

RECOVERY PLAN FOR CENSUS' PRINCIPAL FEDERAL ECONOMIC INDICATORS

OCT-NOV 2025 LAPSE

INTRODUCTION

This document serves as an overview of how the Economic Indicators Division of the U.S. Census Bureau has planned to recover from the lapse in funding from October 1 – November 12, 2025. It describes the core expectations of our data users and outlines how a typical Census Principal Federal Economic Indicator (PFEI) is produced. It also explains how a lapse disrupts this process, and the strategies necessary to restore our regular PFEI release schedules.

DATA USER EXPECTATIONS

To understand how PFEIs recover from a lapse in funding, it helps to first lay out our data users' core expectations. Meeting the critical needs of our data users establishes the success criteria and ensures our strategy will best serve the American public.

First, PFEI users value continuity of the time series as one of their top priorities. This means that the Census Bureau's plan to issue missed PFEI releases must result in delivery of time series with no gaps or missing reference periods and where all reference periods remain comparable. Second, PFEIs are valued for their timeliness. The longer the delay between a report's release date and its reference period, the less relevant and valuable the statistics are to our users. This means that the Census PFEI recovery plan must also ensure that release dates return to their original timing as quickly as possible.

PRODUCING A CENSUS PFEI

COLLECTION

Census PFEIs generally begin collection for a reference period immediately following the last day of that period. For example, collection of retail sales for September can't begin until October 1. If we were to try to collect earlier, any responses received before October 1 would not reflect sales for the entire month resulting in an erroneous report. While many Census Bureau indicators rely on respondents to provide data through an online portal, others require field representatives to conduct interviews or perform site visits to obtain responses. In this latter case, field representatives are shared across multiple programs with collection schedules finely tuned to ensure no overlap or resource conflicts.

Collection for a reference period generally relies on the indicator program area having already completed collecting, analyzing, and processing data from the previous period. The scope of collection for an indicator is dynamic as businesses launch, merge, or shutter, and processing these scope changes in chronological order is critical to ensure we collect data for the accurate set of respondents each month.

Finally, the data collection window for an indicator is measured in days. The specific length of a collection window is a balance between obtaining sufficient responses and ensuring the report is released as quickly as possible following the reference period.

REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

As data are collected, Census Bureau analysts must review and perform statistical analysis on the data received to ensure accuracy. These efforts focus on identifying outliers or influential responses and either validating or correcting them as appropriate. While some of this effort can begin concurrently with the start of data collection, activities related to macro analysis generally can't begin until a sufficient volume of response is received. The review, validation, and analysis of the current reference period also relies on having a collected, analyzed, and processed prior period. The comparison of current period to prior period data is a foundational component of both micro and macro analysis for Census Bureau PFEIs.

NON-RESPONSE TREATMENT

If a response is not obtained for the current period, Census Bureau PFEIs employ non-response methodology to ensure the aggregate estimates reflect the complete target population. Non-response adjustment and imputation methods used by Census Bureau PFEIs generally rely on the prior period having completed collection, analysis, and processing. High-quality prior period data is a critical input to non-response modeling for the current period.

ESTIMATION / SEASONAL ADJUSTMENT

Creating a current period aggregate estimate for a PFEI relies on completion of data collection, review and correction, and non-response treatment for the period. For some PFEIs, the estimation methodology will require the existence of a prior period estimate. For all Census PFEIs, creating a seasonally adjusted estimate for the current period requires prior periods to be complete with no gaps.

APPROVALS AND DISSEMINATION

Once a reference period is fully processed, the final stage is to prepare internal clearance and dissemination materials such as tables, reports and visualizations. These must be presented to and approved by the Census Bureau's associate director for Economic Programs prior to publication. Additionally, release materials are provided to the Council of Economic Advisors. For highly-sensitive PFEIs, a summary analysis is prepared and presented to the Office of the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs as appropriate.

LAPSE IMPACT

The lapse in funding from October 1 to November 12 impacted PFEI processing as follows.

August Reference Period – Census Bureau PFEIs had already completed collection of August responses. Some had published results prior to the lapse while others had to stop just prior to the final processing stages and dissemination.

September Reference Period – Nearly all PFEIs were able to proactively accelerate opening collection instruments for September data, allowing respondents to report during the lapse. In these cases, unprocessed response data for September were available immediately upon return from the lapse. Further processing (e.g. analysis, imputation, estimation, seasonal adjustment) could not occur until the lapse ended. Construction indicators that rely on field representatives for collection were not able to perform any collection of September data.

October Reference Period – No Census Bureau PFEIs were able to conduct any collection or processing for the October reference period.

November Reference Period and Beyond - Despite the lapse ending on November 12, all collection and processing for November reference periods forward cannot begin until previous periods are completed.

RECOVERY STRATEGY

CONSTRAINTS

The data user expectations, processing steps, and lapse impact outlined above yield two key constraints for our PFEI recovery plan:

- To deliver complete and continuous time series, any reference periods missed or delayed due to the lapse must be processed in chronological order.
- Completing a reference period requires the Census Bureau to proceed sequentially through the key processing stages (e.g. collection, analysis, estimation).

Given these constraints, the Census Bureau determines:

- For our PFEIs to return to their original release schedules, processing stages must be accelerated and condensed where possible while still adhering to established quality standards

IMPLEMENTATION

Below are the general strategies the Census Bureau is employing to bring the PFEIs back to their original release schedule as quickly as possible:

- Data collection – Shorten the collection window. For example, if the typical process allows 10 business days to obtain response, narrow it to seven days. For construction indicators that use field representatives, there may be an opportunity to collect two reference periods simultaneously.
- Review and analysis – Reduce the time allotted. Temporarily reallocate resources to prioritize high-value review and correction while ensuring the shorter analysis period will not negatively impact data quality.
- Nonresponse Treatment – Generally no change as this process is automated. Additional attention is paid to this stage to mitigate any negative effects of reduced response stemming from a shorter collection window.
- Estimation / seasonal adjustment – Minimal change as this process is mostly automated. There may be an opportunity to readjust resources to help fast track review and validation component of seasonal adjustment.
- Approvals and dissemination – Streamline internal clearance materials and presentations to core metrics required for approval. Temporarily reallocate resources to fast-track review, approval, and dissemination processes.

EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

By leveraging the strategies above, a Census Bureau PFEI such as Monthly Wholesale Trade could temporarily reduce its total processing time from 30 to 20 days. If the indicator is starting 40 days behind schedule due to the lapse, it could return to its original release cadence within four reference periods after implementing the acceleration strategy.