

# Evaluating the Performance of Vignettes in Focus Groups and Cognitive Interviews in a Cross-Cultural Context

Mikelyn Meyers, Yazmín García Trejo,  
Lucia Lykke, & Nicole Holliday, US  
Census Bureau

# Review of Literature

- Vignettes generally used to evaluate survey questions, particularly for rare situations or sensitive topics (Willis 2015, Martin 2004).
  - Cross-cultural research has been done regarding the comparative performance of vignettes in cognitive interviews in certain languages (Goerman & Clifton 2011, Sha & Pan 2009, Sha In press)
- There is little cross-cultural research comparing the performance of vignettes across pretesting methodologies (e.g., focus groups & cognitive interviews) in languages other than English.**

# Comparing Data from CIs & FGs

	Cognitive Interviews	Focus Groups
Speed	More time consuming	Faster
Cost	More costly	More cost effective
Level of detail	More detail per respondent	Less detail at individual level
Social desirability	1 respondent + 1 interviewer	6-12 respondents + moderator

# Research Question

1. How do answers to a vignette administered during cognitive interviews [CIs] compare to focus groups [FGs] for a given language?
2. Can the richness of the data in focus groups approximate the richness of the data in cognitive interviews for a given language?

# Methodology

- The same vignette was administered in 7 languages by RTI, RSS, and Census researchers in CIs and in FGs
- Rs given vignette on hand out and it was read aloud
- Half of Arabic focus groups were split by gender. Korean focus groups were split by age.

Language	Cognitive Interviews	Focus Groups
English	15	4, N = 38
Spanish	10	6, N = 58
Chinese	15	4, N = 36
Korean	15	4, N = 38
Vietnamese	15	4, N = 36
Arabic	15	4, N = 29
Russian	15	4, N = 39

# Vignette

Mrs. Smith is responding to the census questionnaire for her household. She lives with her son, who pays the mortgage, but she doesn't pay anything. How should she respond?

4. Is this house, apartment, or mobile home — Mark  ONE box



Owned by you or someone in this household with a mortgage or loan? *Include home equity loans.*



Owned by you or someone in this household free and clear (without a mortgage or loan)?



Rented?



Occupied without payment of rent?

# Common Misinterpretations

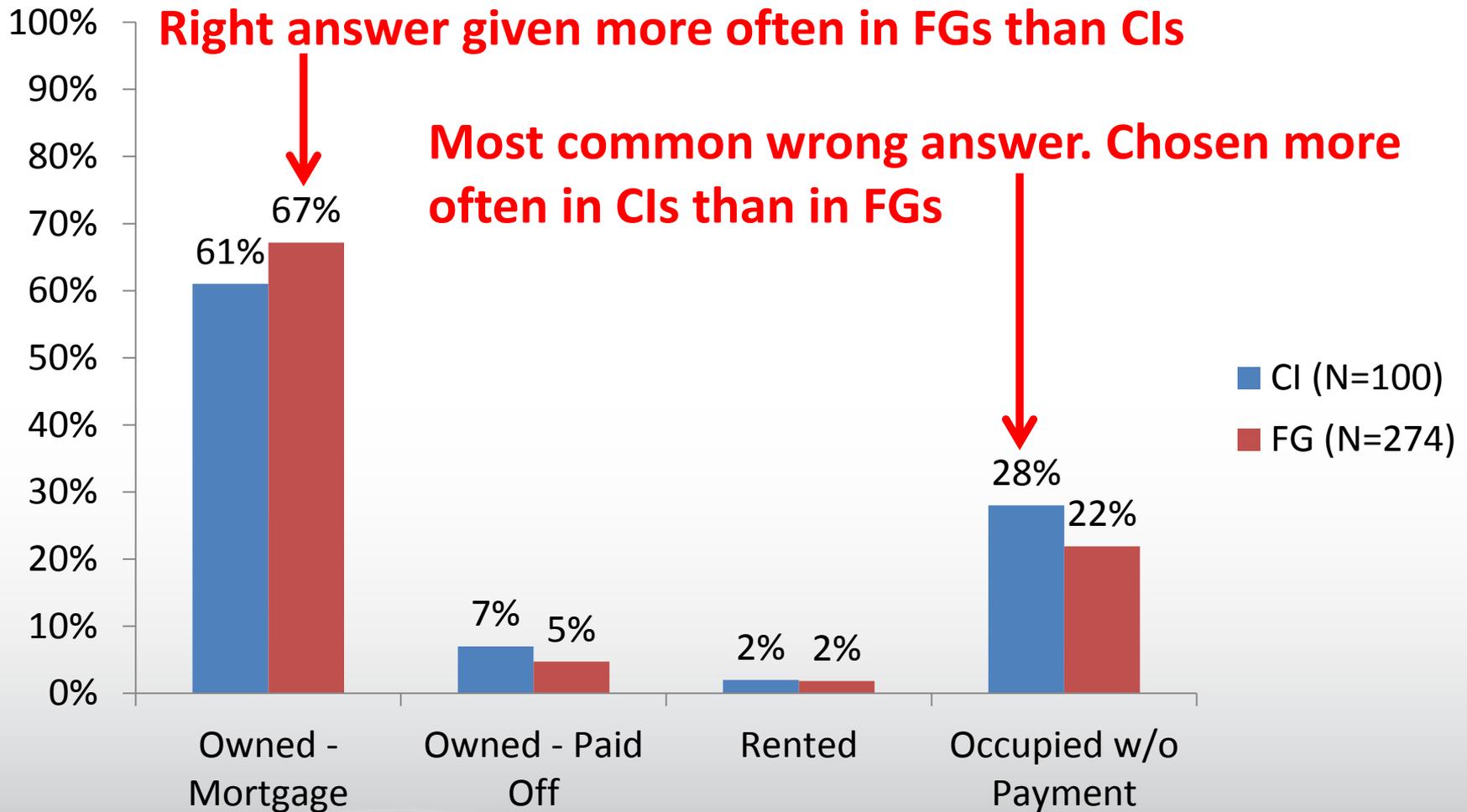
1. Focal point of interest (e.g. The housing unit?  
The respondent?)
2. Complicated terms (e.g. “occupied without  
payment of rent”)
3. Dual intent of question (i.e., capture  
ownership status AND payment status)
4. Context-related cultural barriers to  
understanding US housing concepts

# Coding

- 2 coders reviewed CI and FG summaries to code:
    - Response to vignette
    - If response was right or wrong
    - Qualitative rationale given for response
  - **Goal:** To measure how effective the vignette is in uncovering problems with the survey question
- **Wrong answers tell us more about problems with the survey question than right answers**

# Variation in Answers between CI & FGs

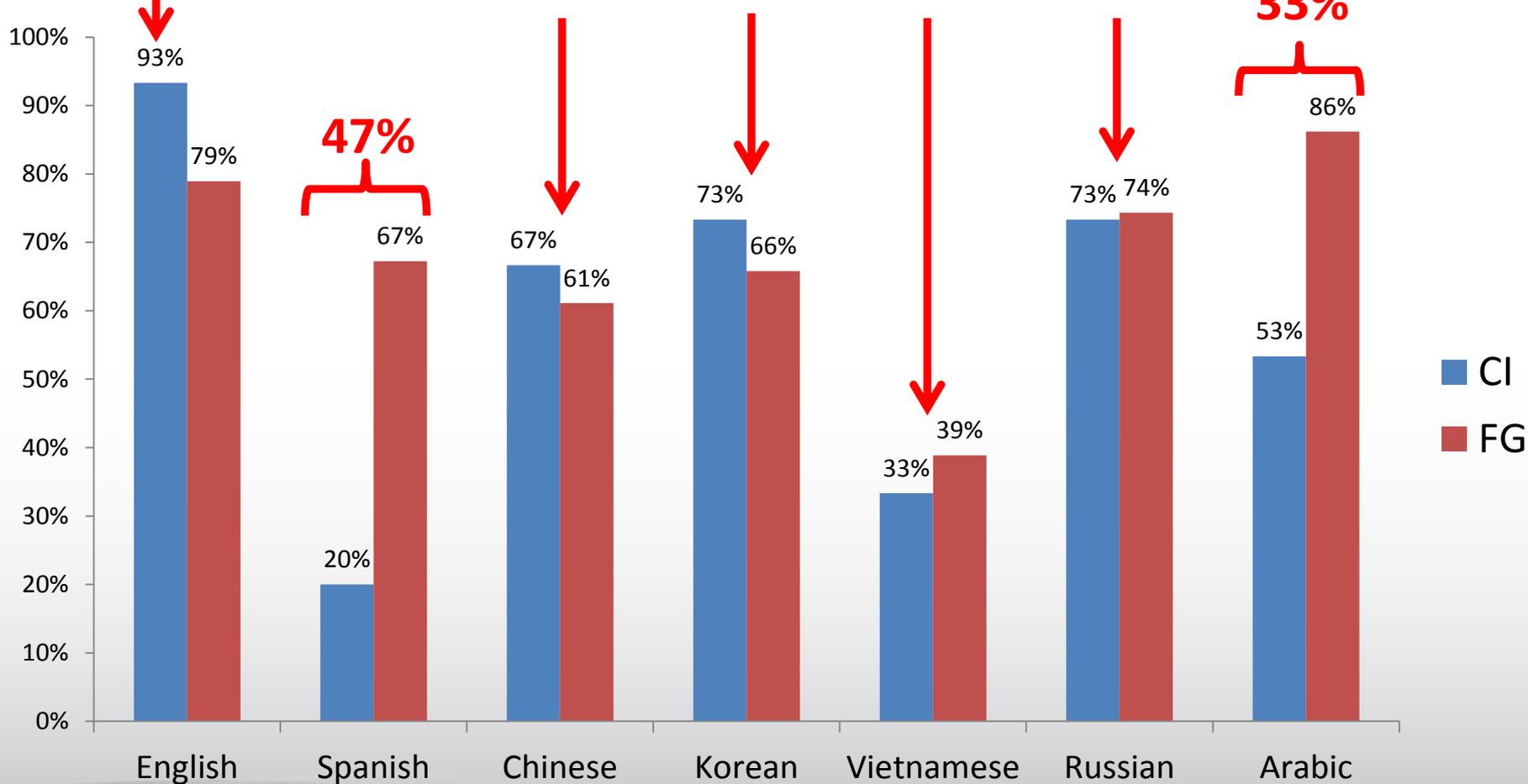
# Responses by CI & FG (All Languages)



# Selected Response Options by Language

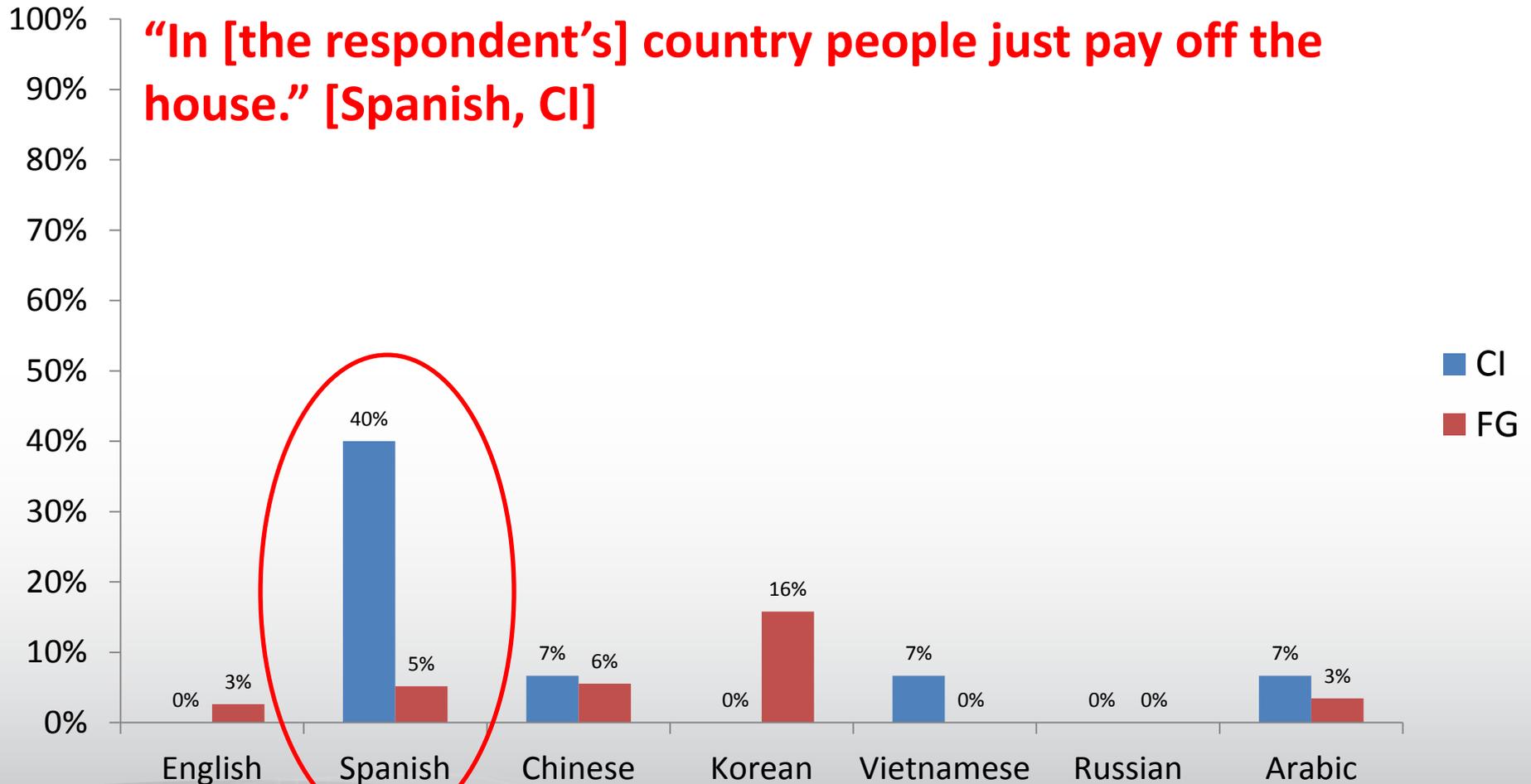
# Owned w/Mortgage

In Spanish and Arabic, there was a wide discrepancy. Only FGs doing FGs would have hidden problems that came out in CIs  
In Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Russian, CIs than FGs  
difference between methods was not so pronounced



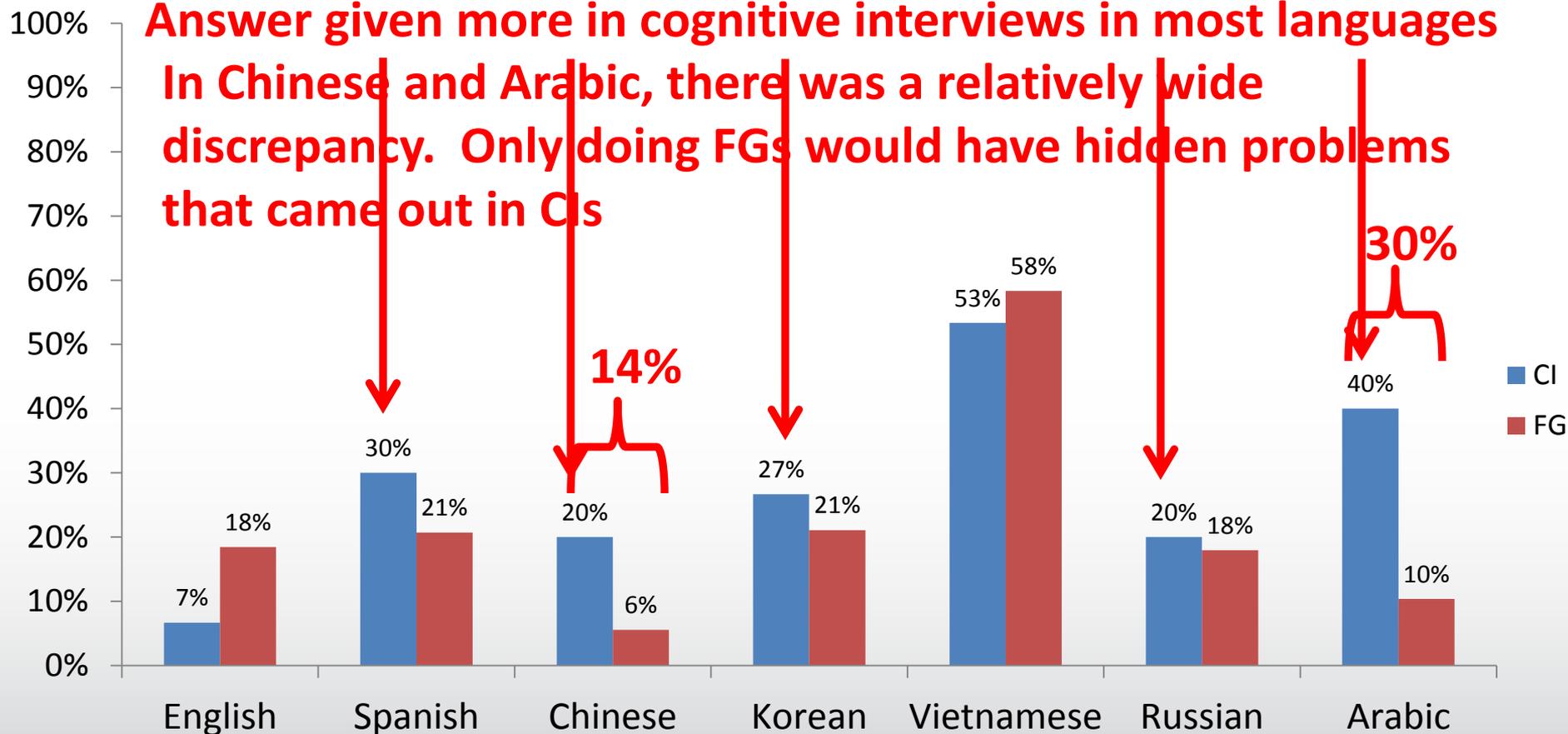
# Owned – Paid Off

**“In [the respondent’s] country people just pay off the house.” [Spanish, CI]**



# Occupied w/out Payment of Rent

**Answer given more in cognitive interviews in most languages**  
**In Chinese and Arabic, there was a relatively wide discrepancy. Only doing FGs would have hidden problems that came out in CIs**



# Role Playing in the Vignette

- “If I were in the situation in my age, I would choose [owned with a mortgage]. But I should pretend that I am this grandmother? A grandmother will simply think about the fact [that] she doesn’t pay. So, I think she will choose that [occupied without payment option].” [Korean, FG]

# Limitations

- Variation in level of detail found in summaries across languages/interviewers
- Small N sizes in general
- Vignette hand-outs were collected after Focus Group discussion, and showed evidence that respondents changed answers, so these were excluded from analysis

# Discussion

1. How do answers to a vignette administered during CIs compare to FGs for a given language? ***Generally, administering vignettes in CIs resulted in Rs volunteering more wrong answers than in FGs, which uncovered more problems with the survey question.***
  - Only doing FGs may not uncover problems with survey questions that emerge in CIs, particularly for Arabic, Spanish, and Chinese.
  - In English and Korean, vignettes were more effective in FGs than in CIs.

# Discussion

2. Can the richness of the data in FGs approximate the richness of the data in CIs for a given language?  
***Probably not for most non-English languages.***

- Maybe if we had collected hand-outs in FGs before discussion
- Maybe if we made FGs more homogenous
- Rs seem to lack familiarity with vignette task in non-English languages – more research needed

# Evaluating the Performance of Vignettes in Focus Groups and Cognitive Interviews in a Cross-Cultural Context

Mikelyn Meyers, Yazmín García Trejo Lucia Lykke, & Nicole Holliday, US Census Bureau

For more information, please contact [mikelyn.v.meyers@census.gov](mailto:mikelyn.v.meyers@census.gov)

## *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.*

# Works Cited

- Buckley, J. (2008). Survey context effects in anchoring vignettes. URL <http://polmeth.wustl.edu/media/Paper/surveyartifacts.pdf>.
- Goerman, P., & Clifton, M. (2011). The Use of vignettes in Cross-Cultural Cognitive Testing of Survey Instruments. *Field Methods*, 23(4).
- King, G., Murray, C. J., Salomon, J. A., & Tandon, A. (2004). Enhancing the validity and cross-cultural comparability of measurement in survey research. *American political science review*, 98(01), 191-207.
- Martin, E. (2004). Vignettes and respondent debriefing for questionnaire design and evaluation. *Methods for testing and evaluating survey questionnaires*, 149-171.
- Sha, M. and Pan, Y. (2009). The Use of vignettes in evaluating Multilingual Questionnaires. *AAPOR Proceedings*.
- Sha, M. (In Press). The Use of Vignettes in Evaluating Asian Language Questionnaire Items. *Survey Practice*.
- Willis, G. (2015). *Analysis of the Cognitive Interview in Questionnaire Design*. New York: Oxford.

# Auxiliary Slides

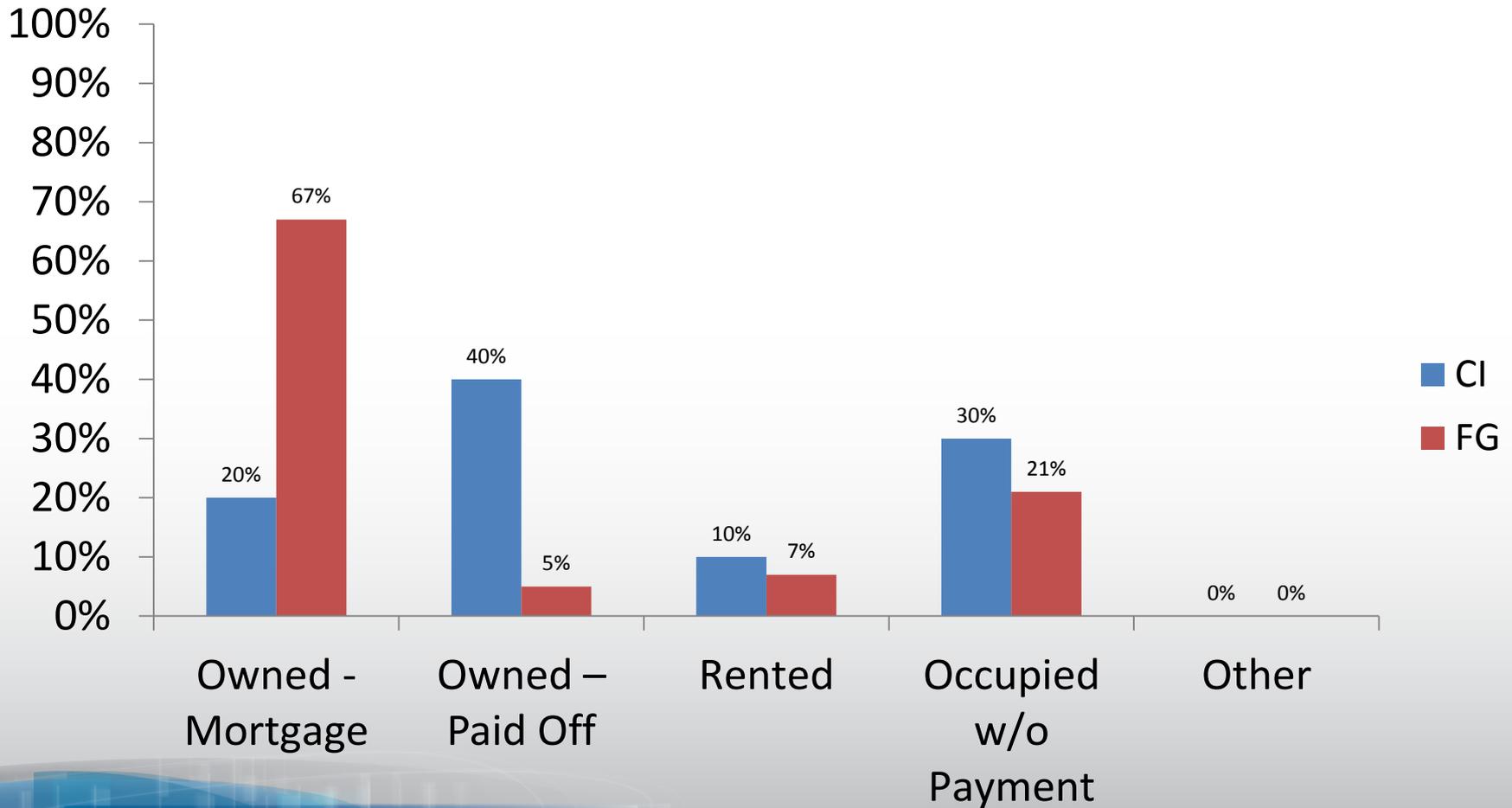
# English

(CI N=15, FG N=38)



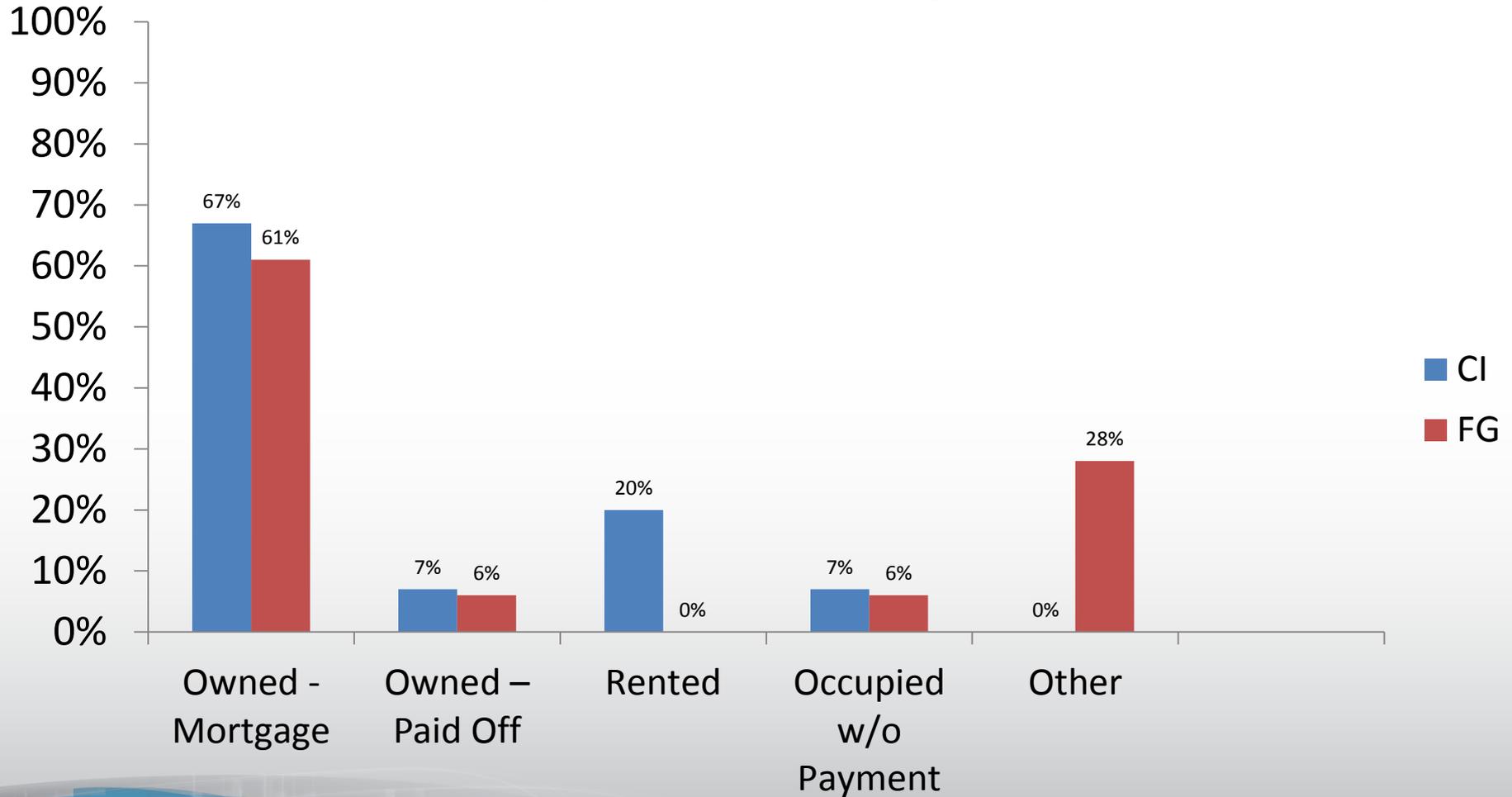
# Spanish

(CI N=10, FG N=58)



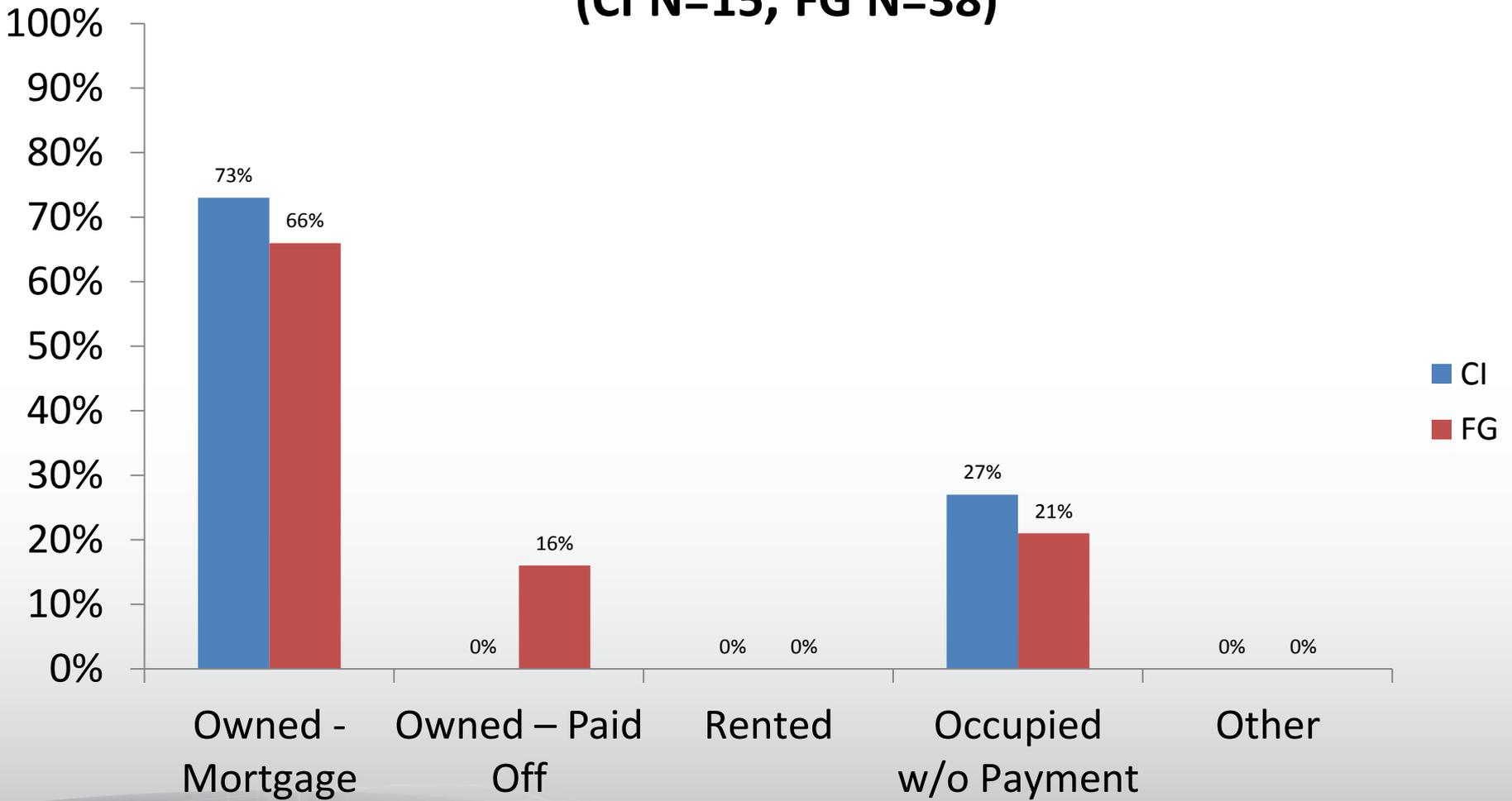
# Chinese

(CI N=15, FG N=36)



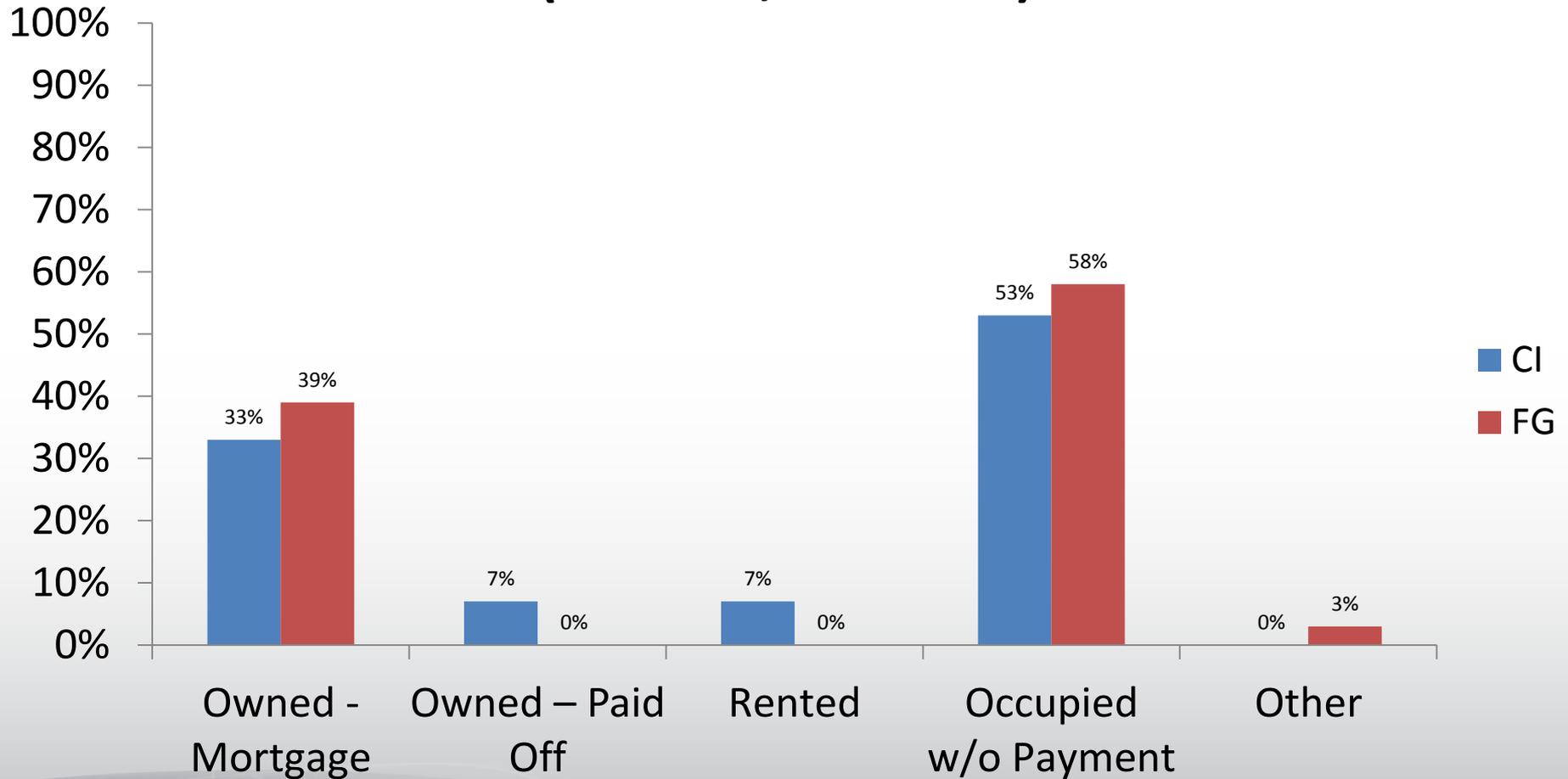
# Korean

(CI N=15, FG N=38)



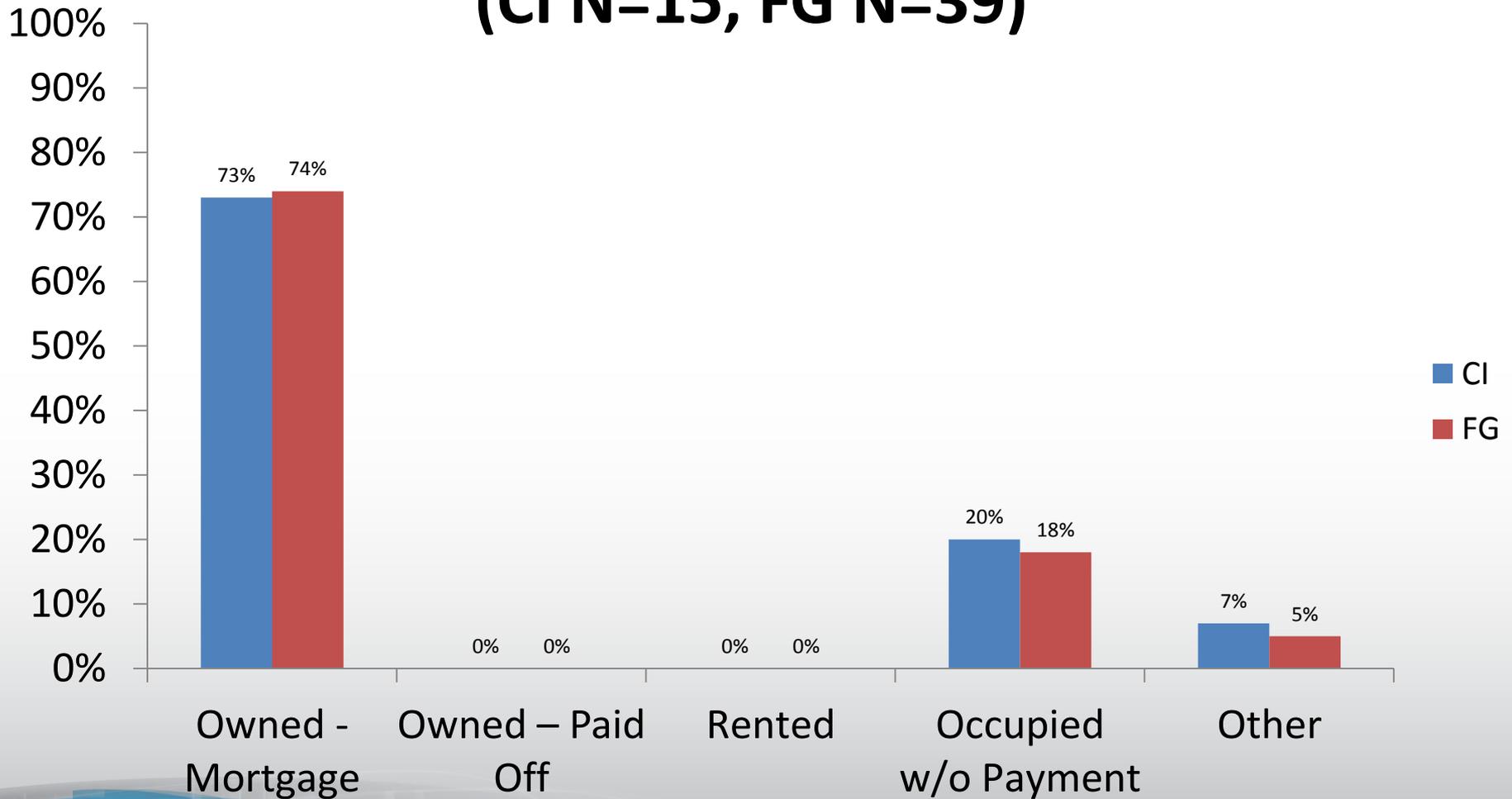
# Vietnamese

(CI N=15, FG N=36)



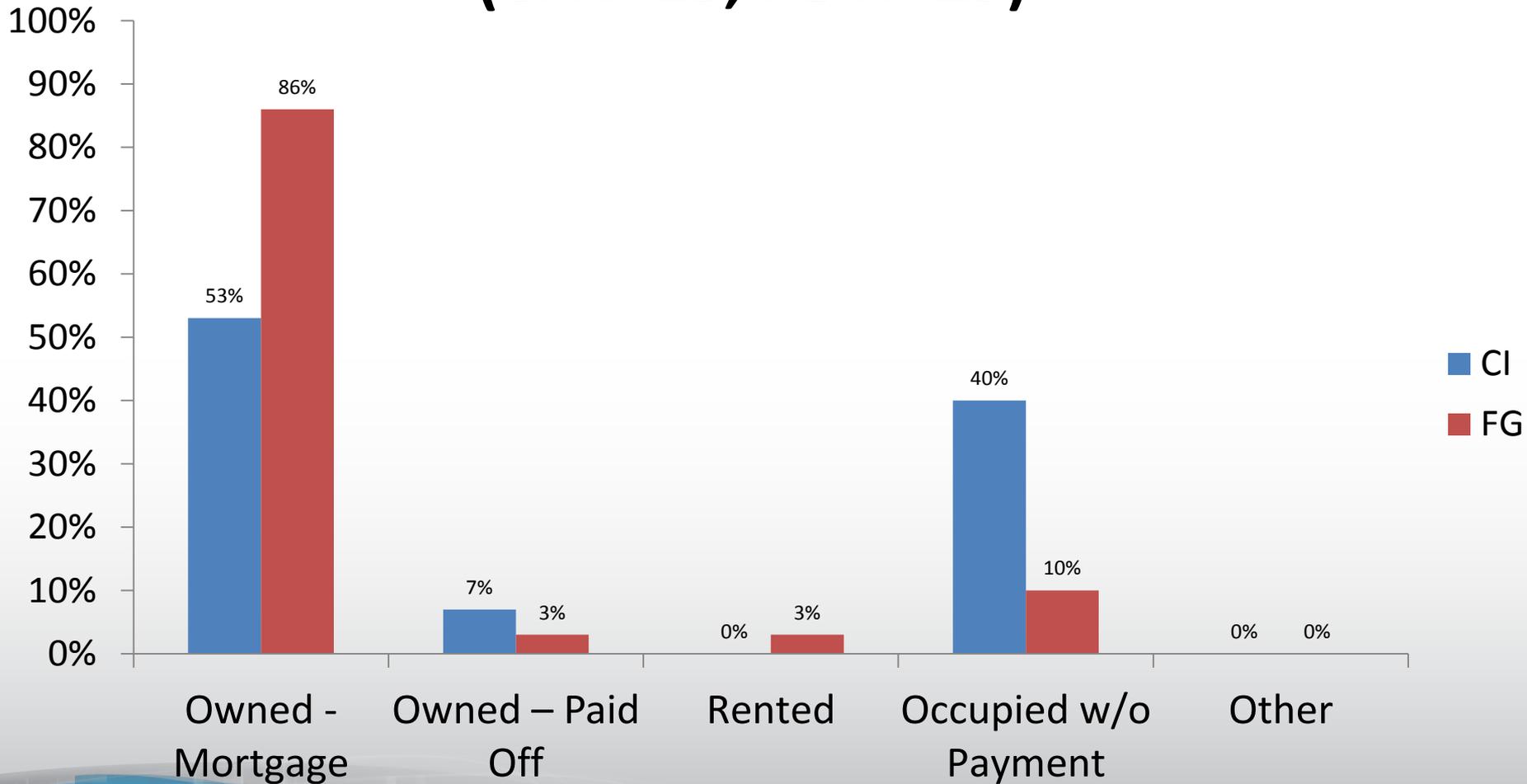
# Russian

(CI N=15, FG N=39)

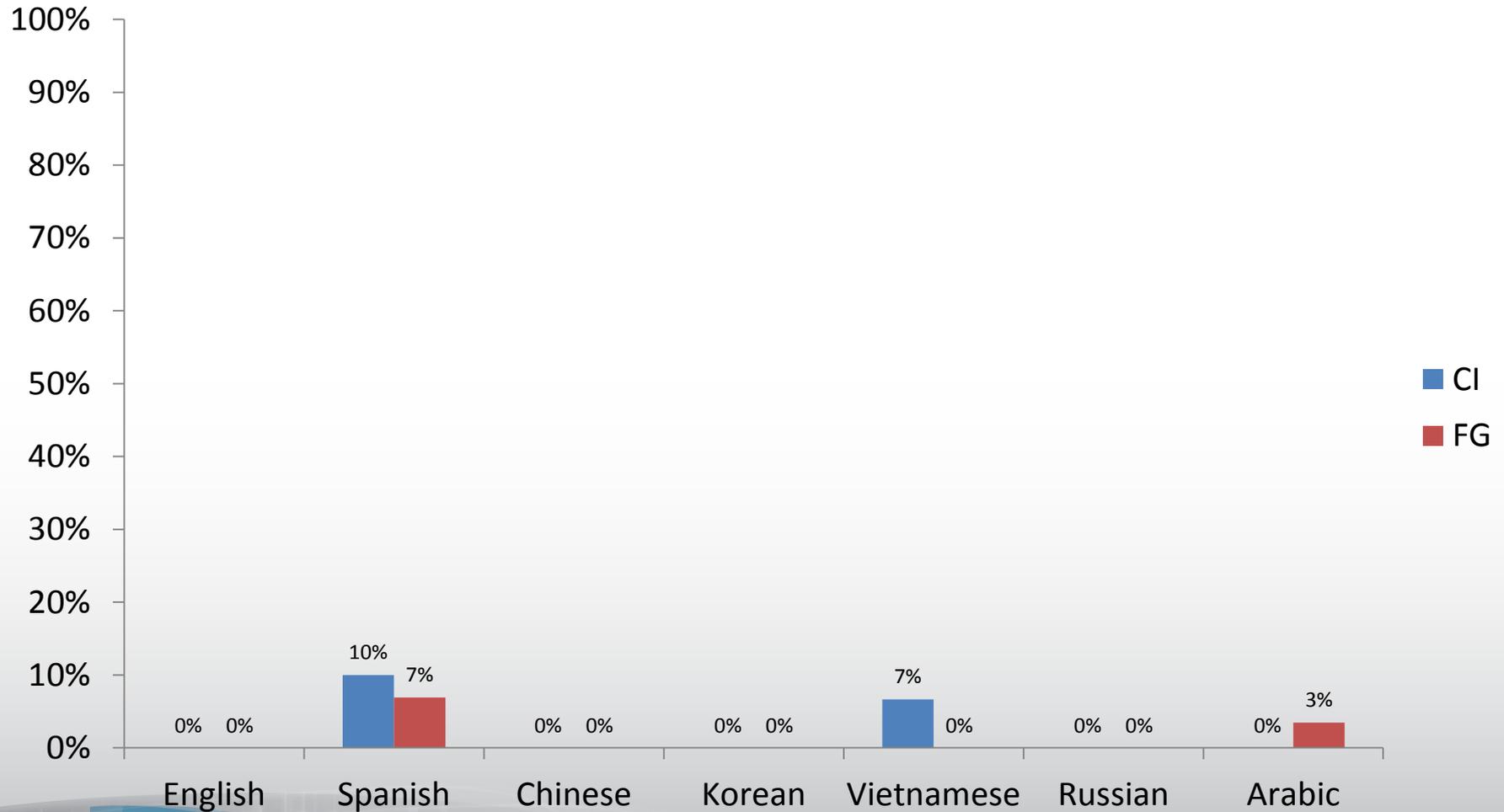


# Arabic

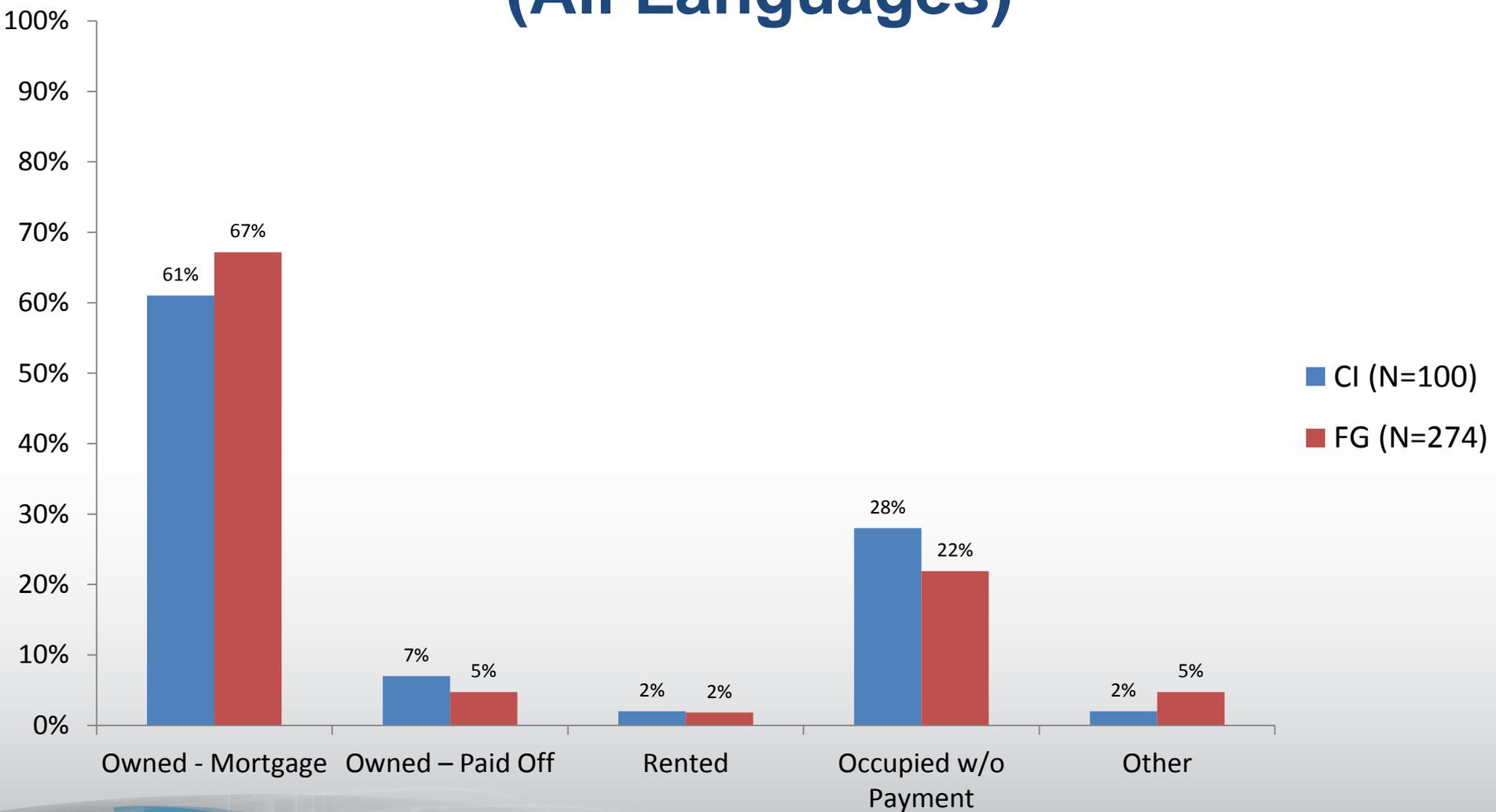
(CI N=15, FG N=29)



# #3: Rented



# Responses by CI & FG (All Languages)



# Refusing to Answer

- “They questioned the intent of this question, saying that the census was about population count and not about personal property. They commented that it was not the government’s business to know whether a particular house was owned or rented....[They] commented that there were no questions on personal property in a census in China or Taiwan.”  
[Chinese, FG]

# Misunderstanding the Focal Point

- “Mrs. [Smith] is filling out this form and she would choose [occupied without payment]; whereas, her son would choose [owned with a mortgage], if he were to fill out this Census form.” [Vietnamese, FG]

# Occupied w/out Payment

- ““There should be no case like that’ because...no one can live in a house for free. People live in a house either by renting or by owning and even after you pay-off your mortgage, you still have to pay monthly property taxes.” [Korean, CI]

# Ownership

- Owned - Paid Off: “Respondent said that the house was already paid off...she wasn’t sure because in her country people just pay off the house.” [Spanish, CI]
- Owned w/Mortgage: “[Mrs. Smith] lives here and does not pay. Her son pays the mortgage and her son is...the head of the household.” [Chinese, CI]