An Effective Strategy To Reduce Census Undercount: Results from California Pilots of Community-Based Address Canvassing

by Ed Kissam
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Overview

A major source of census undercount is that “unconventional” housing units where many low-income families, predominantly minorities and immigrants, live are left off the Census Bureau’s address list. Families living in these sorts of housing situations – converted garages, back of the house add-ons, informally-built living quarters and trailers in backyards - will not receive an invitation to participate in Census 2020 or receive any follow-up. This problem can be effectively addressed by community-based address canvassing.

Community-based address canvassing is a new technique designed to identify these unconventional housing units and add them to the Census Bureau’s address list. The strategy is to mobilize outreach staff and/or volunteers from local grassroots organizations already working in “hard to count” communities to identify the unconventional housing units in these neighborhoods and partner with local government in the Census Bureau’s LUCA process to add them to the final address list that will be used in Census 2020.

The California pilots, conducted during December, 2017 and January, 2018, show that unconventional housing is prevalent in both urban and rural California communities and that the community-based address canvassing strategy. The pilots show the strategy is operationally feasible and affordable and that the community canvassers’ identification of these housing units can augment the Census Bureau’s address list by 4%-6%. The result is that opportunities for the most economically marginal minority and immigrant households to be counted in Census 2020 are dramatically improved.

The community-based address canvassing pilots also show that the strategy is affordable, and that involvement in the community-based address canvassing contributes greatly to grassroots organizations’ preparedness and volunteers’ enthusiasm about getting involved in subsequent phases of census promotion and enumeration.

Community-based address canvassing can make a major contribution toward a complete count in communities which move rapidly during March-June, 2018 to take this first step toward a fair and accurate Census 2020 in their local area.

Why It Is Important to Invest In Improving the Census Bureau’s Address List

The decennial census is a survey—meant to include 100% of the U.S. population: “to count everyone once, only once, and in the right place”. That is why developing a complete address list is so important for census accuracy and fairness. If a household is not included in the Census Bureau’s Master Address File (MAF) – built primarily on multiple federal data sources and augmented with administrative data from local government – that household does not get the invitation to participate in the survey.
However, the Census Bureau’s address list is, inevitably, incomplete. Several decades of research in inner-city neighborhoods and farmworker communities show that one-third to one-half of total census undercount stems from “total household omission” (Fein and West 1988) because the place a family lives is not included in the MAF and does not receive an invitation to respond to the census. A Census Bureau study of undercount in Los Angeles basin communities reported by David Fein, Kirsten West, showed that 3.3% of housing units in the predominantly Latino study area were not on its address list (Fein 1989). Ethnographic and survey research in immigrant communities suggests that even more of the unconventional housing is missed in California farmworker communities (GAO 2003, Kissam 2006, Kissam 2017).

It is reasonable to ask how prevalent this type of unconventional housing is now in 2018. There are reasons to believe it is as prevalent now as in the past.

About one out of five California families lives in poverty (Public Policy Institute of California, October, 2017) and more than one-quarter (28.8%) of California low-income households need to pay more than half of their income for shelter (California Budget and Policy Center, September, 2017). The high cost of housing and the prevalence of low-income households living in “unconventional” housing has very likely increased greatly during the past decade in California and will increase further by 2020. This means that more and more low-income minority and immigrant families are at risk of being left out of the decennial census because of their housing accommodations.

Community-based Address Canvassing enhances the effectiveness of the Census Bureau’s Current LUCA Partnership with Local Government to Improve Its’ Address List

In recognition of the challenges in assuring that every housing unit in the U.S. is on its address list, the Census Bureau invites local governments to participate in a partnership to secure an accurate inventory of all the places people live in the United States. It invites local governments to review and correct the Bureau’s prior address list (based primarily on U.S. postal service data and commercial address lists) for their local communities. This process, known as LUCA (Local Update of Census Addresses), runs from February through June, 2018.

Unfortunately, most local governments’ current efforts to update the Census Bureau’s address list typically rely only administrative records – such as property assessor data. But administrative records do not usually include most unconventional housing. This is why community-based address canvassing is a crucial supplement which effectively complements the standard approach to LUCA.

Findings from the California Community-based Address Canvassing Pilot Initiative

This report presents findings from pilots conducted in urban and rural areas of California in December, 2017 and January, 2018. Local community-based organizations familiar with housing conditions in their local neighborhoods conducted address canvassing to identify the unconventional housing units for submission to the Census Bureau’s address list. The exact details of pilot implementation varied from community to community but was successful in each of the pilots.

The pilots were conducted in Fresno, San Jose, and in several neighborhoods of San Francisco. Overall, neighborhood areas with slightly more than 30,000 housing units were canvassed in the pilots and canvassers identified 1,550 unconventional housing units likely not to have been included in the current Census Bureau MAF or identifiable by reliance on administrative records in the course of LUCA.
The Community-based Address Canvassing pilots identified significant additional housing units. The pilots added 6.3% additional households in Fresno County, 4.8% additional households in San Jose, and 4.0% additional households in the Portola neighborhood of San Francisco. These additions represent a major contribution toward overcoming differential undercount of minorities since the official undercount rate for Hispanics in Census 2010 was 1.54% and for Blacks, 2.06% (Mule 2012).

The community canvassing took from 1.5 to 2.5 hours per block group in each community. Training of address canvassing used a train-the-trainer model. A mobile survey was created with input from the US Census Bureau that easily allowed canvassers to enter data on their phone as they canvassed the streets. San Jose organized the canvassing to be completed in a single day with large-scale turnout with more than 50 community canvassers while the Fresno pilot relied on a small team of five canvassers who worked during nine days.

The in-field canvassing costs were about $25 for each unconventional housing unit identified, about $40,000 for all 3 pilots. In these neighborhoods where crowded housing predominates there are about 3.3 persons per household. If the 5,000 or more persons living in these unconventional households were to be left out of Census 2020 because they never received an invitation to participate and enumerators did not know the existence of the place they lived, the cost to these local neighborhoods would have been more than $100 million in census-driven federal program funding allocated elsewhere during the decade from 2021-2030.

Key Recommendation

It would be judicious for the state of California, local government entities, and philanthropy to collaborate in sponsoring extensive efforts to integrate community-based address canvassing into local LUCA efforts during March-June, 2018—especially in communities where there are relatively high proportions of low-income neighborhoods, crowded housing, and concentrations of immigrants.

Genesis Of The Community-based Address Canvassing Pilot Initiative

The rationale for the pilot initiative emerged from a body of research by ethnographers and Census Bureau survey methodologists examining the multiple causes of undercount in minority neighborhoods in California and elsewhere. A review of this research and the design of such an initiative is available on the WKF Family Fund website (WKfamilyfund.org) and an excellent summary is available on the Census Outreach website (www.censusoutreach.org)

Planning for implementation of the community-based pilot initiative began with discussions between the WKF Fund and CommunityConnect Labs and assumed shape in discussions with foundation colleagues—Holly Kreider and Deanna Gomby at the Heising-Simons Foundation, Myra Chow and Tessa Rouverol Callejo at the San Francisco Foundation - the staff at the San Jose Mayor’s Office, Myung Lee, Mauricio Garcia and their colleagues at Cities of Service.

Funding for the pilot initiative covered the cost of developing training materials, development of the mobile application for submitting newly-identified housing units, project management, supervision and cost of in-field canvassing, and data analysis.
Implementation of the Community-based Address Canvassing Pilot Initiative

Consultation With U.S. Census

Brian Timko, the Census Bureau’s LUCA manager, James Christy and Julie Lam of the Census Bureau’s Los Angeles Regional Office, and Gregory J. Robinson, a retired Census Bureau researcher, each provided valuable technical assistance and advice. The project’s operational design benefited particularly from discussions between Brian Timko as Jacob Model, PhD., CommunityConnect Labs’ Vice-president for Research, worked to develop the mobile texting tool which provided an easy way for community address canvassers to submit data on the housing identified to a secure server, and in a format which can easily be used by the Census Bureau in its review of LUCA submissions.

Training Materials

Community canvasser training materials are based on the Census Bureau’s own in-field address canvasser training material and was refined and further developed by Jessica Lopez, an anthropology graduate student at NYU, Jacob Model at CommunityConnect Labs, and Ed Kissam at the WKF Fund. Cities of Service, an important partner in the San Jose pilot, has developed a toolkit for additional cities to implement the community-based address canvassing.

User-Friendly Technology

CommunityConnect Labs managed the pilots, working in San Jose with the City of San Jose Office of Immigrant Affairs, Cities of Service, and several San Jose community-based neighborhood organizations (including Somos Mayfair, Sacred Heart, the International Children Assistance Network, and Viet Unity), in Fresno County, with the Central Valley Immigrant Integration Collaborative (CVIIC), and in San Francisco with the Chinese Progressive Association.

The mobile data submission tool used by canvassers was developed to be most publically accessible. Even canvassers with inexpensive phones, such as so-called “Obama phones” with limited internet access could use it. The user-friendly interface (see Appendix A) makes training volunteers easy (even if they are not very data-oriented). The mobile tool was an important element in project implementation because it enabled data to be collected quickly, transmitted, and stored securely. CommunityConnect Labs also generated walking maps using a variety of standard mapping resources, participated in on-the-ground training and observed canvassing in San Jose and San Francisco.

Identifying Target Neighborhoods

A key to making address canvassing process cost-effective is targeting these efforts to the neighborhoods where there is likely to be a significant amount of unconventional housing. Ed Kissam and J. Gregory Robinson worked collaboratively to develop an algorithm to target census block-groups which were likely to have higher-than-average concentrations of unconventional housing in each of the pilot counties.

The algorithm ranks block-groups in order of predicted likelihood of unconventional housing. The pilots were designed to target about 5% of each community, focusing on neighborhoods believed to be most problematic to assure the effort would be cost-effective. Since local community-based organization partners have the best insights about which areas to target given the fact that their members lived in these
hard-to-count neighborhoods, the final choice of areas to canvass was left to the community-based organizations.

**Selecting and Organizing Canvassers**

Community-based organizations that had experience with outreach in “hard to count” neighborhoods were recruited.

Canvassing in San Jose took place on the second weekend in December. The approach used in San Jose was the “weekend of service” model where more than 50 volunteers canvassed 31 census block groups in 16 different tracts. Canvassing took about 1.5-2.0 hours for each block group. Overall, about 200 person-hours were needed for the canvassing.

Canvassing in Fresno County used a smaller team of 5 canvassers and took place over a period of 10 days between Christmas and the first week of January. Overall, the Fresno area canvassing took about 270 in-field person-hours. An advantage for the smaller team conducting canvassing over a period of a week or two was that canvassers were able to share insights from their work daily so as to learn along the way.

Canvassing was only recently completed in the Latino neighborhoods of San Francisco identified for the pilot so total person-hours required is not yet known and data from canvassers’ observations have not yet been analyzed (but will be reported subsequently).

**Data Analysis**

Jacob Model at CommunityConnect Labs analyzed data submitted by canvassers at each of the sites. In order to assure that submissions would be valid additions to the Census Bureau’s MAF, the data analysis included deletions of unconventional housing arrangements where there were multiple families living in a structure with a single entrance cases. These unconventional housing arrangements identified by canvassers were not tallied as proposed MAF additions in the pilots, due to constraints on determining that these crowded housing arrangements meet OMB/Census Bureau criteria as “housing units”.

Data validation also included spot checks of submissions against county/city assessors’ records. Consequently, the proposed additions to the MAF are housing units which are extremely likely to be determined to be valid additions.

It bears note that about 20% of all the unconventional housing arrangements observed by community canvassers in San Jose and in Fresno County but not included in the tally of proposed MAF additions reported here consisted of “doubled-up” households (complex households). Under ideal circumstances, in such cases, each social unit/family would receive its own census notification and be encouraged to submit its own census response but this is not part of the Census 2020 design.

This particular cause of differential census undercount—which disproportionately affects poor families doubling up in crowded housing to make ends meet—is another important cause of undercount (Schwede 2003) and will require serious attention in future articulation of the residence rules and investing resources in innovative messaging, collaboration with grassroots organizations working in “hard to count” neighborhoods and, ideally, enhancement to current approaches to non-response followup. Typically, in the complex households household/social units not part of the nuclear family of the householder are omitted. These partial household omissions are an important source of undercount among young children.
as well as adults which is not very effectively addressed by census form instructions to include in a household census response “everyone living here”. Community-based organizations will be able to play a valuable role in assisting the Census Bureau to “get out the (full) count” in the neighborhoods where crowded and unconventional housing is most prevalent results in many “complex” doubled-up households).

Outcomes from the Community-based Address Canvassing Pilots and Implications

There are both direct and indirect outcomes from the pilot initiative. The direct impacts include actual additions to the Census Bureau’s address list. The indirect impacts include significant increase in organizational capacity and tools for efficiently and effectively rolling out a statewide community-based address canvassing campaign as part of LUCA.

The CommunityConnect Labs mobile texting survey technology makes community-based address canvassing easy to implement. Similarly, the address canvassing training materials are available for any local community that wants to integrate community-based address canvassing into its LUCA efforts.

The WKF Fund, working in collaboration with the Welcoming America network, and CommunityConnect Labs is striving to help other communities with concentrations of low-income immigrants conduct their own local community-based address canvassing.

Salt Lake City and County are on a fast-track toward implementing this approach and our Cities of Service will be offering to work with its members. The strategy has been discussed with census stakeholders in San Mateo County, Los Angeles County, Orange County, and in Stockton but a great deal will need to be done to assist California local government in understanding how to use community-based address canvassing as a tool to maximize the effectiveness of their LUCA efforts.

Additions to the Census Bureau Master Address File

Table 1 presents a summary overview of the direct outcomes of the pilots in each community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Fresno</th>
<th>San Jose</th>
<th>San Francisco</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Census Block Groups canvassed</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Units canvassed</td>
<td>9,602</td>
<td>15,312</td>
<td>5,346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Range MAF adds per Block Group</td>
<td>0.9%-19.4%</td>
<td>0.1%-45.6%</td>
<td>0.8%-8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggregate MAF improvement</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newly-identified Housing Units</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Av. Persons per unit in canvassed BG’s</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Estimates of the number of HU’s in areas canvassed are based on Census Bureau Block Count January, 28, 2018 estimates available on their LUCA web page. Estimates of person per unit are based on the Census Bureau’s latest version of its Planning Database (2016 files published in November, 2017). Newly-identified housing units have been reviewed to assure they conform to Census Bureau criteria as additions to the MAF. The canvassers only added “unusual” housing units.

Targeting to Guide Community-Based Address Canvassing Efforts

Census geography does not necessarily conform to actual neighborhoods, the real-world patterns of housing in communities where low-income families try to manage the extraordinary cost of housing as
part of limited family budgets. Consequently, the density of unconventional housing arrangements varies greatly from one block group to another. This means that it will be useful for community-based address canvassing efforts conducted as part of LUCA to broaden the scope of areas canvassed more broadly than the narrow targeting used in the pilots (which focused on <5% of the block-groups each community) to canvass perhaps 20% of the housing units in each community, typically those in hard-to-count neighborhoods.

It is inevitable that some amount of unconventional housing is extremely difficult to identify. Community-based address canvassing is indeed much more effective than building a survey sampling frame based on administrative records—but there will still be additional unconventional housing units as income disparities grow. It would be desirable for the Census Bureau to include neighborhoods similar to those canvassed in the pilots as part of their “in field” address canvassing in 2019 and to augment its’ use of update-enumerate procedures in its 2020 non-response followup (NRFU) phase, as well.

The pilot address canvassing teams’ experience provides valuable confirmation that in-field address canvassing should include urban areas (formerly designated as mailout-mailback areas) where low-income minority families and immigrants reside. In rolling out community-based address canvassing initiatives as part of LUCA, and in subsequent address in-field address canvassing by the Census Bureau in 2019, it will be important to keep in mind that there are deep pockets of unconventional housing omitted from the MAF—not only in rural areas but, also, in more populated areas—both inner-city neighborhoods and some ex-urban neighborhoods where there are unconventional concealed “back houses” or housing add-ons. While Census Bureau use of satellite imaging and use of local government administrative records as ways to improve the MAF are valuable they cannot be expected to substitute for on-the-street observations by locally-knowledgeable and well-trained canvassers.

To enhance the effectiveness of its address canvassing in 2019, the Census Bureau should also adapt its recruitment and screening procedures to assure hiring an adequate number of locally-knowledgeable canvassers with established relationships in hard-to-count neighborhoods. Both Fresno and San Jose canvassers relied on their knowledge of local areas to approach canvassing in ways that were probably more effective than standard address canvassing as implemented by the Census Bureau (e.g. in Fresno focusing on back alleys where the entrances to unconventional housing units were located rather than simply walking the streets, in San Jose up-close observations of garages to determine if they were used as living quarters).

**Community-based Address Canvassing as Outreach and Census Promotion in Hard-to-Count Neighborhoods**

Although the address canvassing in the pilots did not typically involve a great deal of interaction with neighborhood residents, the community-based canvassing teams made up of local volunteers and activists in the pilots did, from time to time have occasions to talk with curious neighborhood residents about what they were doing. Despite concerns about potential hostility given the intensity of anti-immigrant messaging and actions by the federal government, conversations went well as canvassers had been prepared to explain to those who asked ways in which the census benefits local community residents. In San Jose, city staff prepared a pamphlet with the city logo for canvassers to share with residents who wanted to know what the canvassers were doing. In the Fresno area, the community partner organization, CVIIC, was interested in preparing for the community-based canvassing with informational neighborhood meetings but the timeline and funding level did not make it possible to do this.
Implications for Improving Census Accuracy and Recommendations

1. Community-based address canvassing is affordable, easily replicable, and can be implemented rapidly.

Community-based address canvassing is affordable. There is ample evidence that volunteers and community workers currently involved in program-related outreach activities can be rapidly trained (in half a day) to work effectively as canvassers to identify low-visibility housing likely to have been omitted from the MAF.

In-field canvassing can be conducted, even in a large community such as San Jose or Fresno in 1-2 weeks at most. Although the LUCA process begins on the date a community receives the address list for its jurisdiction and corrections and additions must be submitted back to the Census Bureau within 120 days (i.e. March-June, 2018) there is adequate time to integrate community-based address canvassing into any community’s overall LUCA efforts.

Every local jurisdiction has pre-existing relationships with a range of community-based service providers who interact daily with diverse “hard to count” populations. These community-based organizations understand they are key stakeholders in communities’ receipt of census-driven federal program funding supporting their activities (e.g. WIOA, CSBG, CDBG) or the populations they serve (e.g. SNAP, WIC, Medicaid).

Recruitment of volunteers or deployment of outreach staff with the requisite local knowledge and communication skills to efficiently and safely conduct canvassing is not difficult. The data collection/submission app and training materials developed in the pilot initiative are available to any local government or non-profits which seeks to implement a community-based address canvassing initiative as part of LUCA.

2. Return on investment in community-based address canvassing is very high.

Local community campaigns costing as little as $15,000 can, by improving eventual census accuracy, be expected to have positive fiscal impacts in the millions of dollars over the post-decennial decade.

Adding low-visibility housing is a crucial investment in facilitating census enumeration of hard-to-count households. Even if a household living in a concealed, unconventional housing unit—e.g. a “back house”, converted garage, or backyard trailer—which has been added to the MAF fails to receive a mailed invitation to respond to the census online or on paper, or if the household receives the invitation and fails to respond, the housing unit’s inclusion in the MAF means that an enumerator will seek to contact them and enumerate them in person.

Return on investments in community-based address canvassing will be dramatic even if some of those who are provided the opportunity to respond fail to take advantage of it. Improving the inventory of low-visibility housing units in any community inevitably improves the efficacy of subsequent census promotion and non-response followup among the most economically marginal “hard to count” groups. Community-based canvassing efforts also provide the basis additional real-world guidance to the Census Bureau about the nature of “hard to count” neighborhoods in diverse communities; these insights complement and augment the valuable information in the Bureau’s ACS-based Census Planning Database and will provide practical guidance for crucial but problematic components of Census 2020—e.g. enhancing low-income households’ access to online census participation and non-ID processing (NID).
3. Integrating community-based address canvassing into the Census Bureau’s pre-existing partnerships with local government (states, counties, municipalities) in LUCA, provides a new, effective model of collaboration.

Community-based address canvassing represents a strategy to achieve an important commonly agreed-upon societal objective by deploying local cultural capital (local knowledge, language and communication skills) and social capital (community-based networks working to conduct canvassing campaigns) to complement shortage of financial capital, i.e. the Census Bureau’s budget shortfalls.

To be sure, ongoing vigorous advocacy to assure the Census Bureau receives the public funding needed to do its job successfully is crucial. But, given current political/fiscal circumstances, particularly the urgent need for adequate funding in FY 2019, such efforts are bound to fall short. Community-based address canvassing provides an important launching pad for developing more innovative and robust partnerships to assure a fair and accurate count in Census 2020.

4. Immediate and decisive action by philanthropy, local, and state government is required to make good on the promise of community-based address canvassing.

The LUCA process, established by statute provides the only opportunity to directly deploy local community resources to improve the undercount of low-income minority and immigrants’ households in local communities. This opportunity is only available from March through June of 2018. Experience in the pilot initiative shows that investments in community-based canvassing are almost certain to yield significant improvements in the local address list and that implementation is feasible, even in neighborhoods which are generally considered to be “difficult”. The resources and experience developed in the pilot initiative—most notably the data collection/submission app, training materials, and experience in deploying and coordinating teams of community canvassers—are available at low cost due to the developmental investments in the pilot project.

5. Canvassing Builds Community Organizations’ Capacity to Partner with the Census Bureau in recruiting and training culturally and linguistically skilled address canvassers and enumerators.

Local community-based organizations and local outreach workers had not known the full range of partnership opportunities for collaborating with the local and state government and the Census Bureau to work toward an accurate and fair census. Address canvassing provides a compelling example of an active way to collaborate where community organizations’ unique local knowledge of their community and current human resources can be used to make Census 2020 as accurate as possible. Acknowledging the value and power of social networks and inviting local grassroots organizations to proactive involvement provides a way to re-frame perspectives on census partnership, broadens opportunities for messaging about census participation as part of a locally-led, locally-relevant collaboration. It provides an opportunity for local communities to assert their identity the importance of “hard to count” families and individuals, and a way to make the decennial census a better mirror of America.

6. Community-Based Canvassing Should Be Incorporated Into the Census Bureau’s Final Strategy for post-LUCA “In Field” Address Canvassing in 2019

The Census Bureau’s October, 2017 Operational Plan and its’ severely-constrained budget means that only 30% of the housing stock in the United States is scheduled to receive “in field” address canvassing (i.e. actual street-level observations of housing) to improve the inclusiveness of the Master Address File.
Current plans understandably appear to give priority to in-field canvassing in areas affected by natural disasters (e.g. Puerto Rico, southwest Florida, California fire areas, Houston flood areas). However, the Community-Based Address Canvassing Pilot highlights the importance of identifying unusual housing accommodations in order to reduce the longstanding chronic undercount of low-income minority and immigrant families in a broad range of “hard to count” neighborhoods.

Census stakeholders’ policy advocacy focused on improving the differential undercount of minorities should include specific recommendations for supplemental operational funding for in-field address canvassing in hard-to-count neighborhoods—in inner-city urban areas, low-income ex-urban areas, and rural communities where poverty and lack of affordable housing lead households to live in unusual housing.
Appendix A-Photo examples of unconventional housing
Appendix B—Interface for data collection/submission by community address canvassers

Appendix C—Community Address Canvasser Training Materials (available on request)
Selected References


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