

The census delivers good news for New York: Let's count the ways

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Despite the debate about the results of the 2010 Census, which Mayor Bloomberg credibly argues undercounted large chunks of the city, the headline news is very good - and undermines all those pessimistic forecasts about New York City.

Case in point: Almost 10 years after the Sept. 11 attacks, when most people thought this was a city without a future, the government's official count reveals that the city continues to be a magnet for people from all over the world. People did not run away, rather they continued to flow here.

In fact, lower Manhattan in particular is surging. More than 20,000 people have moved to the general vicinity of Ground Zero over the past decade. Lower Manhattan, filled with strollers and dogs, now has more than 10 preschools and 11 public and private grade schools.

Counter to popular rhetoric, New York City is not pushing out working-class minorities. Rather, we are witnessing a remarkable flow of people within the five boroughs. Households are relocating as never before from more cramped quarters to single-family homes in Canarsie, Ridgewood, the north and east Bronx, as well as in southeast Queens.

That's one of New York City's great achievements: Since the streets are safer and the schools are better, one can live a suburban life within the five boroughs. You can own a private home, have two cars - and your property taxes are far lower than in the suburbs.

While much attention is being given to the 5% decline in the city's African-American population, this is no cause for alarm. It's the standard American cycle. As people move up the economic ladder, they often relocate to suburban areas or to the Sunbelt cities. Whites have been doing this for decades; that's why there are so few Irish strongholds left in New York City and why the city has lost almost a million Jews over the past half century.

Some irresponsibly suggest the flow out of the five boroughs by African-Americans is a reaction to the NYPD's aggressive law enforcement methods. There is zero evidence of that; polls show race relations have improved since the Giuliani era. Rather, the outflow appears to be a result of the fact that African-Americans are finally able to take advantage of the opportunities that other groups have enjoyed.

We cannot ignore this powerful fact: The city overall is becoming more diverse, not less.

The positive news will bring growing pains. With just over 200,000 African-Americans now living in Manhattan - that's just 12% of the island's population - Rep. Charles Rangel can expect serious Latino challengers. And the heavily black and Latino Bronx, which is less than 10% white, is destined to become a political graveyard, since that borough, despite its size, no longer provides the opportunities for coalition-building across races.

Further, with more than a million Asians now living in the city, it will be time to include this significant demographic group when new lines are drawn for the City Council, Congress and the state Legislature. Until now, the Asian community was geographically split between Chinatown, Sunset Park and northeast Queens, limiting their political strength.

In short: The overall undercounting shouldn't prevent us from appreciating the evolving city in which we live. As some urban areas wither and die, New York remains more than twice as big as the country's second largest metropolis. Queens alone has more people than San Francisco and Dallas combined.

Like so many New Yorkers themselves, the city succeeds because it never stands still.

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