



What is a Government Shutdown?

This brief provides an overview of federal government shutdowns, what they are and are not, who they affect, and what they can mean for social and behavioral science research. See the Further Reading section for additional resources.

What is a government shutdown?

A government shutdown occurs when Congress fails to enact funding legislation and current funding expires. While, these days, lawmakers rarely pass annual appropriations bills before the start of the new fiscal year on October 1, Congress often relies on **continuing resolutions (CR)** to provide stop-gap funding until the final budget bills are enacted. Without enactment of funding legislation (i.e., appropriations bill or CR), government funding lapses and all affected federal agencies transition to shutdown operations according to the procedures outlined in their **“shutdown plans.”**

The [*Antideficiency Act*](#), originally enacted in 1870, prevents federal agencies from entering into funding obligations without appropriations. Exceptions are made for some entitlement programs and duties that involve the safety of human life or protection of property. In addition, programs or activities that are funded by other non-appropriations laws, such as forward funded activities, funding carried over from a previous year, or mandatory programs (e.g., Social Security or Medicare), are not reliant on the passage of appropriations legislation and are therefore unaffected by a government shutdown.

What is a *partial* government shutdown?

A government shutdown applies only to federal departments, agencies, and programs for which appropriations have lapsed. There are 12 annual appropriations bills that provide annual funding to the entire federal government. Some appropriations bills may make it through the Congressional process and signed into law by the President before the end of the fiscal year. For other bills, agreement may be more difficult to achieve, and funding may expire. In that case, a shutdown would apply only to the departments, agencies, and programs that receive funding through the unpassed legislation; departments, agencies, and programs that receive funding through enacted appropriations bills operate as usual (with the exception of any activities that include affected agencies).

“COSSA 101” is an activity of the Consortium of Social Science Associations. The goal is to provide easy-to-understand information about the inner workings of the federal government to help explain how federal government actions affect the social and behavioral science community.

Who is affected by a government shutdown?

During past government shutdowns, federal agencies have been forced to furlough a significant number of federal employees. “Essential” or “excepted” employees may be required to continue working unpaid (e.g., law enforcement or transportation safety). However, federal employees are guaranteed backpay once funding is restored under the [Government Employee Fair Treatment Act of 2019](#). Federal contractors may also stop work unless expressly directed otherwise but will only receive backpay for work they were required to perform. The President and Members of Congress continue to receive their wages through the duration of the shutdown. However, Congressional staff may be furloughed.

Others potentially affected by a shutdown include people or institutions that depend on federal funding. This can include citizens who access or rely on federal services, such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), or those who receive grants or contracts from the federal government, including research grants.

What does it mean for **social and behavioral science research**?

A government shutdown can significantly hinder the operations of federal agencies depending on the length of the shutdown.

Federal agencies can be affected differently when there is a lapse in appropriations. While it is best to consult an agency’s shutdown plan, there are some activities that are generally affected at federal science agencies like the National Science Foundation (NSF) or the National Institutes of Health (NIH). For example, agencies will be unable to review or award new grants or contracts; peer review panels and advisory committee meetings will be postponed or cancelled; and, in the case of NIH, graduate and postdoctoral trainees at NIH facilities will not report to work.

Because of staff furloughs, extended shutdowns can also delay the collection and release of important federal data and surveys from statistical agencies, such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), and the Census Bureau.

Systems that do not need a government employee to administer, such as Research.gov or Grants.gov, may still allow for submission of grant proposals and reports; however, as noted, proposals will not be reviewed and technical assistance likely will not be available until the government reopens. In addition, current awardees may still be able to draw down funds provided those funds were **obligated** prior to the shutdown. Researchers who have

already received notice of an award but await funding can be left wondering if they will receive their funding at all.

What a government shutdown is *not*

As noted, a government shutdown can be detrimental to the operations of federal agencies. However, a government shutdown does not lend any additional authority to the President over these agencies, such as mass firing of furloughed employees (also known as “reductions in force” or RIFs). This is because shutdowns, by their very nature, are temporary, while RIFs are intended to make permanent changes based on budget shortfalls or agency reorganizations. Federal agencies are expected to remain independent and often continue limited operations under their contingency plans, which can be found on each agency’s website. Actions related to the budget remain under the purview of Congress and require enacted legislation to be legally implemented.

Key terms

Agency Shutdown Plans – The White House **Office of Management and Budget (OMB)** issues a revised [Circular A-11](#) each year, which provides instructions to Executive Branch agencies on how to prepare for and operate in the event of a government shutdown, among other budget related guidance. These may be called “shutdown plans” or “contingency plans.” Federal agencies are required to review their shutdown plans every two years, the last being in 2025.

Shutdown plans must outline agency actions that will be taken during a “short-term” lapse in appropriations (1-5 days) as well as changes to agency actions should the shutdown extend beyond five days. The plans include information on the how long it will take for the agency to complete shutdown activities (often half of a day), total number of employees to be furloughed, and the total number of employees to be retained and expected to report to work (but not paid). They must also include procedures for reopening the agency once funding is restored.

Until recently, OMB hosted a website with links to agency shutdown plans. Instead, most plans can be found on agency websites by simply searching the agency and “shutdown plan.”

Continuing Resolution (CR) – A continuing resolution is a joint resolution passed by both chambers of Congress and signed into law by the President that appropriates money to fund agencies (often at the level of the previous fiscal year) whose funding bill has not yet been passed by the start of the new fiscal year. It is used to bridge funding past the end of

the federal fiscal year (September 30) until funding legislation can be passed and signed into law.

Obligated Federal Funds – Federal funds are considered “obligated” when the relevant agency commits the funds to a specific future use, such as the awarding of a grant or contract. It creates a legal commitment by the federal government to provide funds to a recipient for a specific purpose. Obligation happens before funds are spent (or liquidated) and signifies that those funds that been “used” from a budgetary standpoint. Once obligated, the funds are available for drawdown or disbursement.

Office of Management and Budget (OMB) – [OMB](#) is an office within the Executive Office of the President/White House responsible for overseeing the performance of federal agencies and administering the federal budget.

Further Reading

Government Shutdowns and Executive Branch Operations: Frequently Asked Questions (R47693), Congressional Research Service, September 2, 2025

Government Shutdowns and Legislative Branch Questions: Frequently Asked Questions (IN12259), Congressional Research Service, September 30, 2025

Past Government Shutdowns: Key Resources (R41759), Congressional Research Service, September 30, 2025

Office of Personnel Management, [Furlough Guidance website](#)

National Science Foundation Shutdown Website: <https://www.nsf.gov/shutdown>

National Institutes of Health Shutdown Website: <https://www.hhs.gov/about/budget/fy-2026-nih-contingency-staffing-plan/index.html#activities-not-continue>

Have a federal government topic you would like explained by COSSA 101? Contact us at kshelstad@cossa.org.