

## Primary spaces of social interaction and insecurity in Matamoros, Tamaulipas

### Espacios de convivencia primaria e inseguridad en Matamoros, Tamaulipas

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#### Abstract

This article reviews the importance of gathering places in strengthening the primary social groups of individuals over the age of 15 years within six families in Matamoros, Tamaulipas. The relationship between primary social groups and spaces of social interaction is contextualized in an environment of insecurity fostered by the existence and violence of criminal groups who have managed to involve themselves in a range of significant activities in the city. Together with structural factors, insecurity has helped lead to a reconfiguration of gathering places between young people and adults; private and semi-public spaces predominate, while the intensive use of certain public spaces in the city has diminished.

Keywords: primary social groups, spaces of social interaction, urban centre, insecurity.

#### Resumen

En este escrito se revisa la importancia de los lugares de encuentro en el fortalecimiento de los grupos sociales primarios de habitantes mayores de 15 años pertenecientes a seis familias en Matamoros, Tamaulipas. Se contextualiza la relación entre grupos sociales primarios y espacios de convivencia, en un ambiente de inseguridad propiciada por la existencia de la violencia y de grupos criminales que han logrado involucrarse en diferentes actividades importantes de la ciudad. Junto a factores estructurales, la inseguridad ha ayudado a que se reconfiguren los lugares de encuentro entre jóvenes y adultos; predominan los espacios privados y semipúblicos y disminuye el uso intensivo de ciertos espacios públicos de la ciudad.

Palabras clave: grupos sociales primarios, espacios de convivencia, centro urbano, inseguridad.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the influence of insecurity in the city of Matamoros on spaces of social interaction of a group of residents over the age of 15 years. This objective is achieved first by defining the primary groups of interviewee and some external characteristics of these groups (type of group, number of groups, intensity of shared life). Additionally, there is an attempt to identify the public and private spaces that do or do not foster this type of social interaction, whether as generators or strengtheners of primary networks in the population.<sup>2</sup> Finally, these aspects are contextualized in an environment of violence and insecurity fostered by criminal activity over recent years in the city of Matamoros, with the aim of understanding the effect of this context on the intensity of spaces of social interaction, primarily regarding the young people interviewed.

The text is organized as follows: First, there is an introduction that contextualizes and offers a general approach toward the issue; then, in the first section, the analytical framework of the paper is presented. Next, a methodological section considers the criteria for choosing the neighborhoods and interviewees for the study, as well as the type of interview and how the interview results were analyzed. Subsequently, the historical and urban background of the city of Matamoros is described, emphasizing the spatial distribution of the population and the availability of public and private spaces as existing and possible spaces of social interaction. The remaining sections discuss the results of the interviews and of the focus group.

## Background and approach

Currently, the long workdays of heads of households and seasons of unemployment and underemployment limit the time for participating in family activities as well as for forming peer groups and mutual interest groups that strengthen the values of social interaction within and without the family.

There are other aspects of the social lives of working families living in large urban centers that have an impact on the strengthening of their primary networks. For example, the construction of public residential developments in outlying areas without enough urban services, such as education, work, recreation, and commercial centers, forces residents to travel long distances from their homes to different locations to satisfy their different needs. Thus, the daily time for recreation and social interaction among the family members is significantly reduced.

Together with these social factors, in recent years, the presence of the violence caused by criminal groups has been significant, and it has increased the feeling of insecurity in the daily lives of people in different social strata in Mexico. It has also caused forced displacement of the population in some regions of the country (Durin,

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2013). According to the diagnosis of some governmental institutions and civil society groups, there is a rupture in the *social fabric*<sup>3</sup> (Secretaría de Seguridad Pública [ssp], 2011; Romero, 2006).

To rebuild the social fabric, the state and federal governments have taken action and implemented programs dating back to 2003, when the Habitat program began to be developed in the most marginalized sectors of the country's urban areas with over 50,000 inhabitants. Through different social activities and urban infrastructure programs, the aim was to strengthen or foster the human and social capital of the poor population in Mexico (Arzaluz and Jurado, 2006).

The intention of the Habitat projects was to improve the quality of life of the population; however, they did not explicitly aim to strengthen individuals' primary networks. When the program evaluations began to take place, it was found that the beneficiary population found advantages or personal benefits in the courses that they took or as a result of participating in work committees. However, these benefits had to do with not only increasing their human and social capital but also strengthening and creating new friendships.

The benefits were subjective, related to people's emotional state and self-esteem. People may have learned tailoring, hairdressing, and piñata-making; however, they also recovered a closeness with people—with their neighbors and with new friends and with those aspects of human interaction that do not have to do with economic or material support but rather involve the need for social interaction (Ordoñez and Zenteno, 2012, pp. 149-169).

Years later, during the administration of President Calderón, in 2007, the Program to Rescue Public Spaces (Programa de Rescate de Espacios Públicos) was developed; it has been implemented in the country's main cities.

This program has already been evaluated, and we reproduce one of the recommendations of the evaluators. They note that it is necessary:

To support the realization of recreational, educational, cultural and artistic activities that are of interest to the different age and gender groups and that are associated with positive emotional states and the possibility of expressing oneself more freely, generating belonging and integration into public space (Vargas, Merino and Seman, 2010, p. 5).

The specific dimensions related to play, art, conversation, and activities that identify individuals are motives or arguments that have led us to ask ourselves about how the population and its primary groups cope with contexts of insecurity in the urban centers of Tamaulipas, in this case the city of Matamoros.

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<sup>3</sup> The social fabric is constructed based on significant relationships that determine ways of being and acting. It is a component of behavior that allows an individual to be identified in social groups, communities, traditions, and the like. It is a network of social, economic and cultural ties that is strengthened when it is synonymous with solidarity and respect for the rights of the rest of the members of the groups or communities (Romero, 2006).

## Primary social groups, gathering places and insecurity

Charles Horton Cooley (1909) is the first to mention the *primary group*. Previously, the discussion about aspects of the primary group centered on the traits of traditional society compared to the modern one characterized by the industrial revolution. Tonnies considers traditional society as that where family plays a predominant role and relationships are intimate, private, and with face-to-face bonds, as well as lifelong commitments and a common understanding based in harmony (Tonnies, cited in Dunphy, 1972).

Cooley defines primary groups as follows:

By primary groups I mean those characterized by intimate face-to-face association and cooperation. They are primary in several senses, but chiefly in that they are fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual (1909, p. 23).

These are some basic characteristics of primary groups: 1) face-to-face association, 2) non-specialized association, 3) relative permanence of the group, 4) a small number of people involved,<sup>4</sup> 5) relative intimacy among the group participants (Cooley, cited in Dunphy, 1972), 6) a set of implicit norms that regulates the behavior of the members, 7) a high level of solidarity among the members (Shils, cited in Dunphy, 1972), 8) the group is based on and sustains the spontaneous participation of members, 9) the group involves emotional manifestations and expressions, and 10) the group allows relationships that are satisfactory in themselves, unrelated to other ends and not calculated and explicit (Schäfers, 1984).

Among primary groups, Dunphy includes 1) the family, 2) free associations of groups in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (gangs and groups of political elites), 3) informal groups that exist in organizations (such as in classrooms, factories, military organizations, churches, and sports teams), and 4) resocialization groups (therapy, rehabilitation and/or self-analysis groups).<sup>5</sup>

We will now consider some of the varying characteristics used to define primary groups, such as spatial proximity or the face-to-face relationship; these characteristics are observed especially in family members who live in different distant cities and who maintain contact through means such as telephone or, currently, electronic media, such as the internet. The other characteristic is the primary transmission of norms and values because primary groups also exist among adults, once they have consolidated their personalities and are clearly established in their identities (Berger and Luckmann, 1998; Heller, 1977).

Particularly notable is the counterbalancing role played by primary groups when faced with social aspects such as anonymity, isolation, alienation and role specialization (Schäfers, 1984).

This quality of the primary group can provide society with citizens with a higher probability of accepting the commitments that come along with the activities specific to the secondary world, where social roles are important (connected to occupation, study, and politics, among others).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Not all small groups are primary, due to the existence of small groups without close or intimate ties (Olmsted, 1966, p. 18).

<sup>5</sup> It is not always clear that resocialization groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, can consider themselves primary groups because there is formal behavioral control (Menéndez, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See definition of secondary group in Olmsted (1966, p. 13).

The role of these citizens is why strengthening primary groups and their shared spaces of social interaction is important in public policy, while at the same time seeking to improve quality of life and the educational, work, and social levels of the population.

The number of primary groups to which an individual belongs becomes his or her personal network, which at the same time is part of the social network that serves as a support to satisfy certain needs. In terms of social networks, the individual participates in different aspects of the group (personal, family, neighbor, community, citizen). In our case, we will only emphasize the two former dimensions that are most connected to the emotional state and emotional supports of the members of these networks (Oddone, 2012).

One limitation of this study is that it does not investigate the internal nature of group function; that is, we do not examine whether it functions through solidarity, cooperation, trust and respect or if it is an antisocial group that seeks distinction and separation and its own interests without respecting those of others.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, we do not reflect on the degree of the social integration of the individual, although this integration is one of the functions of the primary group. We are only interested in contextualizing the urban environment, from the home to urban and public spaces.

In this text, we talk about different types of gathering places: public, private or pseudo-public spaces. Public space derives from the differentiation between private and public property. Public spaces are allocated for collective activities such as recreation, transportation, and cultural activities, among others, and free access to all should be guaranteed legally (Segovia and Jordán, 2005).

The focus on the meeting space helps us consider the different possible spaces for social interaction and be open to different possibilities and interpretations. Together with this aspect of the meeting space, we also utilize other interpretations of public space. First, public space is the territory where our differences and inequalities are reflected and the site where social power manifests and expresses itself (Salcedo, 2002; Valera, 2008). Lofland (1998) notes that in cases where private or intimate bonds prevail in public spaces, the spaces become privatized places. When work or neighborhood connections prevail, then spaces are said to be local spaces. When there are more strangers or outsiders, then we speak of public space. The challenge is promoting personal and group interests—in other words, diversity—without ending up with privatization, exclusion, and division (Segovia and Jordán, 2005).

Therefore, if we think about public space as part of a social relationship in which individuals can give the space their own meaning according to certain social characteristics, class or their social role (e.g., man or woman, young or old, worker or student), then we can speak of a very heterogeneous space that depends less on its territorial configuration than on the perception or its potential for building and strengthening relationships.

In contrast, the home is the private space par excellence, the refuge when public space is privatized. The tendency in current society, according to Borja (2005), is the holistic search for social functions in the home. In the present day, these functions are designed to substitute public activities with modern artifacts: Television substitutes for cinema, the yard with a garden substitutes for the public park, and the internet and Facebook substitute for communication and face-to-face interaction between relatives and friends. This trend applies to the middle-and upper-class sectors but not to the majority of the population

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<sup>7</sup> There are different examples showing that friend groups can present a threat to social integration, instead fostering division and isolation (Puig et al., 2006; Segovia and Jordán, 2005).

living in marginalized sectors, who live overcrowded in small homes. Therefore, we note that there is a movement from the public to the private and consequently a vacuum and deterioration in social space (Remedi, 2000). Safe activities in the context of violence and insecurity are considered to belong to private space, while dangerous activities are carried out in public and in less clearly defined spaces, such as alleys, alleyways, access elevators, and benches.

Nevertheless, there are those who maintain that public space helps socialize children and foments the creation of new friendships, among other benefits (Segovia and Jordán, 2005). Some places appear to be public (cinemas, buses, religious temples, private teaching centers, shopping malls) and where people congregate or gather but, in reality, are not public. Together with those, there are commercial spaces that have received a greater boost in current society, spaces where limits are imposed by the owners (Salcedo, 2002; 2003). These spaces are private property and therefore are not public, despite the fact that large groups of people come together in them. These are mainly malls (shopping centers) and, in our case, also private gathering places, such as restaurants.

## Methodology

We consider studying the changes brought about by the insecurity and violence in Tamaulipas in a city such as Matamoros important because it is one of this state's main cities that, together with cities such as Reynosa, Ciudad Victoria and the metropolitan area of Tampico, have suffered from the presence of organized crime for some time. Additionally, the population's daily life has been affected by this context.

Because we wanted to conduct an exploratory study, we decided to employ a perspective that would encompass cases of different social strata; therefore, we chose three neighborhoods that would reflect different socioeconomic situations. We based our study on a stratification using educational, income and occupational variables, and we chose three neighborhoods to work in: one from an upper-middle-class stratum, one from a median-middle-class stratum, and one from a lower stratum. Due to the situation of insecurity, we considered it important to conduct the interviews in private, at the home of the interviewee. Additionally, the families that we visited to interview individuals older than 15 years were chosen using the snowball technique, with the aim of situating the interview in an environment of trust and security for the interviewees and the interviewers. Originally, the plan was to interview 24 people; however, this was not possible because two were not in the city and we were unable to align our schedules with a third. The interviews were conducted between October 11, 2012 and December 13, 2012. In total, there were 21 interviewees: 11 young people and 10 adults, seven males and 14 females. Of the 21, 12 were workers, seven were students, and two were homemakers. The ages of the adults interviewed ranged from 27 to 58 years, while the range for the young people was 15 to 24 years. Additionally, the recommended families had a mainly female composition. The interview was semi-structured and was composed of four sections. The first included identification questions; the second section concerned primary groups, with the interviewees asked about their friends, family relationships, and consideration and type of social interaction with their neighbors and those whom they considered their most intimate connections. In the third section, the interviewees were asked to talk



about gathering places; a description of the interviewees' daily routine was included in this part of the interview, which helped us complement the information about spaces of social interaction, and we obtained details about different activities (e.g., meeting needs and going to the supermarket, school, and church). Finally, in the fourth section, the interviewees were asked about life before and after the period of insecurity. The duration of the interviews had a range of 20 minutes to one hour, with a mean duration of 37 minutes.

Families with at least three members older than 15 years were included. Thus, we have the perception of the problem from the perspective of members of a traditional family at a certain moment in their life-cycle.

The interviews were analyzed based on four major categories: primary groups, spaces of social interaction, perception of insecurity, and strategies for social interaction; each of these categories in turn has different corresponding subcategories. The interviews were transcribed, and analysis was conducted to identify the significant relationships in these categories.

A focus group was also conducted on January 4, 2013, with university students. The group was composed of six young people (four male and two female). This group gave us their perspective on the difficulties for young people in carrying out their recreational and personal activities in a context of high insecurity. The duration of the focus group was 1 hour and 26 minutes.

## Spatial distribution of the population of Matamoros

Matamoros is a city with 493,000 inhabitants; it is the third most populous city in Tamaulipas. An important economic feature of the city was the installation of textile factories beginning in the 60s and 70s. The textile factories are one of the main sources of employment.<sup>8</sup> These factories have promoted the immigration of workers from different states of the republic. For this reason, housing developments under the aegis of the Instituto del Fondo Nacional de la Vivienda para los Trabajadores (Infonavit) for *maquiladora* workers have proliferated. Currently, 40 percent of the existing residential developments in Matamoros are connected to this type of financing (Jurado, 2011).

The distribution of the residential zones in Matamoros begins from a nucleus around the Bravo River and close to the international bridges and then distributes in a radial and irregular form toward the west, east and south of the city. As in the other border cities of the northwest, Matamoros has its city center (plaza, cathedral, government palace) relatively close to the border with the United States. Unlike other Mexican border cities, however, the sectors with the highest incomes are established around the center and closer to the Bravo River and the international bridges (Alarcón, 2000, p. 117; Castro, 2011); they are also distributed along significant roadways and close to central spaces, while the lower-income sectors are found on the periphery of the city (Alarcón, 2000, p. 123).

There is currently a more heterogeneous distribution of the different social strata in the urban space (Castro, 2011). The historical center of Matamoros is not directly next to the international bridge. The area between the center and the bridge was a commercial

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<sup>8</sup> Currently, according to data collected in the Municipal Development Plan (Plan de Desarrollo Municipal) 2011-2013, 39% of the city's employment is in the garment (*maquiladora*) industry (Ayuntamiento Municipal de Matamoros, 2011).

area with nightlife and entertainment and currently has a number of abandoned and closed facilities due to the lack of tourists and nightlife clientele.

In relation to the lower-income sectors, the population that resides in these residential developments lives in overcrowded conditions, with the average square meters per home varying between 43 and 60 m<sup>2</sup> with a 6 m front. Green areas are minimal, and the average square meters per inhabitant does not surpass two, while the mean recommended by the United Nations [UN] is 9 m<sup>2</sup> (Jurado, 2011).

### Some considerations regarding public and private spaces in Matamoros

According to urban land use in Matamoros, there are 196 ha of green spaces representing 3.24% of land use, while abandoned lots add up to 22.84% and residential use is 18.9%. Industry, commerce and equipment encompass 29.58% of the total urban surface area (Ayuntamiento Municipal de Matamoros, 1995). The above means there is a great deficit in public areas for social interaction. The Municipal Plan of Matamoros (Plan Municipal de Matamoros) (1995) calculates that the city should have at least 340 ha of green spaces.

The deficit seems greater because the vast majority of green spaces are unused; they have not been set up for the population to be able to enjoy them but rather are hills of brush and abandoned lots. Some have been transformed and used to construct schools or churches.

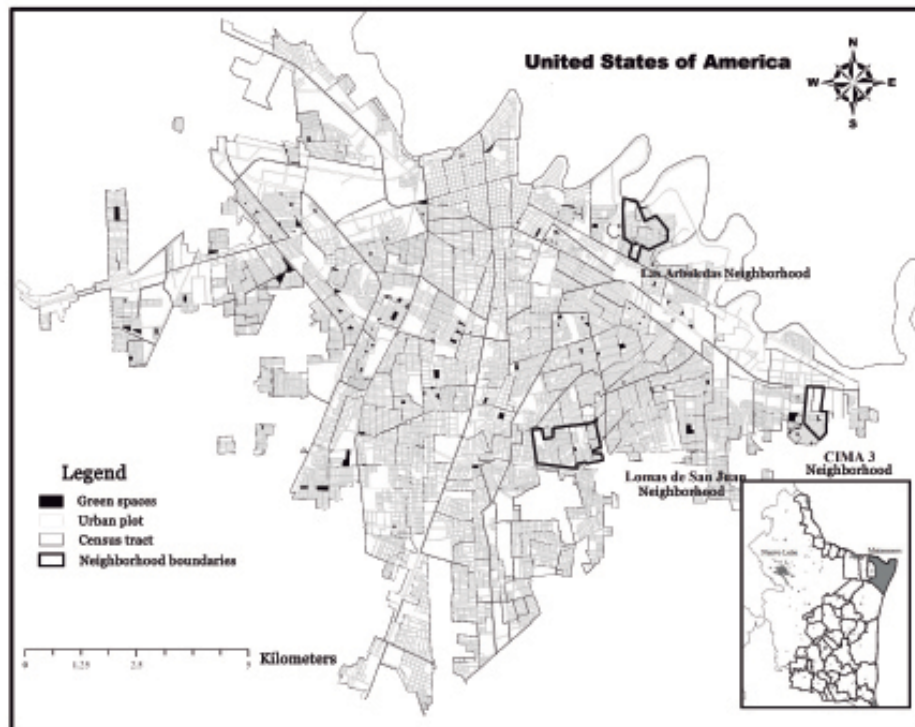
Additionally, looking at their distribution (Figure 1), we note that the green spaces are present in different neighborhoods of the city. This means that there is huge potential for the establishment of social interaction zones that could strengthen the primary connections of the inhabitants of Matamoros.

In a diagnostic of the spaces allocated for sports, health, culture and recreation in the city of Matamoros, Quintero (2011) notes that despite the sustained growth and the distribution of the population toward the periphery, the urban infrastructure allocated for these activities is concentrated in the central part of the municipality.

However, social interaction has also developed in closed spaces where the main objectives of the use of these spaces are commercial or service-oriented. In the case of Matamoros, Implan has located 12 commercial centers that are regularly mentioned as shopping places and occasional sites of family outings; the majority are located on significant avenues and distributed at different points throughout the city.



**Figure 1: Distribution of the green spaces in Matamoros, Tamaulipas and in the neighborhoods considered for the study**



Source: Created by Rosalía Chávez based on the Instituto Municipal de Planeación [Implan] Matamoros, (2012).

Additionally, there are at least eight sports centers, some private and others related to schools or restricted to sports teams that compete in amateur sports leagues. There are five community centers, called Tamules, which were created recently and can be a great help in promoting gathering, mainly for those who live around those centers.

According to Table 1, we calculated the square meters per inhabitant, both on the urban level and for the neighborhoods in the sample: There are 422,891.24 m<sup>2</sup> of green space (in the locality), divided by the population of the locality (449,815 inhab.), giving us 0.94 m<sup>2</sup>/inhabitant.

**Table 1: Green spaces per inhabitant in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, 2010**

Settlement	Total population	Green space (m <sup>2</sup> )	Green space per inhabitant (m <sup>2</sup> )
Matamoros (Locality)	449,815	422,891.24	0.94
Lomas de San Juan Neighborhood	8,761	3,573.39	0.41
Las Arboledas Neighborhood	4,256	5,170.20	1.21
Cima 3 Neighborhood	2,705	2,017.20	0.75

Source: Authors' calculations based on the 2010 population and housing census (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática [Inegi], 2011) and the Implan Matamoros (2012).

In this case, the square meters per inhabitant of an upper-middle-class sector, such as the Las Arboledas neighborhood, stands out in comparison to the other two neighborhoods; Lomas de San Juan and Cima 3 are residential developments built using Infonavit housing credits. Unfortunately, sufficient green spaces were not built into these residential developments, whereas in Las Arboledas, the green spaces were considered part of the promotional attraction of the residential development.

### Sociodemographic characteristics of the inhabitants of Matamoros and the neighborhoods studied

The data presented refer exclusively to the inhabitants of the municipal seat, which in general contains 90% of the population of Matamoros. Some characteristics should be highlighted about the sample neighborhoods. First, according to the neighborhoods' locations and ages, Cima 3 is the youngest of the three, first populated in 2006. It is a neighborhood that, despite not being in flood zones according to the official information, has flooded several times according to the press (Martínez, 2012).

The Lomas de San Juan neighborhood is the largest of the three neighborhoods considered and is, to a certain extent, more heterogeneous because it has small 64 m<sup>2</sup> houses together with houses that are larger than 100 m<sup>2</sup>. Like the Cima 3 neighborhood, together with other neighborhoods, it has suffered the abandonment of houses by inhabitants who could not continue to pay their housing credit due to the unemployment crises that have occurred in border cities.<sup>9</sup> One newspaper has reported at least 80 abandoned houses in the Lomas de San Juan neighborhood since the beginning of 2011 (Valle, 2011).

The Las Arboledas neighborhood is the oldest of the three. One of the interviewees informs us that he has lived in Las Arboledas for more than 24 years and bought his house using a bank loan. The neighborhood has sections in which only the lot was sold and the home was constructed according to the taste or means of the inhabitant. This is in contrast to the other two residential developments, which are more uniform in the design of the houses.

An indicator of the age of the Las Arboledas neighborhood can be found in the proportions of the adult population and those younger than 15 years. These proportions allow us to consider families whose life-cycle is approaching the "empty nest" stage, when the children leave to form their new family. For this reason, in Las Arboledas, the percentage of people older than 60 years is higher than in the other two neighborhoods.

One of the indicators that reflects the social stratum of the inhabitants of these three neighborhoods is the education level of their residents. Compared with Cima 3 and Lomas de San Juan, more professionals and people with higher incomes live in Las Arboledas, as observed in Table 2.

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<sup>9</sup> In general, Tamaulipas has a higher rate of uninhabited houses than the national average, and the abandonment of houses is not solely due to the lack of pay and loss of work; inhabitants have also left the city due to violence, extortion and insecurity (Durin, 2013). In Matamoros, it is known that a high number of residents have gone to live in the United States; all of Tamaulipas has seen an exodus of thousands of middle- and upper-class inhabitants who have changed their place of residence (Jurado, 2011).

**Table 2: Distribution of the population according to age group by municipality and neighborhoods in the study, 2010**

Settlement	Total population	Younger than 15 years (%)	Young people (15 to 24 years) (%)	Adults (25 to 60 years) (%)	Population older than 60 years (%)	Not specified
Matamoros (Locality)	449,815	29.45%	18.13%	43.67%	6.60%	2.15%
Lomas de San Juan Neighborhood	8,761	37.86%	13.88%	44.84%	1.77%	1.66%
Las Arboledas Neighborhood	4,256	23.33%	19.41%	46.22%	3.97%	7.07%
Cima 3 Neighborhood	2,705	36.30%	15.16%	46.32%	1.37%	0.85%

Source: Authors' table created from the database of the Área Geoestadística Básica (AGEB), which comes from the 2010 population and housing census (Inegi, 2011).

Another datum that tells us about the age of the neighborhood is the impact of migration. Being the newest neighborhood of the three, Cima 3 has a higher rate of migrants than the other two, while Las Arboledas presents the lowest rate. This datum can also reflect levels of social interaction. One could suppose that the more time a person has spent living in a neighborhood, the higher his or her probability of increasing ties with the neighbors; nevertheless, as deduced from the interviews, this tendency is not always manifested (Table 3).<sup>10</sup>

**Table 3: Sociodemographic indicators in Matamoros and in the neighborhoods of the study, 2010**

Settlement	Female heads of household * (%)	Mean years of study	Population born outside the state
Matamoros (Locality)	25.66%	7.40	23.67%
Lomas de San Juan Neighborhood	25.78%	7.89	24.27%
Las Arboledas Neighborhood	21.20%	10.28	18.96%
Cima 3 Neighborhood	21.00%	9.03	32.31%

Source: Authors' table based on data by AGEB, which comes from the 2010 population and housing census (Inegi, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> The percentage of female heads of household is calculated based on the particular homes that are led by female heads of household and is not based on the number of members nor the number of female heads of household.

## Spaces of social interaction and primary groups: Neighbors, friend groups, common interest groups, extended family

With the aim of determining whether the structure of the interviewees' primary network and its connection to spaces of social interaction is maintained or whether it changes as a result of the insecurity that the interviewees perceive, we will analyze the results of the interviews conducted.

### *The interviewees of the Cima 3 neighborhood*

Cima 3 is one of the city's peripheral neighborhoods, and this peripheral location makes distance a deciding factor when a resident is carrying out an activity outside of the neighborhood. This is especially true if we consider that the inhabitants of Cima 3 constitute a low-and middle-income population. A mother comments that when she purchases items for the house, she does so in a supermarket:

It's closer, and from there, sometimes we go to... yes, Lauro Villar (Avenue), and well sometimes,... we go in to walk around (name of a supermarket), the one that's here, is where we mostly, only... to begin with, it's the closest one that you have here in the neighborhood, since you see how far out we are, and this one, it's very good (Jiménez, 2012a).

Despite having a car, she says:

If I leave here for school with the children every day, it wastes gas no matter what, and so sometimes we think about it, and sometimes I tell him (her son), let's go, but let's go in the "pesera"<sup>11</sup>... because man, it's rough (Jiménez, 2012a).

Distance is not an insurmountable obstacle. A young 18-year-old man who attends a school an hour and a half away (according to the time it takes using public transportation from the neighborhood) takes advantage of the route home to visit friends in the city center. What is reduced is the intensity of social interaction with people in primary networks who live far from the neighborhood. A father who likes to play soccer goes once a month to play with some friends who live at the extreme opposite end of the city. A mother mentions how distance has diminished the intensity of her social interaction with a friend:

Yes... if we get together, she comes to visit me, or sometimes, I get away and go see her, but it's not the same anymore. We do see each other but not like before, before she lived nearby and I went to have breakfast at her house, but now it's farther out (Jiménez, 2012b).

If the neighborhood is a great distance away from some recreational and commercial services, then one would expect the social interaction within the neighborhood to be intense. In this regard, we would state that there is a relationship with the neighbors among the majority of the interviewees but that almost none count their neighbors as part of their most important personal network. There are two exceptions—one in which brothers are neighbors and another in which one of the interviewees considers a neighbor to be his best friend. However, in general, there is communication between neighbors, sometimes on

<sup>11</sup> The "pesera" is a van-type vehicle that serves as public transportation in Matamoros.

special occasions. For example, on Children's Day, the woman who runs the store provides candy for children and throws a small party together with some neighbors. Additionally, in connection with a particular female leader who belongs to a political party, the poorest neighbors receive food support from the municipal or state government, and some neighbors organize themselves for these tasks. A father states:

Sometimes we get in touch when someone needs a favor, we might lend each other a shovel or something, or if someone needs a tool; for example, I told the neighbor here the other day that I had a problem, and I asked her if she would call the police if I needed her to, and she said yes. So like, we do have communication with the woman living behind us, the neighbors on the two sides and in front (Jiménez, 2012c).

The friends of the interviewees in reality come more from the main activity in which they engage. For example, one interviewee, when working many years ago in domestic service, became friends with a woman who had hired her. It has been more than ten years since she left that job; however, the friendship continued, and she continues to see her friend approximately once a month because she lives in a neighborhood far from Cima 3. Similarly, the majority of the friendships of the young people who study come from school.

The family members of the interviewees are distributed in a more dispersed way than other groups. Some are immigrants, and their relatives live outside the city, some live in cities in Tamaulipas, others live in the United States, and some live in various states in the country; even so, there are intense relationships with relatives who live in the city, and for the young people, cousins are important in games and conversations.

The other important group is that related to play and recreation. The young people mainly play soccer. One of the interviewees belongs to a bicycling club, and another plays basketball; however, in the neighborhood, they have had difficulty taking part in these activities because there are no adequate places for games and sports. In relation to the places where groups are strengthened, we would state that the interviewees who play football consider the street an option because the park near the neighborhood is almost always occupied and it is difficult to find space there, especially in the evening hours when the young people are no longer in school. Another relatively close soccer field is private property, and it is necessary to ask permission to use it because it belongs to a textile factory. One of the fathers coaches a team but not one from the neighborhood itself, which does not have a team; as a result, he commutes to relatively far places. Another father, who is an immigrant, likes to play basketball but finds neither a court nor people who like the game in the neighborhood, and he still has not found a nearby option where he can practice. Other young people play basketball at school during recess.

The home appears to be the main place for family and friends to meet. The interviewees rarely go to the movies, and restaurants are barely mentioned in the interviews as places to get together, whereas the shopping mall is included as a family outing place and, in some cases, as a meeting space for young people; the beach is mentioned twice and is only visited on vacations, by the family.

In the opinion of one mother:

No, well it's that here there isn't even one public space; look, the green space we have is very neglected. So like, here there are no Tamules, there isn't any of that, where people can go, nothing, so people who have weekends off, we want

to go out with the kids to distract them, be it to a store. Or, a lot of people take the opportunity to take them to the (a hamburger place) to have breakfast or whatever, because well, what are we going to do here all day locked up inside the house? There isn't even room to run around (Jiménez, 2012a).

Regarding the impact of insecurity, the majority of the interviewees consider the neighborhood to be a quiet place and have not been affected by any events, except one interviewee who mentions that he once had to protect a person who was being followed.

The insecurity has mainly limited their movements outside the neighborhood, especially at certain times of day, and they have stopped visiting some friends who live in some areas that they consider dangerous. The insecurity also affects visits with relatives who live in the rural part of the state of Tamaulipas; however, the structure of the primary network remains relatively the same, and the types of meeting places are maintained. What has decreased is the frequency of gathering with friends and relatives who live outside the neighborhood.

### *Interviewees in the Lomas de San Juan neighborhood*

The Lomas de San Juan neighborhood is better located than Cima 3. For this reason, there is no allusion in the interviews to distance as a factor that limits the mobility of the population. The difference between this neighborhood and Cima 3 is in insecurity. The majority of the interviewees here agree that there are places within the neighborhood that can be considered dangerous. For example, one of the young women interviewed, a 16-year-old, mentions that one dangerous place is "here in front of the Tamul because there are times that soldiers can arrive and anything can happen" (Rodríguez, 2012a).

We also interviewed the woman in charge of the Tamul, and she states that the period of kidnapping at that location is over:

There used to be bad people around here, people into destroying things and into hurting themselves. There were a lot of young people taking drugs, there were a lot; honestly, when I arrived here (in the year 2011), there were violent people. There were people who didn't even want us to arrive because they were the bosses (Jiménez, 2012d).

What the woman in charge did was negotiate, and it seems that they established themselves in front of the Tamul and in other places:

They felt that they owned the place. And when speaking and talking with them and making them understand that everyone should find his or her place, I told them we are going to put ourselves each one in our place and each one has to do their own thing. My thing is to work with families and support them, and that is my work. If you want to destroy families, you know what, you have to do it somewhere else, because I am here. And I like to respect people, but people have to respect me, too. And I have been talking with the majority of the young people, and they have been a bit... I mean, they are not violent, they are people who understand. So, thank God so far until now they have been very good, off over there in their area and us here working with our families (Jiménez, 2012d).



Despite the efforts of the woman in charge of the Tamul, the interviewees express feeling unsafe within the neighborhood, and they view the public spaces as neglected. A woman who is an immigrant and has been living in this neighborhood for three years says it bothers her that the neighborhood residents are careless, dirty the area and do not maintain the neighborhood Tamul.

In reality, within the structure of the interviewees' primary network, there is social interaction with neighbors; however, neighborhood organization is not mentioned as one of the purposes of social interaction. The majority of the interviewees have friends who come from their neighborhood life, and there is more or less intense interaction between some neighbors.

Yes, in December, we get together at one house, and we bring food or something there, and we eat; last September 16 we also threw a Mexican party. All of us dressed up in traditional Mexican clothes and brought plates of typical food... There are two women who love nothing more than to throw parties to bring us all together (Jiménez, 2012e).

The network of friends also comes from workplaces or school, and there are no stories about people who the interviewees may have met in public spaces. Even the interest groups related to games, sports or hobbies are connected to the school and the neighborhood.

In interviews with three young people from the Lomas de San Juan neighborhood, we note the importance of the school in promoting the formation of primary groups, such as cheerleading squads and bands:

The first is the band from here from the CBTis; we rehearse every Saturday from 8 to 1, more or less, now we are preparing for a state competition, it's going to be in Tampico... right now we are focused on that, but sometimes people get together; there are get-togethers in the teacher's house, the conductor of the band... I really like talking with them, playing or bringing out all the songs, helping them with the arrangements. You could say it's my hobby, it's what I like to do (Rodríguez, 2012b).

In relation to the family network, the interviewees maintain close ties with their relatives who live in the city. The places where they meet and share are usually their homes; some of them get together daily and others on weekends to talk and share their lives. They barbecue and obtain updates on the lives of their relatives who live in the United States or in other states in the republic.

Regarding social interaction spaces, one of the most often used by young people in Matamoros is a mall. The mall is important because it has movie theaters, clothing and shoe shops, and a food court that is perfect for young people to meet and make plans, check the internet or walk; additionally, it has a good location because it can function not only as a place for meeting, shopping and social interaction but also as a node for traveling to other parts of the city.

What makes this place useful is the possibility of multiple activities: One can shop, eat, take a walk and go to the movies if he or she has the economic means to do so. Additionally, in the context of insecurity, this particular mall, due to its location, has become a good place for the cheerleaders to practice when preparing for regional competitions.



The other social interaction spaces mentioned are houses and, for some young working women, hangout spots such as karaoke bars. Some green spaces are mentioned; however, they are visited occasionally, not regularly, and it is noted that they are near the city center.

For the interviewees, the insecurity has mainly affected them in terms of their commute, depending on the time of day they do so; however, in contrast to Cima 3, in Lomas de San Juan, insecurity has affected the internal life of the neighborhood.

One mother, whose best friend is an aunt of her husband and who has limited her gathering places, comments:

Yes, we go out sometimes, but yeah, before the situation was so difficult, the insecurity, we would go to the parks, we would go have some juice or to socialize, just walking to the parks, but now we prefer to meet at her house or at my house (Rodríguez, 2012c).

With her family, she has also been limited in taking walks; for example, she does not go to the Tamul with her children because she considers it dangerous. She laments having to go far to take walks with her children (the mall or Rotonda park) and wants an abandoned lot in front of her house to be developed:

I would like for my daughters to be able to go there so they could have a place to walk, distract themselves, something closer so they're not looking for a park that's so far away and everything and so they can have a place to distract themselves and walk, and my son, too, so he could have a place to play so he won't be putting himself in danger in the street, somewhere he could ride his bicycle safely. I mean there is space, there's this whole area, but it's empty and everything, but it's neglected, there is space to do that, and it would really help out (Rodríguez, 2012c).

It is mentioned that some have left this neighborhood to live elsewhere: "well there are people who have left the neighborhood for that reason, yeah, yes there have been people who have moved to the United States" (Jiménez, 2012f).

Well I would like a solution for so much insecurity, to be able to live with my family in peace without worrying. I wish that one could go out like before, go out to the stores, without being afraid of getting kidnapped or of one's kids getting kidnapped. You just don't know anymore, I mean, how it's going to be, mmm... how can I put this, well you don't know what you're going to find in the street, what you're going to run into or not, what kind of person you're going to bump into in the street. You're afraid when you go out (Jiménez, 2012f).

### *Interviews in the Las Arboledas neighborhood*

Las Arboledas is a neighborhood with better indicators of well-being than, similar to many other neighborhoods, also floods. Its advantage is due to its access to the avenues, industry and the city center, located near the Bravo River, which serves as a barrier making the neighborhood semi-closed. One resident who moved there three years ago says of Las Arboledas:

Supposedly it is "private," quote unquote because there is no access to other neighborhoods other than Las Arboledas, that is, you have to enter and then

go back again, supposedly it's a so-called residential area, well we get flooded, but at least there isn't mud like where we used to live (Rodríguez, 2012d).

Those interviewed in this neighborhood have university degrees, with higher income levels than those in Cima 3 and Lomas de San Juan. Some have relatives in Brownsville, Texas, and this broadens the social interaction spaces and the options regarding insecurity.

Therefore, both young people and adults extend their recreation and meeting places toward Brownsville. As one comments to us, they go "with my cousin, over there in Brownsville in the (name of the place) to dance. It's a bar but where we can dance, country music, and the mall, that's all" (Rodríguez, 2012e).

Additionally, the types of spaces where the young people from the upper-middle class are most connected are places of consumption or private places. In addition to meeting in restaurants and cafes, they also have the possibility of exercising in private paid spaces: "The gym is in a plaza by the beltway, it's a gym for only women, and what's great about it is that you can go with confidence because it's only girls and it's not a mixed gym" (Rodríguez, 2012f).

As with interviewees from the other two neighborhoods, friend groups come from the centers of work and study, except for one interviewee, who mentions that she met her boyfriend at a party; friendships, according to the interviewees' comments, do not emerge from meetings in public places.

In this neighborhood, a lower level of social interaction with neighbors is also noted; however, it has not always been this way, as explained by a father in the Las Arboledas neighborhood:

Well, at first, we were invited to look into issues in the residential development, they invited all the inhabitants of the then-small neighborhood to someone's house, but it's been many years that and we don't participate in that because it's like it seems to be becoming very political. For example, they invite us to somebody's house when they want us to vote for a certain candidate and that sort of thing, so no. And maybe then it's with the aim of getting a vote, not really to improve the condition of the residential development, so no (Rodríguez, 2012d).

Regarding insecurity, the interviewees comment that both within the neighborhood and in the entire city, violent acts appear in the forms of roadblocks and gun fights in the street. An interviewed mother notes:

Well, here it happened to us once, witnessing a problem in the street in front... they closed the road with armored cars and all that, and we saw that they shot someone, but in the case of our house, it hasn't suffered any problems of that kind, but yes in the neighborhood, you hear a lot that there are gun fights near the river, more in the east of the neighborhood that there are a lot of gun-fights and house raids. We haven't seen it, but they do say it happens (Rodríguez, 2012g).

A father notes that the insecurity does not affect his activities but that it does affect their duration:

In reality, we haven't stopped doing our normal activities, but the impact has been that if we are at a get-together, we try to get back earlier than normal. Because, for example, for family gatherings, we would sometimes get back at 3 in the morning, 2 in the morning and now no, we find a way to get home at 11 at night or around then (Rodríguez, 2012d).

## Gathering places before and after the insecurity or the intensification of the violence

An activity unique to the young people was what they call *rol*, performed in cars; this activity began occurring regularly on two streets, the Paseo de la Reforma and Álvaro Obregón Street. As one young person notes:

I remember before, when I was in high school, we would go out usually, I remember one meeting point was the Paseo de la Reforma, we were always there, the police would come, we would get in the cars, and ten minutes later, we'd be there again, they wouldn't say anything at all (Jurado, 2013).

Another public place that was often visited by young people was Bagdad Beach, and their comments express how these places were part of a set of fun weekend activities that established the necessary places for social interaction and getting together. These activities began in the street where youth made plans and chatted and then continued in the clubs and ended up on the beach. As commented in the group: "The beach, too, you remember, we would go at all hours, sometimes we'd come out of the club and go, or at 12 at night, we would go for a stroll"<sup>12</sup> (Jurado, 2013).

Another popular event on the beach was organized by the students of the Tecnológico Regional de Matamoros. During Easter week, they would get together, beer companies would set up shop, and the beach would become a party place. Now, according to the perception of the focus group participants, to hold that event, it is necessary to ask permission from the criminal groups who have taken over such recreational spaces. Some young people comment that even the beer companies have been affected:

That's how it is, to do something you practically have to ask permission, they say yes, in the case of bars, but they say, let me ask permission from those people (in this case permission for the party on the beach), because you can have music and then suddenly these people show up and tell you to lower the music or everything is over, get out, shut it down, just because they say so (Jurado, 2013).

For this reason, one young man's conclusion is clear: "really they have taken over our things, there is no respect for the government... they have hands in everything" (Jurado, 2013).

Obregón Street was the place for tourism and youth nightlife. During the day, tourists went to restaurants on that street or saw dentists or doctors located in the commercial and services corridor, while at night, young people did their *rol* and visited the nightclubs known as *antros*. Currently, the social practice of the *rol* has disappeared, despite the efforts of the young people who tried to revive it but did not have support from the authorities: "Even, not long ago, using social networks, we agreed to open the *roles* again, all of us got together, but then when we got there and people were getting together, *these people* showed up and again, let's get out of here" (Jurado, 2013).

This situation is in contrast to those of other cities such as Tijuana, where, after the violence and the lack of tourism on Revolución Street, young people and national tourism took over this space. In Matamoros, Obregón Street remains empty, as the young people say:

<sup>12</sup> In personal interviews, the students who live in the Lomas de San Juan and Cima 3 neighborhoods mention Bagdad Beach as a shared living space that is rarely visited.

No, Álvaro Obregón has lots of empty spaces, *it's dead*. If you go on a Friday night to Álvaro Obregón, where before it would be full, that street is where people did the *rol*, it's empty and that was the place where the clubs were, the *antros* and all that, and now everything is desolate (Jurado, 2013).

Now, the social interaction spaces extend to Brownsville. Various young people tell us about places that they visit in that US border city. These places are usually public spaces for consumption, such as restaurants, bars and clubs that were in some cases founded in Matamoros and are now located in Brownsville. However, they also include concerts: "Even the concerts that radio stations would hold aren't done anymore; if they do them, they do them in Brownsville" (Jurado, 2013).

The only action that the government has implemented to revitalize social interaction in open spaces is to manage events with the best security possible. It seems that unless there is an evident and large security presence, people do not go to public places that offer open shows. As the young people tell us:

And there was a lot of security at the TRI concert, it was impressive. What really drew my attention was a concert that was held in the plaza... I think that's the strategy right, tons of security so people can go (Jurado, 2013).

## Conclusions

In Matamoros, we see a municipal strategy of centralizing public spaces. After listening to the interviews and conducting a focus group, we conclude that this strategy can be a mistake because the population has difficulties commuting daily toward the center of the city. Their movement is limited due to their daily work routines, their low incomes or the peripheral location of the residential developments where they live. Social interaction in these concentrated public spaces, at a certain point, becomes not daily but rather extraordinary, limited to when there is an event, or weekly, when it is possible to go out with one's family.

Criminal groups use the main avenues of the city as their workspaces or as their escape routes from the threat of the military. For this reason, people are afraid to move from their neighborhoods toward the center of the city; the less distance that people travel, the better it is for them because limiting their travel increases their sense of security. For this reason, they are implicitly asking the municipal government to invest in the public lots close to their homes.

Daily social interaction requires nearby spaces; the majority of the interviewees note the lack of green space in their neighborhood. The advantages of green space are enormous because this space would spare them the need to travel, giving them more time for social contact with a greater number of closer people, increased social interaction with their neighbors, which is currently very rare, and a strengthening of activities for children.

The issue of spaces close to home is important in the populous sectors, which have small houses that do not make intimate social interaction or personal activities very easy.

We should also take into account the different dimensions of personal social interaction—games, conversations, health, strengthening of identity and learning—to determine the profiles of public space. To date, this and other cases show us that public

space is losing ground in the struggle for family and personal social interaction due to the “preference” for private spaces (the home) or semi-public spaces (commercial centers, schools and restaurants).

This privatizing tendency and this deficit already existed before the context of violence and insecurity, and they are reaffirmed with the limitations imposed by the actions of criminal groups. The structure of social interaction spaces does not change; however, their accessibility and use do, such that primary groups continue to meet in private or semi-public spaces but not with the same frequency or intensity. In the fight for public space, the criminal groups manage to impose unwritten norms and rules on some, such as on the beach or in the streets where young people would do their *rol*. Even taking into account that public space is not mainly defined by its territorial nature, we can say that in the case of the *rol*, the power of criminal groups is causing the disappearance of one of the most important public spaces for young university students.

This struggle for public space, above all tied to the access routes to different social interaction spaces, is being won by the actions of criminals, such that these groups are becoming highly powerful actors that clearly limit the population’s mobility and ability to strengthen and expand their personal and social networks.

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