

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) puts forth tremendous effort to conduct a complete and accurate count of the nation's population and housing; yet some degree of error in the form of persons missed, duplicated, or counted in the wrong place is inevitable due to the complexity in counting a large and diverse population. The Bureau designed two operations, Coverage Follow-up (CFU) and Field Verification (FV), to reduce certain types of counting, or coverage, errors in the 2010 Census. GAO was asked to assess (1) the extent to which the Bureau completed CFU and FV on schedule and within estimated cost and (2) the implications of their key design elements for improving coverage.

GAO reviewed Bureau evaluations, planning, and other documents on CFU and FV, and prior GAO work, and interviewed Bureau officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Commerce direct the Bureau to assess (1) how well questions to help identify miscounted people on census forms helped reduce differences in the undercounts between demographic groups; (2) the degree to which telephone numbers led to completed contacts for households of various demographic characteristics; and (3) how trends in telecommunication usage and new technology may influence the effectiveness of CFU. The Secretary of Commerce concurred with our recommendations.

View [GAO-11-154](#) or key components. For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoffr@gao.gov.

2010 CENSUS

Follow-up Should Reduce Coverage Errors, but Effects on Demographic Groups Need to Be Determined

What GAO Found

The Bureau completed CFU and FV on schedule and within budget. FV cost \$21 million (about 38 percent less than estimated) and CFU cost about \$267 million (about 2 percent less than estimated). These operations followed up on potential errors on census returns or lists of addresses after census data had been initially collected. Their completion provided follow-up data used by subsequent data processing that removed errors from the official census tabulations.

Three of the Bureau's key CFU design elements will likely improve overall census accuracy, but their effect on undercounts of different demographic groups is not clear. One key design element increased the number and types of follow-up cases. The Bureau expanded the scope of CFU from about 2 million households in the 2000 Census to more than 7 million in 2010. It also added 20 different types of households for potential follow-up. New types included households that reported members temporarily residing elsewhere, such as at college, in nursing homes, or in jail. According to the Bureau, the 2010 CFU operation should remove more than 2.7 million coverage errors from the census.

Another key design element of CFU prioritized follow-up cases based on their likelihood to result in a census correction, which was a reasonable attempt to leverage the resources for the operation. However, the Bureau's evaluation plans, based on considerations of what may best reduce cost or increase accuracy in the future, do not link the demographic characteristics of households to how they responded to the additional questions or CFU results for those households. Therefore, it is unclear whether the prioritized follow-up will help reduce differences in the accuracy of census counts across demographic groups.

Finally, CFU's design relied on a telephone-only approach to complete follow-up rather than personal visits. This limited costs, resulting in more follow-up and likely more coverage errors being removed from the census. But the telephone-only decision excluded about 700,000 households from CFU that could not be contacted by telephone. Prior Bureau experience indicates that some historically undercounted groups were less likely to be reachable by telephone, and more recent independent research suggests that trends in telecommunication usage may also make it harder to reach some demographic groups this way in the future. Yet the Bureau's evaluation plans do not include an assessment of either the usefulness of the telephone numbers it collected in reaching specific groups or the effect of these trends. Greater understanding of how best to reach different groups as well as the influence of trends on the effectiveness of CFU could help to control costs while working to further reduce differential undercounts.