



Solos en casa - Home alone



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Since a few years back I have been working on a study with children as caretakers of siblings in León, Nicaragua. The aims of the study are to identify, describe

and analyse the life situation of these children, based on their own perceptions and experiences.

The division of **Epidemiology** in Umeå has a longstanding collaboration with the Centre of Demographic and Health Research (**CIDS**), León University, and the main research areas for this bilateral project have been reproductive and child health. **The Home Alone (HA) study** initiated in 2004 and developed from the study of caretakers is one of the many studies conducted within this collaboration. The **HA project** aims to - by making it possible for home-working children to give voice to their situation - create awareness and put into action changes and interventions suggested by the children themselves.

Nicaragua is ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world and has a very young population, and the life for many children is shaped by the poverty. The widespread unemployment causes many to migrate searching for work, creating a situation of loose family structures. Households headed by single mothers are therefore another Nicaraguan characteristic that affects the situation for poor children. It is very common for children to work alone in their homes and, apart from performing routine household duties, look after their younger siblings.

Planning for fieldwork

In February 2005 our project entered a new phase when we together with a Spanish NGO, **CrozzCom**, introduced **The Child Photographer** to a group of children in León.

The selection of children proved to be a bit tricky, despite that the selection criteria were simple enough: being caretaker of small children at a regular basis, between 7 and 14 years of age and not participating in any project activities organized by NGOs. However, the sampling of children could not be made through the database at CIDS since it does not contain detailed information on circumstances in the families that could reveal if children are alone at home working as caretakers. None of the on-going studies could provide information on this either since the fieldworkers did not make repeated visits to the same households during this period. The schools were not open because of a strike among teachers so we decided to ask for information at the local NGOs who have experience of working with children.

Collaboration with NGOs in León

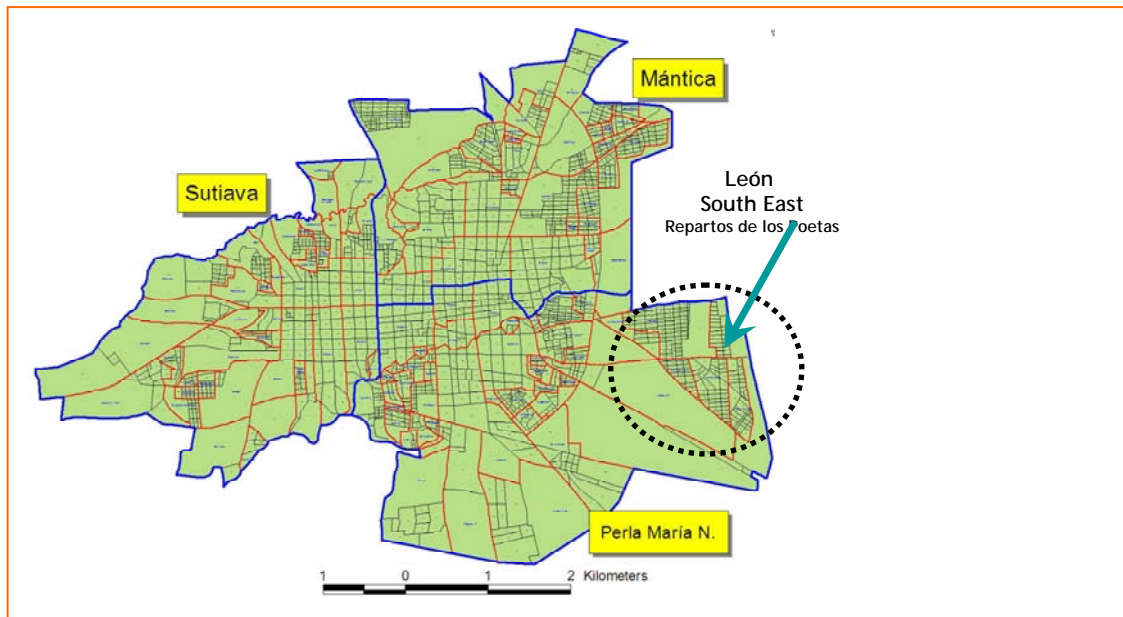
In our efforts to select children for the Home alone project we learnt that there is considerable knowledge and experience on children's living conditions to be found in all the various NGOs active in the León area. Since many years a number of them collaborate under the administrative conduct of Comisión Coordinadora de la Niñez y la Adolescencia CCAN, who serves as a link between the NGOs, local authorities and the governmental education and health authorities. In this time there were 14 different NGOs engaged in activities directed towards children in León and they try to divide and distribute their activities so that as many areas and people benefit from their joint actions as possible.

Carlos Chevez, head of CCAN, invited us to present the Home Alone project at one of their meetings in February and they were all willing to help us in trying to survey the phenomenon of home-working children. All of them were familiar with this problem but only CISAS (Centro de Informacion y Servicios de Asesoría en Salud)-Niño-a-Niño (Child-to-child) had actually been running any projects with them. To obtain an overview of the magnitude of the situation we will try to map in which areas it is most frequent. The intention is to put up a list of all known families that are in the situation of having to leave their children alone at home. To date we can only speculate that it very common, but in reality nobody knows if this is a general problem in the whole of León, if it is a common situation in all poor countries like Nicaragua or if it is occurring mainly in areas where people recently have moved in.

We also made visits to Las Tías, Chavaladas, Aldeas SOS, Los Caminantes and CISAS Niño-a-Niño during February to present and discuss our project, and seek ways of collaborating together in identifying home-working children. We had the opportunity to participate in the inauguration of a beautiful mural painting on Las Tías project house made by a group of children. It is encouraging to find so many committed people working to improve the lives of children in need.



Fieldwork



With the help of CISAS Niño-a-Niño, León, we selected a new area southeast of León where a lot of children are left on their own at home while their parents are working. We held several meetings with the community leaders and the coordinator of the community board to present and explain the project and its objectives.

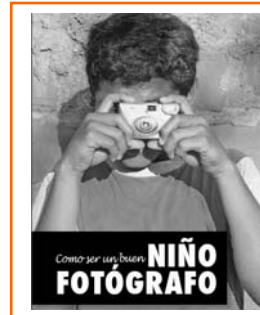
They all agreed to assist us by inviting and informing the children and their parents about the project and to obtain their consent to participate. They also promised to accompany the children to the workshops. We were both surprised and delighted to note their willingness to cooperate but they explained that it was important for them to support the project as they recognized the situation – even from their own childhood. They could now easily identify themselves with the children in their neighbourhood.



The Child Photographer

Photography, video, child-led interviews and advocacy are central elements in the participatory action research methods of Child Photographer, Testimony Video Documentary, and Visual Research Diary. The use of various communication techniques facilitates participation and creates new ways for the children to express their views and opinions on issues concerning their lives and work at home.

Workshop “How to become a good child photographer”



A manual on photography was produced and to achieve authenticity and to gain curiosity among the children, we invited former Home Alone children participants to join as “child photographer models”. Octavio 17 years, and Magdaly 19 years participated in two photo sessions as models and they also attended the first children’s workshop as instructors.

At this first workshop we provided single-use cameras to a group of 32 children – 14 girls and 18 boys - and introduced the manual so that they would be able to use the cameras on their own. We choose to work with disposable cameras since they are relatively cheap and they are easy to replace in case they are lost, stolen or broken.

They were instructed to document what they do on a normal day when alone in the house. All children were enthusiastic about the project, and when we met again the following Saturday expectations were high.

We had collected the cameras during the week and developed the films so that all the children got a set of their own photos and an album to stick them into. The excitement and happiness after we had distributed these is best illustrated by the photos below from the workshop!



All children had completed their "homework" very well, and only a few had minor difficulties with the use of the camera. Most of them had chosen to take a few photos of their family and friends apart from showing themselves in different work situations. For most of them it was the first time they had used a camera and they all expressed satisfaction with the activity. To us it was also good to see how easily they got on together since one of the aims with this project is for the participants to exchange experiences.

In the autumn we will follow up this first step by inviting the children to participate as storytellers in the Testimony Video Documentary, where they will be asked to describe the meanings of the photographs they have taken.

One of our most important experiences from this project is that we need to work in close collaboration with the community especially since we are dealing with sensitive issues. It is also important to appreciate the vast knowledge on children's situation shared by authorities and the local NGOs and work together with them. It was interesting and reassuring to note that our connection to León University proved to be essential in their decision to support our project.

The Home Alone research team:

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 Anna Wall, Lena Wall, CrozzCom
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Testimony Video Documentary

By using the children's own photographs as visual stimulus during the interviews, the collected data (in form of photographs) are interpreted, analysed and categorized by the children themselves. This enables the children to communicate their experiences and concerns in their own environment as it provides an alternative way for the children to meet with and to influence policy- and decision-makers.



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**CrozzCom -
 Communication for Development in Action,
 Barcelona, Spain.**

CrozzCom was founded by Anna Wall and Lena Wall as a NGO to facilitate collaboration with other NGOs, academics, media professionals and development practitioners in the various phases of work such as; research, design, implementation, monitoring and the evaluation of programs and projects in the development field. CrozzCom is committed to work for the fulfilment of children's rights and works especially with actions research and participatory methods, using in particular visual methods and tools, such as video and



