

2020 Census

Initial Enumeration Underway but Readiness for Upcoming Operations Is Mixed

In the coming months, the 2020 Decennial Census will begin its operations to count the population of the United States. The success of these operations relies on the Bureau's preparations, including recruiting and hiring a sufficient work force, developing and testing IT systems, and maintaining public trust to ensure participation by developing community partnerships, combating disinformation, and protecting the privacy of respondent data. The Bureau is actively managing these preparations, but faces significant risks that could adversely impact the cost, quality, schedule, and security of the count.

Over the past decade, GAO has made 112 recommendations specific to the 2020 Census to help address issues such as cost estimation, key innovations, and acquisition and development of IT systems. The Department of Commerce has generally agreed with the recommendations. As of February 2020, 28 of the recommendations had not been fully implemented.

GAO was asked to provide regular updates on the 2020 Census. This report examines the cost and progress of key 2020 census operations critical to a cost-effective enumeration, and early warnings, if any, that may require Census Bureau or congressional attention.

The Bureau provided technical comments that were incorporated as appropriate.

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This correspondence is the second in a series of updates meant to provide timely reporting on the Census Bureau's (Bureau) 2020 Census activities and operations. This update includes information from GAO's ongoing work on preparing for operations including recruiting and hiring, information technology (IT) systems development and testing, and cybersecurity.

In recent years, GAO has identified challenges that raise serious concerns about the Bureau's ability to conduct a cost-effective count of the nation, including new innovations, acquisition and development of IT systems, and other challenges. In 2017, these challenges led us to place the 2020 Census on GAO's High Risk list.

The Bureau Has Generally Executed Early Operations on Schedule, but Faces Challenges Going Forward

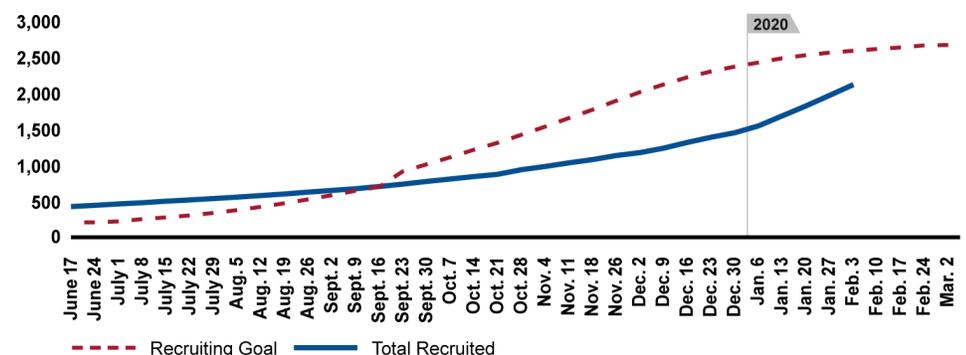
Preparation for Data Collection Operations

The Bureau continues to prepare for upcoming operations for the 2020 Census. These activities included launching media materials and opening area census offices and call centers. The Bureau's first self-response mailing is expected to arrive at households beginning March 12, 2020. Further, the Bureau has begun or is preparing to begin four operations that reach populations that do not receive mail at their residence, including (1) remote areas; (2) areas in which many housing units do not have mail delivered to their homes; (3) individuals living in transitory locations, such as hotels and campgrounds; and (4) individuals in group quarters, such as college resident halls and correctional facilities, as well those experiencing homelessness. The Bureau has also begun work on its Mobile Questionnaire Assistance Operation, which will provide staff to help people complete the questionnaire in locations with low self-response.

Recruiting

The Bureau is behind in its recruiting of applicants for upcoming operations. If the Bureau does not recruit sufficient individuals, it may have difficulty hiring enough staff to complete its upcoming operations within scheduled time frames. As shown by the graphic, despite efforts to increase recruiting through advertisements and increased recruiting staff, the Bureau continues to miss its interim recruiting goals as of February 3, 2020.

Census Bureau Progress on Recruiting as of February 2020



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau Unified Tracking System Data. | GAO-20-368R

Partnerships

The Bureau continues to form both national and community partners, which are crucial in educating the public and maximizing survey response rates, particularly among hard-to-count populations. As of early February 2020, the Bureau had almost 240,000 community partners, such as businesses and nonprofits, in place. However, the Bureau has missed interim goals building towards its overall goal of 300,000 community partners by March 2020.

IT Systems Implementation

The Bureau has made progress in executing work against its development and testing schedule for the 52 IT systems expected to be used during the 2020 Census, but continues to face risks in implementing the systems in time for key operations. For example, as of January 2020, the Bureau was at risk of not meeting key near-term IT system testing schedule milestones for five upcoming 2020 Census operational deliveries, such as self-response and non-response follow-up (i.e., when the Bureau follows up with households that do not initially respond to the Census).

The Bureau also needs to quickly address concerns related to the readiness of its internet response system. In January 2020, the Bureau identified a scalability issue that was preventing it from meeting its goal of enabling up to 600,000 users to access the primary internet response system at the same time without experiencing performance problems. As a result, in February 2020, the Bureau decided to use its backup system to manage internet responses for the 2020 Census. Late design changes, such as the shift from one system to another, can introduce new risks, in part, because the backup system was not used extensively in earlier operational testing. The internet response system is scheduled to be available in March 2020 and will enable the public to respond to the 2020 Census online. Therefore, it is critical that the Bureau quickly ensures the readiness of the system it has decided to use, including fully testing the system before it is deployed.

Cybersecurity

The Bureau also continues to face significant cybersecurity challenges, including those related to addressing cybersecurity weaknesses in a timely manner, resolving cybersecurity recommendations from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and addressing numerous other cybersecurity concerns (such as protecting the privacy of respondent data). For example, in April 2019, GAO recommended that the Bureau (1) take steps to ensure that identified corrective actions for cybersecurity weaknesses were implemented within prescribed time frames, and (2) implement a process for tracking and executing appropriate corrective actions to remediate cybersecurity findings identified by DHS for the 2020 Census.

The Bureau has made progress toward addressing these recommendations, but more work remains. For example, the Bureau has not always addressed cybersecurity weaknesses in accordance with established deadlines. Because the 2020 Census involves collecting personal information from more than 300 hundred million people across the country, it will be important that the Bureau continue to address these challenges. GAO has ongoing work monitoring the Bureau's progress in addressing these and other cybersecurity challenges.