AkLA Census Tutorial Part 3: Census and Race I: Category changes and Hispanic Origin

For the next two weeks, we will discuss what, for me, is the most confusing part of this current Census: the new ways race is being tabulated. This week I will cover renamed/reorganized race categories and spend some time discussing the Hispanic origin question. Next week we will tackle the implications of letting Americans choose up to six different races to describe themselves.

Before I go any further, I would like to cover how the Census determines the race of respondents. By far the most common method is to let people choose for themselves! The Census Bureau will never decide a person's race unless the person either 1) Left the race question completely blank, or 2) Chose "Some other race" and filled in a response that matches one of the other categories. The full story on how the Census Bureau decides a person's race under the above conditions can be found on page 115 of the technical documentation for the Census 2000 Redistricting Data Summary File, available at http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/pr94-171.pdf.

CATEGORY CHANGES FROM 1990 CENSUS: NEW NAME.

The category that contains Native Americans was called "American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut." Starting with Census 2000, it will be called "American Indian and Alaska Native. I do not see any comparability problems arising from this change.

CATEGORY CHANGES FROM 1990 CENSUS: SPLIT CATEGORIES.

Prior to the 2000 Census, Asian and Pacific Islanders were lumped into one big category called, well, "Asian and Pacific Islanders." For the 2000 Census and beyond, this category has been split into "Asians" and "Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders."

This split category will make it questionable to compare numbers for these two groups between the 1990 and 2000 Censuses. One help to this problem might be to focus on subcategories. The 1990 Census had these subcategories for "Asian and Pacific Islander" Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Asian Indian, Korean, Vietnamese, Hawaiian, Samoan, and Guamanian. These subcategories have been carried over into Census 2000. Currently, "Asian" contains Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Asian Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese, while "Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders" contain Native Hawaiian, Samoan, and Guamanian or Chamorro.

WHO IS HISPANIC?

Since 1970, the Census Bureau has been gathering information on people of Hispanic origin. The definition of what constitutes Hispanic origin has varied over the years, but the current definition is "Origin can be viewed as the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person's parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States. People who identify their origin as Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino may be of any race." More detail on the Hispanic Origin question, plus a summary of current results from Census 2000, can be found in a new Census Brief, "The Hispanic Population," available at http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-3.pdf.

The question order in Census 2000 has shifted. In the 1990 Census, the Hispanic origin question followed the race question. For the 2000 Census, the Hispanic origin question precedes the race question.
Additionally, in the words of the Census Bureau, "the terms 'Mexican Am.' And 'Chicano' are shown with 'Mexican' so that more Mexican Americans will identify with this category, and thus, improve the accuracy of the data." (Source: "Basic Facts about Us" http://www.census.gov/pub/dmd/www/pdf/03b_ba.pdf, p. 12).

Because of these significant changes in how the data on Hispanic origin is collected, one should be cautious about comparing 1990 Census numbers with 2000 Census numbers as many media outlets have been doing. Also, if you have seen some of those reports, they are comparing Hispanics (an ethnic group), with African Americans, Asians, and so on (races). Since Hispanics can be of any race, this seems to be a case of comparing apples and naranjas (oranges).

Why is this question asked? As with all questions on Census 2000, the Census Bureau was mandated to collect information on this topic (see 13 USC 141(c)). There are other statutes that cite the requirement to use Hispanic origin data from the Census. For a partial list, please see page 13 of "Basic Facts about Us" available at http://www.census.gov/pub/dmd/www/pdf/03b_ba.pdf.

So much for the minor changes in race questions that makes it more difficult to compare different groups between Censuses. I hope you will stay with us as we dive into the 63 possible race categories and why we can no longer assign a single number to the question "How many African Americans live in Juneau, Alaska?"

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