Report In Brief

U.S. Department of Commerce Office of Inspector General

Why We Did This Review

The Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2008 gave the Census Bureau an additional $210 million to help cover spiraling 2010 decennial costs stemming from the bureau's problematic efforts to automate major field operations, major flaws in its cost-estimating methods, and other issues. The Act's explanatory statement required the bureau to submit to Congress a detailed plan and timeline of decennial milestones and expenditures, as well as a quantitative assessment of associated program risks, within 30 days.

OIG must provide quarterly reports on the bureau's progress against this plan. This report's objective was to provide an update of activities and operations, identify budget and spending issues, and examine risks to the 2010 Census program.

Background

Since first conducted in 1790, the constitutionally mandated decennial census's field activities have largely been paper based. The 2010 Census plan included significant expansion of automation, using handheld computers to verify addresses (address canvassing), conduct in-person surveys with households that did not return their questionnaires (nonresponse follow-up), and collect data from a nationwide sample to evaluate the accuracy of the decennial count (coverage measurement).

Nonresponse Follow-up (NRFU) is the most expensive and labor-intensive operation of the decennial census. Increasing costs and automation problems prompted the bureau's decisions to abandon the handheld computers for NRFU and coverage measurement operations in favor of paper.

2010 Census: Quarterly Report to Congress
May 2010 (OIG–19791–4)

What We Found

About 9,400 key operations and activities make up Census 2010. Such a complex, time-sensitive undertaking requires that the Census Bureau operate efficiently and within budget.

During the current reporting period, which covers 2010 Census activities from January through March 2010, we evaluated the bureau's information systems, including its paper-based operations control system (PBOCS); observed several early field operations; and reviewed the bureau's risk management procedures and physical security at several Census locations. We found the following:

- *Information Technology Systems.* PBOCS poses the greatest risk to the success of NRFU, which is Census's largest field operation. The system's performance is still unstable, and its ability to support NRFU's volume is questionable. Census staff report frequent outages and reliability problems with PBOCS, and the increased need for monitoring workarounds to compensate for the system's inadequacies will be a substantial challenge for Census. While the Decennial Applicant, Personnel, and Payroll System's performance appears to have improved with the addition of a hardware upgrade, the system has experienced increased performance problems during early NRFU operations.

- *Enumeration Difficulties.* Many Census enumerators have had difficulties with their assignments due to inaccurate, incomplete, or otherwise unusable maps. Overstaffing, inefficient coordination, inconsistent adherence to procedures, and problems with information provided by partnership specialists have hindered several field operations.

  Also, the bureau's current "verbatim" training method, wherein recently trained crew leaders read to new employees word for word from a training manual on how to conduct a census operation, does not provide employees with the necessary information to accomplish the job.

  Finally, the public may not have been clearly informed about Census's different collection methods. For example, based on their address type, some members of the public did not receive their census forms when others did, causing concern.

- *Budget and Costs.* Census spending during this quarter has been under budget; however, with NRFU commencing, costs can be expected to rise. The bureau expects to meet its requirement to spend all Recovery Act funding by the end of FY 2010. While Census releases a financial management report monthly, some of the report's information is not transparent.

- *Risk Management and Security.* Census's Risk Review Board has identified and is tracking 24 program-level risks. The Board continues to meet monthly to review each risk, and is working to finalize and implement contingency plans for the risks that need them.

  In March, OIG staff tested the physical security at the three national data-capture centers through which completed census forms are processed. Our tests disclosed minor issues and we suggested improvements at some locations, but we also discovered some significant vulnerabilities at other sites. We presented our findings to the Department's Office of Security and Census, who informed us that they have improved security at these facilities.

This report does not provide recommendations. We will forward the Census Bureau a separate document that includes the following recommendations:

- Census should ensure clerical workarounds are being performed properly by having Census office managers, regional Census centers, and Census headquarters increase manual and automated checks of workaround procedures as well as questionnaire control and tracking. Census should also take larger samples in already established quality-control procedures.

- Census 2020 planning should include a thorough review of the decennial training process.

- For Census 2020, the bureau should better communicate the processes of its various enumeration activities to the public.

- The Census Bureau needs to improve the transparency of its budget process, especially the presentation of surplus (or elimination of the surplus) as shown in its financial management reports.