
Census questions discriminate, offend

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This most recent decennial census is asking some questions that go beyond the constitutional mandate of counting the country's population. Some people are taking offense as to the nature and wording of several questions on the form, but even more puzzling is why they were deemed necessary to appear in the first place. Yet, these facts may even be secondary, considering that our nation has used the census information for some alarming purposes in the past.

The Census Bureau makes claims regarding the purpose of the information it collects, and its use. These claims can be found on the organization's Web site, and are summarized in some of their advertisements. The foremost purpose of the census is to determine how congressional districts will be drawn. Other uses of the data include allocation of funds for Medicaid, planning infrastructure such as roads and schools and helping real estate agents.

These purposes seem useful enough, but the uses of census data have some alarming blips in their timelines. It is important to understand the confidentiality pamphlet that comes in every census form. It assures Americans that the information will only be used for the purpose of counting the population and that the names and addresses will not be sold to any third parties or other government agencies.

But according to David Kopel of the Cato Institute, in the past the Census Bureau has handed over information to assist with locating draft resisters during World War I. Perhaps even more alarming, the internment of Japanese Americans was aided by the Census Bureau when it identified high-concentration neighborhoods of Japanese Americans for the Justice Department. As our history points out, many Japanese Americans were unlawfully detained in concentration camps during World War II.

The form is reminiscent of a prying neighbor with the amount of information it asks about each person. Remember, its purpose is to count the number of people in a given area. Apparently,

the Census Bureau needs to know a person's name, sex, age, birth-date, Hispanic origin (or lack thereof), race, home-ownership status and temporary living status in order to count him or her. When considering the previously mentioned information about drafts and internment camps, this information in the wrong hands can actually be harmful. The form claims that the information is protected by law, yet the past seems to speak for itself.

What is still unclear is why the census requires some of the information on the forms at all. There is no clear explanation as to why, for example, race is an important human characteristic to count. What the Census Bureau does do, however, is compile its data into several charts and fact sheets so that it can be easily interpreted. What most people do not know is that these charts can tell you information such as which states have the most or fewest of any race; a tool that seems useless to anyone who is not a racist.

The questions will also undoubtedly leave many people unhappy and uncounted in the ways that matter to them. On the most recent census form, anyone of Hispanic origin or background is required to check the box as "white." The first question about race does have options for people of Hispanic origins to identify themselves, yet this same question clarifies with these seven words: "For this census, Hispanic origins are not races."

This clarification of Hispanic origin requires an entire question of its own, separate from the question claiming to be about race. Yet it is assumable that many people who identify as Hispanic would feel that they are somehow being manipulated when they are required to identify as white on a government form.

There is also the issue of sex. One of the questions asks, "What is Person (#)'s sex? Mark ONE box." The choices leave male or female, and the question has already clarified that only one may be chosen. This is a further alienation of those who would consider themselves intersex or transgender. Seemingly to add insult, the word "one" is capitalized, assuring the reader that there is only one of two possibilities.

It is important to have an accurate idea of the population densities in America, yet it is also important that the government take nothing more than taxes from its private citizens. It would be prudent that the Census Bureau consider whom it will offend with its questions, especially since it has 10 years to formulate them.