

GAO
Accountability • Integrity • Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-04-1077T](#), 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 excluded from the census private citizens residing abroad, but included overseas members of the military, federal civilian employees, and their dependents (in the 1990 and 2000 Censuses, these individuals were included in the numbers used for apportioning Congress). The Bureau recently tested the practicality of counting all overseas Americans. GAO was asked to testify on the test's initial results. Our statement is based on our published reports, one of which is being released at today's hearing.

What GAO Recommends

In our latest report, we suggest that Congress may wish to consider eliminating funding for additional research related to counting Americans abroad as part of the decennial census. However, funding for the evaluation of the 2004 test should continue as planned to inform congressional decision making. Should Congress desire better data on overseas Americans for certain policy-making 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 decision making, we are recommending that the Bureau, in consultation with Congress, research options such as using a separate survey. The Bureau agreed with our conclusions and recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-1077T.

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 Census Would Not Be Feasible

What GAO Found

The test results suggest that counting all American citizens overseas as part of the census would require enormous resources, but still not yield data at the level of quality needed for purposes of congressional apportionment. Participation in the test was poor, with just 5,390 questionnaires returned from the three test sites.

Enumerating Americans in Mexico and France



Source: GAO.

Moreover, as the Bureau's experience during the 2000 Census shows, securing better participation in a global count might not be practical. The Bureau spent \$374 million on a months-long publicity campaign that consisted of television and other advertising that helped produce a 72-percent return rate. Replicating the same level of effort on a worldwide basis would be difficult, and still would not produce a complete count. Further, the low participation levels in the test made the unit cost of each response relatively high at around \$1,450.

The test results highlighted other obstacles to a cost-effective count including the resources needed to address country-specific problems and the difficulties associated with managing a complex operation from thousands of miles away. 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 such as a complete and accurate address list and the ability to follow-up with nonrespondents. As the Bureau already faces the near-daunting task of securing a successful stateside count in 2010, having to simultaneously count Americans abroad would only add to the challenges it faces.