

The Georgia Center for Nonprofits urges the Commerce Department to withdraw the improper citizenship question from the 2020 Census to avoid hurting American businesses, governments at all levels, the 501(c)(3) community, and the public.

On behalf of our members, the Georgia Center for Nonprofits joins with charitable and other organizations across the nation in expressing our strong opposition to inclusion of a citizenship question on the census questionnaire because of the clear and well-documented negative effect it will have on the count.

We detail our position below but make three specific summary points:

1. The impact of including a citizenship question has been researched by the federal government numerous times and has been clearly proven to impact the total count required by law.
2. The historical context of including a citizenship question shows that census tabulations were used with bias toward a particular group and directly implicated in the denial of civil rights to citizens of the United States.
3. Disregarding the deadlines mandated by Congress has prevented proper testing of the question in the field and does not adhere to congressionally mandated Census process.

Inclusion of a Citizenship question suppresses the count

As the U.S. Census Bureau notes, “The decennial census is the largest mobilization and operation conducted in the United States and requires years of research, planning and development of methods and infrastructure to ensure an accurate and complete count – a constitutionally required “actual Enumeration” of everyone in the nation – more specially: all “persons in each state.”

The Census Bureau itself has previously provided research demonstrating that a question on a person’s citizenship status would discourage participation in the count. Census Bureau leadership – repeatedly, for decades, have clearly supported excluding any inquiry into citizenship status of survey participants. Six former Census Bureau Directors serving under both political parties warned that adding a citizenship question would depress responses among minorities who fear that the government would use that information against them. At an appropriation hearing in April 2018, Acting Census Bureau Chief Ron Jarmin disagreed with the notion that the impact of the citizenship question on the count would be “minimal” and acknowledged that the impact “could be, in some communities, important.”

Historically, citizenship question inclusion has been used with bias

Inclusion of the citizenship question cannot be viewed outside the context of the historical record and the existing environment of aggressive deportation of individuals and highly charged anti-immigrant rhetoric. In 2000, Kenneth Prewitt, then-Director of the U.S. Census Bureau, issued a public apology on behalf of the agency because the Census Bureau had provided confidential census data to other government officials to aid in identifying individuals to be sent to internment camps during World War II. He acknowledged, “The historical record is clear that senior Census Bureau staff proactively cooperated with

the internment, and that census tabulations were directly implicated in the denial of civil rights to citizens of the United States who happened also to be of Japanese ancestry.” With such a history, the Census Bureau today must be hyper-sensitive to avoiding even the appearance of bias, illegality, or indifference to the legitimate fears of retaliation and misuse of census information.

Disregarding the deadlines mandated by Congress has prevented proper testing of the question in the field.

Because of the enormity and importance of the Census, federal law dictates the strict process to be used so that solid plans and informed decisions can be made.

One requirement is that three years before the next Census, the Secretary of Commerce must present to Congress the topics to be included in the survey. Another requirement is that two years before the next Census, the Secretary must present the actual survey questions to Congress. These timing requirements are important because they are designed to dovetail with the various Field Tests and End-to-End Census Tests that provide the Census Bureau with feedback on how to avoid unintended problems with the operations, systems, and questions.

Commerce Secretary Ross disregarded the statutory deadline when, by letter dated March 26, 2018, he directed his staff to include a question on a topic not previously identified in the required list of topics submitted to Congress in 2017. Specifically, he resurrected a citizenship question that had been disavowed and removed from the decennial census 60 years ago following the federal government’s misuse of that confidential data.

Disregarding the deadlines mandated by Congress has prevented proper testing of the question in the field. Six former Census Directors who served under Republican and Democratic administrations wrote earlier this year: “There is a great deal of evidence that even small changes in survey question order, wording, and instructions can have significant, and often unexpected, consequences for the rate, quality, and truthfulness of response.” They concluded with this summary: “[A]dding a citizenship question to the 2020 Census will considerably increase the risks to the 2020 enumeration” required by the U.S. Constitution.

Conclusion

Those who will be harmed the most by an undercount are not the uncounted individuals, but the businesses, governments, nonprofits, and public who then suffer for a decade without the quality data they rely upon to fuel our economy, plan local, state and federal strategies, and strengthen our communities.

It is imperative that Congress insist that no citizenship question be included on the 2020 Census questionnaire because of the likelihood that, among other things, it will suppress participation and lead to an unfair, inaccurate, and incomplete count.

Sincerely,



Karen F. Beavor, CEO