Published in final edited form as:

Ann Am Acad Pol Soc Sci. 2018 May ; 677(1): 180–190. doi:10.1177/0002716218766276.

Counting America's First Peoples

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Abstract

The descendants of the First Peoples of the Americas (labeled “American Indians and Alaska Natives” in the federal definition) are a particularly challenging group to count in censuses. In this review, I describe some enumeration issues and then outline what we have learned about American Indians and Alaska Natives from efforts that rely on individuals’ answers to census questions on race, ancestry, ethnicity, and tribe. Those who do not report a tribe and those who change their race response from one census to another complicate these efforts. Tribal self-enumeration and indigenous data sovereignty may improve data about some portions of the population. Census and survey enumeration efforts should continue to separate the concepts of race, ancestry, and tribe lest the various sub-populations become indistinguishable in the data, making the data much less useful and possibly misleading.

Keywords

American Indians and Alaska Natives; U.S. Census; Self-Identification; Tribe; Indigenous

American Indians and Alaska Native (AIAN) people have proven difficult to count in surveys and censuses (Lujan 2014). In this review, I describe some issues that have caused these difficulties and then outline what we do know based on some of the best available data – census data. Tribes’ self-enumerations could meet some of the challenges if done with sufficient resources, though a substantial proportion of self-identified AIANs would be excluded from such efforts. I end by offering some suggestions for future endeavors to enumerate this important population, including the prioritization of indigenous data sovereignty and the importance of distinguishing between concepts of race, ancestry, and tribe.

Who is “American Indian/Alaska Native”?

Which individuals should be included in a count of “American Indian and Alaska Natives”? This philosophical question has a variety of answers – I have illustrated some of the possibilities in Figure 1.¹ Some definitions start with excluding people who have no AIAN ancestors, then add stipulations from there. For example, the current federal definition of who is included in the “American Indian/Alaska Native” group is “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and

¹See Lujan (2104, 324) for additional ways to answer: “Who is AIAN?” See Roth (2016) for a broader discussion of dimensions of race and ethnicity.

who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment.” (Office of Management and Budget 1997, 58789).”

Some definitions of who is AIAN start with the principle of self-identification, which means that an American Indian/Alaska Native is a person who reports being American Indian and/or Alaska Native (in a race question or perhaps an ancestry question). A corollary of the principle of self-definition is that individuals should be able (though not required) to report their full self-definition, including multiple races, multiple ancestries, multiple tribes, and both Hispanic and non-Hispanic origins. Relatedly, they should have the freedom to change their response(s) over time if they change how they see themselves or revise their understanding of which answers best describe them.

Because American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and their members have unique political status (i.e., government-to-government relationship with the United States; see Lujan 2014), some definitions of AIAN include only enrolled members of federally recognized tribes. This definition includes only a small portion of AIANs (Thornton 1997). For example, it excludes individuals with American Indian ancestors who have missing family tree information or who have ancestors from a variety of tribes, bands, or villages. Many tribes require a minimum number of ancestors (“blood quantum”) from that band of that tribe for enrollment. In most cases, proving ancestors’ pedigree involves finding them on a list (e.g., Dawes Rolls²) that was collected at a time when registering on a government list might not have seemed like a wise idea (late 1800s and early 1900s, just after the Indian Wars). Another excluding factor is the federal government’s long and involved process for federal recognition, which not all tribes have navigated.³

Challenges to Counting American Indians

Once a definition of “American Indian/Alaska Native” is chosen, the task of finding out about this population can begin. It is important to understand AIAN enumeration issues⁴ so that this fundamentally important group can be equitably included in studies and the public eye. High quality enumeration and inclusion in studies generates useful and appropriate information for tribal, state, and federal policies. Analysts often leave AIANs out of analyses because they are a relatively small group that can be difficult to count, but AIAN people should not be left out of analyses simply for the convenience of the analyst. Below I outline some of the more obvious challenges to counting gathering high-quality information about AIAN people.

Challenge: A deficit of trust and shared resources

North American history abounds with examples of mistreatment of American Indian and Alaska Native individuals and tribes by federal and state governments and their representatives. Although mistreatment has usually been more subtle in the contemporary

²See <https://www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/dawes/tutorial/intro.html>

³<https://www.bia.gov/WhoWeAre/AS-IA/OFA/>

⁴NCAI highlights many data quality issues: <http://www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/initiatives/data-quality>.

period, federal and state governments continue to ignore many treaties and tribal rights. Mistrust remains.

In recent years, the Census Bureau has been enhancing its efforts to consult with AIAN people, tribes, and organizations (such as the National Congress of American Indians) about data collection efforts (Lujan 2014; U.S. Census Bureau n.d. and 2015); not all AIANs are enrolled in tribes, so a high-quality *census* enumeration of all AIANs remains important. However, as critics point out, these efforts do not change the fact that the federal government (not tribes) has almost exclusive decision-making power because it controls most of the financial resources for enumeration and tabulation. For example, as National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) pointed out, “there has not been a comprehensive federal effort to improve the capacity of tribes to use existing data or collect tribal demographic data” (NCAI 2016, 1). This imbalance limits tribes’ ability to act on their rights of sovereign self-determination. When or if a tribe has decision-making power, financial resources, and the trust of its members, it could potentially use its membership rolls, records, personal connections, and cultural competencies to find tribal members and encourage them to participate.

Challenge: Enumerator effects and location-related undercount

Because of the histories of tribal relocation and reservation placement, AIANs are overrepresented in very rural areas that pose challenges to standard U.S. census and survey enumeration strategies (Fallica et al. 2012; Walker et al. 2012). One challenge is that homes do not always have mailing addresses and so a census worker must travel to the homes (missing some, perhaps, especially if underfunded) even in the modern era. If a census worker helps the residents fill out the form, the interaction can affect how (and by whom) the questions are answered.

Most AIANs live outside of reservation areas and are rather dispersed in cities and suburbs (Keeler 2016; also see Iceland, Weinberg, and Steinmetz 2002). They are also a high-mobility group (see Lujan 2014). Without residential segregation as a clue, neighbors filling out a census form for a non-responsive household are relatively unlikely to report AIANs as such, and instead report them as a different race (Porter, Liebler, and Noon 2016). This dynamic adds to (and complicates) the general undercount of AIANs (Lujan 2014; Williams 2011).

Challenge: Soliciting and conveying meaningful answers on a questionnaire

A relatively high proportion of AIANs (by any definition) have mixed racial heritage (Snipp 1997) and have a wide variety of ways of reporting their identities, including using combinations of census questions on race, ancestry, tribal information, and Hispanic origins (Liebler 2010a; Snipp 1997).

Ancestry versus race—Because some people are “American Indian/Alaska Native” in one definition but not another, the wording of a question can make a substantial difference in who self-identifies as AIAN. Since 1980, the Census Bureau has been asking an ancestry question – “What is this person’s ancestry or ethnic origin?” – in addition to questions about

race and Hispanic ethnicity. In each census year, the number and characteristics of those who report AIAN ancestry are substantially different from those who report AIAN race (Liebler 2010a; Snipp 1997); the ancestry question is tapping a different concept than the race question. Because there are so many more people who identify as having AIAN ancestry than there are racially-identified AIAN (discussed further below), the two concepts should not be mixed when creating or using data on American Indians and Alaska Natives.

Tribal affiliation or community attachment—Some concepts cannot be well-captured in a questionnaire, such as the idea of “maintaining community attachment” from the federal definition (What does “attachment” mean? How much and what kind of maintenance are enough?). At the same time, a tribal identity is an important part of many people’s AIAN identity because language, symbols, history, and traditions vary by tribe, band, and village. Also, tribes are important because tribal sovereignty underlies the legal / political dimension of AIAN identity (see Robertson 2013).⁵

Despite the general importance of tribe for American Indian/Alaska Native identity, a substantial number and increasing proportion of racially-identified AIANs do not report any tribal affiliation on the census. In Figure 2, I show the number of people reporting AIAN race in the census for the five censuses that included a tribal affiliation sub-question within the race question (1970–2010).⁶ In 2010, about one-third of people who reported American Indian race did not give any answer at all in the boxes set aside for the respondent to “Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.”⁷ As non-response increases, the usefulness of the information declines because the tribe information that *is* provided is from a non-random subsample of the total set of people affiliated with one or more tribes. See Liebler (2004) and Liebler and Zacher (2012) for more on tribal non-response.

Challenge: Race response change among people who ever report AIAN race

People (in all race groups) do not always keep the same race response for their entire lives (e.g., Harris and Sim 2002; Doyle and Kao 2007; Liebler et al. 2017). Thus, the set of individuals who self-identify as AIAN changes over time.⁸ Response change into, and probably out of, the AIAN race response group has been going on for decades (e.g., Eschbach 1993; Liebler, Bhaskar, and Porter 2016; Liebler and Ortyl 2014; Passel 1976, 1997). Race response change can be seen even in cross-sectional data by comparing the number of people in one age/sex group to that same group a decade later (and 10 years older). For example, there were about 174,000 AIAN boys ages 10–19 in the 1980 census and, instead of this number decreasing due to deaths, ten years later there were about 181,000 AIAN men ages 20–29. Another decade later there were about 325,000 single- or

⁵The National Congress of American Indians objected to a potential census question about tribal enrollment in part because of issues of tribal sovereignty; see NCAI (2016).

⁶The wording of the race question has changed over the period (starting in 2000: inviting multiple race responses and AIAN identification by Central and South American indigenous people), and the tribal affiliation sub-question has also changed wording.

⁷This research was conducted in the Minnesota Research Data Center (NSF SES-0851417) with restricted-use data. Any opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Census Bureau. All results have been reviewed to ensure that no confidential information is disclosed.

⁸When American Indians were first included in censuses (mid-1800s), the race reported for those with mixed white and American Indian heritage depended on where the person lived (with whites or with American Indians). See Lujan 2014.

multiple-race⁹ AIAN men ages 30–39 (see Liebler and Ortyl (2014) for more 1990 to 2000 comparisons). This is an 86 percent net increase in population.

Because census data are cross-sectional unless linked post hoc, the amount of response change for the AIAN race response category was unknown until recently and is still being explored. Research using linked 2000 to 2010 census data shows that response change is more common among people who ever report AIAN race than it is among the larger race groups (Liebler et al. 2017). A person reported as single-race AIAN in 2000 or 2010 is often reported as multiple-race AIAN or reported as a different single-race (usually white if they reported being non-Hispanic, and Some Other Race if they reported Hispanic origins) in the other year (Liebler, Bhaskar, and Porter 2016). Countervailing flows of response changes are similar in size, which hides them in single-year data (Liebler et al. 2016, 2017). This means that comparing characteristics of the AIAN population in 2000 to the AIAN population in 2010 is like comparing the population of Minneapolis in 2000 to that in 2010 – it is not safe to presume that you are comparing the same set of people. Some will be new and some will have left through processes of birth, in-migration, death, and out-migration. In the AIAN case, the in- and out-migrations are “mental migration” in the form of response change.

What the census data do tell us about American Indian and Alaska Natives

The most comprehensive data available on American Indian and Alaska Natives is from the U.S. Census, which has (separate) race, ancestry, tribe, and Hispanic ethnicity questions. Like all federally-defined race groups, AIANs (as delineated by the census questions) are a diverse set of individuals. The various population subsets have substantially different average characteristics, which reveal different experiences and needs.

What we know from the intersection of race question responses and ancestry question responses

Research shows that people report their AIAN origins differently depending on whether they think they are being asked about their ancestry or their race. Many more people report AIAN ancestry than AIAN race. The number of people reporting AIAN race almost tripled between 1980 and 2000, growing from 1.539 million to 1.999 million to 4.319 million. In the same censuses, the number of people who reported AIAN ancestry but *not* AIAN race remained over 5 million (up to 7.1 million in 1990; see Liebler 2010a and Gullickson and Morning 2011). To give a more specific example: there were about 541,000 boys ages 10–19 in the 1980 census who were reported as having AIAN ancestry but a non-AIAN race – more than three times as many as were reported with AIAN race (about 174,000). With such a large population of ancestrally-identified AIAN people relative to the racially-identified population, even a small misunderstanding of race or ancestry question intentions could have serious consequences for data quality and usability to the extent that the ancestrally-identified population is different than the racially-identified population in substantively important ways.

⁹A person who was reported as AIAN in 1990 could have reported single-race or multiple-race AIAN, or a different race entirely, in 2000; see Liebler and Ortyl (2014).

This is indeed the case. Snipp (1989) and Liebler (2010a) have studied the intersection of AIAN race and ancestry responses in censuses, comparing, for example, the number and characteristics of people who report AIAN race to the number and characteristics of those who report AIAN ancestry but a different race (usually white or black). Both researchers showed clear, significant differences between groups. Ancestrally-identified AIANs are, for example, more urban, more educated, and have higher incomes than racially-identified AIANs in 1980–2000 (Liebler 2010a; Snipp 1989).

Another complexity involves the identity and self-identification of people with parents of different races. One might assume they would be reported as multiple-race. However, the federal definition prioritizes self-definition and the choice of how to report race and ancestry to the Census Bureau is in the hands of individuals and families. Using decennial census data from 1960 through 2010, I found that children of an AIAN parent and a non-AIAN parent were very likely to be reported as having one race and a consistent ancestry (AIAN *or* white *or* black), as opposed to being reported as multiple-race or one race and another ancestry (Liebler 2016). This pattern was distinct from patterns of identification for children in other interracial families.¹⁰

What we know from the intersection of race question responses and Hispanic ethnicity question responses

Hispanic AIANs are a small but growing group – they were six percent of the AIAN population in 1990 and 10 percent in 2000 (Liebler and Ortyl 2014, Table S1). Some Hispanic AIANs are connected to indigenous communities in Spanish-speaking countries in South or Central America (Fox and Rivero-Salgado 2004). Others are descendants of mixed unions between Hispanics and American Indians, whether long ago or recently. Previous research has not disaggregated these or other sub-populations of Hispanic AIANs.

Response change is an important issue when looking at data for Hispanic AIANs. In 2000, the Hispanic AIAN population size was two and a half times the expected size based on 1990 data – the largest increase in any race/ethnic group (Liebler and Ortyl 2014, Table S1). Linked 2000–2010 census data shows that Hispanic AIANs were much more likely than non-Hispanic AIANs to change their race response across years (usually to/from Hispanic white or Hispanic Some Other Race; Liebler, Bhaskar, and Porter 2016).

What we know from the tribe sub-question response and non-response

AIANs have had a sub-question within the race question since 1970, asking (with varying wording) for their enrolled or principal tribe. The Census Bureau has tabulated tribe data with varying detail over the decades, although not all people answer this question, as Figure 2 (above) illustrates. Most recently, a very detailed list of tribes has been publicly available for one subset of people – those who report only AIAN race and only one tribe. If the person reported multiple races or multiple tribes, detail is available in restricted-use microdata and in public pre-made tables.

¹⁰Note that other interracial families have often used the ancestry and race questions together to report a child as mixed-heritage, both before and during the era when multiple race responses were invited (Liebler 2016).

Beyond its usefulness in terms of content, knowing whether an AIAN person answered the tribal affiliation question allows a more nuanced understanding of sub-populations within the population of racially-identified AIAN people. My research results show that there is benefit of asking the tribal affiliation question because of how it helps disaggregate the AIAN population. This benefit is in addition to the cost/benefit of recording and reporting tribal response detail in a way that is useful for tribes and other policy-making bodies.

Giving any answer at all to the tribal affiliation question is correlated with other indicators of a connection or “thick ties” to AIAN communities (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). For example, I found that in the 1990 Census, a response was more common among American Indian and Alaska Natives who spoke an AIAN language or lived in a state with a long-standing, large number of AIANs (Liebler 2004; Liebler and Zacher 2012). Interracially married AIANs who reported a tribe were more likely to report their mixed-heritage children as single-race AIAN in 2000 (Liebler 2010b). Also, those who reported a tribe were more likely to give the same race response in both 2000 and 2010 (Liebler, Bhaskar, and Porter 2016).

Non-response to the tribe question in 1990 was most common for “Hispanic women with low education who report no American Indian ancestry, do not live with other American Indians, and live in a metropolitan area of a ‘non-Indian state’” (Liebler 2004, 310). The 2000 census shows similar results (Liebler and Zacher 2012). Other factors predictive of tribal non-response are associated with survey item non-response that undermines all fill-in-the-blank questions (e.g., urban, large household, very old person, and/or uses a non-English language).

Better counts of American Indians

The issues outlined here (and others discussed by Lujan 2014) might be addressed in a few ways. With training and resources, tribes could undertake high-quality censuses of the people in their populations. This would give a clear delineation of the population (e.g., tribal members, their households, and their descendants) and would presumably address many undercount issues. AIAN data sovereignty¹¹ would be increased if AIAN individuals and tribes had more control over how data are collected and owned, as well as access and support for research projects (see Kukutai and Taylor 2016). For example, outsiders collecting data on tribal land should partner with tribes from the outset of data collection efforts (at the design stage) to assure that data collected for tribes are maximally useful to tribes themselves, then be sure that ethical data access is arranged.

Within a project such as the census – one that has broad coverage and inclusive conceptions of “who is AIAN” – conceptualization and question wording are important for understanding and disaggregating the populations involved. There should be a clear separation between the concepts of race, ancestry, and tribal affiliation so that people with AIAN origins can figure out how to convey their self-identification clearly.

¹¹New organizations intended to support indigenous data sovereignty have been founded recently, for example US Indigenous Data Sovereignty Network hosted by the University of Arizona, and the International Indigenous Data Sovereignty Interest Group within the Research Data Alliance.

For both scientific and ethical reasons, researchers working with these data should work through complexities involved in defining the population and analysis of small population sizes so that they can include AIAN respondents in their research results. Excluding a subpopulation gives an incomplete picture of a social situation and unfairly removes the opportunity for the group to benefit from the results of the study. American Indians and Alaska Natives deserve full inclusion in the benefits of census enumeration (e.g., allocated funds) and studies aimed at understanding or improving society. With attention to questionnaire details and cooperation with the people themselves, we can make great progress in this direction.

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Biography

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Figure 1.
Who is “American Indian/Alaska Native”?

Figure 2.

Among those who report AIAN race, reporting a tribal affiliation is not guaranteed

* Note: Tribal non-response is less common among single-race respondents than multiple-race respondents (18% versus 30% in 2000 and 29% versus 37% in 2010).