What GAO Found

Overall, the U.S. Census Bureau’s (Bureau) planning efforts for 2020 are off to a good start, as the Bureau made noteworthy progress within each of the four lessons learned from the 2010 Census. Still, additional steps will be needed within each of the lessons learned in order to sustain those reforms.

1. Reexamine the nation’s approach to taking the Census. The Bureau has used a similar approach to count most of the population for decades. However, the approach has not kept pace with changes to society. Moving forward, the Bureau has begun to rethink its approach to planning, testing, implementing, and monitoring the census. For example, the Bureau is researching how it can use administrative records, such as data from other government agencies, to locate and count people including nonrespondents. Use of administrative records could help reduce the cost of field operations, but data quality and access issues must first be resolved.

2. Assess and refine existing operations focusing on tailoring them to specific locations and population groups. The 2010 Census had several operations tailored to specific population groups or locales. For example, the Bureau mailed bilingual English/Spanish forms to some areas and sent a second questionnaire to areas with historically lower response rates. Preliminary evaluations show these targeted efforts contributed to an increased awareness of the census and higher mail-back response rates. For 2020, the Bureau is considering expanding these efforts. Designing future studies to better isolate the return on investment of key census operations would help the Bureau further target its operations to specific population groups and locations and potentially gain significant cost savings.

3. Institutionalize efforts to address high-risk areas. Focus areas for the Bureau include improving its ability to manage information technology (IT) investments and develop a reliable cost estimates. In January 2012, GAO reported that the Bureau did not have policies and procedures for developing the 2020 Census cost estimate. In moving forward, it will be important for the Bureau to improve its IT acquisition management policies and develop better guidance to produce more reliable cost estimates.

4. Ensure that the Bureau’s management, culture, and business practices align with a cost-effective enumeration. In May 2012, GAO reported that the Bureau’s early planning efforts for the 2020 Census were consistent with most leading practices for organizational transformation, long term planning, and strategic workforce planning. Nevertheless, GAO found that additional steps could be taken to build on these early efforts. For example, the Bureau’s schedule does not include milestones for key decisions to support the transition between planning phases. These milestones are important and could help with later downstream planning.