



Highlights of [GAO-10-567T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Information Policy, Census, and National Archives, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

In March 2008, GAO designated the 2010 Census a high-risk area in part because of information technology (IT) shortcomings and uncertainty over the ultimate cost of the census, now estimated at around \$15 billion. The U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) has since made improvements to various IT systems and taken other steps to mitigate the risks to a successful census. However, last year, GAO noted that a number of challenges and uncertainties remained, and much work remained to be completed under very tight time frames.

As requested, this testimony provides an update on the Bureau's readiness for an effective headcount, covering (1) the reliability of key IT systems; (2) a broad range of activities critical to an effective headcount, some of which were problematic in either earlier 2010 operations or in the 2000 Census, and (3) the quality of the Bureau's cost estimates. The testimony is based on previously issued and ongoing GAO work.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making new recommendations in this testimony, but past reports recommended that the Bureau strengthen its testing of key IT systems and better document and update its cost estimates. The Bureau generally agreed with these recommendations and is in varying stages of implementing them.

View [GAO-10-567T](#) or key components. For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or [goldenkoffr@gao.gov](mailto:goldenkoffr@gao.gov).

## 2010 CENSUS

### Data Collection Is Under Way, but Reliability of Key Information Technology Systems Remains a Risk

#### What GAO Found

Overall, the Bureau's readiness for a successful headcount is mixed. On the one hand, performance problems continue to plague a work flow management system essential for the Bureau's field operations and a payroll processing system that will be used to pay more than 600,000 temporary workers. Both systems have not yet demonstrated the ability to function reliably under full operational loads, and the limited amount of time that remains to address their shortcomings creates a substantial challenge for the Bureau. Aside from the mail response, which is outside of the Bureau's direct control, the difficulties facing these two automated systems represent the most significant risk, jeopardizing the cost and quality of the enumeration.

On the other hand, the rollout of other key enumeration activities is generally on track, and the Bureau has taken action to address some previously identified problems. For example, the Bureau has taken steps to reduce the number of temporary workers with unreadable fingerprint cards, a problem that affected an earlier field operation. Among other actions, the Bureau plans to digitally capture a third and fourth set of fingerprints if the first two sets cannot be read for background security checks. The Bureau's 2010 Census communications campaign is also more robust than the one used in the 2000 Census. Key differences from the 2000 campaign include increased partnership staffing, expanded outreach to partner organizations, targeted paid advertising based on market and attitudinal research, and a contingency fund to address unexpected events. To increase participation rates, the Bureau plans to mail a second, replacement questionnaire to census tracts that had low or moderate response rates in the 2000 Census. To help ensure that hard-to-count populations are enumerated, the Bureau plans to employ several initiatives. For example, Service Based Enumeration is designed to count people who lack permanent shelter at soup kitchens, mobile food vans, and other locations where they receive services. The Be Counted program is designed to reach those who may not have received a census questionnaire. To help ensure a complete count of areas along the Gulf Coast, the Bureau is hand delivering an estimated 1.2 million census forms in areas that were devastated by hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Ike.

In addition, the Bureau re-examined its cost estimate for Nonresponse Follow-up, the largest and most costly field operation where census workers follow up in person with nonresponding households. The Bureau provided a range of estimates, with \$2.3 billion as the mid-point. However, the Bureau's analyses of cost are not complete. According to the Bureau, it continues to reexamine the cost of two other operations related to nonresponse follow-up.

Moving forward, it will be important for the Bureau to quickly identify the problems affecting key IT systems and test solutions. Further, given the complexity of the census and the likelihood that other glitches might arise, it will be important for the Bureau to stay on schedule, monitor operations, and have plans and personnel in place to quickly address operational issues.