

Reuben Perez
CLAS Research Report

Since the 1980s, there has been growing interest from regional development organizations to identify Afro-descendant and Indigenous populations on national censuses in Latin America. During this time, the official recognition of Black and Indigenous populations on national censuses became a major topic at several international conferences.¹ The recent focus on ethnoracial statistics² stems in part from the desire to understand the conditions of these populations, as a way to gain insight on the nature of ethnoracial inequality in the region. To further this aim, major regional development organizations in Latin America pushed for the collection of more precise ethnoracial data on national censuses.

By the 2010 census round, nearly all Latin American countries that administered a national census included at least one question to capture Indigenous or Afro-descendant individuals with the exception of the Dominican Republic.³ Because the population of the Dominican Republic is predominately Afro-descendant, census planners were not concerned that the absence of ethnoracial categories on the Dominican national census would render invisible a population that already comprises the majority.⁴ Indeed, approximately 90 percent of Dominicans have African ancestry.⁵ Despite the predominance of Afro-descendants in the Dominican Republic, high-levels of inequality based on skin color is still highly prevalent (Howard, 2001; Bailey et al., 2014; Telles, 2015; Painter II, 2019). Discrimination against Haitians (who are typically conceptualized as the Blacks of island) and dark-skinned Dominicans

¹ This report contains more information about the international and regional forums that were focused on official ethnoracial categories: https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/6940/1/S0900568_es.pdf

² In this proposal, I use the phrase “ethnoracial” as an umbrella term for categories relating to race, ethnicity, and skin color

³ Access this report for more information about ethnoracial statistics in the last census round in Latin America: https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/42654/1/S1701063_es.pdf

⁴ As for the indigenous population in the Dominican Republic, they were nearly exterminated by disease in the mid sixteenth century.

⁵ Patten and Brown. 2013. Hispanics of Dominican Origin in the United States, 2011. Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/06/19/hispanics-of-dominican-origin-in-the-united-states-2011/>)

Reuben Perez
CLAS Research Report

is also recurring issue. In 2013, for example, the Dominican high court passed a ruling that retroactively stripped the citizenship of Dominicans of Haitian descent since 1929.⁶ If regional development organizations are encouraging States to collect ethnoracial statistics in order to generate better estimates of ethnoracial inequality in the region, then how will they receive this information from the Dominican Republic if not from the census?

The absence of ethnoracial categories on the Dominican national census dates back to the mid-twentieth century, a period when the majority of other Latin American States dropped questions about ethnoracial identity from their respective national censuses (Loveman, 2014). The Dominican Republic is not the only country that has resisted the inclusion of ethnoracial categories in its census. Other countries (e.g., France) have banned the collection of ethnoracial statistics altogether (des Neiges Léonard, 2014). Dominican law, however, does not prohibit the collection of ethnoracial data. In fact, official ethnoracial categories—such as *blanco*, *mulato*, *mestizo*, *indio*, and *negro*—still appear on Dominican national identification cards (Simmons, 2008). What remains unclear is the motivation for the Dominican government to continuously exclude ethnoracial categories from its national census despite the shift among other Latin American countries to include these categories in their respective censuses.

Seeking to explore this issue further, I decided to spend some of my summer in the Dominican Republic, with the support of the CLAS research grant, to investigate why census planners of the Dominican Republic continue to abstain from the inclusion of the ethnoracial categories on the national census. Specifically, this research study seeks to understand what

⁶ Please see this article on the Atlantic for more information about the issue of statelessness in the Dominican Republic: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/11/dominican-republic-erased-birthright-citizenship/575527/>

Reuben Perez
CLAS Research Report

motives the Dominican State to include and exclude ethnoracial categories from its national census.

I arrived to the Dominican Republic on June 20th 2019. I stayed in the capital city Santo Domingo for most of my stay and managed to find an apartment that was close my research sites—the census office (ONE) and the general archives of the Dominican Republic. My plan was to collect archival materials from the general archives of the Dominican Republic pertaining to the planning of the census since the 1970s. Unfortunately, the general archives only carried official census results—which could be found on ONE’s website—but did not have documents pertaining to the planning of the census. After a week of negotiating access to ONE, I was able to schedule two interviews with high-ranking officials of ONE. The interviews made one thing clear: While the literature suggests that demands from regional development organization plays in a significant role in determining how nations in Latin American design their census ballot, my informants explained that national census offices have to ultimately decide if they want to include new questions to the census based on the *recommendations* from regional development organizations. In the case of ethnoracial categories on the Dominican national census, ONE determined that these questions are not appropriate for the Dominican Republic.⁷ They stated that Dominicans will not appropriately categorize their racial identity on the census ballot. And that many will avoid any classification that denotes an association to African ancestry, such as “*Negro*” or “*Mulato*,” or refuse to answer the race question altogether; one informant even said, “the word Black is prohibited; it doesn’t exist here.”

The so-called denial of Blackness in the Dominican Republic is rooted in a legacy of state mandated anti-Black (and anti-Haitian) discourse initiated by the Dictator Rafael Trujillo

⁷ To be clear, race questions were included in the Dominican national census until 1970. The census of 1981 also included a question about ethnicity.

Reuben Perez
CLAS Research Report

during his thirty-year reign in the country (1930-1961). The informants stated that this legacy of anti-Blackness is deeply ingrained in Dominican national ideology and will deter Dominicans from categorizing themselves as Black. Similar to reports from regional development organization on the situation of ethnoracial classification in censuses across the region, the informants explained that having a question about race in a country where approximately 90 percent of the population is afro-descendent is not logical. And that ethnoracial data should only be collected in countries that have sizeable indigenous populations because their culture and experiences are markedly different from that of the general population. Because the population of the Dominican Republic is predominately afro-descendent, they suggested that skin color or race is not a condition for social mobility as is the case in other Latin American countries. As such, they maintained that the collection of such data in the Dominican Republic is not necessary given the country's unique sociohistorical context.

The assertion that the collection of ethnoracial data is not necessary in the Dominican Republic made me wonder if other government agencies in the country have a similar stance. If so, then why do ethnoracial categories still appear on national identification cards and how are those data being used? Studies have shown that inequality based on skin color in the Dominican Republic is still highly prevalent. Yet these state officials maintain that skin color or race in the Dominican Republic is not a precursor for social mobility. My intention here is not to problematize the absence of ethnoracial categories on the Dominican national census but to understand how state officials think about the collection of such data as it relates to larger projects of state building in the modern era. Overall, I was able to conduct several interviews with census officials and collect archival documents from 2010 census round. I'm currently in

Reuben Perez
CLAS Research Report

the process of scheduling Skype interviews with former census officials and have plans to return to the Dominican Republic in December 2019 to finalize data collection.

Reuben Perez
CLAS Research Report

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