



**Juan Castillo** AMERICAN STATESMAN  
Supplies are low at Casa Hogar Elim in Nuevo Laredo, and Austin's Peggy Gerke is doing what she can. Food is a necessity. But it's also that human touch. That's something else the kids are lacking, she said.

# Kids caught in the crossfire

## Ranks of U.S. volunteers willing to help orphans of violence thinning

**By Juan Castillo**  
AMERICAN STATESMAN/STAFF

**NUEVO LAREDO**, Tamaulipas — The drug war tormenting this border city has many tentacles, some not easily seen. In some cases, it is blamed for putting surviving children of murder victims in city orphanages.

But because of the violence, some orphanages cannot depend on the help from Americans they desperately need.

For five years, Peggy Gerke of Austin has recruited area youth groups, families, church groups, Girl Scouts and anyone else willing to help for monthly trips to Nuevo Laredo to volunteer at four children's homes.

getting the food and supplies they have counted on, though Gerke "and a few brave souls" continue to deliver items about twice a month.

"They're in dire straits. They have very little financial support," Gerke said.

In the mid-1990s, Gerke spent 18 months doing volunteer work at a children's home in Guatemala. Missing that service work on her return to Texas, Gerke seized on the idea of helping children in Nuevo Laredo because it was close enough for weekend trips.

Last weekend, Gerke packed her compact car with food and supplies and traveled alone, delivering goods to three homes, Casa Hogar Monseñor Enrique Tomas Lozano, Casa Hogar Elim and the Salvation Army Children's Home.

Lupita Carmona, who runs Casa Hogar Elim and is known there as Mama Lupita, said she

took in 30 boys and girls in July, many the children of people killed in the drug-related violence. In some cases, a surviving spouse couldn't make ends meet and made the decision to give up a child. More than 100 children now live at the home.

Carmona said her food supply was running low and she is behind on the electric bill.

"I've never seen problems like this," she said. "People ask me why I take in more children when we have so many needs already. But I can't deny them."

"It's an incredible service they provide here," Gerke said. "Otherwise these children would be on the streets."

Cam O'Keefe of Austin, who has regularly made trips to the homes, said they have offered a perspective "of what you can do with your time and your money if you take your eyes off of yourself".

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