

Why GAO Did This Study

GAO's prior work has shown that it will be important for the Bureau to re-examine the design of the census in order to ensure a cost effective census in 2020. As requested, this report evaluates the Bureau's efforts to improve the cost-effectiveness of the enumeration, paying particular attention to the following three key efforts: (1) leveraging the Internet to increase self-response; (2) improving how the Bureau builds its address and mapping databases, including a possible move to targeted address canvassing, and use of private-sector geographic data; (3) and using administrative records to reduce nonresponse follow-up costs. This report (1) identifies what opportunities and risks, if any, the Bureau might need to consider for these efforts going forward and (2) examines to what extent these three efforts are on track with respect to scheduling, resources, and other performance metrics. To meet these objectives, GAO reviewed Bureau documents and interviewed officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Acting Census Director take a number of actions to improve the Bureau's research and testing for the 2020 Census, such as developing risk mitigation plans, contingency plans and cost estimates for each project, and performance metrics and skill sets for those projects that do not have them. The Department of Commerce concurred with GAO's findings and recommendations and provided one clarification, which was included in the final report. Also, the Bureau in its comments noted that it has begun to address GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-13-53](#). For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoffr@gao.gov.

2020 CENSUS

Initial Research Milestones Generally Met but Plans Needed to Mitigate Highest Risks

What GAO Found

According to U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) officials, to inform timely design decisions, research on new methods to improve the cost effectiveness of the 2020 Census must be accomplished early enough in the decade to confirm their likely impact on both cost and quality. Three key efforts—(1) the use of the Internet as a response option, (2) a potential move towards targeted address canvassing, and (3) the possible use of administrative records to replace data collected during census field operations—present the Bureau with potential opportunities to reduce costs while maintaining quality. The Bureau's 2020 Research and Testing Program has 14 fiscal year 2012 projects focused on informing design decisions related to the three key efforts. Bureau officials are also aware that the changes they are testing come with many risks, and for each project the Bureau has identified a number of risks and prioritized them from high to low. However, the Bureau has not developed mitigation or contingency plans for these project risks. For example, there are several risks, including tight time frames and accurate cost information, without mitigation and contingency plans. Additionally, GAO found that the Bureau had not developed cost estimates for any of its 2020 research and testing projects as required in guidance provided to project teams. Unreliable cost estimates was one of the reasons the 2010 Census was placed on GAO's high-risk list. Without timely cost estimates, it will be difficult for the Bureau to ensure that resources are adequate to support the research and testing program.

The Bureau met its internal deadline for submitting each of its 14 research project's plans and charters. However, not all the project plans were complete. For example, some project teams did not fully document the types of skills needed or perform a skills gap assessment to determine the resources needed to carry out their respective projects as required in the Bureau's planning template. According to Bureau officials, they are working to document these skills sets, as well as any gaps in skills. Completing this analysis is important to ensuring sufficient resources are available for conducting the research and testing projects. Additionally, performance metric documentation for several projects was incomplete. According to Bureau guidance, project teams were to provide performance metrics for measuring progress and for determining the project's final outcome. However, one team did not provide either of these required performance metrics, while six other teams did not include performance metrics that could be used to monitor research and testing progress. Absent these metrics, the Bureau does not have the assurance that it will be able to avoid potential schedule slips or the certainty as to whether project outcomes will be adequate for making decisions.