How Will Indians Be Counted in the 2020 Census?

There is a simple answer to that question. Anyone who checks the box for American Indian or Alaska Native in response to the race question on a Census form will be counted as an American Indian or Alaska Native person, AI/AN in Census parlance. It's all a matter of self-identification. No proof is requested or required.

The Census Bureau changed its enumeration procedures in the 1960 to 1980 time frame. Before then a person's race was determined by a Census taker in a face-to-face interview. Within that period respondents were finally given the right to choose their own race. In those days just one race was permitted as an answer to the question.

Self-identification produced a considerable increase in the Census count of AI/AN persons. The count in 1980 was over two-and-a-half times larger than the count in 1960, a result in part of the change in the way a person's race was determined.

But there is also a complicated answer to the question.

In 2000 the Census Bureau, following a revision to the federal-wide racial classification system mandated by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), permitted, even encouraged persons filling out a Census form to check the boxes for more than one race. This produced an enormous difference in the AI/AN count.

In 2000 a total of 2,475,956 persons identified AI/AN as their only race (called "AI/AN alone" by the Census and referred to in this newsletter as AI/AN "only.") A total of 1,643,345 others identified as AI/AN and simultaneously with one or more other races (called AI/AN "in combination with one or more other races" by the Census Bureau, AI/AN "multi-racial" in this newsletter.) This produced a total count of everyone who checked the AI/AN box in answer to the race question of 4,119,301.

In the 2010 decennial Census both the AI/AN only and AI/AN multi-racial numbers were higher. A total of 2,932,248 persons identified as AI/AN only. A total of 2,288,331 others identified a AI/AN and simultaneously as members of one or more other races.

So the Census Bureau now counts persons as AI/AN in two ways. One nearly doubles the total number of persons checking the AI/AN box on the race question.

The count of AI/AN persons is further complicated by another factor. American Indians and Alaska Natives are not simply considered as a major racial group. They are also a unique group with special political rights under federal law. For these purposes
they are defined under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (PL 93-638) as "members of an Indian tribe," meaning a federally-recognized tribe.

Members, that is citizens, of each tribe are determined by the enrollment process specific to that tribe. Only individual tribes have accurate records of the total count of their member/citizens, a count that can change at any time.

These complications produce multiple and very different counts of the total number of American Indian and Alaska Native people in the US.

For 2020, the Census questionnaire will pose the race question this way:

![Image of Census questionnaire]

The question on American Indian/Alaska Native identity looks like this:

![Image of American Indian or Alaska Native question]

Everyone checking the box is counted as AI/AN. If the person checks only this box among the six choices of racial groups, the Census Bureau counts the person as AI/AN only. If the person checks this box and one or more of the boxes for other racial groups, she or he is counted as AI/AN multi-racial and included in the Census tallies of "AI/AN alone or in combination" persons. The Bureau usually combines both counts in its tables of persons identifying as "AI/AN alone or in combination" (with one or more other racial groups.)

In looking at the historic patterns, many who now identify as AI/AN multi-racial appear to be persons who, in the past, would have put an AI/AN group in response to the separate question on ancestry and identified their race as other than AI/AN.

Another important factor is the way AI/AN counts are shown in various Census tables. The Bureau-published tables generally feature the AI/AN only counts, though there are some counts of the total AI/AN only and multi-racial populations. In the ACS, most tables feature counts for just the AI/AN only population.
In some uses of Census data, persons identifying as AI/AN multi-racial are grouped with others also identifying with multiple races in a single catch-all category of persons who identify with two or more races.

For the last several decennial censuses, a number of tribes and Native organizations promoting participation in the decennial census have encouraged their members and clients to identify as AI/AN only, regardless of whether all of their ancestors were AI/AN or not. This insures that they are included in every Census count of the AI/AN population.

One final point. Persons identifying as of Hispanic origin will also be counted as AI/AN, either only or multi-racial, if the person checks Yes in response to the completely separate question on ethnicity and AI/AN in response to the question on race.

The Citizenship Question Strikes Out Three Times in Federal District Court

The question on whether each person counted in the 2020 decennial Census is a US citizen or not, ordered included on the questionnaire by Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, has been ruled contrary to federal law and ordered off the questionnaire by three separate federal District Court judges. Its fate now rests with the US Supreme Court, which is scheduled to hear arguments on the issue on April 23rd.

In the first ruling, handed down by Judge Jesse Furman in a New York case found that the citizenship question violated federal law as an "arbitrary and capricious" decision by the Secretary of Commerce and ordered it stricken from the questionnaire.

Since that decision in January, two other federal judges have found the same problem and also ordered the question off the 2020 form. In addition those two judges, one in a California case and one in a Maryland case that included an Indian organization plaintiff, found the same problem. In both of those cases, the judges also ruled that the decision to add a citizenship question violated the provision in the US Constitution that requires an actual enumeration of the total population in the decennial census.