



Counting Ohio's Cooperatives: Methodology

Because cooperative businesses span various industries and can be organized using numerous legal entities, basic data on the cooperative sector is difficult to gather. A few organizations have assessed the number of cooperatives in the United States and basic “demographic” information about these businesses, including the number of people they employ.ⁱ However, these assessments are not regularly updated, are generally focused on larger cooperatives or singular co-op sectors, and do not provide meaningful state-level data, although the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives’ Wisconsin Co-op Directory is a notable distinction. This project was developed using the Wisconsin Co-op Directory as a model.

Cooperative businesses are difficult to identify and assess, in part, because they can take various legal forms, from limited liability companies that operate under internationally recognized cooperative principles to entities organized under state cooperative statutes that vary across the country and according to industry. Cooperatives are not currently identified as such in any U.S. federal data source, nor in comprehensive business databases.ⁱⁱ

To develop a current census of cooperatives in Ohio, the Center gathered data using a combination of publicly available industry membership and directory listings, state-level incorporation data, data from federal sources like the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and other publicly available online information. Specifically, the Center gathered the name, location, year founded, website, and other information about cooperatives with physical locations in Ohio from the following sources:

- National Co-op Grocers Association’s “NCG Co-op Locations” tool
- National Council of Farmer Cooperatives’ online membership list
- National Co-op Bank’s Co-op 100 annual listing of the nation’s top 100 revenue-earning cooperative businesses for 2017 and 2020
- U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development’s 2017 Directory of Farmer, Rancher, and Fishery Cooperatives, Service Report 22
- U.S. Farm Credit Administration
- U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives Directory of Worker Co-ops and Democratic Workplaces and “Worker Co-ops & Democratic Workplaces in the United States” published in 2017
- National Rural Electric Cooperative Association Member Directory
- National Credit Union Association credit union locator
- Ohio Credit Union League directory
- Midwest Association of Housing Cooperatives directory



Next, the Center supplemented these industry listings with data gathered from the Ohio Secretary of State, the agency that registers and tracks the existence of business entities in the state. Under the Ohio Revised Code Chapter 1729, the Ohio Cooperative Law, entities in Ohio may not use the terms “cooperative,” “coop,” “co-operative,” or “co-op,” as a part of their business name or title unless they are: (1) organized under O.R.C. 1729 as a cooperative association; (2) organized under O.R.C. 1702, Ohio’s nonprofit corporation law, and operating on a cooperative basis; (3) organized and operated under the cooperative laws of another state; or (4) a state or federally chartered credit union. Thus, Center staff conducted searches in the Ohio Secretary of State business records for entities with the term “cooperative” and/or “coop” in their name and gathered the results.ⁱⁱⁱ Center staff recognize that cooperatives that have chosen to leave the term “cooperative” or “co-op” out of their corporate name, which is permissible under O.R.C. 1729, would not be returned in these searches. Therefore, the industry and federal data sources listed above were combined with the data from the Ohio Secretary of State. Finally, Center staff have an extensive working knowledge of the cooperative community in Ohio, particularly related to new and emerging cooperatives and agricultural cooperatives. Center staff members added several cooperatives to the database based on their working knowledge.

To create manageable and useful parameters for the database, Center staff decided to exclude cooperatives that may serve customers in Ohio or include members in Ohio, but that do not have a physical business presence in the state, such as an office or branch location. For example, CoBank is a cooperative lender and member of the Farm Credit System whose customer-members are agricultural and rural utility cooperatives across the United States, including cooperatives in Ohio. However, CoBank does not have a physical location in Ohio, so the cooperative was not included in the database. Although these excluded cooperatives play important roles, the primary measures for economic impact analyses and other potential uses of this data are based on physical presence in an Ohio location.

Next, Center for Cooperatives staff reviewed the organizing documents on file with the Ohio Secretary of State for each business listed in the data set to determine if the entity was a cooperative by assessing whether the entity was mutually owned by multiple members, operated on a non-profit cooperative basis, or conducted bulk purchasing on a cooperative basis. Where these factors were unclear based on organizing documents, staff conducted an online search to locate and explore the website or social media of the business to assess the same factors. Through this process, when additional cooperatives were identified online, staff verified that they were a cooperative using the same methods described above and added businesses to the database as appropriate.

To determine if businesses in the data set were currently in operation, Center for Cooperatives staff utilized their knowledge of Ohio’s contemporary cooperative landscape and online searches to verify activity via websites, social media, or news articles. Where a business had a social media account but was not active for a few years, and additional information could not be located online, the business was assumed to be no longer operating and removed from the database.

Finally, after a comprehensive listing of the cooperatives headquartered and with physical locations currently operating in Ohio was created, Center for Cooperatives staff identified the Ohio branch locations of these cooperatives. Branch locations were identified by collecting

information from each cooperative's website or from an online search for locations of each cooperative.

This database excludes mutual insurance companies, non-food consumer cooperatives, and non-electric utility associations, in part due to the complexity of locating reliable data about these businesses. Future iterations of this project may expand to include these important sectors of the cooperative community.

While Center for Cooperatives staff members were quite diligent in ensuring this resource is as comprehensive as possible, it is very difficult to produce a census of this type with complete accuracy. We understand and acknowledge that there will likely be cooperative businesses missing from this database.

ⁱ World Cooperative Monitor, International Cooperative Alliance and Euricse, <https://monitor.coop/en>; Measuring the Cooperative Economy, University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives, <https://mce.uwcc.wisc.edu/>; Measuring the Size and Scope of the Cooperative Economy: Results of the 2014 Global Census on Cooperatives by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/2014/coopsegm/grace.pdf>; the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development collects data annually on rural-farmer, rancher, and fishery cooperatives in the U.S., <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/all-programs/cooperative-programs>.

ⁱⁱ Measuring the Cooperative Economy, University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives, <https://mce.uwcc.wisc.edu/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ In Ohio, the Secretary of State's office is authorized to cancel a corporation's business licensure for various reasons, including failure to pay taxes or file tax reports, failure to maintain a statutory agent, court orders, and other reasons. (Your Guide to Starting a Corporation in Ohio, Frank LaRose, Ohio Secretary of State, <https://www.ohiosos.gov/globalassets/publications/busserv/startacorp.pdf>). Additionally, entities on file as no longer engaging in business following a voluntary dissolution are listed as "dead" by the Ohio Secretary of State. (Help: Business Name Search Glossary of Terms, Ohio Secretary of State, <https://businesssearch.ohiosos.gov/>) Thus, entities listed in searches as cancelled or dead were not included in the database. Note, ostensibly a business with a canceled status can be reinstated through curing the issue that led to their cancellation. Due to the uncertainty around whether a business listed as cancelled is actually operating, the Center determined that these businesses would not be listed in the current database.