

**NYCT**  
NEW YORK STATE  
**CENSUS EQUITY FUND**  
IN THE NEW YORK COMMUNITY TRUST



**New York State Census Equity Fund**

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**DOCUMENTATION &  
EVALUATION REPORT**

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Seema Shah, Ph.D.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## NYSCEF: OVERVIEW & BACKGROUND

The 2020 census was a high stakes affair for New York. With a decreasing population and a large number of historically hard-to-count groups residing in the state, along with efforts by the federal government to suppress the count among immigrant communities, New York risked losing not just one, but possibly two, congressional seats. An incomplete count had the potential to result in diminished federal resources for a host of community services, ranging from education to health care. In fact, [estimates](#) indicated that each uncounted individual in the state would translate into \$3,054 in lost federal funding.

In June 2018, following a year of planning, the New York State Census Equity Fund (NYSCEF), a statewide collaborative of funders, was launched to support a fair, accurate, and complete count throughout New York. With nearly 40 supporting funders and more than \$3 million in funding, the NYSCEF also represented an opportunity to test a model of statewide funder collaboration at scale.

Drawing upon survey, interview, and secondary data, this report documents and assesses the NYSCEF's grantmaking, awareness-raising, and relationship-building work, as well as the feasibility and possibilities of future statewide funder collaboration. This report:

- 1) Documents the activities of the NYSCEF and situates its work within the national and state context;
- 2) Examines funders' experiences with the NYSCEF;
- 3) Describes grantee partners' census strategies, challenges, and successes; and
- 4) Offers recommendations to foster future statewide funder collaboration and prepare for the 2030 census.

## FUND MEMBERSHIP & STRUCTURE

The NYSCEF received contributions from 37 institutional donors, as well a critical mass of individual donors, totaling \$3.6 million. Ten of the 37 institutional donors were community foundations. The remaining represented a mix of private, public, and corporate foundations.

The New York Community Trust, the largest community foundation in the state and one of the state's largest foundations overall based on asset size, served as the Fund's administrative home. The New York Community Trust has a longstanding history of hosting funder collaboratives and brought considerable capacity, credibility, and expertise to the Fund, including past work on the census.

The Fund consisted of a 10-member Steering Committee (later expanded to 12 members) representing five major regions of the state: New York City; Western New York; Central New York; Hudson Valley; and Long Island.

The Steering Committee provided leadership for and oversight of the Fund's work. A cluster of sub-committees were also formed to guide specific pieces of work: the Grantmaking Committee, External Relations Committee, Education Committee, and Documentation & Evaluation Committee. In addition, Regional Grantmaking Committees were formed to make grantmaking decisions within each of the five regions designated for the Fund.

The Fund's day-to-day work was staffed by two consultants. In addition, the Fund hired a documentation and evaluation consultant to support its work.

*Due to delays in the release of census data, this report focuses on documenting and evaluating the work of the collaborative. A companion research brief will assess the extent to which NYSCEF's efforts contributed to an improved count for hard-to-count populations and geographies. The companion brief will be written and published following the release of the Census Bureau's final data on the 2020 count.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CENSUS 2030: FUND ACTIVITIES AND GRANTMAKING

**Start early.** The most consistent recommendation from literally every single stakeholder interviewed for this evaluation was to initiate support for census efforts earlier. Thoughts varied on how early, but many suggested at least five years prior. By starting earlier, funders could lay the groundwork for their collaboration, including establishing a clear set of goals and activities and determining what kind of staffing is needed for the Fund. An earlier start would also allow for initial grants to be awarded sooner, an act that would align more closely with when grantee partners begin planning for census, given that many in this cycle had started their census planning a full year before they received funding from the NYSCEF.

**Support LUCA efforts.** The Local Update of Census Addresses (LUCA) gives state, local, and tribal governments the opportunity to review and comment on the Census Bureau's address files. Given how critical it is for the census to have accurate address information to conduct its count, foundations have an opportunity to connect with the state and their local municipalities to find out about the status of its LUCA operations and how philanthropy can support their efforts.

**Keep stakeholders aware of the census and its implications for communities.** With the network and relationships NYSCEF built through the 2020 census, it has an opportunity to keep the conversations and the relationships going by bringing people together for periodic online or in-person briefings, or even email updates, to keep the census, and related activities such as the American Community Survey, on everyone's radar in "off" years.

**Invest in civic engagement efforts writ large.** As many grantee partners said, getting counted is one component of sustaining a vibrant democracy. Building an informed citizenry able to make choices about who represents them and how they can have

input in how resources flow to their communities is a long-term effort, not something that happens once every ten years. Organizations on the ground, as well as many allies, advocated for a long-term commitment to civic engagement, building a pipeline of organizations that can support civic engagement and civic literacy writ large and position census efforts for greater success.

**Strengthen communication and coordination among census stakeholders.** New York State was fortunate to have many entities support the census – NYSCEF, other philanthropists who operated outside of the NYSCEF, New York City, New York State, New York Counts 2020, nonprofits who were outside of NY Counts 2020, county governments, and Complete Count Committees. Many observed that it would be helpful to have more coordination among the entities and to the extent possible, a centralized repository for information and resources.

**Build relationships with local and county governments; seed Complete Count Committees.** There was wide variation in the strength and efficacy of Complete Count Committees, but a critical mass of both grantees and funders who were deeply involved in such efforts believed that deeper relationship with local government had the potential to strengthen future GOTC efforts in a variety of ways. They believed such partnerships could build and strengthen the local infrastructure for civic engagement, inclusive of census outreach; support counties by helping them move money more nimbly; and make the case more powerfully for the ways in which the census supports community and human services.

**Continue to prioritize grassroots organizations, while also supporting larger organizations that can help build capacity.** With the critical role of trusted messengers in GOTC efforts, both grantee partners and funders discussed the importance of prioritizing grassroots organizations who have authentic relationships in the community. At the same time, organizations like the New York Civic Engagement Table and the New York Immigration Coalition create efficiencies by developing resources, such as toolkits and media, that can be used across the state. These organizations also provide valuable technical

assistance and capacity-building resources to smaller organizations.

**Invest in digital literacy and broadband access.**

Although investments in digital literacy and broadband access may seem tangential, grantees raised these issues with consistency across urban, suburban, and rural regions. As the census moves online and digital outreach strategies increasingly become the norm, improving broadband infrastructure and tackling the problem of internet deserts not only benefits GOTC efforts, but benefits communities more broadly, giving them better access to health care and other social services.

**Discuss how best to support advocacy efforts.**

Given all the threats to the census, the Fund supported a number of advocacy efforts. It is unclear to what extent philanthropy made a difference in national advocacy efforts, although there is some evidence that NYSCEF helped keep pressure on the state to release its funding, however belatedly. Can philanthropy play a productive role in census advocacy? Although this evaluation does not provide any clear answers, it would behoove the members of NYSCEF to think more deeply from the get-go about whether or not it wants to engage in advocacy and if so, what form it will take.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CENSUS 2030: FUND STRUCTURE

**Build on the successes of the existing structure.**

Fund members gave high marks to the structure of the Fund, particularly the Steering Committee, Grantmaking Committee, and Regional Grantmaking Committee. The Trust, as an administrative home, also received high marks. The next iteration of the Fund can likely use a similar structure with minor tweaks.

**Assess capacity needed and ascribe roles and responsibilities accordingly.**

As one Steering Committee member said of the Fund, “Everyone owns it and no one owns it.” The observation speaks to the value of taking time up front to clarify roles and responsibilities, particularly if the Fund decides to expand or change its scope. Although things generally ran smoothly, the Fund

Chair carried a disproportionate workload and at times, there was duplication in how consultants performed their roles. For the next iteration of the NYSCEF, it will be helpful to articulate the capacity needed upfront and develop clarity on who is doing what, with an eye toward lessening administrative work for the Fund chair. One option for doing so is to consider co-chairs representing upstate and downstate regions.

**Revisit sub-committee structure.** Much of the work of the Education and External Relations Committee phased out over time. In the next iteration of the Fund, these activities could be coordinated more efficiently by the Fund consultant(s) with support from the Steering Committee as needed.

**Consider how to engage non-donor foundations.**

Some smaller foundations were disappointed they could not contribute more financially but believed they could contribute in other ways, for example, by helping to recruit and engage funders in their region or providing input on potential grantees in under-resourced parts of the state. To this end, NYSCEF may want to consider ways to meaningfully engage foundations who may not be in a position to contribute financially to the Fund or commit to sitting on the Steering Committee.

**Explore evaluation and learning opportunities during the course of the Fund’s work.**

Some funders felt that in the future it would be helpful to have opportunities to learn along the way to inform their decision-making. In other states, evaluation teams held learning sessions with grantee partners early in the process and conducted baseline surveys that would allow them to better track progress and assess impact. At the same time, the Fund will need to balance any learning and evaluation efforts with the potential time burden on already stretched grantees.

**Build in opportunities to learn about different parts of the state.**

As part of the ongoing effort to learn about the diversity of the state and its communities, funders were interested in opportunities to do site visits so they could have a better first-hand sense of the possibilities for connection and collaboration, while also gaining an understanding of how local contexts are unique.

## FUNDER EXPERIENCES & LESSONS

Drawing upon interviews with 14 funders and 9 allies/partners, as well as responses to a funder survey (N=27; 73% response rate), the evaluation sought to address the following questions:

- How well did the Fund execute its work?
- What did Fund members gain from their participation?
- To what extent did the Fund engage other stakeholders effectively in its work?
- How can the work of the NYSCEF inform future statewide funder collaboration?

The key findings are:

- Most Fund participants (59 percent) had no prior experience with the census.
- In addition to their contributions to the Fund, 74% of Fund members made additional grants to support GOTC efforts, totaling at least \$1.24 million.
- Funders also supported the census in other ways, by attending educational events (59%), using their foundation's social media handles to promote GOTC efforts (48%), and encouraging peer funders to support GOTC efforts (41%).
- The Fund was well-managed and well-administered (all items rated 4.4 or higher on a 5-point scale).
- The grantmaking process was well-run (all items rated 4.0 or higher). In fact, grantee partners gave even higher ratings than Fund members to the grantmaking process.
- Fund members built new relationships with a variety of partners, most deeply with funders outside of their regions.
- The Fund's work aligned with its equity values, including maintaining a focus on reaching hard-to-count populations and balancing upstate and downstate concerns (all items rated 4.0 or higher).
- Fund members benefited in a variety of ways, but especially by gaining new knowledge related to the census (4.4 on a 5-point scale).
- Participation in the Fund also increased interest in statewide funder collaboration (4.2 on a 5-point scale). In interviews, funders noted that coming

together for statewide policy change can be more impactful than working solely at a local level, and that working collectively gives funders more voice and influence on issues of common concern.

- External partners spoke highly of the Fund, complimenting its close connection to community, expertise, and open lines of communication.

## GRANTEE EXPERIENCES & LESSONS

Drawing upon interviews with 24 grantees, as well as responses to a grantee survey (N=86; 72% response rate), the evaluation sought to address the following questions:

- What are the organizational characteristics of CBOs supported through the NYSCEF?
- What strategies were used by grantee partners to increase participation in the 2020 census? What strategies were the most fruitful?
- What challenges did grantees face in implementing their outreach efforts?
- How were grantee partners' organizational capacities strengthened (if at all) through the Fund?
- What were grantee partners' experiences with the NYSCEF?

The key findings are:

- Eighty-one percent of grantee partners identified service delivery/human services as one of their primary areas of focus; followed by advocacy (57%) and community organizing (35%).
- Fifty-six percent of grantee partners had no prior experience with the census; 71 percent had started preparing for the census before receiving their grant, some for as long as a year.
- Two-thirds (64%) of grantees conducted census outreach with modest support -- \$50,000 or less from all funding sources.
- Grantee partners focused primarily on the following hard-to-count populations: people living in low-income neighborhoods (84%); families with children 0-5 (77%); older adults (71%); and immigrants and refugees (70%).





- Seventy-four percent of grantees conducted outreach in a language other than English. Outreach was conducted in at least 39 different languages.
- Grantee partners made significant pivots to digital and virtual strategies due to COVID-19 but still perceived relational strategies, such as the use of trusted messengers and coalition-building, to be more effective.
- Limitations on in-person outreach and the Census Bureau's changing timeline for completion posed major challenges for groups' GOTC efforts. Protests for racial justice, as well as the racial inequities surfaced by the pandemic, created powerful messaging opportunities.
- Eighty-three percent of grantee partners said they built or deepened their expertise on the census. A similar percentage said they built or deepened their communications skills as well as their connections with community constituencies through their census work.
- Grantee partners reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with the NYSCEF (4.4 or higher on a five-point scale on 8 out of 9 items) and especially appreciated the Fund's flexibility and early awards.

## STATEWIDE COLLABORATION: LESSONS

Fund members, particularly Steering Committee members, lauded their experience with the Fund, with many describing it as eye-opening and transformative. Here are some of the lessons learned.

**Successful collaborations** require head and heart. When asked what contributed to such a positive

experience with the NYSCEF, funders' responses reflected a combination of both values and operational practices that contributed to a collaborative, warm, and adaptive culture rooted in trust. Values such as respect and honesty grounded the work of the Fund, while attention to operational processes, from a commitment to honoring deadlines to making sure there was clarity on action items, helped the group accomplish its goals.

**Use Engage New York as a springboard for future collaboration.** A critical mass of funders observed that it was sometimes hard to know where the NYSCEF ended and Engage New York began, given the shared goals of the two entities and the overlap in membership. Though not all NYSCEF are members of Engage New York, many observed that Engage New York became stronger as a result of the census work and should be used as the natural point of entry for future statewide collaboration.

**Be attentive to which issues are ripe for successful collaboration.** In many ways, census was the perfect issue for statewide collaboration given its wide applicability to the work of virtually any foundation, regardless of how progressive or mainstream it is and regardless of its issue areas of interest. Most issues will not have such broad resonance, and in interviews, funders said that for future collaborations, they would have to consider the time and staff capacity involved; their board's interest and support for statewide collaboration; and the potential benefits for their communities. It is expected that future statewide collaboratives might engage a smaller group of funders or require greater sensitivity to navigating different views.