

Highlighting New Poverty Research

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"Place, Scale, and the
Racial Claims Made for
Multiracial Children in
the 1990 US Census,"
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Racial Studies*

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Place, Scale, and the Racial Claims Made for Multiracial Children in the 1990 U.S. Census

Background. One of the consistent findings from poverty research over the years has been that there are differences in the risk of poverty by race, with nonwhite groups generally having higher rates of poverty than whites. Although this is still true, the increasing size of the multiracial population as well as increasing attention to the social construction of race make racial classification and monitoring the economic status of racial groups more complicated. Previous research has shown that how people racially identify themselves sometimes depends on context. For example, some individuals may identify themselves differently at home and at work or school. The growing number of multiracial children also provides an opportunity for studying how children identify themselves or are identified by their parents and how the choice of a racial identity is influenced by various family, neighborhood, and metropolitan influences. However, how these contexts influence the classification of mixed-race children is not well understood.

Methods. Using 1990 Census tract data on parents in roughly 37,000 heterosexual, mixed-race (black-white, Asian-white, and Latino-white) households from twelve large metropolitan areas (Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Philadelphia, San Diego, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.), WCPC Faculty Affiliate Mark Ellis and coauthors Steven R. Holloway, Richard Wright, and Margaret East investigate how parents racially identify their mixed-race children. The authors use multinomial logistic regression analyses to examine how child and family characteristics such as nativity, father's race, and income; neighborhood characteristics such as percentage white, a measure of racial diversity, and median household income; and metropolitan area affected whether a child (under age 5) was identified as white, the non-white parent's race (i.e., black, Asian, Latino), or "Other."

Findings. Among the multiracial children in the sample, 41 percent were classified as white, 57 percent were classified as the race of the minority parent, and 2 percent were classified as "Other." The descriptive results show that children's racial identity is influenced more strongly by their fathers' race than their mothers': children with mixed-race parents are most likely to be classified as white if their father is white and to be classified as non-white if their father is non-white.

The regression results showed that parents' gender mattered for how children were identified, but this relationship was only significant in Latino-white and Asian-white families. In those families, children with white fathers were more likely to be identified as white; in black-white families, the father's race had no effect on how children were identified. Multiracial children living in neighborhoods with a higher percentage of white residents were also more likely to be classified as white. Black-white children living in neighborhoods with greater racial diversity were twice as likely to be identified by their parents as "other" rather than black or white (although the increased probability that a child with black-white parents was identified as "other" was still only about one in twenty). The effect of metropolitan contexts also varied by the type of family. Including metropolitan areas in the models improved model fit for Latino-white and Asian-white families, but not for black-white families. These findings provide a baseline for understanding various influences on racial identity. Because the 2000 Census allowed individuals to choose more than one racial category, future research will need to explore whether racial identification has become more or less sensitive to these contexts.

Poverty Research Flash

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Poverty Research Flash 2008-13

Place, Scale, and the Racial Claims Made for Multi-racial Children in the 1990 U.S. Census

New research from Steven R. Holloway, Richard Wright, Mark Ellis, and Margaret East

Key Findings

- Among the multiracial children in a sample of 37,000 mixed-race households in 1990, 41 percent were classified as white, 57 percent were classified as the race of the minority parent, and 2 percent were classified as "Other."
- Children's racial identity was influenced more strongly by their fathers' race than their mothers'. Children with mixed-race parents were most likely to be classified as white if their father was white and to be classified as non-white if their father was non-white.
- Multiracial children were more likely to be classified as white if their families lived in neighborhoods with a higher percentage of white residents.
- Neighborhood diversity was most important for black-white children, for whom living in a more racially diverse neighborhood increased the probability that their parents identified them as "other" rather than black or white. Including metropolitan areas in the models improved model fit for Latino-white and Asian-white families, but not for black-white families.