

# ***NEWYORKTITLAN: A SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE OF MEXICAN NEW YORKERS***

by *Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz*

**M**exicans had the highest rate of population growth of all the major racial and ethnic groups in New York in the 1990s. According to the U.S. Census of Population, between 1990 and 2000, the number of Mexicans residing in New York tripled, reaching close to 200,000 in the year 2000.<sup>1</sup> By comparison, the overall population of New York City rose by 9.4 percent during this same time period. Mexicans now compose the third largest Hispanic group in the City (only Puerto Ricans and Dominicans have a greater presence).

Despite the spiraling visibility of Mexicans in New York, relatively little systematic information is available about their current social and economic situation. There is an extensive literature on the socioeconomic and labor market status of the overall Mexican population in the country, mostly focusing on the Southwestern U.S.<sup>2</sup> There is also some research available on the budding Mexican population of New York in the early 1990s and studies of specific issues, such as the migration process, education, identity, and gender.<sup>3</sup> And research on other Latino groups in New York City has proliferated in recent years.<sup>4</sup> But there is no recent economic profile of the Mexican population of New York.

Who are Mexican New Yorkers? What are their characteristics? This research report presents a comprehensive analysis of the Mexican population in New York City. The study utilizes the 2000 U.S. Census of Population and other data sources in providing a current picture of the income and labor market outcomes of Mexican New Yorkers.

## **Population Growth & Location**

The U.S. Census of Population found that there were 186,872 Mexicans residing in New York City on April 2000.<sup>5</sup> This constitutes a substantial increase over the 61,722 Mexican New Yorkers counted by the Census in 1990. In fact, as Table 1 shows, Mexicans had the highest rate of population growth in New York in the 1990s, rising by 202.8 percent compared to the 9.4 percent growth of the City population overall. Mexicans have now become the third largest Hispanic/Latino group, behind Puerto Ricans (789,172 in 2000) and Dominicans (estimated to be 554,087 in 2000).

The remarkable growth of Mexican New Yorkers is reflected in the fact that New York is now one of the top 15 cities in the concentration of Mexicans in the U.S. It is ranked number 11, following cities with a long-standing Mexican community like San Diego, Santa Ana and San Jose. Most Mexicans are located in Brooklyn and Queens, where, together, 61.2 percent of Mexican New Yorkers live. Within Brooklyn, the neighborhoods of Sunset Park and Bushwick have major Mexican populations. In Queens, it is Elmhurst, North Corona, and Jackson Heights where Mexicans are concentrated. And in Manhattan, East Harlem has a visible Mexican presence.

What explains the rapid increase of the Mexican population residing in New York? Partly, the growth in New York reflects the general expansion of the Mexican population in the United States in the decade of the 1990s. The Mexican population in the U.S. grew by 52.9 percent between 1990 and 2000, substantially above the overall growth rate of the population in the country, which was 13.2 percent for this time period.

Yet, the substantial growth of the overall Mexican population in the United States falls far short of its explosive rise in New York City. There is an explanation for this. The expansion in New York reflects a new pattern of Mexican location in the U.S., a pattern that is more geographically diversified than in the past. The great majority of Mexican immigrants moving to the United States over the last thirty years flowed into a few states mostly in the Western or Southwestern United States: California, Texas, Illinois, Nevada, Arizona, etc. As labor markets in these states flooded with immigrants in the late 1980s and 1990s, many Mexicans started to search for alternative job locations, from poultry processing and meatpacking in the Midwest to service sector jobs and construction in New York City.<sup>6</sup>

Immigration is indeed the major source of the rapid Mexican population growth in New York. There were 145,012 Mexican

immigrants residing in New York City in 2000. This accounts for close to 80 percent of the resident Mexican population in the City. Most of these immigrants moved to the country in the nineties: 97,023 (or about half) of all Mexicans residing in New York in 2000 moved to the U.S. between 1990 and 2000. Although Census data cannot be used to determine the proportion of the Mexican population in New York that is undocumented, other demographic studies suggest that between 20 to 40 percent of the Mexican immigrant population in the City may be undocumented.<sup>7</sup>

The great majority of Mexican immigrants in New York were born in Puebla.<sup>8</sup> Located on East Central Mexico, the state of Puebla has approximately 5 million people. Although not amongst the poorest states in that country, Puebla has a per-capita income which is less than one-third that of the Mexican Capital District (Mexico D.F.) and substantially lower than the overall average for the country.<sup>9</sup>

The reason for the concentration of Pueblanos in New York City is the same that links so many other specific towns and cities in the U.S. and Mexico: network migration. Most Mexican migration to the U.S. is the result of a process that has developed over long periods of time, involving migrant networks connecting the migrants and non-migrants at home and abroad in an integral way.<sup>10</sup> How the process of network or chain migration unfolds is well-illustrated by the journalist Michael Kamber in an award-winning *Village Voice* piece on Mexican migration to New York from Zapotitlan de Salinas, a village in the state of Puebla: “Luis Garcia, the first resident of Zapotitlán to arrive in New York, in 1983, settled near Willis Avenue, in the Bronx, down the block from where the 6 train stops under the 40th Precinct. Within a few years, dozens of friends and relatives were arriving with little more than his phone number, and they slept on his couch or on mattresses lined up on the floor. Gradually the community grew and relocated; some went out to Queens, a few moved south to the burgeoning Mexican community in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. Most, however, stayed near the 6 train, following the el north along Westchester Avenue to Soundview and Castle Hill in the Bronx. They are there today, perhaps a thousand strong; at just one building, 690 Allerton Avenue, at the corner of White Plains Road, there are an estimated 50 families from Zapotitlán...They find each other work, baby-sit one another's children. In a strange land, they take comfort in neighbors they have known since childhood.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Socioeconomic Status**

What is the current socioeconomic status of the Mexican population in New York City? How does it compare with that of other racial and ethnic groups? To measure the average standard of living of a population, economists usually adopt the concept of household income per-capita, which is equal to household income divided by the number of persons in the household.

Column 1 of Table 2 displays the average annual household income per-capita of various groups of New Yorkers in 1999. As can be seen, the per-capita income of the average Mexican household was less than half that of the overall New York City population. Mexicans had an average per-capita income of \$10,231 compared to an average of \$22,402 among New York households in general. The income of Mexican households was below that of all the other major groups listed in Table 2. For instance, the income per-capita among non-Hispanic White households in 1999 was \$36,800, which is over three times the income per-capita of the average Mexican household. Even among the Hispanic/Latino population, the mean per-capita income was \$12,206, about 20 percent higher than that of the Mexican population.

Associated with the comparatively low income-per-person received by Mexican New Yorkers is a high percentage of the population living under the poverty line. Poverty status is determined by comparing the income of the family where the person lives with an income threshold measuring the amount of resources that a family needs in order to purchase a basic, minimum food budget.<sup>12</sup> This threshold varies with the number of persons in the family, number of children, and age of family members. For example, the average income threshold for a family consisting of two adults with one child is \$13,410 for 1999, but for a family of two adults and three children, the threshold rises to \$19,882. The poverty rate is the percentage of persons living in families with income below the poverty income threshold.

Table 2 (second column) displays the percentage of the population of the major racial and ethnic groups in New York living in households with income below the poverty line. One out of every three Mexicans in New York had income below the poverty level. This compares with a 21.2 percent poverty rate among New Yorkers in general in 1999, and a 30.2 percent among the overall Hispanic/Latino population of New York.

Note that these figures show high levels of poverty among Mexican New Yorkers. But their context is local in nature, discussing the situation of Mexicans relative to other major racial and ethnic groups in New York City. There is a salient issue to consider on this regard. Well-being is a relative concept.<sup>13</sup> For immigrant populations especially, it is not clear whether the basis for standard of living and poverty comparisons should be the host country where the immigrants arrive at or the source country where the migrants come from.

For many Mexican migrants in New York the basis of comparison for their own standard of living is not the rest of the City's

population but rather the community south of the border where they come from. From this perspective, the income earned in New York, even if very low by U.S. standards, can represent an enormous leap compared to the situation they would have faced in Mexico.

In 2000, the per-capita income of the average household in the state of Puebla was approximately \$4,133 per year, adjusted for differences in purchasing power between the United States and Mexico. This would be about 40 percent of the income per-capita of the average Mexican household in New York City. But most Mexican migrants in New York come from low-income rural communities where agriculture and farming predominate as economic activities, and where income per-capita could be as low as 20 percent of the average for the overall population.<sup>14</sup> For the rural communities of Puebla, this would amount to about \$827 per year. This constitutes a small fraction of the income per-capita of the average Mexican household in New York. As a result, the remittances sent by Mexican migrants in New York back to their places of origin constitute a major contribution to the Mexican economy.<sup>15</sup>

The large gaps between standards of living in Mexico and the U.S. provide some perspective on why large numbers of Mexican migrants continue to move to New York City despite their comparatively low income-per-capita by U.S. standards. But the issue should not be over-emphasized either. It is also essential to remember that New York will likely be the place where many of the Mexicans residing in New York today will live for a long time, perhaps the rest of their lives. Despite the expectations that migrants have that they will return home, the reality is that many of them will stay in the City, for a wide array of economic and non-economic reasons. It is therefore eminently relevant to compare the socioeconomic status of the Mexican resident population of New York with that of other groups living in the city.

What factors explain the comparatively low income of Mexicans in New York compared to other racial and ethnic groups? A wide variety of social, political and economic forces affect income and poverty. But since income is largely derived from employment, discussions on the topic inevitably end-up focusing on labor market outcomes. This section begins by examining labor force participation, then moving to unemployment, industrial distribution, occupational concentration, and earnings.

### **Labor Force Participation**

Labor force participation rates measure the proportion of persons 16 years of age or older who participate in the labor market, including those who are employed as well as those who are unemployed but are actively seeking employment. Persons out of the labor force, on the other hand, may be working at home (as, for example, unpaid family workers), enrolled in school, retired, or may be discouraged workers, that is, workers who dropped out of the labor force, quitting after failing to find employment opportunities through an extended search effort.

Table 3 presents labor force participation rates for New York City in 2000, decomposed by race/ethnicity and gender. For Mexican men, the labor force participation rate is approximately 74 percent, which is substantially higher than that for New York City overall, equal to 66.9 percent. On the other hand, the proportion of Mexican women participating in the labor force is 45.3 percent, quite below the 53.5 percent prevailing among the overall female population in the City. In fact, the Mexican female labor force participation rate is the lowest among all the major racial and ethnic groups in New York, including the overall Hispanic labor force participation rate, which is 48.3 percent.

The below-average labor force participation of Mexican women in New York is directly connected to the large share of immigrants in the Mexican population: among women born in the U.S., the labor force participation rate is 56 percent, which sharply exceeds the New York City average. The opposite holds for Mexican New Yorkers born outside the United States: in this group, female labor force participation is just 41.6 percent.

Although below the average by New York City (and U.S.) standards, the labor force participation rate of Mexican-born women residing in New York is significantly higher than that in Mexico itself. Mexican female labor force participation rates are sharply lower than in the U.S. In the 1990s, for example, 35.1 percent of women participated in the labor market in Mexico. In the state of Puebla, the average female labor force participation rate was 35.9 percent. In comparison to these numbers, the participation of Mexican-born women in the New York labor force is very high indeed.

### **Unemployment**

Table 4 displays the proportion of the labor force in New York that was unemployed in the week before Census questionnaires were filled-out in April 2000. The data are presented for various ethnic and racial groups and disaggregated by gender. The unemployment rate among the Mexican population, which was equal to 6.4 percent, was about the same as that for the overall New York City labor force, which was equal to 6.0 percent.

As in the case of labor force participation rates, however, there are substantial differences on the basis of gender. The Mexican male unemployment rate is significantly below the City average but the female rate is substantially higher. Among Mexican

men, the unemployment rate in 2000 was 4.8 percent while for women the rate was more than twice, equal to 10.2 percent. Note also that, by comparison with other Hispanic/Latino workers, Mexican men have a much lower unemployment rate, but Mexican women have about the same unemployment rate as the overall Hispanic/Latino female workforce.

The low unemployment among Mexican men in New York is closely aligned with the fact that they fill a niche among the unskilled labor force that other workers do not fill. This labor market niche, which facilitates their employment, is connected to the already-discussed migration networks that make New York City the destination of migrants from specific parts of Mexico. It is a social and economic networking that characterizes other recent immigrant movements to urban areas as well. As sociologists Roger Waldinger and Claudia Der-Martirosian describe it: “Immigrants tend to cluster in activities in which others of their own kind are already established. Initial placements...may be affected by any range of factors –prior experience, cultural preferences or historical accident. But once the initial settlers have established a beachhead, subsequent arrivals tend to follow behind, preferring an environment in which at least some faces are familiar and discovering that personal contacts prove the most efficient means of finding a job. More important, the predilections of immigrants match the preferences of employers, who try to reproduce the characteristics of the workers they already have. Managers appreciate network recruitment for its ability to attract applicants quickly and at low cost; they value it even more for its efficiency. Hiring through connections upgrades the quality of information, reducing the risks entailed in acquiring new personnel; since sponsor usually have a stake in their job, they can also be relied on to keep the referrals in line.”<sup>16</sup>

In New York City, labor market networking has led Mexican men to fill some highly unskilled job niches left open over the last fifteen years by the rest of the population, whose educational attainment has risen through time, qualifying them for higher-skilled employment. In 2000, only four percent of the New York City labor force had received six years of schooling or less. The great majority of these unskilled laborers were born outside the United States. Indeed, as much as 85.4 percent of the New York City labor force with six or less years of schooling was born outside the country. A significant number of these workers were Mexican.

## **Industries and Occupations**

Mexican men are employed in a wide array of occupations and industries in New York. However, there are several niches that present clusters of employment. Table 5 presents the industrial composition of the labor force, for the overall City workforce as well as for Mexican New Yorkers. The data reflect the sector of employment of persons in the labor force in 2000. For persons employed, this is their actual employment at the time they filled out their Census questionnaires in 2000. For unemployed persons, it represents the industry of their last job.

There are three sectors that stand out in terms of the male Mexican labor force: construction, manufacturing, and the food/entertainment sector. Over 60 percent of Mexican men are employed in these three sectors. By comparison, the proportion of the New York City labor force in these sectors is less than 30 percent. More specifically, the food services and food retail trade industries of New York City (including restaurants, grocery stores, etc.) serve as special niches for Mexican men. As much as 42 percent of all Mexican men in the New York City labor force are employed in the food services and food retail trade industries alone.

There are no equivalent niches for Mexican women in the New York City labor market. One sector that has employed Mexican women in large numbers is manufacturing. But the manufacturing sector has been contracting in New York City for many years, leaving an uncountable number of unemployed workers.<sup>17</sup>

The occupational distribution of the Mexican labor force follows the industrial specialization just described. Table 6 shows that the Mexican labor force is concentrated in two sets of occupations: services, and production, transport and moving occupations. Both for men and women, these two sets of occupations account for over 50 percent of the labor force. And following the niche carved by Mexican men in the New York City food industry, food-related occupations offer a major share of employment, particularly among men. Mexicans now form a significant part of the labor force in some of the food preparation and food serving occupations. For example, among men employed as cooks and food preparation workers, Mexicans constitute close to 20 percent of all workers employed in New York City.

The immigrant networking and labor market specialization of Mexican men within the New York City industrial and occupational structures explain to a large extent the comparatively low unemployment rates of Mexican men. The absence of specific labor market niches, except for the manufacturing sector, explains as well the higher unemployment rate of Mexican women in New York. The relative unemployment rates of Mexican men and women, on the other hand, also have their own implications. For one, they help understand the higher labor force participation rates of men and the lower rates for women. As unemployment rates increase, workers become discouraged in their job search, inducing some of them to leave the labor force, even if temporarily. To some extent, then, the comparatively higher unemployment rates of Mexican women in New York City lie behind their lower labor force participation rates. Similarly, the economic incentives provided by low unemployment rates among Mexican men partly explain their higher labor force participation rates.

## **Earnings and its Determinants**

The discussion so far has shown that, despite gender differences, the overall Mexican labor market employment situation is about the average for New York City and it cannot therefore be used to explain the comparatively low per-capita income prevailing in this population. Instead, the key variable turns out to be the earnings received by employed workers.

Table 7 presents the median annual earnings of New Yorkers in 1999. As can be seen, the annual earnings of Mexican men and women were the lowest of all the racial and ethnic groups examined. For Mexican men, the median annual earnings in 1999 were equal to \$15,631, about half of what the overall New York City male worker population makes, which was \$29,155 in 1999. Among Mexican women, the annual earnings of \$11,731 in 1999 were less than half those for women overall, whose earnings were \$24,469.

The wide gap in earnings between Mexican laborers and the average worker in New York City helps explain the huge socioeconomic disparity described earlier. But this leads to a further question: what are the factors that determine the sharply lower earnings of Mexican New Yorkers? The extensive literature on the determinants of earnings suggests that age, educational attainment, English language proficiency, immigration status and labor market discrimination, among other factors, are associated with lower earnings.

### **Age Structure**

The age structure of a population makes a significant difference in terms of salaries: except for the very old, as workers age, their labor market experience is rewarded with increased earnings. As a result, if the average age of a population is less than that of other groups, its average income may be lower.

The Mexican population in New York City is very young. Their median age in the year 2000 was 24.3 years, drastically lower than that of the overall New York City population, which was 34.4 years. As a result, a large portion of the Mexican labor force is in the age range that receives the lowest wages in the City. As a matter of fact, 23 percent of the New York City labor force in the 16 to 19 years of age range consists of Mexican workers.

### **Educational Attainment**

Of all the major racial and ethnic groups listed in New York City, the Mexican population has by far the lowest educational attainment. Table 8 presents the educational outcomes of the adult population of New York City in 2000. Note that of all the racial and ethnic groups listed in Table 8, by far, the Mexican population had the highest proportion of persons who had not completed high school. Close to 60 percent of the Mexican New Yorkers with 25 years of age or older had not completed high school. By comparison, less than 30 percent of the overall New York City population with 25 years of age or older had not completed high school. In terms of college education, 18.9 percent of Mexican New Yorkers had attended post-secondary education but only 9.1 percent had completed a college degree, compared with 47.9 percent and 27.4 percent, respectively, for the overall New York City population. Even among the Hispanic/Latino population, Mexican New Yorkers had lower educational attainment.

The low schooling of the Mexican workforce has severe income consequences. There is a strong positive correlation between the earnings workers receive in the labor market and educational attainment. Higher schooling raises worker productivity and leads to increased earnings. Education is also used by employers as a screening device, with less-educated workers out-ranked by more-educated workers in the rationing of entry-level jobs and higher-paying promotions.

This is graphically illustrated in Table 9, which shows the annual wage and salary income of full-time, year-round workers in New York City in 1999. The average earnings of these workers were \$56,473. But for workers who had completed less than a high school education (only elementary and/or middle school), their annual earnings were \$25,306. For persons with a high school diploma or equivalent, the income rises to \$36,161. And for those with a college degree, annual earnings were equal to \$70,564.

The abysmal gap between the educational attainment of Mexicans and that of other ethnic and racial groups in New York City lies behind their drastically lower earnings and, consequently, lower per-capita income of this population. This is compounded by the fact that a large proportion of the population has not yet acquired the English language proficiency skills required by higher-paying jobs. In response to the Census question asking whether the person knew how to speak English, 46.2 percent of the Mexican population in New York (5 years of age or older) answered “not well” or “not at all.” Among Mexicans born outside the United States, the proportion was much higher, equal to 57 percent.

### **Undocumented Workers and Discrimination**

Although differences in age, education and other variables can explain a substantial portion of the gaps in earnings among different

groups of workers in the population, often they cannot account for all of them. The presence of labor market discrimination can explain some of the remaining wage differentials. Studies documenting discrimination against specific ethnic and racial minorities, including Hispanics/Latinos, have proliferated over the years.<sup>18</sup> In the case of the Mexican population of New York, however, there is a further issue connected to the undocumented status of many workers. The question is the extent to which these workers are exploited, or discriminated against, because of their undocumented status, by being paid wages that are substantially below those paid to legal workers with identical characteristics.

The widespread exploitation of illegal immigrants has been documented in court cases, by the press, and in some academic studies as well. For instance, data for undocumented workers applying for legalization under the 1986 Immigration reform and Control Act indicates that a large proportion of the gap in wages between legal and undocumented workers remains unexplained even after taking into account differences in age, education, etc. between the two groups, suggesting the presence of systematic discrimination against undocumented workers<sup>19</sup>

There is substantial direct evidence of the abuse and exploitation that the undocumented suffer in New York City labor markets. Economists Abel Valenzuela and Edwin Melendez find that, despite the fact that day laborers in New York (a large fraction of whom are Mexican undocumented workers) are generally paid above the minimum wage, the work is “difficult, irregular, and often dangerous...day laborers are routinely abused at the workplace. A full 85 percent of all day laborers report at least one type of abuse including paying less than the agreed upon amount, abandoned at the worksite, bad checks in the form of payment, no breaks or water at the worksite, robbery, and threats.”<sup>20</sup>

## **Looking Forward**

This report has presented information gathered by the U.S. Census of Population. Although released over the last few months, the data was collected in the year 2000. There have been significant changes since that time. The New York City economy continued to grow rapidly until mid-2001, causing a further reduction of the unemployment rate prevailing in early 2000, which hovered above 6 percent. On May 2001, the city had achieved a 4.9 percent unemployment rate, the lowest rate since 1988. Since then, however, unemployment has steadily climbed. Both the economy-wide recession and the after-effects of September 11<sup>th</sup> led to a collapse of the earlier boom. Just in the months of October and November 2001, New York City lost close to one hundred thousand jobs. By early 2003, the unemployment rate had climbed to around 9 percent.

There is no comprehensive data available yet to determine the impact of these events on the Mexican population. Judging by the effects of the last recession in the early 1990s, however, the impact of the current economic slump will be magnified among those with low skills. Indeed, the brunt of the short-term adjustments made by many service, transportation and commerce sectors in New York after September 11<sup>th</sup> were borne by relatively unskilled laborers. A study released in November 2001 showed that the top 7 occupations affected by the recession after September 11<sup>th</sup> included: waiters and waitresses, cleaning and maintenance workers, retail sales persons, food preparation workers, cashiers, housekeeping workers, and fast food servers. This was followed by smaller losses in more-skilled occupations, such as general managers, top executives, sales supervisors and service supervisors.<sup>21</sup> Given the labor market niche of Mexicans in New York, which targets low-skilled jobs in the food industry, manufacturing and construction, one can predict that the impact of the economic developments over the last two years has been serious.

## **Conclusions**

Using data from the 2000 U.S. Census of Population and Housing released in recent months, complemented with other U.S. and Mexican data sources, this research report has provided a detailed profile of the social and economic condition of Mexicans in the City of New York.

The household income per person of the Mexican population is among the lowest of the major racial and ethnic groups of New York City. The mean annual household income per-capita of the Mexican population of New York in 1999 was \$10,231, which is less than half of that prevailing among the overall New York City population, equal to \$22,402 in 1999.

Key among the forces determining low wages is education. The data presented in this report suggest that to improve the long-term social and economic condition of Mexican New Yorkers, education must be the first priority. For the adult immigrant Mexican population, most of which is still a young adult population, the key policy instruments involve adult literacy, English language proficiency, and programs that combine work with schooling. The role played by hometown community development organizations on this regard may be critical, not only because of their access to the Mexican population but also because of their visibility and influence among Mexican New Yorkers.

The comparatively low high school retention rate of Mexican teenagers is a second issue of concern. The school enrollment rates for Mexicans remain high for children up to 14 years of age, but they drop sharply for older teenagers, especially in comparison

with the overall New York City student population. For Mexican children aged 14-17 years, the school enrollment rates in 2000 were 62.2 percent for males and 70.7 percent for females. These are sharply lower than those for the overall New York City population aged 14-17, equal to 93.8 percent for males and 95 percent for females. The enrollment gap widens for teenagers aged 18 and 19. For New York City overall, the enrollment rate of males in this age group is 67.6 percent and for females it is 71.2 percent. But among Mexican teenagers the corresponding figures are 25 and 31.1 percent.

The sharply lower school enrollment rates of Mexican youth after age 14 are partly the outcome of the pressures these youngsters face in raising income for their families. Many Mexican high school dropouts are immigrants, for whom immediate economic gain is often the most important goal. In his account of the life of the Mexican worker Eduardo Gutierrez, who died tragically while at work in a New York City construction site in 1999, Jimmy Breslin poignantly describes the situation of a Mexican youngster applying for employment in a local coffee shop: "Why don't you go to school? Angelo, the owner, asked Jose, fourteen, when he presented himself for a job in the Elite Coffee Shop on Columbus Avenue. Jose asked, "Is the school going to pay me?" Angelo shrugged and he motioned the kid to the kitchen, where he would still be ten years later."<sup>22</sup>

Efforts to increase educational attainment may be particularly urgent for Mexican women. The unskilled female labor market in New York City has been sluggish for years, offering reduced employment opportunities. Sectors within the construction or even the food service industry where many male Mexican immigrants have found a niche are not as open for female employment. On the other hand, manufacturing, where a large fraction of unskilled immigrant women have found jobs in recent years, continues to decline in New York City. As a result, women with lower levels of schooling face substantially higher unemployment rates –and lower earnings—than men with equal levels of education.

The young age of the Mexican labor force and its comparatively low level of schooling limit earnings opportunities. But the presence of labor market discrimination and the widespread exploitation and abuse of undocumented workers also affect earnings and working conditions. As a consequence, one of the policy areas with an immediate impact on the standard of living of the Mexican workforce in New York is the increased enforcement of labor laws. Some progress has been reached on this account in New York State. After a tenacious effort by a coalition of immigrant, community and legal organizations, the New York State legislature passed –and on September 1997 New York State Governor George Pataki signed– the Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act, which constitutes the most stringent wage enforcement law in the United States.<sup>23</sup> This has been complemented in recent years by an affirmative prosecutorial effort by New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, whose office has successfully prosecuted a number of cases of abuse against undocumented workers and has worked with the employers of Mexican workers –such as Korean grocery store owners– in establishing a code of conduct which will diminish future abuses.

These efforts need to be continued and reinforced because of the ambivalent legal positions at other levels of government. For instance, on March 2002, in a 5 to 4 vote, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that undocumented workers do not have the right to collect back pay in a case where an illegal immigrant was fired because of his efforts to organize a labor union. Although this decision has not reversed the efforts made in a number of states to ensure that labor laws are equally applied to legal and illegal immigrants, it has created an uncertain policy environment.

Along different lines, there has been a slow and gradual movement to increase the role played by unions in representing Mexican migrant workers, both legal and undocumented. At a national level, the AFL-CIO reversed recently its long-standing position in this area. It now supports a movement to provide amnesty for undocumented workers and to eliminate the sanctions for employers hiring these workers (imposed by the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act). At a grassroots level, local union organizers in New York continue to make an effort to recruit Mexican immigrant workers into unions. Groups like the Mexican-American Workers' Association and the Community Labor Coalition have joined hands with unions, such as Local 169 of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE), and community organizations such as the Organización Tepeyac, to increase Mexican representation among unionized workers in the City. These, however, represent budding efforts in a labor market where the immense majority of workers are not part of labor unions.

This research report has provided a detailed statistical profile of Mexican New Yorkers. Behind the statistics, however, lie real lives. It is hoped that the analysis here will generate a more informed discussion of the struggles, challenges, and valuable contributions made by Mexicans to New York City.

---

*Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz is a Professor of Economics and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and was the first director of its Latino Studies Program. He is currently a Visiting Scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation.*

## NOTES

1. The Census identifies racial and ethnic populations on the basis of self-identification. One Census question asks persons to answer whether they

are “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino” and to mark whether they are part of a specific Spanish/Hispanic/Latino group. The Mexican population is defined to include anyone who marked the category: “Mexican, Mexican American or Chicano.”

2. See, for example, Frank D. Bean and Marta Tienda. *The Hispanic Population of the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987); Gregory DeFreitas. *Inequality at Work: Hispanics in the U.S. Labor Force* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Vilma Ortiz, “The Mexican-Origin Population: Permanent Working Class or Emerging Middle Class?,” in Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorghehr, eds., *Ethnic Los Angeles* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996); Stephen Trejo, “Why Do Mexican Americans Earn Low Wages?,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 105 (November 1997): 1235-68; Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco, ed., *Crossings: Mexican Immigration in Interdisciplinary Perspective*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Arturo Gonzalez. *Mexican Americans and the U.S. Economy: Quest for Buenos Dias* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002).

3. See Robert C. Smith. “Gender, Ethnicity and Race in School and Work Outcomes of Second-Generation Mexican Americans.” in Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco and Mariela M. Paez, eds., *Latinos: Remaking America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Robert C. Smith. “Mexicans in New York: Men, Women and Prospects.” in Gabriel Haslip Viera and Sherrie L. Baver, eds., *Latinos in New York: Communities in Transition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); Regina Cortina and Monica Gendreau, eds., “Immigrants and Schooling: Mexicans in New York,” (New York: Steinhardt School of Education, New York University, 2001); and Liliana Rivera-Sanchez, “Searching Expressions of Identity, Belonging and Spaces: Mexican Immigrants in New York,” paper presented at the Conference on Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the U.S. (Santa Cruz: University of California at Santa Cruz, October 11-12, 2002).

4. See Gabriel Haslip-Viera and Sherrie L. Baver, eds., *Latinos in New York: Communities in Transition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); Ramona Hernández and Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz, *Dominican New Yorkers: A Socioeconomic Profile, 1997*, Dominican Research Monograph (New York: The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, City College at City University of New York, 1997); Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz. “The Socioeconomic Status of Hispanic New Yorkers: Current Trends and Future Prospects.” Research Study (Washington, D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center, 2002); and Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz. “Puerto Rican New Yorkers in the 1990s: A Demographic and Socioeconomic Profile,” in Gabriel Haslip-Viera and Felix Matos-Rodriguez, eds., *Boricuas in Gotham: Puerto Ricans in the Making of Modern New York City—Essays in Memory of Antonia Pantoja* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 2003).

5. This Census-based population figure is likely to reflect a serious undercount. Past U.S. Censuses have been known to miss significant portions of the minority populations residing in large metropolitan areas. Furthermore, the Census enumerates only persons whose usual residence is the United States. This specifically excludes citizens of foreign countries temporarily visiting the U.S., who are considered to have residence in their home country. But a large number of Mexicans in the U.S. are indeed in the country temporarily, or otherwise plan to be in the U.S. only temporarily. Most undocumented workers, for example, plan to—and many do—return back home. Some move back and forth between the two nations. They do not consider their “usual residence” to be north of the border. As a result, they are automatically exempted from filling out census forms and are not part of the census count. Estimates of the Mexican population of New York City in 2000 by experts and close observers are substantially higher than the Census count, rising to 275,000-300,000 or even higher; see Emily Rosenbaum, “The Social and Economic Situation of Mexicans in New York,” (Puebla: Quinto Congreso de las Americas, Universidad de las Americas, 2001), and Robert C. Smith, “Gender, Ethnicity and Race in School and Work Outcomes of Second-Generation Mexican Americans,” in Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco and Mariela M. Paez, eds., *Latinos: Remaking America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

6. Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand and Nolan Malone. *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002) also place emphasis on anti-immigrant feelings in California and on the greater freedom allowed by the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act on amnestied workers, in explaining the greater geographical distribution of Mexican immigrants.

7. See the more detailed paper, Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz, “The State of New York titlán: A Socioeconomic Profile of Mexican New Yorkers” (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2003) for this estimate.

8. The exact proportion of Mexican New Yorkers originating in Puebla is not known. I have used the *Mexican Migration Project Database* (University of Guadalajara and University of Pennsylvania, Mexican Migration Project, 2002), to determine the Mexican communities where New York City migrants come from. According to this source, which has sampled thousands of Mexican migrants to the U.S. for over a decade, Puebla was the place of birth of 73 percent of those migrants who worked in New York City while they were north of the border.

9. *Anuario de Estadísticas por Entidad Federativa* (Mexico D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2003).

10. For analyses of this process, see Michael Piore, *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Douglas S. Massey, Rafael Alarcon, Jorge Durand and Humberto Gonzalez, *Return to Aztlan: The Social Process of International Migration from Western Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); and Thomas Bauer, Ira N. Gang and Gil Epstein, “What Are Migration Networks?,” (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Economics Department Working Paper, 2000).

11. Michael Kamber, “A Link in the Chain,” “Deadly Game,” and “Toil and Temptation,” *The Village Voice*, 2001.

12. See Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz. “Poverty.” In Deena Gonzalez and Suzanne Oboler, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) for a discussion of the definition of poverty.

13. Robert H. Frank. *Choosing the Right Pond: Human Behavior and the Quest for Status* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
14. Table 4.5, part 1, *Anuario Estadístico de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, (Mexico D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 1996).
15. Rodolfo O. de la Garza and Manuel Orozco. "Binational Impact of Latino Remittances." In R.O. de la Garza and B. Lindsey Lowell, eds., *Sending Money Home: Hispanic Remittances and Community Development*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002). See also Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz. "The International Migration Experience of Mexico: Socio-Economic Aspects." In Ralph Rotte and Peter Stein, eds., *Migration Policy and the Economy: International Experiences*. (Nueried, Germany: Ars Et Unitas, Verlagsgesellschaft, 2002).
16. Roger Waldinger and Claudia Der-Martirosian. "The Immigrant Niche: Pervasive, Persistent, Diverse." in R. Waldinger, ed., *Strangers at the Gate: New Immigrants in Urban America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 236
17. James Orr, "Industrial Restructuring in the New York Metropolitan Area," *Economic Policy Review*, Vol. 3 (February 1997): 61-74.
18. See, for example, Harry Cross, Genevieve Kenney, Jane Mell and Wendy Zimmermann. *Employer Hiring Practices: Differential Treatment of Hispanic and Anglo Job Seekers* Report 90-4 (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Report 90-4, The Urban Institute, Washington, D.C., 1990); William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), chapter 5; and Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mulainathan, "Are Emily and Brendan More Employable than Latoya and Tyrone?" A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination," Working Paper (Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2003).
19. See Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz, "Undocumented Workers in the Labor Market: An Analysis of the Earnings of Legal and Illegal Mexican Immigrants in the United States," *Journal of Population Economics*, 12 (February 1999): 91-116; Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz, "Underground on American Soil: Undocumented Workers and U.S. Immigration Policy," *Journal of International Affairs*, 53 (June 2000): 485-501; and Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz, "Illegal Immigrants in the U.S. Economy: A Comparative Analysis of Mexican and non-Mexican Undocumented Workers." In S. Djacic, ed., *International Migration: Trends, Policies and Economic Impact* (London: Routledge Publishers, 2001).
20. Abel Valenzuela and Edwin Melendez, "Day Labor in New York: Findings from the NYDL Survey," Community Development Research Center (New York: New School University, 2003).
21. As reported by Leslie Eaton and Edward Wyatt, "Attacks Hit Low-Pay Jobs the Hardest." *The New York Times*, November 6, 2001, Page B-1. See also Gregory DeFreitas, "Global Tension, Local Recession and Recovery Prospects: New York's Economy One Year Later," *Regional Labor Review*, 5 (Fall 2002): 4-17
22. Jimmy Breslin. *The Short Sweet Dream of Eduardo Gutierrez* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002), p. 128.
23. A detailed discussion of this movement is provided by Jennifer Gordon, "The Campaign for the Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act: Latino Immigrants Change New York Wage Law" (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).

**Table 1**  
**Mexicans and Other Population Groups in New York City, 1990-2000**

Racial and Ethnic Group	<b>1990 Pop.</b>	<b>2000 Pop.</b>	<b>Increase (% Change)</b>
<b>Mexican</b>	<b>61,722</b>	<b>186,872</b>	<b>202.8%</b>
<b>New York City: All Races/Ethnicities</b>	7,322,564	8,008,278	9.4%
<b>Non-Hispanic White</b>	3,163,125	2,801,267	-11.4%
<b>Non-Hispanic Black/African American</b>	1,847,049	1,962,154	6.2%
<b>Asian and Pacific</b>	489,851	783,058	59.9%
<b>Hispanic/Latino</b>	1,783,511	2,160,554	21.2%
Puerto Rican	896,763	789,172	-12.0%
Dominican	332,713	554,087	66.5%
<b>Other</b>	39,028	301,245	—

Source: New York City Department of City Planning (2002), based on 2000 U.S. Census.

**Table 2**  
**Per-Capita Income and Poverty of Mexican and Other Households, New York City, 1999**

	Mean Annual Household Income Per-Capita, 1999	Poverty Rate (%)
<b>Mexican Population</b>	<b>\$10,231</b>	<b>33.0%</b>
New York City Average	22,402	21.2
Non-Hispanic White	36,800	11.5
Non-Hispanic Black or African American	15,568	25.0
Non-Hispanic Asian	18,787	19.6
Hispanic/Latino Population, Overall	12,206	30.8

Source: 2000 U.S. Census of Population, Summary Tape File 4.

**Table 3**  
**Labor Force Participation Rates in New York City, 2000**  
Persons 16 years of age or older

Population Group	Labor Force Participation Rate (%)	
	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
<b>Mexican Population</b>	<b>73.9%</b>	<b>45.3%</b>
New York City overall	66.9	53.5
Non-Hispanic White	69.3	54.5
Non-Hispanic Black/African American	62.8	57.2
Non-Hispanic Asian	70.3	53.7
Hispanic/Latino Population	64.2	48.3

Source: Author's tabulations, 2000 U.S. Census of Population 5% Public Use Microdata Sample.

**Table 4**  
**Unemployment Rates in New York City, 2000**  
 Persons 16 years of age or older

Population Group	Unemployment Rate (%)		
	<u>Overall</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>
<b>Mexican Population</b>	<b>6.4%</b>	<b>4.8%</b>	<b>10.2%</b>
New York City overall	6.0	5.5	6.5
Non-Hispanic White	3.3	3.2	3.4
Non-Hispanic Black/African American	8.9	9.4	8.6
Non-Hispanic Asian	4.3	3.8	4.9
Hispanic/Latino	9.0	7.5	10.9

*Source:* Author's tabulations, 2000 U.S. Census of Population 5% Public Use Microdata Sample.

**Table 5**  
**Industrial Distribution of the Labor Force in New York City, 2000**  
 Persons 16 years of age or older

Industry	<u>Male</u>		<u>Female</u>	
	All Workers	Mexican	All Workers	Mexican
Agriculture, Forestry and Mining	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1
Construction	7.5	10.6	0.8	0.7
Manufacturing	7.1	11.9	6.2	22.1
Transportation, Communications and Public Utilities	9.7	4.1	3.0	2.1
Wholesale Trade	3.9	4.7	2.3	3.5
Finance, Insurance and Real Estate	12.0	3.4	10.7	5.4
Professional, Technical Services	12.2	5.4	11.7	8.8
Education, Health, Social Services	12.6	3.0	35.0	15.7
Food/Entertainment/Other Services	15.1	39.8	12.7	26.1
Public Administration	4.6	0.7	4.3	1.5

*Source:* 2000 U.S. Census of Population, Summary File 4.

**Table 6**  
**Occupational Distribution of the Labor Force in New York City, 2000**  
 Persons 16 years of age or older

Occupation	<u>Male</u>		<u>Female</u>	
	All Workers	Mexican	All Workers	Mexican
Managerial and Professional	33.9%	9.0%	40.0%	16.5%
Technical, Sales and Administrative Support	21.4	15.1	20.0	33.6
Service Workers	17.3	37.9	33.7	24.8
Farming, Forestry and Fishing	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.1
Construction, Extraction and Maintenance	11.8	13.4	0.4	0.7
Production, Transport and Material Moving	15.5	24.3	5.8	24.3

Source: 2000 U.S. Census of Population, Summary File 4.

**Table 7**  
**The Annual Earnings of Workers in New York City, 1999**  
 Employed persons 16 years of age or older

Population Group	Median Annual Earnings (1999)	
	Male	Female
<b>Mexican</b>	<b>\$15,631</b>	<b>\$11,731</b>
New York City: Total	29,155	24,469
Non-Hispanic White	41,717	31,488
Non-Hispanic Black/African American	26,220	24,882
Non-Hispanic Asian	22,943	20,800
Hispanic/Latino	20,938	16,300

Source: 2000 U.S. Census of Population, Summary File 4.

**Table 8**  
**The Educational Status of the Population in New York City, 2000**  
 Persons 25 years of age or older

Population Group	Percentage of the Population with:		
	Less than High School	High School Diploma	More Than High School
<b>Mexican</b>	<b>59.4%</b>	<b>21.7%</b>	<b>18.9%</b>
New York City: Total	27.7	24.4	47.9
Non-Hispanic White	15.3	23.9	60.8
Non-Hispanic Black/ African American	28.7	28.6	42.7
Non-Hispanic Asian	30.5	18.5	50.9
Hispanic	46.6	23.4	30.0

Source: 2000 U.S. Census of Population, 5% Public Use Microdata Sample.

**Table 9**  
**Average Annual Earnings of Full-Time, Year-Round Workers, NYC 1999**  
 Persons 16 years of age or older

Educational Attainment	1999 Annual Earnings
Elementary/Middle School	\$25,306
Some High School	29,871
High School Diploma or Equivalent	36,161
Some College	45,261
College Degree	70,564
More than College	100,754

Source: 2000 U.S. Census of Population, Summary File.

*REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2004): 32-43.  
 © 2004 Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, Hofstra University