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Smaller Families to Bring Big Change in Mexico

By SAM DILLON

MEXICO CITY -- Like many old-style Mexican matriarchs, Emma Castro Amador bore so many children that she cannot keep their birthdays straight. Sometimes she even loses track of whether Oscar, her 10th, came before David, her 11th.

"But I never regret having so many," says Mrs. Castro, who is 59 and bore 14 children in 25 years. "I know the government tells everybody to have fewer now, but I think it's none of their business."

Mrs. Castro's offspring, however, have a different view. In a generational divide repeated in millions of Mexican families, all 14 say they are determined to limit their own families to two or three children.

"Small families live better," says Gloria Munoz Castro, Mrs. Castro's eldest daughter, repeating the jingle, broadcast incessantly on television here for 25 years, after the government reversed its stance in 1974 to put a brake on exploding growth. She has two children and says she will have no more.

Next year, Mexico's population is projected to reach 100 million, and the contrast between Mrs. Castro's family and those of her children illustrates the extraordinary changes underway in the country's family and population patterns, which hold important consequences for the rest of North America.

Because Mexican women like Mrs. Castro traditionally had so many children, the population has quintupled since 1940, and will continue to surge at about 1 million people a year for nearly three decades. But because of people like her daughter, many forecasters predict that slowing fertility rates will mean that the country's population will virtually stop growing by 2045.

The tremendous reduction in fertility, from 7 children per woman in 1965 to 2.5 today, has brought a significant drop in the number of dependent children supported by each worker. That is offering Mexico what population experts call a "demographic bonus," the opportunity to generate higher savings rates and domestic investments that can bring rapid development if the bonus is managed shrewdly.

"The drop in fertility is a spectacular change that has meant a revolution in mental attitudes," said Dr. Rodolfo Tuiran Gutierrez, secretary general of Mexico's government-run National Population Council. "It's opening a demographic window of opportunity for Mexico."

Around the world, fertility rates have fallen from an average of 4.95 children per

1977. "We didn't want to spend all our money just to feed and clothe children."

Several of Gloria's married siblings and in-laws have no children. Eira Hernandez Ramirez, a 39-year-old sister-in-law, explained her childlessness: "Food is expensive, the oil is running out, water is scarce," she said. "The future's just too bleak."

But even though Mexican birth rates have plummeted, the population has continued to expand. Although none of Emma Castro's 14 children have borne nearly as many children as she did, they have produced 23 grandchildren. And millions of others in their generation have formed new families, too. That is why the population surged from 66.8 million in 1980 to 81 million in 1990 and is projected to reach 100 million next year.

For more than two decades, the economy has failed to keep up with the exploding population. Jean Maninat, director of the Mexico office of the International Labor Organization, said that about 1.3 million new workers join Mexico's job market each year.

"That's the population pressure," Maninat said. "And despite the government's efforts to generate investments, never in any year has the economy created that many jobs."

In good years, the expanding economy and new investments can create 900,000 or perhaps 1 million new jobs, leaving about 300,000 new job seekers unemployed. In 1995, a recession year, Mexico lost 500,000 jobs, meaning that together with the 1.3 million new job-seekers, the ranks of the the unemployed grew by a total of 1.8 million.

Mexico has accumulated at least 12 million unemployed since population growth began to overwhelm the economy.

A vast army of other Mexicans are sort-of-employed in the informal sector, the platoons of windshield washers who converge on cars at street corners and battalions of chewing gum vendors who clog downtown sidewalks.

Still others have emigrated to the United States. During the 1960s, only about 27,000 workers left Mexico each year to establish permanent residence in the United States, according to Mexican government figures. Today, it is currently about 277,000 a year, according to the migration study.

For the next 10 years or so, population growth is expected to continue to generate mass emigration and millions of new unemployed. But as the effects of the dropoff in fertility rates continue, the number of people who join the job market each year is projected to fall to about 650,000 in 2010, government demographers estimate.

If the economy continues to grow, then the number of Mexicans who emigrate to the United States each year, legally and illegally, could begin to decline, according to the migration study. But some demographers believe that because wages in the United States are often 10 times as high as they are here for the

Table 1. Demographic and Socioeconomic Status of Mexico, 1990

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
State	Population (1990)	Net No. of Migrants migration (85-90)	% net 1985-90	% urban	% native to state	% agricultural employment	% professional and technical employment	% literate	% dwellings with electricity	% dwellings with flushing toilets	% crowded housing	% households with potable water	% population with no or low income
Aguascalientes	720,000	26,527	3.68%	77	80	14	10	93	95	69	15	96	18
Baja California (Norte)	1,661,000	180,255	10.85%	91	51	9	12	95	90	59	9	80	9
Baja California (Sur)	318,000	17,725	5.57%	78	67	16	12	94	89	57	12	89	16
Campeche	535,000	9,762	1.82%	70	75	33	10	84	85	33	25	71	33
Coahuila	1,972,000	-11,554	-0.59%	86	84	11	12	94	94	60	13	92	18
Colima	429,000	12,747	2.97%	83	71	23	11	90	94	56	19	93	14
Chiapas	3,210,000	-27,502	-0.86%	40	95	57	7	70	67	25	33	58	59
Chihuahua	2,442,000	77,933	3.19%	77	83	16	10	94	87	59	11	88	15
Districto Federal	8,236,000	-737,523	-8.95%	100	75	1	17	96	99	74	10	96	20
Durango	1,349,000	-41,211	-3.05%	57	88	26	10	93	87	45	16	85	29
Guajuato	3,983,000	3,443	0.09%	63	91	21	8	83	88	42	22	83	26
Guerrero	2,621,000	-73,619	-2.81%	52	94	35	10	73	78	25	32	57	38
Hidalgo	1,888,000	-18,945	-1.00%	45	89	36	8	79	77	31	24	70	39
Jalisco	5,303,000	39,645	0.75%	82	85	14	10	91	93	63	15	86	19
México	9,816,000	514,946	5.25%	84	60	8	10	91	94	51	17	85	20
Michoacán	3,548,000	-15,532	-0.44%	62	91	33	9	82	87	40	23	79	29
Morelos	1,195,000	51,614	4.32%	86	71	19	12	88	96	48	18	89	18
Nayarit	825,000	-2,904	-0.35%	62	83	37	10	88	92	39	20	83	22
Nuevo León	3,099,000	47,597	1.54%	92	76	6	12	95	96	72	11	93	16
Oaxaca	3,020,000	-64,888	-2.15%	39	94	52	7	72	76	19	30	58	55
Puebla	4,126,000	-13,446	-0.33%	64	91	36	9	81	84	33	26	71	39
Queretaro	1,051,000	38,593	3.67%	60	82	16	9	85	85	46	21	83	24
Quintana Roo	493,000	73,841	14.98%	74	41	19	9	88	85	40	22	89	22
San Luis Potosí	2,003,000	-13,251	-0.66%	55	90	30	9	85	73	39	21	67	36
Sinaloa	2,204,000	-22,519	-1.02%	64	87	34	10	90	91	45	18	80	15
Sonora	1,824,000	18,261	1.00%	79	82	20	11	94	90	57	13	91	12
Tabasco	1,502,000	-6,597	-0.44%	50	90	34	10	87	85	38	23	58	36
Tamaulipas	2,250,000	39,697	1.76%	81	75	14	11	93	84	51	15	81	23
Tlaxcala	761,000	10,830	1.42%	76	87	27	10	89	94	39	26	90	32
Veracruz	6,228,000	-72,695	-1.17%	56	90	38	8	82	74	34	22	60	36
Yucatán	1,363,000	-9,020	-0.66%	79	94	26	10	84	90	40	25	72	39
Zacatecas	1,276,000	-32,230	-2.53%	46	91	37	9	90	87	36	19	75	38
México	81,251,000			71	82	22	11	87	88	48	19	79	27

Source: INEGI, 1990 Mexican Census of Population