RACIAL AND ETHNIC CLASSIFICATIONS USED BY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The Department of Education (ED) like other federal agencies has heard from many parents, schools, and other members of the public that the current five federal race/ethnicity categories are not sufficient. Most of the comments address the lack of a category for persons who are multi-racial or multi-ethnic. However other problems with the current categories have also been raised. These concerns led to a federal-government-wide review of how we classify race and ethnicity and what we use those identifications for. This paper reports on a component of that review: how best to collect information on race and ethnicity from administrative record data (e.g., school records).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted a survey in Spring 1995 on how schools collect data on students' race and ethnicity. Questions on this survey included what racial/ethnic categories are used by the school and school district, who provides students' race/ethnicity identification to the school, how often is the information collected, how does the school report data to the federal government. Also included in the questions was whether there were currently problems or issues in their school with the specific classifications. All of these questions were asked in the context of the minority composition of the school, its size, and its geographic location.

KEYWORDS

Administrative records, OMB Directive No. 15, Fast response survey system, NCES

Introduction

When individuals in the United States complete forms for school enrollment, or applications for jobs, mortgages, college scholarships or other kinds of loans, they are asked to provide information about their racial or ethnic heritage. Typically, they are asked to check one of four racial categories: American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian or Pacific Islander; black; or white. They are also asked to indicate whether or not they are of Hispanic origin. In addition, persons residing in the United States are also asked to check a racial or ethnic category for the decennial census. This information is used by the federal government for a variety of purposes, including monitoring job discrimination and school segregation and determining how to allocate large amounts of federal aid.

The Census Bureau has included a question on race in each census since 1790. The content and format of the question, in addition to the method of data collection, have changed over the years. In 1790, four categories were used to collect data on race—Free White Males, Free White Females, All Other Free Persons, and Slaves. By 1970, nine categories—white, Negro or black, Indian (American), Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Korean, and Other race—were being used. Beginning with the 1970 census, the Census Bureau also introduced a separate question to collect data on Hispanic origin. By the 1990 census, the race categories had expanded even further to 15 categories—white, black, Indian (American), Eskimo, Aleut, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, Asian Indian, Samoan, Guamanian, Other Asian or Pacific Islander, and Other race.

In 1974 the Federal Interagency Committee on Education (FICE) created an Ad Hoc Committee on Racial and Ethnic Definitions to develop specific terms and definitions for designating race and ethnicity. The purpose of this endeavor was to create a system so that a broad range of racial and ethnic data could be collected by federal agencies on a compatible and nonduplicative basis. The efforts of this committee, along with those of numerous other federal offices and commissions, resulted in the categories that are currently being used. In 1977 the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued "Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting," which are contained in Statistical Policy Directive No. 15. For the first time standard categories and definitions were to be used by all federal agencies in both collecting and presenting data on racial and ethnic populations. Directive No. 15 has four racial groups and breaks down ethnicity into "Hispanic origin" and "Not of Hispanic origin." The directive also allows agencies to collect data using a format that combines the racial and ethnic categories, which includes Hispanic in the list of choices. These categories were developed largely to produce data on population groups that historically had suffered discrimination and differential treatment in the United States because of their race or ethnicity (Evinger 1995).

The same five standard federal categories have been used for nearly 20 years. Yet during the time that the standards have been in effect, the country's population has become increasingly diverse, both racially and ethnically. During the 1980s immigration to the United States reached historic levels, and, since the 1965 Immigration Act, the flows have shifted from Europe and Canada to Mexico, Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Asia (Harrison and Bennett 1995). Interracial marriages are also beginning to increase the population that is of mixed race or ethnicity (Evinger 1995). However, the proportion of these marriages is still relatively small (about 2 percent of all marriages in the United States). One consequence of these demographic changes has been concern on the part of data collectors and respondents themselves that the current standard federal categories no longer reflect the diversity of the nation's present population.

In July 1993 OMB announced that it would undertake a comprehensive review of the current categories, including an analysis of the possible effects of suggested changes to the categories on the quality and utility of the resulting data. An integral and essential part of OMB's review is, therefore, the research and testing being conducted by a number of federal agencies of alternative approaches to collecting data on race and ethnicity. For additional information on the OMB review process see OMB's *Federal Register* notices of June 9, 1994 (59FR29831-35) and August 28, 1995 (60FR44674-93). For information on review efforts by the Census Bureau, see the Bureau of Labor Statistics (1995) and the *Federal Register* notice of December 1, 1995 (60FR62010-15).

The survey described in this report is part of this research agenda and provides information on the collection of racial and ethnic data from the perspective of administrative records maintained by schools. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in the Department of Education commissioned the study. The purpose of the survey was to determine by what methods schools classify students' race and ethnicity, what categories they use, and how they report this information to the federal government. The survey was also designed to identify any problems schools are experiencing currently in recording and reporting racial and ethnic information using the current categories. The following are the major findings from the survey.

They are discussed more fully in the following text.[1]

Highlights

Approximately half (55 percent) of all public schools collect data about students' race and ethnicity only when students initially register for school in the district. Another 17 percent collect these data at initial registration and whenever students change schools within the district. One-quarter of public schools collect racial and ethnic data on an annual basis (figure 1).

A sizable number of schools (41 percent) reported that there are students in their schools for whom the five standard federal categories are not accurately descriptive (table 5). Of the 31 percent of all schools that could estimate the number of students for whom this applied, the majority (84 percent) reported that it applied to less than 5 percent of their total student population.

The majority of public schools (73 percent) reported that they use only the five standard federal categories to classify the race and ethnicity of students (figure 2). Of the remaining 27 percent of schools that use classifications other than these five categories, 10 percent use "other" or "undesignated," with space for indicating a specific race or ethnicity. Another 5 percent of schools reported the use of "other" without space for specification. A general "multiracial" category is being used by 5 percent of schools.

Additional racial and ethnic designations, such as "Filipino," are being used by 7 percent of all schools (figure 2). Use of designations such as these appears to be limited primarily to schools in the West, those in cities and urban fringe areas, and those with 20 percent or more minority enrollments (table 2).

About half of the 27 percent of schools that use classifications other than the five standard federal categories reported that the central district office handles the task of aggregating this information before reporting it to the federal government (table 4). Many of the remaining schools (35 percent) reported that these students are distributed by the school among the five standard federal categories based on which ones the school considers most appropriate.

Public schools typically ask parents or guardians to identify the race and ethnicity of their children. Almost half (44 percent) of all schools ask parents to select one of the five standard federal categories. A much smaller percentage (17 percent) ask parents to select from a set of

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[1]This paper presents the findings from the *School Survey on Racial and Ethnic Classifications* conducted for NCES by Westat, Inc., a research firm in Rockville, Maryland. The survey was conducted through the NCES Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) during spring 1995. FRSS is a survey system designed to collect small amounts of data with minimal burden placed on respondents and within a relatively short time frame. Short, three-page questionnaires were sent to a nationally representative sample of public elementary and secondary schools. Findings from this survey were also published by the National Center for Education Statistics as *Racial and EthnicClassifications Used by Public Schools*, 96-092, by Nancy Carey and Elizabeth Farris. Discussion of the survey methodology, data reliability, tables of standard errors, and a copy of the questionnaire are included in that report.

categories used by the school district. In 12 percent of schools, parents may write in their own specifications when identifying the race or ethnicity of their children (table 1).

Approximately one-quarter (22 percent) of public schools assign students to racial and ethnic classifications based on observation by teachers or administrators (table 1). In the Northeast, the percentage is double that of the national average (44 percent).

In general, most respondents reported that various suggested revisions to the five standard federal categories were not an issue or were only a minor issue in terms of their applicability to students enrolled in their schools (table 6).

Survey description

Survey findings are presented for all public schools, and by the following school characteristics: School enrollment (Less than 300, 300-499, 500-999, 1,000 or more); Metropolitan status (City, Urban fringe, Town, Rural); Geographic region (Northeast, Southeast, Central, West); and Percent minority enrollment (Less than 5, 5-19, 20-49, 50 or more). Data have been weighted to national estimates of public schools. All comparative statements were tested for statistical significance through chi-square tests or t-tests adjusted for multiple comparisons using the Bonferroni adjustment and are significant at the .05 level or better. However, not all significant comparisons have been presented, since some were not of substantive importance.

How Do Public Schools Collect Information About Students' Race and Ethnicity?

The majority of the nation's public schools (55 percent) reported that they collect information about race and ethnicity only when students initially register at any school in the district.

Procedures for collecting racial and ethnic data at most schools involve a modified system of self-identification rather than third-party identification. That is, parents or guardians are generally given the opportunity to identify the race and ethnicity of their children, as reported by 73 percent of all schools (table 1). Almost half (44 percent) of all public schools reported that when parents or guardians provide this information, they are asked to select one of the five standard federal categories: American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian or Pacific Islander; black, not of Hispanic origin; Hispanic; and white, not of Hispanic origin (table 1). Another 17 percent of public schools ask parents or guardians to select one of the categories that are being used by the school district, which would include the five standard federal categories or some variation thereof, but might also allow reporting in additional categories, including "other" or "multiracial." In 12 percent of all public schools, parents or guardians are allowed to write in their own specifications for the race and ethnicity of their children, rather than being restricted to selecting from a list of categories provided by the school district.

Table 1.—Percent of public schools indicating various methods of collecting information about the race and ethnicity of students, by school characteristics: 1995

School characteristic	Parents or guardians can:			Teachers or administrators assign students to categories based on observation	Other method[1]
	Select one of the five standard federal categories	Select one of the categories used by the school district	Write in their child's specific race or ethnicity		
All public schools	44	17	12	22	5
Size of enrollment					
Less than 300	48	11	15	24	2
300 to 499	36	16	15	26	8
500 to 999	44	21	10	20	4
1,000 or more	53	21	6	16	4
Metropolitan status					
City	45	25	13	11	7
Urban fringe	47	21	8	22	2
Town	36	13	16	29	8
Rural	46	9	14	28	3
Geographic region					
Northeast	43	4	4	44	5
Southeast	46	18	19	14	4
Central	39	12	12	30	6
West	47	28	13	8	3
Percent minority enrollment in school[2]					
Less than 5	35	7	11	42	5
5-19	50	14	12	22	2
20-49	49	25	15	7	3
50 or more	47	22	13	10	9

[1]Includes some other procedure at the school (3 percent) and data collection by the central district office (2 percent).

[2]Minority enrollment data were missing for about 4 percent of the sampled schools. These schools are not listed in this analysis but are included in the total and in analyses with other school characteristics.

NOTE: Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Naional Center for Education Statsitics, Fast Response Survey System, "School survey on racial and Ethnic Classifications, FRSS 53, 1995.

Some schools rely on third-party identification of students' race and ethnicity. Approximately one-quarter of all schools assign students to categories based on observation by a teacher or administrator. Another 5 percent of schools indicated either that the school followed some other procedure for collecting racial and ethnic data, or that this information was not collected at the school but at the central district office.

Use of some of these procedures varies by the region of the country in which the school is located, the metropolitan status of the community served, and the percentage of minority students in the school population. For example, in the nation as a whole, 29 percent of public schools indicated that parents either may choose from a list containing categories other than the five standard ones or write in their own specifications. While 41 percent of schools in the West allow parents these two options, only a small percentage of schools in the Northeast (8 percent) reported providing parents with any option other than selecting one of the five standard federal categories. In addition, schools in the Northeast and Central regions are more likely to use third-party identification than schools in the Southeast and West. Schools in cities are least likely to use this procedure when compared to the other three types of metropolitan areas. Finally, schools with 20 percent minority enrollments or more are also less likely to rely on third-party identifi-cation of students' race and ethnicity than schools with less than 20 percent minority enrollment.

To What Extent Are Public Schools Identifying Race and Ethnicity With Categories Other Than the Five Standard Categories Used by the Federal Government?

Schools were asked to report what other categories they use to classify the race or ethnicity of students. Respondents could check any of six possible alternative classifications, or specifically indicate that the school uses no additional categories. Approximately three-quarters of the nation's public schools specified that they use only the five standard federal categories to identify students' race and ethnicity. Fifteen percent of all schools reported using an "other" or "undesignated" category—10 percent use this classification and provide space for

identifying a specific racial or ethnic group, while 5 percent use it without space for specification. A general "multiracial" category is reportedly being used by 5 percent of all schools, while 7 percent of schools are using additional racial and ethnic designations, such as "Filipino." Specific combinations of the five standard federal categories, such as "black/ white,"or an "unknown" category are rarely used by schools to classify students' race and ethnicity (2 percent of schools).

Limiting the classification of racial and ethnic data to the five standard federal categories also appears to vary somewhat by certain school characteristics (figure 3). Schools in the Northeast are more likely than those in other regions of the country to use only the standard federal categories, and schools in rural areas are more likely than those in cities and urban fringe areas to do so. Schools with less than 5 percent minority enrollment are also more likely than those with 20 percent or more to restrict the designations they use to the five standard federal categories, although 63 percent of schools with more than 50 percent minority enrollment also reported that they use no additional classifications. Finally, very small schools (less than 300 students) are more likely to adhere to the five standard federal categories than those with enrollments of 500 students or more. However, it must be noted that use of only the five standard categories to classify racial and ethnic data does not necessarily depend on the data collection procedure used by the school. For example, schools might use only these categories but have teachers do the assigning, or they may have parents write in the information but then fit the data into the standard categories.

Seven percent of schools reported using additional racial or ethnic designations (table 2). However, use of additional categories appears to be more prevalent in schools in the West, schools with 1,000 or more students, those in cities and urban fringe areas, and those with 20 percent or more minority enrollments. Adding a separate Filipino category was most frequently mentioned by schools surveyed, although this only applied to 4 percent of all schools (table 3). Some schools also reported breaking down the Asian and Pacific Islander category into two separate categories. Other categories mentioned by schools were Middle Eastern and various specific Asian nationalities, such as Chinese and Japanese, but each was reported by less than 1 percent of all schools.

Table 2.--Percent of public schools using additional racial or ethnic categories, by school characteristics: 1995

School characteristic	Percent of public schools using additional categories
All public schools	7
Size of enrollment	
Less than 300	3
300 to 499	5
500 to 999	9
1000 or more	16
Metropolitan status	
City	13
Urban fringe	11
Town	3
Rural	1
Geographic region	
Northeast	(+)
Southeast	1
Central	1
West	22
Percent minority enrollment in school*	
Less than 5	3
5-19	4
20-49	13

*Minority enrollment data were missing for about 4 percent of the sample schools. These schools are not listed in this analysis but are included in the total and in analyses with other school characteristics.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System, "School survey on Racial and Ethnic Classifications," FRSS 53, 1995.

For Federal Reporting Purposes, How Do Public Schools Provide Racial Information for Students Who Are Reported Using Designations Other Than the Five Standard Federal Categories?

When schools use designations such as "other" or "multiracial" to classify racial and ethnic data, they are required to use the five standard categories specified in Directive No. 15 when submitting their data to the federal government. How do schools convert their records into data that are compatible with the federal guidelines?

Table 3.— Percent of public schools using "Filipino" as a separate designation, or breaking down the "Asian and Pacific Islander" category into two separate categories: 1995

Additional categories	Percent of schools that use any additional categories[1]	Percent of all schools[2]
Filipino	63	4
Asian and Pacific Islander category separated into two categories	31	2

[1]Based on the 7 percent of estimated schools (5,420) that reported using any specific additional categories (unweighted n = 264).

[2]Based on all schools.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System, "School survey on Racial and Ethnic Classifications," FRSS 53, 1995.

Schools that indicated the use of any racial or ethnic categories other than the five standard ones were asked to select from a list of six procedures the one procedure that they use to aggregate the data for federal reporting. Separate responses were requested for "other," "undesignated," or "unknown" classifications and for "multiracial" or additional racial or ethnic categories (table 4). Of those public schools that reported using any classifications other than the five standard federal categories (27 percent of all schools), approximately half (46-56 percent) indicated that their school district's central office handles the aggregating of information for federal reporting.

Table 4.—Percent of public schools using additional racial and ethnic classifications, by various methods schools use to aggregate the data for federal reporting: 1995

Method schools use to aggregate data for federal reporting	Schools that use: "Other," "undesignated," or "unknown" classifications[1]	Schools that use: "Multiracial" or additional racial or ethnic categories[2]
Central district office handles this reporting	46	56
Students are distributed among the five standard categories based on which ones the school considers appropriate	35	35
Students are prorated or otherwise distributed by some formula among the five standard categories	4	2
School ascertains the mother's race or ethnicity and assigns the student to that category	10	1
All the students are put into one of the five standard categories	1	4
Some other action is taken	4	1

[1]Based on the 16 percent of estimated schools (12,335) that reported using these classifications.
[2]Based on the 12 percent of estimated schools (9,341) that reported using these classifications.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System, "School survey on Racial and Ethnic Classifications," FRSS 53, 1995.

Since this survey did not collect district-level information, the procedures these school districts follow are unknown. For those schools that indicated that the aggregating is done at the school

level, many (35 percent) reported that students who are classified using any additional categories are distributed among the five standard federal categories based on which ones the school considers most appropriate. For example, students classified as Filipino would be aggregated into the Asian or Pacific Islander category. No more than 19 percent of these schools reported using any particular alternative procedure, such as determining the mothers' race or ethnicity and assigning students accordingly, or distributing the students by prorating data among the five standard federal categories.

Table 5.--Percent of public schools indicating enrollment of any students whom they feel are not accurately described by the standard federal categories, and their estimates of the percent of their total population for whom this applies, by school characteristics: 1995

School characteristic	All schools		Schools acknowledging any inaccurately described students				
				Estimate of percent of students[2]			
	Percent reporting any inaccurately described students	Percent able to estimate the number of inaccurately described students	Percent able to estimate the number of inaccurately described students[1]	Less than 1	1 - 4.9	5 - 10	More than 10
. . All public schools	41	31	77	34	50	10	6
Size of enrollment							
Less than 300	29	23	80	18	53	22	8
300 to 499	45	34	76	34	60	3	2
500 to 999	43	35	82	41	41	11	7
1,000 or more	56	34	60	40	46	5	9
Metropolitan status							
City	48	31	66	27	53	8	13
Urban fringe	51	41	81	31	53	10	6
Town	41	34	83	44	44	9	3
Rural	25	21	81	38	48	14	0
Geographic region							
Northeast	37	29	78	37	43	11	10
Southeast	43	37	86	47	47	5	1
Central	38	28	74	38	59	1	2
West	45	33	73	19	47	23	11
Percent minority enrollment in school[3]							
Less than 5	26	23	89	63	35	2	(+)
5-19	46	36	78	34	53	8	5
20-49	61	42	68	25	56	14	4
50 or more	41	31	76	16	51	19	15

(+)Less than .5 percent.
1 Based on the 41 percent of estimated schools (or 24,453 of the 31.699 schools) that reported any inaccurately described students. The same schools are represented in columns 2 and 3 using different bases for the two percentage distributions.
2 Based on the estimated schools (24,453) that reported the ability to estimate thenumber of students who are not accurately described by the five standard federal categories.
3 Minority enrollment data were missing for about 4 percent of the sampled schools. These schools are not listed in this analysis but are included in the total and in analyses with other schools characteristics.
NOTE: Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System, "School Survey on racial and Ethnic Classifications," FRSS 53, 1995.

To What Extent Would Suggested Revisions to the Five Standard Federal Categories Be Applicable to Students in the Nation's Public Schools?

In an effort to further understand the usefulness of the five standard federal categories for today's school population, respondents were asked to indicate whether their enrollments included any students for whom these categories are not accurately descriptive. If so,

respondents were then asked if they could estimate the number of such students, and those who could were asked to provide an approximate number. While it would have been preferable to ask all respondents to provide this estimate, during the pretest of the questionnaire it was clear that even if there were "hard-to-classify" students at their schools, some respondents were reticent to provide this information because of a district requirement to classify all students using only the five standard federal categories.

Although only 27 percent of public schools indicated that they are going beyond the five standard federal categories to classify students' race and ethnicity, a larger percentage of schools (41 percent) reported that their enrollments include students whom they feel are not accurately described by these categories (table 5).

The standard federal categories seem most appropriate for students in very small schools, those in rural areas, and those in schools with less than 5 percent minority enrollment. The categories appear least appropriate for students in schools with over 300 students, and in schools with 20-49 percent minority enrollment. Schools with smaller or larger percentages of minority students may have less difficulty classifying the race and ethnicity of students because their populations are more racially homogeneous, and this would be an interesting issue to follow up in future research.

Of the 41 percent of schools that acknowledged having any of these "hard-to-classify" students, 77 percent (31 percent of all public schools) indicated that they could provide an estimate of how many such students were enrolled in their schools. The majority of these schools (84 percent) reported that less than 5 percent of their student population was considered to be inaccurately described by the standard federal categories (table 5).

Table 6.—Percent of public schools indicating the extent to which suggested revisions to the standard federal categories for classifying race and ethnicity apply to students at their school: 1995

Suggested revision	Not an issue	A minor issue	A moderate issue	A significant issue	Already included, or soon to be implemented
Adding a general "multiracial" category	46	23	13	12	6
Allowing individuals to write in a racial or ethnic designation	55	14	12	10	9
Adding an "other" category	56	17	9	6	11
Changing the name of the "black" category to "African American"	57	16	12	10	4
Changing the name of the "American Indian or Alaskan Native" category to "Native American"	63	14	11	9	4
Adding specific combinations of the current categories	64	19	10	5	1
Including Native Hawaiian as a separate category or as part of a "Native American" category	83	10	4	3	1
Adding additional racial or ethnic designations	88	4	4	3	1

NOTE: Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System, "School Survey on Racial Ethnic Classification," FRSS 53, 1995.

Suggested Revisions to Directive No. 15 and Their Relevance to Schools

During 1993 the House Subcommittee on Census, Statistics, and Postal Personnel held a series of

four hearings, focusing primarily on the measurement of race and ethnicity in the decennial census, at which OMB announced a review of Directive No. 15. As a first step, OMB requested the Committee on National Statistics to convene the workshop held in February 1994 to discuss the issues surrounding a review of the categories in Directive No. 15. In June 1994 OMB published a notice in the *Federal Register* soliciting public comment on the adequacy of the current categories, and as part of the comment period held four hearings in Boston, Denver, San Francisco, and Honolulu. During the workshop, the hearings, and the public comment period, OMB received a number of suggestions for revisions to the Directive. In the present survey, eight of the most prominent of these suggested changes were listed and schools were asked to indicate the extent to which each was applicable for students enrolled at their schools.

In general, most respondents (69 to 93 percent) reported that these revisions to Directive No. 15 either were not an issue or were only a minor issue in terms of their applicability to students enrolled in their schools (table 6). Between 3 and 12 percent of schools indicated that any of these issues were significant in terms of their applicability to students. Adding a "multiracial" category was reported as a significant issue by 12 percent of schools, allowing individuals to write in their own designations and changing the name of the "black" category to "African American" were viewed as significant issues in 10 percent of schools, and changing the name of the "American Indian or Alaskan Native" category to "Native American" was considered significant in 9 percent of schools. Relatively few schools (1 to 11 percent) reported that they had already included or were planning to implement any of these revisions. Nevertheless, many states are aware of implementation problems with the current classifications, and some, such as Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio, have enacted laws requiring the addition of new categories. Information concerning such state laws or regulations will be collected in a followup survey addressed to state-level educational officials in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Other Issues Related to the Collection of Data on Race and Ethnicity

Respondents were asked to comment on any additional issues regarding racial and ethnic classifications that they felt were significant for their schools. Of the 926 school personnel who completed questionnaires, about 15 percent provided some written comments.

Many of these comments reiterated some of the information included elsewhere in the questionnaire. For example, several respondents commented on the need for a multiracial, biracial, or multinational category. Others indicated that they felt it would be important to allow individuals either to mark a category that meets their identity or to let them write in their own specific racial or ethnic designation, with no categories provided. About 10 percent of the comments implied that no changes are warranted. These comments often were from respondents who acknowledged that because of the homogeneity of the population at their particular schools, they were not experiencing any problems with the current standards. Finally, a slightly higher number of comments were from individuals who expressed displeasure with the entire process of collecting data on race and ethnicity and suggested eliminating this system of identifying and categorizing this population characteristic entirely.

Summary and Conclusions

The federal government collects racial and ethnic data for a variety of purposes. The most widely known collection is in the decennial census. Racial and ethnic categories are also found

on many forms individuals are asked to complete, including school enrollment forms. Disparities among racial and ethnic groups in social and economic status, credit experience, educational attainment, health outcomes, and availability of health services, to name a few areas, can reveal underlying civil rights problems. For example, the OCR in the Department of Education uses racial and ethnic data to detect possible racial discrimination in ability grouping, discipline, athletics, financial aid, and programs for special populations.

According to recent censuses, the U.S. population is becoming increasingly diverse primarily as a result of immigration from all parts of the world. The federal government has therefore undertaken the task of reviewing and possibly modifying the way racial and ethnic data are collected and reported. Some members of the public are even questioning the usefulness of these data and whether it is reasonable for the government to collect racial and ethnic information.

In response to OMB's June 1994 *Federal Register* notice, a large number of comments came from parents of multiracial children who are dissatisfied with selecting one racial category when registering their children in school. This survey does not suggest that such complaints are widespread at the local level, or that the majority of public schools have seen the need to modify the way they collect data on students' race and ethnicity. While most schools did not report that making particular changes to the current categories would be applicable to a significant number of students in their schools, some changes have been initiated to enable parents either to use an "other" category or to write in their own designations.

The majority of public schools collect racial and ethnic data when students initially register at any school in the district. Some of these schools also update this information whenever students change schools in the district. About three-quarters of public schools leave it up to parents or guardians to identify the race and ethnicity of their children, typically giving parents and guardians the opportunity to select one of the five standard federal categories. Ten percent of schools use the standard categories but also use an "other" category with space for providing a specific designation; another 5 percent use an "other" category without space for specification. Five percent of schools indicated that they use a general "multiracial" category. When categories such as "other" or "multiracial" are used, schools typically aggregate these data into the one of the five standard federal categories that is deemed most appropriate by school staff before reporting the information to the federal government. However, in about half of the schools that use classifications other than those in Directive No. 15, the central district office is responsible for aggregating and submitting these data to the federal government.

When respondents were presented with a list of suggested changes to the current federal categories for race and ethnicity, a small percentage (11 percent or less) of them indicated that any of the changes had been, or soon would be, made at their schools. Another small percentage indicated that any of these issues were significant in terms of their applicability to students enrolled at their schools (3-12 percent). These data are corroborated by the finding that, of the 31 percent of schools reporting that they could estimate the number of students not accurately described by the five standard categories, 84 percent estimated that this was the case for fewer than 5 percent of their student population.

This survey was designed by OCR and NCES to be part of the research associated with OMB's review of Directive No. 15. The results of the survey have provided important data on this complex issue from the perspective of public schools, which represent one of the largest groups of institutions required to collect data on the race and ethnicity of the U.S. population. As such, schools would bear the considerable cost and burden of incorporating any changes to the categories should they be adopted by OMB. A followup state-level survey will provide additional information about the existence of any state laws, regulations, or guidelines concerning collecting information about the race and ethnicity of students. Together, the two surveys should provide valuable input to OMB about administrative record issues surrounding the collection of race and ethnicity information in schools.

References and Additional Readings

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