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Down on the count

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Never mind the fact many Latino immigrants fear filling out census forms. Never mind that, as a result, Latinos are traditionally undercounted, that even census officials admit it, and that politicians refuse to allow the use of statistical sampling formulas to correct the inequities.

Now it turns out that the Census Bureau managed to undercount even those who were counted.

Thanks to a confusing question in the 2000 census, the bureau is now charged -- by demographers and community activists -- with severely undercounting most Hispanic groups.

"The real numbers are about 50 percent more than the reported numbers," said John Logan, a demographer and professor at the State University of New York at Albany. "These groups are actually present in much more substantial numbers than we can tell simply from the Hispanic origin question, as it is reported by the census."

Logan and others have charged that many Latinos were confused by the part of the form where "other Hispanics" were supposed to specify their nationality. This doesn't apply to Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans -- three groups that are privileged to have their own check box on the census form.

But it is obvious there was a problem with the part that asked "other" Hispanics to spell out their nationality.

Particularly affected are the other large Hispanic groups,



including Dominicans, Colombians, Ecuadoreans, and Peruvians.

In 1990 -- when the question included more detailed instructions and even the suggestion that one write in "Colombian" or "Dominican" -- there were 76,887 New Jersey Latinos who failed to specify their nationality or declared a generic term such as "Spanish-American." But according to census figures released today, the number of undefined Latinos went up to 209,993.

Census officials are using all kinds of excuses to justify the huge jump in "other" unspecified Latinos, even suggesting Latinos in 2000 simply embraced a pan-Hispanic identity, and preferred a general term that reflected them more accurately than a more narrow, national one.

"What some are seeing as our possible missing of groups, or people identifying themselves with those groups, might be a change in how people chose to identify themselves between 1990 and 2000," said Kevin Deardorff, the chief of ethnic and Hispanic statistics at the Census Bureau.

Logan doesn't buy it.

"There was a very large difference, and this is why I think everybody can be quite sure that the numbers reported for specific groups are not realistic," said Logan, who did an analysis for The Record of the figures.

Using a formula based on the Census Bureau's own monthly surveys, Logan calculated that of 210,000 New Jersey Latinos who failed to identify a nationality, 181,000 might have done so if the census form was simpler.

Based on the proportion of the New Jersey population, Logan parceled out 181,000 New Jersey Latinos by nationality and discovered that the census counted 51,564 fewer Dominicans, 32,695 fewer Colombians, 22,806 fewer Ecuadorans, and 18,927 fewer Peruvians than he believes are actually living in New Jersey.

"Fifty percent [larger than census figures] is what I have found in most parts of the country where the data has been released," Logan said. "The percentage difference is

been released," Logan said. "The percentage difference is about the same for all groups. But of course, the larger the group, the bigger absolute difference it makes."

In New York, where the census figures breaking down the ethnic population were released more than a month ago, community activists and city officials have expressed concern that the most affected groups -- Dominicans, Colombians, Ecuadorans, and Peruvians -- will suffer when government funding and political representation is decided based on census figures.

Logan's figures show that exactly the same concern should exist here.

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