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Smaller Families to Bring Big Change in Mexico

By SAM DILLON

MEXICO CITY, June 7— Like many old-style Mexican matriarchs, Emma Castro Amador bore so many children that she can't keep their birthdays straight. Sometimes she even loses track of whether Oscar, her 10th, came before David, her 11th, or vice versa.

"But I never regret having so many," said Mrs. Castro, 59, who had 14 children in 25 years.

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 families to two or three children.

"Small families live better," says Gloria Munoz Castro, Mrs. Castro's eldest daughter, echoing the jingle, broadcast incessantly on television here after the Government reversed its stance in 1974, and put a brake on exploding growth. Gloria 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 under way in the country's family and population patterns, which hold important consequences for the rest of North America.

Because Mexican women like the elder Mrs. Castro traditionally had so many children, the population has quintupled since 1940, and will continue to surge at about one 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, slightly below worldwide rates. The drop is resulting in a significant decline in the number of dependent children supported by each worker. It may also offer Mexico what population experts call a "demographic bonus," the opportunity to generate higher savings rates and domestic investments that can raise this country's standard of living and 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 the 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 woman in the 1960-1965 period to 2.96 children in the first half of the 1990's.

But fast-growing populations are like speeding locomotives that cannot brake slowly, and even though Mexican birth rates fell dramatically, the population has kept surging.

For now, unemployment will remain high, since even when the economy is robust it cannot provide jobs for the 1.3 million new workers who enter the job market each year. Many of the jobless will continue to emigrate to the United States; during the next decade, some 3.5 million Mexicans are projected to travel to the United States to work and establish residence.

When Emma Castro was born in 1940, Mexico's population was 19.6 million, little changed from what it had been in 1910, at the outset of the Mexican Revolution. She married at 15 after a one-day courtship, and bore her first son the following year. For the next 25 years she bore one child, on average, every 21 months.

Her experience was typical. In 1956, the year Mrs. Castro bore her first son, an American anthropologist, Oscar Lewis, began collecting an oral history of a poor Mexico City family, later published as "The Children of Sanchez." When Mr. Lewis first interviewed the patriarch, Jesus Sanchez, he had 4 children, but when Mexican reporters interviewed him 14 years later, Mr. Hernandez had 16 more.

Government policy encouraged rapid growth, partly for historical reasons. Mexicans believed that the 19th century seizure of Mexican territories stretching from Texas to California by the United States would have been impossible had they not been so sparsely populated.

But in the late 1960's, as Mexico's postwar economic boom began to slow, the sheer force of the population figures began to alarm experts. In 1970, Mexico's population hit 48 million, and in an influential study several prominent Mexican demographers warned that unless policies changed it would more than triple by the year 2000, to 148 million.

Faced with the challenge to national stability those projections implied, President Luis Echeverria Alvarez in 1974 reversed course, establishing a National Population Council to control population growth and a network of Government clinics to help couples plan their families.

The reversal came as women's attitudes about birth control were already changing; ignoring the Government and the Roman Catholic hierarchy, many women in the 1960's and early 1970's were buying contraceptives on the black market. As a result, the Government's new offer of family planning services began satisfying a repressed demand, and Mexican families began changing dramatically, almost overnight.

"We were determined to have just two," said Mrs. Castro's eldest daughter, Gloria, who married in 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 with no children, explained : "Food is expensive, the oil is running out, water is scarce. The future's just too bleak."

But though Mexican birth rates have plummeted, the population has continued to expand. While none of Emma Castro's 14 children have borne even a quarter as many children as she did, they have produced 23 grandchildren so far. 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 the 100 million mark 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," Mr. 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 one 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 in a single year.

A vast army of Mexicans are 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 1960's, only about 27,000 workers left Mexico each year to establish permanent residence in America, according to Mexican Government figures. In the three decades since, the flow has multiplied by 10; it is currently about 277,000 a year, according to the binational 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 to make themselves felt, 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 a 1977 Binational Study on Migration. Some demographers believe, however, that because wages in the United States are often 10 times the pay for the same work in Mexico, Mexicans will continue to emigrate even when jobs are available here.

The slowing growth is bringing Mexico good news of another kind. In 1970, for every 100 Mexican workers there were 100 dependents, mostly children and a few retired people. As the children have

grown up and entered the work force, this "dependency ratio" has declined, to about 60 dependents for each 100 workers. By the year 2020, the burden of nonworking dependents should decline still further, to about 40 per 100 workers.

"There's a moment in the evolution of populations when they have the absolute best structure for development, and that's the structure Mexico is developing right now," said Eduardo Arriaga, an Argentine demographer who is a lecturer at Georgetown University.

This demographic bonus gives Mexico the opportunity to increase domestic savings and with sensible economic management, could result in higher per capita economic growth.

The bonus phase of Mexico's demographic transition is expected to last for 30 years. By then, the population will be, on average, far older than it is today, and millions of Mexicans will need retirement care.

The costs of caring for the elderly will be higher, because currently most retired Mexicans live with their children. But the characteristically large Mexican family is shrinking, increasing numbers of Mexicans live alone, and in the future the elderly may not be able to count on home care provided by their children.

"The Mexican family is being transformed in crucial ways," said Carlos Welti, a demographer at the National Autonomous University. "Throughout our history, an important social safety network has been the extended family, uncles, cousins. In the future, fewer will have these relationships."

Photos: The 14 children of Emma Castro Amador, 59, of Mexico City, want fewer offspring, a sign of shift with major implications for Mexico. (Keith Dannemiller for The New York Times)(pg. A1); Emma Castro Amador, 59, of Mexico City, says she has no regrets about bearing 14 children in 25 years. Mrs. Castro, seated, was photographed with 5 of her children, 4 of their spouses and 13 of her grandchildren. (Keith Dannemiller for The New York Times)(pg. A12) Graphs: "HEADCOUNT: Smaller Families, Little Elbow Room" While women in Mexico are giving birth to far fewer children than in the past . . . Graph plots average number of children born per woman in Mexico and the United States, from 1950 through 1995. . . . the population is still growing and is projected to reach more than 112 million in 2010. Graph plots the population of Mexico, from 1950 through a projected 2010. (Sources: U.N. Population Division; Mexico's Population Council; Mexico's Institute of Statistics)(pg. A12)
