

## Fact Sheet: Census Schedules and Ethnic Classification

The Census is required because the U.S. Constitution requires a decennial enumeration of the country's population as the basis for representation and taxation. From the first census in 1790 to the mid-nineteenth century, few items pertained to ethnicity. Until 1820, the ethnic data that was derived was done as a distinction between white citizens and groups with fewer civil rights and liberties, such as non-naturalized foreigners, slaves, and tribal Indians. This changed in 1830 when the first nationally uniform printed schedule distinguished free white persons from free colored persons. This was modified in 1850 when the concept of color, (institutionalized as white, black, or mulatto), was first specified for free inhabitants, and black or mulatto for slave inhabitants (Espiritu, 1992)

- ❑ The census schedules began to increase their coverage of ethnic minorities during what could be called the era of the *melting pot* ideology. This was done mainly due to popular concern about newcomers' characteristics and their rate of Americanization, and as such the 1870 census added two questions to determine whether either of the respondent's parents had been born abroad. Ten years later, the census recorded the specific country of birth for each parent and conducted a special census of the American Indian population. By 1890 schedule, foreign-born males were asked their length of residence in the United States and their naturalization status (Espiritu, 1992).
- ❑ In order to respond to social and political issues raised by the swelling tide of immigration, the census schedules from 1890 through 1930 increasingly attended to the complexities of ethnic identification. By 1930, the list of categories for "Race and Color" expanded to include "White, Negro, Mexican, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hindu, and Korean," plus a space for other write-in choices. After the passage of the restrictive immigration laws of the 1920s, interest in ethnic composition waned and the number and complexity of questions dealing with immigration and the foreign born were reduced (Espiritu, 1992).
- ❑ The census classification of ethno-racial groups has been problematic because Census Bureau categories have been arbitrary and inconsistent, often reflecting their administrative needs rather than the population's perceptions of meaningful cultural and racial differentiations. For example, the 1920 census stipulated that mixed race persons be reported as non-White (Espiritu, 1992). Census classifications of ethnic and racial groups appear to reflect the cultural attitudes of the people doing the counting more than representing those of the people being counted. For example in the 1970 Census, enumerators were instructed that "a person of mixed White and Negro blood was to be returned a Negro, no matter how small the percentage of Negro blood...a person of mixed White and Indian blood was to be returned as Indian" (Fox, 1996).
- ❑ It was not until the 1960 census that people were allowed to specify their own 'race.' However, if their self-descriptions did not match the preexisting

categories, the census reclassified them (Fox, 1996). For example, Puerto Ricans" and Mexicans" were reclassified as white unless they were obviously (in the eyes of the enumerator) Negro, Indian, or some other race (Espiritu, 1992). Thus, minorities had a racial identity thrust upon them regardless of how they saw themselves or were seen by others in their communities (Espiritu, 1992).

- For Americans of African decent, researchers have shown that generally, the "one-drop rule" generally prevails. This means that the black racial classification (by itself or with others) is routinely applied to African Americans with even the smallest degree of African ancestry. For African Americans, therefore, 'black/negro' race and African ancestry are closely related (Nagel, 1996). This means that even if the person looks white, the white is reserved exclusively for supposedly pure Euro-Americans (Fox, 1996). The census has been the most inconsistent in its handling of persons of Mexican origin or descent. With no significant change in the population itself, the classification of Mexicans in the United States changed from one census to the next (Espiritu, 1992).
- The census has treated, constructed and re-constructed the classification of Hispanic (Nagel, 1996). In 1930 Mexicans were counted as "other nonwhite," a vague and inaccurate label contaminated representing cultural prejudice. Anyone who was Mexican or Mexican American was presumed nonwhite, regardless of actual ancestry. Many Mexican Americans are, or appear to be, of unmixed European descent. Ten years later, they were counted as a linguistic category, "persons of Spanish mother tongue" which would not include all Mexican Americans, nor would it distinguish those included from other Spanish speaking nationalities. In 1950 and 1960, in five states with high Mexican populations in the Southwest, Mexicans had suddenly become "white persons of Spanish surname." (Fox, 1996).
- The 1970 Census created the classification that eventually became called Hispanic by gathering data on all those who met any of four criteria: Spanish surname, Hispanic origin, Spanish heritage, or mother tongue. While these criteria worked well regionally, they did not work well nationally. Spanish surname worked pretty well in the Southwest, but not in the Northeast, where there were many Italians whose surnames were indistinguishable from Spanish. In this way, Hispanics may have been over counted. However, the use of the "Spanish surname" criterion must also have undercounted by missing a lot of the people the Bureau intended to count. Migrations, intermarriages, stage names, etc., have left many Latin Americans with non-Spanish surnames (Fox, 1996).
- Before the 1970 Census, "Hispanic" was not an option on the census bureau's list of races, which forced Spanish speaking respondents to choose black, white, Indian or some other race when completing the census form. Despite their mestizo background that provides Hispanics with a range of skin colors (since many Hispanics are of mixed European, African, and Indian ancestry), the majority of Hispanics previously reported their race to be "white" (Nagel,

1996). Research has found that as many Mexican Americans rose on in socioeconomic status, they have chosen a white racial identity.

- ❑ In the past many who might not have chosen white were simply assigned that race by census coders (Nagel, 1996). This was commonly the case when there was missing data on race, which was then estimated through 'statistical allocation' or 'hot decking. This procedure involves locating a previous record for which data was missing and substituting that record's response for the missing datum. Therefore, Hispanics who did not have enough information to select a race category had one chosen for them, and it was usually chosen as "white."
- ❑ Hot decking has had enormous implications in American Indian enumeration, and the American Indian population is thought to be vastly undercounted. In addition to the 7.1 million Americans of Indian descent identified by Snipp and Eschbach in the 1980 Census, it is estimated that another "seven to eight million persons classified as "Spanish" are of Native American ancestry." These individuals are buried in the data as Hispanics who identify a non-Indian race or who do not specify a race and whom the census bureau recodes as "white." Another aspect of how confusing the 1980 census data choices were for Hispanics is the fact that more Hispanics reported their race to be "Asian" than "Indian" (Nagel, 1996).
- ❑ In the 1980 Census, 5.5 million Hispanics could not or would not identify their race from among the fourteen racial options – an event that raised a number of questions about the meaning of race to Hispanics and the ability of the census questionnaire to depict accurately the American racial landscape.
- ❑ Researcher Jose Piedra has stated that are historical reasons why race needs to be deemphasized as an ethnic boundary among Hispanics. Spanish empire builders pursued a strategy of incorporating diverse peoples of color into a Spanish-speaking linguistic community, which created a strong linguistic identity among Hispanics (Nagel, 1996). Most of Latin America there are intermediate categories. Skin color is an individual variable – not a group maker, so that within the same family one sibling might be considered white and another black (Fox, 1996).
- ❑ Not all census population growth can be attributed to immigration and birth. To illustrate this situation, demographers need only to look at the rapid increase in the number of American Indians since 1960 (Nagel, 1996). The 1980 census has been most often looked at by researchers of the Indian population for several reasons. This census recorded the largest population increase, for many years it has been the most recent U.S. census whose publication was the most complete, and it has remained one of the most studied of the United States censuses.
- ❑ From the turn of the century until 1990, the American Indian population grew from fewer than 250,000 to nearly 2 million in 1990, an increase of almost 700%. Most of this extraordinary growth occurred in post WWII decades. The

1950 census indicates that there were 359,499; a number that increased 46%, to 523,591, in the 1960 census. In 1970 an even greater increase of 51% occurred as 792,730 respondents reported their race as American Indian.

- The 1980 census recorded the largest increase to date: a 72% growth in the number of American Indians to 1,364,033. During the 1980s, the Indian population continued to increase, but at a slower rate of 38% as 1,878,285 Americans identified themselves as Indians (Nagel, 1996). There were clearly factors outside of a natural population growth rate. For example, in the Cherokee population the growth rate was at an unbelievable rate of 251%. Researchers concluded that a large number of persons counted as Cherokees in 1980 identified their race as something other than American Indian in 1970 (Nagel, 1996). The issues of why these individuals have changed their race to Indian in the 1980 and 1990 census requires an examination into the meaning of ethnic self-reconstruction, or the development of ethnic group consciousness as redefined by minority groups.

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