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CLASSIFICATION OF ANCESTRY GROUPS IN DECENNIAL CENSUS

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United States decennial censuses give snapshots of both the number and the characteristics of the population. The questions used to obtain the information change as the population itself changes; both the particular questions asked, and the form of those questions gives us insight into the general thinking of American society. The collection of ethnic data reflects these changes.

Ancestry data are more difficult to collect than other social and economic information because of the lack of clear-cut definitions, changing terminologies, poor reliability, and lack of knowledge of the degree of affiliation with a group or groups. Although indirect measures such as own birthplace, parental birthplace, and mother tongue help estimate ethnicity because they are less susceptible to changes in reporting between censuses, a direct question on ancestry should give more useful information if criteria for inclusion in particular groups could be established with reliability. Ancestry would refer to the ethnic group, "roots", or country in which a person or person's parents or ancestors was born, regardless of the number of generations removed from their country of origin; the ancestry would reflect identification, but not the degree of attachment or association the persons had with the particular ethnic group(s).

Since the Census Bureau had never asked a question on ancestry before, a considerable amount of preparations was necessary to determine which groups would be coded, which would not, which would be subsumed into other groups, and what the general hierarchy of the named designations would be. This classification was complicated by the fact that immigration has not been constant, that some groups arrived before other groups, that geography which existed in the 18th and 19th centuries no longer exists, that some groups immigrated under circumstances which would probably make them uncomfortable about naming their sending countries, that some could not name their sending countries in any case because time since arrival of the group has been too long, or because their cultures were stripped away from slavery or other alienation.

The ancestry data from the 1980 census reflect the diverse nationality groups which have come to the United States throughout its history. Prior to the 17th century, most of the residents of this country were American Indians; however, most of the 7 million respondents who reported American Indian ancestry in the 1980 census did so in combination with other groups, such as German, Irish, and English. Persons of English, German and Irish origin - the three largest groups reported in the census - were the first to come in large numbers; the immigration of these groups peaked in the 19th century. From the early 17th century to the early 19th century, many Africans were forcibly moved to the United States. The number of "newer immigrant" groups, including the Italian and Polish, reached an apex in the early part of the 20th century. Other groups, such as Portuguese and Greek, have had significant, but relatively

smaller, streams of immigrants settling in this country. The immigrants during the last two decades include substantial numbers of West Indian, Spanish, and Asian persons; the latter two groups were also among earlier immigrants.

In order to determine the ancestry classifications, the Census Bureau prepared a preliminary list using a number of source materials, including the Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups. Persons knowledgeable in different aspects of ethnicity then reviewed the preliminary list for accuracy, consistency, and completeness. On the basis of a review of the comments, 1980 census results, and additional research, the Census Bureau determined a final list of ancestries for use in 1980 processing and display.

Persons knowledgeable in ethnic identification sometimes have different views on some classifications since several groups may justifiably be classified in various ways. As a result, some experts would have classified several groups in the ancestry code list differently.

Although the final list was not exhaustive, it was seen as a preliminary attempt to classify groups for census purposes. This paper, then, is a first attempt to reassess the selection criteria used in the 1980 as the Census Bureau begins to consider refinements in the list for use in the 1990 Census. In this paper, we will only be looking at European groups, partly because to look at all groups would necessitate a much wider scope, and partly because we have recently been prodded to look carefully at the European groups by Magocsi (1987) and others.