

Comparing Mormons, Adventists, and Witnesses in Mexico, 2000-2010: Contrasting their Outreach Strategies, Growth, who they Attracted and Retained, and the Reliability of their Official Data

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Paper prepared for a meeting of the Summit on Nurture and Retention, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, November 2013. Published on the SPECTRUMMAGAZINE.ORG web-site, November 2013.

Abstract

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses all originated in the USA within a fifty-year period during the nineteenth century, and each, believing that it was charged with God's final message to the world, set out to evangelize globally. All today have a significant presence in Mexico. By choosing to focus there in 2000 and 2010, we are able to compare the official statistics of each religious group with the number of Mexicans identifying with them in the censuses taken in both years. The cross-tabulations offered in these censuses also test the reliability of each group's official data, their growth during the decade, who they baptized and who they retained.

Introduction

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints ("Mormons"), Seventh-day Adventists ("Adventists"), and Jehovah's Witnesses ("Witnesses") all originated in the USA, where they, respectively, trace their origins to the periods 1820-30, 1844-61, and 1869-76. (Jehovah's Witnesses were known originally as Bible Students and did not adopt their current name until 1931.) Each was exclusive, believing that it was charged with God's final message to the world, and has since set out to evangelize globally.

Both Mormons and Witnesses focus on door-to-door witnessing as their main outreach strategy. They introduce themselves through their publications and try to arrange Bible studies in the homes. Both use a "one-size-fits-all" approach whose Mormon version is lampooned hilariously in the current hit musical, *The Book of Mormon*. Adventists have developed a greater variety of strategies, establishing schools and medical facilities, holding public evangelistic meetings, and, more recently, utilizing radio and television. A recent twist on a long-used strategy, satellite evangelism, reminded observers that they too are inclined towards "one size-fits-all" content.

Mexico: The Accuracy of Membership Data

Today, all three religious groups have a significant presence in Mexico. In 2010 Mormons listed 1,234,545 members, Adventists 674,755, while Witnesses had 696,749 "publishers". However, the composition of these data differ in noteworthy ways. Adventists count all baptized members but omit unbaptized children. The age at which they baptize their children varies widely with geographic region; in Mexico the typical age for baptism is about 10 (Miranda 2013). It is also Adventist policy to purge

their rolls of members who no longer claim to be Adventists or cannot be located. Mormons count baptized members, but also “children of record”—younger children blessed as infants in a church ceremony, who may make up as much as 15% of their US membership (Bennion and Young 1996: 9). The age of baptism for children raised in Mormon families is set firmly at eight. Mormons make no attempt to remove missing and inactive members from their rolls, and the whereabouts of many listed as members is unknown. Indeed, since Mormons believe that only they can enter the Third Heaven, it is their policy to retain the names of missing members on their rolls until they reach the age of 110, to avoid the risk of removing any that are in fact active though apparently missing. Most of these are undoubtedly inactive and many are likely to no longer consider themselves to be Mormons (Knowlton 2005, Mauss 2010). However, the names of children who reach the age of nine without being baptized are removed. Witnesses use the most stringent criterion, counting only “publishers”—those reporting regular witnessing to nonmembers. They exclude baptized members who are not witnessing regularly, but include both children and converts entering the ranks of publishers shortly before baptism (Watchtower 2010:25; Chu 2008a, 2008b). Their Yearbook lists both “peak” and “average” publishers. This study uses the latter because they are more representative.

It is relevant to compare what each of the three groups makes available in its annual data: the differences suggest sharp variations in the cultures of the three groups. Adventist data are published in great detail on the web, and are thus available to all. They list such items as growth in their official membership, the numbers of baptisms, deaths, and names dropped because the people cannot be found or no longer consider themselves Adventists, for every geographic entity within their global structure; the number of employees in different roles, and income from tithes and from offerings again geographically, statistics concerning employees and students at the universities and schools worldwide, including the proportion of students from Adventist families at each school, and statistics concerning the staffing and patients treated at each of their hospitals and clinics. They place a great deal of emphasis on posting accurate data, seeing this as increasing their credibility, and press their local leaders to audit their rolls regularly. The statistics available concerning both Witnesses and Mormons are much more limited. Neither lists anything about finances; Witnesses count only those who are publishing regularly, but make no attempt to account for the disparity between the number of baptisms and the smaller growth in publishers, nor do they suggest whether baptized members who cease publishing continue to attend services; in regions where they face difficulties with political authorities, they often refrain from publishing any data. Mormons are in some ways even more secretive than Witnesses: they publish only global baptisms, not making them available by country; while they count children of record as members, they do not publish what proportion of these are not baptized as expected at age eight; and they proudly announce annual increases in their official membership without acknowledging that this includes many missing members who have undoubtedly died or who no longer consider themselves Mormons and in fact a goodly number of whom, according to researchers, have gone on to become baptized members of other groups. Neither Witnesses nor Mormons list the number of deaths among their members nor numbers purged from their rolls.

Because of these differences in data collection, and the fact that member retention differs among the three groups, it is instructive to compare their official statistics with the number of people identifying

with each group in the Mexican census reports. While such respondents do not necessarily attend worship or involve themselves in other activities of the group, their responses do indicate an attachment to the particular religious identity. Table 1 compares census reports with official membership/publishers, and the ratio between the two, for both 2000 and 2010.

TABLE 1: COMPARING CENSUS REPORTS AND MEMBERSHIP ROLLS, MEXICO, 2000 and 2010

Religious Group	2000			2010		
	Census Report	Membership	Ratio	Census Report	Membership	Ratio
MORMONS	205,229	884,071	0.23	314,932	1,234,545	0.26
ADVENTISTS	488,945	524,207	0.93	661,878	674,755	0.98
WITNESSES	1,058,736	526,913	2.01	1,561,086	696,749	2.24

This table lists the ratio between census identification totals for each of the three groups and their membership/peak publisher rolls for the two most recent census years. A ratio of 1.00 would indicate that the totals by both measures are equal. A strong pattern emerges, for each of the three religious groups has very different ratios, which occur consistently in both censuses.

The ratio for Witnesses was 2.01 in 2000, 2.24 in 2010, indicating that twice as many people identify as Witnesses in the census data than are listed as Publishers. While the difference goes in the expected direction, it is much higher than interviews with Watchtower Society staff had suggested, for these had stated that once members cease being active publishers they tend to drop out because meetings and activities focus so heavily on publishing (Chu 2008b). However, the data show that many continue to identify as Witnesses, at least when they are asked their religion.

Among Adventists, the ratio increased from 0.93 to 0.98 between 2000 and 2010. While these are close to a 1.0 ratio, they are not as high as the fact that the census counts children too young for baptism would lead us to expect, suggesting that the official membership is somewhat inflated. The Adventist leadership, realizing that the policy of keeping the rolls current has often been neglected during recent decades, when many regions have experienced rapid growth, has reminded the various regional administrations to clean the membership rolls of the names of missing members several times since the turn of the millennium. Where this has been taken seriously, as in Brazil and the Philippines, it has resulted in a purging of as many as 42.8% of the listed members. However, this process has not yet been accorded the same priority in Mexico.

The Mormon ratio is very low, 0.23 in 2000 and 0.26 in 2010. That is, the number identifying as Mormons in the Mexican censuses is only about one-quarter of those on their church rolls. Since Mormons count the young children of members among their official membership statistics, this suggests that findings of rapid losses of up to 75% of Mormon members in other countries of Latin America is likely to be true in Mexico also. The Mormon ratio stands in sharp contrast to those of Witnesses and Adventists, indicating that Mormon membership data are grossly inflated.

Growth and Retention, 2000-2010

Table 2 shows the growth of each of the groups during the intercensal decade as measured by both their official membership/publisher figures and the two census reports. It also lists the growth of Catholics and of the Mexican population in the censuses for comparison. The latter show that all three groups grew at a fast rate, with Mormons growing at the fastest of all. However, at the same time they posted the smallest numerical gain among the three groups because the number of people identifying with them was much lower than the other groups. Census growth rates surpass those shown by the membership statistics for each group.

TABLE 2: MEXICAN GROWTH, 2000-2010, MEASURED FROM BOTH CENSUS AND MEMBERSHIP SOURCES

	Census Reports				Official Membership			
	2000	2010	Growth	%	2000	2010	Growth	%
Mormons	205,229	314,932	109,708	53.5	884,071	1,234,545	350,474	39.6
Adventists	488,945	661,878	172,933	35.4	524,207	674,755	150,548	28.7
Witnesses	1,058,736	1,561,086	502,350	47.4	526,913	696,749	169,836	32.2
Catholics	74,612,373	92,924,489	18,312,116	24.5				
Mexico	97,483,412	112,336,538	14,853,126	15.2				

Among Witnesses, intercensal growth exceeded the increase in the number of publishers by 352,514. This occurred because the census counts children who are not yet publishing, members who continue to identify with the group after falling out of the ranks of publishers (a category which is considerably larger than expected), and people who come to identify as Witnesses while studying with them as part of their process that aims at leading to baptism and induction into the publishing work but have not yet been baptized. The disparity among Adventists was much smaller: 22,385. It is related to the census counting unbaptized children and people identifying with the group before baptism. Given the high Adventist birth-rate in Mexico (see below), the disparity between these totals would have been greater if the membership rolls had been cleaned according to policy.

For Mormons, the disparity between the two totals is reversed, with the increase in the membership rolls exceeding that in the census count by 240,771. This is the result of their rolls being greatly exaggerated as a result of their policy of not removing the names of missing and inactive members, some of whom are undoubtedly dead.

This table, together with other data, in turn sheds light on the extent to which these groups retain members. Witnesses reported 232,565 baptisms during the intercensal period, during which time the number of publishers increased by 169,836. This indicates that the equivalent of 30.4% of those baptized during that period (62,729 people) ceased to be publishers during that period. (Since the Watchtower Society does not list the number of deaths, this number should be larger by whatever that number was.) Since the growth in the number of people identifying as Witnesses in the census reports was so much larger than the increase in publishers, this begs for explanation. Some of these will be

children, though the Witnesses' birthrate is lower than that of Adventists. Apparently, also, their public profile has led an increasing number of people to identify with Witnesses without actually having been baptized.

Adventists added a much larger number of Mexican members than did Witnesses during this period -- 407,490 compared with 232,565. However, their membership increase was somewhat lower than that of Witnesses and the increase in the number identifying with them in the censuses much smaller. This was because the numbers dropped from the Adventist membership rolls, either because they no longer wished to be members or because they could not be found, was much greater than for Witnesses. It may be that the increased emphasis among Adventists on the need to clean the rolls in order to keep them accurate lay behind this disparity. Unlike the Witnesses, Adventists do list deaths in their statistics. However, since these averaged only 1,774 per annum on a membership that was listed as 524,207 in 2000 (a death-rate of only 0.3%), this indicates that the keeping of such records still needs improvement.

The fact that the increase in the Mormon membership was over three times the increase in those identifying with them in the censuses indicates that their loss of converts was steep. Gooren, who has researched their growth in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Chile and Paraguay, found that half of their converts stopped attending within six months and the ultimate loss was typically about 75%. Some of these moved on to other religious groups, but nevertheless remained on the Mormon rolls. These statistics point to a similar pattern in Mexico.

Contrasting Social Profiles

Table 3 shows the highest education completed by the adherents of the three religious groups as identified in the censuses of 2000 and 2010. While all have adherents covering the whole range from no education to university graduate and beyond, their concentrations differ greatly: Mormons are the best educated, Adventists the least. In 2000 56.7% of Adventists had either no or only some elementary education; 59.1% of Witnesses had partial or complete elementary education; while 52.0% of Mormons had university degrees, had graduated from secondary programs, or had at least some secondary education. By 2010 Mormons with those categories of education had increased to 58.0%, while the greatest concentration of Witnesses had risen one category, to lower secondary and complete elementary; Adventists were still concentrated in the two lowest categories, but to a lesser extent, with 48.2% with no education or only some elementary. While the educational attainment of all three groups had generally risen during the decade, with Witnesses and Adventists with more than elementary education increasing in all three top categories, and Mormons increasing in the top two categories, at the same time the number of adherents with no education increased for all three groups, peaking at one in five Adventists. The fact that Mormons had the highest education is surprising given Gooren's observation that their converts included a high proportion of poor people: this suggests that their retention of those from this class was especially weak.

TABLE 3: HIGHEST EDUCATION COMPLETED, 2000 AND 2010

Highest Education	2000			2010		
	Mormons	Witnesses	Adventists	Mormons	Witnesses	Adventists
No Education	6.8%	10.2%	15.8%	9.1%	13.4%	20.1%
Some Elementary	20.5	30.7	40.9	16.8	22.8	28.1
All Elementary	20.8	28.4	22.5	16.1	22.9	20.8
Lower Secondary	24.6	21.1	12.5	22.9	25.3	17.1
All Secondary	19.6	7.8	5.7	24.7	12.5	9.7
University Graduate	7.8	1.8	2.5	10.4	3.1	4.2

Table 4 shows that there are parallel sharp contrasts between the mean income received by adherents of the three groups. The average Mormon earned more than three times the average Adventist and nearly twice the average Witness in 2010; the amount was 58.1% above the mean Mexican income. While the mean Mormon salary, when compared with the mean Mexican salary, jumped more than 20 additional points higher, and the negative gap between Witnesses and the average Mexican decreased by 10 points, the situation of the average Adventist worsened by five points.

TABLE 4: MEAN INCOME, 2000 AND 2010

Religious group	2000	% of Mexican Mean	2010	% of Mexican Mean
Mormons	1,981.82	135.7%	2,738.29	158.1%
Witnesses	1,127.01	77.1	1,512.80	87.7
Adventists	809.05	55.4	868.31	50.3
Catholics	1,470.95	100.7	1,734.78	100.6
MEXICO	1,460.61		1,725.06	

The significance of the mean income statistics is illustrated by Table 5, which relates incomes to the minimum wage in 2000¹: at that time half the Adventist adherents earned less than the minimum wage, while 36.2% of Mormons earned over three times the minimum wage and half of Witnesses earned between one and three times that amount.

¹ These cross-tabulations were not released by the Mexican Census until 2005; they have not yet been released concerning the 2010 census.

TABLE 5. THE PERCENTAGE OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS' ADHERENTS FALLING IN DIFFERENT INCOME CATEGORIES, MEXICO 2000

Income category	Mormons %	Witnesses %	Adventists %
The Minimum Wage or Less	13.2	25.4	49.5
Between 1 and 3 Times the Minimum Wage	45.6	50.3	32.4
Between 3 and 5 Times the Minimum Wage	19.0	12.5	8.0
More than 5 Times the Minimum Wage	17.2	7.1	6.0
Not specified	5.0	4.7	4.1

Table 6 shows that differences in education and income are related to where the adherents of the three groups are concentrated. Mormons are concentrated especially in the Central region, which includes Mexico City and, to a lesser extent, in the prosperous Northeast and Northwest region. Witnesses have a similar pattern, though less in the Central region than Mormons. On the other hand, over three-quarters of Adventists are concentrated in the rural, mountainous region of the South and Southeast. Witnesses and Mormons are also well represented there, but their concentration there is only about one-third that of Adventist's.

TABLE 6: THE REGIONAL CONCENTRATION OF ADHERENTS, 2000

<i>Region</i>	<i>Mormons</i>	<i>Witnesses</i>	<i>Adventists</i>
Central	36.0%	<u>29.5%</u>	8.8%
Northeast	21.3	15.6	5.5
Northwest	10.2	13.0	4.0
West-central	8.2	9.6	3.3
South-Southeast	24.3	<u>32.3</u>	78.4

Moreover, Adventists are much more rural than the others. Table 7 shows that more than half of their adherents are located in communities of fewer than 2,500 people; in contrast, more than two-thirds of Mormons and half of Witnesses are located in cities of more than 100,000 people, the largest concentration listed. It is not surprising, therefore, that 18.4% of Adventists speak indigenous languages (compared to 2.9% of Mormons and 5.2% of Witnesses), and that 20.1% of their women and 10.5% of their men (compared to 3.4% and 1.7% of Mormons and 6.9% and 3.7% of Witnesses) are illiterate.

TABLE 7: THE SIZES OF COMMUNITIES WHERE ADHERENTS WERE LOCATED, 2000

<i>Size</i>	<i>Mormons</i>	<i>Witnesses</i>	<i>Adventists</i>
Less than 2,500	5.5%	20.9%	52.9%
2,500-14,999	9.3	13.4	<u>14.8</u>
15,000-100,000	<u>17.9</u>	15.6	12.4
More than 100,000	67.3	<u>50.1</u>	19.9

When the mean age of those listing themselves as adherents is considered, Adventists were lowest in 2010 (26.9) and Witnesses highest (30.2), with both Mormons and Catholics falling between them. All three groups had a higher proportion of women than the Mexican population, which was 51.2% female in 2010--the three ranged from Adventists 52.9% to Witnesses 55.3%.

The marital status census table showed all three groups with a higher proportion married than Catholics, ranging from Witnesses 37.6% in 2010 to Adventists 33.3, while 30.4% of Catholics were married. The proportion in established common-law relationships ranged from Mormons 5.4% to Adventists 8.2%, all lower than Catholics (11.3%). However, this difference between adherents of these groups and Catholics did not hold for divorced and separated: 0.5% of Adventists were divorced and 1.6% of Mormons, with both Witnesses and Catholics between them; 2.4% of both Adventists and Catholics were separated, 3.1% of Mormons, with Witnesses in the middle.

TABLE 8: FERTILITY - MEAN TOTAL LIVE BIRTHS PER FEMALE AGE-GROUP

<u>Age-Group</u>	<u>Mormons</u>	<u>Witnesses</u>	<u>Adventists</u>	<u>Catholics</u>
<u>50+</u>	5.6	6.3	6.7	5.9
<u>40-49</u>	2.8	4.1	5.0	4.1
<u>30-39</u>	2.7	2.8	3.5	2.8
<u>20-29</u>	1.0	1.1	1.6	1.2
<u>12-19</u>	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1

However, as Table 8 reveals, the fertility rates are very different from what those with access to the USA data for these groups might have expected: Mormons were lowest, Adventists highest, with Catholics and Witnesses, almost identical, between the two. Clearly, socio-economic status and rural location are the key predictors rather than religious teachings and cultures.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on three religious groups that originated in nineteenth century America and then set out to become global because they believed it was their responsibility to take their particular

teachings to the whole world. It has compared their growth and social profiles in Mexico, where each has developed a strong presence, finding sharp differences between them in spite of their similar origins and ambitions. The Mexican censuses of 2000 and 2010 show that only about one-quarter the number listed on Mormon membership rolls in fact identify with that group in the censuses, while, in contrast, the numbers identifying as adherents of the Witnesses are more than twice those listed as "publishers" in their year-books; Adventist adherents are much closer to the number of official members, though the latter are still somewhat exaggerated given that while the membership omits children who have not been baptized but the census includes them, the latter should be a good deal larger than the former. Moreover, the social profiles of the adherents of the three groups that emerge from the censuses also differ considerably: for example, both the education and income levels of Mormons far exceed those of Adventists, with Witnesses between them. This is surprising, given that Adventists run three universities, including a medical and a dental school, 42 secondary schools, 131 elementary schools, and three hospitals in Mexico, which make both education and employment available to members, while the other groups have none of these. How, then, can these contrasting profiles be accounted for?

It was noted above that Mormons make no attempt to remove members who no longer attend services or regard themselves as members, even though research in Latin countries has shown that about half of new converts cease attending within six months and that the ultimate loss-rate is about 75%. Research also found that Mormons baptize a large number of poor people, who respond positively to the visits from charming youthful missionaries, but who then, after the latter have moved on, find themselves uncomfortable in congregations with prosperous members who fail to nurture them because the newcomers are too different from them and they expect that the latter will, like many before them, soon drop out. That is, most of the poor converts drop out, but the few with higher SES who are converted then prove more likely to feel comfortable and put down roots.

Witnesses count only active publishers, and converts are supposed to be publishing before they are considered eligible for baptism. However, turnover among publishers occurs as many find what is expected of them too onerous, even though the required time commitment has been reduced sharply over the years. Although these tend to gradually stop attending services, which focus on preparing and encouraging people to witness, in Mexico they apparently continue often to think of themselves as Witnesses, at least when asked their religious affiliation. However, these are insufficient to account for the large numbers identifying as Witnesses in the census. Perhaps many who have studied with them in the past or are currently doing so come to identify with them even though they have not (yet) been baptized by them. Those studying with Witnesses need a certain degree of education in order to be able to digest their convoluted doctrine, and this becomes visible in the educational level and income of adherents, even though Witnesses encourage members to drop out of school after completing a basic education in order to then focus their efforts on witnessing.

The discrepancy between the Adventists membership rolls in Mexico and the adherents counted by the census, given the fact that the latter should exceed the former because it counts children who have not been baptized, suggests that the Adventist organizations there have not been as careful about keeping rolls current as they are supposed to be, so that their membership statistics are exaggerated.

The reasons for the low socio-economic status of Adventists in Mexico are complex. Adventists have typically chosen to focus their endeavors, including their educational and medical institutions, in rural areas and small towns, where they have often proved to be especially successful in reaching fairly poor people who hope to improve their lot, either here or in the world to come. Indeed, Adventist preaching and the existence of its institutions is typically geared to attracting such classes, so that their urban evangelism often attracts recent immigrants who migrated hoping to improve their situations but are currently fairly low in resources. Consequently, many members everywhere, and especially in the countries of the Developing World, cannot afford the costs of an Adventist education, which include travel, living away from home, and tuition, or indeed to remain for long in any school. The founders of Adventist schools saw them as preparing members for church careers but also as mission schools, where youth from other backgrounds would learn their message and be converted. It is therefore not surprising to find that in Mexico in 2010 40.1% of the students enrolled in Adventist schools were not from Adventist families--except that a total of only 16,188 Adventist students at the 237 Adventist schools, including its three universities, seems pitifully low considering their large numbers of youthful members indicated by their low mean age and the large size of Adventist families and the low level of education of most members. While some members have benefitted from the educational and employment opportunities offered by Adventist institutions, becoming as a result established professionals, the census data reveal starkly the extent to which most Adventists continue to lag in education and income.

Since both Mormons and Adventists teach their members to tithe their incomes for the benefit of their church, the huge discrepancy between the incomes of their adherents in Mexico must cause a dramatic difference between the incomes received by the two religious groups. In 2010 tithe received from Adventists in Mexico totaled, in terms of US dollars, \$50.65 million. Per capita tithe for the whole year, as published for the four administrative "unions" into which Adventism in Mexico is now divided, ranged from \$110.90 in the north to \$64.09 in the south. Given that the mean income of Mexican Adventists in 2010 was \$868.31, these statistics show that in spite of their poverty many tithe faithfully. In contrast to Adventists, Mormons choose not to publish their finances. However, given the fact that the mean income of Mormons in Mexico is more than three times that of Adventists, we can perhaps make an informed guess at the tithe differential. I estimate the number of tithing Mormons as 314,932, the number identifying as adherents in the census, rather than the inflated number listed in their rolls. This is less than half the equivalent Adventist statistic. However, the much higher Mormon incomes would generate a total of \$86.24 million in tithe, which would exceed the Adventist tithe income there by \$35.59 million, or 70.3%.

The pattern of very few Adventist students being able to afford to attend Adventist schools and colleges is found throughout the developing world in spite of the rapid growth there in recent decades. The proportion of students from Adventist families in 2015 was only 15.3% in Latin America and the Caribbean, 29.2% in South, South-East and East Asia, and 43.3% in sub-Saharan Africa. This is evidence that throughout those regions, as in Mexico, Adventism appeals to and retains mostly poor people. Some of their youth are now receiving higher education at Adventist and other colleges; hopefully these will remain Adventists and result in a more varied distribution of members and some better educated

laity in these regions. The pattern of Adventism appealing mostly to the poor and poorly educated is true today in the developed world also. However, there such converts often feel less comfortable in established congregations, where the active members have more frequently received higher levels of education, so that retention can be poor. However, converts are so few in most churches, that it is possible to put considerable effort into nurturing them if the members take responsibility for this in spite of social differences. However, in the developing world the influx of converts can be so great that nurture is poor and therefore many of the newcomers drift away. For example, when I was in Kinshasa, capital of the Congo in Africa, this was two and three years after two evangelistic campaigns where African Americans had been the speakers and a total of over 1,600 converts had been baptized. I had the opportunity to speak to all the pastors together, when they had been called in to the Mission headquarters, and I took the opportunity to ask them how many of those converts were still attending church services. They began to talk to one another in their own language, and I could see them counting on their fingers. The ultimate answer to my question was “about 50.”