

PUERTO RICO

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 Puerto Rico based on review of secondary data, and interviews with key actors involved (n=2).

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

STRUCTURE OF CENSUS OUTREACH

Many compounding challenges severely affected Puerto Rico's ability to reach a complete count for the 2020 Census. A predominantly Latino unincorporated territory of the United States, Puerto Rico has historically had a lower than average census response rate, with many regions of the country containing large concentrations of historically undercounted groups. Efforts related to the 2020 Census were shaped by contextual factors both prior to and during the count. In 2017, Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico, leading to major damage to infrastructure, including broadband access, and displacement of people from their homes, both of which complicated efforts to complete the count. Leading up to the census, two crises posed additional challenges. In December 2019, a series of earthquakes led to widespread power outages, property damage, and significant displacement. Finally, throughout 2020, Puerto Rico dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic and imposed one of the strictest lockdowns in the United States, which led the US Census Bureau to pause its operations for much of the year. In response, the Hispanic Federation (HF), a US-based nonprofit working in the interests of Latino communities in the United States and its territories, coordinated a coalition of nonprofits, government agencies, and media organizations to undertake efforts to promote the count in Puerto Rico.

Under the Hispanic Federation's leadership, Puerto Rico mobilized a small network of nonprofit organizations and government agencies to work on 2020 Census engagement activities. The HF coalition included about 22 local nonprofits that conducted activities on the ground to engage the population around the census. While a few organizations had begun work on 2020 census mobilization predating HF's coalition—for example, Colectivo Ilé, a Puerto Rico-based organization focused on anti-racism and decolonization—most were working on the issue for the first time. HF and its national partners, including national funders and the Census Bureau, worked to support the efforts of nonprofits and government agencies by providing funding, communications materials, and training so that groups could work effectively. Popular media companies, such as Univision, Telemundo, and GFR Media, also contributed to the effort by providing in-kind donations of airtime and ad space for census messaging on their broadcast, digital, and print outlets. HF and its partners helped fill a large void that was left when the Census Bureau delayed outreach efforts and were able to reach many people on the island to encourage them to complete the census.

The earliest efforts in relation to the 2020 Census efforts centered on a Local Update of Census Addresses Operation (LUCA) initiative, led by the US Census Bureau and the Department of Commerce, to confirm and standardize addresses of homes with multiple households. As those plans were in motion, HF received funding from a group of national funders, the Census Equity Fund, to undertake census outreach efforts with the most historically undercounted populations in Puerto Rico in early 2020. HF was already engaged in census work in the Latino community across multiple states and developed a three-month grant campaign to support the census in Puerto Rico. After the earthquake in late 2019 delayed the start of census efforts, the COVID-19 pandemic struck. This led the Census Bureau to place its LUCA initiative on indefinite hold, causing

significant delays in Census Bureau outreach related to the census and placing Puerto Rico last in self-report rates on National Census Day, April 1. The pause of Census Bureau operations effectively positioned HF and its coalition of grantees as leaders in efforts to promote the census on the island. The change in context necessitated that HF change its strategies and reallocate its resources to engage more broadly on the island. While the Census Bureau worked to resume enumeration in mid-2020, HF maintained a working partnership with them to receive the latest updates on the census timeline and guide their outreach strategies.

Table 1: Key actors involved in Census Efforts²:

Actor	Role
Hispanic Federation (HF)	Organizing hub for grassroots and service organizations working on census activities; had been working on Puerto Rican community interests as part of Hurricane Maria recovery. As the coordinating hub and regrantees, they provided the basic census information, print materials, and training for each of the questions for subgrantees. They also led the media strategy with mass media outlets, video and graphic production, and marketing. HF became deeply knowledgeable about the processes that were affecting census work in Puerto Rico and were regarded as the experts on this topic.
Colectivo Ilé	A community-based nonprofit that had begun developing a census strategy before becoming subgrantees of HF. The group led a focused outreach and education campaign targeting the Afro-descendant community in Puerto Rico to claim their status on the racial question.
Media partners: Telemundo, Univision, and GFR Media	These corporations provided generous in-kind matches of advertising services and materials that were essential for broad census outreach.

FUNDING FOR CENSUS OUTREACH

Resources for Puerto Rico census efforts came from a combination of national-level philanthropy and in-kind advertising contributions of materials and staff time. Overall, those involved in the efforts estimate that **over \$595,000 in resources were leveraged within the territory**, with approximately \$595,000 in philanthropic dollars and \$200,000 of in-kind contributions.

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

Table 2: Funding for 2020 Census Outreach³

Funding Source and Amount	Funding Purpose
<p>Philanthropy: \$595,000</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The national Census Equity Fund provided three rounds of grants to HF totaling \$450,000. Additional resources were secured through integration census outreach with pandemic relief efforts. • \$5,000 to HF from social change organization Harness toward collaboration on an ad featuring Rita Moreno that aired on Telemundo, additionally supported by in-kind production services. • An approximate \$140,000 match from HF’s own funds toward general census organizing and staff time, as well as subgrantee funding matches.
<p>State Government: \$0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • n/a
<p>In-Kind Contributions: \$200,000</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In total, in-kind donations likely surpassed \$200,000, mostly from media partners. This includes an in-kind contribution of \$40,000 from Facebook to HF for social media advertising. • Media companies agreed to donate airtime for census communications. Telemundo, the most watched television station, and Univision, which runs the largest radio stations in Puerto Rico, provided some in-kind matching of TV and radio advertising services requested by HF. GFR Media, owner of the two largest newspapers on the island, also matched paid print and digital ads.

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

DESCRIPTION OF 2020 CENSUS OUTREACH

The overall approach to census communications involved leveraging grassroots organization networks and implementing mass media tactics to reach a broader audience in response to pandemic challenges. HF had originally planned a targeted door-knocking and street outreach effort to specific groups. By April, however, the self-response rate lingered at 7% and key actors broadened the scope of engagement after recognizing the need. In collaborating more closely with their partners, they crafted census messaging with a broader reach to the general population as well as tailored messaging for the various undercounted populations they hoped to reach through their nonprofit partners and subgrantees. Overall, HF developed and provided the outreach materials, and the nonprofits were responsible for connecting with and mobilizing their target groups.

Recognizing the technology infrastructure limitations of residents, communication strategies incorporated more radio, television, and print ads than digital media. General outreach and education tactics included culturally appropriate modes of communication, such as popular AM radio, telephone banking, and creative television advertising. For example, a census hotline event aired in partnership with Telemundo to transfer people to census agents for assistance with completion. Other methods included twice-weekly print ads in the country's two largest newspapers and text banking. As the census went on and the response rates continued to lag, more outreach partnerships were developed, such as an information push and texting campaign by a local bank, Banco Popular. HF also partnered with local cultural influencers to encourage census completion by including them in advertising for outreach materials.

With the exception of the capital of San Juan, most of Puerto Rico is considered historically undercounted. The initial strategy of reaching the most marginalized groups within the broader population continued within the expanded outreach to the broader population. These groups included the LGBTQ+ community, Black Puerto Ricans, people who are homeless or living in shelters, younger people, and rural residents. Rural communities were especially challenging to reach for several reasons, including lack of broadband infrastructure, missing addresses to identify households, and a steeped cultural norm of completing the census with enumerators in person, the method many residents perceive as the most secure for their data.

Puerto Rico's long struggle with colonialism has led some residents to distrust the US federal government and disengage from the census. Many Puerto Ricans have a national identity separate from the United States and do not necessarily feel a personal connection to the US government or programs, despite the recognized political and legal relationship as a territory. The colonial relationship's diminishment of the most significant uses of the census, such as its determining representation in Congress and access to federal funds, discourages census completion. Further, delays in critical federal recovery funds and programs in the years leading up to the census created cynicism toward popular messaging that connects census participation with federal aid.

Racial categories of the census do not fully reflect Puerto Rican national identities. Racial identities in Puerto Rico are not parallel to that of the United States, complicating individuals' census responses. Although many identify as having Spanish, Taino, and African roots, confusion about how to respond to the limited options of the racial category question on the census, Puerto Rico's unique racial context, or internalized cultural anti-Blackness lead them to self-identify as White. Some campaigns directly targeted their messaging to address this challenge. For example, Colectivo Ilé set out to create more consciousness around that question within the Black and Afro-descendant community, encouraging those individuals to self-identify as "Black" and write in "Afro-descendant" in the descriptor to capture a wider spectrum of identities.

Limited access to data greatly impeded campaign efforts. Puerto Rico has stricter regulations for access to publicly registered information, such as driver's license information and voter registrations; information lists cannot be accessed or purchased from governmental agencies or political parties as they can in US states. Although HF did secure some lists for mobile and landline phone numbers from data vendors, unexpected challenges with incomplete data, prohibitive cost structures for Puerto Rico area codes, and other barriers to technological tools normally used for census activities added to the difficulties of the efforts as well as its cost.

Extraordinary and compounding events led to severe campaign delays and an 18 percentage point drop in the response rate compared to the previous census. On January 7, 2020, a magnitude 6.4 earthquake struck southern Puerto Rico, resulting in widespread power outages and houselessness for many people. The displacement of individuals caused immediate challenges for complete count efforts. Furthermore, HF had to manage its emergency relief programs while developing its newly funded census campaign, and partner organizations were also generally stretched thin through disaster response. The ongoing need for technology infrastructure investment and adoption also posed a major challenge: Many of Puerto Rico's residents still lack or experience spotty service across the mountainous island because of insufficient or delayed federal funding to expand its broadband network; many people have limited phone data plans; and the population generally trends older and prefers speaking to enumerators over submitting personal information online.

COVID-19 exacerbated campaign challenges and elongated the campaign timeline. Shortly after the earthquake, the pandemic forced the Census Bureau and Department of Commerce to put their address verification initiative on hold indefinitely, delaying a range of census activities, from outreach to form mailings. Organizations integrated the pandemic response with census efforts, however. For example, many blended pandemic food relief work with census information distribution. Although data was not as easily available or cost-effective to access, key actors also shifted to more texting and phone banking. Other events created confusion and distrust in the process. For example, some households that had already completed the census were being visited multiple times by enumerators.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Key actors benefited from flexibility in planning and funding to navigate unexpected challenges.** In response to pandemic challenges and trailing response rates, HF recognized the need to make a much larger investment in broader public education and mass media outreach than initially planned. Flexibility of funders like the Census Equity Fund was essential in mitigating the census infrastructure challenges.
- **Strategies to activate a network, regrant the work of local organizations, and lean on corporate media partners worked well.** Community-based organizations leveraged their trusted leaders to engage the most historically undercounted audiences and dispel misinformation about the use of census data. Media partners provided ample in-kind matching of paid services in attempts to reach all residents.
- **In-person and mail outreach remain important as outreach tactics for certain populations.** Sensitive to data privacy, many older residents distrust providing information over the internet or phone and choose to engage with the census through enumerators and the mail. Given the Census Bureau's push toward digital, attention must be paid to include these preferences for a more complete count.
- **Structural factors hinder civic engagement efforts in Puerto Rico, but high-capacity nonprofits can overcome barriers to support census outreach and other civic engagement efforts.** Civic engagement infrastructure to support outreach, education, and engagement is not currently well developed in Puerto Rico for several reasons. Compared to US states, there are fewer regular elections and stricter nonprofit regulations. For example, nonprofits cannot assist individuals with voter registration. As demonstrated through HF's efforts, high-capacity organizations can address the systemic effects of these barriers to conduct effective civic engagement around the census and other issues.
- **Data access is a critical gap for census outreach in Puerto Rico.** Infrastructure building also requires thinking through how to gather data for communications so that technological tools for communications are as available and accessible there as they are in U.S. states. For example, using the telephone is a highly culturally appropriate engagement method which could have been better activated had there been better access to telephone numbers.
- **Key actors must navigate complex history to apply culturally appropriate approaches.** The colonial context creates a larger cultural division between individuals who engage in US civic processes to receive federal funds, and those who disengage in protest of colonial status. Confusion around limited US census racial categories and historical anti-Blackness within Latinx communities, as well as a strong sense of the importance of social traditions and in-person interactions, further complicate census education and outreach.

LOOKING FORWARD

Overall, key actors are confident in the strategies they implemented with the information they had on Puerto Rico. Though fraught with challenges, the 2020 Census provided an opportunity for a new organizing hub to test baseline assumptions and tactical boundaries against the uniquely structural, cultural, and legal context of Puerto Rico. Moving forward, there is opportunity to address the specific barriers inhibiting organizations to build capacity for the work, including building more culturally appropriate outreach campaigns and addressing the structural inequities of data access for Puerto Ricans.

DATA SOURCES

Representatives from the following organizations participated in interviews for this report:

- Hispanic Federation
- Filantropía Puerto Rico