

Ensuring Adequate Policies and Resources for the 2020 Census

Background

The census is one of the most important elements of U.S. democracy. Article I, Section 2, Clause 3 of the U.S. Constitution mandates a full and accurate enumeration of the total population¹ in each state and the country as a whole every ten years; the Fourteenth Amendment (Section 2) requires that each person be counted equally (slaves were initially counted as three-fifths of a person). The principal use of the information collected in the census, as identified in the Constitution, is to apportion seats for the U.S. House of Representatives, but the data also serve many other purposes.

Today, the Census Bureau collects data on important demographic, socioeconomic, and employment indicators through several initiatives. For foundations involved in civic engagement work, the most critical of these are the annual American Community Survey² (ACS, which replaced the decennial census “long form”) and the decennial census (i.e., the “short form”).

A wide array of institutions across the country, from governments and businesses to nonprofits and research organizations, rely on census and ACS data to craft policies, plan initiatives, deliver services, and promote economic development. Foundations are no exception. Census data help funders make crucial decisions about where and how to invest their resources, and are critical for evaluating programmatic successes and failures.

Unfortunately, many people that use data from the decennial census or the ACS in their day-to-day work are not aware of it. Yet, census data are critical to:

- Develop formulas to distribute \$400-500 billion in federal funds to states each year;
- Implement, monitor and enforce civil rights laws in areas such as education, housing, workplace and criminal justice;
- Provide evidence in litigation ranging from *Brown v. Board of Education* to voting rights and redistricting;
- Conduct research on social and economic issues;
- Determine service delivery needs at the federal, state and local level, such as services to children;
- Guide business decisions, such as where to break ground, whom to hire, and how to attract customers;
- Reapportion seats in the U.S. House of Representatives; and
- Draw state and congressional political districts.

These are but a few examples of the important role census data play in our daily lives, and the implications are far-reaching. Accurate census data have a positive impact on our communities by ensuring that everyone gets their fair share of resources and has a political voice. Historically, however, marginalized communities, such as people of color, low-income individuals, and children, are at the greatest risk of being undercounted. The 2010 census was largely considered to be the most accurate in U.S. history—thanks in no small part to nearly \$40 million in private funding. Nevertheless, according to Census Bureau estimates, African Americans were undercounted by roughly 2 percent, Hispanics by 1.5 percent, and American Indians by close to 5 percent, while whites were over counted by

¹ The full population count includes non-citizens.

² The ACS is currently considered an integral part of the decennial census and thus constitutionally-mandated. Additional laws in the U.S. Code that are relevant to keeping the ACS mandatory are [Title 18 U.S.C Section 3571](#) and [Section 3559](#), which amends [Title 13 U.S.C. Section 221](#).

approximately 1 percent. Renters, who are more likely to be lower-income, were also undercounted by approximately 0.6 percent compared to homeowners. The net undercount of children (0-4 years) was 5 percent and in large cities climbed as high as 10 percent; African American and Latino children were also more likely to be missed than their white peers.

Threats to the Census

Despite the significance of the census and the challenges to ensuring a complete and accurate count, Congress has required the Census Bureau to hold the cost of the 2020 decennial census at the same level as the 2010 census, approximately \$13 billion. The significant budget constraint³ will make it all but impossible to meet, let alone exceed, the precedent for accuracy set in 2010.

In addition to budgetary shortfalls, the Census Bureau is facing a number of pressing and unprecedented policy issues, such as debates over whether the ACS should be made voluntary or discontinued entirely;⁴ revisions to questions about race, ethnicity, and ancestry; the use of administrative and commercial records to replace door-to-door outreach; and more – all of which have significant impact on the treatment of people of color and low-income people, and the quality of data essential to researchers, businesses, service providers, policymakers, and governments.

Adding to this mix, the Census Bureau will be rolling back door-to-door canvassing and conducting a largely electronic, Internet-based census in 2020. The Bureau projects a 47 percent online response rate with a daily volume about eight times that experienced by HealthCare.gov. Noting the Census Bureau has had a bad history using new technologies, the GAO has warned the overhaul might be too ambitious and complex to pull off in the time remaining. If there is another HealthCare.gov crisis when it comes to the census, it cannot be fixed in time regardless of the amount of money spent.

Confronting a Moment of Crisis

Recognizing these challenges – and the importance of the census – leaders from ten foundations, most of which participate in the Democracy Funders Collaborative, have come together to form a Census Subgroup and to develop a plan to ensure a complete count as the U.S. Constitution requires (see Appendix A for a list of member foundations). The proposal outlined below draws upon ongoing discussions with over a dozen organizations with expertise in census work; numerous local funders throughout the country; representatives of the business community; and the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation's Funders Census Initiative (FCI).

The work is focused on three primary goals:

1. **Policy Improvements:** Advocating for policy improvements to the ACS and decennial census to ensure adequate federal funding and sound strategic decision making by the federal government;
2. **Funder Outreach and Increased Support:** Leveraging the profile of the foundations in the Census Subgroup to highlight the importance of the ACS and decennial census, and supporting the FCI to bring other supporters and funders to the table; and
3. **Public Outreach and Education:** Supporting outreach and public education to improve response rates for the 2020 census, particularly among undercounted populations.

Below is a summary of our plan of action to implement the above goals. We estimate that support for national organizations would cost approximately \$28 million between now and 2020, not including local and regional foundation support for outreach and public education. Support for census policy work in that time period would be roughly \$11 million and national support for outreach and public education efforts would be roughly \$17.4 million.

³ A recent Government Accountability Office study predicted that the true cost of the census should be roughly twice this amount (\$26 billion). See <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/669768.pdf>.

⁴ See, for example, S. 530. 113th Congress. 2013; H.R. 1078, 113th Congress, 2013.

Members of the Census Subgroup have committed to funding the first two components of the plan of action, and have agreed to revisit funding needs for public outreach and education at the end of 2017.

Goal 1: Policy Improvements

Given the significant shortfall in census funding – and concerns about the Census Bureau’s current plans for the 2020 census – an aggressive campaign around policy improvements has the potential to pay significant dividends. Because of the high-impact nature of the work, and since the policy questions surrounding the 2020 census need to be resolved quickly, the Census Subgroup has agreed to prioritize this aspect of the initiative.

Currently, there are only a handful of organizations actively working on policy issues – such as the potential risks associated with the current plan to conduct a largely electronic census – and all are woefully underfunded.

These groups, including the Census Project, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, and Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC, have deep expertise on these issues and can help to:

- Advocate for adequate funding and policy changes;
- Advise government officials on policy and implementation questions;
- Help organize and coordinate with other key stakeholders; and
- Respond to unexpected challenges.

In addition to funding these organizations, this initiative advances a number of other steps to support census policy work. These efforts include:

- **State-based Projects:** Setting up state-based census projects that can mobilize constituencies and advocate for this work on the state and local level (including influencing local and state governments to provide funding for census outreach and education);
- **Interactive Analysis:** Developing an analysis or interactive website that shows how much federal funding could be lost in each congressional district due to poor quality data;
- **Messaging:** Continuing to lay the groundwork for a longer-term campaign around completing the census by organizing supporters and testing different messaging strategies; and
- **Expanding the Players Engaged in Census Policy Work:** Collaborating with business leaders, bipartisan elected officials, and others to increase the diversity of voices working on census policy issues with the clout to influence outcomes.

Goal 2: Increased Funding and Support

Census Subgroup members have identified several activities its member foundations can engage in to highlight the importance of the census and ACS, and to engage additional funders in supporting this critical work, such as:

- Crafting a joint letter or series of op-eds on the importance of fully funding the census;
- Testifying at hearings or briefings;
- Organizing events;
- Collaborating with other stakeholders; and
- Reaching out to potential funders.

There’s strong evidence that such engagement could be beneficial in activating several key groups,

Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup
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including local, state, and regional foundations, members of business community, and state and local elected officials.

The Funders Census Initiative will play a crucial role in conduct funder outreach and education, and support for their work is included in this plan. In particular, FCI will:

- Establish the philanthropic community and grantees as recognized, knowledgeable stakeholders;
- Educate funders;
- Mobilize funders;
- Expand the universe of funders;
- Help empower national and grassroots organizations to support the census; and
- Serve as a trusted link between the Census Bureau and the funding community.

Goal 3: 2020 Public Outreach and Education

In 2010, The Leadership Conference Education Fund (the sister to The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights), organized a public education campaign, which collaborated with four national partners and numerous community-based organizations to target census outreach in 15 cities. The focus of the campaign was to educate stakeholders on the importance of the census and to reduce the potential undercount, which has been historically higher among communities of color.

The four national partners, Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund, and National Congress of American Indians, also each implemented outreach and public education campaigns for their own constituencies.

These programs proved extremely successful, and should be replicated – and potentially expanded to new constituencies – with additional funding earlier in the cycle. This plan also recommends providing some funding to continue studying the use of census data on race and ethnicity and to be able to adequately respond if there are changes to these questions on the census form.

This work is essential for two reasons. First, the census budget cuts will put even more emphasis on the need for outreach and public education within communities that are often undercounted. Second, even if the Census Bureau had enough money, there is cautiousness among undercounted communities in responding to government officials. Undocumented immigrants, for example, must be counted, but may fear that filling out government forms could lead to deportation or other sanctions. Having people from the community speak to those who are often undercounted has proved very important in previous census cycles in producing a more accurate count.

Conclusion

A full and accurate count of the U.S. population is vital to the basic functions of government and provides an irreplaceable source of information to a wide range of other stakeholders. With the 2020 census facing numerous challenges, foundations have the chance to be a key catalyst in protecting one of the most critical tools of democracy. With the 2020 census only five years away, the time is now to take action to set the right course.

Appendix A – List of Member Foundations of the Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup

Annie E. Casey Foundation
Bauman Foundation
Carnegie Corporation
Democracy Fund
Ford Foundation
Joyce Foundation
JPB Foundation
Open Society Foundations
Rockefeller Brothers Fund
Wallace H. Coulter Foundation