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Exploring Agricultural Census Undercounts Among Immigrant Hispanic/Latino Farmers with an Alternative Enumeration Project

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Abstract

This article argues the need to examine whether or not the agricultural census is locating and including Hispanic/Latino farmers, particularly recent immigrants, who are not aware of the census. We explore the possible reasons why Hispanics/Latinos may be missed. We also suggest an alternative Hispanic/Latino farmer enumeration to gather basic information that will allow us to identify Hispanic/Latino farmers and check if they were included in the 2002 agricultural census. Our plan is based on an alternative enumeration project conducted by US Census Bureau in Census 1990.

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Introduction

According to Agricultural Census 1997, Hispanics or Latinos (henceforth referred to as "Hispanics/Latinos") were the largest and fastest growing minority farmer group in the United States (USDA, 2000). (2002 Census results were not available at the time of the writing of this article.) In 1997, Hispanic/Latino farmers numbered nearly 28,000, an increase of 32%, or 8,870 farmers, from 1992 to 1997. As the National Agricultural Statistical Service (NASS) prepares to release the results of Agricultural Census 2002, Hispanic/Latino farmers, minority farmer advocates (e.g., Center for Latino Farmers and The Rural Coalition), and Extension agents are voicing their concerns about agricultural census undercounts among the Hispanic/Latino farmer population.

Recent research suggests that a segment of the Hispanic/Latino farmer population in particular may be at a high risk for not being included in the agricultural census (Garcia & Marinez, 2002). New immigrants, who do not seek assistance from the Farm Service Agency and other USDA providers or may not be familiar with the agricultural census, are likely to be missed. Other possible barriers, such as English language competence and illiteracy and informal farming arrangements, may also keep these and other Hispanic/Latino farmers from participating in agricultural censuses. The unintentional exclusion of these immigrants skews NASS Hispanic farmer profiles, or "statistical totals," that are used by USDA and other government agencies to generate priorities, write policies, and to develop regional and national programs aimed at helping farmers and ranchers.

Nationally and regionally, an undercount of Hispanic/Latino farmers in agricultural censuses also has consequences for Agricultural Extension. One problem is that Extension agents will not have reliable figures on the size and growth of this hard-to-reach farmer population. In fact, Extension agents, as we found, may not always be aware of their existence, if NASS figures do not bring this population to light (Garcia & Marinez, 2002).

Another shortcoming is that unreliable figures, as a result of an undercount, will provide Extension agents with an unsound profile of Hispanic/Latino farmers in their region. Flawed information will keep them from developing new programs or tailoring existing programs to meet the needs of these farmers. Closely related, Extension agents will not be in a position to advocate for their Hispanic/Latino farmer clientele in programming and policy arenas because they will be unable to demonstrate need.

Agricultural Census 2002 provides a timely opportunity to explore the participation of immigrant Hispanic/Latino farmers and to develop approaches for including them in the next agricultural census. Towards this end, we propose a plan for examining their participation in Agricultural Census 2002. We start by briefly discussing how the agricultural census is conducted and why it is important for all farmers to participate. Possible barriers to census participation, based on our field observations of immigrant Hispanic/Latino farmers in southwestern Michigan, follow.

We conclude by suggesting an alternative Hispanic/Latino farmer enumeration, one design to assess if there is an undercount among this group as well as to improve their inclusion in the future. Our enumeration plan is based on an alternative enumeration project conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in Census 1990 to assess the undercount of minority populations and to develop creative strategies for including them in future decennial censuses.

The Agricultural Census

Every 5 years, NASS conducts an agricultural census designed to count the number of farms, gather statistical information about producers, and measure agricultural activity and productivity for county, state, and region in the United States (NASS, 2002a). In Agricultural Census 2002, a "report form," was distributed in two formats: a sample long version or a non-sample short version. The report forms, only printed in the English language (with the exception of those used in Puerto Rico), were designed, according to region (13 regions in all nationwide), to gather information on:

- Crops
- Sales
- Acreage
- Food and fiber production activities specific to the region (NASS, 2002a & b).

The census forms--either a long or short version--were mailed in December to independent operating units, called "operations," or to farms, ranches, and other agricultural businesses with farm acreage under production (NASS, 2002a & b). The forms are mailed to agricultural businesses that participated in the previous agricultural census or that sought assistance from USDA agencies and their programs, such as the Farm Service Agency. Operators, or individuals who make the day-to-day decisions, were to complete the forms and return them by February. By law, under Title VII, United States Code, the recipients of the form, who can be landlords, tenants, corporations, are required to respond factually.

USDA carries out various activities during the census year to get the word out and convince farmers to participate (NASS, 2002a). News releases, public service announcements, and public presentations are used with this objective in mind. Depending on the state and the availability of resources, if the census form is not returned by the due date, several measures are taken. Most often, local Extension agents call farmers who do not return their forms. The farmers are either reminded to return their forms or the census information is gathered over the telephone. If funds permit, Extension agents also visit the farmers and solicit the census information in person.

The data compiled from the forms are used to put together and publish statistical totals of production, sales, and acreage, at the county, state, and national levels. These totals are used for annual crop and livestock estimates. Additionally, service agencies that work with farmers, such as Cooperative Extension and Farm Service Agency, use census information to design programs and offer services and products to producers who need them. More important, Congress employs these same data in considering and implementing farm legislation. Major resource allocations to the counties and states are made on the basis of the information gathered in the agricultural census.

Immigrant Hispanic/Latino Farmers and Agricultural Census Participation

Hispanics/Latinos--mainly Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants--are the largest group of ethnic-minority farmers in the country. By far, they outnumber other immigrant groups, such as Cambodians and Ethiopians, who are also becoming farmers in unprecedented numbers. One of the largest concentrations of Hispanic/Latino farmers is found in the Southwest, but their numbers are also increasing outside of this region. In the Midwest and South, for example, Mexican immigrants--many of them ex-peasants and farm workers--are replacing aging White and African American producers whose children are not staying on the family farm but moving on and pursuing non-farm careers.

Our USDA-funded project, "Farmwork Transition to Farm Ownership" (grant number 00 68-3A75-9-41), provides insights on the reasons for a possible undercount of Hispanic/Latino farmers in the agricultural census (Garcia & Marinez, 2002). We sought to find out whether Hispanic/Latino farmers in Van Buren County, Michigan, were using USDA programs. Working through local contacts and social networks, we found all of the Hispanic/Latino farmers in the county (the

majority of who were of Mexican-origin). Thirty-one out of the 33 were interviewed using an open-ended interview guide. Additionally, Extension agents and staff of the Migrant/Bilingual Education Program of the Van Buren Intermediate School District proved to be a source of valuable information regarding Hispanic/Latino farmers in the area. Our final report, which includes a detailed discussion of our field methods and findings, is posted on Michigan State University's Extension Web page at <web1.msue.msu.edu/home/ifo_resource.htm>.

Possible Participation Barriers

Despite their eligibility, we found that the Mexican immigrant farmers, particularly recent arrivals, do not participate in USDA and Extension programs. In fact, the majority had little or no contact with local Extensions. Based on these findings, we suspect that the immigrants, particularly the newcomers, are not participating in the agricultural censuses. We believe the following to be barriers to their participation:

- **Missing from USDA Mailing Lists:** Surprisingly, we found that the majority of the recent Mexican immigrant farmers were not on the mailing lists of Cooperative Extension or Farm Service Agency--lists used by the USDA to mail agricultural census forms.
- **Limited or No Knowledge of Agricultural Censuses:** Many of the immigrant farmers, particularly newcomers to farming, are also not familiar with agricultural censuses. They are not aware that the censuses are held every 5 years and that all farmers are to participate.
- **Language and Illiteracy Problems:** Many of the immigrants are monolingual Spanish speakers who do not comprehend the English language. They also have limited or no formal education in their native language and, as a result, may be unable to read and write in Spanish. These language and literacy constraints may discourage immigrants from completing English language agricultural census forms and mailing them as instructed.
- **Apprehension about USDA:** Some immigrant farmers prefer not to deal with USDA, fearing that irregularities on the farm, such as the improper storage of pesticides and other chemicals, will be discovered. They also suspect that state assistance comes with strings attached. Believing this, they keep their distance from government agencies, irrespective of their needs.
- **Immigration Status:** Recently, as a result of the public backlash against immigrants and the call for excluding them from federally funded programs, some immigrant farmers, who are not U.S. citizens but legal permanent residents, are under the misconception that they are not to participate in the agricultural census, a federal government undertaking. Related to immigration is illegal judicial status; that is, residing and working in the country without proper immigration documents. These individuals live a clandestine existence and do not divulge their identity or location to government agencies for fear of deportation.
- **Presta Nombres:** Another possible barrier is *presta nombres* (lending one's name). In this practice, family members with good credit obtain loans on the behalf of kinsmen and good friends who are ineligible. On paper, the loan holder appears as the farmer when in reality it is someone else who is farming. The agricultural census form is mailed to the loan holder as opposed to the actual farmer.
- **Informal Farming Arrangements:** Similarly, informal farming arrangements among immigrant farmers may be another obstacle. In these arrangements, one or two individuals appear as the sole owners on property deeds and other documents, when, in fact, there are others, usually kin, who are also farming on the property. They pool their resources, but farm and market their crops as independent producers.
- **Farmers as Farmworkers:** We have uncovered cases where producers, who are also farm laborers, consider themselves farmworkers because a significant portion of their income is derived from farm work. However, a close look at their farm production and sales reveals that they are also farmers and, given their farm sales, should be included in the agricultural censuses.

Some of these possible barriers are similar to those identified by the Census Bureau in its decennial censuses. Census studies (e.g., Brownrigg & Martin, 1992; Garcia, 1992; 1995) specifically designed to determine the causes of census undercounts among minority populations found that limited or no knowledge of the census, language and illiteracy problems, fear and apprehension of government agencies, and immigration status keep Hispanics/Latinos and other minority groups from participating in census enumerations and contributes to their undercount.

A Hispanic/Latino Farmer Alternative Enumeration

To assess the participation of Hispanic/Latino farmers and, more important, to improve their inclusion in future agricultural censuses, an alternative enumeration is needed. This enumeration--a Hispanic/Latino Farmer Alternative Enumeration--should have two basic objectives:

- To examine the omission of Hispanics/Latinos and
- To develop strategies for improving their inclusion.

Ideally, it should be conducted as soon as possible after Agricultural Census 2002 in order to capture all Hispanic/Latino farmers who were farming during the enumeration and target farm operators as defined in the census, i.e., persons who run the farm, making the day-to-day decisions, and produce \$1,000 or more in agricultural products (crops and livestock) on the farm, which are sold or normally would have been sold during the year under consideration (NASS, 2002b). A delay in implementing the alternative enumeration may miss farmers who were farming in 2002 but have quit the business altogether or moved on to another region.

The Census Bureau's Alternative Enumeration

The alternative enumeration should be modeled after the Ethnographic Evaluation of the Behavioral Causes of Undercount Project, successfully carried out by the US Census Bureau during the 1990 decennial census. The objective of that project was two-fold:

- To assess the degree of undercounts in minority populations in Census 1990 and
- To discover the reasons for the undercounts

In all, 24 sites nationwide--representing different ethnic minority populations--were selected for the project. The sites were entire census tracts within cities or rural areas, or parts of tracts if they covered an extensive geographical area. Anthropologists, who had conducted ethnographic or qualitative research at the sites and were well familiar with the local residents, were selected as researchers.

Concurrently or immediately after Census 1990, they gathered information on the size (i.e., number of members) and the composition (i.e., the relationship of the members) of all the households living in both conventional and non-conventional housing. Traditional ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and informal interviews, were used to gather the data. Garcia, one of the authors of this article, was a researcher in this project (Garcia, 1992), and he has also participated in other census studies designed to locate and enumerate Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants and migrants (Garcia, 1995; 2001).

The household data gathered in the alternative enumeration--names, ages, and the relationship of the household members--were compared with similar information recorded in census forms. The researchers were provided with printouts of the information on record for each household. If a household was missed altogether in either the alternative enumeration or the official census, the researcher was required to find out why this occurred. Additionally, any discrepancies in the household information gathered in either of the censuses, such as omitted household members or an inconsistency in the relationships of the household members, were to be explained. For detailed information about the Census Bureau's alternative enumeration project see Brownrigg and Martin (1992).

Hispanic/Latino Farmer Alternative Enumeration and Agricultural Census 2002

Similar to the Census Bureau's 1990 alternative enumeration, a Hispanic/Latino farmer alternative enumeration should be carried out nationwide after Agricultural Census 2002. However, given current financial constraints, a more modest undertaking may be more realistic. Instead, three or four sites in different parts of the country should be selected for pilot alternative enumeration. Care should be taken to include regions with an increasing number of new immigrant farmers, given that they are the largest group of new Hispanic/Latino farmers.

Culture-sensitive measures should be employed in locating and contacting Hispanic/Latino farmers in the selected alternative enumeration sites. Flyers and other mailings to get the word out do not work. Direct contact as opposed to indirect means should be used. Face-to-face relations are important in the culture of Hispanic/Latino farmers, particularly among the immigrants. The researchers or alternative enumerators should contact the farmers in person--visiting them in their homes or on their farms--and map their social networks. These networks in turn should be enlisted to get the word out about the alternative enumeration and to convince as many immigrant farmers as possible to participate in this worthwhile project.

Information that will allow the researcher to identify a Hispanic/Latino farmer in an agricultural census form should be gathered in the alternative enumeration. Essential information for this task is:

- Name of the Hispanic/Latino farmer
- His/Her address
- Agricultural sales
- Number of years in farming
- Type of crops and livestock sold
- Acreage holdings
- Ownership of acreage

This basic information will allow the researcher to identify a Hispanic/Latino farmer and to see if he or she participated in Agricultural Census 2002. As with the Census Bureau's alternative enumeration, omissions of farmers and discrepancies in the information gathered in both the alternative enumeration and the agricultural census should be noted and explained. The explanations are essential if we are to develop strategies for getting immigrants to participate in

future agricultural censuses.

There may be USDA and farmer concerns about non-USDA researchers viewing non-aggregated data from agricultural census forms. The possible breach of confidentiality and privacy will worry some farmers. There were similar concerns in the Census Bureau, but, with proper safe guards in place (e.g., keeping Census information under lock and key or traveling to Suitland, Maryland, to view files in the Census Bureau's facilities), the researchers of the alternative enumeration project were granted permission to view unpublished census data. They were hired as Census Bureau consultants and required to take an oath (similar to one taken by all federal employees) and obligated to refrain from discussing confidential Census information with anyone outside of the project.

Conclusions

Hispanic/Latino immigrants are entering farming in unprecedented numbers. Many are not familiar with the agricultural census and its mission. This lack of knowledge, together with limited or no contact with USDA, keeps many from being included in the census. How many are not participating? We just do not know.

What is certain is that the omission of Hispanic/Latino farmers keeps NASS from coming up with an inaccurate profile of this growing farmer population, and in turn, a skewed profile prevents USDA from developing programs that serve these farmers. It also keeps Agricultural Extension from adequately advocating for and serving the needs of Hispanic/Latino immigrant farmers.

There is growing evidence that these immigrant farmers can benefit from USDA and its many agencies. Many of them are becoming indebted financially as they use their credit cards or high interest rate loans to farm and, in the worst of cases, falling into bankruptcy and losing their farms and homes. This problem and others identified in our study can be addressed effectively through USDA programs, but first we must know their actual numbers and needs. We strongly believe that new programs are not needed, at least, not until Hispanic/Latino farmers start to use existing USDA programs and we learn if they are beneficial.

Following the lead of the Census Bureau, we need to assess to what degree there is an undercount of minorities, particularly immigrants, in the agricultural census. In the last two decennial censuses, the Census Bureau has addressed this shortcoming by developing campaigns and strategies to get the word out to ethnic minorities, immigrants, and other hard-to-reach populations.

USDA needs to take similar action. It needs to assess the omission of minorities and immigrants in the agricultural census and determine the causes behind this problem. With this information, USDA and Extension will be able to develop strategies for including as many of them as possible in agricultural censuses. The census data on Hispanics/Latinos in turn will allow them to develop a more accurate profile that will serve to develop and implement needed programs.

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