



441 G St. N.W.  
Washington, DC 20548

June 4, 2026

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

The Honorable Andy Kim  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Disaster Management, District of Columbia, and Census  
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

The Honorable James Comer  
Chairman  
The Honorable Robert Garcia  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
House of Representatives

## **2030 Census: Census Bureau Needs Additional Data to Inform Design Decisions**

The Constitution mandates a recurring census for purposes of apportioning political representation among the states within every 10 years. To carry out this mandate, the U.S. Census Bureau conducts the decennial census of the U.S. population. The decennial census also provides vital data for the nation, which are used to redraw congressional districts in each state and allocate hundreds of billions of dollars each year in federal financial assistance, as well as to support many private sector business decisions. The Bureau is well into its 14-year life cycle (2019-2033) for the 2030 decennial census. The Bureau released a preliminary high-level operational plan in July 2025 and is making design and planning decisions that will affect implementation of the 2030 Census.

The Bureau is planning several changes for the 2030 Census, including updating its address list on an ongoing basis, expanding its use of administrative and supplemental data from other government agencies, and reducing census field-office infrastructure compared to the 2020 Census. As part of this effort, the Bureau is implementing the 2026 Census Test as the first of two major field tests planned to help the agency examine new methods, processes, and approaches to the census. The purpose of the 2026 Test is to assess the viability of new or revised design elements for the 2030 Census.

You asked us to report on a range of topics related to preparations for the 2030 Census. This product constitutes the first in a series on how the Bureau is preparing for the 2030 Census. This report examines (1) the status of preparations, planning decisions, and testing for the 2030

Census; and (2) emerging challenges that could affect the Bureau's approach for the 2030 Census.

For both objectives, we reviewed the Bureau's operational and staffing plans and risk and issue documentation for the 2026 Test and 2030 Census. We also interviewed Bureau officials. For the first objective, we identified design, scope, and timeline changes to the 2026 Test and compared them to plans and timelines described in the initial test plan. We determined whether the Bureau is following internal controls and evidence-based policymaking practices where appropriate to generate the information needed to inform decisions regarding the 2030 Census.<sup>1</sup> We analyzed selected publications describing current professional standards for survey research and research on the effects of survey length on data quality. We also asked Department of Commerce officials for their rationale regarding changing the focus of the 2026 Test. As of May 2026, we had not received a response.

For the second objective, we reviewed Bureau data for 2025 on total staffing levels, resignations, early retirements, and reductions-in-force provided by the agency. We also described the effects of Bureau-identified active high risks to the 2026 Test and 2030 Census and steps the Bureau is taking to address them. To assess the reliability of personnel data, we reviewed written responses from the Bureau about data sources and quality. We also conducted electronic testing for potential reliability concerns, such as outliers or missing values. We determined the data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes of reporting the Bureau's staffing levels.

We conducted this performance audit from January 2026 to June 2026 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.

We provided briefings on the results of our review to your staff on April 22, 2026. Those briefing slides as presented, updated to incorporate agency comments, are attached as appendix I to this letter.

### **The 2026 Test Will Not Produce Data on the Viability of Certain Proposed 2030 Census Design Features**

The goal of the 2026 Test as stated in the Bureau's September 2025 initial test plan is to determine whether the Bureau should continue pursuing key enhancements and innovations identified by early research efforts. However, the 2026 Test will not produce data on the viability of certain proposed 2030 design features. Specifically, the Bureau reduced the scope of the 2026 test in two ways: (1) reducing the number of test locations from six to two; and (2) reducing or eliminating 10 of 19 operational activities that the Bureau originally had planned to test for viability, as shown in appendix II.

Bureau officials acknowledged the importance of finalizing a plan for testing the operational activities that were removed from the 2026 Test but said they had not done so. As a result of Commerce's review of the 2026 Test Plan, the Bureau determined that the 2026 Test would focus on two key priorities, according to agency officials: (1) piloting in-field enumeration by U.S.

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<sup>1</sup>GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO-25-107721 (Washington, D.C.: May 15, 2025); and *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, GAO-23-105460 (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2023).

Postal Service (USPS) staff, and (2) enhancements and innovations to field infrastructure, staffing, and training.

According to Bureau officials, the Bureau eliminated four of the six test sites because they were not included in the Bureau's original USPS pilot. The changes to the 2026 Test delayed internet self-response at the two remaining sites by 50 days, and in-field enumeration at the two remaining sites by more than 2 months. It also reduced total hiring goals by more than 90 percent following site and scope changes.

Our prior work identified evidence-based policymaking practices, including that agencies should build a portfolio of high-quality, credible sources of evidence to support decision-making. This includes assessing the sufficiency of existing evidence, identifying and prioritizing evidence needs, and generating new evidence.<sup>2</sup> In addition, agencies should use evidence in decision-making to address identified problems and identify additional needs for new evidence.

As a result of the narrowed scope and other test changes, the Bureau may not be in a position to collect information on the efficacy of certain design features before it has to finalize decisions on implementing those features. Consequently, the Bureau could experience cost and quality challenges in managing the 2030 Census. For example, for the 2020 Census, we reported on challenges the Bureau faced with submitting group quarters data electronically—a design feature for which it had reduced its testing of during the 2018 Test leading up to the Census.<sup>3</sup> In addition, congressional and public confidence in the census may be harmed if decision-making does not appear to be evidence based.

### **2026 Test Questionnaire Asks Substantially More Questions, Including on Citizenship**

The Bureau is also asking substantially more questions in the 2026 Test internet self-response questionnaire compared to the 2020 Census, including questions on citizenship, education, and housing.<sup>4</sup> As a result, according to the Bureau, it will take about 40 minutes to complete the questionnaire for those who self-respond via the internet, compared to about 10 minutes for the one used for the 2020 Census. However, Bureau officials said that a subset of the questions—including those addressing citizenship—would be used for the in-field enumeration portion of the test.

In addition, Bureau officials said Commerce approved an English-only language version of the 2026 Test questionnaire as sufficient to meet the test's primary objectives, and the Bureau has no plans to specifically hire bilingual enumerators. By contrast, the 2020 Census questionnaire was offered in 12 non-English languages, and the Bureau previously called for the use of Spanish and Chinese language versions. Commerce and Bureau officials told us that the questionnaire being used is not scheduled to be compatible with new enterprise systems until 2027, and testing with the new systems took precedence over devoting resources to providing non-English options using legacy systems. Commerce also indicated that the test design would

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<sup>2</sup>GAO-23-105460.

<sup>3</sup>GAO, *2020 Census: Lessons Learned from Planning and Implementing the 2020 Census Offer Insights to Support 2030 Preparations*, GAO-22-104357 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 11, 2022).

<sup>4</sup>The 2026 Test will use the questionnaire from the American Community Survey, which is an ongoing survey fielded to a sample of households nationwide.

be consistent with Executive Order 14224, *Designating English as the Official Language of the United States*.<sup>5</sup>

### **Bureau Is Taking Steps to Close Skills Gaps, but Has Not Yet Completed Its Workforce Assessment**

According to the Bureau, total agency staff decreased 16 percent—from 13,312 to 11,119—from January 20 through October 22, 2025, due in part due to staff opting into early retirement and deferred resignation programs. Bureau officials said the agency has skills shortages resulting in part from a federal hiring freeze and elevated attrition. For example, the Bureau has identified mission-critical skill gaps needed to support the agency’s transition to a data-centric organization and in areas that require coordination across the Bureau such as field operations modernization. The agency is taking steps to close the skills gaps such as through targeted hiring of specialized talent and upskilling and professional development.

In addition to identifying and taking steps to close known skills gaps, the Bureau has also launched an agencywide workforce assessment to identify skills gaps, which would include management of the 2030 Census. As part of this effort, the Bureau developed a project plan and schedule for the assessment. However, the Bureau has not yet completed this assessment nor reported action plans to address any skills gaps it may identify. A key principle for effective strategic workforce planning is to develop strategies that are tailored to address gaps in number, deployment, and alignment of human capital approaches for enabling and sustaining the contributions of all critical skills and competencies.<sup>6</sup>

Given the statutory deadline for tabulating census results, the Bureau must have sufficient staff with the right skill set in place to manage an effective enumeration.<sup>7</sup> However, as of February 2026, Bureau officials said that the Bureau’s workforce assessment is paused until the Bureau establishes roles for employees participating in the assessment. Bureau officials said the agency may need to wait to complete the assessment until it finishes an enterprise-wide reorganization, which is tentatively scheduled to be completed in fiscal year 2027. Waiting for an enterprise-wide reorganization may delay the agencywide workforce assessment until after the Bureau hires and trains staff for the 2030 Census. As a result, the Bureau risks having a workforce without sufficient staff or the right skill sets in place to manage an effective enumeration.

Further, without better understanding its 2030 Census workforce needs—either through the agencywide workforce assessment or other means—the Bureau’s current efforts to address skills gaps (such as through targeted hiring of specialized talent and upskilling and professional development) may not fully address the gaps. Expediently taking the necessary steps to determine decennial workforce needs in time to effectively manage the 2030 Census would help the Bureau more successfully carry out census activities.

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<sup>5</sup>Exec. Order No. 14224, *Designating English as the Official Language of The United States*, 90 Fed. Reg. 11363 (Mar. 6, 2025). The executive order revoked an earlier executive order directing agencies to create a plan to improve accessibility to activities for individuals with limited English proficiency. However, agencies were not directed to change their services or stop production of documents offered in languages other than English.

<sup>6</sup>GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, GAO-04-39 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

<sup>7</sup>Federal law requires the tabulation of total population by States to be completed within 9 months of the census in order to apportion Members among the states. 13 U.S.C. § 141(b).

## Conclusions

Adequate testing and research of proposed new design features will help the Bureau make evidence-based decisions for the 2030 Census. These efforts can strengthen the census's design and its ability to collect, process, and report information. This, in turn, can improve congressional and public confidence in the census.

It is also important for the Bureau to determine workforce needs in time for the 2030 Census. These steps will better ensure that the Bureau has staff with the necessary expertise to carry out census activities.

## Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following two recommendations to the Secretary of Commerce:

The Secretary of Commerce should instruct the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau to research and test the operational activities and design features removed from the 2026 Census Test prior to finalizing its design of the 2030 Census. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Commerce should instruct the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau to determine decennial workforce needs so the Bureau may address skills gaps in time to effectively manage the 2030 Census. (Recommendation 2)

## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this letter and the attached slides to the Department of Commerce for review and comment. Commerce provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. In its technical comments, Commerce agreed with both recommendations and indicated that discussions were ongoing about new plans for small-scale testing in advance of the 2030 Census.

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

If you or your staff members have any questions about this report, please contact me at [VanarsdaleL@gao.gov](mailto:VanarsdaleL@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Media Relations may be found on the last page of this product. Key contributors to this report were Laurel Plume (Assistant Director), Mark Ryan (Analyst-in-Charge), Devin Braun, Brett Caloia, Robert Gebhart, Yvonne D. Jones, Serena Lo, Robert Robinson, and Crystal Wesco.

**//SIGNED//**

Lisa Van Arsdale  
Acting Director, Strategic Issues

Appendices - 2



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# 2030 Census: Census Bureau Needs Additional Data to Inform Design Decisions

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**Briefing for Congressional Requesters  
April 22, 2026**

**Note: This enclosure was updated prior to June 4, 2026  
issuance to incorporate agency comments from the  
Department of Commerce.**

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For more information, contact Lisa Van Arsdale at [VanarsdaleL@gao.gov](mailto:VanarsdaleL@gao.gov).

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## Source of GAO Work and Objectives

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- Congressional requesters asked us to report on a range of topics related to preparations for the 2030 Census. These slides primarily focus on 2026 Census Test preparations and U.S. Census Bureau staffing.
- The objectives of this report are to examine (1) the status of preparations, planning decisions, and testing for the 2030 Census; and (2) emerging challenges that could affect the Bureau's approach for the 2030 Census.

## Scope and Methodology

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- We reviewed Bureau operational and staffing plans and risk and issue documentation for the 2026 Test and 2030 Census and interviewed Bureau officials to
  - identify design, scope, and timeline changes to the 2026 Test and compare them to the initial test plan;
  - describe the magnitude of Bureau-identified active high risks to the 2026 Test and 2030 Census, and steps the Bureau is taking to address them; and
  - determine whether the Bureau is following evidence-based policymaking practices and internal controls where appropriate to generate the information needed to inform decisions regarding the 2030 Census.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO-25-107721 (Washington, D.C.: May 15, 2025); and *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, GAO-23-105460 (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2023).

## Scope and Methodology (Cont'd)

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- We analyzed selected publications describing current professional standards for survey research and research on the effects of survey length on data quality.
- We also reviewed Bureau 2025 personnel data on total staffing levels, resignations, early retirements, and reductions-in-force provided by the agency. To assess the reliability of personnel data, we reviewed written responses from the Bureau about data sources and quality. We also conducted electronic testing for potential reliability concerns, such as outliers or missing values. We determined the data was sufficiently reliable for our purposes of reporting Bureau-provided personnel data.
- We also asked Department of Commerce officials for their rationale regarding changing the focus of the 2026 Test. As of May 2026, we had not received a response.

## Background

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- The Bureau is planning several changes for the 2030 Census compared to 2020, according to its July 2025 operational plan, including
  - updating its address list on an ongoing basis throughout the decade;
  - expanding its use of administrative and supplemental data from other government agencies and sources;
  - expanding use of internet self-response;
  - cross-training staff to enumerate housing units, group quarters, and transitory locations; and
  - reducing census field office infrastructure.

## Background (Cont'd)

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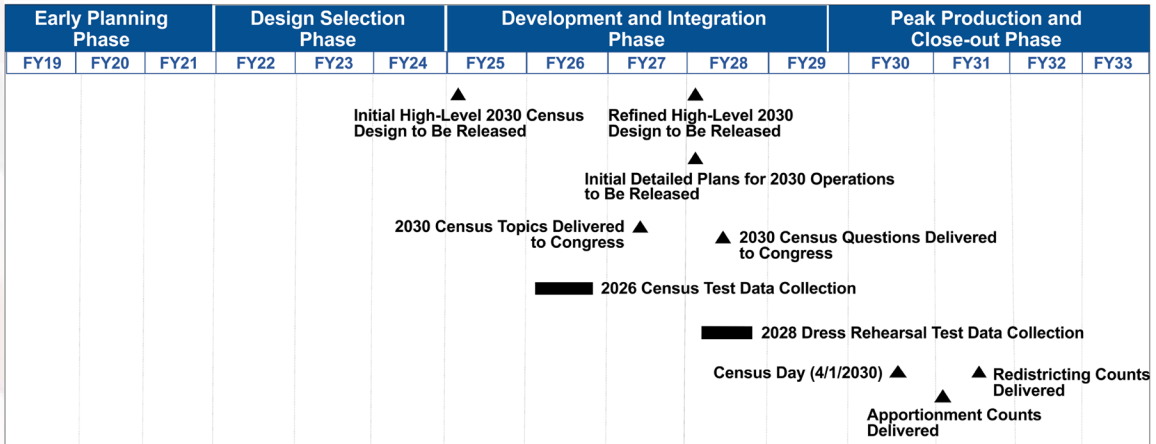
- The 2026 Test is one of two major field tests to prepare for the 2030 Census alongside periodic smaller-scale testing.<sup>2</sup>
- The goal of the 2026 Test as stated in the Bureau's September 2025 initial test plan is to determine if the Bureau should continue pursuing key enhancements and innovations identified by early research efforts.
- This test is expected to
  1. test the viability of new methods, processes, and approaches to determine if they are effective and suitable; and
  2. test other improvements to make existing methods or processes more efficient or accurate.

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<sup>2</sup>The other major field test is 2028 Dress Rehearsal of the Census. Unlike the 2026 Test, the dress rehearsal is designed to fine-tune processes and systems and ensure readiness for the 2030 Census. Page 6

# Background (Cont'd)

**Figure 1: 2030 Census Tests Roadmap Summary**



▲ Operational Design Milestone or Deliverable

Source: U.S. Census Bureau operational planning documentation. | GAO-26-108848

## **Objective 1: Status of Preparations, Planning Decisions, and Testing for the 2030 Census**

## 2026 Test Will Not Produce Data on the Viability of Certain Proposed 2030 Census Design Features

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- In February 2026, Bureau officials said that the agency fully or partially canceled 10 of the 19 operational activities it had planned to test for viability. These areas included, for example:
  1. providing an internet self-response option for residents of university residence halls;
  2. gauging the accuracy of new administrative data modeling to enumerate certain non-responding households remotely; and
  3. using the same staff to enumerate both group quarters and individual housing units.
- See appendix II for a list of the status of the 19 original operational activities for the revised 2026 Test.

## 2026 Test Will Not Produce Data on the Viability of Certain Proposed 2030 Census Design Features (Cont'd)

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- The Bureau conducts other evaluative research and is maintaining a program of small-scale testing through 2029 to inform, enhance, and refine 2030 Census operations.
- In February 2026, Bureau officials said they had not yet finalized a plan for testing the areas that were removed from the 2026 Test but acknowledged the importance of doing so.

## 2026 Test Will Not Produce Data on the Viability of Certain Proposed 2030 Census Design Features (Cont'd)

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- Informing decisions around the viability of certain other proposed 2030 Census design features is a role of the 2026 Test, according to the Bureau's initial 2030 high-level design.
- Our prior work identified key evidence-based policymaking practices, including that agencies should build a portfolio of high-quality, credible sources of evidence to support decision-making. This includes assessing the sufficiency of existing evidence, identifying and prioritizing evidence needs, and generating new evidence. Agencies should also use evidence in decision-making to address identified problems and identify additional needs for new evidence.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>GAO-23-105460.

## 2026 Test Will Not Produce Data on the Viability of Certain Proposed 2030 Census Design Features (Cont'd)

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- As a result of the test changes, there is risk that the Bureau will not collect information on the efficacy of certain design features that it is planning for the 2030 Census before it updates its 2030 Operational Plan and finalizes its high-level design for the census. Consequently, the Bureau could experience cost and quality challenges in managing the 2030 Census. For example, for the 2020 Census, we reported on challenges the Bureau faced with getting group quarters data submitted electronically—a design feature it had reduced its testing of during the 2018 Test leading up to the Census.<sup>4</sup>
- Congressional and public confidence in the Census may also be harmed if operational decision-making does not appear to be evidence based.

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<sup>4</sup>GAO, *2020 Census: Lessons Learned from Planning and Implementing the 2020 Census Offer Insights to Support 2030 Preparations*, Page 12 GAO-22-104357 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 11, 2022).

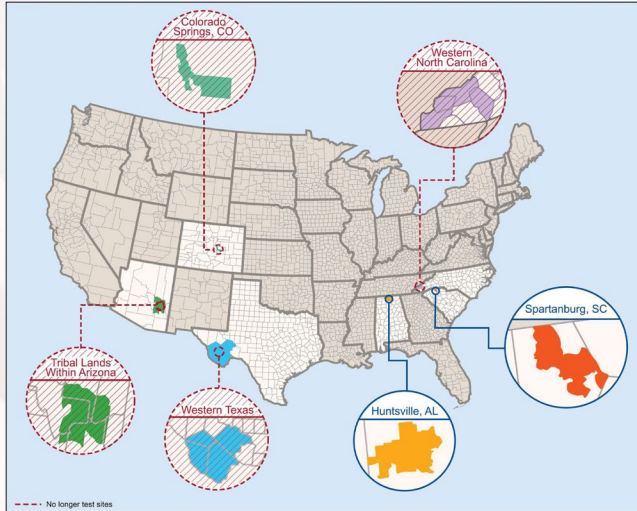
## The Bureau Canceled Several Planned Test Sites and Reduced Hiring Plans

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- The Bureau, as a result of Commerce’s review of the 2026 Test, determined that the 2026 Test would focus on two key priorities, according to agency officials:
  - piloting in-field enumeration by U.S. Postal Service (USPS) staff, and
  - enhancements and innovations to field infrastructure, staffing, and training.
- Agency officials also said that the Bureau’s rationale for the priorities was to “ensure key objectives could be adequately tested.”

## The Bureau Canceled Several Planned Test Sites and Reduced Hiring Plans (Cont'd)

Figure 2: Original and Revised 2026 Census Test Sites

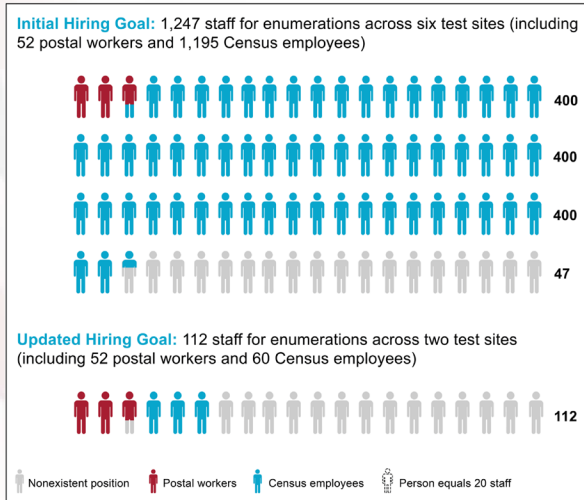


Source: U.S. Census Bureau test planning documentation. | GAO-26-108848

- Four of the six original sites (Colorado Springs, Tribal Lands within Arizona, Western North Carolina, and Western Texas) were not included in the Bureau’s original USPS pilot and thus were excluded from the revised 2026 Test, according to Bureau officials.

# The Bureau Canceled Several Planned Test Sites and Reduced Hiring Plans (Cont'd)

**Figure 3: 2026 Census Test Hiring Goals**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Census Bureau information. | GAO-26-108848

- The Bureau originally planned to hire about 1,250 staff for the original six test sites.
- As of February 2026, the Bureau was planning to hire 112 staff only at the Huntsville, Alabama, and Spartanburg, South Carolina, sites. This includes about 25 USPS staff and 30 Census employees at each site. Bureau officials said that staffing for the USPS pilot was unchanged.
- The Bureau recruited 1,543 people across the six sites and selected eight people prior to announcing the 2026 Test changes. Hiring was not completed for any staff at the canceled test sites.

## The New Test Questionnaire Asks Substantially More Questions, Including on Citizenship

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- As part of the 2026 Test changes, the Department of Commerce directed the Bureau to use the questionnaire from the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS is an ongoing survey fielded to a sample of households nationwide, with estimates released annually.
- The 2020 Census included nine questions (for a one-person household) that focused on demographic person and household characteristics. In contrast, the ACS questionnaire to be used for the internet self-response portion of the 2026 Test includes 77 questions that cover a range of additional topics including education, employment, housing, and citizenship (see table 1 on next slide). However, Bureau officials said that a subset of the questions—including those addressing citizenship—would be used for the in-field enumeration portion of the test.

## The New Test Questionnaire Asks Substantially More Questions, Including on Citizenship (Cont'd)

**Table 1: Comparison of Census Questionnaires**

	2020 Census Questionnaire	2026 Census Test Internet Self-Response Questionnaire (American Community Survey)	2026 Census Test In-Field Enumeration Questionnaire (Modified from American Community Survey)
<b>Number of questions (for one person in a household)</b>	9	77 <sup>a</sup>	12
<b>Categories of questions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demographics</li> <li>• Housing status</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demographics</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Previous residence</li> <li>• Citizenship and place of birth</li> <li>• Health insurance</li> <li>• Disabilities</li> <li>• Marital status</li> <li>• Children/grandchildren</li> <li>• Service in the U.S. Armed Forces</li> <li>• Disability rating</li> <li>• Employment</li> <li>• Sources of income</li> <li>• Housing status and details</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demographics</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Citizenship and place of birth</li> </ul>
<b>Estimated time per questionnaire (minutes)</b>	10	40	10

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Census Bureau documentation. | GAO-26-108848

<sup>a</sup>Respondents may be allowed to skip certain questions. For example, respondents who identified as never being married may skip the question on how many times they have been married.

## The New Test Questionnaire Asks Substantially More Questions, Including on Citizenship (Cont'd)

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- The Bureau is required to seek Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approval to collect information.<sup>5</sup>
- Bureau officials said that they decided to use the ACS questionnaire for the 2026 Test because OMB had already cleared the questionnaire for use. They added that using an OMB-cleared questionnaire allowed the Bureau to shorten the public comment period from 60 days to 30 days.<sup>6</sup>
- Officials found the 30-day time frame to be advantageous to completing the 2026 Test by September 30, 2026 (the end of fiscal year 2026).

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<sup>5</sup>The Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, as amended, requires agencies to submit to OMB a proposal and obtain a control number prior to a collection of information. Pub. L. No. 104-13, § 2 (1995), codified at 44 U.S.C. § 3507.

<sup>6</sup>Generally, agencies must provide a 60-day notice in the *Federal Register* or otherwise consult with the public concerning a proposed information collection to solicit public comments. 44 U.S.C. § 3506(c). Following the comment period, agencies must evaluate received public comments and revise the information collection if necessary. 44 U.S.C. § 3507.

## The New Test Questionnaire Asks Substantially More Questions, Including on Citizenship (Cont'd)

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- All but one decennial census between 1820 and 1950 included some form of citizenship question. The “long form” census also asked a subset of households about citizenship between 1970 and 2000. After the 2000 Census, the “long form” census was replaced by the ACS, which asks for citizenship of respondents and household members but is not used to produce population counts for purposes of apportionment.
- The Bureau previously explored collection of citizenship data through the census for 2020. However, as we have previously reported, it ultimately did not produce citizenship counts for 2020 Census apportionment and redistricting data products due to a 2019 Supreme Court ruling and executive action taken in early 2021.<sup>7</sup>
- Prior research and testing from the Bureau and others provide some insight on potential effects the questionnaire changes could have on response rates.

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<sup>7</sup>A 2019 executive order initiating an interagency effort to compile citizenship data for the 2020 Census was revoked by a January 2021 executive order. See Executive Order No. 13986, *Ensuring a Lawful and Accurate Enumeration and Apportionment Pursuant to the Decennial Census*, 86 Fed. Reg. 7015 (Jan. 25, 2021); and Executive Order 13960, 84 Fed. Reg. 33821 (July 16, 2019). For more information, see GAO, *2030 Census: Preparations Are Underway with Changes to How the Count Takes Place*, GAO-25-107886 (Washington, D.C.: July 24, 2025); and *2020 Census: Bureau Needs to Take Additional Actions to Address Key Risks to a Successful Enumeration*, GAO-19-685T (Washington, D.C.: July 24, 2019). New York v. U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 588 U.S. 752 (2019). Page 19

## The New Test Questionnaire Asks Substantially More Questions, Including on Citizenship (Cont'd)

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- The Bureau found in its 2019 Census Test that overall self-response rates were not significantly affected when the Bureau asked a citizenship question. However, the Bureau also found that certain population subgroups, such as areas with majority Hispanic populations and areas designated for bilingual materials, were statistically less likely to self-respond when a citizenship question was included. Research conducted in 2025 on the test results extended this finding to households with at least one non-citizen.
- Prior academic research suggests that longer survey questionnaires generally yield lower response rates and that length is an important element of survey design testing.

## The New Test Questionnaire Asks Substantially More Questions, Including on Citizenship (Cont'd)

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- For the 2030 Census, the Secretary of Commerce is required to transmit questionnaire topics to Congress by April 2027 and questions by April 2028.
- Because it is using the ACS questionnaire, which has different response rates historically than the census, Bureau officials said they do not plan to use the 2026 Test to model or predict response rates nor compare them to a shortened census form like the 2020 Census.

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## Commerce Approved English Language-Only Version of 2026 Census Test Questionnaire

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- Bureau officials said Commerce approved an English-only language version of the 2026 Test questionnaire as being sufficient to meet the test's primary objectives. It did not approve other languages, and the Bureau has no plans to hire bilingual enumerators specifically. In contrast, the 2020 Census questionnaire was offered in 12 non-English languages, and the Bureau previously called for the use of Spanish and Chinese language versions.
- Bureau officials said they did not have sufficient time after the announced February 2026 Test changes to adapt and test its new questionnaire in other languages and complete the 2026 Test on schedule.

## Commerce Approved English Language-Only Version of 2026 Census Test Questionnaire (Cont'd)

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- Commerce and Bureau officials told us that their new enterprise data collection systems are not scheduled to operate the ACS in multiple languages until 2027.
- As a result, to use those systems with the ACS questionnaire, the officials said they could only conduct the test in English. They also indicated that the need to test using the new systems took precedence over devoting resources to providing non-English options using legacy systems.
- Commerce also indicated the test design would be consistent with Executive Order 14224 (*Designating English as the Official Language of the United States*), issued in March 2025. The executive order revoked a prior executive order directing agencies to create a plan to improve accessibility to activities for individuals with limited English proficiency.
- Executive Order 14224, however, states that nothing in the order requires any change to the services provided by an agency. Further, it also does not require agencies to “amend, remove, or otherwise stop production of documents, ... prepared or offered in languages other than English.”

## Commerce Approved English Language-Only Version of 2026 Census Test Questionnaire (Cont'd)

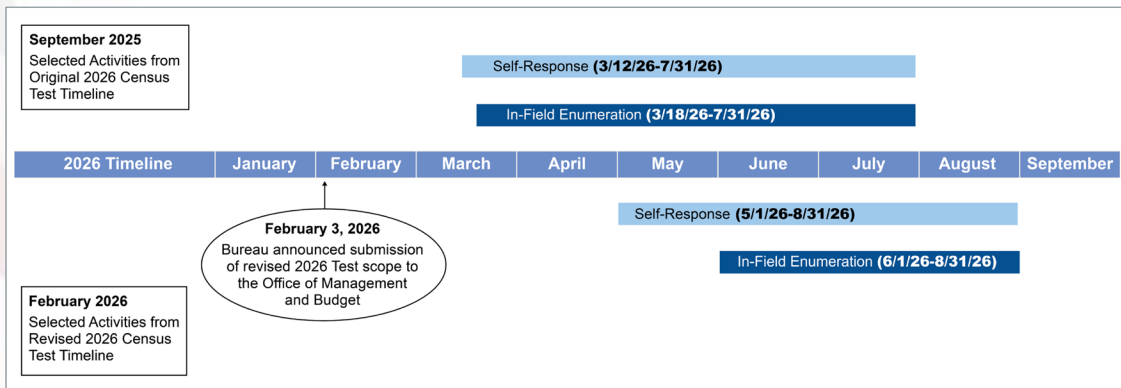
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- Bureau data show that in the 2020 Census, 2,860,350 responses were collected in non-English languages, of which 2,407,000 (84 percent) were in Spanish.
- The total number of non-English responses represents approximately 2.5 percent of all 2020 Census self-responses and represents approximately 53.9 percent of limited-English speaking households in the U.S. (i.e., those households in which no one 14 years old or over speaks only English or speaks English “very well”)

# The Bureau Delayed 2026 Census Test Operations at Remaining Sites

- Following the 2026 Test changes announced in February 2026, the Bureau developed a revised timeline.

**Figure 4: Census Bureau Delayed 2026 Test Self-Response by Close to 2 Months, and In-Field Enumeration by More than 2 Months**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Census Bureau information. | GAO-26-108848

## The Bureau Delayed 2026 Census Test Operations at Remaining Sites (Cont'd)

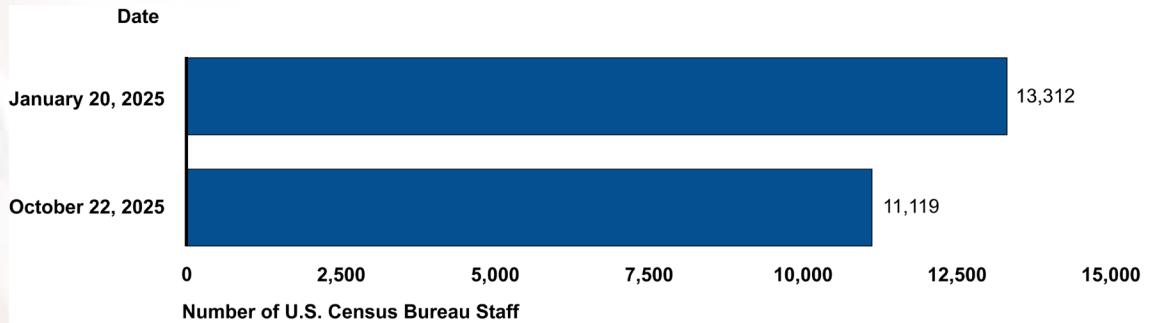
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- The Bureau's revised plan called for selecting enumerators in March 2026. As of March 2026, no plans or dates had been finalized for training the hired enumerators (or U.S. Postal Service staff).
- According to Bureau officials, completing the 2026 Test by September 30, 2026, allows the agency to align its activities so they are completed before the start of fiscal year 2027.

## **Objective 2: Emerging Challenges That Could Affect the Bureau's Approach for the 2030 Census**

## Total Bureau Staff Decreased About 16 Percent from January 20 through October 22, 2025

Figure 5: Total U.S. Census Bureau Staff, January 20, 2025–October 22, 2025



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Census Bureau personnel data. | GAO-26-108848

## Total Bureau Staff Decreased About 16 Percent from January 20 through October 22, 2025 (Cont'd)

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- According to the Bureau, employees who left the agency include those who
  - opted into Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA), Voluntary Separation Incentive Payments (VSIP), or both;
  - retired without participating in VERA or VSIP;
  - participated in the Deferred Resignation Program;
  - were terminated during their probationary period; or
  - left the agency for other reasons (e.g., regular attrition).

## **Bureau Is Taking Steps to Close Skills Gaps, but Has Not Yet Completed Its Workforce Assessment**

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- The Bureau identified a risk of an “inadequate knowledge base” due in part to skill-set shortages. Bureau officials told us that the agency faces skills shortages in several mission-critical areas due to a federal hiring freeze and elevated attrition.
- In addition, the Bureau found that staffing issues could be exacerbated by retirements.

## **Bureau Is Taking Steps to Close Skills Gaps, but Has Not Yet Completed Its Workforce Assessment (Cont'd)**

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- According to the Bureau's December 2025 Staffing Plan, the agency's largest skills gaps are concentrated in three mission-critical areas:
  - advanced data science, artificial intelligence, and machine-learning capabilities needed to support the agency's transition to a data-centric organization;
  - modern IT engineering and cybersecurity skills; and
  - enterprise program and operational integration expertise, especially in areas that require coordination across the Bureau such as field operations modernization.

## **Bureau Is Taking Steps to Close Skills Gaps, but Has Not Yet Completed Its Workforce Assessment (Cont'd)**

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- According to the Bureau's February 2026 program risk register for the 2030 Census, the Bureau could potentially lack the necessary staffing levels and staff with the appropriate competencies to satisfy 2030 Census program objectives.

## **Bureau Is Taking Steps to Close Skills Gaps, but Has Not Yet Completed Its Workforce Assessment (Cont'd)**

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- According to the Bureau's December 2025 Staffing Plan, the agency is pursuing a multi-pronged strategy to close the gaps, including
  - targeted hiring of specialized talent,
  - upskilling and professional development,
  - structured developmental assignments, and
  - use of mentoring and technical communities of practice to ensure knowledge transfer.

## **Bureau Is Taking Steps to Close Skills Gaps, but Has Not Yet Completed Its Workforce Assessment (Cont'd)**

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- In addition to identifying and taking steps to close known skills gaps, Bureau officials told us they have launched a workforce assessment to identify skills gaps across the agency workforce, which would include management of the 2030 Census. As part of this effort, the Bureau developed a project plan and schedule for the assessment. However, the Bureau has not yet completed this assessment nor reported action plans to address any skills gaps it may identify.
- A key principle for effective strategic workforce planning involves developing strategies that are tailored to address gaps in number, deployment, and alignment of human capital approaches for enabling and sustaining the contributions of all critical skills and competencies.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, GAO-04-39 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

## Bureau Is Taking Steps to Close Skills Gaps, but Has Not Yet Completed Its Workforce Assessment (Cont'd)

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- Given the statutory deadline for tabulating census results, the Bureau must have sufficient staff with the right skill sets in place to manage an effective enumeration.<sup>9</sup>
- However, as of February 2026, officials said the Bureau's workforce assessment is paused until the Bureau establishes roles for employees participating in the assessment.
- Bureau officials said the agency may need to wait to complete the assessment until it finishes an enterprise-wide reorganization, which is tentatively scheduled to be completed in fiscal year 2027.

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<sup>9</sup>Federal law requires the tabulation of total population by States to be completed within 9 months of the census in order to apportion Members among the states. 13 U.S.C. § 141(b).

## **Bureau Is Taking Steps to Close Skills Gaps, but Has Not Yet Completed Its Workforce Assessment (Cont'd)**

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- Waiting for an enterprise-wide reorganization may delay the agencywide workforce assessment until after the Bureau hires and trains staff for the 2030 Census. As a result, the Bureau risks having a workforce without sufficient staff or the right skill sets in place to manage an effective enumeration.
- Further, without better understanding its decennial workforce needs—either through the agencywide workforce assessment or other means—the Bureau’s current efforts to address skills gaps (such as through targeted hiring of specialized talent and upskilling and professional development) may not fully address the gaps.

## Conclusions

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- Adequate testing and research of proposed new design features will help the Bureau make evidence-based decisions for the 2030 Census. These efforts can strengthen the census's design and its ability to collect, process, and report information. This, in turn, can improve congressional and public confidence in the census.
- It is also important for the Bureau to determine workforce needs in time for the 2030 Census. These steps will better ensure that the Bureau has staff with the necessary expertise to carry out census activities.

## Recommendations for Executive Action

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- Recommendation 1: The Secretary of Commerce should instruct the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau to research and test the operational activities and design features removed from the 2026 Census Test prior to finalizing its design of the 2030 Census.
- Recommendation 2: The Secretary of Commerce should instruct the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau to determine decennial workforce needs so the Bureau may address skills gaps in time to effectively manage the 2030 Census.

## Agency Comments

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- Commerce provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.
- In its technical comments, Commerce agreed with both recommendations and indicated that discussions were ongoing regarding the future of small-scale testing in advance of the 2030 Census.



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## Appendix II: Status of Original 2026 Census Test Operational Activities for Revised Test

**Table 2: List of Original 2026 Census Test Operational Activities and Status for Revised Test**

Operational Activity	Activity Retained?	Activity Reduced?	Activity Removed?
<b>Enhancement Area: Build on Alternative Data Sources and Methods for Use Throughout the Decade (Continuous Data Collection and Aggregation)</b>			
In-Office Enumeration Model Input Data	○	○	●
In-Office Enumeration Model Accuracy	○	○	●
In-Office Enumeration Model Results	○	○	●
Person Characteristic Frame	●	○	○
Person Matching and Linkage	●	○	○
<b>Enhancement Area: Integrate Data Processing with Data Collection in Near Real Time</b>			
Centralized Address Control	●	○	○
Near Real-Time Processing	○	●	○
New Methods for Processing Addresses Without an Identifier	○	○	●
<b>Enhancement Area: Modernize Group Quarters Enumeration</b>			
Group Quarters (GQ) Internet Self-Response Option	○	○	●
<b>Enhancement Area: Optimize Operational Support Infrastructure</b>			
Centralized Administrative Support	●	○	○
Direct Shipment of Devices	●	○	○
Direct Shipment of Kits	●	○	○
Virtual Hiring and Training	●	○	○
<b>Enhancement Area: Simplify Data Collection</b>			
Combined Field Operations	○	○	●
In-Field Self-Response Using a Quick-Response Code	●	○	○
Multi-Operational Field Staff for GQ and Housing Unit Cases	○	○	●
<b>Other Test Topics</b>			
Ability to Integrate Multiple Operation Processing Segments in Near Real Time	○	●	○
Functionality of Near Real-Time Data Processing	○	●	○
United States Postal Service Pilot for In-Field Enumeration	●	○	○

● = Yes ○ = No

Source: 2026 Census Test planning documentation and U.S. Census Bureau officials. | GAO-26-108848

Note: We only included operational activities that the U.S. Census Bureau is testing for viability for the 2030 Census.

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