

Frequently Asked Question (FAQs)

Natural Disasters and the Impact on New Residential Construction and Sales Data

1. For areas impacted by a natural disaster, how can I tell how much they typically represent in terms of the nation's total new residential construction?

The Building Permits Survey is the best source for local, county, and state data on new residential authorizations.

To look up the data for an impacted area, data users can use the visualization time series and table tool located at www.census.gov/construction/bps/data_visualizations/. This allows users to select specific geographies and time periods and view how many new units that area typically authorizes on a monthly or annual basis.

To approximate the overall impact on new residential construction, those data can be compared to the region or total U.S. levels in Table 1 of the New Residential Construction report published at www.census.gov/construction/nrc/index.html.

2. How are building permit estimates for affected by a natural disaster?

The majority of jurisdictions are usually able to report their data or provide some operational information to us even in the event of a natural disaster. Generally, if a local government in the monthly Building Permits Survey (BPS) sample does not report its permit activity to the Census Bureau, data for that jurisdiction are imputed based on the assumption that the ratio of authorizations for the current time period to the prior year total is the same for reporting and nonreporting jurisdictions in that Census Region.

In the event of a natural disaster, Census Bureau staff will review non-reporting jurisdictions in the area and try to determine a likely impact on their authorizations. If we determine that the standard imputation method is not appropriate given the analysis and likely impact of the disaster in their area, we can intervene in the imputation process. This includes options to either reduce the amount of imputed authorizations or assume that no authorizations for new residential units were issued for these jurisdictions until the local office is fully operational again.

3. Does New Residential Construction or New Residential Sales produce estimates for the affected sample areas?

Monthly state and local estimates are generally available for building permit authorizations on the 17th working day of each month at www.census.gov/construction/bps/. Housing starts, completions, and sales are not available at the state or local level.

4. How are the collection of data on housing starts, completions, and sales affected by a natural disaster?

Housing starts and completions are obtained from the Survey of Construction, a sample survey of new housing units from 900 permit jurisdictions and from a sample of land areas where permits are not required. Since the sample for the Survey of Construction is much smaller than the building permit survey, many times there is no impact to the sampled areas and therefore no impact on data collection.

In the event that data collection is occurring in an area impacted by a natural disaster, our field representatives will attempt to collect the information by phone or will visit the building site where appropriate. If the field representative is unable to obtain new information on the project, it will remain in the same status as it was in the previous month. For example, if the project was under construction in July and a hurricane hit in August, which caused the field representative to be unable to obtain August information, the project will remain in “under construction” status for the August data month.

In addition, the Survey of Construction allows for revisions to data for up to 2 additional months for starts and completions and 3 additional months for sales. This allows the field representatives to enter the data into the correct month as they get new information and allows the data to be revised to reflect actual information as we receive it for the months following the natural disaster.

5. Do you have monthly estimates of starts, completions, or sales for the affected areas?

No. The Survey of Construction sample was designed to make regional and U.S. estimates, not local estimates.

6. Are completely rebuilt houses counted as new residential construction?

Yes. 100% rebuilds will be counted. However, most damaged homes are not completely rebuilt, but are considered repairs, which are not included in these statistics. Following Hurricane Andrew in 1992, the definition of a new housing start was modified to include structures where the entire building was razed, and a new house was built on the existing foundation. We generally work with local jurisdictions in areas impacted by a natural disaster to assist in the proper classification of the permits for the units being rebuilt.

7. Are manufactured homes placed in the area after a natural disaster counted as new residential construction?

Manufactured (mobile) homes inspected by HUD at the factory (“HUD-code” homes) are not counted as new residential construction because permits from the local jurisdictions are not required to inspect the construction of the units. Shipments of these units are counted separately in the Manufactured Housing Survey; data from that survey can be found at this link: www.census.gov/programs-surveys/mhs.html . Modular homes without a HUD factory inspection require local building permits and are included in the new residential construction statistics.

8. Are there usually any estimates that are withheld or delayed because of data collection problem due to a natural disaster?

No. In general, natural disasters have not caused us to delay or withhold any estimates. In cases where collection or estimates have been impacted by a natural disaster, our intention is to inform the data users of the impact or limitations with the issuance of special notices or FAQ's.

9. Where can I find additional information on the impact of natural disasters?

For data from other Census Bureau sources on the areas impacted by natural disasters, please see the Census Bureau's www.census.gov/topics/preparedness.html page.

Source: U. S. Census Bureau
Economic Indicators Division

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