

Constructing Racial Categories

65 ■ Reynolds Farley

Racial Identities in 2000

The Response to the Multiple-Race Response Option

The greatest change in the measurement of race in the history of the United States occurred in the census of 2000. For more than two centuries, the federal statistical system had classified each respondent into a single race. That is no longer the case. According to the new rules, anyone may now identify with as many races as he or she desires. . . .

The efforts to change the one-race-only classification system came from individuals who believed that many Americans shared multiple racial origins, but information about the size or growth of this population was seldom presented. Indeed, no reliable data existed before the Census Bureau pretested queries for the census of 2000. Although a small number of studies attempted to estimate changes over time in the frequency of interracial marriages (Kalmijn 1993, 1998), few data sets lend themselves to the measurement of rare events; until 1967, some states prohibited marriages across racial lines, and so there are few data on the mixed-race offspring of interracial unions. However, public-use files from census data may be used to ascertain the percentage of married couples in which the husband and wife reported different races.

As a result, studies of interracial marriage have become numerous (Fu 2001; Gilbertston, Fitzpatrick, and Yang 1996; Heer 1974; Hwang, Saenz, and Aguirre 1995; Model and Fisher 2001; Qian 1997; Rosenfield 2001; Sandefur and McKinnell 1986; Schoen and Thomas 1989). Presumably, as the proportion of interracial marriages increases, so too will the percentage of children who think of themselves as multiple by race.

Table 1 reports data about interracial marriage compiled from the 1990 census and the March 2000 Current Population Survey. Spouses were classified into one of five mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories: Hispanic, non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black or African American, non-Hispanic Asian or Pacific Islander, and non-Hispanic American Indian. For these tabulations, Hispanic origin is treated as if it were equivalent to a race.

According to the table, the percentage of married couples in which the races of the spouses differ rose from 4.5 percent at the start of the 1990s to 5.4 percent at the end—an increase from 2.4 million interracial couples to about 3.0 million. This finding is consistent with previous studies that reported a

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Table 1. Estimates of Racial Inter-marriage, 1990 and 2000, by Race and Sex (Thousands)

Racial Group	Men		Women	
	1990	2000	1990	2000
White				
Number	43,710	43,809	43,546	43,590
Percentage married out	2.7	3.4	2.2	2.9
Black				
Number (000)	3,566	4,089	3,383	3,872
Percentage married out	6.3	8.4	2.4	3.3
Hispanic				
Number (000)	3,489	5,181	3,562	5,318
Percentage married out	18.7	15.0	19.9	17.2
Asian				
Number (000)	1,299	1,922	1,543	2,201
Percentage married out	11.3	9.9	24.1	21.3
American Indian				
Number (000)	300	351	330	371
Percentage married out	57.8	52.3	61.5	53.9
Total				
Number (000)	52,364	55,352	52,364	55,352
Percentage married out	4.5	5.4	4.5	5.4

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Public Use Microdata Files from the 5 Percent Sample of the Census of 1990 and from the March 2000 Current Population Survey.

Note: These data tabulate the race of spouses for persons married and living with a spouse. Five mutually exclusive races were used: Hispanic, non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black, non-Hispanic Asian (including Pacific Islanders), and non-Hispanic American Indian.

secular trend toward increasing interracial marriage, especially among blacks and whites (Farley 1999, figures 5.7 and 5.8). Presumably, a growing but still small minority of children have parents of different races.

The primary reason for change through the 1990s was that white and black men and women increasingly married persons from races other than their own. The percentage of black men with nonblack wives rose from 6.3 to 8.4 percent, while that of white men with nonwhite wives went from 2.7 to 3.4 percent. Interestingly, the percentage of Hispanic and Asian spouses marrying outside their race decreased. Migration from abroad has produced rapid growth for these groups. Immigrant enclaves are getting much larger, and this presumably promotes greater racial homogeneity for Hispanics and Asians who marry, especially among immigrants. . . .

The Official Governmental Decision About Measuring Race

Because the new 1997 OMB (Office of Management and Budget) guidelines for measuring race will have consequences for decades to come, it is important to summarize them carefully. They include the following:

- When self-identification is used to identify race in the federal statistical system, respondents should be given the opportunity to identify with more than one race, but the term "multiracial" is not to be used. Rather, the names of specific races are to be presented as choices for the respondent.
- When self-identification is the method of data collection, separate questions should be asked to determine race and Hispanic ethnicity.

- The Hispanic-ethnicity question should precede the race question (an important change from the 1990 census procedure).
- "Arab" and "Cape Verdean" should not be used as races. (Spokespersons for these groups had advocated the addition of these terms as races.)
- The term "American Indian" should not be replaced by "Native American," but the term "Hawaiian" should be replaced by "Native Hawaiian."
- The term "Alaskan Native" should replace "Aleut" or "Eskimo."
- Asian races should be distinguished from Pacific Islander races. A broad racial category called "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander" (NHOPI or NHPI) should be used.
- The five major racial categories to be used are white, black or African American, American Indian, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander.

The radical shift away from the assumption that each person had only one racial identity did not occur because powerful civil rights organization or professional associations advocated a change nor because federal enforcement agencies demanded improved data to carry out the responsibilities mandated by Congress and the courts. Rather, a small number of persistent advocates who were greatly upset by the status quo effectively challenged the traditional system. They found a sympathetic hearing in Congress and in the Clinton administration: elected and appointed officials did not want to be in the untenable position of insisting that a person had only one racial identity when he or she wished to identify with two or more races. The idea that every individual can be classified as a member of a single race may gradually disappear in the United States, just as the idea that people were either Angles or Saxons disappeared in England.

How the OMB Guidelines Were Put into Operation for the 2000 Enumeration

After data were gathered in 2000, the Census Bureau developed coding rules to process the results. These rules increased the number of major races by adding a sixth option, "some other race." Persons who identified with a single race—those who either checked only one box or checked no box but wrote a term directly denoting race, such as white, black, or African American, in the "some other race" space or anywhere near the race question on the census questionnaire—were classified into one major race.

Other respondents presented challenges, and the Census Bureau devised new procedures for their classification. A person who marked two Asian races, such as Chinese and Vietnamese, or two Pacific Islander races, such as Guamanian and Samoan, was classified as identifying with a single major race—Asian or NHOPI, respectively.

Although not consistent with OMB recommendations, the Census 2000 enumeration form included a "some other race" box where a respondent could write a word or phrase. The size of the multiple race population depended greatly upon the coding procedures the Census Bureau developed for coding entries written in the "some other race" box.

If a person wrote any term indicating a Hispanic origin, he or she was automatically considered to be "other" by race. For example, a person who wrote Castilian, Cuban, or Argentinean was classified into the "other" race category. If the respondent had already checked a box for his or her and then wrote a Hispanic term, he or she was multiple by race. Thus persons who marked white or black for their race and then went on to write Dominican or Puerto Rican in the "some other race" box were classified as multiracial. This explains why two of the most frequently reported combinations

Table 2. Population by Number of Races Reported, 2000 Census

Number of Races Reported	Number	Percentage of Total Population
One only	274,595,678	97.4
Two	6,368,075	2.3
Three	410,285	0.1
Four	38,408	<0.1
Five	8,637	<0.1
Six	823	<0.1
Total	281,421,906	100.0

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001, table 1.

were white and "some other race" and black and "some other race."

If a person wrote a term in the "some other race" box indicating an origin other than Hispanic, the Census Bureau may or may not have classified that individual into the "other" race category. The agency considered the word or phrase written on the 2000 Census form and then examined data for persons who wrote that same word or phrase for their ancestry in the enumeration of 1990. If 70 percent or more of the persons reporting that ancestry in 1990 identified with a specific race, that race was assigned to the 2000 respondent. If less than 70 percent of those reporting that ancestry in 1990 had identified with a race, then the person was considered "other" by race in 2000. Several examples illustrate this procedure. Those who wrote French or Irish in the "some other race" box on the Census 2000 form were classified as white since more than 70 percent of those reporting French or Irish as their ancestry in 1990 had marked white for their race. Those who wrote South African in the "some other race" box in Census 2000 were considered to be "other" by race since, in the 1990 census, those writing South African for their ancestry reported a variety of races: white, black, and Asian Indian. These coding rules mean that if a person marked white in 2000 and then went on to write "Spanish" in the "some other race" box, he or she was multiracial just as was a person who checked black and then wrote "Dominican" in the "some other race" box. However, a person who checked white on the Census 2000 and then

wrote "French" or "Italian" in the "some other race" box was not multiple by race.

Identifying with Multiple Races: How Many Used This Option?

There were no instructions on the census form telling a respondent what to do to be tabulated as multiracial. Thus, the reported size of the multiracial population largely results from Census Bureau coding rules.

As table 2 indicates, 6.8 million of the 281.4 million Americans counted in 2000 marked two or more boxes or wrote a Hispanic-origin term for their second race, such that they were classified as identifying with two or more of the six major races used in the census. Approximately one American in forty identified with two races, whereas about one in one thousand marked boxes to identify with three or more races. Fewer than one thousand persons checked sufficient numbers of boxes to identify with all six major races.

Table 3 lists the racial combinations reported by at least one hundred thousand in 2000; the pie chart in figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the multirace population. The most popular combination—reported by one-third of those who identified with two or more races—was white and "some other race." Typically, these were people who marked both the box for white and the box for "some other race" and then wrote in a term denoting Hispanic origin. White and American Indian was the next most popular combination, followed by white and Asian. The most commonly

Table 3. Frequency of Report of Multiple-Race Ancestry, 2000 Census

Racial Combination	Number Reported	Share of the Total Multiple-Race Population (Percentage)
Most Frequently Reported		
White and some other race	2,206,251	32.3
White and American Indian	1,082,683	15.9
White and Asian	868,395	12.7
White and black	784,764	11.5
Black and some other race	417,249	6.1
Asian and some other race	249,108	3.6
Black and American Indian	182,494	2.7
Asian and NHOPI	138,802	2.0
White and NHOPI	112,964	1.7
White, black, and American Indian	112,207	1.6
Black and Asian	106,782	1.6
All other combinations	564,529	8.3
Least Frequently Reported		
White-Black-Indian-NHOPI-some other race	68	<0.1
Black-Indian-NHOPI-some other race	111	<0.1
Indian-Asian-NHOPI-some other race	207	<0.1
Black-Indian-Asian-NHOPI-some other race	216	<0.1
White-Indian-NHOPI-some other race	309	<0.1
White-black-NHOPI-some other race	325	<0.1
Black-Indian-Asian-some other race	334	<0.1
White-black-Asian-NHOPI-some other race	379	<0.1
Indian-NHOPI-some other race	586	<0.1
White-Indian-Asian-NHOPI-some other race	639	<0.1
Total	6,826,228	100.0

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001.

Note: NHOPI refers to the major racial group of Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders. Ninety-seven percent of those who marked "Some other race" as their only race went on to identify with a Spanish-Hispanic-Latino origin on the separate Hispanic-origin inquiry. Fifty-eight percent of those who marked "Some other race" in combination with one or more other major races went on to identify with a Spanish-Hispanic-Latino origin.

reported second race for those who marked the box for black was also "some other race," just as it was for whites. Subsequent data from the census will allow us to confirm the hypothesis that many of the individuals who identified themselves as black and "some other race" were Caribbeans or Central Americans who identified with their African origin and then wrote a Spanish term, such as Dominican. The only three-race combination marked by one hundred thousand or more respondents was white, black, and American Indian—reflecting, undoubtedly, the high rates at which American Indians have married outside their own race since the arrival of the first Europeans.

The Census of 2000 provides counts for 6 major race designations (including "some other") and for all possible combinations of multiple reporting. There are 57 such possible combinations of 2 to 6 races—implying that this enumeration gives us counts for 63 distinct races or combinations of races down to the lowest level of census geography, the city block. When these 63 races are tabulated according to reported Hispanic ethnicity, data are available for 126 different groups.

Table 3 also lists the ten least frequently reported races. Some people identified with every one of the combinations, but fewer than ten thousand persons identified with 35 of the

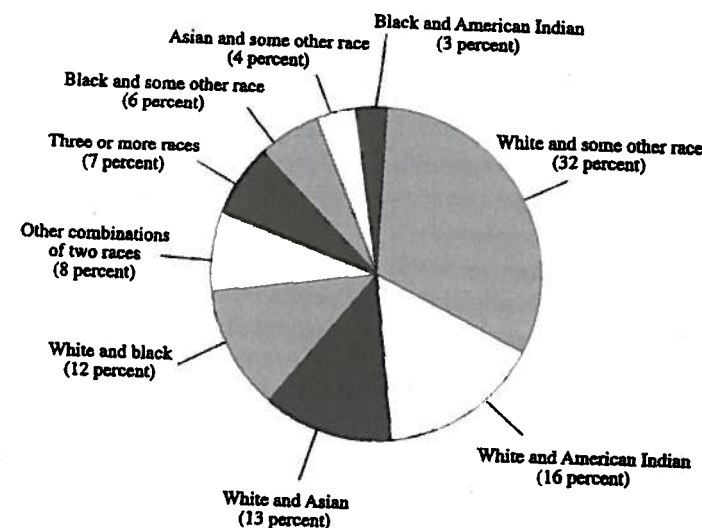


Figure 1. Distribution of the Multiple-Race Population, 2000
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001.

57 possible multiple race groups, and fewer than one thousand persons checked boxes to identify with 14 of the combinations. As this table shows, the combination white-black-American Indian-NHOPI-some other race was chosen least frequently, with a national count of just sixty-eight persons. Most of the 57 multiple-race combinations were reported so infrequently that the groups will not be subject to scholarly analysis.

Maximum and Minimum Counts of the Race in 2000

The 2000 census data generate thirty-two different estimates of the size of each of the major races; that is, it provides a count of those who identified with each race only, five different counts for the two-race combination involving each race, ten different counts for both three-race and four-race combinations, five different counts for five-race combinations, and, finally, the count that includes persons who claimed all six major races. No longer is there an unambiguous answer to the question, how many whites, or how many American Indians, did the census count.

Figure 2 presents a comparison of the minimum and maximum counts of each of the six major race categories. There are substantial differences between these counts. Among those who marked a box to report they were white by race, for example, few went on to identify with a second race, and so the minimum count of whites is close to the maximum count. Among Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, however, there were many more who identified with a second or third race than who identified as NHOPI only.

Whites and African Americans differed from the other major races in that those who identified as white or black were relatively unlikely to identify with a second race—thus the minimum and maximum counts are fairly similar. Although 5.2 million Americans marked both white and a second race, 97.4 percent of those who marked white claimed white as their only race. Among those who marked black, 95.2 percent marked only black-African American-Negro.

The "some other race" group presented in figure 2 is largely—but not entirely—made up of Latinos; 90.4 percent of those who checked the "some other race" box went on

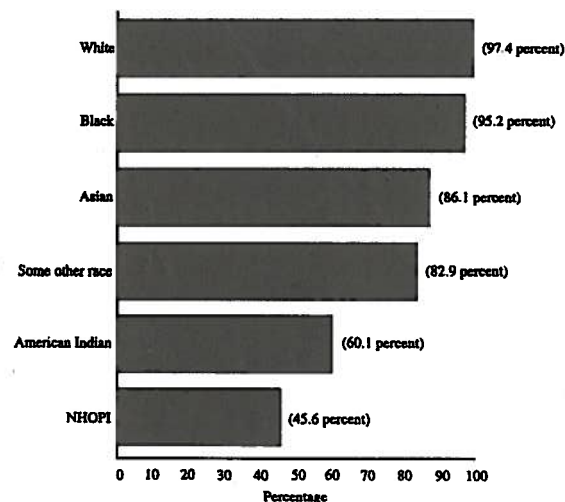


Figure 2. Minimum Counts of Census Race Groups—Races as Percentage of Maximum Counts, 2000

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001.

to claim a Spanish-Hispanic-Latino identity on the distinct Hispanic-ethnicity question. Of those who checked only the "some other race" box, 97 percent marked themselves as Hispanic in origin.

American Indians and the NHOPI races were distinguished by the frequency with which they were reported in combination with other races. The estimates of the American Indian population are spread across a broad range in the census of 2000: from 2.5 million who identified uniquely with this race to a maximum of 4.1 million, if those who marked Indian along with a second or third race are included in the count. . . .

Conclusion

Putting this new conceptualization of race into practice on the self-administered census form presented a formidable challenge to the Census Bureau. Their decision was to classify all persons into one or more of six race categories: white, black, American Indian, Asian, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, and "some other race."

Current regulations of the Office of Management and Budget strongly recommend that

the Hispanic-origin question be asked, in addition to the mandatory race question. This may confuse respondents and certainly adds a burden for users of data: approximately 40 percent of those who identified with a Hispanic origin in both the 1990 and 2000 censuses did not mark a box for any one of the major races. Instead, they wrote a term denoting a Hispanic origin for their race and were thereby classified by the Census Bureau as "some other race."

In the census of 2000, approximately 2.4 percent of the total population—one person in forty—identified with two or more races. This number is misleading, however, because it includes those who wrote in a term denoting Hispanic origin for their second race. If those who wrote in a Hispanic-origin term are excluded, approximately 1.6 percent of the population identified with two or more of the five major races—that is, about one person in sixty-five.

Multiple-race reporting was more common among the young, reflecting the demographic consequences of increasing interracial marriage. Among those under the age of eighteen, 4.4 percent identified with two or more races; among those eighteen years and older, that figure fell to 1.9 percent. If those who were counted as multiple in race because they wrote in a Hispanic-origin term for their second race are excluded, then the multiple-race population accounted for 3.2 percent of the population under the age of eighteen and 1.4 percent for their elders. Stated differently, about one American child in thirty-one was reported to be multiracial, compared with one in seventy-one for the population eighteen and older.

The reporting of multiple races displays strong geographic patterns. It is most common in Hawaii, Alaska, and California. Given the large black and white populations, the history of miscegenation, and a significant literature describing generations of mulattoes, one might expect multiple-race reporting to be high in the southern states. Instead, such reporting was lowest in the Deep South. . . .

The social movement that led to the change in racial identification has not been active in the years since census data were collected. It has faded. Because of apparent increases in marriages across racial lines, however, there will inevitably be a growing population of children whose parents differ by race. At this point, we do not know whether the current OMB racial classification system will be readily used by these individuals or whether many of them may identify with the race of one parent in some circumstances and that of the other parent in other circumstances. The traditional system of categorizing persons according to membership in a unique race is no longer accurate nor acceptable, but it is far from certain that the approach used in Census 2000 is practical, ideal, or useful (Skerry 2000).

We have yet to determine whether the concept "multiracial" will enter popular discourse. I believe that it will not, and that into the foreseeable future, most people will continue to assume that every American has a "basic" or "essential" race.

The multiple-race option is a dramatic change in the federal statistical system, but there is a telling demographic analogy. From 1870 through 1970 the census asked the birthplaces of respondents' parents. After the restrictive immigration laws of the early twentieth century went into effect, the second-generation population declined, and in 1980, an open-ended question about ancestry supplanted the query on parents' birthplaces. Respondents were encouraged to write in a term or terms to identify their ethnicity, ancestry, or national origin. The Census Bureau coded the first two terms unless the individual had entered a religious identity. At first glance, one might assume that analysts would exploit these new ancestry data to describe patterns of ethnic intermarriage, the nation's ethnic heterogeneity, and the way ancestry or national origin was

linked to achievement. Few scholars, however, have analyzed ancestry and multiple-ancestry information from the last three censuses, and as far as I know, these data have not been used by governmental agencies.

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