

ETHNOGRAPHIC EVALUATION OF THE BEHAVIORAL CAUSES OF UNDERCOUNT: WOODBURN, OREGON

by
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INTRODUCTION

This coverage report presents the findings of an Alternative Enumeration (AE) conducted in Woodburn, Oregon, for the U.S. Census Bureau. Five hypotheses of the causes of undercount were suggested by Brownrigg and Martin (1989) and served as the basis of this research. It was predicted that Hispanics in Woodburn would conceal their living arrangements in order to protect their over-occupancy of limited housing. It was also suggested that language barrier would cause undercount among this population.

Woodburn is a small farming town and it suffers a severe shortage of housing, even without an annual influx of migrant workers. However, in recent years this situation has gotten progressively worse during harvest, when there is a much greater demand for housing than actually exists. During the peak season, thousands of workers are forced to scramble for any available shelter. The situation can only be described as out of control. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that there are many more agricultural migrants pouring into Oregon than there are jobs.

Many of the resident Hispanics are Mexican and Mexican Americans directly tied to the agricultural industry. There is also an unknown number of documented and undocumented migrant farm workers who take up residency for months and years at a time. Because these workers earn less than poverty-level wages, they are forced to enter into complex household arrangements (characterized by non-relatedness) in order to ameliorate the cost of housing, which they would not be able to afford if there were only one wage earner in the household. Therefore, this research is important because it illuminates the decade-old problem of counting the large households of rural Hispanics, especially those participating in the low-wage migrant agricultural labor force.

While the findings of this ethnographic research are certainly not generalizable to the entire U.S. Hispanic population, they question basic Census Bureau assumptions regarding what constitutes "Usual Household" composition and also undermines the validity of the way the Census Bureau locates and enumerates rural Hispanic households.

THE RESEARCH SITE

The Woodburn ethnographic site is not a *barrio* -- defined as a number of contiguous city blocks with a high concentration of Hispanics. Instead, Hispanics are dispersed around the site according to their ability to purchase a single-family home, to rent a duplex, or to share a motel unit catering to migrants. Generally, then, whites live in the newer housing and Hispanics live in the rentals. To facilitate this discussion, the entire ethnographic site (107 housing units) can be divided into three easily identifiable sub-sites: 18 housing units at the Kitchenette Motel; 21 units at the Great Society Duplexes; and 49 mostly-owner-occupied Tract Homes. However, another 19 houses are spread around the ethnographic site. In other words, they are not geographically located in the three sub-sites described below.

The Kitchenette Motel: Sadly, the motel is representative of the shabby housing available to migrant farm workers in Woodburn. Occupied mostly by Mexicans (16 of 18 units), 12 of those Mexican units exhibited complex household arrangements. The motel is unpainted and dirty, and the earthen courtyard is filled with ruts. Junk vehicles have been parked on the property for years. A fire had burned a gaping hole through a carport wall. The damage was never repaired.

The Great Society Duplexes: The 21 housing units at the Great Society Duplexes comprise a Johnson-era development where a working-class mix of single mothers, young couples, poor whites and poor, socially-integrated Hispanics (young and old) live side by side. Fourteen of the 21 households are Hispanic. Several households (white and Hispanic) receive housing assistance. There are no add-ons or hidden housing units. Units rent by the month. In that regard, the duplexes and the motel are the same.

The Tract Homes: Located on the very edge of town, the Tract Homes comprise a neighborhood of 59 middle to lower middle-class households, four being Hispanic. The rest are white. This housing is typical of that in the West: free standing, single-family, ranch-style houses on individual property. During the day, this neighborhood is deserted. Driveways are empty and the street is quiet. "Neighborhood Watch" signs are posted at each end of the street.

FIELD METHODS

This section describes the methods used during the AE, following guidelines provided. This ethnographic site included three distinct socioeconomic levels of housing. Hence, the Duplexes, the Motel, and the Tract Homes are all sub-sites within a larger ethnographic site. I sometimes refer to them as sub-sites to facilitate description. While the residents of the motel sub-site comprised less than one fourth of the residents of the ethnographic site (92/370), I easily devoted more than half of the six-week research period to the enumeration of the motel. This is because of the complex nature of the motel household found there, which I have described elsewhere in this paper as the Ad

Hoc household. For instance, in a six-person migrant household, at least six or more separate interviews were usually required to collect data because no individual would speak for others in the household.

Locating the site: The research period was continuous from June 15 to July 25, 1990. Because of residency patterns in Woodburn, an ethnographic site with 40% Hispanic households was selected. However, because they were twice as large as white households (5.2 to 2.6) the research guideline that the site should include a majority of Hispanics was met. The selection process included a windshield strategy, a reverse phone directory, and a doorstep survey.

Constructing A Working Map: Following the Ethnographic Evaluation guidelines, all housing units were noted and recorded on a map. Other maps were consulted and residents were asked to name their street. Initially, 101 units were found.

Entree: Participant observation was engaged in mainly at five motel units, translating, giving advice, offering transportation, eating, playing cards, etc. Entree was achieved with the help of the resident manager, by spending large blocks of time with him on several days. I also acted as a language broker. At first, I translated for him and then later for the tenants. I was careful not to be identified with the manager's interests.

In order to understand the behavior of the migrants, it was necessary to determine whether they were documented. However, I did not ask: "Do you have papers, work permit, etc?" I felt as though that would be intrusive and cause concealment. At some point I would ask them if they had been enumerated. After their usual negative response, I would follow with: "Why, are you afraid of the census?" This practice not only determined whether or not they were afraid, but quite often they would volunteer that they were either documented or undocumented. It was a very helpful strategy.

Weekday interviews were conducted from 5 p.m. until 9 p.m., or sometimes later (many times as late as midnight at the motel). Interviews had to be done in the evening, even though an attempted household enumeration might have found one person cooking, another bathing, still others waiting to bathe, and/or watching TV, already asleep, or talking outside. Thus, there was no guarantee that all household members would be available.

At the Motel or Duplexes, if a door or window were open, I would simply "announce" myself by issuing a greeting in a friendly voice. If admission were gained, I would affect a non-threatening manner, carefully judging when a question could appropriately be asked. Sometimes this is fruitless, but the alternative is to press for a response and have a subject refuse to answer.

Systematic Observation: Several times each day I traversed and observed the entire ethnographic site by bicycle. Most of the systematic neighborhood observations were accomplished this way, closer household and individual observations while talking with the residents in their homes.

The Tract Homes: Most residents of the Tract Homes were willing to divulge basic household data, but others refused to give more information than was absolutely necessary. For instance, 15 white women (who had all already returned a census form) refused to participate in varying degrees. Seven refused to talk to me, or gave only scant information. It is important to note that: (1) they had already self-reported by mail, or (2) had been enumerated in follow-up by the Census Bureau by the time the AE began.

The Kitchenette Motel: Initially, observation seemed impossible because it was like watching a shell game with migrants coming and going. Car pool drivers arrived at dusk, sometimes staying or entering a unit, confusing the identity of the various households. However, observation improved with the passage of time. Still, peripheral members of these households were not counted because their attachment to any household was never established, i.e, persons who would come home late and were never identified, staying for only a few nights, or sleeping on mats in the carport or in parked cars.

The Great Society Duplexes: This racially mixed (white and Hispanic) sub-site can be observed from one end of the street. In that regard, it is similar to the Motel which can be completely observed from one position. Unlike the residents of the Motel or Tract Homes, the people here seem to know their neighbors very well. Several residents said that there had been drug users in the neighborhood in the past, but that they were "gotten rid of." The residents watch each other with suspicious eyes. To illustrate, one Hispanic woman said of a white neighbor, "See that house? That woman always has the police over there? The kids don't respect her and they are always yelling and fighting."

FINDINGS

Test of the Language Barrier Hypothesis

Because census methodology (mainly the mail-out/mail-back questionnaire) relies on the general population possessing a high degree of English-language skills, the problem of language barrier, i.e., poor access to native-language media, and illiteracy were predicted as factors which would contribute to the problem of undercount in the ethnographic site. This hypothesis assumes that if migrants were only made more aware of the census that they would on their own initiative self-report.

For the migrant population, this turned out to be a rather dubious proposition. While some evidence was observed among the resident Hispanic population that supports the argument that those with better English-language skills will self-report to a higher degree, there were also examples of native, English-speaking, assimilated Hispanics who did not self-report. However, of the three Hispanic households at the Kitchenette Motel which self-reported all had at least one native English speaker -- no migrant household self-reported. Two of the migrant households indicated that they had wanted to self-report, but never received Spanish-language census materials. The census was of little interest to the remaining migrant households. The enumeration of these households (or whether or not they self-report) is based on more than the fact that they may not be able to read or write in English. It is related to the fact that some Hispanics (but especially migrants) demonstrated a world view which sees agents of the US Government as persons who should be avoided.

Test of the Concealment of Living Arrangement Hypothesis

In the Woodburn ethnographic site, it was specifically hypothesized that Hispanics possessed knowledge of the occupancy restrictions that exist for rental housing in Woodburn, which limits the rental of housing units to no more than 5 unrelated persons. Woodburn has a housing officer who investigates infractions of the housing codes and, therefore, Hispanics are frequently cited for overcrowding. Therefore, mindful of these restrictions and the dire shortage of housing that exists in Woodburn, it was believed that Hispanics would conceal their living arrangements. However, Hispanics were not found to be preoccupied with, or even aware of Woodburn's occupancy restrictions.

Test of the general Concealment Hypothesis

The difficulty of enumerating the migrant population is compounded by the fact that (whether or not they are documented) almost all migrants possess some residual phobia regarding the immigration authorities. The Language Barrier hypothesis, above, assumes that educational or media campaigns would lead migrants to voluntarily self-report if they were only made more aware of the census, or if census forms were in Spanish. It also assumes that these campaigns can overcome the fear that migrants have towards the information gathering efforts of the US Government. There was little evidence to indicate that these assumptions would hold among the migrant population.

During fieldwork, it became clear that census participation is a practice that only the most socially-integrated individuals engage in. Consequently, it became obvious that stronger forces were at work preventing migrants from participating in the census. Thus, the fear of immigration authorities emerged as the single most serious concern of Hispanics. Of course, it can't be separated from some of the precautions that migrants take regarding the protection of Ad Hoc household secrecy, but it became apparent that even documented Hispanics have a fear of immigration authorities or government agents which manifests itself in varying degrees of resistance. This fear is present in the Ad Hoc household (described below) and contributes to the difficulty of enumerating those households.

The fear of immigration authorities in particular and the police in general was obvious in the ethnographic site. For instance, Ysidro is documented and his residency status is permanent, but he was still intimidated by the threat that the census presents. The reason for his fear is because of the fact that his wife and children were undocumented. He says:

"I go straight to work and home again because I am afraid of being arrested. I don't drink or walk the streets because a person can get into trouble by doing that. I am not afraid of being here, but I have to take precautions. What would my wife do if I am taken to jail and I stay there for a week or two until everything is sorted out? My wife and children are alone and they do not know what to do. Who will take care of them? ... No one! ... Who knows? ... The census could fall into the hands of the police. I'll tell you the truth, my life is worse in the USA than it was in Mexico. Here, I am nothing but a prisoner; I can't go anywhere; I can't

do anything. I can't even take my family to the restaurant like the other families."

The Housing Unit

The economic reality of Ad Hoc living arrangements practiced at the Kitchenette Motel made the census concept of housing unit very problematic. For instance, these buildings were not structurally subdivided: but had direct access from the outside and the occupants lived and ate separately from everyone else in the Motel. These conditions are Census Bureau requirements of a separate housing unit. Thus, the Census Bureau expectation of a structural subdivision conflicted with the reality of the complex households occupying the housing units at the Kitchenette Motel.

I discovered numerous situations where related and unrelated people were inhabiting the same housing unit. These people were observed to have the same household privileges and the same internal access. However some people ate separately while others ate communally. Many of the housing units were so small that they had only one door. The only entitlement that household membership guaranteed was access to the accommodations inside the housing unit: the kitchen (if needed), the bathing facilities, and a spot on the floor for a sleeping mat. Hence, the reality of the Ad Hoc household, discussed below, does not agree with the Census Bureau assumptions regarding usual privacy (i.e., how a housing unit should be used) or usual household practices (i.e., that households eat together, for instance).

The Ad Hoc Household

I have chosen to describe the complex living arrangements observed in Woodburn as Ad Hoc Households. I describe them this way because they are created by the actors involved to deal with one common issue -- their poverty. The Ad Hoc household found in Woodburn is the result of various economic and social factors specific to this locality. It is practical because it provides shelter for workers who do not, and would not earn enough wages to provide shelter for themselves if they were to live alone.

The Ad Hoc household relationships found in Woodburn concur with the complex housing arrangements discussed in other census research: for instance, Rodriguez and Hagan (1991:10), identify 15 different "complex housing arrangements" in their study of Houston's Latino immigrants; Stepick and Stepick (1990:35) report 13 variations of "complex household composition" in their study of Haitians in Miami; Camilo Garcia Parra (1989:9), reports that "established Hispanics" in Washington State provide newcomers with housing; Victor Garcia (1992:12), in Guadalupe, (CA), also describes "irregular housing set ups" to accommodate temporary boarders.

Identifying these households is difficult. This is because the Ad Hoc household arrangement itself produces a new set of household conditions. The alienated nature of the Ad Hoc household itself produces behaviors which vary according to the complexity of social relationships in the household arrangement.

For instance, in Woodburn, the Ad Hoc Household implies none of the behaviors assumed in a usual household living arrangement, such sharing food or eating together. Therefore, it should not be assumed that persons inhabiting a housing unit constitute a household in the familial sense. Romero discovered (1992:7), in her study of the Mission District of San Francisco, that various household groupings sharing one housing unit:

"...have organized the apartment into three internal apartments with each bedroom representing a separate unit. Each bedroom has a lock. The bathroom and kitchen are shared; however, each group has a separate section in the refrigerator and much of the dry and canned food is stored in their rooms."

The difference at the Kitchenette Motel is that the household members do not have the luxury of separate sleeping quarters. Yet, the reality of the non-relatedness of the Ad Hoc household creates separateness.

In Woodburn, while migrants employed a limited communal strategy in order to deal with the shortage of cheap housing, this communality was only observed with the sharing of space, bathing and cooking facilities. To wit, the personal property of other household members, for example, radio, television, clothes, were not shared. In addition, traditional household activity was not observed, i.e., joint meals or free transportation, familial household purchases, etc. Thus, those without an automobile pay a \$2 car pool fee, some eat fast food, and a fee is charged to use a household phone.

From these behaviors it is obvious that Ad Hoc Households do not manifest the same interpersonal relationships one might expect to find in the usual mainstream household. They undercut the Census Bureau notion of usual household and unless census procedures are changed, the Census Bureau will always have difficulty enumerating households where this type of Ad Hoc living arrangement is practiced.

The most important byproduct of the Ad Hoc Household arrangement is the generation and maintenance of relationships which can only be described as loosely tied, ephemeral, and alienated (no responsibility to household) because each slot in the household is allocated by money and not necessarily kinship. House members come and go as they please with little concern for the housing unit itself, individual household members or groups. It is suggested that the money relationship destroys the notion of true communal living, implied in the census definition of usual residence or household. Within this context, the unwillingness of Ad Hoc householders to identify other persons living in the same housing unit can be easily understood.

The Ad Hoc Household itself contributes to undercount

In the Ad Hoc household, if all members are not present, the likelihood of obtaining the data pertaining to persons outside, asleep, at work, or temporarily absent is virtually

impossible. It is as if those persons do not exist. However, even when the number of housemates is determined or provided, the personal data for those other persons is still unattainable. This is because Ad Hoc households protect their identity. This means that coverage of the Ad Hoc household will be determined, to a great extent, by coincidence (who is actually present during the visit) and/or the perseverance of the enumerator.

The historic, economic, and political circumstances of those who create an Ad Hoc household explains and determines to what degree that household will participate in the census. In other words, the economic activity in which migrants participate and the criminal marginality into which they are cast therefore prevents them from living freely in US society. In other census research, concealment of household resources was determined to be a cause of undercount (Valentine and Valentine, 1971). In the Ad Hoc household, the motivation for the protection of household resources is at least as great, but differs in that the Ad Hoc household requires that everyone be concealed, because detection means deportation. Concealment of the Ad Hoc household sometimes occurs passively, at other times purposively -- making it difficult to suggest a better way in which these households can be censused more accurately than by enumeration. Regardless of the motivation for concealment, the fact remains that many of these households will not volunteer readily for the census.

Census Errors Contribute to undercount

In the Fall of 1989, a census enumerator listed the Kitchenette Motel as a "Special Place." It was erroneously designated as such because it was considered to be a motel. It should have been designated as apartments instead. For example, one resident who was missed by the census had been residing in the Motel for eight years. That these apartments were incorrectly listed as a motel is supported by the fact that the Motel doesn't have a phone number or advertisement in the white or yellow pages and doesn't rely on overnight clientele, but word-of-mouth instead. The census erred again by (later) designating the motel as "an agricultural migrant worker dormitory," leading to inadequate enumeration of these housing units. As a result, the census only enumerated 44 individuals (losing the data on 11 others) instead of a figure closer to the 92 individuals the AE enumerated.

Contrast the above with the fact that the census did an excellent job of locating and counting middle-class Americans residing in the Tract Homes: 50 of 53 selected households were completely matched. Another might have matched if a continuation form had been filled. The census not only counted Tract Home households which didn't self report but also counted the households of housing units which didn't even exist during the 1980 Decennial Census. The census also did a similarly good job of locating the households of Americans who live in poverty (as evidenced by the enumeration of the 21 Duplexes). Only two white households were completely missed. On the other hand, the census did a poor job of enumerating the Kitchenette Motel by not devoting adequate time or resources to the enumeration of this sub-site, as evidenced by some

of the smaller-than-expected households enumerated by the census (within household misses). Thus, the existence of Hispanic Ad Hoc Households, combined with poor census enumeration, caused numerous residents to be missed at the Motel.

The fact that enumerator(s) obtained very little data at the Kitchenette Motel is a major criticism of the low-degree of emphasis and thoroughness accorded the enumeration of housing where migrant workers might reasonably be expected to be living. This type of uninformed, one-trip enumeration, which indeed works effectively with the middle-class, is not satisfactory with the migrant population. Whether or not migrants self-report, or don't consider themselves eligible for census inclusion, is beside the point. The census must make a greater effort to document their population.

CONCLUSION

Undercount in the rural, Hispanic population will increase unless census methods are improved. American farmers will continue to demand an over-supply of cheap farm labor, possibly drawing in as many as one million new undocumented workers by the end of the decade. Many of those workers will not self-report. As a result, unless this migrant population is more accurately accounted for, many rural communities will receive less federal funding than they would ordinarily be entitled to.

If rural Hispanic households are to be counted to any accurate degree they will require better personal enumeration. This is because, even when located, complete census enumeration of any rural, Hispanic household will consume more time than the enumeration of the mainstream household.

The census does not represent a safe activity to poorly-educated migrants (even if documented) who consider themselves subject to arrest at all times. The secrecy surrounding migrant households should be thought of as a practical manifestation of the migrant's political and economic reality, not as a culturally embedded behavioral practice of Hispanics in general. Therefore, the practice of maintaining and protecting the secrecy of migrant households is a practical manifestation of the subculture of Mexican migrants. Secrecy is not an inherent part of the Mexican value system. However, it is important in the survival strategy of the migrant worker. The migrant's behavior should be understood as the survival strategy of a group of workers who are forced to live as criminals. Consequently, they live like criminals, residing in hideaway housing units, where they "hole up," practicing so-called unusual living arrangements without complaining.

Finally, as long as it benefits American growers to employ Mexican farm workers and the same unequal economic relationship between the two countries persists the flow of labor will continue uncontrollably. A large percentage of those workers will be uncounted by the Census Bureau. I suggest that until Mexican migrant farm workers are organized into a more rational, legal pool of labor -- instead of being treated as an outlaw workforce -- the problem of undercount in the migrant farm worker population will continue unabated, and in fact may worsen. The problems of mobility, language "barrier," illiteracy, lack of documentation -- and therefore fear, secrecy, unusual or deviant behaviors -- will all continue to be thought of as ethnic quirks or cultural problems inherently related to something in the migrant farm worker's nature and not directed at the way the host nation operates.

Recommendations for the U.S. Census Bureau

- 1) Adopt the perspective that migrant farm workers will not self-report, regardless of whether they are documented or not. The Census Bureau must develop a more purposive strategy to find them and be more deliberate in its efforts to count them when they are found. This can be done by taking account of historical migration patterns and

implementing more intensive enumeration procedures in those areas.

2) Live up to the obligation to include farm workers in the census. Many residents at the Motel are migrant workers who spend the winter in Mexico but most of the year in the U.S. The census has an obligation to make every attempt to count them because they are part of the American workforce and economy: they work in the US, pay various taxes: income tax, sales tax, property tax (through their rent), in addition to paying into the social security fund, etc.

3) Make the reference day of the Census later in the Spring. If enumeration of these workers is to be more effective, a date later than the first day of April would be more appropriate for such an endeavor -- because it would give a more accurate picture of the migrant population. Thus, in order to improve census data collection methodology (so that what it reports is more in line with reality), I suggest that a better date to enumerate migrants might be May, June or July 1st when a more accurate level of their true population is present.

4) Do not apply the "Usual Residence Elsewhere" (URE) designation to migrant workers as though they were students away at college. If it were, then certainly all migrant workers would be ineligible for enumeration merely because they have a "usual residence" three to five months a year in Mexico. This status should only be applied to domestic migrant workers who, in fact, might have another household within the borders of the USA.

5) Improve census enumerators performance in rural areas by taking more care in applying housing codes, especially for housing classified as "special places."

6) Migrant farm workers are known to disproportionately take up residence in "special places" along the migrant streams (i.e., motels, camps, trailer parks, and other immediately available housing). In rural areas, this type of housing should either be removed from the category of "special places" in counties, states or regions where labor-intensive farming is practiced or they should, in fact, receive special (enumeration) treatment.

7) Direct the enumeration of rural Hispanics and migrant farmworkers away from relying on the mail-out/mail-back techniques.

8) Accept the fact that any attempt to reach the migrant population with impersonal survey strategies (i.e., mail return, telephone, media campaign) will be grossly ineffective. Even when a migrant is literate in Spanish, nothing is gained by self-reporting and, in fact, migrants believe it will ultimately hurt them.

9) Documented and undocumented migrant farm workers will continue to have few institutional ties. Therefore, the purchase of commercial mailing or advertiser lists, phone lists (or cross listings), property ownership roles, automobile registration or

drivers' license lists, credit card lists, public utility rolls, etc., are unnecessary because they will be as ineffective in the next Decennial Census as it was in Woodburn for the 1990 census.

10) Reimplement a strategy which includes a traditional door-to-door enumeration AND the required return visits for the rural, Hispanic population. The Motel received no return visits.

11) Require that all enumerators sent to enumerate the Spanish speaking population possess Spanish-language fluency and instruct them on what to expect: How to frame questions, how to put respondents at ease, etc.

12) Specifically designate as special places troublesome living quarters and conduct more intensive enumeration with people trained in what to expect.

13) Two-person Hispanic teams could enumerate or re-enumerate the Hispanic households identified during the pre listing phase, initial census enumeration, or follow-up. In this way, more-culturally-competent teams could enumerate larger geographic areas by only enumerating the Hispanic, or migrant housing units identified by regular census efforts, above. The rest of the housing in any census block would be censused in the usual way as it is currently being done. In other words, the regular enumeration effort would stay the same and the culturally competent census workers would enumerate the Hispanic households identified by the regular census effort.

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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 area studied 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.

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