

BLS Strategic Plan

FY 2020–2025



U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS



Introduction

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) was established in 1884 to “collect information upon the subject of labor, its relation to capital, the hours of labor and earnings of laboring men and women, and the means of promoting their material, social, intellectual and moral prosperity.” The first BLS Commissioner, Carroll Wright, described the work of the agency as “conducting judicious investigations and the fearless publication of results.”

That mission continues today.

MISSION STATEMENT: The Bureau of Labor Statistics measures labor market activity, working conditions, price changes, and productivity in the U.S. economy to support public and private decision making.

We adhere to a set of **VALUES and PRINCIPLES** that guide us in fulfilling our mission, including:

- We execute our mission with independence from partisan interests
- We strive to meet the needs of a diverse set of customers for accurate, objective, relevant, timely, and accessible information
- We protect the confidentiality of our data providers
- We employ innovative methods to keep pace with the rapidly-changing economy
- We support our staff and are good stewards of the taxpayers' money.

VISION STATEMENT: To be the gold-standard source of data and analyses on U.S. labor markets, working conditions, price changes, and productivity.

Who we are

BLS achieves its mission through the dedicated work of over 2,000 federal employees working at headquarters in the national capital region, in six regional offices, and in localities across the country. This staff is comprised of economists, statisticians, data scientists, information technology specialists, researchers, administrative specialists, and many other professionals. To assist us in achieving our mission, we maintain partnerships with state and territorial governments, coordinate with other federal statistical agencies, and contract with private vendors for data collection, information technology, and related services.

As an agency of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), BLS provides statistical guidance to the department and its agencies and works in partnership with those agencies to support their data needs. We support the DOL's mission "To foster, promote, and develop the welfare of the wage earners, job seekers, and retirees of the United States; improve working conditions; advance opportunities for profitable employment; and assure work-related benefits and rights."

Though part of the Executive Branch, we conduct our work with independence to ensure that our data and analyses are objective and free of partisan influence. Such independence is the hallmark of the decentralized U.S. statistical system, which includes many separate agencies typically located within cabinet-level departments. These agencies follow a series of laws, regulations, and guidelines to ensure that statistical policy is consistent across the government, including:

- Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act, which incorporates the Confidential Information Protection and Statistical Efficiency Act
- Statistical Policy Directives issued by the Office of Management and Budget
- Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency issued by the Committee on National Statistics of the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine.

Further, BLS is a member of the Interagency Council on Statistical Policy, which provides a forum for federal statistical agencies to share ideas, coordinate common activities, and improve operations.

We live in an age where data are ubiquitous, used for everything from where to position the defense on the baseball diamond to what advertisement will appear in social media feeds. BLS has been in the data business since our founding, but must also keep pace with this new world of data. To that end, BLS supports the Federal Data Strategy, which complements our efforts to be the innovative leader in measuring the U.S. economy.

What we do

As stated in our mission statement, BLS measures labor market activities, working conditions, price changes, and productivity in the U.S. economy. We do this through the operation of about 20 statistical programs. These programs operate in a variety of ways: some provide a monthly "first-look" at economic activity, some track activity over time, some take an in-depth look at specific aspects of the economy, and some offer detailed information available for further research. While each statistical program is unique, nearly all follow these general steps:

planning, testing, sample selection, data collection, review, estimation, and dissemination. BLS has staff who are experts in each of these areas.

Most BLS data come from surveys, nearly all of which are voluntary. We extend our appreciation to the businesses and households who are called upon to provide information. Without their voluntary cooperation, we would be unable to provide high-quality data.

From its roots more than a century ago, BLS has focused on getting information to customers quickly, in an understandable way, and with sufficient technical detail to help users understand the data and their limitations. Today, those goals are achieved by announcing release dates in advance, providing information in many formats (including video, interactive graphics, and social media posts), and maintaining a robust catalog that details our methodology. To expand upon the output that BLS provides, we make much of our data available for further statistical analysis to qualified researchers under strict confidentiality agreements.

BLS data influence many aspects of Americans' lives. For example, the Consumer Price Index is used to adjust Social Security payments and federal income tax brackets while the Employment Cost Index is one of several BLS sources used to adjust Medicare reimbursements. Several national data series, including employment, unemployment, and productivity, are used by policymakers to track the state of the economy and to drive changes in economic policy. State and local employment and unemployment data are inputs to formulas used to distribute job training funds and other resources. Trends on worker pay, health insurance, and retirement benefits have influenced legislation while workplace injury data have led to new safety regulations.

Some BLS programs have existed for over a century while others are but a few years old. We continue to seek improvements for all programs. In some cases, this may take the form of new data sources. The rapid expansion of electronic data provides both challenges and opportunities for BLS. We are addressing those challenges by researching and beginning to use alternative data sources, both to supplement and to replace our traditional collection methods. We are also looking at how the world is changing, and how our statistics must change to keep pace. This includes new forms of work to be tracked by employment programs, new goods and services to be tracked by our price and consumer spending programs, new forms of compensation to be measured, and much more.

To help in this work, BLS seeks input from many stakeholders. We sponsor formal advisory committees that provide regular input from representatives of labor, business, government, research, academic organizations, and other groups. One such committee provides advice on

technical issues of common interest to the three U.S. statistical agencies that focus on economic data: BLS; the Census Bureau, and the Bureau of Economic Analysis. Beyond these formal groups, BLS is constantly seeking informal input from businesses, individuals, and other organizations.

Finally, BLS staff participate in a variety of organizations and activities that allow us to share our expertise, build relationships, and learn from colleagues. We provide seminars and training opportunities for our staff, colleagues in other agencies, and international visitors. We participate in:

- Professional associations, such as the American Statistical Association
- Cross-government groups, such as those responsible for updating industry and occupation classification systems
- International groups, such as the United Nations High Level Group for the Modernization of Official Statistics.

Management of the Plan

This plan was developed by BLS senior staff in 2018 and 2019. Senior staff sought input from a variety of stakeholders and gleaned information from customer comments and satisfaction surveys. The plan includes one strategy that recognizes the major production activities that are the core work of the agency – we issue about 170 national data releases and over 800 regional data releases every year. Beyond that, the plan identifies four additional strategies that focus on what we do, how we do it, and the improvements we envision in the coming years.

The BLS executive staff is responsible for the oversight of this Strategic Plan. Progress on the strategies, goals, and objectives identified in the plan is monitored on a quarterly basis. This monitoring includes performance measures, such as the timeliness and accuracy of data releases, as well as progress toward completion of specific objectives. Formal project management reporting systems and periodic status meetings are used to track our internal and external performance commitments.

We are confident that the strategies and goals identified in this plan will put BLS on a path for continued success over the coming years. Nonetheless, a challenge in planning over several years is the uncertainty over future budgets and future priorities of the administration and Congress. We have built this plan on the basis of current information. As priorities change, we will make needed adjustments.

Our Strategies and Goals

STRATEGY 1 (Production): Produce objective statistics and analyses that are accurate and released on time

This Strategy recognizes that the core mission of BLS is to continue to produce the highest quality economic statistics and analyses. Strategy 1 is unique. Unlike the other strategies, this strategy encompasses ongoing production rather than improvement. Fulfilling this strategy requires not only the dedicated work of staff directly involved in each of these programs, but also the high-quality work of expert staff who perform important functions in the areas of administration, information technology, data collection and other field operations, statistical methods, publications, and data dissemination.



STRATEGY 2 (Valued and trusted data): Advance the measurement of BLS statistics to ensure they remain relevant in describing the dynamic U.S. economy

As economic trends and issues change, BLS is committed to updating the information we collect and study to remain relevant in describing the dynamic U.S. economy. BLS will engage in research to advance economic theory and statistical techniques related to measurement. Through these efforts and the innovations of others, BLS will improve the accuracy, timeliness, and relevance of existing measures and will expand coverage to enhance the usefulness of our data to our customers. By engaging with our stakeholders, BLS will gain a better understanding of customer needs to inform our priorities and will foster greater public trust through continued transparency and improved clarity of methods. This Strategy focuses on improvements.

Goal 2.1 Ensure relevance in an ever-changing economy and respond to evolving needs

- Objective 2.1.1 – Engage in research to understand the changing economy
- Objective 2.1.2 – Pursue improvements to make existing data more relevant
- Objective 2.1.3 – Develop new data, expand coverage, and test experimental data series

Goal 2.2 Improve the accuracy and timeliness of BLS data through advances in economic theory and innovations in statistical techniques

- Objective 2.2.1 – Evaluate and contribute to research that enhances economic theory and statistical techniques

- Objective 2.2.2 – Improve data quality and timeliness by applying advances in economic theory and statistical techniques
- Objective 2.2.3 – Maximize the amount of releasable data by implementing innovative disclosure avoidance techniques that protect respondent confidentiality

Goal 2.3 Foster greater public trust through improved transparency and clarity of methods

- Objective 2.3.1 – Ensure transparency by maintaining and improving clear, up-to-date documentation on BLS methodology
- Objective 2.3.2 – Remove barriers to ensure equal access to BLS data
- Objective 2.3.3 – Develop and implement standards for providing measures of data reliability to users

Goal 2.4 Ensure BLS priorities align with stakeholder needs

- Objective 2.4.1 – Regularly adjust the membership of BLS Advisory Committees and the agendas of their meetings to ensure timely and useful feedback can be incorporated into program and product development
- Objective 2.4.2 – Collect quantitative and qualitative input to understand stakeholder needs
- Objective 2.4.3 – Strengthen working relationships with organizations that are current or potential sponsors for the development of products that fall within the BLS mission and its strategic goals

STRATEGY 3 (Source data innovation): Reengineer data sources and collection methods to balance statistical quality with survey costs, including respondent burden, and to ensure transparency

The quality of BLS statistics is the direct result of the collected data, traditionally available from employers and households. Increasingly, alternative sources of data can both complement and substitute for our directly-collected data. Further, BLS will expand data collection methods to limit burden on and increase flexibility for data providers. This Strategy focuses on our source data.

Goal 3.1 Integrate alternative data into BLS programs

- Objective 3.1.1 – Identify alternative data sources, including administrative data
- Objective 3.1.2 – Evaluate the “fitness for use” of alternative data sources and develop methods to incorporate these data into BLS programs

- Objective 3.1.3 – Incorporate alternative data and methods into BLS programs and survey processes
- Objective 3.1.4 – Increase collaboration and information sharing within BLS and with other organizations, including international statistical organizations, on alternative data sources and their uses

Goal 3.2 Improve data collection processes

- Objective 3.2.1 – Ensure the reliability of existing electronic data collection systems and processes
- Objective 3.2.2 – Expand and improve electronic data collection to provide respondents with IT solutions to report data efficiently and better manage their reporting burden
- Objective 3.2.3 – Enhance IT systems to increase capacity to collect and process alternative data
- Objective 3.2.4 – Increase coordination in data collection and sharing across BLS programs and with other governmental organizations, including coordination prescribed by the Foundations for Evidence-based Policymaking Act of 2018
- Objective 3.2.5 – Expand the use of paradata (data about data) for assessing data collection

Goal 3.3 Balance quality with the cost of data collection, including respondent burden

- Objective 3.3.1 – Pursue a research agenda that integrates new technology and alternative data sources as part of a continuous process to increase data quality while reducing costs and respondent burden
- Objective 3.3.2 – Explore innovative sampling design and estimation alternatives to allow targeted data collection that increases data quality while reducing costs and respondent burden
- Objective 3.3.3 – Conduct research on ways to encourage voluntary participation and reduce respondent burden



STRATEGY 4 (Organizational excellence): Provide visionary leadership that upholds and improves our standing as a dynamic, world-class statistical agency

The activities identified throughout this plan can only be accomplished through strong leadership and the dedicated work of BLS staff, our greatest asset. We strive to be good stewards of all our resources – staff, budget, and information technology – and foster future leaders who will continue these efforts. This Strategy focuses on our staff and our other resources.

Goal 4.1 Pursue dynamic BLS-wide governance and program performance management structures to guide decision-making, inform priorities, and achieve results

- Objective 4.1.1 – Leverage a strategic and operational planning process to establish agency-wide performance goals and measures that optimize resource deployment
- Objective 4.1.2 – Assess goal attainment, address new or emerging priorities, and mitigate risks through a rigorous quarterly review and analysis process
- Objective 4.1.3 – Enhance documentation of internal BLS practices to replicate and continuously improve operations
- Objective 4.1.4 – Identify and execute program improvements through a regular program review and planning process
- Objective 4.1.5 – Assure continuous risk management is embedded across all mission-critical activities and operations, including BLS performance management, to identify, mitigate, and manage threats and vulnerabilities

Goal 4.2 Recruit, train, and engage a talented and diverse workforce, encourage and reward innovation, and implement robust succession planning to meet our workforce needs

- Objective 4.2.1 – Draw on the talents, expertise, and creativity of agency staff to inspire a collaborative agency-wide culture of continuous learning and achievement
- Objective 4.2.2 – Advocate for professional staff development and growth through support for staff cross-training, participation in multi-functional user groups and teams, and opportunities to generate and be part of innovative solutions within Bureau programs
- Objective 4.2.3 – Provide opportunities for staff to stay abreast of emerging trends and changes in BLS topic areas, ensuring that the BLS workforce is ready for the challenges of the coming decades
- Objective 4.2.4 – Empower, recognize, and reward staff innovations
- Objective 4.2.5 – Create a talent sourcing strategy to identify and continuously engage with a skilled network of workers to fill current and future workforce needs
- Objective 4.2.6 – Maintain a strong staff retention and succession plan by developing aspiring and new leaders, providing them with opportunities to serve and gain experience in leadership roles, and establishing a robust strategy for knowledge transfer

Goal 4.3 Optimize the use of financial resources

- Objective 4.3.1 – Preserve transparency and accountability in the execution of budgeted resources

- Objective 4.3.2 – Champion innovation by investing strategically in the future state of the organization

Goal 4.4 Advocate for staff by providing leadership in national and regional office space changes

- Objective 4.4.1 – Plan, advocate, and execute a compelling change management and communication strategy resulting in the smooth transition of BLS staff to a new national office headquarters
- Objective 4.4.2 – Deliver strategic, cost saving regional office workspace consolidation plans and work toward efficient implementation

Goal 4.5 Participate and provide leadership in government reform activities

- Objective 4.5.1 – Develop solutions in support of ongoing shared service initiatives
- Objective 4.5.2 – Keep abreast of, and prepare to participate in, future government reform activities

Goal 4.6 Advance IT modernization through a mission-responsive and cost-effective IT Portfolio

- Objective 4.6.1 – Devote resources to equip BLS with a modern, reliable IT infrastructure
- Objective 4.6.2 – Modernize BLS applications to support next generation data collection, analytics, and public dissemination
- Objective 4.6.3 – Improve systems development processes to reduce development time and improve efficiency

Goal 4.7 Be a leader in the national and international statistical community

- Objective 4.7.1 – Maintain and improve leadership in economic, statistical and professional communities
- Objective 4.7.2 – Strengthen the research environment at BLS
- Objective 4.7.3 – Enhance collaboration with BLS partner organizations (such as Census, Bureau of Economic Analysis, states, data providers), consistent with the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act
- Objective 4.7.4 – Strengthen activities related to providing data and technical assistance to the international statistical community in BLS topic areas, statistics, and survey methodology
- Objective 4.7.5 – Actively engage with international statistical organizations to learn about new research, methods, and technologies outside the United States and incorporate best practices



STRATEGY 5 (Seamless customer experience): _____
Provide information in ways that are easy for a broad customer base to access, understand, and use

BLS information must be readily available for a broad range of data users to inform their decisions. As methods of sharing information expand in the digital age, BLS must continue to expand the ways that we provide data. This Strategy focuses on our customers.

Goal 5.1 Continue to improve customer experience on the BLS website

- Objective 5.1.1 – Ensure website content stays current
- Objective 5.1.2 – Continually monitor best practices in website design to improve functionality, navigation, search, and available tools
- Objective 5.1.3 – Improve accessibility of the website by ensuring all materials are Section 508 compliant and content follows plain English “writing for the web” principles
- Objective 5.1.4 – Develop a more effective feedback system for BLS.gov that provides actionable recommendations to BLS programs and offices on customer satisfaction and website performance

Goal 5.2 Create a new public database that expands available data and improves access

- Objective 5.2.1 – Solicit and evaluate available vendors and information technology solutions that might assist in developing a new BLS data repository
- Objective 5.2.2 – Develop and finalize requirements for a data repository with appropriate tools for data users to query, assemble, and format desired information across BLS programs
- Objective 5.2.3 – Develop an action plan toward release of initial version

Goal 5.3 Evaluate and use new methods and platforms to deliver BLS content to our customers

- Objective 5.3.1 – Broaden transmittal of BLS content through current platforms, including videos, blogs, and social media
- Objective 5.3.2 – Keep up with technology by identifying and evaluating new and emerging dissemination platforms, implementing them as feasible
- Objective 5.3.3 – Review and update formats of news releases, other data reports, Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), and other outputs to better meet online user needs

Goal 5.4 Broaden communication and outreach efforts to promote the BLS brand to data users and survey respondents

- Objective 5.4.1 – Develop and implement a targeted outreach plan to (1) educate potential customers on the availability and use of BLS data products, and (2) promote the value of survey participation to current and potential respondents
- Objective 5.4.2 – Continue to conduct Data Users Conferences and other outreach events sponsored by offices and programs across BLS
- Objective 5.4.3 – Develop and expand partnerships with key stakeholders to build supporters and advocates for BLS, including State Labor Market Information offices, state and local economic development entities, and schools of journalism
- Objective 5.4.4 – Provide explanatory material to help the public understand and use BLS measures and concepts effectively

Goal 5.5 Continue to support and expand secure microdata access by outside researchers, utilizing the latest technology and being consistent with current and future data sharing legislation

- Objective 5.5.1 – Continue to support secure microdata access onsite at BLS while exploring alternatives
- Objective 5.5.2 – Continue to support secure microdata access to selected data sets at the Federal Statistical Research Data Centers
- Objective 5.5.3 – Transition to secure microdata access offsite via a virtual platform
- Objective 5.5.4 – Streamline the review process for approving access to microdata by outside researchers

