



Report In Brief

DECEMBER 3, 2013

Background

The Census Bureau is directed by law to carry out the decennial census, which is mandated by the Constitution. Decennial census data are used to apportion seats in Congress, re-draw congressional districts, and allocate hundreds of billions of dollars in federal funds for state and local governments, as well as other public- and private-sector purposes.

The 2020 Census, though years away, is a massive undertaking that requires extensive planning and testing. For 2020, the Census Bureau plans to design and conduct a high-quality decennial operation that will cost less per household on an inflation-adjusted basis than the 2010 Census. To achieve this goal, the bureau is focusing on three primary design features: (1) offering the Internet as a response option, (2) targeted address canvassing, and (3) using administrative records to follow up on cases of non-response. Implementing these changes could save the government hundreds of millions of dollars.

Why We Did This Review

Preparations for the 2020 Census must be completed early in the decade if congressionally-mandated deadlines are to be met, and because of the sheer size of the task: counting millions of people and housing units.

Our audit objectives for reviewing the 2020 Census research program were to (1) assess the implementation status of each individual project in the 2020 Census design effort, including the extent of implementation, time frames for completion, milestones, deliverables, and impact on the overall design program, (2) assess the bureau's plans to evaluate each research project, including whether accurate and reliable data will be available to determine each project's impact on design efforts, and (3) determine if governance and internal controls are adequate to manage the design effort.

CENSUS BUREAU

2020 Census Planning: Research Delays and Program Management Challenges Threaten Design Innovation

OIG-14-003-A

WHAT WE FOUND

The current Census schedule shows research delays and lacks budget integration. Research activities for the 2020 Census are delayed, with the schedule undergoing major revisions almost 2 years into the R&T phase. The bureau's ability to manage the research program in a challenging budget environment is hampered by not integrating budget information with the research schedule.

Research quality assurance strategy is undeveloped. Most research teams are not incorporating the results of Census Program Evaluation and Experiments (CPEX) into 2020 Census research. In addition, quality control measures are not evenly applied at the project level and the quality assurance practices for many projects are unclear or incomplete.

Program management plans incorporate best practices, but implementation is inconsistent. Implementation of decisions and program management processes has been uneven, with the bureau abandoning its efforts to develop a complex automated tool for comparing relative costs and quality of alternative designs. A new governance structure clearly defines functions of various parties and who is responsible for key decisions, but the structure does not establish a policy or mechanism for documenting those decisions.

WHAT WE RECOMMEND

We recommend that the director of the Census Bureau:

1. Determine when 2020 Census design decisions must be made; adhere to an activity schedule that aligns with those decision points; and develop a critical path for the 2020 Census R&T schedule.
2. Determine whether efforts to resolve internal data-sharing problems are progressing adequately.
3. Incorporate earned value management (EVM) and budgets at the project level to prioritize projects as well as assess and quantify 2020 Census research program results.
4. Define and adhere to a final testing schedule. Determine how iterative testing and the American Community Survey can be used for the operational testing phase.
5. Require R&T teams to update the Knowledge Management Database with the status of current CPEX recommendations and develop a bureau-wide solution for knowledge management.
6. Create a more structured process for R&T review by drafting guidelines that specify responsibilities of the Scientific and Methodological review panels and the research teams.
7. Ensure research outputs are usable and on time to drive the trade-off analysis process and develop a vehicle for communicating key decisions and events.
8. Establish a formal process to review, approve, and monitor R&T project teams' risk registers to ensure timely identification of risks and development of mitigation and contingency plans as appropriate.