

Race & Origin Questions in Context

UNDERSTANDING THE 2020 CENSUS

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Census race and Hispanic origin data are used to protect civil rights and ensure programs meet the diverse needs of communities.
- All respondents will be able to check off or write in their national origin, ethnicity, or principal or enrolled tribe on the 2020 Census form.
- The Hispanic origin question will not be combined with the race question and there will not be a new Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) race category.
- The race and origin questions for Census 2020 do not fully reflect the results from the Census Bureau’s rigorous research.

CENSUS RACE & ORIGIN QUESTIONS CHANGE OFTEN

The census race questions are important. Title 13 of the U.S. code protects the confidentiality of census data and race data collected in the census are used to protect civil rights and to make sure that communities get their fair share of federal resources.

Census race questions and categories have changed many times throughout history and continue to evolve as the U.S. changes socially and culturally.¹ For example, the 2000 Census was the first to allow respondents to report more than one race.² A separate question on Hispanic or Spanish origin was first added to the 1970 Census sent to a sample of households.³ The 1980 Census was the first to ask all respondents if they were of Hispanic origin.⁴

The data collected about people whose origin is in Asia or Pacific Island nations have been disaggregated to some degree since the 1870 Census and increasingly so over the past 50 years.⁵

Figure 1. 2020 Census Hispanic Origin Question

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.* ↴

Figure 2. 2020 Census Race Question

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.* ↴

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese | <input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese | <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Filipino | <input type="checkbox"/> Korean | <input type="checkbox"/> Samoan |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asian Indian | <input type="checkbox"/> Japanese | <input type="checkbox"/> Chamorro |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other Asian – <i>Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc.</i> ↴ | <input type="checkbox"/> Other Pacific Islander – <i>Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc.</i> ↴ | |

- Some other race – *Print race or origin.* ↴

Source: Questions Planned for the 2020 Census and American Community Survey. Available at www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/2020/operations/planned-questions-2020-acs.pdf.

Significantly, the 2000 Census included a Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander category distinct from the Asian category.⁶

Official federal race classifications reflect contemporary social constructs and are not based in science or anthropology.⁷ The Office of Management and Budget (OMB), not the Census Bureau, defines the race and ethnicity classifications used for federal government purposes. The Census Bureau may collect and publish more detailed data, as long as the bureau can aggregate the results to fit the standard classifications. The categories that are used often do not reflect the ways that people would prefer to identify themselves.

THE RACE & HISPANIC ORIGIN QUESTIONS WILL CHANGE IN 2020

There are modest, though important, changes from the 2010 Census based on rigorous Census Bureau research. The race and Hispanic origin questions continued to evolve for the 2020 Census. Ultimately, the 2020 Census will include two questions about race and origin: “Is this person of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin?” and “What is this person’s race?” Changes were made with the goal of collecting more accurate data that reflect the population diversity in the U.S.

Changes to the race and Hispanic origin questions since the 2010 Census include:

- **Latinos will be able to identify more than one national origin if they are of mixed Latino status.**
- **All respondents will be able to write in their national origin or, in the case of American Indians and Alaska Natives, their principal or enrolled tribe, after their race.**
- **The term “Negro” has been dropped from the Black or African American race category.**
- **The term “Guamanian or Chamorro” will be replaced with “Chamorro.”**

OTHER PROPOSED CHANGES WERE NOT ADOPTED

Expert Census Bureau staff made additional, more substantial research-based recommendations for collecting race and origin data that were not adopted.

The changes that were not adopted include:

- **Combining the Hispanic origin and race questions into a single question;**⁸
- **Including checkboxes for the largest national origins for the White and Black categories; and**
- **Adding a distinct Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) category.**⁹

These recommendations were based on multi-year research and testing designed to improve the accuracy of race and origin data collected in the 2020 Census.

In fact, nearly 43% of Latinos chose “Some other race” or did not answer the separate race question on the 2010 Census.¹⁰ Of those who chose “Some other race” and wrote in the nationality with which they identified, nearly 95% indicated they were Mexican, Hispanic, Latin American, or Puerto Rican.¹¹

Also of note, stakeholders have described the decision not to include the MENA race category as a “severe blow” to capturing an accurate count of people with roots in the Middle East or North Africa.¹² Researchers found that “the inclusion of a MENA category helps MENA respondents to more accurately report their MENA identities.”¹³

When no MENA category is available in tests, people who identify as MENA predominantly report in the White category, but when a MENA category is included, they predominantly report in the MENA category.¹⁴ Data on the MENA populations is “lost” within the White classification, making it more difficult to understand the unique needs and characteristics of MENA respondents.

RACE & NATIONAL ORIGIN REPORTING IS FLEXIBLE & ALLOWS FOR THE REPORTING OF MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Respondents may continue to find the questions confusing despite the improvements to the design. Options for responding to the questions include:

- **Those who are unsure** how to identify can reference a glossary provided by the Census Bureau. For example, someone who identifies as Kanaka Maoli would be listed as Native Hawaiian on the glossary.¹⁵
- **Black respondents** can now write in their national origin, and the census form provides examples. The examples likely will support a more accurate count of Black immigrants (e.g. Nigerian Americans and Haitian Americans). Black respondents who are unsure about their national origin can identify as African American or Black.¹⁶

- **White respondents** can now write in their national origin and the census form provides examples. The examples listed on the form include “Lebanese” and “Egyptian”—both are classified as White by OMB.
- **Respondents with multiple nationalities** can check or write in all of their origins, or the one(s) they identify with most.¹⁷
- **Mixed-race respondents** can select multiple race groups (e.g. Asian and Black) and write in their origins for each in the corresponding space.¹⁸
- **People of Hispanic/Latino origin** can mark a check box to identify as Mexican, Puerto Rican, and/or Cuban, and/or mark the “Other Hispanic” check box and write in their nationality (such as Dominican, Guatemalan, or Colombian).
- **Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander respondents** who do not see their national origin listed can write it in. The form includes multiple checkbox options based on Census Bureau testing which found that omitted the checkboxes would lead to under-identification among respondents.¹⁹
- **Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) respondents** can check the race category they identify with or the “Some Other Race” box and write in their national origin.²⁰ MENA is not listed as its own race category on the census.
- **Respondents who do not identify with any of the provided race categories** can select “Some other race” and write in their national origin.²¹
- **American Indian and Alaska Native respondents** can write in their tribal affiliation.
- **Each household** should respond to both questions for every household member so the Census Bureau can produce accurate data. For example, Latinos of African descent (i.e. Afro-Latinos) and Latinos of Asian descent must answer both the Hispanic origin and race questions to indicate their heritage.

RACE & HISPANIC ORIGIN DATA UNDERPIN IMPORTANT CIVIL RIGHTS PROTECTIONS AND HELP MEET COMMUNITY NEEDS

Accurate, detailed census data on race and origin are necessary to enforce civil rights protections, reveal disparate impacts of laws and policies, and meet the needs of diverse communities.²² For example:

- **Enforcing the Voting Rights Act of 1965.**²³ Race and origin data are essential for discovering evidence of racial discrimination in voting practices and policies.
- **Enforcing fair housing laws such as the Fair Housing Act and Home Mortgage Disclosure Act.**²⁴ Race and origin data are an important tool for establishing that a housing policy or practice has a disparate impact on certain groups.
- **Evaluating discrimination in employment.**²⁵ These data can reveal employment discrimination and can help establish federal affirmative action plans.
- **Highlighting health disparities.**²⁶ These data allow researchers to uncover health disparities between groups and inform the work of policymakers tasked with eliminating those disparities.
- **Allocating resources to tribal communities.** Census data are crucial to the accurate allocation of funds that support programs, and help tribal leaders understand the needs and characteristics of their communities.
- **Supporting environmental justice.** Census data are used to produce the EPA’s Environmental Justice Mapping and Screening Tool, which is used to inform environmental justice initiatives related to racial health disparities.²⁷
- **Allocating funds to school districts.** Census data are used to allocate funds to low-income schools and school districts. For example, race data are used to allocate funds for bilingual services under the Bilingual Education Act.²⁸

ADVOCATES HAVE SOUGHT MORE DISAGGREGATED RACE DATA FOR DECADES FROM THE CENSUS

Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC) and the larger Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) community have supported a disaggregated “Asian and Pacific Islander” category since 1990 and advocated for maximizing the number of origin checkboxes and examples included in the census race question to get the most accurate data possible by detailed subgroup.²⁹

The National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund supports a combined Hispanic origin and race question because it would allow more accurate reporting of multiple Hispanic national origin identifications. NALEO believes that an accurate count of the Latino community is critical for both the community and the country.

The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) and the Arab American Institute (AAI) have long advocated for an Arab category and also supported adding a Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) category to more accurately capture Arab Americans and the MENA community, most members of which are currently counted as White.

The National Urban League, NAACP, and many other advocates for the Black and African American community have long urged collection of national origin data for their race category, which the 2020 Census will now do.

Figure 3. 2010 Census Hispanic Origin & Race Questions

9. What is Person 1's race? Mark one or more boxes.

White
 Black, African Am., or Negro
 American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.* ↕

Asian Indian Japanese Native Hawaiian
 Chinese Korean Guamanian or Chamorro
 Filipino Vietnamese Samoan
 Other Asian — *Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.* ↕ Other Pacific Islander — *Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.* ↕

Some other race — *Print race.* ↕

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census questionnaire. Available at www.census.gov/history/pdf/2010questionnaire.pdf

Figure 4. OMB Race & Ethnicity Classifications

OMB Categories & Definitions for Data on Race	
American Indian or Alaska Native	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment.
Asian	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.
Black or African American	A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.
White	A person having origins of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.
OMB Categories & Definitions for Data on Ethnicity	
Hispanic or Latino	A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race.
Not Hispanic or Latino	

Source: Office of Management and Budget

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For more information about the history of race and origin questions on the census, see (civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/reports/Census-Report-2014-WEB.pdf) and *What Census Calls Us: A Historical Timeline* (pewsocialtrends.org/interactives/multiracial-timeline).

REFERENCES ARE LISTED AS URLS FOR BREVITY.

¹ <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/final-analysis-reports/2015nct-race-ethnicity-analysis.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ <https://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/reports/Census-Report-2014-WEB.pdf>

⁴ <https://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/reports/Census-Report-2014-WEB.pdf>

⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/11/04/every-term-the-census-has-used-to-describe-americas-racial-groups-since-1790/?utm_term=.48a98cdf040

⁶ <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-12.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html>

⁸ <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/final-analysis-reports/2015nct-race-ethnicity-analysis.pdf>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/naleo/pages/134/attachments/original/1497290942/6_8_17_-_NEF_Release_on_Census_Policy_Brief_-_Final.pdf?1497290942

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/26/580865378/census-request-suggests-no-race-ethnicity-data-changes-in-2020-experts-say>

¹³ <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/final-analysis-reports/2015nct-race-ethnicity-analysis.pdf>

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¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ <https://www.advancingjustice-aaajc.org/sites/default/files/2017-05/FAQs%20on%20Data%20Disaggregation%20and%20Asian%20Americans.pdf>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/newsroom/press-kits/2018/paa/2018-paa-presentation-race-question.pdf?eml=gd&utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery

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²³ <https://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/reports/Census-Report-2014-WEB.pdf>

²⁴ <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/09/30/2016-23672/standards-for-maintaining-collecting-and-presenting-federal-data-on-race-and-ethnicity>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2017-09/documents/2017_ejscreen_technical_document.pdf

²⁸ <https://www.census.gov/acs/www/about/why-we-ask-each-question/race/>

²⁹ <https://www.advancingjustice-aaajc.org/publication/detailed-letter-revision-standards-maintaining-collecting-and-presenting-federal-data>