

ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATORY

RESEARCH REPORT #4

**RESEARCH HYPOTHESES CONCERNING CENSUS-RELATED BEHAVIOR
OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEES**

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Research Hypotheses Concerning
Census-Related Behavior of
Southeast Asian Refugees

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Introduction

This report proposes preliminary hypotheses being generated by a 15-month ethnographic study of Lowland Lao refugees in St. Louis. The research is supported by the Center for Survey Methods Research, U.S. Bureau of the Census. These hypotheses and supporting material will be presented in more complete form in the final report to be submitted in late 1989. Where appropriate we include a brief discussion but the hypotheses should stand on their own. Therefore there is a minimum of ethnographic detail in this report.

Our goal in this paper is to suggest testable hypotheses concerning the relationship between independent characteristics of behavior and/or demography and patterns of undercounts discovered through matching results of alternative enumerations and census results. These hypotheses will guide ethnographic data collection and analysis of 1990 census results. Such research will, in a sense, test the validity and reliability of our findings. Ultimately these joint results will contribute to a better ethnographic understanding of the behavioral causes of census undercount

which may then be used to improve census coverage of hard-to-reach populations.

Methodology

The present research and hypotheses presented below grow out of eight years of ethnographic fieldwork among Lowland Lao refugees in St. Louis and upon records and information obtained through ongoing association with several organizations working with the Lao. The research team, led by Drs. Ann Rynearson and Thomas Gosebrink, also includes sociologists Barrie Gewanter and Manisha Desai. We are carrying out extensive participant observation and a series of indepth interviews with members of the Lao community.

At the present time, there are about 600 individuals or 100 Lao families in the greater St. Louis area. This figure parallels the total number resettled in the area over the last 10 years; although there has been some out-migration over time, this has been balanced by an almost equal number moving in. Like most Southeast Asian refugee populations in the U.S. it is clearly limited in time; the first Lao family only arrived in St. Louis in 1979. Numbers grew rapidly between 1980 and early 1982, when changes in Thailand almost halted the flow of Lao refugees to the U.S. and other third countries. A second and smaller wave arrived in 1986 and 1987. Admissions have once again slowed in 1988 and 1989.

The Lowland Lao population of St. Louis is quite stable. Although small relative to some areas of the country, it is extremely well known ethnographically and is similar in important respects to larger groups elsewhere. This is an excellent "laboratory site" for studying processes in refugee communities because it is clearly bounded and well understood. Literature review and contacts with others researching refugees throughout the U.S. indicate that this population is in many ways representative of Southeast Asian refugee groups elsewhere. Future research will test the generalizability of our findings concerning census related behavior of Lao in St. Louis.

Overview of Southeast Asian Refugees

Since 1975 almost 850,000¹ Southeast Asian refugees have been admitted to the United States. It seems likely that language, cultural differences and the particular circumstances of resettlement of any new Americans will pose barriers to obtaining complete and accurate census data. In fact, some evidence indicates that in 1980 there was a 28% undercount of Southeast Asian refugees in the United States. For purposes of the Census, in what respects are Southeast Asian refugees different from other newcomers? And what impact do these differences have upon their census behavior? At the simplest level, they are very far from their homelands. As refugees they are, by definition, unable to return home

●1 882,900 according to Refugee Report, December 16, 1988:p.10.

unless the political situation changes dramatically. In the context of the present paper, the most important point of contrast with other immigrants, both legal and illegal, can be found in the circumstances of their arrival in the United States.

Refugees are subjects of an enormous, complex bureaucratic mechanism, the resettlement process. Once chosen to come to the U.S., they acquire a special legal status which entitles them to a range of benefits and services. Hence it is to their material benefit to be identified as refugees. This is a dramatic contrast to other kinds of immigrants, especially those who are illegal or semi-legal.

An elaborate network of social service institutions has been created to handle the resettlement process. Among other programs, the U.S. government has promoted the formation of mutual aid associations (MAAs) as one form of assistance. Both MAAs and mainstream social service institutions have well-established channels for working with local refugee populations. Alongside these official organizations are elaborate networks of patron-client ties within the refugee communities which are important for relations between individuals and the outside world.

A further ethnographic observation is important as background to the hypotheses: for understanding barriers to censusing, characteristics of households and neighborhoods are more important than those of individuals. A significant feature of such neighborhoods and communities is their degree

of encapsulation. In St. Louis as elsewhere, residence patterns and levels of accommodation range along a continuum. Many people live in tightly bounded clusters, where everyday interaction with outsiders is infrequent and unnecessary. Although some go out to work, the important part of their social life takes place within the confines of the refugee community. Most residents of such encapsulated social groups are little acculturated and have minimal skills in spoken and written English. At the other end of the continuum are those families who are dispersed in the larger society. Many have bought homes well away from the clusters. Although they maintain ties to the refugee community, they are often more acculturated and fluent in English. In general, they are far more comfortable in dealing with American institutions. Of course other individuals and families range between these two extremes. The range of behaviors displayed in the St. Louis Lao community parallels those described for Southeast Asian refugee populations in other parts of the United States. Levels of clustering or encapsulation will be important for the following discussion of hypotheses and ultimately as those hypotheses are tested elsewhere.

HYPOTHESES

The following discussion is organized into general realms of behavior, each with important census-related barriers--language/literacy, cultural patterns, economic integration, and ecological setting. For each domain there are specific hypotheses which can be tested using ethnographic data

collected in alternative enumerations. Brief explanatory notes are included where necessary. Because social data are complex, some variables may affect behavior in several different domains.

It seems to us that in considering censusing behavior and results there are three main kinds of inaccuracies: data which are missing, errors, or falsehoods. It seems likely that each of these would have different causes and different effects upon censusing. These considerations dictate the form hypotheses take; specifically some behaviors will lead to undercounts, while others will result in missed, erroneous or false data within households.

1. LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

1a. High levels of undercount will be associated with high levels of illiteracy and semi-literacy.

Southeast Asian refugees who are illiterate or marginally so in English have great difficulty with written materials. Those who are illiterate in their own languages have even more problems. Because the Census is heavily dependent upon mail returns, illiteracy will be a source of undercount. The following hypotheses grow out of problems associated with high levels of illiteracy in the populations.

1b. High levels of undercount will be associated with large numbers of newcomers in the local population.

While there are programs to teach English language and literacy in refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines, most refugees arrive with major difficulty in understanding written and spoken English. For most people, language and literacy skills generally improve over time in the US. Furthermore after several years of living here those who still have major problems in language and literacy tend to develop channels for dealing with the larger society.

1c. High levels of undercount will be associated with highly encapsulated communities.

In encapsulated communities most daily needs can be satisfied without the use of English. Hence residents have little need or motivation to improve their skills in English language and literacy. Measures of encapsulation include residential concentration, ethnically specialized stores, and native language media. On the other hand, ethnic leaders may not benefit from improving the English language skills of community members, but it is in their interest to have their followers counted. Hence, where census takers are successful in gaining the support of ethnic leaders, the undercount will be reduced.

1d. High levels of undercount will be associated with populations with a lower percentage of school age children.

Because of intensive ESL programs refugee teenagers are a language resource in households and raise the general literacy level of the community. We have found that parents routinely turn to their children as first help in understanding puzzling mail and in dealing with non-Lao visitors. Populations where such help is not available will be less able to respond to mail returns and less accessible to enumerators.

2. CULTURAL PATTERNS

2a. Census accuracy and completeness will be greater for households in which men (rather than women) complete the census form or respond to enumerators.

A cultural pattern common in Southeast Asia is for women to be more concerned with domestic matters, including trade and business outside the household, while men are more concerned with political and religious affairs. Also, Southeast Asian educational systems have traditionally focused on men more than women. Hence men are more accustomed to dealing with government matters as they relate to the household. Our research indicates that in general Lao men have better English language skills. They usually handle mail and are more willing and accustomed to interacting with official strangers.

2b. Census accuracy and completeness will be greater for households in which younger adults (rather than old people) complete the census form or respond to enumerators.

Levels of education are usually higher for younger people. They are more accustomed to dealing with employers and other non-refugees. Traditionally older people were more withdrawn from everyday affairs of the outside world.

2c. Census accuracy and completeness will be greater for households in which there is only one nuclear family.

At the present time, most Lao households in St. Louis consist of the nuclear family only. In the early days after resettlement this was less often the case, but the nuclear family household does seem to be a preferred residence pattern. In fact during guided discussions, most Lao claimed that no one outside the nuclear family had ever lived with them although we knew from past observations that this statement was untrue.

2d. Census undercount will be greater for households in which there are young single males who are not members of the nuclear family.

Lao married couples often take in one or more single young men (and more rarely women), who share expenses and eat with the family. Partly this reflects a wish to save money on housing, and partly it echoes residence patterns in the homeland. In some cases these people are relatives of nuclear family members, if only classificatory ones. During

times of economic hardship the number of such shared residences is much higher.

The Lao themselves count the community size in terms of number of (nuclear) families, not individuals. They tend to equate family with household. Since the young singles are not family members, they are not always seen as household members either. These young men, therefore, are socially almost invisible. Further research should determine the extent of this residence pattern among other refugee groups.

2e. Census accuracy and completeness will be lower for extended family households.

In some cases two or more married couples may share an apartment. These are often close kin, e.g. parents and married children or two married sisters and their families. This fits the traditional Lao residence pattern, wherein a newly married couple goes to live with the wife's parents. This type of household may cause problems for the census, depending upon who completes the form or is interviewed initially. Extended family households are very common among certain other refugee groups, particularly the Hmong.

2f. Census accuracy and completeness will be greater for households in which the person completing forms seeks help outside the household.

Some informants reported that they often check the same materials with at least two different helpers. Frequently they seek aid from known

and trusted culture brokers. Anthropologists use the term "culture brokers" to refer to those individuals who are able to bridge the gap between cultures. In this case they may be either Lao who speak and write English better or Americans who are accustomed to dealing with Lao refugees. Our analysis of the 1988 alternate enumeration found that where enumerators had the assistance of culture brokers, returns were highly accurate. Where this was not the case, the returns were badly garbled, including missed individuals and gross spelling inaccuracies.

2g. Census accuracy and completeness will be greater for households in which all members have complete documentation.

In the process of being resettled in the U.S. refugees become accustomed to producing "papers" containing basic information about their identity. The head of household and/or his wife must frequently gather all their documents to obtain social services--welfare, food stamps, energy assistance, school, etc. These documents include I-94s during the first year after arrival and "green cards" after that. Growing numbers of illegal aliens from Southeast Asia introduce the possibility that people will be unwilling to produce documents so readily. The documents themselves may also be less reliable. This parallels the situation for communities with large numbers of illegal aliens.

3. ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

3a. Census accuracy and completeness will be greater for households which depend primarily upon the wage economy.

Emphasis in this section is placed on the economic base of the household because the usual pattern of participation in the wage economy includes husbands, wives and not infrequently older children and other relatives. Our research and review of the literature indicate that participation in the wage economy involves refugees with direct contacts with the American system in a variety of ways. They become accustomed to completing forms and dealing with outsiders.

3b. High levels of census undercount will be associated with communities in which households dependent on public assistance are common.

Many of the same mechanisms operating in other populations dependent on public assistance will also affect refugee communities, in particular the tendency to conceal the presence of working men. It seems likely that the young single males discussed above (2d) would be even more likely to be dropped from household rosters in places where there is a high welfare dependency rate among refugees.

3c. High levels of census undercount will be associated with high levels of neighborhood participation in various types of underground economic activity.

Many of the same forces affecting other socio-economic groups in this situation apply to refugees as well. This is the facet of the census undercount problem being analyzed by Bourgois. Measurement of underground economic activity depends on the skill of ethnographers who know the population very well.

4. ECOLOGICAL SETTING

4a. High levels of undercount will be associated with high neighborhood crime rates.

Barriers to interacting with neighbors are reinforced because Lao and other refugees are initially settled in the City's most dangerous neighborhoods primarily because housing is cheapest there. Experiences in these neighborhoods produce an aversion to strangers. Virtually every discussion sooner or later comes around to tales of vandalism, burglary, mugging or arson experienced in such neighborhoods. Thus reality based fear adds to the feelings of social distance towards outsiders.

4b. High levels of undercount will be associated with high levels of individual and household mobility.

Especially during the first years after arrival, refugee households are renters. This makes their attachment to any particular housing unit tenuous. They move between units within the same cluster, between clusters in the same city and between states. This mobility makes it harder to trace individuals and household groups and affects accuracy of mail returns and agreement between mail returns and enumerator results. Furthermore, young single males (discussed in 2d.) have an even greater level of inter-household and inter-community mobility.

4c. High levels of undercount will be associated with high levels of interethnic conflict.

Where there are high levels of tension between members of different ethnic groups people avoid contact with other group members. Refugees may not answer the knock on the door if census enumerators are not of the same ethnic group. Most Lao we spoke with reported that they would not readily answer a knock on the door unless they knew the person. They stated that they would be more willing to talk to a stranger accompanied by a Lao. In general Lao and other refugees seem to prefer that contact with outsiders be structured through interpreters, appointments and references. They prefer to deal with strangers only after they have been introduced, usually through the good offices of a friend, a culture broker or a fellow Lao.