

Racial Statistics and Race-Conscious Public Policy

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Responding to ongoing criticism of the census and to rapid change in the racial and ethnic makeup of the country, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB)—responsible for coordinating the activities of all federal statistical agencies, including the Census Bureau—conducted a comprehensive review of the racial categorization system from 1993 to 1997. The review eventually focused on a proposal sparked by a small group of “multiracial” activists to add a multiracial category to the 2000 census. In the end, although a stand-alone multiracial category was not added to the census, for the first time ever, a “mark one or more” (MOOM) option—allowing individuals to identify officially with as many groups as they saw fit—appeared on the 2000 form. The decision to allow people to identify with multiple racial heritages has introduced new data, questions, and controversies into an already volatile debate on race-conscious public policy.

What's at Stake

Throughout American history, the U.S. government used racial designations as a tool of dominance, serving to separate and penalize those not deemed as white. Census data fueled antebellum racial attitudes, later facilitated the hasty retreat from racial

equality, and even served to legitimate this shift. Indeed, racial classifications enabled a range of exploitative arrangements until the civil rights movement turned the previously oppressive function of racial data on its head.

Together, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 dismantled the structure of black disenfranchisement in the South and various types of public and private discrimination throughout the United States. In the process, racial statistics became valuable to American minority groups in new ways. In implementing and regulating the Civil Rights Act, for instance, racial statistics became important in order to identify the number of minorities employed in firms and the racial composition of schools. Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act mandated that racial minorities have an equal opportunity to elect representatives of their choice; enforcement of the act required population tabulations by race to the level of the city block. Likewise, many of the social welfare programs of the era, in their efforts to improve living conditions in cities and to address the problems faced by disadvantaged groups, distributed funds by means of statistically driven grant-in-aid formulas.

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So, in the 1960s, racial classifications became useful for the purpose of enforcing and monitoring civil rights laws. A few decades later, the idea that there was nothing inevitable or preordained about most categories, including racial ones, began to pick up steam. As things stand now, the stakes involved in racial categorization are considerable, yet the grounds for identifying and delimiting racial groups are increasingly suspect.

Racial Classification Before 1997

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), created by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, sought to develop quantitative indicators of the extent to which blacks were subject to discrimination. Underfunded, understaffed, and initially denied cease-and-desist authority, the early EEOC had few resources and prudently chose to focus government attention on the most flagrant discriminators. To this end, the EEOC developed the EEO-1 form, which solicited information from employers about the racial, ethnic, and gender breakdown of their workforces. Later, with this form as a guide, the OMB standardized ethnic and racial data collection across government agencies in 1977.

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Statistical Directive No. 15 stipulated the protocol. “OMB 15,” as it came to be known, mandated the use of four standard racial categories:

1. **American Indian or Alaskan Native:** A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North America and

who maintains cultural identification through tribal affiliations or community recognition.

2. **Asian or Pacific Islander:** A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, or the Pacific Islands. This area includes, for example, China, India, Japan, Korea, the Philippine Islands, and Samoa.
3. **Black:** A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa.
4. **White:** A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East.

And it included one ethnic category inclusive of all races:

5. **Hispanic:** A person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.

This would serve as the final word on the administrative collection and reporting of American racial data for the next twenty years. Before its adoption, agencies often used different nomenclature or different categories altogether. A uniform set of classifications was badly needed. OMB 15 filled this role, and, as such, it facilitated civil rights enforcement efforts on a national scale. The directive moved away from race as biological—the mandated categories should not be “interpreted as... scientific or anthropological in nature”—but not so far as to suggest that Americans could be of more than one race. The implication was that these categories, developed to meet expressed congressional and executive needs, were intended as political instruments. Indeed, by formally articulating the official racial categories in this way, the OMB gave lobbying groups an identifiable target through which to pressure the federal government to consider categorical modifications.

The Multiracial Movement

The American multiracial movement is best known for its advocates' efforts, throughout the 1990s, to add a "multiracial" category to the 2000 census. By the end of that decade, the federal government, along with a number of state governments, had not only devoted substantial resources to investigating the issue; eventually it agreed to document race in a new way. The issue of multiracial recognition on school forms helped to galvanize the movement, which started with a handful of groups that formed on the West Coast in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Many parents registering children from the growing number of interracial unions for school felt that monoracial categories on school forms—as required for federal reporting to the U.S. Department of Education—forced unacceptable and avoidable decisions upon individuals and families to identify with one

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parent and deny the other. In 1988, a number of these local, adult-based organizations joined forces to create the Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA), whose political objective was to push the OMB to add a multiracial category on government forms. Soon after the establishment of the AMEA, two other organizations claiming national memberships and networks also came to the fore: Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally) and A Place For Us (APFU). By the mid-1990s, there were thirty active adult-based multiracial organizations across the United States and approximately the same number of student organizations on college campuses. While the groups diverged on many details, they

shared the conviction that it was inaccurate and improper to force multiracial Americans into monoracial categories.

Civil rights groups increasingly came to perceive the multiracial movement as a threat over the course of that decade. The civil rights community feared that a multiracial category would dilute the count of minority populations, and—although in actuality this prospect triggered different concerns for different civil rights organizations—their shared position was that a multiracial identifier would undercut existing civil rights safeguards. Multiracial advocates, however, saw compulsory single-race categories as an outdated response to a growing multiracial reality and maintained that their recognition would come at no adverse civil rights cost. The OMB decision of 1997 appeared to validate both of the latter claims.

Racial Classification Since 1997

In October 1997—after almost five years of research and deliberation—the OMB announced that it would adopt the recommendations of the Interagency Committee for the Review of Racial and Ethnic Standards (created by OMB at the beginning of the review to oversee the process and submit final recommendations). The Interagency Committee recommended against a stand-alone multiracial category on the 2000 census; instead, it advised that respondents be allowed to "mark one or more" races from the preexisting list. While the thirty federal agencies represented on the Interagency Committee unanimously opposed the addition of a multiracial category, the committee articulated no specific suggestions as to how its proposed (and adopted) alternative could be carried out; hence, the creation of the Tabulation Working Group.

The Tabulation Working Group was made up of a subset of Interagency Committee members: their job was to establish the mechanics for

processing multiple race responses and to generate guidelines for federal agencies' aggregation and reporting of multiple-race data. The assignment provoked a new round of controversy about how to tackle this technically challenging and politically charged task. The situation also led to justifiable criticism of the OMB for announcing the new policy while the details still remained unsettled. As but one indication of the difficulties involved, the Tabulation Working Group managed to produce the guidelines only a few weeks before the 2000 census was conducted. This delay was largely caused by civil rights laws'

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requirement that statistics plainly distinguish between those individuals who are members of minority groups and those who are not. This meant that, for the purposes of civil rights monitoring, the Tabulation Working Group had the unenviable job of devising a standard by which to reallocate multiple race responses to a single race. Multiple race responses would have to be "put back" into a single box in order to produce numbers for the purposes of civil rights enforcement and comparison of 2000 data with data from earlier censuses.

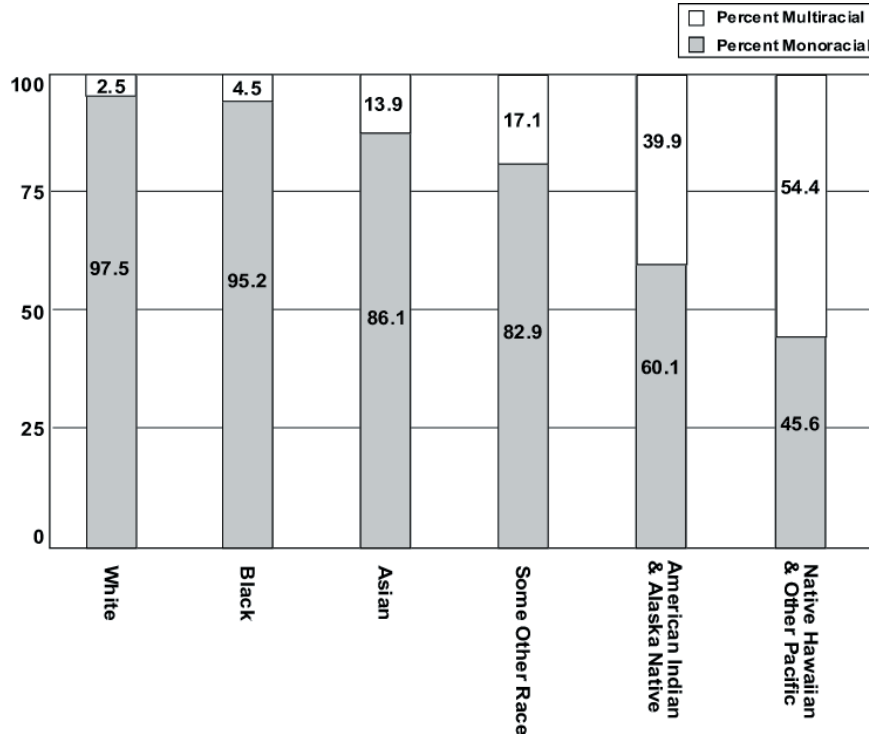
Throughout the OMB review, the main concerns of civil rights groups were to (1) keep intact the data infrastructure necessary for civil rights enforcement and (2) tabulate to the minority group when an individual identified as such and also as white. OMB Bulletin No. 00-02, issued March 9, 2000, reflected these priorities. The most important aspects of the new guidelines were as follows.

First, in order to distinguish those persons who selected a single race—say Asian—from those who selected Asian and another race, groups were reported in ranges from minimum to maximum sizes: this created alternate—yet official—counts of racial groups (see Figure 1). Second, allowing people to mark more than one race resulted in a total of 57 possible multiple-race combinations. Add to that the five official single-race categories plus a sixth option "Some Other Race" and the tally increased to 63 racial categories. Because each racial category can be divided by a question asking respondents if they are Hispanic, the constellation of race/ethnic mixtures swelled to a universe of 126 possibilities. Third, the tabulation guidelines for MOOM stated that people who marked white and some other racial group should be tabulated as a part of the identified minority group for the purposes of civil rights enforcement. Inevitably, this meant that some people classified as whites in 1990 were counted as minorities in 2000. While this procedural decision addressed the civil rights community's immediate concerns about dwindling numbers, it is otherwise difficult to justify. Also of concern is how the tabulation process undermined the principle of self-identification; that is, people were reallocated into categories they did not choose for themselves. What is more, one must contend with the awkward observation that the new allocation scheme is conceptually indistinguishable from the old one-drop rule.

Aftermath

About seven million people (2.6 percent of the total population) reported more than one race in 2000. Some analysts contend that the multiple-race option ultimately settled upon by the OMB is immaterial to antidiscrimination efforts, due to the putative size and status (not a protected class) of this population. On the other hand, some observers point out that the new policy could introduce fresh disputes over the definition of the racial composition of, say,

Figure 1. Minimum Count of Census Race Groups as Percentage of Maximum Count, 2000



	White	Black	Asian	Some Other Race	American Indian and Alaska Native	Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific
Percentage of Total U.S. Population, alone or in combination	77.1 %	12.9%	4.2%	6.6%	1.5%	0.3%
Number of Total U. S. Population, alone or in combination	216,930,975	36,419,434	11,898,828	18,521,486	4,119,301	874,414
Alone	211,460,626	34,658,190	10,242,998	15,359,073	2,475,956	398,835
In Combination	5,470,349	1,761,244	1,655,830	3,162,413	1,643,345	475,579

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, Summary File 1.

Notes: Short form data indicated that 6.8 million Americans reported more than one race in 2000. "Percentage multiracial" is the proportion that the "more than one race" (multiracial) population represented of the total count of each racial group. This double counts persons who appear in more than one racial category, resulting in totals of more than 100 percent.

a firm or a labor pool. The latter viewpoint is likely to prevail in the long run. Consider Figure 1.

Multiple-race reporting, while low nationwide, was far from evenly distributed across racial groups. As shown in Figure 1, the percentage of blacks who checked both black and something else (4.8) was relatively low. Only whites were more likely to identify with just one race. Put differently, whites seem far more

securely affixed to traditional views of singular racial identification than anyone else, including blacks, who nonetheless occupy the same end of the spectrum. Yet the difference between minimum and maximum counts is significant for Asians (almost a 14 percent differential), considerable for American Indians/Alaska Natives (nearly 40 percent), and astronomical for the newly recognized group of Native Hawaiians/Other Pacific Islanders (over 50 percent).

Likewise, are we to believe that the 63 (or 126) possible categories are on equal footing with the stand-alone categories? Is someone who marks white and a minority race on a form eligible for the same programs and protections as someone who identifies only as a member of a minority group? What if it can be shown that that same person had, in the past, identified only as white? Although confidentiality rules prevent such analyses of individuals' census responses, racial categories used by the government reach deeply into the private sector. The OMB backs away from such questions, and they remain unanswered. The courts may well intervene. If so, they will surely revisit the meaning of proportionality—a bedrock civil rights tool for detecting discrimination and measuring progress—in a

context of growing racial diversity and shifting ideas about race.

In MOOM and related stipulations, the OMB tried to strike a balance between capturing increasing diversity and providing the statistics necessary to measure discrimination and enforce the nation's civil rights laws. Even so, the implications of remain unclear and the circumstances invite further challenge. Eventually, MOOM—separately and in tandem with coexisting trends, in particular, high levels of immigration—is likely to reach deep into the nation's civil rights agenda.

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