



Testimony

Before the Committee on Oversight and Reform, U.S. House of Representatives

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# 2020 CENSUS

## Key Areas for Attention Raised by Compressed Timeframes

Statement of J. Christopher Mihm, Managing Director,  
Strategic Issues

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Chairwoman Maloney, Ranking Member Comer, and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss the U.S. Census Bureau's (Bureau) progress in preparing for the 2020 Decennial Census. The Census is mandated by the Constitution and provides vital data for the nation. Census data are used, among other purposes, to apportion the seats of the U.S. House of Representatives; redraw congressional districts in each state; and allocate billions of dollars each year in federal financial assistance.<sup>1</sup>

Like the rest of the country, the Bureau has been required to respond to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) national emergency. Resulting delays, compressed timeframes, implementation of untested procedures, and continuing challenges could undermine the overall quality of the count and escalate census costs. Further, compounding factors in some areas, including high rates of COVID-19 and weather events such as Hurricane Laura and wildfires, affect the Bureau's ability to use in-person methods for obtaining responses.

In March 2020, the Bureau was forced to pause its operations as a result of the COVID-19 national emergency. In May 2020, the Bureau began to resume select operations while facing a new set of operational and public safety challenges resulting from COVID-19. The Department of Commerce (Commerce) had requested that Congress extend its statutory reporting dates by 4 months. While legislation providing this relief has been introduced in Congress, the legislation has not been enacted into law.<sup>2</sup>

On August 3, the Bureau announced it would end data collection by September 30, 2020 and deliver apportionment data by the statutory deadline of December 31, 2020. As a result of this decision, the Bureau

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<sup>1</sup>The Bureau is required by law to count the population as of April 1, 2020 (Census Day); deliver state apportionment counts to the President by December 31, 2020; and provide redistricting data to the states by April 1, 2021. 13 U.S.C. §§ 141(a)-(c).

<sup>2</sup>One bill, The Heroes Act, has passed the House of Representatives. The Heroes Act, H.R. 6800, 116th Cong. (2020). See also Fair and Accurate Census Act, H.R. 7034, S. 4048, 116th Cong. (2020).

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shortened data collection and data processing operations in order to meet the statutory deadlines.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past decade, we have issued numerous reports on challenges and risks facing the 2020 Census. In 2017, we designated the 2020 Census as a high-risk area and added it to our 2017 High-Risk list.<sup>4</sup> The 2020 Census remains on the list, as new innovations, acquisition and development of IT systems for the 2020 Census, and other challenges we have identified in recent years—such as the reliability of the cost estimate—raise serious concerns about the Bureau’s ability to conduct a cost-effective enumeration.<sup>5</sup>

Over the past decade, we have made 112 recommendations specific to the 2020 Census to help address these risks and other concerns. Commerce has generally agreed with these recommendations and has taken action and made progress to address them. To date, the Bureau has implemented 92 of our recommendations and we have closed one recommendation that Commerce did not implement.<sup>6</sup> As of September

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<sup>3</sup>On September 5, 2020, the United States District Court for the Northern District of California issued a temporary restraining order enjoining the Census Bureau from implementing the acceleration of its data collection and data processing operations (as the Bureau announced on August 3, 2020) or allowing any actions as a result of the shortened timelines to be implemented, including but not limited to winding down or altering any Census field operations, until the Court conducts its September 17, 2020 hearing on a motion for a permanent injunction. *National Urban League v. Ross*, Case No. 20-cv-05799 (N.D.Cal. Sept. 5, 2020).

<sup>4</sup>GAO’s high-risk program identifies government operations with vulnerabilities to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement, or in need of transformation to address economy, efficiency, or effectiveness challenges.

<sup>5</sup>GAO, *High-Risk Series: Substantial Efforts Needed to Achieve Greater Progress on High-Risk Areas*. [GAO-19-157SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 2019) and *High-Risk Series: Progress on Many High-Risk Areas, While Substantial Efforts Needed on Others*. [GAO-17-317](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 15, 2017).

<sup>6</sup>In 2010 we recommended that the Bureau assess visitation, response rate, and other applicable data on Be Counted locations. In December 2018, Bureau officials informed us that the 2020 Census would not be relying on Be Counted forms or Questionnaire Assistance Centers, and instead would rely on local partners to determine where best to conduct any special outreach efforts or events. As such, we consider this recommendation closed and not implemented. GAO, *2010 Census: Key Efforts to Include Hard-to-Count Populations Went Generally as Planned; Improvements Could Make the Efforts More Effective for Next Census*. [GAO-11-45](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec 14, 2010).

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2020, 19 of the recommendations have not been fully implemented and 10 of these are designated as priority recommendations.<sup>7</sup>

Since March, we have reported on the steps the Bureau has taken to adapt to its new environment, including suspending and delaying data collection operations; extending the time period for individuals to self-respond by internet, phone, or mail; and using data and criteria to reopen offices and operations as it became safe to do so.<sup>8</sup> We have also reported on the Bureau's updates to its protocols to limit in-person interactions when possible and, where necessary, provide personal protective equipment (PPE) to keep both its employees and the public safe.

My statement today focuses on our most recent work on implementation of the 2020 Census. The information in this statement is based primarily on work we released on August 27 entitled *2020 Census: Recent Decision to Compress Timeframes Poses Additional Risks to an Accurate Count*.<sup>9</sup> For that work, we reviewed, among other things, Bureau planning documentation; Bureau provided data on cost and progress of key operations; and goals as outlined in Bureau plans. In addition, we surveyed the Bureau's entire population of 248 area census office (ACO) managers at various points during the production of the 2020 Census.<sup>10</sup>

We also reviewed information, such as executive-level system status reports and dashboards from our ongoing work on the readiness of the Bureau's IT systems, and the Bureau's status in addressing cybersecurity

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<sup>7</sup>Priority recommendations are those that GAO believes warrant priority attention from heads of key departments or agencies. They are highlighted because, upon implementation, they may significantly improve government operations; for example, by realizing large dollar savings; eliminating mismanagement, fraud, and abuse; or making progress toward addressing a high-risk or fragmentation, overlap, or duplication issue.

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, GAO, *2020 Census: Recent Decision to Compress Census Timeframes Poses Additional Risks to an Accurate Count*, [GAO-20-671R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 27, 2020) and *2020 Census: COVID-19 Presents Delays and Risks to Census Count*, [GAO-20-551R](#) (Washington, D.C., Jun. 9, 2020).

<sup>9</sup>[GAO-20-671R](#).

<sup>10</sup>We surveyed ACO managers at various points during the 2020 Census, including late February to early March, early April, late May, late June to early July, and late August. The response rates were 71, 75, 76, 72, and 67 percent, respectively. We also reviewed open-ended responses provided by the ACO managers as part of this survey.

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risks. More detailed information on our objectives, scope, and methodology can be found in the issued report.

Our work was performed in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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## Compressed Timeframes Pose Additional Risks to an Accurate Count

### The Bureau Considers Late Design Changes to be a Risk

Late design changes introduce risk and can affect cost and quality. The Bureau defines late design changes as modifications to the design of one or more operations or to the design of data products after planning and development milestones are completed. According to the Bureau, late design changes could potentially impact census data quality, force the implementation of an inadequately tested design, and require the Bureau to request additional funds which might put the 2020 Census over the cost goal.<sup>11</sup> The Bureau tracks existing risks in its risk register, a document that catalogues information regarding all risks to the 2020 Census that the Bureau has identified, including risk descriptions and mitigation and contingency plans.<sup>12</sup>

As of August 2020, the Bureau considers the risk of late design changes, to be realized—or to have occurred—due to COVID-19 and schedule changes, including the shift in the planned dates for delivering the apportionment count.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>The Bureau expected the 2020 Census to cost \$15.6 billion in current decennial timeframe costs. According to the Bureau, these figures rely on fiscal year 2020 constant dollar factors derived from the Chained Price Index from “Gross Domestic Product and Deflators Used in the Historical Tables: 1940–2020” table from the Fiscal Year 2016 Budget of the United States Government. According to Commerce documents, the more recently reported figures for the 2020 Census are “inflated to the current 2020 Census time frame (fiscal years 2012 to 2023)” rather than to 2020 constant dollars.

<sup>12</sup>For more information see GAO, *2020 Census: Additional Actions Needed to Manage Risk*, [GAO-19-399](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2019).

<sup>13</sup>We have previously recommended that the Bureau develop and obtain management approval of mitigation and contingency plans for all risks that require them. As of August 2020 this recommendation is still open. [GAO-19-399](#).

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## Areas for Attention Raised by Compressed Field Operations

With about thirty days less than planned to complete non-response follow up (NRFU) under its current timelines, as of September 8, the Bureau is 70.27 percent complete, ahead of its goal to be 62.02 percent complete nationwide for NRFU production. Bureau officials told us that productivity is typically higher at the start of the operation when cases are easier to enumerate. Officials said they expect productivity to slow towards the end of the operation when the most difficult cases remain.

The Bureau must monitor several areas related to workload and completeness as it conducts its field work, including:

- **Hiring and retaining a sufficient NRFU workforce:** The Bureau planned to hire up to 435,000 enumerators to conduct NRFU and began hiring these enumerators on July 14. As of September 8, the Bureau had hired 354,990 NRFU enumerators.<sup>14</sup> Bureau officials told us they are managing local hiring needs for NRFU to ensure there are sufficient applicants with the necessary skills in the hiring pool, but as of August 30, 7 ACOs were below 50 percent of their goal for the number of enumerators actively working.

Further, the Bureau is experiencing a greater attrition rate than it anticipated. The Bureau expected 10 percent of enumerators that started training would not show up for work in the field. However, as of August 18, approximately 35 percent of employees that started training subsequently did not show up for field work.

To combat attrition, Bureau officials told us they are continuing recruiting, hiring, and onboarding enumerators. Additionally, the Bureau is providing incentive awards to census field supervisors based on hours worked and enumerator awards based on hours worked and productivity. The use of awards has not been tested previously in the 2020 Census environment. Bureau officials told us that there are controls built into their time and attendance and production systems to guard against potential abuse. Additionally, Bureau officials stated that its Decennial Field Quality Monitoring Team reviews attendance and production data for indications of enumerator fraud and to ensure awards are properly administered.

- **Operational changes to expedite NRFU:** To meet the September 30, 2020 deadline to complete NRFU data collection the Bureau has made several operational adjustments, some of which have not been tested for purposes of the decennial census. Notably, the Bureau has

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<sup>14</sup>The Bureau considers an individual hired when they have completed their onboarding forms and been sworn in on the first day of training.

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not changed the number of visits it will attempt for a housing unit that has been determined to be occupied. The Bureau will continue to make up to six attempts to collect data from occupied housing units in most cases.<sup>15</sup>

However, on September 5, a temporary restraining order was issued enjoining the Census Bureau from implementing the acceleration of its data collection and data processing operations or allowing any actions as a result of the shortened timelines to be implemented, including but not limited to winding down or altering any Census field operations, until the Court conducts its September 17, 2020 hearing on a motion for a permanent injunction. As a result, the Bureau's ability to continue with the adjustments is unclear at this time.

We are monitoring NRFU operations in our ongoing work, which includes interviewing census field supervisors across the country on their experiences and those of their enumerators.

Our August 2020 survey of all 248 ACO managers found that 40 percent of responding managers reported satisfaction with "time and resources provided to meet production goals while maintaining data quality". We also received comments from more than 20 ACO managers reporting that it will be difficult to complete NRFU by the end of September. Specifically, responding managers expressed concerns regarding inability to complete NRFU in time, insufficient staff in some locations, and resulting inaccuracy in hard-to-count areas.

- **Efforts to ensure coverage at the local level:** The census is inherently local, and response rates vary not only by state but by town. Compounding factors in some areas, including high rates of COVID-19 and weather events such as Hurricane Laura or wildfires, affect the Bureau's ability to visit households to get responses. As of September 1, 49 of the 248 ACOs were not meeting NRFU production goals.

In the COVID-19 environment, the public may be less likely to cooperate with the door-to-door interviews used to reach nonresponding households during NRFU, and less responsive to other in-person interactions used to engage with hard-to-count populations, which may result in a less complete count. Many of the

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<sup>15</sup>Nonresponding households that the Bureau can confirm are occupied using administrative records will only get one NRFU visit and a final mailed invitation to respond, as planned.

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Bureau's efforts to reach hard-to-count populations, such as minorities, short-term renters, and small children, rely on in-person face-to-face interactions with trusted organizations and leaders in the community to build support for the census. Though the Bureau resumed in-person partnership and Mobile Questionnaire Assistance activities in June and July of 2020, a shorter NRFU operation gives these efforts less time to encourage response among hard-to-count populations.<sup>16</sup>

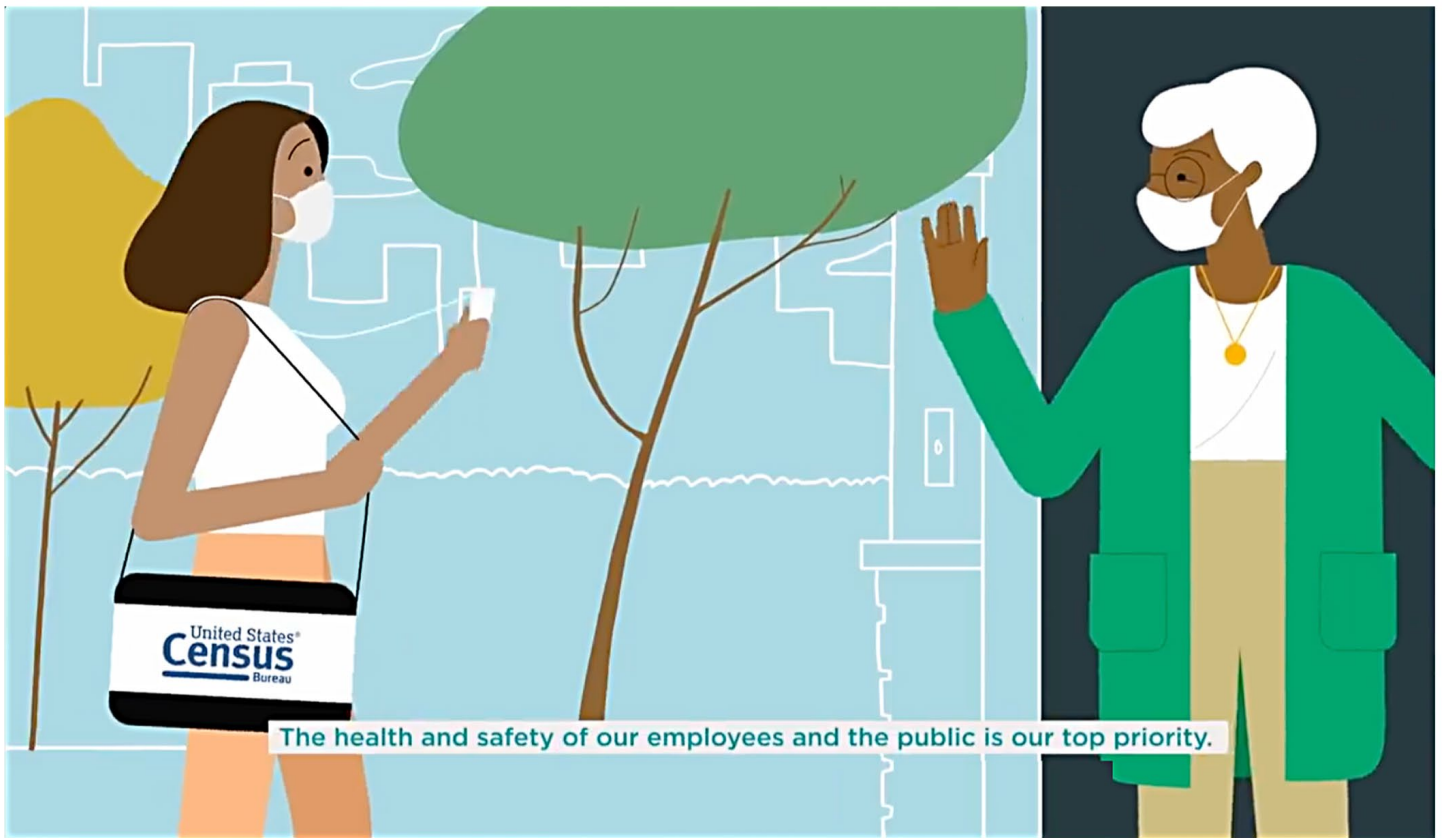
To continue to motivate responses, the Bureau's communications campaign included new advertisements encouraging online self-response and promoting cooperation when census takers arrive to conduct an interview. New advertisements also feature census staff wearing PPE while in the field to address public safety concerns (see figure 1). The Bureau also aimed to reach new audiences with advertisements in 33 additional languages and an expanded list of media vendors, for a total of 45 languages in addition to English.

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<sup>16</sup>The Mobile Questionnaire Assistance (MQA) initiative was intended to provide staff at community events to help people complete their questionnaire and answer questions in locations with low self-response. In July 2020, the Bureau announced that MQA staff would resume offering in-person assistance in select areas based on current health conditions and in accordance with local PPE and social distancing guidelines. The new plan positioned staff in location such as grocery store and pharmacy entrances rather than at large community events.



Figure 1: Example of Census Bureau Advertisement Showing Use of Personal Protective Equipment



Source: Census Bureau. | GAO-20-720T

### Areas for Attention Raised by Streamlined Response Processing

The Bureau has stated that given the compressed data processing schedule, its priority is to provide the data used for apportionment by the statutory deadline of December 31. This commitment means the Bureau would have less time to conduct its post data collection activities, which improve the completeness and accuracy of census data. However, due to the temporary restraining order issued on September 5, the Bureau's plans may change.

During response processing, the Bureau checks for duplicate, inconsistent, and incomplete responses and uses administrative records to supplement response data. These activities were designed to take 153 days, but now would have to be completed in 92 days to meet the statutory deadline. More specifically, the Bureau would expect to begin

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response processing in mid-October 2020, instead of January 2021, as previously planned after Commerce had requested a statutory change to its required deadlines. As a result, there would be less time available to complete the remaining system operational testing needed before the response processing operation begins.

If the Bureau proceeds with its plans to meet the statutory deadline, it will need to monitor the following as it implements response processing:

- **Evaluating risks in streamlining response processing:** Bureau officials said that to meet the statutory date for apportionment, they will prioritize tasks needed to produce apportionment counts rather than simultaneously preparing redistricting data, which requires greater precision. Additionally, they will examine each activity and determine which ones, if removed, would have the smallest effect on the accuracy of the census count. We have requested but have not yet received information from the Bureau about what activities they plan to remove and their potential effects on quality.

The Bureau acknowledges both delays and the compressed timeframes as a risk to data quality. In May 2020, the Bureau added “Data Quality Concerns Resulting from Adjustments to the 2020 Census Operations” as a risk in its risk register. Further, Bureau officials told us in early August that they planned to add “Reaching the Apportionment Date” to their risk register. We have requested but have not yet received information from Commerce on additional updates to the Bureau’s risk register related to the compressed timeframe.

- **Ensuring timely and quality processing of census responses.** It will also be important that the Bureau monitor the risks associated with the ability of its systems to perform census response processing under compressed time frames. The Bureau is doing operational testing of the systems needed to conduct the response processing operation. According to the Bureau, this testing is intended to ensure that all components are ready to conduct the operation, and will need to be completed by early October 2020.

Going forward, it will be important that the Bureau complete all remaining operational testing for the response processing operation as expeditiously as possible to better ensure that its systems are ready to complete this operation under compressed timeframes. If the Bureau does not complete all required testing, it may face an

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increased number of system defects or other issues after it deploys the response processing operation, which could affect the quality and accuracy of the census count.

As the 2020 Census continues, we are monitoring the remainder of field operations and the Bureau's response processing operations. Our work will examine the quality and cost implications of the Bureau's COVID-19 response and late design changes. As we begin to look forward to the initial planning for the 2030 Census, we will also report on the Bureau's experience with its innovations to the 2020 Census and any lessons learned that can inform 2030 planning.

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Chairwoman Maloney, Ranking Member Comer, and Members of the Committee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have.

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## Staff Acknowledgments

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