

**Summary of Undercount Issues & Introducing “Community-Validated Population Counts”  
in Multnomah County  
Ann Curry-Stevens, March 2, 2012**

## **Introduction**

Participation in Census occurs every 10 years, and while participation is mandatory, many still do not participate. It is well-recognized that some people do not participate in Census, yet beyond efforts to get people to complete the returns, no accommodations for this under-participation occur. This means that the population counts gathered through the Census process are defined to be the accurate count of the population, and of each community of color. The durability of the Census population counts lasts 10 years, with adjustments made for population growth and decline, and the Census counts serve to stratify every other survey conducted by the government. For example, if 7% of the population is determined to be Asian and Pacific Islander (through Census), then when the American Community Survey is conducted, they will similarly aim for 7% of the sample to be from the API community, with adjustments made in each subsequent year for estimating how the population will likely have changed. The lifespan of the Census population counts thus stretches for ten years, and into every other mainstream survey which bases its stratification practices on the Census figures. Getting population counts “right” is thus essential for the visibility of communities of color not just for now, but for the following ten years.

The impacts of these undercounts are pronounced as they are tied to **visibility, financial flows** to the region, **political representation, research** (as most researchers aim to stratify their samples by race to ensure “representative” samples are used), **benchmarks in employment** (administrators assess their employment profiles according to the distribution in the population), and **dominant discourse** that is more likely to result in tokenistic responses to the needs of communities of color when their population size is diminished.

To address these undercounts, research has been conducted in a partnership between the Coalition of Communities of Color and Portland State University, aiming to establish more accurate numbers through conducting “community-validated population counts.” These counts have been administered in the following communities: Native American, Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander, African immigrant and refugee, and Slavic. Underway is a count within the African American community, and it will be completed by mid-March 2012.

## **Reasons for the Undercount**

There are a number of reasons that people of color will not have participated in the Census or in the American Community Survey (ACS). These are listed below:

- **Having English language skills:** All surveys are conducted in English with a secondary offering of Spanish and far fewer in other languages. The level of those who speak English “less than very well” is 9.1% in the county, and divided into 4.3% who are Spanish-speaking and 4.8% speaking another language.<sup>1</sup> We thus have a population with 4.3% who cannot participate when surveys are conducted in English or Spanish. The most relied-upon survey for this research report is the American Community Survey and it is available in only English and Spanish. An interviewer might have an additional language to resource respondents but nothing is required of the ACS to ensure participation.

- ***Have a telephone:*** An estimated 2.2% of the White population of Multnomah County does not have a phone while 3.7% of households of color do not have a telephone, which results in more accurate data being collected from White households.
- ***Having stable enough housing to participate:*** Situations of homelessness, frequent moves and “couch surfing” will reduce participation as one needs an address to be “found” by most surveys. Being a renter (as opposed to owning one’s home) dramatically increases the likelihood of not being counted: at 4.3% for renters instead of 0.1% for owners. When disaggregated by race, more pronounced differences appear. Among the Asian and Pacific Islander community (for example), renters face an undercount of 7.0% while owners are not undercounted.<sup>2</sup>
- ***Ability to read the surveys:*** Most surveys are initiated by a mailed form. Without an ability to read, one does not understand the purpose, the instructions or the questions. And typically when people lack basic literacy skills, they avoid the surveyors who might follow up with a phone call or a visit to expand participation options. Looking at “high school graduation” as a proxy for literacy (an imperfect proxy, we know, but such is the nature of available data), we know that 6.3% of the White population has not completed high school while 28.0% of people of color have not completed high school.<sup>3</sup>
- ***Ability to be “found” by surveyors:*** Even if housing, phone, language and literacy accessibility exists, sometimes community members still do not receive communications (although this number is likely to be small). We believe that the proxy for this dynamic is poverty as one may have precarious living and working conditions such that mailboxes might be shared or might not exist, forwarding addresses not completed, living where your neighbors do not know you to assist when canvassers come knocking, and busy irregular schedules that might result in someone not having the time and/or energy to respond to surveyors. Again, there are racial disparities in poverty rates, with Whites having poverty levels of 13.0% while that of people of color is 43.2%.
- ***Understanding the importance of participation and having a culture of participation:*** As communities acclimatize to the USA, a culture of participation develops to support practices such as surveys and censuses. Accordingly, newer communities will be less oriented to the importance of these practices and the ways in which participation matters. Newcomers are much more numerous among communities of color than among White communities: 26.8% of people of color arrived in the USA since 2000, while the equivalent figure for Whites is 2.1%.
- ***Having a history of distrust with the US government:*** There have been two significant violations of the history of federal data for the persecution of its residents – the first was that of Native American families for the seizure of Native children to be removed from their families and placed in residential schools to ensure their “civilization” into US society. The second was the tracking down of Japanese Americans and their subsequent imprisonment during WWII. While the Census Bureau promises privacy and confidentiality, these historic violations leave some communities of color with uncertainty about participation. Even if they receive all forms, can understand them, and have a culture of participation, this violation of trust leaves many skeptical and thus participation rates are likely low. There is likely an additional age bias in how this issue influences participation rates, with older members of communities of color holding a more vivid memory of this violation and being less likely to participate. In addition, federal tribal terminations (circa 1954) led to the official dissolution of many Native identities, and an explicit directive from the government that defined some Natives as no longer being Native. Even when some tribes later regained recognition, this transition placed a “chill” on Native self-identification.

- ***Having a distrustful relationship with one's own government:*** For refugee communities in particular, many communities have experienced persecution by one's own government in their home country. State bodies often used violence, imprisonment, torture and killing of communities. Accordingly, keeping a low profile with the state is an act of self-preservation. There are two dimensions to this dynamic: the first is to not participate at all, and the second is to participate but not to identify features of one's identity that gave rise to the persecution. This is the "ancestry" category and is important as it is the source of data for identifying the size of many particular communities of color.
- ***Degree of racism faced in the USA:*** When one experiences racism – whether it is institutional, cultural or individually-enacted racism – one is less likely hold a prideful embrace of one's racial identity. Furthermore, there is research that illustrates that when surveys are administered by Whites, there is a lesser likelihood that one will identify as a person of color. The dynamic is both a combination of internalized oppression, and self-protective features whereby one wants to hold an identity that is similar to the "person in charge" such that one is less likely to be "othered" or otherwise marginalized by the institution conducting the survey.

At this point, we hope that the reader appreciates why communities of color are less likely to both participate in surveys and also to identify themselves as a person of color. Given that these surveys (particularly Census population counts) are relied upon to determine the size of the community, the accuracy of these population counts are called into question. Quite simply, communities of color are undercounted.

### **Published Research on the Undercount**

We are not the first to make such an assertion. The Census Bureau itself has determined that there is an undercount of numerous communities in the years that followed Census 2000. But revising the population counts required an act of Congress, and Congress twice refused to accept these upwards revisions. The most generous interpretation of these refusals is financial – for with upwards revisions, the federal government would be responsible for increased funding to state and local governments. Another interpretation would be the impact of newer numbers that would have increased the counts of more poor urban centers, which generally are more likely to be Democratic. Given that Congress was controlled by the Republicans at the time, and that these numbers are used for redistricting purposes and thus affecting the numbers of elected officials across the country, it would likely have led to an increased number of Democratic-leaning districts.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the cause, this example is illustrative that population counts are more than demographic practices – they are political and deeply influenced by the constructs that support and that limit participation.

In the charts below, we compile the existing data on the various undercount measures that have been conducted by mainstream institutions (the first chart) and conducted via traditional methods that compare different population counts in conventional databases (the second chart). There are two purposes to listing these undercounts: the first is to illustrate the growing documentation of undercounts within very conventional institutions, and the second is to illustrate the magnitude of some of these undercounts that range from 1% to 97%.

Community	Institution	Size of Undercount
Multnomah County, total population	Census Bureau	0.94%
Communities of Color, USA	Census Bureau (2000 Census)	Pacific Islander = 3.7% Asian = 1.1% African American = 2.1% Native American = 2.6% Latino = 2.8%
API young men, USA	Census Bureau (1990 Census)	10%
Undocumented Residents	Immigration & Naturalization Service (INS)	10%
Immigrants	Immigration & Naturalization Service (INS)	2.5%
State of California	California's Department of Finance	3.9% (of Census 2010)
New York City	NYC Planning Department	2.6% (of Census 2010)
Aboriginals, Canada	Statistics Canada - review of Census 2001	38.5%

Traditional Methods	Population	Size of Undercount
Compare ODE with ACS, Multnomah	All Public School Attendees	7.6% (1.1% for White students and 15.7% for students of color)
Compare Office of Refugee Resettlement with ACS, Oregon	Iraqis	59.5%
Compare Office of Refugee Resettlement with ODE, Multnomah	Burmese	57.8%
Compare ODE with ACS, Multnomah	Somali	89.4%
Compare ACS with traditional health survey, Boston	Brazilian	29%
Compare Census with Birth/Death Records, California	All races & nativity of mother	13.2% for native-born API mothers; 13.7% for foreign-born API mothers
Compare Current Population Survey with Death Certificates	All in USA	Black = 0% Native American = 37% Asian & Pacific Islander = 13% Latino = 7%

We want to highlight one of these undercounts: communities of color have been highlighting that they believe the school system has more accurate counts of their communities than the American Community Survey (ACS). We have identified that this is indeed true: when compiling the total data from the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) with the numbers from ACS, we find that ACS has an undercount of students ranging from age 5 to 17 that totals 7.6%. We included the numbers of home schooled students, but were not able to include the number of students who were not in school, so it is likely that even this 7.6% is itself undercounted as well. When we disaggregate this undercount by race, there are pronounced differences: the undercount of White students is 1.1%, while the undercount of students of color is 15.7%.

An interesting addendum is that there are abundant challenges across the nation to the population counts generated through Census 2010. As of June 2011, 48 localities had filed challenges under the Census Bureau's Count Question Resolution Program, a formal process designed to address faulty counts (with the challenges typically, if not universally, addressing undercounts). Failure to adequately respond to these complaints has, at least, resulted in legal proceedings being launched by the States of California and Texas, and New York City.

## Methods for Determining Community-Verified Population Counts

The methods used vary by community as a result of data availability, size of the community, and local conventions. A quick overview of the methods of each community is detailed below:

1. **Native American:** A tally of all tribal enrollment figures
2. **Latino:** Triangulation<sup>5</sup> of three different counts
  - a. Conventional data used by the Department of Homeland Security
  - b. Application of an undercount measure determined in another region
  - c. The community's own research using a survey of Latinos to determine the non-participation in Census 2010
3. **Asian & Pacific Islander:** Triangulation of three different counts
  - a. Results that disaggregate the community by citizenship status (drawing from conventional measures)
  - b. Results that disaggregate the community by age (drawing from published studies for the youngest and oldest age group, and from our own comparison of ODE and ACS data for school-aged children and youth)
  - c. Community estimates of the size of smaller communities (under review)
4. **Slavic:** The community's own research using a survey of Slavic community members to determine the level of non-participation in Census 2010
5. **African Immigrant & Refugee:** Averaging of two different measures
  - a. The community's own research using a survey of African community members to determine the level of non-participation in Census 2010 (still being completed)
  - b. Application of the undercount established for the largest African community (Somali) as determined by comparison of ACS data with ODE data (as established by microfile data analysis of files provided by ODE)
6. **African American:** Averaging of two different measures
  - a. The community's own research using a survey of African American community members to determine the level of non-participation in Census 2010 (still being completed)
  - b. Application of the undercount as determined by comparison of ACS data with ODE data

## Community-Verified Undercounts

The following chart summarizes the size of the undercount in each community. Please note that we are still assessing the appropriateness of applying these numbers to Census 2010 data, as opposed to ACS 2009 data on which most calculations have been conducted.

Community	Percentage Undercount
Native American	47.2%
Latino	12.2%
Asian & Pacific Islander	6.5%
Slavic	31.6%
African American	*
African Immigrant & Refugee	64.7%

Source: Each community report (in the "Unsettling Profile" series) contains the details of each method.

\*Indicates that this number is still in development and anticipated to be concluded by mid-March 2012.

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<sup>1</sup> All the data in this section is drawn from the 2009 American Community Survey and unless otherwise specified are for Multnomah county.

<sup>2</sup> These data were calculated by the Census Bureau and based on 1990 Census data – without a repetition of these calculations done for the 2000 Census. The data are drawn from Hogan, H. & Robinson, G. (1993). *What the Census Bureau's coverage evaluation programs tell us about differential undercount*. Downloaded on September 25, 2011 from <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/1993/conference.html>.

<sup>3</sup> This figure draws from the 2007-2009 data from the American Community Survey (only for the Asian population).

<sup>4</sup> Buery, R. (1998). GOP Census politics. *The Nation*, 267(19): 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Triangulation refers to a process of averaging the results of different measures. When such a process is used, confidence in the result increases as each of three methods inform the community count but we have not unduly relied upon a specific method.