



Why the Census Matters for Environmental Justice and Climate Action

Accurate census data is one of the least seen but most powerful tools for environmental justice. It helps us understand where climate impacts hit hardest and who is most affected, and guides billions in federal funding to the communities that need it most. When we count everyone, we can protect everyone. An accurate 2030 Census will bring visibility and dollars to the communities most vulnerable to climate impacts and environmental hazards. Environmental justice begins with accurate data, and accurate data begins with the census. This factsheet outlines how funders who care about the environment can ensure we have fair and accurate census data.



What's the Census?

Every ten years, the U.S. Census Bureau counts every person living in the United States—a constitutional requirement that shapes our democracy and public spending for the next decade. The census determines political representation and it serves as the statistical backbone for funding decisions in every policy arena, including environmental policy. **Each year, census data, together with the American Community Survey, is used to direct over \$2 trillion in federal spending and helps ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent wisely.**

Alongside the decennial census, the annual American Community Survey provides ongoing demographic data that environmental advocates, policymakers, researchers, and funders rely on to make decisions that guide billions of dollars in environmental funding.

Why It Matters for Environmental Justice

It's hard to overstate the significance of the census in guiding actions and resources to achieve environmental justice. The census:

Determines Federal Environmental Funding

Census data guides billions in federal environmental funding. For example, the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program annually distributes \$5.9 billion to provide low-income individuals with access to cleaner energy sources. Federal Transit Formula Grants provide \$6.9 billion for community public transit. The Water and Waste Disposal Loan and Grant Program directs \$50.9 million to fund clean water projects, sanitary sewage and solid waste disposal, and stormwater drainage in rural areas.

Identifies Vulnerable Communities

Persistently undercounted communities often bear disproportionate environmental burdens—living closer to pollution sources, having less access to healthy air and water, and facing greater vulnerability to climate impacts. Census data provides the demographic information needed to assess which communities face

Accurate Census Data:



**Helps target
investments to improve
health outcomes**



**Identifies communities
at greater risk of exposure
to harmful chemicals**



**Guides grantmaking
and helps
measure impact**

greater risks. Researchers used census data to discover that low-income neighborhoods in Baltimore have significantly higher temperatures than affluent neighborhoods. [The Harvard Chan School of Public Health issued a study](#) that found people of color are more likely to be exposed to harmful levels of “forever chemicals” (i.e. PFAs) than others. With an accurate census, we can direct resources to where they are most urgently needed.

Pinpoints Environmental Health Impacts on Underrepresented People

A [2024 report](#) found 56% of people in the US within 3 kilometers of carcinogenic sites were people of color. Linking biomonitoring data with race and ethnicity categories has [shown there are systemic inequalities for people of color being exposed to toxic chemicals found indoors](#).

For example, Black Americans have higher levels of lead, mercury, phthalates, and volatile organic compounds (VOCs); Hispanic Americans show elevated exposure to arsenic, pesticides, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs); and Asian Americans have higher average levels of arsenic, cadmium, and manganese. These data correlate with higher rates of asthma, obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. With accurate and complete census data, we can target investments to improve health outcomes and reduce environmental health disparities.

Determines State Environmental Funding

States also rely on census data to allocate their own environmental funding, using census data to determine per capita spending levels. In Texas, for example, regional solid waste funds are allocated based on a population formula. States also allocate federal Land and Water Conservation Funds based on census data.

Enables Environmental Philanthropy Decisions

The census is fundamental to everything environmental funders do. Accurate census data enables them to effectively plan, research, evaluate, and advocate for environmental change. For example, foundations use demographic and other census data to better understand community needs and use that understanding to guide their grantmaking.



An accurate 2030 Census will bring visibility and dollars to the communities most vulnerable to climate impacts and environmental hazards.

Empowers Environmental Protections

Policymakers and advocates rely on census data to enforce equitable protections under the Clean Air Act and other environmental laws. In Minnesota, residents successfully used census data to prevent a wood-burning power plant from being built near a community with large populations of elderly residents and children. Community groups across the country regularly link census data with the Toxics Release Inventory to support informed decisions about environmental policy, community health, and urban planning.

Directs Climate Crisis and Other Disaster Response

The Census Bureau's [OnTheMap](#) application provides detailed demographic data used to prepare for disasters like extreme weather events, plan evacuation routes, and identify where to distribute supplies. This data guides investments in communities and programs that build disaster resilience and strengthen climate preparedness. The Census Bureau has also used census data to create a [Community Resilience Estimates for Heat](#) tool, which helps communities prepare for extreme heat events.

Our Path to a Complete 2030 Count

The 2030 Census is being planned right now: how the Census Bureau will reach undercounted populations, what resources will be available, and how data will be collected.

The federal government will not provide the resources for comprehensive community outreach. That's where philanthropy comes in. We have a proven model from 2020, when foundations came together through the Census Funder Collaborative to raise more than \$120 million for the national effort and an additional \$75 million for state-based activities.

Philanthropic investment made a measurable difference: "Civil society saved the 2020 Census." That's the conclusion drawn by one evaluation. The infrastructure built for 2020 continues working today—supporting broadband access, civic engagement, and other community campaigns. Everyone counts, and together we showed we can make sure everyone is counted.



Join Us!

The Census Funder Collaborative is actively welcoming environmental funders.

You can:

- ▶ **Provide funding directly** to trusted community organizations doing census outreach
- ▶ **Leverage your convening power** to bring together stakeholders for 2030 planning
- ▶ **Help your colleagues understand** the importance of census data to your work
- ▶ **Contribute to CFC's pooled fund** to support coordinated national and state efforts

When we count everyone, we advance our environmental goals for people and the planet.

Ready to Learn More?

Contact the Census Funder Collaborative at info@censusfunders.org to explore how your foundation can support a fair and accurate 2030 Census.

