

New Federal Standards Recognize Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders as Distinct Group

By Houkje Ross

Closing the Gap, Pacific Islander Health • June/July 2000

If you are a Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, you probably noticed the change on the Census 2000 form. While previous Census forms grouped Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders with Asian Americans, there is now a separate category called “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.”

This change is one of the most visible results of the 1997 “Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity.” Promulgated by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), this guidance is the revision of OMB Statistical Directive 15 (OMB 15). The directive aims to make the collection and use of data on race and ethnicity by federal agencies uniform. The five categories for race are: American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black or African American; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; and White. The two categories for ethnicity are: “Hispanic or Latino” and “Not Hispanic or Latino.”

Growth of interracial marriages and an increase in immigration stimulated the revision to OMB-15. There was also a letter writing campaign by Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islander communities who wanted to be counted separately from Asians, according to Olivia Carter-Pokras, PhD, director of the Office of Minority Health’s Division of Policy and Data.

According to Pua’ala’okalani Aiu, PhD, of the Hawaiian health organization Papa Ola Lokahi, implementing the OMB revisions will help solve one problem affecting researchers and program managers. “Combining data on the larger Asian American populations with several, much smaller Pacific Islander populations tends to conceal substantial differences in health status and needs among these groups,” she said. “When that happens, program planning for Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders suffers.”

In 1997 Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) populations accounted for approximately 10.4 million people or 4 percent of the total U.S. population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Pacific Islanders comprised approximately 5 percent of the AAPI population.

Jeffrey Caballero, executive director of the Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations (AAPCHO), added, “The revisions will enable us to validate the trends we have seen in small scale studies and give us a more detailed picture of the Pacific Islander community.”

The original guidance laid out the minimum for what data collectors needed to do, according to Dr. Carter-Pokras. “But many data systems did not go further. The separate category will make it more likely that data will be presented for Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders. Then we should be able to monitor the health trends of Pacific Islanders with more accuracy,” she said.

The 1997 revisions also include the following changes:

- Encourages data collectors to ask two separate questions for race and ethnicity. OMB-15 allowed data collectors to collect and report information on race and ethnicity in two ways. They could ask two separate questions: “What is your race?” and “What is your ethnicity?” Or they could ask one question: “What is your race or ethnicity?” The new guidance allows for these same options but encourages data collectors to go with the two-question approach. “Studies show that asking two separate questions reduced missing information on Hispanic ethnicity and the use of “other race” by Hispanics,” said Dr. Carter-Pokras. It also allowed more complete reporting of Hispanics.
- More than one option for race. OMB-15 had five basic categories by which individuals could identify themselves. These were: Black, White, Asian and Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and American Indian/ Alaskan Native; you had to choose only one. The new guidance offers individuals the option of selecting more than one race. This ensures that federal agencies can maintain the ability to monitor compliance with civil rights laws. If an individual checks off two boxes, Pacific Islander and White, for example, the person is then classified as a minority and can be protected under civil rights laws.

This guidance applies to federal agencies, but federal officials hope that other institutions such as state governments and universities will follow this lead, according to Dr. Carter-Pokras.

For more information on the revised standards and implementation guidelines, click on “Statistical Policy” at: <http://whitehouse.gov/OMB/infomag>.

Who are Pacific Islanders?

Polynesians

Native Hawaiians, Samoans, and Tongans, Maoris, Cook Islanders, Tahitians, and Rapa Nui.

Micronesians

Marshall Islanders, Palauans, Chamorros, Northern Mariana Islanders, and Carolinians

Melanesians

Fijians

