

# WHEN IT COUNTS

*An Evaluation of the 2020  
We Count LA Campaign*

**WE COUNT**  
**LOS ANGELES**  
*Our Community. Our Census.*

Prepared for California Community Foundation  
By Engage R+D and USC Dornsife Equity Research Institute

October 2021



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The report was prepared by witnesses to that bravery and loss - Jennifer García, Sonia Taddy-Sandino, Shayla Spilker, and Eric Wat of Engage R+D and Jennifer Ito, Cynthia Moreno, and Ashley K. Thomas of ERI. Thank you to Manuel Pastor of ERI and Efrain Escobedo of the California Community Foundation (CCF) for their thoughtful feedback and strategic vision which helped steer this report. Our sincerest thanks to Stephania Ramirez who served as Director of Strategic Initiatives with CCF and Campaign Director of We Count LA through 2020. Your leadership, dedication, and perseverance cannot be overstated.

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Our work exists because of you.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Organizers, funders, and state officials knew the 2020 Census would require a herculean effort. With so much at stake, local advocacy groups and philanthropic leaders began planning early and ultimately coalesced under one county-wide campaign known as We Count LA (WCLA). With the California Community Foundation (CCF) at the helm, a broad coalition of community-based organizations (CBOs) leveraged their local knowledge and assets as trusted community messengers to reach the hardest-to-count (HTC) groups across the county. In the end, about \$30 million was raised in public and private funding to support targeted outreach efforts in specific HTC geographies and populations, leverage trusted messengers and ethnic media, utilize data and research, and develop a regional network of intermediaries to coordinate, train, and provide resources to community-based organizations across an expansive landscape.

WCLA evolved into the most significant census outreach effort in Los Angeles County’s (LAC) history. Three key characteristics of WCLA are worth highlighting for future census planning and other civic engagement efforts:

- **Data-driven:** CCF utilized data at every key decision point in both the planning and implementation of the campaign. As early as 2018, Fenton Communications conducted an assessment of the capacity of non-profits in Los Angeles County (LAC) to identify what types of training, technical assistance, and resources might be needed to support a complete count (California Community Foundation 2018). In

2019, the University of California, Los Angeles researchers conducted an analysis of best measures to assist CCF in identifying the hardest-to-count areas in order to inform priorities and neighborhoods for grantmaking (Frasure-Yokley and Masuoka 2019). CCF’s decision to bring on an evaluation team before the campaign launch was also driven by a desire to have in place a “living roadmap of learning that can be applied both during and after the campaign for future civic engagement in our region and beyond” (California Community Foundation 2019).

- **Community-powered:** The core partners that came together in the early days approached the census as a social justice issue—and as a milestone along a longer path towards ensuring an equitable and inclusive LAC region. The Steering Committee for the LA Regional Census Table (LARCT), which helped to shape campaign plans and funding priorities, was composed of organizations with a deep commitment to the civic engagement of key HTC populations or neighborhoods. Through three rounds of grantmaking, CCF funded 115 community-based organizations to engage in direct census outreach and education, training, and technical assistance—and made available communications trainings, materials, and tools as well as digital tools for tracking contacts and leaders in hopes that these capacities could be carried over into ongoing efforts to pursue structural changes towards a more inclusive and just region (California Community Foundation 2019).
- **Responsive:** CCF understood and trusted that the organizations working directly with HTC

## Executive Summary

populations or in HTC neighborhoods were best positioned to know what was needed to encourage participation in the census. What emerged was the need to make the census relatable and personal and to mitigate suppression and attempts to fuel misinformation. That meant a dual approach of having trusted messengers talk to their neighbors and peers one-on-one and in-person or by phone, bolstered by an integrated communications campaign with earned and paid media and digital engagement. Then during a year of unprecedented crises and uncertainty, CCF took on more of the responsibilities of coordination, tracking, and communication of information on the census that was in constant flux to allow the community organizations to respond to immediate community needs.

Los Angeles County has historically lagged behind the state in previous census counts not only as the nation's most populous county but also due to the diversity of its population. This report highlights noteworthy attributes and assets of the WCLA campaign that provide valuable insights for future census counts and large-scale civic engagement efforts. In fact, some of these lessons have already been applied to the state's COVID-19 rapid response and vaccination campaign. The WCLA campaign exemplifies the power of partnerships and a robust ecosystem of trusted messengers, community organizers, and networked allies to ensure those most at-risk of exclusion and the adverse impact of the pandemic are reached. WCLA stood out in a number of ways:

- **Co-designed campaign structure and coordination:** The multi-year, collaborative planning process between community-based organizations, advocates, and the community foundation translated to a more organized and agile team that was ready to launch into deeper census campaign planning as 2020 approached. WCLA's structure, technical supports, and coordination, designed to address the known challenges that threatened to exacerbate an undercount in Los Angeles, made it possible for the network of over 100 community-based organizations to adapt outreach strategies in response to the confluence of crises posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Black police violence, and wildfires. And not only did the structure support an ability to adapt but it also helped to spread creativity in local responses across the county precisely because they could not rely on traditional methods of outreach.
- **Integrated ground and air game outreach strategies:** While stay-at-home orders dramatically reduced the "ground game" and in-person outreach activities (e.g., door-to-door canvassing, workshops, events, and help centers), which almost all WCLA grantees had planned, the pre-crisis planned support for the "air game," such as digital media, phone-banking, and texting, proved prescient as those became the primary set of activities. It was also important in keeping the census on people's minds amidst a very competitive news cycle during the primary outreach period. Digital outreach became an effective strategy for reaching scale—and a new capacity for most organizations who now have staff and volunteers

trained and ready for the next civic engagement campaign.

- **Ground game as the backbone:** While digital outreach became an effective way to reach a large number of hard-to-count people quickly, activating a contact to be counted often required a deeper interaction than possible through most digital platforms. Grantees who conducted door-to-door canvassing and in-person census activities toward the end of the summer confirmed that these types of strategies were the most effective to reach HTC communities. Without these strategies, the campaign was significantly limited despite the successful deployment of digital outreach strategies.

WCLA provides important lessons for philanthropic strategies that take a community capacity-building approach to achieve a common goal. Recommendations for building on LAC's readiness in order to prepare for future census efforts are:

1. Invest in trusted messengers, community organizing, and ongoing civic engagement to build social capital and restore trust.
2. Begin planning in 2025 and invest in a centralized coordinating hub or intermediary to facilitate regional planning and implementation.
3. Invest in community-based organizations' capacity to integrate strategic communications, message testing, and partnerships with ethnic media with community organizing and engagement strategies.
4. Invest in the long game by supporting the

capacity of community power-building and base-building organizations.

5. Cultivate and leverage cross-sector partnerships to support community-centered and community-powered campaigns and systems change efforts.

WCLA evolved into a sophisticated campaign with a robust set of investments in new capacities across LAC that could reset the possibilities for future countywide campaigns—not only for census 2030 but for near-term opportunities. After participating in the WCLA campaign, over 100 community organizations have new readiness for the next campaign. They have deeper reach into HTC populations and communities. They have stronger relationships with organizations and public agencies working in the same community. More staff members and community volunteers have new civic engagement skills, ranging from text-banking to posting social media content to tracking outreach for follow-up engagement.

In looking back, if there is one storyline that we should remember it is this: Those Angelenos who have been most failed by our government, most impacted by the pandemic, and most likely to not be seen were among those who stepped up to be counted and convinced others to do so. A commitment to nurturing their resilience, sharpening their skills, and investing in their ability to organize others will help move Los Angeles and the nation towards a future where all belong, and all have the opportunity to thrive.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF THE WE COUNT LA CAMPAIGN**

*Unless otherwise noted, all photos found in "When It Counts" are provided by Rudy Espinoza and Mike Dennis*

The U.S. Census serves as a fundamental building block for our democracy with direct implications for our state's representation at the federal level as well as the allocation of billions of dollars of federal funding for critical public programs. Long before the 2020 Census launched, planning efforts were underway in Los Angeles County (LAC) to ensure an accurate count, particularly among hard-to-count (HTC) populations that are often overlooked. The Public Policy Institute of California estimated that more than 1.6 million residents in the state could be missed without a concerted effort to reach HTC populations (Thorman, Hayes, and Bohn 2019). In response to advocacy efforts, the state of California made an unprecedented investment of \$187 million to support census outreach across the state. Despite early planning and an infusion of state and philanthropic resources, no one could have predicted the unprecedented barriers of the 2020 decennial effort, arguably making it one of the most challenging census counts in U.S. history.

These constraints were more profoundly felt in Los Angeles County, which is considered one of the hardest-to-count regions in the nation. With more than 10.4 million people, Los Angeles County is larger than 42 other states, spanning 4,000 square miles of territory, 88 municipalities, 140 unincorporated areas, and more than 200 spoken languages. Other socio-economic conditions create challenges to a complete count, including language barriers, lack of broadband internet access, and fear and confusion about participation, particularly among immigrant communities and other groups that have been traditionally marginalized. One out of three residents are immigrants and over one million

undocumented immigrants reside in LAC.

Organizers, funders, and state officials knew the 2020 Census would require a herculean effort. With so much at stake, local advocacy groups and philanthropic leaders began planning early and ultimately coalesced under one county-wide campaign known as We Count LA (WCLA). With the California Community Foundation (CCF) at the helm, a broad coalition of community-based organizations (CBOs) leveraged their local knowledge and assets as trusted community messengers to reach the hardest-to-count groups across the county.

In the end, about \$30 million was raised in public and private funding to support targeted outreach efforts in specific HTC geographies and populations, leverage trusted messengers and ethnic media, utilize data and research, and develop a regional network of intermediaries to coordinate, train, and provide resources to CBOs across an expansive landscape. It evolved into the most significant census outreach effort in the County's history. In addition to ensuring an accurate count of HTC populations, the campaign partners also sought to build stronger civic engagement infrastructure across the county for engaging residents of HTC communities beyond the census.

## ***Los Angeles: The Nation's Hardest-to-Count Region***

Los Angeles County has historically lagged the state and nation in its efforts to achieve a full and accurate census count. Los Angeles is the most populous county in the nation and is home to a

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*"We Count LA campaign was an ongoing beacon of hope and consistency through this challenging year, and we are thankful for that moral support during some very dark days. It is crucial to have that reminder that even through life's travails that we must remember what is important—to be counted, to be included, and to be seen as vital. And we are thankful for this constant reminder of our humanity and the need to remind the government that we are not expendable...that we matter, and that we count."*

*-WCLA grantee*



high share of populations considered to be hard-to-count, including non-Latinx Black residents, renters, children under the age of five, people who do not speak English fluently, lower-income households, foreign born, LGBTQ+ individuals, the unhoused, multigenerational households, and Indigenous Peoples. The state identified hard-to-count communities using an index based on multiple demographic and socioeconomic variables.

Nationally, the accuracy of the count had been steadily improving between 1940 and 1980. In 1990, the census count suffered a major setback, marking the first major drop in accuracy compared to previous counts (Hill 1999; Taylor 2018). In 1990, California's undercount was disproportionately worse than the national undercount and estimated to have cost California one seat in the U.S. House of Representatives and at least two billion dollars in federal funds over the course of the decade. Los Angeles was ground zero, experiencing an even higher undercount than the state. In 1990, it accounted for 30 percent of the state's population but 37 percent of the undercount (Hill 1999).

To begin to remedy the impact of the 1990 undercount, the state of California has provided funding starting in 2000 for its Complete Count Committee, which coordinates the state's outreach to hard-to-count populations. For the 2020 count, California allocated an unprecedented \$187 million for census outreach. The significant increase in funding was intended to address the compounding impact of a three-decade long undercount, but historical trends were not the only challenges facing LA County.

## Anticipated Challenges

In 2020, several administrative and federal policy shifts threatened to exacerbate the risk of a significant undercount in Los Angeles County, leading the state and regional partners to double-down on their outreach efforts. New barriers and challenges included:

- The shift to online census administration created barriers for households with limited access to broadband internet:** A congressional mandate to save costs required the Census Bureau to administer the census online, for the first time in our country's history. In addition to having the highest concentration of HTC in the state (estimated at 5.2 million or half of all LA county residents), there was deep concern about the digital divide and the ability of HTC groups to participate. As noted earlier, many HTC groups do not have access to broadband (high-speed) internet.
- The proposed addition of a citizenship question created fear and distrust among non-citizen and mixed status households:** The Trump administration's proposed addition of a citizenship question had a chilling effect among immigrant communities. About 34 percent of the LAC population are immigrants; over 1.7 million people are either undocumented or live in a household with undocumented family members (see the California Immigrant Data Portal at [immigrantdataca.org](http://immigrantdataca.org) for more information). Opponents argued the inclusion of the question would risk a significant decrease in response rates and threatened the overall

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*"All of our partners — their willingness to pivot, do something completely different than what they've done before, and put in the blood, sweat, and tears to make that happen—I'm eternally grateful for that and for everyone's resiliency. The staff of all these organizations had tremendous challenges, not just with the census, but with everyday life and keeping healthy and safe, and my own staff as well. And the fact that they did this work on top of that, reminds me of our humanity at a time when I think it's been slipping through America's hands for many years."*

*-WCLA Grantee*

quality of census data. Even though opposition to the citizenship question ultimately prevailed, in many ways the damage was already done and resulted in extreme apprehension and fear among immigrant households.

- **Federal policy shifts and exclusionary rhetoric had a chilling effect on many hard-to-count populations:** The shifting federal landscape, most notably sweeping changes to immigration policy and hostile rhetoric towards immigrants, Muslim Americans, and communities of color also incited fear and discouraged participation. Executive orders calling for increased immigration enforcement, as well as the orders banning entry to the U.S. from several Muslim-majority countries, generated significant anxiety. There was also a hostile tenor that discouraged participation and distrust among communities of color more broadly. Furthermore, the underfunding of the census and changes in leadership at the Bureau further compounded concerns about an accurate count.

## *Unanticipated Challenges*

In addition to policy shifts, the COVID-19 pandemic created unanticipated barriers throughout the campaign, temporarily shutting down outreach efforts, shifting timelines, and creating more uncertainty. Specific challenges included:

- **Census outreach was severely impacted by the pandemic and more immediate efforts to respond to the crisis:** As the census launched, government officials were sounding

the alarms about COVID-19 and LA County issued the first “stay-at-home” order in early March. This put a dramatic stop to all in-person census outreach activities, such as door-to-door canvassing, public events and workshops, trainings-of-trainers, and questionnaire assistance centers/kiosks, just as groups were planning for Census Day on April 1.

- **Hard-to-count populations were hardest hit by COVID-19 and priorities focused on crisis response:** Low-income populations and communities of color experienced the highest rates of cases and death due to COVID-19 (Cabildo et al. 2020). Census participation in these HTC communities was understandably overshadowed by health, economic, and emotional distress caused by the pandemic (USC Dornsife: Equity Research Institute, Committee for a Greater L.A., and UCLA Lusking School of Public Affairs 2020). Furthermore, many of the CBO staff conducting outreach are from these impacted communities and were grappling with their own health, safety, and economic issues spurred by lay-offs. When COVID-19 hit, CBOs were rightfully turning their attention to crisis response.
- **The constantly shifting census timelines created confusion and disruption:** The U.S. Census Bureau changed the timeline several times, eventually ending census operations abruptly with two days’ notice. The constant changes and legal challenges made it difficult to plan and pace outreach and communications efforts. In addition, many organizations involved in census outreach had to shift their attention to get-out-the-vote (GOTV) plans in advance of the

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## *Evaluation Framework and Report Overview*

With the desire to provide a living roadmap, CCF partnered with Engage R+D and the USC Equity Research Institute (ERI) to document and support real-time learning. Throughout the campaign, the evaluation team conducted observations, interviews, and surveys to document the effectiveness of strategies, strategic pivots, and shifts in movement building capacities. Given the rapidly shifting context, the team also used pulse surveys and facilitated partner discussions, virtual town halls, and sensemaking sessions to inform immediate decision-making and feedback loops. Figure 1 on the next page highlights the learning and evaluation goals, methods, and key areas of inquiry.

This report highlights key findings about WCLA's approach to building capacity throughout LAC to educate and mobilize hard-to-count Angelenos to participate in the 2020 Census—and to building lasting capacity for the civic engagement of HTC populations around other issues. It starts with the context for the 2020 Census in Los Angeles County and a description of the WCLA campaign structure. It then lifts up key lessons about how WCLA successfully mitigated the risks of a significant undercount, what civic engagement capacities WCLA built and strengthened, and recommendations for leveraging the infrastructure for future countywide civic engagement efforts.

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# Figure 1. Evaluation Framework

## Goals

1. Assess the effectiveness of Get Out the Count (GOTC) strategies on increasing census participation among HTC groups;
2. Understand the impact of the external landscape on the effectiveness of GOTC efforts;
3. Document promising strategies and tactics to reach HTC groups—on-the-ground (outreach and coordination), from-the-air (strategic communications), and how the two intersect to support GOTC efforts;
4. Support collaborative learning and capacity building of grantee partners;
5. Explore the contributions and implications of census outreach for sustained power building and movement infrastructure among partners.

## Methods

Oct – Nov '19	<b>Interviews</b> with members of the Los Angeles Regional Census Table (LARCT) to document the road to readiness, highlight early achievements, and identify key issues in transition to implementation.
Oct 2019 – Jul '20	<b>Observation</b> of communications trainings and regional convenings and facilitation of town hall meetings.
Nov 2019 – Jan '20	<b>Pre-Survey</b> of CCF grantees and non-grantees to establish a baseline understanding of outreach efforts and capacities (n=162).
Mar '20	<b>Pre-Townhall Pulse Survey</b> on the impact of COVID-19 on outreach and communications strategies (n=105).
Apr '20	<b>Pulse survey</b> on the extended timeline to October (n=76).
Jun '20	<b>Pulse survey</b> on the shifts in outreach and communications strategy due to COVID-19 (n=95).
Aug - Oct '20	<b>Post-survey</b> to document increased capacity from participation in WCLA (n=111).
Sep – Dec '20	<b>Interviews</b> with campaign team, regional leads, grantees, and public sector partners.

## Areas of Inquiry

**WCLA campaign coordination and structure:** How did pre-campaign planning efforts pave the “road to readiness” for the 2020 Census? In what ways did the structure of the campaign facilitate or hinder coordination across grantees and partners? How did the campaign leverage assets and navigate the pandemic and many challenges throughout Census implementation?

**Outreach strategies and “the ground game”:** What strategies (or combination of strategies) were used for different HTC populations and what appeared to be most effective? How and in what ways did grantees pivot, adapt, and advance efforts to reduce the undercount of HTC populations? In what ways did both “on-the-ground” outreach and “from the air” (strategic communications) support efforts to reach undercounted populations?

**Integrated communications and the “air game”:** What strategic communications and messages were used (and with whom)? How did communication support and strategies shift throughout the course of the campaign? What types of messaging and messengers appear to be most effective? How did the integrated communications approach bolster or hinder outreach efforts?

**Network development and collaboration:** To what extent did countywide coordination contribute to alignment and prevent duplication of efforts? How were traditional and non-traditional partners engaged? To what extent were networks, relationships, and partnerships between and across groups built and strengthened?

**Movement building and lasting capacities:** To what extent were groups able to strengthen capacities or gain and deploy new ones that are relevant to addressing census outreach and other issues in their communities? To what extent were groups able to develop lasting capacity for movement building and civic engagement in local and national issues? What did we learn about reaching hard to count populations that could be applied to other civic engagement and movement building efforts?





## THE ROAD TO READINESS

### BUILDING A ROBUST AND INCLUSIVE CAMPAIGN

*"I always say Tongva women never left their ancestral homeland, they just became invisible. 'How do we make ourselves not invisible?' is the question I ask every day."*

*- Julia Bogany*

*In 2021, we lost our beloved community member and Tongva elder, Julia Bogany. We chose to continue to include her image here to honor her legacy.*



One of the hallmarks of WCLA was the intentional focus on planning and designing a robust and inclusive campaign structure to mobilize resources and stakeholders. Building on lessons from the 2010 Census, a core group of partners began planning as early as 2017 to ensure that 2020 Census outreach efforts were well resourced and coordinated. The original group, known as the Los Angeles County Census Table (LARCT), intentionally sought to ensure that outreach efforts were community-powered, data-driven, and strategically targeted to reach populations that are traditionally hard-to-count. In 2018, Fenton Communications and the California Community Foundation (CCF) conducted a nonprofit landscape assessment to identify the training, technical assistance, and resources needed to support their participation in the massive effort.

The Advancement Project California brought deep experience from the 2010 Census, and as the convener of the Census Policy Advocacy Network (CPAN), it also brought a collaborative of statewide organizations to engage in federal and state level advocacy related to Census 2020 policies and priorities. In partnership with CPAN, they provided community-driven regional planning support. To inform where to strategically focus outreach efforts, CCF commissioned researchers from University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) to identify regions with heavy concentrations of HTC populations (Frasure-Yokley and Masuoka 2019). Meanwhile, CCF spearheaded a pooled fund that included government partners and philanthropy, ultimately raising over \$30 million to support outreach efforts and mitigate an undercount of the hardest-to-count

communities in the county.

In 2019, the LARCT evolved into a broad-based coalition of leaders from philanthropy, community-based organizations, government, and other stakeholders united under the countywide We Count LA (WCLA) campaign, the most significant census outreach effort in the County's history. Under the united banner, WCLA sought to reach diverse HTC groups, ranging from Latinx families living in the rural northern region of Antelope Valley, to the Cambodian community in Long Beach, to Black immigrants on the westside, and day laborers on the eastern border of LAC in Pomona.

WCLA had two explicit goals: to ensure a complete count and to build a stronger ecosystem and civic infrastructure for future campaigns and ongoing civic engagement. Drawing inspiration from the 2010 California Counts strategy, WCLA leadership recognized the opportunity to strengthen lasting civic engagement capacities that are essential for a healthy and inclusive democracy (Dobard, Ramirez-Zarate, and Poston 2018; Ito et al. 2011). Many of the activities used for census outreach, including door-to-door canvassing, phone-banking, and community events, are the same for activating residents to get-out-the-vote (GOTV) or to engage in policy campaigns. In addition, the census campaign created ripe opportunities to strengthen relationships, networks, and cross sector collaboration.

For the reasons described earlier, the 2020 Census

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*"We see the census as a movement-building opportunity. We care about the census itself. We want to see a fair and accurate count. It's also an opportunity for organizations focused on equity issues to come together and establish relationships."*

*-WCLA Grantee*

### Los Angeles Regional Census Table (LARCT) and Regional Co-Conveners

Advancement Project CA  
 Antelope Valley Partners in Health  
 Asian Americans Advancing Justice – LA  
 California Calls / Black Census and Redistricting Hub  
 California Native Vote Project  
 Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights  
 Community Coalition  
 LA Voice  
 Long Beach Forward  
 National Association of Latino Elected Officials  
 Pacoima Beautiful  
 Pomona Economic Opportunity Center  
 Southeast LA Collaborative

proved to be one of the most complex counts in U.S. history, but stakeholders were resoundingly clear that the robust planning process and campaign infrastructure played a critical role in mitigating a more significant undercount. It also facilitated coordination and the rapid adaptation of strategies when seismic shifts disrupted the census campaign. In addition to the critical importance of early and robust planning, key facilitators of campaign effectiveness included (1) centralized coordination and advocacy efforts, (2) multiple waves of funding to support robust partnership with trusted community messengers, (3) a network of regional co-conveners, (4) a coordinated technical support team, and (5) shared values and principles of engagement.

### *Centralized campaign coordination and advocacy efforts*

Even before the census officially launched, local leaders recognized that centralized coordination would make communication more efficient and keep partners abreast of what was going on at the state and county level. CCF stepped into a leadership role as the Los Angeles County Administrative Community Based Organization (ACBO) in California, an intermediary model designed to coordinate and channel funding to regions across the state. In addition to its intermediary ACBO role, CCF contributed \$2 million and pooled funding from various public and private sources including Los Angeles County, City of Los Angeles, City of Long Beach, and 13 private philanthropic partners. The pooled fund simplified and streamlined the application, grant-making, and reporting processes for CBOs which helped reduce duplication and facilitated greater agility with the deployment of

resources. See Appendix A for a list of philanthropic partners.

In addition to its grantmaking role, CCF staff served as the “command center” for the campaign. This role included convening and coalescing cross-sector partners, re-energizing grantees and partners when crises hit, and staging rounds of funding strategically when and where they were needed most. The importance of this role cannot be overstated, particularly when the pandemic struck, and campaign partners went into crisis mode. That said, managing what was essentially a large-scale, civic engagement campaign is not a typical role for a foundation, and, while CCF rose to the occasion, having a more robust team with campaign management experience would have alleviated some of the burden on the foundation’s very lean team.

A third critical role was their advocacy efforts at both the regional and state level. As a well-connected and respected regional funder, CCF not only convened local partners but organized two convenings for ACBOs and CBOs across the state to strategize and troubleshoot with the State’s Census Office. In addition to helping resolve a range of implementation issues from data reporting to communications and scenario planning, CCF sought to model a more collaborative and less contractual partnership with the state and other public sector agencies. As a team member from the State’s Census Office noted, CCF was a “perfect example of how it wasn’t transactional [but rather] really relational.” They described CCF as a “thought partner” and critical sounding board by providing feedback on implementation issues and helping them see blind spots at a time when many

## The Road to Readiness

*"We were really intentional about mapping out [and using data] before we started any big grantmaking waves [to understand] what has changed over the last ten years [knowing] there's been a lot of gentrification, movement, etcetera."*

*-CCF staff*

community members had lost faith in government. All of these roles were complex and messy even in the best of times, and not the typical role played by a regional community foundation.

### *Multiple waves of funding to trusted community organizations and messengers*

CCF released three rounds of grants to support CBOs engaged in direct census outreach and education, training, and technical assistance. The focus on CBOs and trusted messengers has been an effective strategy in the past and for other similar campaigns, but circumstances leading up to the 2020 Census—specifically the fear and distrust of government—made their role even more paramount. The first 50 organizations were funded in July 2019, with another

50 funded in December 2019. A third wave of funding was set aside for the Non-Response Follow-Up period, which was originally between March to July 2020. That funding was deployed in the summer of 2020 when the census timeline was extended to October and stay-at-home orders were lifted. In the third round, 15 organizations were funded to target census tracts with high non-response rates through in-person activities such as door-to-door canvassing, organizing in-person events, hosting workshops, and disseminating materials on-site and at community events. In total, CCF funded 115 community-based organizations (see Appendix B for full list). More about the nature and effectiveness of their strategies can be found in the next section, but here we highlight the diversity and breadth of CBOs and service providers that were funded by the WCLA campaign.

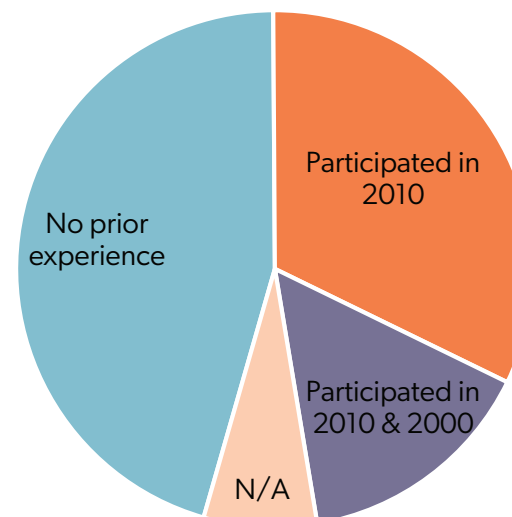
## The Road to Readiness

### Figure 2. Spotlight on Grantees

#### *Hard to Count Communities Served*

- *Immigrants and refugees*
- *People with limited English proficiency*
- *Latinx people*
- *Seniors / Older Adults*
- *Young adults*
- *Children, ages 0-5*
- *Black / African Americans*
- *Asian Americans*
- *LGBTQ+ people*
- *People with Disabilities*
- *People experiencing homelessness*
- *Pacific Islanders*
- *Other*
- *Veterans*
- *Middle Eastern and/or North Africans*
- *Native Americans and Tribal Communities*

#### *Census Experience*



#### *Unique Languages*

**50**

Source: Baseline Survey of Grantees (n=99)

## *Regional co-conveners and network model to support hyper-local coordination*

In 2019, LARCT expanded to include eight regional co-conveners, each responsible for convening regional tables to coordinate more hyper-local outreach efforts and to bring new and existing partners into the campaign. This regional structure was designed to support participation of a broad spectrum of organizations, strengthen relationships within and across sectors, and provide real-time flexibility to address unique regional needs. Representatives from each of the eight co-conveners met regularly with the central campaign team to coordinate, strategize, and co-manage outreach efforts.

WCLA campaign team and regional co-conveners continued to meet throughout the campaign. Co-conveners shared updates, monitored response rates, and cross-walked outreach activities, events, and resources. They also served as a sounding board for campaign coordination and strategies and played an important role boosting the morale of partners during a particularly challenging time.

As one campaign partner reflected, “We could have never built the campaign that we did if we didn't have a structure that was disaggregated... We had many tables of different stakeholders all working together in different ways with different priorities, and the listening sessions and the good arguments that came out of those sessions allowed us to make sure that we were addressing all the diverse needs of different communities.”

While the shift to a distributed regional model helped to deepen work and relationships geographically, the organizations focused on populations who were geographically dispersed, such as Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), Native American, and indigenous people, had a harder time staying connected to the various regional groups.

Co-conveners played an important intermediary role between CCF and local communities by sharing information, convening partners, leveraging relationships, and supporting long-term goals in their respective regions. For some of the intermediary partners, this was a natural fit given their pre-existing roles as regional cross-sector conveners working to build power and improve the quality of life. For others with less experience as regional conveners, it became an opportunity to build their capacity and nurture networks in their region.

## *Coordinated team of technical support partners*

One of the things that became clear early on was the need for more CCF staffing and coordinated technical support. CCF had the foresight to bring on technical contractors long before census implementation to support and build capacity around strategic communications, data tracking and use, and learning and evaluation. In response to the rapidly changing landscape, CCF began pulling together the various contractors into a “campaign support team,” which met regularly throughout the campaign to ensure resources

## The Road to Readiness



Figure 3. Regions within LA County that have high concentrations of HTC populations (in orange font)

were effectively leveraged and working in tandem. This became particularly critical when crisis hit and rapid pivots were necessary.

During the activation phase (March to October 2020), the **Advancement Project California (APCA)** expanded its role to “data translator,” producing an interactive, online map of the hardest-to-count census tracts and providing biweekly updates of real-time response rates for each of eight priority regions. Because SwORD, the statewide data platform for real-time response rates, was not as interactive or accessible for many grantees, APCA supported the data infrastructure and capacity of CBOs to adjust outreach plans based on real-time response rates. They regularly met with regional partners to support data use and to co-strategize. While the usage of data varied across the grantees, many used APCA’s up-to-date response data to identify high-need areas, coordinate outreach collaboration, and shift strategies and messages. One grantee mentioned how they knew they had to try a different message when the response rate stalled in a census tract. In one region, during the last weeks of census outreach, data was used to concentrate outreach efforts in “penetrating very dense neighborhoods that we didn’t have a specific plan for initially,” according to another grantee.

**Fenton Communications** was brought on early to support strategic communications, messaging, and training that would augment and amplify the on-the-ground efforts of CBOs and provide “surround-sound” about the census. The Fenton team spent significant time testing and retesting messaging that explained how to complete the census online

and developed a vast toolkit of multicultural and multilingual materials in partnership with other funded organizations to support outreach efforts. Leading up to the census launch, Fenton held community trainings to build the capacity to organizations to use media tools and digital platforms, though the intent was never that WCLA would be a heavily media focused campaign. They also took the lead on integrated earned and paid media and collaborated with the LARCT on communications materials and digital engagement.

**Action Network** brought a suite of digital platforms and trainings for organizing and mobilization to the campaign. Its customized organizing toolset, called Action Builder, supports organizing by identifying leaders and leadership levels, tracking their engagement over time, and providing grantees with lists of people to recruit and build into a membership base. The primary goal was to make its Action Builder mobile platform available for CBOs that planned to engage volunteer leaders in census outreach and to identify potential members to recruit into their ongoing work after the census. Its role also included developing the infrastructure to be able to collect and report activity across the entire campaign to the state. WCLA had to balance the tensions between the reporting requirements of the state with the varied capacity of its grantees to track outreach activities. To minimize the burden on grantees, CCF took proactive steps to work with the state to troubleshoot systems for reporting and collaborated with Action Network to build digital tools for grantees to report outreach activity to the state. While Action Network was brought to the table originally for its digital platforms for organizing, grassroots leadership development,

## The Road to Readiness

*“We have been able to communicate and empower our CBOs, our non-profits, our schools, our leaders, how important the census is and why we should all be united and working together... seeing how everybody wants to work and encouraging each other to apply for the outreach census funding, that has been amazing.”*

*-WCLA Regional Co-Convenor*



and mobilization, its focus shifted more towards reporting systems for the state.

### **Engage R+D and USC Equity Research**

**Institute** were the evaluation and learning partners embedded in the campaign team to provide real-time documentation, findings, and recommendations. The team gathered input and insights from the campaign partners, regional co-conveners, grantees, and non-funded partners through interviews, observations, and surveys at key points during the campaign. Early lessons from the “Road to Readiness” report during the transition from the planning to activation phase identified a set of adjustments needed to accommodate the influx of new partners and brief surveys to get a pulse of the field informed the campaign team’s decisions at key pivotal moments.

### *Shared values, commitment to authentic partnership, and community engagement*

In addition to the structure and scaffolding necessary for a county-wide census effort like WCLA, a shared commitment to collaboration, co-design, equity, and community power was at the heart of the campaign. LARCT members viewed the census as a racial and social justice issue and sought to focus on inclusion of communities of color and those who are historically marginalized. For example, the Fenton team brought the mindset that any successful communications campaign must be driven by and produced for the community, working diligently to center authentic community voice and ensure culturally competent messaging.

Other key values-driven attributes of the campaign were trust, transparency, and relationships. CCF took a collaborative and participatory approach to engage CBOs in community-driven planning and to ensure grantmaking was timely, responsive, and strategic. They trusted CBOs to determine how to best reach HTC populations and leveraged their deep knowledge of communities in census tracts with high HTC populations.

Despite significant hurdles for organizations over the course of the pandemic—including staff layoffs, illness, and the overall uncertainty of the moment—CCF’s leadership helped organizations pivot while providing the needed flexibility for grantees to shift their strategies and scopes of work. Grantees were not asked to spend time on tedious reporting but rather focused on tracking data and activities that could be used to for learning and decision-making. CCF focused on providing ongoing census updates and support while community organizations concentrated on immediate community needs and COVID-19 relief. The campaign support partners also pivoted. The Fenton team rapidly developed messaging to counter misinformation and more support for digital outreach. Action Network focused on supporting grantees with text-banking capacity, and the evaluation team jumped in to facilitate a series of virtual town halls to make sure all grantees had the same information and keep their morale up during the early months of the pandemic.

## The Road to Readiness





## **THE GROUND AND AIR GAME**

***FROM TRIED-AND-  
TRUE TO ADAPTIVE  
OUTREACH STRATEGIES***

The WCLA campaign pursued a multi-pronged approach to strategically focus on HTC communities with a robust cadre of trusted messengers and community-based organizations (the “ground game”) and continuous surround sound through well-crafted strategic communications and partnerships with ethnic media and other media outlets (the “air game”). At the end of the day — and similar to previous census counts — the Los Angeles County self-response rate of 65.1 percent trailed behind the state (69.6 percent) and the national rate (67 percent).<sup>1</sup> While the self-response rate (based on households) is not the same as the undercount (based on individuals), a lower response rate is likely to signal an undercount. The extent of the undercount for different population groups and geographies will not be known until 2022 when the U.S. Census Bureau plans to release results of the post-enumeration survey.<sup>2</sup>

However, to focus on the final self-response count as a singular measure of success, would completely miss some of the more powerful and lasting benefits of the WCLA campaign. There is a great deal to be learned from the adaptive strategies employed throughout the campaign and in the midst of unprecedented crises. In fact, the campaign may have mitigated a more significant undercount if not for the herculean efforts and resilience of partners.

Furthermore, evidence from this evaluation suggests that the campaign contributed to a stronger civic engagement ecosystem in LAC. While trusted relationships and community-powered strategies are known to be most effective, it was a combination of adaptive strategies and collective commitment that facilitated forward momentum despite the adverse conditions and obstacles in 2020. In many ways, this reflects the experience and resiliency of the very communities the campaign sought to reach. While the 2020 Census was riddled with challenges, it was also ripe with innovation, capacity building, and collaboration.

Throughout the campaign, grantees and partners demonstrated extraordinary resourcefulness and resolve to ensure a complete count. Figure 5 on the following page highlights a few of the intense changes that grantees navigated. This section sheds light on the various strategies employed by partners from door-to-door canvassing to digital platforms. Key takeaways include (1) the undeniable importance of relationships and trusted messengers, (2) the unbridled capacity for creative solutions in times of strife, and (3) the essential union of the ground and air game.

WCLA campaign partners launched the campaign with a sound and coordinated game plan that

## The Ground and Air Game



Figure 4. Three Words that Describe Your Experience with the 2020 Census collected from constituent interviews.

*"The fast response of adapting the We Count LA campaign amidst the pandemic was impressive and it gave our organizations strength in the midst of very uncertain and precarious times. It gave us the tools to be able to continue to do the great work that we do and imagine the different ways in which we could continue to support our communities make them not be afraid and to fully understand the importance of being counted."*

*-WCLA grantee*

<sup>1</sup> The self-response rate represents the percent of households that completed the census form online, by phone, or by mail. Those households that do not respond are then visited by a census taker in-person during the phase of non-response follow-up (NRFU).

<sup>2</sup> For the first time, the U.S. Census Bureau will release metrics on data quality when it releases the first results from the 2020 Census. It is conducting a post-enumeration survey to measure whether particular geographies and demographic groups were undercounted or overcounted. Its tentative plans are to release the first results in November 2021 and additional results in February 2022. For more, see the U.S. Census Bureau press release on December 7, 2020 available at: [Census Bureau Announces Quality Assessments for 2020 Census.](https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/qcass-2020.html)

# Figure 5. Shifting Census Timelines and Campaign Pivots

## Federal and California Landscape

## WCLA Campaign Events and Pivots

2017

Jan 2017  
Citizenship question proposed for the first time by Trump administration in draft executive memo

2017  
Fenton completes landscape assessment to inform Census 2020 planning and prep

2020

Apr 2019  
U.S. Census Bureau announces move to **online self-response**

2018  
Regional plan for CBO outreach with CPAN is developed; **LARCT launches**

Jun 2019  
Supreme Court rules Trump administration's **rationale for citizenship question inadequate**

2019  
Advancement Project CA begins **6-month regional planning process** to inform WCLA

Jul 2019  
Executive Order 13880 **requires collection of citizenship information**

**LARCT expands to include 450+ CBOs**; grantmaking and regional infrastructure building begin

Mar 12, 2020  
**U.S. Census Bureau opens phone/online tools for self-response**

Mar 27, 2020  
WCLA **"transforms to virtual GOTC"**

Mar 19, 2020  
**LA County issues Safer at Home Order** due to COVID-19, effectively shutting down on the ground Census outreach

Apr 1, 2020  
**Census Day!**

Apr 23, 2020  
**Phone and text banking operations launch**

June 3, 2020  
WCLA **responds to racial justice movement**, connecting census to racial justice and equity

Jun 17, 2020  
Census Caravan Day takes the census on the road across LAC

Jul 22, 2020  
CCF reassures grantees and partners that **the federal census memo will not impact their work**

Oct 7, 2020  
Partners **continue working on outreach amidst tumultuous federal timeline battle**

October 15, 2020  
**Census Closes**

Self-response period **extended** to 8/14/20

Self-response period **extended** to 10/31/20

Self-response period **shortened** to 9/30/20

Aug 11, 2020  
NRFU and **in-person door-to-door operations resume federally**

Sep 6, 2020  
US District Judge Lucy Koh issues **temporary restraining order against U.S. Census Bureau winding down operations**

Sep 22, 20 Hearing results in **extension of self-response period** back to 10/31/20

Oct 13, 2020  
**U.S. Supreme Court issues order officially ending census** on 10/15/20

COVID-19 sets off a series of Census timeline changes resulting in confusion and political challenges

May 25, 2020  
**George Floyd murdered** and racial justice movement begins

Jul 21, 2020  
Trump releases **Census Memorandum attempting to exclude immigrants from apportionment**



sought to integrate community-powered outreach strategies on the ground with strategic communications and surround sound from the air. Not surprisingly, most WCLA grantees had planned to raise awareness and educate community members through highly relational activities, like door-to-door canvassing, neighborhood events, and social gatherings. The core strategy of relying on trusted community messengers aimed to counter the fear and distrust generated by years of divisive narratives and exclusionary policies that were reinforced by political developments under the Trump administration.

These tried-and-true strategies had to be significantly scaled back when the pandemic hit. Figure 6 illustrates the core activities grantees originally planned and how grantees had to pivot

and build new capacities when in-person strategies were severely curtailed. Nonetheless, grantees noted several strategies that continued to be critical to their efforts.

### *The Undeniable Importance of Trusted Messengers*

Having community-based organizations as trusted messengers has traditionally been an effective strategy for reaching HTC communities. With the heightened level of distrust in government leading up to the 2020 Census, the role of trusted community partners was paramount. Even with the removal of the citizenship question, many people had concerns about how their information would be used and immigrant communities were particularly fearful. Community members needed

## The Ground and Air Game

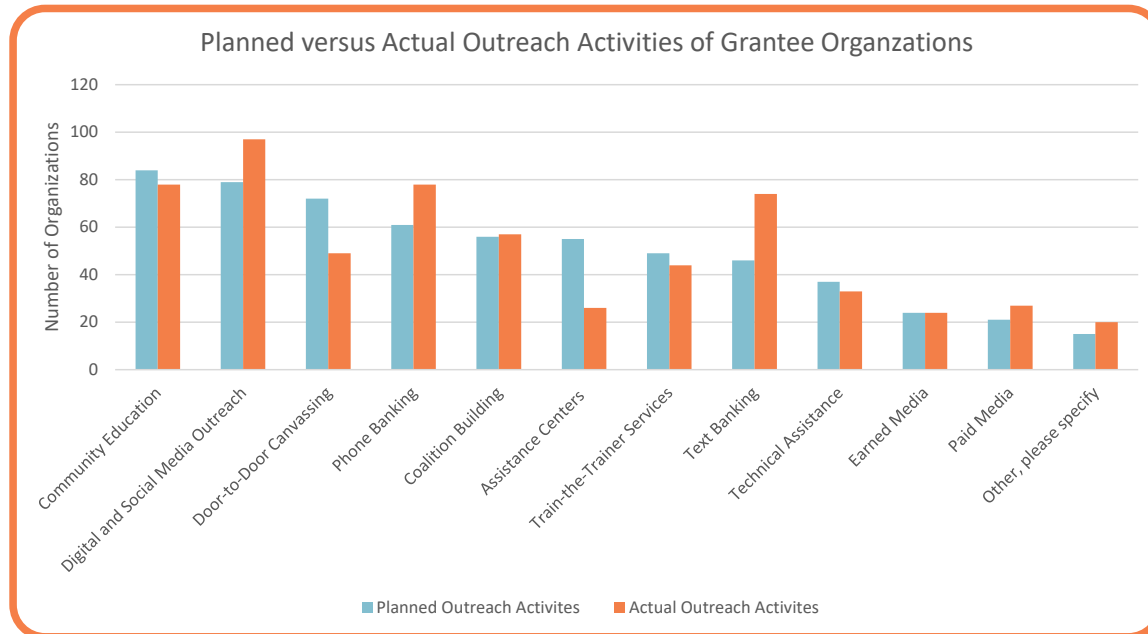


Figure 6. Planned vs. Actual Outreach Activities



PHOTO CREDIT: Kait Lavo



messages from people they identified with and trusted. One grantee noted, “We felt that [distrust in government] was difficult to combat because if you’re told that somebody’s going to come and knock on your door and arrest and deport you, the next person knocking on your door to count you is probably not going to get the door answered.” Many people of North African and Middle Eastern descent were reticent about the census because of the federal administration’s anti-Muslim policies and travel ban. Some Asian Americans were discouraged from participating by the president’s derogatory rhetoric around the coronavirus and the rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans. Those living in overcrowded (and perhaps unauthorized) conditions were also afraid to report the number of people in their households due to fear of eviction.

WCLA grantees sought to address fears and language barriers by conducting outreach in multiple languages and dialects beyond what the Census Bureau supported. For example, Black Alliance for Just Immigration conducted outreach in Haitian Kreyol, Jamaican Patwa, Amharic, Tigranya, French, Ewe, Somali, and Yoruba. Several community groups, such as Maternal and Child Health Access, Central City Neighborhood Partners, and Instituto de Avance Integral Latino CDC, reached communities speaking K’iche’, Kanjobal, and other Mayan languages. And Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council (A3PCON) conducted outreach in the major Asian languages as well as Marshallese, Tongan, Samoan, Urdu, and Bangla.

The inability to conduct door-to-door canvassing in

these communities during the first half of the census was a serious obstacle. Grantees who were able to resume in-person census activities during the delayed Non-Response Follow-up period reported these strategies appeared to be most effective in HTC communities. A small set of grantees took advantage of the short window towards the end of census outreach in July and August when the COVID-19 incidence rate had declined to focus on the activation message in-person. Some invested in mobile resources, such as tablets and mobile kiosks, so that they could help community members complete the census on the spot. In one region, organizers turned an RV into a traveling kiosk. “It was like a dream team,” one grantee recalled. “We had Cesar’s really cute [40-foot RV] kiosk and then we would have folks going door-to-door and telling them that they could literally do it [fill out the Census form] right now across the street.” As one grantee said, “People don’t trust Zoom. People trust people.”

### *The Unbridled Capacity for Creative Solutions and Adaptation*

The extensive groundwork during the planning phase paid dividends when the pandemic disrupted in-person outreach efforts and the nation turned its attention to the impending crisis. Fenton Communications and Action Network quickly moved to assist grantees to pivot to digital outreach and phone- and text-banking. While some grantees had used digital outreach strategies, many had limited or no experience with these technologies. Grantees with no prior text-banking experience had to learn from scratch and train staff and volunteers.

## The Ground and Air Game



PHOTO CREDIT: Kait Lavo

Digital outreach became, as one grantee put it, “a game changer.” Phone-banking, text-banking, and social media became the primary outreach activities. Some grantees reported success with their text-banking activities allowing them to reach thousands of people in their community which would not have been possible through in-person outreach and phone-banking. Some residents were more comfortable asking for help through texts than over the phone.

To be clear, there were definite gaps in the data infrastructure and digital platforms that created new challenges. The contact lists and text-banking platforms geared for other electoral and mobilization campaigns were not conducive for census outreach to HTC populations. For example, some platforms focused on registered voters which excluded many in HTC communities. Other text-banking platforms were missing crucial information, including census tracts or even names, making it hard for grantees to assess whether they were reaching their target populations. No platform supported languages like Khmer, K'iche', or other indigenous languages. For more targeted outreach, some grantees ended up using internal lists and getting their leaders and volunteers to contact people in their networks.

Partners and grantees agreed that digital outreach alone would not have been effective. Motivating and activating community members to participate required more and deeper interaction than most digital outreach allows. Some groups were able to integrate census outreach as they responded to immediate needs and COVID-19 relief. Food

distribution was most frequently mentioned as a service that was often combined with census outreach in addition to other social services such as benefits assistance (especially for unemployment benefits) and tax support (like VITA). These examples of creatively integrating census outreach with more immediate needs allowed grantees to build trust and receptiveness to census messages.

The creativity and resilience of partners led to new outreach activities that may be useful in future civic engagement strategies. The most celebrated example was the festive car caravans that took place across Los Angeles County. These events were data-driven and highly coordinated, as organizers strategically mapped out the best route to ensure maximum visibility in the hardest-to-count neighborhoods. Some grantees reported an uptick in response rates in these census tracts after caravan parades. Other local examples of festive community-building events included chalk-a-thons, where participants shared chalk art to raise census awareness, and Black Church Census Sunday, where faith leaders included census messages in their sermons during remote worship. While the extent to which these events contributed to increased response rates is unclear, they may play an important role in community-building as well as shifting sentiments and narratives about the census and other civic engagement activities. Organizers and activists used similar strategies in the 2020 electoral cycle as exemplified by the Joy to the Polls campaign, an effort intentionally designed to create a sense of joy about voting and to motivate every single person to stay in often long lines to cast their

## The Ground and Air Game

vote during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

## *In Search of the Perfect Union of the Ground and Air Game*

Integrated and strategic communications (the air game) became more essential than anyone could have anticipated. From the onset, the philosophy around an effective communications strategy was that it had to be community-driven. “Even if we put together the most beautiful, smart [communications campaign], if it’s not of the community, for the community, if it’s not done by them, it would not move forward,” reflected a member of the Fenton team. This perspective was the driving force behind their collaboration with the grantees during the planning phase and became critically important later in the campaign. The communications toolkit developed in partnership with grantees was designed to be adaptable with messages and materials that could be tailored to resonate with different audiences.

The diversity of Los Angeles’ HTC populations required a diversity of messages. WCLA campaign partners recognized that focusing on one magic message (or messenger) that could speak to everyone simply would not be effective. No single message resonated with everyone. Multiple audiences had different concerns and motivations for completing the census. Some community members questioned the benefits of census participation, especially in neglected communities where many HTC populations resided, because they

had not seen improvements in their neighborhoods based on previous censuses. Some community members needed reassurance that information would not be used against them or shared with law enforcement. Others emphasized how the census was a tool of political empowerment for their community.

Community-based organizations with language and cultural competencies were an important asset to the communications strategy. Beyond simple language translation, grantees could provide cultural translation. For example, official materials in Korean and Spanish sometimes confused residents. Messages that worked for some communities were counterproductive in others. For instance, mainstream messages about how everyone is “legally required” to fill out the census turned off some community members. Some grantees worked with ethnic media by providing data, community stories, and spokespeople. One grantee described how Spanish-language media, like Univision, was instrumental in defusing the fear among immigrant Latinx communities about the census.

Continuous communications support also became essential to modify messages in real time. Fenton provided updated messaging in response to the pandemic, the police violence highlighted by racial uprising, and shifting timelines. One grantee noted, “We have to modify our messaging depending on what the new attack is to ensure that we’re able to provide key information that is going to

## The Ground and Air Game

*“U-N-I-T-Y. U is unknown individual and diverse life stories. N is for narrative, how we see our neighbors and our neighborhoods. I, identify, finding our strengths as a valley. T, through supporting networks and resources. And then Y is you, most of all through you, so just making sure you count.”*

*-WCLA grantee quoting an African American community representative in the Antelope Valley*

<sup>3</sup> Joy to the Polls was a campaign that captured national attention in November 2020, funded by the Pop Culture Collaborative and organized by a coalition known as Frontline Election Defenders. <https://popcollab.org/projects/joy-to-the-polls/>

alleviate any fears.” Not surprisingly, the census became a much lower priority for many residents of HTC communities, who were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. As one grantee stated, “I don’t know if you can come up with a better way to scare people than a virus that nobody has ever seen before or knows anything about.” In addition, confusion about shifting timelines trickled down to the community. One regional co-convenor recalled having to place a sticker over a wrong date on hundreds of flyers. Confusion did not breed confidence or trust and continued to undermine the efforts of grantees.

In light of the challenges, organizations developed creative and entertaining social media to reach HTC populations. Youth provided a lot of social media content, like TikTok videos that managed to be both educational and entertaining. In one region, grantees discussed the impact of a trans youth who performed in a series of videos as ‘Ms. Census’, which created a lot of views and buzz in that community. The creativity of these young people revealed a more joyous side of census participation that countered a lot of the fear-driven narratives in the community. As one state official noted, a priority for them was to “get out of the way... meaning supporting and working with those partners on the ground, but also allowing that creativity [...] obviously, as trusted messengers they know the communities better than we do.”

## The Ground and Air Game







**BEYOND THE COUNT**  
**BUILDING CIVIC**  
**ENGAGEMENT**  
**CAPACITIES AND**  
**COMMUNITY POWER**

Perhaps one of the most notable achievements of the WCLA campaign was its ability to mobilize and strengthen the capacity of regional partners and the broader civic engagement ecosystem. From the onset, the campaign sought to tap into a robust constituency base, facilitate network connections, and strategically mobilize partners and resources. In a region as large and diverse as Los Angeles County, that alone is a monumental feat.

In addition to large-scale outreach, campaign funders viewed the census as an opportunity to strengthen the capacity of grantee organizations, particularly in the areas of data use, communications, and network building. According to grantees, the WCLA campaign also created opportunities to raise their visibility and mobilize their constituency base around efforts to improve community conditions more broadly. Surveys and interviews with grantees and other partners revealed a variety of ways the WCLA campaign has helped to build durable organizational, community, and ecosystem capacities that may last well beyond the 2020 Census. In fact, many campaign partners are actively leveraging those capacities and relationships for other civic engagement initiatives and as part of COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery efforts.

This section surfaces key lessons from 2020 as well as ways the WCLA campaign helped to strengthen civic engagement and network capacity at the organizational and ecosystem levels. It is based on pre- and post-census grantee surveys (in 2019 and 2020) as well as interviews and sensemaking sessions with grantees, non-funded partners, state

census staff, public sector officials, and funders. While the survey was circulated to the wide network of organizations involved in the campaign, the data presented in this section is based on grantees (n=111) unless otherwise noted. Specifically, evaluative findings suggest organizations strengthened their profile and capacities in the following areas: (1) adaptive capacity, (2) technical capacities such as data management and use, digital strategies, and strategic communications, and (3) cross-sector collaboration and network building. Furthermore, numerous grantees shared multiple ways they have transferred new skills, knowledge staff capacity, and relationships to champion other community and countywide efforts including, but not limited to, get-out-the-vote (GOTV), COVID-19 relief, economic recovery, housing, and racial equity initiatives.

### ***Increased adaptive and relational capacity within the civic engagement ecosystem***

The circumstances of 2020, and events leading up to the census, underscored the critical importance of adaptive and relational capacity as part of the broader civic engagement ecosystem. Adaptive and relational capacities focus on the ability to learn from the environment and use that information to adjust strategy as well as the ability to understand roles within the broader ecosystem and adapt as it evolves (Cardona, Simpson, Raynor, 2015). This is an area where community-based organizations often shine given the need to work nimbly with limited resources in a constantly shifting landscape. For larger and more bureaucratic partners,

## **Beyond the Count**

*"Not only are they getting to know more about the census, which is the unifier ... whether you are independent, CBO, entrepreneur, private, grassroots organization ... the win is the sense that we are [a] community, and that has been enhanced by virtue of this table. That is valuable."*

*-Member of the LA Regional Census Table*

## Beyond the Count

the ability to rapidly adapt is inherently more challenging. As noted throughout this report, CBOs were remarkably resilient and adaptive, but public sector partners reflected on the ways they too strengthened their adaptive capacity. According to one municipal staff member, a major growth was “being able to think on your feet, be creative, assign partnerships and figure out ways to make things visible without having to do anything extra. I remember one of the things that we did was creating magnets to put on our city vehicles. It was just one additional way for people to see the census. It cost us something, but it didn’t take any extra work.”

According to stakeholders, one critical way to ensure the adaptiveness of a complex ecosystem of partners is through early planning and building partnerships. Stakeholders across the board agreed that planning should start at least five years before launch, and public sector partners, in particular, underscored the importance of having contingency plans. While the state team did engage ACBOs in scenario planning, no one anticipated the avalanche of obstacles to come. A member of the State Census team shared, “One of the biggest lessons that I took away from the census experience is we always need to have a contingency plan, but I will take that even a step further, anything that can happen, will happen, and you need to be prepared for it.”

### *New technical capacities and understanding of campaign strategy and implementation*

WCLA provided a model and roadmap for

campaigns that involve education, motivation, and activation. When reflecting on how to leverage this campaign for future advocacy, one grantee reflected on new skills related to implementing effective campaign resources and training WCLA provided: “We got a skeleton of how to do campaigns — we [can] just change the message and what we’re pushing for. We will definitely use [this campaign] format again if presented the opportunity.” Organizations were given the tools and trainings to expand their reach for long-term efforts and build grassroots leadership in important communities such as Native nations, Black women and girls, undocumented immigrants, and youth.

Another grantee reflected on how “we saw the importance of civic engagement, [and our organization] actually became a voter site, which is the first time that ever happened. I think that is due to the fact that we saw how much people reacted to our census work, that it was important for us to also become a voting site. [...] Civic engagement is truly very important and it’s bigger than just the people in our bubble.”

Several grantees reported that staff and community volunteers gained new technical skills that will be useful for other civic engagement and power-building efforts. Grantees reported digital outreach as the area where they saw the most gains, specifically social media outreach and text banking or mass texting. Grantees reported that they would use these strategies again—and in some cases were already using for community outreach and civic engagement in their future work.

## *Increased capacity to gather and use data*

The ability to gather and use data to target outreach efforts and adjust strategies is a critical capacity for civic engagement campaigns. In the pre-post survey, 72 percent of grantees reported they had built a better data system to track outreach efforts as a result of their participation in the WCLA campaign. Most importantly, most said they would continue to use what they gained, and several noted using these systems for tracking leadership development as part of an organizing strategy. Action Network was brought on board to set up a digital platform for CBOs to identify community leaders and leadership levels, track their engagement over time, and to provide them with the lists of people to recruit and build into a membership base. While some groups did follow through on plans to engage community members in census outreach as a way to develop their organizing and leadership skills, these plans were dramatically scaled back due to the reduction of in-person activities.

While the evaluation documented noteworthy shifts in this capacity, it also revealed significant variability in data capacity across the CBOs as well as more support needed in this area. Continued investment in building in-house capacity to use data for education, outreach, and mobilization will help build for the 2030 Census. Several mapping and interactive data platforms are already available.

## *Transferring new skills and leadership capacities to address other critical community issues*

In addition to increased visibility in their communities, numerous grantees and partners shared concrete examples of how WCLA has catalyzed alliances and built capacities to work on other intersectional issues from public health to housing and economic justice. Several noted how staff hired to support census outreach have taken those skills and transitioned to supporting COVID-19 relief and recovery efforts. One grantee said the majority of team members hired for the census are now part of their COVID-19 project. "It's the same intensity as the census, but now they have all these different skills that were transitioned over to the COVID. We learned a lot from the census participation."

Another grantee shared how they are transferring skills from the census campaign to participate in the county's new Community Equity Fund designed to work with communities most impacted by COVID-19. "We'll be calling community residents to ask them how they are doing and connect them with county resources. We're going to use that capacity that we learned and gained [from the census] to implement this new program."

Several grantees invested in developing the leadership of community residents to conduct census outreach, and 67 percent of all grantees said they were able to implement better systems for identifying and tracking the development of leaders in their communities. Youth organizing and

## **Beyond the Count**

*"We didn't even have laptops and had to purchase new technology. We had to acquire cell phones and learn how to do the text messaging [...] and have a bigger presence on our social media. Those are skills that everyone had to learn that we didn't have before."*

*-WCLA grantee*

*"When you talk to people about the census you end up inadvertently talking about so many other things. You realize what their needs are."*

*-WCLA grantee*



the activation and development of youth leaders, in particular, stood out in the WCLA campaign. Grantees tapped into the technological savvy of young people, many of whom helped parents and elders in their households with the online questionnaire. In addition, grantees noted the adeptness and creativity of young people, not only for their comfort with digital technology but for their energy and ability to motivate participation in ongoing civic engagement campaigns.

### *Strengthened collaboration with new and existing cross-sector partners*

A critical key to unlock systems change is the capacity of diverse actors within and across ecosystems to effectively collaborate. The WCLA census campaign — and all the circumstances surrounding it — called upon the active participation of cross-sector actors to work together in ways they have never done before. While the campaign clearly benefitted from pre-existing relationships, it created ample opportunities to forge and strengthen new relationships within and across networks. The post-census survey revealed 92 percent of grantees strengthened existing and new partnerships with other CBOs, 70 percent built stronger relationships with government leaders and agencies, and 84 percent strengthened their relationship with CCF.

Relationships were strengthened both within and across geographic regions and sectors. At the subregion level, grantees noted the regional tables created space to build awareness and foster

relationships with other organizations working in the same geography. These regular regional conversations facilitated active coordination on census events such as Facebook livestreams, car caravans, and trainings. Equally important is how these relationships have been leveraged post census and are already contributing to collaboration on other community and civic engagement issues. Reflecting on the gains and achievements of WCLA, a grantee shared, “One important thing is the level of collaboration we created with other organizations because now, after the census, we are working with a lot of organizations on housing issues.” Many regionally focused CBOs also reported increased interaction and collaboration with state and national advocacy organizations such as NALEO, Advancement Project California, and Asian Americans Advancing Justice.

In addition to strengthening regional networks, many CBOs built relationships beyond their usual networks with small businesses, school districts, city governments, and public officials. Some grantees recruited public and private sector partners as speakers at press conferences with ethnic media. Organizations worked hand in hand with elected officials, staff from various cities throughout the county, state senate and assembly offices, and congressmembers. In total, grantees indicated that they worked with nearly 100 different public sector partners. These relationships were not only helpful in coordinating census outreach activities but also became critical in distributing supplies to the community throughout the pandemic.

At a time when the social sector is turning a critical

## Beyond the Count

*“Partnerships with the organizations, elected officials and local government allowed us to have a stronger support in our efforts to get our communities counted. These partnerships were not only names and people, but once the pandemic took place these partners became a life support. They provided what they could to help get people counted, from tablets with hotspots to tents to food boxes to PPE.”*

*-WCLA Grantee*

eye to equity, privilege, and power, CCF sought to promote an ethos of partnership rather than a transactional relationship as a funding intermediary. This is not an easy role to play or sustain when conditions are constantly changing and there is so much at stake. CCF did not simply play a role as a neutral funding mechanism but as critical campaign partner and advocate that understood success hinged as much on the quality of relationships as it did on financial resources and expertise. As noted earlier in the report, the shared values and commitment to trust, transparency, and partnership — which were continuously tested throughout the campaign — ultimately generated more evidence for the power and potential of trust-based and participatory philanthropy as a new paradigm for social change movements. "It's the power of relationships and trust that drives everything," noted a WCLA co-convener, "And bringing partners to the table early, co-creating together, and using a grassroots equity-based approach."

## Beyond the Count





## **BUILDING ON WHAT COUNTS**

***TAKEAWAYS AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS***

# Building on What Counts

WCLA provided important lessons for philanthropic strategies that take a community capacity-building approach to achieve a common goal. The following are top takeaways from the census campaign with more general recommendations for immediate implementation:

## 1. **Trust is a fundamental building block for civic engagement and census participation.**

Continue to invest in trusted messengers, community organizing, and ongoing civic engagement to build social capital and restore trust. Federal policy shifts, misinformation, and divisive rhetoric have contributed to a general erosion of trust in government and public institutions. Across the board, WCLA partners understood the chilling effect this had on census participation in 2020. The inability to do door-to-door canvassing and other in-person outreach during the early days of the pandemic posed yet another significant barrier. Building and restoring trust and a sense of community is a long-term enterprise that requires continuous resources and attention, particularly among hard-to-count groups. Community-based organizations will continue to play a vital role as trusted messengers in the years to come.

## 2. **Massive engagement campaigns like the census require considerable planning and coordination.**

Begin planning in 2025 and invest in a centralized coordinating hub or intermediary to facilitate regional planning and implementation. WCLA stakeholders applauded the early planning efforts, but many noted the planning process should have started three to

five years before the census launched. A longer runway would create more time to influence census policy, assess the landscape, and coalesce regional partners. The leadership and intermediary role of the California Community Foundation was also lauded as a key facilitator, but some observed the campaign would have benefitted from more robust staffing given the scope and scale of the campaign. Several key pivots helped to address this gap including the coordination of technical assistance partners into a cohesive support team and the regional co-convenor model, which regularly brought leaders together to strategize, share information, and advise the foundation. A skilled and well-staffed intermediary can play a critical “air traffic control” role in the coordination of partners, resources, and information, particularly in rapidly changing environments.

## 3. **Strategic communications, tailored messaging, and continuous surround sound are critical components of census outreach and education.**

Invest in strategic communications, message testing, and partnerships with ethnic media to ensure effective communication to diverse communities. Throughout the WCLA campaign, the “air game” proved to be a critical complement to the “ground game” in Los Angeles throughout the 2020 Census. The earlier engagement of Fenton Communications and the focus on collaboration, community-driven messaging, capacity building, and digital media support became even more critical as the campaign shifted from door-to-door canvassing



to virtual outreach and engagement. Equally important was the agility of campaign partners to rapidly pivot and reframe messaging to meet the moment by making clear and compelling connections between the census, the COVID-19 pandemic, the racial justice movement, and the ensuing economic crisis. The census outreach efforts became another platform for communicating the intersectional nature and implications of representation, resources, racism, and a range of other social issues.

**4. The decennial census count is part of a larger civic engagement arch and a critical opportunity to build durable long-term capacity and civic infrastructure.** Continue to invest in the long game by supporting the capacity of community power-building and base-building organizations. This is particularly important as Los Angeles County embarks on the road to recovery in the wake of COVID-19 and the calls for racial justice. The WCLA campaign helped to build the capacity of community organizations to gather and use data to make real-time decisions about how to deploy their resources. They also strengthened their networks, strategic communications skills, and ability to use digital and social media for outreach. While notable capacity was strengthened in these areas, more resources are needed to help build the capacity and resilience of CBOs to ensure historically marginalized communities are counted, represented, and heard in our democratic processes and institutions.

**5. The census and other large-scale civic initiatives require a robust ecosystem of cross-sector partners.** Moving forward, continue to cultivate and leverage cross sector partnerships to support community-centered campaigns and systems change efforts. The WCLA campaign and the census tables exemplified a herculean effort in the largest and hardest to count county in the nation. The evaluation of the campaign revealed new and stronger connections between funders, public sector agencies, service providers, community-based organizations, and advocates across a broad range of HTC populations and issues. With a host of social issues to tackle from climate change and economic recovery to racial justice, authentic and intentional cross sector partnerships will prepare LAC to spur civic leadership and build a more inclusive democracy.

The 2020 Census was arguably one of the most challenging counts in U.S. history and surfaced long-standing rifts about who belongs and who counts as Americans. In many ways, Los Angeles County, one of the most populous and diverse regions in the nation, became ground zero for an accurate count. If there is one storyline we should take from the LA experience, it is the power of everyday people to come together under the most difficult of circumstances to be seen, heard, and counted. It required a highly orchestrated collaboration of partners to sharpen their messaging, strengthen their skills, and invest time, resources, and relentless commitment to rebuild trust and create a society where all belong and have the opportunity to thrive.

## Building on What Counts



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# APPENDIX A : PHILANTHROPIC PARTNERS

Ballmer Group

Broad Foundation

California Health Care Foundation

California Wellness Foundation

Goldman Sachs Philanthropy Fund

Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees

L.A. Care's Community Health Investment Fund

Roy and Patricia Disney Family Foundation

The Stein Family

The California Endowment

The James Irvine Foundation

The Libra Foundation

The Smidt Foundation

The Weingart Foundation

# APPENDIX B : GRANTEE PARTNERS

A New Way of Life Reentry Project (ANWOL)

## **Advancement Project CA**

ALMA Family Service

AltaMed Health Services Corp

Anahuak Youth Soccer Association

## **Antelope Valley Partners for Health (AVPH)**

API Equality-LA

API Forward Movement (Special Service for Groups, Inc.)

Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Los Angeles

Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council (A3PCON)

Asian Youth Center

Black Alliance for Just Immigration

Black Women for Wellness

Building Skills Partnership

California Black Women's Health Project

California Calls (On Behalf of the CA Black Census & Redistricting Hub – “The Hub”)

Center for Asian Americans United for Self-Empowerment (CAUSE)

Central City Neighborhood Partners

Centro CHA Inc.

Child Care Resource Center Inc.

Children’s Institute, Inc.

Chinatown Service Center

Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE)

Clinica Msr. Oscar A. Romero

Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA)

Community Clinic Association of Los Angeles County (CCALAC)

## **Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment**

Community Development Technologies Center (CDTech)

Community Partners fbo ActiveSGV

Community Partners fbo California Native Vote Project

Community Partners fbo El Monte Promise Foundation

Community Partners fbo Latino Equality Alliance

Community Power Collective

Consejo de Federaciones Mexicanas en Norte America (COFEM)

Council on American-Islamic Relations California

Crystal Stairs, Inc.

Disability Community Resource Center (formerly Westside Center for Independent Living)

El Nido Family Centers

Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC)

Equality California Institute



Families In Schools	California/ Koreatown Immigrant Worker Alliance (KIWA)	Mexican American Opportunity Foundation
Federacion Duranguense USA	Korean Resource Center	Mujeres Unidas Sirviendo Activamente
Filipino Migrant Center	Koreatown Youth & Community Center, Inc.	NALEO Educational Fund
Golden State Opportunity Foundation	<b>LA Voice</b>	Network of Myanmar American Association
Greater Long Beach Interfaith Community Organization (ICO)	Lancaster Museum & Public Art Foundation	NewStart Housing Corporation
Homies Unidos, Inc.	Legacy LA Youth Development Corporation	Nile Sisters Development Initiative
Human Services Association	Little Tokyo Service Center	ONEgeneration
Inclusive Action for the City	<b>Long Beach Forward, A project of Community Partners</b>	Pacific Asian Counseling Services
InnerCity Struggle	Long Beach Immigrant Rights Coalition, a Community Partners Project	<b>Pacoima Beautiful</b>
Instituto de Avance Integral Latino CDC	Los Angeles Black Worker Center (LABWC)	Para Los Niños
International Rescue Committee	Mar Vista Family Center	Parent Engagement Academy
Korean American Coalition	Maternal and Child Health Access	Pars Equality Center, Los Angeles
Korean American Federation of Los Angeles (KAFLA)	Meet Each Need with Dignity	Pasadena Altadena Coalition of Transformative Leaders
Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates of Southern		Pilipino Workers Center of Southern California

Planned Parenthood Pasadena and San Gabriel Valley Inc.

**Pomona Economic Opportunity Center**

Power California

Proyecto Pastoral

Pueblo y Salud Inc

Pukuu Cultural Community Services

Rio Hondo Community Development Corporation

SALVA

Salvadoran American Leadership & Educational Fund (SALEF)

Self Help Graphics

Social Justice Learning Institute

South Asian Network (SAN)

South Bay Center for Counseling

South Central LA Regional Center

Southeast Community Development Corporation

**Southeast Los Angeles Collaborative (SELA)**

Southern California Association of Non-Profit Housing

Southern California Education Fund

Southern Christian Leadership Conference of Southern California

Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE)

Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE)

Thai Community Development Center

The Center at Blessed Sacrament

Toberman Neighborhood Center Inc.

United Cambodian Community, Inc./Cambodian Complete Count Committee

University Auxiliary Services, Inc./Pat Brown Institute

Vision Y Compromiso

Watts Century Latino Organization

YMCA of Metropolitan Los Angeles