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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-04-898](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Technology, Information Policy, Intergovernmental Relations and the Census, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) has typically counted overseas members of the military, federal civilian employees, and their dependents. However, it usually excluded private citizens residing abroad. In July 2004, the Bureau completed a test of the practicality of counting all overseas Americans. GAO was asked to assess (1) whether the Bureau implemented the test consistent with its design, and (2) the lessons learned from the test results.

What GAO Recommends

Congress may wish to consider eliminating funding for additional research related to counting Americans abroad as part of the decennial census, including funding for tests planned in 2006 and 2008. However, funding for the evaluation of the 2004 test should continue as planned, particularly to inform congressional decision making on this issue. Should Congress desire better data on overseas Americans for certain policymaking and other nonapportionment purposes, Congress may wish to consider funding research on the feasibility of counting this group using alternatives to the decennial census. To facilitate this, we recommend that the Bureau, in consultation with Congress, research options such as a separate survey, administrative records, and data exchanges with other countries' statistical agencies. The Bureau agreed with our conclusions and recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-898.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Patricia A. Dalton at (202) 512-6806 or daltonp@gao.gov.

2010 CENSUS

Counting Americans Overseas as Part of the Decennial Census Would Not Be Cost-Effective

What GAO Found

The Bureau generally implemented the overseas census test on schedule and consistent with its research design. Still, participation was poor, with just 5,390 questionnaires returned from the three test sites—France, Kuwait, and Mexico. Moreover, because of the low response levels, obtaining those questionnaires proved to be quite expensive—around \$1,450 per response, which is far costlier on a unit basis than the 2000 Census. Although the two are not directly comparable because the 2000 Census included operations not used in the overseas test, the 2000 Census cost around \$56 per household. Further, boosting the response rate globally might not be practical. On the domestic front, during the 2000 Census, the Bureau spent \$374 million on a months-long publicity campaign that consisted of television and other advertising that helped yield a 72-percent return rate. Replicating this level of effort on a worldwide basis would be difficult, and still would not produce a complete count. Ensuring a smooth overseas count could also stretch the Bureau's resources. For example, at each test site the Bureau encountered various challenges that needed to be resolved such as French privacy laws. Moreover, managing a complex operation from thousands of miles away also proved difficult.

Enumerating Americans in Mexico and France



Source: GAO.

The approach used to count the overseas population in the 2004 test—a voluntary survey that largely relies on marketing to secure a complete count, lacks the basic building blocks of a successful census. The Bureau has done some initial research on alternatives, but all require more extensive review. Given that the Bureau already faces the difficult task of securing a successful stateside count in 2010, having to simultaneously count Americans abroad would only add to the challenges facing the Bureau.