

U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

The Census Bureau is the federal government's largest statistical agency, producing data that inform our democracy and economy. It is best known for conducting the decennial census of population and housing beginning in 1790 as mandated in Article 1 of the Constitution. Census data are used to apportion seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and redraw congressional, state, and local districts to reflect changes in the population. Census data also serve many other functions, including input to federal, state, and local government planning and redrawing of boundaries of metropolitan, urban, and rural areas. The Census Bureau's statutorily mandated population estimates program produces annual estimates for states, counties, and other geographic units, using census data updated with birth and death records and information on migration to and within the country. These estimates support the distribution of approximately [\\$1.5 trillion in federal funding annually](#) to state, local, and tribal governments and are used to calibrate other surveys to represent the population. The American Community Survey, which replaced the decennial census "long-form" sample beginning in 2005, provides annually a wide range of social, demographic, and economic data for states and small geographic areas, which serve a multitude of purposes. The Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement produces annual estimates of household income, poverty, and health insurance coverage and is widely used in research. The Census Bureau also conducts the statutorily mandated Economic Census of all businesses in the nation every five years and annual, quarterly, and monthly surveys of business sectors, such as construction and retail trade. Data from its business censuses and surveys are input to the National Income and Product Accounts produced by Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) and are widely followed by financial markets and business economists. In addition, the Census Bureau conducts many surveys under contract to other federal agencies that do not have their own infrastructure for conducting large national surveys, such as the Current Population Survey, National Crime Victimization Survey, Annual Business Survey (data on research and development investments and characteristics of business owners), and National Health Interview Survey. Census data affect every facet of American society. The full breadth and depth of the Census Bureau's work is challenging to convey in a short document.

**The following is based on publicly available information and select information from our questionnaire.

STRENGTH OF CENSUS'S SUPPORT†

Autonomy: Weak. The Census Bureau lacks protections in statute for most of its professional autonomy, leaving it susceptible to the political meddling that occurred with the 2020 Census. Its professional autonomy is also undermined due to a 1950 law that transferred the duties of the director of the Census Bureau to the Secretary of Commerce.

Budget/staffing: Mixed. The Census Bureau is the largest of the federal statistical agencies by budget but is often challenged to maintain and redesign programs, launch new products to fulfill its mandate to produce relevant and timely data, and make cost-saving upgrades to legacy systems. In particular, funding for the decennial census tends to be inadequate for early R&D and testing, which can lead to missed opportunities to identify improvements in processes that could boost population coverage.

Parent agency: Good. The Department of Commerce (DOC) is generally strongly supportive of the U.S. Census Bureau through recognition of its work, requesting budget increases that allow the agency to continue to produce relevant and timely data, and generally supporting the many demands of the decennial census. The DOC also regularly calls on the census director (currently serving as the DOC statistical official), includes Census officials in some congressional meetings, and provides such shared services as HR, counsel, and security. DOC has also been collaborative in recognizing the need for the Census Bureau to have a measure of autonomy in IT operations, providing more of an oversight function rather than production and operational functions. The Census Bureau's agility could be improved by more timely support of Census hiring.

Despite strong parent-agency support currently, the Census Bureau has gone through periods of little support as well as periods when the DOC leadership has tried to interfere in the methodological and scientific integrity of the Census Bureau's data collection and dissemination.

† See Supporting Materials F for an explanation of the support ratings.

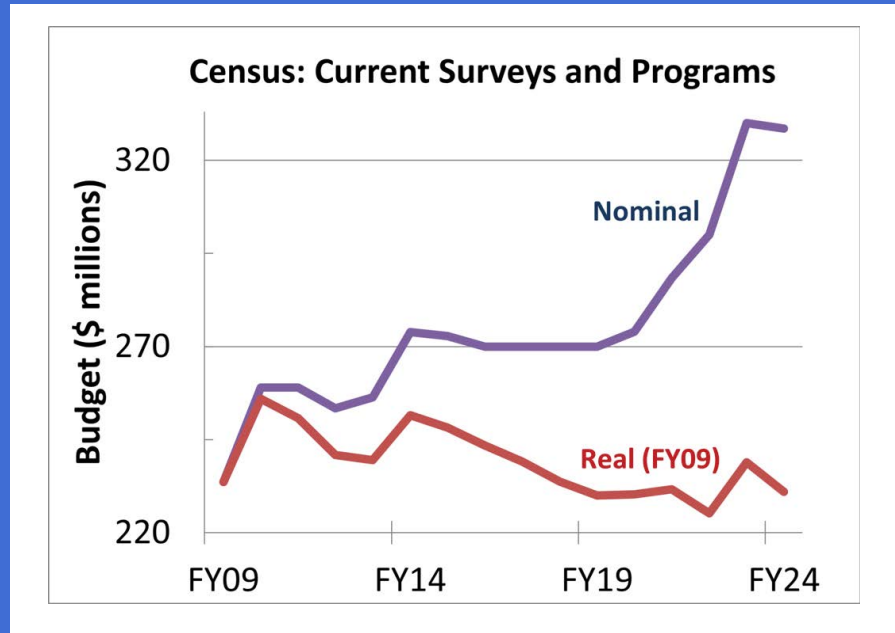
AGENCY FAST FACTS

Budget inputs and FY24 level

Appropriations line items: \$1,383 million

1. Current Surveys and Programs: \$329 million
2. Periodic Censuses and Programs \$1,054 million

Funding history, inflation adjusted (figures shown exclude the decennial and economic censuses)



Appointment of head & layers down in DOC org chart

The Census Bureau director is presidentially appointed and Senate confirmed, one of three federal statistical agencies with such an appointment. The director has a fixed five-year term set in statute, with the opportunity for reappointment to a second term. The statute also establishes professional qualification requirements for the position. The director may serve an additional year after the end of the director's term until reappointed or until a successor is appointed.

Two: The Census Bureau director reports to the Under Secretary of Commerce for Economic Affairs, who reports to the Secretary.

Other

- The director serves as the Commerce Statistical Official (on a two-year rotation with the BEA director).
- The Census Bureau regularly administers more than 125 surveys, about 75 of which are economic surveys and 50 are demographic surveys. It conducts many of these surveys for other agencies or jointly with others. It also uses a long list of [administrative data sources](#).
- Thirteen of Census's data products are official [Principal Federal Economic Indicators](#) (some joint with BEA).
- Census Bureau staff include mathematical statisticians, survey methodologists, economists, demographers, data scientists, communications and other specialists, and a large field staff.

Recent successes

- The Census Bureau has a strong innovation culture. Some recent examples include:
 - April 2020: In just the second month of the pandemic, the Census Bureau developed and launched the [Small Business Pulse Survey](#) (SBPS), reaching more than 1 million small businesses, to provide high-frequency data to policy-makers and the public about the challenges small businesses are facing. The program's relevance and timeliness led to the Census Bureau institutionalizing the program as the [Business Trends and Outlook Survey](#).
 - April 2020: The Census Bureau created and launched the [Household Pulse Survey](#) in collaboration with numerous other agencies. Its quarterly reports on topics ranging from baby formula access to living through natural disasters were of such value that the program continues to be funded as part of the "High Frequency Data Program."
 - The Census Bureau released new products from existing surveys to measure the [adoption of new technologies](#) (e.g., [machine learning](#), [robotics](#), [automation](#), and [artificial intelligence](#)) and indirectly measure their impact on employment and productivity.
 - The Census Bureau illustrated the potential of data linkage with its experimental release showing [earnings and employment outcomes for U.S. Army veterans](#), [Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes](#), and Business Dynamics Statistics (BDS) on [U.S. High Tech Industries](#) and [Single Unit Firms](#).
 - The Census Bureau's [BDS-Goods Traders data tables](#), an experimental data product, provides insights on job creation and destruction; job expansions and contractions; number of establishments and firms; establishment openings and closings; and number of startups and firm shutdowns for importers, exporters, and non-traders.
 - In February 2023, the Census Bureau launched the [Index of Economic Activity](#) (IDEA)—an aggregation of 15 of the Census Bureau's primary economic data series that provides a single time series constructed as a weighted combination. The IDEA is a monthly index that is calculated daily.
- For more, see the [Innovations](#) box.

Agency strengths

- The Census Bureau is a high-profile agency and produces products with far-reaching relevance. Its web page views number well over 100 million annually and several times that in a decennial year. By another measure, census scholar Andrew Reamer found that in FY 2017, “316 federal spending programs relied on 2010 Census-derived data to distribute \$1.5 trillion to state and local governments, nonprofits, businesses, and households across the nation.”
- The Census Bureau engages with its data user communities, including through advisory committees, data-user conferences, and other conference attendance. In 2023, its data-user conferences included one on the Survey of Income and Program Participation and the annual data products training conference for State Data Centers, Census Information Centers, Data Dissemination Specialists, and Training Specialists and Data Dissemination Assistants. From 2021 to 2023, Census experts attended more than 110 conferences, as captured here. The Census Project supports the decennial census and American Community Survey (ACS) with Congress, the administration, and the public, and an ACS data users group provides a channel of communication with the Census Bureau and among users (American Community Survey Data Users Group).
- The Census Bureau has strong parent agency support through meaningful inclusion in department leadership meetings, in department- or administration-wide policy initiatives and recognition of Census Bureau employees with Department Gold and Silver medals in each of the last three years, and through regular consultation with the director as the department’s current Statistical Official. The department promoted the 2020 decennial census and supported federal funding for the census. The department also promoted census public awareness activities, which included extensive efforts by state and local governments. It also provides ongoing legal and policy support for Census Bureau engagements with legislators, appropriators, and regulatory bodies, including at least annual meetings with appropriators.
- While the current parent-agency support is strong, it depends on the leadership at the Department of Commerce. Census has gone through periods in which the leadership has tried to interfere in the methodological and scientific integrity of the Census Bureau’s data collection and dissemination. This is still a threat.
- The Census Bureau does engage in proactive Congressional outreach in addition to providing requested demographic and economic information to congressional offices. The Census Bureau regularly engages Congress on a range of issues (e.g., the 2020 Census Congressional Partnership Initiative and promoting the American Community Survey, the Economic Census, and data tools such as MyCongressional District, MyTribalArea, and MyCommunityExplorer).
- The Census Bureau makes extensive use of administrative datasets, which helps it provide more relevant and timely data and reduce respondent burden.
- As exemplified in recent successes above, the Census Bureau has a strong record of innovation, which we further discuss here. The Census Longitudinal Infrastructure Pilot Projects, which make use of the Census Bureau’s data linkage infrastructure, have shed light on such topics as migration patterns after a natural disaster, intergenerational mobility, and the impact of universal preschool on later-life outcomes. The Opportunity Project “helps companies, non-profits, and universities turn federal open data into new technologies that solve real-

<p>Agency strengths</p>	<p>world problems for people across the country.” Beyond its many federal partnerships, the Census Bureau also partners <u>internationally</u> and at the <u>state level</u>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ The Census Bureau has additional valuable website resources, including a <u>catalog of publicly available data</u>, an <u>experimental data product webpage</u>, and a <u>modernizing federal statistics webpage</u>.
<p>Agency threats/ vulnerabilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ The Census Bureau has little professional autonomy in statute, leaving it still susceptible to meddling like that which occurred during the 2020 Census. Most of the critical decisions around the Census are statutorily given to the Secretary of Commerce, rather than the director of the Census Bureau. However, as a modest counterpoint, the Census Bureau director is confirmed by Congress and has a fixed five-year term that bridges over presidential elections. ➔ The environment for collecting comprehensive data or information from surveys is dramatically changing, with survey response rates continuing to fall. Like the rest of the federal statistical agencies, the Census Bureau is working to diversify its data sources to include such modes as administrative records and third-party data. However, an efficient and effective transition to multimodal data sources will require prioritizing research and investment to ensure data quality and improve timeliness.
<p>Agency challenges</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ The Census Bureau often faces funding challenges in the build-up to a decennial census and for its Current Surveys and Programs. In addition, the 2017 Economic Census was hampered by funding issues and delayed by several months as a result of the partial government shutdown in January 2019. Similarly, two of the 2020 Census field test sites, Pierce County, Washington, and the Bluefield-Beckley-Oak Hill area of West Virginia, had to be dropped from the end-to-end operations testing. The Current Surveys program has, for example, struggled to co-fund with the Bureau of Labor Statistics the much-needed redesign of the Current Population Survey. (See Supporting Materials: H.) ➔ Because the Census Bureau is the largest of the statistical agencies and has the most expansive research and field capabilities, it could serve as a leader and provide multiple shared services for the whole federal statistical system. However, its attention and resources are focused primarily on its own mission, reducing its effectiveness as a shared service provider across the system. In addition, its confidentiality protections embedded in Title 13 reduce its ability to share valuable data with other statistical agencies, thus limiting their ability to innovate using linked data. The Census Bureau has also interpreted Title 13 to limit the geographic detail and the accuracy for small areas of the data it provides to users from the decennial census. ➔ The Census Bureau faces unique challenges due to its structure of maintaining six regional field offices to conduct large national surveys and then also building up a massive temporary field infrastructure to conduct the decennial census, including hiring, training, and conducting technology-supported operations with significant contractual support.

<p>Agency Challenges</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Census data products are in high demand. Its outreach to users of published tables and public use files tends to be one-way through webinars and similar means; it is challenged to identify and dialogue with its broad base of users. Access to highly protected microdata is restricted to a small number of researchers who are adept at navigating the unwieldy process for using census data through a Federal Statistical Research Data Center. Because the Census Bureau has limited resources to devote to providing access to restricted data to researchers, the wait time to initiate projects can be long and cumbersome, and the process is less inclusive of diverse groups of researchers than it could be. ➔ For the decennial census, the Census Bureau is challenged to minimize the inaccurate counts of various populations, inaccuracies which affect virtually all demographic surveys—both public and private—because such surveys use estimates from the census-based Population Estimates Program as controls. Significant investment is needed to address these challenges effectively.
---------------------------------	---

<p>Agency opportunities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ With additional funding, the Census Bureau could implement such <u>FY 2024</u> and <u>FY 2025</u> proposals as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • initiate measurements of key inputs, challenges, and constraints faced by U.S. businesses producing advanced and emerging technologies in order to provide insights into U.S. competitiveness in the global market; • modernize measures of the construction sector of the economy; • expand the High Frequency Data Program to provide more timely and granular information on current economic conditions and trends; • improve the Census Bureau’s ability to measure the impact of natural disasters on people and economy; • develop the operational plan for the 2030 Census, and • continue to transform its data systems to support secure, efficient, and economical collection, storage, and dissemination of data. ➔ While the Census Bureau tracks visits to its websites to assess data usage, it is lacking comprehensive information on how census data are used in research, planning, and other applications. Tools such as the Search and Discovery Platform piloted by other statistical agencies could help the Census Bureau identify the researchers who are using census data, their institutions, and the topics they are researching. In turn, this would help the Census Bureau reach out to institutions that are less well represented to encourage use of census data and obtain feedback to improve the utility of the data and help build broader collaborative communities of users.
------------------------------------	---

<p>Agency-specific recommendations</p>	<p>In addition to the all-agency recommendations in the body of the report,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ we urge continued strong parent-agency support of the U.S. Census Bureau along with respect for its professional autonomy.
---	--

See also

[State of the Data Infrastructure Series: Census Bureau](#). February 2022. Two former leaders of Census and an outside expert in Amstat News.

INNOVATIONS

In this box, we highlight the Census Bureau's innovation culture beyond those listed in Successes. For **business and economic statistics**, Census started a new [series](#) that tracks the creation of new U.S. businesses, reporting on both applications for an Employer Identification Number and actual business formation on a weekly basis and at the national, regional, and state levels. To improve the quality and completeness of statistics on household and family income and poverty, the Census Bureau released its first estimates from its the [National Experimental WellBeing Statistics](#), which links survey, decennial census, administrative, and commercial data to capture income not reported by survey respondents. To better understand **earnings and employment outcomes for college and university graduates**, Census initiated [Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes](#), which breaks out data by degree level, degree major, post-secondary institution, and state of institution. To provide more timely and granular information on **retail sales**, Census launched a [new program that reports retail sales](#) in 11 categories at the state level based on information from the Monthly Retail Trade Survey data, administrative data, and third-party data. To help track **government aid to companies** at the pandemic's onset, Census released a [breakdown](#) by program and one of three sectors through its Annual Business Survey (ABS). Finally the agency's new [Community Resilience Estimates](#) and its interactive tool explore a connection between income inequality and higher social vulnerability to the impact of disasters.

For additional innovation work, see, for example, <https://www.census.gov/data/experimental-data-products.html>.