RESPONDING TO RACE/ ETHNICITY QUESTIONS & BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN?

Reporting of race/ethnicity in the U.S. dates back to the 1700s, when the government started counting "whites," "slaves," and "other free persons." New terms have been added and altered with changes in the law over time. Throughout the 1800s, the terms "free blacks," "mulatto" and "mulatto slaves," "black," "quadroon," and "octoroon" were all used to describe the Black population, which included multiracial people. This can be traced back to racist laws that abide by the "one-drop rule," which declares that anyone with African ancestry (even just one ancestor) is considered Black and, therefore, subject to segregation from the White population (Davis, 2014).

Although civil rights laws have banned racial segregation, inequities on the basis of race/ethnicity continue. The census currently asks anyone who identifies as Black or African American to select that racial category, and that data collection contributes to a broader understanding of national diversity and potential inequities of various kinds (for example, healthcare access and quality).

However, Black Americans are not homogenous. They consist of African Americans, Afro-Latinos, Afro-Caribbeans, and individuals of African descent whose ancestors did not arrive in the U.S. through the Transatlantic Slave Trade (for example, Ghanaian immigrants and their children). The 2020 Census found that Black/African American-identifying people make up 12.4 percent of the U.S. This number increases to 14.2 percent when you add the 5.8 million people who identify Black/African American and another race.

WHY SHOULD BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN CATEGORY BE DISAGGREGATED INTO MORE SPECIFIC GROUPS?

As mentioned, Black/African American category is diverse, although it is often reported as a homogenous group. In health settings, for example, cardiovascular rates are compared across racial/ethnic groups, but studies show clear within-group disparities among Black/African American adults. These disparities include significantly lower rates of risk factors for heart attacks and strokes among African immigrants when compared to Afro-Caribbean and African Americans. This information helps researchers focus on socio-political determinants of health, rather than biological factors that could contribute to disease (American Heart Association, 2020).

HOW SHOULD I RESPOND TO DISAGGREGATED QUESTIONS?

There is no 'right' way to answer questions about race and ethnicity. The way you respond to question(s) about race and ethnicity may also depend on how the question is formatted.

Self-reporting provides the most accurate responses to race and ethnicity questions. This means that these questions should be open-ended questions, giving people the opportunity to write in any response you wish. In this case, you should write out the race/ethnicity that you feel best represents your identity. If you identify with more than one racial/ethnic group, you should list all of them.

Sometimes, it can be hard for institutions and people who manage data to organize many written race/ethnicity responses, so instead they offer specific racial/ethnic categories for you to choose from.

Including more specific race/ethnicity categories allows more options for accurate self-reporting.

Most forms will include a multiple-choice race/ethnicity question. In this case, the race/ethnicity options may vary. For example, there may only be one Black/African American category, or there may be more specific categories to choose from. You may or may not decide to select a more specific group. However, selecting all of the relevant racial/ethnic groups that you identify with is recommended for more accurate reporting.

Here are some example scenarios of how someone might respond to different race/ethnicity question formats:

Scenario 1: Multiple choice, limited disaggregated options; respondent is Dominican American but identifies as Hispanic/Latino and Black	**Scenario 3:** Multiple choice, disaggregated options; respondent identifies as African American
What is your race or ethnicity (check all that apply)?	**What is your race or ethnicity (check all that apply)?**
☐ White ☐ Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish ☑ Black ☐ Middle Eastern or North African ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander ☐ Asian ☐ American Indian, Native, First Nations, Indigenous Peoples of the Americas, or Alaska Native ☐ Some other Race or ethnicity: _____ ☐ Don't know ☐ Prefer not to anser	☐ White ☐ Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish ☑ Black ☐ Middle Eastern or North African ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander ☐ Asian ☐ American Indian, Native, First Nations, Indigenous Peoples of the Americas, or Alaska Native ☐ Some other Race or ethnicity: _____ ☐ Don't know ☐ Prefer not to anser
Since "Black" was selected as your race or ethnicity, which group best represents your ethnicity or ancestry (check all that apply)?	**Since "Black" was selected as your race or ethnicity, which group best represents your ethnicity or ancestry (check all that apply)?**
☐ African American ☐ Barbadian ☐ Ethiopian ☐ Ghanaian ☐ Haitian ☐ Jamaican ☐ Nigerian ☐ Somali ☐ Trinidadian and Tobagonian ☐ Another option: _____ ☐ Don't know ☑ Prefer not to answer	☑ African American ☐ Barbadian ☐ Ethiopian ☐ Ghanaian ☐ Haitian ☐ Jamaican ☐ Nigerian ☐ Somali ☐ Trinidadian and Tobagonian ☐ Another option: _____ ☐ Don't know ☐ Prefer not to answer

Scenario 2: Multiple choice, limited disaggregated options; respondent identifies as Jamaican and African American	Scenario 4: Write-in option only, respondent identifies as Nigerian American
Since "Black" was selected as your race or ethnicity, which group best represents your ethnicity or ancestry (check all that apply)? ☑ Aftican American ☐ Barbadian ☐ Ethiopian ☐ Ghanaian ☐ Haitian ☑ Jamaican ☐ Nigerian ☐ Somali ☐ Trinidadian and Tobagonian ☐ Another option: _____ ☐ Don't know ☐ Prefer not ot answer	**What race or ethnicity best describes you?** *Nigerian*_____

WHAT DISAGGREGATED RACE/ETHNICITY GROUPS CAN I EXPECT TO SEE ON A FORM OR SURVEY?

The table below shows the different groups that can fall within the Black/African American category. In some regions of the U.S., these populations may be very small, so they are unlikely to be included as a specific multiple-choice option on all forms.

- Please note that this table may not include every single group that fits this category, and it's possible that there is overlap between broad race groups. This means that some ethnic groups that you see below may fall under more than one racial category.

Category: Black			
African American	Nigerian	Sierra Leonean	British West Indian
Barbadian	Somali	South African	Dutch West Indian
Ethiopian	Trinidadian	Sudanese	US Virgin Islander
Ghananian	Cape Verdean	Ugandan	Another African group not listed here
Guyanese	Kenyan	Zimbabwean	
Jamaican	Liberian	Bahamian	Another Caribbean group not listed here
Haitian	Senegalese	Bermudan	

RECOMMENDED READINGS

American Heart Association. **Heart disease risk profiles differ widely among African Americans, blacks from the Caribbean and African immigrants.** 2020 March 4. Available from: https://newsroom.heart.org/news/heart-disease-risk-profiles-differ-widely-among-african-americans-blacks-from-the-caribbean-and-african-immigrants

Davis, FJ. **Who is Black? One Nation's Definition.** PBS Frontline. 2014. Available from: https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/mixed/onedrop.html

Jones, et al. **2020 Census Illuminates Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Country.** U.S. Census Bureau. 2021 Aug 12. Available from: https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html

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