

# ‘We’re talking about a big, powerful phenomenon’: Multiracial Americans drive change

While still a relatively small part of the population, more Americans than ever identify as multiracial, according to the census

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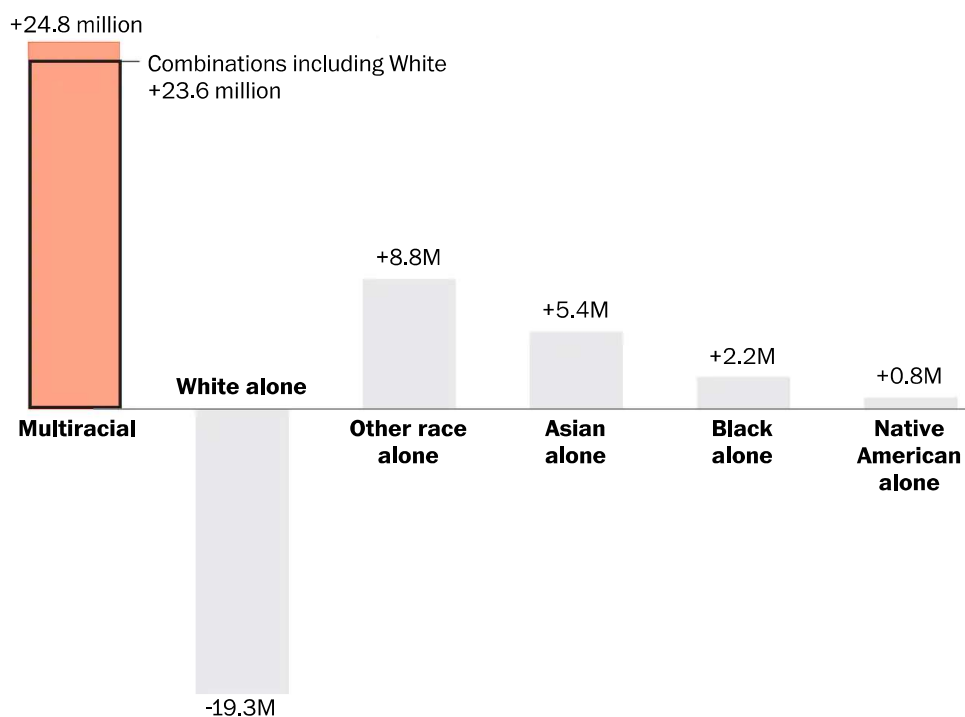
Tony Luna was once again being asked to choose one of his racial identities over the other.

He firmly believed in the anti-racism training his workplace was offering. But the instructor told him he had to pick a group for the program — either the one for White people, or the one for people of color.

Luna is biracial, Filipino and White, a combination that defined his upbringing and sense of self. He has always felt he was either both identities, equally — or in some settings, not fully one or the other.

## More people say they are multiracial

Here's how census numbers on race changed from 2010 to 2020



All races include people of Hispanic origin.  
Asian includes Hawaiian and Pacific Islander.

Source: 2020 Census

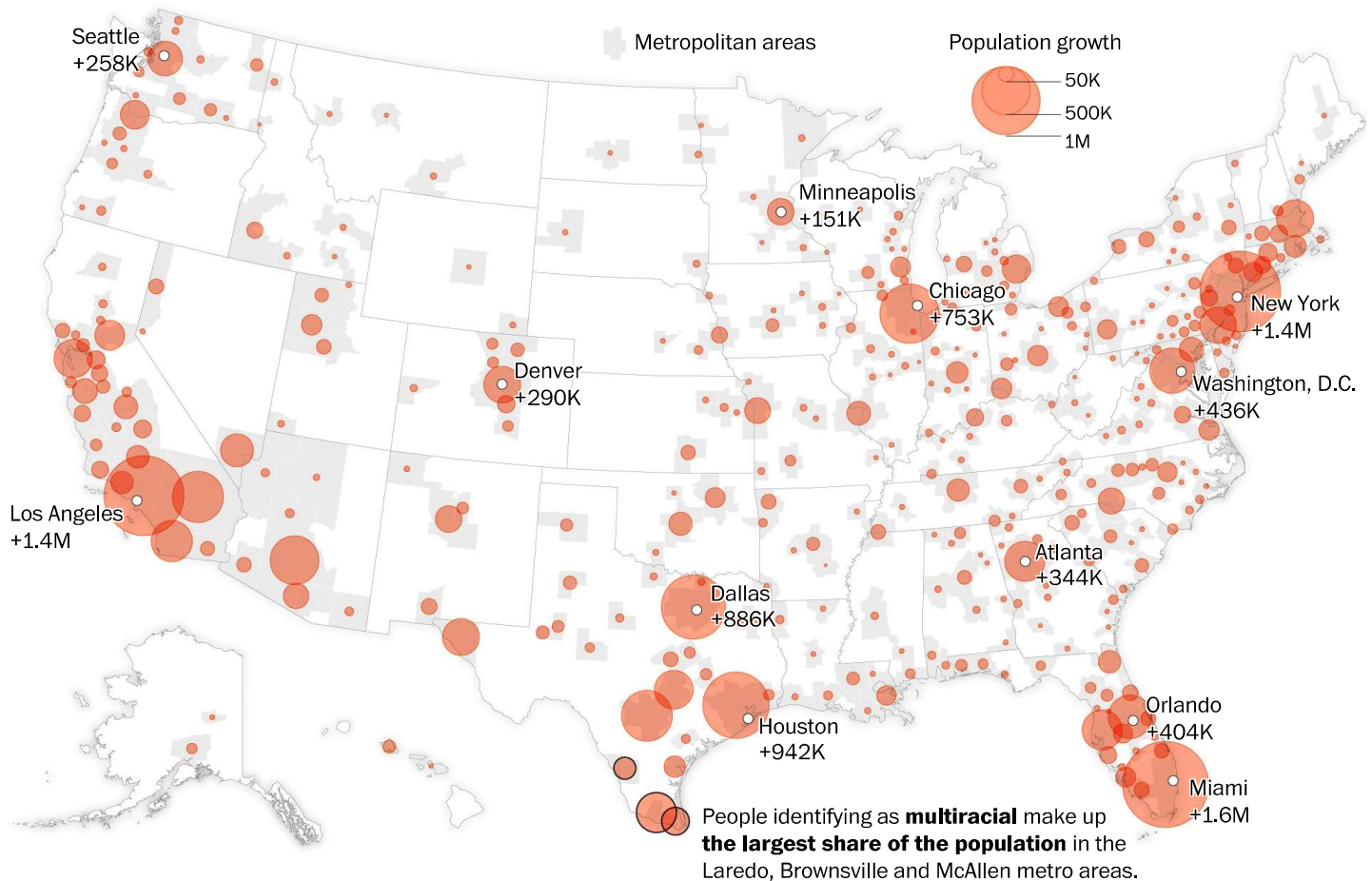
“I felt like it was a false choice, because you’re saying which one are you more comfortable with, your mom or your dad?” Luna, 49, said. “Identity can be based on how people see you, but that can be wrong for mixed people. It’s really based on how you identify, what your experiences are — so many variables go into that.”

More than 33 million Americans — about 1 in 10 — identify as being of two or more races, a number that grew by nearly 25 million people in the past decade, according to the 2020 Census. Multiracial people span all different combinations of races and ethnicities and make up the fastest-growing demographic in the country.

In some cities, the growth is stark. Almost 1.4 million more people each in Los Angeles and New York identified as multiracial in the 2020 Census compared with a decade ago, according to a Washington Post analysis. In Miami, nearly 1.6 million more did so.

## Multiracial population growth in metropolitan areas

Multiracial populations increased faster than any single race across the U.S. in the last census. Gains were highest in major metro areas, but the number of people identifying as multiracial also tripled in non-metro areas.



Source: 2020 Census

“The mixing of all sorts [of races] is really a new force in 21st-century America,” said Richard Alba, a demographer and professor of sociology at the City University of New York. “We’re talking about a big, powerful phenomenon.”

In a country that has been racked by racial strife since nearly its beginning, Americans who embody two or more racial identities that are often perceived as being at odds with

each other are seen by some as a symbol of hope for a future of racial harmony.

“You’re seeing the future of America right now,” said Luna, of Quakertown, Pa. “The more immigration, the more people become broad-minded, you’ll see more children and we won’t all look a certain way. It does give me hope for the future, and even for the present, that more and more people are mixing together like my family.”

But social scientists say such optimism may be premature, arguing that the growth in the number of multiracial Americans will not be enough to topple the institutional racism that dates back to the nation’s founding, and that such symbolism has the danger of promoting false notions of a post-racial America as its multiracial population grows.

“It’s hard to predict what this [growth] is going to do. I do not believe it’s going to make our society more racially tolerant,” said Reginald Daniel, a University of California at Santa Barbara sociology professor who identifies as multiracial, but is often perceived as Black. “But it is going to require a remaking of the way people think about race and the racial boundaries in our communities.”

Just what that remaking of race will look like, however, is unclear. Part of the answer lies in the reasons behind the increase in those who identify as multiracial.

There are a growing number of interracial couples in the United States as a result of the increase in immigrant populations, the legalization of interracial marriage and acceptance of interracial relationships, and technological advancements that make it easier for people to connect with those outside their communities. These couples’ children and grandchildren are leading the way for the multiracial population.

Census forms and coding have also been changed to capture more detail in responses to the race question and better identify multiracial people, according to Census Bureau officials. A growing number of people have also recognized that they could select more than one racial category.

Some people are identifying with multiple races for the first time after learning of their heritage through the proliferation of at-home DNA tests or ethnic studies courses that shine a light on their origins — an interpretation of race based on one’s lineage, with which some scholars take issue.

And as social scientists lean in to study this growing group with renewed interest, multiracial Americans like Luna are grappling with how to have more than one identity in a racially divided country — and finding a new voice as they grow in numbers.

“This is a newly developing phenomenon, so everything we talk about has no precedent,” Daniel said. “We’re trying to figure out how to navigate this, how to study this.”

## The rise of at-home DNA testing

Susan Graham, 70, identified as White until she took one of the popular DNA tests a few years ago. According to the results, she was 97 percent Ashkenazi Jewish — and 3 percent Black and Asian, she said.

Graham, who founded an organization to advocate for biracial children like hers — her husband is Black — marked all three races on the census, and now identifies as multiracial, not White.

“If anybody asks me, ‘Are you multiracial?’ I would have to say yes, I’m multiracial,” said Graham, of Los Banos, Calif.

The popularity and ease of at-home DNA tests have led to a problematic conflation of

genes and heritage with race, sociologists said. This has contributed to an unknown number of people marking multiple races on the census, despite having grown up identifying as one race, being perceived as that race and living in a culture that reflects that race.

“To say that translates to somebody identifying as White, Black and Asian because their genetic ancestry points to those places on the globe is just really wild and super problematic,” said Nitasha Tamar Sharma, a professor of Asian American and African American studies at Northwestern University. “I find this to be in some cases a really racist role of peak Whiteness.”

Sharma, who is multiracial, said if DNA testing is leading to more White people claiming non-White identities, that “makes it difficult to uplift and advance causes of historically marginalized groups.” It also reifies race as if it were genetic, when race is a social category based on culture, physical characteristics and a variety of other factors, she said.

It’s unknown how many people in the census who newly identified as multiracial are like Graham. But there is this: Though the number of non-Hispanic White people in the United States declined for the first time by 5 million — a widely reported figure — there was an increase of 7 million people who identified as both non-Hispanic White and another race, and are thus considered multiracial.

Sharma and other experts also said the country could be seeing a general cultural shift away from Whiteness amid the racial reckoning by a group of Americans who may no longer feel comfortable with an identity that has been associated with racism and the rise of far-right politics.

Graham founded Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally) in 1991 with another White mother out of concern for their biracial children. It was the decade of multiculturalism, when racial affinity groups at universities exploded in number and America was touting its diversity, Sharma said.

There was a push in the 1990s for the census to include multiracial people, but exactly how to include them was controversial. Graham and Project RACE advocated for a “multiracial” checkbox. This was opposed by the National Urban League and similar organizations, which argued that adding a single multiracial checkbox to the census would siphon off numbers — and therefore, funding and political representation — from marginalized groups.

A single checkbox also would make it difficult to analyze what racial combinations made up the multiracial population. In the end, the Census Bureau chose not to include a multiracial box and instead allowed people to check two or more races for the first time in the 2000 Census.

Graham said she did not see a problem with claiming a multiracial identity, despite being 97 percent White, and still advocates for a single multiracial checkbox.

“Being multiracial is a full person. When I start to break it down to White, Latino, Asian, whatever — it’s like taking parts of a person and building another person,” she said. “What we’re saying is we exist as a multiracial person. And that’s why we want to be recognized as multiracial, not as two or more races.”

## Latinos are multiracial

For more than 30 years, Desirée Boyer’s ethnicity was Hispanic, and her race was White. It was how her mother identified her on the census, and it was how she filled out school, work and other forms. Hispanic is considered an ethnicity, not a race, and is listed as a

separate question on the census and on many institutional forms.

But a few years ago, Boyer took a Mexican American studies class at a San Antonio community college that changed her sense of self-identification. She learned that her family — which had lived on Texas land for decades, and had uttered the refrain “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us” through the generations — was technically Indigenous to the area.

Suddenly, things started to make sense: the corn-based traditional food like tortillas and tamales, her brown skin, the fact that her family was Hispanic, but not immigrants.

“That’s where I started connecting, ‘Wow, we’re more than what they tell us,’” she said. “We are actually Indigenous, we are part of this land, we have these traditions and things that go so far back — why we don’t think about it, why we don’t go that far back in our history, is a shame,” said Boyer, 34.

So on the 2020 Census, Boyer marked White, in homage to her European ancestors, and American Indian, for her Indigenous ones, on the latest census. For her, marking Native American was both an act of reclaiming her Indigenous heritage and pushing back against the forces that had long told her Mexican American family to act White and assimilate to White culture.

In U.S. history, Latinos have traditionally marked themselves as White to avoid segregation and other forms of discrimination, said Juan Tejada, a retired Mexican American studies professor at Palo Alto College, the community college where Boyer took the ethnic studies class. He said the growth of multiracial Latinos represents a rising awareness of many Latinos’ inherent multiracialism as part European, part Indigenous and sometimes part Black.

But Sharma said one’s lineage as Indigenous does not translate to belonging to the Native American racial group, and so people discovering such lineage should not necessarily mark it on the census without sharing culture, community and other indicators of racial identity with Native Americans.

“The stakes for Indigenous people are so high. It feels like another form of erasure,” Sharma said. “I don’t think race can be put on and taken off. If one thinks one can do that, that shows one has not taken enough ethnic studies classes.”

“I think it’s complicated, though. Another professor might say they can do whatever they want,” Sharma added. “I think it comes with an ethical commitment to community.”

Luis Urrieta Jr. was born in Los Angeles, but he and his family are descendants of an Indigenous community in Michoacán, Mexico. On the census, he checked “Hispanic” and specified Mexican American on the ethnicity question, and checked “Some Other Race” for the race question and wrote in P’urhépecha, the name of his Indigenous group.

He said he did not check the Native American box because that racial category is “tied to a very particular experience and very particular political relationship that U.S. tribal communities have had to the United States historically” — which he does not share. “Their issues and their causes for tribal sovereignty and nation-to-nation diplomacy are very particular. And I have deep respect for that,” said Urrieta, a professor of cultural studies in education at the University of Texas at Austin.

American University professor Elizabeth Rule said assuming an Indigenous identity after having not lived your life as such is an issue, but not her biggest worry. The larger concern when it comes to the census is the undercounting of Indigenous people. And she said there is no easy answer regarding Latinos who have varying degrees of connection to Indigenous groups and whose cultural traditions themselves have Indigenous origins.

Even within the indigenous community there is tremendous diversity, said Kue, an enrolled citizen of the Chickasaw Nation and a professor of critical race, gender and culture studies. “We have people who are American Indian who are White-passing. We have people who are American Indian who are Black. And ... this sizable Latino population that now is also understanding their Indigenous roots and reflecting that in a document like the census. What’s really important is that we understand the usefulness, but also the limitations, of this census tool.”

Latinos in particular often find the census confusing because there is no racial category for them — which some advocates say is its own kind of erasure.

Latinos accounted for 17 million of the nearly 25 million more people who identified as multiracial on the 2020 Census. That means 17 million more people who marked their ethnicity as “Latino” also marked two or more races for the race question. Many of them chose “Some Other Race,” which some experts viewed as representing a need for a Latino racial category. The number of Latinos who identified as multiracial increased from 3 million in 2010 to more than 20 million in 2020, according to the census.

Census officials, however, cautioned against using such comparisons, particularly for multiracial and Latino respondents. The agency stated on its website that combining the question of Latino ethnicity into the race question on its survey would provide more clarity on both the Latino and multiracial figures.

Boyer said she wouldn’t join a tribe or profess to be culturally Native American. But embracing her native heritage on forms made her feel as if she was embracing the full complexity of her identity as a Mexican American in South Texas.

“I feel more confident in knowing more about what makes me Latino, what makes me mestizo,” or mixed, Boyer said. “I’m happy I finally know more about that, and I hope other Latinos will learn more, too.”

## ‘I don’t fit a stereotype’

Multiracial Americans span the spectrum of skin colors, racial combinations, cultures, traditions. Yet they grapple with similar challenges that arise specifically from being at the intersection of two or more races. “What are you?” is a common question many multiracial Americans said they are expected to answer — and tire of answering.

“[It] is a coded question of, ‘What is your status? How am I supposed to interact with you? Where do you fit in the racial hierarchy so I can determine how to interact with you?’” said Wei Ming Dariotis, a San Francisco State University professor who focuses on critical mixed race studies. “And that’s why mixed-race people make people feel so uncomfortable, because they don’t know how they fit in.”

She said sometimes when she responds that she is part Chinese and part Greek, people respond: “Wow, what a great mix!”

“I always wondered, ‘Is there a mix that you would think is not great?’” Dariotis said. “‘You have the best of both worlds’ is just the flip side of ‘You have the worst of both worlds.’”

Pennsylvania resident Sherry Ornitz, who is part Dominican and part Eastern European, said she often feels she is never Black enough, White enough or Hispanic enough to fit in.

“People need an easy, clear compartmentalized view of the world. That’s what they normally have,” said Ornitz, 47. “Because I don’t fit a stereotype, because I don’t fit an easy, compartmentalized ideology, a cognitive construct they were taught — I’m a threat.”

Multiple people said their multiracial identity has at times put them at odds with people of color, who perceive them as moving away from their non-White identity and betraying the community.

Daniel recalled a job applicant asking him what it was like being a Black professor at UCSB. Daniel quickly rebuffed her, saying he had no clue. Though Daniel looks Black, and said he would be treated that way if he were behind the wheel of a car and stopped by police, he does not identify that way.

“What she wanted me to do was say I was a Black person — and certainly that’s part of my experience,” he said. “But that’s not a complete component of my identity. And it’s taken years, decades for people to even grapple with that possibility,” he said.

But several multiracial Americans interviewed also said they’ve found a larger and stronger community of people like them in recent years that has given them more confidence to speak out about the obstacles they face and hope for what their role could play in the future of the country.

Their presence could “lead to moments in which racial stereotypes and people’s expectations are disrupted,” Sharma, the Northwestern professor, acknowledged. It won’t make systemic, structural change, she said, but it’s not nothing.

Multiracial people also often have a unique set of cultural competency tools that may come in handy while navigating an increasingly multicultural nation.

Steve Majors, 55, is biracial — Black and White. He has lighter skin and is often perceived as White. But he grew up in an all-Black household — he never knew his White biological father — and was raised by his Black mother and stepfather, with Black siblings.

He said his ability to navigate within both communities has given him “a sense of responsibility to be aware of the privilege that some people afford me, to be aware of how I might use the platforms that I have to speak out on issues of race, culture and identity.”

Majors said that the growing presence of people like him bodes well for the future.

“Our very existence is not going to undo years of oppression and discrimination,” he said. “But I hope over time it does create opportunities for people to see we are more alike than we are different, that we have more things in common with each other than we have differences between us.”