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Saving the Census: Assessing Willingness to Participate in the Census

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Abstract

The decennial U.S. Census is intended to generate an accurate count of the population for use in allocating seats in the House of Representatives and distributing federal funds. However, individuals are less likely to complete the Census if they have privacy and confidentiality concerns. Previous research conducted on behalf of the U.S. government found that reassurances of confidentiality increased participation but not for items asking for sensitive information. In March 2018, the Trump administration announced its intention to add a citizenship question to the 2020 Census, raising concerns that the citizenship question might reduce participation among members of mixed-status households. In October and November 2018, while a legal challenge to the question was pending, we worked with three partner organizations within a faith-based non-profit community network to explore how best to encourage participation in the 2020 Census in hard-to-count populations in Southern California. Using a randomized field experiment with messages delivered using face-to-face canvassers, we find limited evidence that reassurances from the community organization about the confidentiality of information provided to the Census Bureau increased intent to participate in communities.

Keywords

Census, nativity, targeted communities, surveillance, experiment.



An accurate U.S. Census count is normatively desirable for several reasons, including that it is required by the U.S. Constitution and to ensure accurate distribution of political power and resources. Yet gaps in participation with the census have been an issue for decades. In 1970, 78 percent of households returned their mailed questionnaire; by 2010, that rate had declined to 63 percent. Existing research links participation and census data quality to privacy and confidentiality concerns (Hillygus et al., 2006); these concerns have intensified during the Trump administration. The 2010 Census National Partnership program suggested that participation among hard-to-count (HTC) communities could be increased through partnership with trusted local community organizations. Does HTC community participation increase when trusted organizations provide reassurances about confidentiality? In the fall of 2018, we tested that hypothesis with a field experiment conducted in cooperation with local community organizations. To preview those results, we found limited evidence that such messages increased willingness to participate. The results are consistent with prior research about the different ways in which these two communities have been politicized and the degree of concern they have about immigration enforcement and potential threats of deportation. Overall, they suggest that had the Trump administration's preferred wording been included it would have been difficult for community organizations to overcome resistance to completing the census by individuals in HTC communities.

There is widespread, persistent public skepticism about the privacy of data provided to the U.S. Census. Members of the public believe census data is shared with other agencies and that there is no law preventing such sharing and also that the government cannot be trusted to protect their personal information (O'Hare, 2019). These concerns are not without merit: census data was used to facilitate the roundup and internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, a fact denied for over half a century by the U.S. Government. The truth was revealed in a 2000 study and made another round of the news in early 2020 (Seltzer and Anderson, 2001; Feeney, 2020). Concerns about confidentiality are especially true for members of minority groups (Mayer, 2002; Gates, 2011). These concerns have intensified over time: increasing numbers of respondents are refusing to cooperate with the Census Bureau due to fear and increased distrust of the federal government (O'Hare, 2019).¹

Individuals with concerns about privacy and confidentiality are less likely to complete the census or may choose to leave blank or answer inaccurately those items they consider too personal (Mayer, 2002; O'Hare, 2019). For example, undocumented residents, immigrants, and citizens with undocumented immigrants in their households are less likely to accurately complete the census or to participate at all due to fears that doing so might expose non-citizens to risk of deportation (O'Hare, 2019). Opinions about the census as a tool of surveillance and to target

¹ Because the Census Bureau follows up with non-respondent households with door-to-door enumerators, this has led to increased costs for completing the census, from \$16/housing unit in 1970 to \$92/housing unit in 2010 (in 2020 constant dollars), for a total cost of over \$13.2 billion in 2010 (U.S. GAO 2017: p. 42).



specific communities of color are not new but have been documented for decades (Valentine and Valentine, 1971). More recently, Arab Americans have expressed concerns about census data being used to enhance surveillance and policing of the community, a fear based on historical use of census data “to monitor and control certain populations” (Strmic-Pawl et al., 2018). Valentine and Valentine (1971)’s ethnographic study in the late 1960s found that some of the undercount among Black and Hispanic residents of Brooklyn was due to their desire to not share information that might result in disclosure and “punitive sanctions” against themselves or other individuals, and that they found assurances of confidentiality and privacy to not be credible: “The result is that most people are strongly motivated to withhold information about their personal affairs because they believe that such knowledge might well be used against them by the authorities” (p. 16). Valentine and Valentine (1971) note that this misreporting to census enumerators is done despite the fact that the involved individuals know what they are doing is illegal; they believe it is more important to protect themselves and their families:

The principle most often invoked is survival. Every person’s primary duty is to insure his own and his family’s survival and essential welfare. While breaking rules and violating laws are wrongful acts, neglecting this primary obligation is much more immoral (p. 19).

Subsequent ethnographic studies have yielded similar results: undercounts are often the result of fear of prosecution and doubts about the confidentiality of collected data (Martin et al., 1989; O’Hare, 2019). Seeking to reduce concerns about confidentiality and enhance participation, multiple studies have tested the effect of Census Bureau reassurances of confidentiality. Summarizing those previous experiments, Mayer (2002) finds limited evidence that confidentiality assurances increase response rates with surveys asking for sensitive information and that “confidentiality assurances will not be effective if respondents do not believe that the promise will be kept.” In other words, promises from the Census Bureau that they would keep information confidential were not particularly effective given skepticism about the source of those reassurances.

Undercounts of immigrant populations, particularly the undocumented, have long plagued the census. “Estimates of undercounts generated from small surveys range from 10% in the 2000 Census to as high as 20% in 2010. Unauthorized immigrants... [often seek] to avoid contact with public authorities, making them less likely to respond to Census Bureau surveys than other populations” (Capps et al., 2018). Studies have found that cooperation among hard-to-count populations is sensitive to political context: an enumeration evaluation in 2010 in Texas found respondents were negatively affected by the contemporary passage of anti-immigrant ordinances “aimed at identifying illegal immigrants through police stops or the reporting of immigration status of applicants wishing to rent apartments.” The heightened tensions created by these laws, and accompanying fears about confidentiality and deportation, significantly decreased participation among Hispanic households (Terry et al., 2017). Using data from a national survey conducted in 1990, Couper et al. (1998) find that concern about confidentiality significantly decreases the likelihood of a respondent returning their mailed census form.



Research conducted by the Census Bureau's Center for Survey Measurement in 2017 indicated that concerns about the Trump administration's "Muslim Ban," the end of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, and immigration enforcement in general, might decrease participation in 2020 (Chishti and Bolter, 2018). Similar concerns related to state policies toward undocumented immigrants led to decreased participation in the 2010 Census (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2017). Surveys conducted by the Census Bureau in 2019 found higher levels of concern about confidentiality among racial and ethnic minorities compared to non-Hispanic whites. Fears that personal information would be used against them were voiced particularly by non-Hispanic Asians, individuals not proficient in English, and immigrants (McGeeney et al., 2019). Many Hispanic, Asian, and Pacific Islander participants feared the Census Bureau would share their information with other government agencies "to find undocumented people" (Evans et al., 2019).

In March 2018, the Trump administration announced the addition of a citizenship question to the 2020 Census. When first proposed by the Trump administration in December 2017, the proposal to add a question about citizenship to the decennial census was met with widespread condemnation (Van Hook, 2018). The official announcement led to renewed expressions of concern and also legal efforts to block the question, reflecting predictions that it would suppress responses from hard-to-count populations, generating undercounts and thus reduced political power and federal funding for states with large numbers of HTC individuals.

The Census Bureau most recently explored the valence of public opinion surrounding the security of 2020 Census data in a 2018 survey (McGeeney et al., 2019). Overall, 68% of respondents said they intended to respond to the census; intent to respond was significantly lower among non-Hispanic Asian respondents (55%) and those without English proficiency (55%). When asked "How concerned are you, if at all, that the answers you provide to the 2020 Census will be used against you", 22% of survey respondents replied that they were extremely concerned or very concerned; this proportion increases to 32% among Hispanics, 35% among non-Hispanic Blacks, and 41% among non-Hispanic Asian respondents. Concern was also higher among immigrants (34% vs. 20% of non-immigrants) and among those less proficient in English (39% vs. 21% of English-proficient).

In a lawsuit aiming to block inclusion of the citizenship question on the 2020 Census (Cal., 2018), California Attorney General Xavier Becerra noted "Numerous studies—including those conducted by the Bureau—point to the same conclusion: asking about citizenship will repress responses from non-citizens and their citizen relatives" (Cal., 2018). The lawsuit also notes concerns from the Census Bureau of increased fears among immigrants about the confidentiality of their personal information that have become an issue since Trump took office.

Design & Hypotheses

In October and November 2018, while a legal challenge to the question was pending, we worked with three partner organizations within a faith-based non-profit community network, PICO California, to explore how best to encourage participation in the 2020 Census in hard-to-count populations in Southern California. The experiments were conducted in Los Angeles, Orange



County, and Riverside County. The partner in Los Angeles, LA Voice, targeted the cities/neighborhoods of Boyle Heights, East LA, SE Cities, San Gabriel Valley, South LA, Inglewood, Long Beach, Hollywood, Lancaster, and Palmdale. Target populations included African Americans, immigrant Muslims, undocumented, Hispanic/Spanish speaking, formerly incarcerated people, people who are experiencing homelessness, and Pacific Islanders in Long Beach. The partner in Orange County, Orange County Congregation Community Organization, targeted the cities/neighborhoods of Costa Mesa, central Santa Ana, the West End of Anaheim, and southern neighborhoods in Fullerton. Target populations included low-income Hispanic (mostly Mexican) immigrants including those with limited English proficiency and monolingual Spanish speakers. The partner in Riverside County, Inland Congregations United for Change, targeted the cities of San Bernardino, Riverside, and Coachella. Target neighborhoods and populations in all three locations reflect the missions of each partner organization and their ongoing relationships with local residents. In other words, each partner focused their efforts in this experiment in neighborhoods where they had an established presence and are known as a trusted local group. This was expected to maximize the effectiveness of the canvassing effort, consistent with best practices (García Bedolla and Michelson, 2012). These locations represent areas likely to have participation issues: Los Angeles and Orange County rank 6th and 18th, respectively, in terms of their inclusion of HTC census tracts (O’Hare, 2016). Proportions of each pool of potential respondents were assigned to treatment and control in each location based on local partner group capacity.

Our main hypothesis (H₁) was that members of hard-to-count populations with high proportions of immigrants (Asian and Hispanic individuals) would be more likely to say they intend to complete the 2020 Census if they received a message from a trusted source noting that the Census Bureau is prohibited by federal law from sharing citizenship status information with law enforcement. We further hypothesized (H₂) that individuals who are parents would be more likely to say they intend to comply if reminded that the census count influences funding for local K-12 schools. Previous studies found evidence that messages encouraging action (e.g., getting children vaccinated, having conversations, or promoting healthy activities) in parents to be effective in producing various desired outcomes (Bar-Shain et al. 2015; Miller-Day and Dodd 2004; Bassett-Gunter et al. 2017). We test whether such a message about local K-12 funding could increase reported likelihood to complete the census.

The partnering organizations have been conducting door-to-door canvassing to increase voter turnout since 2008. The randomized experiment was embedded in PICO California’s get-out-the-vote (GOTV) effort for the 2018 Midterm Elections, conducted in the four weeks prior to the election. These are high-quality canvassers who represent trusted community organizations. Because the effort was embedded into the group’s GOTV campaign, the pool was limited to registered voters.² By definition, this likely affects our results because individuals who are

² The use of registered voters to test messages related to immigration limits the population to those who are citizens, and likely have fewer personal worries about such a citizenship question. However, much of the anxiety surrounding the citizenship question is related to household members who may be undocumented and at a greater risk for deportation (O’Hare, 2019).



registered to vote are not an unbiased sample of the U.S. population; individuals who are registered to vote are older and have higher levels of income and education than the general population; Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans are less likely to register compared to Black and white Americans (Hanmer, 2009; Leighley and Nagler, 2013; Tran, 2019). The local groups targeted census tracts with the highest proportion of hard-to-count population members within each of the three sets of target cities and neighborhoods. Pools of eligible voters for the GOTV campaign were identified in each geographic location and then randomized by the authors into control and two treatment groups. The restriction to registered voters may mean that those targeted were more likely to intend to cooperate with the census than were unregistered members of those neighborhoods (including unregistered citizens and non-citizens) that were not included in our participant pool. Our results might have varied had we targeted all residents of these neighborhoods. However, this restriction does not bias our results in terms of underlying levels of trust; multiple studies conclude that there is no effect of trust in government on participation (Hetherington, 1999; Levi and Stoker, 2000) and that noncitizens often have higher levels of trust in government compared to citizens (Michelson, 2003, 2007, 2016).

The largest partner, in Los Angeles, included a pool of 20,479 target individuals, with 32% assigned to each treatment group. Orange County’s pool included 7,901 individuals, with 32-33% assigned to each treatment group. Riverside County’s pool included 8,113 individuals with 37-38% assigned to each treatment group (see Table 1). Individuals randomly assigned to Treatment #1 were targeted with a message about the confidentiality of information about citizenship status provided to the Census Bureau (testing H₁). Individuals randomly assigned to Treatment #2 were targeted with a message about the use of census data to distribute funds for local K-12 schools (testing H₂).

Table 1: Assignment to Treatment and Control Groups by Geographic Location, California 2020 Census Experiment

	Los Angeles (N=20,479)	Orange County (N=7,901)	Riverside County (N=8,113)
Control	7,365 (35.9%)	2,770 (35.0%)	2,050 (25.2%)
Treatment #1 (confidentiality)	6,537 (31.9%)	2,542 (32.7%)	3,054 (37.6%)
Treatment #2 (K-12 funds)	6,574 (32.1%)	2,589 (32.1%)	3,009 (37.0%)

Canvassing was conducted in English and Spanish in October and November 2018; the outreach did not include any in-language canvassers for Asian households. Canvassers walked door-to-door in the target neighborhoods. Two attempts were made to contact each voter. After an introduction that identified the organization with which the canvasser was affiliated, the canvasser delivered a short message about the importance of the 2020 Census, including either a control message or one of the two treatment scripts. Each contacted individual only received one

message: control, confidentiality, or K-12. Respondents were then asked how likely they were to fill out the 2020 Census, using a five-point Likert scale ranging from very unlikely to very likely.³ The three messages read:

Control: We want to talk to you about the upcoming 2020 Census. It's important for everyone in our communities to be counted.

Treatment #1: The Census is designed to count ALL members of our communities regardless of U.S. citizenship status; this year there may be a specific question on the census that asks if you are a citizen. Federal law prohibits the U.S. Census Bureau from sharing that information with ANY law enforcement agency.

Treatment #2: As you know the Census determines how much money comes to your community including local schools. This will impact how much money is invested in your child's K-12 education.

Results

We focus our analysis on individuals successfully contacted. This includes 1,026 individuals in Riverside County (a contact rate of 12.9%), 2,824 in Los Angeles (13.7%), and 1,052 in Orange County (12.9%). While these are low absolute contact rates for a canvassing campaign, they are comparable to previous door-to-door efforts in similar communities (García Bedolla and Michelson, 2012). Contact rates varied slightly by control and treatment groups, as shown in Appendix Table 1A. We cannot say with any certainty whether the experiment would have generated the same results with a higher contact rate; we further discuss the external validity of our findings in the conclusion.

The dependent variable of interest in this experiment is the stated willingness of contacted individuals to complete the 2020 Census, measured with a five-point Likert scale ranging from very unlikely to very likely. Contacted individuals in Los Angeles were most likely to say they were very likely to complete the 2020 Census, while Orange County respondents were the least likely to give that response. Overall, most respondents reported that they would fill out their census form: 92 percent in Los Angeles, 79.8 percent in Orange County, and 83.6 percent in Riverside County (see Appendix Table 2A for details).

Our hypotheses predict heterogeneous effects by subgroup. We expected Asian and Hispanic respondents (regardless of whether or not they are parents) to be more likely to say they would complete the census when receiving the confidentiality message, and we expected parents (regardless of race or ethnicity) to be more likely to say they would complete the census when receiving the message about K-12 funds. There are notable differences in the demographics of each sample, with Hispanic individuals comprising the majorities of the Orange and Riverside

³ See Appendix for full script.



County samples and Black individuals comprising the majority of the Los Angeles sample. Race and ethnic data were listed in the original files used to conduct the randomization and canvassing (provided by Political Data, Inc.). Canvassers confirmed at the door the racial and ethnic identity of individuals they contacted. The percentage of respondents who are parents, in contrast, remains fairly constant across all three geographic locations: 22.3 percent in Los Angeles, 24.3 percent in Orange County, and 25.1 percent in Riverside County (see Appendix Table 3A for details).

As shown in Table 2, most contacted individuals in the control groups said that they intended to answer the 2020 Census: 92.49 percent of respondents in Los Angeles, 78.71 percent of respondents in Orange County, and 88.03 percent of respondents in Riverside County. In most treatment conditions, there is no change in likelihood of responding to the 2020 Census compared to these control group rates. The one notable exception is that contacted individuals in Orange County who received the message about data confidentiality were 0.14 percentage points more likely to say that they would respond to the 2020 Census ($p = 0.02$, one-tailed t-test). The OLS results in Table 3 confirm this result ($b = 0.14$; $p < 0.05$, one-tailed).

Table 2: Proportion Stating Likelihood of Responding to the 2020 Census by Assignment and Location, 2020 Census Experiment (N in parentheses)

	Los Angeles	Orange County	Riverside County	Total
Control Group				
Very Likely or Likely	92.49% (961)	78.71% (318)	84.81% (229)	88.03% (1,508)
Unsure	5.39% (56)	12.62% (51)	11.48% (31)	8.06% (138)
Unlikely or Very Unlikely	2.12% (22)	8.66% (35)	3.70% (10)	3.91% (67)
Treatment #1 Group (Confidentiality Message)				
Very Likely or Likely	92.26% (811)	82.70% (282)	82.23% (324)	87.79% (1,417)
Unsure	5.23% (46)	9.68% (33)	10.91% (43)	7.56% (122)
Unlikely or Very Unlikely	2.50% (22)	7.62% (26)	6.85% (27)	4.65% (75)
Treatment #2 Group (K-12 Message)				
Very Likely or Likely	91.28% (827)	78.18% (240)	84.25% (305)	87.11% (1,372)
Unsure	6.51% (59)	14.33% (44)	10.77% (39)	9.02% (142)
Unlikely or Very Unlikely	2.21% (20)	7.49% (23)	4.97% (18)	3.87% (61)



Note: This table groups *Likely* and *Very Likely* responses and *Unlikely* and *Very Unlikely* responses together for ease of interpretation; the original 1-5 coding is used in the statistical models below.

We combined data from the three experiments into a meta-analysis with a random effects model to assess the overall impact of the treatment while accounting for variation across sites, including different proportions of racial and ethnic groups, differences in language of delivery (English and Spanish), and the different name and reputation of the community organization delivering the messages in each location, among other observed and unobserved differences.⁴ As shown in Table 3, the direction of the effect for the confidentiality treatment is not consistent across counties. Therefore, the meta-analysis generates a slightly positive effect (standard mean difference of 0.0151) but it does not reach statistical significance. Similarly, the message about K-12 funding (Treatment #2) did not increase overall reported likelihood of completing the census in any county or in the meta-analysis.

⁴ While somewhat contradictory advice on whether to use fixed or random effects is available (for a review see Clark and Linzer 2014), we selected the random-effects model to allow the true effect sizes to vary from county to county while assessing an overall treatment effect. According to Borenstein et al. (2010), “it is possible that all studies share a common effect size, but it is also possible that the effect size varies from study to study.... Because studies will differ in the mixes of participants and in the implementations of interventions, among other reasons, there may be different effect sizes underlying different studies.” We include analyses with fixed effect models in the appendix (Table 4A).



Table 3: Likelihood of Responding to the 2020 Census by Treatment Group and Geographic Location, compared to Control Group, 2020 Census Experiment

	Coefficient estimate	<i>p-value</i>
Los Angeles (N=2,824)		
Confidentiality Message	-0.03	(0.81)
K-12 Message	-0.04	(0.90)
Constant	4.62	(0.00)
Orange County (N=1,052)		
Confidentiality Message	0.14*	(0.02)
K-12 Message	0.07	(0.16)
Constant	4.03	(0.00)
Riverside County (N=1,026)		
Confidentiality Message	-0.04	(0.70)
K-12 Message	0.00	(0.48)
Constant	4.42	(0.00)
Random Effects Meta-Analysis (N=4,902)		
Confidentiality Message	0.0151	(0.39)
K-12 Message	-0.0147	(0.85)

* = $p < .05$, one-tailed OLS.

Turning to our specific hypotheses, we tested whether Hispanic and Asian respondents were more likely to report they would complete the census when assigned to Treatment #1 (confidentiality), and that parents would be more likely to plan to comply when assigned to Treatment #2 (K-12 funding). Table 4 presents results testing the first hypothesis. Our expectation is that there will be a positive effect of the treatment. Again, this is the case in Orange County among both Hispanic ($p < 0.1$, one-tailed) and Asian ($p < 0.1$, one-tailed) respondents. The random effects meta-analysis does not show a statistically significant effect for any group, although there is a slightly positive but not statistically significant effect among Asian respondents (this effect becomes statistically significant using a fixed-effect model, $p < 0.1$, one-tailed; see appendix Table 4A).⁵

We focused on Hispanic and Asian residents because we theorized they would be most likely to be concerned about the proposed question about citizenship status. However, as noted above, Black communities have also traditionally had concerns about cooperation with the census. As

⁵ Our Asian American samples include considerable diversity in terms of national origin. For example, in Los Angeles our pool included 1 Vietnamese American, 3 Chinese Americans, 3 mixed Chinese and Korean Americans, 11 Filipino Americans, 13 Korean Americans, and 20 Japanese Americans. However, none of these subgroup samples (in any county) are large enough to allow for subgroup analyses. We do not have national-origin data for non-Asians in our sample.



shown in Table 4, we find no significant effect of the confidentiality message on Black respondents in any single county or in our meta-analysis.

Table 4: Likelihood of Responding to 2020 Census when Reassured about Confidentiality, by Race and Ethnicity, 2020 Census Experiment

	<i>Hispanic Respondents</i>		<i>Asian Respondents</i>		<i>Black Respondents</i>	
	Coefficient estimate	<i>p-value</i>	Coefficient estimate	<i>p-value</i>	Coefficient estimate	<i>p-value</i>
Los Angeles	N=591		N=27		N=1,299	
Confidentiality Message	0.03	(0.31)	0.32	(0.145)	-0.06	(0.55)
Constant	4.54	(0.00)	4.50	(0.00)	4.66	(0.00)
Orange County	N=609		N=120		N=9	
Confidentiality Message	0.10	(0.09)	0.32	(0.06)	-0.36	(0.74)
Constant	4.06	(0.00)	3.84	(0.00)	4.86	(0.00)
Riverside County	N=701		N=24		N=18	
Confidentiality Message	-0.03	(0.66)	-0.45	(0.83)	-0.03	(0.97)
Constant	4.41	(0.00)	4.59	(0.00)	4.57	(0.00)
Random Effects Meta-Analysis	N=1,901		N=171		N=1,326	
Confidentiality Message	0.0395	(0.20)	0.2036	(0.14)	0.0901	(0.55)

* = $p < .05$, one-tailed OLS.

Our secondary hypothesis was that being a parent might heighten the effectiveness of the Treatment #2 message, which emphasizes the importance of answering the census for school funding purposes. We first compare parents to non-parents, combining respondents of all racial and ethnic groups, in each of the three experiments and also in a meta-analysis. Parents were more likely to say they were likely or very likely to answer the census compared to non-parents (by 0.04 points) and this difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$, one-tailed t-test). Parents are more likely to say they plan to complete the census after hearing the Treatment #2 message but the difference is not statistically significant in any of the three experiments (Table 5).



Table 5: Likelihood of Responding to the 2020 Census by Assignment to Treatment Group #2 and Parental Status, compared to Control Group, 2020 Census Experiment

	Coefficient estimate	<i>p-value</i>	Coefficient estimate	<i>p-value</i>
Los Angeles				
	Non-Parents (N = 1,519)		Parents (N = 426)	
K-12 Message	-0.05	(0.90)	-0.01	(0.57)
Constant	4.62	(0.00)	4.63	(0.00)
Orange County				
	Non-Parents (N = 552)		Parents (N = 159)	
K-12 Message	0.06	(0.22)	0.13	(0.20)
Constant	4.01	(0.00)	4.11	(0.00)
Riverside County				
	Non-Parents (N = 467)		Parents (N = 165)	
K-12 Message	-0.05	(0.70)	0.15	(0.16)
Constant	4.45	(0.00)	4.34	(0.00)
Random Effects Meta-Analysis				
	Non-Parents (N = 2,538)		Parents (N = 750)	
K-12 Message	-0.0360	(0.68)	0.0536	(0.23)

* = $p < .05$, one-tailed OLS.

The average marginal effect of the treatment condition on parents is consistently higher than non-parents when compared to the control. This pattern is consistent across each region, but the differences do not reach statistical significance. Further teasing these differences out through a random effects meta-analysis model revealed that the standard mean difference between the control and treatment was -0.036 for non-parents and 0.053 for parents; the difference is not statistically significant ($p = 0.14$, one-tailed).

We were interested in the effect of the K-12 treatment on parents in different racial categories but found that certain locations did not have enough participants who fit all criteria. For instance, there were no Asian parents who received the control message in the LA study. Similarly, we only have two Black parents who received the K-12 message in Riverside and Orange counties. However, we were able to run a meta-analysis on Hispanic parents across all studies and analyze the effect of the K-12 message on Black parents in LA alone. While the average response among Hispanic parents ($b = 0.112$) is more positive than among Hispanic non-parents ($b = -0.036$), this difference is not statistically significant ($p = 0.136$ one-tailed). Similarly, the difference

between Black parents ($b = -0.059$) and Black non-parents ($b = 0.005$) in LA does not reach statistical significance ($p = 0.760$ one-tailed).

Discussion & Conclusion

For decades the Census Bureau has worked to increase participation among members of hard-to-count (HTC) communities, but many individuals continue to be skeptical that information shared with the bureau will be kept confidential and not generate punitive consequences for themselves or members of their households. Multiple studies have found that reassurances of confidentiality delivered by the census are not effective at reducing that skepticism and increasing intended participation. We hypothesized that reassurances from a trusted community organization might be more effective, and experimentally tested that hypothesis in three counties in Southern California in late 2018. We find limited support for that hypothesis. Specifically, reminding individuals that information about citizenship status reported to the census cannot be shared with law enforcement (Treatment #1) increased the likelihood that Asian Americans in Orange County would say they intend to respond to the 2020 Census. Our meta-analysis shows similar positive results but does not reach statistical significance. We find the same effect among Hispanic respondents in Orange County. We also tested whether messages about how census data is used to distribute funds for K-12 education might increase participation, hypothesizing that parents would be moved to be more likely to cooperate with the census. We found no support for this secondary hypothesis. Overall, these results suggest that even a message from a trusted community organization is limited in its ability to overcome (legitimate) skepticism about the confidentiality of information shared with the U.S. Census. Had the Trump administration been successful in its efforts to add a citizenship question, the ability of community organizations like those we partnered with to counter the resulting reduction in willingness to complete the census would thus also likely have been limited, with potentially dramatic reductions in compliance by HTC populations like those targeted by these efforts. The ability of the government to manipulate resident fears about negative consequences of compliance with census requirements thus seems well understood by those in the Trump administration who sought to add those questions. With little to gain (personally) from complying, and much to potentially lose, it would have been difficult for community organizations to “save” the census.

In addition, the degree to which we find some evidence that reassurances from a community organization can overcome these concerns are likely overstated. Our results are likely biased to overestimate likelihood to participate in the census—targeted individuals were all registered voters, and they were willing to open their doors and speak with the partner organization’s canvasser. These indications of civic engagement suggest they would also engage in the census. The high baseline rates of likelihood of participating in the census (see Table 2A) left little room for improvement. It is possible that similar messages would generate larger changes in stated willingness to participate in the census among less engaged residents, but it is equally possible that the overall pattern of null results would be replicated, given that less-engaged residents with lower levels of income and education and who are not registered to vote may be even more skeptical that the government will protect their privacy and the confidentiality of information



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shared on a census form. Further studies are needed to explore ways in which trusted community organizations can successfully encourage members of HTC communities to be counted, if at all.



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Appendix (Canvassing Script)

Hi, may I speak to [NAME]? My name is _____ and I'm here with [local organization] and PICO California. How are you doing today? We're talking with voters and community members here in [your community] today about the power and impact our vote and the importance of the upcoming Census in 2020.

As you know we have an election coming up in November and an important Census coming up in 2020.

There is a lot a stake and we want to make sure everyone in [your community] is ready to vote on November 6th and be counted in 2020. Both the Census and the upcoming ballot initiatives will impact affordable housing, access to clean water, schools, healthcare, roads and other public services. We want to talk with you about 2 initiatives that deal with the housing crisis and funding for schools as well as local services.

In addition, we want to talk to you about the upcoming 2020 census—it's important for everyone in our communities to be counted.

Confidentiality Message (Treatment #1): The Census is designed to count ALL members of our communities regardless of U.S. citizenship status however this year there may a specific question on the census that asks if you are a citizen. Federal law prohibits the U.S. Census Bureau from sharing that information with ANY law enforcement agency.

K-12 Funds Message (Treatment #2): As you know the Census determines how much money comes to your community including local schools. This will impact how much money is invested in your child's K-12 education.

How likely are you to fill out the 2020 Census?

[Possible responses: very likely, likely, unsure, unlikely, very unlikely]

The first initiative is Prop 10. Prop 10 repeals the current state law that restricts the ability of cities and counties to pass local rent control laws on single-family homes and apartments. If the election were to take place today, how would you vote on Prop 10?

[Possible responses: yes, no, undecided/unsure]

The second initiative is Prop 5. Prop 5 allows homeowners over 55 (or who meet other qualifications) to receive a property tax discount when they purchase a new house, no matter if it is less or more expensive. Schools and local governments each would lose over \$100 million in annual early on, growing to about \$1 billion per year. If the election were to take place today, how would you vote on Prop 5?

[Possible responses: yes, no, undecided/unsure]

Can we get your cell phone and email so we can send you our voter guide?

Thank you for your time today, would you share with us how you identify racially/ethnically? [Possible responses: African American, Latino, API, Native American, White, Middle Eastern, Other]



Table 1A: Contact Rates by Treatment Group and Geographic Location, California 2020 Census Experiment

	Los Angeles	Orange County	Riverside County
Control	14.10% (1,039/7,365)	19.70% (404/2,050)	13.70% (270/2,050)
Treatment #1 (confidentiality)	13.40% (879/6,537)	11.30% (341/3,009)	13.00% (394/3,009)
Treatment #2 (K-12 funds)	13.70% (906/6,574)	10.00% (307/3,054)	11.80% (362/3,054)
Overall Contact Rate	13.70% (2,824/20,476)	12.90% (1,052/8,113)	12.90% (1,026/7,901)

Table 2A: Proportion Stating Likelihood to Complete the Census by Location, California 2020 Census Experiment (N in parentheses)

	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Unsure	Likely	Very Likely
Los Angeles (N=2,824)	0.8% (22)	1.5% (42)	5.7% (161)	21.0% (592)	71.1% (2,007)
Orange County (N=1,052)	0.7% (7)	7.3% (77)	21.1% (128)	41.3% (434)	38.5% (406)
Riverside County (N=1,026)	2.0% (21)	3.3% (34)	11.0% (113)	19.0% (195)	64.6% (663)
ALL (N=4,902)	1.0% (50)	3.1% (153)	8.2% (402)	24.9% (1,221)	62.7% (3,076)

Table 3A: Proportion of Contacted Individuals that are Parents, and by Race, by Geographic Area, 2020 Census Experiment (N in parentheses)

	Los Angeles (N=2,824)	Orange County (N=1,052)	Riverside County (N=1,026)
Parents	22.3% (629)	24.3% (256)	25.1% (258)
Hispanic	31.0% (878)	81.7% (859)	91.9% (943)
Black	66.9% (1,892)	1.4% (15)	2.4% (25)
Asian	1.7% (51)	15.9% (169)	3.6% (37)
Non-Hispanic white (Anglo)	0.1% (3)	0.8% (9)	2.0% (21)



Table 4A: Fixed Effects Meta-Analyses, Likelihood of Responding to the 2020 Census by Message and Subgroup, 2020 Census Experiment

	Coefficient estimate	<i>p-value</i>
Confidentiality Message		
ALL Respondents (N=3,327)	0.0010	(0.48)
Hispanic Respondents (N=1,901)	0.0395	(0.20)
Asian Respondents (N=171)	0.2245	(0.08)
Black Respondents (N=1,326)	0.0901	(0.55)
K-12 Message		
ALL Respondents (N=3,288)	-0.0190	(0.79)
Non-Parents (N=2,538)	-0.0360	(0.68)
Parents (N=750)	0.0536	(0.23)

* = $p < .05$, one-tailed OLS.