

2020 Census

Recent Decision to Compress Census Timeframes Poses Additional Risks to an Accurate Count

The 2020 Decennial Census is underway after pausing operations in response to the COVID-19 national emergency. As the Bureau resumes its operations, it faces a new set of operational and public safety challenges as a result of COVID-19. These delays, the resulting compressed timeframes, implementation of untested procedures, and additional challenges such as COVID-19 could adversely impact downstream operations, escalate census costs and undermine the overall quality of the count.

In recent years, GAO has identified challenges to the Bureau's ability to conduct a cost-effective count of the nation, including new innovations, acquisition and development of IT systems, and other challenges. In 2017, these challenges led GAO to place the 2020 Census on its High-Risk list.

Over the past decade, GAO has made 112 recommendations specific to the 2020 Census. To date, the Bureau has implemented 90 and GAO has closed 1 recommendation as not implemented. As of August 2020, 21 of the recommendations had not been fully implemented.

GAO was asked to provide regular updates on the 2020 Census. This report examines the cost and progress of key 2020 Census operations critical to a cost-effective enumeration, and early warnings that may require Census Bureau or congressional attention.

The Bureau provided technical comments that were incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-20-671R](#). For more information, contact J. Christopher Mihm at (202) 512-6806 or by email at mihmj@gao.gov and Nick Marinos at (202) 512-9342 or by email at marinosn@gao.gov.

This correspondence is the fourth in a series of updates reporting on the Census Bureau's (Bureau) 2020 Census activities and operations. This update includes information from GAO's ongoing work on the status of 2020 Census operations and challenges, including those raised by COVID-19.

As part of a series of decisions to suspend, extend, and delay certain operations and extend data collection activities until October 31, the Department of Commerce requested statutory relief on the required dates for delivering census data to the President and states for apportioning seats in the House of Representatives and redistricting for elections. While legislation providing this relief was introduced in Congress, the legislation has not been enacted into law. On August 3, the Bureau announced it would accelerate completion of its data collection and data processing operations to deliver the apportionment counts by the statutory deadline of December 31, 2020. To do so, the Bureau announced it would end all data collection operations by September 30, reducing the amount of time the Bureau has to complete its nonresponse follow-up (NRFU) operation. GAO and the Bureau have previously identified late design changes as a risk to a complete and accurate count.

As of August 10, the Bureau had received responses from 63.4 percent of households and plans to hire up to approximately 435,000 enumerators to follow-up with the approximately 56.4 million nonresponding households.

Areas for Continued Bureau Attention to Help Ensure a Complete and Accurate Census

COVID-19 has forced the Bureau to change how it will conduct its operations. As it implements those operations and anticipates completing them within the new compressed timeframes, the Bureau must monitor a number of areas to help ensure a complete and accurate census, including:

- **Hiring a sufficient NRFU workforce.** The Bureau began hiring for NRFU on July 14, and as of August 18, the Bureau hired 309,391 enumerators, but is experiencing higher attrition than expected. To complete the operation by September 30, the Bureau plans to maximize the number of hours worked by staff each week and continue recruiting, hiring, and training replacement enumerators.
- **Ensuring the safety of Census workers and the public.** The Bureau is taking social distancing steps to protect census enumerators and the public and to increase the likelihood that households will participate in door-to-door interviews- see figure.

Safety Protocols for the 2020 Census in Response to COVID-19



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau protocols. | GAO-20-671R

- **Maintaining the public's awareness of the 2020 Census.** The Bureau has expanded its communications campaign with new advertisements promoting online self-response and promoting cooperation with in-person interviews. To

reach new audiences, it will advertise in 33 additional languages with an expanded list of media vendors for a total of 45 languages in addition to English.

- **Safely planning for an in-person outreach strategy to encourage responses.** While the Bureau initially moved to a virtual outreach strategy in light of COVID-19, partnership specialists resumed in-person efforts in early June 2020. The Bureau also modified its Mobile Questionnaire Assistance initiative, intended to offer in-person assistance at large community events in low-response areas, by placing staff outside locations such as grocery stores and pharmacies.
- **Limiting in-person contact for Group Quarters.** To reduce in-person contact to enumerate group facilities—such as prisons and nursing homes—staff are calling these facilities to ask them to submit their responses electronically or by mail.
- **Counting persons experiencing homelessness.** In consultation with stakeholders, the Bureau decided to count persons experiencing homelessness in late September to better mirror the weather conditions of the original planned operation in late March and early April.
- **Counting college students while colleges are closed.** To count college students at the correct address, the Bureau requested records from colleges and universities for students living in university-owned housing and those living off campus. According to the Bureau, as of August 19, colleges and universities with housing facilities have already submitted their administrative records for students living in 81.3 percent of those facilities (approximately 33,000 facilities).
- **Monitoring ongoing risks to information technology (IT) systems implementation.** The Bureau is utilizing 52 IT systems to conduct the 2020 Census. It will be important that the Bureau continue to assess the risks to the implementation of these systems. For example, it is critical for the Bureau to continually monitor performance of the IT systems supporting NRFU and quickly address any system defects or other issues, if they arise.
- **Adequately protecting mobile devices.** The Bureau will need to protect up to about 435,000 mobile devices provided to enumerators to collect personally identifiable information (PII) from households that did not self-respond to the survey.
- **Managing disinformation and misinformation.** The Bureau has reviewed the performance from previous operations in the 2020 Census and adapted the policies and practices for ongoing and future operations to improve event response.
- **Ensuring timely and quality processing of census responses.** After 2020 Census data collection, the Bureau must conduct its response processing operation, which removes duplicate responses, ensures complete information is collected, and formats the data files used to produce census results. The Bureau's August announcement that it intends to deliver the apportionment counts to the President by December 31, 2020, increases the risks associated with conducting the response processing operation. The Bureau must complete remaining IT system and operational testing expeditiously in order to ensure that its systems are ready to fully support this operation under compressed timeframes.
- **Evaluating the impact of census delays on data quality and coverage.** Delays to data collection operations, public reluctance to participate in door-to-door interviews, and compressed timeframes for data collection and processing response data may affect the accuracy, completeness, and quality of the count. The Bureau has stood up internal working groups in an effort to address some of these issues.