



Talking Points on the Need for a Question on American Indians and Alaska Natives in the 2030 Census Survey

The Department of Commerce has proposed removing a race and ethnicity question from the 2030 Census. On September 10, 2026, the Department of Commerce and the Census Bureau issued a Federal Register Notice that proposes changes to the decennial census form that “would prohibit the inclusion of questions about race and ethnicity... on the decennial census short-form questionnaire or any questionnaire used for purposes of the enumeration.” (91 Fed. Reg. 57524, 57527)

Why does the Census Bureau say it wants to no longer ask American Indians and Alaska Natives to identify themselves in the 2030 Census? It gives three reasons. (91 Fed. Reg. 57527)

First, it says that the decennial census is only required by the Constitution to allocate congressional seats. It ignores that the Constitution also mandates that jurisdictions not deliberately draw districts that harm particular population groups, such as American Indians and Alaska Natives.

Second, it claims that a single question asking if an individual is “American Indian or Alaska Native” raises the risk of identifying a particular household response to the census survey. But past censuses have shown that privacy can be protected without omitting the number of American Indians and Alaska Natives and where they live. Moreover, the Census Bureau has proposed adding a new question that would ask about “legal status” supposedly to identify “illegal aliens.” That undercuts the Bureau’s contention that it wants to eliminate a question about “American Indian or Alaska Native” from the census survey to shorten the survey and thereby strengthen privacy protections.

Third, it says the data must be excluded because of a recent Supreme Court decision and an Executive Order calling for the need to treat all Americans with “equal dignity and respect.” The Supreme Court decision does not require the exclusion of any data, including the number and percentage of people who identify as American Indians or Alaska Natives. Additionally, the only way to ensure that American Indians and Alaska Natives are treated with equal dignity and respect, and for federal civil rights laws to be enforced, is through robust 2030 Census data of American Indians and Alaska Natives that helps show when their rights are being violated.

How long has race been asked in the Census? The Census Bureau acknowledges that “demographic questions have been asked in every census since 1790.” (91 Fed. Reg. 57527) The first census form in 1790 included three categories for race. For the four censuses from 1820 to 1850, additional race categories were added. Later censuses requested demographic information through “questions asking about race, ethnicity, sex, age, citizenship, health, education, occupation, housing, military service, radio ownership, age at first marriage, and native tongue.” (91 Fed. Reg. 57527)

When were America's indigenous peoples added to the Census? The 1860 Census added a question for "Indians," but only those taxed because they did not live on tribal lands. In 1890, the category for "Indian" was expanded to include all Native Americans regardless of whether they lived on tribal lands. In 1950, "Indian" was changed to "American Indian" to distinguish Native Americans from Asian Indians. In 1960, following Alaska statehood, categories were added for "Eskimo" and "Aleut" and individuals were allowed for the first time to self-identify their own category, instead of census-takers doing it based upon their observations. Since 2000, decennial census forms have included "American Indian or Alaska Native." The 2020 Census added a write-in area to identify all Alaska Native villages, corporations, and tribes with which each person in a household identifies.

Why is data identifying American Indians and Alaska Natives needed? The 2030 Census, like previous decennial censuses, is a critical data source identifying American Indians and Alaska Natives to enforce federal, state, and local civil rights laws. It is essential for federal programs that need to know the number of American Indians and Alaska Natives to appropriate money fairly. The Indian Health Service uses the data to determine service needs, allocate health funds, and plan facilities. The Bureau of Indian Affairs needs it for housing, education, infrastructure, and economic development programs. The Bureau of Indian Education's uses include school construction, staffing, and funding. Other agency requirements for the data include the Department of the Interior to manage trust lands, the Department of Agriculture for rural development, and the Department of Transportation for infrastructure planning. The list goes on and on.

Can't the data be obtained from other Census surveys? No. The Census Bureau says it "is proposing restrictions only for the short-form decennial census questionnaire" and that it "is not proposing any restrictions on its ability to ask demographic questions on the American Community Survey [ACS] or other surveys that are not used for the enumeration of the population." (91 Fed. Reg. 57527-57528) But that ignores countless federal programs allocating billions of dollars annually require decennial census data in addition to supplemental data from other census surveys like the ACS. For example, the current Indian Housing Block Grant (IHBG) formula calculates housing appropriations to tribes by "using single-race and multi-race Census 2020 and the 2017-2021 American Community Survey data" and making the allocation "based on the greater of the two pursuant to the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2026 (Public Law 119-75, signed February 3, 2026)." (HUD, What is IHBG Formula?) Federal law requires that data of the number of American Indians and Alaska from the decennial census, such as the upcoming 2030 Census, be used to fairly distribute funding for essential programs.

Are other sources of the number of American Indians and Alaska Natives as accurate as the decennial census? No. The Census Bureau claims that other census surveys such as the ACS, "data from administrative records can fill information gaps," and "records sourced from other governmental agencies" can obtain demographic data instead of through the 2030 Census. But the Bureau's argument ignores that only the decennial census offers a complete headcount of everyone living in the United States.

Other surveys, such as the ACS, sample only a small number of households, which the Census Bureau has acknowledged has a high error rate for more sparsely populated communities such as Alaska Native villages and those on other tribal lands. The Bureau has explained that for areas with fewer than 65,000 people – which is nearly all Indian Country – "the ACS samples too few housing units to provide reliable single-year estimates." (Census Bureau, Understanding and Using American Community Survey Data at 13)

Administrative records are even less accurate and are intended to fill in gaps, not replace individual responses. Few tribes have provided the Bureau with administrative records. Those records that are available, such as tribal enrollment records, are notoriously underinclusive. Of the 7.1 million American Indians and Alaska Natives identified in 2020, only about 2 million are enrolled members of one or more tribes. That is why tribal enrollment was not asked on the 2020 Census survey.

What will happen if you are not asked if you are American Indian or Alaska Native in the 2030 Census? You will lose your voice. Your identity as an American Indian or Alaska Native will be erased from redistricting. Federal programs will use less accurate data, increasing the chances that tribal communities will be undercounted and underfunded. Acutely needed research will lose a key data source used to protect the health, safety, and well-being of members of tribes, indigenous communities, and Native corporations. Asking you to self-identify is individual sovereignty to help protect tribal sovereignty. Removing the American Indian and Alaska Native question from the decennial census survey is the ultimate breach of trust owed to indigenous peoples.

What can you do? Speak out. Register for and attend the virtual tribal leaders meeting on October 2, 2026. If you are a tribal leader, voice your concerns and ask the Commerce Department and Census Bureau questions that emphasize the harm to your tribe and your community (only tribal leaders will be allowed to ask questions during the session). Submit written comments opposing the proposed changes. Stand up and be counted.

Will an example of proposed comments be provided? Yes. After the tribal leaders session on October 2, 2026, AFN and its partners will provide sample written comments that you may use to help guide the comments you prepare.

How do you submit written comments? All comments must be submitted through one of these methods:

Electronic Submission: Submit all electronic public comments via the Federal e-Rulemaking Portal. Go to <https://www.regulations.gov> and enter USBC–2026–0628 in the Search box. Click on the “Comment” icon, complete the required fields, and enter or attach your comments.

Mail: Submit written comments to 4600 Silver Hill Road, Designation: ADDEMO/FRN, Washington, DC 20746.

What is the deadline for submitting written comments? If you are an individual or are submitting comments on behalf of a Native organization, the deadline is October 13, 2026. If you are a Tribal leader or are submitting comments on behalf of a Tribe, the deadline is November 2, 2026.

