



# BEYOND THE NUMBERS: MULTIRACIAL HERITAGE



Individuals with multiracial heritage are one of the fastest-growing groups in the U.S. Of individuals who live with mental health conditions, 25% identify as two or more races. The term “multiracial” encompasses a wide variety of identities. These communities have varying experiences depending on each individual’s unique ethnic characteristics and closeness to each culture they are a part of. For the purposes of this toolkit, the “multiracial” cultural group will include unique experiences and perspectives of those who do not solely identify with one race.



## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Historically, multiracial children have been subjected to institutional discrimination from the government and private and public organizations. The ability to marry and have children with someone of a different race was only federally legalized in the mid-20th century. Prior to this landmark ruling, the existence of multiracial individuals alone was enough to cause legal issues and/or threats to their life, typically at the hands of white supremacists. Multiracial heritage in the U.S. is reported to primarily consist of the following combinations: American Indian/white, Black/white, Asian/white, and multiracial Hispanic.



Colorism has historically played a paramount role in the ability of multiracial individuals to lead safe and dignified lives. During slavery, lighter-skinned Black/African American individuals were allowed more dignities than those with darker skin. Light-skinned enslaved persons could work in the home instead of outside, get education, travel, or receive less severe abuse. Those with dark skin were forced to work outside and fell victim to harsher abuses, neglect, and death. This colorism contributed to present-day biases associating darker skin with lower class. Over time, these kinds of experiences created inequities in Black communities, especially among those with mixed-race heritage.



Multiracial Asian heritage is often connected to the U.S. invasion of much of Asia during the 20th Century. Referred to as “white sexual imperialism,” the fetishization of Asian females led to increases of white and Asian mixed-race children. It is important to note that imperialism is not the only contributor to multiracial births, but its implications should not be overlooked in a historical study of racism in this community.



Much of the current population of Native American/Alaska Natives in the U.S. is comprised of multiracial backgrounds. The high number of mixed-race heritage in the Native American community can be traced to colonization, displacement, and a large amount of individuals taken from their families in the 19th and 20th centuries and placed in boarding schools or foster care. Many people within this mixed heritage group don’t identify with the term multiracial, nor do many identify closely with the Native American culture.



Like American Indian/Alaska Native multiracial groups, many of those with Latinx/Hispanic multiracial heritage don’t identify with the term “multiracial.” The exact amount of mixed-race heritage in Latinx/Hispanic groups may not be entirely known, though, as there is not a clear racial category for this group in many data collection forms. Despite these challenges, historically, many multiracial communities connect through language, beliefs, and other cultural norms.



## BARRIERS TO WELL-BEING

The experience of having race assumed, targeted, or made fun of is a major challenge to the well-being of those with multiracial heritage. It is not uncommon for someone of multiracial heritage to hear microaggressions such as, “What are you?” There are also assumptions of what race the individual should or shouldn’t be perceived as. Often, these biases may be connected to one’s speech, skin tone, and other ethnic features that factor into how they are perceived in the world. Identity is complex for those with multiracial identities. There may be feelings of displacement and inadequacy in living up to one side of their identity or another.

In mental health care, lack of knowledge around culturally responsive care for multiracial communities can be a major barrier to well-being and prevent individuals from getting the support they need. Furthermore, there is a lack of data collection, research, and resources specific to this experience. As the selection of multiple races can be complex on data collection forms, the option to share multiracial demographic data is often excluded. Ultimately, if there is to be more mental health support for multiracial individuals, there must also be ample data collection opportunities to gain knowledge of strengths and disparities.

## CULTURAL BELIEFS

Culture and identity is complicated for many multiracial individuals, who often shift their own labels and narratives of their race over time. Racial identity may also be fluid, with a person adjusting over time to different factors, such as a new understanding of their culture or changes of skin tone. Many adults with multiracial backgrounds do not choose to identify as “multiracial,” but rather identify more with one race instead of multiple.

Multiracial individuals sometimes must carefully balance identities of each culture they originate from while also holding onto a strong sense of individual identity. Connection to culture may also change depending on the person’s mixture of heritage. In multiracial individuals who are of Black and white heritage, commonalities and strong senses of acceptance are often found within other Black communities. In multiracial individuals with Asian and white mixed heritage, it is more common to see oneself connected to white cultures rather than Asian ones. Diversity of cultures strongly contributes to diversity of perspectives.

## STRENGTHS AND RESILIENCY FACTORS

Multiracial individuals have strength in their experiences and perspectives. Research shows that children and adolescents who are multiracial have a firm sense of resilience. Additionally, it reveals that having a culturally diverse identity can lead to better empathy and appreciation of other diverse identities. The ability for multiracial individuals to live within the boundaries of different cultures and maintain an integrated multiracial identity has additionally been shown to be a large protective factor of psychological well-being.

The majority of multiracial adults are proud of their mixed-race heritage and are able to see their identities as an advantage in their life. In considering the mental health of these communities, there must be special attention placed on helping individuals connect with their identities to lessen negative perceptions and promote positive well-being. This must include a person-centered, intersectional, and community-oriented lens to ensure that each person’s unique multiracial identity is supported.

## CALLS TO ACTION

For the progression of mental health and well-being within multiracial communities, the following calls to action are proposed:

- Practitioners must explore the nuances of multiracial identities and the unique needs of each individual through diversified education and cultural humility.
- Include opportunities for multiracial identification in screening tools, data collection, and research.
- Fund and promote the inclusion of multiracial resources.