



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! ★ ★ ★

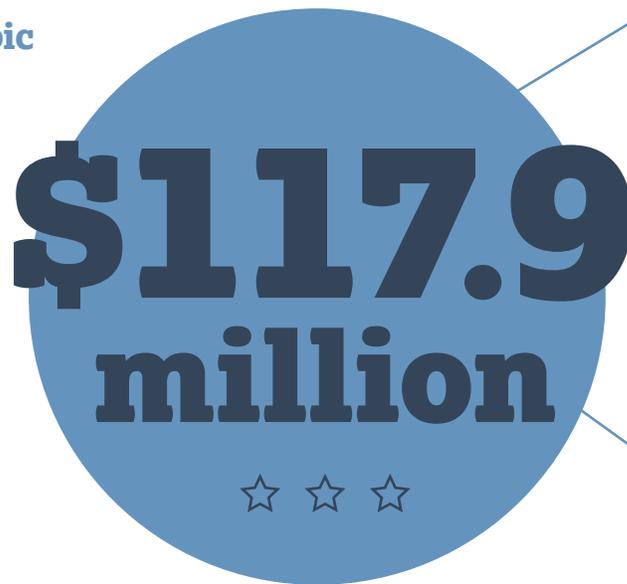
Combining pooled funding and aligned grants from participating foundations, the national funder collaborative for the 2020 census **supported more than 260 grantee organizations** engaged in litigation, advocacy, outreach and other activities.



By the Numbers:

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

National  
Philanthropic  
Funding ▶



Direct funding:  
**\$64.7  
million**

Pooled fund:  
**\$53.2  
million**

State  
Philanthropic  
Funding ▶

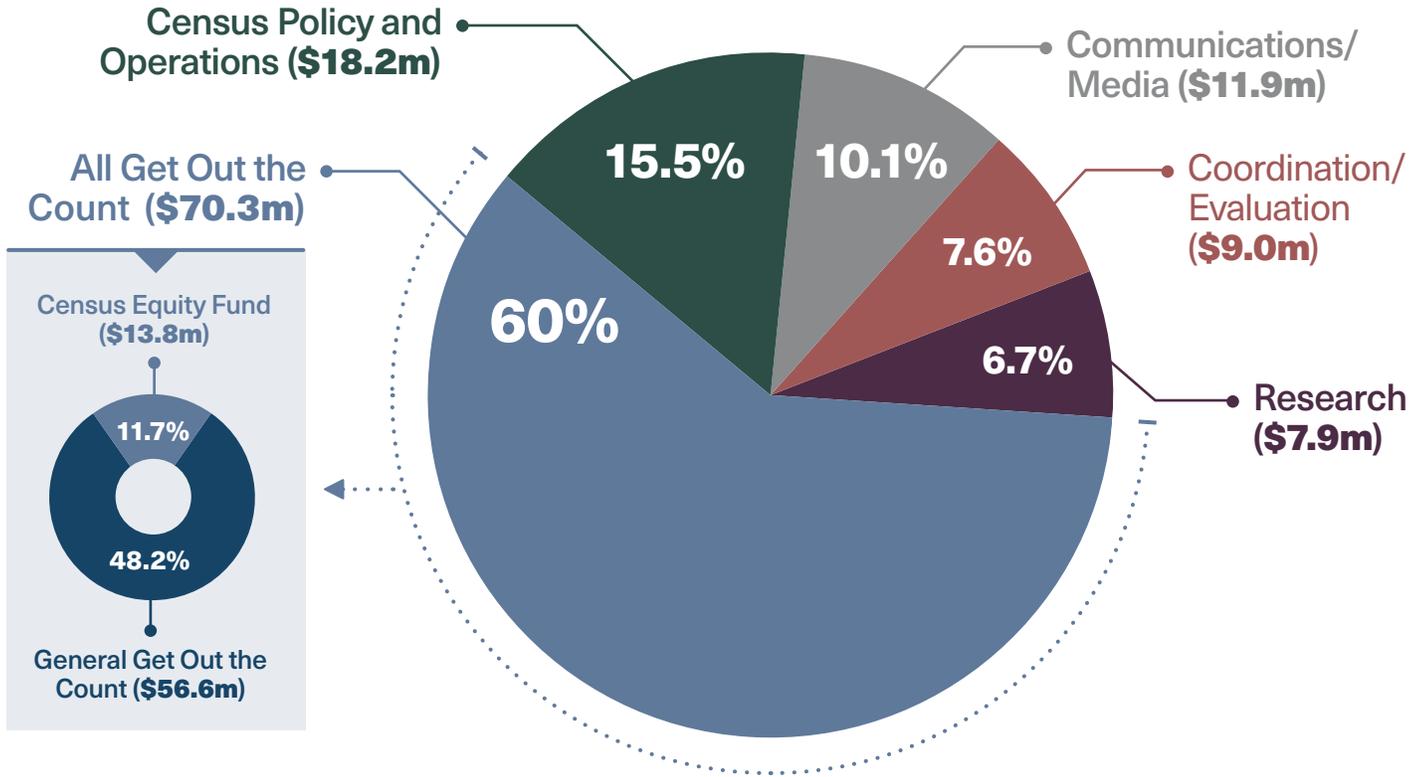


<sup>1</sup>Numbers on philanthropic funding are based on self-reporting by foundations to the Democracy Funders Collaborative Census Subgroup; the totals do not necessarily reflect all philanthropic funding for 2020 Census work.

<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>

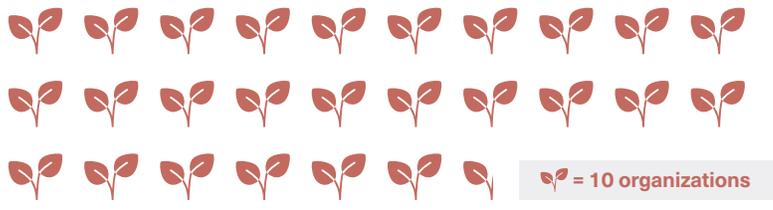


### Funders providing grants toward the national plan of action:



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:

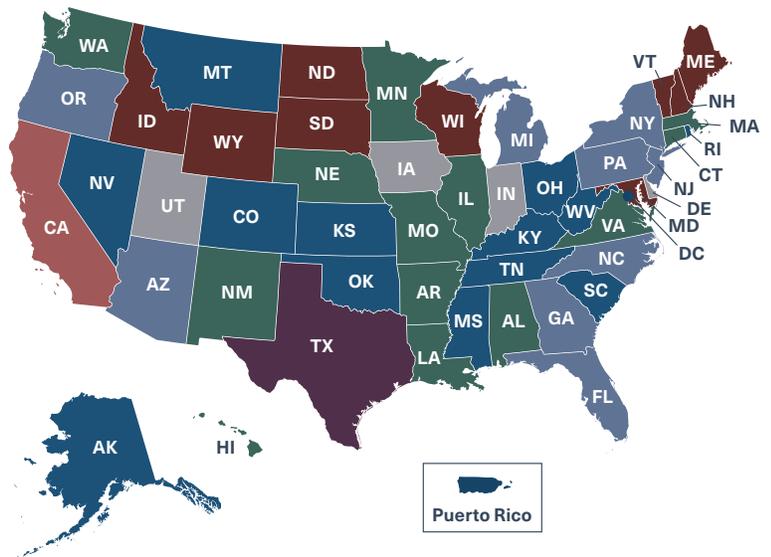
**\$12,500**  
(Wyoming)

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](#).