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1. Government (5)
2. Health and Environment (3)
3. Justice (2)
4. Child Welfare (2)
5. Education (2)
6. education policy (1)
7. energy policy (1)
8. Environment & Energy (1)
9. foreclosures (1)
10. Dennis Wakcott (1)
11. Andrew Cuomo (1)
12. Bloomberg (1)
13. budget (1)
14. Public Education (1)
15. public schools (1)
16. Quality of Life (1)
17. Social Services (1)
18. The Economy (1)
19. Workforce & Labor (1)

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City Limits » Blogs » 10,000 Missing In Astoria? What The Stats Say

10,000 Missing In Astoria? What The Stats Say

Posted by Johann Hamilton

Tuesday, May 17, 2011

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Many people have been questioning the accuracy of the 2010 Census, which reported a 10,000-person exodus from Astoria and roughly 20,000 people moving to lower Staten Island. Although those numbers sound unbelievable, other numbers suggest that arguments can be made for or against the Census findings.

Crime in Astoria, for example, has dropped 41 percent since 2001; however, in the three years between 1998 and 2001, crime dropped 18 percent, and between 1995 and 1998 it dropped 32 percent. This means that despite the (supposed) huge drop in population from 2001 on, the rate at which crime declined decreased significantly, going from approximately 8 percent per year to 4.5 percent per year. If several thousand people left an area, would crime decline faster than before, not slower?

And what about in lower Staten Island, where despite the supposed arrival of several thousand people, the crime rate is still steadily declining? Charlene Wagner, the District Manager of lower Staten Island, said that she "couldn't comment one way or the other," and that "numbers are numbers."

Of course, crime statistics reflect factors other than population—the impact of policing, the accuracy of crime reports, economic forces. But other numbers paint a similarly confused picture.

According to the Furman Center, new apartment units authorized by building permits issued for Astoria rose from 242 in 2000 to 1,237 in 2008 to a mere 11 in 2009.

The economic downturn affects building permits dramatically, and directly. But the economy also affects transit ridership. And while subway ridership citywide increased a modest 2.3 percent from 2007 to 2010, at the Astoria Boulevard stop on the N/Q line rose 6.3 percent.

Voting in 22nd Assembly District (Astoria's district) has also been fluctuating. In 2006, 13,231 ballots were cast on Election Day. In 2010, 12,547 ballots were cast. This means that in Astoria, there was a 684-person difference between how many people voted in 2006 and how many voted in 2010. Are these figures in keeping with the loss of 10,000 people?

According to the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Astoria's community board recorded 1,062 deaths in 2009, down from 1,146 in 2000—a decrease of 8 percent over that time. That could be consistent with a loss of 10,000 people, which is about 5 percent of Astoria's Census 2000 population. But deaths citywide decreased nearly 14 percent over that period, even as the city's population increased.

Numbers might offer mixed indications, but feelings in Astoria tend to point in one direction. Lucille Hartman, the District Manager for Queens Community Board 1, which includes the Astoria, Woodside, and adjacent neighborhoods, said that in her personal opinion, the Census is plain wrong.

"Somebody did it incorrectly," she said. "I see more development going on, more family houses being replaced with multiple dwellings. I think a lot of people just didn't fill out the form or something, because going by housing alone, I see buildings going up everywhere."

Councilman Peter Vallone Jr., who represents Astoria and the surrounding communities, is also adamant that the Census cannot be correct.

"I've spent my whole life in Astoria," he said. "I've watched two family homes be replaced by ten family homes. That's the main reason I've spent five years rezoning. Apparently I've just spent five years rezoning empty buildings filled with potted plants, buildings with no people inside them."

Vallone did concede that it is very difficult to count people who do not want to be counted, such as illegal immigrants.

"[Mayor] Bloomberg can't, as mayor, be seen as a beacon for illegal immigration from all over the world, and on the other hand complain about undercounting," he said.

On the other end of the spectrum is Andrew Beveridge, a sociology professor at Queens College and New York Times consultant. He thinks there's a possibility that the 2010 Census could be fine the way it is.

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