

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104357](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

The 2020 Census, from the planning stages through the COVID-19-affected implementation, produced a unique set of experiences for the Bureau to draw on when planning future work. As GAO [reported](#) in June 2021, the census continues to be a costly undertaking, with the 2020 Census on track to cost roughly \$96 per household, up slightly from \$92 per household in 2010 (in constant 2020 dollars). Key features of the design for the 2030 Census are set to take shape during the next 3 years.

This report examines what lessons learned from preparing for and conducting the 2020 Census the Bureau can apply to its 2030 planning efforts. GAO reviewed planning documents for the 2020 and 2030 Censuses, prior GAO report findings related to selected program-management areas and IT systems development. GAO interviewed Bureau officials to obtain their perspectives on the 2020 Census and how they plan to incorporate lessons learned in 2030 Census planning efforts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made prior related recommendations and is recommending that the Bureau develop a plan to improve resiliency of its 2030 Census research and testing activity in response to Bureau-identified budget uncertainty, including but not limited to specifying the tests and projects that are most important to conduct. The Department of Commerce agreed with GAO's findings and recommendation. The Bureau also provided technical comments, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-22-104357](#). For more information, contact Yvonne Jones at (202) 512-6806 or by email at jonesy@gao.gov or Kevin Walsh at (202) 512-6151 or by email at walshk@gao.gov.

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2020 CENSUS

Lessons Learned from Planning and Implementing the 2020 Census Offer Insights to Support 2030 Preparations

What GAO Found

To inform planning for the 2030 Census, the Census Bureau can leverage lessons learned from the 2020 Census related to: budgetary uncertainty; IT development and privacy controls; program management; and local-level data.

Budgetary uncertainty. The 2020 Census cycle demonstrated that budgetary uncertainty can disrupt key research and testing without adequate planning. The Bureau canceled or delayed many of its planned tests and justified the decisions citing budgetary issues, such as sequestration in 2013 and continuing resolutions in fiscal year 2017. The Bureau can likely expect continuing resolutions to continue to influence the budgetary environment. Bureau officials told us that smaller, more agile tests for the 2030 Census will help with 2030 planning. The figure below provides a provisional timeline of 2030 planning phases. A plan that specifies key research and testing can reduce overall risk to the 2030 Census.

2030 Census Planning Is Underway, with Key Milestones Expected in the Next 3 Years

Provisional 2030 Census life-cycle timeframe

FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY26	FY27	FY28	FY29	FY30	FY31	FY32	FY33
Early planning phase			Design selection phase			Development and integration phase				Peak production and close-out phase				
Initial rough order of magnitude based on 2020 actual costs for cost estimate			Risk management plan, risk registers created			Operational plan(s) released				Address canvassing				
Formation of planning teams			Testing and research projects			Life cycle cost estimate refined				Enumeration, non-response follow-up				
			Detailed integrated master schedule			Initial tests of major field operations (such as address canvassing, non-response follow-up)				Response processing				
			Development of initial life cycle cost estimate							Tabulation for data products				
			Major design innovations selected							Assessments and evaluations				

Source: Interviews with U.S. Census Bureau officials and GAO review of U.S. Census Bureau planning documentation. | GAO-22-104357

IT development, privacy, and cybersecurity. The 2020 Census demonstrated that delayed IT-related decisions can impact schedules and costs. Given the Bureau's challenges in planning and developing enterprise-wide IT capabilities for the 2020 Census, it will be important for the Bureau to prioritize IT decisions early in this decade. In addition, continued attention to privacy and cybersecurity controls can mitigate risk. The 2020 Census introduced large-scale technological changes that increased the likelihood of efficiency and effectiveness gains, but also introduced many privacy and cybersecurity challenges that increased risk. The Bureau should continue to pay attention to privacy and cybersecurity controls to mitigate these challenges as it plans for the 2030 Census.

Program management. The Bureau generally made progress late in the decade in addressing weaknesses in the areas of cost estimation, schedule management, and risk management. Sustaining improvements in these areas will better position the Bureau for a high-quality, cost-effective census.

Local-level data. Prior GAO reporting shows that local data and perspectives can aid census planning and implementation.