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We Bring Value-Added Census Data and Education to the User

December 16, 2017

The Honorable Mick Mulvaney
Office of Management and Budget
Eisenhower Executive Office Building
Washington, DC 20503

Dear Director Mulvaney—

I am writing on behalf of the National State Data Center (SDC) Steering Committee to encourage your Office to revise Statistical Policy Directive No. 15, Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting. Our member organizations support the proposals advanced by the Federal Interagency Working Group to add new major race and ethnicity groups to the standards, and to allow a single, streamlined categorization in federal data collection, starting with the 2020 Census.

Our State Data Center Network includes state government statistical agencies, research offices, and data-providing organizations from 56 states and U.S. territories. We partner with the Census Bureau to provide training, technical assistance, and extension of Census products in our respective states. The Steering Committee represents the interests of these organizations, and coordinates activities with the Census Bureau.

Federal statistical agencies, State Data Centers, and other population research organizations support a combined question that replaces the separate race and ethnicity questions used by the federal government since 1997. In the 2020 Census and future surveys, this would allow a single-question format, with respondents given the freedom to identify one or multiple races. This recommended change in federal standards will simplify question design and data collection, as Latino (Hispanic) origin will not need to be treated as a separate and additional question.

Also, federal statistical agencies and State Data Centers support additional race and ethnicity categories that better represent people who today provide “other race” responses. Middle Eastern and North African origin and Latino (Hispanic) origin should be recognized and added to the list of major race and ethnicity groups found in the 1997 Race and Ethnic Standards.

The Alternative Questionnaire Experiment and National Content Test research have demonstrated that most people who indicate “other race” on today’s census questionnaires would instead identify themselves as Middle Eastern or North African or Latino (Hispanic) *if those categories were available options*. Thus, the re-design of the race and ethnicity question maximizes complete self-reporting of racial identity. These proposed changes will simplify 2020 Census questionnaires, as well as other federal government forms. This will reduce respondent burden and the processing task faced by government agencies involved in population data collection. Our state agencies also benefit, as we apply federal statistical standards in our own surveys, forms, and databases.

I urge OMB to take action *this month* to revise the race and ethnicity categories in Statistical Policy Directive No. 15, *so that new standards are in place for the 2020 Census*. The Census Bureau is expected to prepare final questions for the 2020 Census by March 31, 2018. Adopting the combined question format is cost-effective and enables the Bureau to collect the most complete data on race and ethnicity for the 2020 Census.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments. The State Data Center Network looks forward to working with the Census Bureau to ensure that the 2020 Census is successful and provides the most complete and accurate count of the U.S. population. Our committee can be reached at todd.graham@metc.state.mn.us, or by mail: Todd Graham, Metropolitan Council, 390 North Robert Street, St. Paul, MN 55101.

Sincerely,

Todd Graham
Chairman, National SDC Steering Committee

cc: Allen Barnes, Arizona Office of Economic Opportunity
Gregg Bell, University of Alabama
Suzan Reagan, Bureau of Business and Economic Research (New Mexico)
Charles Rynerson, Population Research Center (Oregon)
Pam Schenker, Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research
Jennifer Shultz, Pennsylvania State Data Center
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