

Why GAO Did This Study

To overcome the long-standing challenge of enumerating hard-to-count (HTC) groups such as minorities and renters, the U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau), used outreach programs, such as paid advertising, and partnered with thousands of organizations to enlist their support for the census. The Bureau also conducted Service-Based Enumeration (SBE), which was designed to count people who frequent soup kitchens or other service providers, and the Be Counted/Questionnaire Assistance Center (QAC) program, designed to count individuals who believed the census had missed them. As requested, GAO assessed how the design of these efforts compared to 2000 and the extent to which they were implemented as planned. GAO reviewed Bureau budget, planning, operational, and evaluation documents; observed enumeration efforts in 12 HTC areas; surveyed local census office managers; and interviewed Bureau officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Bureau take steps to improve the effectiveness of its outreach and enumeration activities aimed at HTC groups, including developing a predictive model to better allocate paid advertising funds, improving coordination between partnership and local census staff, revisiting SBE staffing guidance, and ensuring Be Counted/QAC sites are more visible and optimally located. Commerce generally agreed with the overall findings and recommendations.

2010 CENSUS

Key Efforts to Include Hard-to-Count Populations Went Generally as Planned; Improvements Could Make the Efforts More Effective for Next Census

What GAO Found

The Bureau better positioned itself to reach out to and enumerate HTC populations in 2010 in part by addressing a number of key challenges from 2000. The Bureau's outreach efforts were generally more robust compared to 2000. For example, compared to 2000, the Bureau used more reliable data to target advertising; focused a larger share of its advertising dollars on HTC groups, such as non-English-speaking audiences; and strengthened its monitoring abilities so that the Bureau was able to run additional advertising in locations where mail response rates were lagging. The Bureau also significantly expanded the partnership program by hiring about 2,800 partnership staff in 2010 compared to around 600 in 2000. As a result, staff were not spread as thin. The number of languages they spoke increased from 35 in 2000 to 145 for the 2010 Census.

Despite these enhancements, the outreach efforts still faced challenges. For example, while most of the partnership staff GAO interviewed reported having mutually supportive relationships with local census offices, about half of the local census office managers surveyed were dissatisfied with the level of coordination, noting duplication of effort in some cases. Additionally, a tracking database that partnership staff were to use to help manage their efforts was not user-friendly nor was it kept current.

The Bureau also improved the key enumeration programs aimed at HTC groups and the efforts were generally implemented as planned, but additional refinements could improve them for 2020. For example, the Bureau expanded SBE training by teaching staff how to enumerate all types of SBE facilities, which gave the Bureau more flexibility in scheduling enumerations, and advance visits helped enhance service providers' readiness for the enumeration. Nevertheless, while most local census office managers were satisfied with SBE staffing levels, pockets of dissatisfaction existed and observers noted what appeared to be a surplus of enumerators with little work to do in some locations. While overstaffing can lead to unnecessarily higher labor costs, understaffing can also be problematic because it can affect the accuracy of the overall count, and it will be important for the Bureau to review the results of SBE to staff SBE efficiently in 2020.

For the Be Counted/QAC program, the Bureau addressed visibility and site selection challenges from 2000 by developing banners to prominently display site locations and hours of operation and updating site selection guidance. For 2010, the Bureau opened around 38,000 sites and completed the monthlong operation under budget. However, the Bureau experienced recurring challenges with ensuring that the sites were visible from street level and were in areas with potential for high levels of activity, and the overall effort was resource intensive relative to the average of 20 forms that were returned and checked in from each site. Moving forward, it will be important for the Bureau to explore ways to maximize the program's ability to increase the number of forms checked in for 2020.