

**ETHNOGRAPHIC EVALUATION OF THE
1990 DECENNIAL CENSUS REPORT SERIES**

REPORT #14

**ASIAN AMERICANS IN A MIXED NEIGHBORHOOD:
A LONGITUDINAL STUDY**

Final Report for Joint Statistical Agreement 89-38

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I. OVERVIEW

This is the final report on "Asian Americans in a Mixed Neighborhood: A Longitudinal Study in St. Louis, MO," research conducted by the International Institute of Metropolitan St. Louis with the U.S. Bureau of the Census. In 1988, the Census Bureau conducted a Dress Rehearsal Census of the City of St. Louis. Under a Joint Statistical Agreement with the Center for Survey Methods Research of the Census Bureau, the principal investigators, Ryneanson and Gosebrink, used ethnographic methods to conduct an Alternative Enumeration (AE) of Asian Americans and other residents of a mixed neighborhood at that time. The present study is a replication of the AE of the same blocks conducted after the 1988 Dress Rehearsal Census. Although results may be generalizable to other groups, our primary ethnographic focus is on Lowland Lao refugees.

Our goals are to relate specific cases and rates of census undercounts and coverage issues in a sample area to sociocultural causes of census error. One of our specific hypotheses was that a longitudinal analysis will demonstrate that coverage of the Lao and other Asian immigrants in St. Louis sample area would be positively affected by their experience in the 1988 Dress Rehearsal Census and by community assistance that the Asian immigrants received. On the other hand, we also hypothesized that census follow-up enumeration of the Lao and other Asians would produce undercounts due to language communication barriers and other census procedures.

II. SITE PROFILE

The area selected is in South St. Louis, a mixed neighborhood of Laotians, Vietnamese, Whites, Hispanics and increasing numbers of African Americans. In 1988 we selected from within the neighborhood the two blocks with the highest proportion of Lao and other Asian immigrants. In February 1990, we agreed to return to these same blocks, where Lao seemed to constitute more than 20 percent of the population. At the time of the AE we found their numbers to be less than 20 percent. The absolute number of Lao residents actually increased from 1988 to 1990 (from 56 to 62). But the total number of people living in the sample area increased from 286 in 1988 to 329 in the summer of 1990. The percentage decline in Lao households will be discussed in more detail below.

Historically this has been a marginal working class area with a high level of transients and RURBANS (rural people who live and work in the city during the week and go home to the country on weekends and at retirement). The aging White population is being replaced by a mixture of poor young Whites, Asians, Hispanics, Africans and African Americans. There is minimal gentrification. Housing stock is composed of two and four family units, an increasingly large portion owned by absentee landlords. The housing is fairly good, although deteriorating. The city continues intensive code enforcement, but this is perceived by residents as very selective, indeed harassing behavior on the part of the government. Relations between members of different ethnic groups are superficial at best, hostile at worst, and there is minimal sense of local community.

In 1990 we found that there had been a significant rise in crime in the area as compared to 1988. It was apparent that drugs and prostitution abounded, although not in our particular sample area. As we began fieldwork, the body of a well-known prostitute was found stuffed in a dumpster a few blocks from the research site. The Lao refugees and other residents perceived life in the neighborhood as more dangerous than before. For example, according to local residents one unit of a four family building had become the hangout for several recently released criminals. They terrorized the neighborhood, on one occasion exchanging gunshots with another group across the street.

Another change in the area has been the shift of the local church's attention from the interests and needs of the Lao to those of more recently arrived Soviet and Romanian Evangelicals. Church officials say that they have been trying without success to resettle more Lao refugees, but none were available. The church's social services are now aimed primarily toward the evangelicals. This shift in the church's emphasis reduced the overall attractiveness of the neighborhood for the Lao, who tend to live in mini-clusters around patrons (Rynearson and Gosebrink 1990). This change had important consequences for censusing, as discussed below.

III. METHODS

In this longitudinal study of two census blocks, we replicated the research design of the previous project. The ease of its implementation in the follow-up study demonstrates its reliability as a basis for an AE of census results. Our research model was the traditional neighborhood residential survey. It involved observation, formal and informal introductions into the community network and use of existing administrative records. Our main interest was in possible census undercount of Asian Americans, particularly Laotian refugees. But we also had to obtain the same data for all residents of the two census blocks chosen. Different research strategies were used in collecting information on the Lao and non-Lao.

In order to obtain ethnographic access to this highly diversified population we began by building on existing information. Administrative records from city institutions supplied background information on individuals and addresses, as well as providing a framework in which to place observations. Property records were obtained from the city assessor's office; voter registration lists from the Board of Election Commissioners; neighborhood plans from the Community Development Agency; and names of residents from the reverse telephone directory. International Institute records were also consulted. Information from these sources was combined into a computer database organized by address on the two blocks.

In order to collect the necessary data in the short period of time available we assembled a team of researchers, including four students from local universities and a Lao interpreter. We trained the university researchers based upon our previous experience. They were introduced to the neighborhood in a general way and then assigned to work in pairs by block. Rynearson and the Lao interpreter visited Lao households to conduct ethnographic interviews.

Active field work took place from late June through August 1990. This work included ethnographic observation and collection of census data. We began with systematic observations of residents of the neighborhood. We were seeking to match residents with addresses, so that we knew, for example that a family of five lived at a particular address because we had seen them come in and out so often. We noted race, gender and general physical characteristics and estimated the ages of all people seen entering and leaving households. Minimal behavioral data was also included. Here is one example, in which the date of observation and researcher's initials introduce the entry.

7/3 RF observed WF, in 50s, 2 children one male one female,
another WF in late 20s or early 30s w/m in 30s leave house and load
up coolers and picnic material

The research team met weekly to exchange information and coordinate observations. Rough field notes were entered into the computer using a word processing program which listed all the addresses on the two blocks. This recording process continued for the duration of the fieldwork, so that by the end we had amassed a body of observations about each household over time. We prepared an AE listing of residents and households in the two census blocks, including name, relation to head of household, age, sex, race, ethnicity, date of birth and whether they were there during the census. To do this we integrated ethnographic data into the framework created by administrative records. For those households where ethnographic results gave us physical descriptions but no names, the administrative records sometimes made it possible for us to make educated guesses as to the identity of people we had observed.¹ This procedure seems to have been fairly successful, as evidenced by the high match rate between census and AE listings. The AE lists were submitted to the Center for Survey Methods Research.

After receiving the draft match report the principal investigators met with the full research team to resolve apparent differences between census and AE. As compared to 1988, there were relatively few problems. Issues related to the target population (Asian Americans) were easily resolved due to our detailed ethnographic notes.

Quantitative Analysis

After resolution of all discrepancies, the total number of individual person records found by the AE was 328. The census' total count was 291, but 13 of the census records were duplicates and should be subtracted, leaving a total of 278 individuals. The 50 people missed by census constitute 15.2 percent of the population as found in the AE. Our 1988 data are not broken down by individuals, but it should be noted that for housing units, the 1990 Census is considerably more accurate than the Dress Rehearsal Census of 1988. In our

¹For example, in one case, we never directly observed the resident(s) of an upstairs unit. The property owner, who lived downstairs, told us that a single (white) woman lived there. The reverse telephone directory and voter registration lists gave the name of a woman, whom we concluded was the single woman described by the owner.

earlier research (Rynearson 1990:13) in 1988 in the same sample area, 67 percent of the housing units/households were linked as whole or partial households or as vacant units. In 1990, the rate of those types of housing unit/household linkage improved to 81.9 percent. In addition, we found 9 percent more vacant-to-occupied type housing links, bringing the total rate to 90.9 percent of all housing units found by the AE.

Although a number of interesting patterns are evident in the match report resolution, we shall focus primarily on Asian Americans in the target sample area. We extend the analysis to other categories only when they shed light on patterning of Asian Americans missing from the census. According to our final resolution match, there were 63 Asian Americans (Lowland Lao and Vietnamese) living in 15 households in April 1990. By summer, one Lao household of four individuals had moved away and had not been replaced; for statistical purposes, however, we included them in the total count of Asian Americans on Census Day in the sample area.

Census results show 47 Asian Americans in the sample area and the AE shows 58 living there in the summer. But the discrepancy between census and AE results is greater than immediately apparent. The AE includes some people who moved in after Census Day. The census included duplicates and one family who moved out. In one case census located the same six-person Lao family in two households (B24-865 and B24-873) inflating the census count with 6 duplicates. This also occurred with one Hispanic household (B23-868 and B23-850). In the Lao case, an enumerator duplicated a household already recorded through a mail return. She also placed the family at a different address, which was actually a vacant unit in the same building. Another reason that the census and AE totals appear to be closer than they really are is that census correctly included the four-person family who had moved out by the time of the AE. They were, of course, not included on the AE list, although our ethnographic notes described them. In addition, the AE missed one individual correctly listed by census. To repeat, there were 63 Asian Americans living in the blocks on April 1, 1990, including the four outmovers and the individual missed by the AE, but not including the six duplicate records.

The 1990 Census, then, actually missed the presence of 22 Asian Americans living in the sample area in April, 35 percent of the total number of Asian Americans. The overwhelming majority (17 of the 22 missed individuals) were located in just three households, A23-174; A23-175; A24-117. Census identified these occupied housing units as vacant. The remaining five individuals were scattered through three partially matched households. Three of them were predicted misses on the AE, representing individuals of marginal status in the households.

In addition, only 18 of 41 Asian American residents correctly enumerated by the census were correctly identified in the census as being of Asian race. For the remaining 23 Asian Americans included in the census, the racial identification was blank or Other, representing 37 percent of the Asian population in the sample area. Twenty two² did not identify themselves as

²28 are on the census list, but 6 are duplicates.

Asian but did indicate their ethnic group as Lao, Laos or Laotian. If, as planned, census uses the write-in to assign individuals an Asian racial category when one is not explicitly identified, then all but one of the Asians correctly enumerated will be reclassified.

In summary, comparing the figures for census and AE for 1990, 15.2 percent of all people were missed by census. Of those, 44 percent were Asian American (22 individuals - all Lao). This significant percentage of the target population calls for ethnographic investigation and analysis, detailed below. A similar patterning of the entire count appears in a less severe form for all those missed by the census. The second largest category of missed individuals³ (nine individuals or 18 percent of all those missed) were living in housing units which the census failed to identify. The third largest category of those missed are six members of minority groups. Three were African Americans (one household) and three Mexican Indians (one household). Census listed as vacant the housing units where these two households lived. Perhaps barriers of language or race made them more difficult to enumerate than the majority population of this predominantly White mixed neighborhood. Thus a total of 36 individuals, or 72 percent of those missed by census falls into these difficult to enumerate (DTE) categories. We shall return to this subject later.

When we turn to a comparison of 1988 and 1990 census results on Asian Americans, the differences are striking and unexpected. In the 1988 Dress Rehearsal Census, there was a lower overall match rate, but greater accuracy for Asian Americans. In 1988, there were 56 Asian Americans in this sample area. Only three or 5.4 percent were missed by the census. No households were missed. As we saw above, in 1990, census missed 22 of 63 Asian Americans, or 34.9 percent. Three of the 15 Southeast Asian households on April 1 were missed by the census - a total of 20 percent, all identified as vacant housing units.

In the midst of an overall improvement in census results for the sample area, this sharp decline in the accuracy of census results for Asian Americans calls for qualitative analysis.

Qualitative Analysis

At the outset of this study we intended to research the effects of language and culture on censusing Asian Americans. As mentioned in the Overview above, we expected that, despite these potential barriers, the censusing of Asian Americans in this mixed neighborhood would be positively affected by (1) the assistance of culture brokers and (2) increased familiarity with the census due to experience with the 1988 Dress Rehearsal Census. As the preceding quantitative analysis has demonstrated, census missed far more Asian Americans in these blocks in 1990 than in 1988.

³As compared to the analytic framework used in 1988, the set of decisions provided in advance by CSMR eliminated a major category, movers, as a source of discrepancy.

Ethnographic evidence suggests several explanations for the disparity between the two sets of census results. The most significant factor was a change in the set of patron-client relations in the neighborhood. In 1988 we found that a local church was very active in helping Lao in the neighborhood adjust to American life. Staff members at the church acted as intermediaries between some of the less acculturated Lao and the representatives of the larger society. Often the church screened out individuals who seemed to be taking advantage of their congregation - for example, people selling aluminum siding. In 1988 one Lao family was so closely involved with the church that they refused to cooperate with ethnographers until the church had given its blessing to our project. Church staff members expressed a sense of mission in their dealings with the Lao. Another ethnographer working in the area at the time reported that one woman told her, "I feel that God has given us this privilege and this responsibility" (Maxwell 1989:154). In 1988 this same staff member told us that she had helped most of the Lao fill out their census forms. In fact, several enumerators had sought her out and she gave them the necessary information on all the Lao in the areas they were covering.

By 1990, church members felt their mission had changed. Unable to resettle new Lao refugees, they had begun accepting Soviet and Romanian Evangelicals, for whom they proclaimed a new sense of dedication. Lao church services were relegated to a small basement room. Lao told us that they felt increasingly excluded. In the summer of 1990 the same church official told us that she had not assisted many Lao with the census forms this time because, "they've done it before, they know what they're doing." Census results show otherwise. It seems probable that, had the church still been heavily involved with the Lao, enumerators would have gotten from her all the information they needed on the three households which were missed.

Besides the changed relations with the church, in 1990 the Lao received less assistance from several other agencies which had helped them in 1988. The Mutual Aid Association suffered a partial funding cut in March and a total loss of support in early summer, so their personnel were not available. None of the Lao had much to do with the International Institute at this time, as they had been in the U.S. too long to be eligible for refugee benefits and were little interested in English classes. True, Institute personnel distributed multilingual census posters, one of which was displayed in the local Lao store, but the sign was no help in actually completing mail returns. In fact, only two Lao households are listed as having completed mail returns.⁴ The sole Vietnamese household in the blocks were newly arrived in the U.S.; they did complete the mail return, probably with the help of a Vietnamese social worker at the International Institute.

Without trusted patrons to serve as intermediaries, the census burden fell on the Lao and the enumerators. The results are mixed. A census procedural error led to the double count of a Lao household when an enumerator counted a family which had already filed a mail return. The same thing happened to an Hispanic family on the block.

⁴Interestingly, one of the missed households and one missed individual in a partially matched household said they completed mail returns.

Researchers had anticipated that Lao and enumerators would experience a range of communication problems. Somewhat unexpectedly we found that good results were obtained when enumerators actually encountered resident Lao family members. In contrast to the situation in 1988, there was little or no garbled information, although there were some omissions. Several Lao women reported no difficulty in providing data to the enumerators because "we have to give out that information all the time."

As noted above, most of the Lao missed by the census lived in only three housing units, identified as vacant by enumerators. One possible explanation for the difficulties with counting Lao (and perhaps others) lies in differences in the cultural use of space. In 1988 we pointed out that Lao were highly visible, for they tend to spend a lot of time on stoops and porches. There is constant traffic and visiting among residents of adjacent dwellings. Depending on the spatial configuration of a building, the preferred entry and also stoop and porch for congregating may be either in the front or the back. In each of the missed Lao household cases we observed that the front door areas, including stoops and porches, were usually littered with several weeks of newspapers and wind-driven litter of various kinds.

From the street in front, these units gave many of the usual signals of vacancy. However, the rear entrances in all these cases were scenes of frequent comings and goings by Lao family members, neighbors and visitors. Although it is not possible to interview the enumerators themselves, we speculate that their expectations about use of occupied space caused them to misread the signals of occupancy. Apparently they did not observe the units from the back, where there were usually a large number of automobiles parked very close to rear entrances. In the case of the African American family which was missed, field notes described them as spending a lot of time on the rear porch.

Let us turn now to the cases of Lao individuals missed within partially matched households. In 1988 we pointed out that in Laos and Northern Thailand young men sometimes stay with married relatives while they "seek their fortune" away from home. Among the Lao living in the two census blocks surveyed in 1988, over 33 percent of the households contained such "nephews." In our indepth ethnographic study, "Barriers to Censusing Southeast Asian Refugees," (Rynearson and Gosebrink 1990), we referred to these young men as "invisible nephews." Lao in St. Louis count community size in terms of number of (nuclear) families, not individuals, and equate family with household. Since the young singles are not (nuclear) family members, they are not always seen as household members either. One man we talked to in 1989 said quite clearly that although his household actually consisted of six people (him, his wife, and his two children as well as his unmarried sister, and his wife's brother), he would only count four for the census. These two young singles would therefore not be reported by a Lao household head filling out the form. They would, in effect, be invisible. The only individual missed by the AE in 1990 was just such a nephew. The head of household we talked to just didn't mention him.

Two of the Lao individuals the census missed were living together in a large household. Whereas we have previously talked about "invisible nephews", these

appear to have been "invisible nieces." They were young relatives who had come directly from Laos on a visitor's visa. They hope to remain. Their omission from their "uncle's" mail return may be due either to their invisibility or to their marginal legal status.

Of the other two single males who were missed, one was an unmarried partner, who was probably omitted for that reason. The other case is far more interesting. Two single males live together, above a store owned by another Asian American. One is young and quite literate. He told us that he had completed the mail return for the household, but had not included his housemate. The housemate, an older man who does not speak English well, said he knew nothing about the census. To our amazement, the census enumerator return shows only the older man living there. Subsequent conversations with the younger man revealed a wealth of detail about how he completed his own mail return, helped another family with theirs, and mailed them all out in April. We are unable to account for his missing mail return. It is possible that the census enumerator asked the Asian proprietor of the downstairs store who lived upstairs and she gave him the older man's name. This supposition is also supported by the fact that three other occupied housing units were on the same floor but were totally missed by the census.

The mystery of the missing mail return is compounded by one of the three Lao housing units census reported as vacant. In a lengthy interview, they explained that they always turned things like that over to the man's older brother, one of the most sophisticated and literate members of the Lao community. They said that they knew how important the census was. In fact, they had just arrived at the time of the 1988 Dress Rehearsal Census. They had thrown that census form away, and he made them take it out of the trash and bring it to him to complete for them. Our data does not allow any speculation on what could have happened to these mail returns.

Conclusions

In general, the accuracy and completeness of census results improved between 1988 and 1990, at least as measured by the match between their results and our own. However, census results for the target population, Asian Americans in a mixed neighborhood, were significantly less complete. In 1988 the percentage of Lao missing from census was only 5.3 percent, whereas in 1990 it was 35 percent. Ethnographic analysis indicates that there were two factors operating. One was the decline in support from patrons who had helped both Lao and enumerators. In 1988 enumerators often did not have to even visit Lao households directly, but got the necessary information from a local church.

The other factor contributing to the enumerators' missing Lao households in 1990 seems to be a differential perception about space. Because many Lao households conduct most of their activity around the rear entrance, the front doors may give the unit the appearance of being vacant. We speculate that this happened to three households. In 1988 these households would probably not have been missed because of information provided by the church. While we had expected positive results due to patron intervention in 1990, the decline in accuracy in its absence indirectly but dramatically supports our hypothesis

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Disclaimer: This is the final report for one of the 29 independent Joint Statistical Agreement projects which conducted an ethnographic evaluation of the behavioral causes of undercount. All 29 studies followed common methodological guidelines. This report is based on an analysis of the results of a match between the author(s)' Alternative Enumeration to data from the 1990 Decennial Census forms for the same site. Each ethnographic site contained about 100 housing units. Information was compiled from census forms that were recovered through October 10, 1990. The data on which this report is based should be considered preliminary for several reasons: Between October 10, 1990 and December 31, 1990, additional census forms MAY have been added to or deleted from the official enumeration of the site as a result of coverage improvement operations, local review, or other late census operations. Differences between October 10, 1990 and final census results as reported on the Unedited Detail File were incorporated in later analyses of data from this site. The consistency of the authors' coding of data has not been fully verified. Hypothesis tests and other analyses are original to the author. Therefore, the quantitative results contained in this final JSA report may differ from later reports issued by Census Bureau Staff referring to the same site.

The exact location of the study area and the names of persons and addresses enumerated by the independent researchers and in the 1990 Decennial Census are Census confidential and cannot be revealed until the year 2062. The researchers who participated in this study were Special Sworn Employees (SSE) or staff of the Census Bureau.

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