Ethnographic Evaluation of the Behavioral Causes of Undercount in a Black Ghetto of Flint, Michigan

by

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INTRODUCTION

The City of Flint, Michigan, the location of the Alternative Enumeration (AE), experienced a demographic shift from the 1970's through the 1980's. The racial composition of the city has been changing from White to Black, principally due to massive White flight away from the city. The total population of the city decreased by 17.4 percent, going from 193,317 persons in 1970 to 159,611 in 1980 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970, 1980). As the total population declined, the Black population increased from 54,237 persons in 1970 to 66,124 in 1980. By 1990, the number of Blacks had increased to 67,485. The White population declined from 138,065 in 1970 to 69,788 in 1990 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991). The Black population in Flint has remained highly segregated over the years (Collier 1990, Darden 1992). A report completed by the University of Michigan-Flint Project for Urban and Regional Affairs entitled "Home Mortgage Lending Patterns in Genesee County from 1981 to 1986" found that persons in areas with a high percentage of minority residents received fewer home mortgages, especially since 1984, even when the number of housing units and the median income of the tract are taken into account (Hurley, 1988). The index of segregation for 1990 for the City of Flint was 75.9 percent, the second highest for central cities within Michigan (Darden 1992).

The City of Flint's 1990 Comprehensive Plan, utilizing census data from 1980, identified 60,000 housing units in the City of Flint, of which 75 percent were single-family homes. Of these single-family homes, 67 percent were owner-occupied or in the process of being purchased by the occupant. Five percent of single-family homes were publicly subsidized. About 43 percent of Flint's housing was built before World War II. The Comprehensive Plan predicts that if changes in household characteristics continue as they did during the 1970's, the proportion of minority, low income, female headed and elderly households will increase and average household size will decline (Collier, 1990). The Plan notes that housing problems are concentrated among low-income female-headed households and Black households. According to the Plan, about 25 percent of Flint households have one or more housing problems, such as substandard housing, dwellings too expensive for low-income households, and overcrowding.

DISCUSSION OF THE UNDERCOUNT PROBLEM

For years there has been growing attention to the problem of undercounting the Black population. Results of the official census count by mail and by enumerators in Flint and Genesee County have outraged city and county officials. Some officials attribute the undercount to the location of the Census Bureau's district office and the under-utilization of community constituents. The Census Bureau's main office was located in a suburb (Davison, Michigan) outside the City of Flint. All applicants who applied to be enumerators were tested at two locations near Flint's city limits. To be hired, applicants had to pass a test which, according to our community consultant, had nothing to do with their knowledge of the community.

Some householders in the sample area did not know what the census was about. We discovered one person who could not read or write and who admitted to not completing the census or talking to census takers. Local politicians and civic leaders had been asked to help promote the census on local radio and television. The community consultant noted that this did not appear to have helped much, probably because residents are discontented with civic leaders, whom they perceive as dishonest supporters of the status quo.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Census data from 1980 shows that between 1975 and 1980 there was an increase in renter-occupied housing in the census tracts of the neighborhood site from which the sample was drawn. Among the renters in the site, 25.4 percent had incomes below the poverty level, whereas only 6.3 percent of the owner-occupied households were below poverty level (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980). A report on housing needs in Michigan by the Michigan State Housing Development Authority reported that in Flint, 32.6 percent of lower-income households paid more than 40 percent of their income for rent and other related household expenses, whereas only 9.5 percent of lower-income households who owned their own homes did so (Michigan State Housing Development Authority, 1986). Census data also indicated that the majority of the homeowners had moved into their units between 1960 and 1969. In 1980 of the 1,889 families residing in the census tract where the ethnographic site is located, 372 were female headed households with no husband present. In 1990, the number of female householders in this census tract with no husband present was 534 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1980, 1991). This data suggests that in the majority of the households in this sample live low-income females who rent. In order to secure affordable housing, many low-income residents tend to share their homes with relatives or non-residents. In addition, many young adults remain or move back home because they can't afford housing costs.

In 1980, the median price for housing units in the neighborhood was $25,300 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1980). Housing prices have been declining because of the high level of crime, transiency and drug trafficking. Discussions with community residents show that families who rent do not usually remain in their homes for very long. Studies have shown that in households headed by females in Genesee County, a substantial portion (41.9 percent) are located in the core of the city (Zehnder-Merrel, 1987). Zehnder-Merrel found that poor female-headed households move more frequently than all female-headed households and more frequently than the general population. The percentage of persons in the neighborhood 25 years and older with high school diplomas also was far below the city's average of 60.5 percent. In 1980, 8.6 percent of families in the site were living below the poverty level (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980). Community leaders believe that the 1990 figures will show an increased level of poverty for the area.

The Sample Area

The results of disinvestment, the declining number of homeowners, and an influx of low-income persons and families have earned the sample area a reputation as one of the worst areas in the city in which to live. Crime is a common occurrence. Gang activity is evidenced by the spray-painted symbols that adorn many of the dilapidated vacant houses in the area. During the AE, the research team was told of one resident who had been killed by his brother. During the follow-up field work, we were told about two people who had been killed in an upstairs vacant apartment that had been used to distribute drugs. On another occasion, we were informed of a gang fight that had occurred during the night. Street crime, primarily drug dealing, was poorly disguised. Signs of drug and alcohol addiction were common throughout the area.

One early morning, as we were going through the area, we saw a man who appeared to be in his forties walking with a companion. He had a bottle wrapped in a paper bag which he clung to as he staggered to his destination. He motioned to his friend to continue as he stopped several times and vomited. Neighborhood watchers sit on front porches to warn dealers if police are near or to report any suspicious activity that could pose a threat to their underground business activities. Elderly watchers also sit, looking out for potentially unsafe activities and problems in order to warn other neighbors, especially elderly ones. Throughout the area are vacant lots where there were once homes. Also scattered throughout the area are vacant, deteriorating houses that had been condemned and slated for demolition. Several of these units were open to trespassers, since the windows were not boarded up, and the doors were removed, as well as other interior items of worth.

The Ethnographic Sample

More than a third of the residents enumerated during the AE are considered poor or working poor and were receiving some type of public assistance. The racial breakdown of the ethnographic sample during the AE was 96 percent Black, one percent Hispanic, and three percent White.

METHODOLOGY

Members of the research team included principal investigator Joe Darden, Dean of Urban Affairs Programs and Professor of Geography and Urban Affairs at Michigan State University; research assistant Linda Jones, M.S. candidate in Resource Development/Urban Studies and research assistant Julianne Price, M.A. candidate in Communications/Urban Studies. Linda Jones and Julianne Price were lifelong residents of Flint and have had professional experience in community development, social services, and the government. They were expected to be valuable additions to the team because of their past involvement in the Flint community and familiarity with its residents and community groups. All members of the research team were African-Americans. The race and mixed gender of the researchers seemed to be reassuring to residents, along with the fact that three of the four team members had resided in Flint. It appeared that female householders were often more comfortable when being interviewed by another female.

A community consultant assisted with the study by helping to overcome barriers that the team were likely to encounter. The following criteria were used in selecting a community consultant: (1) familiarity with the census; (2) residence in or near the selected sample area; (3) knowledge of the sample area and its residents; and (4) good community skills. Members of the community referred four people for the position. Three responded and were interviewed.

The person selected for this position was Herbert Cleaves. He is an African-American male who has resided in Flint since 1952 as well as in the sample area. He is well known in the community and, because of years of community and political activism, is considered an insider and local gatekeeper by the residents. Many recognize and know him by name.

The principal investigator (PI) identified three possible sample areas for the AE. The research assistants and the PI visited the neighborhood selected for the ethnographic study in Flint and evaluated each of three potential sample areas. The sample area was selected by driving through the neighborhood and viewing the housing units. Factors that influenced the final selection of the sample area were the size of the area to be canvassed, the number of contiguous housing units, the location of neighborhood resources, and the availability of 100 housing units within the area.

In the site finally selected are a number of abandoned and boarded buildings and some obviously illegally converted units. It is located in an area of the city with a high concentration of poor and working poor families, many of which were headed by females. One of the sites considered but not selected had a large number of vacant, deteriorated housing units and many vacant lots that were created by an active City of Flint program to demolish deteriorating units. The selected sample area more closely met the guidelines, and was representative of an urban Black ghetto with regard to demographic and household characteristics.

The research team established a base of operations at a non-profit neighborhood service organization in close proximity to the sample area. This neighborhood organization has been conducting a variety of human services related activities and serves as an emergency food and clothing distribution center for the indigent. It is one of the oldest grassroots community organizations in the city. The director of the agency provided office space for the project and valuable demographic and resource information to the research team. The office space was first used to interview prospective community consultants and later as a meeting place to discuss the project with the community consultant. The office location also served as a convenient place to leave vehicles while walking through the sample area.

The community consultant was instructed to be the first to visit each housing unit, to tell residents about the study and the research team, and to leave a printed statement of introduction. He developed an appropriate schedule for announcing upcoming visits by the research team and advised the team when the best days and times were to survey the site. He recommended that the team plan visits between 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. when residents were less likely to be disturbed and to avoid being in the area after dark. The community consultant accompanied the research team to each household during interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted on weekdays, however some weekend interviews were necessary.

Fieldwork for the AE began on July 18, 1990 and ended on August 31, 1990.
In the field, the team split into groups of two or three. Many interviews were conducted outside, in the yard, or on the front porch or steps, wherever the resident felt most comfortable. A casual, informal interview technique worked best after a rapport had been established, usually by engaging residents in conversations about their community. One researcher would interview a respondent while another unobtrusively made behavioral observations and notations. Typically, we observed a television, a VCR, and a minimum of reading materials (books, magazines, newspapers) inside most households. Most homes contained a lot of furniture. The research team was never allowed to go beyond the living room. The community consultant made respondents feel comfortable and free to talk to the researcher and inspired trust between residents and the research team. The researchers' knowledge of the community was also useful in facilitating a free discussion with the respondents.

HYPOTHESES AND RESULTS

The hypotheses relate to the causes of undercount in a Black ghetto in Flint, Michigan, in a sample area consisting of 100 housing units. Our study tested the hypotheses that a significant undercount, particularly of Black men and children, is associated with one or all of the following: 1) irregular household composition, e.g., female headed households, 2) resistance to dealing with enumerators from outside the community, 3) concealment to protect household resources.

The Extent of the Errors

A total of 25 persons (11 male, 13 female and 1 of unspecified gender) representing 7.7 percent of the resolved Census Day population of 323 were omitted from the census. All of the persons omitted were Black. Four were under the age of 18, 14 were between the ages of 18 and 34 and six were 35 or older (the ages of 1 other person who was omitted from the census was not specified on the AE).

Eleven of those omitted from the census were in households that had been partially enumerated by the census and 14 were in households that were completely missed by the census. Four of the 11 omitted from the census in partially enumerated households were Black males and seven were Black females. In the 10 households that were completely missed by the census there were seven Black males and six Black females (the race/gender of one person was not specified on the AE). We believe that members of these households are more likely to be receiving public assistance. Eligibility for public assistance is influenced by the presence of men in the household and by other sources of household. Therefore, we expected that a greater degree of concealment of Black males in female-headed households would occur, resulting in an undercount of Black males. However, only one of the 11 males omitted from the census lived in a female headed household. Our hypothesis that males in female-headed households are more likely to be undercounted than those in other kinds of households is not supported by this study.

The census found more persons (323) than the AE (275), probably due to the high rate of mobility in the area. Many people had left the site by the time the AE was taken. The census also found more households (170) than the AE (152). On the AE were 23 persons who were not resident of the site on Census Day. They had either moved into the site after Census Day or, because they were staying there temporarily, were not believed to be residents of the site on Census Day.

Included on both the census and the AE were 235 people. The census erroneously enumerated 18 persons who, we determined, were not residents of the site on Census Day. Thirty-seven others on the census had moved out of the site after Census Day and were not included on the AE.

We identified five factors that may have contributed to coverage errors on the AE or the census:

1. The presence of temporary residents in households
2. Deliberate concealment of information
3. Missed households and/or housing units due to:
    a. misleading appearance of housing units. In several cases there appeared to be a single housing unit where, in fact, there were several housing units with separate households.
    b. misleading appearance of buildings. Several housing units appeared to be either abandoned or vacant but were, in fact, occupied.

4. Resistance to the census because residents' fear that full disclosure to federal or state agencies might jeopardize existing public assistance income, since many female heads of households were on public assistance.
5. Incomplete information about the number of households or residents that were provided to the census and to the AE.

CASE EXAMPLES

Case One
A two story house had been converted into an upstairs and a downstairs apartment. From the street it was not obvious that there were two housing units within the structure. In the upstairs apartment a single female had responded to the census by mail return. On the AE we recorded two cousins in this household. The younger cousin (15 years old) said that she had been living there "a while," since "possibly around or after April", though she wanted us to note that it was after April that she moved in. The older cousin was receiving General Assistance with which she paid the rent and other expenses. Though she did not list her younger cousin on the census form, we believe that the 15-year-old cousin was present on Census Day. We believe that the elder cousin deliberately failed to report the 15-year-old cousin to the census to protect their public assistance payments, assuming that the younger cousin was earning an income from another source. From the older cousin we learned of the downstairs apartment and of her sister who lived there. The cousin warned us that her sister would not talk with us or invite us into her home. She told us that her sister lives alone and receives General Assistance. During this conversation a young man drove up in a new white truck and entered the lower apartment. The cousin said that she would not provide any additional information, abruptly ended the conversation and entered the lower apartment.

We believe that information about the young man in the lower apartment was withheld in order to protect resources. Because we are uncertain whether he actually lived there, we did not include him on the AE. We think he stays there intermittently and provides partial financial support for the household.

The fear of losing resources is so great among persons who are without other viable means of financial support that they conceal information from outsiders who do not pose a threat. Many Blacks on public assistance do not believe that information requested by census takers will remain confidential. Those who do believe in census confidentiality may not cooperate because they don't want to risk disclosure and the possible loss of a reliable source of income.

Case Two
During the AE, we interviewed a young woman who said that her 42 year old mother lived there alone and that she (the daughter) was visiting and lived elsewhere. She said that her mother's spouse also did not live there because he did not get along with the other family members. However, the census mail return record showed a family of

six consisting of the mother, her husband, her brother-in- law, grandson, the daughter and another relative. The community consultant noted that men repair cars in a vacant lot next to the house. We believe that these men were household members but were concealed from us to protect resources.

The respondent may have felt less intimidated filling out the census mail return form than by responding to the ethnographic interview. This Hispanic family may also have been reluctant to provide accurate, detailed information to an African-American research team. <u>These would explain why the Census Bureau received more complete data than the AE</u>. We believe that the information reported during the AE was not accurate with regard to the number of persons residing in the unit.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, to overcome the three factors of mobility, concealment, and the physical appearance of housing units which contribute to enumeration errors and omissions, we make the following recommendations:

1. A community consultant should be involved in all aspects of the enumeration.
2. Enumerators should be hired on the basis of their knowledge of and involvement in the community.
3. Enumerators should reflect (as much as possible) the racial, gender, and socioeconomic composition of the community.
4. Persons who are respected by residents should be identified who can promote the census, to increase participation in and awareness of the census and to increase the number of mail returns, which would reduce door-to-door enumeration. Ordinary people who are involved in the community and who have their fingers on the pulse of the community would be most effective.
5. Interviews of prospective enumerators should be held in local community institutions, e.g., community centers, so that neighborhood residents can be aware of the census-taking process. Local residents should be asked to recommend potential enumerators, and local neighborhood organizations should be used to post notices of the jobs available with the census. By opening up the process for greater participation among community residents at all levels, residents would be made to feel that they are a part of the process.
6. Presentations about the importance of the census should be given to children in grades K-12 and to all local colleges and universities. People from the community should be hired to give the presentations. People on A.D.C. and General Assistance should be involved. Information should be given to all Department of Social Services Agencies in simple wording that uneducated people can understand.

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DISCLAIMER

(1998) This paper reports results of research and analysis undertaken by Joseph Darden, Linda Jones, and Julianne Price at the University of Michigan -Flint. 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 research and to encourage discussion.

(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.

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