Findings and Recommendations from Communications Research for the Annual Integrated Economic Survey

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Economic Programs Directorate [for external release]

U.S. Census Bureau [for external release]

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The Census Bureau has reviewed this data product to ensure appropriate access, use, and disclosure avoidance protection of the confidential source data (Project No. P-7529180, Disclosure Review Board (DRB) approval number: CBDRB-FY26-ESMD010-005).

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Executive Summary

Researchers in the Data Collection and Methodology Research Branch (DCMRB) of the Economic Statistical Methods Division (ESMD) and the Economy-Wide Statistics Division (EWD) conducted cognitive testing with 30 participants to evaluate communication materials for the Annual Integrated Economic Survey (AIES) SY24.

Findings included:

- Participants felt that the email communications were straightforward and explained what they were being asked to do.
- Participants said that the login instructions were prominently located in the email and easy to understand.
- Some participants would like to see a short description of the types of data they would need to complete the survey.
- Most participants are motivated to complete the AIES because it is legally required.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to evaluate email communications that inform participants that they must complete the AIES. These interviews tested participants' understanding of what they are being asked to do, how to access the survey, and that the AIES is mandatory. Participants in the evaluation were also asked their opinions about possible data visualizations that could be included in the emails, their motivations for completing the AIES, switching to email contacts only, any confidentiality concerns, how to refer to the survey, how they would like to learn about upcoming AIES changes, and if they would like to add a secondary contact email address.

Research Methodology

Interviews took 40 minutes to one hour and followed a semi-structured protocol (Appendix A). The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, with participants accessing the materials with a Qualtrics instrument.

Participants reviewed four emails (Appendix B). An initial email introducing the AIES, a reminder email intended to be sent before the due date, the "nudge" email intended to be sent after the due date to remind participants without emphasizing legal consequences, and the final email, which does emphasize legal consequences if the survey is not completed. Participants were asked to click on parts of the emails that were most prominent or noticeable. Qualtrics saved these click data as heat maps, which show the areas that were clicked on the most.

The participants also reviewed a series of potential data visualizations that could be included with the emails (Appendix C). The participants rated them on a scale of 1-5 and gave qualitative feedback on the materials.

Participants

Thirty interviews were conducted. Most companies were small, with only six of them being multi-units. Eight of the companies were in manufacturing, five were in other services (except public administration), and four were in retail trade. The remaining thirteen companies were in other sectors: transportation and warehousing, finance and insurance, real estate and rental and leasing, professional, scientific, and technical services, management of companies and enterprises, administrative and support and waste management and remediation services, health care and social assistance, and accommodation and food services. Participants' job titles included: business manager, controller, executive director, chief financial officer, administrative assistant, and third-party accountant.

Limitations

This study is limited by its non-statistically representative sample of small companies. Since participation in the study was voluntary, the study participants were likely more cooperative and helpful than the average respondent. These participants may have different opinions than others who are resistant to completing the AIES.

Findings and Recommendations

General findings and recommendations for all emails

Participants liked the layout of the login instructions and felt it was clear what they were being asked to do.

- *"The way you have it summarized is good because I don't have a whole lot of time, so I like less, but more efficient information."*
- *"The due date placement is fine where it is. Since it's offset by the lines, it gives you more information and shows it out."*
- *"I think the instructions are clear on how to complete it."*
- *"It's organized nicely in sections. The bold at top is something that helps me understand what it's about, one thing I really appreciate."*

Some participants said that they would prefer to know a general outline of the topics included in the survey to help them prepare records they would need to respond. These participants said that it would be easier for them to gather the information they would need if they knew what the AIES was about before logging in.

- *"On a personal level, I would like more info on what type of info would be required. I might not have it readily available."*
- *"It doesn't say what information I need. If someone doesn't have the information available, they'll just put in crap to get through it."*
- *"I would like to add generally what type of information is expected for this survey. Is it year-end financials? Headcounts? Just a couple sentences of what info is being asked on the survey. Just a few highlights."*

- *"I would like a little more hint of what they'll ask on the survey. I assume I would need actual information to provide. You should spell out what specific information is needed."*
- *"Knowing what information would be … it says gross domestic product, but what information? Sales information? Net income? Cost of goods sold? It doesn't tell you what information until you get into the thing. I like to be prepared before I get into the Census survey to know what information I need and what timeline too."*
- *"The assumption from the survey is that information is readily available and some of these things we don't [have]. We have to actually sit down and do that and some of that can be very time consuming."*

A few participants were not sure if they would have to complete the survey in one session or if they had the option to save the survey and continue later.

- *"I would hate to start it and figure out that I can't finish it. I don't know if I can start and save or not."*
- *"If I get called to a meeting, am I going to lose everything? That's why I prefer the paper so I can start and stop."*
- *[It does not say] "Whether you can save and continue."*

Recommendations: Consider adding a general outline of topics included in the survey to help participants prepare. Additionally, revise "You can return to your account over multiple sessions to complete the survey" to "You can save your data and return to your account over multiple sessions to complete the survey."

Initial Email

Figure 1: Initial Email Heat Map



Subject: Your response is needed: Annual Integrated Economic Survey

ANNUAL INTEGRATED ECONOMIC SURVEY

Online Reporting Open

Check our email address – it's official if it ends in census.gov

ATTN: Alex Doe

COMPANY: Best Widgets, Inc.

Your company has been selected to participate in the **2024 Annual Integrated Economic Survey (AIES).** The AIES offers a full annual picture of the U.S. economy. The information you provide is important for calculating the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), empowering policymakers and businesses, including your own, to make informed and data-driven decisions.

Online reporting is now open. Please use the following information to access your survey:

Due Date: April 30, 2025 OR 30 days from receipt

1. Register or sign in at https://portal.census.gov
2. Enter your authentication code: 5467-2197-7613

   Case-sensitive; if you copy and paste, ensure no blank spaces are captured.
3. Report by clicking on "REPORT NOW." You can return to your account over multiple sessions to complete the survey.

Your response is required by law and will be kept strictly confidential. Information about the authority, confidentiality, and purpose of this data collection can be found at the bottom of this email.

Please do not reply directly to this automated email. For more information or assistance completing this survey, please visit https://census.gov/aies/information or call our customer helpline at 1-800-681-3012, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern time. For a preview of the questions in this survey, visit https://census.gov/aies/questionspreview/.

Thank you in advance for your time and participation, and for helping the U.S. Census Bureau measure America's economy.

Sincerely,

Lisa E. Donaldson
Chief, Economy Wide Statistics Division
U.S. Census Bureau

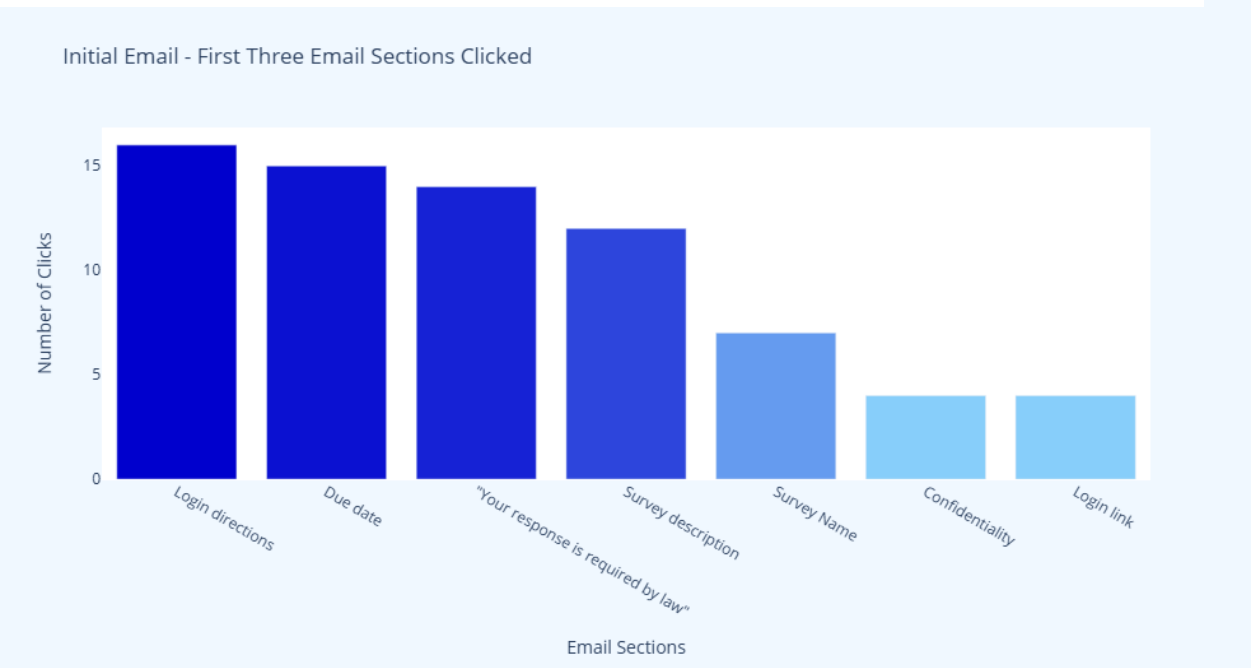
OMB Number
This survey has been approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The eight-digit OMB approval number is 0607-1024 and appears in the lower left corner of each reporting screen. Without this approval, we could not conduct this survey.

Authority and Confidentiality
We are conducting this survey under the authority of Title 13, United States Code, Sections 131 and 182. The U.S. Census Bureau is required by law to keep your response confidential (Title 13, U.S. Code, Section 9). The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify your business, organization, or institution. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit data.

Burden Estimate Statement
We estimate the Annual Integrated Economic Survey will take an average of 2.5 hours to complete. Factors such as company size, complexity, and activity will affect your actual time to complete the survey. This estimate includes the time to review instructions, search existing data sources, gather and maintain the data needed, and complete and review the survey.

ID: 5078543

Figure 2: Initial Email First Three Sections



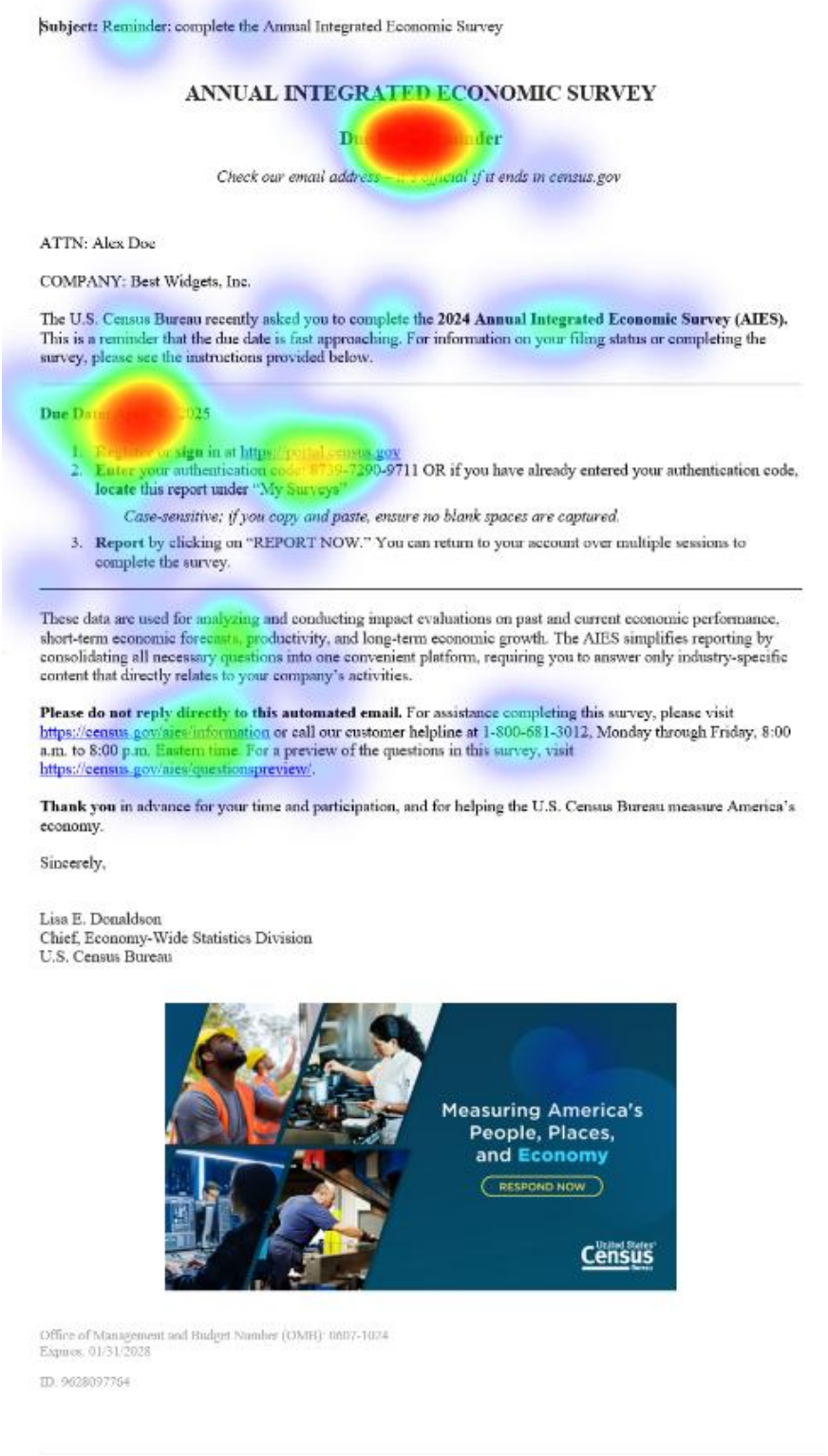
Participants understood that this email was telling them to complete the AIES. They understood the login directions and how they were expected to access the survey. Figure 1 shows that the login directions, the due date, and the statement "your response is required by law" were the parts of the email that were noticed the most. Figure 2 shows that these parts of the email were most often one of the first three sections that respondents clicked on.

- *"It's asking me to provide information on our economics for our area and company."*
- *"Link and authentication code are important because if you don't have that you can't do it."*
- *"It's helpful too if it has a deadline and that's always the first thing I look at. It's good that it's first."*
- *"I saw the register or sign in and also what it is – to participate in the 2024 Annual Integrated Economic Survey. I saw when it is due and how you get online."*
- *"Right away, I noticed the bold face that response is required. I noticed the instructions."*
- *"All relevant (login) is highlighted nicely. I'm mostly interested in the due date and login."*
- *"I like the due date, it's very clear. The registration information is good. I like the instructions on how to get in. It is required by law and confidential."*

No recommendations are needed.

Reminder Email

Figure 3: Reminder Email Heat Map



Subject: Reminder: complete the Annual Integrated Economic Survey

ANNUAL INTEGRATED ECONOMIC SURVEY

Due Date Reminder

Check our email address – the official if it ends in census.gov

ATTN: Alex Doe

COMPANY: Best Widgets, Inc.

The U.S. Census Bureau recently asked you to complete the **2024 Annual Integrated Economic Survey (AIES).** This is a reminder that the due date is fast approaching. For information on your filing status or completing the survey, please see the instructions provided below.

Due Date: April 30, 2025

1. **Register** or **sign** in at https://portal.census.gov
2. **Enter** your authentication code: 8739-7290-9711 OR if you have already entered your authentication code, **locate** this report under "My Surveys"

   Case-sensitive; if you copy and paste, ensure no blank spaces are captured.
3. **Report** by clicking on "REPORT NOW." You can return to your account over multiple sessions to complete the survey.

These data are used for analyzing and conducting impact evaluations on past and current economic performance, short-term economic forecasts, productivity, and long-term economic growth. The AIES simplifies reporting by consolidating all necessary questions into one convenient platform, requiring you to answer only industry-specific content that directly relates to your company's activities.

Please do not reply directly to this automated email. For assistance completing this survey, please visit https://census.gov/aies/information or call our customer helpline at 1-800-681-3012, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern time. For a preview of the questions in this survey, visit https://census.gov/aies/questionspreview/.

Thank you in advance for your time and participation, and for helping the U.S. Census Bureau measure America's economy.

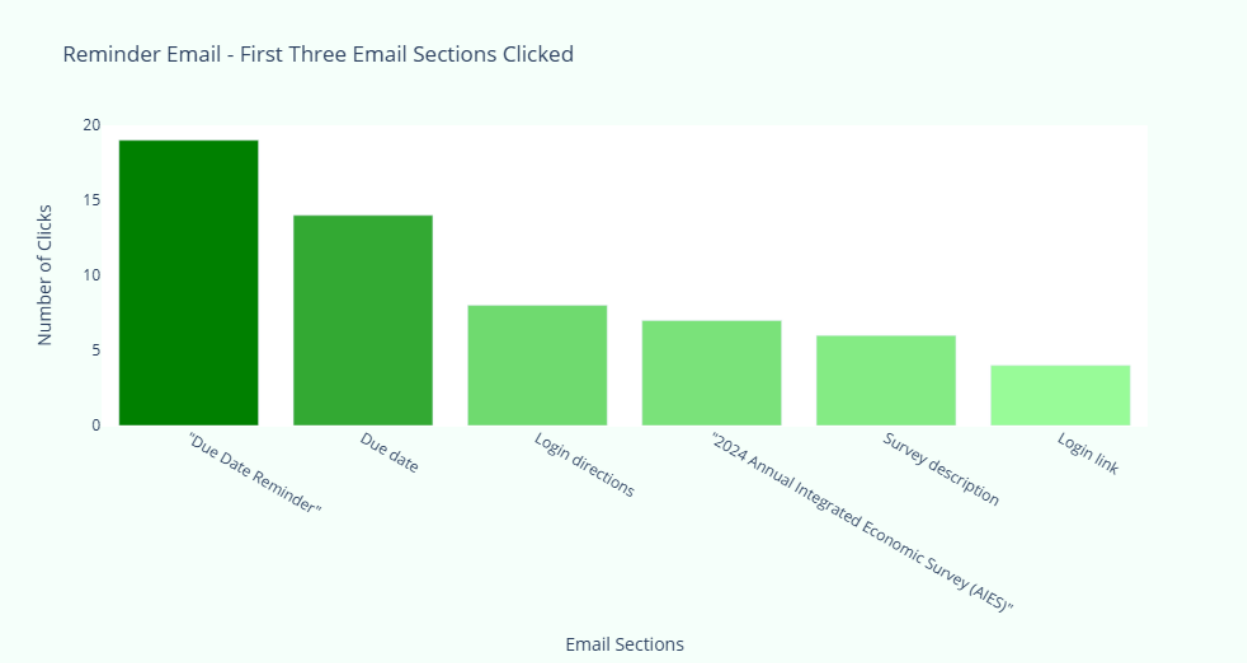
Sincerely,

Lisa E. Donaldson
Chief, Economy-Wide Statistics Division
U.S. Census Bureau

Office of Management and Budget Number (OMB): 0607-1024
Expires: 01/31/2028

ID: 9628097764

Figure 4: Reminder Email First Three Sections



Participants understood that this email was a reminder that would be sent if they had not completed the AIES. Figure 3 shows that participants tended to notice the subtitle of the email "Due Date Reminder" and the actual due date. Figure 2 shows that "Due Date Reminder", the due date, and the login directions tended to be noticed first.

- *"The most important thing is the due date and link. I like that you're highlighting the due date and login."*
- *"The due date is clear. I like that it reminds that due date is fast approaching."*
- *"It's called due date reminder, so I scrolled down to look at the due date."*
- *"The due date is approaching is the most important."*
- *"It says that I have passed the due date and I'm getting a second chance to complete the survey."*

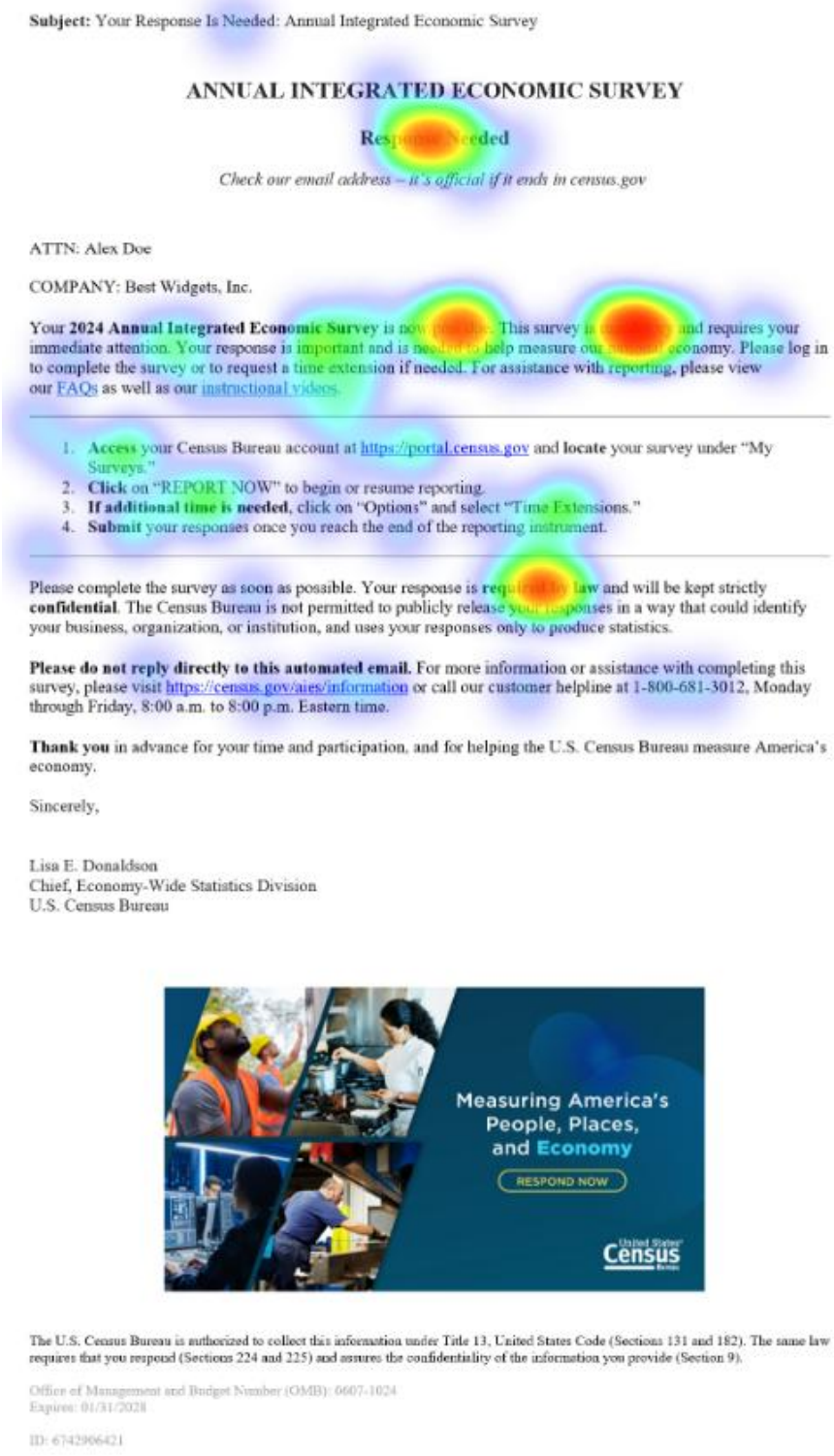
A few participants commented that they appreciate the login information being on the reminder:

- *"What's annoying in reminder emails is how I have to go back to figure out how to access, but this one has information on how to access and login and that's very appreciated."*
- *I noticed first that it's a reminder, a reminder is good. I do like the authentication code, and information on how to get in there."*

No recommendations are needed.

Nudge Email

Figure 5: Nudge Email Heat Map



Subject: Your Response Is Needed: Annual Integrated Economic Survey

ANNUAL INTEGRATED ECONOMIC SURVEY

Response Needed

Check our email address – it's official if it ends in census.gov

ATTN: Alex Doe

COMPANY: Best Widgets, Inc.

Your **2024 Annual Integrated Economic Survey** is now [illegible]. This survey is [illegible] and requires your immediate attention. Your response is important and is needed to help measure our nation's economy. Please log in to complete the survey or to request a time extension if needed. For assistance with reporting, please view our FAQs as well as our instructional videos.

1. **Access** your Census Bureau account at https://portal.census.gov and **locate** your survey under "My Surveys."
2. **Click** on "REPORT NOW" to begin or resume reporting.
3. **If additional time is needed**, click on "Options" and select "Time Extensions."
4. **Submit** your responses once you reach the end of the reporting instrument.

Please complete the survey as soon as possible. Your response is [illegible] by law and will be kept strictly **confidential**. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify your business, organization, or institution, and uses your responses only to produce statistics.

Please do not reply directly to this automated email. For more information or assistance with completing this survey, please visit https://census.gov/aies/information or call our customer helpline at 1-800-681-3012, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern time.

Thank you in advance for your time and participation, and for helping the U.S. Census Bureau measure America's economy.

Sincerely,

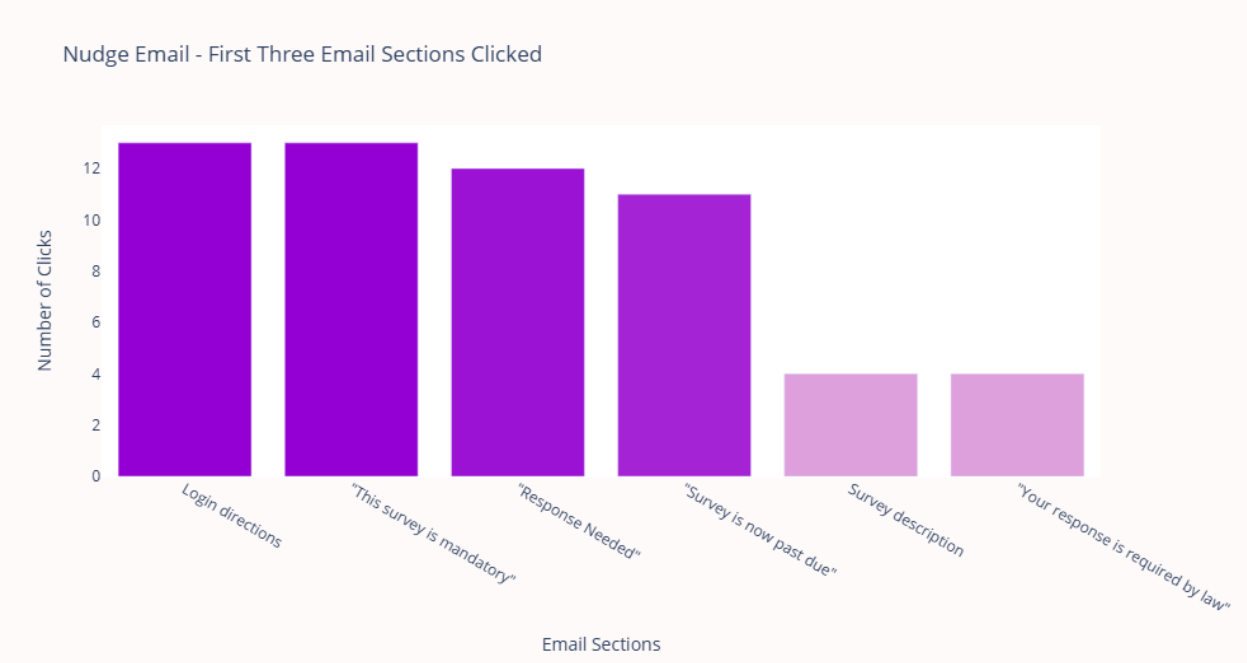
Lisa E. Donaldson
Chief, Economy-Wide Statistics Division
U.S. Census Bureau

The U.S. Census Bureau is authorized to collect this information under Title 13, United States Code (Sections 131 and 182). The same law requires that you respond (Sections 224 and 225) and assures the confidentiality of the information you provide (Section 9).

Office of Management and Budget Number (OMB): 0607-1024
Expires: 01/31/2028

ID: 6742906421

Figure 6: Nudge Email First Three Sections



Participants understood that this email would be sent if the survey's due date had passed. The participants understood that the AIES is overdue, and that they were being asked to complete it, but could request an extension. Figure 5 shows that the most noticeable parts of the email were the subtitle "Response Needed," the phrase "past due" in the first paragraph, the sentence "this survey is mandatory" in the first paragraph, and the "required by law" in the second paragraph. Figure 6 shows that the login directions, "this survey is mandatory", "Response Needed", and "past due" tended to be one of the first three parts of the email that were noticed.

- *"I have not done the survey and it's past due and required by law."*
- *"I didn't file it, and I need to pay attention to it quickly."*
- *"I haven't done it and it's past due, it's mandatory in case I didn't catch that in the first two, and that I can ask for an extension."*
- *"Yikes, I missed the first two and now it's needed, so now I will definitely complete it because in bold it says your response is required by law and in bold that it's confidential."*

Most participants noticed the instructions for how to request an extension. Some commented on the instructions and made guesses for how long they would get for an extension.

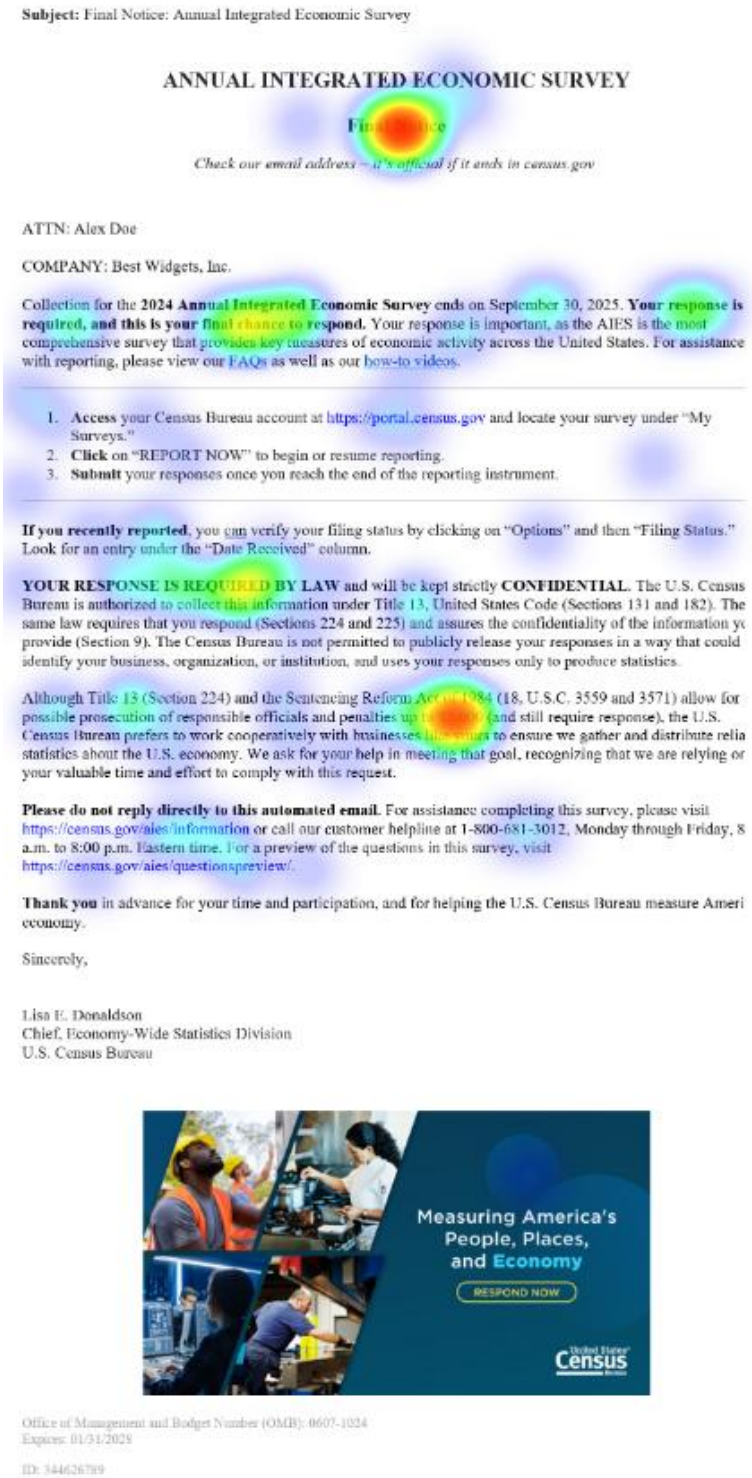
- *"I would think maybe a month or two."*
- *"On one hand you're saying my response is needed, but on the other hand you're saying that I can extend so that's a little confusing to me."*

- *"I would expect it would give three additional business days. I think it's clear. I like the little box that outlines the steps and numbers in it. It's clear you can get an extension."*
- *"I think 30 days is reasonable, and if anyone needs more than 30 days, maybe another 30 days extension could be given with no explanation like the IRS. Beyond 30 days, you could require a reason. If you put in the email that they get 30 days extension, they might take it anyway even if they don't need it, so maybe better not to mention it."*
- *"I did notice the extension instructions. It's hard to know how long an extension would be. An extra two weeks would be appropriate."*
- *"Maybe a week for an extension? But they've already procrastinated quite a bit. If you give them a month, they'll take a month!"*

No recommendations are needed.

Final Email

Figure 7: Final Email Heat Map



Subject: Final Notice: Annual Integrated Economic Survey

ANNUAL INTEGRATED ECONOMIC SURVEY

Check our email address – it's official if it ends in census.gov

ATTN: Alex Doe

COMPANY: Best Widgets, Inc.

Collection for the **2024 Annual Integrated Economic Survey** ends on September 30, 2025. **Your response is required, and this is your final chance to respond.** Your response is important, as the AIES is the most comprehensive survey that provides key measures of economic activity across the United States. For assistance with reporting, please view our FAQs as well as our how-to videos.

1. **Access** your Census Bureau account at https://portal.census.gov and locate your survey under "My Surveys."
2. **Click** on "REPORT NOW" to begin or resume reporting.
3. **Submit** your responses once you reach the end of the reporting instrument.

If you recently reported, you can verify your filing status by clicking on "Options" and then "Filing Status." Look for an entry under the "Date Received" column.

YOUR RESPONSE IS REQUIRED BY LAW and will be kept strictly **CONFIDENTIAL**. The U.S. Census Bureau is authorized to collect this information under Title 13, United States Code (Sections 131 and 182). The same law requires that you respond (Sections 224 and 225) and assures the confidentiality of the information yc provide (Section 9). The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify your business, organization, or institution, and uses your responses only to produce statistics.

Although Title 13 (Section 224) and the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984 (18, U.S.C. 3559 and 3571) allow for possible prosecution of responsible officials and penalties up to $5,000 (and still require response), the U.S. Census Bureau prefers to work cooperatively with businesses like yours to ensure we gather and distribute relia statistics about the U.S. economy. We ask for your help in meeting that goal, recognizing that we are relying or your valuable time and effort to comply with this request.

Please do not reply directly to this automated email. For assistance completing this survey, please visit https://census.gov/aies/information or call our customer helpline at 1-800-681-3012, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern time. For a preview of the questions in this survey, visit https://census.gov/aies/questionspreview/.

Thank you in advance for your time and participation, and for helping the U.S. Census Bureau measure Ameri economy.

Sincerely,

Lisa E. Donaldson
Chief, Economy-Wide Statistics Division
U.S. Census Bureau

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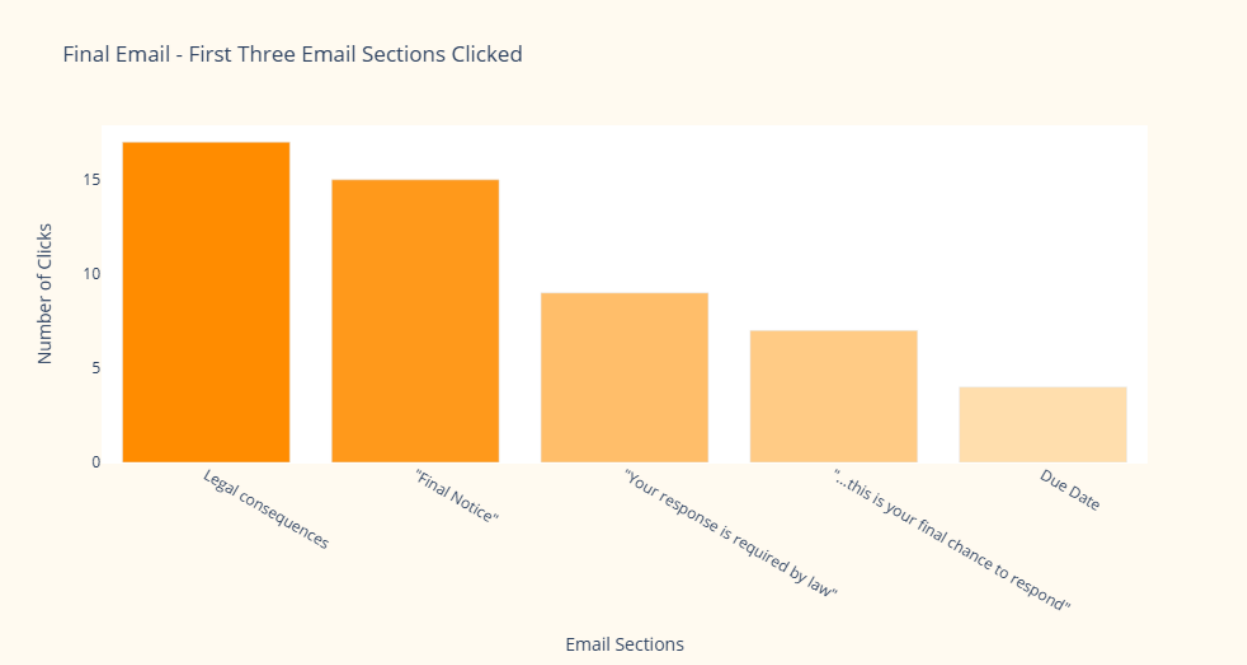
Expires: 01/31/2025

ID: 344626789

Figure 8: Final Email First Three Sections



The participants understood that this was the final chance to complete the survey, and that there would be penalties if the survey was not completed. Figure 7 shows that the parts of the email that were clicked on the most were the subheading "Final Notice," the statement describing the legal consequences that could happen if they did not respond to the AIES. Figure 8 shows that the statement of legal consequences, "Final Notice", and "Your response is required by law" were often one of the first three parts of the email that were noticed.

- *"If you don't do it there could be penalties, that's pretty important. You work for a company, and you get a bill for $5,000 because someone didn't do something and that's not good."*
- *"If it's telling me that it's required under Title 13, it's important to understand why I'm providing it and that you have the authority."*
- *"This is your last time that you have to fill this out, or you'll be fined."*
- *"$5,000 is a big number. I like that this one reads like – the government is here. The first 3 were friendly, but this one is government heavy."*
- *"You're not going to get any more notices, if you get any problems or ramifications, we've done everything we can… this is your final notice. As far as email notifications, you're not going to get any more of these."*
- *"Potential consequences inherently give an air of importance."*
- *"You're spelling out that Title 13 allows for penalties. If that doesn't scare me, I don't know what will!"*
- *"It's important that people know that there are penalties for not responding to these."*

No recommendations are needed.

Data visualizations

Participants were shown three out of five possible visualizations (Appendix C) presented in a random order. These visualizations are intended to motivate response by presenting data from the previous year's AIES, showing how the responses are used, and how the respondents' information would contribute to the data. Interviewers explained to the participants that the images presented were only examples, and that the intention was to customize the images by industry and/or state. Participants were asked to rate each image on a scale of one to five, explain what they liked or disliked about each image, explain what they felt the image was trying to say, and whether having a data visualization in the AIES emails would motivate them to respond. A heartbeat analysis (Figure 9) calculated the overall positive, neutral, and negative sentiment for each visualization based on the ratings. Example C (Figure 10), and Example E (Figure 11) had the highest approval.

Figure 9: Heartbeat Analysis

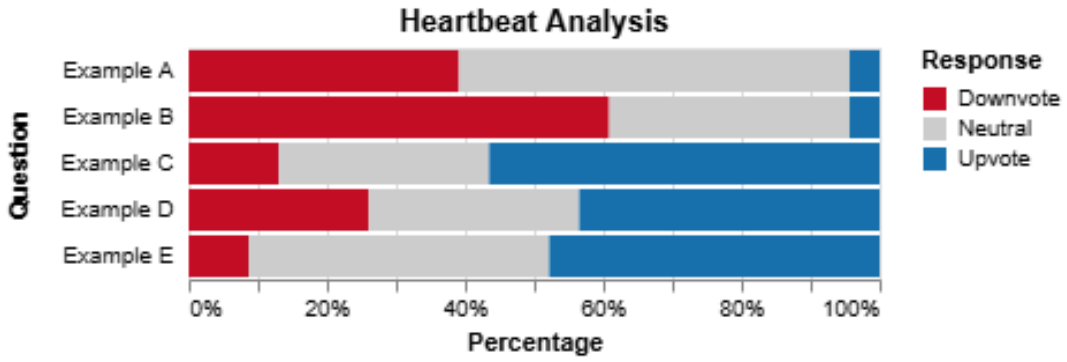


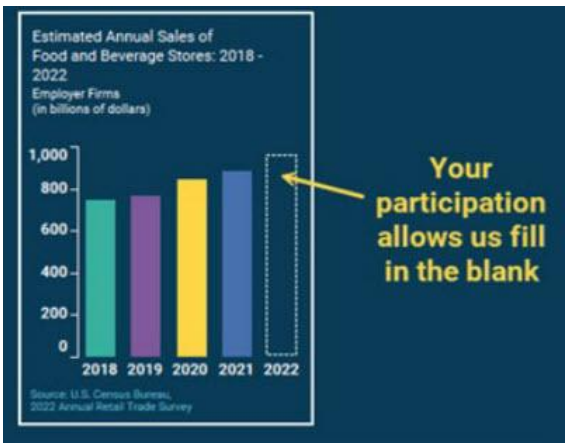
Figure 10: Example C



Participants generally liked this visualization. Example C was seen as direct, to the point, and easy to understand. When asked why they liked Example C, participants said:

- *"Very clean, easy to understand, very specific information. Main message – it's trying to tell you in a specific industry, in a specific area of the country, for a specific timeframe."*
- *"This tells me something important…Main message – I need to fill this out so you can create information like that."*
- *"If that was the category you were looking for information from, it's got everything need right there."*

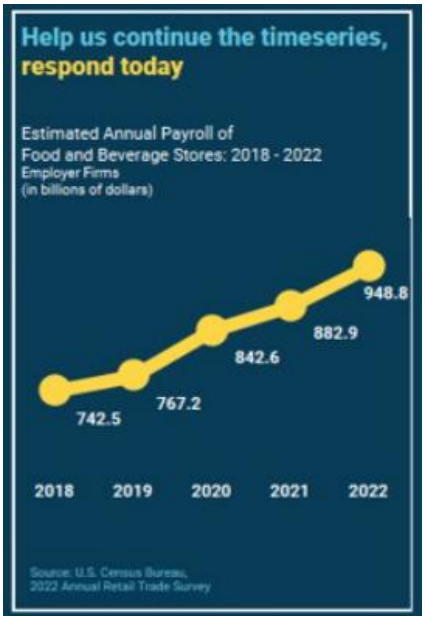
Figure 11: Example E



Example E was also well liked, because the blank bar in the chart shows why respondents' data are needed. When asked why they liked Example E, participants said:

- *"Makes more sense to me in the framework of filling out a survey – your participation allows us to fill in the blank. That really is asking me to do something."*
- *"A graph like this, personally, I like that it's simple and straight to the point. It's saying your participation allows us to fill in the blank, and this interests me more."*
- *"By my supplying this information – you can get the numbers. You can fill it in for the scale. Yes, this would help motivate me more than [Example D]."*

Figure 12: Example B



Example B (Figure 12) was generally disliked by the participants. Many of them did not understand the time series, and did not feel it was important information:

- *"My first impression is – what's this all about? I don't know what the time series is."*
- *"You're saying what the amount of the payroll is and how it's gone up over the years, but just give me the numbers. I don't care about the dots with the lines in it. It's almost insulting that you have to do this. How can you not understand that things are going up and are greater? Do they really need a line chart to show this?"*
- *"Main message – honestly, I don't know, like you're wanting me to report so that the payroll will increase? I'm not sure."*

Figure 13: Example A



Participants generally thought that Example A (Figure 13) was difficult to read and was not meaningful:

- *"There's something weird about the formatting… some fit within the color bar but some are wider. I can read this as one sentence if I didn't have my right brain going. There's a formatting issue."*
- *"I don't think it has anything to do with a survey. It's compiled revenue and it's showing how much of it is retail, healthcare, etc. and it's breaking it down by that. I'm trying to connect it. No, this isn't important or meaningful to me."*

Figure 14: Example D



Example D (Figure 14) had mixed response, with some participants being interested in the data and visual of the time series, and other participants feeling that it was not meaningful or interesting:

- *"You say 'shape the nation's future', but this is all historical. Trend lines only go so far. This statement is what's happening next, but the graphic is what happened in the past."*
- *"It's to shape the nation's future so I know it's nation and not state based. And it shows a positive trend, and I see that as a good visual."*
- *"It's information and not necessarily anything I need to respond to. My government knows more about this particular statistic because you did a survey."*

Participants said that they would be most interested in data visualizations that are customized to both their industry and state. Participants were asked whether they would prefer visualizations customized to their industry or to their state if it were not possible to customize them to both. Most participants said that in that case, they would prefer to have nationwide statistics for their industry, rather than statewide statistics for all industries.

Most participants said that these visualizations, while interesting, would not further motivate them to respond to the AIES. However, it is difficult to determine the effects of these visualizations on respondent motivation because they did not see examples that were customized to their industry.

Recommendations: Consider additional testing with visualizations similar in style to Examples C and E, either a single statistic written out as text, or a bar graph with a blank, asking participants to fill it in. If

possible, customize the visualizations by industry and state. If this is not possible, visualizations should be customized by industry.

Referring to the survey

Participants were asked if they would prefer that the AIES be referred to in emails as a "survey," "filing," or "report," and which term made it sound like the AIES was required. The majority of participants preferred the term "filing" over "survey" and "report," as they interpreted a filing as mandatory task. Some participants said the word filing made them think of filing taxes, something that is important and legally required. "Survey" was associated with optional tasks and general information gathering.

- *"Filing makes it seem like it's not optional. We do require this information whereas a survey makes me feel like it's not as important. You can fill out if you have time, but it's not required so I don't put it at the top of my priority list."*
- *"Filing has the connotation of a requirement. If you call it a filing or a requirement, I know I have to do it and that there are ramifications – not good ramifications – if I don't."*
- *"[Filing] sounds like you're filing your taxes or something that's required and something that's been scrutinized a lot more than a survey."*
- *"Filing is more official. I think of it as something mandatory, like taxes. A report is what's provided in a filing. A survey is just like 'how are we doing?'"*
- *"I feel [survey] is asking general questions to get a generalization of a certain issue or group, but not anything to be official. [Filing is] a report to the government. I do a filing online for taxes or on the state portal things like that."*
- *"Filing has a greater sense of obligation to complete. Survey seems more optional. Report is probably in between in the level of obligation."*

Recommendation: Consider referring to the AIES in communications as a filing to help respondents understand that they are required to complete it. However, this is not typically how Census forms are referenced; they are usually called surveys.

Confidentiality and data security

Participants generally felt that their data would be confidential. There is an assumption that the Census Bureau keeps data as secure as possible.

- *"I've never had the sense that data compromise or the Bureau is doing things in a way that are not responsible."*
- *"I feel like it's stored in a place and it's probably confidential."*
- *"I'm assuming the website is a secure website. We used to do it by mail and didn't have any problems."*
- *"It goes directly to the Census Bureau and Census Bureau website, there's a presumption of confidentiality."*

Some participants said that they were not very concerned with confidentiality because they do not feel that the information they are reporting is sensitive.

- *"I think it's just an overall number, I don't think I'm giving details or anything on it… anything going over the internet has the possibility of being hacked."*
- *"You don't ask anything that sensitive or important."*
- *"Most of the information is generalized, no social security, nothing too personal."*
- *"Unless they wanted the tax report, I really don't care. I'm just not that worried about the numbers anyway, they can't trace it back to me."*
- *"I understand that its combined, sanitized aggregate data. I provide the EIN, and after that, nothing else is that important."*

Participants believe that Census Bureau emails are legitimate because of census.gov email address.

- *"Check who they're from, the email domain, the type of images or wording, and the cleanliness of the email."*
- *"I look at the sender's address and then I guess I look at the URL to see if it's a dot gov to see where I'm going to click."*
- *"Usually if it comes from the government, it's a dot gov."*
- *"If it says it's from a dot gov it's legit. It's a nice easy check."*
- *"The census dot gov part. If it says dot gov it's official."*

No recommendations are needed.

Motivations for completing the survey

Most participants complete the AIES solely because it is legally required. Some participants reported that their company completes all survey requests they receive.

- *"Required/mandatory – that motivates me more than anything."*
- *"The fear of penalty or some type of punishment."*
- *"Pointing out that prosecution and fines were possible would be a big motivator and would be a big motivator to do it in a timely fashion."*
- *"I feel like our business is so small that it can't possibly be that helpful. An appeal to my altruism probably wouldn't motivate me."*
- *"The biggest driver is if we have the time, we wouldn't ignore a specific survey."*
- *"I've never considered not doing the survey even if it doesn't say it's required. But most are required. Once you've done one or two, they don't take that much time. I don't feel the need to avoid it."*
- *"We don't get very many, we respond to maybe 75%, usually the government ones. Census or state surveys are the ones we respond to."*

Nearly all participants in this research indicated that they were unsure of what happens with their data and what benefit participation could be to their company.

- *"Explain it to me like I'm five – this is why it matters. There was a one liner in the emails but maybe more information about that."*
- *"I'm going to respond because I know it's required of me, but I'm not going to take it much further and find out what the outcomes are."*
- *"It says it's important and needed to measure the economy, but it doesn't say what we're doing. Theres almost too little information."*

Recommendations: Ensure that all communications make it clear that the AIES is legally required. Provide participants with more information on data products and how their participation in the survey could potentially help their company.

Switching to email only

Most participants would be fine with only being contacted by email, but a few did have some concerns about what would happen if emails were sent to spam or sent to an incorrect email address.

- *"I'm a little concerned that there's a fine potentially attached to not responding and you wouldn't get the emails with the spam filters."*
- *"I think they'll still come hopefully. The postal mail loses things too, but having multiple ways of communications is good. If you aren't getting responses to email, then maybe you should send a letter in the postal mail."*

Recommendation: Consider sending mail only if the email has not been opened or the code has not been used.

Adding a second email address

Participants were asked if they would like the option to add a second contact email address. Not all participants would feel the need to add a secondary email address, but some said they would appreciate the option to add an email address for a colleague or a department email, in case the respondent was not available or did not receive the message.

- *"What if the email bounces? If there are two emails available, it will get answered. If I'm on vacation someone would answer."*
- *"I would probably give it to my controller and at least then they could. If I happen to be out and something was urgent for the Census Bureau, then she would know to give to the owner at least."*

Recommendation: Add an option for participants to add a secondary contact email address.

Communicating changes to the survey

Most participants said they would prefer to be emailed about changes, rather than having to watch a video. A few participants suggested listing changes in the survey portal.

- *"I would only watch a video if it's really in depth or complex, but this isn't complex."*
- *"Webinars are overused…digest on your own time."*
- *"Probably would not do the webinar, I have a lot of other things to do. I just want clear instructions."*
- *"I don't like those [videos]. It's become kind of the training method. If you can fast forward through them it's helpful, but if you have to watch the whole thing to get one piece of information it's frustrating."*

Some participants do not feel the need to learn about survey changes in advance.

- *"At the end of the day if this is required – like, thanks for telling me about the changes, but I still have to do it. If you were changing it to make it easier or faster, then that would be good to get the word out to make people want to do it."*
- *"I don't care, just give me the survey and I'll do it. I don't need to be informed of the changes."*
- *"It wouldn't matter to me if we changed the survey, it wouldn't change anything or how I handle responding."*
- *I don't think it's necessary to let people know. When they get the survey, they'll follow whatever instructions you have. No need to send another email."*

A third of participants said they may be interested in watching a webinar about the AIES. Participants were interested in tutorials for the survey, such as how to fill out the spreadsheet, how the AIES data are used, and what government assistance or guidance are available for businesses.

- *"Learning what is available would be a start because I don't really know what's available"*
- *"I would like to know how to find data in the future."*
- *"How to use the data for my industry or sector. I'd like to know what is available."*
- *"How the information can help me."*

Recommendations: Consider keeping number of contacts low by including necessary information about changes to the survey that will affect the participants' experience in the survey invitation emails. Webinars and short videos should only be used for optional information, such as how the AIES data are used.

About the Data Collection Methodology and Research (DCMR) Branch

The Data Collection Methodology and Research (DCMR) Branch in the Economic Statistical Methods Division assists economic survey program areas and other governmental agencies with research associated with the behavioral aspects of survey response and data collection. The mission of DCMR is to improve data quality in surveys while reducing survey nonresponse and respondent burden. This mission is achieved by:

- Conducting expert reviews, cognitive pretesting, site visits and usability testing, along with post-collection evaluation methods, to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the data collection instruments and associated materials.
- Conducting early-stage scoping interviews to assist with the development of survey content (concepts, specifications, question wording and instructions, etc.) by getting early feedback on it from participants.
- Assisting program areas with the development and use of nonresponse reduction methods and contact strategies.
- And conducting empirical research to help better understand behavioral aspects of survey response, with the aim of identifying areas for further improvement as well as evaluating the effectiveness of qualitative research.

For more information on how DCMR can assist your economic survey program area or agency, please contact the branch chief, Barbara Zamora-Appel.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

AIES Communications Research

Moderated Interview Protocol

Introduction

- *If respondent has not yet signed the consent form*: I sent you a consent form in an email today – could you please review and sign that now before we get started?
- Thank you so much for agreeing to talk with me today!
- I am part of a research group within the Census Bureau that provides feedback to other parts of the Bureau about ways to improve the overall experience. I'm talking with you today to evaluate some of our communications about one of our surveys.
- Remember, my job is to improve the survey experience. Please be candid and frank in your responses. Our interview is being conducted under the authority of Title 13, which means that your responses are confidential, and your name and any identifying information about your company will be included in any of our findings.
- Do you have any questions before we get started?
- I'd like to record our session today so that when I go to analyze the results of these interviews, I can use the recording to pick up on anything I may have missed in my notes. Do I have your permission to record our session today?

Background Information

- Tell me a little bit about your business. What types of goods or services does this business provide?
- What is your role in the company?
    - How long have you been in this role?

Routing of survey requests

- What is your role in responding to Census Bureau surveys for this company?

- Do you complete the surveys on your own, or do you work with or delegate this to colleagues? Do you involve others outside your company, such as an accountant?
- Please tell me how you receive survey requests and communications. Do they come directly to you, or to someone else?
    - If requests go to someone else, how do survey requests usually get to you?
        - How long does that process usually take?
- Do you tend to receive emails, letters via mail, or both? Do you prefer email or letters, or does it not make a difference?
- Does your company generally respond to all survey requests? If not, how do you decide which surveys to respond to?

Name of Survey

- During this meeting we will be talking about the AIES. AIES stands for Annual Integrated Economic Survey. We are considering calling it a report or filing instead of a survey.
- Do you think that survey, report, and filing mean the same thing? Or do you think that they mean different things?
    - In your own words, can you tell me what you think is meant by:
        - Survey?
        - Report?
        - Filing?
- Which of these terms sound the most official: survey, report, or filing? Or does it not make a difference?
- Do any of the terms do a better job implying that the AIES is mandatory, or does it not make a difference?

Reactions to emails

- Now I'm going to show you the current emails we use to ask companies to participate in the AIES. I'm going to put a link in the chat so you can see the emails. (generic link if needed) https://answer.census.gov/jfe/form/SV_efCGbdW48HlHI10
- I'm going to have you read the email, and click on parts that stand out most to you.
- First, I'd like to do a quick test round. Can you please click on the worm's tongue?

Initial Email

- What stands out to you in this email? As you read through this email, please click on what stands out the most.
- What piece of information in this email do you think is the most important?
- In your own words, what is this email asking you to do?
- [IF NEEDED] Did you notice the due date for the survey?
- What do you think of where the due date is placed? Is it noticeable, or would you prefer the due date to be placed somewhere else?
- Is there anything in this email that is confusing, or does not make sense?
- Is there any information that you think is missing from this email that would be important in supporting your response to the AIES?
- [IF NEEDED] Is it clear that the AIES is mandatory?

Reminder Email

- What stands out to you in this email? As you read through this email, please click on what stands out the most.
- What piece of information in this email do you think is the most important?
- In your own words, what is this email saying?
- [IF NEEDED] Did you notice that it says you can request an extension?
    - In your own words, can you tell me what you think that means?
    - How long would you expect the extension to be?
- Is there anything in this email that is confusing, or does not make sense?
- Is there any information that you think is missing from this email that would be important in supporting your response to the AIES?
- [IF NEEDED] Is it clear that the AIES is mandatory?

Nudge Email

- What stands out to you in this email? As you read through this email, please click on what stands out the most.

- What piece of information in this email do you think is the most important?
- In your own words, what is this email saying?
- Is there anything in this email that is confusing, or does not make sense?
- Is there any information that you think is missing from this email that would be important in supporting your response to the AIES?
- [IF NEEDED] Is it clear that the AIES is mandatory?

Final Email

- What stands out to you in this email? As you read through this email, please click on what stands out the most.

- What piece of information in this email do you think is the most important?
- In your own words, what is this email saying?
- Is there anything in this email that is confusing, or does not make sense?
- Is there any information that you think is missing from this email that would be important in supporting your response to the AIES?
- [IF NEEDED] Is it clear that the AIES is mandatory?

Example data visualizations

- Here are some examples of data visualizations that I would like you to look at. These are not from the AIES because those data are not ready, but we wanted to include examples of potential data visualizations that could be included in the AIES communications. We would only include one visualization per email. The states and industry data chosen for these images are only examples, they would have data for either your business's state or industry. I'm going to have you look at these images, and tell me what you think of them, and give each one an overall rating from 1-5.

  Suggested probes for each visualization:

- What do you think of when you look at this image? Please just give me your first impression.

- What do you think is the main message this image trying to convey?
    - How do you feel about this message? Is it important or meaningful to you?
- Would this image help motivate you to complete the AIES?
- Is there anything in this image that is confusing, or does not make sense?

Probes for after images have been shown:

- These visualizations can be customized by state or industry. Would you prefer data visualizations for your state, or for your industry nationwide?
- If you saw one of these visualizations as part of an email, would you expect the visualization to be clickable, and link to a website?
    - IF YES: Would you click the image?
    - What would you expect to see on the website?
- Are there other types of data visualizations you would prefer to see?

Confidentiality and Data Security

- [If participant does not mention confidentiality or data security during the interview, probe about it.]
- Do you have any concerns about the confidentiality and security of your data? If yes, what concerns do you have?
- Do you feel that the e-mails sufficiently addressed your concerns of confidentiality and data security? If not, what information would you like to see in the e-mails about confidentiality and data security?
- If you had additional questions about the Census Bureau's confidentiality and/or data security, how or where do you think you could find this information?

Motivation to complete AIES

- What would motivate you to complete the AIES?
- Is there any information we could include in the AIES emails that would help motivate you to complete the survey?

- Do you have any concerns about completing the AIES? Tell me more about that.
    - [If yes] What information would you need to help alleviate those concerns?
- Do you personally use business or economic statistics as part of your job? To your knowledge, does someone else in your company use them?
- Does knowing that the Census Bureau has these statistics for you and your company affect your interest in responding to Census Bureau Surveys?

Moving to email only

- We are considering removing postal mail contacts for the AIES and moving to email only. How do you feel about that?
- Do you think you would be more likely to receive email messages about the AIES, less likely, or would it not make a difference?
- If you were able to add a secondary contact email for the AIES, would you do this?
    - If so, would you add a specific colleague, a department email, generic company email, or something else?
- We are concerned that some participants may not realize that our emails are legitimate requests from the Census Bureau. How do you decide whether an email is legitimate?
    - What email characteristics make you think that the email is likely legitimate?
    - What email characteristics make you think that the email is likely a scam?
- How often would you like to receive reminder emails for the survey?

Additional information

- When changes are made to the AIES instrument or content, what's your preferred way of having those changes communicated to you?
- We are considering having an AIES webinar in the future for participants to learn about the data and data tools. What would be some topics of interest for your/your company to be covered at a webinar? What would you want to learn?

Conclusion

- Are there other ways that the Census Bureau could make it easier for you to answer their surveys?
- Are there other ways that the Census Bureau could help you feel more motivated to respond?
- Is there anything else you wanted to share with me?
- Thanks so much for your time today!

Appendix B: Emails Tested

Subject: Your response is needed: Annual Integrated Economic Survey

ANNUAL INTEGRATED ECONOMIC SURVEY

Online Reporting Open

Check our email address – it's official if it ends in census.gov

ATTN: Alex Doe

COMPANY: Best Widgets, Inc.

Your company has been selected to participate in the **2024 Annual Integrated Economic Survey (AIES).** The AIES offers a full annual picture of the U.S. economy. The information you provide is important for calculating the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), empowering policymakers and businesses, including your own, to make informed and data-driven decisions.

Online reporting is now open. Please use the following information to access your survey:

Due Date: April 30, 2025 OR 30 days from receipt

1. **Register** or **sign in** at https://portal.census.gov
2. **Enter** your authentication code: 5467-2397-7613

   Case-sensitive; if you copy and paste, ensure no blank spaces are captured.

3. **Report** by clicking on "REPORT NOW." You can return to your account over multiple sessions to complete the survey.

Your response is required by law and will be kept strictly **confidential**. Information about the authority, confidentiality, and burden of this data collection can be found at the bottom of this email.

Please do not reply directly to this automated email. For more information or assistance completing this survey, please visit https://census.gov/aies/information or call our customer helpline at 1-800-681-3012, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern time. For a preview of the questions in this survey, visit https://census.gov/aies/questionspreview/.

Thank you in advance for your time and participation, and for helping the U.S. Census Bureau measure America's economy.

Sincerely,

Lisa E. Donaldson
Chief, Economy Wide Statistics Division
U.S. Census Bureau



OMB Number
This survey has been approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The eight-digit OMB approval number is 0607-1024 and appears in the lower left corner of each reporting screen. Without this approval, we could not conduct this survey.

Authority and Confidentiality
We are conducting this survey under the authority of Title 13, United States Code, Sections 131 and 182. The U.S. Census Bureau is required by law to keep your response confidential (Title 13, U.S. Code, Section 9). The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify your business, organization, or institution. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit data.

Burden Estimate Statement
We estimate the Annual Integrated Economic Survey will take an average of 2.5 hours to complete. Factors such as company size, complexity, and activity will affect your actual time to complete the survey. This estimate includes the time to review instructions, search existing data sources, gather and maintain the data needed, and complete and review the survey.

ID: 5679543

Subject: Reminder: complete the Annual Integrated Economic Survey

ANNUAL INTEGRATED ECONOMIC SURVEY

Due Date Reminder

Check our email address – it's official if it ends in census.gov

ATTN: Alex Doe

COMPANY: Best Widgets, Inc.

The U.S. Census Bureau recently asked you to complete the **2024 Annual Integrated Economic Survey (AIES).** This is a reminder that the due date is fast approaching. For information on your filing status or completing the survey, please see the instructions provided below.

Due Date: April 30, 2025

1. **Register** or **sign** in at https://portal.census.gov
2. **Enter** your authentication code: 8739-7290-9711 OR if you have already entered your authentication code, **locate** this report under "My Surveys"

   Case-sensitive; if you copy and paste, ensure no blank spaces are captured.
3. **Report** by clicking on "REPORT NOW." You can return to your account over multiple sessions to complete the survey.

These data are used for analyzing and conducting impact evaluations on past and current economic performance, short-term economic forecasts, productivity, and long-term economic growth. The AIES simplifies reporting by consolidating all necessary questions into one convenient platform, requiring you to answer only industry-specific content that directly relates to your company's activities.

Please do not reply directly to this automated email. For assistance completing this survey, please visit https://census.gov/aies/information or call our customer helpline at 1-800-681-3012, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern time. For a preview of the questions in this survey, visit https://census.gov/aies/questionspreview/.

Thank you in advance for your time and participation, and for helping the U.S. Census Bureau measure America's economy.

Sincerely,

Lisa E. Donaldson
Chief, Economy-Wide Statistics Division
U.S. Census Bureau



Office of Management and Budget Number (OMB): 0607-1024
Expires: 01/31/2028

ID: 9628097764

Subject: Your Response Is Needed: Annual Integrated Economic Survey

ANNUAL INTEGRATED ECONOMIC SURVEY

Response Needed

Check our email address – it's official if it ends in census.gov

ATTN: Alex Doe

COMPANY: Best Widgets, Inc.

Your **2024 Annual Integrated Economic Survey** is now past due**.** This survey is mandatory and requires your immediate attention. Your response is important and is needed to help measure our national economy. Please log in to complete the survey or to request a time extension if needed. For assistance with reporting, please view our FAQs as well as our instructional videos.

---

1. **Access** your Census Bureau account at https://portal.census.gov and **locate** your survey under "My Surveys."
2. **Click** on "REPORT NOW" to begin or resume reporting.
3. **If additional time is needed**, click on "Options" and select "Time Extensions."
4. **Submit** your responses once you reach the end of the reporting instrument.

Please complete the survey as soon as possible. Your response is **required by law** and will be kept strictly **confidential**. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify your business, organization, or institution, and uses your responses only to produce statistics.

Please do not reply directly to this automated email. For more information or assistance with completing this survey, please visit https://census.gov/aies/information or call our customer helpline at 1-800-681-3012, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern time.

Thank you in advance for your time and participation, and for helping the U.S. Census Bureau measure America's economy.

Sincerely,

Lisa E. Donaldson
Chief, Economy-Wide Statistics Division

U.S. Census Bureau



The U.S. Census Bureau is authorized to collect this information under Title 13, United States Code (Sections 131 and 182). The same law requires that you respond (Sections 224 and 225) and assures the confidentiality of the information you provide (Section 9).

Office of Management and Budget Number (OMB): 0607-1024
Expires: 01/31/2028

ID: 6742906421

Subject: Final Notice: Annual Integrated Economic Survey

ANNUAL INTEGRATED ECONOMIC SURVEY

Final Notice

Check our email address – it's official if it ends in census.gov

ATTN: Alex Doe

COMPANY: Best Widgets, Inc.

Collection for the **2024 Annual Integrated Economic Survey** ends on September 30, 2025. **Your response is required, and this is your final chance to respond.** Your response is important, as the AIES is the most comprehensive survey that provides key measures of economic activity across the United States. For assistance with reporting, please view our FAQs as well as our how-to videos.

---

1. **Access** your Census Bureau account at https://portal.census.gov and locate your survey under "My Surveys."
2. **Click** on "REPORT NOW" to begin or resume reporting.
3. **Submit** your responses once you reach the end of the reporting instrument.

If you recently reported, you can verify your filing status by clicking on "Options" and then "Filing Status." Look for an entry under the "Date Received" column.

YOUR RESPONSE IS REQUIRED BY LAW and will be kept strictly **CONFIDENTIAL**. The U.S. Census Bureau is authorized to collect this information under Title 13, United States Code (Sections 131 and 182). The same law requires that you respond (Sections 224 and 225) and assures the confidentiality of the information you provide (Section 9). The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify your business, organization, or institution, and uses your responses only to produce statistics.

Although Title 13 (Section 224) and the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984 (18, U.S.C. 3559 and 3571) allow for possible prosecution of responsible officials and penalties up to $5,000 (and still require response), the U.S. Census Bureau prefers to work cooperatively with businesses like yours to ensure we gather and distribute reliable statistics about the U.S. economy. We ask for your help in meeting that goal, recognizing that we are relying on your valuable time and effort to comply with this request.

Please do not reply directly to this automated email. For assistance completing this survey, please visit https://census.gov/aies/information or call our customer helpline at 1-800-681-3012, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern time. For a preview of the questions in this survey, visit https://census.gov/aies/questionspreview/.

Thank you in advance for your time and participation, and for helping the U.S. Census Bureau measure America's economy.

Sincerely,

Lisa E. Donaldson
Chief, Economy-Wide Statistics Division
U.S. Census Bureau



Office of Management and Budget Number (OMB): 0607-1024
Expires: 01/31/2028

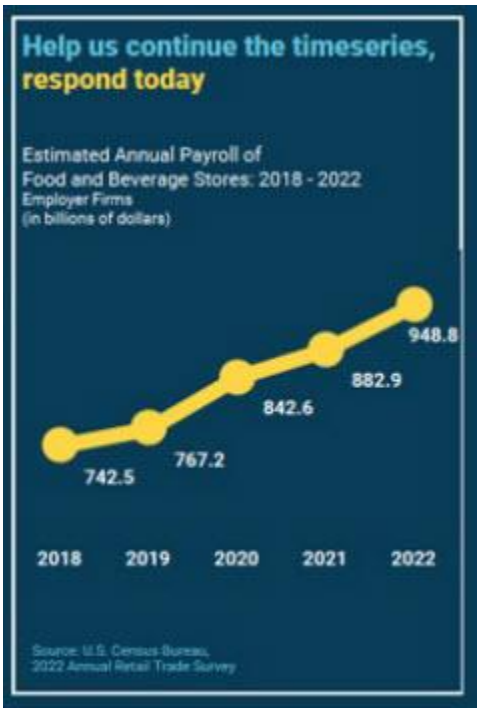
ID: 344626789

Appendix C: Data Visualizations Tested

Example A



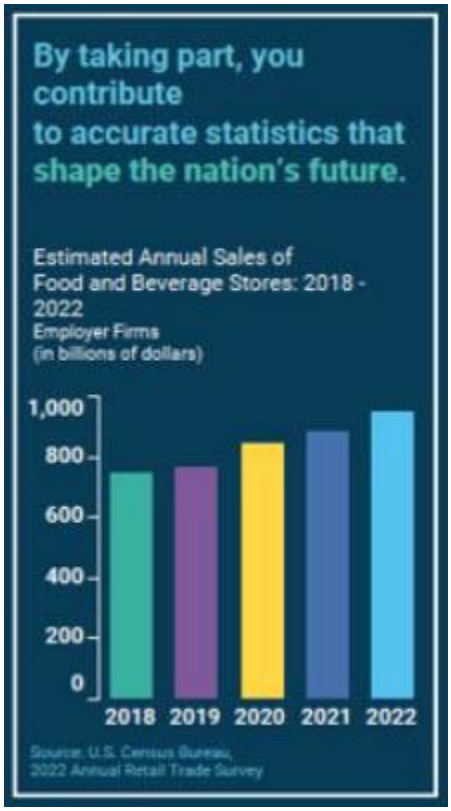
Example B



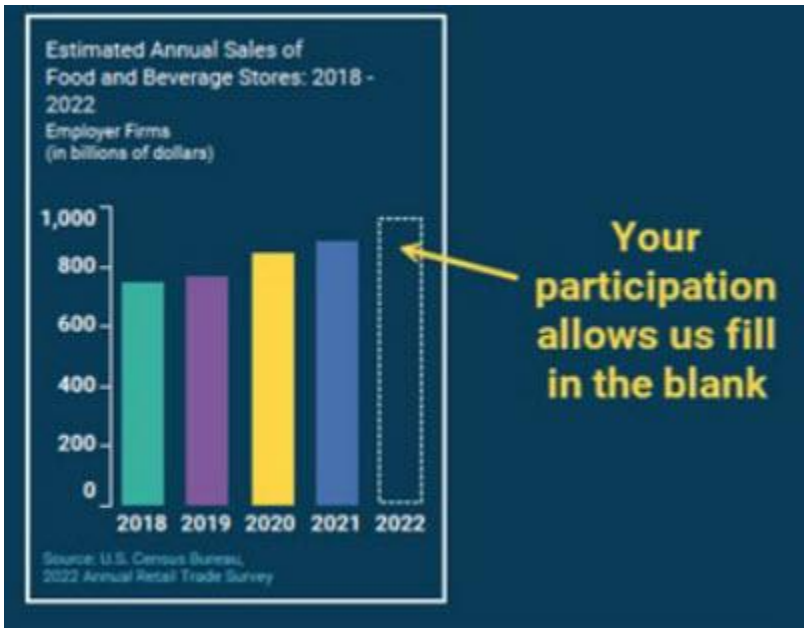
Example C



Example D



Example E


Estimated Annual Sales of Food and Beverage Stores: 2018 - 2022
Employer Firms
(in billions of dollars)
1,000
800
600
400
200
0
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 Annual Retail Trade Survey
Your participation allows us fill in the blank