

MEXICO CITY JOURNAL

Police Department Puts Corpulent Cops on a Diet



Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

Police officers at a police cafeteria in Mexico City, where portions are now smaller. The heaviest 1,300 officers in the force are now offered about 2,500 calories per shift instead of 4,000.

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MEXICO CITY — Their bulletproof vests squeeze like corsets, their gun belts lie hidden under rolls of fat. Mexico's police officers may not catch as many criminals as they should, but they have the reputation of rarely missing a taco stand.

In the sprawling Mexican capital, where both officers and taco vendors proliferate, portly policemen have become such a problem that police officials have begun tracking not only the number of tickets officers issue or bad guys they arrest but also the [calories](#) they consume.

To slim down a force in which three-quarters of the more than 70,000 officers are considered overweight, the powers that be have imposed a rather austere [diet](#) at official department eateries. Instead of the 4,000 calories that officers used to consume at police cafeterias, the heaviest 1,300 officers are now offered about 2,500 calories per shift. (A person's caloric needs vary, but for most of the population, 4,000 calories a day is more in line with gorging than simply satisfying hunger pangs.)

Dr. Alfredo Peniche, who runs the department's medical program, described the rather diverse menu options under the new austerity eating plan, including chicken fajitas, beans, and steak with mushrooms and nopales, or prickly pear cactus, though not all in one sitting.

Officials acknowledge that officers will still be able to grab a bite on the beat, easily defeating the department's dietary guidelines. "We have to accept that the culture of snacking is present in most of the population, and the police also have this habit," Dr. Peniche said. But the department still hopes to inculcate better eating habits in the police force.

[Mexicans as a whole have rapidly expanding waistlines](#). The Health Department said in a report released this year that [obesity](#) levels in Mexico were [second in the world](#) only to those in the United States, and the problem is especially acute among the young.

And it is not just large portions that are the problem. Mexicans do not exercise enough, officials say, and a recent government health study found that Mexicans consumed [almost twice the amount of salt](#) recommended by the [World Health Organization](#), leading to elevated rates of [hypertension](#), heart disease and [kidney failure](#) along with obesity.

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Many Mexico City officers are going along with the healthier menus, and initial reports are that waistlines are shrinking. But there is also plenty of cheating as officers admit to supplementing their official fare with more filling food from the street — overflowing tacos, tortas, quesadillas and huaraches, all washed down with sugary sodas.

“It’s good to lose weight,” acknowledged Crescencio Aguilar, 48, an 18-year veteran of the transit police who weighs just over 200 pounds, has a protruding abdomen and was interviewed near a rather aromatic stand selling beef tacos and quesadillas. “But the truth is, the way I am, I’ve been chubby since I was a boy, and it’s going to be difficult to drop down.”

He then broke into what can best be described as a belly laugh.

But the police department’s medical team say the problem is serious. Officers’ girth not only affects job performance, making it all but impossible for them to chase down wily outlaws, but also increases their exposure to a plethora of life-shortening diseases. Still, eating habits cannot be changed overnight.

“We can’t tell them, ‘Don’t eat sandwiches and tacos,’ ” Nora Frias, a top police official, told reporters in announcing the diet. “What we can tell them is if you eat one sandwich today, if you eat three tacos today, then balance it all with some vegetables.”

Mexico City is not the only place with plump policemen. A study in Tijuana released in 2004 found that nearly all of the 530 police officers were overweight, and that 42 percent were obese. [Cholesterol](#) and [blood pressure](#) levels were also far too high, the study found.

Similar problems were reported in Monterrey, where an overhaul of the department found many officers who were corrupt but many more who were too overweight to effectively do their jobs.

In Aguascalientes, a city in central Mexico, the authorities tried positive reinforcement to help officers lose weight, briefly offering officers 100 pesos, or about \$9, for every kilogram, or 2.2 pounds, they shed. The program was recently discontinued after, officials said, the force slimmed down considerably.

Mr. Aguilar, the corpulent officer in the capital, said his wife had been assisting the department’s official weight-loss effort by hiding cookies, cupcakes and other sweets at home. The department cut the calories on the official meals they issued him. The sandwiches grew thinner, he said, and his sodas were replaced with water. Instead of a sugary snack, he got a piece of fruit.

But when Mr. Aguilar is out directing traffic, it is hard for him not to nosh. His churning stomach, he said, compels him to leave his intersection from time to time to add another sandwich or soft drink or two.

“The truth is that you die of hunger if you diet,” he said.

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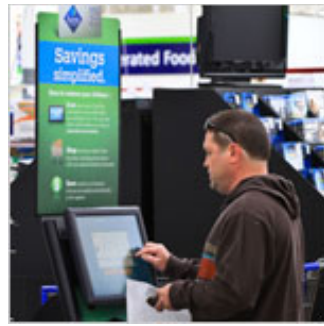
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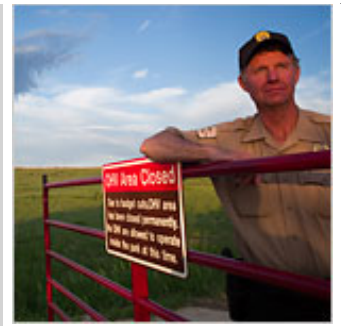


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