

Troubled Reflections: Summary of Themes and Implications for Census 2020

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INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

Beyond its practical implications for equitable allocation of federal funding and political representation, the constitutionally enshrined ritual of a national census has been seen as part of our country's celebration of robust growth and diversity. In a 2009 report discussing prospects for continued efforts toward more accurate decennial census data, the National Academy of Sciences aptly titled their goal as being "a census that mirrors America."

At the end of 2018, CIRS and CVIIC¹ designed and carried out a targeted survey in the San Joaquin Valley aimed at gaining insight into the choices members of hard-to-count communities might make regarding the 2020 Census. Four hundred and eighteen Latinos were surveyed. In addition, focus groups were convened to gain deeper insight into the perceptions of specific groups about the census in general and the proposal to add a citizenship question to the questionnaire in 2020. With funding from the San Joaquin Valley Health Fund, a short-term research project was launched—the San Joaquin Valley Census Research Project (SJVCRP).

Reflections from survey research and focus group discussions with Latino immigrants in the San Joaquin Valley² show that increased non-response and variations in response among different sub-populations in the region's hard-to-count communities threaten to distort the census as a statistically reliable mirror of the United States. This prospect is a cause for serious concern to the affected groups themselves.

This report is a summary of the over-arching themes and implications these findings have for the 2020 Census. In short, the implications from our analysis for the 2020 Census are:

1. Census response should be promoted as community empowerment.
2. Potential respondents need conceptual support to help them navigate uncertainty about the perceived pros and cons of census response.
3. It will be essential to draw on social and cultural capital—going beyond reliance on "trusted voices"—to craft powerful authentic messages.
4. There is a distinct need to develop an articulated and responsive messaging strategy.

SUMMARY

The survey and focus group participants' answers to questions probing the reasons for their prospective decision to participate or not participate in the census show that most are not idly undecided about what they might or might not do. They are, instead, torn between recognizing the benefits of participating in the census and fear about the potential consequences of sharing personal information with the government.

It is crucial to recognize that the backdrop to patterns of willingness to participate in a census that includes the citizenship question is very widespread belief that information provided to the government is not necessarily confidential and the citizenship question is really one about immigration status.

The proposal of adding a citizenship question to the 2020 Census, in and of itself, has created an atmosphere of distrust and fear of government among Latino residents in the San Joaquin Valley. While many Latino residents interviewed in the SJVCRP start out both excited and willing to do their civic duty by participating in the census, this attitude changes drastically when discussing the possibility of a citizenship question being added to the decennial count. There is clearly a personal battle going on between the need to do one's civic duty and the fear of doing so.

The decision to add the citizenship question will seriously degrade accuracy for the 2020 Census in the San Joaquin Valley. It is clear that asking about citizenship will suppress many Latino immigrant households' willingness to self-respond to the census, decrease their willingness to participate in an interview with an enumerator who visits, and virtually eliminate their willingness to participate in proxy interviews.

The idea of answering about one's own family or part of one's family but not including others who live in the residence emerged spontaneously from time to time. It will be necessary to proactively explain that lying about citizenship is not a wise strategy—especially for non-citizens.

Census promotion also needs to focus on the safety of responding to enumerators as well as the desirability of

1 California Institute for Rural Studies and Central Valley Immigrant Integration Collaborative
2 The San Joaquin Valley Census Research Project interviewed 418 Latino residents using a survey and engaged with others in focus groups. 414 surveys are reported on in these initial reports.

self-response. This will be a steep hill to climb in gaining the confidence of San Joaquin Valley residents, many of whom have low educational attainment or may not speak common languages, like English and Spanish. However, there are those residents who would welcome assistance in filling out the census if they could receive it.

Hiring enumerators who are local, naturalized citizens and second-generation immigrants could be particularly useful in encouraging those who are fearful to respond. Local residents may be particularly well-prepared to provide authentic and effective persuasion.

There were participants who stated that they would answer an enumerator if they were at home when he or she knocked or if he or she arrived on the weekend. It would be in the best interest of the Census Bureau to develop schedules for enumerator visits on weekends or after working hours to secure responses from households where most adults work long days, every day.

In the past, outright refusal to participate in the census has been uncommon. Relying on past experience does not provide sound guidance for planning census operational efforts in 2020. Based on our research and that of others, it can be assumed refusals will be much higher in 2020. Messages to assuage fear among San Joaquin Valley residents are essential, but it will be challenging to build trust in assurances from a federal government that is so widely and profoundly distrusted.

Going forward, those who see the value and importance of an accurate census count will need to determine how to motivate residents to participate in the 2020 Census. This effort would include the willingness and ability of the Census to engage with local and state census stakeholders, including community-based organizations that have long-standing relationships within communities that are historically hard to count. Despite the best efforts, it is quite possible that the 2020 Census will fail to reap an accurate and complete count in the San Joaquin Valley. Efforts by the federal administration to add the citizenship question to the census may have already caused irreparable damage.

California may need to plan independent targeted research, post 2020, to gain an accurate measure of 2020 Census enumeration and evaluate the patterns of differential undercount across the state, especially in diverse immigrant populations.

Over-arching Themes

Seven notable themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of survey responses and focus group discussions with the Latino immigrants reported in *Troubled Reflections: Latino Immigrants' Thinking about Census 2020* (Wadsworth, et al 2019)³.

Theme 1: Lack of Trust in Government

Including the citizenship question on the census was not seen simply in terms of information exchange. The recurrent question the respondents posed to themselves and to interviewers was, "What is the information going to be used for?"

Survey respondents did not go so far as to state they were sure that household information provided in response to the census would be misused by government, but they consistently expressed their uncertainty about belief in government assurances about use of census information.

Focus group participants were asked explicitly about whether they trusted local, state and federal governments. No discussant said they would trust the federal government. There was not much trust in local government either, although a few focus group discussants said they would trust California state government and some specific state officials.

The many comments stemming from distrust of government underscore the need for pro-census messaging to distinguish the purpose of census data collection from the legal provisions meant to protect confidentiality. If one trusts the integrity of the government, then information about provisions that are in place to assure the protection of individual respondents' privacy become relevant to a decision about participation in the census. But, if not, such assurances are hollow.

Theme 2: Underlying Concerns about Privacy and Information Security

Respondent comments in connection with Theme 1 indicate they generally distrust government. A distinct strand emerged in which respondents focused specifically on the issue of information privacy. And this was not necessarily because they were or were not documented. There were a variety of factors entering into the high level of concern about privacy and information security.

3 Gail Wadsworth, Ed Kissam, Cindy Quezada and Jo Ann Intili, 2019. *Troubled Reflections: Latino Immigrants' Thinking About Census 2020*. San Joaquin Valley Health Fund.

There is widespread distrust among Latino immigrant households about the dangers of sharing any personal information. This is quite similar to that observed in the CBAMS II research and in other analyses of evolving attitudes about privacy and information security among the general public.

Theme 3: Is The Question about Citizenship or About Immigration Status?

Respondents did not consistently make a clear-cut distinction between the citizenship question on the census as being one about who is a citizen and who is a non-citizen. It was broadly interpreted as a question about immigration status. In fact, answering a question about citizenship status is widely viewed as being tantamount to answering about immigration status.

Due to the breadth of feeling about the administration's anti-immigrant animus, some were concerned not simply about the impact of the question on people without papers, but also about the effect on the community at large. Even respondents who were well-informed expressed suspicions about the government's rationale for, need for and potential use of census information provided. They contrasted their accurate understanding of the census as a statistical endeavor to count the U.S. population with the level of detail sought in the additional census questions.⁴

Theme 4: Latinos' Quest for Inclusion and Equity

Many survey respondents understood the effort to add the citizenship question as one with implications extending well beyond its immediate impact on an individual household's well-being. This has positive implications for efforts to promote census response. They saw themselves as members of their local communities and part of U.S. society, irrespective of legal or citizenship status.

A number of respondents raised the issue of paying taxes as a mode of civic participation linked to census response and as an indicator of one's right to be counted. A number of others raised the same issue in variations on the theme of paying taxes as assuring them the right to be counted—but without the hostility of the citizenship question or the intrusiveness of such personal questions.

Theme 5: Listening to the Dog-Whistle: Widespread Concern about the Social Policy Implications of a Census that Includes the Citizenship Question

It is not surprising that the citizenship question triggers concerns among immigrants about how detailed personal and household information might be misused by the government. What is surprising is the breadth and depth of concern among Latino households who have legal status or citizenship about the social policy and messaging implications of adding the citizenship question.

Many among the U.S.-born citizens and the long-term legal residents for whom the confidentiality and safety of answering the census was not a primary concern were, nonetheless, concerned about the addition of the citizenship question to a survey that has been widely promoted as a national ritual of self-awareness—the census as “a mirror for America.” For them, participating in a census with the citizenship question represents collaboration in deliberately creating a distorted profile of a diverse U.S. population.

Theme 6: Thinking About the Prospect of a Visit from a Census Enumerator: A Threat at the Door or Someone Who Can Help?

Widespread worries about the potential practical implications of answering a question about citizenship, and unwillingness to answer a census with the question, are even more pronounced in comments about responding to an enumerator visit than in the context of self-response. Distrust of the government is ever-present and the threat of someone actually coming to the door seems to exacerbate this fear.

Theme 7: Latino Immigrants' Conceptualization of Census Response

The semantics of how census participation is visualized and talked about by the Mexican and Central American immigrants interviewed is worth noting. In the Spanish-language interviews, the concept of census response was often spontaneously framed in colloquial Spanish as “registrarse” (to register oneself) or “inscribirse” (to sign up) as well as “contestar” (answer). This is notable because of its potential to nudge respondents' toward visualizing possible census participation as more threatening than if it

4 Questions on the race/ethnicity, names, and relationships between the census respondent, household members, and others (non-family members) who might live under the same roof.

were anchored simply to the concept of answering a series of questions. This is because the verbs registrarse and inscribirse stem directly from references to the process of list-making or voting, thereby embedding census participation in an official/institutional context.

Implications for Census Promotion Strategy and Messaging

1. Census Response Should Be Promoted As Community Empowerment

For many Latino immigrant households, willingness to respond to the census is not determined entirely by clear-cut expectations of personal consequences. Survey respondents and focus group discussants recognized the census as a national endeavor to understand the United States as a diverse nation. **While individual respondents varied in their framing of the notion, many saw the census as an opportunity for asserting their own identity and that of Latinos, for affirming their place in America.**

This perspective blends in with appreciation of census participation as a contribution to their community's ability to secure a fair share of funding for services and infrastructure investment. However, they saw the effort to add the citizenship question as an attempt to dilute their community's political voice and to deprive their community of a fair share of federal funding. Some also saw it as a proactive effort to promote racial divisiveness. Thus, the individual willingness or unwillingness to respond to the census reflects not simply an assessment of private (personal) risks and benefits, but also a perspective on proper public social policy.

In a sense, the extreme reluctance of survey respondents and focus group discussants to participate in proxy interviews—providing enumerators with information on non-responding household composition—reflects a form of civic commitment, to be concerned about the well-being of one's neighbors.

To be sure, altruistic concern about the potential consequences of providing census enumerators with information on neighboring households is mingled with a consideration of personal consequences (being seen as nosy, irresponsible in providing private information to outsiders). Nonetheless, the tacit notion of the Census Bureau that neighbors will “help out” in a federal government enterprise is made particularly suspect by

virtue of including efforts to secure information on the citizenship of everyone in every household.

2. Potential Respondents Need Conceptual Support to Help Them Navigate Uncertainty about the Perceived Pros and Cons of Census Response

The desire to affirm one's presence and importance as part of one's own community was evident in responses from long-time settlers—the naturalized citizens, the legal residents and even some of the undocumented respondents. There was also awareness that census response contributes to community well-being. But the mindset characterized in the CBAMS taxonomy as “compliant and caring” and the mindset of “suspicious” often competed.

Participants' comments provide the basis for a more nuanced understanding of the fear among San Joaquin Valley Latino immigrants that supposedly confidential information might be misused. Many of the respondents made reference to “worries” or “uncertainties.” They incorporated “what if” scenarios into their comments and conversations. For example, they wondered about possible use of their information for immigration enforcement and used these doubts to help explain the reasons for their reluctance or likely refusal to answer the census.

This pattern reflects the Latino immigrants' perspective that the decision to participate or not participate in the census is an exercise in risk assessment. They were aware that census responses were said to be confidential, but were not inclined to trust the government assurances. While the first-generation respondents expressed generic distrust, the younger-age cohorts—both the second-generation and the DACA recipients—were able and willing to formulate scenarios with specific ways in which confidentiality might be violated.

3. Deploying Social and Cultural Capital—Going Beyond Reliance on “Trusted Voices” to Craft Powerful Authentic Messages

“Trusted voices” will be an important part of census promotion strategy. Reliance on trusted voices will be a necessary condition, but not so clearly a sufficient condition for successful campaigns. Reliance on trusted voices to promote census participation is an important part of strategy, but the messaging will not have impact if it is purely informational.

The psychological barrier is high to responding to a census that includes a citizenship question that is considered to be, at best, worrisome, at worst, an extension of a threatening government campaign. What this implies is that there will need to be very careful attention to determining ways to support trusted voices in delivering persuasive messages. The overall tenor of survey responses reflect a mindset where even trusted voices may not be heeded.

Practically speaking, it is hard to see how the Census Bureau might adequately address distrust in the confidentiality of census information.

Bland assurances about “commitment to confidentiality,” detailed explanations of “disclosure avoidance” provisions, and recitation of Title 13 provisions will have limited effect. Government distrust is pervasive and deep. This fundamental distrust catapults the Latino immigrants’ thinking about census response out of the realm of straightforward information dissemination into a struggle for “hearts and minds” against a backdrop of information wars over “fake news” and government deception.

Community-based organizations can potentially play an important role in census promotion, but they will not be able to fulfill this promise if they simply circulate information bulletins. Assuring suspicious individuals that a message is “from people like you to people like you” is challenging. If messaging intermediaries fail in this endeavor, the result is that messages will be discounted or ignored entirely. The de facto assumption in many pro-social messaging campaigns is that repetition strengthens the impact of messaging. This is seldom the case. Messages will need to be varied, vernacular and diversified to connect with the concerns to households with distinctive mindsets and concerns.

California’s investment in outreach in order to “get out the count” in hard-to-count communities around the state, and, specifically, with Latino immigrants such as those in the San Joaquin Valley, may be placing too much blind faith in the power of trusted voices to impact reluctant respondents’ behavior. Trusted voices will need to learn how to convey compelling messages.⁵ Fact sheets, posters, informational pamphlets, wallet-size cards and rigid canvasser scripts will not do the trick, because the reluctant census respondents need to work through the difficult process of risk assessment to find their way clear

to census response. Canvassers’ preparedness to engage in dialogue with them to do this will be crucial.

4. The Need to Develop an Articulated Messaging and Outreach Strategy

There is no single best message to convince reluctant Latino immigrants to participate in a census that includes a citizenship question. The variation in perspectives regarding census participation linked to legal and citizenship status makes it clear that a campaign to encourage census participation within this hard-to-count population will need to include messages crafted for, and targeted to, distinct sub-populations. Canvassers will need to be prepared to listen carefully to discern each potential census respondent’s distinct constellation of concerns and address each. The overall pro-census strategy will also need to include solutions to overcome a range of barriers faced by those who may be willing to participate.

Census promotion will not benefit much from simply translating and widely disseminating generic messages about census confidentiality and the community benefits of widespread census participation. To be persuasive, pro-census messaging will need to be authentic. In order to be authentic, messaging will have to acknowledge the extent and depth of distrust in government. The common strategy of translating carefully crafted generic advertising copy into Spanish will not actually provide much traction, because the Latino immigrant households in the San Joaquin Valley communities we studied will discern that they are not authentic and will de-value and reject them.

Even within each of the sub-populations of Latino first- and second-generation immigrants there are diverse perspectives. These viewpoints can be further inventoried, building on the insights stemming from the San Joaquin Valley Census Research Project and contribute to developing persuasive communication strategies to address different sets of concerns. Ideally, census promoters—both within community-based organizations and census enumerators themselves—would then be able to draw on a compendium of possible strategies and persuasive messaging frames to guide their discussions with reluctant households.

⁵ There are analogies to the dynamics observed in research on Get-out-the-Vote (GOTV) campaigns in California communities. Lisa Garcia Bedolla and Mellissa Michelson, *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns* (Yale University Press, 2012), stress time and again how crucial it is for canvassers to engage in a genuine, authentic conversation with the households they contact.

For example, naturalized citizens were surprisingly willing to respond to the census even with the citizenship question included. These older, settled immigrants who had taken the initiative and been successful in going through the difficult process of naturalization are oriented toward conformity, and census response is often seen by them as a civic duty.

In contrast, among the younger U.S.-born, second-generation immigrants, conversations show that unwillingness to respond to a census with the citizenship question often stems from respondents' disapproval of the semi-covert political sub-text of the addition of the question. This makes non-response more or less a protest vote against compliance with a request from an anti-immigrant federal government.

Arguments to convince potential non-respondents to participate in the census will need to address how the meaning of a civic ritual—typically framed as a celebration of unity—that has been transformed into a divisive ritual can be re-framed into an action that affirms both civic unity and ethnic diversity. Messaging strategy will benefit from diligently tracking evolving perspectives and monitoring the street-level texture of community conversation about census participation.

In particular, census advocates will need to be prepared by the summer of 2019 to engage in dialogue with hard-to-count communities, like Latino immigrants, and with distinct sub-populations within them about census participation under two widely divergent scenarios—in the event the Census 2020 goes forward without the threatening citizenship question or includes it.

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