US Census data may undercount Mexicans, Arabs, others

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The number of Mexican-Americans known to be legally in the United States would increase nearly 10 percent if the federal census broadened its standard definition to include people who don't identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino but who were nonetheless born in Mexico or report Mexican ancestry, according to a new study by a Duke University professor.

The 20.9 million Mexican-Americans who identified themselves as "Mexican" in response to the Hispanic origin question in the 2000 [census](#) would have risen by 9.8 percent to 22.9 million with this broader definition. The additional people would have been better educated, more prosperous and more likely to identify themselves as white, according to the analysis by Jen'nan Read, a professor of sociology and [global health](#) at Duke.

By contrast, if the 2000 census had broadened its standard definition of "Arab-American" to extend beyond "Arab ancestry" to also include birth in an Arabic country or speaking Arabic at home, the total would have risen 13 percent, from 1.1 to 1.3 million. Those added would have been less educated, poorer and more likely to identify as non-white or multi-racial.

Read sees several plausible explanations for the [discrepancies](#), such as some families of Mexican ancestry seeking to differentiate themselves from newer [immigrants](#).

"Many U.S.-born Mexicans consider the term 'Mexican' synonymous with 'immigrant,' and thus reject it in order to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with foreign-born migrant workers," she writes in a recently published article in *Population Research and Policy Review*. When it comes to Arab-Americans, the official definition is at odds with trends such as a recent increase in the number of poorer refugees and immigrants from Iraq and Yemen.

Scholars and policy makers have long debated the definitions used in U.S. census tallies, which have a big impact on how political power and resources are shared across American society, Read notes. She analyzed the Public Use Microdata Sample files, a large database of individuals and households in the 2000 census that statistically represents the U.S. population as a whole.

"The Arab and Mexican cases," she writes, "offer unique opportunities to examine whether and how alternative definitions of group identity alter what we know about the size, racial identifications and socio-economic profile of these groups."

If current trends continue, she predicts, "the implications for the Arab population are that immigrants in more socio-economically disadvantaged positions may be missed in standard classification methods. The opposite would be true for the Mexican population, where those who are U.S.-born and/or who are in more affluent social positions might be overlooked."

The situation is further complicated by the fact that "the census directs respondents into single-ethnic categories, leaving multi-ethnics or those who might affiliate with more than one primary identity largely unaccounted for," Read says. "In the end, findings from this study reaffirm the fact that ongoing debates over racial and ethnic classification schemas are far from being resolved and underscore the

complexities that exist in defining U.S. ethnic populations."

More information: Read, J. Measuring Ethnicity with U.S. Census Data: Implications for Mexicans and Arabs, *Population Research and Policy Review*, 2013. Volume 32: 611-631. [DOI: 10.1007/s11113-013-9286-5](#)

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