

**REDUCING THE UNDERCOUNT IN THE 2010 CENSUS:
THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE**

**Joseph J. Salvo
Director, Population Division
NYC Department of City Planning**

Testimony submitted to the Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, and Federal Services and International Security, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, September 23, 2008.

Good afternoon, Chairman Carper, Senator Coburn, and members of the subcommittee. I am Dr. Joseph Salvo, Chief of the Population Division at the Department of City Planning of the City of New York. On behalf of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak about issues affecting undercount in the 2010 Census. It is important to emphasize, that while I do represent the interests of New York City, the issues I discuss in my testimony are relevant for many small, medium and large municipalities, as well as for a number of the nation's rural areas.

Regardless of your political leanings or assessments about the past performance of the Census Bureau, I think we can all agree that the Bureau is struggling right now with the daunting task of trying to engineer a successful 2010 Census within a very tight timeline. This includes attempts to deal with recent procedural changes in non-response follow-up, technological hurdles involving the block canvass, and less-than-adequate testing of some operations in the dress rehearsal. At this point, those of us on the outside looking in are concerned that the objective of the census not be reduced to "making a census happen," but instead should be focused on "creating a high-quality enumeration" that counts all Americans. All of the Bureau efforts to make the census happen "on time," will be for naught if it fails to enumerate the population of the nation *accurately*.

We have heard the Census Bureau's pledge that the 2010 Census will fully enumerate the population of the nation. I am here today to ask the subcommittee to hold the Census Bureau to its pledge in two areas of concern to those of us who are avid users of the data:

1. **The Census Bureau needs to provide us with their plan regarding how it intends to mail questionnaires to millions of housing units that lack apartment information; information that links a questionnaire to occupants of a housing unit (remember, names are not used to mail census questionnaires).** This affects many communities throughout the nation, where mail delivery may not "cut it" for census purposes.

This problem has been acknowledged for three decades, in the work of no less than three separate expert panels convened by the National Academy of Sciences. And, to its credit, the Census Bureau has undertaken extensive research in the post-2000 period to explore the best ways of dealing with apartments that are not labeled, in preparation for the March 2009 address

canvass. Indeed, Lester Farthing, the Director of the New York Regional Census office and I have had regular discussions about this issue. In fact, frustration is the order of the day in our conversations, over a resolution that we both believe is at hand, if only the creative energies of the Census Bureau staff are permitted to triumph over bureaucratic hurdles.

The irony is that a consistent listing of housing units in the address canvass will save a lot of grief later on, when census questionnaires are returned, and especially when non-response follow-up is conducted. If apartment designators are inconsistent or nonexistent, follow-up enumerators will not be able to do their job well. Right now, the danger is that, with all of the pressure on the Bureau to keep to its timeframe and with the block canvass of the nation fast approaching, this innovative work may fall by the wayside, with a serious ripple effect on the enumeration itself. A recent GAO report points out that the Census Bureau has repeatedly overestimated the productivity of field workers in the address canvass in urban and suburban areas.¹ They point out that the costs of the address canvass can dramatically increase if the Census Bureau cannot accurately anticipate the number of housing units per hour that can be examined. The problems that exist in small multi-unit buildings can complicate the address canvass and greatly increase costs in many areas, if the Census Bureau fails to implement a strategy to deal with these problematic addresses.

Therefore, I would like to request that the subcommittee ask the Census Bureau if they plan on implementing a procedure in the block canvass to label problematic housing units in small multi-family buildings and, if so, when the details of their plan will be released.

The Census Bureau has built a list of addresses that can serve as the basis for mailing questionnaires and following-up on households that fail to respond. In addition, they have provided local governments with opportunities to conduct a review of this list, by way of the Address List Improvement Act of 1994. It is critical for census purposes that every person be tied to an address, either a residence or facility (in the case of group quarters population). In order for the Census to enumerate someone, there must be a link to an address. This makes

¹ "Census Bureau's Decision to Continue with Handheld Computers for Address Canvassing Makes Planning and Testing Critical" (GAO-08-936) July 2008.

sense, since reapportionment and redistricting are both tied to residence. When this residence is an apartment in a building, exact apartment information is required to place the questionnaire correctly in the hands of the occupants (and to go to that apartment when the occupants fail to respond). The Census Bureau has conducted research on the problems that occur when apartments in small multi-unit buildings do not have apartment numbers, but has yet to announce their plan for conducting the enumeration in places with many of these buildings.

Throughout the nation, there are many neighborhoods with buildings where the mail is delivered using the name of occupants as a “pointer,” for the postal worker and for residents. Since census questionnaires do not have any name information, these questionnaires rely on other indicators for accurate delivery. This is usually an apartment designator, a number or other indicator of apartment location (right front, basement, rear left etc). When the Census Bureau builds its Master Address File (MAF) for use in the decennial census, it tries to place identifiers on each apartment in a building. In the case of large buildings with a bank of mailboxes, the task is simple: create a list using the indicators on the mailboxes. Over time, however, strategies among families to make ends meet have resulted in the subdivision of small buildings to accommodate two- three- and four or more families. Listing them in the address canvass is a challenge because doors may not be clearly marked or may not be marked at all (for some examples, see the illustrations at the end of this document). Since mail is delivered using names, the postal service may not have apartment numbers. When the Census Bureau sends mail to these places, the results are often chaotic, since the link between the questionnaire and the housing unit is misleading or nonexistent. Further, when follow-up enumerators go to these places attempting to get responses from those who failed to respond by mail, they frequently have trouble trying to figure out which questionnaire belongs to each apartment.

The research conducted by the Census Bureau has been fairly extensive, involving consultation with local governments, field assessments, and the examination of procedures already in use by Statistics Canada. A solution is at hand, but the details of this procedure have not been made public. Also, there has been only limited reference to the effect of this problem on the productivity and cost estimates from the Dress Rehearsal in San Joaquin, California and

Fayetteville, North Carolina. Even if a thorough evaluation were to occur, however, the results from these sites probably cannot be generalized to the 2009 address canvass for many cities of the nation. About 10 percent of San Joaquin's 223,000 housing units are found in small multi-family buildings (those with between two and nine housing units). Even in Stockton, the largest city in San Joaquin County, about 14 percent of its 97,000 housing units were estimated to be in small multi-family buildings. While hardly trivial, these numbers fail to convey the severity of this problem for address canvassing in many other places in the nation where housing subdivision has been adopted by families who are subsidizing the costs of ownership with tenants. Of Chicago's 1.2 million housing units, over 500,000 units or 43 percent of their housing stock is in buildings that were identified as having between two and nine housing units. Of the 255,000 housing units in Boston, 131,000 or 51 percent are in small multi-family buildings. And, in New York City, of 3.3 million housing units, more than 996,000 or 30 percent were in small buildings. Clearly, in these places and in many others, the Census Bureau will face productivity and accuracy challenges in the address canvass operation of small buildings that can jeopardize accuracy and increase costs.²

- 2. The Census Bureau needs to be made to deliver on its promise to form meaningful partnerships with local governments.** Even if the Census Bureau has a perfect list of addresses, there are no guarantees that people will respond. The messages delivered by even the most impressive national advertising and communications campaign will be useless unless mechanisms are in place to bring that message directly into the neighborhoods of the nation. This requires an extensive effort, one that may be jeopardized in the current crisis environment.

To their credit, the Census Bureau staff does have a plan to facilitate partnerships with local governments and other organizations that are capable of delivering the census message at the grassroots level. Ask local census officials or members of local government who have participated in previous censuses, and they will tell you that the census message can be exciting and powerful. This message does not come by way of a national campaign ad on

² The estimates just provided may themselves be problematic, since the Census Bureau does not currently have an established procedure in their canvassing and survey operations to accurately label housing units in small multi-family buildings.

television, but by way of pro-active efforts by local community leaders, who understand the power of census numbers, and how they can be translated into benefits for their communities and a voice in decisions at all levels of government.

It is hard to overstate the importance of pro-active community involvement in the census. Threats to privacy have become more real than ever, suspicion of government is commonplace, fear of authority among many of the nation's newcomers is real, language and cultural barriers are common, and economic stress is playing out all over the nation. This situation is ripe for a high level of undercount. And, as has been the case historically, the undercount is most likely to occur among groups and in places that are most in need of the benefits offered by the census: fair shares of political representation and government resources. Now, with more communities of this nation becoming ethnically diverse, the challenge to local census officials and to local governments is unprecedented.

The only way to overcome this is with messages, facilitated by the Census Bureau, provided *by* local neighborhood residents *for* local neighborhood residents. "Buy-in" is best achieved by hiring *local* census workers and accessing their ties to the community. The partnership network needs to involve thousands of partnership specialists throughout the nation, with an adequate budget for promoting activities to engage local communities, ranging from tee shirts or buttons at a community event to participation in an ethnic parade. These are the little things that can make a real difference and translate the census from an abstract concept to a locally purposeful activity.

Therefore, I am asking the subcommittee to hold the Census Bureau to its word by requiring that they demonstrate how they plan on reaching out to the locals, in detailed terms. The subcommittee should also ask the local governments themselves and organizations that represent these local governments how they are working in concert with the Census Bureau to take ownership of the census message. Moreover, details on the regional allocation of resources, the timing of delivery of these resources, and the game plan for local media presentation of the census message (especially regarding the plan for ethnic media) should be made available to local governments involved in census preparations.

I want to commend the subcommittee for holding this hearing and their appreciation for the important role that the decennial census plays in the lives of all Americans.

The following four pictures provide examples of buildings that contain housing units without apartment numbers. The first two pictures show a building with three apartments, each with its own separate entrance. Since there are no apartment numbers, the Census Bureau needs to create labels when the building is examined in the address canvass, so that each questionnaire can be “attached” to each individual apartment. These need to be labels that the postal service can use to deliver the questionnaires (e.g. Apt 1R for 1 Right, 2 for second floor etc.).

In the second example, we see two pictures of a larger building with five doorbells and one mailbox, which is common in places where people sort/retrieve their own mail by name of occupant. Putting all five census questionnaires into the single mailbox without apartment designators can cause confusion when trying to “attach” a questionnaire to each apartment, especially when non-response follow-up is required. The Census Bureau can avoid this problem by issuing specific instructions to field workers in the address canvass operation on how to label each apartment using descriptors (e.g. basement, 1F for 1 Front, 2B for 2 Back etc.).