

A LETTER FROM U.S. PHILANTHROPIC LEADERS

OVER 300 GRANTMAKING EXECUTIVES FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY – AN UNPRECEDENTED NUMBER – JOIN TOGETHER TO CALL FOR REMOVAL OF THE CITIZENSHIP QUESTION ON THE 2020 CENSUS SURVEY

August 2, 2018

Ms. Jennifer Jessup
Departmental Paperwork Clearance Officer
Department of Commerce
Room 6616
14th and Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20230

Submitted via regulations.gov

RE: Comments on Proposed Information Collection on 2020 Census

Dear Ms. Jessup,

We write in response to the June 8 notice in the *Federal Register* requesting comments on the 2020 Census proposed information collection. We urge the Department of Commerce to withdraw the citizenship question from the 2020 Census questionnaire because we believe it will significantly undermine efforts to achieve a fair and accurate census in 2020.

We are leaders of nonpartisan philanthropic institutions from across the country, large and small, giving hundreds of millions of dollars each year to advance the common good and improve the quality of life in the United States. We have different funding priorities, are ideologically diverse, and do not always agree with each other. But we wholeheartedly agree that the citizenship question should not be part of the 2020 Census.

Across our varied institutions, we share a commitment to reliable and accurate data as a necessary foundation for a well-functioning government, robust civil society, and thriving business sector in the United States. We rely on accurate census data to help identify community needs and prioritize grantmaking, and our grantees rely on accurate census data to serve communities, especially those that are hard-to-count, through their work on various issues including poverty, health care, criminal justice reform, racial equity, education equity, and infrastructure improvement.

On January 19, 2018, the Census Bureau's Chief Scientist and Associate Director for Research and Methodology, John M. Abowd, warned Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross that adding a citizenship question "harms the quality of the census count." The January memo describes the impact: "reduced self-response," "increased item nonresponse," "erroneous enumerations increase," and "whole-person census imputations increase." The bureau emphasized the expected lower response rates and data quality problems "will be amplified during the 2020 Census compared to historical levels." Nonetheless, Secretary Ross instructed the Census Bureau on March 26 to add the citizenship question currently asked on the American Community Survey (ACS) to the 2020 Census.

The Census Bureau's own Scientific Advisory Committee (CSAC), a committee of appointed academics and other census experts, strongly disagreed with the decision to add the citizenship question. They noted that the bureau normally tests a question thoroughly for many years before adding it to a survey, but in this case added the citizenship question with no testing or research. "We think the rationale offered by Sec. Ross in favor of adding the question relied on flawed logic," said the CSAC, adding that the question raises concerns about the completeness and accuracy of the 2020 Census, as well as the future of public trust in the Census Bureau. Similarly, over the years, ten former Census Bureau directors from both Republican and Democratic administrations have repeatedly noted that adding a citizenship question without necessary testing endangers the quality of all census data because it could discourage census participation among the tens of millions of households with non-citizen members, have unknown adverse consequences for other populations' participation, and possibly influence the accuracy of responses to other census questions, such as those collecting data on race and ethnicity.

Although the citizenship question is asked on the ACS, which is sent only to a sample of households, experts agree that it needs to be tested for the 2020 Census because the decennial census is a different collection operation, which goes to every household, and is in a different political climate than when the question was tested for the ACS. The last, best chance to test the question in the context of the 2020 Census was the 2018 End-to-End Census Test. However, that test, well underway in Providence County, Rhode Island does not include the citizenship question.

If anything, a new analysis of ACS data corroborates a broader analysis that the Census Bureau shared with Secretary Ross demonstrating a "decline in self-response for noncitizen households" and higher rates of Hispanics breaking off completion of questions such that "survey response quality is differentially affected." The new analysis, which we are willing to share with the Census Bureau, shows that the citizenship question had the highest non-response rate of any 2016 ACS question that also will be on the 2020 Census questionnaire. Many of the hardest-to-count groups were the likeliest to leave that question unanswered.

The situation may have worsened since 2016. A September 20, 2017 Census Bureau memorandum noted that "fears, particularly among immigrant respondents, have increased markedly this year...These findings are particularly troubling given that they impact hard-to-count populations disproportionately, and have implications for data quality and nonresponse." This conclusion alone, reached prior to the decision to add the citizenship question, warrants removal of any inquiry into citizenship status on the decennial questionnaire.

Estimates from the Census Bureau and external researchers show recent decennial censuses have resulted in net undercounts in communities of color – Blacks, Asians and Pacific Islanders, Middle Easterners and North Africans, American Indians and Alaska Natives, and Latinos – and among children under five years old. Many households in these communities do not trust government, and many may have family members who are fearful of responding to the 2020 Census. Adding the citizenship question in this climate of fear and distrust will have a disproportionate impact on hard-to-count communities. Being undercounted deprives children, families, and whole communities of critical resources ranging from health care to education to public infrastructure.

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Many of our foundations have a strong working relationship with the Census Bureau, in some cases stretching back decades. Many are supporting research, education, outreach, and other efforts to help the bureau fulfill our mutual goal of a fair and accurate count. Even before the citizenship question was added, there was concern about the difficulty of ensuring that the hardest to reach are counted in the 2020 Census. The question unnecessarily adds to the challenge by increasing the hesitancy of our grantees and trusted community leaders to encourage participation in the census.

For all the reasons stated above, we urge you to withdraw the citizenship question from the 2020 Census and instead focus on making sure everyone in the U.S. is counted once, only once, and in the right place.

Thank you for your attention to our comments. If you have any questions or need any further information, please contact Gary Bass at the Bauman Foundation (baumanfoundation@baumanfoundation.org).

Sincerely,

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Simmons Foundation, The
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Sister Regina Fox, SSND
Executive Director

Sisters of St. Joseph Healthcare Foundation
Orange, CA

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Skillman Foundation, The
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Sobrato Family Foundation
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Samuel G. Huber
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Stone Foundation of New Jersey, The
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Fo-Ching Lu
President
SYL Foundation
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Taos, NM

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Newell Flather
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Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation
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Ellen Dorsey
Executive Director

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Washington, DC

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Washington Area Women's Foundation
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Watertown Area Community Foundation
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Wayfinder Foundation, The
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Regina McGraw
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Yakima Valley Community Foundation
Yakima, WA

Merryl Snow Zegar
Trustee and Executive Director

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Zegar Family Foundation

New York, NY

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