

La Nueva Mayoría

By David R. Jones



Census Undercount Threatens City's Funding and Representation

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The 2010 Census figures are in, and it looks as though New York City has been undercounted again. If we are to believe the Census count, the city's population – a total of 8,175,133 - grew in the last decade by 166,855 residents, or about 2.1 percent while the number of homes and apartments increased by 170,000. Considering that more housing units were built than the growth of residents in the past decade – each housing unit in the city averages about 2.37 people – the Census numbers seem inconceivable.

Census numbers are important because they are used to determine both federal aid and political representation in Congress and the state Legislature over the next 10 years. An undercount could end up costing the city a representative in Congress, several state legislators, and billions in funding over the next decade.

Possible Challenge

Mayor Bloomberg is contemplating a legal challenge. The city attempted a legal challenge to the 1990 Census results that were probably undercounted by as much as 400,000 residents. It was unsuccessful. But when I was in charge of the city's efforts during the 1980 Census, we were able to get a recount of the Bronx and Brooklyn that saved a congressional district for the city. So it can be done.

Over the years, New York City has suffered census undercounts on a regular basis. The primary reason is the large number of immigrants living here. Even though there have been great efforts by census takers and local officials, a number of immigrants, some of them illegal, are inevitably overlooked. Fear of giving any information to a government agency keeps many immigrants from taking part in the Census. This feeling is probably exacerbated by the anti-immigrant sentiment that has permeated the political discourse over the years since 9/11 and has been exploited by some politicians to explain a virtually jobless recovery that the nation is now experiencing.

In addition to immigrants, those New Yorkers living in poverty are often reluctant to give out information because of a serious distrust of government authorities. Many poor New Yorkers are doubled up in housing units and are afraid of eviction. And those living in public housing may worry about a former felon living with them, a breach of public housing rules.

There have been arguments in favor of adjusting the Census figures by statistical sampling of populations where an accurate count has been difficult to obtain. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled against this approach. But the Supreme Court over time has been known to reverse its decisions, so statistical sampling could be an aid to future census counting.

Latino Growth

The 2010 Census revealed that the city's Latino population grew by 8 percentage points to 29 percent. Blacks comprise 23 percent of the city's population, down from 28 percent in 2000. Whites are down 3 percentage points to 33 percent. With Asian Americans comprising 13 percent of the population, people of color now account for about two-thirds of the city's residents.

The city is continually shortchanged by both Congress and the state Legislature when it comes to funding. New York provides billions more in taxes every year than it gets back in public monies. The Census undercount is one reason for this situation. The city must do all it can to ensure that the count in New York is accurate. We must not give Washington or Albany another reason for shortchanging the people of New York City.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 165 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.