

## **MEXICO COMES TO MAIN STREET: MEXICAN IMMIGRATION AND URBAN REVITALIZATION IN POUGHKEEPSIE, NY**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Poughkeepsie is a small city with a population of about 30,000 in the Mid-Hudson region of New York that has struggled for three decades to revitalize the commercial life of its Main Street downtown neighborhood. In the past, these efforts included closing off a portion of Main Street to create a pedestrian mall and many years later re-opening it to vehicular traffic. Currently, projects to rehabilitate older buildings and construct new residential, commercial and government buildings are underway, funded by both government and private investment. Since 1990, the city's Hispanic population, especially Mexicans, has increased dramatically, particularly in the census tracts close to Main Street. Their presence as entrepreneurs and consumers has become visible in new Hispanic businesses along Main Street. This study examines the background and implications of these two convergent trends in the redevelopment of Main Street. Changes in the volume and characteristics of Poughkeepsie's Hispanic population are linked to shifts in the urban commercial structure along Main Street. This revitalization reflects top-down investment in large government and private projects, as well as bottom-up growth in small Hispanic and Mexican businesses.*

**Keywords:** *Immigration, Mexican, Poughkeepsie, Revitalization*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Most residents and local observers of Poughkeepsie, New York, would agree that two particularly striking processes are occurring today in the city's changing downtown streetscape. First, major urban revitalization efforts that have been attempted in the downtown central business district since the mid-1970s are re-emerging, with a growing sense of optimism. At the same time, a recent surge of Mexican and other Hispanic immigrants into the Hudson Valley region has become especially noticeable in the population and commercial life of the city's downtown area. New or expanding businesses whose owners or clientele are Hispanic have grown in number and in variety in the past decade.

In 2000, Gober called upon geographers to contribute to the "mushrooming interdisciplinary literature on immigration and the city" (Gober, 2000). This study examines the complementary impact of newly emerging Mexican immigrant communities and their commercial enterprises and large-scale investment projects in revitalizing Poughkeepsie's Main Street. This approach links convergent perspectives, embracing both the analysis of immigration trends and changing urban commercial structure. The City of Poughkeepsie (as distinct from the surrounding Town of Poughkeepsie) is an ideal

place to examine these trends. Poughkeepsie is a small city located on the Hudson River, halfway between New York City and Albany. It is the county seat of Dutchess County, with a population of 29,871 in 2000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Its officials and civic leaders have been struggling since the mid-1970s to maintain the commercial vitality of the Central Business District (CBD), especially the section located along Main Street, in the face of suburban growth and competition from shopping malls (Bradshaw, 2006; Densmore, 2002; Valkys, 2006a; Valkys, 2006b; Wolf, 2006). With this focus in mind, the study area is defined as four City census tracts, which are crossed by Main Street. They form the heart of the area of concern among the city's leaders. Poughkeepsie is also one of many smaller cities across the United States that have experienced a wave of immigration since 1990 that has shifted away from historical gateway cities such as New York and Los Angeles (Arreola, 2004; Brown et al., 2007; Johnson-Webb, 2002).

This study first examines the recent, dramatic increase in the Hispanic population of Poughkeepsie, with special emphasis on the Mexican population and its geographic concentration along Main Street. Census data, local newspaper reports, and field observation shed light on the immigrant influence in the study area. In the second part of the study, Main Street's commercial composition is examined for 1975, 1992, and 2006, based on

previous work by one of the authors (Mano and Knight, 1991) and on field observation and survey data. Next, efforts to bring businesses and social life back to Main Street are described. Such efforts include both top-down projects by private investors and public agencies, as well as bottom-up growth in small businesses exemplified by the recent appearance of Mexican enterprises. In particular, two Hispanic businessmen serve both as catalysts for business growth and as leaders of the Hispanic community. Each of these processes, in its own way, contributes to the revitalization of the city's Main Street business corridor. Although vacancies on Main Street have increased over the 30-year study period, the current activity may indicate a significant turning point.

## **BACKGROUND LITERATURE**

Recently, Poughkeepsie has become the subject of academic investigation by social scientists interested in migration and related issues. The Mexican community has been studied in detail by geographers, anthropologists, and sociologists because of strong ties between Poughkeepsie Mexicans and their home communities in Oaxaca. Frequent travel, communications, and exchange of goods and cash between Oaxacan villages and Poughkeepsie are components of transnational identity, a topic of global concern (Mountz and Wright, 1996). Of particular interest are the social and cultural impacts of such exchanges on Mexican communities and on the individuals who may spend a decade or more traveling frequently as repeat migrants. South of the border, scholars have studied how Oaxacan households and villages use the earnings returned by relatives in Poughkeepsie (VanWey et al., 2005; Cohen and Rodriguez, 2004).

Studies of the impact of Mexicans and other Hispanic immigrants on their North American communities have taken several different directions among geographers (Arreola, 2004). Identifying and mapping the distribution of cultural features in the landscape has been the focus of many such studies (Arreola, 1993; Benedict and Kent, 2004). Most important for this study are those that examine the role of Hispanic businesses in urban economies of North America (Berry, 2004; Oberle, 2004). Many of these studies, however, have been carried out in cities much larger than Poughkeepsie, or in cities with larger or long-established Hispanic communities. Such studies contribute the benefits of field observation and case studies to the ongoing research among sociologists and economists

regarding ethnic economies. Part of the debate about the impact of ethnic economic activities on immigrants' success focuses on the importance of ethnic niches and ethnic enclaves (Light, 1998). Geographers are particularly well-suited for this line of inquiry, as it leads to questions of spatial concentration of ethnic businesses and the workplaces or residences of their customers (Kaplan, 1998). Poughkeepsie's downtown business district may offer some insight into these questions as its Hispanic business sector emerges and expands.

## **Hispanic Immigration to Poughkeepsie**

In the suburbs and county surrounding Poughkeepsie, the Puerto Rican population is numerically dominant among Hispanic groups, but the city of Poughkeepsie has a strong concentration of Mexicans (Pfeiffer, 1998; Lynch, 2001). Rapid growth of the Mexican population is mirrored in New York City, as well, where the Puerto Rican and Dominican populations have historically been the largest among Latinos (Miyares, 2004). Unlike New York City's Mexican population, which comes mainly from the state of Puebla, Poughkeepsie has received a steady stream of immigrants from Oaxaca.

The 2000 Census showed that Poughkeepsie City's total population grew from 28,844 to 29,871 between 1990 and 2000, a 3.6% increase. In that decade, the Hispanic and Latino population almost tripled from 1,086 to 3,177, and grew from 3.8% to 10.6% of the City's total. Mexicans counted in the 2000 census increased from 288 in 1990 to 1,616 in 2000, a fivefold increase. In 2000, Mexicans accounted for 5.4% of the total city population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Given the problems of counting immigrants, especially undocumented residents, these census figures are almost certainly underestimates. Even local organizations and officials have been unable or reluctant to estimate the size of Poughkeepsie's Mexican population (Pollack, 1998).

The dramatic increase in Poughkeepsie's Hispanic population was probably due to recent arrivals rather than natural increase. The 2000 census estimates social statistics from a 16.6% sample of the population and this proves to be a problem in analyzing data about the Mexican population, who are probably under underestimated in this sample.<sup>1</sup> These data contain information about year of entry and citizenship status. According to the census sample and estimates, approximately 42% of Poughkeepsie's Mexicans in 2000 were born in Mexico. Of this group, 85% moved into the city in the decade 1990-2000, most from 1995-2000.<sup>2</sup> Most Poughkeepsie Mexicans who were born in Mexico

are non-citizens (91%). Unfortunately, there are no updates since 2000 about the number of Mexicans, and that number is certainly an underestimate, due to legal concerns over immigrant status.

Most of the Mexican immigrants identified in the 2000 census are concentrated in a few of the census tracts, particularly in two of the census tracts along the Main Street commercial transect examined below (Figure 1). In the 2000 census, Mexican immigrant numbers are only available for census tracts, not for the more detailed block groups. About 40% of the city's Mexicans live in two census tracts,

2204 and 2205. In these tracts, as in the city as a whole, Mexican immigrants outnumber those from the Caribbean, the other major Latin American group in Poughkeepsie City. To summarize, there has been a recent dramatic increase in Poughkeepsie's Mexican population since 1990, which appears to be a result of recent immigration. Although Mexicans are scattered throughout Poughkeepsie city and in fact, throughout Dutchess County, they are particularly concentrated in the census tracts bisected by Main Street.

The census data is supported by popular reports and newspaper articles as Mexicans have become far more visible in Poughkeepsie and nearby cities in the past decade. The daily Poughkeepsie Journal newspaper began covering the Mexican community in depth following a tragic event in 1998 when Jaime Gil Tenorio, an immigrant from Oaxaca, Mexico, was killed in a road accident. As the residents of Poughkeepsie became aware of the need for cash and services in order to repatriate the body to relatives in Oaxaca, they also became educated about Tenorio's home village, San Agustín Yatareni. Much of the fundraising and publicity effort that occurred around these events took place in the restaurant El Bracero, whose owner has served as a link in the social networks that Oaxacans rely on in the process of chain migration (Cohen and Rodriguez, 2004; Flad, 2005). Tenorio's death awakened public interest in the growing Hispanic presence in the Hudson Valley region, and in the lives and home towns of new residents. Several months later, a special section of the newspaper was devoted to describing life in San Agustín and relevant social and economic data, in order to better inform the public about the culture and concerns of the newly emerging Mexican community.

Since then, frequent articles about the region's various ethnic groups and immigrant populations have been published in the Poughkeepsie Journal and other local newspapers. Along Main Street, the cultural impact of Hispanic and Mexican immigration can also be noted by the increase in Mexican groceries and restaurants with names like La Poblanita, La Michoacana, and La Cocina de la Tía. Ubiquitous posters advertise local concerts and performances featuring Mexican performers. Many of these musicians apparently come from northern and central Mexico ("Los Tigres del Norte") while others originate in Durango and San Luis Potosí. Further evidence of Mexican immigration that is visible in the cultural streetscape is found in bulletins and publications from Hispanic cultural organizations, advertisements for English language classes, and churches offering more services in Spanish.

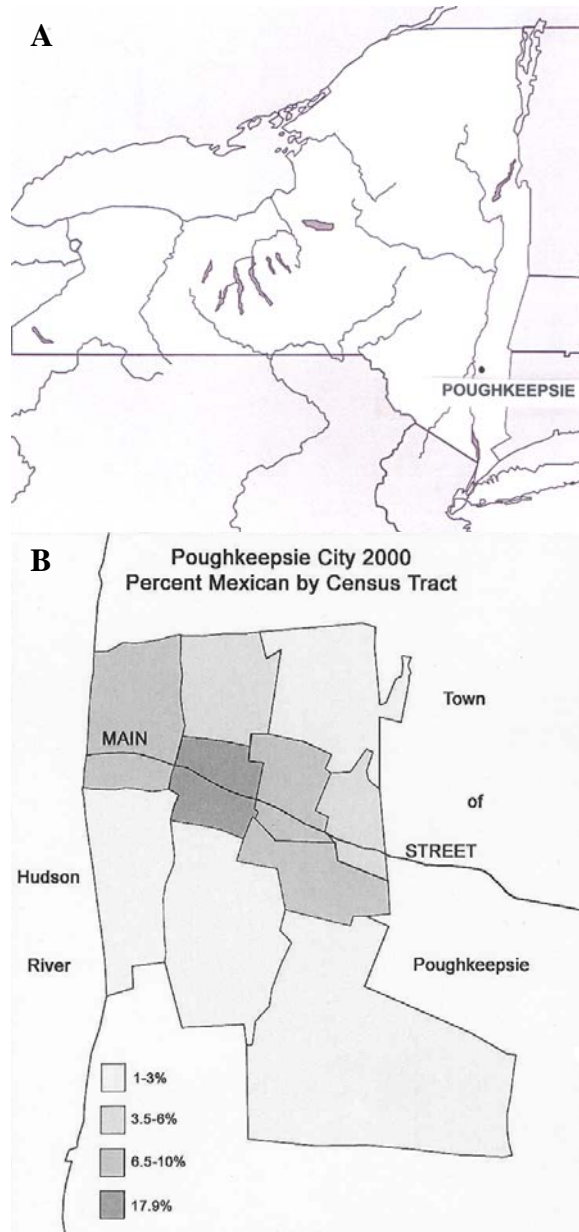


Figure 1. Location of Poughkeepsie, NY (A), and Mexican population by Census Tract (B).

### Main Street Commercial Activity

This next part of the study examines commercial activity in the City of Poughkeepsie in the section of Main Street that represents both the heart of the Central Business District, and an outer frame area, referred to here as the outer blocks. The City’s traditional CBD is centered on the intersection of Main and Market Street, at the western edge of the study area. The outer blocks extend east to the City line, and have more specialized, space-consuming commercial uses like automobile sales and repair, furniture stores mixed with neighborhood functions, including restaurants and small variety stores, as well as some residences. This transect along Main Street reflects historic changes in older buildings and current trends in the City’s commercial fabric from the CBD to the City boundary. The components of business activity on Main Street for 1975, 1992, and 2006 were examined.

These three dates were chosen because they represent particular commercial revitalization efforts in the City. In 1974, the three central CBD blocks were converted into a downtown pedestrian shopping area called the “Main Mall” to counteract the competition from suburban malls being constructed in the neighboring Town of Poughkeepsie. In 1991, the pedestrian area in the outer eastern Main Mall block was removed and the road rebuilt. This action was taken to revive commercial activity in the area, as the lack of traffic was perceived as encouraging crime and vagrancy. In 2001, the remaining pedestrian areas were returned to through traffic, again as an attempt to stimulate commercial activity.

### METHODOLOGY

To analyze the businesses, Main Street was divided into two sectors: the three downtown blocks, which comprised the pedestrian Main Mall, created in 1974 (244-395 Main), and the outer blocks, more distant from the CBD (399-739 Main). This was to differentiate between the characteristics of CBD business types found in the Main Mall area from those in the outer blocks, activities typically found in “traditional shopping” or “urban arterial” streets (Cadwallader, 1996). City Directories provided the detailed data for 1975 and 1992. These reference sources listed the street address and the type of business or residential activity, detailed by floor. Publication of City Directories ceased in 1992, so a field survey was necessary to collect the comparable data for 2006. Only ground floor activities for 1975 and 1992 were included in the data to simplify

analysis. These data were further examined to identify Mexican businesses, determined by name for 1975 and 1992, and visual assessment in June 2006.

The business types were divided into retail, food-related (restaurants and groceries), auto-related, service-related (professional, personal, and FIRE), other, and vacant. Professional service included lawyers, doctors, consultants, and similar activities, while personal service described barbers, beauty salons, and manicure businesses. The FIRE category identified finance, insurance, and realty activities.<sup>3</sup>

### RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Because the total number of businesses changed through time, only activity percentages are shown. These simplified categories allowed a broad comparison between the three time periods, which represent significant periods in the commercial history of Poughkeepsie’s Main Street over the last 30 years, for both the Main Mall area and the outer blocks section (Figures 2 and 3).

#### Changes in the Main Mall Sector (244-395 Main Street)

In 1975, when the Poughkeepsie CBD had just begun to face competition from suburban malls, 50% of the 121 Main Mall businesses were retail: department stores, jewelers, clothing, shoe, card, and gift stores. 15% were restaurants or specialized food stores, while services accounted for 23% of the businesses. Most services were professional in nature: doctors, attorneys, opticians, as well as several photography businesses. There were few personal service providers or FIRE offices. Vacancies totaled 11%.

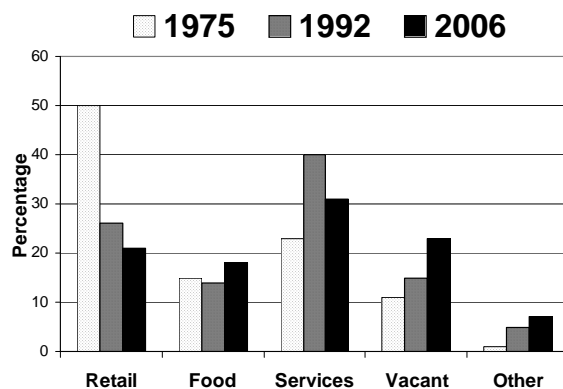


Figure 2. Main Mall business activity.

By 1992, competition from suburban malls had considerable impact and the Main Mall's retail sector had shrunk to 26% of the 100 commercial establishments. The service sector had grown to 40%, due mainly to an increase in professional services. Poughkeepsie is the county seat of Dutchess County, and the governmental activities attracted professional services. Food related businesses were stable, comprising 14% of the businesses in this three-block section. Vacancies increased to 15%, and personal services increased from 4% to 9%.

In 2006, retail had dropped to 21% of 90 businesses in this section of Main Street, despite its reopening to traffic in 2001. Service related businesses slipped to 31%, mostly because there were fewer professional activities. The percentage of food related businesses increased slightly to 18% and had a higher proportion of restaurants.

Over the 30-year period, the Main Mall blocks' establishments changed from being those found in a regional retail center to the mix of activities more typical of neighborhood commercial activity. As higher level functions moved to the suburban malls, Main Mall essentially slipped down the commercial hierarchy.

**Changes in the Outer Blocks (399-739 Main Street)**

The "outer blocks" encompass what has been termed the "zone of transition" found at the edge of the CBD. This part of Main Street housed the space-demanding activities of auto sales and repair and furniture stores, mixed with neighborhood functions like restaurants, variety stores, and personal services. This section also includes several apartment complexes, as well as some houses, which were also divided into apartments, as well as two historic buildings (Glebe House and Clinton). The mixture of businesses and housing in these "outer blocks" can be seen as a result of the composite growth of the evolving edge of a CBD over many decades.

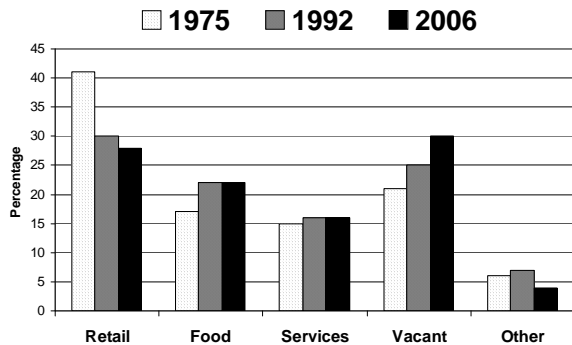


Figure 3. Outer blocks business activity.

In 1975, 41% of the 160 businesses in the outer blocks were retail, with 12% auto-related. 17% were restaurants or food stores. Services comprised 15% of the total, mostly personal (11% were beauty parlors, barbers, dry cleaners, and laundromats). These blocks had a higher vacancy rate of 21% than the pedestrian mall area. By 1992, the number of businesses in the outer blocks had shrunk to 134, with only 30% retail and auto-related. The restaurant/food percentage increased to 22%, while service activities increased slightly to 16%. The vacancy rate rose to 25%, reflecting the continuing exodus to area malls. In the 2006 survey, retail including auto related activities slipped to 28%. The percentage of restaurants/food stores remained stable at 22% and services held steady at 16%, still mostly personal in type. The vacancy rate again increased, to 30%.

These outer blocks suffered even more vacancy and abandonment than the Main Mall over the 30-year period, particularly in the 400-block area. The number and percentage of retail and auto-related businesses decreased, as these functions moved to suburban locations. However, the percentage of restaurant/food related and service businesses held steady, reflecting the commercial activity of a neighborhood commercial area.

**Mexican Businesses and Main Street Revitalization**

Behind these dry statistics is the much more interesting story of the recent emergence of Mexican businesses on Main Street. In the 1992 directory, there were just two that could be identified, both in the outer block section. One was a Mexican grocery store (La Oaxaqueña) and the other, a restaurant, El Bracero. The Mexican owner of El Bracero is still an important leader in Poughkeepsie's Mexican community. By 2006, there were 17 Hispanic businesses in the outer blocks, and six in the former Main Mall area. Almost all of these were identified as Mexican. Such businesses were identified by name, particularly names of states of Mexico, and/or on-site visual assessment using cultural clues (Mexican signs, flags, or products). Most (13) of the outer block Mexican businesses were restaurants or groceries, or a combination of both. The others included video rentals, a music store, beauty parlor and clothing store. Most of the Mexican businesses were in the 500-600 blocks, and appeared to have moved into stores that were occupied in 1992. A few of the Mexican restaurants replaced existing restaurants. However, more restaurants moved into storefronts that had been occupied by a variety of different types of businesses, including thrift stores,

hair care salons, and an auto-part supplier. A highly significant development was the opening of the Casa Latina, a large grocery store, in 2001. It is currently the only such food store in the City of Poughkeepsie and offers a greater variety of products than the corner grocery stores.

Five of the new Main Mall area Mexican businesses were restaurants, the other one a multi-functional store offering passport photos, money grams, and gifts. In this area, while two restaurants moved into existing restaurant facilities, the others replaced storefronts used by the City court offices, a clothing store, and a planning consultant's office.

Among Main Street's growing community of Mexican business owners, two "catalyst" entrepreneurs have been cited in newspaper reports and field studies as important leaders in the Mexican community. The owner of the El Bracero bar and restaurant in the 500 block serves as a link in the chain of migration between Poughkeepsie and towns in rural Oaxaca, as previously noted. The restaurant serves as a social gathering place for Mexican immigrants, and an anchor for subsequent surrounding commercial development due to owner's influential position in the immigrant community. Francisco del Moral is president of the Benito Juárez Hispanic Association, and owns the Casa Latina store. He started by selling lunches from his van, then moved into a storefront on Main Street. Needing more space he opened the 6000 square foot Casa Latina store in 2001 to "cater to the city's burgeoning Hispanic population" (Progressive Grocer, 2005). He and his co-owner, Reyna Garcia, now plan to open a 14,000 square foot supermarket in the 400 block opposite the new Hamilton building, having gained planning approval for the Tower Food Plaza in late 2005.

### **Governmental/Private Partnerships in Revitalization**

Paralleling this "bottom up" business activity is a "top down" effort which has resulted in significant new building and rehabilitation efforts on Main Street, supported through governmental leadership and funding. Over the last few years, the revitalization of the City of Poughkeepsie has been a top priority for city and county officials. Main Street is one of three major areas where this effort is focused, the other two being the waterfront and northwest section. The Main Street area is part of Poughkeepsie's Empire zone, making it eligible for financial and tax incentives to support redevelopment and rehabilitation programs. Federal, state, and local monies together with leveraged investment are providing the resources to achieve several

rehabilitation and construction projects.

A major milestone in the renaissance of Main Street is the recently completed Hamilton complex, which provides 54 new affordable housing units above seven commercial stores. This 3-story brick structure, styled to blend with the historic buildings in the area, replaced the dilapidated, vacancy plagued, zone of transition section on the north side of the lower 400 block (417-451 Main). The proposed Tower Food Plaza will be located across the street. Just to the west, the historic landmark Luckey Platt department store, which had been empty and decaying for years, is finally being restored for apartments, artists' lofts and workspaces, and ground floor stores, with some help from federal funding. Renovations are also planned for the Cleveland Building, across Academy Street from Luckey Platt. In the east end of the 300 block, private investors have restored historic buildings, with apartments above the ground floor stores.

On the north side of the 500 block, the City of Poughkeepsie is currently constructing a new public safety building to house fire and police departments. This building replaces a section of decayed and vacant structures, and represents a prominent civic investment and presence in remaking Main Street's new streetscape. Just to the east, another group of four vacant properties in the 500 blocks were rehabilitated, spurred by City grants and loans.

## **CONCLUSION**

While Mexican immigration and downtown redevelopment have increased in Poughkeepsie, these trends have deep roots. For example, the El Bracero restaurant was established many years ago, and has played a long-term role in the commerce of Main Street's outer blocks, as has the Casa Latina grocery store and its owner. The recent spotlight on these individuals coincides with a spurt of investment in large projects and a growing optimism in Main Street's revitalization. Food related businesses (restaurants and groceries) have been the one stable component on Main Street. The construction and rehabilitation of residential units is another positive development. A significant difference from past efforts appears to be taking place in the return of a supermarket to the downtown area where this commercial element has been missing for many decades. This path to revitalization is embodied in the planned Tower Food Plaza. A Mexican entrepreneur who began by selling lunches has now joined the wider system of financing and investing in

order to provide a much needed service to Main Street customers. Both bottom-up and top-down approaches to investment merge in this one project. During the 30-year study period, vacancy rates continued to increase despite attempts to reverse the trend. Thus, the question remains as to whether this time revitalization efforts will be successful over the long term.

## ENDNOTES

1. Comparisons between the 100% count and sample Census data reveal startling discrepancies, which are probably caused by too small a sample and under-representation of the Mexican population in the detailed (16%) sample.

2. The term "Hispanic" has raised questions and objections, and has caused comparability problems in analysis. The term is used here as the Census Bureau defines it.

3. Complications arose because there are missing street addresses for all periods, sometimes replaced by a vacant lot, and two different businesses could have the same street address. To deal with vacancies, the most problematic category, 1992 vacancies which remained in 2006 were added to "new vacancies"-stores or apartments which were occupied in 1992, but empty in the 2006 survey. The percentages of vacancies are thus conservative, and more may have been present.

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