



Highlights of [GAO-08-1012](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) estimates that it will spend at least \$2 billion to enumerate households that did not return census forms during the 2010 Census. Increasing the response rate would reduce the number of households that Bureau field staff must visit. To address concerns about reducing the cost of enumerating these households, GAO (1) analyzed how the Bureau develops, supports, and updates the response rate estimate, and the extent to which the Bureau uses the estimate to inform its 2010 planning efforts; (2) described the methods the Bureau considered for increasing response in 2010 and how it tested these methods; and (3) assessed how the Bureau identifies and selects for testing methods to increase response rate, including considering other surveys' methods.

To meet these objectives, GAO analyzed the Bureau's documentation for estimating the response rate and selecting for testing methods to increase response, and interviewed experts from other survey organizations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Commerce direct the Bureau to establish procedures for developing, documenting, and reevaluating the response rate estimate and for selecting for testing methods to increase the response rate. In commenting on a draft of this report, Commerce generally agreed with GAO's recommendations and committed to take action for the 2020 Census.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-1012](#). For more information, contact Matthew J. Scire at (202) 512-6806 or sciremj@gao.gov.

2010 CENSUS

Census Bureau Needs Procedures for Estimating the Response Rate and Selecting for Testing Methods to Increase Response Rate

What GAO Found

The 2010 Census response rate estimate is not fully supported, systematically reevaluated, or clearly incorporated into the life cycle cost estimate and planning efforts for nonresponse follow-up—where census workers visit households that do not return their census forms. Specifically, the Bureau could not demonstrate support for one component underpinning the estimate—a general decline due to decreasing public participation in surveys—because it did not document its decisions or data sources when developing the estimate. The two other estimate components that affect responses are the short-form-only census and the replacement questionnaire. In 2001, the Bureau estimated the 2010 Census response rate to be 69 percent. However, from 2001 through 2008, the Bureau did not systematically reevaluate the estimate or consider test results from this decade to determine if the estimate should be updated. Although the Bureau revised the estimate to 64 percent after a major redesign of its nonresponse follow-up operation in 2008, the Bureau still lacks procedures for establishing when and how to reevaluate and, if necessary, update the estimate. To estimate costs and plan for nonresponse follow-up, the Bureau relies on response rate estimates for local census office types because these estimates reflect geographic differences. Officials said that the local estimates reflect components of the national estimate. However, only one of the three components from the national estimate—the replacement questionnaire—was clearly reflected in the local census office type estimates.

Through various national and field tests and experiments, the Bureau tested nine methods to increase 2010 Census response and currently plans to implement two of these methods—the replacement questionnaire and two-column bilingual form. The Bureau also plans to use a communications campaign to increase response and plans to test campaign messages in 2009. In July 2006, the Bureau decided not to include an Internet response option in the 2010 Census. However, the Bureau recently announced that it is again considering including the Internet option in 2010, although it has not developed further plans for testing it.

For 2010, the Bureau established test objectives and research questions to identify methods to test for increasing response. However, Bureau officials did not document the methods that they considered but decided not to test or the rationale behind those decisions. Although officials said that they considered cost, complexity of the test, and compatibility of experiments in their decisions, they did not specify how they weighed these factors to select and prioritize the nine methods they chose to test. Officials said that they consider the experiences of other survey organizations to identify potential methods to increase response, but they, along with some experts, noted that such methods may only be indirectly applicable to the decennial census. Nonetheless, testing modifications to methods the Bureau has previously considered or tested, such as testing a variety of telephone reminder messages, may yield additional opportunities for increasing response.