

AND YOU THOUGHT YOU HAD IT BAD... *by Ann Gerhardt, MD*

(07/2006)

Ancient-appearing women, probably no older than 50, sell dolls, fruit or trinkets. Children sell finger puppets in the street. "Lady, Lady, buy from me!" When I bought from one child, two other hopefuls clamored for sales.

At major intersections, as soon as the light turns red, young men and boys stream between lines of cars, trying to sell knock-off CD's, toys, wallets and kitchen utensils. Others perform gymnastics in the cross-walk and solicit tips from each car before the light changes.

If they didn't sell, they would have no income. The income they glean as street vendors garners them no social security or health insurance. There is no safety net for the frail, old or disabled who never worked for an employer which would have entered them into the social security system. In the menacing words of one doctor, spoken with finality, **"If you have no money, you die."**

Whether poverty is measured in terms of family income or in terms of social indicators such as child mortality, it is worse in Peru than would be expected on the basis of the country's average per capita income. This situation results from an exceptionally high degree of inequality. Clearly, money from the very rich doesn't trickle down to the average Jose.

In the 1980s, poverty in Peru increased more than in other major Latin American countries, chiefly because of the drastic deterioration of the economy's overall performance under President Garcia. Garcia has just become president again, beating a Chavez-type opponent in the May election. Who knows what will happen now?

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean draws two lines for measures of poverty - one for destitution, and a second cutoff for run-of-the-mill poverty. Destitution refers to income so low that it could not provide adequate nutrition, even if it were spent entirely on food. Poverty in the less extreme sense implies an income that, spending on food the percentage of income that normal families spend on food, could not provide adequate nutrition.

Fifty two percent of Peruvian families fall below the poverty line and 25 percent are destitute. The rates are much higher for families in rural than urban areas. Most of the middle class, constituting professionals like doctors, lawyers, accountants and small business people,

Published by

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live in urban areas. One EsSalud doctor I worked with makes about \$600 per month. Others make more, by working more than one job.

Business people and drug traffickers constitute the rich class. Even their wealth may be transient – In the past new governments have summarily divested people of their mansions and businesses.

The poor subsist in colored shacks dotting barren foothills on the edge of town, with no water or electricity. I took a taxi to Canto Grande, one of Lima's poor outlying districts, to visit a nutrition clinic. The drive took me from tree-lined city streets to desert landscape, punctuated by increasingly delapidated buildings. Most had no roof – just some rebar, irregular, partly finished brick walls and clotheslines. With no money and no rain, why roof?

Canto Grande's taxis are small, surrey-like affairs, powered by a man on a bicycle. The main road's median strip serves as a left-over concrete dumping ground. Everything is dry and dusty.

The clinic's tiny cubicles house cheerful staff (a pediatrician, nurse and dietitian) and colorful toys to occupy children while they wait for their appointment. Every child who sees the doctor is weighed and measured and given nutrition advice. The dietitian Michelle tells mothers, who look more than adequately nourished, that they should feed their children 'thick' foods with nutritional value, rather than thin broth soups. She encourages them to send junior to school with a snack containing juice, a protein and some starch.

They may be poor, but Peruvians seem to manifest the human capacity for resiliency and accommodation. Literacy has climbed to greater than 92%, the death rate has fallen to 6.5 per 1000 population and they seem to keep on keeping on, trying to make things work, regardless of who runs the country.