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# The Palmetto (Luso-)Latinos?

## A Profile of Brazilians in South Carolina

### Summary

*Increasingly, over the past few years, more Brazilians have been making South Carolina home. Unlike their South American peers with which they are often categorized, Brazilians do not typically self-identify as Hispanic/Latinos. Thus, they tend to get lumped together with other racial groups. In this brief we explore some of the key socio-economic data points associated with South Carolina's growing Brazilian community, in the hopes of building bridges and providing recognition of this unique, vibrant, and globally recognized ethnic group.*

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### On the Unique Contours of Brazilian Latinness

Hispanic Heritage Month (Sept. 15 to October 15) was originally designed to recognize the impressive contributions, both historical and contemporary, of people of Hispanic descent to the economic, cultural, and political tapestry of the United States. Hispanic and Latino/a, terms often used interchangeably, often refer to the linguistic and cultural (and sometimes racial) heritage of people that: a) speak Spanish (Hispanic) as their primary language or b) fall under the definition of the "Latin" race<sup>1</sup>. To make matters more confusing, there also exists the term "Iberoamerican," which refers to people from the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Americas. However, one of the massive unresolved questions continues to be: What about countries such as Belize, Brazil, Haiti, Suriname, and others whereby Spanish is not the official language? These countries are not "Spanish-speaking," but often fall within the classification of "Latin America." Yet, they are often excluded from discussions of who is considered a "Latino" in the United States, both in political and academic circles.

Brazil, populated by 215 million people and harboring one of the largest economies in the world, is a major regional player in the Americas. Unlike many of their South American neighbors, Portugal's colonization of that territory cemented Portuguese as the most widely spoken language. Although Spanish and Portuguese are distinct, Brazilian Portuguese shares many affinities with South American Spanish. However, Brazil's colonial experience also differed markedly from its neighbors, generating important cultural, racial, and political trajectories that set Brazil apart. Unfortunately, statistical data can be more burdensome to parse than the historical narrative. Researchers often prefer that the definitions of concepts not be altered, which makes measuring changes over time easier.

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<sup>1</sup> The "Latinization" of the non-English-speaking Americas was a component of the 19th Century French imperial project. The idea of "Latin America" was coined under Napoleon III and defined that "continent" as a place whose religious, linguistic, cultural, and racial schemas were more in line with French and Catholic (Southern) Europe than with the economically dominant British.



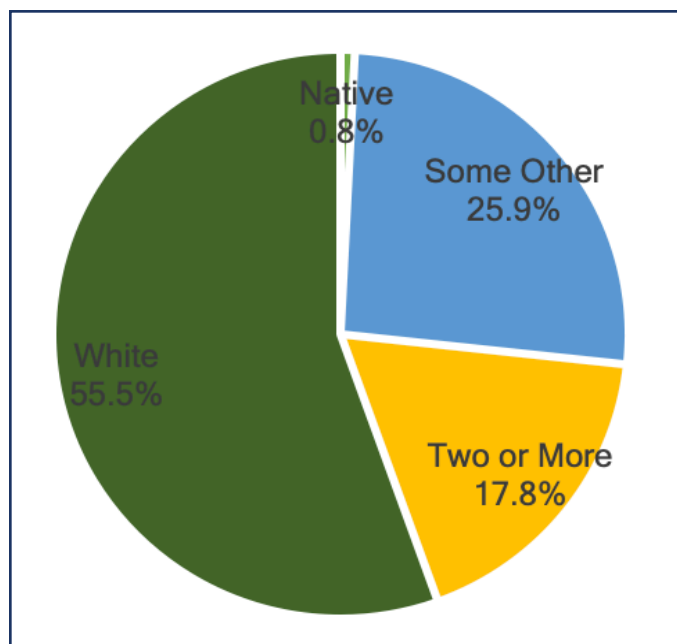
For other ethnic and racial groups, this is less of an issue. Asian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, and Native American groups can now identify as any national origin or tribal group of their choosing on the decennial census and be counted as such. No such option exists for Brazilians, not even under the auspices of the ethnic categories subsumed under the Hispanic/Latino label. To create our category of “Brazilians,” we took data from the 2021 American Community Survey Five-Year Public-Use Microdata Sample and determined whether a person was Brazilian or not by how they responded to the ancestry questions on the survey. If at least one of the two options selected was “Brazilian,” the subject was coded as Brazilian. The following, then, is a brief profile of the Brazilian population of the state according to findings from that data.

## A Profile of Palmetto Brazilians

### Race and Ethnicity

In 2021, around 4,000 individuals in the state identified at least one of their ancestral lines as being Brazilian. This is around 0.8% of the state’s population, which represents a small fraction of the nation-level data which indicates that around 344,000 Brazilians resided in the United States. Although it appears small, as a single group it is larger than many Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American groups that are covered under the umbrella of minority classifications that CMA addresses. Racially, Brazilians are extremely diverse. There are a litany of official-use and everyday categories and classifications that go far beyond the more limited vocabulary used in the United States (i.e., concepts like *pardo*, *moreno*, *preto*, *negro*, *loiro*, *amarelo*, *mestiço*, etc.). Like other Latin American countries, modern state-building projects in the 19th and 20th Centuries involved the creation of a “mixed-race” national identity coupled with an ideology of “whitening.” In sum, Brazilian understandings of race do not neatly map on to concepts employed by the US Census Bureau.

Figure I. Racial Identities of Brazilians in South Carolina



In South Carolina, around 55.5% of Brazilians identify their race as being white, which is higher than Hispanics (42.9%). However, not a single Brazilian in South Carolina identified as being black, while around 3% of Hispanics in the state did so. In 2010, 11% of Brazilians identified themselves as pretos (i.e., the Brazilian Census category for “blacks”) and 53.5% as brancos (whites), with the rest identifying as pardos (mixed; 19.3%) or morenos (tanned and dark haired; 13.6%) according to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). South Carolina’s Brazilians, then, partially reflect that breakdown, with a huge caveat (see Figure I). A pivotal discrepancy centers around the differences between Brazil’s preto population and the lack of a “black” identity for Brazilians in South Carolina. This might be explained by differing cultural understandings of what the US concept of “black” means to Brazilians, or it could represent a

meaningful difference in the racial composition of those Brazilians able to relocate to the United States. The data available to use does not help us resolve this dilemma.



### Language, Birthplace, and English-Speaking Abilities

Figure II. Hispanic/Latino Classification by Racial Identity of Brazilians in SC

Racial Identity	Not Hispanic/Latino	Hispanic/Latino
Native	100%	0%
White	84.3%	15.17%
Two or More	67.41%	32.59%
Some Other	95.87%	4.13%

Language is the key variable differentiating the concept of Hispanic from Latino in the minds of many commentators. Nearly all (99%) Brazilians speak Portuguese and Brazil is, by far, the country with the most Portuguese speakers on the planet. Around 210 million Brazilians speak Portuguese,

nearly 87% of the global Portuguese-speaking population of 241 million. By 2016, there were around 746,000 Portuguese speakers in the United States, a figure which has increased steadily over the years. In 2021, however, South Carolina had a Portuguese-speaking population of around 6,500, but persons with Brazilian ancestry only account for 36.5% (2,400 people) of that estimate.

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For those categorized as Brazilians, 61.7% speak Portuguese in their homes, while 17.7% speak Spanish, and 20.7% speak Only English. One of the biggest factors influencing the breakdown of these estimates is the number of Brazilians born in the United States, roughly 26.9% of the total (compared with 73% born in Brazil). Spanish-speaking Brazilians should not surprise anyone who has visited South America, as Brazilians can be found in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Venezuela, and so forth, in relatively large numbers.

When it comes to English-speaking abilities, Brazilians and other Latinos express slightly different levels of self-assessed skills. Around 46.1% of Brazilians in South Carolina claimed that they speak English “Very Well”, followed by around 20.8% that assess their level as “Well,” while only 8.8% claim that they don’t speak it well.

Figure III. ACS Question Regarding Hispanic/Latino Origin

**NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 5 about Hispanic origin and Question 6 about race. For this survey, Hispanic origins are not races.**

**Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?**

No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin

Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano

Yes, Puerto Rican

Yes, Cuban

Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – Print, for example, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc.

<sup>21</sup>It should be mentioned that there are many persons below the age of five that are Brazilian and are excluded from this data as the Census Bureau only includes those older than five.



*“Around 46.1% of Brazilians in South Carolina claimed that they speak English ‘Very Well’, followed by around 20.8% that assess their level as ‘Well’”*

For Hispanics, 35.2% speak it “Very Well,” and 12.5% do it “Well,” while 11.3% claim they do not speak it well and almost 4% claim they cannot speak it at all. In other words, Brazilians have a relatively higher share of the group (compared to other Hispanics) that speak English Well/Very Well or as their only language (86.7% vs. 74.63%), but these numbers are skewed slightly by the larger population of Hispanics under the age of five as compared to Brazilians (10.1% vs. 4.5%).

### *Age, Educational Attainment, Employment, Income*

The median age of Brazilians in the state who were born in Brazil is 41 and is only 10 for those born in the US. Just under half (46.6%) of all Brazilians in the state are under the age of 35, and 29.2% are under the age of 18. Less than 2% of SC Brazilians are over the age of 55. For the state’s Hispanics, nearly 61.6% of the population is younger than 35, and 35.9% are younger than 18. The demographic structure of each population determines how many individuals will have been able to attain higher levels of educational attainment and/or participate in the active labor force.

In terms of educational attainment, Brazilians in South Carolina fare well. Only around 10.6% of those over the age of 24 have yet to earn a high school equivalent diploma and 20.8% have completed at least a bachelor’s degree. The latter figure is just on par with Hispanics, but nearly 30.7% of Hispanics have not completed high school. Of the population over the age of 18, 74.2% of Brazilians are actively participating in the labor force, with an unemployment rate of around 5.3%. The median personal income for Brazilians participating in the labor force was around \$35,000, slightly higher than the \$27,000 earned by Hispanics.

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## Conclusion

**South Carolina’s Brazilian population is growing, particularly in the state’s tri-county area (Berkeley, Charleston and Dorchester counties) and in Horry County, according to data analyzed by CMA. Brazilians are one of many groups that might be lumped into one of the racial/ethnic categories covered by CMA’s program areas, but they do not necessarily identify with the “Hispanic/Latino” label. Although Brazilians may share many cultural, historical, culinary, and geo-political traits with those traditionally deemed to be “Latino,” they continue to identify as something distinct. This work attempts to showcase the basic characteristics of Lusophone Latin Americans, as a bid to increase awareness of this unique community, but also to (hopefully) generate interest and support from that community to the activities of CMA as well as the agency’s Hispanic/Latino Program.**

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Note: All data was sourced from the US Census Bureau’s 2021 American Community Survey Five-Year Public-Use Microdata Sample and analyzed in R Studio. Data scripts to reproduce the analysis are available upon request. For that or any additional information related to this research, please contact CMA’s Director of Research, Dr. Robert P. Fenton (rfenton@cma.sc.gov) for assistance.