

PRO/CON: Should our next census ask about citizenship status?

By Merrill Matthews and Wayne Madsen, Tribune News Service, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.18.18

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Ahead of the 2020 census, a debate has emerged about the inclusion of a question about citizenship status. Photo by: Getty Images

PRO: The question helps the government do a better job

The government plans to add a question to the 2020 census. The question asks each person if they are a U.S. citizen.

The U.S. government sends out a census every 10 years. The census asks questions about every family in the country. It helps find out how many people live in each state. It has many uses. One use is deciding how many lawmakers each state sends to Washington, D.C.

In the U.S., citizens have certain rights. One example is the right to vote. Some people are not citizens but have permission to live in the country. Others are in the country without permission. The government isn't exactly sure how many people are in each group. That's because the census has not asked who is a citizen for many years now.

The census asked if people were citizens through 1950. It stopped in 1960. The hope was that more people would respond.

Useful Information For The Government

Adding the question again is a good idea. It could help those who make government rules. For example, it can help count people who don't have health insurance. People use health insurance to pay for going to the doctor. This can be expensive.

Many people who are here without permission probably don't have insurance. That means they are unlikely to be affected by government changes to health insurance.

Not knowing this information is hard for lawmakers.

The problem is not limited to health care. The government has many programs. Some programs support people without permission to be here. This money should be used for citizens and people who came to the U.S. with the proper permission.

Asking if people are citizens goes back hundreds of years. Asking it on the census once again is a good idea.

Merrill Matthews is a scholar with the Institute for Policy Innovation.

CON: Such questions don't belong in a free country's census

The 2020 census will ask people if they are citizens. It's the first time since the 1950 census.

Asking if people are citizens is worrying. It could be used to find groups of non-citizens. I'm worried that this information could be misused.

Census data has been used in bad ways in the past.

The Misuse Of Census Data

In 2004, the government used census data from 2000. The government kept track of Arab-Americans and where they lived. It was wrong for the government to do this.

The government also misused census data during World War II. The U.S. was at war with Japan. It rounded up about 120,000 Japanese-American citizens. It put them in camps. The camps were like being in jail. Japanese-Americans were taken to the camps even though they had not broken any laws.

President Donald Trump often says hateful things about people from other countries. Because of this, the census question probably has a harmful purpose.

A Lesson From Abroad

Many Americans have not heard of Jacques Fauvet. He worked for the French government from 1984 to 1999. He warned about census data being misused.

German Nazis took over France in 1940. Fauvet pointed out that they took French census records. They used the census records for bad purposes. They used them to choose who to take away to concentration camps. Many of these people died. Enough said!

Wayne Madsen is a writer. His articles have appeared in American and European newspapers.