

Over the past three decades there has been growing concern about measuring the increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the United States. This was a topic of concern for our founding fathers and it continues to be an area of great concern. The Census Bureau has been one of the major federal agencies concerned with measuring racial and ethnic diversity and classifying or categorizing people into discrete categories.

Different categories have been used to collect data on race. The number of categories grew from two in 1790 to 15 in 2000. More importantly, beginning in 1950, the Census began using the “Other race” category to allow respondents of mixed racial parentage to racially identify. Since 1950, both the number and percent of people in this category has grown. In 1950, less than one-half million people (0.03 percent) were reported in this category. By 2000, there were over 15 million people (5.6 percent) if one uses the single race number, or to over 18 million (6.6 percent) if one uses the alone or in any combination figure. The overwhelming majority of people included in this category reported a Hispanic ethnicity.

The Census Bureau only used the Some Other Race category in the decennial census, under an exemption granted by OMB. This response category is not used in household surveys conducted by the Census Bureau, in making population projections and estimates, or by other federal agencies, resulting in problems of comparability of race data. Census research shows that reporting in the Some Other Race category is vulnerable to mode effects and other methodological differences between surveys.

In this paper, the author examines the racial distribution from the 2003 National Content Test (NCT). In the 2003 NCT, two different formats of the question on race were used – one with a Some Other Race category and one without a Some Other Race category. The goal is to measure the reporting of race using two different questions and to identify alternative ways for assigning race(s) for individuals who do not answer the question on race using information from these questions.