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A Mexican migration - Mexicans boost local population Boosting area's Latino numbers

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An influx of Mexican immigrants to the Pennsylvania suburbs - spawning Spanish-language soccer leagues in Norristown and bulging elementary schools in Avon Grove - is highlighting the growth in the region's Latino population, new census data show.

In Chester County, the Mexican population doubled to more than 10,000 between 2002 and 2005, according to the data. The Mexican community there, the largest outside Philadelphia, accounted for more than half of the county's Latinos.

In Montgomery County, the Mexican population grew by a startling 600 percent between 2002 and 2005 to about 7,800 - more than a third of the county's roughly 20,000 Latinos, compared to just 7 percent in 2002. Bucks County's Mexican population increased by 133 percent to more than 6,000.

The Mexican population increased at a lesser rate in Camden and Burlington Counties. In Delaware and Gloucester Counties and Philadelphia, the change was within the survey's margin of error.

The figures come from the 2005 American Community Survey, a statistical survey the U.S. Census Bureau released yesterday. Its findings contrasted with those of 2002, the earliest year for which comparative data were available for the eight-county area.

The number of Hispanics in the region increased by one percentage point, with Latinos now accounting for 6 percent of the area's population. The long-established Puerto Rican community remains the area's largest Hispanic group.

Nationally, according to the survey, 15 percent of the U.S. population in 2005 was Hispanic, a number that includes Puerto Ricans. About 12 percent of residents were foreign-born.

Mexicans accounted for nearly two-thirds of all Hispanics, representing growth of less than 1 percent. The survey is not a head count, as the 10-year census is.

The boom in the area's Mexican population has accompanied a boom in restaurants and construction, said Kristin Shipler, civic engagement director at Congreso, a Latino social service organization in Philadelphia.

"They're providing labor that is needed," especially in Pennsylvania, which has a decreasing and aging population, she said.

Once attracted primarily to rural agricultural jobs, like those of the mushroom industry in Kennett Square, Mexicans now work throughout the city and suburbs, said Nelly J. Arevalo of West Chester, who serves on the board of the Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition.

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Derek Ziegler, executive director of **CamConnect**, which tracks Camden demographics, said most of that city's new Hispanic arrivals were Mexican.

"That's a switch from previous years," when they were Puerto Rican, Zeigler said.

Overall, Philadelphia had the lowest percentage of foreign-born residents among the country's 10 largest cities. Immigrants constituted 11 percent of the city population in 2005, up one point from 2002. The largest group was Asians, followed by Latin Americans.

Los Angeles ranked first, with a 40 percent non-native population.

Nearly 20 percent of New Jersey residents were from another country, according to census data. The state ranked third in foreign-born people, trailing only California and New York.

Camden County's Latin American population nearly doubled to 16,600. It accounted for 37 percent of the county's non-native population, up from 20 percent in 2002.

The growth in immigrants from Mexico has increased the demand for English classes. In Chester County, 11 percent of residents spoke a foreign language at home.

In Montgomery County, of those who spoke Spanish at home, respondents who said they spoke English less than "very well" doubled to 45 percent.

Last year, Shipler said, Congreso had 400 people on its waiting list for English classes. The organization is looking for additional funding.

Chester County Futures, an Exton academic mentoring and scholarship program for disadvantaged students, has also turned away pupils, including Latinos, executive director Catherine Mesaros said.

School districts such as Kennett Consolidated "nominate far more students for our program than we have room" for, she said.

Though the Mexican population has grown, the percentage of Hispanic students has held steady at 38 percent because the program focuses on African Americans from the Coatesville Area School District.

"If we don't serve these students who are now going to be entering our schools, early and quickly, in all likelihood they won't be contributors to the community," Mesaros said.

In New Jersey, 27 percent of residents said they did not speak English at home. Nearly 14 percent of New Jerseyans speak Spanish at home.

Andres Camacho, of the Camden County Office of Hispanic Affairs, which assists with social services for the Latino community, was skeptical of the 2005 survey estimate that 3,000 Mexicans lived in Camden.

Latinos are "way undercounted," said Camacho, who put the number around 8,000.

"Some of these people are illegal," he said. "They're afraid to go to the grocery store, so why would they fill out a census form?"

Many of the city's Mexicans, he said, are from the city of Puebla. "They get one person who will bring over a relative, and then they know a friend who brings over another, so when they cross the border, they come to a place where they know somebody."

Julian Trinidad, 32, first came to the United States from Puebla in 1994 and eventually made his way to Camden, where he manages the Mexico Lindo restaurant.

Trinidad is married and has three children, two born in the United States. Though he has had good bosses, he said, "Language and money is the most difficult."

Jobs and health care are also hurdles for immigrants, Camacho said. "They come to us with health issues because they don't have the money to pay for care," he said.

Immigrants also complain about not being compensated by small companies that employ them illegally.

"Sometimes they go three or four weeks without pay," Camacho said.

When Hector Moreno came to Norristown from Mexico 16 years ago, "there was nobody" from his homeland, he said. Now he runs a Latino soccer league with 18 teams.

"They're trying to find a better life. The economy in our country is real bad," said Moreno, who is married with two children, ages 12 and 26. He works in construction and his wife, Debbie, works at an insurance company.

In other findings contained in the data released yesterday:

In Delaware County, African Americans composed 18 percent of residents, up from 14 percent. Asians accounted for 5 percent, up from 4 percent.

Of the nation's 10 largest cities, Philadelphia had the highest percentage of residents over 65 (13 percent). The median age was 35.3, second only to New York City. Bucks County's median age of 40 was the oldest in the area.

Pennsylvania, with 15 percent of its residents 65 or older, remained the nation's third-oldest state, behind Florida and West Virginia. Its median age of 39.7 was the fifth highest.

New Jersey was among the top 10 states for residents with post-high school degrees. Among residents 25 and older, 22 percent had bachelor's degrees and 12 percent had advanced degrees. In Gloucester County, the number of people with bachelor's degrees rose 4 percent, to 18 percent. Those with advanced degrees increased by about two percent, to 8 percent.

Eighty percent of Pennsylvanians were born in the state. Only New York, Louisiana and Michigan had higher percentages.

The American Community Survey is mailed monthly to about 250,000 addresses nationwide. An annual average is calculated from a total of three million surveys and released for states, counties and places with populations of 65,000 or more. Unlike the decennial census, people living in dormitories, nursing homes, prisons, and other group quarters were not surveyed. The results were subject to a margin of error that varied in each county.

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Census Snapshot

Suburban Mexican population soars

Chester, Montgomery and Bucks Counties had dramatic increases in the Mexican population. The numbers were less dramatic elsewhere in the eight-county region.

N.J. immigrant surge Nearly 20 percent of N.J. residents were from another country, ranking the state third in foreign-born people, trailing only California and New York. New Jersey tied for fifth place in the nation with 27 percent of residents who said they did not speak English at home.

The graying of Philly Of the nation's 10 largest cities, Philadelphia had the highest percentage of residents over 65 (13 percent) and a median age of 35.3, second only to

New York.

More diversity in Delco In Delaware County, African Americans composed 18 percent of residents, up from 14 percent, the report said.

Caption: PHOTO AND CHART

MICHAEL PEREZ / Inquirer Staff Photographer Hector Moreno and his son Luke, 11, play in the backyard of his home in East Norriton. Moreno, who arrived from Mexico 16 years ago, runs a Latino soccer league with 18 teams.

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