

# MEXICO

*Child labour in Mexico under the age of 14 is banned by law. From 15 to 16 children may work for up to six hours a day, provided that they do not do overtime or night work. Enforcement of this law seems to be reasonably adequate for large and medium-sized companies but less certain for small ones, and the worst enforcement is with the many very small companies, especially those with five or fewer employees. In the informal economy, there are significant numbers of under-age street vendors.*

## The field study

The industrialisation which started in the 1950s attracted many country-people to Mexico City in search of a better life. **Some found it; others did not.** Marginalisation and destitution in some areas of the capital are on the increase.

One of the products of this mass movement of people was - and is - thousands of street-children. UNICEF divides them into two categories:

**Children of the street.** These are children who have broken their family links and survive from their own resources in the informal market. They spend the night on the streets and are generally perceived to be anti-social.

**Children in the street.** These are children who live with their family but spend much of their life on the streets earning money for themselves and their family or simply for recreation.

The field study concentrated on the children in the street: vendors of chewing-gum, sweets and newspapers, porters and mechanic's assistants.

It focused on several areas where the children worked, such as metro stations, the famous Plaza Garibaldi, the La Luna and La Comercial supermarkets and sports centres.

Forty child-workers were interviewed and many more were observed. Children could be seen going out to work at night, (which is illegal), to be paid less than the minimum wage, working in markets, carrying merchandise on their backs or in trolleys, singing in the streets, shining shoes, selling gum and many other products in the streets, cleaning windscreens and working as domestic servants.

### A vital contribution

The investigation showed that 85% of the children questioned joined the informal economy because of their parents' lack of sufficient income to support the family. Their contribution helped the family but hampered their personal development: they neglected their education and health; long working hours in some cases deformed their bones; and under-nourishment coupled with tiring work made them more vulnerable than normal to illness.

**The newspaper vendors** live in the State of Mexico, which surrounds Mexico City (the Federal District). They have to leave very early in the morning to travel to the Federal district to pick up the newspapers and sell them. They then go to school and return to selling newspapers before going home. They receive no pay as their earnings go into the family budget.

**The porters** have families living in poor parts of the countryside (in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Puebla) and live with family members or with fellow-migrants in a rented room. In both cases the children contribute to the household budget. They also try to send money home.

Like the newspaper vendors, they have to get up very early in the morning to rent the trolleys in the market. Once they have achieved this, the children are threatened, insulted and occasionally hit by adult porters who have official work permits. The children, who are working illegally, have to hide from market officials while working, as well as refraining from retaliating against the adult workers. Of the children interviewed, almost all can read and write. But none is attending

school now, and five per cent have never been to school at all.

### **A retail network**

#### **Vendors of sweets and foreign foods.**

There is a paradox surrounding their employment - while firms are banned by law from employing minors to work in the factories, they may freely sell their products at wholesale prices to minors who they can assume will re-sell them on the streets at a profit. The manufacturers also sell to intermediaries who will re-sell the products to child-retailers and to the child-vendors' parents. The manufacturers thus profit from child labour without employing children directly, but, nonetheless, the children serve as an informal retail distribution network. Among the companies mentioned to our investigators were Adams, Nestle, Ricolino and Gamesa, and sweets such as Snickers, Twix, Hall's, Three Musketeers, Life Savers and Clorets.

**The girls selling chewing-gum** said they went to school as well as street selling, although how they manage it beggars the imagination. They work through the night at Plaza Garibaldi and go home on the first Metro at 7 am. The investigators were concerned that the girls are not accompanied by their mothers during the night and are vulnerable, particularly as they work in very rough areas.

**The mechanic's assistants** are children who work with mechanics in permanent premises, passing them tools or spare parts, carrying and cleaning. They earn about half as much as an adult mechanic. Those interviewed could read and write but were educated only up to primary grades, and did not attend school. They do not live with their parents and their money is their own.

The investigators came across a 15-year-old boy who said he had obtained a work permit at the age of 12 (he did not say how) and had subsequently worked as a bag-packer, shop assistant and - for the past five months - as a packer at the Coca Cola factory in San Juan Aragon where he was treated as an adult. He had given up school because he had to work but he

hoped, since his current job stopped at 6 pm, to study computers in the evenings.

### **A helping hand**

#### **Voluntary supermarket bag-packers**

aged between 14 and 16 are in an entirely different category. The field study found that they have homes with two parents and they go to secondary school. They do not have a fixed income because they are by law too young to have a job contract, and so the only income they receive is the tips the supermarket clients give them. But they are legal: the Federal District has authorised work of this kind in agreements with the supermarkets.

The Federal District overnment is helping these **privilege poor children**, encouraging them to stay at school. Those with good marks are given school materials and uniforms. Medical care is guaranteed for any accidents at the supermarket.