

Census Data: A Fair and Accurate Count

We all deserve to live in a society that promotes dignity, supports families, and uses our can-do spirit to expand opportunity. Collecting Census data in a fair and accurate way makes it possible for us to tell a story about the kind of progress that we can and should make. At some time in our lives, we all rely on building block programs that are the foundation of our nation. Social insurance programs like Medicaid and Medicare, and infrastructure programs like Community Development Block Grants, all receive federal dollars that are disbursed based on a fair and accurate Census count.

The impact of the Trump administration's decision to add a question regarding citizenship status to the 2020 Census could result in whole communities not being counted, and therefore an unfair and inaccurate understanding of the communities we live in. We know that the economic security – and basic societal and cultural inclusion – of these communities could be even more at risk due to this decision. And we also know that investments in equal opportunity will be short-lived or underserved, if the question about citizenship is included, and if there are drastic cuts in a range of initiatives that rely on Census data to determine investments in safety net and other programs.

Following are a few tips for talking about the importance of Census data, achieving a fair and accurate count, and the story it tells us.

Lead with Values: Fair and accurate Census data is important, but we have to spend a little bit of time telling audiences why that is: what it really stands for and the story it really tells us. Use a values lens to do this, focusing on Opportunity, Family, Dignity, Inclusion, Pragmatism/Common Sense, and American Ingenuity. Each of these represents why the programs that rely on Census data really matter, what they protect and promote, and what they represent in terms of our American identity. And each of these value lenses speak to the inclusion of *everyone* in achieving a fair and accurate count — which means being intentional about how Census questions are asked and whether people are encouraged to participate in the first place.

Ask audiences what kind of society, or country, we want to be – the kind that promotes inclusion, opportunity and raises the quality of life for everyone here? Or the kind that stops progress in its tracks, cutting off those in need in favor of tax cuts to corporations and the very wealthy? Or so that political gains instead of human need gets prioritized?

Connect the Dots: Show how decision makers, investments, policy choices, and outcomes are all related.

- Audiences' default thinking about "the economy" tend to view it as an uncontrollable phenomenon like the weather, or a wild animal that does as it pleases. We need to frame it as the result of policy choices – which rely on Census data – by *specific* decision makers that can (and should) be crafted to meet the goals of opportunity for all.
- Show how the current Administration's proposals endanger our country's value in inclusion and prosperity for all, and the well-being of millions of ordinary people, so that corporations and the wealthiest can move away from paying their fair share, or political gains can be made. For instance, nutrition, health care, and energy assistance programs alone keep millions from continuing to live in poverty. But absent fair and accurate Census data, these programs will not achieve what they should for the people who rely on them the most. And the recently-proposed budget takes us backward on all of these fronts. Health insurance gains –largely driven by Medicaid expansion—are particularly at risk. While the repeal of the Affordable Care Act failed for now, waivers and attempts to sabotage insurance markets are threatening to reverse the progress we've made.
- Be clear that the numbers tell only part of the story. Most Americans continue to face steep obstacles to economic security and basic opportunity like a job that pays decent wages or the chance to send their kids to college. We need solutions that preserve the gains while expanding opportunity for an economy that works for all of us. And these solutions rely on a fair and accurate Census count.

Be Strategic with Language: Instead of talking about "the poor," "the undocumented" or "people in poverty," speak at a more personal level – "families like mine" or "you and your family" – to move audiences' understanding from charity for others to personal advocacy. Talking about people/families "struggling to make ends meet" also connects with strategic audiences. It also enables people to broaden the scope of who they think about when considering who is left out – or could be – if Census data is used as a tool to exclude, not include. Finally, focusing on families/people "facing" "hurdles" or "obstacles," can highlight that the fault lies with the system, and not with the family.

Equal Opportunity Matters: In addition to overall progress and peril on poverty, highlight findings about racial, ethnic, and gender equity, which may tell a different story—or multiple stories. At the values level, this means establishing greater *and more equal opportunity* as among the nation's goals. It also means that we must connect what the Census *can and should do* in service of equal opportunity and share economic prosperity. As with the overall numbers, identify specific policy principles that contributed to any progress (or kept things from being even worse than they are); choices that held us back; and solutions going forward. This is

especially important regarding racial inequality, as people tend to misattribute differing outcomes to differing work ethic and “culture,” or purely socioeconomic class differences.

Underscore the Importance of Census Data: Highlight the importance of the Census in providing accurate, fair, unbiased information about who lives in our country. And that means *everyone* who lives in our country. Because this is used to determine policy outcomes that serve the health and prosperity of our nation, as well as our progress toward the goals of greater and more equal opportunity for all.

Highlight a Positive Role for Government: Remind audiences of government’s crucial role, as well as the unpredictable economic and other challenges that we all face over the course of our lifetimes. Underscore the importance of government in providing support systems for Americans facing misfortune, while expanding opportunity for all. Government-run social insurance and building block programs improve the lives for many people in the United States. Medicaid, for example, supports special education in K-12 schools and over 60% of nursing home beds nationwide. We all benefit from the roads and public transportation that enable us to get to work. All of these are dependent on an accurate and reliable census count.

Building a Message

We recommend structuring messages in terms of Value, Problem, Solution, and Action. You can use the themes and recommendations above to build a message around the specific policy solutions you need to highlight. For example:

Value: We need to build an economy that offers opportunity and economic security to *everyone* who lives here. Every family should have access to a quality education, a job that enables them to provide for their family, affordable healthcare, and a dignified retirement. That starts with a fair and accurate Census count.

Problem: Wrongheaded proposals by the current Administration and congressional leadership not only endanger the progress we’ve made but take us sharply in the wrong direction. Harmful proposals such as a citizenship question on the Census go against our values as a nation, and would pull resources away from real solutions. This proposal, and others like it, also lead to division in our culture, communities and the prospect of commonality in how equality for all is understood as a value.

Solution: Experience tells us what works to expand opportunity and build economic security for all Americans. Solutions include [Illustrative policy solutions].

Action: Join the #SavetheCensus or #HandsOff campaign and tell the President and Congress

that #WeAllCount and they must help build an economy that works for all of us.