



Census wants to know more

By [Mark Davis](#)

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Think the census is done? Don't count on it.

The U.S. Census Bureau, which recently completed its once-a-decade inventory of U.S. residents, is still asking Americans questions about their lives.

In some instances, they are of the sort of queries you don't want to answer until that third date, such as, just how many times have you been married?

The questions are contained in the frequently criticized American Community Survey, which the Census Bureau mails monthly. By year's end, the additional questionnaire will have been sent to about 3 million homes, computer-selected at random.

More than 50,000 are mailed to residents in Georgia, Florida and Alabama who have already been counted in the earlier census.

Federal law requires a recipient to fill out the survey and return it. If not, that person may get a phone call from census officials, a visit — or maybe a \$5,000 fine.

The survey asks wide-ranging questions on education level, ancestry, income, residence, monthly utility bills and when the survey-takers leave for work and return home, for example. The questions help the government understand resident' habits and needs, said Marvin Dudek, assistant regional director of the U.S. Census Bureau's Atlanta office. The Census Bureau says all ACS questions are held in the strictest confidence and that the information helps municipalities' and states' planning efforts. Business owners can use the data when trying to make decisions where they should offer certain services.

It is not, Dudek said, the government's way of meddling in private lives — a charge he's heard before.

"Anytime you ask questions, you are going to have some resistance" from respondents, said Dudek. "For the most part, people fill it out accurately and completely." He estimated 24 of 25 households complete the questionnaire.

But not everyone complies. Phil Myers, a retiree who lives near Cartersville, recalls receiving the survey several years ago. He answered one query and mailed it back. He never heard another word about it, Myers said.

"I told them how many people lived in my house," said Myers. "I just thought the rest of it was nosy."

Others say it's worse than that.

Constitutional questions

The nation's first census took place in 1790, when federal marshals went house to house taking a count of the residents of each household in the young nation. It took 18 months and counted 3.9 million people.

The census has consistently become more sophisticated and invasive since then, said David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute in Washington. The nonprofit organization espouses limited government, free-market principles and individual liberties. It views the bureau's community survey with distrust.

The 10-year census, said Boaz, is designed to count Americans to guarantee they have proper representation in Congress and other legislative bodies. Anything beyond that, he said, is unconstitutional.

"Obviously, you don't need to know how many toilets I have in my house to know how many congress people Virginia gets," said Boaz, who lives in Arlington, Va. "I don't think it's appropriate for the government to ask us about race, about housing, about the rent we pay."

Natalie Dominguez of Snellville thinks even the bureau's standard short form is too nosy. The community survey, she said, is the government's attempt to expand its role in American lives beyond basic services such as military protection and transportation. That way, she said, bureaucrats keep their jobs.

"They certainly have zero respect for the Constitution and the original intent of the census," said Dominguez, 48.

Others, like Amanda Davis of Douglasville, think critics overreact to the community surveys. She was a temporary worker this year for the Atlanta Census Bureau's quality assurance division, calling residents to make sure questioners had done their jobs properly.

"I don't see the purpose of making a big deal out of it," said Davis, 30.

Touchiest query?

The questions serve a purpose, say federal officials. Citizens' responses about commute times, for example, help transportation planners determine which areas need new highways.

Most people who refuse to answer the questionnaires eventually change their minds, said Brenda Marshall of College Park. A great-grandmother and retiree, she started working for the federal agency more than a year ago, visiting people who failed to mail in their community surveys and offering to help them. She works all points of the Atlanta area.

The toughest question? "Income," she said, after a moment's thought. "A lot of people are touchy about that."

When she explains why the agency is interested in a family's life, said Marshall, respondents usually open up.

A bureau employee since 1973, Dudek said the agency is not out to hurt anyone.

“We’re not the census police,” he said.

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