

Generating Greater Participation in the 2000 Census

Analysis from a National Survey Conducted for U.S. Census Monitoring Board

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Introduction

In preparation for the 2000 Census, the U.S. Census Monitoring Board's Presidential Members -- Co-chair Gilbert F. Casellas, Dr. Everett M. Ehrlich, and Lorraine A. Green -- asked Belden Russonello & Stewart (BRS), a Democratic firm, in collaboration with Research/Strategy/Management (R/S/M), a Republican firm, to conduct a non-partisan national survey to measure public attitudes toward the Census, and to gauge the appeal of specific messages designed to increase participation in the 2000 Census. This research is intended to assist the Board in its oversight mission, specifically its review of the Census Bureau's \$167 million paid advertising campaign led by the firm Young & Rubicam (Y&R).

The survey questionnaire draws on information from eight focus groups among the public, which identified reasons for participation as well as those factors that inhibit participation in the Census. BRS and R/S/M conducted the focus groups among the general public in July 1999. The focus groups are reported separately.

The survey included 1,885 interviews. 1,005 of these were carried out among a representative probability sample of the U.S. population, of all races, aged 18 and older, using a random digit dial (RDD) sample. In addition, we oversampled 280 additional African Americans (for a total of 382), 300 additional Hispanics (for a total of 391), and 300 more Asian Americans (for a total of 314). For the oversamples of African Americans and Hispanics, additional targeted RDD samples were drawn in telephone exchanges with higher than average concentrations of these two groups. The Asian-American oversample was randomly drawn from telephone numbers across the country listed with Asian surnames. The questionnaires were weighted so that each racial and ethnic group is represented in the correct proportion in the data.

The sampling tolerance for the basic sample of 1,005 is plus or minus three percentage points, at the 95% confidence level. The sampling tolerance for African Americans (n = 382) is plus or minus 4.9 percentage points, for Hispanics (n = 391) it is 4.9 percentage points, and for the Asian Americans (n = 314) it is 5.5 percentage points.

The interviewing was conducted from September 27 to October 16, 1999 by telephone, using experienced, trained and monitored interviewers. The questionnaire was translated into Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, and Vietnamese, and was administered in these languages to individuals who preferred to respond in their native tongues.

After the interviewing was completed, the survey data were weighted statistically to bring gender and race and ethnicity into proper proportions for the nation as a whole, based on Census data. The following table shows the demographic composition of the survey respondents.

Composition of survey interviews

	Unweighted Number	Unweighted %	Weighted %
Total	1885	100%	100%
Male	949	50%	49%
Female	936	50	51
18-29	470	25%	19%
30-44	642	34	32
45-59	380	20	23
60+	374	20	25
DK/Refuse	19	1	1
White	756	40%	72%
Black	382	20	12
Hispanic	391	21	11
Asian	314	17	4
Other/DK/Refuse	42	2	1
<HS/HS graduate	795	42%	43%
Some college	533	28	28
College/Grad	325	17	17
Graduate work/degree	215	11	11
Refuse	17	2	1
Less than \$25,000	525	28%	27%
\$25,000-\$49,000	568	30	30
\$50,000-\$74,000	298	16	17
\$75,000 or more	232	12	12
Refuse	262	14	14
Married	997	53%	55%
Single	475	25	20
Other	394	21	24
Refuse	19	1	1
Immigrants	437	23%	11%
1st Generation	251	13	11
Non Immigrants	1186	63	78
Refuse	11	1	--
Northeast	397	21%	20%
Midwest	337	18	22
South	702	37	35
West	449	24	22

Overview

Our national survey of Americans' attitudes toward the Census sends the message that Census 2000 has yet to be introduced to the public, and the Census Bureau has a considerable task ahead to grab the country's attention. Most Americans are unaware that the Census will take place next year or that the country takes a census every 10 years.

Despite this lack of awareness, Americans' impressions of the Census are mostly positive. Large majorities believe having an accurate Census is important for the nation, and believe there is civic responsibility for participation. Currently, Americans are more likely to hold these rather general attitudes toward the Census than to identify with more personal reasons to fill out the Census form -- that government funds and political representation for their communities are at stake or that the Census is their opportunity to be counted.

The current lack of certainty about how the Census is used to benefit local communities suggests that advertising and other Census communications would benefit from demonstrating clearly the connections between the Census and communities. The data also reveal public anxiety over confidentiality in the Census, which a majority of Americans feel, but only about one in four feel strongly.

When the public is exposed to a number of messages intended to increase commitment to participate in the 2000 Census, the messages that emphasize the practical connection between the Census and the flow of federal dollars to local communities, the Census as civic responsibility and the Census' importance to political representation proved highly persuasive.

The analysis of current attitudes and reactions to messages points to several communications strategies for encouraging increased participation in Census 2000:

- First, those who hold definite intentions to participate in the Census are drawn most to a message of civic responsibility because they themselves believe most strongly that participation is a responsibility shared by every American. Emphasizing civic responsibility is like preaching to the faithful, as a reminder of why they are engaging in their act of faith.
- Second, the message of how the Census benefits communities is particularly persuasive to Americans we describe as weak participants, those say they would “probably” fill out the Census form. These Americans need to hear more about the practical benefits of an accurate Census than about their own civic responsibility to participate.
- Third, for those who currently are disinclined to participate in the Census, a dual message would be most persuasive: lead with the Census’ connection to federal dollars to local communities, and include an assurance about confidentiality.
- Fourth, when communicating across racial and ethnic groups, minorities and whites agree on the primary importance of learning how the Census is connected to federal dollars for their communities. However, there are some distinctions: African Americans and Asian Americans give dominance to a message about what the Census means in practical terms for their communities; whites and Hispanics place community needs on a par with a general message about civic responsibility; and assurances about confidentiality find more appeal among Hispanics and Asian Americans than other groups.
- Fifth, the public holds more trust in the Census Bureau than the Congress, the President, or the news media when it comes to learning about information on the Census. Among these institutions, the Census Bureau would be the most trusted messenger on the Census.

In conclusion, the survey points to strong public interest in the messages that the Census Bureau and Y&R plan to communicate to increase participation in Census 2000. The twin challenges of increasing awareness and commitment to participate in Census 2000 appear to be addressed effectively by the combination of themes relating to community benefits of the Census, civic responsibility, confidentiality, and representation. The levels of support these themes receive in the survey reflect positively on the Census Bureau and Y&R communications plan.