

"STRIVIN,' GETTIN' OVER, AND KEEPIN' PEOPLE OUT OF OUR BUSINESS':
PUSHING HOUSEHOLD BOUNDARIES IN SURVEY DATA COLLECTION

Peter C. Hainer, Curry College
Milton, Massachusetts 02186

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Since the early 1960's the Bureau of the Census has been concerned with the problem of undercoverage with certain hard to enumerate populations, notably ethnic minority groups. The locus of the undercoverage problem has been the household. While it is people who are counted, the unit of counting is the household, which has been associated with a physical structure, a co-resident social group, a consumption unit, and a kinship group, usually thought to be the family. If enumerators miss households or miss household members in irregular or unusual households they miss people who are then not reported in the final tally. Consequently, it is to households that the Bureau of the Census looks, in its efforts to improve coverage.

In this paper I will briefly explore some problems that are a consequence of these assumptions among hard to enumerate populations and suggest that there is significant variation in how households are formed, who is in them, what they do, and how they appear spatially on the ground. Household is thought to be a discrete nomothetic unit useful for description and comparison, and one that is presumed to be universally appropriate for the accurate counting of all populations, including hard to enumerate ones. Long-term field work with urban poor blacks and recent research from a cognitive study of living situations suggest that household is a polythetic category and that the basis for household formation varies, both between various social groups and within them. Further, household is better reformulated as a unit that may be described as the confluence of a number of factors, all of which may vary, but none may be determined to be minimally sufficient for all cases.

The problem of undercoverage, occurs because households are missed entirely by enumerators or individuals are missed within households which are then only partially covered (Kearney, *et al.* 1993: 1). Brownrigg and Martin proposed five possible sources of both types of coverage error: mobility, language and illiteracy barriers, deliberate concealment and misrepresentation of information on the part of respondents, irregular housing and household arrangements, and a general resistance to dealing with community outsiders (1989: 1). These hypotheses were tested in 29 ethnographic sample areas by ethnographers doing qualitative evaluations as a part of the 1990 Decennial Census and were largely confirmed (de la Puente 1993).

While the problem of undercoverage is found in many groups it is particularly a problem with urban

poor blacks. This problem is most pernicious among young black males, where the differential undercount has been increasing with each Census since the end of World War II (Hogan and Robinson 1993: 9).

Much of the recent research on coverage improvement has focused on trying to find phantom members of households, either by convincing them to participate or getting others to reveal their presence. Much of the research effort has focused on poor urban black populations, because, using Willie Sutton logic, that's where the undercounted are, or at least many of them. Ethnographic qualitative approaches have been tried as a way of identifying the variables in household formation and social organization, identifying the sources of coverage error, and then generating operational strategies, such as improving questionnaires and training enumerators to recognize and record irregular households (Hainer *et al.* 1988, de la Puente 1993).

For some time now I have been one of those ethnographers who has tried to help the Census Bureau, based on anthropological field work with urban poor blacks that has spanned 25 years. My data is qualitative and long-term and has served to raise issues that directly address the problems of household composition and accurate Census coverage. This past year I have worked again with my informants and the Bureau of the Census by participating in The Cognitive Study of Living Situations, designed by Eleanor Gerber, from the Center for Survey Methods Research. What made my participation unique was that some of the people I interviewed were long-term informants. I was not simply trying an ethnographic method in a small sample setting, but I was able to talk with my informants about their responses after the interviews.

The Cognitive Study of Living Situations was conceived as a pilot study to explore the linguistic and conceptual understandings of a small sample of 36 people who were asked to react to a series of vignettes designed to elicit their words and conceptions about residence. It was the hypothesis of the study that linguistic differences were part of the language barrier noted by Brownrigg and Martin (1989: 1). The respondents included middle class whites, African Americans, English-speaking Hispanics, all done in English, and six Spanish-speaking Hispanics, done in Spanish. Twenty-six of the interviews were carried out in the Washington, D. C. area and ten were done in Boston. The format was an audio tape recorded interview privately held between a respondent and ethnographer, that lasted from 45 minutes to an hour

and a half, where the researcher would read vignettes to the respondent and elicit his or her response to various ambiguous living situations. Respondents were asked to give pseudonyms throughout and urged to respond to the vignettes in ways that made sense to them. We were interested in their way of thinking, how they would describe these situations in their own words, and comparing the language used "naturally" by the respondents with the terms and definitions provided by the Census. Care was given to eliciting words for various kinds of residence and time was spent probing for the meaning of these words and their contextual use by the respondents. An example of one of the questions is as follows:

The Vignette:

Loretta always has managed to find an apartment near an adult son and daughter, who have places of their own. They all frequently eat at Loretta's. Her daughter's children usually sleep at Loretta's apartment.

The Probes:

Who is in Loretta's household? Where do Loretta's grandchildren live? What would you call the group of people who eat at Loretta's?

Additionally, each respondent was asked to complete the roster page of a 1990 Census short form and do some brief card sorting exercises. They were told they could use pseudonyms or nicknames and similarly disguise the identity of household members. Respondents were each paid a \$25 honorarium.

While the analysis of this small pilot study is still ongoing some conclusions appear very striking. For example, evaluating the Bureau of the Census terms "live," "stay," and "usual residence"¹, words all used in census questions, we found much confusion about meaning and variation in use, both between census forms and respondents and between respondents by geographical area (Gerber and Bates 1994). "Live" appears to be a more permanent term than "stay" and is associated with "home" while "stay" is not. No one uses "usual residence" and this term was close to incomprehensible for my informants. None understood it. In our study the few that did profess comprehension often assumed it meant where they got their mail or what they used as a "legal residence." The term "household" for many indicates a social and not spatial unit, and people may acknowledge membership in more than one household, research findings that confirms

¹Usual residence has a long history as a census phrase. According to Keane it was used to help enumerators place persons not in the household on Census Day and goes back 200 years. They were counted at their place of "usual residence...where he or she lives and sleeps most of the time or where he or she considers the usual residence" (Keane 1987: Attachment 1 p. 1).

patterns found elsewhere (Hainer et al. 1988, Hainer 1991).

Linguistic confusion often leads to misrepresentation unwittingly, as willing respondents simply don't understand what's being asked, or answer with linguistic categories that mean one thing to them and something else to the Census enumerator or the computer that codes the responses. This is not trivial problem. Ronald, a respondent, found the card sort confusing and frustrating:

I don't understand. Household, right... explain it to me, just explain it...so you make a difference between household and home... home, like as in yours, and usual residence as like in somebody else's? I don't understand.

When I asked my respondents to fill out the Census form, that asks one to list the household roster, only one out of ten made any effort to read the question. All of them asked me who they should put down.

While the focus of the study was to look at "language problems," my participation allowed me to assess concealment issues and the presence of irregular households. I chose five respondents who were long-term informants and then had them refer me to five respondents I didn't know, but my informants knew. This would allow me to evaluate whether long term trust would influence concealment issues and enable me to ask questions of my informants to evaluate the validity of the responses of the five respondents who were non-informants, as I compared the actual living arrangements with what they put down on the form during the interview. The bulk of this interviewing was carried out during a six-week period in late summer and early fall 1993. I did some additional follow up research during the spring of 1994. This research was informal in nature and was focused on assessing the actual living arrangements of all these respondents compared to what they put down on the form during the interview, and seeing how those arrangements had changed over six months. Finally, of the ten respondents, five were male, five were female, and ages were ranged between the teens to the seventies for both genders.

And what did twenty-five years of informant-to-anthropologist trust yield? Only two of the ten respondents truthfully reported their actual living situation in spite of the fact that I knew they were misrepresenting their living situations and they knew I knew how they actually were living. None of this was surprising, and showed the anticipated reticence not to reveal information that might somehow get to officials. B.K. presented me with a roster form saying she lived with her children. She and I both knew she also lives with Ronald, her live-in boyfriend, whom she refers to as her "husband," and another friend. I asked her if she would fill out the household roster form the same way she did for me if she received it by mail or from an enumerator. She answered, "I don't want the welfare to see this. All I'm puttin' down is just me and my kids."

Olivia Winn, a friend of my principal informant, but unknown to me, presented herself on the census form as living alone. In fact, she lives in an irregular household with her daughter who lives across the street. The daughter has a boyfriend and a friend staying in her apartment, while the daughter's three kids sleep, store their clothes and toys, and eat at Olivia's. Official records show the children living with the single parent mother across the street. Mrs. Winn treated me very formally and knew I knew about her situation, but we simply did not discuss it. From years of field work this kind of representation/misrepresentation was both familiar and expected and indicative of the kind of problem with which anonymous census enumerators are presented all the time.

There were other reasons, though, that were not so anticipated. One of the more surprising reasons for misrepresentation concerned normative standards that people have relating to how they think they should be living, as opposed to how they in fact are living. Respondents repeatedly explained irregular living arrangements in the vignettes as examples of what people have to do when faced with hardships of one sort or another, most prominently lack of income. The same themes entered into the post-interview discussions and were repeated often. People talked of "getting over," "movin' up," "strivin'," and "tryin' to make it," as reasons for actual living arrangements they felt were somehow not acceptable. Vivian Knight, one of my principal informants, who I've known for 25 years, made the following observation when I asked her why she refused to put down many of the people who actually live in her house on the roster form during the interview. She said she knew she "was supposed to put them down," but she didn't want to acknowledge them. She added,

I don't think it should be that way [putting incorrect information down] but when you trying to survive you do a lot of things that you wouldn't ordinarily do. When push comes to shove you have to do things like that sometimes [here she is referring to the discussion of irregular households we were having]. And besides it ain't just the welfare or the government, I wants to keep people out of my business. You know [she gestures at me], 'cause we friends and you've been with us for a long time, but I don't like for other peoples to know.

The "other peoples" here are not the usual suspects: The courts, school, welfare, police, and the Bureau of the Census. Rather, in this instance, they included family, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, people from church, any member of the social world. For the record she put herself down on the census form as living alone. In actuality, she owns her house and currently has two borders, a grandchild, a great grandchild, a foster child, and a grandson through another child, for a total

of 7 people. When I asked her why she refused to list them she had a reason why not to include all six. For the borders, for example, she said, "They don't count. They live here. They got a room, but they ain't part of my household."

Another interesting but not usual arrangement was indicated by Ronald. Ronald is B.K.'s social husband and lives with her. He considers himself a simultaneous member of another household, one spatially based in his sister's apartment. B.K. did not list him on her form, for fear the welfare would find out about him. He listed his sister's household on his Census form. Ronald's sister would not have listed him on her form, for the same kind of reasons B.K. wouldn't have (I asked). Consider for a moment some future census day enumerator or survey interviewer arriving at B.K.'s apartment. Ronald is not reported. The same interviewer goes next to Ronald's sister apartment, and again, Ronald is still among the legions of underenumerated black males. Now, assume for a moment, that the restraints of welfare exposure don't exist, and the "don't want any body knowin' my business" restraints don't exist, and everyone is willing to report honestly? What happens to Ronald? He's there in both households, so he is either counted in both (and therefore overenumerated) or the willing respondents, B.K. and Ronald's sister, are faced with the problem of trying to describe the arrangement to the Census Bureau with categories that don't let them adequately or accurately record the living situation.

These few examples from the Cognitive Study of Living Situations suggest the following conclusions about household organization and underenumeration:

- Biculturalism is an external and internal problem and may be with any group who recognize a difference between their actual living situations and those asked about on Census forms. The issues of trust and deception are related to this problem. People choose not to disclose their actual living arrangements for reasons related to concealing resources and information from both to the external world and the internal one. Trust is an issue with everyone. Information is not neutral, it has social value and worth.
- Language barriers are real and hard to overcome. Illiteracy is an obvious problem, but so are the meanings and uses of terms regularly employed by the Bureau of the Census. Even seemingly simple words like "live" and "stay" vary in their use and connotation and may show significant regional variation. These problems are particularly pernicious when willing respondents simply don't understand what's being asked of them or unwittingly respond in ways that are misinterpreted by census takers.

- Household as an analytic concept must carefully separated from the family and domestic function (Hainer 1993). Family is the social/biological reproductive group based on kinship. Household is the social group based on common residence, that place on the ground where activities of daily living are carried out. Domestic functions, the domestic activities, such as the socialization of children, economic cooperation, and consumption cut across both groups, and are carried out by both families and households, in a variety of different ways. The interaction of these three variables can produce lots of complex variation and may not be isomorphous as the Census form assumes. Families may be based on social criteria, not genealogical ones, households may be socially determined constructs and not spatial ones, and domestic functions may be performed by all sorts of arrangements of families, friends, and neighbors, who often may "live" in lots of different physical spaces.
- Household has remained as the unit of enumeration for historical and pragmatic reasons. Ethnographic research has found ample evidence of non-conforming, irregular households, that transcend apartment address, reveal people with multiple household affiliations, and sometimes people who disagree about who actually is a member of the household or not.

While these conclusions may appear to deconstruct the household and the hope of improving household coverage, improvement is possible, as is better capturing how people are actually living in households, as is finding and documenting missing people. Being aware of the complexity is the first step in resolving it. The following suggestions/implications emerge:

First, the various uses and meanings of household should be clearly separated and carefully used. Household is used in at least three different ways: as an enumeration unit, analytic unit, and folk category.

Household should remain as the enumeration unit in spite of the problems found in ethnographic reports. Because of the pragmatic realities of field data collection that finds "address," an observable named and numbered physical space, it remains the easiest way to find, record, and re-record people systematically.

However, household as a comparative analytic unit should not to be confused with how household may appear on the ground, as an enumeration unit, or be recognized by people living in them, as a folk unit. Household as a folk category and household as a census word may have different meanings. Household, in other words, is a polythetic category, that varies across many dimensions. Those differences may not be recongized

by the enumerators and respondents using them. The folk categories then for living arrangements may be significantly different than Bureau of Census categories, or, if the same, connote different things and have different meanings.

We need to have an appreciation for the cultural context in which households are found and may vary. As Gerber concluded, determining residence for some, for example, may involve weighing the judgments from a variety of social domains, physical spaces, and cognitive meanings rather than simply placing a person in a physical space because he/she is found at an address on any given day (1993: 18). Enumerators should be trained to recognize these and further studies ought to try to categorize and name these variations systematically and with more precision.

It is possible however to discover, map, and measure these dimensions in ways that can lead to a better analytic definition of household, that will account for this variation and be more useful in all cases.

Second, irregular households may reflect cultural difference and variation, and/or be temporary pragmatic solutions of life problems. People may be reluctant to acknowledge living in ways they feel are normatively unacceptable.

Third, issues of trust and confidentiality are best overcome by simplicity and anonymity, particularly with hard to enumerate populations. If you are really interested in a body count, then count the bodies found without names, social security numbers, and the other information that is seen by many respondents as personal and private. Rosters should be simplified and clear to everyone. Wright (1993) reached similar conclusions reviewing de la Puente's (1993) summary of findings from ethnographic coverage reports. He writes,

...the census should attempt to collect less data from everyone...The need for more detailed information could be captured with follow-up much smaller well-designed probability samples. The conjecture here is that by asking for less from everyone, response rates will increase, resources can be concentrated, and the censuses will actually provide more data with better quality.

Wright (1993: 75)

Rosters would be simplified and clear to everyone.

Fourth, the field staff for all surveys and censuses ought to be regarded as skilled employees who are trained to listen for linguistic variation, see irregular households, and encourage respondent cooperation. Training here is critical and recognition of the enumerators' skilled contributions essential (Hainer 1987).

One final comment. In preparing for the abstract for this presentation I used the grammar check on my notebook computer, which objected immediately to the phrase "usual residence" suggesting: "word choice. Try

using a simpler term like home if you mean dwelling." Irony and humor of computer logic aside, we are indeed all about trying to use simpler terms, but as the instruction reads we have to be sure of what we mean, and appreciate that arriving at what we mean is a complex process.

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