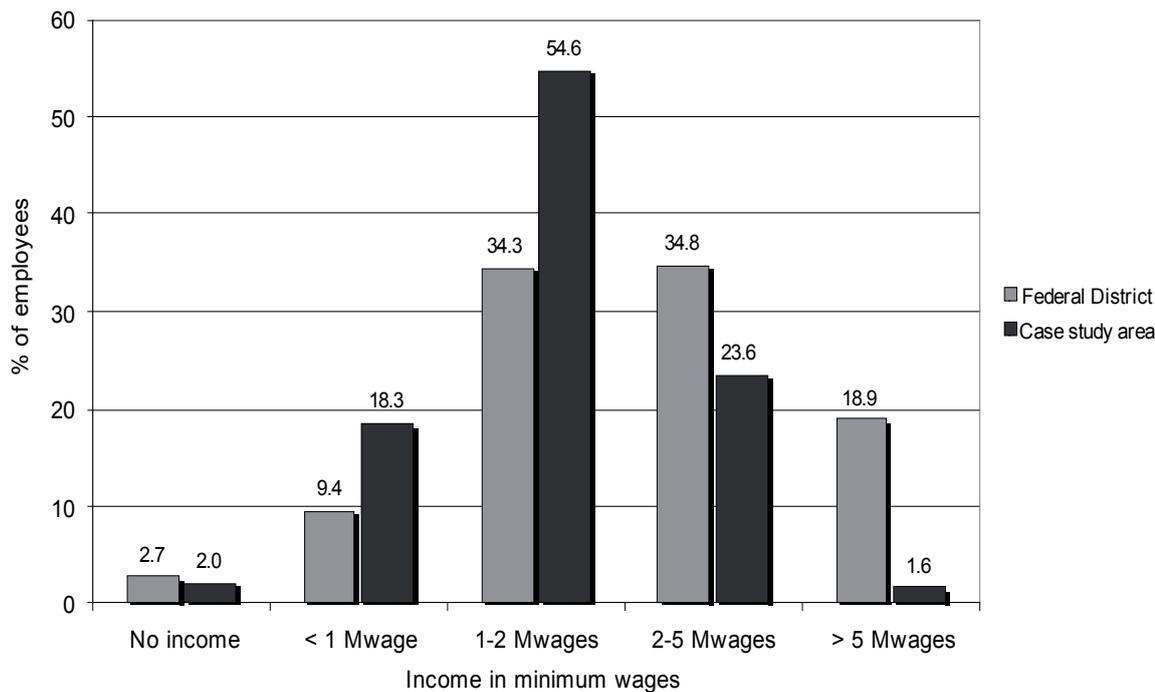


Figure 1: Comparison of income distribution amongst the economically active population, Federal District and case study area, year 2000. Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI): Censo de Población y Vivienda, 2000

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particularly during the decades of 1950–1980 (Parnreiter 2007). As a result, 50% of today’s inhabitants of Mexico City live in structures created through informal urbanisation (Duhau 2008: 128). This has two implications for mobility: limited access to transport infrastructure and residential immobility.

On one hand, Mexico City’s *colonias populares* show a characteristic process of inversed urbanisation. The settlements literally evolve from the individual plot, and public infrastructure is implemented afterwards in a lengthy, often disputed process. Depending on the level of consolidation and the location within the city, public transport in these areas is therefore largely insufficient.

On the other hand, many inhabitants of *colonias populares* demonstrate a striking residential immobility. Several reasons explain why selling the consolidated self-built dwelling and moving within the city would not be a feasible option for these settlers. First, the structure of the Mexican housing market still has its limitations especially for those working in the informal sector or households with low income. As a result, homeownership rates tend to be the higher the lower the socio-economic status – with 63% of the highest and 78% of the lowest socio-economic strata being homeowners (Rubalcava and Schteingart 2012: 90). Second, the exchange value for a self-built dwelling does not equal the use value. This accounts in particular to the amount of time invested in construction. Third, there tends to be a strong identification with the neighbourhood and the individual dwelling, which is a product of long-term social struggle:

“It has already taken me so much work to live here from the very beginning, since the settlement started – I suffered at lot. As now there is more or less everything we need, I want to enjoy the fruits of my previous suffering. (...) Would I move out to another neighbourhood now? The truth is: no. I want to stay here, until the end.”
(Author’s interview with Ana², 2009)

In order to understand the everyday mobility patterns of lower-class residents of Mexico City, it is therefore crucial to keep in mind that the residential location is permanently fixed. Poor homeowners are unlikely to change their place of residence within the city, which makes daily travel (e.g. to the job location) mandatory, irrespective of travel distances.

Everyday mobility in Mexico City

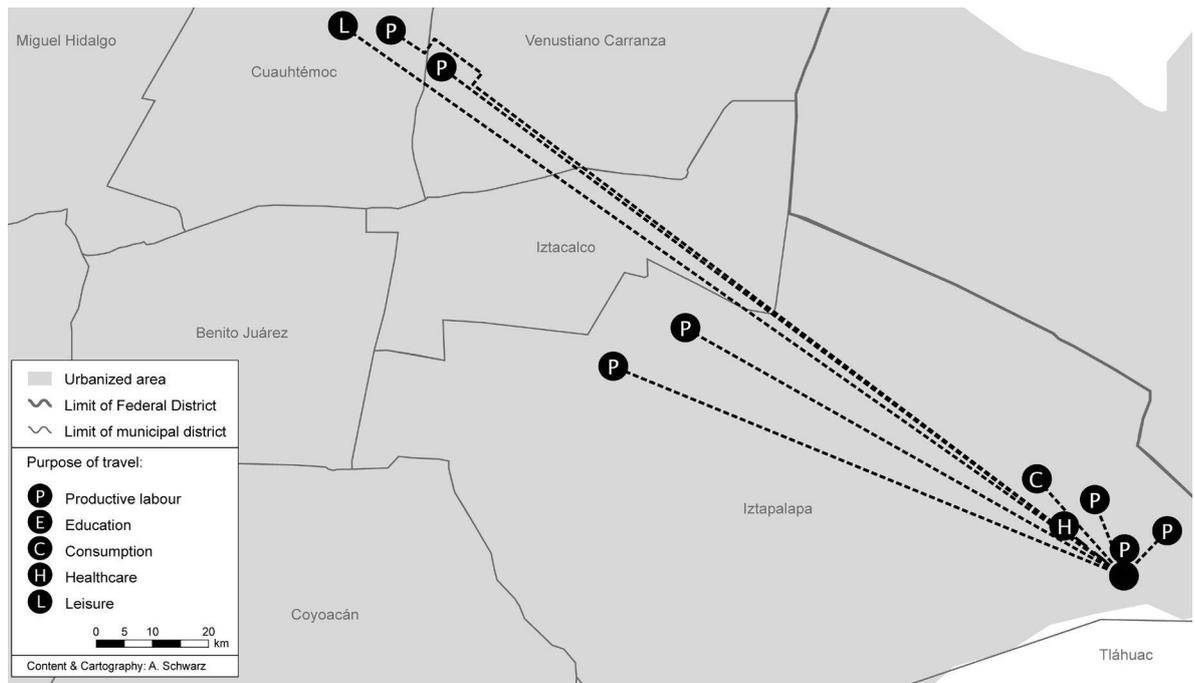
Private car ownership is not widespread in Mexico City’s lower socio-economic strata, which makes public mass transport a key factor for mobility. Mexico City’s metro system, however, mainly covers central districts while an expansion to the periphery (in particular the State of Mexico) is only slowly being implemented³. Consequently, marginal and peripheral locations in particular are highly dependent on private minibuses run under a public license, which are crowded, unsafe and often more expensive than other public transport options. These minibuses alone made up 54% of the modal split of the Federal District in the year 2000 (GDF 2010: 40).

Accordingly, transport in the case study area is provided by two microbus lines, taxis and private cars. The case study area is a typical *colonia popular*, located in the district of Iztapalapa in the south-eastern part of the Federal District. Iztapalapa today is one of the poorest and most densely populated districts of Mexico City. The case study area consequently features a comparably low socio-economic status with employee incomes lower than the Federal District average (see figure 1). 75% of employees from the case study area earn an income of up to two minimum wages (totalling about €239 per month) – that is, just below the official marginality line (as defined by CONAPO). The neighbourhood lacks infrastructure, such as higher public education, health care and, most obviously, income-generating jobs (Schwarz 2009). All 14 female interviewees are living in owner-occupied self-built dwellings and most of them earn a regular income below two minimum wages.

2 Here and throughout the text, pseudonyms are used to identify the informants.

3 Mexico City spreads out to the Distrito Federal (Federal District) and the State of Mexico, with its population of 21 million being split almost half-and-half between these entities. Similar as with other integrative approaches in the metropolitan region, collaboration in the field of public transport is hindered in part by political tensions between the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD) governing the Federal District and the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) governing the State of Mexico.

Figure 2: "Absent" mobility pattern of Marta, displaying all destinations outside the neighbourhood visited at least on a weekly basis, distinguished by purpose. Source: Author's survey 2009



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Two mobility types could be identified amongst these interviewees: the absent and the locked-in. The absent are a group with long distances travelled daily, which is made up by employees and street vendors. 59-year-old Ana is a typical representative: for two decades, she has worked as a cleaner in an office building in the city centre, earning 2 minimum wages and spending the majority of her day outside the neighbourhood. "I work from 6:30 am to 4:30 pm and come home at 7:30 pm. Sometimes I do a second job afterwards."

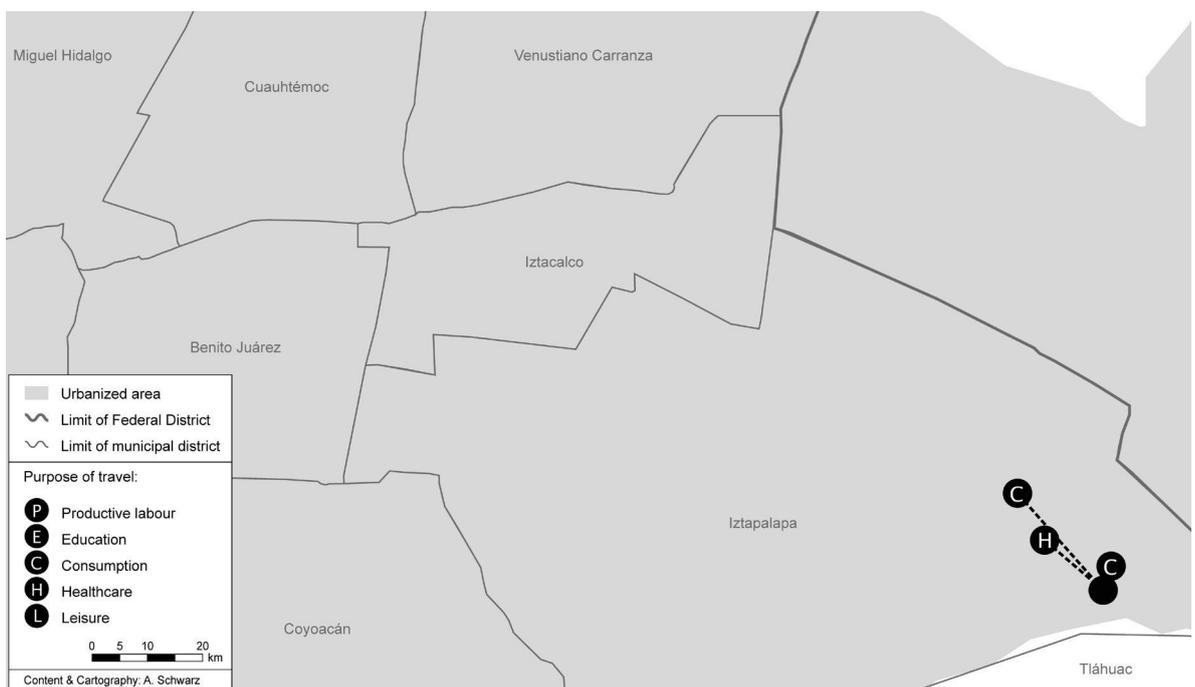
Ana leaves her neighbourhood with the first microbus at 4:45 am, then continues her trip by metro and finally another microbus. On weekdays she spends about 18 pesos (€0.96) daily on transport. The overall trip takes 2 hours in the morning and, depending on traffic conditions, up to 3 hours in the afternoon. As a result, her everyday mobility is characterised by long distances travelled daily but includes very few destinations.

Unsurprisingly, street vendors and other traders, such as 51-year-old Marta, demonstrate a large range of different destinations visited within the city on a regular basis (see figure 2). Marta and other members of her family sell textiles and notions door-to-door, covering different neighbourhoods in Iztapalapa each day of the week.

Marta walks to the nearby neighbourhoods and takes the microbus on her way back home. Twice a week, she visits La Merced Market in the city centre in order to restock goods. Every once in a while, Marta combines this with a visit to her sister who lives near the historic centre. These restocking trips take 90 to 120 minutes one way, depending on traffic conditions. Marta spends about 14 peso (€0.75) on the round trip by microbus, changing lines once.

The locked-in, in contrast, are a group with a severely restricted mobility (see figure 3). These women gain the

Figure 3: "Locked in" mobility pattern of Guadalupe, displaying all destinations outside the neighbourhood visited at least on a weekly basis, distinguished by purpose. Source: Author's survey 2009.



lowest incomes, mostly through low-paid home manufacturing or shop keeping. They fulfil most purposes, including income generation, within their home or in the neighbourhood. Guadalupe, 53 years old, for instance, conducts home manufacturing while attending her own poorly stocked convenience store, and leaves the house only to go to the hospital and to buy food, mostly in the local stores (see figure 3). She sees mobility is an unaffordable luxury: "As there is no money, one doesn't leave." Economic pressures and the need to contribute to the family budget also result in a lack of time for leisure, be it in- or outside of the individual dwelling. As Teresa states: "If I go take a stroll there will be no food." The 47-year-old conducts domestic work and home manufacturing, earning below 2 minimum wages. Once a week, she leaves the neighbourhood and travels to the *Central de Abastos* to buy food staples en gross. On the way back, she takes a (more costly) taxi, as microbus drivers do not permit the transport of large luggage items.

Discussion

The results presented here indicate that poor women in Mexico City are either highly mobile or significantly restricted in their everyday mobility. The non-availability of time engrained in both mobility types coincides with Boltvinik, who defines a lack of time as a dimension of poverty, as time for education, leisure and recreation are sources of wellbeing necessary to fulfil basic needs – along with access to transport infrastructure and other public services (Boltvinik 1997: 384). The evident lack of mobility of the locked-in as shown in this case study area is consistent with female "spatial entrapment" (Hanson and Pratt 1995) linked to productive and reproductive tasks (Jirón 2007). Another interesting finding is the absence of employees commuting long distances on a day-to-day basis, which coincides with the desperate everyday mobility covering multiple destinations Boschmann (2011) identified amongst the working poor in Columbus, US. What impacts the long daily hours of absence of the employed, and the lack of leisure time for all, bear upon personal well-being, family life and social engagement remains to be studied.

As for residential mobility, it can be stated that in the context of Mexico City, those residents possessing low levels of capital (in an economic as well as cultural and social sense) tend to be confined to a place of residence. Moreover, female residents employ a key position in consolidating informal settlements and are thus highly active in "fixing" their own and their family's location in the urban space. Interestingly, this contrasts with findings on the working poor in the US, where neither employment nor housing are permanent. As a result of this spatially transitory nature of the working poor's lives, their residential choice rests more upon mobility options than upon proximity to the work place (Boschmann 2011).

Limited access to collective infrastructures indicates that the observed mobility patterns of Mexico City's urban poor are compulsory rather than voluntary. There is a strong need for daily commuting towards the work location, as the place of residence is spatially fixed through self-help, and often offers few local employment opportunities. The example of a *colonia popular* in Mexico City illustrates that access restrictions, as given in the case

study area in regard to higher education and employment, are likely to increase the need for daily travel. It in turn also requires time, money and efforts which residents could otherwise spend on other activities – and therefore deprives those without these capitals of even more access options. In this sense, "self-help is a response to poverty, but it may also reproduce it" (Ward 1998: 245). The fixed place of residence in an urban context underprovided with infrastructures deprives residents of access options and time. This comes along with other indirect costs of informal urbanisation, such as introducing public infrastructure ex-post.

Need for research and action

The findings suggest that a range of policies are required to overcome exclusionary effects in socially and spatially peripheral neighbourhoods in Mexico City. In order to move towards an equalisation of urban living conditions in the realm of mobility, there is a need to improve access to employment, higher education, health care, leisure and recreation by implementing it locally, thus decreasing the need for outbound travel. Despite its neoliberal competitiveness, the Federal District's *Programa Comunitario de Mejoramiento Barrial* is one step in this direction. Simultaneously, improving access to public transport would improve travel conditions and travel times, thus increasing the potential mobility. The Federal District's government has already implemented several progressive projects in this realm over the last years, the most prominent being the rapid bus transit scheme (Metrobus).

Despite being rather successful and widely accepted by the population, these projects mainly cover the more centrally located districts of Mexico City, and it is precisely the most marginalised areas that are still lacking an improved access through public transport systems. This holds especially true for transport in the State of Mexico and between the latter and the Federal District, whereas in the Federal District itself, a new Metro line opened in late 2012, bringing a much needed connection between western and eastern parts of the city. For future mobility research, there is a need to explore interrelations between spatial and social mobility limits more deeply. As mobility is about meanings as well as mappable movements (Cresswell 2010), mobility research essentially requires a spatial approach rather than a purely territorial one. Simultaneously, everyday mobility patterns can be used as an indicator for social inequalities along categories such as gender and class.

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates how a lack of capital is coupled with the experience of spatial constraints (Bourdieu 1991). In the case of Mexico City, such immobility holds true for women with a low socioeconomic status in a dual sense: they are constrained in their choice of residential location, and some of them are also strikingly immobile in their everyday life. Their mobility experiences also depict a lack of time for leisure and recreation which Boltvinik (1997) has defined as a dimension of poverty. Hence, mobility is essentially a spatial as well as social question, to be analysed beyond the realm of territorial distribution and the engineers' technical perspective on physical infrastructure. It is at and through the place of residence, and through everyday mobility, that urban residents experience their social status.

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