



Frequently Asked Questions: Updating OMB's Race and Ethnicity Data Standards

April 2023

The U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is soliciting public input through April 27, 2023 on [initial proposals](#) to revise its standards for federal race and ethnicity data collection.

1. What is Directive 15?

OMB's Statistical Policy Directive No. 15: Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity ([Directive 15](#), often referred to as "OMB standards") sets forth the minimum categories that federal agencies — including the U.S. Census Bureau — must use when they collect information on race and ethnicity.

Under the current standards, which have been in place since 1997, race and ethnicity data are collected through two separate questions, with the ethnicity question (asking about Hispanic or Latino origin) placed before the race question. Respondents may select one or more of five race categories (American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White). The Census Bureau is also required by law to include a "Some Other Race" response option in the decennial census and the American Community Survey; however, that option is not permitted on other federal data collection forms.¹

2. Why do the OMB race and ethnicity standards need to be revised?

Accurate race and ethnicity data are essential to understanding the share of resources that our communities receive and for revealing and addressing inequalities. Given increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the United States and a growing number of people who identify as more than one race and/or ethnicity, many people do not see their identities reflected in the categories available under OMB's current standards, leading to less accurate federal data. More inclusive standards would allow many individuals to more accurately self-identify, improving data quality for all communities.

3. Why is it so important to revise the OMB standards now?

The window of opportunity to improve the standards in time to test new questions for the 2030 Census is closing quickly. OMB has set a summer 2024 deadline for finalizing updated standards, which must be met so that the Census Bureau can field test question formatting from 2025 to 2027.

1. [Initial Proposals For Updating OMB's Race and Ethnicity Statistical Standards](#). U.S. Office of Management and Budget. January 27, 2023.



4. What changes are being recommended and why?

The Census Bureau's extensive research on race and ethnicity data collection supports three key revisions being proposed by OMB's Interagency Technical Working Group:

- Adopt a combined race and ethnicity question format.
- Add a new, discrete category for people from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.
- Require agencies to collect and report disaggregated data for detailed subgroups (via checkboxes and write-in spaces under the larger categories) to the fullest extent possible.

The bureau's research over the past decade indicates that these changes would better reflect the ways that many people in the United States self-identify, especially for individuals who identify with more than one race and/or ethnicity.²

5. What do we mean by a “combined” question? Why is it preferable to the current separate race and ethnicity questions?

Under OMB's current standards, race and ethnicity data are collected through two separate questions, with the ethnicity question (asking about Hispanic or Latino origin) placed before the race question. Because many Latinos do not identify with any of OMB's racial categories, a large proportion (nearly 44 percent) of Latinos selected “Some Other Race” (which is difficult to analyze) or skipped the race question in both the 2010 and 2020 Census — a critical loss of data for Latino communities.³

A “combined question” would put race, Hispanic origin, and other ethnicity categories in the same question, allowing respondents to select any categories with which they self-identify. It would also allow for the addition of a MENA ethnicity category. The Census Bureau's research indicates that a combined question allows many individuals (particularly of Latino and MENA origin) to self-identify more accurately, resulting in a much smaller proportion of respondents selecting “Some Other Race” or leaving the race question blank.² A combined question would not turn Latino or MENA into races; instead, it would be considered a combined race and ethnicity question. For more information, see our [FAQ on the combined question](#).

6. Why is it important to include a MENA category in the “combined” question? What should the MENA category look like?

The Census Bureau has historically categorized people of MENA origin as White, rendering this community invisible in federal data. A combined question with a MENA ethnicity category would give individuals of MENA origin the opportunity to accurately self-identify for the first time ever. When offered the option in a combined question, 79 percent of respondents of MENA origin selected the MENA category.²

2. [2015 National Content Test Race and Ethnicity Analysis Report](#). February 28, 2017. U.S. Census Bureau.

3. [Racial Identification for the Self-Reported Hispanic or Latino Population: 2010 and 2020 Census](#). U.S. Census Bureau. March 27, 2023.



Since MENA populations identify with different racial categories, MENA should be added as a distinct, geographically based ethnicity category within the combined question, and MENA ethnicities should be removed from the current definition of the White category. This would allow MENA individuals to identify as they see themselves — for example, as MENA and White (some Lebanese and Iranian individuals), MENA and Black (some Egyptian and Sudanese individuals), or as MENA only.

7. How will these changes improve the quality of federal race and ethnicity data?

A combined question would significantly improve data quality and accuracy not only for Latino and MENA communities, but for all communities of color. While the separate question format causes the White population to be overstated in certain datasets, data from a combined question would more accurately reflect the increasing diversity of the U.S. population.

8. Will updated OMB standards lead to changes in how the data are tabulated and/or presented?

We expect that updated standards for race and ethnicity data collection will lead to changes in how data are tabulated and presented. OMB should work with a wide range of stakeholders — especially those involved in implementation, enforcement, and monitoring of civil rights laws, as well as with the redistricting process — to develop guidance for tabulation and “bridging” between data collected under different versions of its standards.

9. What does OMB's review and revision process look like and what is the timeline?

Through a [Federal Register Notice](#) published on January 27, 2023, the Interagency Technical Working Group is currently soliciting stakeholder comments on its initial proposed revisions to the standards. Comments will be accepted through April 27, 2023. The chief statistician, who is part of OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, will then review the working group proposals and public comments and complete the revision process by summer 2024.

10. What actions can I take to support the adoption of improved race and ethnicity data standards?

1. [Sign on](#) to comments being prepared by The Leadership Conference and our coalition partners in response to OMB's Federal Register Notice! Note that you may sign on to more than one set of comments.
2. Submit your own comments to OMB's [Federal Register Notice](#) on initial proposals for revisions.
3. Educate your networks and communities about the importance of revising OMB standards by sharing this FAQ guide, our [FAQ on the combined question](#), our [fact sheet](#) on Directive 15, and additional resources [here](#). If you or members of your community have further questions, please reach out to the Census Counts coalition by emailing vertal@civilrights.org.