

# Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology



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## Race and Ethnic Population Projections: A Critical Evaluation of their Content and Meaning

by

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October 14, 1998

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Meaning**

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Revision of a paper presented at the 13th SUNY-Albany Conference, "American Diversity: A Demographic Challenge for the Twenty-First Century," sponsored by the Department of Sociology and Center for Social and Demographic Analysis, State University of New York-Albany, April 15-16, 1994. The first draft of this paper was written while the author was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and supported in part by the National Science Foundation (SES-9022192).

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the U.S. Census Bureau has added racial and Hispanic-origin populations as part of the standard projections of the American population to the middle of the twenty-first century. Some of the numbers in these ethnic population projections have stimulated considerable popular interest—in particular, the projected decline in the proportion of the white nonHispanic population to about one-half (or less) of the total U.S. population. Fears about the future ethnic composition of the American population are frequently noted with alarm by anti-immigration lobbies, some journalists, and a few politicians. Although public rhetoric has not reached the level of the hysteria that was part of the response to the immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe during the first two decades of the twentieth century, there are ominous parallels.

Population projections are usually considered an esoteric topic in applied demography. Although there is occasional general interest stimulated by concerns of too rapid (or too slow) population growth, the field is largely left to technical demographers, applied statisticians, and urban planners. Within this realm of professional users, there is a healthy skepticism about the limits of population projections beyond the short-term of ten to twenty years. Beyond this time frame, unforeseen changes in fertility, mortality, and migration frequently lead to population trends that diverge from prior projections. Long-term population projections of the American population have rarely anticipated actual demographic changes (Preston 1993).

In this essay, I raise fundamental questions about the technical bases and the standard interpretation of the long-term projections of the U.S. population by race and ethnicity. In addition to the unknowns of the standard demographic components of growth (especially, net international migration), race and ethnic population projections are flawed by the lack of information about

future trends in intermarriage and changes in ethnic identity among the descendants of intermarried couples. Even if past (and future) trends in international migration and intermarriage were known with complete certainty, ethnic identities in the future are very likely to depend on events that cannot be extrapolated from the past. The discussion about race and ethnic population projections tells us more about the current state of ethnic relations in American society than future population trends.

## **THE CONTENT OF RACE AND ETHNIC POPULATION PROJECTIONS**

Population projection is one of the most valuable tools in applied demography. Although there are many technical details for the specialist to master, the basic ideas are simple to grasp. Beginning with a base population (arrayed by sex and age), mortality, fertility, and net-migration rates are used to project the base population forward into the future. The standard cohort-component framework uses the first projected population (one or five years into the future) as the base population for the next step of the projection, and so on (Shryock and Siegel. 1971: 377). While current levels of fertility, mortality, and migration can be used for the first step of the projection, successive steps must rely on assumptions about future changes in the components of population growth. Uncertainty about future trends in fertility, mortality, and migration is what makes long-term projections such a hazardous enterprise.

The practical demand for population projections is greatest for sub-national areas, especially for cities and metropolitan planning units concerned with future needs for schools, transportation, housing, and other facilities. The problem is that migration, which may not be an

important component of national-level projections, typically looms as the most important element of population change for local areas. All population projections must assume that future changes reflect some continuity with the past, but this assumption is much weaker for migration than for fertility and mortality. The biological bases of fertility and mortality provide a modicum of inertia that mitigates against rapid change. In contrast, the volatility of migration in response to economic conditions means that the useful time horizon for local-area population projections is much less than for national projections. Long-term race and ethnic population projections are problematic for the same reason as local-area population projections: both are heavily dependent on future trends in migration (international migration in the case of race and ethnic population projections). This is, however, only one of the many problems that make it difficult, if not impossible, to construct meaningful race and ethnic population projections.

At first glance, population projections by race and ethnicity seem to be a reasonable idea. In the standard grouping of population attributes, ethnicity is considered to be an ascriptive characteristic—one that is fixed at birth and remains the same over a person's lifetime (Schnore 1961). If this assumption is met, then ethnic population projections can be constructed if the requisite fertility, mortality, and migration data are available. Ethnic fertility and mortality patterns are known for the present, and convergence is often a reasonable assumption for the future. As noted above, there is great uncertainty about future trends in international migration. For some ethnic groups (Asians and Hispanics), assumptions about future immigration are the most important elements of future population projections. In this chapter, I review the components of several recent population projections by race and ethnicity and then evaluate the demographic

assumptions underpinning these projections. I also raise the question of whether race and ethnicity are likely to remain ascribed characteristics in American society.

The Census Bureau and others have published U.S. population projections by race and ethnicity to the middle of the next century (Day 1996, Bouvier 1992, Edmonston and Passel 1992, 1994; Smith and Edmonston 1997, chap. 3). Even with differing assumptions, the projected race and ethnic composition of the future U.S. population is fairly similar in these alternative projections. According to the Census Bureau "middle series" projections for 2050, the American population will be 53% nonHispanic white, 14% nonHispanic Black, 1% American Indian, 9% Asian, and 22% Hispanic (Day 1996: 13).<sup>1</sup> The race and ethnic composition in Edmonston and Passel's projections for 2050 are broadly similar: 57% nonHispanic white, 12% nonHispanic black, 1% American Indian, 11% Asian, and 20% Hispanic (Edmonston and Passel 1994:334). The National Research Council (NRC) race/ethnic projections with mutually exclusive ethnic assignment led to very similar projections in 2050: 51% nonHispanic white, 14% Black, 8% Asian, and 26% Hispanic (Smith and Edmonston 1997: 121). These modest differences are well within the range of highest and lowest series published by the Bureau of the Census.

The primary differences between the present and the projected ethnic composition in 2050 are the relative decline of the white nonHispanic population (declining from about three-quarters to approximately one-half of the population) and the relative increases in the shares of the Asian origin (from 3% to 8-11%) and Hispanic origin (from 9% to 20-26%) populations. The relative

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<sup>1</sup>The projections are produced by race (white, black, American Indian, and Asian) and also for the Hispanic (who may be of any race) and the nonHispanic (subdivided by race) populations.

size of the Black and American Indian populations will also increase, but not as rapidly as the Asian and Hispanic populations. Although future immigration is a major component of the projected changes, the projected ethnic balance would shift in the same direction (relative decline in the proportion of nonHispanic whites) even without further immigration. If there were to be zero net immigration after 1994, the Census Bureau projections show that the white nonHispanic population would decline to 61% of the total population in 2050 (a decline of 13 percentage points from 1995, instead of the 21 percentage point decline projected with immigration) (Day 1996: 13 and 23).

### **THE ASSUMPTIONS DRIVING THE PROJECTIONS**

There are modest differences in the assumptions about the future course of fertility and mortality in the various population projections that may account for some of variations in the expected ethnic composition of the population in 2050. The Bureau of the Census assumes that overall life expectancy will improve from about 75.9 in 1995 to 82.0 in 2050 with the current black-white differential of about seven years widening to nine years (black life expectancy is projected to increase from 69.4 to 74.2 years and for whites from 76.8 to 83.6 years, see Day 1996: 2). The Bureau also assumes that fertility remains constant for current high fertility populations (i.e., Hispanic TFR of 3.0 and black TFR of 2.4), and that white fertility will rise from a current TFR of 2.0 to 2.2. Edmonston and Passel posit differential fertility levels by generation (their projections incorporate generations for each ethnic population), converging towards replacement-level fertility over time and across all populations. The NRC projections accepted

most of the Bureau of the Census assumptions for current fertility, but used a generational model (with current data on fertility by generation) to project future fertility (Smith and Edmonston 1997: 86). The most important difference is that lower second- and third-generation Hispanic fertility is projected to result in a lower overall Hispanic TFR of 2.6 in 2050 in the NAS series compared to the Bureau's assumption of a constant Hispanic TFR of 3.0 for the entire period (also see Swicegood and Morgan, this volume).

Although the variations in assumptions in fertility and mortality matter, especially for the absolute size of the future population, the most important demographic component determining the future ethnic composition of the population is international migration. Immigration has a disproportionate impact on future estimates of the Asian and Hispanic populations. Similar to the problem of local area projections, for which internal migration is the great unknown, estimates of future levels of international migration are dependent on unforeseeable economic forces and the very unpredictable political context that shapes immigration law.

In spite of the great uncertainty about the future course of immigration to the United States, the assumptions about international migration are very similar in the Bureau of the Census, NAS, and Edmonston/ Passel projections. The Census Bureau (middle series) and NAS middle assumption is of 820,000 net annual immigrants for the indefinite future (Day 1993:2, Smith and Edmonston 1997:88-89). Edmonston and Passel assume a current level of 900,000 net annual immigrants rising to 950,000 in the year 2005 (Edmonston and Passel 1994). The similarity of these extrapolations is because all of them draw upon the recent patterns of international migration.



The “middle” net-immigration assumption of 820 thousand migrants per year in the Bureau’s projections is actually the composite of a series of specific flows, including 685 thousand legal immigrants, 115 thousand refugees, 225 thousand undocumented immigrants, 5 thousand migrants from Puerto Rico, 10 thousand civilian citizen arrivals, and 220 thousand emigrants (Day 1997: 28). Edmonston and Passel project annual levels of 855,000 legal immigrants, 200,000 net undocumented immigrants, 70,000 Puerto Rican and other civilian arrivals, and 175,000 annual emigrants (Edmonston and Passel 1994). The assumption of continued high immigration from Latin American and Asia is reflected in the predicted ethnic composition of immigration: 42% Hispanic and 28% Asian of annual net immigration in the Census Bureau series, and 42% Hispanic and 32% Asian in the Edmonston and Passel Series (Day 1996: 2; Edmonston and Passel 1994).

These similarities in these two series should not, in my opinion, be the basis of confidence in the projected levels of future international migration. The estimates of future net immigration are simply the latest data projected forward. For the short run, 5 years or so, this is likely to be close to the mark. Beyond that, however, there is no way to predict how immigration laws will be changed and what impact they will have. There have been several major overhauls in immigration and refugee policy since the landmark reforms in 1965. At any point in the last 30 years, the absolute levels of immigration and the projections based on those levels would have been radically different than those contained in the recent projections. For example, the Census Bureau's latest projections assume future net annual immigration to be 820,000, an increase of 76% over the assumption of 500,000 per year made only a few years earlier.

## **HISTORY AS A TESTING GROUND FOR ETHNIC POPULATION PROJECTIONS**

For ethnic population projections to be useful, two essential attributes have to be met: first, there must be good data on the components of future growth, and second, the assumption of ethnic categories as ascriptively defined populations must be valid. One possibility to evaluate the latter assumption is to look at history where the logic of the population balancing equation can control the former. If the initial and final populations are available from census data and the components of population growth can be measured from independent sources, then we can compare discrepancies between the expected and enumerated populations based on the logic of the population balancing equation identity—the population at time two equals population at time one plus births, minus deaths, plus net migrants.

A fundamental problem is, however, the inconsistent measurement of ethnicity in different censuses. For example, the definition and measurement of the Hispanic and Asian populations has varied considerably across censuses. Nor are data on the components of population growth available by ethnic groups except for the most recent period. There are two recent studies, however, that are worthy of close examination. In one study, the components of population growth for racial groups and the Hispanic population are estimated, but without the possibility of ethnic change (except by natural increase and immigration). The other study estimates ethnic change from any source (not limited to natural increase and immigration), but only for white ethnic groups.

Based on heroic efforts to piece together partial data and iterative estimation methods, Passel and Edmonston (1994) have estimated the relative contributions of immigration and natural increase for the five major race/ethnic populations (nonHispanic white, black, Hispanic, Asian,

and American Indian), by generational status, from 1900 to 1990. Although their methodology precludes any residual of population change that might question the assumption that race/ethnic categories are fully ascriptive populations (thereby closed to intermarriage and changes in ethnic identity) the results are very instructive.

Passel and Edmonston estimate the contribution of immigration to the growth of the American population over the twentieth century and to changes in the contemporary ethnic balance (1994). The U.S. population is 30% larger in 1990 than it would have been without immigration (including immigrants and the descendants of immigrants) from 1900 to 1990. Over this period (1900 to 1990), 60% of the increase attributable to immigration has consisted of additions to the nonHispanic white population. Only in the last 20 years, from 1970 to 1990, has immigration from Latin America and Asia has led to increases in the proportions of Asians and Hispanics and a modest decrease in the relative proportion of the white population. In sum, international migration has not been, until very recently, had a significant impact on the ethnic balance in the United States.<sup>2</sup> The population fraction of nonHispanic whites was 75% in 1990—only slightly below what it would have been had all immigration ceased after 1900 (81%) or after 1970 (80%) (Passel and Edmonston 1994).

In their study, Passel and Edmonston assumed fixed ethnic boundaries. A recent paper by Hout and Goldstein (1994) provides a strong challenge to this assumption, at least for the case of white ethnic groups. Hout and Goldstein compared the "expected" 1980 population of four white

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<sup>2</sup>Immigration from Europe in the nineteenth century led to an increase in the relative proportion of whites and a diminution of the relative numbers of African Americans and American Indians.

ethnic populations (British, Irish, German, and Italian) to the number of persons who identified with that ancestry group in the 1980 Census. The expected 1980 populations were created as a function of initial size, immigration, length of time since arrival, and net reproduction rates. The expected numbers were further adjusted for differential fertility and weighted so that the total expected population agreed with the enumerated census population. Differences between expected and census ethnic populations can be interpreted as primarily due to selective ethnic identification among those who are the descendants of mixed (intermarried) ancestry.

The single largest difference in Hout and Goldstein's analysis is that twice as many persons (40 million) claim Irish ancestry in the 1980 census as would be expected (21 million) on the basis of demographic analysis under the assumption of endogamous marriage. This discrepancy is most likely due, according to the authors, to the high rate of intermarriage among the Irish and a very high likelihood of subjective identification with Irish heritage among those with partial Irish ancestry (Hout and Goldstein 1994:79).

Although the trends among white Americans of European ancestry cannot be glibly generalized to racial/ethnic groups with differing phenotypic characteristics, the implications are potentially significant. The present day definition of "races" was cast much wider only a few decades ago. Assumptions about the differing biological capacities and temperaments between the races of Europe (especially for those from Eastern and Southern Europe) were widely accepted by many if not most educated persons for the first half of the twentieth century. If these ethnic divisions proved to be porous, in spite of the stigma of "crossing," then perhaps contemporary race barriers may appear to be so in the future.

## **PATTERNS OF ETHNIC INTERMARRIAGE**

The first crack in the assumption of closed ethnic populations is intermarriage. While intermarriage does not necessarily directly change ethnic identity (although it may), the classification of children of interethnic marriages is uncertain. Although small departures from the assumption of a closed population (closed to intermarriage) might not invalidate future projections, high levels of intermarriage would undermine the logic of mutually exclusive population categories.

Almost all population projections assume "one sex reproduction," that is, future births are a function of assumed fertility rates multiplied times the number of women in the reproductive years. Although this method ignores men, there is not an inevitable bias in the estimation of future births. With a significant degree of intermarriage, however, the numbers of intermarried persons, their fertility and the assignment of ethnicity of their progeny are new factors to be considered in the accounting methods of population projections. An historical perspective provides some basis to evaluate this question (Kalmijin 1998, Shinagawa and Pang 1996).

A relevant case for our present discussion is the change in intermarriage patterns among white ethnics in the United States over the twentieth century. Based on data from the 1910 U.S. Population Census and a sample of New York City marriage license records for 1908-12, Pagnini and Morgan (1990) analyzed the incidence of ethnic intermarriage among immigrants and other populations at the turn of the century. They reported almost complete endogamy within nationality and generation categories. This finding coincided with the conventional wisdom of the era, namely,

that the "new" immigrant groups from Eastern and Southern Europe were unlikely to assimilate fully into American society. Population projections of European ethnic groups would have seemed like an entirely reasonable activity.

Two to three generations later, it is difficult to find any evidence of ethnic endogamy among white ethnics in the United States. The research of Lieberman and Waters (1988) based on the 1980 census and of Alba and his colleagues (Alba and Golden 1986; Alba 1990) based on survey data show widespread ethnic intermarriage among white Americans with most respondents reporting multiethnic ancestry. The results of Hout and Goldstein (1994) show that demographic methods of forward estimation (when the components of growth can be directly measured) of white ethnic populations lead to major inconsistencies with contemporary counts. The problem is, of course, that high levels of ethnic intermarriage have made ethnic identity an option for whites rather than an ascribed status (Waters 1990).

The historical experiences of white ethnic groups do not necessarily predict the same patterns will hold for racial groups and Hispanics. Recent research, however, does show significant levels and rising trends of intermarriage patterns for Asian Americans (Kitano, Yeung, Chai and Hatanaka 1984; Sung 1990; Wong 1989), Mexican Americans (Murguia and Frisbie 1977; Cazares, Murguia, and Frisbie 1984), and American Indians (Sandefur 1986, Eschbach 1995).

According to the 1990 Census, 31 percent of Hispanic-origin couples (classified by the race/ethnicity of the female spouse or partner) are intermarried (Harrison and Bennett 1995: 166). Intermarriage is about at the same level for Asian Americans, and even higher for American Indians (Harrison and Bennett 1995: 166). Although the number of black-white marriages has

historically been much lower, there has been an upward trend over the last 30 years. The percent of black intermarried couples rose from 3.8 percent in 1980 to 6.3 percent in 1990 (Harrison and Bennett 1995: 166, also see Kalmijin 1993).

These figures call into question the assumption of universal ethnic homogamy in the conventional race and ethnic population projections prepared by the Bureau of the Census. Indeed, the recent population projections prepared by the National Research Council (NRC) include explicit assumptions of intermarriage by generation in order to project race and ethnic populations. The NRC estimates of exogamy (based on census and birth statistics data) are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Estimates of Exogamy Rates by Ethnic Group and Immigrant Generation, 1995-2050 by the National Research Council Panel on the Demographic and Economic Impacts of Immigration

RACE/ETHNICITY	IMMIGRANT GENERATION			
	First	Second	Third	Fourth or More
White	.10	.09	.08	.08
Asian	.13	.34	.54	.54
Black	.14	.12	.10	.10
Hispanic	.08	.32	.57	.57

Source: Smith and Edmonston 1997: 132.

These projected levels of intermarriage create a wide band of uncertainty around any future population projections by race and ethnic groups. If the history of interethnic marriage among

whites is any guide, current levels of interracial marriage will rise even further in the future. In addition to increasingly liberal attitudes towards intermarriage, the significant pool of persons with mixed ethnic ancestry changes the social environment for intermarriage. Not only does the decrease in the proportion of the population with "pure" ethnic ancestry create fewer options for marriage solely within their ethnic community, but it exposes the myth of universal endogamy. For some groups (e.g., American Indians and Hawaiians) the majority of persons in the community are of mixed ancestry, and there is no stigma attached to intermarriage.

### **THE UNCERTAINTY OF ETHNIC IDENTITY**

The race and ethnic classifications used in the census and the federal statistical system are socially constructed composites that have arisen from a variety of historical and contemporary influences (Waters, this volume; Snipp 1989, ch.2). Although the central variable of "race" has been included since the first U.S. census in 1790, the categories used in the census racial classification have changed over the years, as have the methods of measurement (from interviewer assignment to respondent's choice). In the 1980 census, several Asian nationality groups were added as race categories, and in 1990, a new format and instructions were used for the census race question (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990; for a summary of changes in the measurement of race in earlier censuses, see U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975: 3-4). In the year 2000, the census will allow multiple responses on the race question (Office of Management and Budget 1997a, 1997b).



The conventional practice by most users of census data is to accept the race categories as given, and then to assign ethnicity within (or in addition to) race groups with other variables such as birthplace, parental birthplace, and mother tongue (or current language). Because these other variables were only indirect signals of ethnic attachments and because there was thought to be an important public need to know the “true” numbers (and characteristics) of the population by race and ethnicity, there have been pressure from ethnic groups to add direct questions on ethnicity in the census. In 1970, a new census question on Hispanic origin was added, and in 1980, a new question on ancestry was added. The latter question was added, however, with the deletion of the long-standing census question on birthplace of the respondent’s father and mother. This wealth of new data has stimulated considerable research and new thinking about the measurement and meaning of race and ethnicity in the United States (Lieberson and Waters 1988, Lott 1998). One of the unanticipated findings from the first wave of research with multiple measures of race and ethnicity was the inconsistency of responses and the difficulty of assuming that one dimension can be inferred from another (Farley 1991; Hirschman 1983; Lieberson and Santi 1985, Levin and Farley 1982).

Theoretical ambiguity may be the normal state of scholarship, but is much more difficult to allow inconsistency in the measurement of official statistical data. Census data (and other statistical sources) are used to allocate federal funds and to inform public policy. To try to minimize some of the uncertainty and confusion about race and ethnic categories, the Office of Federal Statistics Policy and Standards in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued

Statistical Directive 15 on "Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting" in 1978 (see Waters, this volume and Office of Management and Budget 1995).

Statistical Directive 15 recognized two race/ethnic dimensions for data collection and reporting by government agencies: Race (defined as four groups: American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, black, and white) and Hispanic/nonHispanic origin. The rules for data collection (and presentation) allow for either independent or overlapping measurement of these two dimensions. For example, government data could have two questions (or tables), one for race (with the four populations mentioned above or more detailed categories that can be collapsed into these four) and another for Hispanic-origin (this item may also be measured with more detailed categories, e.g., Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Other Hispanic/Latino). The decennial census includes both a race question and a Hispanic-origin question. The other acceptable format under OMB Statistical Directive 15 combines these two dimensions into five mutually exclusive categories with a Hispanic-origin category that includes persons of all racial groups, and the nonHispanic population subdivided by the four race categories.

In spite of a valiant effort to standardize data collection on race and ethnicity, the implementation of OMB's Directive 15 has faced continual problems. Even if there were no conceptual problems or political considerations, it is not an easy task to explain the logic and nuanced reasoning that lies behind the seemingly arbitrary definitions in the OMB race and ethnic classifications and the appropriate methods for data collection and presentation. The root problems are, however, much deeper. Ethnic identities in are in flux in contemporary America, and it is difficult, if not impossible to make assumptions about fixed identities and stable boundaries that

are the bases of statistical measurement. There are a growing number of loose threads that threaten to unravel the conceptualization and measurement of both "race" and the combined race/ethnic categories in the OMB scheme (Perlmann 1997).

The growing uneasiness with the current methods of measuring race and ethnicity was reflected in two recent conferences. In April, 1992, the Census Bureau and Statistics Canada convened a conference to reexamine the measurement of race and ethnicity in censuses (Statistics Canada and U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993). In February, 1994, the Committee on National Statistics of the National Research Council, at the request of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), held a workshop to evaluate the race and ethnic classifications in Statistical Directive 15 (Edmonston et al. 1996). The papers and discussions at these conferences have clarified the statistical problems, the social dilemmas, and the political concerns that affect the measurement of race and ethnic categories. Many of these issues are also addressed in the report of the Interagency Committee for the Review of the Racial and Ethnic Standards to the Office of Management and Budget (Office of Management and Budget 1997a, Appendix 2)

The statistical problems of measurement are evident in nonresponse to some questions and the reliability of responses. In the 1990 census, the allocations for nonresponse were 2.7% for the race question (up from 1.5% in 1980) and 10% for the Hispanic-origin item (up from 3.5% in 1980) (McKenney and Cresce 1993:208-210).<sup>3</sup> About 3.9% checked the "other race" category in the

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<sup>3</sup>The allocation for the sample questionnaire was less. There was a cutback in funding for the 1990 census that limited field follow-up for the short form questionnaires (McKenney and Cresce 1993:185).

1990 census (up from 3.0% in 1980). Most of the "other race" responses are persons of Hispanic-origin. Rodriguez (1992) argues that Latinos do not misunderstand the census race categories, but that the census categories do not reflect Latin American conceptualization of race and ethnicity. The U.S. system of mutually exclusive white or black categories (with nothing in-between) does not provide meaningful options for many Latinos (for a historical discussion of the development of the concept of race, see Harris 1968).

For most white Americans, the ties to ethnic identity are fairly tenuous. About 15-16% of the population responds with "American" or leave the line blank when asked about their ancestry in the 1980 and 1990 censuses. The number of persons reporting English ancestry declined from 50 to 33 million and the number reporting German rose from 49 to 58 million from 1980 to 1990—most likely in response to the examples listed on the census form (McKenney and Cresce 1993:213). In a study of the meaning of ethnicity based upon in-depth interviews among a sample of Catholic Americans, Waters (1990) reports that many respondents seem to select an ethnic identity for idiosyncratic reasons from among the several choices offered by the national origins of their ancestors. Although the volitional nature of ethnic identity of whites cannot be generalized to the experiences of minorities for whom "racial" identity is imposed by others, there is a significant number of persons of Hispanic descent and of other mixed ancestry for whom neither appearance or cultural behavior provides recognizable cues for ethnic recognition.

There are other challenges to the legitimacy of the current census and OMB classifications. The most basic problem is the internal logic in the construction of ethnic categories. The American Indian/Native American category is thought to represent descendants of indigenous peoples of the

United States, but native Hawaiians and indigenous peoples of American territories in the Pacific are grouped with Asians and Pacific Islanders. It is not clear where descendants of indigenous peoples of Central and South America (who do not speak Spanish) should be classified since they are not natives of North America and are not of Hispanic origin.

One of the most perplexing questions is how to handle persons of mixed ancestry. The traditional convention of including all persons of any African ancestry (the "one drop rule") in the Black/African American population reflects the legacy of racism. There are a significant number of persons who are both Black and Hispanic (a smaller number of persons of Asian and American Indian origin who also have a Hispanic identity). Individual self-identity and perception/treatment by others are not always the same for persons of mixed ancestry.

In the 1980s, a social movement emerged that attempted to create a new statistical category of "multiracial" for use in the census and in all government forms that collect race and ethnicity data. Concerned parents of children with a mixed racial heritage feel that the current system of mutually exclusive race categories lowers the self esteem of their children who do not fit into any of the existing categories (Office of Management and Budget 1997a: 36880, Edmonston et al. 1996). Some school districts have created a multiracial category for local statistical records, and several state legislatures also approved adding a multiracial category to all statistical forms that ask for race and ethnic data. The number of children in interracial families has increased from less than 500 thousand in 1970 to more than 2 million in 1990 (Bureau of the Census 1997: 2-1).

Another element in the current negotiation over race and ethnic measurement is the political interests of the groups themselves (Peterson 1997). In the political arithmetic of our

multicultural society, greater numbers mean greater visibility and weight in both informal and formal politics. The addition of a separate question on Hispanic origin in the 1970 census and its movement to the 100% sample in the 1980 census reflect the political awareness of the Hispanic community (Choldin 1986). The politics of modifying census practices to enlarge the numbers of some ethnic groups is not at all new; Dudley Kirk reports that many European censuses in the 1920s and 1930s were adjusted with this aim in mind (Kirk 1946, cited in Lieberman 1993).

The interests of stakeholders were clearly apparent in the planning of the race and ethnic questions in the 1990 census (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990). In the mid-1980s, there were discussions about whether and how the Bureau should modify the race, Hispanic origin, and ancestry questions for the 1990 census. Plans and pretesting of alternative questions were undertaken with advice from Interagency Working Groups, Open Public Hearings, and a large number of Census Advisory Committees (including advisory committees representing the concerns of the American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian and Pacific Islander, Black, and Hispanic communities). Although there was a proposal to combine the race and ethnic questions, the final recommendation was to keep separate race and Hispanic origin questions because it "could result in the undercount of certain racial groups and the Hispanic origin population" (among other reasons) (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990: 5).

In spite of the extensive review process and testing of a variety of alternatives, the final race question in the 1990 census was revised at almost the last minute (late 1988) to add specific Asian and Pacific Islander populations as categories that could be checked (instead of listing a global API category and asking respondents to write-in specific populations) (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990:

15). The objective of the representatives of the Asian American community and their congressional representatives was to insure that the count of Asians was not diminished by the omission of the list of specific Asian groups on the census form. Historical precedent was on the side of the Asian American community; Japanese and Chinese have been included as categories in the census race question for over 100 years. In other contexts, however, the political effort to include nine Asian and Pacific Islander "nationality" groups (Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, Asian Indian, Samoan, Guamanian, and others) as "races" would have seemed absurd, if not offensive. For many persons, there is no clear or "correct" response to the census race question (e.g., a Vietnamese immigrant of Chinese heritage). The subjective nature of responses to the census means that individuals can choose whatever categories they want, but the ambiguity of ethnic identity and measurement is causing increasing concern for those who collect and interpret the nation's statistics.

The one community with less interest in maximizing numbers is the American Indian community. Entitlement programs operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs require tribal affiliation for eligibility. If the substantial number of persons who claim Indian ancestry were to become eligible for these entitlements, there may well be fewer resources for the members of currently recognized tribes. In the 1990 census, 1.96 million persons identified themselves as American Indians, Eskimo, or Aleut in the race question, but 8.7 million persons considered themselves to have American Indian ancestry. In the final recommendations for the revision of Statistical Directive No. 15, OMB decided leave "American Indian or Alaska Native," as one

major category and to create a new major category for “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander” (Office of Management and Budget 1997b).

It is difficult to contend that the populations defined by race and ethnicity in the census or in OMB's Statistical Directive 15 (original or revised) can be considered as ascriptively defined. The statistical problems that confound measurement and the political processes that surround definition and data collection of race and ethnic groups reflect the underlying problems of porous boundaries and indeterminateness of ethnic identity for a growing number of Americans.

### **RACE AND ETHNIC PROJECTIONS WITH UNCERTAINTY**

With an awareness of many of these issues, the National Research Council Panel on the Demographic and Economic Impacts of Immigration produced population projections by race and ethnicity to the year 2050 that incorporated current levels of intermarriage, variations in ethnic attribution, and variations in international migration (Smith and Edmonston 1997, chap. 3). Ethnic attribution is the likelihood that children from interracial marriages will choose to identify with one group or another. Based on the race/ethnicity of the children in mixed marriages (presumably assigned by a parent) from the 1990 census, ethnic attribution ranged from a low of .39 for of Asian race/ethnicity for children with one Asian parent to a high of .64 attribution of Hispanic origin for children with one Hispanic parent (Smith and Edmonston 1997: 133).

Simply allowing for variations in ethnic attribution (holding international migration and intermarriage to current levels), the potential number of whites in 2050 ranged from 175 to 220 million, the number of blacks from 43 to 59 million, the number of Asians from 23 to 43 million, and the number of Hispanics from 64 to 114 million (Smith and Edmonston 1997: 133). This is just



one of several potential sources of uncertainty in population projections by race and ethnicity. Significant variations in intermarriage and international migration could also have major effects that would rival those of ethnic attribution (as could fertility and mortality differentials).

Perhaps the greatest uncertainty arises from the assumption that persons will consider themselves (and considered by others) to be one (and only one) of our current race and ethnic categories. With a growing numbers of persons with complex race ancestries, this seems most unlikely. Just as many whites claim to multiple ethnic ancestries at the present time (or just to be an “American” without any ethnic identity), the progeny of interracial marriages may not wish to be fit into a single category. The official recognition that persons can check more than one race in the 2000 census is likely to accelerate this process.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Two decades ago, there was widespread concern that excessive population growth was the major demographic problem confronting the United States. As fertility rates have declined, the issue of population growth has moved to the backburner of national concerns. Other population issues, including the aging of the population, changes in family structure and adolescent fertility, and the continuing exodus of the middle class from the cities are topics that have kept demographic research on the front pages of national attention and policy concerns. None of these topics, however, has rivaled the interest and controversy generated by another demographic process – immigration (Chiswick and Sullivan 1995). The new immigration flows of the 1970s and 1980s have fed into the political debates of the 1990s. Even with frequent platitudes that the United States

is a nation of immigrants, the political reality is that taking a hard stand against immigrants can be very popular with some segments of the American population.

What contribution can demographic scholarship make to the policy concerns and political debates over immigration? One small step is to evaluate the demographic implications of future immigration with population projections. These exercises can be very useful. Population projection models show that moderate levels of immigration in the coming years will postpone the arrival of negative population growth, will lead to a somewhat higher eventual population size, and will mitigate the inevitable trend to a much higher ratio of the elderly dependent population to the working age population. Although the precise levels of future immigration cannot be known, it is clearly useful to know the directions of change in these important demographic dimensions.

One seemingly logical extension of the population projection exercise is to estimate the future population by race and ethnic groups. Ethnic divisions are clearly one of the most salient dimensions of American society. Moreover, it is clear that contemporary immigration from Latin America and Asia will increase ethnic diversity in the coming years. There are two serious problems, however, with this logical exercise. First, the critical assumption of race and ethnic groups as ascriptively defined populations with fixed boundaries is a very tenuous one and is likely to become an even more tenuous assumption for the future. The second issue is that race and ethnic population projections are being used, without careful thought or reflection, as firm demographic evidence to show that American society and culture is being threatened by continued immigration. These claims rest on very dubious assumptions.

With intermarriage rates of Hispanics, American Indians, and Asians with others (primarily whites) running from 25% to 50%, it seems clear that the future of American ethnicity will not be one of separate communities with differing languages, cultures, and rivalries. Although at much lower levels for other groups, the apparent doubling of the black-white intermarriage rate from 1980 to 1990 may be a harbinger than even the widest racial fault line in America is not immutable. If these trends continue, the growing density of interethnic familial ties and the increasing number of children of mixed ancestry will surely weaken traditional racial and ethnic divisions in the United States.

The growing problems of defining and measuring race and ethnicity in recent censuses, and the intense political efforts to change (or maintain) ethnic categories reveal the profound flux in ethnic identities that have been created by recent trends in intermarriage. If the experiences of Southern and Eastern European groups in the first half of this century are any guide, then the coming decades will see an exponential increase in ethnic intermarriage and shifts in ethnic identity. Population projections that rely on the conventional criteria of race and ethnic measurement will be increasingly anachronistic.

The use of race and ethnic population projections in the political debate over immigration can be best illustrated with an examination of Leon Bouvier's recent book entitled, *Peaceful Invasions: Immigration and Changing America* (1992). Although Bouvier uses demographic projections of the population by race and ethnicity to argue the threat of continued immigration, he is careful to reject the racist fears and metaphors that are sometimes used by others in the anti-immigration camp. Precisely because Bouvier's book is so reasonably written and relies on

demographic logic and methods, it is certain to be seen as a scholarly and detached statement that will be widely used in the political debates over immigration policy and the implications for American society.

Although the future ethnic composition projected by Bouvier is fairly similar to that projected by the Census Bureau, the underlying assumptions are almost invariably selected to show more rapid growth of minorities, especially the Hispanic population. On the volatile issue of net illegal immigration, Bouvier says (without any citation), "While guesses range from 100,000 to 1 million per year, more reasonable estimates lie in the vicinity of 300,000 to 500,000 per year" (p.19). Both the Census Bureau and the Edmonston and Passel projections use figures of 200,000 to 225,000 per year—which are much closer to the estimates conducted by the most careful demographic research on the topic (Warren and Passel 1987; Woodrow 1992). On the possibility of intermarriage among persons from Latin America and Asia, he reports an increasing trend, but that "they remain a relatively rare occurrence" (p.115) even though this statement is footnoted to a reference which notes more than one-third of the marriages of third-generation Japanese Americans are with whites.

Beyond the technical limitations of his projections and the assumption of continued ethnic endogamy, Bouvier's discussion is colored by his frequent expressions of the potential problems created by too many of "them." Consider the following statements:

"Immigrants today are mostly young Latinos and Asians who settle in major cities, especially in California, New York, and Texas. If current demographic trends continue, within 25 years Anglos would no longer be the majority population in these states and by

2060 the Anglo population would become a minority in the United States. The United States would then be the only industrial nation with no ethnic majority (p. 5),"

and

"If the United States truly were a color-blind society, changes in ethnic composition would be of little consequence. Unfortunately that is not the case. Minorities and most of the newest immigrants are disproportionately represented in the nation's lower class (p. 40)."

Bouvier is not alone in his thinking that continued immigration and the growing diversity of the United States population is one of the major demographic problems confronting the country. I suspect that many white Americans share these sentiments and that some political leaders will exploit their fears in the coming years. This would not be an entirely new political phenomenon. The anti-immigrant movements that led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the immigration legislation of the 1920s that established national-origin quotas were based on similar fears. The potential for such a similar backlash against contemporary immigrants is a serious political problem for American society. There is, however, very little reliable evidence that would support strong claims about future changes in the ethnic composition of the American population. If the experience of the twentieth century suggests anything, it is that future generations of Americans are likely to have quite different notions of race and ethnicity than those at present.

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