

A HISTORY OF CENSUS PRIVACY PROTECTIONS

Today's law is clear: The Census Bureau must keep responses completely confidential. It cannot release identifiable information about an individual, household or business to anyone, including other government or law enforcement agencies.

It wasn't always that way. Public attitudes on privacy have changed since the first census in 1790. Early laws and policies focused on preventing direct disclosure of personal information. Later, laws and policies addressed the growing threat of indirect disclosure—the risk that someone might be able to figure out the identity of a person or business just by analyzing the statistics we publish.

Twenty-first century privacy threats—faster and more powerful computers, new data science, and exponential growth in personal data available online—demand new safeguards to protect against indirect disclosure.

See how the laws and protections have changed from 1790 to the 2020 Census—the first census to use advanced disclosure protections based on the new data science known as “differential privacy.”

