

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
COVID-19's Effect on the March 2020 Advance Monthly Retail Trade Survey

Data Collection

Did the Census Bureau change its data collection procedures this month?

Yes. The Census Bureau utilizes a wide variety of collection methods for its surveys. Data, particularly from businesses, are collected on paper, online, fax, and through telephone interviews. Our National Processing Center (NPC) is responsible for mailing, faxing, data capture, responding to email messages, and handling inbound/outbound calls. Services offered by NPC have been limited to ensure employee safety. As a result, data collection is now occurring primarily via email requests and online reporting. Companies that have not responded may be contacted via an automated phone tree operation or by an analyst from our headquarters.

How has the collection of Advance Monthly Retail Trade Survey data been affected?

Many businesses are operating in a limited capacity or have ceased operations completely. As a result, their ability to provide accurate, timely information to Census may be limited.

For the March 2020 Advance Monthly Sales for Retail and Food Services Report, processing and data quality were monitored throughout the month and quality metrics, including response rates, fell within normal ranges for this survey.

Methodology

Were any estimates withheld or delayed because of data collection problems?

No. All March estimates were released as scheduled.

Did the Census Bureau modify its usual weighting or estimation methods used to produce monthly retail estimates for March 2020?

No. Standard weighted and estimation methods were used to produce all indicator estimates for March 2020.

Has the reliability of the monthly retail estimates changed?

No. The reliability of the retail estimates as measured by the coefficient of variation for monthly totals and the standard error for month-to-month change has not changed substantially. For the published industries, reported data for March 2020 exhibited variation similar to that for prior months.

Seasonal Adjustment

Did the Census Bureau alter the procedures for developing seasonally adjusted estimates for monthly retail data?

Yes. An alteration was made in an option in the Census Bureau's X-13ARIMA-SEATS seasonal adjustment software (the "additive outlier adjustment" option) for the March 2020 data month for some kinds of business. This was done in effort to ensure that the published seasonally adjusted values fully include any immediate effects. These effects are not typical March effects and so should not be permitted to influence the seasonal factors for March and surrounding months. The altered option was applied to each kind of business whose March unadjusted value was found to be statistically untypical, as indicated by the appropriate t-statistic having a magnitude larger than a commonly used "critical value", and for which there were independent indications of an impact. Such indications confirm that a March survey value has an unusual potential to be untypical and justify the use of a standard critical value. In a usual month, every survey value is "blindly" tested, therefore a higher critical value is used, making it more difficult for the survey value to be classified as untypical.

What was the impact of altering the seasonal adjustment option (additive outlier adjustment) for the March 2020 data month?

The kinds of business that the alteration impacted may show a change in either direction from February. For these kinds of business, if the March values had been treated as typical, the program would have taken part of the change to be a seasonal effect and would have adjusted the data in a way that would have brought the adjusted percent change from February to March closer to zero. The altered option we used determined the changes in these kinds of business to be out of the ordinary. As a result, the February to March percent change in the adjusted value was left further from zero.

How was the survey value for a kind of business determined to be out of the ordinary?

Each month, independent indications of how each kind of business performed are researched as part of our normal review of the estimates to detect reporting errors. This research includes, but is not restricted to, conversations with companies in our survey, a review of publicly available press releases from both companies and industry associations, and a review of other economic indicators.

This month, the March value of a kind of business was considered to be out of the ordinary if it was found to be statistically untypical (as indicated by the appropriate t-statistic having a magnitude larger than a "standard" critical value) and independent sources indicated an impact.

Source: U. S. Census Bureau
Economic Indicators Division

Last Revised: April 15, 2020