



May 2020

# 2020 CENSUS

## Update on the Census Bureau's Implementation of Partnership and Outreach Activities

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-496](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

The decennial census is used to apportion seats in Congress, redraw congressional districts, and allocate hundreds of billions of dollars in federal assistance annually and helps to guide public policy decisions based on social, economic, and demographic data.

While recent censuses appear to have been increasingly accurate, measurement errors are not evenly distributed across the population. Given the uses of census data, ensuring an accurate count is important.

As part of its partnership and outreach efforts, the U.S. Census Bureau's (Bureau) Partnership Program works with local and national organizations, businesses, and governments to promote awareness of and participation in the census, as well as to help recruit census workers.

GAO was asked to review the Bureau's partnership and outreach efforts, including paid advertising and targeted communications. This report examines the Bureau's progress in addressing selected prior census challenges in these areas. GAO reviewed relevant Bureau planning documentation, collected regular Bureau reports on progress, and interviewed Bureau officials responsible for partnership and outreach efforts.

GAO provided a draft of this report to the Bureau. The Bureau agreed with the report's findings.

View [GAO-20-496](#). For more information, contact J. Christopher Mihm at (202) 512-6806 or [MihmJ@gao.gov](mailto:MihmJ@gao.gov)

May 2020

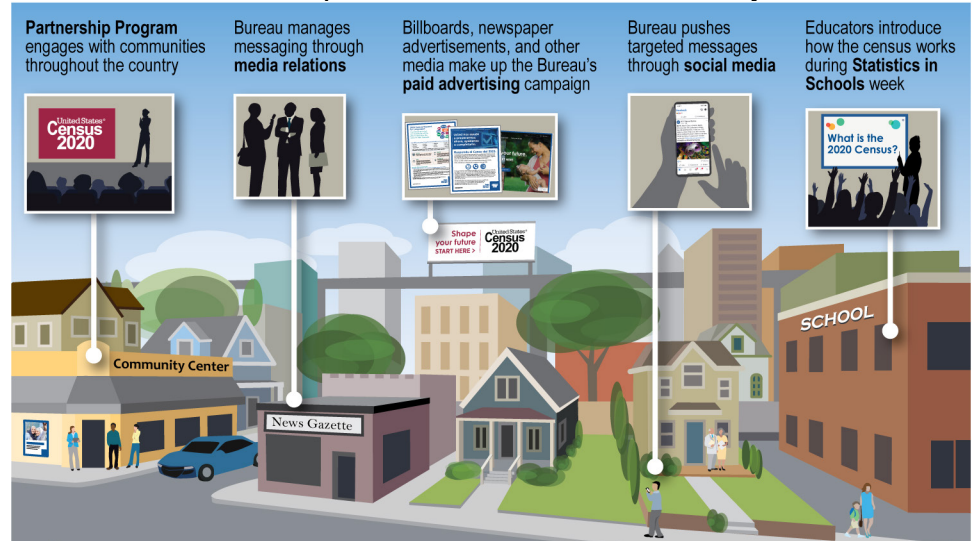
## 2020 CENSUS

### Update on the Census Bureau's Implementation of Partnership and Outreach Activities

## What GAO Found

The Partnership Program, a core component of the Bureau's partnership and outreach activities, delivers outreach to partnering organizations at the national and local levels in order to ensure a more complete and accurate count. These partners include retail associations, tribal, state, and local governments, local businesses, and non-profit organizations, among others. Roughly 1,500 partnership specialists, who are temporary Bureau employees responsible for building relationships with and obtaining commitments from these partners, help to implement the Partnership Program, which exists alongside several other components of the Integrated Partnership and Communications operation, as shown below. The Bureau experienced delays, however, in getting these employees onboarded.

#### The Census Bureau Uses Multiple Avenues of Outreach to the Community



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau documentation. | GAO-20-496

The Bureau has taken important actions to address challenges that GAO, the Bureau, and others have previously identified. These challenges include: (1) Enumerating hard-to-count groups; (2) Mobilizing partnership and outreach resources; (3) Coordinating outreach across the Bureau's organization and operations; and (4) Measuring outcomes.

Events taking place during implementation of partnership and outreach activities, such as the COVID-19 outbreak, provide a salient basis for which to continue to monitor these challenges and any effects they may have on the census. Moreover, continued monitoring of the Bureau's survey of public awareness of and sentiment toward the census, for example, will provide information on whether difficulties experienced in getting partnership specialists onboarded had an effect on the success of the Bureau's outreach.

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## Abbreviations

Bureau	U.S. Census Bureau
CCC	complete count committee
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CPEP	Community Partnership and Engagement Program
IPC	Integrated Partnership and Communications
MQA	mobile questionnaire assistance
NPP	National Partnership Program
SCCC	state complete count commission
SIS	Statistics in Schools

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May 13, 2020

### Congressional Requesters

The decennial census is used to apportion seats in Congress, redraw congressional districts, and allocate hundreds of billions of dollars in federal assistance annually. The census also provides social, demographic, and economic profiles of the nation's people to guide policy decisions at each level of government. The goal of the decennial census is to count the entire population of the United States once, only once, and in the right place—a task made even more difficult with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak affecting the U.S. Census Bureau's (Bureau) plans and the ability of individuals to have basic interactions like in-person interviews.

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. While recent censuses appear to have been increasingly accurate, measurement errors are not evenly distributed across the population. In the 2010 Census, Black and American Indian races were statistically undercounted, as were respondents of Hispanic origin. Lifestyle characteristics, such as being a renter versus a homeowner, also were associated with undercounts.

As part of its partnership and outreach efforts, the Bureau's Partnership Program works with local and national organizations, businesses, and governments to promote awareness of and participation in the census, as well as to help recruit census workers. The Bureau notes that trusted voices in the community are among those best suited to disseminate the Bureau's message on such topics as data privacy and the benefits of participating in the census.

You asked us to review the Bureau's partnership and outreach efforts, including paid advertising and targeted communications. This report examines the Bureau's progress in addressing selected prior census challenges with the Bureau's partnership and outreach. To select challenges for follow-up with the Bureau, we reviewed our relevant prior reports, prior Department of Commerce Office of Inspector General reports, Bureau evaluations and assessments from the 2010 Census, and recommendations made by third-party groups such as the Bureau's National Advisory Committee on Race, Ethnic and Other Populations,

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which serves as a stakeholder to monitor and consult with the Bureau on its decennial operations.

To determine the Bureau's progress in addressing the selected challenges, we reviewed Bureau planning documentation to identify how the Bureau was planning to implement its partnership and outreach activities and what planned actions, if any, were designed to try to address those prior challenges. We received and reviewed regular Bureau reports, such as weekly updates on the level of Partnership Program activity, to determine where the Bureau's reported progress was in relation to its operational goals. We also interviewed Bureau officials to get their perspectives on the goals of the partnership and outreach efforts and obtain their views of the progress toward those goals.

In addition, we distributed a survey to the population of 248 area census office managers at the local level from February 25 through March 2, 2020, to get their perspectives on the effectiveness of the Partnership Program and how well related efforts had been coordinated with census field operations.<sup>1</sup> We received responses from 175 area census office managers for a response rate of 71 percent.<sup>2</sup> We also reviewed open-ended responses provided as part of this survey to develop broad themes to share with relevant Bureau officials.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2019 to May 2020 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain 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.

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## Background

The Partnership Program is part of the Bureau's Integrated Partnership and Communications (IPC) operation, which contains the Bureau's varied partnership and outreach activities aimed at spreading the word about the importance of participating in the census. Specifically, the IPC operation is intended to:

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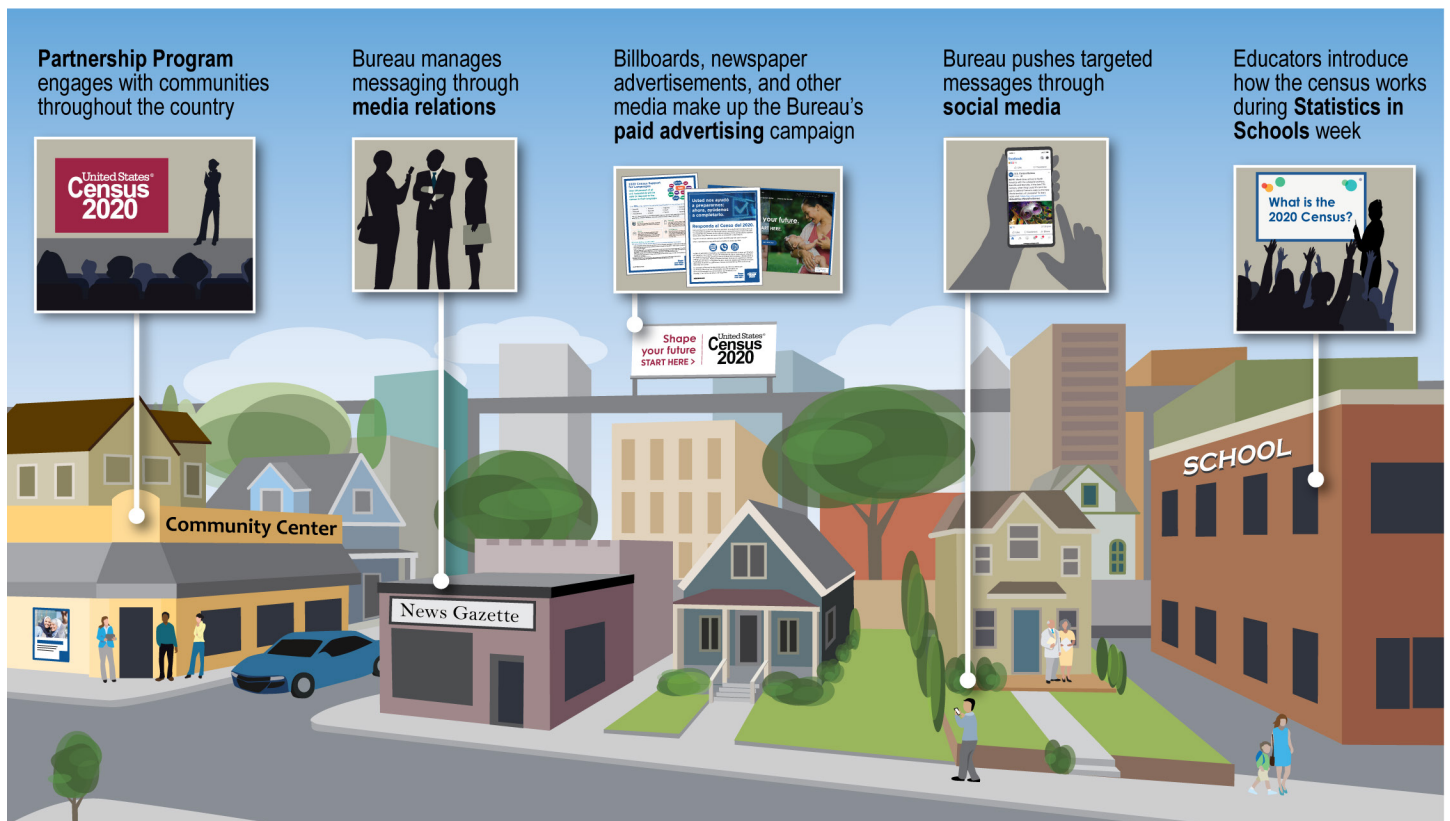
<sup>1</sup>Reported results from this survey are not generalized to all area census office managers.

<sup>2</sup>We omitted responses from three area census office managers who the Bureau informed us had recently been reassigned from other regional management positions and thus may have had different experiences from the rest of the area census office managers.

- engage and motivate people to self-respond;
- raise and keep awareness high throughout the entire 2020 Census to encourage response;
- support field recruitment efforts for a diverse, qualified census workforce; and
- support dissemination of census data to stakeholders and the public.

Several components of the IPC operation, including the Partnership Program, are described in more detail below. Figure 1 also demonstrates these components in example situations.

**Figure 1: The Census Bureau Has Multiple Forms of Outreach to the Community**



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau documentation. | GAO-20-496

## Partnership Program

The Partnership Program has two main components that deliver outreach at the national and local levels, respectively: the National Partnership

Program (NPP) and the Community Partnership and Engagement Program (CPEP), as shown in table 1. NPP and CPEP are intended to complement and leverage their respective expertise to help maximize participation by partners. According to Bureau officials, the Bureau’s Census Open Innovation Labs is another important component that aims to integrate these partnership activities and provide guidance at the national and local levels on various strategies for messaging with partners.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1: Two Main Components of the Partnership Program Complement Each Other**

	<b>National Partnership Program</b>	<b>Community Partnership and Engagement Program</b>
Managed by	Bureau Headquarters	Bureau’s Field Directorate
Objective	Encourage participation of audiences of national-level organizations	Increase local awareness and participation in the 2020 Census
Partner reach	National	State, tribal, local
Illustrative partners	AARP; the National Black Chamber of Commerce; the Boys and Girls Clubs of America; lawmakers, such as the National Association of Latino Elected Officials	State, local, and tribal governments, as well as community-based organizations and local businesses

Source: Bureau documentation. | GAO-20-496

The roughly 1,500 Partnership specialists hired for 2020 are temporary Bureau employees who implement CPEP and are responsible for, among others things, establishing local partnerships and engaging those partners to host activities and events (known as “commitments”) within the communities they serve. These commitments could include activities and events such as conducting knowledge-sharing seminars, issuing press releases, providing questionnaire assistance, producing pamphlets, and hosting field recruiting events, among others. For the 2020 Census, the Bureau had a goal of establishing 300,000 community partners nationwide. In 2010, the Bureau secured approximately 256,000 local partners.

<sup>3</sup>According to the Bureau, the Census Open Innovation Labs framework was designed to engage partners to co-design and co-create test partner messaging, visual design, delivery, distribution channels, messengers, timelines, and evaluation metrics.



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The Partnership program also supports inter-governmental census outreach activities through state complete count commissions (SCCCs) at the state level and complete count committees (CCCs) at the tribal and local levels. These groups foster a collaborative partnership between political, business, and community leaders to deliver messages on the importance of participation in the census. The Bureau had a goal of encouraging every state to create an SCCC, formed at the highest level of state government, such as the governor's office. SCCC's seek to leverage the state's vested interest in a timely and complete population count.<sup>4</sup>

According to Bureau planning documentation, CCCs are usually formed by the highest elected official in that jurisdiction, such as a tribal leader, a mayor, county commissioner, or regional chairman. The Bureau notes that partnership specialists are the primary contact between the Bureau and the CCC. Partnership specialists may conduct workshops, train CCC members, and provide or direct CCCs to census promotional materials. Bureau officials noted that initial partnership specialists were hired earlier in the decennial cycle for 2020 in part to help form CCCs. Partnership specialists are also to play a role in assisting CCCs with identifying hard-to-count populations within their respective communities and assist in developing strategies to reach those communities.

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## Paid Advertising

Similar to previous censuses, for 2020, the Bureau plans to use multiple paid media outlets such as radio, television, newspapers, magazine, and billboards as one of its means to promote awareness and encourage participation in the census. Along with the traditional advertising, the Bureau also plans to use digital advertising such as web banner ads, video ads, digital extensions of traditional outlets, and social media channels. According to Bureau officials, they plan to be able to use paid advertising modes to target specific audiences including hard-to-count populations that may be more apt to trust such communication.

For example, the Bureau's 2020 communication plan cites research that states that the majority of Asian-Americans use traditional media—whether in print, online, or from a mobile device—as their primary source of local news. The Bureau plans to implement its 2020 paid media campaign in four phases (see table 2).

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<sup>4</sup>According to the Bureau, if the state has failed to commit to form a SCCC, then the CPEP staff are to engage at the county level, working to gain commitment support to build an integrated effort between the county and its municipalities.

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**Table 2: The 2020 Census Paid Media Campaign Phases**

Phase	Timetable	Activity
Awareness	January 14, 2020 - March 12, 2020	Build awareness that the 2020 Census was approaching and educate the public
Motivation	March 13, 2020 - May 12, 2020	Drive participation and encourage the public to complete the census
Reminder	May 13, 2020 - June 28, 2020	Encourage non-responders to complete the census and inform the public about non-response follow-up enumerators and encourage their cooperation
Thank You	September 2020	Inform the public that the 2020 Census is complete and educate them about where census information can be found

Source: Bureau documentation. | GAO-20-496

As of early May 2020, the Bureau has not yet indicated the revised timeframes for the phases of paid advertising to reflect the COVID-19 disruptions. Bureau officials told us that they are planning to spend an additional \$160 million on advertising as part of its public education and outreach campaign, originally estimated to cost over \$500 million. According to the Bureau, its paid advertising campaign is designed to reach more than 99 percent of the nation’s 140 million households.

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## Media Relations

For the 2020 Census, to distribute these messages, the Bureau will conduct outreach to the media including providing talking points, media lists, news releases, fact sheets, frequently asked questions, and other scripts and messaging for multiple media platforms, such as a variety of radio, podcasts, and special events. Media-focused materials such as press kits and press releases will be available in the media section of 2020Census.gov.

As part of its media relations effort, the Bureau has also developed a crisis communications plan for handling major events and potential messaging disturbances. According to the Bureau, its crisis communication plan is intended to allow it to respond quickly and effectively to any events or actions that jeopardize the public’s confidentiality or reduce its willingness to respond to the 2020 Census. For example, the Bureau stated that in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, it adapted part of its advertisement messaging to re-emphasize the importance of responding to the census online, avoiding the need for in-person follow-up interviews.

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## Social Media Outreach

The Bureau’s social media strategy for 2020 reflects the increased number of social media platforms that were not available during the last

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census, such as Snapchat, Instagram Live Stories, and Facebook Messenger. According to the Bureau, social media will play a critical role in raising awareness of the census—particularly among hard-to-count audiences—as well as enhancing customer service efforts, promoting recruiting efforts, driving online completion of the census, assisting with data dissemination, and mitigating disinformation.

The Bureau’s social media outreach efforts are to leverage source material on the Bureau’s website. Such material includes prepared language for posts and graphics, lists of influential partners, messages for those partners, customer service-themed frequently asked questions that are tailored for social media, methods for sharing content across the Bureau’s regional offices, and social media events.

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## Statistics in Schools

In March 2020, the Bureau kicked off its Statistics in Schools (SIS) program. During the week of March 2-6, 2020, prior to the widespread closure of schools due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the Bureau provided daily modules to educators for dissemination to students. These modules included such topics as an introduction to the census, a virtual tour of the Bureau headquarters, and a take-home assignment in which students and their families were asked to summarize a discussion of what they want to see in their communities.

According to the Bureau planning documentation, the SIS materials were to encourage students to pass along the importance of counting everyone to an adult in their home who will complete the census. SIS was also intended to raise awareness among students themselves, which can be important in instances where the presiding adult(s) have limited English proficiency and have to rely on children to translate or interpret information from English into their native language.

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## The Bureau Has Taken Actions to Address Prior Challenges, but Issues for Continued Monitoring Remain

We, the Bureau, and others, such as the Bureau’s National Advisory Committee, have previously identified several challenges the Bureau has

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faced related to its partnership and outreach efforts in prior censuses.<sup>5</sup> While the Bureau has taken important actions to address these challenges, current events such as the COVID-19 outbreak provide a salient basis for which to continue to monitor these challenges and any effects they may have on the census.

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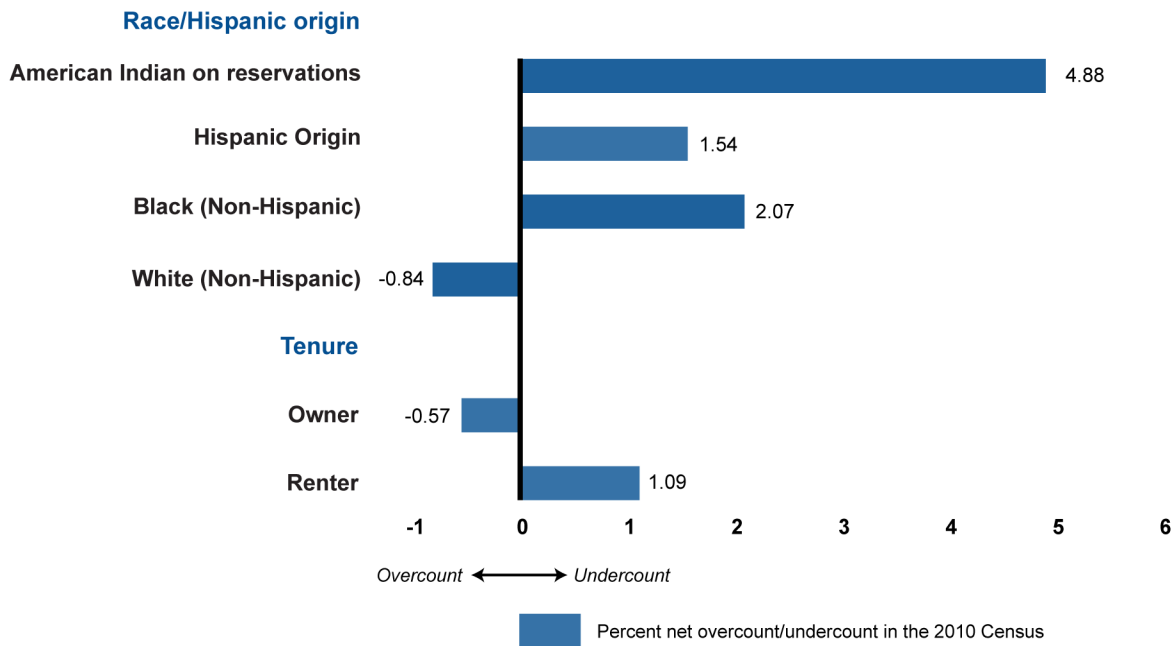
### Challenge 1: Enumerating Hard-to-Count Groups

**Nature of Challenge.** The Bureau strives to conduct an accurate count of the nation's population. However, some degree of inaccuracy is inevitable. While the Bureau reported that the 2010 Census did not have a significant net undercount or net overcount nationally, the Bureau also reported that errors in coverage were unevenly distributed through the population, as figure 2 shows. In addition to the undercounted groups shown below, prior censuses, such as the 1990 Census, also showed statistically significant undercounts of Non-Hispanic Asians, American Indians off (as well as on) Reservations, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders.

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<sup>5</sup>The National Advisory Committee is a 32-member panel chartered by the Secretary of Commerce to provide counsel to the Bureau on improved census operations and survey and data collection methods. The National Advisory Committee also serves as a representative body for a range of racial, ethnic, and other communities.

**Figure 2: 2010 Census Resulted in Differential Undercounts for Several Demographic Groups**



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau documentation. | GAO-20-496

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. The Bureau has noted these historical trends and has classified these and other subpopulations as hard to count. According to the Bureau, hard-to-count groups can share some or all of the following characteristics:

- **Hard to Locate:** Some groups are hard to locate because where they live is unknown, or they move frequently.
- **Hard to Persuade:** Other groups are hard to persuade to participate in the census.
- **Hard to Interview:** Some groups may have communication barriers, such as limited English proficiency.
- **Hard to Contact:** Other groups may live in places with access barriers, such as residents of gated communities or renters with doormen and locked buildings.

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Adding to the challenge in 2020 is the possibility that, as the Bureau adapts its timing and procedures for outreach and promotion, as well as data collection, there is a possibility of uneven effects resulting on the participation rates of different groups. For example, messaging and operations that emphasize the importance of filling out the census online, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, may not be applicable to communities or groups with limited internet access. If social distancing measures result in fewer successful interviews during Non-Response Follow-Up, for instance, then these groups with less internet access will be at relatively greater risk of being missed by the census. Adapting field enumeration procedures to implement social distancing might also be less effective in addressing respondent concerns about interacting with strangers in apartment buildings or other densely populated areas if a census worker cannot practically distance themselves from the door.

**Actions Taken.** As part of its integrated communications plan, the Bureau's lead communications contractor segmented the market and developed a series of strategic frameworks targeting advertising and messaging to hard-to-count subpopulations through demographic profiles. These groups include:

- persons experiencing homelessness;
- households with young children;
- lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning persons;
- persons with disabilities;
- renters;
- rural residents;
- veterans; and
- the young and mobile.

In addition to demographic profiles for each of these groups, the contractor compiled lists of relevant community partners and consulted with stakeholders to construct a "day-in-the-life" analysis and develop advertising strategies to align tailored census advertising with the experiences of each group. According to Bureau documentation, these strategic frameworks provide the NPP data to decide how to best target related outreach resources.

The Bureau also developed for 2020 a publicly-available tool that displays the areas of the country that are considered hard to count, according to

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an index of demographic indicators known as the Low Response Score.<sup>6</sup> Using this index, the Bureau is able to monitor incoming census data for those areas, such as response rates and hiring and recruitment numbers, to see if efforts to reach hard-to-count areas are succeeding amid challenging current events, such as the COVID-19 outbreak, which could affect willingness of workers to participate in work taking them door-to-door to nonrespondents.

Using funds appropriated under the Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2020,<sup>7</sup> the Bureau also developed a mobile questionnaire assistance (MQA) initiative to deploy census workers to specific locations, such as grocery stores, houses of worship, and community centers, or at specific events, such as festivals, to assist residents of low-response areas in filling out the census. For the beginning of the self-response period, partnership specialists identified the initial locations and times for the initiative within hardest-to-count census tracts. The Bureau plans to then monitor actual self-response data later in the operation to target those areas reporting the lowest response rates. In April 2020, the Bureau announced an indefinite delay of this latter stage of MQA in response to the outbreak of COVID-19.

**Basis for Continued Monitoring.** Participation in the census and availability of nonrespondents for follow-up will help indicate whether the Bureau is successfully reaching hard-to-count groups. With self-response and follow-up for nonrespondents still ongoing, it is too early to know the effectiveness of the Bureau's outreach efforts. However, multiple streams of data will provide indications of Bureau success in enumerating areas and demographic groups considered hard to count:

- As during the 2018 Census Test, the Bureau is monitoring active data on self-response rates at the local level, which it can compare across areas it deems hard to count.
- The Non-Response Follow-Up operation will yield data on interview rates—namely, the rate at which census workers are able to complete interviews with residents who had not yet responded to the census. These rates can also be compared across areas deemed hard to count.

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<sup>6</sup>Higher values on the Low Response Score indicate a higher likelihood of nonresponse from a given tract and are thus used by the Bureau as an indicator of how hard to count that area is.

<sup>7</sup>Pub. L. No. 116-69, Div. A, § 101, 133 Stat. 1134 (Nov. 21, 2019).

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- Demographic evaluation data and the Bureau’s post-enumeration survey will further provide insight into whether racial, ethnic, and other demographic groups were counted accurately.

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## Challenge 2: Mobilizing Partnership and Outreach Resources

**Nature of Challenge.** For its partnership and outreach strategies to be effective, the Bureau must have the necessary people and resources in the right places to execute those strategies. In prior censuses, we have reported on issues related to staffing and promotional materials faced by the Partnership Program. Specifically, during the 2000 Census we noted that partnership resources were stretched thin and in some cases took effect too late in the decennial cycle.<sup>8</sup> We recommended that the Bureau review its staffing levels to ensure adequate support to partners, a recommendation the Bureau subsequently implemented.

During the 2010 Census, partnership specialists expressed concern about the timely availability of promotional materials, and the impact on their ability to build relationships with potential partners.<sup>9</sup> We recommended in December 2010 that the Bureau ensure that promotional materials are provided to partnership staff when they are hired, a recommendation that the Bureau agreed with but that remained open at the beginning of our audit work in December 2019.

Similarly, in a 2012 Bureau evaluation of the 2010 NPP, the Bureau found that some national partners felt that promotional materials needed to be better tailored to target their audiences’ needs and that these partners had difficulty accessing relevant census data for their audiences. The Bureau also observed that improvements were needed in the distribution of promotional materials by region.

**Actions Taken.** The Bureau increased its partnership specialist hiring from roughly 800 in 2010 to a little more than 1,500 in 2020. As figure 3 shows, collectively these partnership specialists were able to secure more than 307,000 community partners by the end of February 2020—higher than the Bureau’s goal of 300,000 and the roughly 256,000 local partners the Bureau had by the end of the 2010 Census. Partnership staff were also able to encourage the creation of state complete count commissions

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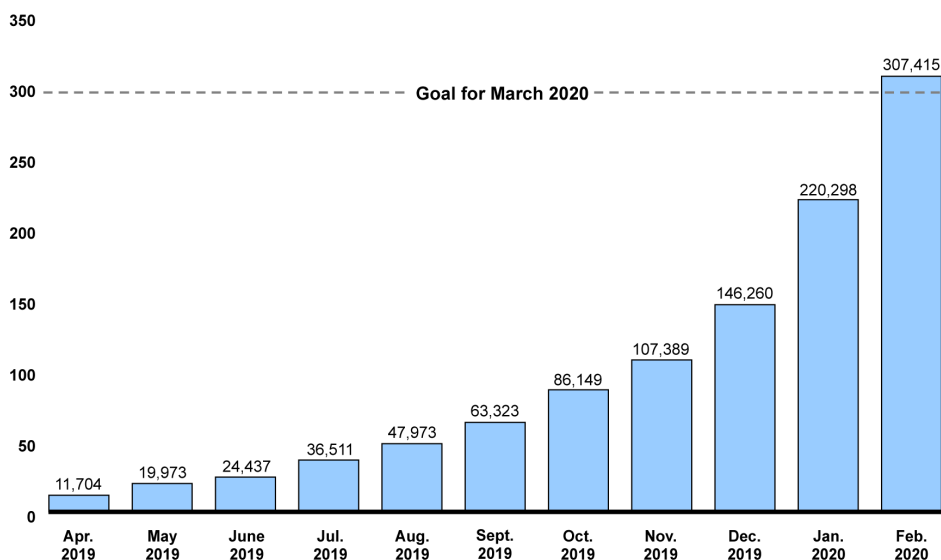
<sup>8</sup>GAO, *2000 Census: Review of Partnership Program Highlights Best Practices for Future Operations*, [GAO-01-579](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 20, 2001).

<sup>9</sup>GAO, *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).



(SCCCs) in every state and territory except Nebraska and South Dakota. These SCCC are complemented across the country by more than 10,000 complete count committees (CCCs) at the local level.

**Figure 3: The Bureau Reported Surpassing Its Nationwide Goal for Community Partners by March 2020**



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau management reports. | GAO-20-496

The Bureau also set a priority of getting partners in the right places. In addition to the Bureau’s overall goal for community partners, the Bureau also set out to get at least one community partner in 100 percent of census tracts that, according to their predicted indicator of low response, are hardest to count.<sup>10</sup> As of late March 2020, the Bureau had made progress towards this goal, establishing partnerships in 85 percent of such areas.

The Bureau also provided partnership specialists a centralized website where they can access promotional materials for distribution to partners. These materials included fact sheets, brochures, and marketing messages translated into 13 languages. Bureau officials indicated that these materials were developed and published on the website prior to the completion of partnership specialist training. According to officials, the

<sup>10</sup>The Bureau classified all census tracts with a Low Response Score (predicted nonresponse rate) of 30 or greater as hardest to count.

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website was made available to partnership specialists when they started work. In addition to national and community partners, tribal, state, and local CCCs also have access to these materials. The Bureau also provided guidance on how to order hard copies of such materials through the U.S. Government Publishing Office. We found during the course of our audit work that these actions implemented our December 2010 recommendation.

**Basis for Continued Monitoring.** The Bureau encountered some issues in onboarding partnership specialists and tracking the establishment of partnerships in hard-to-count areas. We will continue to monitor any effects of these issues as part of our ongoing work:

- The Bureau experienced delays in onboarding partnership specialists, which resulted in less time to form partnerships and meant less time for community engagement and education activities leading up to the census. While the Bureau was able to increase the number of partnership specialists from 2010, the Bureau did not get all of its more than 1,500 partnership specialists on board until November 2019, more than 4 months later than its initial goal.
- The Bureau successfully surpassed its nationwide goal for registering more than 300,000 community partners. However, we reported in February 2020 that the Bureau missed interim goals for getting at least 200,000 partners in place by January 1, 2020, and at least 250,000 partners in place by February 1, 2020.<sup>11</sup> We reported during the 2000 Census on the benefits of having Partnership Program resources on the ground earlier in the decennial cycle.<sup>12</sup>
- The Bureau varied by region in terms of getting community partners located in hard-to-count areas. As noted, the Bureau had a goal of getting at least one partner in each of the hardest-to-count census tracts by March 2020. Nationwide, the Bureau was able to achieve this in 85 percent of such areas as of late March 2020. According to Bureau data, five of the six regional offices reached at least 82 percent of this goal, with the Los Angeles region the farthest along at 90 percent as of late March 2020. On the other hand, only 70 percent of the hardest-to-count tracts in the Philadelphia region, which covers the Mid-Atlantic States, had at least one community partner.

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<sup>11</sup>GAO, *2020 Census: Initial Enumeration Underway but Readiness for Upcoming Operations Is Mixed*, [GAO-20-368R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 12, 2020).

<sup>12</sup>[GAO-01-579](#).

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Bureau officials noted that partners in adjacent tracts can provide relevant services to the hardest-to-count tracts. Officials indicated that they would continue monitoring progress using this measure.

Given the effect of the COVID-19 outbreak on partner activities, having partnership specialists on boarded and partnerships formed later than anticipated meant several months less time for in-person community engagement and education activities leading up to the census in some areas. In April 2020, Bureau officials told us that partnership specialists had been instructed to continue interactions with partners via conference calls, text, email, and other virtual means. Officials also cited the ability of partnership specialists to support virtual partner commitments such as radio interviews and virtual town halls, and officials noted that the Government Publishing Office could continue to directly supply hard copies of promotional materials to partners. Going forward, response rates the Bureau achieves in areas where the Bureau lagged in registering partners may shed light on whether or not having full partnership coverage in certain hard-to-count areas is associated with lower response rates.

Additionally, the Bureau is conducting a survey of public awareness of and sentiment toward the 2020 Census, with a goal of evaluating the effectiveness of public communication efforts. This survey will also provide data that could help answer the question of whether having less time on the ground than anticipated for the full complement of partnership specialists and community partners affected community awareness of the census.

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### Challenge 3: Coordinating Outreach across the Bureau's Organization and Operations

**Nature of Challenge.** Partnership and outreach activities, along with local enumeration activities, span numerous decennial operations and phases of data collection, and the Bureau has at times struggled to fully integrate these efforts. For instance, we reported in July 2018 that, during the planning stages for the 2020 Census, the Bureau's management of initiatives aimed at enumerating hard-to-count groups was decentralized and not fully integrated across operations.<sup>13</sup> We recommended that the Bureau take steps to ensure greater integration of efforts going forward.

Coordination across regions of the country can also be a challenge. Bureau officials overseeing CPEP told us that during the initial staffing of partnership specialists, they observed variations in how job expectations were communicated across regional offices through training. The COVID-

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<sup>13</sup>[GAO-18-599](#).

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19 outbreak further complicates coordination across the country where state, tribal, and local public health rules, guidance, and enforcement may affect how partners in different locations need to interact with the census, and messaging to Bureau partnership staff and partners may not be amenable to a one-size-fits-all approach nationwide.

The challenge of coordination can also have effects on how local managers of census activities perceive the efficiency of census efforts. Partnership specialists are expected in 2020 to work on initiatives, such as MQA, to which area census office staff also contribute. However, partnership specialists do not report to managers within the area census office, but directly report to the Bureau's regional offices. As part of our December 2010 report on hard-to-count populations, we found that about half of all local census office managers we surveyed were dissatisfied with the level of coordination between local census office staff and partnership staff, noting duplication of effort in some cases.<sup>14</sup> We recommended that the Bureau develop mechanisms to increase coordination between partnership and local census office staff, a recommendation that remains open.

**Actions Taken.** In January 2020, in response to our July 2018 recommendation cited above, the Bureau provided us evidence of ongoing, multi-team discussions focused on integrating perspectives on decisions and planning for hard-to-count enumeration activities. In closing the July 2018 recommendation, we noted that the Bureau's use of such an integrated approach will help ensure that the Bureau's otherwise decentralized efforts to address hard-to-count challenges will be more effective.

For field operations, the Bureau is holding a series of weekly teleconferences, to which area census office managers and all partnership specialists are invited to hear about updates from Bureau management on field operations and partnership and outreach activities. Bureau officials told us that having these calls, along with providing emailed summaries of the calls, helps to standardize any updates to guidance on field procedures or messaging across the area census office and partnership staff. For example, the Bureau sent an email in mid-March 2020 to partnership staff that included guidance on emphasizing

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<sup>14</sup>GAO-11-45. During the 2010 cycle, what are now known as area census office managers had the title of local census office managers.

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the importance of internet self-response when responding to inquiries on the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Bureau indicated taking steps to standardize partnership staff training and integrate partnership staff into field enumeration operations. Specifically, officials told us they convened a nationwide, standardized training curriculum after the Bureau had hired all of its partnership specialists. This curriculum replaced what had been a regional office-specific approach.

The Bureau developed guidance for partnership specialists on how to provide direct feedback to area census offices when they become aware of a potential facility or location that should be added to the Bureau's database for enumeration. Specifically, if partnership staff become aware of soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and other locations potentially being missed, they are instructed to submit information including the address, type of living quarters, and any applicable contact information to the relevant area census office. Moreover, the Bureau indicated it had assigned at least one partnership specialist to every area census office to improve coordination between the Partnership Program and local census operations.

In addition, the Bureau created a rumor control page on its website to quickly disseminate factual content in response to misinformation. Examples of misinformation that the Bureau has detected include the false suggestion of a citizenship question being on the census and the posting of a potentially fraudulent census job website. The Bureau's rumor control page includes the email address [rumors@census.gov](mailto:rumors@census.gov) for the public to report possible misinformation and disinformation. The web page also has a set of frequently asked questions on topics such as data confidentiality and ways to participate in the census, thus helping to ensure that partnership staff, partners, and the public alike with access to the internet have access to accurate online information.

#### **Basis for Continued Monitoring.**

- As the Bureau experiences inevitable turnover in partnership specialists and needs to update its messaging and outreach to reflect changing conditions on the ground, such as the COVID-19 outbreak, ensuring consistent training and guidance across its partnership staff and keeping all staff abreast of changes will be important.

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- As noted above, our December 2010 recommendation for the Bureau to increase coordination between the Partnership Program and its area census offices remains open.<sup>15</sup> While partnership specialists were assigned to area census offices, the Bureau has not put in place formal expectations for how partnership staff should support area census office staff and their activities. To fully implement this recommendation, the Bureau would need to document how partnership specialists and area census office staff are expected to work together.
  - We will also continue to monitor how area census office managers express their perspectives on the effectiveness of the Partnership Program in supporting implementation of census field operations. For example, we surveyed area census office managers in March 2020 and found that nationally a plurality (42 percent) who responded said they were dissatisfied with the level of communication and coordination between the Partnership Program and their offices, while 41 percent said they were satisfied.<sup>16</sup> A plurality of respondents (44 percent) were also dissatisfied with the level of clarity of roles and responsibilities between the Partnership Program and their offices, while 38 percent of respondents were satisfied.<sup>17</sup>

Open-ended comments we received from survey respondents contained ideas for improving the level of communication between partnership staff and area census office staff, such as having partnership staff be more integrated within the area census office structure. We are sharing such suggestions with the Bureau in near-real time as we receive them for the Bureau to consider moving forward. We will continue to periodically survey the office managers throughout the summer of 2020.

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## Challenge 4: Measuring Outcomes

**Nature of Challenge.** We have previously reported on challenges the Bureau has faced across operations in measuring outcomes. Namely, during the 2018 Census Test we reported that the Bureau's primary measure of operational progress during Non-Response Follow-Up overstated the amount of completed workload because it emphasized the

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<sup>15</sup>[GAO-11-45](#).

<sup>16</sup>Of the 175 area census office managers who responded to our survey, 162 responded to this question specifically.

<sup>17</sup>Of the 175 area census office managers who responded to our survey, 160 responded to this question specifically.

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number of follow-up attempts made instead of the number of cases in which the Bureau got the data it needed—the preferred outcome of the operation.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, our 2017 review of in-office address canvassing—when the Bureau attempted to use aerial imagery to identify areas of the country called blocks that did not require fieldwork to validate the address list—found that the Bureau’s performance measures looked at how many of the addresses in the address list were reviewed in-office, rather than how many addresses did not require additional fieldwork.<sup>19</sup>

Separately measuring the contributions of partnership and outreach activities on the desired outcome of maximizing the number of residents who respond to the census is inherently difficult. In one of its evaluations of the 2010 Census, though, the Bureau noted that the Partnership Program needed to do a better job of measuring and rewarding the intensity of partner effort throughout census operations, rather than simply looking at the number of contacts made or the number of partners. As Bureau officials noted to us, the quality of partners ultimately matters more than the quantity.

**Actions Taken.** In its performance measures of the Partnership Program, the Bureau has taken steps beyond measuring the number of partners nationwide. For example, as noted previously, the Bureau prioritizes and tracks the extent to which it secures partnerships in hard-to-count areas, acknowledging that partnerships are needed everywhere but are particularly critical in areas that may otherwise be less likely to have high response rates. Additionally, the Bureau tracks the number of events partners complete and the number of commitments partners signed up for but did not fulfill by their planned dates (known as overdue commitments). As of early March 2020, community partners had fulfilled more than 270,000 committed events nationwide, while nearly 14,000 commitments were overdue.

**Basis for Continued Monitoring.** Going forward, Bureau evaluations of the 2020 Census will demonstrate what, if any, lessons learned the Bureau is able to draw regarding the quality of its 2020 partnership and

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<sup>18</sup>GAO, *2020 Census: Additional Steps Needed to Finalize Readiness for Peak Operations*, [GAO-19-140](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 10, 2018).

<sup>19</sup>GAO, *2020 Census: Bureau Needs to Better Leverage Information to Achieve Goals of Reengineered Address Canvassing*, [GAO-17-622](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 20, 2017).

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outreach efforts. The Bureau has multiple sources of data that it is, and will be, collecting to better understand how success can be defined:

- While the Bureau monitors and reports the number of overdue partnership commitments (cited above), it is not clear what the current level of nearly 14,000 overdue commitments means in the context of the universe of more than 270,000 total committed events. When we asked about this issue, Bureau officials indicated that they monitor the status of overdue commitments mostly to see if partners are staying active in their communities. Officials also said they use the metric to verify that partnership specialists are recording any follow-up they do with partners that have not fulfilled their commitments.
- Similarly, the Bureau's plan for the MQA initiative cites the number of census questionnaire responses received through MQA as an indicator of how successful the Bureau is in connecting partners and other census questionnaire assistance resources to areas that need them. Yet, it is unclear from Bureau documentation what levels of MQA uptake, if any, would constitute success. While low MQA uptake, for instance, could mean that partnership specialists and census response representatives were not successful in identifying the right times and locations for MQA, it could also mean that residents were successfully able to respond to the census via other means, or that they did not attend MQA events due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

When we followed up with Bureau officials, they indicated that they have planned a series of required debriefings and exit interviews with partnership specialists, which will include MQA effectiveness as a topic. Such debriefings and exit interviews will likely be particularly important, given the MQA change necessitated by the COVID-19 outbreak.

- Lastly, the COVID-19 outbreak could further complicate the Bureau's ability to determine the ultimate effectiveness of its partnership and outreach—how well the Bureau achieves the goal of counting everybody once, only once, and in the right place. The Bureau plans to estimate census quality by relying in part on interviews conducted door-to-door in a nationwide sample of households, scheduled for the summer and fall of 2020. The COVID-19 outbreak could prompt the Bureau to delay the related field operation to collect the data or affect household responsiveness to in-person visits.

As the timing of this report coincides with ongoing implementation of the self-response period and field enumeration operations, planned Bureau evaluations and assessments will be best positioned to identify any lessons learned and determine whether, in light of the challenges cited



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above, the Bureau's partnership and outreach efforts were successful in maximizing participation in the census.

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## 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 U.S. Census Bureau said it agreed with the findings of our report and would continue to work to implement related open recommendations from our prior reports.

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We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of Commerce, the Undersecretary of Economic Affairs, the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau, and the appropriate congressional committees. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report please contact me at (202) 512-6806 or [mihmj@gao.gov](mailto:mihmj@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.



J. Christopher Mihm  
Managing Director  
Strategic Issues

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*List of Requesters*

The Honorable Ron Johnson  
Chairman  
The Honorable Gary C. Peters  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

The Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney  
Chairwoman  
The Honorable Jim Jordan  
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Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Jamie Raskin  
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The Honorable Gerald E. Connolly  
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and Government Reform  
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The Honorable Karen Bass  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Joaquin Castro  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Judy Chu  
House of Representatives

Steven Horsford  
House of Representatives

# Appendix I: Comments from the Department of Commerce



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
U.S. Census Bureau  
Office of the Director  
Washington, DC 20233-0001

05/04/2020

Mr. J. Christopher Mihm  
Managing Director, Strategic Issues  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Mihm:

The U.S. Census Bureau appreciates the opportunity to comment on the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report titled, "2020 Census: Update on the Census Bureau's Implementation of Partnership and Outreach Activities" (GAO-20-496). We also appreciate the statements in this report noting the advancement the Census Bureau has made regarding previous recommendations from the GAO about these matters.

The Census Bureau invested heavily in a robust partnership program and has secured nearly 350,000 national and community partners across the nation that reach into almost every household in some way. As trusted voices in their communities, our many partners have played a key role in raising awareness for the 2020 Census. Prior to the pandemic, approximately 320,000 partner events were successfully carried out in thousands of cities and towns across the nation.

Overall, the Census Bureau agrees with the findings of this report. Because it contains no new recommendations, we will not need to prepare a corrective action plan following release of the final version of this report. We will, however, continue our efforts toward closing the remaining open recommendations from GAO's previous work. Again, thank you for your interest and efforts towards improving these programs for the 2020 Census.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven D. Dillingham".

Steven D. Dillingham  
Director



[census.gov](https://www.census.gov)

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# Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

J. Christopher Mihm, (202) 512-6806 or [mihmj@gao.gov](mailto:mihmj@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Ty Mitchell (Assistant Director), Devin Braun (Analyst-in-Charge), Mark Abraham, Carole J. Cimitile, Alexandra Edwards, Amalia Konstas, Kerstin Meyer, Cynthia Saunders, Kate Sharkey, Farrah Stone, Jon Ticehurst, Peter Verchinski, and Alicia White made key contributions to this report.

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## Public Affairs

Chuck Young, Managing Director, [youngc1@gao.gov](mailto:youngc1@gao.gov), (202) 512-4800 U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7149 Washington, DC 20548

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## Strategic Planning and External Liaison

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

