

REPORT  
PREVIEW

# 10 Years of The Opportunity Project

Looking Back on a  
Decade of Impact

# Table of Contents

This is a publication of  
**CENSUS OPEN INNOVATION LABS**  
at the U.S. Census Bureau.

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## LOOKING BACK ON A DECADE OF IMPACT

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6	Letter from the Team
9	A Note on the Methodology and Approach for Creating This Report
10	A History of TOP
16	Product Innovation in Action

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## SPARKING CHANGE ACROSS INDUSTRY: TOP'S IMPACT ON THE PRIVATE SECTOR

---

21	Fast-to-Market Solutions
22	Higher Quality, Transformative Tools
26	Forging New, Lasting Connections with Government Partners

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## REACHING COMMUNITIES NATIONWIDE: TOP'S IMPACT ON EVERYDAY AMERICANS

---

30	TOP Sprints Take on the Country's Most Urgent Challenges
31	The Role of User Advocates in Sprints

---

## REIMAGINING PUBLIC SERVICE: TOP'S IMPACT ON GOVERNMENT

---

35	Expanding Connections to End Users of Government Data
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“ The Opportunity Project is an example of the things we should aspire to do on behalf of our citizens — because it represents a combination of deep and passionate experts from agencies, and collaboration from federal, state, local, Tribal [governments], our industry partners, academia, advocacy groups, and others to solve problems in ways that are challenging and more innovative ... **The Opportunity Project is one of the most important accelerators in federal government.**”

— Suzette Kent, Former Federal Chief Information Officer, at 2019 TOP Demo Day

“ I think The Opportunity Project really captures the spirit of what we have here in America. We not only have the most amazing R&D enterprise across the sectors of industry and academia and government and nonprofit organizations, but we have American values that really make that enterprise absolutely sing.”

— Dr. Kelvin Droegemeier, Former Director, White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, at 2019 TOP Demo Day

“ Americans have a long history of crafting intelligent solutions to complex problems. American innovators and entrepreneurs built the systems and technologies that characterize life in the 21st century, and [the results of The Opportunity Project] prove that spirit of greatness is still with us. The Opportunity Project has conferred great benefit to the public at large.”

— Wilbur Ross, Former U.S. Secretary of Commerce, at 2020 TOP Demo Week

# Letter from the Team

We're thrilled you've taken the time to dive into The Opportunity Project's (TOP) 10-year impact report, a project underway for nearly two years. As we look back on the past decade, we're struck by how far we've come, and how much more is possible.

This report marks a major milestone: 10 years of a bold experiment in collaboration, innovation, and impact. What began as a fresh approach to engaging the public with federal open data has evolved into something truly transformative. Now, we take a moment to celebrate the results, reflect on what we've learned, and look ahead to what comes next.

Dear Colleague,

Over the past 10 years, we've seen firsthand the power of open innovation to inspire new ideas, unexpected partnerships, and meaningful solutions. The secret behind The Opportunity Project's longevity and success isn't just the process, it's the people. Time and again, Americans have shown up with creativity, urgency, and purpose to help solve big problems.

This work has lasted because we've stayed true to our guiding principles: being radically responsive, efficient, and helpful. We've never lost sight of our responsibility to make the best use of every taxpayer dollar. That mindset has allowed us to move fast, work smarter, and deliver value that's both immediate and long-lasting.

The impact of the TOP program speaks for itself. In the pages ahead, you'll find evidence of just how powerful this model has been. You'll see:

- A proven track record of measurable outcomes for the U.S. Census Bureau, every federal agency that collaborated with TOP, and most importantly, the public.
- Lasting benefits for businesses, students, and communities.
- A dramatic increase in the use of and access to federal data.
- The role of TOP in powering products, services, and organizations.
- A clear case for continued investment in collaborative innovation that continues to work this well.

TOP is a movement toward a more effective government for the people. And this report is our way of capturing that legacy and building momentum for the future.

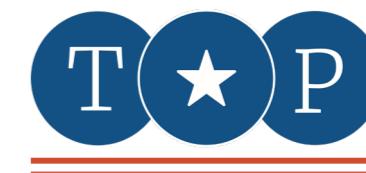
Inside, you'll find key success stories, product metrics, firsthand testimonials, and a detailed look at TOP's impact on communities, business, and government itself. We set out to answer the questions: How much impact have we made? In what ways? And we're proud to share the answers with you now.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the dedicated, talented team behind TOP – not just at the Census Bureau, but across federal agencies, local governments, and more – and the thousands of industry collaborators who brought their ideas, energy, and brilliance to the table over the years. This has been a massive team effort and a true testament to what public service can look like at its best.

Thank you for being part of this journey. We hope you enjoy this report, and we look forward to continuing this work – together – for many years to come.

With gratitude,

The Opportunity Project Team  
at the U.S. Census Bureau



You're reading  
a preview of  
*10 Years of The  
Opportunity Project.*

Stay tuned for the  
full report!

## *A Note on the Methodology and Approach for Creating This Report*

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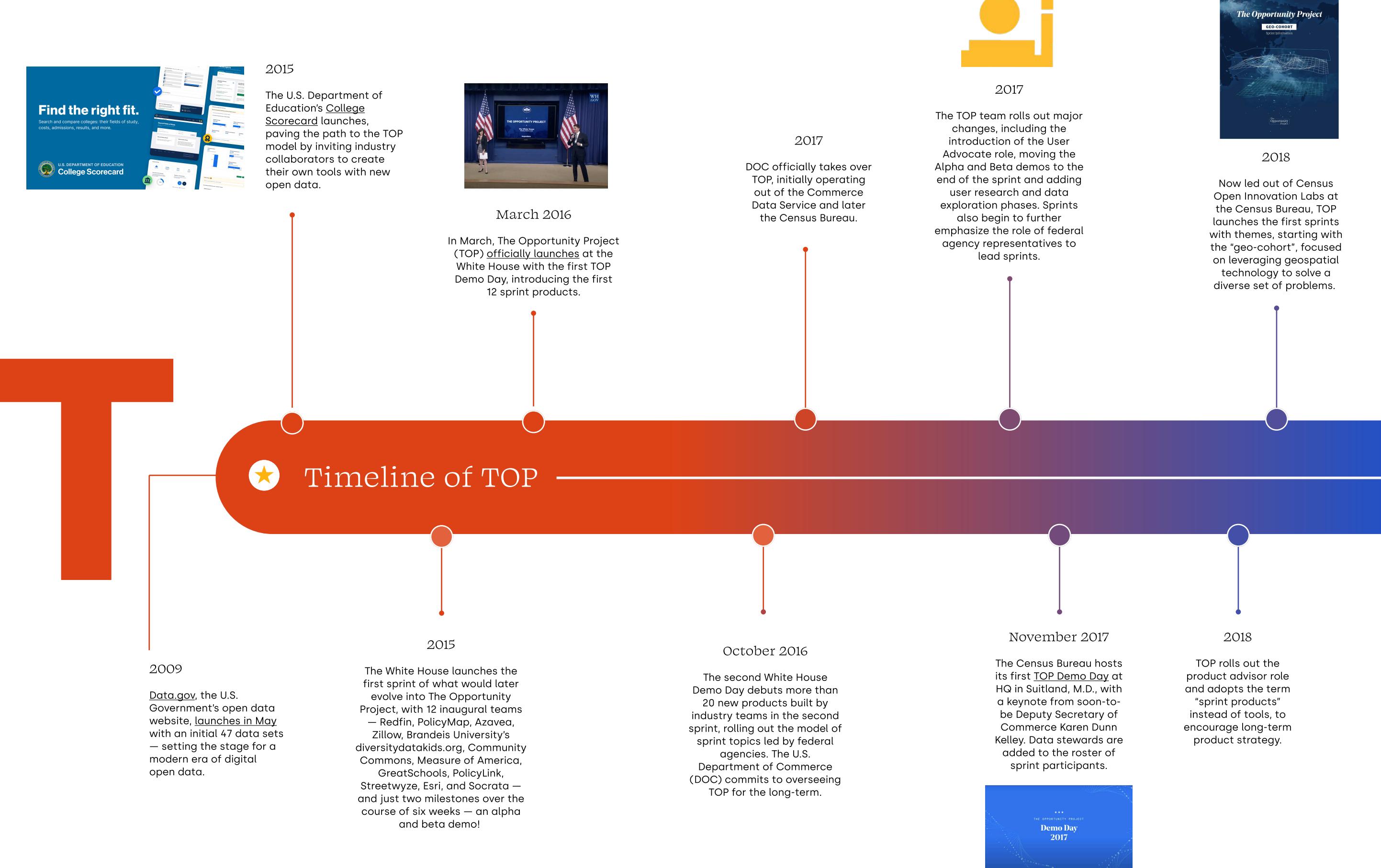
There are hundreds of ways to parse the outcomes of 10 years of impact for The Opportunity Project (TOP).

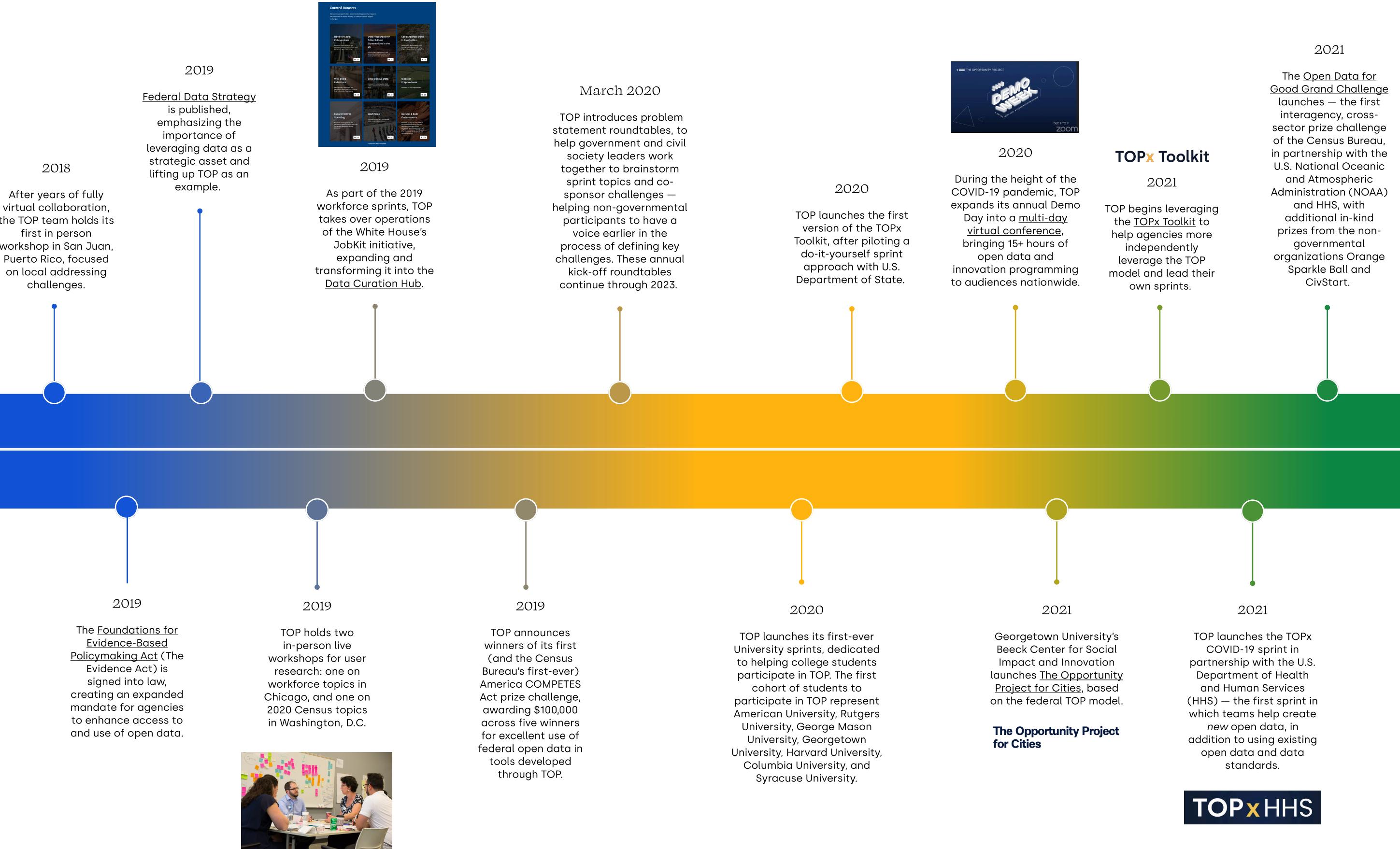
In the last decade, the program has engaged more than 3,300 stakeholders from outside government, as well as more than 30 federal agencies and 25 universities. More than 280 digital, and recently some analog, products have been created in this time — some built to tackle immediate challenges, and some oriented toward long-term outcomes.

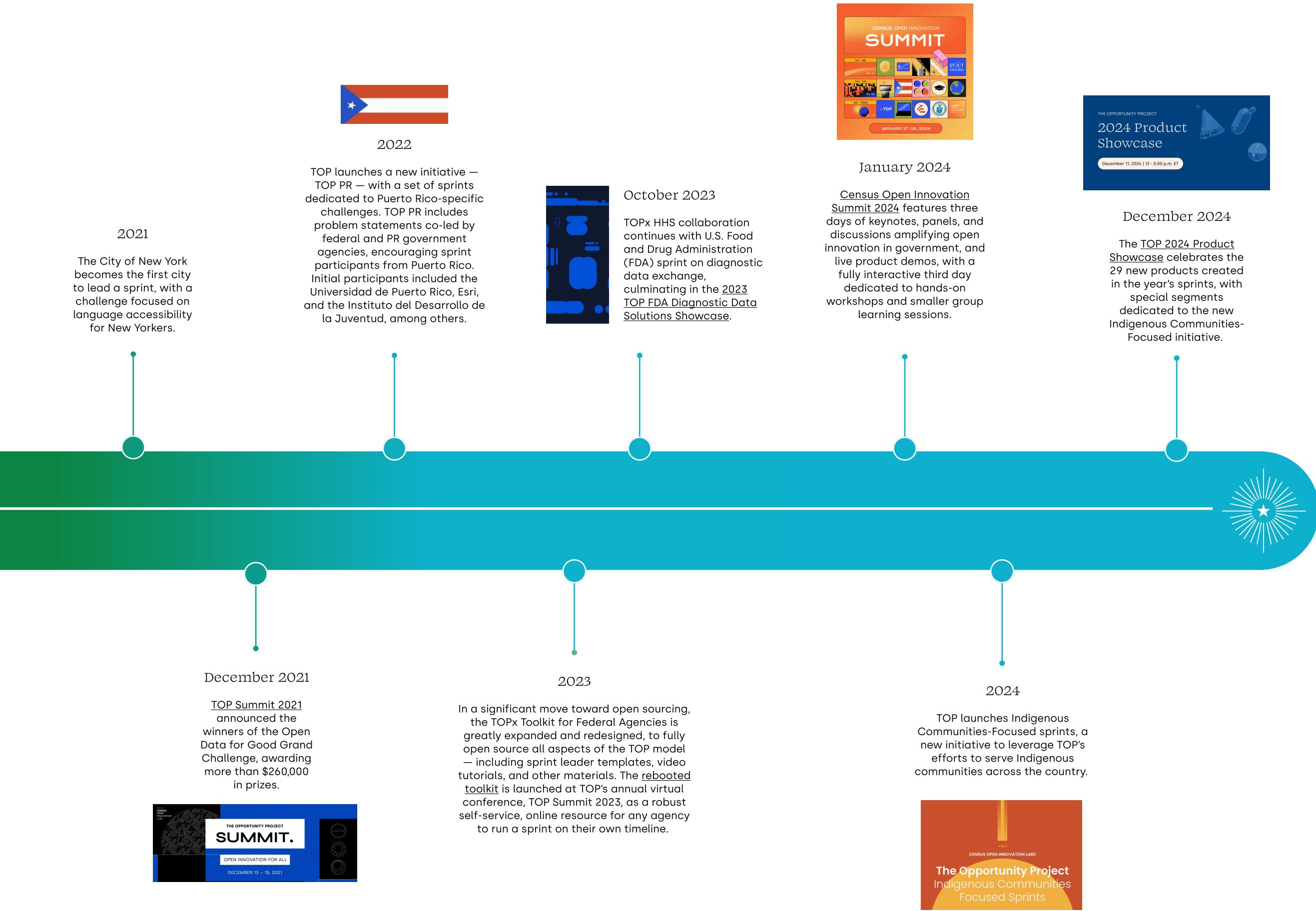
To measure our impact, The TOP Team at the Census Bureau shared a survey with more than 100 past organizations who participated as tech teams in TOP sprints on the users, trajectory, and business results of their sprint products. We also interviewed 35 people for this report, including tech teams, user advocates, and federal agency leaders.

Lastly, we culled impact from the program's own open data: many of the testimonials and quotes you will read throughout the report are publicly available as recordings from previous public events that TOP has hosted, including open innovation summits, showcase events, product demo days, panels, as well as published blogs. This public record represents additional experiences of more than 160 past participants.

The TOP team is still working on the final version of this report, which will be available in late 2025. If you think we missed something or would like to add your experience to the report, please email us at [census.opportunityproject@census.gov](mailto:census.opportunityproject@census.gov)!







# Product Innovation in Action

Over the last decade, TOP has been instrumental in the development of many new tools that serve the public. Here are just a few notable outcomes.

## FEATURED PRODUCT

### Opioids Analysis Insights

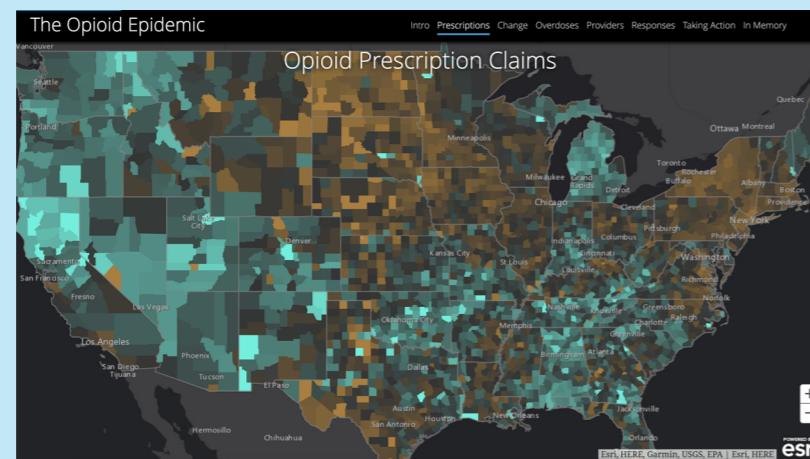
Harnessing Data and Leveraging Digital Tools to Combat the Opioid Crisis

*Sprint led by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2018*

Esri, TOP Participant in 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022, and 2023

Esri used Census Bureau and emergency response data to develop the Opioids Analysis Insights prototype — an interactive, data-driven approach to support public health, public safety, law enforcement, and community partners in addressing the opioid epidemic. After the sprint, this prototype inspired public health agencies across the United States to visualize data for public dissemination.

**“The world today is all about analytics, and the U.S. Census Bureau provides systematic and science-based information about the demographic profile of Americans. Census [Bureau] data is, in many ways, the lifeblood of these kinds of organizations.”**  
– Jack Dangermond, President and Founder, Esri



A screenshot of Esri's Opioids Analysis Insights tool.

## REPORT PREVIEW

10 Years of The Opportunity Project

## FEATURED PRODUCT

### Sidekick

Improved Data Access for Local Policymakers

*Sprint led by the U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023*

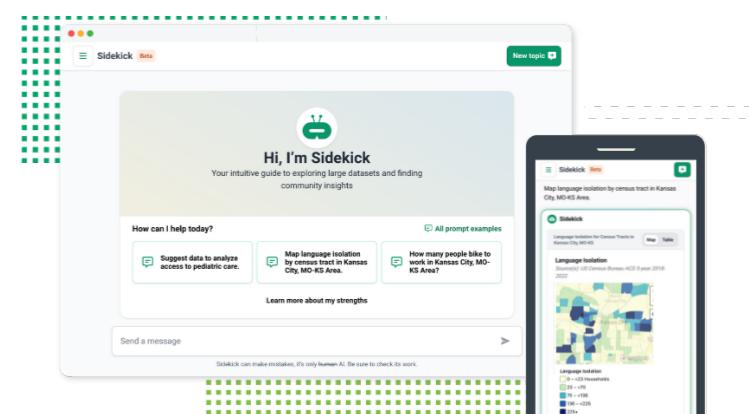
mySidewalk, TOP Participant in 2016, 2021, 2023, and 2024

Kansas City-based company mySidewalk built Sidekick, an AI-powered data assistant that helps community leaders and changemakers find, visualize, and share data to inform decisions and improve outcomes. Sidekick offers access to a robust library of reliable data on public health, housing, the economy, and more in the places users care about. In the 2023 sprint, mySidewalk drew on open data from the Census Bureau, Office of the Surgeon General, and U.S. Department of Transportation to build Sidekick.

**“TOP has provided us real-time feedback on design ideas that would've taken us much longer to come up with our own. TOP has given us access to data sources and expertise on those data sources that are fundamental to our entire customer base that we wouldn't have had without TOP. TOP has helped us as a business organize around some really important milestones. ...”**

The framework that exists to support that work has helped us to take some leaps forward in our product roadmap. ... **We're working with TOP two times in two years right now, and that is the strongest endorsement that I can give.** – Stephen Hardy, CEO, mySidewalk

**mySidewalk**



Product images of Sidekick.

## FEATURED PRODUCT

# City Builder

## Catalyzing Investment in Opportunity Zones

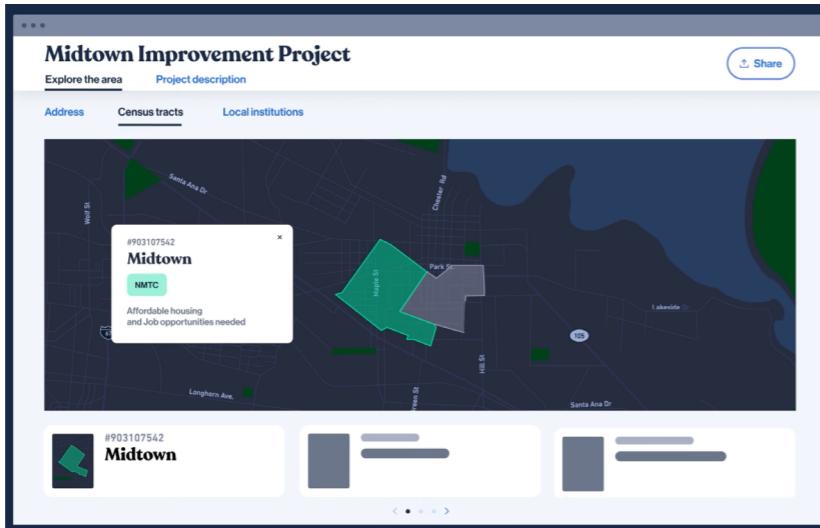
*Sprint led by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and White House Council of Economic Advisors, 2019*

[Citi Ventures](#), TOP Participant in 2019 and 2021

Developed by Citi Ventures, City Builder by Citi is a free, data-driven platform designed to help investors, developers, municipalities, and community members make impactful, place-based investments. The tool integrates data from the Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

“ Being a part of the Opportunity Project has had an incredible impact on the development and initial success of the City Builder by Citi platform. We are especially grateful for the network of experts we've met through the process and the advice we've received along the way. The TOP prize helped validate what City Builder stands for and encouraged us to expand the platform to include additional geographies and investment incentive programs.” – Ryan Harper, Former Group Product Manager, Studio, Citi Ventures

**citi** VENTURES



A still from the City Builder overview video.

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# Sparking Change Across Industry

## TOP's Impact on the Private Sector

TOP has accelerated innovation in the private sector by connecting companies with federal data, user advocates, and government expertise. Industry participants have used this environment to bring more relevant, user-centered products to market faster, while refining their strategies toward collaborative, data-informed approaches. These sprints have also helped lay the groundwork for ongoing partnerships and continued product development beyond the program.

TOP has offered a unique environment where companies, startups, and nonprofits can rapidly prototype, test, and refine digital tools in partnership with federal agencies and community stakeholders. Through TOP's short and structured sprint cycles, industry participants have gained early access to government data, real-time feedback from user advocates, and direct insight from federal subject matter experts.

This process has not only accelerated the timeline to market for new solutions, but also improved their quality and relevance.

For many teams, participation in TOP has marked a turning point, shifting their innovation strategies toward more collaborative, data-informed, and mission-driven approaches.

From product roadmap breakthroughs to long-lasting government partnerships, the experience has often led to tangible business growth, deeper public impact, and a more resilient, user-centered model of innovation.

## Fast-to-Market Solutions

TOP's 12- to 14-week sprint model has been intentionally designed to accelerate the path from idea to impact. This immediate feedback loop has helped tech teams quickly validate ideas, pivot when needed, and stay aligned with actual user needs instead of assumptions.

### FEATURED PRODUCT

#### Stemavator

##### Strengthening the STEM Educator Workforce

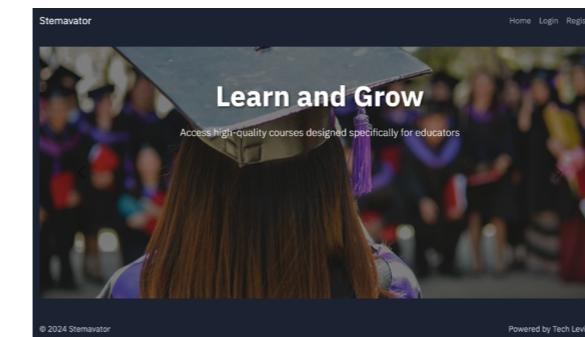
*Sprint led by the U.S. Department of Education, 2024*

[Tech Levitate](#), TOP Participant in 2020, 2023, and 2024

Tech Levitate used U.S. Department of Education data on teacher skill shortage and teacher salaries to build Stemavator, which provides income-producing training opportunities for elementary and high school teachers.

“ The TOP team does a phenomenal job maintaining project momentum while empowering the freedom of data-driven change. The TOP process of driving innovation development with access to data stewards, user advocates and government leadership sped up our development process tremendously.

We experienced a **25-35 percent increase in speed to development of our MVP** thanks to the availability [of] immediate feedback from the impacted user. This also allowed us to pivot our ideas as necessary so we could ensure we were sprinting towards the right goal.”  
– Joe Sumpter, CTO and Founder, Tech Levitate



A screenshot of the Stemavator website.

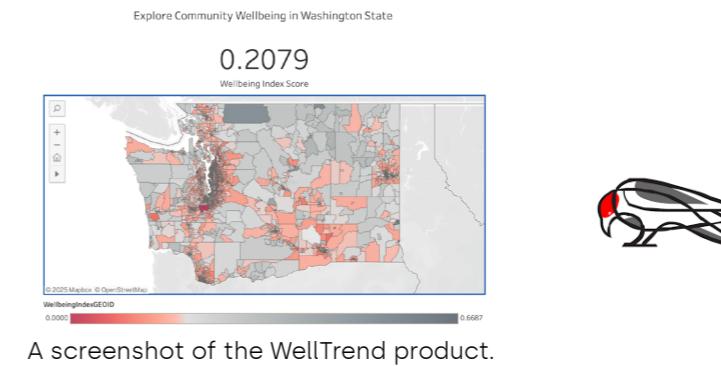


# Higher Quality, Transformative Tools

Each year, technology industry teams participating in TOP consistently underscore the value of engaging directly with potential end users at the earliest stages of development. This kind of early, multi-perspective collaboration, bringing together federal data stewards, community leaders, researchers, and practitioners, has proven critical in shaping products that are not only technically robust, but responsive to real-world needs.

By identifying key pain points early on, validating assumptions, and adjusting course in real time, teams have been better equipped to create solutions that are both effective and grounded in actual user needs.

Early interactions have consistently resulted in higher-quality tools, more efficient use of time and resources, and valuable insights that are often inaccessible through traditional development approaches. This process improves alignment with community priorities, streamlines development, and fosters more meaningful and widely adopted outcomes.



## FEATURED PRODUCT

### WellTrend

Empowering Community-Led  
Wellbeing Measurement

*Sprint led by Harvard Business School, U.S. Department of Commerce, and National League of Cities, 2024*

[CloudRaven Labs](#), TOP participant in 2022 and 2024

CloudRaven Labs used the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) data to build WellTrend, which enables community stakeholders, researchers, and policymakers to build a customized community wellbeing index based on their specific needs and priorities.

“ Over the last several years, I've participated in three TOP sprints and contributed to a number of adjacent federal innovation and research efforts. These experiences consistently reinforced one central truth: innovation at the intersection of public data and community needs is most powerful when guided by real user voices and cross-sector collaboration. The TOP ecosystem — through its focus on data clarity, user advocacy, and rapid prototyping — helped me refine my vision, elevate product ideas, and ultimately build with purpose.

“ Through the support of TOP, I was able to engage directly with data stewards at agencies like the Census Bureau, and connect with community researchers working in cities such as Tukwila, [W.A.], Kent, [W.A.], East Lansing, [M.I.], San Antonio, [T.X.], Baltimore, [M.D.], and Atlanta, [GA]. These engagements and deep dive sessions made it clear that there was an urgent need for accessible, explainable, and action-oriented insight tools that could reflect and predict the lived experiences of communities — not just high-level metrics and summaries. **TOP didn't just influence our direction — it gave us velocity.** ” — Rob Schaper, Solutions Lead, CloudRaven Labs

In several cases, specific connections made through the TOP sprint model have directly influenced product functionality and impact.

One such example comes from **FORERUNNER** — a software startup that helps government agencies better understand, plan for, and communicate flood risk — who built a Substantial Damage Estimator (SDE) tool in collaboration with federal and local stakeholders.

Meghan Finlayson, Director of Marketing at Forerunner, explained: "TOP has connected us with key stakeholders and facilitated conversations that have helped us ensure we're building the right tools to address emerging challenges. ... One especially impactful introduction helped inform specific aspects of [our product], which we developed to support communities during damage assessments after disasters."

The impact of this work was quickly evident, Finlayson said. "Several communities used the SDE tool following Hurricanes Milton and Helene this fall, streamlining their post-disaster workflows during a critical time.

After using our SDE tool, Cassie Harmon, the Floodplain Manager for Hernando County, Florida noted, '*I believe this was the best damage assessment performed by Hernando County.'*'



Across sectors and topics, from disaster recovery and economic mobility to public health and housing, TOP has helped teams build tools that are not only innovative, but also deeply rooted in the realities of the communities they aim to serve.

## *Forging New, Lasting Connections with Government Partners*

For many sprint participants from industry, TOP marks the first time they have worked closely with government agencies. This opportunity for collaboration fosters mutual understanding and lays the foundation for sustained cooperation. It also means that TOP's unconventional model — which prioritizes customer service, tailored support, and fast response times — has the opportunity to leave a lasting impression on members of the public.

Reflecting on the first TOP events showcasing the digital tools produced during the sprints, Robert Sienkiewicz, Acting Assistant Director for the Research and Methodology Directorate of the U.S. Census Bureau, recalled:

 They were great! They really served a need. I think they generated ideas and a degree of excitement that you just don't have every day. ... It allowed people to step outside of their silos."

Through TOP, government subject matter experts help companies from the private sector identify and better understand high-priority issues in need of cross-sector innovation.

Osa Aihie, CEO and co-founder of Earlii (formerly called GrantVEST) and a frequent TOP participant, noted that TOP — and the government connections that the program fosters — have helped his company identify opportunities for growth. "**The program has been instrumental in aligning our products and initiatives with the most pressing issues facing our nation,**" Aihie explained. This collaboration has paid off for Aihie and his team: since participating in TOP, his startup has been selected by gBETA/gener8tor and Techstars, become a venture-backed company, and secured a contract with the Oklahoma Center for Advanced Technology (OCAST). The startup also established a partnership with CO-LABS and other Tech Hubs from the U.S. Economic Development Administration to advance commercialization outcomes across the 33 federally-funded research institutions within Colorado, including NREL and NIST.

In addition, the partnerships formed through TOP have extended beyond the duration of each sprint. Many stakeholders have continued their collaborations long after their initial projects conclude, driving meaningful change in their respective fields.

Sara Brenner, Principal Deputy Commissioner at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), explained, "[TOP] gives interested parties the chance to engage on substantive topics with scientific, medical, and other professionals at FDA — people with a great deal of experience as well as valuable perspectives and insights."

She added, "The engagement facilitated by these sprints can be impactful for all participants and help to establish several points of contact at FDA to turn to when questions arise in the future."

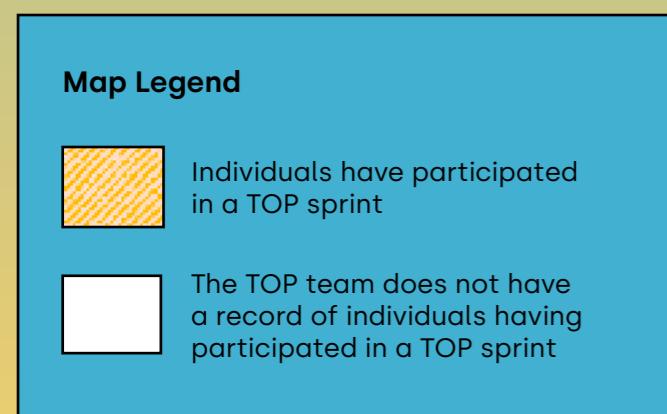
You're reading a preview of *10 Years of The Opportunity Project*.  
Stay tuned for the full report!

# Reaching Communities Nationwide

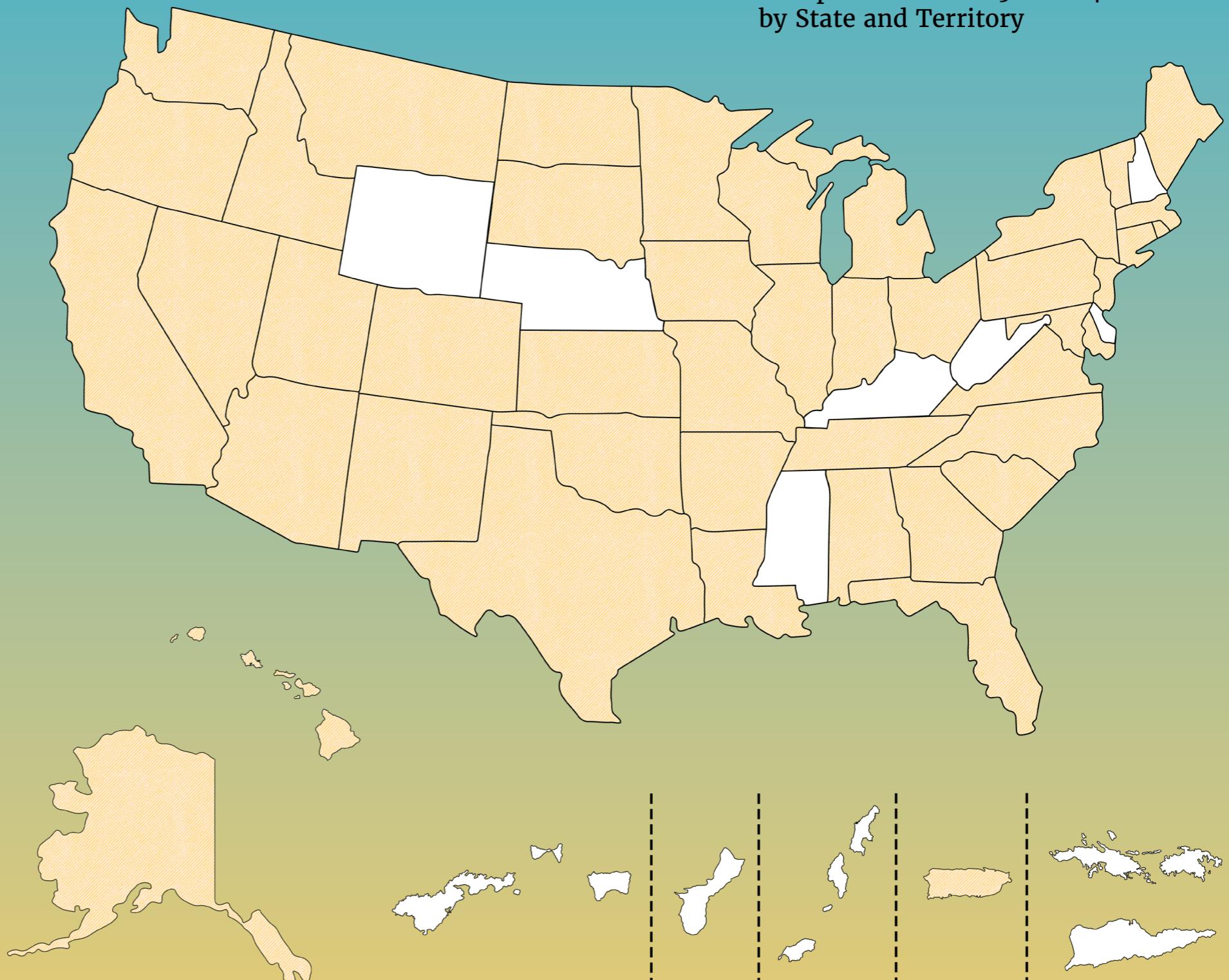
## TOP's Impact on Everyday Americans

For over a decade, TOP has connected federal data with real community needs by engaging user advocates whose lived experience keeps solutions grounded and useful. By focusing on issues with the greatest benefit for communities facing real-world challenges, TOP delivers practical tools that save time, expand access to vital information, and help local leaders turn data into meaningful action.

Not only has TOP aimed to serve Americans in tangible ways, the program has also engaged thousands of Americans from communities across the country, ranging from Hawaii to Texas to Florida, and everywhere in between. TOP has both served and engaged Americans from all backgrounds and perspectives to co-create solutions, and ensure that their own communities would benefit in real ways from the process and the products created.



TOP Participants from 2015 – 2024  
by State and Territory



# *TOP Sprints Take on the Country's Most Urgent Challenges*

During sprint topic development, prospective sprint leaders from federal agencies, state and local governments, and NGOs have identified pressing issues facing members of the public. These stakeholders have included families, communities, businesses, educators, and state, local and Tribal governments.

 I think there's tremendous value in investing in communities in ways that allow them to address their needs, in ways that they know are going to work for them.”

— David Schleifer, User Advocate, Former Vice President & Director of Research, Public Agenda, at 2023 TOP FDA Diagnostic Data Solutions Showcase

 It's probably hubris for us in the federal government to ever think that we have a monopoly on the questions that would be asked of our data and value that would be derived from it. And in order to make sure we are getting the maximum benefit and making data open, it is very important that we interact with the external community.”

— Margie Graves, Former Deputy Federal CIO, Office of Management and Budget, Executive Office of the President, at 2017 TOP Demo Day

# *The Role of User Advocates in Sprints*

TOP has always held a key role for the individuals experiencing challenges directly — through the “user advocate” role in sprints, and a strong emphasis on user research from the very beginning of each sprint. The dedicated user research phase that kicks off each TOP sprint is foundational and distinct from many technology development processes: it ensures that every development effort is informed by the real experiences, challenges, and needs of the people the tools are designed to serve.

## **What Is a User Advocate?**

In TOP's very first year, it became clear that the process had to go beyond bringing government officials and technologists together to solve critical problems. Members of the public with lived experience needed a central role in the process. As a result, in 2017, TOP introduced a pivotal new role to its sprint model — the user advocate — to guarantee that the targeted end users of products being developed could inform their design from the start of the process.

User advocates have become a cornerstone of the program, bringing lived and professional experience to

**Across TOP's nearly 80 sprints since its inception, TOP has dedicated more than 950 hours to user research and more than 600 hours to collaborative work between user advocates and tech teams.**

These extensive efforts reflect TOP's commitment to hearing from local communities about grassroots-level needs and challenges, ensuring that every tool developed is informed by real user needs and firsthand insights.

every sprint and ensuring work stays grounded in the realities of those most affected. They have played an active and strategic role in TOP sprints — reframing problem statements, surfacing hidden barriers, and guiding the creation of truly useful, accessible tools. User advocates have represented the voice of the end user in every stage of every sprint. From the outset, they have given sprint teams a clear understanding of community priorities, pain points, and constraints, laying the foundation for tools that are both innovative and aligned with real needs.





“ Each of these teams’ tools allows community champions to spend more time on working with stakeholders and taking more action, compared to time wrangling data or trying to find the right information from different federal agencies. It’s a better use of their time and expertise and it allows us to move from data to decisions.”

— Jim Fox, User Advocate, Senior Resilience Associate, Fernleaf, at 2021 TOP Summit

By being embedded in the product design process, user advocates help ensure TOP sprint tools deliver tangible benefits to the communities they represent. These products – along with the connections formed through TOP – often make it easier for them to advance their goals and create meaningful impact.

“ I can’t wait for TOP to come around each year! ... It’s been great because we’ve been able to take these stories and issues which our communities are seeing, and translate them into tools, solutions, and opportunities. ... I’m also excited about it because it expands our approach to what we do ... using science, data and technology to [support] communities that need it most.”

— Garry Harris, User Advocate, President/CEO, Center for Sustainable Communities

“ Sometimes you feel like you’re the only one out here doing this work, and tools that ... help us make sense of a fire hose of information we’re expected to engage, or even develop a cohort approach within your state or region, [are] super useful.”

— Carol Davis, User Advocate, Sustainability Manager, Town of Blacksburg, VA, at 2021 TOP Summit

## Who Has Been a User Advocate?

- Community leaders, local or national advocates, and people with direct lived experience that represent the needs of the end users of the tools.
- 600+ individual participants, representing different organizations nationwide.
- People with lived experience from community advocacy, academia, nonprofit work, state and local government, and more.

### FEATURED PRODUCT

## City Health Dashboard

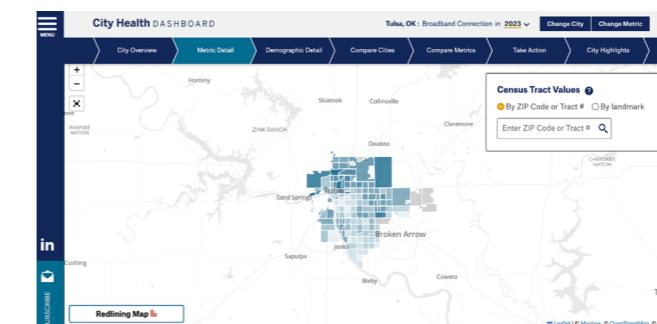
Building Stronger Pathways to Grants and Funding for Indigenous Communities

*Sprint led by the Natives Count Coalition and the National Urban Indian Family Coalition*

[NYU Health Dashboard Initiatives](#), TOP Participant in 2024

“ We learned early in the TOP Sprint from user advocates that approximately 70 percent of the U.S. Indigenous population lives in urban areas. This helped direct our focus to expanding the City Health Dashboard to include 59 new cities with significant Indigenous populations, thereby also providing these cities new access to city- and neighborhood-level data on health and its drivers ... these additions to the City Health Dashboard now serve as a resource to city leaders, advocates, and organizations serving Indigenous communities and will increase the visibility of indigenous populations living in urban areas.

— NYU Health Dashboard Initiatives Team



A screenshot of the City Health Dashboard.



# Reimagining Public Service

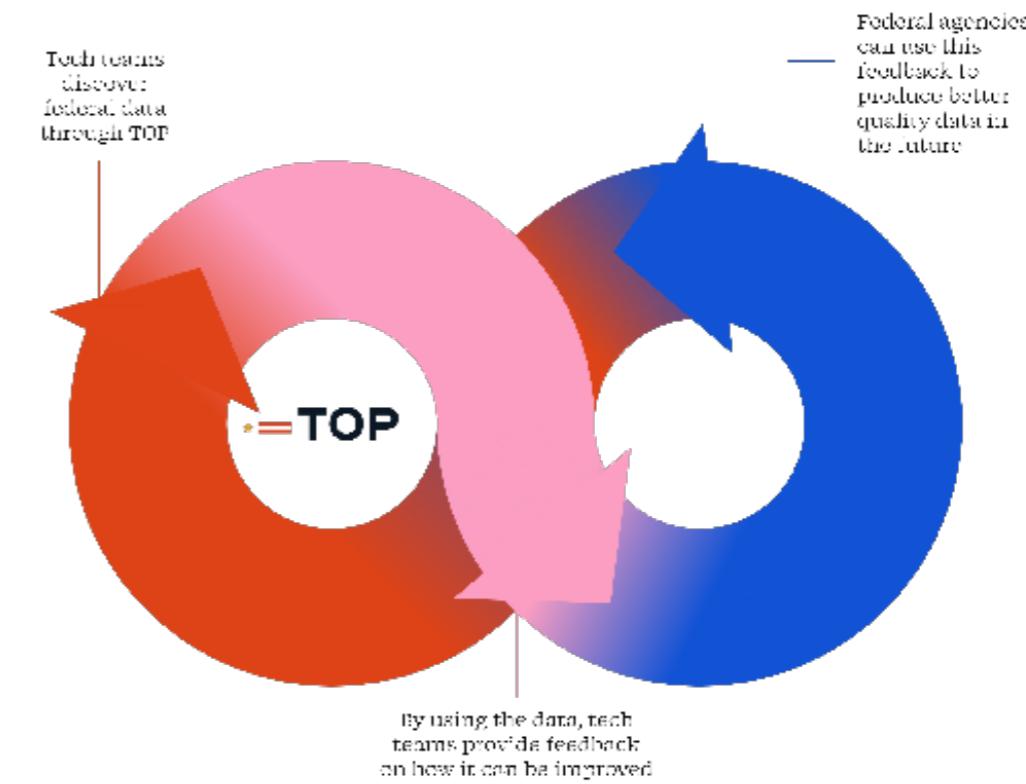
## TOP's Impact on Government

TOP has helped over 30 federal agencies forge new partnerships and make government data more accessible, usable, and relevant to data users across the country. By connecting data stewards with the communities who rely on their information, the program has turned open data into practical tools and advanced a more responsive, user-centered approach to public service – with the ultimate goal of delivering better public service for the people.

## *Expanding Connections to End Users of Government Data*

TOP has strengthened government agencies' abilities to engage directly with the end users of their data. Traditionally, data stewards and developers within government have had limited opportunities to interact with community members, nonprofit organizations, and other stakeholders who depend on public data for decision-making. TOP's sprint model has bridged this gap by facilitating ongoing, structured collaboration between federal agencies, local governments, and end users throughout the development process.

### Feedback Loop Between Government Data Providers and Data Users



These direct connections have enabled government partners to gain a clearer understanding of how their data is applied in real-world settings and have revealed gaps between available data and community needs. As a result, agencies have been able to improve data transparency, usability, and relevance, supporting more effective public services and policies. The feedback gathered through these engagements can also guide future data collection and dissemination efforts, helping government programs become more responsive and user-focused.

For government partners, TOP represents a means to advance their agency's goals and priorities while modeling new, innovative ways of working. These methods — emphasizing quick timelines, user-centered design, and cross-sector engagement — generate momentum for the work at hand and have inspired replication across agencies.

“ We [at the CFPB] like to call ourselves a 21st-century organization: we use open-source code, embrace transparency, competitiveness, fairness, and believe in transparency of our data collection (and making it public) as well. So the idea of using data we have and empowering people outside the government to use that data to create change, that aligns with bureau priorities.”

— Nat Weber, Program Manager, Office of Competition & Innovation, Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, June 12, 2024 Interview

Within the federal government, TOP’s approach to data stands out as a novel one. By placing data experts in direct conversation with private-sector data users and community members, TOP ensures that the government’s rich troves of open data are used effectively, expansively, and for the public’s benefit.

“ The Opportunity Project is one of the best models of unlocking government data to serve the American people. It is a rare safe space for federal data stewards to interact with technologists and for community stakeholders and subject matter experts to make sure that the final digital products hit the mark and do no harm.”

— Denice Ross, Former U.S. Chief Data Scientist, then Fellow at the Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation, at 2019 TOP Demo Day

In a report published by the Center for Open Data Enterprise (CODE) for the IBM Center for the Business of Government, titled “[The Opportunity Project: 10 Years of Open Data and Agile Development](#),” IBM writes that TOP “has educated a new generation of open government data users — building reciprocal relationships between government data stewards and user communities, and enhancing the accessibility and usability of large government data sets. Through a collaborative process, TOP has brought innovative strategies and agile methodologies to agencies, supporting a more flexible and user-centered government workforce.”

Ready to read more?  
Stay tuned for the full report, coming late 2025!