

# CULTURAL FACTORS AFFECTING WITHIN HOUSEHOLD COVERAGE AND PROXY REPORTING IN HISPANIC (SALVADORAN) HOUSEHOLDS

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## Introduction

This paper describes the first use of anthropological research methods by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) to investigate cultural factors associated with Hispanic undercoverage and proxy reporting in a major BLS survey. The research consisted of a small-scale ethnographic field study of Salvadoran and Non-Hispanic White households in suburban Maryland.

The Current Population Survey (CPS) is a BLS-sponsored longitudinal survey of labor force participation in 60,000 households in the United States, and is the main source of information on employment, unemployment, and underemployment in this country. While the response rate for the survey is about 95%, a source of agency concern is the underreporting for Hispanic households.

A recent Census Bureau figure for total Hispanic undercoverage in the CPS is over 10%, and most of this is believed to be within-household undercoverage. Male undercoverage is somewhat higher than female, with Hispanic male undercoverage about 12% and female undercoverage about 9% (Bureau of the Census, 1992). These undercoverage rates for CPS are in addition to the Hispanic undercount of five percent in the 1980 Census.

A research plan to improve minority coverage, developed for a joint BLS-Census CPS Task Force in 1989- identified two primary reasons for within household undercoverage:

- Deliberate underreporting because of economic reasons;
- Lack of fit between survey definitions of household and residency and people's actual living situations.

Among the recommendations for research activities to improve minority coverage contained in this 1989 Plan are:

- Ethnographic field studies using participant observation techniques;
- Cognitive anthropological interviews to elicit concepts connected with household membership and residence.

## Ethnographic Field Study

The ethnographic field study described in this paper was designed to address the possible lack of fit between survey definitions of household and residency and the actual living situations of Hispanics.

The field research was conducted in 1991 in a multi-ethnic Maryland suburb of Washington, DC. The largest Hispanic group within the Washington area is from El Salvador, and this was the Hispanic group chosen for study. The design of the study called for ethnographic interviews with all household members 15 years of age and older in a convenience sample of Salvadoran and non-Hispanic White households with similar socioeconomic characteristics. Many adults in both ethnic groups worked in house-cleaning, office maintenance or construction. Care was taken to recruit households that represented the main VM found among Salvadorans. These are the single nuclear family, two nuclear families living together, the female-headed household, and groupings of several single males.

Salvadoran and Non-Hispanic White respondents were recruited from the congregations of local Catholic and Protestant churches. Salvadoran respondents were also recruited from a free language school at which the author worked as a volunteer teacher. In addition, a Montgomery County outreach worker introduced us to the Resident Manager of a sprawling apartment complex which housed many undocumented as well as documented Salvadoran migrants.

The Resident Manager proved to be an excellent "key informant" on Salvadoran household composition. He served as "patron" of the apartment complex, arranging for "coyotes" to bring relatives and friends across the border. He placed undocumented individuals into households with documented members in order to provide the former with some protection. He also advised the newcomers on survival strategies in the new environment, including job hunting. Through this contact, we were introduced to households, and vouchsafed to household members, whom it would not otherwise been possible to interview.

The interviews were conducted in Spanish by a bilingual Hispanic BLS economist. The first Salvadoran household interviewed was that of a middle-aged woman and her 27 year-old daughter who attended a "Conversation Club" at which the author worked as a volunteer aide. When scheduling this interview, we were told that the only other person who lived in their house was a 23 year-old son. The night of the interview, another middle-aged woman was observed watching television in the family's living-room. In asking if this other woman also lived in the house, we were told that "she is just staying here." In asking how long the woman had been staying in the house, the daughter replied, "two years." We arranged to interview this other woman as well. (It is noteworthy that the mother and daughter owned their townhouse so there was no need to hide this other woman's presence from a landlord.)

On subsequent visits to other households recruited for the interviews, we would learn of the existence of additional household members only after we had been in the house or apartment for

an hour or two. Especially in the course of late night interviews, one or two adult males whom we had not been told about would arrive home about 10 P.M. There was never any attempt to hide their presence from us. With the one exception of a female boarder who was a close friend of the female head of household, boarders were considered very peripheral to the life of the household, and their presence in the household was not spontaneously reported.

In one particular type of Salvadoran household, that of several unrelated young adult males, household rosters were even more incomplete. This Hispanic household type has been termed the "Ad Hoc household" by Montoya in a paper on Mexican agricultural workers in Oregon which he presented at the Ethnographic Census Evaluation Research Seminar in 1991 (Montoya, 1991). The 'Ad Hoc' household" comes into being to fill the need for unrelated individuals to pool resources in order to keep a roof over their heads. It also serves as an 'Receiving Station' for newly-arrived, unattached Hispanics, who will hear about a vacancy in the household by "word-of-mouth" in the Hispanic community. In most cases, the newcomer will be taken to a construction site or other workplace by an established member of the household and helped to find employment. This assistance will even include the experienced worker giving some minimal vocational training to the newcomer.

While the newcomer's situation will be well-known to the member who has helped him to make ties to a job, the other household members might know very little to nothing about the newcomer. In interviewing in a five member "Ad Hoc" household, we were surprised to learn that one respondent did not know the names of some of the other men living in the apartment. While our first thought was that this respondent might be trying to protect his housemates, we later learned that the respondent had only been in the United States for two weeks, and he did not remember the names of housemates he had seen but a few times.

In some cases, the head of the household was a legal resident, and the boarders were undocumented. The reverse was also true. In households composed of several adult males, the likelihood was that everyone was undocumented.

Table I shows the distribution of males and females 15 years of age and older who were reported and observed in the 17 Salvadoran and 15 Non-Hispanic White households surveyed. The high number of males in the Salvadoran households is noteworthy given the fact that 6 of the 17 households were female-headed. The expected shortage of males was canceled out by the presence of six male and only two female boarders.

**Table 1. Reported and observed household members in Salvadoran and Non-Hispanic White Households**

Salvadoran

	Repd	Obsd	Diff	%Diff
Males	32	36	4	11
Females	34	35	1	3
Total	66	71	5	7

Non-Hispanic White

	Repd	Obsd	Diff	%Diff
Males	25	25	0	00
Females	23	23	0	00
Total	48	48	0	00

There were no discrepancies between reported and observed household members in the Non-Hispanic White households compared to the 11 % unreported males and 3 % unreported females in the Salvadoran households. In Table 2, we see that the difference between Salvadoran and Non-Hispanic households in reported vs. non-reported members approaches significance, with chi square at the  $p = 0.09$  level (chi square = 2.935). A Fisher's Exact 2-tailed test with correction for continuity yielded a similar  $p$  value of  $p < .09$  ( $p = .079$ )

**Table 2. Households with and without unreported persons**

	With unrptd	Without unrptd	Total
Non-Hisp White	0	15	15
Salvadoran	3	14	17
Total	3	29	32

$X^2 = 2.935$

$p < .09$

Potential problems exist in collecting complete household rosters even for some categories of relatives who are integrated into the social life of the Salvadoran migrant household. This can be best illustrated by the following excerpt from a respondent's lengthy account of the changing composition of her household since she came to the United States:

Mrs. Ramozo recounted that she and her daughter, together with Mrs. Ramozo's mother, brother, brother's wife, and their daughter, moved to their present house early in 1979. After six months, her father came for a visit from El Salvador and returned to El Salvador with Mrs. Ramozo's daughter. Mrs. Ramozo's stepmother, two half-sisters, and a nephew came from El Salvador to stay in her house in 1981. Two months later, an uncle and a brother-in-law came from El Salvador to stay with them. In October of 1981, her two half-sisters, nephew, step-mother and brother-in-law moved to Chicago.

For purposes of the CPS, which attempts to measure the size of the U.S. labor force, we were interested in learning whether or not any of the relatives who were described as "visiting" from El Salvador for one or two months did any paid work while here. We were told, matter-of-factly, that of course it was necessary for these visiting relatives to work in order to cover expenses during their visit to the United States. (Parenthetically, the CPS does not ask about persons who are Visiting in the household.)

### Proxy Reporting

Structured interviews asking each household member for labor force information on all household members 15 years of age and older were conducted in both the Salvadoran and Non-Hispanic White households. Some interesting contrasts between Hispanics' and Non-Hispanics' proxy reporting patterns have emerged, including evidence of greater intergenerational communication and greater knowledge on the part of Hispanic parents about their children's job search and hours worked.

For purposes of this paper, we will only be concerned with the effect of household status, i.e., boarder vs. family member, on proxy reporting of labor force characteristics. We were especially interested to learn the effect of the boarder's marginal household role on family members' knowledge of the boarder's labor force characteristics.

The numbers were too small to do reliable statistical tests of the data. However, the data suggest that even though family members *do not* spontaneously list their boarders on the household roster, they *do* know about their boarders' labor force characteristics.

Table 3 shows the percent of self-proxy agreement for reporting having worked last week. There was 85 % agreement for family members reporting for boarders and 94% agreement for their reports on other family members. In Table 4, which shows self-proxy agreement in occupational classification at the one-digit level, the degree of agreement was again very high for family member's reports for their boarders (100%) as well as their relative (96%). Table 5 shows the same pattern of high self-proxy agreement in family members reporting "Industrial Classification" at the one-digit level, for boarders (88 %) as well as other family members (94%).

**Table 3. Self-proxy agreement on "worked last week"**

	Agree	Disag	Total	% Agr
Fam/Bdr	11	2	13	85
Fam/Fatn	105	7	112	94
Total	116	9	125	

**Table 4. Self-proxy agreement on occupational class**

	Agree	Disag	Total	% Agr
Fam/Bdr	8	0	8	100
Fam/Fatn	81	2	83	96
Total	89	2	91	

**Table 5. Self-proxy agreement on industrial class**

	Agree	Disag	Total	% Agr
Fam/Bdr	7	1	8	88
Fam/Fatn	78	5	83	94
Total	85	6	91	

### Conclusions

Evidence from the small-scale ethnographic field study of reported household rosters in Salvadoran and non-Hispanic White households suggests cultural differences in household composition, concepts of household membership, and reporting patterns between the two cultural groups. The finding that family members in Salvadoran households are generally knowledgeable about the labor force characteristics of their boarders would seem to justify greater effort in eliciting their presence in the household, not only for purposes of reducing the undercount of Hispanics in the CPS, but for the promise of some description of the missing individuals' labor force characteristics as well.

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