RESPONDING TO RACE/ETHNICITY QUESTIONS & AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE IDENTITY

NYU CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF **ASIAN AMERICAN HEALTH**

CACF
Coalition For Asian American Children+Families

NYU Grossman School of Medicine at NYU Langone Health

HOW MANY AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE PEOPLE ARE THERE IN THE U.S.?

There are an estimated 3.7 million American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) people in the U.S. There is an additional 5.9 million multiracial people who are AI/AN and at least one other race, making it the largest multiracial group in the country. Altogether, this makes up 2.9% of the population, based on the 2020 Census (Jones et al, 2021).

As of 2022, there are 574 American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and 326 American Indian reservations that are recognized by the federal government, along with 63 state-recognized tribes in 11 states. About 13% of the AI/AN population live on reservations or trust lands, while 78% live in major cities. AI/AN individuals live all over the country, but the states with the largest AI/AN populations are Arizona, California, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Texas, North Carolina, Alaska, Washington, South Dakota, and New York (HHS, 2022).

WHY WOULD ONE DISAGGREGATE THE AI/AN CATEGORY, AND WHAT DOES DISAGGREGATION ENTAIL?

The AI/AN population is one of the most undercounted groups in the country. There is a high rate of misclassification of AI/AN individuals, who may be mistaken for a different race based on their appearance and/or last name, which happens frequently on birth, death, and hospital records. Thus, the AI/AN population is often left out of data reports due to this misclassification and therefore are not present in analyses about population needs and disparities by race/ethnicity (NCAI, 2022; UIHI, 2020).

Data disaggregation is not always appropriate due to identification and security concerns among the AI/AN population. Race/ethnicity questions should always include an AI/AN option to select and can provide more specific identification by tribal affiliation, but only if the appropriate data sharing permissions and data protections are in place. Additionally, any analyses that report disaggregated tribal affiliation should be accompanied by suppression of small population sizes to avoid re-identification.

Disaggregating AI/AN can be useful in very specific settings or contexts, if those who are collecting data do so with transparency and intention. Local efforts to collect disaggregated AI/AN data should always be led by members of the community and should never compromise data sovereignty and tribal sovereignty. For this reason, we have developed additional materials to guide community collaboration with leaders and governments when it comes to data collection, privacy, and community-led decision-making.

HOW MIGHT DISAGGREGATED DATA BE USED TO HELP THE AI/AN COMMUNITY?

Since offering this option helps accurately count the AI/AN population in datasets, policymakers can make decisions about funding and resources for this population. This can include improving

healthcare access and quality in areas where there are AI/AN communities, and creating more tailored programs for chronic disease prevention. Currently, AI/AN-focused health programs are underfunded by the federal government, even though this population faces significant health disparities and reports high discrimination in healthcare settings compared to the general U.S. population (NPR, 2017).

Disaggregating this category nationwide will help also authorities understand how diverse the AI/AN community is, and how the ethnic makeup of the AI/AN changes region-by-region. This information has the potential to improve population-level health by illustrating the different needs/ strengths of unique communities, rather than assuming all AI/AN needs are the same.

DO I NEED TO BE OFFICIALLY ENROLLED IN A TRIBE TO MARK IT AS MY TRIBAL AFFILIATION?

If you primarily identify with a specific tribe, you should report that as your race/ethnicity on a form that includes disaggregated race/ethnicity options. "UIHI recommends using "tribal affiliation" in contrast to "tribal citizenship," as only tribes determine and define tribal citizenship. Use of tribal affiliation allows for the collection of what tribe(s) and an individual identifies with, without impeding on tribal sovereignty." (UIHI, 2020). Tribes alone have the ability to determine citizenship. Again, specific tribal affiliations may not be appropriate in areas where the AI/AN population is very small.

HOW SHOULD I RESPOND TO RACE/ETHNICITY QUESTIONS?

There is no 'right' way to answer questions about race and ethnicity.

In the case where you have an open-ended question, 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 can list all of them.

It is worth noting that the terms Native American, Indigenous, and American Indian/Alaska Native can all be used on data collection forms; the National Congress of American Indians does not advocate one definition or term in data questionnaires/surveys. If you are asked to write out your race/ethnicity, you may use the **term that you prefer** as well as any tribal affiliation(s).

Most forms that incorporate data disaggregation will include a **multiple-choice race/ethnicity question**. In this case, the race/ethnicity options may vary. For example, there may only be one broad/general American Indian/Alaska Native category, or you may be able to choose your tribal affiliations in a drop down list, potentially based on the largest racial/ethnic groups in your area. You may or may not decide to select more specific groups. However, selecting all the 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: Example of disaggregated race/ethnicity question.
Respondent identifies as White and American Indian/Alaska Native (Sioux)

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

Since "White" was selected as your race or ethnicity, which group best represents your ethnicity or ancestry (check all that apply)?

☐ English
☐ French
☐ German
☐ Greek
☐ Hungarian
☐ Irish
☐ Polish
☐ Russian
☐ Ukrainian
☐ Another option:
_____
☑ Don't know
☐ Prefer not to answer

Since "American Indian or Alaska Native" was selected as your race or ethnicity, which group best represents your ethnicity or ancestry (check all that apply)?

☐ Blackfeet
☐ Cherokee
☐ Choctaw
☐ Iroquois or Haudenosaunee
☑ Sioux
☐ Central American Indian
☐ Mexican American Indian
☐ Southern American Indian
☐ Another option:
_____
☐ Don't know
☐ Prefer not to answer

Scenario 2: Write-in only option; respondent does not want to identify with a group more specific than American Indian/Alaska Native.

What race or ethnicity best describes you?

Native American

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

The table below shows some of the different groups that can fall within the American Indian/Alaska Native 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 the AI/AN category, and it's possible that there is overlap between broad race groups. This means that some ethnic groups may fall under more than one racial category.

Category: American Indian or Alaska Native		
North American Indian	**South American Indian**	**Central American Indian**
Apache	Quechua	Mayan
Blackfeet	Kichwa	K'iche'
Cherokee		Mixteco
Navajo	Shuar	Nahua
Sioux	Aymara	Mam
Another North American Indian group not listed here	Another South American Indian group not listed here	Another Central American Indian group not listed here

RECOMMENDED READINGS

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Profile: American Indian/Alaska Native. Office of Minority Health. 2022 November 3. Available from: https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=3&lvlid=62

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