



Point-Counterpoint: What could go wrong with the 2020 census?

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Point: We all are responsible for an accurate census. Counterpoint: Be skeptical about the census.

Point: We all are responsible for an accurate census

By Suzanne Almeida

This year, the U.S. government will undertake its largest peacetime operation: the decennial census.

The census is an enormous logistical, technological and social challenge that relies on a complex web of experts, community outreach and an enormous hiring effort to conduct a complete headcount of every person living in the United States.

What could possibly go wrong?

The biggest challenge of an accurate census is not counting everyone.

People may not be counted for a wide variety of reasons. Many think their response to the census questionnaire does not matter. Others don't trust the government with their household information. And some don't have a home address to receive the form or the internet access to fill it out.

Regardless of the reason, it is the job of every person in America to make sure our family, friends and neighbors have all the information about why the census is important and why their response makes a difference. The consequences of an inaccurate count are serious and will last for the next decade.

Census results are used to divide up \$1.5 trillion in federal funding for resources like firetrucks, roads and bridges. Without an accurate count, communities may not receive the vital resources that they need to ensure a high quality of life for everyone.

Businesses and nonprofits also use census data to decide where best to create jobs and provide services. An inaccurate census undermines this decision-making process and impedes economic and social growth in our communities.

Census data are used to decide how many representatives each state gets in the U.S. House of Representatives and where we draw the electoral boundaries for those congressional and state legislative districts. An undercount translates to taxation without representation — and that's a serious problem.

Some people are afraid that if they report their age, race, ethnicity, relationship status and home address to the federal government, the data will be used against them. For many, these fears intensified during the failed attempt to add a citizenship question to the 2020 census questionnaire. The census is a time for unity, a time that our Founding Fathers decided everyone, citizen and non-citizens alike, should count once and only once in the place where they live.

That is why Congress passed a law to maintain the privacy of census responses. The Census Bureau, courts and civic groups have been dogged in enforcing these protections. Once someone provides information to the Census Bureau — whether by filling out the census online, on a paper form, or by answering questions from a census canvasser — it is only used to produce statistics. A second challenge is fighting the spread of false information or interference with the census. The 2016 presidential election taught us that the risk of foreign and domestic interference in our democracy is real and cannot be overestimated.

A number of tech companies, including Facebook and Twitter, have committed to removing disinformation about the census from their platforms. A network of organizations and activists, alongside many local and state governments, have committed to spreading accurate information about the census using traditional and social media, along with person-to-person interaction.

Finally, the census is an enormous logistical and technological undertaking. This year, for the first time, the majority of census data collection will be done using an online portal. In addition to posing challenges for people who do not have easy access to the internet, this will be new technology that has not been tested in a previous census.

Experts have already raised alarms about the portal crashing or coming under cyberattack. Fortunately, the alarms were raised prior to the start of the enumeration in March, and the Census Bureau is building redundancies into their systems before they start asking every household in the United States to respond.

So, what could go wrong with the 2020 Census? Plenty. The stakes are incredibly high.

To succeed at counting everyone, we need to spread the message of the vital importance of achieving an accurate count and consider the census as something we are all responsible for getting right.

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Counterpoint: Be skeptical about the census

By Matthew Feeney

This year the Census Bureau will begin conducting the constitutionally required census, which takes place every 10 years. Many readers will dutifully fill out the forms, informing the bureau about their household and providing researchers with data. In May, the bureau will begin visiting those who haven't responded to the census.

But why wouldn't someone want to contribute to social science and an accurate head count? The history of the census provides ample evidence to justify such reluctance.

The census sounds harmless enough. In a representative democracy like the United States where seats in at least part of the legislature are determined by population, it's important to know how many people live in the country and where they live. The framers of the Constitution codified the

decennial census as the mechanism for determining the number of seats each state occupies in the House of Representatives. Yet the information included in the census has been used to violate civil liberties, and it would be a mistake to assume similar abuses won't occur again.

Governments often overreact in the wake of a crisis, and a crucial feature of such overreactions is the collection and analysis of information. During the first Red Scare, a 24-year-old J. Edgar Hoover was put in charge of the so-called "Anti Radical Division" formed by the Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer after a string of anarchist bombings. Hoover, who previously worked at the Library of Congress, used his librarian skills in his hunt for aliens to deport. His team assembled hundreds of thousands of index cards associated with not only individuals but publications and organizations. These notecards aided Department of Justice officials, who conducted the so-called Palmer Raids in late 1919 and early 1920. The raids resulted in thousands of people being arrested without warrants, hundreds of whom were deported.

Such zeal for data collection was not isolated to the first Red Scare. Other crises have resulted in increased information gathering. And one of the best sources of information available to the government is the census.

After the Japanese navy's air service bombed the U.S. Navy base at Pearl Harbor in December 1941, military officials reached for the census to facilitate one of the most shameful civil liberty abuses in American history: the internment of Japanese-Americans. A few months after the attack, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. The order authorized the secretary of war to exclude those considered national security risks from designated military areas. As result, 120,000 people of Japanese descent — the majority of whom were U.S. citizens — were moved into internment camps.

Census officials denied that the bureau had assisted Japanese internment. But in 2000 historian Margo Anderson of the University of Wisconsin and Fordham University statistician William Seltzer uncovered evidence that Census Bureau officials provided information on whereabouts of people with Japanese ancestry. In 2000, the Census Bureau director apologized, but only a few years after the apology the bureau was aiding the surveillance of another minority group.

In August 2002 and December 2003, the Census Bureau put together tabulations of Arab-Americans for Customs and Border Protection. These tabulations included information on how many Arab-Americans lived in specific ZIP codes. The creation of these tabulations was a small part of the U.S. government's broader overreaction to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which resulted in widespread and needless infringements on civil liberties.

We should expect that in response to the next crisis officials won't be shy about seeking census data. This risk is more pronounced when the targets of government surveillance come from broad groups such as "Japanese-Americans" or "Arab-Americans." The history of American surveillance reveals a list of the targets that is long and diverse. Today the administration is concerned about illegal immigrants. This misguided concern prompted the administration to seek to add a citizenship question to the 2020 census before the Supreme Court ruled against the administration.

Future administrations will have different targets. Given that anyone could one day be on the receiving end of government surveillance, it behooves us to be hesitant to volunteer intimate details about our families.

Refusing to accurately complete a census form is against the law and could result in a fine. Fortunately, the Department of Justice is hesitant to pursue census refusal cases. It's true that the census provides researchers with valuable data, but given the history of government overreaction to crises you could forgive those who err on the side of providing less information to the Census Bureau.

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