



Race and Ethnicity in Head Start Data Collection

Changing Definitions of Racial/Ethnic Categories in Data Collection Limit Tracking of Trends Over Time

The Program Information Report (PIR) records the race and ethnicity of Head Start participants on an annual basis and reports these data in aggregate at the program level. Although the PIR survey has collected this information since 1988, the definitions of racial/ethnic categories used in the survey have evolved over time. These changes have included expanding the number of categories, thereby allowing for more precise definitions of racial/ethnic groups. However, one recent change separated the reporting of Hispanic/non-Hispanic ethnicity from race categories (such as white, black, etc.) without providing combined race/ethnicity categories (e.g. non-Hispanic white). This change has resulted in the reporting of racial and ethnic categories that are not mutually exclusive. For example, the race category “black” includes both Hispanic and non-Hispanic blacks. The new PIR reporting system (1) complicates efforts to chart historical trends in racial-ethnic composition over time and (2) impedes comparisons to other data sets that combine race and Hispanic ethnicity into mutually exclusive racial-ethnic categories. Below is an overview of major changes to PIR racial/ethnic categories over the past 30 years. For a more detailed timeline, see the [timeline of changes in the exact definitions of PIR race/ethnicity categories](#).

Major changes to the racial/ethnic categories included in the annual PIR survey¹

1988 ²	<p>Five mutually exclusive racial/ethnic categories, one of which is Hispanic.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Indian or Alaskan Native • Asian or Pacific Islander • Black • Hispanic • White
1998	<p>The Asian or Pacific Islander category is split, to make a total of six mutually exclusive categories. Hispanic remains one of these categories.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Indian or Alaskan Native • Asian • Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander • Black or African American • Hispanic or Latino • White
2002	<p>Biracial/Multiracial, Other, and Unspecified categories are added to the list, for a total of nine mutually exclusive categories. Hispanic remains one of these categories.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Indian or Alaskan Native

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- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino origin
- White
- Biracial/Multi-racial
- Other
- Unspecified

2005 - present

The Office of Head Start modifies the PIR race/ethnicity categories so that Hispanic/Latino is defined as an ethnicity and is separate from the other eight categories which are defined as race groups. As a result, each student reports an ethnicity (Hispanic or non-Hispanic) as well as a race group. The PIR, presented at the program level, does not report combined race/ethnicity categories.

Ethnicity (children in each category may be of any race group)

- Hispanic or Latino origin
- Non-Hispanic/Non-Latino origin

Race (children in each category may be either Hispanic or non-Hispanic)

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- White
- Biracial/Multi-racial
- Other
- Unspecified

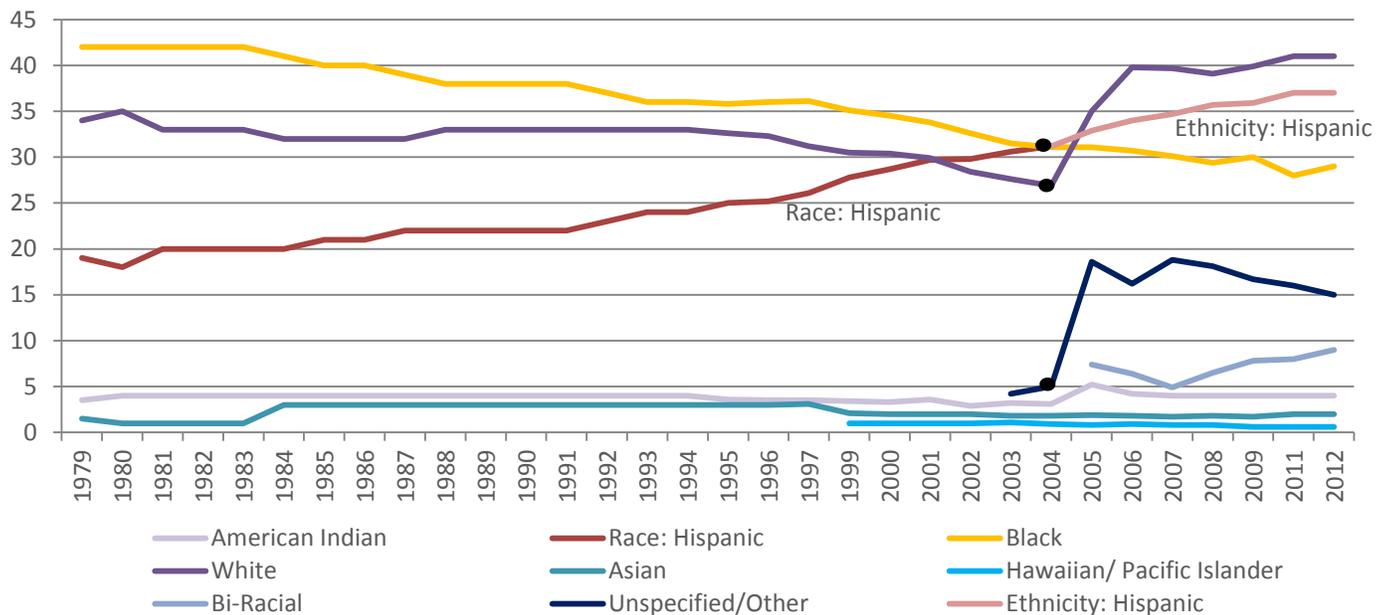
Obstacles to examining trends over time in racial/ethnic composition of Head Start participants:

The evolving PIR definitions and categories intended to capture participant race and ethnicity have led to inconsistent reporting over time. As these definitions change (e.g., addition of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity), or new categories are added (such as biracial, other, or unspecified), the new reporting categories do not reflect the same types of participants as the old categories, limiting the ability to document changes in Head Start racial/ethnic composition of enrolled children over time.

The 2005 reporting changes, which separate ethnicity from race without also reporting combined racial/ethnic categories, are especially problematic for studying racial composition, as illustrated by the graph below. Between 2004 and 2005, white and unspecified racial groups experienced an improbable jump in the number of enrolled participants. This was most likely caused by Hispanic/Latino participants who had previously identified racially and ethnically as Hispanic/Latino, and were then required to choose both an ethnicity and a separate race group. As a result, in addition to identifying themselves ethnically as Hispanic/Latino, a large number of these participants also identified themselves as white or of unspecified race. Therefore, the racial distribution of participants from 2005 onwards is no longer comparable to the racial distribution of participants prior to 2005.



Racial/Ethnic Composition of Head Start Participants Over Time, 1979-2009³ (percent)



Discussion of Head Start’s 2005 changes to race/ethnicity data collection procedures

The changes to Head Start’s race/ethnicity data collection procedures may have been in response to changes in data collection requirements for all federal agencies. In 1997 the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued revised race and ethnicity data collection guidelines requiring the collection of Hispanic/non-Hispanic ethnicity separately from race (white, black, Asian, other, American Indian, etc.). Subsequently, in 2005 Head Start modified its definition of racial and ethnic categories and separated race and ethnicity into two questions in the PIR.

While the current presentation of race and ethnicity in Head Start follows the recommended OMB guidelines for data collection, it does not meet the OMB guidelines for reporting race/ethnicity categories. OMB guidance states, “when data on race and ethnicity are collected separately, provision shall be made to report the number of respondents in each racial category who are Hispanic or Latino.” In addition, Head Start reporting of race/ethnicity categories is not aligned with OMB’s recommendation that agencies develop a plan to bridge data collection before and after changes in racial/ethnic definitions so that these changes do not affect the study of time trends.⁴ Unfortunately, race and ethnicity are not combined in PIR reporting, nor was data collection bridged pre- and post-2005, so it is no longer possible to present enrollment for mutually exclusive racial-ethnic categories or to compare changes in Head Start enrollment by race/ethnicity over time. Head Start’s practice of reporting of race and ethnicity separately rather than in combined categories means that the only category that can be compared accurately over time is Hispanic.

Sources & notes:

¹ PIR Survey forms 1988-2012, available at <http://hses.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/pir>.

² 1988 is the first year for which a PIR survey form is available from the Office of Head Start; therefore, it is the first year for which clear definitions of racial/ethnic categories are available.

³ Chart source: Head Start Fact Sheets, 1979-2009. Head Start Fact Sheets 2004-2012 are available online at the Office of Head Start, Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECLKC). Head Start Fact Sheets 1979-2003 are available by request from Office of Head Start. Data represent the combined racial/ethnic composition of all existing Head Start programs at each year. From 1979 to 1994, it represents the racial composition of all children in Head Start programs,

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American Indian/Alaska Native programs, and Migrant & Seasonal programs (Early Head Start was not created until 1994). From 1995 onwards, it represents the racial composition of all children in all four types of Head Start programs: Head Start programs, American Indian/Alaska Native programs, and Migrant & Seasonal programs and Early Head Start programs.

⁴ The OMB guidelines regarding data collection and statistical reporting of racial/ethnic categories changed over time with the addition of new multiple race categories added to the Decennial Census in 2000. Retrieved from:
http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/assets/information_and_regulatory_affairs/re_app-a-update.pdf.