Background:

“Changes for 2020 (Race/Ethnicity, Household Relationship, and Disclosure Avoidance)” was presented by Charles Rynerson at the symposium Making Oregon Count 2020 held in November 2019. Rynerson is the Interim Director for the Population Research Center at Portland State University.

The 2020 Census will feature some changes to questions regarding race/ethnicity and household relationships. Additionally, there will be changes to the published data tables to comply with Title 13, Section 9 of the US Code by protecting the privacy of respondents.

Changes Regarding Race and Ethnicity Question:

Questions regarding race have been asked on every census since 1790, and a Hispanic origin question has been asked since the 1970 Census. There was a proposal to combine race and ethnicity into one question and include a Middle Eastern/North African category, but these changes were not adopted by the Office of Management and Budget.

For the 2020 Census, the race/ethnicity questions will have some minor changes but the major categories will remain unchanged. The changes will be to checkbox options, write-in responses, and wording. White and Black or African American individuals will now have the opportunity to specify their specific ethnic origins if they choose to do so. For example, respondents can check a race box and also self-identify as Irish, or Jamaican, for example. Individuals will not be limited to one origin, which will likely be a large logistical undertaking for coding. Lastly, language such as “Negro” and “Guamanian” that appeared on previous censuses will be removed.

Changes Regarding Household Relationship Statuses:

For household relationships, which have been asked on every census since 1880, there will be changes to differentiate between married and unmarried opposite-sex and same-sex couples. The options for “Husband or Wife,” “Roomer or boarder,” and “Unmarried partner” have been removed. There will be an additional option for foster children, however. “Roomer or boarder” will be changed to “Roommate/Housemate.” Two married couples living in one household would be difficult to capture as the information collected for each person is based on their relationship to person 1.

Differential Privacy and Changes for Published Census Data:

The largest change regarding the 2020 census is regarding disclosure avoidance. Title 13, Section 9 of the US Code bars the US Census Bureau from releasing identifiable data “furnished by any particular establishment or individual.” In other words, the US Census Bureau cannot release information that could lead to the identification of a particular individual or household. This has become a problem due to the proliferation of commercial databases and advancements in computer power so traditional methods for data privacy protection are no longer satisfactory.

To solve this issue, the Census Bureau will use differential privacy. Differential privacy “quantifies the precise amount of re-identification risk for all data products produced no matter what external data is available now, or in the future.” This will add noise to the data which will restrict data at certain geographical levels and may cause some statistics to no longer be statistically useful due to high margins.
of error. In other words, differential privacy and disclosure will come at the expense of data accuracy. There is a demonstration file available on the census website to demonstrate how the information from the 2010 census would change based on differential privacy.

**Quick Note on Income Data and the American Community Survey:**

Income information comes from the American Community Survey. The American Community Survey will continue to be conducted during the 2020 Census, which may cause confusion for the small sample of households that are asked to respond to both.

**Additional Reference Materials:**

- Questions included on the 2020 Census
  - [Sample Copy of the 2020 Census Questionnaire](#)
  - [Questions Planned for the 2020 Census and American Community Survey](#)
    - Includes descriptions of how data derived from each question are used by government programs, researchers, advocacy groups, and policymakers.
    - Note: this document released in March 2018 includes a citizenship question that was later removed from the form.

- Differential Privacy
  - [The Definition of Differential Privacy - Cynthia Dwork (YouTube)](#)
  - [Disclosure Avoidance and the 2020 Census](#)