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Census Annual Business Survey: Owner Data, Tables and API

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What the ABS is and which vintage you are reading

The Annual Business Survey (ABS) is the Census Bureau's main source of statistics on who owns U.S. employer businesses. It is a joint project of the Census Bureau and the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES) within the National Science Foundation. It covers owner demographics, research and development, innovation and other business characteristics (Census Bureau, ABS program page). It replaced the five-year Survey of Business Owners (SBO) for employer businesses. It also superseded the Annual Survey of Entrepreneurs and the BRDI-M survey (Census Bureau, ABS developer page).

Check the naming convention before you quote any figure. Through the 2024 cycle, a survey's name was the year it was fielded, not the year it measures: "the 2024 ABS ... covers reference year 2023" (ABS methodology). The API and the data.census.gov tables are filed under the reference year. So the most recent owner tables, labelled 2023, come from the survey fielded as the 2024 ABS. The convention changes from the next cycle on. The survey fielded in 2026 is called the 2025 ABS, after its reference year, and earlier releases keep their original names (ABS developer page). A citation should therefore record the table ID and the reference year, not just "the 2024 ABS". As of 2026-10-28, reference year 2023 is still the newest vintage: the Census Data API catalog lists no ABS dataset later than 2023, and data.census.gov has no 2024 or 2025 owner table (Census Data API catalog). The 2025 ABS was scheduled to be mailed in May 2026 (ABS developer page), so its tables are not yet out.

The 2024 cycle went to about 330,000 employer businesses, and about 63.3% of firms still operating responded (ABS methodology). The sample was drawn from the Business Register, which the Census Bureau built from business tax returns and its other economic surveys. Several industries are out of scope, including parts of agriculture, rail, the postal service, private households and public administration (same source).

For the ABS row in the reference catalog, see the Docket data-source page for the Census Annual Business Survey. This article covers the owner tables only.

What it says about owners, including owner age

The 2023 owner dataset (`abscbo`) has five dimensions with their own variables: sex, ethnicity, race, veteran status, and number of owners (`OWNPDEMP`). Every other owner trait sits inside two coded variables. `QDESC` is the question code and `OWNCHAR` is the answer category (2023 abscbo variables).

Owner age is one of those coded questions. No variable is named "age", so a scan of the variable list misses it. In the published 2023 owner table, AB2300CSCBO, owner age is question `009` (label `OWNRAGE`), with six bands: under 25, 25 to 34, 35 to 44, 45 to 54, 55 to 64, and 65 or over (Census Bureau, table AB2300CSCBO). The same table carries these other owner questions under `QDESC`:

QDESC	Label	What it records
O02	YRACQBUS	Year the owner acquired the business (banded: before 1980 through 2023)
O05	PRIMINC	Whether the business was the owner's primary source of income
O07	EDUC	Highest education level
O08	FLDEDUC	Field of degree
O09	OWNRAGE	Owner age band
O10	REASONOWN	Reasons for owning the business
O11 / O12	USBORN / USCITIZEN	Nativity and citizenship
O15	PRIORBUSTAT	Whether the owner owned an earlier business, and what happened to it
O16	DISABLED	Disability status

Source: question codes read from table AB2300CSCBO, national, all sectors, 2023. Other codes exist; the list above is not exhaustive.

The headline figures, read correctly

In the 2023 table, 4,208,231 owners of respondent employer firms reported an age. Of these, 28.2% were 55 to 64 and 23.1% were 65 or over, so 51.3% were 55 or older (AB2300CSCBO). The 2022 table gives 28.9% and 22.8%, or 51.7% (AB2200CSCBO). The Census Bureau's graphic for reference year 2018 gave 51% aged 55 and older (Census Bureau, "Business Owners' Ages").

The unit matters. These are counts of **owners**, not firms. The ABS collects demographics for "up to four persons owning the largest percentages in the business" (ABS methodology), so a firm with three owners can add three people to the table. The Census Bureau's own note on the 2018 graphic says the percentages "do not represent all U.S. business owners" and cover only responding owners of employer businesses (Business Owners' Ages).

"Half of business owners are over 55" is therefore accurate as a statement about owners. "Half of companies have an owner over 55" is a different claim, and the ABS owner table does not support it.

Owner age by sector

Owner age differs by sector more than the national figure suggests. National, 2023, all owners reporting:

NAICS sector	Owners reporting	55 to 64	65 or over	55+ (sum)
Wholesale trade (42)	223,182	30.7%	32.7%	63.4%
Manufacturing (31-33)	206,182	30.9%	30.7%	61.6%
Real estate and rental and leasing (53)	256,602	27.2%	30.0%	57.2%
Retail trade (44-45)	418,614	28.1%	26.1%	54.2%
Professional, scientific and technical services (54)	704,052	28.9%	23.9%	52.8%
Construction (23)	552,579	29.2%	19.9%	49.1%
Transportation and warehousing (48-49)	130,862	28.7%	20.2%	48.9%
Health care and social assistance (62)	431,969	25.7%	19.3%	45.0%
Accommodation and food services (72)	373,761	26.7%	17.9%	44.6%
All sectors	4,208,231	28.2%	23.1%	51.3%

Source: AB2300CSCBO, reference year 2023. The 55+ column is our sum of the two published bands, so its sampling error is not published.

They describe the population of owners in a sector, not the age of any particular owner.

Employer vs nonemployer coverage

The ABS covers employer firms only, defined as firms "with payroll at any time during the reference year" (ABS methodology). Owners of businesses with no employees are in a separate product, the Nonemployer Statistics by Demographics series (NES-D). The Census Bureau says NES-D "is not a survey". Instead it assigns owner traits to the nonemployer universe from individual-level administrative records, and those traits include owner age, place of birth and citizenship (Census Bureau, NES-D).

The NES-D owner table for 2023 (AB2300NESD04) uses the same 009 age question. It counts about 32.7 million nonemployer owners reporting an age, of whom 18.5% were 55 to 64 and 15.9% were 65 or over (Census Bureau, table AB2300NESD04). NES-D counts are published rounded to thousands.

Most acquisition mandates have an EBITDA floor that rules out nonemployer businesses. Keep NES-D out of employer-firm analysis. The two products differ in method (survey versus administrative records) and in their geographic codes, so adding them together produces a number that neither source supports.

Tables vs API: which dataset answers which question

Question	Dataset (API name)	Published table	Key fields
How old are owners in sector X, state Y?	`abscbo`	AB2300CSCBO	`QDESC=009`, `OWNCHAR`, `OWNPDEMP`, `OWNPDEMP_PCT`, `OWNPDEMP_PCT_S`
How long have firms been in business?	`abscs`	AB2300CSA02	`YIBSZFI`, `FIRMPDEMP`, `EMP`, `RCPPDEMP`
Firm counts, receipts, payroll by owner demographic group	`abscs`	Company summary tables	`SEX`, `ETH_GROUP`, `RACE_GROUP`, `VET_GROUP`
Business practices, financing, technology	`abscb`, `absmcb`	Characteristics tables	`QDESC`, `BUSCHAR`
Nonemployer owners' age, nativity	`absnesdo`	AB2300NESD04	`QDESC=009`, `OWNNOPD`

Dataset list from the Census Data API catalog for the 2023 vintage. The `YIBSZFI` "Years in business code" variable is listed in the 2023 abscs variables.

There are two ways to retrieve the data.

1. **data.census.gov tables.** Open a table ID such as AB2300CSCBO, filter geography and NAICS, and download. The national owner table is too large to display unfiltered (the viewer reports roughly 285 MB), so filter to one geography first.
2. **Census Data API.** The ABS developer page says "All data queries to the Census Data API now require an API key" (ABS developer page). Keys are free from the Census Bureau's key signup page. The variable lists and the official example calls can be read without a key.

The official 2023 owner examples follow this pattern (2023 abscbo examples):

```
https://api.census.gov/data/2023/abscbo?
get=NAME,GEO_ID,NAICS2022_LABEL,OWNER_SEX,OWNER_ETH,OWNER_RACE,OWNER_VET,OWNPDEMP&for=state:*&OWNCHAR=CG&NAI
CS2022=00&QDESC=002&key=YOUR_KEY_GOES_HERE
```

To pull owner age for wholesale trade in every state, change the question and industry codes and select all age bands:

```
https://api.census.gov/data/2023/abscbo?
get=NAME,NAICS2022_LABEL,OWNCHAR,OWNCHAR_LABEL,OWNPDEMP,OWNPDEMP_PCT,OWNPDEMP_PCT_S&for=state:*&NAICS2022=42
&QDESC=009&OWNER_SEX=001&OWNER_ETH=001&OWNER_RACE=00&OWNER_VET=001&key=YOUR_KEY_GOES_HERE
```

The second call follows the documented pattern. We did not execute it, because doing so requires a key; the same rows were read from the data.census.gov table service, which serves the published table without one. The owner-demographic filters set to `001`/`00` return the "all owners" rows, and the age bands come back as `OWNCHAR` codes (`ED` = 55 to 64, `EE` = 65 or over in the 2023 table, as returned by that service on 2026-10-28). Check the codes against the vintage you pull, because labels and codes have changed between vintages.

Suppression, noise and sampling

- **Noise infusion.** This is the ABS's primary disclosure-avoidance method. A random multiplier is applied before tabulation, which causes "the vast majority of cell values to be perturbed by, at most, a few percentage points" (ABS methodology).
- **Suppression.** The methodology states that "estimates with high errors of 50 percent or more are suppressed" (same source). Suppressed cells carry a flag such as `S`. In the Ohio manufacturing slice below, the under-25 band is suppressed.
- **Sampling and imputation.** About 14.4% of the firm-count estimates were imputed. The owner-characteristic tables have "no weighting adjustment to account for nonresponse" (same source). Every cell is an estimate with a published error. In the owner table, `OWNPDEMP_S` is the relative standard error of the count, and `OWNPDEMP_PCT_S` is the standard error of the percentage (2023 abscbo variables).

Errors grow quickly as cells get smaller. The national wholesale 65+ share has a standard error of 0.5 points. In a single state the same cell can carry a standard error of several points, and at county level a cell may not be usable at all.

Building an ownership view by NAICS and state

Worked example: Ohio wholesale and manufacturing

The example is illustrative: a sponsor tests a succession-driven thesis in Ohio wholesale distribution and wants to know whether owner age in the state differs from the national figure. The figures are real, from AB2300CSCBO, reference year 2023, all owners.

Slice	Owners reporting (RSE)	55 to 64 (SE)	65 or over (SE)
Ohio, all sectors	129,108 (1.5%)	29.2% (0.8)	26.3% (1.1)
Ohio, wholesale trade (42)	8,649 (4.8%)	26.9% (2.6)	40.0% (3.7)
Ohio, manufacturing (31-33)	9,547 (6.6%)	37.7% (4.3)	29.7% (4.0)
U.S., wholesale trade (42)	223,182	30.7% (0.4)	32.7% (0.5)

How to read it:

1. The Ohio wholesale 65+ share (40.0%) is above the national wholesale share (32.7%). The difference of about 7 points is roughly twice the Ohio standard error. That is suggestive, not decisive, and a formal comparison would also need the national error.
2. The survey counts about 8,600 owners in Ohio wholesale. That is the population behind the percentage. It is not a count of firms, and it is not a target list.
3. Nothing in the table identifies a company: it says where to point outreach, not whom to contact.

Add business age from the same survey

Firm age is a different variable from owner age, and the ABS has it as years in business (`YIBSZFI`) in the company summary. In the 2023 table, 1,921,775 of the roughly 5.93 million employer firms across the six years-in-business classes had been in business 16 years or more. That is about 32% of firms, but they accounted for about 75% of the employment in those classes. In wholesale trade, firms 16 years or older were about 48% of firms (Census Bureau, table AB2300CSA02; shares are our arithmetic on the published counts).

For a longer time series, the Business Dynamics Statistics (BDS) gives annual measures of firm startups, shutdowns and job flows by firm characteristics. Its tables run from 1978 to 2023 (Census Bureau, BDS). BDS defines firm age by "the age of the oldest establishment in the firm" (BDS methodology). A firm that is old by that measure may still have a young owner who bought it recently. The owner table's `002` (year the owner acquired the business) is the closer measure of how long the current owner has held it.

For firm counts by size class to use as a denominator, the comparison of CBP, QCEW and SUSB explains which source answers which sizing question.

Getting owner age and succession signals at company level

The ABS tells you the age mix of owners in a sector and geography. It cannot rank targets, because microdata are confidential and every published cell is an aggregate. Company-level succession evidence has to come from other places:

- the company's own statements (founding date, leadership pages, announced transitions)
- state registry filings that name officers and record changes
- ownership-structure records such as employee benefit plan filings
- direct conversation with the owner

The succession and ownership guide sets out how to gather that evidence and grade it. Use the ABS to choose and size the hunting ground, and company-level research to find and qualify owners within it.

There are also things the ABS does not measure. It has no question on owner intent to sell, succession plans or retirement timing. "Older owner" stands in for "likely seller" only as a hypothesis, which outreach then tests.

Worksheet: ABS pull checklist

Copy this into the research log for each pull (illustrative template):

Field	Entry
Product	ABS employer (`abscbo` / `abscs`) or NES-D (`absnesdo`)
Table ID and reference year	e.g. AB2300CSCBO, reference year 2023
Survey name as published	e.g. 2024 ABS (fielded) = reference year 2023
NAICS vintage	2022 NAICS for the 2022 and 2023 tables; 2017 NAICS in earlier vintages

Field	Entry
Geography	US / state / metro / county; note which levels the vintage publishes
Question and category codes	e.g. `QDESC=009`; `OWNCHAR` codes checked against this vintage's labels
Owner-demographic filters	"All owners" codes recorded (`001/00`), not assumed
Unit	Owners (not firms) for `abscbo`; firms for `abscs`
Error fields kept	`OWNPDEMP_S`, `OWNPDEMP_PCT_S` stored next to every value
Flags	Suppressed (`S`) and other flagged cells listed, not dropped silently
Derived figures	Each sum or ratio marked as analyst arithmetic, with no published error
Retrieval record	Full query URL with the key removed, retrieval date, file hash

The last row makes the pull reproducible: a reviewer can rerun the request and confirm the figure, as the Docket evidence standards require for any cited number.

Before a memo goes out, also check that 2017-NAICS tables (2018 and earlier) are not compared with 2022-NAICS tables at detailed industry levels without checking the NAICS changes.

Docket's agents can take a mandate's criteria, including a succession hypothesis, and turn them into questions answered company by company, each answer quoting a retained page.

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Source links

Links cited in this article, in order of first appearance. Full addresses are provided for readers using extracted text.

1. https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/abs.html
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