Daniela, 31, lives with her husband and six children in the same concrete house in La Matanza where she grew up. La Matanza is a satellite city west of Buenos Aires with a population of 1.8 million. Several industries in La Matanza used to manufacture textiles, diesel engines, household appliances, and steel, but they have all shut down. A local Ford plant laid off a thousand workers, and Fiat dismissed another thousand.

In the past, most people in La Matanza earned their living at these factories, but now most of the men work in temporary construction jobs and many of the working women are domestics. Poor people in La Matanza also survive as trash pickers, beggars, thieves, and drug dealers. Some of the areas settled within La Matanza are considered illegal by the municipality and are denied access to all basic services. A group of women from La Matanza rates hunger as the most pressing problem for their community, second only to the lack of work.

Daniela’s four boys all attend school, but “they don’t have notebooks, pencils, or uniforms.” Daniela says that making ends meet has become an endless struggle:

I am an only child, I have no relatives. My baby daughter is a year old. My husband juggles temporary jobs. The last time he had work, it lasted three months. He has no contract and there are no sure jobs. I used to work cleaning. It brought some money home, but now with the baby I cannot work, although if something comes up, I can manage. My husband works wherever he can. Last week he was a laborer cutting lawns, which was good as I bought some shoes for the children. I buy whenever he finds some
job. . . . I am waiting to be called by the employment agencies. I have put my name down in all of them. . . . As long as the work is decent, I have no problem sweeping streets or traveling to the capital. Perhaps employers would pay for the trip.

Another woman in La Matanza, for decades a skilled worker in a textile mill, has been unemployed since the mill closed. She tells researchers that a close friend died a few hours after receiving a telegram informing her she was being laid off. Another woman in the same discussion group adds, “When it happened to me, I felt like my legs had been cut off.” Elena, a day-care worker, remembers,

In this neighborhood’s better days, we had a bishop who supported us. They say sadness over Menem’s policies killed him. . . . They found him dead of a heart attack. He was a friend of the workers and the unions. . . . When the area’s textile plants, which had provided jobs for so many, all closed down, he couldn’t bear it.

In another discussion in the area, men aged 45 to 65 recount their own stories of downward mobility: “There used to be plenty of jobs at good pay; you could even land two jobs”; “I worked in the steel industry as a solderer, and in my spare time I did roofing and construction”; “I worked a backhoe, dug holes for all kinds of underground work, telephone cables, gas lines”; and “I used to make $40 a day at the meatpacking plant—been out of work since it closed four years ago.” In another group, a young man relates, “In my father’s time you were out of work maybe for a week or so. Nowadays, you’re unemployed for years. The only way out is when you die.”

The repercussions of the layoffs affect not only individuals, but entire families and society at large. Poverty is already impairing La Matanza’s younger generations. A mother says, “I’m unemployed, so I can’t keep my kids in school. They have to go to work instead of getting an education.” Violence in the home is escalating, as is violence in the streets. Parents fear for more than just their children’s education. Women in a discussion group explain,

The lack of security is tremendous. Anyone can do anything to you. There are kidnappings, murders. When we cleaned up a vacant field we found all kinds of horrible things—weapons, syringes—and we also know that rapes were committed there. . . .
Riding a bicycle used to be pleasant but I can't ever let my children out; you can't let a child go ride a bike. It's not just that [thugs] will steal the bike, it's that they use knives and guns... It isn't the robberies that scare me so much, it's the rapes. I have teenage daughters and I don't sleep at night because we live in a very unsafe neighborhood... People never used to rob from their own neighbors.

People who want a safer environment for themselves and their families have little recourse in La Matanza. A woman reports, "Within the police department and in my neighborhood there are informants. If we report a criminal we run the risk of being fingered and suffering retribution."

A common theme underlies the sentiments expressed by men and women who participated in the Voices of the Poor study in Argentina: the quality of their lives has deteriorated. In urban areas, they attribute the decline mostly to unemployment and crime. From their words, a dramatic picture emerges of the personal and social consequences of market reforms and factory closures. Policy and market changes have also affected the country's agricultural sector; however, poor families in the three rural communities appear to have a better quality of life than those in urban areas on account of their safer, less crowded, and less polluted environments. Still, rural study participants remark that their lives are now more difficult than in the past. According to a villager in Los Juries, "Before, you could buy everything. It has been years since I bought a chair; I can't buy clothes. There isn't enough money for food. We eat every day, but only at noon, not in the evening."

Argentina suffered a long period of hyperinflation and recession in the 1980s, which lasted well after the nation's transition from military rule to democracy in 1983. In those years, poverty in Buenos Aires skyrocketed from 8 percent of the population in 1980 to 41 percent at the end of the decade. In the 1990s, however, the Argentine economy underwent a massive transformation. Upon taking office in 1991, President Carlos Menem introduced an austerity program and market-oriented policies that initiated a period of unprecedented price stability and high rates of economic growth. The government's reforms included improved
fiscal and tax policies, liberalized trade, a large privatization program, the
devolution of health and education responsibilities to the states, and
changes to the social security system. The second-term Menem adminis-
tration managed to maintain growth despite the emerging markets crisis
of 1997–98, but the economy fell into a severe and prolonged recession
in 1999.

Argentina enjoys the highest per capita income in Latin America
($7,550 GNP per capita in 1999) and some of the region's highest so-
cial sector spending. However, these averages camouflage large pockets
of remaining poverty, a chasm between the incomes of the rich and
poor, as well as an inequitable distribution of public resources. Al-
though on the decline, Argentina's poverty rate remained relatively high
at 29 percent in 1998. This means about 9 million Argentines live in
poverty and about 2 million of these people cannot meet their basic
food needs. Urban-rural disparities are also large. While rural poverty
statistics are limited, in 1998 poverty rates approached 50 percent in
three rural provinces. Further, while Argentina has one of the most ad-
vanced education systems in the region and universal primary enroll-
ment, only 24 percent of students among the poorest 20 percent of the
population complete secondary school. In addition, poverty-oriented
safety net programs are abundant, but 75 percent of poor people do not
receive any public assistance. Overall, the gaps in the provision of basic
services and infrastructure are far larger than would be expected in view
of the country's GNP and the level of public resources devoted to eco-
nomic and social development.

The key theme that emerges from the study is the impact of the major
economic changes and weak social infrastructure on the lives of poor peo-
ples in Argentina. Researchers met with women, men, elderly people, and
youths in five poor urban neighborhoods located in the core and on the
outskirts of Buenos Aires, and in three poor rural communities (see table
1, Study Communities in Argentina, at the end of this chapter).

The municipalities and communities in this study were selected ac-
cording to poverty indicators and geographic distribution. All five urban
communities and one of the three villages are from the Province of
Buenos Aires, which contains more than 40 percent of the country’s pop-
ulation. The remaining two rural communities are located in the north-
eastern Province of Santiago del Estero, one of the poorest and least
populated areas of the country.

Participants were identified with the assistance of municipal authori-
ties and local institutions, including the Cooperativa Unión Campesinos in
the case of Los Juries, school directors in Isla Talavera, and day-care staff in La Matanza. In some communities the institutional linkages were facilitated by the World Bank. A total of seventy-two discussion groups involving 714 men, women, and youths were held, including forty-seven groups in urban areas and twenty-five in rural areas. In addition, sixty-one individual and institutional case studies were conducted, including forty-seven individual case studies with poor women, men, and youths. An independent consultant coordinated the study team, which consisted of nine researchers. The study was carried out in March and April of 1999.

The chapter highlights urban participants’ struggles with factory closures and lack of livelihood alternatives. It then reviews the linkages that poor Argentines perceive between downward socioeconomic trends and changes in household relations between women, men, and children. Next, the case study explores rising problems of crime and lack of police protection. It concludes with a discussion of poor people's very mixed reviews of governmental and civic responses to the problems they face.

**Lost Livelihoods and the New Labor Markets**

Like men and women in La Matanza, people living in the other communities visited in Argentina are concerned first and foremost about unemployment. The economic transformation of the 1990s resulted in a greater reliance on technology and shifted labor demands to skilled workers. This has left many unskilled workers unemployed or earning very low wages in the informal economy. Only 55 percent of Argentina's entire labor force is employed in the formal economy and covered by unemployment insurance, health insurance, and labor legislation protections. The remaining 45 percent are self-employed and informal workers; the latter are more likely to be poor. According to a woman from Florencio Varela, "The job shortage is a neighborhood problem, but it's also a problem for the entire country. There isn't enough work. Men can only get temporary jobs as laborers and sometimes not even that. Often we women have more chance [than men] of finding work, as domestics."

In general, people in many discussion groups attribute deepening poverty and joblessness to extensive governance problems. They also view high levels of inequality as a cause of poverty. A leader of a cooperative in Los Juries explains,
I believe that this government is not interested in changing things. They want poor people to continue being poor, and if possible to get poorer because that way they have secure votes and no one speaks out, and if someone does challenge them they buy him off with a political job or they find another way to shut him up.

In more than one urban neighborhood, “foreign debt,” “inequitable distribution of resources,” and “lack of solidarity” are listed as causes of poverty.

A discussion group of young and adult women in Florencio Varela concludes that the five key causes of poverty are: “Companies aren’t hiring. They require a high school diploma. Industries have shut down. They hire foreigners over natives. They discriminate on the basis of buena presencia [a middle-class appearance].” A list from a group of men in La Matanza underscores the widespread view that poor people are at an increasing disadvantage in finding a job, particularly those who are no longer young: “They ask for a high school diploma, you have to be under 30, and you can’t have any kind of health problem or have had an operation... For those who are over 40, no one will hire us. You can look and look, but you’ll never find a job.” Concerns about age discrimination surface elsewhere. A discussion group of women in Florencio Varela reports that “men, if they are over 35, do not get hired”; and in Villa Atamisqui a woman fears that her husband “will never get hired again because he’s in his late forties.”

Many poor people also blame mechanization and competition from foreign producers for the unemployment crisis. A group of women in La Matanza observes, “They import junk... and you get the fall of Argentine industries like El Hogar Obrero, Textil Oeste... Lots of those plants employed women, too, but they couldn’t compete and we’ve been out of work ever since.” A laid-off worker in Dock Sud blames technology: “I believe the more machines you have, the less you’re going to need people. Take the loading dock. You used to need 100 or 200 workers to load a ship. Now everything is in huge closed containers and one guy with a crane can load them all. Who needs a workforce?” Similarly, people in La Matanza identify “technology versus labor” and “investment in machines rather than workers” as two of the causes of poverty. In Los Juries people conclude, “Technology generates unemployment because it brings machines.”

Other poor people consider technology to be a source of new barriers to employment because higher skills are required to work with new
technologies. Participants in a discussion group of young men and women from Barrio Sol y Verde explain,

The machines . . . made the work easy and clean, but now the worker has no job. To run the machines you have to know word processing, and whether you get the job also depends on whether you have buena presencia. . . . It isn't enough anymore to have completed primary school. Now you need computer skills to get a job packing vegetables.

Jobs that require higher skills mean that employers look to hire educated workers. In Isla Talavera, where only a few have an education beyond primary school, young women say, “You need a high school diploma to get a decent job. If not, you'll be exploited by the ones with money.” Similarly, a woman in La Matanza comments, “Even to get hired as a servant you need an education.”

For those who have jobs, study participants report exploitative pay, abusive treatment, and loss of dignity (box 1). As a man in Sol y Verde describes it, “I work in construction. In the old days, the architects would ask me things. Now I am treated like dirt.” Another man from Sol y Verde says, “I used to have a position where I had specific responsibilities. They didn’t order me here and there; no, I had my job. Now they make you do every kind of task imaginable and for only $200 a month.”

**Insecurity and Struggling Families**

Barrio Sol y Verde lies in the heart of Buenos Aires. It was a residential neighborhood until the late 1970s, when a military government began bulldozing villas in the capital. Since that time, large numbers of poor people from other parts of the city, nation, and continent have ended up in Sol y Verde. A neighborhood activist estimates that 85 percent of the community’s men are unemployed. Many households live on what mothers and daughters earn as domestics. Participants in Sol y Verde say that this is a dramatic departure from the past. According to one resident, “Now there are gangs, and since there is no work, they take drugs and drink alcohol.”

Just before the researchers visited Sol y Verde, two suicides occurred. The first was a battered wife who poisoned herself. The second was a young pregnant woman who threw herself in front of an oncoming train with two small children in her arms, ending all of their lives.
Attempts to survive poverty—not always successful—often wreak havoc on traditional family roles, and pain caused by these upheavals is borne by women, men, and children. Many participants in urban locations report a dramatic shift of the breadwinner role from men to women. Although women’s lives have not drastically improved with employment opportunities, women who enter the work force frequently acknowledge gains in their status, including greater freedom and control over household decisions. A resident of Florencio Varela explains, “Before, when men had jobs, they made most of the decisions. Now that women go out and work more and cover the household expenses, they make a lot more of the decisions. . . . The one who works is the one who makes the decisions.”

Unemployment for men, in contrast, has been a blow to their authority and self-esteem. Some men are adapting, particularly those who find new roles helping their families and communities, but many others
seem to be withdrawing into antisocial and even abusive behaviors. Children are particularly vulnerable as families struggle with economic hardship and the difficult transition in household gender roles and responsibilities. Trends in gender role reversals are much less prominent in the rural communities visited than in urban settings.

**Gender Roles Overturned**

In the urban settlements, it is generally agreed that with increased women’s employment, men perform more household tasks than they used to. However, men and women disagree about the extent to which men assume responsibility for domestic chores. While men firmly state that they now do some household chores, women say that men cooperate only grudgingly. From a women’s group in Florencio Varela, researchers heard: “Now men help more, but this does not represent a significant contribution to household chores,” and “Men are more concerned about their own matters.” Another woman from Florencio Varela says,

> When I go to community meetings, [my husband] stays home and takes care of the kids and sometimes even cooks and does the wash. You have to push them to help around the house. They know how to do housework, but they wait for the woman to do it. . . . They aren’t all the same. Some—a few—are different and they take on all the housework.

Sometimes there is a complete reversal of breadwinner and caretaker roles. A man from Moreno reports, “The economic situation changed everything. I feel awful when my wife has to leave for work on Saturdays and doesn’t come back until Monday, but she earns $40 per day. I take care of the kids, cook for them; we do okay. I don’t hit them and I try not to punish them.”

Sudden and extensive gender role reversal has not been easy for men or women. A woman in La Matanza says,

> I watch the unemployed men dropping off their kids at day care, which used to be a woman’s task. Their heads are low; I think they feel humiliated. Now that the woman is working, the man feels very impotent and sad. One man in our neighborhood left his family just so he wouldn’t be a burden anymore. He
could no longer help support them because he couldn’t find work. He was just one more mouth to feed.

A woman from Sol y Verde says, “You can’t do anything right for a man stuck at home. He criticizes everything; he’s always in a bad mood.” The emotional toll that unemployment takes on men affects the whole family. “Since he’s been out of work, my husband has little interest in life. He doesn’t know what to do with himself,” says a woman from Moreno. “He paces; it scares me sometimes. Lately he’s been helping around the house a lot, even though he doesn’t like it, but I’m worried about him.” A woman from Dock Sud observes, “Men are more difficult now... They won’t discuss things; they’re more impatient. They get angry a lot easier. When they’re jobless they’re anxious and they take it out on you.”

Almost universally, discussion groups of men speak of the frustration, anger, and humiliation that stem from a diminished traditional male role and the misery of joblessness. “As the father of the family, it troubles me that my wife has to travel to another city and work. Being out of work makes you anxious and puts you in a very bad way. It is the worst thing that can happen to you,” says a man from Florencio Varela. Men also state that joblessness is undermining their effectiveness as fathers and husbands, which in turn they relate to problems with children and to domestic strife. A man from Sol y Verde notes, “When I was young we showed more respect for our parents. I used to call my father ‘Sir.’ Now, my kids say to me, ‘What the hell do you want?’” According to a group of men from Moreno, “There is no place for the man anymore, no role. Men used to be closer to their children.”

In the three rural communities visited for the study, gender roles are reported to have changed little in the past decade, largely because men and women have traditionally shared demanding household and agricultural tasks. Also, rural areas are typically more cut off than urban areas from broader forces that shape social change. In Los Júrìes men report,

*The man’s activities haven’t changed, they’re the same as they’ve always been because we are the ones who bring home the bread. . . . We’ve always gone to work in the fields to plant the cotton, harvest the cotton. . . . We don’t have much time to concern ourselves with housework, but we tend the garden and the animals, which the women also do. We also haul water and bring firewood. But it hasn’t changed much. We’ve always done that. Our other occupation is to raise our children, to educate them.*
Similarly, people in Villa Atamisqui indicate that men's household activities have remained relatively constant over the past decade. When they return from their temporary work in other provinces, men “split wood, make repairs to home and fence, talk with children, cook, clean house, and tend the goats and chickens.” In Isla Talavera women fish from canoes, hunt, raise poultry, and till the soil as they have always done. Marveling at their strength, the director of the local elementary school describes mothers in Isla Talavera who manage to send as many as ten children to school every day with clean uniforms, which were washed in the river, scrubbed against rocks.

Some rural people perceive that women are gaining more authority in the household despite few changes in responsibilities. A young man in Villa Atamisqui says, “Men used to come back from working several harvests and be able to say, ‘Here is the money I’ve earned.’ Now, if they’re lucky, they work one harvest, but the rest of the year they have no income. So women now have more say over household expenditures.”

Abuse at Home

Domestic abuse of women is present in all eight of the study communities, according to discussion groups. They associate it with social norms that sanction violence, as well as with rising poverty and alcohol abuse. While people acknowledge that problems of domestic violence are now dealt with more openly, they say that it remains a widespread problem.

In the rural settlement of Villa Atamisqui, women trace domestic abuse to long-standing social norms. “Sons beat their mothers” and husbands “teach their sons to beat women up,” these women say. Participants in urban areas also recall when abuse of women was widely accepted. According to a woman from La Matanza, “Women used to put up with everything: infidelity, mistreatment, and sexual relations out of obligation instead of love. The union was maintained for the sake of appearances. There was more abuse and one stayed quiet.” Similarly, a woman from Florencio Varela reports, “In the old days, the man was boss and lord . . . not so much as lifting a finger around the house. Before, people didn’t talk much about wife battering. Women kept quiet and didn’t even ask for help. Perhaps there was more violence then, but women put up with it.”

Other discussions associate domestic abuse against women with women’s employment and men’s frustration with unemployment. A young woman in Sol y Verde observes, “When my father was out of work
he felt really bad. He was home all day doing nothing and got worse and worse. My brothers and sisters went to school, my mother went to work, I already had a job, but he had nothing to do but take it out on us. That’s why families break up.”

Alcohol consumption is also widely associated with violence against women. “The woman works, brings in the money. The man asks for money to buy a beer, and she doesn’t want to give it to him. That’s when the hitting starts,” explains a young man from Florencio Varela. Many beatings are linked to drunkenness, as well. Women in Villa Atamisqui note, “Drunkards have a tendency to batter.”

Some women, such as Luisa, a 43-year-old public health promoter in Sol y Verde and a mother of seven, find the resources to leave violent homes. Luisa’s husband became increasingly violent after he lost steady work doing maintenance for a garbage collection business:

In my house it was all fighting; I had to put up with a lot. I tried to be patient, to wait until he realized, to not give it too much importance, but always the fighting. . . . Everything was an excuse for a beating. When I answered it was because I answered, when I didn’t answer it was because I didn’t answer. I got angry and didn’t speak. He would come close and be all nice and then again the fight. I didn’t have any friends—I couldn’t have any friends. He threatened me. He even threatened me in front of the children.

I left home with my children; I couldn’t stand it anymore. I managed to get a small house and I left. I withdrew. The children see their father very little. He still lives close by in Sol y Verde, but they rarely see him, only when I take them, and I have to stay with them.

**Effects on the Next Generation**

The daily struggle to survive has negative impacts not only on women and men but also on children, as frequently both parents must be absent from the home. In cities, both men and women speak of a crisis in day care. A discussion group of men and women from Moreno reports,

*There are small children in the street. They have homes, but their parents are working and they’re out in the street all day without supervision except for maybe a sibling who’s*
only a year or two older. Some older street children are fending for themselves. They get tired of having no food at home and go off on their own. Many disappear. Some return, others don’t.

In part because schools occupy and care for students during the workday, study participants in almost every community rank their schools very high. The residents of Florencio Varela explain, “The school is good for learning because the children get fed and because it allows us to go to work.” In Sol y Verde people also appreciate the school “not so much for the learning, but because the children are safe and well cared for and the teachers are kind to the children.” Though a primary education is practically universal in the urban locations, sending children to school is a hardship for parents. Says a parent in La Matanza, which has the largest elementary school in the nation (2,200 pupils), “You might have to make your child go without supper for a month in order to have enough to buy him his school uniform.” Only the people of Moreno rank their schools relatively low; they say they lack teachers, discipline is weak, children are mistreated, and the facilities are dirty.

While people recognize the importance of a secondary (and university) education for obtaining many jobs, the need to begin working causes many poor youths to drop out. According to recent statistics, 37 percent of youths between the ages of 14 and 18 in the lowest consumption quintile do not attend school.11

Absence of adults at home, according to discussion groups, is linked to increases in juvenile delinquency, abandonment, and incest. Many people also describe an increase in teen pregnancies. “Nowadays you see 14-year-old mothers. Girls aren’t being educated and protected anymore. Maybe it’s because their mothers have to work and aren’t around to educate them better,” says Claudia, a woman from Dock Sud. A parent from Sol y Verde reports, “In my son’s class today there are several pregnant 11-year-olds. It’s not only accepted, it’s common.” Sexual abuse is also becoming commonplace. Dock Sud study participants mention the case of a 7-year-old hospitalized with infections after sexual abuse by her caretakers—her grandfather and stepbrother. In Sol y Verde participants tell of a couple whose urgent concern, upon learning that their daughter had been raped by her babysitter/cousin, was that they no longer had anyone to watch the girl and her many siblings while they worked.

When speaking of the dangers that children face, however, participants are especially concerned about street crime. Substance abuse is
often mentioned as a closely related problem. See box 2 for comments from various discussion groups.

Parents in the study also raise questions about modern cultural forces that reinforce consumer values and violence. “What you’re worth is measured by what you have,” asserts a 46-year-old man from La Matanza. “My kids come home from school saying, ‘I have to have this brand of sneaker, that brand of clothes.’ It’s the culture of consumption; it happens to children; it’s instilled in them very young. If you could hear my 7-year-old daughter . . .” A group of men from Moreno say that in the past “there wasn’t so much violence and sex on TV . . . one grew up in a

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<th>BOX 2 Crime and Drugs Fill the Gap</th>
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<td>“The oldest is supposed to look after the younger children, but the siblings don’t obey. They skip school, get into trouble.”</td>
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<td>A woman, Sol y Verde</td>
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<td>“There aren’t many job opportunities for young people. This leads to drugs, drinking, and robberies.”</td>
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<td>Discussion group of men, women, and girls, Sol y Verde</td>
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<td>“Teenagers say, ‘Why should I bother to study if it won’t get me a decent job?’ They see that the ones who get ahead have chosen the path of crime.”</td>
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<td>A man, La Matanza</td>
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<td>“Here in Isla Maciel, we young people hang out all day with nothing to do, so what do you expect? When you need money, you have to get it somehow.”</td>
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<td>A young man, Dock Sud</td>
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<td>“We believe the violence comes mostly from the drug problem. What we are working for is the regeneration of employment. The drug issue is closely tied to joblessness.”</td>
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<td>A neighborhood organizer, Dock Sud</td>
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<td>“I keep wondering what will become of the guys I used to hang out with, since you need an eighth-grade education to be a manual laborer in construction. Can you believe it? To haul concrete! And people ask why there’s so much crime and drugs.”</td>
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<td>A male teenager in Dock Sud who landed a construction job after a two-year search</td>
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healthier environment.” A man from a discussion group in La Matanza states, “The reality is we don’t have enough to eat anymore, but they bring color TV and Adidas in here. Young people aspire to have things their fathers can’t provide—and that’s where the delinquency comes in.”

**Pervasive Crime**

In all of the urban neighborhoods visited, people make frequent references to crime and violence in their lives and indicate that it is increasing. An older resident of Moreno reports, “Ten years ago this was a tranquil place. There were about 100,000 people. Now there are over 500,000. Everything is totally messed up.” Carmen, 66 years old and also from Moreno, lives with crime and drugs literally at her doorstep:

> I live across the street from a house where they sell drugs. [Buyers] come in cars; they get the wrong place a lot and come bursting into my house. They insult me, they shout, “Where is so-and-so?” One time they grabbed me. You don’t know how terrifying it is . . . I’m so afraid that someday they’ll do something to my son.

Carmen tells the researchers, “I went to the police but they don’t do anything.”

Participants in other urban areas experience the same kind of fear and anxiety. “The violence is bad here. . . . You can get robbed at any hour and often [attackers] are armed. For no reason they’ll wound you or kill you,” reports a study participant from Sol y Verde. In Florencio Varela women say: “You can’t hang clothes to dry because they’ll steal them off the clothesline”; “What kills you is they’ll steal your TV set and immediately sell it for $5 to buy drugs, while you’ll be paying for the thing for years”; “Every night around nine, we start to hear gunfire.”

Poor people assert that fear of crime and lack of police protection have also eroded community ties. “Nowadays when a child is being abused, the neighbors don’t get involved. In the old days they would intervene and defend the child,” says a woman from La Matanza. According to Claudia, a woman from Dock Sud, “It’s every man for
himself. People will watch you getting killed and say to themselves, ‘I’d better stay out of it.’

**Police Brutality**

Across urban communities, many discussion groups single out the police force as one of the worst institutions both in their daily lives and during a crisis. They indicate that the local police are not only ineffective but also corrupt and sometimes repressive. In Moreno a participant says, “You have to pay them to come, and even then they don’t do anything. The muggers will rob you whether there’s a cop nearby or not.” A discussion group of men and women from Dock Sud reports:

*Far from defending us, the police mistreat us; they come in and rough up teenagers and don’t do anything to the real criminals.*

... *The gangs pay them off. ... They’ll round up a bunch of people and beat them up, but not the thieves. ... The police are just another gang. ... The police chase criminals into here, shooting the whole time when there are children playing in the street. When we protest, they shove us around and say we are defending the criminals. ... They insult us and threaten us.*

In Sol y Verde a young man asserts, “We’re more afraid of the police than of the thieves. They grab street criminals and throw them in front of oncoming trains.” Claudia, of Dock Sud, reports, “Now, the police steal from you, and when you go to [the police station] to report a crime, you come out raped.”

In contrast to the treatment poor people receive, discussion groups say that the police cater to the wealthy and powerful. In Florencio Varela participants say, “The reason we don’t have any protection in our neighborhood is because [the police] are all over at the weekend houses, protecting them because those people bribe them”; and “Here security is like everything else: the only ones who have it are the ones who pay for it.” In Los Juries, a woman notes,

*It’s clear that when the [agribusiness] firm files a claim against us peasants, the police take it, but when we go into the police station to make a report on what the company’s agents have done to us, the police don’t let us file a complaint. They tell us the boss isn’t in, come back at six; or you go and they’re*
out of forms—they give you a thousand excuses. But the company can go there at any time it pleases, and the police will take their claim.

Safer Places in the Countryside

Poor people in rural areas report a very different crime situation. In Isla Talavera people say, “It’s peaceful here. You don’t need to lock your doors.” Residents of Villa Atamisqui state, “None of [what happens in cities] happens here.” Participants of Los Juries remark, “Our community is very tranquil. There is no violence. We heard once that the drug problem had reached Santiago [the capital of the province], but we don’t have it here. The violence here is poverty.”

Community bonds also appear much stronger in rural areas. In Los Juries poor people explain, “Around here we help each other out. We all get together and make empanadas to raise money for the community center, or if I’m out of sugar my neighbor will give me some.” In Isla Talavera men in a discussion group say, “Living in poverty isn’t pretty, but to be a poor person is nice because we help one another,” and “We of the island have fewer problems: we are poor, but happy.”

There are numerous indications that life in rural Argentina is changing, particularly in places such as Isla Talavera, an island in the delta north of Buenos Aires. There the number of tourists, the price of property, and the cost of living have already begun to soar. In places such as Los Juries, much of the land is owned by large conglomerates. Due to new laws that encourage landowners and corporations to reclaim abandoned lands, poor people say, it is only a matter of time before development destroys the livelihoods of the 90 percent of people in the area who have occupied and farmed the land for decades.

Limited Community and Governmental Responses to Poverty

In addition to joblessness, hunger, and crime, people in all of the communities visited lack or have inadequate access to most basic services. Polluted drinking water, substandard housing, and nonexistent or inadequate transportation, electricity, sanitation, and communication services are widely reported. A number of poor people in the communities, and poor women in particular, have mobilized organizations
and resources to provide needed services. In addition, there are a striking number of government assistance programs for poor people in Argentina. While extremely important in terms of daily survival, few of these programs seem to result in greater economic opportunities or better provision of basic services to poor communities.

A new study on social capital in Argentina finds that rates of civic participation in organizations and groups are very low relative to those in other countries. Within the country, the level is lowest in the greater metropolitan region of Buenos Aires, where several of the study communities are located. The survey also reveals that very poor people are more likely to participate than middle-income groups, but not as likely as the significantly better-off groups, which suggests that “the very poor participate as part of a coping strategy, while the less poor find the opportunity cost too high or the experience too unrewarding.” More women participate than men, although leaders of organizations are more likely to be male. Poor people’s organizations also tend to consist of other poor people with similar backgrounds, and “serve mainly for self-help and ‘getting by’ rather than for leveraging new resources, transforming situations, and ‘getting ahead.’” These patterns are mirrored in the communities visited for this study, and raise important challenges for building more inclusive and empowered communities that can bring meaningful change.

Community-Based Actions and Partnerships

Men and women in the five urban communities say their community-based organizations provide important services but are not as effective as they could be. In rural areas, few local organizations are even acknowledged in discussions about institutions that help poor people in their daily lives. In explaining the relatively limited effectiveness of local organizations, a participant in Moreno states, “There is a lack of unity and support, there is always a ‘but.’ . . . In the neighborhoods there are always disputes among different groups; if one wins, the others try to bring them down, and vice versa.” In Florencio Varela a resident says, “The cooperative society doesn’t do anything. We don’t even know where it is located. They all function the same way. You ask them for something and they ignore you.” In Dock Sud a villager reports, “Here we have a housing cooperative, but apart from that, for everything else, everyone fends for themselves.”
Against this backdrop of weak local institutions, however, stories emerge in several communities of civic activism to address hunger and other pressing needs. Moreno, on the western outskirts of Buenos Aires, is one such place. Moreno residents used to hunt duck and squab and work in the cattle industry. There were three large meatpacking plants, some employing more than 5,000 workers. Residents also found employment at textile plants and a tile factory. Moreno now has a number of gated communities, one of which employs over a thousand people as domestics, groundskeepers, and pool cleaners.

Nowadays, hunger is a pressing problem. Women in various Moreno neighborhoods have organized soup kitchens for residents. These initiatives rely on local leadership and support, and many also turn to public, private, and civic partners outside the community. As a group of participants explains, “Several women in the neighborhood have run a soup kitchen for four years now. They go out and ask for donations from supermarkets and department stores. The women who are a little better off chip in a few pesos, a poultry plant donates some chickens.” The group also explains that “for ideological reasons” this particular soup kitchen does not receive help from the municipality.

Women from another part of Moreno describe extensive partnerships between a neighborhood group and the municipality for the delivery of food in their neighborhood:

We started our soup kitchen three years ago . . . in my home.
The municipality provides food and assistance through Plan Trabajar. . . . We serve fifty children and ten senior citizens. At first it was small, but we’ve been expanding. The municipality gave us carpeting. The fathers of the children [who eat there] helped with the construction.

A third group of women focuses on hunger relief for older people: “We serve meals to the elderly three times a week. The municipality gives us starches and grains. The rest we provide ourselves, but often there simply isn’t enough food. Neighbors contribute some, but there are grandparents here who have to go without.”

In yet another neighborhood in Moreno, women who run the local soup kitchen needed a proper place to prepare the meals and serve them. Under the tutelage of an elderly bricklayer, these women mixed and
poured the concrete and raised the community building. It is also used for community events, birthdays, wakes, and other milestones, and several Voices of the Poor group discussions were held there.

In the other four urban neighborhoods there are also soup kitchens, day-care centers, and a variety of other neighborhood organizations. With little police protection is available, some of the urban communities in the study have tried to reduce crime on their own. Women in one neighborhood installed and pay for local streetlights. In several urban neighborhoods, women activists use a “buddy system” to avoid having to walk alone. People in La Matanza who founded a settlement on a dump-site proudly recount their neighborhood crime-watch successes. They banished a young, violent criminal from the area and only allowed him to return after many months, reformed and repentant. They threatened a neighbor who was dealing drugs from his home with arson, thereby convincing him to desist.

Community-based initiatives can be found in rural areas as well, and many of the most highly regarded ones benefit from government support. A good example is the Farmers Union Cooperative, which a group of men in Los Juríes ranked the second most important institution in their community. They proudly claim that it was created “by us, ourselves.” “Through it,” they explain, “we manage credits that come from external sources, we distribute them to people who need them and to our members.” Also through the cooperative, “we receive information from other institutions and we solve problems. For instance, in this lot we had planted seeds, but we couldn’t enclose it with a wire fence. Through the cooperative we obtained credit to fence and enclose all lots of land.” The men indicate that the cooperative serves as the contact point for all the government programs in Los Juríes, “and through this channel, these programs are more effective.” They say, “The cooperative is like the central rural commission.”

In Isla Talavera the local school functions as the point of delivery for a range of government services, including transportation, employment, food, education, birth control information, and vocational training. The school provides uniforms and shoes to all children, as well as breakfast, lunch, and a snack every day. Local men are employed at the school in repairs, maintenance, and vegetable gardening. The “school bus” is actually a ferry, and it serves other members of the community as well. Carrying adults and children each day, it is the only means of transportation many residents have to leave the island. Also, whenever there is a flood, the municipal government dispenses mattresses, blankets, food, and drinking water at the school.
The Isla Talavera school houses a women's workshop funded by a provincial government program called Manos Bonarenses, which provides sewing machines, fabric, and a trainer. Local women started by making sheets and became quite proficient. They now embroider shawls and pillow shams, and quilt baby blankets, bibs, and other items. The province pays cash by the unit for their handiwork. In the words of one beneficiary, “At the school they taught us to sew. They give us the fabric and we sew at home or at the school. Some of us earned enough at it to buy sewing machines and work at home.” Some people speak of matters that cannot be quantified. A 58-year-old woman says, “Five years ago I started coming to the school. It changed my life. I used to be holed up in my house. Now I have work and I have friends. They took away all my shame here. There is great camaraderie.” The women of Isla Talavera have heard that elsewhere the province supplies a layette to new mothers, and they are working toward obtaining that benefit, too.

**Government Helps Poor People Survive**

Poor people express appreciation for a large number of government assistance programs, many of which build on and support strong community-based associations and leadership. Manos Bonarenses, discussed above, is but one of the government programs that participants mention favorably. They also give high marks to Plan Trabajador, a municipal jobs program that employs 30 percent of all men and 20 percent of all women in La Matanza, and to Barrios Bonarenses, a provincial government work program to improve neighborhoods in Sol y Verde. Another valued program is Plan Vida, a provincial government plan that distributes a weekly ration of milk, eggs, cereal, and rice to pregnant women and children through the age of 6. Beneficiaries also receive information on nutrition and child development from a *comadre*, a locally trained, female outreach worker. Other programs mentioned include Plan PAIS, a national employment program, and Plan Asoma, a national program to alleviate hunger among the elderly (Dock Sud). Los Juríes receives assistance from additional government programs: INTA, Prohuerta, Programa Social Agropecuario, Plan Surco, and Plan de Fortalecimiento de la Sociedad Civil.

Despite the plethora of programs specifically targeted to poor people, however, coverage is limited. As mentioned above, only one-quarter of poor Argentines receive any public assistance. Forty-four percent of
children from birth to 2 years in the lowest consumption quintile—one of the groups most vulnerable to long-term harm from malnutrition—receive benefits from public nutrition programs. There are significant regional disparities in public spending, with rural and indigenous areas often left out of government social programs. People living in squatter settlements, such as the members of one group in La Matanza, cannot receive many benefits because their settlements are illegal. In addition, many poor people are undocumented aliens and thus cannot use services such as health clinics.

Participants in the study express deep concerns about how social programs are implemented and whether they actually reach the intended beneficiaries. Political interference is identified as a problem in some discussion groups. In general, people do not feel they can participate in improving the programs intended to help them. For instance, although Plan Trabajar is appreciated by most study participants, a day-care director in La Matanza indicates that many of the beneficiaries appear to be selected arbitrarily, and adds, "We have practically no access to Plan Trabajar; it is politically organized around fifteen neighborhoods. We managed to work for six months, but after that they pulled the plug."

"What will become of us when the program ends?" poor people ask. Indeed, the residents of Los Juries describe hardships resulting from the elimination of a monthly subsidy that used to be paid to small landholders (of ten hectares or less). Similarly, people in La Matanza are feeling the cuts to several assistance programs: "The hospitals used to be free and they gave you the prescriptions. Now for them to see you, you have to be dying. It never used to be like that. They would always attend to you the same day"; "Now they charge $5 any time you go to the clinic"; "Ten years ago we had the FONAVI housing program."

Participants also sometimes express mixed emotions about the effectiveness of social assistance in providing a path out of poverty. In Florencio Varela manzameras (neighborhood activists) observe, "Plan Vida relieves the problems, but it doesn't resolve them. The same can be said of the housing program. Sure, we all need housing, but first we need jobs because I for one would like to be able to pay for my house and call it my own." In Villa Atamisqui a similar line of reasoning is heard: "People go to the municipality to receive handouts of medicine and food. It's no good—it would be better to give them jobs." Finally, a young man in Dock Sud points out that "when they give you a box of groceries they're also taming your dignity."
Problems beyond Poor Communities

The many social assistance programs notwithstanding, poor people voice strong disapproval of the government itself, and especially of politicians. People in Villa Atamisqui identify the failure of government institutions as their primary problem, and rank political parties among the lowest of all institutions. In many cases, their anger toward the government is palpable, with critiques including gross economic mismanagement, large-scale corruption, and a total lack of accountability. A discussion group participant in La Matanza charges, “The policies of the national government put us out of work.” Men and women in a discussion group in rural Los Juries express their frustrations with the government:

Ever since Menem took power we are worse off in the countryside. . . . If we don’t get a change of government things are going to get even worse. . . . The municipal government only remembers us when it’s time to vote. . . . They have what they have thanks to our sweat. . . . In election years, the municipal candidates come here for a day, they pat you on the back and give you a kilo of sugar. . . . They deceive you, they lie to you, they toy with the misery of the people. They promise, “When we win we’ll build roads. Whenever you need something, the doors of the municipal government will be open. We’ll be there to help you.” These are false promises—how many years have they been promising such things and the roads are still the same? . . . We go in to see them and are told, “They just stepped out,” or “He’s in the capital, come back another time.”

Poor men and women in the study also reveal a fair amount of resentment toward the upper classes. At more than one location, participants use derogatory terms (ricachones, cogotudos) for people with money and note “excessive accumulation of wealth” by a few in the nation. One man adds, “They’re going to keep squeezing us. . . . Next they’ll be putting little stamps on our foreheads that say ‘Slave So-and-So.’” A young man in Dock Sud notes that the political beliefs held by neighborhood residents are a source of stigma: “One of our problems is that the Anglo [his neighborhood] got labeled as a ‘red’ zone. If you say you’re from here, you won’t get a job.” In fact, the neighborhood was the site of

Argentina 355
intense repression under the military dictatorship. Some community activism still faces resistance—at times brutal—from public authorities (box 3).

Conclusion

A rgentines who shared their perspectives and experiences do not speak entirely with one voice, but they do converge on four issues. First, their lives used to be better, both materially and otherwise. Second, unemployment is destroying their families and communities. Third, crime has become an inescapable fact of life for poor people in urban areas. And fourth, neither elected officials nor the police are much help, but a range of civic and government initiatives do play important roles in their lives. Soup kitchens, food programs for pregnant women and young children, vocational training, and other initiatives are valued, even if they are not catalysts for broader social change. Access to these resources, however, is very uneven.

Labor markets are shifting dramatically and poor people are finding it difficult to cope. With 89 percent of the country urbanized and
extensive poverty affecting the cities, job creation is critical. Small entre-
trepreneurs and informal workers need supportive regulations. In addi-
tion, poor people want better access to training and skills development
programs, as well as financial services to help them generate incomes
and develop the economy in their communities. Poor neighborhoods
desperately need infrastructure improvements. Study participants also
clearly called out for major police reform.

Argentina needs to protect a larger share of its poor population with
effective safety nets. This will require expanded efforts to reach the most
vulnerable as well as greater use of temporary programs that can be mo-
bilized when the economy is in crisis. The study highlights some success-
ful community-government partnerships in the delivery of social
programs, and these efforts should be increased. People say they rely on
these supports, and express concern over benefits that do not arrive as
promised and that leave them dependent or without resources when the
program ends. There are no channels for their participation in the design
or delivery of government services. More transparent and accountable
processes would help to reduce uncertainties, political interference, and
corruption, improve the coverage and targeting of programs, and raise
low levels of civic engagement among poor people.

Some participants in the study acknowledge that government-civic
partnerships for community development require a two-way commit-
ment. As a participant in Sol y Verde explains, “In the neighborhood
there isn’t as much progress as we would like. It’s the fault of the munic-
ipality, but it is also our fault because we neighbors cannot seem to get
together and agree on many things, including cleaning the streets and cut-
ting the grass.” In addition to more and better public support for basic
services, community improvements will require building local capacities
for organizing and problem solving. Measures that support successful
civic groups include providing more information to community organiza-
tions on government programs and on their rights, and supporting broad-
based community involvement in setting priorities and overseeing
implementation. Local groups can also be valuable partners in monitor-
ing the use and impact of the programs designed to benefit them. Other
supportive actions include an improved legal environment for communi-
ty activism as well as direct legal aid to poor men and women.

With the exception of some male community activists, poor men in
Argentina are having trouble coping with the changes forced upon them.
Male teens are at severe risk of taking up criminal activity and drug
abuse, and female teens are becoming single mothers at a startling rate.
Old people in these communities live in fear and suffer from hunger. In the midst of all this, many adult women in Argentina are responding with ingenuity and collective action, and even humor. So, despite the grim circumstances of life in Florencio Varela, a woman can look at a stinking mound of garbage and say, “It’s been here for about two years and it’s starting to seem like it belongs. Pretty soon we’ll be celebrating its anniversary.” Perhaps quite different landmarks could be celebrated if greater numbers of communities had more dynamic local economies and the organizational strength and resources to resolve their pressing needs.
### TABLE 1 Study Communities in Argentina

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>URBAN AREAS</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Barrio Sol y Verde, Buenos Aires Province</strong></td>
<td>An inner-city area of Buenos Aires, the settlement is located in the municipality of José C. Paz (population 205,000). Ninety-five percent of the dwellings have electricity; 90 percent of adults are literate, and only 8 percent of household heads did not complete primary school. The main concerns in the municipality are related to unemployment and to problems with relief assistance and food provision.</td>
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<td><strong>Dock Sud, Buenos Aires Province</strong></td>
<td>The settlement is located in the municipality of Avellaneda (population 350,000). From the turn of the century to the late 1970s it was one of the main industrial sectors in Buenos Aires, with huge meatpacking plants and a soap factory. Dock Sud today is an abandoned shell; only an oil refinery and a shipping container firm remain in operation. Mail carriers, taxis, and ambulance drivers refuse to enter Dock Sud, saying it is too dangerous. Residents come and go via a footbridge or by boat. Either way, they are prey to armed youths. The area is awash with industrial runoff and raw sewage when it rains.</td>
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<td><strong>La Matanza, Buenos Aires Province</strong></td>
<td>La Matanza's dwellings include Ciudad Evita, a complex of high-rises built by the government in the 1950s, villas, and the El Tambo, San Pedro, José L. Cabezas, and González Catán settlements. The José L. Cabezas settlement was established by 170 local residents who invaded a landfill and built regular houses on a traditional street grid, with a plaza. They have not obtained basic services yet and as far as the municipality is concerned, their community is illegal.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Florencio Varela, Buenos Aires Province</strong></td>
<td>One of the poorest communities visited, Florencio Varela is located on the southern outskirts of Buenos Aires, where many settlements have been established on public and private lands. Roads are not paved, and there are no sewers, telephones, or gas lines. Electricity is obtained via illegal connections. To enter and exit, residents must use a single narrow path that leads to the paved road, and young toughs charge them a “toll” for their passage.</td>
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**URBAN AREAS (continued)**

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<tr>
<th>Moreno, Buenos Aires Province</th>
<th>Pop. 370,000</th>
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<td>On the western outskirts of Buenos Aires, which used to be mostly country estates, Moreno is now plagued by unemployment, high crime rates, a serious drug problem, AIDS, polluted water, and mounds of trash. In recent years it has undergone a large demographic expansion.</td>
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**RURAL AREAS**

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<tr>
<th>Villa Atamisqui, Santiago del Estero Province</th>
<th>Pop. 9,300</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mud-brick huts are found throughout the area, and most homes lack water and electricity. Primary education is not universal and many people are illiterate. Chagas' disease, a debilitating blood infection caused by an insect that nests in the mat roofs of poorly built houses, is widespread. In the town, juvenile delinquency and drug abuse are problems.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Los Juríes, Santiago del Estero Province</th>
<th>Pop. 30,000</th>
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<tr>
<td>Most men work on cattle ranches and cotton plantations and most women work in some form of agriculture as well. Travel is by horse and mule. Residents have occupied area settlements for more than three decades. Some of the settlements visited have long-standing activist, peasant cooperatives.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Isla Talavera, Buenos Aires Province</th>
<th>Pop. 500</th>
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<td>The village is located in the municipality of Campana (population 71,500). Cyclical flooding is a major problem. A significant number of people live in yellow two-bedroom houses that the government provides to flood victims. People increasingly work for the owners of weekend homes. A large percentage of the population of Isla Talavera receives some form of public assistance. The main problems are unemployment and lack of transport and communications.</td>
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Notes

1. The study team was led by Daniel Cichero, Patricia Feliu, and Mirta Mauro, and also included Silvia Fuentes, Hernán Nazer, Blanca Irene García Prado, Héctor Salamanca, Mariano Salzman, and Norberto Vázquez.

2. Throughout this chapter, $ refers to Argentine pesos. The peso has been at parity with the U.S. dollar since 1991.


6. Ibid., 108.

7. The other two components of the safety net are social insurance (57 percent), a contributory program that doesn’t reach the many poor people who work in the informal sector; and education and health (36 percent). World Bank, “Memorandum from the President of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development to the Executive Directors on a Country Assistance Strategy of the World Bank Group for the Argentine Republic” (September 2000), 9.


9. The urban poor in Argentina live in three kinds of housing: barrios, villas, and settlements. Barrios are generally older neighborhoods with paved streets, concrete construction, and basic services. Villas are shantytowns with precariously constructed housing and chaotic layouts, usually lacking basic services. Settlements are planned, organized seizures of public or private property in which lot size and shape are regular and streets are designed on grids. Settlement residents work collectively to “normalize” the legal status of their community and obtain services.


11. World Bank, “Together We Stand, Divided We Fall: Levels and Determinants of Social Capital in Argentina” (Latin America and Caribbean Region, April 2001, draft).