Demographic Changes among U.S. Whites: Implications for Research and Policy

Dr. Jen’nan G. Read
Sally Dalton Robinson Professor
Chair of Sociology
Duke University

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Thanks to Fatima Fairfax, Duke sociology graduate student, for her invaluable assistance in the preparation of this document.
1. 1977 OMB standards created to enforce civil rights laws.

2. **Whites** became default reference category:
   - Predominantly western European
   - Arrived in U.S. under more welcoming policies
   - Occupied highest rung on stratification ladder

3. Practice of using Whites in the aggregate persists, despite massive changes in the White population.
Today’s Context


2. Whites defined as:
   “…persons who trace their ancestries to any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.”

3. 100+ white ancestries in U.S. Census
   – 1980: 55% of total population German, Irish, English
   – 2019: dropped to 23%
   – Immigration driving force of change
Origins of Non-Hispanic White Immigrants, 1960-2019

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Migration Policy Institute
OMB categories provide critical data on Whites

Current standards (ACS):

6. What is Person 1’s race?
Mark (X) one or more boxes AND print origins.
- White – Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc.

13. What is this person’s ancestry or ethnic origin?
(For example: Italian, Jamaican, African Am., Cambodian, Cape Verdean, Norwegian, Dominican, French Canadian, Haitian, Korean, Lebanese, Polish, Nigerian, Mexican, Taiwanese, Ukrainian, and so on.)
Current standards capture White diversity

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Origins of MENA immigrants over time

Pre-1991

2001+

Lebanon

Egypt

Iraq

Jordan

Syria

Palestine
Challenges of New Combined Question

1. “White” loses MENA prompts
2. “MENA” listed near bottom
Inconsistencies are Problematic

What is Person 1’s race?
Mark (X) one or more boxes AND print origins.

- White – Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc.

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.

Comparability compromised:
What about persons of Arab ancestry who identify as white?
Recommendations for OMB

1. Proceed with MENA category and combined race/ethnicity question.

2. Ensure comparability in group identification.

3. Be consistent in guidance and prompts for respondents.

4. Provide better training and more guidelines for data users.
Recommendations for Researchers

1. Acknowledge diversity among Whites.

2. Understand that the aggregate category may:
   a. Obscure needs of white ethnic groups;
   b. Provide inaccurate estimates of racial/ethnic inequalities.

3. When possible, examine differences by:
   a. Nativity
   b. Arrival year for foreign-born
   c. Region or country of birth
   d. Parental nativity and/or country of birth
Thank you

Questions?

jennnan.read@duke.edu
EXTRA SLIDE

Changes in Size of U.S. White Population

- All Whites
- Non-Hispanic Whites

Source: U.S. Census Bureau