

# Race Counts: Racial and Ethnic Data on the U.S. Census and the Implications for Tracking Inequality

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## Abstract

This article is a critical review of racial and ethnic categories on the U.S. Census with a focus on how the census categories affect opportunities to track racial and ethnic inequality. The authors summarize how motivations behind the census categories changed from a historical basis in controlling people of color and protecting Whiteness toward a contemporary orientation around equity. Yet, many issues remain that confound the racial and ethnic census data, which are then used in research. A look at these issues and possible changes for the upcoming 2020 census serves as a critical reminder of the limitations of the census data. Taking this information into account, the authors conclude with comments and suggestions on the principles underlying racial and ethnic data collection on the census and the implications for tracking inequality.

## Keywords

census, race, classification, identification, ancestry, nationality, inequality

The United States started the decennial census in 1790, and a race question has been present on every census since then. However, the race question has undergone many changes as it has reflected the political motivations and the racial thinking of each era. For the majority of the existence of the census, Whiteness and power motivated the addition and removal of racial groups, the names for racial groups, and the use of census officials to observe and record the race of participants. Since the Civil Rights Movement, the motivation behind the Census Bureau's racial and ethnic categories changed to a need to record race in order to document inequality. Yet, modifications to the race (and now also ethnicity) question remain ongoing as the Census Bureau continues to face difficulties in capturing something as complex as racial and ethnic identity (Hochschild and Powell 2008; Prewitt 2013; Snipp 2003). Issues such as how individuals self-identify, who counts as members of what racial or ethnic group, and what racial and ethnic groups should be

included complicate the Census Bureau's efforts. As sociologists who believe it is important to track race in order to track racism, we have to understand the race and ethnicity questions on the U.S. Census so that we know the benefits and constraints of the data.

We first provide a brief history and evolution of the racial and ethnic categories on the U.S. Census, particularly demarcating the changes before and after the Civil Rights Movement. We then note two

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major changes proposed for the 2020 census: modification of the question on Hispanic<sup>1</sup> origin, and adding a “Middle Eastern or North African” category. Next, given that race is a social construction and not an objective reality, we review some of the primary issues that social scientists must contend with when relying on “race” data. With this information in mind, we briefly compare the U.S. approach versus European census approaches to consider the costs and benefits of continuing to use a race question. Steeped in the history of the U.S. racial hierarchy and still rooted in political, economic, and social concerns, race and ethnicity questions on the census are a complex and complicated matter, but our closing comments center on how these questions can best be used to track racial and ethnic inequality.

## HISTORY OF THE CENSUS: PRE-CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The foundation and history of the racial and ethnic categories on the census, which we demarcate as pre-Civil Rights Movement, shaped the political and legal status of people, which in turn shaped the U.S. racial hierarchy (Anderson and Fienberg 2000; Hochschild and Powell 2008; Omi and Winant 1986; Prewitt 2013; Snipp 2003). Hochschild and Powell (2008) suggested that the racial categories for the census were motivated by a debate between Congress and the Census Bureau regarding political control, officials’ commitment to scientific and statistical accuracy, and ideological beliefs about race. Beginning in 1850, census development was guided by a formal advisory board and a superintendent, who consulted with professional organizations such as the American Statistical Association and the American Geographical and Statistical Society (Prewitt 2013; Snipp 2003). The Census Bureau changed category names, wording of questions, and/or instructions regarding race every decade since the first census in 1790. Blacks and Whites have been the only two groups represented (in some form) on every census, and only three categories have remained unchanged in name since 1890: White, Chinese, and Japanese (Farley 2002; Saperstein 2012; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975). A brief look at the history of some of these changes is instructive for understanding the volatility of racial classification and the centrality of Whiteness in the census.

One of the most contested classification issues was in counting people of the African diaspora. The Census Bureau instituted the first census in 1790 with only the categories of “Slaves” and “All other free persons” for those of African descent. The 1850

census added “Mulatto” (of mixed Black ancestry) because some believed that free Blacks were more likely to suffer from insanity than enslaved Blacks—“Mulatto” reflected a clear political move to find “data” to support plantation slavery. There was also a move to document the inferiority of mixed Black-Whites by showing an association with poor fertility and shorter lives (Hochschild and Powell 2008; Humes and Hogan 2009; Prewitt 2013). In 1890, “Quadroon” and “Octoroon” were added as Rep. Wheeler (D-AL) posited that mixed-race persons were of a lower biological quality. However, these categories lasted only one census because drawing these demarcations was deemed dubious, and therefore the data were unreliable. In 1900, there was just one category of “Black” or “Negro,” but the 1910 and 1920 Census Bureau removed “Negro” and added “Mulatto” again as it was argued that mixed Blacks were distinctly different from Blacks. “Mulatto” was permanently dropped by 1930, and “Negro” was the sole term used from 1930 through 1960 (Humes and Hogan 2009; Pew Research Center 2015; Thompson 2012).

Other categories also fluctuated in relationship to political, social, and economic concerns. For example, Native Americans originally were counted only when they lived among Whites and were subject to taxes. Furthermore, Native Americans were not subject to the one-drop rule as were Blacks and instead, were generally classified by the majority race and culture of the community in which they resided (Hochschild and Powell 2008). “Chinese” first appeared on a California census in 1860 when concerns arose about their large immigration numbers. “Chinese” was then put on the 1870 national census and on every census since then; it was the first category that used a nation-based classification rather than a race-based one (Hochschild and Powell 2008; Prewitt 2013; Snipp 2003). “Hindu” was first mentioned in 1880, appeared on some tables in 1910, was added as a formal category from 1920 to 1940, and then was permanently removed in 1950. The Census Bureau recognized “Hindus” as ethnically Caucasian, but they were not from the European region and therefore were seen as non-White Asiatics; this idea was upheld in the *U.S. v. Thind* Supreme Court case, which banned South Asians from citizenship (Hochschild and Powell 2008; Pew Research Center 2015). “Mexican” was on the census only once, in 1930, and was determined by one’s birth in Mexico or parents’ birth in Mexico and if one was not “Negro,” “Indian,” “Chinese,” or “Japanese.” The addition of “Mexican” was partly influenced by the anti-Mexican sentiment that took place

during the early stages of the Great Depression. However, the Mexican government and officials fought this classification (partly due to the assertion that Mexicans should not be considered subject to Jim Crow), and after 1930, Mexicans returned to being classified as “White” on the census (Anderson and Fienberg 2000; Balderrama and Rodriguez 2006; Hochschild and Powell 2008; Pew Research Center 2015).

These examples show how racial or ethnic categories fluctuate and how such fluctuations have been influenced by multiple forces. During this pre-Civil Rights Movement era of the Census Bureau, race records were largely used to control and track different populations; categories were formed in relationship to Whiteness, and White officials determined the race boxes. It is also important to note that from 1880 through 1960, enumerators, trained census officials, collected information from participants and assigned their race. In 1970, the census began using participant self-identification. In this era, the Census Bureau had a near obsession with maintaining the lines among races, specifically with political, economic, and social concerns about safeguarding Whiteness and maintaining the racial hierarchy (Hirschman, Alba, and Farley 2000; Omi and Winant 1986; Prewitt 2013; Snipp 2003).

## CONTEMPORARY CENSUS CATEGORIES: POST-CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Since the Civil Rights Movement, the Census Bureau has moved away from recording racial demographics as a tool of control, and advocacy on the behalf of many racial groups has led to a more equity-oriented data collection (Office of Management and Budget [OMB] 1977; Prewitt 2013). Humes and Hogan (2009:119) noted that the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights “stated that racial and ethnic classification can be justified only if the data produced have a legitimate use in terms of combating discrimination, planning programs, or conducting program evaluation.” Census data continue to be used to apportion seats in the House of Representatives, draw legislative districts of equal population, and plan construction of hospitals, highways, bridges, and schools. The racial categories are also used as a sample frame for other federal surveys, such as the Current Population Survey and the National Crime Victims Survey (Nguyen 2007:228).

In 1974, the Office of Management and Budget (more commonly known as the OMB) determined that there should be a clear and discernable

taxonomy for the racial categories. In 1977, the Census Bureau adopted Directive 15, which identified the five basic groups: American Indians and Alaska Natives; Asians and Pacific Islanders; Non-Hispanic Blacks; Non-Hispanic Whites, and Hispanics of any race (Hirschman et al. 2000; Prewitt 2013; Snipp 2003). However, in this same directive it was made clear that “these classifications should not be interpreted as scientific or anthropological in nature” in order to move away from racist biological notions of race (OMB 1977).

Thus, the 1980 census was the first census to have the five groups, often recognized as the “ethnoracial pentagon” (Hollinger 1995) of White, Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Hispanic. In 2000, the Hispanic question was changed to include “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino,” and the order in 2010 was changed to “Hispanic/Latino/Spanish.” Within these five categories, some offer specific racial or ethnic categories to choose from: Hispanic has three options; American Indian or Alaska Native asks participants to write in the tribe; Asian has six options; and Pacific Islander has three options. There is also the option to write in for “another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin,” “Other Asian,” “Other Pacific Islander,” and/or “Some other race.” The Census Bureau added the option to “mark one or more” races in 2000. The option to identify with multiple races was a challenge to the strict “mark one box” rule that had been in place since the inception of the census. Mixed-racial heritage had been previously recognized, but by 1930, the “Mulatto” category had been dropped, and the one-drop rule, whereby one drop of Black blood made one Black, overruled mixed identity. The “mark one or more” option was largely a response to mixed-race individuals and their families advocating for a multiracial identity option on the census. Although the objective of getting “multiracial” was unsuccessful, it still brought forth a significant change in the racial classification scheme: The Census Bureau now reports the number of people who identify with 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 races. Hence, the census now has 63 possible racial categories and 126 with the Hispanic ethnicity option (Farley 2002; Strmic-Pawl 2016; Williams 2008).

Although under different pressures than in earlier years, the Census Bureau still must satisfy multiple interests: the recommendations of the Office of Management and Budget, participants’ needs for the census to be clear and accessible, and appeals from both Congress and advocacy groups (Farley 2002; Prewitt 2013). In addition, Ngyuen (2007) outlined four specific types of accountabilities that the Census Bureau faces: *hierarchical* in response to the president, commerce department, and the undersecretary;

*professional* in response to contemporary theories and methods of data collection; *political* in response to Congress; and *legal* in response to court decisions (continuous lawsuits are brought against the Census Bureau about who to count and how to count them). At the nexus of these accountabilities, changes continue to be made in the categories used, the order of the questions, and the phrasing and instructions of the questions. To address such issues, the Census Bureau, since the 1970s, has used “content tests to research and improve the design and function of different questions, including questions on race and ethnicity” (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). We now turn to discuss possible race and ethnicity changes in the next census.

## MAJOR CHANGES IN THE 2020 CENSUS? HISPANICS, MIDDLE EASTERNERS, AND NORTH AFRICANS

Of particular concern to the Census Bureau is how to account for the problem of “undercounting,” or when a population has a low response rate. Looking at past census results, two groups—the Hispanic population and the Middle Eastern and North African population, the latter collectively referred to as MENA—have been consistently undercounted. Yet the reasons differ; for Hispanics, confusion sometimes arises about what race to choose since “Hispanic” is listed separately as an ethnicity question, while the MENA population is currently grouped with Whites on the census, but often do not identify as such. The Census Bureau has been conducting research to determine possible changes for these groups in the 2020 census.

### *The Hispanic Population*

The Census Bureau added a Hispanic-specific question on the census in 1980 (Hitlin, Brown, and Elder 2007; Snipp 2010). On the 2010 census, the “Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin” question is asked first, followed by the race question with five broad racial classifications, including “Some other race.” On the 2010 census, roughly 16 percent of the population identified as Hispanic but another six percent of respondents selected “Some other race,” and a majority of those respondents were Hispanic. The Census Bureau considers Hispanics choosing “Some other race” as a possible undercounting problem (Humes, Jones, and Ramirez 2011; Krogstad and Cohn 2014).

The Census Bureau has found that merging the race and ethnicity questions might lead to a more reflective count of Hispanics. In 2010, the Census

Bureau introduced the Race and Hispanic Origin Alternative Questionnaire Experiment (AQE) to “test strategies that would decrease item nonresponse, increase reporting in the OMB race and ethnicity categories, elicit detailed race and ethnic reporting, and increase accuracy and reliability of results” (Compton et al. 2012:71). The AQE included mail-out questionnaires, telephone reinterviews of mail respondents, and a series of 67 focus groups. The final AQE report states that “by combining the race and Hispanic origin questions into one item, it appears that Hispanics can better find themselves among the race and ethnic categories, thus reducing Some Other Race reporting” (Compton et al. 2012:73). The Census Bureau also used a 2015 National Content Test (NCT), which compares different questionnaire designs in order to determine the ideal categories and format presentation offered for the race and ethnicity questions (Mathews et al. 2017). This test was sent to 1.2 million households in the United States and Puerto Rico. This research also “indicates that the optimal question format is combined [race and ethnicity] question with detailed checkboxes” for ethnic options (Mathews et al. 2017:xii).

Many sociologists, demographers, and other social scientists have also investigated self-identity among Hispanics to understand census undercounting. In sum, the work done by these researchers highlights some shortcomings of the current framing of race and ethnicity as two separate questions on the census. Significant heterogeneity exists within the Hispanic population, and varying emphases on and understandings of race, ethnicity, and nationality can lead to confusion with the two-part ethnicity-race question (see Campbell and Rogalin 2006; Dowling 2014; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008; Hitlin et al. 2007; Miyawaki 2016; Terry and Fond 2013). Yet, López (2013) maintains that two separate questions on race and ethnicity remain necessary because combining them into one question would ignore race and ethnicity as two distinct axes of oppression and therefore obfuscate efforts to track inequality (see also statements associated with the University of New Mexico, Institute for “Race” and Social Justice). The forthcoming decision from the Census Bureau on how to frame the Hispanic question could potentially have a big effect on the population count and, relatedly, the tracking of inequalities that Hispanics experience.

### *The Middle Eastern and North African Population*

The 2010 AQE and 2015 NCT also tested options for including a MENA category. Arab Americans are

deemed White by the Census Bureau, as the current definition of White is “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa” (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). As a result, the MENA population has been undercounted and disadvantaged in terms of acquiring services that could benefit this group (Arab American Institute 2017; Kayyali 2013). For example, while the Census Bureau has estimated the number of Arab Americans living in the United States at 1.9 million, the Arab American Institute estimates that number to be 3.7 million. On the 2010 census, some reported “Middle Eastern” as an ethnicity and at least half chose “Some other race” (Arab American Institute 2017). Further complicating these patterns, “like Hispanics, Arabic-speaking people relate to and can be identified racially from ‘black’ to ‘white’ or can be classified as Asian or African if accounted for according to continental origins” (Kayyali 2013:1300).

Many groups advocating on behalf of the MENA population, including the Arab American Institute, have been working with the Census Bureau since the 1980s. However, it was not until the 2010 AQE that the inclusion of a MENA question was examined nationally. Relying on 67 focus groups with 768 participants, the Census Bureau found many people felt that including members of the MENA population (Egyptian and Lebanese, for example) within the “White” racial category was “inaccurate” or “wrong” (Compton et al. 2012:70). Consequently, the 2015 NCT included questions to specifically investigate the effects of including a “Middle Eastern or North African” response category.

Some maintain that adding MENA on the census can be potentially dangerous—leading to increased surveillance and policing of this community—especially in the post-9/11 “war on terror” environment. For instance, Beydoun argued that “the proposed MENA box will facilitate War on Terror policing . . . [and] will chill constitutionally protected activity and further curb the civil liberties of Arab Americans” (2016:744). The Census Bureau sharing demographic data with the military to enforce the internment of Japanese Americans following Pearl Harbor serves as a glaring example (Beydoun 2015, 2016; Seltzer and Anderson 2007). Census data provide not only publicly available macro-level data, but also local-level details that can be used “in tightly concentrated Arab American communities” (Beydoun 2015, 2016:746; Seltzer and Anderson 2001). This point is a valid concern given that census data have historically been used to monitor and control certain populations.

In both the 2000 and 2010 census, “Some other race” was the third largest “race” group (Humes

et al. 2011; Mathews et al. 2017). That being said, the Census Bureau has been trying to find ways to better capture the racial groups that exist in the United States. The Census Bureau has even considered not asking race at all, instead asking people to check the “categories” that describe them, or not using a term at all (“Is Person 1 . . . Mark one or more boxes”) (Cohn 2015; Compton et al. 2012; Mathews et al. 2017). The final wording for the 2020 Census must be submitted to Congress by April 2018 (Mathews et al. 2017). Yet regardless of the specific phrasing of the race and ethnicity questions, fundamental issues remain in collecting racial demographics, issues that we address now.

## ISSUES WITH COLLECTING RACIAL AND ETHNIC DEMOGRAPHICS

Census data on race and ethnicity can be uncritically accepted and then used in the creation of new data, reports, and peer-reviewed publications. Sometimes the justification of the “social construction of race” is used to acknowledge on some level the scientific fallacy that is the racial classification system. Likely, most social scientists now know and work on the premise that race is a social construction, but nevertheless proceed with survey data on race because data are needed in order to address social inequality. “Race is not real but racism is”—so goes the saying that rationalizes the need for race data. The American Sociological Association (2003) stated as such in its statement on race:

Sociological scholarship on “race” provides scientific evidence in the current scientific and civic debate over the social consequences of the existing categorizations and perceptions of race; allows scholars to document how race shapes social ranking, access to resources, and life experiences; and advances understanding of this important dimension of social life, which in turn advances social justice. (P. 4).

Although we agree with this premise, we outline in this section the numerous factors that shape the race data with which we work. The race counts reported by the Census Bureau vary in relationship to (1) whether the word “race” is used, (2) the order and phrasing of the question, (3) self-identification versus outsiders’ assignment, and (4) the categories provided.

### *Race versus Ethnicity versus Ancestry*

The census (as of 2010) contains two primary questions that ask about racial and ethnic identity, and an

instructional note prefaces these questions. Prior to the questions the census reads, "NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 8 about Hispanic origin and Question 9 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races." Question 8 reads, "Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin," and Question 9 reads, "What is Person 1's race? *Mark one or more boxes.*" Within these questions, the census currently has the two terms "origin" and "race," but the Census Bureau reports Hispanic as an ethnicity. The problem is that the lines separating these terms and others, such as ancestry, nationality, and heritage, are blurred lines at best and with an arbitrary distinction and application. Respondents may see these terms as overlapping and redundant, or they may see them as independent and thus have multiple identities (Hirschman et al. 2000; Liebler et al. 2017; Nguyen 2007; Simon 2012). For example, someone who is Puerto Rican could identify as Puerto Rican as an ethnicity, race, nationality, and ancestry. Or, someone who is Puerto Rican could identify with a Hispanic ethnicity, a White race, an American nationality, and a Taino ancestry. Thus, the terms used in the phrasing of the question can determine the identity provided by a respondent. Moreover, relying on the word "race" in the question does not necessarily inform as to which identity is most salient or important to that person's lived identity. The question of whether the term "race" is still the best term that should be used in the census is discussed further below.

### *Order and Phrasing of the Question*

How a question is asked can influence a respondent's answer, a problem that exists in any qualitative research method that uses survey or interview questions (Weiss 1995). This point is salient for the census race question because responses change in relationship to placement of the question, the phrasing of the question and related instructions, and the number of options provided (Anderson and Fienberg 2000; Burton, Nandi, and Platt 2010; Gullickson 2016; Liebler et al. 2017; Simon 2012). The Hispanic question is a good example of this issue as it has been changed a number of times in efforts to capture this demographic.

The Hispanic category has long been troublesome for the Census Bureau. As noted earlier, Mexicans were counted as a separate race only once in 1930, but in response to pressures from the Mexican government and officials, in the following census Mexicans were again counted as White. Yet the Census Bureau returned to counting those of Hispanic descent separately in 1970, when the following

question was added: "Is this person's origin or descent Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, Other Spanish; and, No, none of these." The 1970 census count of Hispanics was about 500,000 fewer than estimated, and some people thought that "Central or South American" referred to the central or southern region of the United States and so mistakenly identified as such. Thus, the 1980 question was rephrased to specifically address Hispanics in the question: "Is this person of Spanish/Hispanic origin or descent?" The options were: "No (not Spanish/Hispanic); Yes, Mexican, Mexican-Amer., Chicano; Yes, Puerto Rican; Yes, Cuban; Yes, other Spanish/Hispanic." The placement of this question also followed the race, age, and marital status questions. The 1980 census was believed to be more accurate in that it reached more people who had this self-identification, but still there was some underreporting. The 1990 census counted about 22 million Hispanics while the 2000 census counted more than 35 million, which is presumed to be more representative (Anderson and Fienberg 2000; Cohn 2010). By 2010, the question included the term "Latino," the term "Mexican-Amer." was shortened to "Mexican-Am.," the question was placed before the race question, and the order was changed to "Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin." Explicit instructions were also given to answer both the ethnicity question and the race question. Concerns remain, however, regarding accurate representation of this population. The variations in the Hispanic population numbers and respondents' confusion over whether they fit in this category reflect the significance of the phrasing and order of the questions.

### *Self-identification versus Identity Assignment*

As noted earlier, the Census Bureau moved from a tracking and control ideology pre-Civil Rights Movement toward a social equity ideology post-1960s. In this vein, the Census Bureau also moved away from assigning racial identity and toward self-identification. The underlying belief in using racial self-identification is that a person's self-identification is the most accurate since anyone else's perception is a guess (dependent on perceiver's experience and social context). Moreover, since race is not biological, there is no correct answer that can be assigned. Two primary complications, however, arise with self-identification: (1) people may change how they prefer to racially identify, and (2) self-identification may not capture or reflect discrimination based on society's racial assignment of that person.

First, to some extent, it is reasonable to expect a person's ethnic and racial identity to be stable across time, but it is not always so. An individual's self-identification may vary (independent of or in addition to other issues such as question phrasing, as discussed above) by context or across time. Burton et al. (2010:1334) noted the "conundrum of attempting to divide the population into a set of mutually exclusive categories using a single question. That is, treating a multidimensional, fluid and contextually and relationally specific concept as if it were unidimensional, fixed and stable." For example, racial identity can change when one moves from a southern town to a northern city, or one's identity may at age 50 be different from what it was at age 20. Liebler et al. (2017) found greater response instability among children (particularly for those who moved between Black and White-Black and vice versa) and those who live in the West (particularly for those who moved between White-Asian and Asian and combinations of Hispanic, Some other race, and White). Hübner and Andersson (2012) also noted that racial identification change is prevalent among non-White adoptees of White families as these adoptees often identify as White as a child and later identify as a person of color.

Second, although self-identification tends to be the preferred method, some potential drawbacks arise when racial identity is collected based only on self-identification. If one of the goals of the Census Bureau is to correlate data on race-ethnicity with inequality (in income, residence, health, employment, etc.), then having data on how *others perceive* a person rather than self-identification can correlate better with inequality measures. Vargas and Kingsbury (2016:719) wrote a critical review on "racial identity contestation" or "the discordance between racial identity and racial identification given the racial categories available" and how understanding racial identity contestation is useful for understanding ongoing racial projects and implications for studying racial inequality. Saperstein (2012) found that income and health care correlate with two measures of racial identity: how a person self-identifies and an assigned identity by an interviewer. Therefore, self-identification and social assignment are not always the same identity, but both provide useful information (i.e., one way is not "right" or "wrong"). In recognition of the various ways that race can be captured, Mary Campbell, Jenifer Bratter and Wendy Roth (2016: 382–3) organized a workshop titled "Measuring the Diverging Components of Race in Multiracial America," and they "compiled an online resource, the Multiple Components of Race Data Library,

that profiles survey data sets that have measures of at least two components of race or racialized experience." The Census Bureau has spent a lot of time and energy trying to get at the "right" racial identity for each person, but self-identification can change, and self-identification is not always the best reflection of the desired data.

### *The Category Options*

The racial and ethnic data with which we work are never a true or accurate reflection of society but rather a reflection of society as refracted through the categories provided. Since race and ethnicity are not biological, the categories offered on the census are representations of racial and ethnic groupings. The Census Bureau attempts to offer categories that accurately reflect group divisions and how people self-classify, but the census categories (a) help to frame and set the standards for the racial and ethnic categories with which people identify and (b) do not always capture different group dynamics within a category. To the first point, the census has such a large reach that it somewhat sets the gold standard of contemporary racial and ethnic identities available to U.S. society. Thus, people learn to self-identify in relation to the categories available to them; in this way, the categories on the census dictate the options for racial identification—not the people (Farley 2002; Hochschild and Powell 2008; Simon and Piche 2012). In contrast, and to the second point, sometimes people choose a box that does not match their self-identification or they choose "Some other race." Prewitt (2013) used the example of African immigrants to America who may choose "Black" but who do not identify with Black in the same ways that some native Black Americans do. In this case, the 2010 category of "Black, African Am., or Negro" does not capture how Africans or West Indians who may phenotypically look Black experience "Black" in a different manner. It is important to remember that the categories on the census have always been and will continue to be in flux, so that the racial and ethnic data we have reflect what the Census Bureau chooses to provide.

### *The Wrong Numbers?*

As outlined above, several primary issues arise with collecting and reporting of census race data: the use of the word "race" or alternative words; the order, phrasing, context, and content of the question; self-identification versus social assignment of the identity; and the available categories. The race

data that scholars use are therefore not always as consistent or coherent as we suppose them to be. Changes in the data suggest that sometimes the census data are the “wrong numbers.” Liebler et al. (2017) found that almost 10 million people in their data set of about 161.7 million (i.e., 6.1 percent) changed their identity from one census to the next. The categories Non-Hispanic White, Black, and Asian had the most stable reports, with 3, 6, and 9 percent, respectively, changing their identity. The most change occurred in the categories of American Indian, Pacific Islander, and/or “More than one race,” as well as those who reported a Hispanic origin. The two most common response changes were from “Hispanic Some other race” to “Hispanic White,” as well as the other way around; these changes added up to 37 percent of all the response changes in their data. Change was also common among non-Hispanic American Indians and non-Hispanic Blacks; most often people moved from non-Hispanic White into one of these categories (Liebler et al. 2017:274). In addition to people changing their identity, overcounting and undercounting cause the racial demographics to be off-balance. The 2010 census had an overcount of the non-Hispanic White population by 0.8 percent. The 2010 census also had some significant undercounts: 2.1 percent of the Black population, 1.5 percent of the Hispanic population, 4.9 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives on reservations, 1.3 percent of Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and 0.1 percent of Asians (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Changes in racial identification along with undercounting and overcounting are some symptoms of the fallibility of census racial categories.

### **EUROPEAN COMPARISONS: SHOULD THE UNITED STATES CONTINUE TO COLLECT “RACE” DATA?**

If we adopt a comparative frame, it is clear that the United States is in the minority in having racial and ethnic categories on its census. In Europe, for example, the majority of countries do not use race or ethnicity, while some use only ethnicity. Only the anomalous U.K. and Ireland have ethnic and racial categories on their census. However, many Eastern and Central European countries were once (or even twice) part of empires (e.g., Russian, Habsburg, Swedish) and count national minorities mainly by language use, reflecting this multinational composition of their population. However,

the largest single cluster of European countries uses country of birth/nationality rather than race or ethnicity. Moreover, the vast majority of all nation states in the world actually use the “equality data method” (i.e., asking the citizens how they identify themselves), with the exception of Northern and Western Europe. The question is therefore whether using categories such as race and ethnicity actually has a progressive effect on patterns of discrimination. Critics of using these categories maintain that they are ultimately unhelpful and divisive.

Indeed, the collection of racial and ethnic data always supposes not only a conversation on the methods and saliency of the categories deployed, but also an appropriate end use for the data. It has already been noted that some groups’ experiences of control and surveillance make them wary of engaging with state-led counting exercises and the use of race categories. So what is offered internationally in terms of rationales? The United Nations provides a clear statement on the issue:

The decision to collect and disseminate information on ethnic or national groups of a population in a census is dependent upon a number of considerations and national circumstances, including, for example, the national needs for such data, and the suitability and sensitivity of asking ethnicity questions in a country’s census . . . . It is important that the responding public be informed of the potential uses and need for data pertaining to ethnicity, as this improves public support for the census exercise. Data on ethnicity provide information on the diversity of a population and can serve to identify subgroups of a population. Some areas of study that rely on such data include demographic trends, employment practices and opportunities, income distributions, educational levels, migration patterns and trends, family composition and structure, social support networks, and health conditions of a population. (2006:2, 160)

Moreover, for the European Union, such data collection is driven by the need to address the following:

discrimination based on racial and ethnic origin in the fields of employment, social protection, including social security and healthcare; social advantages, education and access to and supply of goods available to the public including housing, action against which is framed under three principal agreements; the Racial Equality Directive (RED), 2000; Article 21 of the Charter

of Fundamental Rights; and the Council Framework Decision, 2008. (Farkas 2017:4)

The function performed by collecting racial and ethnic data is thus to enable the enforcement of antidiscrimination work undergirded by legislation. Moreover, the U.K.'s Office of National Statistics (ONS 2003) underscores this conclusion stating that the 2000 Race Relations (Amendment) Act gives public authorities a duty to combat racial discrimination. The E.U. report cited here also notes that the ONS makes the guidelines for data collection public, as advocated by the U.N. Moreover, the use of racial and ethnic data is argued to have a significant role in tailoring services and, for example, enabling health-care and health outcome disparities to be addressed (Fremont and Lurie 2004).

This point, of course, does not overcome either particular groups' reluctance to provide personal sensitive details for historic reasons or individuals disagreeing with the principle of collecting racial and ethnic data in the first place, as evidenced in ongoing colorblind critiques in North American and European nations. France (Simon 2012) and Sweden (Hübnette and Lundström 2014) are among the prominent European nations to refuse to collect racial data, suggesting that to do so would infringe ideas of belonging to the nation as a set of individuals. This stems from a republican notion of the nation in the case of France and avowed commitment to antiracism in the case of Sweden. However, countries with no such census categories still have a raft of ways to talk about who belongs to the nation by bloodlines and culture. The Netherlands statistics office, for example, in 2016 officially stopped using the terms "autochtonen" and "allochtonen" (Essed and Trienekens 2008), loosely translated as "indigenous" and "nonindigenous," respectively, only to replace them with "of immigrant background" and "of Dutch background."

Racial categories, it is argued, reify divisions and therefore the State should help extinguish them. However, in terms of combatting discrimination, there is no neat distinction between nations using racial and ethnic categories in a census and those not using them. Minorities in the nations without these categories still experience racism, and popular ways of conceptualizing the nation are still racialized. The chief argument in favor of collecting race data is to enable observation of discrimination patterns. The debate about whether progress occurs cannot take place without the statistical material. The exercise of collecting the data constitutes a symbolic recognition of social scientists' arguments that despite their lack of biological

basis, "race" and "ethnicity" have social lives and racism has real social consequences. It should be noted, however, that identifying the patterns and remedying them are separate functions. For the data collection to be justified, the monitoring function supposes that state agencies implementing antidiscrimination laws have legitimacy, effective means, and authority to hold departments, companies, and other agencies to account and thus to enforce required changes.

## CONCLUSION: RACE COUNTS

We have examined the ways that the U.S. Census came to be, its roots in racism and control, its evolution toward multiculturalism and group rights, and its struggle with creating racial categories and collecting data. With this examination in mind, we consider five main propositions about race and ethnicity on the census. We are not taking a particular stance on any one specific racial or ethnic category; instead, the following points address the broad principles underlying racial and ethnic data collection on the census: (1) we need to be open to categories consistently changing; (2) the addition of racial groups should be linked to tracking inequality and not necessarily cultural identity; (3) "race" should be the term used; (4) we need more consideration for the addition of a second racial identity question that asks about one's race as assigned by society; and (5) sociologists need to be more active in the census development process.

U.S. Census racial categories have consistently changed since the inception of the census in the 1700s. As social, political, and economic concerns shifted, the number of racial groups and the terms used to describe groups changed. With the option to mark more than one race, we now have 63 possible racial categories. Rather than criticizing the numerical and qualitative changes in the racial and ethnic categories as problematic, we assert that such change is necessary. Racial representation on the census permits data collection that can help in proving a number of important social inequalities: income gaps, underemployment, residential segregation, low political representation, and more. Therefore, racial representation is much more than identity politics or cultural acknowledgment; it is an important pathway toward tracking discrimination in order to fight it. In this vein, as society changes, so will the racial categories on the census, and these changes should be welcomed, not contested.

However, as we see the census race question primarily as a tool for tracking inequality, we ask whether the addition of categories should be rooted

less in the desire for cultural recognition and more on whether the racial or ethnic category is needed to track inequality. In particular, we need to be open to groups advocating for themselves, not necessarily because they have a low public profile but because they are experiencing discrimination. Collecting and categorizing groups does not always serve progressive ends, in that being “culturally” different does not equate 100 percent of the time to discrimination.

It is important to consider at what point, if any, some categories could be removed from the census; simply because a racial group was added does not mean that it will perpetually be necessary. Removal from the census does not mean a group should be disregarded, but we hypothesize a time might arrive when some categories are more necessary than others based on social inequality. The addition of new categories is likely inevitable, so the question must be asked whether at some point categories should be removed to maintain the list at a manageable number. We suggest that a “manageable number” should be evaluated by the ability for categories to be meaningful enough that they allow the tracking of inequality; that is, with too few categories the important differences among groups are lost, but too many categories may cause a dilution effect in that the more detailed the disaggregation, the less clear aggregate forces appear.

For the foreseeable future, “race” should be the term used on the census. We acknowledge the many conceptual difficulties with “race” as well as the reasons that other terms such as “origin,” “ancestry,” or “ethnicity” are advocated (Prewitt 2013). Yet, “race” has a particular history in the United States, and this history has cultivated and shaped people’s understanding of their identities on the micro level and the racial hierarchy on the macro level. Terms like “ancestry,” which could be exchanged for “race,” do not have the same definition or application in people’s lives or in society. Thus, changing the term could possibly lead to distorted numbers and a lack of efficient tracking over time as identities on the census do not match the social reality. Sociologists need to be unwavering in explaining the social construction of race and in debunking contemporary biological reifications of race while recognizing that replacing the term “race” does not get rid of racism and could potentially lessen our ability to address it.

In fact, we could possibly be doing more to track racism with the racial identity question. As social scientists, we know that racial self-identification is just one form of racial identity in society, and research indicates that one’s racial self-identification

does not always match the racial identity that society would assign. The social assignment of racial identity is more likely to be the one that correlates with racial discrimination, and therefore this identity might be equally or more helpful in tracking stratification. For example, if Person A self-identifies as White but is viewed in society as a person of color, then with a self-identification question, the census is perhaps not capturing that experience accurately. We are not the first scholars who have brought attention to this issue, and some have suggested more than one question on race (e.g., see Burton et al. 2010; Campbell, Bratter, and Roth 2016; Denton 1997; Saperstein 2012); we call for more conversations on the feasibility of adding a question on the census that reflects racial identity based on others’ perceptions.

Taking the above into account, our final suggestion is a call for sociologists to be more involved in the consultation and decision-making process of the racial categories on the census. The census categories dictate not only the racial data we receive via this outlet, but also the data from a number of other federal and state surveys. The racial categories that appear on the census, therefore, both enable and constrain our analyses, conclusions, and recommendations.

The Census Bureau has a number of advisory committees that “provide a venue and forum for the Census Bureau Director to interact with and solicit input from a variety of external stakeholders to improve overall Census Bureau programs, surveys, data collection, quality and decennial census.” In particular the National Advisory Committee provides feedback on race and ethnicity; based on member biographies, it currently seats four sociologists in academia (Julie Dowling, Kathleen Mullan Harris, Stuart Michaels, and Ann Morning) (<https://www.census.gov/about/cac/nac/member-bios.html>). All National Advisory Committee meetings are open to the public and take questions. If one cannot be there in person, a link is provided to join the meeting online. Updates on meetings and agendas are posted at <https://www.census.gov/about/cac.html>. As well, a number of centers work through colleges, universities, and organizations that communicate with the Census Bureau via the Census Information Centers Member Network; these centers and organizations “are recognized as official sources of demographic, economic, and social statistics produced by the U.S. Census Bureau. CICs provide training and technical assistance to local governments, businesses, community groups, and other interested data users in accessing and using Census Bureau data for research, program administration, planning, and decision-making purposes”

(<https://www.census.gov/about/partners/cic/network.html>). On a smaller level, a Respondent Advocate center takes concerns about the survey and its administration; the center can be reached at [respondent-advocate@census.gov](mailto:respondent-advocate@census.gov).

Changes to the U.S. Census not only have helped social scientists measure the racial and ethnic demographics in the country but have been useful in tracking disparities. Although neither simple solutions nor a perfect instrument is available to collecting racial data, as social scientists we must continue to question what the census looks like and in what ways it can better help us capture issues of inequality. As noted, the census and the conversations that surround it have real world consequences. These conversations help to highlight the many ways that race counts.

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## NOTE

1. We use the word “Hispanic” rather than “Latina/o/x” to be consistent with the wording of the Census Bureau.

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