



More Than a Count: How Investing in the Census Builds Lasting Community Infrastructure

Accurate census data is one of the least seen but most powerful tools for strengthening communities—but the count does something even its champions sometimes overlook. The work of getting every person counted builds lasting civic infrastructure: networks of community organizations, trusted messengers, funders, and often government agencies who learn to work together and keep working together on other initiatives long after the decennial census ends. Since the 2020 Census, that infrastructure has powered everything from pandemic response to voter engagement, to broadband access, to redistricting efforts. A complete count is the spark, and durable community capacity is the legacy. This factsheet outlines how funders can invest in census outreach that pays dividends for a decade and beyond.



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, but it also serves as the statistical backbone for funding decisions in every policy arena. **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 nonprofits, community organizations, researchers, and funders rely on to plan, serve, and strengthen their communities.

How Census Organizing Builds Lasting Civic Infrastructure

Census campaigns are often treated as a once-a-decade obligation. In practice, they are one of the best investments in the long-term health of the social sector. The work of getting out the count:

Builds Durable Networks of Community Organizations:

To reach every household, census campaigns knit together coalitions of community-based organizations that had often never worked together—across regions, issues, and populations. Those relationships don't disappear when the count ends; they become permanent civic infrastructure. In North Carolina, the NC Counts Coalition formed in 2017 as the state's hub for census outreach. It has since grown into a network of more than 250 partners and works year-round to build a healthier, more equitable state.

Strengthens the Organizations Communities Rely On:

Census investment flows to the same trusted local organizations that lead a community's most important work. The census work helps those organizations build their capacity in a range of ways: data analysis, leadership development, communications, funding, and relationships with local government. They end up stronger at everything else



Investing in the 2030 Census:

Builds durable networks of community organizations

Creates civic infrastructure that responds to community crises

Turns one-decade campaigns into lasting institutions

they do beyond the census. In Pennsylvania, a statewide census network grew from 35 to 58 permanent partner organizations whose staff and members built lasting skills and connections. This is the multiplier effect that funders often seek: an investment in the census is an investment in the local infrastructure behind every other priority.

Creates Infrastructure That Responds in a Crisis: Because census organizing builds civic infrastructure, communities can pivot quickly when there are opportunities like the federal broadband initiative or when something goes wrong. When COVID-19 hit in the middle of the 2020 count, groups that had been working together on the census shifted almost overnight to COVID-related phone banking, text banking, and pairing outreach with food and supply distribution. In Washington State, the very coalition formed to lead the census went on to help administer a \$98 million COVID relief fund for immigrant families left out of federal aid. The same networks have powered responses to the digital divide and other emerging community priorities.

Carries Communities from the Count to the Ballot to Fair Maps:

The infrastructure built for the census naturally extends to the rest of civic life. Nationally, the relationships and capacity built for the 2020 count rapidly carried over to voter engagement in the 2020 elections and to redistricting efforts in 2021. In Pennsylvania, census organizing flowed directly into a community-led redistricting initiative and an expanded voter-engagement network of 30 organizations now active in every election.

Turns Temporary Campaigns into Lasting Institutions: The strongest census efforts don't disband—they institutionalize, preserving knowledge and relationships for the next cycle and the decade in between. In Texas, the 2019 Texas Counts campaign—a funder collaborative that regranted to more than 50 community organizations—became the permanent Texas Census Institute in 2021. It's now the state's year-round hub for census research, advocacy, and regional partnerships. In Washington, the Washington Census Alliance became the standing Washington Community Alliance. Institutions like these are also doing the year-round education and outreach needed for the annual American Community Survey. These ongoing efforts mean our investments in 2030 are not starting from scratch.

Deepens Collaboration Among Funders: The infrastructure built through census work is also reshaping philanthropy. Through their census coordination, funders have aligned strategy, pooled resources, and built trusted relationships with community leaders, all skills and habits that outlast the count. After 2020, foundations including Pennsylvania's Heinz Endowments and William Penn Foundation launched new, permanent democracy programs born of their census collaboration. Nationally, more than 120 funders worked together through the model that became today's Census Funder Collaborative.

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. The 2020 infrastructure is still standing—and with continued investment, it will be ready for 2030 and the decade beyond.



Join Us!

The Census Funder Collaborative is actively welcoming 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 invest in the census, we build the lasting infrastructure that every community and every cause depends on.

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.



**CENSUS FUNDER
COLLABORATIVE**