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Survey Hints at a Census Undercount in New York City

By [SAM ROBERTS](#)

“We demand a recount,” declared Assemblyman Rory I. Lancman, a Democrat from Queens.

The Brooklyn borough president, Marty Markowitz, pronounced himself “flabbergasted.”

“The numbers are dead wrong,” said Senator Charles E. Schumer, “and it makes you wonder if the [Census Bureau](#) is living on a different planet.”

After learning that the population of Queens had increased by a mere 1,300 people in 10 years, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg proclaimed: “As they say in Brooklyn: Fuhgeddaboutit!”

This crescendo of scorn was touched off by the [Census Bureau](#)’s decennial verdict that though New York City’s population reached a record high of 8,175,133 in 2010, the gain of 2 percent, or 166,855 people, since 2000 fell about 200,000 short of what the bureau itself had estimated.

Public officials were incredulous that a city that lures tens of thousands of immigrants each year and where a forest of new buildings has sprouted could really have recorded such a puny increase.

How, they wondered, could Queens have grown by only one-tenth of 1 percent since 2000? How, even with a surge in foreclosures, could the number of vacant apartments have soared by nearly 60 percent in Queens and by 66 percent in Brooklyn?

Now, an informal house-to-house New York Times survey of three representative square blocks where the Census Bureau said vacancies had increased and the population had declined since 2000 suggests that the city’s outrage is somewhat justified. In those blocks alone, census takers appear to have missed dozens of New Yorkers and to have overestimated the number of vacant apartments.

In Brooklyn, on a block near Ocean Parkway between Midwood and Gravesend, where the census said nearly half of the 148 homes were vacant, a resident said the only vacancies were in a new 33-unit apartment building that is partially occupied.

“There are not a lot of empty buildings,” said another resident, Ralph Shamah. “They’re too expensive to be empty.”

On another block in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, the number of vacancies on the block recorded by the Census Bureau far exceeds the number of unsold condominiums in a new apartment

building. Superintendents of other nearby buildings say those had few vacant apartments when the census was conducted.

And on a block of two- and three-story homes in East Elmhurst, Queens, where the census recorded 26 fewer occupied apartments and 20 more vacant ones (defined as habitable but with no one living there) than a decade earlier, a real estate agent said a one-family house had been illegally divided and had 14 residents — evidence of demand for housing.

“The garbage men have to work double because there’s so much additional garbage,” said the agent, Robert Butts.

The magnitude of any undercount is uncertain. The Times survey did not replicate the methods the Census Bureau uses, including mailing questionnaires and making up to five visits to addresses that have not returned the forms. As a last resort, a census worker will consult with a landlord or neighbors and make a best guess about whether a home is occupied.

Often, though, owners of illegally divided houses are reluctant to disclose the number of tenants, who tend to include people who are in the country illegally and are leery of providing any information to the government. A visit from Times reporters may have proved less intimidating to landlords and residents.

City officials say as many as 80,000 residents appear to have been systematically overlooked in crowded immigrant neighborhoods like East Elmhurst and Jackson Heights in Queens and Sunset Park, Bay Ridge and Bensonhurst in Brooklyn.

Classrooms in those neighborhoods are overcrowded and “for rent” signs are rare. Some demographers say the number of vacancies was not all that anomalous, given some overbuilding before the recession and a surge in foreclosures. But of 500 houses or apartments on the three blocks surveyed by The Times, only four were in foreclosure or had been seized by the mortgage holder, according to an analysis conducted at The Times’s request by the [Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy](#) at New York University.

Relying on earlier census surveys and evidence from the Postal Service and other sources, the city plans to formally ask the Census Bureau next month to review its findings. Census officials have acknowledged that a processing glitch is one possibility for any pattern of population declines and increased vacancies in specific neighborhoods.

At stake is more than just restoring the city’s wounded pride: federal aid is based on population.

“Why would so many units be there and be illegally subdivided if there was no demand for housing?” said Joseph J. Salvo, director of the department’s Population Division, adding that the city had done “extensive field research, work that is corroborated by local data sources on foreclosures, new construction and rents.”

In East Elmhurst, in the square block The Times canvassed, bordered by 99th and 100th Streets and 25th and 27th Avenues, the census concluded that the population had shrunk by 14 percent, from 516 to 446.

One census taker who not only lives in East Elmhurst, but was also assigned to make follow-up visits to neighborhood addresses to determine if they were occupied, acknowledged the challenges of trying to find people who do not necessarily want to be found.

“The ones that were illegal, people were uncomfortable giving information,” said the census taker, Michael Williams. “Even though I’d inform them that the information was confidential, they were afraid.”

“We did the best we could,” he added.

Jeff Silverbush, a real estate agent in East Elmhurst, said: “There are certain areas in Queens where half of the houses seem to be for sale. That’s not the case there. You don’t find a huge amount of empty houses around there.”

One woman who answered the door at a single-family home on 99th Street said she never returned her census questionnaire. “I don’t understand much English,” said the 30-year-old woman, who did not want to give her name. In Brooklyn, off Ocean Parkway, a block of mostly one- and two-family homes bounded by East Second and Third Streets and Avenues O and P, recorded an increase of 65 vacancies, to 70 from 5, and a decline in population of 57, to 283 from 340.

One reason for the increase in vacancies was the construction of the Venetian, a 33-apartment building on Avenue P that replaced a row of one- or two-family homes. Occupancy started early last year, and the ornate building is still about one-third vacant. But that would account for fewer than half of the vacancies recorded by the Census Bureau on the block, which is home mostly to immigrants from Russia and Syria.

“You want to see a vacant building?” said Jacob Cohen, 25, who has lived with his wife on East Third Street for two years. “That’s a vacant building,” he said, pointing toward the Venetian. “That’s the only one.”

Nearby, in Sheepshead Bay, the block bounded by Coyle and Bragg Streets and Shore Parkway and Emmons Avenue registered an increase in vacancies to 52 from 2 and a loss of 153 residents, from 547 to 394.

Among the mostly two- or three-story homes are two seven-story apartment houses that contain about 150 apartments, only a few of which were vacant in April 2010. At 3165 Emmons Avenue, a new 43-apartment condominium named Bay Breeze is now nearly half-full.

Theresa Scavo, the chairwoman of Community Board 15, doubted that the block had lost more than 150 people since 2000 and suggested instead that many of the Russian immigrants who

moved to the neighborhood in recent years had not filled out forms or answered the door when census takers visited.

“How do you get a decrease in population,” she said, “when 10 years ago the buildings were not as crowded?”

Noah Rosenberg, Tim Stelloh and Rebecca White contributed reporting.