

Census shows 32 percent local growth since 1990

HISPANIC POPULATION SURGES



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

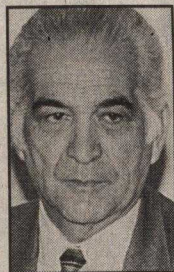
Plentiful work in Pajaro Valley fields is one lure for Hispanics who emigrate from Mexico and other Latin countries.

Perseverance spells success for many Mexican immigrants

By **MICHAEL MERRILL**
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Hispanics now comprise about 73 percent of the Watsonville population and have made great strides moving into mainstream society, but that transition has not been easy.

Two men who found better lives in the Pajaro Valley re-



Alcala

Faced racism early in his business career.

County grapples with rapid increase

By **JOHN SANFORD**
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The county's Hispanic population grew 32 percent between 1990 and 1997, according to Census Bureau estimates, while the total population rose just 4.7 percent.

Census figures show that one of four county residents is of Hispanic origin, but some population experts say these estimates are too low.

"I would say (the Hispanic population) is vastly undercounted — in some cases by 15 to 20 per-

cent," said John Borrego, a professor of community studies at UC Santa Cruz.

During the peak agricultural months, migrant farm workers augment the population by at least 5,000, he said, noting that even that number is "conservative."

A majority of Hispanic immigrants living in the county are legal residents, Borrego said. But while their growing number will eventually translate into more political strength, the sheer num-

Census

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ber of new arrivals will also put a strain on public education and health services, he said.

Chuck Moody, county Health Services Agency administrator, disagreed, saying growth in the Hispanic population has not overwhelmed their services because the increase has been gradual.

"We're adapting over time, and I think we're doing a fair job," he said.

He also pointed out that the youthful Hispanic population — it is believed that one-third of Hispanics in Watsonville are 18 or younger — are generally healthy and do not make big demands on health services.

Of greater concern are new immigrants who are carrying diseases such as tuberculosis but are afraid to seek help, Moody said. Many fear the state could eventually force doctors to turn over the medical records of undocumented immigrants.

Education is likely to be the public service most affected by the growing Hispanic population, said Daniel Dodge, chairman of the county's Latino Affairs Commission. Other experts agreed.

"It's going to impact public schools, which means that you'll need more teachers and more programs for students," said Pedro Castillo, a UCSC history professor and former director of the university's Chicano and Latino Research Center.

The large number of Hispanics in the county is due to the population's high fertility rate and to Mexico's poor economic conditions, which make field work in California lucrative, Castillo said.

Agricultural changes in the Pajaro Valley, where strawberry fields have been replacing apple orchards, also make Santa Cruz County an appealing destination. Growing strawberries is more profitable for growers, but also more labor intensive, and this means jobs.

Borrego also attributed the statistical growth of the local Hispanic population to the 1994 passage of Proposition 187 and 1996 passage of Proposition 207, which made it illegal for the state to consider race or gender in public hiring, contracting and education.

The propositions resulted in a flood of citizenship applications, in part because immigrants feared they would be denied public services.

"There was a window, and many people took advantage of it," Borrego said. In August 1997, for example, the Immigration and Naturalization Service office in San Jose faced an eight- to 12-month backlog

of citizenship applications.

Given the long-established network of migrant farm workers and booming agricultural economy, Watsonville is a natural destination for Mexican migrant workers, said Patricia Zavella, a UCSC professor of community studies and current director of the Chicano and Latino Research Center.

"The occupation of farm worker is the fastest growing occupation in Watsonville," Zavella said.

Migrant farmers can work nine to 11 months planting, weeding and harvesting the strawberry crop, Zavella said. The long season translates into more money.

The county's Hispanic population is likely to continue increasing in

'The occupation of farm worker is the fastest growing occupation in Watsonville.'

— Patricia Zavella, Chicano and Latino Research Center

the near future, according to many, but it is hard to predict what will happen in the long term.

Zavella predicted the increase would probably last about five years.

"It's part of an overall sea change," she said, discussing the Hispanic population explosion in many rural California towns.

Watsonville City Councilman Al Alcala said even though strawberry

acreage appears to have leveled off, he thinks the Hispanic population will continue to increase.

"There will be migration but not as much," he said. "Now that those people who came to work in the fields have settled and moved into more mainstream jobs, their friends and family will follow. The economic status of Mexico is the worst it's ever been, and there is good work here. It is only human

nature for people to want to improve their lives."

A lot depends on whether or not Watsonville develops some of its agricultural land and on how the city's water shortage affects the local economy.

Statewide the Hispanic population has risen 29 percent since 1990 while the non-Hispanic population has risen 6.3 percent. However, these percentages are based on previous population counts. The actual numbers do not show such an extreme discrepancy.

The Census Bureau estimates 14,885 Hispanics moved into the county between 1990 and 1997, while 7,765 whites — or roughly half of the new Hispanic popula-

tion — took up residency during this time.

Asian and Pacific Islanders the third largest increase, from 9,083 in 1990 to 11,661 in 1997.

According to Census Bureau estimates, people of Hispanic origin now comprise 11.3 percent of nation's total population.

California now has 9.9 million Hispanics, who comprise 31 percent of the state's total population. According to Census Bureau projections, Hispanics will comprise 43 percent of California's population by 2025, becoming the state's largest ethnic or racial group.

Staff writer Michael Merrill contributed to this story.