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ARTICLES

Symposium on Adding a Middle Eastern or North African category to the US Census

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In January of 2023, agencies within the U.S. Federal government proposed changing the questions used to measure the race and ethnicity of U.S. residents on the Census and in other surveys used to measure the US population. The proposed changes came after a lengthy review that started in 2014 but was halted during the Trump administration.

Some of the proposed changes – the first since 1997 - are not controversial; for example, removing terms like "Negro" and "Far East" from the question garners little, if any, opposition. Other changes, like asking for more details about ancestry ("Italian" or "Colombian," for instance), or adding a category for Hispanic or Latino (which were previously measured separately from the race item), have been widely seen as important to help people better answer these questions but also require more deliberation. Indeed, these changes attracted significant attention from the public: during the 90-day open comment period, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Interagency Technical Working Group on Race logged more than 20,000 comments on the newly proposed combined race question. Within the AAPOR community in particular, the creation of a new category for "Middle Eastern or North African" (MENA) has proven complicated, leading to days of discussion and debate among members.

Proponents of adding a separate category for MENA argue that it will help the government to identify U.S. residents of MENA ancestry, and better meet their needs by measuring, for example, discrimination or health disparities. They also argue that members of MENA groups have traditionally had difficulty knowing what category they're supposed to assign themselves on these forms. Someone from Algeria, for instance, might be considered African American, as they are from Africa, but might not consider themselves to be Black. At the same time, the White category is not a good fit, either. Similarly, someone from Iran may technically be from Asia, but might not consider themselves to be an Asian American. There are, of course, "right" ways for these people to answer these questions, based on instructions that they may or may not ever see, but those instructions may well be secondary to the people's lived experiences and senses of identity in shaping how they answer the questions.

In the past, the OMB definition of the White category included people in the MENA category. However, more recently, and after much research on the topic, the OMB working group determined that they "do not share the same lived experience as White people with European ancestry, do not identify as White, and are not perceived as White by others."

Unfortunately, the proposed change does have obstacles. The new approach may be seen as being at odds with the way government bodies have traditionally measured race and ethnicity, which is based on social categories. There is no evidence that significant numbers of Americans consider themselves to be "MENA Americans" in the same way as communities of Black Americans or Asian Americans. Opponents of the change also argue that the change complicates the analysis of the changing demographics of the U.S. population, by making it more difficult to compare figures over time. As an alternative, some have proposed that MENA ancestry be treated as an ethnic group, rather than a race, and advocate for keeping a separate ethnicity question similar to the question for Hispanic or Latino. At the extremes, opponents have even argued that having MENA ancestry in official documents could enable discrimination against them, likening it to lists of people of Jewish ancestry in pre-Holocaust Europe.

The categorization of U.S. residents of MENA background as White has its roots in the early 20th century. Laws that discriminated against Asian and African immigrants may have pushed people of MENA ancestry to categorize themselves as "White." In 1909, a Federal Court held that an Arab American from Syria should be considered as White, allowing him to claim citizenship, over the objections of the Department of Justice. That case drew on an argument that Jesus Christ was from the Middle East, so ruling against the Syrian American in question, George Shishim, would imply that Jesus wasn't White.

The Interagency Technical Working Group is expected to make its final recommendations in summer 2024. Given the importance of these measures for the survey research community, Survey Practice is presenting short pieces that attempt to contextualize the debate over the inclusion of MENA into the Census and other government forms. Zachary Smith, Valerie Ryan and Stephanie Willson, all from the National Center for Health Statistics, look at both interpretative and cognitive approaches to the issue, and argue that the key question is how respondents themselves understand these questions. Andy Beveridge, of Queens College and Graduate Center CUNY and Social Explorer, and Margo Anderson, of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, argue that the new questions amount to an enormous change in the way that race and ethnicity are being measured in the U.S. and point to the complexities that arose from even small changes in the way that the questions were asked in the 2020 Census. They argue that more research, and studies to ensure compatibility with past work, are needed before these changes are made. Sarah

Abboud from the University of Illinois Chicago makes the case that the inclusion of a category is needed to help identify areas where MENA Americans continue to be disadvantaged.

In an effort to provide a balanced view of the matter, Survey Practice reached out to a number of other AAPOR members who had expressed opinions on the matter, including some with a less qualified positive view of the proposed changes, but they declined to provide a piece.

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