

NBER Conference on Advancing Economic Measurement

Rethinking the Production of Economic Statistics

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Blindingly Obvious Observations

1. Response rates on U.S. government surveys have dropped sharply in the 21st century, undermining the quality of key statistical products.
2. Errors and revisions in government statistics (GS) have become costlier and more consequential. A broad, enduring loss of trust in institutions.
3. Funding to support GS will remain tight in the best scenarios.
4. Non-government sources (NGS) of micro data and statistics on labor have grown enormously.
 - a) Commercial enterprises now produce survey data that can rival or surpass government survey data in scale, scope, and adaptation to changing conditions. See Davis (2025) and Buckman et al. (2025) and references therein.
 - b) Our ability to access, process, and analyze text-as-data has exploded.
5. Data and statistics from NGS complement and benefit GS. They differ greatly in their strengths and weaknesses.

Some Detail on Survey Response Rates

Consider ***unit non-response*** rates as of 2023 for several major surveys that inform labor market analyses: (See Davis (2025) for sources)

- 30% in the Current Population Survey (up from 7% in 2000).
- 56% & 58% in the diary & interview parts of Consumer Expenditure Survey
- 63% in the American Time Use Survey
- 58% in the Current Employment Statistics Survey (conditional on initiation)
- 34% in the Occupational and Employer Wage Statistics Survey
- 68% in the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey.

→ High potential for non-random patterns of unit non-response to yield biased statistics and misleading analyses.

Non-random ***item non-response*** and imperfect sample frames are also important concerns and potential sources of bias.

On Commercial Survey Firms

- Commercial firms rely on sample recruitment methods that differ greatly from the ones deployed by government agencies.
 - Commercial firms typically compensate respondents, and government agencies typically don't.
 - Some people dislike or distrust for-profit enterprises, others dislike or distrust government. In our polarized era, aversion to government surveys may depend on political views and partisan affiliation, and how these relate to the party in power.
- Commercial firms and government agencies elicit responses from segments of the target population that the other misses. ***Testable, quantifiable.***

For discussions of how commercial enterprises form pre-recruited survey research panels, see Aksoy et al. (2022, Section 1), Stantcheva (2023, Section A.1), and Podkul and Martherus (2023).

In Light of These Observations,...

1. What should U.S. statistical agencies seek to optimize?
 - a) The overall quality and informativeness of government statistics (accuracy, timeliness, scope, etc.), given available resources; or
 - b) The social value of GS and NGS statistics, taken together.
2. Examples of what 1.b might mean for US statistical agencies:
 - a) Field special CPS modules to characterize who responds to government surveys but **not** to commercial surveys, and why.
 - b) Cooperate with commercial enterprises to bring their survey and other data, including individual-level PII, into the federal statistical system. Compare their data to data in core frames that underlie the ACS, CPS, ATUS and CES. Use comparison results to inform federal statistical agencies about who responds to commercial surveys but not government surveys, **and** to inform commercial enterprises about the representativeness of their panels. In the same spirit as Davis et al. (2010) use of QCEW micro data to assess non-random non-response in the JOLTS and Nela Richardson remarks about ADP.

In Light of These Observations,...

3. Current Employment Statistics (CES) program. Reforms to consider:
 - a) Benchmark to administrative sources quarterly rather than yearly. (Decker)
 - b) Push back the release date of the Monthly Employment Situation Report to get better CES statistics. Recall David Wilcox on late responses to the CES.
 - c) Replace survey data with private sector payroll data in selected sectors. (Decker)
 - d) Drop survey. Shift to quarterly releases based on administrative data. (Wilcox on survey initiation, my remarks on response rates, Decker on Birth-Death model.)
4. There is a case for phasing out surveys (and individual survey questions) that elicit information which is also available from high-quality administrative and commercial sources.
5. Surveys should focus on concepts and objects that **cannot** be obtained from administrative sources – expectations, perceptions, attitudes,...
6. Examples below.

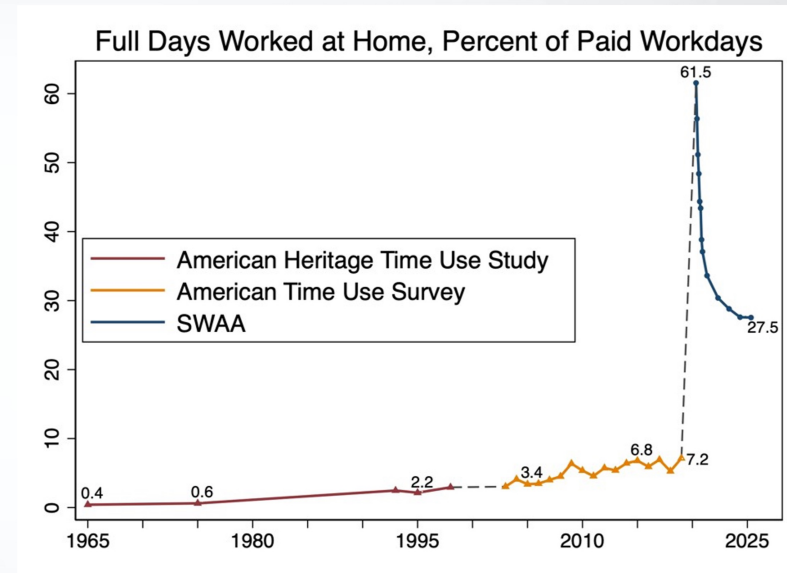
Selected Examples of NGS Data & Statistics

Survey of Working Arrangements & Attitudes

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THE PANDEMIC AND IS NOW
PERMANENTLY
HIGHER

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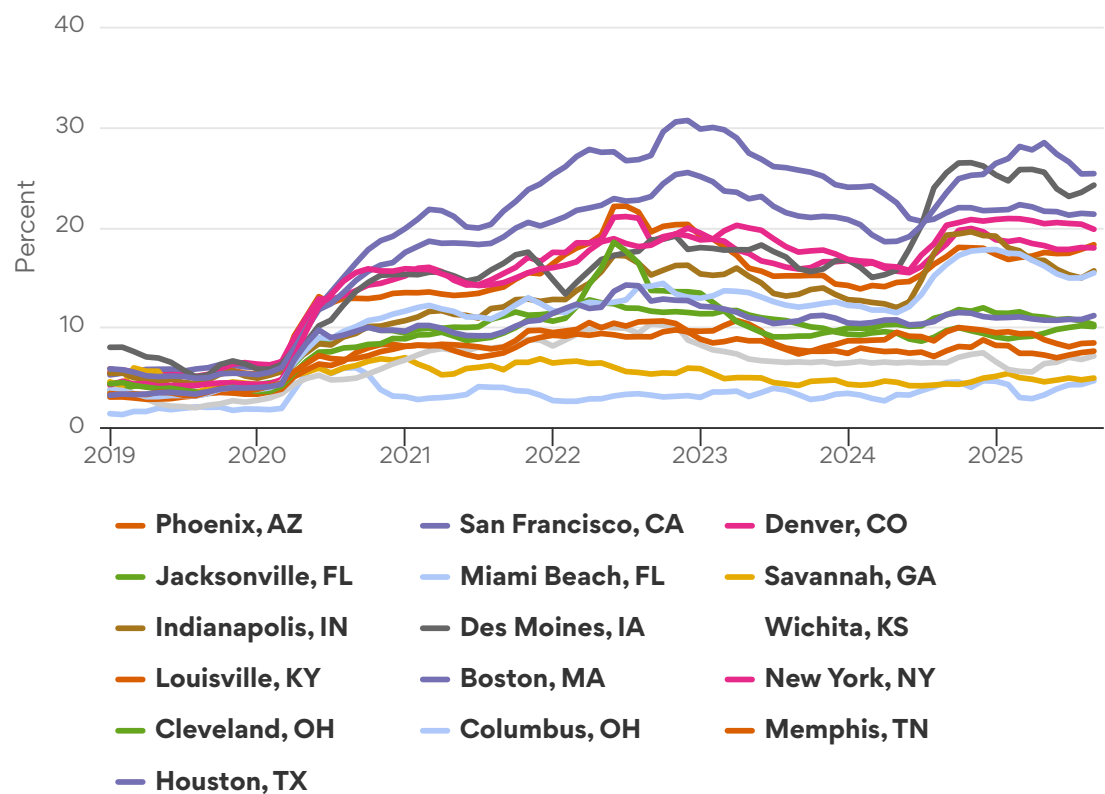
Download our [time series data on the extent of working from home](#) in [Excel](#) or [JSON](#) format
[Our data on Work From Home are now on the FRED Database](#)

Download and visualize the series listed [here](#)

See Barrero et al. (2021) for description and Buckman et al. f(2025) or comparison of WFH stats from many⁸ sources

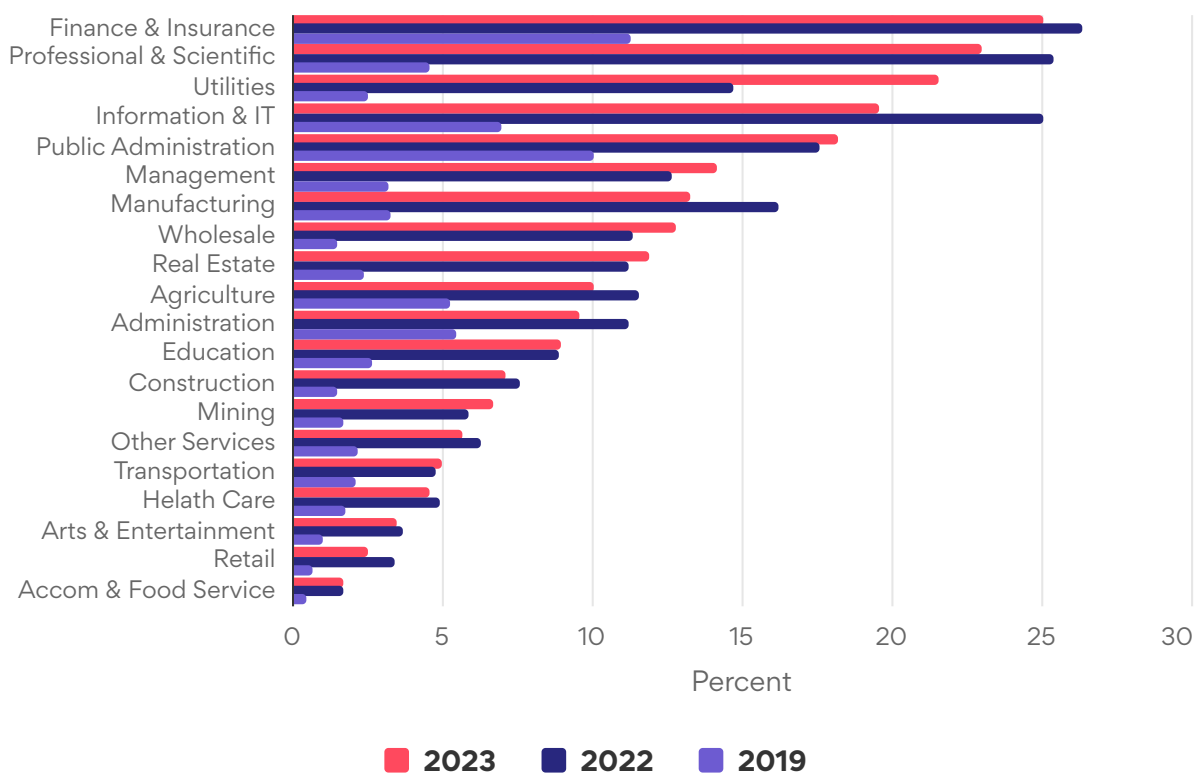
WFH Map Project: Tailored LLM (trained and tested) Applied to Millions of U.S. Job Postings Per Month

Figure 2: Advertised remote/hybrid work shows substantial divergence across US cities



wfhmap.com

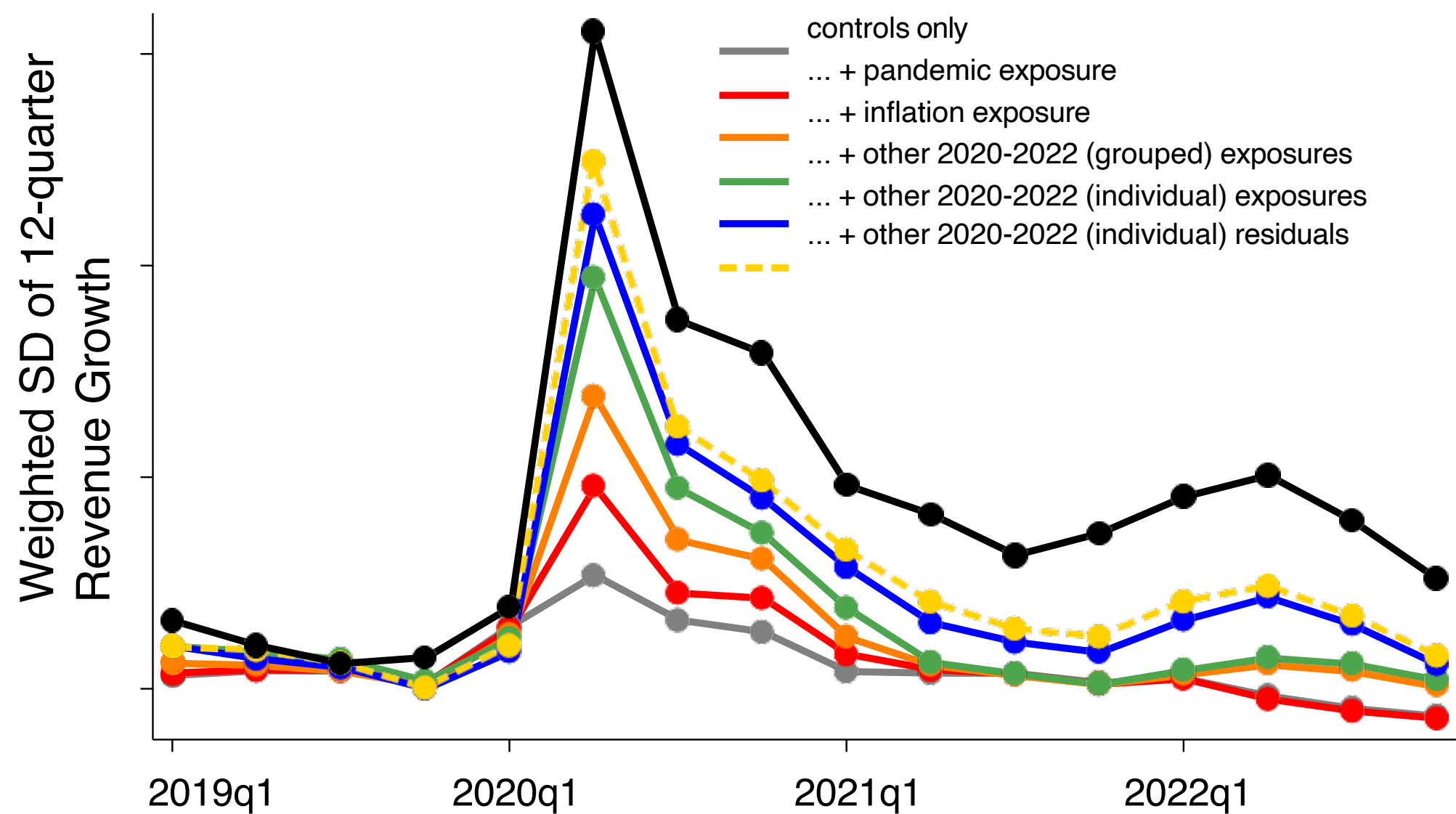
Figure 3: Percent of job ads offering remote/hybrid vary widely by Industry



wfhmap.com

See Hansen et al. (2023) for development of LLM and description of data.

Supervised ML Applied to Firm-Level Equity Returns and 10-Ks



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