



Highlights of [GAO-12-905T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services, and International Security, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Obtaining an accurate census in the face of societal trends such as increased privacy concerns and a more diverse population has greatly increased the cost of the census. At \$13 billion, 2010 was the costliest census in U.S. history. Without changes, future enumerations could be fiscally unsustainable. GAO's past work noted that early planning, leading management practices, and strong congressional oversight, can help reduce the costs and risks of the enumeration. GAO also identified four key lessons learned from 2010 that could help secure a more cost-effective 2020 Census. The Bureau agreed and is taking steps to address them. As requested, this testimony focuses on the Bureau's progress on these lessons learned and what remains to be done going forward. It is based on GAO's completed work, including an analysis of Bureau documents, interviews with Bureau officials, and field observations of census operations in urban and rural locations across the country.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making new recommendations in this testimony, but past reports recommended that the Bureau strengthen its testing of key IT systems, develop policies and procedures for its cost estimates, and take actions to make 2020 Census planning more consistent with leading management practices. The Bureau generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations and is taking steps to implement them.

View [GAO-12-905T](#) or key components. For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoffr@gao.gov.

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2020 CENSUS

Sustaining Current Reform Efforts Will Be Key to a More Cost-Effective Enumeration

What GAO Found

Overall, the U.S. Census Bureau's (Bureau) planning efforts for 2020 are off to a good start, as the Bureau made noteworthy progress within each of the four lessons learned from the 2010 Census. Still, additional steps will be needed within each of the lessons learned in order to sustain those reforms.

1. Reexamine the nation's approach to taking the Census. The Bureau has used a similar approach to count most of the population for decades. However, the approach has not kept pace with changes to society. Moving forward, the Bureau has begun to rethink its approach to planning, testing, implementing, and monitoring the census. For example, the Bureau is researching how it can use administrative records, such as data from other government agencies, to locate and count people including nonrespondents. Use of administrative records could help reduce the cost of field operations, but data quality and access issues must first be resolved.

2. Assess and refine existing operations focusing on tailoring them to specific locations and population groups. The 2010 Census had several operations tailored to specific population groups or locales. For example, the Bureau mailed bilingual English/Spanish forms to some areas and sent a second questionnaire to areas with historically lower response rates. Preliminary evaluations show these targeted efforts contributed to an increased awareness of the census and higher mail-back response rates. For 2020, the Bureau is considering expanding these efforts. Designing future studies to better isolate the return on investment of key census operations would help the Bureau further target its operations to specific population groups and locations and potentially gain significant cost savings.

3. Institutionalize efforts to address high-risk areas. Focus areas for the Bureau include improving its ability to manage information technology (IT) investments and develop a reliable cost estimates. In January 2012, GAO reported that the Bureau did not have policies and procedures for developing the 2020 Census cost estimate. In moving forward, it will be important for the Bureau to improve its IT acquisition management policies and develop better guidance to produce more reliable cost estimates.

4. Ensure that the Bureau's management, culture, and business practices align with a cost-effective enumeration. In May 2012, GAO reported that the Bureau's early planning efforts for the 2020 Census were consistent with most leading practices for organizational transformation, long term planning, and strategic workforce planning. Nevertheless, GAO found that additional steps could be taken to build on these early efforts. For example, the Bureau's schedule does not include milestones for key decisions to support the transition between planning phases. These milestones are important and could help with later downstream planning.