

Highlights of GAO-04-37, a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The key to a successful census is meticulous planning as it helps ensure greater cost-effectiveness. However, the 2000 and previous censuses have been marked by poor planning, which unnecessarily raised the costs and risks of those efforts. GAO was asked to (1) review the U.S. Census Bureau's (Bureau) current plans for 2010 and whether they might address shortcomings of the 2000 Census, (2) analyze the Bureau's cost estimates, and (3) review the rigor of the Bureau's 2010 planning process.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Commerce direct the Bureau to combine information on goals, costs, and other key planning elements into a single integrated project plan that is updated as needed. The Bureau should also study the feasibility of procedures that could allow it to adjust census results for those purposes where it is both legal and appropriate to do so.

Further, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget should ensure that the Bureau take steps to improve the transparency of census life cycle costs. In commenting on a draft of this report, both agencies disagreed with our interpretation of key findings. They also disagreed with our recommendations. We believe our findings and recommendations still apply.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-37.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Patricia Dalton at (202) 512-6806 or daltonp@gao.gov.

January 2004

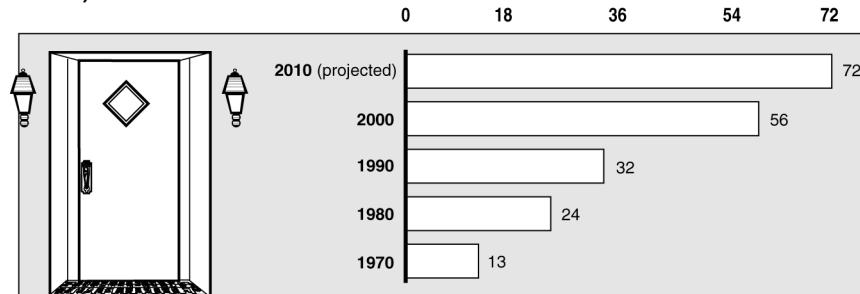
2010 CENSUS

Cost and Design Issues Need to Be Addressed Soon

What GAO Found

While preparations for the 2010 Census appear to be further along compared to a similar point prior to the 2000 Census, cost and design information had to be pieced together from various documents. The Bureau's plans also lack a substantial amount of supporting analysis, budgetary transparency, and other information that made it difficult to verify the Bureau's assertions concerning the costs and benefits of its proposed approach. Further, unlike in previous censuses, the Bureau does not intend to develop coverage measurement procedures that would allow it to adjust census data for certain purposes. Although its experience in 2000 shows that its coverage measurement methodology needs improvement, GAO believes the Bureau should have researched alternative approaches more thoroughly and disclosed the results of its research before making a decision. In designing the 2010 Census, the Bureau hoped to address several shortcomings of the 2000 enumeration, namely to (1) increase the relevance and timeliness of data, (2) reduce operational risk, (3) increase coverage and accuracy, and (4) contain costs. To achieve these goals, three components—all new operations—are key to the Bureau's plans for 2010. They include enhancing procedures for building the census address list and associated maps, replacing the census long-form questionnaire with a more frequent sample survey, and conducting a short-form-only census.

Census Costs Are Increasing (Average Cost per Housing Unit in Constant Fiscal 2000 Dollars)



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau figures.

The Bureau's approach has the potential to achieve the first three goals, but reducing operational risk could prove to be more difficult as each of the three components actually introduces new risks. The Bureau will also be challenged to control the cost of the 2010 Census, now estimated at over \$11 billion. The current budget reporting process masks the long-term costs of the census, most of which will be incurred in 2010; making it difficult for Congress to monitor the Bureau's planned expenditures. Certain actions by the Office of Management and Budget could produce greater fiscal transparency, and thus help inform congressional deliberations on how to best balance the need for an accurate census, with the need to ensure a reasonable cost for this endeavor.