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URBAN TACTICS

## URBAN TACTICS; Destination, Neza York

By SETH KUGEL

NOT long ago, you could impress the typical Mexican immigrant in New York by asking a simple question: "Usted es de Puebla?" Are you from Puebla?

The typical answer? "Yes, how did you know?"

It wasn't that difficult. Starting in the late 1980's, most Mexicans who came to New York were from poor, rural towns in Puebla, a state in the south central part of the country. But in the past decade, immigration patterns have changed in a way that has important ramifications for the future of Mexican New Yorkers and those who employ, organize and educate them.

New York is home to 190,000 Mexicans, according to the 2000 census; some estimates place the figure closer to 300,000. Although immigrants from Puebla still represent 50 to 80 percent of Mexicans in New York, many newer arrivals are young urbanites who have emigrated alone from poor settlements in and just outside Mexico City. They come with street savvy, slightly more education and, sometimes, disdain for the rural Mexicans who preceded them.

These changing patterns mean that young Mexicans coming to New York are not only more educated but also more likely to learn English and continue their education once they get here. They may also have specific skills, making it easier for them to find jobs. And because they are moving from one urban area to another, they may find it easier to adjust to life in New York.

Francisco González, an outgoing 22-year-old clerk in a music store in Port Richmond, Staten Island, is typical of the new group. He came to New York from gritty Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, a city of more than two million people just outside Mexico City that is known as Neza, and is so poor that trash is still collected by donkey cart.

Although Mr. González finished middle school in Neza, he could not get a place in a public high school and his parents could not afford a private one. He left home four years and eventually made his way to Staten Island, where he found a community of immigrants from Neza and a job at Neza Records, which caters to Latinos.

In Mr. González's opinion, urban migrants often feel superior to Mexicans from the countryside, and not just because they are typically better educated.

"Sociocultural factors are very influential," he said. "Immigrants from the countryside have a very different culture than those from the city: the type of music they listen to, how they speak." Customers from Neza, he said, buy alternative rock and ska, while those from more rural areas prefer traditional music like cumbias and rancheras.

The tension between the two groups is apparent. Some Mexican city dwellers described their rural cousins as uneducated hicks; those from the countryside dismiss urban migrants as lazy, immoral and more likely to be gang members. "In the countryside there's not much culture," Mr. González said. "They devote themselves to working."

Amadeo Macareno, a cook who comes from a small town in Puebla and works in El Rey del Taco, a grocery and taqueria in Woodside, Queens, added: "They think they are better than us, that they know more than us. People that come from the state of Puebla are the ones that work more. We're more responsible."

The changing nature of Mexican immigration patterns is supported by data provided by the Mexican Consulate, which has records showing the birth states of 325,000 Mexicans from the metropolitan region who sought passports between 1996 and 2003.

The annual numbers from Mexico State are rising much faster than those from Puebla. The numbers from Mexico State soared by 854 percent between 1996 and 2003; the increase in Puebla during that period was only 491 percent. Neza and similar crowded urban settlements surrounding Mexico City account for most of the emigrants from Mexico State, said Manuel Vázquez Cabrera, an anthropologist and former state representative who lives in Neza.

Since 1996, Mexico State has gone from being the eighth-most-common state of origin to being the fifth. (Puebla is still No.1, but now accounts for less than 50 percent of the city's most recent Mexican immigrants seeking passports.)

THERE has even been a shift within Puebla. Immigration has slowed from its rural areas and increased from the regions around the state capital, also named Puebla, according to Robert C. Smith, a sociology professor at Barnard College whose book "Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants" is to be published this fall by the University of California Press.

On average, Professor Smith said, immigrants from in and around Mexico City have two more years of education than those from Puebla. And the increased numbers from Neza are heartwarming for the few who came in the 1980's. Although the city was not formed until the 1950's, when migrants from other states squatted on the dry bed of the former Lake Texcoco, residents had a sense of pride.

"We were very, very few," said Raul Velez, who moved to Washington Heights in 1984. "Around here, I was the only one. About five or six years ago, I started seeing more people from Neza."

Today, Mr. Velez is an American citizen who owns Tacos Neza, a restaurant on St. Nicholas Avenue that he named after his home city because he was so tired of seeing Mexican businesses named after Puebla. His fellow Nezans have taken to calling this city Neza York.

Although some students of immigration worry that urban migrants are more likely to have criminal pasts, many see advantages in the shift that outweigh the possible negatives. "Some of these people coming in will have secretarial skills, or will have at some point been employed in services," said Arturo Sarukhan, the Mexican consul general. "That, I think, provides employers the opportunity to find skilled labor."

Urban savvy is another ingredient that may make it easier for these newer immigrants to fit into their adopted city. The term "Neza York" was originally coined decades ago, before immigration to New York began, to reflect Neza's urban texture, and the attitude has carried over: many New Yorkers from Neza say they find it easier to adjusting to city life here than do their peers from Puebla.

"Puebla's, like, really calm people," said Mike Amigon, whose father owns Neza Grocery in Woodside, Queens. "Neza's like, really hyper people. In Neza, you live fast, like in New York."

But urban migrants may come with certain disadvantages, in part because they often arrive alone, as young men.

"It's more likely to be a less organized, less institutionalized migration," Professor Smith said. "I see the change from one place to another as involving risks to immigrants. Not because of their urban or rural backgrounds, but because of the communal structures that do or don't exist for them."

Some Mexican immigrants, like Sergio Maldonado, a cook from Neza who works in a Mexican restaurant in Port Richmond, Staten Island, agreed that there were differences. But, he added, "At the end of the day," he said, "we're all from the same country. Once we're here, we don't make a distinction."

Photos: Raul Velez, left, owner of the Tacos Neza restaurant, and his brother, Francisco, top right, are from Neza, just outside Mexico City. Neza, above, is an urban area characterized by bleak poverty. (Photo by Above, Wesley Bocxe for The New York Times; top right and below, Michelle V. Agins for The New York Times)