

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-543T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

One of the Bureau's most important functions is to conduct a complete and accurate decennial census of the U.S. population. The decennial census is mandated by the Constitution and provides vital data for the nation. A complete count of the nation's population is an enormous undertaking as the Bureau seeks to control the cost of the census, implement operational innovations, and use new and modified IT systems. In recent years, GAO has identified challenges that raise serious concerns about the Bureau's ability to conduct a cost-effective count. For these reasons, GAO added the 2020 Census to its high-risk list in February 2017.

GAO was asked to testify about the Bureau's progress in preparing for the 2020 Census. To do so, GAO summarized its prior work regarding the Bureau's planning efforts for the 2020 Census. GAO also included preliminary observations from its ongoing work examining the 2018 End-to-End Test. This information is related to, among other things, progress on key systems to be used for the 2018 End-to-End Test, including the status of IT security assessments, and efforts to update the life-cycle cost estimate.

## What GAO Recommends

Over the past decade, GAO has made 84 recommendations specific to the 2020 Census to address the issues raised in this and other products. The Bureau generally has agreed with the recommendations. As of May 2018, 30 recommendations had not been fully implemented.

View [GAO-18-543T](#). For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or [goldenkoffr@gao.gov](mailto:goldenkoffr@gao.gov) or David A. Pownner at (202) 512-9286 or [pownnerd@gao.gov](mailto:pownnerd@gao.gov).

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## 2020 CENSUS

### Actions Needed to Mitigate Key Risks Jeopardizing a Cost-Effective and Secure Enumeration

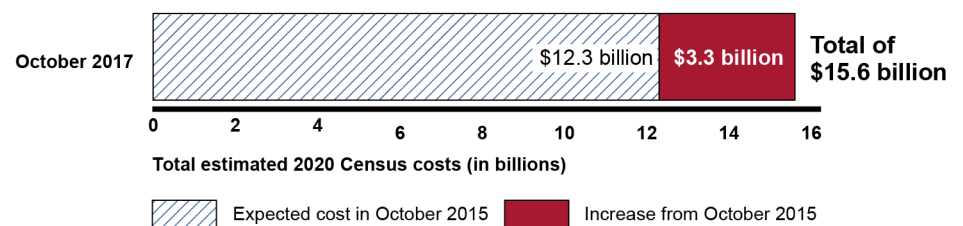
## What GAO Found

The Census Bureau (Bureau) is planning several innovations for the 2020 Decennial Census, including re-engineering field operations by relying more on automation, using administrative records such as Medicare and Medicaid records, to supplement census data, verifying addresses in-office using on-screen imagery, and allowing the public to respond using the Internet. These innovations show promise for controlling costs, but they also introduce new risks, in part, because they have not been used extensively in earlier enumerations, if at all. As a result, robust testing is needed to ensure that key systems and operations will function as planned. However, citing budgetary uncertainties, the Bureau canceled its 2017 field test and then scaled back its 2018 End-to-End Test by reducing the number of test sites from three to one. Without sufficient testing, operational problems can go undiscovered and the opportunity to improve operations will be lost, as key census-taking activities will not be tested across a range of geographic locations, housing types, and demographic groups.

The Bureau continues to face challenges in managing and overseeing the information technology (IT) programs, systems, and contracts supporting the 2020 Census. For example, GAO's ongoing work has determined that the schedule for developing IT systems to support the 2018 End-to-End Test has experienced several delays. Further, the Bureau has not addressed several security risks and challenges to its systems and data, including making certain that security assessments are completed in a timely manner, and that risks are at an acceptable level. Given that operations for the 2018 End-to-End Test began in August 2017, it is important that the Bureau quickly address these challenges.

In addition, the Bureau needs to control any further cost growth and develop cost estimates that reflect best practices. In October 2017, the Department of Commerce announced that it had updated its October 2015 life-cycle cost estimate and now projects the life-cycle cost of the 2020 Census will be \$15.6 billion, a more than \$3 billion (27 percent) increase over its earlier estimate (see figure). The higher estimated life-cycle cost is due, in part, to the Bureau's earlier failure to meet best practices for a quality cost estimate. The Bureau provided GAO with the documentation used to develop the \$15.6 billion cost estimate. Based on its preliminary analysis, GAO has found that the Bureau has made improvements in its cost estimation process across the best practices.

Increases to the 2020 Census Life-Cycle Costs Estimated by the Census Bureau



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau data. | GAO-18-543T