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# The Census Count Relies on Private Philanthropy

And that could produce an uneven count depending on the private dollars available in various communities.

BY JULIA ROCK FEBRUARY 14, 2020



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP FILE PHOTO

## Census demonstrators gather at the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C.

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On Wednesday, the House Committee on Oversight and Reform held a hearing with the Census Bureau director and the Government Accountability Office about the status of the count, which fully begins one month from today.

“The administration’s preparations for the census have been woefully inadequate,” said Committee Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) in her introductory statements. Representative Maloney pointed out that over the next ten years, census data will be used to allocate an estimated \$1.5 trillion in federal funds.

The Government Accountability Office also concluded in a report this week that the Census Bureau is behind schedule on recruiting enumerators and community partners, and preparing the technology that will be used for the census and preventing cybersecurity threats. Of the 248 census offices around the country, 202 have failed to meet recruiting targets.

The big risk of the census is not a national population undercount, but an undercount of certain groups: minorities, immigrants and refugees, children, disabled people, and homeless people. According to a lawsuit filed by the NAACP against the Census Bureau, the 2010 census failed to count 1.5 million black and Hispanic residents, “enough people to fill two Congressional districts,” according to the complaint. By contrast, the complaint says, non-Hispanic white people were overcounted by an estimated 0.8 percent.

The NAACP lawsuit alleges that the bureau’s preparations for the 2020 census “are so deficient as to raise imminent concerns of a substantially greater undercount than in past

years, particularly affecting such ‘hard-to-count’ populations.” The deficiencies, the complaint says, “are a conspicuous neglect of a constitutional duty.”

Partially in response to this neglect, philanthropic foundations around the U.S. have massively mobilized to fund local census outreach efforts. Nongovernment, or state and local government involvement in the census has been on the rise since 1980, when the Census Bureau launched an official partnership program, encouraging states and nongovernment entities to form Complete Count Committees. However, a coordinated effort by philanthropies to conduct census education and outreach is a new trend.

Philanthropic funding for outreach has exceeded \$80 million for the 2020 census so far, according to estimates from the United Philanthropy Forum. The Funders Census Initiative estimates that in 2010, philanthropic funding amounted to \$33 million. The committee called the 2010 census “what may be the largest public-philanthropic partnership in the nation’s history.” Funders and experts point to two reasons that have led to a mushrooming private involvement in this civic enterprise: the bureau’s failure to adequately prepare for the count, and declining trust in the federal government, especially among immigrant communities.

Maggie Osborn, senior vice president and chief strategy officer for the United Philanthropy Forum, tells the *Prospect* that foundations have become involved in the census because government services that are allocated based on census data align with the funding priorities of their organizations. “If your community, because of an undercount, receives less of the federal funds than they would be entitled to if the count had been accurate ... they are going to look to philanthropy, and philanthropy will never have the kind of money to replace that funding,” she says.

Partnerships with local nonprofits and community organizations have become a crucial aspect of the decennial count over the past few decades. But the scale of philanthropic investment reveals the federal government's reliance on private partners to carry out a constitutionally mandated duty. And more importantly, while so-called "trusted messengers" of census information may have an easier time reaching hard-to-count communities, their capacity to do so relies in many cases on whether they can access funding.

The partnerships are not always smooth. Representative Jimmy Gomez of California's 34th Congressional District, which contains Los Angeles, has more official census partners than any other district in the country. In Wednesday's committee hearing, he asked why nonprofit partners in his district have been told by the bureau not to have door-knockers while enumerators are out. Census Bureau Director Steven Dillingham responded that a private think tank (the RAND Corporation Survey Research Group, on contract with the State of California) was carrying out its own census in the state. "We have given advice that we don't want to mix the two together, so people aren't confused about who is knocking on their door. Is it the think tank-administered survey, or is it the census?"

In Texas, bills to fund census outreach were killed by Republicans in the state legislature, and philanthropies have given away millions of dollars to nonprofit and community organizations for the count. "In some areas, [census outreach] efforts will live and die by how much philanthropic support can be mustered," wrote reporter Alexa Ura in an [article for \*The Texas Tribune\*](#) earlier this year.

While philanthropic funds may help increase the tally of undercounted populations in some areas, private money cannot fill the gaps left by the federal government. Hard-to-count communities that haven't been reached by private dollars—those without nonprofit or community organizations that philanthropies are willing to support, or

in areas without philanthropic networks that have made the census a funding priority—will be left behind.

Not only could a reliance on private dollars produce an uneven count, but the use of philanthropy to fund a civic enterprise creates a deeper problem. Lawmakers and community leaders have expressed that fear of the federal government is a barrier to certain communities answering the door when an enumerator comes knocking. The census is not simply a count: Dillingham told the House Oversight Committee this week that the 2020 census will be “the largest civilian mobilization since World War II.”

Community partnerships should help build trust in government and civic engagement, rather than serve as a replacement for effective government operations. For example, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) asked Dillingham in this week’s hearing whether the bureau would “advise the public clearly and decisively” that there would be no citizenship question. Dillingham said he would answer if asked about the citizenship question, but that their research shows “people are more interested in knowing the benefits” of the census, “so that’s what we emphasize.”

In 2018, the U.S. Census Bureau ran an end-to-end test of the count in Providence County, Rhode Island. Initially the bureau had planned for four end-to-end tests in locations across the country, but due to budget cuts the other three were canceled. The bureau didn’t have a budget for outreach during the test, so local officials and organizations banded together to build a public-information campaign around the test.

The outreach was funded in part with a grant from the Rhode Island Foundation, the state’s largest philanthropic organization, which has already allocated \$300,000 in grants to community groups and nonprofits and is planning to spend \$125,000 more. The Rhode Island Foundation was invited to join the state’s Complete Count

Committee, a coalition of state and local officials and nonprofit and community organizations, created by Governor Gina Raimondo by executive order after the state House failed to create it through legislation. The self-response rate for the test was 53 percent (compared to a national average of 66 percent for the 2010 census), but these organizations are hoping a coordinated outreach effort can increase responses for the official count.

In Providence, which has a large population of recently resettled refugees, the Refugee Dream Center is sending employees to visit families in their homes and educate them about filling out the census. Omar Bah, the center's founder and executive director, says that case managers speak with families about why it is important to fill out the census and spread the message that census takers will not be sharing information with immigration agencies. While the Supreme Court ensured there would be no citizenship question on the questionnaire, the Trump administration's attempts to include one has stoked fears.

Bah says his organization was invited to join the committee because refugees are among the hardest-to-count populations. "We had a lot of difficulty in understanding why our populations should participate in the census," Bah tells the *Prospect*, "when there was extreme fear about deportations or whether the census was used by the federal government to locate people somehow, and this was amplified when the issue of the citizenship question came up." Bah says that his case managers have already visited 100 households for census outreach, and plan to visit between 300 and 500 before the census is completed. (Many of these homes have at least 5 and as many as 10 residents, according to Bah.) It is the federal government's job to count the people in these households, but the burden has fallen upon the refugee community itself to be counted.

Over \$3 billion in federal funds are allocated to Rhode Island annually—over a third of the state's annual budget—

based on the census count. This money funds programs that are crucial to recently resettled refugees, such as food stamps and cash assistance, Bah says. He hopes to convey to the families he works with that filling out the census is necessary to ensure that the programs they rely upon continue to be funded.



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