



Highlights of [GAO-11-496T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services, and International Security, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

GAO added the 2010 Census to its list of high-risk programs in 2008 in part because of (1) long-standing weaknesses in the Census Bureau's (Bureau) information technology (IT) acquisition and contract management function, (2) difficulties in developing reliable life-cycle cost estimates, and (3) key operations that were not tested under operational conditions. These issues jeopardized the Bureau's readiness for the count. Moreover, societal trends, such as concerns over privacy, have made a cost-effective census an increasingly difficult challenge. At about \$13 billion, 2010 was the costliest U.S. Census in history. As requested, this testimony focuses on lessons learned from the 2010 Census, and initiatives that show promise for producing a more cost-effective population count in 2020. This testimony is based on completed and ongoing work, including an analysis of Bureau documents, interviews with Bureau officials, and field observations of census operations in urban and rural locations across the country.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making new recommendations in this testimony, but past reports recommended that the Bureau strengthen its testing of key IT systems, better document and update its cost estimates, and develop an operational plan that integrates performance, budget, and other information. The Bureau generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations and is taking steps to implement them.

View [GAO-11-496T](#) or key components. For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoff@gao.gov

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2010 CENSUS

Preliminary Lessons Learned Highlight the Need for Fundamental Reforms

What GAO Found

In February 2011, GAO removed the 2010 Census from its High-Risk List because the Bureau generally completed its peak enumeration activities and released congressional apportionment and redistricting data consistent with its operational plans. The Bureau improved its readiness for the census by strengthening its risk management activities, enhancing systems testing, and meeting regularly with executives from its parent agency, the Department of Commerce. Strong congressional oversight was also critical. Still, the 2010 Census required an unprecedented commitment of resources, and the cost of enumerating each housing unit has escalated from around \$16 in 1970, to around \$98 in 2010, in constant 2010 dollars. Based on the results of the 2010 and prior censuses, the following four early lessons learned could help secure a more cost-effective enumeration in 2020:

- 1. Reexamine the Nation's Approach to Taking the Census:** The Bureau has used a similar approach to count most of the population since 1970. However, the approach has not kept pace with changes to society. Moving forward, it will be important for the Bureau to rethink its approach to planning, testing, implementing, and monitoring the census to address long-standing challenges.
- 2. Assess and Refine Existing Operations Focusing on Tailoring Them to Specific Locations and Population Groups:** The Bureau plans to complete over 70 studies of the 2010 Census covering such topics as the Bureau's publicity efforts and field operations. As this research is completed, it will be important for it to assess the value-added of a particular operation in order for it to determine how best to allocate its resources for 2020.
- 3. Institutionalize Efforts to Address High-Risk Areas:** Focus areas include incorporating best practices for IT acquisition management; developing reliable cost estimates; and ensuring key operations are fully tested, in part by developing clearly stated research objectives, a thoroughly documented data collection strategy, and methods for determining the extent to which specific activities contributed to controlling costs and enhancing quality.
- 4. Ensure that the Bureau's Management, Culture, and Business Practices Align with a Cost-Effective Enumeration:** The Bureau will need to ensure that its organizational culture and structure, as well as its approach to strategic planning, human capital management, collaboration, and other internal functions are focused on delivering more cost-effective outcomes.

The Bureau has launched an ambitious planning program for 2020. As these actions gain momentum, it will be important that they enhance the Bureau's capacity to control costs, ensure quality, and adapt to future technological and societal changes.