By Susan Grant, Director of Consumer Protection and Privacy, Consumer Federation of America

It’s really important for everyone who lives in the U.S. (and five territories) to be counted in the national census, which is only conducted once every ten years. The census information is used by the federal government to decide where funding should go for hospital, schools, roads and other services. It’s also used to determine the number of seats each state has in the House of Representatives, to establish voting districts, and for many other purposes. Now that the Census Bureau says it will wind the count down on September 30 instead of October 31, as first announced, there’s a scramble to collect information from people who haven’t yet responded. Unfortunately, crooks may take advantage of the census to collect individuals’ personal information and use it for identity theft and other frauds. Here’s what you need to know to make sure you’re giving the right information to the right person and keep your identity safe.

What kinds of questions does the census ask?

The census questionnaire asks how many people were living at your address on April 1, 2020. It also asks for their sex, age, race, ethnicity, their relationships to one another, the phone number, and whether you own the home (and if so, if there is a mortgage), or are a renter, or have some other living arrangement (see the questions at https://2020census.gov/en/about-questions.html). The census does NOT ask for people’s Social Security or financial account numbers, or about their political affiliations, religious beliefs, or citizen status.

How can you respond to the census?

You may have already received a census questionnaire in the mail. If you haven’t filled it out yet, do it now and send it in. Or you can fill out the questionnaire online. If you would prefer to do it by phone, the Census Bureau provides toll-free numbers for people to call in English and several other languages, as well as a TDD number for people who have difficulty hearing.
In the final push to complete the count, census takers are now visiting homes, rooming houses, apartment buildings, nursing homes, shelters and other places where people may be living to collect their information. If they don’t get a response they leave a notice about how to provide the information online, by phone, or by mail. The Census Bureau is also sending emails from 2020census@subscriptions.census.gov to households in areas where the response has been low encouraging them to complete the questionnaire.

If you’ve already submitted your response, it’s possible that you will receive a call or email from the Census Bureau to confirm the information as part of its quality control process. The Census Bureau is also sending texts to a small number of people asking about their experiences with the questionnaire.

How can you detect a census scam?

When census takers visit they must show a photo ID with the U.S. Department of Commerce seal and an expiration date. If you want to double-check, ask for the supervisor’s contact information and/or the regional census center phone number and call to verify that the person is legitimate. If you get a call, email or text it’s a bit trickier because it’s easy to fake where it’s coming from.

The key is, what information are you being asked to provide? If it’s your Social Security number, financial account numbers, or other information that isn’t normally part of the census, don’t respond. A request for money is another danger sign of fraud. If you have any doubts or you want to report a suspected scam, call the Census Bureau at 844-330-2020.

In addition to watching out for fraud, beware of false rumors about the census. For instance, census responses are NOT shared with law enforcement agencies. The Census Bureau has a special section on its website to dispel these rumors at https://2020census.gov/en/news-event/s/rumors.html.

You’ll find everything you need to know about the census at https://2020census.gov/en.html.