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The Hispanic Color Divide

Study: Some align more with blacks

By John Moreno Gonzales
Staff Writer

July 15, 2003

Hispanics who identify themselves racially as black take on economic and social characteristics that more closely mirror those of African-Americans than of other Hispanics, according to a study on the often overlooked group released Monday.

The findings by the Lewis Mumford Center of SUNY Albany said that the nearly 1 million black Hispanics identified by the 2000 U.S. Census are more educated than other Hispanics, less likely to be immigrants and less likely to speak a language other than English.

Yet their economic performance is worse, with a lower median household income than other Hispanics, as well as higher unemployment and poverty rates.

John R. Logan, the author of the study and director of the Mumford Center, attributed the economic disparity between black Hispanics and other Hispanics to the "very strong color line in the United States."

"The opportunity structure here is that when people decide who to hire, or to rent to, when it comes right down to it, race does make a difference," he said.

The most intense concentration of black Hispanics in the United States was by far in the New York metropolitan area, with 9.2 percent of Hispanics calling themselves black, according to the census.

The national origin of black Hispanics was largely Dominican and to a lesser extent Puerto Rican, with Cubans and Central Americans also showing significant numbers of Hispanics who identified themselves racially as black.

Rosina Pearsall, 36, who lives in Garden City and is an instructor at the Westbury Language Center, said her black skin and Latino heritage has led to little direct segregation.

"But when I am with Caucasian people they look at me differently," said the English as a Second Language teacher from Costa Rica. "They are asking themselves 'How come a black girl is Spanish?' And they can't understand that."

The study found that 28 percent of black Hispanics were immigrants, compared with 41 percent of all Hispanics. Sixty-one percent of black Hispanics spoke a language other than English in the home compared with 79 percent of all Hispanics. The mean education level of black Hispanics was 11.7 years, compared with 12.5 for non-Hispanic blacks and 10.5 years for all Hispanics.

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The median household income of black Hispanics was \$35,000, closer to the \$34,000 of non-Hispanic blacks than to the \$38,500 of all Hispanics.

Their unemployment rate was 12.3 percent, compared with 11 percent for non-Hispanic blacks and 8.8 percent for all Hispanics. Their poverty rate was 31.5 percent, compared with the 29.7 percent of non-Hispanic blacks and 26 percent for all Hispanics.

Black Hispanics tend to marry non-Hispanic blacks at a higher rate than they do other Hispanics, the report said. Nearly half the black Hispanic children had a parent who is a non-Hispanic black.

Pearsall married Milton Pearsall last year, an Army warrant officer who is African-American. "African-Americans are a little more open to accept me because I look like them," Rosina Pearsall said.

Faced with such a mixture of racial backgrounds, the report also found that Hispanics are increasingly choosing to not identify themselves as either black or white. In the 1980 Census, only 33.7 percent of Hispanics chose to forgo any racial classification. In 2000, 47.4 percent did not choose a race.

Logan acknowledged, however, that the bulk of Hispanics may not call themselves white or black simply because they factually are neither. The dominate Hispanic group in the United States, those of Mexican heritage, are often of both Spanish and indigenous blood and their skin is neither black nor white.

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