

## **A Note from U.S. Programs**

*April 1, 2010*

It was a beautiful day in the Las Milpas colonia, our fourth stop on a day of site visits in the Rio Grande Valley. The women served us ice-cold Coca-Colas and slices of homemade choco-flan, a local specialty. We sat on the patio with our chairs in a circle, and listened to the challenges they face in this neglected region of the country. A dog lounged under a pick-up truck nearby and birds chirped loudly all around us.

These women struggle every day to make ends meet in South Texas, selling homemade tacos, working as home health care providers, cleaning used clothes and re-selling them at the local flea market. The colonia—along with 923 others in Hidalgo County, Texas—is squarely in the United States, but conditions aren't much better than across the border in Mexico. The colonias frequently lack safe drinking water, septic and drainage systems, electricity, and other vital public services.

To help improve the lives of these hard-working women and their families, it is essential that they be counted in the census. Yet people like them—and millions of others around the United States—are frequently not counted.

Fortunately, these women had a step up—they had heard about the census from trusted community organizations like ARISE and LUPE, which are connected to state and national groups working together to raise awareness about the 2010 Census and to increase its accuracy. They know that getting better health care and education for their children requires an accurate census. They hope that being counted might even lead, someday, to street lights in their colonias and better protection from coastal flooding.

The conditions that make it challenging to count people in the colonias affect many other hard-to-count communities, in other rural areas and also in densely populated cities like New York City and Miami. Too often people of color, immigrants, low-income people and young children are overlooked in the count.

### **Why the Census Matters**

The consequences of an undercount are stark. For every 100 people not counted, a community loses an estimated \$1.2 million in federal funds for programs such as Medicaid, social services block grants and vocational education over a decade. Billions of dollars for hospitals, schools, roads, and other vital programs depend on an accurate census count. The census contributes to economic development as public and private developers use the data when deciding where to build facilities that can bring jobs and retail options to communities. And census data are used to monitor and enforce compliance with civil rights statutes, including the National Voting Rights Act of 1965, and employment, housing, lending and education anti-discrimination laws.

An accurate count brings more than resources to a community, it also brings with it sheer political power that communities can wield to impact lasting change. The reapportionment of congressional seats and the redrawing of political districts are based on the census. In a number of states, a difference of just 1% in the 2010 Census will mean the gain or loss of a congressional seat.

And an accurate census is critical to ensuring open society in the United States. One might say that to be recognized as a human being and to be counted is one of the most basic human rights. The Open Society Institute is committed to expanding public participation, protecting the right to vote, and ensuring that the benefits, responsibilities and opportunities of society are distributed equally among all groups within our society. An accurate census supports these goals.

### **OSI Supports an Accurate Census**

OSI is supporting a range of groups working to reach hard-to-count constituencies so they are counted in the census. The National Congress of American Indians Fund has launched a

campaign, *Indian Country Counts*, to reduce the American Indian and Alaska Native undercount in the Decennial Census. The Southern Coalition for Social Justice is working to minimize the undercount of low-income, racial minority, immigrant, and other traditionally hard-to-count populations in targeted Southern states, including Louisiana, Florida and North Carolina. The Miami Workers Center, Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund Southwest Workers Union, are trusted messengers in Florida, Louisiana and Texas working to ensure fuller participation in their states. Through its vast media coalition of radio DJs, bloggers and television networks, Voto Latino, based in Washington, DC, is working to motivate and inform Latino youth around the country to be counted.

OSI is proud to partner with other foundations on the census. With the Ford Foundation and others, we are active participants in the Funders Census Initiative. We are also supporting census outreach in Louisiana through the Census Community Outreach Fund at the Public Interest Projects (PIP), which supports local groups in California, Florida, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina and Texas. In addition, we support the 2010 Census Funders NYC Initiative, coordinated by The New York Community Trust and the New York Foundation, which funds organizations working to reach Black and Latino males, and to increase the count in public housing communities.

To ensure that people are counted in the neighborhoods they call home, OSI is also supporting groups such as Demos, the Prison Policy Initiative, and their allies to end the practice of “prison-based gerrymandering,” which counts incarcerated people as residents of the counties in which they are incarcerated. This practice allows legislatures to create “phantom districts” that sometimes contain more incarcerated people than actual constituents. The result is an unfair distribution of public resources and political power that reinforces the cycle of divestment in urban communities and prison-dependent rural economies.

During our visit to the Las Milpas colonia, the community learned that the Census Bureau would not be mailing census forms to the colonias, but only sending census takers door-to-door. Local leaders sprang into action, calling colleagues hundreds of miles away for advice about how they could help to ensure that the count is still as accurate as possible. Today, April 1, is Census Day. Let’s make it count for the women of Hidalgo County and for all of us.

**Ann Beeson**  
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