

Even the Government Is Turned Away

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The Census: Data Is Airtight Against Snoopers

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It happens rarely now, but on occasion FBI agents show up at the U.S. Census Bureau seeking information on suspects they're tracking. So, occasionally, do immigration authorities, narcotics agents and military security men.

From outside government come lawyers searching for heirs to estates and genealogists looking for ancestors.

All are politely but firmly fended off by one of the few government agencies so pledged to secrecy that it won't share its personal information even with other parts of the bureaucracy.

"As far as we're concerned," says one census security man, "the individual is just a statistic and we want to keep it that way."

The government's biggest collector of information, the Census Bureau is backed up

by a special public law preventing disclosure of personal data. It has a string of court decisions and administrative rulings protecting its confidentiality. It even has a special computer which "edits" the output of other computers to make sure that gross statistical data does not emerge in detail small enough to pinpoint individuals.

"We've had evidence of information leaking every-

where but from the Census," says Rep. Cornelius Gallagher (D-N.J.), who headed a House subcommittee investigating agencies which collect private information.

"They really are tight. We never found one example of a break. I wish I could say that of the other agencies."

"I can't recall even any hints that the Census information was leaking out in any form," observes Rep. Jackson Betts (R-Ohio), a

persistent critic of the type of questions census-takers ask—such as how many people use a particular shower or bath.

Even the wide-ranging investigation of government snooping and dossier-keeping by Sen. Sam Ervin (D-N.C.) made only a quick pass at the Census Bureau, deciding early that the risks of disclosure there were minor.

See CENSUS, A17, Col. 1

CENSUS, From A1

There are possible loopholes in the Census apparatus, but its penchant for privacy contrasts sharply with recent disclosures of how other government-collected personal information is bandied about among many government agencies.

Social Security information, for example, is given on claims of national security to the FBI, the Secret Service, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Internal Revenue Service. It is also passed on to state welfare agencies.

Federal tax returns, by law, can be pored over by FBI, Narcotics, Customs, and Secret Service agents, certain congressional investigating committees, and state income-tax collection agencies. Cases of unauthorized disclosure are not uncommon.

By contrast, the Census Bureau for years has rigidly opposed such dissemination of individual files. Its classic test came during the old War Department's campaign to imprison Japanese-Americans on the West Coast during World War II. Census refused a demand to turn over names and addresses, although it did furnish statistical data used by the military to select neighborhoods where Japanese-Americans lived.

Immigration authorities once came seeking addresses of persons sought for deportation. The Justice Department finally decided Census was legally prohibited from turning over the information. Similarly, the Labor Department was refused names and addresses it wanted for a survey of all working women in Rochester, N.Y.

Once, the Federal Trade Commission seemed to have broken through the wall when it won a Supreme Court ruling that it could subpoena a corporation's copy of a business questionnaire it had filled out for the Census Bureau. The Bureau promptly got Congress to plug the hole with a new law.

Ground Rules

Such efforts to reach Census personal data are now rare. "Occasionally, an FBI agent will come in and ask for help in locating someone," says one Census official. "But it's always a case of him not knowing the ground rules we play by."

Conrad Tauber, associate director of the Bureau, says there never has been a for-

mal request from top-ranking FBI officials. Others say an agent comes around only once every six or seven years.

There have been cases of suspected leaks by Census employees, but never one with enough substance to warrant prosecution, Tauber says. A Washington woman recently complained that her unlisted telephone number had appeared in a criss-cross directory because a census-taker leaked it. An investigation showed that the directory probably had got the number from another source.

Every employee takes what is called the "census oath," an unusual pledge not to disclose information under penalty of two years in jail and a \$1,000 fine. No one ever has been prosecuted.

There are, however, a number of theoretical loopholes in the confidentiality system. A census enumerator could peddle information on a citizen's living habits, income, health, employment record, child-bearing plans, education and the like—the results of either the decennial census or the many special surveys the bureau performs. Such deliberate leaks would be hard to pin down and prosecute.

Furthermore, anyone willing to risk forgery charges could get minor information such as birth date or places of past residence by filing an application under someone else's name with the Census Bureau's personal census service branch in Pittsburg, Kansas. Behind guarded doors, records are kept on microfilm there for citizens who need to prove their age and birth date in obtaining passports or becoming eligible for Social Security. More than 2,000 requests a day pour into the Pittsburg branch. Only the individual or his legally authorized representative can obtain the information.

Confidentiality of census data is enhanced further because it is available in individual form only in the earliest stages of the gathering process. Questionnaires are photographed onto microfilm in the Jeffersonville, Ind., branch, held for up to a year, and then destroyed either by shredding or by dissolution in a paper mill's chemical vats. The person's address is dropped off during the microfilming stage.

At the Census headquarters in Suitland, Md., the information is transferred from microfilm to magnetic

tape to be used in the computers which piece together such information as population counts, income levels, education and housing characteristics. In the process the individual names are dropped, so that in the computer stage there is no way to track back on the individual who supplied the original information.

Guarded Doors

All the tapes are behind guarded doors. They are kept on reels in a vault-like library instead of being stored permanently in the computers. Thus, it takes a guard's authority to release a particular reel, another confidentiality checkpoint.

What comes out of the computers is gross statistical information from which no personal data could be extracted. It can tell, for example, how many blacks live

in a census tract in southeast Washington, but not who they are individually.

The computer tapes are sold frequently to private purchasers, most often business firms which, for example, might like to zero in a sales campaign on an area of high-income families. Appliance companies want to know, for instance, how many homes in southeastern Ohio are equipped with toasters and television sets.

As an extra precaution, a special computer "edits" the tapes before they are released to eliminate any small-detail data which might give away the characteristics of an individual person or company. For example, if there were only one steel factory in Johnson County, Illinois, it productions, earnings, and costs could show up separately

on a business census of Illinois and provide valuable information for a competitor.

The editing computer blacks out such small-scale statistics and the information would appear only as part of the gross data on steel companies in the entire state.

Census material identifying individuals gets out of the bureau's hands in only one instance—a special series of health surveys taken for the Public Health Service's National Center for Health Statistics. The center wants the names and addresses of respondents for re-surveying later as a way of keeping track of health characteristics over a period of years.

The center's employees are bound by the same non-disclosure oath as the Census

employees and the original questionnaires wind up in the federal records center in Atlanta. They are stored in sealed boxes and are released only on the authority of a health statistics official in Washington.

No one—not even the FBI—can see them, according to Carlton Brown, director of the records center in Atlanta.