

UNDERCOUNT OF BLACK INNER CITY RESIDENTS OF NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

by
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I. PURPOSE

The primary purpose of this report is to identify and explain census errors in terms of our hypotheses of the causes of undercount. The results of the evaluation of the causes of undercount for the target groups are based on the Alternative Enumeration (AE) and ethnographic observations. Many Black inner city areas are characterized by high rates of unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, substandard housing, disease, alienation, frustration, and hopelessness. These problems interact to create other problems, such as crime, welfare dependency, inadequate health and medical care, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy and mortality which lead, in turn, to certain types of adaptive behavioral responses by family members and also create difficult problems for census enumeration.

The major premise of this study is that in economically depressed areas of the inner city, where most residents are locked into a vicious cycle of poverty and are alienated from the socioeconomic mainstream of society, there is a relatively higher undercount rate among young Black males and minor children. Some young Black males who become "invisible" and children of at-risk inner city families are undercounted due to dispersed living arrangements created by family poverty, family dissolution, welfare dependency, inferior schools, and inadequate health and dental care.

High rates of chronic illnesses, high delinquency rates, poor services, and few opportunities for upward mobility are also contributing factors. Nearly half (43 percent) of Black youth under 18 live in families that are below the poverty line. Two-thirds (67 percent) of those living in female-headed families are classified as poor and two of every five Black youth live in female-headed families (Children's Defense Fund, 1986). These are negative economic conditions that have an adverse impact on family structure and the economic status and opportunities of children (Gibbs, 1988). These conditions, in turn, create modes of adaptation among inner city Black families that can lead to an undercount of young males and minor children.

II. SITE PROFILE

The ethnographic site is located in an inner city area where most of the residents are low income and rent rather than own their homes. Although the area is accessible to amenities which are commonly associated with a middle class lifestyle, most of the residents here do not possess the income to purchase these amenities. Thus, the

neighborhood where the sample area is located stands in stark contrast to the affluence which engulfs it. Along the periphery of the sample area are legitimate businesses but in the side streets and in the housing project, illicit activities, including drug dealing, take place.

The sample area is almost 100 percent Black and is located adjacent to a low income public housing project. Many characteristics that are typically associated with a ghetto are present including deteriorated substandard housing, high population density, a large proportion of rental houses, a high crime rate, a high poverty rate, family dislocations, and undeveloped community services. Children were often seen playing in the street. Human traffic was high during the late afternoon and evenings. We observed many residents sitting on their porch, perhaps to socialize or to stay cool if they do not own air conditioners. Streets are very narrow and lined with parked cars on both sides and the drainage is poor. The vast majority of rental housing contained two or more units. The street fronting the site is a major thoroughway lined with apartments that have commercial establishments on the first floor. Some housing units cannot easily be seen from the street. Owner occupied houses are few and a large percentage of the houses are vacant or boarded up. After the initial count of housing units, we discovered 11 additional ones. These additional housing units were found after making repeated visits and using information provided by residents of the neighborhood.

We profiled key socioeconomic indicators for the neighborhood containing the site using 1980 census data. More than 65 percent of the residents of the neighborhood were either over 60 or less than 20 years old (the dependent population), compared to the city-wide average of 63 percent. The percentage of persons in female-headed households with no husband present (9.2 percent) was higher than the citywide average of 7.2. Persons over 65 represented 13.0 percent of total households, compared to 11.7 percent for the city. The average income for the neighborhood was about \$10,650, compared to \$11,814 for the city. The jobless head of household rate was very high. Twelve percent of the housing units of the neighborhood were vacant, 2 percent were boarded up and 88 percent were occupied (1980, PHC80-2-259, U.S. Census Bureau). We hypothesized that an inverse relationship might exist between Census coverage and the socioeconomic status of a neighborhood. That is, the lower the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood, the greater the likelihood of census error. However, the type and pattern of adjustments to adverse socioeconomic conditions may vary from one family or neighborhood to another due to both internal and external social, cultural and historical factors.

III. METHODS

The ethnographic sample was selected primarily because of the co-principal investigators' previous experience with this population. One of the principal investigators grew up near the study site and knows many of its residents. The study site was also selected because it is a typical Black inner city neighborhood. Field

activities included designing, mapping, site selection, and conducting the Alternative Enumeration (AE). Site selection was approved on May 25, 1990. Field work for the AE was conducted by both PIs and a field assistant from June 1 to August 30, 1990. One female field assistant was selected to assist in locating housing units, establishing contact and rapport with residents, obtaining information about residents, conducting the AE, and matching residents with addresses and housing units. It should be noted that a female was selected for this position because we believe that the people in the community feel less threatened by a woman and are more likely to respond openly to one.

Two adjacent blocks were selected as the study site. The best times for making observations were in the morning and in the late afternoon. Observations were conducted on both weekends and week days to permit the researchers to observe patterns of behavior and activity that vary by time or day of the week. The research team convened weekly to compare notes and observations, exchange information and make any modifications or adjustments necessary. Field notes were recorded in tablets and summarized weekly. Ethnographic observations began with a layout and delineation of the study site. Two visits per week over a three-month period were made to observe the ecological, ethnic and cultural characteristics of the area and to obtain information to permit an assessment of the hypotheses that were formulated. The visits were organized into three levels of observations: (1) physical and ecological features; (2) socioeconomic and ethnic features; and (3) attitudinal and behavioral features. Physical and ecological features included geographical location, housing density, housing standards, human traffic and presence of people, street layout, names, numbering or designation pattern, property maintenance, and ethnic presence. Socioeconomic features included an assessment of the value of houses, the social class of the neighborhood, the racial/ethnic characteristics of the people, and signs of wealth, poverty and status. Attitudinal and behavioral features observed included responses or reactions of residents to our presence in the area and to questions asked, such as: Who lives here? Can you tell me where this person lives? How well do you know your neighbors? How long has this unit been vacant? How long have you lived in this neighborhood? Have you been interviewed by the census before? Are you familiar with the purpose of the census? Also, reactions, attitudes, and the behavior of interviewees were observed and recorded. During the interviews, observations were made of the characteristics of persons in the household, the presence of children and babies, and the condition of the housing unit.

Preliminary visits to the neighborhood were made to lay out the blocks, map the housing units, and check the addresses in order to get to know the residents of the area so they would know what we were doing and to reduce any fears and apprehension about our study. It was necessary to repeatedly emphasize to everyone that we were not from the housing authority, welfare, police or a government agency. Research began at the right corner of the first block and proceeded counterclockwise until the entire block was covered. The second block was similarly covered. The majority of the interviews took place outside the homes of residents, usually on their porch or in the

yard. Few respondents invited us inside their home. Fear was evident among some of the elderly residents who would not answer their door even though there were visible signs that the houses were occupied. Many residents were reluctant to provide information concerning the whereabouts of their neighbors, perhaps fearing negative sanctions for providing personal information about persons who did not wish to be bothered. There were several cases where persons agreed to be interviewed but later refused after they discovered the type of information we requested. Residents of one-third of the housing units were visited six times or more because no one was at home or no one would answer the door.

Resolution field work was conducted by the co-principal investigator with close ties to the neighborhood. In order to apply the resolution codes, several rounds were transacted between the PI and the Census Bureau technical representative.

IV. ANALYSIS

In this section we present our analysis of whether or not our hypotheses concerning the behavioral causes of undercount in the sample area were supported. We present our hypothesis, then the related outcome.

1. A high residential and occupational mobility among parents is associated with an undercount of Black children.

The rate of residential mobility during the AE was quite high. Among the AE respondents, more than a third reported living at their current residence less than five years and a number of others had changed their residence two or more times in the past five years. Twenty one persons moved into the study site after Census Day, and after Census Day 23 moved out. Eleven of the 21 persons who moved into the study site were children.

The AE included two children who were not on the census but who were residents of the site on Census Day, 11 children who moved into the site after Census Day and 18 who were resident during the census and the AE and were included on both and matched. On the census, there were 16 children who were not on the AE including 5 who had moved out of the site after Census Day and 11 not included on the AE who were confirmed as having been resident on Census Day.

The resolved Census Day population of children was 35. On the census, there were 34 children and on the AE 31. The high mobility of parents of Black children at this site appears not to have had a notable effect on the census enumeration of children.

2. Adult males will have a relatively higher rate of undercount in the study site.

There were 53 adult females included on the census (including out movers), the equivalent of 90 percent of the resolved Census Day population of adult females and 45 adult males (including out movers), the equivalent of 90 percent of the resolved Census

Day population of adult males.

On the AE, 49 adult females (including in movers) or 83 percent of the resolved Census Day population of adult females and 34 adult males (including in movers) or 68 percent of the resolved Census Day population of adult males were included.

Seven of the 16 adult females included in the census but not the AE had moved out of the site after Census Day. Of the 18 adult men included on the census but not the AE, 11 had moved out of the site after Census Day. Three adult females and three adult males who were residents on Census Day were omitted from the census but included on the AE. Adult males did not experience a greater underenumeration than did adult females in this setting. (See Tables 1 and 2 in the original report).

3. Low visibility of adult Black males is associated with undercount.

We observed that adult males were not very visible in the neighborhood. They were less likely than other persons to be seen sitting on a porch, holding conversations, walking, visiting, or working in the yard or around the house. This was less true in the late afternoon, especially on weekends, which suggests the presence of discernible visitation and activity patterns. Residents often reported they had not recently seen a neighbor whose name we observed on a mailbox. The low visibility of adult Black males suggests not only that relatively fewer live in the neighborhood (they represent 46 percent of the resolved adult Census Day population), but also that they are difficult to locate, and their activity and visitation patterns are somewhat irregular. However, although low visibility of Black males may have affected their census enumeration, roughly equal proportions of adult males and females (90 percent) of the resolved Census Day population were included in the census.

4. Low availability of adult Black males is associated with undercount.

The researchers observed that adult males were less available for interviews than females. Most of those who we actually met and spoke to during the AE were female household heads. Respondents usually did not invite the researcher into their house, a sign of distrust, fear, disinterest or concealment of household members. Thus, the majority of the interviews were conducted outside the house, on the porch or in the yard. A male living there may not have been visible or reported as a member of the household to either the census or the AE.

However, as stated above, the proportion of adult Black males omitted from the census was about the same as the proportion of adult females omitted. Therefore, low availability does not appear to have been a factor affecting census enumeration of adult Black males in relation to adult Black females.

5. Low socioeconomic status and high unemployment are associated with an undercount of Black males.

Most of the persons who were missed by the census refused to give us information

about their income. However, their socio-economic status can be inferred by their educational and occupational level. Some of the occupations reported by those missed by the census (both male and female) were mechanic, foreman, and practical nurse. Many respondents reported as their source of income welfare, unemployment or retirement benefits. Most of those missed by the census came from low socioeconomic status families. In fact, the entire study area is classified as a low-income area, based on the 1980 Census, and our observations of house values and employment characteristics.

Forty-two percent of the household heads we spoke to reported that they were unemployed. Thirty-one percent of the male respondents and 45.5 percent of the female respondents reported that they were unemployed. Most of those employed worked in low paying blue-collar jobs. Twenty percent of the respondents said they were retired. Low socioeconomic status and a high unemployment rate tend to produce high residential mobility among Black males who are "looking for a job," "working away from home," or "living with relatives and friends". These factors combined with the high level of welfare dependency among female heads of household contribute to transiency among Black males who do not have a permanent residence. We learned from neighbors and informants that Black males often had to leave the area to "survive," but sometimes returned to "visit". However, as stated earlier, the proportion of adult Black males omitted from the census was not notably greater than the proportion of adult females omitted. Therefore, low socioeconomic status and high unemployment do not appear to have affected census enumeration of adult Black males in relation to adult Black females at this site.

6. Female-headed households with a large number of children and households headed by single, divorced, separated or divorced females are difficult to enumerate.

Households headed by single (unmarried) women with no adult male present represented 46 percent of the total households on the AE. In the ethnographic sample area, typically the single mother household was extended to include other relatives and their children or the children of nonresident boyfriends. Such extended family households create many exigencies that may pose as barriers to an accurate count.

Eleven children who were living in households headed by a single female with no adult male present were among those who were not included on the AE but were resident on Census Day. Of the eleven children in single family households, one had moved out of the ethnographic site after Census Day. (The other four children who were included in the census but who moved out after Census Day were not in single family households.) One of the two children missed by the census lived in a household with a female head without the father present. Often we were not invited into the homes of female respondents, preventing us from observing others in the household. Relationships among family members and their living arrangements were factors that appeared to have affected the accuracy of the AE more than the census.

7. Poor households in rental units are difficult to enumerate.

Most of the residents in the sample area are renters. The two occupied housing units that were missed by the census were rental apartments in multiunit housing structures. Three of the four housing units missed by the AE were residential duplex apartments and one was an apartment located behind a car dealership. None was a single-family home. Often it was difficult to ascertain whether both halves of a duplex housing unit were occupied. Several duplex housing units had unit designations of "1/2" or ".5" that had been ignored by the census, resulting in incomplete and incorrect addresses. The AE missed 2 unoccupied housing units, one located above a private club and another behind a laundromat. The occupied units missed by the AE were duplex units. One was a "shotgun" duplex occupied by a mother and her two children.

8. Distrust of the motive of the enumerator and how the requested information would be used is associated with households that are difficult to enumerate, particularly those with children.

Many of the residents were welfare recipients with small children. Some of them were reluctant to provide information to us perhaps because they feared that government agencies would be privy to the information and that it would be held against them by bill collectors and welfare or housing officials. One measure of distrust was the reluctance of many of the female household heads to give us information concerning their income. The rate of absolute refusals was relatively high (22 percent). (Information about many of these cases was obtained from neighbors.) Distrust, particularly in households with children, may be associated with difficult to enumerate households.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Importance of Revisits

Repeated visits to the site were essential in order to find people at home. Sometimes it took six visits to observe household traffic, to learn residents' visitation and living patterns and to become a familiar face in the community. For example, when a researcher revisited a household to collect missing data, she discovered a classmate whom she had not seen during previous visits over the past two months. The former classmate readily admitted living there, but her mother had not given us this information during our earlier visits.

2. Hostility Towards Male Researchers

The principal investigators are both male and experienced hostility from respondents during the initial stages of the investigation. Attempts to obtain addresses that were not visible fostered hostility, questions, stares and evasions. Once, while talking to an elderly man sitting on his porch, we asked whether there were other households within the structure. We were advised "to speak to the people who live there." We saw the same elderly man on the same porch each time we visited the area. The female researcher experienced many of the same hostilities, questions, stares and evasions, though overall respondents seemed less suspicious of her. In particular, she felt a

camaraderie with the residents who were female. Some male respondents invited into her home, apparently because they were eager to speak to a woman.

3. Respondent's Perception of Who Benefits

We found that respondents were more willing to cooperate after learning that members of our research team worked for a living. This is probably related to the high unemployment and underemployment of residents in the area. We also found that telling people that this research was sponsored by a local university increased people's willingness to participate. However, respondents sensed that their participation would not directly reward them. They expressed feelings of alienation, being cheated and that the government was generally unresponsive to their needs.

4. Sources of Error

Two of the most common sources of errors on the census and the AE were misidentification of housing units and incomplete information. If an adult could not be located, we obtained the information from any children present in the household. Often information we later obtained from adults did not agree with information provided by the children.

5. Misinterpretation of Questions by Respondents

We had to take special care to explain our questions in simple terms. Otherwise we found that we were frequently misunderstood. We also had to be aware of nonverbal communications from the respondents.

6. Ill-Timed Visits by the Researcher

Luck is an element in counting Black males. Some work two jobs to compensate for low wages. An example is a person we encountered during our last day at the study site in a housing unit that had been empty on previous visits. The occupant worked offshore and was regularly out of town for long periods of time. His neighbors were reluctant to provide us with information about him. This case suggests that some working men are missed by the census.

7. Persistence in Pursuing Refusals

"Wait time" for refusals produced information that otherwise would have been lost or incomplete. Waiting gave the respondents a chance to familiarize themselves with the researcher and the purpose of the visit. It also showed the respondents that the researcher was persistent and serious about completing the work.

8. Explaining How the Requested Information Will be Used

How the requested information will be used was of great concern to many respondents and may help explain their reluctance to cooperate. Fear of crime was also common, especially among elderly respondents. Also, in an area of high unemployment, underemployment and government subsidies, residents were reluctant to give information that could be used against them.

9. Enumeration/Survey Overkill in the Community

Some of the residents complained that they had recently participated in two other census studies and did not wish to become involved in another. The result was more suspicion, apprehension and mistrust and an increased refusal rate.

VI. SUMMARY

In general, factors which contributed to omission from the census or the AE can be classified into the following categories: (1) the household structure and living arrangements of family members; (2) the socioeconomic conditions of the family; and (3) the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood.

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Disclaimer: (1998) This paper reports the results of research and analysis undertaken by professors Thomas Durant and Lenus Jack of Louisiana State University. Research results and conclusions expressed are those of the authors and have not been endorsed by the Census Bureau. This report is released to inform interested parties of the research and to encourage discussion.

Disclaimer: (1990) 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.

To request copies of this report, contact Statistical Research Division, Room 3133-4, Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C. 20033.