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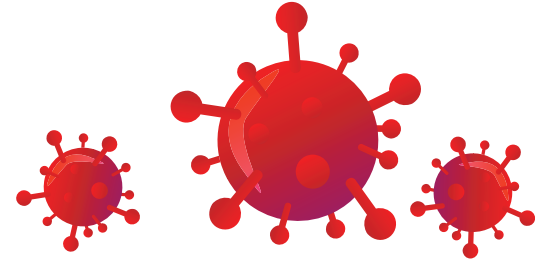


Completing the Count in a Pandemic:

Lessons Learned from
the 2020 Census

Introduction

Context for the Count



Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, ensuring a complete and accurate count for the 2020 Census was going to be difficult. Hard-to-count populations – including complex households, renters, young children, immigrants, and people of color – were going to be a more significant share of the population than in 2010. The nation’s first online Census launched during a time of increased fears about cybersecurity and when almost 20 million Americans lack access to broadband internet. The Trump Administration’s push for a citizenship question stoked fears about Census participation throughout America’s immigrant communities. And the Census Bureau reduced field offices and staff, and it was well behind schedule for hiring and training as the 2019 winter holidays approached.

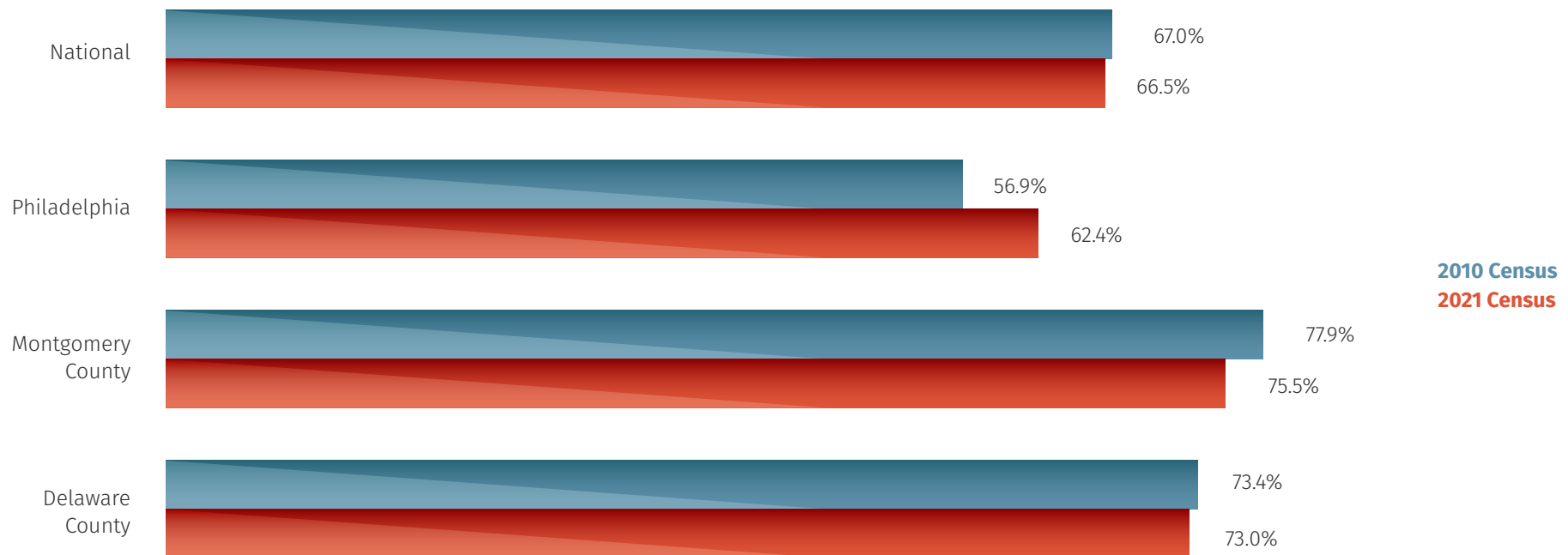


Once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, local and national Census efforts faced major unforeseen hurdles. The outbreak turned into a pandemic just as Census operations and local complete count committee efforts ramped up to Census Day on April 1. Census efforts nationwide were impacted as local leaders focused on pandemic response, community outreach events were canceled, and the capacity of partner organizations was reduced. The Census Bureau halted operations just as fieldwork started, and shifts in its operational timeline reduced the enumeration period.

As a result, reaching hard-to-count populations – particularly children under five, low-income and lower-educated communities, English language learners and undocumented immigrants, and racial minorities – became even more difficult.

Self-Response Rates in Greater Philadelphia

After the enumeration period in October 2020, the national self-response rate was 67 percent, slightly outperforming the 66.5 percent self-response rate for the 2010 Census. Like many large cities across the country, Philadelphia's 2020 self-response rate of 56.9 percent was lower than its 2010 self-response rate of 62.4 percent. Both Montgomery County and Delaware County, however, improved their overall response rate in 2020. Montgomery County reached a self-response rate of 77.9 percent in 2020, compared to 75.5 percent in 2010. Delaware County achieved a self-response rate of 73.4 percent in 2020, slightly outpacing its 2010 self-response rate of 73 percent.



2020 Census

Action Funds Overview

The Delaware County Complete Count Action Fund (in partnership with the Foundation for Delaware County), Montgomery County, and Philly Counts 2020 Census Action Funds were established in partnership with Philanthropy Network Greater Philadelphia to support county-based organizations actively promoting participation in the 2020 Census. The action funds provided grants to support and empower community-based organizations to develop the skills and capacity of communities at risk of being undercounted to help lay the groundwork for a complete count.

Funds were structured to allow for quick decisions and swift disbursement of funding to local organizations. The Philly Counts 2020 Action Fund and Montgomery County Action Fund provided grants ranging from \$2,500 to \$25,000 to nonprofit organizations over five application rounds beginning in August 2019 and ending in March 2020. The Delaware County Complete Count Action Fund primarily provided grants up to \$5,000 to nonprofit community-based organizations across three grant application periods beginning in January 2020 and ending in August 2020.

One hundred nineteen (119) grants totaling \$904,496 were distributed to 110 organizations in Philadelphia, Montgomery County, and Delaware County. Seventy-seven percent of grantees and 82 percent of grant dollars were in Philadelphia. Delaware County accounted for 14 percent of grantees and 11 percent of grant dollars, while Montgomery County represented 9 percent of grantees and 7 percent of grant dollars.

119
Grants

110
Organizations in
3
Counties

Philadelphia
77% of grantees
82% of grant dollars

**Delaware
County**
14% of grantees
11% of grant dollars

**Montgomery
County**
14% of grantees
11% of grant dollars

Census Action Fund Interview Takeaways

With the 2020 Census well behind us, the Philanthropy Network Greater Philadelphia was interested in looking back to better understand Census Action Fund grantees' experience. To that end, the Philanthropy Network engaged Chris Arlene Consulting, a Philadelphia-based consulting practice that works with local governments and nonprofits, to assess Census Action Fund grantees. The assessment had two components: 30-minute interviews with grantees from all three counties and an online survey that all grantees could complete.

Both the interviews and the survey were designed to understand the challenges and opportunities of community engagement efforts before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. What follows is a summary of the primary takeaways and lessons learned based on grantee feedback.

	Philadelphia	Montgomery County	Delaware County
Grants	91	11	17
Grantees	85	10	15
Total Grants	\$744,146	\$63,537	\$96,814
Average Grant	\$8,177	\$5,776	\$5,695
Median Grant	\$7,500	\$5,000	\$4,400

Impact of COVID-19

How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect grantees' community engagement strategies?

Ninety-seven percent of survey respondents had an outreach strategy that primarily relied on in-person activities. Almost all interviewed grantees had events-based outreach plans that were mostly canceled once the COVID-19 outbreak emerged. These types of planned activities included block parties, tabling at community events, and stations set up in high traffic areas like building lobbies or public transportation hubs. Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture planned to expand a series of block parties that originated through the Knight Foundation's OnTheTable initiative, but they could not host those events after the COVID-19 outbreak. Fairhill Neighbors' efforts were limited because their "bread and butter are in-person conversations."

The inability to gather in person also limited efforts to provide access to technology, which was a focus for several grantees. The Community Learning Center planned to open its computer labs to the local community but could not do so once social distancing restrictions were in place. The Delaware County Libraries purchased additional computers to allocate for Census events and planned to designate computers at their locations specifically for the Census.



How did grantees adjust their strategies and focus their activities during the pandemic?

Almost all interviewed grantees pivoted their Census outreach efforts online after the COVID-19 pandemic, with social media as the primary vehicle. And 80 percent of survey respondents cited social media as a critical tool for adapting their post-COVID-19 strategies to reach their target audiences.

- The North Wales Area Library provided WIFI access to vehicles in their parking for Census completion. Making a Change Group did live broadcasts on Facebook and YouTube that included Census messaging. The Asian Arts Initiative pivoted their open mic programs to increase the engagement of their middle school, including student-created Census posters that were converted into digital images and amplified across social media with their community partners. Kiths Integrated and Targeted Human Services used social media to bring awareness to the constant timeline changes to encourage people to complete the Census online before enumerators came to their doors because of the heightened awareness with social distancing rules during the pandemic.

Many grantees also implemented additional outreach strategies like phone banking, canvassing, and literature drops in addition to social media outreach. More than half of survey respondents implemented literature drops, and more than one-third performed phone banking to connect with their target audiences.

- Germantown United CDC did tote bag and literature drops at intersections with high SEPTA ridership, especially for essential workers who continued to use public transit during the pandemic.

Several grantees integrated Census messaging into pandemic response efforts, especially at food access points. Roughly half of survey respondents, however, did not integrate Census outreach into their Covid-19 response efforts.

- Centro de Apoyo Comunitario developed a “quarter sheet” used at food programs to engage residents while waiting in line. The Hunting Park Neighborhood Advisory Committee integrated Census messaging with its’ outdoor COVID-19 testing, in partnership with Black Doctors Consortium, and its’ food distribution work. Making a Change Group leveraged its COVID-19 outreach workers by including flyers with their food deliveries and bringing iPads to events. KITHS sent mailers that contained guidance for both COVID-19 response and Census completion.

Some grantees sharpened their focus on a particular area or specific hard-to-count population in response to capacity constraints.

- The Southwest Community Development Corporation focused its attention on its Vietnamese population after the pandemic hit because other organizations worked with its West African immigrant communities with French language capacity.

“ **80% of survey respondents cited social media as a critical tool for adapting their post-COVID-19 strategies to reach their target audiences.** ”

”

Perspectives on Outreach and Engagement

What types of strategies strengthened outreach efforts?

Planning and Analysis

- Generations On Line conducted a focus group in June 2019 among low income seniors at the Philadelphia Senior Center to assess their target audience's perspective on the Census, which highlighted fears about digital literacy and government skepticism. Germantown United CDC reviewed American Community Survey data before the Census to identify zip codes to target and CUNY's Center for Urban Research's Hard to Count map for real-time analysis of self-response performance. The Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Associations Coalition (SEAMAAC) began its planning in the Spring of 2019, which provided time to educate its staff on the Census and laid the groundwork for solid performance with target populations before the pandemic.

Hyper-Local Approach

- Centro de Apoyo Comunitario purposefully connected with immigrant business owners because they are trusted community leaders, and personal relationships are essential. Asian Americans United used partnerships with local ethnic media sources to get Census information out. Germantown United CDC volunteers specifically wanted to phone bank members of the Germantown community rather than participating in a citywide effort. Accion Communal Latino Americano de Montgomery County used grant funding to hire residents to canvass in their own neighborhoods.



What types of challenges limited outreach efforts?

Communication and Coordination

- Inconsistent messages across Census stakeholders and the difficulty connecting the Census to everyday life were common issues. Some organizations, particularly smaller nonprofits, did not feel connected to a county or regional Census effort. In Delaware County, some organizations found it hard to collaborate with partners when engaging marginalized communities. “There was no one where I would say ‘hey, let me partner with you’; the sense was that’s too hard.”

Funding

- Lack of dedicated funding at the state level left organizations scrambling and regional efforts without adequate resources. While grantees were appreciative of philanthropic funding, it did not cover the total value of staff time and effort for the Census. Several grantees felt like they subsidized the regional Census effort. Some small organizations even lacked basic needs to execute Census work. “How can I make phone calls if I don’t have a phone?”

Connecting with Hard to Count Residents

- Educating hard-to-count populations was more difficult than some organizations anticipated. A “standing in the stream” approach reaches residents who are more accessible to count than many in hard-to-count communities. “The people who are not completing the Census are not going to walk up to a Census table at Clark Park.”

What Should Census Stakeholders Remember for the 2030 Census?

- **Almost all grantees suggested that organizational and regional Census efforts needed to start earlier.** Trust is key to Census participation in hard-to-count communities, and it takes time to build. “We need to embed in these neighborhoods rather than parachuting in every 9.5 years.” Census work required staff to spend time and effort in addition to their typical day-to-day responsibilities, stretching capacity for some grantees. “For next time, I want to remember how much time my staff and I put into the Census.”
- **Community organizations with legitimacy and relationships should be the face of the Census effort, as much as if not more than local government.** “Philly Counts did a great job pulling various organizations together, but these groups should be the ambassadors for the Census, not the government.” It is crucial to ensure that the right organizations – especially community anchors like libraries – are also at the planning table. In the future, the ability to adapt Philly Counts’ or other centralized materials with hyper-local branding would allow for more continuity of message for organizations with community relationships and legitimacy.
- **Connections to other organizations and a larger Census effort were crucial, and these connections should be maintained.** Many Philadelphia grantees noted the value Philly Counts created as a convenor and coordinator. “We felt like we were part of a bigger thing with Philly

Counts.” Regular emails, briefings, and meetings provided helpful information, even though the Census Bureau timeline changed multiple times. Access to one-on-one mentorship from an organization like Philly Counts benefited organizations that were new Census stakeholders. “We got into a rhythm of being connected, and we need to leverage the relationships that we formed.”

- **County efforts should bring closure to the 2020 Census and set collective goals for the 2030 Census.** Several grantees suggested that it would be important and valuable to analyze and understand actual 2020 Census performance once data is available. “We need to see the data and understand what we did well and what we didn’t do well.” Complete Count Committees could use data analysis to keep their partners engaged in the coming years. However, it will be essential to articulate the purpose and utility of maintaining these connections in a manageable way because some grantees noted some repetitiveness during collaborative meetings. “There was a point, pre-pandemic, where it felt like all the partners were working on top of each other...if you wanted to go to 100 meetings, you could have gone to 100 meetings. At some point, we just needed to do the work.”
- **There is also a clear need for tools that explain the actual impact of the Census to both nonprofits and residents in simple terms.** “We need a fact sheet of how the Census impacts everyday life.” Analysis that shows funding levels before and after the 2020 Census for federal programs like Head Start, Supplementation Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers could show the direct impact on vulnerable communities. Several grantees also suggested that clear goals for specific hard-to-count Census tracts or zip codes would help them focus their efforts. “It has to be more than just increasing turnout.”
- **Language access and support require additional resources. Multiple organizations that serve non-Spanish populations, particularly in Philadelphia’s diverse Asian and immigrant communities, noted challenges for language access.** Census Bureau staff provided some language access resources, but these resources were inconsistently available. Staff members who speak critical languages often found themselves overstretched. Additionally, Philly Counts’ non-Spanish language materials didn’t always “make its’ way down” to Delaware County, where language support is also needed.
- **A long-term plan for funding and convening is vital moving forward.** Convening tends to fall to local government, but it may not make sense for local government to serve as the primary convenor if it is not the primary funder. Philanthropic fundraising could benefit from a longer timeline. “It’s easier to donate \$10,000 per year than to donate \$100,000 at once.” Grants that start earlier would allow organizations to start outreach earlier, and several grantees suggested they could be more effective starting two years out instead of one year out.

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