

Greetings from Cuernavaca!

On Sunday we went shopping for essential grocery items to compare prices and availability in two different settings, a bustling people's market and a supermarket of the type commonly found in the US. Our three teams were provided shopping lists of essential grocery items, maps of the city, and 50 pesos (about \$5), the Mexican minimum daily wage. We could not spend any of our own money as we attempted to purchase our food. To add to the challenge, we had to communicate as best we could with our limited Spanish.

The people's market was well named as it was packed with vendors and customers jammed together underground. In individual stands, vendors sold fresh produce, unrefrigerated fish and meats, flowers, backpacks by the score, school supplies, clothing, sandals, souvenirs, and commercial foods such as boxed milk and bottled oil. Women called 'Marias' who could not afford stands wandered the crowded passageways selling wares such as prickly pear cactus ears, small fruits, and flowers. Far more indigenous people shopped at this market than at the supermarket.

The supermarket, on the other hand, was brightly lit and offered wide aisles well stocked with name brands -- Nabisco, Nestle, Gillette, Palmolive, Ponds, Libby, etc. Here, we found mostly packaged products vs. the fresh found in the people's market. Advertisements featured white models rather than Latino. Fish, meat and dairy products were refrigerated and workers around fresh foods wore masks and hairnets. The baggers, all teenagers, were "volunteers" who earned only tips.

Our groups found it nearly impossible to buy the four or five items on their lists with the 50 pesos allotted. One group, hoping to buy one kilo of beans, wound up purchasing only a half kilo. Another group had to return their onions and tomatoes when they discovered they didn't have enough money at the checkout counter. In short, it's extremely difficult to live on the wage earned by as many as 70% of Mexico's workers.