Tracking Federal Awards: USAspending.gov and Other Data Sources

Updated December 14, 2023
Summary

USAspending.gov, available at http://www.USAspending.gov, is a government source for data on federal awards by state, congressional district (CD), county, city, and zip code. The awards data in USAspending.gov are provided by federal agencies and represent contracts, grants, loans, and other forms of financial assistance. USAspending.gov also provides tools for examining the broader picture of federal spending obligations within the categories of budget function, agency, and object class.

Using USAspending.gov to locate and compile accurate data on federal awards can be challenging due, in part, to continuing data quality issues that have been identified by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). Users of USAspending.gov need to be aware that while search results may be useful for informing consideration of certain questions, these results may be incomplete or contain inaccuracies.

USAspending.gov was created under P.L. 109-282, the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006 (FFATA), and later enhanced under requirements in P.L. 113-101, the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014 (DATA Act).

Other federal awards data sources reviewed in this report include the following:

- Federal Procurement Data System (FPDS);
- Census Federal Audit Clearinghouse;
- U.S. Budget: Aid to State and Local Governments;
- GAO’s “Tracking the Funds”
- Rockefeller Institute of Government;
- Federal Funds Information for States;
- Census Federal Aid to States (FAS) and Consolidated Federal Funds Report (CFFR); and
- Additional federal grant awards databases, including sources tracking medical, scientific, and technical research.
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Introduction

USAspending.gov, available to the public at http://www.usaspending.gov, is a government source for data on federal grants, contracts, loans, and other financial assistance. The website enables searching of federal awards from FY2008 to the present by state, congressional district (CD), county, city, and zip code. Grant awards include money the federal government commits for projects in states, local jurisdictions, regions, territories, and tribal reservations, as well as payments for eligible needs to help individuals and families. Contract awards refer to bids and agreements the federal government makes for specific goods and services.

USAspending.gov also provides tools for examining the broader picture of federal spending obligations within the categories of budget function, agency, and object class. Budget function refers to the major purpose that the spending serves, such as Social Security, Medicare, and national defense. Object class refers to the type of item or service purchased by the federal government, such as grants, contracts, and personnel compensation and benefits.

For Congress, the ability to more accurately track these federal awards is necessary to better inform oversight of federal spending. In recent years, Congress has passed laws to create and improve systems used by government departments and agencies to report and input data on federal awards for contracts, grants, and other financial assistance:

- P.L. 109-282, the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006 (FFATA), called for the creation of a database that became USAspending.gov. The publicly available database replaced data collection and annual reports issued for more than 30 years in the Census Bureau’s Federal Aid to States (FAS) report and Consolidated Federal Funds Report (CFFR). ¹
- P.L. 111-5, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), required federal agencies awarding stimulus funding and state and local recipients of such funding to report spending back to the ARRA Recovery Board; this reporting also became a part of USAspending.gov.
- P.L. 113-101, the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014 (DATA Act), transferred responsibility for USAspending.gov from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to the Department of the Treasury and required that expenditures data be added to the federal agency obligations data already included in the USAspending.gov database. The DATA Act also required Treasury and OMB to develop government-wide data standardization to facilitate consolidating, automating, and simplifying reports on grant awards and contracts and to improve USAspending.gov underreporting and inconsistencies.

Congress has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with multiple pieces of legislation providing relief to individuals and families, state and local governments, businesses, and health care providers. ² USAspending.gov provides several features through which users can explore COVID-19 award data, including a COVID-19 profile page and specific search filters. The Pandemic Response Accountability Committee (PRAC; https://www.pandemicoversight.gov/track-the-money), a federal entity created by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act

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¹ Congress subsequently defunded the Census office that issued these reports in FY2012, with FY2010 Federal Aid to States (FAS) report and Consolidated Federal Funds Report (CFFR) being the last reports issued.
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(CARES Act; P.L. 116-136), also presents COVID-19 funding data through a variety of visual displays. For more information on accessing COVID-19 funding data through USAspending.gov, PRAC, and other sources, see CRS Report R46491, Resources for Tracking Federal COVID-19 Spending.

Search filters to enable tracking awards made through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (P.L. 117-58) have also been added to USAspending.gov.

Finding accurate and complete data on federal funds received by states and congressional districts continues to be challenging due to ongoing data quality issues originally identified by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in June 2014. A GAO report released in November 2023 found that 25 executive branch agencies that are included in the overall federal government financial statements did not report data to USAspending.gov in FY2022. In addition, among the agencies that did report to USAspending.gov, GAO found that some reported COVID-19 obligation amounts did not agree with the information in their budget and annual financial reports. Subsequent GAO analysis of grant subaward data in USAspending.gov identified data quality issues, including grant subawards with missing information, impossibly large subaward amounts, and likely duplicative records. Users of USAspending.gov should be aware that although search results may be useful for informing consideration of certain questions, these results may also be incomplete or contain inaccuracies.

USAspending.gov Background

Origins

FFATA required OMB to create a public database of all federal funds awarded to the final recipient level. The DATA Act followed eight years later and required the Department of the Treasury and OMB to develop government-wide data standardization to consolidate, automate, and simplify reports on grant awards and contracts to improve underreporting and inconsistencies as identified by GAO. These requirements in the DATA Act were intended to expand on the transparency efforts originally mandated by FFATA, specifically by

- disclosing direct agency expenditures and linking federal contract, loan, and grant spending information to federal agency programs;
- establishing government-wide data standards for financial data and providing consistent, reliable, and searchable data that are displayed accurately;
- simplifying reporting, streamlining reporting requirements, and reducing compliance costs, while improving transparency; and

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3 For more information on PRAC, see CRS Insight IN11343, The Pandemic Response Accountability Committee: Organization and Duties, by Ben Wilhelm.

4 The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) “estimates with 95 percent confidence that between 2 percent and 7 percent of the awards contained information that was fully consistent with agencies’ records for all 21 data elements examined.” See GAO Highlights, Data Transparency: Oversight Needed to Address Underreporting and Inconsistencies on Federal Award Website, GAO-14-476, June 2014, at http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-14-476.


• improving the quality of data submitted to USAspending.gov by holding agencies accountable.\textsuperscript{7}

In addition, no later than four years after enactment (by spring 2018), Treasury and OMB were to ensure that all information published on USAspending.gov conforms to government-wide data standards. OMB is also required to issue guidance so that all agencies can follow government-wide data standards when reporting on grantee and contractor awards.

The USAspending.gov site is maintained by the Treasury’s Bureau of the Fiscal Service (BFS). BFS is responsible for facilitating data standardization and streamlining of award reporting, as well as the design and usability of the site.\textsuperscript{8}

Types and Timing of Data

The data in USAspending.gov are submitted by federal agencies and represent award obligations and outlays for grants, contracts, loans, and other financial assistance (e.g., Social Security benefits, food stamps, housing assistance). These obligations are spending commitments made by the federal government, and outlays occur when federal money is actually paid out.\textsuperscript{9} Federal agencies are required to submit reports on awards transactions within 30 days after transactions are implemented. There may be a longer lag time with data from the Department of Defense, generally 90 days.

Site Features

USAspending.gov enables congressional staff and the public to search back to FY2008 for prime and subaward data by state, congressional district, and other jurisdictions. The site includes the following features:

• **Award Search** of prime and subaward data back to FY2008 allows filtering by award type, awarding agency, recipient, country, state, zip, county, city, CD,\textsuperscript{10} and other criteria. To identify where money is being spent, search on *Place of Performance versus Recipient Location*. Search results include awards that are active during the selected fiscal year, regardless of when the award initially started. Details on an individual award, including transaction history and subawards, may be viewed by clicking on the *Award ID*. The *Time*, *Map*, and *Categories* tabs above the search results allow users to view aggregated award transactions data from different perspectives. The results list displayed can be downloaded at either the award or transaction level, along with additional details about each award, into a spreadsheet. The award search is continually being developed and improved, so new features may have become available since the publication of this report.

• **Spending Explorer** enables “big picture” browsing of federal spending obligations and offers interactive data visualization by budget function, agency,

\textsuperscript{7} USAspending.gov “About” page at https://www.usaspending.gov/about.

\textsuperscript{8} For more information, see https://fiscal.treasury.gov/data-transparency/history-overview.html.

\textsuperscript{9} See official and plain language definitions for these terms at https://www.usaspending.gov/search?glossary=obligation and https://www.usaspending.gov/search?glossary=outlay. For more information, see CRS In Focus IF12105, *Introduction to Budget Authority*, by James V. Saturno.

\textsuperscript{10} The Award Search includes filters that enable searching by either “current” CD, within the new boundaries created by 2023 redistricting, or “original” CD, within the boundaries that existed pre-2023 redistricting. For further discussion, see the section on “Congressional District Data” under “Issues with Tracking Awards” in this report.
and object class. With this tool, users can see the budget function breakdown by categories, such as Social Security, Medicare, and national defense; obligated amounts by agency; and obligations by object class categories, such as grants, contracts, and personnel compensation and benefits.

- **Profiles** of the following:

  - **Agencies** features data on each agency’s total budgetary resources, the total amount that has been obligated (or committed to be spent) against those budgetary resources, and the amount the agency has obligated and outlaid for awards. Additional data include breakdowns of total budgetary resources, total obligations, and award obligations by subagency.

  - **Federal Accounts** features a list of over 2,000 federal accounts through which users can track spending obligations and outlays. Data in this section are presented visually through graphs and other infographics.

  - **States & Territories** provides tables, interactive maps, and graphs showing a breakdown of a total awarded amount to each state and territory back to FY2008. Breakdowns include obligated totals by award type, county, and CD. Profiles also include top five rankings in various categories, such as awarding agencies and recipients.

  - **Recipients** contains profiles of entities that have received federal awards in the form of contracts, grants, loans, or other financial assistance back to FY2008. Profiles include data on award trends over time and top five rankings in various categories.

  - **Covid-19 Spending** provides a snapshot in time of the overall federal funding response to COVID-19.11

  - **Data Download** allows bulk exporting of large award datasets by agency, award type, and fiscal year through the Award Data Archive. The custom download pages—**Custom Award Data** and **Custom Account Data** (which covers all spending data, including nonaward spending)—also allow downloading of large datasets but provide additional filtering options.

### Issues with Tracking Awards

In addition to the data quality problems in USAspending.gov mentioned earlier,12 the following issues should be taken into consideration.

**Recipient Location Versus Place of Performance**

As recipients of federal grant funding, state and local governments may provide services directly to beneficiaries. Alternatively, a state may act as a pass-through, redesigning federal grant funding to localities using a formula or a competitive process13 through subgrants or subcontracts.

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12 For examples of the data quality problems GAO has identified in USAspending.gov, see the GAO website at [http://www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov), particularly the search term **USAspending.gov** and the headers **Data Act**, **Data Transparency** or **Federal Spending Transparency**.

Both federal grant and procurement awards thus may have a *where awarded* vs. *where spent* component that is not fully identified in grant or procurement records.

For example, most federal grant funding is awarded to states, which then subaward or subcontract to eligible recipients elsewhere in the state (see **Figure 1**). So, a project’s place of performance (where the award is spent) may therefore differ from the initial recipient location (where the funding is awarded).

**Figure 1. Examples of Federal Spending Streams**

*Recipients at Multiple Levels*

![Diagram of Federal Spending Streams]

**Sources:** Jerry Brito, George Washington University, 2009; and the Congressional Research Service, 2016.

In addition, a funding award may pass through multiple different jurisdictions (in different CDs) before reaching the final place of performance. For example

- Federal grants may go first to the state (the state capital, in one CD), then be distributed to a city or county government (in one or more additional CDs), which then may pass the funds to an organization that spends the money in other CDs. A CD in which a state capital is located may appear to receive more federal funds than other CDs in the state, but searching USAspending.gov data by place of performance rather than recipient location would identify data by the project location.

- Procurement awards may be given to a corporation headquartered in one state (and one CD), but the company may spend the money manufacturing the purchased product at one or more of its manufacturing facilities in one or more additional states (and CDs).

**Congressional District Data**

The USAspending.gov award search enables filtering by state and congressional district. When searching for CD data, note the following:

- CD borders can change significantly with decennial redistricting. There are options to search for awards within either “original” (pre-2023) CD boundaries
or “current” (2023-onward) CD boundaries. Searching current CD boundaries will enable capturing historical award data within current district borders.14

- Because CD boundaries change over time, use caution when choosing to search within “original” versus “current” boundaries.
- For grants and contracts data in CDs, search USAspending.gov by place of performance rather than recipient location to identify awards by project location (see “Recipient Location Versus Place of Performance,” above).
- CDs that include state capitals will appear to receive more federal funds because states are prime recipients of federal block and formula grants. State Administering Agencies (SAAs) then pass through or subaward federal funding for projects throughout the state.

**Other Data Sources**

**Federal Procurement Data System**

The General Services Administration (GSA) maintains the Federal Procurement Data System (FPDS) at https://www.fpds.gov/fpdsng_cms/index.php/en/, which contains information on federal contract awards. FPDS

- serves as the source of USAspending.gov contracts data;
- contains information on contract awards with estimated value of $10,000 or more; and
- provides basic search capabilities.

Information on data included in FPDS is provided through the site’s FAQs at https://www.fpds.gov/wiki/index.php/FPDS-NG_FAQ.

Current and historical FPDS federal procurement data reports can be generated from the System for Award Management (SAM) site at https://sam.gov/content/contract-data. Static procurement reports on various topics are also available on this site.

For more refined searching, such as by CD, the FPDS Help Desk can guide congressional staff and the public through filtering for data needed (called ad hoc reports).

**Federal Audit Clearinghouse**

States, local governments, and nonprofits (including universities) spending $750,000 or more15 in federal grants during a fiscal year are required to submit an audit detailing expenditures. The U.S. General Services Administration currently maintains the FAC at https://www.fac.gov/ and enables searching of recent audits (accepted since October 1, 2023). The U.S. Census Bureau previously maintained the FAC and is the source for older audits at https://facissem.census.gov/Main.aspx.

- Because the audit data are for the fiscal year of the filing agency or organization (which may differ from the federal fiscal year), they are not comparable with data from any other federal source.

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15 For fiscal years prior to December 26, 2014, the threshold was $500,000 (https://facweb.census.gov/FAQs.aspx).
U.S. Budget: Aid to State and Local Governments

The Analytical Perspectives volume of the President’s budget covers various topics, including “Aid to State and Local Governments” (Chapter 8 in the FY2024 report). Federal financial assistance to state and local governments, U.S. territories, and American Indian tribal governments is intended to help fund programs administered by those entities and is primarily administered as grants. Most often federal grants are awarded as direct cash assistance, but federal grants can also include in-kind assistance—nonmonetary aid, such as commodities purchased for the National School Lunch Program—and Federal revenues or assets shared with state and local governments.

In 2022, the federal government spent roughly $1.2 trillion, approximately five percent of GDP, on aid to state, local, tribal, and territorial governments. The budget estimates $1.1 trillion in outlays for aid to state, local, tribal, and territorial governments in both 2023 and 2024. Total federal grant spending to state and local governments is estimated to be 4% of GDP in 2024. Individual program tables with state-by-state obligation data for grants-in-aid programs to state and local governments may be found on the OMB website. Tables 8-3 through 8-51 show state-by-state obligations for 49 federal grants-in-aid programs.

Federal grants generally fall into one of two broad categories—categorical grants or block grants, depending on the requirements of the grant program. In addition, grants may be characterized by how the funding is awarded, such as by formula, by project, or by matching state and local funds. As recipients of federal grant funding, state and local governments may provide services directly to beneficiaries or states may act as a pass-through, disbursing grant funding to localities using a formula or a competitive process. As discussed above, this pass-through, or subawarding, at the state level makes tracking federally originated funds to the final recipient a challenge.

GAO’s “Tracking the Funds”

In the FY2022 appropriations cycle, a process became available for Members of Congress to submit requests designating funding within appropriations measures to a particular recipient—such as a local government or nonprofit organization—or for a specific project. These provisions are officially known as “Congressionally Directed Spending” (CDS) in the Senate and “Community Project Funding” (CPF) in the House of Representatives; they are also popularly known as “earmarks.” GAO provides information on enacted CDS and CPF spending by fiscal

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17 Ibid., p. 77.
18 Ibid., p. 77.
21 For more information see the following: CRS Report RS22867, Earmark Disclosure Rules in the Senate: Member and Committee Requirements, by Megan S. Lynch, and CRS Report R46722, Community Project Funding: House Rules and Committee Protocols, by Megan S. Lynch.
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year through its “Tracking the Funds” site, at https://www.gao.gov/tracking-funds. This site includes a summary of funding provisions, links to reports by fiscal year, and reports on individual agencies.

In addition to analysis of provisions by agency, budget function, and recipient type, GAO provides interactive tools to enable tracking specific projects by state, requester, and other criteria at https://files.gao.gov/multimedia/gao-23-106318/interactive/index.html. For each project, this tool includes information, when available, on total funds designated, amount obligated, and amount outlaid. The complete datasets can be downloaded into a spreadsheet.

It may also be possible to identify obligations and outlays for enacted CDS and CPF projects in USAspending.gov by searching recipient names, project keywords, or other criteria.

Rockefeller Institute of Government

The Rockefeller Institute of Government produces an annual report titled Giving or Getting?: New York’s Balance of Payments with the Federal Government available at https://rockinst.org/issue-areas/fiscal-analysis/balance-of-payments-portal/. The report focuses on New York but includes federal spending data for all states. It attempts to show the balance of payments by state, or the amount of revenue paid to the federal government from each state’s residents and economy minus federal spending in the state. Federal spending data include direct payments for individuals (e.g., Social Security and Medicare), grants, contracts, and wages and salaries of federal workers.

Federal Funds Information for States

Federal Funds Information for States (FFIS), https://ffis.org/, is a subscription-only service that tracks federal grant funding in states. Data are provided at the summary level as well as by type of grant and specific program. Many state governments subscribe to FFIS. Information is limited for nonsubscribers.

Federal Aid to States and the Consolidated Federal Funds Report

These Census Bureau reports, published from FY1983 to FY2010 and available at https://www.census.gov/library/publications/time-series/cffr.All.html, were the federal government’s primary documents summarizing the geographic distribution of federal monies to states and counties, whether grants, contracts, or appropriations. The FY2010 Federal Aid to States (FAS) and Consolidated Federal Funds Report (CFFR) were the last reports issued due to the termination of the Census Bureau’s Federal Financial Statistics program. Federal obligations data continue to be posted on USAspending.gov, now the official source collecting federal awards data.

- FAS covered federal government expenditures to state and local governments and presented figures to the state level by program area and agency.
- CFFR included payments to state and local governments as well as to nongovernmental recipients. Dollar amounts reported represented either actual

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22 The joint explanatory statements accompanying Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022 (P.L. 117-103) and Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328) include provisions for GAO to review agencies’ implementation of FY2022 and FY2023 CDS and CPF funding, respectively.
expenditures or obligations (see CFFR introduction and source notes for each table or graph).

- CFFR provided data to the state and county level for grants, salaries and wages, procurement contracts, direct payments for individuals, other direct payments, direct loans, guaranteed or insured loans, and insurance.
- Although CFFR indicated congressional districts (one or more) for each county, it did not give separate data by CD.

**Selected Agency Grant Awards Databases and Information**

USAspending.gov collects brief data on all federal grants and contracts awarded. However, some agencies, in particular those awarding research grants, also continue to post information on their own websites.

**Department of Agriculture (USDA)**
- Current Research Information System
  https://cris.nifa.usda.gov/
  Ongoing agricultural, food science, human nutrition, and forestry research, education and extension activities, with a focus on the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) grant programs. Projects are conducted or sponsored by USDA research agencies, state agricultural experiment stations, land-grant universities, other cooperating state institutions, and participants in NIFA-administered grant programs, including Small Business Innovation Research and the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative.

**Department of Education (ED)**
- Institute of Education Sciences, Funded Research Grants and Contracts

**Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)**
- Tracking Accountability in Government Grants System (TAGGS)
  http://taggs.hhs.gov/AdvancedSearch.cfm
  Database of awards from HHS and its subsidiaries.
- National Institutes of Health (NIH) Research Portfolio Online Reporting Tools RePORTER
  http://projectreporter.nih.gov/reporter.cfm
  Includes projects funded by the NIH, Administration for Children and Families, Agency for Health Care Research and Quality, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Food and Drug Administration, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

**Department of Justice (DOJ)**
- Office of Justice Programs (OJP), OJP Grant Award Data
  http://ojp.gov/funding/Explore/OJPAwardData.htm

**Department of Labor (DOL)**
- Employment and Training Administration (ETA), Grants Awarded
  http://www.doleta.gov/grants/grants_awarded.cfm

Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)
• IMLS Awarded Grants
  http://www.imls.gov/recipients/grantsearch.aspx

National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)
• Grant Search
  https://apps.nea.gov/grantsearch/
  NEA grants awarded since 1998.

National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)
• Funded Projects

National Science Foundation (NSF)
• NSF Awards
  http://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/
  Includes data from 1989 to the present.

Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR)
• SBIR and STTR Awards
  https://www.sbir.gov/sbirsearch/award/all
  The SBIR/STTR program’s mission is to stimulate technology innovation by strengthening the role of innovative small business in federal research and development. Currently, 11 federal agencies participate in the program: the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce (National Institute of Standards and Technology and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), Defense, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, and Transportation, and the Environmental Protection Agency, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and National Science Foundation.

Transportation Research Board (TRB)
• Research in Progress
  http://rip.trb.org/
  View projects by subject, individuals, or organizations.

Further Reading


Author Information

Jennifer Teefy
Senior Research Librarian

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