CENSUS 2000

Design Choices Contributed to Inaccuracy of Coverage Evaluation Estimates

What GAO Found

According to senior Bureau officials, increasingly complicated social factors, such as extended families and population mobility, presented challenges for A.C.E., making it difficult to determine exactly where certain individuals should have been counted thus contributing to the inaccuracy of the coverage error estimates. For example, parents in custody disputes both may have an incentive to claim their child as a resident, but the Bureau used rules for determining where people should be counted—residence rules—that did not account for many of these kinds of circumstances. Other design decisions concerning both A.C.E. and the census also may have created “blind spots” that contributed to the inaccuracy of the estimates (see figure). The Bureau has not accounted for the effects of these or other key design decisions on the coverage error estimates, which could hamper the Bureau’s efforts to craft a program that better measures coverage error for the next national census.

Factors Potentially Affecting Accuracy of Coverage Error Estimates at Different Points in the A.C.E. Program

- Bureau collected data in A.C.E. sample areas
- Bureau matched A.C.E. data to census data from sample areas
- Bureau used matching results to estimate rates of undercounts in sample areas, then revised estimates
- Bureau limited geographic scope of searching for matches.
- Bureau removed certain records from the census data being matched, but not from the census.
- Bureau left some populations out of A.C.E. sample survey.
- Limits in revision methodology raised questions about usefulness of revised estimates.

Despite having twice revised A.C.E.’s original coverage error estimates, the Bureau has no reliable estimates of the extent of coverage error for the 2000 census. While both revisions suggested that the original estimates were inaccurate, in the course of thoroughly reviewing the revisions, the Bureau documented (1) extensive limitations in the revision methodology and (2) an unexpected pattern between the revised estimates and other A.C.E. data, both of which indicated that the revised coverage error estimates may be questionable themselves. Furthermore, when the Bureau published the revised estimates, it did not clearly quantify the impact of these limitations for readers, thus preventing readers from accurately judging the overall reliability of the estimates. It is therefore unclear how A.C.E. information will be useful to the public or policymakers, or how the Bureau can use it to make better decisions in the future.

Source: GAO.