

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-664](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The cost of the decennial census has escalated the last 4 decades. To help control costs for the 2020 Census, the Bureau plans to use innovative methods, including administrative records when they are of sufficient quality to reduce expensive field visits. Administrative records are information already provided to the federal government and others to administer programs such as tax collection and public assistance. While these innovations have potential to control cost, they also introduce new risks. GAO added the 2020 Census to its High-Risk List in part because of the challenges with implementing administrative records and other innovations. GAO was asked to review coverage limitations of administrative records and what the Bureau is doing to address them.

This report describes (1) steps the Bureau has taken to address limitations for the use of administrative records in the 2020 Census and (2) the Bureau's planned uses of administrative records that have not been tested. GAO reviewed documentation from the Bureau on its assessments, testing, and preparations for using administrative records in 2020, and interviewed cognizant Bureau officials. GAO reviewed academic and other articles to identify limitations on the use of administrative records.

GAO provided a draft of this report to the Department of Commerce, which agreed with the findings.

View [GAO-17-664](#). For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoffr@gao.gov.

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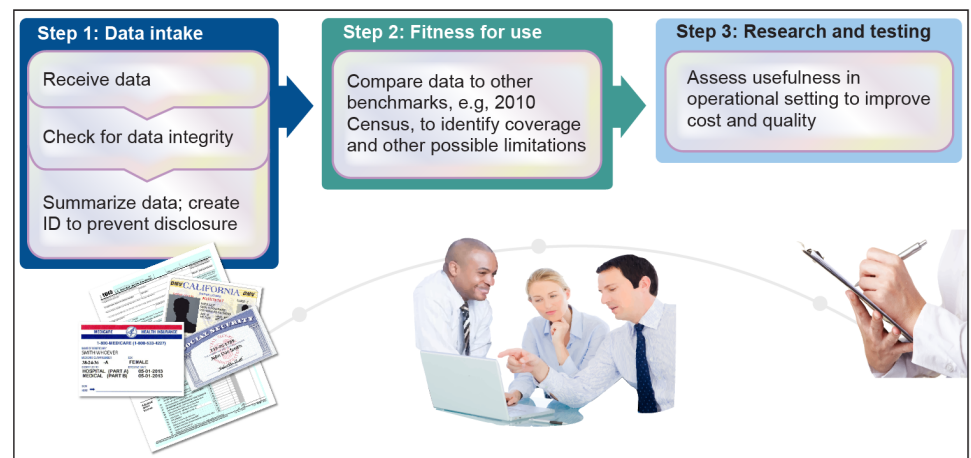
2020 CENSUS

Bureau Is Taking Steps to Address Limitations of Administrative Records

What GAO Found

The Census Bureau (Bureau) has taken steps to ensure that its use of administrative records will lower the cost and improve the accuracy of the 2020 Census. For example, the Bureau set a rule that it will only use administrative records to count a household when a minimum amount of information is present within data sources. According to the Bureau, this helps ensure that administrative records are used only in circumstances where research has shown them to be most accurate. This step will also assist the Bureau in avoiding missing populations that may be underrepresented in administrative records, such as the homeless or recent immigrants. Additionally, before using any administrative records to support census operations, the Bureau is to subject each source to a quality assurance process that includes, among other things, basic checks for data integrity as well as assessments by subject matter experts of the information's fitness for various uses by the Bureau. (See figure below.)

Census Bureau Implements Quality Assurance Steps before Using Administrative Records



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Census data. | GAO-17-664

According to the Bureau, it links administrative records data sources to complement each other, improving their reliability and completeness. The Bureau told GAO it also creates an anonymous personal identifier for each individual in the data to reduce the risk of disclosure once the data are linked across sources.

The Bureau has already tested the uses of administrative records that hold the most potential for reducing census costs, such as counting people who did not respond to census mailings. The Bureau plans to test additional applications of administrative records for the first time during its upcoming 2018 End-to-End Census Test, which is essentially a dress rehearsal for 2020. For example, it plans to test the use of administrative records to help detect fictitious census responses. Testing the remaining uses should help detect potential problems that, if unaddressed for the 2020 Census, could increase costs.