

Cornell University
ILR School

Survey Nonresponse: Discussion

Erica L. Groshen, Cornell U.–ILR

*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



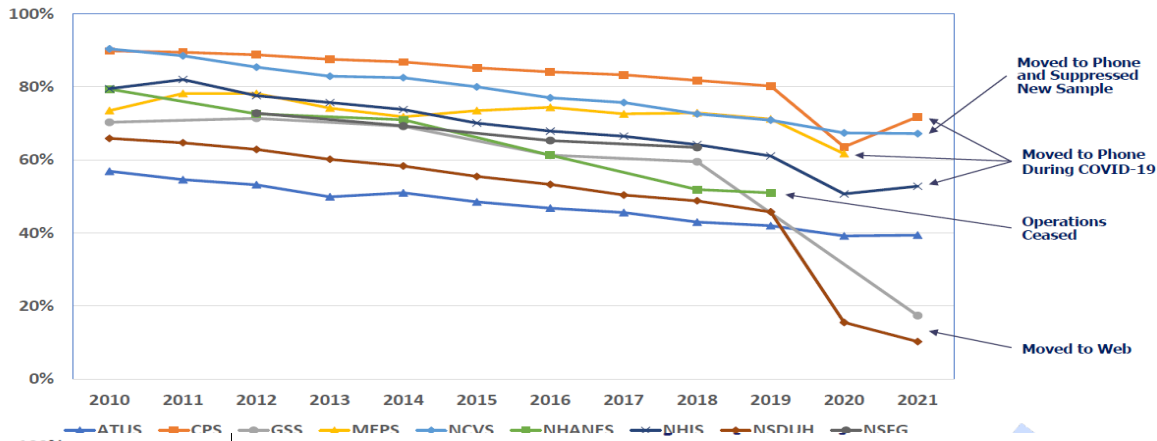
Ricardo Limes, Bureau of Economics

Mid-20th century data infrastructure

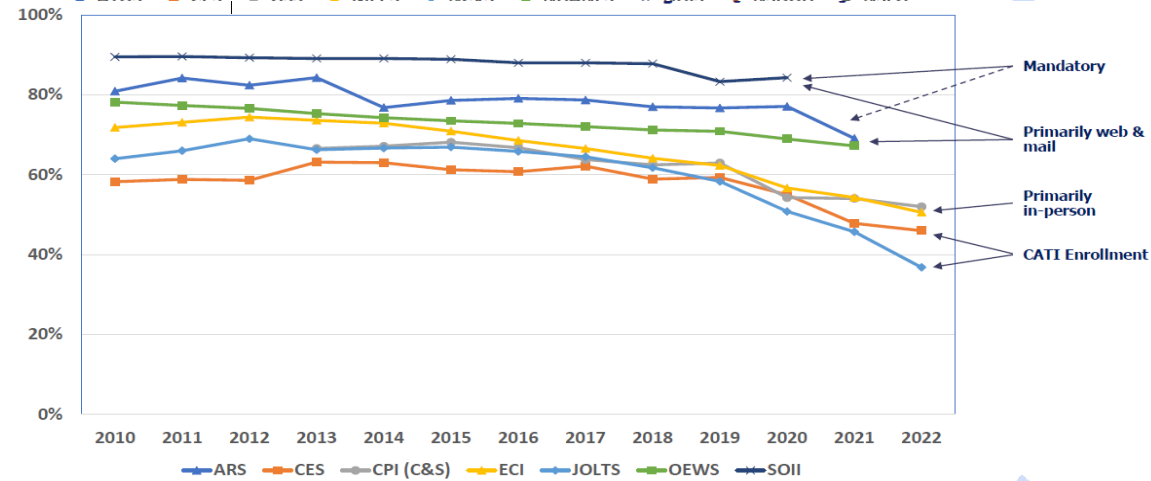
- Credible statistical info supports democratic society
- Official statistics rely heavily on surveys
 - Few other sources
 - Sample and data designed to fit measurement needs
 - Response rates high
 - Low “fatigue”
 - Public service valued



Federal survey response rates decline



Household surveys



Business surveys

Source: Williams' slides

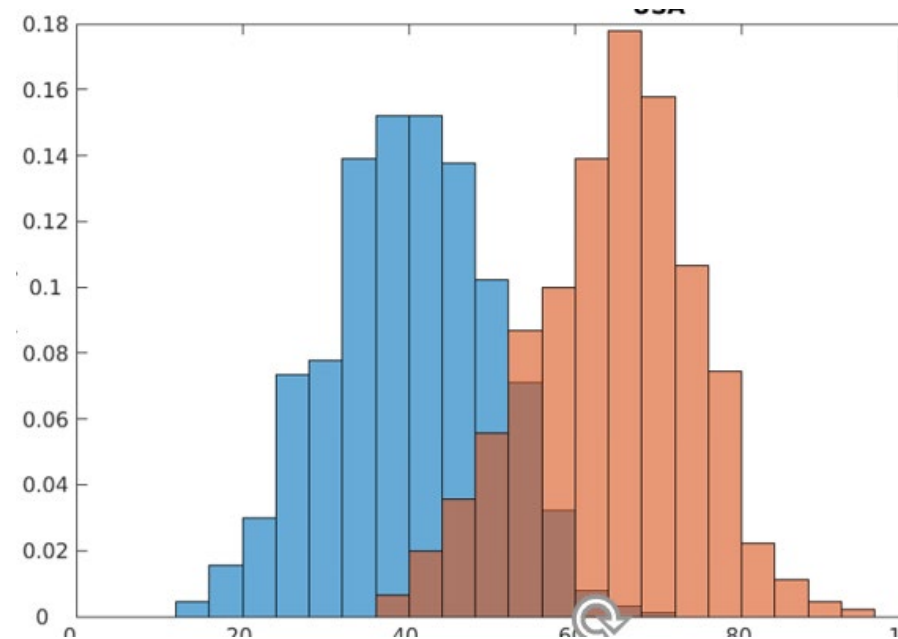
Recent nonresponse patterns

- 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.

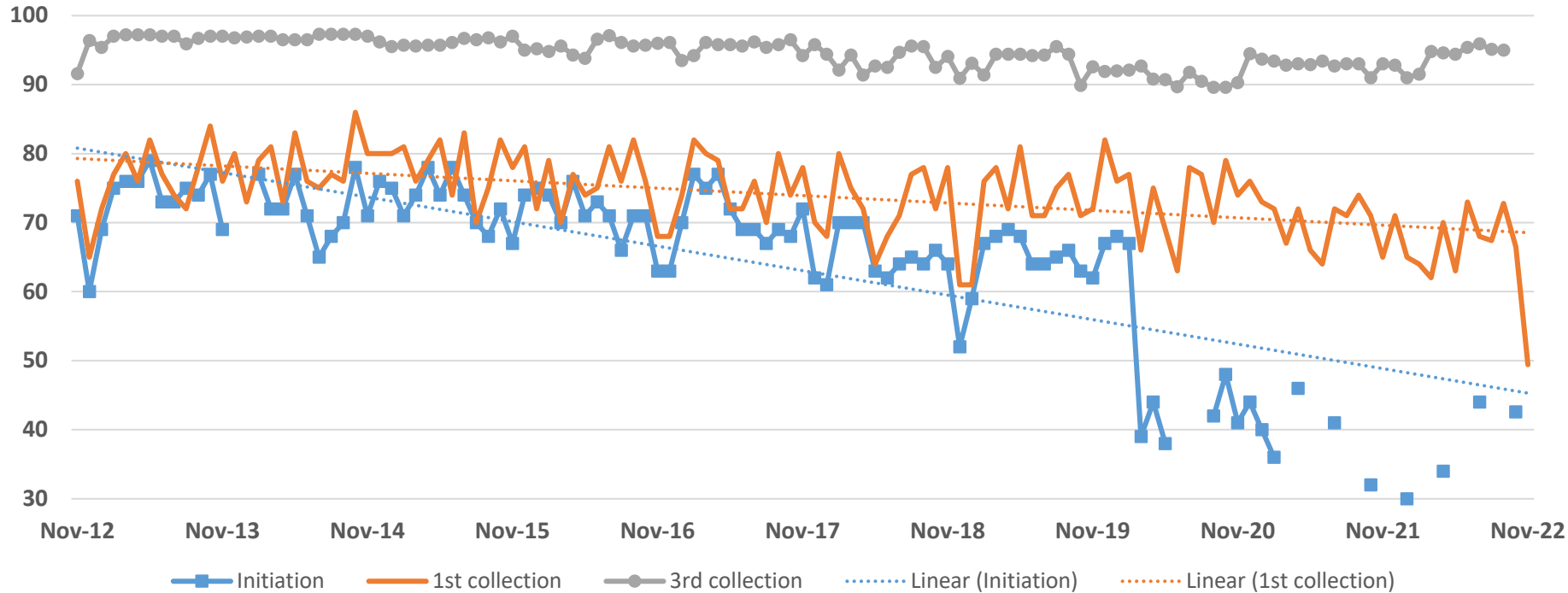


Where are the nonresponse bias studies?

- 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

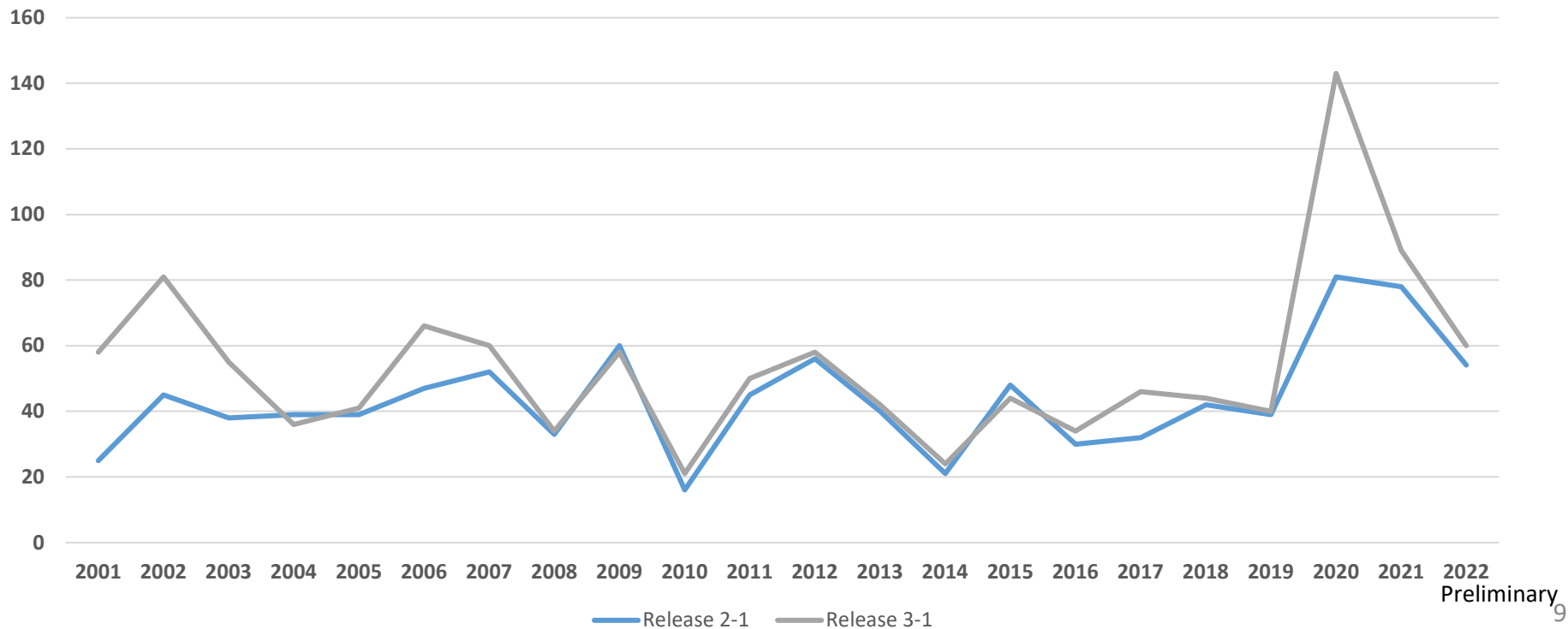


Payroll survey (CES) initiation, and 1st & 3rd release collection rates



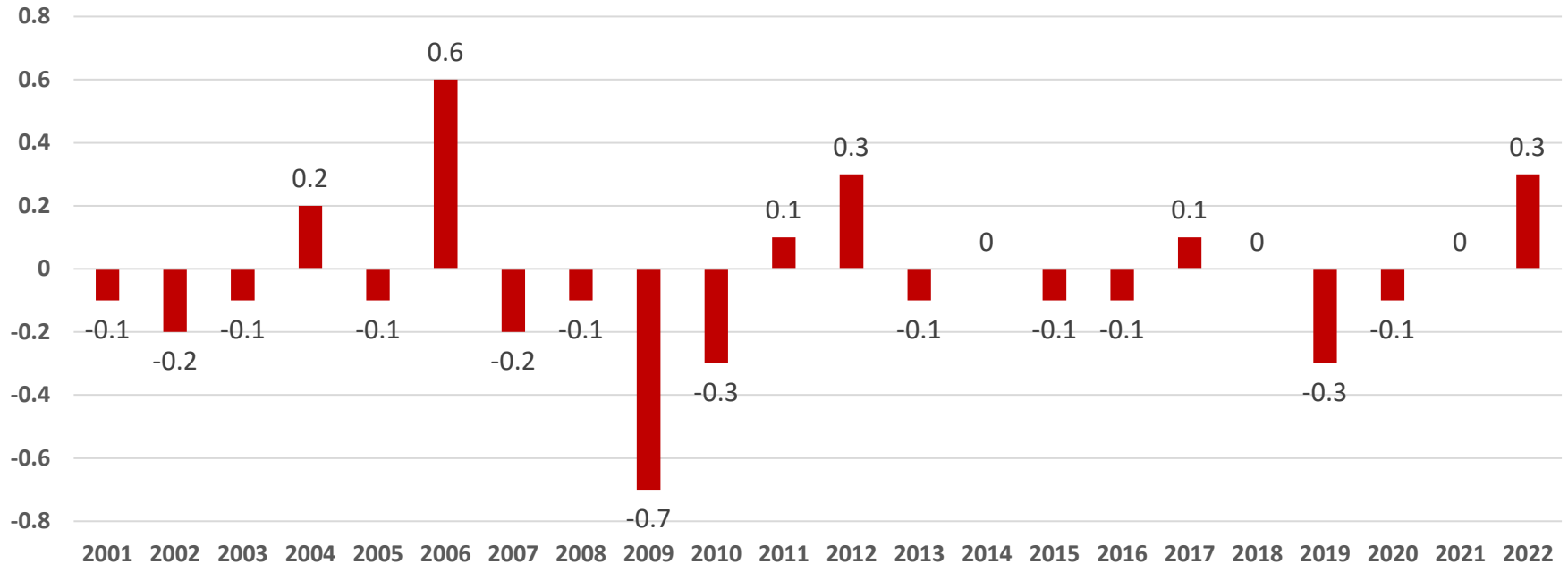
CES revisions in over-the-month payroll change spiked during COVID and partially recovered

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

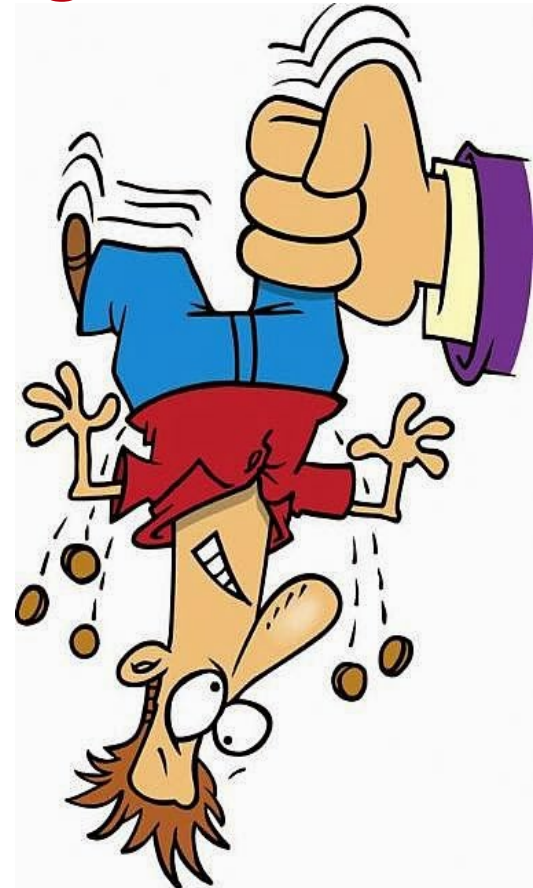
1. Spend more on sample or follow-up
 - Could increase nonresponse bias
2. Longer collection period
 - Could lower timeliness, relevance, data quality (e.g., recall issues)



Solutions (not mutually exclusive), page 2

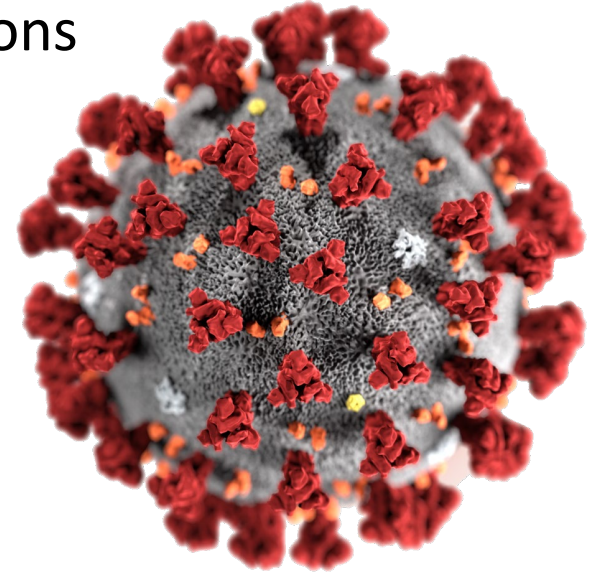
3. Reduce burden

- 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



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.

Erica L. Groshen
Cornell-ILR
erica.groshen@gmail.com

