



GOTC Toolkit Messaging and Media

The need for a fair and accurate 2020 Census count is easily explained through data: Census data are critical to the distribution of more than \$1.5 trillion in federal funding; they can shift the distribution of electors your state has in the electoral college; and they will affect the ratio of federal-to-local dollars your state has, impacting the flexibility of your state's budget — **however this isn't what resonates with most people. Our communications outreach strategy cannot rely on data alone to move people and communities to action.**

Effective GOTC messaging will use education, emotional appeals, and reassurance to motivate people — especially those in communities that the census has historically missed – to participate in the 2020 Census.

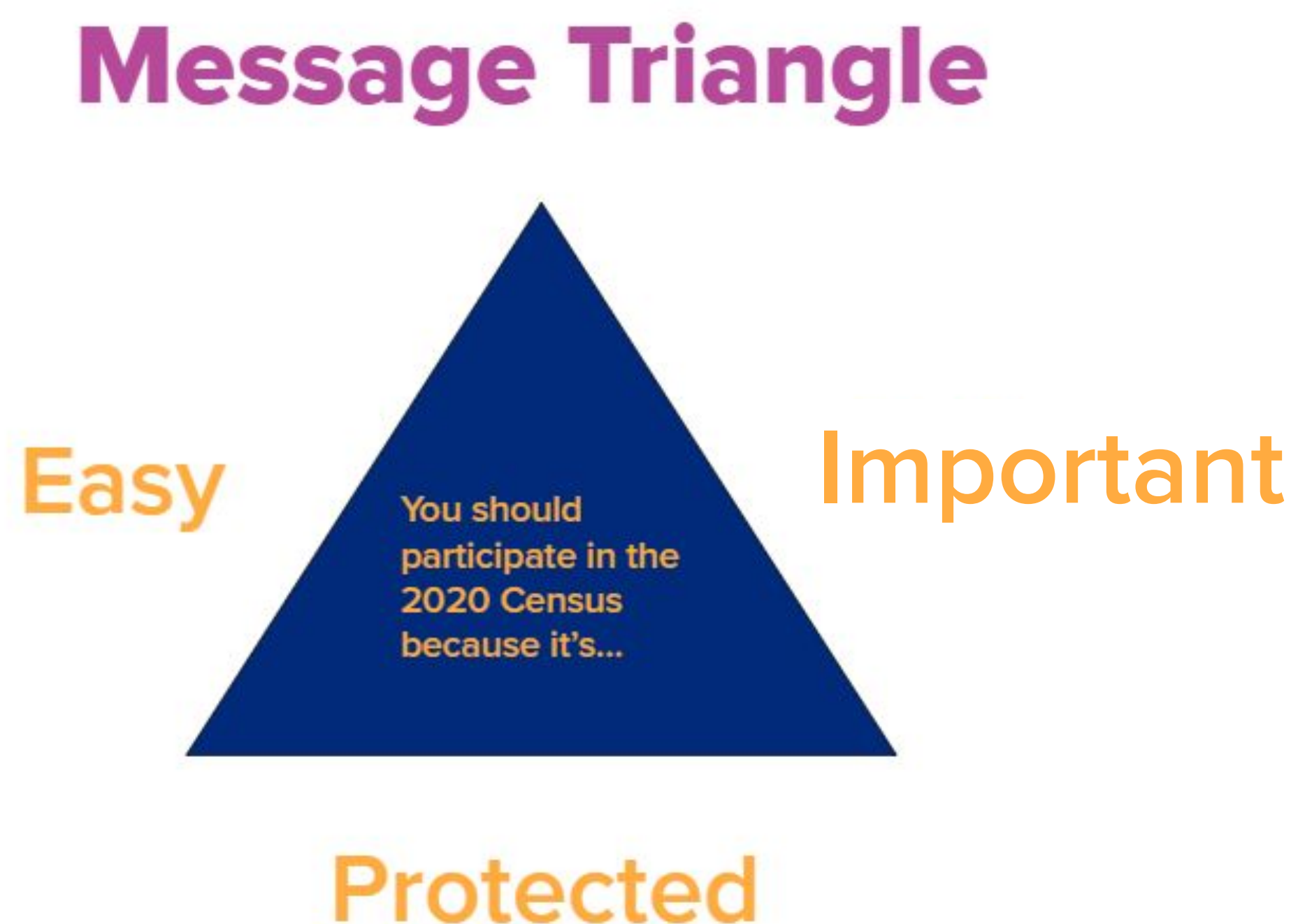
This section of the toolkit outlines how to create messaging that resonates with people and how to use media outreach to move them to action. We want to help you move people from having a basic understanding about the census to sparking a genuine passion for making sure that they, as well as their families and communities, are counted.

Census Counts developed these recommendations through the experience of living and working in many of the communities the census has historically missed, as well as through an investment in survey research and focus group conversations led by The Leadership Conference Education Fund, the NALEO Education Fund and Latino Decisions, Color Of Change, Asian Americans Advancing Justice, Arab American Institute, American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Partnership for America's Children, and National Congress of American Indians. We hope you find the below tips and guidelines useful and welcome your feedback.

MESSAGING

Our topline message is simple:

You should participate in the 2020 Census because it's easy, it's protected, and it's important.



EASY

People want reassurance that participating in the census won't be a burden, and are more likely to fill out the questionnaire when they're told that they can do so on their own schedule, at home, and hear that it will probably only take 10-20 minutes.

It's also important for people to know there are several ways to participate, and that they can choose the one they're most comfortable with. Some people are enthused about participating online, whether that's on a desktop computer or a personal mobile device. Others are less responsive to that option because they have limited internet access or are unfamiliar with computers. Some people like the idea of answering by phone so they can ask questions in real time or because they have trouble reading forms, and some want to use the paper form because they've used it in the past or speak a language not currently supported by the U.S. Census Bureau. Given these varying preferences, we suggest emphasizing the number of options available and the power of choice. We also encourage you to include the census phone numbers for the English and Spanish lines since the bureau is currently only running ads for those lines in Puerto Rico (they will be running ads elsewhere in the United States for [additional languages](#)).

The importance of having easy options is critical for us to remember when crafting our field strategy, since part of what will make participating in the census “easy” is our joint ability to ensure that people have access to translations, internet access, large print guides, and other elements that will make the 2020 Census more accessible.

Sample Messages

“Life gets busy — that’s why the 2020 Census is all about options. You can choose between a paper form, a phone call to the Census Bureau, or a quick online survey. Just 10 minutes can change the next 10 years for you and your family.”

“When you get your invitation to participate in the 2020 Census, you can choose to respond by phone in 13 languages, or by TTY by dialing 844-467-2020.”

PROTECTED

Many people in communities that have been traditionally missed by the census are distrustful of the government, largely due to historical and current discrimination and persecution at the hands of government institutions. This can create a barrier to participation, so it’s important that people know about, and trust in, the strong protections in place to protect themselves and their data.

Note: *In a recent survey, respondents ranked their trust in the U.S. Census Bureau as higher than their trust in the general government. As such, while we’re dedicated to holding the bureau accountable, our messaging should build on that trust.*

There’s no citizenship question on the 2020 Census

Last year, immigration and civil rights advocates defeated the Trump administration’s effort to force a citizenship question onto the 2020 Census. If it had not failed, this question could have deterred many people from participating in the census and deprived their communities of resources and political power.

Messaging research shows that, unfortunately, many communities may still believe that the question is on the census form, which could deter them from participating. It’s critical for our organizations to make sure people know that they will not have to identify the citizenship status of themselves or anyone in their household. It may be helpful to share a copy of the [2020 Census Questionnaire](#).

There are federal protections for your individual responses

The Census Bureau has very strong privacy protections. It’s illegal, under federal law, for the Census Bureau to share individual census data for 72 years. Anyone who shares that data could go to prison for up to 5 years or pay up to \$250,000 in fines — our research shows that people need to know the severity of the penalty.

This is important for the public to know because the failed attempt to add a citizenship question to the 2020 Census raised concerns in many immigrant communities about whether or not their data could be shared with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), potentially leading to their detainment or deport

Other concerns people may have that are prohibited by law are that:

- The bureau could tell their landlord they have more people living in their home than what is listed on their lease
- A public benefits provider might decrease their access to health care, food, or other benefits based on their responses
- Their location could be shared with police or other law enforcement

Addressing fear and resistance

One way to reassure people who are nervous about the immigration status of people in their household, or about their privacy in general, is to make sure everyone is aware that they have the right to respond to the 2020 Census by phone, on a paper form, or online. If a household self-responds completely and accurately, it's highly unlikely the Census Bureau will send an enumerator to count it.

The U.S. Census Bureau maintains its cybersecurity systems

This year's internet self-response option has raised concerns for some about digital data security. When crafting your messaging, you should take this into consideration, and remember that different people may need different levels of reassurance, depending on their knowledge of computer systems.

For many, it will be enough to know that Congress has oversight over the Census Bureau and that the bureau is routinely testing and bolstering its systems. For others, it will be key to know broader assurances, like that the bureau maintains a full-scale structure to ensure its systems are functioning, implements continuous testing, and has a thorough framework for identifying and fixing system bugs — even working alongside skilled hackers to find vulnerabilities and patch them before the system is deployed.

Sample Messages

“It's illegal for the Census Bureau to share individual responses for 72 years after they're collected. Any Census Bureau employee who shares individual data could face up to five years in prison or up to \$250,000 in fines.”

“Federal law keeps individual data or personal responses collected by the Census Bureau confidential for 72 years. That means the Census Bureau can't share your personal information with ICE or law enforcement, can't be shared with your landlord, and won't affect any public benefits you receive.”

“The Census Bureau is not a law enforcement agency, it's a statistical agency. Census data are used to fund community resources, distribute political power, and your personal information is protected by law.”

“The Census Bureau takes seriously its responsibility to protect your data, and is committed to monitoring, testing, and defending its IT systems to keep your information safe.”

IMPORTANT

Census data helps build the foundation of our everyday lives, and an accurate count will help to feed, shelter, protect, heal, and build our communities.

To connect with people on an emotional level, avoid relying on vague, broad, or wonky statements about the importance of the census to our democracy or to funding formulas. Tell a story to which people can relate. Talk about specific local issues that make a difference to them: help paying for child care or school lunch, or funding for schools, hospitals, roads, and jobs that their community needs. Make the harm caused by a potential undercount feel unacceptable.

Federal Funding for Critical Community Resources

More than [\\$1.5 trillion in federal funding](#) is allocated based on census data — you have to know where people live in order to know where resources are needed. These federal programs fund necessities in local communities, like schools, health care, treatment for clean drinking water, and road repairs that benefit everybody. In addition, when a region has an accurate census count and gets its fair share of federal resources, it frees up state and local funds and helps create more flexibility to invest in new community programs.

Political Power

A fair and accurate count builds political power for your community and state because census data are also used for [apportionment](#) and [redistricting](#). Census data alter the electoral college and therefore affect the presidential election, as well as who appoints federal judges. The data impact Congress, state legislatures, school boards, city councils — all the institutions that have the power to protect or harm us.

Civil Rights Enforcement

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX, and the Americans with Disabilities Act — these have all strengthened our nation, changed people’s lives, and improved our life experiences because they’re more than just words on a page. They are laws that are enforced for our protection and safety. The census ensures that advocates, lawyers, and government officials have the demographic data they need to enforce civil rights laws.

Government and Business Decision-Making

State and local governments need to know where people live and work in order to build a community that works for everyone. In conjunction with data from other sources like the American Community Survey, governments can make decisions like where a new bus route is needed, if it makes sense to build a new school in a certain neighborhood, and the best location to distribute supplies in an emergency.

Businesses use census data to help make key decisions. For example, they can decide where to build a new location by identifying communities that have the labor force to support a new manufacturing plant or enough customers to support a grocery store —and to show the benefits for those who already have jobs or are not in the workforce, or they can decide which stores need bilingual staff based on where their target customers live.

Sample Messages

“Participating in the census helps determine how many books and computers our kids’ school can afford, whether our elders can afford heating in the winter, and if there are bus routes where we need them.”

“Even if you can’t vote, the census is a way to participate in our democracy and ensure you’re not erased.”

“The census is a way to get back what you put in. You put a lot into this country, build your community and your family. You pay taxes. America couldn’t be what it is without you. The census determines what you get out for all that you put in. It’s about time you get what’s right, what you and your family and community deserve. But you have to be counted. And that means filling out your census form.”

“When our people are missing from the census, resources and political power for our communities get assigned to somewhere else — somewhere that already has more money, more privilege, and more power.”

“Election Day is not the only day in 2020 that will decide our future. Census Day, April 1, is our first chance to make a difference. And on Census Day, everybody counts. When we fill out the census form, and we make sure that all of us are counted, we can help our communities get the schools, hospitals, and roads we need. If we don’t get counted, we don’t count. And we’ll miss out for the next 10 years.”

“I’m participating in the 2020 Census to protect my community. When we win the fight for the Equality Act, it needs to be more than just words on a page. It needs to change people’s lives and better their experiences. The census ensures advocates, lawyers, and government officials have the data they need to enforce civil rights laws.”

SAY THIS, NOT THAT

DO	DO NOT
Highlight specific community needs and localize your examples whenever possible (e.g. a specific highway in town that needs repairs)	Just talk about “programs” or “services” broadly
Provide accurate information and distinctions to help maintain public trust	Imply that all census data will <i>never</i> be made public — it is the individual responses and data that could identify someone that are protected by law and those protections last for 72 years
Present submitting online responses as an <i>option</i> and emphasize that people can still fill out a paper form or call the Census Bureau to self-respond as well.	Use misnomers about the 2020 Census like “first online census” or “first digital census”
Talk about “ community leaders ” when describing who needs and uses census data.	Talk about general “ policymakers ” when describing who needs and uses census data

CONSIDERATIONS BY COMMUNITY

American Indian and Alaska Native Communities

[National Congress of American Indians: Message Testing Slide Deck](#)

American Indians and Alaska Natives were not counted in the first six censuses, from 1790 to 1850, and they continue to be at high risk of being missed due to miscategorization of mixed race American Indians, language barriers, resistance to federal government activities, and lack of culturally knowledgeable census workers. Almost 5% of American Indians and Alaska Natives were missed in the 2010 Census.

Top Messages:

- In National Congress of American Indians’ message testing, the key themes in persuasive messaging were around garnering more resources and visibility for Native communities and legacy statements related to honoring past generations and contributing to a better future.
- Respondents indicated that the most compelling reasons to participate in the 2020 Census were “my community needs resources and government programs” and “it’s my civic duty.” However, while civic duty resonated with respondents, stating that the census is required by the Constitution was not compelling, and respondents linked it to government oppression.

Trusted Messengers: Community resource centers directly impacted by federal funding (e.g. Indian hospitals), tribal governments, community members working as enumerators.

Arab American Communities

[Arab American Institute and American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee: Message Testing Slide Deck](#)

The Arab American Institute's focus group and survey research found that nearly one-third of Arab Americans either do not plan to participate in the census or are unsure, highlighting the importance of focused outreach. Nearly half expressed concern that the government would use their information against them — a concern due to longstanding mistrust of the government, government surveillance, and the bureau's 2002 move to give the Department of Homeland Security specially tabulated population statistics (not personally identifying information) on Arab Americans.

Top Messages:

- Positive messages are more likely to encourage Arab Americans to participate, with a focus on community benefits, state and local funding, convenience of participation, and protection of personal data.
- Messages that revolved around community and family did well, especially the importance for the future and for children.
- The most expressed sentiment in focus groups was that messaging should be inclusive, by showing the common culture as well as the rich diversity of the community.

Trusted Messengers: Only 4% of Arab Americans said they trusted information found online. The most trusted messengers in Arab American communities consist of family members, healthcare providers, teacher /local educators, people from religious organizations (peers, not leaders), notices at post offices, and Arab American organizations.

Asian, Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Communities

[Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC: Message Testing Slide Deck](#)

The 2010 Census found that Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) communities were the fastest growing group in the country — with communities emerging in regions that have not historically had a large AANHPI presence. Language proficiency is often a barrier to census participation, and more than one-third of Asian Americans and 13.5% of NHPI have limited English proficiency. As Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC reminds us, AANHPIs span a wide range of cultures and countries of origin. Breakdowns by country of origin and other demographics are available in Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC's message testing slide deck.

Top Messages:

Messaging research finds that AANHPIs respond to messages about the importance of participating in the census to help children and families get their fair share of resources and government services. The most effective messages across AANHPI communities were:

- **Family** – Census data is critical to our families’ future and the next generation. It helps us get the health care, transportation, schools, affordable housing, and higher education that our families need to get a good start and be successful.
- **Family (Children Focus)** – Census data is critical to our children’s future and the next generation. It helps us get the health care, transportation, schools, affordable housing, and higher education that our children need to get a good start and be successful.
- **Resources** – Census data is not only used by the federal government to determine funding for programs and services, but also by businesses to decide where to invest and create jobs. Filling out the census makes sure that you, your family, and your community get a fair shot at those resources.
- **Helped in Past** – The 2010 census showed that in one major city, the Asian American community had doubled in the previous ten years. This led to a 50 million dollar increase in federal dollars for schools, hospitals, and services for our kids. Filling out the census can have real benefits for our community.

Trusted Messengers: Friends and family, including seniors and elders. News Media, including community newspapers. Children’s schools, including teachers and school officials. Local public health officials, including doctors and nurses. Personal social media networks.

Black Communities

[Color of Change: Message Testing Slide Deck](#)

As a group, Black people are among those most at risk of being missed in the census. Color of Change’s messaging research concluded there is a need for outreach that explains why the census is conducted and what is at stake. So, make sure your messaging addresses these two points.

While more than two-thirds of Black adults say they are likely to participate, only half of Black millennials say they will. Take this into consideration when conducting outreach.

Top Messages:

- Across generations, the two most important reasons to participate in the 2020 Census were to “ensure my community gets its fair share of federal funding” and “to ensure my community is accurately represented in Congress/state.” Highlighting the cost of Black people not being counted also generated interest in participation:

- Of the individual programs tested for impact and persuasiveness, Medicaid and food stamps/SNAP outscored the third highest option (College financial aid/Pell Grants) by 23 and 14 percentage points respectively.
- In addition to messaging around funding and political power, Black millennials were also responsive to a “stand up to Trump” message.
- Color of Change suggests using “inoculation messaging” that delivers factual information to an audience before they have encountered false information intended to dissuade them from participating in the census. For example:

“Many of the same forces trying to suppress the Black vote are also trying to suppress Black participation in the Census. They know that it’s a critical way to ensure our communities get the resources and representation we deserve. That’s why it’s so crucial that we all understand why the Census matters, and that we make sure everyone in our families and communities knows why it’s so important that they get counted in the 2020 census.”

Trusted Messengers: Black elected community leaders and Black organizations have great influence. When testing individual messengers, Michelle Obama and Oprah scored the highest. Cable and local TV emerged as top news sources overall, but social media was the top source for millennials.

Latino Communities

[NALEO Education Fund: Message Testing Slide Deck](#)

[NALEO Education Fund: Message Testing Fact Sheet](#)

[Message testing by NALEO Education Fund and Latino Decisions](#) found that the political and legal climate around immigration raised fear and cynicism about participation in the census, as did the public debate over a potential citizenship question.

Top Messages:

- In the survey, the most effective messaging focused on participation being convenient, safe and required. Immigrants were especially responsive, with 75% saying they would definitely participate in response to this message.

“Participating in the Census is safe and really easy, just a few clicks online. The Census protects your personal data and keeps your identity anonymous. By federal law, your response is required, and your information cannot be given out or shared”

- In the focus groups, messages about how census data allocates funding for local schools and community programs were the most effective.
- Latinos under 40 were most responsive to a “resistance/defend the community” message.
- A message focused on “civic and community duty” was most effective among Latinas.

Trusted messengers: Family members; people who speak for children or schools, including health providers; Latino community organizations; and, for Spanish-speakers, Spanish-language media.

Young Children

[Partnership for America's Children: Message Testing Slide Deck](#)

The Census Bureau has historically gotten the number of young children, ages 0-4, in America wrong. This is a serious problem. Estimates show that between 1 million to more than [2 million](#) young children were missed in the 2010 Census. Children of color and children living in complex households — especially households in which the person filling out the form is not a parent — are even more likely to be missed in the count.

The Partnership for America's Children's survey of parents with young children identified that one major problem is confusion among adults about whether they are supposed to include all the young children in their household when they respond to the census. Families leave their young children off even when they respond to the census, and parents say they are less likely to include children temporarily living in the household, even if they have no permanent home. But according to census guidelines, these children should be counted as residing in that household.

Top Messages:

- The strongest two messages include values (e.g. missing a child means they miss out on resources for most of their childhood) and programs (child care, schools, children's health insurance, housing, and public transportation).
- It's helpful to look back and talk about the changes in the past ten years. Then, either give specific examples of what the losses will be if children are not counted (overcrowded classrooms, fewer child care options, and busy hospital emergency rooms) or highlight the benefits of accurately counting all children.
- The research found that parents are more connected to and trusting of local governments, so it helps to mention local governments first, and then federal funding.
- The top persuasive statements for parents highlighted the link between the census and local school funding and/or how the census helps local governments plan for the future. It was just as strong to highlight how local governments can use the data to plan without the mention of a dollar amount as it was to include the amount.
- The weakest messaging refers to democracy and is vague about programs.
- It's important to be explicit about counting babies and children. Parents who hear that the census makes a difference for programs that benefit kids, like schools, don't necessarily realize they are supposed to count young children from birth on.

Trusted Messengers: Grandparents, religious institutions, schools, direct service providers.

MEDIA ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES

In addition to the direct outreach you'll be doing through your field, digital media, and paid advertisement campaigns, earned media coverage of your activities can help your message reach a large audience. Below are several census-specific considerations for when you're doing media, as well as communications toolkits from several organizations leading on census organizing.

Census Considerations:

Meet people where they are

Making sure people of color, young children, immigrants and other communities aren't missed in the 2020 Census starts with reaching people where they are — in the news they read, in the languages they speak, and in the communities they live.

This often means thinking beyond large, legacy news organizations and instead targeting ethnic and identity-based media, local news, radio shows in non-English languages, community and religious newsletters, and news and entertainment sources that trusted messengers like teachers and nurses are reading and watching.

Every local issue is a census issue

Flip through your local paper and you'll find that every story has a link back to the census — it's truly foundational.

First, there are the resources for which census data is used to allocate funds like education, health care, emergency management, housing, and transportation. Pay attention to which reporters and outlets cover these issues and pitch them on the census connection. For example, a new infrastructure project that wouldn't be possible without census data; an important deadline for qualifying for federal assistance; how a community with chronically underfunded schools could benefit from fair funding for Head Start, special education, or school lunches.

If you plan to hold press conferences or do in-person interviews, choose a strategic location, e.g. inside of a school, on a bridge that was built using funding allocated by census data, or in a manufacturing plant owned by a business that uses census data to determine where to open factories.

The census' impact on elections, governance and political power is another great opportunity to garner media coverage. With all eyes on the 2020 U.S. presidential election, there's room to educate on how participating in the census could grow your state's influence in the electoral college, determining the president and therefore federal judges. You can also take the story more local — whose voices are currently underrepresented in elections for city council and school boards? If everyone secured fair political representation due to a full and fair count, how would your town change for the better?

Use the 2020 Census timeline to create media hooks

There are several key points in the [2020 Census timeline](#) that you can use to make the census feel timely and entice reporters to write a story, e.g. “One month from now, households across our area will be getting their first contact from the U.S. Census Bureau. Here’s what people should know and how they can respond.”

April 1 is the “reference day” for the 2020 Census. It’s a good day to emphasize that anyone in your home that day who has no permanent residence needs to be included on your census response (message research showed many people thought they should only include their permanent household, so lots of poor people who live in doubled up housing or are couch surfing get missed.)

Reporter education is key

As you build relationships and work with journalists, ensure that they have all the facts they need to report accurately on the census.

Imagine if your local paper were to erroneously report incorrect information about what happens to your personal data or how to participate in the census — you’d have to spend time correcting the record, not just with the news outlet, but with all the people who read and internalized the wrong information.

Try to also reach out to journalists proactively to share information about key dates, local and national impact, data protections, the different ways folks can participate, accessibility options, and any other information they may not know to lift up to their audience.

Use trusted messengers as spokespeople

The Census Counts campaign is unique because our partner organizations live and work in the communities we serve. We’re able to be trusted messengers and bring these messages directly to the communities who have been missed before in the census. That means your organization’s usual spokespeople may not always be the right choice for a story on the 2020 Census.

For instance, instead of selecting your executive director for an interview, you may want to choose an organizer who works with people on the ground. In other cases, you may want the spokesperson to be a legal expert that community members recognize for having defended their civil rights in other instances. You can also direct journalists to validators in the community (teachers, religious leaders, community leaders) who aren’t affiliated with your organization and can speak to the benefits, ease, or safety of the census. Make sure census education to those validators is a robust part of your organizing outreach.

Don't amplify disinformation or misinformation

In your work, you may come across false narratives about the 2020 Census that distort the facts about its process, safety, or benefits. If this is an intentional attempt to dissuade people from participating in the census, it's called *disinformation*.

Unintentionally false pieces of information are called *misinformation*. Either way, it's important to make sure your community has the facts, without amplifying these false narratives.

While your first instinct might be to share a false image or social media post along with an explanation of why it's incorrect, research has shown that false information sticks in people's minds the more they see it, even when it's being debunked. Instead, 1) refrain from sharing examples of disinformation 2) provide factual information that counters the false information *without repeating the negative* and 3) explain why the disinformation is being spread:

"Individuals with anti-immigrant views are spreading incorrect information about the 2020 Census to scare people out of participating in the census and securing funding and representation for their communities. We're working to remind folks that it's illegal for the Census Bureau to share personal information with other government agencies — this data's protected for 72 years."

Remember: If a bad actor is spreading disinformation, they want to see it amplified — passed around in a private messaging group, shared on television or described online or in a newspaper. We need to take care not to do that. If a journalist contacts you about disinformation, urge them to connect with a national civil rights organization that can help ensure they have the background and resources they need to report responsibly.

Encourage and reassure

While the work we're all doing around the 2020 Census is critically important, during GOTC you may want to prioritize getting press on how the census benefits communities instead of your behind-the-scenes advocacy. This will ensure you have the bandwidth to pitch stories with the kind of messaging that we know moves participation and don't overload audiences with the issues you're working to fix when you could just communicate the solutions.

Say your organization is working to set up assistance centers that can help people who speak a language not supported by the Census Bureau. It's far more useful for community members to read a story aimed at recruiting volunteers or advertising the center than one about how there's a lack of support for that language. We want to use our limited time and resources to educate communities about the census, connect them to helpful resources, and build trust in the Census Bureau.

Communications Toolkits

Here are some resources for more detailed discussion of communications planning and media outreach:

[The Leadership Conference Education Fund: Grassroots Toolkit \(pgs.18-30\)](#)

[Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC: Count Us in 2020 Communications Toolkit \(Pg. 20-42\)](#)

[NALEO Education Fund: Hágase Contar Communications Toolkit](#)



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