

Abstract

In the summer of 2004, it was revealed that the US Census Bureau had provided tabulations in 2002 and 2003 on Arab-Americans to the Department of Homeland Security that included detailed information on the number of people of Arab backgrounds living in selected ZIP codes. Although not a violation of law, the Census Bureau realized that this perceived breach of confidentiality would have a negative impact on public trust and within a few months following the news of the Arab-American tabulations, it announced that it would no longer assist law enforcement and intelligence agencies with tabulations on ethnic groups and other sensitive populations. In spite of this damage control, we believe that the Bureau's tabulation of Arab-Americans provides momentum to a process that adversely affects data quality by increasing both non-response and the cost of obtaining survey and census data. We argue that there are no "methodological fixes" that can repair the damage, and, further, that public relations campaigns and internal administrative changes are not optimal solutions because of the governing structure within which the Bureau currently operates. Ultimately, the best way to limit the damage already done is to effect a political solution. Toward this end we describe short and long-term actions. In the long run, we recommend removing the Census Bureau from the Executive branch of government and re-structuring it under a permanent and non-political oversight panel similar to either the Federal Reserve Board or the Congressional Budget Office. Such a move would make a strong statement that the Bureau is non-partisan federal statistical agency.

Key words: Arab-American, Confidentiality, Non-response, Public Trust