

Hispanic groups at odds over census; Disagreement over calls for a boycott.; Some say dodging the count in protest will cause more problems.

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Body

While government officials blanket the area to encourage participation in the 2010 Census, some Hispanic groups are at odds as to whether to stand up and be counted.

The Rev. Antonio Mansogo, president of the Confraternity of Pastors and Ministers of Atlanta, is advising undocumented residents to avoid the census. He said the failure of lawmakers to enact immigration reform and the implementation of the new inmate screening program, known as 287g, has raised suspicions among Hispanics.

"With the absence of immigration reform, we are very concerned," Mansogo said. "As you know, the 287g program is causing so many problems. The bridge that used to be between the police and the Latino community is completely broken."

He said the National Coalition of Latino Clergy is mounting drives to boycott the census in order to pressure Congress for immigration reform. That group, headed by the Rev. Miguel Rivera, supports an immediate legalization plan that will allow undocumented immigrants to pay a fine and comply with rigorous guidelines in order for them to be considered eligible for permanent residency status.

Mansogo, pastor of the Ministerio Pentecostal Central de Atlanta in Norcross, said the drive is gaining ground in Gwinnett County, which has the state's largest Hispanic population. Based on his community contacts and lukewarm turnout for census forums, he said he is convinced 75 percent of the undocumented Latino community will not participate.

"They want to bring them out of the shadow without any guarantees," he said. "We believe it is immoral to con these people out of the shadows so [the governments] can receive federal funds, then use the same money to persecute them."

But Jerry Gonzalez, executive director of the Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials, blasted the boycott, saying it will drive an already under-represented group further into the shadows.

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"Pastor Rivera's call for a boycott is irresponsible, and it's dangerous," he said. "He's encouraging undocumented immigrants to be invisible, which is the same thing anti-immigrant groups, such as the Minutemen, want."

Gonzalez said the boycott movement is spreading fear and untruths about the census.

"If you want immigration reform, we must work through the political process," he said. "It's important, because it's about power and money for our communities."

Gonzalez said his group is leading an effort with more than 100 organizations and cities to advocate a complete count of residents.

Under-reporting could spell trouble for local governments because, as the true Hispanic population rises, the county cannot keep up with its needs, said Tanikia Jackson, grants manager for Gwinnett County. Census numbers are a major component of the federal grant funding formula, she said.

"If our population remains stagnant or decreases, it will have a significant impact on the funding because that is the driving force for us to receive the amount of money we receive," she said.

Last year, Gwinnett County received \$58 million in federal grant funding.

Steve North, director of support services, said the county is coordinating with cities to form a governmental committee, which will use its resources to encourage participation and locate hard-to-find groups that often go under-counted.

North said he is also working to form a community committee, comprising members of church, business and service groups who will fan out through their communities to promote census participation.

Metro Atlanta Hispanic populations

County percent Overall

total pop. '08

Clayton 11.6% 273,718

Cobb 11.7% 698,158

DeKalb 10.4% 739,956

Douglas 6.2% 127,932

Fayette 4.2% 106,465

Fulton 8.3% 1,014,932

Gwinnett 17.5% 789,500

Hall 26.3% 184,814

Henry 5.2% 191,502

Rockdale 9.8% 83,222

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