

# **Changing Questions, Changing Races: New Indigenous People in Contemporary America**

**Carolyn A. Liebler and Timothy Ortyl**

Department of Sociology and Minnesota Population Center  
University of Minnesota

Proposal to the Population Association of America  
2011 Annual Meetings in Washington, DC

September 2010

Funding for this research was provided by a Grant-in-Aid-of-Research granted by the College of Liberal Arts, University of Minnesota. The Minnesota Population Center sponsored research time in the Minnesota Restricted Census Data Center (MnRDC). A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meetings of the Population Association of America, May 2003. We would like to thank C. Matthew Snipp and J. Trent Alexander for their helpful comments. Please direct correspondence to: Carolyn Liebler, Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota, 909 Social Sciences Tower, 267 19th Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55455. Email: [liebler@umn.edu](mailto:liebler@umn.edu)

**ABSTRACT:**

The enumerated American Indian population saw a tremendous increase when the question wording changed from about 2 million in 1990 to about 4 million in 2000. What are the characteristics of people who change their race responses when the question changes? And can we assume that people who reported American Indian race in 1990 are the same people who reported American Indian as their only race in 2000? We decompose the enumerated 1990 population of American Indians by age, sex, and birth state and apply life table methods to calculate the expected number of American Indians in 2000, by age, sex, birth state, Hispanic origin, and achieved education. To limit the negative effects of sampling error on our results, we utilize the restricted-use, high-density versions of the decennial census data.

## INTRODUCTION

Racial identity is consequential for those experiencing it. Social scientists have shown that it matters for health and well-being, academic achievement, and economic outcomes, among other things (Chavous et al. 2003; Sellers, et al. 2006; Borrell 2005; Yip et al. 2006; Darity et al. 2006). Challenges to past conceptions of who is a “real” member of each race group are troublesome for law makers and courts hoping to enforce civil rights laws, for policy makers aiming to improve outcomes for a specific racial or ethnic group, for demographers charged with predicting future population sizes, and for community members who wonder how their groups are changing. People who change race responses may have identities that have changed; they may also be less committed to that race group’s communities and political goals. This issue is especially important for indigenous people who have official claims on government resources.

Though race response changes have tremendous policy implications, very little is known about which segments of the population recently began reporting an indigenous group as one of their races. The specific ways in which race responses are context-dependent provides important information to sociologists and others interested in understanding race as a socially constructed phenomenon. In practical terms, users of the Census Bureau’s race data often assume that race reports remain stable over time and situation, even though this can be a relatively poor assumption (Passel and Berman 1986; Passel 1996).

Basic research on this new topic has begun. Researchers have learned that an individual’s racial identity and race report can change. Now we need to better understand how, when, or why it changes; to do this, we must identify more precisely which groups of people

are most likely to have fluid race reports and which groups are more stable. Knowledge about which types of people are most likely to change their race responses will serve as building blocks for other studies about causes and implications of these changes.

As of Census 2000, the Census Bureau subtly but fundamentally altered the way they asked about people's racial identity; for the first time, it was possible to choose more than one race response on the census form. This new race question format has provided opportunities for people to clarify their self-definitions around race/ethnicity, but produces serious headaches for analysts hoping to use the data to understand specific populations.

We limit this particular study to American Indians (including Alaska Natives), though our future research will examine the growth of other populations such as Native Hawaiians. The enumerated American Indian population saw a tremendous increase when the question wording changed from about 2 million in 1990 to about 4 million in 2000. Our research addresses the following core questions: What are the characteristics of people who change their race responses when the question changes? And can we assume that people who reported American Indian race in 1990 are the same people who reported American Indian as their only race in 2000?

This is a timely and important topic. Our research will help policy makers, the public, and academics understand the current data and thus understand what it can tell us about our society. The federal government's change in how it asks about race reflects our country's increasingly migratory, urbanizing, and intermixing cultures. These factors produce increased racial heterogeneity throughout the country and fundamentally challenge the racial boundaries of the past.

## PRESENT STATUS OF KNOWLEDGE

Racial identities and responses to survey questions about race are much more fluid and ambiguous than thought only a few decades ago (see Edmonston and Schultze 1995:141; Harris and Sim 2002; Eschbach 1992). Answers to census and survey questions about race can be especially unstable for people of mixed racial heritage (e.g., Harris and Sim 2002). As small indigenous groups who have been forming interracial unions for many generations, American Indians and Native Hawaiians are among the people who are least likely to give exactly the same race response on different questionnaires (e.g., Harris and Sim 2002; Eschbach 1992).

The extreme growth in enumerated indigenous populations between 1990 and 2000 was partially due to the new format of the race question which allowed respondents to mark multiple races for the first time in 2000. Many people were enumerated in 1990 as white or black and added an indigenous response in the 2000 census. This kind of change in racial identification has been on-going among American Indians since at least 1960, with several hundred thousand people each decade reporting American Indian as their race for the first time (Passel and Berman 1986; Passel 1996). Prior research (using methods other than the one we employ) suggests that some people are more likely to change their racial identification than are others. Gender, age, and region of residence have been shown to be related to these changes.

**Gender:** Girls are often more likely to report a mixed heritage than are boys. Harris (2002) focused American Indian-white youth and found that girls are significantly more likely to report both races (as opposed to white only) when asked in a written survey at school. This suggests that, given the opportunity (as they were in Census 2000), young women may be more likely than young men to report more than one race. This may be true regardless of which

single race the individuals reported in previous years; if so, we may see an especially large population of young female multiracial indigenous people who did not report being indigenous in 1990.

**Age:** Many studies of the identities of mixed race people have focused on young people in accordance with theories of identity development (see Erickson 1963, 1968 and Phinney 1990) and/or because of data constraints (e.g., Harris and Sim 2002; Lysne and Levy 1997; Twine 1997; Xie and Goyette 1998). Overall, research on the effect of age on identity and identification has not been conclusive (Harris and Sim 2002; Harris 2002; Xie and Goyette 1997). Because identity research has focused on youth, it is unclear what levels or patterns of identity change we should expect in later ages. Phinney (1989) suggests that only the first stages of identity development are usually achieved in adolescence and that further exploration in later years is relatively common. However, she does not have specific predictions about the outcomes of these explorations for people with mixed-race heritage. In general, theory implies that racial identity should be more stable among adults, but there is no research that actually tests this claim. The method I propose to use involves calculations for people of all ages and both genders and is thus significantly more inclusive than prior work.

**Birthplace:** In his study of regional variation in patterns of identification as American Indian using the 1980 Census, Eschbach (1992) concluded that the growth in the population between 1970 and 1980 was from changes in racial identification. “Old Indian areas” – states with reservations or other American Indian ethnic communities – experienced much more stability in their American Indian populations. My study of birthplaces will tap into regional changes while avoiding issues of inter-regional migration. The population changes by birth state

may be parallel to the regional changes reported by Eschbach to the extent that people remain in their birth state. This will especially be true for younger people.

It would be interesting to know other characteristics of people who change their race responses (e.g., income, education, family structure). However, these characteristics cannot be expected to remain the same between 1990 and 2000. Thus, they cannot be explored using the methods described here.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

We address our research questions using the tools of demography. First, we decompose the enumerated 1990 population of American Indians by age, sex, and birth state. Then we apply life table methods to calculate the expected number of American Indians in 2000, by age, sex, and birth state. Finally, we compare the expected number of people to the observed number of people and note situations where the over-count is especially large or small. We also investigate differences according to Hispanic origin and achieved education.

We start with the assumption that people who reported American Indian and another race in 2000 might have reported only American Indian in 1990, or they might have reported a different race in 1990. Similarly, people who reported only American Indian in 2000 might have reported only American Indian in 1990, or they might have reported a different race in 1990. In our analyses, we treat all people who report American Indian (alone or in combination) as part of the group of enumerated American Indians in 2000. At the same time, we pull the 2000 population into two groups: those who reported a single race and those who reported multiple races.

To limit the negative effects of sampling error on our results, we utilize the restricted-use, high-density versions of the decennial census data from 1990 and 2000 for our analyses. Restricted data are essential because they provide a larger sample of multiple race individuals (which improves estimates by providing much smaller standard errors). These data can be used only with permission from the Census Bureau under strict oversight in a secure facility such as the MnRDC (Minnesota Research Data Center in Minneapolis). For example, results may not leave the premises until approved by a Census Bureau committee and are limited in the detail that can be presented. Our research results will thus be presented in the form of rounded numbers and/or images. We feel that the limitations on the presented results will not significantly hamper our ability to gain feedback or advance knowledge because the changes in the population size are very large and are rather insensitive to nuances in coding decisions.

## **PRELIMINARY RESULTS**

Because of restrictions on the release of detail, we can discuss our preliminary results only vaguely. For the PAA meetings, we will submit detailed results for Census Bureau review and permission so that we can present more specifics for peer feedback.

Age: In early analyses, we have found that young people are over-represented among the unexpected or “new” American Indian population. New social meanings of race, and willingness to report multiple races, may be especially easily absorbed among people in their teens, twenties, and thirties. At the same time, people of all ages have started reporting American Indian as their race or as one of their races.



Gender: Our early analyses indicate moderate gender differences in the “new” American Indian population. We find higher rates of growth among women in their twenties and thirties compared to men of the same age. We find smaller differences between women and men at other ages, though there are more newly identified American Indian women than men in virtually all age brackets.

Birth State: We find strong birth state variation in the number of American Indians first enumerated in 2000. “Indian States” – defined as those states with 3,000 or more American Indians in 1950 – show substantially less growth in the American Indian population between 1990 and 2000, compared to other states. Given the more solid connection to homelands and long-standing American Indian communities, the people born in these states may have already identified themselves as racially American Indian in 1990. In particular, we find the Northeast region to have the highest rate of growth and the West to have the lowest rate of growth.

For about two-thirds of American Indians in 1990 and in 2000, their birth state is their current state of residence. This proportion is higher in Indian States such that American Indians in traditionally Indian areas are less likely to have moved out of their birth state before 2000. On average, about four in five American Indians were enumerated in the same broad region in which they were born.

Hispanic/Latino/Spanish Origin: We find remarkably higher rates of growth in “new” American Indian identification among Latino American Indians compared to non-Latino ones, regardless of age and gender. Among Latino American Indians, there tend to be higher rates of growth among young women compared to young men. We find particularly high rates of growth of “new” American Indians among Hispanics born in states with large Hispanic

populations. This result is consistent with the recent finding by Frank, Akresh and Lu (2010) that new immigrant Latinos who do not report their race as “white” or “other” are very likely to report their race as American Indian. Frank and colleagues suggest that “the two-thirds of the non-White group who identify as Native American may do so because of a shared heritage with Native Americans after generations of their own subjection to colonial rule.”

Education: (preliminary analyses not yet completed)

## WORKS CITED

- Borrell, Luisa N. 2005. "Racial Identity among Hispanics: Implications for Health and Well-being." *American Journal of Public Health* 95(3): 379-381.
- Chavous, Tabbie M., Debra Hilkene Bernat, Karen Schmeelk-Cone, Cleopatra H. Caldwell, Laura Kohn-Wood, and Marc A. Zimmerman. 2003. "Racial Identity and Academic Attainment among African American Adolescents." *Child Development* 74(4): 1076-1090.
- Darity, William A., Patrick L. Mason, and James B. Stewart. 2006. "The Economics of Identity: The Origin and Persistence of Racial Identity Norms." *Journal of Economic Organization and Behavior* 60(3): 283-305.
- Edmonston, Barry, and Charles Schultze, eds., 1995, *Modernizing the U.S. Census*, Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Erickson, Erik. 1963. *Childhood and Society*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Erickson, Erik. 1968. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Eschbach, Karl. 1992. *Shifting Boundaries: Regional Variation in Patterns of Identification as American Indian*. Dissertation (Sociology): Harvard University.
- Reanne Frank, Ilana Redstone Akresh and Bo Lu. 2010. "Latino Immigrants and the U.S. Racial Order : How and Where Do They Fit In?" *American Sociological Review* 75: 378-401.
- Harris, David R. 2002. "Does it Matter How We Measure? Racial Classification and the Characteristics of Multiracial Youth." Pp. 62-101 in *The New Race Question: How the Census Counts Multiracial Individuals*, Joel Perlmann and Mary C. Waters, eds. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Harris, David R. and Jeremiah Joseph Sim. 2002. "Who is Multiracial? Assessing the Complexity of Lived Race." *American Sociological Review* 67(4):614-627.
- Liebler, Carolyn A. 2003. "Understanding Recent Changes in the American Indian Population." Paper presented at the annual meetings of the Population Association of America, Minneapolis, MN.
- Liebler, Carolyn A. 2008. "Uneven Growth in the Enumerated Pacific Islander Population." Annual meetings of the Population Association of America, Boston, MA.
- Lysne, Mark and Gary D. Levy. 1997. "Differences in Ethnic Identity in Native American Adolescents as a Function of School Contexts." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 12(3):372-388.
- Passel, J. S. and P. A. Berman. 1986 "Quality of 1980 Census Data for American Indians." *Social Biology* 33(3-4):163-182.
- Passel, J. 1996. "The Growing American Indian Population, 1960-1990: Beyond Demography." In *Changing Numbers, Changing Needs: American Indian Demography and Public Health* (G. Sandefur, R. Rindfuss, and B. Cohen, eds). Washington, DC: Natl. Academy Press.
- Phinney, Jean S. 1990. "Ethnic Identity in Adolescents and Adults: Review of Research." *Psychological Bulletin* 108:499-514.
- Phinney, Jean S. 1989. "Stages of Ethnic Identity in Minority Group Adolescents." *Journal of Early Adolescence* 9:34-49.
- Sellers, Robert M; Nikeea Copeland Linder, Pamela P. Martin, R L'Heureux Lewis. 2006. "Racial Identity Matters: The Relationship between Racial Discrimination and Psychological Functioning in African American Adolescents." *Journal of Research on Adolescence*. 16(2):187-216.

- Twine, France Winddance. 1997. "Brown-Skinned White Girls: Class, Culture, and the Construction of White Identity in Suburban Communities." In *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, edited by Ruth Frankenberg. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Xie, Yu and Kimberly Goyette. 1998. "The Racial Identification of Biracial Children with One Asian Parent: Evidence from the 1990 Census." *Social Forces* 76(2):547-70.
- Yip, Tiffany, Eleanor K. Seaton, and Robert M. Sellers. 2006. "African American Racial Identity across the Lifespan: Identity Status, Identity Content, and Depressive Symptoms" *Child Development* 77(5):1504-1517.