

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-205T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittees on Government Operations and Information Technology, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The cost of the nation's decennial census has steadily increased over the past 40 years; the 2010 Census was the most expensive to date, at about \$13 billion. To achieve cost savings while still conducting an accurate count of the population, the U.S. Census Bureau is planning significant changes for the design of the 2020 Decennial Census, including major efforts to implement new technologies and IT systems supporting its surveys. For example, the Bureau is planning to offer an option for households to respond via the Internet, which requires developing new applications and IT infrastructure.

This statement summarizes the critical challenges the Bureau faces in successfully delivering IT systems in time for testing redesigned 2020 Census operations. To develop this statement, GAO relied on previously published work, as well as information on steps the Bureau has taken to implement prior GAO recommendations.

What GAO Recommends

In its prior work, GAO made recommendations to the Census Bureau to prioritize IT testing and research and determine how key decisions for the 2020 Census were to be answered. GAO also made recommendations to improve IT management, workforce planning, and information security. The Bureau has taken steps to address selected recommendations, but more actions are still needed to fully address these recommendations.

View [GAO-16-205T](#). For more information, contact Carol R. Cha at (202) 512-4456 or chac@gao.gov.

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2020 CENSUS

Key Information Technology Decisions Must Be Made Soon

What GAO Found

GAO has previously reported that the U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) faces a number of critical challenges in developing and deploying the information technology (IT) systems and infrastructure it plans to rely on to conduct the significantly redesigned 2020 Census. Specifically, the Bureau has a major IT program under way to modernize and consolidate the multiple, duplicative systems it currently uses to carry out survey data collection and processing functions; however, with less than 2 years before preparations begin for end-to-end testing of all systems and operations to ensure readiness for the 2020 Census, there is limited time to implement it. While the Bureau documented many key decisions about the redesigned 2020 Census in the 2020 Census Operational Plan, released in October 2015, several key IT-related decisions have not been made. Specifically, the Bureau has not yet made decisions about the projected demand that the IT infrastructure would need to meet or whether it will build or buy the needed systems.

This lack of prioritization of IT decisions has been a continuing trend, which GAO has previously identified. For example:

- In April 2014, GAO reported that the Bureau had not prioritized key IT research and testing needed for its design decisions. Accordingly, GAO recommended that the Bureau prioritize its IT-related research and testing projects. The Bureau had taken steps to address this recommendation, such as releasing a plan in September 2014 that identified research questions intended to inform the operational design decisions.
- In February 2015, however, GAO reported that the Bureau had not determined how key IT research questions that were identified in the September 2014 plan would be answered—such as the expected rate of respondents using its Internet response option or the IT infrastructure that would be needed to support this option. GAO recommended that the Bureau, among other things, develop methodologies and plans for answering key IT-related research questions in time to inform design decisions. However, this has not yet happened.

In addition, while the Bureau has made improvements in some key IT management areas, it still faces challenges in the areas of workforce planning and information security. Specifically:

- It has taken steps to develop an enterprise-wide IT workforce planning process, as GAO recommended in 2012. However, the Bureau has yet to fill key positions. Most concerning, it is currently without a permanent chief information officer.
- The Bureau has taken steps to implement the majority of the 115 recommendations GAO made in 2013 to address information security weaknesses; however, completing this effort is necessary to ensure that sensitive information it will collect during the census is adequately protected.

With the deferral of key IT-related decisions, the Bureau is running out of time to develop, acquire, and implement the systems it will need to deliver the redesign and achieve its projected \$5.2 billion in cost savings.