



Report in Brief

MARCH 25, 2025

Background

The U.S. Census Bureau carries out a decennial census of the U.S. population to reapportion the U.S. House of Representatives and determine the distribution of federal funding to the states, tribal governments, and local communities for services and infrastructure. The bureau also carries out a quality check of the decennial census, which in 2020 was called the Post-Enumeration Survey (PES). The PES's purpose is to independently survey a representative sample of households from the decennial census enumeration to measure coverage error and census accuracy.

The PES results are one of the most important quality measures of the decennial census. This is especially true for the 2020 Census, which experienced complications and delays largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic—particularly with the Person Interview (PI) operation. Because of a low response rate at the end of the original operation compared to 2010, the bureau decided to reopen PI to increase response rates. PES estimates found that 14 states had population undercounts or overcounts. In addition, some historically undercounted demographic groups were undercounted again, but to a higher degree, while others were overcounted.

Why We Did This Review

Our audit objective was to assess the validity of the 2020 PES results as they related to overcounts and undercounts. We assessed (1) whether the bureau's methodologies for carrying out the 2020 PES were consistent with relevant federal and agency statistical standards and (2) the effectiveness of 2020 PES operations to ensure that estimates were accurate and reliable.

U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

The Census Bureau Should Address Challenges from the 2020 Post-Enumeration Survey Ahead of the 2030 Census

OIG-25-015-A

WHAT WE FOUND

Overall, while the 2020 PES results were derived using methodologies that were consistent with federal and bureau statistical standards, we identified areas of concern that had an impact on the survey results, bringing into question the validity of the 2020 PES. Specifically, we found the following:

- I. Operational disruptions and mitigations in response to missing data increased uncertainty in PES estimates.
 - A. The 2020 PES experienced increased levels of missing data.
 - B. The bureau did not always quantify sources of non-sampling error.
- II. A smaller-than-anticipated sample size contributed to increased uncertainty in PES estimates.
- III. The bureau did not carry out quality control (QC) processes for PES operations as planned.
 - A. QC listers did not complete Independent Listing QC checks and rectification within the prescribed timelines.
 - B. The bureau did not conduct Person Interview Reinterview within recommended completion time frames.
 - C. The bureau reviewed fewer Basic Collection Units than planned during clerical matching and did not always review flagged cases.

The reliability of the PES depends on obtaining representative results through an operation that is carried out as designed. Public trust in both the PES and decennial enumeration results follows from a well-conducted survey. The bureau should execute timely QC processes as designed to ensure that the results of PES operations are accurate, consistent, and reliable.

WHAT WE RECOMMENDED

We recommended that the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau consider the following actions when implementing changes to the 2030 PES redesign:

- Advancing approaches to mitigate missing data and conducting research to better understand groups most likely to be impacted by missing data.
- Analyzing and quantifying major sources of non-sampling error, to include the cumulative effect of multiple sources of error, and ensuring the results are communicated to the public.
- Ensuring that sampling designs undergo appropriate analysis prior to production and are designed to support their intended uses.
- Establishing a detailed and effective strategy to ensure computer system relocations are completed on schedule to minimize operational disruptions.
- Ensuring changes to quality assurance processes are documented, approved, and widely communicated across all affected divisions and their operational components.
- Strengthening the bureau's quality assurance plan to ensure reinterviewers complete cases within prescribed time frames.
- Strengthening the clerical matching QC plan to adhere to applicable QC review thresholds.
- Establishing procedures to ensure analysts review flagged clerical matching cases and documentation of analyst reviews is maintained.
- Ensuring that the bureau's records retention schedule for 2030 Census records prescribes only fixed retention periods that also allow records to be available for a sufficient period following the end of operations for internal and external oversight activities.