



July 2018

2020 CENSUS

Actions Needed to Address Challenges to Enumerating Hard- to-Count Groups

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-599](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

A goal for the 2020 Census is to count everyone once, only once, and in the right place. Achieving a complete and accurate census is becoming an increasingly complex task, in part because the nation's population is growing larger, more diverse, and more reluctant to participate. When the census misses a person who should have been included, it results in an undercount. Historically, certain sociodemographic groups have been undercounted in the census, which is particularly problematic given the many uses of census data.

GAO was asked to review the Bureau's plans for enumerating hard-to-count groups in the 2020 Census. This report examines (1) the Bureau's plans for improving the enumeration of the hard-to-count in 2020, and how that compares with 2010; and (2) the challenges the Bureau faces in improving the enumeration of the hard-to-count in 2020. GAO reviewed Bureau planning, budget, operational, and evaluation documents as well as documents of the hard-to-count related working groups of the Bureau's National Advisory Committee; and interviewed Bureau officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Bureau take steps to ensure that forthcoming changes and decisions on its hard-to-count related efforts are integrated with other operational efforts and that it collects data on its 2020 partnership hiring efforts.

The Department of Commerce agreed with GAO's recommendations, and the Bureau provided technical comments that were incorporated, as appropriate.

View [GAO-18-599](#). For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoffr@gao.gov.

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Actions Needed to Address Challenges to Enumerating Hard-to-Count Groups

What GAO Found

The Census Bureau's (Bureau) plans for enumerating groups considered hard-to-count, such as minorities, renters, and young children, in the 2020 Census includes the use of both traditional and enhanced initiatives. For example, the Bureau plans to continue using certain outreach efforts used in 2010, such as a communications campaign with paid advertising, partnerships with local organizations, and targeted outreach to immigrant and faith-based organizations. The Bureau also plans enhancements to its outreach efforts compared to 2010. For example, to help address the undercount of young children, the Bureau revised the census questionnaire and instructions to enumerators to more explicitly include grandchildren in counts. Other planned changes include:

- *Expanded languages:* The Bureau plans to offer more non-English language response options and instructional materials than for 2010.
- *More partnership specialists:* The Bureau plans to hire nearly twice as many partnership specialists as it had planned for the 2010 Census to recruit partner organizations in local communities.
- *Earlier partnership hiring:* The Bureau started hiring a small number of partnership staff in October 2015—2 years earlier than it did for 2010.

While efforts have been made, enumerating hard-to-count persons in 2020 will not be easy. Aside from the inherent difficulties of counting such individuals, the Bureau faces certain management challenges related to its hard-to-count efforts.

- First, the Bureau's hard-to-count efforts are distributed across over one third of its 35 operations supporting the 2020 Census. And while decentralized operations can provide flexibility, to enhance visibility over these hard-to-count efforts, the Bureau recently developed a draft operational document. However, the Bureau will continue to face challenges in ensuring its hard-to-count efforts integrate with each other. For example, some of the detailed plans for 10 of the hard-to-count efforts were released in 2016 and are awaiting updates, while 4 plans have yet to be released. With less than 2 years until Census Day (April 1, 2020), there is little room for delay. Therefore, to ensure that emerging plans related to the hard-to-count efforts integrate with existing plans, Bureau management will need to continue its focus on control of the changes in hard-to-count efforts moving forward.
- Second, the Bureau faces a challenge of a tighter labor market than existed prior to 2010 that could potentially create shortfalls or delays in its hiring of partnership staff who are needed to reach small and hard-to-count communities. In early hiring for 2020, Bureau officials reported smaller than expected applicant pools, declined offers, and turnover. Although it has plans to identify critical skills for 2020 and for tailored recruiting, collecting data on its hiring efforts will also be important. Currently, the Bureau lacks data from its 2010 Census that could have helped inform its partnership-staff hiring efforts for 2020.

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Abbreviations

Bureau	U.S. Census Bureau
Recovery Act	The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009

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July 26, 2018

The Honorable Claire McCaskill
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Gary Peters
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency
Management
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
House of Representatives

A goal of the 2020 Census is to count everyone once, only once, and in the right place. However, achieving a complete and accurate census is becoming an increasingly complex task. This is in part because the nation's population is growing larger; more diverse in culture, living arrangements, and in the number of languages spoken; and more reluctant to participate. The U.S. Census Bureau's (Bureau) efforts during the early part of the decade were largely focused on preparing and testing innovations largely designed to save money. The former Bureau director previously testified that part of these savings could go toward improving the enumeration of the "hard-to-count" groups historically missed in the census, such as racial and ethnic minorities, renters, and young children. However, the Bureau's cost estimates have risen over the decade, eliminating much of those initial projected savings, and the Bureau has requested increased funding over multiple years while it develops its plans for enumerating these groups.

You asked us to review the Bureau's plans for enumerating the hard-to-count groups in the 2020 Census. This report examines (1) the Bureau's plans for improving the enumeration of the hard-to-count in 2020, and how that compares with its effort for 2010; and (2) the challenges, if any, the Bureau faces in improving the enumeration of the hard-to-count in 2020.

We generally limited our scope to the six Bureau operations with a goal or objective related to improving the enumeration of the hard-to-count groups. These operations are: Integrated Partnership and Communications, Language Services, Non-ID Processing, Group Quarters/Service-Based Enumeration, Enumeration at Transitory Locations, and Coverage Improvement.¹

To address both of these objectives, we reviewed Bureau planning, budget, operational, and evaluation documents related to the Bureau's efforts to enumerate hard-to-count groups in the 2020 Census and prior decennials. We also interviewed Bureau officials responsible for planning and executing the 2020 Census and with experience in prior decennials about planned changes from the 2010 Census and related challenges.

To address the first objective, we also analyzed the Bureau's most recently available planned hiring and life cycle cost estimates for these activities and compared those to the Bureau reported level of planned hiring and actual spending for the 2010 Census. To assess the reliability of these Bureau reported data, we compared the historical information the Bureau provided us for the 2010 Census with information found in the Bureau's 2010 Census evaluations, and interviewed knowledgeable Bureau officials. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable to describe the Bureau's planned hiring and cost estimates for the 2020 Census compared to similar activities for the 2010 Census, except where noted.

To address the second objective, we also reviewed related Bureau evaluations and recommendations from the 2010 Census and 2020 Census research and testing activities, and from the Bureau's National Advisory Committee and hard-to-count related working groups to identify challenges the Bureau may face in improving the enumeration of the hard to count. We supplemented our review of Bureau documentation by conducting a search of the literature for academic and other publications related to including hard-to-count groups in surveys.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2017 to July 2018 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain

¹For the 2020 Census, the Bureau included its Coverage Improvement initiative as part of the Non-Response Follow-up operation.

sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

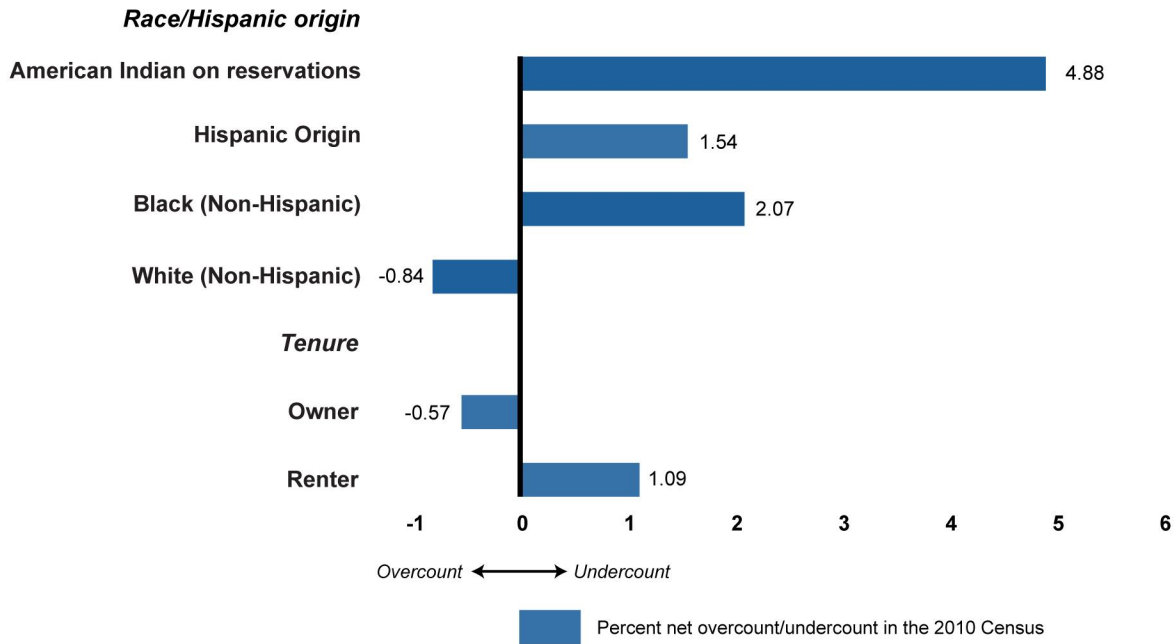
Background

Hard-to-Count Groups

Although the Bureau goes to great lengths to conduct an accurate count of the nation's population, some degree of inaccuracy is inevitable. When the census misses a person who should have been included, it results in an undercount. An overcount occurs when an individual is counted more than once or in the wrong place. These errors are problematic because certain groups such as minorities, young children, and renters are more likely to be missed in the census, while other groups such as those who may own a second, seasonal home are more likely to be counted more than once. As census data are used to apportion seats in Congress, redraw congressional districts, and allocate billions of dollars in federal assistance each year, improving coverage and reducing undercounts are important.

As an example, the Bureau reported that the 2010 Census did not have a significant net undercount or overcount nationally. However, as shown in figure 1, errors in census coverage were unevenly distributed through the population. For example, the Bureau estimated that it missed nearly 5 percent of American Indians living on reservations—the sociodemographic group with the highest percent net undercount in 2010—whereas the Bureau estimated it overcounted almost 1 percent of non-Hispanic whites.

Figure 1: Certain Sociodemographic Groups Experienced Differential Undercounts in the 2010 Census



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau documentation. | GAO-18-599

Note: Census Bureau reported that each of the percent net undercounts included were significantly different from zero at the 90 percent confidence level.

In addition to those groups with characteristics the Bureau can measure—based on their responses to certain questions asked on the census questionnaire—there are many other hard-to-count groups, some of which cut across sociodemographic groups, as shown in table 1. For example, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning persons or persons who distrust government can cut across all sociodemographic groups.

Table 1: Census Bureau Recognizes a Range of Sociodemographic and Other Groups As Hard-to-Count

Category
Complex households including those with blended families, multi-generations, or non-relatives
Cultural and linguistic minorities
Displaced persons affected by a disaster
Lesbian gay bisexual transgender queer/questioning persons
Low income persons
Persons experiencing homelessness
Persons less likely to use the Internet and others without Internet access
Persons residing in places difficult for enumerators to access, such as buildings with strict doormen, gated communities, and basement apartments
Persons residing in rural or geographically isolated areas
Persons who do not live in traditional housing
Persons who do not speak English fluently (or have limited English proficiency)
Persons who have distrust in the government
Persons with mental and/or physical disabilities
Persons without a high school diploma
Racial and ethnic minorities
Renters
Undocumented immigrants (or recent immigrants)
Young children
Young, mobile persons

Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau documentation. | GAO-18-599

There are complex reasons why certain groups are considered hard-to-count. According to Bureau officials, for example, one way to think about the hard-to-count problem is to consider what groups are hard to locate, contact, persuade, and interview for the census (see figure 2).²

²Bureau officials said one way they think about “hard to count” is an organizing principle, based on research contained in Roger Tourangeau, Brad Edwards, Timothy Johnson, Kirk Wolter, and Nancy Bates, *Hard to Survey Populations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Figure 2: Difficulty Locating, Contacting, Persuading, and Interviewing Different Hard-to-Count Groups Illustrate the Complexity of Achieving a Complete Census



Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-18-599

Hard-to-locate. Some groups are hard-to-locate because where they live is unknown, or they move frequently. For example, the Bureau faces difficulty counting persons experiencing homelessness. Adding to this difficulty are reported increases in the prevalence and complexity of outdoor encampments across the country. Inhabitants design many of these encampments to remain hidden; some people may remain in an encampment for years while other people may move frequently.

Hard-to-persuade. Other groups are hard-to-persuade to participate in the census. For example, while the Bureau had identified those who distrust government as a hard-to-count group based on research prior to

the 2010 Census, in November 2017, the Bureau reported to its National Advisory Committee an increase in unprompted confidentiality concerns raised by individuals in focus groups and pretests for the 2020 Census and other surveys.³

Multiple factors. Some groups are hard to count for multiple complex reasons. For example, a Bureau taskforce found that households with young children up to 4 years old may be missed altogether due to frequent moves between rental units (hard-to-contact). Moreover, some households studied—such as complex households with multiple generations—also appeared to be confused about whether or not to include their young children when completing the questionnaire or when being interviewed by census enumerators. The Bureau also found that language barriers sometimes resulted in households leaving young children off their census or other survey questionnaire (hard-to-interview).⁴

Congress Has Prioritized Funding for Decennial Partnership and Communications Efforts in Both the 2010 Census and the 2020 Census

An appropriation in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (Recovery Act) allowed the Bureau to increase the funding of the Bureau's 2010 Census partnership and communications efforts.⁵ The Bureau has partnered with governments, businesses, and local

³U.S. Census Bureau, Center for Survey Measurement, *Respondent Confidentiality Concerns*, Memorandum for Associate Directorate for Research and Methodology (September 20, 2017).

⁴The Bureau created a task force to research the undercount of young children in 2013. The task force has issued a number of reports on different facets of the undercount problem. For example, in 2014, the Bureau released its first report on the topic. U.S. Census Bureau, *The Undercount of Young Children* (February 2014). The Bureau has released additional related reports, including one on child undercount probes in the 2010 Census. U.S. Census Bureau, *Decennial Statistics Studies Division, Investigating the 2010 Undercount of Young Children – Child Undercount Probes* (January 2017).

⁵Pub. L. No. 111-5, div. A, tit. II. The Bureau received \$1 billion from the Recovery Act. In the conference report accompanying the act, the conferees stated that “of the amounts provided, up to \$250,000,000 shall be for partnership and outreach efforts to minority communities and hard-to-reach populations.” H.R. Conf. Rep. No. 116-16 at 417 (2009). All figures in then-year dollars as reported in the act. The purpose of including information related to the Recovery Act is to provide contextual information for when comparing the Bureau's plans from the 2010 and 2020 Censuses.

community organizations to help promote the census. The Bureau has also relied on a communications campaign including paid advertisements in national and targeted markets to help build awareness of the census. After adjusting for inflation, the Bureau spent about \$123 million to expand its advertising and about \$125 million to expand its partnership efforts (in 2017 dollars), primarily by hiring additional partnership-related staff beyond original plans.

Partnership staff hired to support the 2010 Census were responsible for mobilizing local support for the census by working with local organizations to promote participation. Partnership staff for the 2010 Census included a mix of partnership specialists—responsible for building relationships with and obtaining commitments from governments, local businesses, and other organizations to help promote the census—managers, graphic designers, and clerical support positions. After receiving Recovery Act funding, the Bureau created a new partnership assistant position. After the partnership specialists had established agreements with local organizations, these partnership assistants were responsible for supporting the implementation of promotion efforts, such as by staffing fairs and other events. Bureau officials told us that they believed that creating a new partnership assistant position would help promote census awareness.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018 directed the Bureau to conduct its fiscal year 2018 partnership and communications efforts in preparation for the 2020 Census at a level and staffing no less than the Bureau conducted during fiscal year 2008 in preparation for the 2010 Census. The act appropriated more than \$2.5 billion for the Periodic Censuses and Programs account, which according to Bureau officials includes over \$1 billion from the Bureau's fiscal year 2019 budget request intended to smooth transition of funding between fiscal years, such as in the event of a continuing resolution.⁶

⁶Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-141, div. B, tit. I.

The Bureau Plans to Enhance Outreach to and the Enumeration of Hard-to-Count Groups in 2020, but Estimated Spending Is Similar to 2010

The Bureau Plans Enhancements to Key 2020 Census Operations to Address Complexity Enumerating Hard-to-Count Groups

The Bureau will continue to rely on its Integrated Partnership and Communications operation—designed to communicate the importance of census participation and motivate self-response—as a key component of its efforts to improve enumeration of hard-to-count persons in the 2020 Census. Evaluations conducted by the Bureau found that its partnership and communications efforts had positive effects on increasing awareness and participation among the hard-to-count in prior censuses. Because of the positive effects, the Bureau has begun outreach to the more than 257,000 tribal, state, and local governments as well as other businesses and organizations it partnered with in 2010. For example, the Bureau plans to continue using “trusted voices”—individuals or groups with relevance, importance, and relatability to a given population, such as local leaders and gatekeepers within isolated communities—to promote the census. As part of this effort, the Bureau plans to continue outreach initiatives to specific constituencies, such as to faith-based communities, and, through its Foreign Born/Immigrant initiative, to outreach and communicate with recent immigrants, undocumented residents, refugees, and migrant and seasonal farm workers.

In addition, the Bureau still plans to advertise in national and targeted markets. For example, to support its 2020 outreach efforts, including to hard-to-count groups, the Bureau awarded a communications contract in August 2016 to Young and Rubicam, an advertising firm. As has been done in prior censuses, this contractor has enlisted 14 partners and subcontractors to help it reach specific sociodemographic groups, such

as American Indian and Alaska Native populations and Hispanic communities.⁷

Given the increasingly complex task of counting those historically missed in the census, the Bureau has taken steps or plans to enhance some aspects of the initiatives under its Integrated Partnership and Communications operation and to other key operations compared to the 2010 Census, as shown in table 2.⁸ For example, the Bureau overhauled a metric it has used to help manage and target field work for its partnerships to areas with hard-to-count populations, basing it now on predictions of each household's likelihood to self-respond to the census.⁹ Using this new low response score metric, the Bureau created a publicly available online mapping tool for its partnership staff and other users to better understand the sociodemographic make-up of their assigned areas and to plan their outreach efforts accordingly.¹⁰ Moreover, as we previously recommended in 2010, the Bureau also plans to develop predictive models to help allocate its advertising using: (1) these predictive response data, (2) results describing the complexity of difficult enumeration from its recent "behaviors, attitudes, and motivators survey" study and focus groups, and (3) other third-party data.¹¹

⁷The Bureau publicly released the first of three planned versions of its Integrated Communications Plan in October 2017, outlining the high-level components of the communications campaign being developed by Young and Rubicam in consultation with the Bureau. U.S. Census Bureau, *2020 Census Integrated Communications Plan Version 1.0* (June 2, 2017).

⁸We examined the Bureau's plans for the 2020 Census in the six Bureau operations that we believed were most directly related to the hard-to-count. Within the Non-Response Follow-up operation, we focused on the Bureau's Coverage Improvement initiative.

⁹The new "low response score" metric uses tract and block-level housing, demographic, and socio-demographic variables from the 2010 Census, five-year American Community Survey estimates, and other 2010 Census data. This low response score replaces the Bureau's prior "hard-to-count" score used for the 2010 Census that was based on mail-back response information from the 2000 Census, including socio-demographic variables as well as the number of vacant homes and the percentage of people living below the poverty line in each given census tract or geographic area.

¹⁰The Bureau has made its Response Outreach Area Mapper (ROAM) application available at www.census.gov/roam.

¹¹GAO, *2010 Census: Key Efforts to Include Hard-to-Count Populations Went Generally as Planned; Improvements Could Make the Efforts More Effective for Next Census*, GAO-11-45 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 14, 2010).

Table 2: Examples of Planned Changes to 2020 Census Hard-to-Count Operations from 2010 to Help Address Increasing Complexities

Operation	Description	Planned change for 2020 Census
Integrated Partnership and Communications	Communicate the importance of participating in the census by engaging and motivating people to self-respond	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance use of data to support predictive modeling Use focus groups with hard-to-count groups to help develop communications message, rather than just to test it Publish public tool to map low-response areas Consult with American Indian and Alaskan Native tribes (2 years earlier than for last census) Formally promote state and local complete count committees to improve the count (one-year earlier) Expand college outreach to community colleges, vocational schools, and off-campus housing
Coverage Improvement ^a	Resolve errors with people who were counted in the wrong place, counted more than once, or missed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise enumerator job aides and probes on questionnaires to emphasize counting young children
Group Quarters/Service Based Enumeration	Enumerate people in group quarters (colleges, nursing homes, etc.) and people experiencing homelessness when receiving services at soup kitchens, mobile food vans, and targeted outdoor locations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow administrators of target programs to transfer enumeration data electronically
Language Support	Support language needs of non-English speaking populations through non-English language response options and guidance materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase number of non-English language response options and instructional materials Formalize in-house language translation expertise
Non-ID Processing	Verify addresses for responses that do not already include a unique Census ID on them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow for near real-time validation of Internet responses Incorporate administrative records and other improvements to improve acceptance rates
Enumeration at Transitory Locations	Enumerate people at transitory locations who do not have a usual home elsewhere, such as recreational vehicle parks, campgrounds, racetracks, carnivals, marinas, hotels, and motels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes not yet known; detailed operational plan scheduled for release in September 2018

Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau documentation. | GAO-18-599

^aThe Bureau included its Coverage Improvement initiative as part of the Non-Response Follow-up operation for the 2020 Census.

The Bureau is still evaluating certain initiatives before deciding whether or not to include them in its 2020 plans. For example, as part of the 2018 End-to-End Test currently underway in Providence, Rhode Island, the Bureau is piloting the use of Internet kiosks in selected post offices to help allow persons to self-respond to the census. Bureau officials said

they will decide whether to move forward with the use of kiosks in post offices in 2020 after evaluating the pilot and the test.

In addition, according to the Bureau's current planning documents, the Bureau has plans to change other key operations to help improve the enumeration of certain hard-to-count groups. For example, to help address the complex undercount of young children, the Bureau revised the census questionnaire and instructions to enumerators to more explicitly mention the inclusion of grandchildren and any non-relatives in household population counts. In addition, the Bureau's planning documents describe plans to offer administrators at certain group quarters locations, such as college dormitories, the option to electronically transfer their rosters to the Bureau.¹² Bureau officials said that this planned change will help reduce the need for enumerators to visit those locations, and that such an efficiency gain will allow them to devote resources on the ground to other harder to enumerate group quarters.¹³

Recognizing the importance of reaching an increasingly linguistically diverse population, the Bureau has also made significant changes to its Language Services operation for 2020, including increasing the number of non-English languages formally supported by the Bureau. Table 3 below summarizes changes in the number of languages the Bureau plans to support. According to the Bureau, this larger choice of languages should increase the percentage of limited-English-speaking households directly supported by that operation from 78 percent in 2010 to 87 percent in 2020.

¹²The other response option for group quarters will be enumerators visiting these locations and using paper questionnaires to capture responses. The Bureau had initially planned to use mobile devices to enumerate individuals at these locations, including at service-based locations such as shelters and soup kitchens, but in September 2017, announced its decision to revert back to paper-based methods as had been done in prior censuses.

¹³We previously recommended in 2010 that the Bureau determine the factors led to staffing issues we observed during enumeration at such service-based locations and take steps to ensure more efficient staffing levels ([GAO-11-45](#)). The Bureau agreed with the recommendation and has taken initial steps to update its staffing model. However, as of June 2018, the Bureau had not provided information to show it had determined the underlying factors that led to the observed overstaffing in order to help prevent a repeat in 2020. We continue to monitor the Bureau's progress in fully implementing the recommendation.

Table 3: Census Bureau Generally Plans to Expand Coverage of Non-English Language Support for the 2020 Census, Compared to the 2010 Census

	Language Support	2010 Census (# non-English languages)	Planned 2020 Census (# non-English languages)
Response Options	Paper questionnaire and related mailings	Spanish only	Spanish only
	Internet questionnaire	n/a	12
	Telephone assistance	5	12
Support Materials	Enumerator glossary to translate technical terms	n/a	59
	Enumerator job-aid to help identify respondent's preferred language	50	59
	Guides to help respondents complete questionnaire	59	59
	Advertising, partnership, and promotional material	27	Decision pending (at least 12)

Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau documentation. | GAO-18-599

The Bureau is still assessing the level of non-English support it will directly provide through advertising, partnership, and promotional materials. Bureau officials stated that they will decide the number of — and which—non-English languages to support after it has completed research on how best to segment advertising markets in fall 2018. Until then, it has committed to at least 12 non-English languages—which is less than half of the 27 non-English languages similarly supported in the 2010 Census.¹⁴ Bureau officials said that one action they will take to mitigate any effects if the Bureau decides on a fewer number of languages for 2020 is to provide language-independent media templates—including scripts to videos ready for non-English voiceovers—to any partner groups that may need them.

The Bureau has also formalized its language translation capabilities for the non-English languages it chooses to support based on 2010 Census evaluations that found, among other things, that the Bureau's lack of sufficient oversight of its translation process hampered consistency of its translation of promotion and outreach materials. For the 2020 Census, Bureau officials said they intend to rely on in-house translation experts adhering to translation industry standards. Bureau officials stated that the

¹⁴The Bureau provided additional non-English language support in 2010 using Recovery Act funding. According to Bureau officials, prior to the additional Recovery Act funding received in 2009, the Bureau planned to support 13 non-English languages.

Bureau will not attempt to oversee the translations that partners may make into less commonly spoken languages using the Bureau’s language-neutral materials when trying to reach more isolated language areas, though officials stated that its partners, including contractors for advertising, will rely on Bureau-developed language glossaries for census terminology when translating into other languages.

The Bureau Plans Total Spending for Its 2020 Census Outreach Efforts Similar to that for 2010 Census, and to Hire More Partnership Specialists Instead of Assistants

The Bureau estimates total spending for its 2020 partnership and communications outreach efforts to be similar to what it reported spending on those efforts for the 2010 Census after adjusting for inflation. Specifically, according to documents supporting the Bureau’s most recent life cycle cost estimate for the 2020 Census, the Bureau may spend about \$850 million in its outreach to promote the 2020 Census, compared to nearly \$830 million in total spending in comparable categories for the 2010 Census.¹⁵ (See table 4.)

Table 4: Census Bureau’s 2020 Life Cycle Cost Estimates Show Shifts in Spending Categories for Outreach Efforts, Compared to the 2010 Census

n/a Categories	Dollars in millions	
	2010 actual ^a	2020 estimated
Partnership staff in local and regional offices	334	248
Support from census headquarters	106	111
Communications campaign	388	492
Total	828	851

Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau documentation. | GAO-18-599

Note: All data are in constant fiscal year 2017 dollars adjusted for inflation using the fiscal year Gross Domestic Price index.

^aThe Bureau’s spending for the 2010 Census includes additional funding (\$125 million for partnership and \$123 million for communications in 2017 dollars) it received in 2009 pursuant to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Partnership staff. According to the Bureau’s current planning documents, it will hire nearly twice as many partnership specialists—responsible for building relationships and obtaining commitments from

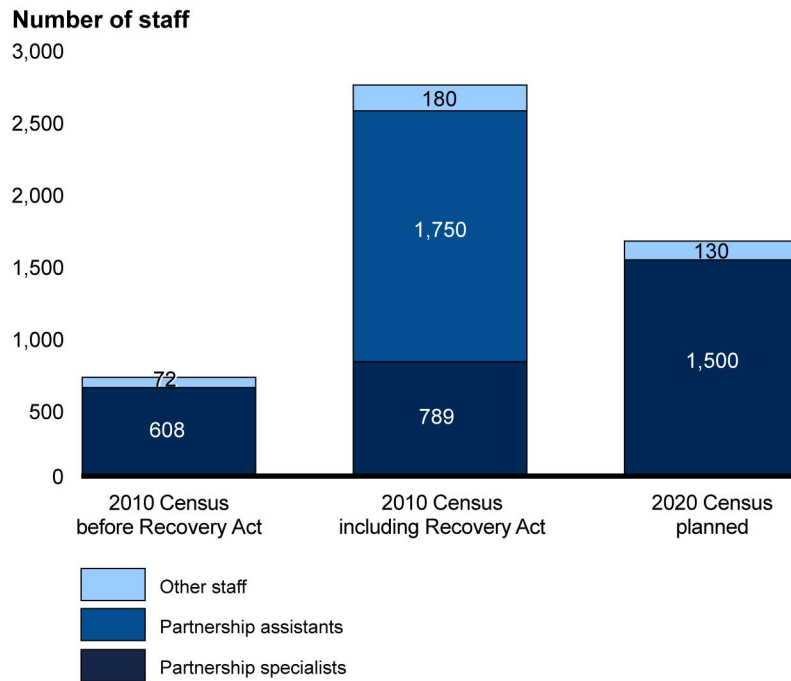
¹⁵All figures are in constant 2017 dollars adjusted for inflation using the fiscal year Gross Domestic Price Index.

organizations—to support the 2020 Census than it hired to support the 2010 Census. Despite this planned increase in partnership specialists, the Bureau’s total estimated spending on partnership staff—\$248 million—is less than the \$334 million the Bureau reported spending in the same cost category for 2010 after adjusting for inflation.¹⁶ This change is in part because the Bureau does not plan to hire any partnership assistants to support the 2020 Census.

According to Bureau planning data from the 2010 Census, the Bureau planned to hire over 1,700 partnership assistants—those that assisted specialists for the 2010 Census—with Recovery Act funding. As noted previously, Bureau officials said that the additional funding it received from the Recovery Act in 2009 (about \$125 million in 2017 dollars) largely funded the hiring of these partnership assistants. The effect of the Recovery Act funding on partnership hiring is shown in figure 3 below. According to Bureau officials, without the Recovery Act funding and its direction for the Bureau to increase hiring in order to stimulate the economy, the Bureau would not have hired the large number of partnership assistants that it did.

¹⁶Without the Recovery Act funding, according to Bureau documentation, the Bureau’s spending on partnership staff in field offices would have been about \$209 million in the 2010 Census, about \$40 million less than planned for the 2020 Census after adjusting for inflation.

Figure 3: Census Bureau Plans to Hire More Partnership Specialists and No Partnership Assistants for 2020 Census, Compared to the 2010 Census Plans



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau documentation. | GAO-18-599

Note: All data are planned hires.

According to Bureau officials, this shift in hiring toward more partnership specialists will enable a greater focus on creating more partnerships and require greater reliance on partner organizations to help with staffing for outreach and promotion events in local communities that partnership assistants were used for in the 2010 Census. While the ability of future partners to help with these events remains to be seen, Bureau officials involved in early outreach with partners stated that they believe this planned approach shows early promise based on the over 1,500 partners they have engaged for the 2020 Census so far.

Headquarters support. The \$111 million amount the Bureau plans to spend in headquarters support for outreach efforts is similar to the \$106 million it spent in the 2010 Census after adjusting for inflation. According to Bureau documents, this support will be used for advertising, media, and partnership efforts.

Communications campaign. The Bureau plans to spend more in its communications campaign category in the 2020 Census than what it

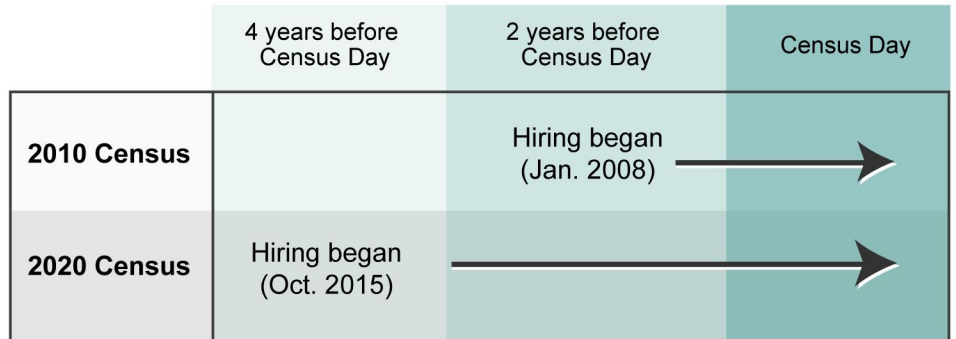
reported spending in this area during the 2010 Census—\$492 million compared to \$388 million after adjusting for inflation, according to the Bureau’s cost estimation documents. The campaign will include paid advertising and the development of promotional materials. According to Bureau officials, they will initiate much of this spending in May 2019. This larger figure includes about \$152 million for additional contracted services still being planned, but provisionally allocated for various advertising support efforts with the balance for various partnership materials not included in other contracts.

The Bureau does not plan to repeat its “2010 Census Road Tour” involving a large mobile display and over a dozen cargo vans that were driven to promotional events around the country at a cost of about \$16.6 million after adjusting for inflation. While the Bureau did not conduct a formal evaluation of the initiative’s effectiveness at encouraging response during the 2010 Census, Bureau officials told us that they do not believe it was as effective a use of resources compared to the other options they are planning for 2020.

The Bureau Started Partnership Hiring Earlier for the 2020 Census Than for 2010

An evaluation conducted by the Bureau of its 2010 partnership efforts recommended that, for the 2020 Census, the Bureau hire at least a core group of partnership staff 3 years prior to census day instead of the 2 years prior as was done for the 2010 Census. Consistent with that recommendation, according to Bureau officials, the Bureau hired five partnership specialists for the 2020 Census in October 2015—more than 2 years earlier in the decennial cycle than its first hiring of partnership specialists in January 2008 for the 2010 Census, as shown in figure 4. Bureau officials told us that this hiring helped the Bureau complete tribal consultations earlier than it had for the 2010 Census. Moreover, the Bureau continued its early hiring with 39 more partnership specialists in fiscal year 2017. Bureau officials said that, with the additional year of preparation, these staff initiated outreach to the highest level of government in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, resulting in, as of April 2018, partnership staff having obtained commitments or statements of interest from all but two state governments to form State Complete Count Commissions/Committees. These Commissions/Committees are intended to help form partnerships at the highest levels of government within each state and leverage each state’s vested interest in a timely and complete count of its population.

Figure 4: Census Bureau Began Hiring 2020 Partnership Staff 2 Years Earlier Than for 2010 Census



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau documentation. | GAO-18-599

Bureau officials said they also recently further accelerated the Bureau’s planned time frames for hiring partnership specialists. These officials said that with the funds made available in the Fiscal Year 2018 Consolidated Appropriations Omnibus, the Bureau began posting job announcements for about 70 partnership specialists in April 2018 and hopes to begin hiring in July 2018—3 months earlier than October 2018, as had otherwise been planned.

In addition, with 2018 funds, Bureau officials said they are working to identify elements of the communications campaign to begin earlier than the planned start date of October 1, 2018. The Bureau and the lead communications contractor identified possible efforts to start months earlier. According to Bureau officials, they are finalizing how to accelerate these efforts, including the *Statistics in Schools* initiative, media planning, and hosting a creative development workshop with the communications contractors.¹⁷

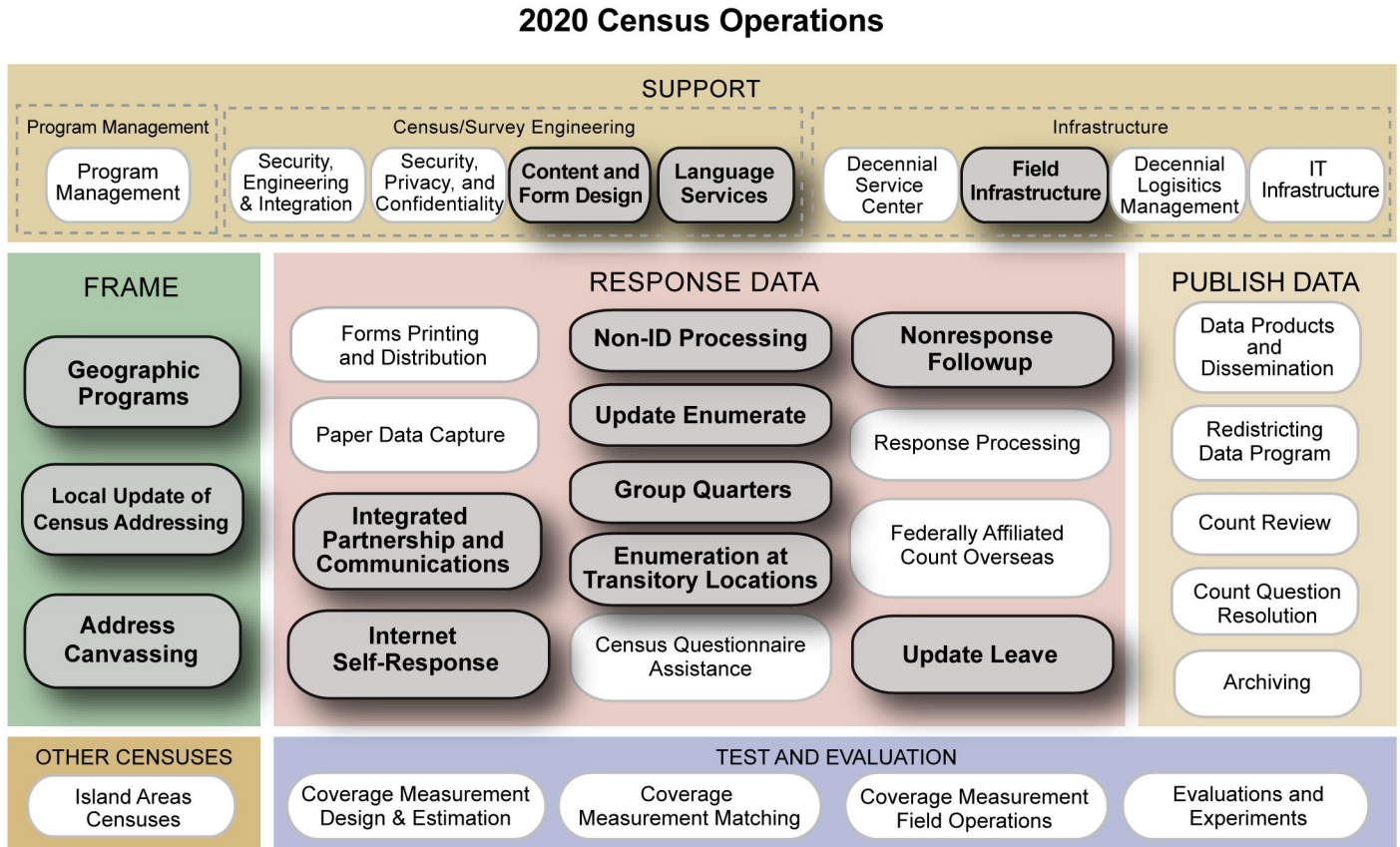
¹⁷The Statistics in Schools initiative is intended to promote census participation and use of census data by providing resources and learning activities to teachers, students, and parents.

The Bureau Faces Internal Management and External Workforce Challenges in Improving the Enumeration of Hard-to-Count Groups in 2020

The Bureau Faces an Internal Management Challenge Integrating Its Many Hard-to-Count Efforts

According to the Bureau and as shown in figure 5, over one-third of its 35 operations (14 of 35) are designed, at least in part, to help improve the enumeration of hard-to-count groups. These efforts range from the earliest field data collection operations—such as *address canvassing* when the Bureau aims to identify all possible addresses where people live, including hidden housing units such as basement apartments or attics—to some of its later field operations, such as *nonresponse follow-up* when census enumerators visit each household that did not self-respond.

Figure 5: Over One-Third of 2020 Census Operations Involve Efforts Intended to Improve Enumeration of the Hard-to-Count Groups



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau documentation. | GAO-18-599

Note: Gray shading indicates an operation included in the draft Census Bureau Plan for Enumerating the Hard-to-Count.

Each of the 35 operations is implemented by a separate team that manages and controls its activities and, according to Bureau governance documents, is also responsible for reviewing and managing its risks, schedule, and scope, as well as developing needed capability requirements. Team leads are responsible for ensuring integration with other operation teams, and escalating risks to management, as well as ensuring communication upward to the various governance bodies overseeing the decentralized structure.¹⁸ Operational decisions within the

¹⁸Decentralization is an organizational structure in which operations and decision-making responsibilities are delegated by top management to others within the organization.

scope of plans that have been approved by the governance bodies are made at the team level, while ultimate responsibility rests with respective associate directors for the decennial, field, communications, and other directorates, whose staff largely comprise the teams, and the Director of the Census Bureau itself. The Bureau exercises change control over the scope, schedule, and documentation of its baseline program design, with a change control board comprising process and program managers with responsibility over the operational teams. Approved changes are formally communicated via e-mail to stakeholders in the change control process.

Managing decentralized operations in such a way can be effective and provide an agency flexibility in responding to changing conditions on the ground, such as when adapting census methods in response to natural disasters as the Bureau had to do during the 2010 Census for areas affected by Hurricane Katrina. However, such decentralization also presents a challenge to management as it tries to ensure the integration of its efforts to improve enumeration of the hard-to-count groups.

To help address the challenge of managing so many hard-to-count efforts that cut across the decentralized operations, during our review, the Bureau developed a draft operational design document. This document describes the major operations and initiatives that contribute to, at least in part, its goal to improve the enumeration of hard-to-count groups in the 2020 Census. This is the Bureau's first comprehensive look at the hard-to-count goal for the 2020 Census. Bureau officials said that they developed the document because they realized that looking across the Bureau's operations and how they relate to difficulties enumerating hard-to-count groups would provide them a useful perspective that could help identify any gaps or interdependencies in their various hard-to-count efforts. Bureau officials said they plan to refine and include this document as a chapter in the fall 2018 update of their broader 2020 Census Operational Plan. Although this is a good first step to elevate the visibility of the hard-to-count goal, we identified a number of other areas where additional steps or management focus may be needed in order to help ensure integration of certain hard-to-count related efforts, including the following:

- During exchanges of information between the Bureau and its National Advisory Committee in 2017 and 2018, the Bureau proposed using additional focus groups with certain population groups, census interviewers, and trusted community messengers. These focus groups are intended to identify root causes and ways to overcome the confidentiality concerns increasingly being raised by respondents in

the Bureau's earlier testing by helping to inform messaging and outreach plans as well as staff support documents and training materials. However, as of May 1, 2018, the Bureau reported that it had yet to identify the resources needed to conduct the additional focus groups it had proposed. If the Bureau is going to take this step, it would need to complete its analysis from these proposed focus groups with interviewers and others before starting to develop its 2020 messaging, currently scheduled to begin in October 2018. Any delays in scheduling these activities could have an effect on activities intended to help improve enumeration of the hard-to-count in other related operations.¹⁹

- The detailed operational plans for 10 of the Bureau's 14 hard-to-count-related operations have been documented and released publicly. However, we found that several of the detailed plans already released—while self-described as being updated over time to reflect changes in strategies based on ongoing planning, research, and testing—are nearly two years old and may not reflect more recent decisions made. Attention by Bureau management to the details of these operational plans as they are updated will be critical to ensure that their interdependencies with other efforts are accounted for.
- Similarly, as of May 2018, little detail is available about what interdependencies the other 4 hard-to-count related efforts will have on the overall 2020 Census Operational Plan and on the Bureau's efforts to improve the enumeration of the hard-to-count in particular. For example, the Bureau's operation to enumerate persons at transitory locations—key to counting mobile persons, including those living at motels or with traveling carnivals—is one of the 4 efforts without a detailed operational plan yet. Because the Bureau is not scheduled to test the integration of this enumeration with other systems before the 2020 Census, it remains to be seen how its forthcoming design may interact with other related operations and systems. While Bureau officials stated that procedures likely to be used for this operation are well established from prior censuses, they also stated that there may be significant changes from the past in the process the Bureau uses to determine where to count persons in this operation and may rely on changes in the non-ID processing operation—helping enumerate persons not having a pre-assigned census identification number. With less than 2 years to go until

¹⁹In technical comments in response to a draft of this report, Bureau officials told us that they do not have plans to conduct the additional proposed focus groups with census interviewers and trusted community messengers.

Census Day (April 1, 2020), there is little room for delay in considering how forthcoming details on hard-to-count efforts yet to be finalized—or changed based on ongoing testing or other decisions—may have consequences on other related efforts.

According to the Project Management Institute's *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, integrated change control can help address overall risk to related efforts, which often arises from changes made without consideration of the overall goals or plans.²⁰ A significant amount of hard-to-count-related planning for the 2020 Census is currently underway, and in the less than 2 years remaining before Census Day, it will be important for Bureau management to maintain a focus that helps ensure that hard-to-count-related decisions yet to be made as well as any changes to those already made are integrated with other related efforts. Focused attention on these efforts will also help ensure that any interdependencies, synergies, or gaps are identified and included in the change-control processes the Bureau already has in place.

Hiring Partnership Staff with Critical Skills in a Tight Labor Market Creates a Workforce Challenge for the Bureau and It Lacks Data from 2010 to Guide Its Efforts

As noted previously, a key component of the 2010 Census was the hiring of partnership staff to help build relationships with and obtain commitments from local organizations to help encourage census participation, particularly among hard-to-count groups. For the 2020 Census, in addition to the core relationship-building skills, Bureau officials said they are working to identify specialized skills needed to operate partnership initiatives in a 2020 environment, such as advanced knowledge of digital media. However, the Bureau faces a significant challenge in hiring these kinds of staff because it is operating in a much tighter labor market than it did prior to the 2010 Census. As a result, it may not be able to hire the partnership staff with the skills it now needs as easily as it had in the past.

According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, the unemployment rate in January 2008, when the Bureau first hired partnership staff for the 2010

²⁰Project Management Institute, Inc., *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*, Sixth Edition (Newton Square, PA: 2017). PMBOK is a trademark of Project Management Institute, Inc.

Census, was 5 percent. That number increased to more than 7 percent by December 2008, and then ranged from more than 7.5 percent to 10 percent in 2009 and through Census Day in April 2010. During this time, the Bureau hired nearly 3,000 partnership staff, many of which the Bureau hired in a few short months after receiving additional funding from the Recovery Act. The unemployment rate is substantially lower now as we approach the comparable part of the decade for the 2020 Census. Specifically, the rate has ranged from 4.9 percent in October 2016, when the Bureau starting hiring for an early round of about 40 partnership staff, to less than 4 percent in May 2018.

Bureau officials reported experiencing challenges during these early hiring efforts for partnership staff, although they were ultimately able to fill the nearly 40 positions the Bureau sought to fill across its six census regions. Bureau officials in the regional field offices reported observing smaller applicant pools, declined job offers, and early turnover due to a lower pay rate the Bureau offered compared to the local economy. Moreover, these officials reported seeing fewer applicants through local job markets, which had been successful recruiting mechanisms in the prior census. According to the Bureau's planning documents, the Bureau plans to ramp up its hiring of partnership specialists between July 2018 and 2019. If the unemployment rate generally holds steady at around the 4 percent of May 2018, the Bureau will likely face challenges recruiting and retaining partnership staff with the critical skills needed.

Bureau officials said that they will develop customized recruiting strategies to fill specific needs as they identify and refine the mix of partnership skills needed to support their 2020 efforts. For example, Bureau officials acknowledged the need to more effectively use USAJobs, the federal recruiting website, and targeted job announcements. They also identified the possibility of hiring additional partnership staff for short-term assignments closer to census day to help meet specific needs, such as assisting with non-English language enumeration and connecting with faith-based or immigrant communities in areas with low participation. Following through on its plans to identify an optimal mix of skill-sets and tailored recruiting strategies, in accordance with leading practices, will be important for the Bureau as it operates in a tight labor market because

delays or shortfalls in hiring partnership staff could put the Bureau's plans for building support for the census at risk.²¹

As the Bureau has decided to rely more heavily on partnership specialists as part of its outreach and promotion strategy to reach hard-to-count groups and still faces decisions about where to staff them, it has done so without the benefit of data on its actual hiring of partnership staff from the 2010 Census. During our review, the Bureau was unable to readily provide us with data on the actual number or timing of partnership specialists and assistants hired to support the 2010 Census, and instead, we had to use detailed Bureau planning documents for our analysis. Bureau officials reported that their records in 2010 did not clearly link the positions and grades recorded in the payroll system for individual staff who were hired to support a different operation to the roles they subsequently played in carrying out the partnership efforts.

Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government state that management should use quality information to achieve the entity's objectives.²² Bureau officials recognize the importance of having such data readily available both for evaluating implemented efforts and for future planning, and said they will take steps to better record these types of data for the 2020 Census. Doing so will better position the Bureau to evaluate the effectiveness of its hiring strategy and tradeoffs in alternative approaches, to learn lessons from the 2020 implementation, and to optimize related staffing strategies in the future.

Conclusions

Much of the Bureau's planning efforts to help address the longstanding challenge of enumerating hard-to-count groups in the 2020 Census are underway. Importantly, the various operations and initiatives related to the hard-to-count are either in the planning or early implementation stages. While the Bureau has taken some steps to better understand the scope of these efforts, going forward, it will be important for the Bureau to ensure that management maintains a focus on forthcoming changes and

²¹GAO, Key Issues, *Best Practices and Leading Practices in Human Capital Management*, and *Human Capital: Effective Use of Flexibilities Can Assist Agencies in Managing Their Workforces*, [GAO-03-2](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 6, 2002).

²²GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

decisions on hard-to-count related efforts to ensure they are integrated with other hard-to-count related efforts across the Bureau's decentralized operations. Doing so will help the Bureau identify possible synergies, interdependencies, or gaps specific to how they might affect the Bureau's ability to improve the census and help address overall risk to related efforts.

In addition, information about related efforts in prior censuses can help inform management and its ongoing planning. However, the Bureau's lack of complete and reliable data on hiring partnership staff for the 2010 Census—such as numbers, dates, and positions filled—affects its ability to fully consider tradeoffs it is making among types of staff it plans to hire for the 2020 Census. As the Bureau continues to ramp up its hiring of partnership specialists and other staff to support enumeration of the hard-to-count, improved recording of hiring numbers, dates, and positions filled—particularly for staff supporting multiple operations—can help position the Bureau to evaluate the effectiveness of its hiring strategy and support efforts to optimize any related hiring in future censuses.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following two recommendations to the Department of Commerce and the Census Bureau:

- The Secretary of Commerce should ensure the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau takes steps to ensure that forthcoming changes and decisions on hard-to-count related efforts are integrated with other hard-to-count related efforts across the Bureau's decentralized operations. (Recommendation 1)
- The Secretary of Commerce should ensure the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau takes steps to ensure for the purposes of evaluation and future planning that information is recorded and available on partnership hiring numbers, dates, positions filled, and in support of what part of the 2020 Census. (Recommendation 2)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of Commerce. In its written comments, reproduced in appendix I the Department of Commerce agreed with our findings and recommendations and said it

would develop an action plan to address them. The Census Bureau also provided technical comments that we incorporated, as appropriate.

As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies of this report to the Secretary of Commerce, the Undersecretary of Economic Affairs, the Acting Director of the U.S. Census Bureau, and the appropriate congressional committees. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoffr@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. The GAO staff that made major contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.



Robert Goldenkoff
Director
Strategic Issues

Appendix I: Comments from the Department of Commerce

**Appendix I: Comments from the Department of
Commerce**



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
The Secretary of Commerce
Washington, D.C. 20230

July 18, 2018

Mr. Robert Goldenkoff
Director
Strategic Issues
United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Goldenkoff:

The U.S. Department of Commerce appreciates the opportunity to comment on the United States Government Accountability Office's (GAO) draft report: "*2020 Census: Actions Needed to Address Challenges to Enumerating Hard-to-Count Groups*" (GAO-18-599).

The Department agrees with the findings and recommendations in this draft report. Once GAO issues the final report, we will prepare an action plan to document the steps we will take regarding the final recommendations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Wilbur Ross".

Wilbur Ross

Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Robert Goldenkoff, (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoffr@gao.gov.

Staff Acknowledgements

In addition to the contact named above, Ty Mitchell, Assistant Director; Chris Falcone, Analyst-in-Charge; Mark Abraham, Ann Czapiewski, Kayla Robinson, Cynthia Saunders, and Stewart Small made key contributions to this report.

Appendix III: Accessible Data

Data Tables

Accessible Data for Figure 1: Certain Sociodemographic Groups Experienced Differential Undercounts in the 2010 Census

Category	Entity	Percent net
Race/Hispanic origin	American Indian/Alaska Native on reservations	4.88
Race/Hispanic origin	Hispanic origin	1.54
Race/Hispanic origin	Black (Non-Hispanic)	2.07
Race/Hispanic origin	White (Non-Hispanic)	-0.84
Tenure	Owner	-0.57
Tenure	Renter	1.09

Accessible Data for Figure 3: Census Bureau Plans to Hire More Partnership Specialists and No Partnership Assistants for 2020 Census, Compared to the 2010 Census Plans

	2010 Census (Pre-Recovery Act)	2010 Census (Including Recovery Act)	2020 Census planned
Partnership Specialists	608	789	1,500
Partnership Assistants	n/a	1,750	n/a
Other Staff	72	180	130
Total	680	2,719	1,630

Agency Comment Letter

Accessible Text for Appendix I Comments from the
Department of Commerce

July 18, 2018

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Washington, D.C. 20230

Mr. Robert Goldenkoff

Director

Strategic Issues

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Wilbur Ross

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U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7149
Washington, DC 20548

Strategic Planning and External Liaison

James-Christian Blockwood, Managing Director, spel@gao.gov, (202) 512-4707
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7814,
Washington, DC 20548