

**Survey Results:**

***Understanding the  
Impact of COVID-19 on  
2020 Census Funders &  
Grantees***

MAY 2020



# About FCCP

The Funders' Committee for Civic Participation (FCCP) is an innovative and thought-provoking network that shares an underlying conviction that all people deserve a voice in our democratic process. FCCP serve leaders in the philanthropic community working to further this vision with heightened attention to issues of equity and historically disenfranchised and underrepresented communities. FCCP members support non-partisan efforts to engage voters, eliminate structural barriers to voting, advance reforms to improve government and electoral systems, and inspire public involvement in civic life. FCCP provides funders with a community in which to build connections, a stage for showcasing innovations, a forum for strategic dialogue and collaboration, and a resource for civic participation research and tools. We work to build an effective network of grantmakers who are passionate about realizing our collective vision of a vibrant and inclusive democracy for all. For more information, visit: [funderscommittee.org](https://funderscommittee.org).

## Funders Census Initiative

The Funders Census Initiative (FCI), a working group of FCCP, is helping to mobilize philanthropy to participate, convene, and invest towards a fair and accurate 2020 Census with a focus on historically undercounted communities. This is done through outreach, education, resource development, and technical assistance. FCI 2020 supports grantmakers by providing forums for funders to learn, strategize, and plan together including webinars, briefings, meetings, and the FCCP Convening; developing and distributing census timelines, updates, factsheets, analyses, and resources to inform funder engagement; monitoring Census Bureau progress and tracking policy issues. Through this initiative, FCI works to achieve a democracy where traditionally marginalized communities have equal access to participation and decision-making in the democratic process. For more information, visit: [FCI2020.org](https://FCI2020.org).

## Questions?

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# Background

The 2020 Census is a building block for our democracy for the next decade, informing the fair distribution of political representation and federal resources, including for public health, community health centers, and emergency planning. Philanthropy relies on accurate census data to inform grantmaking, strategic planning, and evaluation.

Since 2015, funders have been working toward a fair and accurate 2020 Census through the Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup (Census Subgroup). The Funders Census Initiative (FCI) at the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation (FCCP) and the United Philanthropy Forum (the Forum) have been supporting this effort to mobilize philanthropy to participate, convene, and invest toward a fair and accurate 2020 Census, all with a focus on historically undercounted communities, including communities of color, low-income communities, immigrant and mixed-status households, households with limited English proficiency, and young children. These collective efforts have spurred unprecedented engagement from national, state, and community-based funders. For example, national funders have pooled and dispersed more than \$85 million, while state or local grantmaking is taking place in 42 states, including 19 states with a statewide funder collaborative. Further, the nonprofit sector's coordination with state and local governments on the census, through various models, has helped leverage hundreds-of-millions in additional public sector investments.

The Census Bureau began mailing 2020 Census invitations to a majority of households in mid-March, right when the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus a global pandemic and social distancing and shelter-in-place orders were implemented in states and communities across the country. As a result, funders and their grantees needed to adjust years' worth of planning to prioritize the health and safety of their staff and communities since they could not execute census engagement -- like in-person events, questionnaire assistance, and door-to-door canvassing -- as originally envisioned. At the same time, the Census Bureau announced operational adjustments of its own to comply with federal, state, and local guidance. This included a three-month extension of the census through October 31. (See: The Census Bureau's [latest operational timeline](#)). It was during this initial adjustment period that the Census Subgroup and Funders Census Initiative developed and distributed a survey to their funder networks to capture and understand how philanthropic institutions and the organizations they support were adjusting their work in response to the pandemic. A total of 64 individuals participated in the survey, representing a mix of national, state, and community-based foundations, philanthropy serving organizations (PSOs), and donor advisors. (**See Methodology on page 12 for additional details**).

The disproportionate impact of the coronavirus pandemic and related economic crisis on marginalized groups puts the stakes for the census and our democracy into sharp focus, and underscores the importance of early planning, coordination, and engagement.

# Overview

- Funders have responded quickly to support their census grantees. For example, 93 percent of respondents are offering flexibility of grant deliverables, 83 percent are offering extended grant timelines, 33 percent are providing additional census funding, and 22 percent are offering additional general operating support.
- Uncertainty is impacting all of the work, including the lack of clarity on the Census Bureau's operational timeline and whether or not state and local governments will offer flexibility for census grant deliverables, timelines, or reporting.
- Funders' assessment of their grantee's most urgent needs are broad, but -- not surprisingly -- flexibility and general operating support topped the list of priorities. Sixty-nine percent and 63 percent of respondents rated flexibility and general operating support, respectively, as a "very urgent" need. As organizations have adjusted their operations and census programs from in-person engagement, support to address this shift as well as the digital divide are also urgent needs. This includes rural outreach strategies, internet access, paid or earned media, digital organizing capacity, technology tools, and list-building capacity.
- Organizations are demonstrating resilience, flexibility, and creativity through new methods of census engagement to reach historically undercounted communities. This includes approaches that leverage census resources and infrastructure to respond to COVID-19 such as dual mailings and an effort to convert census champions into COVID-19 response captains; pairing census promotion with meal and service delivery as well as online instruction; celebratory and educational digital outreach like census dance parties, town halls, faith services, and questionnaire assistance; text and phone banking; and other creative, socially distant approaches like contests, signs at grocery stores and gas stations, and, sidewalk chalking.
- Funders expressed compassion and concern for their grantee partners, both for the short-term impact that COVID-19 is having on nonprofits' operations and programming -- including the overlap with Get-Out-the-Vote efforts -- and the impact that the resulting financial crisis will have on their long-term viability.

# Analysis

## Census Funders' Response to COVID-19: flexibility and timeline extensions

Ninety-one percent of respondents represent institutions that are either funding or distributing grants to organizations to conduct census education, outreach, and/or mobilization. Remaining survey participants represent philanthropy serving organizations who are supporting census funders.

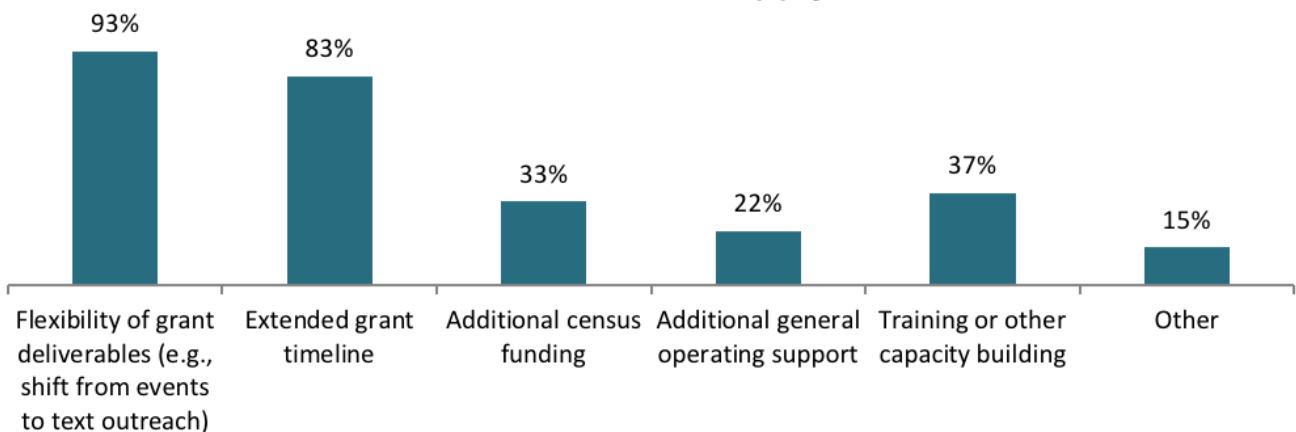
As COVID-19 has dramatically impacted organizations' operations and programming, philanthropy has responded in myriad ways. (See **chart below**). Among census funders, flexibility of grant deliverables and extended grant timelines were the most common adjustments, with 93 percent and 83-percent, respectively. Thirty-seven percent of respondents are providing training or other capacity-building. Funders are also increasing resources to their grantees: 33 percent are providing additional census funding (though

it is unclear if these are exclusively new resources or yet-to-be dispersed funding to be allocated for rapid response or Non-Response Follow-Up needs) and 22 percent are offering additional general operating support.

Respondents also offered a range of specific examples of how they are supporting grantees, for example, through weekly grantee calls or guidance about how to successfully implement census outreach. One funder noted that they "sent a note to grantees letting them know we wanted them to prioritize their safety and well being and that of their communities, and to encourage flexibility with rethinking census strategies in this environment." Another funder has allowed all current grantees to shift their grants to general operating, while another has retained a consultant to provide training for their nonprofit grantee boards and staff on topics like "Leading in a Crisis" and "Nonprofit Financial Management Strategies."

Funders that are offering supplemental funding are doing so in different ways. For example, one funder is providing funding for undocumented

In response to COVID-19, has your institution provided (or does your institution plan to provide) any of the following to your census grantees?  
Check all that apply:



immigrant households affected by COVID-19 and for tracking the “trajectory of the pandemic within their service area to evaluate options for continued census promotion during the extended Census 2020 period.” Another respondent noted they are adjusting their campaign to strengthen communications in late July and October to align with the extended self-response timeline. One funder was planning a census rapid response fund informed by household self-response rates, but has since expanded the grants to include needs arising from shifts in outreach as a result of COVID-19.

Several funders noted the heightened importance of collaboration among their partners. One funder explains: “We realize a coordinated approach right now is key. We want to make sure all our grantees are working together to maximize the dollars we have. For example if a few grantees are paying for social media ads can we come together to get a better larger contract?” Another offers: “We are funding a single organized campaign approach, which allows the various grantees to receive support from the broader campaign as well as each other for best practices.”

The adjustments have also revealed challenges. A couple of respondents noted that additional grantmaking was contingent on fundraising while several others noted contributions to COVID-19 emergency response and recovery funds. One foundation requested guidance on extending census efforts without giving organizations additional funding, while another explained that they have cut funding from an outstanding RFP because of the market downturn caused by

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COVID-19. One respondent summarized the situation: “Unfortunately, like many other organizations, our foundation has also been pulled into dealing with the immediate fall out of the pandemic and census efforts have taken a back seat.”

### **Government Funding: flexibility with some uncertainty**

Public-private partnerships (between philanthropy and state and local governments, for example) have been a constructive model to leverage census funding for trusted organizations and messengers. Philanthropy is arguably more flexible than the public sector, however. Fifty-three percent of respondents are aware that their partners or grantees are also receiving state or local government funding for census, but only half of these respondents knew that the government agency was providing some type of flexibility for grant timelines or deliverables to its census grantees. “Most [state and local governments in the region] are providing flexibility, one or two are less flexible, and one released additional funding,” said one respondent, while another said that the government agency is offering additional resources for the pivot to digital outreach.

Two funders offered worrisome assessments of the current landscape:

**"The state is being somewhat flexible. They have relaxed. . . reporting requirements, but have pushed out deadlines to reports that have funding tied to them, meaning that it will be even longer to receive that funding. Additionally, we were asked to participate in phone banking for the state but we never had any follow up after we got the volunteers lined up. We didn't have any phone numbers to do the call banking. . . or a platform to use so that volunteers wouldn't have to use their private cell phones."**

**"With census [operations] suspended and typical social activities at a halt, it has been difficult to plan for regional action. . . the [nonprofits] that were positioned to do outreach are struggling financially [because of] lost revenue and unexpected expenses, and the State is not likely to fund census activities (a loss of \$1.66 million for our region). . . activities will need to be low cost and high impact."**

Remaining respondents were either unsure whether the government agency was providing flexibility or noted that no flexibility was provided for grant timelines or deliverables. One reported "They are not cutting funding, but their timelines haven't been adjusted yet, nor has the reporting been relaxed." This is concerning given the looming end (and grant deadline) of most state fiscal years on June 30. Three respondents noted the uncertainty is related to the government agency's focus on COVID-19, with one saying "It's hard to tell if there is real flexibility in the contracts

they have in place. I know the state is interested in innovative and adaptive ideas. . . I have observed that the relationship between public and private is better since we have a common crisis to address."

No respondents reported that government agencies have cut census funding, but a few noted that government agencies are withholding funds. Grantees in one state are still waiting on state funding to arrive, despite the fact that the state keeps announcing census funding. One agency is monitoring response rates to decide where to allocate remaining funds, while in another case it is not clear if or when the state agency will release census funds.

Funders are stepping in to provide support where they can. "We are not receiving additional funding from the State but private funders are digging deeper to help," said one respondent. One statewide PSO is working with city officials to pass through a census outreach grant to trusted individuals and organizations, adjust grantees' scopes of work, and extend the reporting deadline in alignment with the state's stay-at-home order and the Census Bureau's extended self-response timeline. They are doing all of this while "trying to center the grantee experiences in our revised approach including asking for new/preferred addresses for check mailing, working with the city to buy a shareable phone banking system, and coordinating outreach strategies with the city's COVID19 food distribution program."

## Assessing Grantee Needs

Funders were asked to assess 14 potential needs of their census grantees by offering a rating of each need on a three-point qualitative scale: not urgent, somewhat urgent, very urgent. “Not sure or N/A” was also an option. (See Table A). The needs that were rated “very urgent” by most respondents were flexibility and general operating support, with 69 percent and 63 percent of respondents, respectively. Needs to address the digital divide and the shift from in-person to digital outreach represent the next highest categories of urgent needs, including rural outreach strategies, internet access, paid or earned media, digital organizing capacity, technology tools, and list-building capacity.

There is significant concern about rural areas. One respondent explained that -- as of their participation in this survey -- twelve percent of the hardest-to-count households in their state had not received any notification about the census, and that “Unless there is a massive infusion of efforts to the update/leave geography there will be a truly massive undercount of largely Native American populations.” Another funder expressed concern about rural parts of South Carolina without internet access, which was already trending 10-15 percent behind the rest of the state.

Two themes emerged from open-ended responses. First, there are many challenges associated with the shift from in-person to digital outreach, especially for small organizations, public libraries, and organizations working with rural or

**Table A: What are your census grantees' most urgent need?**

“Very Urgent” Needs	Percent
Flexibility	69%
General operating support	63%
Rural outreach strategies	46%
Internet access	44%
Paid or earned media	43%
Digital organizing capacity	40%
Technology tools (e.g., virtual meeting platforms)	35%
List-building capacity (e.g., email phone numbers, etc.)	31%
Staffing	25%
Training for digital organizing	24%
Equipment (e.g., laptops, cell phones, etc.)	23%
Volunteers	21%
Materials (e.g., posters, flyers, stickers, mailers, etc.)	18%
Other training	6%

mobile populations like Tribal communities and farmworkers. One funder offered that “There is a huge need for training and support for digital strategies,” while another offered that “Some [organizations] were able to adjust quickly, some don't quite know what to do.” Second, there is a need for greater clarity from the Census Bureau on the timeline of operations. “Without such information, promoting census participation is seriously compromised,” cautioned one respondent. Another respondent commented that it is “hard to create urgency and get folks to respond to the form now when we keep changing [the] goalpost.”



## Creative Outreach Approaches

Respondents were asked to explain the most creative approaches they have come across from their grantees as organizations adjust their census outreach plans. Organizations are demonstrating resilience, flexibility, and creativity through new methods of census engagement to reach historically undercounted communities. There were a range of responses, which are organized into several categories.

### **Coordinating around a public health response:**

Several respondents explained how nonprofits are responding to the moment by leveraging census resources and infrastructure to distribute information about and respond to COVID-19. One respondent said their grantees are “Using trusted messengers to build even more trust by distributing accurate messages on covid health alerts.” Other examples include a successful effort to convert census champions into COVID-19 response captains, dual Census/COVID-19 mailings, online marketplaces to support small businesses and promote census participation, and an effort to merge COVID-19 crisis relief and 2020 Census efforts by promoting census completion through nutrition programs. One funder underscored the necessity of this approach, saying “Everyone is scrambling. They are also involved in responding to multiple problems stemming from COVID-19. They have to keep doing that or they will cease to be 'trusted voices.'”

### **Pairing census with meal or service delivery:**

Fifteen respondents offered examples of census

***“Everyone is scrambling. They are also involved in responding to multiple problems stemming from COVID-19. They have to keep doing that or they will cease to be 'trusted voices.'”***

education and outreach that were paired with meal or service delivery. Efforts to include census flyers with school meal delivery were mentioned multiple times, as was integrating census messages as part of other social service agency food distribution and tele-health conversations. A couple of respondents offered examples of integrating census messages as part of online instruction. “When schools closed, it was recommended we ‘follow the children,’ so we created a kids cartoon video,” noted one respondent.

### **Shifting to digital and social media**

**engagement:** Seventeen respondents noted virtual events, meetings or engagement, including online faith services, enlisting niche influencers and trusted community partners to participate in educational videos and regularly scheduled weekly community meetings. Some online engagement is celebratory -- like census parties and dance parties -- while other content is educational. Some have shifted questionnaire assistance online, while others are “Creating video guides for people with visual impairments, engagement competitions, and census face masks.” The social media platforms and communications apps that were mentioned

include WhatsApp, Facebook, Outvote, YouTube, Instagram, FaceTime, and TikTok.

Some practitioners have made the shift to digital outreach easily, while it has been more complicated for other organizations. "The shift to virtual outreach. . . was a painful decision to make, but nonprofits have adjusted rapidly," said one respondent. "The digital, social media strategies have gone into hyper-drive," said one funder.

## ***"The digital, social media strategies have gone into hyper-drive."***

**Phone and text banking:** Nine respondents noted various phone and text banking strategies with both volunteer and paid field staff models. One respondent offered that staff from census assistance centers are now being trained in phone banking, while another noted state funded robocalls.

**Other creative approaches:** Four respondents mentioned contests or incentives. These efforts included a social media content creation challenge for funny social media posts regarding census completion and awarding gift cards for census participation to support local businesses closed by COVID-19. Another approach was offering \$10 restaurant gift cards which, according to the funder, is enough to incentivize people to participate and almost always stimulates a larger purchase for the business.

Respondents offered examples of billboards, signs at grocery stores and gas stations, car magnets, sidewalk chalking, and one youth-led effort to

create posters messaging "honk if you have completed your Census," whereby youth stand on busy streets -- with adult supervision -- encouraging drivers to complete the census. One community foundation contracted with an ice cream truck driver to deliver census handouts and free ice cream bars in the hardest to count areas on April 1 (all while maintaining necessary distances).

Finally, one funder summarized that the most creative outreach plans include a "balance of both virtual outreach like using WhatsApp and [Facebook and]. . . other traditional tools like driving in rural communities using a loudspeaker to talk about the Census, hosting food banks as one of the few opportunities to do one-on-one outreach. In addition, some local nonprofits have been able to get free electronic billboard space from businesses that are closed due to the current shutdown."

## ***"Nonprofits funded to do census outreach are overwhelmed trying to keep their lights on and adjust to our new reality."***

### ***Long-Term Impacts***

Funders expressed compassion and concern for their grantee partners, both for the overwhelming short-term effects of COVID-19 on nonprofits' operations and programming (including the implications of the extended census timeline, which now overlaps with Get-Out-the-Vote efforts) and the impact that the resulting financial crisis will

have on their long-term viability. Multiple respondents noted that census has fallen as a priority given other emerging concerns. One noted that the most urgent need is “time to do all this on top of their added responsibilities at home and work.” Another funder said “Nonprofits funded to do census outreach are overwhelmed trying to keep their lights on and adjust to our new reality.”

Two respondents offer a sobering picture of census-funded organizations:

***“I think that we must also remember that this is not just a funding/monetary issue - we are also dealing with burnout, with organizations [ceasing] to exist, with layoffs. There is also [the] challenge between GOTC vs GOTV with this new timeline. Capacity and focus on outreach during a busy summer is anticipated.”***

***“We are continuing to follow response rates in our census tracts and are currently trying to***

***match community based organizations [CBOs] working in those tracts. However, due to COVID-19, many of our CBO partners are temporarily closed and not able to perform census outreach. Sadly, there are quite a number of CBOs who won't be able to weather the economic fallout of COVID-19 and will never be able to reopen. We're trying to assess just how many of our partners we may lose, which is even more concerning.”***

Census funders, as well as the broader network of philanthropic and practitioner partners, are benefiting from the early planning, coordination, and engagement. However, there is much more work to do to ensure a fair and accurate 2020 Census, especially given new challenges. The disproportionate impacts of the coronavirus pandemic and related economic crisis on marginalized communities puts what is at stake for the census -- and our democracy -- into even sharper focus.

# Methodology

This report is a qualitative analysis of emerging gaps and needs from census funders and practitioners. The data are not necessarily representative of all census funders and the experiences of their grantees, but can inform a general understanding through trends and specific examples of how organizations are adjusting in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. This is particularly true given the rapidly evolving landscape of the coronavirus and resulting actions from governments, the Census Bureau, funders, and nonprofit organizations.

An eight-question survey, designed using the data-collection tool SurveyMonkey, was distributed between April 8-24, 2020 through philanthropy contact lists of FCCP -- including FCI -- the Census Subgroup, and the Forum. ([The full survey is available here](#)). Survey recipients represented a few categories of philanthropic institutions, including foundations, philanthropy

TABLE B: States Represented by Survey Respondents			
AL	HI	MO	OH
AR	ID	MS	OR
AZ	IL	MT	PA
CA	IN	NE	SC
CO	KY	NH	TN
DC	MA	NJ	TX
FL	MD	NM	WA

serving organizations (PSOs), and donor advisors. A total of 64 individuals participated in the survey. Half of respondents (32) represented state or local funders; 14 represented a state or local PSO; 11 represented a national or regional (multi-state) funder; three represented a national or regional (multi-state) PSO; and four self-identified as "Other." (**See chart below**). Respondents represented 31 states plus Washington, DC. (**See Table B**).

## Which of the following options best describes your institution?

