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COVID-19 FEARS MAY DEPRESS CENSUS 2020 RESPONSE RATES FURTHER IN HARD-TO-COUNT COMMUNITIES: CASE ANALYSIS OF DALLAS COUNTY, TEXAS

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A. Background

Report Advisory No.3 follows two previous Report Advisories that we issued regarding progress on the Census 2020 that discussed potential problems in achieving an accurate count in hard-to-count (HTC) communities and some recommended solutions. This series of advisories are issued as a public service to inform community residents, data users and public officials about the progress that is being made towards an accurate count of the population since an under-count threatens the allocation of federal dollars and political representation over the next ten years. Dallas County, Texas was chosen as the geographic area of interest for two reasons: (a) Dallas County is located in a large and culturally diverse metropolitan area, and (b) Dallas County is one of the few 3,142 U.S. counties that funded a $1.9 million Census 2020 campaign to improve population counts in hard-to-count communities. As such, Dallas County may serve as an example of achievable self-response rates in HTC communities that have the benefit of a funded Census 2020 campaign.

While the Census Bureau does provide public access to self-response rates on their web site (https://2020census.gov/en/response-rates.html) for different levels of geography, the maps do not provide detailed insights into specific communities unless further analysis is conducted with the relevant datafiles.   Thus, Report Advisory No. 3

provides an update of the Census 2020 self-response rates for Dallas County to illustrate the differential progress that is being made in HTC and non-HTC communities and discuss the amplified impact that the coronavirus will likely have on the Census Bureau's objective of achieving a complete count for the 2020 Census.
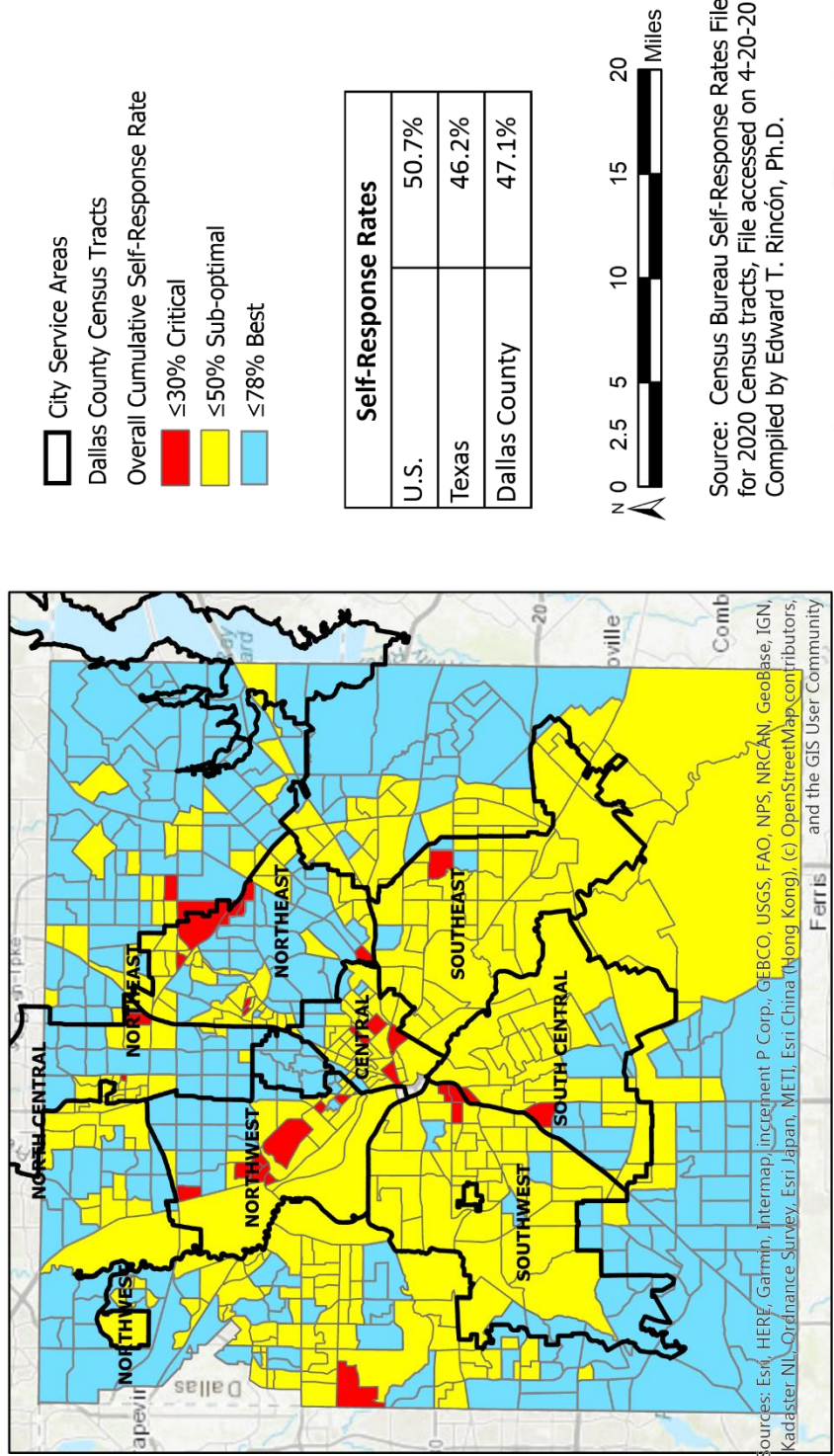
B. Analysis and Results

Figure 1 on the following page presents the self-response rates that were made publicly available by the Census Bureau on April 4, 2020. In 2010, Dallas County had 529 census tracts but the 2020 census tract files used in our analysis includes 645 census tracts. Thus, this difference means that some of the 2010 census tracts were dropped or split up into new census tracts in the current 2020 self-response rate file.

Based on the Census 2020 self-response rates, the 645 census tracts were classified into three categories: "Critical" with self-response rates less than or equal to 30 percent; "Sub-optimal" with self-response rates of 31 to 50 percent; and "Best" with self-response rates of 51 percent or higher. Of the 645 census tracts displayed in Figure 1, 30 tracts (4.7%) were classified as "Critical," 335 tracts (51.9%) were classified as "Sub-optimal" while 280 tracts (43.4%) were classified as "Best." As a point of comparison, overall self-response rates for Dallas County (47.1%) are keeping pace with Texas (46.2%) but somewhat behind the U.S. rate (50.7%).

Nonetheless, our analysis revealed that 303 tracts (47.0%) in Dallas County had self-response rates below the overall Dallas County self-response rate of 47.1 percent – most of which were concentrated in HTC communities (Sub-optimal tracts).

These patterns clearly illustrate that Census 2020 self-response rates are lagging behind primarily in hard-to-count communties in the City of Dallas – including city service areas like the Southeast, South Central, Southwest, and Northwest – which past research [1] shows are primarily populated by lower-income black and Latino residents.

Figure 1: Dallas County Census 2020 Self-Response Rates by Census Tracts and City Service Areas, (As of 4-20-20)

Legend:
- City Service Areas
- Dallas County Census Tracts
- Overall Cumulative Self-Response Rate
  - ≤30% Critical
  - ≤50% Sub-optimal
  - ≤78% Best

Self-Response Rates	
U.S.	50.7%
Texas	46.2%
Dallas County	47.1%

N 0 2.5 5 10 15 20
Miles

Source: Census Bureau Self-Response Rates File for 2020 Census tracts, File accessed on 4-20-20. Compiled by Edward T. Rincón, Ph.D.

Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, Intermap, increment P Corp., GEBCO, USGS, FAO, NPS, NRCAN, GeoBase, IGN, Kadaster NL, Ordnance Survey, Esri Japan, METI, Esri China (Hong Kong), (c) OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community

By contrast, the highest self-response rates are concentrated in areas populated by middle to higher-income white and Asian residents. While this outcome may not be surprising, it nevertheless greatly increases the burden on personal interviews to achieve an accurate count in these communities.

Our previous report advisories [2] have reviewed the variety of factors have influenced the lower self-response rates in HTC communities, including the following:

- The toxic political programs and policities introduced by the current administration to discourage response rates by Latino immigrants;
- The Census Bureau's primary reliance on the Internet to introduce 2020 Census forms instead of its past primary reliance on mail questionnaires; and
- The coronavius restrictions that will limit the amount of personal contact by Census takers for personal interviews.

In addition, recent national news [3] regarding the high Covid-19 mortality rates in black and Latino communities[4] have amplified the potential threat posed by the coronavirus to the personal interview component of the Census Bureau's data collection strategy. As discussed in Report Advisory No.2, the Census Bureau has relied strongly in past American Community Surveys on the personal interview to achieve its annual completion goals, especially among Latinos, non-U.S. citizens, Spanish speakers who do not speak English very well, younger persons and persons with less than a college education. The majority of the self-response rates reported for Census 2020 thus far have been submitted via the Internet, which systematically excludes many members of HTC communities that will require a personal interview. Unfortunately, the fear and anxiety surrounding the coronavirus is very likely to complicate efforts by Census takers to complete a personal interview with members of these communities, leading to lower population counts than prevously estimated by their predictive models. For Dallas County, the stakes are indeed high: County officials have estimated that $40 million in federal funds would be lost for every 1 percent drop in the Census 2020 response rate. [5]

Unfortunately, there are many other communities in the U.S. that face similar challenges as Dallas County that may experience larger under-counts of the population since a decision was made not to fund a Census 2020 campaign due to lack of financial resources or political considerations.

C. Conclusion

Our analysis points to one clear conclusion: Unless renewed or more aggressive efforts are initiated by public officials to encourage residents of HTC communities to complete the Census 2020 questionnaire, the previously estimated response rates are likely to be much lower, especially in HTC communities, and result in greater losses of federal dollars to communities throughout the U.S. While the Census Bureau may not change their data collection strategy, it is imperative that public agencies assume a greater responsibility to ensure that their community residents are engaged and provided every opportunity to complete the 2020 Census questionnaire by the online, mail questionnaire or telephone interview options – especially since the personal interview is likely to face significant roadblocks from anxious communities.

REFERENCE NOTES

[1] Rincón, E. T. and Tiwari, C. (2020). Demand metric for supermarket site selection: A Case study. *Papers in Applied Geography*, March 3, 2020).

[2] Rincón & Associates http://www.rinconassoc.com/category/publications

[3] Ray, R. (2020, April 9). Why are Blacks dying at higher rates from COVID-19? *The Brookings Institution*. Accessed on 5-15-20 at https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/04/09/why-are-blacks-dying-at-higher-rates-from-covid-19/

[4] Singh, M. and Korean, M. (April 18, 2020). The virus doesn't discriminate but governments do': Latinos disproportionately hit by coronavirus. *The Guardian*, Accessed on 4-22-20 at https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/18/the-virus-doesnt-discriminate-but-governments-do-latinos-disproportionately-hit-by-coronavirus

[5] Dallas County Purchasing Department, Texas (October 24, 2018). Request for Proposal for 2020 Census Participation Initiative for Dallas County Dallas County RFP.