

With a congressional seat in the balance, City Planning prepares for Census count

By Conor Skelding

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A few years ahead of the 2020 Census, New York City is looking to ensure New Yorkers aren't undercounted, which could cost federal funding and possibly a congressional seat.

"Essentially, New York state is most likely going to lose one seat in the next Congress," Joseph Salvo, the city's chief demographer, said in an interview. "We're not growing as fast as the rest of the country."

Salvo, who directs the Department of City Planning's Population Division, is currently leading an effort to make sure the U.S. Census Bureau misses as few occupied homes as possible when it compiles its final address list.

"We are likely to lose one seat. The big point, though, is the difference between an accurate census and a census that is compromised by an undercount" he said. "We could prevent the loss of the second seat."

Undercounting could also mean the loss of billions in federal funding, Salvo said. For about a year, field teams from his office have been identifying addresses that the U.S. Census Bureau may miss.

"We need to examine places in the city where we think the addresses are problematic for one reason or another," he said.

In February 2018, the Census Bureau will send DCP the address list it on which it will base the 2020 count. DCP then has until June to send them corrections. This is the 'Local Update of Census Addresses' or LUCA program Salvo said. The list could number as much as 3.6 million addresses.

"We need to do a lot of prep beforehand," he said. "We only have 120 days to look at those addresses. That's the 'LUCA period.'"

Salvo said that City Planning is "agnostic" about whether housing units, or their occupants, are legal or off the books, and said the department is prohibited by law from using Census data for any other purpose.

"We just want to make sure people get counted," he said. "We don't render any judgments on them. We just make sure the unit makes the list."

He also said that while the priority is to avoid missing units, his office will report discrepancies that work in the other direction.

"Our first priority is certainly to list those apartments that are missing. But if we see something else, we do look into it," he said.

"In 2010, there was a serious undercount in southern Brooklyn and in northwest Queens, essentially in Astoria, because the Census Bureau had a problem operationally," he said. "They were erroneously labeling housing units as vacant. We have places in Astoria where the number of vacant units between 2000 and 2010 went up in the hundreds, which anybody who knows the city, is not a possibility."

A Census spokesperson didn't immediately respond to an inquiry asking for more information about the Astoria count.

Planning director Marisa Lago said in an interview that the department recently met with the Census Bureau and officials from the tri-state area to share information.

"It was a sharing of expertise of teaching the — tricks gets the wrong sense — teaching the tools that we know," she said. "I think it's hard to overstate the importance of the Census."