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◀ **Census 2000**

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Census 2000

A blending of identities: Census shows large increase in minorities

Background, Related Info & Multimedia:

by **Florangela Davila**
Seattle Times staff reporter



Meet the Sundvall family, a mosaic of races and a portrait of an increasingly diverse Washington state.

Mitsu Sundvall is Japanese. Husband Herb is Caucasian. They have two sons, Eric, 35, who lives in Louisiana, and Jesse, 32, who lives at home in Seattle.

Daughter Nina, 24, is Korean, adopted two decades ago. And the youngest member in the Seattle household - indisputably the wiggliest of them all - is Nina's 4-year-old son, Oshay Rhodes, whose father is African American.

The state's minority population - those who identified themselves as nonwhite or non-Hispanic - now stands at 1.24 million, an increase of 92 percent over 1990, according to the 2000 census.

And in a first-of-its-kind tabulation, the state's mixed-race population is just under 4 percent, or 213,519 people. That's



BETTY UDESEN / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Seated at center is Nina Sundvall and her son, Oshay Rhodes. Above left is her brother, Jesse Sundvall. Top center is her father, Herb Sundvall, and at top right is her mother, Mitsu Sundvall.

above the national average of 2.4 percent - and far below the 21 percent reported in the state of Hawaii.

In Washington, the most common mixed-race combination is American Indian/Alaska Native and white (47,000), followed by white and Asian (45,000), according to the census.

More people of mixed race live in King County than any other county in the state. And among Washington cities, Seattle has the highest number of mixed-race people - 25,148 - twice as many as in the next-largest city, Tacoma.

Census numbers about race and ethnicity are important: They are used to divvy up federal dollars, set voting districts, assess disparities in environmental and health risks, and gauge whether federal anti-discrimination laws are being enforced.

The federal government and state agencies, are wrestling with how to incorporate and apply the new mixed-race census data. Some racial-minority groups, worried that an increase in mixed-race numbers would dilute minority population numbers, encouraged people to check only one racial category. Which is what Cathy Lowenberg of Seattle did.

"I figured if I checked everything that applied I'd be wasting my vote and that it wouldn't help fund the community I care about, which is Japanese," said the 28-year-old who is one-quarter Japanese, one-quarter German, one-quarter Irish, an eighth Puerto Rican and an eighth Korean.

Nationwide, the percentage of Americans who are multiracial is expected to increase, given a 20-year trend of more interracial marriages, as well as a propensity for native-born Hispanics and native-born Asians to marry outside their race, said Sharon Lee, a sociology professor at Portland State University.

In Washington state, where it was never illegal to marry someone outside of your race, the percentage of mixed-race babies has been increasing steadily, according to a Seattle Times analysis of birth records from 1989 to 1999 in which the race of both parents was known.

Census 2000

There are twice as many Asian Americans in King County as blacks or Hispanics.

Blacks and Native Americans were most likely to have a child with someone of a different race, the analysis showed.

The most common mixed-race combination was a Hispanic

father and a white mother, followed by a white father and Asian mother, and a black father and white mother.

Even giving people a choice of racial categories, some argued, didn't account for the nation's increasingly diverse palette of racial hues. And after public pressure, last year's census included the option of checking more than one race. That meant respondents could choose from up to 63 different racial categories; 126 if a person considered himself of Spanish or Hispanic origin (defined by the Census Bureau as an ethnicity and not a race).

If the new racial categories pose a statistical nightmare for government agencies, they nonetheless validated the identity of many Americans all too familiar with having to check the "other" box.

"Other. What does that mean?" said Cindy Runger, 31, of Seattle, who identifies herself as Afro-Asian. Not having an option to check more than one racial category felt a bit like being in "racial limbo," Runger said.

On the census form, Runger, who is often stopped by curious strangers and asked, "What are you?" checked African American, in acknowledgement of her father, and Vietnamese, in recognition of her mother.

Ryan Minato was in college when he first became proud of his half-Asian or "hapa" roots. But while the 27-year-old checked the "other" box last year and wrote in Japanese-

German, he now wishes he had checked only Japanese. Race, he said, is still very much a political statement and he is concerned how the numbers will affect federal funding.

Census 2000

Sammamish is King County's youngest city with kids making up one-third of its residents.

Even members of the same family don't always identify themselves in the same way.

In 1997, when Maria P. Root, a Seattle psychologist who has written extensively on the mixed-race experience, completed a study of biracial siblings in the greater Seattle area, she found differences among pairs of siblings who selected different races according to what they said best "fit" them.

Lowenberg, for example, identifies herself as Asian but her mother says she should consider herself white because of her German and Irish ancestry. The discrepancy, Lowenberg figures, has a lot to do with her mother having grown up in Hawaii and a sense that, on the mainland, society is much

more polarized by race.

For members of the Sundvall family, race has been alternately oppressive (Mitsu Sundvall and her family were interned during World War II); offensive (an older Asian woman, at first cooing at Oshay, gasped when she saw his curly hair); uncomfortable (people assuming Jesse Sundvall is white, and not half Japanese, and making racial slurs).

It has also been humorous. One of their favorite stories is the one about Herb Sundvall splashing his then 8-year-old daughter at Green Lake. A lifeguard yelled out, "Little girl, is that man bothering you?" To which Nina Sundvall groaned back, "He's my *father!*"

Herb Sundvall, the son of Swedish and German immigrants, met his wife, Mitsu, in New York City. They wed in 1961.

Census 2000

11,869 people in Seattle claimed full or part Native American heritage.

Her parents never felt uncomfortable that she had married a "hakujin," or someone who was white, she said. Neither did his parents object.

"I was proud of the fact that I was with and married to someone who was different," Herb Sundvall recalled. "We were both Protestant. Both English majors. Frankly, there would have been more dissimilarities if one of us had been a poor, white Southerner and the other a white, upper-class New Englander."

And while they acknowledge some progress has been made in broadening perceptions of what a family ought to look like, they admit that, up until now, they hadn't thought so much about race.

The difference is having Oshay now in their lives.

If an increasingly multiracial society is redefining the definition of what race is, the Sundvalls worry racial attitudes have not changed dramatically.

"Although he's Korean and African American, I figure most people will look at him as black," said Nina Sundvall, surrounded by her family one evening as her son raced about the living room.

"As much as my family has experienced discrimination, the discrimination he'll get as an African American will be much different," said Mitsu Sundvall. "He'll have to deal with it and

we'll have to be prepared for the treatment he'll get."

Seattle Times staff researcher Vince Keuter contributed to this report. Florangela Davila can be reached at 206-464-2916 or fdavila@seattletimes.com.

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Background, Related Info & Multimedia:

- [Chart showing race in Washington state vs. nationally](#)
- [Charts showing mixed race births and racial makeup of those under 18](#)
- [Chart showing racial and ethnic breakdown in Seattle, King and Snohomish counties](#)



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