

Facts Disprove Stereotype of Large Mexican Families

By [AGUSTIN GURZA](#)

"Too many babies!"

The caller said the words slowly, like a scolding parent, elongating the vowels to stress her frustration.

"Toooooo many baaaay-beeees!"

That's the problem with Santa Ana, she said.

The reader left her high-strung message following my recent Orange County column about Santa Ana's overcrowded school district and its attempt to build a new high school on the old Tustin Marine base. Tustin officials have big plans for luxury homes, a golf course and high-tech industries on the abandoned federal land. They've made room for new schools for Tustin and Irvine. But they've resisted making room for Santa Ana, though part of the base falls within the boundaries of the heavily Latino school district.

"You make no sense whatsoever," said my caller. "You want this precious land turned over to Santa Ana kids because of, quote, overcrowding. The reason there is overcrowding is because . . . Mexicans have toooooo many baaaay-beeees!"

"They've always got one in the arm, five or six walking along, two or three in the stroller. . . . And they keep breeding! There will never be enough land for the, quote, overpopulation of Santa Ana. . . . What's wrong with having one or two children, instead of breeding and breeding and asking people for more and more and more? What about responsibility?"

Well, I 'm not responsible for Latino family planning. I'm responsible for presenting facts to make an argument. And lady, you've got your facts all wrong.

All you have to do is read the newspaper to know that Mexicans have slashed their growth rate (births minus deaths) in half since the 1960s. At that time, women in Mexico had an average of 7.2 children each. Today, the average is down to 2.4.

My mother was typical of her generation. (Though she was exceptional in keeping her youthful figure well beyond her final baby.) In 1962, she had the last of her eight children, not counting the one she lost.

The trend toward smaller families plays out among my siblings. We have 12 kids among us, or 1.5 apiece. Census figures show that Latino married couples in the United States have an average of 4.1 children, compared to 3.24 for married couples overall. Why panic over eight-tenths of a baby?

In Mexico, the slowdown in the birthrate was no accident, as The Times' Mexico City Bureau Chief James F. Smith reported in September. It was the result of the government's "unswerving national crusade" launched in the 1970s to promote family planning. Tactics included sex education in schools and TV portrayals of popular soap opera characters using birth control.

Not even the Catholic Church, which officially opposes artificial contraception, can compete with the power of telenovelas. Today, 70% of married Mexican women use birth control compared to 30% in 1976.

Mexico's National Population Council calls it "a silent demographic revolution."

But the nation still faces challenges in educating the rural poor, who frequently migrate north. According to one expert, 80% of all Mexican babies are born to the poorest 20% of the population.

Mexico's success story, reflecting a worldwide decline in birthrates, proves that education works. We can help by promoting family planning among immigrants, legal or not. Efforts to withhold public funds for such services for the undocumented are clearly counterproductive, costing taxpayers much more in the long run.

Unfortunately, prejudice against poor people with big families is blind to the facts. The outdated bias is so severe I've decided to avoid mentioning family size in stories unless it's essential to know how many children or brothers or sisters somebody has.

I foolishly thought the information would elicit sympathy. That's why I mentioned it last year when I wrote about the young Mexican immigrant who was shot to death in Texas after stopping to ask an elderly American couple for a drink of water. He was 22, I wrote, the oldest of 16 siblings and a father himself.

I hoped the numbers would help readers see the man's desperation. I assumed people understood the responsibility of older brothers and sisters to help their parents provide. But instead of being outraged by the cruel execution, many readers blamed the man's parents for having--that's right--too many babies.

"If there was ever a good [occasion] to call you an epithet," concluded the caller who was upset about Santa Ana's overcrowding, "you would definitely be a dumb Mexican."

That may be true. Because instead of allowing my son, Miguel, to grow up as an only child, I should have let him know the joy of brotherhood.

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