



Appendix H: Validity of Race/Ethnicity Classification

Appendix H: Validity of the Race/Ethnicity Classification in Public Health Data Sets

The race and classification scheme used in the U.S. was discussed in Appendix B. That classification scheme, however, is only as good as its ability to be accurately applied by the people who report the data to the public health vital statistics and surveillance systems. In general, race and ethnicity are believed to be more valid to the extent that they have been self-reported. The following paragraphs describe the method used to classify an individual into one or more race and ethnic groups. Known validity issues regarding the application of the race and ethnicity classification schemes in public health have been noted.

Birth Certificates

The child's mother and father complete a question sheet that includes all the personal information, such as names, street address, race and ethnicity. The race and ethnicity fields are open-ended, meaning the mother and father write in words that describe their race and ethnicity. There is a standard coding system that classifies them according to what they wrote in. The infant's race/ethnicity status is not derived from both the mother's and father's race and ethnicity, it is assumed to be the same as the mother's.

Death Certificates

Race and ethnicity on the death certificate are completed by a funeral director. He or she speaks with the family of the deceased. The next of kin is usually considered the "informant" for purposes of completing the death certificate. The decedent is not able to self-report. Studies have shown that light-brown-skinned races and ethnicities, such as Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native are sometimes reported to be White and non-Hispanic. This appears to be a widespread problem, affecting death data from most states. However, most decedents of non-White races are reported accurately.

Communicable Disease Surveillance

In the most typical scenario, a communicable disease nurse from a local health department completes the disease report with the affected individual on the telephone, and asks the person to self-report on separate race and ethnicity questions. At other times, however, the information may be derived from medical records or physician report, which may be inaccurate or incomplete.

Health Surveys

Respondents to health surveys generally, although not always, self-report. The validity of the response is determined primarily by how well the race/ethnic categories used on the survey instrument match what the respondent thinks.

Hospital and Emergency Department Data

Hospital discharge and emergency department data derive from hospital billing records. Race and ethnicity are not required fields on the standard billing records. In Utah, the field is completed less than half the time and is currently not used.



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Cancer Incidence

The Cancer Registry derives cancer incidence records from several sources. The primary source is the hospital medical record. In most cases, the attending physician probably records the race and ethnicity information on the medical record, although it might also appear on the hospital admission form that was completed by the patient. Sometimes race and ethnicity information on cancer registry records derive from death certificates, in which case, they would be prone to the same limitations as the death certificate data in general. Hispanic ethnicity for cases with missing data is derived from the New Mexico Spanish surname list.

Population Estimates

Population estimates derive from the U.S. Census Bureau. We depend on timely updates for Utah population estimates by race and ethnicity. Census Bureau population estimates are generally very good, but do rely on response from individuals. Questions remain about whether certain disenfranchised groups are as likely to complete and return census forms at the time of the decennial censuses.

Overarching Issues

- Oftentimes, Hispanic persons who may be White by the Census Bureau definition will report their race as “Other.” The Hispanic ethnicity question is asked first on surveys to allow respondents to self-identify as Hispanic ethnicity prior to hearing the race question. But it appears that Hispanic persons often do not embrace the Census Bureau definition of race.
- Classifying persons into standard race categories requires that the Census Bureau race definitions are known and understood. In South Asia (e.g., India), the Middle East and the Philippines, classification errors are probably common.
- Different data systems are moving over to the new Office of Management and Budget standards at different times.