

A Mexican Baby Boom in New York Shows the Strength of a New Immigrant Group

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When Lilian Vazquez was born in Brooklyn on Thursday, a rosy 8 pounds 12 ounces and 20 1/2 inches, she joined a baby boom among Mexican New Yorkers -- one that bucks an overall decline in New York City births.

A new analysis by city demographers showed a 28 percent increase in births to Mexican women living here from 2000 to 2005, with 8,234 babies born in 2005, the last year for which statistics were available. For the first time, the number of babies born to Mexican women surpassed births to Dominican-born women, which dropped by more than 10 percent in the same period.

Native-born mothers, who account for fewer than half of all births in the city, had 7 percent fewer babies over the five years. And with births to foreign-born women showing only a small increase, the total was down by 3 percent.

To Dr. Iffath Hoskins, who oversaw Lilian's delivery at Lutheran Medical Center in Brooklyn -- a hospital whose patients include immigrants from more than 100 countries and which was founded more than a century ago to care for the families of Norwegian sailors -- the numbers open a new chapter in a familiar story.

"We've seen the shift," said Dr. Hoskins, chairwoman of obstetrics and gynecology at the hospital and a 30-year veteran of delivering babies in a city where Dominicans have been the largest immigrant group since 1990. "The Dominican population came earlier, and they have done what every immigrant population does: They have assimilated more, so their lives are beginning to mirror the native-born -- getting married at later ages, working in offices, seeking education and having smaller families."

Mexicans are now estimated to be among the city's top three immigrant groups, joining Dominicans, who are still No. 1, and Chinese. Mexicans began arriving in large numbers in New York only within the last 10 years, and most of them are here illegally. Lilian's 19-year-old mother, Teresa Vazquez, came from the state of Puebla, where agricultural traditions encourage big families. Ms. Vazquez, a housecleaner married to a busboy, joined two brothers and a sister in New York two years ago and has another four siblings in Mexico.

"They're fresh immigrants," Dr. Hoskins said. "Girls are having babies, becoming wives and mothers at a far earlier age. They tend to have more children because they bring their Mexican culture with them."

On Friday, with newborn Lilian nestled on her chest, Ms. Vazquez was focused on her firstborn's American future. "I'm very happy," she said in Spanish of her daughter's United States citizenship, "because she won't have problems with her papers."

Downstairs, at a prenatal class about labor and delivery, six women in advanced stages of pregnancy spoke of the advantages their children would have as citizens -- and of the hope that they would grow up to be educated professionals. Five of the women were from Mexico, one from the Dominican Republic, and all lacked legal immigration status.

It is difficult to forecast the shape the Mexican baby boom will take in New York City, experts say. Mexican men still outnumber women among immigrants, and the rise in births partly reflects the arrival of wives, sisters and daughters who had been left behind. On the other hand, a study released last week by the Pew Hispanic Center found that the growth of Mexican immigration to the United States, mostly illegal, had slackened since mid-2006. And like those who preceded them, Mexican immigrants are already having fewer children.

"It's striking to see the dramatic shift in family sizes within one generation," said Alyshia F. Galvez, a cultural anthropologist engaged

in a two-year research project concerning Mexican women who give birth in New York. "These women are coming from families of 6, 7, 11, 12 siblings. Usually they have two children, and when you ask, 'How many would you like to have?' they usually say three."

Ms. Galvez has interviewed more than 60 women for her project, which examines what is known as the Mexican birth weight paradox: that recent Mexican immigrants with many risk factors for low-weight babies and high infant mortality actually have healthier babies and lower infant mortality rates than Mexican-American women or immigrants who were raised here.

Census data show that Mexican immigrants in New York have the least schooling, the lowest per-capita income and the lowest rate of English proficiency of the city's immigrant groups. But Ms. Galvez, who teaches at New York University, said she had been impressed by the extraordinary cultural strengths and swift adaptation of these young parents.

"Families are deciding to have, as they say, the number of children they can care for," she said. "Earlier, it was about having as many children as you could possibly feed because you needed them for agricultural labor. Now, it's not just about giving them food, it's about communication and education and love."

For women like Hanet Cortes, 26, a Mexican mother with a daughter born in New York and another due soon, schooling is a primary concern. "An American diploma is worth something all over the world, while a Mexican diploma is worth nothing here," said Ms. Cortes, who also is a patient at Lutheran Medical Center.

Educating such children to their potential will not be easy, said Robert Courtney Smith, a sociologist and author of "Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants."

"On the one hand, Mexicans are the hardest-working people I have ever met, and many children of immigrants are jumping into the

middle class in one generation," Professor Smith, who teaches sociology and immigration studies at Baruch College, wrote in an e-mail message. "On the other hand, Mexicans will present a particular challenge for the educational system."

Nearly half of Mexicans in the city aged 16 to 19 are neither in school nor high school graduates, he said. At age 14, about 95 percent of boys are in school, but by age 18 or 19, the number is down to 26 percent. For girls, it falls to 31 percent from 96 percent. But the city's Mexican population -- conservatively estimated at about 350,000, including children born here -- is so dispersed that there is no political leader focused on this issue, Professor Smith added.

"What is desperately needed is some targeted intervention that will help fight the high dropout rate among Mexicans," he said. "Because it is the first large cohort of young Mexicans to come of age in New York, we can make a huge difference if we intervene now."