

GAO
Accountability • Integrity • Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-03-227](#), a report to Congressional Requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Bureau of the Census partnered with local governments, advocacy groups, and other organizations to help it enumerate people without conventional housing. Counting this population—which includes shelter residents and the homeless—has been a longstanding challenge for the Bureau. A number of organizations put substantial resources into an operation the Bureau called Service-Based Enumeration. In return, some expected the Bureau to provide data that would help them plan and deliver employment, health, and other services. However, the Bureau did not release the data as planned, which raised questions about the Bureau's decision-making on data quality issues. In response to a congressional request, GAO examined the Bureau's decision-making process behind its change in plans.

What GAO Recommends

The Secretary of Commerce should direct the Bureau to (1) properly test and evaluate procedures for counting people without conventional housing; (2) develop guidelines for decisions on the level of quality needed to release data to the public, how to characterize any limitations, and when it is acceptable to suppress data; and (3) ensure that plans for releasing data are clearly communicated to data users.

The Bureau agreed with GAO's recommendations, but took issue with our findings on the adequacy of its data quality guidelines.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-227. To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Patricia A. Dalton at (202) 512-6806.

DECENNIAL CENSUS

Methods for Collecting and Reporting Data on the Homeless and Others Without Conventional Housing Need Refinement

What GAO Found

The Bureau's original plan for releasing Service-Based Enumeration data was outlined in an April 1999 internal memorandum that called for the separate release of data on people counted at "emergency and transitional shelters." The Bureau planned to combine other components of Service-Based Enumeration, including people counted at soup kitchens, regularly scheduled mobile food vans, and certain outdoor locations, into a single category. Driving the Bureau's decision was its experience during the 1990 Census when it released separate counts of people found at shelters, on the street, and similar locations that proved to be incomplete. The Bureau also tried to ensure that the Service-Based Enumeration figures could not be used as a "homeless" count, because it was not designed to provide a specific count of the homeless. Instead, the operation was part of a larger effort to count people without conventional housing.

The Homeless Are Hard to Enumerate



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

In January 2001, the Bureau changed its earlier decision because a statistical procedure used to refine the emergency and transitional shelter data proved to be unreliable, which lowered the quality of the data. In response, the Bureau combined the shelter data with a category called "other non-institutional group quarters," a category that also includes data on people enumerated in several other group locations such as facilities for victims of natural disasters. In the fall of 2001, the Bureau produced a heavily qualified special report on the shelter data. A key cause of the Bureau's shifting position on reporting these data appears to be its lack of well documented, transparent, clearly defined, and consistently applied guidelines on the minimum quality necessary for releasing data. Had these guidelines been in place at the time of the census, the Bureau could have been better positioned to make an objective decision on releasing these figures. Additionally, the Bureau could have used the guidance to explain to data users the reasons for the decision, eliminating any appearance of censorship and arbitrariness. Because the Bureau did not always adequately communicate its plans for releasing the data, expectation gaps developed between the Bureau and entities that helped with Service-Based Enumeration.