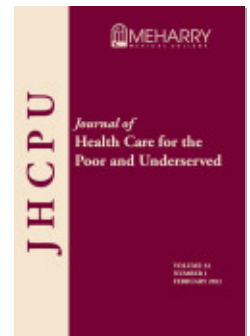




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Counting the Unsung by Promoting Participation in the 2020 US Census: A Survey of Migrant Workers in Washington State

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Abstract: Introduction. Participation in the United States Census is critical for determining congressional representation and federal funding, but in every census there are groups systematically undercounted due to socioeconomic and demographic factors. Migrants and refugees are a group particularly threatened by being undercounted, including Hispanic migrant workers living in more rural areas. **Methods and results.** To gather information to promote migrant participation in the census, the Community Health Worker Coalition for Migrants and Refugees in Washington state conducted a systematic survey of 71 migrant workers in seven urban and suburban Washington communities. The results showed that while most participants had heard of the census, basic knowledge about the census was limited and people wanted more information. **Conclusions and recommendations.** A strong, coordinated outreach approach should be carried out to educate people in migrant communities about the census. This may involve one-on-one structured conversations, radio telenovelas, and community conversations organized by the trusted leaders.

Key words: Census, historically-undercounted community, migrants, community health workers.

The Constitution of the United States requires the government to count the number of people living in the country every 10 years, regardless of citizenship status, and to use those data to apportion the seats in Congress among the states and to allocate federal resources. State legislators and local governments also rely on census data for redistricting, where the data indicate that districts are equally populated and helps

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Table 1.**CHARACTERISTICS OF MIGRANTS, MIGRANT WORKERS, IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES**

Category	Definition	Return to country of origin?
Refugees	A person who has been forced to leave their country to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster	No—Cannot return to county of origin. Often experienced trauma, tragedy, persecution and prolonged stays in transitional refugee camps.
Migrants	A person who chooses to move from one place to another, especially to find work or better living conditions.	Yes—although some migrants leave their homes that have become dangerous or difficult to live in. They might be fleeing from unrest, famine, drought, or economic collapse. They may experience trauma
Migrant Workers	A person who moves to another country or area to find employment, in particular seasonal or temporary work without intention to stay permanently in the county or region in which they work	
Immigrants	A person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country.	

guide decisions on whether to draw majority-minority districts. The federal government uses population totals to determine congressional representation as well as how much funding state and local governments receive for a variety of programs in fundamental areas such as education, health care, and the arts.^{1,2}

In every U.S. census, there are groups undercounted due to socioeconomic and demographic factors such as age, housing status, and language.^{3,4} Particular groups associated with low response include people of color; low-income or no-income households; families with children under five years of age; rural residents; people with limited English proficiency; frequent movers or renters; large or single-parent households; people experiencing homelessness; foreign-born residents; and those with low educational attainment.⁵

Migrants and refugees are a group particularly likely to be undercounted, especially Hispanic migrant workers living in more rural areas.⁶ Table 1 provides more detailed definitions for the different groups that will be the focus of this paper: Migrants, migrant workers, refugees, and immigrants. All of these groups have in common that they are uprooted; separated from their country of origin, family members, and culture; and learning to navigate a new and unfamiliar culture and physical environment. Such stresses can lead to mental health issues, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, and anxiety. We will refer to study participants as “migrant workers,” although the group also includes some refugees and immigrants.

Strategies are needed to ensure that migrant workers are counted in the census. Developing these strategies requires an understanding of the specific barriers they face,

their knowledge and attitudes surrounding the census, and identifying potential ways of reducing barriers and enhancing understanding to ensure migrant worker participation. To this end, the Community Health Worker Coalition for Migrants and Refugees conducted a systematic survey among Hispanic immigrants, migrants, and refugees in historically-undercounted communities in Washington state. This paper describes the results of that survey and offers recommendations for increasing participation in these communities.

Methods

Project overview and history. The Community Health Worker Coalition for Migrants and Refugees (CHWCMR) is a group of volunteers dedicated to the promotion, empowerment, leadership, continuing education and integration of community health workers (CHWs) into the health care system to improve the quality of life of migrants, the mobile poor, and refugees. In July 2018, CHWCMR received funding from the Arcora Foundation to develop a needs assessment of census participation among Hispanics living in rural and underserved communities in the state.

A draft survey was created, tested, and refined through conversations with CHWs, 10 “community champions,” and several members of the CHWCMR. The 10 community champions were selected from rural and suburban areas in Eastern and Western Washington, where there are significant numbers of migrant workers and their families. In December 2018, seven of the 10 champions who helped develop the survey were selected to reach out to approximately 10 individuals living in their communities. These communities were selected based on information provided by the state about where Hispanics historically have had low census participation, including Lakewood, Tacoma, Pasco, Prescott, Richland, Rochester, Shelton, and Olympia.

Survey instrument and protocol. The CHWCMR census survey included questions about knowledge and awareness of the census, and the uses of census data; opinions about the importance of the census; the likelihood the respondent will participate in the 2020 census; perceived barriers to participation; preferences for information about the census; and ideas about how participation might be increased. The survey also included a number of sociodemographic questions. Most of the survey items were closed-ended; a few open-ended questions were included to ask more details about factors that might limit their participation in the census or might improve participation. The open-ended questions were included to understand what personal or structural barriers limited participation and what might improve participation.

The survey was administered in Spanish by the community champions through one-on-one phone calls. The participants were presented with choices for each question but were allowed to respond in an open-ended manner if none of the options presented seemed correct. Each champion interviewed approximately 10 participants. The community champions were compensated \$300 each for helping to refine the instrument and leading the survey sessions; participants each received a \$10 gift card.

Data analysis. Descriptive statistics were computed for each survey question using Stata.⁷ Open-ended questions were transcribed into a spreadsheet and analyzed by two of the authors (IPG and AC) using thematic analysis⁸ to identify common themes.

Results

A total of 71 participants were interviewed between January and July 2019. Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of participants. Eighty-two percent were between 18–49 years old, and 75% were female. Almost all (93%) were Spanish-speaking, two-

Table 2.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

	#	%
Age		
18–29	13	23%
30–49	34	59%
50–64	9	16%
65+	1	2%
Sex		
Female	42	75%
Male	14	25%
Education		
University degree+	11	27%
Some college	8	19%
HS or less	22	54%
Family income		
\$75K+	2	4%
\$30–75K	14	24%
<\$30K	42	72%
Voting		
Yes	10	18%
No	46	82%
Country of birth		
Mexico	37	65%
USA	5	9%
Venezuela	9	16%
Guatemala	3	5%
Other	3	5%
How long lived in USA?		
0–11 months	7	11%
12 months—5 years	1	2%
5–15 years	11	18%
15+ years	42	69%
Native language		
Spanish	60	94%
English	3	5%
Other	1	1%
Marital status		
Single	21	32%
Married/partner	35	54%
Other	9	14%

thirds (64%) originated in Mexico, and 69% had lived more than 15 years in the U.S. Almost three-quarters (72%) had incomes less than \$30,000 per year.

Participants generally believed that they would participate in the census: 26% said “definitely yes” and another 36% said “probably yes” (Table 3). Sixty-three percent said participating in the census was very important to them. However, as Table 4 shows, their knowledge of the census was limited: Less than half knew that the census is required by law, and that the census decides the distribution of government funds and congressional representation. There was also uncertainty about whether the census could be used to locate undocumented immigrants for arrest and whether census information could be shared with other institutions.

Barriers to participation were asked about in two ways (Table 5): (1) focusing on individual characteristics such as immigration status, race, or ethnicity, and English proficiency; (2) other barriers such as lack of knowledge, not trusting the government, and worries about privacy. Among the individual-level characteristics that surfaced as top barriers were being an immigrant and having limited English proficiency. Lack of knowledge and limited trust in the government were the reasons given most frequently for why they might not take part.

In response to an open-ended question asking what would cause them to participate, the overwhelming majority mentioned the need for more information. Twenty-two of 29 respondents who gave an answer said something about needing more information (for example: “I need general knowledge and more understanding,” “We need more information to the Latino communities in order to educate us more, and for us to not have fear,” “That I obtain correct information about the census and know the motives for the census”).

Finally, respondents were asked the best way of reaching out to them to give them

Table 3.

LIKELY PARTICIPATION, IMPORTANCE OF CENSUS

Question	#	%
Likely to participate?		
Definitely yes	16	26%
Probably yes	22	36%
Could be yes or no	3	5%
Probably no	1	2%
Definitively no	5	8%
I don't know	14	23%
Total	61	100%
How important is census to you?		
Very important	39	63%
Somewhat important	9	15%
Not so important	4	7%
I don't know	9	15%

Table 4.
KNOWLEDGE OF THE CENSUS

Question	#	%
Heard of census		
Yes	51	73%
Never	19	27%
Census required by law?		
Yes	28	40%
No	32	46%
Not sure	10	14%
Census decides distribution of government funds?		
Yes	32	47%
No	6	9%
Not sure	30	44%
Census decides congressional representation.		
Yes	25	36%
No	9	13%
Not sure	35	51%
Census used to locate undocumented immigrants for arrest?		
Yes	7	10%
No	24	34%
Not sure	39	56%
Believe information could be shared with other institution		
Yes	13	20%
No	25	38%
Maybe	27	42%

information. Table 6 shows that most preferred more traditional approaches such as mail (43%) or a house visit (8%) rather than electronic means such as email (16%).

Discussion

This paper reports the results of a survey designed to understand the perceived barriers faced by migrants to participating in the U.S. census. The results showed that while most migrants had heard of the census, basic knowledge about it was limited. Participants did not know how participation in the census can have an impact in their life and communities. For example, only 47% of participants were aware that the census is used to decide how government money is distributed, and only 36% knew that the census is used to decide congressional representation. In addition, there is limited understanding that the personal information obtained in the U.S. census is not shared: over half of participants perceived that the census may be used to locate undocumented immigrants for arrest.

Table 5.**BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION—PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND OTHER BARRIERS**

Question	#	%
Personal characteristics: If not participating, why not? (could check >1)		
Immigrant	12	16%
Limited English	10	13%
Latino	8	11%
Agricultural worker	6	8%
Undocumented	4	5%
Person of color	3	4%
Disabled	3	4%
Single mother	2	3%
Female	2	3%
Homeless	1	1%
Other	24	32%
Total	75	100%
Other barriers: Why won't you take part in the US census?		
I don't know much about it	13	19%
I don't trust the government	12	17%
Not interested	10	14%
I haven't done it before	9	13%
I am not a citizen	9	13%
Very busy/no time	5	7%
Worries about privacy	5	7%
I do not wish to be identified	3	4%
My English is not good	1	2%
Transportation issues	1	2%
I don't have a physical address	1	2%

Table 6.**PREFERRED MODES OF COMMUNICATION**

Question	#	%
How do you like to receive information (mark all that apply)		
Email	12	16%
Mail	32	43%
House visit	6	8%
Television	6	8%
Radio	3	4%
Other	15	21%

Our results showed that it is not enough to talk about the importance of the census, it is also necessary to educate migrants about the benefit of the census to people who want to participate in, and support, their communities. The census count has an important influence on where money will be allocated; there were 132 federal programs using the Census Bureau data to distribute more than \$675 billion in funds during fiscal year 2015.⁹ These included medical assistance programs, Medicare Part B, maternal and child health services, Head Start, community centers, unemployment programs, career and technical education, nutritional services (e.g., school breakfast and lunch programs), Section 8 housing, and public housing. Specific to Washington State, the Washington Census Alliance estimates that the state stands to lose \$19,000 for every person not counted in the census.⁹ In addition, communities must be informed and reassured the information gathered through the census can not be shared with immigration or other government institutions.

Therefore, a strong, coordinated outreach approach involving civic engagement and education to promote census participation must be implemented in areas with a high proportion of agricultural workers, people with limited-English proficiency and Hispanics. The Community Health Worker Coalition for Migrants and Refugees recommends the use of a trusted messenger (e.g., CHWCMR Community Champions) to conduct outreach activities with migrant and refugee communities. Ideally, they can conduct one-on-one structured conversations that will include learning about the individual's personal history; finding a common ground (what is important for them); communicating an inspirational vision about the impact of the census; going over specific census-related tasks and timelines; and then following up later about progress.

For broader outreach, while most respondents to the survey preferred mail as the delivery option, there are challenges to that approach. Migrant workers often lack a fixed address, as do refugees and others in the undercounted populations. Instead of mail, the CHWCMR recommends radio telenovelas¹⁰ as well as community conversations organized by the trusted leaders to inform, educate, and increase the participation of these communities.

Our study had several limitations that should be noted. The sample included only 71 people from seven groups in a single state, so it may not be representative of other populations in the U.S. In addition, it was a community-based study with data collected by community health workers with limited training in data collection and this may have affected data quality. Finally, the survey itself was closed-ended and relatively brief. More in-depth qualitative interviews would have provided richer insights, but we were working with limited time and resources, precluding that approach.

The surveys described in this paper help increase our understanding of the knowledge and attitudes of migrants toward the U.S. census. However, much more needs to be done (1) to reduce the gaps in knowledge about the census; (2) to address barriers that potentially prevent migrant and refugee populations from participating; and (3) to find mechanisms to motivate these populations to be counted.

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