



Report in Brief

February 27, 2023

Background

The U.S. Census Bureau's (the Bureau's) Center for Behavioral Science Methods, Research, and Methodology Directorate (the Program Office) sought to build a nationally representative survey panel for tracking public opinion on topics of interest to numerous federal agencies and their partners. The panel was intended to enable near real-time research in key areas such as privacy and confidentiality, public attitudes toward the use of administrative records, and messaging strategies to boost response rates, among other things. In September 2020, the Program Office granted a financial assistance award in the form of a cooperative agreement with Research Triangle Institute (RTI) to design, build, and maintain an address- and probability-based online research panel known as the "Ask U.S. Panel," to reach difficult-to-survey populations and provide a statistically valid representation of the U.S. population by demographic characteristics. The award included three initial tasks—sample design, recruitment of panel members, and panel maintenance—to be performed over 5 years.

The panel underwent multiple rebudgets and amendments in 2021. Two of those amendments, added in September of that year, increased the total obligation amount by 21 percent—from \$7,840,709 to \$9,523,143. In January 2022, the Bureau began discussions with RTI to terminate the agreement. In September 2022, the Bureau and RTI mutually terminated the agreement.

Why We Did This Review

The Bureau requested that we evaluate its award and use of the cooperative agreement. Our evaluation objective was to determine whether the cooperative agreement was properly authorized, executed, and administered in accordance with relevant laws and regulations.

U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

The Census Bureau Can Improve Processes to Promote Transparency of Cooperative Agreements

OIG-23-011-I

WHAT WE FOUND

We found that the Bureau's use of a cooperative agreement was authorized by statute and the process for awarding the cooperative agreement followed the agency's guidelines. However, the Bureau's management and oversight of the cooperative agreement lacked transparency over key financial assistance award processes. Specifically,

- the Bureau lacked documentation to support the need for the Ask U.S. Panel and the decision to utilize a cooperative agreement;
- improper planning resulted in scope expansion;
- the Bureau reimbursed RTI without validating costs; and
- the Bureau did not disclose its plans to terminate the cooperative agreement until after we completed our fieldwork.

There are opportunities for increased transparency within the cooperative agreement process to improve fiscal stewardship and ensure that the public is receiving value for funds spent on financial awards. It is important that the Bureau use every tool available, including its interagency agreement with National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, to improve its oversight over the millions of dollars in financial assistance that it awards, particularly in an environment of increasingly scarce resources.

WHAT WE RECOMMEND

We recommend that the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau ensure the Program Office does the following:

1. Retain thorough documentation of all decisions, discussions, and research surrounding the development of programs funded through financial assistance awards.
2. Revise policies to require evidence of decisions and justifications when selecting the type of funding instrument during the pre-award process for future financial assistance awards.
3. Retain formal records of funding vehicle recommendations from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Grants Management Division during the pre-award phase before proceeding with the financial assistance award process.
4. Retain documentation of research conducted to support justifications when expanding the scope of future financial assistance awards.
5. Establish detailed procedures, including documentation of reviews validating expenditures made against future financial assistance awards.