STATEMENT BY

JOSEPH SALVO
CHIEF DEMOGRAPHER
POPULATION DIVISION
NYC DEPARTMENT OF CITY PLANNING

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CIVIL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

ON

"GETTING COUNTED: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CENSUS TO STATE AND LOCAL
COMMUNITIES"

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Good afternoon Chairman Raskin and members of the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties. My name is Dr. Joseph Salvo and I am the Chief Demographer for the Population Division for the New York City Department of City Planning. On behalf of Mayor Bill de Blasio, I am pleased to testify before your subcommittee today to discuss the profound impact that the accuracy of the census count would have on New York City.

Research shows that people are increasingly reluctant to respond to surveys. Concerns about confidentiality, daily reports about sharing of data and breaches of privacy, along with an environment of hostility toward the nation's immigrants, all make response to the decennial census increasingly tenuous. Moreover, the proposal to add a citizenship status question to the 2020 Census has further exacerbated concerns among an already apprehensive public.

Self-response is the gold standard in the decennial census. For 80 percent of the U.S. population in 2020, the Census Bureau will initially ask for a response via the Internet; 20 percent will get a paper questionnaire to mail back. Some number in both these groups will opt to respond via telephone. Regardless, the past has shown us that self-response is the most accurate and efficient way to collect data in the census, and that a decrease in self-response gives rise to numerous issues regarding census counts and data quality. Therefore, encouraging self-response is the best way to ensure an accurate count. When communities fail to self-respond, they are subject to the Census Bureau's Non-Response Follow-up (NRFU) operations, all of which contain error in various forms. Areas with low self-response are more resistant in all stages of the enumeration, require more energy and resources and a longer enumeration process, with the result that fewer people are eventually counted and the data that are collected are less accurate.

Generalities projecting the impact of a census undercount abound: on political representation, redistricting, and the allocation of federal dollars. A census undercount causes inequities that are more tangible as well.

The Census Bureau imputes characteristics of persons who fail to self-respond or respond in NRFU. This is what happened in areas of east central Brooklyn in 2010 when the Census Bureau engaged in what is called large-scale imputation of data for persons and households. As many as 1 in 6 persons in census tracts in communities in/around Brownsville, East New York, and Canarsie were imputed, meaning that they had to have their data created by a statistical algorithm, based on the characteristics of their neighbors. While these statistical algorithms have come a long way, it is a maxim in statistical science that populations which fail to respond are inherently different from those that do respond, leading to errors in the characteristics data and, if enough of this occurs, to wholesale inaccuracy in population counts.

I would like to present you with an on-the-ground feel for how local government uses census data, and talk about what happens if a decennial census fails to produce accurate counts of the population. I draw my examples from experience gained over 30 years working with census data in city government. Finally, it is important to say at the outset that the census is much more than just a sheer number and more than a simple count. It also contains other information that can help us plan schools, craft policy, direct city resources generally and when issues involving public health or disaster strikes.

Let's begin with the fact that the Population Division, which I lead, disseminates census data to the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). The data forms a base for DOHMH's calculation of rates and the annual revision of population groups that serve as the base for calculation of those rates. In 2010, problems in NRFU in the Astoria area of northwest Queens and in a corridor from Bay Ridge to Gravesend on the southern perimeter of Brooklyn led to an undercount of population, especially among children, making the calculation of rates of disease suspect. DOHMH was unable to use the data in many of these neighborhoods. We were required to adjust for undercount to allow DOHMH to make a proper assessment of public health risks. In addition, DOHMH conducts surveillance surveys to track progress toward the reduction of chronic diseases. Many of these surveys rely on sampling and weighting designs which are linked to the American Community Survey or ACS (which is based on the decennial census). A prime example is tracking the prevalence of uninsured New Yorkers as a means of targeting programs for health insurance enrollment.

We regularly provide data and consultation to the New York City Department of Education (DOE) and the School Construction Authority (SCA). For example, DOE relies on our analysis of recent changes in the composition of the population in neighborhoods to inform decisions on how to change the zones around schools as conditions demand. Are there new entrants to the neighborhood and what are their characteristics or how is the population of the neighborhood changing, especially regarding the number of children?   To answer these questions, we use data from the decennial census, the ACS and vital statistics to advise the DOE about proposed boundary changes.   For the SCA, we project the number of school children who are likely to be associated with new housing, using decennial census data, along with counts of recently-constructed housing, to provide guidance.

Our population that is 65 years and over is projected to increase nationally and in New York City over the next 20 years. As part of the *Age-friendly NYC* initiative a partnership between the City of New York and the New York Academy of Medicine, my division projected counts of older populations by neighborhood. These data are used to target neighborhood services for the aged, and to help government agencies, elected officials, health care and social service providers, planners, funders, and researchers, understand and analyze spatial and socio-demographic patterns and trends involving the burgeoning older populations of the city. This neighborhood-level approach is based – first and foremost – on data from the 2010 decennial census. Inaccuracies in population counts from the census and from the ACS compromise our ability to target current services, to determine priorities, and to ensure a more accurate projection of older population for future years.

Finally, New York City relies on demographic data from the census and from the ACS to make determinations about vulnerable populations in coastal flood zones around the city -- pre- and post- Sandy. Key to this effort are estimates of persons with mobility limitations and other disabilities, especially older populations requiring special assistance during natural disasters. Teams at NYC Emergency Management evaluate these numbers on a continuous basis as part of plans for mitigation in times of natural disasters and in other emergencies, such as the activation of cooling centers for vulnerable populations when an extreme heat wave strikes.

I believe these examples of how New York City uses census data puts into clear perspective why we cannot afford a failed census, which can happen if the NRFU "door" opens too wide. Now, while I hope the citizenship question is not included in the 2020 census questionnaire, I believe that damage to self-response has already been done. Unfortunately, the Census Bureau may be

ill-equipped to deal with what may be an unprecedented NRFU workload, given what continues to be planned reductions in NRFU field staff.

This is my 4th decennial census and I am very familiar with the challenges we've faced in the past, some quite formidable; but, I can say without hesitation that outreach in the interest of promoting self-response has never been more important than it will be in the 2020 Census. New methods of data collection, privacy concerns, anti-immigrant sentiments, and a general suspicion of government activities all threaten response -- especially self-response. Motivating all New Yorkers to see the value of the census on a personal basis, as part of a robust program that emphasizes the importance of standing up for who we are as New Yorkers is more important than ever.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.