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Census Bureau word choice bothers some

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Just as the U.S. Census Bureau kicks off its campaign to raise awareness about the decennial survey, some in the African-American community are questioning whether its questionnaire is in desperate need of an update.

Question number 9 on the census form asks for a person's race. One of the options is "Black, African Am., or Negro." It's the last word that has drawn some ire since the bureau started its road tour in New York City earlier this week.

9. What is Person 1's race? Mark one or more boxes.

White
 Black, African Am., or Negro
 American Indian or Alaska Native — Print name of enrolled or principal

Asian Indian Japanese Native Hawaiian
 Chinese Korean Guamanian or Chamorro
 Filipino Vietnamese Samoan
 Other Asian — Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on. ✓ Other Pacific Islander race, for example, Fijian, and so on. ✓

"I wouldn't say it offends me, but it makes me feel uncomfortable," said Austin Jackson, a 16-year-old from Fremont who serves as president of the NAACP Youth Council in Alameda County. "It's unfortunate they would use such a clearly outdated term."

According to Sonny Le, a regional spokesman for the bureau, the term "Negro" has been on the survey for at least 100 years. He added the form is reviewed and analyzed thoroughly by different offices and advisory groups before being finalized.

Le said the decision to keep the term "Negro" on the form was due in large part to that fact some older African-Americans still identify themselves with the term. In fact, in the 2000 census, more than 50,000 persons chose to write down explicitly that they identified themselves as "Negro." That number does not include those who checked the box "Black, African Am., or Negro."

"We decided to keep the term, but at the same time, I think it's good for everybody to have this conversation now," Le said.

"The census is an evolving process. It's supposed to reflect our country. If enough people do not want the term, we should revisit again whether or not it belongs."

On Friday, the Census Bureau issued a release stating it will gather research from the 2010 census to analyze the effects of removing the term "Negro" on future surveys and the 2020 census.

Le said while he has not heard much about the controversy on the West Coast, he is well aware the term caused a mild media storm when the Census Bureau kicked off its road tour in New York City, including a story in the New York Daily News.

David Glover, executive director of Oakland Citizens Committee for Urban Renewal, a 55-year-old organization that is partnering with the Census Bureau this year to reach out to African-Americans in Oakland, agreed that the time for the word "Negro" has likely passed.

"The consensus among the folks I've surveyed is the word Negro needs to be retired," Glover said. "If there's anybody who still thinks of themselves as a Negro they have enough associative reasoning to know that black or African-American will apply."

Glover noted that his parents, who died last year at ages 96 and 90, had not used the term for themselves since at least the 1960s.

"That is not a term that anybody uses. Culturally it is obsolete, and it should be obsolete on that form," he said.

Glover expects that the term will be a turnoff to many African-Americans when they receive the questionnaires from the Census Bureau in March. That could be a problem for Glover and other community activists, who have been working hard to increase the participation of African-Americans in the once-a-decade count. Thousands of African-Americans in Alameda County and elsewhere were missed in previous census counts, according to previous government studies by the Census Bureau and the GAO.

If residents are offended, Glover said he will tell them to "go ahead and be counted, because being counted is the most important thing."

Jackson agrees people likely shouldn't spend too much time on one question on the U.S. Census.

"This is a good discussion to have," Jackson said. "But, honestly, there are more important things going on in the world right now than this."