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QUALITY OF LIFE FOR THE VENEZUELAN URBAN POOR UNDER CHAVEZ

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the quality of life of the residents of Venezuelan shantytowns has changed since Hugo Chávez was sworn in as president in February of 1999, and whether those changes can be attributed to Chávez's social policies and programs. It finds that some of Chávez's programs, such as his various missions, have found much more success at improving the quality of life of the urban poor than other efforts.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

When Hugo Chávez Frías was elected president of Venezuela in December of 1998, he rose to political success with a large mandate from the Venezuelan people, in particular the poor and he began to enact political and social reforms in accordance with his anti-party and self-defined “Bolivarian” rhetoric. Now in power for over a decade, he has continued to garner the support of Venezuela’s lower classes, which form his largest and most steady electoral base. How exactly he has maintained the support of this key group, however, is debatable. While a demographic group’s support for a politician is obviously affected by many different factors, and Chávez has indeed employed many tactics to win continued support, a crucial part of his popularity is the perception that he has improved the plight of the Venezuelan poor.

Chávez’s success or failure at effectively improving the quality of life for the Venezuelan poor is a contentious issue. His programs have been depicted as “poorly designed” and contributing “little to long-term development.”¹ They have been called “mostly dubious” and considered to have yielded “only very modest gains” despite copious social spending allowed by high oil prices.² Various analysts have termed nearly all of Chávez’s major programs as clientelistic in nature. Javier Corrales goes so far as to say that Chávez had by 2006 (the time of his writing) failed to improve education, poverty, or equity and that he lacked the broad support of the poor.³ Others, like Venezuelan Ambassador to the United States Bernardo Alvarez Herrera, have claimed grand improvements areas such as the education, food security, housing, and health of the

Venezuelan people, especially of the poor. Herrera also dismisses the criticism that Chávez's projects are clientelistic, arguing that they are the manifestation of the desires of the Venezuelan people.⁴

This paper endeavors to determine how the quality of life of the residents of Venezuelan shantytowns has changed since Hugo Chávez was sworn in as president in February of 1999, and whether those changes can be attributed to Chávez's social policies and programs.

To answer these questions, this study examines trends in the statistics of measures of quality of life for the shantytown residents, or simply the urban poor, in order to reveal any significant changes in the standard of living of the group. It then weighs these changes against the Chávez administration's most significant programs and their timelines to conclude whether the president's policies were their likely cause. This calls for the establishment of an appropriate method for evaluating quality of life, and the proper contextualization of Chávez's simultaneously celebrated and denounced efforts on behalf of the urban poor, requiring a firm understanding of the importance of the urban poor as a demographic group and of details concerning Chávez's various programs.

Measuring the Quality of Life of the Urban Poor

Measuring the abstract concept of "quality of life" has challenged the academic community for decades, and many methods have been proposed as appropriate solutions to the problem. Quality of life was for many years measured simply using a state's per capita Gross National Product or Gross Domestic Product, but this practice has since

fallen out of use, as it became seen as a “very narrow view of development” which did not sufficiently represent a populace’s quality of life.⁵ In many cases, various indicators are coalesced into a single quality of life index.^{6,7,8} These indices are often comprised of a few social statistics deemed to be crucial aspects to the understanding of quality of life, such as life expectancy, income, literacy, malnutrition, and infant mortality. Only a few of these are generally used in any one quality of life index; the Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI), the best known index as described by Frey and Al-Roumi, utilizes three: infant mortality rate, literacy rate, and life expectancy at birth.⁹ In addition to these physical characteristics of quality of life, there is also a movement which holds that subjective assessments such as happiness or life satisfaction must also be included in the measure, as they comprise a large part of an individual’s estimation of their own quality of life.¹⁰

Urban quality of life itself is generally composed primarily of home ownership, electrification, access to clean water and sanitation services, and levels of crime. While some of these measures, such as home ownership and electrification and to some extent access to a water source, are generally high in Latin America, access to basic sanitation is not a given in many urban centers, crime levels are high and the feeling of lack of security is fairly widespread.¹¹

This study forgoes the use of any one measurement or index of quality of life for its analysis for two reasons. First, quality of life indices are appropriate for analyzing with large datasets for diverse purposes, often comparing various different countries. This paper focuses on one country and has a relatively narrow aim: to determine to what extent quality of life changed over a short period of time (Chávez’s decade in power). A

conglomeration of several indicators into one would allow very limited analysis during that time period. Second, it attempts to identify in which individual areas of public policy Chávez has been successful or unsuccessful, which would be precluded by the use of a combined measure of quality of life.

The actual social indicators used in this study are described in more detail as they are introduced, but they include various aspects of physical quality of life such as under-nourishment, water and sanitation access, literacy, school attendance, unemployment levels, healthcare access, and poverty itself. The different measures are designed to correspond with stated goals and efforts of the Chávez administration, such that they can be judged against these efforts to determine how effective the administration's programs have or have not been. As for the use of subjective, intangible aspects of quality of life such as happiness, the study focuses more on physical aspects of quality of life, as they are more reliably measurable. In addition, Chávez has not necessarily proposed to improve the happiness of the Venezuelan people but has instead focused on poverty and other concrete aspects of quality of life.

The data are drawn from several different sources, including the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, Spanish: CEPAL) statistical database CEPALSTAT, LexisNexis Statistical Insights Datasets, Latinobarómetro Online Analysis of public opinion surveys, and Venezuela's Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas (INE – National Institute of Statistics).

The Importance of the Venezuelan Urban Poor

The urban poor of Venezuela play a particularly integral part in keeping Chávez in power because of their openness to Chávez's message and political rhetoric and their organizational potential, as well as their huge numbers. Over 90% of the Venezuelan population lives in urban areas, and national poverty rates have been cited as anywhere from 40% to 80%. They are also a group that participated little in politics, let alone as a relatively unified bloc, until Chávez became a major player in Venezuela.¹²

During the Punto Fijo period in Venezuela when the parties Acción Democrática (AD – Democratic Action) and Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI – Committee of Independent Electoral Political Organization) dominated, what few members of the urban poor that were politically active were split between the parties, weakening what could have been a powerful electoral influence. Although the current ruling party did often attempt to implement policies and programs in order to aid the poor, they were ineffective in the long-term because they made the poor depend on the government clientelistically rather than building a base from which the poor could elevate themselves.¹³

As the Punto Fijo democracy deteriorated due to economic crises in the 1980s and 1990s, even the ineffective programs supporting the poor dried up and many more people found themselves in desperate situations. To add to the urban poor's troubles, neoliberal austerity programs worsened their conditions further still. It was this climate that led to Chávez's failed 1992 coup attempt and the subsequent widespread popular support for Chávez.¹⁴ The urban poor did not feel represented by the existing political parties, and

support for the system as a whole was dwindling. Into this atmosphere stepped Hugo Chávez the candidate, and with his anti-party rhetoric and his promises to lessen the hardships of the poor, he succeeded democratically where he had failed militarily.¹⁵ In the 1998 election, the urban poor were more likely to vote for Chávez than the middle or upper classes, and he benefitted from the large turnout of the urban poor. This support has followed him for years, even after backing in the other socioeconomic groups had waned.¹⁶

The urban poor's endorsement of Chávez is not unconditional, despite their relative constancy in the first years of Chávez's presidency. This "prolonged honeymoon," as Damarys Canache describes it, was unlikely to hold indefinitely because the urban poor had proven to be pragmatic in terms of their voting behavior. Their abandonment of AD and COPEI showed that they were willing break with politicians who had not "transformed symbolic action into substantive results."¹⁷

Chávez, as an astute politician, knows that the support of the poor is not unqualified and he has throughout his tenure as president pursued policies geared towards building and maintaining the support of the urban poor. These policies usually involve two simultaneous goals: improving the lives of the poor and spreading Chávez's ideals. Three of the organizations Chávez has created hold particular importance for the urban poor. The *Círculos Bolivarianos* (Bolivarian Circles) and the *consejos comunales* (communal councils) are important in terms of Chávez's favored "participatory democracy," and the many *misiones* (missions) are crucial to Chávez's efforts to improve the quality of life of the urban poor and of Venezuelans in general.

Círculos Bolivarianos

The *Círculos Bolivarianos* which were established starting in the year 2000 when Hugo Chávez called for their formation and supporters signed up in droves. The network of small local groups with membership open to all, strong ties to Chávez, and a movement boasting about 2.2 million members by 2003, were clearly a force to be reckoned with.

The *Círculos Bolivarianos* were the subject of no small controversy, inside and out of Venezuela. Some accounts have described the *Círculos* as government-sponsored neighborhood groups, as promoting social unrest or political violence.^{18,19} Some even called them government-armed and organized “circles of terrorists,” which opposition leaders demanded be disarmed and disbanded.²⁰ Others instead characterize them as autonomous, nonviolent community groups which work on small-scale development projects in their neighborhoods without funding from the state.^{21,22,23}

In their analysis of the *Círculos Bolivarianos*, Hawkins and Hansen sought to clarify what exactly the *Círculos* did, how they operated, and how they were financed. In performing interviews of members of various *Círculos*, the authors discovered that the groups received very little funding from governmental bodies, and were generally non-violent (though some members of *Círculos* may have carried out violent acts, such activities were not standard procedure for the groups themselves). They found that the *Círculos* had democratic goals and ideals, but that they carried a strong linkage to Chávez himself, such that the groups depended on his continued power in order to continue their own actions. The *Círculos* often participated in pro-Chávez demonstrations and actions,

some of them on a daily basis, though they exhibited little consistent support for any other candidates or parties. The main societal activity of a *Círculo Bolivariano* was to work locally to facilitate access to government programs. Hawkins and Hansen point out that this work could give preferential access of government programs to neighborhoods which supported Chávez, since the *Círculos* were more likely to be active in such areas.²⁴

This strong association between the *Círculos Bolivarianos* and Chávez became very useful during the brief ouster of the president in April of 2002, during which many *Círculos* mobilized to urge the urban poor and others to protest the coup, leading to widespread pro-Chávez demonstrations in Caracas which contributed in part to Chávez's successful return to power.

The study found that the members of the *Círculos* did not generally belong to what one might call the "poor," as many of the respondents had more education than an average Venezuelan or an average Chávez-supporter, and they also lived in better quality homes than the other groups. They did, however, identify themselves as "working class" more than did the general populace or Chavistas. "While these levels of wealth and education may seem high for Chavistas," Hawkins and Hansen suggest that the members of the *Círculos* are "a core of committed activists rather than the rank and file of the Chavista movement."²⁵

While the *Círculos Bolivarianos* were composed mainly of a relatively well educated "working class" rather than the urban poor themselves, they still have an important effect on the Venezuelan urban poor. With the *Círculos* established as a delivery system for the Chávez government's programs for the poor and as models of Bolivarian activists and citizens, they were in an excellent position to advocate for the

government, or rather Chávez, in the shantytowns and barrios. The *Círculos* were particularly active in the lead-up to the August 2004 presidential recall referendum, with 84% of their respondents being active in pro-Chávez activities and 40% doing so on a daily basis.²⁶

The activity of many of the *Círculos Bolivarianos* declined a few years after the groups were founded, particularly in 2004 and beyond. Hawkins and Hansen predict that this decline is due to the fact that Chávez continued to start new programs, and the *Círculos* were made obsolete by the new, well-financed programs because the *Círculos* “never had consistent material objectives and were not well funded or provided with the infrastructure needed to carry out long-term projects.”²⁷

In the first several years of Chávez’s presidency, the *Círculos Bolivarianos* played an important role in spreading Bolivarian ideals, organizing Chávez’s supporters, mobilizing the urban poor during times of crisis, and in facilitating access to government services in the shantytowns. They were not, as the opposition claimed, government-armed terrorists, nor were they organizations only devoted to improving society as supporters of Chávez described them. The political loyalty to Chávez of the *Círculos* sometimes took precedence over their social work, as in the months before the recall referendum.²⁸ Their strong clientelistic ties to Chávez led the *Círculos* to eventually diminish in importance as the president shifted his focus to other programs and forms of organization. Despite the brevity of their time in effect, the *Círculos* were a hallmark of Chávez’s Bolivarian project in participatory democracy and they helped shore up his base during crucial times for several years.

Consejos Comunales

In 2006, Chávez announced the creation of *consejos comunales*, neighborhood communal councils, as a new avenue for local political participation. The new institutions allow for neighborhoods of 200 to 400 families to create a council which designs and oversees local development projects such as building roads and improving lighting and trash collection in the community.²⁹ The projects are funded by various institutions of formal government, mainly from the national level, and much of the labor is voluntarily provided by members of the community.³⁰

The *consejos* system is available to all Venezuelans, with lower population requirements for rural and indigenous communities, but the focus is clearly on the urban poor. The shantytowns are densely populated, are more in need of development than many other areas and have traditionally been most difficult to serve by all levels of government. The *consejos* can allow a method for development projects to proceed without coordination from local and municipal governments. Multiple *consejos comunales* may exist in one broad neighborhood, with the *consejos* themselves determining the boundary lines between each other. The ability to divide neighborhoods into several *consejos* is particularly helpful to the urban poor, for whom a *consejo* could apply to only a few blocks, because each group has the same maximum funding limit for a project which allows a broad community to have larger amounts of money allocated to it if it is segmented.³¹ This possibility, criticized by some as Chávez pandering to the urban poor, is less feasible in rural areas or wealthier urban areas where the population is less dense.

The *consejos comunales*, while representing participatory democracy and placing government in the hands of the people, to use Bolivarian expressions, also stand to improve the quality of life of the urban poor significantly. By involving the poor in the decision-making concerning projects in their area, the theory is, priority will go to solving the most urgent problems facing the community.³² The *consejos* system is not without its faults, as Steve Ellner points out, and its flaws may prevent it from accomplishing improvements to the urban poor's standard of living.³³

Some of Chávez's opposition as well as members of local and municipal governments fear that the creation of the *consejos comunales* is an attempt by Chávez to bypass the power of the local authorities and place more power and influence into his own hands, since he and his national government the main providers of the councils' funding. This fear is bolstered by the fact that the *consejos* take on some work traditionally reserved for local government, particularly infrastructure development. Ellner points out, however, that while the *consejos* are indeed autonomous from the local government and owe their existence to Chávez and the national government, they could not begin to take on all of the duties of local governments without a large increase in their mandate, powers, and funding. Their main purpose is to conceive and realize relatively small-scale development projects using volunteer labor from community members, and they seem unlikely to take a very much larger role, as the elected members of the *consejos* are unpaid and thus must continue to work for a living in addition to their activities organizing the *consejos*.³⁴

The organizations can also face "free-rider" problems in which members of the community benefit from the activities of the *consejos* but do not contribute to their

success, as well as issues concerning how trustworthy local leaders can be when they are placed in control of large amounts of funding. Moreover, there are concerns that the *consejos comunales* operate clientelistically, as did the *Círculos Bolivarianos*, and are overly dependent on the continued power and patronization of Hugo Chávez.³⁵

There has unfortunately been little research done into the activities and effectiveness of the *consejos comunales* to date, but with nearly twenty thousand community councils created in the first year since their announcement and billions of dollars worth of funding provided,³⁶ the *consejos comunales* are clearly a potentially powerful form of organization under Chávez, and are aimed largely towards the urban poor.

Misiones

While the *Círculos Bolivarianos* and *consejos comunales* were methods and organizations that intended to improve the quality of life of the poor by employing the Venezuelan populace in the effort, the government *misiones* (“missions”) represent Chávez’s attempts to do so directly. The first missions were initiated in 2003 and 2004 and in addition to improving the livelihood of the poor, they were meant to bolster support for Chávez in the upcoming presidential recall referendum in August of 2004. Chávez’s popularity had been lagging in 2003 after opposition-organized strikes, but the widespread popularity of his *misiones* helped him revitalize his base and win the referendum handily.^{37,38}

Venezuela's government website identifies nearly 30 ongoing missions, over half of which have to do directly with improving the quality of life of the Venezuelan people. Their goals are diverse; from providing food, shelter, and access to medicine to creating Ché Guevara's ideal "new man," the missions are ambitious and encompass many aspects of society.³⁹ However, the *misiones* have, as seems to be the case with all things Bolivarian, received criticism for being clientelistic and designed with ulterior political motives in mind.⁴⁰

While the subjects of the *misiones* vary, the intended beneficiary of their collective endeavors is abundantly clear: the poor. Misión Cristo ("Mission Christ") exists as a sort of umbrella mission which unites the others in the lofty goal of the eradication of poverty and hunger in Venezuela by 2021. Other missions such as Misión Mercal, Misión Barrio Adentro, Misión Ribas, Misión Robinson, and Misión Madres del Barrio, among others, cite the poor as the primary recipients of their services, which range from subsidized food to improved access to healthcare to education to relief for the homeless.⁴¹

Many of Chávez's missions have been widely popular and have served millions of people, but as Michael Penfold-Becerra (2007) argues, the distribution of funding, goods, and services through the *misiones* is largely influenced by political necessities rather than solely being aimed at poverty alleviation. In his analysis, Penfold-Becerra shows that the benefits of some of the missions are strategically aimed at certain areas of the population in order to support areas that lean toward Chávez or to influence opposition-held areas toward Chávez's camp.⁴²

Data on the funding sources and amounts of the *misiones* are limited. The Venezuelan government does not provide systematic data to the public on the missions, nor is it required to since the missions are funded from oil windfalls rather than normal budgetary spending.⁴³ Penfold-Becerra's results are therefore limited by scarce data, but his analysis suggests that while Chávez's *misiones* are likely to have a positive impact on the Venezuelan urban poor, the programs may not perform optimally due to the additional political engineering that accompanies them.

Expectations

Based on the analyses reviewed thus far, I expect various indicators of the quality of life of the Venezuelan urban poor to have improved during Hugo Chávez's presidency in three different "eras." The first will be the 2000-2004 period during which the *Círculos Bolivarianos* were influential, and I expect the data to show slight improvements for the urban poor, specifically in terms of housing and poverty as a whole. The *Círculos*, as local organizations, are likely to have made an impact on development in individual neighborhoods, not on the scale of national education or nourishment rates. Their effects are expected to be marginal because as Hawkins and Hansen explain, their political affiliation to Chávez sometimes "took precedence over their social work."⁴⁴

The second "era" begins in 2004 and is the era of the *misiones*. As national-level programs, they are likely to have had a larger effect than the *Círculos Bolivarianos*, and their effects should be seen across the spectrum of quality of life indicators, since their

individual goals similarly encompass a wide range of issues. While their effects should be noticeable because of their scope, those effects are unlikely to be dramatic due to the constraints imposed by the additional focus on electoral maneuvering.

The *misiones* era continues on through the third era, during which the *misiones* are joined by the advent of the *consejos comunales*. Effects of the *consejos* are likely to begin being evident in 2007, after they were established in 2006 and had time to organize themselves and launch their initiatives. They, like the Bolivarian Circles, are local actors and therefore are expected to have more of an effect on housing statistics and perhaps on poverty. The effect of the communal councils may be insignificant compared to that of the *misiones*, since they were still fledgling organizations and their scope was relatively limited.

In short, the quality of life of the Venezuelan urban poor is expected to have increased under Hugo Chávez, thanks mainly to the Bolivarian Circles and the Missions programs, although not dramatically,.

Chapter 2

Analysis

As Venezuela is a country that is no stranger to poverty rates above 30%, even above 40%, it can be difficult to develop a working definition of “urban poor.” As Damarys Canache puts it, “poverty loses meaning as a descriptive category when virtually everyone is poor.” Following Canache’s lead (she considered the urban poor to be the bottom 39.8% in terms of economic status),¹ and building on the fact that in 2004, 40% of the Venezuelan urban population lived in the slums,² in this study the urban poor are considered to occupy the bottom two economic quintiles or strata whenever the available data are so stratified.

Many of the indicators are simply organized by geographic area (national, urban, rural) and in some cases only national data were available. In such cases, the use of national data is reasonable; in a country where over ninety percent of the population lives in urban areas (compared to about 80% in the United States), national data can be taken to approximate urban data for purposes of discussion.³

This study’s analysis of the quality of life of the Venezuelan urban poor is based on several crucial aspects of one’s quality of life: food, housing, education, employment, health, and poverty. These topics are derived from literature on measuring quality of life and are also designed to correspond to Chávez’s stated goals in terms of improvements to urban quality of life, conveniently compartmentalized by Chávez’s *misiones* programs. This study briefly discusses Chávez’s treatment of each facet and then examines

statistical data having to do with that facet and determines the progress or lack thereof that Venezuela has made during Chávez's presidency. The data are evaluated in the context of one of the missions, not because the mission is necessarily the only influence on the data but because the missions provide Chávez's most direct efforts at changing the standard of living of the urban poor, and they provide fitting backgrounds for the analysis of data in each sector.

The goal, then, of this study is to evaluate the trends in these various statistics to determine whether or not Chávez's efforts have produced significant gains for the Venezuelan urban poor, and how those changes might be related to Chávez's programs.

Misión Mercal: Food

Food is perhaps the most basic of all necessities, but a year before Chávez took office, about 14% of the Venezuelan populace was below the minimum level of dietary consumption as determined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. It is reasonable to assume that the majority of the approximately 3.2 million people below minimum consumption level were among the poor. In the beginning of the formulation of his *misiones* in 2003 and 2004, Chávez sought to alleviate this problem through *Misión Alimentación*, or *Misión Mercal*. *Misión Mercal* is an initiative in which special stores, supermarkets, and open-air markets were set up throughout Venezuela to sell heavily subsidized food.⁴ The program aims to serve those with "scarce resources," though any citizen may use the Mercal network, provided they have an official government identification card (for the distribution of which Chávez also set up a

mission).⁵ *Misión Mercal* quickly became popular, boasting over 9 million users in its first year and continuing to grow. The program's success is crucial, with over 3 million under-nourished citizens and escalating prices for a basic food basket threatening the stability of Venezuelan families.⁶ In a 2008 Latinobarómetro survey, a full 86% of Venezuelans were either "somewhat worried" or "very worried" that increasing food prices would affect the economic situation of their family.⁷

Table 1: Proportion of Venezuelan Population Below Minimum Level of Dietary Consumption

	1990-1992	1995-1997	2000-2002	2004-2006
Percentage of Population	10	14	13	12

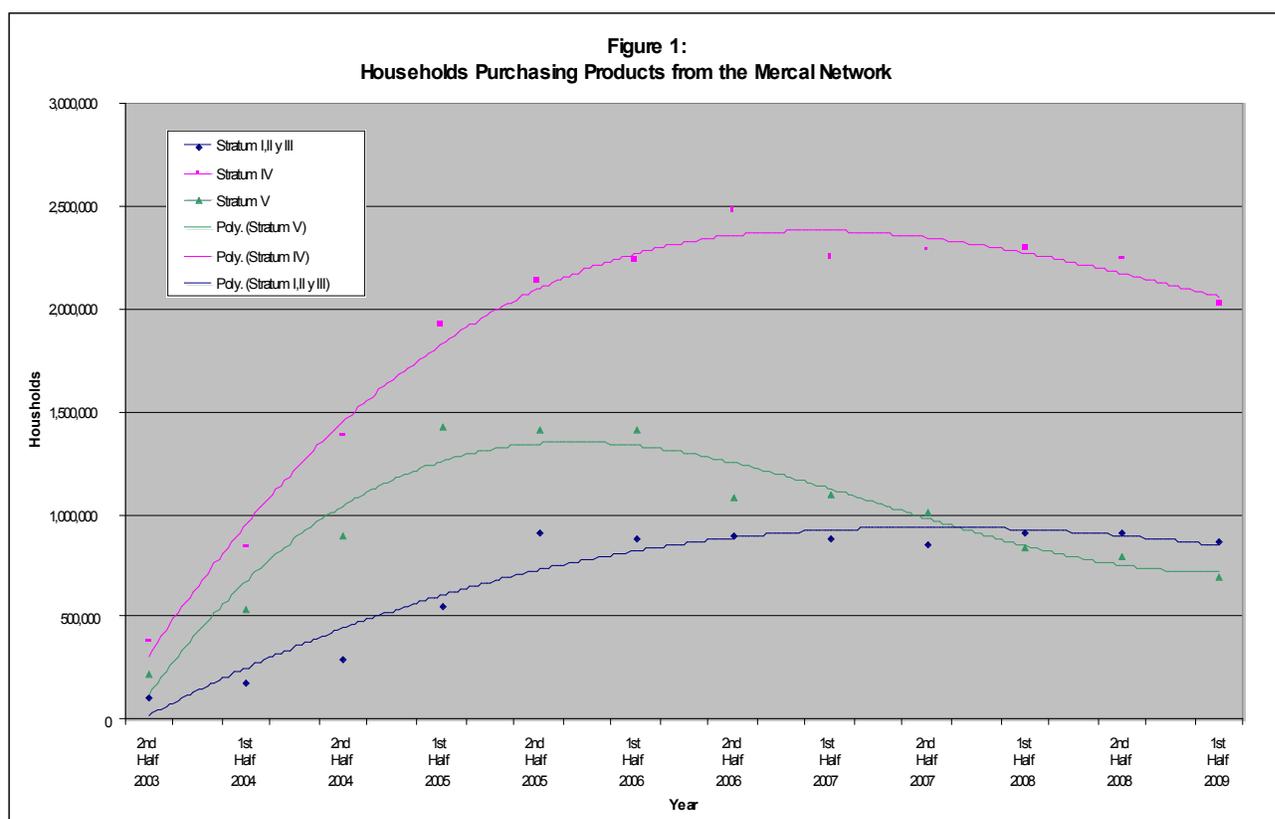
Source: "Proportion of population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption," CEPALSTAT, 2009.

The percentage of the Venezuelan population under the minimum dietary consumption levels since Chávez's presidency began had decreased slightly to 12% by the 2004-2006 period. This decrease is a negligible change, illustrated by the fact that due to Venezuela's increasing population, 12% in 2005 (the middle of the 2004-2006 period) still represented approximately 3.2 million people, the same figure as 14% in 1996.

Why have efforts on nourishment not had a more dramatic effect, or for that matter any effect at all? *Círculos Bolivarianos* generally focused more on information dissemination, political activity, and local infrastructure projects, leaving little time for providing food for the underfed. The *consejos comunales* came to the scene too late to have a chance at affecting the CEPALSTAT data. But *Misión Mercal*, with millions of users in the first year alone, seems as though it should have had a more noticeable effect on the nourishment of the Venezuelan poor.

It is entirely possible that the under-nourished are so poor that even subsidized food is beyond their means. With extreme poverty rates higher than the 14% under-nourishment rate when Chávez took office, such a situation is not unreasonable. Given that the under-nourishment data are national statistics, it may also be that most of the hunger in Venezuela is concentrated in rural areas which would be logistically harder to serve through the Mercial program because stores would have to be set up in many distant, sparsely-populated areas.

The former of these explanations is somewhat supported by statistics on the use of the Mercial network provided by Venezuela's National Institute of Statistics. The data in Figure 1 on the use of Mercial by households (not individuals) show that while the bottom



Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, “Hogares que compran al menos un producto en la red Mercial, según estrato social,” 2009.

two strata (IV and V, the two strata composing what we have defined as the urban poor) are the main users of Mercal, the bottom stratum has used the system far less than stratum IV. This suggests that some of the poorest households still cannot afford even the discounted food, or perhaps that they cannot access it due to lack of a means of transportation, for example.

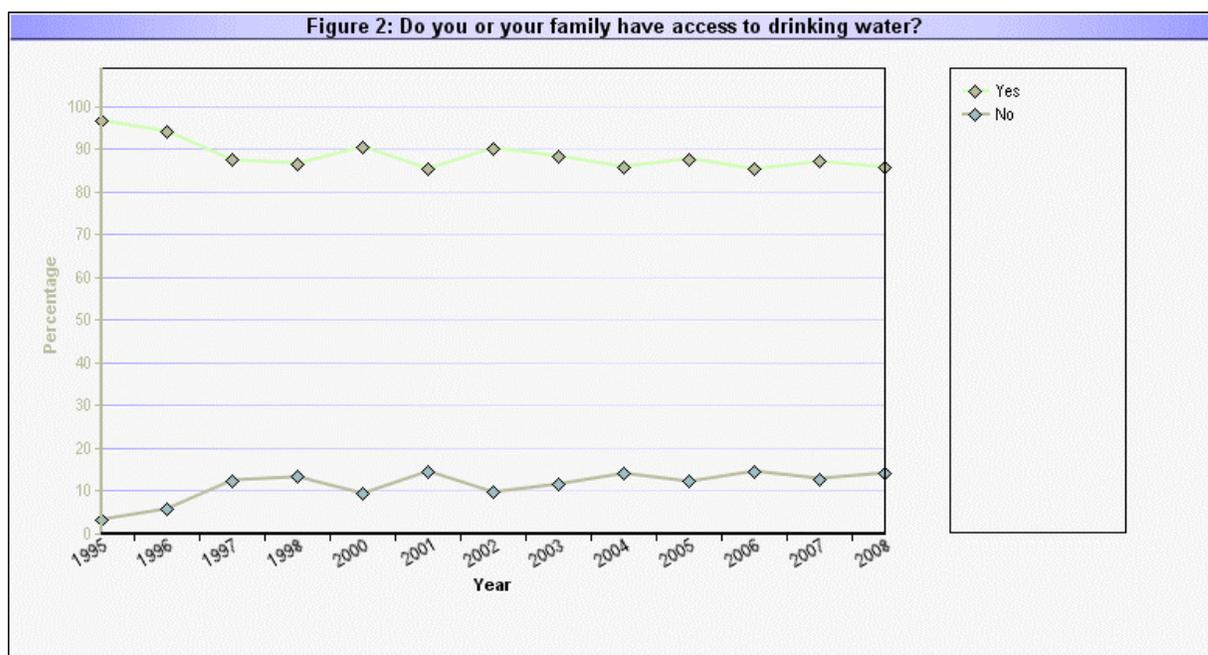
Despite the lack of success concerning under-nourishment, *Misión Mercal* should not be immediately considered unsuccessful. In this case, the rate of individuals who do not meet the minimum levels of consumption may not be an adequate measure for the success or failure of *Misión Mercal*. While 3.2 million under-nourished Venezuelans ought not to be ignored, the specific successes or failures of this mission may lie more generally in terms of alleviation of poverty, allowing Venezuelans to spend less money on their food and more on other aspects of their lives. The mission has clearly benefitted the poor more than the middle and upper classes as depicted in Figure 1 and it has served a large number of households, although in recent years the numbers served have declined somewhat, particularly in the lowest economic stratum.

In terms of improvement to quality of life, there has been little to no improvement for those suffering the most from hunger in Venezuela. This is a failure in terms of the goals of *Misión Cristo*, which aims to eliminate hunger in the country. It is also a failure of *Misión Mercal* insofar as the Mercal system is designed to accomplish the goals set forward in *Misión Cristo*. However, it does not necessarily spell failure for *Misión Mercal* as to its broader goals of providing the Venezuelan poor, and especially the urban poor, with food subsidized by oil wealth. Large numbers of poor households have participated in the program, and this is likely to have aided in the alleviation of poverty.

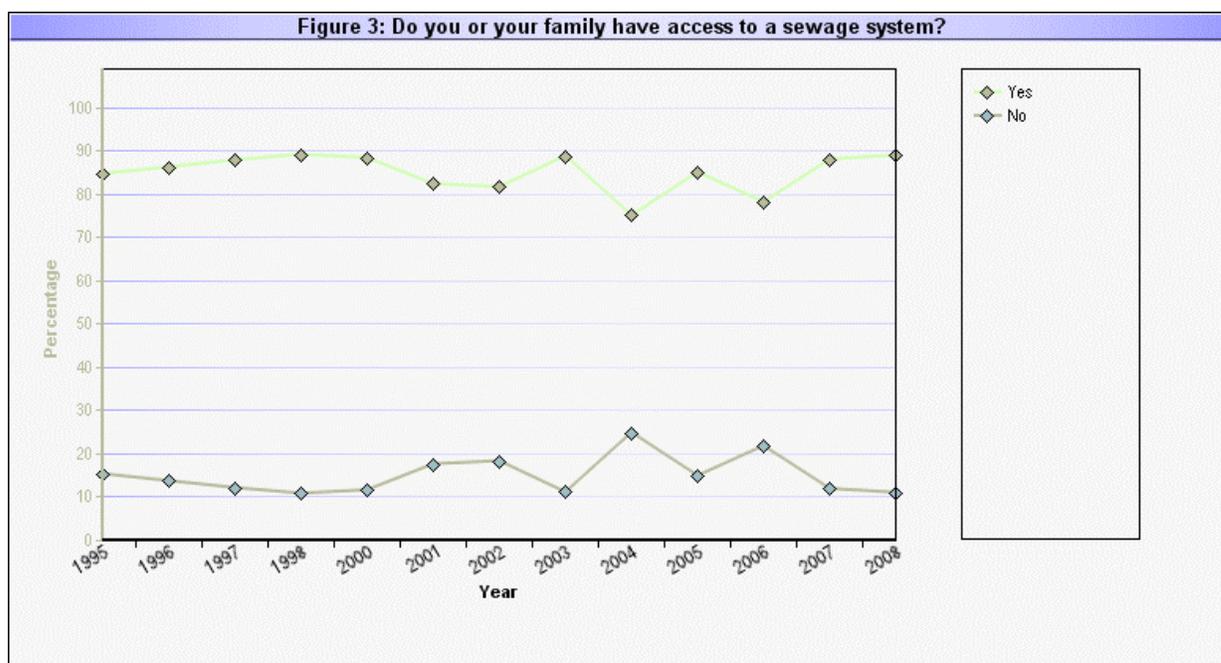
Misión Hábitat: Housing

Another pressing issue facing the Venezuelan urban poor is the condition of their housing. With forty percent of the urban population living in slums and shantytowns, stable, well-constructed homes can be rare and basic services may not be available. Damarys Canache points out that many of the shantytowns are situated on the hillsides and mountainsides surrounding cities, which can be vulnerable to land- and mud-slides during heavy rains. This danger became reality in 1999 in the Vargas state, killing tens of thousands and leaving many tens of thousands more homeless.⁸ *Misión Hábitat* and more recently *Misión Villanueva* seek to provide improved housing to those whose homes are unsafe or whose basic necessities are not met.⁹ In addition to *Misión Hábitat*, access to water and sanitation would be projects taken on by some *Círculos Bolivarianos* and *consejos comunales*, although the advent of the *consejos* may to be too recent to have a noticeable effect on any data concerning those goals.

Data is unfortunately scarce concerning the quality of actual homes themselves, but there is data on urban access to improved water sources and sanitation. Latinobarómetro, using public surveys, reports statistics on drinking water and sanitation levels every year from 1995 through 2008. From Figures 2 and 3, it is clear that there have been no substantive improvements in the delivery of these basic services, and access to drinking water has even trended downward. Although the *Fundación Misión Hábitat* website displays reports of construction workers improving homes in the barrios, over ten percent of Venezuelans still lack access to basic services.



Source: “Do you or your family have access to drinking water?” Latinobarómetro, 2008.



Source: “Do you or your family have access to a sewage system?” Latinobarómetro, 2008.

Chávez's housing efforts have been characterized by lack of success, especially given that as *El Universal* reports, he had only accomplished the construction of about a quarter of the 150,000 houses he promised by 2006.¹⁰ This lack of success at providing housing, added to the stagnation or even decline of Venezuelans' access to basic services indicates negligible or no improvement in the quality of housing for the urban poor.

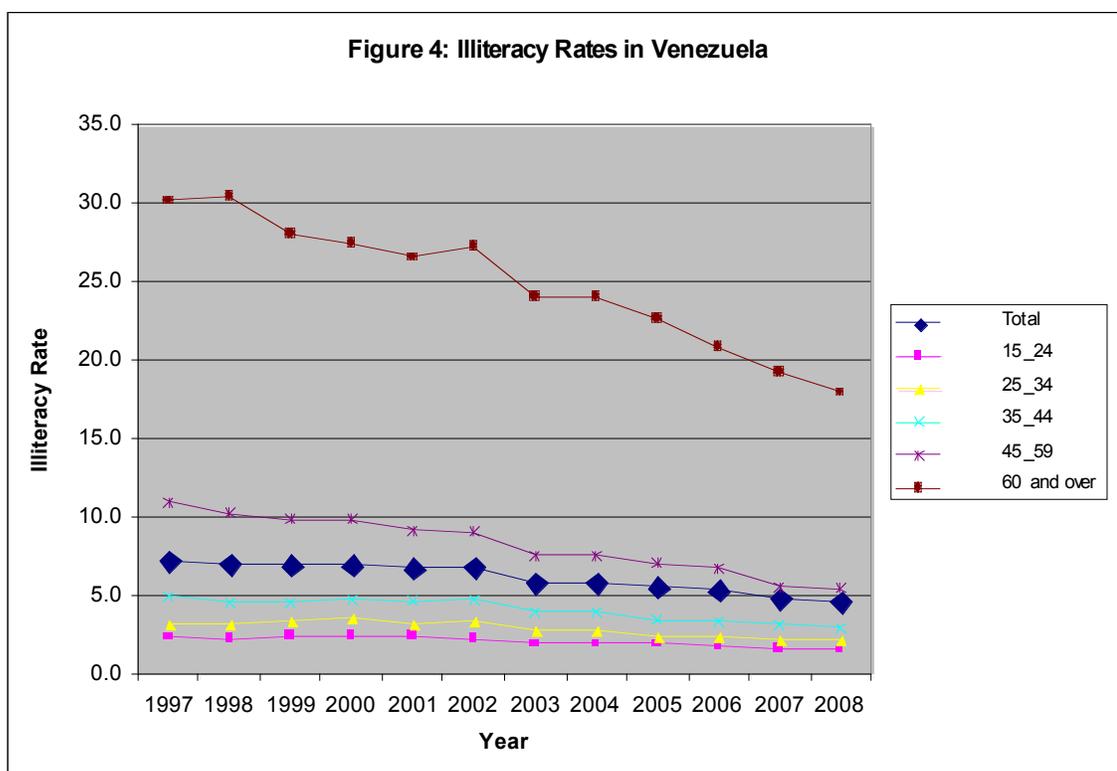
Misiones Ribas, Robinson, y Sucre: Education

Education indicators are often included in measures of quality of life, and are often seen as a crucial part of improving one's economic situation.¹¹ Education is an important aspect of any country's social agenda, and Chávez's Venezuela is no different. He has dedicated three different *misiones* to various aspects of education. *Misión Ribas* concerns itself with helping adults finish their high school degrees, *Misión Robinson* is charged with increasing adult literacy rates, and *Misión Sucre* provides aid for students of modest means who are engaged in university study.¹²

Michael Penfold-Becerra reports that *Misión Ribas* was widely criticized for poor quality, saying that it employed the use of video lessons in place of instructors in person, and the lessons were not equivalent to a normal high school education. The program served over six hundred thousand people by 2004, one year after its inception, and provided scholarships in the form of cash transfers to nearly two hundred thousand students.¹³ So, while serving an impressive number of adults-turned-students, *Misión Ribas* appears to have favored quantity over quality. Since school attendance rates in the CEPALSTAT data are based on age, and not level of instruction, it is not possible to

determine how *Misión Ribas* has affected attendance rates, but the figures cited by Penfold-Becerra indicate that large numbers of people have been served, though perhaps not very well, by the program.

In the case of *Misión Robinson*, the effort was immediately popular and according to official figures, as Penfold-Becerra details, over one million people were served in the first year.¹⁴ The mission was geared toward providing literacy education for residents of the shantytowns and rural areas who were extremely marginalized, although the program extended to more than just the extremely poor. The popularity of *Misión Robinson* led Chávez to create a second mission of the same vein: *Misión Robinson II*, in which graduates of *Robinson I* and other individuals work to pass sixth grade exams and to further improve their literacy.



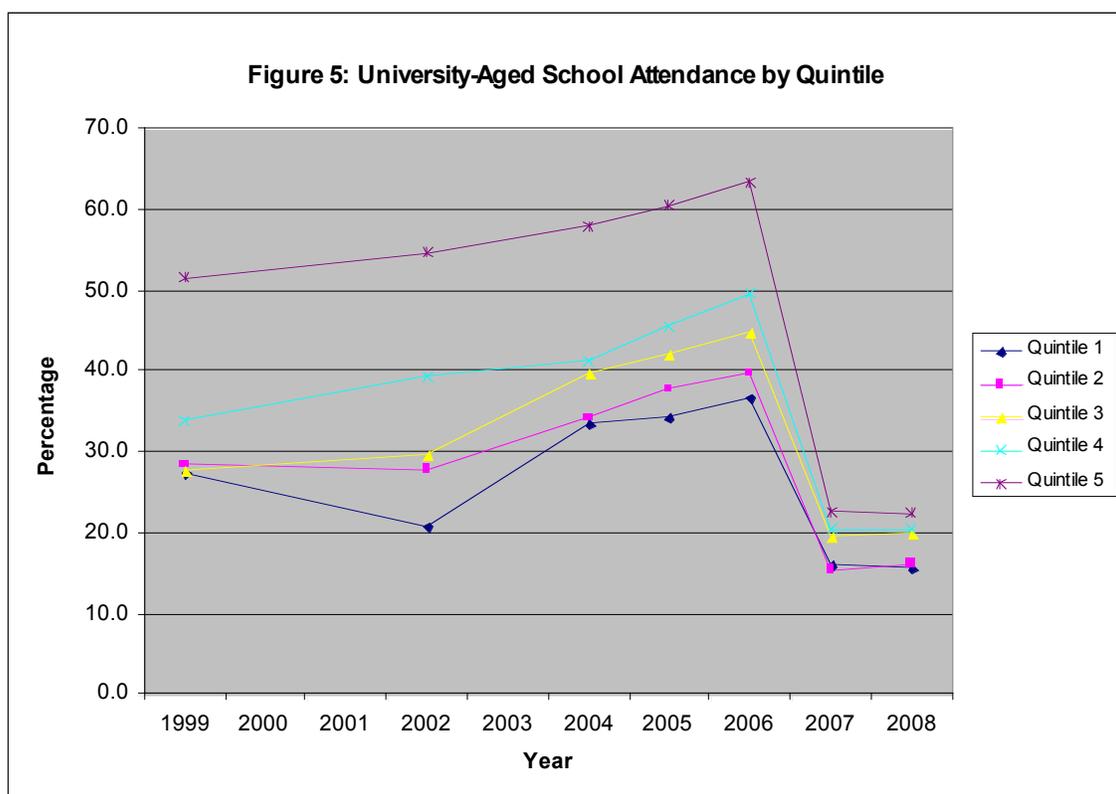
Source: “Illiteracy rate of the urban population aged 15 and over, by age group and sex,” CEPALSTAT, 2009.

Chávez's literacy campaign seems to have been essentially successful, with illiteracy rates consistently falling throughout his presidency. The largest decreases lie in the age 60 and over group, which had hovered at about 30% illiteracy for years, but the successes are not confined to the oldest age group. Illiteracy rates across the board have decreased under Chávez, and the overall illiteracy rate has dropped by just over a third. Additionally, the largest one-year improvement for each age group was in 2003, the year *Misión Robinson* went into effect.

Misión Sucre provides an entirely different service than the other education-oriented missions. While the others focus on raising the uneducated to basic levels of schooling, *Misión Sucre* endeavors to provide scholarships to university students who would otherwise be unable to pursue higher learning.¹⁵ This mission could offer a valuable and unique opportunity for members of the urban poor to obtain a university education, which can greatly increase their chance to improve their own socioeconomic status. Figure 5 features university-aged (20-24 years old) school attendance rates based on economic quintile. The data are unfortunately national statistics, but as discussed before, they will suffice to approximate the attendance of the urban population as well. The urban poor are, as always, determined to occupy the lowest two quintiles, which in this case (as opposed to the INE data for use of Mercal) are Quintiles 1 and 2.

School attendance rates for 20-24 year olds for the urban poor decreases (as a group) during the first few years of Chávez's presidency (1999-2002). However, starting in 2003, the rates rise considerably for the next three years until 2006, after which point attendance rates fall drastically for all sectors of society according to the CEPALSTAT

data. Attendance increased most in the bottom quintile, and Quintile 2 increased more than Quintiles 4 and 5.



Source: “School attendance of both sexes in urban areas by quintiles of per capita income of head of household, by age group,” CEPALSTAT, 2009.

Note: The household income is classified by quintile, based on per capita income. Quintile 1 is composed of the poorest households; quintile 5 corresponds to the richest.

The steep, unexpected and unexplained drop-off in university-aged school attendance across all economic quintiles creates something of a problem. Attendance rates in other age groups do not undergo a similar fall, and short of a nationwide university crisis, there is no reasonable explanation other than systematic error or a change in the way the data were collected or how variables were defined. Lacking an appropriate explanation, for the purposes of this study the university-aged school

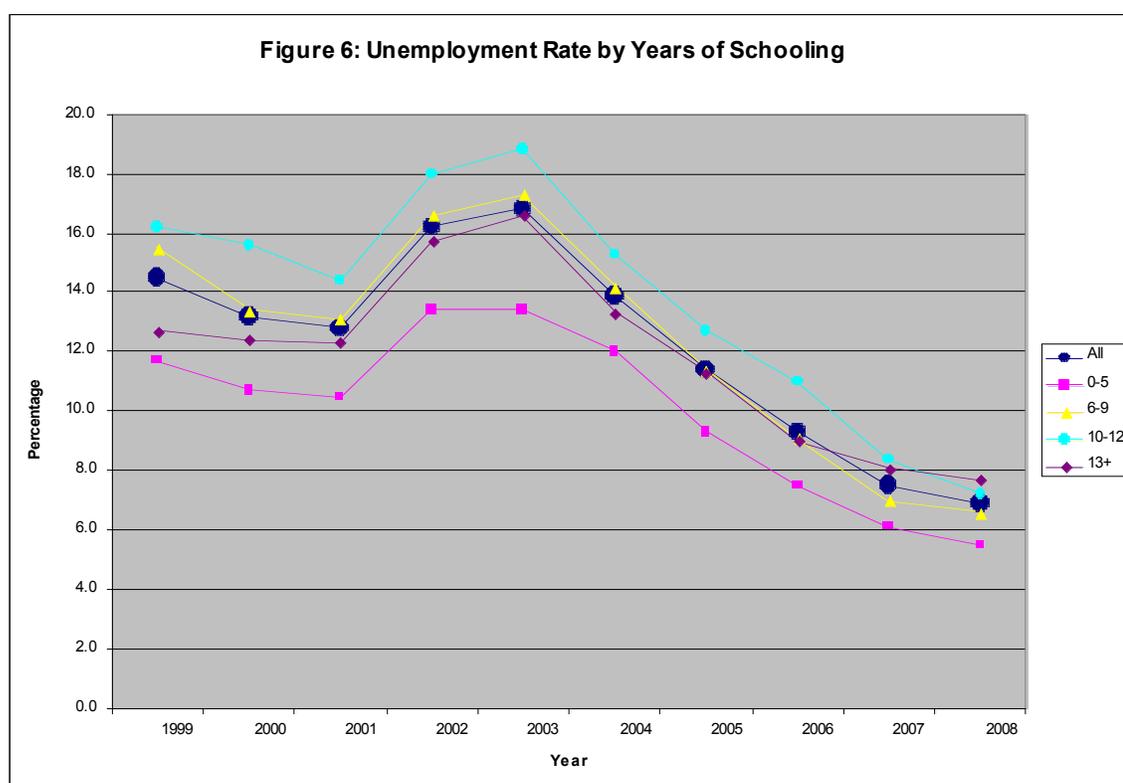
attendance statistics for 2007 and 2008 will be considered outliers and will not be considered in rendering final conclusions.

Education indicators for the urban poor have fared well under Chávez, with urban illiteracy rates falling and university attendance climbing, thus increasing the quality of life of the urban poor. While the Bolivarian Circles may have had something to do with increases in literacy in the early years of Chávez's rule, the most significant advances were made after the establishment of the *misiones* programs and *Misión Robinson* in particular. School attendance of poor university-aged students flourished under *Misión Sucre* but suffered before its existence. *Misión Ribas* may be an exception to Chávez's success in terms of education because of its reported poor quality, but without data that effectively measures its accomplishments pertaining to its audience of uneducated adults, it is fruitless to speculate what effects it has had.

Misión Vuelvan Caras / Ché Guevara: Employment

Misión Vuelvan Caras, which later became *Misión Ché Guevara*, has various aims, including some grand ideological and paradigmatic shifts towards socialism. Its more tangible goals are the twin objectives of providing employment for the unemployed and "dignified" employment for the underemployed, or those working in the vast informal sector not regulated by the state.¹⁶ Employment and quality of employment is a crucial part of quality of life because one's job often determines their economic prospects and therefore can have a large effect on other aspects of quality of life.¹⁷

Employment issues are a major concern of many Venezuelans. As depicted in Figure 8, when Chávez was elected over 60% of the population was “very concerned” about losing their job in the next year, and nearly 20% being “concerned.” This was not based on fear that Chávez would ruin the economy after being elected, since the level of concern over jobs is relatively constant for the years before and after his election, evidence that the reason was instead chronic job insecurity and uncertainty. Venezuelans’ concerns were well-grounded, with unemployment in the mid-teens (see Figure 6) and over half the employed population in the informal sector (see Figure 7).

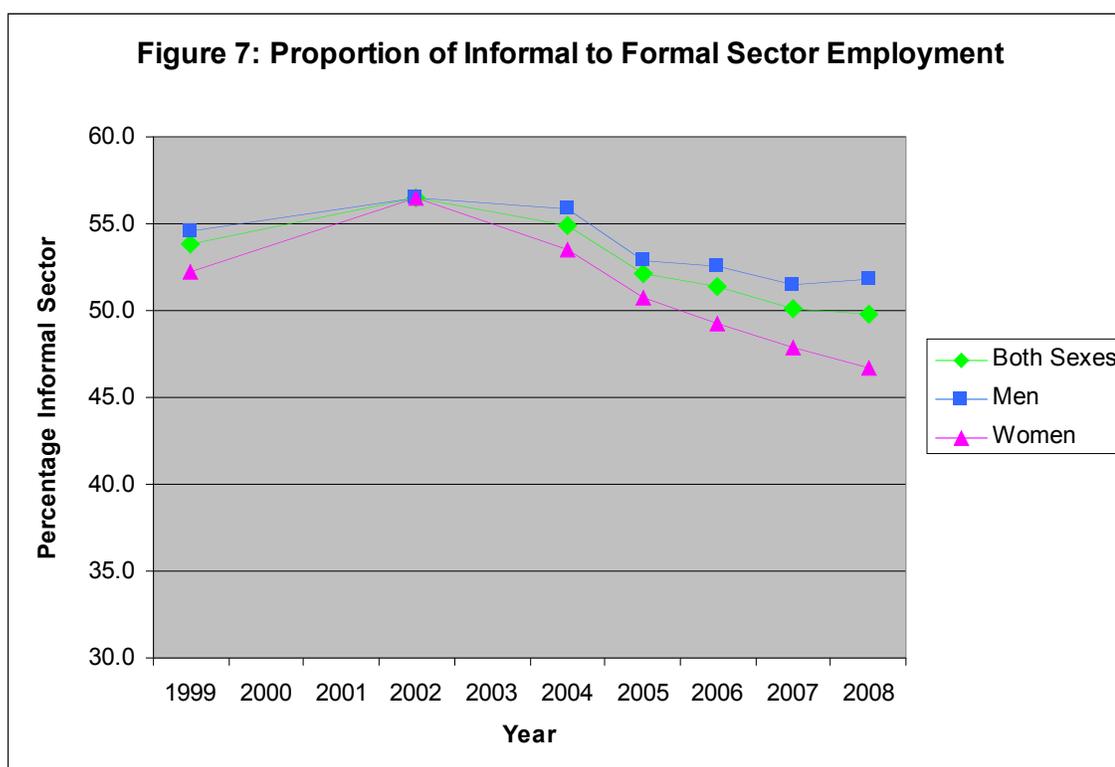


Source: “Urban open unemployment rate, by years of schooling and sex,” CEPALSTAT, 2009.

The national unemployment rate (Figure 6) increased under Chávez during his first few years, reaching a zenith in 2003, a year filled with opposition protests and strikes, including a major oil industry stoppage.^{18,19} 2003 was also the year that Chávez

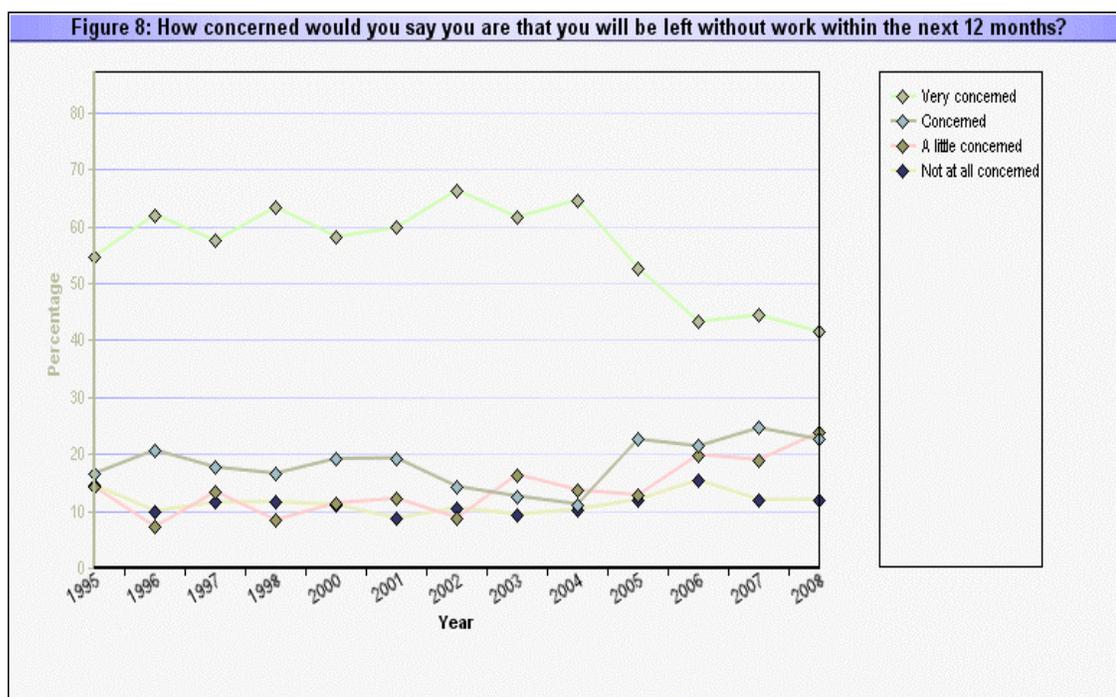
instituted his missions, and *Misión Vuelvan Caras* (Mission About Face), intended to turn the unemployment numbers around by focusing on work cooperatives, was founded early in 2004.^{20,21} After 2003 begins a sharp decline in the unemployment rate, a trend which can be reasonably attributed to *Misión Vuelvan Caras* and Chávez's other missions because of the timing of the improvements – they started the year after the missions were launched.

An interesting trend surfaces when the unemployment data are stratified by level of education as they are in Figure 6. One would expect that the more education a person has the more likely they are to have a job, but in Venezuela's case, the unemployment rate is generally lower for those with less schooling than for those with more. A person with zero to five years of education in Venezuela is more likely than any more educated person to have a job. This does not mean that the uneducated (or less educated) person will work a better job, however. On the other hand, the education level most likely to be out of work is high school graduates (ten to twelve years). The trend finally turns around after passing 13 years of schooling, or post-secondary study, at which point the unemployment rate predictably drops, but these well educated people are still less likely to be employed than someone in the lowest category of schooling. While this trend seems counter-intuitive, it is indicative of Venezuela's continued status as a developing country. Many opportunities exist for unskilled labor for the uneducated (especially in the informal sector) than for the better educated class which expects to work better jobs. Although unemployment as a whole has decreased under Chávez, this structure does not appear to have changed.



Source: “Ocupados urbanos en sectores de baja productividad (sector informal) del mercado del trabajo, por sexo,” CEPALSTAT, 2009.

Looking at Figure 7, it is evident that the proportion of employment in the informal sector to the formal sector has decreased during Chávez’s presidency, with the decreases beginning in earnest after 2004. This also coincides with the introduction and goals of *Misión Vuelvan Caras*. Informal sector jobs are less secure and generally lower-paying, but often require no education, which contributes to explaining the employment trend in Figure 6, since many of the unschooled workers are likely to be working in the informal sector.²²



Source: “How concerned would you say you are that you will be left without work within the next 12 months?” Latinobarómetro, 2008.

Under Chávez, unemployment has dropped significantly while still allowing the proportion of informal to formal sector workers to decrease, meaning that the jobs being created are in the formal sector and more likely to be stable than informal ones.

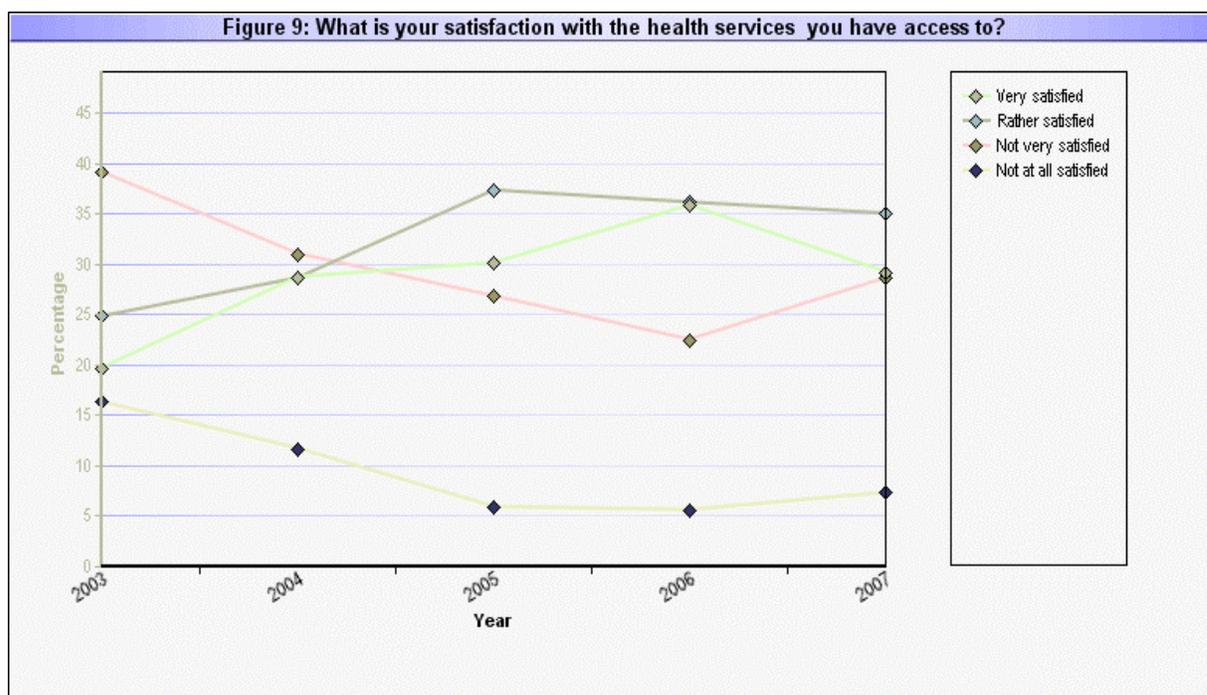
Venezuelans’ lack on confidence in their jobs displayed in Figure 8, while still high in 2008 with about 40% “very concerned” and over 20% “concerned,” has improved noticeably in conjunction with the increase in employment rates. All of this signifies an improvement in quality of life for the urban poor, with more people employed and greater confidence (or perhaps less lack of confidence) in their work prospects for the future.

Misión Barrio Adentro: Healthcare

Indicators of healthfulness are included in nearly all estimations of quality of life, and in the case of the urban poor, access to healthcare services is particularly salient. The shantytowns were established informally on otherwise undesirable land, often far away from proper hospitals, although most shantytown residents would be unable to afford a hospital visit anyway.²³ This leaves the urban poor with limited or no access to healthcare.²⁴ In order to balance the use of a measure of how satisfied Venezuelans are with their access to healthcare, which could be based on simple access and not quality, a more traditional measure of quality of life, Venezuela's infant mortality rate, will also be examined as a test for quality of care.

As another of his early *misiones*, Chávez began *Misión Barrio Adentro* (Mission Inside the Neighborhood) which aimed to “guarantee access to healthcare services for the excluded population,” that is, the poor.²⁵ In order to do this, offices and medical clinics were set up in areas where there was little access to healthcare, particularly the urban shantytowns. In its second phase, the mission planned to expand free care to all Venezuelans, and its third phase aims to modernize the hospital infrastructure. Another early mission, *Misión Milagro* (Mission Miracle) brought Cuban doctors to Venezuela as a result of an agreement between Chávez and Fidel Castro, and these doctors staffed the clinics set up by *Misión Barrio Adentro*.²⁶

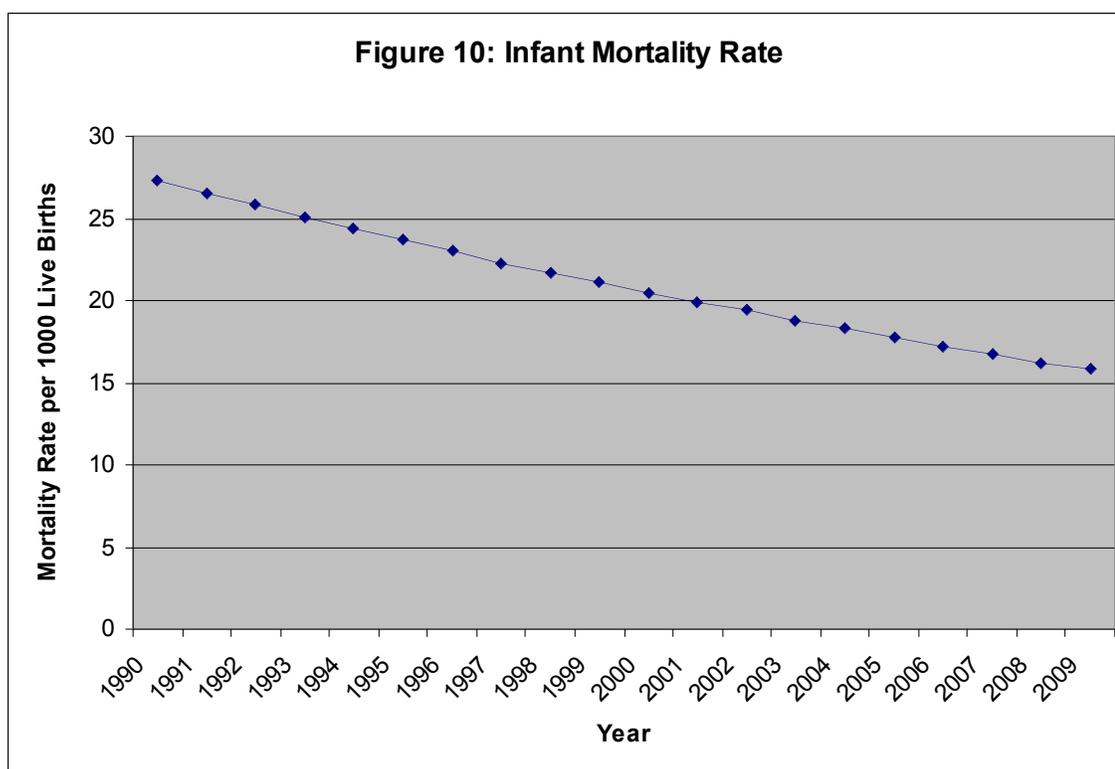
Figure 9 shows the results of a Latinobarómetro poll asking respondents to what extent they were satisfied with their health access, beginning in 2003 before the clinics set up by *Misión Barrio Adentro* were well established and continuing until 2008.



Source: “Satisfaction with the health you have access to,” Latinobarómetro, 2007.

The results of the polls show increasing percentages of respondents who answered “very satisfied” or “rather satisfied” through 2004 and 2005, when *Misión Barrio Adentro* was becoming more and more prevalent in Venezuelan healthcare. Satisfaction with health access remains relatively consistent after 2005. This suggests that the other phases of *Barrio Adentro* may not have been implemented, as it would be logical for satisfaction to increase if healthcare were made free to all Venezuelans.

With clinics being established across the country and with an influx of thousands of doctors, it would follow that national measures of health would increase as people achieved improved access to health services. Figure 10 presents the Venezuelan infant mortality rate, a commonly used measure of quality of life, including data dating back to 1990 for historical context.²⁷



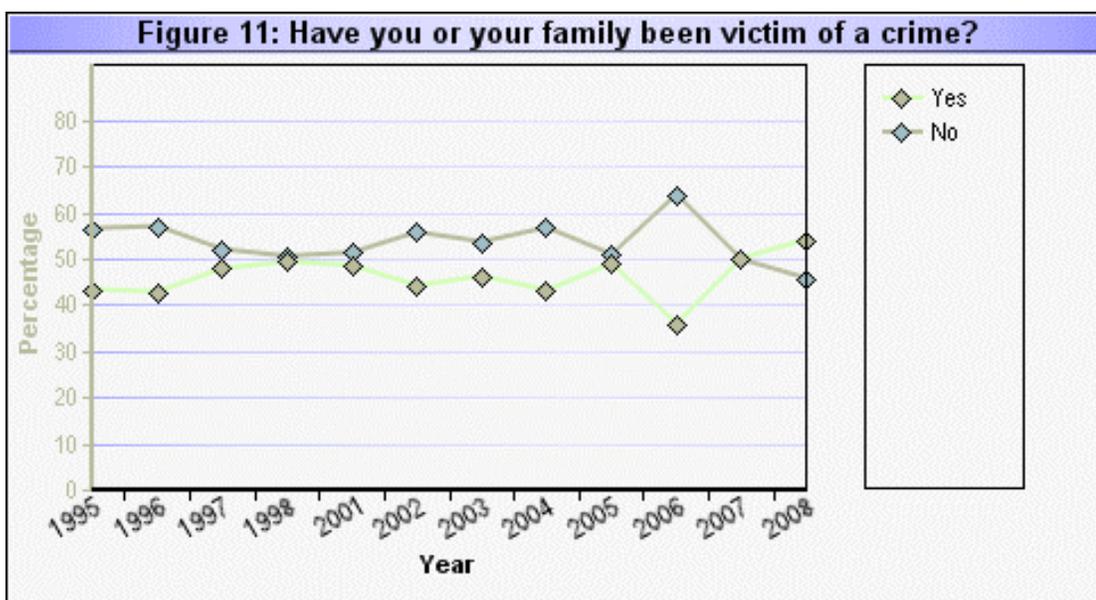
Source: “Infant Mortality Rate,” CEPALSTAT, 2009.

As is clear from the infant mortality data, the indicator has seen steady improvement during both Chávez’s administration and previous ones, so steady as to create a linear trend. While this is good for Venezuela, it does not exhibit any remarkable changes that are attributable to Chávez’s programs.

Misión Barrio Adentro seems to have had a positive impact on the Venezuelan people’s satisfaction with their healthcare access, and has successfully established clinics all over Venezuela, but it has not had a major impact on the trajectory of the improvement in the infant mortality rate. This does not necessarily mean that the clinics are a failure, since the infant mortality rate has continued to decrease, and the focus of the clinics lies in basic preventative care, which would not necessarily improve post-natal care.

Common Criticism: Crime

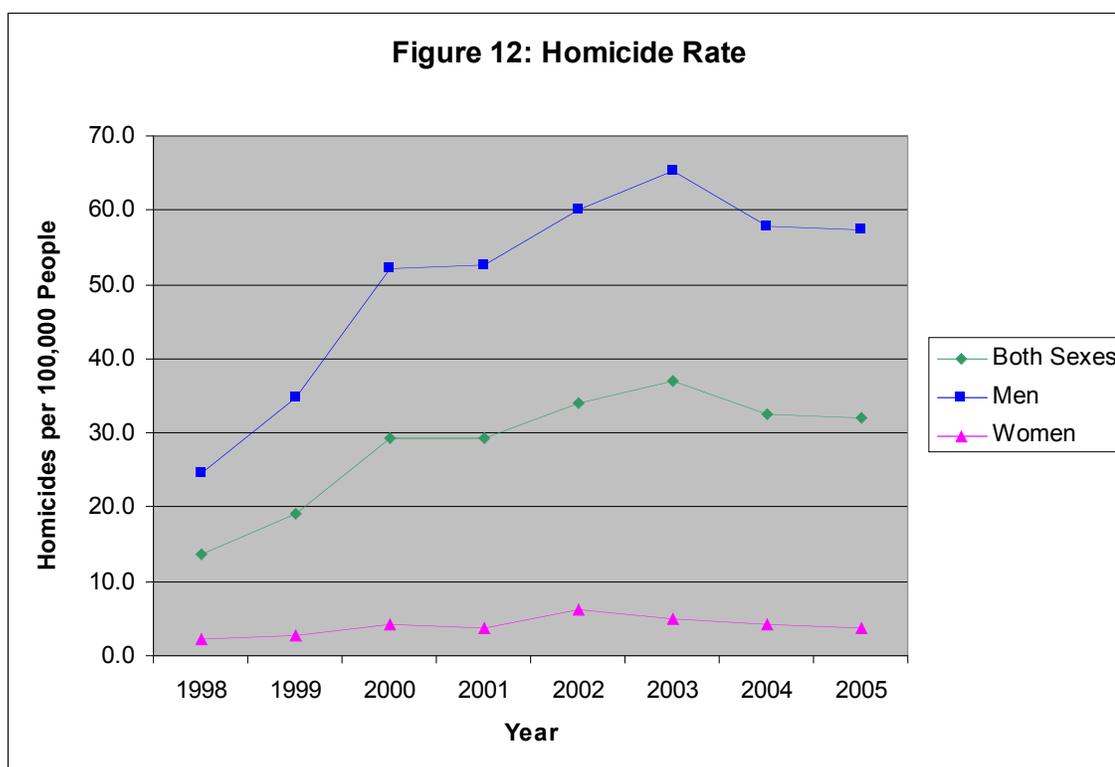
Safety from crime is yet another crucial aspect of quality of life in the context of shantytown residents in Venezuela. Crime is a major issue in Latin America as a whole, and in many countries people do not feel safe walking in their own neighborhoods at night. In Venezuela, about 45% of people felt this way in 2007.²⁸ A frequent criticism of Hugo Chávez is that crime rates have risen during his presidency, so this study will examine two indicators of crime levels, the first being an overall estimation of crime levels based on a series of Latinobarómetro polls and the second being the homicide rate in Venezuela.^{29,30,31}



Source: “Have you or your family been victim of a crime?” Latinobarómetro, 2008.

The number of respondents reporting having been the victim of a crime in the last 12 months remains relatively constant, within a reasonable degree of fluctuation, before and during Chávez’s presidency, although in 2007 and 2008 over half of the respondents answered “yes.” The evidence in Figure 11 does not suggest that there was a marked

increase in crime levels under Chávez. However, the data in Figure 12 suggest otherwise.



Source: “Tasa de Homicidios, por sexo,” CEPALSTAT, 2009.

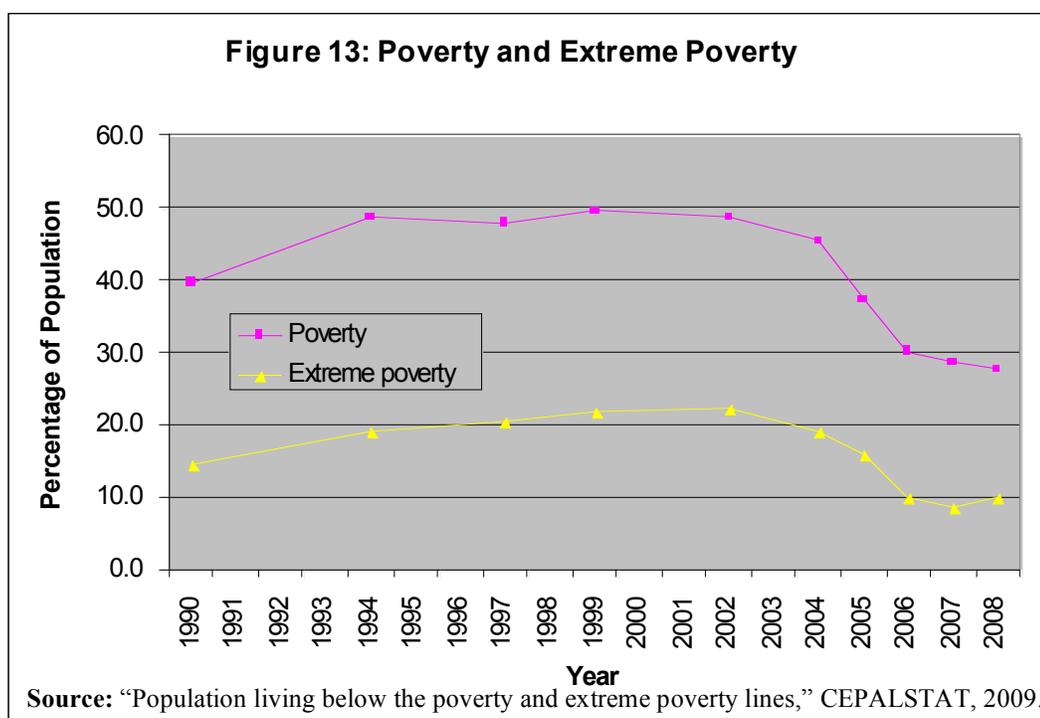
The homicide rate in Venezuela has increased dramatically to more than double what it was when Chávez was elected in 1998, lending support to criticisms levied against the president. While Figure 11 does not indicate any significant increase in crime, Latinobarómetro public opinion polls show that between 62% and 87% (depending on the year) of Venezuelans perceive crime as having “increased a lot,” and over 90% see crime as a “real issue” rather than an exaggerated problem.^{32,33}

Whether or not non-violent crime really is on the rise, about half of Venezuelans report having been the victim of a crime within the last year, the homicide rate has skyrocketed under Chávez, and large numbers of Venezuelans see crime as a pressing

problem. Crime has clearly affected the quality of life of Venezuelans, and as with any population, the poor are likely to be more subjected to crime than more wealthy classes.

Misión Cristo: Poverty

Widespread poverty is perhaps the most obvious problem facing Venezuela, and Chávez treats it as such in *Misión Cristo*, which declares the eradication of poverty as the overarching goal of all of the *misiones*.³⁴ In addition to all of their individual purposes, each mission has as an indirect objective: the alleviation of poverty. The majority of them



do so by directly helping the poor, such as *Misión Mercal*, *Barrio Adentro*, *Vuelvan Caras*, and the educational missions. In the case of *Misión Mercal*, for example, the Mercal subsidies allow the poor to spend less on food and more on other efforts that could help lift them out of poverty.

After Chávez was sworn in as president, the poverty and extreme poverty rates stagnated for several years until 2003 or 2004 when, as shown in Figure 13, they began to drop significantly until about 2007, when they evened out once again.

Although a poverty rate of twenty-seven percent is not exactly impressive, moving 21% of a country's population out of poverty over a span of six years certainly is. Given that the consistent drop in the poverty rate began around 2004, it is reasonable to surmise that much of the credit for the decrease can be attributed to Chávez's various *misiones*, many of which were established in 2003 and 2004. The stagnation of poverty rates during the first four or five years of Chávez's presidency suggests that the *Círculos Bolivarianos* were ineffective at fighting poverty, although they are generally more recognized for their political and organizational role than for their role in social work. It is also not surprising that the poverty level evened out after decreasing for a few years; had it continued its steep decline, Chávez would have accomplished the end goal of *Misión Cristo* already. Unfortunately, it is likely to be more than a few years before poverty is eliminated in Venezuela.

Chapter 3

Conclusions

Chávez has during his presidency mounted many different attempts to gain the favor of his most crucial voting bloc – the Venezuelan urban poor. Some of his attempts have been organizational in nature, such as the *Círculos Bolivarianos* and the *consejos comunales*, and others are more institutional like the *misiones*. All of these efforts have a political and a public purpose; to build support for Chávez and to improve the lives of the Venezuelan poor. This correspondence between Chávez's political and social goals is definitive of his political success. One can choose for themselves which realm Chávez favors more. An anti-Chavista might see that Chávez's political goals, i.e. remaining in power, are sustained by his careful manipulation of his social policies aimed towards the poor. However, a leftist could see that Chávez's social goals, i.e. the alleviation of poverty, happen to gain him increased electoral support and help him win elections. While reality is sure to be grounded somewhere between the two views, there is certainly no shortage of moral positioning on the topic.

This study sought to determine tangible results changes in the quality of life of the urban poor during Chávez's presidency, and to understand how his policies may have affected those changes.

During the first several years of Chávez's presidency, many indicators of urban quality of life fluctuated without establishing any discernable trend. This was the case with unemployment, school attendance, poverty rates and housing statistics. This lack of

dynamic change suggests that the early Bolivarian organizations, in particular the *Círculos Bolivarianos*, had little concrete effect on the quality of life of the urban poor. Chávez also pursued lower-profile efforts during this time, some of which the *Círculos* helped administer, but there was no significant improvement in the standard of living of the urban poor. This may be due to the importance that the *Círculos* placed on political activism, which limited their possible scope because of finite time commitments and because the groups may have alienated (or chosen not to help) some anti-Chávez individuals.

After the advent of the *misiones* initiatives in 2003 and 2004, however, nearly all components of urban quality of life included in the study saw noticeable, even dramatic improvement. The literacy rate, the university attendance rate, the unemployment rate, healthcare access, and the poverty rate all saw improvements in the *misiones* era. Not all social indicators improved, however. Access to basic housing-related services has not improved under Chávez. Even though *Misión Mercal* seems to have failed to assuage the problem of under-nourishment in Venezuela, it has been widely popular and provides heavily discounted foodstuffs to all manner of Venezuelans. As a result, it is likely to have had positive effects for the Venezuelan populace despite its lack of success for the population under the minimum daily consumption level. One of the largest problems with the Bolivarian missions is that they operate on oil windfalls, and are therefore not sustainable in the long-term. Another is that spending on the missions is opaque and purely up to the executive.¹ Michael Penfold-Becerra also points out that some of the missions are focused with more attention to politics than to poverty.²

One issue not covered in Chávez's missions is crime. The homicide rate has more than doubled under Chávez and Venezuelans have identified crime as one of their major concerns, but there has been no major coordinated effort to combat it.

The *consejos comunales*, created in 2006, had little time to establish themselves by 2008 (the most recent year for which there is any consistent data), so any effect they have had or will have is likely to be the subject of future research. In terms of other possible investigation, an analysis of some of the *misiones* which were difficult to capture in this study – such as Ribas and Hábitat – could be worthwhile.

Venezuela has achieved some impressive accomplishments in terms of quality of life during the recent years of Chávez's presidency, such as lifting over 20% of the Venezuelan population out of poverty. These accomplishments may prove fleeting, supported as they are by subsidies and programs funded by oil revenues, but that is an issue for another study. The quality of life of the Venezuelan urban poor has improved in some tangible ways under Chávez, largely by his *misiones*, and he has reaped the political rewards that this success offers: continued electoral and political support from his most crucial electoral base.

Despite the quantitative successes at poverty alleviation, it is important to keep in mind that while according to CEPAL guidelines the poverty rate was 27% in 2008, the people who were recently lifted out of poverty are not likely to be wealthy quite yet. Again, as Damaris Canache puts it, “poverty loses meaning as a descriptive category if virtually everyone is poor.”

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