



OIG Flash Report

US Department of Commerce
Office of Inspector General



May 2009

Program/Operation: US Census Bureau Address Canvassing Operation

Risk Areas:

Cost

Schedule

Performance/Quality

Accountability/Transparency

Census 2010: Observations and Address Listers' Reports Provide Serious Indications That Important Address Canvassing Procedures Are Not Being Followed (OIG-19636-01)

To conduct the 2010 census, the Census Bureau must contact, via mail or in person, more than 130 million housing units, and will rely on its master address file and maps to do so. The address file is intended to be a current, comprehensive list of every address in the nation—whether occupied or vacant.

During the address canvassing operation, which is currently under way, decennial staff are collecting addresses and geographic information to update the address file and maps. This operation is projected to cost \$371 million (excluding the cost of handheld computers), employ approximately 140,000 temporary workers using handheld computers, and require 4 months for completion. A key feature of the handheld computers is global positioning system (GPS) capability, which allows address listers to accurately locate an address on the handheld's electronic map, a procedure called "map spotting." The Census Bureau describes "an accurate, comprehensive, and timely [address] list" as "one of the best predictors of a successful census." An accurate decennial census is required for congressional apportionment and redistricting, the annual distribution of more than \$300 hundred billion in federal funds to states and localities, and government and business planning and decision making.

As part of our oversight of the 2010 decennial census, we have been observing address canvassing operations in the field to determine, among other things, whether address listers are following Census procedures. Our field observations and information independently provided to us by address listers show that listers are not consistently following certain key procedures. If left unaddressed, these inconsistencies may negatively impact the quality of the 2010 census address list, and Census may incur additional costs in subsequent quality control and enumeration operations.

On April 23, 2009, we recommended to Census that it immediately communicate in writing with its field offices to reinforce the need to follow documented procedures. Census responded rapidly by issuing an e-mail to field staff and conducted a teleconference with its regional directors about the issue. This report provides several additional recommendations. We plan to increase our field observations to determine the effectiveness of Census's actions and whether subsequent remediation activities are required.

Listers Do Not Consistently Knock on Doors or Traverse Rural Roads as Documented in the Bureau's Instruction Manual

According to the Census address canvassing manual, when listers encounter a structure in the field, they must determine if that structure contains a living quarters. If so, the lister should

knock on the door if feasible. If someone is home and answers the door, the lister should interview the resident. If the house number is posted, the lister should ask if additional living quarters exist in the building. If the house number is not posted, the lister should also ask about the address of the building, whether that address is used for mailing, and if there are additional living quarters in the building. The lister uses this information to determine if the structure is a single residence, contains separate housing units, or is a group quarters such as a nursing home, college residence hall, group home, or shelter. The lister also determines whether addresses should be added to or deleted from the address list.

Effectively training 140,000 temporary workers to conduct address canvassing is a major challenge because address canvassing procedures must be followed as closely as possible to ensure consistent and accurate results. Census requires each lister to complete 3 days of rigidly scripted “verbatim” training conducted by crew leaders. This training focuses on implementing address canvassing procedures, including use of the handheld computer to accomplish important address canvassing, timekeeping, and other administrative tasks.

During address canvassing field observations, we found that some Census listers were not consistently following the procedures in their instruction manual. In several cases we observed listers skipping the procedure for knocking on doors. In at least one case a crew leader ignored portions of the verbatim training and instead instructed listers to omit this procedure. We received several additional reports from listers who were specifically told by their crew leader to omit this procedure. Further, we observed listers map-spotting addresses from their cars when they were instructed to collect a map spot at or near the main entrance of a structure—usually the front door.

Despite instructions to traverse every road in an assignment area, some listers we observed completely skipped roads in rural areas when they assumed no houses existed on the road. Address canvassing in rural areas can be difficult as tree cover and other conditions can visually obscure structures. Road conditions also can pose significant challenges: for example, rough terrain may necessitate four-wheel-drive vehicles, and some roads may only lead to fields or barns, or may dead-end at a physical feature such as a river. Nonetheless, canvassing these areas is essential to accurately locate rural living quarters.

OIG staff observed address canvassing in 15 different locales in 5 of the 12 Census regions. We identified the failure of listers to conform to address listing and map-spotting procedures in 7 different locales representing all 5 regions. We also received independent information on the same problems for 2 locales not associated with our sample. Although our observations were not conducted on a statistically drawn sample and therefore cannot be considered representative of the entire operation, the widespread nature of the problem is noteworthy.

A number of factors may be contributing to this breakdown in procedures. Skipping procedures reduces the time it takes to conduct address canvassing. We have received reports from Census field staff that they are under intense pressure to complete their assignments within a limited time frame and to minimize or avoid overtime. Some are concerned they may face termination if they miss deadlines or work unauthorized overtime. Production pressure may therefore be one cause for this breakdown, but Census needs to determine why these problems are occurring.

Failure to follow procedures negatively impacts the quality of the address list, map spots, and the subsequent enumeration. Living quarters that are not included on the address list have a greater probability of not receiving a decennial questionnaire and thus not having their residents counted. Address canvassing is the primary means for identifying “hidden” dwellings, such as sheds and makeshift garage apartments, but the likelihood of missing such living quarters increases if the lister does not attempt the required personal contact. Because of smaller populations, missing a single living quarters in a rural area has a greater impact on the quality of final census population counts.

Failure of listers to correctly use the handheld’s GPS capability—a key component of Census’s nearly \$800 million field data collection automation contract—jeopardizes Census’s ability to ensure that living quarters are recorded within the correct census block. This accuracy is particularly important for redrawing congressional and state legislative districts.

Census is depending on its address canvassing quality control operation to identify and correct errors resulting from listers’ not following procedures. We are therefore expanding the number and breadth of our field observations to focus on this quality control operation, particularly in rural areas. Given the problems we have identified, we are concerned that Census has not completed its contingency plan for improving list quality in the event that the results of address canvassing are found to be deficient.

These shortcuts have cost impacts as well. Quality control operations may take longer to complete and cost more than anticipated since improperly listed addresses that are identified or deleted must be recanvassed. Inaccurate map spots can increase the time it takes for enumerators to find their assignments during enumeration and nonresponse follow-up operations and add to their chances of getting lost and enumerating the wrong housing unit or group quarters. Inaccurately located rural living quarters may have a greater cost impact on subsequent census operations, as locating and driving to these potentially remote units requires greater effort than doing so in urban or suburban areas.

Recommendations

To promote an accurate address list and contain costs, Census should do the following:

1. Since the Census Bureau has completed initial listing operations in many areas, conduct an analysis of assignment areas where listing operations were completed materially ahead of schedule to determine whether early completion of production may indicate areas where procedures were not followed. These areas should receive special attention using additional quality control checks in ongoing and upcoming address canvassing quality control operations.

Census disagreed with this recommendation, stating it is not feasible given that there were multiple reasons for an area being completed ahead of schedule.

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2. Finalize the contingency plan for improving address list quality in the event that the results of the address canvassing operation are found to be deficient.

Census stated that its schedule cannot accommodate an additional major field operation. However, our recommendation did not call for that. Several operations subsequent to address canvassing could potentially be expanded to address deficiencies in address canvassing.

3. In planning for the 2020 decennial census, analyze the costs and benefits of 100 percent address canvassing and consider whether alternative, more effective strategies for developing the address list are feasible.

Census stated that it is analyzing how it can maintain an accurate and timely address list and maps throughout the decade and indicated that if an approach to doing so proves feasible and is funded, it would reduce the need for a nationwide address canvassing operation late in the next decade.

BACKGROUND

The Office of Inspector General has been identifying risk areas related to the 2010 Census that require continuing oversight. One of these areas is the Census Bureau's address canvassing operation, which we are now reviewing in the field. Our review has recently identified issues that could affect the quality and cost of the decennial. We discussed these issues with Census officials and provided recommendations.

The purpose of this flash report is to promptly communicate issues in a manner that provides Census the ability to effect rapid corrective actions. We made revisions to this report based on informal comments we received from the Census Bureau and actions Census took to reinforce the need for address listers to follow documented procedures.

This is a flash report, not an audit conducted in accordance with Government Auditing Standards, and is significantly reduced in scope. Our work was performed in accordance with the *Quality Standards for Inspections* (rev. January 2005) issued by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency, and under authority of the IG Act of 1978, as amended, and Department Organization Order 10-13 (dated August 31, 2006).