What GAO Found

The decennial census is an inherently fragile undertaking, requiring many moving parts to come together in a short time frame. For example, accurate cost estimates help ensure that the Bureau has adequate funds, and that Congress, the administration, and the Bureau itself have reliable information on which to base advice and decisions. However, as GAO has reported before, the Bureau has insufficient policies and procedures and inadequately trained staff for conducting high-quality cost estimation for the decennial census.

A successful census requires a complete and accurate address list. The Bureau sends thousands of census workers (listers) into the field to collect and verify address information, and this year for the first time, listers will use handheld computers to collect data. During the dress rehearsal there were significant technical problems. A small-scale field test showed that these problems appear to have been addressed; however, the test was not carried out under full census-like conditions and did not validate all address canvassing requirements.

Nonresponse follow-up, the Bureau’s largest and most costly field operation, was initially planned to be conducted using the handheld computers, but was recently changed to a paper-based system due to technology issues. The Bureau has not yet developed a road map for monitoring the development and implementation of nonresponse follow-up under the new design. Such a plan is essential to conducting a successful nonresponse follow-up. Furthermore, the system that manages the flow of work in field offices is not yet developed. Lacking plans for the development of both nonresponse follow-up and this management system, the Bureau faces the risk of not having them developed and fully tested in time for the 2010 Census.

In an effort to reduce the undercount, the Bureau is implementing a program of paid advertising integrated with other communications strategies, such as partnerships with state, local, and tribal governments and community organizations. Moving toward 2010, the Bureau faces long-standing challenges with the nation’s linguistic diversity and privacy concerns, which can contribute to the undercounting of some groups.

Since 2005, GAO has reported concerns with the Bureau’s management and testing of key IT systems. GAO is reviewing the status and plans for the testing of key 2010 Census systems, and while the Bureau has made progress in conducting systems, integration, and end-to-end testing, critical testing still remains to be performed before systems will be ready to support the 2010 Census, and the planning for the testing needs much improvement. In short, while the Bureau has made some noteworthy progress in gearing up for the enumeration, with just over a year remaining until census day, uncertainties surround the Bureau’s overall readiness for 2010.