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Census Participant Observation Research in 1986 and 1988

Catherine Hines
Camilo Garcia Parra[1]
James Diego Vigil[2]
John Long[1]

[1]University of Southern California
[2]UCLA

Center for Behavioral Science Methods
Research and Methodology Directorate
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, D.C. 20233

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Abstract

The current program of participant observation research has its origin in the recommendations made in 1985 by the Panel on Decennial Census Methodology, Committee on National Statistics of the National Research Council. Based on a review of previous participant observation research undertaken for the Census Bureau, the panelists recommended that in hard-to-enumerate areas the Bureau use records of household composition generated by participant observers as sources of coverage data. To locate experienced fieldworkers with current or recent field contacts in neighborhoods within the test census area, universities were contacted, including departments of anthropology, ethnic studies and Black Studies, in the Southwest and throughout the United States. The three researchers who agreed to work with the Census Bureau were James Diego Vigil, John Long and Camilo Garcia Parra. Dr. Vigil selected the suburb of Pico Rivera for this research, where he had conducted studies of adolescent gangs in the 1960's and 1970's. John Long selected an area in East Los Angeles where he had both lived and done research. Dr. Garcia selected a residential area about six blocks from Long's assignment, where he anticipated a large number of undocumented Central American immigrants and serious coverage problems. Each researcher produced a separate report which covers field work methods, a comparison of their population count with the census count and an analysis of discrepancies and recommendations for improving census enumeration in this kind of neighborhood.

Keywords: census, hard-to-enumerate, participant observation

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Bureau of the Census
Washington, D.C. 20233

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1986 TEST CENSUS
PRELIMINARY RESEARCH AND EVALUATION MEMORANDUM NO. 68

Prepared by: Catherine Hines
Center for Survey Methods Research

Subject: Participant Observation Research in 1986 and 1988

The attached documents report on participant observer research conducted in the 1986 Census of Central Los Angeles County and on plans for related research to be conducted in 1988.

Attachment

NOTE: The data in this report are preliminary and tentative in nature. Users of the results memoranda should understand that these documents are prepared for internal office use, with the aim of circulating information among Census Bureau staff members as quickly as possible. These memoranda, therefore, do not undergo the careful review and clearance normally associated with published census documents. Conclusions and recommendations contained herein essentially reflect the thoughts of certain staff members at the time of publication and should not be interpreted as statements of Census Bureau position.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Bureau of the Census
Washington, D.C. 20233

October 13, 1987

MEMORANDUM FOR Distribution List

Through: Elizabeth A. Martin
Chief, Center for Survey Methods Research

From: Catherine Hines
Center for Survey Methods Research

Subject: Participant Observation Research in 1986 and 1988

Attached is a report on Participant Observation Research related to planning for the 1990 Decennial Census.

Attachments

Distribution List

B. Bailar (DIRS)
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October 1987

Participant Observation Research in 1986 and 1988

Background

The current program of participant observation research has its origin in the recommendations made in 1985 by the Panel on Decennial Census Methodology, Committee on National Statistics of the National Research Council. Based on a review of previous participant observation research undertaken for the Census Bureau, the panelists recommended that in hard-to-enumerate areas the Bureau use records of household composition generated by participant observers as sources of coverage data (p. 124).

More specifically the panelists outlined a research program which they called "systematic observation," to be used in a sample of hard-to-enumerate areas to evaluate coverage in the 1990 census. The "systematic observer" proposal envisioned full-time census employees assigned up to 9 months before Census Day to live in a randomly selected sample of neighborhoods. Based on their growing familiarity with the neighborhoods, "the systematic observers would prepare a listing of households in their designated area, and indicate the household composition" (p. 352).

The panelists recognized that "ethical and public relations dimensions of such an operation are the most problematic... since there is the possibility of these types of studies [sic] being perceived as an invasion of privacy" (p. 353).

The risks of the public perceiving this research as an invasion of privacy were not the only basis for objecting to the systematic observation program as envisioned by the National Academy of Sciences. Based on a greater familiarity with the realities of ethnographic fieldwork in low-income communities, it was argued that using well-trained professional ethnographic researchers would be more efficient and less costly, as well as less dangerous, than the in-house residential research program proposed by the Academy (Hines to Bailar, 10/9/85, attached).

It was decided to test the ideas proposed by the Academy in conjunction with the Post Enumeration Survey (PES) in the Los Angeles Test Census of 1986. The major difference was to use experienced ethnographic researchers rather than untrained Census Bureau employees. The research was sponsored by SRD, and coordinated with the PES in the test census area.

Methods

To locate experienced fieldworkers with current or recent field contacts in neighborhoods within the test census area, universities were contacted, including departments of anthropology, ethnic studies, and Black studies, in the Southwest and throughout the United States. Preliminary plans included sponsoring several researchers in Hispanic neighborhoods and several researchers in Black neighborhoods. When operations were halted in the Bell district the studies in Black neighborhoods were cancelled, and the three researchers who had agreed to work in Hispanic neighborhoods in the North office were retained.

Assigning three experienced researchers to separate Hispanic neighborhoods in the test census area had one additional advantage. When participant observation research had been used at the Bureau in the past, it has sometimes been difficult to generalize to applications because the work was not replicable in any statistical sense. With multiple observers working in neighborhoods with many similarities, I hoped there would be less uncertainty about the reliability of the results (see Hines, SFAA, 3/85).

I made a trip to Los Angeles in April 1986 to talk to the three ethnographic researchers and observe sites for the research. Each of the ethnographers contacted for this study had annotated a test census area map to indicate neighborhoods with which they had some research familiarity. Without any in-depth knowledge of the neighborhoods, I looked for blocks without commercial development and with a lot of residential units (especially small multiple units) to maximize the number of potential residents. It had already been decided (on the basis of budget and the number of other evaluations and studies taking place in the test census area) to assign each researcher two city blocks.

The three researchers who agreed to work with the Census Bureau were:

James Diego Vigil (Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Southern California and Chair, Department of Ethnic Studies. Dr. Vigil has written numerous books and articles since the mid-1970's on the Hispanics of the Southwest, and has conducted extensive field research among Mexican-American adolescents, including gang members in East Los Angeles.)

John Long (A Senior Research Associate with USC's Department of Anthropology and a lecturer in Anthropology at East Los Angeles College. He has conducted participant observation research in Los Angeles' Hispanic neighborhoods since the 1960's, and is the author of related articles on urban anthropology and social psychology.)

Camilo Garcia Parra (Dr. Garcia completed a degree in Anthropology at UCLA in 1985, based on 6 years of participant observation research among undocumented and homeless Hispanics in Los Angeles. He has conducted extensive field research in Mexico, California, and the Northwest, and has published numerous articles reporting his research in both anthropology and psychology since 1979.)

Dr. Vigil selected the suburb of Pico Rivera for this research, where he had conducted studies of adolescent gangs in the 1960's and 1970's. John Long selected an area in East Los Angeles where he had both lived and done research. Dr. Garcia selected a residential area about six blocks from Long's assignment, where he anticipated a large number of undocumented Central American immigrants and serious coverage problems.

The participant observers were to make a complete enumeration of their selected two block area, provide that count to the Census Bureau, then

analyze the results of a match to Census Day counts from the same addresses. The goal was for the field-workers to work in non-PES blocks, and for their counts to be matched against Census Day counts to provide an independent gauge of census coverage and, indirectly, a gauge of PES coverage. The observers were not assigned to PES blocks to avoid the consequences of overlapping in the field. In their final reports the participant observers were asked to consider census and PES procedures in general, and make recommendations for improved training for PES interviewers.

The three participant observers were instructed to develop whatever procedures for entering the field and presenting themselves to respondents they were most comfortable with. Each researcher was provided with a Census ID by the Los Angeles Regional Office, but they were not required to use them. The researchers were asked to make a record of the methods they used to complete the fieldwork, and to report on the methods which enhanced full/complete respondent reporting as well as to recommend systematic ways to incorporate these improvements in PES interviewer training.

Each participant observer was sworn in as a Census Special Sworn Employee (SSE) before the fieldwork began, and the Regional Office arranged for them to observe interviews in comparable neighborhoods distant from their assignments. This was done to expose them to the legal and operational constraints on census fieldwork, in the hope that their recommendations would ultimately be more realistic and useful. All three researchers chose to present themselves openly to respondents as working with the 1986 Los Angeles Test Census, and all three displayed their Census ID to respondents throughout the project.

The researchers were also provided with copies of the PES interview form to be used in Los Angeles to indicate the identifiers and characteristics which had to be collected to match individuals against the Census Day counts. The individual variables required for matching were name, age, sex, race, Spanish origin and relationships.

In September and October when the counts collected by the participant observers were forwarded to the Census Bureau, they were transcribed onto PES match forms as if derived from PES interviews, and sent to Laguna Niguel for matching to Census Day counts by the PES special clerical matching group. The match forms that reached Laguna Niguel from the participant observers differed from PES forms because they lacked data related to sample selection, but were similar in all other respects.

Before the participant observers' counts reached the Bureau it was suggested by Charles Jones, Associate Director, that they be asked to predict, case by case, those persons who were likeliest to be missed by the Bureau. Vigil and Long agreed to try this, and on their counts they noted cases which they expected the census to miss. Long, for example, noted households where residents appeared to be undocumented, were very seldom at home, or were reluctant to cooperate with an interview. Garcia was not comfortable making predictions about coverage before more empirical study. For Vigil and Long, the small number of households designated this way accounted for about half of all missed cases.

Findings

The findings from the three researchers were consistent, both with the PES results in comparable neighborhoods and among themselves. The three reports are attached, along with a summary prepared for SRD in April 1987. The findings are briefly reported here, in four general areas: fieldwork, processing the match, characteristics of persons missed by the census, and recommendations for improving coverage.

Fieldwork:

Among the procedures which were mentioned as making fieldwork easier, Garcia cited taking an assistant to record data while he concentrated on rapport-building with the respondents. Vigil studied the neighborhood's physical appearance and visited the public schools to learn about the population from which the students were drawn, before contacting any individuals or households. Long studied the neighborhood through the clients at local businesses before he began interviewing. Both Vigil and Long began by contacting persons known from previous research and asked each informant for references to other informants, employing a snowball design to reach as many residents as possible.

Processing/Matching:

All three researchers noted that a number of unmatchable cases identified at Laguna Niguel could have been matched by anyone familiar with Spanish names or cultural naming practices.

There were persons (11 of Garcia's 102 unmatched cases, for example) who matched for every characteristic but name, and the Spanish name they collected could be translated into the English name on the census record, or vice versa. The researchers guessed that in a bilingual population, when an interview is conducted in English the name is given in English, and when the interview is conducted in Spanish the name is given in Spanish.

There were no clerks on the matching staff (per conversation with Howard Hogan) who spoke Spanish. It is surprising to note how many of these cases might have been successfully matched if the clerical matching staff had been familiar with local cultural/linguistic patterns in hard-to-enumerate areas.

Persons Missed by the Census:

The neighborhoods studied by the participant researchers differed from one another in subtle ways (see the researchers' reports), although all could be described as low-income Hispanic with an admixture of undocumented residents. Most of the persons in all six blocks missed by the census and found by the participant observers could not be assigned to a single cause, because the causes were often related. Long, for example, cited three major reasons for coverage problems: undocumented immigrants who are reluctant to be counted; dwelling units the Census Bureau did not find; and unlicensed apartments added to dwelling units. He pointed out that undocumented immigrants frequently live in the illegally converted units, and these units are frequently missing from the Bureau's lists of addresses.

Vigil and Garcia also found a number of persons missed in the census count who were receiving public welfare payments, and whose reluctance to be counted the researchers attributed to a fear of jeopardizing recipiency status.

All three researchers noted a small but persistent number of cases where persons in very large households were not reported, and they attributed this to forgetfulness.

Recommendations for Improving Coverage:

Garcia concluded that the cooperation he received from informants was due to rapport he established personally, not as a representative of the Census Bureau. He stated "for this population the census does not mean anything, not even anything negative, with the possible exception of potential negative consequences for citizenship status" (p. 5).

Vigil and Long made a list of suggestions for improving fieldwork, related to reducing suspicion among respondents, and increasing the local knowledge of enumerators. To reduce distrust they suggested using male/female teams; interviewing in daylight only; displaying all the work openly, spending time "hanging out" locally; and responding repeatedly and in detail to any requests for explanations. To increase the enumerators' local knowledge, they suggested using local people; training enumerators to observe the local landmarks/institutions before they begin their work; and using snowball-type contacts to reach respondents.

Limitations

Two factors should be noted because they affected the completeness of the matching process. This is worth pointing out because they can easily be avoided in future studies, not because they prevented the work from achieving its stated goals.

Timing:

Like the PES interviews, the participant observers did their independent fieldwork several months after Census Day. In some of the blocks it appears that a large number of households had changed due to the mobility of the population. In some cases whole households had moved into or out of rented addresses in the intervening months; in others, members of large extended families had arrived or departed in the same period, and the task of reconstructing households as of the time of Census Day was difficult for the respondents. The largest households the participant observers encountered were prone to reporting error, in that members who were present were inadvertently omitted by the respondents. These households were also characterized by the temporary presence of collateral relatives, and it would be hard to distinguish the specific cause of discrepancies when the counts were matched.

The problem of distinguishing coverage error from changes caused by the passage of time is an argument for scheduling participant-observation research to be in place before Census Day. If that is done, the researchers

can not only report on true household composition as of the time of the census, they can observe/probe attitudes toward the census and census promotion while in the field.

Matching:

The special PES clerical matching group in Laguna Niguel appeared to do their work very well. I was impressed by the way the clerks picked up the task of matching the participant observers' counts, and dealt with the way this study differed from the PES. The problem of nonmatches introduced by Spanish naming practices and described above is mentioned again because the solution is relatively simple. Some real change in the match rate could be anticipated by ensuring that clerical matching staff has some local cultural familiarity, at least in areas where languages other than English are used by hard-to-enumerate populations.

Related Research in 1988

Studies similar to the participant observation research in Los Angeles in 1986 are planned for 1988. Some will be sponsored by the Undercount Behavioral Research Group, focussing on coverage improvement in five hard-to-count populations before the 1990 Decennial Census. Two or more will be conducted in conjunction with PES studies in St. Louis and/or Eastern Washington State, to provide independently derived population counts for matching against Census Day counts.

St. Louis, MO:

The University of Missouri at St. Louis will undertake an evaluation of the coverage of homeless persons in the dress rehearsal. The University is currently conducting a tracking study of a sample of St. Louis' homeless population, and will develop a method for individual matching to provide a measure of coverage.

Joyce Aschenbrenner, Chair of the Anthropology Department at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville (across the river from St. Louis) has done long-term field research on the structure of low-income Black families. She will conduct a small-scale study in St. Louis similar to those conducted in the 1986 test.

Eastern Washington State:

Camilo Garcia, one of the researchers involved in the 1986 studies, has conducted research in the past among the undocumented (and largely hidden) rural Hispanic population in this area. We are planning a study of dress rehearsal coverage and census response in this environment.

New York City:

The research staff at the Vera Institute of Justice has conducted extensive studies of adolescents in low-income Black and Hispanic neighborhoods. Their principal researcher, Mercer Sullivan, working with trained indigenous research

assistants, will conduct a small-scale study of household coverage in these neighborhoods, focussing on attitudes and behaviors related to coverage of young men.

Los Angeles:

John Baugh, Associate Professor at the University of Texas, is the author of many studies on Black linguistic behavior. In 1988 he will be at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto, conducting research on race, language and social stratification. He will conduct a small field study on attitudes toward confidentiality among low-income Black respondents in Los Angeles.

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Hines, Catherine
1985 "The Appearance of Reliability in Participant Observation Research: A Census Bureau Case," paper presented to the Society for Applied Anthropology, Washington, DC, March 1985.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Bureau of the Census
Washington, D.C. 20233

April 23, 1987

MEMORANDUM FOR Howard Hogan
Chief, Undercount Research Staff
Statistical Research Division

Through: Elizabeth Martin
Chief, Center for Survey Methods Research

From: Cathy Hines
Center for Survey Methods Research

Subject: Reports on Participant Observation Research in the Los Angeles Test Census

The three participant observers hired to do independent counts in Los Angeles in 1986 have submitted reports, copies of which are attached. Each report covers field work methods, a comparison of their population count with the census count and an analysis of discrepancies, and recommendations for improving census enumeration in this kind of neighborhood. Diego Vigil and John Long collaborated in writing one set of recommendations, as well as each writing their own.

Dr. Vigil and Mr. Long also each include a description of predictions about which households were most likely to be undercounted, predictions they made before seeing the census results for their blocks. (As I told you last fall, Dr. Garcia felt he should see the data before attempting to guess what was going on.) In each case, about half of all the missing individuals were from the households these researchers expected to be undercounted.

I will ask each researcher to send us (in addition) the lists of households they counted, and the matched census lists. These lists will be edited to remove identifiers (street numbers and surnames), then the full reports can be circulated within the Census Bureau to those who are interested. I will prepare a summary report (removing precise geographical information as well as household identification) which can be used to present the data to persons outside the Census Bureau.

For your immediate purposes, I have written a brief summary of each report. I think these three researchers should be invited to the Census Bureau in the next few months to discuss their findings, and would like to know what you think about the level of interest in this kind of presentation.

Attachments

cc:
B. Bailar
E. Martin

Camilo Garcia
UCLA

The census counted 273 persons in 100 households (including 70 persons Garcia didn't find)

Garcia counted 375 persons in 103 households (including 102 persons the census missed)

for a net difference of 27%

Garcia attributed the missed people (located in only 45 of the households) to:

- residential mobility (48 of 102)
- lack of motivation (38 of 102)
  (i.e., fear of jeopardizing public assistance, and
  (less often, in this neighborhood) fear of being reported to the INS (pp. 11-12)
- clerical error associated with cultural practices
  (i.e., Spanish surname practices)

He concludes: "undercoverage in this area is not in alarming proportion, considering the nature... of the population studied" (p. 2)

of the missed persons, half were male and half were female, and 40% were under 15 years old.

Diego Vigil
USC

Census Count: 290 persons
Vigil's count: 330 persons (a difference of 14%) (see report, pp. 8-9)

Vigil counted 58 additional people
(The Census counted 18 additional people. If most of these people were no longer there-by the time of the second enumeration, the discrepancy is 20%.)

Vigil predicted 8 households would have uncounted people. Seven of the eight were undercounted (including one missed household), accounting for 31 of the 58 cases he identified.

Vigil attributes many of the missed people to:

- o secondary or converted units at an enumerated address (40/58)
- o undocumented immigrants (24/58)
- o welfare concerns (3/58)
- o miscellaneous (temporary absences, very large households) (p. 10)

(the total is over 58, because some missing people belonged to more than one problematical category)

(Vigil also pointed out that a non-trivial number of cases were not matched because of Spanish naming practices, i.e. using the Wife's maiden name in some interviews, or because undocumented immigrants use other peoples' names under certain circumstances.)

John Long
USC

Census Count: 463
Long count: 509 (a difference of 10%) (see report, pp. 8-9)

Long counted 102 additional people
The Census counted 56 additional people.

Long predicted 35 households would have uncounted people, because they appeared to be undocumented immigrants, or showed reluctance to talk to him, or were seldom at home. In 24 of these households there were a total of 49 missing people. Overall Long counted 155 people in these 35 households, 18% more than the census counted. In the two blocks, 7 addresses were missed by the Census, and 6 of these were converted or secondary units.

Long attributes most of the missed people to:

- o missed addresses
- o converted or secondary units
- o undocumented immigrants

  (it would be hard to separate these 3 sources of error; undocumented immigrants frequently live in the secondary units, and the secondary units accounted for many of the missing addresses)

- o children or collateral relatives in large, extended families. (p. 10-11)

There were some "data entry" problems (Long's term) that caused non-matches; i.e., false names, and Spanish versions of a name given in response to an interview in Spanish, while the Anglicized name was elicited in an interview in English.

Summary of Recommendations for Improving Enumeration in these Neighborhoods
(From Vigil, Long and Garcia)

1. Study the area (e.g., look for converted units, and important neighborhood institutions)
2. Use local enumerators
3. Enumerate in teams (especially male/female teams)
4. Invest time in informal contacts and conversations
5. Do the work openly and conspicuously (to allay suspicions)
6. Use key informants and local contacts, then snowball contacts
7. Be willing to explain the purpose patiently and repeatedly
8. Avoid saturating a neighborhood with multiple Census activities (i.e., several evaluations in the same neighborhood).

Note: Using local enumerators is a short cut to accomplishing #1, 4, & 6; #3, 5, &7 can be used to improve the training of any enumerator. Enumerators are at the mercy of headquarters planning when it comes to #8.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Bureau of the Census
Washington, D.C. 20233

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

October 9, 1985

MEMORANDUM FOR Barbara A. Bailar
Associate Director for Statistical
Standards and Methodology

From: Cathy Hines
Statistical Standards and Methodology

Subject: "Systematic Observations" as Recommended by the National Academy of Sciences Panel on Decennial Census Methodology

Thank you for letting me look at a copy of the National Academy of Science report on Census methodology for 1990. I read the sections dealing with participant observation and systematic observation and, reluctantly, have to disagree with the recommendations for "systematic observers".

Reluctantly, because it seems like ingratitude on my part when the NAS is recommending the participant observation approach to learning why within household underreporting occurs. My disagreement is only with the method they propose for putting observers in the field, but I believe that the method they have chosen is an extremely poor one.

The NAS proposes putting full time Census employees in the field for up to a year before an enumeration is made. There is no indication that they are talking about a team of people with any advanced training (or experience) in ethnographic methods. The presumption has to be that they are talking about people with no particular skills, because they argue that their approach will reduce costs.

On the contrary, I do not believe that the "systematic observer" program will accomplish their goals. It would also cost more than an observation program using professional ethnographers, and it would incur a tremendous risk for the Bureau, for reasons described below.

On the surface, the NAS proposal sounds ideal: Data collected by observers with intimate contact in hard to enumerate communities where they are living would be the best possible evaluation of the completeness of Census counts. It would be like sitting down with a knowledgeable family in each District, poring over the raw counts, and having them openly name and describe all the individuals whom they know to be missing from the Census schedules, in the full knowledge that their information will improve the local Census count. But to understand the possible dangers, think about the similarity between the words "informant" and "informer".

A gregarious, empathetic person full of curiosity about the people living around him is not a participant observer. The distinction between a "systematic observer" working for the Census Bureau and a "participant observer" doing independent field work and with a temporary contractual relationship to the Bureau is a real one, and can cause an observation program to succeed or fail. An independent ethnographer has an alternative sponsor (a University), and has a reason for being in the field ("to study witchcraft", "to record a dialect", "to study marriage patterns") which is understandable to the community. He is also responsible for (and has experience in) preserving the anonymity of informants when it is required.

The Census Bureau's systematic observers would have no reason to be in the neighborhood except to feed information to the Census Bureau that the local people have already decided to suppress. In some communities, a systematic observer would be perceived quickly as a threat and an informer. In those cases, the effort would simply fail through local resistance. What I fear more is a community where the perception of a systematic observer as an "informer" comes later. Once a community (or a few members of it) came to see a systematic observer as a spy who has already gathered and conveyed information to a government agency, I think the results might include violence.

If this sounds a little hysterical, think what happened to automobiles parked in front of the District Offices in New York City in 1980. And the cars were not taking notes.

This whole objection may be moot: No one with any sense would take this sort of job, once they understood what it entailed. And I am not even talking about communities with undocumented aliens where questions about living arrangements are frowned on. In my own fieldwork in a county in Southwest New Mexico where few illegals lived, everyone assumed I was working for INS when I arrived. After a couple of months someone dangled reports of illegals in front of me, then reported back that I didn't bite. This made a big difference in attitudes toward me, and it happened slowly.

Part of my reluctance to criticize the NAS recommendation is due to the similarity of my criticism ("systematic observers are too risky") to the ungrounded criticisms made of participant observers in general in the 1970's. But there is a genuine difference between trained ethnographers and others.

The NAS suggests that a systematic observer, directly employed full time by the Census Bureau to live in a hard to enumerate area and identify and count members of households, will save the Bureau money. They could make an independent count more quickly and thoroughly than a professional ethnographer, who would work for the Bureau only part time, collecting household rosters as part of a larger research project.

I disagree with this assumption. An experienced ethnographer, already headed for a field site (or established there) would be paid only an incremental fee (somewhere between 5 and 20 thousand dollars) for the identification of and a report on discrepancies in household counts. A full-time Census employee would have to cost at least twice $20,000, given a year of a journeyman's salary, travel costs, and the costs of overhead and benefits.

I do not understand why the NAS espouses the value of "ethnographic" work, while refusing to recommend ethnographers to do it. I am afraid that the suggestion that the Bureau's own people be put on the job is, at bottom, an attempt to feel more comfortable with a research technique that statistically trained people are leery about.

Since 1969 four separate and totally independent field ethnographies (the Valentines, Alan Harwood, Census participant observers in the 1970's, and Peter Hainer) have reported essentially the same patterns of within household undercoverage; patterns very similar to those identified through other analytical techniques. There must be a very low probability of this occurring at random.

Somehow I would like to convince planners to reduce their doubts about the reliability of the ethnographic approach by using multiple trained observers. (See the attached paper presented to the Society for Applied Anthropology in March 1985.) Speaking as someone who has done long term field research in a suspicious community, I think the NAS recommendations have little chance of yielding useful results; the project would cost more than one employing people who have the right training; and it would have a very good chance of blowing up in a nasty way in the Bureau's face.

Attachment

cc: H. Hogan (SRD)
C. Citro (SRD)
M. Levin (POP)

CAUSES FOR UNDERCOVERAGE IN EAST LOS ANGELES

FROM AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

by

Camilo Garcia Parra, Ph.D.
University of California at Los Angeles
April 1987

U.S. Bureau of the Census
(Contract Number 40-YABC-6-023410)

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I. INTRODUCTION

This is the final report of an anthropological study of census undercoverage in two blocks located in the City of Los Angeles. This report compares population data gathered through typical census techniques with data obtained through participant observation fieldwork. The goal has been to assess the magnitude of undercoverage and to identify the factors affecting cooperation and response.

In general, undercoverage in this two block area was not excessive, considering the nature of the population studied. Of the 375 inhabitants identified as residents through participant observation, 102 (27 percent) were not reported to the census. These missed persons were located in 45 of the 103 household units enumerated. While these findings may be troublesome, an analysis of coverage reveals several positive and instructive factors.

The main factors associated with undercoverage were not related to census enumeration methods, as much as they were related to the nature of the population. The most important factor was residential mobility, which accounted for 47 percent of the 102 missed persons. Seventeen percent of the persons missed could be attributed to problems of motivation. Another important cause of coverage problems was an open reluctance to disclose information. This reluctance, combined with specific personal motives for hiding information, accounted for an additional 17 percent of the missed persons. The rest of the missed persons can be explained by a combination of unintentional reporting problems as in the case of children and old people. Some of these persons were underreported by those answering on their behalf. Finally, a small number of unmatchable cases were due to clerical problems associated with traditional Spanish surname practices.

The next section will describe the research methods used in this study. The third section details missed persons and the characteristics associated with nonreporting. The final section is an analysis of the reasons for undercoverage and their implications for the Census Bureau.

II. POPULATION BACKGROUND AND CHARACTERISTICS

The blocks studied for this report are in East Los Angeles. Most of the older inhabitants claim to be of Mexican origin and feel proud of it, although they acknowledge that for their children and for "official" purposes, it is important to be labelled Mexican-American.

Historically most of the residents migrated from Northern and Central Mexico around the 1940's. Some of them claim to have served in the US Army and in the Second World War. They also frequently state that they have worked long and hard in industrial jobs to buy their current homes. These homes are perceived as their greatest achievement, because they are a place where respondents can offer shelter to their children, kinsmen, and friends.

The important unit for these respondents is the extended family, which is virtually unlimited in size because it potentially includes relatives of friends, and friends of a relatives. This family network serves as a cushion for in- and out-migration. Families who are able to accumulate

capital educate their children and send them to live in other areas once they marry. Those who cannot, divide their property in as many parts as necessary in order to accommodate their married children. Family development creates a constant flux of inhabitants, and makes it difficult to define membership or residence in these households.

The economic adaptation of these households is also defined by the extended family networks, within which social resources are continuously converted into economic resources. These households are characterized by economic uncertainty, total reliance on kin and friends, a strong belief in God, and in Catholic institutions.

III. METHODS

The research task was to identify the factors associated with undercoverage at the behavioral as well as at the cognitive level. This was achieved through observations, and by intensive and informal interviews.

An assistant familiar with the area was hired and trained to do the mechanical work of recording routine information, while the researcher concentrated his attention on the interview and on observing other factors such as the situation or context. At times the assistant deliberately served as a distracting factor, and at times he rechecked the consistency of information. A focus was placed on gathering data on three levels: what people say, what they think they do, and what they actually do. In other words, data were collected on behavior and perceptions.

A. Procedures

The interviewees were always informed of the purpose of the research:

1. That the census was interested in finding out what techniques to use to get accurate, complete information, and to make this process as easy as possible for the respondents.

2. That the census needed data on whether the respondents were well informed about the nature of the census, and whether such information would influence their response.

3. That routine information only would be collected and used exclusively by the census.

4. That, despite the fact that they had answered the census already, we still needed this information because mistakes do occur during data processing.

5. That additional information was going to be used exclusively for my research to advise the census on modifications that might make the process easier, thereby encouraging people to take part in the census.

6. Respondents were informed that this research was taking place in a very limited area in Los Angeles.

7. That if respondents were busy, we could set up an appointment and visit them at another time.

After the above instructions were given and consent was obtained from the informants, several issues were explored through intensive and informal interviews. Questions were formulated using colloquial expressions and in the context in which they would fit into conversation, rather then following a pre-designed guide. Some typical questions were: What factors do you perceive are involved in underreporting? From what you know about your relatives and friends, why don't they return census questionnaires? How would you convince other people to answer the questionnaire? How were you informed about the census? Was there a special message that convinced you of the need to answer the census questionnaire? What kind of media do you think are most important for promotional messates? Radio? TV? Church leaders?

IV. RESULTS

A. Respondent Behavior

Respondents in general were highly cooperative. The respondent usually was the head of the household or the one with the highest level of education. (Sometimes both characteristics were involved.) Responses varied from immediate and strong cooperation to negative answers. Limited cooperation at the beginning sometimes occurred because informants confused the researcher with representatives of other agencies involved in getting information such as market researchers, leaders of the Protestant churches, and agents of other projects taking place in the same area.

Refusal to cooperate usually occurred when respondents desired to hide information. Typically this was due to fear of jeopardizing public assistance, or fear of being reported to the Immigration Service. In these cases, I instructed the informants that they should feel safe in disclosing any information, and this was also an opportunity to explain to them again what the role of the researcher was in this context.

Persons whom this research identified as missing in the census were not different in terms of sex, although some difference could be predicted by age. Men and women were missing in almost equal numbers; 45 males and 46 females. (Some missing persons could not be identified by sex.) Of the unmatched persons, 40 percent were younger than 15 years old. The most meaningful findings, however, were related to motives for nonreporting, which are discussed in the following section.

B. Match Results

The Census Bureau provided a list of residents of the two blocks as counted by the census as of April 1, 1986. These lists included household address and residents by name, age, sex, race and ethnicity, and relationship to the reporting person. The lists of households and

residents based on ethnographic fieldwork were matched to the census lists, and each household and person was assigned to either "matched" or "unmatched" status.

A study of the lists led to the identification of probable motives for the cases which were identified as missing. A frequency table was generated, and the relationships among different variables were explored, with the following results.

1. Households:

Participant observation enumerated 103
Census enumerated 100

These discrepancies are probably due to clerical errors.

2. Individuals:

Participant observation enumerated 375
Census enumerated 273

(A net difference of 102.)

V. SOURCES OF NONREPORTING

The records of persons identified through participant observation in the census were examined in field notes, and the following factors were identified as being associated with nonreporting.

A. Mobility

Members of extended families or friends of household members who move in or out of a residence on an indefinite basis. (This accounted for 47 cases)

B. No Motivation to Report

Individuals who did not think it was important, or simply did not care enough to answer. (This accounted for 18 cases.)

C. Openly Refused

Respondents who openly refused to disclose information. (This accounted for 10 cases.)

D. Hiding Information

Because of fear of losing alimony or public assistance, fear of deportation, etc. (This accounted for 9 cases.)

E. Unmatchable Names or Characteristics

This occurred because names and other personal data, intentionally or not, are not consistently reported.

Unmatchable names were due to such factors as incomplete names; names given in English to the census and in Spanish to the participant observer; women using husband's surname and maiden name; the Spanish custom of incorporating mother's maiden name in the surname.

Other unmatchable data were related to marital status (i.e., unmarried couples living together report themselves differently in different interviews), and ethnicity, which is reported with great variability, and interchangeably with national origin.

(This accounted for 11 cases.)

F. Unable to Report Accurately

In a small number of caes, characteristics for old people or children were unmatchable because others provided the information. (This accounted for 5 cases.)

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was an attempt to assess the magnitude of and explain the causes for undercoverage in a Hispanic neighborhood. The magnitude of undercoverage, up to 30 percent of the population, originally seemed to be very high, but the factors that appeared to be associated with undercoverage serve to put the coverage rate into perspective.

My observations show two important points. First, the cooperation of the Hispanic population in this study, at least in these two blocks, was actually good. The second is that this cooperation reflected primarily respondents' attitudes toward a participant observer and an ethnographic approach, rathar than attitudes toward the census. This explains why participant observation counted more people than were counted by regular census procedures.

Another major point is that residential mobility is not as important to coverage as the element of motivation. For this population the census does not mean anything, not even anything negative, with the possible exception of a perception of potential negative consequences for citizenship status. This phenomenon is crucially important because a highly mobile population could be fully enumerated, but that would not solve the motivational problems that are causing undercoverage in this population. There are significant cultural factors that create the motivational problems for the census. This study has suggested that for Hispanics, kinship and friendship-based institutions are virtually the only institutions which are meaningful to them, and that minimal attention is given to their civic- (or legal-) based institutions or roles.

Garcia

	A Census Count	B P/O Count	C % Difference [B-A/A]
All Households*	104	104	--
All Persons*	307	375	22%
Male	140	170	21
Adults	98	110	12
Children	42	58	38
Females	167	193	16
Adults	116	132	14
Children	51	59	16

*No separate counts were provided for households/persons in converted or secondary units.

COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC AND CENSUS COVERAGE IN EAST LOS ANGELES

by

John M. Long

April 1987

INTRODUCTION

Early in 1986, I was contacted regarding participation in a study of the utility of ethnographic field methods in census-taking in ethnic minority areas. I agreed to conduct a census of two-square blocks somewhere in the broad swath of predominantly Latino neighborhoods from the Eastside of Los Angeles toward El Monte and Whittier. I had lived and/or worked in or near most of these neighborhoods, and I was therefore familiar with them. My research was originally planned to be underway in the spring of 1986, but was delayed until late in the summer.

The two blocks are located in unincorporated East Los Angeles. Some residents of the community, which overlaps into Montebello, prefer to identify it as a Montebello neighborhood; Montebello enjoys a more genteel reputation than East Los Angeles. Three decades ago, when I attended high school "west of Atlantic" (a major boulevard that marked the outermost boundary of the neighborhood, separating it from most of East Los Angeles), the area was populated predominantly by lower-middle and middle class Whites, including a considerable number of recently arrived Armenians. Realtors generally steered prospective Mexican-American families away from the community, as they did in nearby suburban cities. Residential structures were overwhelmingly single family dwellings. On some lots, small cottages were located in the back, usually near the driveway and thus readily visible from the street; one-story duplex apartments were often located on corners.

By the late 1960's, the combined effects of an ageing population and pressures for open housing had weakened the barriers to neighborhood integration, and upwardly mobile Latinos became common in the community, often buying "fixer-uppers" with the intent to restore them. Many of the new Latino owners, as well as older non-Hispanic Whites at or near retirement age, built additional rental units on their lots to absorb some of the cost of the mortgage. The sharp rise in property values and rentals throughout Los Angeles in the 1970's accelerated these trends. Today, two- and four-unit apartment buildings can be found on most blocks in the community, and a large number of former single-family dwellings have been divided into two apartments. (On the other hand, many of the older small duplexes on corners have been modified into single households.)

Latinos--mostly Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants--greatly outnumber non-Hispanic residents and small businesses on the adjacent boulevards typically conduct much (in some cases, almost all) of their business in Spanish.

PRELIMINARY CONTACTS

By the time I initiated fieldwork, the elementary school next to the target area and the middle school two blocks north were closed for summer vacation. The area is not part of a clear, coherent community to the degree that the neighborhood where Vigil worked is; and there were no other apparent formal institutions at hand. I began to familiarize myself with the general area

by frequenting nearby stores and eating establishments, and striking up casual conversations with customers or employees. In the evening, I stopped in at two nearby beer bars. In conversations, I identified myself as an anthropologist who taught at East Los Angeles College and said that I was doing research currently for the Bureau of the Census. My purpose was two-fold: I hoped to help spread the word of my presence and make it clear that this was not a secretive (and therefore suspect) undertaking; and I wanted to accumulate incidental information about the area and its residents. I discovered in this way that at many of the small establishments, an employee could take orders in English but would otherwise be unable to converse in the language. At the beer bar, I heard no one but myself ever addressed in English (I do not look Latino); and there was little of the local Spanish street slang. Obviously, this was a hangout for immigrants, and the fact that it was invariably crowded suggested that a considerable number of immigrant men lived in the vicinity. None of the several men I talked with reported that he lived in the two-block target area, but all were willing to discuss the neighborhood in general; and one told me of his sister and brother-in-law. (I was able to mention his name when I called at their apartment.)

During this period, I also drove through the target area at various times of day, alone or with an old friend who lived two blocks away. (Indicative of the lack of neighborhood coherence, was the fact that my friend did not know any of the residents two blocks from his home; his father, an active, gregarious man at 74 years of age, was able to introduce me to one family.) Later, I began to map the residences while walking through the two blocks. I searched for signs of living quarters in the back, noting obvious clues like extra mailboxes and multiple addresses printed on the curb (these were old and fading), and less obvious signs--shaded windows and/or extra doors on garages or sheds, for example. Whenever an adult or teenager was in the yard or on a porch, I would stop to inquire about the address (even when it was in plain sight); explain my reason for requiring it; ask if anyone lived in the back of the lot or of adjacent lots; and inform the individual that I would be back in a week to obtain the names of everyone living there. I took note especially of those who welcomed or expressed interest in my undertaking--these were usually older men and women.

In the meantime, I recruited my friend's teenaged nephew, who also lives two blocks from the target area and thus attended school with youths living on those blocks. He introduced me to one of his friends. The boy in turn introduced me to his parents, and we spent a few hours leisurely discussing the family and their neighbors (as well as the Dodgers, the high price of everything, and mutual school ties). The teenager introduced me in turn to a girlfriend residing around the block, I repeated the process with her family.

ENUMERATION

The first households enumerated were those of my teenaged informants. I was careful at the end of each of those long visits to recite from my notes the names and ages of all of the household members, checking to insure that I had not omitted anyone.

I began my formal canvassing by going first to those households where a resident had indicated interest in my work during the days I was mapping the area. Most of these were widowed men and women who lived alone. Typically, they were nearly "shut-ins"--too frail or timid to get out of the house much, they were happy to have a trusted visitor, even a census worker. A few, however, were keen observers of the local scene. One eighty-year old man who lived in a four-unit apartment house with a small cottage at the back of the lot, was able to describe by name, sex, ethnicity and approximate age, the other residents at this location and the two houses on the lot next door. He even gave me phone numbers for the households where no one was at home that day. (I was able to interview residents at five of the six households he was informed on, and his information very closely approximated what they reported. Residents of the cottage in the rear had moved out the day before, leaving no forwarding address.)

I then turned to those families for which I had names and general descriptions from the parents of my teenaged informants and the one woman whose brother I had met in the bar. This "snowball" technique allowed me to address the respondents by name and gave me a local character reference known to them. In addition to collecting the required information about the members of the household, I tried to elicit similar references to other families in the area.

When these references played out, I systematically canvassed the remaining households from one end of the block to the other. In doing so, I always stopped to chat briefly or at least exchange greetings with anyone I had previously spoken with. I hoped that this high visibility would allay suspicions about my motives.

In all interviews, I would identify myself as a researcher working from the Census Bureau, present my identification badge, and indicate the information needed and its confidentiality. This was often met with visible disbelief, and I would then explain as clearly as I could the uses to which the census statistics would be put and the traditional mandate for complete confidentiality (which differs from conditions in other parts of th wordl). At other times, my introductory remarks would bring annoyance. Seventeen informants at as many households said they had been called upon in person or by phone by Bureau representatives recently, in some cases several times, and they were feeling harassed and angry. To such a reaction, I responded that mine was a separate experimental project and I was not responsible for the previous questioning; in fact, it was counter to my expectation and I would report the complaints. I then tried to convince the respondent of the importance to the community of an accurate count, managing to include a remark to the effect that if I did not get the required information my "boss" would simply send me back again.

I confined all canvassing to daylight hours; the barred windows and locked gates at many houses indicated that after-dark visits would be unwise. Most interviewing was done in mid-afternoon (which proved especially good for locating retired persons living alone) and around dinner time (best for catching a working parent at home). For those households where no one was present on initial visits, I varied the hours of my return attempts, leaving a note each time with my phone humber. (No one responded to these notes.)

On two occasions, I prevailed upon Polly Vigil, the wife of Diego Vigil and an experienced field worker herself, to accompany me. This proved to be especially valuable in generating rapport and trust when the person at the door proved to be a child or a female head-of-household drawing AFDC payments. On two other occasions, I got my old friend to accompany me; although he is not a social scientist, many would recognize him as a familiar face in the neighborhood. Mrs. Vigil and my friend both facilitated my introductions and questioning, but I recorded the information in all cases.

When alone, I introduced myself in English; many Mexican-Americans are not comfortable speaking Spanish and often interpret an Anglo doing so as an insult. Only when the respondent indicated an inability to speak English did I switch to Spanish. (This had the additional benefit of destroying the first line of evasive defense for many reluctant respondents, who seemed astounded at my ability to speak the language, albeit with a pronounced accent.)

COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS

I collected information on 131 households and a total of 509 residents. I forwarded two copies of the completed roster to the Bureau, on which I marked 35 households where I suspected the original enumeration would have missed one or more residents. These included households whose residents appeared to be undocumented aliens, households headed by a person who had been reluctant to comply with the request for information (these were usually AFDC households), households that were unusually difficult to locate anyone at home, and households so large that I (and the respondent, in some cases) simply had trouble keeping track of the data.

When the comparison sheets compiled by the Bureau were returned to me, I tabulated my count versus the previous count, as well as three subtotals: the number of persons for which information I collected matched that of the original census; the number of persons I listed who were not on the original listing; and the number of persons counted in the original census but not by me. Of the 463 individuals initially enumerated, 408 (88 percent) were substantially matched in my count. Seventy of the 131 households I enumerated contained no discrepancies in comparison with the original enumeration. My total count (509) was 10 percent higher than the first census. I included 102 persons who were not originally listed, while 56 persons from the first census were not on my listing.

Of the 35 households I designated as likely to be problematic, 11 in fact matched exactly with the first count. Overall, I counted 155 people in those 35 households, 18 percent more than were shown in the original enumeration. I had information on 49 persons not in the first count (just less than half of the total number of such persons), while 25 persons in the first count were not matched on my list (also nearly half of the total in that category). Seven of the 35 households were not in the census records at all. These included two converted garages, two back houses not visible from the front and without mailboxes, two units in a four-plex apartment building with no addresses marking the doors, and a small house on one street which appears to have been renovated in the past two years.

Most of the persons missed in the first census either reside in places not on the Address Control File; are young single males or women with children living in rear houses or garages, many of them apparently undocumented immigrants; or are young children collaterally related to the household head (e.g., nephews, grandnephews) or in-laws (mostly common law) of the household head in extended family households.

Most of the persons I missed appear to be in the last mentioned category, or to be individuals who have moved soon after the spring census--e.g., a husband recently separated from his wife, a boyfriend separated from a woman now living alone, and a wife and son who left home. In a few cases, mismatches are simply due to my typographical errors: a birth year of 72 instead of 82; an age of 36 for a three-year-old (although the year of birth was correctly shown); and listing "Guadelupe"--shown on the first census as "Jose G."--as a female. In other instances, especially in immigrant households, the mismatches are probably due to false names elicited in one or both counts, where the sex matches and the age is similar. (Slight discrepancies in age are not at all unlikely even when the respondent is trying to be accurate. Several fathers I spoke to had to poll their children to get correct ages and birthdates, and several women could not tell me their husband's age or year of birth--although they knew the month and day.) On one street, there are many crowded multiple dwelling structures, several of which appear to be occupied by a fairly stable core of immigrants and a more transient set of relatives and friends. It is unlikely that many of the latter who moved between the spring census and my appearance, were simply not remembered as having been there at the time.

RECOMMENDATION FOR INCLUSION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH IN CENSUS ENUMERATION

Field enumerators for the Census Bureau can improve their accuracy by incorporating ethnographic techniques into their routines. An enumerator sent to obtain information from nonresponding households should also carefully observe the surrounding dwellings for indications of unusual or unmarked places of residence--converted garages or back houses not readily seen from the street. The existance of such sites should be compared to returned forms, to determine whether they, too, need to be enumerated in person. He or she should be conspicuous in mapping and in interviewing, making clear that this is not "spy" work, and should make use of information from one respondent to gain easier entree to nearby households, where possible.

These considerations lead to the following recommendations (which were in part generated through discussions with Diego Vigil):

1. Recruit enumerators who are intimately acquainted with the target area. or who can and will take the time to familiarize themselves with it.

    a. Sociology and anthropology students at nearby junior and state colleges (which are apt to draw enrollment from surrounding areas) would be likely for recruitment.

    b. Senior citizens who have lived in the area for a long time could be recruited through senior citizen centers.

2. Obviously, in an area with a substantial number of people who do not speak English, enumerators should be conversant in the predominant language. However, care should be taken especially when the enumerator is not a member of the ethnic group in question: Many minority group members will read an Anglo addressing them in any language but English as indicating an assumption that they do not speak English, and they will interpret that assumption as an insult.

3. Two-person teams, especially male-female teams, are useful particularly in establishing initial contacts. Two people working together are usually seen as both less vulnerable and less threatening, and this helps in establishing rapport. Their insights and observations will often be complementary, leading to better elicitation of needed information.

4. Enumerators should be encouraged to visit local hangouts (cafes, fast food enterprises, parks, etc.) for snacks and refreshment before and after work, on breaks and at lunch. The normal course of events in such locales often leads to a conversation regarding one's work and reasons for it; and information and perhaps introductions to families in the target area may result.

5. Being seen publicly and regularly with neighborhood residents and regular visitors (e.g., the mailman) helps to alleviate normal latent (and in some areas, express) mistrust of strangers. One can help to assure such visibility, for example, simply by parking (when returning to start canvassing again) so as to require that you walk past previously enumerated household to reach your new destination--and stopping to chat with anyone you recognize.

6. Engage people in a natural conversational manner, at least initially. Some people are receptive to a "just the facts, ma'am" routine, but many are put off by it and in their haste to have it over with, may omit needed information. Conversation also often leads to serendipitous information--e.g., the existence of a resident whom the respondent doesn't consider a household member but who fits the definition of one.

7. Make use of key informants--persons knowledgeable about the area and willing to discuss it--by cross-checking information and hunches with them. Do not accept their statements blindly, however; more than one fieldworker has been led astray by misinformed informants.

8. Make use of authority wisely. Showing your indentification badge is necessary but not always sufficient. You must also be prepared (no matter how monotonous the task becomes to you) to carefully and clearly discuss the purpose for the intrusive inquiries, the potential benefits from collecting such information and most importantly, the confidentiality of census data.

9. Observe carefully and investigate possible discrepancies. If a neighbor had told you there are twelve residents and you have elicited only seven from a household head; or if there are more cars in the driveway than adults listed; or if toys are on the floor, but no children have been identified--inquire further. Always ask if there are other houses, apartments, sublets, etc., that you have missed on the premises. Many people who will not volunteer such information, will supply it when asked directly.

10. Finally, the Census Bureau must better co-ordinate its field activities during enumeration. Recurrent calls and visits to the same household for the same information is seen as harassment and makes people resistant to co-operating.

Long

	A Census Count	B P/O Count	C % Difference [B-A/A]
All Households	124	131	6%
Secondary/Converted Units	18	25	39
All Persons*	466	509	9
Male	227	257	13
Adults	154	178	16
Children	73	79	8
Females	223	252	13
Adults	172	193	12
Children	51	59	16
Persons in Secondary or converted units*	70	100	43
Males	29	54	86
Adults	20	35	75
Children	9	19	111
Females	30	46	53
Adults	20	32	60
Children	10	14	40

*Includes persons counted by the census for whom sex and age were not furnished to P/O.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ENUMERATION OF A BARRIO IN GREATER EAST LOST ANGELES

by

James Diego Vigil

April 1987

INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of the Census contacted me in early 1986 and asked if I would be interested in conducting an enumeration study of a Mexican (or Latino) neighborhood. The purpose of the study was to determine, by participant-observation fieldwork procedures, the number of people (and other demographic features) living in a section of a neighborhood. The numbers that were to be derived qualitatively would then be matched with the figures gathered through traditional census, quantitative techniques. With this information, so I was informed, the Census Bureau could determine how accurate their estimations are in relation to ethnographically derived numbers, and more important, whether there were approaches, procedures, and insights that anthropologists could provide to the census to help address the undercount problem in Mexican or Latino neighborhoods.

I accepted the assignment, and explained that I was familiar with most Mexican neighborhoods in the greater Los Angeles area, having conducted fieldwork and other work in several locations, and felt confident that I could gather the information the Census Bureau requested. In cooperation with the Census Bureau, two blocks were selected for this study based on my previous work in the area with the youth Teen Post program in the mid 1960's. I had worked there for over a year and was familiar with the neighborhood and its residents. It is a classic example of a barrio, an ethnic enclave that is insular (bordered by a large open space park, a dry wash, light industry buildings, and a major, heavily congested throughfare), marginal, and with an active street gang.

The area was first, in 1929, a low budget working class tract home development of single-story, one- or two-bedroom homes on the outskirts of suburban Montebello. It was mostly upper-lower class Whites then, but after WW II and the Bracero (Mexican migrant) era, it gradually changed to include a large number of first- and second-generation Mexicans. Pico-Rivera, then only a rural outpost of Los Angeles, blossomed to become the second- and third-generation Mexican American bedroom community. The area selected became increasingly distinct ecologically amid such rapid suburban developments. While residents over the decades gradually added garages, back rooms, and other improvements and additions to their household sites, by the late 1950's the enclave became predominantly low income and working class Mexican American. By the time I worked there in 1966, it had an active street youth gang. Reflecting the demographic shifts of the current era, the two census blocks I canvassed are about one-half Mexican American and one-half Mexican and other Latino. Only a handful of "cholos" and gang members remain.

PRELIMINARY CONTACTS

The two census blocks targeted were the center of the barrio, and before working there I thought it was appropriate to first contact anyone that remembered me from my previous work and explain why I had returned. I walked about the neighborhood during the day and contacted as many people, adults and children, as were available (e.g., either walking by, sitting on the porches, or in the front yards of their homes). Introducing myself as a former community worker, I asked them if they could recall the family

names and residences of a list I had assembled from memory. This list was of individuals who had been in the Teen Post program. By happenstance, I ran into a young man who had been in the program and was reasonably familiar with the names I had remembered. From this contact and association, I was then able to visit several homes and make the rationale for my presence known; in addition, of course, to pursuing a mutual exchange of what had transpired through the years.

Establishing a presence in the barrio through old ties was important in several ways. First, it served to develop trust as to my formal census pursuits, and local residents would then see how others openly received me. Second, it facilitated the expansion of my social network when old acquaintances introduced me to their neighbors and specifically their friends who lived in the blocks of the study. Finally, it cultivated a network of key informants that enabled me to check and cross-check the accuracy of my enumeration. To ensure that this rapport-establishing venture included more than just Teen Post networks, I pursued other avenues.

Lest the initital contacts limit my social opportunities and ties, I decided to pursue common fieldwork contact techniques that had served me well in previous urban research. In a small community study of this sort, it is important to identify both formal and informal social units and activities that are central to the residents. The local elementary school, the Senior Citizen Center, and Saturday night cruising of youth, were such units and activities. Visiting the school and talking to teachers, and especially adult teacher's aides who were local residents with children in school, added to the trust, rapport, and network goals previously mentioned. Under these friendly circumstances, children would then be encouraged to recognize and view me in an accepting way when I later conducted research. In fact, one of the best rapport generators upon approaching a household is to begin interacting with the youngster who knows you from previous interactions. One other express purpose of this school visit was to determine the ethnic make-up of the student body; that is the cultural style of the children, from first-generation Mexican/Latino to later generations, as the overwhelming majority of them were of Spanish-surnamed background. By thus constituting this population, I became informed of what the characteristics of the general adult population in the community were likely to be.

The Senior Citizen's Center was even more helpful. By attending several of their meetings and social affairs, mainly Bingo on Sundays and a dance, I was able to, again, explain the purpose of my work. It was this group that particularly realized the importance of an accurate census count for their community. I enlisted the help of several individuals in this way. While rapport, trust, and a broadening of social arenas was the expected outcome, it also helped to allay the suspicions of others who politely listened to my explanations and would pass the word on to other close neighbors and relatives.

Saturday night cruising is a regular social affair involving youth, and interestly, most first-generation Mexican/Latinos, and I joined them on one occasion to observe their cultural style (most were a new breed known as "Cha-Chas," engaging in social drinking and cruising, but unlike the cholo and gang members I remembered working with before; the latter are a dying style in this as well as other barrios as the first-generation Mexicans

reach adolescence and young adulthood). This observation supplemented the inferred ethnic composition of the barrio gathered from other sources. To reiterate, the occasion was aimed to make my presence known in a nonthreatening way and help alleviate suspicion among some individuals who perhaps had relatives or friends that were undocumented residents.

Finally, I thought it necessary to have a map of the census blocks showing number of hosueholds, addresses, and so on. To simplify matters, I visited the city hall and asked for and received a xeroxed copy of the site. I later reconnoitered the two blocks and verified and corrected the map, noting changes that have occurred over the years. It was then that I noticed a number of structures--e.g., garages, sheds, rooms resembling apartments--behind the front edifice with no separate address number, althougn I did not give it much further thought. This map made it easy to keep track of household visits, and provided a sense of the universe of the study.

All of the preliminary field events and experiences benefited me in one way or another. For instance, two of the contacts I made resided in the census blocks themselves. Also, several individuals helped introduce me to others within the blocks. When I started the enumeration process, I was able to walk freely up and down the streets without arousing suspicion. In fact, I periodically dropped in at these aforementioned households for "rest and recuperation" as well as to discuss any problems, such as encountering disinterest/resistance or discrepancies of household numbers. On at least a couple of occasions one of these key informants returned with me to help gain the confidence of the residents, who then, albeit reluctantly, cooperated.

ENUMERATION

I found that a male-and-female team facilitated communication. My wife, an experienced fieldwroker who is fluent in Spanish, accompanied me on all the preliminary field events. Besides approaches and insights she suggested throughout the study, it was quite helpful to have each gender represented in the canvassing for both establishment of rapport and on-site recognition of what ways to interview and how to ask questions of distinct individuals. This was especially the case in instances when children answered the door; they were more likely to respond to a couple that appeared nonthreatening.

Daylight hours were best, preferably midday, because this neighborhood had a sizeable number of retired elderly. Dinner time proved to be the best for working families. Besides visiting on Sundays to catch those who were missed earlier, it was also helpful to use this day to recheck what appeared to be problematic households; for instance, one suspect household showed two extra young women missed earlier because they worked as domestics during the week and were home only on Sundays.

It helps to begin with someone you know. I began with a Teen Post contact in the middle of the block and worked from that person to someone else known to them on the block. This initial start followed a "snowball" technique where household family names of neighbors were given upon my request; and I proceeded to visit their home. I utilized this "last name"

information as an informal introduction to help establish trust and rapport. I attempted to make sure that I was seen with my acquaintances at different places and occasions.

Several of the first contacts served as key informants throughout the enumeration process; and, as noted, helped me follow up in certain households. They would assist me in going over the results of the day's work, offering names and figures that they were familiar with, especially in problematic households. I was able to establish rapport with the local postman, too (through prior Teen Post connections). He had been working in the area for close to 20 years, and while I could not exploit his knowledge of household residents, being seen with such a familiar neighborhood figure was helpful..

After my initial contacts were exhausted, I then proceeded to ask household interviewees about the inhabitants next door. This questioning provided me with an idea of how many people resided in those residences. When I visited them, I made sure that the figures matched. For example, I was informed that one household site had twelve inhabitants but the front house household head said only seven lived there. When I asked, in a probing manner, about the other people there, he said: "Oh, you mean the people in the back!" I proceeded to contact the people in the back.

One problem that surfaced during the enumeration, despite the various techniques and assistance I utilized, was the fact that the area had been over-saturated by census workers. Even during my work, some residents were receiving calls from other census workers. I confirmed that this was the case with census officials in Washington; some of the households were part of another survey. This occurrence undermined my work to a degree, setting up a certain amount of reluctance, and even resistance, in cooperating with me even if I was officially associated with the census.

The official census identification badge was quite helpful. Upon showing it to establish the official nature of the visit and the importance to the residents that they take the visit seriously, it often generated immediate cooperation. However, at least two-thirds of the residents, in varying degrees, benefited from further statement of my official presence. It was then that I educated them about the purpose of an accurate census, and especially how the information they provided was for their welfare and could not be used to do them harm. This interaction, balancing public authority with their private confidentiality, helped allay the suspicious and improve cooperation.

COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS

The household enumerations I collected were forwarded to the Census Bureau, where they were compared in detail with data collected for the same blocks by Bureau personnel. When the comparisons were delivered to me, I compared my count, the census count, the number of persons I listed who did not appear on census data, and the number of persons listed by the census but not on my enumeration. The Census Bureau had counted a total of 290 people (including 18 whose names and descriptions were not given on the comparison sheets), while I counted 330--14 percent more. (If the 18 whose names were

not furnished me, comprised in fact only estimates of the number in the household, then the difference is increased to 20 percent.)

Prior to receiving the comparisons, I had designated eight households where I suspected the census enumerators would have missed people. Each of these appeared to me to be occupied by undocumented residents. Seven of these eight households proved to in fact be problematic. In those seven households, I counted 31 persons who were not on census files, while the census data showed seven names I did not have. The difference (24) constitutes three-eights of the total increase in count that I elicited. One of these households did not even appear on the Address Control File.

Five other households also not listed on the Address Control File--mostly structures behind the front house on the lot--accounted for many more persons missed by census enumerators. Rear houses and other living quarters not readily apparent from curbside together accounted for over 40 residents uncounted by the census. Additionally, three uncounted persons in two welfare households were probably deliberately omitted from the original enumeration due to the household head's lack of trust in the confidentiality of the census. One wife with her two children apparently had briefly separated from the household head at the time of the census. Other persons missed by the original census appear to have been overlooked in recounting details for very large households or not considered to be household members by the respective respondents.

I cannot meaningfully assess the discrepancies involved in the 18 persons who were not matched by my count, but were unnamed on the comparison sheets. Several others appear not to have been missed in my count, after all; they differ in name but only a year or two in age. One son of a female head of household differs from a counterpart on the census list only in surname; the census had it the same has his mother's, while I elicited a different last name. In one instance, the enumerator appears to have counted a young woman twice. Several people not reported by me had moved out by the time of my survey, and my informants did not remember them being present at the time of the census. In a few instances, I was clearly confused by the same things that often confused the first enumerator: I omitted one or more members of very large households (e.g., a father whose son shared the same first and middle names).

In summary, most of the persons not counted by the census enumerators were missed due to a lack of trust by respondents (i.e., undocumented alien residents or, in two households, welfare-dependent respondents); and/or due to the fact that their irregular living quarters were not censused. Accidental omissions in large households and the omission of persons whom the respondent did not consider to be household members account for the remainder.

RECOMMENDATION FOR INCLUSION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO CENSUS ENUMERATION

Ethnography means a picture of a culture or ethnic group and includes the environment as well as the economic, social, cultural, and psychological patterns of a people. Census work can benefit in several ways from the

techniques of ethnography. As this report shows, one of the first objectives is to map and categorize your environment. This area was a classic enclave, a barrio in the strict sense of the word with definite boundary lines. It has its own school, church, and other facilities. Such an isolated neighborhood makes for closer social ties among residents. All of the houses are single-story family dwellings, with a congerie of garages, back rooms, houses, and sheds filling the backyards. Some of the back structures lack city permits and are rented to other individuals and families. Understanding the type of barrio and housing arrangements that exist there would aid in the enumeration process. The fact that it is a marginal settlement, less subject to city building inspection, and a closed community of residents, more or less familiar with one another, indicates that a census worker should look for (or ask about) dwellings hidden behind the main structure and also utilize a "snowball" networking system of interviewing/questioning based on neighbor familiarity. This simple environmental understanding helped frame an approach and system of human interaction that greatly facilitated the enumeration.

It is also necessary to have enumerators gain the trust and confidence of the residents and thus the support so necessary to open and candid communication. This objective begins when you first visit a neighborhood, during mapping and walking the barrio. My case was unusual because of my previous work in the area, but anyone can identify key social institutions (e.g., schools, senior citizen centers), general meeting places, and older, informed residents as first steps in "brokering" oneself into the community. From these initial contacts, especially in a barrio like this, a "snowball" network can build. Eventually, a network limit is reached where you have to continually introduce yourself, the purpose of the census, and start anew with each resident. Nonetheless, making an effort to know somebody with contacts and community involvement is always a good way to start; even being seen with these individuals over a long period of time can help other neighbors become acquainted with you (and thereby less suspicious of you).

These considerations lead to the following recommendations (which were in part generated through discussions with another researcher, John M. Long):

1. Recruit enumerators who are intimately acquainted with the target area, or who can and will take the time to familiarize themselves with it.

    a. Sociology and anthropology students at nearby junior and state colleges (which are apt to draw enrollment from surrounding areas) would be likely for recruitment.

    b. Senior citizens who have lived in the area for a long time could be recruited through senior citizen centers.

2. Two-person teams, especially male-female teams, are useful particularly in establishing initial contacts. Two people working together are usually seen as both less vulnerable and less threatening, and this helps in establishing rapport. Their insights and observations will often be complementary, leading to better elicitation of needed information.

Vigil

	A Census Count	B P/O Count	C % Difference [B-A/A]
All Households	65	71	9%
Secondary/Converted Units	19	21	10.5
All Persons*	293	341	16
Male	137	166	21
Adults	104	124	31
Children	33	42	33
Females	138	174	26
Adults	108	129	23
Children	30	45	57
Persons in Secondary or converted units*	91	135	48
Males	44	67	52
Adults	33	52	70
Children	11	15	36
Females	41	68	66
Adults	30	45	53
Children	11	23	118

*Includes persons counted by the census for whom sex and age were not furnished to P/O.