Bureau Needs to Better Leverage Information to Achieve Goals of Reengineered Address Canvassing

Why GAO Did This Study

With a lifecycle cost of $12.3 billion (in 2020 dollars), the 2010 Census was the most expensive in U.S. history. Reengineering how the Bureau builds its address list is one of the ways the Bureau intends to reduce the per-housing unit cost of the 2020 count.

GAO was asked to evaluate the Bureau’s reengineered approach for 2020 address canvassing. This report (1) describes the Bureau’s design for 2020 address canvassing, (2) evaluates the extent to which the Bureau assessed the cost and quality implications of its reengineered address canvassing approach, and (3) assesses the status of the Bureau’s efforts to reduce the in-field address canvassing workload. GAO reviewed relevant design and testing documentation and interviewed cognizant Bureau officials. GAO also reviewed Bureau address canvassing production and payroll data in December 2016 and March 2017.

What GAO Found

To achieve cost savings, the Census Bureau (Bureau) decided in September 2014 to use a reengineered approach for building its address list for the 2020 Census without having to go door-to-door (or “in-field”) across the country, as it has in prior decennial censuses. Rather, some areas (known as “blocks”) might only need a review of their address and map information using computer imagery and third-party data sources — what the Bureau calls “in-office” procedures. The Bureau planned to use a two-phase, in-office address canvassing operation to update 75 percent of all housing units in its master address list, and initially estimated this approach could reduce 2020 Census costs by $900 million.

The Bureau has not completed evaluations of results from tests and activities it carried out in 2016 to assess the effectiveness of in-office address canvassing. Specifically, the Bureau has not completed its evaluations designed to evaluate the accuracy of in-office address canvassing. Similarly, citing budget constraints, the Bureau also cancelled 2017 fieldwork that could have provided additional data to evaluate the reengineered approach. Further, the Bureau has changed the design of the in-office address canvassing operation with limited information on the cost and quality implications of the changes. Citing budget uncertainty, in March 2017 the Bureau suspended its second phase of in-office address canvassing, which was designed to resolve address coverage issues identified in the first phase. Bureau officials indicated that this decision would increase the in-field address canvassing workload from 25 percent to at least 30 percent, but they could not provide details of the cost or quality tradeoffs of this decision.

Using its remaining evaluations to determine cost and quality implications would better position the Bureau to justify future decisions for its reengineered approach.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Bureau (1) use its remaining evaluations before 2020 to determine cost and quality implications and to justify future decisions for its reengineered approach; (2) plan and execute smaller, more flexible tests needed to support key address canvassing design decisions in future census operations; and (3) use productivity measures that track the progress of the in-office address canvassing and its effectiveness in reducing fieldwork. The Department of Commerce had no disagreements with GAO’s findings and recommendations. In addition, the Secretary noted that the Department was conducting its own review.

View GAO-17-622. For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoffr@gao.gov.