

## **AAA Recommends “Race” be Scrapped; Suggests New Government Categories**

**Mary Margaret Overbey**

ARLINGTON, VA — September 8, 1997. The US Government should phase out use of the term “race” in the collection of federal data because the concept has no scientific justification in human biology, according to a statement released today by the American Anthropological Association (AAA).

Instead of race, ethnic categories which better reflect the diversity of the US population should be used. The AAA statement includes five recommendations for changes in the way the government collects information about its citizens. It addresses the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Directive 15, which designates racial and ethnic categories used in the US census and in innumerable other public and private research projects.

“There are many misunderstandings associated with notions of race and ethnicity. The AAA advocates a more scientific and realistic approach to how the federal government categorizes Americans, and thus how Americans identify themselves,” said Mary Margaret Overbey, Ph.D., AAA Director of Government Relations. “The proposed directive 15 revisions are not significantly different from 20 years ago. Should Americans still be characterized in the same way for the new millennium and beyond?”

The recommendations outlined by the AAA include the immediate need for the OMB to combine the now-separate “race” and “ethnicity” questions into one question for the 2000 Census, and to eliminate “race” by the time planning begins for the 2010 Census. Respondents should also be allowed to identify more than one category in reporting their ancestry. Additionally, the AAA advocates more research to determine what terms best capture human variability in ways best understood by the American people.

Developed in 1977, Directive 15 describes four races (Native American or Alaskan Native; Asian or Pacific Islander; Black; and White) and two ethnic categories (of Hispanic origin and not of Hispanic origin). Although the Directive notes the absence of scientific

or anthropological foundations in its formulation, race and ethnic categories are used in federal scientific research and, as such, serve as a basis for interpreting research findings, ranging from biomedical to economic research. However, race and ethnicity categories used by the US Census have changed over time and rely upon an inconsistent mixture of principles and criteria, including national origin, language, minority status and physical characteristics. Since 1900, 26 different racial terms have been used to identify populations on the US Census.

The concept of race is a social and cultural construction, with no basis in human biology — race can simply not be tested or proven scientifically, according to the AAA. In fact, many Americans do not understand differences between race, ethnicity and ancestry categories in surveys, and fail to distinguish between them.

Probably the clearest data on human variation come from genetic studies. Genetic data do show differences between groups, and these can potentially trace an individual’s likely geographic origin. This can be helpful in such applications as health screening. Nevertheless, the data also show that any two individuals within a particular population are as different genetically as any two people selected from any two populations in the world.

Anthropologists are well qualified to speak on this issue. As an academic and applied discipline, anthropologists have been researching human variation for over 100 years. Founded in 1902, the AAA is the world’s largest organization of individuals interested in anthropology, and has nearly 11,000 members.

The AAA response statement and a fact sheet are available on the World Wide Web, <http://www.ameranthassn.org/ombprin.htm> For more information contact: Mary Margaret Overbey (703) 528-1902, ext 3006.