Respondent Confidentiality Concerns and Possible Effects on Response Rates and Data Quality for the 2020 Census

National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic, and Other Populations Fall Meeting

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Motivation for Research

- Recent increase in respondents (Rs) spontaneously expressing concerns to researchers and field staff about confidentiality and data access relating to immigration
  - Legal residency
  - The perception that certain immigrant groups are unwelcome

Motivation for Research

- Observation of increased rates of unusual respondent behaviors during pretesting and production surveys (data falsification, item non-response, break-offs)
- Undocumented immigrants are considered "hard to count" (National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic, and Other Populations: Administrative Records, Internet, and Hard to Count Population Working Group Final Report, 2016)

Projects

- Studies conducted Feb – Sept 2017
- Small, qualitative, non-representative samples
- Data from projects pretesting various topics - NOT designed to examine confidentiality concerns
- Rs and field staff spontaneously brought up these concerns

Respondent Pretesting Projects

Study	Type of Pretesting	Language of Interview/Group	Locations	N
2017 Census Test Internet Instrument	Usability interviews	English, Spanish	DC-Metro Area	15
CBAMS	Cognitive interviews	Spanish	DC-Metro Area	10
Doorstep Messaging Research	Focus groups	English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Russian, Arabic	California, Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina, DC-Metro Area	366

Pretesting Respondents

- Pretesting Rs are different than the general public:
  - Paid a cash incentive
  - Recruited through trusted community organizations
  - Researcher sitting next to them during survey
  - Researchers explain confidentiality during informed consent

→ Respondent concerns might be more pronounced during a production survey than during pretesting

Unusual Respondent Behavior During Pretesting Interviews

- Rs intentionally provided incomplete or incorrect information about household members:
  - Left household members off the roster
  - Provided false names, incorrect dates of birth, non-specific detailed origins
- Rs tried to break off the interview
- Rs seemed visibly nervous, required extensive explanations about redacting PII and data access

Respondent Fears

- "The possibility that the Census could give my information to internal security and immigration could come and arrest me for not having documents terrifies me." (Spanish interview)
- "Particularly with our current political climate, the Latino community will not sign up because they will think that Census will pass their information on and people can come looking for them." (Spanish interview)
- English-speaker mentioned the "Muslim ban"

Respondent Focus Group Findings

- Legal residency status, fear of deportation, concern about how the data are used, and which agencies can see it (DHS? ICE?)
- Receiving advice not to open the door; Rs should request warrant be slipped under the door.

  "They say, 'Never open the door!'"

  "This alert has been spread everywhere now." (Korean Focus Group)

Respondent Focus Group Findings

- “Maybe if we tell them that this is not going to affect anything, not your visa, nor whether you just arrived or came here a long time ago.” (Arabic Focus Group)
- “In light of the current political situation, the immigrants, especially the Arabs and Mexicans, would be so scared when they see a government interviewer at their doorsteps.” (Arabic Focus Group)
- “The immigrant is not going to trust the Census employee when they are continuously hearing a contradicting message from the media every day threatening to deport immigrants.” (Arabic Focus Group)

Field Staff Focus Group Projects

Study	Type of Pretesting	Participant Characteristics	Locations	N
NHIS	Focus groups	Spanish bilingual interviewers	Connecticut, Massachusetts, Kentucky, Arkansas, Nebraska, Arizona, Texas, Oregon	16
NYCHVS	Focus group	Monolingual and Spanish bilingual field supervisors	New York	7
NYCHVS	Focus groups	Monolingual and bilingual interviewers (Spanish, Cantonese, Greek, Romanian)	New York	17

Unusual Respondent Behavior Reported by Field Staff

- R walked out and left interviewer alone in home during citizenship questions
- Rs worrying about giving out legitimate names or info on other household members. Rs think “the less information they give out, the better. The safer they are.” (Interviewer)
- “There was a cluster of mobile homes, all Hispanic. I went to one and I left the information on the door. I could hear them inside. I did two more interviews, and when I came back, they were moving.... It's because they were afraid of being deported.” (Interviewer)

Behavior Changes are Recent

- "The politics have changed everything. Recently." (Interviewer)
- "This may just be a sign of the times, but in the recent several months before anything begins, I'm being asked times over, does it make a difference if I'm not a citizen?" (Interviewer)
- "Three years ago was so much easier to get respondents compared to now because of the government changes… and trust factors.…Three years ago I didn't have problems with the immigration questions." (Interviewer)

Field Staff Requested Additional Support

- An ad campaign to overcome mistrust
- An immigration statement to appear on materials broadly
- An “immigration letter” interviewers could distribute selectively
- More training on R confidentiality concerns

Discussion

- Findings across languages, regions of the country, from both pretesting respondents and field staff point to an unprecedented ground swell in confidentiality and data sharing concerns, particularly among immigrants or those who live with immigrants
  - May present a barrier to participation in the 2020 Census
  - Could impact data quality and coverage for the 2020 Census
  - Particularly troubling due to the disproportionate impact on hard-to-count populations

How Do We Fix This?

- Respondents and field staff suggested a message like, “Your information will not be shared with anyone, including other government agencies.”
- Census Bureau has used similar statements in the past, but using such a statement now is problematic.

Confidentiality Messages

- Census Bureau supports research by giving other agencies and academics access to some microdata.
- Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015 made changes to federal cybersecurity practices that caused Census Bureau and other federal agencies to need to revise their confidentiality pledges (Scope Confidentiality Pledge Revision Subcommittee Final Report, 2016)

→ **New messages must be accurate and should be transparent.**

Planned and Future Research

- Quantitative analysis of changes in response rates, mode of administration, item non-response, household characteristics, number of contact attempts among immigrant respondents in production surveys
- Designing and systematically pretesting wording to address confidentiality and data sharing concerns for use in mailing materials, survey instruments, and supplementary materials
- Designing and evaluating training for field staff on overcoming confidentiality and data sharing concerns

Questions for NAC

- Given respondents' confidentiality concerns and the ways that other agencies are given access to Census Bureau data, how do you recommend that we address this issue?
- What kinds of messages, materials, and enumerator training do you recommend we develop?
- What populations do you recommend that we test such messages with?

Questions?

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