It's None of The Government's Business

by Phyllis Schlafly

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What is it about bureaucrats and school personnel that they want to pry into the personal life and habits of American citizens of every age? There seems to be no end to the imperial demands by government and schools to require both grownups and kids to reveal personal information.

The use of nosy questionnaires by the public schools has been a bone of contention between schools and parents for years, but New Jersey recently came up with a question that has parents up in arms. Third-graders were asked on a standardized test to reveal a secret about their lives and explain why it is hard to keep.

This question was asked of 4,000 third-graders in an official test called the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge. This test is supposed to judge elementary school students on their proficiency in math and language arts and determine whether or not a student ends up in basic skills classes.

The school wasn't eager to answer parents' questions such as, What if a kid answered "my dad smokes marijuana" or "my mom drank a beer while driving me home"? Would the school report that to the "child protective" agency?

This question about a secret should have been banned as a violation of the New Jersey law that requires prior parental consent before a student can be required to reveal personal information. That law was sponsored by then-state legislator (now Congressman) Scott Garrett.

It's not just school kids who are the victims of nosy questionnaires. The U.S. government has zeroed in on 250,000 Americans and demanded that they answer nearly a hundred nosy questions about their living and work arrangements and habits.

This is called the **American Community Survey** questionnaire, and the cover letter states ominously, "You are required by U.S. law to respond to this survey." Here are some of the questions.

- Does this house, apartment, or mobile home have a flush toilet, a bathtub, a stove or range? Which fuel is used most for heating this house, apartment or mobile home?
- Last month, what was the cost of electricity for this house, apartment, or mobile home? What is the monthly rent for this house, apartment, or mobile home?
- Do you or any member of this household have a mortgage, deed of trust, contract to purchase, or similar debt on this property? How much is the regular monthly mortgage payment on this property?
- At any time in the last 3 months, has this person attended school or college? Is this person currently covered by any health insurance or health coverage plans?
- Is this person deaf or does he/she have serious difficulty hearing? Is this person blind or does he/she have serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses? Does this person have difficulty dressing or bathing?
- In what year did this person last get married? At what location did this person work last week?
- How many people, including this person, usually rode to work in the car, truck, or van last week? What time did this person usually leave home to go to work last week?
- What kind of work was this person doing? What was your income in the past 12 months?

When the recipient of this Community Survey fails to respond, the government uses a variety of intimidating tactics to compel obedience. The government tries repeated mailings and phone calls demanding a response, and sometimes the government employees walk up and down the street asking nosy questions about you from your neighbors.

In response to public demand, Rep. Daniel Webster (R-FL) introduced a bill to defund the American Community Survey, calling it a "breach of personal privacy, the picture of what's wrong in Washington, D.C.". He obviously touched a nerve; it quickly passed the House **232 to 190**.

Webster's bill was immediately denounced in editorials by the *New York Times* and even the *Wall Street Journal*. Indeed, big and intrusive government has its allies.

Webster's House victory was followed by the introduction of another bill that would make answering the nosy questions voluntary and decriminalize any refusal to participate in the survey. The sponsors are Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) and Rep. Ted Poe (R-TX).

This bill will not please the government busybodies who delight in building databases with personal information on Americans and vehemently resist state laws that require parental consent before making schoolchildren answer nosy questions. The bureaucrats protest that "if it's voluntary, then we'll just get bad data."