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HOW SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT MEASURE THE CHANGING FACE OF AMERICA?

New Public Policy Brief Examines Racial Classification, American Intermarriage, and Proposed Changes to Census Bureau Survey

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y.--The great American melting pot is creating a dilemma for the Census Bureau. Increasing racial intermarriage is forcing the government to rethink the way it classifies race and measures the nation's racial distribution. How the Office of Management and Budget resolves this issue will have major implications for civil rights law, public policy, and the ongoing national debate about race.

In his new Levy Institute Public Policy Brief, *Reflecting the Changing Face of America*, Senior Scholar Joel Perlmann examines the controversial issues surrounding this debate and makes the case for permitting people to list more than one race on Census Bureau survey forms, rather than adding a single "multiracial" checkoff. He also considers the methods that might be used to count these new data and their long-term significance.

The Census Bureau currently allows survey respondents to list multiple ethnic ancestries, but the question on race instructs them to "mark one only" racial category. This methodology ignores the reality of racial intermarriage in American society and produces an inaccurate picture of America's current and future racial composition, according to Perlmann.

"Races should be seen as ethnic groups who were treated in very distinctive ways in American history," Perlmann says. He asserts that racial intermarriage should be viewed in the same light as ethnic intermarriage.

The Census Bureau should count race in the same way that it counts ethnicity, using the same method of self-identification and allowing respondents to mark more than one racial category, while still taking into consideration the importance of racial statistics to civil rights laws, Perlmann contends. "To do otherwise is to deny that interracial marriages exist, which by implication would encourage the dishonest and destructive message that members of different races do not 'normally' intermarry," he says.

"If racial barriers are to be broken down, racial intermarriage should be treated in the same

matter-of-fact way that any other form of ethnic intermarriage is treated, while ensuring that civil rights legislation, which rests on clear counts of racial membership, is not hobbled by ambiguities."

One of the key civil rights concerns raised by the proposed census changes is that by permitting multiple responses to the race question, the numbers of minority group members might be reduced, weakening the range of situations in which violations of civil rights can be tried. But Perlmann argues that legislation involving the status of a single individual, such as eligibility for affirmative action, should not be significantly affected because precedents set by past judicial decisions on the eligibility of multiracial individuals for admission to educational institutions, job-training programs, employment, and set-aside contracts will continue to have legal standing.

Another concern is the impact on voting rights legislation and other legislation that is directly dependent on the census count of the racial mix in local areas. This will depend largely on how the Census Bureau actually counts the responses to its survey. Perlmann suggests that an "all-inclusive" approach that counts respondents as members of all of the groups they check would satisfy most concerns about recognition of multiraciality, accuracy and efficiency of counts, and the political consequences of those counts.

He also suggests adopting a ceiling for short-term changes to insure that new counting methods do not cause a dramatic disruption. "Even though changes in the count will probably not be large, the provision for a ceiling might be reassuring," he says.

He takes particular issue with Census Bureau forecasts of America's future racial makeup, noting that such projections have been based on the bizarre assumption that there will be no further intermixing of peoples across racial lines. "Without the recognition of racial intermarriage and changes in our system for counting multiracial people, such forecasts are of little use and could in fact be harmful by conveying an inaccurate view of our cultural future," contends Perlmann.

"Our present system of classifying races has been constructed on the principle that racial categories are immutable," Perlmann says. "Continued use of such a principle is no way to end a racist legacy and no way to think realistically about our present and future society."

[Public Policy Brief No. 35, *Reflecting the Changing Face of America, Multiracials, Racial Classification, and American Intermarriage*, 1997](#)

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