

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-389](#), a report to the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

One of the most important functions of the U.S. Census Bureau is conducting the decennial census, which is mandated by the Constitution and provides vital data for the nation. This is a major undertaking, and the Bureau increasingly relies on IT to support the operational design and execution of the census. For the 2020 Decennial Census, the Bureau is planning significant changes to the methods and technologies it uses to conduct the census. However, it has not previously used many of these methods at the scale being considered for 2020, which adds a large degree of risk.

GAO was asked to review the Bureau's IT-related efforts for the 2020 census. GAO's objectives were to determine (1) progress in researching and testing IT options to support design decisions for the census, (2) key IT risks facing the census and evaluate the Bureau's efforts to mitigate them, and (3) progress in implementing prior GAO recommendations related to IT management and information security. To do this, GAO reviewed Bureau plans, schedules, risk data, and other documentation and interviewed relevant officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Department of Commerce's Census Bureau prioritize its IT-related research and testing projects that it needs to complete to support the design decision and develop project schedules and plans to reflect the new prioritized approach. The Department of Commerce concurred with GAO's recommendations and noted that it had actions under way to address them.

View [GAO-14-389](#). For more information, contact Carol R. Cha at (202) 512-4456 or chac@gao.gov.

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2020 CENSUS

Prioritized Information Technology Research and Testing Is Needed for Census Design Decisions

What GAO Found

The Census Bureau (Bureau) has made progress in researching and testing information technology (IT) options for the 2020 Decennial Census, but several of the supporting projects lack schedules and plans, and it is uncertain whether they will be completed in time to inform the decision on the operational design for the 2020 census, planned for September 2015. Specifically, it has begun research on six IT-related projects, such as using the Internet for survey response and using employees' personal smartphones to collect census data. However, four of the projects lacked finalized schedules, and three lacked plans for gauging progress. Moreover, the two projects with completed schedules are not estimated to be completed until after the September 2015 design decision date (see figure).

Original and Tentative Revised Schedules for 2020 Decennial Census Design Decision
Original schedule (as of August 2012)



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau data.

Further, contrary to industry best practices, the Bureau has not prioritized its projects to determine which are the most important to complete before the decision. Officials stated that they are working with project teams to determine what needs to be completed and by when to support the design decision, but as of December 2013 they had not specified when this would be completed. Without prioritizing its projects and establishing schedules and plans, the Bureau risks not making a timely and well-informed design decision for the 2020 census.

The Bureau has identified key IT-related risks facing the 2020 Decennial Census program but has not consistently developed mitigation plans for all of them. As of October 2013, officials identified 77 program and project risks, with 7 of these identified as critical. However, 6 of these risks, including 1 critical risk, did not have mitigation plans, as called for by industry best practices and previously recommended by GAO. Officials acknowledged that they had not been disciplined about documenting mitigation plans for all risks. Until the Bureau ensures that all risks have mitigation plans, the program will be vulnerable to risks being realized.

Of 21 outstanding GAO recommendations related to IT management and information security, the Bureau has implemented the majority. Specifically, 15 have been fully implemented, 5 have been partially implemented, and 1 has not been implemented. Continued efforts to implement these recommendations will help ensure that the Bureau is able to deliver secure IT solutions on time and within budget.