



Race and Ethnicity In the 2020 Census: Self-Identification or Classification?

This report delves into the implications of the 2020 Census's revised approach to collecting and processing race and ethnicity data. This methodological change, entailing the reclassification of respondents based on their origin, resulted in substantial growth in the "two or more races" category. Executed without respondents' consent, the reclassification distorts demographic analysis and undermines the reliability of Census data. The City of Boston has filed an official complaint to the US Census Bureau protesting this race reclassification scheme.

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Race and Ethnicity in the 2020 Census

The 2020 Census made changes to the collection and processing of race and ethnicity data which undermine the principle of self-identification and have led to large increases in the “two or more races” categories independent of actual demographic or cultural changes in the population. These changes have particular implications for Massachusetts Cape Verdean and Brazilian communities.¹

The Census Bureau has collected data on the U.S. population’s race since the first decennial census in 1790. The 1960 Census was the first to let people identify their own racial category, rather than have it determined by the observation of census-takers. A question about Hispanic or Latino origin was added with the 1970 Decennial Census.

Since 2000, the Census has followed the 1997 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidelines² which set minimum categories for data on race and ethnicity for Federal statistics, program administrative reporting, and civil rights compliance reporting defined as follows:³

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.

Hispanic or Latino - A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.

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.

The 2000 Census was also the first to allow respondents to select more than one race or to select a “some other race” category.^{4,5}

On the 2020 Census form, a person first marked an ethnicity defined by Hispanic or Latino origin (See **Figure 1**).

Next, a person marked one or more races:

1. White,
2. Black or African American,
3. American Indian or Alaska Native,
4. Asian,
5. Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian,
6. Some other race.

Any combination of these races created the two or more races category that the Census Bureau coded (See **Figure 2**).

The Census Bureau considered extensive changes to its ethnicity and race methodology in 2020, including combining these questions. However, in the end, the Census Bureau made only seemingly minor changes to the design of these questions.

In the first of these changes, the Census Bureau added dedicated write-in response areas and examples of a person's origin for the White and the Black or African American categories.

In addition, the Census Bureau changed the write-in instructions for the "Some other race" category from "Print race" to "Print race or origin." The additional text boxes for write-in responses may have increased the number of people reported as having two or more races and decreased the White and Black alone populations as described in following sections.

FIGURE 1

2020 Census Hispanic Origin Question

→ **NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 6 about Hispanic origin and Question 7 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.**

6. Is this person of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

- No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
- Yes, Puerto Rican
- Yes, Cuban
- Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – *Print, for example, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc.* ↴

FIGURE 2

2020 Census Race Question

7. What is this person's race?

Mark one or more boxes **AND** print origins.

- White – *Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc.* ↴

- Black or African Am. – *Print, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc.* ↴

- American Indian or Alaska Native – *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc.* ↴

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese | <input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese | <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Filipino | <input type="checkbox"/> Korean | <input type="checkbox"/> Samoan |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asian Indian | <input type="checkbox"/> Japanese | <input type="checkbox"/> Chamorro |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other Asian – <i>Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc.</i> ↴ | <input type="checkbox"/> Other Pacific Islander – <i>Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc.</i> ↴ | |

- Some other race – *Print race or origin.* ↴

TABLE 1

Massachusetts Population by Race/Ethnicity 2010, 2020

	2010	2020
Non-Hispanic	5,919,975	6,142,232
White Alone	4,984,800	4,748,897
Black/African-American Alone	391,693	457,055
Asian/Pacific Islander (PI) Alone	348,962	506,507
American Indian and Alaska Native Alone	10,778	9,387
Some Other Race Alone	61,547	92,108
Two or More Races	122,195	328,278
Black/African American; Some Other Race	9,900	44,127
White; Asian/PI	32,983	58,299
White; Black/African American	30,780	49,087
White; Some Other Race	12,467	107,699
Other Two or More Races Combinations	36,065	69,066
Hispanic	627,654	887,685
Hispanic, not identifying as Black	566,232	792,085
Hispanic, identifying as Black (Alone or in combination)	61,422	95,600

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 and 2020, BPDA Research Division Analysis

The race/ethnicity data in **Table 1** show non-Hispanics reported as having two or more races almost *tripling* from the 2010 Census to the 2020 Census. The largest increases were in the Black or African American; Some Other Race category which increased fourfold and the White; Some Other Race category which increased by almost ninefold - rates which are not feasible through demographic or cultural change alone.

These seemingly dramatic demographic shifts appear to be mostly the result of the Census reclassification of Massachusetts residents. The addition of write-in boxes for "origins" under the White and Black/African American race boxes led the U.S. Census Bureau to reassign respondents to another or an additional racial category

if their origin responses did not conform to Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidelines used by the Census. The OMB assigns most countries of origin in the world to a particular race, a practice rooted in the idea that one cannot claim origin from a country if one is not part of that country's majority race.

Spanish-speaking countries are not assigned to a race but are assigned to an ethnicity - Hispanic - and put in the "some other race" category. Brazil and Cape Verde are on the short list of countries that do not have an assigned race or ethnicity, but rather are assigned automatically to "some other race," in effect making an origin from either country a race of its own.

This race (re)classification problem is especially acute in Massachusetts with our large Brazilian and Cape Verdean populations.

Brazilians and Cape Verdeans in the 2020 Census

Massachusetts is home to 100,660 Brazilians (19 percent of the U.S. Brazilian population) and 70,314 Cape Verdeans (62 percent of the U.S. Cape Verdean population) according to the 2020 Census. Boston alone has 3,448 Brazilians and 13,668 Cape Verdeans. Brazilians make up 0.5 percent and Cape Verdeans make up 2 percent of Boston's population. Cape Verdeans make up 19 percent of the population of Brockton and 10 percent of New Bedford. Brazilians make up 12 percent of the populations of both Framingham and Everett.

The Census states that "since Brazilians [and Cape Verdeans] are not defined within the OMB definitions, they are not reclassified as one of the OMB race groups and remain as a distinct, detailed response within some other race."⁶ This means that any respondent who writes in "Brazilian" or "Cape Verdean" in any of the write-in blanks is assigned to the "some other race" category. For example, a respondent who checks the "White" box and writes in "Brazilian" is categorized as Two or More Races: White; Some Other Race. A respondent who checks the "Black" box and writes in "Cape Verdean" is categorized as Two or More Races: Black; Some Other Race.

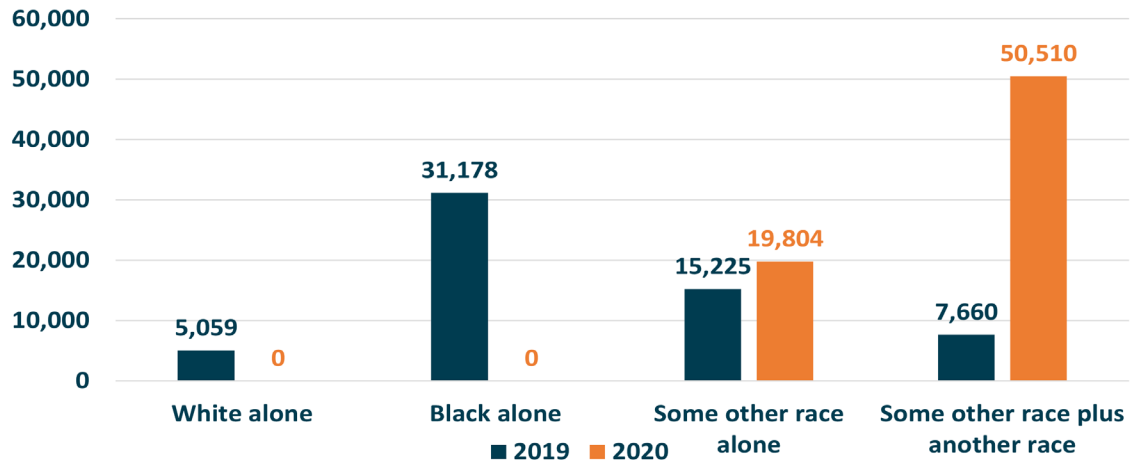
There is ample evidence that many Cape Verdeans had, and are having, their self-reported identifications changed by the Census Bureau under the new race classification system. In the 2019 American Community Survey (under the old methodology), 52 percent of Cape Verdeans in Massachusetts identified as Black alone.⁷ In the 2020 Census (new methodology), nobody who claimed Cape Verdean origin identified as Black alone, because they were not allowed to - if they tried to self-identify as Black alone, their responses were changed to "two or more races: Black + some other race". In the 2020 Census, approximately 19,804 Cape Verdean residents identified themselves as "some other race" while 50,510 Cape Verdean residents were classified as two or more races including "some other race".

Figure 3 shows the racial classification of Cape Verdeans in Massachusetts in 2019 and 2020. It appears that in 2020 approximately 40,000 Cape Verdean residents had their racial self-identification changed from White alone or Black alone to a multiracial "some other race" category without their knowledge or consent.

Brazilian respondents faced a similar situation in the 2020 Census. Under the older methodology used in the 2019 ACS, 72 percent of Brazilians in Massachusetts identified as White alone.

FIGURE 3

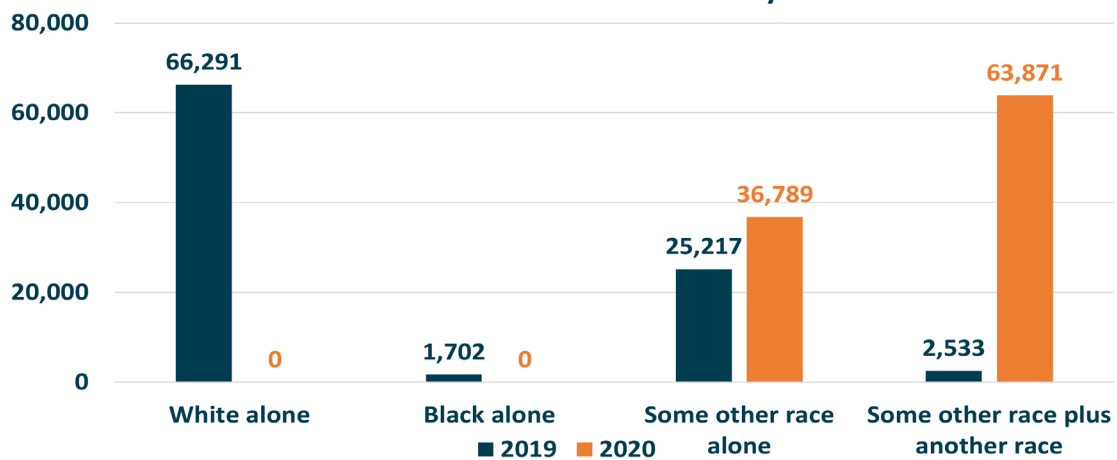
Cape Verdeans in Massachusetts by Race



Source: 2019 American Community Survey (PUMS) and 2020 Decennial Census, BPDA Research Division Analysis

FIGURE 4

Brazilians in Massachusetts by Race



Source: 2019 American Community Survey (PUMS) and 2020 Decennial Census, BPDA Research Division Analysis

Under the new reclassification system of the 2020 Census, nobody who claimed Brazilian origin identified as White alone, because they were not allowed to - if they tried to self-identify as White alone, their responses were changed to "two or more races: White + some other race".

Figure 4 shows the racial classification of Brazilians in Massachusetts in 2019 and 2020. In 2020, Brazilians were effectively "othered" by Census policies that assigned them to the "some other race" category regardless of their self-identification.

Conclusion

This reclassification methodology is ongoing, being used in the annual American Community Surveys administered by the U.S. Census beginning in 2021.

Reclassification is not only disrespectful to the individuals involved, it also causes confusion and misunderstanding as to demographic and migration patterns.

Much has been made of the increase in the multiracial population of the United States in the 2020 Census as a sign of the nation's increasing diversity. However, some of this increase likely

comes from reclassification rather than from actual demographic or cultural shifts in racial self-identification.

Changing people's self-identification to conform to OMB guidelines - unbeknownst to most people - significantly distorts our understanding of the population and undermines the usefulness and trustworthiness of Census data.

Endnotes

¹ https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/10/2020-census-dhc-a-some-other-race-population.html?utm_campaign=20231024msacos1ccstors&utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery

² https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/omb/fed-reg_1997standards

³ www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-1997-10-30/pdf/97-28653.pdf

⁴ <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/de-cennial/2000/briefs/c2kbr01-01.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.congress.gov/108/plaws/publ447/PLAW-108publ447.pdf>

⁶ <https://www2.census.gov/about/training-workshops/2020/2020-02-19-pop-transcript.pdf>, p. 15

⁷ In the 2019 ACS, "Cape Verdeans" and "Brazilians" are identified through a separate ancestry/ethnic origin question, not through the race question.

