

# Census bumps up N.O.'s figure twice

But professor says dead tell another tale

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For two years in a row, the U.S. Census Bureau has responded favorably to challenges from city officials who argued that New Orleans' population was higher than estimated, bumping the number up each time.

This month, the Census Bureau buoyed the 2008 population by nearly 25,000 people.

The Census Bureau bases its estimates on various indicators, such as change-of-address forms and IRS tax returns, and the city's recent challenge used data showing the number of households using a certain amount of electricity.

Now, a local demographer has estimated the city's population with something different: the number of dead people. And he comes up with a much lower figure than the city or the Census Bureau.

Mark VanLandingham, professor at the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine of Tulane University, said that when using official mortality information tracked by the state, his Orleans Parish population counts differ -- sometimes more than 50 percent -- from official estimates.

While he said some measurements, such as voting data, can be reliable, death rates are a consistently steady figure, even post-Katrina.

"There's nothing ambiguous about a dead body," he said. "They don't go missing."

The State Center for Health Statistics at the Louisiana Office of Public Health provided the mortality information for VanLandingham's study, which he presented at a recent demography conference in San Antonio.

Comparing data from 2004 to data from 2006, 2007 and 2008, he estimated the city's population will be about 350,000 when the 2010 census is completed. If existing official estimations for 2007 and 2008 continued their upward trajectories, the city would reach a population of about 442,000 people in the official census, according to VanLandingham's study.

Before the storm, about 462,000 people called the city home, according to the Census Bureau.

VanLandingham said the city's population rebound has been remarkable, especially considering its virtual abandonment after Hurricane Katrina. Still, he said, he believes estimates so far have been too high.

"I worry that the perception will be that everyone flocked back to New Orleans and left," he said, referring to possibility of a low census count. "We're going to end up looking like we blew it. But we did a really good job."

While in the short term the effects of a higher population on paper could be positive, both psychologically and in terms of government aid, bloated estimates could be misleading and affect planning for the future, he said.

That isn't necessarily the view held by city officials, who have fought hard for higher estimates.

"As we continue our rebuilding, it is important that we gain access to every dollar available to our community," Mayor Ray Nagin said when the city announced that the Census Bureau had revised its figure. "This increase will mean millions of additional dollars for valuable community services."

Allison Plyer, director of the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, who helped the city prepare its challenge, said each population study needs to be taken with a grain of salt.

"There is a tremendous amount of uncertainty about population estimates in New Orleans," Plyer said. "Anyone who does any sort of planning should look at the range of all estimates."

People don't take population estimates to the bank, she said, and the only real population data that will ultimately matter will be the population total that comes out in the 2010 census.

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