2020 CENSUS

Additional Steps Needed to Finalize Readiness for Peak Field Operations

Why GAO Did This Study

The cost of the decennial census has steadily increased over the past several decades, with self-response rates declining over the same period. The largest and costliest operation that the Bureau undertakes, NRFU is the Bureau's attempt to enumerate households not initially self-responding to the census.

GAO was asked to review NRFU implementation during the 2018 Census Test as well as the Bureau's overall readiness for peak field operations, which cover the actual enumeration of residents. This report examines (1) how peak field operations, including NRFU, were implemented during the test; and (2) the extent to which prior test implementation issues have been addressed. GAO reviewed test planning and training documentation, as well as production and payroll data. At the test site, GAO observed and interviewed enumerators, field supervisors, and managers conducting peak operations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Bureau (1) determine procedures for late-NRFU data collection; (2) align census field supervisor screening, authorities, and information flows; (3) prepare for targeted mid-operation training or guidance as needed; and (4) improve training on reporting cases that need supervisory attention and alternative ways to communicate these cases.

The Department of Commerce agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations, and the Bureau provided technical comments that were incorporated as appropriate.

View GAO-19-140. For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoffr@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

In preparation for the 2020 census, the Census Bureau (Bureau) set out to enumerate over 140,000 housing units during the 2018 Census Test at a site in Providence County, Rhode Island. The 2018 Census Test marked the Bureau's last chance to test enumeration procedures for peak field operations under census-like conditions before 2020. Implementation of this test identified the following concerns:

- The Bureau experienced operational issues during implementation of the Non-Response Follow-Up (NRFU) as part of the 2018 Census Test. For example, the Bureau had not finalized procedures for data collection during late phases of NRFU (e.g., after multiple attempts to interview had been made) until after the work had already started. As a result, enumerators and their supervisors did not have standardized procedures during the test, which made it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the test procedures. GAO also observed a range of other NRFU implementation issues during the test, such as the Bureau's use of progress reporting that overstates the number of NRFU cases not needing any additional fieldwork and the Bureau having fewer of its enumerators work Saturdays, which can be among the most productive interview days. The Bureau is taking steps to assess and mitigate these and other issues that GAO identified.

- The Bureau's field workforce was not fully prepared to face all of the enumeration challenges that arose during the test. For instance, the Bureau expects census field supervisors to provide front-line coaching to enumerators but did not screen these employees to ensure they had the needed skills. Moreover, it did not provide them with the authorities and information that would have helped them serve that role. As a result, we believe that supervisors did not have the casework expertise, information, or authority to help enumerators with procedural questions, and higher-level census field managers ended up providing direct support to enumerators.

- While the Bureau provided extensive online and in-person training to enumerators prior to NRFU fieldwork for the 2018 Census Test, the Bureau lacked any standardized form of mid-operation training or guidance as new procedures were implemented. GAO observed that during the test some enumerators continued to have questions and were uncertain about procedures. Developing targeted, location-specific training could help ensure that, in 2020, enumerators receive the guidance they need to collect census data consistently and in accordance with NRFU procedures.

The Bureau has made progress addressing prior test implementation issues but still faces challenges. For example, the Bureau improved its collection of enumerator case notes, which reflect real-time knowledge gained during enumeration. However, enumerators did not always report cases using flags built in to their interviewing device that would benefit from supervisory review, such as for language barriers. Moreover, supervisors were not systematically analyzing case notes to identify cases not flagged properly. As a result, critical data on fieldwork challenges were not being communicated effectively to those who could analyze and use them.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**