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## IN THIS ISSUE

Philanthropy and the 2020 census: A once-in-a-decade chance to get it right By VANITA GUPTA	1
How should philanthropy respond to attacks on unions? By LUDOVIC BLAIN AND JIM ARABY	3
What does winning look like for your organization in the current political environment?	6
Funding transformation through racial healing By JEANNÉ ISLER	8
Pay it forward: A new way to fund grassroots LGBTQ organizing in the South By REV. JASMINE BEACH-FERRARA	10
A message from the President and CEO	2
Member Spotlight	15

## Philanthropy and the 2020 census: A once-in-a-decade chance to get it right

By Vanita Gupta

The U.S. Constitution requires a census every 10 years, and getting it right is important to everyone. The census has an enormous impact on the nation's ability to ensure that all Americans receive equal treatment under the law and have equal access to economic opportunities. Census data provide the basis for virtually

all demographic and socioeconomic information used by policymakers at all levels of government, businesses, philanthropy, community leaders and research organizations.

A good census is not a partisan issue. The goal of the U.S. Census Bureau is to "count everyone once, only once, and in the right place."<sup>1</sup> But the census doesn't count all groups equally well, which skews the results in favor of some communities over others for the next 10 years. Already, budget shortfalls are placing census operations designed to reach groups that have been historically underrepresented in the census at risk, threatening fairness and accuracy, and ultimately, our democracy.

The U.S. Census Bureau spends billions of dollars on the census. However, none of that money reaches the non-profit organizations whose outreach to people of color, immigrants and people with low income can help make the difference between a disastrous undercount and an accurate count.

### IT'S NOW OR NEVER

Some of the largest foundations in the country have started to fill a portion of this resource gap, but more focus and resources are needed to support the organizations engaged in critical census education and promotion.

Here are four reasons why funders need to *(continued on page 12)*



challenging grantmakers  
to strengthen communities

# Philanthropy and the 2020 census

(continued from page 1)

prioritize achieving a fair and accurate 2020 census:

## 1. THE CENSUS IS IMPORTANT TO EVERYONE.

The outcome of the census influences – directly or indirectly – almost every issue that U.S.-focused philanthropies support, including political empowerment, social justice, educational opportunity, employment, veterans’ services, rural development, health care and infrastructure in disadvantaged communities. Philanthropy also relies on census data to guide investment strategies and evaluate the work of grantees.

Decennial census data on state populations determine the number of seats in Congress each state receives and how those districts are drawn. More than \$600 billion annually is allocated through federal programs based, in whole or in part, on census data.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, state and local governments use census information to distribute billions more for essential services. Census data are also used to monitor compliance with, and enforcement of, civil rights statutes.

Counting every person in the United States is an extraordinarily complex endeavor – it is the nation’s largest peacetime mobilization of personnel and resources. Even with careful planning, a perfect count is virtually impossible: Some people are missed, some are double-counted, and some do not respond fully. But, because the accuracy of the census directly affects our nation’s ability to ensure equal representation and equal access to public and private resources, achieving a fair and accurate census must be regarded as one of the most significant civil rights and social justice priorities facing the country.

## 2. THE 2020 CENSUS IS ALREADY UNDERWAY.

While the 2020 census may seem far off, key decisions are being made now, and poor choices could lead to signifi-

cant harm for years to come. The Census Bureau has spent an entire decade planning for the upcoming census, and, by the end of 2017, the Census Bureau will have finalized the questionnaire for 2020 and launched its program for sharing preliminary address lists with states and municipalities.

Significant operations will go into effect in 2018 with the End-to-End Census Test. This pivotal “dress rehearsal” had been scheduled to take place in three areas – Pierce County, Washington; Providence County, Rhode Island; and Bluefield-Beckley-Oak Hill, West Virginia – but due to budget shortfalls, it will only be conducted in Providence. The dry run is the only opportunity for a complete test of the 2020 questionnaire and new technologies, including a new Internet response option that the Census Bureau is promoting as the primary response mode for the 2020 census and electronic devices for census takers to collect information during personal visits to unresponsive households.

In 2019, the Census Bureau will ramp up its outreach efforts, which include a partnership program, paid advertising and a census in the schools program. Hundreds of millions of questionnaires will be printed, and local offices across the country will begin recruiting more than a million temporary census employees, with plans to hire about 300,000 enumerators during peak operations. Census workers also will canvass selected communities that have undergone significant change or that have unstable housing conditions, to update the master address file that establishes the universe for the 2020 count.

## 3. ENGAGING LATER MAY BE TOO LATE.

Historically, the census has missed disproportionately high numbers of people of color, low-income households in rural and urban areas and young children. The Census Bureau also des-

ignates “hard-to-count” areas based on additional characteristics, including limited English proficiency, mobile and single-parent households. This uneven accuracy has significant civil rights implications because it could deny the most vulnerable members of our society equal representation and opportunity. Efforts to address these challenges must be built into the census process now, before it is too late for them to have an impact.

Encouraging people to complete their census questionnaires, and eliminating undercounts in at-risk communities, will be particularly challenging in 2020. Encouraging an online response might lead to concerns about Internet privacy and data confidentiality, especially given high-profile news stories about computer hacking affecting businesses and government. And some communities that may already feel besieged by the current political climate may be concerned about new options for identifying Middle Eastern and North African ethnicity. Immigrant and mixed-status households may be especially fearful of providing information to the federal government in 2020, given the heightened climate of fear that anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies have created.

The Census Bureau will attempt to minimize undercounting with an extensive, \$400+ million communications plan, but the bureau cannot be successful on its own. The role that national and state advocacy groups and community-based organizations play is critical to a fair and accurate census.

According to former Census Bureau Director Kenneth Prewitt, “Of the many things necessary for a successful census, none rival ‘trusted voices’ that reassure Americans anxious about the government asking questions. The Census Bureau knows that trusted community voices persuade millions of Americans to join the once every decade opportu-

nity that is truly ‘of the people, by the people, for the people.’”<sup>3</sup>

We commend the philanthropic community for identifying an accurate 2010 census as an important goal and for committing significant resources to this work – The Leadership Conference’s 2010 census education and promotion campaign, a collaborative with Asian Americans Advancing Justice-AAJC, the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund, the NAACP, and the National Congress of American Indians, which served as a key bridge between the Census Bureau and communities at greatest risk of an undercount – would not have been possible without this support.

Foundations invested at least \$37 million in “get out the count” campaigns to increase the accuracy of the 2010 census.<sup>4</sup> But the flow of funds to nonprofit organizations was uneven and unpredictable, and the levels of funding were not commensurate with the importance of the census and the wide-ranging and long-term consequences of underperformance.

Equally important is to consider that meaningful funder involvement did not begin until 2008, which was not early enough in the decade during the last census cycle.

Our work for the 2020 census has been under way for years, and some of the nation’s largest foundations have begun to shore up funding to support nonprofit communities. But the resources and reach to date are inadequate to meet the immense challenge of ensuring a fair and accurate count.

In the current climate, broadening the coalition engaged in census work will be critical. Foundations that understand the importance of the census for their other substantive areas of focus must find ways of ensuring a swift and sufficient investment in the work of community groups.

#### 4. FOCUSING ON POLICY IMPROVEMENTS NOW COULD PAY SIGNIFICANT DIVIDENDS.

The 2020 census faces a severe threat that underfunding will compromise its fairness and accuracy. In order for the Census Bureau to prepare well – and carry out important tests of new technologies and procedures – it requires a continuous ramp up in funding levels in the years ending in “6” through “0.”

Unfortunately, as the below graph shows, for this cycle Congress allocated far less than the Census Bureau requested in both 2016 and 2017; the 2017 funding level was only modestly higher than the previous year. To make matters worse, the administration’s funding request of \$1.5 billion for fiscal year 2018 is irresponsible and unrealistically low, falling at least \$300 million short of the level needed to ensure a cost-effective decennial census in 2020.

This underinvestment has already forced the Census Bureau to scale back or eliminate some key 2020 census preparations. For example, 2017 field

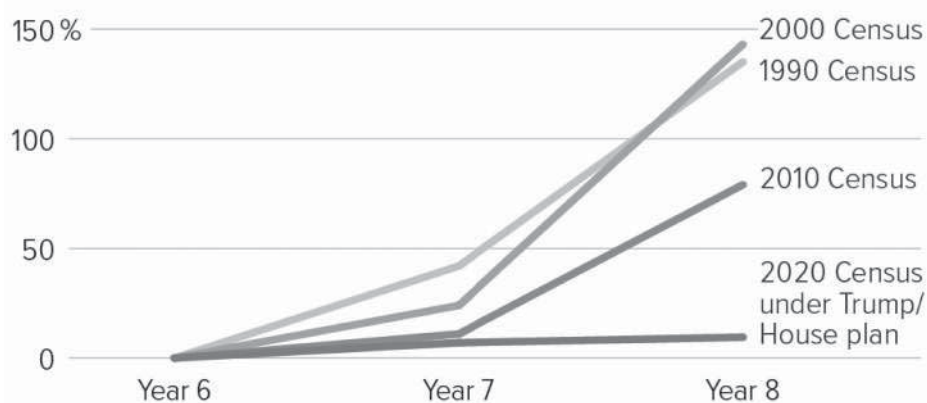
tests planned for Puerto Rico and on two American-Indian reservations were canceled. In addition, the opening of three of six regional 2020 census offices has been delayed, and the communications campaign and coverage measurement components of the 2018 dress rehearsal were eliminated.

Given the Trump Administration’s inadequate budget request for 2018, the Census Bureau has been forced to entirely eliminate two of the three dress rehearsal sites, thus diminishing the opportunity to fully test all methods and operations in a census-like environment in different types of communities.

The consequences of inadequate preparation and funding could be devastating, with vulnerable, hard-to-count communities taking the hardest hits. Educational outreach, to both sides of the aisle, about the need for sufficient government investment in the sound preparation and policy development to ensure a fair and accurate census, can help address this potential crisis, but

### Proposed Increase in 2018 Census Bureau Funding Far Less Than in Previous Decennial Census Cycles

Change in Census Bureau Budget relative to year 6 of each decade



Note: All years are fiscal years. Figures show discretionary budget authority in each year of the decade relative to that in the sixth year, not adjusted for inflation.

Source: CBPP based on Office of Management and Budget, enacted appropriations, and draft legislation from the House Appropriations Committee

philanthropic support is needed for this work to be successful.

Census funding has been traditionally viewed by philanthropy as a once-a-decade undertaking, without a midcycle funding stream. But funding for organizations with a proven track record on census issues, as well as for those who can reach audiences that will support and decide census policy, can help make the difference in bolstering efforts to educate and influence policymakers.

### FUNDERS: BE A VALIDATOR TO YOUR PEERS.

The census is a classic “intersectional” issue. It has a direct impact on antipoverty efforts, criminal justice reform, racial justice issues, educational access and much more. Thousands of community groups across the country are hoping to play a role in promoting the census to their constituents, but they lack the resources to develop and staff major activities.

Foundations that support the core

work of these organizations should recognize that an inclusive census enables grantees to access the resources they need to provide better services.

We hope that funders will be open to combining portfolios, as many did in 2010, to increase the pot of available funding. Please talk to your colleagues about this critical issue.

When it comes to the census, there are no do-overs – we have only one chance this decade to get it right. ■

*Vanita Gupta is president and CEO of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and former head of the Civil Rights Division at the U.S. Department of Justice.*

## Notes

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2. Andrew Reamer, “Counting for Dollars: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds.” GW Institute of Public Policy, June 4, 2017, <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/census/CountingForDollars-Intro.pdf>.
3. Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863.
4. Kim Crews, “Philanthropic Support for 2010 Census Outreach: A List of Grants Awarded,” May 2011, [https://www.funderscommittee.org/files/FCL\\_2010\\_Census\\_Grants\\_Spreadsheet\\_by\\_Kim\\_Crews\\_final\\_1.pdf](https://www.funderscommittee.org/files/FCL_2010_Census_Grants_Spreadsheet_by_Kim_Crews_final_1.pdf). See also Kim Crews, “Philanthropic Support for 2010 Census Outreach: An Overview of Grants Awarded,” May 2011, [https://www.funderscommittee.org/files/2\\_Overview\\_of\\_Grants\\_Awarded\\_by\\_Kim\\_Crews\\_final.pdf](https://www.funderscommittee.org/files/2_Overview_of_Grants_Awarded_by_Kim_Crews_final.pdf).

## A new way to fund grassroots LGBTQ organizing in the South

(continued from page 11)

needed, to be used by those who are most impacted. There’s a strategic reason as well: Creating legal and lived equality in the South requires that we do long-term organizing in every community, not just in large metro areas.

For CSE, funding grassroots work is a core strategy as we build a new model of Southern organizing, just like direct services and litigation. We learn from and build with our grassroots partners. In the shared work and mutuality of these relationships, there is also great joy. ■

*Rev. Jasmine Beach-Ferrara is the executive director of the Campaign for Southern Equality, which promotes LGBTQ equality across the South. She is a minister in the United Church of Christ and*

*a County Commissioner in Buncombe County, North Carolina.*

## Notes

1. According to research from Funders for LGBTQ Issues, foundation funding to LGBTQ groups in the South has increased from less than 5 percent to 25 percent in recent years, with grants primarily going to large non-profits in metro areas.
2. Claudia Horwitz, “Out in the South Part Two: The Assets,” Funders for LGBTQ Issues, September 2014, [https://www.lgbtfunders.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Out\\_in\\_the\\_South\\_Part\\_Two\\_LGBTQ\\_Community\\_Assets\\_in\\_the\\_U.S.\\_South.pdf](https://www.lgbtfunders.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Out_in_the_South_Part_Two_LGBTQ_Community_Assets_in_the_U.S._South.pdf).
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4. Susan Reif, Donna Safley, Carolyn McAllaster, Elena Wilson, Kathryn Whetten, “State of HIV in the US Deep South,” Center for Health Policy and Inequalities Research, Duke University, <https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10161/13807/State%20of%20the%20Deep%20Southrevised%20online2.pdf>.
5. Movement Advancement Project, “Safe School Laws,” July 7, 2017, [http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/safe\\_school\\_laws](http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/safe_school_laws).
6. Movement Advancement Project, “Non-Discrimination Laws,” July 7, 2017, [www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/non\\_discrimination\\_laws](http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/non_discrimination_laws).