Title: Problems with Official Federal Definitions of Racial Categories in the United States

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I propose to prepare a paper for the NBER conference on "Race, Ethnicity, and Economic Statistics for the 21st Century" that provides a critical analysis of the categories for racial groups used for official purposes by the federal government. In particular, I intend to examine the existing scheme of race classification, the associated definitions for each racial group, the consequences for the collection of economic statistics, and the consequences for national policy.

The OMB and the Bureau of the Census use a shared set of definitions for racial groups that constitute the official federal delineations deployed for administrative purposes. Unfortunately, these definitions are deeply flawed. For example, consider the circularity of the definition of the category "Black or African American": "A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa."

No independent definition of what it means to be black is offered. Unlike the other racial groups in the classification scheme, the inclusion of the phrase "any of the Black racial groups" shifts this racial category from being exclusively based upon geographic origin. Oddly enough, the definition of white does not include the qualifier that individuals with ancestry in "Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa" must have "origins in any of the white racial groups." The presumption here is everyone whose family "originated" in Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa" necessarily is "white," regardless of their phenotype. Where does one situate individuals racially whose ancestors are from the Indian subcontinent or from Australian aborigines or New Zealand Maoris?

Further complicating matters is the definition of "American Indian or Alaska Native": "A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintain tribal affiliation or community attachment." But the phrase "original peoples" is undefined and no precise standards for "tribal affiliation or community attachment" are provided. Respondents to the race question on federal surveys who choose the American Indian category appear to have widely varying degrees of connection to indigenous communities--in some cases, no more than a romantic connection (Passel 1996).

Indeed, respondents to federal surveys do not seem to pay much attention to the official definitions when choosing their race classification. A high proportion of self-identified ethnic Hispanics say their race is white despite the official definition of white not including persons with origins in Mexico, Central America, nor South America. Furthermore, research from studies that include data on respondents' skin shade indicates that ethnic Hispanics will disproportionately choose a white racial classification regardless of their phenotype and despite the fact that many do not believe that others will see them as white (Darity 2016).

Furthermore, persons choosing the black category on the Census, particularly if they are descendants of persons enslaved in the United States may self-identify as black without being able to identify an African country of origin, nor necessarily wanting to do so. From the standpoint of ethnic identification, these individuals may see themselves as descendants of American Freedmen, in contrast with a smaller share of the self-reported black population comprised of more recent immigrants to the United States or the much smaller share who are descendants of the American Indian Freedmen (emancipated from the

"Five Civilized Tribes"). Only the second group may possess a primary sense of origin in and identification with countries in Africa or Africa writ large.

The National Asset Scorecard for Communities of Color (NASCC), a survey of six metropolitan areas in the USA conducted between 2014 and 2018, demonstrates substantial variation in the wealth, income, occupational status, and educational characteristics of individuals who can be identified as "native" blacks and those who entered the United States after the 1970s. As a result, organizations like Reparations Planning Committee, authors of a report to be published in May by the University of California Press, and the National Assembly of African American Slavery Descendants have argued it is important to disaggregate the black category by ethnicity, especially in anticipation of the potential enactment of a reparations plan for African Americans.

NASCC also has shown significant variation in economic characteristics of sub-groups of Asians (a racial group in OMB/Census classifications) and Hispanics (an ethnic group in OMB/Census classifications) by national origin. This also has led to an urging for disaggregation of economic statistics for those larger groups as well.

Furthermore, there also has been a recurrent call to convert the ethnicity category of "Hispanic" into a race classification. This has been opposed fiercely by the Afro-Latino Forum who fear this will lead to the outright disappearance from enumeration of persons who identify both as black and Latino.

The race categories identified by Census and OMB have powerful social meaning. Self-reported race correlates strongly with a wide range of social outcomes. But it is not clear self-reported race is selected based upon the official definitions. Nor have the effects of these categories and their definitions for public policy been analyzed satisfactorily in the past. That will be project set for my paper.

References

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