

# NEBRASKA

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 populations<sup>1</sup> 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 Nebraska based on review of secondary data, and interviews with key actors involved (n=4).

<sup>1</sup>We 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

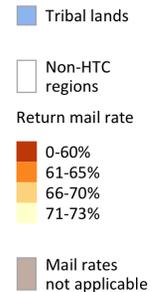
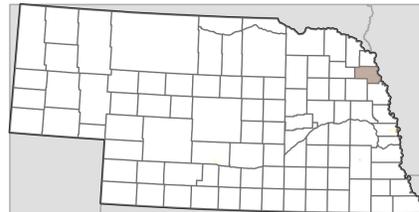
**1,904,760**

TOTAL POPULATION

**135,601**

TOTAL POPULATION LIVING IN HISTORICALLY UNDERCOUNTED CENSUS TRACTS

## HISTORICALLY UNDERCOUNTED TRACTS BY COUNTY



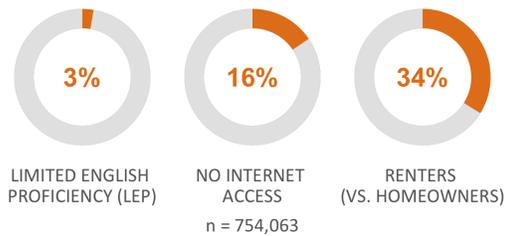
Special update/enumerate method used for counting as mail return rates are not applicable

## 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](http://www.CensusHardToCountMaps2020.us).

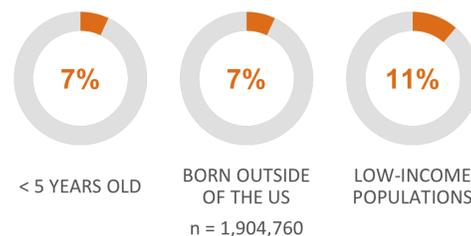
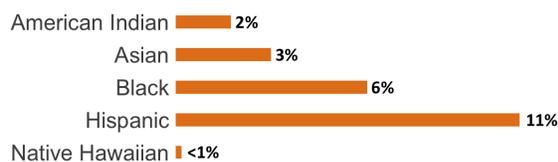
### HOUSEHOLDS

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:

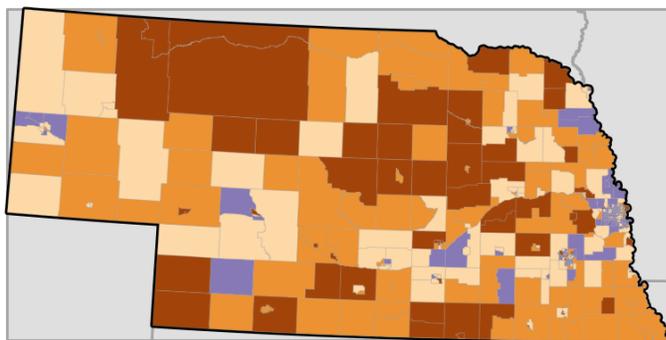




# OVERVIEW OF CENSUS SELF-RESPONSE RATES

YEAR	SELF RESPONSE	CHANGE
<b>2020</b>	<b>71.9%</b>	<b>+0.8</b>
2010	71.1%	

CENSUS TRACTS WHERE 2020 CENSUS RETURN RATE WAS LOWER THAN 2010



- No comparable 2010 rate
- 2020 rate < 2010 rate by 10+ points
- 5-10 points below
- Up to 5 points below
- 2020 rate at or above 2010



## STRUCTURE OF CENSUS OUTREACH

The governor of Nebraska did not form a State Complete Count Committee, and he vetoed legislation to prevent it. As a result, cities and counties were left to do their own census outreach. The Nebraska funders' table joined the State Count Action Network meeting in February 2018, after which a census working group within their membership was formed. With support from the Census Bureau staff and the Nonprofit Association of Midland, the working group started with 60 members and grew to 73 organizations by the end of the Get Out the Count effort. Between 2018 and 2019, the partners began meeting with the regional Census Bureau director, who started holding regular meetings with city officials in Lincoln and with nonprofit organizations to evaluate funding needs and decide which grassroots organizations needed to be involved. This group officially launched the Nebraska Counts Coalition and shortly after secured funding for statewide grassroots outreach efforts. The Nebraska Civic Engagement table, Civic Nebraska, and the Nonprofit Association of Midlands were the key players in building a coalition that officially became the leading complete count committee in late 2019. The Nebraska Count Coalition consisted entirely of nonprofit organizations, and although the effort was mainly local, it included some partners who had statewide reach.

Because the state government did not form a State Complete Count Committee, nonprofits and municipal governments stepped in to fill the gap. There were other local complete count committees with whom they coordinated.. For example, Douglas and Omaha Counties had two separate complete count committees that coordinated well with each other and the coalition. However, there were some challenges in coordination as many of these committees had no financial support or resources to devote to the effort. The regional Census Bureau staff also played an important role in coordinating resources and materials between all complete count committees across the state.

**Table 1: Key actors involved in Census Efforts<sup>2</sup>:**

Actor	Role
<b>Nonprofit Association of Midland</b>	In partnership with other key actors and with Census Bureau staff, they convened statewide nonprofit organizations in formation of the Nebraska Counts Coalition.
<b>Civic Nebraska</b>	A key coalition partner which supported its formation and hired its coordinator.
<b>Nebraska Civic Engagement Table</b>	A key coalition partner which provided communications and social media for 2020 Census outreach.

<sup>2</sup>Data 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 Nebraska census efforts came from philanthropy and in-kind contributions of materials and staff time. Overall, those involved in the efforts estimate that over \$1 million in resources were leveraged within the state.

Table 2: Funding for 2020 Census Outreach<sup>3</sup>

Funding Source and Amount	Funding Purpose
<b>Philanthropy:</b> <b>\$1,000,000</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Nebraska Counts Coalition secured one million dollars in funding from a private foundation. This money was regranted to their nonprofit organization and a statewide media campaign.</li> <li>• The Nebraska Civic Engagement Table provides grants ranging from \$1,000 to \$15,000 to fund some of their members to do census work.</li> </ul>
<b>State Government:</b> <b>\$0</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The governor declined to dedicate any funding toward the census.</li> </ul>
<b>In-Kind Contributions:</b> <b>Unknown</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many organizations contributed staff time and other resources to census efforts within the state.</li> </ul>

# DESCRIPTION OF 2020 CENSUS OUTREACH

**Efforts in Nebraska were concentrated in areas with the highest proportion of historically undercounted populations.** They focused on underrepresented voters who also represent the undercounted populations. They targeted communities with low response rates and joined up with nonprofit partners in those communities to support census outreach efforts. They built relationships with community partners that helped them narrow their focus on rural communities of color. Also included were some counties with high immigrant populations. Based on 2010 Census data and 2020 heat maps, efforts were focused on inner cities, rural areas, and tribal reservations. Other data sources were from University of Nebraska, Omaha. All this data narrowed down 30 census tracts for outreach.

<sup>3</sup>Funding 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

**In addition to in-person engagement, texting and phone banking were also important tactics for engaging with historically undercounted populations.** The tactics used were canvassing, door knocking, phone banking, and a statewide media campaign that included TV, print, and digital advertising. They spent \$500,000 on the media campaign and hired a media director to manage it. One example of collaboration was the use of city buses with Wi-Fi connection at schools' food pick-up locations to make the census accessible to families as well as providing multi-language support and broadband access. Door-to-door knocking and canvassing was the most effective tactic until the COVID-19 pandemic began. Some of the partners had started a year earlier and had a good head start before the shutdowns began, after which phone banking and texting were the most used tactics and worked best in rural areas.

**Rural areas were the hardest to reach.** Broadband access is limited in rural areas. Additionally, in many undercounted communities, including rural communities, messages are more effective if they come from a trusted messenger. Moving to the digital space or text communication is not as effective as in-person communication.

**Other challenges also hampered efforts.** The long timeline of the census made it hard to keep people interested and engaged. Another challenge was the lack of both a statewide CCC and a Census Bureau representative to coordinate all efforts. As a result, responsibility for the daily coordination for census outreach fell on the media director. In addition, the initial conversation around the citizenship question sowed confusion and distracted organizers from efforts.

**Data and population growth directed efforts to reach undercounted communities and populations.** They increased their advertising in areas based on how much canvassing was done before the COVID-19 shutdown. If the areas were not canvassed at least two or three times, they increased their presence in the print and digital advertising for those areas. They also looked at the counties with the fastest growing rates of people of color. Now, some of those counties are on pace to have a majority of people of color voters. They funded some organizations in these counties.

**COVID-19 required adaptation of efforts.** The COVID-19 pandemic had the most impact on the census in Nebraska. The relationships that were formed before COVID-19 were strong enough to allow flexibility to respond to these challenges. All outreach efforts became virtual, and all in-person activities were canceled. Some of the partners offered to open safely to provide internet access for individuals to complete their census.



## LESSONS LEARNED

- **Building strong relationships early on helped set the stage for successful adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic.** Building a coalition early in the process and preparing the groundwork is essential to being ready to start census outreach efforts like providing funding, deploying teams for door-to-door knocking, and having volunteers ready to phone bank very quickly. Finding a champion in the legislature to advocate for census funding is also important. Nebraska has consistently been one of the top five states regarding census self-response rate, which has made it a challenge to get national funding. In the future, starting early on to frame the importance of the census in a more compelling way and looking for local and national funding opportunities could provide more resources for census outreach efforts.
- **Local messengers were critical to outreach efforts.** The trusted messengers played a key role in motivating participation in undercounted communities, especially among immigrants who were concerned about their privacy. Having a media director was essential to keeping all coalition partners informed and coordinating all activities.

## LOOKING FORWARD

There is a ballot initiative for independent redistricting in 2022. Civic Nebraska is in the process of developing a work plan and solidifying that coalition. Many new relationships were formed among the organizations that will endure beyond the 2020 Census. The communities are now more familiar with the census and why participation matters. The experience of coalition building has established the organizations as credible connectors, which will benefit future coalition building in Nebraska. For some of the groups, participating in the census was their first time participating in civic engagement, an experience that allowed them to realize they can do work with voter registration or other civic engagement in their communities.



## DATA SOURCES

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

- Nebraska Funder Table
- Nonprofit Association of Midlands
- Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska
- Civic Nebraska