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NEW FEDERAL STANDARDS FOR RACE DATA COLLECTION

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In 1977, the United States Office of Management and Budget (OMB) published the Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting through its Statistical Policy Directive No. 15. “SPD 15,” as it came to be known, standardized the race categories used across federal programs and surveys, including those of the U.S. Census Bureau.

Since then, SPD 15 has been periodically revised to reflect our country’s changing demographics as well as our evolving understanding of racial, ethnic, and cultural identities in the United States. Each update has been informed by public feedback, advisory committees, and extensive statistical and survey research. The revision process is guided by 12 governing principles established by the OMB’s Interagency Technical Working Group on Race and Ethnicity Standards.

- 1 Race and ethnicity are socio-political constructs.** For purposes of these standards, the race and ethnicity categories set forth are socio-political constructs and are not an attempt to define race and ethnicity biologically or genetically.
- 2 Respect individuals.** Respect for individual dignity should guide the processes and methods for collecting data on race and ethnicity; respondent self-identification should be facilitated to the greatest extent possible.
- 3 Clear concepts and terminology.** To the extent practicable, the concepts and terminology should reflect clear and generally understood definitions that can achieve broad public acceptance.
- 4 Comprehensive categories.** The racial and ethnic categories should be comprehensive in coverage and produce compatible, non-duplicated, exchangeable data across federal agencies.
- 5 Consider useful data aggregations.** Foremost consideration should be given to data aggregations by race and ethnicity that are useful for statistical analysis, program administration and assessment, and enforcement of existing laws and judicial decisions, bearing in mind that the standards are not intended to be used to establish eligibility for participation in any federal program.
- 6 Consider state/local government data needs.** While federal data needs for racial and ethnic data are of primary importance, consideration should also be given to needs at the state and local government levels, including American Indian tribal and Alaska Native village governments, as well as to general societal needs for these data.
- 7 Categories set forth a minimum standard.** The standards should set forth minimum categories; additional categories should be encouraged provided they can be aggregated to the standard categories. The number of standard categories should be kept to a manageable size, as determined by statistical concerns and data needs.

8 Consider operational feasibility. A revised set of categories should be operationally feasible in terms of burden placed upon respondents and the cost to agencies and respondents to implement the revisions.

9 Category changes are based on sound research. Any changes in the categories should be based on sound methodological research and should include evaluations of the impact of any changes not only on the usefulness of the resulting data but also on the comparability of any new categories with the existing ones.

10 Category revisions require a crosswalk. Any revision to the categories should provide for a crosswalk at the time of adoption between the old and the new categories so that historical data series can be statistically adjusted and comparisons can be made.

11 Changes are based upon an interagency collaborative effort. Because of the many and varied needs, and strong interdependence, of federal agencies for racial and ethnic data, any changes to the existing categories should be the product of an interagency collaborative effort.

12 All racial and ethnic categories should adhere to public law. All racial and ethnic categories, both established and potential, should be reviewed and constructed in a manner that adheres to public law.

The 2024 Revisions

The four revisions made to SPD 15 in 2024 are among the most far-reaching changes in its nearly 50-year history.

1. A new combined question for race and ethnicity

Previously, race and ethnicity were conceptualized and collected separately, with “ethnicity” referring to Hispanic or Latino heritage. For example, one could be Hispanic White, non-Hispanic White, Hispanic Black or African American, non-Hispanic Black or African American, and so on. The new approach combines the two questions into a single framework and encourages respondents to select multiple options.

2. Adding Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) as a race category

In the past, MENA respondents were classified within the White race category. Engagement with MENA communities has demonstrated both strong support for a distinct category and the need for better statistics to guide policy, socioeconomic research, and related concerns.

3. Encouraging the collection of additional detail for race categories

The 2024 revisions expand opportunities for respondents to provide detailed information. Building on Census 2020, which allowed White and Black or African American respondents to specify detailed race / origin responses for the first time, the Census Bureau will continue to use additional checkboxes and write-in spaces to support the disaggregation of race data.

4. Updating various terminology, definitions, and question instructions

These extensive updates include removing outdated language, including the removal of the term “Negro” from the Black or African American race definition, replacing “Far East” with “Central or East Asia,” and changing “Indian Subcontinent” to “South Asia.” For race and detailed ancestry, the survey language revisions include changing “Mark / Select one or more boxes” to “Mark / Select all that apply.”

3. Sex <i>Fill one circle.</i>	☐ Male ☒ Female
4. Is this person — <i>Fill one circle.</i>	☐ White ☐ Asian Indian ☐ Black or Negro ☐ Hawaiian ☐ Japanese ☐ Guamanian ☐ Chinese ☐ Samoan ☐ Filipino ☐ Eskimo ☐ Korean ☐ Aleut ☐ Vietnamese ☐ Other — <i>Specify</i> ☐ Indian (Amer.) Print tribe → _____

7. Is this person of Spanish/Hispanic origin or descent? <i>Fill one circle.</i>	☐ No (not Spanish/Hispanic) ☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican-Amer., Chicano ☐ Yes, Puerto Rican ☒ ☐ Yes, Cuban ☐ Yes, other Spanish/Hispanic
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The race and ethnicity response boxes on the 1980 Census Short-Form Questionnaire.

Source: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/technical-documentation/questionnaires/1980_Census.html

A Deeper Dive: Research and Context

After Census 2010, the Census Bureau was increasingly concerned about the large proportion of Hispanic or Latino respondents selecting Some Other Race (SOR) as their racial identity. In Census 2020, the trend intensified, as 94% of SOR respondents were of Hispanic origin. Although SOR was originally designed to function as a small residual category, by 2020 it had grown into the nation's third-largest race group. The [growing body of empirical research](#) bolstered arguments that Hispanic or Latino heritage is commonly understood as a racial identity.

Census Bureau research has demonstrated that a combined question with multiple detailed checkboxes reduces race nonresponse (including SOR responses) and improves both overall accuracy and the level of detailed reporting compared to the separate question format. Specifically, the Alternative Questionnaire Experiment conducted during the 2015 [National Content Test](#) showed that overall race nonresponse decreased from 3.9% to 2% in the new format – a reduction of nearly 50%. Additionally, SOR declined from about 10% overall to 1%.¹ The same research showed that Hispanic respondents identifying as SOR decreased from 39% to less than 1%. In other words, when Hispanics have an opportunity to choose “Hispanic” as their race category in a combined question format, SOR functions as originally envisioned, as a small residual category.

The 2015 National Content Test also addressed survey design issues related to detailed groups in disaggregated race categories. Although there are potentially hundreds of different national / ethnic groups to include as examples in the detailed checkboxes, the majority of each race group's population in the United States is composed of only a handful of such groups. For example, the three largest Hispanic detailed groups (Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban) represent about 75% of all Hispanics in the United States. The results of the experimental checkboxes and write-in responses were evaluated against data from the American Community Survey in order to ensure consistency and accuracy, and to confirm that there were sufficient write-in responses beyond the choices listed in the checkboxes. The major categories, detailed checkboxes, and write-in examples are listed in order of population size, from largest to smallest.

For similar issues involving the new MENA category, the largest North African detailed groups in the United States are significantly smaller than the largest Middle Eastern groups. While the MENA checkboxes all refer to non-

North African countries, the write-in prompt includes two Northern African groups (Moroccan and Yemeni) and one stateless group (Kurdish) in order to emphasize geographic diversity rather than the numeric size of the various MENA detailed groups.

Compared to the other race categories, the distribution of American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) peoples is unique. Specifically, the six largest AIAN groups represent only about 10% of the overall AIAN population nationwide. In addition to this exceptional heterogeneity, there are also differences in the nature of the detailed group identification for some AIAN peoples. Census Bureau research has

What is this person's race?
Mark ☒ one or more boxes **AND** print origins.

☐ White – Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc. ✓

☐ Black or African Am. – Print, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc. ✓

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native – Print name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc. ✓

☐ Chinese ☐ Vietnamese ☐ Native Hawaiian

☐ Filipino ☐ Korean ☐ Samoan

☐ Asian Indian ☐ Japanese ☐ Chamorro

☐ Other Asian – Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc. ✓ ☐ Other Pacific Islander – Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc. ✓

☐ Some other race – Print race or origin

Is this person 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. ✓

The race and ethnicity boxes on the 2020 Census questionnaire.

Source: <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/2020/operations/planned-questions-2020-acs.pdf>

indicated that the use of different terms and concepts (e.g., “enrolled,” “affiliated,” “origin,” etc.) were potentially a source of confusion for some AIAN respondents – particularly related to the distinction between subjective tribal affiliation and the more objective tribal enrollment. Therefore, instead of listing detailed AIAN checkbox examples, AIAN respondents are presented with an open-ended write-in box to specify their detailed tribal group(s).

¹Despite these improvements to the data, concerns have been raised that the combined question format may obscure diversity within the Hispanic population by undercounting Black Hispanic people. [Qualitative research](#) in 2016 showed that participants were less likely to identify as Black when they first identified as Hispanic. This point is emphasized by the [AfroLatino Coalition](#) as well as the [Latino Policy and Politics Institute](#).

Finally, the 2024 SPD updates include extensive changes to the wording and terminology used in data collection surveys. In addition to removing outdated language related to race and to world regions, the revisions include changes to survey instructions. These changes were made in an effort to reduce SOR responses and to encourage the reporting of multiple race responses. Although the wording change was found to not have an impact on rates of SOR responses, the seemingly subtle change from “Mark / Select one or more” to “Mark / Select all that apply” significantly increased the number of respondents who selected two or more races as well as AIAN alone or in combination responses.

In conclusion, more than 15 years of rigorous Census Bureau testing indicates that the 2024 revisions – the combined question format, the inclusion of a MENA category, expanded options for detailed responses, and modifying survey language and terminology – will reduce reliance on SOR, lower nonresponse rates, and strengthen the reliability of race and ethnicity data in the United States.

Bibliography and Further Reading

- A full summary of the 2024 SPD updates can be found in the *Federal Register Notice* published March 29, 2024: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/03/29/2024-06469/revisions-to-ombs-statistical-policy-directive-no-15-standards-for-maintaining-collecting-and>.
- The most extensive analysis of the research discussed in this document is the *2015 National Content Test: Race and Ethnicity Analysis Report* (2017): <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/final-analysis-reports/2015nct-race-ethnicity-analysis.pdf>.
- OMB created a website to provide an overview of the 2024 revisions. The supporting documents on that website were removed as part of the larger document and data purge across various federal agencies that occurred in January of 2025. The website remains active, but the supporting documentation has not been restored as of this writing (September 2025). See: <https://spd15revision.gov/>.
- The changes to federal race data collection will impact many agencies and programs. For a historic overview of updates and research specific to the Census Bureau, see: <https://www.census.gov/about/our-research/race-ethnicity/standards-updates.html>.
- In May of 2015, the Forum on Ethnic Groups from the Middle East and North Africa was held at Census Bureau headquarters in Suitland, Maryland. Experts from around the country participated and provided feedback about the MENA category. See: <https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2015/demo/2015-MENA-Experts.html>.
- The Census Bureau considered collecting self-reported tribal enrollment (in addition to affiliation) for AIAN peoples during Census 2020. Ultimately, the Census Bureau did not solicit self-reported tribal enrollment data. For a discussion of this process and of related research, see the *2020 Research and Testing: 2017 Census Test Report – Tribal Enrollment* (2019): https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/census-tests/2017/2017-census-test-report_tribal-enrollment.pdf. For an overview of related issues concerning AIAN data sovereignty, see <https://aipi.asu.edu/sites/g/files/litvpz1606/files/best-practices-for-american-indian-and-alaska-native-data-collection.pdf>