

# Latinos and their history in the united states

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Although loosely united by a common heritage as native Spanish speakers from the Americas or their descendants, the numerous Latino groups in the United States are ethnically, racially, and socio-economically heterogeneous; each Latino subgroup representing a distinct culture and geographical area of the Americas. Using the terms "Latino" and the more official "Hispanic," which the U. S. Census Bureau adopted in 1970, to describe the cultures of peoples from Mexico and the countries of Central and South America and the Caribbean is problematic in several respects.

The term "Hispanic" is rejected by many authors as too reductive in its association with Spain and Spanish culture, thereby ignoring the indigenous and African heritage of many Latin American and Caribbean people. The term "Latino," based more neutrally on an identity shared through the use of language, is perceived as more useful, if still an unsatisfactory label. "Chicano" and "Nuyorican," more recent terms, are occasionally interchangeable with "Mexican American" and "Mainland Puerto Rican," although the former in particular reflects a political expression of ethnic pride and the latter is now geographically limiting.

The distinctions between these terms, even after being outlined, remain in many situations vague. Indeed, even the US Census fails to make accurate and definitive definitions:

People who identify with the terms "Hispanic" or "Latino" are those who classify themselves in one of the specific Hispanic or Latino categories listed on the questionnaire—"Mexican," "Puerto Rican," or "Cuban"—as well as those who indicate that they are "other Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino." Origin can be viewed as the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the

person or the person's parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States. People who identify their origin as Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino may be of any race. (US Census, Subject Definitions, 2000)

### Current status

Today the Latino presence has emerged, as a fact of American life - this diverse group has come to the United States and themselves become "Americans." In fact, Latinos comprise the largest minority in the US today according to US Census studies. Furthermore, their data shows that "the estimated Hispanic population of the United States as of July 1, 2005 [was 42.7 million] making people of Hispanic origin the nation's largest ethnic or race minority. Hispanics constituted 14% of the nation's total population"

Even today, this group continues to endure obstacles of racism in public policy and widespread discrimination in the US. Being grouped together has made the situation for many of what can loosely be considered Latino sub-groups both challenging and difficult. From the anti-Cuban sentiment in Florida to the anti-Mexican wall that has been proposed by President Bush, despite being the largest minority group in the US, these types of incidents and policies ensure that they remain just that - in the minority.

### Future

As the next U. S.-born generations of Latinos come of age, the barriers and pain of systemic racism could be attacked more openly. Many young people will start to openly reject the assumptions and generalizations that perpetuate stereotypes and keep Latino people in the grip of racism.

Historically, in the organized pursuit of civil rights and equality in the United States black Americans have usually led the way. Since at least the early 1900s they have forced the passage of all major civil rights laws and the majority of the pivotal executive orders and court decisions protecting or extending antidiscrimination efforts. Latinos as well as Native and Asian Americans have been able to make some use of these civil rights mechanisms to fight discrimination against their own groups, and this will likely continue in the future.

Census data shows that in 2004, 21.9% of Latino people in the US were living in poverty and a further 32.7% lacked adequate health insurance. Yet conversely, the same studies show that there were 1.6 million businesses owned by Latino people in 2002 and that from 1997 to 2002, the rate of growth for businesses owned by Latino people was 31% compared to the national average of 10%. According to 2004 data, 2.7 million Latinos over the age of 18 had at least a bachelor's degree. This means that things could well be shifting in the right direction. Education and business savvy could well be conquering the effects of poverty and poor medical care. While these people continue to experience racism and ethnic stereotyping, there is an underlying spirit of perseverance that keeps them going and will no doubt pave the way for a brighter future.

#### References

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