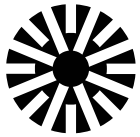




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SEPTEMBER 15, 2022



Who is Hispanic?

BY [MARK HUGO LOPEZ](#), [JENS MANUEL KROGSTAD](#) AND [JEFFREY S. PASSEL](#)



Beauty pageant contestants at the Junta Hispana Hispanic cultural festival in Miami. (Jeffrey Greenberg/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

Debates over [who is Hispanic](#) and who is not have often [fueled conversations](#) about identity [among Americans](#) who trace their heritage to Latin America or Spain. Most recently, the 2020 census has drawn attention to how Hispanic identity is defined and measured. The once-a-decade head count of all people living in the United States used a new approach to identify who is Hispanic and has provided fresh details about how Hispanics view their racial identity.

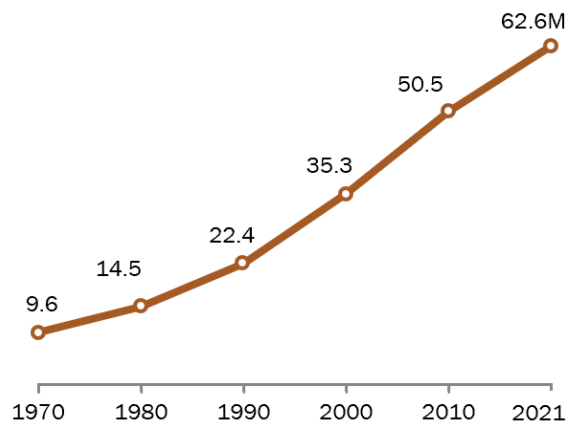
So, who is considered Hispanic in the U.S. today? How exactly are Hispanics counted? What role does race play in deciding who is counted as Hispanic? And how do surveys incorporate the various terms people use to describe their Hispanic identity, such as Latina or Latinx?

In this analysis, we'll answer these common questions and others.

How many Hispanics are there in the U.S. today?

U.S. Hispanic population reached more than 62 million in 2021

In millions



Note: Population totals are as of April 1 for 1970-2010 and July 1 for 2021. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1970-1980 estimates based on decennial censuses (see 2008 report "U.S. Population Projections: 2005-2050"), 1990-2010 PL94-171 census data, Vintage 2021 estimates.

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Let's start with the basics. The Census Bureau estimates there were roughly 62.6 million Hispanics in the U.S. as of 2021, making up 19% of the nation's population, both new highs.

Behind the official Census Bureau number, however, lies a long history of changing labels, [shifting categories](#) and [revised question wording on census forms](#) – all of which reflect evolving cultural norms about what it means to be Hispanic or Latino in the U.S. today.

How are Hispanics counted in government surveys, public opinion polls and other studies?

Before diving into the details, keep in mind that some surveys ask about Hispanic origin and race in separate questions, following the current practice of the Census Bureau:

How the U.S. Census Bureau determines who is Hispanic

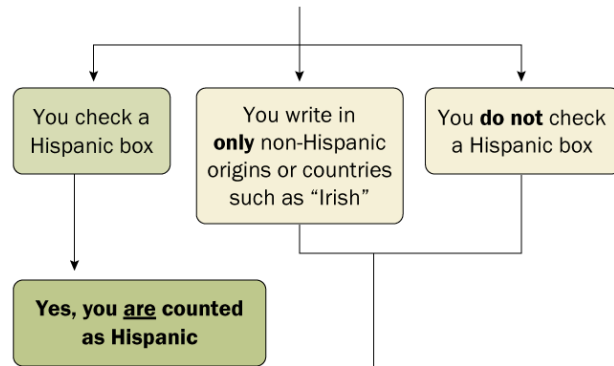
2020 Census Hispanic origin question

→ NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 6 about Hispanic origin and Question 7 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.

6. Is this person of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

- ☐ No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- ☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
- ☐ Yes, Puerto Rican
- ☐ Yes, Cuban
- ☐ Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – *Print, for example, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc.*

On the Hispanic origin question ...



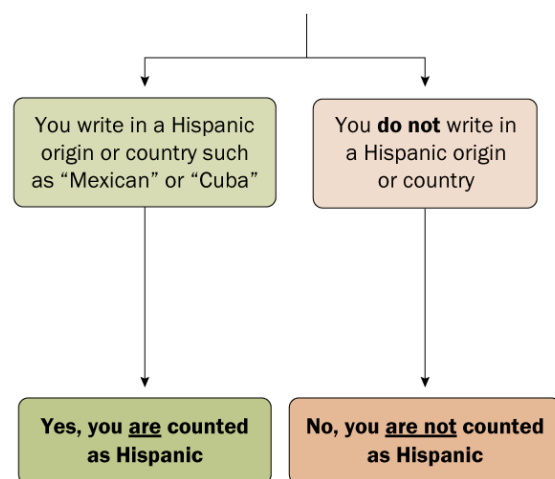
2020 Census race question

7. What is this person's race?

Mark ☒ one or more boxes AND print origins.

- ☐ White – *Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc.*
- ☐ Black or African Am. – *Print, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc.*
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native – *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc.*
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ Vietnamese
- ☐ Native Hawaiian
- ☐ Filipino
- ☐ Korean
- ☐ Samoan
- ☐ Asian Indian
- ☐ Japanese
- ☐ Chamorro
- ☐ Other Asian – *Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc.*
- ☐ Other Pacific Islander – *Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc.*
- ☐ Some other race – *Print race or origin.*

On the race question ...



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One way to count Hispanics is straightforward: Hispanics are those who say they are Hispanic, with no exceptions. Pew Research Center uses this approach in our surveys, as do other polling firms such as Gallup and voter exit polls.

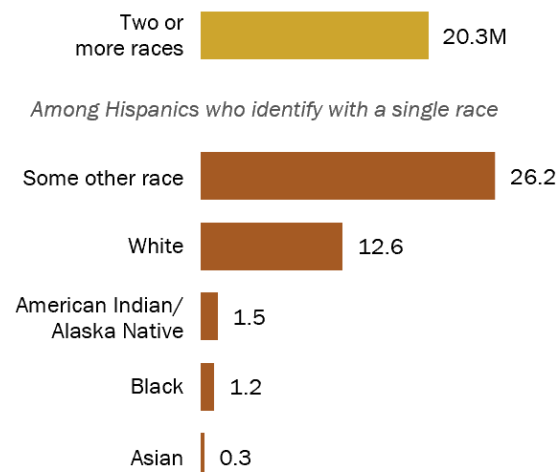
The Census Bureau largely counts Hispanics this way, too, but with some exceptions. If respondents select only the “Other Hispanic” category *and* write in *only* non-Hispanic responses such as “Irish,” the Census Bureau recodes the response as non-Hispanic. However, beginning in 2020, it widened the lens to include a relatively small number of people who did *not* check a Hispanic box on the census form but answered the race question in a way that implied a Hispanic background. As a result, someone who wrote that their race is “Mexican” or “Argentinean” in the race question was counted as Hispanic, even if they did not check the Hispanic box. From the available data, it is impossible to know the exact number of respondents affected by this change, but it would appear to be about 1% of Hispanics or fewer.

How did Hispanics identify their race in the 2020 census?

In the eyes of the Census Bureau, Hispanics can be of any race, because “Hispanic” is an ethnicity and not a race – though this distinction [can be subject to debate](#). A [2015 survey](#) by Pew Research Center found that 17% of Hispanic adults said being Hispanic is mainly a matter of race, while 29% said it is mainly a matter of ancestry and 42% said it is mainly a matter of culture.

Most Hispanics do not identify their race only as White, Black or Asian

Number of U.S. Hispanics who identify with a racial group in 2020 (in millions)



Note: “Some other race” refers to people who wrote in a response that did not fit within the race categories listed on the census. The group “Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander” is not shown. Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of PL94-171 census data for 2020.

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Nonetheless, the 2020 census provides a portrait of the self-reported racial identity of Hispanics. For example, 26.2 million single-race Hispanics identified only as “some other race,” a group that mostly includes those who wrote in a Hispanic origin or nationality as

their race. The next largest single-race group was White (12.6 million), followed by American Indian (1.5 million), Black (1.2 million) and Asian (300,000).

At the same time, more than 20 million Hispanics identified with *more than one* race on the 2020 census, up from just 3 million in 2010. The sharp increase in multiracial Hispanics could be due to a number of factors, including [changes to the census form](#) that added space for written responses to the race question, as well as growing racial diversity among Hispanics. In particular, almost nine-in-ten Hispanics who identified with two or more races in 2020 said they were “some other race” (i.e., those who write in a response to the race question) and one of the specific races (such as White or Black).

Growth in multiracial Hispanics comes primarily from those who identify as White and “some other race” – a population that grew from 1.6 million to 17.0 million over the past decade. The number of Hispanics who identify as White and no other race declined by almost the same amount – from 26.7 million to 12.6 million.

Isn't there an official definition of what it means to be Hispanic or Latino?

In 1976, the [U.S. Congress passed](#) a law that [mandated the collection](#) and analysis of data for a specific ethnic group: “Americans of Spanish origin or descent.” The language of that legislation described this group as “Americans who identify themselves as being of Spanish-speaking background and trace their origin or descent from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central and South America, and other Spanish-speaking countries.” This includes 20 Spanish-speaking nations from Latin America and Spain itself, but not Portugal or Portuguese-speaking Brazil.

Standards for collecting data on Hispanics were developed by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) [in 1977](#) and revised [in 1997](#). Using these standards, schools, public health facilities and other government entities and agencies keep track of how many Hispanics they serve – the primary goal of the 1976 law.

Currently, the OMB is reconsidering how to collect and report statistics about race and ethnicity. The review is scheduled to be [completed by 2024](#).

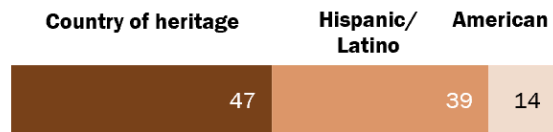
What's the difference between Hispanic and Latino?

“Hispanic” and “Latino” are pan-ethnic terms meant to describe – and summarize – the population of people of that ethnic background living in the U.S. In practice, the Census Bureau most often uses the term “Hispanic,” while Pew Research Center uses the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” interchangeably when describing this population.

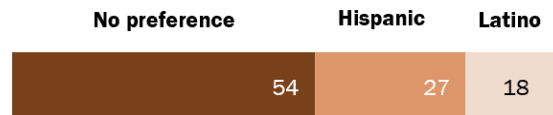
Some have drawn sharp distinctions between [these two terms](#) – saying, for example, that Hispanics are [people from Spain](#) or from Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America (this excludes Brazil, where Portuguese is the official language), while Latinos are people from Latin America regardless of language (this includes Brazil but excludes Spain and Portugal). Despite this debate, the “Hispanic” and “Latino” labels are not universally embraced by the population that has been labeled, even as they are widely used.

Hispanics have mixed views on how they describe their identity

% of Hispanics saying they describe themselves most often as ... (2019)



Do you prefer the term “Hispanic” or “Latino”? (2018)



Note: “No preference” is a voluntary response. Other voluntary responses not shown. Share of respondents who didn’t offer a response not shown.

Source: Surveys of U.S. Latino adults conducted in 2018 and 2019.

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Instead, Pew Research Center surveys show a preference for other terms to describe identity. A [2019 survey](#) found that 47% of Hispanics most often describe themselves by their family’s country of origin, while 39% use the terms Latino or Hispanic and 14% most often describe themselves as American.

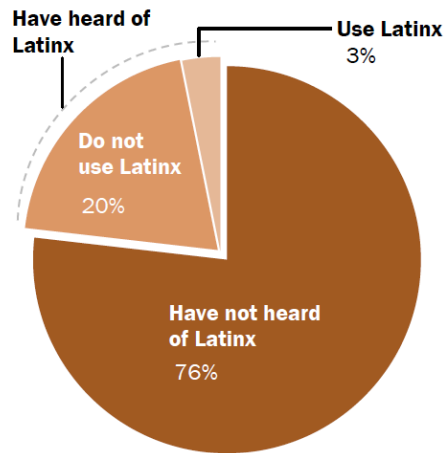
As for a preference between the terms Hispanic or Latino to describe themselves, a [2018 survey](#) found that 27% prefer “Hispanic,” 18% prefer “Latino” and the rest (54%) have no preference. These findings have changed little in [nearly two decades](#) of Pew Research Center surveys of Hispanic adults, which are conducted in English and Spanish.

What is “Latinx”?

Another pan-ethnic identity label is “Latinx,” which has emerged as an alternative to Hispanic and Latino in recent years. It is used by some [news](#) and [entertainment](#) outlets, corporations, local governments and [universities](#) to describe the nation’s Hispanic population. Yet the use of Latinx is not common practice, and the term’s emergence has generated debate about its appropriateness in a gendered language like Spanish. [Some critics](#) say it ignores the Spanish language and its gendered form, while others see Latinx as a [gender- and LGBTQ-inclusive term](#).

Most Latino adults have not heard of the term Latinx; few use it

% who ...



Note: No answer responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. Latino adults conducted Dec. 3-23, 2019.

"About One-in-Four U.S. Hispanics Have Heard of Latinx, but Just 3% Use It"

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The term is not well known among the population it is meant to describe. Only 23% of U.S. adults who self-identify as Hispanic or Latino have heard of the term Latinx, and just 3% say they use it to describe themselves, according to [a 2019 survey](#). Awareness and use of the term vary across subgroups, with Hispanics ages 18 to 29 among the most likely to have heard of the term – 42% say they have heard of it, compared with 7% of those 65 and older. Some of the most common use of Latinx is among Hispanic women ages 18 to 29 – 14% say they use it, compared with 1% of Hispanic men in the same age group.

The emergence of Latinx coincides with a global movement to introduce gender-neutral nouns and pronouns [into many languages](#) whose grammar has traditionally used male or female constructions. In the U.S., the first uses of Latinx appeared more than a decade ago. The term was [added to a widely used English dictionary](#) in 2018, reflecting its greater use. And a new gender-neutral pan-ethnic label, [Latine](#), has emerged. It is largely used in Spanish.

How do factors like language, a person's last name and the background of their parents play into whether someone is considered Hispanic?

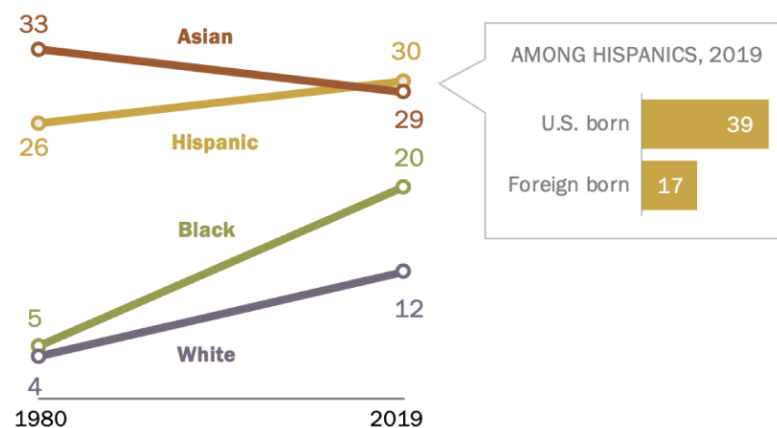
Our surveys of U.S. Hispanics have found many have an inclusive view of what it means to be Hispanic. A [2015 survey](#) found 71% of Hispanic adults said speaking Spanish is not required to be considered Hispanic, and 84% said having a Spanish last name is not required to be considered Hispanic. Meanwhile, 32% of Hispanic adults said having both

parents of Hispanic heritage or descent is an essential part of what being Hispanic means to them, according to a [2019 survey](#).

Views of Hispanic identity may change in coming decades as broad societal changes, such as rising intermarriage rates, produce an [increasingly diverse](#) and multiracial U.S. population.

Three-in-ten Hispanic newlyweds married someone who is not Hispanic in 2019

% of U.S. newlyweds who are intermarried



Note: White, Black and Asian adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Asians include Pacific Islanders. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2019 American Community Survey and 1980 decennial census (IPUMS).

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In 2019, 30% of Hispanic newlyweds married someone who is not Hispanic; the Hispanic intermarriage rate is similar to that for Asians (29%) but higher than the rate among Black (18%) and White (12%) newlyweds. Among Hispanic newlyweds, 39% of those born in the U.S. married someone who is not Hispanic, compared with 17% of immigrants, according to an analysis of American Community Survey data. Among all married Hispanics, 20% had a spouse who is not Hispanic as of 2019.

The Center's 2015 survey of U.S. Hispanic adults found that 15% had at least one parent who is not Hispanic. This share rises to 29% among the U.S. born and 48% among the third or higher generation – those born in the U.S. with both parents who were also U.S. born.

What role does skin color play in whether someone is Hispanic?

As with race, Latinos can have a variety of skin tones. A [2021 survey](#) of Latino adults showed respondents a palette of 10 skin colors; they were asked to choose which one most closely resembled their own.

Latinos reported having a variety of skin tones, reflecting the diversity within the group. Eight-in-ten Latinos selected one of the four lightest skin colors, with the second-lightest ranking most common (28%), followed by the third (21%) and fourth lightest colors (17%). By contrast, only 3% of Latino respondents selected one of the four darkest skin colors.

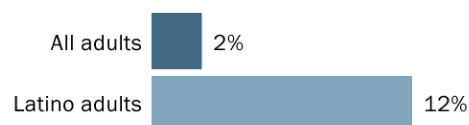
It's worth noting that a majority of Latino adults (57%) say skin color shapes their daily life experiences at least somewhat. Most say having a darker skin color hurts Latinos' ability to get ahead in the U.S. (62%), while having a lighter skin color helps Latinos get ahead (59%).

What about Afro-Latinos? Are they Hispanic?

Afro-Latino identity is distinct and can exist alongside a person's Hispanic identity. The life experiences of Afro-Latinos are shaped by race, skin tone and other factors, in ways that differ from other Hispanics. While most Afro-Latinos identify as Hispanic or Latino, not all do, according to [Pew Research Center estimates](#) based on a survey of U.S. adults conducted from November 2019 to June 2020.

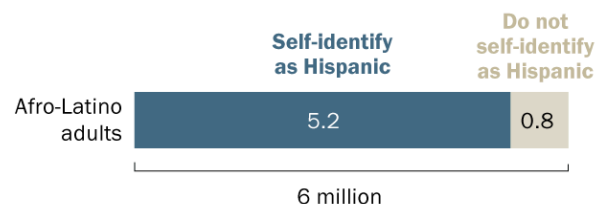
Afro-Latinos are about 2% of U.S. adult population and 12% of Latino adults ...

% saying they are Afro-Latino among ...



... but almost one-in-seven do not identify as Hispanic or Latino

In millions



Note: Estimates of the total number of Afro-Latino adults in the U.S. have a margin of error of plus or minus 600,000.
Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on a Center survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020.

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In 2020, Center estimates found there were about 6 million Afro-Latino adults in the U.S., making up about 2% of the U.S. adult population and 12% of the adult Latino population. About one-in-seven Afro-Latinos – or an estimated 800,000 adults – do not identify as Hispanic.

Can a person's country of origin or ancestry affect whether or not they are Hispanic?

Similar to race and skin color, Hispanics can be of any country of origin or ancestry. One result of this diversity is that people from certain countries may be more likely to identify as Hispanic on census forms. For example, in a Pew Research Center analysis of the Census Bureau's 2020 American Community Survey, nearly all immigrants from several Latin American and Caribbean countries called themselves Hispanic, including those from Mexico, Cuba and El Salvador (nearly 100% each). By comparison, 94% of immigrants from Paraguay and 92% from Argentina said so, as did 95% of immigrants from Spain and 90% from Panama.

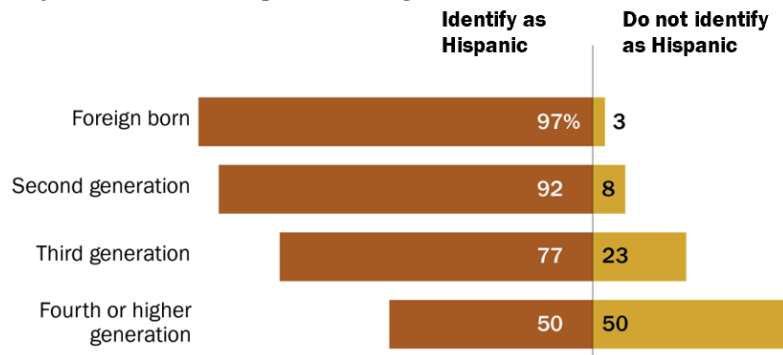
What about Brazilians, Portuguese and Filipinos? Are they considered Hispanic?

People with ancestries in Brazil, Portugal and the Philippines do not fit the federal government's [official definition](#) of "Hispanic" because the countries are not Spanish-speaking. For the most part, people who trace their ancestry to just these countries are not counted as Hispanic by the Census Bureau even if they identify as Hispanic. Only about 2%-3% of immigrants from Brazil are counted as Hispanic, as are about 1%-2% of immigrants from Portugal and the Philippines, according to the 2010- 2019 American Community Surveys.

How many people with Hispanic ancestry do not identify as Hispanic?

Among Americans with Hispanic ancestry, share that identifies as Hispanic or Latino declines across immigrant generations

% of U.S. adults with Hispanic ancestry who ...



Note: Hispanics are those who say they are Hispanic. Those who do not self-identify as Hispanic say they are not Hispanic or Latino but say they have Hispanic ancestry or heritage. "Second generation" refers to those born in the 50 states or the District of Columbia to at least one immigrant parent. "Third generation" refers to those born in the 50 states or D.C. with both parents born in the 50 states or D.C. and at least one immigrant grandparent. "Fourth or higher generation" refers to those born in the 50 states or D.C. with parents and all four grandparents born in the 50 states or D.C.
Source: Pew Research Center 2015 National Survey of Latinos (Oct. 21-Nov. 30, 2015) and survey of self-identified non-Hispanics with Hispanic ancestry or heritage only (Nov. 11, 2015-Feb. 7, 2016).
"Hispanic Identity Fades Across Generations as Immigrant Connections Fall Away"

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Of the 42.7 million adults with Hispanic ancestry living in the U.S. in 2015, an estimated [5 million people, or 11%, said they do not identify as Hispanic or Latino](#), according to a Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults. These people aren't counted as Hispanic in Center surveys.

Notably, Hispanic self-identification among U.S. adults with Hispanic heritage varies across immigrant generations. Among immigrants from Latin America, nearly all identify as Hispanic. But by the fourth generation, only half of people with Hispanic heritage in the U.S. identify as Hispanic.

How has the Census Bureau changed the way it counts Hispanics over time?

The first year the Census Bureau asked everybody in the country about Hispanic ethnicity was in 1980. Some [efforts were made](#) before then to count people who today would be considered Hispanic. In the 1930 census, for example, an attempt to count Hispanics appeared as part of the race question, which had a category for "Mexican."

The first major attempt to estimate the size of the nation's Hispanic population [came in 1970](#) and prompted [widespread concerns](#) among Hispanic organizations about an undercount. A portion of the U.S. population (5%) was asked if their origin or descent was from the following categories: "Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American,

Other Spanish” and “No, none of these.” This approach had problems, among them an undercount of about 1 million Hispanics.

One reason for this is that many second-generation Hispanics did not select one of the Hispanic groups because the question did not include terms like “Mexican American.” The question wording also resulted in hundreds of thousands of people living in the Southern or Central regions of the U.S. being mistakenly included in the “Central or South American” category.

By 1980, the current approach – in which someone is asked if they are Hispanic – had taken hold, with some tweaks made to the question and response categories since then. In 2000, for example, the term “Latino” was added to make the question read, “Is this person Spanish/Hispanic/Latino?”

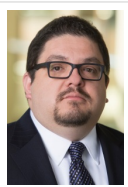
In recent years, the Census Bureau has studied [an alternative approach](#) to counting Hispanics that combines the questions that ask about Hispanic origin and race. This change [did not appear](#) in the 2020 census, though the race question [was changed](#) to allow for written responses to all race categories. The race and ethnicity questions could change for the 2030 census under a [plan announced](#) in June 2022 by the Office of Management and Budget.

Note: This post was originally published on May 28, 2009, by Jeffrey S. Passel and Paul Taylor, former vice president of Pew Research Center. It has been updated a number of times since then.

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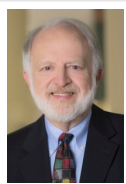
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