

HISPANICS IN A RACIALLY AND ETHNICALLY MIXED NEIGHBORHOOD IN THE GREATER METROPOLITAN NEW ORLEANS AREA

by
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INTRODUCTION

This is the final report on a study of causes of census undercount of Hispanics in a racially and ethnically mixed neighborhood conducted under the auspices of Hispanidad, Inc.¹ in a Joint Statistical Agreement with the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The locus of the research was in Kenner, Louisiana, a city which forms part of the Standard Metropolitan Area of New Orleans.

Kenner was selected because of the relatively high concentration of Hispanic population, a demographic pattern which we believe has continued and, in all probability, increased during the decade leading to the 1990 Census. The ethnographic site was a 400 unit apartment complex, set in a racially and ethnically mixed neighborhood, which is known to have a large number of Hispanic residents. The complex itself reflects this heterogeneous pattern. The ethnographic sample consisted of a sub-sample of 100 contiguous housing units from the 400 housing unit apartment complex.

Because the socio-economic status of the residents in the sample area is very similar, it is possible to examine their participation and outcome in the 1990 Census results on the basis of other factors. In terms of the present research, the factors considered are essentially those of race, ethnicity, undocumented immigrant status and integration into community networks.

It is the goal of the investigators to assist the Bureau of the Census in developing methods and strategies to improve its outreach to groups in the population believed to experience the greatest undercount in the 1990 Census. To accomplish this we engaged in ethnographic research over nine months to familiarize and sensitize ourselves to the people under study; we conducted a household-to-household Alternative Enumeration (AE) and analyzed the comparative data to explain the human or structural reasons underlying the discrepancies found between our enumeration and that of the Census Bureau. This report contains our findings, an interpretation of the results and recommendations to the Census Bureau for improving coverage of the specific groups which fall within our sample area.

DESCRIPTION OF THE REGION

¹ Hispanidad is a non-profit Spanish community umbrella organization in New Orleans. This organization is committed by its charter to advance Spanish culture, history and art.

New Orleans, Louisiana, once part of the Spanish Empire, has historically enjoyed strong cultural and economic ties with Central America and the Caribbean area, in fact it has appropriated for itself the moniker "Gateway to the Americas." This gulf port has served as a major conduit for people, products and customs from Latin America yet, in spite of many conducive antecedents, New Orleans did not see the development of a sizeable or cohesively structured Latin American immigrant community until the second half of the 20th century.

Since the 1950s, New Orleans has experienced a significant increase in Hispanic population as a result of the Cuban Revolution, political and economic disruptions in Central America and the facilitation of travel and entry for persons from the Caribbean and South America. Because Latin American immigrants to New Orleans have met with little to no resistance from the host community and because many networks have become well established over the past century, since the 1950s Hispanics have been arriving and settling in the city and its environs in large but unknown numbers. The range of estimates drawn from community sources in anticipation of the 1970, 1980, and 1990 Censuses have consistently been double or triple the numbers eventually tabulated by the Bureau of the Census. There is little agreement on the number of Hispanics present in the city and most recently, the question regularly surfaces as a hotly contested issue.

Unlike many other Hispanic communities in the United States, that of New Orleans appears differentiated on at least three points. First, it is extremely multinational; no one national Hispanic subgroup dominates or is characteristic of the population. Second, it has historically, and by its own account, not experienced overt prejudice or discrimination as an ethnic group. Third, as a result, the Hispanic population is widely scattered both residentially and occupationally, making it a rather difficult population to systematically or scientifically study as a unit. Furthermore, the general population and the municipal authorities have tended to ignore its presence or at times seem unaware of it.

Until quite recently, the Hispanic community rarely received attention as an ethnic group; in fact, it is a phenomenon of the 1970s and increasingly in the 1980s that Hispanics have begun to view and organize themselves as a social group with boundaries larger than their individual national origins. As the group coalesces, it seeks recognition and consideration as a contending interest group within the local social arena.

Because of the heretofore invisibility and the confusion which surrounds the Hispanic presence in New Orleans, the organization Hispanidad, Inc. and the principal investigators felt that it was of the utmost importance to have this group represented in the ethnographic research initiated by the Census Bureau. This community has received almost no scholarly attention and yet holds the promise of a wealth of information about a very diverse, multinational derived Hispanic population.

DESCRIPTION OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The apartment complex which served as the research site is situated in the heart of the city of Kenner, in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana. Although Kenner is seriously attempting to emerge as a self-supporting metropolitan area, to a large degree it must still be considered as a suburb of New Orleans. New Orleans has been losing population to Jefferson Parish for the last three decades and the census reports for 1960, 1970 and 1980 demonstrate that Hispanics have heavily partaken in the outward flow. Kenner registered 10 percent of the population as Hispanic in the census of 1980 (Henao, 1982).

The selected apartment complex of 400 units is popularly known to have many Hispanic residents, a high turn-over rate and relatively low rents. The managers of the complex are very guarded about information on the residents but were willing to verify what is plainly visible to the eye; although this is a mixed area, there is a high concentration of Hispanic individuals and families on the premises. There are 36 buildings which house the apartments, the offices of management, 2 laundries, a barber shop and a small concession stand, which was most often closed.

The complex was originally constructed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, with subsidized rents based on a percentage of income and strict regulations as to occupancy. It no longer is subsidized, rents are still relatively low but fixed; however, very important to our purposes, still maintained are the strict numerical limitations on occupancy. The apartments range from one to three bedroom units, costing from \$196.00 to \$253.00 per month; certainly not public housing but cheaper than apartments in the surrounding area.

The physical layout is decent but, in the opinion of the researchers, not very conducive to social interaction and community building. Buildings are separated by grassy areas which are fairly abandoned and there had been little attempt to landscape the area. There is no recreational equipment provided for the many children who live there and there is almost no place for the adults to congregate, except in the parking lots which form the bulk of the public space.

The buildings present row after row of two and three story facades of apartment doors fronting on narrow passageways of three and four feet. First floor residents have the advantage of setting a chair or a barbecue pit on the common ground in front of their passageways but on the upper floors even a chair outside of one's doorway obstructs the passage of neighbors. In some cases flower pots have been placed outside or attempts made to decorate windows or doors--small personal statements on the landscape. Overall, the physical space is clean, possibly because few are enticed to use it.

The site does not lend itself to either conviviality or to unobtrusive observation, given its physical layout. It does not have the advantages of urban New Orleans, with

neighborhood parks, cafes, bars or stores where a researcher might pass time, make contacts or simply hide out for a while. A non-resident hanging around too long in the parking lots or on the common grounds is of course immediately visible and probably suspicious.

FIELD WORK AND METHODOLOGY

The field work was carried out in 1990 during the months of January through September, with the Alternative Enumeration occurring in the last week of July, the month of August and the first week of September, a time in New Orleans which is terribly hot and humid. Only "mad dogs and Englishmen" would linger outside in the treeless, awning-less compound during the summertime, especially since all of the apartments have the almost mandatory central air conditioning which this climate demands. The air conditioning also obstructs

neighborly interaction because doors and windows are kept closed and curtains drawn against the sun.

To speak with the residents we had to either knock on doors and hope for admittance or intercept them en route from car to apartment. In the early evenings or on Saturdays there were more people out of doors, washing or working on cars, chatting with neighbors or on some but rare occasions, sitting in their door frames. First floor residents were the easiest to approach because they sometimes pulled a chair outside. Children were outside more than anyone but we were also very cautious as strangers about paying too much attention to them. Sundays found the complex surprisingly quiet; we discovered that families went to church and/or outings, people were catching up on their rest or sleeping it off.

The principal investigators were assisted in the Alternative Enumeration by two graduate students from Tulane University who are not Hispanic but quite comfortable in the Spanish language. All households were observed and visited by possibly all but no fewer than two of the team members. In most cases, it seems, we were accepted because of the affiliations with Tulane, Hispanidad, Inc. or both and the explanation that we were doing research on the complex and its residents, a type of neighborhood study. We asked about local problems, needs and concerns, feelings about local government and, when rapport was established, we asked them questions about the census, i.e. if they had heard of it and if they believed they had been counted. We judged the veracity of their answers to the census questions by our total interactions with them and the other knowledge that we felt had been gleaned.

As mentioned, the apartment managers did not obstruct us or deny us admittance but they were not allowed to provide us with any information either. We had no access to mailboxes, which could only receive or dispense by key. We could not post anywhere, nor could we slid a note under the air tight door frames. All information was gathered by observation and human contact.

Surprisingly, given the limitations just mentioned, and others, such as language, racial and cultural differences, we were quite successful in the task at hand. Although we had to pay many visits to even gain first entry, eventually we had contact, even extended contact, with most of the residents. Still some information was necessarily garnered from neighbors, in the cases where they knew and were willing to share it.

THE RESIDENTS

The Hispanic residents were diverse in their national origins, with individuals from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Cuba, Costa Rica and Puerto Rico, and of course their off-spring. The Asian residents were recent immigrants from Vietnam or Korea.

The socio-economic level of the residents was relatively uniform, most employed

persons worked in entry level service occupations, such as maintenance work, domestic service and child care. Some were in more skilled jobs, such as pastry cook, retired teacher, nurse, merchant seaman and truck driver. In one building of 18 one-bedroom units, most residents were elderly, retired and widowed people living on some sort of pension.

In reference to the Hispanics, there seemed to be a good deal of the underutilization of skills and talent or at least the perception of downward mobility on the part of many of the immigrants. A common complaint was that they were unable to use their skills in this country because of language difficulties or inappropriate credentials. No one referenced their illegal residency status but obviously in some cases it was a very serious obstacle to more rewarding employment as well.

HYPOTHESES

We had hypothesized that the ambiguous or illegal status of some individuals or whole families would translate into being missed by the census. We described this as fear of the authorities and further hypothesized even a transplanted fear and distrust of the government developed and carried from Latin American homelands by individuals whose status was correct and legitimate. Two further explanations that had been suggested were problems of language and/or literacy in English or even in the native tongue and finally the high rate of residential mobility which we knew characterized the apartment complex.

We did find households and individuals who were not enumerated in the 1990 Census for exactly the above hypothesized reasons, which often were found in tandem. Quite interesting to us personally were the other reasons for a miscount which emerged during the research but had not been foreseen by us. The authorities feared or avoided by some were not related to the government but instead were the managers of the apartment complex. Some households were able to conceal family members or guests who abused the limit on the number of occupants placed on the apartments. A second unforeseen development was that some related individuals rented more than one unit in the complex and circulated between each others' apartments. In some of these cases, occupants were enumerated in both places and in other cases, they were missed in both.

We also uncovered another source of confusion or misinformation related to the mixed nature of the apartment complex and the high turn-over rate found there. Many neighbors do not know or do not want to know each other well. We have already pointed to the physical limitations which are not conducive to much social interaction but two other forces also come into play. The apartments are occupied either by long term residents (who usually described themselves as "stuck" there) or people who will move on rather quickly. The long-timers do not try to get to know all or in some cases, any, of the newcomers because they will soon move on.

Additionally, and certainly as important, are the problems imposed by language. A good deal of the lack of neighborly interaction simply turns on the inability to communicate. Spanish, English, Vietnamese and Korean are spoken by the residents in the sample area and neighbors very often do not share a common language. A census enumerator trying to extract information about a neighbor might run into real difficulties and end up empty handed or more likely, misinformed. Through our conversations with the residents we found that non-Hispanics could often not determine a Costa Rican from a Cuban, non-Asians did not know a Korean from a Vietnamese, etc. Also, people in other language groups could not tell a cousin from a daughter or a grandson from a visitor. We believe that we found cases where the census enumerators were misinformed, maybe even by helpful neighbors.

A final source of error or miscount that needs to be only briefly mentioned is simply bizarre behavior. There are of course individuals and even households whose behavior does not fall within the normal range and they present problems which are therefore difficult to overcome. We had two households in our sample which were pure mysteries or sources of fear for their neighbors and it is hard to imagine getting accurate information by any methodology. Their cases will be referred to later on.

THE UNDERCOUNT

The overall census omission rate in the sample area was 9.2 percent. In the preliminary comparison between the Alternative Enumeration and the 1990 Census, what emerged is not the picture that we initially envisioned. A total of 27 individuals were missed by the census. Of these, 17 were of non-Hispanic origin. Further, of those not counted by the census 19 were Whites, 3 Blacks, 3 Asians and 2 "other" race. With respect to gender, there were 11 males and 16 females not included in the census count. We expected more census omissions, especially among Hispanics.

This particular apartment complex is orderly and straightforward in its layout and therefore there are no hidden addresses or subdivided households to contend with. The omissions stem from other sources. In the cases where whole households were missed, it was almost always due to evasion. In the cases of individuals missed within households, it was due to both concealment and confusion. These patterns operate across the ethnic and racial spectrum, although the Hispanics are the only group which is concerned about undocumented resident status. All of the residents had to concern themselves with another tier of authority, the management which regulated the operation of the complex.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The Hispanic population in our sample, the group we had considered most at risk, had in our estimation the best performance in the census enumeration. The native population of African Americans and White, non-Hispanic U.S. citizens, the groups we had assumed least at risk, had the worst. We will first treat the problems that are

common to all and then deal specifically with each subgroup of the sample.

There appears to be a good deal of "helping out" or harboring of family members or even close friends in the apartment complex. We found individuals or couples taking in children and grandchildren, aunts with nieces and nephews, mother-in-laws with daughter-in-laws and grandchildren, cousins with cousins, and households of adult siblings. We also found unrelated persons "staying over" with each other. In many cases the configuration was of a permanent core of renters and others circulating through or in and out.

In some cases this was inappropriate to the regulations of the apartment complex and was most assuredly the source of the individuals being omitted on census questionnaires or not being recalled during the Alternative Enumeration. What proved most interesting to us were the situations where an "inappropriate" guest was listed and counted, showing a belief in the confidentiality of the census, the importance of the census or something else had intervened.

Language and literacy problems were in most cases overcome. Two of the three Vietnamese households where little or no English is understood were correctly enumerated by the census; many of the Hispanic households had requested Spanish language forms or enlisted the aid of a friend; several of the most elderly people with little education had been helped by family members. We believe that where language or literacy did pose unresolved problems, it was because some other form of resistance was in operation.

The high rate of residential mobility did result in other problems, both during the census and certainly during the AE. Neighbors do not know each other, as mentioned, or do not recall much about each other. People do not see "temporary" visitors as needing to be mentioned or, if they are regularly in and out of the household, cannot keep the periods of time sorted out. This is most true of adult children, grandchildren and people with regular residences in other countries.

While the above are common to all subgroups, there are considerations which may be seen as group specific. Both the Asians and the African Americans in the complex are very isolated. In the case of the Asians, it is terribly compounded by language. They were very reserved and extremely hesitant about strangers. In two of the apartments we could not get them to open the apartment door more than the width of a slip chain until we recruited a Vietnamese with some knowledge of English to intercede for us. Because both groups are so under represented here, they obviously stand out. Neighbors can easily point out where either type of household is located but probably know little more about them.

Of the six African American households in the sample, two present the cases of bizarre behavior referred to above. One is feared and therefore disliked by all of the surrounding neighbors because it has apparently been the scene of wild parties, late

night brawls, gun shots, open drug use and visits by the police. None of the Hispanic neighbors even knew that the woman of the household is Hispanic or at least listed herself as such on the census. We were told by several that she was an Anglo.

Another of the six is a source of mystery as well. During the AE, one adult female and two adult males lived there with an infant girl. The apparent parents of the baby were only "house-sitting" for the other man, who never went away. Then they were only staying there "during the day" and going somewhere else for the nights, which they never did.

While inappropriately residing in the apartment would certainly be tolerated by the neighbors, other activities would not be. The mother in the aforementioned household called the police one late afternoon during the Alternative Enumeration to report that one of the men had sexually abused her six month old daughter. Given the police cars and the woman's anguish, the event was noted by many of the residents. These events only fed the undercurrent of racial prejudice that sometimes emerged in conversations with the residents, both Hispanic and non-Hispanic.

The Hispanic households which demonstrated an undercount were overwhelmingly consciously concealing themselves or others from either governmental authorities, the apartment management or in some cases both. For the most part however, there was good compliance with the census. Many of the residents, even with complaints about the local government, were informed about the census, having heard about it from Hispanic media sources, in Church or through friends.

The Hispanic media sources mentioned or recognized by the residents were all local, most specifically the single Spanish language radio station in New Orleans. A real bone of contention in the apartment complex is that cable TV is not allowed, so no one may avail themselves of the nationally syndicated Hispanic TV programs.

The non-Hispanic, White residents seemed less informed and in some cases quite apathetic about the census. Many complied because it was expected of them, some more begrudgingly than others. After the AE, on return visits, more of this group were better informed or aware but by then the local media was giving time to complaints at the state and municipal levels about the alleged census undercount.

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on an analysis of our research, we wish to offer some suggestions to the Bureau of the Census which we feel could improve enumeration in the coming years. It is not at the level of research and conceptualization that the basic problems lie but in the areas of promotion and implementation, i.e. out there "in the trenches" where the enumeration takes place. It is at the implementation level where, in spite of massive and conscientious preparation, the system may tend to break down.

The native population of our sample, both non-Hispanic White and African American, often demonstrated ignorance or apathy about the census. Even from those apparently eager to participate there were a good number of complaints. Hispanics in our sample were frustrated about having to make numerous calls to receive a form in Spanish or to enlist the aid of a Spanish speaking enumerator. The kind of outreach and cultural sensitivity that the Census Bureau has made such effort to develop may not be implemented where it is needed.

At the conceptual level, however, there is one element of cultural sensitivity that needs to be improved upon by the Census Bureau. There should be a refinement of the question for the self reporting of race. Many of the Hispanics in our sample felt confused by the limited number of options for they recognize themselves as the products of racial mixing. If everyone of mixed racial background feels forced to choose a single category or refer to themselves as "other", our data will not capture the rich panorama which actually and increasingly exists in the population.

At the implementation level the problems were more profuse. An important problem to be addressed is that of "outliers" such as the Asians and African Americans in our sample, that is groups who are very under represented in a given area or neighborhood. We suggest a system of "roving players" or a pool of experts that could be notified by the door-to-door enumerators of the presence of special cases. These "special enumerators" who target problematic households could then arrive automatically with the correct language capabilities or with the same race compatibility where called for.

Orleans Parish, adjacent to Jefferson Parish, and constituting the core of the Standard Metropolitan Area, has a predominantly African American population and several areas of concentrated Asian immigrant settlement. Enumerators who work with those populations in Orleans could be brought in specifically to census households which local enumerators feel are beyond their reach. Hopefully this would both ensure more accurate information and allay the suspicions and fears of individuals who already are on the defensive.

A more profound flaw in the undertaking of the 1990 Census in our area appears to lie in the quality and quantity of promotion and publicity. In this day and age it may be hard to appeal only to the "national good," as we have plundered more and more into regional and interest group concerns and politics. While this might be considered an unfortunate turn, it is the reality that we must work with. In order to count and understand the whole population, we must ensure the enthusiastic participation of the increasingly distinguishable parts which comprise it.

The Census Bureau should more closely review the promotion of its own enterprise at the local levels. Louisiana and its municipalities may have been exceptional but the census outreach here was very little and very late. This is perplexing, given that much of the impetus for an accurate count has fallen to the State and municipal governments,

which have seen the burden of social service provision shifted from the Federal government to their own shoulders.

What did exist in outreach locally was often very dry or too lofty and philosophical for many of the average citizens. The importance of the census was not brought personally home to them, except we believe in the case of the immigrant populations. The almost insurmountable language barrier made it difficult to extract any but the most rudimentary and basically demographic information on the Asian households in our sample but from the Hispanic immigrants we learned that the outreach efforts of the Hispanic media, church and social organizations had made a vital impact on many of them.

We suggest that for a large number of the Hispanics in our sample, the census was seen as an ethnic or interest group issue. Long ignored or underestimated locally, Hispanics being counted as individuals was seen as important to the group as a whole. In a surprising number of cases, this factor was enough to overcome fear or suspicion of the authorities, even when the person or household had something to hide from the U.S. government or the apartment management or simply did not enjoy divulging personal information.

Getting this message, however, to a large extent meant integration into the Hispanic networks where it was being circulated. Those Hispanics who, in the original interviews, had been able to mention the Hispanic media sources (Radio KGLA and any or all of the three Spanish language local newspapers), any of the local churches which cater to the Hispanic community or any of the Hispanic social or cultural clubs were taken to be integrated into the broader community, versus those who could not or did not. Those who were integrated most often saw compliance with the census as important to their ethnic group.

The non-immigrant citizenry were not imbued with a corresponding sense of personal investment in the census. Even the African Americans in the sample probably might not have responded on the basis of racially based interest politics, as in New Orleans, because their numbers are quite small in Jefferson Parish and even a complete tabulation might not bring them any clout. We feel, however, that if the Governor of the State, the Presidents of the Parishes and the Mayors of the Cities had spoken more about the relevance of the census before and while it was occurring, they could have garnered more support based on regional interest.

By driving home the dollars and cents issues and linking the census count to schools and playgrounds, job training and highway repair, they could have drawn more people into the count, as part of a regional interest group. In Louisiana, this line of analysis came into play after the release of the preliminary census figures, accompanied by weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In contrast, the Hispanic advocacy groups personalized the census and conducted

outreach to their constituency through many of the means available to them. There is of course room for improvement but the degree of undercount for that population in our research vis-a-vis the other subgroups suggests that their efforts were rewarded. Taking the cue, local governments should make more effort to do the same, using their school boards, their housing authorities, their traffic divisions and any other bureaucracies with great public exposure to make appeals to the populace. The entire effort also must begin much earlier than the last minute bombardment strategy which characterized the census campaign in Louisiana. While the Census Bureau refines the methods and instruments designed to extract the most complete and accurate information on the population, it is at the local level where this is implemented. Our research suggests that there is vast room for improvement there.

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This is the final report of research supported by Joint Statistical Agreement (JSA) 89-45 between the United States Bureau of the Census and Hispanidad, Inc. (of New Orleans, Louisiana). Manuel de la Puente was the Technical Representative. It was issued as Report # 16 in the *Ethnographic Evaluation of the 1990 Decennial Census Report series in July 1992 and as PREM #166 on August 6, 1992*. The views, opinions, and findings contained in this report are those of the author and should not be construed as an official Bureau of the Census position, policy or decision, unless so designated by other official documentation. This is a public document and may not be copyrighted. Please cite as: "Bracken, Karen (1992) Hispanics in a racially and ethnically mixed neighborhood in the Greater Metropolitan New Orleans area."

Disclaimer: This is the final report for one of the 29 independent Joint Statistical Agreement projects which conducted an ethnographic evaluation of the behavioral causes of undercount. All 29 studies followed common methodological guidelines. This report is based on an analysis of the results of a match between the author(s)' Alternative Enumeration to data from the 1990 Decennial Census forms for the same site. Each ethnographic site contained about 100 housing units. Information was compiled from census forms that were recovered through October 10, 1990. The data on which this report is based should be considered preliminary for several reasons: Between October 10, 1990 and December 31, 1990, additional census forms MAY have been added to or deleted from the official enumeration of the site as a result of coverage improvement operations, local review, or other late census operations. Differences between October 10, 1990 and final census results as reported on the Unedited Detail File were incorporated in later analyses of data from this site. The consistency of the authors' coding of data has not been fully verified. Hypothesis tests and other analyses are original to the author. Therefore, the quantitative results contained in this final JSA report may differ from later reports issued by Census Bureau Staff referring to the same site.

The exact location of the study area and the names of persons and addresses enumerated by the independent researchers and in the 1990 Decennial Census are Census confidential and cannot be revealed until the year 2062. The researchers who participated in this study were Special Sworn Employees (SSE) or staff of the Census Bureau.

For more information about this report, contact Manuel de la Puente in Population Division or Leslie A. Brownrigg in Statistical Research Division, Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C. 20033.