2010 CENSUS

Little Time Remains to Address Operational Challenges

Why GAO Did This Study

The decennial census is a constitutionally-mandated activity that produces data used to apportion congressional seats, redraw congressional districts, and allocate billions of dollars in federal assistance. In March 2008, GAO designated the 2010 Census a high-risk area in part because of problems with the performance of handheld computers used to collect data. The U.S. Census Bureau has since strengthened its risk management efforts and made other improvements; however, the Bureau curtailed a dress rehearsal scheduled for 2008 and was unable to test key operations under census-like conditions. This testimony discusses the Bureau's readiness for 2010 and covers: (1) the importance of reliable cost estimates; (2) building a complete and accurate address list; (3) following up on missing and conflicting responses to ensure accuracy; (4) targeting outreach to undercounted populations; and (5) designing, testing, and implementing technology for the census. The testimony is based on previously issued and ongoing GAO work.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making new recommendations, but past reports recommended the Bureau improve its cost estimation procedures and accuracy of its address list, take steps to ensure the readiness of handheld computers, better manage its partnership programs, and conduct end-to-end testing of IT systems. The Bureau generally agreed with the recommendations.

View GAO-09-408T or key components. For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoffr@gao.gov or David Powner at (202) 512-9286 or pownerd@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The Bureau estimates the 2010 Census will cost more than $14 billion over its life-cycle, making it the most expensive census in the nation's history, even after adjusting for inflation. Accurate cost estimates help ensure that the Bureau has adequate funds, and that Congress, the administration, and the Bureau itself have reliable information on which to base advice and decisions. However, as GAO has reported before, the Bureau has insufficient policies and procedures and inadequately trained staff for conducting high-quality cost estimation for the decennial census.

A successful census requires a complete and accurate address list. The Bureau sends thousands of census workers (listers) into the field to collect and verify address information, and this year for the first time, listers will use handheld computers to collect data. During the dress rehearsal, there were significant technical problems. A small-scale field test showed that these problems appear to have been addressed; however, the test was not carried out under full census-like conditions and did not validate all address canvassing requirements.

Nonresponse follow-up, the Bureau's largest and most costly field operation, was initially planned to be conducted using the handheld computers, but was recently changed to a paper-based system due to technology issues. The Bureau has not yet developed a detailed road map for monitoring the development and implementation of nonresponse follow-up under the new design. Such a plan is essential to conducting a successful nonresponse follow-up. Furthermore, the system that manages the flow of work in field offices is not yet developed. Lacking plans for the development of both nonresponse follow-up and this management system, the Bureau faces the risk of not having them developed and fully tested in time for the 2010 Census.

In an effort to reduce the undercount, the Bureau is implementing a program of paid advertising integrated with other communications strategies, such as partnerships with state, local, and tribal governments and community organizations. Moving toward 2010, the Bureau faces long-standing challenges with the nation's linguistic diversity and privacy concerns, which can contribute to the undercounting of some groups.

Since 2005, we have reported concerns with the Bureau's management and testing of key IT systems. We have reviewed the status and plans for the testing of key 2010 Census systems. The Bureau has made progress in conducting systems, integration, and end-to-end testing, but critical testing still remains to be performed before systems will be ready to support the 2010 Census, and the planning for the testing needs much improvement. In short, while the Bureau has made some noteworthy progress in gearing up for the enumeration, with just over a year remaining until Census Day, uncertainties surround the Bureau's overall readiness for 2010.