



September 17, 2020

MEMORANDUM FOR: Dr. Steven D. Dillingham
Director
U.S. Census Bureau

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark H. Zabarsky".

FROM: Mark H. Zabarsky
Principal Assistant Inspector General for Audit and Evaluation

SUBJECT: *2020 Census Alert: Delays to Resolving Alerts Limit the Bureau's Ability to Maintain or Improve the Quality of 2020 Census Data*
Final Memorandum No. OIG-20-048-M

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) is issuing this 2020 Census Alert to bring to your attention our concerns—about area Census office (ACO) supervisors failing to respond to nonresponse followup (NRFU) operational control system (OCS) alerts within required timeframes—that require immediate attention. Without ACO supervisors taking timely action, enumerators may not follow procedures and, as a result, their actions could negatively impact data quality.

To accomplish the Constitutional mandate to conduct its decennial census,¹ the Bureau hires hundreds of thousands of field staff to work in ACOs as enumerators to conduct the count in the community. The Bureau has developed quality control processes in order to ensure that enumerators follow procedures when conducting interviews with households. However, failure to adhere to quality control processes increases the risk of data inaccuracy. Our review indicates that ACO supervisors are not resolving alerts within the 3-day timeframe established to minimize the number of enumerator actions that do not follow procedures.

Background

During the NRFU operation, the operational control system (OCS) generates alerts when enumerators do not follow procedures. Supervisors and managers use the alerts to monitor, track, and report on enumerator progress and performance during NRFU. Alerts will notify the supervisor if, for example, an enumerator's behavior suggests performance or efficiency issues—or, more seriously, the falsification of data. The following day, the OCS notifies supervisors and managers, who are expected to research and resolve the alert.

¹ The U. S. Constitution empowers Congress to carry out the census (Article I, section 2) and requires “counting the whole number of persons in each state” (Amendment XIV, section 2). Since 1790, the United States has conducted a census every 10 years. Data collected during the decennial census provides vital statistics for the nation. Census data are used, among other purposes, to apportion the seats of the U.S. House of Representatives; redraw congressional districts in each state; and allocate billions of dollars each year in federal financial assistance.

According to NRFU training, resolving alerts is a supervisor’s most important duty; failing to do so immediately may result in disciplinary action.

Supervisors and Managers Are Not Resolving Alerts Within 3-Day Timeframe

Our previous work has reported that the Bureau had difficulties resolving NRFU alerts that could affect its ability to maintain or improve the quality of decennial census data.² During the 2018 End-to-End Census Test, supervisors were required to resolve alerts within 2 days. If a supervisor did not resolve alerts within 2 days, some alerts that indicate data quality³ or enumerator efficiency⁴ issues would generate another alert, called a “stale” alert, which would be sent to the manager. To resolve a stale alert, the manager is then required to follow up with the supervisor to make sure that the original alert is resolved. However, as reported in January 2020, we found that supervisors and managers did not resolve 15 percent of NRFU alerts (9,818 of 64,051), which included stale alerts, during the 2018 End-to-End Census Test.

In February 2020, the Bureau extended the number of days required to generate a stale alert from 2 days to 3. Although the Bureau stated that it intended this change to alleviate the burden put on managers, this decision could result in further delays to the resolution of performance issues—which, in turn, could lead to a significant number of unresolved alerts and adversely impact data quality. Timely oversight over enumerator and field supervisor performance has become even more critical as the Bureau plans to complete NRFU within a compressed time frame.⁵

Our review of 3,079,343 alerts generated August 9–27, 2020, (i.e., the first 19 days of all ACOs starting NRFU) found the following:

- *All alerts.* At least 365,440 alerts (11.9 percent) were not resolved within 3 days, including at least 167,888 (5.5 percent) that were still unresolved as of August 31, 2020.
- *Stale alerts.* There were 191,089 stale alerts triggered. Of those—even with an additional day to resolve these alerts—Bureau employees did not resolve at least

² U.S. Department of Commerce Office of Inspector General, January 30, 2020. *2020 Census: Some Decennial Census Data Quality Assurance Methods Were Not Tested or Did Not Work as Intended During the 2018 End-to-End Census Test*, OIG-20-016-A. Washington, DC: DOC OIG.

³ Alerts regarding potential data quality problems note issues such as high number of enumerator cases per hour, enumerators working long distances away from assignments, short interviews, unconfirmed vacancies, or enumerators making no proxy interview attempts.

⁴ Alerts regarding potential enumerator efficiency problems note issues such as low productivity, missed deadlines for payroll submissions, enumerators not showing up to work on time or at all, or overtime claims.

⁵ Because of delays caused by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, field operations, culminating with NRFU, were tentatively rescheduled to end by October 31, 2020, rather than July 31. However, after revising operation plans to adjust to the October 31 deadline, the Bureau announced on August 3 that operations will end on September 30 (i.e., 4 weeks earlier than expected).

87,557 (or 45.8 percent) within 3 days. As of August 31, 2020, at least 54,404 stale alerts (28.5 percent of all stale alerts) were still unresolved.

OCS alerts are a significant tool for supervisory monitoring of enumerator performance. If supervisors fail to resolve alerts and correct enumerator behavior, then the enumerator can continue to make mistakes or, worse, purposely falsify data. Likewise, managers play a critical role in ensuring that supervisors are addressing alerts in a timely manner. If the Bureau does not take timely corrective action to resolve the issues that underlie these alerts, then it cannot ensure the quality of decennial census data.

We are issuing a series of 2020 Census Alert memorandums to bring to the attention of the Bureau and its stakeholders immediate concerns with the 2020 Census that we have identified during our ongoing oversight. We prepared this memorandum in alignment with OIG's quality control standards and the CIGIE Quality Standards for federal offices of inspector general, which require that we conduct our work with integrity, objectivity, and independence.

We are not requesting a formal response to this 2020 Census Alert memorandum, as the key issues discussed in it were briefed to cognizant Bureau officials in advance of issuance. This memorandum will be posted to our public website.

If you have any questions or concerns about this memorandum, please contact me at (202) 482-3884 or Terry Storms, Division Director, at (202) 482-0055.

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