

Central and South American Indigenous, American Indian or Hispanic/Latino Respondents? Navigating racial identity categories in U.S. Census Forms.

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According to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), “American Indian or Alaska Native” refers to a person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment. Thus, individuals who identify as belonging to any of the Central and South American Indigenous groups should fit into the “American Indian or Alaska Native” category. However, these individuals may fit into this category without maintaining political ties such as tribal affiliation.

Initial research by the language and cross-cultural research group at the Census Bureau on American Indian and Alaska Native questions regarding racial identification and tribal enrollment found that rather than identifying with “tribes,” Central and South American indigenous people tended to identify as Hispanics. Although they identified with their indigenous culture and language, they saw tribes as exclusively pertaining to indigenous groups of the United States (Schwede, Terry, & Fernandez, 2016). This poses a challenge that may lead to underreporting indigenous populations in the US, as these respondents may not see their identities represented in the American Indian race category, and the concept of tribal enrollment may be inapplicable to Central and South American indigenous. This paper has several goals: to discuss patterns observed in cognitive interviews; to review the census forms of other countries with large indigenous populations living in the U.S. (Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, and Bolivia); analyze indigenous identifications in these countries; and to discuss the impact that variations in indigenous identifications may have for how respondents interpret the U.S. Census American Indian or Alaska Native items. To conclude we will include recommendations on ways to better survey and capture indigenous central and South Americans.