



# *Treasure trove of Census data stumbles on launch*

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By Alice Lipowicz

The federal government's online release of the 1940 U.S. Census started off with a bit of embarrassment as officials from the National Archives and Records Administration conducting a launch webcast on April 2 could not get the [website](#) to load properly.

The mixed reviews continued throughout the day as dozens of users complained of slow or nonfunctioning servers and privacy experts raised concerns about the personal data being released.

NARA's new 1940 census website allows anyone to search the census' 3.8 million pages of records, but initial searches were reported to be malfunctioning. "It just keeps spinning and the images say 'loading' or 'preparing image,'" wrote a user on NARA's Facebook [page](#). "Not really surprised—just disappointed," wrote another user.

NARA officials apologized and said they were working quickly to resolve the problems.

"We know that you are frustrated with the difficulties we're experiencing on our 1940census.archives.gov site. We completely share these frustrations!" NARA officials wrote on their Facebook page on April 2.

In the first three hours of operation, the website had about 22 million hits from 1.9 million users, Susan Cooper, director of communications for NARA, told Federal Computer Week.

"We had a huge response from the public, and the system just froze. We are working with our partners, Inflection Inc. and Ancestry.com, to resolve the problems," Cooper said. "We are adding more servers and hoping that by this evening it will be a lot better."

While many researchers welcomed the release of information on the nation's 132 million people in 1940, others worried about the apparently broken privacy promise to the 21 million still-living individuals whose personal information is contained in those documents. The 1940 census contained 65 questions, with an additional 16 questions for a small percentage of respondents.

The online publication makes the U.S. census information available to anyone with a Web connection, with no advance registration.

In 1940, the federal government told Americans there would be no disclosure of census records. However, in 1952, census officials agreed to release census records 72 years after each census. The intent of the release was to advance “legitimate historical, genealogical or other worth-while research, provided adequate precautions are taken to make sure that the information disclosed is not to be used to the detriment of any of the persons whose records are involved,” according to a [copy of the agreement](#) published by CNET.

Since the 1970s, NARA has made 1920 and 1930 census information available to public libraries on microfiche. Private companies also make available the 1920 and 1930 census information online for a fee.

But the information remains sensitive and raises privacy and identity theft concerns for the still-living respondents and their ancestors, according to Adam Marcus, chief operating officer of the TechFreedom think tank, writing in an [editorial](#) published by CNET on April 2.

“You can find out what your father did, how much he made, or if he was on the dole. You may be able to find out if your mother had an illegitimate child before she married your father. And you can view information on anyone, not just your own family. Because Americans faced stiff penalties for not answering census questions truthfully, this information is likely to be quite accurate,” Marcus wrote in the editorial.

Many elderly may be at risk for identity theft because the census also contains sensitive information such as mother’s maiden name, father’s middle name and dates of birth, Marcus added.

However, Cooper, of NARA, said the agency did not receive any complaints about privacy from the public. She also pointed out that the census does not include Social Security Numbers.

“We haven't really had any privacy concerns,” Cooper said. “The overwhelming response to the opening is excitement that people can find their families on the census. After 72 years, most, if not all, of the privacy issues are sort of moot.”

Even so, Marcus suggested the broad online release of the 1940 census may dampen public trust in future census efforts, Marcus added.

“For today's release, there's no putting the genie back in the bottle,” he wrote. But in the future, the Census Bureau should explain that all records will be eventually be made public.

“This may indeed result in less participation, but the Census Bureau could simply allow people to refuse to answer sensitive questions (such as phone number, date of birth, race) and/or allow them to completely opt out of publication of their responses,” he added.

Another suggestion is to lengthen the release time to 100 years after each census.

Jim Harper, director of information and policy studies at the Cato Institute, also takes the census bureau to task for failing to keep the information private.

"To be sure, this data will open a fascinating trove for researchers into life 70 years ago. But the Federal Trade Commission would not recognize a “fascinating trove” exception if a private company were to release data it had collected under promises of confidentiality," Harper wrote in a [blog entry](#) on April 2.