

RESPONDING TO RACE/ETHNICITY QUESTIONS & WHITE IDENTITY



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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE WHITE IN THE U.S.?

Reporting of race/ethnicity in the U.S. dates back to the 1700s, when the government started counting “Whites,” “Slaves,” and “Other free persons.” Over time, laws have changed to give equal rights to all racial and ethnic groups, and race/ethnicity questionnaires have adapted over time to include more categories. In general, “White” indicates a person of European descent, but we know that people with European ancestry can identify with other ethnic and cultural groups.

The 2020 Census found that White-identified people remain the largest racial group reported in the U.S - 61.6% of the population reported being White and no other race. This figure increases to 71% when you include individuals who identified as White AND at least one more race, a response type that is growing as the multiracial population in the U.S. increases.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF DISAGGREGATING THE WHITE CATEGORY?

There is limited data available to study the ethnic diversity of those who identify as White and many people who may not consider themselves to be White are often asked to put themselves into this category, as with Middle Easterners or North Africans. There is a major effort to separate people who identify as Middle Eastern or North African from this category, but it may be important to separate out even more groups.

For example, in some parts of the U.S., there are large Appalachian communities with unique cultures, traditions, and other features that may differentiate them from other White people in the same region. One study found that Appalachian counties in Virginia reported poorer health than non-Appalachian counties in Virginia, which illustrates why it is important to treat these populations differently (ARC, 2010). Similar examples include Cajun communities in the South, or Polish and Italian American communities in major cities around the U.S.

Ultimately, the purpose of disaggregated race/ethnicity data collection is to make sure that communities get the services and resources they need, and that no one is ignored when important policy decisions are made. Providing a range of race and ethnicity options within the White category on surveys also helps to avoid generalizing and stereotyping by showing that there is diversity within broader categories like “White.”

HOW SHOULD I RESPOND TO A DISAGGREGATED RACE/ETHNICITY QUESTION?

Self-reporting provides the most accurate responses to race and ethnicity questions. The way you respond to question(s) about race and ethnicity may also depend on how the question is formatted.

Self-report is the “gold standard” when it comes to responding to race/ethnicity questions. This means these questions should be **open-ended**, giving people the opportunity to write in any

response that feels right to them. If you are asked in this format, 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 White 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.

However, that isn't always the case. Here are some example scenarios of how someone might respond to different race/ethnicity question formats:

"I primarily identify with 2-3 ethnic groups"

- It is recommended that surveys allow you to select multiple categories. If this is the case, we encourage you to select all the groups that make up the way you personally identify.
- If the question is open-ended, you can write the different ways you identify in a list.
- If there is no write-in option or the ability to select multiple categories, you may consider one of the following:
 - Select one category that best describes your primary racial/ethnic identity (can be White, or a more specific group).
 - Select "White" without choosing a more specific category.
 - Select "Another option not listed here" within the White category.

"I don't have a clear idea of my ancestry" or "I have a mix of ancestries but don't really identify strongly with any single ethnic group."

- In this case, you can simply select "White" and opt out of selecting a specific group.

Here are some examples of POSSIBLE ways to respond to different race/ethnicity question formats:

Scenario 1: Multiple choice + limited disaggregated options; respondent identifies as Polish American	Scenario 2: Multiple choice + write-in; respondent is Cuban American and identifies as White and Hispanic/Latino
<p>What is your race or ethnicity (check all that apply)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> Black <input type="checkbox"/> Middle Eastern or North African <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander <input type="checkbox"/> Asian <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian, Native, First Nations, Indigenous Peoples of the Americans, or Alaska Native <input type="checkbox"/> Some other Race or ethnicity: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer <p>Since "White" was selected as your race or ethnicity, which group best represents your ethnicity or ancestry (check all that apply)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> English <input type="checkbox"/> French <input type="checkbox"/> German <input type="checkbox"/> Greek <input type="checkbox"/> Hungarian <input type="checkbox"/> Irish <input type="checkbox"/> Italian <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Polish <input type="checkbox"/> Russian <input type="checkbox"/> Ukrainian <input type="checkbox"/> Another option: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer 	<p>What is your race or ethnicity (check all that apply)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> White <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> Black <input type="checkbox"/> Middle Eastern or North African <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander <input type="checkbox"/> Asian <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian, Native, First Nations, Indigenous Peoples of the Americans, or Alaska Native <input type="checkbox"/> Some other Race or ethnicity: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer <p>What race or ethnicity best describes you? <u>Cuban</u></p>

Scenario 3: Write-in only option; respondent identifies as Italian American	Scenario 4: Multiple choice, limited disaggregated options; respondent has mixed ancestry and prefers to identify as 'White'
<p>What race or ethnicity best describes you?</p> <p><u>White, Italian</u></p>	<p>What is your race or ethnicity (check all that apply)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> Black <input type="checkbox"/> Middle Eastern or North African <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander <input type="checkbox"/> Asian <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian, Native, First Nations, Indigenous Peoples of the Americans, or Alaska Native <input type="checkbox"/> Some other Race or ethnicity: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer <p>Since "White" was selected as your race or ethnicity, which group best represents your ethnicity or ancestry (check all that apply)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> English <input type="checkbox"/> French <input type="checkbox"/> German <input type="checkbox"/> Greek <input type="checkbox"/> Hungarian <input type="checkbox"/> Irish <input type="checkbox"/> Italian <input type="checkbox"/> Polish <input type="checkbox"/> Russian <input type="checkbox"/> Ukrainian <input type="checkbox"/> Another option: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer

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 White category. In some regions of the U.S., these populations may be very small, so they are unlikely to be included as a specific option.

- Please note that this table may not include every possible group, and it's possible that there is overlap between these ethnicities and a broader race group different from the White category.

Category: White					
Appalachian	Hungarian	Albanian	Croatian	Finnish	Scottish
Swedish	Welsh	Yugoslavian	Macedonian	Bosnian	Slovak
Cajun	Irish	Austrian	Czech	Irish	Serbian
English	Italian	Belgian	Danish	Latvian	Spanish (EU)
French	Polish	Bulgarian	Dutch	Lithuanian	Slovene
German	Russian	Canadian	Estonian	Norwegian	Swiss
Greek	Ukranian	Celtic	Portuguese	Jewish (Ashkenazi / East European)	Another option not listed here

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). **Creating a Culture of Health in Appalachia: Disparities and Bright Spots**. 2018. Available from: https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Health_Disparities_in_Appalachia_Introduction.pdf

National Public Radio (NPR). **2020 Census May Ask White People To Get Specific About Their Ethnicity**. 2017 November 30. Available from: <https://www.npr.org/2017/11/30/566975742/2020-census-may-ask-white-people-to-get-specific-about-their-ethnicity>

