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Wide world of Hispanics: Ethnic origins abound in N.J.

Wednesday, August 15, 2001

▶ [Graphic: Latino melting pot](#)

By ELIZABETH LLORENTE
Staff Writer

On a recent Sunday in Passaic, a Mexican man drove his ailing Dodge into a service station owned by a Dominican. As Uruguayan mechanics worked on his car, the driver passed the time watching Peruvians march by in their annual parade.

Several feet away, a peddler lugged huge Peruvian flags and balanced five souvenir hats stacked on his head. Passing Peruvians gave him a thumbs up.

But the peddler, Tomas Curizaca, was really Ecuadorean.

"It's a living," said Curizaca, 32, smiling at the irony. "Anything with a Peruvian flag on it is selling like hotcakes today."

Only a generation ago, to be Hispanic in New Jersey was to be of Puerto Rican or Cuban descent. Hispanics of other ethnic origins accounted for only about 30 percent of the total as late as 1980.

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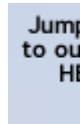
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Census figures released today show that Mexicans and Dominicans surged past Cubans in the 1990s, even though Puerto Ricans remained the largest Hispanic group in New Jersey, at 366,788 strong.

The Mexican population more than tripled and the number of Dominicans doubled, to about 103,000 each. The number of Cubans dropped 9 percent, to 77,337.

All told, more than 60 percent of New Jersey's Hispanics now have roots somewhere other than Cuba or Puerto Rico.

And so, a Mexican customer driving up to a Dominican-owned service station where the employees are Uruguayan and the parade passing by is Peruvian is part of a Latino mishmash playing itself out around New Jersey and the nation.

And more and more Hispanics born in the United States are tracing their heritage to more than one Spanish-speaking nation.

"We're totally scrambled," said Carlos Pichardo, the service station owner. "There are so many of us Hispanics in New Jersey, in this whole country, really, and from every nook and cranny of Latin America."

Hispanics now represent several levels of assimilation, from the undocumented newcomer to the full-blooded American. They are struggling in the urban areas, but also prospering in the suburbs. They work at the most low-skilled jobs in the state, but also are beginning to take positions in corporate boardrooms.

There are the Colombians, who love soccer, and the Dominicans, who prefer baseball. There are the Puerto Ricans, who, as U.S. citizens by birth, can shuttle back and forth between New Jersey and the island of their heritage. And there is the growing number of undocumented immigrants, many of whom crossed the U.S.-Mexican border in triple-digit heat and live in constant fear of government detection.

But with every release of census statistics come charges of undercounts. This time was no different.

Lucilo Santos of Hackensack, president of the Dominican Empowerment Political Action Committee, balked at the count of Dominicans. His organization has chapters around New Jersey that estimate local Dominican populations and then assemble a statewide total.

"There's no way their total of 102,000 corresponds with reality," Santos said. "Those of us in the trenches, who are out in the streets every day and see this community from one end of the state to the other, pretty much agree that the real number is closer to 190,000."

The Ecuadorean Consulate in Jersey City asserts that there are roughly 300,000 people from Ecuador in New Jersey, seven times more than the census' count of 45,392.

Colombians estimate that the constant stream of people fleeing conflict in their homeland has pushed that community's population to well over 150,000 in New Jersey.

"And the census says there are only 65,000 Colombians?" said David Bernal, a leader of the Colombian community in Englewood. "That's just absurd, ridiculous. That's maybe a third of what's really here."

The Hispanic count has been questioned elsewhere, including New York, as each state's numbers were announced. Some officials believe a change in how a key question was worded confused some people.

In 1990, the census form asked people to check a specific box if they were Puerto Rican, Cuban, or Mexican. Others were to check "other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino" and write in their national origin, with several examples provided, such as Argentinian and Dominican.

In 2000, the question was set up similarly, but the examples for "other" were omitted because demographers believed respondents felt limited to those options. The result was that many more people checked "other" without providing a specific nationality.

In New Jersey, the "other" category saw a larger gain, 314 percent, than any Hispanic group. Some 175,000 Hispanics were listed in this category with no nation of

origin.

In an analysis done for The Record, John Logan, a demographer at the State University of New York at Albany, estimated that most Hispanic populations are about 50 percent larger than the census count.

Using other data from a monthly census survey, Logan figured only 29,000 Hispanics cannot identify with a single nationality and would most likely leave it out, rather than the 210,000 tallied by the census. He parceled out the 181,000 he believes should have listed nationalities according to their proportion of the population.

Using that formula, he found that Dominicans should number 154,194 instead of the 102,630 found in the 2000 census; Colombians, 97,700 instead of 65,075; and Ecuadoreans, 68,198 instead of 45,392.

In the combined Bergen-Passaic area, he believes, there were really 50,792 Dominicans instead of 36,360, 28,791 Colombians instead of 20,208, and 21,077 Peruvians instead of 14,888.

Census officials defend the question used in 2000, saying the goal was to get a better Hispanic response. This year, census officials put the Hispanic undercount at 2.2 percent to 3.5 percent, down from 5 percent in 1990.

Kevin Deardorff, the chief of ethnic and Hispanic statistics at the Census Bureau, said no one knows why Hispanics answered questions the way they did.

But one theory the census considers viable, Deardorff said, is that Hispanics view themselves differently than they did in 1990 because more now identify themselves as Hispanics than with any one nationality.

And that touches on one of the Hispanic population's greatest challenges, said Daniel Santo-Pietro, head of the Hispanic Directors Association, a statewide umbrella group of 29 multiservice organizations.

"If we're going to move forward, we've got to be able to cut across our own national interests and work on a broader level on issues that affect all Latinos, like

education and healthcare.

"It's all right for the Mexicans to care about legalization of their status, for Colombians to worry about the violence in their homeland and try to bring solutions, and for Puerto Ricans to keep an eye on the military exercises in Vieques," he said. "But at some point, we all have to look at New Jersey, at our lives here, and work on our evolution as one group in the state."

Staff writers Ben Lesser, Laura Paino, and David Sheingold contributed to this report. Staff Writer Elizabeth Llorente's e-mail address is lllorente@northjersey.com

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