



After the Fact | Race and Research: Representation in Data

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TRANSCRIPT

Michael Dimock, president, the Pew Research Center: There's a paradigm shift that we have belatedly recognized: that there are elements of how we study our society that are not working.

Dan LeDuc, host: Welcome to "After the Fact." For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and we're continuing our look at race and research.

As we noted in our first episode of this season, the country is growing more diverse, with the census showing that for the first time the nation's white population has declined. How to reflect that growing diversity is increasingly essential in many fields of research, from public opinion polling to economics to epidemiology. The Pew Research Center reported this year that 46.8 million people in the U.S. now identify themselves as Black, up from 36.2 million two decades ago. And that 46.8 million is our data point for this episode. But researchers increasingly are working to get the nuances behind those big numbers. In this case, the Pew Research Center also found that the Black share of the population slightly increased, and that an increasing number of Blacks—now about 10%—are immigrants. That sort of context allows pollsters and other researchers to paint more accurate pictures of what society actually looks like. The process to dig more deeply often starts not just with the questions the pollsters want to ask, but with who is developing the questions.

We begin our discussion with Mike Dimock, president of the Pew Research Center.

Music break

Dan LeDuc: So much of what you do is serving public opinion. So I was hoping we could dive into some of the methodology there and learn a little bit more about how you do what you do and how it might be changing because of what's been going on in the past year or so. So take us to the very beginning of how a survey starts. I mean, when you start to do a survey, you start with questions. And I would imagine it even starts before the questions, with the staff you hire. You need a diverse staff who's going to be able to sit around a table and say, "This is an important thing for us to be looking at."



Mike Dimock: Every organization needs diversity, but for our organization, it is critical in terms of being able to be sure that we don't have blind spots in the way that we're thinking, both about our research topics and the way that we then design the surveys. That said, no organization can have every aspect of diversity in it. And so part of it is also about engaging with other stakeholders, engaging with other voices, to be sure that we ourselves are open to understanding the perspectives that we're trying to study.

Part of what we've experienced in America is that focusing on public opinion writ large, we've so much focused on the aggregation of our nation. And in doing so, we have not always heard from the full spectrum of voices that compose that public opinion in the country.

Dan LeDuc: We hope we have a program here that appeals to people who are into the data. So let's go ahead and give the data fans a little bit of how the sausage is made for a minute. How do you start taking these groups and breaking down the questions that allows you to start digging deeper?

Mike Dimock: At one level, we do care about the American public opinion writ large, the sum of the parts. The chorus of American democracy is the sum of many, many voices. And you want to be able to understand what those voices add up to. But you also want to be respectful that all of those voices have unique things to say.

We then do both a combination of national polls, where we don't have a sufficient sample size to be technical about it, to break apart every nuance of every group in society, whether it's racial ethnic groups, educational groups, occupational groups, you name it. But then in a separate track, we want to do deeper dive studies that are really focused on exploring within group diversity and breaking apart the myths and stereotypes that are too often applied when you only look through that first lens.

And so those are uniquely designed studies in no small part, because the questions that you even ask may be very different. Our work is really long and rich on Hispanic Americans. And you find that understanding what Hispanic identity even means in America requires a whole different mindset of questioning and understanding how people think about their roots in other countries, the importance of language, the importance of family association.

That really creates a much more textured view of what identity means and what challenges people face in their lives than you would if you tried to design questions that would make sense to everybody in America and not actually capture the richness of that experience of Hispanic Americans. And the same is true for any number of groups that you want to study, whether it's a religious group, an occupational group, or otherwise. But it's particularly relevant to understanding race and racial diversity.



So as we design work around Black Americans, around Asian Americans, around any group, we want to be sure that we're designing it with that in mind. And the most recent study we did on Black American religion, that was a very deep sample of 7,000-plus Black Americans, was a combination of online and mail outreach in order to really reach people across the board.

Dan LeDuc: Has the research community at large done a good job in the last half-century as public opinion polling started to become a real science in this country?

Mike Dimock: I'd say we've done a terrible job of representing minority voices to a large extent. And part of that, again, is that we relied on a particular set of tools. A survey of 1,000 or 1,500 Americans. And then we said, OK, that survey gives us about 100 or 150 Black respondents. And we can report on their attitudes because we have a sample of Black respondents.

Well, that's true, but we are treating Black respondents then monolithically. We're treating them as if all Black respondents are here and there's no diversity within Black America to represent. And then often we're then placing this monolithic view of Black Americans or Latino Americans or Asian Americans up against a much more textured view of White American attitudes by religion or age or gender. Why? Well, just because we have the sample size to do it. Not because they're intrinsically more important questions to be asking about diversity in our country. And so in that respect, yeah, I think survey research has done a pretty poor job of really reflecting diversity and really taking seriously voices across racial and ethnic groups. We've had, I think, a somewhat narrow-minded view of what our sample size is, what our research designs are there to achieve. Moving forward, again, those are now addressable issues. We can design work that really explores subpopulations of our country, whether along racial or ethnic lines or otherwise, in much more detail.

And we're doing more and more of that at the Pew Research Center, because that's what's lacking. As the market has grown, we're getting more of these national polls that in effect essentialize some of the groups in our society that are not singular. And so the space that needs to be filled is kind of breaking apart those stereotypes of groups in our society that actually have an enormous amount of diversity within them.

Dan LeDuc: So what is it that you are your research colleagues are learning by looking more closely at demographic groups?

Mike Dimock: If you really think about elements of diversity that relate to the subjects you're studying early, it leads you to think about your research design in new ways. And understanding that some of the common experiences that you might be expecting to measure could be thought of differently through different lenses. So here's one example. There's been an enormous conversation over the past year about trust in science related to the pandemic and vaccines and



so forth. That story has very different dynamics among Black Americans and among migrant Americans than it does among White Americans. There's different texture. There's different background.

And so, again, you can focus just on the gaps, and that's important. Trust tends to be higher among Whites than Blacks. But if you stop there, all you—you don't really get the full story. And in fact, that can be a misrepresentation of what's really the dynamic at stake. And if you're a decision-maker and you want to try to build confidence among Black Americans, it doesn't help you at all. Because all it's telling you is there's a deficit. We're doing more projects around confidence in science beyond the pandemic that try to wire that into the research design early.

That sometimes means asking questions of everybody that allow you to compare. But it also sometimes means asking questions specifically of some of the groups you're studying that won't make sense to everybody else but that really will help you understand the dynamic that you're observing.

Dan LeDuc: The Research Center has again done amazing Hispanic work over the last decade or more. You've been looking at Asian Americans and Black Americans more recently. What are you learning both in sort of the texture that we've been talking about those groups? And also, maybe what it's taught you about how to ask questions for the next time?

Mike Dimock: We have a lot of habits in this country of just categorizing people. You're White, you're Black, you're non-Hispanic Black. Because if you're Hispanic, we're going to count you with the Hispanics. And we just do that almost reflexively, because it's sort of wired into the way Americans think about and even researchers think about demographic data. It's also, to put it bluntly, pretty disrespectful of people's identities and people who do identify with multiple groups and people who might think of themselves differently in one context than in another context. And so we can do better to really understand and be inclusive when we're talking about different groups.

It can be consequential. We released earlier this year a statistical portrait of Black Americans. And part of the point is remembering that 10% of Black Americans migrated to America, were born in another country. We have a very typically narrow view. When we think about Black America, we think about the American historical context of Black America. That is important. It's essential. It's a driving factor in this story of race in America, but it's not the only story of race in America. And you've got another big segment of Black Americans who are Black and Hispanic. They're having overlaying experiences. Many of them are Spanish speakers natively. So many of the experiences they have maybe are similar to those of Hispanic Americans, yet at the same time, they're experiencing some of the racial experiences that Black Americans are experiencing.



Some people feel like, well, wait. I don't understand how to make sense of this data because I don't know how it compares to Whites. Well, that's a lens that we're putting on it. We don't always have to put that lens on it. And so doing work that really is about diversity within groups sometimes means respecting that we can get distracted by the differences across groups and not really focus in on some of what we could be seeing in there. And Asian Americans more than almost any group feel oversimplified or treated monolithically. And yet it is arguably the most diverse segment of American society and the fastest-growing.

It's about looking at all the different country-of-origin groups independently and understanding the economic and demographic characteristics and traits that they've experienced. There's a paradigm shift that we have belatedly recognized that there are elements of how we study our society that are not working. They're not working for everybody. The science needs to catch up to that reality. And so I am very optimistic that the tools exist to do that. As much as there have been challenges around polling to use one tool, the advances are really there to be able to do better work and do more high-quality work in this space.

And so is it cheap and easy? No. But no scientific revolution is. It's going to take a lot of work. It's going to take a lot of effort. It's going to take a lot of investment. But I think there are ways to do that really well. And so that over the next five years, we can have the kind of deep research that really reflects the diversity of our country.

Dan LeDuc: To your point, we're working much harder to understand the voices in the chorus. And then how do we bring it together? Can polling do that? I'm just trying to get my brain around how you put all that together to create a new picture.

Mike Dimock: The way we're conceiving of this is really thinking about economic data, demographic data, and even qualitative data. Polling is a big part of this. That's where the voice comes from. That's where we're really connecting, I think, to the humanity of us. But I'm a pollster, of course; I think it's the best tool. But there are a lot of tools that we use to understand the human experience, to understand differences and commonalities that we have. And the same approach really needs to be thought of across the board.

Music break

Dan LeDuc: Understanding the human experience, of course, requires using all sorts of tools and methods—qualitative research that includes focus groups and interviews that take into account the knowledge and skills of the people in various fields, like the criminal justice system.



Yolanda Lewis is the senior director of Pew's safety and justice portfolio. That work focuses on how public safety, criminal justice, and mental health intersect. Using data and seeking diverse viewpoints, its goal is to improve how communities respond to people in crisis.

Yolanda Lewis, senior director, safety and justice, The Pew Charitable Trusts: My former experience as a practitioner has really shaped the perspective that I have on research, its application, how it applies to the criminal justice system. And that comes from my time in court, over 20 years, actually. The broader criminal justice system is complex. It's often siloed. We all have anecdotal notions and theories and opinions about how well or imperfect the system works.

There is a need to provide evidence and information that truly represents how the system functions, how it affects people in the name of public safety, and then how it becomes a case study for the need for deeper reforms. What we know is that a single interaction with the criminal justice system can change the trajectory of a person's life.

We're not just talking about race and why it matters, but it does. What we're trying to unravel is this historiography of the treatment of people of color and their experiences in the criminal justice system. And that's why race matters. If we are truly committed to suss out what these problematic trends are in our society and in the criminal justice system, race has to be a centerpiece of that conversation.

Dan LeDuc: Well, we're talking about race and research from a pretty broad point of view. You, in particular, look at it through the issue of the criminal justice system. So, through that prism, what are some of the national trends that are going on now?

Yolanda Lewis: When we take a closer look at the criminal justice system, what we start to understand is that racial disparities really exist, and that's been a long-standing practice. And it's almost as if we're watching a visible unraveling of some of the concepts that we hold dear, like equal justice and public trust and fairness and equality.

Whether you are paying attention to your 6 o'clock news or you're looking at social media, you'll start to see trends of over-incarceration, that there are challenges in the way certain communities are policed, that youth of color are treated differently in juvenile justice systems, and even people in crisis have a much different experience. There are millions of people who experience mental health crises across the country. That is a health condition. If you have a heart attack, you call an ambulance. You hope that people show up that can help save your life. But if you call the police, that is a different response.



And what we're saying is that sometimes in communities—and we know this to be true in communities of color—that even health conditions can be criminalized. And so, when we talk about the ecosystem of challenges, we're not just talking about the criminal justice system. We're talking about adjacent systems that have nothing to do with criminal justice that oftentimes create disadvantages that play out in the criminal justice system.

Dan LeDuc: So much of what occurs is a police response to a crisis moment. And that crisis may be a mental health issue rather than an actual crime.

Yolanda Lewis: What we envision is that police, jails, and ERs are really not the default response for people in crisis. And leveraging research, we've been able and afforded the ability to think strategically about what makes a difference when you are trying to respond to a person in crisis. And that happens to be that police are not the only answer, and they're certainly not the first response.

There is no greater example of why this concept is important than in the case of Daniel Prude, a 41-year-old African American male who had a history of suffering from mental health and addiction. And after repeated calls from his family for help to 911, now the world is confronted with this notion that a call for help could result in the loss of life.

When we're talking about how we change the narrative around who responds, we really have to think about the idea of trained clinicians who can offer resources not only on-site but also by phone, and what it means to have a multidisciplinary team.

A good place where this is happening is one that we are very familiar with in Texas called RightCare. The model is to ensure that trained clinicians actually answer those calls and that when individuals arrive at the scene, that there is the arrival of a paramedic in addition to a licensed clinician. There is data to suggest that not only there are better outcomes for the individuals but that people are diverted to care and not to jail cells as a result of their interaction with the system. And I think that's what we really want to see across the country. We want to see people deflected from the system, as opposed to being further steeped into the system when they're making a call for help.

Dan LeDuc: As someone who's looking at this systematically, what are the areas where research can come into play to basically make the system better? I'm just curious where else you're starting to say, either we have data or we need to get data, because we've identified these areas where we know we can improve the overall system.

Yolanda Lewis: We've been looking and working in Michigan for the last year and a half, and in a sample of county jails in Michigan where we're providing technical assistance, there is evidence



to show that Black men made up only 6% of the resident population but accounted for 29% of jail admissions. When you start to look at trends like that in local communities, you start to think about how tremendous this issue is. And the idea that there is not only a deep history of racialized practices in criminal justice but how much work it will take to be able to really address these.

One of the things that we are starting to do with data and information is trying to determine if the experience in Michigan is also the experience in another state, and helping policy actors and system actors look into their systems and see if they are experiencing similar trends. And then also providing tools to change that narrative. Whether that is through racial impact statements, through a change in policing, or whether the court system or either prosecutorial practices might need to be changed for better outcomes for individuals who have been disproportionately impacted.

Dan LeDuc: For listeners who may not be familiar with racial impact statements, they're a tool that policymakers can use to evaluate potential disparities of proposed legislation. What kind of material will now be available to lawmakers, and how can they act on it?

Yolanda Lewis: The importance of racial impact statements is this idea of intentionality and consideration of communities of color, and ensuring that policymakers and individuals who have a seat at the table are thinking about intended and unintended consequences to communities that may potentially be harmed by certain legislation. They are in some ways new, but it is an intentional way to really consider harms that have been done to communities and ensuring that those harms don't persist as you're thinking about legislation and new practices and policies. The criminal justice system is highly complex. It presents this ongoing study of disproportionality and how that applies across the board. I think that in the criminal justice system, the areas where change can be made are very clear.

What we know from the data and evidence is that there's a compelling story for comprehensive reform that moves really from the beginning to the end of contact with the system. There is extraordinary opportunity to confront some of the problematic trends that we know exist with a newfound opportunity for change and reimagine what it means to have a system that we trust. A system that responds to all people, and a system that is consistent in its application of fairness.

Dan LeDuc: Yolanda Lewis, thank you.

Yolanda Lewis: I really thank you for this. It's present, it's something that we always have to confront, and we all have a role to play in creating a much better system that responds to people in a way that respects their humanity. And that goes beyond any data point.



Music break

Dan LeDuc: To learn more about this season, visit our website at pewtrusts.org/afterthefact. Our next episode will explore how race and research play out in public health, and we hope you'll listen. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. We also hope that you'll subscribe to "After the Fact" wherever you listen to your podcasts.