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Census refines state's Hispanic tally No change in total, just a better idea of who has roots where

[Tyche Hendricks, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

California may have almost half a million more residents of Mexican ancestry and a quarter-million more people of Central American descent than previously estimated by the 2000 census, according to a new analysis of census data for Hispanic subgroups.

The new study, released Monday by the Census Bureau, doesn't change the overall number of Hispanics counted in 2000 -- which stood at just over 35 million for the nation and almost 11 million in California -- and includes first generation immigrants and citizens whose Hispanic ancestry dates back generations. The study does not change the official count of the Hispanic subgroups released two years ago.

But it does give a clearer picture of the national origins of U.S. residents who are Hispanic or Latino. And it offers more concrete information for Hispanics in California and the Bay Area as well.

"It's very important to look at the subgroups and not stereotype people based on some average pan-ethnic label (like Latino or Hispanic)," said Belinda Reyes, a research fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California, based in San Francisco. "Where immigrants come from, and the experiences they went through to get here influences how they do in the long term."

Almost 6 million of the Hispanics counted nationally by the 2000 census did not give specific information about their national origin, perhaps because of a confusion over the wording of a question on the form, census researchers said.

The 2000 census asked "Are you Hispanic?" A respondent who wanted to answer affirmatively could then check off a box next to "Mexican," "Puerto Rican" or "Cuban" -- the three largest Hispanic groups -- or a fourth box that asked the person to write in a more appropriate Latino group. No sample responses were provided for that question.

The 1990 form offered the same four options, although the last also included examples of answers, such as "Argentinian" or "Dominican."

The large number of generic responses in 2000 convinced planners and community advocates that there

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was a problem, and Congress eventually asked the Census Bureau to come up with a stronger estimate using the data they had.

The latest study incorporated census data on ancestry and place of birth that were not available when the first Hispanic population statistics were released. The refined methodology allowed demographers to identify a specific Hispanic group for more than 3 million people who had been in the "other" category.

"They were understating the size of major new groups such as Dominicans, Salvadorans and Colombians, each of which have close to 1 million people in the U.S.," said John Logan, director of the Lewis Mumford Center at University of New York at Albany, who has studied the data. "They have newly become fairly substantial groups in the country but that was not really being picked up by Census two years ago. We found they had also understated the number of Mexicans."

In California, said Reyes, where people of Mexican descent account for the vast majority of Latinos, the percentage of Central Americans, especially Salvadorans, is gradually increasing.

For the people who make up these groups, an accurate count is important, in order to get the kind of representation and access to services they need, she said.

In the nine-county Bay Area, the new analysis added about 50,000 Mexicans, for a total of 977,000, and 40,000 Central Americans for a total of 149,000.

Among the most dramatic numbers in the Bay Area: The number of Salvadorans grew by 50 percent from 48,000 to 72,000; Nicaraguans, by 45 percent from 24, 000 to 35,000; Guatemalans, by 47 percent from 19,000 to 28,000; and Peruvians,

by 42 percent from 14,000 to 19,000.

Chronicle wire service contributed to this report. / E-mail Tyche Hendricks at thendricks@sfchronicle.com.

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