



Highlights of [GAO-10-665T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Information Policy, Census, and National Archives, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

On May 1, 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) will launch its massive follow-up effort with the roughly 48 million households that did not mail back their census forms (130 million forms were delivered). As part of this nonresponse follow-up effort, over 600,000 enumerators will fan out across the country, personally contacting nonresponding housing units as many as six times in an effort to ensure everyone is counted.

As requested, GAO's testimony in Los Angeles (L.A.) focuses on the importance of census participation, paying particular attention to (1) the Bureau's preparedness for nonresponse follow-up in terms of workload and staffing levels, (2) why it will be critical for Angelenos and others across the country to cooperate with enumerators during nonresponse follow-up, and (3) key steps the Bureau needs to take moving forward to ensure nonresponse follow-up is timely and accurate. The testimony is based on previously issued and ongoing GAO work.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making new recommendations in this testimony, but past reports recommended that the Bureau could build on lessons learned from 2000 to improve its 2010 nonresponse follow-up operation. The Bureau concurred with these recommendations and has taken steps to implement them.

View [GAO-10-665T](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoffr@gao.gov.

2010 CENSUS

Cooperation with Enumerators Is Critical to a Successful Headcount

What GAO Found

Nationally, based on workload and staffing levels, the Bureau appears to be well positioned to implement nonresponse follow-up. On both counts, the Bureau's performance is meeting its expected goals. With respect to the mail-back response rate, the Bureau expected a level of between 59 percent and 65 percent. The actual mail-back response rate when the Bureau determined the universe of houses to visit for nonresponse follow-up on April 19, was 63.2 percent, well within its estimates. The mail-back response rate for L.A. City was 61.4 percent, and L.A. County was 64.7 percent. In terms of staffing, the Bureau met its goals both nationally as well as for L.A. Still, the Bureau could encounter pockets of challenges at the local level where mail-back response rates are less than expected. Further, the reliability of a computer system needed to administer nonresponse follow-up is an open question.

Participation in the census has decade-long implications for individuals, communities, and states. For example, census data are used to apportion House seats, redraw the boundaries of congressional and local election districts, and help ensure compliance with civil rights and other laws protecting our citizens. A complete count also helps ensure that L.A. and other areas obtain their fair share of federal assistance. Indeed, a number of formula grants allocate money based at least in part on census and related population data. GAO's recent analysis found that the 10 largest federal assistance programs obligated an estimated \$478 billion in fiscal year 2009 based, to some extent, on census and related population data. The grants included Medicaid, Highway Planning and Construction, Head Start, and the Children's Health Insurance Program. Local governments as well as businesses use census data for planning and investment decisions, and to better tailor the services they provide.

Nationally, following up on nonresponding households is a daunting task, and L.A. presents its own challenges and opportunities. For example, data from a planning database the Bureau developed placed L.A. County first on a list of the top 50 U.S. counties with the highest number of people living in hard-to-count areas, based on data from the 2000 Census. Factors contributing to the area's hard-to-count challenges include poverty, unemployment, and language barriers. Moving forward, among other activities, it will be important for the Bureau to track various production, quality, and other indicators as planned to help ensure nonresponse follow-up stays on track.

In summary, participation in the census is a quick, easy, and confidential civic act that has a lasting impact on states, cities, neighborhoods, and even individuals. But the benefits that can accrue from a complete and accurate population tally can only occur if Angelenos cooperate with enumerators when they knock on nonrespondents' doors in the weeks ahead.