



Evaluation of the Methodology the Census Bureau Used to Select the Test Sites for the 2026 Census Test

Evaluation Report OIG-26-012-I

March 16, 2026

➤ **What We Evaluated** | Our objective was to assess the Census Bureau’s methodology used to select the test sites for the 2026 Census Test.

➤ **Why This Matters** | The next decennial census of U.S. residents will take place in 2030. The decennial is a massive operation, requiring years of planning and testing to ensure the efficiency of its operations and the accuracy of the headcount. Deficiencies in planning or testing could affect the integrity, efficiency, and effectiveness of decennial operations.

The 2026 Census Test is the bureau’s next major test, intended to evaluate new and enhanced processes and methods to improve the design of the 2030 census. The test will center on a hypothetical Census Day of April 1, 2026, with in-field operations carried out at multiple sites. Each site was selected to provide distinct demographic, geographic, and logistical conditions to help the bureau refine its operations and inform key design decisions for 2030. Bureau officials stated that they used an innovative data-driven process—one that it had never used before—to select the test sites.

➤ **What We Found** | The bureau could not provide supporting documentation of the judgments, methodologies, and assumptions used to plan, execute, and provide oversight of the test site selection process. As a result, we could not verify how the bureau selected the test sites. The bureau did not:

- Have a formal plan outlining site selection responsibilities and methodologies
- Maintain formal documentation to support decisions and methodologies
- Document evidence of reviews, verification of work, or approvals

Without establishing a formal, documented methodology as a solid foundation, as specified by its own statistical quality standards, the bureau risks inefficiencies or suboptimal site selections that could compromise overall readiness for the 2030 census and beyond.

➤ **What We Recommend** | We made two recommendations to the bureau to strengthen its processes for reviewing and documenting site selections for future census tests. The bureau concurred with our recommendations and is working to implement them.