



August 12, 2024

The Honorable Robert Santos  
Director  
U.S. Census Bureau  
4600 Silver Hill Road  
Washington, DC 20233

Submitted via email: [acso.pra@census.gov](mailto:acso.pra@census.gov)

**RE: ACS SPD 15 (Docket Number: 240708-0186) (89 FR 57124)**

Dear Director Santos:

Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC (Advancing Justice | AAJC) is a national non-profit, non-partisan organization founded in 1991. For over thirty years, we have served as the leading Asian American voice on civil rights issues in our nation's capital. Our mission is to advance civil and human rights for Asian Americans and to build and promote a fair and equitable society for all.

Over the decades, we have worked to eliminate the barriers that have historically resulted in undercounting and underreporting (or otherwise inaccurate counting) of Asian Americans in federal data collection and analysis efforts, particularly in the decennial census count. Our permanent census program monitors census policy and educates policymakers—including through testifying at Congressional hearings. We conduct community outreach and education on the surveys conducted by the Census Bureau, including running nationwide Asian American-focused campaigns for Census 2000, Census 2010, and Census 2020. Advancing Justice | AAJC has also served as a member of numerous advisory committees to the Census Bureau since 2000. Most recently, we served on the National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic, and Other Populations, completing our second three-year term in August 2019. Additionally, Advancing Justice | AAJC currently co-chairs the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights' Census Task Force and serves as a co-coordinator of the Census Counts campaign.

Advancing Justice | AAJC considers a fair and accurate census and comprehensive American Community Survey among the most significant civil rights issues facing the country today. Our wide-ranging efforts to promote civic engagement, forge strong and safe communities, and create an inclusive society are guided significantly by objective, inclusive data on America's diverse communities and populations. We appreciate the importance of fact-based analyses and the need for disaggregated, detailed data on our community to identify disparate access and outcomes and devise effective solutions. To

that end, we provide the following feedback in response to the Federal Register Notice seeking comments on the implementation of the revised SPD 15 in the American Community Survey (ACS). This includes the need to ensure that the necessary research and testing is conducted before implementation in the ACS. We detail our concerns and provide recommendations related to the crosswalks, and conclude by stressing the importance of meaningful and effective public engagement on these issues.<sup>1</sup>

## **Overview**

OMB's release of its new, updated SPD 15 standards in March required the collection of further detail beyond the minimum categories, the use of one combined question to ask about race and ethnicity, and the inclusion of a Middle Eastern or North African category. This marked an important step forward, particularly in allowing for more disaggregated data on Asian American communities, who are among the fastest-growing and most diverse racial groups in the United States. Often viewed as homogenous, these communities include around 40 detailed subgroups that can differ dramatically across key social and economic indicators. For example, in the context of health disparities, U.S.-born Vietnamese American women are four times more likely to die of breast cancer than any other Asian American group. Korean American children are "four times more likely to have no health insurance as compared to others."<sup>2</sup> Data disaggregation is critical because it allows us to see these differences. When data are not disaggregated, broad trends can mask much more negative or nuanced outcomes for specific subgroups of people, leaving their needs and issues invisible and unmet.

Census data, including data from the ACS, are the building blocks for our society. They are the basis for reapportioning political representation and redistricting at all levels, informing effective and efficient policy and planning decisions, and distributing more than \$2.8 trillion in federal funds to the states during fiscal year 2021.<sup>3</sup> Without an accurate count of Asian Americans, policy and planning decisions will not address the needs of growing Asian American communities. As one of the few agencies that disaggregated data under the previous SPD 15 standards, census data—especially data from ACS—provide the most comprehensive set of socioeconomic data on Asian American communities. This is especially true for detailed subgroups. The updated SPD 15 standards provide greater opportunities to understand detailed subgroups for all race and ethnicity minimum categories. Moreover, the implementation of these revised standards to the ACS is an important moment to advance and modernize how our country collects and reports data on our communities. As a standard bearer for all federal agencies and other data collection

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<sup>1</sup> While these comments focus on the implementation of SPD 15 for the ACS from the perspective of Asian Americans, we recognize the considerations, concerns, and opportunities that face other communities including other communities of color. To that end, we lift up comments from the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights to which we signed on.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.pfizer.com/news/articles/health\\_disparities\\_among\\_asian\\_americans\\_and\\_pacific\\_islanders](https://www.pfizer.com/news/articles/health_disparities_among_asian_americans_and_pacific_islanders)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2023/dec/census-data-federal-funds.html>

entities, the Census Bureau must take the appropriate steps necessary to ensure that the implementation of SPD 15 addresses the needs of all communities.

### **Timing for ACS Implementation Hinges on Necessary Testing and Research**

The release of the updated SPD 15 standards was only the first step in the long-awaited modernization of our nation's race and ethnicity standards. It is the subsequent and substantive implementation of the revised SPD 15 standards that is instrumental to realizing the potential for the new standards.

A critical component of proper implementation is addressing the further research needed to better inform the implementation of the standards. This includes ensuring the detailed groups used will in fact elicit the best responses across all racial and ethnic groups, such as through proper signaling to the diverse set of detailed subgroups in each category.

OMB itself delineated further topics for research before the next review of the standards.<sup>4</sup> In their own words:

1. What data processing procedures, such as coding, editing, and imputation practices, maximize the comparability of data collected across the Federal Government when using different combined question formats, for example between collections with and without write-in fields.
2. How to encourage respondents to select multiple race and/or ethnicity categories when appropriate by enhancing question design and inclusive language, for example by researching methods for ensuring complete and accurate estimates of people who identify as Afro-Latino.
3. How to collect high quality and useful data related to descent from persons who were enslaved in the United States, including research on terminology, question design, data quality, and willingness to provide these data.
4. The optimal order of presentation for minimum categories, including research on rates of data entry error, burden, and respondent preference.
5. Collecting race and ethnicity consistently across different languages and translations of the question.
6. Evaluating the detailed checkboxes as demographics shift over time for their ability to generate useful, high-quality data.
7. How respondents interpret each of the SPD 15 categories and definitions, and the combined race and/or ethnicity question in general, along with potential modifications to minimum category names.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/03/29/2024-06469/revisions-to-ombs-statistical-policy-directive-no-15-standards-for-maintaining-collecting-and>

8. How to better align the AIAN category title with its definition while preserving data quality, for example by exploring the use of a more inclusive title such as “Indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Further, SPD 15 noted that “the detailed checkboxes and definition examples for the MENA category were selected to represent the largest population groups in the United States as reported by the 2020 Census. Although several commenters expressed interest in explicitly including Armenian, Somali, or Sudanese, the 2015 NCT [National Content Test] found that most respondents who identify as Armenian, Somali, and Sudanese did not select MENA when it was offered... Additional research is needed on these groups to monitor their preferred identification.”<sup>5</sup>

While some of the research topics will require multiple data collections over time, a number of these topics should be addressed prior to moving forward with implementation. In particular, this applies to research topics focused on racial and ethnic communities, such as the research topics related to Afro-Latinos and MENA communities, as well as transnational communities. Their ability to “find themselves” in the new categories and in the new question format cannot be pushed off into the future. Rather, these research topics should be addressed prior to moving forward with implementation.

While Asian Americans have had detailed checkboxes in previous ACS forms, it is worth noting that conducting this research is important to the community as well. Not only would the research help to ensure we are building a fair and equitable society for all, it would also inform a significant portion of our own community. The Census Bureau tells us that around 1 in 5 Asian Americans are multiracial.<sup>6</sup> Between the 2010 and 2020 census, the Asian alone population grew by 35.5% while the Asian in combination population grew by 55.5%.<sup>7</sup> Asian Latinos saw a 27.8% increase.<sup>8</sup> Further research should be conducted to ensure that the way SPD 15 standards are implemented allows respondents who identify across multiple racial and ethnic identities to understand how to respond to the combined question. The implementation of these standards must ensure all Asian American communities can see themselves in the limited space on a form or survey.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/03/29/2024-06469/revisions-to-ombs-statistical-policy-directive-no-15-standards-for-maintaining-collecting-and#citation-29-p22186>

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. *Supplementary Tables on Race and Hispanic Origin: 2020 Census Redistricting Data (P.L. 94-171)*. [Table 1. Population by Race: 2010 and 2020 \(census.gov\)](https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/data/redistricting-supplementary-tables/redistricting-supplementary-table-01.pdf). <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/data/redistricting-supplementary-tables/redistricting-supplementary-table-01.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. *Supplementary Tables on Race and Hispanic Origin: 2020 Census Redistricting Data (P.L. 94-171)*. [Table 2. Percentage of Population and Percent Change by Race: 2010 and 2020 \(census.gov\)](https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/data/redistricting-supplementary-tables/redistricting-supplementary-table-02.pdf). <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/data/redistricting-supplementary-tables/redistricting-supplementary-table-02.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. *Supplementary Tables on Race and Hispanic Origin: 2020 Census Redistricting Data (P.L. 94-171)*. [Table 4. Hispanic or Latino Origin by Race: 2010 and 2020 \(census.gov\)](https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/data/redistricting-supplementary-tables/redistricting-supplementary-table-04.pdf). <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/data/redistricting-supplementary-tables/redistricting-supplementary-table-04.pdf>

We are eager to see SPD 15 implemented as quickly as possible, yet we are also mindful that we must balance that desire for speed with the importance of getting the implementation of SPD 15 right. Our understanding is that much of the Census Bureau's implementation of SPD 15 for the ACS is based heavily on their findings during the 2015 NCT. And while that research effort was expansive, extensive, and fairly comprehensive, there were unaddressed research questions and new research questions that were raised by the 2015 NCT.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, that research is almost a decade old now, and our country's demographics are rapidly changing. It is imperative for the Bureau to update that research in order to move forward with implementing the new standards for the ACS.

We believe that the number one priority for effective implementation must be proper research and testing. The consideration of what is the appropriate timeline should center the importance of that work. To that extent, we recommend that the above testing and research be conducted immediately and prior to implementing the revised standards in the ACS. We believe that moving forward with implementation in the 2026 ACS would be ideal if that testing can be completed in time to inform the implementation. Utilizing the 2027 ACS for implementation would only be acceptable if that additional time were used to conduct the necessary further research to ensure the best responses are elicited from racial and ethnic communities. However, in the scenario in which no further research is conducted, we would expect to see the standards implemented in the 2026 ACS and for the Bureau to utilize those results to assess and address these important research topics.

### **Crosswalk Concerns and Recommendations**

The federal register notice mentions the production of 5-year estimates, which would require a specific crosswalk for all race and ethnicity categories to convert data collected under the 1997 version of SPD 15 to the updated race and ethnicity groups until there are five years of data collected in the updated format. At this point, a crosswalk of the data would no longer be needed. It is important that the bridging method used to create the crosswalk be properly calibrated to ensure racial and ethnic communities are correctly accounted for in the crosswalk products. Our understanding is that the Census Bureau intends to utilize Annex 6 to inform the bridging utilized for its crosswalks.<sup>10</sup>

We understand that Annex 6 is designed to be an initial framework for national level bridging of the minimum race and ethnicity categories. We anticipate Annex 6 to undergo further refinement and revisions moving forward as more data become available and more research is conducted. However, the current Annex 6 does not reflect the reclassification

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., [https://civilrights.org/edfund/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/03/CensusBureauResearchBriefing\\_Dir15Convening.pdf](https://civilrights.org/edfund/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/03/CensusBureauResearchBriefing_Dir15Convening.pdf) (referencing further testing needed in 2017 regarding revised instructions and data collection design for American Indian and Alaska Native category and revised detailed checkboxes and examples for Middle Eastern or North African category)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www2.census.gov/about/ombraceethnicityitwg/annex-6-itwg-bridging-team-methods-report.pdf>

of Central Asians (the largest of which would be Afghani, Tajik, and Uzbek Americans) from White in 2010 to Asian in 2020 Census race and ethnicity code lists.<sup>11</sup> The 2022 ACS 1-year data estimates that Central Asians were about 1.1% of the total Asian Alone population in the United States, with an estimated population of 223,649.

This is a concern because the proposed bridging would slightly underestimate the 2010 Census Asian population (as Central Asians would remain classified as White). Additionally, the 2020 Census Asian population would be slightly larger relative to the 2010 definitions (as Central Asians are now included as Asians). For example, the official Census numbers slightly overstate the growth of the Asian American population by 2 percentage points.

	Asian Alone	Percent Growth from 2010 – 2020
2010 Census (Central Asian classified as White)	14,674,252	
2020 Census with Central Asians (published number)	19,886,049	36%
2020 Census without Central Asians (estimated by AAJC)	19,697,114	34%

It is unclear whether the 2015 NCT, upon which Annex 6 heavily relies for the proportional bridging factors, has a large enough sample size to be able to create a proportional bridging for SPD 15 to account for the change in the coding for Central Asians. We suggest that the Census Bureau take the time to further research how to improve upon the bridging methods for the crosswalk, including perhaps relying on a combination of race, ancestry, and place of birth from the ACS to create bridging factors. The Detailed Race and Ethnicity Crosswalk: 2010 to 2020 included as part of the Technical Documentation for the 2020 Census Detailed Demographic and Housing Characteristics Files is a good starting point for the ACS crosswalk. However, the Census Bureau should use the additional ancestry and place of birth data available in the ACS files to fill in the many gaps in the Census crosswalk.<sup>12</sup> In any event, we recommend that the bridging methodology utilize the more expansive 2020 Census race and ethnicity code list that categorizes Central Asians as Asian and not White.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. *2020 Census Detailed Demographic and Housing Characteristics File A Technical Documentation. 2020 Census Hispanic Origin and Race Code List*. Downloaded at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2023/dec/2020-census-detailed-dhc-a.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/technical-documentation/complete-tech-docs/detailed-demographic-and-housing-characteristics-file-a/2010-to-2020-crosswalk.xlsx>

## **Meaningful Public Engagement**

It is imperative that the Census Bureau continues to implement the revised SPD 15 and engages the public effectively and meaningfully. This will ensure that the Bureau produces more accurate and useful race and ethnicity data. Incorporating information on different types of engagements with the public and the frequency of those engagements can help produce better data in the long run. These engagements are especially important given the nation's everchanging demographics and the ways in which racial and ethnic categories are socially constructed and change over time. For example, engagement around the bridging issues raised above related to the crosswalks would benefit from public engagement. Communities would also greatly benefit from engagement on ensuring racial and ethnic communities understand the question and response options under an updated SPD 15. The Census Bureau must engage with interested stakeholders throughout the process of implementing the updated standards, including the collection of race and ethnicity data using a combined question and the use of a new MENA category. Active public engagement will not only ensure the accuracy of federal data, involving impacted community members early in the process gives them ownership over the content and outcome—building trust in the democratic process and potentially incentivizing increased participation. It is imperative that community organizations and leaders are engaged and consulted on these issues moving forward because mistakes and inaccuracies occur in the absence of community input.

We offer the following as best practices for community engagement:

- Engage interested stakeholders early and often. Bringing community members into the conversation early in the planning process can circumvent mistakes and inaccuracies—which undermine trust in the federal government and broader efforts to collect data on impacted communities.
- Engage with a diverse set of stakeholders, including both community-specific partners as well as those representing a more pan-ethnic perspective.
- Be specific about what is being discussed, any requests being made of the community, and what specific information the agency is attempting to obtain. In instances of prior engagement, it is incumbent on the agency to highlight any major changes that have occurred or are being considered at the point of the most recent request, as well as lifting up any points of potential controversy for feedback. Providing specific requests and the requisite background information will only help groups provide the most useful feedback to the agency.

## **Conclusion**

We thank the Census Bureau for the opportunity to comment on the ACS implementation of SPD 15. As indicated in our comments, we believe it imperative that further testing and research be completed before implementing the SPD 15 updates in the ACS. At the same time, we believe that moving forward with implementation as swiftly as possible is

important. Thus, our expectation is that the revised SPD 15 will be implemented in the 2026 ACS and that the necessary research and testing will be completed prior to this implementation. The only acceptable reason for a 2027 ACS implementation would be to ensure the necessary testing and research is completed if not achievable in time for the 2026 ACS. In order to help achieve both goals, we believe that the Census Bureau must continue meaningful engagement with community groups on these issues of implementation; continued coordination with advocacy groups will ensure that data are accessible and usable for the broader public and will help move the implementation process along more efficiently. If you have any questions, please contact me at [tminnis@advancingjustice-ajc.org](mailto:tminnis@advancingjustice-ajc.org) or 202 815-4412.

Sincerely,



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