

# Count on Me?: Explore the Effect of COVID-19 City Out-Migration on the 2020 Census: A Case Study on New York City

**CLARA FONG**

The University of Chicago – The College

Mentor: Karlyn Gorski, Institute of Education Sciences Pre-Doctoral Fellow,  
Doctoral Candidate, The University of Chicago.

## Introduction

The United States' decennial census is the gold standard for enumerating the country's population. Its data are used by private developers as well as federal and state governments to efficiently allocate federal resources, determine Congressional representation, and provide access to public safety and emergency preparedness (*Why We Conduct the Decennial Census*). Historically, the census has seen the lowest response rates from low-income populations, communities of color, foreign-born populations, and children (O'hare, 2019). However, early reports on the 2020 Census uncovered that in major metropolitan cities, notably in New York City, these may not be the only undercounted groups. Historically high-income, predominantly white communities also faced a low voluntary self-response rate (Rubinstein, 2020; Kim, 2020). This phenomenon aligns with recent internal migration trends during the COVID-19 pandemic; one in five U.S. adults relocated or knew someone who had during the pandemic, with most of these adults ranging from ages 18-29 years old (Cohn, 2020).

While there is preliminary research on the declining residential population in New York City—as well as the city's low census

response rate—research has not yet linked impact of changing demographics to the census count. This paper aims to address the gap and answer the following questions: why might low response rates occur in relatively affluent and supposedly politically active neighborhoods? Does the population decline indicate a greater a “city exodus” resulting from COVID-19, or a temporary circumstance that may have long-term implications?

As of the time this writing, quantitative census data and internal migration data are not yet available. Thus, I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews to explore the relationship between census response rates in high-income neighborhoods and the out-migration of New York City during the pandemic. I find that individuals who completed the census are acutely aware of their civic responsibilities and have a strong sense of attachment to the city. Respondents’ community attachment contributed to their desire to remain in the city in the future, conflicting the general perception that COVID-19 caused or exacerbated major city emigration.

These findings develop a more robust understanding of how those who had left New York City feel about returning, providing little evidence to support a permanent “city exodus” due to COVID-19. Nevertheless, this demographic shift in the census data may have implications on federal resource allocation and will be increasingly relevant during the socioeconomic recovery from the pandemic.

### **Context: The 2020 Census**

For decades, the Census Bureau has dealt with various data quality concerns, from addressing fears of data misuse and a lack of confidentiality, to their criteria for who is counted and at which

residence (Seltzer & Anderson, 2007; Wang, 2020; Anderson, 2020).

In addition to these challenges and the general decline in response rates for government surveys, the Census Bureau predicted that the 2020 Census would face unique issues compared to previous decades (Czajka & Beyler, 2016). Even prior to the pandemic, the census was facing budgetary constraints, which restricting their ability test and evaluate the new online census form; an increasingly diverse population do not identify with the census's current race and ethnicity categories; an increase in informal or complex living arrangements; and a more mobile population than in the previous decade (O'hare, 2019).

The pandemic has not only affected the physical data collection process (i.e., social distancing rules impacted door-to-door enumeration), it has also changed the demographics of several cities in the United States. For example, New York City, one of the hardest hit cities by the initial wave of the pandemic, faced massive outmigration, namely in the city's wealthiest neighborhoods. Residential areas such as the Upper East Side, SoHo, TriBeCa, and Little Italy— home to predominantly white, affluent, and employed individuals as well as college students, have seen a 40% decrease in residential population, with the overall city population decreasing by 5% from the months of March through May of 2020 (Quealy, 2020).

News reports speculated that either these households had not received the census since they were not in their usual residence, had incorrectly completed the form to their second home, or had permanently left New York City (Rubinstein, 2020). However, these speculations have not yet been systematically analyzed.

## **Conceptualizing Internal Migration in Existing Literature**

The challenge with studying migration—especially internal migration—is that it is empirically difficult to track. Often, studies on migration use census data to measure domestic movement within a country, perhaps further underscoring the importance of an accurate census (Stillwell & Dennett, 2012). Internal migration research in the United States often over-emphasizes individuals' economic motivations through regression models of income and amenity differentials between regions (e.g., Greenwood, 1975; Molloy et al., 2011). However, economic opportunity is not the only reason to migrate, and addressing these other motivations is necessary before developing theoretical frameworks to understand the long-term effects of those migrating away from cities.

Often, studies focus on rural to urban migration, arguing that migrant households or individuals relocate in prospects of better economic stability (Rao et al., 2020). However, the literature does not discuss the unique internal relocation taking place during the pandemic. This is largely due to the recency of this phenomenon, but also, perhaps, because this movement is not strictly economically motivated.

Amenity migration—or “lifestyle” migration—is another process in which individuals temporarily relocate or acquire a second home to improve their lifestyle (Benson & O'Reilly, 2015). Typically, these migrants relocate to a region for its natural “amenities,” to be closer to nature, or to detach from urban living while still earning wages from their urban professions. Some research has examined the effects of amenity migration on the environment, nearby property prices, and the local community, finding that migrants improve the regional economy (Borsdorf, 2012; Hjerpe et al., 2020). Previous research has examined migration patterns via census data and focused on the economic

motivations but has not considered how migration affects the very same census data. This study incorporates the amenity migration framework to reconceptualize internal migration motivations and its effects on census completion.

### **Urban Exodus versus Urban Cultural Capital**

There are two competing beliefs about how the sentiment towards cities and city amenities motivates migration. On the one hand, contemporary news reports fear an “urban exodus” from cities during COVID-19, resulting from desire for more space to socially distance and the ability to work from home (Dorsey, 2020; Hughes, 2020). The urbanization and geography literature present a broader theory that supports this “exodus,” called counter-urbanization (Boyle & Halfacree, 1998). Counter-urbanization has been used to explain the steady decline of metropolitan American cities as occupational mobility and relocation has become more available for the middle class, along with changes in lifestyle, such as marriage, starting a family, or retirement (Berry, 1980). While now several decades old, Berry argues that that this movement will result in the growth of rural peripheries in the United States while core cities begin to decline. Frey (2020) finds that U.S. cities’ growth has been declining since 2010, according to estimates from the Census Bureau, largely due to an aging population and rapidly rising housing cost in major cities. His research implies that temporary relocation, as a response to COVID-19, is not indicative of some sudden exodus but is part of a growing emigration trend. If this theoretical framework were to hold true, then we should expect city residences to respond to the pandemic with long-term plans to leave the city.

Counter-urbanization theory conflicts with the theory of urban cultural capital. Urban cultural capital suggests cities continue to

successfully retain their population due to a city's non-economic attractions. Extending Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, Savage et al., (2018) theorized a distinct "urban cultural capital" that individuals acquire by living in a city, manifesting in aesthetic and lifestyle choices. Cities are an establishment of this lifestyle, representing arenas for display and consumption, as well as an aesthetic experience itself. The emergence of cultural capital in urban areas is a result of the physical space, such as museums or theaters that cater to traditionally "highbrow" activities, as well as spaces for more young professionals, such as sports arenas. In other words, urban centers continue to be relevant destinations despite its high cost of living, the ease of mobility, and the recent rise of remote work. Urban cultural capital, therefore, may explain why individuals wish to return to cities instead of permanently relocate to cost-efficient suburban or rural areas. If this theory were to hold true, we should anticipate that despite potential health concerns, individuals would still want to return to the city to reap cultural capital benefits.

Counter-urbanization predicts the steady decline of metropolitan cities while urban cultural capital suggests otherwise. Considering the lack of massive out-migration after previous crises in New York City, I hypothesize that the city will remain highly populated despite the current, but temporary, health and safety risks during the pandemic. Through qualitative interviews with those who have left the city for second homes during COVID-19, my research supports the importance of urban cultural capital.

### **Community and Civic Engagement**

Another facet of temporary migration is its symbiotic effect on identity and community, and previous studies on voluntary migration sought to understand how one's community motivates

migration and vice versa (Hardwick, 2010). Additionally, community groups can greatly influence one's level of civic engagement. While engagement may come in several forms, such as voting or political participation, this study focuses on census completion because of its long-term effects on federal resource and political representation. The census—along with other government surveys—has faced a higher non-response rate nationally. This is particularly true for low-income or BIPOC communities due to the fear of retribution if their information is shared with other federal agencies (Evans et al., 2019).

Uslaner and Brown (2005) argue that trust is a crucial component for civic participation, and trust is strongly tied to income inequality. Historically underrepresented groups, as result of being poorly represented in the political system, are more pessimistic about the government's ability to improve their socioeconomic outcomes. This is supported by previous decades' census data; historically hard-to-count (HTC) populations are often those facing high levels of poverty and inequality (O'hare, 2019). It follows that those of higher socioeconomic status, such as the interview respondents who have the means to relocate during the pandemic, should trust the government and also have a higher level of civic engagement. I hypothesize that of individuals who completed the census, they did so because of some trust and belief in government efficacy.

My study aims to understand the reason for low response rates from historically high responding neighborhoods. In doing so, I also address their attitudes towards long-term residency in New York City. My findings indicate that the participants who completed the survey for their primary address in the city had an overall positive attachment towards the city and strong conceptions about civic engagement. Participants who did not complete the census or completed it to another address were more mobile

individuals with less community attachments to their place of residence.

## **Data and Method**

### *Case Selection: New York City*

New York City serves as an exemplar case study for understanding internal migration patterns during COVID-19. This is for two reasons: first, the city was the epicenter in the United States for the pandemic; and second, the city faced large levels of domestic relocation, which has supported both city exodus and urban cultural capital theories in previous literature (Rubenstein, 2020; Frey, 2020; Hristova et al., 2018).

New York City has also experienced a previous crisis, the terrorist attacks of September 11, that led to similar alarms regarding mass emigration. This allows for some hypothesis-building about how another mass crisis may result in similar or different outcomes. Haughwout (2005) provides a robust analysis on the economic impacts of the September 11 attacks on New York City. He explores and concludes that contrary to fears of a declining housing market post-attack, there was little evidence to suggest that September 11 reduced the demand for residential locations in New York City's metropolitan area. Thus, while there were concerns about the safety and quality of living after the terrorist attacks, paralleling the ongoing health and safety fears about the pandemic, there were no signs of long-term emigration after September 11. Given this history, New York City seemed an appropriate case to begin exploring city out-migration during COVID-19.

## *Interview Data*

This study seeks to understand the rationale and long-term motivations of individuals who have either permanently or temporarily relocated away from New York City during COVID-19. I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with respondents from a range of backgrounds who left the city sometime in March of 2020. I inquired about participants' background, second-home status, sense of community, temporary and permanent relocation status, and engagement with the census. For the sake of this study, I have defined "second homes" to include both rental or owned seasonal homes, vacation properties, and family residences to accommodate for the variety of circumstances that participants may have experienced during this relocation period.

Interviews took places over the phone with adult participants and lasted between 20-40 minutes. Participants were initially recruited through contacting family and friends' networks for referrals. After speaking with initial referrals, I used a snowball sampling method to identify and recruit later respondents. The only eligibility requirement for potential participants was that they were adults (above the age of 18 years old) who spent most of their time residing in New York City and had left at any point during the pandemic to some second-home arrangement. While I did not systematically record participants' demographic information, they often mentioned their backgrounds in conversation, which varied in age groups (ranging from college-aged students who returned home during the pandemic to young professionals and middle-aged families looking to permanently leave the city), racial backgrounds, and countries or place of origin. To conceal any potentially identifiable information, pseudonyms are used for each participant.

## *Method*

As previously mentioned, there are a few challenges with

researching internal migration. Bose (2012) in the *Handbook of Research Methods in Migration* argues that mapping human movement requires an interdisciplinary, mixed-methods approach. Because decennial census, community surveys, and other civil registrations can only capture a single point in time, they should be used as a starting point to reflect existing pattern in migration, rather than as finalized conclusions.

In the same handbook, Carletto et al. (2012) claim that despite how common internal migration is, there is a distinct lack of high-quality, nationally representative data on this population. Temporary and permanent relocation is challenging to summarize in quantitative data, so to further capture the realities and nuances of migration, studies required not only the presence of household data as a starting point, but also actual migrants' experiences. For these reasons, I conduct qualitative interviews. While there already exists data on the differences in response rates from census tracts around the country,<sup>1</sup> this information does not tell the nuanced story of internal migration. I fill this gap with qualitative data regarding participants' personal experiences both in their current relocation and previous movements.

Throughout the data collection process, I transcribed the audio recordings of each conversation and read through the preliminary transcriptions before hand-coding the data. Then, I developed a coding scheme to define community, sentiment towards cities, and political or civic duty. Using these definitions, I synthesized the

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1. If interested in more information about existing maps, visit the CUNY Graduate Center's Mapping Service at the Center for Urban Research's [Hard to Count \(HTC\) 2020 Map](#). The Center created an extensive map of each state's response rate by Census tract, then overlaid the difference in final response rates from the 2010 and 2020 Census to compare net response rate changes. It is evident from their analysis that many of the highest responding neighborhoods in 2010 had some of the lowest response rates in 2020. This trend not only exists in New York City but also across other major metropolitan cities, such as San Francisco, Chicago, and Boston.

data by identifying emerging themes based on the coding scheme and noted any unexpected observations or empirical puzzles that contrasted recent quantitative findings. This method is based on Timmermans & Tavory (2012)'s abductive analysis. In contrast to the inductive process, which sets aside preconceived theories in order to extract emerging ones from the data, abductive analysis interacts with existing heuristics and knowledge to identify empirical puzzles. Anomalous data in this study (historically high responding neighborhoods with current low responses) is at the center of my research question, and while I do not present novel theories to accommodate this empirical puzzle, the data help inform current theories about internal migration and civic engagement.

### *Researcher Positionality*

Throughout the research process, a few participants inquired about my own upbringing, asking whether I had grown up in a city, or ever resided in New York City, in particular. Being Asian-Canadian and having lived a majority of my life in Hong Kong and Singapore—two globally-connected cities in East and Southeast Asia—my background seemed to make participants feel comfortable discussing their own experiences, acknowledging that I may resonate with their lack of “roots” to any one place. When discussing their passion for the living in urban cities, it mattered to participants I could “understand” their experiences. Although my racial or ethnic demographics were not salient in our conversations, it seemed that my socioeconomic status, and specifically, the opportunity for mobility encouraged more of a conversational tone during my interviews, as opposed to an interrogative one. Moreover, my existing relationships with some participants allowed us to discuss personal topics, such as their beliefs about community and politics. These more intimate conversations with my peers offered important insight into how

young adults choose to engage (or in this case, not engage) in civic duties and how older individuals candidly evaluate living in New York City.

## Findings

*Table 1. Distribution of Years Lived in New York City*

| <i>Measurement</i> | <i>Response Information</i> |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Mean               | 12.2 years                  |
| Median             | 8 years                     |
| Range              | 3-35 years                  |

*Table 2. Primary and Secondary Home Locations*

| <i>Additional Variables</i>                 | <i>Response Information (n = 15)</i> |                              |
|---|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|
|   | <i>Category</i>                      | <i>Number of Respondents</i> |
| <i>Region of Residence in New York City</i> | Battery Park                         | 1                            |
|   | Chelsea                              | 1                            |
|   | East Village                         | 2                            |
|   | Hoboken, NJ                          | 1                            |
|   | Midtown                              | 3                            |
|   | Upper West Side                      | 7                            |
| <i>Second-Home Location</i>                 | Tri-State Area (CT, NY, NJ)          | 5                            |
|   | Florida                              | 3                            |
|   | Minnesota                            | 1                            |
|   | Vermont                              | 2                            |
|   | Virginia                             | 2                            |
|   | International                        | 2                            |
| <i>Permanent Relocation</i>                 | Yes                                  | 3                            |
|   | No                                   | 12                           |
| <i>Census Completion</i>                    | Yes                                  | 13                           |
|   | No                                   | 2                            |

Table 1 summarizes the distribution of years lived in New York City by respondents. There was a large range of years respondents had resided in the city, from college students to adults born and raised in the New York area. Table 2 outlines respondents' primary and secondary living situations. The following sections discuss in detail the nuanced evidence supporting urban cultural capital but not a "city exodus," attributes that encouraged community engagement, and why participants completed the census.

## **Evidence Supporting Urban Cultural Capital**

Most respondents who left New York City for second homes considered their relocation to be temporary, and of the participants who returned to the city when I had interviewed them, their main motivation was the city's unique material and social attributes. This supports an argument for urban cultural capital. However, respondents also found non-urban spaces appealing in the short-term, especially during the pandemic. Nicole, an Upper West Side resident who left to her second home in Long Island, remains attached to the city's cultural offerings:

“In New York City, my friends are from different religions, cultures, they're kind of globetrotting, cosmopolitan people. ... And also, I personally am not a peaceful kind of country-living person. I like the buzz of the city.”

Similarly, Candice, who left the city in March to stay in a family home in Miami, Florida, likes to live in New York City because of its urban cultural capital, and she temporarily relocated because it was not accessible during the pandemic:

“I love New York City, but the way it usually is, right, where you can go to movies, you can go to dinner, or you can watch some kind of opera or show, or, you know, a festival. You can go out dining; we used to go dining a lot, my husband and I. ... This is something that we can no longer do when we don't feel safe going out despite everything they're doing. ... So, I think that in Florida, you know, I feel a little safer because you know I can go out, the beach and there's really nobody there.”

Respondents highlighted urban cultural capital in New York City, but the lack of accessibility to these material amenities during COVID-19 motivated them to seek more natural amenities in their second homes. However, since most participants chose to return to the city or had plans to, these findings do not support a long-term counter-urbanization argument.

### *City Attachment and Personal Life*

While respondents demonstrated a strong attachment to the city's urban offerings, both in the material and social sense, participants were realistic about whether access to urban cultural capital would be reasonable after accounting for income factors, stages in their careers, and their personal lives. Katherine and her fiancé agreed they did not want to live in New York City in the long-term, despite living in the city having “always been a pipe dream” of hers, because of the high cost of living and challenges it poses to starting a family, which is only plausible if “you have a ton of money.”

This sentiment was shared with Samuel, who permanently moved from his apartment in Murray Hills to Stamford, Connecticut with his partner. Further supporting the argument for urban cultural capital, Samuel left New York City because “while the city is still kind of getting back on its feet, [we] don't want to pay a New York premium without being able to use all the things that drew us to New York. ... neither one of us is from the city, so our allegiance to living in the city isn't as strong.” The cost of living, therefore, was also a substantial consideration for remaining in the city despite its urban cultural capital.

As young professionals both in their early thirties, Samuel and Katherine both agreed cultural capital drew them to the city, but the ‘premium’ deterred them from remaining in the long-term. While immediate relocation resulted from the pandemic, it did not change

their opinions about the city's cultural offerings. Their choice to remain in the city, however was dependent on personal factors instead.

### *The Case Against Counter-urbanization*

Contrary to previous literature, my findings do not show strong support for counter-urbanization, the growing prominence of sunbelt states, nor the rise of amenity migration amidst overcrowdedness of major American cities. If counter-urbanization were salient, more respondents would have permanently moved from the city to more rural or non-urban environments. However, most participants I interviewed who owned second homes wanted the “best of both worlds,” with continued access to the city while also having an escape from the intensity of urban living.

Nicole suggests second homes for affluent New Yorkers is almost a given “because of the small size of the apartments [in New York City].” Amanda, who temporarily relocated to Stowe, Vermont with her husband and two children for the first few months of the pandemic said she appreciated the unique, “cosmopolitan” attributes of New York City, but felt that “everyone” needs to get out every so often:

“I mean, there’s just things here [in New York City] you can’t do anywhere else. I just feel like [people] will always be drawn back to the city. ... Sometimes the energy is just too much to bear, and, of course, the heat in the summer is too much to bear. So, I think everyone needs that escape.”

Instead of fully supporting a counter-urbanization model, participants found themselves somewhere in the middle, acknowledging the benefits and status of living in New York City while also feeling that these spaces are often overwhelming. These

second home “escapes” were increasingly attractive during the pandemic due to their natural amenities, such as having an open space that allowed for social distancing without having to wear a mask. While these findings don’t wholly reject counter-urbanization, they highlight some nuances with the current framework while largely supporting an argument for urban cultural capital.

### *Urban Cultural Capital in a Post-COVID World*

Although participants largely supported the existence of New York City’s urban cultural capital, their reasons to relocate were precisely because these urban amenities were no longer accessible during the pandemic. Participants disagreed on whether or not these constraints on urban cultural capital would persist in a post-COVID world. This uncertainty impacted respondents’ decisions to remain in the city for the long-term.

Recently an empty-nester (a term used to describe parents whose children move out of the nuclear home to pursue employment or higher education), Grace believes that the ability to work from home will result in a decreased need to physically remain in New York City. She felt it was time to “move out” because of safety risk not only related to COVID-19. Grace also lived in Manhattan during the September 11 attacks and, at that time, struggled to justify remaining in the city. But, as a single working mother, it was important for her to live close to work while also being easily available for her children. Now, Grace feels more flexible about her living situation, claiming that if she continued to work in Manhattan after the pandemic, she would relocate out of the city, but not too far away to commute each day.

For Greg, a mid-to-late career professional who has started considering retirement, New York City no longer contains the same urban cultural capital it once held:

“It’s just not what it used to be. It’s probably one of the first times I’m contemplating leaving permanently from the city or New York state. . . . It has gotten crime ridden, it has gotten filthy. There’s panhandling, lawlessness . . . It just seems that the city unfortunately has spiraled into this, a little bit of chaos.”

He blames the persisting inequality and inadequate care for New York City residents on poor city governance, and Greg believes that these damages to the city’s cultural capital were only exacerbated by the pandemic. However, as mid-to-late career professionals, Grace and Greg have both likely reaped the benefits of the city’s existing cultural capital and have already socially reproduced these cultural advantages for their children, therefore, no longer feeling as attached to these cultural offerings as younger respondents.

Overall, the interviews support an existing urban cultural capital in New York City rather than a long-term exodus resulting from the pandemic. Whether or not this urban cultural capital resulted in permanent emigration, however, was heavily conditional on each participant’s personal goals, material factors—such as income and cost of supporting a family—and, belief in whether the city’s cultural capital would remain after the pandemic.

### **Community Engagement and Reasons to Relocate**

Participants generally felt that their “community” ties in New York City were stronger than in their second homes—regardless of whether this was another owned property or a family home—but community relationships were also dependent on personal

attributes. I identified three prevalent factors that contributed to respondents' sense of community and their engagement: 1) gender and traditional gender roles, 2) age, and 3) number of times previously relocated before living in New York City.

### *Gender on Presence and Type of Community*

My interview sample skewed towards more female respondents (ten of fifteen total respondents), and while I did not systematically inquire about individuals' gender identity, gender was often a part of several conversations. This skew is likely due, in part, to the snowball sampling technique I used to recruit participants. For example, after speaking with my first interviewee, Nicole, she recommended several of her neighbors, all of whom were also women. Another potential explanation for this skew could be attributed to a key finding about gender and community. While the female participants connected me with other women in their social networks, male participants often introduced me to their male colleagues. Moreover, most of the women I talked to were involved with some kind of community group before and during the pandemic, regardless of their employment status, while most of the men I interviewed, broadly speaking, did not have communities outside of their family and professional lives.

Candice, who I was introduced to by Nicole, mentioned her community was stronger in New York City because she did not have a long-term presence in her family home in Florida. Her community affiliations included a "few friends, a group of women," a women's book club, and a "community of Brazilian women" living in New York City. While Candice and Nicole are both working professionals, many of my interviewees had left the workforce after having children and were either volunteering or working part-time while taking care of the home.

In contrast, when I asked male respondents whether they were

involved in some community either in New York City or their second homes, they had relatively brief responses, as one participant succinctly put it: “no, not really. That’s just me.” Some male participants chose to highlight their spouse’s community involvement as it pertained to the family unit. Clay, who is the primary income earner of his household, consisting of his wife and two young children, related community ties in New York City to the nuclear family:

“Yeah, broadly speaking... I mean I don’t do a lot [referring to community groups]. ... A lot of, probably some of that, is mostly due to [my wife] and her participation. ... Other than that, I mean, I work in the city, so my company’s based here, and there are sometimes initiatives that are somehow connected to work, but I don’t really have any other types of clubs or other organizations that I’m part of.”

The gendered difference in community engagement also maps onto who in the household completed the census and followed up with their form submission. The women interviewed from the same neighborhood block were the primary respondents of the survey and communicated with one another on the status of their form.

### *Age and Community Engagement*

Participants’ age played a substantial role in how connected or involved individuals were with their respective communities. This age difference could confound with a variety of other factors, such as the duration lived in the city, differences in lifestyle, and differences in mobility across age groups. Since I did not systematically collect data on respondents’ age, my estimated age range for participants were from college-aged students (20+ years old) to late-career individuals close to retirement (50-60 years old).

This distribution reflected not only differences in community involvement but also seemed to effect civic engagement.

Alyssa and Nadia, current undergraduate students at New York University completing their final year of their respective programs, both returned home when the city implemented shelter-in-place protocols. Expectedly, both students had strong community ties affiliated with their programs; Nadia was involved in pre-professional business organizations as a student at the Stern School of Business, and Alyssa contributed to the undergraduate political newspaper.

Given that their social network is strongly related to their university—perhaps attributed to short amount of time lived in the city—community ties did not impactfully motivate either of them to complete the census. They make up the only two participants I interviewed who did not fill out the form. Nadia speculated that being an international student and having several close peers who are also international students may be one reasons she was unaware of the census. Their lack of responses align with articles by the Census Bureau about how shifting to virtual learning could result in a large undercount of college populations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Participants in their late-twenties to early-thirties demonstrated similarly loose community ties in both New York City and their second homes. Most respondents within this age range did not have active community groups, except for Katherine, who was part of a local church that she claims does not have much of a “social element.” A large part of this disconnect has to do with choices of neighborhoods. When asked if whether he thinks his neighborhood has a high or low self-response rate to the census, Samuel said:

“I assume [the response rates are] probably pretty low this year, and I think that’s a combination of a lot of people in Murray Hill are transplants, if you will. ... there isn’t really a sense of community in that area. It’s just a convenient place to live in the city. And I also wouldn’t be surprised for a lot of people who left there didn’t fill out the census, or didn’t think that they were supposed to.”

Other young professionals interviewed found themselves living in similar neighborhoods selected out of convenience than for community, demonstrating that community ties were developed by more “settled” families than younger respondents.

#### *History of Relocation and Community Attachment*

Prior to living in New York City, several mid-career professionals I interviewed had also lived in a variety of cities across the country and the globe. This mobile lifestyle reformed their thinking towards community attachment and connection to New York City. Rahil, who had lived in over 15 different cities before recently deciding to move to Short Hills, New Jersey during the pandemic with his wife and young children, did not feel attached to the city:

“New York is the worst. I mean, you know how many cities I traveled through, and I’ll tell you it’s extremely the worst city of all when it comes to quality of life. ... I think you’ll think it’s the best city [if you’ve grown up there] because you’ve not seen other cities and grew up in other cities, but ... it’s a stressful environment.”

When asked if he was part of any community while in New York City, Rahil said, “between both the jobs that [my wife and I]

had, which were already quite hectic, we just didn't have time to participate in a community activity." However, he was positive about his future involvement in community activities after moving a suburb in Short Hills, stating that his wife was already involved with a gardening club and that he would like to participate in a cricket sports group.

Anika, an empty nester who traveled back and forth between New York City and her second home in Minnesota, felt a stronger attachment to Minnesota because that is where she and her husband raised their children. Given their tenure in Minnesota was the longest they had settled in any one location since migrating to North America, Anika claims she has "always [thought] of Minnesota as home" because she "depends a lot on [her] personal relationships and friendships." She also contrasts this with her husband's "forward thinking," which allows him to feel that "home" is anywhere they move to.

When it comes to urban cultural capital, participants felt that New York City provides a place for this cultural access, but Rahil's perspective suggests that this capital can be weighed against existing capital in other major cities around the world, if one has the opportunity to make this comparison.

Thus, each individual's cost-benefit analysis is going to differ based on their previous backgrounds. Sachi, who had lived in Providence and Boston before New York City claims that after these experiences, "no other city" was as "appealing" to live in than New York City. These findings demonstrate the complex interaction of gender, age, and previous mobility, which are only a few salient points that can influence one's community. While there are far more intersectional motivations to relocate, these findings lay the foundation for understanding how communities might influence census completion.

## Census Completion

Because of the non-random nature of snowball sampling, many individuals I interviewed were neighbors or part of overlapping communities, and these community ties appeared to influence census completion among participants. Only two participants did not complete the census at all, and one participant completed it outside of New York City as a result of door-to-door follow up efforts.

Of the remaining respondents who did complete the census, I identified three general trends for their motivations: 1) trust in government institutions to implement city resources, 2) pragmatic, legal reasons, and 3) civically active community networks.

### *Completion and Government Trust*

Several participants noted political and social reasons for completing the census in New York City, which contrasts popular speculation that affluent communities were not completing the census because of their apathy towards civic engagement. Nicole summarizes her reason for completing the census in New York City as opposed to her second home in Long Island: “one, it is our primary residence, and two, I felt that’s where the resources were needed.” Amanda believed that “even though [the family] had relocated,” New York City needed “the help” and the “money more than anywhere else.”

At first, Amanda also worried her household was not counted after she completed the online form yet still had an enumerator appear at her apartment building. However, after mailing and tracking in her absentee ballot for the 2020 presidential elections from Vermont, she said it “gave [her] faith in the system.” Grace stated she “believes” in the census and thinks it is important to “at least attempt to find good numbers” because it determines the

city's access to federal resources. She notes, however, her partner might not have completed the census since he does not "believe" it accurately captures the large swath of undocumented populations in major sanctuary cities, such as New York City. Trust in government agencies to accurately count people and distribute federal resources are, therefore, implicit reasons for census completion.

### *Pragmatism and Completion Rates*

Another salient reason participants completed the census in New York City was that it was programmatically correct to do so. Several participants observed that New York City continues to be their legal, primary residence where they file their taxes, and so where they should complete the census. Reiterating this point, Katherine's guidance to her colleagues and friends was to "fill it out for the location where you would be if the pandemic didn't happen, and in April 2020 in a non-pandemic world, [she] would have been in New York."

Pragmatism did not only manifest in legal forms. Philip completed the census because it was "just always ingrained" in him to do so. This mindset, he claims, is "particularly strong in urban areas, so people understand the 'responsibility' of filling out the census accurately and in a timely manner," and "there was no question as to whether [he] would fill the census out or not." Overall, a majority of participants who voiced explicit reasons to complete the census in New York City suggested it was for these pragmatic considerations. Some participants also attached their response to a sense of civic duty to the city and resource allocation, challenging popular discourse around the supposed apathy of affluent, low-responding households.

### *The Role of Community on Completion Rates*

Community ties can heavily influence whether or not respondents were aware of the census. For example, Candice's neighbors made a conscious effort to ensure the census was completed for their building through a neighborhood group chat, where they were all made aware months after the initial self-response period that their online forms were not counted. Jennifer, a young working professional living in Midtown East claimed her roommate completed the census for her apartment, otherwise she may not have. These relationships can capture young professionals in the census who do not live in a nuclear household and would not otherwise have a household head complete the census on their behalf.

For Sachi, social media reminded of the upcoming census prior to the online form's release. When asked how she knew to complete the census early, she replied:

“I mean, the 2020 census has been broadcast loud and clear for a very long, for quite some time through lots of different media outlets, TV, emails, you know, social media, Facebook, and the whole gamut of stuff. Right? So, it was always in the back of my mind. It wasn't something that when it came in the mail was the first time was when I knew about it or anything.”

The two participants who did not complete the census were college-aged students, who uncoincidentally lack community ties outside of their university affiliation, where their peers were equally unaware of the census. Thus, community groups mostly encouraged census completion, whether through neighborhood relationships or social media.

### *Concerns with the Online Form*

While this study did not intend to evaluate the implementation of the online census survey, participants had elevated prominent concerns that are worth noting. Neighbors living in the same building had identified a trend: although they completed the online form, they were informed months later that an enumerator had entered their building claiming they had no data for the entire apartment complex. Candice found that when she went onto the census website to check on the status of her form, they did not have any information on her unit. This led Candice to complete the census twice, once online and once in the mail. Nicole, living in the same building, completed the form online and at her second home when it was sent to her mail, leading her to believe they “must not have a good tracking system.”

Amanda completed the form both online and through the mail, claiming that she had received a physical form once in the mail and again from a door-to-door numerator, which made her skeptical about whether her initial online form was counted. As such, she completed the survey multiple times. While these anecdotal experiences unveil a narrative for potential data mishandling in affluent, highly mobile city neighborhoods during the 2020 Census, a much more systematic research design would be necessary to make conclusive claims about the online form’s accuracy this decade.

Overall, my findings support an argument for urban cultural capital in New York City. The presence of this capital motivates individuals to return in the city in the long-term, challenging the literature on counter-urbanization and long-term city emigration. However, the decision to act on the present urban cultural capital is highly dependent on individual factors, mostly related to justifying New York City’s high cost of living. Second, census engagement

was influenced by community ties. The strength and type of community ties depended on gender, age, and previous opportunities to relocate. While most participants completed the 2020 Census, they had different rationales for completion, such as the belief in government institutions to accurately allocate resources, pragmatic beliefs, and community networks.

## **Discussion**

My findings provide a nuanced analysis on how high-income individuals interacted with the 2020 Census and how their internal migration may affect New York City's population data in the long-term. Not only do census results determine political apportionment and local redistricting numbers for the next decade, it is also used for federal resource allocation, so a lowered response rate from historically high responding neighborhoods will have substantive policy implications for the next decade.

The Election Data Services' 2019 Reapportionment Analysis found that using the 2019 total population estimates, New York state is predicted to lose a seat in Congress. News outlets discovered a further lowered population—now down by 237,000 people—could result in New York state losing an additional seat (Brace, 2019; Mikati, 2020). Given that an estimated 5% of the New York City's population (approximately 420,000 people) have left the city since March of 2020, an undercount of high-income neighborhoods compound with historically undercounted neighborhoods will create severe long-term sociopolitical impacts on the city's resources and the state's political representation (Quealy, 2020). In order for the census to accurately represent the population, the Bureau should implement robust outreach campaigns to combat future undercounts and substantial methodological reforms to capture increasingly mobile populations.

### *Areas for Future Research*

Bose (2012) and Carletto (2012) state that quantitative and qualitative data often work in tandem with one another to study human movement. This study's qualitative interviews supplemented existing quantitative data on low response rates in 2020 compared to 2010 for historically high-income neighborhoods. However, given the small interview sample, it is challenging to parse larger relationships from participants' experience. Almost half of my participants were from the same apartment complex. This was advantageous for understanding how community networks can impact civic responsibility, but it also makes these findings less externally valid to other wealthier neighborhoods in New York City, especially since all my participants lived in Manhattan. Future studies should seek to interview a larger sample and capture more individuals who did not complete the census and continue building on the current analytical framework.

While this paper explores the movement of high-income individuals, pandemic-related migration occurred at various socioeconomic levels as several people were furloughed or laid-off during the pandemic. It would be interesting to explore to what extent response rates in this demographic were affected.

It may also be possible to explore this phenomenon in other major cities since city emigration trends and low census response rates are not unique to New York City. For example, Los Angeles' Santa Monica County, where the median household income is \$96,570 (around 30% higher than the California average), also faced lower response rates in 2020 than the previous decade (Ong et al., 2020; *U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts*). Similar fears of an urban exodus arose in San Francisco as well given the high property prices and the dissolution of corporate tech offices in

Silicon Valley (Kane, 2020). Testing these frameworks in different geographical contexts would help to discern to what extent urban cultural capital is a local phenomenon and whether these trends are generalizable.

## Conclusion

This project sought to understand how pandemic-related internal migration affected the census response rates in historically high-responding neighborhoods, and whether these patterns were indicative of some greater emigration trend out of New York City. I utilize two contrasting frameworks to situate these questions and bridge the gap between civic responsibility and internal migration literature: counter-urbanization and urban cultural capital.

Through 15 semi-structured interviews with those who relocated to a second home outside New York City, I find support for urban cultural capital as the main reason individuals chose not to permanently leave the city. Participants claimed the natural amenities of their second homes alleviated some of the risks of living in New York City during the pandemic; however, these amenities were not enough incentive for most participants to permanently relocate, which does not support the fear of an “urban exodus.”

My findings also highlight three interpersonal factors that influence community engagement, and consequently, census response rates: gender, age, and previous relocation history. Women respondents were more involved in community networks compared to their male counterparts, either through activities, organizations, or neighborhood groups. This occurred regardless of whether or not these women were employed full-time. These networks influenced who completed the census for a multi-person household, and whether participants were involved with tracking

their forms. Younger participants lived in neighborhoods that were more transient and were less involved with community networks. While this did not necessarily prevent participants from completing the census, college students who returned home during the initial lockdown were among the only participants who did not complete the form.

The most common reason participants completed the census in New York City was because it was still their legal residences. Some participants emphasized the importance of federal resource allocation in New York City, which was a determining factor when deciding which address to complete the form to. Several participants of the same apartment building pointed out that their online form was not recorded, prompting them to communicate within their neighborhood networks to ensure their household information was received. These networks highlight the importance of community for active civic engagement.

These findings aim to provide initial insight into the many effects that COVID-19 had on public and social life, and its applicability may extend beyond the present pandemic. Other major crises where inequality in city spaces induce the movement of some and not others may result in a similar migration pattern of the more affluent, leaving behind vulnerable and at-risk individuals. The compounding effect of COVID-19 happening on both an election year and a census year makes many of these temporary movements appear quite permanent in public data and civic life. Future academic and policy research, as well as federal resource distribution plans, will need to account for the unique challenges the pandemic created for the decennial census. It is with hope that this project can highlight the importance of effective data collection for the future decennial censuses. After all, these measures are the gold standard for demographic research and a key component of democratic process in the United States.

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