Illinois grantmakers banded together to form the Illinois Funders Census Initiative (the Initiative) in early 2009. They sought to increase the number of households that would complete and mail back their 2010 census questionnaires – stage one of the decennial census. The funders sought to assure that Illinois would receive its fair share of federal money and an accurate count of those historically undercounted.

The Initiative awarded nearly $1.25 million for the Count Me In campaign: grants to 26 nonprofit organizations who drew on their relationships and reached out to, educated, and mobilized Illinois residents in communities with a history of weak response to the Census form.

Their work helped Illinois increase its participation rate\(^1\) by 2% in the mail-back phase of the 2010 census, Cook County – where nearly 80% of those living in hard to count areas reside – to increase by 2%, and Chicago to increase by 5%, making the Initiative a striking success.

**KEY FACTS**

**Funders and Funding**
- $1,292,500 contributed to the Initiative (contributions from $2,500 to $350,000)
  - $1,112,500 pooled for grants and administration expenses, at the Chicago Community Trust by 6 grantmakers
  - $180,000 grants made directly by 5 contributors to Count Me In grantees

**Expenses**
- $1,224,000 awarded in grants to 26 nonprofit organizations
- $68,500 (5%) allocated for non-grant expenses, primarily for project management consultation

**Count Me In Grantees & Results**
- 26 grants made to support work in 25 Chicago Community Areas, 3 other Cook County cities, and 9 Illinois cities outside Cook County
- With members and affiliates, grantees engaged 60 nonprofit organizations in all
• Chicago Community Areas funded
  o Had final mail response rates under 60% in 2000 census
  o 85% had populations of 40,000 or more (based on 2000 census)
  o 92% had 2 to 7 grantees focused on residents of the Chicago Community Area
  o Averaged 5% increase in 2010 participation rate from 2000 rate (versus 4% increase in comparable Chicago Community Areas with no Count Me In grantees)

• Other funded cities
  o 92% had 2000 final mail response rates 70% and under
  o All had populations of 28,000+ (based on the 2000 census)
  o All had 2 to 4 Count Me In grantees
  o Averaged 2% better participation rate in 2010 than 2000 (versus .5% increase in other comparable Illinois cities)

• Chicago
  o 63% of households returned their census forms — 5% over the 2000 rate
  o Among 25 largest U.S. cities, only Baltimore exceeded Chicago’s gain

• Illinois
  o 75% of households returned their census forms — 3 points above the national average and 2% better than in 2000
  o Compared to 4 other states with comparable hard to count populations (Florida, New Jersey, Louisiana, and Mississippi), Illinois’ participation was higher

LESSONS LEARNED

The Role of Nonprofit Organizations

Many factors likely helped Chicago outperform its 2000 participation by 5% and Illinois by 2%. The U.S. Census Bureau focused communications on hard-to-count areas, mailed a second form to many households, and the regional office promoted the use of Hot Tracts data (tracts with 50% or less response rate in 2000) among its partners. The City of Chicago dedicated staff time to the organization of Complete Count Committees and helped respond to questions and requests for materials. Demographic changes over the previous decade — e.g., the movement of CHA residents out of high rises and gentrification of some neighborhoods — no doubt also played a role in participation rate changes.

Yet, the patterns of better performance overall in funded community areas and cities, most significantly in Chicago, compared to comparable areas where no work was funded, strongly suggest that the work of Count Me In grantees was an important factor in the overall mail-back rate of Illinois households. It seems likely that the most significant characteristic of the nonprofits’ work was their relationships with their communities. Relationships lent credibility and trust to the grantees’ encouragement of residents to complete and mail back the census form.

Nonprofits’ Lessons Learned

Most grantees were very thoughtful about their work, designing and adapting based on experience and critical examination of what was and wasn’t working. Here are three lessons pertinent to many organizations.
Assuring alignment of census projects with core purpose yields benefits beyond census participation. Well-designed census campaigns and projects strengthened community organizations and their relationships with community residents. Such census projects were skillfully woven into and used to advance existing strategies and objectives.

Flexibility and nimbleness are essential. Effective groups refined their plans as they worked. In one case, an organization shifted its emphasis from a couple large events at single churches to organizing and educating pastors to reach their congregations from the pulpit or in ministry visits, as well as via an event customized to each church. It then followed up with phone calls to 800 congregants, many of whom were residents in Chicago Community Areas with the largest increases in participation rates.

Messages must be carefully crafted. Messaging was complex and many grantees found they needed to shape theirs specifically for their community. Different, sometimes contradictory, findings were reported. For instance, in some communities, emphasis on mailing back the form to avoid door-to-door enumerators was well received, but in others it was found to be threatening and undercut the message that participating is safe. In some places, money arguments (such as: every person counted draws resources to the community) worked very well, while in others residents doubted that resources would ever reach their neighborhoods.

Many people were highly skeptical about the Bureau’s promises of privacy and confidentiality, and many grantees found it important to focus mainly on this, rather than making it one of many messages. A number of groups also noted that it was more than a little challenging to explain the census questions about race and ethnicity, which perplexed many.

“We were explicit among our executive directors and staff about the broader goal of building our organizations and engaging our entire communities to a scale and depth we don’t normally have opportunities to reach. [Among] community organizing entities that have often had agitational relationships, the census provided a very positive and proactive project to engage institutions and individuals that would not normally be involved in an organizing campaign.”

Partnering With the Census Bureau
Grantees’ work was nested in the much larger scope of work specific to the U.S. Census Bureau, which is responsible for all aspects of conducting the census. Its operations are massive, complex, and lengthy, and other Bureau operations, such as the American Community Survey, continue throughout the decennial count.

The Census Bureau’s 2010 census partnership program was unprecedented in scale and scope and included new and untested relationships between the Bureau and philanthropy, and between the Bureau and nonprofit organizations. Within this context and with a shared commitment to a better rate of return of census questionnaires, the Count Me In grantees and the Illinois Funders Census Initiative envisioned themselves as partners to the Bureau. It was a fruitful but not an easy relationship. Unanticipated challenges were sometimes well resolved and sometimes not, but lessons learned can help enhance future cooperation.
FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Champion/s Needed

Gretchen Crosby Sims (Joyce Foundation) devoted early and deep research and strategic thinking to ways philanthropy and nonprofits could support the decennial census. This was crucial to the collaboration’s beginning, recruitment, focus, and grantmaking. Future efforts will need one or more people with similar professional latitude, curiosity, and critical thinking.

Maintain Focus on the Mail-Back Phase of the Census

The mail-back portion of the decennial census process was the focus of the Initiative for practical reasons. It is the stage in which the particular asset of nonprofit organizations – trusted relationships – can be most strategically deployed to augment the Census Bureau’s work. It is the less costly segment in the process and focuses on all American residents. Without limitless dollars, grantmakers must consider how to best focus. Success in 2010 with increasing Illinoisans’ completion and return of their census questionnaires suggests that the Initiative focused strategically.

Better Partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau

Ideally, the U.S. Census Bureau and all its partners will benefit from lessons learned in the 2010 experience. Suggestions for the future for the Census Bureau, grantmakers, and nonprofits:

- The U.S. Census Bureau should include representation from philanthropy in its 2020 planning.
- Regional Census Offices and local philanthropy would benefit from a nationally sanctioned joint planning and problem-solving mechanism to be used from the outset of funder planning to the conclusion of funding initiatives.
- Clearly define the role of nonprofits as partners in the decennial census. The Bureau, with input from the nonprofit sector, should clearly describe when, where, and how nonprofits can amplify and extend its efforts.
- The Bureau should provide clear and detailed information about all aspects of the mail-back operations, including automatic, electronic, plain language updates to registered partners as changes are made or details are confirmed. It should make it possible for partner nonprofits to ask and receive the answers to questions, in a timely and reliable fashion.
- The Bureau should plot out and plan to dependably provide adequate printed materials and other resources that funded nonprofit partners require.
- Funders and nonprofits should be clear-eyed and low key about the distinct differences between the Bureau and the nonprofit sector. Collaboration may be increasingly common in the latter, but it is not part of the DNA of large government bureaucracy.
- Grantmakers should expect some glitches and help grantees expect the same. Be tolerant of well-meaning mistakes. Emphasize what is within funders’ and grantees’ power to change and adapt. Plan ahead to rely on sources other than the Bureau for data and other information the Bureau is not prepared to release or cannot easily provide.
- Grantmakers should provide comprehensive training about census operations to prospective applicants, so that plans are designed to be congruent with operations. Give examples of plans that are well-conceived and those that would prove problematic, and explain why.
- Some tension will likely remain. Door-to-door work by community-based organizations will likely remain controversial because of its potential to be confused with Bureau enumerators’
visits or with scams. But well-organized canvassing by well-trained nonprofit workers was effective and essential to the Initiative’s success. Because completing a pledge card may be confused with completing a census form, groups using these should consider how to distinguish between the two. All door-to-door work should be focused solely on the census, to avoid possible conflation of issues and agendas.

**Fund Campaigns First, But Not Only**

Two grantees employed full campaign strategies, including a well-conceived plan, tested messages, strong execution – including micro-targeting by census tract, door-knocking, pledge cards, and follow-up phone calls and visits after census forms had been mailed – and supported by close monitoring (including the use of real time participation rate data provided online by the Census Bureau) and thoughtful revision. These groups documented some of the greatest results.

Because not everyone will open the door to a canvasser and not all hard-to-count communities have nonprofits that can mount strong campaigns, working through networks is likely the second most important approach to reaching and influencing people to complete and mail back their census forms. Networks authoritatively reached multiple member organizations and sites, and in doing so, interacted with many messengers who could, in turn, personally reach many households.

Other grantee activities– events, disseminating census information messages through programs and services, and partnering with the Bureau to provide space for testing, training, and QACs – are important tertiary methods. A community-based messenger can help make the census seem more important and less threatening. But the activities must go beyond the Bureau’s outreach. Handing out paper, if not tied to a personal exchange, should be discouraged.

Not surprisingly, the organizational capacity of a grantee organization was fundamental to its effectiveness in census work.

A core premise of the grants awarded was that supporting multiple groups in a geographical area would increase the impact of the groups’ work and yield better results. Based on reports and interviews, it appears that in higher scoring places the number of groups was less germane than grantee performance and recent community gentrification. This is a reminder that grantmaking is as much art as science.

**Provide More Training**

None of the *Count Me In* grantees was very knowledgeable about the census at the outset. Training provided, especially in October 2009 featuring Terri Ann Lowenthal (a national expert and skillful educator), was essential, providing vital information about census operations that shaped intelligent design and redesign of grantees work plans. A second training would have been valuable.

Funders could offer an in-depth training earlier in the process, to increase the likelihood that applicants create work plans that align with and thus complement and amplify the work of the Bureau. Training should be led by someone expert in the Bureau’s operations but not of the Bureau, to assure that information is focused on what nonprofits need to know, and to offer the kinds of candid commentary and answers that may not be possible by public officials.
Repeat Grantee Convenings and Hands On Project Management
The in-person gatherings of grantees were a useful source of cross-pollination of ideas and information, provided opportunities for strangers working in the same places and with the same populations to meet and share resources, and surfaced questions that were typically of concern to a number of groups.

The project manager (Alice Cottingham) helped assure that grantees received regular updates about a highly technical subject, responded to questions, intervened when information was inaccurate or plans problematic, recognized and encouraged good work, facilitated relationships among grantees, gathered and funneled resources to grantees, and organized meetings and reports. Grantees cited her work by as a facilitator of their success. She also helped develop the RFP and coordinated grantmaking by funders.

Geographical Considerations
Work by Count Me In grantees in most cities outside Cook County was less intensive than tightly organized and focused efforts in Chicago neighborhoods and suburbs. To retain a statewide focus and make best use of dollars, funders might concentrate funding in fewer places, to organizations that experienced in campaigns that increase civic participation.

Alternately, given the outsized impact that Count Me In grantees appears to have had in Chicago and the disproportionate percentage of the state’s total population and hard-to-count areas there, it may be most sensible for grantmakers to focus all grants in Chicago in future census funding. Continued growth of hard-to-count areas in the collar counties may argue for a metropolitan focus.

Plan Ahead to Translate Results
The success of the Initiative is evident in participation rates where nonprofits were funded, but it would have been compelling to be able to describe the value of the efforts, in numbers of more people counted and more federal dollars secured. We were unable to identify a credible way to quantify impact. In the future, earlier consideration of this might be fruitful.

Fund National Resources for Funders
In 2009, the Joyce Foundation (with funders outside Illinois) supported the national Funders Census Initiative, an early national census partner on behalf of the broader philanthropic community, organized through the Funders Committee for Civic Participation. It made consultation available to grantmakers through biweekly calls and on demand. It is questionable whether the Illinois Initiative would have been created without that knowledge bank, and ongoing consultation provided by William O’Hare and Terri Ann Lowenthal was invaluable throughout the Initiative. It would behoove Illinois funders to contribute for the 2020 census.

i With expert guidance from Terri Ann Lowenthal, the Initiative uses the final participation rate data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau in April 2010 to assess its impact.

ii In addition, LISC Chicago generously contributed grants of $10,000 to five organizations selected for Count Me In support that were members of LISC’s New Communities Program. The total dollars contributed includes LISC’s grants, though LISC did not consider itself part of the collaboration.