

The 2026 Census Test

December 11, 2025

The U.S. Census Bureau begins planning for an upcoming [Decennial Census of Population and Housing](#) more than a decade prior to the census year. Over the cycle of each decennial census, this process includes the following phases: early planning; design selection; development and integration; and peak production and close-out.

In the development and integration phase, the Census Bureau typically conducts field tests to assess various operational features of the upcoming decennial census. For example, during the 2020 decennial census cycle, the Census Bureau conducted [several small-scale tests beginning in 2013](#) and the major [2019 Census Test](#) which among other things addressed the effect of a proposed citizenship question on self-response rates. For the 2030 decennial census cycle, the Census Bureau has [ongoing small-scale testing](#) as well as a planned [2026 Census Test](#) and 2028 dress rehearsal.

2026 Census Test Initial Plan

The Census Bureau began releasing initial plans for the 2026 Census Test in the [Spring of 2024](#). The test sites as well as testing objectives were [announced in July 2024](#). Since this time, some directives for the 2026 Census Test have changed after the change in presidential administrations.

Test Goal and Objectives

The goals of the [2026 Census Test](#) are to “test operational viability of new and revamped systems and methods researched and developed for the census[;] to identify, document, and address potential challenges; and to evaluate the efficacy of proposed changes to ensure the overall quality of the 2030 Census design.”

The test aims to study [six operational areas](#):

- self-response;
- in-field enumeration;
- group quarters enumeration;
- communications, partnerships, and engagement;
- cross operational support and infrastructure; and,

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- near-real-time response processing.

Furthermore, the test is intended to focus on [hard-to-count and historically undercounted populations](#). The Census Bureau considers populations hard-to-count when traditional enumeration methods may not be sufficient to fully include them in the decennial census.

According to [post-enumeration surveys](#) conducted for the 1990 through 2020 decennial censuses, the Census Bureau has identified the following groups to have been persistently undercounted:

- the Black or African American population,
- the American Indian and Alaska Native population living on reservations,
- people who indicate that they are some other race than the categories offered,
- the Hispanic or Latino population,
- young children, ages 0-4,
- renters, and
- males, ages 18-29 and ages 30-49.

The [testing site locations](#) are also intended to enable the Census Bureau to implement and evaluate planned efforts to improve how these populations are enumerated.

Timeline

Under the initial timeline for the 2026 Census Test, activities were scheduled to begin during the Summer of 2025. The timeline was adjusted with activities beginning October 2025 as described in **Table 1**.

Table 1. 2026 Census Test Timeline

Time Period	Objective Description
October 6, 2025 – Summer 2026	Outreach is conducted to spread awareness about the test and encourage the public to respond.
October 6, 2025	Applications open for temporary census jobs in test locations.
March 2026	Public begins responding to the test online, by phone, or by mail.
April 1, 2026 (Census Day)	Public is asked to respond to the test based on where they live as of this date.
Summer 2026	2026 Census Test concludes.

Source: “2026 Census Test,” U.S. Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2030/planning-management/plan/research-and-testing/2026-census-test.html>.

Testing Sites

The Census Bureau [announced](#) plans to conduct the 2026 Census Test in six locations based on [various criteria](#) that support the objectives of the test. The testing sites are:

- Western Texas
- Tribal Lands within Arizona
- Colorado Springs, CO
- Western North Carolina
- Spartanburg, SC
- Huntsville, AL

These test sites have high percentages of historically undercounted populations with characteristics including

- historically low response rates;
- tribal areas;
- rural areas;
- limited internet or cell phone service;
- a high percentage of households that don't receive mail directly to their address;
- seasonally vacant housing;
- a high number of multiunit structures and/or hidden units in urban areas;
- significant housing growth; and,
- universities, correctional facilities, military housing, and other types of group quarters.

Selected Issues for Congress

As the planned date for the 2026 Census Test draws near, a number of issues may be relevant for Congress as it undertakes oversight and legislative responsibilities, including relating to appropriations.

Field Staff

An [audit](#) of the workforce hiring goals for the 2026 Census Test conducted by the Department of Commerce Office of Inspector General identified that the Census Bureau has not finalized a plan for recruiting and hiring field staff for the upcoming test. The Census Bureau was expected to finalize and approve their staffing plan and cost model for the 2026 Census Test by January 31, 2025, but did not do so because:

1. Data that was needed to prepare the staffing plan was received later than expected or had not been provided.
2. The Census Bureau did not have a procedure in place that documents requirements of the staffing plan and methodology to ensure workforce planning is completed in a consistent and timely manner according to Census Bureau management's expectations.

The report suggests that the Census Bureau should produce a finalized staffing plan to minimize the risk of recruiting delays which would affect field staffing operations for the test.

On October 6, 2025, the Census Bureau announced plans to hire [approximately 1,500 temporary field staff](#) across the six test sites. This effort was launched through a temporary hiring waiver granted by the Office of Personnel Management while a [federal hiring freeze](#) is in effect.

Lapse in Agency Funding

The Department of Commerce released an [orderly shutdown plan](#) on September 29, 2025 with FY2025 funds set to expire after September 30, 2025. In this plan, many Census Bureau operations ceased, but preparations for the 2026 Census Test continued using carryover balances.

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