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CENSUS 2010

Census at Critical Juncture
for Implementing Risk
Reduction Strategies

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Highlights of [GAO-08-659T](#), a testimony for Chairmen, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform and the Subcommittee on Information Policy, Census, and National Archives, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2007, the U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) estimated the 2010 Census would cost \$11.5 billion, including \$3 billion on automation and technology. At a March hearing, the Department of Commerce (Commerce) stated that the Field Data Collection Automation (FDCA) program was likely to incur significant cost overruns and announced a redesign effort. At that time, GAO designated the 2010 Decennial Census as high risk, citing long-standing concerns in managing information technology (IT) investments and uncertain costs and operations. This testimony is based on past work and work nearing completion, including GAO's observation of the address canvassing dress rehearsal. For IT acquisitions, GAO analyzed system documentation, including deliverables, cost estimates, other acquisitions-related documents, and interviewed Bureau officials and contractors. This testimony describes the implications of redesign for (1) dress rehearsal and decennial operations, (2) IT acquisitions management, and (3) Decennial Census costs.

What GAO Recommends

In its reports, GAO has recommended that the Bureau improve acquisition management capabilities, operational planning, cost estimation, and performance measurement. The Bureau agreed with most of these recommendations, but has not fully implemented them.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-659T](#). For more information, contact Mathew Scire` at (202) 512-6806 or sciremj@gao.gov or David A. Powner at (202) 512-9286 or pownerd@gao.gov.

2010 CENSUS

Census at Critical Juncture for Implementing Risk Reduction Strategies

What GAO Found

The Decennial Census is at a critical stage in the 2008 Dress Rehearsal, in which the Bureau has its last opportunity to test its plans for 2010 under census-like conditions. Last week Commerce announced significant changes to the FDCA program. It also announced that it expected the cost of the decennial to be up to \$3 billion greater than previously estimated. The redesign will have fundamental impacts on the dress rehearsal as well as 2010 Census operations. Changes this late in the decade introduce additional risks, making more important the steps the Bureau can take to manage those risks. The content and timing of dress rehearsal operations must be altered to accommodate the Bureau's design. For example, Commerce has selected an option that calls for the Bureau to drop the use of handheld computers (HHCs) during the nonresponse follow-up operation, and the Bureau may now be unable to fully rehearse a paper-based operation. Additionally, reverting to a paper-based nonresponse follow-up operation presents the Bureau with a wide range of additional challenges, such as arranging for the printing of enumerator forms and testing the systems that will read the data from these forms once completed by enumerators.

Given the redesign effort, implementing GAO's recommendations associated with managing the IT acquisitions is as critical as ever. Specifically, the Bureau needs to strengthen its acquisition management capabilities, including finalizing FDCA requirements. Further, it also needs to strengthen its risk management activities, including developing risk mitigation plans for significant risks and improving its executive-level governance of these acquisitions. The Bureau also needs to plan and conduct key tests, including end-to-end testing, to help ensure that decennial systems perform as expected.

According to the Bureau, the redesign and related revision of the FDCA program is expected to result in significant increases to the life cycle cost estimate for the 2010 Census. Even without considering the recent expected cost increases announced by the Bureau to accompany the redesign of the FDCA program, the Bureau's cost projections for the 2010 Census revealed an escalating trend from previous censuses. Previously, GAO recommended that the Bureau develop an integrated and comprehensive plan to manage operations. Specifically, to understand and manage the assumptions that drive the cost of the decennial census, GAO recommended, among other actions, that the Bureau annually update the cost of the 2010 Census and conduct sensitivity analysis on the \$11.5 billion estimate. However, while the Bureau understands the utility of sensitivity analysis, it has not conducted such an analysis.

Mr. Chairmen and Members of the Committee and Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing. As you know, we recently designated the 2010 Decennial Census as a high-risk area, citing a number of long-standing and emerging challenges facing the census.¹ These include weaknesses in managing information technology (IT), operational planning, and cost estimating, as well as uncertainty over dress rehearsal plans and the ultimate cost of the census.

For 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) planned to make greater use of technology. Among other things, the Bureau planned to automate some of its field data collection activities as a way to reduce costs and improve data quality and operational efficiency. In fact, census workers used new technology, handheld computers (HHCs), during last spring's dress rehearsal operation. The Field Data Collection Automation (FDCA) program is a key IT acquisition that includes systems, equipment, and infrastructure for field staff to use in collecting census data for the 2010 Census. Last year, the Bureau had estimated this and other IT acquisitions would account for about \$3 billion of the then-estimated \$11.5 billion total cost of the census. Under the FDCA program the Bureau planned to use HHCs during operations such as address canvassing, nonresponse follow-up, and census coverage measurement. Last year, during address canvassing dress rehearsal field activities in California and North Carolina, both we and Bureau officials observed a number of performance problems with the HHCs (such as slow and inconsistent data transmissions).

At a March 2008 hearing, the Department of Commerce (Commerce) and the Bureau stated that the FDCA program was likely to incur significant cost overruns and said that a redesigning effort to get the Decennial Census back on track was under way. The Secretary of Commerce outlined several alternatives for redesigning this central technology investment, including possibly dropping the HHCs from the nonresponse follow-up operation. Last week, the Secretary chose to do just that. Additionally, he decided that the Bureau would reduce deployment of field technology infrastructure by the contractor, and have the contractor provide HHCs for address canvassing and develop the information system for controlling field operations.

¹ GAO, *Information Technology: Significant Problems of Critical Automation Program Contribute to Risks Facing 2010 Census*, [GAO-08-550T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 5, 2008).

As requested, our testimony today will call upon our past work, including our observation of the use of the HHCs in the address canvassing dress rehearsal, to provide a description of implications of the redesign for (1) dress rehearsal and Decennial Census operations, (2) IT acquisitions management, and (3) Decennial Census costs. Our remarks today are based primarily on reports that we issued from 2002 through December 2007 on the planning and development of the 2010 Census, as well as the results of work nearing completion. We visited census test sites in Queens, New York; several counties in rural south-central Georgia; Austin, Texas; and the Cheyenne Indian Reservation in South Dakota. During these visits we observed tests of the address canvassing operation, and we observed tests of the nonresponse follow-up operation. In May and June 2007, we observed address canvassing at the 2008 Dress Rehearsal in sites located in North Carolina and California. For IT acquisitions we analyzed system documentation, including project plans, deliverables, cost estimates, earned value management data, other acquisition-related documents, and we interviewed Bureau officials and contractors.

This work was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Results in Brief

The redesign of the Decennial Census carries with it significant implications for its key operations—address canvassing and nonresponse follow-up. Among these are the need for putting in place a paper-based nonresponse follow-up operation, devising approaches to manage workload from late mail returns, and ensuring that the automation for address canvassing works. This is not an exhaustive list of the numerous challenges the Bureau faces going forward. While these challenges are significant, it must be stressed that the Bureau could have faced overwhelming challenges had it chosen not to redesign the Decennial Census.

Given the redesign effort, implementing our recommendations associated with managing the IT acquisitions is as critical as ever. Specifically, the Bureau needs to strengthen its acquisition management capabilities, including finalizing FDCA requirements. The Bureau also needs to strengthen its risk management activities, including developing risk mitigation plans for significant risks and improving its executive-level

governance of these acquisitions. The Bureau also needs to plan and conduct key tests, including end-to-end testing to help ensure that decennial systems perform as expected.

According to the Bureau, this redesign and subsequent revision of the FDCA program is expected to result in significant increases to the life cycle cost estimate for the 2010 Census. Last week, the Secretary testified that the Decennial Census could cost up to \$3 billion more than the existing \$11.5 billion total life cycle cost estimate. Even without considering the recent expected cost increases announced by the Bureau that will accompany the streamlining of the FDCA program, the Bureau's cost projections for the 2010 Census revealed an escalating trend compared to those from previous Censuses. In constant 2010 dollars, the estimated \$11.8 billion cost of the 2010 Census, before the FDCA program redesign, represented a more than tenfold increase over the \$1 billion spent on the 1970 Census. To manage the 2010 Census and contain costs, we previously recommended that the Bureau develop a comprehensive, integrated project plan for the 2010 Census that should include itemized estimated costs of each component, including a sensitivity analysis and an explanation of significant changes in the assumptions on which these costs were based.² In response, the Bureau provided us with the 2010 Census Operations and Systems Plan dated August 2007. This plan represented an important step forward at the time. It included inputs and outputs and described linkages among operations and systems. However, it did not include sensitivity analysis, risk mitigation plans, a detailed 2010 Census timeline, or itemized estimated costs of each component. With the redesign, this plan will need to be updated.

Redesign Implications for Decennial Census Operations

The Decennial Census is at a critical stage in the 2008 Dress Rehearsal, in which the Bureau has its last opportunity to test its plans for 2010 under census-like conditions. The dress rehearsal features a mock Census Day, now set for May 1, 2008. Last year at this time, the Bureau carried out a major dress rehearsal operation—address canvassing—in which the Bureau updated address lists and collected global positioning coordinates for mapspots. The largest field operation of the dress rehearsal was to have begun this month. In this operation (nonresponse follow-up), field

² GAO, *2010 Census: Redesign Approach Holds Promise, but Census Bureau Needs to Annually Develop and Provide a Comprehensive Project Plan to Monitor Costs*, [GAO-06-1009T](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 27, 2006).

staff were to conduct face-to-face interviews with households that did not mail back their questionnaires.

Prior to the redesigning effort, the Bureau had already changed its plans for the dress rehearsal, in part, to focus greater attention on the testing of technology. In a November 20, 2007, decision memo, the Bureau announced that it would delay Census Day for the dress rehearsal by 1 month, to May 1, 2008. The Bureau also listed a number of operations it no longer planned to rehearse, including group quarters enumeration and census coverage measurement. Also in February 2008, the Bureau announced that it would remove from the scope of the FDCA program contract the development of all systems and software associated with the census coverage measurement operation.

The redesign approach selected by the Secretary will require that the Bureau quickly develop and test a paper-based nonresponse follow-up operation. Any paper-based option has its own set of unique issues, such as setting up operations to support paper field data collection centers and seeking printing solutions for enumerator forms. Among other issues, decisions on a printing solution will need to be made soon. Although the Bureau has carried out paper-based operations before, in some cases they now involve new procedures and system interfaces that as a result of their exclusion from the dress rehearsal, will not be tested under census-like conditions. For nonresponse follow-up in 2010 the Bureau will be using newly developed systems for integrating responses and controlling workload. For example, the Bureau will need to rely on a newly developed system called the Decennial Response Integration System to identify households that have not returned census forms and for collecting the results of enumerators conducting nonresponse follow-up person interviews. Dropping the use of the HHCs for nonresponse follow-up and reverting to paper for that operation this late in the decade also precludes nonresponse follow-up from being fully tested in the dress rehearsal. Under the delayed dress rehearsal this operation was to begin next month, soon after households in dress rehearsal locations were to return their census forms. A paper operation requires different training, maps, and other material to be prepared prior to the operation. The Bureau has announced no specific plans for conducting field testing of certain key operations, such as nonresponse follow-up. Without sufficient testing, operational problems can go undiscovered and the opportunity to improve operations will be lost.

The redesign's move from the use of HHCs to a paper-based nonresponse follow-up operation may limit the Bureau's ability to reduce follow-up with

persons who are late in returning their census questionnaires. One of the primary advantages the Bureau cited for using HHCs was the ability, as late mail returns came in, to remove those addresses from enumerators' assignments—preventing enumerators from doing unnecessary work. According to the Bureau, in 2000 enumerators visited over 4 million households that had returned their census form late. In 2004, the Bureau tested the capability of an earlier prototype of the HHC to adjust workloads by identifying late mail returns. We reported in 2007 that based on these tests it appears that if the Bureau had possessed this capability during the 2000 Census, it could have eliminated the need to visit nearly 773,000 late-responding households and saved an estimated \$22 million (based on our estimate that a 1 percentage point increase in workload could add at least \$34 million in direct salary, benefits, and travel costs to the price tag of nonresponse follow-up³). The Director of the Census Bureau stated that he believes that the Bureau can still partially adjust enumerator workload to recognize late mail returns without the use of HHCs. To achieve this objective, the Bureau will need to specify the process it will use and conduct appropriate tests.

The redesign will also affect the 2010 Census address canvassing operation. The Secretary's decision to use the HHCs for the 2010 address canvassing operation means that certain performance issues with the handheld technology must be addressed promptly. Field staff experienced difficulties using the technology during the address canvassing dress rehearsal. For example, workers reported problems with HHCs when working in large assignment areas during address canvassing. The devices could not accommodate more than 720 addresses—3 percent of dress rehearsal assignment areas were larger than that. The amount of data transmitted and used slowed down the HHCs significantly. Identification of these problems caused the contractor to create a task team to examine the issues, and the team recommended improving the end-to-end performance of the mobile solution by controlling the size of assignment area data delivered to the HHC both for address canvassing and nonresponse follow-up operations. One specific recommendation was limiting the size of assignment areas to 200 total addresses. However, the redesign effort took another approach that uses laptops and the software application used for the American Community Survey to collect information in large assignment areas. It is not yet clear how this

³ GAO, *2000 Census: Contingency Planning Needed to Address Risk That Pose a Threat to a Successful Census*, GAO/GGD-00-6 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 14, 1999).

work-around will be carried out. Furthermore, the Bureau will need to define specific and measurable performance requirements for the HHCs as we recommended in January 2005.⁴

Another operational issue is the ability of the contractor to accept changes to its address files after it completes address canvassing updates. This could preclude the Bureau from conducting “restart/redo” operations for an area where the address file is discovered to be incorrect. This function is critical in developing an accurate and complete address list. Without the ability to update the mailing list for “restart/redo” operations, the Bureau would consider not mailing census questionnaires to addresses in that area and instead deliver census forms by hand. This has the potential to significantly increase costs.

Redesign Implications for IT Acquisitions

The Bureau still needs to agree upon and finalize requirements for the FDCA program. In March 2006, we reported that the FDCA project office had not implemented the full set of acquisition management capabilities (such as project and acquisition planning and requirements development and management) that were needed to effectively manage the program.⁵ For example, although the project office had developed baseline functional requirements for the acquisition, the Bureau had not yet validated and approved them. Subsequently, in October 2007, we reported that changes to requirements had been a contributing factor to both cost increases and schedule delays experienced by the FDCA program.⁶ In June 2007, an assessment by an independent contractor of the FDCA program reported on requirements management problems—much like those we reported in March 2006. Similar to our recommendation, the independent assessors recommended that the Bureau immediately stabilize requirements by defining and refining them. The Bureau has recently made efforts to further define requirements for the FDCA program, and it has estimated that the revised requirements will result in significant cost increases. On January 16, 2008, the Bureau provided the FDCA contractor

⁴ GAO, *2010 Census: Basic Design Has Potential, but Remaining Challenges Need Prompt Resolution*, [GAO-05-9](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 12, 2005).

⁵ GAO, *Census Bureau: Important Activities for Improving Management of Key 2010 Decennial Acquisitions Remain to be Done*, [GAO-06-444T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 1, 2006).

⁶ GAO, *Information Technology: Census Bureau Needs to Improve Its Risk Management of Decennial Systems*, [GAO-08-79](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 5, 2007).

with a list of over 400 requirements for the FDCA program to reconcile. Although some of these new requirements will be dropped based on the Secretary's recent decision, many will still need to be addressed to ensure that FDCA will perform as needed.

Commerce and Bureau officials need to address critical weaknesses in risk management practices. In October 2007, we reported that the FDCA project had weaknesses in identifying risks, establishing adequate mitigation plans, and reporting risk status to executive-level officials.⁷ For example, the FDCA project team had not developed mitigation plans that were timely or complete nor did it provide regular briefings on risks to senior executives. The FDCA project team's failure to report a project's risks to executive-level officials reduces the visibility of risks to executives who should be playing a role in mitigating them.

As of October 2007, in response to the cost and schedule changes, the Bureau decided to delay certain system functionality for FDCA. As a result, the operational testing that was to occur during the dress rehearsal period around May 1, 2008, would not include tests of the full complement of Decennial Census systems and their functionality. Operational testing helps verify that systems function as intended in an operational environment. In late 2007, according to Bureau officials, testing plans for IT systems were to be finalized in February 2008. Therefore, we recommended that the Bureau plan and conduct critical testing, including end-to-end testing of the Decennial Census systems.⁸ As of March 2008, the Bureau still had not developed these test plans. In the recent program redesign, the Bureau included conducting end-to-end testing. The inability to perform comprehensive operational testing of all interrelated systems increases the risk that further cost overruns will occur, that decennial systems will experience performance shortfalls, or both.

Given the redesigning effort, implementing our recommendations associated with managing the IT acquisitions is as critical as ever. Specifically, the Bureau needs to strengthen its acquisition management capabilities, including finalizing FDCA requirements. Further, it also needs to strengthen its risk management activities, including developing adequate risk mitigation plans for significant risks and improving its executive-level governance of these acquisitions. The Bureau also needs to

⁷ [GAO-08-79](#)

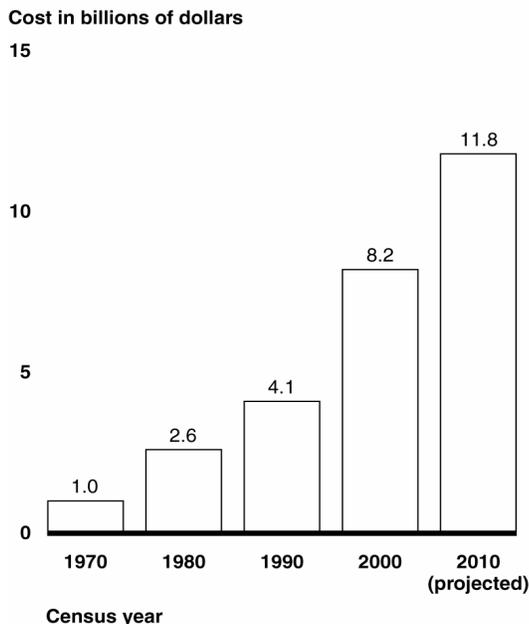
⁸ [GAO-08-79](#)

plan and conduct key tests, including end-to-end testing, to help ensure that decennial systems perform as expected.

Redesign Implications for Decennial Census Life Cycle Costs

Even without considering the recent expected cost increases announced by the Bureau to accommodate the redesign of the FDCA program, the Bureau's cost projections for the 2010 Census revealed an escalating trend from the 1970 Census. As shown in figure 1, the estimated \$11.8 billion cost (expressed in constant 2010 dollars) of the 2010 Census, before the FDCA program redesign, represented a more than tenfold increase over the \$1 billion spent on the 1970 Census. The 1970 Census was the first Census to rely on mailing census forms to households and asking for a mail return—a major part of the data collection. Although some of the cost increase could be expected because the number of housing units—and hence the Bureau's workload—has gotten larger, the cost growth has far exceeded the increase in the number of housing units. The Bureau estimated that the number of housing units for the 2010 Census would increase by almost 14 percent over Census 2000 levels.

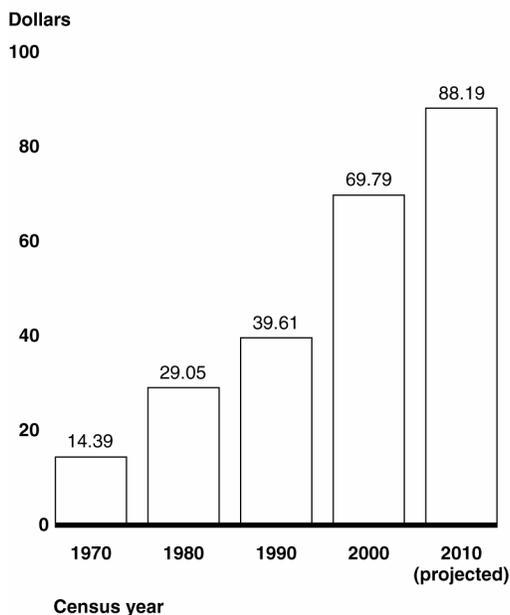
Figure 1: Decennial Census Costs from 1970 through 2010 (Projected) in Constant 2010 Dollars



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Census Bureau figures.

As figure 2 shows, before the FDCA program redesign, the Bureau estimated that the average cost per housing unit for the 2010 Census was expected to increase by approximately 26 percent over 2000 levels, from \$69.79 per housing unit to \$88.19 per housing unit in constant 2010 dollars. When the projected cost increase that accompanies the FDCA program redesign is considered, the average cost per housing unit will increase by an even greater percentage.

Figure 2: Decennial Census Average Cost per Housing Unit from 1970 through 2010 (Projected) in Constant 2010 Dollars



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Census Bureau figures.

Given the projected increase in spending, it will be imperative that the Bureau effectively manage the 2010 Census, as the risk exists that the actual, final cost of the census could be considerably higher than anticipated. Indeed, this was the case for the 2000 Census, when the Bureau's initial cost projections proved to be too low because of such factors as unforeseen operational problems and changes to the fundamental design. The Bureau estimated that the 2000 Census would cost around \$5 billion. However, the final price tag for the 2000 Census was more than \$6.5 billion, a 30 percent increase in cost. Large federal deficits and other fiscal challenges underscore the importance of managing the cost of the census, while promoting an accurate, timely census.

We have repeatedly reported that the Bureau would be challenged to control the cost of the 2010 Census. In January 2004, we reported that under the Bureau's approach for reengineering the 2010 Census, the Bureau might find it difficult to reduce operational risk because reengineering introduces new risks.⁹ To manage the 2010 Census and contain costs, we recommended that the Bureau develop a comprehensive, integrated project plan for the 2010 Census that should include the itemized estimated costs of each component, including a sensitivity analysis and an explanation of significant changes in the assumptions on which these costs were based. In response, the Bureau provided us with the 2010 Census Operations and Systems Plan, dated August 2007. This plan represented an important step forward at the time. It included inputs and outputs and described linkages among operations and systems. However, it did not yet include sensitivity analysis, risk mitigation plans, a detailed 2010 Census timeline, or itemized estimated costs of each component. Going forward, it will be important for the Bureau to update its operations plan.

The assumptions in the fiscal year 2009 President's Budget life cycle cost estimate of \$11.5 billion may not have included recent productivity data from last year's address canvassing dress rehearsal. According to the Bureau, initially, the cost model assumed productivity for address canvassing to be 25.6 addresses per hour for urban/suburban areas. However, results from the address canvassing dress rehearsal showed productivity of 13.4 addresses per hour for urban/suburban areas. While the life cycle cost estimate increased slightly to \$11.5 billion in the fiscal year 2009 President's Budget, these increases were attributed to other factors and not to lower-than-expected canvassing productivity. Best practices call for cost model assumptions to be updated as new information becomes available. We previously reported that the life cycle cost estimate has not been updated to reflect changes in assumptions. In July 2006, we testified that the estimate had not been updated to reflect the results of testing conducted in 2004.¹⁰ As the Bureau updates its estimate of the life cycle cost annually and as part of the redesigning effort, it will be important that it reflect changing assumptions for productivity and hours worked.

⁹ GAO, *2010 Census: Cost and Design Issues Need to Be Addressed Soon*, GAO-04-37 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 15, 2004).

¹⁰ GAO-06-1009T

Concluding Observations

Given its size and complexity, carrying out the Decennial Census presents significant challenges under any circumstances. Late changes in census plans and operations, long-standing weaknesses in IT acquisition and contract management, limited capacity for undertaking these critical management functions, scaling back of dress rehearsal activities, and uncertainty as to the ultimate cost of the 2010 Census puts the success of this effort in jeopardy. Managing these risks is critical to the timely completion of a reliable and cost-effective census. Implementing our recommendations would help the Bureau effectively manage the myriad of interrelated operations needed to ensure an accurate and complete count in 2010 (Bureau officials have agreed with many of our recommendations, but have not fully implemented them).

The dress rehearsal represents a critical stage in preparing for the 2010 Census. This is the time when the Congress and others should have the information they need to know how well the design for 2010 is likely to work, what risks remain, and how those risks will be mitigated. We have highlighted some of the risks today. Going forward, it will be important for the Bureau to specify how it will ensure that planned dress rehearsal operations will be successfully carried out, and how it will provide assurance that the largest operation—nonresponse follow-up—will be tested in the absence of a full dress rehearsal. Likewise, the Bureau will need to establish plans for working around limitations in the technology to be used in address canvassing operations. It is critical that the Bureau ensure that the technology for conducting address canvassing is a success.

The Bureau should implement prior recommendations in moving forward. Contractor-developed IT systems and deliverables need to be closely monitored to ensure that contractors are performing within budget. As we have stressed throughout this testimony and in our prior recommendations, the Bureau needs to practice aggressive project management and governance over both the IT and non-IT components. Further, it is essential that the Bureau implement our recommendations related to information technology. The Bureau must solidify the FDCA program requirements, strengthen risk management activities, and plan and conduct critical testing of the Decennial Census systems.

Mr. Chairmen, Census Day is less than 2 years away and address canvassing is 1 year away. The challenges we highlighted today call for effective risk mitigation by the U.S. Census Bureau, and careful monitoring and oversight by the Department of Commerce, the Office of Management and Budget, the Congress, GAO, and other key stakeholders. As in the

past, we look forward to supporting the committee and subcommittee's oversight efforts to promote an accurate and cost-effective census.

Mr. Chairmen, this concludes our statement. We would be glad to answer any questions you and the committee and subcommittee members may have.

Contacts and Acknowledgments

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