

United States  
A Guide for New  
Immigrants

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## Justice Department wants citizenship question for 2020 Census

Late addition to questionnaire could negatively impact response rates, especially among immigrants, warn ASA and others

New fears for the accuracy of the United States Census emerged after the Department of Justice (DOJ) sent a request to the US Census Bureau asking that data on citizenship be collected as part of the 2020 population count.

The letter, from DOJ general counsel Arthur Gary to Census Bureau acting director Ron Jarmin, argues that this information is necessary to help the DOJ protect against “racial discrimination in voting”, specifically the practice of “vote dilution”, whereby the voting power of a minority group is diminished by splitting or merging electoral districts in which they hold a majority into one or more districts where they do not ([bit.ly/2m8eWNE](http://bit.ly/2m8eWNE)).

Gary’s letter states that to fully enforce the protections of the Voting Rights Act, “the Department needs a reliable calculation of the citizen voting-age population” rather than total voting-age population (which would include both citizens and non-citizens).

However, members of Congress and the American Statistical Association (ASA) have objected to the inclusion of

a citizenship question because it may deter immigrants from participating in the 2020 Census, leading to lower response rates and a commensurate increase in costs as fieldworkers are forced to contact a greater number of non-responding households.

These concerns compound existing worries about the 2020 Census budget and whether funding to date has been sufficient to ensure a successful, accurate count of the US population (see page 4 of our December 2017 issue and [significancemagazine.com/557](http://significancemagazine.com/557)).

Congressional representatives José Serrano and Grace Meng described the DOJ request as “misguided and problematic” in a letter to Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross ([bit.ly/2mawMzG](http://bit.ly/2mawMzG)), whose Department of Commerce oversees the Census Bureau.

They point out that information on citizenship is already collected via the American Community Survey and that “this information has been appropriately used in a variety of Voting Rights Act cases without concern”.

Serrano and Meng also state that “the communities most affected by the

### Citizenship and the census

The United States Census first asked about citizenship in 1820, with a question about “foreigners not naturalized”. Versions of this question were asked of all US households until 1950, after which the citizenship question became part of a new “long-form” census. Like the “short-form” version, the long-form census was sent out every 10 years, but its extended list of questions went only to a sample of households. As of 2005, the long-form census was replaced by the annual American Community Survey, which now asks about citizenship. For the full history of census questions, see [bit.ly/2DhBz8n](http://bit.ly/2DhBz8n).

Voting Rights Act have not requested this question for inclusion in the upcoming census”, nor has the Census Bureau’s National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic and Other Populations (NAC).

However, the NAC has recently received a report that documents an increase “in respondents spontaneously expressing concerns to researchers and field staff about confidentiality and data access relating to immigration”. The same report noted “increased rates of unusual respondent behaviors during pretesting and production surveys”, including data falsification, item non-response and survey break-offs ([bit.ly/2m9XhcQ](http://bit.ly/2m9XhcQ)).

“Adding a citizenship question at this late stage of the decennial census process would likely increase distrust or suspicion of the government among immigrants, many of whom are already anxious about government inquiries and activities,” wrote ASA president Lisa LaVange, in a letter to Secretary Ross ([bit.ly/2maH9Uv](http://bit.ly/2maH9Uv)).

The final list of questions for the 2020 Census is due to be submitted to Congress by 31 March 2018. ■