

Oversight Issues Observed During the 2026 Census Test

REPORT NO. OIG-26-031-I

SEPTEMBER 24, 2026

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





September 24, 2026

MEMORANDUM FOR: George M. Cook
Chief of Staff to the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs,
performing the functions of the Director
U.S. Census Bureau


FROM: Arthur L. Scott Jr.
Assistant Inspector General for Audit and Evaluation

SUBJECT: *Oversight Issues Observed During the 2026 Census Test*
Report No. OIG-26-031-I

Attached is the final management alert describing the oversight issues identified during our initial site observations of the 2026 Census Test. This management alert results from ongoing work on [our evaluation](#) of the effectiveness of the 2026 Census Test in validating operational, technological, and methodological innovations designed to enhance cost efficiency, data quality, and response rates for the 2030 census. We will post the management alert on [our website](#) per the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended (5 U.S.C. §§ 404, 420).

Please note that we are not providing recommendations or requesting an action plan. However, any action the U.S. Census Bureau takes as a result of this alert will inform our overall report at the conclusion of this evaluation.

We appreciate your staff's cooperation and professionalism.

Attachment





Introduction

The mission of the 2030 Census Program is to determine where everyone in the nation lives, count the people at those locations, and share the results with the President, the states, and the public. On May 1, 2026, the U.S. Census Bureau began its 2026 Census Test. As part of the test, the bureau planned to conduct in-field enumeration (IFE) operations. On June 1, 2026, the bureau began its 2026 Census Test IFE activities in Huntsville, Alabama, and Spartanburg, South Carolina. This operation concluded on August 31, 2026.¹

The bureau's test was not a complete enumeration of the population, but its results will provide evidence for assessing enhancements and innovations to field infrastructure, staffing, and training. In addition, the bureau will evaluate the operational feasibility and cost of using U.S. Postal Service (USPS) mail carriers to enumerate while working mail delivery routes in Spartanburg, South Carolina (Flight A), and as temporary, part-time bureau employees while not carrying out postal duties in Huntsville, Alabama (Flight B). The bureau also hired enumerators, census field supervisors (CFSs), and census field managers (CFMs) at both locations.

Before the start of the test, the bureau and USPS signed an interagency agreement (IAA) to govern the USPS pilot feasibility study. The IAA outlines responsibilities for both CFSs and a USPS liaison to monitor USPS mail carriers and ensure that the test was conducted in accordance with the terms of the IAA and federal law.²

In this test, both USPS and bureau enumerators visited housing units to obtain demographic information from households that did not complete the test questionnaire online. The enumerators used bureau-provided mobile phones to record household information in an application called MOJO Casey that is connected to the bureau's operational control system. This application allows enumerators to manage aspects of their work, such as identifying addresses to visit, accessing maps to locate addresses, recording responses to the questionnaire during in-person interviews, and documenting work availability, time worked, and mileage expenses.

On May 7, 2026, we initiated an evaluation of the effectiveness of the 2026 Census Test in validating operational, technological, and methodological innovations designed to enhance cost efficiency, data quality, and response rates for the 2030 census. During site observations in June 2026, USPS denied us access to conduct direct observations of Flight

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. [Census Takers to Start Visiting Households for 2026 Census Test](#). Accessed July 20, 2026.

² See 13 U.S.C. § 9, which protects the confidentiality of respondent data collected by the bureau.

A USPS mail carriers. On August 4, 2026, USPS granted us access, along with the U.S. Government Accountability Office, to conduct joint observations of Flight A USPS mail carriers on August 11-12, 2026. This management alert only describes the oversight issues we identified regarding Flight A USPS mail carriers during our June site visit. These issues impact the 2026 Census Test. Appendix 1 details the scope and methodology we used to carry out our review of oversight.

Observations

During our site observation from June 22-25, 2026, in Spartanburg, South Carolina, we interviewed four CFSs and one CFM in addition to observing bureau-hired enumerators.³ Through those interviews, we learned that CFSs could not perform adequate oversight of the 20 Flight A USPS mail carriers performing enumeration activities due to lack of access to the mail carriers. Thus, they did not have assurance that USPS mail carriers were following enumeration procedures.

The IAA states that CFSs will work in conjunction with a designated USPS liaison to assign cases and manage and track data collection. In addition, USPS will determine the availability of USPS mail carriers to enumerate cases, and CFSs will monitor the enumeration work of Flight A USPS mail carriers and ensure that the test was conducted in accordance with requirements.⁴ However, the IAA does not clearly describe how coordination will work between CFSs and Flight A USPS mail carriers.

At the time of our initial observations,⁵ CFSs reported inadequate communication with Flight A USPS mail carriers, lack of access to work schedules for availability for the week and how much time carriers spent attempting IFE in a day, and an inability to review case notes to monitor data quality collected by Flight A USPS mail carriers. CFSs reported that their only direct oversight of Flight A USPS mail carriers consisted of accompanying them to observe enumerations as part of their training during field exercises.

Oversight of Flight A USPS mail carriers differed from bureau-hired Flight B and census enumerators in both Spartanburg, South Carolina, and Huntsville, Alabama. Specifically, CFSs overseeing bureau-hired enumerators could identify and correct issues while attempting IFE and check timesheets for hours worked and work availability. In addition, CFSs could directly communicate with bureau-hired enumerators to address concerns, assign cases if needed, provide guidance on difficult cases, and give feedback on

³ We previously carried out observations of Flight B bureau-hired enumerators the week of June 15, 2026, in Huntsville, Alabama.

⁴ The IAA and all applicable legal requirements.

⁵ Observations were conducted during the third and fourth weeks of testing.

performance. However, CFSs overseeing Flight A USPS mail carriers said they did not know the number of hours worked, had limited communication with and access to carriers, and could not view case notes.

Conclusion

Limited access to Flight A mail carriers and IFE activities during the first month of the 2026 Census Test prevented the bureau from identifying and addressing performance issues and ensuring proper case completion. An objective assessment of the use of USPS mail carriers during this test is critical to informing the decision on whether to use them for the 2030 census enumeration. Without proper oversight, the bureau may not be able to correct issues early in the operation and objectively evaluate this pilot feasibility study.

This alert is based on our initial site visit and does not include recommendations. OIG conducted additional observations during the week of August 10, 2026. Our analysis from those observations will inform the final report, including recommendations, that we will issue at the conclusion of our evaluation.

Summary of the Bureau's Response

On August 31, 2026, we issued a draft management alert to the bureau. On September 9, 2026, in response to the draft management alert, the bureau provided technical comments. We considered these comments and revised the management alert where appropriate.



Appendix 1. Scope and Methodology

Our evaluation objective was to evaluate the effectiveness of the 2026 Census Test in validating operational, technological, and methodological innovations designed to enhance cost efficiency, data quality, and response rates for the 2030 census. To help address this objective, we carried out in-person observations of bureau-hired enumerators and interviewed local Census Bureau managers during our on-site visits from June 15-25, 2026, to gain an understanding of how IFE procedures were carried out. Observations in the alert were briefed to bureau officials on August 4, 2026. Further, we conducted additional site visits during the week of August 10, 2026.

To carry out our assessment, we:

- Reviewed training material and completed online bureau-required 2026 Census Test enumerator and supervisor trainings.
- Reviewed 2026 Census Test operational and evaluation plans.
- Reviewed the 2026 Census Test interagency agreement between the bureau and USPS.
- Conducted observations of six bureau-hired enumerators in Huntsville, Alabama, and nine enumerators in Spartanburg, South Carolina.
- Interviewed three CFSs and one CFM in Huntsville, Alabama, and four CFSs and one CFM in Spartanburg, South Carolina.
- Interviewed decennial census management and field division managers.

In addition, we assessed internal controls related to IFE operational procedures to gain an understanding of them. This alert identifies a specific weakness that we have identified to date.

We did not rely on computer-processed data; instead, we relied on information gathered during our in-person observations to support our observations and conclusions. Consequently, we did not perform data reliability procedures on that data.

This management alert is based on our work conducted in June 2026 under the authority of the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended (5 U.S.C. §§ 401-424), and Department Organization Order 10-13, as amended October 21, 2020. We conducted observations and interviews in Huntsville and Spartanburg, and interviews with bureau staff at Census headquarters in Suitland, Maryland, and the regional census center in Atlanta, Georgia.

We conducted this part of the evaluation in accordance with *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation* (December 2020) issued by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency.

REPORT

FRAUD & WASTE ABUSE



HOTLINE



Department of Commerce

Office of Inspector General Hotline

www.oig.doc.gov | 800-424-5197