

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-546T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

The cost of the decennial census has steadily increased each decade, with the 2010 Census being the most costly in history, totaling approximately \$13 billion. If the growth rate continues, the 2020 Census could cost approximately \$25 billion (in constant 2010 dollars). In an effort to contain costs while continuing to ensure an accurate enumeration, the Bureau is researching and testing new methods and technologies.

This September, the Bureau plans to announce its preliminary design for the 2020 Census, and in October 2018 the Bureau plans to have all systems and processes for the 2020 Census developed and ready for operational testing. As Census Day 2020 gets closer, the margin for schedule slippages is becoming increasingly narrow.

GAO was asked to testify on the Bureau's progress in implementing cost-savings initiatives and associated challenges for the 2020 Census. To prepare this statement, GAO relied on its previously published work in this area over the last several years.

## What GAO Recommends

In its prior work, GAO made 121 recommendations to, among other things, assist the Bureau in planning for its Internet response option, completing key research and testing activities, and improving its IT management and security. The Bureau generally agreed with these recommendations.

View [GAO-15-546T](#). For more information, contact Carol Cha at (202) 512-4456, [chac@gao.gov](mailto:chac@gao.gov) or Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757, [goldenkoffr@gao.gov](mailto:goldenkoffr@gao.gov).

April 20, 2015

## 2020 CENSUS

### Recommended Actions Need to Be Implemented before Potential Cost Savings Can be Realized

## What GAO Found

The Census Bureau (Bureau) has research and testing efforts well under way to support reforming aspects of the 2020 Census in order to contain costs. The table below briefly describes the four main cost-saving initiatives and the Bureau's associated savings estimates.

2020 Census Cost-Saving Initiatives	
Description of initiative	Bureau's estimated cost savings (in billions)
Expanding use of data previously obtained by other government agencies to reduce the need for costly and labor-intensive follow-up work	\$1.2
Reengineering processes for updating the Bureau's address list and maps of the nation to reduce the need for employing field staff to walk every street in the nation to verify addresses	\$1.0
Reengineering of field operations to automate the management of enumerator work	\$2.3
Maximizing self-response of households by, among other things, offering an Internet response option	\$0.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$5.0</b>

Source: Census Bureau. | GAO-15-546T

Note: GAO did not verify the Bureau's cost savings estimates.

However, the Bureau faces significant challenges and unanswered questions related to these initiatives and their associated cost savings. For example, the Bureau needs to finalize decisions on: the use of data records from other government agencies; more cost-effectively maintaining complete and accurate map and address data; and the use of technology to more efficiently manage field operations. The Bureau also needs to take action on GAO's recommendations to develop reliable cost estimates and time frames for key decisions related to deploying the Internet self-response option.

The successful execution of the 2020 Census also depends on the effective implementation of a large and complex information technology (IT) development effort. This effort—the Census Enterprise Data Collection and Processing program—is intended to result in an interconnected set of systems to serve all the Bureau's data collection and processing functions, including the systems and infrastructure needed to support the 2020 Census cost-savings initiatives. But as GAO has reported, the Bureau has not always prioritized key testing and research activities needed to inform IT system development. GAO has also previously found weaknesses in the Bureau's management of IT, and made recommendations to address them. In response, the Bureau has made important improvements in the areas of governance, system development methodologies, requirements management, and workforce planning. However, more work remains to ensure that it has the critical skills needed to effectively deliver IT solutions and that its systems and information are protected from unauthorized access or tampering.

The Bureau needs to take action to address the recommendations GAO has made in prior reports. If these actions are not taken, cost overruns, schedule delays, and performance shortfalls will likely diminish the potential cost savings that the Bureau estimates will result from redesigning the census for 2020.