After the Fact | Race and Research: America Today

Originally published May 21, 2021

Total runtime: 00:19:59

TRANSCRIPT

[Music underneath]

Charita Castro: *First, we have to ask ourselves, "Why are we asking the questions of diversity and inclusion in the first place?" And that's because we have historically excluded groups in participating fully in creating a just society.*

Yolanda Lewis: *We are trying to make the criminal justice system more transparent, more equitable, and fair, not just in its appearance, but in application for society as a whole.*

Dr. Marie Bernard: *When you have diverse groups of people working on various problems, you end up with more creativity, more innovation, better answers.*

Dan LeDuc, host: I'm Dan LeDuc and welcome to a new season of "After the Fact" from The Pew Charitable Trusts. We'll be focusing on race and research.

To look ahead, we first need to look back. America's history is the immigrant's story from the first Protestant White settlers to the German, Irish, and Italians of the middle 19th and early 20th centuries—to the more recent arrivals from Mexico, Latin America, Asia, India, and Africa. And of course, while immigration has shaped America, not all people were brought to this nation by their choice, and Native Americans already called this land home. This American tale is a continuing and complicated one. Research can help us learn more about ourselves and can help illuminate the nuances of this evolving story.

In this episode, we're taking a look at how diversity impacts our country, how we can better understand it, and what it means for our collective future.

Mark Hugo Lopez, director of race and ethnicity research at the Pew Research Center: *This is a nation of people bringing their diverse experiences, their diverse views of the world, their diverse cultures to the U.S. and sharing that in a way that elevates not only their own culture, but also adds to what makes the U.S. such an interesting place.*

Dan LeDuc: That's Mark Hugo Lopez, who heads up the Pew Research Center's work on race and ethnicity research. He's one of the experts in this episode helping us better understand what America looks like today and the demographic trends taking shape.

The latest census data shows that about 40% of our population identifies as a race or ethnic group other than White—the first time in the nation's history where the White

population has declined. And that 40 percent is our data point for this episode. Our country is more diverse than ever before.

Those are the recent numbers, but the story of immigration to America goes back much further. Mark Hugo Lopez tells us more.

Mark Hugo Lopez: This is a place that's not necessarily just a melting pot, but also a nation with so many people from so many different countries. So I think that it's a little bit of a melting pot and a little bit of, some might say a mixing bowl or a salad bowl.

Dan LeDuc: Could you give us a top-level sort of view of the change in America because of the mixing bowl, melting pot, really from the Founding Fathers' days of the 1700s? We've seen that happen. And it's happened in waves. What are some of those that will help carry us to where we are today?

Mark Hugo Lopez: Over the course of the 200 plus years of U.S. history, there have been three major waves of immigration. There was a first wave of immigration that happened in the mid-19th century, largely Irish and largely German. And that brought maybe about 10 million people to the United States at the time. When you take a look at the second wave which happened in the late 19th and early 20th century, it's largely southern European, as in Italian and Portuguese. And you think about the Eastern European component to this as well, meaning people from places like Poland, you see a different group of people coming. And that too was a wave of maybe about 14 million people at the time. In fact, in 1890, the U.S. share of the population that was born in another country reached about 14%, almost 15%.

The third big wave started in 1965 when the U.S. changed its immigration laws and changed the way in which people could enter the country. From 1965 to today, we've had 59 million, more than 59 million people arrive in the country. If you think about that, that's a lot of people compared to the size of the previous waves of immigration. And the source countries for this new wave of immigration are largely in Latin America as in Mexico, but also in places like, for example, Asia, so China and India have been other big sources of migrants.

Today, the single-largest source country is China, second largest is India, and the third largest is Mexico for new arrivals. But this is always changing. If you're following the news today, you can see that there's a lot of attention paid to the U.S.-Mexico southern border because of the rising number of immigrants who are presenting themselves seeking asylum. And many are from Central America.

Dan LeDuc: Is that continuing to change? I mean, if this has been going on since the mid '60s, we're now into the 21st century. What is the progression of the change now?

Mark Hugo Lopez: So in the mid '60s, when the legislation was passed, the Immigration and Nationality Act changed the country quotas that existed in the early 20th century that limited the number of people that could come from various countries in the world to control the composition of immigrants arriving in a country.

That was largely put aside. And quotas were removed. But there was a new system put in place, a system that we essentially have today. After the 1960s, you didn't quite see a huge surge in people coming to the U.S. on the ground. It wasn't until the '80s and '90s that we really started to see, particularly from Mexico, a large number of arrivals.

But slowly but surely, those numbers rose. And the story of people coming from each country in the world to the United States is in many ways unique. But that really is what's amazing about this, is that we've had this diverse range of experiences in coming to the United States from people who are from just about every corner of the world.

Dan LeDuc: William Frey, of the Brookings Institution, is a researcher at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan and one of the world's most highly regarded demographers who's written that America is on the verge of a diversity explosion.

[Music transition]

Dan LeDuc: I think you're one of the top guys on understanding American demography and the census. And your writings have helped us understand this nation so much. So we're delighted you're here.

Bill Frey, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and internationally regarded demographer: Well, thank you.

Dan LeDuc: I wanted to ask you about something you wrote about not long ago in one of your books. And you use that phrase, "is demography destiny." Is it?

Bill Frey: Those of us that are Baby Boomers know a lot about what the baby boom's influence has been in the United States, for good or for ill. Just because we were just such a big generation. I guess you can say that demography doesn't fully determine destiny. But it certainly shapes it in a big way.

Dan LeDuc: And you've also written that this nation is on the cusp of some great change driven by—the phrase you used, it was "a diversity explosion." You've been looking at census results for a number of decades. What do you mean by the diversity explosion? And help us figure out where we are on this chronological journey here.

Bill Frey: What's really powering what's going on is the younger generations, people who are in the Millennial generation, people who are in Gen Z. There's even a generation beyond that; not sure we have a name for it. But these are people who are very different in terms of their racial and ethnic makeup. And when I talk about a diversity explosion, I'm talking about the growth of people of color in the United States, all people of color. But especially Latinos, which make a huge impact, but also Asian Americans. To a lesser extent, people of two or more races, African Americans, American Indians, Alaska natives, and even other groups are overwhelming the White population growth in the United States. Between 2000 and 2020, combined, the people of color increased by about 53%. The White population increased by less than 1%. In fact, between 2010 and 2019 the U.S. population increased by 19 million people. Ten million of that gain was Latinos, 4 and half million of that is Asian Americans. Another 3

and half million are African Americans. And where that is really making a difference is in the younger part of the population. The 2020 census is going to show that the under 18 population will be minority White.

Dan LeDuc: Is that a first for this nation?

Bill Frey: Yes, for that under 18 population, that's correct. And you know, everybody talks about that we're going to become minority White as a nation maybe in 2045. We're already there for younger age groups, even younger than 18. The under age 18 population, the child population as it's generally thought of in the United States will be minority White.

Dan LeDuc: This diversity explosion, in part driven by the wave of immigration Mark Hugo Lopez mentioned earlier, has also helped us slow the aging of American society—a necessity, according to Bill Frey.

Bill Frey: The nation as a whole, we're aging. And you know, over the last 10 years, the over age 55 population grew by 27%. The under age 55 population grew by 1.3%.

Dan LeDuc: Wow. That's a pretty dramatic number.

Bill Frey: The first Millennial just turned 40 this year. And so all the Millennials and Gen Zers and so forth, the very diverse generation is now more than half the population. And they're soon moving into positions of authority and leadership and government and the private sector and so forth.

Even though we have these young, diverse folks coming into the U.S., that age group, those age groups are not growing nearly as rapidly as the older population, just because all these Baby Boomers are moving in there. And we get to 2030, those Baby Boomers who are now at age 57 and older, will be age 67 and older and going into age 84. And so, then you'll have the older old population growing very rapidly. And getting ahead of a long story, we can tell this is why we need more immigration in the United States, because immigrants tend to be younger. They'll balance this aging of the population going forward.

Dan LeDuc: Let's talk about the implications of an aging society and that the younger population is different than that older population. They are not just different in age. They look different. They have different races, different ethnicities. What are the implications for society when those sorts of differences start to become more evident?

Bill Frey: We now have a large percentage of the people who are children that are first- and second-generation Americans, largely because of this immigration. And will it help us? It'll help us make our population younger and more productive and make our labor force more young. As if we were another kind of country, say Japan or Italy or some Eastern European country that was aging and doesn't have this kind of history of immigration, they're in a much more difficult situation. If you have a youthful country and a youthful labor force, people who have a lot of vibrancy and new ideas, that makes a much more vital country.

Dan LeDuc: These new immigrants bring change with them. Back to Mark Hugo Lopez.

Dan LeDuc: What are some of the social and cultural influences then, that we've seen because of this immigration?

Mark Hugo Lopez: It's everything from something as straightforward as a growing diversity of restaurants. And in fact, one of the things in our survey a few years ago that we found is that about half of American adults say that immigrants have brought cultural diversity and food diversity to the country. And that's a good thing in the minds of many Americans. We've also seen that immigrants have done many other things as well. For example, not only bringing their diverse cultures to be a part of our diverse fabric of cultures in the United States. But also bringing expertise in science, bringing experience and entrepreneurship in establishing businesses. And so you see a whole variety of experiences from immigrants coming to the U.S. It is quite striking how diverse the U.S. immigrant population is. It is not just college-educated people. It is not just people who have less than a high school degree and work in construction or on farms. It is a multitude of people coming in for a multitude of reasons, which in some ways distinguishes the U.S. experience from other countries. Our polling has shown that the U.S. public generally sees growing diversity as something that makes the country better.

Dan LeDuc: And how would you portray the political sort of influences then that also have to arise, in addition to great restaurants and work ethics and all that sort of stuff? It's bound to have political influence.

Mark Hugo Lopez: Yes, and that's what we're starting to see these days is that the echo of the arrival, for example, of so many immigrants from Latin America has led to their U.S.-born children now coming of age and feeding into and helping to increase the number of Hispanics eligible to vote in the United States, people who are at least an adult and a U.S. citizen.

In the case of Hispanics, we see about 4 million more Hispanics become eligible to vote with every presidential election cycle. So that's over the course of four years. That's 4 million more people, so much so that in this last election, the number of Latinos eligible to vote exceeded the number of Black Americans. So the impact of immigration on the nation's demographics is having an impact on the size of various electorates that are participating in elections today. And those numbers are only going to grow in the coming years. What's interesting, though, is that it's important to note that neither Asian Americans nor Hispanic Americans, Black Americans, any group that we talk about are monolithic. They're very diverse.

Dan LeDuc: I want to go back to your phrase about the echo. I like that description because it explains the lasting effects of these various waves of migration. If we look back in history, has there been a similar echo effect?

Mark Hugo Lopez: That's a great question because the story of the U.S. is one of immigrants arriving from, say, Ireland. And then their children being born here and growing up here. And then the grandchildren growing up here and intermarrying. And it's interesting because many Irish immigrants were oftentimes seen as perhaps a group that was disadvantaged, a group that was discriminated against. They were the

immigrants that people weren't necessarily in support of having around or in their neighborhoods.

And then you see today stories about Hispanics or immigrants from, say, places like Central America and so forth. As you can see, the story somewhat repeats itself over the course of the history of our nation.

Dan LeDuc: Integration of cultures seems like a classic American story. Are we starting to see similar types of integration with these newer immigrant groups?

Mark Hugo Lopez: You do. When you take a look at the nation's Hispanic population, for example, the number is 61 million people. About a third of that 61 million were born in another country. But the second generation, that third generation, those born here of immigrant parents or those born here but of U.S.-born parents, you do see some changes happening. For example, the use of Spanish declines across the generation. Spanish is much more prevalent, of course, among immigrants. And their children are generally bilingual. But by the third generation, you start to see English become the dominant language.

You also begin to see a change in identity. As you get to the fourth and fifth generation of Hispanics, many people will say they have Hispanic background. But of that fourth plus generation, half will not self-identify as part of the Hispanic population, even though they'll say they have a Hispanic background.

Dan LeDuc: We are talking about race in America today as well. A lot of current Black Americans trace their ancestors to people who were brought to the United States not by their choice. And this is a population that has lived in this nation for several centuries now. What are some of the trends emerging in the nation's Black population?

Mark Hugo Lopez: It's a population that has a multitude of nuances when it comes to talking about the demographics of the nation's Black American population. It's one that's changing in other ways, too, in that it has a growing foreign-born population. So when I think about the nation's Black population, it's important to note that the stories of the Black population and the public opinion attitudes of the Black population of the U.S. do vary in a number of ways by region, by gender. They also vary by whether somebody was born in the U.S. or not. They vary by income. They vary in many other ways.

Dan LeDuc: The Research Center has recently issued a report on the growing diversity of Black Americans. This very point. Could you give us some of the findings from that? And how do we even know the baseline on which to base some of those decisions or findings on how things have changed?

Mark Hugo Lopez: Identifying the nation's Black population relies on people to self-identify as part of that population. And in Census Bureau data, which was the main data source for this work, the data sources allow survey respondents or people who fill out the Census Bureau's surveys or census to identify more than one race if they would like to. It's notable that this is the population that's becoming more diverse, at least in the way that it self-reports its identity. Because we're seeing a growing number who are multiracial and we're seeing a growing number who are Black and Hispanic or Afro-

Latino. Now, these numbers are still relatively small. Most Black Americans are people who say that they're only Black.

Another dimension, over the course of the last 20 years, the share of foreign-born among Black Americans has gone from about 3% in 2000 to about 10% now. That, too, is another story of the Black American population's growing diversity.

Foreign-born Black Americans, for example, are more likely to have a Ph.D. or a master's degree than U.S.-born. Yet at the same time, we're seeing a growing share of the Black American population overall, U.S.-born or not, finishing college or getting a college degree. Those numbers have been on the rise for the last 20 years.

But it only goes to show you, again, how diverse this population is. To even just talk about Black immigrants masks a lot of the important distinctions between origin groups, whether somebody is from Ethiopia, from Nigeria, from Jamaica, or from the Dominican Republic.

Dan LeDuc: The national conversation about race has changed dramatically in the past year. Has it had an influence on people who do what you do and probe the data?

Mark Hugo Lopez: One of the things that it has helped me emphasize more is the need to understand the nuances about a specific population. That when you're shaping a research question about a group to report out only the topline findings or the main finding for the entire population is helpful and can provide some insight. But it misses the nuances that exist within the group and public opinion, attitude, and views about the nation but also just even in the demographics of the group.

Dan LeDuc: Well, Mark Hugo Lopez, thank you. You're going to have lots of stories to tell in the coming years.

Mark Hugo Lopez: I'm looking forward to it. And thank you again. It's been a real pleasure to chat. There's so much to discuss, but so many exciting things happening, too. Thank you.

[Music transition]

Dan LeDuc: Thank you for joining us for the first episode in this new season on race and research. It is a textured subject, and we hope to examine the nuances.

Yolanda Lewis: *I think it's about how we navigate the moment and make our actions meaningful, and meaningful to certain communities.*

That's Yolanda Lewis. She's the senior director of Pew's safety and justice program, and next week you'll hear from her about how data can be applied to solve longstanding issues that disproportionately affect people of color, including public safety and how authorities respond to people in crisis. We'll also talk with Mike Dimock, president of the Pew Research Center, about how they factor for race in their polling, and why that matters.

Until next time, for The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc and you're listening to After the Fact.