

An Open Letter to Demographers of Racial Change

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Enough already! The first half of 2018 has yielded a bumper crop of foolishness about white extinction and vanishing white America. What is going on? We all know that is not the case: whites will remain the largest population group in the U.S. for the rest of the century or longer. This makes for sensational headlines and certainly grabs attention. But what is the point; and for what purpose? “Extinction” and “vanishing” may not have been exactly your choice of words, but they were the words journalists are encouraged to use based on your press releases. The end result of these escapades is that the conclusions you send to the public are wrong, misleading, and are having a divisive and destructive impact in our diverse, American democracy.

“The reason we are marching is that we are white, we are a people and we will not be replaced!” Is this the desired news headline? The quote is from Richard Spencer, a leader of the white nationalists, made before a 2017 torch-lit march in Charlottesville. Who told him he was being replaced? Who said white extinction is at hand? In fact, unnamed liberal advocates and hard-right websites both are spreading the gospel taken from demographers, and sadly it is not true. Yet still we seem to fan the embers on this resentment of racial replacement, this fear of the so-called explosion. Why can’t we approach our public relations with a little more care for what is true and how the audience may react?

No one is saying demographers’ numbers are in error, but the wrong things are sometimes measured, the wrong numbers sometimes used, and the wrong conclusions all too frequently drawn. This public gaffe is all the more embarrassing because it comes in a year when we have multiple layers of evidence that the way we talk about racial change in America has deep political impacts. Demographers too often have been failing the test.

The Burden of Using Old Data and Methods to Describe the Future

Demographers seem stuck doing things the old way, which may be the best approach for historical trend analysis, but once you cross into the 21st century and want to talk projections, well then we have to talk about the new trends and the future. There is too much damage that is done by only looking backward and reusing racial models from the past. Demographers need to be talking about the new trends of the new century, the projections of the future, and what that all means for public policy today. Our failures in this regard are why I am sending out this open letter to my colleagues who report on racial trends and projections.

Most of us are using the same analysis procedures this year as we did back in the 1990s, even though the Census Bureau totally overhauled their racial definitions and measurements in 2000. Now that we are nearing the end of the second decade of the 21st century, why would

demographers still be using racial binaries (white vs. nonwhite) and mutually exclusive categories? At best, the public analysis I see reported only uses half of the available race data, the half that comes closest to the oldest idea of race in America, namely the “one drop” rule, that says any portion of nonwhite blood makes a person nonwhite, no matter what is their mother or father’s race or no matter how they truly identify.

Let me share exactly where I am coming from, because this was reported in two publications recently, one in the [Annals](#) of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, the other in the [Washington Post](#) (both co-authored with the political scientist Morris Levy). The Annals study, part of the May issue, devoted to “what Census data miss about American diversity,” reviews the changes in Census Bureau race projections since 2000 and tests the impacts of alternative versions of reporting on a randomized sample of white voters. It received favorable coverage in outlets ranging from [Vox](#) to [Reason.com](#). To be brief, as a result of some method changes, the Bureau accelerated the rate of white decline to minority status between projections conducted in 2000 and 2008, lowering the date from 2059 all the way down to 2042, a 17 year acceleration (see [Table 2](#) in the Annals). The most recent projections (as of 2018) have slowed the change back a bit, to 2045.

Even the 2045 date is an exaggeration, of course, because it does not count all the white population. Many data consumers do not know that the Census Bureau actually tracks six definitions of white in their projections. There is a larger, inclusive count of each race and a smaller, more exclusive count, the latter having subtracted out all whites who also identify with another race (people such as Meghan Markle, who has a white father and black mother, and now is a member of the British royal family.) The Washington Post featured [her example](#) in the column they ran on May 18, her wedding day, to emphasize that under the exclusive census definition used in this country, her part of the royal family could never be white, only black. But the Queen of England doesn’t seem a bit concerned about such nonsense. The exclusive definition of white also subtracts all Latinos who are partly white and non-Hispanic, reserving them only into the category called Hispanic. That removes from white the children of Jeb Bush and Ted Cruz, among many other notable figures. The residual category of non-Hispanic white alone, i.e. not mixed with any other parentage, indeed is a slowly declining number because of growing intermarriage and rising numbers of young people who identify with more than one race. The rise of mixing in families across lines of race and ethnicity and the social recognition now given to mixed children, in fact, now constitute a vitally important 21st century development.

The Census Bureau knows this problem of racial classification and handles it by reporting both exclusive and inclusive definitions of white. You can see the latest projections comparing these numbers out to 2060 [here](#). It is up to the users to decide which version of white is best. The Myers-Levy article in the Annals carefully discusses the options. Regardless, we believe that the rising rate of mixed parentage, as analyzed by Richard [Alba](#) and colleagues, suggests that 21st century ethno-racial trends are being shaped by the growing numbers of multiracials and mixed Hispanics, especially at young ages, about 80% of whom are white in combination with another race. Alba’s most recent, unpublished analysis, of the 2017 Census Bureau projections, shows that they imply soaring numbers of individuals who are partly white; if they are counted with other whites, then whites will not become a minority by 2060, the end date of the projections. It

is crucially important, obviously, to understand better the social locations of Americans with partly white and partly minority parentage. The evidence so far demonstrates nevertheless that many are—and feel—integrated with whites.

Why does the Washington Post column claim that the decline of the white majority is a myth? The reason is that it depends on the archaic belief in exclusion of whites who are of mixed parentage. Rather than suffering exclusion by society or the Census Bureau, the mixed-race children of white parents today can be better understood as the progeny of expanding white inclusiveness. Instead of depleting the ranks of whites, as dictated by the exclusive rule, whites of mixed parentage are *adding* to the white race, much as Meghan Markle is proudly adding her black heritage to the royal family in Britain. The definition of whiteness is expanded and richer for it.

Very Real Political Impacts Follow Demographers' Choices

A series of studies have now shown that white voters react very defensively to the threat of racial change that will transform them to [minority status](#). This white anxiety may seem to have all the weight of irrational hyperbole in its outsized fears of [extinction](#), but the sentiment should not be taken lightly in view of the fact that whites will remain a majority of U.S. voters to 2050 and beyond, due to their older age and higher voter participation, even if they lose their majority of the population. In only 12 states in 2050 will whites not retain a [majority of eligible voters](#). Yet evidence is mounting that the fear of cultural replacement was a [major factor](#) in tipping the 2016 presidential [election to Donald Trump](#). Do we really want to encourage whites to vote defensively against inflated fears that are driven by faulty demographic studies?

The public widely believes that whites are rapidly declining to minority status, but that is based on reports skewed by the old definition of white exclusivity. What might be the consequences for white anxiety and defensive voting if the public knew the broader story, namely that a white majority will be sustained to 2060 and beyond when we respect self-identities and report the inclusive definition of white?

The new Annals study of racial projections tested the responses of white voters to these alternative stories about the racial future. In a randomized experiment, summarized in the Annals [Figure 1](#), white voters were assigned to read alternative news stories about the racial future, all based on different takes on the Census Bureau projections. One was the standard account of impending minority status for whites, derived from the exclusive definition. When asked how the story they read made them feel — angry, anxious, hopeful or enthusiastic — results were clear-cut. White Democrats (46%) and especially Republicans (74%) expressed anger or anxiety when reading the story of impending white-minority status.

Negative emotions were far less common when white participants read the alternative story about the more inclusive white majority, explained as due to increasing intermarriage, that would endure through 2060 or longer. Only 35% of Democrats and 29% of Republicans expressed anger or anxiousness after reading this scenario. These results imply substantially more positive feelings about the more inclusive and enduring white majority among nearly a quarter of the

Democrats and two-thirds of the Republicans who otherwise might be agitated about the story of imminent white decline to minority status. Apparently, racial intermarriage was viewed as less troubling than having the white group fall to minority status.

Further analysis shows that whites who feel racial threat and fear whites becoming a minority do [react defensively](#) in the voting booth. They support strong social restrictions and decline to pass tax measures that would provide “welfare benefits” to the poor. They also are more likely to turn down school bond issues that are needed to educate the next generation. In a word, under perceived threat, white voters become defensive and less generous and supportive of their fellow citizens. Finding a description of racial change that makes whites more comfortable with real changes is important, especially if they retain a voting majority at the same time as they think they may be falling to minority status.

It is Time for Updating Professional Practice

Demographers need to be cognizant of these consequences of choosing the wrong projection data and reporting it to the public without regard for the impacts on their audience. The most exclusive definition of white leads to the most dramatic story of decline, gets the most attention in the short run, and also may be the most damaging in the long run to the interests of the democracy. The exclusive definition is also increasingly outdated and the wrong choice for describing the changing demography of the 21st century.

Why should demographers persist in using the old method of racial categorization? Why deny young people the right to be white if that is what they choose to check off on their census forms? And why deny whites the comfort of knowing they can belong to a more inclusive majority for the rest of the century? The Census Bureau provides an ample amount of data from racial projections that use the 21st century method of categorization, so why should demographers ignore it? The answer can't be just that demographers enjoy the adrenaline rush of media attention when we ring alarm bells of vanishing white America.

The more often excuse heard is that using the new data isn't practical. The strongest incentive is not about the meaning of race but simply the convenience in getting the numbers to add up to a 100% total. Demographers protest that if you count people in more than one race category it no longer sums to 100%. In fact, we show in [Table 1](#) of the Annals article that the inclusive total sums to 120%. That's the 21st century reality: people belong to more than one category of race. A black person who is also Hispanic might prefer to sometimes be counted as black and sometimes as Hispanic. Now we can count them both ways. When calculating the shares of the total, simply divide by the total population. Yes, the shares will still sum to 120%, but when the press is speaking of the trend in the white share of the population, we don't see them adding up any shares. All they are tracking is the white share of the total and any other group's share that could be larger than whites. Just give each group its own share and acknowledge they sum to more than 100% due to dual membership. That is the new reality for the 21st century.

The Census Bureau gives us the data for the inclusive alternative and we should use it. This is not too difficult for demographers, and we can help the public handle it as well. The nation's

problems of division and polarization should not be made worse by demographers' lack of facility with using the 21st century data. That would be unfortunate commentary on our professional work as well as on our care for civic responsibilities when speaking to the public.

On this Fourth of July we celebrate the greatest democracy on Earth. Our nation's excellence stems from our success in incorporating people from so many origins, with different religions, political leanings, and races and ethnicities. The many differences sometimes seem like potential fault lines but the mosaic melds together through our positive interactions across boundaries that also are blurring over time. Demographers can help cast the light ahead so that the nation continues to grow into its fullest potential.

With highest hopes

D. M.

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