

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-141T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

One of the Bureau's most important functions is to conduct a complete and accurate decennial census of the U.S. population, which is mandated by the Constitution and provides vital data for the nation. A complete count of the nation's population is an enormous undertaking as the Bureau seeks to control the cost of the census, implement operational innovations, and use new and modified IT systems. In recent years, GAO has identified challenges that raise serious concerns about the Bureau's ability to conduct a cost-effective count. For these reasons, GAO added the 2020 Census to its high-risk list in February 2017.

In light of these challenges, GAO was asked to testify about the Bureau's progress in preparing for the 2020 Census. To do so, GAO summarized its prior work regarding the Bureau's planning efforts for the 2020 Census. GAO also included observations from its ongoing work on the 2018 End-to-End Test. This information is related to, among other things, recent decisions on preparations for the 2020 Census; progress on key systems to be used for the 2018 End-to-End Test, including the status of IT security assessments; execution of the test at three test sites; and efforts to update the life-cycle cost estimate.

What GAO Recommends

Over the past 4 years, we have made 33 recommendations specific to the 2020 Census to address the issues raised in this testimony and others. As of October 2017, the Bureau had fully implemented 10 of the recommendations, and was at varying stages of implementing the remaining recommendations.

View [GAO-18-141T](#). For more information, contact David A. Powner at (202) 512-9286 or pownerd@gao.gov or Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoff@gao.gov.

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2020 CENSUS

Continued Management Attention Needed to Oversee Innovations, Develop and Secure IT Systems, and Improve Cost Estimation

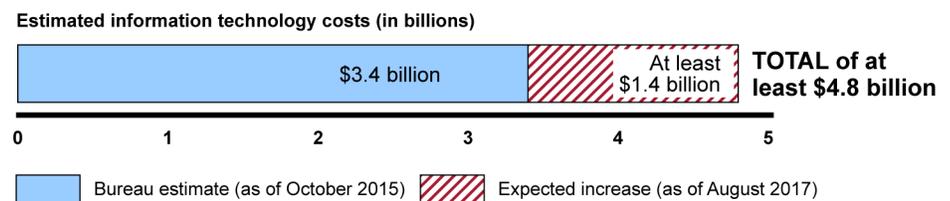
What GAO Found

The Census Bureau (Bureau) is planning several innovations for the 2020 Decennial Census, including re-engineering field operations, using administrative records to supplement census data, verifying addresses in-office using on-screen imagery, and allowing the public to respond using the Internet. These innovations show promise for controlling costs, but they also introduce new risks, in part because they include new procedures and technologies that have not been used extensively in earlier decennial censuses, if at all. GAO's prior work has emphasized the importance of the Bureau conducting a robust testing program to demonstrate that the systems and operations perform as intended under census-like conditions prior to the 2020 Census. However, because of budget uncertainties the Bureau canceled its 2017 field test and then scaled back its 2018 End-to-End Test, placing these innovation areas more at risk.

The Bureau continues to face challenges in managing and overseeing the information technology (IT) programs, systems, and contracts supporting the 2020 Census. For example, GAO's ongoing work indicates that the system development schedule leading up to the 2018 End-to-End test has experienced several delays. Further, the Bureau has not yet addressed several security risks and challenges to secure its systems and data, including making certain that security assessments are completed in a timely manner and that risks are at an acceptable level. Given that certain operations for the 2018 End-to-End Test began in August 2017, it is important that the Bureau quickly address these challenges. GAO plans to monitor the Bureau's progress as part of its ongoing work.

In addition, the Bureau's cost estimate is not reliable and is out-of-date. Specifically, in June 2016, GAO reported that the cost estimate for the 2020 Census did not fully reflect characteristics of a high-quality estimate and could not be considered reliable. Moreover, since the Bureau did not follow cost estimation best practices, its annual budget requests based on the cost estimate may not be fully informed. Additionally, the Bureau has not yet updated its October 2015 cost estimate, but GAO expects that the cost of the current census design (around \$12.5 billion in 2020 constant dollars) will increase due to, for example, expected increases in 2020 program IT costs (see figure). GAO made several recommendations to address these concerns, and the Bureau plans to address these recommendations in an updated cost estimate to be released later this fall.

Expected Increases in 2020 Census Information Technology Costs, in Billions, as of August 2017



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau data. | GAO-18-141T