A HISTORY OF CENSUS PRIVACY PROTECTIONS

Today’s law is clear: The Census Bureau must keep responses completely confidential. It cannot release identifiable information about an individual, household or business to anyone, including other government or law enforcement agencies.

It wasn’t always that way. Public attitudes on privacy have changed since the first census in 1790. Early laws and policies focused on preventing direct disclosure—the risk that someone might be able to figure out the identity of a person or business just by analyzing the statistics we publish.

Early censuses had no legal privacy protections. In fact, census takers (U.S. marshals at the time) were required to post census lists in the town square for local review. There were no restrictions on information sharing.

Businesses are assured their answers will be confidential. Due to dismal response rates in earlier censuses of manufactures, marshals were instructed to provide assurances about privacy of those responses.

Census files are removed from state and local control. Still, results could be bought, and the superintendent could provide lists of names and details to any municipal government.

Potential for jail time for census takers who publish or reveal information. President Taft promises confidentiality. 1st law protecting business data from indirect disclosure.

Data swapping, “blank and impute” protections added. More precise methods enable fewer whole-table suppressions. Published data expands to include block-level data. The new protection methods lower indirect disclosure risk.


Last census to use ad-hoc privacy protections. Differential privacy is too new for 2010 Census use.


New policies tighten restrictions on data releases. Data products must be protected by interim safeguards. (2018)


2020 Census data products will be protected using differential privacy. World’s first large-scale application of new privacy system. (2020)

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