

Cornell University  
ILR School

# Survey Nonresponse: Discussion

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*Federal Economic Statistics Advisory  
Committee*

December 9, 2022

## Survey Nonresponse

Trends, Challenges, and Strategies

Douglas Williams

Office of Survey Methods Research

Federal Economic Statistics Advisory Committee

December 9, 2022

U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS • bls.gov



Nonresponse In Household Surveys  
Conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau

Federal Economic Statistics Advisory Committee (FESAC)

December 9, 2022

Carolyn Pickering, Survey Director  
Demographic Programs Directorate  
U.S. Census Bureau



## Survey Non-Response: A Progress Report from BEA

Federal Economic Statistics Advisory Committee, December 9, 2022



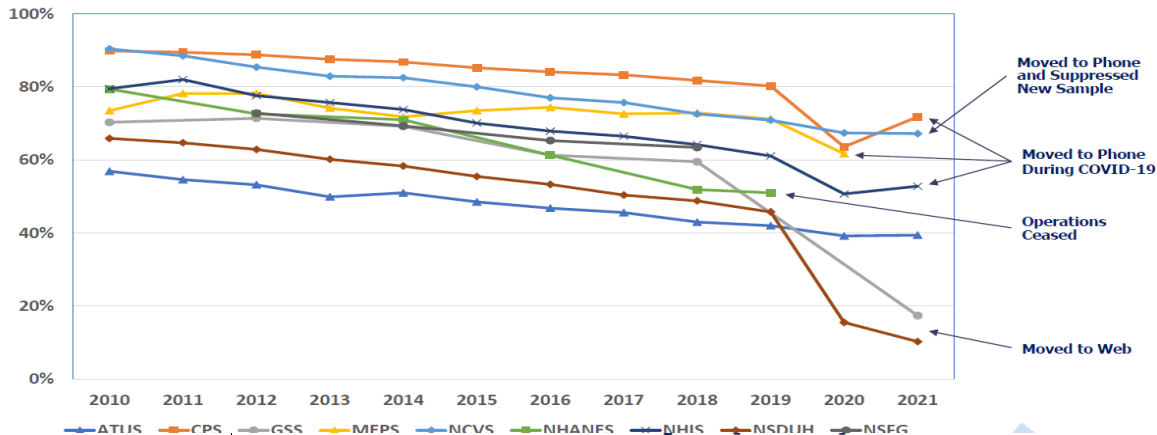
Ricardo Limes, Bureau of Economics

# Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century data infrastructure

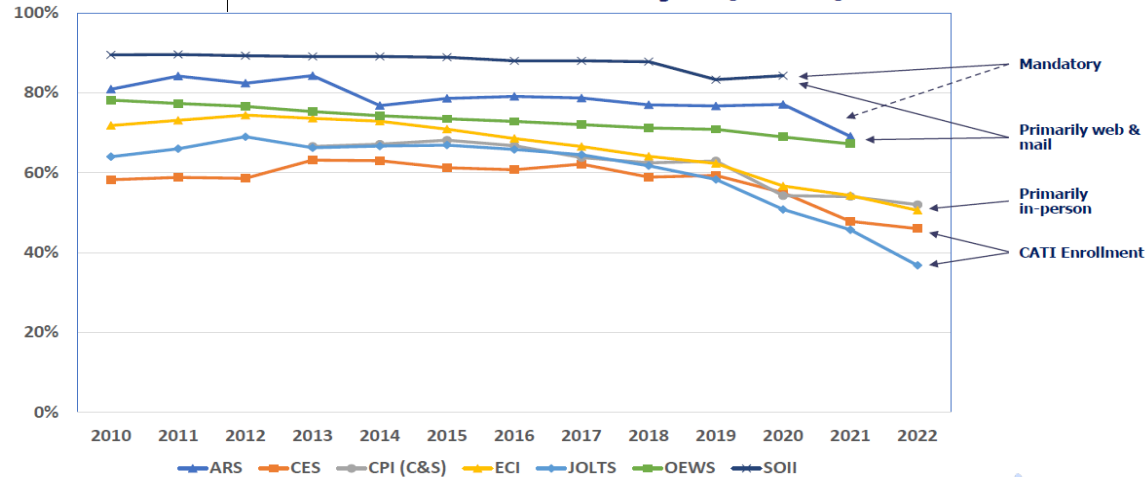
- Credible statistical info supports democratic society
- Official statistics rely heavily on surveys
  - Few other sources
  - Sample and data designed to fit measurement needs
  - Response rates high
    - Low “fatigue”
    - Public service valued



# Federal survey response rates decline



Household surveys



Business surveys

Source: Williams' slides

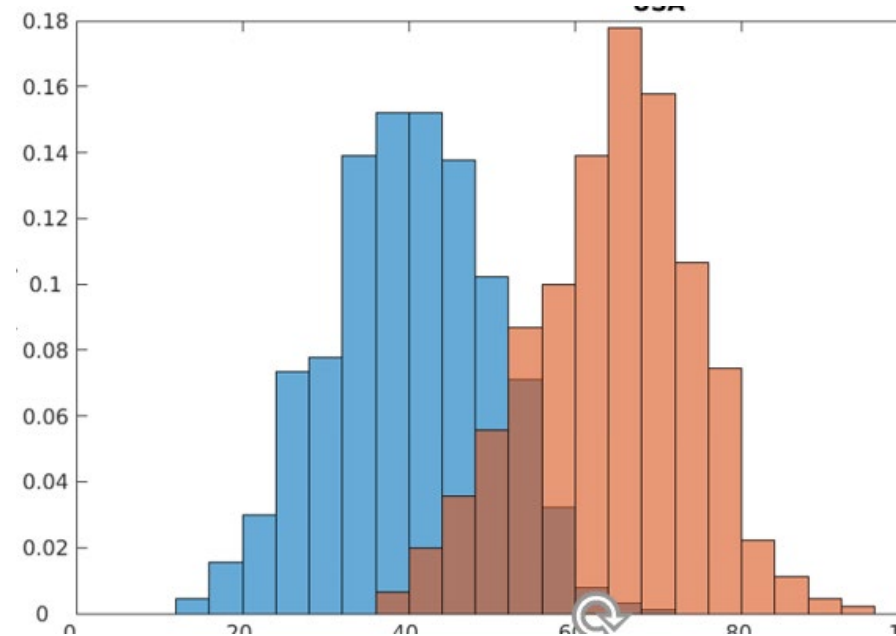
## Recent nonresponse patterns

- All trending down before COVID
  - Households more than businesses
- Immediate COVID impacts
  - All negative
  - Vary In severity and duration
  - Vary by survey and collection modes
- Recovery of response
  - Most show incomplete recovery
  - Vary in extent; households recovered more than businesses



# Falling response rates pose a threat

- Erode reliability
  - Sampling error (volatility, standard error)
  - Bias (systematic error)
- Raise costs
  - Follow-up
  - Sample expansion
  - Research



# OMB Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys

- Standard 1.3: ... ***Nonresponse bias analyses must be conducted when unit or item response rates or other factors suggest the potential for bias to occur.\****
  - Guideline 1.3.4: Plan for a nonresponse bias analysis if the expected unit response rate is **below 80 percent**.
  - Guideline 1.3.5: Plan for a nonresponse bias analysis if the expected item response rate is below 70 percent for any items used in a report.

\*Standard 3.2 says the bias analysis should be reported.

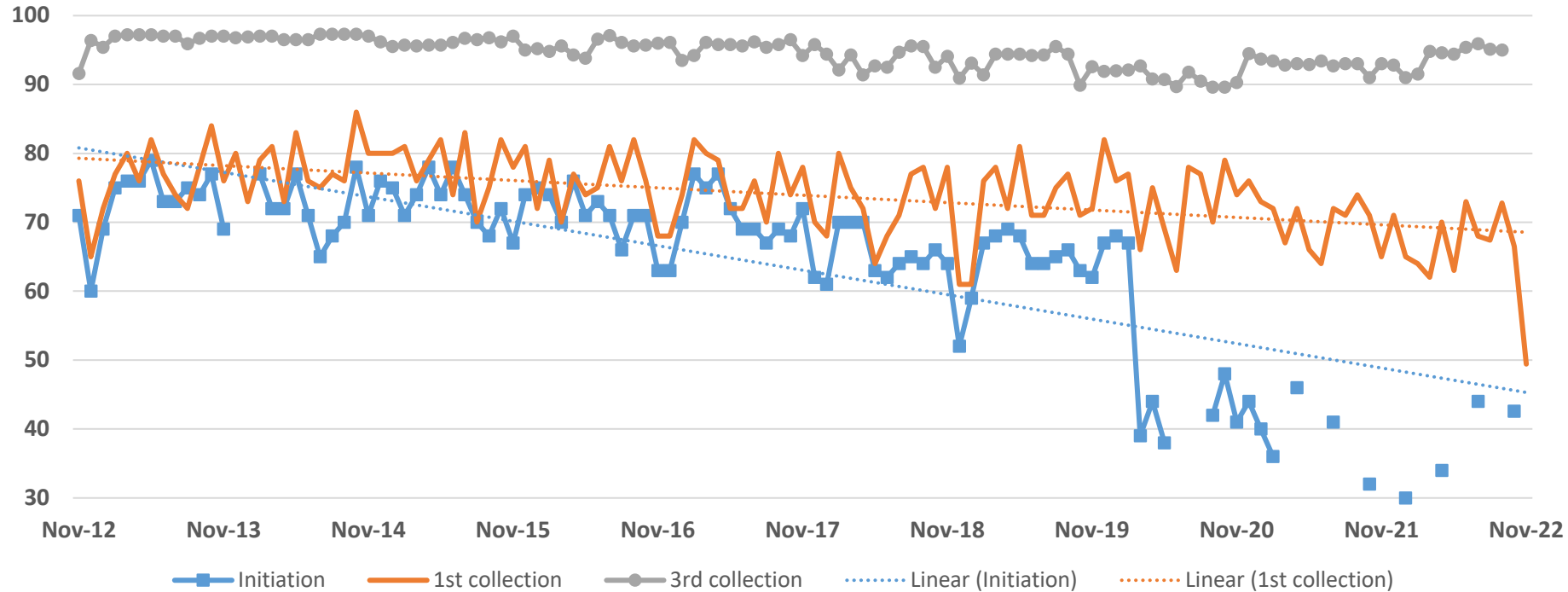


# Where are the nonresponse bias studies?

- Authors mention such estimates
- May not be finished or written up (yet) as formal working paper
  - Very many to do at once, especially during a pandemic
- User concern growing, fueled by economic uncertainties



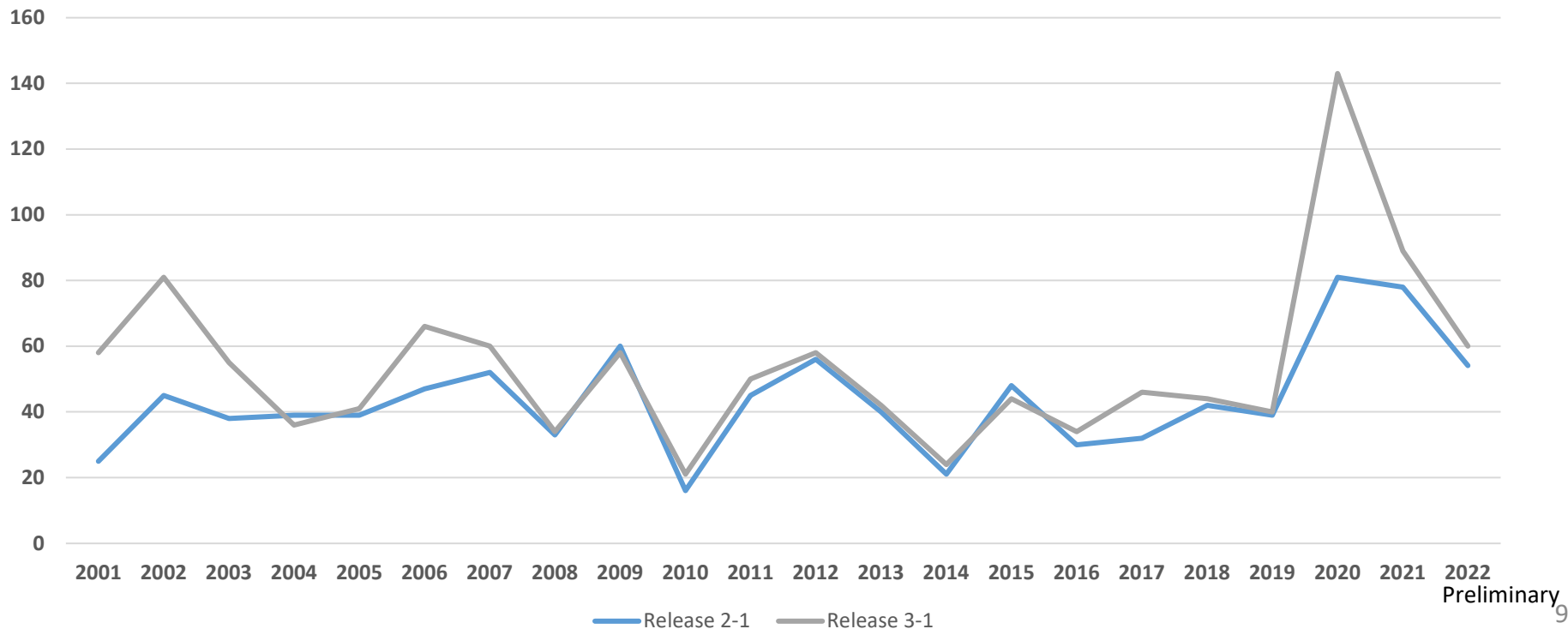
# Payroll survey (CES) initiation, and 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> release collection rates





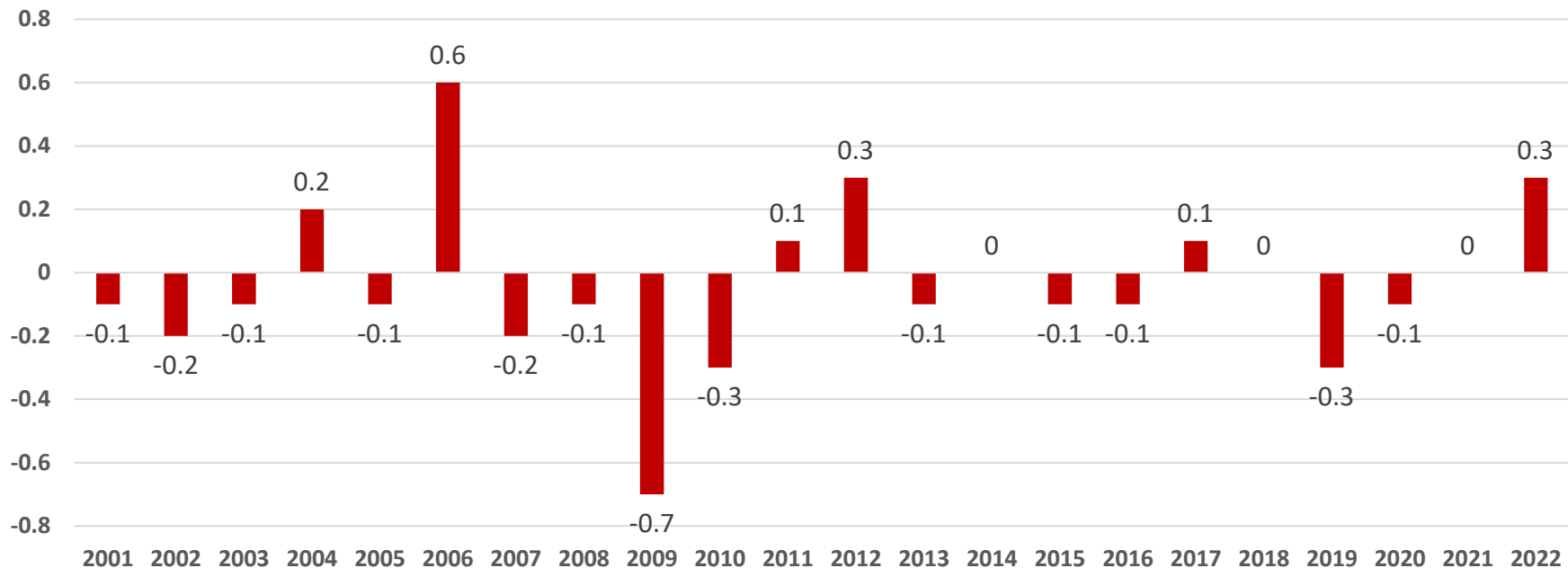
# CES revisions in over-the-month payroll change spiked during COVID and partially recovered

Annual mean absolute revision in over-the-month NSA change (thousands of payroll jobs)



# Payroll survey (CES) benchmarking reassuring

Annual adjustment (in March) as percent of total payroll jobs



Preliminary



# Solutions (not mutually exclusive), page 1

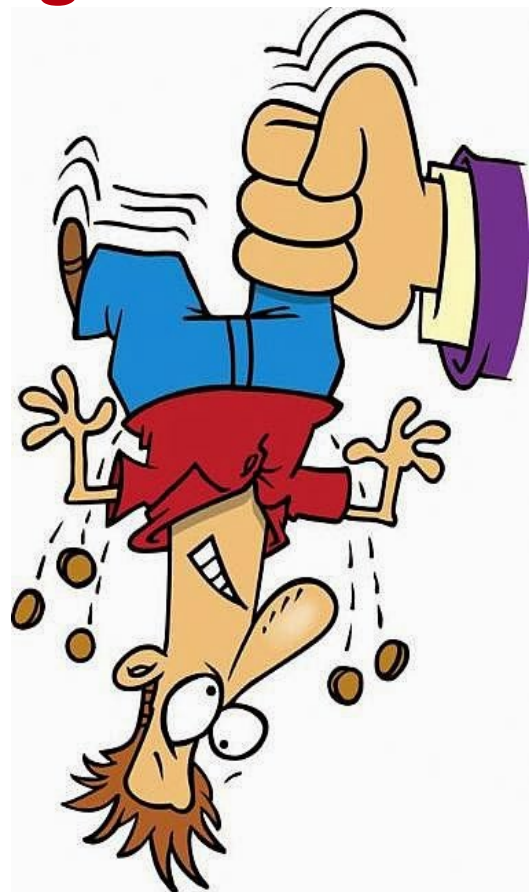
1. Spend more on sample or follow-up
  - Could increase nonresponse bias
2. Longer collection period
  - Could lower timeliness, relevance, data quality (e.g., recall issues )



# Solutions (not mutually exclusive), page 2

## 3. Reduce burden

- Collection mode—web collection, multi-mode
- Fewer questions
- Data standards (e.g., Jobs and Employment Data Exchange [JEDx] initiative)
- Address perceived risks (lawyers!)
- Inter-program/inter-agency collaboration to combine collections, reduce duplication



## Solutions (not mutually exclusive), page 3

#### 4. Incentivize participation

- Carrots: Recognition, tailored products, outreach
- Sticks: Mandates (see BEA and states)



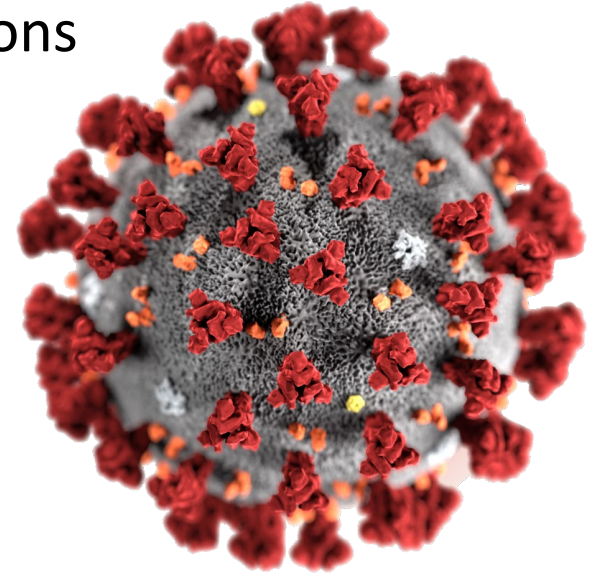
## 5. Blend or replace sources

- Administrative
- Corporate
- Crowd-sourced



# Takeaways from three excellent talks

- COVID worsened falling response rates
- Declines likely to persist without interventions
  - Likelihood of biases growing – may be undetected currently
- Time to produce/release nonresponse bias estimates
  - User concern growing



# Takeaways, continued

- Agencies concerned; surveys critical for official stats
  - More research on methods to increase response rates (old/new, general/tailored)
  - More collaboration and info exchange among programs
  - More efforts to replace/augment survey-collected data
- Progress to improve or preserve quality of official stats will require new
  - Partnerships
  - Shared vision
  - Legislative action and resources



# Thank you.

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