Collecting and Publishing Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity: Understanding OMB Directive 15

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Accurate, detailed data on our nation's racial and ethnic composition, and information on how those data intersect with education, employment, housing, health care, political representation, and other important social institutions, are essential for realizing goals of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

The Office of Management and Budget's Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 (Directive 15) sets forth the minimum set of categories that federal agencies must use when they collect information on race and ethnicity.[1] Directive 15 includes guidance on appropriate ways to collect and publish the data to help ensure consistency across all federal agencies that conduct surveys — including the Census Bureau — and administer programs. Importantly, through providing the parameters for data collection of race and ethnicity standards, Directive 15 also supports effective enforcement and monitoring of civil rights laws.

Current Race and Ethnicity Data Standards

Race	*Ethnicity*[2]
➜ American Indian or Alaska Native ➜ Asian ➜ Black or African American ➜ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander ➜ White ➜ If a respondent identifies with more than one race, they can select multiple races, but there can be no "multiracial" category[3]	➜ Hispanic or Latino ➜ Not Hispanic or Latino

Figure 1 (below) shows how the race and ethnicity questions appeared on the 2020 Census.

Interpreting and Using Data Under the Current Standards

The current standards offer some flexibility with respect to data collection. Applying best practices can also help advocates analyze and use multiple race responses correctly.

First, Directive 15 allows federal agencies to collect more detailed race and ethnicity information, provided that any additional categories can be aggregated to the minimum standard set of categories. So, for example, the decennial census and American Community Survey (ACS) allow respondents to check off or write in one or more national origins, subgroups, or American Indian tribes (e.g., Nigerian, Korean, Polish, Cherokee, Chamorro, Puerto Rican) in the race and Hispanic origin questions.

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[1] The policy is officially called the *Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity*.
[2] Hispanics can be of any race under the current standards.
[3] The option to choose more than one race was added in the 1997 revisions to Directive 15 and offered for the first time in the 2000 Census.

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Second, Directive 15 allows respondents to select more than one race. Because of this flexible policy, data users should consider the following reporting formats when deciding which set of data to use for different purposes:

➜ The data are reported for respondents who selected one race group only (e.g., "Black or African American alone"), followed by another "Two or more races" category that aggregates all respondents who selected two or more races.

➜ The data are reported for respondents who selected only one race group, as well as for those who selected two or more races, with separate categories for each multiracial combination (e.g., "White and Black or African American," "Black or African American, Asian, and American Indian or Alaska Native").

➜ The data combine respondents who selected each race group, whether alone and/or in combination with two or more other races (e.g., "Asian alone or in combination").

Finally, while Directive 15 does not provide for a "Some Other Race" (SOR) category, Congress has mandated that the Census Bureau offer a SOR response option in the decennial census and the ACS.

Improving the Current Standards

OMB Directive 15 no longer reflects the full racial and ethnic diversity of the nation's population or the way many people choose to identify themselves. Without comprehensive standards, some race and ethnic groups are left out of government statistics, and inequalities they face may go unrecognized and unaddressed. Census stakeholders in the civil rights community, joined by many researchers and academics, have urged OMB to update and modernize the standards. Priority proposals for improvements include:

➜ Adding a new, discrete ethnic category for people from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

➜ Allowing a combined race and ethnicity question.

➜ Providing guidance to data users on ways to bridge data collected through separate race and ethnicity questions — if the Census Bureau and other agencies use a combined question going forward.

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Figure 1 - Race and ethnicity questions under Directive 15 (from 2020 Census)

Is this person of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

☐ **No**, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin

☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano

☐ Yes, Puerto Rican

☐ Yes, Cuban

☐ Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – *Print, for example, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc.* ↙

What is this person's race?
Mark ☒ *one or more boxes* **AND** *print origins.*

☐ White – *Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc.* ↙

☐ Black or African Am. – *Print, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc.* ↙

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native – *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc.* ↙

☐ Chinese   ☐ Vietnamese   ☐ Native Hawaiian
☐ Filipino   ☐ Korean   ☐ Samoan
☐ Asian Indian   ☐ Japanese   ☐ Chamorro
☐ Other Asian – ☐ Other Pacific Islander –
Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc. ↙   *Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc.* ↙

☐ Some other race – *Print race or origin.* ↙