

The goal of the census is “to count everyone, once, in the right place” every 10 years. The census is authorized by the Constitution and the results are used to determine representation in the U.S. House of Representatives, provide federal funding and provide important information about the people living in the United States.

It's Safe

The Census Bureau takes its duty to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the data it receives very seriously. Additionally:

- The Census Bureau will never share individual census records with anyone or any other government agency.
- Title 13 of the U.S. Code protects individual records from being released by the Census Bureau as well as by any staff or contractors who have contact with the data.
- The Census Bureau is compelled by Title 13 to keep individual census records private and only releases summary level data by block, block group or tract to avoid releasing any information that would identify information about a specific individual.
- Violations of Title 13 can result in imprisonment and fines up to \$250,000.
- The Census Bureau is also taking preventative steps to protect census data from being co-mingled with other public and private data that then may result in individual identification.



Responding to 2020 Census is safe

Census data is protected by Title 13 and violators are subject to fines and imprisonment. Individual data is not released to anyone or any state or federal agency. Additional disclosure avoidance strategies are being implemented this decade to protect census data from being mixed or processed with other data to re-identify confidential records.

www.nd.gov/news-events/census-2020

Protecting the Confidentiality of Published Data

The Census Bureau produces a large number of data products and reports that summarize data into different geographies, from census blocks to the nation as a whole.

When publishing its information, the Census Bureau works to prevent identification of individual respondents in a geography by suppressing cells or items, data swapping, input noise infusion or censoring to protect respondents' confidentiality.

In 2020, the Census Bureau is employing a new procedure, known as “disclosure avoidance” to prevent improper disclosure of data about individuals from using data processing tools or secondary data to “re-identify” confidential records.

History of Census Data and Confidentiality

Since 1919, it has been illegal to use census records and data for anything except statistical purposes, i.e., summarizing the characteristics of the population. The only exception to this practice occurred during World War II and was authorized by the Second War Powers Act.

1919	Fourteenth Decennial Census Act, passed in 1919, specified that individual responses to the census “shall be used only for the statistical purposes for which [they are] supplied ... nor shall the Director of the Census permit anyone other than the sworn employees of the Census Office to examine the individual reports.” (Section 29(25)).
WWII	During World War II, the Second War Powers act (passed in 1942) overrode census privacy provisions. In 1943, the Census Bureau provided individual level data on persons of Japanese ancestry living in the Washington D.C. area from the 1940 Census in response to a threat to President Roosevelt. The Second War Powers Act was repealed in March 1947. This was the only disclosure of census data in the 20th Century.
1942	While the Census Bureau maintains the privacy of individual records, it does not maintain control of records in perpetuity. Title 44, passed in 1952, established the rules governing the release of historical census records. Under this title, the National Archives will release census records 72 years after their collection (Section 1208b).
1954	Title 13 of the U.S. Code was passed in 1954. This act consolidated rules governing census data privacy into a single statute. It reasserted the rules implemented in the 1929 Census Act that prohibited disclosure of individual census records. Title 13 established the penalty for disclosing census information at 5 years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000.
1954-2002	Since 1954, attempts by the FBI and other agencies to gain access to individual census records were denied by the Census Bureau. These denials were later upheld by the courts. Subsequent laws, passed in 1994, 1997 and 2002, strengthened the privacy policies of the Census Bureau. The “E-Government Act of 2002” (PL 107-347) contains the following language: Data “shall not be disclosed by an agency in identifiable form, for any use other than an exclusively statistical purpose ...” (Section 512.B).
1980	In 1980, the FBI removed boxes of completed census questionnaires from the Colorado Springs district office pursuant to a federal warrant and an investigation of falsifying census forms. After a discussion between Vincent Barabba (Director, Census Bureau) and William Webster (Director, FBI), boxes still sealed with evidentiary tape were returned to the district office.
2017	The Census Bureau reasserted its pledge of confidentiality in 2017. Referring to Title 13, the pledge states, “These acts protect ... statistical information from administrative, law enforcement, taxation, regulatory, or other non-statistical use ...” (81 FR 94321)

Events in the Chronological Development of Privacy and Confidentiality at the U.S. Census Bureau www.census.gov/privacy