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Behind the Surprising Jump in Multiracial Americans, Several Theories

Families across the country have grown more diverse. A design change in the census form also allowed the government to report people's identity in greater detail.

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WASHINGTON — The Census Bureau released a surprising finding this week: The number of non-Hispanic Americans who identify as multiracial had jumped by 127 percent over the decade. For people who identified as Hispanic, the increase was even higher.

The spike sent demographers scrambling. Was the reason simply that more multiracial babies were being born? Or that Americans were rethinking their identities? Or had a design change in this year's census form caused the sudden, unexpected shift?

The answer, it seems, is all of the above.

Multiracial Americans are still a relatively small part of the population but the increase over the decade was substantial and, the data shows, often surprising in its geography. The number of Americans who identified as non-Hispanic and more than one race jumped to 13.5 million from 6 million. The number of Hispanic Americans who identify as multiracial grew to 20.3 million from 3 million. In all, the two groups now represent about 10 percent of the population.

The largest increase in non-Hispanic Americans of two or more races was in Oklahoma, followed by Alaska and Arkansas.

Americans who were mixed race recorded a wide range of identities. People who identified themselves as both white and Asian made up about 18 percent of the total number of non-Hispanic multiracial Americans in 2020. Those who reported their race as both white and Black accounted for 20.5 percent. Americans who were both white and Native American were 26 percent of the total, according to Andrew Beveridge, who founded Social Explorer, a data analytics company.

Part of the rise in people identifying as multiracial was simply the growing diversity of the American population. As the newest immigrants, largely from Asia and Latin America, have children and grandchildren, and those Americans form families, they are much more likely to marry outside their racial or ethnic groups than their parents were. Among newlywed Hispanic people who were born in the United States, about 39 percent marry someone who is not Hispanic, according to the Pew Research Center. For Asian people, that number is about the same.

But the increase can also be attributed in part to changing ways in which Americans identify themselves — and the ways the government categorizes them.

Census categories are complicated, because race and its boundaries change over time based on shifts in culture and society. Some argue the census can leave the impression that race is a fixed, naturally occurring category that can be neatly counted. Until 2000, the Census Bureau only recognized one response for race.

Michael Watson of the Bronx is the son of a Jamaican mother and a Puerto Rican father of Scottish and Bajan descent. He welcomes the Census Bureau's attempt to capture Americans' identities more precisely. Ben Zucker for The New York Times

For Michael Watson, 38, the son of a Jamaican mother and a Puerto Rican father of Scottish and Bajan descent, one box was not enough.

“A lot of times you are painted in a box where you have to choose,” said Mr. Watson, of the Bronx, who is director of an analytics company and co-founder of a digital media company. “But as a Black man, I felt uncomfortable having to feel as if I had to pick between both sides.”

For the 2020 census, officials tried to more accurately capture the profusion of complexity in American demographics.

Last year’s census form differed substantially from the one in 2010, Rachel Marks, chief of the racial statistics branch at the Census Bureau, said in an interview. Lines were added under the boxes for Black and for white, where respondents could describe in more nuance their racial backgrounds. Coding capacity improved too, capturing far more detail in people’s written answers than before.

Some of those changes, she said, contributed to the rise in the numbers of people who identified as more than one race — though precisely what share, she could not say.

“It’s not just one thing,” Ms. Marks said in an interview on Friday. “We improved the questions. There were new write-in lines. All in addition to the ways that we processed and coded the data.”

Demographic change was a factor too, though she said it was impossible to say how much of the dramatic growth it accounted for. Asked whether part of the decline in the number of people who identified as non-Hispanic white was related to the changes in the form, Ms. Marks said she could not “say for sure one way or another.”

“We’re still digging into the data,” she said. “I think these improvements and changes could have also contributed to that. But it’s certainly a trend we’ve been seeing for the past several decades.”

The result was a much more nuanced — and accurate — portrait of how Americans see themselves, social scientists said, even if part of the spike in the multiracial category was as much about reclassification as it was about real growth.

Richard Alba, a sociologist who has written about race categorization and the census, said that typically, a large share of Hispanic Americans check the box for white in the race question. Now, he said, they were given the chance to describe their backgrounds more fully, an addition, he said, that could have flipped them into the multiracial category.

“That’s not a change in social reality, that’s a change in the way social reality is being categorized,” he said. “In the long run we will probably be able to say more precisely to what extent is there a real change and to what extent is this a coding change.”

However, the coding change was not simply a statistical blip. It was a meaningful widening of options people had to say who they felt they were.

For Mr. Watson, the fact that more Americans were identifying themselves as multiracial felt like a recognition by society that he had long craved.

“I think it shows that there’s more depth and breadth to us as people of color,” he said. “It’s a testament that our society is moving in the right direction. It goes beyond just the color of our skin.”

Ruby Herrera, 28, can testify to the frustration of being asked to fit herself neatly into just one racial category. She remembers feeling different from most other children when she was in grade school and had to fill out a form indicating her identity.

Ms. Herrera’s mother is white, from Wisconsin, and her father is from Mexico. She loved speaking two languages and knowing that she belonged to two cultures.

But her teacher advised her to just pick one.

“For me as a 7-year-old kid, I was like I can’t just pick one,” she said. “What do you mean? Which one do I pick? If I pick one, does that mean I’m not the other? None of my classmates understood why I was so upset.”

Ms. Herrera and Taylor Clarkson, friends from college, created an online community called Mixed Millennial to bring people of multiracial backgrounds together to share experiences.

Taylor Clarkson, a business school student, co-founded an online group called Mixed Millennial to promote mixed-race awareness. Allison Dinner for The New York Times

As the children and grandchildren of recent immigrants from Asia and Latin America start families of their own, racial categories in America have again become fluid.

One of the big demographic questions, social scientists said, is what will become of the categories. Particularly salient, they say, is that of white. The declining share of white people as a part of the population has become a part of American politics — as a worry on the right and a cause for optimism on the left.

But while white people have long been at the top of the American social hierarchy, and the category has expanded over time to include the immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe who came at the turn of the last century, the profusion of identities in American society and their growing acceptance is raising the question of how much social power whiteness still holds.

"To me the interesting story is not the decline of white people as a supposed group but the historical advantages of whiteness and how they may be changing," said Charles King, a political scientist at Georgetown University. "With the greater power and visibility of people who feel they fit uneasily inside the old census boxes, it's possible to claim a range of identities without feeling you're harming your chances of success in American society."

The one group that was never allowed to cross the line into whiteness, African Americans, may not have as many options.

"The whole racial classification system is going to shift in the next few years," said Douglas S. Massey, a sociologist at Princeton University. "The off-the-shelf standard American is going to be some kind of blend of Asian, Latino and white. The big question always is, how do Blacks fit in."

Kori Alexis Trataros, a school counselor in the South Bronx, said that she sees hope in the younger generation being more open and accepting of interracial couples and multiracial children.

"Our generation is so great at having open conversation and is willing to unlearn certain things that we were taught when we were younger," said Ms. Trataros, 30, whose father was Greek and mother is Jamaican.

She remembers not being able to date a white boy she liked in high school because he wasn't allowed to bring home a Black girl. But she thinks there's less of that kind of pressure on teens of all races today. And access to social media, she said, has made it easier for biracial and multiracial people to see others who look like them, to claim their identities with pride and to connect with one another.

Ms. Trataros said that though her parents were loving and supportive, talking about race and social justice was a taboo in her broader family, which sometimes made her feel like an outsider in her own family.

In recent years she has distanced herself from some white family members who aren't willing to engage in conversations about racism and social justice.

"It hurts," she said, "but I'm not surprised at the same time."

Charlie Smart contributed reporting.