

Learning from History

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BEFORE YOU READ: Share what you know about Japanese internment camps during World War II. Read and discuss the vocabulary box below.

Many people are worried that the information they provide to the Census Bureau in 2020 will be shared with other government agencies. Here's how that happened in the past and what's different now.

How Census Data Was Misused in the Past

In 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The attack raised Americans' fear of war and intensified racial prejudices against Japanese Americans. In the days after the bombing, the U.S. government arrested more than 1,200 Japanese community leaders and froze all bank accounts in U.S. branches of Japanese banks. The government also imposed nighttime *curfews* for all Japanese Americans.

Within months, President Roosevelt signed an order that allowed the military to *round up* 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent (who were mostly native-born U.S. citizens). The government gave Japanese-Americans on the West Coast only days

Internment is the wartime detention of "enemy aliens" (residents who come from countries we are at war with) but *not* of U.S. citizens. During World War 2, two-thirds of the Japanese Americans who were detained were U.S. citizens. Therefore, **incarceration**, **detention**, and **prison camps** are more appropriate terms. Discuss the words **curfew** (noun), **round up** (both as a verb and a noun), and **aggregate** (adjective). Try using them in sentences.



Two Japanese-American children wait with their parents for an evacuation bus. Photo by Dorothea Lange.

to decide what to do with their houses, farms, businesses, and possessions. According to the Manzanar National Historic Site webpage, "Most families sold their property and belongings for much less than they were worth. Some rented their properties to neighbors. Others left possessions with friends or religious groups. Some abandoned their property. They did not know where they were going or for how long. Each family was assigned an identification number and loaded into cars, buses, trucks, and trains, taking only what they could carry." The military transported Japanese Americans to temporary centers at racetracks and fairgrounds, and then took them to internment camps until the end of the war.

To make this *round-up* go more quickly, Congress passed a law that allowed the military to see confidential census information about individuals. Although the Census Bureau denied it for decades, researchers Margo Anderson and William Seltzer discovered that census officials had released block-by-block information about where Japanese-

Americans were living in California, Arizona, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Idaho, and Arkansas.

World War II is not the only time that the Census Bureau has shared information about individuals or communities. During World War I, the Draft Board got information from the Census Bureau to check the age of citizens they believed were lying about their age to avoid the draft. And after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Census Bureau gave the U.S. Department of Homeland Security information about neighborhoods that were home to large numbers of Arab Americans, sorted by their country of origin. In this case, the information was publicly available, but not useful until the Census Bureau organized and shared it. The government claimed that the requests were made to help identify which airports required signs and pamphlets in Arabic to explain U.S. laws and regulations to travelers.

In response to concerns about this misuse of data, the Census Bureau implemented additional procedures to protect information requested by federal, state, or local law enforcement agencies or that involves a “sensitive population.”

Strategies for Making Data Safe in 2020

There are three important ways that our data is being protected this year. First, current law (see p. 7 for more information about Title 13) ensures that individual information cannot be shared with any other agencies, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the FBI, the CIA or any other government agency. And no private company, landlord, or employer can get any household’s census information, even with a court order.

Second, the Census Bureau is using some strategies to protect against hackers. For example, the Census Bureau will scramble the data by swapping the information from two similar households in different neighborhoods. Mixing up individual information in this way ensures the *aggregate* data is accurate, while individual data is not traceable.

And finally, civil liberties groups such as the ACLU and Asian-Americans Advancing Justice are preparing to respond quickly in the courts if



Signs instructing Japanese-Americans to report to the authorities for detention.

any data are used improperly.

The fact is, there is never a way to be 100% sure that our civil rights and personal information are safe, especially during times of war. And this is not unique to the census. We need to constantly work to safeguard our rights and our personal data. We also have a responsibility to contribute to a full, accurate count of our population so that our communities get our fair share of the tax dollars we have paid. We can’t let anyone steal those resources by frightening us away from the census.

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AFTER YOU READ: According to the author, what are three ways the government has misused census information and three ways to protect data?

Sources: “Yes, The Census Bureau Helped Make Japanese American Internment Possible,” Austin Cross, June 11, 2019, <laist.com/2019/06/11/yes_the_census_bureau_helped_make_the_japanese_american_internment_possible.php>; “Census Data HAS Been Misused Before—in WWII and After 9/11,” Anna Núñez, March 30, 2018, <americasvoice.org/blog/census-data-misuse>; “Census Confidentiality...,” Margo J. Anderson and William Seltzer, <paa2007.princeton.edu/papers/70299>; <www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/01/can-set-equations-keep-us-census-data-private>.