
CONSUMER ALERT

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ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General provides Consumer Alerts to inform the public of unfair, misleading, or deceptive business practices, and to provide information and guidance on other issues of concern. Consumer Alerts are not legal advice, legal authority, or a binding legal opinion from the Department of Attorney General.

Census-Related Scams

The 2010 Census is fast approaching, and some criminals may use this event as an opportunity to con Michigan residents into providing their personal identifying information. This consumer alert will provide you with some background on the census, and will also provide you with tips on how to avoid falling victim to census-related scams while still participating in this important federal program.

THE CENSUS – DO I REALLY HAVE TO FILL OUT THESE FORMS?

Yes, all Michigan residents must participate in the census. Federal law *requires* all American residents to participate in the census process. If you fill out a simple form and mail it back, you will be helping yourself, your family, and your community. Participation in the census will help the federal government determine where federal dollars will be spent to help the greatest number of Americans with the greatest need. And it also ensures that Michigan will be adequately represented in the federal legislature. Here's more background information on the census:

1. The U.S. Census Bureau is always counting: In addition to the large nationwide census that occurs every ten years, and will start in March of 2010, the census Bureau conducts many different surveys. These surveys may occur every month, every three months, or every year *in addition to* the large census conducted every ten years.

For example, the American Community Survey is an ongoing survey, and according to the U.S. Census Bureau, it is sent to random members of the population. This survey, like the 2010 Census, will help federal, state, and local governments determine what their communities look like, and where to allocate

scarce resources that will help the largest number of people who have the greatest need.

For more information on the American Community Survey, please see the U.S. Census Bureau Website, at <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/> or call 1-800-923-8282.

2. Your Information is Protected: Federal law requires federal employees that work for the U.S. Census Bureau to safeguard your information. Any federal employee convicted of unauthorized use or sharing of your personal information is subject to a hefty fine - \$250,000 – and up to five years in federal prison.

Federal law even prohibits the U.S. Census Bureau from sharing personally identifiable information with other state and federal agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Census data, which includes personal identifying information such as your name and address, will only become available to the public after 72 years. Thus, the information that you provide on your 2010 Census form will only be made public in 2082, when it is turned over to the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. These records are released only after 72 years to ensure your privacy, but to allow future generations to conduct genealogy research.

3. Questions regarding the Constitutionality of the Survey: Some have argued that the questions asked by the U.S. Census Bureau may be an invasion of your personal privacy. If you would like to review the questions on either the American Community Survey, or the 2010 Census, samples of both forms are available. A sample copy of the American Community Survey can be found here: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/SQuest09.pdf>, and a sample copy of the upcoming 2010 Census can be found here: <http://2010.census.gov/2010census/how/interactive-form.php>.

Although the forms do ask for some personal information, including your name, address, phone number, and income information (on the American Community Survey), this information *cannot be shared with anyone*. In addition, the forms *do not ask for your Social Security Number or account numbers*, which greatly minimizes the risk of identity theft.

Other critics of the census process argue that the 2010 Census will not fairly and accurately represent the demographic makeup of communities in Michigan and nationwide. But it is important to keep in mind that the United States Constitution requires the ten-year census to be an *actual count* of inhabitants of the United States. Statistical methods of calculating the population are *not*

permitted during the 2010 Census. Thus, if you are concerned that your community is not adequately represented, the best way to combat this is to fill out your census form and mail it back – the solution is just that simple.

TIPS ON HOW TO SPOT CENSUS-RELATED SCAMS

Although the federal, state, and local governments both want and need your participation in the upcoming census, we recognize that many Michigan residents may be concerned about falling victim to census-related scams. So here are some tips to help you spot scams while still participating in the 2010 Census:

1. The U.S. Census Bureau will *not* ask for your Social Security Number!: U.S. Census Bureau employees will never ask you for your Social Security Number, bank account numbers, or your pin numbers. If anyone calls, e-mails, or writes to you and asks you for any sensitive personal identifying information **do not respond!** Hang up the phone, delete the e-mail, or shred the mailing asking you for this information – that communication is almost certainly not from your federal, state, or local government.
2. The U.S. Census Bureau will *never* send you an e-mail or call you requesting information: The U.S. Census Bureau will not be conducting the 2010 Census via e-mail or by telephone. The U.S. Census Bureau will only send you a form for you to fill out and mail back. Census workers may come to your home, but *only after* you receive a form and either take too long to fill the form out, or fail to fill out your census form entirely. If you are ever contacted by someone claiming to work for the U.S. Census Bureau or any other census-related organization, and you are not sure that they are legitimate, call **1-866-861-2010** and ask about the legitimacy of this contact *before you respond or provide any information!*
3. 2010 Census Forms will not be mailed until March, 2010: The federal government will not begin mailing out 2010 Census forms until March, 2010. Before you receive your census form in the mail, you should receive a letter from the U.S. Census Bureau informing you that your form is on the way. If you receive a census form before March, 2010, and you are not sure if it is legitimate, call **1-866-861-2010** *before you respond or provide any information!*
4. Census workers may visit your home if you do not send back your form: If you do not complete and send in your 2010 Census form, you may receive a visit at your home from a census worker. Census workers must carry federal identification with them, and may also have a bag with them indicating they work for the U.S. Census Bureau. For more specific tips on how to recognize a census worker, please visit: <http://2010.census.gov/2010census/how/census-taker.php>, or

call **1-866-861-2010** to confirm the person paying you a visit is a federal employee.

FINDING MORE INFORMATION ON THE CENSUS

For more information on the U.S. Census Bureau and the various surveys they conduct, please visit the Bureau's website, at <http://www.census.gov>.

For more information on the 2010 Census, including answers to frequently asked questions, and a sample form, please visit <http://2010.census.gov/2010census/index.php>. The information on this site is available in almost 60 different languages, to ensure that all American residents can understand the census process.

Finally, you may reach your local census office by calling **1-866-861-2010**. Depending on your location in Michigan, you will be routed to the census office closest to you.

IF YOU HAVE A GENERAL CONSUMER PROBLEM, FILE A COMPLAINT:

For general consumer questions or complaints, you may reach the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division at:

Consumer Protection Division
P.O. Box 30213
Lansing, MI 48909
517-373-1140
Fax: 517-241-3771
Toll free: 877-765-8388
www.michigan.gov/ag (online complaint form)