

The Honorable Wilbur Ross
Secretary, United States Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20230

Re: Protect the Scientific Integrity of the Census

Dear Secretary Ross,

Since its inception in 1787, the decennial U.S. Census has served as the scientific foundation for population-based representation in our democracy, in addition to providing a wealth of social and economic data that serves the entire country. As we approach the 2020 Census, changes in data collection are being proposed at this late stage that threaten to undermine the scientific integrity of this crucial enterprise.

Last December, the Department of Justice requested that the Census Bureau add a question regarding citizenship in an effort to identify undocumented immigrant populations. This request is ill-conceived for a number of reasons. We have more accurate methods for measuring and studying non-citizenship, for example through anonymous surveys. Imposing a citizenship question would lead to a lower participation rate and substantial undercount of certain geographic regions and demographic populations, undermining the scientific integrity of the entire project.

[Preliminary](#) focus groups and interviews with Census field representatives have already shown that greater fears of deportation, threats of a “Muslim ban,” and the termination of the DACA program are exacerbating already high non-response rates among historically undercounted populations. The potential for an increased undercount would have far reaching consequences.

In addition to the possible loss of Congressional seats for states, accurate population counts are essential for commerce. Businesses that depend on sales to individual consumers rely on regional information about the age, income, education, family structure, occupations and commuting patterns of people that determine market segmentations. Additionally, behavioral data about the use of household accessories and technology provide the best picture that we have about how Americans live. Without a high participation rate and accurate interviews, the validity of important economic data is threatened.

The accuracy of the Census is also crucial for effective public policy. Not only do we rely on accurate Census data to provide public services like schools, health care centers and highways, demographic information from the Census has played a major role in the protection of our most fundamental freedoms. The accurate classification of specific racial and ethnic populations provides the core evidence that facilitates enforcement of both the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

Recent calls to [remove](#) or abruptly [transform](#) these questions similarly threaten the scientific integrity of the Census. Traditionally, the Census Bureau has led a continuous effort to refine and improve questions designed to measure evolving constructs such as race. For example, the 2000 Census was the first to provide the option of self-identification in multiple categories, to better reflect the growing complexity of racial identity. Our hope is that demographers and other scientists at the Bureau will

continue to adjust such questions in order to capture meaningful distinctions, but they should be free from political pressure in doing so.

The Census captures the story of who we have been, who we are, and who we are becoming. We urge the Department of Commerce uphold its responsibility to protect the scientific integrity and ensure the accuracy of the population data that results from the 2020 Census.

Sincerely,

Sent 3/23. Signatories as of 3/23:

Steven Aftergood
Acting President, Federation of American Scientists

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Meghan Maury
Policy Director, National LGBTQ Task Force

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Signatories as of 3/26:

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