

MISSISSIPPI

August 2021

Census data determines the allocation of federal and other funds to vital social programs, guides redistricting, and informs research. Therefore, an accurate census that captures historically undercounted populations¹ is crucial for our democracy. Since 2016, a collaborative of philanthropic funders has worked to align and pool funding to build and strengthen the infrastructure needed to support a fair and accurate count.

The Democracy Funders Collaborative's Census Subgroup, which is the steering committee for the census funder collaborative, engaged ORS Impact as a partner to develop state-level reports that provide an overview of philanthropic efforts to promote the 2020 Census within and across the 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. This report provides a summary of census efforts for the State of Mississippi based on review of secondary data, and interviews with key actors involved (n=3).

¹We have opted to use the term "historically undercounted populations" in our narrative, but the term is interchangeable with "hard to count," which we use when our informants opted to do so



OVERVIEW GOING INTO 2020 CENSUS

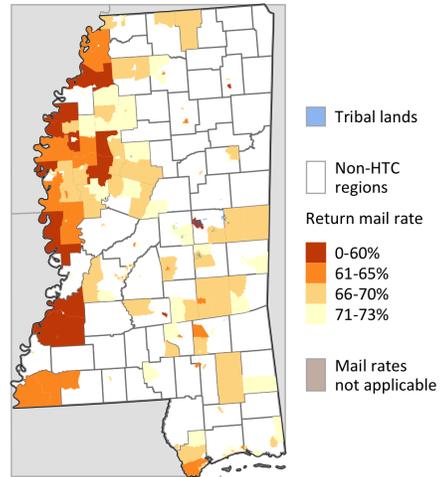
2,988,762

TOTAL POPULATION

798,311

TOTAL POPULATION LIVING IN HISTORICALLY UNDERCOUNTED CENSUS TRACTS

HISTORICALLY UNDERCOUNTED TRACTS BY COUNTY



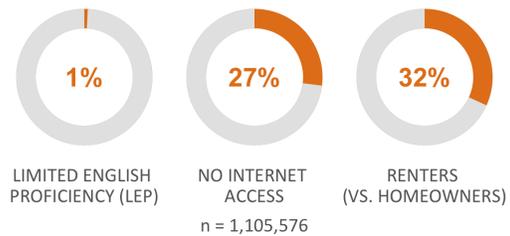
Special update/enumerate method used for counting as mail return rates are not applicable

Population

Past analyses of Census data have consistently shown differences in self-response rates based on household or individual characteristics, indicating that certain populations are at higher risk of being undercounted. The following graphs show the distribution of selected populations within the state that have historically been more likely to be undercounted. Data for all maps and graphs provided by CUNY Graduate Center via the Census 2020 Hard to Count/Response Rate map at www.CensusHardToCountMaps2020.us.

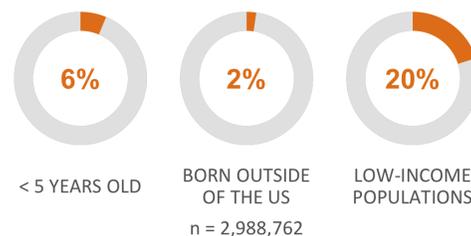
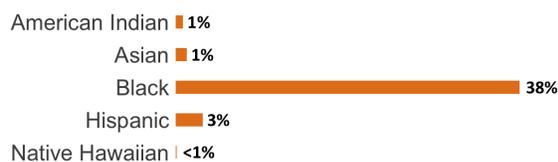
HOUSEHOLDS

Percent of total number of households in the state that have the following characteristics:



INDIVIDUALS

Percent of total number of individuals in the state that have characteristics of historically undercounted populations:

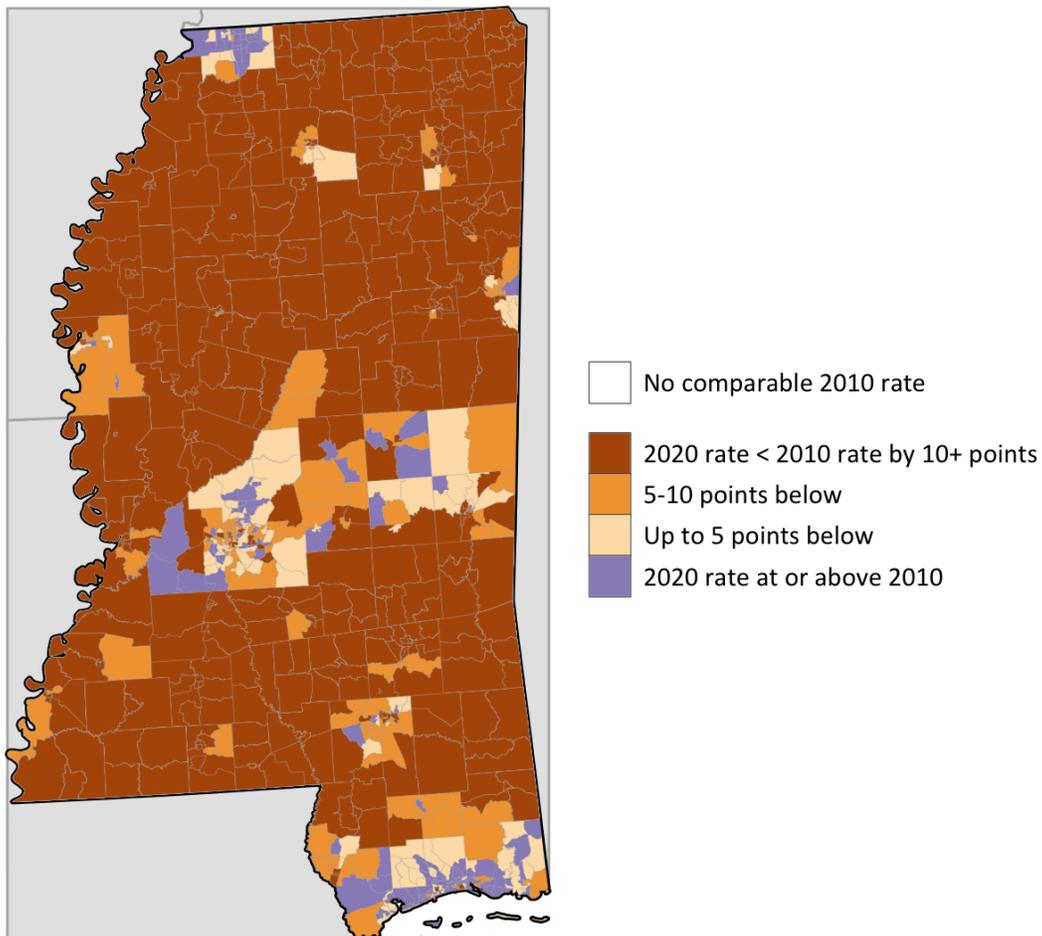




OVERVIEW OF CENSUS SELF-RESPONSE RATES

YEAR	SELF RESPONSE	CHANGE
2020	60.4%	-0.9
2010	61.3%	

CENSUS TRACTS WHERE 2020 CENSUS RETURN RATE WAS LOWER THAN 2010





STRUCTURE OF CENSUS OUTREACH

Efforts to support the 2020 Census in Mississippi benefited from the contribution of state-level and national actors. At the state level, nonprofit organizations played leading roles in organizing and implementing outreach to historically undercounted populations. Overall, around 35 nonprofit organizations were involved in statewide census efforts. Although there was not a formal structure for coordinating efforts in relation to the census, actors involved shared information and coordinated informally. Southern Echo acted as resource hub and convener for state actors working on the census, with some additional statewide organizing support by Mississippi One Voice and the staff of the Leadership Conference on Human Rights. About 15 national-level organizations, including funders and advocacy groups like the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, AARP, and the League of Women Voters, provided key financial and other support to the nonprofit organizations working on the ground. The state government also contributed to efforts via the efforts of the State Complete Count Committee.

Southern Echo, a community-based organization, began early conversations to develop a statewide response to the 2020 Census in 2015 and presented an initial census engagement strategy at the Leadership Conference on Human Rights in 2018. With increased momentum, nonprofits in Mississippi began mobilizing by 2019, holding rallies and meetings to plan outreach activities. National funders, including the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the national Census Equity Fund, provided important funding to support nonprofits' census-related efforts.

Also in 2019, outgoing governor Phil Bryant announced the formation of a State Complete Count Committee, which implemented a broad-based census communications campaign. It was the perception among some that tighter collaboration between the State Complete Count Committee and nonprofits could have been beneficial to efforts within the state. However, there was some collaboration between nonprofit- and state-led efforts, with some members of State Complete Count Committee subcommittees actively working with nonprofits to engage with certain populations and benefiting from the participation of grassroots advocates.

Nonprofits, with the support of philanthropy, led efforts within the state to reach historically undercounted populations, targeting efforts to counties with high concentrations of these hard-to-count groups and strategically identifying local messengers, including faith-based leaders, school districts, mayors, boards of supervisors, and local community nonprofits. Efforts in the state primarily leveraged existing local infrastructure and relationships, although some new relationships were also forged through the course of 2020 Census work.

Table 1: Key actors involved in Census Efforts²:

Actor	Role
Southern Echo	Southern Echo is a leading mobilizing organization that provided funding advocacy, strategic vision, and outreach support for 2020 Census Get Out the Count efforts. They specifically focused on undercounted Black communities in the Mississippi Delta and Jackson area.
Mississippi One Voice, Boat People SOS, Mississippi Votes, and Fair Count	These community-based outreach organizations engaged with their greater networks for targeted census activities throughout the state. Though many were headquartered in Jackson, their work centered on reaching pockets of undercounted communities found statewide or at hyperlocal levels. Mississippi One Voice and regional nonprofit Fair Count focused on Black communities, Boat People SOS engaged the primarily coastal Vietnamese communities, and Mississippi Votes mobilized college students.
The W.K. Kellogg Foundation	This foundation engaged in state funding activities through the national Census Equity Fund pool and as an advocate for greater funding. Community organizations interested in census activities could apply for funds to generate important census work.

²Data reflects the Census Bureau’s last update of self-response data (published in January 2021), which differs from the CUNY maps that use data from October 2020

FUNDING FOR CENSUS OUTREACH

Resources for Mississippi census efforts came from a combination of state-appropriated funds, national-level philanthropy, and in-kind contributions of materials and staff time. Overall, those involved in the efforts estimate that \$985,000 in resources were leveraged within the state, with approximately \$400,000 from state government funding and \$585,000 in philanthropic dollars, as well as an unknown amount in in-kind contributions.

Table 2: Funding for 2020 Census Outreach³

Funding Source and Amount	Funding Purpose
<p>Philanthropy: \$585,000</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The W.K. Kellogg Foundation was part of a pool of funds called the national Census Equity Fund, and reported a total of \$585,000 granted to Mississippi organizations working on census outreach and mobilizing activities in late 2019. Grantees included Mississippi One Voice, Southern Echo, Boat People SOS, homelessness shelter and outreach organization Back Bay Mission, Community Action Network agencies, the Steps Coalition, Mississippi Choctaw peoples, the Immigrant Alliance for Justice, and Mississippi Votes. Many of these organizations were also a part of the State Complete Count Committee’s community-based organization subcommittee. Funding was primarily put toward reaching the undercounted groups they served. • The national Census Equity Fund specifically supported Southern Echo (\$200,000) toward outreach activities. Funds were used to develop outreach and education toolkits, which included printed materials and were distributed across the state, targeting the 43 counties that Southern Echo identified as being hard to count. • All known philanthropic funding came from national groups; there was no known local philanthropy, despite some interest from a community foundation pre-COVID-19.
<p>State Government: \$400,000</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In January 2020, the state provided \$400,000 toward a communications contract, which included an official state census website, public relations messaging, and advertising.

³Funding data should be taken as estimates. We included data from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) and Census Equity Fund (CEF) grants where applicable; other figures are estimates provided by key informants

<p>In-Kind Contributions: Unknown</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other census resources included personal protective equipment donated by businesses, which Southern Echo handed out to people as part of their joint COVID-19 relief and census outreach efforts. Some public service announcements were also donated.
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DESCRIPTION OF 2020 CENSUS OUTREACH

Mississippi as a whole is considered “hard to count” due to its rural nature, and census communications strategies relied heavily on word-of-mouth information exchange throughout and beyond the network of partners to reach individuals across the state. Forty-three counties were targeted as the hardest to count throughout the state, mostly along the western delta region adjacent to the Mississippi River, which experiences a higher rate of poverty and other challenges affecting the count. To reach these populations, key actors activated their network of community-based organizations, supplying them with outreach toolkits and encouraging them to leverage their networks. Individuals were asked to communicate the importance of the census with 10 others in their social circle, help them complete their census forms, or refer them to organizations with the capacity to help. Communication efforts included phone and text banking, tele-townhalls, local radio notices, promotional gift items, and digital campaigns, such as an instructional “how to census” video. Messaging centered on “connecting the dots” of voting, census data, and redistricting. It emphasized that the community needs to be involved at all levels for impact and that this was the time to engage in census work. While general outreach activities were untargeted and diffuse, such as sending regular updates and messaging to Southern Echo’s 2,500-member database, others involved strategic partnerships, such as engagement with faith-based leaders who could activate members through church campaigns and provide crucial event spaces.

Grassroots organizations, church leaders, and county-level officials were crucial for outreach to historically undercounted populations. Although most of Mississippi is rural and many of the historically undercounted are those without regular access to broadband internet, other groups included Black communities in cities and along the delta region of the state, Vietnamese populations on the coast, the Choctaw Nation, young children, and immigrant communities. To better engage with these groups, the community-level subcommittee under the State Complete Count Committee invited participation from organizations that could represent these populations and engage in grassroots organizing. Key actors also leaned on hyperlocal community agents such as churches and county sheriff departments to engage with the hardest to reach groups, especially in the western delta region of the state. For example, despite pandemic challenges, Southern Echo promoted a complete count in one of the poorest counties in the state by leveraging existing relationships with the sheriff’s department, board of supervisors, and community action agency of Mayersville.

A variety of data was used to inform outreach strategies to reach undercounted populations. A centerpiece of the key actors' outreach strategy was a map of target counties created by Southern Echo. Data used to develop the map of hard-to-count census tracts by counties and congressional districts included 2010 Census mail return rates, as well as low response scores from the Census Bureau's 2019 Planning Database. The map was used as an internal tool to inform decisions related to reaching undercounted communities and identifying community partners to engage. Externally, the map served as a visual aide for partners seeking guidance on how to target their efforts. Other key guidance for state census efforts was offered through a partnership with the Center for Population Studies at the University of Mississippi, which was a part of the State Complete Count Committee and helped key groups understand how to use and interpret the data from census enumeration. The Census Bureau's Voter Activation Network was also readily used by nonprofits. With specific concerns about the rollout of the newly digital census, Fair Count partnered with the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation to produce their own zone-based maps based primarily on internet access and other undercount risk factors.

Close partnership with the Census Bureau supported efforts in the state. Notably, many US census partnership specialists were locals who leveraged their community connections and became key partners early on. Specialists offered key information about technologies of the first digitally offered census and provided speaking opportunities for community organizers who could share valuable perspectives and insights involving key strategies.

Early strategic planning by key actors granted a more resilient and compassionate response to COVID-19, but some partner work suffered from capacity issues. Because of the early and comprehensive efforts taken to craft a strategic plan, key actors felt better equipped to make informed pivots to pandemic-friendly strategies. Partners shifted to regular online meetings, community phone trees, or email updates through targeted community listservs that could meet the low-capacity needs of groups that were also delivering pandemic relief. To ensure a complete count, some organizations continued providing in-person opportunities for completion and leveraged pandemic relief efforts as outreach opportunities. For example, Boat People SOS provided computer stations and census completion and translation services for the elderly, and many groups collaborated with social services to include census information in food distribution boxes. Extending the census deadline was not necessarily helpful because many groups had only budgeted through July and no longer had capacity to continue the work. Although efforts became more disparate, localized, and less effective because of the pandemic, key actors felt that they generated new connections through a compassionate approach and still succeeded in engaging their base for meaningful impact.

Nimble organizations discovered opportunity in crafting messaging that leveraged the challenging events of 2020, including COVID-19 and racial injustice uprisings. Nonprofits doing on-the-ground work pivoted to compassionate structures of engagement with individuals and groups by recognizing their hardship before encouraging census completion. Some organizations directly responded to the region's shock vulnerability by weaving it into their messaging, such as Fair Count's "Road to Recovery" bus tour, which connected the

importance of census participation with pandemic economic recovery, as well as the idea of being seen and counted as an act of racial justice.

Key actors felt that the lateness of various census milestones hurt census completion, from federal- and state-level decision making to actual outreach implementation. Important decisions and general initiation of the 2020 Census came late in Mississippi, affecting its public legitimacy and the ability for key actors to organize around specific strategies and messaging. Due to the unexpected challenges of COVID-19, census door knockers were hired late. Adding to the challenges, some individuals who were hired were unfamiliar with the communities they were tasked to engage, creating friction around outreach efforts for undercounted populations that require more sensitive approaches.



LESSONS LEARNED

- **Starting census work early allowed key actors to create a plan that could be readily modified to meet incoming needs and unexpected challenges, as well as build a foundation for deep civic engagement work.** Lessons from the previous census and subsequent court battles helped key actors develop a well-informed strategic plan that could prepare them well for 2020 Get Out the Count efforts. Having developed a comprehensive strategy, leading organizations could more readily modify their tactics, building resilience into even the most unpredictable events. Getting started earlier also created the opportunity for greater network development, preparing a base of partners connected through voting, census, and redistricting mobilization work. The preparation allowed organizations to quickly pivot to other civic engagement work when census efforts were complete.
- **Census efforts in Mississippi could achieve greater impact through earlier and sustained funding that meets capacity needs and leads to the development of critical infrastructure.** Philanthropic funders can address resource gaps in state-appropriated funds not only by meeting the needs of the moment but also by providing a long-term commitment and flex support to the community-based organizations working toward building their capacity for census work. An annual investment in these organizations' work would allow them to prepare basic strategies, mobilize ahead of time, and focus on actual complete count activities during census years. This approach has the potential to also open conversations with funders about strategies and funding distribution, building greater relationships with responsive community-based organizations that have thoughtful base engagement plans to generate real impact. It could also produce a more coordinated effort among partners toward an effective statewide approach.
- **Lack of meaningful state-level engagement is also affecting advocacy for state interests and the ability to create lasting census infrastructure.** Although the previous governor was on record stating that he worried that Mississippi's declining population put Mississippi at risk of losing a congressional seat, census investment and engagement by state actors was still curtailed by political conservatism. Messaging on the importance of the census came late and was differentiated across all political jurisdictions of the state. Some key actors were disappointed by what felt like a lack of planning or oversight of the state's challenges to a fair and complete count, such as the deficiency of broadband access for most of the state. Given the lack of engagement and resources, it is unlikely that any new 2020 Census infrastructure will be sustained outside of the groups already active in census activities.

LOOKING FORWARD

Looking ahead to the 2030 Census, key actors want to better engage with state, city, and local officials to address some of the lessons of the 2020 Census that could lead to a more fair and accurate count, specifically education about the importance and timeline of Local Update of Census Addresses Operation activities—an especially important strategy for rural states with multiple homes sharing a single address. Key actors also want to develop a stronger narrative around climate disaster relief funding and the prevalence of more frequent disasters in Mississippi. Philanthropic partners have an opportunity to re-engage with non-profit grantees earlier to cultivate capacity building and allow a more proactive approach to census activities.



DATA SOURCES

Representatives from the following organizations participated in interviews and/or contributed information for this report:

- Southern Echo
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- Fair Count