

Study: 67% in Colonias Fail to get High School Diplomas

EXPRESS-NEWS, San Antonio, Texas, Wednesday, September 14, 1988

Study: 67% in colonias fail to get high school diplomas

By MARK SMITH
Express-News Austin Bureau

AUSTIN — A profile of Texas colonias shows that 67 percent of the residents failed to complete high school, with 41 percent unemployment among residents over 16 years of age and not in school.

The Texas Department of Human Services study also found that 26 percent of households report inadequate heating and 24 percent of the homes are not connected to treated water.

In the department's survey of colonias in the Rio Grande Valley and El Paso area, officials found 15 percent of the households do not usually have enough to eat.

Some 80 percent of the identified colonias in Texas exist in El Paso, Hidalgo, Cameron and Willacy counties, authorities said.

Almost 140,000 people live in these colonias which are unincorporated subdivisions along the border without adequate housing, water or sewage, according to state estimates. More than 71,000 Texans live in colonias in the Rio Grande Valley, while 68,395 live in El Paso County.

Colonias, however, are thought to exist in virtually every county along the Texas-Mexico border, the survey said.

State lawmakers said the Department of Human Services survey re-

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leased to the Express-News did not surprise them.

“Unfortunately, none of the facts surprise me, and I doubt it surprises many other lawmakers,” said Rep. Dan Morales, D-San Antonio. “We have ignored that tragedy too long.”

“And not withstanding the downturn in the economy, I hope 1989 will be the year those concerns are addressed,” Morales said.

In turn, Juan Hinojosa, D-McAllen, said the study was a waste.

“I could have written the study without taking a step from my air-conditioned office,” Hinojosa said. “The study is just prolonging what needs to be done. We need to find a way to finance the water and sewer services to upgrade the quality of life of these people.”

Hinojosa added: “The colonias have been studied to death. Every state and federal leader wants to take a tour of the colonias when elections roll along, but everyone does nothing about it. They don’t want to make the difficult choices it takes to finance water and sewer services.”

Hinojosa said he also is irked by recent comments from congressional leaders.

Last week U.S. Rep. Kika de la Garza told a House committee that states have failed to take sufficient action to deal with the problem. De la Garza, D-Mission, said about \$50 million in federal funds has been funneled into his South Texas district since 1973 to help fight problems plaguing the colonias.

“Until the state provides the infrastructure, we could dump all the money in the world into the area and the situation would not be corrected,” De la Garza said.

Hinojosa responded, “Those leaders just want to pass the blame.”

Hinojosa said he is currently working on possible legislation to use general revenue bonds to generate revenues for water and sewer projects.

Hinojosa said he is working with Texas Treasurer Ann Richards, Comptroller Bob Bullock and Valley Interfaith on the proposed legislation.

Lawmaker criticizes child abuse penalties

Associated Press

ABILENE — A Tarrant County lawmaker says he was only partly joking when he suggested branding convicted child abusers.

"If there was any way to stick a branding iron in the middle of their head that said 'child abuser,' I'd go for that," state Rep. Doyle Willis, D-Fort Worth, said at a meeting of a delegation from the Texas House Select Committee on Child Abuse and Pornography.

Willis said Monday that punishment for molesters should be somewhere between what is meted now and "doing what the Arabs do and cut off their hands."

"In order to get to these people who abuse children, we've got to change our method of punishment," said Willis, who recently celebrated his 80th birthday. "It's just not getting it across."

A delegation met at Abilene to hear

concerns of local citizens and service agencies and take their suggestions for legislation to help combat child abuse and molestation.

Some of the 12 speakers made recommendations that committee members indicated may someday find their way into the law.

Pamela Sites, a representative of People Against Child Abuse of Abilene Inc., asked the committee to consider a change in the law to disallow unadjudicated probation for convicted child abusers.

A probation term, when not adjudicated, allows an offender's criminal record to be wiped clean if the term of probation is successfully completed.

A person convicted of child abuse or molestation should be required to retain the criminal record "because, I can assure you, the child they abuse will carry the scars," Sites said.

But Steve Chaney, a senior staff attorney with the Tarrant County District Attorney's Office and a member of the committee, said disallowing unadjudicated probation would limit the discretion of prosecutors.

A judge, if an offender on regular probation violates the terms of that probation, may impose a prison sentence of only up to 10 years, Chaney said. When unadjudicated probation is violated, however, the entire range of punishment is available, including life in prison, he said.

"We're going to lose that tool," Chaney said. "But somehow you've got to balance those."

State Rep. Bill Hollowell, D-Grand Saline, the committee's vice chairman, agreed with Sites and said he will introduce the bill in the next session of the Legislature.