

NEWS

Fear of census common for immigrants

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Omar Bah had sequestered himself on the back porch of a relative's home, all the better to work on his doctoral dissertation, when he heard three hard knocks on the door.

"They knocked on the door, very hard, like a police knock," said Bah, an immigrant from The Gambia and executive director of Providence's Refugee Dream Center.

The 38-year-old strained to hear as an elderly relative answered the door. The visitors identified themselves as enumerators working on the U.S. Census Bureau's 2018 End-to-End Test, when the test census examines how well the count's technologies and activities function as a whole. She refused several times to participate.

Finally, Bah recalled, they left. She shut the home's doors and curtains.

Bah said she was worried that the enumerators were involved with the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE).

"She's scared because of what Trump has said about immigrants and Muslims," he said.

"The community is terrified of the enumerators," said Tomás Ávila, director of the Milenio Association, a Providence group meant to educate and empower Latino communities, speaking in Spanish. "Those who have their papers, even though they're documented, are scared because of the way that ICE is going about its business."

Bernard Georges, executive director of New Bridges for Haitian Success Inc., said, "People see these Census workers come up ... and are thinking that ICE is getting ready to come. They're reading about the separations, and they're terrified."

Administration policies are only adding to the panic, according to those who work with immigrant communities.

“When Trump announced that he was going to ask people about their citizenship status, that scared people,” said Ávila. “Even though the question is not on the test, the fact that it was announced has already caused fear.”

“When the test started, people regularly asked me, ‘What should we do when they ask this question?’... But it’s died down because the topic is now family separation,” said Tatyana Tsangarakis-Almeida, program director for Citizenship and Immigration Services at Dorcas International Institute. “It’s moving on from one fear to another, so it’s not a surprise in the least that these people are afraid.”

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 18.5 percent of Providence County’s 637,357 people were foreign-born as of 2016.

Jeffrey Behler, director of the New York Regional Office of the U.S. Census Bureau, which is running the test, acknowledged that there is fear in the community. But he said that he has heard no reports of people refusing to take part because they think Census employees are working with ICE.

“I can certainly understand in our current environment that people are afraid of the government ... This isn’t anything new,” Behler added. “Our confidentiality is the focus of everything.”

The Census Bureau has a legal obligation to not share personal information with other government agencies.

Behler added that because \$678 billion of federal funding is on the table — as well as a Rhode Island congressional seat, if the state’s population no longer entitles it to two — the bureau wants to ensure its systems are functional in 2020.

Bah contends the agency is downplaying the actual extent of the atmosphere that these communities live in.

“For them to say it’s nothing new, that’s not true,” said Bah. “It’s at a different level ... I’ve worked in this community for 11 years, and this is the first time that I’ve seen fears this heightened.”

The Census Bureau said the test has been running smoothly. Community groups, though, say it’s hard to verify that, as information on the municipal and neighborhood level won’t be released until after its conclusion. (See accompanying story for response rates.)

“We haven’t gotten a good sense from the Census of what their benchmarks are,” said John Marion, executive director of Common Cause R.I. “They haven’t fully articulated why reaching 100 percent is not their primary objective...

“I would think that since they’re planning a robust outreach effort in 2020, they would also want to test outreach.”

The Census Bureau emphasizes that outreach was not the primary focus of the test.

“The primary objective of the test was to confirm key technologies, data collection methods, and management and response processes that will be deployed in support of the 2020 Census,” said a Census spokesman, Daniel Velez, in a written statement. “The Census Bureau also created and provided public service announcements, conducted media interviews, sent news announcements, created social media partnership material, and posted calls to respond to the survey on the U.S. Census Bureau social media channels.”

Behler said that community partnership programs — having trusted locals let people know about their operations — are the most effective parts of outreach, and while they weren't present this year, the Census will be ready for the full count.

“While we may not have a robust partnership program for 2018, we do have the partners in place, and it will be robust in 2020,” he said.

The Census plans to spend \$248 million on the partnership program for the 2020 Census.

Local advocates say it's not enough to plan to get it right next time.

“You can’t just knock on someone’s door who doesn’t speak proper English and ask them these questions,” said Bah. “People should be participating and they need to know about it and feel they are not being hunted.”

“That’s the tragedy on the part of there being no effort to do outreach from the Census,” said Marion, “because it will be harder to formulate a national strategy to reach hard-to-count populations.”

But, he said, there's a silver lining for Rhode Island.

“It doesn’t help us know what’s succeeding and what’s failing now, but will give us an advantage going into 2020 as a state, cause we’ll know who wasn’t being reached,” he continued. “No other place in the country will have that advantage.”

The test is slated to end on July 31.

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