

Audit of the Census Bureau's Progress in Meeting Workforce Hiring Goals for the 2026 Census Test

REPORT NO. OIG-25-030-A

SEPTEMBER 16, 2025

U.S. Department of Commerce
Office of Inspector General
Office of Audit and Evaluation





September 16, 2025

MEMORANDUM FOR: Dr. Ron S. Jarmin
Acting Director
U.S. Census Bureau

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Analee Striner-Brown".

FROM: Analee Striner-Brown
Acting Assistant Inspector General for Audit and Evaluation

SUBJECT: *Audit of the Census Bureau's Progress in Meeting Workforce
Hiring Goals for the 2026 Census Test*
Report No. OIG-25-030-A

Attached is the final report on our audit of the U.S. Census Bureau's plans and progress in meeting workforce hiring goals for the 2026 Census Test. We will post the report on [our website](#) per the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended (5 U.S.C. §§ 404, 420).

Within 60 calendar days, please provide an action plan addressing the report's recommendations, as required by Department Administrative Order 213-5.

We appreciate your staff's cooperation and professionalism during this audit. If you have any questions or concerns about the report, please contact me at 202-893-8759 or Director for Census Oversight Amy Jones at 724-343-6921.

Attachment





Introduction

In 2019, the U.S. Census Bureau began the early planning phase for the 2030 census. From 2021 to 2024, the bureau conducted its design selection phase. In 2025, the bureau began its development and integration phase, which will continue until 2029. During this phase, the bureau will conduct its first census test in 2026, which is a trial run of activities and operations to help prepare for the decennial census.

Recruitment of field staff for the 2026 Census Test will begin in October 2025, hiring will start in January 2026, and field operations will take place in spring 2026. This test will try out new or enhanced procedures, changes in organizational structure, and other changes suggested by lessons learned and research conducted after the 2020 census. On July 22, 2024, the bureau announced six sites for the test, which were selected with a focus on improving the count of historically undercounted and hard-to-count populations.

The bureau's Decennial Census Management Division (DCMD) is responsible for planning, implementation, and evaluation of the decennial census. DCMD works with the Field Division, which carries out the bureau's field data collection program for the decennial census and prepares field staffing estimates for field tests and decennial censuses.

Conducting the 2026 Census Test requires recruiting and hiring temporary employees, such as enumerators, census field supervisors, outreach assistants, and census trainers. For this census test, the Field Division planned a more thorough approach to preparing the staffing estimates than had been done in the past. For prior census tests with field data collection components, the Field Division used memorandums and workbooks with proposed staffing estimates as the staffing plan. According to Field Division management, it decided to develop a more detailed staffing plan for the 2026 Census Test because of proposed scope changes to field infrastructure and hiring that require robust staffing estimates.

► Objective

Our objective was to assess the Census Bureau's staffing plans and progress in meeting workforce hiring goals for the 2026 Census Test. Appendix 1 details our scope and methodology.

Finding and Recommendations

We found that the bureau has not finalized its staffing plan for recruiting and hiring field staff for the 2026 Census Test. Assessing the plan and progress in achieving hiring goals is not possible until the bureau finalizes the plan.

As of the end of our fieldwork, the bureau was less than 3 months away from recruiting field staff, and its incomplete staffing plan may lead to delays in recruiting and failure to meet workforce hiring goals. Finalizing the staffing plan in a timely manner will help reduce the risk of having insufficient staff to conduct the test.

► Workforce Planning for the 2026 Census Test Has Been Delayed

Federal internal control standards state that management should use quality information that is appropriate, accurate, and current to make informed decisions.¹ Workforce planning provides critical data analytics and tools to inform decisions about staffing and operations. It ensures that agencies can mitigate gaps between present and future workforce staffing needs. An essential element of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's workforce planning model is conducting a workforce analysis, which involves assessing risk and forecasting the workforce needed to assist with recruitment and hiring.²

We found that the bureau did not finalize its staffing plan for the 2026 Census Test. The bureau expected to finalize and approve the staffing plan and cost model by January 31, 2025, but did not because (1) data needed to prepare the plan was received later than expected or had not yet been provided and (2) the bureau did not have a procedure that documents staffing plan requirements and methodology to ensure workforce planning is done in a consistent and timely manner and according to management's expectations.

Workforce Planning Data Was Late or Unavailable

The bureau anticipated using a data-driven approach for creating the 2026 Census Test staffing plan. This meant the bureau needed historical demographic and cost information as well as estimated workloads and self-response rates.

According to the bureau, finishing the plan was delayed, in part, because bureau management decided to wait for updated American Community Survey³ data, which would

¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office. September 10, 2014. *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#), 60.

² U.S. Office of Personnel Management. November 2022. [Workforce Planning Guide](#), 4 and 13.

³ The American Community Survey is a nationwide survey designed to provide communities with reliable and timely social, economic, housing, and demographic data. It is conducted continuously throughout the year.

provide more accurate housing unit counts and other demographic data. The data was available in November 2024, but due to the analyses needed, the Field Division did not receive the data from the Decennial Statistical Studies Division (DSSD) until January 2025. Detailed site-level data from the master address file⁴ was available earlier, but the Field Division relied on DSSD's expertise regarding when to obtain the data.

The staffing plan was not finalized because the Field Division and DCMD were evaluating the impacts of budget uncertainty and recent administrative changes (such as the freeze on federal hiring) on the staffing plan. In addition, the Field Division and the Decennial Budget Office continued to discuss and refine cost data before finalizing the draft staffing plan. As of early May 2025, development of the cost model was in progress and field operation staff costs were not yet determined. For these reasons, the Field Division has not advanced the staffing plan and cost model to the next level of review.

Staffing Plan Process and Decisions Were Not Documented

The bureau did not have a specific strategic plan for the 2026 Census Test, including objectives for workforce planning. Additionally, prior to starting the staffing plan process, the bureau did not document the necessary responsibilities, expectations, and timelines. Instead, the bureau relied on decisions made at meetings and had estimated dates for activities to finish the staffing plan.⁵ Specifically, the Field Division and DCMD discussed and agreed on staffing plan assumptions and requirements during meetings. However, the meeting notes we reviewed did not contain details such as the framework, expectations, and timelines for the Field Division to deliver the staffing plan to DCMD.

Additionally, the bureau relied on a schedule that includes dates for staffing plan activities. However, the DCMD's schedule management plan policy discourages hard dates that prevent activities being moved. Therefore, the dates outlined in the schedule were suggested rather than firm deadlines. As such, when challenges arose causing delays in completing earlier activities, the result was a delay in receipt of data needed to complete the staffing plan. Because the Field Division relies on data to develop its staffing plan, it is imperative that it receive data in a timely manner to avoid schedule delays.

When we asked Field Division management why there was no written procedure, they told us that each census test and decennial census is different—for example, the design,

⁴ The Master Address File/Topologically Integrated Geographic Encoding and Referencing System is a geospatial database that integrates address information with geographic information to automate the mapping and related geographic activities required to support the bureau's census and survey programs.

⁵ DCMD uses a program schedule with over 100 different projects that captures all scope and work associated with the 2030 census. The schedule includes baseline and actual start and finish dates for activities. DCMD added recruiting and field operation staffing and cost model activities to its schedule in December 2023.

assumptions, and testing approaches change. As a result, they said, a standard operating procedure was not useful.

Because creating a staffing plan is a collaborative process across multiple bureau divisions, a key advantage of a documented process for developing a staffing plan is that it clearly defines what is to be achieved, by whom and how, and the timeframes involved, as well as providing clarity on objectives at all levels.⁶ In this case, having a process that describes the roles and responsibilities for all contributing parties and the tasks for developing a staffing plan would guide bureau staff in completing the work in reasonable timeframes. Additionally, for staff who report to various division chiefs, it would set common expectations such as what data are needed, when data are needed, and when to prepare and finalize the staffing plan for the 2028 Dress Rehearsal and 2030 census. Further, a documented process could describe circumstances when revising staffing plan estimates is appropriate and establish oversight responsibility for the process to ensure timely completion of the staffing plan.

► **Why Workforce Planning Matters**

Finalizing the workforce staffing plan before the upcoming census test is critical because it increases the likelihood of reaching workforce hiring goals in time for recruiting in October 2025 and hiring in January 2026. With the impacts to staffing from recent administrative changes, having a finalized staffing plan is even more critical, to minimize the risk of recruiting delays that would affect field staffing operations for the 2026 Census Test.

Additionally, both the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) and our Office of Inspector General (OIG) have reported recruiting and hiring challenges at the bureau.⁷ Specifically, GAO reported that the bureau repeatedly fell short of its recruiting goals for field staff in the lead-up to the 2020 census operations. OIG reported that shortfalls in enumerator hiring occurred during the bureau's nonresponse follow-up operation in August 2020. Developing a staffing plan with strategies that address the identified challenges is essential to prevent delays in onboarding field staff for the upcoming census test.

Reliable staffing estimates are needed for the 2026 Census Test to ensure the bureau has enough field staff to test the changes it plans to incorporate in operational planning for the

⁶ *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, 35 and 45.

⁷ (1) U.S. Government Accountability Office. February 12, 2020. *2020 Census: Initial Enumeration Underway but Readiness for Upcoming Operations Is Mixed*, [GAO-20-368R](#); (2) Commerce OIG. August 18, 2020. *2020 Census Alert: The Census Bureau Faces Challenges in Accelerating Hiring and Minimizing Attrition Rates for Abbreviated 2020 Census Field Operations*, [OIG-20-041-M](#).

2030 census. Not having enough field staff creates the risk that bureau management will lack quality data needed for decision-making and planning ahead of the 2030 census.

Recommendations

We recommend that the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau:

1. Complete and implement the 2026 Census Test staffing plan before recruitment begins to increase the likelihood of meeting the test's field staff needs.
2. Establish and implement oversight responsibilities to ensure staffing plan activities are completed by established due dates.
3. Develop and implement a process that includes clearly defined staffing plan responsibilities and expectations and ensures decisions made are timely, documented, and retained for future decennial census planning.
4. Establish firm due dates for all staffing plan activities, including all required data received from other divisions to ensure timely completion of the staffing plan.

Summary of the Bureau's Response and OIG Comments

The bureau reviewed a draft version of this report and responded to our finding and recommendations. In its response (received August 13, 2025), the bureau concurred with our recommendations and described actions it has taken or plans to take to address them. The bureau's complete response is included in this report as appendix 2. The bureau also provided technical comments on the draft report. We considered those comments and revised the report where appropriate.

In addition, below we address two notable comments.

Finding 1: The bureau did not finalize its staffing plan for the 2026 Census Test. Specifically, the bureau did not finalize its staffing plan because workforce planning data was unavailable at original forecasted dates.

Bureau Response: "The data requested was more detailed than data previously provisioned for similar efforts. In order to provide the characteristics and geographic level of data required and to meet the need for recent geographic data, experts determined a delivery date that was later than the original schedule estimated. These data ultimately met staffing plan requirements. We are confident that these delays did not negatively

impact the planning and preparation activities needed to prepare for the 2026 Census Test.”

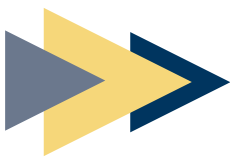
OIG Comment: We appreciate the bureau’s efforts to continuously improve the staffing plan development process. However, as outlined in this report, the staffing plan has not been finalized for implementation and therefore we are unable to substantiate its claim that the data was in fact appropriate and met requirements. Further, as of August 2025, the plan was still not finalized. With recruitment starting soon, it is imperative that the bureau finalize its plan to allow for sufficient time to prepare for timely recruitment operations.

Draft Recommendation 1: Develop and implement the 2026 Census Test staffing plan before recruitment begins to increase the likelihood of meeting the test’s field staff needs.

Bureau Response: “The staffing plan was drafted and provided to auditors. The Census Bureau accepts this recommendation, to the extent that the staffing plan needs to be finalized and implemented.”

OIG Comment: The bureau provided us a draft staffing plan; however, as discussed in the body of the report, several staffing schedule activities, such as adjudicating costs with the Decennial Budget Office and creating a detailed field operation staffing plan and cost model, were incomplete during our fieldwork. As a result, additional work is required to finalize and implement the completed staffing plan for the 2026 Census Test. The staffing plan is still in draft—and an incomplete staffing plan could lead to delays in recruiting and failure to meet workforce hiring goals for the 2026 Census Test. We made a slight revision in the wording of recommendation 1 for clarification.

We are pleased that the bureau concurs with our recommendations. We look forward to receiving the bureau’s action plan, which will provide details on its corrective actions.



Appendix 1. Scope and Methodology

Our objective was to assess the Census Bureau's staffing plans and progress in meeting workforce hiring goals for the 2026 Census Test. Given that the bureau's workforce staffing plan is incomplete and the current draft is subject to change, assessing the plan and progress in achieving hiring goals was not possible. Before issuing this report, we:

- Reviewed the following regulations and guidance:
 - 5 C.F.R. § 410.201, Responsibilities of the head of an agency
 - 5 C.F.R. Part 250, Subpart B: Strategic Human Capital Management
 - Schedule A authorities used to temporarily fill bureau positions, including 5 C.F.R. §§ 213.3102 and 213.3114
 - U.S. Office of Management and Budget, *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys*, September 2006
 - U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Workforce Planning Guide*, November 2022
 - U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO-14-704G, September 2014
- Interviewed bureau personnel to understand staffing plan development and status, including:
 - DCMD and Field Division management and staff, including the division chiefs, deputy division chiefs, assistant division chiefs, branch chiefs, and other bureau personnel
 - DSSD chief and a branch chief
 - Assistant Director for Decennial Census Programs
 - Chief of the Decennial Budget Office
- Gained an understanding of:
 - The approach and data the bureau used to develop recruiting goals and staffing targets for the 2026 Census Test
 - The bureau's schedule management processes and efforts to monitor and control program costs, schedules, and requirements

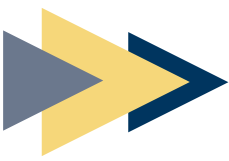
We gained an understanding of the internal control processes that were significant to our objective by interviewing bureau personnel and reviewing documentation for evidence that

internal control activities had been performed. We reported internal control weaknesses in the “Finding and Recommendations” section of this report.

We did not rely on computer-processed data to support our finding, conclusions, and recommendations. Instead, we reviewed documentation submitted by the bureau; therefore, we did not test the reliability of the bureau’s information technology systems.

We conducted our audit from February through July 2025 under the authority of the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended (5 U.S.C. §§ 401-24), and Department Organization Order 10-13, as amended October 21, 2020.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence that provides a reasonable basis for our finding and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our finding and conclusions based on our audit objective.



Appendix 2. Bureau's Response

The bureau's response to our draft report begins on the next page.



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

August 13, 2025

MEMORANDUM FOR: Analee Striner-Brown
Acting Assistant Inspector General for
Audit and Evaluation
Office of the Inspector General

From: Dr. Ron S. Jarmin
Acting Director
U.S. Census Bureau

Subject: U.S. Census Bureau's Response to the Office of the Inspector
General's Draft Report: "*Audit of the Census Bureau's
Progress in Meeting Workforce Hiring Goals for the 2026
Census Test*"

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Office of Inspector General's draft report titled, "*Audit of the Census Bureau's Progress in Meeting Workforce Hiring Goals for the 2026 Census Test*" dated July 22, 2025. The U.S. Census Bureau respectfully submits the attached comments.

Attachment

**U.S. Census Bureau Comments on the Office of Inspector General’s Draft Report:
“Audit of the Census Bureau’s Progress in Meeting Workforce Hiring Goals for the 2026
Census Test”
August 2025**

General Comments:

The U.S. Census Bureau appreciates the opportunity to comment on this draft report. We appreciate the acknowledgement that for the 2026 Census Test, the Field Division planned a more thorough approach to preparing the staffing estimates than had been done in the past. Transitioning to this new approach has required updates to our internal processes that we plan to refine as we amend this approach for the future.

Finding 1: The bureau did not finalize its staffing plan for the 2026 Census Test. Specifically, the bureau did not finalize its staffing plan because:

A. Workforce planning data was unavailable at original forecasted dates.

The data requested was more detailed than data previously provisioned for similar efforts. In order to provide the characteristics and geographic level of data required and to meet the need for recent geographic data, experts determined a delivery date that was later than the original schedule estimated. These data ultimately met staffing plan requirements. We are confident that these delays did not negatively impact the planning and preparation activities needed to prepare for the 2026 Census Test.

B. Process for developing the staffing plan and decisions made were not documented.

As stated above, this approach was a new method of preparing the staffing estimates. Developing the methodology required an iterative approach as staff adapted existing formulae to the new operational parameters and compared the output to historical data. Management was continually briefed on progress and the resulting draft estimates to ensure alignment with expectations. The draft staffing plan documented the work and methodology - albeit as steps were completed - so that it could be replicated or modified as appropriate based on the recruiting and staffing outcomes of the 2026 Census Test.

The staffing estimates, as well as the associated recruiting, hiring and training estimates, are required by many subject matter experts to develop appropriately sized system support, purchase devices and materials, plan device and material distribution, and other preparation activities. The draft staffing plan was shared with a large group of internal subject matter experts during the development phase to both provide them with planning inputs and to ensure authors could address expert feedback on the methodology itself.

Additionally, beginning January 20, 2025, a freeze was ordered on the hiring of Federal civilian employees, to be applied throughout the executive branch. As part of this freeze, no Federal civilian position that was vacant at noon on January 20, 2025, may be filled, and no new position

may be created except as otherwise provided for in the memorandum or other applicable law. Authors paused the planned review and approval steps while the Census Bureau determined potential impacts of the freeze on 2026 Census Test staffing and awaited guidance on the hiring waiver consideration process.

Recommendation 1: Develop and implement the 2026 Census Test staffing plan before recruitment begins to increase the likelihood of meeting the test’s field staff needs.

The staffing plan was drafted and provided to auditors. The Census Bureau accepts this recommendation, to the extent that the staffing plan needs to be finalized and implemented. We agree that finalizing the plan is critical before recruiting and hiring begins. The draft staffing plan developed for the 2026 Census Test was shared with internal subject matter experts to allow for execution of critical planning and preparation activities. Now that there is more clarity on the steps to request a hiring waiver and the scope of the 2026 Census Test, we will collaborate to finalize and baseline the draft temporary staffing plan before 2026 Census Test recruiting begins (tentatively October 1, 2025).

Recommendation 2: Establish and implement oversight responsibilities to ensure staffing plan activities are completed by established due dates.

The Census Bureau accepts this recommendation. The schedule includes the activities needed to develop the staffing plan and who is responsible for completing them, as well as durations and deadlines for each activity. These schedule activities have been refined for future schedules based on lessons learned gathered during this process. We have also refined a business process model that further details the sequence of activities and responsible parties, which will be used and adjusted as needed for 2028 Dress Rehearsal and 2030 Census planning. In addition to these project-level guidance documents, the final version of the staffing plan will be circulated through the Field and Decennial directorate governance processes for approval, and these approvals will be documented within the baselined plan.

Recommendation 3: Develop and implement a process that includes clearly defined staffing plan responsibilities and expectations and ensures decisions made are timely, documented, and retained for future decennial census planning.

The Census Bureau accepts this recommendation. A business process model has been refined to include further details about the sequence of staffing plan activities and responsible parties. Subject matter experts will continue to provide input that clarifies the process for staff at all levels and collaborate to make sure this process is baselined in a timely manner.

Recommendation 4: Establish firm due dates for all staffing plan activities, including all required data received from other divisions to ensure timely completion of the staffing plan.

The Census Bureau accepts this recommendation. The integrated schedule includes the activities needed to develop the staffing plan, and who is responsible for completing them, as well as durations and deadlines. These schedule activities have also been refined for future schedules.

REPORT

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