

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-225](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Census Bureau plans to significantly change the methods and technology it uses to count the population with the 2020 Decennial Census, such as offering an option for households to respond to the survey via the Internet. This involves developing and acquiring IT systems and infrastructure to support the collection and processing of Internet response data.

GAO was asked to review the Bureau's efforts to deliver an Internet response option for the 2020 census. GAO's objectives were to (1) describe the Bureau's efforts to identify demographic groups likely to use Internet response and how they compare to historically hard-to-count populations, (2) assess the reliability of estimated costs and savings for Internet response, and (3) determine key challenges associated with delivering an Internet response option. To do this, GAO reviewed Bureau studies, cost estimates, project plans, schedules, and other documentation and compared them against relevant guidance. GAO also interviewed Bureau officials and experts.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Department of Commerce's Census Bureau update estimated costs for the Internet response option and ensure they are reliable, develop methodologies for answering key research questions, and establish high-level time frames for cloud computing decisions. The department neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-15-225](#). For more information, contact Carol R. Cha at (202) 512-4456 or [chac@gao.gov](mailto:chac@gao.gov).

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## 2020 CENSUS

### Key Challenges Need to Be Addressed to Successfully Enable Internet Response

## What GAO Found

The U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) has taken preliminary steps and plans to further examine the impact of introducing an Internet response option on historically hard-to-count segments of the population (these include, but are not limited to, minorities, renters, children, low-income households, and low-education households). For example, the Bureau is applying lessons learned from its implementation of an Internet response option for another household survey, called the American Community Survey, which is conducted on a smaller scale than the decennial census. Additionally, the Bureau is planning two 2020 census field tests in 2015 that are expected to provide data on Internet response rates among different demographic groups, including the historically hard-to-count populations.

The Bureau's preliminary estimated costs of about \$73 million for the Internet response option are not reliable because its estimate did not conform to best practices. For example, the estimate has not been updated to reflect significant changes related to the Internet response option that have occurred since it was developed in 2011. Additionally, the unreliability of the Bureau's cost estimate for the Internet response option cast doubt on the reliability of associated potential cost savings estimates. Officials have recognized weaknesses in the Bureau's cost estimate and stated that they plan to update it based on a preliminary decision for the overall design of the 2020 census.

While efforts to deliver an Internet response option are under way, the Bureau faces several scheduling, task, and capability challenges in developing such an option for the 2020 census, including:

- Key questions related to estimating the Internet self-response rate and determining the information technology (IT) infrastructure needed to support it may not be answered in time for the preliminary design decision, scheduled for September 2015. Specifically, the Bureau has not developed project plans and research methodologies for answering these questions. In November 2014, officials stated that they had recently begun working on establishing methodologies for answering these questions. However, Bureau officials do not know when the methodologies will be established or when project plans will be updated or created to reflect this new work. Until such plans and methodologies are established, concerns will persist as to whether these two critical questions will be answered in time to inform the design decision in September 2015.
- High-level time frames for making decisions related to implementing cloud computing (i.e., a means for enabling on-demand access to shared and scalable pools of computing resources), such as selecting, testing, and implementing a cloud environment that meets the Bureau's scalability, budget, security, and privacy needs, have not been established. While Bureau officials estimated that such time frames will be established around June 2015, until they are established the Bureau will lack assurance that it has enough time to successfully implement a cloud environment prior to system testing, which is to begin in 2018.