



Fact sheet: Why do we need a combined race and ethnicity question?

April 2023

The U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is soliciting public input on [initial proposals](#) to revise its standards for federal race and ethnicity data collection through April 27, 2023. Among the key proposed revisions is the adoption of a combined race and ethnicity question format. 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. **This FAQ addresses why adopting a combined question would be a critical step forward in allowing more people to see themselves accurately reflected in federal data.**

1. 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 must meet its summer 2024 deadline for finalizing updated standards so that the bureau can field test updated question formatting from 2025 to 2027. *More info [here](#).*

2. What do we mean by a “combined question?”

A combined question would put race, Hispanic origin, and other ethnicity categories in the same question, allowing respondents to select any and all categories with which they identify.¹ *More info [here](#).*

3. Why is the current separate race and ethnicity question format problematic?

The separate question format does not reflect the way that many Latino individuals self-identify. Since many Latinos do not see themselves in any of the race categories under the current standards, a large proportion (nearly 44 percent) select “Some Other Race” or skip the race question entirely.²

When this happens, the Census Bureau must “assign” these individuals a race for many datasets. Under the current standards, many Latinos end up being categorized as White if they do not self-select a race in addition to identifying an ethnicity³, and all individuals who identify as Middle Eastern or North African are categorized as White by definition.⁴ This ends up inflating the apparent size of the White population and hindering our ability to look critically at racial and ethnic disparities. *More info [here](#).*

4. Why is a combined question better?

Extensive research shows that a combined question with a distinct Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) category better reflects the way many people self-identify, allowing more individuals to choose the race and/or ethnicity categories where they actually see themselves.

This improves data quality by dramatically reducing the proportion of respondents who choose “Some Other Race” or skip the race question. A combined question also does not reduce reporting for any of the major race categories except White (suggesting that many individuals classified as “White” actually identify as Latino or MENA).⁴ *More info [here](#).*

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

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

3. [Race Reporting Among Hispanics: 2010](#). U.S. Census Bureau. March 2014.

4. [2015 National Content Test Race and Ethnicity Analysis Report](#). U.S. Census Bureau. February 28, 2017.



5. Does a combined question format convert Latino to a racial category?

No. A combined question would not make Hispanic/Latino a race or equate it with a racial category; it would remain an ethnicity category.¹ *More info* [here](#).

6. Would a combined question allow individuals to identify both their race and ethnicity?

Could Afro-Latino individuals identify as both Hispanic and Black?

Yes. A combined question would direct respondents to identify with as many race and/or ethnicity categories as they choose (“select all that apply”).¹ A combined question actually slightly increases the percentage of respondents identifying as both Hispanic and Black, and does not decrease reporting for any race or ethnic group except White.⁴ *More info* [here](#).

7. Would a respondent who marks both Hispanic and Black be categorized as multiracial?

Would this lead to a loss of race data for Afro-Latinos?

No. With a combined question, a respondent selecting more than one category would be counted within EACH of those categories. An Afro-Latino individual who checks Hispanic and Black would be counted as Hispanic, Black, and Hispanic + Black.

By contrast, under the separate question format, many critical civil and voting rights datasets do not present *any* race data for individuals who select Hispanic or Latino. In these datasets, identification as Hispanic effectively takes precedence over identification with any racial groups, so an individual who identifies as Hispanic and Black would *only* be tabulated as Hispanic. **With a combined question, respondents who select both Hispanic and Black would be counted under both of these categories, providing the maximum counts for both the Black population and for the Hispanic population.**⁵ The separate question format also causes many Latinos to be categorized as “multiracial” because they select one of the race categories (for example, White) *and* write in their specific Hispanic origin (for example, Mexican), which is then coded as “Some Other Race.”⁶ *More info* [here](#).

8. Why is a combined question format important for adding a MENA ethnicity category?

Like the Latino community, the MENA community is not a monolith: A combined question would allow individuals of MENA origin, who have long been classified as White or “Some Other Race,” to identify with the MENA ethnic category only or with MENA and one or more other categories. *More info* [here](#).

9. How did the Census Bureau test the combined question format?

Through its 2010 Alternative Questionnaire Experiment (AQE) and 2015 National Content Test (NCT), the Census Bureau conducted extensive focus groups, interviews, and statistical testing of different question formats.^{4,7} The NCT, which had an extremely large sample size of 1.2 million households, intentionally oversampled communities of color (including Afro-Latino communities) across the United States and Puerto Rico to ensure their representation.⁵ *More info* [here](#).

10. How will OMB and the Census Bureau decide what checkboxes, examples, and instructions to use with the new combined question if it is adopted?

If a combined question is adopted under OMB’s final revisions, OMB and the Census Bureau must work with stakeholders and community leaders in the implementation phase to finalize optimal checkboxes for subgroups, examples for write-ins, detailed instructions, and terminology. This will be a critical opportunity for stakeholders to weigh in and ensure that OMB and the Census Bureau get it right! *More info* [here](#).

5. [Spotlight on U.S. Census Bureau Research to Inform Discussions for Improving Federal Race and Ethnicity Data Standards](#). U.S. Census Bureau. March 21, 2023.

6. [2020 Census Illuminates Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Country](#). U.S. Census Bureau. August 12, 2021.

7. [2010 Census Race and Hispanic Origin Alternative Questionnaire Experiment](#). U.S. Census Bureau. February 28, 2013.



FAQ: Combined race and ethnicity question format

What do we mean by a “combined” question?

Under the current standards, federal agencies typically use two separate questions to collect data on self-reported race and ethnicity, as in the decennial census. One question requires respondents to indicate whether or not they identify as Hispanic or Latino, and the other requires them to select their race. A combined question (see graphic) would put race, Hispanic origin, and other ethnicity categories in the same question, allowing respondents to select any and all categories with which they identify. A combined question would also allow respondents to select more than one race or ethnicity category and more than one national origin or subgroup.¹

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

Before the 2020 Census, OMB conducted an in-depth review of its race and ethnicity data standards, after nearly a decade of Census Bureau research and testing showed that the outdated 1997 standards were not producing the most accurate, useful, and inclusive data possible. Based on this research, OMB proposed to modernize the standards by adopting a combined race and ethnicity question and adding a MENA category within the combined question. Although OMB held two public comment periods and consulted extensively with stakeholders (including the bureau’s advisory committees) on the proposed revisions, it failed to complete the process for finalizing them prior to the 2020 Census.

The window of opportunity to improve the standards in time to test new questions for the 2030 Census is closing quickly. OMB must meet its summer 2024 deadline for finalizing updated standards so that the bureau can field test updated question formatting from 2025 to 2027. This timing will allow the bureau to continue consulting with stakeholders to improve question formatting, terminology, instructions, and checkboxes and examples to help respondents accurately self-identify, ensuring a combined question that improves data quality for all communities.

Proposed Combined Question with Minimum and Detailed Categories¹

What is your race or ethnicity?
Select all that apply AND enter additional details in the spaces below. Note, you may report more than one group.

WHITE – Provide details below.

German Irish English
 Italian Polish French
Enter, for example, Scottish, Norwegian, Dutch, etc.

HISPANIC OR LATINO – Provide details below.

Mexican or Mexican American Puerto Rican Cuban
 Salvadoran Dominican Colombian
Enter, for example, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc.

BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN – Provide details below.

African American Jamaican Haitian
 Nigerian Ethiopian Somali
Enter, for example, Ghanaian, South African, Barbadian, etc.

ASIAN – Provide details below.

Chinese Filipino Asian Indian
 Vietnamese Korean Japanese
Enter, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc.

AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKA NATIVE – Enter, for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Tribal Government, Tlingit, etc.

MIDDLE EASTERN OR NORTH AFRICAN – Provide details below.

Lebanese Iranian Egyptian
 Syrian Moroccan Israeli
Enter, for example, Algerian, Iraqi, Kurdish, etc.

NATIVE HAWAIIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER – Provide details below.

Native Hawaiian Samoan Chamorro
 Tongan Fijian Marshallese
Enter, for example, Palauan, Tahitian, Chuukese, etc.



Why is OMB proposing to move from two separate questions to a combined question?

1. The separate question format does not reflect the way that many individuals self-identify, erasing critical data for Latino and MENA communities: Many Latinos have expressed frustration with the separate race and ethnicity question format, reporting that it does not allow them to accurately self-identify because they do not identify with any of the OMB race categories.⁷ This frustration is reflected by the growing proportion of Latino respondents who select “Some Other Race” on census forms. **In both the 2010 and 2020 Census, nearly 44 percent of Latino respondents either selected “Some Other Race” or left the race question blank.**²

Racial Identification of Self-reported Hispanic/Latino Population ²	2010	2020
Hispanic respondents who left the race question blank	13.0%	8.1%
Hispanic respondents identifying as SOR and writing in “Hispanic”	30.5%	35.4%
Total Hispanic respondents who did not identify with an OMB race	43.5%	43.6%

As a result, Latinos make up the overwhelming majority of the “Some Other Race” category.⁴ “Some Other Race” data is hard to analyze and masks inequalities between groups, allowing them to go unaddressed

2. The separate question format results in less accurate data not only for Latino and MENA communities, but for ALL communities of color: For the first time in the 2020 Census, “Some Other Race” surpassed Black/African American to become the second largest race group in the United States. More than a third of Latino respondents selected “Some Other Race,” as did many individuals of MENA origin. Under OMB’s current standards, many Latino respondents who select “Some Other Race” (and, by definition, all respondents who identify as MENA) are classified as “White” for certain datasets^{3,4}, making the White population appear larger than it actually is. This hinders our ability to look critically at racial and ethnic disparities: For example, inequalities between White and Black communities may be obscured by the inclusion of Latinos and MENA individuals (who may also experience discrimination) in the White category.

How would a combined question improve data quality for communities of color, including Latino, Afro-Latino, and MENA communities?

1. A combined question better reflects the way that many Latino individuals see their identities, producing more accurate data. Research shows that when given the opportunity in a combined question, 70 percent of Latino respondents chose the “Hispanic or Latino” category only. As a result, a combined question dramatically decreases “Some Other Race” reporting, as well as missing responses.⁴ By better reflecting the way many Latinos identify, a combined question would produce more accurate data that would help researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders better understand the share of resources that Latino communities are receiving.

A combined question would significantly improve data quality and accuracy not only for Latino 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.



2. A combined question with detailed checkboxes improves reporting for Latinos who also identify as Black/African American. While concerns have been raised about the potential effects of a combined question on reporting for Afro-Latino communities, research shows that it would actually *improve* reporting for this group. A slightly *higher* percentage of respondents identifying as Hispanic also identified as Black in a combined question with detailed checkboxes (1.8 percent) compared with the current separate question format (1.5 percent). This increase was even more pronounced when looking at paper form responses alone (3.2 percent vs. 1.7 percent).⁴

Table H13. Race Distribution for Hispanic Respondents by Question Format for All Modes

	White alone	Black alone	Asian alone	AIAN alone	MENA alone	NHPI alone	SOR alone	Two or More	Invalid	No Other Major Categories Reported*
Separate Question	18.2% (0.44)	1.5% (0.09)	0.6% (0.06)	1.0% (0.08)	0.1% (0.02)	0.1% (0.02)	33.6% (0.68)	35.5% (0.72)	1.0% (0.09)	8.4% (0.40)
Combined Question with Write-In Response Areas	15.7% (0.66)	1.3% (0.07)	0.6% (0.05)	1.0% (0.07)	0.1% (0.02)	0.1% (0.01)	0.4% (0.04)	4.0% (0.18)	0.8% (0.05)	76.0% (0.82)
Combined Question with Detailed Checkboxes	19.3% (0.66)	1.8% (0.10)	0.9% (0.07)	0.8% (0.07)	0.1% (0.02)	0.1% (0.01)	0.6% (0.08)	4.5% (0.20)	0.6% (0.05)	71.4% (0.81)

*Includes responses of Hispanic when no other major category (White, Black, Asian, AIAN, MENA, NHPI, or SOR) is reported
Source: 2015 National Content Test data. Note: Estimates are weighted with standard errors in parentheses.

Table H15. Race Distribution for Hispanic Respondents by Question Format for Paper

	White alone	Black alone	Asian alone	AIAN alone	MENA alone	NHPI alone	SOR alone	Two or More	Invalid	No Other Major Categories Reported*
Separate Question	23.1% (0.89)	1.7% (0.18)	0.6% (0.13)	1.0% (0.15)	0.1% (0.05)	0.1% (0.04)	21.7% (0.85)	23.4% (0.89)	0.8% (0.13)	27.4% (0.96)
Combined Question with Write-In Response Areas	10.5% (0.48)	1.2% (0.10)	0.5% (0.06)	0.5% (0.07)	0.0% (0.02)	0.1% (0.02)	0.3% (0.05)	2.3% (0.16)	0.8% (0.08)	83.7% (0.54)
Combined Question with Detailed Checkboxes	25.1% (1.00)	3.2% (0.29)	1.2% (0.17)	0.8% (0.22)	0.3% (0.11)	0.1% (0.04)	0.4% (0.12)	3.2% (0.30)	0.9% (0.18)	64.8% (1.19)

*Includes responses of Hispanic when no other major category (White, Black, Asian, AIAN, MENA, NHPI, or SOR) is reported
Source: 2015 National Content Test data. Note: Estimates are weighted with standard errors in parentheses.

3. A combined question is fundamental for adding a MENA category. 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.⁴ A combined question is the optimal design for the inclusion of a MENA ethnicity category because, like the Hispanic/Latino category, MENA communities are not a racial monolith. While the Census Bureau has historically categorized people of MENA origin as White,⁴ this does not accurately reflect the entire population. A combined question would finally 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.

Without a combined question, MENA communities will face the untenable burden of having to continue fighting for accurate representation, civil rights protections, and much-needed health and community resources without accurate data backing their requests — rendering them invisible in the data for at least another decade.



Combined question implementation: truth or myth?

1. Does a combined question format convert Latino to a racial category? A combined question would *not* make Hispanic/Latino a race or equate it with a racial category. A combined question would put race, Hispanic origin (which would remain an ethnicity), and other ethnicity categories in the same question, allowing respondents to select all categories with which they identify. A respondent could identify as Hispanic/Latino and also select additional race or ethnicity categories, as well as one or more subgroups under each major category, or they could select only Hispanic/Latino.¹

2. Would a combined question prevent individuals from reporting both their race AND ethnicity? What about Latinos or MENA individuals who also identify as Black?

A combined question directs respondents to identify with as many race and/or ethnicity categories as they choose (“select all that apply”). A respondent could choose to identify as Hispanic only, or, for example, as both Hispanic and Black (or Hispanic and American Indian, MENA and Black, etc).¹ **A combined question actually *increases* reporting as both Hispanic and Black, and does not decrease reporting for any race or ethnic group except White.**⁴

3. Would a respondent who marks both Hispanic and Black be categorized as multiracial? Would this lead to a loss of racial data for Afro-Latinos?

No, a respondent who marks both Hispanic and Black would not be categorized as multiracial. With a combined question, a respondent selecting more than one category would be counted within EACH of those categories. For example, a respondent who selects Hispanic and Black could be counted under ALL of the following categories:

- Hispanic and Black
- Hispanic alone or in combination with one or more other categories
- Black alone or in combination with one or more other categories⁵

By contrast, under the separate question format, many critical datasets on voting rights, education, fair housing, and criminal justice do not present *any* race data for individuals who select Hispanic or Latino. Instead, “Hispanic or Latino” is commonly presented as a separate category alongside the OMB racial categories and includes respondents who identify as Hispanic and White, Hispanic and Black, Hispanic and American Indian, etc.⁵ In these datasets, identification as “Hispanic” effectively takes precedence over identification with any race groups, making these groups appear smaller and masking race data for Latinos. **A combined question would allow responses such as “Hispanic and Black” to be included in BOTH a “Hispanic alone or in combination” category and a “Black alone or in combination” category, providing the maximum counts for both the Black population and for the Hispanic population.**

The separate question format also causes many individuals who identify as Hispanic to be categorized as multiracial because they answer the race question by selecting one of the race categories (for example, White) and writing in their specific Hispanic origin (for example, Mexican). These individuals are then coded as both White and “Some Other Race” — i.e., multiracial.⁶ If a combined question is adopted, OMB and the U.S. Census Bureau must work with stakeholders to develop guidance for federal agencies on tabulation to ensure that data are presented in the most inclusive and useful format for all communities, including detailed tabulations for groups that select more than one category (such as Hispanic and Black).



How did the Census Bureau test the combined question format? What communities were represented in this research?

1. The Census Bureau first tested a combined question format in its [2010 Alternative Questionnaire Experiment \(AQE\)](#). Embedded in the 2010 Census with a sample size of roughly 500,000 addresses, the AQE focused on improving the race and Hispanic origin questions by testing different questionnaire design strategies. The results of the AQE showed that a combined race and ethnicity question significantly reduced the proportion of respondents who selected “Some Other Race” or left the race question blank.

The AQE also included extensive re-interview and focus group research on how participants self-identified. A total of 67 focus groups were conducted with diverse racial and ethnic groups across the United States and in Puerto Rico, including sessions with MENA communities, Afro-Caribbean communities, and groups where ancestry is different from their place of birth (for example, Asian Indians in Trinidad). The focus groups consistently reported that the separate Hispanic origin question was “unfair and problematic,” and that all racial and ethnic groups should be treated fairly and equitably. Many Hispanic participants reported that they **did not identify with OMB’s current race categories** and felt that the format and instructions prevented them from self-identifying accurately.⁷

2. The Census Bureau tested the combined question format further through its [2015 National Content Test \(NCT\)](#). Analysis of the NCT showed that a combined question with a distinct MENA category more accurately reflects the way many people self-identify, yielding higher quality data. The results also showed that a combined question would not reduce reporting for any of the major race categories except White, compared to data collected through separate questions.⁴

The NCT was conducted using a nationally representative [sample](#) of 1.2 million housing units in the United States, including Puerto Rico — the largest sample size ever for a Census Bureau testing program. The NCT oversampled Latino, Black, AANHPI, and MENA communities, including neighborhoods in northeastern cities with significant Afro-Latino populations to ensure their representation.⁵

If a combined question is adopted, what are the next steps to ensure that it will produce accurate race and ethnicity data for all communities?

The adoption of revised OMB standards, including a combined question, is a critical first step in ensuring that government data accurately reflect how community members identify — but it is only the first step. To ensure that a new combined question would allow individuals from all communities to accurately self-identify, OMB, the Census Bureau, stakeholders, and community leaders must work together in the implementation phase to finalize question formatting, including optimal checkboxes for subgroups, examples for write-ins, detailed instructions, and clearly defined terminology. This could include, for example, instructions indicating that individuals identifying as Afro-Latino may check both the “Hispanic or Latino Origin” and “Black or African American” categories.

OMB should also 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 clear guidance for “bridging” between data collected under different versions of its standards over time. As the Census Bureau continues its testing of updated question formats, it must also consult closely with stakeholders on how data should be coded, tabulated, and presented.