2020 Census Will Continue to Ask Separate Questions on Race and Ethnicity

The Census Bureau announced today that it would continue to ask separate questions about a person's race and about the person's ethnicity in the 2020 Census. American Indian and Alaska Native is one of the five major race groups. The separate ethnicity question asks whether the person is Hispanic or not.

The Census Bureau has conducted nearly a decade of intensive testing on whether the two questions should be combined; in effect, whether Hispanic should be listed as a race. As a result of that testing the Bureau concluded that adding Hispanic to the list of racial categories would produce better results, substantially reducing the number of Hispanic persons who checked the box for "Some Other Race" on the race question because they do not identify with any of the five major races.

Following through on this testing, the Bureau recommended to the Office of Management and Budget last spring that there be just one combined race/ethnicity question on the 2020 Census. OMB has now vetoed the Bureau's recommendation. Exactly why OMB did so remains a mystery at this point.

Although the issue has been treated as a matter affecting only the Hispanic community, it has significant implications for the count of the American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) population as well.

The Census Bureau publishes two very different counts of the AI/AN population. One, the most frequently cited, is a count of those who identify only as American Indians or Alaska Natives on the race question regardless of their ancestry. They do not check more than one box in identifying their race, as has been permitted since the 2000 Census. Such persons are referred to in Census Bureau data tables and publications as the AI/AN "alone" population. In this newsletter, they are referred to as the AI/AN "only" population, intended as a better descriptive term.

Those persons who identify with AI/AN and one or more other races are considered by the Census Bureau as AI/AN persons "in combination" with one or more other races. These persons are not included in the AI/AN only counts but are included in the Census data for the AI/AN "alone or in combination" population.

This is where the issue of keeping the Hispanic identification separate from the racial identification comes in.
**Indians Who Also Identify As Hispanic**

In the 2010 Census nearly 700,000 persons (685,150 to be exact) checked only the AI/AN box on the race question and then said they were Hispanic in response to the separate ethnicity question on the Census form. They were all counted in the Census Bureau's tabulations as AI/AN only. They made up almost 25% of the entire AI/AN only population in that decennial census.

If a combined race/ethnicity question had been used in the 2010 Census, those 700,000 persons would have been dropped from the count of AI/AN only, reducing that count from roughly 2.9 million to about 2.25 million, more than 200 thousand below the comparable number in the 2000 Census. That might well have given rise to stories in the press about the "vanishing Indian."

As the story in this newsletter back in October of 2016 noted, those identifying as AI/AN only and Hispanic live mostly in major metropolitan areas.

Nearly 66,000 were in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) and over 61,000 were in the MSA that includes New York City. The 12 MSAs with the largest numbers of AI/AN only-Hispanic persons, each with more than 10,000, were all in the Southwest with just three exceptions -- the MSA that includes New York City, the MSA that includes Chicago and the MSA that includes Washington, DC.

A little under 4% of the persons counted as AI/AN only-Hispanic in 2010 lived in reservation areas. There were just 9 reservations where such persons accounted for more than 10% of the total AI/AN only population. All but one was in the Southwest.

If the Census Bureau's recommendation that the race and ethnicity questions be combined had been adopted, all the persons identifying as both AI/AN and Hispanic would be moved to the AI/AN "alone and in combination" category in the Bureau's tabulations. That same approach would have carried over into the data from the Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) -- data that is used for fund allocation in the Section 166 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Native American programs.

The Census Bureau is required by law to submit a final list of the questions it intends to ask in both the upcoming decennial census and future data collection in the ACS to Congress by March 31st of this year.

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