



## The 2020 census and CES employment

*By Laura Kelter*

The U.S. Constitution mandates an enumeration, or a full count, of the entire population of the United States every 10 years. The census results are used to apportion Congressional Representatives and distribute billions of dollars in federal funds to local communities.<sup>1</sup> The importance of the census and the Census Bureau's scale of work mean that it must hire hundreds of thousands of temporary and intermittent workers to conduct this exercise. These workers are reflected in employment estimates from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Employment Statistics (CES) survey.<sup>2</sup>

This **Beyond the Numbers** article describes how census workers affect CES employment estimates. Typically, a mass movement of workers onto—and then off of—the Census Bureau payroll occurs around the turn of every decade. These fluctuations cause sharp spikes—and then sharp declines—in the employment data for the CES government series titled “federal government, except U.S. postal service,” as well as aggregate industries up to

and including total nonfarm. Isolating census-specific employment changes from CES data allows users to identify employment trends without the effects of the census. It is also important to note that hiring plans announced for the 2020 census, as well as hiring that has already occurred, are different from historical census hiring.

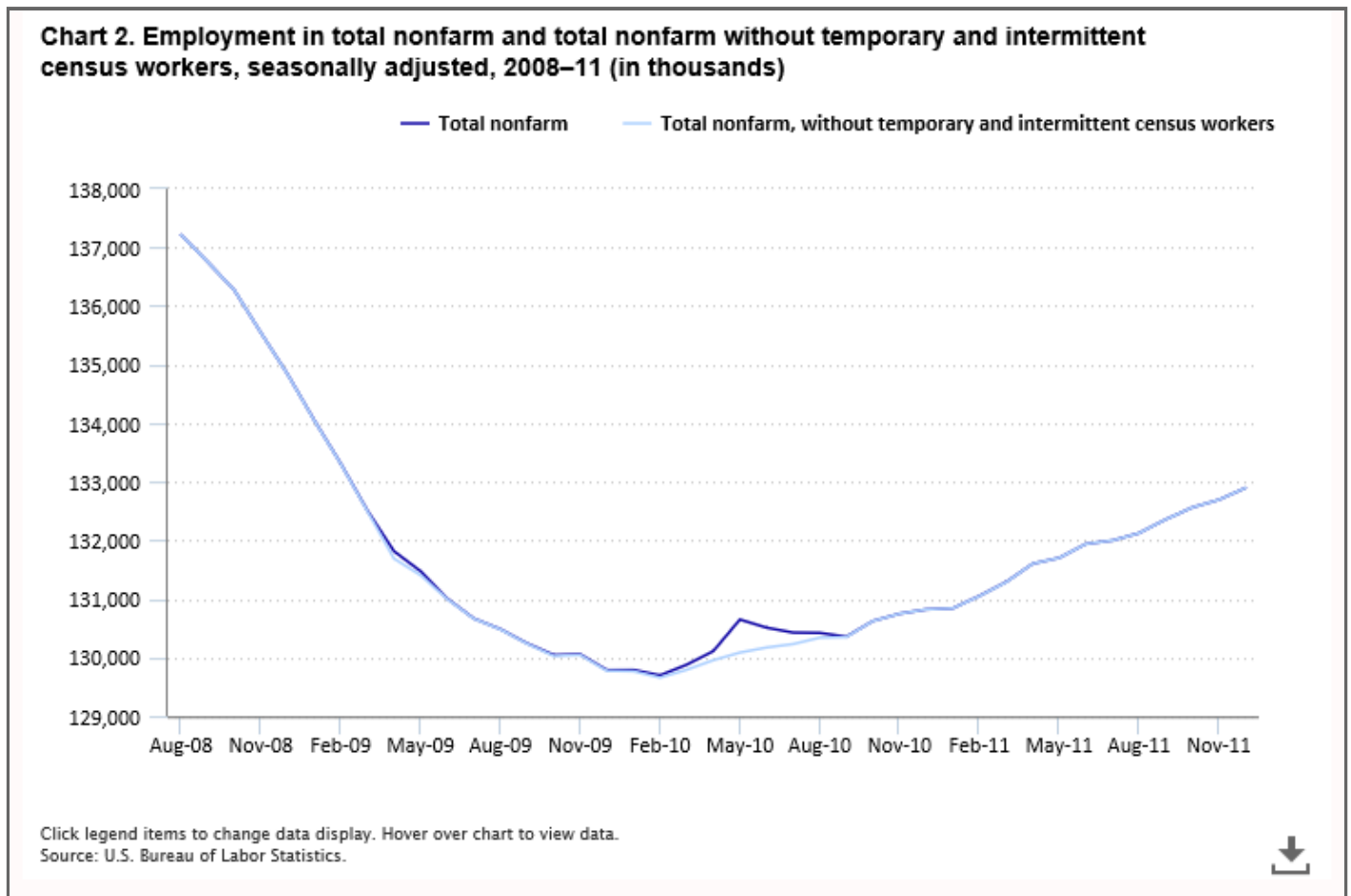
## Census hiring

The Census Bureau designates April 1 of years ending in zero as “Census Day,” the day on which the census is conducted. Historically, hiring for past censuses had begun up to 24 months prior to April 1st, with hiring activity tending to peak in May of the census year. There are two hiring phases associated with the census that are large, in terms of staffing needs—address canvassing and nonresponse followup. During the address canvassing phase, workers update and validate addresses in order to mail out census questionnaires. During nonresponse followup, workers will contact residents that failed to return their census questionnaires.

When temporary and intermittent census workers are hired, they are reflected in CES employment estimates. Chart 1 shows employment in the CES employment series for federal government employment, except U.S. Postal Service, alongside the same series with census workers subtracted. This second series is labelled “Federal, except postal, without temporary and intermittent census workers.” Both series are exactly the same, with the exception of during periods of hiring tied to a census. Through aggregation, the census intermittent workers also appear in data for higher-level government series, and in data for total nonfarm employment.<sup>3</sup> (See chart 1.)

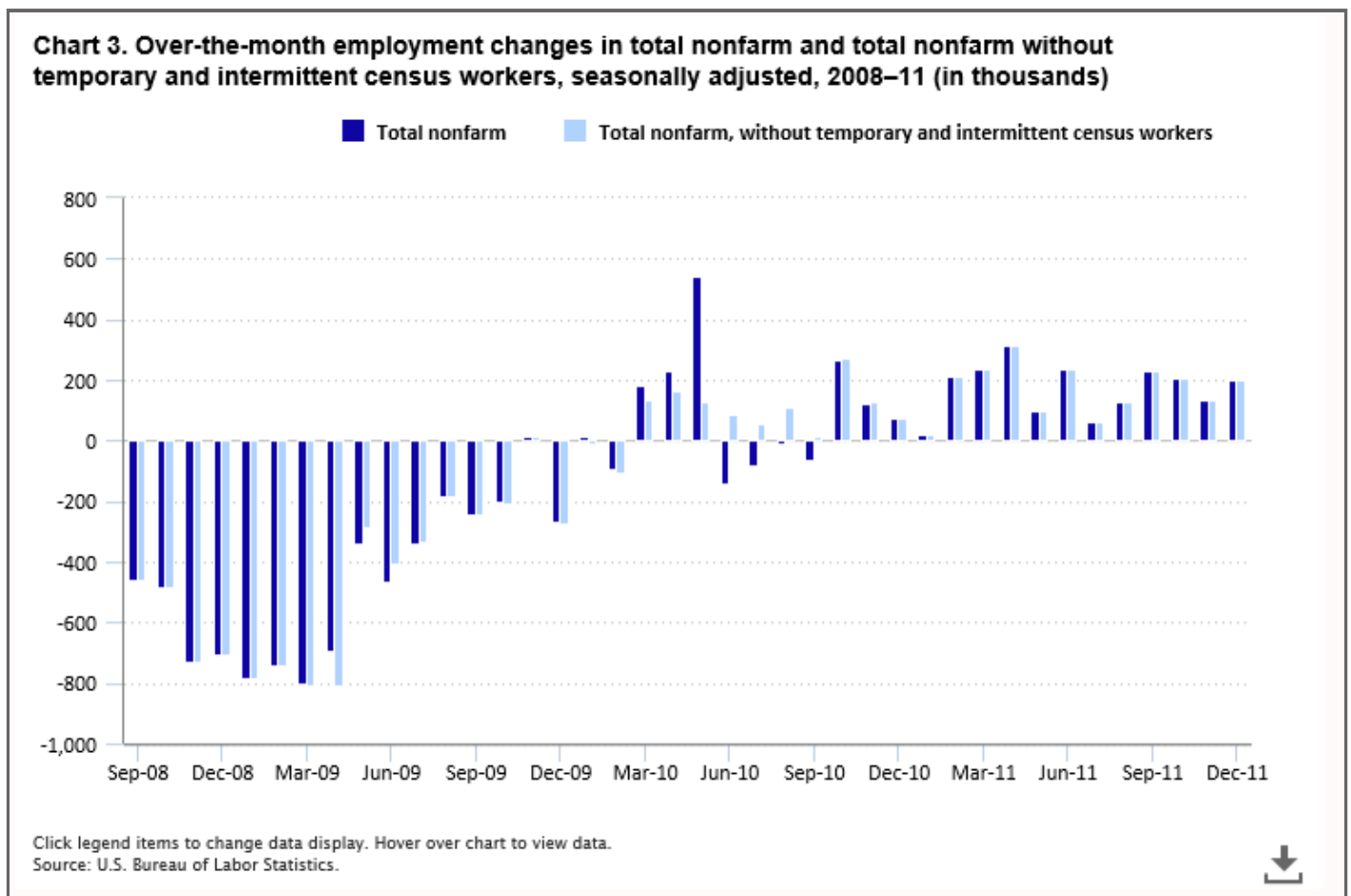


Determining the over-the-month employment change due to census hiring is essential to understanding underlying employment trends in CES data. In fact, census hiring for the most recent census coincided with a turning point in national employment. (See chart 2.)



For example, in 2009, in the midst of substantial monthly employment declines during the Great Recession, the Census Bureau began hiring for the 2010 Census. As a result, employment changes tied to the 2010 Census’ address canvassing phase masked employment declines—see data points for March, April, May, and June of 2009 in chart 3.

Then, after reaching an employment trough in February 2010, the trend began to reflect Census Bureau’s next phase of hiring in order to follow up with individuals who failed to return their census forms. This mass hiring made the employment recovery look stronger than it actually was. (See data points for March through May of 2010 in chart 3.)



## Differences between the 2010 and 2020 census

The Census Bureau continues to refine and improve its methodology for undertaking a census and this, in turn, changes operational plans. As a result, the upcoming 2020 Census will be different in terms of hiring, compared with the 2010 Census.

### Area census offices

For the 2010 census, 494 local census offices and 12 regional census centers were set up around the country to facilitate operations. For the 2020 census, the Census Bureau is planning, instead, to open 248 area census offices (ACOs) nationally. The ACOs will house the managers, staff, material, and equipment needed to support the hundreds of thousands of Census Bureau employees who will conduct local census operations including those who will follow up with households that do not return their census form. Forty ACOs opened early, in a first wave of hiring workers to support address canvassing operations, and the remaining 208 ACOs opened between June and September 2019.<sup>4</sup>

### Address canvassing

Prior to the actual enumeration, the Census Bureau conducts address canvassing. The majority of workers employed in the address canvassing operation are field staff, physically going to communities of the United States

and Puerto Rico, updating the census address list and census maps, and collecting manual and GPS coordinates for each valid address.<sup>5</sup> The 2010 census address canvassing operation began in April 2009 and finished in July 2009. The operation was managed out of 151 field offices throughout the country, in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. During address canvassing for the 2010 Census, the number of temporary and intermittent workers in CES employment estimates peaked at a level of 126,000 in April 2009. (See chart 1.)

For the 2020 census, the Census Bureau conducted address canvassing, using high-resolution aerial imagery to validate most home addresses, instead of having staff physically canvassing communities. This reduced the number of address canvassers necessary to complete the operation. Despite being the most labor-intensive phase of the enumeration process, the Census Bureau estimated that, with a planned start date of August 2019, they would need between 50,000 and 70,000 workers for the new ‘in-office’ address canvassing method—about 100,000 less than in 2009. CES employment estimates showed census hiring for address canvassing started on time, lasted for just over 2 months, and reached a peak of about 28,000 workers—much less than the Census estimated they would need.

Once address canvassing is complete, forms are sent out to each residence, with a due date of April 1st—Census Day. For those forms not completed and returned, there is a nonresponse followup.

## Nonresponse followup

The largest phase of the enumeration involves nonresponse followup, in which hundreds of thousands of workers mobilize to verify the status of people who did not respond to the census questionnaire by Census Day.

In an assessment of 2010 census recruiting and hiring, the Census Bureau noted that a high unemployment rate resulted in a higher-than-anticipated response in early recruiting. Far more individuals applied for census jobs than was anticipated or needed.<sup>6</sup> At peak employment in May 2010, when the nonresponse followup operation began, CES data showed total employment of 564,000 decennial census temporary and intermittent workers.<sup>7</sup>

For the 2020 census, it’s estimated that around 475,000 enumerators will be needed for nonresponse followup.<sup>8</sup> For the first time ever, respondents will be allowed to submit their completed questionnaire online and by phone. As in the 2010 census, the nonresponse followup operation is planned to start in May 2020.

## Nonfarm payroll employment

Starting in 1990, during census hiring, CES has been publishing data tables showing employment levels and over-the-month changes of temporary and intermittent workers hired for each decennial census located on the CES website.<sup>9</sup> One table shows the number of decennial census workers by month. Another table shows CES employment estimates for the federal government, excluding U.S. Postal Service, as well as with the intermittent and temporary census workers removed. Removing these data from the CES estimates show the true employment trends.

## Conclusion

Because each census is different, current census operations may not exactly mirror the magnitude and timing of the previous census. As noted earlier, the Census Bureau planned in-field address canvassing for the 2020 census to begin later in the year than the address canvassing phase in the 2010 census, and with fewer workers. The Census Bureau also expects to operate fewer area census offices in 2020 than in 2010. Likewise, while peak

operations for the 2020 census are estimated to be in May (the same as in 2010), it's estimated that the number of enumerators may be fewer than that in 2010.

This **Beyond the Numbers** article was prepared by Laura Kelter, supervisory economist in Office of Employment and Unemployment Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. E-mail: [CESinfo@bls.gov](mailto:CESinfo@bls.gov); telephone: (202) 691-6555

Information in this article will be made available upon request to individuals with sensory impairments. Voice phone: (202) 691-5200. Federal Relay Service: 1-800-877-8339. This article is in the public domain and may be reproduced without permission.

## RELATED ARTICLES

[The 2010 Census: the employment impact of counting the Nation](#)

[Counting the counters: effects of Census 2000 on employment](#)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census Research, Operational Plans, and Oversight, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/2020-census/about.html>, accessed June 11, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> The CES program, which provides detailed industry data on employment, hours, and earnings of workers on nonfarm payrolls, is a monthly survey of about 142,000 businesses and government agencies representing approximately 689,000 individual worksites. 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. Over-the-year changes are calculated from December of the previous year through December of the reference year.

<sup>3</sup> Census employment is also reflected in aggregate data series of federal, except U.S. postal service. These include federal government, government, and total nonfarm.

<sup>4</sup> See "2020 Census Research, Operational Plans, and Oversight, Memorandum 2017.21," [https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/memo-series/2020-memo-2017\\_21.pdf](https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/memo-series/2020-memo-2017_21.pdf), accessed June 12, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> See "2010 Address Canvassing Operational Assessment," January 17, 2012, [https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2012/dec/2010\\_cpex\\_168.pdf](https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2012/dec/2010_cpex_168.pdf), accessed June 12, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> See "2010 Census Recruiting and Hiring Assessment Report," November 2, 2011, [https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2011/dec/2010\\_cpex\\_155.pdf](https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2011/dec/2010_cpex_155.pdf), accessed June 12, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> DAPPS Employees Paid. 2010 Census Recruiting and Hiring Assessment Report. November 2, 2011, Figure 3, [https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2011/dec/2010\\_cpex\\_155.pdf](https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2011/dec/2010_cpex_155.pdf), accessed June 12, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> What's new for the 2020 Census? The Washington Post. April 2, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/national/census-2020-technology/>, accessed June 12, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Census 2020 temporary and intermittent workers and Federal government employment, last updated August 2, 2019, <https://www.bls.gov/ces/cescensusworkers.htm>.

**SUGGESTED  
CITATION**

Laura Kelter, “The 2020 census and CES employment,” *Beyond the Numbers: Employment and Unemployment*, vol. 9, no. 3 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 2020), <https://www.bls.gov/opub/btn/volume-9/the-2020-census-and-ces-employment.htm>