

Race and Ethnicity Categories

1. Background Information and General Definition:

- Race and ethnicity categories in the U.S. are defined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), with the latest set based on a 1997 revision of a 1977 standard. The minimum race categories and the exact wording for the 1997 OMB standards for collecting data on race and ethnicity are:

1. American Indian or Alaska Native
2. Asian
3. Black or African American
4. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
5. White

The minimum ethnicity categories are:

1. Hispanic or Latino
2. Not Hispanic or Latino

The OMB standards allow for additional race categories to be collected, although they must be additive (i.e., non-overlapping subcategories) within the minimum set of race categories. Finally, the respondent instructions specify “*Mark (X) one or more races*” to indicate what this person considers himself/herself to be, which allows for multiple-race responses.

- The **U.S. 2003 revision of the standards for vital certificates recommends the following race and ethnicity categories**, which are in principle the same as those for the 2000 decennial census, with minor wording changes. Both the 2003 vital certificate standards and the 2000 decennial census questionnaires incorporated the 1997 revision of the OMB race and ethnicity category definitions, albeit the below go well beyond the OMB minimum requirements.

1. Hispanic Origin

No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino

Yes, Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano

Yes, Puerto Rican

Yes, Cuban

Yes, other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino (with space to write in group)

2. Race

White

Black or African American

American Indian or Alaska Native (with space to write in principal tribe)

Asian Indian

Chinese

Filipino

Japanese

Korean

Vietnamese

Other Asian (with space to write in race)
Native Hawaiian
Guamanian or Chamorro
Samoan
Other Pacific Islander (write in race)
Other (write in race)

- Note that race and ethnicity categories are collected in two separate questions, with the ethnicity question being asked first.
- The current format allows for multiple-race reporting for an individual (e.g., white/Native Hawaiian) but not multiple ethnicities.
- Some states still use the older 1977 OMB standard for vital records collection.

1. Race

American Indian or Alaskan Native
Asian or Pacific Islander
Black
White

2. Hispanic Origin

Hispanic origin
Not of Hispanic origin

Instructions specified to mark *one race only*. Prior to the 2003 vital certificate revisions and the 2000 census, multiple race responses were not accepted. There were only four basic race categories (plus a fifth “Other”) collected in the 1990 decennial census, for example. In the 2000 census when the instructions included “mark one or more races,” there were 63 resulting race categories that included the permutations of multiple race responses from the five basic categories (plus a sixth “Other”).

- There is an issue of comparability when data are based on two sets of OMB race and ethnicity category definitions. NCHS, with the help of the Census Bureau, has made efforts to estimate the resulting respondent differences and mitigate the comparability issues at the national, state and county levels. Of course, this is essential for doing vital statistics by race category at the national level since different states submit their vital event data using either the one or the other set of definitions.
- For birth certificates, currently the race of the newborn is not collected and, for reporting purposes, is based on the race of the mother, which she is to self-report.
- For death certificates, it is usually the responsibility of the funeral director to elicit race and ethnicity of the decedent from a family member or responsible party.

2. Common Usage (Purposes) in Vital Statistics:

- The use of race and ethnicity categories is predominant vital statistics in several ways. For example, the commonly cited measures of infant mortality rate, general fertility rate and life expectancy are often disaggregated by race and/or ethnicity.
- The idea and use of **health disparities** is most often based on differences in health outcomes by race category. As such, several of CDC's Healthy People objectives focus on eliminating health disparities by race category.
- Registration areas may collapse some of the collected race categories for tabulation purposes. This could include, as an extreme example, "white" and "other." It is recommended that "other" include the names of the other race categories included under this one name or at a minimum include the predominate race category within "other" in the name (e.g., "Black or African American and all other races").
- Although, according to OMB, the concepts of race and ethnicity represent two different dimensions of a population, they can be combined into categories such as African American Non-Hispanic or white Hispanic for tabulation purposes. For example, some of NCHS's published tables combine these two dimensions in reporting race and ethnicity data.

3. Technical Notes:

- There are a few overarching points about OMB's race and ethnicity categories that should be kept in mind.
 - a. *These are data collection and tabulation constructs.* OMB has defined race and ethnicity categories universally for federal government purposes. As such, they do not represent or necessarily equate to other race category classification systems or typologies, such as those based on genotype or phenotype
 - b. *The primary purpose for the federal government to collect race and ethnicity category data is for enforcement and evaluation of laws prohibiting discrimination based on race or ethnicity (i.e., civil rights monitoring and enforcement, redistricting legislatures).* This allows the federal government to collect data and tabulate statistics by race and ethnicity in a consistent and comparable manner, so as to permit meaningful measurement and to track progress or regress.
 - c. *Race and ethnicity data are based on self-reporting.* Although the race and ethnicity categories are explicitly defined by OMB, the respondents to Census Bureau questionnaires and the informants for state vital certificates are free to interpret the categories (and use their own mental templates of race and ethnicity) and answer any way they see fit.
 - d. *Tabulation categories are not universal.* While the race and ethnicity categories tabulated into statistics for civil rights monitoring and enforcement purposes are defined by OMB, for all other purposes, including vital statistics,

it is generally discretionary (with certain restrictions for federal data, especially regarding multiple-race responses) and to meet specific programmatic needs.

- Race or ethnicity categories sometimes are used in public health research as a proxy for social dimensions, such as education and income. Naturally, such usages are imperfect and go far beyond the original intentions of OMB.

- Respondent variability regarding race categories is a well known phenomenon. That is, an individual's perception of race categories and how they would self-identify relative to them can change over time for a variety of reasons.

- Since the race of the newborn is not collected on the birth certificate and, for reporting purposes, is based on the race of the mother, matching death certificates with birth certificates (as commonly done for infant deaths) or conducting longitudinal studies can be problematic for analysis of race/ethnicity.