



## StatNews #06: Defining Ethnicity in Federal Surveys

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For almost twenty years, the same racial and ethnic categories have been used in surveys by federal agencies. These agencies use ethnic survey data for reporting results of United States censuses, enforcing civil rights and affirmative action programs, and determining funding for other government programs, such as Head Start. Many researchers use these same categories when conducting their own survey research or studying characteristics present to a greater degree in some ethnic or racial groups than in others.

With the population of the U.S. currently at an all time high in racial and ethnic diversity, the categories listed on the census and in other federal survey questionnaires have come under fire by those who feel they cannot identify with any of the given categories, who can identify with more than one category, who feel they have been placed in the wrong category, or who disapprove of the title of the category with which they identify. For example, increasing rates of interracial marriage have led more people to identify with two or more racial or ethnic groups. Such people are often offended when asked to classify themselves in a single racial category, feeling they are being forced to disregard one or more aspects of their backgrounds.

Research is currently underway to determine the effects of changes in ethnic categorization on Federal Surveys. One of the more significant topics being researched is the addition of a "Multiracial" category. There is some controversy regarding the issue, mostly because the addition of such a category could have significant impact on the usefulness of resulting data. Without a specific delineation of race, opponents argue, the data would not provide useful demographic information for policy, civil rights enforcement, and service delivery. Users of health data, for example, worry that the ambiguity inherent in a "Multiracial" category will result in data that are useless in analyzing the health status of population groups that historically have been at risk for certain diseases. One solution to this problem would be a "Multiracial, specify" option, testing of which is currently underway.

Any revisions made to current federal racial and ethnic classifications must be in place by the summer of 1997 in order to appear in the 2000 U.S. census. These revisions will affect not only current and future research projects in which race or ethnicity of subjects is a factor, or in which U.S. census data are used, but will also complicate analyses and research which compare data obtained using previous racial and ethnic categorization with that using revised classifications.

Recently, a series of short articles which detail current controversies and proposed revisions in racial and ethnic categorization and describe initial research findings was published in a magazine from the American Statistical Association. If you would like a copy of these articles, please request one by sending a reply to this message.

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