



MLDC Research Areas

Definition of Diversity
Legal Implications
Outreach & Recruiting
Leadership & Training
Branching & Assignments
Promotion
Retention
Implementation & Accountability
Metrics
National Guard & Reserve

This issue paper aims to aid in the deliberations of the MLDC. It does not contain the recommendations of the MLDC.

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How We Define Race and Ethnicity Categories for MLDC Research

Abstract

In presenting data on race and ethnic origin, MLDC research will use a consistent format based on mutually exclusive categories. This presentation will facilitate comparisons across Services and with the population at large. Not all Services report their data this way, usually because their priority is to maintain consistency with their data from prior years. Thus, some of the data we present may look different from the Service presentations that commissioners receive.

When Service representatives and others brief the MLDC, they vary somewhat in how they present demographic data in terms of race and ethnic (i.e., Hispanic) origin. This can make those different briefings confusing and make it difficult to compare them. Consequently, MLDC research will report demographic data about race and ethnicity consistently for all five Services. Fortunately, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has created a system for federal agencies to use in collecting such data so it can be tabulated to meet such research needs.

This issue paper explains the OMB system and describes how the research staff will use it for the commission's demographic diversity research purposes. It also identifies potential problems in maintaining consistency and ways to resolve them.¹

How Does OMB Guide Federal Agencies in Defining Race and Ethnicity Categories?

The OMB maintains minimum standards for federal agencies to observe in collecting and reporting data on race and ethnic origin. These standards were developed and are occasionally updated by a broad interagency working group, supplemented by multiple

opportunities for input from both stakeholders and the public at large. The goal of this process is to meet all legislatively mandated uses for race and ethnicity information consistently across the federal government while simultaneously ensuring public cooperation with federal data collection.

In 1997, these standards were revised after a lengthy review and research process as follows:²

The standards have five categories for data on race: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and white. There are two categories for data on ethnicity: "Hispanic or Latino," and "Not Hispanic or Latino." . . . Respondents shall be offered the option of selecting one or more racial designations." (*Federal Register*, October 30, 1997)

The new option for reporting more than one race multiplied the opportunities for tabulating data on race and ethnicity.³ As a result, OMB extended its guidance on how agencies can tabulate the data they collect, depending on the purpose of these data. For MLDC purposes, the principal issue is whether to report data for each race, including its Hispanic component, or to report only the non-Hispanic portion of each race plus the Hispanic population as a whole.⁴

What Do We Propose to Use as Race and Ethnicity Categories for MLDC Research?

The military Services are subject to the current OMB directive that says that if agencies collect data based on both race and ethnicity (i.e., Hispanic origin), they must report the number of respondents in each of the five race categories who are Hispanic or Latino. This provides the option of using mutually

exclusive race/ethnicity origin categories which enables us to calculate the proportion of the whole that each category represents—a basic diversity metric. That is, we can remove the Hispanic portion of each of the five race categories and present data for these non-Hispanic categories along with data for the separate Hispanic subgroup.

As OMB points out, “There may be instances where Hispanic respondents only answer the ethnicity question: ‘in these cases you will have information on the number that reported only “Hispanic or Latino”.’” Put another way, in these cases, there is no specific “race” information. This is not a problem for demographic diversity purposes, since we focus on people who report a non-white race **or** Hispanic origin. Thus, using mutually exclusive categories avoids the problem of Hispanics who do not also specify a race.

For MLDC reports, we plan to use the following categories for data on race and ethnic origin:

- White non-Hispanic
- Black non-Hispanic
- Asian non-Hispanic
- Other non-Hispanic (includes American Indians, Pacific Islanders, Alaska natives, and “more than one race”)
- Hispanic.

This set of categories is standard for demographic diversity research because it clearly separates the traditional majority group from the groups that are the focus of the research activity.⁵ It is particularly useful for making comparisons across populations, such as comparing military recruits with the population of recruiting age, as it only counts each person once (rather than counting Hispanics twice—once as Hispanic and once according to the race they report). In addition, this set of categories is most likely to harmonize with the ones chosen by civilian agencies whose data may be useful.

What Are Some Potential Problems in Maintaining Consistency with These Categorizations, and How Do We Propose to Address Them?

In certain circumstances, it may be necessary to deviate from the given set of categories. The most common circumstance occurs when the data being studied do not contain enough members of particular population groups to allow the use of statistical techniques to analyze how they differ from larger groups or the majority or how they change over time. This is why researchers generally create an “Other non-Hispanic” category for American Indians and other small groups.

Because military leaders as a whole account for a small share of the military Services as a whole, small numbers may lead us to include Asians, Hispanics, or blacks in that “Other non-Hispanic” group for some detailed analyses (i.e., other than for creating simple portraits).

This problem is compounded by individuals who do not report either a race or ethnic origin and are, thus, identified as

“unknown.” Without a survey asking why they failed to self-report, we can only speculate about their reasons. However, we know from research conducted in developing the 1997 OMB standards that many people do not see themselves in the categories they are offered. Some people feel they have multiple identities and are reluctant to choose among them. (For example, when Tiger Woods first won the Masters’ golf tournament, he identified himself as “CaBIInAsian.”) We also know that others say that such data collection is divisive and that “American” is the only category the government should care about.

OMB revises the categories when enough people do not identify with the choices they are offered to limit the value of the data as a whole. In the meantime, researchers can include or exclude “unknown” from their analysis, depending on the research goal. For the MLDC, we may want to follow both practices, at least initially.

Conclusion

The military Services collect data on race and ethnic origin in such a way that we can use mutually exclusive categories, thus facilitating comparisons across Services and with the population at large. However, not all Services report their data this way. Thus, some of the data we present may look different from Service presentations.

Notes

¹A good brief source for this information is Appendix A of “Provisional Guidance on the Implementation of the 1997 Standards for Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity (December 15, 2000).” It can be found under “Data on Race and Ethnicity” at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/inforeg/statpolicy.aspx#dr>

²An important aspect of the research was testing new question and category wording to make sure that people would respond in the way the question designers intended. For example, during the 1980s and 1990s, advocates asked the Census Bureau to remove the word “Negro” from the decennial census in favor of “black” and/or “African-American”; however, research found that older people in certain parts of the country were less likely to check the category if the word “Negro” were not there. The research also found differences in responses to “black” versus “African-American.” In short, a data collection system based on self-reporting is ineffective unless people see their self-identity reflected in the terminology.

³Specifically, there are 63 possible combinations of race: six categories for those who report exactly one race and 57 categories for those who report two or more races. Each of these 63 combinations can then be subdivided into Hispanic and non-Hispanic categories.

⁴Since Hispanics tend to choose “white” when they are asked to choose a race, the former option tends to enlarge the “white” population substantially, relative to other populations.

⁵Generally, when military Services do not follow this option, it is because they want to maintain consistency with their previous practices.