

## Why GAO Did This Study

Although the U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) generally completed the field data collection phase of the 2010 Census consistent with its operational plans, at \$13 billion, 2010 was the costliest census in the nation's history. Moving forward, it will be important to both refine existing operations as well as to reexamine the fundamental approach to the census to better address long-standing issues such as securing participation and escalating costs. As requested, this report reviews (1) the conduct of nonresponse follow-up (NRFU), where enumerators collect data from households that did not return their census forms, (2) the implementation of other field operations critical to a complete count, and (3) potential reexamination areas that could help produce a more cost-effective 2020 Census. The report is based on GAO's analysis of Bureau data and documents, surveys of local census office managers, and field observations.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Census Director refine NRFU and other field follow-up efforts by, among other things, emphasizing quality as much as speed during NRFU and by incorporating best practices in its IT acquisition-management policy. To help ensure reform efforts stay on track, the Bureau should develop an operational plan that integrates performance, budget, and other information. The Department of Commerce generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations.

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## 2010 CENSUS

### Data Collection Operations Were Generally Completed as Planned, but Long-standing Challenges Suggest Need for Fundamental Reforms

## What GAO Found

Nationally, the Bureau was well positioned to implement NRFU and subsequent field operations. The Bureau achieved a mail response rate of 63 percent, which was within its expectations, and recruited nearly 3.8 million total applicants for census jobs, which was 104 percent of its staffing goal. Moreover, the Bureau completed NRFU under budget, reportedly spending \$1.59 billion on the operation, about \$660 million (29 percent) less than the Bureau initially estimated. Most of the Bureau's local census offices (LCO) also completed NRFU ahead of the 10-week allotted time frame. Despite these operational successes, the Bureau encountered some notable challenges. For example, the pace of NRFU may have fostered a culture that tended to emphasize speed over quality, as those LCOs with higher percentages of less-complete questionnaires were more likely to have completed NRFU in 53 days or less (the average time LCOs took to complete NRFU). The Bureau also had to overcome issues with critical information technology (IT) systems. For example, performance problems with the IT system used to manage NRFU led to processing backlogs. Although the Bureau developed workarounds for the issue, it hindered the Bureau's ability to fully implement quality-assurance procedures as planned.

The Bureau generally completed other follow-up operations designed to improve the accuracy of the data consistent with its plans. One of these activities was the vacant/delete check (VDC), where enumerators verified housing units thought to be vacant or nonexistent. The Bureau completed VDC two days ahead of schedule, but encountered duplicate addresses on the address list used for the operation, which could indicate a more systemic problem with the quality of the Bureau's address list.

While it will be important to refine existing census-taking activities—many of which have been in place since 1970—results of prior censuses point to the fact that simply improving current methods will not bring about the reforms needed to control costs and maintain accuracy. The cost of conducting the census has, on average, doubled each decade since 1970. At the same time, because of demographic and attitudinal trends, securing a complete count has become an increasing challenge. As a result, a fundamental reexamination of the nation's approach to the census will be needed for a more cost-effective enumeration in 2020. Potential focus areas include new data collection methods; the tenure of the Census Director; and ensuring the Bureau's approaches to human-capital management, knowledge sharing, and other internal functions are aligned toward delivering more cost-effective outcomes. The Bureau recognizes that fundamental changes are needed and has already taken some important first steps, including developing a strategic plan. To help ensure the Bureau's efforts stay on track and to avoid problems it had in planning for prior censuses, it will be important for the Bureau to issue a comprehensive operational plan that includes performance goals, milestones, cost estimates, and other critical information that could be updated regularly.