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## Yes, they're Hispanic, and much, much more

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BY ANA M. ALAYA  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The Dominican population almost doubled.

Costa Ricans and Guatemalans doubled and then some.

The number of Hondurans in New Jersey was way up. Ecuadorians, Venezuelans and Salvadorans, too.

Census figures released this week for the first time detailed the diversity behind the state's surging Hispanic population.

More than 1.1 million state residents identifying themselves as Hispanic in the Census 2000 -- a 55 percent increase over 1990, which is a growth rate 12 times greater than non-Hispanics.

But while the new details on the Hispanic community illustrate the growing diversity of the state, some Latino leaders say the figures still don't tell the whole story.

More than 200,000 of the New Jersey residents counted as Hispanic were not classified by nationality. As a result, some critics say, the new figures vastly undercount Dominicans, Colombians and other groups.

"This has major implications, if the Census Bureau doesn't consider this a problem," said Lucia Gomez, a board member of the Latino Leadership Alliance of NJ, an organization formed to unite various Hispanic groups in the state. "Our community feels, 'What's the sense of filling out the damn form if we're not counted accurately?' This especially has implications for political clout. It's important for each group to know where their numbers are so they can understand growths and trends."



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The problem, which has also surfaced in other states with Hispanic populations, emerged in New Jersey as the Census Bureau released local figures from the 2000 short-form questionnaire.

The form, which is supposed to be returned by every household, asks respondents if they are Hispanic, and if so, provides an opportunity to specify a country of origin. But hundreds of thousands of Hispanics did not -- leaving the exact makeup of the Hispanic population unclear.

While the issue of whether the census reaches all Hispanic households has long been a controversy, the ruckus over Hispanic subgroups is relatively new.

The reason -- New Jersey Hispanics have historically hailed mostly from Cuba and Puerto Rico, but now represent nearly the entire Spanish-speaking world.

The numbers released Wednesday, for example, put the official count of Colombians at 65,075, which is about 150,000 less than demographers and Colombian community leaders who track immigration and housing patterns estimate -- and about 26,000 less than another census survey that was released earlier this month.

The state's Dominican population, which Dominican leaders estimate is at about 180,000, was 49,823, according to the census.

"The fact that we can't be counted appropriately is an issue," said Gomez, who also sits on a national steering committee of 57 nonprofit census information centers.

Gomez said national Latino groups are demanding that the census officials tabulate and release details on the information that Hispanics wrote in the "other" category to discover the root of confusion and to make changes for the next census.

The Hispanic count has been questioned in other parts of the country where data have been released, including New York and Florida. In those places and in New Jersey, officials say a change in a question on the form may have skewed the figures.

In 1990, the census form asked people who identified themselves as Hispanic to also 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 examples provided, including Dominican, Colombian and Nicaraguan.

The 2000 questionnaire, by contrast, did not include suggestions for write-in groups, because demographers thought some respondents felt limited to those options. The Census Bureau also wanted to shorten the form.

Lucilo Santos of Hackensack, a member of the statewide Dominican Empowerment Political Action Committee, said that was a mistake.

"It think the change affected the Dominican count because the form only asked for Puerto Ricans, Cubans and Mexicans, and so Dominicans didn't know what to put," Santos said. "They were confused. I think it's unfair that other groups were not on there."

Luis Ayala, 60, of Dover, said he remembers writing in "Hispanic" on the form, instead of "Chile," where he emigrated from 15 years ago in hopes of giving his three children a better education in the United States.

"I put in 'Hispanic' because I thought that represents me," Ayala said, explaining that he thought he had a choice between that or "Spanish" or "Latino." "I didn't know I was supposed to put 'Chile.'"

Rubiela Garcia, also from Dover, filled out the Census 2000 form because she thought it was important for the Hispanic community that her five-member family from Dover was counted.

But when it came time to specify a country of origin, she was confused. She called the Census Bureau, which sent an official to her home to assist her.

It was too late. She submitted the form, identifying herself, her husband and another adult family member as Colombian. When it came to her children, however, she wrote in "American" after checking off the box for Hispanic.

Census officials, who defend the data, have a different explanation for why so many Hispanics are counted as "other."

Kevin Deardorff, the chief of ethnic and Hispanic statistics at the Census Bureau, said officials speculate that people wrote in "Hispanic" or "Latino" instead of their origin because they may identify themselves in that way.

"Our primary concern is a person's self-identification," Deardorff said. "Ancestry is fluid for some people. It may be that more people in society are identifying with the concept of 'Hispanic' and that through repetitive use of the word, some people may identify themselves as Hispanic rather than Colombian, or any other group."

John Logan, a demographer at the State University of New York at Albany, said the arguments of Census Bureau officials are unconvincing.

"To interpret the results in terms of Hispanics not really having a sense of origin does not make sense,

particularly since the specific groups we're talking about are first-generation immigrants who are likely to have a strong connection to the country they came from," Logan said.

Logan has joined other critics who say evidence of an undercount can be seen in some of the bureau's own numbers. On Aug. 6, the Census Bureau released population estimates for Hispanic groups in New Jersey based on a supplemental survey conducted simultaneously to the Census 2000. There are vast differences in the numbers of certain groups reported.

In Logan's analysis, he estimated that most Hispanic populations are about 50 percent larger than the census count.

Meanwhile, the new data also provided a more definitive breakdown of the Asian community.

While the census had previously reported the rapid rise of the state's Indian population, the new figures show that the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities both doubled in the 1990s, to 12,000 and 2,000 respectively.

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