

How to spot Census Trolls

By Kent Bridgeman



Photo courtesy of Unsplash - "United Nations"

"I called my mom about the Census," said an executive at a human services nonprofit at a recent Complete Count seminar, "And she said, don't worry dear, I'll throw it away as soon as it shows up." The Census has long been plagued by misinformation (the unintentional spread of false information) and disinformation (the intentional spread of lies and rumors). But 2020 faces special challenges. The lead up to the 2020 Census was marred with the battle over the so-called "citizenship question". While the citizenship question was struck down by the Supreme Court, its shadow still looms large.

Confounding this situation is the Coronavirus, which forced the Census Bureau to temporarily halt in-person operations. This led to the rumor that the Census was "canceled". In reality, Census operations have merely been modified and the timeline has been pushed back. As of writing this, the Bureau is currently awaiting approval for their modified plan that would complete the Census count by April of 2021. The situation is still changing and for the latest update, check the news section of [census.gov](https://www.census.gov/newsroom.html) (<https://www.census.gov/newsroom.html>).

Not all the disinformation about the Census is so obvious. Some of the trolling (intentional provocation and disinformation campaigns via various internet venues) around the Census has become rather sophisticated. We'll spend some time dissecting the techniques these trolls use later in this article, but first, let's take a look at what official Census communications look like.

Official Census Bureau Documents

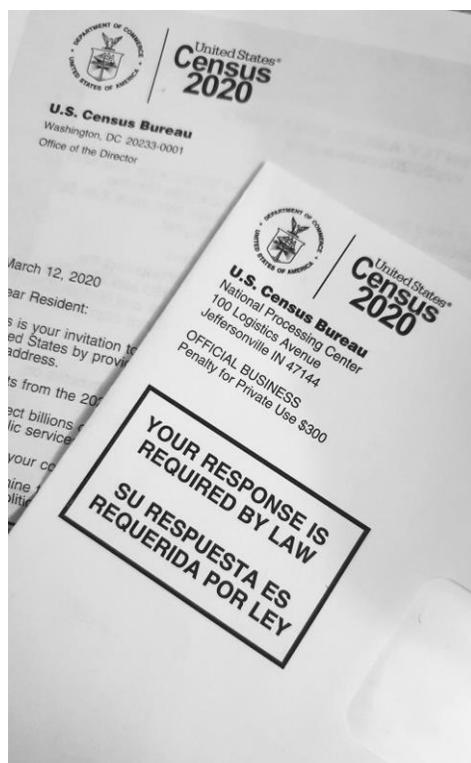


Photo courtesy of Unsplash - Photographer Enayet Raheem

The Census will never ask for money or financial information of any kind. From [census.gov](https://www.census.gov), here is a list of things that the Census Bureau will **never** ask for on the Census or any of their other surveys:

- Your Social Security number.
- Your bank account or credit card numbers.
- Anything on behalf of a political party.
- Money or donations.

All official websites related to the Census will end in “.gov”. The Bureau does not send out emails regarding the Census, but they do have several other ongoing surveys, including the Household Pulse Survey, which is gathering data on the COVID-19 pandemic. All email addresses from the Bureau regarding these secondary surveys will also end in “.gov”.



Photo courtesy of Census.gov

As of writing this, the Census is just beginning to reinstate in-person operations, modifying all Census taking activities to incorporate social distancing techniques. All Census takers will have a badge with a photo ID, the U.S. Department of Commerce watermark, and an expiration date. If you are still uncertain about the credentials of a census worker, you can call the Bureau hotline to confirm the Census worker's identity at 844-330-2020. Census.gov lists operators that speak a variety of languages as well.

It's also worth noting that the easiest way to avoid having a Census worker coming to your door is by responding to the Census online, by phone, or by mail.

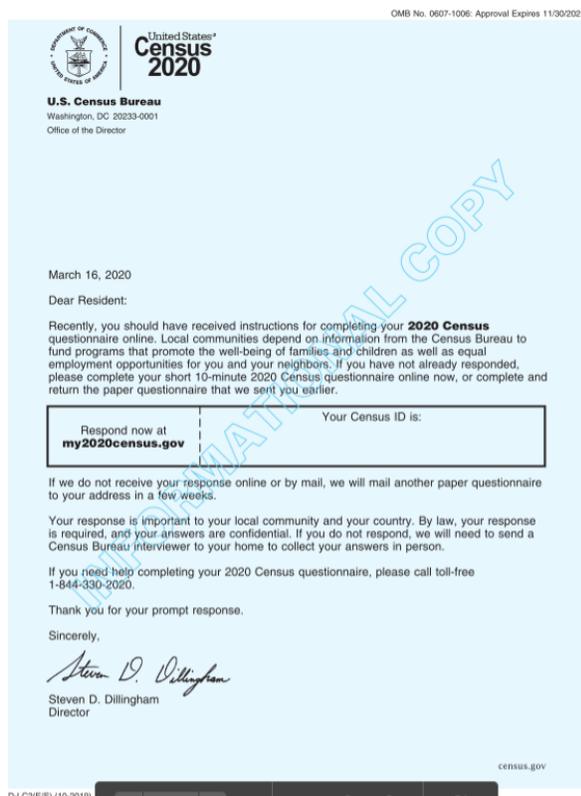


Photo courtesy of Census.gov

Any mail from the US Census will be from the "U.S. Census Bureau" and will have the seal of the Department of Commerce printed on it. By now, most every household in the U.S. should have received a copy of the above letter. If for some reason, you have not received the letter containing the Census ID, you can still respond to the Census without it by following special instructions on the web questionnaire or via phone.

No Census communications will ever have any affiliation with a political party (more on that in a bit).

When Census Trolls Attack

Why do trolls attack the Census? Unlike the misinformed mother at the opening of this article, these attacks are carefully organized and designed to disrupt, dispute and destroy response rates to the Census. But why?

The answers vary, but disinformation campaigns seem to be about power, or rather withholding power from marginalized groups who already have historically low response rates. Trolls target fears for these

groups because they know that the groups the Census refers to as “hard to count” have the most to gain from accurate Census counts. Especially in terms of government funding and redistricting.

Let’s take a look at some recent examples.

Targeting African Americans about information sharing

According to NPR (see the story [here](#)) as recently as March 8th, a Facebook post was circulating that warned African Americans not to fill out the Census or their information would be given to authorities. This trolling attempt preys on long-held fears in the African American community, that the government is secretly collecting information on them. Given standards of institutionalized racism, this concern is certainly understandable.

But the fact remains that this rumor is blatantly untrue. All Census data are protected by stiff federal penalties. Not to mention that Census information is stored as statistical data only. Names are not accessible by any government agency, and they would have no way of checking criminal or financial records based on Census questions anyway.

The Ministry of Home Affairs Scam

This insidious attack garnered some widespread attention. So-called “security alerts” were circulated widely on Facebook, as well as smaller social media platforms tied to neighborhood watches that warned of individuals going door to door, claiming to be from the “Department of Home Affairs”. These supposed spammers were allegedly performing “ID checks” as a cover for home invasion and robbery.

This has been thoroughly debunked by the Bureau and others. The hoax was found to originate overseas. Furthermore, it’s worth noting that there is no such thing as the “Department of Home Affairs”.

As mentioned before, all Census officials work for the Department of Commerce.

Tied to Stimulus Checks

The most recent attempt at fear-mongering is a new spin on an old bit of disinformation. Answering the Census will not affect eligibility for any government aid or programs of any kind, including the stimulus checks that were sent out as part of the CARES act. This idea has long been used to frighten low-income individuals and has been tied to everything from Food Stamps to Medicare.

RNC survey

To restate an earlier point, the Census is never tied to any political party. However, this recent bit of political trolling came from the Republican Party, who sent out a survey designed to look very similar to the official Census Bureau.

According to the L.A. Times (read the story [here](#)), the fake survey was sent out by the Republican National Committee to different spots across the country. Look closely at the two images below. First is the RNC survey, second is the official Census letter.

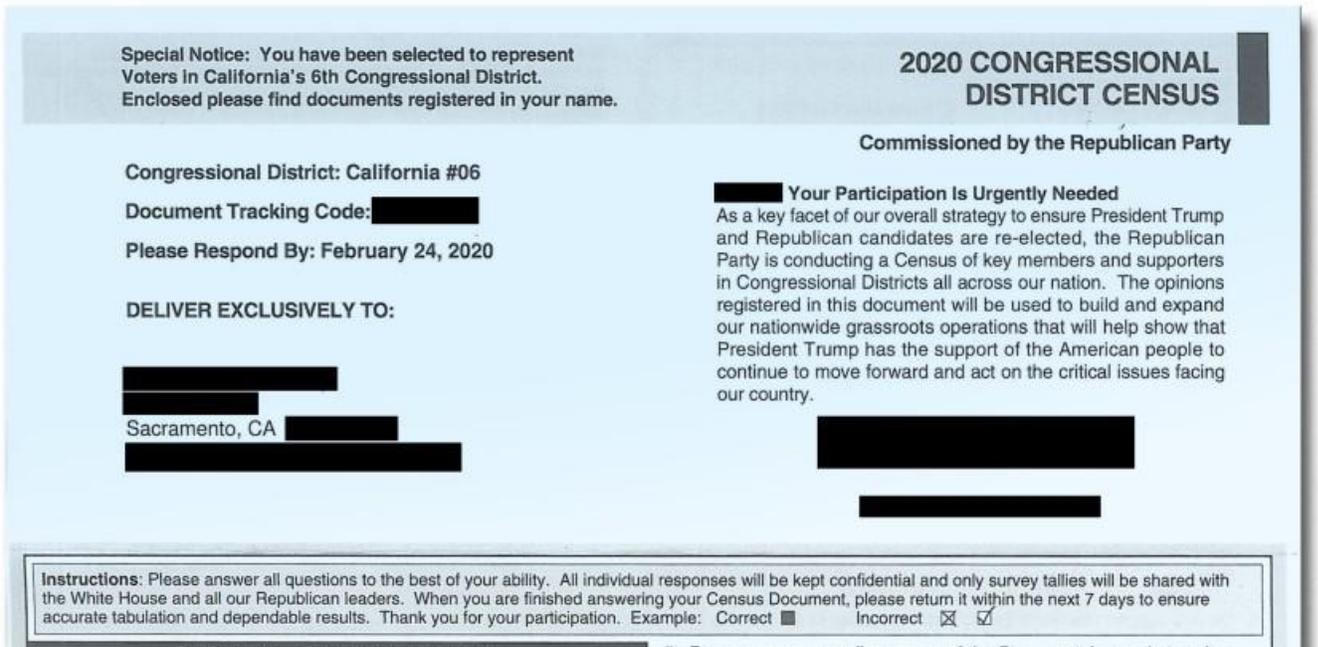


Photo courtesy of the LA Times

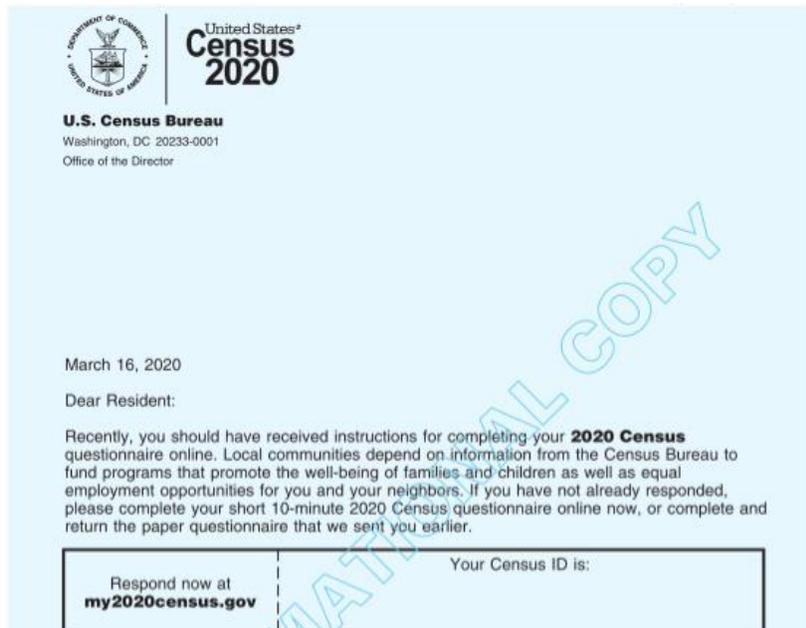


Photo courtesy of Census.gov

As RCN defenders have stated, the photo shows (in small letters on the second page) that the survey is “Commissioned by the Republican Party”. Unlike the official Census questionnaire, the RCN survey is riddled with political questions about the support of military use in Iran and whether or not political correctness has “gotten out of hand” in America.

Rep. Katie Porter (D-Irvine) of California (where many of the RNC surveys were mailed) received many calls from family members of elderly constituents who were confused about the authenticity of the survey. She was concerned that many of her constituents would think that they had already filled out the Census and “toss their actual Census envelope because they’ve already filled this one out”.

Whether or not the similarities to the official Census was intentional, this survey further darkens the already muddy waters.

Why the Census is (still) Important

Besides voting, the Census is one of the most important acts of citizenship we can engage in as Americans. The information gathered by the Census directly guides hundreds of billions of dollars of federal and state funding. Census data draw the lines of congressional and senate districts, as well as the borders of local municipalities.

If anything, the increased efforts of trolls confirm the importance of engaging in the Census. The Census is a tool for claiming political power, federal aid, and civic engagement. We must continue to fight for an accurate count, especially in marginalized communities across the country.

Stay diligent and be sure to double-check any story or social media post about the Census. And please, don't forget to fill out the Census!



Photo courtesy of census.gov

Resources

The Bureau keeps a running tab on current rumors at <https://2020census.gov/en/news-events/rumors.html>

For more on disinformation strategies, check out this free webinar from the Data Resource Center: <https://register.gotowebinar.com/recording/624340490540473864>

For strategies on reaching out to “hard to count” populations, download the DuPage Federation’s free report at <https://www.dupagefederation.org/census-solutions>.

Photos

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