

A revised question in the 2000 census worries agencies who keep track of the race of employees for affirmative employment purposes, according to a February 2, 1999 article in the Kansas City Star.

This year, citizens will be allowed to check multiple boxes to declare their race, as compared to the 1990 census when they were instructed to check only one box from among five options. The government granted the new multi-check option because the earlier policy did not recognize biracial or multiracial citizens, the article points out.

But according to some human resource experts, the article notes, the downside of obtaining a more detailed picture of race in the United States is a record-keeping and compliance mess for agencies.

Human resource offices will have to retool their employee questionnaires to make the race categories match those provided by the census, says a spokesman for the Society for Human Resource Management. And Barbara Schneider, a consultant who specializes in consulting on affirmative action programs, says that resurveying of government workforces could be expensive.

In developing Affirmative Employment Plans, agencies are required to determine under-representation of women, minorities and persons with disabilities by comparing the racial makeup of their work force with the relevant minority population in the Civilian Labor Force. However, with multiple-choice reporting, it's going to be difficult to make any viable statistically comparisons.

"We're not sure if the government will break the data down into the 126 possible classifications," the article quotes Molly Metz, a lawyer at Blackwell Sanders Peper Martin in Kansas City as saying. "If they don't, they'll end up with statistics that don't make sense because the totals will equal more than 100 percent. If they do, the groups may be too small to be statistically viable."

The article points out that agencies have no specific guidelines from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as to how the 2000 race data will be interpreted.

"I don't recommend that anybody do anything right now," the article quotes Schneider as saying. "It may be five years before they put the census data together anyway. That's what it took to get the 1990 census done for affirmative action purposes."

XXXX