

Why GAO Did This Study

A complete count of the nation's population is an enormous challenge requiring the U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) to balance requirements for accuracy with the need to control escalating costs. The 2010 Census was the costliest U.S. Census in history at about \$13 billion, and was about 56 percent more costly than the \$8 billion cost of the 2000 Census (in 2010 dollars). The fundamental challenge facing the Bureau going forward is cost effectively counting a population that is growing steadily larger, more diverse and becoming increasingly difficult to enumerate. As requested, this report assesses (1) the key factors affecting cost growth from the 2000 Census to the 2010 Census; (2) the Bureau's plans for controlling costs for the 2020 Census and what additional steps, if any, could be taken; and (3) the extent to which the Bureau's plans for developing life cycle cost estimates for 2020 are consistent with best practices. The report is based on GAO's analysis of Bureau data and documents as well as interviews with Bureau officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Census Director develop a method to identify and address specific factors that contribute to cost increases, identify decision points, and finalize guidance for the 2020 life cycle cost estimate. The Department of Commerce expressed broad agreement with the overall theme of the report but did not directly comment on the recommendations. It raised concerns about specific aspects of the summary of findings which GAO addressed as appropriate.

View [GAO-12-80](#). For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoff@gao.gov.

DECENNIAL CENSUS

Additional Actions Could Improve the Census Bureau's Ability to Control Costs for the 2020 Census

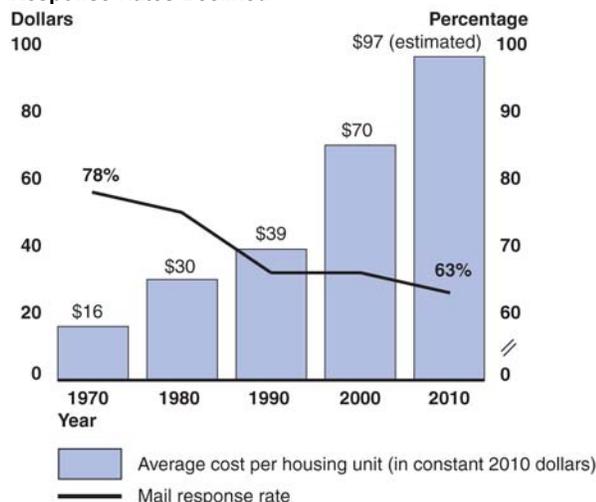
What GAO Found

The average cost to count each housing unit rose from \$70 in 2000 to \$97 in 2010 (in constant 2010 dollars). While the U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) made changes to its budget structure from 2000 to 2010, they did not document the changes that would facilitate comparisons over time and cannot identify specific drivers of this cost growth. According to GAO's *Cost Estimating and Assessment Guide*, an agency can strengthen its ability to control costs by using available cost data to make comparisons over time and identify and quantify trends. The Bureau faces the fundamental challenge of striking a balance between how best to control costs without compromising accuracy. However, the Bureau's inability to identify specific actionable factors affecting past growth will make it difficult for the Bureau to focus its efforts to control costs for the 2020 Census.

The Bureau developed several design alternatives for the 2020 Census that could help reduce costs, but has not identified decision points when executives would review progress and decide whether the Bureau is prepared to move forward from one project phase to another. Office of Management and Budget guidance and previous GAO work support the use of these practices to strengthen an agency's decision making on large-scale projects. Incorporating these practices in its 2020 planning could help the Bureau improve its ability to manage risk to achieve desired cost, schedule and performance outcomes.

The Bureau is taking steps to strengthen its life cycle cost estimates. However, the Bureau has not yet established guidance for developing cost estimates. The Bureau is scheduled to begin work on the 2020 Census estimate in fiscal year 2013 but has limited time to develop guidance. By finalizing such guidance, the Bureau can better ensure that it is developing comprehensive, accurate, and credible estimates for the 2020 Census.

The Average Cost of Counting Each Housing Unit Escalated Each Decade While Mail Response Rates Declined



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data.