



How did the 2020 census affect employment?

By Katelynn Harris

Every 10 years, the U.S. Census Bureau conducts a full count of the entire population of the United States, as mandated by the U.S. Constitution. To achieve this mission, the Census Bureau hires hundreds of thousands of temporary workers. These workers are reflected in the Current Employment Statistics (CES) survey employment estimates.^{[1](#)}

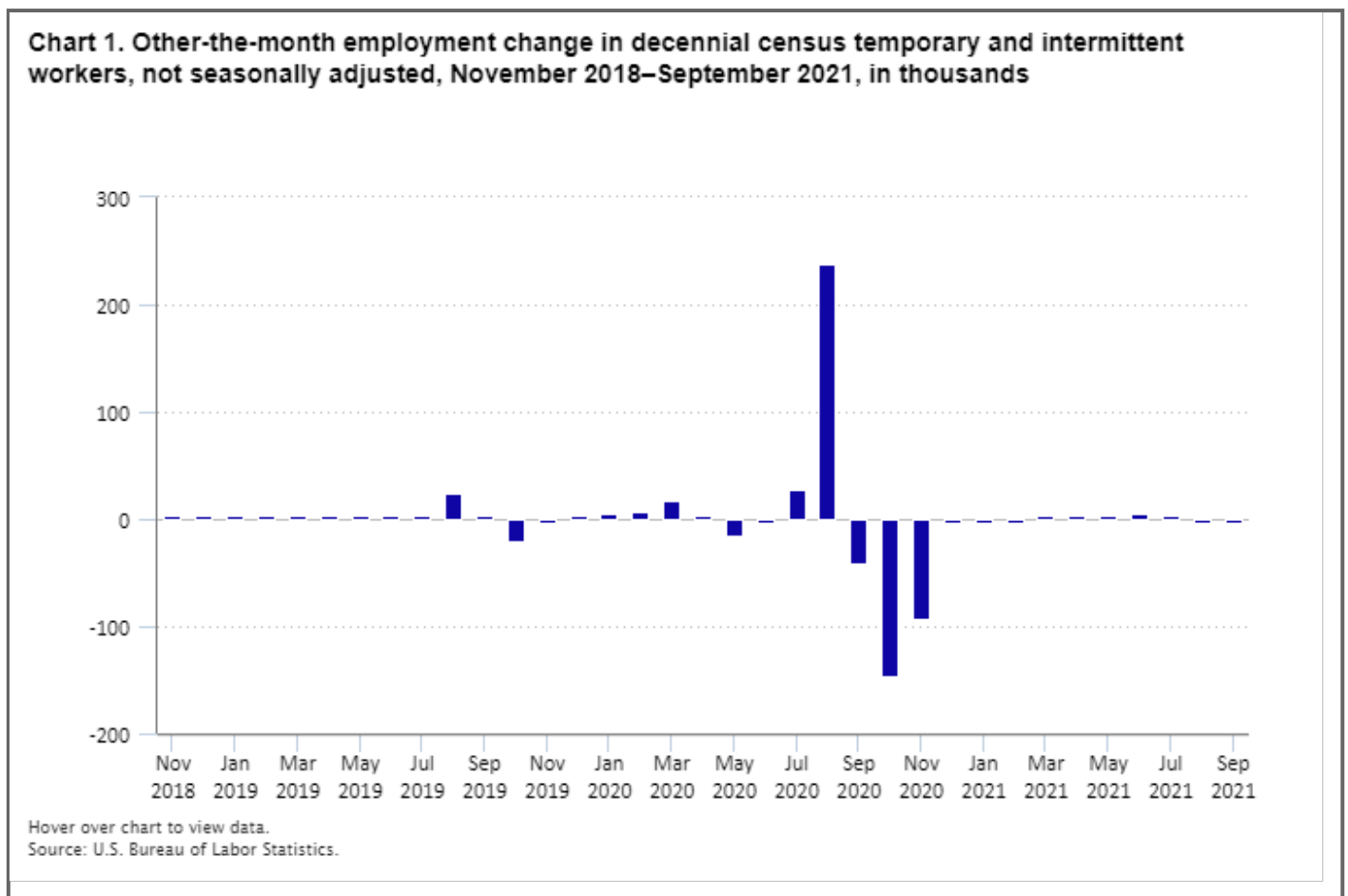
This **Beyond the Numbers** article discusses the spikes in federal employment caused by the hiring of temporary census workers in 2020 compared with 2010, and the challenges the Census Bureau faced in collecting the data. This article is an update to one originally published in 2020.

Data collection process

The 2020 census involves multiple phases in order to collect responses. The first major field operation, address canvassing, where workers verify addresses to ensure a complete and accurate count, began in August 2019 and lasted through October 2019. In March 2020, census forms with a deadline to reply by April 1, 2020 were sent to all households. Next, census workers performed nonresponse follow-up by visiting about 56 million addresses to collect responses.² Finally, workers completed a quality assurance phase to ensure a complete 2020 census count.

Impact of hiring census workers

Hiring for the 2020 census began on May 2018, almost 2 years prior to “Census Day,” or April 1, 2020. In August 2020—the month of peak employment activity—more than 230,000 temporary workers were hired. (See chart 1.)



Limited hiring for the 2020 census began in November 2018, and there was little to no effect on payroll employment estimates for several months. (See chart 1.) The first noticeable surge in CES estimates took place in August 2019, when 24,000 census temporary workers were hired for address canvassing. In September 2019, address canvassing employment level peaked at 28,000 workers, much less than the 40,000 the Census Bureau had expected to hire.³ Hiring for nonresponse follow-up peaked in August 2020, at 288,000 workers, about half as many employees as the Census Bureau expected to hire.⁴ Over the next 3 months, almost all of these workers were let go, totaling a loss of 281,000 workers. Fewer workers were needed to complete the quality assurance

phase, and the Census Bureau slowly reduced employment through the end of 2020 and into early 2021. By March 2021, the count of temporary census workers had fallen to zero. Because of delays in processing the data, the Census Bureau hired 5,000 workers in June 2021 to finish processing the apportionment counts and redistricting data.

Differences between the 2010 and 2020 census

Hiring for the 2020 census was much weaker and occurred later than prior censuses. (See chart 2.) The differences between the lines in chart 2 represent the effect of decennial census hiring.

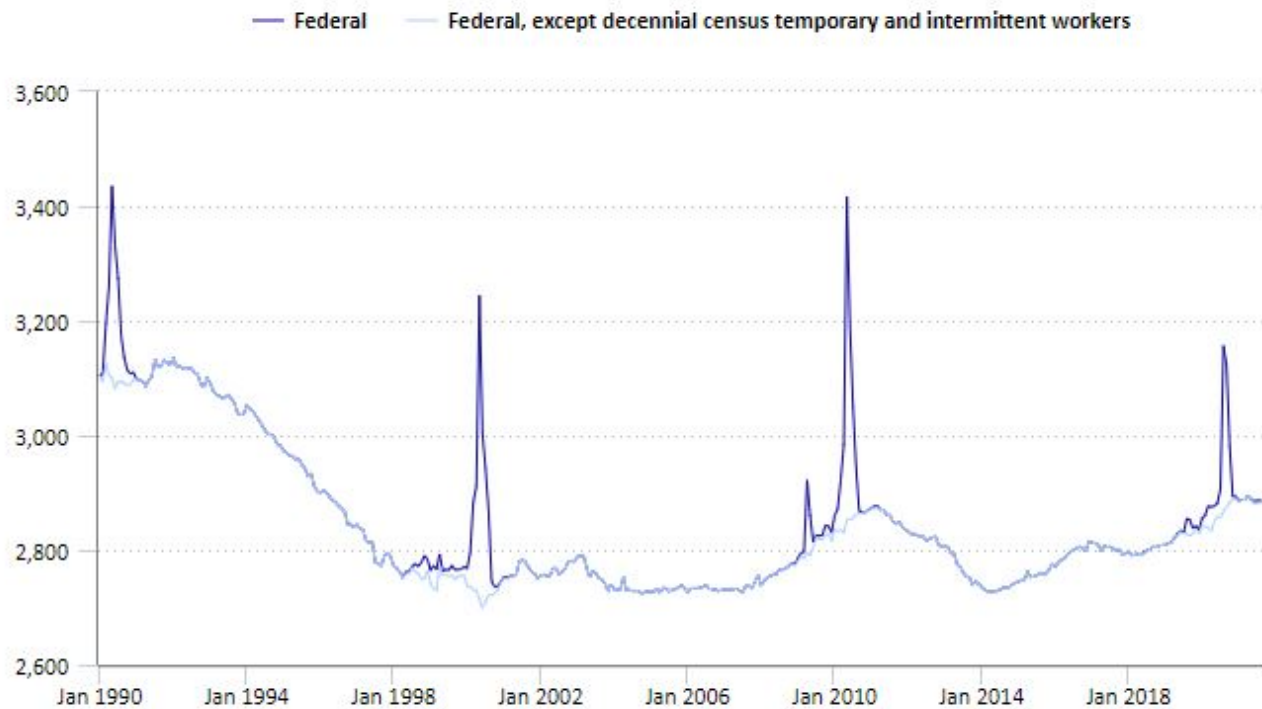
Census field offices

For the 2010 census, the Census Bureau opened 494 total field offices compared with the 2020 census, where it only opened 248 total field offices throughout the country. This decrease was due to increased use of technology, streamlined staffing, and the ability to work and manage remotely resulted in the reduction of field offices for the 2020 census.⁵

Address canvassing

Address canvassing operations for the 2010 census occurred from April through July 2009. Hiring of federal employees peaked at a level of 126,000 in April 2009. For the 2020 Census, employment for 2020 address canvassing peaked in September 2019, at 28,000 workers. This was due to an advancement in technology used to complete address canvassing that allowed the Census Bureau to hire fewer employees than in 2009. In-office canvassing using satellite imagery was used to verify 65 percent of addresses. The remaining 35 percent—about 50 million—addresses were verified through in-field address canvassing.

Chart 2. Federal employment, and federal employment, except decennial census temporary and intermittent workers, 1990–2021, seasonally adjusted, in thousands



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Nonresponse follow-up

Enumerators, or census takers, visit every household that has not already responded to the census to ensure a complete and accurate count.

For the 2010 census, nonresponse follow-up occurred from May to July 2010, with hiring peaking in May 2010 at 564,000 employees. In 2020, for the first time, respondents were able to complete the census online or by phone and that led to 63 percent of households self-responding. Census enumerators had to visit 56 million addresses to collect responses in person.⁶ Nonresponse follow-up took place from July to September 2020, peaking in August at 288,000 workers. Fewer enumerators were needed in 2020 due to the increase in productivity. In 2010 enumerators completed 1.05 cases per hour versus 1.92 cases per hour in 2020.⁷

Challenges facing the 2020 census

Counting every person in the country is a massive undertaking that involves hundreds of thousands of people and years of planning. Even during normal years, the job is difficult and full of obstacles and in 2020 there were more challenges than usual.

In March 2020, just as invitations to complete the census were mailed out the COVID-19 pandemic began. States ordered residents to stay home, social distance, and wear masks. In-field operations were forced to temporarily

stop to ensure the safety of employees and the public. The delay created additional problems, such as pushing peak in-field operations into hurricane and wildfire seasons.⁸

How the census adapted

The Census Bureau revised the schedule of all remaining phases. Self-response was open from March through October 2020, rather than have a July 2020 cutoff. Nonresponse follow-up, originally scheduled to occur from May to July 2020, was delayed beginning in July through October 2020. The Census Bureau also allowed census takers to conduct nonresponse follow-up with phone calls instead of going door to door. The statutory deadline to deliver the apportionment counts to the President by December 31, 2020 was delayed until April 26, 2021. Additionally, the statutory deadline to deliver the redistricting data by March 31, 2021, but was delayed until September 30, 2021.⁹

Conclusion

Although advancements in technology required fewer temporary employees to conduct the 2020 census, the global pandemic caused the Census Bureau to delay collection and to hire even fewer employees than expected. Hiring peaked in August 2020 with 288,000 employees, much later and far below than the estimated peak of 500,000 in May 2020.

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NOTES

¹ The CES program, which provides detailed industry data on employment, hours, and earnings of workers on nonfarm payrolls, is a monthly survey of about 144,000 businesses and government agencies representing approximately 697,000 individual worksites. CES employment estimates are based on payroll data from the pay period that includes the 12th of the month. Thus some employment fluctuations between reference pay periods may not be captured by CES estimates. For more information on the program's concepts and methodology, see "Technical notes for the Current Employment Statistics survey," *Current Employment Statistics—CES (national)* (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cestn.htm>. To access CES data, see <https://www.bls.gov/ces/>. The CES data are seasonally adjusted unless otherwise noted.

² For information on collection efforts, see <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/door-to-door-visits-begin-nationwide.html>.

³ For information on address canvassing, see <https://www.census.gov/library/fact-sheets/2019/dec/address-canvassing-numbers.html>.

⁴ For information on Census Bureau’s recruitment, see <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/2020-recruitment.html>

⁵ For information on Census Bureau’s use of technology, see “Innovations for the 2020 census,” February 12, 2020, <https://www2.census.gov/about/budget/innovations-2020-census-interim-report-2020-02-12.pdf>.

⁶ For information on door to door knocking, see <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/door-to-door-visits-begin-nationwide.html>.

⁷ For information on productivity rates, see <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2020/11/update-2020-census-data-processing-and-quality.html>

⁸ For information on the challenges the Census Bureau faced, see <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2021/03/unprecedented-challenges.html>.

⁹ For information on how the Census Bureau adjusted operations, see <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020/planning-management/operational-adjustments.html>.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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