



Why the 2020 Census Should Keep Longstanding Separate Questions about Hispanic Origin and Race

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The distinction between race and ethnic or national origin is real. Scholarly research from many disciplines shows that people regardless of ethnic or national origins experience racial discrimination based on how others perceive their physical characteristics, such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features. There are well documented social inequalities related to physical appearance variations among Hispanics in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States. Despite these realities, the designers of the 2020 census are considering asking about race and origin in a single, combined question, which would make it impossible to identify race for many respondents – especially because white, brown and black Hispanics would be grouped together. To ensure that the information collected in the census is useful for understanding and solving the problem of racial discrimination in the United States, these questions should not be combined.

Street Race and Inequality

The current set of census questions asks first about Hispanic origin (Mexican American/Chicano, Puerto Rican, or other Hispanic origin) and then about race. Census designers argue that the new question format would reduce the number of Latin-heritage respondents who choose the write-in and “Some Other Race” options. These designers also argue that all origin groups should be treated equitably, and that everyone should all be able to “see themselves” reflected in the census question. Why should Hispanics receive “special treatment” with their own separate question?

To understand why such arguments are problematic, we must first understand that achieving equity requires different treatment. In the United States, the enslavement of Africans and colonization of Native American sovereign groups created systems of racialized inequality, with reverberations in employment, poverty, and many social spheres. Visual markers such as skin color, hair texture, and other racial features are imbued with historically embedded social meanings that map onto many societal inequalities. This means that darker-skinned Latin-origin people often experience more discrimination than their lighter-skinned kin.

Consider what would happen if three Latino-origin men, Ricky Martin, Sammy Sosa, and George López happened not to be famous and found themselves dressed in a t-shirt and jeans on a New York City street, looking for a cab. Who would be able to catch a cab first – or at all, for that matter? Likely, Ricky – a light skinned Puerto Rican American would have the least trouble, while George – a brown-skinned Mexican American and Sammy – a black-skinned Dominican American, would be left standing on the street longer.

What if these three went to vote? Or went looking to rent the same apartment? Or interviewed for the same job? Or drove through a border checkpoint? Or ended up in the same hospital emergency room with the same symptoms? Their differences in physical appearance would lead to similar results, according to a plethora of

research revealing unequal treatment based on “ascribed racial status.” I call this “street race,” because the concept refers to the race strangers on the street would likely assign a person based on their physical characteristics.

Empirical studies underline the value of separate questions about Hispanic origin and race.

- The Urban Institute sent 8,000 testers to apply for housing around the country and found that applicants who were a “visible minority” were dramatically more likely to be told there were no apartments available or were shown significantly fewer apartments than white applicants.
- Thomas LaVeist-Ramos and his colleagues found that people who share ethnic backgrounds have similar health outcomes, but in access to services “Black Hispanics’ visual similarity with non-Hispanic blacks may... subject them to similar levels of discrimination.”
- Rogelio Sáenz and Maria Cristina Morales found that Latin national origin groups such as Cubans and South Americans that most often identified as white in the 2010 census experienced less wage disadvantage than national origin groups such as Dominicans and Guatemalans with lower percentages identifying as white.

Street Race, National and Ethnic Origins, and the Future of Census Questions

Both everyday life and social science research show, in sum, that street race is not the same as national origin, ethnicity, cultural background, language background, or genetic lineage. To return to our example, Ricky, George, and Sammy may share a genetic lineage that includes Native American, European, African, and Asian origins. If they did share this mixed lineage and were asked on the 2020 census a single question about race and origin they might each mark the same races and origins – even though they appear to be different colors in the street racism world. This is where the combined question becomes a problem. In asking about origins and race as if they were the same thing, it becomes impossible to use the data to understand how Ricky, George, and Sammy’s experiences with “street race” and discrimination may differ. More importantly, a combined question would also make it impossible to use the census data to understand how street race interacts, at the population level, with social inequalities in other arenas such as education, socio-economic status, housing status, marital status, criminal status and so forth.

If the U.S. Census starts to ask about origin and race in one question, it would imply a false equivalency between race and ethnic or national origin. Beyond confusion, this move could contribute to what sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls “color blind racism” – the idea that the best way to achieve racial equity is to ignore the reality that many structured disparities of treatment happen based on skin color and other visual markers. Ignoring this reality – including the reality of color lines within Latin communities – would not, however, make racialized inequalities disappear. Instead, changing Census categories would prevent the collection of data that inform meaningful efforts to further racial justice. Without the needed information, civil rights enforcement for visible minorities would be comprised.

Read more in “What’s Your “Street Race”? Leveraging Multidimensional Measures of Race and Intersectionality for Examining Physical and Mental Health Status among Latinxs,” (with Nancy López, Edward Vargas, Melina Juarez, Lisa Cacari-Stone, and Sonia Bettez). *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* (2017).

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