

Hispanic population surges

Latinos hail new status, surpassing blacks as largest minority group

From wire and staff reports

WASHINGTON — Hispanics have surged past blacks and now constitute the largest minority group in the United States, a status Latino leaders are sure to use to push for political and economic advances.

conomic advances.

The Census Bureau released estimates yesterday showing the Hispanic population rose 4.7 percent between April 2000 and July 2001, from 35.3 million to 37 million. During the same period, the non-Hispanic black population rose about 2 percent, from 35.5 million to 36.1 million.

"This is the first time that Hispanic number surpassed the black number," Census Bureau analyst Roberto

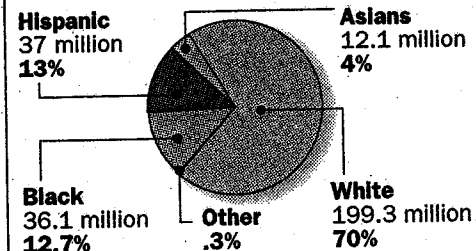
Ramirez said yesterday.

The data are part of the bureau's first statistics on race and ethnicity since results from the 2000 census were released nearly two years ago.

Debra Martinez, a Yonkers resident and chair of Yonkers Mayor John Spencer's Hispanic Advisory Council, said the numbers made sense, given the immigration of so many Hispanics to the United States in recent decades.

Please see CENSUS, 12A

2001 U.S. population



CENSUS, from 1A

"We often talk about the decade of the Hispanic, but now we're reaching a critical mass," said Martinez, who now expects to see this demographic shift reflected at all levels of society. "I'm really looking forward to seeing the next (Hispanic) generation make its mark in the United States."

Martinez added that U.S. Hispanics are no different from any other Americans.

"When people think of Hispanics, they really should be looking in the mirror because we come in every shape and color," said Martinez, who works at the New York State Department of Health.

Judith Ramos Meier, a Yonkers resident and chair of the Hispanic Democrats of Westchester, said the new numbers must lead to more political participation.

"Once you're in those numbers, it's imperative that the community come out and get involved," said Ramos Meier, a lawyer with her own practice. "You have to become involved because being the biggest block is not enough: It's being the biggest block that's taking care of themselves that's important."

Because of high birth and immigration rates, the Hispanic pop-

ulation more than doubled during the 1990s, the 2000 census found. Many new arrivals were drawn by the booming U.S. economy and settled in areas in the South and Midwest that previously attracted few Latinos.

The figures translate into increased Hispanic political clout, say some civil rights advocates, forcing politicians and policy-makers to pay attention to issues such as immigration and language barriers to health care.

They also display a change in how Americans will discuss race relations, broadening a spectrum that has had its focus mostly on black and white, they said.

Whites remain the largest single population group, numbering 199.3 million in July 2001, or nearly 70 percent of all U.S. residents, according to the Census Bureau.

Hispanics make up 13 percent of the U.S. population, which grew to 284.8 million in July 2001. That's up from 35.3 million, or 12.5 percent of the country's 281.4 million residents in April 2000.

Blacks make up 12.7 percent of the population, up from 12.6 percent in April 2000. Asians are the next-largest minority group, at about 12.1 million, or 4 percent of U.S. residents.

Demographers have long fore-

cast that Hispanics would surpass blacks because their birth and immigration rates are higher. Still, tabulating the population data by race and ethnicity is something of an inexact science because of the way the government categorizes people. The process became even more confusing in 2000 after the Census Bureau allowed people to identify themselves by more than one race. Hispanic refers to ethnicity rather than race, according to the government. The census form asks people to identify themselves by race and to say whether they are Hispanic or non-Hispanic.

About 1.1 million people in July 2001 were identified by the government as black and Hispanic, while 34.5 million said they were white and Hispanic. The figure of 36.1 million blacks refers to those who are not Hispanic, just as the figure of 199.3 million whites does not include those who identified themselves as Hispanic and white.

The Associated Press has used the non-Hispanic population figures for blacks and whites since data from the 2000 census were released in April 2001.

The Associated Press, Knight Ridder Newspapers and staff writer Ernie Garcia contributed to this report.