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# On edge of paradise, Coachella workers live in grim conditions

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**T**HERMAL – At one end of Avenue 54, a road slicing through some of the most fertile land in the United States, resides the California of the popular imagination: a place of Bermuda shorts, putting greens and picture-window champagne dinners overlooking the infinity pool.

But there is another Avenue 54 concealed behind tumbleweeds and dust. It is the 54 of arsenic-tainted water, frequent blackouts and raw sewage that backs up into the shower. It is a place of grim housekeeping, where the residents of the Eastern Coachella Valley's roughly 125 illegal mobile home parks struggle to make 720 square feet of deteriorating metal and plywood a safe and habitable home.

Even the names of unincorporated communities here – Mecca, Oasis – evoke Biblical lands, befitting the manmade plagues that beset the region. This desert valley, about 130 miles southeast of Los Angeles, is one of the country's richest agricultural areas, an irrigation-fed bounty of table grapes, bell peppers, seedless watermelons and most of the country's dates. Island-paradise palms spring mirage-like from the hot, arid soil.

This Coachella, unvisited by hipsters who attend a yearly music festival in the valley, is one of the poorest, densest areas of the United States – especially during grape season, when an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 migrant workers pour into already crowded quarters, sleeping in fields, alongside irrigation ditches or on swatches of cardboard in the dirt parking lot of Leon's Market in Mecca.

Israel and Fatima Gutierrez – the parents of Neftoli, 7, and Alexis, 5, and residents of the Rancho Garcia Mobile Home Park – live the nightmare daily.



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*Neftoli Gutierrez, 7, lives in a disintegrating mobile home with his parents and 5-year-old brother. It is overrun with rats, and frogs sometimes make their way in through the pipes.*

The vinyl floors of their disintegrating trailer, which they rent, are dimpled with moisture. Plywood covers holes where windows once were, affixed with duct tape to walls in a slow state of collapse. Rats are a constant presence; sometimes, frogs make their way through the pipes. An extension cord leads from a single light bulb hanging from the bedroom ceiling to a socket with exposed wires.

"Sometimes, the niños shock themselves and scream," Israel Gutierrez said.

In the tumbledown warrens of America's pre-fab favelas – California's Third World – the 20th century is a dim memory. Basic needs like potable water, safe and reliable electricity, rudimentary sanitation, and clean air can go unmet. Darryl Adams, the Coachella Valley Unified School District superintendent, who took over last year, visited some of his young charges recently in 115-degree heat. "These children were splashing around in little portable pools getting infections from unclean water," Adams said.

"This is the Golden State, the great state," he said. "I had no idea."

"We are like a small country within the United States," said Eduardo Guevara, a coordinator of Promotores Comunitarios del Desierto, one of a small but growing number of citizen groups working to improve the trailer parks.

In recent months, this small, isolated country has received national attention, with visits by U.S.

Sen. Barbara Boxer and activist Erin Brockovich.

Earlier this year, dozens of residents, including teachers and schoolchildren, were sickened by noxious odors emanating from a four-story-high mesa of hazardous waste operated by Western Environmental Inc., a Utah-based soil recycling company that leases land from the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians.

The devil's palette of stench was overwhelming, residents say, shifting from gas fumes to the smell of burnt oil to ruptured sewer pipes. The symptoms of "Toxico Mecca," as it became known locally, included nausea, vomiting, dizziness and difficulty breathing.

"At first, we thought it was the Salton Sea," said Isabel Galvez, a yard supervisor at Mecca Elementary School, referring to the scent of dead fish baked in fetid air at the valley's northern edge. "But it was the site."

The valley long has been a go-to toxic dumping ground, particularly on tribal land – a crazy quilt of jurisdictions scattered throughout the region. Among the most notable have been the Lawson Dump, on a Torres-Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians allotment, where hellish subterranean fires smoldered beneath millions of tons of burned waste (it was shut down by a federal judge in 2006). Down the road are remains of the state's largest pile of garbage, nicknamed Mount San Diego by locals and closed by federal order in 1994.

At Western Environmental, the lack of state hazardous waste permits has come under public scrutiny. During a peak period in 2009-10, more than 10,000 shipments, most of it dirt contaminated with oil, gasoline and other hydrocarbons that emit fumes, were trucked to the plant along with sewage sludge, pesticides and other chemicals.

In May, after public outcry, Boxer, chairwoman of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, held a brief press conference at the school where dozens were sickened. Shortly thereafter, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ordered the company to stop receiving hazardous waste. In August, California's Department of Toxic Substances Control acknowledged it had failed for at least seven years to stop hazardous waste from being shipped to the plant and vowed to make improvements over how it monitors the area.

## **'It's just the poor and the rich'**

For those growing up in the Eastern Coachella Valley's mobile home parks, though, there is precious little difference between the kind of environmental crises that bring headlines and TV cameras and the hundreds of dangers and indignities that define everyday life.

Yanet Villicana, now a 20-year-old college student, lives with her farm-worker parents and five younger sisters in a peach-brown metal trailer seemingly held together by will.

She walks the dirt streets of her childhood home, the Lawson Mobile Home Park – a squalid city of about 400 trailers on Torres-Martinez land – to take the county bus to college in Palm Springs. It's a grueling two-hour journey one way.

She passes Duroville next door, the park on tribal land that became synonymous with rural slums,

before arriving in Mecca. After too many stops, the scraggly mesquite and cracked pavement of unincorporated California gives way to bougainvillea-lined boulevards as the bus approaches Indian Wells, where streets are named for Bob Hope and Dinah Shore. The median household income is \$134,615, among the highest in the state; in Mecca, it's \$25,873.

"It's really sad when we go through the wealthy parts," said Villicana, a psychology major who picks grapes in the fields during the summer to pay for braces and school. "It's like the bus goes through all the poor sections first, then out of nowhere there are a bunch of huge houses and beautiful sights. It's sad, because there's really nothing in between. It's just the poor and the rich."

When the bus returns late at night, she is afraid to walk the park's nameless pitch-black dirt lanes because there are no lights. Electricity charges are determined by the landlord, who reads the meters, so rent during the sweltering swamp-cooler summer can run as high as \$700 a month.

"There's nothing here," Villicana said. "No community center. No parks."

What is here, said Cecilia Cote, who works as a health promotora for the nonprofit Clinicas de Salud del Pueblo, are families living 15 to a trailer. Children are exposed to fleas from roaming dogs, open sewers or septic breaches, and overcrowded restrooms. Grape stakes salvaged from abandoned fields are used as kindling for warm baths and cooking.

Dr. Raul Ruiz, an emergency physician at the Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage and an associate dean at the UC Riverside School of Medicine, launched the Coachella Valley Healthcare Initiative last year. Ruiz, the son of farm workers who holds three degrees from Harvard University, considers the trailer parks "a public health nightmare."

## **Humiliating conditions**

At the Rancho Garcia Mobile Home Park, Fatima Gutierrez sweeps rat droppings, changes the traps, bleaches the walls with a dish scrubber and climbs a ladder during rainy season to seal the roof with a plastic tarp, usually futilely.

Dr. Kenneth Russ, a physician in Palm Springs who has consulted with mobile home park residents, said the combination of substandard housing, air pollution, exposure to hazardous waste and poor nutrition "can be physically and emotionally traumatic, especially for children."

Until recently, when the Riverside County Department of Environmental Health stepped in, the Rancho Garcia park had an open fly-infested sewage pit. Raw sewage seeped into streets and yards.

Leonard Garcia, whose father, Miguel, started the park as a labor camp, suggested that residents' habits were to blame for some of the problems, including the sewage.

"It could be a plugged line, even in their own trailer," he explained. "Sometimes, it's a Pamper. Sometimes, it's a buildup of lard. Or toys. Believe me, you don't want to know what we've seen in these things."

Conditions at Rancho Garcia are more acute than at many other parks. According to the state's esoteric mobile home park laws, park owners are responsible for infrastructure and for providing a decent living environment that will protect homeowners' investments. (Ninety-five percent of area



residents own their mobile homes.) If a park closes, those living in rickety hand-me-downs that are too fragile to move are particularly vulnerable.

“Effectively, you lose a piece of property and your shelter,” explained Megan Beaman, an attorney with California Rural Legal Assistance in Coachella.

Riverside County has 121 unpermitted parks and a few dozen legal ones, said Bob Lyman, regional manager for the county’s Transportation & Land Management Agency. In addition, there are five major parks and more than 100 smaller ones on Torres-Martinez land, all outside the reach of county inspectors.

These tribal mobile home park residents have little legal recourse against punitive practices by owners, such as unlawful evictions or “the electricity being shut off if they are a day behind on rent,” said Arturo Rodriguez, directing attorney for the Coachella California Rural Legal Assistance Migrant Farmworker Project.

## Housing law’s unintended consequence

The proliferation of small unregulated parks dates back to the 1992 Farm Labor Housing Protection Act, an emergency measure that allowed growers to build parks of up to 12 units without obtaining zoning and land use permits.

But the bill written by Richard Polanco, a Los Angeles assemblyman, had unintended consequences. Opportunistic landlords swooped in to erect an estimated 400 unpermitted parks, still known as “polancos,” that skirted basic health and safety regulations, including the placement of wells, septic systems and safe electrical wiring.

The parks remained largely under the radar until the summer of 1998, when two people died in two different parks – one a teenager who was electrocuted when a fence became energized due to faulty wiring, the other a man electrocuted while working on repairs to his mobile home.



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*Rotting and disassembled trailers and other refuse are regularly dumped at the edge of the Lawson Mobile Home Park.*

Riverside County code enforcers began cracking down, targeting 18 parks for closure and filing lawsuits against the owners. In response, California Rural Legal Assistance filed housing discrimination suits with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, saying the county had unfairly targeted Latino-owned parks. Two years after the first crackdown, HUD announced a \$21 million settlement with the county to pay for community projects, low-income housing and cash payments to the farm worker families.

“It’s no accident these communities are suffering,” said Beaman, with California Rural Legal Assistance. “It comes with being 97 percent Latino, 50 percent undocumented and 100 percent working class. It’s a snapshot of how certain categories of people are forced to live differently based on their perceived power.”

Widespread panic about park closures prompted thousands of residents, including many indigenous native-speaking Purépecha people from the highlands of Michoacán in Mexico, to move their trailers onto sovereign tribal land, away from code enforcers as well as U.S. immigration agents.

The denouement was the housing apocalypse known as Duroville, a postcard of squalor and lawlessness in which packs of wild dogs roamed muddy alleyways and raw sewage puddled along Michael Street, Marylou Avenue and other byways named for owner Harvey Duro’s family.

Airborne toxins from the burning illegal Lawson dump next door – including elevated levels of dioxin, a carcinogen – finally brought Duroville to the attention of the federal government.

Sister Gabi Williams, 62, a self-described “gringo” nun, has become something of an Our Lady of Mobile Home Parks for her tireless efforts there. She recalls “black water on the ground, the dump with a huge hole in the middle sinking.”

She said of her work there, with flinty matter-of-factness: “It wasn’t a good idea to put up a child center around battery acid.”

After a cascade of events, the Bureau of Indian Affairs announced that the park would be shut down, displacing 4,000 to 5,000 residents. Averting what he called “a mass humanitarian crisis,” U.S. District Judge Stephen G. Larson ordered the park to remain open and set up a two-year receivership charged with making the park livable until alternatives could be found.

Today, the population of Duroville hovers around 2,000, expanding during the harvest and contracting from July to September, when half the residents migrate to the San Joaquin Valley. An 11-acre open sewage evaporation pond is still in use. Thomas J. Flynn, the federally appointed receiver, calls it “a West Nile virus incubator that’s like something out of Margaret Mead.”

Flynn has worked to alleviate the park’s underground economy, a haven for criminal activity, including a notorious drug-dealing intersection in which “cars would pull in as if they were pulling into a McDonald’s,” in his words. He also noted the “repair” shops with hundreds of cars, many stolen.

A blocks-long monolith of domestic detritus – mattresses, playpens, car seats, carpeting, masses of splintered wood – represents the remains of makeshift wooden structures attached to trailers, recently ordered removed.

“Fire accelerators that combined with improperly installed propane tanks were like a bomb,” Flynn said.

Dr. Alberto Manetta, a professor emeritus at UC Irvine and chairman of Latino Health Access, a nonprofit based in Santa Ana, runs a health clinic in Duroville. Two recent health surveys by Manetta and his team offer an illuminating portrait of the park: Ninety-five percent of residents do not have Internet access. Only 8 percent finished high school. One-third lack air conditioning. More than half have no source of hot water for bathing, with children using leftover cooking water to wash. Chronic conditions like diabetes and tobacco and alcohol addiction abound.

Nevertheless, Manetta observes, the residents' deepest concern is not their health. "Their biggest worry is being thrown out of the park," he said.

## **Citizen groups fight for improvements**

Elisa Guevara's first home in America was a wooden shack attached to a friend's trailer in Duroville. She was an accounting assistant for a computer store in Mexico; on her first Monday in California, she went to work in the fields. She suffered dehydration and heat stroke but continued picking. "Once she starts something, she finishes it, no matter what," her brother Eduardo said.

Frightened for her family's safety after an arson, Guevara and her husband, daughter and parents left Duroville. They moved into their own trailer at the Los Gatos Mobile Home Park, brightening a corner of the living room with a shrine honoring the Virgin of Guadalupe.

"It was a dream to have a house," Guevara said, "even if it wasn't the best you could think of."

But her optimism was short-lived: Last summer, half the park's trailers lost electricity for a month when the overtaxed electrical box caught fire, forcing nine families to sleep outside because of the heat. They had to rely on ice coolers to store food and medicine. Before that, there was the defective plumbing system that forced families to live with their own waste.

The park's co-owner, Benjamín Hernández offered a litany of blame for the park's woes – residents who waste water and electricity, county inspectors who are demanding high fees for permits, and the poor economy devastating his family's finances. Hernández said he invested in the park with nine siblings, but now they don't have enough money to make improvements.

"We wanted to get a line of credit to do everything, but then the problems with the economy hit," Hernández said. "We lost our jobs. People lost their homes. We were really affected by the economy. We spoke with the county. We tried to find another way to move forward. But there are too many costs, too many rules, too many requirements."

Guevara remembers praying a lot, convinced that as a non-English-speaking woman with kidney problems, there was little she could do. But inspired by her daughter, she acted.

The result was Comité el Poder de la 62 – "The Power of the 62nd" – named for their avenue, one of a growing number of citizen groups fighting to improve their neighborhoods by taking landlords to court. A lawsuit is still pending; last year, a preliminary injunction required the owners to restore electricity and repair the sewage system.

In the Eastern Coachella Valley, worst-case scenarios are common events: Witness 90-year-old former Sunbird Mobile Home Park resident Lucas D. Hernandez's water bill, which went from \$14.16 to \$596.26 after the park launched a new rate system. (Residents have filed a legal complaint.) And at Oasis Mobile Home Park – a misnomer if ever there was one – a discovery in 2007 by the EPA of a landlord's abhorrent cunning: a system of hidden pipes rigged to agricultural drain lines that discharged residents' sewage into the Salton Sea.

"You get into this floppy mood," Maribel Sanchez, 27, said of St. Anthony's Mobile Home Park, where a collapsed casing on a deteriorating well pumped sand into their water. One resident whose





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*Ana Sanchez's granddaughter peeks from the window during a community meeting at St. Anthony's Mobile Home Park. Sanchez is center outside.*

wife was recovering from breast surgery was forced to drive 15 miles so that she could take a clean shower.

"People don't speak up," added Sanchez, who works as a nanny in a gated community in La Quinta. "They think their voice isn't going to be heard."

The park, home to more than 600 people, has experienced years of violations, most notably dangerously high levels of naturally occurring arsenic in the water – prompting residents like Ana Sanchez, Maribel's mother, to spend \$20 a week or more on bottled drinking water.

Ruiz, of the Coachella Valley Healthcare Initiative, said the long-term health effects of the area's myriad issues, from mobile home parks to hazardous waste, are far from clear.

"This should hit us all in our hearts and minds," he said of the valley's precarious teeter-totter of inequality. "A community doesn't end at a gate."

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*This story was edited by Robert Salladay and Mark Katches. It was copy edited by Nikki Frick. Brown is a contributor to California Watch, the state's largest investigative reporting team and part of the Center for Investigative Reporting.*