2024 Census of Governments: Finance—Survey of Public Pensions:
State- and Locally-Administered Defined Benefit Data

Systems Methodology

The U.S. Census Bureau sponsors and conducts the Survey of Public Pensions as authorized by Title 13, United States Code, Sections 161 and 182.

The survey measures revenues, expenditures, financial assets, and membership information for public-employee pension systems classified as defined benefit plans. Data are shown for individual pension systems as well as at the national, state, and local government level. The survey yields a series of tables and files that provide users with comprehensive statistical information about the financial activity and membership of state and local government employee pension systems.

Population of Interest

The population of interest for the Census of Governments, Survey of Public Pensions includes the approximately 4,500 public employee pension systems or funds administered by state and local governments throughout the nation. Pension systems are only included if they meet the following two criteria: (1) they are sponsored by a recognized unit of government as defined by the Census Bureau and (2) their membership comprises public employees compensated with public funds. These pension systems consist of defined benefit plans – not defined contribution or post-employment healthcare plans. In years ending in '2' and '7' the entire universe is canvassed as part of the Census of Governments. In intervening years, a sample of the population of interest is surveyed.

Content of the Survey

A pension system is a pension plan in which investments, contributions, and benefits are administered as a separate entity independent of the parent government general fund. Assets are accumulated and benefits paid under a particular set of actuarial assumptions, including employee age, compensation, and service credits. They include single employer systems, in which one government is the sole sponsor of the pension plan, as well as multiple employer systems, where two or more governments maintain membership on behalf of their employees.

For both the Census of Governments and the annual survey, the detail of the data is equivalent, encompassing the entire range of financial activity for government employee pension systems – benefits paid, government contributions, employee contributions, and total holdings and investments. Total holdings and investments data include securities and other assets, such as cash and short-term investments, corporate bonds and stocks, and mortgages held directly.

The survey year encompasses the fiscal year beginning July 1 of the previous survey year and June 30 of the current survey year, which most state- and locally-administered pension systems have fiscal years that end on June 30th (for example, for the 2022 survey year covers the fiscal year from July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022). For those state- and locally-administered pension systems with fiscal years that end **after** June 30th, the survey year includes data from their previous fiscal year.

There are exceptions to the fiscal year definition rule for the state pension systems in Alabama, Michigan, and Texas. For systems in these states, the fiscal year moves beyond the June 30th cutoff, so these data cover the fiscal year from September 1 of the previous survey year to August 31 of the current survey year (TX), and from October 1 of the previous survey year to September 30 of the current survey year (AL, MI). This exception is applied to better align the pensions data with data from the The Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances.

The F-11 form used to collect these data can be found here (Annual Survey of Public Pensions Questionnaires (census.gov)). The variables collected on these forms are explained in detail in the 2006 Government Finance and Employment Classification Manual.

Data Collection

Data collected for the Census of Governments: Finance—Survey of Public Pensions: State- and Locally-Administered Defined Benefit Data are a matter of public record and are not confidential, as authorized by Title 13, United States Code, Section 9. Data for this survey were collected using the F-11 form for locally administered systems while Annual Comprehensive Financial Reports (ACFRs) were used for state administered systems.

Letters were mailed to approximately 1,600 local government employee pension systems to report to the survey. Staff contacted nonrespondents through a follow-up mailing and by way of follow-up telephone calls and emails. All respondents were requested to report their data on the Census Bureau's Internet data collection instrument. Data were submitted electronically for approximately 50 percent of the state and local pensions respondents in a given survey year. When a system returned its Annual Comprehensive Financial Report (ACFR) instead of completing the form, Census Bureau staff compiled the data using the report. Staff also used ACFRs available on the Internet to compile data for nonrespondents.
The data collection schedule Census of Governments: Finance—Survey of Public Pensions: State- and Locally-Administered Defined Benefit Data are typically follows:

Initial mail-out	October
Follow-up activities	November - March

Data Processing

Editing
Editing is a process that ensures survey data are accurate, complete, and consistent. Efforts are made at all phases of collection, processing, and tabulation to minimize errors. Although some edits are built into the Internet data collection instrument and the data entry programs, most of the edits are performed post collection. Edits consist primarily of two types: consistency edits and historical ratio edits of the current years reported value to a prior year's value.

The consistency edits check the logical relationships of data items reported on the form. For example, if a value exists for the number of retirees receiving benefits because of age or length of service then there must be a value reported for the amount of benefits paid.

The historical ratio edits compare by item code the data reported for the current year with data reported for the prior year or prior census for those not in the sample in the prior year. If data fall out of acceptable tolerance levels, the item is flagged for review.

For both types of edits, the edit results are reviewed by analysts and adjusted when needed. When analysts are unable to resolve or accept an edit failure, contact is made with the respondent to verify or correct the reported data.

Imputation

Not all respondents answer every item on the questionnaire. Effective with the 2012 Census of Governments: Finance—Survey of Public Pensions: State- and Locally-Administered Defined Benefit Data, the Survey improved upon item imputation methodology to fill in missing data based on grouping similar pension systems together. Both partial and full nonrespondents were imputed using either a median growth rate, cell median, or cell median distribution.

Nonsampling Error

The data from this survey are subject to nonsampling error. Although every effort is made in all phases of collection, processing, and tabulation to minimize errors, these data are subject to nonsampling errors such as the inability to obtain data for every variable from all units in the survey, inaccuracies in classification, nonresponse errors, misinterpretation of questions, mistakes in keying and coding, and coverage errors.

Overall Response Rate

The overall response rate for the Census of Governments: Finance—Survey of Public Pensions: State- and Locally-Administered Defined Benefit Data was 77.0 percent. The response rate was calculated as the number of responses received divided by the number of parent governments mailed minus the number of governments that were determined to be out of scope.

Total Quantity Response Rate

The Total Quantity Response Rate for Total Cash and Investments (RZ01) of the Census of Governments: Finance—Survey of Public Pensions: State- and Locally-Administered Defined Benefit Data was 99.1 percent. The Total Quantity Response Rate was calculated as the value of "total holdings and investments" reported divided by the estimated total value of "total holdings and investments" of those units mailed minus those systems that were determined to be out of scope.

Tabulation

After the data were edited and imputed, the Census of Governments, Survey of Public Pension data were aggregated at the national and state geographies and for state and local levels of government. Data are published for assets, revenues, and expenditures in whole dollars. Data on membership is also published on a per-person basis.

Sampling Variability

The data for the census are not subject to sampling and do not contain sampling error, but they are subject to nonsampling error. The user should be mindful that the data for years not ending in '2' or '7' are from sample surveys and are subject to sampling error. Discussions of sampling error are available in the survey methodology descriptions for those years. For any comparisons of census year data to a sample year, the data user must perform hypothesis tests using the survey year's sampling errors.

Content Changes

Effective with the 2019 data release, the survey content was revised to streamline asset categories and remove data items that were not published. Further, the item codes were revamped in the process. Survey

years 2017 & 2018 were revised to fit this new publication schema.

For data users interested in the granular asset details, the Quarterly Survey of Public Pensions was redesigned to provide greater detail on asset holdings.