



# Philanthropy and the 2020 Census

Stories and Lessons from  
an Unprecedented Funder  
Collaborative to Protect a Pillar  
of American Democracy

By William H. Woodwell, Jr.

A Report  
Commissioned by  
the Democracy  
Funders  
Collaborative  
Census Subgroup





Philanthropy and the 2020 Census



**I**t was 2015 when a small group of funders first started talking and working together to help ensure a fair and accurate 2020 census. No one would have predicted how those early conversations would lead to a sprawling, nationwide collaborative effort connecting philanthropy at all levels, along with amazing nonprofit partners who worked heroically to get out the count in historically undercounted communities.

Likewise, no one would have predicted the unprecedented twists and turns of the 2020 census as it faced political obstruction, a global pandemic and other challenges. Despite all that, funders joined with nonprofits, government and others in a determined effort to protect what this report refers to as a “cornerstone of American democracy.”

This report is part of a series to assess the work undertaken by the philanthropic and nonprofit community to promote a fair and accurate 2020 census. This includes qualitative and quantitative research by ORS Impact and Barsoum Policy Consulting, vignettes describing the census activities undertaken in each of the states, lessons learned from digital efforts, and more. These reports are hosted on the Funders’ Committee for Civic Participation (FCCP) [website](#). Each was commissioned by the Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup as an independent voice describing the work that was undertaken related to the 2020 census.

This report tells the story of philanthropy’s engagement in the 2020 census, including lessons learned as funders continue to invest in civic participation, a stronger democracy (and the 2030 census!) in the years to come. We thank writer Bill Woodwell for helping us capture this story based on extensive





conversations with many of the funders and nonprofit leaders involved. Thanks also to the design team at Ozzmata for their role in bringing the report to life.

We also want to thank the many individuals who informed this report through their conversations with Bill. (See interviewees list, [page 105](#).) By sharing their experiences and reflections, they have played a critical role in creating an important historical record of this work, while helping to ensure that the report reflects the wonderful diversity of people, organizations, and voices that contributed to a nationwide movement for a fair and accurate census count.

Last but not least, we offer our immense gratitude and admiration to the hundreds of funders and nonprofits at all levels who stepped up and got involved. The collaborative, can-do spirit of everyone engaged in this work was a game changer and an inspiration – and hopefully a marker for future philanthropic action to strengthen the power of those who are disenfranchised in our democracy.

We hope you enjoy the report and that it inspires your ongoing work.

Thanks again.



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## **B**etween 2015 and 2020, hundreds of funders across the country joined in an unprecedented, fieldwide collaborative focused on the 2020 U.S. census.

The shared goal of their work: assuring a fair and accurate count among people of color, low-income populations and other historically undercounted communities who often lose out on resources and representation because their true numbers are not reflected in census results.

Working at the national, regional, state and local levels, the funders partnered with nonprofit organizations, government, and business on advocacy, census outreach and other activities. ...

They directed unprecedented amounts of funding to grantee partners via pooled funds and aligned grantmaking. ...

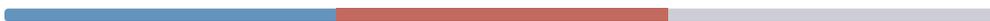
They used their collective voice to speak out on urgent issues. ...

And they built relationships and an infrastructure that rapidly carried over to other collaborative work, including efforts to get out the vote in the 2020 elections and assure a fair post-census redistricting process in 2021 and beyond.

It was a “philanthropic tour de force,” in the words of Sue Van, president and CEO of the Wallace H. Coulter Foundation.

And it happened against the backdrop of perhaps the wildest and craziest decennial census cycle in American history.

This is the story of philanthropy’s engagement in the 2020 census — how the funders came together, what they accomplished through their investments and their close collaboration with nonprofit partners, what they could have done better, and what they learned.







Philanthropy and  
the 2020 Census

# Introduction and Executive Summary

**T**he constitutionally-mandated decennial census is a cornerstone of American democracy. Accurate census data are essential for the fair distribution of political representation and the equitable allocation of more than \$1.5 trillion in annual federal assistance to states, communities, and families. ▶ ▶ ▶



Yet historically, the census has disproportionately undercounted people of color, immigrants, young children, and low-income households across the country. The result: communities and states that are home to significant numbers of these populations have less representation and fewer resources and are, in turn, less able to meet the needs of all residents.

The U.S. census is about voice and representation. It is about power. It is about resources. It is about democracy.

Recognizing these facts, a group of national funders began to meet in 2015 to discuss how philanthropy could make a difference in assuring a fair and accurate count. Over the months and years that followed, the collaborative grew to include hundreds of foundations working with partners at all levels across the country. In the face of divisive policy fights, a global pandemic and ever-shifting timelines for completing the count, the funders and their grantees kept their eyes on the prize of achieving a census that would provide an accurate accounting of historically undercounted populations.<sup>1</sup>

## A Sprawling Collaborative Effort

At the national level, a small group of funders working together as the Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup rallied and

organized more than 100 funders to contribute \$118 million toward a coordinated “plan of action.” Combining pooled funding and aligned grants from participating foundations, the collaborative supported more than 260 grantee organizations engaged in litigation, advocacy, outreach and other activities. They also created a special fund, the Census Equity Fund, to pool funds in support of grassroots get-out-the-count operations in targeted states. Meanwhile, funders at the regional, state and local levels formed collaboratives of their own aimed at getting out the count.

To facilitate coordination and alignment across philanthropy and its nonprofit partners, the national funders supported the development and dissemination of a virtual flood of resources, technical assistance, communications and messaging support, and more.

Among the headline results of the funders’ work: billions in federal and state government appropriations toward a fair and accurate census count; defeat of a divisive plan to add a citizenship question to the census that would have stoked added fear and reduced census participation in immigrant communities; and coordinated campaigns across the nation to mobilize historically undercounted communities to stand up and be counted.

“It was a large, networked effort that brought different perspectives to the table, enabled all of us to think creatively, and really set out to make a difference in protecting one of the fundamental



<sup>1</sup>Historically undercounted groups also have been referred to as “hard to count,” but census experts and advocates have moved away from that term because of the belief that it places blame for undercounts on people and communities instead of the institutions and systems charged with administering a fair and accurate census. In this report, we mainly use the term “historically undercounted” groups or communities.



pillars of American democracy,” said Geri Mannion, director of the Strengthening U.S. Democracy Program and Special Opportunities Fund with Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Amy Desler, who manages a statewide education initiative for the Communities Foundation of Texas, said funders in her state had never collaborated on the census before—but the 2020 cycle changed all that as the foundation and its partners built a statewide partnership to get out the count. “The national funder collaborative really inspired and supported us to make something happen here in Texas,” she said.

Gary Bass, executive director emeritus of the Bauman Foundation in Washington, DC, and chair of the Census Subgroup, said he was “amazed and humbled” at how philanthropy responded. “I think we made census cool,” he said.

## About This Report

In this report commissioned by the subgroup, we review how the funders came together at the national level, how the collaborative grew over time into a community of diverse funders and stakeholders, and how it responded to some of the unique challenges of the 2020 census. We also present lessons learned about what worked, where philanthropy and its partners fell short of their goals, and how to do better going forward.

This report is based on interviews with more than 25 funders involved in the 2020 census collaborative, in addition to selected nonprofit representatives and consultants. It is part of a broader effort to evaluate the work of philanthropy and its partners during the 2020 census cycle, with a focus on lifting up lessons and ideas to help guide the field’s ongoing investments in democracy and other urgent issues, including preparations for the 2030 census.



**“The unique power of the collaborative was that it wasn’t just a small group of funders doing the work alone. It was hundreds of folks making connections and being able to elevate the issues and concerns that mattered to them. It was a whole group of people working together toward a common goal instead of lots of random pieces happening on their own.”**

*Florencia Gutierrez, Senior Research Associate, Annie E. Casey Foundation*



## Key Takeaways from Philanthropy's Work on the 2020 Census

Funders engaged in philanthropy's work on the 2020 census offered a range of takeaways for colleagues to consider as they strive to collaborate on other urgent issues facing society and communities. The report discusses lessons learned in the following core areas:

### Creating a collaborative ethos.

**What worked.** The Census Subgroup and its partners at the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation's Funders Census Initiative and United Philanthropy Forum were able to bring a cohesive and inclusive spirit to philanthropy's collaborative work based on the understanding that all funders were welcome for their contributions and engagement.

**What philanthropy could do better.** Given the time-limited nature of census work, as well as the unique threats to the 2020 census that helped attract added funder support, funders and partners expressed some concern about philanthropy's ability to join together on an ongoing basis and invest in other urgent issues in similar ways.

### Achieving clarity of purpose— and message.

**What worked.** From the beginning, the census funders were organized around a three-part plan of action focused on the goal of achieving a fair and accurate count among

historically undercounted communities. At a time when philanthropy and society increasingly are focused on issues of equity and racial justice, the clarity of the funders' objectives resonated.

**What philanthropy could do better.** Even with a sharp focus on historically undercounted groups, funders often were rebuffed in their outreach to philanthropic colleagues and government, business and community partners due to the political debate over the 2020 census, including the citizenship question and other issues.

### Building a core central group.

**What worked.** The Census Subgroup evolved over time to include a core of funders that were deeply committed to a fair and accurate census. The work was ably and effectively steered by a small group of foundation leaders and consultants with hard-earned expertise on the census and related issues, and a seasoned understanding of how to build and manage coalitions.

**What philanthropy could do better.** As philanthropy considers how to create more "evergreen capacity" on the census and other democracy issues, some funders suggested investing collectively in staffing and infrastructure that could broaden the base of individuals charged with keeping the trains running and coordinating grantmaking and other work.

### Starting early.

**What worked.** Most funders suggested that philanthropy's timeline for engaging on the 2020 census was about right. Especially considering that subgroup members were meeting as early as May 2015 to discuss strategy, the consensus



was that there was adequate time for the collaborative to fine tune its plans and start engaging with other funders and stakeholders.

**What philanthropy could do better.** The fact that national funders were well into their planning and grantmaking by the end of 2017 didn't mean funders at all levels got an early start. Interviews turned up several examples where starting earlier could have made an important difference, particularly in securing state and local support for getting out the count.

### Fundraising and funder recruitment.

**What worked.** The effort to recruit and engage a diverse and broad group of funders in collaborative work on the 2020 census was an enormous achievement. Active funder recruitment was baked into the subgroup's plans and strategies from the start.

**What philanthropy could do better.** The varying roles of the Census Subgroup, the Funders Census Initiative and United

Philanthropy Forum weren't always clear when it came to funder engagement. In addition, it took time before the subgroup and the Funders Census Initiative could clarify their respective roles and mandates.

### Building coordination and alignment among funders.

**What worked.** In the same way that the subgroup, the Funders Census Initiative and United Philanthropy Forum worked collaboratively on funder recruitment, each entity also was deeply involved in educating funders and trying to ensure that their investments and initiatives were aligned toward the broader goal of a fair and accurate census.

**What philanthropy could do better.** Wading through all of the information and resources produced by the funders and their stakeholder partners was sometimes a challenge, although the development and launch of the Census Counts collaborative's website in early 2019 provided a helpful central clearinghouse of available content.



Photos courtesy of the Oklahoma Policy Institute; Fair Count; and The Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights



“ It was a large, networked effort that brought different perspectives to the table, enabled all of us to think creatively, and really set out to make a difference in protecting one of the fundamental pillars of American democracy.”

*Gerri Mannion, Director, Strengthening U.S. Democracy Program and Special Opportunities Fund, Carnegie Corporation of New York*

### Adopting flexible strategies.

**What worked.** The funders and stakeholders regularly adapted strategies and shifted gears in response to events both nationally and on the ground. The funders also were open to extending their focus to issues and concerns that had not been on their radar previously, such as census digital organizing and census data quality. The subgroup also launched the Census Equity Fund in late 2018 based on funder and stakeholder interest.

**What philanthropy could do better.** Given the backdrop of a harrowing census cycle that brought numerous unexpected turns, the flexibility of the funders and stakeholders was universally commended as a signature (and historic) feature of the work.

### Building Community with Stakeholders and Nonprofits.

**What worked.** Funders were conscious of the importance of building a powerful partnership between philanthropy and nonprofits. From quarterly meetings between funders and stakeholders to regular consultations with

grantees on strategies and tactics and where philanthropic resources could help most, funders sent a message of collaboration and respect.

**What philanthropy could do better.** Funders and stakeholders alike conceded that the 2020 census funders and their grantees did not entirely eliminate the consequences of the power differential that so often stands in the way of productive and trusting funder-grantee relationships. At times, there were key stakeholders who felt philanthropy was making important decisions on its own, or that their work was being micromanaged to some degree. ★

### Fast Facts! ★ ★ ★

Combining pooled funding and aligned grants from participating foundations, the national funder collaborative for the 2020 census **supported more than 260 grantee organizations** engaged in litigation, advocacy, outreach and other activities.



By the Numbers:

# The 2020 Census Funder Collaborative<sup>1</sup>

National  
Philanthropic  
Funding ▶

**\$117.9  
million**



Direct funding:  
**\$64.7  
million**

Pooled fund:  
**\$53.2  
million**

State  
Philanthropic  
Funding ▶

**\$75.1  
million<sup>2</sup>**

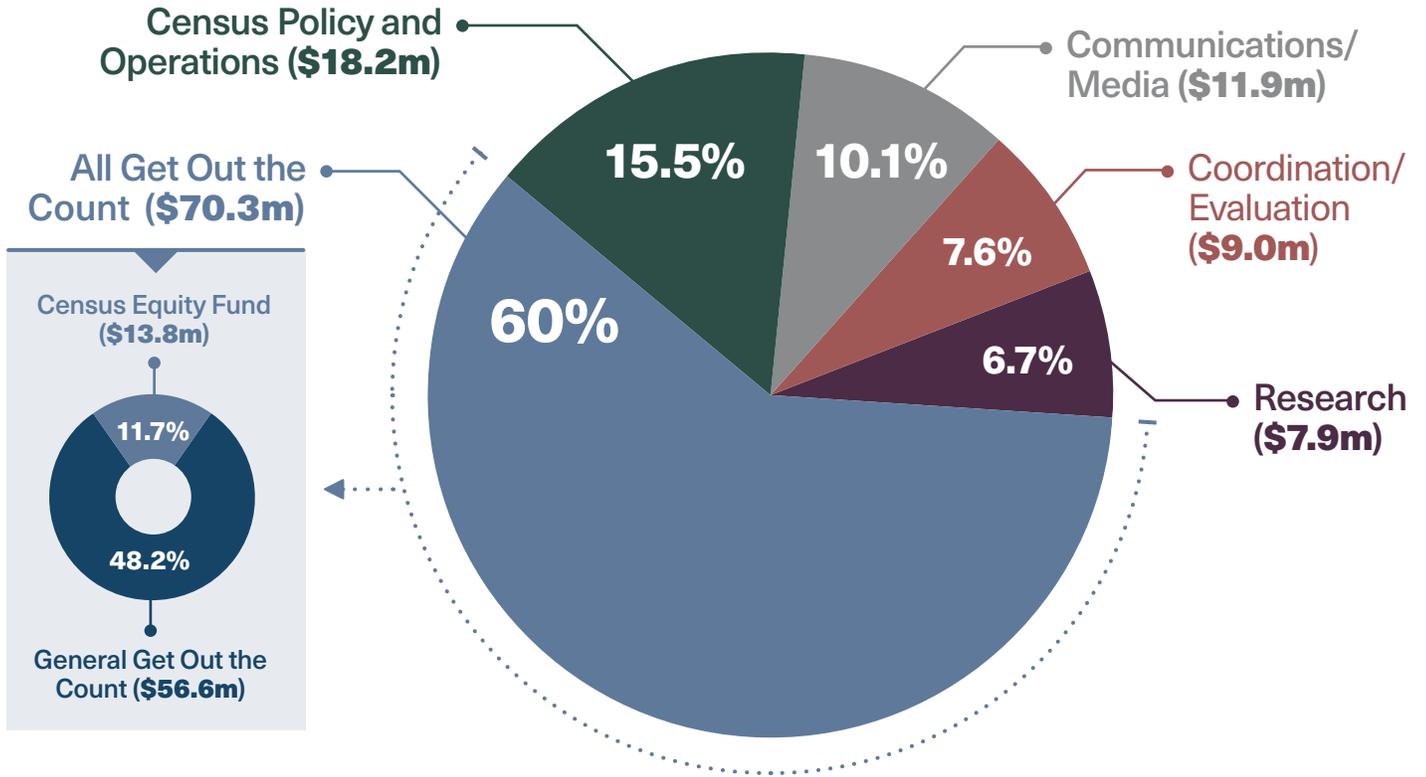


<sup>1</sup>Numbers on philanthropic funding are based on self-reporting by foundations to the Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup; the totals do not necessarily reflect all philanthropic funding for 2020 Census work.

<sup>2</sup>Based on interviews conducted by ORS Impact for the [2020 Census State-by-State Reports](#), August 2021. (Note: Total includes \$30 million in state philanthropic funding in California or 40% of all state philanthropic funding.)



# Where the National Spending Went<sup>3</sup>

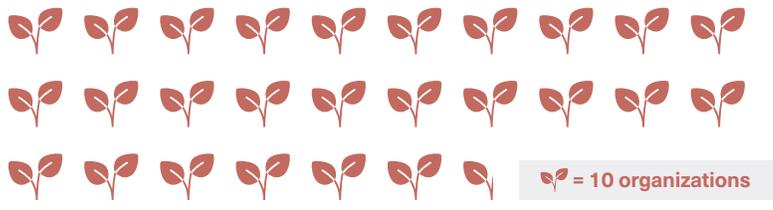


### Funders providing grants toward the national plan of action:



Total: **126**

### Unique organizations funded through national philanthropic funds:



Total: **265**

<sup>3</sup>All Get Out the Count includes support for national hub groups working to increase census participation in historically undercounted communities as well the national Census Equity Fund grantmaking to state and local organizations; Census policy and operations includes support for organizing, public education and advocacy on key issues affecting the census at all levels of government, including education and advocacy related to government spending; Communications/Media includes paid advertising, social media, and content and message development; Coordination and Evaluation includes outreach to other sectors, meeting and convening costs, evaluation, and other program and management costs; Research includes support for data gathering, analysis, and data products on census-related topics. Census work is not always easily categorized as one type of activity shown in this pie, but this helps to show funding priorities.



# Philanthropic Funding for State-Based Activities

Total:  
**\$888.9 million**



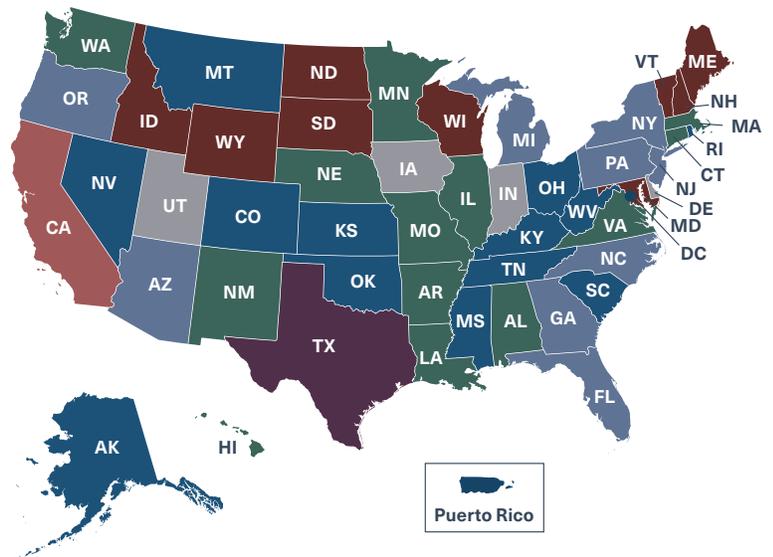
(includes \$13.8 million from the national Census Equity Fund)

Range per state:

**\$12,500**  
(Wyoming)  
TO  
**\$30 million**  
(California)

### Census Equity Fund States:

- |                      |                |                |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Alabama              | Louisiana      | Ohio           |
| Alaska               | Michigan       | Oklahoma       |
| Arizona              | Mississippi    | Pennsylvania   |
| Arkansas             | Montana        | Puerto Rico    |
| Colorado             | Nevada         | South Carolina |
| District of Columbia | New Jersey     | South Dakota   |
| Florida              | New Mexico     | Tennessee      |
| Georgia              | New York       | Texas          |
| Hawaii               | North Carolina | Virginia       |
| Kentucky             | North Dakota   | West Virginia  |



### Total Philanthropy

■ \$30m   ■ \$8.2m   ■ \$2m to 4.3m   ■ \$701k to 1.9m   ■ \$200k to 700k   ■ < \$200k   ■ No Data



## Government Spending on the Census

### Philanthropy and Its Partners Helped Protect, Secure Billions in Government Spending to Ensure a Fair and Accurate Census

An important goal of the Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup and its partners was to ensure adequate government funding at all levels for the 2020 census, especially for outreach to historically undercounted communities. While Congress was initially requiring the Census Bureau to hold 2020 census spending to the same level as the 2010 census, philanthropy and its partners helped make the case for a higher level of spending to ensure a fair and accurate census. Similarly, funders at all levels worked with partners to educate state and local governments about the value of providing adequate resources to promote census participation.

Estimated Census Bureau Funding for 2020 Census:

**\$15.6 billion<sup>4</sup>**

State Government Census Funding:

**\$381.4 million<sup>5</sup>**

Local Government Census Funding:

No comprehensive accounting, but many cities provided substantial resources for local census outreach, with New York City leading the way with \$40 million in census spending.



**In a National League of Cities survey, local officials said the top census funding sources for their communities were: municipal budgets (45 percent); philanthropy (25 percent); and other local and state governments (17 percent).<sup>6</sup>**



Data as of September 2021

<sup>4</sup>This was the Census Bureau's estimate of the costs for the 2020 Census in October 2017, as [presented](#) to Congress. The total is likely to be higher given adjustments made due to the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in the census timeline and operations that are still in process as this report is released. Earlier in the census cycle, Congress was requiring the bureau to keep the budget for the 2020 Census to the same level as the 2010 count, or \$12-13 billion.

<sup>5</sup>Based on data from National Conference of State Legislatures at [NCSL 2020 Census Resources and Legislation](#) and interviews by ORS Impact for [2020 Census State-by-State Reports](#), August 2021. (Note: California provided \$187.0 million or 49 percent of the total for all states.)

<sup>6</sup>National League of Cities, [Lessons Learned from 2020 Census and Voting Initiatives](#).



**Philanthropy** and  
the **2020 Census**

# Why the Census?

**F**rom the start, philanthropy’s engagement in the 2020 census was built on demystifying the decennial count, making it less “wonky,” and underscoring the central role of accurate census data in the effective—and equitable—functioning of communities and society. ▶▶▶



In an [appeal](#) to its membership on the eve of the 2020 count, United Philanthropy Forum wrote:

“It is difficult to overstate the importance of a fair and accurate census count. When census information is not accurate, it threatens to muffle the voices of undercounted groups and regions, and undermine the basic political equality that is central to American democracy. Institutions across the country—including local and state governments, businesses, nonprofits and foundations—routinely rely on data from the census to allocate funding, define where services are delivered and promote economic development.”

The first U.S. census was conducted in 1790 in accordance with the constitutional requirement of a decennial enumeration focused on “counting the whole number of persons in each state.” Black people who were enslaved were counted as three-fifths of a person until after the Civil War. The 2020 census was the 23<sup>rd</sup> federal census. While early censuses focused on a simple count to guide the apportionment of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, the process evolved over time into an effort to gather data on age, race, ethnicity and home occupancy (rental or owned, how many occupants, etc.).

Today, the census is important not just as a roadmap for divvying U.S. House seats among the states. Decennial census data guide hundreds of billions of dollars in federal spending and are crucial to the redrawing of state and local legislative districts, enforcement of U.S. civil rights laws, research and analysis on population trends and service needs, and countless day-to-day decisions on the part of government, business, philanthropy, and the nonprofit sector.

In addition to the decennial census, the U.S. Census Bureau conducts the American Community Survey (ACS) on an ongoing basis to gather more detailed information from a sample of addresses on everything from education and employment status to internet access, health, transportation and more. Between the ACS and the decennial count, the U.S. Census Bureau provides the highest-quality data available about who we are as a nation. And, at a time when philanthropy and society are paying new attention to the impacts of systemic racism on communities of color, the Census Bureau is often the only source of reliable data for many of the marginalized populations at the heart of so many foundation investments and initiatives.

## Data With Many Uses

In early memos to foundation colleagues on how philanthropy could engage in the 2020 census, the Bauman Foundation’s Gary Bass and Adrien Schless-Meier spelled out many of the ways in which census data are used by government, business and the nonprofit sector. They include:

**Distribution of federal funds.** Andrew Reamer, research professor at the George Washington Institute of Public Policy at The George Washington University, found that in the 2017 fiscal year, 316 federal spending programs relied on data from the 2010 census to distribute \$1.5 trillion to state and local governments, businesses and households across the country. That figure accounted for 7.8 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product in that year.





**Voting and civil rights enforcement.**

Census data are critical in enforcing the U.S. Voting Rights Act’s provisions aimed at ensuring that district maps drawn at the local, state, and congressional levels do not dilute the voting strength of communities of color. Census data also are used to ensure the equal protection of the law in all aspects of public life, from education and employment to fair housing and health care.

**Social and economic research.** Virtually all research involving economic and social policy incorporates some aspect of census or ACS data. Furthermore, the census and ACS serve as the benchmark for most other federal surveys and data collection programs.

**Planning for community needs.** Census data allow state and local governments to make informed decisions about where and how to invest resources in employment, education, infrastructure, public and environmental health, and other critical services.

**Economic development.** Virtually all business activity in the U.S. relies on census data in some way. The detailed information

that the Census Bureau collects is crucial to assisting businesses in making decisions about where to set up shop, understanding who their customers will be, and attracting employees.

**Apportionment and redistricting.** Data from the decennial census determine how many seats in the U.S. House of Representatives are allotted to each state. This, in turn, affects the number of Electoral College votes for each state in presidential elections. States also use census data to draw congressional and state legislative districts, while smaller jurisdictions draw census-based districts for counties, cities, and school boards. Census information is critical to ensure that political district maps are fair and representative.

## An Essential System of Democracy

Keesha Gaskins-Nathan is director for the Democratic Practice-United States program with the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. A longtime organizer and trial attorney who previously worked on census issues in Minnesota with the NAACP and the League of Women Voters, Gaskins-Nathan said the Rockefeller Brothers Fund got engaged in the national 2020 census collaborative because of the fund’s broad commitment to advancing a vital and inclusive democracy. She called the census “the single most massive domestic mobilization effort of the federal government.”

“We recognize there are essential systems of our democracy that are dependent upon an accurate census count,” she said, citing everything from school board district lines to how many units of



Photos courtesy of The Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama (jHICA!) and Jera Stribling



“ We view the census count as the baseline for ensuring equal representation and achieving progress on a host of issues that are important for New York and the country.”



*Keesha Gaskins-Nathan, Director, Democratic Practice-United States Program, Rockefeller Brothers Fund*

temporary manufactured housing the federal government sends to an area in the aftermath of a natural disaster. With a geographic focus on New York, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund also was determined to join other funders to support the work of ensuring a fair and accurate count in its home state, which lost two of 29 congressional seats in the aftermath of the 2010 census.

“We view the census count as the baseline for ensuring equal representation and achieving progress on a host of issues that are important for New York and the country,” said Gaskins-Nathan.

## The Impacts of Undercounting

Given the many consequential uses of census data, achieving an accurate count is vitally important. Faulty census data, including undercounts of various population groups, can result in faulty decisions with real impacts on people and communities across the country. As New York did after the 2010 census, states and communities routinely lose representation in Congress to the extent that census data show population declines. These same places also lose out on crucial investments in government and social services, business expansions and more.

When the census undercounts the population of a community or state, these losses can cut deep. It is a problem that generally affects communities that include large populations that are historically undercounted because of a variety of factors, from language barriers and distrust of government to low levels of internet access and literacy to housing issues. Among the most undercounted populations are people of color (particularly Black and Latinx people and Native Americans living on reservations), young children, low-income individuals and families, undocumented immigrants, individuals with limited English proficiency, highly mobile people, people experiencing homelessness, and people with mental or physical disabilities.

Undercounts can have a particularly harmful effect on communities of color. According to the Census Bureau’s “post-enumeration” analysis of the accuracy of the 2010 count, the undercount for Black people in 2010 was 2.1 percent; that includes 6 percent of African American children, which was double the undercount for white children. For the Hispanic population, the undercount was 1.5 percent. For American Indian and Alaska Natives living on reservations, it was 4.9 percent. While the undercount for Asian Americans was not significant, it is likely that some subgroups of this diverse population





group had disproportionately high undercounts. By comparison, the 2010 census *overcounted* the non-Hispanic white population by 0.8 percent.

“While the overall coverage of the census was exemplary, the traditional hard-to-count groups, like renters, were counted less well,” then-Census Bureau Director Robert Groves said about the 2010 count in a 2012 [press release](#). “Because ethnic and racial minorities disproportionately live in hard-to-count circumstances, they too were undercounted relative to the majority population.”

They may sound like small percentages, but undercounts like these can result in big changes in representation and investment for communities of color. In New Mexico, for example, which has one of the highest rates of undercounted

populations in the country, it was [estimated](#) that a 1-percent undercount in the 2020 census would result in a loss of \$750 million in federal spending in the state over the following decade.

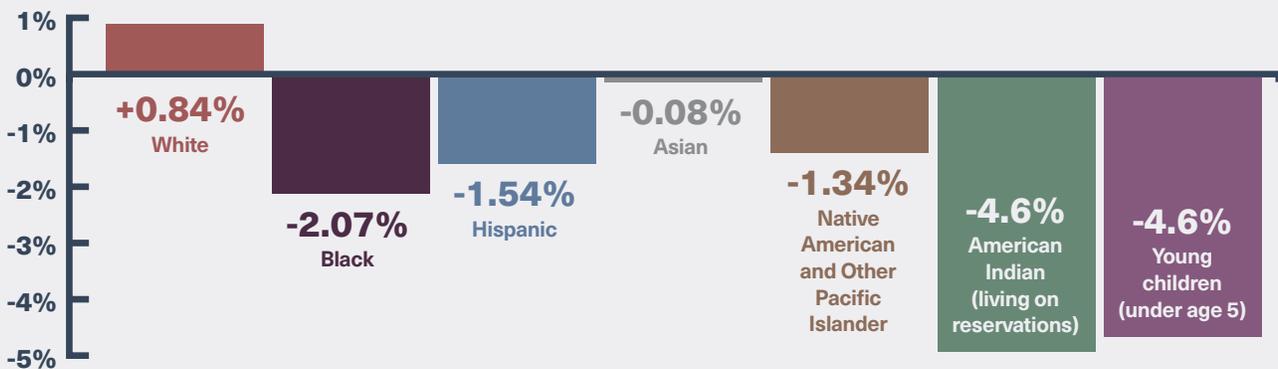
It’s a statistic that Allan Oliver, executive director of the Santa Fe-based Thornburg Foundation, said he used often in his outreach to funder colleagues and government officials about the urgency of ensuring a fair and accurate count in the state. Ultimately, a group of 24 foundations raised more than \$1.25 million for a [statewide effort](#) aimed at getting out the count in undercounted communities across New Mexico.

Oliver said the Thornburg Foundation’s leadership in the statewide campaign was driven by its deep engagement in policy and democracy issues. ▶▶▶

## Census Undercounts Miss People of Color, Other Groups

**H**istorically, the U.S. census has undercounted specific populations including people of color, young children, immigrants and others. The result is that communities that are home to these groups lose out on representation and resources.

### 2010 Census Undercount by Population Group



Sources: Thomas Mule, “Census Coverage Measurement Estimation Report,” U.S. Census Bureau DSSD 2010 Census Coverage Measurement Series #2010-G-01, May 22, 2012, Table 7; and William P. O’Hare, *The Undercount of Young Children in the U.S. Decennial Census, 2015*, Springer, Table 4.1.



“When you are talking about good government and building a democracy that works for everybody, census is at the heart of everything else,” he said. “And here in a state with one of the highest rates of undercounting in the country, that’s a message people responded to.”

## A Unifying Concern

The possibility of significant undercounts of various populations was a unifying concern for foundations involved in the 2020 census, even if different funders were focused on different undercounted groups. For example, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, with its focus on issues impacting children and families, has played a leading role in philanthropy’s work on the census for many years, primarily because of its concern about the regular undercounting of children under age 5. In 2010, the Census Bureau missed more than 2 million young children, according to Florencia Gutierrez, senior associate with the Casey Foundation and manager of its national KIDS COUNT data initiative.

“Our efforts focused on ensuring this did not happen again,” Gutierrez said of the Casey Foundation’s engagement in the 2020 count. “We’re in this work because we want to help make sure all kids are counted so families and communities get the resources they need to care for their youngest children.” She added that the KIDS COUNT initiative draws on census data to track key indicators regarding child and family well-being.

“Without accurate data we cannot effectively measure where the need is, where progress has been made, and where limited resources should be targeted to improve outcomes for children and families,” Gutierrez said.

Another foundation involved in the 2020 census based on concerns about undercounting young children was the Grable Foundation in Pittsburgh. With a mission focused on improving outcomes for young people in its hometown, Grable and its trustees and staff immediately saw the value of playing a leadership role in local census work.

“I think our trustees really responded to the message that this was a way to leverage our investments,” said Kristen Burns, associate ▶▶▶



“If you’re a democracy funder, a health funder, an education funder or a community foundation, the census has obvious and important connections to your work. And the stakes, if we get it wrong, are incredibly high, and especially for underrepresented communities that so many foundations care about.”

*Jocelyn Bissonnette, Director, Funders Census Initiative, Funders’ Committee for Civic Participation*



director of the foundation. “We know that philanthropy can’t possibly take care of everything when it comes to children and learning, and we rely on public money at all levels to push the ball forward on those issues.”

Burns continued, “Investing in the census is really about making sure that our region is accurately represented and that there are enough federal dollars to support the kinds of things that we are already supporting.”

For The JPB Foundation, a nationally focused funder based in New York, ensuring a fair and accurate count of undercounted groups is part and parcel of a broader commitment to helping people and communities move out of poverty. “For us democracy and civic engagement are both a strategy and a goal,” said Angela Cheng, senior program officer with the foundation. “The idea is that you can’t really advance on issues of poverty and economic justice if people directly affected by those issues are not counted or represented.”

## Unique Issues for the 2020 Count

The case for philanthropic engagement in the 2020 census was magnified by several issues unique to the 2020 cycle. For example, despite population growth, the significance of the census, and the challenges associated with ensuring a complete and accurate count, Congress initially was requiring the Census Bureau to hold the cost of the 2020 census to the same level as the 2010 census, approximately \$12-13 billion. Experts on the census considered this a significant budget constraint and far short of what was needed to ensure a fair and accurate count. ▶▶▶

## Census Messaging to Funders: What Worked

**A**s director of the Funders Census Initiative with the Funders’ Committee for Civic Participation starting in 2018, Jocelyn Bissonnette played a key role in outreach to philanthropy around the 2020 census. In an interview, Bissonnette reflected on the messages that worked to rally funders to support this work:

**It’s about your issues.** “If you’re a democracy funder, a health funder, an education funder or a community foundation, the census has obvious and important connections to your work. And the stakes, if we get it wrong, are incredibly high, and especially for underrepresented communities that so many foundations care about.” →



Photo courtesy of Fair Count



In addition to budgetary shortfalls, the Census Bureau was facing a number of pressing and unprecedented policy issues. These included: debates about whether the American Community Survey should be made voluntary or discontinued entirely; possible revisions to census questions about race, ethnicity, and ancestry; and the use of government and commercial records to replace some door-to-door outreach. Adding to the mix of concerns, the Census Bureau was planning on rolling back door-to-door canvassing and conducting a largely electronic, internet-based census for the first time in 2020, a plan that could disadvantage undercounted communities because of inequities in broadband and internet access. (For more on all of these issues, see [pages 38-39](#).)

Later in the cycle, an additional policy issue emerged as the Trump administration proposed adding a question to the 2020 census about respondents' citizenship and immigration status. The proposal was widely viewed as a transparent attempt to increase fear in immigrant communities and reduce immigrant participation in the census—not to mention a violation of the constitutional requirement to “count the whole number of persons in each state.”

Any one of these issues could have had significant impact on the treatment of immigrants, people of color and low-income people, and on the quality of the census data that is so essential to researchers, businesses, philanthropy, service providers, policymakers, and governments. Taken together, the issues presented what national funders termed “a moment of crisis” in early strategy memos.

It was in the face of these challenges that philanthropy ultimately stepped up with an unprecedented level of investment and coordination to support a fair and accurate count. ★

→ **It's about money.** “The role of the census in driving federal funding is incredibly persuasive for funders because if there's a huge gap, they know they are going to be asked to step in. And the truth is, there's no way for philanthropy to be able to make up the difference. So it's in philanthropy's interest to help make sure those communities they are supporting get their fair share of resources.”

**It's about representation and voice.** “Of course, the census isn't just about money. It's about representation and voice. Especially after 2020, foundations all across the country are concerned about systemic racism and supporting Black, Indigenous and People of Color communities to build power and visibility. For those who want to center race and equity in their work, census is a powerful investment.”

**It's about good government and social cohesion.** “A lot of funders responded to a broader message around fairness and the role of the census in making sure government is truly reflective of the people and communities it serves. At a time of real division across society on fundamental issues, people saw investing in the census as part of building stronger civic infrastructure and emphasizing the interconnectedness of people and communities across the country.” ★



Philanthropy and  
the 2020 Census

# Funder Engagement in Prior Censuses

**P**hilanthropy's engagement in the U.S. census didn't start with the 2020 count, even if the most recent decennial cycle attracted unprecedented support. Funders have been involved to varying degrees in prior counts as well. ▶ ▶ ▶



The Annie E. Casey Foundation, for example, made a lead grant to create the Washington, DC-based Communications Consortium Media Center's Census 2000 Initiative, which was focused on engaging a variety of interests in the work of ensuring an accurate 2000 count. The center tapped former congressional staff member Terri Ann Lowenthal, who is widely recognized as a leading expert on the census, as a consultant to work with its staff on the project. Other funders included Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Kauffman Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Most of these same foundations, together with others like the Joyce and AT&T foundations, also supported civil rights organizations and other groups as they engaged in outreach, litigation and other activities related to the 2000 count.

In the years following the 2000 census, many of these funders and the nonprofits they supported maintained contact and spoke out on various census-related issues as they came up. According to a [summary](#) of funder engagement in the 2010 census published by the Hagedorn Foundation, the advocacy of the funders and their nonprofit partners in the early 2000s “may well have made the difference” in ensuring continued funding for the American Community Survey (ACS) in the face of repeated congressional calls for its elimination during this period.

## Preparing for 2010

After a series of meetings in 2008 and 2009, a core group of funders intent on investing in work related to the 2010 census—including a number of the 2000 census funders—decided to create the Funders Census Initiative (FCI) as a

working group of the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation (FCCP). Founded in the 1980s to help rally philanthropic support for voter registration, FCCP's work had evolved over time to focus on campaign finance, voting technologies, and election administration reforms. Support for the Funders Census Initiative was provided initially by the Hagedorn Foundation. Hagedorn was a Long Island, New York-based grantmaker that invested in local, regional and national efforts focused on civic engagement, immigration and other issues over a 12-year span before “sunsetting” in 2017.

FCI was not a collective grantmaking initiative but rather an effort to build relationships among funders working on the census and provide resources and information to support their work. With Lowenthal providing consulting support alongside Bill O'Hare, a demographer and census expert who previously led the KIDS COUNT initiative at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, FCI hosted weekly calls and webinars (often in partnership with stakeholder groups), created factsheets, developed a website to post resources, and provided a forum for funders to engage with the Census Bureau, state and local census initiatives, and other partners.

At the same time that a select group of funders were working together at the national level, funders in several states and regions launched their own collaborative census initiatives for the 2010 count. California's philanthropic partnership around the 2010 count was considered uniquely strong, with the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, The California Endowment and others working together to support census-related community organizing across the state. Under the headline California Counts!, the California work was coordinated by the funder collaborative Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR).





According to Ted Wang, who managed the California Counts! collaborative as a consultant to GCIR, funders in the state initially came together in response to the state's decision to cut back on census outreach in the wake of the Great Recession. Altogether, he said the census funders raised almost \$10 million, with a particular emphasis on supporting outreach to communities of color, immigrants and other undercounted populations. Among the indicators that these investments paid off: the response rate to the 2010 census in California topped that of other states with large immigrant populations, including Texas and New York. Wang now works as U.S. programs director with Unbound Philanthropy, a funder focused on immigration issues and an active participant in the 2020 Census Subgroup.

Another high-profile funder-led initiative in 2010 was Count Me In, which united 10

Illinois-focused funders including the Joyce Foundation, the Chicago Community Trust and others. In all, Count Me In provided \$1.2 million to 60 nonprofit organizations in Chicago and statewide, with grantees conducting census outreach in undercounted communities. Funders launched similar efforts in [Massachusetts](#), [New York](#) and other states.

In all, Funders Census Initiative figures indicated that philanthropy provided \$38 million toward census outreach between 2008 and 2010, with \$16.5 million going to organizations working at the national level. The FCI tallies showed that the bulk of this funding came from a relatively small group of funders.<sup>2</sup> The data also showed that total spending by a couple of foundations (Ford Foundation and The California Endowment) overshadowed all other giving.

In the lead-up to the 2020 count, the Bauman Foundation's analysis of grantmaking related to the 2010 census indicated that the FCI figures may have overestimated total philanthropic support. Among the reasons: some grants for general operating support may have been counted as support for census work. At the same time, the FCI figures also missed some large funders like the Wallace H. Coulter Foundation, which spent \$4 million on census work during the 2010 cycle.

The focus of the funders' national support for the 2010 cycle was the 2010 Census Public Education Campaign organized by The Leadership Conference Education Fund, ▶▶▶



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<sup>2</sup>Ford Foundation, California Endowment, California Community Foundation, Count Me In (funder collaborative in IL), James Irvine Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Joyce Foundation, Hagedorn Foundation, Silicon Community Foundation.



the sister organization to The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. The campaign was a collaboration among The Leadership Conference and four other national civil rights organizations that implemented outreach and public education campaigns targeting their respective constituencies. The partners included: Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC, NAACP, National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund, and National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).

In a May 2015 memo to funders about the possibility of philanthropic collaboration around the 2020 census, the Bauman Foundation's Gary Bass and Adrien Schless-Meier summarized the success and the challenges of the 2010 Census Public Education Campaign as follows:

“The Education Fund and the four national partners facilitated communication with the Census Bureau, served as trusted sources of accurate information about the decennial census to community partners, elevated the importance of the census within the civil rights community, and provided helpful materials to constituents about completing the census. However, its reach was limited because the groups were not able to raise the full budgets for their campaigns.”

In an interview for this report, Arturo Vargas, CEO of NALEO Educational Fund, recalled that his organization did not receive the major grants it needed to mount effective 2010 census outreach to Latino communities until well into 2009. “Time was short and we had to scramble, and I know that overall philanthropic giving was affected by the recession at that

time,” Vargas said. Nevertheless, he credited philanthropy with providing NALEO and other national groups with “critical support” to help them put necessary funds to ensuring a fair and accurate count.

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## Lessons from the 2010 Count

Funders who were involved in the 2010 census offered a number of takeaways and lessons learned that were applied in varying ways to philanthropy's collective efforts around the 2020 count. The top takeaway for many was the power of funder collaboration. The funder collaboratives in California and Illinois were cited as important examples of how funders can bring a spirit of partnership and alignment to their work on the census.

Evan Bacalao, a program officer with the Open Society Foundations, was working on the census as a staff member at NALEO during the 2010 cycle and had a firsthand view of funder collaboration from the grantee side, particularly in California. “I think the funding community in California was far more evolved and advanced than it was at the national level, both in terms of the timing of their funding commitments, but also the interconnectedness and the communication between them,” he said.

Another set of lessons from 2010 revolved around the need for funders to invest earlier. As Terri Ann Lowenthal noted in a [2016 article](#) reflecting on the 2010 census, the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation began organizing civic engagement funders in support of a fair and accurate census in





“ Census can be a tough issue for folks. ... You really have to get past those barriers to entry that have previously made census a focus only for a select group of funders.”



*Karen Narasaki, former president and executive director, Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC, and consultant to the Bauman Foundation for the 2020 Census*

late 2008, at a moment when the 2010 census was “a mere 18 months away.” A March 2011 FCCP [report](#) on philanthropy’s engagement in the 2010 census was blunt about how starting earlier would have yielded better results:

“In hindsight, foundations involved in the 2010 Funders Census Initiative universally agreed that an earlier start to their activities would have yielded even greater success in positively influencing participation rates in historically undercounted communities.”

Bass and Schless-Meier, in a September 2015 memo to funders reflecting on opportunities for funder engagement in the 2020 count, said a key lesson from 2010 was the need to provide grants “with enough time for groups to properly plan for outreach and public education efforts.” Looking to the 2020 census, they recommended in the memo that planning grants for the 2020 cycle be made by fall 2017, with organizations receiving the first round of funding for outreach and public education by July 2018.

Beyond starting earlier, there was also a sense coming out of the 2010 census that funders

could do a better job coordinating their activities and investments. According to Carrie Davis, democracy program director with the Joyce Foundation, national funders involved in the 2010 count provided grants directly to many groups without fully understanding how the work of those groups was or wasn’t aligned, let alone how exactly other funders were supporting the same or similar work. “We really needed better coordination and collaboration among the interested organizations so there could be more efficient use of resources and so we would have a sense that we were all pushing in the same direction,” Davis said.

During the 2010 cycle, funders supported the national civil rights groups to “re-grant” funds to partners working on outreach efforts at the state and local levels. Karen Narasaki, who was leading census work for Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC at the time, said the re-granting approach was a source of heated debate among funders and groups engaged in the 2010 census. On one hand, national groups appreciated the ability to support their grassroots networks to engage in census work. On the other hand, many state and local





funders and nonprofits felt that they should have more leeway to identify the strongest partners to work on census outreach in their communities.

“That was a tough issue, and it’s something we kept front of mind as we were thinking about how best to support state and local work in 2020,” said Narasaki, who was a senior adviser

## Fast Facts! ★ ★ ★

The 2010 California Counts! collaborative coordinated by Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR) raised **almost \$10 million**, with a particular emphasis on supporting census outreach to communities of color, immigrants and other undercounted populations.

to the Bauman Foundation helping to guide philanthropy’s 2020 investments.

Yet another takeaway for philanthropy from the 2010 census was the importance of active outreach to build a broader coalition of funders to support the work. Bass and Schless-Meier calculated that there were fewer than 50 foundations nationwide supporting 2010 census outreach.

“Census can be a tough issue for folks,” said Narasaki. “People see it as a government enterprise, or else it’s too political, or else funders just don’t have staff who are experts on



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## Lessons from the 2010 Census

**Start earlier.** Funders didn’t organize at the national level until 2008, with many grants not arriving until 2009 or early 2010. Groups needed more time to plan and invest in order to ensure a fair and accurate count.

**Support more coordination among funders.** Despite being together in forums such as the Funders Census Initiative, national funders did not necessarily coordinate funding decisions during the 2010 census cycle. Collaboratives in California, Illinois and other places provided a picture of what can happen when funders truly align their funds for broader impact.





it because it happens only every 10 years.” In order to overcome these and other challenges, Narasaki and others agreed that funders should spend time and resources educating a broader base of colleagues about the importance of the census to their work. Also important: creating vehicles and platforms that make it easier for funders to engage.

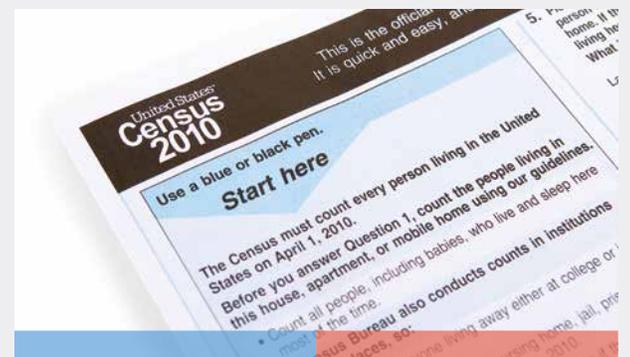
“You really have to get past those barriers to entry that have previously made census a focus only for a select group of funders,” Narasaki said.

The 2010 census is widely considered to have been an accurate count relative to prior censuses, with the Census Bureau [estimating](#) a net overcount of just 0.01 percent. Translation: the census counted an extra 36,000 people, largely because of duplicate counts of white people owning multiple homes. However, given the government’s historic undercount of some communities in 2010 and prior censuses, perhaps the biggest takeaway for philanthropy going into the 2020 count was the need for a more laser-like focus on getting out the count among communities of color, immigrants, and other marginalized and underrepresented groups. ★

→ **Support more coordination among nonprofit partners.** Funder support for large national civil rights organizations was largely uncoordinated in 2010, which meant the groups and their funders missed opportunities to work in alignment.

**Build a broader base of philanthropic support.** Work on the 2010 census was supported by a relatively narrow group of democracy and civic engagement funders. For bigger, broader impact, philanthropy needs to enlist more funders working in diverse communities and on a broader range of issues affected by the census.

**Focus investments on undercounted communities.** Funders cannot and should not try to fill the Census Bureau’s role of getting out the count overall. Philanthropy needs to find ways to get more funding to on-the-ground efforts in undercounted communities.



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Philanthropy and  
the 2020 Census

# The 2020 Funder Collaborative Takes Shape: 2015-2016

**I**t all began with a whiteboard exercise. In late January 2015, a group of staff and senior leaders from foundations working on various democracy issues met to discuss topics participants felt might be ripe for collaborative action. ▶ ▶ ▶



The conversation had been spurred by an earlier meeting of democracy funders convened by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The January 2015 group, which included representatives from Hewlett, Ford, Open Society Foundations and others, identified several ideas to look into and discuss at a future meeting, with the goal of presenting a final list of topics at a fall 2015 meeting of the foundations' presidents.

One of the topics that ended up on the board during the conversation was ensuring that there were adequate policies and resources in place for a successful 2020 census. The person charged with researching the topic and developing ideas for the next meeting was Gary Bass, executive director emeritus of the Bauman Foundation, a DC-based funder with a longtime focus on issues of democracy and economic justice.

Bass was a veteran of countless policy fights in Washington. As leader of the nonprofit advocacy group OMB Watch (now part of the Project on Government Oversight) for three decades, he established himself as one of the nation's top experts on issues of transparency and accountability in government. While at OMB Watch, he led numerous coalitions focused on issues of government accountability, nonprofit advocacy and federal budget issues. He also worked closely with Bauman Foundation President Patricia Bauman on the creation of RTK NET (the Right-to-Know Network), a free online service that provides the public with access to government data on toxic chemicals and other pollutants. Bass left OMB Watch in 2011 to join the Bauman Foundation staff. At the time, the foundation was increasing its grantmaking on voting rights and redistricting issues.

Bass's review of 2010 census activities, plus interviews with civil rights and local government leaders, census experts, and foundation leadership and staff, led him to believe there was a strong possibility of funders having a positive impact on ensuring a successful 2020 count. But he said he still wasn't sure whether foundations would go for it.

"I remember there was real uncertainty at the time," Bass said. "I think people understood the census is important but it can be technical and dry and not on the normal agenda for these funders. And a lot of people think it's something government should pay for anyway."

In May 2015, Bass and Adrien Schless-Meier, a Bauman Foundation program associate at the time, submitted a memo to their foundation colleagues including background on the census and a proposed plan for foundation engagement in the 2020 count, along with an initial cost estimate. The memo's key conclusion: "(I)t is nearly certain that an investment by foundation leaders to support a fair and accurate census will yield a huge return to improve U.S. democracy, ensuring a more complete count of each person as required by the Constitution."

The memo proposed that the funders focus on three strategies for the 2020 census: broadening foundation engagement on the census; focusing on policy improvements for the American Community Survey and the decennial census; and supporting outreach and public education to ensure a successful 2020 count. Bass initially estimated the costs of this work at \$24-25 million, not including local and regional foundation support for outreach and public education. ▶▶▶



**An initial 2015 memo circulated among funders estimated that philanthropy needed to raise:**

**\$24-25 million**



**Ultimately, the Census Subgroup raised:**

**\$118 million**



During a June 2015 meeting of senior foundation staff in New York, participants discussed the ideas in the memo and agreed that the census could be a “potentially galvanizing issue” for philanthropy, according to a post-meeting summary prepared by Bass and Schless-Meier. However, the funders decided they needed more details on costs and a timeline for census engagement, as well as other information, before committing to the work. Following the meeting, several participants volunteered to form a steering committee to help move the plan forward with consulting support from Freedman Consulting, a DC-based firm focused on federal policy issues.

In a subsequent memo in September 2015, Bass and Schless-Meier provided an update to

the funders and stakeholder partners including The Leadership Conference Education Fund, NALEO Educational Fund and Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC, based on additional research and conversations among the steering committee. The memo included a revised budget that increased proposed funding levels for census policy work, organizing, evaluation and other activities; the new estimate was \$28.9 million. The September memo also included a timeline for a national census initiative anticipating that funders would need to make planning grants for the 2020 cycle by fall 2017 and that organizations should receive their first round of funding for outreach and public education campaigns by July 2018. ▶▶▶



## “A Vast Scope of Work”

The September 2015 memo described a “vast scope of work” for the 2020 census and recommended melding two models for distributing philanthropic funds. The first was a pooled fund that would make grants based on the recommendations of a steering committee of funders. The second was termed “coordinated proposal review,” with the steering committee coordinating with funders to ensure that their direct grants were aligned toward a shared plan and objectives.

The memo described how this two-track approach could potentially appeal to a broader group of funders:

“For those willing to pool their funds, it would ensure grantees receive funds in a timely manner. For those foundations that want to participate in the broader Census Initiative but prefer to make their own grants, they can be part of the proposal review process to ensure that their grants will also play a role in leveraging other resources.”

“We wanted to make sure foundations’ direct grantmaking was consistent with the bigger plan and supporting the overall goal,” Bass explained in an interview.

As the 2020 cycle got under way, he noted, funders were more comfortable making their own grants rather than giving to the pooled fund, but that tendency reversed over time. “I think over time there was a realization that the pooled fund

could act faster and be more precise in making grants, and many funders came around to that.”

Open Society Foundations Program Officer Evan Bacalao, who had worked on the 2010 census as a staff member at NALEO, said the pooled fund was an important innovation for 2020, given the lack of a means for tightly coordinating philanthropy’s investments in the prior census cycle. “Even though there was initial hesitance internally, we were big advocates for not just doing the aligned funding, but going through the pooled fund just to streamline things with other funders,” Bacalao said.

Whether grants were going out from the pooled fund or not, the intent from the beginning was to ensure that philanthropic investments in 2020 census work would be coordinated for maximum impact. Sue Van, president and CEO of the Wallace H. Coulter Foundation, said the idea of bringing more alignment to philanthropy’s support for the 2020 census was “brilliant.” Coulter had been the top philanthropic supporter of outreach to Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities during the 2010 census cycle, but it was working “very independently,” Van said.

“I can’t tell you how happy I was to see these funders coming together,” Van said.<sup>3</sup> She added that the foundation’s active engagement with the subgroup helped ensure that its support for what Van calls the “ground game” of outreach and organizing in AAPI communities was aligned with what other funders were doing. “The way they handled collaborative funding was critical to making sure we were in sync, we weren’t double



<sup>3</sup>At this time, the subgroup included: Annie E. Casey Foundation, Bauman Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Democracy Fund, Ford Foundation, Joyce Foundation, The JPB Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and Wallace H. Coulter Foundation. Over time, other participating funders included: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, James Irvine Foundation, Unbound Philanthropy, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Heising-Simons Foundation, The California Endowment, and the Kresge Foundation.



dipping, and we weren't leaving out different people and communities where philanthropy could make a real difference," said Van.

## The Subgroup Is Formed

The funders ended up creating a committee called the Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup; members began meeting on a regular basis either via teleconference or around the conference table at the Bauman Foundation offices in Washington. Among the other subgroup members hosting early meetings was the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in New York. Bauman Foundation staff initially served as the staff for the subgroup, with added support from selected consultants as time went on.

In November 2015, the subgroup members approved a plan of action (see sidebar, right) to guide their work on the census. Members also were beginning individual outreach to organizations focused on 2020 census issues to solicit proposals. The expectation was that members of the subgroup would give at least \$100,000 annually toward the collective's census work.

Funders involved in the early conversations remember a small and intimate group of colleagues. Angela Cheng joined The JPB Foundation in the summer of 2016 as a program officer working on voting rights and civic engagement issues. She said The JPB Foundation was interested in 2020 census work as part of its overall commitment to uplifting the voices of people in poverty. Cheng recalls those early conversations among the subgroup as enormously valuable, both in

## The Plan of Action

The Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup's plan of action, adopted in November 2015 and based on extensive outreach to stakeholders, census experts and others, identified three priorities for pursuing a fair and accurate census:

**Policy Improvements:** Advocating for policy improvements to the American Community Survey (ACS) and decennial census to ensure adequate federal funding and sound strategic decision making by the federal government.

**Outreach and Increased Support:** Leveraging the profile of the foundations in the Census Subgroup to highlight the importance of the ACS and decennial census, and to bring other sectors and funders to the table.

**Public Outreach and Education:** Supporting outreach and public education to improve response rates for the 2020 census, particularly among undercounted populations. This work was referred to as "Get Out the Count."

bringing her up to speed on the issues as a new program officer and in boosting her confidence that The JPB Foundation's grantmaking would be aligned with the investments of other funders working on the census.





“There was a startup quality and an iterative element to those early conversations that was different,” Cheng said. “It was a real workshop feeling as people were developing and refining the core strategies and asking for input.”

Florencia Gutierrez at the Annie E. Casey Foundation had a similar reaction to participating in the early meetings of the subgroup. “I just remember sitting around the table with these other funders and thinking, ‘This is cool work. We are going to accomplish a lot together.’”

The subgroup housed its pooled fund at New Venture Fund, a fiscal sponsor headquartered in Washington, D.C., and it developed what Bass called a “consensus-based” model for grant decisions. To track participating funders’ individual grants and assure alignment toward the broader plan of action, Bass maintained a spreadsheet tracking all of the different foundation grants to different organizations. Based on the plan of action, the subgroup would reach out to organizations and ask for ideas and proposals. Those proposals, in

turn, would be discussed and decided on at subgroup meetings.

In an effort to apply lessons from philanthropy’s work on the 2010 census, the subgroup set out from the start of the 2020 cycle to try and track the proportion of general operating grants to various groups that was supporting census work. Funders making their own general support grants (i.e., not via the pooled fund) would either ask grantees how much of the grant was going to census, or else they would use the grant agreement to specify a percentage of the grant for census work. After the 2010 census cycle, it was difficult to develop an accurate accounting of census funding because of the lack of this kind of tracking for groups engaged in more than just census work.

Amy Dominguez-Arms, a former vice president of programs at the Irvine Foundation in California, worked as a consultant with the Ford Foundation and New Venture Fund during the 2020 census cycle with a focus on engaging more funders in the work. She said one of the key strengths of the subgroup’s work was alignment around the plan of action.

“That was really valuable to have high-level buy-in among all of the funders to a clear plan,” Dominguez-Arms said. “Over time, I think people were comfortable and willing to delegate decisions to the subgroup because there was trust in the plan, along with a sense that the process was relatively streamlined and lacking in bureaucracy. People were aligned at a strategic level and they weren’t getting bogged down in the details of this or that grant, and I think that helped move resources fairly quickly and efficiently.”



Photos courtesy of the Arab American Institute and GALEO



## Relaunching the Funders Census Initiative

At same time that the Census Subgroup was commencing its work and operations, the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation was working to relaunch the Funders Census Initiative for the 2020 census cycle. As early as 2016, the subgroup funders had agreed that FCI and United Philanthropy Forum would ultimately lead funder outreach and engagement around the census. (For more on their roles in funder outreach, see [page 52](#)). The subgroup, for its part, would be responsible for setting strategy and managing the pooled fund and aligned grantmaking among participating funders toward the plan of action.

After extensive back-and-forth negotiations over strategies, staffing and other issues, the subgroup approved funding to support FCI's work starting in 2017. It was in the course of these conversations that Marcia Avner, a board member of the Bauman Foundation, took on the role of co-chair of the FCI. Jocelyn Bissonnette subsequently came on board as FCI director in 2018, and the subgroup and FCI developed a coordinated and productive partnership, including as co-hosts of the quarterly meetings of funders, nonprofits and other census stakeholders. Originally convened by the subgroup and held in the Bauman Foundation office in D.C., the meetings moved over time to larger venues as more funders became involved in the work.

From the beginning, the Census Subgroup was designed to be a low-profile (if critical) player in

driving philanthropy's work on the 2020 census. As an early backgrounder described it:

"The Subgroup does not intend to be an organization or longstanding institutional operation. It exists solely to provide coordination and collaboration on census matters until the 2020 decennial census is complete. Accordingly, the subgroup has no website and seeks no publicity. Implementation of census actions should occur through our grantees and philanthropic affinity groups."

Bass said the subgroup's decision not to brand itself or develop an umbrella name for the collaborative and its steering committee of funders was based on its hope that existing entities like FCI would be the focus of attention, alongside the funders' grantees. Bass added that the subgroup was never intended to be a standing entity but rather a time-limited collaborative that would "come, do our work, and then disband."

## An Early Focus on Policy

The Census Subgroup's plan of action was explicit that its first priority, at least at the start of the 2020 census cycle, was policy. This decision was driven largely by concerns about the level of federal appropriations for the 2020 census. At the time the subgroup was starting its collaborative work and planning, Congress was requiring the Census Bureau to hold the cost of the 2020 decennial census at the same level as the 2010 count, or roughly \$12-13 billion. This was true despite an [estimate](#) from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) that population growth and other factors could push



the true cost of the 2020 census to twice what Congress was recommending, or \$25 billion.

Bass and Schless-Meier wrote an [article](#) for The American Prospect in November 2015 with the goal of raising awareness among funders and other audiences on this issue. The piece described how proposed cuts in census funding threatened to produce an undercount in communities of color, low-income areas and rural communities. The article's attention-grabbing lede read as follows:

“African Americans, Hispanics, and other minority populations are in danger of losing representation in Congress as well as their share of more than \$400 billion a year in federal funds for health care, education, job training, and community development. That possibility should get anyone's attention, yet few have noticed that it will be the likely result if Congress cuts the budget for the U.S. Census Bureau to the extent it now threatens to do.”

In addition to concerns about the budget, subgroup members, their stakeholder partners, and others were concerned about a number of other pressing policy issues that potentially threatened the fairness and accuracy of the count. These included:

**The American Community Survey.** As in prior decades, a small but vocal minority in the U.S. House of Representatives was advocating to eliminate the American Community Survey or to make it voluntary, which would reduce the quality and reliability of the ACS data. The funders and their allies argued that either of these moves would significantly hinder the ability of governments, businesses, foundations and other entities that rely on ACS data to ensure that key

decisions are informed by accurate information on all population groups.

**Census questions on race, ethnicity and ancestry.** In the lead-up to the 2020 count, the Census Bureau was weighing revisions to questions on race and ethnicity in an effort to improve response rates and accuracy. One option under consideration: combining separate questions about race and ethnicity into one question and allowing respondents to report more than one category (Hispanic and White, for example). The bureau also was researching the option of creating a new ethnicity category for Middle Eastern/North African residents. The funders and their partners were intent on working with the bureau to ensure that any changes to census questions would produce data of the same or higher quality than the 2010 census.

**Use of administrative records.** In order to keep the costs for the 2020 census at 2010 levels, the Census Bureau was exploring alternate ways to collect or corroborate data. One idea was to use government administrative records to confirm the bureau's list of addresses and extrapolate data for non-respondents to the census. However, there was concern that the use of administrative records could lead to an undercount of immigrants and other populations with limited contact with government agencies.

**Online response.** Another strategy the Census Bureau was exploring to increase efficiencies and reduce costs was rolling back door-to-door canvassing and conducting a largely electronic, internet-based census in 2020. However, the U.S. Government Accountability Office and others were expressing [grave concerns](#) about the bureau's readiness to conduct a secure and reliable online census. Based on these concerns, ▶▶▶



Photos courtesy of NALEO Educational Fund; GALEO; and Fair Count

the GAO actually placed the census on its “high risk list” of federal programs and operations that were vulnerable to major problems and that required transformation.

In addition to these concerns, advocates argued that the Census Bureau was ignoring the potential for significant undercounts in communities without the necessary internet access to complete the form. At the very least, advocates were saying that many of the consequential policy changes that were on the table should be rigorously tested to make sure they would not result in lower-quality data. The funders and their allies also were concerned about an array of other policy issues, from the size of the Census Bureau’s enumerator workforce to the importance of counting people in prison based on their place of residence prior to incarceration.

In one of the first public acts of the Census Subgroup, the member funders organized an August 2016 [letter](#) from 35 foundation leaders urging the Census Bureau to count incarcerated populations in their home residence. Among the reasons: incarcerated people cannot be considered “usual residents” of the areas where they are incarcerated, and counting them in their

home communities ensures a more accurate count in places that often are undercounted.

Later in the cycle, an additional policy issue rose to the top of the list of stakeholder and funder concerns as the Trump administration proposed adding a question to the census asking about respondents’ citizenship status (see [page 60](#) for more information).

The common theme across all of these issues for the funders was ensuring the quality of the 2020 census, including an accurate count of historically undercounted communities.

## Investing in Core Stakeholders

In order to help achieve this goal, the funders’ plan of action included what it called an “aggressive campaign for policy improvements” as a first priority for philanthropy. The funders proposed supporting a range of groups that were working actively on census policy issues, albeit with very low levels of funding. The groups included the





“Over time, I think people were comfortable and willing to delegate decisions to the subgroup because there was trust in the plan, along with a sense that the process was relatively streamlined and lacking in bureaucracy.”

*Amy Dominguez-Arms, Former VP for Programs, Irvine Foundation, and consultant to the Ford Foundation and New Venture Fund for the 2020 Census*

Census Project, a broad-based coalition focused on assuring an “inclusive and accurate” 2020 census, as well as The Leadership Conference Education Fund, NALEO Educational Fund and Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC.

Under the plan, the funders intended to support these organizations to advocate for adequate funding and policy changes, advise government officials on policy and implementation questions, and help organize their communities and coordinate with other stakeholders. The funders themselves also were engaged in “administrative advocacy” with the Census Bureau on these and other topics through letters like the one on counting people who are incarcerated, as well as other outreach to bureau officials.

The funders’ plan also anticipated investing in a number of other areas to support census policy work. These included: state-based projects focused on advocacy and mobilization of key communities; analysis of how much federal funding could be lost in each congressional district in the event of an undercount, along with a companion website; and outreach to business, bipartisan leaders and others to build support for a high-quality census.

Adding to philanthropy’s advocacy muscle, the Open Society Policy Center was one of the few funders to bring 501(c)(4) money to the table during the 2020 cycle, meaning it was able to use its funds to support direct lobbying on issues such as congressional appropriations for the census. Among other investments, the Open Society Policy Center supported D.C. lawyers at Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Field to work with national grantees to lobby Congress on various census-related topics in the course of the 2020 cycle. These funds also went directly to the 501(c)(4) arms of grantees like NALEO to support their lobbying work.

## Moving Toward the Count: The Advent of the Get-Out-the-Count Strategy

Beyond working on policy issues in the early going, the funders began to explore how they ▶▶▶



and their nonprofit partners could begin to shape a successful strategy for getting out the count in historically undercounted communities.

In late 2016, Gary Bass hired Karen Narasaki as a consultant to the Bauman Foundation, based on her experience with the 2010 census and her extensive contacts across the civil rights community as the former leader of Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC, former vice chair of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, and a member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights under the Obama administration. Working with Bass and consultant Cathy Duvall, Narasaki led the development of an implementation plan for a Get Out the Count campaign where the subgroup would direct funds to a group of national “hub” organizations (see sidebar at right for list). Some of these were the same groups that the funders were already supporting to engage in



## National Get Out the Count Hubs – 2020 Census

The get-out-the-count strategy approved by funders and stakeholders for the 2020 census relied on a nationwide network of “hub” organizations to lead outreach and dissemination of materials and resources to the communities they served. The following are the hub groups that were supported by the Census Subgroup funders.

### African Americans

- Black Alliance for Just Immigration
- Color of Change
- NAACP
- National Coalition for Black Civic Participation
- National Urban League

### Arab Americans

- American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee
- Arab American Institute Foundation

### Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders

- Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC
- APIAVote

### Libraries

- American Library Association →



Photo courtesy of Inter Tribal Council of Arizona



policy work. Now, the idea was to expand their funding so they could start planning efforts to help mobilize get-out-the-count drives focused on their constituencies.

Narasaki said the get-out-the-count strategy emerged from extensive conversations among the funders and stakeholders, who voted together to approve the final plan. “There was a choice to be made about whether we were going to fund national groups individually and try to encourage them to work together, or do we fund one national organization that would sub-grant funds to the other national organizations in more of a classic campaign approach,” she said.

Ultimately, the funders decided on the hub strategy (i.e., funding many groups individually) for a number of reasons, Narasaki said. First, many of the national groups told the funders (for obvious reasons) that they preferred to be funded directly for their census work. Second, many of the subgroup funders already were providing direct grants to various hub groups for census work; the hub strategy therefore would help ensure that funders could continue this support in a more aligned way. And third, it was thought that the ability to fund a larger pool of hub organizations might be a selling point in drawing more funders to the work, because they would have more choices about where they wanted their funding to go, and which historically undercounted constituencies they might want to target via their census investments.

The decision to fund the hub organizations also had the practical effect of enabling the subgroup and its member funders to forge stronger relationships across all of the nonprofits. “It’s an obvious point, but it’s worth



Photo courtesy of NALEO Educational Fund

### → Business and Business Organizations

- ReadyNation (a project of Council for a Strong America)

### Immigrants and Mixed-Status Families

- Fair Immigration Reform Movement (FIRM)/Community Change
- Center for Popular Democracy
- United We Dream

### Latinx Americans

- NALEO Educational Fund

### Civic Engagement Tables

- State Voices (co-coordinator of States Count Action Network)





saying that it's harder to work with groups on common strategies if you aren't funding them directly," Narasaki said.

The hub strategy was deliberately designed so the hubs would not engage in re-granting activities to their local and state networks. This was a response to concerns about how re-granting from national civil rights groups worked in the context of the 2010 census, when state and local funders and their partners said they would have preferred to have more control over the resources coming to their communities. Later, the subgroup created the Census Equity Fund as a platform for getting needed resources from funders to state and local get-out-the-count efforts in states with limited philanthropic resources or state funding to support the work (see [page 71](#)). As more funds were raised, the subgroup also adopted a "mini-grant" strategy focused on getting funding to local organizations that were less able to attract funds to support their census efforts. These funds were distributed via the American Library Association, the immigration and faith-based hub groups, and a coalition for groups working with formerly incarcerated people and their families, among other entities.

Under the Get Out the Count strategy, the hub groups would be supported to serve as intermediaries across their communities and provide what the initial plan for the work termed "coordination, training, materials and technical assistance" to state and local census campaigns across the country.<sup>4</sup>

To maximize coordination across the hubs, the Census Subgroup relied on the Census Counts coalition led by The Leadership Conference



### → Civil Rights Organizations

- Leadership Conference Education Fund/Census Counts Campaign (co-coordinator of States Count Action Network)

### Faith-Based Organizations

- Faith in Action
- Faith in Public Life
- National African American Clergy Network
- National Latino Evangelical Coalition
- Shepherding the Next Generation (a project of Council for a Strong America)

### LGBTQ Americans

- National LGBTQ Task Force

### Persons with Disabilities

- The Arc of the United States

### Low-income and Low-literacy Households

- Community Action Partnership
- Formerly Incarcerated Convicted People and Families Movement
- National Coalition for Literacy

### Native Americans and Native Alaskans

- Native American Rights Fund
- National Congress of American Indians
- National Urban Indian Family Coalition

<sup>4</sup>Get Out the Count 2020: An Implementation Plan, February 2018.



Photos courtesy of the Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama (¡HICA!) and Fair Count

Education Fund, Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC and NALEO Educational Fund. The coalition was the result of conversations among the funders and the three civil rights groups after the hiring of the former head of the U.S. Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division, Vanita Gupta, as president and CEO of The Leadership Conference in June 2017.

Gupta was determined to carve out an active role for The Leadership Conference in work on the 2020 census. She found willing and determined partners in NALEO Educational Fund CEO Arturo Vargas, a nationally recognized leader on issues affecting Latinos and a veteran of numerous census cycles; and John Yang, president and executive director of Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC and an accomplished civil rights and corporate attorney who worked in the Commerce Department during the Obama administration. Gupta already was serving alongside Vargas and Yang as cochairs of The Leadership Conference’s Census Task Force.

Census Counts was conceived as a diverse coalition that would provide a table for a range of interests to be involved in the broader work of ensuring a fair and accurate count. While the politicization of the 2020 census ended up limiting participation among some sectors that were wary about playing a high-profile role, the table included a range of civil rights and civic engagement groups, along with state coalitions, organized labor, business partners and others.

The Census Counts collaborative was housed at The Leadership Conference Education Fund. Starting in December 2018, the collaborative was led by Beth Lynk, a strategist and communications expert with extensive experience in policy and advocacy campaigns. ★



Philanthropy and  
the 2020 Census

# Funder Recruitment and Engagement: Bringing More Funders to the Table

**A**n important focus for the Census Subgroup from the start was outreach to other funders in support of the plan of action. ▶▶▶



“We knew from the outset that we weren’t going to be able to have the significant impact we wanted with just a handful of foundations sitting around that table,” said Erika Wood, who began participating in the subgroup meetings immediately after joining the staff of the Ford Foundation in early 2017 as a senior program officer on the civic engagement and government team. “So a really important focus of those early conversations was how do we make this table bigger.” Prior to Wood’s involvement, other Ford Foundation staff members had been active in the subgroup.

Wood recalled an informal conversation early in her tenure with Ford Foundation President Darren Walker when she mentioned the census collaborative and talked about how this work was a good fit for the foundation. In a follow-up meeting with Walker to explore how Ford could play more of a leadership role on the issue, she said he responded enthusiastically. “He was all in, and that was a game changer,” Wood said. Citing the foundation’s focus on issues of poverty and injustice, Wood said that Walker “immediately understood” how a fair and accurate census helps ensure that marginalized communities have representation and a voice.

In the months that followed, the Ford Foundation became an early leader in [activating more philanthropic support](#) for census work, in large part through Walker’s one-on-one outreach to other foundation CEOs. To assist with funder outreach, the foundation brought in Amy Dominguez-Arms as a consultant, based largely on her experience with the collaborative of California funders who worked on the 2010 census. Her role was to help coordinate outreach to funders across the country by Ford and other subgroup members. “We really tried

to focus people on what was at stake with the 2020 census, what the funding opportunities were, and how they could get involved,” said Dominguez-Arms.

Dominguez-Arms worked with Wood and the Bauman Foundation’s Gary Bass to design what she called a “classic fundraising campaign.” “We wanted to create a tailored experience where we were personally inviting funders to be a part of this important work,” Dominguez-Arms said. “A lot of what we did was about organizing, orchestrating and supporting outreach by the subgroup members to interested funders they knew, and supporting those contacts with email updates, messaging work, and follow-up.”

Bass said funder recruitment was an “all-hands-on-deck” exercise for the early funders—and ultimately, for many of the other funders they brought to the table. “We needed to really engage with people one-on-one in a lot of retail conversations, and we all took responsibility for that because we knew how important it was going to be to build a broad-based collaborative.”

Among the other subgroup members who were active in funder outreach during this period was Geri Mannion, director of the Strengthening U.S. Democracy Program and Special Opportunities Fund with Carnegie Corporation of New York. A veteran of the 1990, 2000 and 2010 censuses, Mannion said she was impressed by the group’s ability to make a powerful case for broad-based philanthropic support for an accurate and fair 2020 count. “As we all kept talking up the importance of investing in the census to everyone we knew, I felt like a funder would have to be living under a rock not to know about this work,” Mannion said.





Funders on the receiving end of appeals from the subgroup at this time included the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Carolyn Miller, a senior program officer in the foundation's Research, Evaluation and Learning unit, said two of her colleagues were participating in the quarterly census meetings convened by the subgroup and the Funders Census Initiative in 2016 and early 2017. But she wasn't quite sure how the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which is focused on health issues, could get involved in a more substantive way in the work. In ongoing conversations with Bass and others, however, Miller and her colleagues began to see a path for the foundation's census investments.

"What happened to change our view was how the subgroup and Gary in particular were incredibly welcoming and open and interested in helping us see the relevance for our work, connecting us with all sorts of people to explore opportunities and identify entry points for a foundation like us," Miller said.

Following an initial grant to the pooled fund in 2017, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation steadily increased its census investments over the course of the 2020 census cycle. "The reason we kept investing more was because we started to see very clearly how a fair and accurate census was absolutely aligned with our focus on health equity," Miller said. "We realized how the communities we care about are the ones most at risk for undercounts and for losing voice and representation if the census doesn't achieve a full, fair and accurate count."

Another funder that reached out to Bass and the subgroup to explore the possibility of getting involved was the Heising-Simons Foundation. A family foundation based in California, the grantmaker does not have a program focus on democracy or civic engagement, but President and CEO Deanna Gomby said the organization's work is driven by a powerful belief in building and protecting the power and voice of people and communities on issues from climate change and education to human rights. After the foundation made an initial grant to the subgroup's pooled fund in 2017, it invited Bass, Bauman Foundation consultant Karen Narasaki, and the Ford Foundation's Erika Wood to discuss what more it could do in a presentation to the foundation's board and staff. Based on these conversations, the Heising-Simons Foundation provided additional support, joined the Census Subgroup, and became an active participant in the quarterly meetings and other work.

"The ability to work in a collaborative that was focused on such a critical issue for democracy and that had such strong and expert leadership presented an exciting opportunity for us," said Gomby.



Photo courtesy of Arab American Institute



## Making a Public Case

At the same time that they were engaged in one-on-one contacts with colleague funders, the subgroup members also were making more public calls for philanthropy to join in the work. In a July 2018 Chronicle of Philanthropy [article](#), Bass and the Ford Foundation's Darren Walker joined with Antonia Hernández, president and CEO of the California Community Foundation, and Barbara Picower, president and chair of The JPB Foundation, in a broad appeal to philanthropy to "rescue the census" in the face of funding threats and the Trump administration's plans to add the citizenship question.

"Grant makers cannot replace the federal underfunding for the census, but we can use our resources and expertise to make the census fairer and more successful," they wrote.

Also making a public case for broader philanthropic engagement were census advocates supported by the subgroup. In a September 2017 [article](#) for the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, Leadership Conference President and CEO Vanita Gupta wrote: "In the current climate, broadening the coalition engaged in census work will be critical.

Foundations that understand the importance of the census to their other substantive areas of focus must find ways of ensuring a swift and sufficient investment in the work of community groups."

A crucial moment in the funder outreach campaign was a September 2018 [convening and dinner](#) for more than 50 foundation presidents hosted by Walker and the leaders of other foundations participating in the subgroup. Held at the Newseum in Washington, the event was organized to provide prospective funders with an opportunity to learn about the census and meet the leaders of some of the national groups leading census work. The "2020 Census Summit" event secured commitments of \$5 million from participating funders.

In the aftermath of that convening, the Ford and Bauman foundations and others initiated more one-on-one conversations and briefings at the CEO and program staff levels to make the case for investing in the 2020 census. Erika Wood at the Ford Foundation described the overall pitch to foundations as follows: "The census is so fundamental to so many different issues that foundations care about. If you care about health care or education or the environment or children, a fair and accurate census is critical to progress on all of those different issues because it means



**We knew from the outset that we weren't going to be able to have the significant impact we wanted with just a handful of foundations sitting around that table. So a really important focus of those early conversations was how do we make this table bigger."**

*Erika Wood, Senior Program Officer, Ford Foundation*





that the people affected by those issues are being seen and heard.”

In May 2019, Ford joined the Open Society Foundations, The JPB Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in announcing a commitment of \$20 million to census work and appealing to other funders to get involved. In an [open letter](#) addressed to their colleagues, the leaders of the four foundations appealed for broader engagement to fill a \$10 million gap in census funding. The letter received [extensive coverage](#) in the philanthropy press.

Thanks to these and other efforts, funding commitments for the 2020 census grew substantially over time. During 2016, the subgroup raised and spent \$2.3 million toward the census plan of action. Total spending rose to \$6.3 million in 2017, \$19 million in 2018, \$51 million in 2019 and \$37 million in 2020.

## Using Data to Show High Stakes

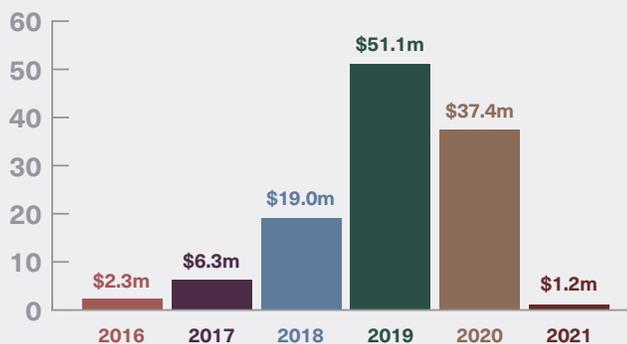
Bass said the funders quickly learned to tailor their outreach messages to topics that prospective funding partners might care about, highlighting the direct impact of the census on funding for various issues. Subgroup members also had to be prepared to counter some of the biggest concerns expressed by the funders they were talking to. “People thought the census is too political, or that it’s government’s job,” Bass said.

In response to these types of concerns, the subgroup members sought to help funder colleagues understand how a failed census would result in real harm for communities across the country for years to come. It was in the course of funder outreach on the topic that a critical early investment by the subgroup paid off in a big way. In 2016, the subgroup started supporting the George Washington Institute of Public Policy at The George Washington University to explore how the decennial census affected the distribution of federal funds to each state. Led by Research Professor Andrew Reamer, the institute subsequently [produced](#) detailed backgrounders on the costs of an undercount in each state, as well as the role of census data in guiding federal spending across the government. Also involved in the research was the Project on Government Oversight, a nonpartisan watchdog group.

Kristen Burns, associate director at the Grable Foundation, said the George Washington Institute of Public Policy statistics on Pennsylvania proved crucial in making the case to trustees and other audiences for the Pittsburgh grantmaker’s active engagement in the 2020 census, as well as its recruitment of other funders to join in the work. “The idea that every Pennsylvanian missed in

### National Philanthropic Spending By Year – 2020 Census

The Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup raised and spent \$118 million toward its three-part plan of action aimed at ensuring a fair and accurate 2020 census. This chart shows how national spending grew during the census cycle.





the census resulted in roughly \$20,000 of lost money for the state over 10 years really hit home for people,” Burns said. “When foundations talk about ROI for our investments, spending even a thousand dollars to get one person to respond to the census delivers huge returns.”

Maggie Gunther Osborn, who led census outreach for United Philanthropy Forum, said she had been wrestling for a while with the best strategies for getting funders engaged in the 2020 census. Then, during an early meeting of the subgroup, Andrew Reamer talked with the funders and stakeholders about his team’s research.

“He came in and said here are all of the line items in the federal budget and here’s how they are all affected by the census. And then he was able to track things down to the state level in all of those areas. And in that instant it was like a lightbulb went off for me. I was thinking this is the conversation we should be having with funders. This is the conversation that will make this relevant and help funders understand the alphabet soup of the census,” Osborn said.

Another resource funders flagged as hugely helpful in their outreach to philanthropic and other partners were maps developed by the Center for Urban Research at the City University of New York (CUNY) in a separate research effort supported by grants from the subgroup. The “CUNY maps,” as they came to be known, analyzed [response rates](#) to the 2000 and 2010 censuses down to the neighborhood level, allowing grantmakers and stakeholders to understand varying responses across different communities and populations, including those with the biggest undercounts.

“Those maps were incredibly helpful because we could use them with funders and nonprofits

and elected leaders to show where there were undercounts in the past, and to make the case for investing in census organizing and outreach so we could increase response rates in 2020,” said Kiki Jamieson, president of The Fund for New Jersey. The CUNY maps also served a crucial role later in the census cycle as the subgroup and its stakeholders targeted their get-out-the-count campaigns toward communities with historically high undercounts and areas with actual lower self-response rates after the census count began (see [page 69](#)).

As the census cycle continued, the George Washington Institute of Public Policy and the Center for Urban Research at the City University of New York became highly visible partners in policy advocacy and other activities. As the census count got under way in 2020, Steven Romalewski, director of the CUNY Mapping Service, was a fixture in weekly calls of funders and stakeholders as they parsed get-out-the-count data. Meanwhile, George Washington University Research Professor Andrew Reamer was an expert witness as civil rights groups and others went to court to challenge the Trump administration’s plans to add the citizenship question to the census.

The Census Subgroup also supported other research that helped make the case for investing in outreach to historically undercounted communities. A 2019 Urban Institute report supported by the funders, “[Assessing Miscounts in the 2020 Census](#),” received extensive media coverage based on its assessment of the risks of an unfair count. In addition, the subgroup supported demographer and census expert Bill O’Hare, who had been extensively involved in prior censuses, to do research and [writing](#) on issues related to undercounting young children. ▶▶▶



Photos courtesy of Jolt; Mujeres Latinas en Acción; and Arab American Institute

## FCI, United Philanthropy Forum Roles in Funder Outreach

While the Census Subgroup played a critical role in funder engagement and outreach in the early going, the Funders Census Initiative and United Philanthropy Forum eventually stepped in with their own concerted efforts to keep funders engaged and informed. Both organizations received grant support from the subgroup to fund their census-related outreach.

Jocelyn Bissonnette joined the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation in October 2018 as the first full-time director of the Funders Census Initiative. At that time, the subgroup had recruited a strong collaborative of national funders to join in the work, so Bissonnette ended up focusing her early outreach on getting more state and local funders involved. She said the funding from the subgroup was essential in enabling FCI to step up its funder outreach. "That support really allowed us to ramp up the work

in a way that just wouldn't have been possible without a full-time person," Bissonnette said.

FCI's activities included everything from the development of easily accessible educational materials for funders about the census to webinars, presentations, and other activities. The FCI listserv for funders grew from 200 when Bissonnette joined the team to 500 in 2020. As Bissonnette describes it, FCI's role was both to provide information and materials to encourage and support funders to get involved, and also to help build community among those funders. The FCI even developed and shared sample requests for proposals (RFPs) for funders to support their census-related outreach to potential grantees, as well as talking points for convincing foundation board members about the importance of investing in the census.

"We were charged with broadening the network of funders who are interested in the census and serving as a central resource hub to provide easy on-ramps for funders to be able to engage," she said. "The idea was to make it simple for funders who had never done this work before so they could make the



case internally and move to standing up their census grantmaking. We just wanted folks to feel we had their backs and they weren't doing this work in isolation."

To support this work, FCI developed a 20-member leadership team of diverse funders from across the country. Bissonnette said she was also in regular contact with Bass and others to make sure that FCI's work was well aligned with the subgroup's latest messaging and plans.

Sol Marie Alfonso Jones served as co-chair of the FCI leadership team. A senior program officer with The Long Island Community Foundation, Alfonso Jones was a leader of a group of funders in New York state working on census issues. The other FCI co-chair was Bauman Foundation board member Marcia Avner, a consultant, author and expert on advocacy and organizing for nonprofits. Alfonso Jones described the FCI's role as making sure there was nationwide engagement in the census among funders. "We wanted to create an open and accessible group that everyone would want to be a part of, a safe place for connecting with experts and sharing information and ideas," she said.

United Philanthropy Forum, for its part, launched what its former senior vice president and chief strategy officer, Maggie Gunther Osborn, called an "all-out campaign" to engage philanthropic support organizations (PSOs) across the country in census-related policy work. The forum's membership includes nearly 90 regional and national organizations who together represent more than 7,000 funders. These groups run the gamut from national entities like the Center for Effective Philanthropy and Funders for LGBTQ

Issues to local, state and regional grantmaker forums and associations.

Working in close alignment with both the subgroup and FCI, United Philanthropy Forum focused on educating its member PSOs about the census and supporting them to engage in census-related policy work. The forum provided tools and resources to support PSOs in their advocacy with local and state governments, and Osborn regularly attended PSO convenings across the country to make the case for census work. "I became the census crazy person going anywhere and everywhere to try and convert people to the cause," she said.

In addition to funding from the subgroup, the forum received grant support from the Joyce Foundation for a two-year project to mobilize regional funders to advocate for policy improvements for the 2020 count. The forum used some of its Joyce Foundation funding to offer "mini-grants" of up to \$5,000 to PSOs in four midwestern states. Osborn said the mini-grants proved invaluable in spurring PSOs to get involved. For example, after receiving a mini-grant from the forum, the Council of Michigan Foundations joined with the Michigan Nonprofit Association on a statewide [campaign](#) to mobilize the state's nonprofits to work together for a fair and accurate count.

"The mini-grant wasn't a lot of money, but it sparked a conversation about how to get involved in the census and why it was important, and the same thing was happening in big and little ways across the country," Osborn said.

Among the many PSOs that became deeply involved in the census through outreach and ▶▶▶



I think it was very powerful for our members to see that national funders were making a commitment to this issue. There was a feeling that funders here needed to be part of this and that we could do it in a way that fit into an integrated strategy that was going to be playing out nationwide.”



*Meredith Higashi, Director of Public Policy and Advocacy, Philanthropy Northwest*

support from the forum, as well as FCI and the subgroup, was Philanthropy Northwest, a network of funders working in six states from Wyoming to Alaska. Meredith Higashi, director of public policy and advocacy with the organization, said census-related appeals and information from United Philanthropy Forum were the spark in getting Philanthropy Northwest to commit to census work in the fall of 2017. Then, in early 2018, Higashi invited Karen Narasaki to speak about the census at a convening of the organization’s membership cohosted with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other partners. Higashi had previously worked with Narasaki on the staff of Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC.

Higashi recalled the convening with Narasaki, which had more than 100 attendees, as a “catalytic event.” “That really got our members in Washington excited about the work and it helped people see there was a bigger movement happening in philanthropy,” she said. “And it showed how funders could get on board through really concrete and collaborative work.”

Before long, Philanthropy Northwest was holding additional member convenings and producing a range of [resources](#) on the census for its member funders. Toward the end of 2018, it also began conversations with the Gates Foundation about creating a pooled fund to support census work in Washington state. The [Washington Census Equity Fund](#) grew into a collaborative of three dozen funders who pooled \$1.5 million in 2019 and 2020 to support community-based organizations and tribes in their census outreach to historically undercounted communities.

Higashi said the work of United Philanthropy Forum, FCI and the subgroup opened the door for Philanthropy Northwest to play an active part in census work in its region. “I think it was very powerful for our members to see that national funders were making a commitment to this issue,” said Higashi, who ended up joining the leadership team at the FCI. “There was a feeling that funders here needed to be part of this and that we could do it in a way that fit into an integrated strategy that was going to be playing out nationwide.”





## “A Lot We Could Do”

Across the country, PSOs and funders share similar stories about their initial contacts with subgroup members, FCI or United Philanthropy Forum as the genesis for deep work on the 2020 census. Meghna Goswami, program director for civic engagement with the Houston Endowment, recalled a conversation with Carnegie Corporation of New York’s Geri Mannion in 2018; Goswami and Mannion had a history of close collaboration on immigration issues. When Goswami mentioned that the endowment might be interested in working on the 2020 census, Mannion told her about the subgroup and connected her with Gary Bass. The conversation with Bass, in turn, led to an invitation for Narasaki to appear at a convening of 35 or so Texas funders in March 2019 to discuss how they could support a fair and accurate count in Texas.

“I thought we were a little late in the game, but Gary and Karen told us that wasn’t the case and there was still a lot we could do,” Goswami said.

The connection to Bass and Narasaki also proved helpful in connecting the Houston Endowment to other funders across the country that were already investing in 2020 census work. “That was really helpful, just learning about what other communities were doing so we could pull some of those best practices to Houston,” Goswami said.

Ultimately, the Houston Endowment supported the partners in Houston in Action, a local collective impact initiative seeded by the endowment, as they embarked on a plan to get

out the count in undercounted communities across the area. The Houston Endowment also funded census efforts in other nearby counties. In addition, the endowment worked closely with the statewide coalition led by the Communities Foundation of Texas and Every Texan that [pooled philanthropic resources](#) to create a Texas Counts campaign to support a fair and accurate count, particularly in historically undercounted regions of the state.

Goswami said the Houston Endowment and other Texas funders likely would have engaged in some 2020 census work even if national funders hadn’t come together via the subgroup, FCI and United Philanthropy Forum. But she said the work in Houston and statewide was “so much more impactful” because of what was happening nationally to rally and support philanthropy on the census. Not only did the national funders invest in Texas via the subgroup’s pooled fund, but they also provided Goswami and her Texas colleagues with the information, resources and inspiration they needed to get out the count.

“Just being part of those conversations at the national level, and having access to everything that was coming out of FCI, was invaluable in giving credibility to what we were doing in Texas and making sure we were connected to the bigger picture,” Goswami said. ★



Philanthropy and  
the 2020 Census

# The Census Gets Crazy: 2017-2020

In the opening weeks of the Trump administration in January 2017, a draft executive order began making the rounds in Washington, DC. ▶▶▶



With the stated goal of “prioritiz[ing] the interests of American workers,” the unissued order included a provision directing the Census Bureau to ask about respondents’ U.S. citizenship and immigration status on the “long-form questionnaire in the decennial census.” The American Community Survey (ACS), which replaced the long-form census questionnaire and is sent to a sample of U.S. addresses on a monthly basis, already included a citizenship question. The Census Bureau had [never before](#) asked every person in every household in the United States about their citizenship.

Word of the draft executive order was an alarming development that stoked fears that the White House and Congress might resurrect proposals to add questions on U.S. citizenship and legal status to the 2020 census. Funders and census stakeholders had long argued that such questions would have the effect of substantially reducing response rates among immigrants. What’s more, the Constitution states that the census should count the “whole number of persons” living in each state, with no mention of immigration status.

It was the first sign of the rollercoaster to come as funders and census stakeholders battled a range of threats to the fairness and accuracy of the census, from the citizenship question to ongoing policy fights to the advent of a global pandemic that threatened to shut down the count right as it was getting started.

## The Continuing Fight on Appropriations

Congressional demands that the Census Bureau not spend more on the 2020 census than it did on the 2010 count faced mounting scrutiny and criticism as the Trump administration took office in 2017. In addition to highlighting the potential consequences of funding shortages, the Census Subgroup supported its nonprofit partners as they continued to press the case for substantially more funding to ensure a fair and accurate count. These appeals appeared to have found a receptive audience at the Commerce Department when the administration [told Congress](#) in October 2017 that it would require \$15.6 billion to conduct a “full, fair and accurate census,” a significant bump-up from the \$12-13 billion ceiling Congress had set. Nevertheless, in subsequent budgets the Trump administration regularly requested [less funding](#) than Commerce requested for the census.

The lack of adequate funding was already causing problems for the 2020 count in 2017, as the Census Bureau was forced to cancel and [scale back](#) plans for important “dress rehearsals” aimed at testing technologies and systems and troubleshooting potential problems. When the



Photos courtesy of Jolt and Jera Stribling



Census Subgroup supported the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality to conduct an [analysis](#) of the one “end-to-end” census test the bureau performed in Providence, Rhode Island, in 2018, the researchers flagged a number of challenges. These included: shortfalls in the hiring of census enumerators, potential readiness problems with the bureau’s IT systems, and public distrust of the census due to the controversy over the citizenship question. NALEO Educational Fund found similar problems in its own supported [research](#).

Ultimately, philanthropic support proved crucial to the ability of anchor grantees like The Leadership Conference, NALEO and Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC to engage in public education, advocacy and organizing aimed at assuring adequate funding for the census. Through [letters](#) to Congress, [briefings](#) for elected leaders and their staffs, factsheets and talking points for advocates, media outreach, and other activities, national groups supported by the Census Subgroup were engaged in a wide-ranging effort to [save the census](#).

Meanwhile, the Funders Census Initiative, United Philanthropy Forum and members of the Census Subgroup engaged in their own outreach and educational activities to help funders understand the importance of adequate funding and get involved. FCI hosted webinars and provided [updates](#) on the issue via its website and listserv, while the forum wrote letters to congressional leaders and provided member PSOs with talking points and leave-behind materials for congressional meetings, as well as other support so they could advocate for increased funding with their members of Congress. Some funders

and philanthropic support organizations also signed onto a December 2019 [letter](#) from the Census Project on the issue.

Ultimately, these and other efforts paid off when Congress provided more funding than the Census Bureau requested in its 2019 and 2020 budgets. Advocates celebrated the fact that lawmakers were providing [“full funding”](#) to conduct the count. “That was a massive win,” the Bauman Foundation’s Gary Bass said of the increase in appropriations for the Census Bureau. “And the reason it happened is because The Leadership Conference and the other groups were able to make a strong case that the success of the census relied on adequate funding.”

It wasn’t just at the national level where philanthropy and its nonprofit partners were working to ensure adequate funding for the 2020 census. Funders and their nonprofit grantees, in fact, played a crucial role in many state-level policy battles over the funding needed to get out the count among residents, especially those in historically undercounted communities.

In New Mexico, for example, lawmakers initially displayed a reluctance to commit needed state resources to census outreach, despite the fact that the state is considered the most difficult to count in the nation. But thanks to public education and other activities spurred by the funder-led coalition [NM Counts](#) and its nonprofit and community partners, lawmakers ultimately agreed to commit \$11 million to this work.

“New Mexico ended up investing more per capita in census outreach than any other state with bipartisan support from the legislature,” said Allan Oliver, executive director of the Thornburg





“Working together, our partners got the conversation started about what it would really take to count every hard-to-reach Californian. They said if you really want a credible and effective effort, you have to put a lot more money into on-the-ground outreach through trusted messengers.”



*Tara Westman, Senior Program Manager, The California Endowment*

Foundation, a family foundation in Santa Fe. He added that the governor stood up a powerful, bipartisan Complete Count Commission that included state agencies, tribal governments, business organizations, elected officials and community-based organizations, with the commission collectively deciding to dedicate most of its outreach funding to historically undercounted communities. “That investment directly followed the joint strategy, research, messaging, and priorities established by the New Mexico funders group and our nonprofit table partners,” Oliver said.

A similar story played out in California, where lawmakers initially were proposing to spend \$40 million on census outreach. Given the size of the state’s population, advocates considered this to be insufficient. In response, a group of nonprofit organizations conducted research to determine the costs of outreach to the estimated 14 million residents who would require focused and specialized attention to ensure their participation in the census. The groups were led by the Advancement Project’s

[Census Policy Advocacy Network](#), which received core support from The California Endowment, the Irvine Foundation and other funders in the state. After the network publicized its findings and reached out to lawmakers, the legislature ended up allocating a total of \$187 million toward census activities over three years.

“Working together, our partners got the conversation started about what it would really take to count every hard-to-reach Californian. They said if you really want a credible and effective effort, you have to put a lot more money into on-the-ground outreach through trusted messengers,” said Tara Westman, senior program manager with The California Endowment. Later, after state leaders realized how hard it was going to be to disseminate these funds via individual contracts with community groups, they contracted with community foundations, United Ways and other partners to manage coordinated outreach campaigns in their areas.





## The Citizenship Question

The Trump administration went public with its intention to add a citizenship question to the 2020 census in March 2018, when Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross announced plans to ask census respondents, “Is this person a citizen of the United States?” The government subsequently opened a public comment period on the issue ending August 7.

Within days of Ross’s announcement, more than 300 foundation leaders joined in a conference call organized by the Census Subgroup to discuss how to respond. In the following weeks, FCI and United Philanthropy Forum mobilized to provide background information on the issue, host [events](#), and engage in other activities to provide funders with more information and [encourage them to submit public comments](#).

One high-profile result of the extensive funder engagement on the issue was an August 7 [letter](#) signed by more than 300 philanthropic leaders calling for removal of the citizenship question from the census. “We have different funding priorities, are ideologically diverse, and do not always agree with each other,” the funders wrote. “But we wholeheartedly agree that the citizenship question should not be part of the 2020 Census.”

In other activities, funder groups across the country organized their own outreach and letter-writing efforts. For example, United Philanthropy Forum rallied the leaders of 33 philanthropy-serving organizations to develop their own [letter](#) opposing the question. Philanthropy Northwest, Northern California Grantmakers, Southern

California Grantmakers and the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy were some of the regional associations to submit letters of their own.

Gary Bass said the citizenship question was a galvanizing moment in philanthropy’s work on the 2020 census. “We still had appropriations fights happening at that time, and the response to the citizenship question showed a growing understanding and acceptance across philanthropy that we all needed to be engaged and use our voices to ensure a successful census,” Bass said. “People didn’t want the census to become politicized and there was already a lot of concern about undercounting populations that funders care about, and so that was a big moment.”

Tara Westman at The California Endowment said funders in her state were especially concerned about the citizenship question, given the large population of undocumented residents in the state. “This was essentially a plan to reduce 2 million people from the California count while stoking fear among all immigrants about participating, so there was a wide recognition that California had a lot to lose in terms of representation and funding if this went forward,” Westman said. “Funders also understood the importance of demonstrating solidarity with immigrant communities, as well as the costs of the social division it would cause to say that we will count some people and not others.”

At the national level, the Census Subgroup and its members provided rapid-response funds to many of the funders’ core civil rights grantees to support litigation against the citizenship question. Organizations such as the ACLU, the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, MALDEF, Asian Americans Advancing Justice |





AAJC, and the Brennan Center led the opposition in the courts. Bass estimates that these and other groups filed more than 50 legal briefs against the citizenship question. When the issue made it to the U.S. Supreme Court, the justices ruled that the Commerce Department's decision to add the question violated federal law. Analysis of the June 27, 2019, Court decision suggested that Chief Justice John Roberts, who cast the deciding vote in the case, was [likely swayed](#) by arguments that the census was being changed for political reasons.

Florencia Gutierrez with the Annie E. Casey Foundation called the unified response of philanthropy against the citizenship question a “game changer.” “That one event really showed the amazing power of this collaborative we were building,” she said. “Without that table, and without the sense of common cause it created, some foundations might have developed their own briefs or statements but it would have been scattershot and much smaller in scale. I am so thankful that we had the capacity to organize quickly to make our collective voice heard.”

On July 11, 2019, President Trump announced that he was dropping plans to add the citizenship question to the 2020 census. At the same time, the White House issued an executive order instructing the Census Bureau to use administrative data from other federal agencies (such as the Social Security Administration and Immigration and Customs Enforcement) to affirm the immigration status of census respondents.

The July 11 announcement was widely considered to be a White House retreat on the issue of excluding unauthorized immigrants from the census count. Yet funders and their allies still had their work cut out for them as their focus



## Assessing Philanthropy's Relationship with the Census Bureau

If philanthropy is looking for important partners in the work of assuring a fair and accurate census, number one on the list would be the Census Bureau itself. The Census Subgroup and its funders set out from the start to create an open line of communication with bureau officials. Then-bureau director John Thompson attended some of the early funder meetings before retiring in 2017. In addition, the funders and their Census Counts partners tried to coordinate their grantmaking for communications and advertising with what the bureau was doing to ensure that philanthropy's investments were adding value when it came to reaching historically undercounted communities. →



Photos courtesy of Jera Stribling and NAKASEC



shifted to getting out the count, particularly among the nation's immigrant communities. The reason: 70 percent of U.S. adults still believed the citizenship question would be part of the census, according to a December 2019 [survey](#) from the Urban Institute.

In addition, the Trump administration continued to show a determination to politicize the census. In July 2020, for example, Trump issued a presidential memorandum stating that the administration would exclude unauthorized immigrants from apportionment data for the first time in U.S. history. In an apparent effort to advance these plans, the White House placed an unprecedented four political appointees in top jobs at the Census Bureau, starting while the census count was occurring.

The administration's plans for altering the count never came to full fruition, and the bureau's Office of Inspector General issued a damning [report](#) on how two of Trump's appointees were placing significant pressure on census statisticians to try and exclude unauthorized residents. Together, these developments illustrated the intense political pressure the White House was placing on the Census Bureau, as well as the urgency of funder-supported efforts to ensure a fair and accurate count.

## COVID-19 and a Changing Census Timeline

The U.S. Census Bureau began mailing 2020 census invitations to a majority of households in mid-March 2020, the same month the



→ In 2018, the bureau designated a staff member, Jennifer Shopkorn, to serve as liaison to the funders during the remainder of the census cycle. This was an important step, according to the Bauman Foundation's Gary Bass, in assuring that philanthropy had a direct point of contact for raising questions and concerns and sharing information about its work and investments. It became even more critical when the pandemic created the need for numerous changes in the Census Bureau's field operations.



Photo courtesy of Virginia Coalition of Latino Organizations

That said, Bass noted that the relationship between philanthropy and the Census Bureau was “complicated,” in large part because of the politicization of the 2020 census, the pressures created by the COVID-19 pandemic and other issues. It's no secret that the bureau was under





World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus a global pandemic. As states and localities across the country began to implement social distancing and shelter-in-place orders, funders and their grantees were forced to adjust years' worth of planning. In-person events, door-to-door canvassing and other activities were canceled as people and organizations explored how to engage in safer, mostly virtual ways with historically undercounted communities. (See [page 66](#) for more on getting out the count.)

At the same time, the Census Bureau announced a number of COVID-related operational adjustments of its own. One of these was a three-month extension of the census count through October 31; it was originally slated to conclude July 31. In the weeks and months following the April 2020 announcement of the new end date, the House and Senate introduced bills extending the legal deadlines for the Census Bureau to deliver official counts to guide the reapportionment and redistricting processes. This happened after Census Bureau officials went public with concerns about their ability to deliver reliable redistricting and apportionment data by the deadlines mandated by law.

In August 2020, however, the Commerce Department announced its intention to cut census operations *shorter* because of the pandemic. The new target date for ending door-to-door enumeration and self-response operations was September 30. Headlines across the country linked the new deadline to the possibility that the Trump administration might want to control the apportionment numbers in case the then-president lost the November election. An internal Census Bureau analysis obtained by Congress [revealed](#) some of the consequences of the curtailed schedule for the Census Bureau's data

→ intense pressure from all sides during the 2020 cycle—including from Congress, the White House and census advocates.

Advocates and their philanthropic partners were particularly concerned about a lack of transparency at the bureau. For example, bureau officials would not give the Census Subgroup and its partners an advance walk-through of its online form and phone operations, making it impossible for trusted groups on the ground to help households understand what to expect. The bureau also refused to provide public notice when its phone lines got overwhelmed early in the process. This created excessively long wait times, with the result that groups engaged in census outreach could no longer feel confident advising communities to reach out the bureau with questions and concerns.

The subgroup and its partners also were frustrated when the bureau would not provide sufficient advance information about its paid advertising content and plans, making it difficult for funders and state agencies to minimize unnecessary duplication and sufficiently fill the gaps. Finally, Census Bureau staff working locally were sometimes giving information that conflicted with what was coming from national headquarters. ★





processing efforts: “Serious errors discovered in the data may not be fixed — due to lack of time to research and understand the root cause,” the document warned.

Philanthropy’s response to the prospect of a hurried census echoed what happened after the Trump administration initially announced its plans for the citizenship question. Just two days after the announcement of the curtailed schedule, more than 500 philanthropic organizations signed a [letter](#) to Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and Census Bureau Chief Steven Dillingham urging the bureau not to rush the significant enumeration and data processing work that remained unfinished at the time. Like the letter about the citizenship question, this one signified broad-based concern across philanthropy about the integrity of the 2020 census. As Jocelyn Bissonnette of the Funders Census Initiative put it at the time: “Philanthropy has raised its voice at this critical moment because communities deserve to be fairly and accurately counted, resourced, and represented.”

Funders at all levels wrote their own letters and engaged in public education and outreach to help communities and partners understand the importance of taking the time to conduct a fair and accurate census. In a “Letter to the Community,” the president and CEO of the Houston Endowment, Ann B. Stern, [wrote](#), “This curtailment will almost certainly result in an inaccurate census count, which is bad news for our region.”

After a federal judge reinstated the October 31 end date for the census, the Supreme Court decided on October 13 that the bureau could end data collection on October 15; the Court did not address the timing of the Census

Bureau’s delivery of data for apportionment and redistricting. Once again, funders spoke up with a statement from the Funders Census Initiative expressing alarm about the impact of the move on census data quality. “The Bureau needs additional time to do all it can to improve data quality and accuracy,” the statement read. “The stakes are too high to rush this work.” Meanwhile, many of the civil rights groups funded by the subgroup and its members engaged in their own [advocacy](#) on the issue.

Ultimately, the Census Bureau ended data collection for the 2020 census on October 15 at 11:59 p.m. Later, the bureau decided to postpone delivery of apportionment data until no later than April 30, 2021; it was released April 26. The bureau shared all redistricting data with states in August and September 2021.

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## Census Data Quality in Focus

The reason funders and their allies were so concerned about the ever-shifting timelines for completing the count and delivering key data came down to two words: data quality. From their earliest conversations, members of the Census Subgroup and their partners in the Census Counts collaborative regularly expressed concerns about what would happen if the 2020 census fell dramatically short of achieving the goal of a fair and accurate count. It’s why they began their work with a focus on congressional budget mandates that would have vastly shortchanged the Census Bureau of the resources required for the count. And it’s also why a small group of funders began meeting in 2018 to discuss possible funding





strategies for averting what they referred to collectively as “a failed census.”

At the same time that the Census Subgroup members were having their initial conversations about census data quality, data and technology expert Denice Ross, a former senior advisor with the White House Office of Management and Budget, received support from Schmidt Futures, a funder focused on science and technology, to do her own work on census data quality issues. “The North Star was the best count possible, but we also had to figure out ways to remediate if that didn’t happen,” Ross said.

Ross convened a diverse table of historians, data scientists, former Census Bureau leaders and others to begin talking about the issue. They became known as the Census Quality Reinforcement Task Force. “Basically, it was a table for everyone who was worried about the census,” she said. “This became a safe space where we could try to stay ahead of possible scenarios and have ideas and plans at the ready if bad things happened.”

Ultimately, Ross’s table drew support from other funders including the Bernard and Anne Spitzer Charitable Trust, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Later, the Census Subgroup supported members of the table to conduct additional research and planning.

Data quality became a major focus for the funders as the 2020 census cycle moved toward conclusion. Of particular concern to the funders and their nonprofit partners: the census ended early despite the fact that self-response rates were lagging significantly in many urban and rural areas, as well as in predominantly Black,

## Fast Facts! ★ ★ ★

Two days after the Commerce Department’s August 2020 announcement of a curtailed schedule for completing census operations, **more than 500 philanthropic organizations** signed a letter to Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and Census Bureau Chief Steven Dillingham urging the bureau not to rush the significant enumeration and data processing work that remained unfinished at the time.

Hispanic, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native communities, compared to 2010.

Gary Bass and Leadership Conference President and CEO Vanita Gupta raised their concerns about census data quality in a December 2020 [article](#) for Ms. Magazine. Their conclusion: “There is a growing consensus among census stakeholders and data experts that the 2020 census data are likely to be insufficiently accurate for many if not most of the use cases.”

Acting on these and other concerns, the Census Subgroup raised \$6 million in additional funding from foundations to address census data quality issues during late 2020 and early 2021. The funds were slated for additional research, litigation and communications around the importance of high-quality data, among other activities. ★



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# Getting Out the Count: How Philanthropy Supported 2020 Census Outreach

**F**rom the start of their work together, a core goal for the funders involved in the 2020 census was ensuring a fair and accurate count. ▶▶▶



The plan of action adopted by the Census Subgroup in November 2015 included among its three goals “supporting outreach and public education to improve response rates for the 2020 census, particularly among undercounted populations.” Over the course of the census cycle, this work evolved from early investments in research to craft effective messaging and communications strategies to an all-out sprint in 2019 and 2020 to support groups working at all levels to get out the count in historically undercounted communities.

By the end of August 2018, the Census Subgroup had raised and invested about \$30 million in national efforts to promote an accurate census count. About 70 different foundations had provided financial support and grants directed to about 75 organizations for policy work, research, communications, outreach to new audiences, and other key activities. In September 2018, the subgroup announced a goal of raising another \$35 million for the remaining national 2020 census efforts, with the bulk of the funding going to get-out-the-count (GOTC) efforts. As part of their GOTC strategy, the funders created

a new Census Equity Fund that would pool funder investments and make grants to support census outreach in states with large numbers of historically undercounted communities.

## Messaging Research and Communications

According to Karen Narasaki, who was consulting with the Bauman Foundation on the 2020 census, the funders’ early focus on messaging and communications was dictated by the fact that the Census Bureau’s extensive get-out-the-count outreach and advertising don’t always reach historically undercounted populations. For example, the bureau doesn’t promote census participation across the full range of ethnic media channels, and its messaging doesn’t necessarily reflect the concerns, interests, culture and languages of all communities. In addition, as an arm of the federal government the bureau isn’t always



**We knew we were going to focus on historically undercounted populations, so we wanted to really understand how the census is perceived within these different communities, and how open or closed people were to participating in the census.”**

*Carrie Davis, Democracy Program Director, Joyce Foundation*



a trusted messenger across all communities, particularly immigrants and people of color.

The funders set out to respond to these challenges by supporting multilingual translation of census materials and investing in hub groups and consultants to conduct culturally-resonant messaging research focused on specific undercounted populations, such as Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, Arab Americans, Native Americans, and families with young children. Some of this work was based on an early landscape scan conducted by Freedman Consulting to assess the field's communication needs.

Carrie Davis, democracy program director with the Joyce Foundation, co-chaired a communications subcommittee of the subgroup to help coordinate these investments. "We knew we were going to focus on historically undercounted populations, so we wanted to really understand how the census is perceived within these different communities, and how open or closed people were to participating in the census," Davis said. "Do they know what the census is? Are they skeptical of it? Do they need more information about it? And who are the most compelling messengers to get them to participate?"

In 2018, the Census Bureau conducted its Census Barriers, Attitudes and Motivators (CBAM) study to drive its messaging and media planning for the 2020 count. According to Davis, the hub groups' research was necessary in part because the CBAM study had been delayed due to funding uncertainties and the groups needed data to help guide their early outreach and education. The funder-supported research also complemented the CBAM findings by providing

a "deeper look" at historically undercounted populations. For example, the hub group Partnership for America's Children received support from the funders for opinion research and message development focused on outreach to families with young children, while Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC conducted focus groups and surveys to help guide outreach to Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities.

Arturo Vargas, CEO of NALEO Educational Fund, said the funders' support was critical in providing NALEO with the resources to research and develop messages, materials and outreach aimed at Latino communities across the country. At the same time, he noted that some of the research and messaging work supported early on by the funders may have been duplicative.

"The decision to fund so many groups oftentimes created a little bit of redundancy and recreating the wheel by different groups," Vargas said. He went on to suggest that the funders and the hubs would have been better served if they had worked together early on to clarify the "overall research needs of the field."

As an example of the messaging guidance resulting from the hub groups' research, subgroup grantee Color of Change found that Black communities could be motivated to participate in the census through messages emphasizing how an accurate census assures adequate funding for community programs. "The fact that undercounts in cities with high Black populations could have caused them to lose millions of dollars in funding for important programs and services clearly communicates why census participation is important," a Color of Change [toolkit](#) advised local advocates.





With the results of the groups' research in hand, the funders and stakeholders moved to dissemination and application of their findings. The funders supported the hubs to share their findings across their networks, along with messaging, advertising, toolkits, and even sample social media posts and graphics for use at the local level. The hubs also provided training to state and local partners on effective marketing and advertising strategies. Meanwhile, United Philanthropy Forum and the Funders Census Initiative shared the results of the messaging work with funders via [webinars](#) and other means. To bolster this work, the funders supported outreach to various constituencies that could serve as allies in messaging and outreach (e.g., business, faith-based groups and local governments).

According to Davis, one challenge the funders and their partners encountered in the course of this dissemination process was that they were amassing a huge amount of material. "Just coordinating all of the information was hard because there was so much," she said.

The groups conducting the research and developing materials used their own websites and communications channels to make the information available across their networks. But the sheer volume of information was intimidating, and there was no single place where nonprofits, government agencies and other organizations could access (and easily search) the available materials to find those that were most relevant to their work.

In response, the Census Counts collaborative spearheaded by The Leadership Conference Education Fund launched a new [website](#) in March 2019 intended as a one-stop resource for easy-to-find census information and resources, including



## Highlighting the Costs of an Undercount

The funders' early investments in research on the importance of the census and the costs of an undercount proved critical in informing messaging and outreach to get out the count. The [interactive maps](#) developed by the Center for Urban Research at the City University of New York (CUNY) provided a neighborhood-level view of where there were undercounts in 2000 and 2010, providing local and state groups with critical information to target their campaigns.

In addition, the funders supported the George Washington Institute of Public Policy at The George Washington University to explore how the census affected the distribution of federal funds to each state. Funders credit this [research](#) with providing critical data and information as they and their nonprofit partners made the case in their communities and states about why census participation was so important.

Last but not least, funders provided support to the Urban Institute to produce the 2019 report, "[Assessing Miscounts in the 2020 Census](#)"; and to demographer and census expert Bill O'Hare for the development and free dissemination of his 2019 book, [Differential Undercounts in the U.S. Census: Who is Missed?](#) ★



on other websites. Filters allowed visitors to search materials by product type (brochure, factsheet, etc.), targeted community, language and more.

The Census Counts website was an important contribution. Davis said she only wishes the materials had gone up sooner so stakeholders could launch coordinated campaigns to get people and groups to use them.

Another concern expressed by some funders was that the available resources weren't widely advertised to all groups and communities engaged in census outreach. Kiki Jamieson, president of The Fund for New Jersey, pointed out that many local governments and nonprofits in her state weren't aware of the wealth of materials and content available to support their outreach to historically undercounted communities—in large part because they were not part of the hub group networks. "The national groups did tremendous work on messaging and materials, but the information didn't always travel down as effectively as it could have," Jamieson said.

The messaging work philanthropy supported around the 2020 census became even more crucial as the Trump administration moved forward with plans to add a citizenship question to the census (see [page 60](#)). At issue were concerns that the question (and the high-profile debate around it) were creating fear about the census in immigrant communities. Even after the Trump administration withdrew its plans to add the question, there was still enormous uncertainty.

"We kept hearing from groups that there was confusion," said Davis. "People thought the citizenship question was still going to be on

the census, and there was also a mistaken belief that census data could be wrongly used for immigration enforcement or other law enforcement purposes."

Given that the Census Bureau would in all likelihood not be a trusted messenger on these topics, the funders and their partners developed their own messaging, materials and advertising on issues such as [confidentiality](#) and related issues. Groups also continued to highlight the importance of recruiting trusted messengers to carry vetted GOTC messages to targeted communities.

## Investing in Digital Organizing

In addition to supporting broader work on messaging and communications, the funders and their partners recognized even before the COVID-19 crisis that digital outreach and organizing were going to play an unprecedented role in ensuring a fair and accurate census in 2020. Consequently, the subgroup created a Census Digital Organizing Advisory Group (C-DOG) with representation from funders, stakeholders, technology and organizing experts, and more.

Their charge was to identify and recommend pilot projects the funders could support to experiment with using digital organizing tools (such as peer-to-peer text messaging, social media, and search engine optimization) for outreach to historically undercounted communities. In addition, the funders and their partners wanted to strengthen the capacity of groups to do online census organizing and outreach.





C-DOG Chair Nick Chedli Carter, managing director of the civic engagement group Resilient Democracy, said the group's work ended up supporting a variety of innovative approaches. These included: "geofencing" of cellphone data to target ads at locations with high concentrations of historically undercounted people; using automated chatbots to recruit census workers and answer questions about the census; and collaborating with the hub group State Voices to develop a texting platform for use by state and local census advocates to reach millions of people with census information. Carter also noted C-DOG's innovative efforts to apply a "trusted messenger" approach to census-related communications in the online world. ("Trusted messengers" are community members whom people trust to deliver important news and information.) One strategy groups adopted in this work was the use of the Facebook Messenger app to allow people to repost census messages to friends.

In addition to supporting projects like these, the C-DOG funders contracted with two digital companies, 270 Strategies and Do Big Things, to build the digital organizing capacity of the national census hub groups and other nonprofits working on the census nationwide. Over time, the consultants organized and hosted trainings and produced toolkits and resources on a range of topics. Their [Census Digital Academy](#) included a series of videos, webinars and trainings on how organizations could strengthen digital outreach.

"I think the biggest benefit of all of this is we created a support system to help organizations navigate a completely topsy-turvy civic engagement environment," Carter said. "I don't think there will ever be one particular strategy, tool or platform that is going to solve all of

our problems when it comes to reaching the populations we want to reach. But I do think we created an infrastructure to help groups innovate, troubleshoot and iterate as needed."

Participating funders were equally enthusiastic about being a part of C-DOG. "There was a lot of really good capacity and learning that came out of that," said the Joyce Foundation's Carrie Davis of the funders' investments in digital organizing support. "It actually turned out to be an incredibly good thing we did this, because when the pandemic hit and groups had to shift to these non-contact forms of outreach, they already knew what to do." (See [page 75](#) for more on how organizations shifted their outreach because of COVID-19.)

## The Launch of the Census Equity Fund

Getting out the census count in regions with high proportions of historically undercounted populations is complicated by the fact that these same regions often have relatively few government or philanthropic resources to support the preparations needed to promote an accurate population count. In the face of this conundrum, the Census Subgroup created the Census Equity Fund to try and drive more resources to those regions. Bass originally proposed the idea for the fund in a presentation he made to the board of the Heising-Simons Foundation at the end of 2017, together with Bauman Foundation consultant Karen Narasaki and the Ford Foundation's Erika Wood.





“ Having national funders step up with this support (for the Census Equity Fund) and essentially redistribute it to other states in that way was unprecedented and fantastic.”

*Allan Oliver, Executive Director, Thornburg Foundation (New Mexico)*



As more funders responded favorably to the idea for the fund, Amy Dominguez-Arms, who consulted with the Ford Foundation and the subgroup on funder outreach, helped develop guidelines and procedures for its grantmaking. “This was an effort to address the problem where there are clear haves and have-nots among different places when it comes to finding the resources to do deep census work,” Dominguez-Arms said. It also was a vehicle for funders, and particularly national funders, to support on-the-ground work in states and communities they might otherwise have to overlook because of a lack of understanding of what organizations and activities to support.

Bass said the Census Equity Fund rapidly gained popularity among the national funders for this reason. “The ability to target your funding to places where you can really make a difference in increasing the count for populations you care about as a funder—that was a huge selling point,” Bass said.

The Census Equity Fund issued its first request for proposals in November 2018 and initially planned four rounds of grants between early 2019 and early 2020. Grantees included state or

regional collaboratives of funders, nonprofits and other organizations. The funders initially prioritized census outreach efforts in 19 states<sup>5</sup> based on the proportion of the population in historically undercounted census tracts, as well as the numbers and proportions of particularly vulnerable populations. They also considered available philanthropic resources in the states, particularly large foundations with the capacity to contribute locally to census outreach, and public funding that had been allocated to census outreach. Over time, the original \$7 million in Census Equity Fund support for work in 19 states grew to \$13.8 million with grants to 28 states, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico.

A summary in the Census Equity Fund’s February 2019 request for proposals provides a window into the kinds of activities the funders intended to support in their efforts to assure a fair and accurate count:

“Such activities must target HTC (hard-to-count) households and could include, but are not limited to: developing partnerships with public agencies, child care and other service providers, schools, health care centers, local businesses, faith-based ▶▶▶

<sup>5</sup>Alabama, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Alaska, Montana, South Carolina, Arkansas, Nevada, South Dakota, Arizona, New Mexico, Tennessee, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, Georgia, North Dakota, Virginia, Louisiana.



groups, and other entities to plan a comprehensive census outreach campaign for the state or region; providing materials and information to community partners to support their outreach activities; organizing events to promote participation in the census and provide information about filling out the census form; establishing community sites that provide information and assistance to community members about the census form and how to fill it out online or on paper; or conducting targeted communications efforts, including the use of digital tools to reach target audiences.”

Most grants from the Census Equity Fund were in the range of \$100,000 to \$200,000 with a maximum of \$225,000. The RFPs asked applicants to demonstrate that they had secured matching funds for their projects, ideally on at least a 1:1 basis; in-kind resources such as staff time could count toward the match. However, Narasaki said the match was not a “hard and fast” requirement. “We knew there were some places we were funding that weren’t going to be able to get the match, and we didn’t want that to be a barrier,” she said.

The Census Equity Fund complemented the work of the national hubs that the funders were supporting by reaching beyond the networks of those groups and providing direct support to grassroots get-out-the-count efforts. Examples of campaigns supported by the Fund were: the [Miami - Dade Counts Campaign](#) launched by the Florida Immigrant Coalition, the Miami Workers Center and others; and a census [campaign](#) launched by Georgia Family Connection Partnership and Voices for Georgia’s Children.

In selecting grantees for the Census Equity Fund, the national funders regularly consulted with funders and others in the targeted states and communities. Clare S. Richie, public policy



## Reaching Out to Other Sectors

In the course of efforts to get out the count, philanthropy sought allies in business and state and local government to help engage key constituencies in the work. Although the politicization of the 2020 census affected the willingness of some entities to join in, these partnerships resulted in important resources and guidance that helped business and government leaders encourage and support a fair and accurate count.

**Business.** In late 2017 and early 2018, the members of the Census Subgroup began to explore in more detail how to partner with business in efforts to promote census participation. “We knew the private sector should care about a fair and accurate census because of how it influences so many business decisions,” said the Ford Foundation’s program officer for civic engagement and government, Erika Wood. “We also knew that business had real policy influence that could be brought to bear on ensuring a successful census.”

Wood led a subcommittee of subgroup funders and practitioners from The Leadership Conference, NALEO, Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC and other groups to lead business outreach →



specialist with the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, said support from the Census Equity Fund was critical in allowing local groups to stand up “really impressive and targeted campaigns.” The national funding also allowed local and state funders to show their boards and other stakeholders how they were opening the door to added resources for their communities.

“It became an example,” Richie said of the Census Equity Fund. “We could say to people, ‘Here’s how we’re leveraging our investments with national money.’” In turn, she said the community foundation was able to target its own investments to smaller organizations that didn’t have the ability to apply to the Census Equity Fund, but that were conducting get-out-the-count campaigns at the neighborhood level.

In New Mexico, Thornburg Foundation Executive Director Allan Oliver said the Census Equity Fund had a “huge impact” on statewide efforts to get out the count in historically undercounted communities. “Having national funders step up with this support and essentially redistribute it to other states in that way was unprecedented and fantastic,” he said.

Either independently or inspired by the subgroup’s grantmaking, funders in many states created their own vehicles to target investments toward historically undercounted communities. The New York Census Equity Fund, for example, was a partnership of more than 35 funders to pool funds in support of census outreach in historically undercounted neighborhoods, towns and rural areas across the state. Administered by the New York Community Trust, the fund awarded \$3.1 million to more than 80 organizations. It was the first-ever such statewide effort in New York.



→ for the census. At the subcommittee’s recommendation, the funder collaborative made a grant to ReadyNation, a coalition of business leaders focused primarily on education and workforce issues. ReadyNation used the funds to develop [toolkits](#), talking points and other materials to support its members’ outreach to employees, communities and government on the census. ReadyNation and its staff also were regular participants in funder and stakeholder meetings during the census cycle.

Wood said the partnership with ReadyNation resulted in “strong materials and added awareness” across a diverse segment of the business community. In addition, national groups like NALEO had ongoing partnerships with selected corporate partners to support their census work. Wood noted, however, that the politicization of the 2020 census made it hard to recruit business as an active, ongoing and high-profile partner. “We found that a lot of businesses didn’t want to make a target of themselves by being too out front,” she said.

**Local and state government.** In addition to their regular communications with the Census Bureau, funders and grantees sought to form partnerships with local and state government entities to help ensure strong support for a fair and accurate 2020 count at all levels. →



## The COVID Pivot

As COVID-19 shutdowns and stay-at-home orders were instituted across the country starting in March 2020, funders and their grantees were forced to adjust years' worth of planning focused extensively on in-person census outreach in communities across the country. To comply with local and state guidelines and protect the health of staff, volunteers and local residents, groups shifted to digital forms of outreach and engagement, phone banking, and targeted advertising to encourage census participation in historically undercounted communities.

Funders say they were impressed and humbled by the ability of grantees across the country to pivot quickly in the face of the pandemic. Erika Wood, program officer for civic engagement and government with the Ford Foundation, said it helped that nonprofits were receiving flexible support in sufficient amounts to allow them to reorient their work toward digital engagement. Another important factor, she suggested, was that by March 2020 the funders and stakeholders had been working together to prepare for census outreach for months and even years.

"I think the fact that the funding happened quite early in the census cycle was game-changing because when we got to issues like the citizenship question and then COVID, the organizations were ready and they were able to pivot and rely on each other," said Wood. "Those networks and relationships and capacities that were built around census work, whether it's digital organizing or fighting disinformation, were being supported far enough in advance that people were able to respond in the moment and pivot quite quickly."



→ While local and state funders regularly were in partnership with local and state officials through complete count committees and other activities (see [page 77](#)), the national funders focused their outreach on national groups representing those officials. Like the funders' business outreach, their engagement of these groups yielded disparate results.

Some groups, such as the National League of Cities (NLC), National Association of Counties (NACo), National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), and U.S. Conference of Mayors, were important partners in keeping their constituencies engaged and informed. The funders supported NLC, for example, to produce a helpful "[Cities Count Census Toolkit](#)," as well as other materials for local elected officials about ensuring a fair and accurate count. Meanwhile, NCSL used its grant support to offer [guidance](#) to state lawmakers on state funding for census outreach, state complete count committees and other topics.

However, other government groups, such as the National Governors Association, appeared less willing to be out front on the issue, according to the Bauman Foundation's Gary Bass. "It's kind of striking given how much was at stake, but I think it was another sign of how political things had become with the citizenship question and everything else," Bass said. ★



Wood continued, “I am not saying it was easy, but I hesitate to think what things would have looked like if we hadn’t been working together to build up those capacities and infrastructure earlier in the cycle.”

In April 2020, the Funders Census Initiative conducted a survey of funders to try and understand how they and their grantees were adjusting their work in response to the pandemic. A total of 64 individuals responded representing a diverse mix of national, state and local funders, philanthropic support organizations, and donor advisers. Among the headlines from the survey:

- **Funders were trying to respond quickly to support their census grantees.** For example, 93 percent of funders surveyed were offering flexibility in grant deliverables, 83 percent were offering extended grant timelines, 33 percent were providing additional census funding, and 22 percent were offering additional general operating support.
- **Uncertainty was impacting all of the work.** The survey surfaced a lack of clarity among funders about the Census Bureau’s operational timeline and whether or not state and local governments would offer flexibility for grant deliverables, timelines and reporting.
- **Grantee needs were broad.** Funders rated flexibility and general operating support as critical for grantees. Among the top grantee priorities: rural outreach, internet access, paid or earned media, digital organizing capacity, technology tools and list-building.
- **Organizations were showing “resilience, flexibility and creativity.”** Grantees were embracing new, socially distant approaches

to census outreach such as: pairing census promotion with meal and service delivery, and organizing digital events including townhalls, dance parties, contests, and more.

“They’re the real heroes of census outreach in California,” The California Endowment’s Tara Westman said of grantees’ response to COVID-19 in the state. “The nonprofit sector stood up and said, ‘We’re going to figure out how to work from home, employ more digital organizing and expand phone banking.’ And there were a lot of quick, adaptive changes made to reach people through other venues such as food distribution sites, schools and COVID testing centers. And they did it with great ingenuity.”

As grantees across the country shifted strategies and plans, many funders offered additional support. Nationally, the Funders Census Initiative organized [webinars](#) and other activities to help funders in their work. Meanwhile, the Census Subgroup created a COVID-19 response committee and decided to make available resources for what it called “[emergency grants](#)” ▶▶▶



Photos courtesy of NAKASEC and Fair Count



to support “additional outreach in low self-response areas.” The funders added an extra round of grantmaking to the Census Equity Fund and refashioned the grants to focus on digital organizing and related activities. They also based grant decisions in part on [real-time self-response data](#) from the Center for Urban Research at the City University of New York (CUNY), which the subgroup continued to support to track where census self-response rates were falling short as the count continued.

Similarly, funders at the regional, state and local levels were disbursing their own emergency funding and providing other added support to census grantees. For example, the Washington Census Equity Fund, managed by Philanthropy Northwest, raised and distributed nearly \$600,000 in grants to organizations it was already funding so they could adjust strategies and plans after COVID-19 hit. “The grants went out with no strings attached and no reporting requirements,” said Director of Public Policy and Advocacy Meredith Higashi. “We already knew and had built trust with these groups, and we wanted to get them rapid resources they could use at a time when they were really having to scramble.”

One of Higashi’s favorite stories of how these funds were used was the Tacoma Refugee Choir’s “Be Counted” song and [video](#). Created to promote participation in the census among refugee communities in the Seattle-Tacoma area and across Washington state, the song was published on YouTube and Facebook and across the choir’s social media networks.

Meanwhile, the Houston Endowment’s Meghna Goswami said funders worked closely with nonprofits in that city to support necessary shifts after Houston and surrounding Harris County



## Philanthropy and State, Local Complete Count Committees

The Census Bureau’s Complete Counts Committees [program](#) is designed to support tribal, state and local governments to create diverse collaboratives focused on getting out the count at the state and local levels. During the 2020 census cycle, philanthropy played an important role in advocating for and supporting complete count committees at all levels, as well as actively participating in the groups alongside nonprofit and community partners.

In Pittsburgh, for example, Grable Foundation Executive Director Gregg Behr co-chaired the complete count committee for Allegheny County, which included a diverse range of nonprofit groups, educational institutions, businesses and others. According to the Grable Foundation’s associate director, Kristen Burns, the complete count committee was instrumental in guiding the work of Pittsburgh-area funders on the census. After the funders created a pooled fund for census grantmaking through the regional association of grantmakers, they met regularly to consider requests for funding submitted via the committee.





went under stay-at-home orders in late March. “Within a week we had phone banking up and running, we had text messaging drives, and we had people giving out flyers and information at food bank sites,” Goswami said. “Some of these nonprofits even got involved in activities like making and distributing masks and providing census information while they did it.”

Jera Stribling, executive director of the funder association Alabama Giving, shared a similar story about what the pivot looked like in her state. As the shutdowns led to economic hardship for local residents and families, funders and their nonprofit partners organized to provide census information and outreach at locations where residents were picking up food and applying for other social services. “We worked with every United Way in the state and every food bank and we printed census flyers and gave them a small stipend to put those flyers inside every box and bag of food,” Stribling said.

## A Wide-Ranging Communications and Advertising Effort

Given the challenges facing the 2020 census—from COVID-related changes in procedures and deadlines to high levels of politicization—the Census Subgroup set out to ground its support for getting out the count in a strong communications and advertising effort aimed at encouraging participation and fighting disinformation with facts. In addition to supporting the national hubs to do their own messaging research and



→ “The committee played a role in lifting up activities and strategies for reaching the communities that its members were closest to, and that helped guide city resources and foundation support to where those funds could make the biggest difference,” said Burns.

Elsewhere, funders played a key role in standing up complete count committees through seed funding, advocacy or a combination of the two. In New York, the Long Island Community Foundation reached out to county executives in Nassau and Suffolk Counties to secure their buy-in for local committees. The foundation’s senior program officer, Sol Marie Alfonso Jones, subsequently was able to provide extensive guidance to the counties on how to build strong committees based on her work on the leadership team of the national Funders Census Initiative. Once the Long Island committees were up and running, Alfonso Jones worked with other New York funders to encourage counties across the state to create their own committees.

In Texas, the state government refused to form an official statewide complete counts committee, so the Communities Foundation of Texas led the effort to get cities and counties to create their own. Working with local and statewide partners, the foundation also helped create an unofficial complete count committee for Texas via the [Texas Counts](#) campaign. ★



advertising, the collaborative organized briefings connecting census experts and advocates to national and local reporters. The funders also provided support for social media outreach (including suggested Twitter and Facebook posts) for the national hub partners, and multi-language paid advertising (TV, radio, streaming and digital) in states and communities that were the focus of its Census Equity Fund grantmaking.

In addition, the subgroup worked with Tim Lim, a public affairs and media consultant who runs Lim Consulting Services, on a campaign to distribute \$1 million in donated advertising credits from Facebook to Census Equity Fund grantees for digital ads. While these efforts were complicated by Facebook's determination that census advertising qualified as "advocacy" and therefore had to go through a special authorization process, Lim ultimately was able to get Facebook to approve 20 key Census Counts partners to run the ads. Based on messaging and materials developed by the hub groups, the ads focused on encouraging census participation among Latino, Black and Native American populations in areas with low self-response rates.

Like everything else, the subgroup-supported advertising effort was forced to shift its focus and messaging with the advent of COVID-related shutdowns and other challenges. For example, an initial advertising strategy developed by the consultants at Civic Nation relied in part on advertising in movie theaters to reach historically undercounted groups in smaller communities. After COVID hit and movie theaters closed, the strategy shifted more to TV and streaming ads targeting families adjusting to life under newly imposed stay-at-home orders.

Alana Tomasita Moriarty, communications officer with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, noted that the collaborative's support for advertising was part of a wide-ranging communications effort that included digital outreach, national speaking events and more. She also emphasized that one of the key elements of the 2020 census outreach was a community-centered "trusted messenger" approach where people were educated and mobilized to be in contact with historically undercounted populations. Given the Kellogg Foundation's commitment to assure that all children have equitable opportunities to thrive, Moriarty said some of the most critical communications work was focused on local trusted messenger outreach and resources targeting families with children ages 0 to 5, one of the most undercounted groups in the country. She said the collaborative supported the development of digital resources, training and technical assistance, and "culturally child-centered communications," including multilingual messaging toolkits focused on young children.

"These incredible efforts helped to equip local trusted messengers, including teachers, pediatricians, early childcare providers, staff at libraries, and other groups that are in regular communication with children and their families with resources to get the message out quickly on the importance of counting young children," Moriarty said. As part of this work, the subgroup also supported Count All Kids, a coalition of organizations focused on issues related to undercounted children. Among other activities, Count All Kids did [message testing](#) and developed materials and resources to guide outreach to families with young kids. ★



Philanthropy and  
the 2020 Census

# Building Community Among Funders and Nonprofits

**T**hrough all the twists, turns and tension-filled moments of the 2020 census cycle, funders remained connected and committed to the work at hand. ▶▶▶



Interviews with participating funders indicate that the national collaborative proved remarkably successful not just in rallying philanthropy to engage in census work but also in creating a cohesive community of organizations and individuals working in alignment—both with each other and with grantee leaders—toward the common goal of a fair and accurate census.

As a former senior leader with NALEO, Evan Bacalao was wary when he “crossed over” from field and nonprofit work to philanthropy and joined the program staff at the Open Society Foundations. In his experience, funders often had “high expectations” that field groups should be highly aligned in their work, avoid duplication, and collaborate across organizations whenever and wherever possible. But he rarely saw philanthropy apply the same collaborative expectations to itself. However, as he and the Open Society Foundations became increasingly engaged in the Census Subgroup, he said he was “more than pleasantly surprised” at the level of coordination and partnership among participating funders, as well as their responsiveness to field organizations’ genuine needs and concerns.

“This was more of an authentic partnership among philanthropy and between philanthropy and the field than I had ever seen,” Bacalao said. “Philanthropy isn’t always known for practicing what we preach about collaboration, but this time I think people got outside of their institutional preciousness and really came together in a genuine way for a bigger purpose.”

Creating that sense of community and alignment was a shared responsibility among subgroup members, the Funders Census Initiative, United Philanthropy Forum, and collaboratives at

the regional, state and local levels. They did it through a range of activities, including meetings, subcommittees and other forums, as well as an overall commitment to transparency and the sharing of information, resources, best practices and more.

## Keeping in Touch

For many funders, the quarterly meetings hosted by the Census Subgroup and the Funders Census Initiative were central to fostering and sustaining the collaborative spirit of the work. Mostly held in Washington, DC (and online after COVID-19), the day-long meetings included census updates, substantive discussions of key issues with stakeholders and other experts, and breakout sessions to discuss funder and stakeholder strategies. As the census cycle continued, the meetings attracted hundreds of online and in-person participants from across the country. For the subgroup and FCI, a key element of the meeting design was to center the perspectives and leadership of grantees.

“This is a collaborative where I had the most meaningful and consistent interaction with grantees I ever had, and a lot of that was because of those quarterly meetings,” said Erika Wood, program officer for civic engagement and government with the Ford Foundation.

Jocelyn Bissonnette played a key role in the design of the meetings as director of the Funders Census Initiative. “We wanted to create a space where the ownership of the work was genuinely shared. You had national funders and state funders, nonprofits working at the national level and state-based nonprofits. And there was a sense of camaraderie and a sense that this is





“Philanthropy isn’t always known for practicing what we preach about collaboration, but this time I think people got outside of their institutional preciousness and really came together in a genuine way for a bigger purpose.”

*Evan Bacalao, Program Officer, Open Society Foundations*

everybody’s strategy and that different voices were driving the conversation.” Bissonnette added that FCI and the subgroup built time into the agenda for networking and breakouts so participants could develop stronger relationships.

Kerrie Blevins, executive director of the Gold Bay Foundation in Minnesota, said the quarterly meetings helped set a welcoming tone for the funders’ work with stakeholders and each other. “I really felt welcomed to the work as a small funder through those meetings,” she said. “They did not feel like they were driven by the perspective of national funders or even philanthropy alone. It felt like philanthropy was following community leadership.”

In addition to the quarterly meetings, the subgroup was holding monthly calls throughout the census cycle to approve grants or hear from key grantees about emerging issues and field needs. The Bauman Foundation’s Gary Bass and consultant Karen Narasaki would generally prepare materials for those meetings. “All of it was incredibly well coordinated,” the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s senior program officer, Carolyn Miller, said of the meetings.

“There was a packet of materials and a surprising number of people actually read them and came equipped with questions. There was a lot of transparency and constructive dialogue about where the work was going and what to do next.”

Simultaneously, the Funders Census Initiative was holding regular meetings of its leadership team, a diverse group of 15 to 20 funders working in states and regions across the country. According to FCI Co-chair Sol Marie Alfonso Jones of the Long Island Community Foundation, the leadership group was a “powerful space” for checking in with peers across the country on a range of issues. “If I was having a particular issue, I could talk to one of the other state funders or local funders and find good advice,” Alfonso Jones said.

As the census count got under way in 2020, the pace of check-ins between funders and stakeholders quickened. In the summer of 2020, there were biweekly FCI meetings for funders and biweekly meetings among the subgroup and its nonprofit partners focused on reviewing census self-response rates. These two meetings alternated weeks to ensure broad participation. ▶ ▶ ▶



## Digging Into Issues

Beyond participating in national meetings, funders who were interested in deeper work on various issues had the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues through subcommittees created by the Census Subgroup.

“We stood up ad hoc committees as they were needed,” explained the Joyce Foundation’s Carrie Davis, who led and participated in subcommittees focused on communications and digital organizing. Other subcommittees and task forces were charged with evaluation, business outreach and COVID-19 response. Whether the subcommittees met for short periods or the better part of the census cycle, the idea was to give participants a chance to do a deeper dive on issues of concern to them and their foundations. Often, the subcommittees would identify issues and grantees for the attention of the subgroup.

Another group of funders met informally during the census cycle to discuss issues related to undercounted children. Alana Tomasita Moriarty, communications officer with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, said the group (which also included the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Ford Foundation, NALEO and others) worked to make sure the subgroup’s strategies were focused in part on “making sure we were supporting the most effective targeted audience outreach methods to count all children.” This included local support for census-related media outreach as well as national efforts in partnership with Sesame Street and Nickelodeon, including the production of multilingual educational materials about the census for families with young children.

The JPB Foundation’s Angela Cheng, who led the group that steered the funders’ evaluation of their collective work on the 2020 census, said the subcommittees were another reflection of how funders set out to bring a collaborative spirit to the work. “It feels like there was a really intentional effort to create a culture where we were working together and engaging with each other on a regular basis,” Cheng said.

## Connecting Across Geography

One of the notable aspects of philanthropic collaboration on the 2020 census was how funders working at all levels (national, regional and local) were able to connect and align their strategies and investments. One example of how this alignment contributed to greater impact for the funders and grantees was the subgroup’s reliance on input from local and regional funders in decisions about where and how to invest their monies, particularly when it came to disseminating grants from the Census Equity Fund. (See [page 71](#) for more on the fund.)

“That national pool of dollars was really helpful in Houston, and I appreciated how the national funders looked to us for advice on local realities and how to support what was happening here,” said Meghna Goswami of the Houston Endowment. She added, “I’ve seen circumstances where you have a national funder come in and throw money around without consulting local people, and that can totally change the dynamic of what’s happening on the ground. The way funding was deployed in this case was very thoughtful and considerate of local input.”





Of course, regional and local funders weren't only connecting with national peers through the census collaborative; they also were connecting with other funders working at the regional and local levels, in part because of connections facilitated by the Census Subgroup, the Funders Census Initiative, United Philanthropy Forum and its member philanthropic support organizations.

Jera Stribling of Alabama Giving said she is in regular contact with colleagues in South Carolina via the work of the Southeastern Council of Foundations. When she learned that the SC Grantmakers Network, the statewide philanthropic support organization, had not applied for funding from the national funder collaborative, she encouraged them to do so, and they were supported to launch a census outreach [campaign](#) with the statewide United Way and other partners. Stribling said she was also in regular contact with other colleagues across the South throughout the census cycle to share ideas and strategies.

"In the rural South, it's often easier to try to emulate what other Southern areas are doing because we face a lot of the same issues and the census became highly political in our region," Stribling said. "So I found it incredibly valuable to check in with people in Arkansas and South Carolina

and other states and compare notes on what was going on." Among the strategies she and her peers shared that helped build local support for census outreach in the South was leading their appeals to local governments and others with data from the George Washington Institute of Public Policy at The George Washington University, which the subgroup supported to analyze how the census affected federal funding for each state.

Similarly, Kiki Jamieson at The Fund for New Jersey recalled connecting with FCI Co-chair Marcia Avner in 2017 with the goal of learning more about other states' plans for census outreach. "We were really starting from scratch so I wanted to find out how other states have handled it," Jamieson said. Avner, a Bauman Foundation board member, ended up connecting Jamieson to Bass, Narasaki and others who provided her with additional guidance and resources that helped her organize the New Jersey Counts [campaign](#). As the cycle continued, subgroup members often referred other statewide funders to Jamieson so they could learn from The Fund for New Jersey's work.

"They played a lot of matchmaking roles and introduced me to a lot of people and resources, which was a huge plus for all of our work," Jamieson said of the subgroup. ★

**“ It feels like there was a really intentional effort to create a culture where we were working together and engaging with each other on a regular basis.”**

*Angela H. Cheng, Senior Program Officer, The JPB Foundation*





Philanthropy and  
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# Lessons for the Future: Takeaways from the Funders' Work

**O**ver time, the national funder collaborative's work on the 2020 census grew to involve more than 100 foundations supporting 31 national hubs and hundreds of grassroots groups across the country, with active involvement from philanthropic support organizations and ongoing engagement with the Census Bureau, business, and other sectors. ▶ ▶ ▶



As of February 2021, the funders had raised \$118 million in support of the Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup's plan of action and grassroots get-out-the-count efforts targeting historically undercounted communities in nearly 30 states, with regional, state and local funders doing even more.

The funders and their partners in the nonprofit, public and private sectors faced enormous barriers in their work to achieve a fair and accurate census, including political challenges, disinformation, a global pandemic and shifting timelines for completing the count. While the exact results of their efforts will not be known until the Census Bureau releases detailed data on undercounts and other issues in 2022, the 67-percent self-response rate [reported](#) by the bureau as of October 2020 exceeded the 66.5-percent rate from the 2010 census.

Regardless of the final numbers, philanthropy's engagement in the 2020 census was historic in the sense that funders came together in unprecedented numbers to invest unprecedented sums in a crucial pillar of American democracy. The collaborative effort also illuminated clear lessons for philanthropy about how to bring funders and partners together to address shared priorities at all levels. Participating funders offered a range of takeaways from the work for their colleagues to consider as they look ahead to the 2030 census, and as they strive to collaborate on other urgent issues facing society and communities.

## Creating a collaborative ethos.

**What worked.** The Census Subgroup and its partners at the Funders Census Initiative (FCI) and United Philanthropy Forum were

able to bring a cohesive and inclusive spirit to funders' collaborative work based on the understanding that all funders were welcome for their contributions and engagement. While the 2020 census collaborative included some of the country's biggest foundations, no single funder dominated the decision making or the proceedings. From the quarterly meetings to the resources and support for funders provided by FCI and United Philanthropy Forum, participants uniformly praised what some referred to as a "big tent" approach to collaboration and funder engagement.

"I think the census experience demonstrated that even for the largest foundations, like the Fords of the world, you need to work hand in hand with others," said Gary Bass of the Bauman Foundation. "If you're really going to create positive social change, none of us is big enough to tackle racial inequity. None of us is big enough to tackle healthcare reform. None of us is big enough to tackle democracy reforms. So if there's one big lesson from the census, it's that holding hands with philanthropic partners is essential. It's not just an added value. It's a way of operating in the future if you want to create large-scale change."

The Long Island Community Foundation's Sol Marie Alfonso Jones credited Bass and Bauman Foundation consultant Karen Narasaki, along with FCI Director Jocelyn Bissonnette, with creating the collaborative ethos reflected in the funders' meetings and other activities.

"There were a lot of people involved, but that core team really created this forum where everyone had a role and a value around that table," said Alfonso Jones. As a regional funder, Alfonso Jones said her foundation could easily have felt





intimidated working alongside national funders putting many millions of dollars more than her organization toward the census. “I never felt like the child at the adult table. The way they structured it created an ability for every player to have an equal voice and that’s not easy to do.”

**What philanthropy could do better.** Given the time-limited nature of census work, as well as the high-profile battles during the 2020 cycle over the citizenship question and other issues, funders and partners expressed some concern about philanthropy’s ability to join together on an ongoing basis and invest in other urgent issues in similar ways.

Nelson Beckford, program director with the Cleveland Foundation, said the 2020 census, combined with the work of nonpartisan voter outreach and engagement for the 2020 election, had a galvanizing effect on funders and communities. He said he would like to pull more funders together around redistricting and other issues. At the same time, however, he said funders in Ohio were “fatigued, uncertain and anxious.”

“The challenges have outpaced and outweighed available resources when it comes to grant dollars,” Beckford said. But he still remains hopeful. “Philanthropy is no longer in the shadows, and I feel that the stories, relationships, tactics and lessons from the census work will endure.”

Census expert Terri Ann Lowenthal said the 2020 census lifted up the importance of creating what she referred to as “evergreen capacity” in philanthropy around the census and other democracy issues. “If we have to re-up on this issue and build back staff expertise and collaborative capacity every 10 years, maybe that’s not the most efficient approach,” she suggested. Lowenthal advocated for at least a modest level of ongoing investment across philanthropy in collaborative work on the census, with those investments ratcheting up as each decennial cycle continues.

### Achieving clarity of purpose—and message.

**What worked.** From the beginning, the funders were organized around a three-part plan of action ▶▶▶



Photos courtesy of: Inter Tribal Council of Arizona; Arab American Institute; and Fair Count



(see [page 36](#)) focused on the goal of achieving a fair and accurate count among historically undercounted communities. The launch of the Census Equity Fund in late 2018, with grants to state-based groups engaged in census outreach to those communities, placed an even sharper emphasis on the funder's overarching goal and drew added philanthropic support.

At a time when philanthropy and society increasingly are focused on issues of equity and racial justice, the clarity of the funders' objectives and message resonated. Ria Pugeda of the Consumer Health Foundation in Washington, DC, said that from the time she first participated in one of the quarterly meetings convened by the Census Subgroup and FCI, she could see an "alignment of values" between her organization and the work. "The national funders were very clear in terms of why they were doing the census work, which included a commitment to racial equity, and that was very important to us," she said.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Florencia Gutierrez added, "What really held it together is we were all working toward a fair and accurate count with a focus on communities that too often lose out."

Focusing on undercounted communities also helped funders get past the concern about philanthropy getting involved in what is essentially a government enterprise. "No one ever said we were going to duplicate or overlap with the Census Bureau's mandate and responsibilities," said Keesha Gaskins-Nathan of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. "Focusing on undercounted populations allowed the collaborative to be more effective because we weren't trying to be all things to all people and we could rally support for a clear objective."

The focus on historically undercounted communities—and how undercounts affect resources and representation for communities and states across the country—also helped funders and their partners assuage political concerns that the work was ideologically or politically motivated. In particular, funders and stakeholders highlighted the funder-supported research from the George Washington Institute of Public Policy at The George Washington University and the Center for Urban Research at the City University of New York (CUNY) (see [page 51](#)) as instrumental in illustrating the importance of a fair and accurate census for diverse communities and states.

"I think we did a very good job of maintaining nonpartisanship throughout this work," said Geri Mannion of Carnegie Corporation of New York, pointing out that some of the Census Equity Fund's largest investments were in politically conservative states across the South. "We wanted this to be seen as a collective opportunity that benefits all communities."

Mannion added, "The census should be an all-hands-on-deck event each decade; it should not be a partisan effort. This is something that can impact all communities, both financially and politically, over a decade."

**What philanthropy could do better.** Even with a sharp focus on historically undercounted areas, funders often were rebuffed in their outreach to philanthropic colleagues and government and community partners due to the political debate over the 2020 census, including the citizenship question and other issues. Jera Stribling at Alabama Giving said community foundations and other funders in her state regularly turned down her appeals to get involved ▶▶▶



“ I think an important lesson about getting funders on board, especially when an issue is perceived as politicized, is to help people really break things down for their community.”

*Meghna Goswami, Program Director for Civic Engagement, Houston Endowment*



in the work based on politically-driven opposition from their boards. The same was true of many local government leaders. “Things had been politicized so much that people were somewhat fearful,” she said.

Stribling recommended a more determined effort at all levels to “convert” people around the importance of the census, especially in communities where there might be more skepticism. While she was a regular user of the George Washington Institute of Public Policy data on how the census affects federal funding at the state level, she advised that funders also support similar data gathering on the effects of the census on funding for localities. “More community-level data would have really helped us make our case,” she said.

Meghna Goswami at the Houston Endowment agreed. “I think an important lesson about getting funders on board, especially when an issue is perceived as politicized, is to help people really break things down for their community,” she said.

A related point some funders shared is the need for more support and technical assistance to help people understand that philanthropy has every right to engage in census work, including advocacy and litigation. While the Funders Census Initiative and United Philanthropy Forum shared [guidance](#) on the legal considerations

facing foundations engaged in census work, some funders felt they wanted more.

### Building a core central group.

**What worked.** The Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup evolved over time to include around 15 foundations that took responsibility for developing and executing the collective plan for funder engagement in the 2020 census in partnership and consultation with colleague funders and stakeholders.

Within this relatively small group, a couple of individuals assumed day-to-day responsibility for coordinating the work over time. They included Gary Bass, executive director emeritus of the Bauman Foundation, and Bauman Foundation consultant Karen Narasaki. In close coordination with Jocelyn Bissonnette at the Funders Census Initiative, Maggie Gunther Osborn at United Philanthropy Forum, consultants Cathy Duvall and Amy Dominguez-Arms, and the Ford Foundation’s Erika Wood, among others, Bass and Narasaki put untold hours into the work of growing and managing the collaborative, raising funds, overseeing grant applications and grants, leading and coordinating funder outreach, and implementing the funders’ strategies.





It was the day-to-day engagement of these individuals that contributed to the ability of the collaborative to stay on top of the latest census developments while also staying on plan and on message. “I think what was really key to this work was the people who woke up every day and believed it was their job to make this happen,” said Kiki Jamieson of The Fund for New Jersey. Jamieson said she saw a similar dynamic play out in New Jersey as a small core of people in philanthropy, the nonprofit sector and government played a central coordinating role.

As the census cycle got under way, Bass essentially had the approval and encouragement of the Bauman Foundation board to devote a lot of his time to census; he subsequently hired Narasaki as a consultant to provide critical guidance and support. “Gary just played a huge role in keeping things moving, and bringing in Karen was brilliant,” said Wood, citing Narasaki’s deep connections to the civil rights community and her expertise on the census based on her leadership of Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC during the 2010 census cycle.

Together, Bass and Narasaki (with critical support from Freedman Consulting, Duvall, and Dominguez-Arms) would organize grant materials and proposals for the subgroup meetings and serve as the key contacts for the funders, the hub groups, the Census Bureau and other partners. (With deep expertise in organizing and advocacy, Duvall had been hired by the New Venture Fund to work on post-census redistricting issues but ended up offering “huge help on nearly all things census,” Narasaki said.) The group also worked with Bissonnette on the design and agenda for the quarterly meetings of the funders and stakeholders, while acting as ambassadors for the work (alongside

other subgroup members) in phone calls and presentations across the country.

“There was an enormous amount of work behind the scenes that we will never know about that made it feel so seamless and also gave us this regular forum and source of information that made us all a lot smarter about what we could do and how we could exercise leadership beyond our grants,” said Tara Westman of The California Endowment.

**What philanthropy could do better.** The degree to which a sprawling funder collaborative can be managed by a small core group who are able to focus 24-7 on the work is an open question. The same goes for whether one foundation (in this case the Bauman Foundation) will always be willing and able to carry a significant load of the coordinating work for such a collaborative.

While funders uniformly and enthusiastically commended the work of Bass, Narasaki, Bissonnette and others, some also wondered if it is a replicable model. “My concern is that I don’t know how sustainable that is,” said one funder remarking on Bass’s extraordinary leadership and engagement.

To spur broader leadership, the Census Subgroup created subcommittees of funders to help steer the work (see [page 83](#)), and FCI created a diverse leadership group of regional and state funders who were active in guiding its work and offerings. But participation was largely voluntary, and many funders commented on how easy it was to be part of this work without formal commitments.

“I feel sort of personally guilty about it, but this collaborative sort of allowed it to happen that folks could check in and check out,” said one





funder. "I think that was probably useful in getting participation from a big and diverse group. But it's a model that puts a lot on that central core of people."

As philanthropy considers how to create more "evergreen capacity" on the census and other democracy issues in the years ahead, some funders suggested investing collectively in staffing and infrastructure that could broaden the base of individuals charged with keeping the trains running and coordinating grantmaking and other work. One model would be something like the [State Infrastructure Fund](#) at NEO Philanthropy, a permanently staffed initiative that coordinates funder investments in voting rights work across the country.

### Starting early.

**What worked.** The question of when philanthropy should start organizing for the decennial census was central to the post-mortems on the field's involvement in the 2010 count (see [page 30](#)). Based on consultations with funders and stakeholders who were involved in the prior census and their uniform conclusion that the work started too late, the Census Subgroup developed a timeline for the 2020

cycle specifying that grantmaking should start in fall 2017. By the end of that year, the collaborative had invested more than \$8.5 million, with another \$19 million granted in 2018 and many more millions to follow.

Most funders believe the timeline was about right for the 2020 census. Especially considering that subgroup members were meeting as early as May 2015 to discuss strategy and timelines, the consensus is that there was adequate time for the collaborative to fine tune its plans and start engaging with other funders and stakeholders.

That said, starting any later than they did could have easily dimmed the funders' impact. "It takes a lot of time to build relationships and trust," said Bass. "And if we believe in infrastructure, we have to start early enough and invest in the time-consuming process of letting funders and groups get to know one another and work out how they can coordinate in ways that work for them."

**What philanthropy could do better.** Of course, the fact that national funders were well into their planning and grantmaking by the end of 2017 didn't mean funders at all levels got an early start. For example, funders supporting the Texas Counts Campaign only kicked their work



I think what was really key to this work was the people who woke up every day and believed it was their job to make this happen."

*Kiki Jamieson, President, The Fund for New Jersey*



into high gear after it became clear during the 2019 state legislative session that the legislature would not be funding census outreach, and the governor would not be creating a statewide complete count committee.

“We were so late to the game that the national funders were already way past us and we were trying to catch up on the conversation,” said Amy Desler of the Communities Foundation of Texas. She said they eventually succeeded in building a strong collaborative and an unofficial complete counts operation in [Texas Counts](#). But she noted that state efforts (and particularly those in Texas with its biennial legislature) would benefit from earlier outreach and support, particularly when it comes to advocating for state census funds.

Sol Marie Alfonso Jones of the Long Island Community Foundation agreed. She said that she and her colleagues on the leadership team at FCI, which included mostly regional and state funders, have talked repeatedly about the importance of early census outreach to funders across the country. “There has to be early communication about the relevance of the census in a way where by the time census comes up, everybody already gets it,” she said.

Even in places where there was extensive planning and coordination, there were issues that funders were late to address, which suggests that funder and stakeholder engagement should start sooner. One example is the Local Update of Census Addresses (LUCA) operation. A regular feature of the census cycle, LUCA is when state and local governments review and correct the Census Bureau's master address lists for their jurisdictions. For the 2020 cycle, LUCA

began in July 2017. It is a critical part of the process during which funders and allies can forge partnerships to make sure missing and unconventional housing units are added to the master file, including units predominantly used by historically undercounted residents.

“As much as I feel that Long Island walked on water during the census, we really dropped the ball on LUCA,” said Alfonso Jones. “By the time we realized we should have created a funding and outreach strategy, it was over.”

## Fundraising and funder recruitment.

**What worked.** Without any doubt, the effort to recruit and engage a diverse and broad group of funders in collaborative work on the 2020 census was an enormous achievement. From the initial group of 10 or so foundation leaders and program staff meeting around the table in the Bauman Foundation offices in Washington, DC, in 2015 and 2016, the collaborative grew to involve hundreds of funders working on a range of issues at all levels of society, including large and small foundations, community foundations, private and public foundations, corporate foundations, and more. The growth of the collaborative was not a matter of happenstance or random connections among funders; it was baked into the group's plans and strategies from the start, with “funder outreach and increased support” occupying the second spot in the group's original plan of action adopted in November 2015.

Arturo Vargas, CEO of NALEO Educational Fund, said he hasn't seen anything like it in his decades of leadership in the nonprofit and civil rights communities. “I think the most significant





“ I think the most significant contribution of the collaborative was the education process for foundations and other philanthropic entities about how the census touches their work.”

*Arturo Vargas, CEO, NALEO Educational Fund*

contribution of the collaborative was the education process for foundations and other philanthropic entities about how the census touches their work,” he said. “Bringing in funders who did not tend to fund democracy work and helping them see the way to investing in the census because of how it connected to their mission—that was a huge success.”

As noted above, the work of funder recruitment was shared and coordinated across the membership of the Census Subgroup, with the Bauman and Ford Foundations leading the way (see [page 46](#)). Also playing critical roles were the Funders Census Initiative and United Philanthropy Forum, which received subgroup funding to lead a broader national campaign of funder engagement and education.

“We all worked together to send an organized message that funders should invest in this work,” said Maggie Gunther Osborn at United Philanthropy Forum. “It doesn’t matter if you fund education, if you fund children and families, if you fund economic development. This is it. The census is the place where all of that other work starts. And fundamentally, if you care about the health of our democracy, this is the foundation for all of it.”

Osborn continued, “I think that message and the way that it was shared by trusted people across philanthropy was really extraordinary.”

One critical pillar of funder outreach was the data and research supported by the subgroup to illustrate both the impacts of the census on federal funding across various issues that funders care about and the locations of historically undercounted communities (see [page 50](#)). Also contributing to the success of funder engagement was a strategic and tailored approach to fundraising and funder recruitment, including rigorous tracking of funder commitments. While subgroup members committed to putting at least \$100,000 annually toward the plan of action, other funders did not face any hard-and-fast expectations or requirements.

“Understanding that it’s not a one-size-fits-all approach to engaging funders was critical,” said Amy Dominguez-Arms, who played a central role in shaping the fundraising strategy as a consultant to the Ford Foundation and, later, the New Venture Fund. “We all recognized from the beginning that people would be coming at this issue from a lot of different directions and with different interests and constraints depending on their issues, their foundation types, their missions and the interests of their boards.”

Dominguez-Arms added that as the collaborative began to attract more funding and more partners, its success began to breed ▶▶▶



more success. “I think there was a real sense of momentum and excitement as more funders came on,” she said. “That attracted more interest and it created even more buy-in among those funders who already had committed, because they were more secure in the belief that this was important and that they weren't going to be alone in carrying the water for the work.”

As the resources flowed in, the subgroup led the work of tracking funding commitments and coordinating with grantee groups about their needs and where more resources could help. “It was an ongoing process of sharing spreadsheets and reminding everyone we still had gaps we needed to fill,” said Carolyn Miller of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “And that would lead to conversations about whether funders could support these groups independently, or whether we could do it through the pooled fund and how much more we needed.”

**What philanthropy could do better.** The only critique funders shared about funder engagement and recruitment during the 2020 census cycle was that it sometimes wasn't clear who was who, or rather who was responsible for what. The different roles of the Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup, the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation's Funders Census Initiative and United Philanthropy Forum weren't always clear to everyone. In addition, it took time before the subgroup and the Funders Census Initiative were able to clarify FCI's role in the work, with FCI leading funder education and outreach and the subgroup leading the grantmaking work.

In retrospect, however, these appear to be minor quibbles given the scope that the funder

collaborative was able to achieve, with the national work attracting \$118 million in funding overall from more than 100 funders, and with regional, state and local efforts securing millions more.

One question for the future is the degree to which the intensive funder engagement during the 2020 census cycle was driven by the unique and high-profile challenges of the 2020 count. “It's a legitimate question to ask if we were able to do so much because of the deep fear, anger, and anxiety people were feeling these last few years,” said Erika Wood of the Ford Foundation. “Can we repeat this success for the next census? I honestly don't know.”

## Building coordination and alignment among funders.

**What worked.** In the same way that the subgroup, the Funders Census Initiative and United Philanthropy Forum worked collaboratively on funder recruitment, each entity also was deeply involved in educating funders and trying to ensure that their investments and initiatives were aligned toward the broader goal of a fair and accurate census.

“One of the biggest things that made it easy for me to push for census funding was to say we had this structure in place where we were connected with the people across the country at the national, state, and local levels,” said Carolyn Miller of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “The idea that this collaborative was aligned with our values and focused on communities of color and low-income communities was a big confidence builder for us.”





In order to build that alignment, the collaborative developed a wealth of resources to guide funders in their census work, as well as a steady drumbeat of meetings, webinars, funder briefings and other events. “The national collaborative really made it so much easier for funders to participate in census work because of all the work to keep all of us knowledgeable about what was happening, where people could invest and why,” said Meredith Higashi of Philanthropy Northwest. “And just being at that national table meant that we and our funders could feel we were part of something bigger and that our work was deeply integrated with what was happening in other places across the country.”

The funders also succeeded in facilitating alignment by rallying philanthropy in key moments about urgent issues and creating opportunities for people and organizations to speak with a unified voice. Funder calls-to-action around the citizenship question, census appropriations in Congress, and changes in the census timeline were critical in coordinating the field’s investments and responses at all levels.

“This collaborative really took it to heart that funders needed to all be pushing in the same direction, especially when things got really hard,” said Osborn.

Alignment also was a hallmark of the subgroup’s grantmaking as it offered funders the option of supporting the national pooled fund or making direct grants to groups in coordination with the bigger plan. As the census cycle continued, many funders opted to make grants to the pooled fund as a streamlined and fairly simple means of investing. However, even among those who decided to make their own direct grants, there was what Unbound Philanthropy’s Ted Wang called “a certain comfort” in knowing that they were doing so as part of a broader and coordinated funding effort.

Wang is US program director for the private foundation focused on immigration issues. He said Unbound Philanthropy decided on making its own grants due to its longstanding relationships with national immigrant rights organizations that were working on the census. But Wang said that Unbound’s grants were guided in large part by the subgroup’s analysis of where there were



“Philanthropy is no longer in the shadows, and I feel that the stories, relationships, tactics and lessons learned from the census work will endure.”

*Nelson Beckford, Program Director, Neighborhood Revitalization and Engagement, The Cleveland Foundation*





gaps in funding and which groups were doing what. “For a relatively small funder like us, that level of coordination was really helpful, because it meant I could go to my board and say that our support was targeted and that we were part of this bigger effort,” Wang said.

**What philanthropy could do better.** As the 2020 census count approached, the funders and their stakeholder partners were amassing a considerable amount of information and resources, including funder toolkits, factsheets and updates on important census issues, messaging points and advertising targeting different historically undercounted communities, and more. Wading through all of the information and resources and finding what people wanted was sometimes a challenge, although the development and launch of the Census Counts collaborative’s website in early 2019 provided a helpful central clearinghouse of available content.

Another challenge cited by some funders was the flow of information and resources to grassroots groups and local communities. The funders supported their national hub partners to lead messaging research, technical assistance and communications focused on their respective constituencies, but it wasn’t always clear how the resulting resources were available and accessible beyond the hub groups’ networks.

“For our grantee partners, a lot of the time they were developing materials and messaging on their own,” said Ria Pugeda of the DC-based Consumer Health Foundation.

Similarly, with so many urgent issues vying for attention, funders said their email inboxes regularly were flooded with information and appeals (frequently including extensive

attachments) that might have been better managed via Slack or a membership website. “I think information management is always a concern on fast-moving issues like this, and I am sure there are ways we could have improved the efficiency of distributing and finding resources in ways that could have been more streamlined,” said Erika Wood of the Ford Foundation.

## Adopting flexible strategies.

**What worked.** While the plan of action adopted by the subgroup in late 2015 provided a broad frame for the funders’ work and investments, they regularly adapted their strategies and shifted gears in response to events both nationally and on the ground. The funders also were open to extending their focus to issues and concerns that had not been on their radar previously. For example, the subgroup expanded its investments in census digital organizing and census data quality based on recommendations from subgroup subcommittees working on those issues, and it launched the Census Equity Fund in late 2018 based on funder and stakeholder interest in doing more to support grassroots census outreach at the state level.

Florencia Gutierrez of the Annie E. Casey Foundation shared another example of the subgroup’s flexible approach to grantmaking and strategy. When she joined the funder table in late 2016 and early 2017, the outlines of the get-out-the-count strategy were already taking shape, with the subgroup identifying national groups to support for census outreach in historically undercounted communities. Gutierrez recalled talking with the group about the Casey Foundation’s interest in ensuring that all children should be counted, especially



in light of the census's persistent undercounting of children under age 5. Based on those conversations, the Partnership for America's Children was added to the list of hub groups and received extensive support for advocacy, outreach and other activities throughout the census cycle.

## Fast Facts! ★ ★ ★

At the national, regional, state and local levels, **funder collaboratives created rapid response funds** and other vehicles for getting monies out the door quickly to grantees and communities dealing with the twists and turns, as well as the unique challenges, of the 2020 census cycle.

The clearest example of how the funders and their nonprofit partners maintained a flexible and adaptive posture in their work was how they responded to the twists and turns of a frenzied 2020 census cycle. Carrie Davis of the Joyce Foundation said, "This census was a reminder that there are going to be surprises. We're going to have to be able to adapt." She added that the funders regularly paid attention to "having some cushion in the budget" for unforeseen needs, or at least "having people around the table who were prepared to make additional investments in the event of unanticipated challenges and opportunities."

In a census cycle marked by threats of serious underfunding, the citizenship question, a global pandemic, and other real and potential challenges,

the availability of added funding and the ability to pivot were instrumental to the funders' response. For example, when the debate over the citizenship question came to a head, not only did the subgroup organize a letter from 300 foundation leaders arguing against it, but the Funders Census Initiative and United Philanthropy Forum provided extensive resources, backgrounders and calls to action to rally philanthropy to the cause (see [page 60](#)). Equally if not more important, the subgroup provided emergency funding to national civil rights groups to litigate against the citizenship question.

Similarly, as the COVID-19 pandemic essentially shut down person-to-person census outreach, funders across the country supported groups to shift to socially distanced methods and digital organizing. As noted on [page 70](#), the Census Digital Organizing Group (C-DOG) supported important experiments and strengthened the capacity of groups to do this work. Many funders also began to support service delivery groups to incorporate census outreach into their programs aimed at providing food and other relief to people and families affected by the economic shockwaves of the pandemic.

Davis said "rapid response" was the name of the game as funders at all levels set out to support grantees caught up in the maelstrom of the 2020 count. She added that at the national level, the subgroup's pooled fund provided a ready vehicle for getting resources out as quickly as possible. "Going through the pooled fund meant we didn't have to work through the processes of lots of different foundations to get funds out when they were needed most," she said. Davis recalled several instances between monthly subgroup meetings when Bass would email rapid-response grant requests and the funders would have to vote by email.





“The pros definitely and certainly outweighed the cons, and we always felt the funders had our backs, but were there times when we felt a little micromanaged? Perhaps there were.”

*John C. Yang, President and Executive Director,  
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC*

The national funders were not alone in building a rapid-response capability into their grantmaking. At the regional, state and local levels, funder collaboratives had their own rapid-response funds and other strategies for getting monies out the door quickly. In greater Washington, DC, the funder-led Count DMV In Census Project created a rapid-response fund at the Greater Washington Community Foundation. According to Ria Puggedá of the DC-based Consumer Health Foundation, the fund combined local resources and monies from the national subgroup funders to provide rapid-response grants to grassroots groups combining direct services and census organizing and advocacy after the start of the COVID-19 crisis.

**What philanthropy could do better.** Given the backdrop of a harrowing census cycle that brought numerous unexpected turns, the flexibility of the funders and stakeholders was universally commended as a signature (and historic) feature of the work.

## Building Community with Stakeholders and Nonprofits.

**What worked.** Throughout the 2020 census cycle, funders were conscious of the importance of building a powerful partnership

between philanthropy and nonprofits. It's why the subgroup and FCI tried to structure the quarterly meetings as opportunities for grantees to participate on an equal footing with funders in conversations about strategies and tactics. And it's also why the funders regularly consulted with the hub groups and other nonprofits about their priorities and needs and where funder support could make the biggest difference. At a more basic level, the simple fact that the funders were organizing unprecedented sums of grant money to support census work meant they were helping to alleviate the “scarcity mindset” that so often exacerbates the power imbalance between funders and grantees.

John C. Yang, president and executive director of Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC, one of the three lead Census Counts organizations, said he appreciated the commitment of the funders to “genuinely collaborative” conversations and back-and-forth with the hub groups.

“I think there was a very unique and admirable level of give-and-take and transparency in our relationship with the funders,” Yang said. “I felt like the funders were open and eager to hear from us about strategies and ideas and what we were hearing from our communities, and we had a direct line to hearing about their interests and





priorities through the quarterly meetings and conference calls and other connections.”

Yang said he also appreciated that the subgroup provided a streamlined means of seeking and obtaining philanthropic funding for his organization’s census work. “There is a real benefit to grantees when you aren’t having to research who’s funding what or who’s interested in what, or you aren’t cold calling this program officer or that foundation president. Everyone was there at the table, and they all wanted to support some aspect of census work. This provided a method where funders could sort of pick and choose how they wanted to support you.”

Participating funders agreed that the collaborative was intentional about forging respectful, strong and mutually beneficial relationships between funders and grantees, a goal that was particularly evident during the quarterly meetings of funders and stakeholders. “Grantees weren’t just brought in to do a presentation or a dog-and-pony show,” said the Ford Foundation’s Erika Wood of those meetings. “We were all there together talking about strategy and planning and what it was going to take to have a good census.”

**What philanthropy could do better.** At the same time that they commended the collaborative for working closely and respectfully with nonprofits, Yang and others conceded that the 2020 census funders and their grantees did not entirely eliminate the consequences of the power differential that so often stands in the way of productive and trusting funder-grantee relationships.

“The pros definitely and certainly outweighed the cons, and we always felt the funders had our backs, but were there times when we felt a little micromanaged? Perhaps there were,” Yang said. During the heat of his organization’s census work, Yang recalled getting calls or emails from funders asking him and his team to deliver information or proposals with a one- or two-day turnaround. “We at times had to scramble because the funders wanted this or that, and it could get in the way of things,” Yang said.

Arturo Vargas, CEO of NALEO Educational Fund, said the funders and the hub groups eventually formed a strong alliance as “equal partners” in the work of achieving a fair and accurate census. But he said there were “obvious growing pains” along the way resulting in ▶▶▶



Photos Courtesy of Together Oklahoma; Arab American Institute; and Inter Tribal Council of Arizona



large part from the funders controlling both the purse strings and the broader strategy.

“The major dynamic that had to be worked through was that the funders were deciding what they were going to fund and for what purposes,” Vargas said. He pointed to the example of the subgroup funders making early decisions about which groups to identify and support as national hubs. “I think that process could have been done with more consultation about who would be the most competent and effective partners in the work,” he said. Vargas also noted that the funders initially lacked a coordinated approach to supporting communications and messaging research among the hub groups and beyond, which resulted in some confusion and duplication of effort.

Another issue that appeared to cause some early tension between the funders and the hubs was the decision not to support the national civil rights organizations to regrant monies to local and state affiliates and partners, as funders had done during the 2010 cycle. As noted above, the national funders had heard feedback from state and local funders and grassroots organizations that they lacked clarity and certainty about the resources coming to their communities for the 2010 count, in part because of how the regranting process was managed. As a result, the 2020 census funders supported the hubs to serve as clearinghouses for research, technical assistance, communications, census advocacy and other support, with the Census Equity Fund ultimately becoming the funding vehicle for getting grants to state and local nonprofits to support their get-out-the-count activities. The funders also provided mini-grants to some

of the hub groups so they could get funding to local organizations that were less able to attract funds to support their census efforts.

For the hub groups, the decision on regranting was a disappointment. “That did cause a little bit of a disconnect at times,” said Yang. “First it meant that local groups were asking why we weren’t funding them like we had in 2010, and we had to explain that. And second, if we are regranting to those groups, we tend to have more clarity and visibility about what’s happening on the ground.”

Despite an intentional effort on the part of funders to build an equal partnership with grantees, the notion that philanthropy had a stronger hand in the relationship with nonprofit grantees remained an undercurrent of the field’s work on the 2020 census. “I think that the intention of working in close collaboration with some of the leading nonprofits was a strength of the collaborative,” said Amy Dominguez-Arms, who consulted with the Ford Foundation and the New Venture Fund on funder outreach during the 2020 cycle. “But I certainly heard at times some tensions where the nonprofits were feeling like funders were stepping out in front of them when the groups themselves should be driving the strategy.”

Dominguez-Arms continued, “Maybe it was done as well as one can do it. But there’s always going to be a question of who’s in control, and it’s something funders absolutely need to be attentive to.” ★



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# Looking Forward

**T**he 2020 census cycle continued well into 2021 and beyond as the Census Bureau extended its deadlines for delivering data to help drive the apportionment and redistricting processes.





As the cycle moved toward a conclusion, funders at the national, state and local levels continued to monitor the latest news and developments, while investing in advocacy and other activities related to census data quality and other issues.

Participating funders also began to reflect on how to sustain the partnerships and momentum they built in the course of philanthropy's work on the 2020 count.

"Funders will often talk about boom-and-bust cycles of supporting democracy and civic engagement and how it all happens around elections or, in this case, the census," said the Bauman Foundation's Gary Bass. "People say we need strong infrastructure to keep this work going—and that's what's been created here. There are all these new relationships, networks and skills, and the real question is how we make sure we continue to put them to use."

Bass noted that many of the Census Subgroup funders have remained engaged and in touch through their involvement in post-census redistricting. In fact, the Bauman and Ford foundations are among the participants in a funder collaborative known as the Fair Representation in Redistricting initiative. The focus of their work: aligning resources and strategies with the goal of ensuring that district lines are drawn in ways that are equitable and fair. The funders also have created a pooled fund at the New Venture Fund to support this work. Similarly, the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation was reprising its role as a hub for census information and resources for funders by striving to provide similar [support](#) for funders engaged in redistricting work.

In addition, the Census Digital Organizing Group has now morphed into the Civic Digital Organizing

Group (C-DOG) with funders and stakeholders exploring how to apply new technologies and social media to organizing for civic participation.

More broadly, funders who participated in the 2020 census collaborative at all levels shared that the work has stimulated broader interest in their organizations in collaborative work on related topics. "I think there's a stronger voice in our foundation about supporting democracy and civic engagement now, and really looking at how to ensure that many of these underrepresented populations have a voice on issues that affect them," said Carolyn Miller, senior program officer with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Ria Pugada, senior program officer with the Consumer Health Foundation in Washington, DC, said funders in the DC-Maryland-Virginia region are reacting to their collaborative work on the 2020 census in similar ways. The funders are exploring options for an ongoing collaborative focused on strengthening democracy and spurring more civic engagement across the region.

Meredith Higashi, director of public policy and advocacy with Philanthropy Northwest, said similar conversations are happening among funders in her region who took part in 2020 census work. "I've seen a shift in terms of who's taking part in democracy-focused conversations," she said. "It used to be kind of a specialty area with just a few funders at the table, but now we're seeing it is an area where more and more funders in our network want to be engaged. There's much more interest in our programming and convening and conversations around democracy."

Higashi added that Philanthropy Northwest's engagement in the 2020 census, including its partnership with the Gates Foundation ▶▶▶



and others in creating a pooled fund for census outreach in Washington state, has expanded the organization's understanding of its own role and capabilities. "Managing a pooled fund and a campaign like this is not something we had ever done before with our network, and it's helped us see a new place for ourselves in engaging funders in the region around important issues."

## Keeping the Infrastructure Alive

How to create ongoing capacity and infrastructure for funder collaboration on democracy issues — including the census — was a common topic in funder conversations about what happens once the 2020 count is over and done. "I would love for funders to come together and support the leadership of one or two people so we can continue this work and shift the focus not only to redistricting but to other topics that funders should be tracking," said Florencia Gutierrez of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. "I think we need to find a way to continue some level of infrastructure so that we don't have to start over from scratch."

Jocelyn Bissonnette said the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation and its members were engaged in conversations about these and other questions as the 2020 census cycle drew to a close. After leading the Funders Census Initiative during the 2020 cycle, Bissonnette moved to managing FCCP's work on redistricting. She said she had a firsthand look at how the 2020 census was a "real spark" for funders across the country

to get involved in issues at the core of ensuring a strong and representative democracy. "We hope the incredible infrastructure and capacity and power that have been built around the census will continue to attract funder support so it can be leveraged for other good purposes going forward," she said.

As for funder involvement in the 2030 census, there is a feeling among funders that philanthropy should find a way to maintain some capacity to keep tabs on policy matters affecting the census and the American Community Survey on a continuing basis, with the collaborative work accelerating in mid-decade. Tara Westman at The California Endowment used the analogy of a stovetop to describe what the work should look like in the years ahead.<sup>6</sup> "If the burner goes up to 10, then let's keep the census on two or three for a while, but then turn it up to 10 at the appropriate time," she said. "We need to be able to do that so it doesn't become a surprise and we're not scrambling for resources. It should be built into our plans for the next 10 years."

Amy Desler at the Communities Foundation of Texas has no worries about the 2030 census somehow being a surprise event for her organization and its funding colleagues in that state. "After this experience, we will never enter the census cycle unprepared. We will keep this on the radar, we will mobilize the philanthropic community and our state legislators, and we will be well poised to make sure we're doing everything we can for a fair count." ★

<sup>6</sup>In mid-2021, the Census Subgroup announced the formation of the Census Equity Initiative, with the goal of raising funds for ongoing work on census policy and operational issues through 2024, as well as maintaining connections forged during the 2020 cycle. That plan is being reviewed by funders and stakeholders as this report is being written.



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# Appendices

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## Interviewees

*The author and the Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup send many thanks to the following individuals for participating in interviews for this report:*

**Sol Marie Alfonso Jones**, *Senior Program Officer, Long Island Community Foundation*

**Gary Bass**, *Executive Director Emeritus, Bauman Foundation*

**Evan Bacalao**, *Program Officer, Open Society Foundations*

**Nelson Beckford**, *Program Director, Neighborhood Revitalization & Engagement, Cleveland Foundation*

**Jocelyn Bissonnette**, *Special Projects Director, Funders' Committee for Civic Participation*

**Kerrie Blevins**, *Executive Director, Gold Bay Foundation*

**Kristen Burns**, *Associate Director, Grable Foundation*

**Nick Chedli Carter**, *Managing Director, Resilient Democracy*

**Angela Cheng**, *Senior Program Officer, The JPB Foundation*

**Carrie Davis**, *Democracy Program Director, Joyce Foundation*

**Amy Desler**, *Director of Development (Educate Texas), Communities Foundation of Texas*

**Amy Dominguez-Arms**, *Philanthropic/Nonprofit Consultant*

**Keesha Gaskins-Nathan**, *Director, Democratic Practice-United States Program, Rockefeller Brothers Fund*

**Deanna Gomby**, *President and CEO, Heising-Simons Foundation*

**Meghna Goswami**, *Program Director for Civic Engagement, Houston Endowment*

**Florencia Gutierrez**, *Senior Research Associate, Annie E. Casey Foundation*

**Meredith Higashi**, *Director of Public Policy and Advocacy, Philanthropy Northwest*



**Kiki Jamieson**, *President, The Fund for New Jersey*

**Holly Kreider**, *Program Officer, Heising-Simons Foundation*

**Terri Ann Lowenthal**, *Consultant*

**Geri Mannion**, *Director, Strengthening U.S. Democracy Program and Special Opportunities Fund, Carnegie Corporation of New York*

**Carolyn Miller**, *Senior Program Officer, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation*

**Alana Tomasita Moriarty**, *Communications Officer, W.K. Kellogg Foundation*

**Karen Narasaki**, *Consultant*

**Allan Oliver**, *Executive Director, Thornburg Foundation*

**Maggie Gunther Osborn**, *President and CEO, Maryland Philanthropy Network (formerly with United Philanthropy Forum)*

**Ria Pugeda**, *Senior Program Officer, Consumer Health Foundation*

**Clare S. Richie**, *Public Policy Specialist, Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta*

**Denice Ross**, *Senior Fellow, National Conference on Citizenship*

**Jera Stribling**, *Executive Director, Alabama Giving*

**Sue Van**, *President and CEO, Wallace H. Coulter Foundation*

**Arturo Vargas**, *CEO, National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund*

**Ted Wang**, *U.S. Program Director, Unbound Philanthropy*

**Tara Westman**, *Senior Program Manager, The California Endowment*

**Erika Wood**, *Program Officer, Civic Engagement and Government, Ford Foundation*

**John Yang**, *President and Executive Director, Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC*





## Members - Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup

**Annie E. Casey Foundation**

**Bauman Foundation**

**The California Endowment**

**Carnegie Corporation of New York**

**Democracy Fund**

**Ford Foundation**

**Heising-Simons Foundation**

**James Irvine Foundation**

**Joyce Foundation**

**The JPB Foundation**

**Kresge Foundation**

**Open Society Foundations**

**Robert Wood Johnson Foundation**

**Rockefeller Brothers Fund**

**Unbound Philanthropy**

**Wallace H. Coulter Foundation**

**William and Flora Hewlett  
Foundation**

**W.K. Kellogg Foundation**



“ I think we made  
census cool. ”

*Gary Bass, Executive Director Emeritus, The Bauman Foundation,  
and Chair, Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup*



### About the Author

William H. Woodwell, Jr. is an independent writer and communications consultant who works with foundations and nonprofits to tell powerful stories about their work. Since starting his career on Capitol Hill, he has written extensively on issues from voting rights and democracy to immigration, education and healthcare.

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