The case of the disappearing Mexican Americans: An ethnic-identity mystery?

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The analysis of ethnic populations with census data generally presumes substantial stability in the identification of members over time. At the limit, this assumption is tantamount to the demographic equation. Without it, analysts face difficulty in making sense of trends in such important indicators as residential segregation and educational attainment. That is, if membership is unstable, so that many former members no longer indicate membership or previous non-members elect to belong, then what appears at first blush to be a change in the objective situation of the group, such as a decline in residential segregation, can be the product of shifts in identification.

Although a long-standing sociological tradition views racial and ethnic memberships as ascriptive, and therefore stable, even life-long, traits, we know that the reports of membership in some ethnic populations have shifted over time, in some cases according to a consistent trend, in others according to idiosyncratic fluctuations. Thus, the numbers of Americans claiming to be American Indian on the census race question rose sharply after 1960, as individuals who once described their race in some other way changed their self-designation. It is plausible to hypothesize that this rise has occurred because of the growing acceptability of indigenous origins and of specific benefits associated with some tribal memberships, which have encouraged many Americans with part Indian ancestry to claim this identity. By contrast, the numbers of claimants of various European origins on the census ancestry question have exhibited considerable stochastic flux, prompted partly by the examples listed just below the write-in question.

In this paper, we examine the issue of identification stability for U.S.-born Mexican Americans, by far the largest of the ethnic groups growing as a result of contemporary immigration. We demonstrate that, throughout the period 1980-2000, most birth cohorts of Mexican Americans declined substantially more than can be accounted for by mortality or overall shifts in census coverage. To be sure, the identification of Mexicans and other Hispanic groups in Census 2000 was made problematic to some extent by a wording shift in the Hispanic-origin question. However, we show that the exit of some members from the Mexican group was apparent even in the 1990 Census, though it was accentuated in 2000. We show also that this exit is selective, so that a comparison of the characteristics of U.S.-born members over time is affected by changing patterns of identification with the group.