Many lands give Florida its Latin flavor

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South Florida, defined for decades by waves of immigrating Cubans, is increasingly becoming a miniature Latin America, with a diverse cast of Central and South Americans taking up residence in record numbers.

U.S. Census figures released today -- pinpointing for the first time since 1990 the exact size of each Hispanic group -- show that non-Cuban Hispanics in Miami-Dade County are now equal in number to those with Cuban ancestry.

“The other Hispanic groups have discovered Miami,’’ said demographer Thomas Boswell, an expert in Hispanic immigration at the University of Miami. “They see it as a very attractive place for many of the same reasons as Cubans traditionally have.’’

NUMBERS SWELLING

CELEBRATION IN A NEW LAND: South Floridians applaud speakers Friday at Colombian Independence Day gathering Friday outside the Pembroke Pines City Hall.

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It’s a statistical sea change for Miami-Dade, triggered by figures such as these: 16,000 more Colombians, nearly 13,000 more Dominicans, almost 9,000 more Hondurans and a whopping 161,000 new residents classifying themselves as ‘‘other Hispanic.’’

The numbers are almost certainly higher. They do not include untold thousands of Colombians and others who have fled instability and natural disasters in their countries since the 2000 Census. And critics of the count say even Hispanics who were in South Florida at the time of the survey weren’t fully counted.

Still, the census shows that non-Cuban Hispanics have reached parity, in sheer numbers, with the more than 650,000 people of Cuban descent in Miami-Dade.

In Broward County, where no Hispanic group clearly dominates, Puerto Ricans -- whose numbers reached nearly 55,000 in 2000 -- remain slightly more numerous than Cubans.

Nearly every Hispanic group in Broward registered huge gains. Consider these numbers: Paraguayans, up 787 percent; Venezuelans up 388 percent; Costa Ricans up 245 percent.

Even Little Havana, long an icon of the Cuban-American world, is no longer majority Cuban. A decade ago, its population was 60 percent Cuban. In 2000, it dropped to just under 49 percent, with the remainder divided largely among Central Americans and ‘‘other Hispanics.’’

In part, that’s because the growth rate among other Hispanics far outstrips that of Cuban-Americans. Though their numbers remain relatively small, immigrants from Paraguay increased 161 percent in Miami-Dade. Venezuelans were up by 119 percent, and Mexicans 65 percent. By comparison, Miami-Dade’s Cuban population grew 15 percent.

Though South Florida has long been home to Latin American immigrants, the stream has become increasingly diverse as political and economic upheavals occurred in Latin America, along with natural disasters like Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

NEW NEIGHBORHOODS

These newer immigrants are settling all across South Florida, bypassing the traditional neighborhoods that served as first homes for Hispanic immigrants.

‘‘You’ll find us living in Little Havana, or opening businesses on Biscayne Boulevard in downtown Miami. You’ll find us picking tomatoes down in Homestead and doing construction work in Fort Lauderdale,’’ said Jose
Lagos, a Honduran American who settled in Miami 18 years ago.

In Weston, for example, the population is 30 percent Hispanic. The largest groups are Colombian and “other Hispanic” at 6 percent each, but the census numbers also indicate a mix of Cubans, Venezuelans and others.

Alex Arreaza, a Venezuelan who is president of the Broward County Hispanic Bar Association, says he sees more Venezuelan clients now than ever.

“The biggest reason Venezuelans are coming over here is that they just don’t feel safe there any more,” he said. “People are getting kidnapped and robbed. Everybody has bars on their windows.”

One group registered a notable decline in numbers: Nicaraguans in Miami-Dade dropped 7 percent, a change that some experts attribute to immigrants returning to their recently stabilized home country.

But some in Miami’s Nicaraguan community, who had banked on increased numbers to help them gain political clout, strongly dispute the figures.

“There is no way, absolutely no way that number is accurate,” said Miami attorney Mario Lovo, a Nicaraguan immigrant. “Either the census question was not properly worded, or people went underground because they were afraid of being deported.”

COUNT QUESTIONED

Lovo’s skepticism is not unique. A growing national debate over whether the census accurately measured many Hispanic groups has cast doubt on figures in New York City and elsewhere, fueled by a surprisingly high number of people who chose the broad “other Hispanic” category rather than a specific nationality.

In Miami-Dade, the number of “other Hispanic” selections soared 664 percent. It was nearly the same in Broward, with an increase of 592 percent.

“There’s obviously some technical glitch in the question,” said Max Castro, a researcher at UM’s North-South Center who also writes an opinion column for The Herald.

Though some of the increase could be attributed to people of mixed Hispanic heritage, Castro says that doesn’t fully explain “a five- or six-fold increase.”

Census Bureau officials say they are aware of the high rate of people choosing “other Hispanic” and they are conducting their own evaluations.

“Some people think there is a mistake, others don’t,” said
census statistician Betsy Guzman. “We did extensive testing on these questions. We’re pretty confident.”

RECALCULATION

One sociologist, John R. Logan, of the State University at Albany, in New York, recalculated the Hispanic numbers using data on ancestry and place of birth taken from a survey done by the bureau. Logan estimates that the number of Dominicans in Miami-Dade, for example, is about 18,500 higher than the census count, and Nicaraguans are 35,000 higher. In Broward, he estimates that the census missed nearly 15,000 Colombians, 5,000 Dominicans and 5,000 Peruvians.

“The weight of the evidence is that we really need to adjust the way the question is asked,” he said. “Public officials and public organizations and political parties make decisions that hinge on the size of the group . . . These numbers are important for people’s lives.”