

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105819](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Conducting the census is an enormous, expensive, and complex undertaking. The Bureau spends years planning for it. Documenting program cost estimates and implementing good schedule management are essential to conducting a cost-effective, high-quality census within statutory time frames.

GAO was asked to review the Bureau's implementation of the 2020 Census. This report analyzes how (1) the Bureau's actual 2020 Census spending differed from plans, (2) the Bureau's actual schedule differed from plans, and (3) the Bureau is using lessons from the 2020 Census to inform 2030 planning. GAO analyzed the Bureau's 2020 cost and schedule data and reviewed prior related GAO and Bureau reporting. GAO reviewed documentation and interviewed Bureau officials about the lessons the Bureau learned from the 2020 Census.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations to the Department of Commerce, including that the Bureau take steps during the 2030 Census to document and evaluate its lessons-learned process. The Department of Commerce agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105819](#). For more information, contact Yvonne Jones at (202) 512-6806 or JonesY@gao.gov.

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2020 CENSUS

A More Complete Lessons Learned Process for Cost and Schedule Would Help the Next Decennial

What GAO Found

The 2020 Census will have cost roughly \$13.7 billion by the time its activity ends in 2024. This falls below the Census Bureau's October 2017 estimate of \$15.6 billion. The Bureau allocated more than 80 percent of its 2020 Census spending to enumeration operations, infrastructure, and information technology. The largest area of spending was for enumeration projects such as following up with households that did not return their census forms and counting people who live in group quarters, such as skilled nursing and correctional facilities. The second largest spending area was for infrastructure to support various operations, such as hiring field staff and leasing office space. The third largest spending area was for census survey and engineering, which was mostly spent on IT.

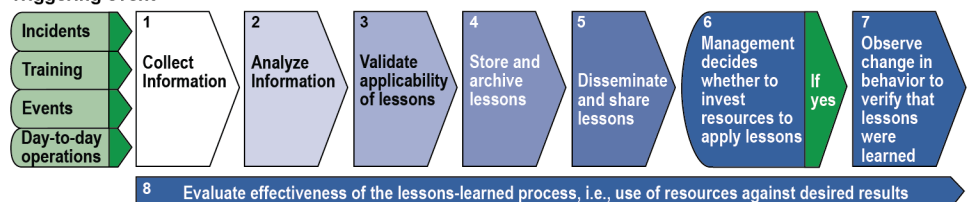
The actual cost of some census operations was higher than planned. Other operations cost less. For example, the Bureau reported it used technology to increase the productivity of field data collection above expectations. This, in turn, resulted in spending less than planned on activities such as following up with non-respondents. Conversely, the Bureau spent more than planned on temporary office space, which it used longer than expected because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Bureau delayed or extended census activity prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, Bureau hiring was delayed due to problems processing temporary staff background checks. The Bureau also had delays in integrating IT systems within their operations. Additionally, the Bureau paused, extended, or delayed several of its 2020 operations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Bureau is learning lessons from the 2020 decennial to be used for its early 2030 planning. It is using seven of the eight steps GAO has previously identified for a lessons-learned process. For example, in addition to collecting internal lessons, the Bureau stores and archives resulting recommendations, along with those from external oversight bodies. The Bureau's recommendation management plan describes many of these steps. However, neither the plan nor other decennial guidance refers to periodic evaluation of the process. Documenting and carrying out this process step for the 2030 Census can improve the Bureau's ability to build on prior successes and address future challenges.

Eight Steps of a Lessons-Learned Process

Triggering event



Source: GAO analysis. | [GAO-23-105819](#)