CHILDREN OF LATINO IMMIGRANTS CHOOSING TO HAVE SMALLER FAMILIES IN THE SOTO CLAN, SECOND GENERATION SLOWS BABY BOOM

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Body

The two-story San Jose home with a dining table that seats 12 and a garage transformed into a playroom just isn't enough space for the tightknit ***Soto family***.

There's Josefina ***Soto***, 68, the matriarch whose home is the hub for countless weekend gatherings. There are her 11 ***children*** and their spouses. And there are her 23 grandchildren, some college-age, some barely out of diapers.

The ***family*** has grown so large over the years that the Sotos now celebrate Thanksgiving outside over four 20-pound turkeys, 12 pumpkin pies and a steady supply of rice and beans. But even as their numbers grow with each new grandchild, the ***Soto family*** is shrinking.

Armed with more diplomas, fatter wallets and loftier dreams, the current ***generation*** of the ***Soto family*** is ***choosing*** to have fewer ***children*** than the last. They and ***families*** like them are quietly ***slowing*** the ***Latino baby boom*** that is transforming the state. And as they do, they are offering California powerful evidence that the ***boom*** will ultimately diminish.

The longer Latinos live in the United States, the more their ***families*** begin to mirror those of other native-born Americans. Josefina ***Soto***, like other ***Latino immigrants*** who have crossed the border, brought with her centuries-old traditions that value large ***families***.

But like many other middle-class Americans, the newest ***generation*** of Sotos has begun to place greater value on careers and the perks that often come with having a ***small family***: more summer vacations and after-school dance lessons.

The Sotos' lives weave an American tale of assimilation and ascension, one played over time and again since the birth of this country.

New way of life

"I don't want to push my grandchildren to get married too soon," ***Soto*** explained on a recent morning as she watched over two of her younger grandchildren. "Let them get married and have kids when they want to. In my day, if you were 15, they were already talking about marriage."

It was the late 1940s when ***Soto***, a native of Tampico, Mexico, crossed the Rio Grande at 16, wading through chest-deep water in search of a better life than her job ironing pants for 35 cents a dozen could offer. She was an

orphan with a third-grade education, in charge of sending the pennies she earned home to her three younger siblings.

But at 19, when she married her late husband, a Texas-born Mexican-American, her life changed. She would spend the next 16 years creating a ***family*** that would go further than she ever imagined.

She never longed for a prescribed number of ***children***. Like many ***Latino*** women who cross the border holding traditions rich in ***family*** values, she left that decision up to her faith.

"Once I started having ***children***, I had as many as God wanted," ***Soto*** says.

She embraced each new ***child*** with unbridled anticipation. Until ***Soto*** -- a day after her 32nd birthday -- found herself sitting in a San Jose hospital bed cradling her 10th ***child***.

She was tired, and her body was weak. She pleaded with the nurse for what was once unthinkable. "Forgive me, but I can't have any more kids," she told the nurse. "I want my tubes tied before I get pregnant again."

The nurse scoffed at the idea, pointing out that as a practicing Catholic, ***Soto*** shouldn't dare take the decision out of God's hands. The nurse never relayed the request to the doctor, and ***Soto*** went on to have one last ***child*** three years later.

Soto admits it was tough in the beginning, raising 11 ***children*** on her husband's $1.25-an-hour job as a truck driver and the meager pay he earned later as a janitor. The ***family*** lived its early years in a two-bedroom home near downtown San Jose, spending the summer picking strawberries and onions. Back then, they celebrated Thanksgiving over a modest dinner of chicken and canned goods delivered to needy ***families***.

But ***Soto*** has no regrets. She watched all 11 ***children*** graduate from high school. She marveled as each went on to college; two received their associate's degrees. And she beamed with pride when they bought their homes -- all but one within 10 minutes of her East San Jose Camelot.

"Who would've thought that a woman with no parents would come to this country not knowing the language and be here today surrounded by all this ***family***?" ***Soto*** said on Easter Sunday as the aroma of menudo and homemade tortillas filled the kitchen and her ***family*** gathered for the ***second*** time that weekend.

Bound by more than just blood, the Sotos enjoy one another's company as much as they do a well-orchestrated Easter egg hunt. The tradition played itself out this year as it has in the past, with the adults scurrying around like ***children***, hiding dozens of candy-filled eggs in the front yard.

Jose ***Soto***, one of Josefina's five sons, dropped to his knees and began to furiously dig a shallow hole in his mother's flower bed. There, he hid the ultimate treasure for the older grandchildren -- an oversize yellow plastic egg stuffed with coins and dollar bills. This time, he thought, he'd fool them.

Fat chance.

"Oh, my poor plant. They're going to kill it," Josefina ***Soto*** shouted as her 22-year-old granddaughter, Veronica Segovia, unearthed the precious pot amid cheers and laughter.

Josefina ***Soto*** couldn't help but smile. It is moments like these, she said, that define a ***family***.

Higher stakes

By the time her ***children*** began having their own ***families***, ***Soto*** noticed how much times had changed since the days of picking fruit and packing 11 ***children*** into the back of a station wagon. Most of her ***children*** married in their early or mid-20s. Only one had four ***children***; most had fewer than three. They and their spouses landed better jobs with better pay.

The stakes suddenly seemed higher, too, as they tried to build better lives for their ***children***.

Maria Segovia, the oldest, bought a ***second***, more spacious home with a swimming pool in Tracy. Rosemary Garcia, the next-eldest daughter, lived paycheck-to-paycheck to send her oldest son to the prestigious Bellarmine College Preparatory school in San Jose. And Cruz ***Soto*** Jr., the oldest son, recently paid $1,200 to send his youngest son to Washington, D.C., on a school field trip.

"My parents would have never been able to afford that. With 11 kids, they couldn't afford to do a lot of things," Cruz ***Soto*** said as his son, Marcos, anxiously counted the hours until leaving for D.C. the following day. "For us, if we have the money, we do it."

For many of the ***Soto*** siblings and other parents like them, weighing the trade-offs that come with a large ***family*** evolves from ***generation*** to ***generation***.

For Latinos, the average number of ***children*** per ***family*** drops from 3.5 to 2.6 between the first and ***second generations***, according to Hans Johnson, a demographer who is studying ***Latino*** birth rates at the Public Policy Institute of California. By the third ***generation***, demographers project, the fertility rate drops to 2.0 ***children*** per ***family***.

Grace Garcia, the middle ***child*** of the ***Soto family***, is ahead of the curve. The way she sees it, paying for the after-school swimming lessons, theater classes and summer vacations to New York and Yosemite would require too many sacrifices if she had more than two ***children***. She'd have to work full time and give up her "free Fridays," when she spends the day volunteering at herchildren's elementary school.

Beyond the extra quality time that comes with fewer ***children***, Grace Garcia believes there is a greater good to having a ***small family***:

"Zero-growth population," she said with a grin, repeating the term she learned in the fourth grade and has never forgotten. "Resources are so limited, if we continue to have ***children*** at the rate my parents did, we'd deplete those resources."

She gleefully points out that her sister, Rosemary Garcia, is known affectionately within the ***family*** as "Fertile Myrtle," a nickname that was coined after Rosemary gave birth to her third ***child*** and stuck after she had her fourth. But even Rosemary admits she had ***second*** thoughts about having her fourth ***child***, realizing the financial sacrifices she and her husband would have to make.

"When Jose made it through his first year at Bellarmine, I thought: 'OK. We made it, we didn't go broke, we ate,' " she said of her oldest son. "I couldn't believe when he graduated. We actually did it."

Changing expectations

Now Jose Garcia, Rosemary's first ***child***, is a 22-year-old junior at the University of California-Berkeley studying anthropology. He is at the helm of a new ***generation*** of the ***Soto clan***, driven by new ambitions and new priorities.

Graduating from high school, though still a milestone, is far from the end of the road for this bunch. Part-time jobs are only necessary to help pay for luxuries their parents don't already provide: gas for the new Dodge Ram (a graduation gift), a weekend manicure or tickets to a must-see concert.

And having a ***family***?

Only after they earn a college degree, land the perfect job, settle down with the person they love and buy a home, in that order. The Sotos, like others in their ***generation***, have become increasingly pragmatic.

"I need to be able to take care of myself first before I take care of anyone else," Veronica Segovia, a San Jose State University student, said of the prospect of having ***children*** one day. "I want to live comfortably and give my kids what they want, not just what they need."

And just as their expectations evolve, so do their definitions of what constitutes a large ***family***. Maria Segovia described her decision to "only have three ***children***" as opting for a ***small family***. But when her daughter, Veronica, talks about the possibility of having a large ***family***, three seems like plenty.

Yet the thought of three ***children*** makes Tony Garcia's head spin.

"It's too expensive around here to have a big ***family***," said the 20-year-old computer science student at San Jose State University.

Garcia is the ***second*** of Rosemary's four ***children***. He doesn't hesitate when asked how many ***children*** he hopes to have one day. He has thought about this already. He knows. He wants either two or none.

Even he couldn't imagine having a ***child*** without a sibling.

CHART: MERCURY NEWS

THE ***SOTO FAMILY***

The first ***generation*** of the ***Soto family*** born in the United States has ***chosen*** to have fewer ***children*** than the previ ous ***generations***. They and ***families*** like them are ***slowing*** the ***Latino baby boom*** that is transforming the state.

Notes

POPULATION TREND: ***SECOND*** OF TWO PARTS

Graphic

Photos (4), Chart;

PHOTO: EUGENE H. LOUIE -- MERCURY NEWS

FAMILY MATRIARCH: Josefina ***Soto***, celebrating her 68th birthday at Lake Cunningham in April, has 11 ***children***. But while ***immigrants***' high birthrates have fueled a ***Latino baby boom*** in California, their childrenare having ***smaller families***.

PHOTO: EUGENE H. LOUIE -- MERCURY NEWS

CELEBRATING TOGETHER: Albert ***Soto***, one of Josefina ***Soto***'s 23 grandchildren, comes up with the ball in a game at one of the huge ***family***'s frequent gatherings.

PHOTO: EUGENE H. LOUIE -- MERCURY NEWS

Josefina ***Soto***'s large ***family*** turned out to celebrate her birthday in April at Lake Cunningham. Pictured, from left, are grandson Jose Manuel Garcia, daughters Gloria Alva and Rosemary Garcia, and grandson Albert ***Soto***.

PHOTO: EUGENE H. LOUIE -- MERCURY NEWS

Josefina ***Soto***'s granddaughter Alexia ***Soto*** shares a moment with her mother, Sylvia ***Soto***, during the ***family***'s Easter Sunday gathering at the matriarch's home in San Jose.

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