

*The Census and Blacks in the  
United States*

**Mobilization, Change, and Political  
and Civic Engagement Project:  
2008–2009**

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## Introduction

Every ten years the United States government entrusts the Census Bureau to conduct the decennial census, an attempt at its constitutionally appointed task to count every person living in the country. The bureau mails the form out to every household and asks one individual to fill out basic demographic information (name, sex, age, race, etc.) on members of the household. After the census results are aggregated by locality and state, Congress sets in motion procedures to reapportion the seats in the House of Representatives and the votes in the Electoral College on the basis of the reported data.<sup>1</sup> Although information about individual respondents is not made publicly available for seventy-two years after a given census is conducted, aggregate demographic information about cities, states, and the country at large are made accessible to the public almost immediately. In addition to aiding in the congressional apportionment process, the census also facilitates governmental decision-making about the distribution of resources throughout the country (money for schools, highways, jobs, etc.). As such, accurately counting the populations of cities and states is more important than many presume. To put it simply, the more people a given area has, the more money that locality may receive.

Despite attempts by the Census Bureau to gain an accurate representation of the population, there are some groups that have and continue to be significantly under counted every ten years. These “hard to count” population groups include the geographically mobile, renters, the unemployed, racial and ethnic minorities, recent immigrants, and undocumented workers and residents.<sup>2</sup> The consistent undercounting of these populations can have extensive and lasting ramifications for the groups and the geographic spaces that they inhabit. For racial and ethnic minorities, this historically has been and continues to be the case. With the 1990 census, the Census Bureau estimated that it missed less than 1 percent (.007 percent) of the non-Hispanic white population, but at least 12 percent of Native Americans living on reservations, 5 percent of Hispanics,

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<sup>1</sup>Margo J. Anderson and Stephen E. Fienberg, *Who Counts? The Politics of Census-Taking in Contemporary America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>D. Sunshine Hillygus, Norman H. Nie, Kenneth Prewitt, and Heili Pals, *The Hard Count: The Political and Social Challenges of Census Mobilization* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006).

and 4.4 percent of African Americans.<sup>3</sup> For minorities who inhabit increasingly segregated urban spaces, this consistent undercount of their populations has meant less of the resources, including funding, that are vital to the functioning of any community.

Given the significance of being counted, many community organizations have focused their energies on making sure that their target groups are accurately counted in the 2010 census. It is the goal of this memo to assist community organizations in that work by providing insights into the patterns of census participation (or lack thereof) among blacks living in the United States based on both focus group discussions and statistical data from the Mobilization and Change Research Project.

## **“Blackness” and the Census**

An analysis of the census participation of black U.S. inhabitants is significantly more complicated than most academics and policy makers acknowledge. What often makes this analysis most complicated is the lack of appreciation for the diversity within black communities. For example, the assumption that all black census respondents are African American results in a failure to address the critical differences between black immigrant communities and African American communities. This breakdown happens as a result of both groups being lumped together under the same racial category on both the 2000 and 2010 census.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, adequate resources are not provided to communities with large numbers of black immigrants that might have specific needs to ensure their completion of the Census (multilingual support in their language of origin, etc.).

Similarly, we know that older black Americans are more likely to send in their census forms than are younger blacks. Thus, any attempt to address undercounting on the census in black communities needs to build on an understanding of the multiple segments and groups of individuals which comprise diverse black communities. As this memo will point out, the messages that inspire participation from, for example, African Americans are not always the same as those that elicit census participation from black immigrants.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Racial categories are admittedly problematic. The choice about whether or not to identify person's of African descent as black, African American or even negro can be deeply personal. In this case, the author has chosen to identify black American citizens as “African Americans,” simply for clarity's sake.

## What We Know

The population count of black inhabitants within the United States has been fraught with controversy since the inception of the United States Census in 1790. The racial categorization of communities of color and the subsequent count of those communities has always been overtly political. The census as a series of historical documents is interesting in the way in which it is a living and breathing reflection of how the country presently chooses to racialize itself. Decisions over who is considered “white” and who is considered “other” have sometimes changed drastically over the decades. As scholar John A. Powell makes clear, the category of whiteness has and continues to expand in order to ensure its continued dominance as “normal” in this country.<sup>5</sup> Examples of the racial politics at play in constructing the racial categories to be included on the census date back to slavery when laws that designated those enslaved as “three-fifths” of a person resulted in only three out of every five enslaved Americans of African descent being counted. At the onset of the census, Native American populations were not counted at all, and European immigrants were initially categorized as “non-white.” Each of these political decisions had a significant impact on the resources that were distributed (and not distributed) to the localities that these communities inhabited as well as to the acknowledgment of members of these communities as full and equal human beings.

Aside from this political history, the count of black inhabitants within the United States has been complicated by a historical unwillingness of many in the United States, not just black Americans, to fill out the census. This refusal in large part stems from a systemic distrust of government and government bureaucracy. Hillygus, Nie, Prewitt, and Pals argue that potential United States Census respondents fail to turn in the form for three reasons: privacy fears, confidentiality fears, and lack of civic engagement. Although the focus of Hillygus et al. was on the entire U.S. population, focus group data on black men and national survey data, collected by the Mobilization, Change and Political and Civic Engagement project at the University of Chicago in 2009, reflects similar sentiments and reservations about filling out the census. The primary reasons that black

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<sup>5</sup> John A. Powell, “Minority-Majority Nation,” *Fordham Urban Law Journal*. XXIX (2002).

U.S. inhabitants do not participate in the census are due to 1) issues dealing with privacy, 2) confidentiality concerns, and 3) a belief that the census has no real impact on their lives or the livelihood of black communities.

As Anderson and Feinberg make clear, too often the census is discussed in terms of congressional reapportionment. In that context, it is difficult for many to understand why they should even care about the census. In the face of the data collected by Anderson and Feinberg that suggests that greater minority representation in the census population probably would not result in greater minority representation in Congress, this sentiment does not seem to be illogical, or even overly pessimistic.<sup>6</sup> However, this cynicism—by which I mean the extent to which individuals feel that the political system is constructed to work against them—is not an irreparable reality. In 2000, the United States Census Bureau launched a massive public outreach campaign directed at all potential census respondents that was by all measures successful. The bureau created over 250 print, radio, and television ads in over 17 languages.

The ads shared a theme: They portrayed a piece of American life that would be influenced by census responses—schools, public transportation, highways—and the Census 2000 tag line. Various executions were targeted to reach different markets. To reach blacks, for example, the team learned that it was important to create a strong sense of group identity in their creative executions. The tag line for this group read, “This is our future. Don't leave it blank.”<sup>7</sup>

By informing black communities about the political ramifications of filling out the census for their communities, as well as by addressing their privacy and confidentiality concerns, the bureau was able to increase black participation, even in the face of a massive anti-census campaign<sup>8</sup>. “By the end of the campaign, 2/3 of the black population had heard from at least one community group [encouraging them to fill out the census] compared to

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<sup>6</sup> Anderson and Feinberg, *Who Counts? The Politics of Census-Taking in Contemporary America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Alison Stein Wellner, "The National Headcount—National Advertising Campaign for 2000 US Census," [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m4021/is\\_2001\\_March\\_1/ai\\_97223028/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m4021/is_2001_March_1/ai_97223028/).

<sup>8</sup> “The [2000 census] privacy debate—a decidedly partisan information campaign—served to depress cooperation (although that effect was largely offset by the mobilization campaign)” (Hillygus et al, *The Hard Count*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 2006).

just half of the white population.”<sup>9</sup> Black census respondents were most frequently reached by community groups at church. The bottom line is that in 2000, targeted census outreach to black Americans, particularly in churches, proved to be especially effective in improving census participation. However, due to the lack of specificity within the census data on black populations, the previous research fails to give much insight into which specific outreach strategies were most effective with different segments of black communities based on, for example, nationality, age, or geography. Our analysis of the Mobilization, Change and Political and Civic Engagement Project national survey data as well as recent focus group data, will attempt to fill that void.

## **Focus Group Data**

The Mobilization, Change and Political and Civic Engagement Project at the University of Chicago had the opportunity to conduct, through the leadership of Lisa Gaines McDonald of Research Explorers, four separate focus groups with black men about the United States Census. Two focus groups were conducted in Chicago and two were conducted in New York City, each with ten participants. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 50 years, with a diverse mix of economic status, educational achievement, and country of origin. Specifically, half of the respondents in one of the focus groups in New York and one in Chicago were black men of African or Caribbean descent. The focus groups allowed the project to get at subtle nuances between respondents that large n surveys do not easily facilitate.

In the focus group sessions, the feelings of suspicion and caution evident in the remarks of this respondent was common among many participants:

*Like he was saying, if you don't know [the repercussions of filling out the census], why risk it. So people in that situation are thinking, why am I even going to bother [with filling out the census]? Just because it might get me in trouble, I'm not going to do it. So, when in doubt, don't do it...*

Our analysis of the focus group data shows that the sentiments expressed by this respondent typify three areas of concern for black men around completing the United States Census:

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<sup>9</sup> Hillygus et al., *The Hard Count: The Political and Social Challenges of Census Mobilization*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006. Print. Pg. 55

- First, cynicism (the census will not do anything for me or for my community)
- Second, concerns around issues of privacy (why does the government have the right to this data?)
- Third, issues of confidentiality (what will happen to me if I divulge this sensitive information?)

Below we detail how each of these three concerns manifest themselves in the lives and responses of our focus group participants. As will be made clear in both the focus group and statistical data, cynicism is one of the most significant mechanisms when black respondents decide whether or not to fill out the census.

### Successful Messaging

Before we move to a discussion of how cynicism, privacy, and confidentiality issues among black men inhibit their completion of the census, it is important to note that focus group participants did suggest that these areas of concern can be addressed by informing potential black respondents of the benefits of the census.

*OK, coming from where I come from, a lot of people don't know what a census is, so most of the time they don't know that there's money provided by the government to help build things that probably could provide jobs for most people you don't see with jobs and by them not doing the census, they never know how many peoples is needed to help with aid...*

According to the focus group data there seem to be two primary messaging and outreach mechanisms that are most effective in encouraging black male respondents to fill out the census:

- Messaging and education efforts that depict the census as having a positive impact on job availability within the community
- Messaging and education efforts that depict the census as helping community organizations with advocacy work on the part of the respondents' community.

Interestingly, for the black immigrant men in our focus groups, there appeared to be an additional endorsement strategy that proved effective in mobilizing their census participation. For black men not born in the United States, the endorsement of the census by a political person of authority (most notably Barack Obama) had unique salience. Again, we will discuss this finding in detail below.

## Cynicism

The memory of the systematic marginalization of black people by the government played a major role in the politics of our black respondents. When discussing their reservation to trust the government, not so distant historical legacies were frequently mentioned.

*Like I said, if they had some kind of a deal where they said like, there's a mandatory swine flu vaccine where everybody needs to report to the armory to take, I would be a lot more leery of that and I would get more into conspiracy theorism because I know about the Tuskegee experiment, I know about my history. Because that's a greater risk, if somebody's putting something in my body. But we, as a black community, we have this conspiracy theory to like, something as simple as the census.*

Here the respondent is expressing skepticism at what he perceives as a tendency to “conspiracize” everything government related in his community. But despite his skepticism, his acknowledgment that these historical legacies are at play in the decision making of black people is an important one. Regardless of whether or not he agrees with this perspective, the reality that many black inhabitants of the United States see the census as being part of a long legacy of the government working against black people has important implications when attempting to encourage completion of the census. The cynicism and suspicion of the government that exists in many black communities has not been eliminated even with the election of President Obama as some have suggested.

*Yeah, when we had a foot on your neck for all these years and put down for whatever, whether you can't get a job, whether you're put in a corner, and you have to do what you have to do to feed your family, it's like, all right, sure, we may have Obama in office, but you really know that you can't get that change immediately...*

For this respondent, President Obama's election doesn't change the history of exploitation experienced by black people in the United States. He notes that the election of a black president does not mean that immediate change will occur in his life or the lives of those around him. He believes that racism is a constant that probably will not dissipate in his lifetime, black president or no black president. As such, his fears around filling out the census are not assuaged by Obama's election (this is different, however, for black immigrants, which will be discussed in more detail below).

It was not only the history of slavery and Jim Crow that generated cynicism toward the government, but also central biblical stories that African Americans have related to

their own historical oppression. Black religious frameworks have also contributed to the shaping of black political understandings.<sup>10</sup>

*I think sometimes the first place you ever heard of the census ended up in all the male children—the first-born male children—being killed, so that’s the first place most people heard about it, what a census is. That being Joseph and Mary going to Jerusalem in the winter to have a baby. So, like a lot of older people have passed that down and the census is going to lead to no good; going to lead to my baby’s being killed. So, I’ve heard that a lot of times...*

For this respondent, elders in his community telling him that the census almost resulted in the death of Jesus significantly impacted his willingness to fill out his form and mail it back into the government. Many black Christian communities (across countries of origin) closely identify with the biblical story of the persecution of Jesus. It is not uncommon for leaders of black churches to relate the struggle of black communities to the struggles of Jesus, as well as a number of other biblical figures. Through this viewpoint, the importance of census outreach coming from black churches would seem to be particularly relevant.

At the root of the cynicism expressed by these respondents is the simple belief that the census will not have any real effect on themselves as individuals or their communities.

*Because if I fill it out, yeah, we’ll get part of the money, but it’s not guaranteed that we will. Because like you said, we don’t know where it’s going. I don’t know where it’s going. I don’t know how it’s being counted...*

Another respondent’s skepticism remained after he was told that the census allowed the government to allocate money proportional to the number of people living in a given locality.

*Can I ask a question? If it’s [the census] so helpful, why do the schools stay overcrowded and there’s not enough money?*

For all of these respondents, simply being told that the census would provide their communities with more money for schools, housing, jobs, and so forth was not enough.

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Murphy notes that the black slaves’ religious experience in the United States caused African Americans to relate their oppression to stories like Exodus and the oppression of Jesus. This close tie between black religiosity and blacks daily experience seems to also be impacting their politics in important ways (Murphy, *Santeria*, Beacon Press, 2006)

Many asked the obvious question: if funds allocation has always been the purpose of the census, why have I never seen improvement within my community as a result of it?

Although the answer to this question is a complicated one (the reality being that simply completing a census is no cure for structural racism), it seems that the most effective messaging strategies for mobilization around the census in this case are ones that reinforce that in the past, communities have not received their “fair share” due in part to their low participation.

Ironically, messaging that made prominent the history of oppression faced by black people also proved to be largely ineffective in resonating with our focus groups. For example, when participants were shown a potential census outreach message that read “*There was a time when we weren’t even counted as full human beings in this country. Now it’s up to us to make sure we’re counted,*” it was not well received. One respondent explained his negative reaction to the message.

*It’s trying to manipulate you into thinking some way that you wouldn’t normally think. Or, I wouldn’t normally think. I don’t think that my people were a half a person sixty some odd years ago, so now today I need to vote because my great-great-great grandmother wasn’t counted. You know, it’s not... My great-great-great grandmother is dead, and now it’s about me and me taking the census. It’s a census about me and me making sure that I count as an individual in this community. It’s a very manipulative statement...*

For this respondent, the attempt of the message crafters to address cynicism by directly speaking to the country’s, and specifically the census’s, oppressive past backfired.

Respondents felt that this messaging strategy (and pretty much every messaging strategy that overtly mentioned race<sup>11</sup>), was disingenuous and unproductive. Language like

“President Obama was a step forward for us,” received reactions like; “*voting for Barack was a step forward for us like he’s just our black president. He’s the president of the whole United States.*” Respondents rejected any insinuation that Obama was the president of black Americans; they made it very clear time and time again that he was *everyone’s* president. Overall, the bottom line seems to be that black respondents appreciate messaging that they feel applies to the broader population. Thus it seems that the best

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<sup>11</sup> Another message that participants reacted negatively to was: “*Many of us feel hopeless because too often and for too long, our community hasn’t been counted. But things are changing. Millions of people voted for the first time to elect an African American man to represent us at the highest office in the land. Voting for President Obama was a step forward for us. We need to take the next step and fill out the census.*”

strategy for combating cynicism among black Americans or at least black males is straight forward messaging that directly addresses what the census is for and how the information will be used. These were the types of messages that our focus group respondents were most responsive to.

## Privacy

An objection to the government's right to collect census information was another common theme throughout our focus groups.

*I just want to know why are there so many questions. It's been a long time since I filled it out but it seemed like they were trying to pry into a lot of personal things, like income and background. It's been so long ago, but people just were throwing it out because it seemed like they didn't have enough time...*

This respondent couldn't understand why certain information like economic status is required on the census. For him, and many others, it seemed invasive and unnecessary.

*The government is prying into people's private lives and people don't feel too comfortable with the government in their lives...*

For black respondents who are already surrounded by the government in their daily lives (police, case workers, government housing, etc.), an additional government-sponsored presence is unwanted. Some respondents wondered why, if the census is just a population head count, they could not simply note the number of residents living in their home and send it back. The additional information—involving income in particular—raised the suspicions of many of the participants in our focus group. Reassurances that the data would be used by businesses to figure out neighborhood viability for new business ventures did not assuage their concerns.

*No, no, that's part of the census, that they take all this information and they're going to decide what to put in a neighborhood but I'm thinking like, but you can also decide what not to put in a neighborhood. You can also decide, OK, that's not going to prosper there and that's not going to work there. Or, if some company looks and they say—like a Starbucks, for instance—and they'll take a look and they'll say, OK, well, we don't want to set up there. They don't need one over there! Maybe that's the cynicism in me. That's what I get out of reading that. I didn't see the shiny, glowing spot of it; I saw the dark other side.*

Here respondents immediately started thinking about the ways in which racial and economic information collected by the government could be used against them. In this

case, the concern is that if businesses observe that a locality has a certain number of low-income black residents, certain businesses (hypothetically, Starbucks or healthier grocery stores, etc.) will not want to move into that neighborhood. Addressing privacy concerns in outreach is similar to addressing cynicism concerns, respondents seemed to respond best to messages that were straight forward and to the point. Any language that seemed to exaggerate the potential impact was generally ineffective. For example, when focus group respondents were presented with the message, “the government uses the census to distribute \$400 billion,” many reacted to the number \$400 billion, questioning how the number was arrived at and if it was really \$400 billion.

If the message presented to black communities is one that directly addresses how demographic information helps government and businesses create jobs and better educational opportunities, this outreach should prove to be effective. Most notably, clear and concise information about how the census improves job and educational opportunities were effective outreach mechanisms for our respondents.

*OK, coming from where I come from, a lot of people don't know what a census is, so most of the time they don't know that there's money provided by the government to help build things that probably could provide jobs for most people you don't see with jobs and by them not doing the census, they never know how many peoples are needed to help with aid. So I feel that a census is needed, so we can use the tax dollars for some value. They are always complaining that nobody has jobs in the ghetto but that's 'cause they don't know how many people are actually in the ghetto because no one really pays attention to the census as it don't mean anything but it basically means a lot...*

For this respondent, the knowledge that the government could help bring jobs to his community was more than enough to make him want to fill out the census. For him, the ability of the census to potentially attract new business and government building projects that could create new employment opportunities made filling out the census an exceptionally attractive and worthwhile activity.

### Confidentiality

The last major area of concern for our respondents was the issue of confidentiality. A central worry was what ramifications individuals could potentially face by filling out the census.

*Fear of the unknown [is an issue]. They don't know who sees it [the census]. Is it public knowledge to the landlord? Will they see it? You know, what are they doing claiming one or two people living there when she's got a boyfriend, she's got a sister, she's got three kids...*

Contrary to the assumption expressed by some scholars, that confidentiality concerns are generally only held by “the criminal or those engaged in criminal activity,”<sup>12</sup> many of these concerns among our focus group participants were rooted in housing issues.

Respondents worried that if their landlords found out (through the census) that they had more than the allotted number of occupants in their homes, their rent would go up or they would lose their home altogether. For community members who simply cannot afford to live on their own or who have family members who cannot live alone, the issue becomes one of basic survival.

*[It's fear] of the unknown. When I was growing up I know a lot of people who didn't necessarily sign up with selective service 'cause you thought you would be drafted. Not even thinking about voting, but... So the same thing [with the census], I think people will be thinking, what do they [the government] want to know this for and ain't nothing ever going to change around here and it's just paper, you know? ... I think it might not be their business. Some people might not be working. Some people might not have any income coming in. Nobody needs to know that. Their house might be overcrowded. They don't need to know that... You'll be in trouble...*

Lack of knowledge about what information collected is made publicly available was a major with focus group participants. In the absence of knowledge about what the potential impact could be on them personally, our respondents noted that they simply would not fill out the census. When asked what they would do if a census enumerator came to the door, a respondent simply replied “*lock my door.*” As mentioned earlier, this knowledge gap around the potential consequences of the census can be addressed by providing information about the positive impact of the census. Another strategy might be providing clear messages that landlords and employers do not receive personal or individual information from the census and that all personal information is guarded and withheld from the public for seventy-five years.

Being a parent also helped to make the relationship between filling out the census possibly improving the quality of education in one's neighborhood particularly salient to

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<sup>12</sup> Hillygus et al., *The Hard Count: The Political and Social Challenges of Census Mobilization*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006. Print. Pg. 17-18

our participants.

*I think if you're a father or you plan on being a father, or hope to be a father, you really do need to fill it out... then you have to look at as, what's the benefit to my community? Is this going to make the school that my children are in better and have more computers or more music programs or whatever and you have to look at it as a "we" kind of a thing; not what am I going to get out of it because it don't work like that...*

This father's concern about the quality of education that would be available to his children and his grandchildren was enough to make him put aside "individual" concerns about confidentiality with the census and prioritize the quality of his neighborhood for his children's sake. This theme was fairly consistent for parents across our sample.

### Black Immigrants

As was noted previously, there was one particular outreach strategy that was more effective for black immigrant men than for African American men. The endorsement of the census by political persons of authority had significant resonance for black males of African or Caribbean nationality.

*I think it's important to remember the example of Obama. One of the things that I pulled out of him running and winning the election the most is that for years, black people always said like, "Oh, a black man could never run and he will be shot on the campaign!" ... And if you never tried, there never would be Obama running... So there's a power of this like... I mean, yes we live in America that's controlled by... This is not disputed. It's controlled by the white power structure. Yes there is racism; yes there is institutionalized racism. But if you sit down and you let this whole bogeyman stuff just kill you, you will get nowhere. And I think it's like R said, they're counting people. At the end of the day if you take away all the reasons, they're doing a population count.... So you weigh the pro and con of that—they're counting people—and you go with it that way...*

For many black immigrant respondents, the Obama election was a story of hard work and resilience in the face of opposition, that they could identify with. They saw President Obama as an example of what can be achieved when one does not give into the white power structure. From this perspective, Obama's endorsement lent legitimacy to the intentions of the United States Census Bureau. When asked what would encourage him to complete the census, a black immigrant participant responded with the following:

*If you were trying to make a slogan, it would be like, the*

*census form is here to help, not to hurt, and then a picture of a signature from Barack Obama! ... The purpose of the census is to help, not to hurt. Signed, the office of the President of the United States. And the president's office—either Obama or Biden—needs to really get behind it and endorse...*

A message from President Obama or a photograph or signature that accompanied the census form were all listed as items that would lend credibility to the census process for black immigrant respondents.

It is important to note that for many American-born black respondents, this outreach strategy was not as salient.

*I feel like they just act like Obama's just the cure for everything. They just use his name, which has nothing to do with the census...*

As was noted earlier, many African American participants remain skeptical of government despite Obama's election to the United States presidency. As such, outreach strategies that were dependent on his endorsement did not prove to be very resonant for focus group respondents that were born in the United States.

## **Statistical Data**

The Mobilization, Change and Political and Civic Engagement Project was designed to gather data through a three-wave national panel survey, the *Election 2008 and Beyond Survey*. The purpose of the project is described as such:

As researchers, we want to know if and what type of change can be enacted over the next few years. Specifically, we are interested in the impact of Obama's winning on possible changes in participation, civic activity, feelings of political alienation and trust, and racial and gender attitudes and interactions. Studying these questions over time with a nationally representative panel of respondents provides us with the unique opportunity to explore if and how this political moment might be used to expand individuals' civic and political attitudes and behavior<sup>13</sup>.

The first survey went into the field in November 2008, the second survey went into the field during in May 2009, and the third survey went into the field in November 2009, one year after President Obama's election.

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<sup>13</sup> "About Election 2008 and Beyond." *Election 2008 and Beyond*. University of Chicago, October 28, 2009, <http://www.2008andbeyond.com/survey/>.

The data for the *Election 2008 and Beyond Survey* will be collected in three waves by Knowledge Networks (KN) using an online computer methodology. The Knowledge Networks panel is drawn from a random sample of the population of households in the United States. Our specific survey sample is a nationally representative panel survey that includes oversamples of blacks, Latinos, Asians, and young people ages 18–35. One-third of the Latino respondents will come from Spanish language dominant homes and will receive the questionnaire in Spanish. With this data we are able to explore the attitudes and behaviors of different groups of people, including those eligible to vote versus those who are not.<sup>14</sup>

This report uses data from the second wave of the *Election 2008 and Beyond Survey*, which had a sample size of 3,202. On this survey we asked respondents whether or not they completed the 2000 census and what their reasons for completion or noncompletion were. The statistical data captured through large N surveys allowed us to open up our analysis, focusing on both black men and women. It also allowed us to systematically examine the ways in which cynicism, confidentiality, and privacy concerns affect the census completion of black people in the United States.

## **Survey Findings**

The statistical data is presented in two sections. First is an overview of how social demographics (race, age, gender, household income, and educational status) affect an individual's likelihood to complete the United States Census (or not). This summary provides a broader overview of the way in which an individual's social positioning may impact his or her willingness to turn in the form (or, even receive the form in the first place). The second section is an analysis of the way in which political alienation impacts respondents' desire to fill out the census form. This section can be seen an extension of the focus group analysis on the ways in which privacy, confidentiality, and cynicism impacts census form completion. Ultimately, skepticism of the state apparatus plays a major role in the unwillingness of black respondents to fill out the United States Census. In the following discussion section, the links between the statistical findings and focus group findings are laid out.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

## Social Demographics and the United States Census

We briefly want to explain how the tables for this part of the analysis should be read. For example, table 1 represents findings on completion rates for the census. There are four columns in the table. The first column on the left is for the total sample of approximately 2,830 respondents.<sup>15</sup> Just to the right of the column title (i.e., “total”), the overall average for census completion in our study was approximately 75 percent (or 75.2 percent to be exact). As you look down the column and into the first row, you are presented with total differences in census completion rates by gender. That is, according to our study, approximately 75 percent of both men and women completed the United States Census.<sup>16</sup>

According to findings presented in table 1, approximately 80 percent of black men say they completed the census (third column, first row: sex), in contrast to the approximately 77 percent of black women who reported completing the census. Although it may seem like there is a definite 3 percentage point difference between black men and women, the fact that there is no star next to the (rather low) *eta* score means that we are less than 90 percent sure that this three point difference is a difference that would be found within the actual black population of the United States. Another way to think of this is that since both numbers are approximations, we cannot be sure if such a small difference is a real difference. As such, we conclude that there is no difference between

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<sup>15</sup> This total number includes the 415 Asian Americans that are apart of the working sample. Here, “working sample” means the number of Asian Americans in the survey sample after removing those who were not eligible to complete the U.S. Census in 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Although in this particular case the percentages for men and women are almost exactly the same, throughout this section you will find percentages that appear to be slightly different but are interpreted as not being different or being essentially the same. This is due to the concept of “statistical significance.” Statistical significance is a mathematical calculation that allows researchers to assess the likelihood that any finding or relationship observed in a survey would be found in the actual population of interest. Statistical significance (or the likelihood that we are observing a finding in our data that does not exist in the larger population of interest) is not the only way to assess differences. While statistical significance allows us to assess the likelihood that any differences we observe are also present in the population of interest, *eta* scores allow researchers to assess the magnitude of that difference. See “Additional Notes” for more information.

black men and women when it comes to the likelihood of completing the United States Census.<sup>17</sup>

The lack of difference in the reported census completion between black men and black women came as a surprise. We thought that we would find that black men would be less likely to complete the census form than black women, given our focus group data. Similarly, the findings that differences in household income and education do not change the likelihood that black people will complete the census was also surprising. As with all statistical analyses, these findings may be a result of error (question wording, question clarity, etc.). In particular, we were asking respondents to remember what they did nearly ten years ago—“did you complete the census in 2000?”—so their memory may be faulty. Furthermore, if respondents were not sure if they did complete the form they were more likely to indicate that they completed the survey, since individuals generally want to represent themselves as engaging in socially acceptable behavior, such as filling out the census.

The three things that do appear to influence whether or not blacks completed the United States Census are age, membership in a voluntary organization (e.g., church or school club), and membership in an organization that is focused on “improving the status of blacks.” Blacks who are older than 55 years are generally more likely to complete the census form—approximately 89 percent reported completing the census—than those who are ages 18–34—about 71 percent reported completing the form. Of those ages 35–54, approximately 83 percent say they completed the census in 2000. Blacks who are members of a voluntary organization were about 11 percent more likely to complete the census than were nonmembers.<sup>18</sup> It might be that blacks who are members of voluntary organizations are beneficiaries of some of the census outreach that was mentioned at the outset of this memo. The same percentage difference is true for blacks who are members of organizations dedicated to “improv[ing] the status of blacks.” Finally, of the three

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<sup>17</sup> This type of “no difference” is often described as “no statistical difference” or a “statistical tie” in reference to the slight inaccuracy associated with doing all social survey research.

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that approximately 29 percent of blacks surveyed were members of a voluntary organizations.

things that matter in terms of census completion among blacks, according to table 1, age matters most.<sup>19</sup>

When comparing blacks to the other racial groups in the study, a few things stand out. While blacks (79 percent) reported completing census forms less often than whites (86 percent), they were more likely than both Asians (74 percent, not reported in the table) and Latinos (64 percent) to complete the census. This makes blacks, according to our data, the racial minority group that is most likely to be represented in the United States Census. Another significant finding is that gender differences do not matter (statistically) for blacks, but they also do not matter (statistically) for any other group. Similarly, respondents who are members of voluntary community organizations are always more likely to complete the census independent of racial or ethnic group. In contrast, while household income is not important in determining census completion for whites and blacks, Latinos with more household income are more likely to be represented in the 2000 census (*eta* = .285, with an asterisk).<sup>20</sup>

Our survey also included questions concerning why respondents did or did not complete the United States Census. If the respondent reported completing the census forms in 2000, they were asked to tell us why they completed the forms. The abbreviated options were the respondent “did it without thinking about it,” “felt obligated to fulfill government requests,” “knows that the results effect voting districts,” “wants group to be recognized by the government,” and/or “wants funding for the district.” Respondents were allowed to pick more than one explanation (**AU: In table 1?** which is why the column percentages do not add up to 100 percent).

Approximately 42 percent of blacks reported that they “felt an obligation” to complete the census forms. Additionally, 32 percent of blacks who completed the forms said they did it in part because “the results affect voting districts.” Thirty-two percent of blacks completed census forms in part because they wanted blacks to be “recognized by the government.” The most popular reason, however, why blacks completed the census was because they were interested in “funding for the district” (approximately 44 percent).

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<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, we are unable to consider differences in immigration status in this study because there are too few non-U.S. born respondents to perform an accurate analysis.

<sup>20</sup> White respondents were not asked if they were members of organizations intended to improve the status of whites.

This finding also reflects what we heard from participants in our focus groups.

Ultimately, black respondents seem to be most motivated by messaging that points to the ways in which the census will directly improve their communities. The only explanation for completing the census where there was a marked difference between black men and black women was in the likelihood of returning the census forms because they know it “affects voting districts.” Thirty-seven percent of black men and 28 percent of black women choose this explanation. For whites, blacks and Latinos,<sup>21</sup> the most likely response for not completing the census form was that they “did not receive the form.”<sup>22</sup>

### Feelings toward the Government and the United States Census

In this section we consider how negative feelings about the government might be contributing to census completion rates. We used nine questions to determine the degree to which respondents feel negative or alienated from different segments of the political process and political system. Respondents were asked if they 1) strongly agreed, 2) agreed, 3) neither agreed nor disagreed, 4) disagreed or 5) strongly disagreed with the following questions/statements:

- *I believe that by participating in politics I can make a difference.*
- *I have the skills and knowledge necessary to participate in politics.*
- *The leaders in government care very little about people like me.*
- *The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves and their friends.*
- *In the United States, everyone has an equal chance to succeed.*
- *Generally the American legal system treats all groups equally.*
- *In the American economic system, everyone has a fair chance.*
- *I believe in the fundamentals of our political system like the Constitution.*

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<sup>21</sup> Although the entire enterprise of statistics is based on the use of small samples to estimate trends in much larger populations, there is a limit to how small a sample can be used to responsibly estimate an given population trend. In this case, the number of blacks available to analyze the question of why blacks did not complete the census is only 199.

<sup>22</sup> Although blacks appear to be the most likely to have not received the census forms, there are not enough whites (only 102), blacks (only 162) and Latinos (only 320) to be 90 percent sure that the differences we observe in this sample would be found in the larger U.S. population.

Respondents were also asked, “*How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do the right thing?*” Response options for this question were: 1) almost always, 2) frequently, 3) about half, 4) once in a while or 5) almost never. In short, if respondents disagreed, strongly disagreed or said they neither agreed nor disagreed with “positive” or “inclusive” statements (i.e., “I believe that by participating in politics I can make a difference”) they were considered to feel politically alienated vis-à-vis that particular question. The opposite is true for “negative” or “non-inclusive questions.”

In table 4, you can see our analysis on the relationship between feelings about the political system and political process and census completion. In addition to our focus on blacks, table 4 also includes whites and Latinos. In the first row of the table is the “political alienation index.” This index is an average of the responses for all nine indicators or questions detailed above. As such, if a respondent reported feeling alienated in each of the nine ways, their political alienation score would be a 1 (for 100 percent politically alienated). The opposite is also true. If the respondent answered all nine question/statements in a way that showed they did not feel politically alienated, their score would be a 0 (for 0 percent politically alienated).

As we might expect, blacks who completed the census were less politically alienated (with a score of .634 on the political alienation index) than those who did not complete the census forms (with a score of .689 on the political alienation index). This pattern also holds for whites and Latinos, although it is strongest for Latinos (using the comparison of the *eta* scores: .94 for whites, .97 for blacks and .142 for Latinos).

Those blacks who feel more negative or alienated<sup>23</sup> in terms of their ability to make a difference are about 10 percent less likely to complete the United States Census.<sup>24</sup> There are three more indicators or questions from our survey that are associated with the likelihood of black Americans completing the census forms. First, those blacks that feel as though they do not “have the skills and knowledge necessary to participate in politics” are 11 percent less likely to complete the census forms than those who do feel they have such skills and knowledge. This finding once again points to the necessity of outreach

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<sup>24</sup> For guidance on how to interpret these tables please see the notes under table four.

that informs black respondents both about the mechanics of filling out the census, as well as how it could positively affect their lives. Also, those who think, “the leaders in government care very little about people like me” are 5 percent less likely to complete the forms than those who do not hold such beliefs. Lastly, blacks who do not believe (or are neutral on the question) of their feelings toward political fundamentals like the Constitution are 9 percent less likely to complete the census than those who do believe in the Constitution. This skepticism of government reflects the same type of cynicism that was present in our focus group data.

Table 4 also suggests that the sources of the relationship between feelings about the government and census completion are different for different racial groups. For blacks, it is about feeling less empowered, less able, and less trusting. For whites, issues or a sense of unfairness in life is likely to lead to less census completion. However, the relationship between political alienation and census completion among Latinos is more evenly spread across all nine indicators.

## **Discussion**

The statistical analysis reaffirmed much of the qualitative data detailed earlier in this report. Two of the most significant themes that come into play when black respondents consider whether or not to respond to the census are privacy (does the government have the right to collect this data?) and cynicism (the census won’t do anything for me or for my community). Our statistical analysis suggests that black inhabitants of the United States who did not return the census form reported higher levels of political alienation. Within this measure of political alienation, there were four indicators that most consistently predicted noncompletion of the census:

- Not feeling as if their participation would make a difference
- Not feeling as if they had the knowledge and skill necessary to participate in politics
- Feeling as if governmental leaders do not care about “people like [them]”
- Disagreeing with statements like “I believe in the fundamentals of our political system, like the Constitution”

Black respondents with less than a high school diploma were more likely to be political alienated. Black respondents who made less than \$20,000 per year were also more likely to be political alienated. Interestingly, black women were more likely to feel as if they

did not have the requisite skills and knowledge to participate in politics (as compared to black men). They were also more likely to disagree with the statement, “I believe in the fundamentals of our political system, like the Constitution.” This seems to indicate that for black female inhabitants of the United States, outreach that focuses on educating communities on how to properly fill out the census would be especially critical, making them feel they have the skills and knowledge to accurately complete the census. These results also seem to reiterate the qualitative findings around which messages would most effectively address cynicism. For black men and women, census outreach messages that clearly state the benefits of the census (particularly around jobs and education) would be most effective.

It is important to note that the most frequent reason black respondents reported for not filling out the census is because they did not receive it. For advocacy groups doing census outreach, it seems that a critical issue will be making sure that black communities are actually receiving the forms and that census enumerators are coming to their neighborhoods. Lastly, black respondents who are in voluntary organizations were 11 percent more likely to return the census form. This finding is in direct contradiction to previous research that suggests that traditional measures of political participation are not salient predictors of census form completion.<sup>25</sup> This reaffirms the qualitative data finding that suggests that outreach to black voluntary organizations (schools, churches, etc.) is particularly critical to successful census outreach.

## **Conclusion**

The single most effective census outreach messaging strategy seems to be a focus on messages that clearly and simply communicate the benefits of the census. For our respondents, the benefits that were most salient were job opportunities, better educational opportunities, and resources for groups doing advocacy work on the part of the community. In general, respondents did not respond well to messages that attempted to address cynicism by speaking to historical inequalities. Respondents preferred messages that did not single out black communities. Notably, endorsement of the census by

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<sup>25</sup> Hillygus, et al., *The Hard Count: The Political and Social Challenges of Census Mobilization*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006. Print.

governmental leaders (especially President Obama) proved to be a particularly salient outreach mechanism for black immigrant communities. However, for respondents born in the United States, endorsement by political figures did not seem to make a difference.