



Report In Brief

U.S. Department of Commerce Office of Inspector General



Why We Did This Review

The Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2008 gave the Census Bureau an additional \$210 million to help cover spiraling 2010 decennial costs stemming from the bureau's problematic efforts to automate major field operations, major flaws in its cost-estimating methods, and other issues. The act's explanatory statement required the bureau to submit to Congress a detailed plan and timeline of decennial milestones and expenditures, as well as a quantitative assessment of associated program risks, within 30 days.

OIG must provide quarterly reports on the bureau's progress against this plan. This report's objective was to provide an update of activities and operations, identify budget and spending issues, and examine risks to the 2010 Census programs.

Background

Since first conducted in 1790, the constitutionally mandated decennial census field activities have largely been administered via paper and pencil. The 2010 Census plan included significant expansion of automation, using handheld computers to verify addresses (address canvassing), conduct in-person surveys with households that did not return their questionnaires (nonresponse follow-up), and collect data from a nationwide sample to evaluate the accuracy of the decennial count (coverage measurement).

Nonresponse follow-up is the most expensive and labor-intensive operation of the decennial census. Increasing costs and automation problems prompted the bureau's decisions to abandon the handheld computers for nonresponse follow-up and coverage measurement operations, but to still use the handheld computers for address canvassing.

2010 Census: Quarterly Report to Congress December 2009 (OIG-19791-2)

What We Found

Census is moving forward with important decennial operations and activities, including the completion of two major operations (address canvassing and group quarters validation). However, errors in the decennial scheduling system and potential delays continue to affect management of the 2010 Census. Census also must develop a paper-based operations control system (PBOCS) to manage field operations. Because this is being done on a compressed schedule, it represents a major risk to the decennial census. The results of system testing, planned for late December, should help the bureau understand whether this system will be capable of managing the 2010 Census operations.

For FY 2010, Census requested about \$674 million in contingency funds for key operations and activities, almost 9 percent of its total 2010 Census budget request. This fund—formulated with the advice of officials from the Department and Census—is based on the level of risk or uncertainty associated with key decennial activities.

Census was able to cover an \$88-million (nearly 25 percent) address canvassing overrun by utilizing several sources, including \$41 million from FY 2009 contingency funds and \$47 million in savings from other operations and activities.

The bureau's process for managing 2010 Census program risks represents a significant improvement over the previous census in 2000. However, because the majority of its time has been spent on contingency planning, the bureau's Risk Review Board (RRB) has not been able to review risk ratings in detail at weekly meetings, as required by Census's risk management plan. The RRB is working on a plan that should help Census management complete its contingency plans and actively monitor its risk management activities.

This report does not provide specific recommendations. However, we will continue to monitor specific 2010 Census operations and activities, such as:

- Given the importance of the PBOCS in managing the workloads of Census's fieldwork operations, and the short time frame available for system development, we will continue to monitor and report on PBOCS development and testing in subsequent quarterly reports.
- Because of the address canvassing cost overrun, Census is currently revising nonresponse followup (NRFU) cost assumptions, especially the projected mail response rate. We will evaluate NRFU planning efforts, operational effectiveness, and data quality.
- Census used Recovery Act funds to hire additional partnership positions in hard-to-count areas. While we recognize its relatively quick recruitment and hiring, we will monitor the adequacy of management and supervisory controls over the partnership workforce.