

Department of International Health and Development



Working Paper 2007-09

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Commentary on New Orleans Population Estimates for 2007

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April 29, 2008

The Census Bureau's 2007 mid-year estimate for Orleans Parish was released on March 20, 2008. The bureau estimates a total of 239,124 persons for mid-year 2007. The Census Bureau also revised downwards its previous estimate for mid-year 2006 from 223,388 to an updated estimate of 210,198 .

The local and national news coverage last week emphasized our mayor's announcement to challenge these new estimates as too low. In my opinion, there are some very important implications of these new estimates for our city and region, and I summarize some of these below. I also explain why I think that we'd be better served focusing our energies on key problems facing our city rather than become distracted by a challenge to these new numbers.

The Census Bureau's estimate for our city for 2007 should not be challenged for three reasons. First, the Bureau's estimate appears to be much more accurate than those of the two local outfits (GCR & Associates and GNOCDC) challenging the estimate. An analysis I did of voter turnout for the fall 2007 and 2003 gubernatorial elections indicates that New Orleans' mid-year population for mid-year 2007 can be no higher than about 273,000, and the Census Bureau's estimate is on the correct side of (below) this estimate. Previous projections made by a nationally recognized research outfit with formidable in-house demographic expertise (Rand) have been far below the estimates made by our local groups. So was the most comprehensive population assessment for New Orleans completed to date, done by the LRA in 2006. While both GNOCDC and GCR are doing valuable public service by collecting and maintaining raw data related to rebuilding and repopulation, their close affiliation with the current administration (which is seeking a higher count), the absence of scientific peer-review of their methods, and their lack of in-house technical expertise in population estimation all cast doubt on the validity of their estimates. We need to view with more skepticism these very high locally-generated population estimates that are routinely released without technical documentation and are reported uncritically in the media without review by professionally trained demographers.

Second, a successful challenge is unlikely to result in a significant change. The mayor and his supporters emphasized in his press conference last week that some challenges are successful, 59 in 2006. What the group did not emphasize was that the average change in estimates from those challenges accepted from large cities (cities over 200,000 in population) was only a 2% increase. 5 of the 59 challenges resulted in no change. One resulted in a *smaller* population estimate. Given the weaknesses of the data I've seen supporting higher population counts for our city, an outcome of trivial or no change seem the most likely result from a challenge. Such a failure will likely receive a lot of national press attention, just as the mayor's announcement did yesterday. We need to realize that the sympathy and good will we've received in large measure from the rest of the country

over the past 2 ½ years is not limitless, and we can't afford to be viewed as an insatiable city seeking government funds that we are not entitled to. We need to instead focus on obtaining (and spending) government funds that we *are* clearly entitled to.

Third, having a reasonable – as opposed to an inflated – estimate of our city size has practical advantages. Put the other way, the negative consequences of inflated measures of growth provided by city boosters only become apparent long after those who solicited them have left the scene, while the rest of us remain to face the medium and long-term consequences. These consequences are likely to be substantial. As the Census Bureau pointed out when it released the figures last Thursday, it won't be until 2010 that we get a thorough count of the population of New Orleans. If we get these early intercensal estimates too high, when we do get a solid count in 2010 it will show a much lower population for New Orleans than expected. This will lead to the conclusion that we failed to attract and retain an increasing population base after Katrina – when in fact, what happened was that these exaggerated early estimates established an inflated early benchmark, making it impossible for us to demonstrate a reasonably healthy rate of return migration to our city between 2007 and 2010. The current city administration will have left office by then, leaving the rest of us to suffer the consequences for these exaggerated counts that were made early in the rebuilding process. There is no free lunch in inflated estimates, at least not for those who are here for the long haul.

Our city would be much better served if instead our city's leadership focused its energies on policies and programs that address the underlying social and economic forces that are determining our rate of re-population, forces such as violent crime.

The new Census estimates have very dire implications for the city's homicide rate. The reason is that for a given number of homicides, the smaller the mid-year population, the higher the homicide rate. Given our city's leaders' propensity to consistently understate our crime rates, it is easy to conclude that this is part of the reason why our city's administration desires a higher mid-year population count.

The Census Bureau's downward revision of our mid-year population estimate for 2006 results in an increase in our per-capita murder rate from 72.5 (already the highest in the country) to 77.1 per 100,000, a 6% increase over what we thought it was. For 2007, the Census Bureau's mid-year population estimate translates into a murder rate of 87.8 per 100,000 for New Orleans. This rate of homicide is over 50% higher now than it was in 2004 (i.e., pre-Katrina), when it was already a remarkably high 57.1 . To put these figures in perspective, other cities our size have a murder rate of about 8 per 100,000 . Our homicide rate is now 11 times higher than it is for other cities our size. Last year, we were 10 times as high. Before Katrina, we were "only" 4-5 times as high.

It is misguided and counterproductive to direct our shock and ire regarding such figures towards the Census Bureau. The homicide rate is only *mechanically* calculated from homicides and the mid-year population estimate; it *results* from decades of poverty, lack of opportunities for decent education and employment for many of our citizens, widespread drug trafficking, and a culture of violence throughout much of our city. This

lethal combination of negative social and economic forces has somehow become more potent since the Katrina flood, and our steeply rising rate of violent crime shows no signs of abating. Our city's murder rate has never been this high before, even during the darkest days of the early 1990s, when New Orleans needed (and pulled off) a minor miracle to pull out of that tailspin. Our city's current leaders and their advisors need to focus their energies on forging another one, and not get bogged down in the much easier but distracting exercise of launching a challenge to Census Bureau estimates.

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