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TRANSCRIPT

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FEATURING

Vipin Arora

Director, Bureau of Economic Analysis

Ron Jarmin

Deputy Director and Chief Operating Officer, U.S. Census Bureau

William Wiatrowski

Acting Commissioner, Bureau of Labor Statistics

CSIS EXPERTS

Navin Girishankar

President, Economic Security & Technology Department, CSIS

Transcript By

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Navin
Girishankar:

There's a lot to talk about, so we're going to – first of all, that was a fantastic economic security session, so I just want to thank Phil and everyone who participated in that. We're going to move back to government and to the agency perspective. We started with users. We had an interesting perspective on economic security. Sandwiched in between that chief statistician Mark gave his perspective, which I thought was quite interesting, informative, thoughtful – obviously, issues to discuss.

But let me swing back to our colleagues who have come from the agencies. First of all, we have to thank you again. Everyone should just express their appreciation for these three gentlemen here who – (applause) – who continue to keep the system going, innovating the system as you go along, oftentimes below the radar screen oftentimes, I'll just say, pilloried in public, fairly or unfairly, with the politics, and it is not easy to do. But the country owes you a major debt for doing what you're doing and I'm very interested in what we're going to talk about. So thank you, all of you.

So here's a way to introduce this part of the conversation. There's a lot of talk about change. In fact, our early conversations you inspired me, in a way, to start thinking about let's talk about the system of the future. What is it that we need to build? It's not just what we have to preserve.

Having said that, I'm going to ask you in your specific roles – so I didn't properly introduce you. Bill Wiatrowski, acting commissioner of BLS; Ron Jarmin, who is the CEO of the Census; Vipin Arora, who's the director of BEA.

How do you balance continuity and change? You're probably doing both of it all the time and so, you know, this is a very high level question but I wanted to raise that with you because it's one thing to talk about change but you have to preserve, and it's not – it's a nontrivial effort to keep the system going, to preserve its integrity, to preserve its efficiency.

Start with that. I'm happy to start with Ron and then we can go around the team – the room here.

Ron Jarmin:

Well, let me just maybe rephrase that. We have to change in order to preserve the continuity. So, you know, when we talk about things like, you know, declining response rates, how are you going to get the data that support the estimates that you produce that the public all relies upon?

And, you know, so one of those ways is to think about are there other ways of getting the same information, and so we've been doing a lot of

work of trying to work – and we do more of this on the business side because it's easier but at some point we're going to have to think about it on the household side, too.

But when we work with businesses so think about what happens when we send a business a survey, some employee of said business or some team of employees from said business is going to go query a database. They're going to then try to mentally map the schema of their database into our – the questions that we ask, and then they're going to respond to the survey.

So we've been working with several large companies. I think we got 40 or somewhere around there signed up right now. One of them will allow us to talk about it and that's Amazon, and so it was taking Amazon 600 person hours a year, a team of, like, four or five people to respond to our monthly, quarterly and annual surveys. That's not even including the economic census. That's every five years, a very burdensome survey.

And so we worked with them to automate how we get the data from them. So we get the data more granularly, more frequently, and it now takes them 15 minutes a quarter to, like, check to make sure that the thing is working correctly. OK.

So there's a huge benefit to the companies of doing this. We're getting more data or we're getting better data than we were getting before but it supports the same statistics. But not only does it support the same statistics, as we get more of this from other companies I think we can start entertaining, you know, some other statistical series.

So I think when – it's often a false dichotomy between trying to preserve what you've been doing and doing something new. It's often you need to do something new to keep doing what you've been doing, yeah.

Mr. Girishankar: Great. Great point.

Bill, to you.

William
Wiatrowski:

Sure. So what I would say is one of the most important things is exciting the staff into doing new things, and so we have a lot of monthly programs. There's a lot of production that goes into a monthly program. You know, it's somewhat routine but you got to do it every month and you got to do it right but – and those people do a great job.

But they're also interested in doing it better and so, for example, in the Consumer Price Index to look for alternative data sources. We've had a

lot of success to alternative data sources but the Consumer Price Index is probably the place where we've had the most success.

And so finding those sources, working with that data often for months and years to make sure that it's consistent, that it sort of meets the needs that we have but that ultimately seeing that come to fruition. We introduced an alternative data source for telecommunication services this past summer.

And so people have been working at that for a long time and so being able to get out that monthly CPI but also see the progress of their work improve and so that's how we attract new staff, good staff, and that's how we do our best to retain those staff.

Mr. Girishankar: Phenomenal.

Vipin?

Vipin Arora: It's a really hard question. I mean, it's really hard, and I've been kind of thinking around in my head how do you balance it. And then for me, you know, I don't like to play defense. I like to play offense. And so, like, I think you always have to improve so you have to find somewhere something that you can improve.

So the way, you know, we've thought about it at BEA is if you think about – maybe you've got 10,000 things you do, right? If you can make a 1 percent improvement in half of them – just think about 1 percent, just a little incremental improvement across half your organization and your processes. Just think how much better you can get.

And so I think taking more of an offensive mindset to it I think has really helped us and so then it kind of goes back to what Ron was saying and actually it builds on what Bill was saying. It excites staff to see wins, to see improvements, but then you're always changing, right? You're not – you're improving but, you know, your legacy products are improving and everything else is improving as well. So I think staying on offense is really important for that.

Mr. Girishankar: I'm so glad you all shared your perspective on this and corrected what I think is my own misimpression, like, how do I frame this as stability versus change, and I go back to I think it was Dave McNellis.

Dave, did you talk about continuous improvement? Like, our systems are continuously improving. You're going through this process.

Now, one can debate how fast you're going or whether you're going fast enough. But what I heard was – and I'd like your thoughts on this – there's new data that needs to be collected. There are new methods. There's a new machinery particularly with technology that you might want to deploy and then there's, like, how do you bring in either new people or excite people to do new things.

And all of these things are happening I think from what you're seeing simultaneously and you're continuing to do that probably under resource constraints. (Laughs.)

Do I have that right and where would you push further if you could? Maybe start with you.

Dr. Arora: So I'm going to go back to a sports analogy. So I really like football and I was never fast enough to get on the field to play, and so in other aspects of my life I think I try to overcompensate with speed.

So I just want to get faster. I want BEA to do everything faster and that's where I would hit. You heard Todd talk about it earlier when he opened up. Contemporaneous data is what he called it. But timeliness, I think, for us is huge and we just want to get faster at every single thing we do.

Mr. Girishankar: Mm hmm.

Dr. Jarmin: So yeah, I think the idea is to – you know, everything you do to do better to get, you know, more granular data out there more quickly. But then how are you going to do that?

So, you know, the case I cited with Amazon so that requires someone at a stat agency to have, like, almost a salesperson relationship with companies, right? That's not the kind of people we've hired in the past.

And so to think about how do we augment our staff so that, you know, as we scale that up how do we do that. Then what are we going to need? You know, if we're going to get far more data in and maybe the data doesn't even all come here, that we're computing on data behind company firewalls, you know, what's the engineering talent that we're going to need?

So, you know, how do we, you know, augment our, you know, economists and demographers and data scientists and statisticians with these other toolkits that we're going to need to bring to bear as you sort of modernize the statistical system and how do you get all of that team working?

You know, it's easy to get economists and demographers excited about data on companies and households, right? Maybe it's a little harder to get, you know, an engineer excited about that.

So how do we get them and bring them in, acculturate them to the sort of stat agency ethos about, you know, trying to provide data for the public where their other job opportunities might be, like, go work at a tech firm or something like that.

So I think it's really about trying to, you know, think about the kind of folks that we're going to need to sort of scale this, you know, sort of modern vision out and then how do we bring them in and get them, you know, as part of the team of the stat system.

So thanks.

Mr. Wiatrowski: There are a lot of misconceptions about sort of how backwards some of the work is. So, certainly, BLS has been in the news a lot in recent months and last couple of years and a lot of questions about sort of the methods of producing things like, you know, we're still sending out paper and a pencil and people fill it out and send it back, which is just not true.

So we have introduced over time a lot of electronic methods for getting data in. We work – we collect data almost exclusively from businesses and so as we heard earlier they don't want to be burdened with a lot of time and so providing a lot of options for entering data and also providing opportunities to provide large data files or for us to work with them on how that data file might work. And so we've spent a fair amount of time trying to modernize that process and trying to add new options as much as possible.

And just to add to what Ron was saying, we have staff around the country that do a lot of data collection for our price programs and our compensation programs and we've discovered over time that we have to hire – we hire economists but they have to be salespeople as well. You know, a wallflower is not going to be a great data collector and so over time I think we've learned that and been able to adapt.

Mr. Girishankar: Yeah. I think there's so much for the public to learn about what you're actually doing and I think – I wonder how much of that, you know, organizations like ours or others should be able to bring that to light and you yourselves, what you're doing about that, because otherwise you're caught in a moment where the politics and the credibility of the institution is questioned.

But in fact under the, like – you know, like the duck paddling under the water there's all this stuff happening. What's your perspective on that, particularly around the notion of credibility versus independence versus the kinds of things Mark Calabria was talking about?

Mr. Wiatrowski: So there's certainly been a fair amount of misstatements and I think BLS has been in the crosshairs on a lot of that, and it's not new.

So, I mean, I do an introductory session for brand new BLS staff and I show a tape – a video from 15 or so years ago that talked about the Obama administration cooking the books and that – it wasn't true then. It's not true now. But there's certainly a lot of misstatements about cooking the books, about sort of adding politics into the data.

We're a bunch of math nerds and we rely on our methodology, and we feel very strongly about making that methodology as transparent as we possibly can. I can give you other examples. Even recently with the shutdown that there were individuals who were certain that I had the unemployment data in my back pocket and that I wasn't releasing it because it was going to make somebody look bad and I can assure you I have no idea what the September unemployment data are. And so getting past those misconceptions is something that all of us could work on.

Mr. Girishankar: Ron?

Dr. Jarmin: Yeah, I agree. I mean, I don't think people, you know, have a good enough sense of how the sausage gets made and how, you know, it would be difficult to do some of the things that, you know, people out in the public arena sometimes think is happening.

But I would also say we need to do more to – especially for sort of the public at large is to do things that they see direct value from and so, you know, one of the things that we worry about with declining response rates is that, you know, there could be many reasons. I think the main reason is people just don't have the time and they – you know, they get lots of requests for surveys and what have you.

But if they see that there's some value from participating in these things that's more direct to them, perhaps they would have a different attitude about engaging with the statistical system. And so one of the things that we've been working on over the past several years is with our LEHD – you know, linked employer-employee data.

First, we worked with several university systems around the country to build something called the post-secondary employment outcome so

what happens to your earnings one, five, and 10 years after graduating from college or university and by campus by major, right?

And so that was one of the things – you know, this is one of these products that advanced and modernized disclosure avoidance procedures allows us to produce. We'd been talking about doing something like this for decades but, you know, traditional disclosure procedures wouldn't allow you to do this.

So this is where, you know, modernized methods sort of met an old need and but it's also something that we're trying to do that provides value directly to a family who's thinking about sending a student to a – in a particular program.

So more recently we've worked with the – first with the Army but then with the Defense Department to do a similar thing for veterans. So we have by branch of the service, by occupation within the military, we have the same sort of thing.

So for, you know, folks that are in the military thinking about different career paths through the military and how that impacts their earnings after they leave. So finding something that, you know, from the statistical system that gives value to sort of average everyday people I think it – you know, that helps blunt, you know, their willingness to listen to these rumors because, like, well, hey, Census and BLS and BEA are giving us, you know, useful information.

So I think when they consume the information so – in such a secondhand way that they don't see us directly as providing value.

Mr. Girishankar: Yeah. Vipin, your thoughts on this?

Dr. Arora: So one of the questions that I get – even when I get a chance to speak to just a general public audience is who gets to see GDP before it's published? Always can guarantee that that's going to be a question that comes out of the audience.

And so it's nice to be able to talk through the processes we have and the segmentation we have and bringing all this stuff together because, you know, for decades we've been doing this and the process it's very secure and not many people – you know, like, that's the answer and people seem to be very comforted by that.

And I think just in general that kind of communication – I'll say key to me to credibility is plain language communication and it's got to be plain language communication, whether it's in your methodology

documents or whether it's me up here or Ron up here or Bill up here talking about it.

I mean, I watched – I know Adam Sieminski's in here somewhere. Just a master when he was the administrator of EIA in plain language communication and, you know, I learned a lot from him and I think following that model would be very effective for us in terms of credibility.

Mr. Girishankar: Yeah. That's powerful. So you've reminded us you are in the process of innovating to keep the system going. You've told us what you think can be done to make sure the public understands it.

But there is something to this thesis that the economy is changing profoundly, that data is being generated in volumes and in complexity that it – outside of government that hadn't been done before, that there is certainly an accelerating technology race, national security competition with China – economic security competition with China. We heard that from the other panel.

These things certainly throw up questions for the statistical system. I think my thought would be similar to other challenges our nation has faced in the past and so I guess this goes back to the – one of our conversations about what's the system of the future.

So I'd just like your thoughts on what one or two big things are that you are thinking should respond to this if you agree with this thesis, and maybe start with Ron and then Bill and Vipin.

Dr. Jarmin: So I think, first of all, is how do we adapt our methods, our infrastructure, to, you know, take advantage of the much more data-rich world that we now inhabit and, you know, so I talked a little bit about that, what we're doing with Amazon and others.

And David Johnson's back here. We're on a project where we're using transactions data to do sort of combined price and quantity information for the retail sector.

But I think it's – you know, that gets you part of the way there. But then the question is what is it that we need to be measuring that's different than it was before and this is where I think we need more help from others.

So that was a great conversation that we had on the panel before. I think that's a lens on economic measurement that we don't see that much and so how do we, you know, sort of plug into that conversation and what

can we do to help that. I don't – you know, I don't think that stat agencies want to be working with the intelligence community, you know, directly probably because, you know, I think the public might be – have some ideas about that.

But, you know, so what is it that we should be, you know, using these – this new data-rich environment, these new techniques, to what should we be measuring over and above what we're currently doing.

And so, you know, I think there are some things, you know, so obviously we've added a lot of questions about AI use, you know, on business surveys and so, you know, it would have been cool in the first half of the 20th century if we would have asked companies about, you know, their use of electricity.

You know, you would have saw a huge, you know, benefit from, you know, moving from local power generation to using the grid. But, you know, so is AI really, you know, on that kind of level of big general purpose technology that's going to have profound impacts on the economy? Well, at least we're trying to, you know, see how it's diffusing through the economy.

But what else should we be doing? You know, so we get a lot of this. You know, who's really good at telling us what to measure? Academics are really good at telling us what to measure. But that's one kind of segment of the economy that's telling us to look at things. So are there other voices we should be hearing on that and I don't think we're getting the full picture. So –

Mr. Wiatrowski: So, I mean, there's several things that we would certainly like to expand on. So we heard earlier about, you know, the great move from a manufacturing economy to a service economy. I think we do a pretty good job in employment in that area but not so good a job in the price area.

So our producer prices and our import-export prices are, largely, a manufacturing program. One, it's easier to collect those data. We have a great partnership with the Census Bureau on trade data that we use for import-export price index but most of that is for goods. So expanding our services in the price area is something that I think, you know, we would love to do more of.

In the employment area you hear lots and lots about the gig economy. You know, the numbers that we've put out have been quite small and no one sort of believes them, and so being able to expand on that a little bit more.

And then we are sort of venturing into the AI world, some looking at sort of the impact on the labor market on changes in occupation mix or in replacement of tasks and things like that. So there's certainly a lot of things and I'm sure there's many more and, again, input from as many folks as possible is what we really need in that area.

Mr. Girishankar: Thank you. Yeah.

Vipin?

Dr. Arora: Probably take a different perspective on this and talk about internally how can we make our organizations more effective. I just think there's so much to be gained by improving our organizational effectiveness just a little bit.

If you just ask simple questions like are we structured in the right way, are we structured in a modern way, and this isn't just a stat agency thing. This is any bureaucracy I think you could say this about.

But, like, I think that is a real question that all of us should be asking, and then what that leads me to think about goes back to where Bill started in that are we making the most effective use of the talent that we have. Because I can tell you, I feel at BEA we've got talent everywhere. But am I, you know, using them in the right way? Are we making the most effective use of all the talent that we have?

And I don't know that that – it could be yes, could be no, but I think we can – I do think we can do better, and so internally I think that's important.

Mr. Girishankar: Well, thank you for raising that. I was going to ask about people and process because there's, obviously, some discussion about how a statistical agency should be organized. There's also the point you're raising is within each agency how do you improve? Like, what you can control? What can you do right now?

What are your thoughts on that in terms of – well, I'm not going to put you on the spot about some of these recommendations that are out there in the public domain. What I'm asking is how do you coordinate right now? How do you coordinate better to be able to answer the big questions that policymakers are asking?

Mr. Wiatrowski: So I'll talk a little bit about some lessons learned.

So, again, I've mentioned more than once that BLS is in the news. So last year, 2024, we had a series of missteps of our own making, and each of them were different and each of them had sort of a personnel issue behind them. But they all gave the impression that we were providing unequal access to people, which is never our intention and far from the truth.

There's a lot of public information about this including a report from a panel of outside experts. It's on the BLS website. But not to be outdone, the Department of Labor's inspector general is still looking into this topic as is, I think, the Government Accountability Office. So we never get off the hook.

But one of the things that we realized is that the way that we handle public inquiries needed to be thought about differently, and Vipin was part of the panel so he could speak to this as well. We have a reputation for a hundred and forty some years of answering every possible question that comes in and providing people as much detail as possible about how we put together our statistics and our methodology.

And what we realized is that we were providing some information to some people and maybe other information to other people, and providing it often in our own words, which were not consistent from one place to another and, frankly, some of the requesters were taking advantage of that and, you know, finding out the right person that they were going to get a little bit more information from.

And so we have completely revamped our customer service approach to focus entirely on the trust of BLS data and so I think some of our customers may be a little less happy about that. But we now focus entirely on what information is already public and providing the same information to everyone, and I think that just helps to sort of expand the credibility of the agency and something we continue to work on and will continue to be working on with staff.

Mr. Girishankar: Thank you, Bill.

Ron?

Dr. Jarmin: So remind me exactly what was the question here. (Laughter).

Mr. Wiatrowski: I'm sure I went off topic.

Dr. Jarmin: No, that was awesome. I mean –

Mr. Girishankar: Actually, I have to try and remember it myself. (Laughter.)

Mr. Wiatrowski: It was about data-sharing restrictions.

Dr. Jarmin: Oh, yeah.

Mr. Girishankar: It's about coordination between the agencies.

Dr. Jarmin: Oh, how we work – how we work together? Oh, yeah.

Well, I mean, so first of all, we work together all the time. So people think that, you know, it's complete silos. So Bill mentioned the project we did working with the trade data that we collected and, you know, we just had a big ceremony. You know, we're all in the same building now, right? So – well, when we're working we are.

But, you know, so I think – and, you know, we've worked with BEA in fact and then, you know, we work with other stat agencies as well.

Now, you know, some things make it hard to do as much as we'd like to do because there are restrictions on data sharing and what have you. But I think we find ways to do what we can within the resources and constraints that we face.

You know, Barry Johnson is sitting back there. He's retired now but he was a great partner when he was at the IRS. I mean, you know, the amount of collaboration within the stat system I think is very underappreciated and I think people outside say, oh, there's too many silos and they should – you know.

But there is a lot of collaboration and we try to do – you know, obviously, you work on the project you think are going to have a big impact and so I think that's what we, you know, strive to do. And, you know, so over the years we've moved down that – sort of that curve of from the biggest impact to the next biggest impact, and so on and so forth.

But, you know, obviously, could there be more? Could there – you know, could there be things that change? You know, one thing I think about as we move forward, you know, it is – you know, you're talking to three of the bigger agencies here. Scale matters for innovation, OK? And so if I'm at the Bureau of Transportation Statistics or the Bureau of Justice Statistics and I got, you know, 75 staff, it's hard to think how I'm going to adopt AI to help, you know, with my processes. So I think some notion of bringing more scale to the broad set of statistical domains, not just at

Census or not just a BLS, I think that's something that we're going to have to talk about going forward.

Mr. Girishankar: I hear implicit in that the potential for some structural discussion.

Dr. Jarmin: Yeah, or some way to get around that.

Mr. Girishankar: Vipin.

Dr. Arora: Yeah. I think there's just a tremendous amount of collaboration on the product side. And you see it all over, and actually on the technical side. I think these two – Census and BLS house some of the world's experts in things like, I don't know, Dave, you're here somewhere, you mentioned seasonality. I mean, they've got the world's experts in seasonality. And a lot of them wrote the manuals or, you know, the seasonal adjustment programs and whatnot. We're talking to them all the time about that type of thing. But there's no getting around it. Like, some of the paperwork is the pain in the ass. (Laughter.) I mean, like, you think about trying to, like, share data, it's so hard, man. And it's come up over and over again. And these are – there's simple fixes to some of this stuff.

And I just – I just hope that we can make more progress on that. And it's not the product side, but it's on the back end, really, where you see a lot of that. I'll add one last thing. So BEA is kind of like the aggregator of a lot of data across the fiscal system. But, you know, we use over 300 different sources to put our statistics out. About a third of those come from the private sector, maybe a third come from state and local government, and then the rest comes from the federal government, a lot from BLS and Census. So we have a lot of experience with this. And we've made some progress, but things are harder than they should be, I think, in a lot of ways.

Mr. Girishankar: Yeah. Very thoughtful and candid conversation from all of you. I'm going to open it up. We have 10 minutes before lunch. And I want to make sure that we had the opportunity for people to ask you questions. Yes, sir.

Q: Howard Fienberg with the Insights Association. Sorry. Howard Fienberg with the Insights Association.

So we're talking a lot about trying to find ways to innovate within the federal statistical agencies. What role is the private sector going to have to play in that in terms of providing services to your agencies? There are a lot of things that various statistical agencies are trying to do that are already done at warp speed by comparison in the private sector.

Dr. Arora: Can I – because one of the things that I think is we need – we, and I’m talking about BEA here – we need to do better learning from the private sector. And I think the thing the private sector – they have customers, you know, that are paying them. And they are very responsive to their customers. And I think staying – you know, learning from them and how they stay relevant I think is really important for us. And there’s many aspects to that, but I think there’s a lot that we can learn from them.

Dr. Jarmin: So I’d just say we’re already working with the private sector on these things. So the Amazon example I gave before, there’s a team of engineers from Intel that are working with us on that. So, you know, I think that that’s always been the case, that we have private sector partners. I would say, I think over the past couple decades we probably skewed too much to relying strictly on contractor-provided solutions. And we want to get back to where there’s folks that have more technical expertise inside, that have more skin in the game, and are also, you know, more able to do proper oversight of contractors as well. So I think, you know, it’s – I think it’s more of a teamwork model, as opposed to we’re going to go buy something off the street.

Mr. Wiatrowski: So the two areas that we work on most with private sector are contracts. And that’s IT, but it’s also data collection, and a lot of research contracts. But then the other area is in obtaining data. So we work with data aggregators. We work with private employers on getting data. And there are challenges. So I’ll just give one example of data we were getting from a data aggregator for the Consumer Price Index. We were getting the data for free until that company was bought out by another company. And the other company is, like, we’re not giving this data away for free. And so we had to figure out whether or not we could pay for the data. So there’s definitely challenges with those types of arrangements.

Mr. Girishankar: Great. Yes, sir.

Q: Hi, Mike Horrigan. I’m formerly of the BLS, so I’m a big fan. I’m a big fan of the statistical system.

So it’s a little bit of a loaded question, but I just wanted to sort of get a sense from the panelists. In terms of the decline in the budgets in real terms over whatever period you want, that if, as a standard, in terms of policies that would be recommended out of a forum like this, just to maintain the real value of the budgets. Not increase them, but just maintain the real value. How much has been lost over the last whatever – whatever your period of time that’s relevant, 10 years, five years. Because I think it is a substantial issue, but I’d like the audience to have a sense of how much the budgets have actually declined in real terms.

Mr. Wiatrowski: So Steve Pearsons (sp) in the back knows the numbers better than I do. (Laughs.) But I think it's around 20 percent over the last 15 or so years. So BLS is part of the Department of Labor. And for appropriations purposes, it's the Labor, HHS, and Education appropriation. And so, as you might imagine, healthcare issues often get top – you know, top interest. In certain administrations, education topics get a lot of interest. And then within the Labor Department, some of my colleague agencies are saving miners' lives or saving workers' lives. And so sometimes the priority is such that the statistical agencies sort of are at the bottom of the list. But we have done – despite those losses, we're producing more data now than we were 15 years ago.

Dr. Arora: And I think that that is a really good point. You know, so for us, BEA's high-water mark for budget in real terms was 2009. And we've been on a steady decline since that time. I forget the exact percentages, but we have definitely been on a decline. But we are producing orders of magnitude more data than we were then. I think, you know, something like on the order of magnitude – you know, we had four – maybe four – 100 times more data because such an expansion our state and local information over the last 20 years. It's been tremendous.

Dr. Jarmin: Yeah, same with us. I mean, you know, I think if you exclude the Decennial Census, I think we're more – we're probably somewhere between BEA and BLS in terms of real decline. I mean, so I grew up in the economics directorate of the Census Bureau, the part that does establishment surveys. I think when I started in the '90s there was 1,500 people there. There's now, I think, under a thousand. And they produce far more data than they did in the '90s, OK? So there's been a huge amount of productivity increase. And so some of that probably justifies some reduction in budget, if we can do more with the same amount of money.

But, you know, we do have a – you know, this is my, personal opinion. We do have a \$30 trillion economy. Census Bureau budget is, like, a billion and a half dollars a year. We get another 400,000 (dollars) in – 400 million (dollars) in reimbursable survey work. So when you think about – as sort of national priorities – about the size of our economy and how much we spend on measuring it, we're getting a really good deal, OK? So, you know, should it be more? Where I sit, of course it should be more. But, you know, that's not my decision. And we'll do the best with what we get. But the – you know, I think it is open for a reasonable discussion about – especially in this time of rapid change – should we be investing more in our ability to understand what's going on in the economy? So.

Mr. Girishankar: Yes, ma'am. Please.

Q: Hi. Molly Smith from Bloomberg News.

Can you talk a little bit about if you've explored making surveys mandatory? A lot of them are voluntary. And if they could be mandatory, if there is a consequence to not participating, and how to enforce something like that.

Dr. Jarmin: So I think I'm the only one here that has any –

Mr. Wiatrowski: I have one.

Dr. Jarmin: You have one, OK. So it's probably unlikely that we would introduce more mandatory surveys. So right now, at Census, the Decennial Census, the economic census which is done every five years, and a few annual surveys are – the ACS – are mandatory, OK? Everything else is voluntary. We've never imposed a consequence on anyone for failing to respond to a survey, in total or in part. And so, you know, non-response, you know, is not just when people fail to respond to the survey, it's when they fail to respond to all the questions in the survey. We don't even have a law enforcement arm to do anything like that. We would have to send that case to the Justice Department. And they've got bank robbers, and kidnappers, and murderers, and stuff like that. I'm sure that, you know, not responding to a Census survey wouldn't be high on their list to prosecute. (Laughter.) And, look, I don't think we want to do that. I think we want to encourage response to surveys.

But that said, I think, you know, on this notion we don't want to get out of the survey business. There are some things you can only learn from a survey, especially in a timely manner. We want to right-size surveys. So to the extent that we can replace information that we currently collect through surveys with some other either administrative data, or feeds from companies, or working with state and local governments – you know, if we can – if we can do that, then let's not ask those questions on a survey, and only burden people and businesses with things that we can only learn through a survey questionnaire. And that could be learning something we could learn from other sources in a more timely manner, because sometimes administrative data takes a long time to get there. So, you know, kind of a long way of saying, I don't think making surveys mandatory is probably the answer, even if the environment was permissive to allowing that to happen.

Mr. Wiatrowski: So we have one survey, or our Workplace Injury and Illness Survey, that's mandated by the Occupational Safety and Health Statistics Act. And the response rate is pretty good, but it's not 100 percent. And we

don't have survey cops out there, you know, arresting anyone for not participating. Similar to what Ron said, you know, we'd have to go through the Justice Department. There's sort of confidentiality issues about, you know, indicating who the employers are that aren't providing the data.

One other thing I'll mention is that we do a lot of work with the states. I see our colleague from South Carolina is here. And a few of the states have mandated one or two of our employment surveys. And I think that has helped with the response on the state level. And those are federal-state cooperative programs, so we produce comparable federal and state data. So I think that does help a little bit on the state level.

Dr. Jarmin: Yeah, no question, mandatory does help response. You know, having that on the top.

Mr. Wiatrowski: Big red letters.

Dr. Jarmin: Yeah, it is helpful.

Mr. Girishankar: Do you have any thoughts on this? No? Well, we're at the 12:30 mark. Any other final questions? Yes, sir. Final question.

Q: Nathan Goldschlag, Economic Innovation Group.

Some of the discussion about modernization – and, Ron, some of your comments hinted at this pretty directly – implied of sort of a change in the need of skills, the types of workers that you need. So I just wanted to ask you to reflect on how difficult that's been to do in the recent years, and then, with all the changing technology, how difficult do you expect that to be in the coming years?

Dr. Jarmin: You know, hiring in a federal agency is always difficult. So – but I think we've had, you know, some good luck bringing in the kind of folks that we need. I think, like – you know, like, right now, if you're asking me, like, what, what do we really need, like, cloud engineers? This is kind of a new thing. But, you know, that's where we are. And so, you know, there's currently a freeze that we hope is ending soon. And we'll be out looking for folks. So if you know people that are energetic and want to come work at a stat agency, send them to USAJobs.

Mr. Wiatrowski: I do think economists and statisticians, either undergrad or coming out of grad school, do have a lot of these skills. I mean, people come in with Python skills all the time. And they might look at software that we already have and say, well, what is that? IT skills are difficult and

expensive. And so we contract a lot of that work, just because the federal government's not going to pay what the going rate is.

Mr. Girishankar: This has been a fascinating conversation. I think what's really important is the folks who watch this, either live or afterwards, get to hear from you and get that rich perspective that you've been providing on what you're doing every day, and your teams across your agencies. And, again, just deep appreciation for what all of you are doing for the country. Thank you. (Applause.)

(END.)