

International Conference on Methods for Surveying and Enumerating Hard-to-Reach
Populations

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Need

Data from population surveys and censuses are perhaps the most widely used data upon which social policy and program decisions are made. For example, in the U.S., data from the decennial census are used to make program and service funding decisions totaling in the trillions of dollars from one census to the next; more globally, the Demographic and Health Surveys Programme (DHS) collects data from over 75 countries on health and health provision. Often, these data collections take place to address policy or program issues specific to “hard to reach” populations -- for example, to understand income and program participation among low income households, health care access among recent immigrants, food insufficiency among nomadic tribes, safe-sex practices among sexual minorities, or post-intervention evaluation among drug users. Invariably, however, researchers find themselves in an unenviable situation: The very population critical to the survey is also the population least likely to participate (or hardest to trace). Consequently, this conference seeks to bring together a group of diverse researchers from different disciplines to encourage new research and experimentation to address the

fundamental question of how can we successfully count and survey hard to reach populations.

There are several reasons that survey practitioners would benefit from attention to the hard-to-reach at this time. First, by our account, it has been 16 years since a research conference on such populations was held in the U.S. (the 1993 Census Bureau-sponsored conference on undercounted ethnic populations in Richmond, Virginia). In 2004, Statistics Canada held a symposium in Ottawa, Ontario on surveying difficult to reach populations. In both of these cases, a proceedings volume was issued. However, there has been relatively little peer-reviewed research on this topic. Further, the importance of this topic is increasing rather declining, in North America and elsewhere. In the last two decades the survey climate has shifted, such that overall participation is waning, and is reflected in lower cooperation rates, lower response rates, and lower coverage rates. As a result, concerns are growing about nonresponse bias and the validity of our data to make sound policy decisions.

Also, the concept of who qualifies as “hard to reach” is shifting. In addition to historically undercounted groups such as racial and ethnic minorities, new research suggests that additional hard to reach groups are emerging. These include cell phone-only households, an increase in “hidden” populations pushed out of the mainstream by new immigration-related policies, and a growing percentage in the general population who are cynical about surveys and censuses due to data breaches, identity theft, privacy concerns, and mistrust of government. Finally, in the U.S., Europe and many other nations, the

population continues to diversify due to immigration. This diversification has produced an increase in the composition and complexity of racial and ethnic minorities, which in turn create barriers such as linguistic isolation, lack of acculturation, and a general lack of familiarity and trust in surveys.

On the other hand, several innovative methods have emerged to ensure that hard to reach populations are represented. For example, strides have been made in the area of probability-based Internet panels that include racial minorities and some unacculturated groups. Likewise, organizations are beginning to explore new recruitment techniques for young populations by way of social networking sites and virtual reality. This conference would provide a stage for presenting these and other innovations.

Purpose

The conference will bring together survey methodologists, sociologists, statisticians, demographers, ethnographers, policy analysts and other professionals from around the world to present new and innovative concepts and techniques for surveying hard to reach populations. The conference will address both the statistical and survey design aspects of including hard to reach groups. Researchers will report findings from censuses and surveys and other research related to the identification, definition, measurement, and methodologies for surveying and enumerating undercounted populations. The conference will serve as a venue to network, and to share research and experiments designed to

advance our understanding of the topic.

At a minimum, the work product of the conference will be a peer-reviewed special journal issue devoted to hard to reach populations. We have spoken with Lars Lyberg, editor of Journal of Official Statistics about such a special issue, and he is receptive to this idea. A proceedings volume will also be issued. In addition, a special conference monograph consisting of pre-identified invited chapters may be produced. We have begun conversations with Wiley & Sons to gauge interest in such a volume. These work products will fill the need of a scholarly volume for survey practitioners to reference. Applications will include sample design, survey design, field procedures, questionnaire design, and general planning. It will also serve as a guide and benchmark for continuing research in the field. Some of the proposed topic areas include:

Identifying, defining and measuring the Hard To Reach (HTR):

- Metrics for defining HTR populations
- Measuring undercounts
- Administrative records to improve measurement
- Sampling HTR populations

Techniques and Methodologies:

- Use of innovative survey methods
- Targeting the HTR
- Use of social marketing and outreach campaigns
- Overcoming language and literacy barriers
- Dealing with complex living and housing situations
- Tracking and tracing hard to reach populations

HTR subpopulations:

- Challenges counting racial minorities
- Immigrant populations
- Indigenous populations
- Highly mobile populations
- Homeless and refugee populations

- Cross-cultural similarities and differences in HTR populations
- Populations in zones of armed conflict

Intended Audiences

The primary audience will be practitioners who work in the area of survey methods research including survey and census testing and design, survey sampling, survey and Census coverage measurement, questionnaire testing and design, and survey nonresponse. We will therefore invite demographers, survey statisticians, sociologists, policy analysts, psychologists, ethnographers and socio-linguists. The practitioners will represent government agencies (local, state, federal and international), non-for-profit organizations, private sector survey organizations, Census and survey advisory committee members, and policy makers. The conference will solicit papers and presenters both nationally and internationally.

Timetable

The conference would occur in the fall of 2012 and be held in the United States or Canada.

Conference Sponsors

The organizing committee will solicit conference seed money from conference sponsors. At this time, we are considering seeking sponsorship from several sections of ASA, the Population Association of American, the American Association for Public Opinion

Research, and other professional organizations. The ASA will act as our legal entity to sign and negotiate contracts and provide administrative services and logistical conference support. The organizing committee assumes responsibility for raising funds, organizing paper contributions, and coordination of publications emanating from the conference.

Budget Expectations

Expected number of participants: ~300 paid registrants.

Expected funding from other sources: The conference committee will solicit funding from the Census Bureau, from other government agencies and private-sector survey research organizations and grant proposals.