

Measuring Electronic Business

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On September 27, the CSIS Technology Forum was host to Mr. Thomas Mesenbourg, Assistant Director for Economic Programs at the Bureau of the Census. In a very informative and interactive session, Mr. Mesenbourg described the Census Bureau's program for "measuring electronic business" in the United States. He also outlined ways that industry and other private sector representatives can help the Bureau refine and expand its e-commerce measurement program.

The Census Bureau began collecting data on e-commerce transactions as part of its 1998 Annual Trade Survey. One of the biggest challenges in that first year was devising common definitions and categories that would allow organization of the data in a clear and useful way. Though this work continues, the Bureau has made considerable progress toward establishing effective means for measuring e-commerce sales, processes, and infrastructure on the whole. A new challenge is to find ways to divide these broad categories into their more precise components, for example breaking out numbers on total retail sales by type of business. The Bureau is also seeking to ensure that the figures it currently collects are meaningful, and that its instruments and measures are robust enough to keep up with advances in technology.

The Census Bureau now produces quarterly reports on retail e-commerce sales, and in 2000 issued baseline measures of e-business activity for 1999. Future projects will include expanded reporting on e-business process usage and supply chain activity, and data about infrastructure usage and technology spending by governments. Complete information about the Census Bureau's 'E-Stats' program, including the recently-released Retail 3Q, 2001 E-Commerce Report, are available on the Internet at <http://www.census.gov/estats>.