

# Bridge to Democracy

Community Organizations & US Census 2020



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# Executive Summary

Staff of community organizations were asked to serve a crucial role during U.S. Census 2020. In recent decades, the Bureau has considered community organizations, with their deep roots, knowledge, and trust among historically undercounted communities, to be ideal “surrogates” for the government. In the lead up to the 2020 count, the Bureau once again asked community organizations to serve as “trusted messengers” that could mitigate mistrust among historically undercounted groups. Civil rights organizations also advocated for community organizations to participate in census outreach as part of a national effort to prevent an undercount.

The stakes for every census are high. Census results are used to determine political representation, enforce voting rights and civil rights legislation, shape the distribution of federal dollars to states, and inform policy makers, businesses and nonprofits. The census is also central to defining, and continuously redefining, the racial and ethnic categories used in the U.S. The stakes for Census 2020 were particularly high. The introduction of policies that targeted historically undercounted groups, including the Trump administration’s very public attempt to add a citizenship question to the questionnaire, threatened to discourage participation and hamper the count.

Even as the Bureau asked community organizations to step up their outreach, they provided no funding and instead asked state legislatures and private philanthropy to step in. The result was a patchwork of funding and coordination across the country. By the end of 2019, twenty-six state governments had appropriated millions of dollars for census outreach and coordination, while twenty-four dedicated no monies at all.

This study was designed to gain greater insight into the role that community organized played in addressing a potential undercount in 2020. Our research team interviewed staff and funders in Washington state, which invested significantly in census outreach, and in Texas, which did not. We found that staff, particularly those who are representative of historically undercounted communities, dedicated extensive time and energy to providing their constituents with the information and access needed to complete the census questionnaire. This work is highly skilled, requiring staff to draw from their experiences and relationships to adapt, translate, interpret and weigh the risks and benefits of participation in the count.

Findings include:

- 1. Staff who were non-representative tended to view census outreach as information sharing.** They tended to describe their census outreach work as a straightforward process of sharing the messaging provided by the Bureau.
- 2. Staff who were representative of their constituents used a range of complex strategies for outreach.** Drawing from their deep knowledge and relationships with historically undercounted communities, they viewed their census outreach in complex terms, focused on translation, trust-building and trading off between the benefits and the risks of participation.
- 3. Staff, particularly those representative of their constituents, were highly responsive and adaptive.** They met major challenges before and during the count, adapting their outreach and communications strategies and often working above and beyond their job descriptions.
- 4. Funding & coordination matters.** Initial results indicate that spending on census outreach and coordination paid off, helping to mitigate undercounts in states with high Hispanic/Latino populations. And timing matters: early investments in Washington state provided community organizations with time and networks needed to create and adapt their outreach strategies.

These findings suggest more attention is needed to understand the role that staff of community organizations, particularly those who are asked to serve as representative of historically undercounted communities, play in democratic practices like the census. Given the expectations and stress on community organizations, and the uneven support across the country, we also call for greater public and private investment in their work.

# Introduction

The staff of community organizations were asked to play an important role in U.S. Census 2020. The Census Bureau has long struggled to fulfil its charge of securing a full and accurate headcount of all persons living in the U.S. In recent decades, the Bureau has come to rely on community organizations to serve as “trusted messengers” that can reach historically undercounted groups. National civil rights organizations have also advocated for community organizations to participate in census outreach, ensuring that everyone counts.

Across the country, staff of community organizations took up the charge, serving as key partners with the Census Bureau. During the count, staff communicated the importance of the census, removed barriers to participation, and encouraged their constituents to complete the census questionnaire. And they performed this work in the midst of political and social upheaval. The stakes for every census are high, but the stakes in 2020 were even higher as the Trump administration announced a series of policy decisions that threatened participation among historically undercounted groups. Then just as the census was poised to launch, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. A few months later, protesters took to the streets in response to police brutality and racial injustice.

Even as community organizations planned and adapted strategies to prevent an undercount, funding for this work was uncertain. The Bureau provided no funding for outreach to partners, instead encouraging philanthropy and individual states to fund the work. The result was an uneven patchwork of funding and coordination across the U.S.

This study was designed to gain greater insight into the role that community organizations played in addressing a potential undercount.<sup>1</sup> Our research team interviewed staff and funders in Washington state, which invested significantly in census outreach, and in Texas, which did not. We found that staff, particularly those who are representative of historically undercounted communities, dedicated extensive time and energy to providing their constituents with the information and access needed to complete the census questionnaire. Their work is highly skilled, requiring staff to draw from their experiences and relationships to adapt, translate, interpret and weigh the risks and benefits of participation in the count.

## What’s at stake?

Each decade, census data is used to

- Reapportion representation;
- Draw congressional and state legislative districts, school districts and voting precincts;
- Enforce voting rights and civil rights legislation;
- Shape the distribution of more than \$800 billion in federal dollars to states;
- Inform decisions by policy makers, businesses and nonprofits;
- Serve as a benchmark for nearly every survey in the United States.

The census has also been central to defining, and continuously redefining, the racial and ethnic categories used in the U.S.

## Census Partnership Program

In recent counts, the Bureau has promoted its partnership program, designed to “employ the strengths” of tribal, state and local governments, nonprofits, schools, businesses and media.<sup>2</sup> After the 2010 count, the Bureau reported that 257,000 partners offered 400,000 outreach activities and provided assistance in 145 languages, resulting in “\$97,000,000 in value-added” to the census.<sup>3</sup>

In the lead up to 2020, the Partnership Program was “hyper-focused” on reaching “hard to count” populations at the grassroots level. Community-based nonprofit organizations were asked to increase their role as “trusted messengers” that could increase awareness and participation in the count.

Based on their own research, the Bureau noted that distrust in government as a major barrier to participation, particularly for minoritized groups who shared their concerns over confidentiality and government misuse of data, lack of faith in government effectiveness, and a general distrust “in all levels of government.”

Community organizations, with **deep roots, knowledge and trust among the communities and neighborhood where they are located**, were considered ideal “surrogates” for the Bureau who could mitigate this mistrust and motivate participation among the “hard to count.”

## Bridge to Democracy

Scholars argue that community organizations have long played a pivotal role for democratic governance in the U.S. Often deeply embedded in minoritized communities, community organizations often serve as “civic intermediaries” that link individuals to governing systems and to political processes.<sup>4</sup> Staff who are representative of minoritized groups (through shared race, ethnicity, sexual identity, class, and/or ability) are expected to serve as bridges or buffers between their constituents and the rights and resources of government.

Even as they are asked to take on this role, community organizations often operate with small budgets and small staffs.<sup>5</sup> The **more informal, less bureaucratic, and highly relational structures of many community organizations** may assist them to stay closely connected to communities but may be judged by government and private funders to be deficits, limiting prospects for additional financial support.

## Hard-to-Count or Historically Undercounted?

The Bureau defines certain populations as “hard to count”: racial and ethnic minorities, non-English speakers, undocumented immigrants, people experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ persons; children under the age of five; people with mental or physical disabilities; and people who do not live in traditional housing.<sup>6</sup>

The Bureau further distinguishes populations into four subcategories:

- those who are *hard to interview* due to language barriers, low literacy, or lack of internet access;
- those who are *hard to locate* because their housing units are outside of the Bureau’s frame or they wish to remain hidden;
- those who are *hard to contact* because they are highly mobile, experience homelessness, or live behind physical access barriers such as gated communities;
- and those who are *hard to persuade* due to suspicion of the government and low levels of civic engagement.

Among community organizations in Washington state, staff had an active discussion about the assumptions embedded in the phrase “hard to count.” As several respondents explained, the phrase places the blame on people and not on the systemic barriers that discourage or prevent full participation. They proposed replacing the term hard-to-count with “**historically undercounted**,” reflecting the failure of government to fully address barriers to democracy.

# Race, Ethnicity & Trust in the Census Count

Since first established under the U.S. constitution, the census has been at the center of debates and struggles over race, ethnicity, representation and the full protections of citizenship. Over time, the Bureau has come to increasingly rely on community organizations to serve as partners and trusted messengers that can mitigate mistrust among historically undercounted groups.

**1789**

Unequal representation is written into the constitution, which stipulates that “free persons” would be counted fully, while “Indians not taxed” were excluded and “all other persons” are counted as a “fraction of a whole person.”

The categories for race change with each census, reflecting the politics and social struggles of their time.<sup>9</sup>

**1880**

The Bureau begins hiring supervisors and enumerators, providing detailed instructions about how to assign racial categories.

**1954**

Census privacy laws are consolidated into Title 13, which prohibits the Bureau from sharing census results with anyone for nonstatistical purposes.

**1970 & 1980**

Undercounts result in lawsuits, and coalitions of civil rights activists and elected officials demand to be included in future census planning.

**2002/2003**

The Bureau produces special tabulations of non-confidential data for the Department of Homeland Security about neighborhoods home to large numbers of Arab Americans.

**2019**

After a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court, the administration withdraws the citizenship question. The Bureau’s own research shows the threat of the question heightened fear and mistrust among historically undercounted groups.<sup>11</sup>

In the lead up to the 2020 census, the Bureau expands its digital strategy, automates many functions, and cuts the workforce and number of field offices. It also cancels survey and field tests planned for some of the most challenging places to enumerate.

**Summer 2020**

The administration cuts short door-knocking efforts by 1 month as a former census director warns of potential undercounts for the historically undercounted.<sup>14</sup>

**1790**

The first enumerators are U.S. marshals, who are given wide discretion to determine the race of residents.<sup>7</sup>

Officials rely on coercive compliance, issuing fines and publicly shaming individuals who failed to comply with census takers.<sup>8</sup>

**1850**

The first confidentiality policies are introduced.

**WW II**

U.S. census officials provide data to the FBI and military that is used to target Japanese Americans for internment. The Bureau’s actions do not fully come to light until the early 2000s.<sup>10</sup>

**1960**

The Bureau moves away from hired enumerators, implementing a system of self-identification supplemented by outreach and in-person visits.

Census data becomes central to the implementation of civil rights policies.

**1990**

After another undercount, community leaders advocate for the Bureau to partner with community organizations that have the trust of historically undercounted communities.

**2018**

The Trump administration announces its intention to add a citizenship question to the census questionnaire.

The administration rejects changes to questions about race and ethnicity question, originally proposed to address confusion for Hispanic/Latinx respondents.<sup>12</sup>

They also reject proposed questions on sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>13</sup>

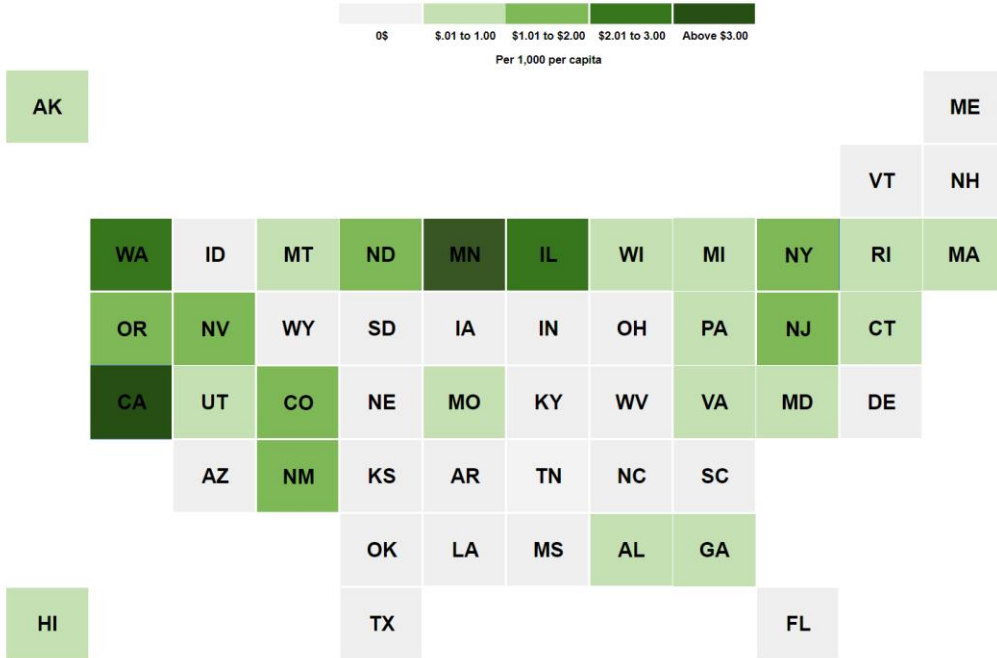
**Spring 2020**

The Bureau relies on its partner network, including many community organizations, to reach historically undercounted groups. When the COVID-19 pandemic hits just before the count begins, many organizations scramble to adapt their outreach strategies.

# State-Level Census Outreach

In the lead up to the 2020 count, the Bureau asked individual states to appropriate monies for census outreach and encouraged philanthropy to supplement with grants and donations. By the end of 2019, twenty-six state governments had appropriated millions of dollars, while twenty-four dedicated no monies at all to census outreach and coordination. States with Democratic leadership were more likely than states with Republican leadership to provide financial support to outreach efforts.

Census Outreach Funds Appropriated by State



Based on data from National Conference of State Legislatures

## Washington State

In Washington, early organizing by a coalition of advocates resulted in more than \$15 million in funding for census outreach and coordination from the legislature. Up to \$7.5 million was available to nonprofit organizations, local and tribal governments, and other groups for on-the-ground education, outreach, motivation, and assistance.

Private funders coordinated and granted support to community organizations that were representative of historically undercounted groups. The statewide nonprofit association coordinated with the Bureau to distribute messaging and facilitate regular strategy sessions, providing a venue for organizations across the state to share resources.

## Texas

In Texas, the state legislature declined to appropriate monies for census efforts in 2019. Several large private foundations stepped in to raise funds and coordinate outreach strategies across the state.

With less time to build coalitions, the funding in Texas was more likely to be awarded to larger nonprofit organizations with a broader, often state-wide focus. As a result, there was much less coordinated investment in smaller, community organizations that were representative of the primary constituents served, and any support that was allocated for outreach and coordination came much later in the process.

# Research to Understand the Role of Community Organizations

For this study, a team of three researchers sought to understand the perspectives and contributions of community organizations in the census count. The study was constructed from document review and a total of thirty-three interviews with staff of organizations engaged in census outreach and advocacy between March and July of 2020 in Washington state, which invested heavily in census outreach, and in Texas, which did not.

In Washington, we developed a purposive sample from the more than 140 organizations funded through the state's census fund. Most were 501c3 organizations concentrated in Western Washington with small or very small budgets. Our sample included staff who were representative of historically undercounted groups, including African; Asian/Pacific Islander; Latinx; immigrants and refugees; Native American; People of Color; LGBTQ; homeless; veterans; and youth. We also spoke with staff at two funding organizations.

The patterns of funding in Texas required a different approach. Of the seven interviews we conducted with staff from organizations that were engaged in census outreach, the majority were from larger, state-wide nonprofit organizations. Their staffs were less likely to be representative and most identified as white. In addition, we talked with one funding organization. Note that the funded organizations in Texas were largely located in urban areas. Our research does not reflect any work of community organizations in rural areas or at the border.

## Findings

### 1: Staff who were non-representative tended to view census outreach as information sharing

Staff who were not themselves representative of historically undercounted groups tended to describe their census outreach work as a straightforward process of sharing the messaging provided by the Bureau.

- These respondents framed the relationship between government and their constituents as straightforward, downplaying the political nature of the count and emphasizing the benefits of participation.
- They identified the cause of past undercounts in a lack of information among certain communities.
- Through focus groups and consultations with bilingual co-workers, they evaluated and selected among the Bureau materials that they believed would resonate with their constituents. Their outreach efforts largely focused on providing that information.

*"The census] would seem [to be] very political, but who doesn't want to be counted? Who doesn't want roads? Who doesn't want healthcare or Medicare or child nutrition in their community? I think it's a lovely common denominator and a base from which we can help create the common good."<sup>15</sup>*

## 2: Staff who were representative of their constituents used a range of complex strategies for outreach

Staff who shared an identity with their constituents, particularly those who had shared experiences with race, ethnicity, immigration status and/or gender and sexual identity, tended to describe their census outreach in more complex terms, ranging from translation, trust-building to trading off between the risks and benefits of participation.

### Outreach as Translation

Some staff described their role in terms of translation, focusing on the need to ensure that their constituents had access to the census questionnaire and instructions. They emphasized how they:

- Provided translation for additional languages or dialects beyond the 12 prioritized by the Bureau;
- Adapted outreach materials to reflect and resonate with their constituents;
- Assisted their constituents to interpret the wording of the questions about race, ethnicity, and gender, which often conflicted with the ways that constituents thought about their own identities.

*"You have to be able to ask the right questions... When we look at the census, it's written very white."*

### Outreach as Trust-Building

Some staff described their role in addressing the mistrust their constituents held towards the government and the census process. They emphasized how they:

- Answered questions from constituents about the potential use and misuse of census data;
- Were able to draw from their shared identity and language to build greater trust and communication with constituents;
- Reassured constituents about the security of their information, the legal protections in place, and the punishment for census officials who share personal information.

*"Those of us who... look like them, they're going to trust us... we've been around long enough, and people in the community [...] and government agencies, whether they're local or state level, recognize [that we] have credibility..."*

### Outreach as Trade-Off

For some, their work with the census was more complicated, requiring them to weigh the risks and benefits for their constituents. They emphasized how they:

- Were aware of the history of misuse of census data against communities of color and LGBTQ communities and adapted their messaging to be sensitive to this history;
- Weighed the need to encourage participation against potential risks to their constituents. They also weighed potential risks to the credibility of their organizations if the government were to misuse census data in the future.
- Described their participation as a "double-bind" or "tightrope" between securing resources for communities vs. asking constituents to mislabel themselves or put themselves at risk.
- Saw their census work as directly tied to advocacy at the national and local level.

*"I'm always concerned because I don't trust our current administration. Our mission is to support, motivate, encourage and advocate for all Latinos and communities of color... That's always on the forefront of my mind— how can this information be used for greater good or for greater evil?"*



### 3: Staff, particularly those representative of their constituents, were highly adaptive before and during the count

Major challenges before and during the count required staff to adapt quickly. With pandemic lock-downs and social distancing, in-person outreach and communications were restricted. As they adjusted their strategies, staff of organizations in Washington reported that they were able to draw from the networks facilitated by state and regional census coalitions. The solutions they developed were often creative, drawing both from the ideas generated in the coalitions and their organizations' long-standing relationships with media, local leaders and individual constituents.

It is important to note that even among organizations that received supplemental funding, many staff reporting working above and beyond the scope of their jobs, working extra, often uncompensated hours and relying on community volunteers to assist with outreach. In addition, their census work was often added on top of the other demands they faced in 2020, from addressing disparities in the pandemic response to engaging in the larger the struggles for racial justice.<sup>16</sup>

### 4: Funding & coordination matters

The contrast between the response in Washington state and in Texas was clear. Because of early public and private funding, combined with coordination and communication among grantees, community organizations in Washington state reported they were better equipped to plan outreach strategies and then adapt those strategies in the face of disruptions of the spring of 2020.

In Texas, by contrast, planning came later and philanthropic monies did not extend to community organizations in the most severely undercounted areas of the state. Here, initial results point to a correlation between spending on outreach and census results in states with large Hispanic/Latino populations. In Texas, Florida and Arizona, which did not dedicate state funds in outreach, early numbers indicate an undercount. New Mexico, California, and New York, which did invest in funds for outreach, do not appear to have an undercount.<sup>17</sup>

## Lessons & Opportunities

In this study, staff reflected on their role as trusted messengers to their communities during US Census 2020. Their work was essential, helping to mitigate another undercount in historically undercounted communities. Staff who were not representative of their constituents were more likely to see their outreach role as straightforward and transactional. By contrast, those who shared an identity with their constituents described their work along a wider continuum of translation, trust-building and trade-off. Their outreach work for the census was complex, requiring them to draw from their skills, experiences and relationships, even as they grappled with potential risks to their constituents and the implications for their organizations.

These findings suggest more attention is needed to understand the role that staff of community organizations, particularly those who are asked to serve as representative of historically undercounted communities, play in democratic practices like the census. Their labor is underrecognized, undertheorized, and significantly underfunded. Until the U.S. government takes responsibility for the failures of democracy, the staff of community organizations will bear a responsibility for advocating for their constituents and mitigating mistrust in government. Given the uneven support of census funding across the states and the many expectations placed on community organizations, we call for greater public and private investment in their work.

# Acknowledgements

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The results of this study are discussed in more depth in the article “Tightrope of advocacy: Critical race methods as a lens on nonprofit mediation between fear and trust in the U.S. Census” available at [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10841806.2021.1944586](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10841806.2021.1944586)

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## Endnotes

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