

Pacific Islander American Identity: The Racial Identification of People of Pacific Island Heritage

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Abstract

The 2000 Census of Population raises new challenges and opportunities for our understanding of the perception of racial identity among people of mixed ancestry. Traditionally, census enumeration forms have forced respondents to identify one specific “racial preference” for self identified race and ethnicity. In the most recent census this has changed and individuals are allowed to identify themselves as being of mixed or multiple racial backgrounds. The implementation of new OMB regulations that requires finer detail in the reporting of racial categories has also significantly broadened the array of information available to researchers. While the methodological challenges of organizing these new identities into consistent analytical categories is daunting, the opportunities presented by these mixed race categories represent the chance to greatly increase our understanding of racial and ethnic identity in the United States and how self identification correlates with social, economic and demographic outcomes.

One of the primary beneficiaries of these new research opportunities lies in our ability to examine Pacific Island populations in the United States. Despite the rapid changing demographic and socioeconomic impact of Pacific Islanders very little is understood about this group. This is in part due to their relatively small population size relative to other racial groups but more the result of historic patterns of racial classification for statistical purposes that have resulted in this population remaining one of the most understudied groups in the United States. This is unfortunate as this group suffers from significant unmet need in terms of service provision and so their economic impact on government services is disproportionately high due to poverty, under employment and low educational attainment.

Prior to the establishment of the new guidelines for measuring race and ethnicity by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Pacific Islanders (PI) were aggregated within the broader Asian American classification scheme. This grouping of Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders (API) created ongoing measurement problems due to the high level of heterogeneity within this category. In general, the lack of any consistent social, economic or genetic relationships between these groups suggests the combined category was the result of the need to put Pacific Islanders “somewhere”. With the new OMB Guidelines Pacific Islanders are no longer aggregated with Asian populations as a matter of policy and we are now able to take a look at this racial group as a distinct population.

The paper proposed for this session represents an element of an emerging body of work by the authors to understand patterns of racial identification among Pacific Islanders and to provide meaningful insight into the demographic characteristics of this

population. This is important given the level of heterogeneity within the Pacific Islander category and the unique combinations of ethnicities, culture, history and language that they represent. It is not unusual for Hawaiians to have Chinese, Japanese or European ancestries, Tongans and Samoans to have German or English ancestries and Fijians to have Indian, Chinese or English ancestries. It is still unclear how these mixtures correlate with other demographic characteristics (for example, race of parents, place of residence and language use) and lifecourse outcomes no less how they equate to an individual's perception of their identity as a Pacific Islander. Unfortunately, while ethnographers have written and theorized on issues of Pacific Island identity for some time, demographers and population researchers have lacked the data and information that would allow us to test how ethnicity and self identification translate into fertility behavior, educational and labor force outcomes, health and poverty. The new OMB guidelines for racial/ethnic categories finally present us with an opportunity to address these issues. The 2000 Census represents the first data set to provide detailed demographic information on the total Pacific Islander population as an independent racial category in sufficient numbers to allow for statistically meaningful results.

An initial examination of data now emerging from the Census Bureau has already shown that a high proportion of the Pacific Islander population report themselves as being from more than one race. In fact, they were the only race where the number of respondents reporting two or more races was actually higher than the number reporting a single race. This paper will provide a detailed analysis of the Native Hawaiian Other Pacific Islander population collected by the 2000 US Census. The paper will present findings on how Pacific Islanders identified themselves based on parental identification, ancestry, residential location and language use. Descriptive statistics illustrating the racial identification patterns for Pacific Islanders will be presented along with results of the logistic regression analysis to predict the racial identification of PIs of mixed race. This paper discusses the salient characteristics that are associated with multiethnic identities of Pacific Islander Americans and as such these findings will have applications to other studies of racial identity using the new mixed race categories.

Little is known about the lives of Pacific Island populations in the United States. This paper represents an important first step in a process that will lead to a greater understanding of this understudied population.