

The Census is Coming: How Nonprofits Can Make Sure That Everyone Counts—and Why They Should

I. From Preparation to Action: The Time to Engage is Now

The 2020 Census is nearly here. Years of raising awareness, organizing, and securing resources will soon culminate in the largest field operation conducted in the United States.

The decennial Census is one of the most foundational, high-stakes activities that communities undertake collectively. Census data determines the allocation of federal funding as well as political representation at the local, state, and federal levels. This funding provides critical social services—including health care, childcare, and food and nutrition access—for those with the greatest need.

The Census is also a challenging undertaking. Despite its importance as an underpinning of civic society, certain populations have historically been undercounted. Communities considered ‘hard to



Photo by Axie Breen

KEY POINTS:

- April 1, 2020 is Census Day. Nonprofits around the Commonwealth can prepare now to mobilize their communities in support of a complete count.
- Nonprofits are on the front lines in their communities. As trusted messengers, they can raise awareness, help individuals access and complete the Census, and coordinate efforts with partners to maximize collective impact.
- Nonprofits can leverage existing assets and take advantage of new resources that are designed to get out the count, particularly in historically undercounted communities.

count’ include urban and rural areas with large populations of low-income residents, people of color, immigrants, non-English speakers, young children, the elderly, renters, and those experiencing homelessness. Compounding these factors are unique challenges heading into 2020, including the first all-digital Census, dwindling federal support for community outreach, and fear and uncertainty among certain populations about providing the federal government with individual information.

This edition of Commonwealth Insights provides a guide for nonprofits’ work to help ensure that everyone is counted in the 2020 Census.

II. Steps Nonprofits Can Take to Ensure a Complete Count

Nonprofits are uniquely positioned to address the Census challenges outlined above. As trusted voices, direct service providers, and community connectors, nonprofits can help overcome barriers to Census participation to ensure that the communities they serve are accurately counted.

2020 Census: Key Dates and Steps for Nonprofits

Now - January 2020:

- Finalize a plan outlining how individuals served will access and complete the Census.
- Attend a train-the-trainer workshop (see massnonprofitnet.org/2020Census).
- Train staff to be able to talk about the Census, answer key questions, and address concerns.
- Encourage community members to sign a pledge to complete the Census at masscounts.org.

January - March 2020:

- Distribute fact sheets about the Census at meetings, events, and community gatherings.
- Host a community forum, or integrate messages about the Census at existing events.
- Make a public statement about the importance of the 2020 Census.
- Hang Census posters in visible spaces and distribute flyers at community centers.
- Reach out to Local Complete Count Committees and the local US Census Bureau office to align efforts and identify helpful resources.

March - July 2020:

- Set up and oversee computers and phones for people to complete the Census onsite.
- Plan and host a Census Day event on April 1, 2020 to celebrate and complete the Census.
- Conduct a community canvass to circulate Census information in public spaces and encourage people to complete the form.
- Answer questions and address concerns from community members.

✓ **Promote the Census through existing and new communication channels**

Nonprofits should work to raise awareness of the Census and disseminate information about its importance. They can tailor technical information about the Census to communities that they serve in ways that will resonate, address specific concerns or barriers, and encourage individuals to participate. Community members are more likely to respond to the Census if they hear from a familiar provider about why it is safe to complete the survey, and about what it means for their community to be counted.

Nonprofits can communicate the importance of the Census through newsletters, social media, phone banking and texting campaigns, flyers and posters, and community canvassing.

✓ **Provide direct assistance to help individuals complete the Census**

Nonprofits should develop strategies to help those they serve complete the Census. This can be especially valuable in hard to count communities, where nonprofits are trusted local messengers. The first step is to consider ways to provide space, support,



Castle Square Tenants Organization

The Castle Square Tenants Organization (CSTO) aims to promote the economic, educational, and social empowerment of low and moderate individuals in the Castle Square Apartments in Boston by providing access to safe, quality, affordable housing and supportive direct service programs. To encourage participation in the Census, CSTO engaged their teen interns to create a YouTube series about the 2020 Census. The resulting series, entitled "Everyone Counts," has four different segments: How Boston Government Works, Active Citizenship, History of the Census in America, and Looking Forward to the 2020 Census. These videos are available to the public, and help further communities' knowledge about the importance of Census participation.

and guidance that facilitate Census participation. Examples of resources and services nonprofits can leverage include: computer stations and Internet access to help people take the Census online, language support to translate materials and help non-English speakers take the survey in their own language, accessibility services to help differently-abled individuals with physical impairments complete the Census, and standing community events or forums that encourage community members to complete the Census while onsite for other programming.

✓ **Coordinate efforts with other groups to maximize impact**

As natural connectors, nonprofits are well-positioned to help build local coalitions—both formal and informal—of organizations working to ensure a complete count. Grassroots-level organizing can help ensure that messages about the Census are amplified and that resources are employed in the most efficient way possible. In many regions of the state, Complete Count Committees are up and running and welcome more participants. Where a Committee doesn't yet exist, nonprofits can band together to start one. These committees work to increase awareness and motivate residents to complete the Census. They often include a broad collection of voices from local government, education, business, planning and community development organizations, faith organizations, and public libraries.

2020 Census Talking Points: Key Messages Nonprofits Can Use

- **The Census is safe:** Personally identifiable information is stored in the aggregate, and strong legal and technological protections are in place to protect it. Census Bureau personnel can be fined and jailed for sharing information.
- **The Census is easy:** The 2020 Census will contain nine questions, taking 10 minutes to complete, that can be filled out on any device with an internet connection.
- **The Census is important:** Data collected from the Census will inform the distribution of more than \$20 billion of federal funds in Massachusetts annually, impacting political representation and a wide range of critical services including public education, social services, roads, health care.

III. State and Philanthropic Funding to Support Nonprofits' Census Efforts

State government and philanthropic partners are making new resources available to nonprofits to support their Census-related efforts. In the Commonwealth's FY20 budget, statewide advocates were successful in creating a new \$2.5M line item to establish the Complete Count Grant Program. The Secretary of the Commonwealth will soon release a Request for



The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission

The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) is the regional planning body for the Pioneer Valley region of Massachusetts. It develops and advocates for policies, programs, and projects that are beneficial to the community in order to preserve and enhance the quality of life for its 43 individual member communities and for the region as a whole. The PVPC, realizing the importance of a complete count in the 2020 Census to the Pioneer Valley, proactively organized a 2020 Complete Count Committee for the region. This committee holds Census job fairs, plans outreach events, and looks for routine ways to spread

awareness about the 2020 Census. The PVPC also set up computer banks with Census workers to ensure that everyone has access to the digital form. Anyone from the community is able to join and attend the Committee's regular meetings. Despite being in existence for less than a year, the Committee has made considerable strides in advancing community knowledge, awareness, and willingness to participate in the Census.



The Chelsea Collaborative

The Chelsea Collaborative, a Latino-led organization that empowers residents to enhance the social and economic health of its community, is making the Census a top priority in 2020. The Chelsea Collaborative is hosting major civic mobilization and community education events, including a door-knocking and information distribution campaign through the public school system to reach over 10,000 residents. In the months leading up to the Census, the Collaborative is teaming up with Lawyers for Civil Rights Boston to hold trainings that teach residents about the Census, how to fill it out, and the importance of a complete count for the community and its residents.

Proposals, and nonprofits will be able to apply to support their outreach, communications, training, and on-the-ground support to help their constituents complete the Census. In addition the Massachusetts Census Equity Fund, a coalition of philanthropic funders working to increase participation in the 2020 Census, is providing more than \$900K in grants to community-based nonprofit organizations to support complete count efforts.

IV. Conclusion

Nonprofits are in a unique position to be a powerful, mobilizing force in the preparation for the 2020 Census. The stakes—financial, political, and moral—are high. With trusted voices, direct access to those most at risk of being undercounted, resources that can make the Census accessible, and strong networks to amplify information about the Census, nonprofits can play a lead role in making sure that communities receive the resources and political apportionment that they deserve. In doing so, nonprofits will help make real the belief which unites the sector—that everyone counts.

Resources for Nonprofits:

- Massachusetts Nonprofit Network: summary of Census resources for nonprofits, and a list of Train-the-Trainer workshops [<http://www.massnonprofitnet.org/2020Census>]
- MA Census Equity Fund: listserv, legal toolkit [<https://www.masscensusequity.org/>]
- MassCounts: digital pledge cards [<https://actionnetwork.org/forms/massachusetts-pledge-to-count>]
- Secretary of the Commonwealth: free outreach materials in several languages [<https://www.sec.state.ma.us/Census2020/index.html>]
- Local Complete Count Committees: list of established local committees and contacts [<https://www.sec.state.ma.us/Census2020/complete-count.html>]
- US Census Bureau: operations information, sample questionnaire, and outreach materials [<https://2020Census.gov/en/partners.html>]



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About the Massachusetts Nonprofit Network

MNN brings together nonprofits, funders, business leaders, and elected officials across Massachusetts to strengthen nonprofits and raise the sector's voice on critical issues. The network has more than 700 nonprofit member organizations and more than 150 business affiliate partners. To join visit massnonprofitnet.org/join.

MNN's work is made possible through the generous support of our organizational sustainers.

