

May 8, 2018

The Honorable Trey Gowdy, Chairman  
The Honorable Elijah Cummings, Ranking Member  
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
2154 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Gowdy and Ranking Member Cummings:

We write to you regarding the hearing on “Progress Report on the 2020 Census.”<sup>1</sup> EPIC is a public interest research center established in 1994 to focus public attention on emerging privacy and civil liberties issues. The Census implicates numerous privacy issues.<sup>2</sup> As the Committee evaluates the 2020 Census, we ask you to consider the risks of Census data being used for illegitimate purposes.

The Census is an essential part of understanding the changing demographics in America. The census helps ensure evidence-based policy decisions and census data is the source of much political and economic planning in the United States. However, it is of the utmost importance the individual privacy is respected. Every effort must be taken to ensure that the personal information of individuals and that census data is not used improperly.

There has been greater concern about the confidentiality of 2020 census data than in previous decennial censuses. The Census Bureau conducted a study in 2017 that found respondents expressing new concerns including the “Muslim ban,” the dissolution of DACA, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement.<sup>3</sup> The study found that these concerns were most pronounced among immigrant respondents.<sup>4</sup>

Secretary Ross’s decision to add a citizenship question to the 2020 census raises concerns about improper uses of Census data. The U.S. has misused Census data to target minority groups before. During World War II, the Census Bureau provided information to the War Department that led to the internment of 120,000 innocent Japanese.<sup>5</sup> After 9-11, EPIC pursued a Freedom of

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<sup>1</sup> *Progress Report on the 2020 Census*, 115<sup>th</sup> Cong. (2018), H.R. Comm. on Oversight and Government Reform, <https://oversight.house.gov/hearing/progress-report-on-the-2020-census/> (May 8, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> *The Census and Privacy*, EPIC, <https://epic.org/privacy/census/>.

<sup>3</sup> Center for Survey Measurement, MEMORANDUM FOR Associate Directorate for Research and Methodology (ADRM) Respondent Confidentiality Concerns (Sept. 20, 2017), <https://www2.census.gov/cac/nac/meetings/2017-11/Memo-Regarding-Respondent-Confidentiality-Concerns.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 1.

<sup>5</sup> W. Seltzer and M. Anderson, “Census Confidentiality under the Second War Powers Act (1942-1947).” Paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America, New York, March 29-31, 2007, available at <http://studylib.net/doc/7742798/census-confidentiality-under-the-second-war-powers>.

Information Act request about the potential misuse of census data. Documents from the 2000 Census obtained by EPIC revealed that the Census Bureau had provided the Department of Homeland Security with data on individuals of Arab ancestry.<sup>6</sup> As we explained in 2004:

EPIC obtained documents through the Freedom of Information Act last week revealing that the Census Bureau gave the Department of Homeland Security statistical information on people who identified themselves on the 2000 census as being of Arab ancestry. The special tabulations were prepared specifically for the law enforcement agency, and do not indicate that similar information about any other ethnic groups was requested. The tabulations apparently include information about United States citizens, as well as individuals of Arab descent whose families have lived in the United States for generations.

One tabulation shows cities with populations of 10,000 or more and with 1,000 or more people who indicated they are of Arab ancestry. For each city, the tabulation provides total population, population of Arab ancestry, and percent of the total population which is of Arab ancestry.

A second tabulation, more than a thousand pages in length, shows the number of census responses indicating Arab ancestry in zip codes throughout the country. The responses indicating Arab ancestry are subdivided into Egyptian, Iraqi, Jordanian, Lebanese, Moroccan, Palestinian, Syrian, Arab/Arabic, and Other Arab.

The heavily redacted documents show that in April 2004, a Census Bureau analyst e-mailed a Department of Homeland Security official and said, "You got a file of Arab ancestry information by ZIP Code Tabulation Area from me last December (2003). My superiors are now asking questions about the usage of that data, given the sensitivity of different data requests we have received about the Arab population."<sup>7</sup>

EPIC's FOIA efforts led the Census Bureau to implement new procedures regarding the release of "potentially sensitive data to requesting law enforcement agencies and organizations or individuals."<sup>8</sup> EPIC supported those efforts but recognizes also the ongoing concerns about the potential misuse of data collected by government agencies. Amid rising fears that some minority groups may be targeted by law enforcement agencies, your committee should ensure that the data collected by the federal government is not misused.

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<sup>6</sup> *Department of Homeland Security Obtained Data on Arab Americans From Census Bureau*, EPIC, <https://epic.org/privacy/census/foia/>; Lynette Clemetson, *Homeland Security Given Data on Arab-Americans*, New York Times, Jul. 30, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/30/us/homeland-security-given-data-on-arab-americans.html>.

<sup>7</sup> *EPIC Report: Homeland Security Given Census Data on Arab Americans*, EPIC Alert 11.15 (Aug. 4, 2005), [https://epic.org/alert/EPIC\\_Alert\\_11.15.html](https://epic.org/alert/EPIC_Alert_11.15.html)

<sup>8</sup> Census Bureau News, "U.S. Census Bureau Announces Policy Regarding Sensitive Data," press release CB04-145, August 30, 2004; Lynette Clemetson, *Census Policy On Providing Sensitive Data Is Revised*, New York Times, Aug. 31, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/31/us/census-policy-on-providing-sensitive-data-is-revised.html>.

EPIC looks forward to working with the Subcommittee to ensure that the census data provides the maximum benefit to the American public while minimizing the privacy risks.

We ask that this letter from EPIC be entered in the hearing record.

Sincerely,

/s/ Marc Rotenberg

Marc Rotenberg  
EPIC President

/s/ Caitriona Fitzgerald

Caitriona Fitzgerald  
EPIC Policy Director

/s/ Christine Bannan

Christine Bannan  
EPIC Administrative Law and Policy Fellow