



Report in Brief

SEPTEMBER 30, 2015

Background

The Census Bureau recognizes that fundamental changes must occur to the design, implementation, and management of the 2020 Census in order to conduct this census at a lower cost than the 2010 Census. There exist several challenges to a cost-efficient yet high-quality decennial census, including cost containment, quality, flexibility, innovation, and a disciplined and transparent acquisition decision process. The Bureau is now entering a critical stage of its research and testing (R&T) phase of the 2020 Census life cycle that will inform decisions that must be made by the end of fiscal year (FY) 2015 to apply to the 2020 Census.

Why We Did This Review

In FY 2013, the Bureau—unable to complete all of its scheduled R&T—reassessed the Decennial Program's R&T effort. As a result of the reassessment, the 2014 Census Test was revised to include a self-response component, increased integration across modes, and optimized contact strategies for the nonresponse followup portion of the test. The 2014 Census Test was conducted in portions of Washington, DC, and Montgomery County, Maryland, and included approximately 190,000 housing units.

Our audit of the 2014 Census Test had two objectives: (1) to evaluate whether 2013 test results informed 2014 testing strategies and (2) examine whether projects' testing strategies included in the 2014 Census Test responded to the Bureau's original research questions.

U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

2020 Census: The 2014 Census Test Misses an Opportunity to Validate Cost Estimates and Establish Benchmarks for Progress

OIG-15-044-A

WHAT WE FOUND

The Bureau's cost estimate lacks adequate documentation and the 2014 Census Test was a missed opportunity to validate cost estimates. Currently, the Bureau still lacks an auditable cost estimation process, which calls into question the reliability of the Bureau's estimated \$5.1 billion savings for a redesigned 2020 Census.

- *The 2020 Census cost estimate was not auditable.* The Bureau's Decennial Management Division, which calculates the cost estimate, neither obtained nor required supporting documentation when recording and updating input factors.
- *Cost estimate cannot be adjusted based on 2014 Census Test results.* The Bureau's cost estimate does not account for some design features that are included or dismissed as viable options for the 2020 Census.
- *2014 Census Test did not generate cost data that validates cost savings estimates.* Although the Bureau has a strategic objective to contain or reduce the cost of the 2020 Census, the 2014 Census Test did not provide cost data that can be used to validate cost savings estimates or compare the cost of various design strategies.

Project teams are not following project plan management and change control protocol. We could not identify whether scope changes occurred during the 2014 Census Test because the project teams could not provide the original project plan, or a project plan was not developed prior to the test.

2014 Census Test projects did not develop measurable success criteria. Six of the seven project teams included in the 2014 Census Test did not develop measurable success criteria with which to validate potential cost savings or establish benchmarks for a cost-benefit analysis of test results.

WHAT WE RECOMMEND

We recommend the Director of the Census Bureau

1. Obtain and keep a record of documentation that supports the cost estimation process and results.
2. Implement a sufficiently robust cost modeling system, which includes all vital component variables, and incorporates cost updates as design decisions are reached, or quantifies the effect on the cost of design alternatives as needed.
3. Prior to testing activities, ensure that the cost information that will be collected is reliable and can be used to validate life-cycle estimates.
4. Develop an improved process for research project teams to document and maintain a complete history throughout each project's life cycle, and prepare updated project plans prior to the start of tests.
5. Develop test success criteria that are in compliance with the guidelines recommended by GAO and the Census Bureau.