

Hispanics rival blacks as largest minority

By Genaro C. Armas
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The census finding that Hispanics now rival blacks as the nation's leading minority group offers blacks a potential alliance with a powerful partner on issues such as fair housing and racial profiling.

Both sides agree that on the national level, the lines of communication between advocacy groups will grow stronger in the future. Ac-

tivists point to the neighborhoods and towns where the Hispanic population is booming as the area where the most work must come.

The census showed there were 35.3 million Hispanics in 2000 and between 33.9 million and 35.4 million non-Hispanic blacks.

Black leaders say they must strengthen bonds with their Latino counterparts — and vice versa — to ensure a united front on their shared concerns. Combined, they now make up roughly a quarter of the country's 281 million people.

"For all of us, we can now focus more sharply on the analysis of the problems that we share, so we can craft a much more sharply focused solution," said Hilary Shelton, director of the Washington bureau of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

"We have some cultural and

racial differences ... but even the subtle difference between these two groups need to be crafted together," Shelton said.

The Hispanic population caught up with non-Hispanic blacks faster than Census Bureau experts had projected. One forecast predicted that would not happen until at least July 2002.

Blacks still have more political clout nationally, though there are growing pockets of Hispanic strength, particularly in Texas and California, said Eric Rodriguez, director of the economic mobility project for the National Council of La Raza, a Latino advocacy organization.

The greatest challenge for a combined front may come at the local level.

Teacher Barbara Brady did not need to look at census figures to detect the changes in the once mostly

black neighborhood in Washington where she raised her eight children.

Over time, some black families moved to the suburbs and were replaced by recently arrived Hispanic immigrants and a few white families.

But that growing diversity does not translate into a decline in segregation, Brady said as she watched her grandson and some of his classmates play on the National Mall.

"Even with that Hispanic growth, it's still white families here, black families here, Hispanic families there. It's been that way for years and it's never going to change," she said.

Overall, the country's Hispanic population jumped 58 percent the past decade, while the non-Hispanic black population increased between 16 percent and 21 percent.

Exact comparisons by race between 1990 and 2000 is impossible because the 2000 count was the first

to allow people to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race. This change increased the number of race categories available from five to 63 this year.

Additionally, the federal government considers "Hispanic" an ethnicity rather than a race; that means people of Hispanic ethnicity can be of any race.

Both groups are still mainly concentrated in urban areas, while the most explosive growth in the Latino population occurred across the South and West.

During the 1990s, some upper- and middle-class black families took advantage of the strong economy and fair housing regulations to move to suburbs that were once the province primarily of whites, said Roderick Harrison, an analyst with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

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Governor's proposal places Medicaid at risk

SALEM, Ore. — Gov. John Kitzhaber's proposal to reduce Medicaid reimbursements to state-financed assisted-living projects would force some residents into nursing homes and cause widespread defaults by borrowers, according to consultants hired by the state.

Facing a budget shortfall for 2001-03, Kitzhaber has proposed cutting programs across state government, including a \$6.1 million reduction in Medicaid payments to assisted-living centers.

Assisted-living operators would see monthly payments fall from an average of \$1,500 to \$900. At lower rates, care centers couldn't cover the cost of services for Medicaid residents, the consultants discovered.

Oregon Housing and Community Services, which made 43 loans totaling \$98 million to operators, estimated that 27 of them could be at risk if rates are cut.

If the study is correct, Medicaid residents would be forced to move to nursing homes or foster care

homes, and there isn't sufficient demand to fill the beds they would vacate.

The study concluded that the higher cost of nursing-home care and the expense of dealing with foreclosed real estate would cost more than the \$6.1 million Kitzhaber hopes to save.

"I'm aware of the issue, and I'm not willing to step in at this point," Kitzhaber said. "In the end, we may have to put in more money."

Republicans and long-term providers have been critical of

Kitzhaber's plan.

If the cuts are made, "you will see financial catastrophe," said Jim Carlson, a lobbyist for long-term care providers. "Any significant change in their revenue stream is going to put them in a negative cash flow situation."

House Speaker Mark Simmons, R-Elgin, said lawmakers would restore the money, but he hasn't said where the money would come from.

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