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Ethnic groups say 'white' isn't enough on the 2010 census

Arab Americans, others fear loss of benefits if ancestry not accounted for

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As a land of immigrants, the United States is home to people from all corners of the world.

And in the past, it has documented where its people hail from by using the U.S. census, conducted every 10 years as mandated in the Constitution.

But the 2010 census form -- in a departure from 2000 and previous decades -- will not contain a question asking people about their ancestry, prompting concern among metro Detroit's diverse ethnic communities. Many in the sizable Arab-American population in metro Detroit -- who have faced a host of challenges during the past 10 years -- are particularly concerned.

Government officials say they eliminated the ancestry question along with several others because they wanted a shorter form that will make it easier for people to complete.

But ethnic groups are worried that they might lose their fair share of federal and private dollars since institutions often rely on census data to allocate funds.

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With her light-brown skin and Islamic headscarf, Khadigah Alasry of Dearborn said she doesn't see herself as white.

But the Arab American is officially classified as such by the U.S. government, which says that anyone with roots in the Middle East -- including north Africa -- is white.

"That's just weird to me," said Alasry, 23, born to immigrants from Yemen.

It's also weird for thousands of other Americans who say they don't fit into traditional categories of race in the United States. As the 2010 U.S. census prepares to tabulate millions of Americans, the issue of racial and ethnic identity is being debated as groups push to get their voices heard.

The census is conducted to get accurate population statistics that are used to determine the number of congressional seats and amount of government funding, and to ensure that minorities are not discriminated against.

The concern is acutely felt in metro Detroit, home to the highest concentration of Arab Americans and Chaldeans -- Iraqi Christians -- in the United States, according to 2000 census figures.

Having the ancestry question is important because terms like "white" and "black" are vague and don't

offer much detail, said ethnic advocates.

"There is no such thing as white culture," said Thaddeus Radzilowski, president of the Piast Institute, a Polish-American group in Hamtramck that is one of 56 census Information Centers in the United States and the only one in Michigan. Having the ancestry question "provides a better notion of our pluralistic society and who we are," Radzilowski said.

Polish Americans and members of other European groups, such as German Americans -- two of Michigan's most common ethnicities on the 2000 census -- are interested in keeping the ancestry question. But the issue has somewhat faded for them given that they, on average, are more culturally assimilated and not as visible in the post-Sept. 11 world as Arab Americans.

Discrimination and advantages

Since the 2000 census and 9/11, many Arab Americans say they have experienced bias. On the other hand, they also are being recruited for federal jobs and invited to participate in conversations with top U.S. leaders as the government finds itself involved in conflicts across the Middle East and the Muslim world.

But Arab Americans -- who make up about 1.5% of Michigan's population, based on the 2000 census -- won't be counted as such in 2010. Census officials say part of the reason was to streamline and shorten the form so that more people fill it out.

Two of the 10 questions will ask about a person's race -- white, black or Asian -- and whether the respondent is Hispanic. Arabs are considered white.

"It's unfair because we are not treated as white in society and by the government, but we also don't qualify as minorities to get the benefits of some programs" such as minority contracts, said Imad Hamad, regional director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

Still, Hamad and other Arab-American leaders are pushing Arab Americans to fill out the census forms because, in the end, they are part of wider communities, which would be adversely affected if there's an undercount.

Whites and blacks are not given the choice to further specify what their backgrounds might be. In the past, one out of six households would receive a long form with 53 questions, one of them asking about ethnic origin.

"We're aware of the problems with the census," Gary Locke, secretary of the Commerce Department, which oversees the Census Bureau, told a crowd of Arab Americans in Dearborn. "But we still need you to participate."

Locke and census officials said the ancestry question will be retained under the American Community Survey, which is done every month. But that survey reaches a much smaller percentage of the population than the full census.

Arab Americans and Chaldeans have varying views on the issue of race, said Andrew Shryock, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. His research showed that religion can affect racial identity, with Arab-American Christians much more likely to see themselves as white than Arab-American Muslims.

The imperfect racial label

Arab Americans and Chaldeans are 10 times more likely to identify their race as "other" as compared

with the general population, according to the Detroit Arab American Study, a survey in 2003 of 1,000 Arabs and Chaldeans in metro Detroit.

"I'm often told by Arab Americans that they check 'white' on official forms but do not feel that they are 'white white,'" Shryock said.

In 1997, Mostafa Hefny, an Egyptian-American Detroit resident, filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Office of Management and Budget -- which classified Arabs as white in 1977 -- in order to be classified as black. In the lawsuit, Hefny said, because of his dark skin and kinky hair, he was more African than blacks such as former Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer. The case was dismissed in 1998.

Another challenge in getting Arab Americans and other ethnic groups to participate in the census is that some may be reluctant to give personal information to the U.S. government out of a fear the information will be given to law enforcement, said community advocates. In 2004, federal officials said that the census had forwarded information on Arab Americans to a Homeland Security agency that had requested it.

"This is the first census post-9/11," said Kim Hunter of the Detroit office of the Census Bureau. "We don't know what effect that will have."

"There are traditionally undercounted groups out there," he said. "So we have to make sure folks are engaged."

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Race, ethnicity and the census

Race: On the 2010 form, question No. 9 asks a person to indicate his or her race. Choices are "White," "Black, African-Am, or Negro," "American Indian or Alaskan Native," and several Asian categories such as "Vietnamese," "Asian Indian," and "Chinese."

Hispanic: "Hispanic" is not considered a race, according to the U.S. census. On the 2010 form, question No. 8 asks if the person is "of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin" followed by several boxes to check. Some of the choices include "Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am, Chicano," "Yes, Puerto Rican," and "Yes, Cuban."

Ancestry: On the long form in 2000, given to one of every six people, respondents were asked to list up to two ancestries, such as Irish, Polish, Lebanese, etc. But the census tabulated only those ancestries from Europe and the Middle East. Ancestries from other regions of the world -- such as Asia and Africa -- were classified as races.

This question was eliminated for the 2010 census.

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Sources: U.S. census, interviews
