FAQs: Data Disaggregation and Asian Americans

In the context of the census work we do, data disaggregation is a term used to refer to the collection and reporting of data by detailed Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) subgroups. By producing disaggregated data for detailed groups, you can always combine the data to produce summarized data on the entire group. However, the reverse is not true. You cannot get detailed data from aggregated data. And without accurate data by detailed race group, some of the most disadvantaged in our communities are rendered invisible to policy makers, leaving their critical needs unmet.

Question: What is the reason that Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders are disaggregated? Is this community-driven or directed to the community?

The history of race data collection in this country is long, complex, and ever evolving. For example, in the early decades of this country's history, the census collected minimal data on race. In 1900, the census offered five categories: White, Black, Chinese, Japanese, and American Indian. Up until 1960, respondents were not allowed to self-identify their race or ethnicity on the census without the observation of census takers, who often influenced their choice.

In more recent decades, the inclusion of AANHPI detailed subgroup checkboxes has been a well-fought victory by the community. The 1980 census race question offered nine AANHPI subgroup check-off boxes and space to write-in a different subgroup rather than an umbrella term. Both Congress and the AANHPI community strongly opposed the Census Bureau's proposal to collapse the subgroups into an "Asian and Pacific Islander" category (with a subgroup write-in space) for the 1990 Census, citing test results showing diminished accuracy of detailed data. A similar discussion occurred prior to the 2010 Census, where there were proposals on the table that would have collapsed the detailed subgroups into one single "Asian" or one single "Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander" checkbox with a write-in option. Again, the community pushed back, citing the Census Bureau's own testing that showed lower quality detailed data when using the proposed options, and the Census Bureau agreed to utilize detailed AANHPI checkboxes for the 2010 Census. Quite simply, without subgroup checkboxes, individuals belonging to the AANHPI community would not be accurately detailed.

Question: I've noticed that on the Census form, other racial groups are not subjected to disaggregation into subgroups. Why is this?

Data collection and reporting on race and ethnicity by the federal government is defined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). OMB's Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity ("OMB Standards") governs how information is collected and presented for the decennial census, household surveys, administrative forms, and numerous other statistical collections. The numbers also guide civil rights enforcement and program administrative reporting.

In fact, there is a [review underway currently by OMB](#) to potentially revise their standards to better address the growing diversity in America. The Census Bureau has also been conducting research on how better to ask survey respondents about their race and ethnicity. Under [the current proposal](#), the 2020 Census would provide each of the minimum reporting groups a series of detailed checkbox options, including a write-in option for more details. Thus, under the current proposal, other racial groups would be disaggregated into subgroups.

The [current OMB standards](#) provide five categories for data on race: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White. It also presents two categories for data on ethnicity: "Hispanic or Latino," and "Not Hispanic or Latino."

Federal agencies are required to use these race and ethnicity categories as the *minimum* categories for collecting and presenting data on race and ethnicity for all Federal reporting purposes. However, the standards do not preclude an agency's ability to collect more detailed data. The Census Bureau is one of the more comprehensive surveys that collects detailed data for Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, Asian Indian, and Alaskan Natives and Latinos through checkbox and write-in options on their survey.

Question: Are there specific issues that require disaggregation of data of AANHPIs or should there be general disaggregation of data for our communities?

Data disaggregation of AANHPIs is critical across the board. The reality is that the failure to include detailed data on AANHPIs will provide a misleading story about AANHPIs in the United States. Aggregated data points in health, education and other issues perpetuate the model minority myth – that all Asians are affluent and well-educated — by not allowing for a deeper dive into the differences within subgroups. When data is disaggregated, a much more complex story emerges.

Often viewed as homogenous, AANHPIs include more than 50 detailed race groups that can differ dramatically across key social and economic indicators. For example, while only 3 in 50 Filipino Americans nationwide live below the poverty line, approximately 1 in 4 of Hmong Americans are poor. Similarly, about 1 in 2 of Marshallese live below the poverty line, while only 1 in 20 Fijians are poor. Pay equity is another example of where disaggregating data is critical to understand the needs and concerns of specific subgroups. While AANHPI women are paid an average of 86 cents for every dollar a Caucasian male is paid, disaggregated data demonstrates that Native Hawaiian women are paid only 66 cents for every dollar a white male is paid. Additionally, in contrast to what a Caucasian male is paid, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Samoan American women earn 61 cents; Burmese American women 53 cents; and Bhutanese American women only 38 cents on that same dollar.

Census data is also used by businesses in a variety of ways helpful to the community. National stores use this data to determine where to open new stores or franchises. Banks use the data to determine where to open new branches and what services might be most needed. Small businesses rely on this data to help secure loans for their business. The use of subgroups allows these businesses to refine their strategies further to be responsive to community needs.