EXHIBIT 7

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-20-551R.

A Report to Congressional Requesters

June 2020

2020 Census

COVID-19 Presents Delays and Risks to Census Count

The 2020 Decennial Census began its operations to count the population of the United States. However, the COVID-19 national emergency has forced the Bureau to adjust its plans and timelines for conducting these operations. The delays to key operations could adversely impact downstream operations, undermine the overall quality of the count, and escalate census costs.

Over the past decade, GAO has made 112 recommendations specific to the 2020 Census to help address issues such as cost estimation, key innovations, and acquisition and development of IT systems. The Department of Commerce has generally agreed with the recommendations. To date, the Bureau has implemented 90 and GAO has closed 1 recommendation as not implemented. As of June 2020, 21 of the recommendations had not been fully implemented.

GAO was asked to provide regular updates on the 2020 Census. This report examines the cost and progress of key 2020 census operations critical to a cost-effective enumeration, and early warnings that may require Census Bureau or congressional attention.

The Bureau provided technical comments that were incorporated as appropriate.

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This correspondence is the third in a series of updates reporting on the Census Bureau's (Bureau) 2020 Census activities and operations. This update includes information from GAO's ongoing work on the status of 2020 Census operations and challenges raised by COVID-19.

In March 2020, the Bureau decided to delay, suspend, or extend its upcoming operations. In April, the Bureau suspended all field operations until June 1, 2020, and extended its data collection through nonresponse follow-up (NRFU)—which was originally planned to end on July 31—until October 31. In May, the Bureau announced the restart of selected operations at 211 area census offices in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico based on an assessment of local conditions. The Bureau has requested statutory relief on the required dates for delivering data to apportion seats in the House of Representatives among states to the President and data for redistricting for elections to states, and proposed delivering this information approximately 4 months later than originally planned.

In recent years, GAO has identified challenges to the Bureau's ability to conduct a cost-effective count of the nation, including new innovations, acquisition and development of information technology (IT) systems, and other challenges. In 2017, these challenges led us to place the 2020 Census on GAO's High-Risk list.

Challenges to 2020 Census Operations Raised by COVID-19

Delays and changes to operations as a result of COVID-19 present further risks to an accurate, timely, and cost-effective count. As operations resume, the Bureau will need to consider multiple factors to ensure the implementation and quality of the count, including:

- **Continued attention to self-response.** Self-response rates—the percentage of households that respond by internet, phone, or mail prior to receiving a visit—affect the quality and overall cost of conducting the census. The Bureau's self-response operation began on March 12. The Bureau's expected self-response rate was to reach 60.5 percent by June 10, 2020. The Bureau has received responses from 60.1 percent of households as of May 25. As part of its response to COVID-19, the Bureau has extended its self-response operation—which was originally planned to end July 31—until October 31.
- **Communicating pandemic plans to ensure continued operations.** In response to COVID-19, the Bureau updated its Continuity of Operations Plan and made a number of procedural changes to operations. GAO has previously recommended that the Bureau develop a contingency plan for all risks requiring one, including major disasters such as a pandemic. As operations resume, the Bureau will need to distribute information to its area census offices that is timely, clear, and consistent regarding operational changes, work status, and pay. Less than half of respondents to our early April survey of area census office managers expressed satisfaction on survey questions about the clarity and timeliness of the Bureau's communication related to the pandemic.
- **Achieving and maintaining sufficient staffing levels.** The census cannot be implemented effectively without sufficient staff. At the time the Bureau

suspended operations in March, it had almost completed selection of enumerators for all operations and exceeded its selection goals. The Bureau will need to quickly onboard field workers and has stated that it will work with federal, state, and local officials to ensure the safety of staff and the public.

- **Revising its approach to communications and partnerships.** Many of the Bureau's efforts to reach hard to count populations rely on in-person face-to-face interactions. The Bureau revised its communication and media efforts in response to the need for social distancing, including spending at least an additional $160 million on its community and partnership efforts such as advertising, and developed a virtual engagement strategy to engage with national and community partners. Effective coordination with Partnership Specialists, who coordinate community partnerships, will continue to be important as area census office managers consistently expressed low satisfaction with the program. GAO has previously recommended that the Bureau develop mechanisms to increase coordination and communication between partnership and local census office staff.
- **Adjusting plans for Group Quarters and Service-Based Enumeration.** Recall bias, the ability to remember where one was living on April 1, and the ability of facilities to provide a person's census data may disproportionately affect individuals enumerated through these methods, such as people experiencing homelessness. Bureau officials stated that they are reviewing how to enumerate individuals at places such as soup kitchens and shelters.
- **Monitoring ongoing risks to IT systems implementation.** The Bureau is utilizing 52 IT systems to conduct the 2020 Census. It will be important that the Bureau continue to assess the risks associated with the COVID-19-related schedule changes to the implementation of these IT systems. For example, the Bureau noted that it will need to monitor the availability of IT contractor staff needed to perform system testing for upcoming census operations.
- **Managing disinformation and misinformation.** The Bureau will need to continue to provide a timely response to disinformation and misinformation events in order to protect the reputation of the Bureau and the integrity of the 2020 Census.
- **Addressing cybersecurity weaknesses.** The Bureau has made progress toward fulfilling our recommendation to ensure that identified corrective actions for cybersecurity weaknesses are implemented within prescribed time frames, but more work remains.
- **Protecting the privacy of respondent data.** The Bureau reported progress in implementing a disclosure avoidance technique to protect the confidentiality of its respondents' data in their publicly-released statistical products. However, final decisions for the implementation have yet to be made.
- **Ensuring data quality under potentially compressed timeframes.** After data collection, the Bureau must conduct post data collection processing, which removes duplicate responses, ensures complete information is collected, and formats the data files used to produce census results. The delays to data collection operations may affect the Bureau's ability to deliver data to the President and the states on time unless there is a statutory change in required dates.
- **Evaluating the impact of census delays on data quality.** In a post-COVID-19 environment, door-to-door interviewing may be less effective, affecting both NRFU operations and independent surveys that assess the quality of the count. The Bureau's evaluation program—designed to answer questions about the conduct of census operations, including the quality of data collected—becomes a critical component in measuring census coverage.

U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

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June 9, 2020

Congressional Requesters

2020 Census: COVID-19 Presents Delays and Risks to Census Count

Through early March 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) had begun its major operations to count the population of the United States under the schedule established in its operational plan. However, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) national emergency forced the Bureau to make major and unprecedented adjustments to its plans. The delays to key operations could adversely impact downstream operations, undermine the overall quality of the count, and escalate census costs.

You asked us to provide regular updates on the implementation of the 2020 Census. For these updates, we review the cost and progress of key 2020 Census operations critical to a cost-effective enumeration and early warnings that may require Bureau or congressional attention. For this correspondence—the third in a series of products—we focused on the status of 2020 Census operations and challenges raised by COVID-19.[1]

To describe the status of the Bureau's execution of key operations for the 2020 Census and describe major trends and early warning signs, we reviewed Bureau-provided data on cost and progress of key operations and compared those data with Bureau plans and Bureau-determined target dates and metrics. We determined those data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our reporting objectives by interviewing Bureau staff about the information technology (IT) systems used. We interviewed Bureau officials to gather additional information on the status and progress of these key operations.

In addition, to obtain a ground-level perspective on the conduct of key field activities during production of the 2020 Census, we surveyed the Bureau's entire population of 248 area census office (ACO) managers at the local level from February 25 through March 2, 2020, and from April 6 to April 13, 2020.[2] The response rates were 71 and 75 percent, respectively.[3] We also reviewed open-ended responses provided by the ACO managers as part of this survey.

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[1]For the prior reports in this series, see GAO, *2020 Census*: *Initial Enumeration Underway but Readiness for Upcoming Operations is Mixed*, GAO-20-368R (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 12, 2020); and *2020 Census: Status Update on Early Operations*, GAO-20-111R (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 31, 2019).

[2]Reported results from this survey are not generalized to all area census office managers.

[3]We omitted responses from three ACO managers in our late-February-to-early-March survey 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 ACO managers. We omitted five ACO managers from our early-April survey, two for the reason just stated, one due to insufficient experience as an ACO manager, and two due to incorrect email addresses that could not be resolved in time for survey deployment.

We also included information from our ongoing work related to the Bureau's IT system readiness and cybersecurity activities for the 2020 Census. We collected and reviewed documentation on the status of systems development and testing and for addressing cybersecurity risks, such as executive-level system status reports and dashboards. We also interviewed relevant agency officials.

We conducted this performance audit from March 2020 to June 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.

Background

In 2017, we designated the 2020 Census as a high-risk area and added it to our High-Risk list. The 2020 Census remains high risk, as new innovations, and acquisition and development of IT systems for the 2020 Census, along with other challenges we have identified in recent years, such as the reliability of the cost estimate, raise serious concerns about the Bureau's ability to conduct a cost-effective enumeration. Over the past decade, we have made 112 recommendations specific to the 2020 Census to help address these risks and other concerns. The Department of Commerce has generally agreed with these recommendations and has taken action and made progress to address them. To date, the Bureau has implemented 90 and we have closed 1 recommendation as not implemented. However, as of June 2020, 21 of the recommendations have not been fully implemented of which 10 are designated priority recommendations.[4]

The Bureau Delayed Many of Its Operations in Response to COVID-19

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, just a day before invitations to respond to the census were scheduled to arrive in mailboxes across the country, and as peak census operations were set to begin. In March 2020, the Bureau announced its decision to suspend, extend, or delay certain operations, including suspension of field operations through April 15, extension of key operations, and suspension of hiring and onboarding of field staff.[5]

On April 13, 2020, the Bureau further suspended operations until June 1 and extended key operations. This included an extension of data collection through nonresponse follow-up (NRFU), which was originally planned to end on July 31, until October 31 (see figure 1). On April 13, the Department of Commerce also asked Congress to act to change required dates for delivering data to apportion seats in the House of Representatives among states to the

[4]Priority recommendations are those that GAO believes warrant priority attention from heads of key departments or agencies. They are highlighted because, upon implementation, they may significantly improve government operations; for example, by realizing large dollar savings; eliminating mismanagement, fraud, and abuse; or making progress toward addressing a high-risk or fragmentation, overlap, or duplication issue.

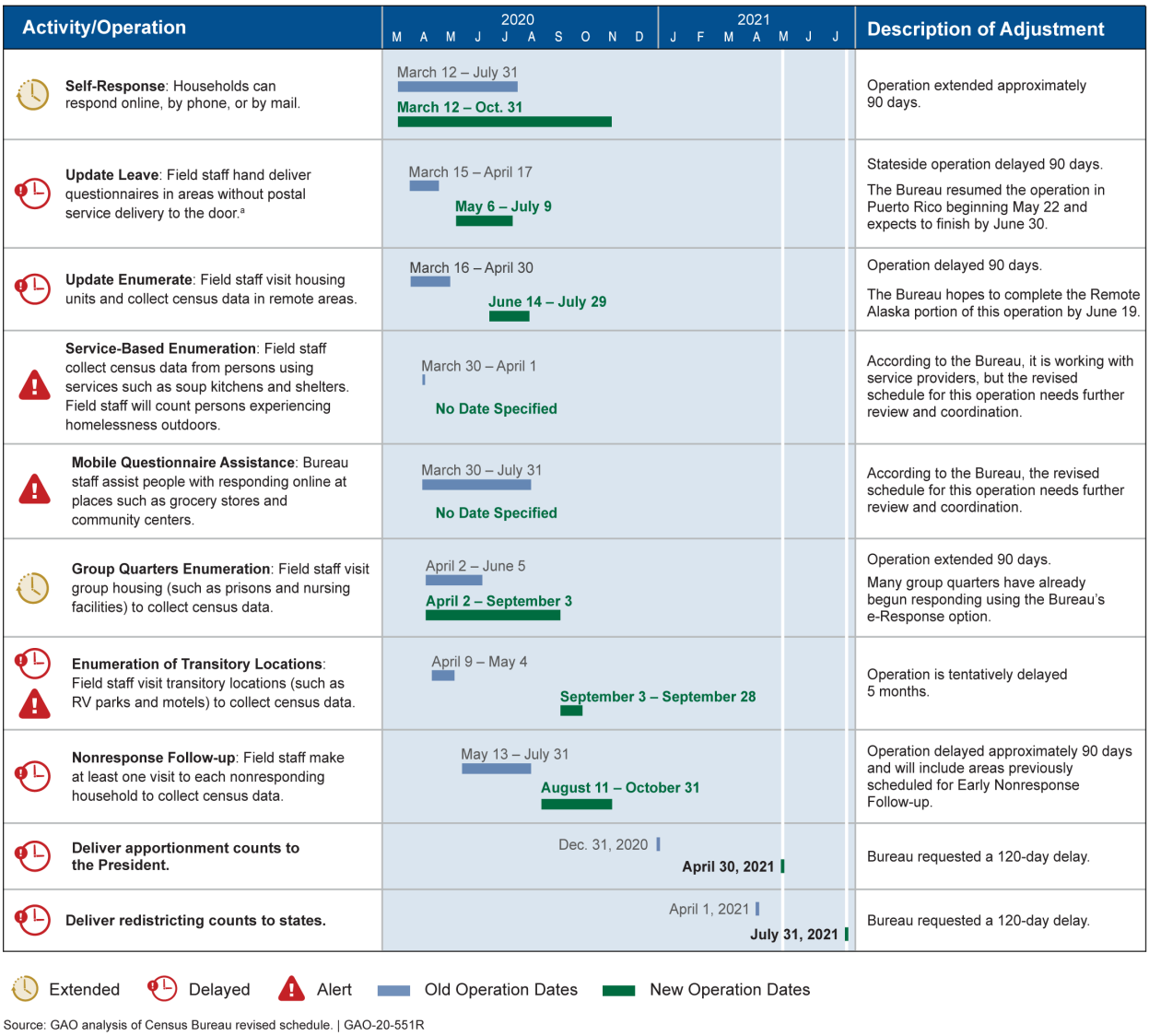
[5]Census Bureau, *Census Bureau Update on 2020 Field Operations*, March 28, 2020; *Census 2020 Operational Adjustments due to COVID-19,* March 21, 2020, and *U.S. Census Bureau Director Steven Dillingham on Operational Updates*, March 18, 2020.

President from December 31, 2020, to April 30, 2021, and data for redistricting for elections to states from April 1, 2021, to July 31, 2021.

On May 4, based on assessments of local COVID-19 conditions, the Bureau announced it would restart selected operations at 23 area census offices in 13 states. According to the announcement, amongst other activities, the Bureau would restart the hiring process for NRFU.[6] Since that time, the Bureau announced it will resume operations at additional area census offices each week. As of May 29, the Bureau had announced it would resume operations at a total of 211 area census offices in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. To determine which areas would be able to support field operations in each coming week, the Bureau considered whether the state had begun phased reopening, whether data on federally established health criteria supported the decision to restart, and whether the Bureau could meet the safety needs of their employees and the public.

[6]Census Bureau, *Census Bureau to Resume Some 2020 Census Operations in Select Locations,* May 4, 2020.

Figure 1: Changes to Census Operations Due to COVID-19



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau revised schedule. | GAO-20-551R

[a]The Bureau resumed its Update Leave operation in select locations on May 6, 2020. This decision was made based on an assessment of local conditions.

Status of 2020 Census Operations and Challenges Raised by COVID-19

When key operations resume and as the Bureau collects census data, concerns over COVID-19 will remain a major preoccupation for the Bureau. To execute operations with its new schedule, and ensure these changes will not impact the quality of the count, the Bureau will need to closely manage several key areas, including the following:

- **Continued attention to self-response.** The Bureau's self-response operation began on March 12. The first mailing arrived in households between March 12 and 20, 2020. This was

the first of potentially six self-response mailings, and covered 95 percent of households. The first mailing consisted of a letter inviting recipients to complete the census online, by phone, or by mail. Households considered less likely to respond online, often in areas with low internet connectivity, also received a paper questionnaire they could mail back.

As of early May, the Bureau has sent out its first five mailings. According to Bureau officials, the printing contractor is experiencing staffing shortages due to COVID-19. As a result the Bureau had to delay its fourth and fifth mailings and in April 2020, the Bureau announced that it would send out an additional sixth mailing to non-responding households just before the start of NRFU in August 2020.

The Bureau's call centers also experienced reduced capacity because some individual call sites have needed to close due to staff who tested positive for COVID-19. As a result, the Bureau observed increasing caller wait time and call abandon rates. As of May 29, the Bureau has received a total inbound call volume of 10.1 million calls and its interactive voice response system deflected 68 percent of these calls, meaning the callers did not request to speak to a customer service representative. The remaining calls, as well as those calls that bypass the voice response system such as those placed to a phone number that is Non English Non Spanish (NENS), are routed to a customer service representative.

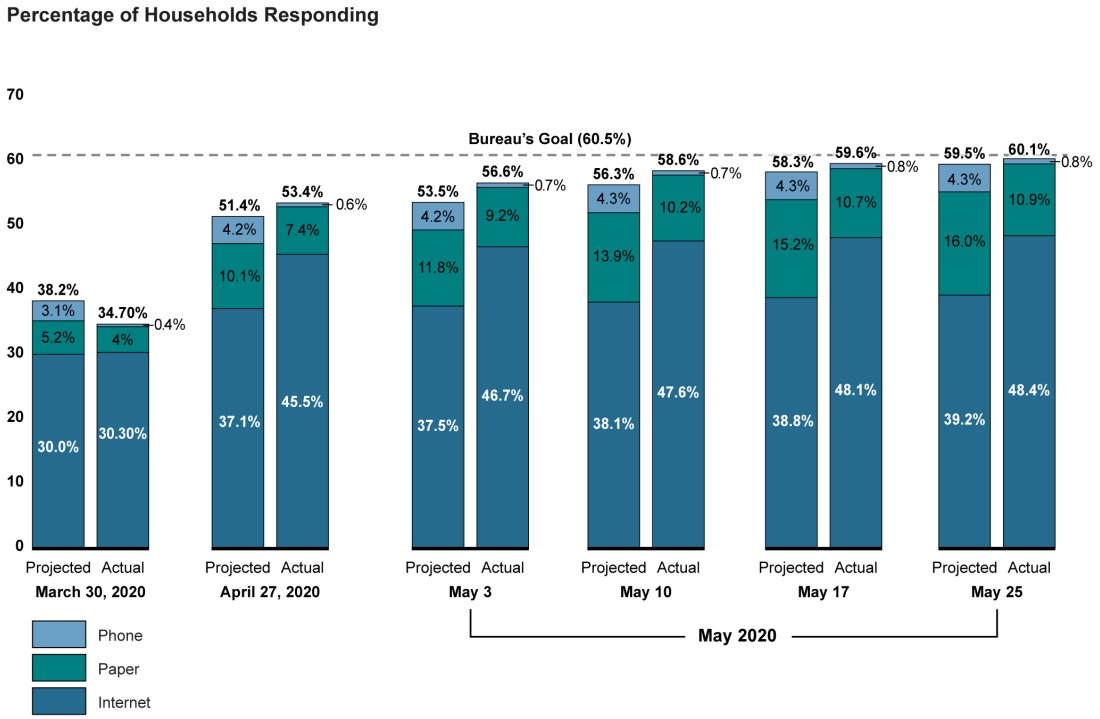
The Bureau's service level agreement with its contractor required the contractor to answer 80 percent of calls within 30 seconds of that call being routed to a customer service representative, measured weekly. However, the Bureau relaxed this requirement and, as of May 29, the Bureau's service level of answering calls within 30 seconds was 60.7 percent since the beginning of the call center operation.

The Bureau's abandon rate for the duration of the operation, which includes callers who hang up after being routed to a customer service representative but before the representative answers, was 14.7 percent as of May 29. The rate was much higher for NENS callers (38.7 percent).

In response to this, the Bureau told us it had made several changes including implementing a return call back feature and authorizing a work from home workforce to assist and enumerate callers who requested a call back. According to the Bureau, since implementing these measures, call wait time and abandonment rates have returned to acceptable levels. For example, for the single day of May 29, the Bureau was able to answer 98.6 percent of calls routed to a customer service representative within 30 seconds. Additionally, the abandon rate was 1.3 percent or less for all types of callers.

The Bureau's expected self-response rate—the percentage of households that respond by internet, phone, or mail prior to receiving a visit—was to reach 60.5 percent by June 10, 2020. As of May 25, 2020 the Bureau has received responses from 60.1 percent of households (approximately 90.4 million housing units), which is slightly above its modeled expectation of reaching 59.5 percent by the same date. To date, the majority of self-responses have been received via the Bureau's internet self-response option (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentages of Households Self-Responding by Mode Compared to Census Bureau Projections



Source: GAO analysis of Census Bureau management reports and updated projections as of May 25, 2020. | GAO-20-551R

Self-response rates have a large effect on the quality and overall cost of conducting the census. Households that do not self-respond typically receive up to six in-person visits from a census worker to collect their census data as part of the Bureau's NRFU operation. High self-response rates reduce the workload for this operation, which saves taxpayer dollars because the workforce required to collect data in-person makes NRFU the Bureau's most expensive operation. Through its press releases and media campaign, the Bureau is strongly encouraging self-response online, by phone, or by mail as it responds to the delays and suspensions to its operations as the result of COVID-19.

While the national response rate is important, the decennial census is a local endeavor, and self-response rates vary widely across states and counties. For example, while Minnesota had a 70 percent self-response rate by May 25, 2020, Alaska had only a 40.8 percent self-response rate. Additionally, as of June 1, there are counties in Alaska, Texas, Utah, and South Dakota with self-response rates below 3 percent. Bureau officials stated that delays to the Update Leave operation, in which field staff hand-deliver questionnaires to addresses that do not have mail delivered to their doors, may explain some of the variation seen in the self-response rates. The range of self-response rates is also a result of the markedly different operational environments and challenges that the Bureau faces from one locale to another.

- **Communicating pandemic plans to ensure continued operations.** In May 2019, we reported that the Bureau did not have contingency plans for many risks in its risk register including for major disasters and recommended that it develop such a plan for all risks requiring them.[7] The Bureau updated its risk register for major disasters to include a contingency plan. According to the Bureau's March 2020 risk register, the contingency plan for any major disaster—including an epidemic—is rapid response, meaning the Bureau would develop a plan to address the risk once it was realized. Bureau officials told us that, depending on the type of major disaster, response would vary widely and even if they had a more detailed contingency plan for a pandemic it would have never addressed the magnitude of the current national emergency that is taking place across the country.

  On March 12, 2020, the Bureau updated its Continuity of Operations plan with a Pandemic Addendum.[8] The document outlined when certain continuity procedures would be used, responsibilities, and delegations of authority. The Bureau also created a COVID-19 Internal Task Force to create a communications plan and appropriate workforce flexibilities. The Bureau has made a number of procedural changes to census operations, including contacting places like health care facilities to ask them to change the method of enumeration for safety reasons.

  As operations resume, the Bureau will need to distribute information to its area census offices (ACO) that is timely, clear, and consistent regarding operational changes, work status, and pay. Responses to our survey underscore the need for the Bureau to ensure that there are lines of communications for ACO managers to ask questions and get timely responses. Less than half of the respondents in our early-April survey expressed satisfaction with the clarity and timeliness of headquarters and Regional Census Centers communication related to the pandemic.

  Specifically, in response to multiple survey questions about the clarity of Bureau communications, respondents reported satisfaction 42 percent of the time on average; in response to multiple questions about the timeliness of Bureau communications, respondents expressed satisfaction 35 percent of the time on average.

  On the other hand, more than half of responding ACO managers in our early-April survey expressed satisfaction with their ACO's ability to safely manage employees and operations during the pandemic. For example, 55 percent were satisfied with their ACO's ability to maintain continuity of operations during the pandemic.

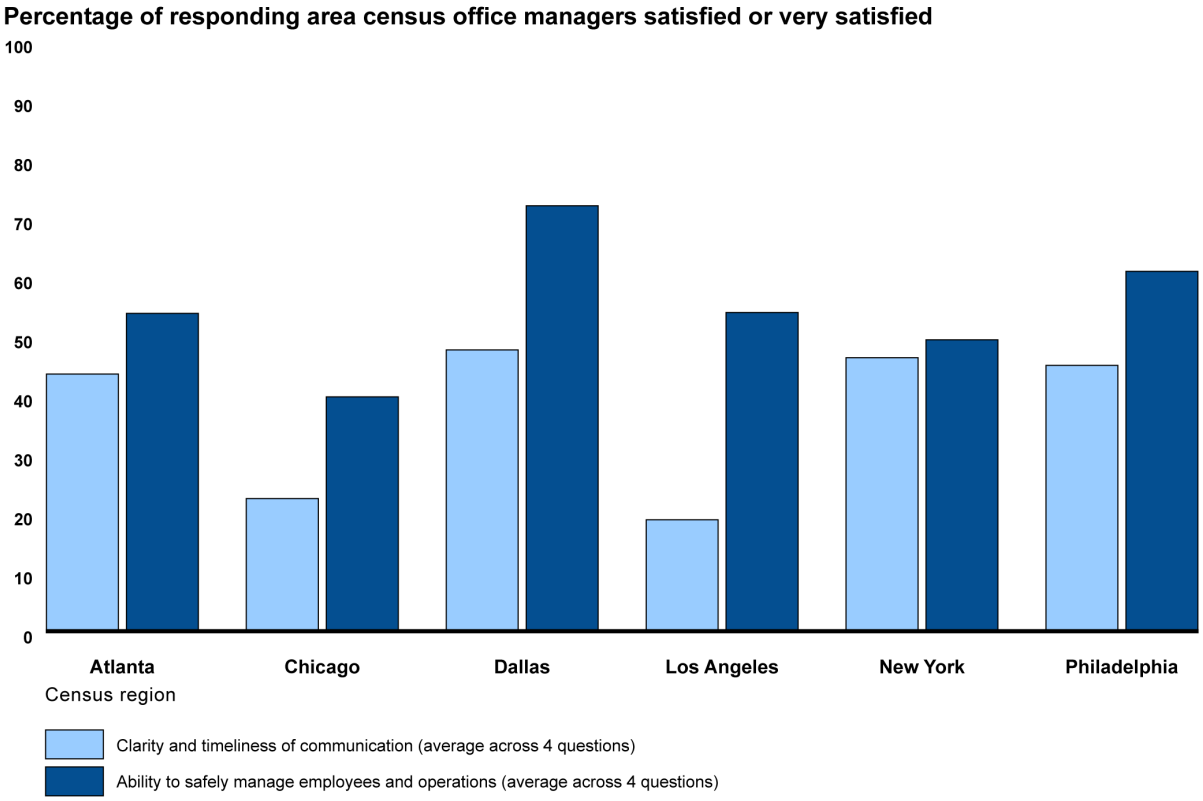
  As shown in figure 3, while ACO manager satisfaction with his or her ability to safely manage employees and operations and with the Bureau's pandemic communication and guidance varied, ACOs generally were more satisfied with their ability to safely manage employees and operations than with the Bureau's communications. Bureau officials acknowledged their earliest communications to managers on the pandemic were not as

[7]This recommendation is still open. GAO, *2020 Census: Additional Actions Needed to Manage Risk*, GAO-19-399 (Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2019).

[8]Census Bureau, *Pandemic Addendum to Continuity of Operations (COOP) Plan*, March 12, 2020.

informative as later guidance. They suggested that because the timing of COVID-19 outbreaks varied geographically, satisfaction reported by managers may also vary.

Figure 3: Most Responding Area Census Office Managers Satisfied with Ability to Safely Manage Employees and Operations but Less Satisfaction with Communication of Pandemic Guidance



Source: GAO survey of area census office managers, April 2020. | GAO-20-551R

- **Achieving and maintaining sufficient staffing levels.** The census cannot be implemented effectively without sufficient staff. The Bureau may need to hire more field staff than anticipated to work within compressed time frames or complete work within constraints presented by further COVID-19 disruptions, and will have to quickly hire and onboard sufficient staff to conduct its operations.[9] According to the Bureau, additional staff and handheld devices may be needed to support NRFU in certain geographies based on self-response rates.

[9]We previously reported that the Bureau experienced delays in hiring and onboarding for its address canvassing operation due to delays in processing background clearances and higher than expected attrition. The Bureau has taken a number of steps to improve these processes for peak operations, including recruiting and selecting a larger number of applicants, increasing the number of fingerprinting locations, and increasing wage rates in approximately 78 percent of counties nationwide. We will continue to monitor the effectiveness of these efforts. GAO-20-111R

At the time the Bureau suspended operations in March, it had almost completed selection of enumerators—employees who travel from door to door using handheld devices to attempt to obtain census data from individuals who do not self-respond—for all operations and exceeded its selection goals.[10] To communicate to applicants and hired fieldworkers, in late March the Bureau emailed all applicants that had previously been offered a position informing them that fingerprinting had been suspended but that they were still selected for the position. The email also informed individuals who had completed fingerprinting that training may be delayed and would include social distancing measures.

The Bureau has stated that the health and safety of its staff and the public is a top priority, and that it will coordinate with federal, state, and local health officials and put appropriate protocols and procedures in place and ensure adequate protective equipment and cleaning supplies. In our early-April survey of ACO managers, open-ended comments we received from survey respondents contained concerns about census worker safety and its effect on staffing levels, such as the fear of being in contact with coworkers who potentially could be carrying the virus.

Other comments received contained concerns about whether relevant public health guidance had been followed and about the adequacy of protective equipment and cleaning supplies provided to the ACO. In early May, the Bureau announced that it had ordered this equipment for all field staff and that these materials will be secured and provided before starting operations.

Additionally, when operations do resume, the Bureau would experience further disruptions in the event of a resurgence of COVID-19 that would require intermittent sheltering-in-place in parts of the country. Continuity of operations during such periods can be facilitated where organizations have telework ready workforces. In our early-April survey of ACO managers, although none of our survey questions asked specifically about telework, more than 15 ACO managers provided open-ended comments expressing concerns related to telework restrictions.

For example, nine ACO managers commented that the ACO had been kept open during the suspension of field operations with some staff required to be present each day, and 10 commented that the ACO had not been issued a sufficient number of laptops to enable telework for all managers. In our discussions with senior Bureau officials, they confirmed that the ACOs had been kept open and that it would be looking at a range of options, including possible telework, to flexibly respond to COVID-19 moving forward.

- **Revising approach to communications and partnerships.** Many of the Bureau's efforts to reach hard-to-count populations rely on in-person face-to-face interactions, and during a time of social distancing, the Bureau's communications campaign and National and Community Partnerships are more important than ever. The Bureau revised its communication and media efforts in response to COVID-19. For example, Bureau officials stated that to continue to motivate self-response it increased spending on its

[10]The Bureau considers applicants "selected" when they have accepted a job offer. After being selected, individuals must wait a minimum of 60 days before they can begin training, a time period during which they must complete fingerprinting and a background check. Individuals are considered hired when they have completed their onboarding forms and been sworn in on the first day of training. The Bureau's selections effort was scheduled to end on March 21.

communications and partnership efforts, including advertising, by at least $160 million on top of its original $500 million communications campaign. See figure 4 for an example of this advertising.

Figure 4: Census Bureau Advertisement to Motivate Self-Response during COVID-19 Pandemic

Source: Washington Post, April 29, 2020 | GAO-20-551R

The Bureau also adapted its approach with National and Community Partners, who work with the Bureau to educate the public and maximize response rates, particularly for hard-to-count populations. In April 2020, while face-to-face outreach had been suspended, the Bureau provided Partnership Specialists with a virtual engagement strategy. This strategy included contacting partners to notify them about changes to census operations and seek their continued support. According to Bureau officials, Partnership Specialists are supporting virtual town halls, conference calls, podcasts and radio interviews, and other virtual events hosted by partners.

For example, in early April, Chambers of Commerce in San Diego and Honolulu both held virtual events for small business owners demonstrating the connection between completing the 2020 Census and economic development. The Bureau also shipped printed material and promotional items to partners, such as food banks and schools, to include in free lunch packages that are given out to students and families.

When operations resume, effective ACO staff coordination with Partnership Specialists will continue to be important. As we have previously reported and again in early April, ACO managers consistently expressed low satisfaction with the program.[11] In our early-April survey, between 31 and 44 percent of ACO managers reported satisfaction with the program's responsiveness to ACO requests, helpfulness to ACO operations, assistance with local challenges, communication and coordination, clarity of roles and responsibilities, opportunities to provide feedback, and assistance in communicating with the community on pandemic-related operational details.

A senior Bureau official noted that the two key points of engagement between the Partnership Program and ACOs—Mobile Questionnaire Assistance (MQA) site identification and the NRFU operation—had not begun. However, he stated that the Bureau would nonetheless have expected to see positive relationships established by the time of the survey. We have previously recommended that the Bureau develop mechanisms to increase coordination and communication between the partnership and local census office staff.[12] This recommendation has been designated as a priority recommendation and remains open.

The MQA initiative was intended to provide staff at community events to help people complete their questionnaire and answer questions in locations with low self-response.[13] The operation had been planned to begin by deploying staff in areas with anticipated low levels of self-response and then to deploy in areas in which the Bureau was experiencing low levels of self-response for 2020. With community events widely cancelled, Bureau officials stated that they are reviewing the operation and coordination with partners.

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[11]GAO, *2020 Census: Update on the Census Bureau's Implementation of Partnership and Outreach Activities,* GAO-20-496 (Washington, D.C.: May 13, 2020).

[12]GAO, *2010 Census: Key Efforts to Include Hard-to-Count Populations Went Generally as Planned: Improvements Could Make Efforts More Effective for Next Census*. GAO-11-45 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 14, 2020).

[13]In November 2019, the *Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2020* directed the Bureau to establish Mobile Questionnaire Assistance Centers and provided $90 million for the operation. Pub. L. No. 116-69, div. A, § 101, 133 Stat. 1134 (Nov. 21, 2019).

- **Adjusting plans for Group Quarters and Service-Based Enumeration.** These operations, including enumeration of people experiencing homelessness, count individuals who may be transitory. Recall bias, the ability to remember where one was living on April 1, and the ability of facilities to provide a person's census data may disproportionately affect individuals enumerated through these methods. Bureau officials stated that they are reviewing how to count those people experiencing homelessness at places such as soup kitchens and shelters.
- **Monitoring ongoing risks to IT systems implementation.** It will be important that the Bureau continue to monitor ongoing COVID-19-related risks to the implementation of its IT systems as well. To conduct the 2020 Census, the Bureau is utilizing 52 IT systems and plans to deploy them across 16 operational deliveries.[14] As of April 2020, the Bureau had continued to make progress in executing work against its IT development and testing schedule by deploying the systems for 10 of the 16 operational deliveries.[15] For example, the Bureau recently deployed the systems to support NRFU on April 9, 2020.[16]

  However, as of April 2020, the Assistant Director for Decennial Census Programs, Systems and Contracts stated that the Bureau was continuing to assess the risks associated with the COVID-19-related schedule changes to the implementation of IT, including the number of enumerator handheld devices expected to be available and the significant contract support required to conduct the 2020 Census.

  For example, if the Bureau hires more enumerators than originally planned due to, among other reasons, a higher-than-expected workload, there may be a shortage of enumerator handheld devices. To reduce this risk, the official stated that the Bureau ordered 125,000 additional enumerator handheld devices (for a total of approximately 559,000 devices). The official added that the Bureau would need to conduct additional performance and scalability testing to better ensure that the Bureau's systems can support these additional devices without encountering performance issues.[17]

  Regarding the Bureau's contractor support, the official noted that the Bureau would need to continue to assess contractor staffing levels to ensure that a sufficient number of staff is available to perform any additional systems testing needed for COVID-19-related changes to upcoming census operations, such as the example previously discussed. Moreover, the

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[14]The Bureau plans to deploy the 52 systems being used in the 2020 Census multiple times across 16 operational deliveries, which includes operations such as self-response and NRFU. That is, the Bureau may deploy a system for one operation in the 2020 Census (such as self-response), and again for a subsequent operation (such as NRFU). As such, additional development and testing may occur each time a system is deployed.

[15]As of April 2020, the Bureau had deployed the systems for the following 10 operational deliveries: early operations preparation; address canvassing; peak recruiting and hiring; integrated partnership and communications; count review/remote Alaska; group quarters advanced contact; self-response; update enumerate/update leave; group quarters enumeration; and NRFU. The systems for the remaining six operational deliveries that had not yet been deployed were: response processing; data products/dissemination; providing data for redistricting; island area census; and post-enumeration survey.

[16]Although the Bureau deployed the systems needed to conduct NRFU, the start date for this census operation has been delayed due to COVID-19.

[17]According to the Bureau's 2020 Census Operational Plan, the purpose of performance and scalability testing is to ensure that systems will scale to meet the workloads, or volumes, of the 2020 Census.

official noted that the time frames for reducing contractor-provided IT servers, storage capacity, and software licenses supporting 2020 Census operations would need to be reassessed to take into consideration the changes in the timing of the field operations. We have ongoing work intended to monitor the risks to the Bureau's implementation of IT to support the 2020 Census and its efforts to mitigate these risks.

- **Managing disinformation and misinformation.** The public perception of the Bureau's ability to adequately safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of the 2020 Census responses could be influenced by disinformation and misinformation spread through traditional media (e.g., newspapers) and social media.[18] To help address this challenge, the Bureau informs the public of the risks associated with disinformation and misinformation through the Bureau's education and communication campaigns, and by posting information on the agency's website.[19] The Bureau also uses specialized tools to monitor traditional media and social media, and then tracks, categorizes, and responds to disinformation and misinformation that may be shared. For example, in March 2020, in response to misinformation, the Bureau issued a statement on its website to clarify that an individual's 2020 Census response could not be used to impact eligibility for any government benefits, including any potential stimulus payments.

  In partnership with the Bureau, social media companies have modified relevant Terms of Service to include support for the 2020 Census. To help maintain an effective relationship, Bureau officials stated that they are coordinating with several technology companies and social media partners weekly. According to Bureau officials in the Trust and Safety team, as a result of this communication and coordination, social media partners have removed misleading content about the 2020 Census that violated these Terms of Service.

- **Addressing cybersecurity weaknesses.** The Bureau's risk management framework requires it to conduct a full security assessment for nearly all the systems expected to be used for the 2020 Census. If deficiencies are identified, the Bureau is to determine the corrective actions—known as plans of actions and milestones (POA&Ms)—needed to remediate those deficiencies.

  In April 2019, we reported that the Bureau did not always address POA&Ms in accordance with its established deadlines.[20] Thus, we recommended that the Bureau take steps to ensure that identified corrective actions for cybersecurity weaknesses are implemented within prescribed time frames. In February 2020, the Bureau reported that it is taking steps to more actively manage overdue POA&Ms and has made progress in closing them. For example, the Bureau reduced the number of open "high" and "very high" risk POA&Ms delayed past their completion dates from 128 in April 2019 to 98 in April 2020.

  Although the Bureau has made progress in closing overdue POA&Ms, more work remains to address other POA&Ms. Specifically, as of the end of April 2020, the Bureau had a total of 234 open "high" and "very high" risk POA&Ms that needed to be addressed. Fully

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[18]Disinformation is manufactured information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the intent to cause harm. Misinformation is false information shared without the intent to mislead.

[19]https://2020census.gov/en/news-events/rumors.html.

[20]GAO, *2020 Census: Further Actions Needed to Reduce Key Risks to a Successful Enumeration*, GAO-19-431T (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 30, 2019).

implementing our recommendation will help to ensure that the Bureau is in a better position to manage and mitigate cybersecurity risks in a timely manner.

- **Protecting the privacy of respondent data.** To protect the privacy of respondent data as required by statute,[21] the Bureau reported progress in implementing a disclosure avoidance technique, known as differential privacy,[22] to its publicly-released statistical products to protect the confidentiality of its respondents and their data. The Bureau tested this technique late last year using data collected during the 2010 Census and 2018 End-to-End Test, and published sample data products on its website.

  In February 2020, the Bureau reported that it had solicited input on those sample data products from several sources, including internal advisory committees, academic experts and researchers, federal and state partners, and privacy advocates. According to the Bureau's Chief Scientist, the Bureau revised its implementation of differential privacy to address feedback voiced by the data users and other stakeholders.

  In March 2020, the Bureau reported its plans to continue to solicit feedback from data users and the public regarding the sample data products and its efforts to implement differential privacy. According to the Chief Scientist, the deadline for the final decisions on the Bureau's implementation of differential privacy is in January 2021. The Bureau plans to document decisions it makes regarding differential privacy in a series of memorandums that the Bureau intends to post on its website. We have ongoing work monitoring the Bureau's progress as it works to implement differential privacy for the 2020 Census.

- **Ensuring data quality under potentially compressed timeframes.** As part of its April announcement further suspending and delaying census operations, the Department of Commerce requested a statutory change to deadlines for delivering apportionment and redistricting data. Without such a statutory change in required dates, the Bureau stated that delays to data collection operations are expected to affect the Bureau's ability to meet the currently required statutory dates for delivering data to the President and the states.

  Before the Bureau is able to deliver data from the 2020 Census, it must conduct its post data collection processing, which removes duplicate responses, ensures that complete information is collected, and formats data files used to produce census results.[23] It will also be important that the Bureau monitor the risks associated with the ability of its systems to perform post data collection processing under compressed time frames.

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[21] 13 U.S.C. § 9.

[22] Differential privacy is a disclosure avoidance technique aimed at limiting statistical disclosure and controlling privacy risk. According to the Bureau, differential privacy provides a way for the Bureau to quantify the level of acceptable privacy risk and mitigate the risk that individuals can be reidentified using the Bureau's data. Reidentification can occur when public data are linked to other external data sources. According to the Bureau, using differential privacy means that publicly available data will include some statistical noise, or data inaccuracies, to protect the privacy of individuals. Differential privacy provides algorithms that allow policy makers to decide the trade-off between data accuracy and privacy.

[23] The Bureau's initial plan was to complete any necessary data edits to housing unit and group quarters' response data by October 2, 2020 and to "unduplicate" the data by November 2, 2020. To provide statutorily required data on apportionment counts to the President by December 31, 2020, the Bureau planned to complete data processing by November 30, 2020. See 13 U.S.C § 141(b). To provide the required data to states for redistricting purposes by April 1, 2021, the Bureau planned to complete data processing by January 25, 2021. See 13 U.S.C. § 141(c).

- **Evaluating the impact of census delays on data quality.** The Bureau goes to great lengths to ensure the quality and coverage of the data collected for the census. If a person does not respond to the census, the Bureau typically can make up to six visits to collect that data. However, in a post-COVID-19 environment, door-to-door visits for NRFU interviewing may be less effective. This may affect the quality of the data, especially for groups that are less likely to self-respond (often hard to count populations). To measure the quality of the census, the Bureau conducts a Post-Enumeration Survey (PES).

  The PES collects person and housing unit information (independent from the 2020 Census operations) from a sample of housing units to provide estimates of census coverage. Less effective door-to-door visits may also affect the reliability of the PES and therefore its ability to assess the quality of the count. Given the potential impact of COVID-19 on data coverage and quality, the Bureau's evaluation program—which is designed to answer questions about the conduct of census operations, including the quality of data collected—becomes a critical component in measuring census coverage.

  In response to operational and schedule changes, in April the Bureau stood up a 2020 Data Quality Executive Governance Group to provide guidance on data quality efforts and to facilitate the work of various new and ongoing working groups related to data quality. According to the Bureau, these efforts will identify new ways to assess and ensure quality, both during and after data collection.

Agency Comments

We provided a copy of this draft report to the Department of Commerce. The Census Bureau provided technical comments that were incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of the Department of Commerce, the Under Secretary of Economic Affairs, the Director of the Census Bureau, and interested 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 J. Christopher Mihm at 202-512-6806 or by email at mihmj@gao.gov or Nick Marinos at (202) 512-9342 or by email at marinosn@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 enclosure I.

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(104189)

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