



# Non-Hispanics with Latin American ancestry: Assimilation, race, and identity among Latin American descendants in the US

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## ABSTRACT

In the 2006 American Community Survey (ACS), 6% of respondents with Latin American ancestry answered 'no' when asked whether they were Hispanic themselves. Conventional definitions of the Hispanic population exclude such respondents as 'not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino' even though they are self-identified Latin American descendants. Since their exclusion may bias our assessments of Hispanic social mobility, it is important to know more about them. Non-Hispanic identification is most common among Latin American descendants who (1) list both Latin American and non-Latin American ancestries, (2) speak only English, and (3) identify as White, Black, or Asian when asked about their 'race.' Ancestry and racial identity are considerably more influential than respondents' education, income, place of birth, or place of residence. These findings support both traditional straight-line assimilation and a more recent "racialized assimilation" theory in explaining discrepant responses to the ethnicity and ancestry questions among Latin American descendants.

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## 1. Introduction

In the year 2006, there were an estimated 44.1 million US residents who reported Spanish or Latin American ancestry (e.g., Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Guatemalan, Spanish, Salvadoran, Colombian, etc.). Of that number, 2.5 million (6%) answered in the negative when asked whether they were "Spanish/Hispanic/Latino." This fact may reflect a pattern of 'ethnic attrition' that has important methodological and theoretical implications for the study of racial/ethnic identification and immigrant incorporation. Since most studies of Hispanic<sup>1</sup> experience and advancement define the Hispanic population(s) on the basis of Hispanic *identity* and not Latin American or Spanish *ancestry*, those 2.5 million non-Hispanic (identifying) Latin American descendants are routinely excluded from assessments of intergenerational mobility (Duncan and Trejo, 2007a) as well as from projections of Hispanic population growth (Golash-Boza and Darity, 2008).

Strong cases have been made that assimilation will not proceed at the pace nor to the extent for recent immigrants as it did for the European immigrants of the early 20th century (Gans, 1992; Levitt, 2003; Portes and Zhou, 1993). Non-Hispanic identities held by Latin American or Spanish descendants, however, may speak to the centripetal force assimilation continues to exert on American life in the 21st century. Recent studies have demonstrated the emergence of the unhyphenated 'American' identities among Latinos (Golash-Boza, 2006; Telles and Ortiz, 2008), but in those studies the 'American' label is not necessarily to the exclusion of Hispanic or Latino identities. The question here is not why some Latin American

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<sup>1</sup> While we understand that the term 'Latino' is preferable in some regards, we use the term 'Hispanic' throughout the paper to minimize confusion as we discuss the imperfect relationship between Latin American ancestry and Hispanic identity. Those who identify as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or some 'other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino' in response to the American Community Survey Hispanicity question are referred to as 'Hispanic'; those who respond 'no, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino' are referred to as 'non-Hispanic.'

descendants choose to identify as ‘American’ but rather why they choose to identify ethnically as ‘not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.’ Few studies focus squarely on the issue of non-Hispanic responses among Latin American descendants, and those that do focus entirely on Mexican descendants (Alba and Islam, 2009; Duncan and Trejo, 2007a, 2007b). However, the Mexican–American experience is unique and not necessarily generalizable to other Hispanic groups with respect to identity (Jimenez, 2008; Agius Vallejo, 2009). This study is novel in that we focus on patterns of racial and ethnic identification among Latin American descendants of all ancestries.

The theoretical and methodological contributions of this paper will inform debates on the extent and processes of Latin American identificational assimilation by using 2006 American Community Survey (ACS) data to answer the question, what explains the occurrence of non-Hispanic identification among Latin American descendants?

## 2. Measuring hispanic identity: problems and potentialities

It should be noted from the outset that we can never know the meanings and motivations respondents draw on when answering survey questions regarding their racial and ethnic identities which tend to be fluid and situational (Harris and Sim, 2002; Nagel, 1994; Omi, 2001). This is no less true among Hispanic people (Eschbach and Gomez, 1998; Oboler, 1995; Rodriguez, 2000) who are often confused by race and ethnicity questions (Hirschman et al., 2000; Rumbaut, 2006) that treat their Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, etc., identities as *ethnic but not racial* (Grieco and Cassidy, 2001). The complex nature of racial/ethnic identity is revealed in the US Census and ACS questions regarding race, ethnicity, and ancestry which often yield inconsistent answers – especially among Latin American descendants.

### Part 1: ‘List of Residents’ – 6 Questions

#### Question 5 (Close-ended)

“Is this person Spanish/Hispanic/Latino? Mark (X) the “No” box if not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.” Response options:

- “No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino”
- “Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
- “Yes, Puerto Rican”
- “Yes, Cuban”
- “Yes, other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino. Print group” below

#### Question 6 (Closed-ended)

“What is this person’s race? Mark (X) one or more races to indicate what this person considers himself/herself to be.”

- “White”
- “Black or African American”
- “American Indian or Alaska Native – Print name of enrolled or principle tribe” below
- “Asian Indian”
- “Chinese”
- “Filipino”
- “Japanese”
- “Korean”
- “Vietnamese”
- “Other Asian. Print race” below
- “Native Hawaiian”
- “Guamanian or Chamorro”
- “Samoan”
- “Other Pacific Islander. Print race below”
- “Some other race. Print race below”

### Part 2: ‘Housing’ Survey – 25 questions

### Part 3: ‘Person’ Survey – 42 questions

#### Question 12 (Open-ended)

“What is this person’s ancestry or ethnic origin?” Followed by two blank spaces and the instruction, “(For example, Italian, Jamaican, African Am., Cambodian, Cape Verdean, Norwegian, Dominican, French Canadian, Haitian, Korean, Lebanese, Polish, Nigerian, Mexican, Taiwanese, Ukrainian, and so on.)”

Fig. 1. Exact wording and ordering of Hispanicity, race, and ancestry questions on the 2006 American Community Survey.

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