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Trying to Break Down Resistance to the Census

By FERNANDA SANTOS

“Ni hao!” the young volunteer exclaimed in Mandarin, greeting the stranger on the other side of an apartment door in Queens. First there was silence, but then the door cracked open, and the volunteer announced the reason for her visit.

“We want to talk to you about the census,” the volunteer, Luzheng Huang, said.

The stranger, Boshi Lai, 81, who spoke no English, smiled and ushered Ms. Huang inside. He showed Ms. Huang his census form — still in its official government envelope and still blank. Mr. Lai said he had no idea what he was supposed to do with the questionnaire, so he had ignored it.

One way or another, similar scenes have played out countless times over the past few days across New York City, as volunteers did whatever they could — cajole, implore, reassure — to convince people that being part of the great American count was the right thing to do.

Their efforts had a sense of urgency because Thursday was the day by which the [Census Bureau](#) wanted every resident to complete the 10-question form that will provide the data for the 2010 census. The bureau knew that New York City, with its huge immigrant population and its bevy of unorthodox and sometimes illegal living arrangements, would be a difficult challenge

The early returns were not encouraging.

By Wednesday, 32 percent of the surveys mailed to New York City addresses had been returned, compared with 52 percent for the country as a whole. Stacey Cumberbatch, the city's census coordinator, said she was disappointed with the rate so far, adding, "It should be higher, and we have to work to get it higher."

The work of volunteer groups helping the census is critical, and their success has often been measured in small victories. It might take hours to persuade Mexicans who illegally share an apartment on Staten Island to put all of their names on the form or days to persuade day laborers in western Queens that they should participate in the survey.

Illegal immigrants must be told, sometimes repeatedly, that the Census Bureau does not share information about individuals with any other government agency. And some immigrants and other New Yorkers need an explanation about why their taking a few minutes to fill out a form could translate into better schools, hospitals and transportation.

"People are afraid, but most of all, they are confused," said Ms. Huang, 25, one of about a dozen volunteers from the MinKwon Center for Community Action who spent seven days going door to door in Flushing, where Mr. Lai lives, to talk to Chinese and Korean residents about the count.

At Masjid Aqsa, a Harlem mosque, Imam Soulemaine Konaté said that many of his congregants, French-speaking African immigrants who know very little English, threw away their census forms. He said they thought the envelopes addressed to "resident" were meant for someone else.

In Jackson Heights, Queens, volunteers for New Immigrant Community Empowerment who talked to day laborers on street corners often heard them say, "Eso no es para mí," or "This is not for me," dismissing the census as something important only for citizens and legal immigrants, said Valeria Treves, the group's executive director.

In Flushing, which has the largest concentration of Asian immigrants in the city, the participation rate in some areas was as low as 25 percent, and after a few hours with the MinKwon volunteers, it was easy to see why. Aside from the linguistic isolation and fear of deportation, many people had no idea of the census's purpose, why it matters or who should fill it out.

"The lady at the library told me that the more people filled out the forms, the more money the community

would get for transportation, but how come there are cuts to transportation?” Rubina Khani, who is from Pakistan, asked Ms. Huang and her partners — a volunteer named Sandra Choi and MinKwon’s executive director, Steve Choi (he is not related to Ms. Choi).

Ms. Khani’s neighbor on Barclay Avenue, a man from Afghanistan, said he had not received the form. Upstairs, Jenny Li, 33, who arrived in New York from China five months ago, said in Mandarin through an interpreter, “I don’t know English, so I throw it out.”

The MinKwon volunteers set out to knock on every door in a relatively small but densely populated area. Each team had at least one Mandarin and one Korean speaker, and they all followed a carefully laid out script. If people said they had lost or discarded their questionnaires, for example, volunteers should instruct them to wait for replacement forms in the mail.

“One important thing to remember is to always offer them the freebies,” Mr. Choi said before the volunteers headed out on Monday night, their bags stacked with can openers and pens bearing the 2010 census logo.

Sometimes, doormen barred them from entering buildings. Other times, they got in, but were received with hostility or indifference. Voices could be heard coming from inside an apartment at 142-09 Barclay Avenue, but no one answered when Ms. Huang knocked and bellowed her friendly “Ni hao,” or “hello.”

“That’s part of it, but we focus on the people who listen to us,” said James Hong, an outreach coordinator at MinKwon who led the campaign. “That’s what keeps us going.”

In the sixth-floor apartment of Mr. Lai, who needed help filling out his census form, Ms. Huang sat on the floor, explaining the questionnaire line by line to him and his wife, Mli Hu, who is 73. It took them about 25 minutes in all; they stumbled when they had to write their names in Roman letters.

“America,” Mr. Lai said, flashing a smile and a thumbs-up sign. He and Ms. Hu then clasped their hands together and bowed, thanking Ms. Huang, Ms. Choi and Mr. Choi for their assistance.

The team stepped outside, and when the door closed behind them, they moved down the hallway and knocked on another door.

Sam Roberts contributed reporting.

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