



ASA Statement Regarding Decision to Add Citizenship Question to Decennial Census

March 29, 2018

The American Statistical Association (ASA) leadership is profoundly disappointed with the decision of Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross to add a citizenship question to the 2020 Census. Nonetheless, we remain committed to doing our part to support a fair and accurate census. We echo ASA President Lisa LaVange's January letter to Secretary Ross: "We strongly caution against adding this or any other question at this late stage of the process ... [and we] believe there is very strong potential the quality of the census will be undermined."

US prosperity and global competitiveness are due in no small part to our data infrastructure. Census data are the backbone of that infrastructure. Besides empowering our economy, census data serve the health and welfare of our citizens, improve our governance, and inform decisions and policies in the public and private sector too numerous to list or even know. As ASA President LaVange noted in her letter to Secretary Ross that "adding a citizenship question ... could possibly further exacerbate the undercount concerns for immigrant populations" and "adding a question at this late stage of the census process does not allow time for adequate testing to incorporate new questions." The repercussions to our society, governance, and economy of a poor census that would reverberate over the next decade are too great to risk for the modest and unsubstantiated benefits that might be gained by adding the citizenship question. Quite simply, it is unsound practice to make last-minute, untested changes to such an important activity.

We appreciate the care and thoroughness with which Secretary Ross presented his response to the US Department of Justice request to add the citizenship question and his consulting of current and former US Census Bureau officials and others. We disagree, however, with the following aspects of his memo:

- Foremost, Secretary Ross states no one "could document that the response rate would in fact decline materially," due to the addition of a citizenship question. While it is true we have little experience and testing on this specific change, Secretary Ross ignores the expert opinion of the broad scientific community involved with survey and questionnaire research, which includes government, industry, and academic scientists. Given the

innumerable and powerful ways census data help improve societal and economic conditions, great care should be exercised to avoid any situation that may further increase the risk of an undercount. Therefore, considerable justification is required before adding such a question to ensure the census would not be undermined. The secretary notes the response rate did not change materially in the impacted communities because of the Department of Homeland Security's 2004 request to the Census Bureau to provide aggregate data on the number of Arab Americans by ZIP code in certain areas of the country. There is no scientific justification, however, that the experience can be generalized to all immigrant communities in 2020.

- Secretary Ross, after noting prior decennial census surveys “consistently asked citizenship questions up until 1950” and the American Community Survey (ACS) has included a citizenship question since 2005, concludes, “[T]he citizenship question has been well tested.” Not only does Ross’ conclusion fail to recognize the many changes that have occurred in the census-taking process over 70 years, but it also neglects the important differences between the ACS and decennial census—including in the accompanying materials, interviewer instructions, and contact process. Indeed, if the secretary’s statement were true, the Census Bureau would not prudently test the many questions that remain unchanged from past decennial questionnaires. Further, the culmination of the testing for the years-long preparation process is just starting, with the full end-to-end dress rehearsal in Providence, RI.
- The secretary also concludes a citizenship question to the census will provide DOJ accurate block-level data, which is contradicted by his own words in the memo that non-citizens responding to ACS questions on citizenship inaccurately mark “citizen” about 30 percent of the time.

The secretary’s decision is regrettable and lacking in scientific rigor. If reversal of the decision is possible, we strongly advise it.

Since the 1840s, the ASA has worked to support a fair and accurate census. We will continue this proud tradition going forward.