

April 20, 2018

The Honorable Trey Gowdy
Chairman
House Committee on Oversight and
Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Elijah Cummings
Ranking Member
House Committee on Oversight and
Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
2471 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Gowdy and Ranking Member Cummings,

On behalf of the 10 undersigned Jewish organizations, we urge you to hold oversight hearings promptly on Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross's decision to include a new citizenship question on the 2020 decennial census. We fear the wide-ranging consequences of Secretary Ross's decision, which ignored advice from stakeholders, former directors of the Census Bureau, and career Census Bureau staff. Secretary Ross should explain his plans to ensure the fairness and accuracy of the 2020 Census, despite this new, disturbing development.

The addition of this question will likely suppress response rates from immigrant and other minority communities. From the ban on entry of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries to the termination of DACA, America's immigrant communities are increasingly vulnerable. A new Census question about citizenship has raised fears about such information now or in the future being used against them or their loved ones.

Depressed Census participation would have far reaching consequences, as the data gathered by the Census is relied upon to allocate federal funding and determine congressional representation. If communities with large immigrant populations are undercounted by the Census, the government's ability to meet the needs of the American people through the provision of essential services and aid dollars will be thwarted. Further, the interests of immigrant communities would not be accurately represented in Congress if the congressional apportionment process is based upon flawed data, undermining our representative democracy.

Since its inception in 1790, the decennial Census has counted citizens and non-citizens alike. If the Administration's decision is allowed to stand, it will be the first time since 1950 that a citizenship question will appear on the decennial census.

All questions that are included on the Census are carefully designed and tested to ensure that the data collected is accurate. Adding a question to the Census at this stage of the planning process would disrupt preparation and increase costs, in addition to threatening the accuracy of the data. Further, the Justice Department claims that adding a citizenship question is necessary to facilitate enforcement of the Voting Rights Act, yet the data collected by the American Community Survey to obtain estimates of the citizen population has been deemed suitable for use in Voting Rights Act enforcement cases, rendering the Department of Justice's reasoning moot.

Throughout history, the Jewish community has valued its responsibility to support broad participation in civic life and understood the importance of a fair and accurate census. The Torah tells us that in the wilderness of Sinai, God commanded Moses to take a head count of the people (Numbers 1:2). Our modern-day responsibility to support the engagement of all people in the life and well-being of our communities is no less significant.

Historically, the Census has undercounted people of color and immigrants. Adding a question about citizenship will only compound this problem. We urge you to exercise your oversight authority to conduct hearings on Secretary Ross's decision as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

American Jewish Committee
Anti-Defamation League
Bend the Arc Jewish Action
Central Conference of American Rabbis
Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, Inc.
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Jewish Women International
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
National Council of Jewish Women
Union for Reform Judaism