

## **Ethnic Shift;**

### **Immigration: An Irish enclave learns a new language**

### **Mexican immigrants boost a growing Latino population**

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## **Body**

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St. Patrick, Norristown's largest Roman Catholic church, was founded in 1839 by men with such surnames as Mulholland, Flynn, Shannon and McReady. Even into the mid-1990s, the parish was still largely **Irish**.

Today, it is easier to find a Fernandez, Jimenez or Garcia in the pews. Latinos compose more than half of the 500-member church, and the most popular Mass is said in Spanish.

St. Patrick's transformation is emblematic of the profound **ethnic shift** that is remaking Norristown, and quickly. The populace increasingly resembles California's more than the rest of Montgomery County's.

In the 1990s, the number of Caucasians dropped 28 percent to 15,450, putting them in the minority for the first time. The number of African Americans increased 34 percent to 10,750, and Asian Americans nearly 140 percent, to 930.

No group has approached the growth of the **Latino** community, which almost quadrupled to 3,300. But the near-unanimous opinion in Norristown is that the census figures are incomplete, that a true count would yield up to 8,000 Latinos, about 25 percent of all residents.

The vast majority are **Mexican immigrants**, and most of them are undocumented. They have been drawn by the borough's relatively low-cost housing and its proximity to wealthy suburbs flush with service, landscaping and construction jobs.

"One person comes and finds a job," said Hector Moreno, a pioneer in the borough's **Mexican** community, having arrived 13 years ago. "Then they bring some more people, then they bring people . . . ."

That chain reaction, even as it accelerated in the last five years, went unacknowledged by Norristown officialdom. The **Latino** market has not been factored into any revitalization plan - although at least 13 **new Mexican** American businesses, such as the always-busy restaurant Taqueria La Michoacan on Main Street, have opened, providing some of the only action in an otherwise inert merchant economy.

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"There's been a lot of other things on our plate," said Olivia Brady, the Borough Council's president and sole **Latino** member.

Only in recent weeks, she said, has the council moved to create an **immigration** task force, to answer residents' concerns about the impact of the surging **Latino population**.

Will children of undocumented aliens burden the schools without providing any tax dollars? Will the uninsured overwhelm emergency rooms and health services? While **immigration** experts nationally are divided on the answers, borough officials are a long way from reaching their own conclusions.

Other problems are not in dispute. For instance, that many borough apartments are overcrowded with limited-income **immigrants**. Or that police have had trouble communicating with Spanish-speaking residents, as highlighted last year by a rash of ethnically targeted muggings. Or that race relations have at times been strained by cultural differences.

"People in . . . Norristown want to continue to live the way they've always lived," said the Rev. Charles Kennedy, who leads the Spanish Mass at St. Patrick. That means, "no, you can't drink beer on your front steps. Don't play music outside loudly, even if it's a baptism."

However awkward the adjustment, most urban economics experts are adamant that **immigrants** can breathe life into aging towns. As white residents have fled Norristown, they say, arriving Latinos have prevented the sort of widespread abandoned housing that blights North Philadelphia, Chester and Camden.

Other communities "would probably love to have some of [Norristown's] problems - the decision between whether a little supermarket should be called the corner market or the corner bodega," said Bill Fontana, executive director of the Pennsylvania Downtown Center, a Harrisburg-based nonprofit that promotes revitalization.

Norristown's **Latino population** already has shown its potential. Church membership is up. A weekend soccer league formed by **Mexican immigrants** last year has **grown** into a racially diverse group of 400 players, drawing opponents nationwide.

"The future in this town is Hispanics," said Miguel A. Dones, a **Latino** community leader.

"My message has been: 'You have to **learn** to live with that.' "

## Notes

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### DOWN TOWNS

Part III: Writing a second act for Norristown

Sidebar to the third in a series.

## Graphic

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PHOTO;

Melvin Munoz and his mother, Patricia Cervantes, at Mass at St. Patrick in Norristown. Latinos compose more than half of the 500-member church. The most popular Mass is said in Spanish.

## Classification

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