



Report in Brief

August 30, 2023

Background

The U.S. Census Bureau (the Bureau) serves as the nation's leading provider of quality data about its people and economy. Though it is well known for carrying out the Decennial Census of Population and Housing every 10 years, it also conducts more than 130 other surveys of households and businesses each year. Data collected from these surveys measure changing demographics and economic conditions and are used in political, economic, and social policymaking decisions. These surveys are funded by direct Congressional appropriations or federal agencies on a reimbursable basis and provide periodic and comprehensive statistics across a range of sectors.

Demographic reimbursable surveys are some of the most important surveys conducted by the federal government. In fiscal year (FY) 2021, the Bureau obligated \$386 million for reimbursable surveys.

The reimbursable surveys we reviewed as part of this audit included the American Housing Survey, Consumer Expenditure Survey (CE), and Current Population Survey (CPS). We focused on reimbursable surveys that have an in-person or telephone data collection component, a high dollar cost, a large sample size, and a high impact on the U.S. economy, and that were carried out by divisions within the Demographic Programs Directorate during FYs 2019–2021.

Why We Did This Review

Our overall audit objective was to determine whether reimbursable surveys conducted by this directorate provided quality and reliable data to help sponsoring federal agencies make informed decisions. As part of this review, we (1) determined whether quality metrics were met or exceeded, (2) determined whether quality assurance processes were working as intended, and (3) assessed the impact of data quality issues on survey sponsors.

U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

The Census Bureau Needs to Improve Its Performance Management Processes and Quality Control Program for the Reimbursable Surveys Program

OIG-23-025-A

WHAT WE FOUND

We found that while the Bureau has established controls along with performance and quality metrics to ensure the quality of survey data, it does not consistently follow or achieve them. Specifically,

- I. The Bureau needs to improve performance management processes for reimbursable surveys.
 - A. The Bureau did not meet data collection targets and faces declining response rates.
 - B. The Bureau did not meet performance measurement goals for diary placement and telephone interview rates.
- II. The Bureau needs to improve its quality assurance program for reimbursable surveys.
 - A. The Bureau did not meet reinterview (RI) completion goals and RIs were not completed timely.
 - B. The Bureau did not investigate cases with discrepancies for falsification.
 - C. The Bureau did not adequately document or timely complete falsification investigations.
 - D. The Bureau did not rework CPS cases completed by field representatives (FRs) with confirmed falsifications.
- III. Regional offices did not relieve FRs from survey data collection during falsification investigations and systematically track confirmed falsifications for use in future hiring decisions.

WHAT WE RECOMMEND

We recommend that the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau

1. Evaluate alternative strategies to achieve target response rates, particularly in underrepresented units.
2. Establish internal response rate targets to ensure CE estimates are accurate and precise.
3. Periodically review statistical measures for managing nonresponse to ensure measures are updated and appropriately communicated to stakeholders in a timely manner.
4. Develop strategies to address respondent refusal in the next Consumer Expenditure Diary (CED) survey redesign.
5. Ensure that regional offices adhere to prescribed telephone interview rates or work with the Bureau of Labor Statistics to adjust them as needed.
6. Ensure all surveys and regional offices maximize the use of data analysis and monitoring tools to oversee survey quality and performance.
7. Ensure RI requirements are met and completed in a timely manner.
8. Reevaluate the effectiveness of the CED survey RI lag time metric.
9. Establish a policy and criteria for discrepancy adjudication to determine when cases should be referred for investigation.
10. Ensure that falsification investigation requirements are met and completed in a timely manner.
11. Issue a formal policy explaining the falsification investigation process and specifying the documentation required to support the investigation's findings and outcome.
12. Ensure that staff are trained on completing adequate falsification investigations.
13. Strengthen the quality control plan for the CPS by evaluating cases worked by FRs with confirmed falsifications to assess the impact on survey estimates.
14. Ensure that Bureau officials follow Bureau policy to immediately relieve FRs of all survey work if their potential falsification cannot be cleared with a preliminary investigation to ensure they do not continue to collect survey data.
15. Implement a system for tracking FRs with confirmed falsifications so that applicants for FR positions can be appropriately vetted prior to reemployment.