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June 27, 2001

A Census Query Is Said to Skew Data on Latinos

By JANNY SCOTT

The Census Bureau thought it had a new and improved way to count the many Hispanic groups in all their variety, but it appears to have backfired. As a result, New York City officials say, the bureau significantly underestimated the size of several groups, including Dominicans and Colombians.

The problem became apparent yesterday as the bureau began to release the first detailed data from the 2000 census on Latinos and Asians in New York. Large numbers of Latinos turned out to have failed to identify themselves as belonging to any specific Latino group.

Demographers for New York City say they believe that the problem can be traced largely to the rewording of a census question about Hispanic ethnicity. Bureau officials said the rewording is one possible explanation for a problem that poses problems for social scientists, city agencies and social service groups.

The total number of Hispanics of all kinds was put at 2,160,554, out of a city total of 8,008,278, in 2000.

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"Boy, this has opened up a big can of worms," said Roberto Ramirez, a survey statistician with the Census Bureau. "Because this is sensitive stuff. People want their detail, but they don't understand how people report in the real world."

The census numbers released yesterday put the official count of Dominicans in the city at 406,806, nearly 150,000 below what city officials say figures on immigration, births and deaths strongly suggest. The official number for the city's Colombian population dropped by more than 7,000 since 1990. The city had estimated that it would rise by 35,000.

Meanwhile, the number of Latinos counted as part of a generic "other Hispanic" category jumped to 401,108 in 2000 from 115,541 in 1990. City officials and others suspect that many Dominicans, Colombians, Ecuadoreans, Peruvians and others ended up in that group after failing to write in their specific group as asked on the questionnaire.

"It's pretty significant, I would say, if it really, truly is a mess-up," John Mollenkopf, director of the Center for Urban Research at the City University of New York Graduate Center, said yesterday. "Hispanics are the biggest category of immigrants to the United States, and we want to know all we can about the diversity and specifics of that population. So, if we've done something to give us less good information, that's too bad, really."

The problem does not affect the count of Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Cubans. They are asked simply to check a box next to the name of their group, not to write in their group's name.

The numbers made public yesterday are just the latest in a series of data from the 2000 census being released in a three-year period. They include counts of all Latino and Asian groups, as well as of non-Hispanic blacks, whites and others, along with data on the makeup of their households, family sizes and ages in every census tract in the city.

The numbers shed new light on which groups are creating the marked increase in the average size of city households, which had declined for most of last century but increased since 1990 to near the national average. The new data show that the growth in household and family size in the city has been heavily among Asians and Hispanics and in heavily immigrant neighborhoods.

Non-Hispanic whites had the smallest average household size in the city, with an average of 2.1 people per household, compared with a statewide average for whites of 2.4. The average household size for blacks in the city was 2.7, also below the state average. Asian households averaged 3.1 people and Hispanic 3.5, both in the city and statewide.

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The highest percentages of Hispanic family households made up of five or more people were in Queens, where one in four family households were that size. One in five Asian family households in Queens included five or more. Only 6 percent of all non-Hispanic white family households in New York City included that many people, and they were concentrated most heavily in Staten Island.

The highest percentages of people who described themselves as relatives and nonrelatives living with families were in the Bronx and Queens, often in immigrant neighborhoods where many families take in boarders and double up. Relatively few non-Hispanic whites put themselves in that category, but they were more likely than other groups to live in nonfamily households.

Non-Hispanic whites were also older than other groups, and older than whites living in the outer suburbs and upstate New York. The median age for white New York City women, for example, is 42.8. The median age for Hispanic women is 30.5; for Asian women, 33.8; and for black women, 34.2.

The question about the count of what are called Hispanic subgroups arose initially because of the gaps between the official numbers for Dominicans and Colombians and the Department of City Planning's estimates. That was in addition to the startling increase in the numbers in the "other Hispanic" category, which rose 247 percent.

"The number of Dominicans that the Census Bureau has reported for New York City is far too low," said Joseph J. Salvo, director of the population division of the Planning Department. "It's well below even the most conservative or minimal estimate that this department has produced. Similarly, other groups that had to report by writing in also look like they're too low."

Mr. Salvo traced the problem at least in part to the bureau's decision to change a single question on the census short form, intended to be filled out by everyone living in the country. That question concerned whether the person answering was "Spanish/Hispanic/Latino."

People answering could check one box if they were Puerto Rican, another if they were Cuban and a third if they were Mexican or Mexican-American. But if they belonged to another Hispanic group, they were to check a box for "other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino" and then write in the name of their specific group.

In 1990, the question included more detailed instructions: "Print one group, for example: Argentinian, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on." But the bureau decided in the 1990's

to eliminate the examples after finding a suspiciously large increase in the number of people who named one of those six groups, as opposed to any others, Mr. Ramirez said.

The change may have caused some confusion, he said.

"Some, we suspect, might have viewed it as a multiple-choice question," he said. "When we asked, 'Are you Spanish/Hispanic/Latino, they might have thought, 'I'm Argentinian but, yeah, I'm Hispanic.' "

He added, "Some respondents may not have understood that they were supposed to give us a detailed origin."

Jorge del Pinal, assistant division chief for special population statistics at the bureau, said there were other possible explanations. Some Latinos may have simply chosen to identify with the greater group, Hispanic or Latino, instead of their specific national origin. Or, he said, younger Latinos born in the United States may have answered differently from Latinos born abroad.

But Moises Perez, executive director of Alianza Dominicana, the largest Dominican social service agency in New York City, said the problem was confusion, not choice.

"What a ridiculous thing," he said. "If you're illiterate, or you don't write Spanish appropriately, it was a confusing form."

Finally, Philip Kasinitz, a professor of sociology at Hunter College who specializes in urban sociology and immigration, said another possible explanation was that Dominicans and others have simply left the city. He said, "Anybody who thinks they understand what went on with these numbers right now is purely seat-of-the-pants guessing."

The failure of some Latinos to identify themselves with a specific group, and any underestimations that might result, could have implications beyond those for social scientists, who use the census to determine patterns of neighborhood change and to study differences among groups in income and education levels, employment and housing.

As for city agencies, Mr. Salvo said inaccurate numbers could affect programs aimed at serving Dominicans, the second-largest Hispanic group in New York, after Puerto Ricans. "One of the great things about the census is its ability to represent what's really there at the small-area level," he said. "What I'm worried about is we're starting off with less than what's there."

Others pointed to political ramifications.

"If Colombians are perceived to be a decreasing group over the long run, what political presence will they have when they speak to elected officials?" said Arturo Ignacio Sanchez, a professor of urban planning at the Pratt Institute Graduate School of Architecture and Planning.

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