MONKEY CAGE

How the U.S. census ignores Afro-Latinos

Afro-Latinos are the most vulnerable to discrimination, but their official invisibility makes them harder to serve

Analysis by Michelle Bueno Vásquez

June 3, 2022 at 7:00 a.m. EDT

The 2020 U.S. Census largely undercounted Black, Latino and Native American communities, raising skepticism about the accuracy of its data. Even if the census had counted more accurately, it faces a more fundamental problem: Its race and ethnicity measurements overlook Afro-Latinos.

The 2020 Census faced many obstacles

The 2020 Census faced many obstacles: the pandemic, natural disasters, labor shortages, President Donald Trump's racist rhetoric against Black and Latino immigrants, and his attempt to add a citizenship question. Many were thus reassured when the Census Bureau announced its first Latino and non-White director, Robert Santos.

However, even if the census improves enumeration, it still makes some identities invisible. The questions that it asks about race and ethnicity exclude Afro-Latinos — Black people with Latin American ancestry — from representation.

Afro Latinos are underrepresented in surveys

Afro-Latino identity has been complicated by transnational anti-Blackness and the particular history of race in the Latin American diaspora.

For centuries, Latin American political elites emphasized narratives of national sameness, playing down racial differences, even while their Black and Indigenous communities were regularly disenfranchised. American racism is largely based on physical differences, while racism in Latino communities erases and denies different racial groups' diverse experiences. These inequities persist among U.S. Latinos.

Many Latinos are proud of their complex racial background, seeing themselves as having a beautiful mixture of Spanish, Indigenous and Black African cultures. Thus, Latinos tend to embrace cultural affinities to Africa, even as their physical appearances range the full spectrum of color. Survey research misses this complexity. For instance, it is hardly surprising that in a survey that asked Latino respondents whether they identified as "Afro-Latino," most identified their race as only White.

Nationally representative samples of Latinos contribute to Afro-Latino erasure by favoring the densely populated Western region over the north and southeast coasts, where Afro-Latino enclaves predominate. This adds greater weight to non-Black Latinos and disregards the hardships specific to Afro-Latinos.

Though surveys treat Black Latinos as Latinos, U.S. society and institutions treat them as Black based on their appearance. Afro-Latinos' looks can determine whether they are seen as professionals or as dangerous, as citizens to be protected or threats to be detained. As such, Black Latinos experience higher rates of discrimination than non-Black Latinos.

Census categories contribute to Afro-Latino invisibility

The U.S. census — which plays a key role in shaping government funding and interest group organization — complicates things further.

Before 1960, a federal "enumerator" (census official) identified a respondent's race, not the respondent themselves. Neither Black nor White Latinos had the option of identifying as Latino or Hispanic. Under a 1930 rule, an enumerator would record someone with even just "one drop" of Black blood as "Negro" and others as White.

Then the 1930 Census added the "Mexican" race category. Latino interest groups opposed this addition, fearing negative social and political consequences. In the 1940 Census, Mexicans and other non-Black Latinos were categorized as "White" again.

In 1980, the census included a "Hispanic origin" category, allowing Black Latinos to count themselves among other Hispanics. However, until 2000, individuals were limited to one racial identification, inaccurately recording the many Afro-Latinos who identify as *mulatto* or mixed race.

Today, the modern census uses five racial and ethnic categories: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and Hispanic origin.

The "Hispanic origin" category reflects a 1970s reversal by Latino organizations, which began pressing for an umbrella "Hispanic/Latino" ethnic category to secure federal funding and protections. This created a Latino identity coded as White or *mestizo* and non-Black. This reflects what I call "minority racial essentialization," a process in which a racial category becomes equated with the image of the group majority with leadership power. As non-Black Latino leaders mobilized to add the "Hispanic" category, Black Latinos were neglected by federal funding and political action.

The census implies that Latinos can't be Black and Blacks can't be Latino

The census still has no clear understanding of what constitutes Latino or Hispanic identity. However, scholars of race like myself have a firm grasp of these terms' nuances. Latino refers to any person with heritage stemming from Western Hemisphere countries south of the United States that were formerly colonized by Spain, France or Portugal. Hispanic, however, refers to those with roots in Spanish-speaking Latin America or the Iberian Peninsula.

Conflating "Latino" with Spanish-speaking is an aspect of "racial essentialization." It leaves out Brazil and Haiti — the two Latin American countries with the highest Black populations — while including European Spaniards, who enjoy the privileges of being European and White.

Under the 2020 Census race questionnaire, "Haitian" is listed under "Black," and no other Latin American country is listed as an example. In contrast, examples of "White" origins exclude any Latin American countries, even those well known to have greater than average White populations. This suggests to respondents — and U.S. institutions — that those with Latin American heritage cannot be White or benefit from White privilege and that Afro-Latinos do not belong to the category. This creates a downstream effect of mismeasurement across fields, affecting medicine, journalism, NGOs and more.

A broken promise

While the U.S. Office of Management and Budget states that the goal of the Hispanic origin question guidelines was to enforce civil rights and equal access, it fails to provide equality for the Black Latinos who are most vulnerable to discrimination. They are either concealed within a broader Latino identity or excluded if they are Haitian or Brazilian. This has structural downstream effects, making Black Latinos invisible to U.S. institutions, and hence leading to their willful or accidental neglect.

Don't miss any of TMC's smart analysis! Sign up for our newsletter.

Michelle Bueno Vásquez (@_MichelleBuenoV) is a PhD candidate in political science and statistics master's candidate at Northwestern University.