

The Border Colonias: Needs and Solutions

World Habitat Day

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Housing Assistance Council

1025 Vermont Ave., NW

Washington, DC 20005

202-842-8600 www.ruralhome.org



What are Colonias?

- Colonia in Spanish means neighborhood.
- In the U. S. the term refers to settlements along the U.S.-Mexico border that typically lack potable water, sewer services and electricity and have unpaved roads, aging mobile homes and housing units built using found materials.
- Rural, border settlements inhabited overwhelmingly by persons of Mexican heritage living in impoverished conditions. Often there are public health issues.
- Nonprofit networks were formed to address the needs in colonias, and government programs directed funding to assist these efforts.

What are Colonias?

- Most colonias developed through sale of land without infrastructure and the gradual construction of a dwelling. Today infrastructure is required, but construction still may be substandard. (E.g., wooden grocery pallets used to frame.)
- Residents were drawn to these settlements because they offered an opportunity for land and home ownership.
- Visible substandard conditions may mask thriving communities.
- Colonias vary from a small cluster of homes located near agricultural employment to bedroom communities for nearby urban centers with thousands of residents.

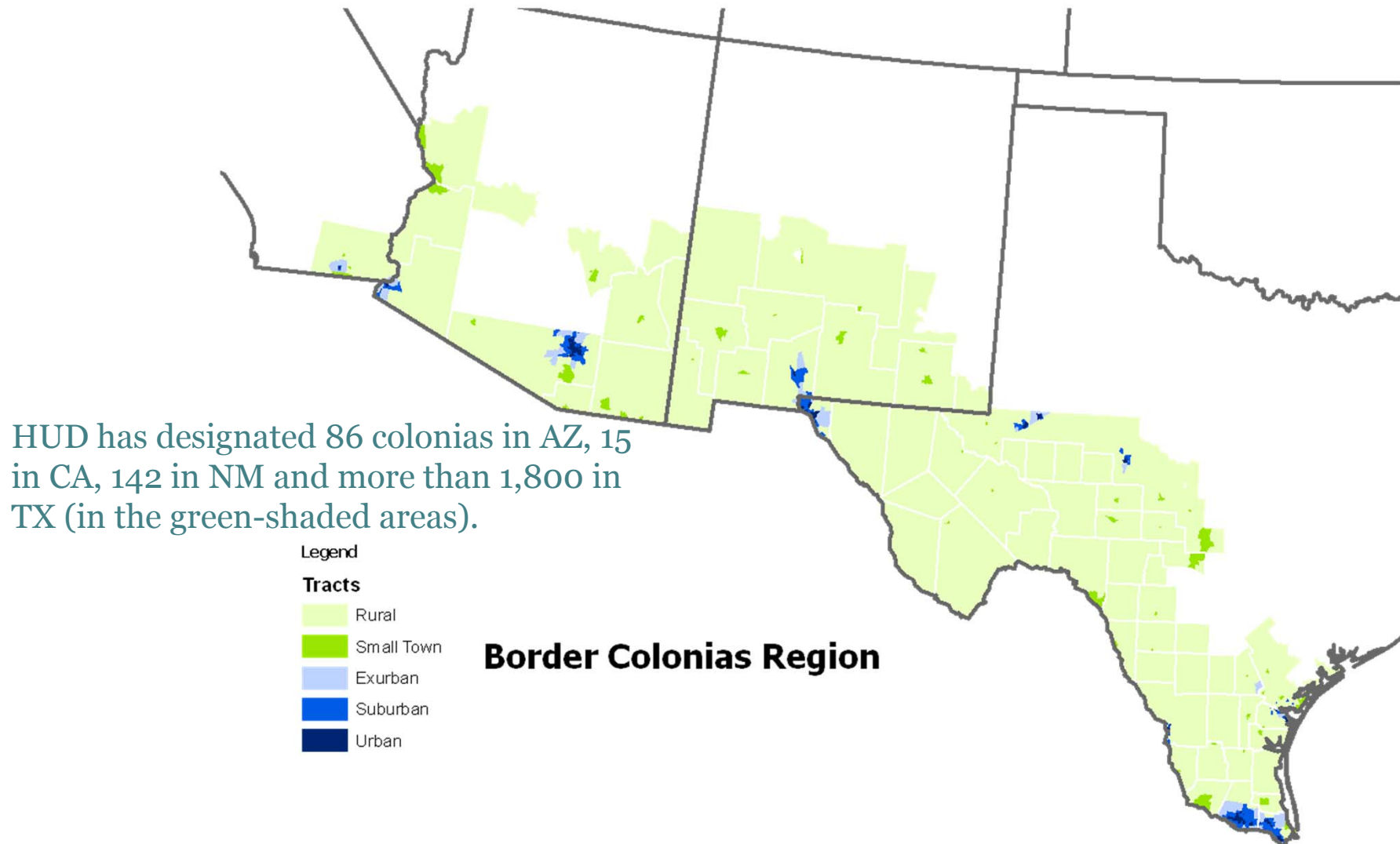
What are Colonias?

- In 1990 legislation created a federal definition, still used for HUD programs: an “identifiable community” -- established before November 28, 1989 in Arizona, California, New Mexico, or Texas and within 150 miles of the border -- that lacks potable water and sewage systems and decent housing.
- 150-mile limit is also used by USDA. US EPA uses 62 miles.
- HUD has designated 86 colonias in Arizona, 15 in California, 142 in New Mexico, and more than 1,800 in Texas.
- Some colonias emerged in the last 50 years while others have been in existence since the 19th century.
- Some other areas of US have similar communities (both recent Latino and older African-American).

Origins of Colonias

- Colonias resulted from lax land regulations
 - Until the mid-1990s county governments in Texas lacked the power to regulate the subdivision of land that lies outside the stronger jurisdiction of city governments.
 - Without these controls in place, landowners were able to illegally subdivide and sell their property without the necessary infrastructure.
- Contract for deed agreements were prevalent

Southwest Border Region



Needs within the Border Region

Housing Affordability and Quality

- Substandard housing
- Affordable housing
 - 24% of homeowners are cost burdened *
- Affordable rental housing
 - 45.6% of renters are cost burdened *
- Conversion of contract deed to mortgage (especially in Texas)
- Homeowner education
- Down payment assistance



Colonia home in Zavala County, Texas

Photo: HAC

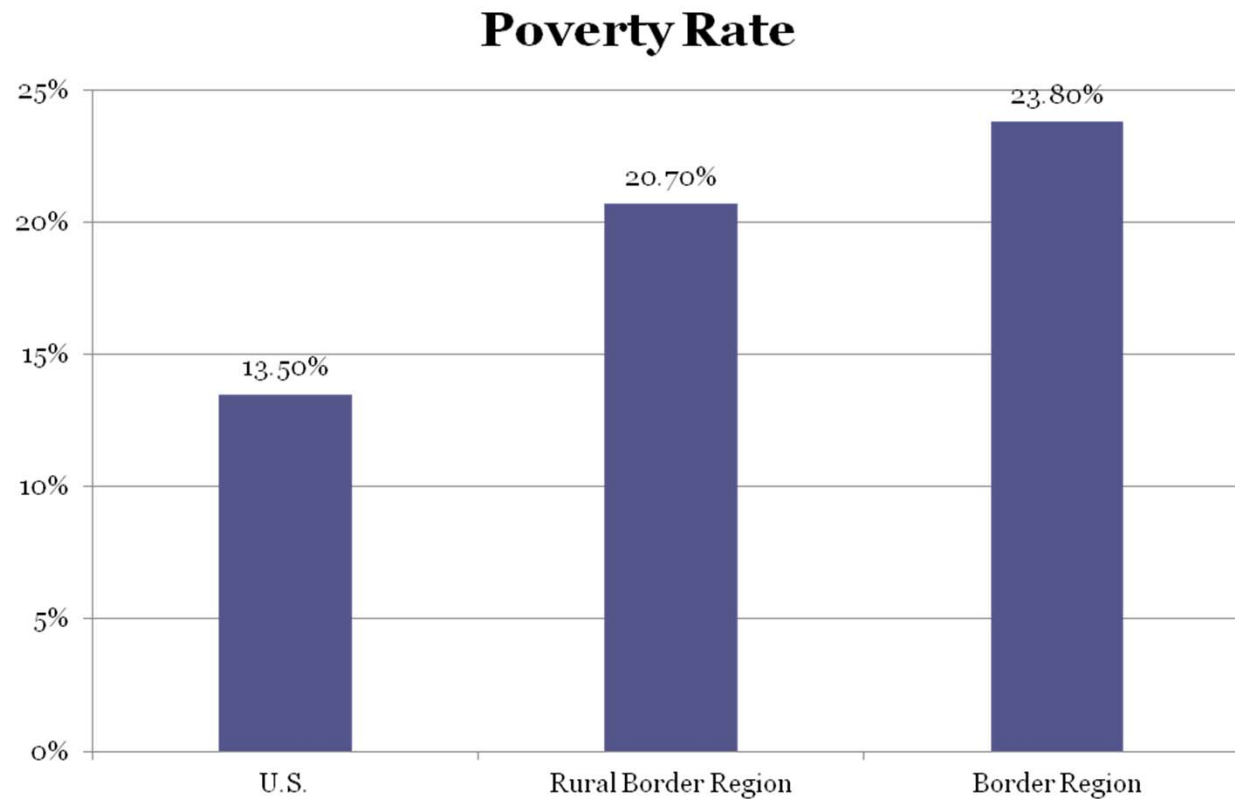
Needs within the Border Region

Economic and Social Conditions

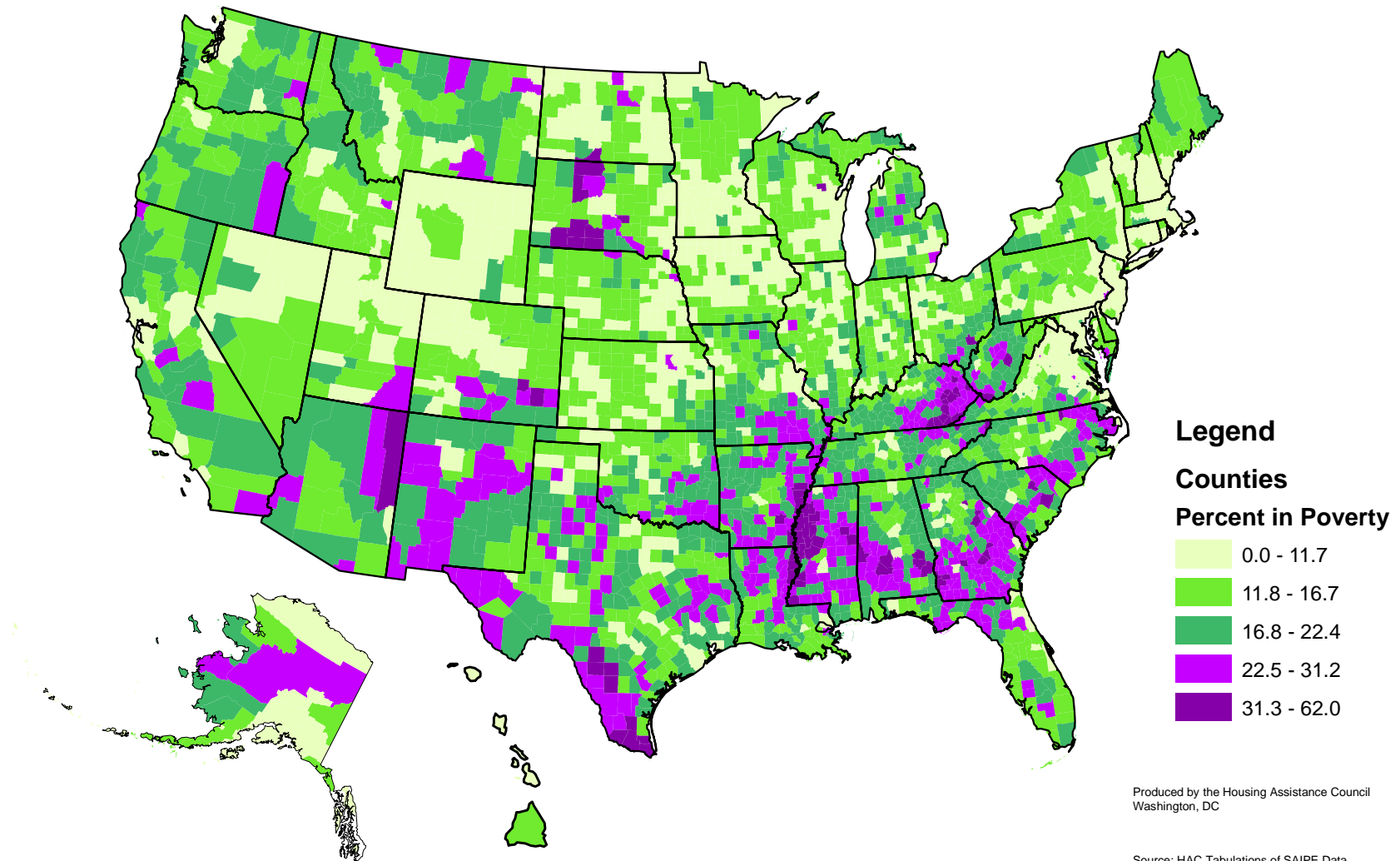
- Unemployment
 - 27.2% do not have earned incomes*
- Extremely low-income
 - 23.8% below poverty line*
- Lack of educational resources
 - 25% w/o high school diploma*, 83.6% w/o college diploma*
- Lack of sufficient infrastructure for water and sewer
- Higher rates of certain diseases

*U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey 2005-2009; generated 2010.

Needs within the Border Region

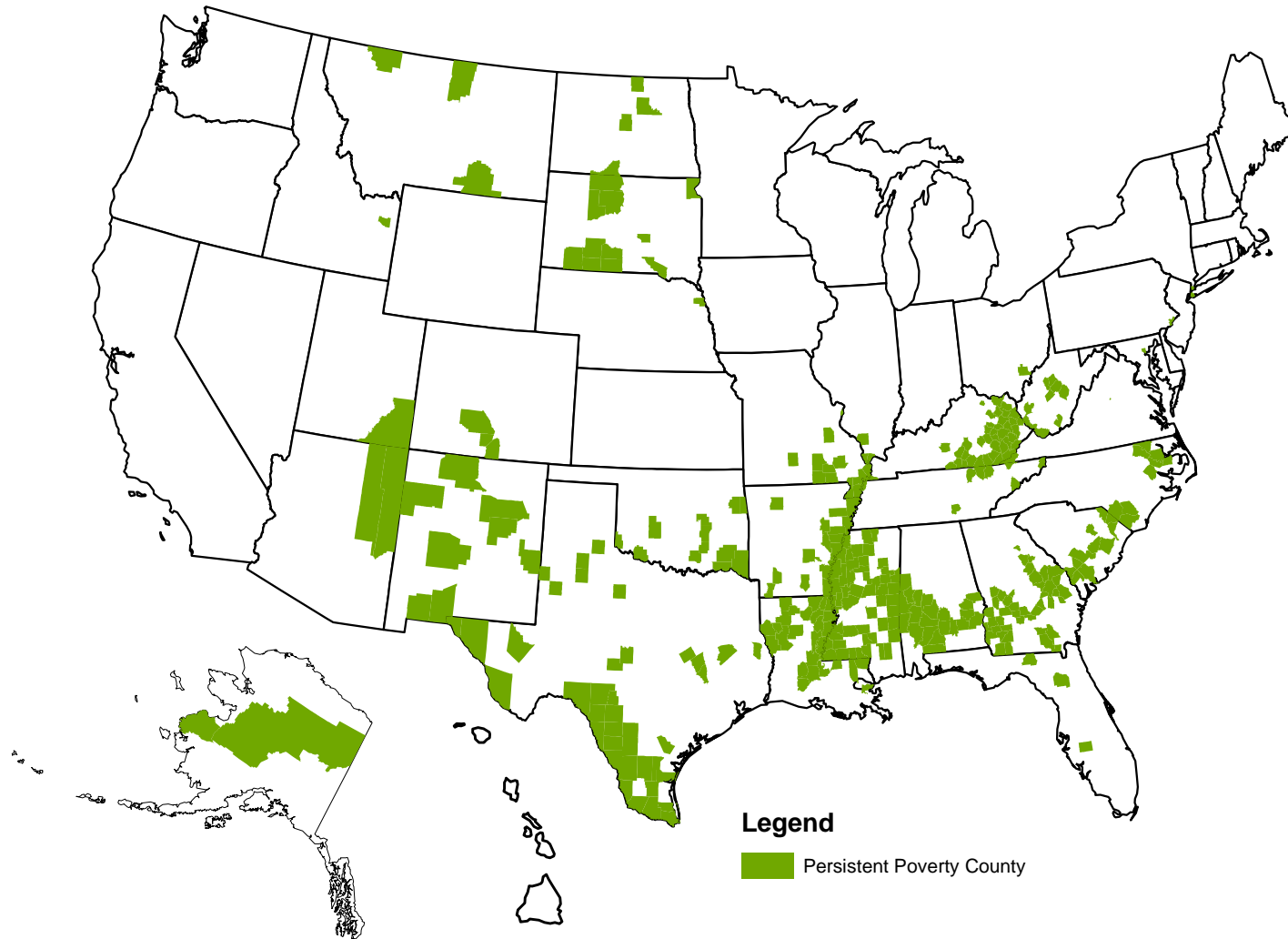


Poverty by County, 2009



Persistent Poverty in the United States, 1980 - 2009

Counties with Poverty Rates of 20% or more in 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2009.



A Local Solution: Proyecto Azteca, San Juan, Texas (in Hidalgo County, site of 1,200 colonias)

- Has helped over 600 families attain first-time ownership in 120 Hidalgo County colonias since 1991
- Builds 35-60 homes a year with sweat equity
- Families build in groups of 5 to 10, with each family required to contribute 550 hours of sweat equity on own homes and 100 hours on other participants' homes
- Basic house is 1,200 sq feet, 4 br, 2 BA with sales price of \$44,000 - \$68,000
- Incomes served are \$5,000 to \$16,000

A Local Solution: Proyecto Azteca

- Also conducts classes on home repair, financial literacy/budgeting, & healthy homes/living
- Maintains a native trees and plants nursery
- Benefited from 5,023 volunteer hours in 2010
- Funded by federal, state, corporate and foundation sources
- Maintains own mortgage pool to finance homes



A Proyecto new home owner previously rented this property for \$185/month. Built his own outhouse on left. (All photo credits: Proyecto Azteca)

Home of a family on Proyecto's waiting list --



Proyecto's construction yard. Families build with sweat equity. Home is then moved to their site --



One of Proyecto's families in their new home --





- Building a Proyecto home at the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival – July 2000

www.proyectoazteca.com



Other organizations (local HAC partners) --

- Affordable Homes of South Texas, McAllen, TX
www.ahsti.org
- Coachella Valley Housing Coalition, Indio, CA
www.cvhc.org
- Housing America Corp., Somerton, AZ
www.housingamericacorp.com
- Tierra del Sol Housing Corp., Las Cruces, NM
www.tierradelsohousing.org