

Proposed Revisions to Statistical Policy Directive No. 15: Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity

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The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) oversees the collection of race and ethnicity data through [Statistical Policy Directive \(SPD\) No. 15](#): Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity. [SPD No. 15 seeks to](#) “ensure the comparability of race and ethnicity across Federal datasets and to maximize the quality of that data by ensuring that the format, language, and procedures for collecting the data are consistent and based on rigorous evidence.” On January 27, 2023, OMB released [initial proposals](#) to revise SPD No. 15 for public comment. The proposed changes to SPD No. 15 are intended to

- collect race and ethnicity information using [one combined question](#);
- add “[Middle Eastern or North African](#)” (MENA) as a new response category;
- require the collection of [detailed race and ethnicity categories](#) by default; and
- [update certain terminology](#) within categories.

OMB plans to [complete these revisions](#) by summer 2024. The revisions would impact how population demographics are presented in federal statistics, including the [American Community Survey](#) and the [decennial census](#). This Insight provides information on OMB’s role in statistical policy, previous revisions to SPD No. 15, and the current revision proposal. It concludes with potential considerations for Congress.

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Federal Statistical Policy and OMB's Role

Within OMB, the administrator of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) is responsible for the development and oversight of implementation of [government-wide statistical policies](#). The [chief statistician](#) heads the Statistical and Science Policy office of OIRA.

Alongside statutory requirements, OMB has its own [administrative process](#) in place for updating existing SPDs, which includes

- technical evaluation of the current standard by an interagency working group composed of career federal subject matter experts;
- additional technical research, testing, and analysis to close identified gaps; and
- solicitation and consideration of public comment on ways to improve the standards.

Final decisions on changes to an SPD are determined by OMB.

Previous Revisions of SPD No. 15

Originally developed in 1977, SPD No. 15 was last revised in 1997. The [1977 version](#) established standard race and ethnicity classifications for federal data purposes. The directive defined the following racial categories:

- *American Indian or Alaskan Native*
- *Asian or Pacific Islander*
- *Black*
- *White*

This directive also established these ethnic categories:

- *Hispanic origin*
- *Not of Hispanic origin*

These [categories were to be used](#) for civil rights compliance reporting; general program administrative and grants reporting; and statistical reporting. In terms of individuals of mixed race or ethnicity, the directive indicates use of “the category which most closely reflects the individual’s recognition in his community.”

The [1997 revision](#) maintained collection of minimum racial categories as a default along with the ability to collect more detailed racial data. Furthermore, the directive [emphasized self-identification from respondents](#):

self-identification is the preferred means of obtaining information about an individual’s race and ethnicity, except in instances where observer identification is more practical.

The 1997 standards were developed after the previous standards faced [increasing criticism](#) since the 1990 decennial census for not reflecting the increasing diversity in the United States. In these standards, among other changes, the previous “Asian or Pacific Islander” category was separated into two categories, “Asian” and “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.”

Proposed 2023 Revision

In 2023, OMB stated that there have been “large societal, political, economic, and demographic shifts” in the United States since 1997 that warranted an update to SPD No. 15, including

- increasing racial and ethnic diversity;
- a growing number of people who identify as more than one race or ethnicity; and
- changing immigration and migration patterns.

Since 1997, research and practices regarding the collection of race and ethnicity information have also continued to evolve.

In 2008, for example, the Census Bureau began exploring the possibility of combining race and ethnicity in one question with the design of the 2010 Census Alternative Questionnaire Experiment (AQE) Research on Race and Hispanic Origin. The AQE was completed in 2012 and [the results](#) found that a higher number of individuals were more likely to respond to a question which combined Hispanic origin and race than having Hispanic origin as a separate question.

In 2014, [OMB formed](#) the Interagency Technical Working Group on Race and Ethnicity Standards to “exchange research findings, identify implementation issues, and collaborate on a shared research agenda to improve Federal data on race and ethnicity.”

This iteration of the [working group](#) consisted of representatives from 10 Cabinet departments and 3 other agencies that collect or use federal race and ethnicity data. OMB presented the working group’s proposals [for comment in March 2017](#).

A working group was [convened again in September 2022](#) with representatives from the 13 principal statistical agencies, 24 agencies enumerated by the [Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990](#), and one additional agency that relies on race and ethnicity data. The working group [assessed](#) the research done by the previous working group; experiences from the 2020 decennial census; work done by the Interagency Working Group on Equitable Data pursuant to [Executive Order 13985](#); and public input gathered through bimonthly listening sessions.

The working group released its [findings](#) and OMB requested comments in 2023 on the [initial proposals to revise SPD No. 15](#).

Potential Considerations for Congress

The proposed revisions to SPD No. 15 would alter how demographic data are collected and presented in federal statistics. A number of issues related to the proposed revisions may be of interest to Congress, including

- the timing, substance, and implementation of any revisions to SPD No. 15 adopted by OMB;
 - the impact of data collected under a revised version of SPD No. 15 on the work of federal agencies that utilize such data; and
 - more broadly, the role of Congress in federal statistical policy through its legislative and oversight activities.
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