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Hispanics Now Largest Minority, Census Shows

By LYNETTE CLEMETSON

WASHINGTON, Jan. 21 — Hispanics have edged past blacks as the nation's largest minority group, new figures released today by the Census Bureau showed.

The Hispanic population in the United States is now roughly 37 million, while blacks number about 36.2 million.

The figures, the first detailed findings on race and ethnicity since the 2000 Census was released two years ago, confirm what demographers and many advocacy groups have anticipated for several years. The new numbers are based on new population estimates from July 1, 2001, that were compared with the census figures from April 1, 2000. The figures showed that the Latino population grew by 4.7 percent, while the black population grew by just 1.5 percent. The white, non-Hispanic population, estimated at roughly 196 million, grew by 0.3 percent during the same period.

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"It is a turning point in the nation's history, a symbolic benchmark of some significance," said Roberto Suro, director of the Pew Hispanic Center, a Washington-based research and policy analysis organization. "If you consider how much of this nation's history is wrapped up in the interplay between black and white, this serves as an official announcement that we as Americans cannot think of race in that way any more."

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The explosive growth in the Hispanic population results from higher birth rates and from the huge wave of immigration that has taken place in the last decade. The Census Bureau counts all people residing in the United States, whether they are legal immigrants or not.

In addition to their symbolic significance, the figures carry important implications for the allocation of resources. In recent years blacks and Hispanics have often felt in opposition in seeking financing and political representation, and the new numbers could bring fresh tensions.

Some Latino advocacy organizations, perhaps anticipating possible difficulties, are already playing down the significance of the shift. "Rather than comparing groups we should be looking at the status of communities," said Sonia Perez, deputy vice president for research at the National Council of La Raza, a national Latino organization. "When you look at Latino and African-American communities, the elements of the agendas are not that different. We share many of the same issues, interests and values."

In many ways, the new figures are an indication of the growing multiculturalism in American society and the change in the way the Census Bureau allows people to classify themselves. The 2000 census, for the first time, allowed respondents to choose more than one race in identifying themselves. In addition, Hispanics, a cultural and ethnic classification, can be of any race.

While the general African-American population is slightly smaller than the general Hispanic population, the number of Americans who declared themselves as black "in combination with one or more other races" is now 37.7 million, slightly higher than overall figure for Latinos.

"The statistics are in the eyes of their beholders," said William H. Frey, a demographer at the University of Michigan. "What these numbers reveal is a bit of a conundrum. But advocacy groups, policy people and politicians will pick the interpretation of them that works best for them at any given time."

Much of the social and political impact of the population surge may not be immediately apparent. Roughly one quarter of Latinos living in the United States are noncitizens. And while there has been a significant migration of Hispanics to cities in the South, Midwest, and central

plains, more than 50 percent of the Latino population remains concentrated in Texas, California and New York.

The speed of population shift, though anticipated, has taken some demographers by surprise. "It came sooner than we thought," said Martha Farnsworth Riche, director of the Census Bureau during the Clinton administration.

Among the factors that contributed to the faster than anticipated growth, said Ms. Farnsworth Riche, was greater cooperation between the Census Bureau and Latino organizations, which helped undocumented migrants feel safer cooperating with census takers.

The slim numerical gap between blacks and Hispanics is expected to widen significantly in the next decade. Deteriorating economic conditions across Latin America, say many demographers, will continue to spur immigration. The birth rate among Latinos is also higher than among blacks.

Researchers expect the spurt to level off in a generation or so, as economic stability leads to lower fertility rates and Hispanics intermarry with other groups with some choosing to identify as black, some as white, and some as a combination of one or more ethnic groups or races.

"It will only get more broad and more complicated," said Mr. Suro. "It's a reminder that we will increasingly, as Americans, need to find new ways of categorizing people and talking about their differences."

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