

TENNESSEE

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 Tennessee 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

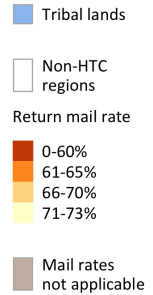
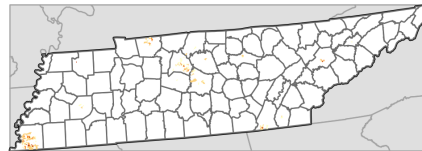
6,651,089

TOTAL POPULATION

893,775

TOTAL POPULATION LIVING IN HISTORICALLY UNDERCOUNTED CENSUS TRACTS

HISTORICALLY UNDERCOUNTED TRACTS BY COUNTY



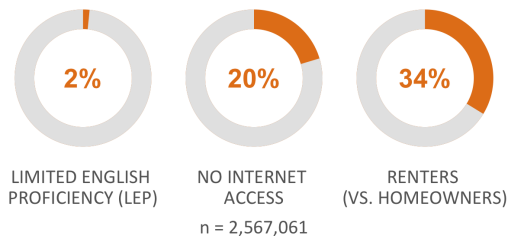
Special update/enumerate method used for counting as mail return rates are not applicable

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.

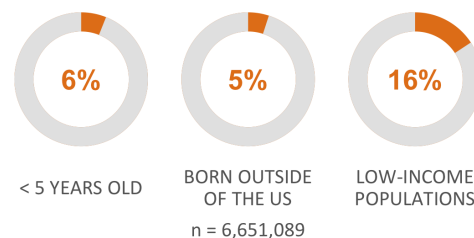
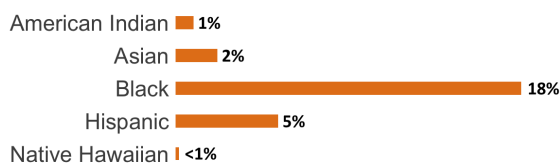
HOUSEHOLDS

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:

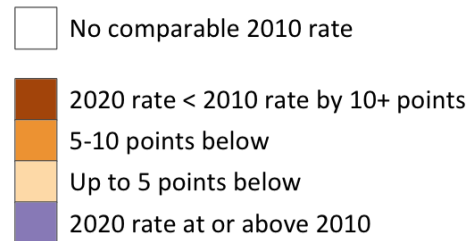
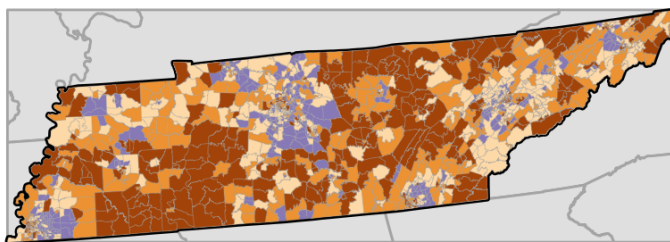




OVERVIEW OF CENSUS SELF-RESPONSE RATES

YEAR	SELF RESPONSE	CHANGE
2020	66.0%	-1.1
2010	67.1%	

CENSUS TRACTS WHERE 2020 CENSUS RETURN RATE WAS LOWER THAN 2010





STRUCTURE OF CENSUS OUTREACH

Tennessee is a long, narrow state divided into three metropolitan regions separated by rural expanses, and its 2020 Census activities mirrored this segmented infrastructure. A statewide structure to coordinate census activities between state, city, and nonprofit actors was not formed in Tennessee. Rather, census activities were organized at the regional level centered around the main metropolitan areas in cities like Memphis, Nashville, Knoxville, and Chattanooga. Local complete count committees, philanthropic groups, and leading nonprofit organizations spearheaded these regional efforts.

As the state capital and most populous city, Nashville housed many of the key actors. Concerned about census participation from historically undercounted groups, the city of Nashville formed the local complete count committee under the Mayor's Office of New Americans in summer 2019, which provided some cross-sector representation and collaboration among social service, education, community, and faith-based organizations early on. A sudden mayoral administration change and other events leading up to the census politicized the work and prevented leadership from taking hold, but the knowledge, strategies, and foundational partnership development was passed on to inform the work of ongoing key actors in Middle Tennessee and beyond. At the state level, the State Complete Count Committee did not appoint seats until late 2019, delaying statewide infrastructure development.

While strategic outreach activities unfolded as mostly disjointed, independent efforts across regions, some coordination of funding materialized. By early 2019, it became clear that the state government would not be allocating funds to census work. In hopes of generating interest in philanthropic funding of grassroots outreach efforts, national and regional philanthropic entities such as United Philanthropy Forum and Grantmakers for Southern Progress engaged with state philanthropy and nonprofit leaders, including the Middle Tennessee Donors Forum (MTDF), to convey the importance of the census. The effort proved pivotal in educating local grantmakers about the systemic challenges of a primarily digital count and the importance of the census for redistricting and representation of marginalized communities. With greater understanding of the lack of state leadership and the needs of grassroots organizations to encourage census participation, local philanthropy agreed to initiate the state's first participatory pooled fund, administered by MTDF.

In collaboration with United Way, MTDF then convened over 90 nonprofit groups to exchange information about the census process and historically undercounted populations, as well as redistribute outreach resources provided by the US Census Bureau via a partnership specialist. Certain nonprofits (e.g., The Equity Alliance and Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC]) had already been actively involved in complete count efforts and shared their resources with other key actors as they emerged. At this time, organizations were also invited to apply for additional funds for outreach needs and to develop campaigns, some of which spurred community-based and cross-regional partnerships. For example, at the community level, funds supported alliances between trusted leaders in Black faith-based communities and nonprofits

with capacity to help implement strategies, while at the state level, coalition groups like CivicTN supported broader efforts by regranteeing funds, distributing resources, providing training and technology tools, and aiding regional collaborations with groups such as The Equity Alliance, based in Nashville, and Memphis For All.

Table 1: Key actors involved in Census Efforts²:

Actor	Role
The Equity Alliance	Nonprofit focused on improving civic engagement opportunities among Black communities across Tennessee and strengthening Black political power. Though statewide, their census activities were focused on Middle Tennessee. The organization worked closely with CivicTN and the Census Bureau partnership specialist for the “Count Me In TN” campaign.
Middle Tennessee Donors Forum	Newly established organization of about 180 individual, institutional, and corporate donors in the Nashville region. MTDf facilitated the participatory pooled fund for census outreach and provided regular educational resources, including community meetings in collaboration with United Way.
Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition	Statewide organization that had received some national funding for census activities. The coalition pushed targeted campaigns to their broad footprint of partners to dispel misinformation about the census and encourage a complete count. TIRRC also provided crucial translation services to undercounted immigrant communities across the state.
Urban League and United Way	National groups which shared census strategies and resources with community nonprofits statewide. Leveraging their resources and capacity, their collaboration guided and enhanced the census efforts of other key actors.
CivicTN	Tennessee’s civic engagement table that collaborated with key nonprofits across the state to support their census outreach activities. CivicTN served as a regranteeing organization, advocated for more funding, and provided resources and support across coalition members.

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 Tennessee census efforts came from a combination of national- and state-level philanthropy and in-kind contributions of materials and staff time. Those involved in the efforts estimate that over \$700,000 in resources were leveraged within the state, mostly from philanthropic dollars, as well as an unknown amount of in-kind contributions.

Table 2: Funding for 2020 Census Outreach³

Funding Source and Amount	Funding Purpose
<p>Philanthropy: \$700,000</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The state’s first participatory pooled fund of \$250,000 was organized by MTFD, which facilitated distribution of funds through a committee of nonprofit leaders. The three rounds of funding began with an initial round to groups already actively engaged in census outreach activities. The second round of funding broadened their reach to organizations more deeply engaged with undercounted populations, and the third round was budgeted for contingencies. In all, 23 census projects were funded, with equal allocation to grassroots outreach efforts and broader statewide census activities. Grants ranged from \$1,000 to \$16,000 toward educational and outreach opportunities to encourage people to complete their census. At the onset of COVID-19, most of the outreach funding went toward collateral. • The national Census Equity Fund contributed \$300,000 towards 2020 Census efforts in the state, including a \$200,000 grant for The Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition. • New Venture Fund provided \$100,000 to CivicTN, which regranted the funds to organizations engaged in complete count activities across the state. • \$50,000 was awarded to The Equity Alliance across all grants.
<p>State Government: \$0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The state chose not to allocate funding to support the work of the State Complete Count Committee.

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"> • Many organizations contributed staff time and other resources to census efforts within the state.
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DESCRIPTION OF 2020 CENSUS OUTREACH

Broader outreach efforts were fragmented but leveraged partner resources creatively. Independent efforts among key actors across the state created variations of census campaigns, even among groups with some partnership. For example, the wider coalition CivicTN adopted the “Count Me In TN” campaign created by The Equity Alliance, while TIRRC continued efforts through their own “Yes I Count TN!” campaign. Prior to the pandemic, nonprofits had planned to incorporate census activities into already existing programming, such as outfitting family resource centers with kiosks containing census completion information and translation services. During a meeting at the start of efforts, the Census Bureau provided thousands of posters and translated materials for broad distribution throughout communities. Ultimately, organizers relied heavily on mailed materials, posters, text and phone banking, drive-by and drive-through events, and online social media campaigns to communicate the importance of the census. Other unexpected partners were creatively engaged for wider outreach, such as the foundation for the local hockey team, Nashville Predators, which organized the display of census information on promotional materials and scoreboards during games.

Relational organizing was channeled on social media to boost responses on National Census Day. The original plan to hold a large press conference, door-to-door canvass, and family friendly festival on April 1 was scrapped due to the pandemic. To encourage census completion on this day, The Equity Alliance led a “Count Me In TN” social media campaign, instructing the public to print or create signs depicting “I’m counted” for posting across social media. The campaign resulted in Tennessee ranking as the southern regional leader for National Census Day response rates. In Nashville, the social media campaign worked in tandem with a small press conference in which key actors, including the mayor, raised awareness about the census and later held a caravan with organizations and the Mayor’s Office.

Trusted organizations and network partnerships reached undercounted groups. Some of these complete count efforts included providing electronic tablets to groups experiencing houselessness at encampments; activating church partnerships in historic Black neighborhoods and communities of color; and leveraging existing outreach efforts from issue-specific organizations, such as The Arc, which advocates for neurodivergent adults, and TIRRC, which regularly engages immigrant, refugee, and new American groups. The messaging across groups—relayed through culturally appropriate radio stations, television, print and social media, general newsletters, and websites—served to dispel misinformation and address the concerns regarding census privacy and court decisions. Critically, organizations like TIRRC had access to translators for dozens of languages, providing translation services and materials that could be shared across partners for dissemination (e.g., Metro Nashville Public Schools). Urban professionals, uniquely undercounted because

they misidentify as transient, are especially hard to reach outside traditional social service partnerships and were instead engaged through some employers in corporate support of the census.

Culturally responsive outreach strategies were used to motivate census completion. As part of their relational organizing strategy, The Equity Alliance hired culturally responsive validators who could engage undercounted subgroups within the Black community. For example, one census organizer hired was a formerly incarcerated individual who could leverage existing relationships in lower-income housing communities. Leaning into Black culture, the organization also leveraged Instagram Live traffic of “Verzuz battles,” ranging from thousands to millions of viewers, by encouraging census participation in the stream of public comments and by increasing the frequency of census posts as the battles generated higher user traffic. Shelby County radio station 88.5 FM ran promotional ads produced by Memphis For All. DJs featured on 88.5’s “House In The MidSouth” program also performed a special four-hour virtual block to promote census awareness. Organizers in Memphis also created Spanish-language videos that were distributed through three Memphis Latinx-serving organizations. Other targeted outreach activities included phone banking and “Days of Action” events at low-income housing sites, as well as disseminating census materials at Juneteenth celebrations.

Data played a critical role in shaping outreach and funding strategies. Key among the sets of data were the Census Bureau’s hard-to-count website, flexible search tools, and real-time updates, all which guided strategic decisions. Official Census Bureau outreach materials were also used to test against the undercounted groups identified for the state as well as their messaging. Certain data provided more local specificity. For example, the Nashville Department of Human Services generates an annual heat map of various county demographics, which key actors used to further target undercounted groups by neighborhood. Using unregistered voters as an indicator of who might also be less civically engaged for the census, some groups mapped the census tracts to voter registration. Much of the data gathered was shared at meetings and used by organizations applying for outreach campaign funds.

Challenges with infrastructure and COVID-19 affected original outreach strategies. Key actors believe that the biggest challenges were related to infrastructure, such as forces which delayed the start of efforts and the lack of high-speed internet access across the state. The pandemic posed additional challenges: Understanding that trust is one of the barriers to census participation among undercounted groups, key actors believe that shifting to pandemic-safe census outreach activities hindered the ability to reach a more complete count. Although most community-based organizations pivoted to online or distanced census outreach activities in response to the pandemic—including car caravans and distribution of safety kits with census, voting, and pandemic resources—the inability to gather and collaborate in traditional ways seemed to diminish trust-building efforts. Some targeted outreach tactics, such as united ministries of Black pastors’ plans to engage faith-based communities through church events, had to be abandoned altogether.



LESSONS LEARNED

- **Delayed or missing information across many levels created challenges for census efforts.** A late start in engagement created challenges because some funders already had their annual budgets set. State-level funders new to census support did not know how to contribute most meaningfully, and some others were turned away by government actors who believed their county had adequate resources. The lack of clear, meaningful data from the federal government about historically undercounted groups also delayed strategic efforts from the onset.
- **Overall lack of funding kept complete count committees from their full potential.** Limited time and resources kept organizations from collaborating and building infrastructure for complete count activities across the state.
- **Tension around philanthropy's role in supporting democracy was successfully navigated.** Tennessee's first participatory pooled fund developed out of concern for the conditions of the 2020 Census, including its digital emphasis and abundant misinformation. Despite a highly politicized census, state philanthropy understood the needs and responded to a clear call to action. Communication among funders improved, and there is hope that further dialogue will continue to develop a better funding process in the future.
- **A participatory grantmaking approach empowered people in the field to be experts and trust their financial decisions for census work.** Those involved in the efforts believed this led to greater performance of outreach activities than would have otherwise occurred, despite the challenges of the 2020 Census. The experience also signaled to funders that this sort of structure achieves results.
- **Culturally responsive messaging from trusted messengers is well received, but basic misinformation remains challenging.** As demonstrated by the state's top results on National Census Day, relational organizing and culture-forward campaigns are highly effective. However, key actors expressed the need for better messaging around common misconceptions that keep individuals from participating (e.g., the assumption that the government generates household counts based on disclosed addresses).

LOOKING FORWARD

2020 Census efforts for Tennessee led to the state's first participatory pooled fund and recognition on National Census Day. The success of the pooled fund has created a pathway for further democratizing the process of civic engagement work moving forward. One such effort that may materialize as a direct result of this work aims to address the historic Black neighborhood with the highest per capita incarceration in the country and chronic multigenerational poverty, creating a community-led fund to alleviate the issue. Leading with culturally responsive outreach strategies, both in-person and digitally, will also carry through to efforts for the next census.



DATA SOURCES

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

- The Equity Alliance
- Middle Tennessee Donors Forum
- Grantmakers for Southern Progress