

FUNDERS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEADING AN ACCURATE CENSUS COUNT IN BOISE

As a part of our Democracy Lens tools, for each state in our region, we report a data snapshot and case studies (called Bright Spots) about philanthropy's role in democracy. You can access all these data and Bright Spots on the [Democracy Northwest webpage](#).

The census is a constitutionally mandated survey to count the United States population once per decade. Census-derived equations inform funding for more than 300 federal programs, with Idaho receiving \$6.8 billion from the federal government in Fiscal Year 2017.¹ A complete count leads to more dollars and provides information for organizations serving communities to assess local shifts in wealth, the economy, demographics and migration.²

Boise, Idaho's largest city, is focused on a complete population count in the 2020 Census because it is one of the fastest growing markets in the country. Counting the human expansion is important for accurate political representation from the federal to the local level, according to Nora Carpenter, president and CEO of the [United Way of Treasure Valley](#). Second, an accurate population count ensures that an effective amount of federal resources are deployed for social services.

Largest Census-Guided Programs for Idaho in Fiscal Year 2016 (in Millions \$)*³

Medicaid	\$1,276	Lower Income Housing Loans	\$171
Student Loans	\$333	Pell Grants	\$157
Highway Funding	\$300	HUBZones	\$101
Nutrition Assistance (SNAP)	\$255	State Children's Health Insurance	\$66
Medicare Part B	\$198	Grants to High-Poverty Schools	\$59

*Based on a sample of 55 programs

Persistent Challenges in Encouraging Census Participation

Funders and the [City of Boise](#) have been aware of challenges to a complete count since well before the start of the census in March 2020, citing concerns about the spread of census misinformation, people's worry about providing census information online, plus anxiety over a potential citizenship question.⁴ These concerns especially affect participation among Boise's significant refugee and Hispanic populations. Wayne Rysavy, communications manager at the Office of Community Engagement with the City of Boise, noted the City feared an incomplete count of the Hispanic population, which in 2010 was undercounted by 30,000.⁵



Another challenge is the COVID-19 pandemic, which eliminated in-person events and door-knocking right around the start of the census. The City's field team manager, Charity Strong, indicated that as of early June 2020, 60% of the households in and around Boise State University still had to be counted. The campus closed due to the pandemic and so many students left the area.⁶

Complete Count Efforts

On the charitable side, the United Way of Treasure Valley received support from a variety of local, regional and national funders to conduct work around the census, and Carpenter noted that the [Idaho Community Foundation](#) was especially generous with financial resources to get the state accurately counted.⁷ The Idaho Community Foundation supported three grantees doing outreach in the Boise area, according to Cara Walker, the foundation's chief strategy and engagement officer. Both funders' involvement in the local and regional complete count committees helped census partners in the area share strategies and spread informational materials.⁸

The City of Boise also recognized the importance of collaborating with funders and other community partners. The City's census advisory group included perspectives ranging from funders, like the United Way of Treasure Valley, to people who represented hard-to-count (HTC) groups less likely to complete the census. For example, the 2020 Census had an online survey option for the first time that made some of the elderly population wary, so the City brought the local AARP onto their complete count committee. The City also gathered advice from Census Bureau partnership specialists and other complete count committees like those representing the region, state, Hispanic population and tribes.⁹

The City's Two-Tiered Campaign

With \$100,000 from the City to get the local complete count committee off the ground and fund a campaign, the government developed a two-tiered effort. First, to raise awareness, Boise placed radio, television and online ads in English and Spanish. Messaging was educational and, as suggested by the United Way of Treasure Valley, displayed the census as a form of civic engagement, in which a complete count could ensure equal representation and funding regardless of a person's background.¹⁰ The second tier, focusing on field outreach, was led by Strong, a political organizer in her first contracting role with the City. She led 30 community organizers on her team to conduct over 30 outreach events with 20-100 people attending each one. Then COVID-19 necessitated socially distant methods such as poster distribution to local businesses and organizations, placement of yard signs, social media outreach, a peer-to-peer emailing campaign and a raffle.¹¹

Strong noted that working in a bureaucracy can be difficult, but her team operated under an open, flat and collaborative structure. Instead of giving someone money and telling them the outcome, Strong believed in hiring the right people to create the right outcomes. To accomplish this, the diverse group of field staff, made up of informal community leaders, reached HTC populations with tailored messaging they developed themselves. For example, due to the very low census participation at Boise State University, Strong worked with the school to hire 20 students of diverse backgrounds and from HTC populations, many whom were women of color, to raise awareness among their peers.¹²

Clear Progress So Far

Despite the pandemic, over three-fourths of households in Boise had responded to the 2020 Census as of mid-August – much higher than the national average and surpassing Boise's 2010 self-response rate.¹³ The City believed targeted outreach would minimize an undercount of the Hispanic population. Other HTC groups, including tribal, refugee and LGBT populations, also seemed better represented among respondents.¹⁴ The end goal for self-response was still much higher, according to Carpenter, but reenergized exposure about the 2020 Census helped close the gap.¹⁵ Rysavy noted that the mayor wanted to mirror the field team model for work on other civic issues in the future, such as homelessness and the environment. The City desires to connect with people beyond the 2020 Census, keeping community channels open to ensure people are recognized throughout the pandemic.¹⁶

Beyond the Census

It is clear to the City of Boise and philanthropic partners that the inroads made during the 2020 Census extend beyond the count. It is also about fostering a legacy of citizenship for young people and ensuring that people want to engage in civil society in the long run. Carpenter pointed out that it is easy for funders to dismiss government work like the census, but realistically it is not only government work. Funders should think about systems-level change for whatever subject they focus on, because policy changes are a major lever for philanthropy to see differences on a large scale.¹⁷

For the funding side, Carpenter and Strong believe it is important to give resources while agreeing on the outcome but not impose too many restrictions on the path to the goal; groups with close ties to their community will know the best strategies.¹⁸ To stay on the same page as the public sector, Rysavy believes in funders reaching out and connecting with the government on issues like the census, which in turn improves representation across the community.¹⁹

Key Takeaways

- Supporting civic engagement efforts can lead to new strategies for encouraging the public’s participation in public policy issues.
- Local funders and governments have a common goal of serving their communities. Philanthropies can take the first step by reaching out to their local governments to share knowledge and address civic issues.

Endnotes

1. Andrew Reamer, Brief 7: Comprehensive Accounting of Census-Guided Federal Spending (FY2017) (Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, 2020), 1-2, https://gwipp.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2181/f/downloads/Counting%20for%20Dollars%202020%20-%20Comprehensive%20Accounting_Report%207B%20Feb%202020%20rev.pdf.
2. Nora Carpenter, telephone interview with author, June 4, 2020.
3. Andrew Reamer, Counting for Dollars 2020 The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds: Idaho (Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, 2019), 2, https://gwipp.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2181/f/downloads/IPP-1819-3%20CountingforDollars_ID.pdf.
4. Carpenter, interview; Wayne Rysavy, online video interview with author, May 29, 2020; Charity Strong, telephone interview with author, June 5, 2020.
5. Rysavy, interview.
6. Strong, interview.
7. Carpenter, interview.
8. Cara Walker, email correspondence with author, June 16, 2020.
9. Rysavy, interview.
10. Carpenter, interview; Rysavy, interview.
11. Strong, interview.
12. Ibid.
13. “Census 2020 Hard to Count Map,” City University of New York Mapping Service, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://www.censushardtocomap2020.us/?latlng=43.60078%2C-116.16463&z=11&query=cities%3A%3A1608830&promotedfeaturetype=cities&arp=arpRaceEthnicity&baselayerstate=5&rtrYear=sR2020latest&infotab=info-rtrselfresponse&filterQuery=false&searchbox=searchcity&searchval=Boise%20City%2C%20Idaho>.

14. Rysavy, interview; Strong, interview.
15. Carpenter, interview.
16. Rysavy, interview.
17. Carpenter, interview.
18. Carpenter, interview; Strong, interview.
19. Rysavy, interview.