

# Insight from Field Interviewers on Low Response Rates among Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Households: Implications for 2020 and Recommendations for Training and Messaging

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*Disclaimer: This presentation is intended to inform people about research and to encourage discussion. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.*

# Motivation for Research

- History of Census research to help bilingual interviewers increase response at the doorstep
- Goal: Inclusion of field staff perspective and insight
- Exploration of spontaneous comments from field staff in focus groups about distrust in government and concern about immigration status among limited English-speaking and foreign-born respondents
  - > Plan for more systematic research on the challenges field staff are currently encountering

# Literature Review: Insights from the Field

- Census research on field interaction and doorstep messaging
  - Ethnographic observation in multiple languages (2010)
    - Theme of mistrust among immigrant and limited English-speaking households (Isabelli, Pan, and Lubkemann, 2012)
    - Fear that the Census will be used for immigration enforcement
    - Mistrust in the context of legislation that had recently passed in Arizona making it illegal to not carry immigration documentation (in 2010)
  - Expert review of translated messages (2015)
  - Focus groups to gain respondent feedback (2015, 2017)

# Recent Interviewer Focus Groups

- Review of survey translations: seeking feedback from interviewers about translated questionnaire items that they have already administered in the field
- Development of training materials to support bilingual interviewers
- Evaluate non-English materials and supports currently in place for interviewers for various surveys
- Hear from the interviewers about their needs and experiences

# Data Sources

1. Focus groups with bilingual Spanish-speaking field interviewers on a national health survey to get feedback on revisions to the Spanish translation
  - Focus was comments on the Spanish translation, NOT respondent attitudes in the field
2. Debriefing focus group with bilingual and monolingual interviewers and field supervisors in New York City who worked on a housing survey
  - Gathered data on challenges in the field with limited English-speaking households

# Data Source 1: Focus Groups with Spanish-speaking Interviewers

- Round 1: 2 focus groups, 5 interviewers in each
  - Participants were asked a general question at end:
    - “Anything else you’d like to mention?”
- Round 2: 2 focus groups, 3 interviewers in each
  - Participants asked if there were any field materials they were missing but would have liked to have (e.g., introduction letters, brochures)
  - Participants were asked if they ever have difficulty explaining Title 13 or data confidentiality policies to respondents

# Spontaneous Insights from the Field – Round 1

- Respondent walked out and left interviewer alone in home during citizenship questions on American Community Survey; interviewer suspected respondent lied about his answers to citizenship and country of origin questions
- Another interviewer reported that a family of immigrants moved out after she visited for an interview
- Mention of “respondents’ perception of the current political climate” causing trust issues, respondents not wanting to give out information

# Spontaneous Insights from the Field – Round 2

- Interviewers reported recent increases in distrust among immigrants:
  - “The politics have changed everything. Recently.”
  - “This may just be a sign of the times, but in the recent several months before anything begins, I’m being asked times over, does it make a difference if I’m not a citizen?”
- Specific references to current policy changes as causing trust issues for interviewers: “DACA is on the chopping block.”
- They asked for additional field materials to help specifically address immigration enforcement concerns.



# Data Source 2: Debriefing Focus Groups with NYC Field Staff

- Background
  - Interviewer-administered survey which occurs periodically in NYC
- Purpose of research
  - Understand how a Spanish translation worked in the field
  - Learn about field staff challenges when working with limited English-speaking and immigrant households
- Debriefing focus groups with interviewers and field supervisors immediately after survey field period

# Methods - Participants

- Bilingual English/Spanish interviewers (N=11, divided into 2 groups)
- Bilingual English/Other language interviewers (N=3)
- Monolingual (English only) interviewers (N=3)
- Field Supervisors (FSs) who supervised bilingual interviewers (N=7)

# Methods

- Confidential questionnaire returned before focus groups
  - Asked about experience with limited English-speaking households, challenges encountered
- Five focus groups held remotely in fall of 2017
  - Discussion about:
    - Types of challenges faced with households where respondents speak little English and how they were handled
    - Experiences completing interviews in languages other than English
    - Training received about language and/or cultural differences

# Findings: Challenges in Limited English households

- All 4 types field staff reported recent challenges with fear and distrust of government
  - Interviewers being confused with ICE
  - Some interviewers said they felt like “most” incomplete cases were due to distrust of government
  - “I don’t start with I am from Census Bureau. When you talk [with] Spanish people [sic], they [are] afraid of the Census. They think that you will hunt them down”  
[Spanish-speaking interviewer]

# Findings: Fear and Distrust (continued)

- Pattern is more pronounced recently
  - “[A few] years ago was so much easier to get respondents compared to now because of the government changes, because of what happened to people in their own countries and trust factors, but also because of what happened here.” [bilingual interviewer]
  - “Years ago I didn’t have problems with the immigration questions. For a lot of trust issues to begin with because also what’s going on around everywhere in general.” [Chinese-speaking interviewer]
  - “This behavior was different from [a few] years ago because of the “political temperature these days” [field supervisor]

# Findings: Insufficient Training

- Minimal or no training on working with limited English-speaking households
- Interviewers specifically said they needed additional training on overcoming respondents' confidentiality concerns

# Strategies for Overcoming Mistrust among Respondents

- Skipping over names and other personal information
- Collecting pseudonyms rather than names
- “Breaking the ice” before bringing up working for a federal agency
- Explicitly stating to respondents that data are not shared with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)
  - They asked for materials that explicitly state this that they could share with respondents

# Methodological Insights

- Field staff can give a pulse check on what's going on in the field, including over time and in context
- Designing focus groups: Who to include?
- How to address topics of interest without leading participants
- Field staff are eager to share their insight and asking them for help fosters a sense of commitment and buy-in
- Possible limitation: Would field staff be hesitant to share stories that might make them look bad?
  - Not in our experience!
  - Consider more confidential ways to collect data, such as individual questionnaires



# Implications for Future Data Collections

- Changes in trust among limited English-speaking and immigrant respondents is described as **recent** by field interviewers
  - Evidence from these focus groups as well as 2010 ethnographic observations suggest that **policy changes and discourse matter for respondents' attitudes and concerns**
- Lack of trust can threaten data quality
- Need for empirical research to learn about extent and impact of these issues

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