

# AMERICA BECOMING

Racial Trends and Their Consequences

Volume I

Neil J. Smelser, William Julius Wilson, and Faith Mitchell, *Editors*

Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education

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## Foreword

*Christopher Edley, Jr.*

The President's Race Initiative was launched in June 1997 in the belief that no challenge facing the nation as it enters the new century is as critical and daunting as the challenge of color. Around the world and throughout human history, there have been countless tragedies born of our seemingly innate tendencies toward misunderstanding, distrust, resentment, prejudice, hatred, and even violence—all triggered by racial, ethnic, tribal, and religious differences. It would be hubris to believe that Americans have somehow escaped this human condition, miraculously healed and henceforth immune from our own color-based brand of tribalism. We are unlikely in the next few years to face the upheavals of ethnic cleansing familiar from the Balkans and Central Africa, or the slow burn of ethnicity-based conflict and even terrorism we have witnessed in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Northern Ireland, Spain, Mexico, and countless other places. The growth of America's diversity is breathtaking. However, unless we in the United States do better to confront and bind our racial and ethnic divisions, the powerful legacy of racial caste will shackle our progress and rend our communities.

Our secular catechism of equality and justice for all, authored at the nation's birth, was belied by practices at the time. Yet these remain the powerful ideals to which we aspire, at least in our nobler moments, and without regard to political party or social status. One could even argue that the essence of being an American has much more to do with allegiance to our conceptions of justice and fairness than it does to proficiency in a common language or devotion to some vague set of cultural practices. (Baseball? Apple pie? Some religion? Television?) When Ameri-

cans express patriotic pride, we may mention our relative prosperity or some iconic character trait such as self-reliance. But more likely, we boast about our civic institutions and, especially, civic values such as equality and tolerance.

Racial caste in this land is more than twice as old as the nation itself. It began with the campaigns of displacement, killing, and subjugation of native peoples by European settlers, and then expanded to the chattel slavery of imported Africans. Because the roots of American prejudice and racism are some 250 years deeper than the bedrock of our constitutional ideals, it would be yet another form of hubris to believe that the legacy can be undone in a mere generation or two, and the wounds healed. Nonetheless, healing with unflinching determination is precisely what we must be about. The first step must be a better understanding of our history and our present condition. This is where the leaders of the social sciences have an indispensable contribution to make. The Race Initiative asked the National Research Council of the National Academies to provide the nation with an authoritative assessment of where we are. *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences* is the result.

*America Becoming* details demographic changes that have moved America beyond Black and White into a complex multiethnic environment that we still do not understand. Disparities, discrimination, progress, and retrogression within this multilayered economic and social environment demonstrate that the color question is pervasive in our lives, and it is an explicit tension or at least subtext in countless policy debates. These debates range from K-12 school improvement, to criminal justice, to reinvention of the health care system.

The premise is that rational explication, based in research, can make a difference in the pursuit of our ideals. There is, unfortunately, substantial evidence to the contrary when it comes to race and ethnicity. The difficulties are of many sorts. These volumes amply illustrate that there is no shortage of factual, methodological, and conceptual challenges in studying “race”—itself a contingent social construct, rather than a fixed biological or anthropological one. They also illustrate that the research enterprise, try as we might, is almost inextricably tied to our politics—to the currents of public values, interests, and debates. There are contestable judgments implicit in the choice of data we decide to keep, the subjects scholars choose to investigate (and that can attract funding), the questions and variables researchers select, the interpretations and application of the research findings, and so forth. All of this means that research related to race has been the victim of the public’s decreased interest in civil rights in the past 25 years, and that even sound research results have often been viewed through lenses shaped by political or ideological agendas.



In the complex agenda of color and ethnicity, it is vital that researchers contribute to a reengagement of both the public and the research community, despite the difficulties and risks. In these papers, researchers repeatedly identify important questions requiring further research. The greatest success of *America Becoming* will be in providing the impetus for a reinvigoration of the social scientific commitment to the cause of racial and ethnic justice: to answer and raise questions, to guide and critique policy actors, to take stock, and, especially, to teach.

*America Becoming* will be instrumental in feeding thoughtful debate. There is ample nourishment here, to be sure, and one can find in the media and countless communities and institutions reason to hope that the appetite for serious civic discourse on the matter of race is on the rise. In colleges and universities, to take one example, dialogues on race have proliferated, and one must hope that a resurgence of sophisticated course offerings in this field will be a signal achievement of this decade. As we prepare students to live and lead in increasingly diverse communities, it is education malpractice if we fail to provide an understanding of where America is and has been on these troubling matters.

Race is not rocket science; it is harder than rocket science. Race demands an intellectual investment equal to the task. It also demands relentlessness in research and teaching that will overwhelm the human tendency to let our differences trigger the worst in our natures.

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The editors would like to acknowledge the role that many people and agencies played in contributing to the success of the Research Conference on Racial Trends in the United States and the report based on that conference, *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences*.

The conference grew out of discussions between the National Research Council (NRC) and the President's Initiative on Race. Judith Winston, the executive director of the Initiative, and her staff, including Lin Liu and John Goering, were engaged and helpful throughout the process. The additional support of Christopher Edley, Jr. (special adviser to the Initiative), Rebecca Blank (Council of Economic Advisers), Peter Rundlet (White House), and Katherine Wallman (Office of Management and Budget), was indispensable. Their ability to demonstrate the importance of the documentation of racial trends persuaded many agencies to support the conference. An advisory committee, made up of representatives of the sponsoring agencies and chaired by Rebecca Blank, met several times with NRC staff during the conference planning period. This committee provided the NRC with very helpful feedback and advice.

The sponsors of the conference included the Bureau of Transportation Statistics of the U.S. Department of Transportation, the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Institute of Justice of the U.S. Department of Justice, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the

President's Initiative on Race, the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Energy, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of the Interior, and the U.S. Department of Labor. A generous Mellon Foundation grant provided support for the dissemination of *America Becoming*. Thanks to the paper authors, discussion leaders, and other presenters, the intellectual content and tone of the conference were of the highest quality from beginning to end. We would like to thank: Bruce Alberts, chairman of the National Research Council and president of the National Academy of Sciences, Richard Alba, Marcus Alexis, Rebecca Blank, Alfred Blumstein, Lawrence Bobo, Frank Bonilla, Thomas Boston, John Sibley Butler, Albert Camarillo, Ken Chay, Beverly Coleman-Miller, Cecilia Conrad, Christopher Edley, Jr., Reynolds Farley, Ronald Ferguson, Roberto Fernandez, Rodolfo de la Garza, Peter Gottschalk, Darnell Hawkins, Jennifer Hochschild, Harry Holzer, James S. Jackson, Paul Jargowsky, Gerald Jaynes, Renée Jenkins, James Jones, Thomas Kane, Randall Kennedy, Raynard Kington, Sanders Korenman, Betsy Lozoff, Anthony Marx, Douglas Massey, Vonnice McLoyd, Robert Moffitt, Charles Moskos, Don Nakanishi, the late Herbert Nickens, Eugene Oddone, Michael Omi, Manuel Pastor, Laura Petersen, Sharon Robinson, Gary Sandefur (with Molly Martin, Jennifer Eggerling-Boeck, Susan E. Mannon, and Ann M. Meier), Thomas Shapiro, Daryl Smith, James Smith, Matthew Snipp, Carol Swain, Russell Thornton, Mary Waters, Morris Weinberger, David Williams, and Min Zhou.

This report was reviewed in draft form by individuals chosen for their diverse perspectives and technical expertise, in accordance with procedures approved by the NRC's Report Review Committee. The purpose of this independent review was to provide candid and critical comments that assist the institution in making the published report as sound as possible and to ensure that the report meets institutional standards for objectivity, evidence, and responsiveness to the study charge. To protect the integrity of the deliberative process, the review comments and draft manuscript remain confidential.

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Neil J. Smelser  
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# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1 Introduction <i>Neil J. Smelser, William Julius Wilson, and Faith Mitchell</i>	
2 An Overview of Trends in Social and Economic Well-Being, by Race <i>Rebecca M. Blank</i>	21
<b>DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS</b>	
3 An Overview of Racial and Ethnic Demographic Trends <i>Gary D. Sandefur, Molly Martin, Jennifer Eggerling-Boeck, Susan E. Mannon, and Ann M. Meier</i>	40
<b>TRENDS AMONG ASIANS, HISPANICS, AND AMERICAN INDIANS</b>	
4 Hispanics in a Multicultural Society: A New American Dilemma? <i>Albert M. Camarillo and Frank Bonilla</i>	103

5 Trends Among American Indians in the United States	135
<i>Russell Thornton</i>	

6 Political Trends and Electoral Issues of the Asian Pacific American Population	170
<i>Don T. Nakanishi</i>	

## IMMIGRATION TRENDS

7 Contemporary Immigration and the Dynamics of Race and Ethnicity	200
<i>Min Zhou</i>	

## RACIAL ATTITUDES, AFFIRMATIVE ACTION, AND INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

8 The Changing Meaning of Race	243
<i>Michael A. Omi</i>	

9 Racial Attitudes and Relations at the Close of the Twentieth Century	264
<i>Lawrence D. Bobo</i>	

10 Racial Trends and Scapegoating: Bringing in a Comparative Focus	302
<i>Anthony W. Marx</i>	

11 Affirmative Action: Legislative History, Judicial Interpretations, Public Consensus	318
<i>Carol M. Swain</i>	

## EDUCATION TRENDS

12 Test-Score Trends Along Racial Lines, 1971 to 1996: Popular Culture and Community Academic Standards	348
<i>Ronald F. Ferguson</i>	



## NEIGHBORHOOD AND GEOGRAPHIC TRENDS

13 Residential Segregation and Neighborhood Conditions in U.S. Metropolitan Areas <i>Douglas S. Massey</i>	391
14 Geography and Opportunity <i>Manuel Pastor, Jr.</i>	435

## APPENDIXES

A Acronyms	469
B Agenda: Research Conference on Racial Trends in the United States	472
C Biographical Sketches	477
Index	485

## TABLES AND FIGURES

### Tables

3-1 Population Percentage by Region, 1950 to 1990, 50
3-2 Population Percentage Inside/Outside Metropolitan Areas and Central Cities, 1950 to 1990, 53
3-3 Population Percentage by Selected Metropolitan Areas, 1950 to 1990, 54
3-4 Total Fertility Rates (births per 1,000 women), 1950 to 1996, 64
3-5 General Fertility Rates (births per 1,000 women), for Teenagers Ages 15-19, 1950 to 1995, 68
3-6 Fertility Rates (births per 1,000 women) for Unmarried Women, Ages 15 to 44, 1950 to 1995; All Ages, 1995, 70
3-7 Percent Distribution of Marital Status, 1950 to 1995, 72
3-8 Percent of Wives and Husbands in Same-Race Marriages, 1960 to 1994, 75
3-9 Percent Distribution of Children Younger Than Age 18 Living in Both- or Single-Parent Households, 1960 to 1995, 78
3-10 Life Expectancy at Birth, 1950 to 1995, 82

- 3-11 Death Rates and Age-Adjusted Death Rates Reported (per 1,000 persons), 1950 to 1995 (per 1,000 persons), 86
- 3-12 Infant Mortality (percent reported per 1,000 live births), 1950 to 1995, 88
  
- 4-1 Hispanic Population in the United States 1960 to 1996 with Projections for 2000 to 2050 (millions), 106
- 4-2 Hispanic Population in Selected States, 1970 to 1990 with Projections to 2020 (millions), 109
- 4-3 Percentages of Unemployed and Employed Persons (16 years and older) and Employment Categories by Race and Ethnicity, 1996, 112
- 4-4 Family Income and Poverty Rates, by Race and Ethnicity, 1995, 113
  
- 5-1 Twentieth Century Estimates of the Aboriginal Population of North America, 136
- 5-2 American Indian and Alaska Native Population in the United States, 1900-1990, 137
- 5-3 The 10 Largest Reservations and Trust Lands, 139
- 5-4 Blood-Quantum Requirements by Reservation Basis and Membership Size, 139
- 5-5 Percentage Urban of American Indian Population of the United States, 1900 to 1990, 142
- 5-6 Schools Under the Auspices of the Five Tribes, 151
  
- 6-1 Education-Attainment Levels (percentage) for Males and Females, 25 Years and Older, California, 1990, 180
- 6-2 Education-Attainment Levels (percentage) for Asian Pacific American Males and Females, 25 Years and Older, California, 1990, 181
- 6-3 Distribution of Naturalized and U.S.-Born Asian Pacific American Registered Voters, 1994, 186
- 6-4 Voter Registration and Turnout Rates (percentage) for Asian Pacific Americans and Others, 1994, 186
- 6-5 Registration and Voting (percentage) by Year of Immigration for Naturalized and U.S.-Born Asian Pacific American Citizens, 1994, 188
- 6-6 Asian Pacific American Registered Voters, Monterey Park, California, 1984 and 1997, 190
  
- 7-1 Socioeconomic Characteristics of Immigrants from Selected Countries, 1990, 208

- 7-2 Top 10 Countries of National Origin for Refugees and Asylees Granted Permanent Resident Status, 1946 to 1995, 211
- 7-3 Top 10 Immigrant Groups by Selected PMSAs, Listed by National Origin, 1990 (1,000s), 216
- 7-4 Labor Force Participation and Underemployment Among Immigrant Workers Ages 25 to 64 by Ethnicity and Gender, 1990, 226
  
- 12-1 NAEP Scores for Black, Hispanic, and White 9-, 13-, and 17-Year-Olds, 352
- 12-2 NAEP Score Gaps and Percentage of Gap Remaining, 354
- 12-3 Percentiles of NAEP Reading Scores for 13- and 17-Year-Olds by Race, for Four Cohorts, 361
- 12-4 Mathematics Proficiency of 17-Year-Olds, by Highest Math Course Taken and Race/Ethnicity, 1978 and 1990, 367
- 12-5 Trends in NAEP Reading Scores, Leisure Reading, Telling Friends About Good Books, and Watching Television Among 17-Year-Olds, 370
- 12-6 Trends in Time Spent on Homework for Black, Hispanic, and White 17-Year-Olds, 1980 to 1996, 371
- 12-7 Percent Responding That the Problem Is “Very Serious” or “Somewhat Serious” in Their School, 381
- 12-8 Percent Responding That the Proposed Change Would Get Them to Learn “a Lot More”, 382
- 12-9 Percent Responding That Certain Kinds of Teachers Would Lead Them to Learn “a Lot More”/Percent Responding “Most” of Their Teachers Are Like That Item Now, 383
  
- 13-1 Indices of Black-White Segregation Computed at Three Geographic Levels, 1900 to 1940, 394
- 13-2 Indices of Black-White Segregation Computed at Four Geographic Levels, 1950 to 1990, 397
- 13-3 Trends in Black Segregation and Isolation in the 30 Metropolitan Areas with the Largest Black Populations, 1970 to 1990, 400
- 13-4 Trends in Hispanic Segregation and Isolation in the 30 Metropolitan Areas with the Largest Hispanic Populations, 1970 to 1990, 404
- 13-5 Trends in Asian Segregation and Isolation in the 20 Metropolitan Areas with the Largest Asian Populations, 1970 to 1990, 408
  
- 14-1 Comparative Views on Los Angeles County, 1990, 456

## Figures

- 2-1 Minority population by region, 1995, 23
- 2-2 Household structure, 24
- 2-3 Computer use by children in first through sixth grades, 26
- 2-4 Persons aged 25 to 29 with a four-year college degree or higher, 27
- 2-5 Labor force participation rates of persons aged 25 to 54, 28
- 2-6 Median weekly earnings of male and female full-time workers, 29
- 2-7 Median family income, 30
- 2-8 Poverty rates for individuals, 31
- 2-9 Infant mortality rates, 32
- 2-10 Prevalence of smoking among persons aged 18 to 24, 33
- 2-11 Death rates by cause, for persons aged 15 to 34, 1994 to 1995, 34
- 2-12 Victims of homicide, 35
- 2-13 Housing units with physical problems, 36
- 2-14 Average racial and ethnic composition of metropolitan neighborhoods, 1990, 37
  
- 3-1 Racial and ethnic composition of the United States: 1900 to 2050, 44
- 3-2a 1950 and 1996 U.S. total age composition, 45
- 3-2b 1950 White (including Hispanic) and 1996 non-Hispanic White age composition, 46
- 3-2c 1950 Black (including Hispanic) and 1996 non-Hispanic Black age composition, 46
- 3-2d 1950 and 1996 American Indian age composition, 47
- 3-2e 1970 and 1996 Hispanic age composition, 47
- 3-2f 1980 and 1996 Asian age composition, 48
- 3-3 Life expectancy at birth by sex, 1950 to 1995, 84
  
- 4-1 Hispanic population in the United States, by national origin, 1970 to 1996, 108
- 4-2 Median family income by race, 144
- 4-3 Persons aged 25 to 29 with a high school degree or equivalent, 115
- 4-4 Educational attainment of Hispanics by national origin and by nativity, 1996, 116
- 4-5 Persons aged 25 to 29 with a four-year college degree or higher, 117
  
- 5-1 Native American populations according to the 1990 census, 141

- 7-1 Immigration to the United States: 1901 to 1925 versus 1971 to 1995, 202
- 7-2 Immigration from the Americas (not including Canada) and Asia, as a proportion of the total immigration to the United States, 1911 to 1990, 210
- 7-3 Distribution of major ethnic groups by generational status in major metropolitan areas with large immigrant populations, 219
- 7-4 Distribution of age cohorts in major metropolitan areas with large immigrant populations, 231
  
- 9-1 Trends in Whites' attitudes about school integration, 269
- 9-2 Trends in Whites' attitudes about residential choice, 270
- 9-3 Trends in Whites' attitudes about race and employment, 271
- 9-4 Trends in Whites' attitudes about racial intermarriage, 272
- 9-5 Support for race-based job training and education assistance programs, by race, 274
- 9-6 Support for race-based preferences in hiring and promotion, by race, 274
- 9-7 Percentage of Whites rating racial minorities as inferior to Whites, 278
- 9-8 Percentage of Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asian/Pacific Islanders who believe there is "a lot" of discrimination in getting good-paying jobs, by race, 281
- 9-9a Trends in Whites' beliefs about individualistic bases of Black/White economic inequality, 283
- 9-9b Trends in Whites' structural beliefs about Black/White economic inequality, 284
- 9-10 Percentage of Blacks, Hispanics, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Whites agreeing or disagreeing with fairness statements regarding ethnic group deprivation, 286
- 9-11 Importance of race to Blacks, 287
  
- 12-1 Standardized NAEP reading and math scores for Black, Hispanic, and White 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds, 357
- 12-2 Annual growth in average number of math (algebra and higher) and English courses, for students graduating from high school, by race/ethnicity, 366
- 12-3 Trends in NAEP reading scores and reading for pleasure among Black 17-year-olds, 1984 to 1996, 372
- 12-4 "What is the lowest grade you can get without your parents getting upset?" Answers by student's race/ethnicity and mother's education, 379

- 12-A Changes since 1976 in SAT (A) verbal and (B) math scores by racial/ethnic background (three-year moving averages), 386
- 14-1 Suburbanization of employment and population in 74 metropolitan areas, 1970 to 1990, 437
- 14-2 Suburbanization of the population in 74 metropolitan areas, 1970 to 1990, 438
- 14-3 Ratio of suburban to central-city income, from 1970 to 1990, 438
- 14-4 Ratio of central-city to metropolitan poverty, from 1970 to 1990, 439
- 14-5 Metropolitan-level inequality in 74 metropolitan areas, 1970 to 1990, 440
- 14-6 Variability of income growth by metropolitan area, 1970 to 1990, 440
- 14-7 Ethnic composition of low and high job growth areas in Los Angeles County, 1990, 441
- 14-8 Exposure by group to environmental negatives in Southern California, 444
- 14-9 Exposure to high-capacity toxic facilities over time in Los Angeles County, 447
- 14-10 Per capita income growth and change in inequality in 74 metropolitan areas, 1980 to 1990, 449

# Contents

## Volume II

### JUSTICE TRENDS

- |   |  |    |
|---|--|----|
| 1 | Racial Trends in the Administration of Criminal Justice<br><i>Randall Kennedy</i>              | 1  |
| 2 | Race and Criminal Justice<br><i>Alfred Blumstein</i>   | 21 |
| 3 | Commentary on Randall Kennedy's Overview of the<br>Justice System<br><i>Darnell F. Hawkins</i> | 32 |

### LABOR FORCE, INCOME, WEALTH, AND WELFARE TRENDS

- |   |   |    |
|---|---|----|
| 4 | Race and Ethnicity in the Labor Market: Trends Over the<br>Short and Long Term<br><i>James P. Smith</i> | 52 |
| 5 | Racial Differences in Labor Market Outcomes<br>Among Men<br><i>Harry J. Holzer</i>                      | 98 |

6	Racial Trends in Labor Market Access and Wages: Women <i>Cecilia A. Conrad</i>	124
7	Ethnic and Racial Differences in Welfare Receipt in the United States <i>Robert A. Moffitt and Peter T. Gottschalk</i>	152
8	Labor Force Trends: The Military as Data <i>John Sibley Butler and Charles C. Moskos</i>	174
9	Trends in Minority-Owned Businesses <i>Thomas D. Boston</i>	190
10	Wealth and Racial Stratification <i>Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro</i>	222
<b>HEALTH TRENDS</b>		
11	Racial and Ethnic Differences in Health: Recent Trends, Current Patterns, Future Directions <i>Raynard S. Kington and Herbert W. Nickens</i>	253
12	Racial and Ethnic Trends in Children's and Adolescents' Behavior and Development <i>Vonnie C. McLoyd and Betsy Lozoff</i>	311
13	The Health of Minority Children in the Year 2000: The Role of Government Programs in Improving the Health Status of America's Children <i>Renée R. Jenkins</i>	351
14	Racial Variations in Adult Health Status: Patterns, Paradoxes, and Prospects <i>David R. Williams</i>	371
15	Health-Care Use in the Veterans Health Administration: Racial Trends and the Spirit of Inquiry <i>Eugene Z. Oddone, Laura A. Petersen, and Morris Weinberger</i>	411



*CONTENTS* *xxv*

**APPENDIXES**

A	Acronyms	431
B	Agenda: Research Conference on Racial Trends in the United States	434
C	Biographical Sketches	439
	Index	447

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## Terminology Used in This Report

**A**s many of the authors point out, the term “race” as used to categorize ethnic origins of human beings is a social construct and has no biological basis. Nevertheless, we have come to identify certain terms and names with certain groups of people. The variety of those terms was reflected in the various authors’ usage choices; often, more than one term was used for the same group in the same paper. For the purposes of these volumes, we will use the terms as recommended by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in 1999: it coded race into five single-race groups: White, Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, and Other. These terms are defined the terms as follows:

*American Indian or Alaska Native.* A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment.

*Asian.* A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.

*Black or African American.* A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa. Terms such as “Haitian” or “Negro” can be used in addition to “Black or African American.”

**Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.** A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.

**White.** A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.

**Hispanic or Latino.** With respect to ethnicity, is defined as: Hispanic or Latino. A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race. The term “Spanish origin” can be used in addition to “Hispanic or Latino.” (Note: A Hispanic person can be Black or White.)

Again, for the purposes of brevity and consistency, the terms used throughout these volumes are those recommended by OMB—American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, and White. Where necessary to distinguish, non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic White are used.

SOURCE: Tabulation Working Group, Interagency Committee for the Review of Standards for Data on Race and Ethnicity. 1999. Draft Provisional Guidance on the Implementation of the 1997 Standards for the Collection of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity (3-5,65; February 17, 1999). Washington, D.C.: Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget.

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