

2020 Census

COVID-19 Presents Delays and Risks to Census Count

The 2020 Decennial Census began its operations to count the population of the United States. However, the COVID-19 national emergency has forced the Bureau to adjust its plans and timelines for conducting these operations. The delays to key operations could adversely impact downstream operations, undermine the overall quality of the count, and escalate census costs.

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. To date, the Bureau has implemented 90 and GAO has closed 1 recommendation as not implemented. As of June 2020, 21 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 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 third in a series of updates reporting on the Census Bureau's (Bureau) 2020 Census activities and operations. This update includes information from GAO's ongoing work on the status of 2020 Census operations and challenges raised by COVID-19.

In March 2020, the Bureau decided to delay, suspend, or extend its upcoming operations. In April, the Bureau suspended all field operations until June 1, 2020, and extended its data collection through nonresponse follow-up (NRFU)—which was originally planned to end on July 31—until October 31. In May, the Bureau announced the restart of selected operations at 211 area census offices in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico based on an assessment of local conditions. The Bureau has requested statutory relief on the required dates for delivering data to apportion seats in the House of Representatives among states to the President and data for redistricting for elections to states, and proposed delivering this information approximately 4 months later than originally planned.

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

Challenges to 2020 Census Operations Raised by COVID-19

Delays and changes to operations as a result of COVID-19 present further risks to an accurate, timely, and cost-effective count. As operations resume, the Bureau will need to consider multiple factors to ensure the implementation and quality of the count, including:

- **Continued attention to self-response.** Self-response rates—the percentage of households that respond by internet, phone, or mail prior to receiving a visit—affect the quality and overall cost of conducting the census. The Bureau's self-response operation began on March 12. The Bureau's expected self-response rate was to reach 60.5 percent by June 10, 2020. The Bureau has received responses from 60.1 percent of households as of May 25. As part of its response to COVID-19, the Bureau has extended its self-response operation—which was originally planned to end July 31—until October 31.
- **Communicating pandemic plans to ensure continued operations.** In response to COVID-19, the Bureau updated its Continuity of Operations Plan and made a number of procedural changes to operations. GAO has previously recommended that the Bureau develop a contingency plan for all risks requiring one, including major disasters such as a pandemic. As operations resume, the Bureau will need to distribute information to its area census offices that is timely, clear, and consistent regarding operational changes, work status, and pay. Less than half of respondents to our early April survey of area census office managers expressed satisfaction on survey questions about the clarity and timeliness of the Bureau's communication related to the pandemic.
- **Achieving and maintaining sufficient staffing levels.** The census cannot be implemented effectively without sufficient staff. At the time the Bureau

suspended operations in March, it had almost completed selection of enumerators for all operations and exceeded its selection goals. The Bureau will need to quickly onboard field workers and has stated that it will work with federal, state, and local officials to ensure the safety of staff and the public.

- **Revising its approach to communications and partnerships.** Many of the Bureau's efforts to reach hard to count populations rely on in-person face-to-face interactions. The Bureau revised its communication and media efforts in response to the need for social distancing, including spending at least an additional \$160 million on its community and partnership efforts such as advertising, and developed a virtual engagement strategy to engage with national and community partners. Effective coordination with Partnership Specialists, who coordinate community partnerships, will continue to be important as area census office managers consistently expressed low satisfaction with the program. GAO has previously recommended that the Bureau develop mechanisms to increase coordination and communication between partnership and local census office staff.
- **Adjusting plans for Group Quarters and Service-Based Enumeration.** Recall bias, the ability to remember where one was living on April 1, and the ability of facilities to provide a person's census data may disproportionately affect individuals enumerated through these methods, such as people experiencing homelessness. Bureau officials stated that they are reviewing how to enumerate individuals at places such as soup kitchens and shelters.
- **Monitoring ongoing risks to IT systems implementation.** The Bureau is utilizing 52 IT systems to conduct the 2020 Census. It will be important that the Bureau continue to assess the risks associated with the COVID-19-related schedule changes to the implementation of these IT systems. For example, the Bureau noted that it will need to monitor the availability of IT contractor staff needed to perform system testing for upcoming census operations.
- **Managing disinformation and misinformation.** The Bureau will need to continue to provide a timely response to disinformation and misinformation events in order to protect the reputation of the Bureau and the integrity of the 2020 Census.
- **Addressing cybersecurity weaknesses.** The Bureau has made progress toward fulfilling our recommendation to ensure that identified corrective actions for cybersecurity weaknesses are implemented within prescribed time frames, but more work remains.
- **Protecting the privacy of respondent data.** The Bureau reported progress in implementing a disclosure avoidance technique to protect the confidentiality of its respondents' data in their publicly-released statistical products. However, final decisions for the implementation have yet to be made.
- **Ensuring data quality under potentially compressed timeframes.** After data collection, the Bureau must conduct post data collection processing, which removes duplicate responses, ensures complete information is collected, and formats the data files used to produce census results. The delays to data collection operations may affect the Bureau's ability to deliver data to the President and the states on time unless there is a statutory change in required dates.
- **Evaluating the impact of census delays on data quality.** In a post-COVID-19 environment, door-to-door interviewing may be less effective, affecting both NRFU operations and independent surveys that assess the quality of the count. The Bureau's evaluation program—designed to answer questions about the conduct of census operations, including the quality of data collected—becomes a critical component in measuring census coverage.