



Health Experts Warn Against Adding Census Citizenship Question

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Adding a question about citizenship status to the U.S. census could have wide-ranging impacts on federal and local health programs, experts say.

The Department of Commerce on Monday announced it will reinstate a question about citizenship to the census in 2020, a move that has Democrats and public advocates worried about a chilling effect on responses from immigrant communities.

Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said the question will aid the Department of Justice in enforcing the Voting Rights Act, but critics say the decision is unnecessary and politically motivated.

The census is taken once a decade to determine how many House representatives a state is entitled to in Congress. But the survey also provides invaluable data on everything from ethnicity and education to housing and transportation. Those data are used to inform Congress and public officials in determining the effectiveness of health programs and calculating proper funding.

Data are the “lifeblood” for federal programs, said Licy Do Canto, founder of the public health lobby firm The Do Canto Group. If individuals aren’t properly counted,

it could skew funding levels for health care programs, particularly those funded through block grants.

“The data is the primary way in which money towards state and local governments for those particular programs is determined,” he told CQ.

In the 1990s, Do Canto worked for former Massachusetts Democrat Barney Frank on improving the language and helping communities understand the importance of the survey leading up to the 2000 census. Based on local data, Do Canto knew that important demographics were slipping through the cracks.

The chilling effect from the current political environment could drive immigrants back into the shadows, he said, and the data gap would be too wide for other public and private surveys to fill. Many studies begin with the census data as a starting point.

“The census is broad and national and deep,” he said. “In many ways, it goes further than these targeted studies.”

Joshua Peck, co-founder of advocacy group Get America Covered and the former chief marketing officer for HealthCare.gov, relied heavily on Census Bureau data for demographic information. Hispanics have the highest uninsured rate and are consequently a top target for coverage on the insurance exchanges set up under the 2010 health care law (PL 111-148, PL 111-152). The Census Bureau also determines the Federal Poverty Level each year, which is necessary for calculating subsidies and Medicaid eligibility.

The citizenship question is already included in the smaller, annual American Community Survey conducted by the Census Bureau, but that is “scientifically

irrelevant,” said Terri Ann Lowenthal, policy adviser to The Leadership Conference Education Fund.

Because of the sheer scale and importance of the census, the survey undergoes careful testing on the wording and order of questions to maximize response rates. The census questionnaire for 2020 is currently undergoing final testing in Rhode Island, but that version doesn't include the citizenship question. That means the Census Bureau will not have tested the effects of the highly sensitive question before the full census is sent across the country.

“It is clear that Secretary Ross has abdicated his responsibility to demonstrate that the addition of this question will not have negative consequences,” Arturo Vargas, executive director of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund told reporters Tuesday.

The Senate’s hardline immigration conservatives, on the other hand, applauded the announcement. Sens. Tom Cotton of Arkansas, Ted Cruz of Texas and James M. Inhofe of Oklahoma had petitioned the Department of Commerce to include the question.

“Counting the number of U.S. citizens in the country should be a high priority of the census, and the only way to get an accurate count is to add a question about citizenship to the census itself,” Cotton said in a statement.

The fear from immigrant families is real, Do Canto said. While the Census Bureau is prohibited from sharing data with other federal agencies, Peck believes that even legal immigrants with undocumented family members will avoid the census.

“They won’t want to get anywhere close to anything that might jeopardize their family,” Peck said.

California’s Democratic Attorney General, Xavier Becerra, has filed suit against the Trump administration, and fellow Democrat, New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, is planning on leading a separate multi-state challenge against the decision. House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi of California is also calling on Congress to pass legislation prohibiting the question.

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