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## **THE CORONAVIRUS MAY FORCE A NEW GAME PLAN FOR CENSUS 2020**

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### **A. Background**

Covid-19 is widespread globally and U.S. infections are growing rapidly. Amid this threat to our quality of life, the Census Bureau has the formidable responsibility of accurately counting the U.S. population and has launched an extensive national campaign to ensure that it achieves this legislative mandate. The stakes are high for an accurate census since an estimated 300 federal programs geographically allocate over \$800 billion a year based on census-derived statistics <sup>1</sup> for schools, food and healthcare programs, infrastructure and apportionment of Congressional seats. To achieve this mandate, the Census Bureau has embraced a data collection methodology that is likely to conflict with the many limitations that have become a reality with the expansion of Covid-19, thus threatening an accurate count of the population.<sup>2</sup>

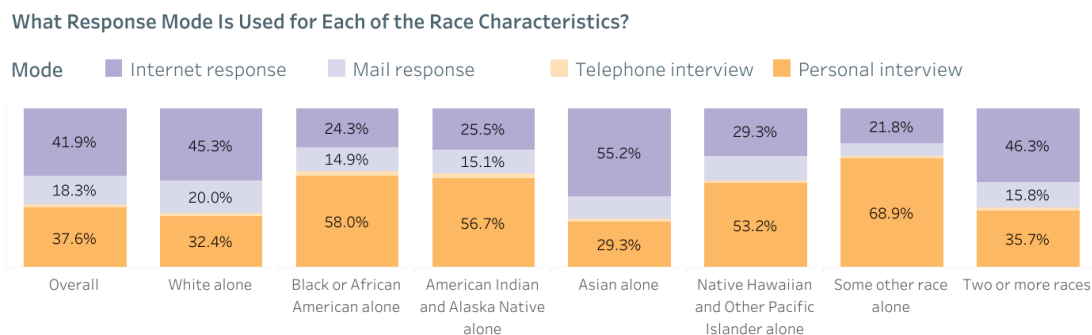
The current methodology employed by the Census Bureau is multi-faceted but relies primarily on the expectation that an invitation to complete the Census 2020 questionnaire via the Internet is an effective initial data collection strategy, followed by a mail questionnaire, telephone support, field visits to community centers, and personal household interviews. Because the methodology involves personal contact with individuals at several points, it is likely to conflict with the limitations currently imposed by various government entities to control the spread of Covid-19. These limitations require the closing of various points of contact with individuals that were an important

part of the Census Bureau’s outreach campaign, such as community events, schools, churches, retail establishments. In addition, mobile interviewing teams were also planning to visit targeted locations in communities to assist individuals in completing the census questionnaires. The Census Bureau has long understood the importance of personal interviews in completing surveys, especially with hard-to-count segments of the population. Indeed, Census Bureau staff will need to adjust their data collection plans and perhaps minimize activities that require personal contact.

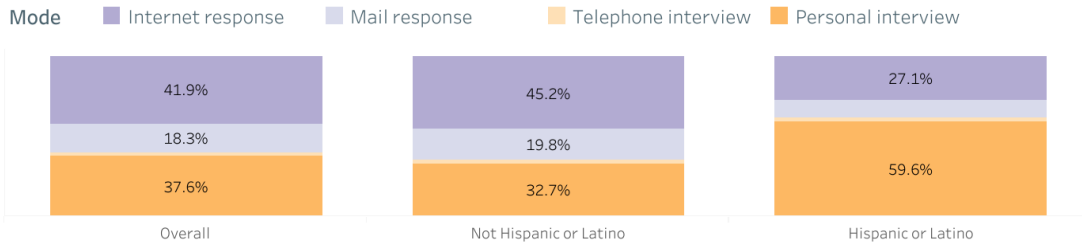
In our view, the Census Bureau’s confidence on the online mode to achieve its objectives was misplaced given a decade of experience with the American Community Survey as well as our own experience with mixed mode studies in multicultural communities.<sup>3</sup> That is, the use of the online mode to complete surveys by key demographic subgroups --- such as Hispanics, blacks, the lower income, the less educated, and immigrants -- is generally found to be minimal, while personal interviews and mail surveys are often required to complete the survey completion goals.

For example, Figure 1 below includes a summary of selected demographic characteristics by mode of response that we captured from the ACS collection website. The demographic subgroups analyzed include race, Hispanic origin, citizenship, language spoken at home, age and educational attainment. The period covered was 2013 to 2017. The findings are revealing and brings into question the rationale for using the online mode as the primary data collection strategy for the Census 2020.

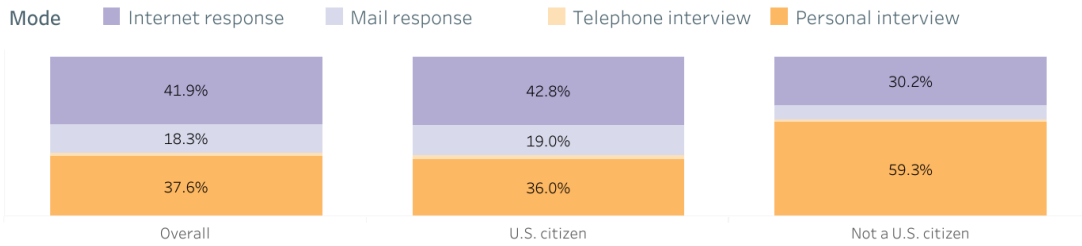
**Figure 1: Demographic Profile of ACS Respondents by Mode of Response, 2017**



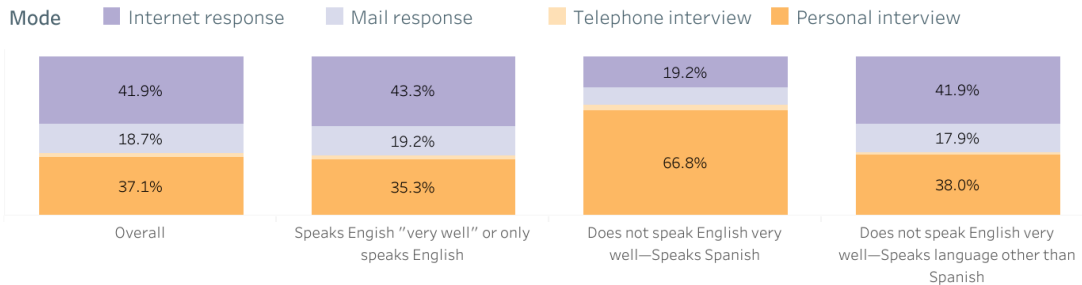
**What Response Mode Is Used for Each of the Hispanic Origin Characteristics?**



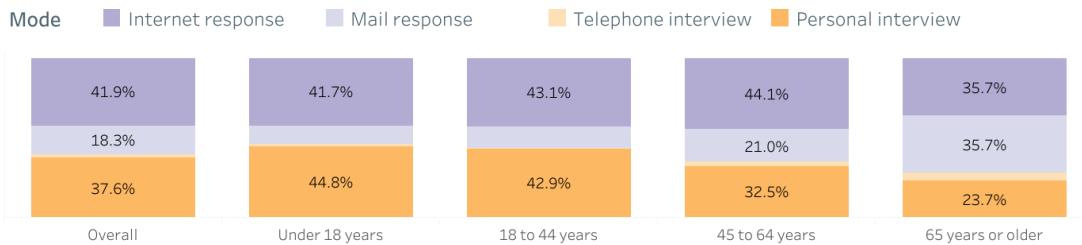
**What Response Mode Is Used for Each of the Citizenship Characteristics?**



**What Response Mode Is Used for Each of the Language Spoken at Home Characteristics?**



**What Response Mode Is Used for Each of the Age Characteristics?**



Census Bureau (2018). *What people and households are represented in each American Community Survey data collection mode?* Accessed at <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/acs-collection.html>

In general, the mode profiles reveal distinct patterns:

- Online surveys were more likely to be completed by whites and Asians, non-Hispanics, U.S. citizens, persons speaking English very well, younger persons and the college educated.
- Personal interviews were more likely to be completed by non-whites, Hispanics, not U.S. citizens, Spanish speakers who do not speak English very well, younger persons and persons with less than a college education.
- Mail surveys were generally the third most common mode used across the demographic subgroups although more frequently utilized by persons 65 years or older.

Census 2020 campaign staff and research practitioners should glean two important lessons from these findings about the American Community Survey: (a) Online surveys are more successful in capturing the responses of persons who are NOT hard-to-count such as whites, Asians, and U.S. citizens and (b) personal interviews are very important in capturing the responses of hard-to-count persons, such as non-U.S. citizens, Hispanics, limited English speakers, younger persons, and the less educated. Since the ACS discontinued the use of the telephone interview in 2017, its value cannot be judged by these tables. Nonetheless, our own research experience in conducting mixed mode surveys in culturally diverse communities reveals similar patterns as those shown in Figure 1, although our studies continue to show a strong reliance on telephone and mail surveys among Blacks and Hispanics.<sup>4</sup>

Based on these findings, Census Bureau staff and its extensive user community should be very concerned about the Census 2020 response rates that are actually realized in hard-to-count communities, especially those that include substantial numbers of Latinos. Coupled with the toxic political environment towards Latinos and the impending conflict between the Census Bureau's outreach strategy and Covid-19 limitations, it appears that the Census Bureau is in dire need of a different game plan to ensure a more accurate count of the Latino population.

## B. THE NEED FOR A NEW GAME PLAN

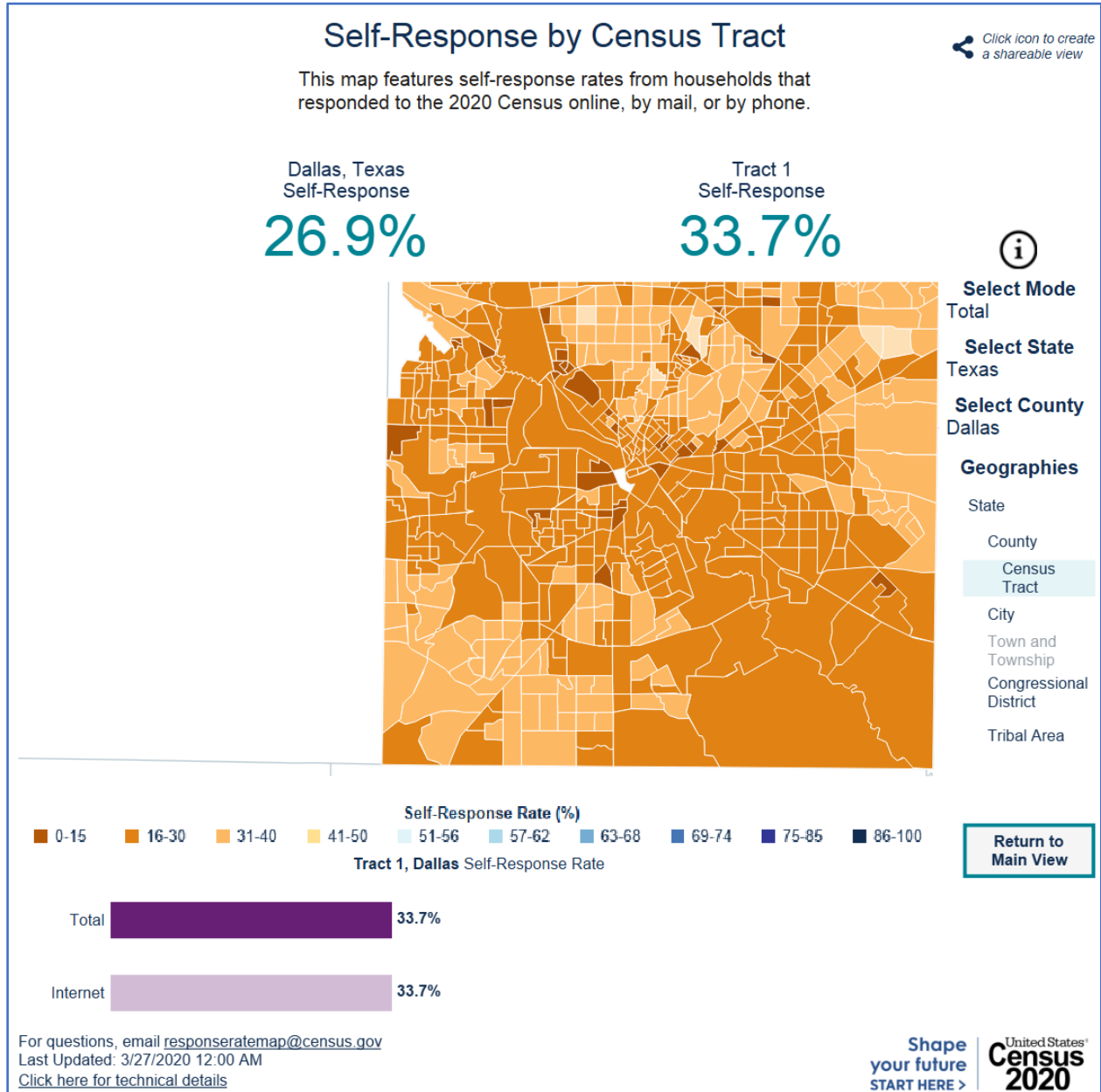
Although the HTC communities include various segments of the population, there are multiple reasons that we should be particularly concerned with serious undercount of the Hispanic population. Indeed, the Trump administration and GOP conservative groups have spared no expense in diminishing the political power and quality of life for U.S. Latinos and immigrants through a series of actions, such as:

- Attempting to include a citizenship question in the Census 2020 questionnaire that was recognized as a deliberate effort to exclude Latino participation. Although the U.S. Supreme Court disallowed inclusion of the citizenship question, a recent survey by Pew Research found that three-quarters of Americans still believe that the question will be included in Census 2020 questionnaire, while the same survey found that three quarters were uncertain about using the online method to complete the questionnaire.<sup>5</sup>
- Distribution of fake Census 2020 forms in California to deceive residents into thinking that they were completing the actual Census questionnaire;<sup>6</sup>
- Incarcerating immigrant families seeking entry into the U.S. and detaining them in unsanitary conditions;<sup>7</sup>
- Creating a public charge rule that will make it easier to deny immigrants a green card by showing that they will not be dependent on public assistance;<sup>8</sup>
- Attempting to purge voter lists of 100,000 registered voters in Texas by questioning their citizenship – later determined to be illegal;<sup>9</sup> and
- Implementing a 'zero tolerance' policy that has incarcerated thousands of immigrants in detention centers even though a study revealed that the majority of those incarcerated have no criminal history.<sup>10</sup>
- The Trump administration is using the fears surrounding the coronavirus to accelerate the building of the border wall despite advice from health experts that the wall has little effect on the growth of the virus within the U.S.<sup>11</sup>

Close inspection of the Self-Response Rates for the Census 2020 in one county suggests that the GOP strategy to diminish Latino participation is bearing fruit. For example, Figure 2 on the following page presents a map of the Self-Response Rates by census tracts for Dallas County, Texas which we retrieved on 3-26-20 from the Census Bureau public access web site. After examining the ethnic composition for the 27

census tracts with the lowest Self-Response Rates (0-15%), one clear pattern emerges: ***Latinos comprised from 45 to 94 percent of the population in these low-response communities.*** While the Census Bureau’s data collection activities were just launched in early March, improvements in these reported response rates are likely to improve although it is a troubling beginning.

**Figure 2: : Self-Response Rates for 2020 Census for Dallas County, Texas**



Source: Retrieved from [www.2020census.gov/en/response-rates.html](http://www.2020census.gov/en/response-rates.html) on 3-26-20 at 8:30am.

Given this disturbing pattern, it may be tempting to conclude that there is little that can be done to change its course given the investments that have already been made by the Census Bureau in their data collection strategy. Without any further action, it is likely that the Census 2020 could undercount the Latino population more than previously estimated and that many public programs that receive federal funding based on census population counts will be under-funded or discontinued. While this scenario looks grim, there may be some actions that could be initiated to minimize the potential undercount of Latinos even at this stage of the Census Bureau's data collection process. Following are some ideas for consideration that are based on our experience in conducting surveys in culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

### **Expanded Distribution of Smartphones and Internet Services**

- Distribute portable hotspot devices to HTC households to provide temporary access to the Internet. Some libraries have already started a lending program for these devices, but these programs need to be expanded immediately.<sup>12</sup>
- Telecommunications firms should be encouraged to create a County-wide Internet signal that can be accessed by any resident to complete the Census questionnaire. Although public access Internet connections do not have the security protocols needed for confidential information, perhaps these security protocols could be included in such a program.
- Make people aware that the Census 2020 online questionnaire can be completed on smart phones and tablets, not just computers. Communications companies should be encouraged to temporarily make smartphones with Internet access available at no cost to residents of HTC communities. This is especially important given the high penetration rate of wireless devices among Latino and Black households in the U.S.

### **Language and Race-Ethnic Matching in Personal Interviews**

- The Census Bureau is providing extensive language support to complete the Census 2020 form at different points of the data collection process – including the online mode, requests for telephone support, mail questionnaires and personal interviews.
- Since a large portion of the completed Census surveys are likely to be completed by personal interviews, it will be very important that census takers are screened carefully for their comprehension and verbal expression of the relevant

languages. In the U.S., most native-born Latinos do not study Spanish formally in educational settings, while foreign-born Latinos are more likely to have acquired these language skills. Just self-identifying as Latino and stating that one is “bilingual” will not suffice for screening census takers, a practice that leads to communication problems and invalid survey responses.

- All things being equal, our experience as well as past research supports the practice of matching interviewers by race or ethnicity. Of course, the appropriate language support would supersede the desire to match by race or ethnicity. Nonetheless, once race or ethnic matching between the interviewer and survey respondent takes place, rapport and comprehension are enhanced, leading to improved response rates and more valid survey responses.

### **Completion of Mail Surveys**

- Since many HTC households are located in apartment communities, efforts should be made to designate a secured drop-off box for delivery of completed questionnaires at the apartment complex so that a U.S. Post Office representative can easily collect these completed questionnaires from one location. This suggestion could avoid requiring residents to make an extra trip to a post office building that would require transportation and expose them to crowds of people. Physically disabled apartment residents would also benefit from this suggestion.
- To facilitate completion of the mail questionnaire, school children should be encouraged to assist parents with more limited skills that could include visual, reading and hearing impairments. Latino children typically have a better command of the English language than immigrant parents and are often a strong source of motivation to get their parents to take action.

### **Census Data Overload and Confusion**

- The Census Bureau has provided an abundance of demographic information and maps to help government entities target their campaigns and intervention efforts in hard-to-count (HTC) communities. To make the best use of this information, a basic knowledge of demographic, geographic and statistical terms is beneficial. In addition, a user is usually presented a web site that includes much information that they need to navigate before arriving at their desired geographic location, a feature that could be made more efficient by simply allowing the users to select the one geographic area of interest to them.
- While the Census Bureau provides several indicators that can be used to identify HTC communities, limited guidance is provided that allows users to make



informed choices. The two most commonly discussed indicators are the Low Response Score (LRS) and the Self-Response Rate (SRR). A recent report advisory demonstrates that different census tracts could be selected for an intervention depending on which indicator was used<sup>13</sup> -- a problem that could influence local campaign activities to focus on the wrong census tracts or miss important ones. Census Bureau staff need to provide an online video that clarifies these two indicators and provide recommendations for their appropriate usage.

### **Media Usage**

- Latino immigrants are the primary audience for Spanish-language media. As such, these media shops should aggressively escalate and reinforce their messaging to their immigrant audiences about the importance of completing the Census 2020 questionnaire and the potential loss of federal funding for schools, food, healthcare and many other programs that are key to their family's quality of life.
- Broadcast television, like Univision and Telemundo, delivers large audiences of Latino immigrant adults. Radio has a large audience of immigrants and older adults, while some stations cater to the needs of Latino youth. Radio is also effective in reaching immigrants at common workplaces like restaurant kitchens, hotels and construction sites. Social media are also effective in reaching Latino youth. Spanish-language newspaper audiences, however, have declined in recent years while Asians are avid readers of native-language newspapers.

### **Conclusion**

At this point, the reader may correctly ask: Is this report advisory "too little, too late"? Our response would be a qualified "yes" – it may be too late to change the course of the Census Bureau's data collection strategy or to stop the GOP's negative campaign against U.S. Latinos. In our opinion, however, it is not too late to implement some of the recommended actions to minimize (a) the negative impact of the GOP's campaign to reduce Latino participation in the Census 2020 and (b) the potential losses in federal funding for important community programs. Coupled with the challenges and anxieties associated with the coronavirus, however, it is difficult to perceive a rosier picture at this time.

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