

# Colonias

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Colonias are economically distressed areas that often lack the most basic necessities, such as drinkable water, sewer systems, paved roads, and safe, sanitary housing. While colonias are found all across the state of Texas, the majority are found in counties that border Mexico.

## Quick Facts

About 400,000 people live in more than 2,300 colonias in Texas. (Based on a 2003 Texas Water Development Board needs assessment)

Counties with the largest colonia populations are along the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>1</sup>

These counties have an average per capita income of \$14,200, compared to the Texas average of \$25,000.<sup>2</sup>

(Map of Counties with Colonias in Texas. Shaded counties are home to colonias, with a concentration of counties along the border. El Paso, Maverick, Webb, Starr, Hidalgo, and Cameron counties are highlighted.<sup>3</sup>)

## History

### *1950s*

Small lots sold at low prices, often with high interest rates to low-income individuals. These lots often lacked infrastructure and access to publicly provided utilities. Water and wastewater were, and still are, one of the greatest concerns. These unsanitary living conditions sparked interest by Texas legislature.<sup>4</sup>

### *1989*

**Senate Joint Resolution 5:** Voters approve grants authorized for use in economically distressed areas with inadequate water or sewer systems.

**Senate Bill 2** (71<sup>st</sup> Texas Legislature): Counties required to adopt Model Subdivision Rules if they wish to provide water and sewer funding to colonias.

### *1999*

**Senate Bill 1421** (76<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature): Created Director of Colonia Initiatives and six colonias representatives serving in counties with the largest colonia populations.

### *2005*

**Senate Bill 827** (79<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature): Created the Colonia Classification System and a progress-tracking system of state funded colonia improvement projects.

### *2007*

**Senate Joint Resolution 20:** Voters approve additional funding to provide assistance to economically distressed areas.

**Senate Bill 99** (80<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature): Continued work of Senate Bill 827.

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<sup>1</sup> Texas Secretary of State. [www.sos.texas.gov/border/colonias](http://www.sos.texas.gov/border/colonias)

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. [quickfacts.census.gov](http://quickfacts.census.gov)

<sup>3</sup> "Economically Distressed Areas Program Status Report." Texas Water Development Board. 2013.

<sup>4</sup> "CHIPS: A New Way to Monitor Colonias Along the United States-Mexico Border." USGS. 2007.

2010

From 2006 to 2010, counties with the largest colonia populations saw improvements thanks to state, federal, and local funding.

## **Colonia Classification System**

Green colonias have drinkable water, wastewater disposal, paved roads, drainage, and solid waste disposal. Yellow colonias have drinkable water or wastewater disposal. Red colonias lack drinkable water, wastewater disposal, and plats. Unknown colonias lack infrastructure data.<sup>5</sup>

## **Improvements**

Infrastructure investments resulted in an increase in number of colonias classified as green and yellow, and a decrease in colonias classified as red or unknown.<sup>6</sup>

(Chart and graph showing change in number of colonias in each color class for counties with the largest colonias populations from 2006-2010)

### **El Paso County:**

Number of green colonias increased by 27.  
Number of yellow colonias increased by 15.  
Number of red colonias decreased by 4.  
Number of unknown colonias decreased by 19.

### **Maverick County:**

Number of green colonias increased by 12.  
Number of yellow colonias increased by 8.  
Number of red colonias decreased by 19.  
Number of unknown colonias decreased by 1.

### **Webb County:**

Number of green colonias increased by 5.  
Number of yellow colonias increased by 13.  
Number of red colonias decreased by 17.  
Number of unknown colonias decreased by 1.

### **Starr County:**

Number of green colonias increased by 12.  
Number of yellow colonias decreased by 1.  
Number of red colonias decreased by 10.  
Number of unknown colonias increased by 19.

### **Hidalgo County:**

Number of green colonias increased by 200.  
Number of yellow colonias increased by 86.  
Number of red colonias decreased by 38.  
Number of unknown colonias decreased by 248.

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<sup>5</sup> "Senate Bill 99: Tracking the Progress of State Funded Programs that Benefit Colonias." Presented by the Colonia Initiatives Program, Office of the Secretary of State. 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

**Cameron County:**

Number of green colonias decreased by 1.  
Number of yellow colonias increased by 2.  
Number of red colonias decreased by 1.  
Number of unknown colonias did not change.

**Total:**

Number of green colonias increased by 255.  
Number of yellow colonias increased by 123.  
Number of red colonias decreased by 89.  
Number of unknown colonias decreased by 250.

Projects completed between 2006 and 2010 in these six counties received funding from local, state, federal, and international agencies. \$320 million benefitted 130,000 residents.<sup>789</sup>

**Success Stories****Villa Nueva Colonias**

Cameron County

First time wastewater collection service

Cost: \$2,000,000

Residents Served: 300

Funding Sources: Texas Water Development Board, Brownsville Public Utilities, and City of Brownsville

**City of Alamo**

Hidalgo County

First time wastewater collection service

Cost: \$5,000,000

Residents Served: 300+

Funding Sources: Texas Water Development Board and Texas Department of Agriculture

**Continuing Challenges**

Housing, flooding due to poor drainage, solid waste disposal, paved roads, and health conditions are continuing challenges.

Colonias are among the most distressed areas in the United States. The current and growing colonia population must rely on a variety of financial institutions and foundations to continue improving conditions. Understanding the current conditions, issues, challenges, and successes allow for greater promotion and coordination of community and economic development projects.

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<sup>7</sup> "Senate Bill 99: Tracking the Progress of State Funded Programs that Benefit Colonias." Presented by the Colonia Initiatives Program, Office of the Secretary of State. 2010.

<sup>8</sup> "Summary of Completed Projects" and "Status of Active Projects". North American Development Bank. 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Border Environment Cooperation Commission. [www.cocef.org](http://www.cocef.org)