

# San Joaquin Valley Latino Immigrants: Implications of Survey Findings for Census 2020 — Executive Summary

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY CENSUS RESEARCH PROJECT  
SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY HEALTH FUND

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The San Joaquin Valley Health Fund is managed by The Center at Sierra Health Foundation with funding support from 18 state and national funders: Sierra Health Foundation, The California Endowment, Rosenberg Foundation, The California Wellness Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Blue Shield of California Foundation, Wallace H. Coulter Foundation, Dignity Health, Tides, Hellman Foundation, The James Irvine Foundation, Convergence Partnership, Health Net, The Grove Foundation, Werner-Kohnstamm Family Giving Fund, New Venture Fund, Sunlight Giving and Heising-Simons Foundation.

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The San Joaquin Valley Health Fund census-related work is made possible with the support from Sierra Health Foundation, Blue Shield of California Foundation, Hellman Foundation, The James Irvine Foundation, The Grove Foundation, Werner-Kohnstamm Family Giving Fund, New Venture Fund, Sunlight Giving and Heising-Simons Foundation.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Overview: The Prospect of Census 2020 with a Citizenship Question

The San Joaquin Valley, a large and diverse region with dense immigrant settlement, faces major challenges as a result of efforts by the Department of Commerce to add a question on citizenship to Census 2020. Because federal and state funding throughout the post-census decade are allocated based on census-derived data and political representation is determined by a community's, county's or state's share of the national population, census fairness and accuracy is crucial to community well-being.

There is widespread consensus that adding the citizenship question will suppress census response among non-citizens and result in differential undercount of low-income immigrant and minority-headed households. However, although the research to date shows there would clearly be a serious problem and that states such as California would be disproportionately impacted, there have so far been only limited opportunities to project what the quantitative impacts would be at the community, regional and state levels.

## The Current Report

The San Joaquin Valley Census Research Project was initiated to provide data-based insights into the impact the citizenship question would have on immigrant household census response throughout the region. This first of six working papers on consequences of adding the citizenship question to Census 2020 presents key findings from the project's regionwide survey of and focus groups with first- and second-generation Latino immigrants. Subsequent reports will present in-depth details on survey respondents' and focus group perspectives in the Latino and non-Latino immigrant communities.

## The Survey and Focus Group Research

The eight-county San Joaquin Valley region has a current population of more than 4.2 million—more than major cities such as Los Angeles or Chicago—and a foreign-born population of more than 900,000. Slightly more than two-thirds of the region's foreign-born population are Latino immigrants. Moreover, the majority (52%) of the region's population are of Hispanic origin. The study population—first- and second-generation Latino immigrants 18+ years of age (representing the population of “householders” who would choose to respond or not respond to the census) make up more than one-third

(about 35%) of the San Joaquin Valley adult population.<sup>1</sup>

Survey data are drawn from face-to-face interviews by interviewers who are themselves immigrants, with 414 Latino respondents. Interviews took place in 31 communities throughout the region, in a range of venues frequented by the hard-to-count Latino population: remates (flea markets), parks, malls, laundromats, community celebrations, college campuses and community food distribution events. The survey was fielded during September and October 2018.

Because it is expected that response to Census 2020 with the citizenship question would be related to legal and citizenship status if the citizenship question is added, interviewers elicited information to determine status for each survey respondent to provide a basis for detailed analysis of patterns of non-response. More than one-third (37%) of the interviews were with undocumented respondents, 27% with legal residents, 12% with naturalized citizens and 24% with second-generation (U.S.-born) immigrants.

Focus groups were conducted with three sub-populations of Latino immigrants: indigenous-origin Mexican immigrants, DACA recipients, and young U.S.-born second-generation adults.

## Key Findings on the Negative Impact of the Citizenship Question on Latino Immigrants' Willingness to Participate in the Census

### ***Adding the citizenship question dramatically decreases willingness to participate in Census 2020.***

Most survey respondents (84%) were willing to respond to a “simple” census without the citizenship question, but if the citizenship question were added, only 46% said they would be willing to participate.

The Census Bureau's Census Barriers, Attitudes and Motivators Study research shows that actual response in Census 2010 was 10% lower than a sample of survey respondents had indicated when asked in 2008 if they were planning to respond. This implies a San Joaquin Valley census self-response rate no higher than 40%. This is much lower than the 52.3% observed in the 2018 end-to-end test and the Census Bureau's expectation of an overall 60% self-response rate in 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Data on the Latino immigrant population are drawn from the 2017 American Community Survey. The first-generation (foreign-born) Latino immigrants 18+ make up 20% of the San Joaquin Valley population. The second-generation immigrants are the adult children of foreign-born parents. Census Bureau research shows they make up close to one-third of the Hispanic population nationally. We estimate they make up 15% of the region's population.

***Willingness to respond to a census with the citizenship question varies greatly by legal and citizenship status.***

As might be expected, adding the citizenship question had the greatest impact on undocumented immigrants' willingness to respond. Only 25% said they would participate in a census with the citizenship question.

Although they have status, legal residents' willingness to respond would also be dramatically reduced from an enthusiastic 85% willingness to participate in a simple census (as it was in 2010) down to 63%. Naturalized citizens, having initially expressed enthusiasm about census participation, were also pushed toward not responding by the citizenship question—down from 89% willingness to 70%.

In contrast to the widespread expectation that adding a citizenship question would only affect the response rate among non-citizens, the second-generation Latino immigrants, grown U.S.-born citizen children of foreign-born parents, initially very enthusiastic about census participation also were strongly pushed toward non-response. Their willingness to respond decreased from 89% to 49%.

Survey respondents' comments show that practical concerns about the confidentiality of household information provided to the Census Bureau being shared and used to adversely impact households was widespread.

However, just as important as practical worries about misuse of census data, there was widespread anger and disapproval about the government having added the question. Many of the second-generation U.S.-born Latino citizen survey respondents considered the citizenship question to be divisive and racist.

Few of the survey respondents saw the prospect of answering a census with the citizenship question as an isolated one. Instead, they saw the question as another piece in a panorama of anti-immigrant rhetoric, policy decisions and immigration enforcement actions by the federal government. Many who were aware of the census as the process of counting the U.S. population questioned the rationale for an intrusive personal question about citizenship status.

**Response to proxy interviews as part of non-response follow-up**

An important part of the census enumeration process is for enumerators to go to neighbors to try to secure a proxy

interview about the size and characteristics of a household that has failed to self-respond and which has not been successfully contacted. These proxy interviews usually account for 25% to 30% of the enumerations of households that failed to self-respond, were not home when the enumerator stopped by or who refused to respond to an enumerator.

Survey respondents were adamant that it was not their place to provide information about their neighbors—under any circumstances. Even when considering a census without the citizenship question, only 19% were willing to provide information about their neighbors. In the eventuality of a census with the citizenship question included, only 8% said they would provide information about a neighboring household.

Considerations entering into respondents' thinking about providing information about their neighbors to a census enumerator included a widespread shared perspective that census information belonged to each household. It also included a practical concern that neighbors would be angry if their information were shared. There was widespread concern that providing such information might adversely affect undocumented neighbors. And, finally, respondents said that they did not know much about some of their neighbors, so their ability to do a proxy interview, even if they might be willing to do so, was uncertain.

***Structural Barriers to an Accurate Census Count in San Joaquin Valley Latino Immigrant Communities***

In addition to respondent motivation, additional structural factors are causes of undercount. The study examined several of these factors.

**Mail delivery**

Invitations to respond to the census online and paper census form are mostly delivered by the U.S. postal service—except in areas designated as “Update/Leave.”

More than one-quarter (28%) of respondents said they did not have standard mail delivery to the door or a household mailbox. One out of eight (13%) said they only received mail at a PO Box. Another 12% said they only got mail at a mailbox they shared with others. The remaining 3% said they either had no mail delivery or had some other arrangement, such as getting mail at a relative's house.

Those with only a PO Box will not get census mailings, which go to housing units with city-style addresses. Those

who share mailboxes or get mail at neighbors' houses may not be recognized by the Census Bureau as being a separate distinct household.

### Internet access

A major element in the Census Bureau's re-engineering of census processes for 2020 has been to encourage online census response. This has many benefits, but also serious drawbacks stemming from lack of Internet access and/or lack of digital literacy among the first-generation immigrant households.

One-quarter (24%) of the Latino immigrant survey respondents lack Internet access. The most prevalent mode of Internet access is via cell phone.

Internet access is closely related to age. While more than 90% of the respondents 25 years of age or younger had Internet access, less than 20% of the older respondents (65+) did. This presents a challenging problem because the older householders, many of them naturalized citizens or legal residents, are the demographic group most willing to respond but least able to respond online.

Use of tablets, laptops or desktop computers to access the Internet is much lower than cell phone access. This is a particularly important consideration vis-à-vis response mode for the large 46- to 64-year-old demographic group in which cell phone access is more than 80%, but where access via computer or tablet is available to only about 30% of the households.

Design for Internet response mode will need to have a robust, user-friendly interface easily usable by respondents with relatively low levels of literacy and digital literacy going online using their cell phones.

### Enumerating Complex Households

The survey found that a very high proportion (22%) of the Latino immigrants live in complex households where multiple families live under the same roof or at properties where there are multiple low-visibility hidden and/or unconventional dwellings and a single street address. Although census form instructions tell the householder to include everyone living at a place on their census household roster, the Census Bureau's own research and comments from respondents in the current survey show that "extra people" who are not part of the core household/budget social unit will usually not be included.

For several decades, there has been—and continues to be—a conflict between Latino immigrant (and other) groups' conceptualization of "household" and the Office of Management and Budget's residence rules governing Census operations. These conflicts will persist, but could be addressed helpfully with explicit interviewer training and collaborations with community groups to persuade households to include other non-family members in their census response. Such efforts will be made much more challenging in the context of a census with the citizenship question because, in many cases, some of the doubled-up families in a complex household are undocumented.

### Language and Literacy as Dual Constraints on Census Response

The San Joaquin Valley Census Research Project survey secured information on each respondent's educational attainment and English-language ability. Analysis showed that more than one-third (37%) of the first-generation Latino immigrants have only an elementary school education and know only a little English or no English. They will have serious difficulties in responding to the census—either online or by filling out and returning a paper form sent to them.

As is the case with respect to online response, the problem is that the households headed by the least-educated, limited-English-speaking immigrants are those of legal permanent residents, a sub-population relatively oriented toward census participation but constrained in following through due to these barriers to census participation.

Although the Census Bureau did a good job in 2010 in getting bilingual census forms to the Spanish-speaking households in the San Joaquin Valley where no adult spoke English (linguistically isolated households), one-quarter did not receive the bilingual form.

A practical priority in efforts to assure the highest possible level of census response will be to provide in-person questionnaire assistance, since the Census 2020 redesign does not include physical Questionnaire Assistance Centers. If there were an adequate level of community engagement, sending bilingual/bicultural digitally literate community navigators (mobile questionnaire assistance teams) out to offer assistance to low-literate, limited-English-speaking households could make a significant contribution to lowering response barriers.

## Heightened Levels of Non-Response Will Result in Serious Differential Undercount Throughout the San Joaquin Valley

Patterns of census non-response do not immediately translate into undercount because Census Bureau operational teams work hard to implement a methodological strategy to compensate for non-response during the non-response follow-up process.

Although each stage of the Census Bureau’s enumeration process will meet with some success, widespread non-response will lead to errors and, ultimately, census omission. This cascade of errors will erode data quality and seriously distort the Census Bureau’s reporting on the size and demographic characteristics of the San Joaquin Valley region.

Incorporating the San Joaquin Valley Census Research Project survey findings into a “cascade model” explains how multiple factors, including both propensity to respond and the structural barriers to census participation (such as uneven mail delivery of census material, limited Internet access, limited literacy and English-language ability) are transformed into differential undercount. The model provides a sound, but conservative, estimate of eventual undercount in the region.

The model also makes it possible to see the extent of differential undercount among sub-populations of Latino immigrants. This estimate is provided in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1—ESTIMATE OF SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY UNDERCOUNT OF LATINO FIRST- AND SECOND-GENERATION IMMIGRANT POPULATION**

San Joaquin Valley Latino Sub-Population as defined by status	Undercount for Latin Sub-Populations	Impact on overall San Joaquin Valley Census Count (% undercount in sub-population X sub-population as % of region)
Undocumented	21.1%	-1.8%
Legal residents	7.5%	-0.4%
Naturalized citizens	5.9%	-0.4%
U.S.-born generation	10.3%	-1.5%
Aggregate impact—undercount of first and second-generation Latinos	11.7%	-4.1%

\*Technical details on components and coefficients used in the cascade model are presented in a companion report to this one, “A Cascade Model Explaining How Latino Immigrants’ Non-Response To Census 2020 is Transformed into Regional Undercount,” San Joaquin Valley Health Fund, January 2019.

To place the projections presented here in historical context, the officially acknowledged Hispanic undercount in Census 2010 was 1.54%, while the non-Hispanic White overcount was 0.8%.<sup>2</sup> Differential undercount of minorities has persisted in the decennial census for many decades, but no census in the past half-century has had an undercount of a minority population of more than 10%.

## Regionwide Impacts of Latino Immigrant Undercount

### Population undercount and fiscal impacts

The regionwide undercount of Latino immigrants can be expected to decrease the aggregate Census 2020 San Joaquin Valley population count by about 188,000 persons. The fiscal impact of this aggregate undercount can be expected to be about \$200 million per year—simply from the Latino undercount. Unfortunately, since decennial census data are used in allocation of funding for many federal programs, the eventual impact would be more than \$2 billion over the decade from 2021-2030.

In general, the patterns of undercount identified in the San Joaquin Valley Census Research Project survey will also shift census-driven funding away from smaller, rural municipalities that have higher proportions of foreign-born Latinos toward urban areas, exacerbating pre-existing tensions. At the county level where many social programs are administered, the varying proportions of foreign-born Latino adults suggests that Madera, Merced and Tulare counties will be disproportionately affected by the patterns of undercount identified in the research because they have higher proportions of foreign-born Latino non-citizens than other counties in the region.

It must also be stressed that the cascade model of census undercount is conservative because it does not seek to quantify the extent to which Census Bureau operational shortcomings, such as inability to hire enough enumerators to handle the increased non-response follow-up workload, from greatly increased levels of non-response may affect enumeration. Inability to hire culturally and linguistically competent local enumerators who can persuade undecided households that they should respond may further compromise census accuracy.

<sup>2</sup> Mule T. 2010 “Census Coverage Measurement Estimation Report: Summary of Estimates of Coverage for Persons in the United States,” Decennial Statistics Studies Division, U.S. Census Bureau, May 2012.

### ***Consequences of expected undercount for equitable political representation***

Undercount of Latino immigrants has a direct and significant impact on political equity within the San Joaquin Valley region because representation in the California Legislature and configuration of legislative districts also relies heavily on decennial census data for apportionment. Jurisdictions with higher proportions of Latino non-citizens would be disproportionately affected.

Ironically, one of the consequences of the skewed demographic profile that would result from adding the citizenship question to Census 2020 is that the reliability of citizen voting-age population tabulations that the Department of Commerce has alleged would be improved by adding the citizenship question to the decennial census would be seriously degraded. Adding the citizenship question not only degrades the reliability of data on citizenship status. It also makes profiles of the racial/ethnic composition and age structure of communities, crucial elements in Voting Rights Act enforcement, inaccurate. In communities, counties, regions and states with higher than average concentrations of Latino immigrants, census-derived racial/ethnic profiles at every geographic level would be skewed to so as to dilute the voting power of Hispanics.

### ***Consequences for immigrant integration and civic life***

Adding the citizenship question has more than simply fiscal and political implications. It transforms the decennial census from a civic ritual of affirmation—a collaborative effort to secure an accurate picture of the U.S., a “mirror of America”—into an exercise in government-sponsored efforts to diminish the importance of immigrants and blur our vision of a diverse American nation. This will take a toll on civic life.

There is already widespread distrust of the federal government and diversity of opinion within Latino immigrant networks about the usefulness of becoming engaged in civic life. Census 2020 with a citizenship question will fuel the growth of a mindset Census Bureau researchers describe as “cynical and suspicious,” while eroding the numbers who fall into mindsets broadly defined as “dutiful and local-minded” and “compliant and caring.”

Many in the Latino immigrant community believe that adding the citizenship question provides clear-cut evidence of federal government animus against Latinos, specifically those of Mexican origin. This is a harbinger of further weakening of bridging social capital—the ability of diverse individuals and groups in a community to overcome differences and work together to improve community well-being.<sup>3</sup>

### **In Summary**

Proceeding with a politicized decennial census—widely understood by Latino first- and second-generation immigrants as compromising a potentially attractive collective endeavor, the process of “standing up and being counted” to assure one’s community gets its fair share of federal funding and equitable political representation—will further erode already-wavering trust in government.

Going forward with a decennial census that includes the citizenship question will have short-term and long-lasting negative impacts on individual, household and community well-being in the San Joaquin Valley.

Community stakeholders will need to work diligently during the spring of 2019 to assure the citizenship question is removed from the 2020 decennial census by summer 2019, when the Census Bureau needs to move forward and begin printing census forms.

Even if the citizenship question is removed from the census, it will still be necessary to work energetically and strategically to restore Latino (and other) immigrant communities’ willingness to participate in a census when so many questions have arisen about the federal government’s commitment to faithfully carrying out its constitutional mandate to conduct a fair and accurate census.

3 The overall community impact on all groups’ social life— “hunkering down” as Robert Putnam calls it—despite being gradual and insidious, is a serious concern.