

Inside Philanthropy

Who's Funding What, and Why

Census 2020: Inside Efforts to Make Sure Rural Communities Count

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GREG LARSON/SHUTTERSTOCK

The 2020 census has put many foundations on a state of high alert. Getting an accurate count on the census is important because the data collected is used to determine not only representation in Congress, but also the destination of federal dollars. In the private sector, businesses and nonprofits use the data to make decisions about where their services are needed.

Although there's a constitutional mandate to count everyone, some people are more likely to be left out of the count than others. Low-income people and minorities tend to be overlooked by the census. Children younger than five are another blind spot, along with young adults and others who tend to move around a lot or live in nontraditional housing. Immigrants, documented and undocumented, are also often undercounted—a problem that could worsen if the Trump administration succeeds in adding a question about citizenship status to the census. (So far, the [proposal has been blocked](#))

by federal courts.) Meanwhile, higher-income, white households tend to be overcounted.

Philanthropy has been keenly engaged in the 2020 census, seeking to shore up efforts to reach hard-to-count populations and [backing advocacy](#) to fight the citizenship question. It's an investment that makes sense. Accurate counts that maintain or increase federal and state support for vulnerable groups would free up foundations to take on more strategic, innovative work. When government programs go underfunded, philanthropy's coffers are tied up picking up the slack. Over the past year, we've reported on a number of national and local philanthropic initiatives that take on the barriers facing the 2020 Census.

But one open question is how effective foundations will be in addressing the danger that rural America will be under-counted. This is a risk for white rural residents, and even more so for already hard-to-count groups that live in rural communities.

Heading into 2020, the stakes are high, said Allen Smart, the project director of Campbell University's Office of Rural Philanthropic Analysis. "The impact of prospective rural census undercount—with respect to decreasing state and federal support—will last for a decade," said Smart. "The financial impact will be very serious."

Major philanthropies, often based in big cities, have a history of neglecting rural work. So it's not surprising that support for get-out-the-count efforts in rural regions lags behind engagement with other hard-to-count populations.

When Christine Reeves, the executive director of the Sapelo Foundation in Georgia, was first introduced to census work through a National Funders Committee for Civic Participation (FCCP) conference back in 2017, she set about learning everything she could about the work.

“I got involved in trying to educate myself as much as possible, and came to learn that most of the foundations working on it were based in New York, Chicago, San Francisco,” said Reeves. “Very few were based in the south, and even fewer were explicitly focusing on a rural area.”

Still, there are some bright spots.

In several states, local foundations like Sapelo are using their dollars and influence to support census work in rural areas. Gary Bass, the executive director of the Bauman Foundation, singled out Alaska, Georgia, Michigan, Minnesota and New Mexico as states with particularly strong ground games when it comes to rural engagement.

Foundations backing rural census work tend to have ties to rural communities already, and a track record of local, place-based philanthropy. Both the Sapelo Foundation, based in Georgia, and the Blandin Foundation, which is leading this work in Minnesota, have explicit commitments to the rural communities in their states.

Because these tend to be smaller foundations, they’re also likely to work on the issue from several angles, dedicating more than their financial resources. That often includes convening other stakeholders and leading or working alongside cross-sector partners.

On the national level, Bass leads a coalition of funders supporting the census through a subgroup of the Democracy Funders Collaborative. Although support for rural get-out-the-count efforts lags behind funding for cities and suburbs, Bass says the foundations are aware of the discrepancies and doing what they can to address them through the Census Equity Fund.

The fund is a pot of pooled money from foundations that gets redistributed to states with high hard-to-count populations that lack their own robust, local philanthropic sector. That includes states with rural communities.

So far, \$3 million of the fund's \$8 million cache has been doled out to states. It's a start, but Bass acknowledges more needs to be done to reach rural communities and make sure their residents are counted.

"If there are some weaknesses we have now, reaching rural, hard-to-count populations would be one of those," Bass said. "By no means do we have this covered. That's why we need a federally funded Census Bureau to carry this out."

Philanthropy can lend a hand, Bass said, "But we're simply not a replacement for government."

The Challenge

Heading into 2020, rural communities face all the barriers to a full and accurate count as the rest of the country, along with some others. Challenges facing the entire country include a growing mistrust of government generally, and fears that authorities will misuse information they gather about immigration status. On top of that, census funding lagged in the first three-quarters of the decade, and several early tests were canceled.

Rural communities will also face additional challenges in 2020, said Shirley Sherrod, who leads the Southwest Georgia Project. The group traces its roots back to the civil rights movement, and is one of the Sapelo Foundation's grantees working to get out the count in rural counties.

"Rural communities are often persistently poorer than urban communities; they have lower educational attainment, less access to resources, and few opportunities," Sherrod said. "These factors, among others, leave rural residents highly marginalized. These factors create a very peculiar set of challenges for rural communities."

In 2020, rural communities will also face a new challenge. The 2020 census will be the first to be distributed largely online, though paper forms will be

sent to a select number of households. While that may pose challenges in terms of cybersecurity or public perception of a threat for everyone, rural households are the most vulnerable to undercounting on a partially online census.

It boils down to internet access, said Arloc Sherman, a senior director and fellow at the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, a progressive-leaning think tank.

“The challenges for rural areas are also much bigger in this census, in part because non-metropolitan homes are significantly less likely to have internet access, and the Census Bureau is banking on lots of people replying online,” Sherman said. “In 2016, 26 percent of non-metro homes lacked an internet subscription, compared with 19 percent in metro areas.”

Smart agrees broadband access will play a huge role in the rural response rate in 2020 and thinks that for the most part, philanthropy doesn't completely understand the challenge.

“There is still a profound under-recognition of how access to broadband in rural communities will inevitably lead to undercount,” he said. “So [it's] less a blindspot in terms of care or concern, but more of a misunderstanding of how serious some of the tactical and technical changes in census implementation will impact rural communities around the country—particularly low-income rural communities where access to broadband is often also a financial issue in addition to an availability issue.”

In addition, rural communities are just more spread out, meaning census workers have to cover more ground. When everything's running smoothly, that may not be an issue, but, Sherman said, if there are issues, like those that plagued the 1990 census, attributed [to budget cuts and technical snafus at the federal level](#), the rural count suffers.

On top of that, census workers may also face challenges simply because they're not members of the communities that they're trying to count, Sherrod said.

"Oftentimes, census field agents are coming into rural areas and are not familiar with the culture or landscape of rural areas, i.e., dirt roads without names, and in some cases [are] afraid to go down some roads," she said. "It is difficult for some rural residents to give information to a stranger, where, if the agent was someone who lived in that county, the task would be easier."

The Opportunity

That's why working with trusted community voices is so important to census work, not just in rural areas, and it's one of the areas where foundations can help.

When Reeves decided to focus Sapelo's census efforts on 14 rural counties in southwestern Georgia, Sherrod's team stuck out as a smart, strategic partner. Sapelo partnered with the organization because it had already cultivated ties and built up trust in the communities the foundation wanted to target.

The Southwest Georgia Project has a team of about 75 organizers. About half of those are faith leaders, who play a big role as trusted voices in southern rural communities. Finding such voices can be another challenge in rural census work, Reeves said. In most communities, healthcare providers are valued and trusted, but access to healthcare is another issue rural communities struggle with. The paucity of hospitals, and even primary care doctors or pediatricians in rural areas, shuts off that avenue as a way to reach residents. Picking a partner already embedded in a community that understands the culture is key for foundations looking to improve census accuracy.

The nonprofit is also working with census field workers on messaging and making sure the workers know the places residents tend to gather, like libraries, grocery stores, churches, barbershops and after-school programs.

Another way foundations are getting involved is by using their ability to convene and lead broader, cross-sector partnerships.

In Georgia, the Sapelo Foundation convened foundations, nonprofits, stakeholders and census experts at the end of last year. Experts shared data on the state's hard-to-count populations, which include residents in southern rural Georgia, immigrants, children younger than five, and black men. At the retreat, partners put their heads together and came up with a statewide game plan to reach those groups heading into 2020.

In terms of money, Sapelo dedicated some funds to exploring the issues around the census last spring, and since then, has sponsored a census coordinator position at the Georgia Alliance Education Fund. For 2019 and 2020, Reeves is recommending a \$250,000 budget to her board to cover the foundation's census efforts, more than a fifth of the foundation's total grantmaking budget.

To stretch dollars further, the foundation has leveraged its clout to get matching grants from the Census Equity Fund and other partners. So far, Sapelo has more than doubled its investments through matching grants.

In Minnesota, the Blandin Foundation is deeply involved in making sure rural communities are counted next year. The funder has put \$50,000 into census work, which went to seeding funding for the Minnesota Census Mobilization Partnership.

Kathy Annette, the foundation's CEO and president, doesn't see her organization's value to census efforts as purely financial, though.

“In philanthropy, it’s not always dollars,” she said. “Sometimes it’s the other resources that we bring—the ability to convene, the ability to say, ‘We’ll support you, communities. We’ll stand side-by-side with you in the efforts that you bring forward. How can we support you in that?’”

Those resources can manifest in several ways. For one, Annette co-chairs the Minnesota Complete Count Committee, which was started by the state’s governor to coordinate and oversee statewide efforts to ensure a full and accurate count.

As with Sapelo in Georgia, fostering partnerships is a big part of census efforts in Minnesota and a role that foundations can take on.

“We’re really used to partnering with each other, and with the communities and with the state. What I’ve seen here is that we’re really coming together on this in terms of state, private, nonprofit, for-profit groups to make sure we can get counted,” Annette said. “I’m not sure whether that’s seen throughout the country. But I’m sure seeing that in the state—the importance of partnership and how committed we are to getting out the count.”

In Minnesota, groups supporting different sectors, demographics and issues, including faith groups, tribal leaders and housing advocates, have come together to work on the census, Annette said. “The state is coming together, rural and urban, to be partners.”

The foundation is working not only with advocacy groups and community leaders, but also, importantly, the public sector and state government.

State and federal governments may seem like an obvious partner for philanthropy, given that the census is ultimately a government responsibility, but private-public sector partnerships are also a hallmark of rural philanthropy.

Foundations that work in rural communities tend to lack the extensive nonprofit infrastructure found in cities. As a result, they're more likely to partner with the public sector to extend the reach of and sustain their work. So while coordinating with the government is more common in census philanthropy, those partnerships may come more naturally to foundations with a history of rural work, which are more likely to have public sector relationships already in place.

The Stakes

For those working to get an accurate count in 2020, it's hard to overstate the effects an undercount could have on the same people philanthropy seeks to serve.

"It is not partisan. It is constitutional," Sapelo's Reeves said. "And it's not about being overlooked for one year. It's about rights, opportunities, access, data, decisions, laws, resources, infrastructure, schools, hospitals, and jobs being overlooked for half a generation."

For foundations still on the fence, both Reeves and Annette urged funders to think of the populations they serve and how they would be affected if Congressional representation disappeared, government services dried up and private sector investment slipped away, thanks to faulty data.

"I'd encourage my philanthropic peers to try to think of a single population, single issue, single grantee partner, or single geographic area they care about that will not directly or indirectly rely on the census every single day for the next decade," Reeves said. "And in rural areas, where people are more dispersed, services are scarcer, and broadband internet is far less available, the stakes are even higher for the first online census in 2020."

Reeves hopes more philanthropies will turn their attention to rural communities before next year. Urban investment makes sense, she said,

given that most foundations are based in cities and already have relationships with grantees in those areas.

“It’s such a complex, enormous thing that I think a lot of people don’t know where to start, but then, when you do start, you think of major population centers. You can reach more people that way,” she said. “It makes absolute sense. We absolutely need those urban cores and greater metro areas counted, but I’m hoping that it can be viewed not as a zero-sum game.”

It’s a dynamic that’s hardly unique to census-focused philanthropy, but the stakes are particularly high when it comes to the count.

“There might be the idea that, ‘There’s only so many dollars, so if we fund something or work in rural areas, that means less for urban,’” Reeves said. “But is there a way that we can grow the size of the pie?”