



February 18, 2025

Shannon Wink
Program Analyst, Policy Coordination Office
U.S. Census Bureau
4600 Silver Hill Road
Washington, DC 20233

Submitted via regulations.gov

RE: The Census Bureau's Proposed Race/Ethnicity Code List for the American Community Survey and the 2030 Census (USBC-2024-0022)

Dear Ms. Wink:

Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC (Advancing Justice | AAJC) is a national non-profit, non-partisan organization founded in 1991. For over thirty years, we have served as the leading Asian American voice on civil rights issues in our nation's capital. Our mission is to advance civil and human rights for Asian Americans and to build and promote a fair and equitable society for all.

Over the decades, we have worked to eliminate the barriers that have historically resulted in undercounting and underreporting (or otherwise inaccurate counting) of Asian Americans in federal data collection and analysis efforts, particularly in the decennial census count. Our permanent census program monitors census policy and educates policymakers, including through testifying at Congressional hearings. We conduct community outreach and education on the surveys conducted by the Census Bureau, including running nationwide Asian American-focused campaigns for Census 2000, Census 2010, and Census 2020. Advancing Justice | AAJC has also served as a member of numerous advisory committees to the Census Bureau since 2000. Most recently, we served on the National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic, and Other Populations, completing our second three-year term in August 2019. Terry Minnis, Advancing Justice | AAJC's Vice President of Census and Voting Programs, is a current member of the 2030 Census Advisory Committee. Additionally, Advancing Justice | AAJC currently co-chairs the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights' Census Task Force and serves as a co-coordinator of the Census Counts campaign.

Advancing Justice | AAJC considers a fair and accurate census and comprehensive American Community Survey among the most significant civil rights issues facing the country today. Our wide-ranging efforts to promote civic engagement, forge strong and safe communities, and create an inclusive society are guided significantly by objective, inclusive

data on America’s diverse communities and populations. We appreciate the importance of fact-based analyses and the need for disaggregated, detailed data on our community to identify disparate access and outcomes and devise effective solutions. In order to achieve the most detailed and accurate reflection of our community, we provide the following feedback in response to the Federal Register Notice seeking comments on the Census Bureau's Proposed Race/Ethnicity Code List for the American Community Survey and the 2030 Census. This includes considerations to keep in mind as the Census Bureau updates its coding list, our specific responses to questions as it relates to Asian Americans, and the importance of meaningful and effective public engagement on these issues.¹

Overview

Asian American communities are among the fastest growing and most diverse racial groups in the United States. Often viewed as homogenous, these communities include around 40 detailed subgroups that can differ dramatically across key social and economic indicators. For example, in the context of health disparities, U.S.-born Vietnamese American women are four times more likely to die of breast cancer than any other Asian American group. Korean American children are “four times more likely to have no health insurance as compared to others.”² Accessing disaggregated data is critical because it allows us to see these differences. When data are not disaggregated, broad trends can mask much more negative or nuanced outcomes for specific subgroups of people, leaving their needs and issues invisible and unmet. It is important that the data are collected on the vast, diverse communities that make up the Asian American group.

Census data, including data from the ACS, are the building blocks for our society. They are the basis for reapportioning political representation and redistricting at all levels, informing effective and efficient policy and planning decisions, and distributing more than \$2.8 trillion in federal funds to the states during fiscal year 2021.³ Without an accurate count of Asian Americans, policy and planning decisions will not address the needs of growing Asian American communities. Census data—especially data from ACS—provide the most comprehensive set of socioeconomic data on Asian American communities, especially for detailed subgroups. It is important that as the Census Bureau once again conducts its decennial review and revises its Race/Ethnicity Code List for the American Community Survey (hereafter, the Code List) it takes into account the growing and diversifying subgroups in the Asian American community.

¹ While these comments focus on the coding list from the perspective of Asian Americans, we recognize the considerations, concerns, and opportunities that face other communities including other communities of color. To that end, we lift up comments from the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights to which we and other partner organizations signed on.

² https://www.pfizer.com/news/articles/health_disparities_among_asian_americans_and_pacific_islanders

³ <https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2023/dec/census-data-federal-funds.html>

Coding Considerations

Properly Capturing and Representing Respondent's Intent

The Census Bureau's coding list and process must adequately and accurately capture and reflect a respondent's self-identification. The ever-growing diversity and complexities in how people understand the concepts of race, ethnicity, nationality, and national origin alongside the introduction of a combined race and ethnicity question make it even more important to appropriately determine a respondent's intent. As the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights noted in their comments to the Census Bureau and their National Advisory Committee⁴, reliance on associating specific national origin groups with specific race and ethnic group combinations can result in potential misclassifications. For example, the proposed race and ethnicity codes are coding groups with complex immigration experiences such as Indo-Caribbean and Indo-Fijians as multiracial (Asian and Black for Indo-Caribbeans and Asian and Pacific Islander for Indo-Fijian) even if the respondents are checking off only one major race and ethnicity group. These groups remain primarily of Asian Indian descent in diasporic communities.

The Census Bureau should ensure that self-response is prioritized over re-coding. The Census Bureau should only recode race and ethnicity responses if research and testing shows that the responses on the form are systematically different from what respondents meant. Even then, the Census Bureau should be adjusting questions to remove those systematic errors or provide better instructions to make clear what options are available for respondents. It is incumbent on the Census Bureau to ensure that question format, wording, and terminology steer respondents in the right direction with respect to selecting/providing responses to the race and ethnicity question that capture the categories with which they identify. Moreover, the Census Bureau must ensure that their editing and coding decisions do not undermine the intent of respondents to self-identify fully by race and subgroup or national origin.

⁴ See Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, Recommendations to the National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic, and Other Populations on Coding of Race and Ethnicity Data Under 2024 SPD 15 Standards, <https://civilrights.org/resource/leadership-conference-comments-to-the-census-bureau-on-coding-of-race-and-ethnicity-data-under-2024-spd-15-standards/> (noting that “the Bureau’s editing and coding decisions may have undermined the intent of some respondents to self-identify fully by race and subgroup or national origin” and providing “for example, a person who selected the Black or African American checkbox in the race question, and then wrote in “British” beneath the Black category. The coding rules for the 2020 Census assigned this person to both the Black and White race categories, thus adding them to the “Two or more races” category. Was this the respondent’s intent? It might have been; but perhaps the respondent was born and raised in England and later moved to the United States, thereby identifying as British, but only as Black, not White, racially.”).

Transparency about Coding Process

When the race and ethnicity data were published after the 2020 Census, there was a lot of confusion about what the data represented about our communities.⁵ Thus, it is important for there to be transparency about the coding process so that there is a common understanding about what the data are saying and what they are not.

There must be transparency with respect to the testing of the coding and tabulation schemes (i.e., the way data are coded and tabulated) in order to understand the implications of these decision-trees as well as any proposed changes in the coding and tabulation protocols from one census to the next. We encourage the Census Bureau to evaluate the 2020 Census not only the potential effects of question format changes between the 2010 and 2020 enumerations (such as the additional write-in opportunities) but also the coding and tabulation processes. The Bureau should also create transparency testing opportunities moving forward in anticipation of the 2030 Census. This would include an examination of how changes in the collection of race and ethnicity data, as well as changes in coding and editing schemes for the 2030 Census, reflect actual demographic change rather than changes arising from data processes and methods. Having this level of transparency about the process, as well as transparency about the final determinations about the coding list and the coding editing and tabulation processes, will go a long way to ensuring and assuring public confidence in the data produced by the Census Bureau.

Meaningful Public Engagement

It is imperative that the Census Bureau effectively and meaningfully engages the public, including researchers and academic experts, community leaders, and survey respondents, as part of this effort to update the ACS and 2030 Census coding list. Communities must be properly represented in the coding list and respondents' intent must be captured in the Bureau's coding scheme. This will ensure that the Bureau produces more accurate and useful race and ethnicity data. Incorporating information from different types of engagements with the public and the frequency of those engagements can help produce better data in the long run. These engagements are especially important given the nation's ever-changing demographics and the ways in which racial and ethnic categories are socially constructed and change over time. Active public engagement will not only ensure the accuracy of federal data, involving impacted community members early in the process gives them ownership over the content and outcome—building trust in the democratic process and potentially incentivizing increased participation in census surveys. It is imperative that community organizations and leaders are engaged and consulted on these issues moving forward because mistakes and inaccuracies occur in the absence of community input.

⁵ See Starr, Paul, and Christina Pao. 2024. "The Multiracial Complication: The 2020 Census and the Fictitious Multiracial Boom" *Sociological Science* 11: 1107-1123m, https://sociologicalscience.com/download/vol_11/december/SocSci_v11_1107to1123.pdf (discussing how to best understand the astronomical "growth" in the multiracial population from 2010 to 2020).

We offer the following as best practices for community engagement:

- Engage interested stakeholders early and often. Bringing community members into the conversation early in the planning process can circumvent mistakes and inaccuracies—which undermine trust in the federal government and broader efforts to collect data on impacted communities.
- Engage with a diverse set of stakeholders, including both community-specific partners as well as those representing a more pan-ethnic perspective.
- Be specific about what is being discussed, any requests being made of the community, and what specific information the agency is attempting to obtain. In instances of prior engagement, it is incumbent on the agency to highlight any major changes that have occurred or are being considered at the point of the most recent request, as well as lifting up any points of potential controversy for feedback. Providing specific requests and the requisite background information will only help groups provide the most useful feedback to the agency.

Specific Responses to FRN Questions for the Asian American community

1. Are there any groups missing from the proposed code list? If so, please identify them and suggest how the groups should be classified and why.

We appreciate that the list of terms that are assigned codes in the Proposed Race/Ethnicity Code List for the American Community Survey (ACS) and the 2030 Census has been greatly expanded, particularly under the Asian category. The inclusion of transnational groups such as Hmong, Rohingya, and Indo-Guyanese is encouraging. This expansion reflects the growing diversity of an already-diverse group.

At the same time, this expansion can be much more thorough and systematic for the Asian category. For example, the two largest Asian groups, Chinese and Asian Indian, have a similar number of subcodes as the Burmese group. There is evidence that there should be many more subcodes under the Asian Indian and Chinese categories. For example, the Asian Indian code 4221 has 18 subcodes, many of which are language or region based. However, those 18 subcodes fall short just based on the 36 official regions (states and union territories). Similarly, under the Chinese code 4021, there is a mix of terms that include sub-geographic (Cantonese), ethnicity (Manchurian), and transnational (Peranakan), but the terms are not comprehensive. Moreover, in China, there are 56 recognized ethnic groups and 22 provinces, many of which are not included in the proposed code list, far exceeding the 12 subcodes under Code 4021.⁶

⁶ See, e.g., List of ethnic groups in China, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_groups_in_China; <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/679341468216945542/pdf/647630BRI030Bo0IC00China0brief00928.pdf>.

As such, the Census Bureau should have a formal, comprehensive, open, and transparent process that includes consultation with the communities to be classified. This process is important when the coding staff find a new term in the race and ethnicity responses that does not fit within the adopted coding classification system, especially for groups that are transnational and do not fit in the largely national-origin-based classification. This process would avoid the issue currently facing many Burmese minority groups, such as the Chin, Karen, and Karenni, who may prefer a category or tabulations separate from the Burmese majority ethnic group, for cultural, historical, and linguistic reasons.

2. Are any groups on the proposed code list misclassified? If so, please identify them and suggest an alternative classification or indicate if the term should be removed.

We believe that the CHIU CHOW term under 4021 Code for Chinese is an alternative romanization of the TEOCHEW term under 4100 Code. Unless the Census Bureau has strong research backing up the decision to separate the two romanizations, we favor keeping the 4100 Code and combining responses to accurately code this diasporic community.

We are also unclear about the process or decision that granted Hakka, Han, and Tibetan separate codes under the Chinese umbrella code range (4020-4039), while large and equally distinct groups such as Cantonese and Mandarin remained under the 4021 Code.

We encourage the Census Bureau to consult directly with Burmese minority communities such as the Chin, Kachin, Karen, etc., regarding how their responses are currently coded under the same code number as the Burmese majority. There appears to be code space available to accommodate a similar structure to that of the Chinese category, where Han, Hakka, and Tibetan responses have separate codes but are under the general Chinese range of codes. Only then will we have the data available to determine whether those groups have sufficient population sizes to meet reporting thresholds.

3. Are there alternative terms, abbreviations, or in-language terms people may use to identify with a specific group that should be added to the proposed code list? If so, please identify them and suggest a classification.

We do not currently have specific suggestions for this question. In general, the Census Bureau needs to be aware of potential alternative romanizations or spellings of terms that describe ethnic groups and indigenous terms used to describe ethnic groups that may differ from names applied during colonial eras.

4. How do you use the data produced for regional categories from the 2020 Census? How would removing regional categories from the code list and tabulated products impact your ability to use the detailed race/ethnicity data? Would the ability to create your own regional categories using disaggregated data be useful to your work?

The regional groups were a missed opportunity to provide additional means to disaggregate race and ethnicity data, especially for the Asian American community. We have seen the population of Asian Americans grow faster outside the top six groups of Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese since 2000. The share of the other Asian categories in the 2000 to 2020 Censuses has increase from 12% in 2000 to 20% in 2020. Additional means to create disaggregated categories that meet population thresholds by aggregating similar communities would have provided new levels of detail for Asian American communities. However, the regional categories from the 2020 Census as implemented were problematic in a number of ways.

Asian Alone	2000 Alone	2010 Alone	2020 Alone
All Asians	10,019,410	14,314,103	19,886,049
Indian	1,678,765	2,843,391	4,446,058
Chinese (except Taiwanese)	2,314,537	3,137,061	4,128,718
Filipino	1,850,314	2,555,923	3,076,108
Vietnamese	1,122,528	1,548,449	1,951,746
Korean	1,076,872	1,423,784	1,508,575
Japanese	796,700	766,078	741,544
Other Asian Categories	1,179,694	2,039,417	4,033,300
Other Asian Categories Share of Asian Population	12%	14%	20%

First, the regional groupings used by the Census Bureau included the misclassification of Hmong as an East Asian regional group for the 2020 Census coding list.⁷ As a SEARAC petition signed by over 1,7000 individuals stated, “The Hmong community is bound by a shared indigenous history and culture that finds its roots in the lush mountains of Southeast Asia. Our connection to countries like Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and parts of China is the heartbeat of who we are. Our language, customs, and traditions tell a story of resilience and strength. We have faced many hardships, including forced migration and persecution, but

⁷ See the Census Bureau’s Race and Ethnicity Codes in Appendix F of PL94-171 Redistricting Summary File Technical Documentation (https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/technical-documentation/complete-tech-docs/summary-file/2020Census_PL94_171Redistricting_StatesTechDoc_English.pdf). See also SEARAC, Press Release, Hmong Leaders Meet with Census Director on Hmong Misclassification, May 30, 2024 (<https://searac.org/news/hmong-leaders-meet-with-census-director-on-hmong-misclassification/>).

through it all, our distinct identity as Southeast Asian has remained unwavering.”⁸ An earlier SEARAC letter sent to the Census Bureau on March 2, 2023 noted, “[a]ccording to the American Community Survey, nearly all foreign-born Hmong Americans migrated from Southeast Asia, which the Bureau defines as including the following countries: Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. The most recent American Community Survey estimates [at the time of March 2023] show that 95.6% of Hmong Americans reported Southeast Asia as their region of origin, while only 1.6% reported East Asia.”⁹ In addition to the community’s understanding of Hmong as Southeast Asian American, this is also well-established in academic literature.¹⁰ This misclassification, and rejection to reclassifying the community as a Southeast Asian regional group, has resulted in concerns by Hmong community leaders. Specifically, their concerns include that this will depress participation by their community members in future census surveys. Therefore, this error should be rectified in any future coding lists that use these regional groupings.

Second, the way in which the regional groups were defined meant that for each regional group, the largest subgroup was significantly larger than the rest of the regional group. This can be problematic because the data about a regional group would be skewed heavily towards the largest group, which may or may not be representative of other subgroups within that regional group. As a result, the other subgroups would be rendered invisible and could potentially inadvertently create misinformation about the community. For example, Indian Americans comprised 77 percent of the South Asian regional group. Among South Asians, Indian Americans have a much lower poverty rate of 6.1 percent, compared to Bangladeshi and Pakistani Americans (the next two largest South Asian groups in the US), who had poverty rates of 14.0% and 13.5% respectively.

Because of these concerns, we support the removal of regional groupings from the code list. What is most important for our work is having access to the underlying disaggregated data, rather than the regional group data. This is especially the case where, due to the disclosure avoidance system in place for the 2020 Census, aggregating the population

⁸ SEARAC, Letter and Petition, Follow-up Request for Reclassification of the Hmong as Southeast Asian in Census Data, March 8, 2024 (<https://live-searac2024.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Letter-and-Petition-to-Director-Santos-on-Hmong-Census-Misclassification.pdf>).

⁹ SEARAC, Sign-on Letter of 57 Hmong American; Southeast Asian American; and Asian American, Native Hawai’ian, and Pacific Islander organizations sent on March 2, 2023 to the Census Bureau (on file with author).

¹⁰ For a selection, see, Wayne Carroll, “Economic Progress of Hmong Americans: The First Twenty-Five Years,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 23 (January 2021); --- and David Schaffer, “Employment and Wages of Hmong and Other Southeast Asian Refugees in the United States,” *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 19, no. 4 (2021): 526–539; Bic Ngo and Stacey J. Lee, “Complicating the Image of Model Minority Success: A Review of Southeast Asian American Education,” *Review of Educational Research* 77, no. 4 (2007): 415–453; Arthur Sakamoto, John Iceland, and Thomas Siskar, “The Socioeconomic Attainments of Second-Generation Southeast Asian Americans in the 21st Century: Evidence from the American Community Survey, 2012–2016,” *Population Research and Policy Review* 41, no. 1 (2022): 59–88.

totals for specific detailed Asian groups from the Detailed Demographic and Housing Characteristic files resulted in totals with larger margins of error and was specifically not recommended by the Census Bureau. The existing regional groupings from the 2020 Census did not work in practice, despite the potential and intention of their use.

To that end, while we appreciate the Census Bureau's continual increase to the race and ethnicity code list to accommodate the growing diversity of the Asian American population, the level of detail that is collected is currently not reflected in published data tables. While the regional grouping was meant to help meet this need, we believe that it would be more helpful to provide end-users with the ability to create their own aggregations to best advocate on behalf of their communities. For example, we think it would be helpful if there was a standalone, user-friendly app or data tool that would allow the public to create their own customized aggregated groups for their advocacy needs to reach population thresholds that meet privacy and data accuracy requirements. One example would be being able to aggregate similar socioeconomic groups like a large share of refugee populations, like Burmese, Nepalese, Vietnamese, and others, together to achieve the 65,000-population threshold for specific jurisdictions, where we would then be able to request 1-year ACS data to more timely track the status of those communities, rather than waiting for every 5 years for the Selected Population Tables from the ACS 5-year data product.

Conclusion

We thank the Census Bureau for the opportunity to comment on the Proposed Race/Ethnicity Code List for the American Community Survey and the 2030 Census. As noted, we believe this is an important step in ensuring that the coding list and editing and tabulation processes for the ACS and the 2030 Census best reflect the make-up of our community and the intent of respondents. In addition to the feedback collected through the coding FRN, we strongly encourage the Bureau to conduct further research to better understand the potential effects of different coding, tabulation, and editing approaches. Additionally, we recommend that the Census Bureau infuse transparency and robust, meaningful public engagement into this process to more accurately capture respondent intent and reduce the risk of misidentification. Finally, we lift up our recommendations related to removing the regional groupings and creating a user-friendly mechanism by which the public can provide customizable, aggregate data. If you have any questions, please contact me at tminnis@advancingjustice-aaajc.org or (202) 815-4412.

Sincerely,



Terry Ao Minnis
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Asian Americans Advancing Justice – AAJC