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## **Invisible in the Numbers: Rethinking Latino Classification in U.S. Federal Data**

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### **Executive Summary**

- Federal misclassification: For more than four decades, federal data standards—like the Office of Management and Budget’s Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 (1997)—have treated “Hispanic or Latino” as an ethnicity separate from race. Federal oversight agencies and public health researchers have expressed apprehensions that this framework conceals racial diversity within Latino communities.<sup>1</sup>
- 2024 OMB reform: The new combined race–ethnicity question for the 2030 census presents a step toward progress but risks repeating old erasures without disaggregated Latino-by-race reporting.<sup>2</sup>
- Policy implications: Inaccurate data distort funding allocations<sup>3</sup>, public health research,<sup>4</sup>
- and civil rights enforcement<sup>5</sup> for Afro-Latinos, Indigenous Latinos, and Asian Latinos.
- Recommended actions: Congress and OMB must require agencies to publish cross-tabulated data, strengthen interagency coordination, and partner with community organizations to improve respondent accuracy.

### **Background**

The categorization of Latinos in U.S. federal data has historically resulted in conceptual and statistical distortions. The census has asked people every ten years since 1980 to say if they are of "Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin" and then to choose a race, like White, Black, or Asian. This two-question format, set up by the Office of Management and Budget's Statistical Policy Directive No. 15,<sup>6</sup> is more about how the government works than how most Latinos understand their identities.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 was designed to standardize how federal agencies collect race and ethnicity data for civil rights enforcement, program eligibility, and statistical comparability across datasets. It prioritizes administrative consistency—ensuring data can be aggregated and compared across agencies—over capturing how individuals self-identify. Individuals who identify as African, Indigenous, or mixed-race stated that none of the listed racial categories accurately represent them.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, about 40% of Latinos choose "Some Other Race," which was not intended to include such a large group of people.<sup>9</sup>

This framework makes it challenging to assess the racial diversity of Latino communities.

Federal agencies have historically classified Hispanic or Latino as an ethnicity; census race categories often fail to capture how Latinos understand their racial identity, resulting in millions being grouped into the category “Some Other Race.”<sup>10</sup> The result is systematic misclassification that skews population counts, funding formulas, and civil rights enforcement.<sup>11</sup> As Borrell and Viladrich observe, “given the salience of race in US society, self-identification

with White and Black categories is crucial for understanding racial health inequities,” particularly those lived by Afro-Latinos.<sup>12</sup>

In March 2024, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) changed Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 to combine race and ethnicity into one question for future federal data collections like the 2030 census.<sup>13</sup> People can now choose "Hispanic or Latino" along with Black, White, and Asian. Although the census design change aims to streamline reporting, it has already impacted Latino identity in official statistics. Ventura and Flores found that Hispanic multiracial identification increased sevenfold after the technical recoding of "Some Other Race" responses from 2010 to 2020.<sup>14</sup> Different data processing caused this increase, not population change. Their findings suggest that procedural changes without clear implementation and racial disaggregation could cause similar issues in the new OMB system.

## **Problem Analysis**

The consequences of inaccurately categorizing Latino identity in federal data extend across three essential domains: resource distribution, public health, and civil rights enforcement. Addressing each demonstrates that neglecting Latino racial diversity compromises policy outcomes.

## **Resource Allocation**

Data from the census decide how hundreds of federal programs distribute money.<sup>15</sup> Census data are used to help the federal government spend more than \$2.8 trillion in FY 2021.<sup>16</sup> Grouping Afro-Latinos, Indigenous Latinos, or Asian Latinos under the "Hispanic/Latino" label blurs their distinct realities, rendering them invisible in the data.<sup>17</sup> For instance, census-based measures of poverty and population characteristics at the school-district and census-tract level are used to determine Title I education funding. When Latino students are reported as one group, districts with an overrepresentation of Afro-Latino or Indigenous Latino students—who tend to have higher rates of concentrated poverty, language-access needs, and school-level inequities—look the same as districts with more advantaged Latino populations. This makes it harder for districts to show need and obtain more federal dollars per student.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, under-resourced urban and rural communities may face inequitable distributions of resources for health, education, and physical infrastructure.<sup>19</sup>

## **Public Health**

Accurate measurement of race and ethnicity is critical for identifying and addressing health disparities.<sup>20</sup> Aggregating all Latinos conceals important differences: Hispanic people who self-identify as Black often experience similar rates of chronic illness and adverse health outcomes as non-Hispanic Black populations.<sup>21</sup> Medicaid finances nearly 50 percent of U.S. hospital births, making this limitation especially consequential in maternal health.<sup>22</sup> Within these deliveries, Black mothers account for 64.0 percent and Hispanic mothers for 58.1 percent.<sup>23</sup> These alarming statistics mask within-group variation and specific risks. According to the Latino Data Hub health indicators, there are differences in access to insurance, but when it comes to maternal outcomes, the data doesn't show the risks for Afro-Latina women because of how race and ethnicity are classified by the federal government.<sup>24</sup> The Kaiser Family Foundation notes that incomplete race and ethnicity data impede tracking of health equity and limit agencies' ability to design targeted interventions.<sup>25</sup>

## Figure 1. Upstream Health Access Indicators by Latino Racial Identification

Source: Latino Data Hub, Health Insurance Coverage by Latino Racial Identification, based on U.S. Census Bureau (ACS).

### Civil Rights Enforcement

Anti-discrimination laws, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Fair Housing Act, rely on comprehensive race and ethnicity data to reveal disparities in treatment.<sup>26</sup> Allen et al. note that when data collection fails to reflect Latinos' lived racial identities, it "can significantly alter our understanding of a population's health needs, masking some disparities while overestimating others."<sup>27</sup> When we solely classify Afro-Latino or Indigenous Latino individuals as "Hispanic," we statistically obscure their experiences of racial bias, thereby undermining enforcement and oversight. Civil rights organizations have warned that federal race and ethnicity data standards that fail to collect and publish sufficiently granular information limit the effectiveness of civil rights programs that rely on these data for oversight, monitoring, and enforcement.<sup>28</sup>

Ensuring accurate racial details in Latino data is important for fairness, especially now that Latinos constitute about 20% of the U.S. population.<sup>29</sup> The 2030 census reform is a chance, but only if agencies commit to release Latino-by-race data. Without this commitment, the reform's intended beneficiaries will persist in experiencing marginalization.

### Stakeholder Landscape

Changing how federal data measures Latino identity involves many institutions with overlapping authority, as well as advocacy groups that have long fought over how race and ethnicity are defined. These actors influence both the technical execution of the 2024 OMB standards and the political narrative surrounding Latino racial diversity.

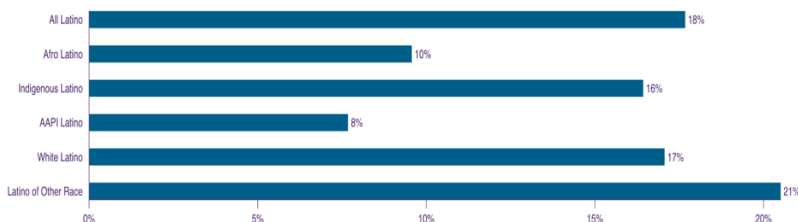
#### Federal Agencies

Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 and its 2024 update set forth the federal rules for gathering race and ethnicity data.<sup>30</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau puts these standards into action by designing questionnaires and conducting 2030 census tests. To give out money and enforce civil rights laws, agencies like Health and Human Services, the Department of Education (DOE), and the Department of Justice (DOJ) need accurate data on race and ethnicity.<sup>31</sup> Coordination, though, remains inconsistent. Some agencies still treat "Hispanic or Latino" as a racial proxy rather than an ethnicity, resulting in datasets that do not work together. Latinos come from many different Indigenous, African, and European backgrounds.<sup>32</sup> Putting them all in one group ignores important differences that affect their health, social status, and experiences of discrimination. For example, a 2020 study in the *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* found that compared to non-Hispanic white people, Black Hispanic people had a higher risk of hospitalization and death than white Hispanic people.<sup>33</sup> When these populations are aggregated



Health Insurance Coverage Varies Within Latine Groups in the United States (2023)

Compared by Latino Racial Groups



Source: Estimates by the UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau.  
Note: Cases without sufficient sample size will be reported as 'N/A'. Estimates are rounded to the nearest thousand.

under a single “Hispanic/Latino” category, these race-specific health risks are obscured, leading to underestimation of need and inadequate targeting of public health interventions.<sup>34</sup>

### **Advocacy and Civil Rights Organizations**

NALEO,<sup>35</sup> MALDEF,<sup>36</sup> and the Afro-Latino Coalition<sup>37</sup> are some of the groups that have called for separate data and more visibility for Afro- and Indigenous-Latinos. The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and the National Urban League are two larger groups that also argue incomplete race data make it harder to enforce Titles VI and VII because they hide patterns of discrimination.<sup>38</sup>

### **Political Stakeholders**

Congressional oversight—particularly by the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs—monitors how the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Census Bureau implement data-collection standards.<sup>39</sup> State governments have a lot of money on the line when it comes to getting the numbers right: Census-based formulas are used to figure out how to divide up federal Medicaid, education, and infrastructure grants. If the population count is inaccurate, these grants are not distributed fairly.<sup>40</sup> Without congressional and state alignment on data transparency, racial inequities within Latino communities will remain structurally invisible.

### **Community Stakeholders**

Misclassification has effects on Latino communities at the local level. According to a study by the Pew Research Center,<sup>41</sup> Latinos are becoming more multiracial and many do not feel represented by the labels “White Hispanic” or “non-White.” Community groups turn arguments about data into real demands for equal access to healthcare, education, and representation. If the federal government does not respond, the gap between self-identification and bureaucratic classification will stay the same, which will make people lose faith in demographic systems.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### **Policy Opportunity 1: Mandate Cross-Tabulated Latino-by-Race Reporting.**

OMB should issue supplemental guidance requiring all federal agencies using the combined race–ethnicity question to publish data tables that disaggregate Latinos by race (e.g., Latino-Black, Latino-White, Latino-Indigenous, Latino-Asian).

- *Pros:* This option ensures the inclusion of Afro- and Indigenous-Latinos in funding and civil rights monitoring.<sup>42</sup>
- *Cons:* It makes it harder to analyze and manage the risk of disclosure for small-sample geographies.<sup>43</sup>
- This option builds on prior agency precedents—such as HHS’s requirement for Asian subgroup data—and can be implemented through administrative guidance without new legislation.<sup>44</sup>

### **Policy Opportunity 2: Establish a Federal Interagency Task Force on Latino Racial Data.**

The White House Domestic Policy Council or Congress should bring together OMB, the Census Bureau, the Department of Justice, the Department of Health and Human Services, and advocacy groups to work together to put the new Directive 15 standards into action.

- *Pros:* Promotes consistent coding practices and prevents data loss during system conversion.<sup>45</sup>
- *Cons:* Requires sustained interagency cooperation and staffing resources.

Comparable coordination efforts during earlier census cycles improved minority participation and could replicate that success.<sup>46</sup>

### **Policy Opportunity 3: Appropriate Funds for Transitional Data Infrastructure.**

Congress should instruct the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Census Bureau to update their IT systems to store data on Latinos of different races and provide states money to make their administrative datasets more consistent.

- *Pros:* It addresses the lack of resources that most agencies cite as the reason they do not comply with the standards.<sup>47</sup>
- *Cons:* It can be politically sensitive when negotiating a deficit.

Investing early would lower the costs of fixing incomplete data sets in public health and education systems later on.<sup>48</sup>

### **Policy Opportunity 4: Require Latino Racial Data in Civil Rights Enforcement.**

When assessing complaints of discrimination, the DOJ, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and Housing and Urban Development should change their rules to require race-specific data within Latino categories.

- *Pros:* Strengthens enforcement of Titles VI and VII by showing differences among Latinos.<sup>49</sup>
- *Cons:* It may need legal clarification to fit in with the reporting forms that are already in use.

This option establishes a direct connection between data equity and legal responsibility, linking modifications in data classification to quantifiable results.

### **Policy Opportunity 5: Conduct Community Testing and Outreach for the 2030 Census.**

The Census Bureau should work with NALEO, UnidosUS, and groups that represent Afro-Latino and Indigenous communities to test the wording of questions and show people how to choose both race and ethnicity options.

- *Pros:* Reduces “Some Other Race” responses and improves comprehension.<sup>50</sup>
- *Cons:* This option requires sustained funding and a multilingual outreach infrastructure.

Pilot outreach by community partners in prior census cycles demonstrated measurable gains in Latino response accuracy.<sup>51</sup>

## **Conclusion and Next Steps**

The 2024 revision of OMB Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 is the most significant opportunity in decades to correct the misclassification of Latino identity in federal data. For the reform to succeed, Congress and federal agencies must guarantee that race-and-ethnicity reporting is both standardized and cross-tabulated by group. Without consistent enforcement, Afro-, Indigenous-, and Asian-Latinos will remain statistically invisible—perpetuating inequities in funding allocation and civil rights protection.<sup>52</sup>

Congress should require the OMB and the Census Bureau to issue annual progress reports on the implementation of the new Latino-by-race standards and to fund modernized information systems capable of handling multiracial responses.<sup>53</sup> Research by the Pew Research Center shows that Latino respondents were more likely than other groups to select “Some Other Race” under the separate race and ethnicity questions.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, U.S. Census Bureau testing found that combined question formats significantly improved self-identification accuracy, an approach informed by extensive community input during questionnaire development.<sup>55</sup>

In the end, accurate racial and ethnic data are not just bureaucratic formalities; they decide who is chosen to represent whom, how resources are distributed, and how the law is enforced fairly. Recognizing the full racial diversity within Latino communities is important to hold people accountable in a democracy and to restore trust in the institutions that govern them.

## Endnotes

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