

Hispanic population booms in Kenner and elsewhere in New Orleans area

By Mary Sparacello and Michelle Krupa, *The Times-Picayune*, June 16, 2011

Hector Sanchez came to **Kenner** after **Hurricane Katrina** to help his relatives rebuild their homes. He stayed for its warmth -- both the temperature and likable people.

"The weather was pretty close to what I always knew in Honduras," he said.

Sanchez is part of a wave of new residents who have raised the Hispanic population of the **New Orleans** area over the past decade, further diversifying neighborhoods in Kenner, **Terrytown**, **Mid-City**, **eastern New Orleans** and central **Metairie**.



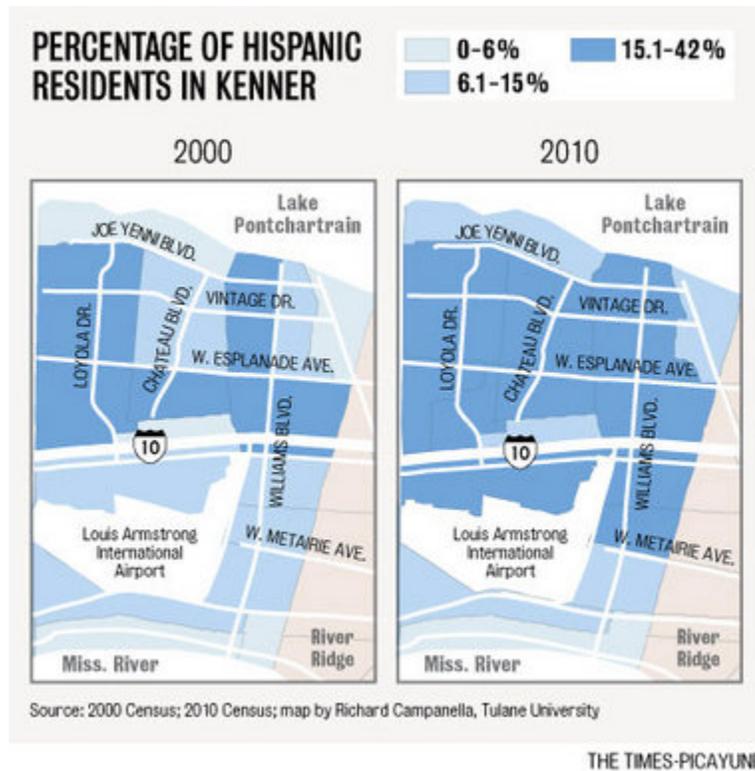
Photos by Brett Duke/The Times-Picayune Brothers Michael, 8, and Miguel Herrera Jr., 4, shop at Celina's International Supermarket in Kenner with their mother on Wednesday.

Few areas have morphed like Kenner, where Hispanics now make up 22 percent of the population, up from 14 percent a decade ago. Twelve of the city's 20 U.S. Census Bureau tracts boast a Hispanic population greater than 15 percent, up from five tracts in 2000, according to Tulane University geographer Richard Campanella's analysis of **census data**. One of the tracts, where Sanchez lives, now has more Hispanic people than any other in Louisiana.

The change is evident all over Kenner.

"Drive down Williams Boulevard," said real estate agent Conchita Sulli. "You will see every block has a grocery store or restaurant or something Hispanic on it."

Darlene Kattan, director of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Louisiana, said that in addition to mom-and-pop stores, Kenner is seeing a range of businesses catering to Latinos, from restaurants and grocery stores to tax preparers, doctors, lawyers and banks.



Business is booming for the Irula family, for example. They now own two supermarkets in Kenner and one in Metairie, and sales at the 5,000-square-foot anchor, Celina's International Supermarket, have increased about 25 percent over the past couple of years, Rafael Irula said.

The rise of Hispanic population is also evident at Kenner's Hispanic Resource Center, where after-school programs and classes in English for non-native speakers are growing in popularity, manager Rebeca Hasbun said.

Sulli, who teaches first-time home-buyer classes at the center, immigrated to Kenner with her family from Nicaragua in 1954, when she was 3 years old. She said Hispanics continue moving here, from their native countries or from elsewhere in the United States, "because they feel welcomed. Family goes to family."

That's been true of immigrant groups historically, said Campanella, who noted that parts of north Kenner have been called Little Honduras.

"The incoming wave settles where the preceding wave had already settled," said Campanella, who has written six books on the New Orleans area's geography. "Humans do not randomly or pointlessly distribute themselves across the cityscape. They do so in

certain patterns that maximize their chances for success and minimize chances for failing."

Mexico-born Jovanna Herrera, her husband and three daughters live in Kenner's Labelle Maison apartments, a complex that she estimated is about two-thirds Hispanic. The apartments are located in a census tract that has Louisiana's highest concentration of Hispanics, at more than 41 percent, Campanella found.

Herrera said her family had been living in Dallas when her husband heard at a party that there was post-Katrina work in New Orleans. He moved four years ago, and the rest of the family eventually joined him.



Cesar Espinoza, of Kenner, participates in a Jefferson Parish adult education English as a second language class at the Hispanic Resource Center in Kenner on Wednesday.

They chose Kenner because they like the **Jefferson Parish public school system's** services for non-English-speaking children, because rents were relatively cheap and because they were surrounded by Hispanic people who had moved here before them.

Vince Madrigal, a family practice physician who has lived in Kenner for 32 years, said good education for Hispanics is going to be even more of a concern as that portion of the overall population continues to grow. He suggested building an international charter school in Kenner.

"The more we continue to ignore the problem, the bigger it's going to get," he said.

The Hispanic growth in Kenner came as the city's overall population fell 5 percent in the past decade, from 70,517 to 66,702. The same was true in Jefferson Parish as a whole, where the overall population slipped 5 percent but the Hispanic portion rose from 7 percent to 12 percent.

New Orleans experienced the same trend: an overall loss of 29 percent of its people but a rise in Latinos from 3 percent of the population in 2000 to 5 percent last year, census data

show. According to Campanella's analysis, the areas that saw the most Hispanic growth included Mid-City, particularly along Canal Street and Tulane Avenue, and along Chef Menteur Highway in eastern New Orleans.

One census tract along the Chef, which often offers cheaper housing costs and a shorter commute to construction jobs, more than doubled its number of Hispanic residents last year, the analysis shows.

"Before we used to measure the number of Hispanic residents in New Orleans East based on the number of meals the taco truck delivered," said Martin Gutierrez, a former banker who now serves as vice president of community services for Catholic Charities. "Then we saw grocery stores popping up, and now you see tortillas next to the rice paper," he said, crediting the change in part to Vietnamese-American residents' embrace of new Hispanic neighbors.

The proportion of Hispanic residents living **Uptown**, from the University area through **Central City**, also ticked up, Campanella's work shows. City Councilwoman Stacy Head, whose district includes the area, said the subtle change has been palpable in the increase in local businesses that cater to Hispanic customers.

Since Katrina, Catholic Charities has seen a doubling of its clientele for traditional services such as English and immigration classes and job placement and emergency assistance programs, Gutierrez said. With crime a problem in some neighborhoods where Spanish-speaking immigrants have put down roots, the organization also has placed a new emphasis on building ties between Spanish-speaking immigrants and local law enforcement officials, he said.

Generally, he said, new Hispanic residents are concerned about "housing, education, health care, jobs, and crime and public safety," Gutierrez said. "People often say, 'That's not different than the general population,' and they're right.

"But when you throw in the culture, the language and perhaps the immigration issue, that's what sometimes makes a difference."

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