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2024 Census Test: Design and methodology of the content test

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2024 Census Test: Design and methodology of the content test

1. Introduction

Preparing for each census requires several stages of consultation, testing and test data evaluation before recommended questionnaire content for the upcoming census can be proposed to the Cabinet of Canada for approval. These steps include

- a content consultation with stakeholders and census data users
- qualitative testing of proposed modifications and additions to the content
- quantitative testing to evaluate content and respondent behaviour on a larger scale
- an evaluation of the test results guided by the content determination framework.

Statistics Canada conducted its content consultation process¹ for the 2026 Census from fall 2022 to spring 2023 using an online questionnaire and one-on-one discussions with key stakeholders. All Canadians were welcome to participate in the online consultation. More than 2,900 respondents participated, a greater number than in the last consultation cycle, demonstrating a high level of interest in helping to shape an important source of demographic and social information for decision making and analysis. Detailed responses were received from organizations and individuals representing federal, provincial, territorial and local government departments; First Nations people, Métis and Inuit; the general public; academia; special interest groups; and the private sector.

Factors considered when developing content, as detailed in the Census Program's content determination framework, include legislative requirements for information, program and policy needs, the burden on respondents of answering the questions, privacy concerns, input from consultations and testing, data quality, costs and operational considerations, historical comparability, and the availability of alternative data sources.

Based on the findings from consultations and discussions, Statistics Canada considered modifications to the questions asked in the census. In 2023, various versions of the modified questions were tested qualitatively through cognitive one-on-one interviews, conducted across Canada in both official languages.

Based on the results of qualitative testing, the census questionnaires were further revised and tested quantitatively during the 2024 Census Test, which evaluated changes to the wording and flow of some of the questions, as well as the potential addition of new questions. This test also incorporated the evaluation of new communications material and variations to further improve collection methods, which are not discussed in this document. Testing ensures that the Census of Population provides high-quality data to support a wide variety of programs and services in communities across the country.

After statistically analyzing the results of the 2024 Census Test and considering costs, operational factors and safeguards against quality loss, Statistics Canada made recommendations to the government, with the final content of the 2026 Census questionnaire being determined by Cabinet.

Upon Cabinet's determination on the 2026 Census content, the Governor in Council reviews the questions and issues an order in council to prescribe the questions to be asked under Section 19 or 20 of the *Statistics Act*. Within 30 days of the signing of the order in council, the content of the census is published in the *Canada Gazette*.

1. For more information on the content consultation, please refer to [2026 Census of Population Content Consultation Results: What we heard from Canadians](#).



2. 2024 Census Test: Quantitative content testing

The 2024 Census Test was made up of two major components: a content test to evaluate new and modified questions, and a field operations test to assess new and modified collection procedures and technologies for use in data collection. This report presents the details of the content test component only.

To ensure that the census measures important trends in society, multiple changes in content were proposed for the 2026 Census. The content test component was conducted in two phases to assess different sets of content changes. The first sought to evaluate a variety of modifications to existing content areas and the addition of questions on general health, homelessness and second address, whereas the second phase evaluated the addition of a question about sexual orientation. As the design and methodology (and content) of each phase of the 2024 Census Test differed, their results are presented here separately.

The content test was scientifically designed and based on an experimental design to statistically test differences in content. The following sections describe the design of the content test.

3. Data collection

Collection for the first phase of the mandatory content test took place from April 8 to June 28, 2024; Census Test Day was May 14, 2024. Collection included responses by Internet, responses by paper, field enumeration, telephone interviews, the Census Help Line and non-response follow-up.

Collection for the second phase of the mandatory content test took place from September 3 to October 13, 2024; the reference date was September 10, 2024. Collection for this phase included responses by Internet, as well as telephone interviews and non-response follow-up; field enumeration and responses by paper were not available.

Data were collected directly from survey respondents and, in some cases, from administrative data sources already held by Statistics Canada. To enhance the data from this survey and to reduce response burden, Statistics Canada combines the information collected by the Census of Population with administrative data, such as immigration records and personal income tax and benefit data. For the 2024 Census Test, to evaluate the quality and relevance of new or modified questions, Statistics Canada combined test data with these administrative records or with data from other surveys or administrative sources.

4. Target population and sampling

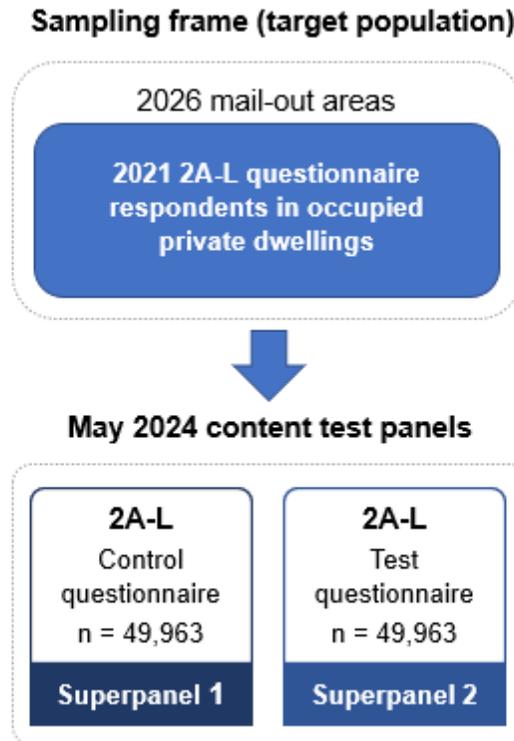
Taking into account the operational constraints of the test, the sample for the first phase of the content test in May 2024 was selected from private dwellings located in mail-out areas in the 10 provinces, excluding First Nations reserves and settlements. Mail-out areas are areas where Statistics Canada can mail census material, covering more than 90% of dwellings, and consist of areas with entirely mailable addresses (86% of dwellings), as well as mail-out with drop-off (MODO) areas, where all dwellings have addresses, the majority of which are mailable. In MODO areas, only dwellings that were mailable (4% of dwellings) were included in the sample. Collective dwellings were excluded from this test. Only households in private dwellings that were selected for and responded to the long-form questionnaire (2A-L) in 2021 were invited to respond to the 2024 Census Test to maximize comparability between 2021 and 2024 responses among matched respondents. The target population, collection method and sample design were defined to obtain enough responses to ensure that all the proposed changes were tested properly. In fact, the goal was to obtain an adequate level of accuracy during data analysis to detect statistically significant differences for any of the changes to content.

To meet all the test objectives and quantitatively assess the impact of various modifications to census content, two panels of respondents were needed, and each panel received different versions of the 2A-L questionnaire. The control version of the questionnaire contained the same questions as the 2021 Census, whereas the test version included modifications to existing content areas, as well as the addition of questions on general health, homelessness and second address. Given the design of the 2A-L questionnaire, these panels were sufficient to test both the short-form questionnaire and the long-form questionnaire. This was possible because the questions from the short-form questionnaire are asked in the same format at the beginning of the long-form questionnaire.



Respondents were also given the option to respond by completing a paper questionnaire (PQ), but the sample sizes were determined to simply ensure enough overall responses would be received. These panels were also used to test the 2026 Census communication strategy, another objective of the 2024 Census Test. Figure 4.1 illustrates the design of the test held in May 2024.

Figure 4.1
Design of the May 2024 content test



Source: Statistics Canada, 2024 Census Test (May).

Many of the content changes for the 2024 Census Test applied to very specific, often small, subpopulations. Therefore, the sampling strategy used a stratified simple random sample, where the strata grouped specific subpopulations of interest for the test. The final sampling strategy was chosen after conducting simulations incorporating different groups of subpopulations to see which would work well for all stakeholders. The sampling strategy was finalized based on simulations. The first step was to determine the stratification to ensure proper representation of key subpopulations in the sampled panels. Five strata were used: Indigenous people, Veterans and current members of the armed forces (military), Indigenous people who are in the armed forces, people who are more likely to be experiencing hidden homelessness, and the remainder of the population. This allowed for more households to be sampled to test questions specific to these subpopulations, since they are relatively rare in the Canadian population.



The strata that were created took into account different regions (provinces or groups of provinces) and the language of response (English or French). The number of households expected to answer in each official language was controlled so that an adequate number of respondents would be selected to test both the English questionnaire and the French questionnaire.

The final sample selected for the first phase of the content test in May 2024 consisted of 99,926 households across all 10 Canadian provinces.^{2,3}

In September 2024, Statistics Canada conducted a second phase of the content test to evaluate the addition of new content, in preparation for the 2026 Census of Population. A sample of approximately 24,000 private dwellings was selected in MODO areas across the 10 provinces, excluding First Nations reserves and settlements, to participate in this second phase of the mandatory census test.

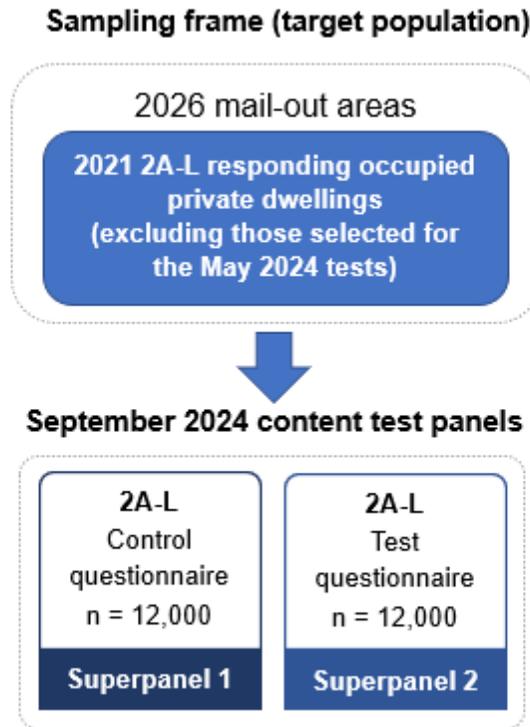
The sampling strategy also employed a stratified simple random sample. The subpopulation of interest was the dwellings where respondents indicated, in the 2021 Census, that Person 1 and Person 2 formed a same-sex couple, a same-gender couple or a couple in which one of the members was a transgender person. The strata were created by considering whether a dwelling was part of this subpopulation, the different regions (provinces or groups of provinces), the type of region (rural or urban) and the language of response (English or French). The number of dwellings expected to respond in each official language was controlled to ensure that an adequate number of respondents would be selected to test both the English questionnaire and the French questionnaire.

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2. The field operations test component of the 2024 Census Test separately sampled around 89,000 households.
 3. The 2024 Census Test also introduced a new participation method for some selected households as part of research and development on the modernization of the Census Program. In May 2024, a sample of approximately 8,700 dwellings received a letter providing the option to either complete a census short-form questionnaire or permit Statistics Canada to use administrative data already collected from other federal and provincial government departments to enumerate their household. Households that opted for the latter were not required to take any action (i.e., they did not need to fill out a questionnaire). In this case, Statistics Canada used administrative records to obtain the necessary information, such as the number of usual residents at their dwelling, their age and their sex at birth or gender. The data collected as part of this research activity are not included in this report. For more information about this research activity, please visit the [Census Futures web page](#).



The sample was split into two panels, each receiving a different version of the 2A-L questionnaire. The control version of the questionnaire contained the same control questions used in the first phase of the 2024 Census Test, whereas the test version included one new question on sexual orientation, for respondents aged 15 and over. Figure 4.2 below illustrates the design of the test held in September 2024.

Figure 4.2
Design of the September 2024 content test



Source: Statistics Canada, 2024 Census Test (September).



5. Collection approach to the 2024 Census Test

May 2024 collection

For the May 2024 content test, communication with respondents was done through a wave collection approach. The approach was very similar to the one used in the 2021 Census and the one planned for the 2026 Census. The wave approach increases data quality by reducing non-response and encouraging Internet self-response, and it ultimately decreases the cost of conducting a census. Under this approach, respondents are sent invitations and reminders at certain times (called waves) during the collection period. Building on the success of the previous censuses, the 2024 content test incorporated potential changes to the communications materials of all three waves. Moreover, around Census Test Day, a sample of dwellings received a text message as a test for the 2026 Census. Table 5.1 shows the communications materials and key dates for each wave of the May test.

Table 5.1
Wave collection approach for the May 2024 content test

Collection phase	Wave material ¹	Start date
Wave 1	Invitation letter	May 6, 2024
Wave 2	Reminder letter	May 15, 2024
Around Census Day	Text message to a sample of dwellings	May 16, 2024
Wave 3	Different formats of reminder letter	May 23, 2024
Text message reminder or voice broadcast	Text message reminder or voice broadcast to a sample of dwellings	June 3, 2024

1. Invitation letters include an automated telephone number that respondents can call to request a paper questionnaire.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2024 Census Test (May).



September 2024 collection

For the September 2024 content test, a slightly different communication wave collection approach was used. Reminder letters and text message reminders were part of the approach, but this phase of the test also included a period of non-response follow-up to ensure that as high a response rate as possible could be obtained within the shorter collection window, given that this test had a smaller sample. Table 5.2 shows the communications materials and key dates of each wave for the September test.

Table 5.2
Collection approach for the September 2024 content test

Communication methods	Dates
Invitation letter	September 3, 2024
SMS/text message reminder 1	September 12, 2024
Reminder letter 1	September 16, 2024
SMS/text message reminder 2	September 27, 2024
Reminder letter 2	October 1, 2024
Non-response follow-up	September 30 to October 13, 2024

Source: Statistics Canada, 2024 Census Test (September).

6. Processing of returned questionnaires

For the content test, electronic questionnaires (EQs) completed by respondents were sent directly to the servers in Statistics Canada's secure server infrastructure and saved automatically upon receipt. The PQs that were mailed back were recorded by scanning the barcode on the cover of the questionnaire and processed for data capture.

Once captured, the PQ data were combined with the EQ data and stored in a common relational database; a complex integration process was required to standardize the data for each response mode. The purpose of this process was to obtain a single record for all response modes and panels. Processing rules were applied to this file to ensure that certain problems and inconsistencies were identified and corrected (e.g., a PQ returned with no responses, or both a PQ and an EQ completed for the same household). Verifications were also included to identify questionnaires that contained no information or insufficient information to proceed to the processing and analysis stages.

Given the analysis objectives, the data were not subjected to the edit and imputation or coding process.



Return rates

Table 6.1 presents the return rates for the first phase of the content test held in May 2024, by panel. Return rates are calculated using the total number of returned questionnaires divided by the number of dwellings in the sample. Questionnaires received via EQ self-response, PQ self-response and the Census Help Line are classified as returned, as well as incomplete saved or autosaved questionnaires that are evaluated for and meet content requirements after collection. The overall return rate of the panels in the May 2024 test was 82.20%. Unoccupied dwellings (some identified as such by respondents) were included in the numerator and the denominator.

Table 6.1
2024 Census Test return rates (May 2024)

Panel	Sample size	Count	Return rate (%)
Panel 1 subtotal: Control version of the questionnaire	49,963	41,107	82.27
Panel 2 subtotal: Test version of the questionnaire	49,963	41,028	82.12
Panels 1 and 2: Total	99,926	82,135	82.20

Source: Statistics Canada, 2024 Census Test (May).

Table 6.2 presents the return rates of the second phase of the content test held in September 2024, by panel. Return rates are calculated using the total number of returned questionnaires divided by the number of dwellings in the sample. Questionnaires received via EQ self-response and from interviewer EQ are classified as returned, as well as incomplete saved or autosaved questionnaires that are evaluated for and meet content requirements after collection. The overall return rate of the panels in the September 2024 test was 75.12%. Unoccupied dwellings (some identified as such by respondents) were included in the numerator and the denominator.

Table 6.2
2024 Census Test return rates (September 2024)

Panel	Sample size	Count	Return rate (%)
Panel 1 subtotal: Control version of the questionnaire	12,000	9,003	75.03
Panel 2 subtotal: Test version of the questionnaire	12,000	9,026	75.22
Panels 1 and 2: Total	24,000	18,029	75.12

Source: Statistics Canada, 2024 Census Test (September).



7. Conclusion

Following the 2024 Census Test, the results from the test questionnaires were compared with those from the control version to assess the impact of proposed content changes and new additions, including any unexpected effects on neighbouring or other related questions. Questions for which no changes were tested were also analyzed to ensure that the results remained accurate. Paradata⁴ from EQs were analyzed to assess response burden and behaviour, such as the time required to complete the questionnaire and whether respondents completed it in one or multiple sessions, and EQ features, including, for example, the automated messages that prompt respondents to provide an answer when a field is left blank. Lastly, the test results were analyzed and compared with data from the 2021 Census and other datasets.

The key findings and conclusions from the analyses that were conducted are summarized in a series of fact sheets and technical reports. The fact sheets explain why the questions are asked and describe the changes considered for testing and the resulting approach for 2026. The technical reports offer a more in-depth analysis of the results of the 2024 Census Test for the topics of [general health](#), [homelessness](#) and [sexual orientation](#).

4. Paradata provide information on the data collection process, such as the length of the interview, the time it takes to complete the online form, the frequency with which online prompts are displayed, the proportion of respondents who save the online form to complete later and the frequency with which text in a help button is consulted. These data can be used to minimize survey error and better understand respondent behaviour.