

## **Frequently asked questions: The impact of the partial federal government shutdown on the Employment Situation for October 2013**

### **1. Household and establishment surveys: How did the federal government shutdown affect survey operations?**

Some agencies of the federal government were shut down or were operating at reduced staffing levels from October 1, 2013, through October 16, 2013. All household and establishment survey operations, including data collection, were suspended during that time period.

In the household survey, individuals are asked about their labor market activities during the survey reference week—generally the week that includes the 12th of the month. For October 2013, the household survey reference week was Sunday, October 6, through Saturday, October 12. Data collection was originally scheduled to begin on October 13th but was delayed because of the shutdown. Collection began on October 20th, and the survey reference week was unchanged. The response rate for the household survey was within its normal range.

In the establishment survey, the reference period is the pay period that includes the 12th of the month, regardless of the length of the pay period. Data collection for a specific month begins as early as the 13th of that month. Collection continues for about 2 months, and the estimates are revised twice after their initial release to reflect the additional data collected. From October 1 through October 16, 2013, BLS normally would have collected data to be used for the August final, September second preliminary, and October preliminary establishment survey estimates. October data collection began shortly after BLS reopened. The response rate for the establishment survey was above average.

The Employment Situation news release, which had been scheduled for publication on November 1, was rescheduled to November 8 to allow enough time to collect data.

### **2. Household and establishment surveys: Were the survey response rates affected by the shutdown?**

October data collection for both the household and establishment surveys was delayed due to the shutdown. In the household survey, collection began 1 week later than originally scheduled (starting October 20 instead of October 13). For the establishment survey, October collection began soon after BLS reopened. The response rate for the household survey was within its normal range, and the response rate for the establishment survey was above average. The response rate for the household survey was 90.1 percent in October 2013. The household survey typically has a response rate of about 90 percent. The collection rate for the establishment survey was 83.5 percent in October 2013. Historical establishment survey collection rates are online at [www.bls.gov/ces/cesreinfo.htm](http://www.bls.gov/ces/cesreinfo.htm).

### **3. Establishment survey: How did the federal shutdown impact October estimates?**

Looking at the October payroll survey estimates, there were no discernible impacts of the partial federal government shutdown on the estimates of employment, hours, and earnings. Federal employees on furlough during the partial government shutdown were still considered employed in the payroll survey because they worked or received pay for the pay period that included the 12th of the month. In the establishment survey, workers who are paid for any part of a pay period are defined as employed.

### **4. Household survey: How did the federal shutdown impact October estimates?**

Unlike the establishment survey, some of the estimates from the household survey clearly reflect an impact of the partial government shutdown. This is due to differences in the concepts and definitions used in the two surveys. In the household survey, workers who indicate that they were not working during the entire reference week due to a shutdown-related furlough and expect to be recalled to their jobs should be classified as unemployed on temporary layoff, whether or not they are paid for the time they were off work. In October, many furloughed federal employees were so classified, contributing to a rise in the overall number of persons unemployed on temporary layoff. (See details in item 5 below.)

However, some federal workers who were not at work during the entire reference week in October were not classified as unemployed on temporary layoff. Rather, they were classified as employed but absent from work. BLS review of the data indicates that most of these workers should have been classified as unemployed on temporary layoff. Such a misclassification is an example of nonsampling error and can occur when respondents misunderstand questions or interviewers record answers incorrectly. (See details in item 6 below.)

Some federal workers were at work during the survey reference week, but the shutdown may have affected the number of hours they worked. Employed persons who usually work full time (35 hours or more per week) but indicated that they had worked fewer than 35 hours in the reference week because of the shutdown would have been classified as employed part time for economic reasons. (See details in item 9 below.)

### **5. Household survey: How many federal workers were unemployed on temporary layoff in October?**

In the household survey, workers who indicate that they were not working during the entire reference week due to a shutdown-related furlough and expect to be recalled to their jobs should be classified as unemployed on temporary layoff, whether or not they are paid for the time they were off work.

In October, there were 223,000 unemployed federal workers on temporary layoff (not seasonally adjusted). This is much larger (roughly 200,000 larger) than the number on temporary layoff in prior months and years and reflects the impact of the October 2013 shutdown. These furloughed federal employees contributed to the rise in the overall number of unemployed persons on temporary layoff.

Table A. Unemployed federal workers, including those on temporary layoff, September and October 2009–2013, not seasonally adjusted  
(Numbers in thousands)

	September		October		Difference* (October - September)	
	Total unemployed	On temporary layoff	Total unemployed	On temporary layoff	Total unemployed	On temporary layoff
2009	184	15	184	6	0	-9
2010	311	13	309	9	-2	-4
2011	276	8	238	16	-38	8
2012	266	17	244	6	-22	-11
2013	270	19	437	223	167	204

\* Users are generally cautioned against over-the-month comparisons of not seasonally adjusted data, as the change could be affected by some seasonal component.

Note: Federal workers refers to federal wage and salary workers in nonagricultural industries.

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**6. Household survey: Where else did furloughed federal workers appear?**

Although federal workers who did not work during the reference week due to the shutdown should have been classified as unemployed on temporary layoff, it appears that some workers were included in the measure of employed persons with a job but not at work.

In October, there were 307,000 federal workers classified as employed with a job but not at work during the survey reference week (not seasonally adjusted). This is much larger (roughly 200,000 larger) than the number with a job not at work in prior months and years and reflects the impact of the October 2013 shutdown.

Table B. Employed persons with a job but not at work, September and October 2009–2013, not seasonally adjusted (Numbers in thousands)

	September				October				Difference* (October - September)	
	Total employed	With a job not at work			Total employed	With a job not at work			With a job not at work	
		Total	Federal			Total	Federal		Total	Federal
			Total	Percent of total employed			Total	Percent of total employed		
2009	139,079	4,832	151	0.1	139,088	4,143	147	0.1	-689	-4
2010	139,715	4,197	102	0.1	139,749	4,025	138	0.1	-172	36
2011	140,502	3,877	133	0.1	140,987	4,084	125	0.1	207	-8
2012	143,333	4,025	112	0.1	144,039	3,913	104	0.1	-112	-8
2013	144,651	3,620	111	0.1	144,144	3,621	307	0.2	1	196

\* Users are generally cautioned against over-the-month comparisons of not seasonally adjusted data, as the change could be affected by some seasonal component.

Note: Federal workers refers to federal wage and salary workers in nonagricultural industries.

There are many reasons why employed persons were absent from work for the entire survey reference week. BLS tabulates data on employed persons not at work whose main reason for being absent was vacation, illness, childcare problems, other family/personal obligations, labor dispute, bad weather, maternity or paternity leave, school/training, civic/military duty, and other reasons. Of the 307,000 employed federal workers not at work during the survey reference week in October 2013, about 217,000 people were included in the “other reasons” category (not seasonally adjusted). This is much higher than usual. BLS analysis of the data suggests that this group included federal workers affected by the shutdown who should have been classified as unemployed on temporary layoff. Such a misclassification is an example of nonsampling error and can occur when respondents misunderstand questions or interviewers record answers incorrectly.

Table C. Employed federal workers with a job but not at work by reason, October 2009–2013, not seasonally adjusted  
(Numbers in thousands)

	Total not at work	Vacation	Illness	Childcare problems	Other family/ personal obligations	Labor dispute	Bad weather	Maternity or paternity leave	School/ training	Civic/ military duty	Other reasons
2009	147	84	49	-	0	-	-	4	1	-	9
2010	138	105	24	-	-	-	-	6	-	-	3
2011	125	76	25	-	5	-	-	6	-	4	10
2012	104	76	15	-	0	-	-	4	-	-	9
2013	307	43	22	-	6	-	-	17	3	-	217

Note: Federal workers refers to federal wage and salary workers in nonagricultural industries.

#### 7. Household survey: Why weren't the misclassified October data corrected?

According to usual practice, the data from the household survey are accepted as recorded. To maintain data integrity, no ad hoc actions are taken to reassign survey responses.

#### 8. Household survey: What would the unemployment rate be if these misclassified workers were included among the unemployed?

If the federal workers who were recorded as employed but absent from work had been classified as unemployed on temporary layoff, the overall unemployment rate would have been slightly, but not substantively, higher than reported. This kind of experiment requires some assumptions. For example, one might assume that all 217,000 federal workers with a job but not at work who were included in the “other reasons” category were misclassified workers on furlough. (While this is the category where workers were misclassified, not every person in this category was necessarily misclassified.) If these 217,000 employed federal workers were to be considered unemployed, that would increase the number of unemployed persons in October (on a not seasonally adjusted basis) by 217,000 from 10,773,000 to 10,990,000. The number of persons in the labor force (employed and unemployed combined) would remain at 154,918,000 (not seasonally adjusted). The resulting unemployment rate for October would be 7.1 percent (not seasonally adjusted), little different from the official estimate of 7.0 percent (not seasonally adjusted). Estimates of federal workers are not available on a seasonally adjusted basis, so seasonally adjusted data, such as the unemployment rate mentioned in our news release, cannot be used in this exercise.

**9. Household survey: How many federal workers were at work part time for economic reasons in October?**

Some federal employees did work during the partial shutdown, including during the survey reference week. The shutdown may have affected the number of hours they worked. For example, some federal employees may have worked for some part of the survey reference period, but not as many hours as they usually work. Employed persons who usually work full time (35 hours or more per week) but indicated that they had worked fewer than 35 hours in the reference week because of the shutdown should have been classified as employed part time for economic reasons.

In October, there were 84,000 employed federal workers working part time for economic reasons (not seasonally adjusted). This is not much different from the prior month or years.

Table D. Persons at work part time for economic reasons, September and October 2009–2013, not seasonally adjusted (Numbers in thousands)

	September			October			Difference* (October - September)	
	Total	Federal	Percent federal	Total	Federal	Percent federal	Total	Federal
2009	8,255	82	1.0	8,474	66	0.8	219	-16
2010	8,628	55	0.6	8,408	57	0.7	-220	2
2011	8,541	45	0.5	8,258	36	0.4	-283	-9
2012	8,110	42	0.5	7,870	70	0.9	-240	28
2013	7,522	70	0.9	7,700	84	1.1	178	14

\* Users are generally cautioned against over-the-month comparisons of not seasonally adjusted data, as the change could be affected by some seasonal component.

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