

Rep. Stephen Horn  
Chair  
House Government Reform and Oversight  
Management Committee,  
House of Representatives,  
Washington, D. C.

6 May 1997  
Re: Census Proposals

Dear Congressman Horn:

For several decades persons of Native American (American indigenous) ancestry and interested scholars have been trying to persuade the Bureau of the Census and the Office of Management and Budget to use ethnic categories which will allow all Native Americans, including those from Mexico, Canada, Central America and South America, to identify themselves and to mention the languages spoken in their homes. This information is vitally needed by public school districts, by the Administration on Native Americans, by social service agencies, and by Native American organizations.

We have been unsuccessful for several reasons, among them being the political interference in the process by self-interested persons from Spanish-speaking organizations who fear the loss of significant numbers to an indigenous American category. Similarly, African-American organizations have feared the loss of numbers to either an indigenous or a mixed-race category because many African-Americans are part-Native American.

Our search for accuracy has also been thwarted by the Bureau of Indian Affairs which has sometimes sought to have only so-called federally-recognized Native persons counted by the Census Bureau, a perspective which ignores the vital interest of other federal and all state and local agencies in having an accurate ethnic count. The vast majority of Native Americans are not served by the BIA and this includes large numbers of urban Indians and terminated Native California tribal members here in the state of California.

We are also very concerned because now the majority of the farm workers in many California counties, such as San Diego, are speakers of Mixtec, Zapotec, Maya and other Native American languages. They are often unable to speak Spanish even though they may possess Spanish-surnames. Some individuals have experienced psychiatric and penal incarceration because no one in an official capacity could understand what they were saying. Many school districts

are having difficulty because it is assumed that the children are Spanish-speakers when, in fact, Spanish may be only a second language and not the home tongue.

In any case, it is vital, especially for California, Florida, Texas, Arizona, and many other states with large numbers of Native Americans from Mexico and Guatemala, that accurate data be collected by the Census Bureau and by the official forms used by other federal and state/local agencies.

It is also vital that the political nature of the Census categories be set aside once and for all in favor of categories which will more accurately reflect the genetic and biological as well as the social realities of the persons being counted or documented in some form, such as a birth certificate. We are in an age where reasonably accurate biological data can make the difference in life or death for a young child needing a bone marrow transplant. That need should take precedence over any political considerations.

As I point out in the enclosed material, it is quite easy to come up with categories which reflect biology to a considerable degree, and yet which are not too cumbersome. Basically, this simply means trying to get accurate geographical background data since geography (including specific countries of origin) and genes correspond much better than do vague politico-linguistic groupings (such as "Hispanic"). At the same time, it is possible to improve upon present social categories also, since it is nonsense to force persons to place a check mark for a group which they do not actually affiliate with. Of what value is that, except to perhaps funnel money to some organizations which probably don't serve the people being coerced into a false identity?

Our social service agencies and other institutions need to have accurate data on the social/ethnic identities of our people, not politically-motivated and ultimately meaningless conglomerations.

Thus I would hope that you and your colleagues would at last bite the bullet and take the politics out of ethnic/racial categories. I believe that our ethnic communities have nothing to fear from accurate information and our people in the future will be extremely thankful for birth certificates and other documents which tell them a little bit more about their biological origins.

Please note, that the classification system adopted eventually will have a great impact not only on the census but also on birth and death certificates, medical research studies, and numerous other kinds of official forms used by agencies such as NIMH, NIH, the Bureau of Labor Statistics and so on. This is why it is so crucial to take politics out of the determination of terms. It is also important to ignore some statistician's desires for "compatibility" since having a compatibility of terms is less than useful if the terms in themselves are deceptive or meaningless.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely yours,

Jack D. Forbes  
Professor of Native American Studies  
and Anthropology