



Report In Brief

U.S. Department of Commerce Office of Inspector General

November 18, 2010



Why We Did this Review

As part of our ongoing oversight of the 2010 census, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) audited purchases made under the Partner Support Program (PSP) to determine

- (1) whether Census Bureau employees effectively managed PSP purchases to prevent fraud, waste, and abuse;
- (2) whether bureau employees correctly followed PSP procedures; and
- (3) whether employees responsible for administering the program were adequately trained.

Background

PSP was developed by the Census Bureau to complement the outreach efforts of Census's partner organizations. Partner organizations include government, non-profit, and corporate or community organizations that formally pledged their commitment to share the 2010 Census message and mobilize their constituents in support of the bureau's goal of achieving a complete and accurate count.

Through its partners, Census tried to reach a wider audience of historically "hard-to-count" demographic groups. The bureau also sought to increase mail response, reduce undercounting, and communicate a consistent message about the decennial census.

Census worked with its partners in a variety of ways to spread the bureau's message, including purchasing promotional items (such as pens, flyers, or caps) for the partners to distribute locally, and participating in festivals or other community events.

Census Bureau

2010 Census: The Partner Support Program Lacked Adequate Controls for Monitoring Purchases and Ensuring Compliance (OIG-11-013-A)

What We Found

While Census has several reports and systems in place to monitor purchases made for partners, few of the systems actually communicate with or reconcile to one another. This makes it difficult for Census headquarters to track purchases over the long term. Purchases that had been miscoded in some of these systems further hindered management's ability to monitor the program.

Some Census employees who had purchasing authority did not follow federal and Commerce acquisition guidelines and policies. For example, employees paid intermediary vendors with the understanding that the vendor receiving the payment would forward funds to the vendor providing the products or services. In other cases, employees placed and received large orders without authorization, failed to safeguard government purchase card account information, or did not properly document purchase details. We also discovered a potential conflict of interest between a partner and a vendor that had gone undetected until several purchases had already been made.

Finally, purchasing for the program started later than anticipated, and the program changed rapidly over its lifecycle. These factors made it difficult to train Census staff thoroughly and in a timely fashion. Although the bureau distributed written guidance to staff, the guidance was often unclear or misunderstood by them.

What We Recommended

The last PSP purchase was approved in May 2010. Therefore, our recommendations focus on planning for future decennials. Should Census implement a similar promotional outreach program in 2020, we recommend the following:

1. Ensure that manual and automated tracking systems are fully functional and integrated, and that reconciliation with the financial accounting system is in place prior to implementing the program.
2. Improve management oversight of purchase card purchases to identify staff non-compliance with policies and procedures for both purchase cardholders and partnership staff.
3. Conduct timely training that reemphasizes federal and Commerce acquisition rules, such as split purchases, conflicts of interests, and other procedural rules; and provide manuals with updates and step-by-step processing transaction instructions.