

Census in Peril: Getting the 2010 Decennial Back on Track
Chairman Joe Lieberman
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The purpose of today's hearing is to examine problems that, if not corrected, will threaten the Census Bureau's readiness for the 2010 survey.

I want to thank Senator Carper and Sen. Coburn, the Chairman and Ranking Member of HSGAC's Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, who have been closely monitoring this issue, for their steadfastness in pursuing the Committee's oversight agenda. And I thank Commerce Secretary Guitierrez and Census Director Murdock for taking time from their very busy schedules to be here.

The Bureau's decennial population counts are not only the Census Bureau's most important function, they are constitutionally required. The nation has been relying on them ever since 1790 when U.S. Marshals rode around on horseback to count our young nation's population of 3.9 million that year.

Every 10 years since, we have conducted the survey in order to divide states up into Congressional districts, to distribute billions of dollars in federal aid, and to make basic decisions at every level of government.

For most of the survey's history, counters have used old fashioned methods to tabulate their numbers. As recently as 2000, Bureau employees were using paper and pencil. But a decision was made shortly after the completion of the 2000 Census to move to an electronic system to ensure greater accuracy and to streamline the process.

Now, two years before the 2010 Census, we learn that the development of handheld computers is in serious trouble and that they may not be functional by the time they are needed. The Census Bureau has recently indicated that development of the handheld computers had experienced several delays and cost overruns and that the handhelds may not meet the Bureau's operational needs and quality controls. With just two years to go, this is extremely distressing news.

So, how did it come to this? In March 2006, the Census Bureau awarded Harris Corporation a \$600 million contract to develop and manufacture the handheld computers in time for the 2010 Census. As late as December last year, Census Bureau officials reassured Congress that development of the electronic counters was on schedule and contingency plans were unnecessary.

But the Government Accountability Office warned Census officials in an October 5, 2007, report of the consequences of falling behind schedule and questioned the Bureau's ability to manage the project's risks. Then, last November, the Mitre Corporation, which Census hired to advise it on IT programs, told the Bureau that requirements for the handhelds may not be achieved in time for 2010 - even if the Bureau received an influx of funding. Mitre recommended the Bureau immediately develop plans to use paper forms for the 2010 Census. A January 2 story in the trade publication Government Executive reported that Census officials "have no plans to revert to paper."

The Bureau will very quickly need to decide if problems with the handheld computers can be fixed before a 2010 Census dress rehearsal that starts on May 1, 2008. If the problems can be fixed, Census estimates it will need an additional \$1 billion in the FY09 Budget to do so. If the problems cannot be fixed, the Bureau will need even more money to prepare for a paper system both for the 2008 dress rehearsal and the 2010 Census.

The situation is clearly troubling, and I am concerned that it could have deteriorated to this degree and without proper warning from the Bureau. I have noted with concern the failure of other government agencies to properly oversee

high-priced technology contracts. Too much of the taxpayer's hard earned dollars ride on these contracts not to manage them closely. Furthermore, 10 years into the 21st century, it is inexcusable that the Census Bureau must still rely on paper and pencils to perform its most important function.

I understand that the Bureau is working hard to correct these specific problems. A great deal is at stake, and the nation must be able to rely on the accuracy of the decennial. Thank you.