

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
COVID-19's Effect on the December 2020 Monthly Wholesale Trade Survey

Data Collection

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

For the December 2020 Monthly Wholesale Trade 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 there any estimates withheld or delayed because of data collection problems?

No. All December estimates were released as scheduled.

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

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

Has the reliability of the monthly wholesale estimates changed?

No. The reliability of the wholesale 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 December 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 wholesale 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 December 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 December effects and so should not be permitted to influence the seasonal factors for December and surrounding months. The altered option was applied to each kind of business whose December 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 the December 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 December 2020 data month?

The kinds of business that the alteration impacted may show a change in either direction from November. For these kinds of business, if the December 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 November to December 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 November to December 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 December 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.

Additional Information

Are there additional Census Bureau resources available on the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Yes. The Census Bureau has created a [COVID-19 reference page](#) which includes links to relevant Census data sources.

Source: U. S. Census Bureau
Economic Indicators Division

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