

Hispanic Definition Pew 111119

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Who is Hispanic?

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Debates over who is Hispanic and who is not have fueled conversations about identity among Americans who trace their heritage to Latin America or Spain. The question surfaced during [U.S. presidential debates](#) and [the confirmation](#) of Sonia Sotomayor to the U.S. Supreme Court. More recently, [it bubbled up](#) after a singer from Spain won the “Best Latin” award at the 2019 Video Music Awards.

So, who is considered Hispanic in the United States? And how are they counted in public opinion surveys, voter exit polls and government surveys like the upcoming 2020 census?

The most common approach to answering these questions is straightforward: Who is Hispanic? Anyone who says they are. And nobody who says they aren't.

The U.S. Census Bureau uses this approach, as does Pew Research Center and most other research organizations that conduct public opinion surveys. By this way of counting, the Census Bureau estimates there were roughly [59.9 million Hispanics](#) in the United States as of July 1, 2018, making up 18% of the total national population.

Behind the impressive precision of this official Census Bureau number 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 United States today.

Here's a quick primer on the Census Bureau's approach of using self-identification to decide who is Hispanic.

Q. I immigrated to Phoenix from Mexico. Am I Hispanic?

A. You are if you say so.

Q. My parents moved to New York from Puerto Rico. Am I Hispanic?

A. You are if you say so.

Q. My grandparents were born in Spain but I grew up in California. Am I Hispanic?

A. You are if you say so.

Q. I was born in Maryland and married an immigrant from El Salvador. Am I Hispanic?

A. You are if you say so.

Q. I was born in Argentina but grew up in Texas. I don't consider myself Hispanic. Does the Census Bureau count me as Hispanic?

A. Not if you say you aren't. Of the 42.7 million adults with Hispanic ancestry in 2015, an [estimated 5 million](#) people, or 11%, said they do not identify as Hispanic or Latino. These people aren't counted as Hispanic by the Census Bureau or in Pew Research Center surveys.

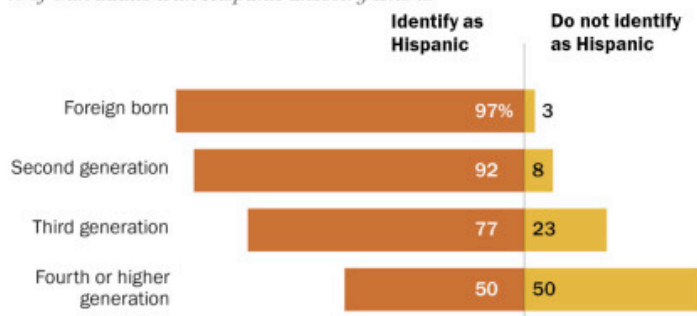
Hispanic self-identification varies across immigrant generations. Among the foreign born from Latin America, nearly all self-identify as Hispanic. But by the fourth generation, only half of people with Hispanic heritage in the U.S. self-identify as Hispanic.

Q. But isn't there an official definition of what it means to be Hispanic or Latino?

A. In 1976, the [U.S. Congress passed](#) the only law in this country's [history 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

Among Americans with Hispanic ancestry, share that identifies as Hispanic or Latino falls 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 have Hispanic ancestry or heritage. Second generation refers to those born in the U.S. to at least one immigrant parent. Third generation refers to those born in the U.S. to parents and grandparents who are U.S. born. Fourth or higher generation refers to those born in the U.S. with parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, or even more distant relatives, who are U.S. born.

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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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.

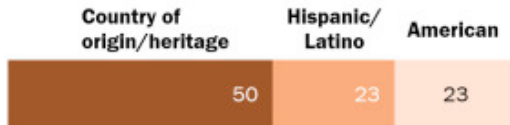
However, the Census Bureau does not apply this definition when counting Hispanics. Rather, it relies entirely on self-reporting and lets each person identify as Hispanic or not.

Q. What's the difference between Hispanic and Latino?

A. The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are panethnic terms meant to describe – and summarize – the population of people living in the U.S. of that ethnic background. In practice, the Census Bureau most often uses the term "Hispanic," while Pew Research Center uses the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" interchangeably.

Hispanics have mixed views on how they describe their identity

% of Hispanics saying they describe themselves most often as ...



Do you prefer the term "Hispanic" or "Latino"?



Note: "No preference" is a voluntary response. Other voluntary responses not shown.
Source: Pew Research Center 2015 National Survey of Latinos (Oct. 21-Nov. 30, 2015).

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Some have drawn sharp distinctions [between](#) these two terms, saying for example, [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). Despite this debate, the "Hispanic" and "Latino" labels are not universally embraced by the community that has been labeled, even as they are widely used.

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Instead, Pew Research Center surveys show a preference for other terms to [describe identity](#). A 2015 survey found that 50% of Hispanics most often describe themselves by their family's country of origin, 23% use the terms Latino or Hispanic, and 23% most often describe themselves as American. As for a preference between the terms Hispanic or Latino, the survey found that 32% of Hispanics prefer "Hispanic," 15% prefer the term "Latino" and the rest (51%) have no preference.

Another common identity label is "Latinx," an emerging panethnic, gender-neutral term that is used in place of "Hispanic" or "Latino." While the Census Bureau has not recognized the term, U.S. public interest in "Latinx" has grown since 2018, according to [an analysis of Google search data](#). [However, some](#) have not embraced the term.

Q. The Census Bureau also asks people about their race and their ancestry. How do these responses come into play when determining if someone is Hispanic?

A. They don't. In the eyes of the Census Bureau, Hispanics can be of any race, any ancestry or any country of origin. This results in varying patterns that relate to where people come from and how they choose to identify themselves on census surveys. For example, nearly all immigrants from Mexico (99%) called themselves Hispanic, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of the Census Bureau's 2017 American

Community Survey. By comparison, 93% of immigrants from Argentina said so, as did 88% of immigrants from Spain and 87% from Panama.

Q. What about Brazilians, Portuguese and Filipinos? Are they Hispanic?

A. They are in the eyes of the Census Bureau if they say they are, even though these countries do not fit the [federal government's](#) official definition of "Hispanic" because they are not Spanish-speaking. For the most part, people who trace their ancestry to these countries do not self-identify as Hispanic when they fill out their census forms. Only about 2% of immigrants from Brazil do so, as do 2% of immigrants from Portugal and 1% from the Philippines, according to Pew Research Center tabulations of the 2017 American Community Survey.

These patterns reflect a growing recognition and acceptance of the official definition of Hispanics. In the 1980 census, 18% of Brazilian immigrants and 12% of both Portuguese and Filipino immigrants identified as Hispanic. But by 2000, the shares identifying as Hispanic dropped to levels close to those seen today.

What people report on census forms are not subject to any independent checks, corroborations or corrections. This means, in theory, someone who has no Hispanic ancestors could identify as Hispanic and that's how they would be counted.

Q. Has the Census Bureau changed the way it counts Hispanics?

A. The first year the Census Bureau asked everybody in the country about Hispanic ethnicity was in 1980. Some efforts took place before then to count people that 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 produced 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 south or central regions of the U.S. to be 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. However](#), this change will not appear in the 2020 census.

Note: This is an update to a post originally published on May 28, 2009, by Jeffrey S. Passel, senior demographer, and Paul Taylor, former vice president of Pew Research Center.