Tribes and the 2020 Census

Wording of the Race Question on the 2020 Census Recommended by Census Bureau Officials

Census Bureau officials have recommended a number of changes in how the question on race should be asked in the 2020 Census. The biggest change involves combining what have previously been two separate questions on the Census form: asking a person to identify his or her race and a different question asking whether the person is Hispanic or not.

These recommendations would result in the combined question reading like this:

"What is [this person's] race or ethnicity?

Mark all boxes that apply AND print ethnicities in the spaces below:
Note, you may report more than one group."

Eight separate race and ethnic groups would be listed:

• White
• Hispanic, Latino or Spanish
• Black or African-American
• Asian
• American Indian or Alaska Native
• Middle Eastern or North African
• Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
• Some Other Race or Ethnicity

The idea is to list the groups in the order of their size in the total US population. The American Indian or Alaska Native category was fourth on the list of the race groups in the last several decennial censuses. It would drop to fifth with this listing.

The recommendations of Census Bureau officials would also change the wording of the American Indian / Alaska Native question.

The paper version of the 2020 questionnaire would look like this:
There would be a similar version of the question on the 2020 Census form that's available on the Internet. That questionnaire would be submitted electronically.

The language would replace the wording used in previous Censuses that said simply: "Print name of enrolled of principal tribe."

The examples of tribal names shown above are drawn from the three principal groups defined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as part of the American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) race category: American Indians, Alaska Natives and Central and South American Indians.

These and other recommendations involving the racial and ethnic question for the 2020 Census were contained in the final report on the Census Bureau's "National Content Test." The nearly 400 page report was released on February 28th. The National Content Test (NCT) itself was conducted through a major nationwide survey in 2015.

The recommendations of Census Bureau officials must now be formally approved by the Bureau Director, then sent to OMB for further approval and submitted to the Congress in April of 2018.

At first glance the changes relating to the race question may appear relatively minor and, for the most part, rather technical. However, they could have a major effect on how many persons are counted as AI/AN in 2020.

Some background information is helpful in judging the significance of the changes.

Starting with the 2000 Census persons could identify with more than one racial group. A person could check just the box for AI/AN or could check that box and also one or more boxes for other races.

This resulted in two very different counts of the Native population. One was the count of persons that checked only the AI/AN box (called by the Census Bureau the AI/AN "alone" population) and those that checked the AI/AN box along with other boxes. The Census Bureau calls those checking AI/AN and other boxes the AI/AN "in
combination" population (in combination with one or more other races). These persons can be considered as the AI/AN multi-racial population.

The Bureau publishes counts for both the AI/AN only ("alone") population and the sum of the AI/AN only and AI/AN multi-racial (AI/AN "alone or in combination") population.

In 2010 the number of persons who said their race was AI/AN only was over 2.9 million. An additional 2.3 million said they were AI/AN and also a member of another race for a total AI/AN "alone or in combination" population of 5.2 million.

Much less noticed was the fact that in 2010 nearly 700,000 persons said that they were AI/AN only and Hispanic. They represented nearly 24% of the total AI/AN only count.

If the 2010 Census had used the combined race/ethnicity question that the Bureau staff is recommending be used in 2020, the AI/AN only count would have dropped from 2.9 million to 2.2 million. The 700,000 persons who said they were AI/AN only and Hispanic would have been counted as AI/AN multi-racial instead.

To date the Census Bureau appears to have given little if any attention to the implications of such a drop in the AI/AN only count, should it occur in 2020 as a result of combining the race and ethnicity items into a single question.

Another major issue involving the 2020 Census has now faded into the background. This is an idea that figured prominently in previous Census Bureau research. It involved adding a question on tribal enrollment to the Census questionnaire.

After some testing and discussion at the many tribal consultations the Bureau conducted around the country, the Census Bureau Director agreed to drop the matter. In reaching that decision he cited the strong opposition of a number of tribal leaders and a resolution opposing a question on enrollment passed by the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).

**Impact of the New Administration on the 2020 Census and the ACS**

At the moment, the impact of the new Administration on the Census Bureau and its programs is largely unknown.

John Thompson, the Bureau's Director for the last four-and-a-half years, remains in place. Unless another person is nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate or unless he is reappointed for another five-year term, he can remain as Director for no more than one more year.
As the head of the Bureau, Director Thompson has been unusually attentive to Indian issues, personally participating in nearly all of the tribal consultations on the 2020 Census.

The biggest question currently looming over the Bureau's activities involves the agency's budget. The budget for the Census Bureau, as for most other federal agencies, has yet to be finalized for the current Fiscal Year that is now nearly half over. In addition, the Administration is expected to release its budget recommendations for the coming Fiscal Year in the near future. Major cuts in many federal programs and in federal staff are expected.

With a major ramp-up in both money and personnel essential as the Bureau enters into its final preparations for the 2020 decennial census, final funding decisions for both the rest of this year and for 2018 are crucial.

Cuts could adversely affect the final tests of Census procedures, including the possibility of a test in a reservation area. Uncertainty about the Bureau's funding for 2017 led the agency to cancel the two tests originally scheduled for this April on the Standing Rock and Colville reservations.

Cuts could also severely affect the Bureau's outreach and promotion efforts for 2020. The tribal liaison program, critical to getting a meaningful count of the Indian on-reservation population, the Indian population in the former reservations areas in Oklahoma and the Alaska Native population in rural Alaska, is an important part of these outreach and promotion efforts.

The fate of the American Community Survey (ACS) also hangs in the balance. The newly installed Director of OMB, a former Congressman from South Carolina, has been highly critical of the ACS in the past. Though its counts in Indian Country are open to question, the ACS remains the only source of detailed demographic data on the Indian population at the reservation level for every reservation in the country.

Many questions, few answers. That will change over the next few months as the personnel and money issues are resolved in final action on the FY 2017 and FY 2018 budgets.

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