

INDIGENEITY'S DATA DILEMMA
**THE FEDERAL STANDARD USED TO COUNT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES USES TWO
MAIN ELEMENTS: RACE AND ETHNICITY, BUT DOES THAT WORK FOR A
PEOPLE WITH A POLITICAL CLASSIFICATION?**

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What kind of story does the data tell about Indigenous communities?

That, dear reader, is a trick question. Any answer is complicated and nuanced. And this is especially true because there is no shared definition of race or ethnicity (on the other hand, tribal citizenship is clear. You are either a member or not.)

The federal standard is set by the Office of Management and Budget – Directive No. 15 – and it's under review. The standard has been used for the past 25 years and, as Karin Orvis, chief Statistician of the United States, said at the White House last June, that definition “provides minimum standards that ensure our ability to compare information and data across Federal agencies, and also to understand how well Federal programs serve a diverse America.”

There are two primary screens, race and ethnicity. The OMB aggregates data for five major racial categories: white, Black, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Then “ethnicity” the additional method used to count Hispanic or Latino.

“The concept of “race” can be a problematic descriptor for Native American identity, which is a political and legal identity in addition to a racial one,” say authors Robert Maxim, Gabriel Sanchez and Kimberly R. Huyser in a report published March 30 by the Brookings Institution, [“Why the federal government needs to change how it collects data on Native Americans.”](#)

The authors call for a rethinking of how the federal government collects and publishes Indigenous data so “we can begin to better assess the challenges they face and ensure the population is accurately represented when that data is used in research and policy.”

One measure of that complexity is the very definition of Indigenous. The OMB directive says that includes “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.”

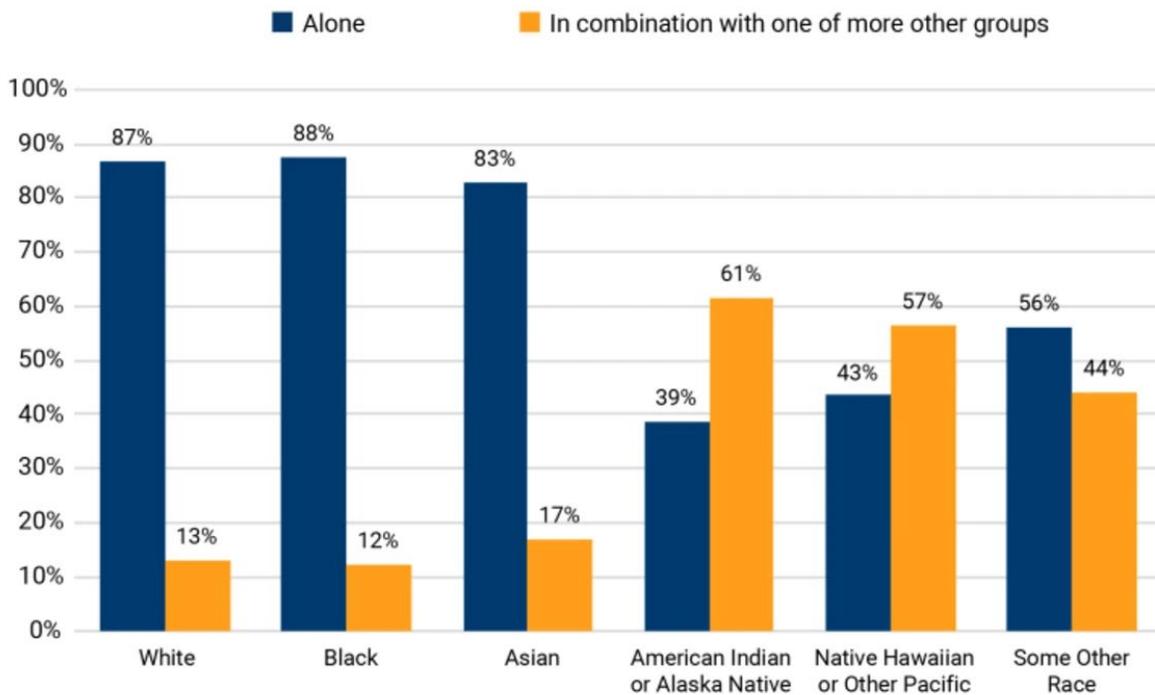
That is a standard that is difficult to measure.

Maxim told ICT that colonization is a factor in breaking down data. “The U.S. thinks about American Indian or Alaska Native ... (yet) the federal government itself defines American Indian or Alaska native as the original peoples of North and South America, including Central America. So because of that, there are a bunch of complex dynamics that end up getting raised” including the more than once category or the ethnicity of Hispanic or Latino.

“And all of that gets mixed up here, Maxim said. “And the way that the U.S. collects and publishes data doesn't account for really any of those nuances.”

FIGURE 1

Racial classification on the 2020 Decennial Census



Note: Racial groups are inclusive of individuals identifying as Latino or Hispanic

Source: Brookings analysis of Census Bureau data

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The Brookings paper said this is a problem when government agencies cite the multiracial category. “When that happens,” the paper said, “it removes a majority of Native Americans and

lumps them into a catch-all category with groups that have significantly different backgrounds and life experiences.”

In fact only 39 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives are classified as one race alone (compared to 87 percent of white Americans, 88 percent of African Americans, and 83 percent of Asian Americans).

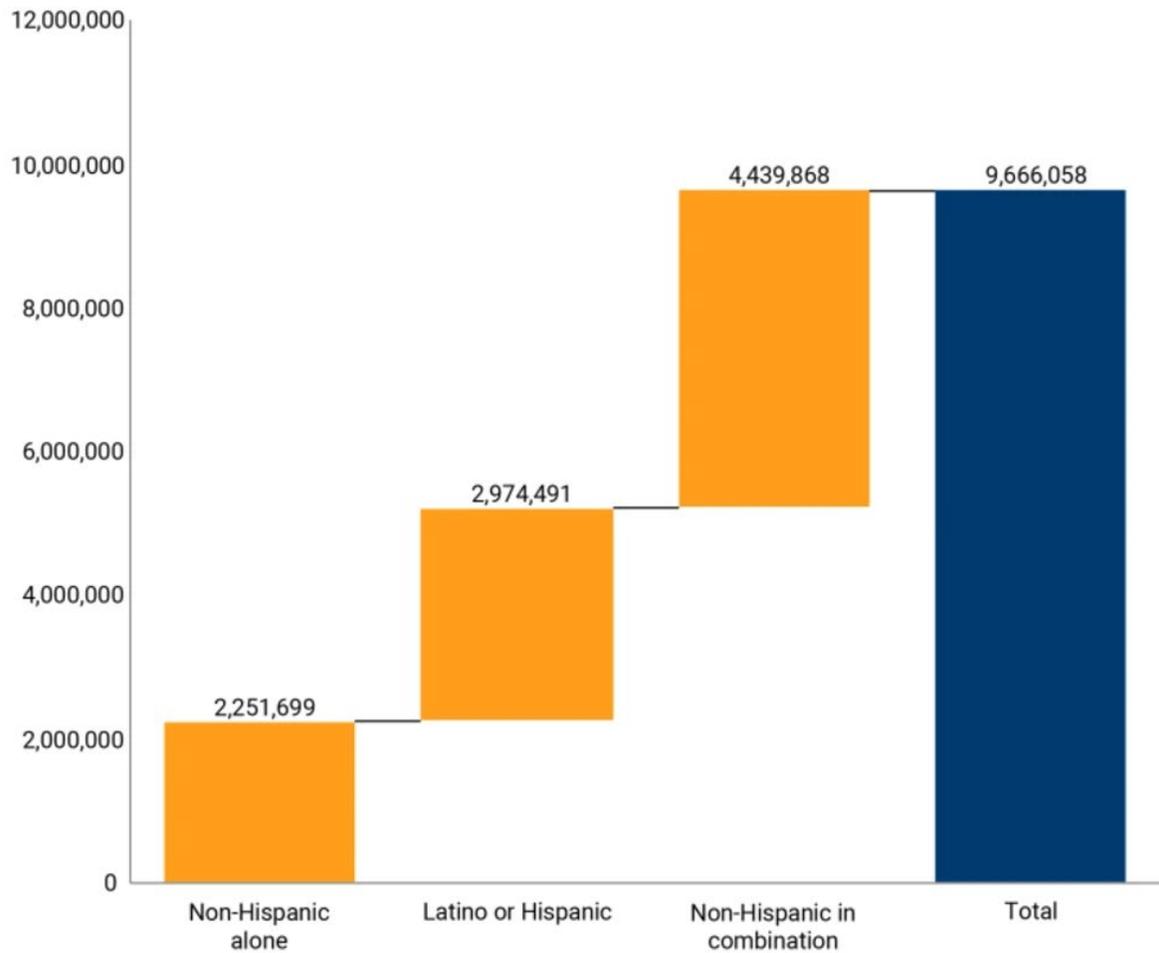
The case is even more dramatic when Latino ethnicity does not include Native American data.

“On the 2020 census, just 23% of all Native Americans [were classified as single race and non-Latino or Hispanic](#),” Brookings reported. “In other words, one of the most commonly used racial categorizations of Native Americans – single-race, Non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native – excludes more than three-quarters of the total Native American population. In contrast, nearly 3 million American Indian or Alaska Native people (either alone or in combination with another race), accounting for 31% of the total American Indian and Alaska Native population, were classified as having Latino or Hispanic ethnicity.”

FIGURE 2

American Indian and Alaska Native population by race and ethnicity

2020 Decennial Census



Source: Brookings analysis of Census Bureau data



The conclusion: “Given that Latino or Hispanic individuals represent nearly one-third of the Native American population, improving our understanding of how mixed-race individuals who are Latino or Hispanic and Native American are faring is vital.”

One example of the harm that can come from that methodology was a widely-cited Princeton report in 2015 showing [“deaths of despair”](#) such as suicides, drug overdoses, and deaths from alcoholic liver disease was highest for non-Hispanic, white Americans. But that study did not include Native American data “effectively erasing them—a common occurrence when data is aggregated in a way that excludes many Native Americans and treats them as a small enough portion of the population to be ignored entirely.”

Another study, just published in January by the medical journal, The Lancet, found that Native Americans were the most impacted group for that type of death. The problem, once again is that both studies used single-race data. Maxim said this happens because some states were still using the old (single-race only) 1977 federal OMB race standards in their mortality records as late as 2017.

Indeed, the explanation by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) is a remarkable piece of writing: "During the transition to full implementation of the 1997 OMB standards on race and ethnicity, race data on the 2000 and 2010 censuses were not comparable with race data on other data systems that were continuing to collect data using the 1977 OMB standards on race and ethnicity. For example, states implemented the revised birth and death certificates—which have race and ethnicity items that are compliant with the 1997 OMB standards—at different times, and some states still used the 1989 death certificates that collect race and ethnicity data according to the 1977 OMB standards."

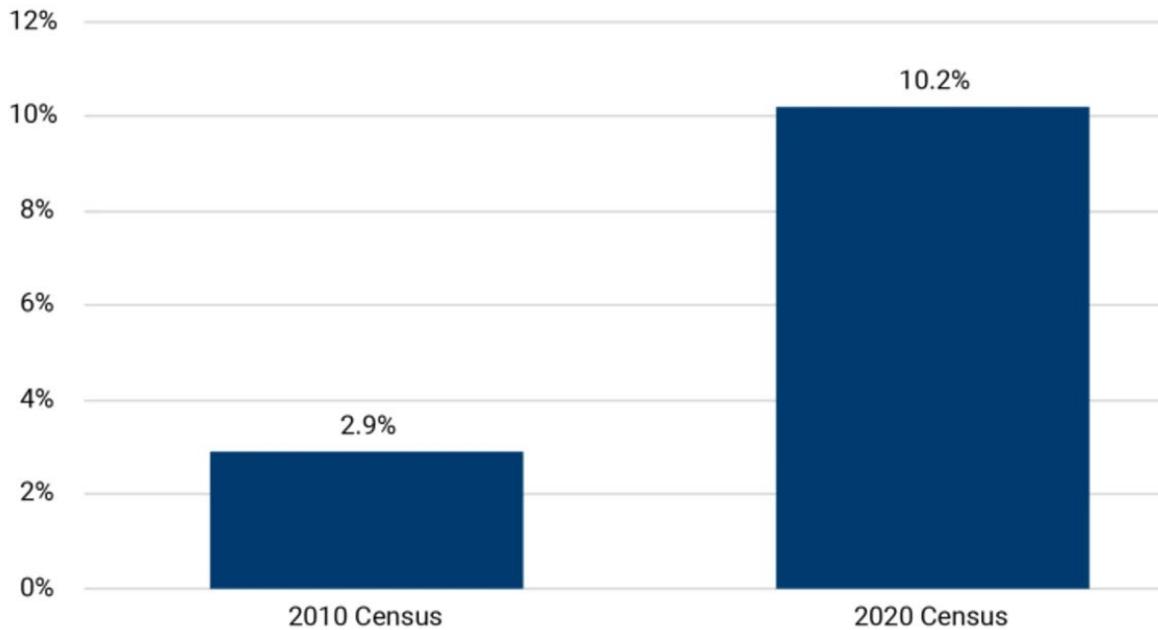
Clear about that?

The Brookings report says other countries have come up with different techniques for better measuring Indigenous populations.

“For example, both [Canada and Australia](#) ask about Indigenous identity in a separate census question, rather than as only one option among several races,” the report states. “Creating a separate question or questions to ask about Native American identity – with a write-in for tribal affiliation – in addition to the current racial question could be one way to begin delinking the concept of indigeneity from ‘race,’ as well as get a more accurate picture of the total Native American population,” Brookings said. The Minnesota Fed’s Center for Indian Country Development does this now with its [Native American Labor Market Dashboard](#).

FIGURE 3

Share of U.S. population classified as two-or-more races by Decennial Census



Source: Brookings analysis of Census Bureau data

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Another solution would be to invest in data sovereignty, the power of tribes to collect and calculate their information.

Maxim said an example is a [federal law called RECOMPETE](#), enacted in the last Congress. It's designed to provide resources to distressed economic communities and tribes can apply for the funding. But "part of the problem was it included a formula for how tribes can calculate their employment rate, but unfortunately, very few, if any, tribes have the data on hand to do that calculation. And so, you know, a big part of that is the federal government isn't providing the resources, the leeway, or the technical assistance for tribes to go ahead and do that."

He said another alternative would be for tribes to be considered as a "co-equal branch of government" and thus have the same resources and capabilities as those other forms of government.

Then that comes back to the tension about race, ethnicity, and in the case of Indigenous peoples, citizenship.

“The problem comes from when you have a system that is predicated on federal recognition of tribes for them to be legitimate. And so that's really a tension, the idea of who gets counted as Native, who is enrolled in tribes,” Maxim said. “Today tribes absolutely should have sovereignty to define their own citizenship, but it's also important to recognize that a lot of the modern rules that tribes use for their own citizenship are based in inherently colonial structures.”

Meanwhile the OMB says it hopes to [revise Directive No. 15](#) by the summer of 2024.

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