



The Neza-Chalco-Itza mega-slum is thought to be the largest in the world  
[Misael Valtierra]

# KINGS AND COYOTES

Inside the world's largest mega-slum.

Founded in 1963 but born around 20 years earlier, when the bed of Lake Texcoco was drained, Nezahualcóyotl was named after the Acolhua poet and king of nearby Texcoco. The name is derived from the Nahuatl language and means 'fasting coyote', which seems strangely appropriate for its current incarnation as a hub of crime and poverty.

At its heart is Bordo de Xochiaca, a 370 acre open-pit landfill site opened in 1945 which drew impoverished Mexicans - looking to make a living from what others had discarded - to the previously rural area. From their shacks, the municipality of Nezahualcóyotl was born, and the rubbish dump continues to define life for many here. Its fetid smell hangs over the area, its piles of waste are a workplace for the tens of thousands who make a meagre wage scavenging through them, and its function as a dumping ground for the bodies of murder victims has compounded the slum's ominous reputation for brutality.

Nezahualcóyotl now has more than 300 public elementary schools but, according to a saying popular here, there are three night clubs for every school. And it is through these that the numerous gangs – some estimates suggest there were as many as 800 during their peak in the 1980s and 1990s – operating here, make much of their money. Most of them have now been absorbed into by drug cartels which, according to the attorney-general of the State of Mexico, regularly force club owners to sell their drugs and surrender the proceeds, with refusal resulting in death. As one club owner who has been threatened by the La Familia Michoacana cartel explains: “The club owners, residents, clients, gangs and police know the situation and [it] has been reported in the press, but the authorities are [either] in collusion [with the cartels] or have been threatened [by them].”

The presence of gangs and drug cartels has also contributed to Nezahualcóyotl holding another grim record: it is the only city in the world with four operating prisons.

# MEET THE RESIDENTS





A close-up photograph of a woman with dark, curly hair, looking down at a newborn baby she is holding. The baby is wrapped in a pink and yellow blanket and is wearing a white knit hat. The woman is wearing a brown shirt. The background is a textured, brownish surface, possibly the interior of a tent. The lighting is warm and natural.

Laura Olvera holds her grandson as she poses for a photograph inside the tent where she lives on the street with her family  
[Misael Valtierra]

# LAURA OLVERA


“We are citizens like everyone else”



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El Güero Loco,  
a member of  
the Cacos 13  
gang, poses for a  
photograph  
[Misael Valtierra]

# EL GÜERO LOCO

“Fighting  
discrimination”



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Children pose for a photograph on a football field in San Pedro Chimalhuacan, where sport is often used to keep young people away from crime and drugs  
[Misael Valtierra]

# ELENA GONZÁLEZ

“Football helps us to forget our troubles”



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A man sells ice cream on a street on the border between the municipalities of Nezahualcóyotl and Chimalhuacan. Many of the people in these poor neighbourhoods are self-employed [Misael Valtierra]





Locals visit Las Torres, one of the largest street markets in Nezahualcóyotl. The market is a source of informal employment for thousands of people [Misael Valtierra]





Scavengers drive carts loaded with waste from the Bordo de Xochiaca rubbish dump. It was recently closed by the governments of Mexico City and the State of Mexico but continues to operate clandestinely [Misael Valtierra]





Families evicted from their homes near the Bordo de Xochiaca rubbish dump live in a makeshift home that they have constructed from canvas and wood [Misael Valtierra]





A family plays in a field on the outskirts of Chalco  
[Misael Valtierra]





A sofa sits beside the makeshift homes of people evicted from a slum near the Bordo de Xochiaca rubbish dump [Misael Valtierra]





Makeshift homes made from tarps and wood house people evicted from their shacks near the Bordo de Xochiaca rubbish dump [Misael Valtierra]





La Compañía is a sewage canal that runs through the municipalities of Chalco, Chimalhuacan and Nezahualcoyotl, carrying with it multiple health risks for those who live nearby [Misael Valtierra]





Children play football beneath high-voltage power lines in the town of Chimalhuacan [Misael Valtierra]





Mexico's Neza-Chalco-Itza mega-slum is thought to be home to four million people [Misael Valtierra]