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## **Mexican Organization Works to Counter Domestic Violence**

### **JUCONI works with families of street children to end chronic poverty**



Mexico's street children are often the victims of abuse by parents who had been abused when they were young.

By Stephen Kaufman

Staff Writer

Washington — Mexico's street children are among the nation's most vulnerable populations. Many who have been expelled or are behind at school and are on the streets or working have escaped domestic violence, live in unstructured homes or have disinterested parents. The JUCONI Foundation is trying to help these troubled children by getting to the core of their dilemma: their troubled families.

"If a child is on the street it's a consequence of something far more detrimental, which is intergenerational family violence," Travis Ning, director-general of JUCONI, told *America.gov*. "The damaging effects of violence really prevent this child and their family from ever climbing out of what is a destitute situation."

He said the violence is contributing to chronic poverty, with parents repeating the same bad behavior and abuse they themselves had experienced. Emotional health, security and general well-being can create a foundation for more productive interactions with society, despite the level of poverty, including the ability to stay and succeed in school, get along with employers and end the despair that inhibits a drive for greater success, he said.

Founded in 1989 and based out of Puebla, JUCONI finds local street children, many of whom have come from even more poverty-stricken areas in southern Mexico, and begins what Ning said is a three-to-five-year process of working with the children and their families. The children receive a safe place to come during the day and are given opportunities to try different activities to help them discover skills, interests and abilities. Then, after trust is established, the staff asks to meet their families.

Ning said the families, which are "fairly invisible in Mexican society," initially tend to resist JUCONI's efforts. "These are families that have been rejected by every intervention out there, or other organizations have offered them support and never

come through. So they're burnt [disappointed]. Burnt all around," he said. "It takes a lot for them to believe us."

Through weekly family therapy sessions, JUCONI engages the parents and helps them work through their own past traumas in an effort to break a cycle of which they might not be aware. "[We] model the relationship that we want them to have with their own children," Ning said, and give the parents a point of reference on what it is to receive care so they can better provide that type of care to their children.



JUCONI won the 2008 best practices award from UNICEF for its work to help street children and their families.

"It's essentially mothering a mother that's never been mothered because we can't ask her to do something that she doesn't know how to do," he said.

Ning acknowledged that when JUCONI has finished its work, the family still will be living in poverty. "The difference that we are promising is that they won't be chronically poor. They will get a little bit further with each generation," thanks to building a greater capacity for educational success, good emotional and physical health, better social relations and a tendency to start their families at a later age.

JUCONI works with approximately 350 children and their families each year. Ning said that with millions of Mexicans living in poverty, the foundation must concentrate on finding the hardest cases.

"If a mother were to come to the door of JUCONI and ring the doorbell for help, she is demonstrating that she is mothering, and in a way, JUCONI knows that if we don't help her, someone else will. She will keep looking," he said. "JUCONI is looking for the mother who doesn't even do that — the mother who is so far isolated and damaged that she doesn't have the capacity to look for the most basic resources for her own children."

With narco-terrorism dominating headlines about Mexico, Ning said JUCONI's work could have an impact in dissuading future gang members. For example, the international public might be shocked that the innocent family members of a public official are brutally murdered as part of the violence. "But if you come from a situation where your system of values and the truth about life is so absolutely skewed, you're a perfect fit" for gang membership.

"These are not well integrated individuals [who] are joining these gangs. These are people that are being preyed upon just because they come from families like those JUCONI works with, and that have a capacity to be brainwashed in that sense because they have no moral compass to speak of," Ning said.

Over its 20-year history, JUCONI has helped 96.5 percent of its children end their life of living or working on the streets, and the organization has done so without any government support or a budget large enough to hire therapists or other professionally licensed staff.

In 2008, JUCONI won the best practice award from UNICEF not only for its work, but also because of its staff model. Ning said the foundation is exporting that model to other organizations in Latin America and Africa, along with its expertise and information on best practices.

[More information on JUCONI](#) is available on its Web site.