



# Every Moment Counts

## New Jersey's Blueprint to Census Success in 2020 and Beyond



### Executive Summary

As coordinator of the Census 2020 NJ Coalition, Advocates for Children of New Jersey has compiled learnings from the state's successful 2020 Census campaign. A novel collaboration between federal, state and local governments, as well as non-profit and philanthropic organizations, the campaign has much to teach campaign organizers for future civic engagement activities.

This report compiles learning from individual interviews with Census advocates, primary source documents, and feedback from key stakeholders. New Jersey's success did not happen by accident, but rather as the result of extensive planning, funding and collaboration. The 2020 Census campaign serves as an example of how collaborative efforts to build civic engagement can succeed and what kinds of tools will be needed to replicate this success in the future.

#### ■ New Jersey's Census Success in 2020

- In 2020, a strategy of collaboration between federal, state and local authorities, non-profit organizations and philanthropic foundations led to unprecedented success:
  - The statewide self-response rate was 69.5%, the highest in 30 years.
  - A total of 9,288,994 people were counted, a 5.7 percent increase compared to 2010, a faster growth rate than NY or PA.
  - New Jersey outperformed the projected population growth by nearly 400,000.
- New Jersey achieved Census success despite huge obstacles including:
  - The COVID-19 pandemic, which cancelled Census outreach events during March and April, usually peak Census data collection times;
  - High percentages of "hard-to-count" populations, including recent immigrants, renters, seniors, low-income residents, and children under age 5;
  - Rising distrust of the federal government and data collection efforts.

#### ■ How New Jersey Did It: A combination of factors made New Jersey's success possible:

- **An Early Start.** By early 2018, The Fund for New Jersey began funding non-profit organizations representing hard-to-count populations to begin planning Census outreach. In mid-2018, the New Jersey legislature passed legislation creating a statewide Complete Count Commission to develop a statewide plan for Census outreach.
- **Robust Funding.** In 2019, Census champions successfully advocated for a \$9 million budget appropriation for the Complete Count Commission to distribute in grants to counties and non-profit organizations. In addition, philanthropy raised almost \$2.5 million in additional funding for Census outreach grants. These funds put New Jersey well ahead of other states with larger populations in Census-related spending, without which successful efforts would have been impossible.

- **Extensive Coordination.** The “four-legged stool” of the Census Bureau Regional Office, the NJ Secretary of State, The Fund for New Jersey, and the Census 2020 NJ Coalition of non-profits communicated regularly, updating messaging and developing new guidance as events such as the pandemic and Census-related litigation changed the playing field regularly. This collaborative effort also drove resources to areas with high needs, targeting low-response-rate neighborhoods and helped get materials and information to organizers on the ground.
- **In-Person Advocacy.** The pandemic revealed just how important in-person outreach and advocacy are for successful Census outreach. In-person conversations, especially with hard-to-count populations and community organizations, yielded more buy-in than virtual ones.

## ■ Recommendations for 2030 Census Cycle and Beyond

- **Start early.** A common refrain from all stakeholders was to start earlier in the cycle. Every stage of the process should be shifted earlier, especially getting the word out about the Census to community leaders. The preparation timeline should shift earlier with a stronger push for “official” activities starting at least four years out from Census Day 2030, especially for the creation of CCCs and initial grants for Census advocacy planning.
- **Retain and build on local relationships.** Much time and energy was expended building ties with local elected officials, community leaders, businesses, and community members, and these relationships should be cultivated and developed over time rather than lost in the intervening decade. Permanent Census Partnership Specialists and Secretary of State employees could help by checking in with existing Census partners to maintain relationships.
- **Rebuild civic engagement and trust.** Along these lines, campaigns for other types of civic engagement (e.g., voting, local organizing) might help develop a stronger sense of community and shared values that makes Census organizing easier in the future. Many hard-to-count populations had not been previously engaged by other civic engagement efforts or were ineligible to vote. When asking for participation in data collection such as the Census, organizers will be more successful if they can build on preexisting civic engagement efforts rather than starting from scratch.
- **Strengthen messaging and outreach to immigrant populations.** New Jersey is already one of the most racially and ethnically diverse states in the country, with more than 30 percent of NJ households speaking a language other than English at home. These trends are likely to continue over the next decade. Differentiated messaging is needed for each hard-to-count group, along with in-language services whenever possible, especially Asian languages which had limited support from the Census Bureau. A “one-size-fits-all” approach to messaging and outreach is simply ineffective when dealing with such a varied set of audiences.

## Conclusion:

New Jersey’s success in its 2020 Census campaign was the result of extensive planning, funding and collaboration. If New Jersey hopes to replicate its success in 2030, and in other civic engagement campaigns, the lessons of the 2020 Census campaign are clear: early planning and frequent contacts with local leaders, robust funding, coordination across sectors and strong in-person advocacy form the foundation of a winning strategy.

For more information, or to view the full report, visit [www.acnj.org](http://www.acnj.org) or contact Alana Vega, [avega@acnj.org](mailto:avega@acnj.org).



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