

Highlights of [GAO-13-269](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The Bureau's Population Estimates Challenge Program gives local governments the opportunity to challenge the Bureau's annual estimates of their population counts during the years between decennial censuses. Challenges rely on local administrative records, such as building and demolition permits. In addition to their role in the challenge program, these and national administrative records, such as tax data and Medicare records, could save the Bureau money if they are used to help build the Bureau's master address list, and reduce the need for certain costly and labor-intensive door-to-door visits among other things. GAO was asked to review changes to the challenge program and the Bureau's use of administrative records.

This report describes the changes to: (1) how local administrative records will be used in the challenge program; (2) how the Bureau will assure the quality of population estimates updated by the challenge program; and describes (3) what plans, if any, the Bureau has to use the types of local administrative records used for the challenge program to improve the cost or quality of the 2020 Decennial Census.

GAO reviewed documentary and testimonial evidence from Bureau officials and state and local data experts. Additionally, GAO interviewed Bureau officials to identify changes to the challenge program and reviewed documentation on the challenge program's quality assurance processes. GAO provided a draft of this report to the Department of Commerce. In response the Bureau provided technical comments, which were incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-13-269](#). For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoffr@gao.gov.

February 2013

2020 CENSUS

Local Administrative Records and Their Use in the Challenge Program and Decennial

What GAO Found

The Census Bureau (Bureau) issued significant changes to rules governing the records that communities use to challenge the Bureau's population estimates. Previously, the Bureau routinely accepted all challenges, largely without regard to the data sources cited or provided so long as they supported the calculations and covered the appropriate reporting periods. According to Bureau officials, these changes are based on research that shows that estimates based on some methods and records (e.g., births, deaths, and migration) are substantially more accurate than estimates based on others. Among other changes, the Bureau modified procedures so that challenges by subcounty governments to the Bureau's estimates of people living in housing units will no longer affect county-level population estimates. Moving forward, any such challenge resulting in an increase in the estimate of a subcounty population will be offset by a downward revision to the population estimate of all other communities in the same county. Also, the Bureau plans to routinely review population challenges in light of each community's population growth trend. Corroborating data will be required for challenges inconsistent with the trend.

Challenge program officials told GAO that in the past the program focused quality assurance on (1) reviewing the calculations in the documentation submitted by local governments as part of challenge submissions and (2) checking documents and calculations for internal consistency. Moving forward, the Bureau is preparing a quality assurance plan for Bureau staff who review challenges to better ensure proper handling and processing of challenges, as well as the review of calculations.

The Bureau's 2020 research and testing program is exploring the use of local administrative records for the 2020 Census, such as those used in the challenge program, but this effort is a lower priority than research on the use of national records, in part because national administrative records show greater promise than local records for controlling costs. Bureau officials said local records show the most promise for supporting the development of the 2020 address list. Specifically, the Bureau is exploring how it can use local records to more seamlessly and continually update address lists and maps, rather than waiting to receive such information as part of a one-time decennial update. Bureau officials stated that it is important to continue research on local records because they may be helpful in targeting decennial operations to hard-to-count groups or those in certain geographic areas. However, the results of 2010 Census research and testing on national records have led Bureau officials to conclude that continuing research on national records should be a higher priority.