

COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA ON RACE AND ETHNICITY
QUESTIONS IN SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER APPLICATIONS

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Background

Since its inception, the Social Security Administration (SSA) has collected data on race. These data were originally used to aid in identifying individuals but are now used for statistical and research purposes only. The self-perception of the applicant is the basis for the response. The data are collected through the application process when the individual first completes the "Application for a Social Security Number Card" (Form SS-5) and at subsequent times if the need arises for a duplicate or a change of information on a current card. Due to recent legislative changes, there is now almost universal coverage of the U.S. population. About 12 million applications are filed annually.

Applicants submit SS-5 applications either by mail or in person at one of 1300 social security district offices throughout the country.¹ On the application form individuals are asked to indicate White, Negro, or Other as their color or race. The current SS-5 form does not show that the completion of the race item is voluntary (i.e., not required for issuance of a social security number), although this information is available in a separate pamphlet.

The Office of Federal Statistical Policy and Standards (OFSPS) has moved to standardize the categories used by government agencies in the collection of race and ethnic data and to provide comparability among agencies.^[1,2] The five minimum acceptable race and ethnic categories established include:

1. American Indian or Alaska Native
2. Asian or Pacific Islander
3. Black (not of Hispanic origin)
4. Hispanic
5. White (not of Hispanic origin)

The OFSPS directive states that data on these categories may be collected either through the use of a combined race/ethnic format (as above), or by separate questions on race and ethnicity. The use of separate questions provides flexibility in adding or dropping groups as needs arise and also provides comparability with universally collected data such as that collected by the Bureau of the Census. Separate questions also permit the cross-classification of Hispanic respondents into White and Black groups.

Faced with revising the race categories currently in use--because the authority to use its old form expired--SSA tested a two-question approach through the use of focal group interviews.^[3] Utilizing the findings from the focal group interview study, three possible alternatives were developed--a one-question approach and a pair of two-question approaches.

Following discussions with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and OFSPS regarding the further need for an operational pretest, these three alternatives were reduced by one when the two-question approach with Hispanics isolated was dropped from further consideration. In addition, the use of the word "Voluntary" as a Privacy Act notifier on the form itself was to be tested. The experimental design then

consisted of a 2x2, split-panel test in which a one-question approach with "Voluntary" and a one-question approach without "Voluntary" were compared and contrasted with a two-question approach with "Voluntary" and a two-question approach without "Voluntary".

The formats of the two approaches to be tested were:

One-Question Approach

ARE YOU (Voluntary) (Check one only):

- Asian, Asian-American or Pacific Islander (Includes persons of Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Samoan, etc., ancestry or descent)?
- Hispanic (Includes persons of Chicano, Cuban, Mexican, or Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish ancestry or descent)?
- Negro or Black (not Hispanic)?
- North American Indian or Alaskan Native?
- White (not Hispanic)?

Two-Question Approach

RACE (Voluntary) (Check one only):

- White
- Black or Negro
- Other (Specify)

ARE YOU (Voluntary) (Check one only):

- Asian, Asian-American, or Pacific Islander (Includes persons of Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Samoan, etc., ancestry or descent)?
- Hispanic (Includes persons of Chicano, Cuban, Mexican or Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish ancestry or descent)?
- North American Indian or Alaskan Native?
- None of these?

(On the SS-5 test form, the two questions were separated by a question requesting the applicant's sex.)

The other two versions of the question tested did not contain the word "Voluntary" in the item label.

Goals

- The goals of the operational pretest were to:
1. use the new applications under operating conditions--i.e., in SSA district offices;
 2. evaluate the two approaches to requesting race/ethnic information--i.e., the one-question and the two-question--and determine which provided the more complete and accurate data in terms of response rate and reliability;

3. evaluate the effects of using the word "Voluntary" on the form;
4. examine the effects of in-person editing and followup questioning; and
5. finalize the item format, content and instructions for full nationwide use beginning in October, 1980.

For example, to evaluate the enumeration of the Hispanic group, several areas were selected: Los Angeles for Chicanos and Mexican-Americans, Miami for Cubans, and New York for Puerto Ricans. SSA district offices in downtown Los Angeles and in Brooklyn, New York were selected for half the 6,000 study cases, not only because of their high concentrations of Hispanics (and other minority groups) but also because of the high daily volume of applications.

Sample Population and Test Sites

The sample was designed by selecting those locations which would provide for testing the application forms among individuals from the major race/ethnic groups and subgroups. Based upon previous Census and SSA focal group experience, it was decided to concentrate on the groups and subgroups believed to be more difficult to enumerate.

Other locations were selected to provide a mix of race and ethnic groups from geographically diverse areas of the country. In addition, SSA district offices were chosen so that individuals varying in socio-economic status within the major race/ethnic groups and subgroups as well as varying in urban and rural living were represented in the sample, as noted below:

TABLE 1. Sample Design for Operational Pretest

District Office Site	Targeted Population Characteristics	Number of Cases Targeted	Number of Cases Received
1. Los Angeles, California (Downtown)	Hispanics (Mexican-Americans, Chicanos); Asians; Blacks; Low/Mod SES ^{1/} ; Urban	1500	1428
2. New York, New York (Boro Hall, Brooklyn)	Hispanics (Puerto Ricans); Blacks; Racially Mixed Groups; Urban	1500	1350
3. Chicago, Illinois (Loop)	Whites (Ethnics); Low/Mod SES; Urban; Midwest	500	508
4. Honolulu, Hawaii	Racially Mixed Groups; Asian-Americans; Low/Mod/High SES	400	385
5. Boston Massachusetts (Cambridge)	Whites; Mod/High SES; NE	300	311
6. Camp Springs, Maryland; Rockville, Maryland	Whites; Mod/High SES; Suburban	300	335
7. Houston, Texas (Southwest)	Blacks; Mod/High SES; Urban SW	300	320
8. Meridian, Mississippi	Blacks; Whites; Low/Mod SES; Rural South	300	219
9. Miami Beach, Florida (Hialeah)	Hispanics (Cubans); Low/Mod/High SES; Urban	300	287
10. Santa Fe, New Mexico	Near Indian Reservation; SW	300	278
11. Seattle, Washington (Bellevue)	Whites; Mod/High SES; NW	300	301

^{1/} SES is an abbreviation for socio-economic status, which also may be used as a proxy for expected level of functional literacy.

Due to time and processing constraints, the test was limited to samples of about 1500 of each of the four versions of the form.

Procedures for the Operational Pretest

Within each SSA test office, an SSN application was given to individuals who satisfied three criteria:

1. requested a social security card;
2. planned to complete an application in the office;^{2/}and
3. had in their possession the proper evidence to support an SSN application or change, i.e., information to identify themselves and confirm date of birth and citizenship.

SSN applicants at each district office were then systematically assigned one of the four test versions of the SSN application, sequenced

A, B, C, D; A, B, C, D, etc. The applicant was then instructed to complete the form and bring it back to the interviewer. The interviewer reviewed each item on the form and followed up on items which were left blank or appeared not to have been completed correctly. The interviewer then recorded three items of information--the applicant's initial and final response to the race/ethnic question and the interviewer's own impression of the applicant's race/ethnicity. The initial response was the applicant's pre-edited response to the race/ethnic question, i.e., before any clarification or followup was provided. This review and followup process resulted in the applicant's final response. Last, the interviewer provided his own impression of the applicant's race and ethnic background which furnished a measure of agreement or reliability.

Results and Discussion

The pretest results for all sites are summarized in Table 2, below.

TABLE 2. Responses to Race and Ethnic Questions on Test Versions of the SS-5

Type of Approach	Applicants' Initial Responses				Applicants' Final Responses			
	Version A		Version B		Version A		Version B	
	Voluntary		No Voluntary		Voluntary		No Voluntary	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
One-Question								
Total.....	1,485	100.0	1,397	100.0	1,485	100.0	1,397	100.0
Asian.....	257	17.3	247	17.7	284	19.1	268	19.2
Hispanic.....	340	22.9	332	23.8	374	25.2	343	24.6
Black (not Hispanic).....	305	20.5	304	21.8	331	22.3	339	24.3
Indian.....	14	.9	7	.5	13	.9	7	.5
White (not Hispanic).....	395	26.6	404	28.9	432	29.1	419	30.0
Nonresponse.....	150	10.1	80	5.7	42	2.8	13	.9
Other Error.....	24	1.6	23	1.6	9	.6	8	.6
Two-Question								
Total (Race).....	1,461	100.0	1,379	100.0	1,461	100.0	1,379	100.0
White.....	651	44.6	600	43.5	655	44.8	610	44.2
Black.....	311	21.3	304	22.0	323	22.1	311	22.6
Other.....	390	26.7	369	26.8	452	30.9	442	32.1
Nonresponse.....	71	4.9	70	5.1	13	.9	10	.7
Other Error.....	38	2.6	36	2.6	18	1.2	6	.4
Total (Ethnicity).....	1,461	100.0	1,379	100.0	1,461	100.0	1,379	100.0
Asian.....	253	17.3	242	17.5	280	19.2	277	20.1
Hispanic.....	352	24.1	343	24.9	386	26.4	373	27.1
Indian.....	5	.3	7	.5	6	.4	8	.6
None of these.....	480	32.9	480	34.8	655	44.8	649	47.1
Nonresponse.....	317	21.7	262	19.0	115	7.9	58	4.2
Other Error.....	54	3.7	45	3.3	19	1.3	14	1.0

Note: The structural properties of the two approaches differ, making exact comparisons strained. Nevertheless, distributions of respondents within the one-and two-question approaches may be conformed by "folding back" the two-question format to the one-question by giving preference to the ethnicity response in the two-question approach. This eliminates the double counting (e.g., White and Hispanic, Black and Asian, etc.) and yields the following final responses (for comparison, total final responses on the one-question approach are shown in parentheses): Asian-557 (552), Hispanic-759 (717), Black-591 (670), Indian-14 (20), White-848 (851), Nonresponse-14 (55).

From the summarized results, several conclusions may be drawn:

1. The interviewer intervention, which consisted of the editing and followup provided after the initial response and resulted in the applicant's final response, was quite effective in reducing initial nonresponse. Combining data on both the "Voluntary" and no "Voluntary" applications using the one-question approach, initial nonresponse rates were reduced from 8 percent to less than 2 percent (230 to 55). On the two-question approach, nonresponse was reduced from 5 percent to less than 1 percent (141 to 23) on the race question and from more than 20 percent to 6 percent (579 to 173) on the ethnicity question.

In the one-question approach, interviewer followup increased responses by about 10 percent among Asians (504 to 552) and Blacks (609 to 670) and by about 7 percent among Whites (799 to 851) and Hispanics (672 to 717).

A higher level of initial nonresponse occurred in the ethnicity portion of the two-question approach. Followup increased the response among Asians by about 13 percent (495 to 557), Hispanics by 9 percent (695 to 759) and "None of these" by about 36 percent (960 to 1304). In the race portion of the two-question approach, followup increased response among Whites by 1 percent (1251 to 1265) and Blacks by 3 percent (615 to 634).

2. In terms of the goal to evaluate response differences between the one- and two-question approaches, both initial and final nonresponse was higher on the one-question than for the race portion of the two-question. However, initial and final nonresponse to the ethnicity question in the two-question approach was considerably higher than either the one-question approach or the race part of the two-question approach. It should also be noted that while final nonresponse on the race part was less than one percent (23 out of 2840), more than 13 percent (120 out of 894) of those who indicated their race as "Other" did not specify the race in the blank provided.

3. Next, the word "Voluntary" had a varied effect on the rate of response. On the one-question approach, an initial nonresponse rate of 10.1 percent among applicants using the form with the word "Voluntary" was significantly higher ($p < .05$) than the 5.7 percent nonresponse rate among those using forms without the word "Voluntary". These differences in nonresponse rates were also consistent across the district offices. The influence of "Voluntary" on initial response to the two-question approach was not significant.

4. Finally, the distribution of applicants according to the various race/ethnic designations was roughly equivalent for both one- and two-question approaches with the exception of those designated as White. It should be noted, however, that data for Whites are not comparable for the two approaches due to structural properties of the questions. For example, the higher proportion of Whites in the two-question approach occurred because Hispanics could be counted as White (Black or Other) as well as Hispanic; however, in the one-question approach, Hispanics could be counted either as Hispanic or White

(Black or Other), but not as both.

It is important to note that the reliability of race/ethnic responses, as measured by comparing applicant response and interviewer impression, was quite high (99 percent) for the one-question approach and the ethnicity part of the two-question approach. However, as the data below indicate, this level of agreement dropped to 92 percent for the race portion of the two-question approach.

	Total Impressions Recorded	Same As Applicant Response
One-question	2604	2578
Two-question		
Race	2559	2360
Ethnicity	2365	2336

The differences were due primarily to the difficulty experienced in classifying the race of Hispanic applicants.

Implications of Study Results for Operational Use of the Race/Ethnic Question

In the light of the above results, it is important to consider the question of whether the pretest finding of a relatively high final response rate will continue when the form is placed into full operational use in all SSA district offices. The answer may be "No" for several reasons:

1. First, persons applying by mail (who were excluded from the study) may have a higher non-response rate than those applying in person. Mail applicants may be expected to read the instructions more carefully and to take notice of the voluntary aspect of the race/ethnic question. Thus, they might be more likely to be nonrespondents than those applying in the district offices. The effectiveness of interviewers in reducing initial nonresponses for mailed applications may also be limited due to missing telephone numbers and a lack of interviewer persistence in pursuing information which is not required to process the application.
2. In addition, there is a "demand" or "social influence" quality which is present in the face-to-face district office situation with interviewer and applicant but which is obviously absent in the mail and mail followup conditions. The effect of this factor may be to increase in-person response relative to mail response.
3. Next, we observed a related phenomenon, a "social desirability" effect which resulted from a dependency exhibited by non-English speaking applicants. Because only English language applications were used in the study, applicants who were unable to read English were questioned by interviewers who translated each item for the applicant and recorded each response. Thus a considerable psychological dependency resulted from this interaction which tended to produce responses to all questions and thereby also increase response rates for race/ethnic questions. While the effect was present to some extent among all applicants who had literacy or language problems, it was especially pronounced among Hispanics who did not read or speak English. This "social desirability" effect will be sharply reduced, however, when the new SS-5 form is used

nationwide due to the availability of a Spanish language version. This likely will lead to an increase in nonresponse rates among this group of individuals.

4. Finally, there is the strong possibility that a Hawthorne Effect operated with respect to SSA district office interviewers, and which tended to inflate response rates. That is, the SSA interviewers involved in the study were treated with uncustomary attention in being asked their opinions about study plans and findings. Study interviewers were generally more thorough than usual in editing and following up, particularly in those cases in which the applicant had not responded. Once the new form is placed into full operational use, however, the probability that all SS-5 district office interviewers will be as diligent as those in the study is unlikely.

Recommendations

Based upon the results of this study, SSA recommended to OMB and OFSPS several courses of action regarding the race/ethnic question:

1. To use the one-question approach. The initial and final nonresponse rates for the one-question version were lower than those observed for the ethnic portion of the two-question approach. In addition, the one-question was easier for applicants to understand and apparently less confusing, conceptually, than the use of separate race/ethnic questions.
2. To use the word "Voluntary" on the application form itself. While this did have an adverse effect upon response rate in the study, SSA believed that compliance with the Privacy Act requirement of adequate notification to applicants of the non-mandatory character of the race/ethnic question was a more compelling consideration.
3. To change the item heading. A change was made to the race/ethnic question heading based on pretest findings related to item clarity. Specifically, the label for the race/ethnic question was changed from

ARE YOU (Voluntary) (Check one only)
to

RACE/ETHNIC DESCRIPTION(Check one only)(Voluntary)

The effect of this modification is not known, however, and needs to be monitored.

4. Institute a program for close monitoring of operational results. There are several reasons for this decision. First, while nonresponse in the study was not dramatically high, it may well be higher in actual operation due to some of the reasons cited earlier. Only by a regular and systematic monitoring of the results for each SSA district office, and for mail-in and in-person respondents separately, can problems be identified and subsequently addressed. In developing a system to monitor the operational data, it is important that response be viewed not only as a function of an applicant's willingness or capability to respond, but also as a result of district office interviewer followup procedures. Results from this study strongly suggested that most initial nonresponse to the race/ethnic item did not indicate refusal to respond, but rather misunderstanding or inadvertent omission.

Therefore, the SSA Office of Research and Statistics suggested to operational staff at SSA that structured followup questions be used to elicit response(while respecting the applicant's right not to respond). The use of such structured followup questions also will permit more valid comparisons of nonresponse rates among SSA district offices. Obviously, it is important that these procedures be followed in each office for without such followup, nonresponse rates may well become unacceptably high as suggested by the study findings. Therefore, nonresponse rates from each SSA district office will be examined on a regular basis to identify offices where trends in nonresponse may indicate a failure to follow recommended procedures. Where this is found to be the case, appropriate corrective management action will be implemented. If this action and related attempts to remedy the nonresponse problem fail to increase response rates to acceptable levels, SSA may request that response to the race/ethnic question be made mandatory.

FOOTNOTES

1. About half of all applications are submitted by mail.
2. Individuals applying by mail were excluded from the study for administrative reasons.

REFERENCES

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