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***[Virginia Prescott] Today we're speaking with Joseph Salvo. He's director of the population division at the Department of city planning and one of the most challenging places to count people in the nation. New York City. Joe welcome*.**

[Joseph Salvo] Thank you for having me.

***[VP] First tell us what the census is and why it matters.***

[JS] The census is a count of every body that resides in the United States. You're asked your name age gender you are asked to raise Hispanic origin your relationship to the head of household whether you live in another place. Those are the basic census questions. The census matters because each one of us provides a level of representation for the places where we live. The state needs to have elected representatives in the Congress and the House of Representatives is determined based on population. So let's go to northern New Hampshire and let's think about people who may be reluctant to answer the census for one reason or another. The absence of that person costs the state political representation. So now what does this all mean. Well northern New Hampshire gets very cold. We know we know that. And there is a pot of money at the federal level that goes to the states for low income energy assistance. The census count is used to determine not only the amount of money that the state of New Hampshire gets for the low energy assistance program but at a local level the state has to figure out where to put that money. So guess what the state does. The state goes to the data. And if you're not included you may not get it.

***[VP] So how is it done? Does a census taker actually visit all three hundred and 23 million of us?***

[JS] Well no. The Census Bureau encourages people to respond on their own. Ultimately about 75 percent of all units with occupants respond to the census request. The problem is that additional 25 percent and that last 10 percent gets very, very expensive and very difficult to get that last group of people. Every percentage point that the Census Bureau loses in that initial response requires 85 million dollars to address essentially about how people who have been traditionally difficult to count.

***[VP] Are the homeless counted for example are undocumented people counted or people who are Native Americans who live on reservations.***

[JS] Each one of those groups that you mentioned undocumented immigrants, the homeless for example, Indian reservations; there are special procedures that the Census Bureau used to count for example the homeless population. They go to places where the homeless seek services and they enumerate people for example in shelters. OK on a special night in March when it comes to Indian reservations there are special procedures that where people go out to Indian reservations in an effort to get an enumeration. And in the case of the undocumented population it's the reassurance about what's called Title 13 of the U.S. Code which essentially is ironclad. It protects the confidentiality of census responses. So community leaders are engaged in local partnerships to get that message out to the undocumented in the city of New York. We have very high rates of census compliance among Hispanics for example many of whom are undocumented and it's through these efforts that we achieve that goal. is the census questionnaire.

***[VP] Is the census questionnaire the same throughout all of the United States?***

[JS] Yes with some exceptions. And I'm thinking about rural areas in Alaska or some of the U.S. territories where they have to employ special tools at the Census Bureau is going to need to get into those places to get the count.

***[VP] Has the U.S. population ever decreased?***

[JS] No.

***[VP] Which agency does the Census Bureau fall under?***

[JS] The Department of Commerce. And it's important to recognize that actually the responsibility for the census from the Constitution, the responsibility lies with the Congress. The Congress then delegates that responsibility to the Department of Commerce and the Census Bureau.

***[VP] There has been an ongoing debate about what to ask on the census you know questions about race and ethnicity especially come up. How have the questions that are asked on the census changed over the years?***

[JS] Well we can go back and look at history and what you learn very quickly is that the census is a reflection of the concerns of within society of the needs of people within society and the census over time has collected more and more data on various topics for example persons of foreign birth the countries of immigration education occupation starting in 1940 we collected all this housing data trying to understand the living conditions of people in the country. The question that currently exists on the census which asks about race and Hispanic origin is there because of federal requirements. Voting rights Equal Employment Opportunity Act. A number of federal statutes that require that information. OK. Now there is a movement which has been which is now years in the making for the Census Bureau to collect information about the population that couldn't be. That can be seen as more inclusive. Let me give you an example in 2010 Caribbean New Yorkers came to me and to the regional Census Bureau director as well as many European groups or the Arab community and said, “Where am I on the census form? Show me where I can register who I am”. But in a nutshell the current questions were not expansive enough. They didn't provide opportunities for many groups to respond. So now the Census Bureau has years for years been testing a question that allows persons who regard themselves as white, black, Asian, American Indian, Hispanic to respond in detail about their ethnicity. They can actually either check a box that's listed or write in under white, under black, under Asian. And now we have a new category that's being proposed - Middle East North African - where many for example of the Arab communities can register their presence and it's a very inclusive question. The Federal Office of Management and Budget has to approve these categories for the collection of data. So we're awaiting their decision and their decision will be given by the end of this year. And if it's positive the Census Bureau will adopt the question for the additional census.

***[VP] Well Joe you've certainly set up some stakes for how important it is to get an accurate count. But now we're closing in on 2020. Do you have concerns about getting this 2020 census as accurate as possible.***

[JS] Very much so. And I'm especially worried because the Census Bureau typically in years 7, 8, and 9, up to the decennial enumeration gets a huge ramp up in funding. Several hundred million each year. The Census Bureau currently is not being funded at a level where they can conduct the kinds of tests that they need to conduct for an accurate census. An example we have a situation right now where the Census Bureau has been told by Congress that they cannot spend more money than they spent in 2010, Inflation adjusted. So the Census Bureau came up with all these new tools for example, methods of monitoring the enumeration in the field as it's occurring in real time. But these methods need to be tested. These methods will bring the census in in a cost effective way. It will. It will honor the pledge that they made to the Congress but they need to test these methods before they can use them. The problem is that the ramp up has not occurred. The Census Bureau has in effect received little or no increase in their fiscal 18 budget. And already there is a dress rehearsal or it's called The End to End census test that was supposed to occur in Providence Rhode Island Pierce County Washington which is to Colma with some rural areas and I believe a couple of Indian reservations and rural West Virginia right now it is only going to take place in Rhode Island. The other two were dropped because the budget is not there to test these new methods. And without these new methods an accurate census is probably wishful thinking at this point. Now combine that with the hostility we do have - an environment which is which is quite negative about the federal government. People are afraid. And combine those two and that's a pretty lethal combination. And so I am very, very worried about the next count. And by the way this is my fourth census so I've seen just about everything. This is a very tough situation.

***[VP] Joe you mentioned the fear. Are there any misconceptions about the census that you would like to clear up.***

[JS] The primary one is that there's a perception out there that the census is a once a decade enterprise and that is just not true. The Census Bureau works to out the decade. It takes years to prepare for a census I would call it a statistical Sless engineering marvel with several hundred processes that all have to fit together in order to come up with an accurate count one or two of those go off line there is a problem and it's not corrected. The Census Bureau can easily miss people in particular locations. So the idea that the census is this one shot deal in fact some people saying well why don't we send a postcard. You know that kind of thing that is just not true.

***[VP] Joseph salvo his director of the population division at the Department of city planning in New York City. And thank you for tackling this big but clearly important subject for us.***

[JS] You're very welcome. Thank you for having me.