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## TRUMP ADMINISTRATION PLANS TO CHECK YOUR ANSWER ON CENSUS CITIZENSHIP QUESTION

*Census Bureau will mine state and federal records to verify accuracy of responses*

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The Trump administration, anticipating millions may avoid answering the citizenship question it has added to the 2020 census, plans to mine immigration, Social Security and other state and federal records to check accuracy, and perhaps even change answers.

Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross's order, issued last week, requires the Census Bureau to collect data about citizenship status that can be matched accurately to each census form.

"At my direction the Census Bureau is working to obtain as many additional federal and state administrative records as possible to provide more comprehensive information for the population," Mr. Ross wrote.

The change could lead to costly and cumbersome cross-checking and to new questions about the accuracy of the census, a tool used to draw congressional districts and apportion government spending on programs.

Mr. Ross's order to add the citizenship question late in the census-preparation cycle prompted opposition from immigrant and minority groups, as well as business and research groups. Eighteen states and the District of Columbia have sued to block the move. They fear that the citizenship question will prompt immigrants to shun the census. That could drive up its cost and lower its accuracy by increasing the need for census workers who must follow up in person.

In the past, if multiple mailings and visits to a home didn't produce a complete census form, workers filled in blanks based on responses from previous surveys or a statistical formula that borrowed information from similar people in similar households nearby.

Workers haven't previously used other government records to correct census responses – a change that introduces new layers of complexity to what is already a sprawling government undertaking. What the process might be if records suggest a household's form is inaccurate has yet to be written.

Mr. Ross left the choice of whether to use other government records to fill in blanks or correct census responses up to the bureau, but he said that neither the citizenship question nor government data alone seemed likely to be accurate enough to fulfill a request by the Justice Department to help it enforce the Voting Rights Act.

It has asked for voting-age citizenship status totals for 11 million areas called census blocks, which in cities are typically a street block. An accurate count of where minority voters live could provide evidence of illegal "vote dilution," where districts are designed to prevent such groups from forming majorities, the Justice Department wrote in December.

Mr. Ross said asking the question and cross-checking answers “will permit the Census Bureau to determine the inaccurate response rate for citizens and noncitizens alike using the entire population.”

The use by the Census Bureau of other government records isn’t by itself novel. The bureau has long used government records to help with census operations, mostly to lessen its workload or keep its address list current. For 2020, it is testing a plan to use data from the U.S. Postal Service to help determine if a home is vacant, precluding multiple visits by census workers. It also will use government records to count people living in some homes who don’t respond to the census.

But the bureau has shied from using government records to change census responses because of the difficulty of making accurate matches and the intense scrutiny focused on the census.

Terri Ann Lowenthal, a private consultant on census-related issues based in Stamford, Conn., questioned how useful such records would be. She said administrative records often don’t adequately cover the undocumented population, and that such records could be out of date by the time respondents answer the 2020 questionnaire.

“I fear that the secretary’s directive will just add an additional element of uncertainty and chaos into what is already a challenging environment,” she said.

Census’s population count – of citizens and noncitizens – is used to distribute seats in the House of Representatives among states and to set boundaries for those districts as well as state and local districts. It also shapes the distribution of more than \$700 billion in federal funds each year and guides billions more in state funds and business investment.

To cross-check answers to the citizenship question, the bureau will rely primarily on the file that documents applications for Social Security numbers, according to Ron Jarmin, who is acting as the bureau’s director. It is also seeking other data on immigrants, such as from the Department of Homeland Security.

John Abowd, the bureau’s associate director of research and methodology, told an advisory committee Thursday the bureau would have to create a statistical model but hadn’t begun to figure out how.

A model would blend information from the census and government databases to establish the likelihood that a person is a citizen or not.

“The composite source has never been tested,” said Amy O’Hara, the bureau’s former director of research on government records and now a researcher at Stanford University. She also said that each database has weaknesses. For example, naturalization and passport records don’t have current addresses, she said.

The census, now just two years away, has delayed or narrowed testing of its other questions and data-collection processes for lack of funds, and struggled to keep on schedule. It is listed as a “high-risk program” by the Government Accountability Office because of its complex design and the logistics of locating 125 million households and counting all 330 million Americans just once. A final test counting all 275,000 households in Providence County, R.I., will run into this summer.

A 2013 study showed citizenship misreporting on the bureau's American Community Survey was common among recent immigrants from all countries, and among Mexican men no matter how long they had lived in the U.S. Jennifer Van Hook of Penn State University and James Bachmeier, now at Temple University, compared federal immigration statistics with the ACS, which asks about birthplace, citizenship and an immigrant's arrival year.

They found discrepancies suggesting that a quarter to a third of Mexican immigrants who claimed citizenship on ACS did so incorrectly. Similar gaps didn't appear for groups from Central and South America or other regions except among those here less than five years.