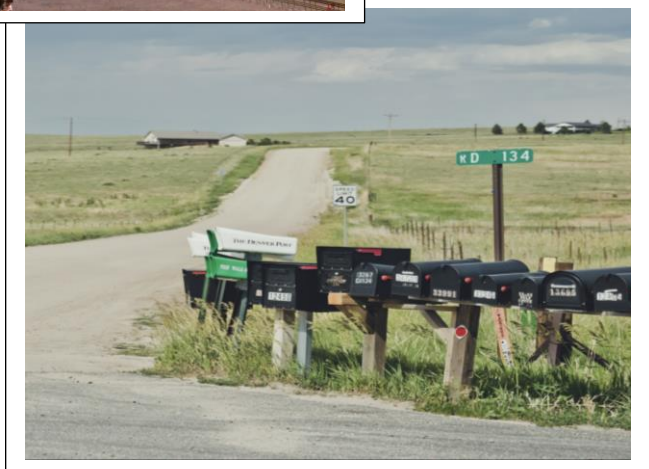
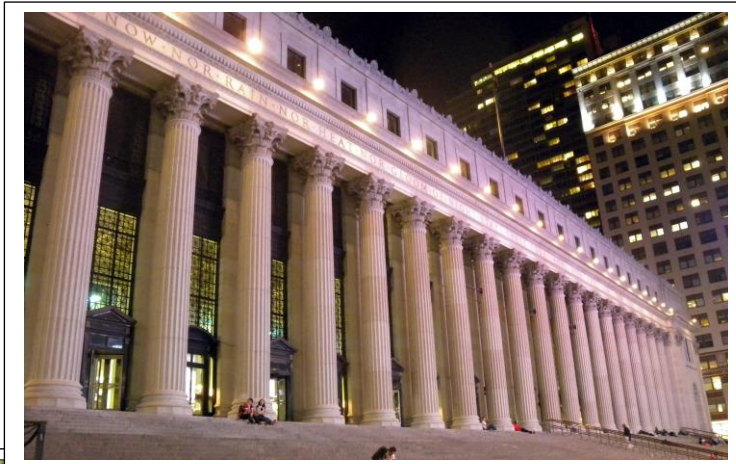


# The U.S. Postal Service: A Primer



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January 8, 2021**

## Table of Contents

<b>AN INDISPENSABLE INSTITUTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>USPS MISSION OF UNIVERSAL POSTAL SERVICE .....</b>	<b>2</b>
UNIVERSAL POSTAL SERVICE: LEGAL REQUIREMENTS AND PRACTICES.....	2
COSTS TO PROVIDE UNIVERSAL POSTAL SERVICE .....	3
USPS MONOPOLIES.....	4
<b>USPS: AN INDEPENDENT ESTABLISHMENT OF THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH .....</b>	<b>4</b>
INDEPENDENCE.....	4
GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE .....	5
POSTMASTER GENERAL LOUIS DEJOY.....	6
<b>THE POSTAL WORKFORCE .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>OVERSIGHT OVER USPS .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>POSTAL SERVICE PRODUCTS .....</b>	<b>9</b>
TYPES OF MAIL.....	9
RETAIL POSTAL RATES.....	10
POSTAGE DISCOUNTS FOR BULK MAIL .....	11
CONTRACTS WITH BULK MAILERS.....	12
LIMITS ON NON-POSTAL PRODUCTS AND SERVICES .....	12
<b>REGULATION OF POSTAL RATES.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>USPS REPORTS .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>USPS FINANCIAL CONDITION .....</b>	<b>14</b>
OVERVIEW.....	14
REVENUES .....	15
EXPENSES.....	16
MAIL VOLUME, REVENUES, AND PROFITABILITY.....	16
PRODUCTIVITY.....	19
UNFUNDED LIABILITIES AND DEBT .....	20
POSTAL RETIREE HEALTH BENEFITS.....	21
<b>POSTAL RETIREE HEALTH BENEFITS: A FOCAL POINT FOR POSTAL LEGISLATION .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>KEY POSTAL STAKEHOLDERS .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>APPENDIX: SELECTED SOURCES OF POSTAL INFORMATION .....</b>	<b>24</b>

### About This Publication

This publication is an objective introduction to USPS and postal issues. It was not reviewed or approved by USPS. The author, Kenneth E. John, is President of [Postal Policy Associates](#), an independent consulting firm. He has worked on postal issues for more than 20 years. Photos are used under license, are in the public domain, or were taken by the author. © Postal Policy Associates.

## An Indispensable Institution

The U.S. Postal Service (USPS) provides essential services to individuals, businesses, non-profit entities, and the government. It is a vital conduit for personal and business communications, payments, and the distribution of goods, including merchandise, medicine, and medical supplies. The government also relies on mail to securely communicate with citizens. State and local governments conduct voting by mail, including in federal elections—a means of casting ballots that has become increasingly important during the COVID-19 pandemic. The federal government depends on mail to carry out the U.S. Census.

USPS is expected to be financially self-supporting. However, USPS lost \$87 billion from FY 2007-2020, including \$9.2 billion in FY 2020, and has defaulted on \$63 billion in federal payments. Profitable First-Class Mail is in long-term decline while USPS wages and benefits costs are rising. Package volumes are growing, but revenues from this source are not enough to solve USPS's financial woes. Thus, USPS is on a financially unsustainable course.

USPS has been the source of political controversy in recent years. President Trump repeatedly criticized USPS and attacked voting by mail. He called on USPS to hike package rates and assailed its contract with Amazon. In 2020 Trump opposed legislation to provide USPS with \$25 billion in appropriations to address its financial problems, including those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. He later agreed to legislation that provided USPS with \$10 billion in added borrowing authority. The pandemic relief bill enacted in December 2020 converted this amount to a grant.

The Trump administration also called for restructuring USPS to a sustainable business model or preparing it for privatization. Its Task Force on USPS recommended major changes in organizational mission and role.<sup>1</sup> President-elect Joseph Biden, as expected, has taken different positions on key postal issues such as funding and privatization.<sup>2</sup> Former Deputy Postmaster General [Ronald Stroman](#) is heading Biden's four-member transition team relating to USPS.

The current Postmaster General is Louis DeJoy, a major GOP donor and ally of President Trump. Shortly after assuming the position in June 2020, he directed cost-cutting changes that impacted timely delivery, as he subsequently acknowledged. Timely delivery of First-Class Mail declined after the changes and has not fully recovered. The changes also reportedly impacted timely delivery of some packages. Democrats, postal unions, state attorneys general, civil rights groups, and others strongly objected to the changes. Many states pursued legal action resulting in court orders enjoining the changes. The courts also

### USPS Statistics: FY 2020

- 644,000 total employees.
  - 496,000 career employees.
  - 148,000 non-career employees.
- 34,500 post offices and retail facilities.
- 232,000 vehicles.
- 161 million delivery points (addresses).
- \$73 billion in revenue.
- Would rank 46<sup>th</sup> on the Fortune 500 list.

Source: USPS

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<sup>1</sup> The task force, created by an April 2018 [Executive Order](#), was charged with developing recommendations for reforms to the U.S. postal system that would not shift additional costs to taxpayers. See Task Force on the United States Postal System, [United States Postal Service: A Sustainable Path Forward](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 4, 2018).

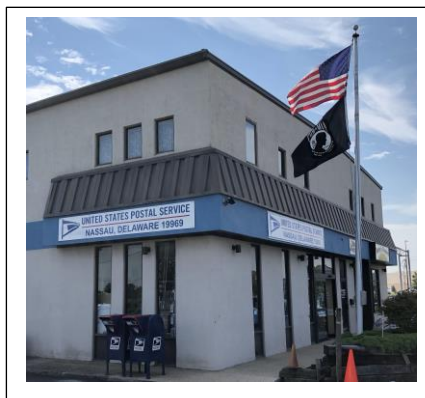
<sup>2</sup> See [the Biden campaign's response](#) to a July 2020 questionnaire sent by the National Association of Postal Supervisors (NAPS).

required USPS to take specific actions to provide timely and effective service for voting by mail in the November 2020 elections.

Looking forward, USPS and many stakeholders agree that Congress needs to take further action to restore USPS's financial viability. However, Congress has been gridlocked over postal reform legislation for many years, and no end to the impasse is in sight. Key stakeholders lack consensus, and progress is difficult to achieve in a polarized political environment. No silver bullet exists to solve USPS's financial problems. Although USPS has plenty of cash on hand at present, it is on track to eventually run out of money.

## USPS Mission of Universal Postal Service

USPS's mission is to provide universal postal service. Universal service is defined by laws, regulations, and practices. It has two main dimensions: nationwide mail delivery and postal retail services.<sup>3</sup>



### Universal Postal Service: Legal Requirements and Practices

Laws: Universal service is governed by Title 39 of the U.S. Code. In addition, annual appropriations legislation has long [required](#) USPS to deliver mail at least 6 days a week. Key requirements in Title 39 include the following:

- USPS is [required](#) to provide prompt, reliable, and efficient service to all areas of the country. It is further [required](#) to serve the entire population as nearly as practicable.
- USPS is [required](#) to provide a maximum degree of effective and regular postal services to rural areas, communities, and small towns where post offices are not self-sustaining. No small post office can be closed solely for operating at a deficit.
- At least one class of mail must have a uniform rate regardless of distance. First-Class Mail has always met this [requirement](#).

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<sup>3</sup> For more information, see Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC), [Report on Universal Service and the Postal Monopoly](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 19, 2008).

- USPS is [required](#) to seek an advisory opinion from the Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC) before making a change affecting postal services nationwide or on a substantially nationwide basis.

**Regulations:** Title 39 of the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) provides specific standards for some aspects of universal service. USPS issues these regulations and has authority to change them.

- USPS [regulations](#) define “service standards” for timely delivery of various types of mail. The regulations cover “market-dominant” products, including First-Class Mail, Marketing Mail, Periodicals, and Package Services such as Media Mail, Library Mail, and Bound Printed Matter. For each type of mail, the standards specify the number of days that USPS has to deliver the mail in order for the delivery to be considered timely. For example, most local First-Class Mail has a 2-day standard, which means USPS has until the second “delivery day” (days not counting Sundays and federal holidays) to be considered on time. Long-distance First-Class Mail within the continental United States must be delivered in 3 days.
- USPS [regulations](#) also set standards for other USPS services, such as making mail available for pickup at the PO Box each delivery day no later than the daily “up-time” publicly posted at the post office. Other standards specify how quickly USPS must electronically provide delivery status notification to senders of certain types of market-dominant mail.

In addition, the CFR has [incorporated](#) some USPS documents and decisions by reference—such as the [Mailing Standards of the United States Postal Service, Domestic Mail Manual](#); the [International Mail Manual, Mailing Standards of the United States Postal Service](#); the [Employee and Labor Relations Manual](#); the [Postal Operations Manual](#); the [Administrative Support Manual](#); the [Financial Management Manual](#); Headquarters Circulars; Management Instructions; Regional Instructions; delegations of authority; and, resolutions of the USPS Board of Governors.

**Practices:** Within the framework of law and regulation, USPS practices at the local level affect how universal service is provided to customers. For example, USPS determines the total number of post offices and postal retail facilities. USPS determines where these facilities are located in each community, their hours of operation, and which facilities have self-service kiosks. USPS also decides how stamps are sold online, by phone, mail, and at private stores.



## Costs to Provide Universal Postal Service

Universal service obligations cost USPS an estimated \$5.2 billion in 2018, the most recent year for which figures are available.<sup>4</sup> The largest cost was \$2.3 billion for 6-day delivery (compared to 5-day delivery of

<sup>4</sup> PRC, [Annual Report to the President and Congress: Fiscal Year 2019](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 2020).



mail and packages).<sup>5</sup> Other costs included \$1.2 billion for nonprofit mail discounts, \$614 million in losses on Periodicals, \$462 million for the U.S. Postal Inspection Service,<sup>6</sup> and \$340 million for small post offices, mostly located in rural or remote areas.

## USPS Monopolies

USPS has statutory monopolies to deliver letter mail and to access mailboxes. Federal law generally prohibits anyone from establishing, operating, or using a private company to carry letters for compensation on regular trips or at stated periods over postal routes or between places where mail regularly is carried.<sup>7</sup> As a practical matter, First-Class Mail and Marketing Mail comprise most mail under the delivery monopoly.<sup>8</sup> The mailbox monopoly prevents private competitors and others from depositing unstamped items into mailboxes, essentially granting USPS exclusive access to mailboxes.<sup>9</sup> The combined value of the letter delivery and mailbox monopolies was \$5.5 billion in fiscal year 2018, according to the most recent PRC [estimate](#). This figure indicates that USPS's net income would decline by this amount if these monopolies were eliminated.

## USPS: An Independent Establishment of the Executive Branch

Congress created USPS in 1971 out of the former U.S. Post Office Department, a traditional federal agency.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, Congress left the organization within the executive branch but removed it from the President's Cabinet and gave it authority to operate independently from the President. Congress intended that USPS would remain a public service and operate in a businesslike manner.

## Independence

- USPS manages its operations, owns its property, facilities, and vehicles, and issues its own regulations.
- The Postmaster General is not part of the Cabinet. The USPS governing board is not subject to day-to-day political control.
- USPS is exempt from many laws that apply to other federal agencies. Guidance issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) does not apply to USPS, although USPS may voluntarily follow it.

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<sup>5</sup> USPS has estimated it could save \$1.4 to \$1.8 billion annually if it reduced mail delivery to 5 days a week while continuing to deliver packages 7 days a week. See GAO, *U.S. Postal Service: Additional Guidance Needed to Assess Effect of Changes to Employee Compensation*, [GAO-20-140](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 17, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> The [U.S. Postal Inspection Service](#) is the law enforcement arm of USPS.

<sup>7</sup> [18 U.S.C. §§ 1693-1699](#) and [39 U.S.C. §§ 601-606](#). Mail under the delivery monopoly has a weight limit of 12.5 ounces and a price limit of 6 times the stamp rate (*i.e.*, the first ounce of a single-piece First-Class Mail letter).

<sup>8</sup> For more information about USPS monopolies, see GAO, *U.S. Postal Service: Key Considerations for Potential Changes to USPS's Monopolies*, [GAO-17-543](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 22, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> [18 U.S.C. § 1725](#).

<sup>10</sup> USPS was created as "an [independent establishment](#) of the executive branch of the Government of the United States." For more information, see GAO, *Postal Service Reform: Issues Relevant to Changing Restrictions on Private Letter Delivery*, [GAO/GGD-96-129B](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 12, 1996), pp. 8-9.

- USPS sets postal rates subject to approval by the independent PRC.
- USPS engages in collective bargaining to establish compensation and work rules for most postal employees. Unresolved disputes are settled by binding arbitration.
- USPS sets compensation for its executives and managers.

The former Post Office Department was primarily supported by postage revenues. Congress funded the Department's shortfalls (deficits) through appropriations. Congress set postal wages, postal rates, and exercised patronage for postmaster and rural carrier jobs. Bluntly stated, it was largely to blame for the Department's woes. It provided inadequate funding, underpaid employees, and meddled in management, notably through the patronage process.<sup>11</sup> When USPS was created, Congress intended it to become fully self-supporting, and the last appropriations to cover basic postal expenses were provided in 1982.<sup>12</sup>

***USPS was created in 1971. It was preceded by the former U.S. Post Office Department, which was beset by problems.***

## Governance Structure

USPS is governed by an 11-member [Board of Governors](#), which has responsibilities similar to a corporate board of directors. Nine members (Governors) are appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. The other two members are the Postmaster General and the Deputy Postmaster General. The Governors appoint the Postmaster General, who is a voting member of the Board; this group then appoints the Deputy Postmaster General, who also is a voting member. However, some powers are reserved solely for the nine presidentially appointed Governors, such as approving postal rates.

The Governors are required to represent the public interest generally, are prohibited from being representatives of specific interests using USPS, and may be removed only for cause. For additional qualification requirements, see [39 U.S.C. § 202\(a\)](#). Governors serve 7-year staggered terms that expire in December of each year. Governors can serve up to 1 year after their terms expire or until a successor is confirmed. No more than five of the nine Governors may be members of the same political party.

Currently, the Board has six Governors, including four Republicans and two Democrats. They are [Robert M. Duncan](#), Chairman (R), [John M. Barger](#) (R), [Roman Martinez IV](#) (R), [William D. Zollars](#) (R), [Ron A. Bloom](#) (D), and [Donald L. Moak](#) (D). All were appointed by President Trump and confirmed by the Senate. In December 2020 President Trump nominated [Roy A. Bernardi](#) (R) to fill one of the three vacant positions, but the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress took no action.

The Board of Governors is less diverse than the postal workforce as well as boards of Fortune 100 companies. It includes no women, no African Americans, and no Asian Americans. In contrast, [USPS's](#)

<sup>11</sup> President's Commission on Postal Organization (the "Kappel Commission"), [Toward Postal Excellence](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 1968) and USPS, [The United States Postal Service: An American History](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 2020).

<sup>12</sup> USPS does receive roughly \$55 million in annual appropriations to cover free and reduced-rate mail for the visually impaired and for overseas voting materials. This is less than 0.1 percent of USPS expenses.

[workforce](#) in 2018 was 45% female, 23% African American, and 7% Asian American. [Fortune 100 board members](#) in 2018 were 25% female, 11% African American, and 4% Asian/Pacific Islander.

## Postmaster General Louis DeJoy

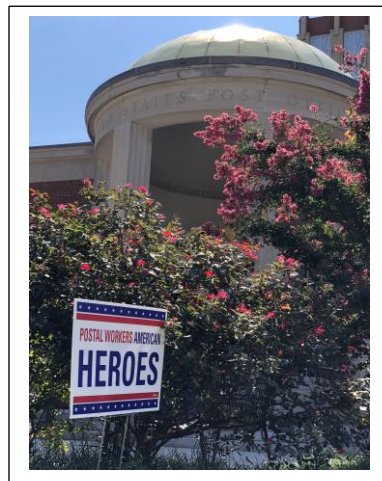


[Louis DeJoy](#) is the current Postmaster General of the United States and is the first Postmaster General to be hired from outside USPS since the 1990s. He was the [Chairman and CEO](#) of the former New Breed Logistics, a nationwide logistics and supply-chain services provider headquartered in North Carolina and a longtime USPS contractor. He sold New Breed Logistics to XPO Logistics in 2014 for a [reported](#) \$615 million. Mr. DeJoy was CEO of XPO Logistics' supply chain business in the Americas before his retirement in December 2015. After retiring from XPO Logistics, he was on its board of directors until 2018. XPO continues to be a USPS contractor, and DeJoy and his wife continued to hold assets in XPO after he became Postmaster General. Mr. DeJoy [reported](#) last fall that he will be divesting from XPO; the Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) have raised [concerns](#) about the specifics. In addition to his work with XPO, Mr. DeJoy founded LDJ Global Strategies, a real estate, investment, and consulting company. He is a longtime [major GOP donor](#) who came under scrutiny in September 2020 after [the media](#) raised questions about his political fundraising activities.

## The Postal Workforce

USPS is a massive organization. It had 644,000 employees at the end of FY 2020, including 496,000 career employees and 148,000 non-career employees.<sup>13</sup> Its workforce size has remained roughly the same in recent years despite declines in mail volume.

- *Career employees* are considered permanent and have full benefits, including pension and retiree health benefits. Nearly all are assigned to work full-time schedules.
- *Non-career employees* are considered temporary. They have lower pay and fewer benefits, such as not receiving pension and retiree health benefits. Many of them work part-time.

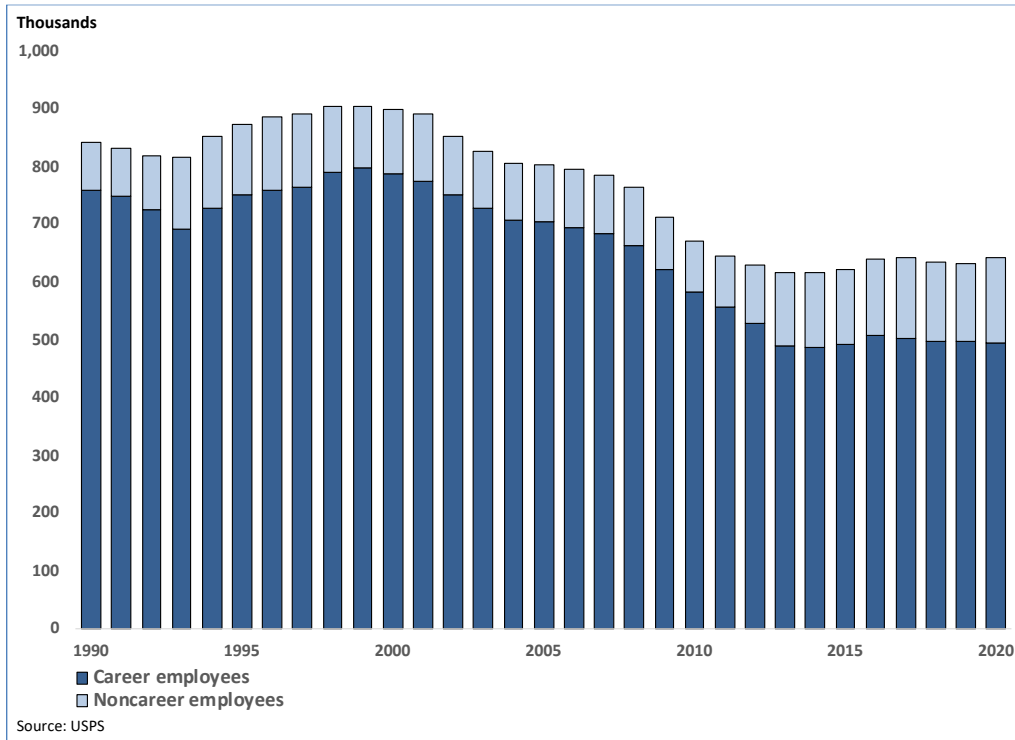


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<sup>13</sup> USPS will soon be converting more than 10,000 of these non-career employees to career status. See [this article](#) and this [Memorandum of Understanding](#).



**Figure 1: Number of USPS Employees, FY 1990-2020**



USPS employees are part of the federal civil service. According to USPS, it is one of the leading U.S. employers of minorities, women, veterans, and disabled veterans. USPS has reported that it employs close to 100,000 military veterans, nearly one-sixth of its workforce.

USPS has a complicated pay scale determined largely through the collective bargaining process. The four most common positions are city carriers, clerks (*e.g.*, retail window clerks and processing clerks who operate sorting equipment), rural carriers, and mail handlers who load, unload, and move bulk mail at processing facilities.

**Figure 2: Number and Type of USPS Employees, FY 2020**

Type of Employee	Number
City carrier	206,013
Clerk	144,949
Rural carrier	133,002
Mail handler	49,648
Postmaster/Supervisor/Manager	40,815
Building maintenance	28,675
Vehicle maintenance/Motor vehicle operator	14,296
Other	26,635
<b>Total</b>	<b>644,033</b>

Source: USPS

Note: Data include career and non-career employees.

**Figure 3: Average Cost per Hour for Selected Types of Employees, FY 2020 (dollars per hour)**

Type of Employee	Employees: Basic Pay	USPS: Total Compensation and Benefits
<b>Full-time career employees</b>		
City carrier	\$ 27.74	\$ 48.46
Rural carrier	27.96	47.47
Clerk	27.99	49.27
Mail handler	26.36	47.90
<b>Non-career employees (mainly part-time)</b>		
City carrier assistant	\$ 18.06	\$ 23.99
Rural carrier associate	18.75	22.28
Postal support employee	17.93	23.36
Mail handler assistant	16.66	21.93

Source: Analysis of USPS data for pay periods 1-20, ending September 2020.

Note: Postal support employees generally do the same type of work as career clerks.

About 90 percent of USPS employees are covered by collective bargaining agreements. The four largest postal unions are:

- [American Postal Workers Union](#) (APWU) represents clerks as well as maintenance and motor vehicle employees.
- [National Association of Letter Carriers](#) (NALC) represents city carriers.
- [National Postal Mail Handlers Union](#) (NPMHU) represents mail handlers.
- [National Rural Letter Carriers Association](#) (NRLCA) represents carriers on rural routes.

Most nonunion postal employees are represented by management associations, including the [National Association of Postal Supervisors](#) (NAPS) and the [United Postmasters and Managers Association](#) (UPMA). These associations do not collectively bargain. However, USPS is required to consult them with respect to pay and related issues.

## Oversight Over USPS

The [Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs](#) and the [House Committee for Oversight and Reform](#) have primary jurisdiction for congressional oversight of USPS. In addition, the Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC), U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), and the USPS Office of Inspector General (USPS OIG) provide oversight.

- [PRC](#) was established in 1971 as the Postal Rate Commission and renamed the Postal Regulatory Commission in 2006. PRC is comprised of five Commissioners appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. No more than three Commissioners can be of the same political party. They serve staggered terms of 6 years. PRC’s Chairman is designated by the President, and Robert G. Taub is the current Chairman. He is serving his second term, which expires in 2022.

- [USPS OIG](#) is part of USPS and was established in 1996. The OIG conducts audits of postal programs and operations, analyses of postal issues, and criminal investigations. OIG’s work is self-initiated or started at the request of Congress or USPS management. The USPS Board of Governors appoints the Inspector General, and Tammy L. Whitcomb is the current Inspector General. Her 7-year term expires in 2025.
- [GAO](#) is an independent nonpartisan agency of the legislative branch. GAO’s postal-related work is requested by Congress, although in the past some has been required by law or self-initiated. The current head of GAO is Comptroller General Gene L. Dodaro. He is serving a single 15-year term that expires in 2025.

## Postal Service Products

### Types of Mail

There are types or "classes" of mail such as First-Class Mail and Priority Mail. Each class of mail has different features, postage rates, and standards for the speed of delivery. These features vary according to (1) the specific type of mail, (2) whether it is “single-piece mail” such as a letter with a stamp or “bulk mail” such as a mass mailing of bills or advertisements, and (3) whether it is sent within the United States (domestic mail) or to another country. In addition, USPS has a host of detailed mailing requirements, such as how the mail should be addressed and the maximum weight of each piece.

All USPS products are grouped into two categories: “market-dominant products” and “competitive products.”<sup>14</sup>

- Market-dominant products include First-Class Mail, Marketing Mail, Periodicals, and Package Services such as Media Mail, Library Mail, and Bound Printed Matter. The average rates for each class of market-dominant mail generally are limited by an inflation-based price cap.<sup>15</sup> USPS also can raise rates above inflation to recover some costs outside of its control—a recent change to the price cap that is under legal challenge.<sup>16</sup>
- Competitive products include parcels and other mail that face competition from private delivery companies, such as United Parcel Service (UPS), FedEx Corporation (FedEx), Deutsche Post DHL Group (DHL), and Amazon. Competitive product rates are not subject to an inflation-based price cap. Each competitive product is required to be profitable (*i.e.*, product revenues cover costs).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> By law, market-dominant products include those in which USPS “exercises sufficient market power that it can effectively set the price of such product substantially above costs, raise prices significantly, decrease quality, or decrease output, without risk of losing a significant level of business to other firms offering similar products.” See [39 U.S.C. § 3642](#). Competitive products include everything else.

<sup>15</sup> Rates can increase above inflation under extraordinary or exceptional circumstances that necessitate a larger rate increase. [39 U.S.C. § 3622\(d\)](#).

<sup>16</sup> See the November 30, 2020, PRC [press release](#) and [order](#) which issued new rules that regulate rates for market-dominant products.

<sup>17</sup> All competitive products combined are required to earn a minimum profit. PRC determines this minimum.

**Figure 4: Selected Types of Domestic Mail**

Type of Mail	Typical Contents
<b>Market-Dominant Products</b>	
<a href="#">First-Class Mail</a>	Correspondence, bills, payments, postcards, lightweight packages
<a href="#">Marketing Mail</a>	Advertisements including catalogs
<a href="#">Periodicals</a>	Magazines, newspapers, other periodical publications
<a href="#">Package Services</a>	Media Mail, Library Mail, Bound Printed Matter
<b>Competitive Products</b>	
<a href="#">Priority Mail Express</a>	Packages and envelopes that need the fastest delivery
<a href="#">Priority Mail</a>	Packages and envelopes that need fast delivery
<a href="#">First-Class Mail Package Service</a>	Packages up to 13 ounces
<a href="#">USPS Retail Ground</a>	Packages with less urgent delivery or oversized packages
<a href="#">Parcel Select</a>	Bulk quantities of packages entered where carriers pick up mail
<a href="#">Parcel Return Service</a>	Returned merchandise

Source: USPS

More information on domestic and international mail is accessible on the USPS web site, such as from its [Mail & Packages](#) web page. See also USPS, [A Customer Guide to Mailing](#).

USPS offers [PO Boxes](#), [money orders](#), and [other services](#) such as mail insurance, delivery notification, and extra security for valuable items. USPS also offers some non-postal services, such as [passport services](#).

### Retail Postal Rates

Retail postal rates are based on the type of mail and its characteristics such as weight, size, and where it is sent, among other things. Rates also depend on the shape of the mail – that is, whether the mail is a letter, postcard, large envelope (“flat”), or parcel.

USPS will be changing many retail postal rates on January 24, 2021. However, the basic stamp rate will remain 55 cents. This rate applies, with some exceptions, to First-Class domestic letters which weigh up to 1 ounce. The additional ounce rate for stamped letters, which currently is 15 cents, will increase to 20 cents. Rates for First-Class Mail are the same regardless of distance (“uniform rate”).

The postage rates for packages sent by the general public vary by distance as well as weight. Flat-rate Priority Mail is a notable exception; its rates vary depending on the size of the box or envelope.



**Figure 5: Selected Retail Postage Rates, January 1, 2021 and Scheduled for January 24, 2021**

Type of Mail	Postage rate	
	January 1, 2021	January 24, 2021
<b>Market-Dominant Products</b>		
<b>First-Class Mail</b>		
Letters - up to 1 ounce (standard rectangular envelope with a stamp)	\$ 0.55	\$ 0.55
Letters - each additional ounce	0.15	0.20
Postcards (standard size)	0.35	0.36
Large envelopes (“flats”) – up to 1 ounce	1.00	1.00
Large envelopes (“flats”) – each additional ounce	0.20	0.20
<b>Package Services</b>		
Media Mail (formerly known as the “book rate”)	At least \$2.80	At least \$2.89
<b>Competitive Products</b>		
Priority Mail Express	At least \$26.35	At least \$26.35
Priority Mail	At least \$7.50	At least \$7.70
First-Class Mail Package Service	At least \$3.80	At least \$4.00
USPS Retail Ground	At least \$7.50	At least \$7.70

Source: USPS

The first “Forever Stamp” went on sale in April 2007 and featured an image of the Liberty Bell. It was introduced largely for customer convenience but also reduced the amount of USPS window clerk time spent selling individual stamps. From 2011 onward, almost all First-Class Mail stamps (for letters up to 1 ounce) have been Forever Stamps. Forever Stamps remain valid even if postage rates rise after the stamps are sold.

### Postage Discounts for Bulk Mail

Bulk mail is generally sent by private companies, non-profit organizations, and federal, state, and local governments. USPS provides postage discounts for this mail. They are called “worksharing discounts” because mailers are required to prepare the mail in ways that reduce the workload of the USPS. This preparation includes:

- *Presorting*: Mailers presort mail in order of ZIP Code and in some cases by the address order that the carrier will deliver the mail. This reduces USPS sorting costs.
- *Barcoding*: Mailers apply barcodes to each piece of mail. These barcodes provide information on the destination of the mail, which facilitates sorting by USPS automated equipment.
- *Destination entry*: Mailers bring their mail to USPS facilities that are closer or closest to the mail’s final destination. As a result, USPS avoids transportation costs.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Mailers can receive discounts for presorting and barcoding mail without doing destination entry. First-Class Mail is not eligible for destination entry discounts.



To receive worksharing discounts, mailers must meet minimum volume requirements.<sup>19</sup> Mail pieces must be organized in containers (trays, tubs, sacks, pallets) to enhance USPS's ability to handle it efficiently.

Most mail receives worksharing discounts. These discounts have led to the emergence of companies in the mailing industry that are called "consolidators." They pick up mail from individual mailers, do presorting and other required activities, and enter it into the mail stream. There also are companies in the mailing industry, often referred to as "mail service providers," which specialize in mail design, printing, preparation, pre-mailing transportation, and tracking.

### Contracts with Bulk Mailers

USPS can contract with bulk mailers to provide them with customized postage rates. These contracts are called "negotiated service agreements." Contract terms are tailored to each mailer and can include volume minimums and mail preparation requirements. PRC is required to review and approve each contract. Each contract must be profitable when its postage rates are for competitive products. Currently, all USPS contracts with bulk mailers are for competitive products. Three of the largest are with Amazon, UPS, and FedEx.

### Limits on Non-Postal Products and Services

USPS [can provide](#) non-postal services to federal agencies, such as the passport services mentioned previously. Some members of Congress and postal stakeholders have suggested that USPS be allowed to expand its non-postal services to enhance revenue in light of declining mail volume. However, USPS currently is [not allowed](#) to introduce new non-postal services to generate revenues from the general public.

## Regulation of Postal Rates

PRC regulates postal rates. It also reviews USPS compliance with law and regulation.

- PRC reviews USPS requests for changes in postal rates. For each request, PRC holds a public proceeding in which interested parties can submit comments. PRC appoints a knowledgeable "public representative" to act on behalf of the general public in all proceedings.
- PRC determines requirements for how USPS measures its costs and allocates them to products and services. USPS and other parties can petition PRC to make changes in postal costing methods. PRC reviews these proposals in public proceedings.
- Interested parties can appeal PRC decisions to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit. In the past decade, the Court considered a number of appeals, including challenges to the PRC decision

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<sup>19</sup> For example, to qualify for a worksharing discount, a bulk mailing of presorted First-Class Mail must include at least 500 pieces of mail. A mailing of Marketing Mail must contain 200 or more pieces or at least 50 pounds of mail.

on an “exigent” rate increase above the price cap and decisions on postal costing matters. The Court has affirmed some decisions and remanded others to PRC for further consideration.

PRC annually reviews postal rates for legal compliance and issues an [Annual Compliance Determination Report](#). If PRC finds noncompliance, it then specifies actions that USPS must take to come into compliance. For example, PRC may direct USPS to change specific postal rates so that the mail meets cost-coverage requirements.

On November 30, 2020, PRC issued [final regulations](#) that made a number of changes to the regulatory system for market-dominant products, including relaxing the inflation-based price cap.<sup>20</sup> Under the new price cap, USPS can increase rates for market-dominant products over the rate of inflation to recover some costs outside of its control. Four mailer groups have [challenged](#) the relaxation of the price cap in a petition to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit.

PRC also issues two annual reports: an [Analysis of USPS’s Annual Performance Report and Performance Plan](#) and a [Financial Analysis of USPS’s Financial Results and 10-K Statement](#).

## USPS Reports

USPS regularly issues reports with detailed information on the organization, its goals, and its financial and service performance.

USPS is required to report costs, revenues, and profitability for each type of mail. Its normal organizational accounting system does not fully provide this information. Therefore, USPS must employ further means to compile the data. It is an extremely complex process handled by a USPS Finance Department unit which employs staff with specialized knowledge in economics, statistics, research methodology, and postal operations.<sup>21</sup>

Many USPS reports are required by law and regulation while some are issued by USPS under its own authority. The following figure highlights public USPS reports and data.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See the [PRC press release](#) issued November 30, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> For more information, see USPS OIG, *Costing Best Practices*, [CP-AR-19-004](#) (Arlington, VA: Sept. 17, 2019), *Postal Service Product Costing Methodologies*, [MS-MA-13-002](#) (Arlington, VA: Apr. 11, 2013), *A Primer on Postal Costing Issues*, [RARC-WP-12-008](#) (Arlington, VA: Mar. 20, 2012); and, John C. Panzar, [The Role of Costs for Postal Regulation](#) (Sept. 30, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Links in Figure 6 are to the most recent report as of October 1, 2020. For reports issued since then, as well as for prior time periods, see the [USPS Financials](#) page on USPS’s website and the [USPS Reports](#) page on PRC’s website.

**Figure 6: Selected USPS Reports**

Report	Contents
<a href="#">5-Year Strategic Plan</a>	Goals, objectives, and strategies
<a href="#">Annual Report to Congress</a>	Statement from the Postmaster General and the Chairman of the USPS Board of Governors
<a href="#">Comprehensive Statement of Postal Operations</a> (annual)	Overview of USPS operations, key financial and operating statistics, USPS executive compensation
<a href="#">Annual Performance Plan</a>	Goals and targets for the fiscal year
<a href="#">Annual Performance Report</a>	Results for the past fiscal year
<a href="#">Integrated Financial Plan</a>	USPS operating and capital budget for the fiscal year
<a href="#">Form 10-K</a> (annual)	Financial results for the most recent fiscal year
<a href="#">Form 10-Q</a> (quarterly)	Financial results for the most recent quarter
<a href="#">Preliminary Financial Information, Unaudited</a> (monthly)	Financial results for the most recent month
<a href="#">Cost &amp; Revenue Analysis</a> (annual)	Revenue, costs, and profitability for types of mail and services
<a href="#">Revenue, Pieces &amp; Weight</a> (annual)	Revenue, volume, and weight for types of mail and services
<a href="#">Revenue, Pieces &amp; Weight</a> (quarterly)	Revenue, volume, and weight for types of mail and services
<a href="#">Service Performance</a> (annual)	Results for market-dominant mail and services
<a href="#">Service Performance</a> (quarterly)	Results for market-dominant mail and services
<a href="#">Service Performance</a> (USPS website)	Targets and results for market-dominant mail and services

Source: USPS and PRC

Note: Links in this figure are to the most recent report as of January 1, 2021.

## USPS Financial Condition

### Overview

USPS finances are poor as total mail volume is declining while wages and benefits costs are rising. These trends will be difficult to reverse. GAO has reported that USPS’s financial condition is unsustainable.<sup>23</sup> However, USPS is unlikely to run out of money in FY 2021 due to its large financial resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturn have accelerated the decline in total mail volume. The profitability of USPS package mail has been rising. However, packages are more labor-intensive to deliver.

Total USPS expenses have grown faster than revenues. USPS finds it difficult to rein in expenses due to legal requirements, collective bargaining, and political constraints.

#### USPS financial highlights

- Lost \$87 billion in FY 2007-2020.
- Defaulted on \$63 billion in required federal payments since 2010 and through FY 2020.
- Accumulated \$184 billion in unfunded liabilities and debt as of September 30, 2020.

#### USPS financial resources

- \$14 billion in cash on hand as of September 30, 2020.
- In late December 2020, Congress converted \$10 billion in USPS borrowing authority to a grant.

<sup>23</sup> GAO, *U.S. Postal Service: Congressional Action Is Essential to Enable a Sustainable Business Model*, [GAO-20-385](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 7, 2020).

Highlights of USPS finances:

- *Net losses*: USPS lost \$87 billion in FY 2007-2020, including a \$9.2 billion loss in FY 2020, up from \$8.8 billion in FY 2019.
- *Payment defaults*: USPS defaulted on \$63 billion in federal payments since 2010 and through FY 2020, including \$52 billion for retiree health benefits and \$11 billion for pension benefits.<sup>24</sup>
- *Unfunded liabilities and debt*: USPS accumulated \$184 billion in unfunded liabilities (\$170 billion) and debt (\$14 billion) by the end of FY 2020. This amount was 251 percent of USPS’s annual revenues. Most unfunded liabilities were for retiree health benefits (\$75 billion), pension benefits (\$61 billion), and workers’ compensation (\$20 billion).

**Figure 7: USPS Financial Results, FY 2010-2020 (billions of dollars)**

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total revenues	\$ 65.7	\$ 65.2	\$ 67.3	\$ 67.9	\$ 69.0	\$ 71.5	\$ 69.7	\$ 70.8	\$ 71.3	\$73.2
Total expenses	70.8	81.2	72.3	73.4	74.0	77.1	72.4	74.7	80.1	82.4
<b>Net loss</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>15.9</b>	<b>5.0</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>3.9</b>	<b>8.8</b>	<b>9.2</b>

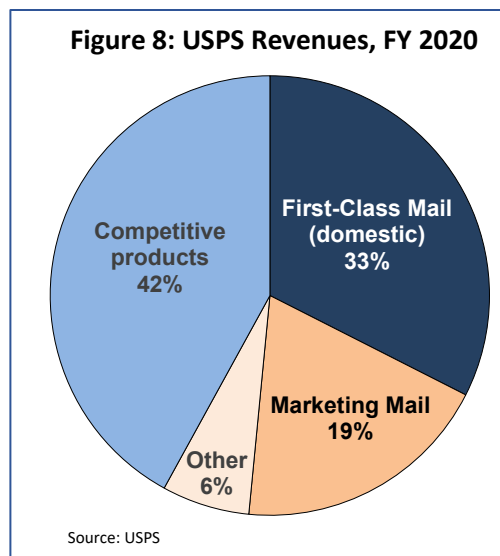
Source: USPS

Revenues

Market-dominant products, mainly First-Class Mail and Marketing Mail, generate a majority of USPS revenues. Competitive products, mainly Priority Mail and Parcel Select, are a growing share.

Revenues from First-Class Mail and Marketing Mail are impacted by the continuing shift to electronic communications and payments. As previously noted, these revenues also are limited by the price cap.

Total revenues have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic as growth in competitive product revenues—mainly a surge in packages—exceeded declines in revenues from market-dominant products including First-Class Mail and Marketing Mail.

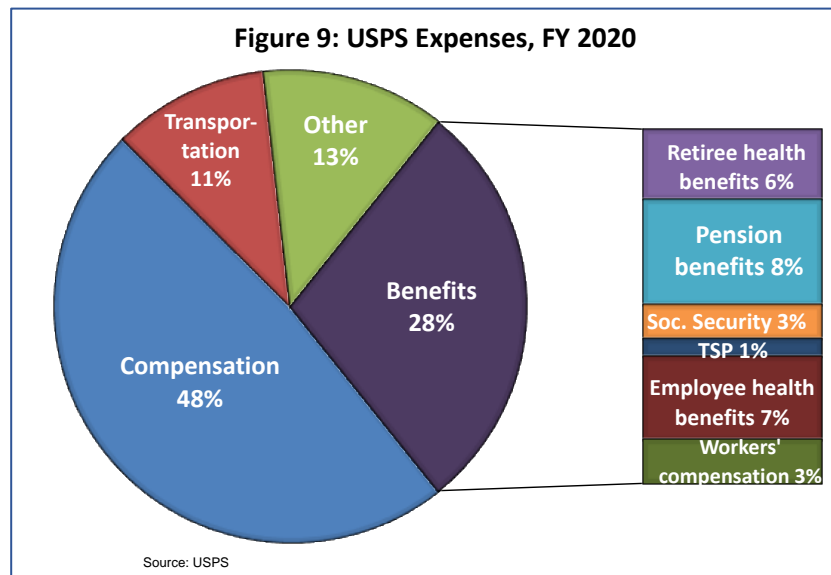


<sup>24</sup> These USPS defaults are past due payments to OPM.

## Expenses

Three-quarters of expenses are for compensation and benefits. Expenses are growing faster than revenues. In FY 2020, expenses rose for compensation, health insurance premiums, workers' compensation, and pension benefits.

According to USPS, the pandemic increased paid sick leave as well as transportation expenses due to restrictions on available air transportation and other modes of moving the mail. It also significantly increased USPS expenses for supplies and services, such as personal protective equipment (PPE).



Mandates on USPS make it difficult to cut expenses. USPS is required by law to participate in federal pension and retiree health benefit programs. It is required to provide universal postal service that includes 6-day mail delivery and a national network of post offices. In addition, pay and work rules, such as limits on the number of non-career employees, are largely set by collective bargaining with binding arbitration when the parties do not reach agreement.

## Mail Volume, Revenues, and Profitability

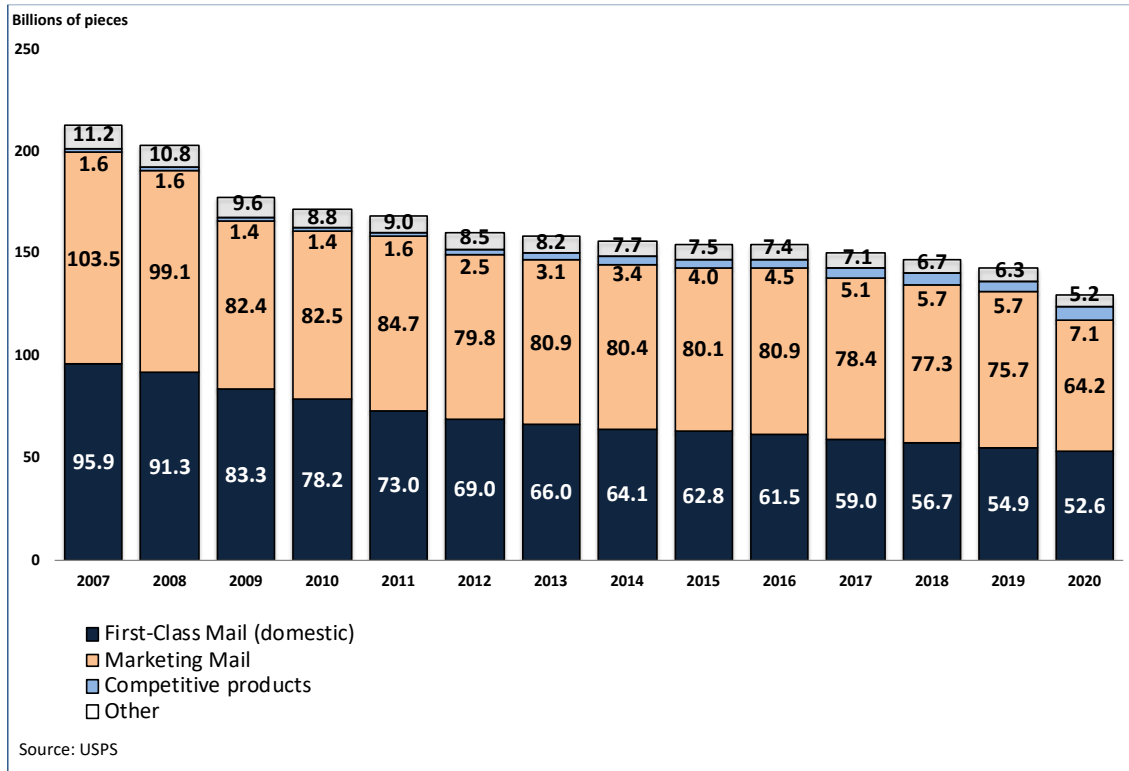
Total mail volume has been declining for many years. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, mail volume began an accelerated decline in late March 2020. This volume decline continued through FY 2020 and into FY 2021. USPS has reported that it is possible that mail volume may never fully recover to levels prior to the pandemic, similar to how mail volumes dropped significantly and never recovered following the Great Recession of 2007-2009.

First-Class Mail is USPS's most profitable class of mail but its volume, revenues, and profitability are in long-term decline, largely as a result of the shift to electronic communications and payments. Likewise, Marketing Mail is profitable but has been declining in recent years. The volumes of First-Class Mail and Marketing Mail have declined at a faster rate during the pandemic.

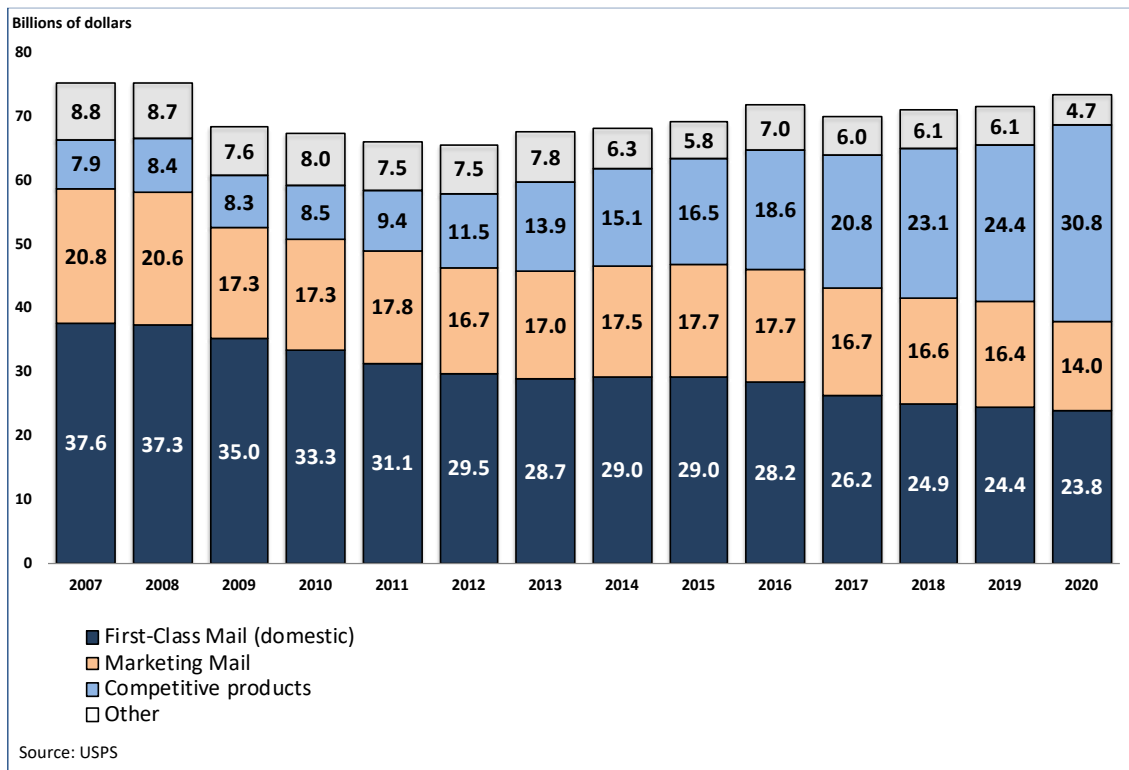
Competitive products (mainly packages) are profitable and have been a major growth product in the past decade, aided by the e-commerce boom and a surge in package volume during the pandemic. USPS has reported that while the future is uncertain, it expects package volume to remain at elevated levels compared to past years. In the long term, USPS will be hard-pressed to maintain competitive product growth due to rising competition from UPS, FedEx, DHL, Amazon, and other delivery companies.



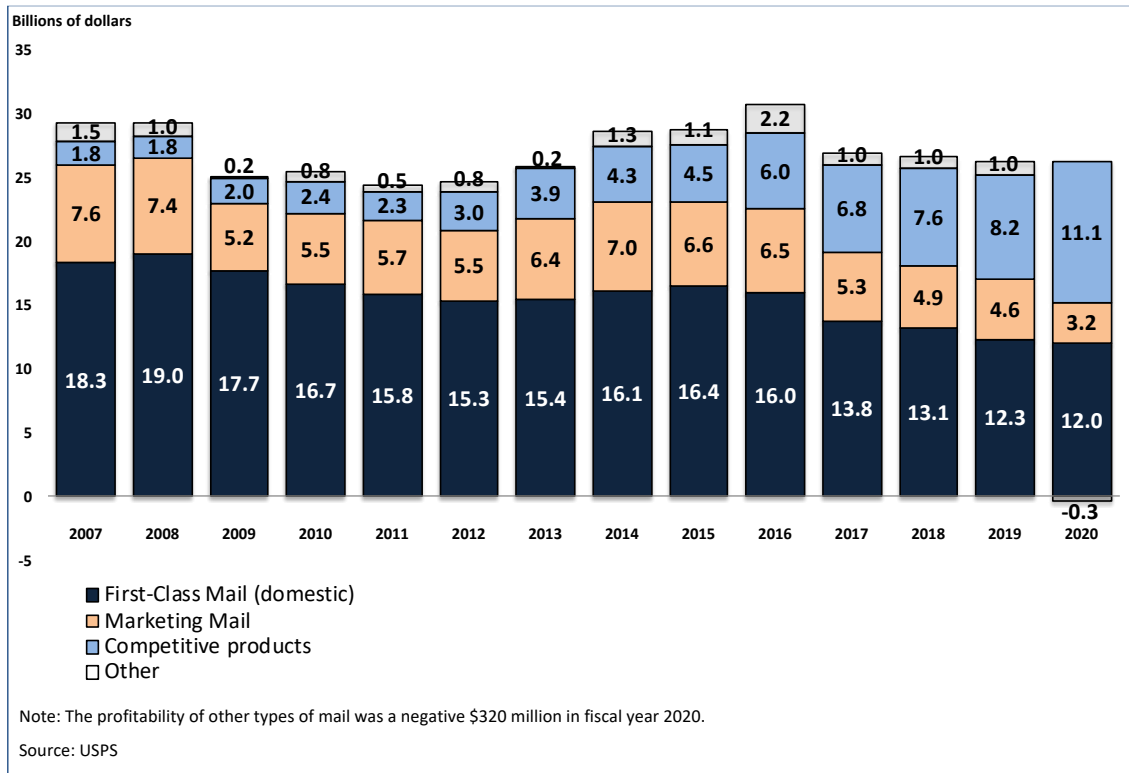
**Figure 10: USPS Mail Volume, FY 2007-2020**



**Figure 11: USPS Revenues, FY 2007-2020**



**Figure 12: USPS Profitability for Selected Types of Mail, FY 2007-2020**

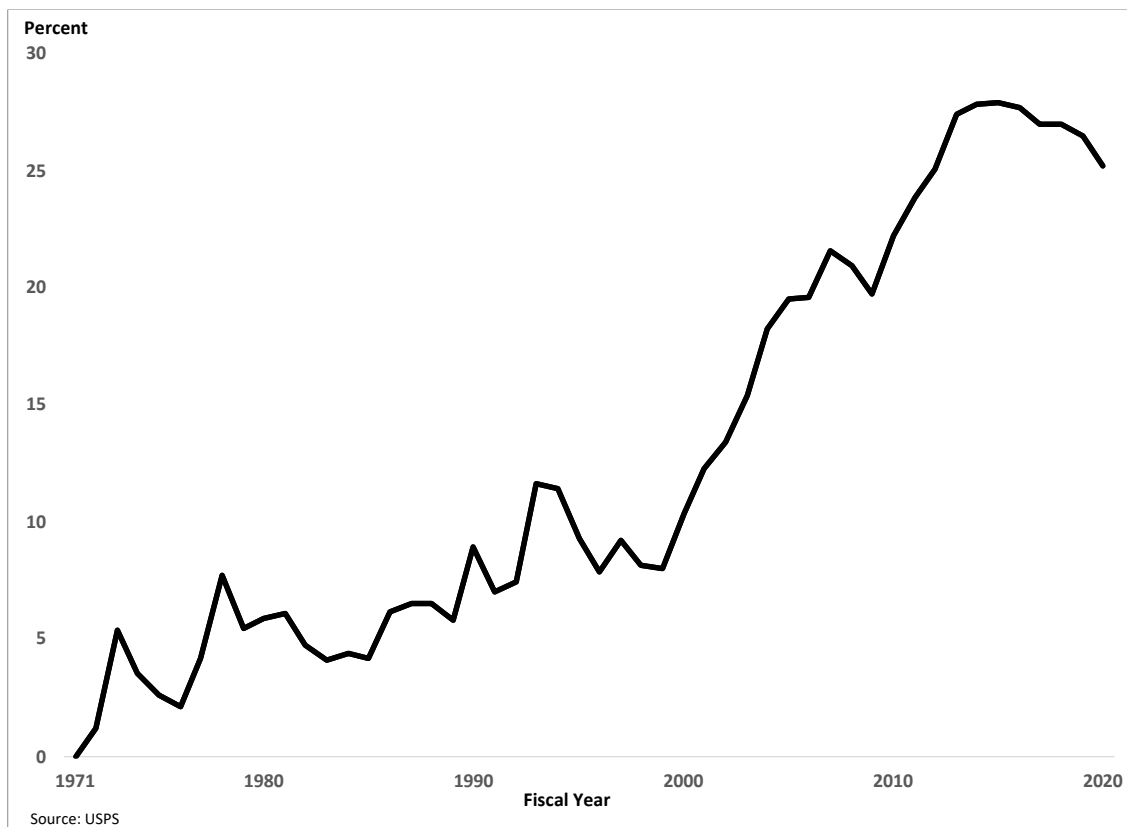


## Productivity

USPS productivity growth is fundamental to its financial health. Total Factor Productivity (TFP) is the measure used to determine how efficiently USPS uses its resources.<sup>25</sup> TFP has declined from fiscal years 2016 to 2020, breaking a trend of growth. The continuing trend in declining productivity is one of the longest in USPS's history.

In fiscal year 2020, TFP declined 1.2 percent and reached the lowest level since fiscal year 2012. According to USPS, the latest drop in TFP was mainly due to sharp increases in transportation costs. The COVID-19 pandemic affected the availability of mail transportation by commercial airlines, while USPS also had to handle a surge in package volume. TFP also was negatively affected by significant costs that USPS incurred for personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies due to COVID-19.

**Figure 13: USPS Total Factor Productivity (TFP) and Labor Productivity, Cumulative Percent Change, FY 1971-2020**

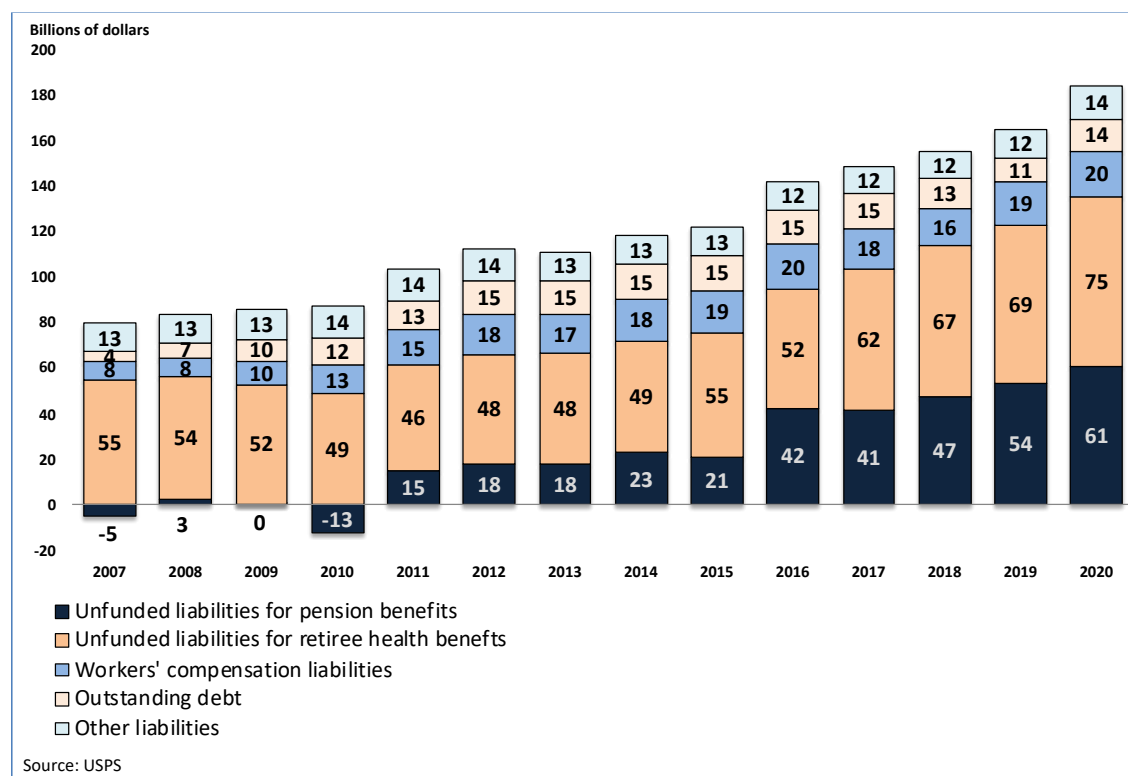


<sup>25</sup> TFP is based on the ratio of USPS outputs to the inputs that it uses. Outputs include mail volume that is delivered and special services such as money orders and passport services. Inputs include labor, materials, and capital.

## Unfunded Liabilities and Debt

Unfunded liabilities are future financial obligations that USPS has not set aside funds to pay for. USPS debt is money that USPS has borrowed from the U.S. Treasury Department. As previously noted, USPS's total unfunded liabilities and debt were \$184 billion at the end of fiscal year 2020, including \$170 billion in unfunded liabilities and \$14 billion in debt. This was more than double USPS's annual revenues. Most unfunded liabilities were for retiree health benefits (\$75 billion at the end of fiscal year 2020), pension benefits (\$61 billion), and workers' compensation (\$20 billion).

**Figure 14: USPS Unfunded Liabilities and Debt, FY 2007-2020**



## Postal Retiree Health Benefits

Postal retiree health benefits are administered by OPM. OPM maintains a fund called the Postal Service Retiree Health Benefits Fund (RHB Fund) that covers USPS's share of insurance premiums for these health benefits.

USPS is required to make annual payments into the RHB Fund to prefund postal retiree health benefits. OPM determines the annual amount to be paid, consistent with a complicated set of payment rules set forth in law.<sup>26</sup>

However, USPS has defaulted on all prefunding payments into the RHB Fund since 2010 and through FY 2020. USPS defaulted to conserve cash for day-to-day postal operations. These defaults are likely to continue as long as USPS finances are poor.

OPM has projected that the RHB Fund will be depleted by 2030 if USPS makes no further payments. At that point, either USPS will pay, consistent with its status as a self-funding organization, or Congress will need to craft an alternative solution. Congress, for example, could provide annual appropriations directly to the RHB Fund so that OPM could continue paying USPS's share of insurance premiums for postal retiree health benefits.

### Highlights: Postal Retiree Health Benefits

- The Federal Employees Health Benefits Program provides health insurance to eligible postal retirees and their survivors.
- USPS is responsible for funding most of the cost of postal health insurance premiums, thereby reducing premium costs paid by postal retirees.
- The 2006 Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act (PAEA) requires USPS to prefund postal retiree health benefits. Prefunding retiree health benefits means that USPS is supposed to pay its share of the benefit costs before employees retire and draw benefits.
- USPS defaulted on \$51.9 billion in retiree health prefunding payments that were due through 2020 and still owes this amount to OPM.

**Figure 15: Postal Retiree Health Benefits: Summary Data, FY 2017-2020 (dollars in billions)**

	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020
Required USPS payments into the RHB Fund	\$ 4.3	\$ 4.5	\$ 4.6	\$ 4.6
Actual USPS payments made into the RHB Fund	0	0	0	0
RHB Fund income – interest on assets	1.4	1.3	1.2	1.1
<b>RHB Fund expenses - insurance premiums paid</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>3.9</b>
<b>RHB Fund assets (Treasury securities), end of fiscal year</b>	<b>\$ 49.8</b>	<b>\$ 47.5</b>	<b>\$ 45.0</b>	<b>\$ 42.1</b>

Source: USPS

<sup>26</sup> For more information, see [USPS's 10-K Report for Fiscal Year 2020](#).



## Postal Retiree Health Benefits: A Focal Point for Postal Legislation

Members of Congress introduced legislation in past sessions of Congress to reduce USPS expenses for postal retiree health benefits, but none of these bills were enacted. They took three main approaches.<sup>27</sup>

*Approach #1: End Prefunding:* [House](#) and [Senate](#) bills in the last session of Congress would have eliminated the requirement that USPS prefund retiree health benefits. Specifically, the bills would have ended the requirement for USPS to make payments into the RHB Fund. If the Fund is depleted, USPS would be required by law to pay its share of premiums for postal retiree health benefits as they come due. It is unclear what would happen if the Fund is depleted and USPS does not pay its share of premiums. It is reasonable to assume that Congress would make appropriations to cover these costs.

*Approach #2: Outside Investment:* A [House](#) bill in the last session of Congress would have changed how funds set aside for postal retiree health benefits are invested. Currently, these funds must be invested in low-interest Treasury securities. Outside investment, including in the stock market, could boost earnings but also subject the funds to greater risk of loss.

*Approach #3: Medicare Integration:* Bills in past Congresses would have required nearly all USPS retirees to participate in Medicare when they become eligible.<sup>28</sup> This would shift substantial USPS costs to Medicare. USPS has long favored Medicare integration.<sup>29</sup>

## Key Postal Stakeholders

Key postal stakeholders include postal labor unions and management associations, the mailing industry, private delivery competitors, USPS contractors and suppliers, the federal government, local communities, and the general public, among others. See the Appendix for a listing of selected stakeholders.

- *Postal labor organizations:* Postal labor unions and management associations are influential organizations that represent USPS employees. Postal labor unions bargain collectively for compensation and work rules, while postal management associations seek to improve their members' compensation and working conditions through the consultation process.
- *Mailing industry:* The industry includes: the employees of USPS; businesses and organizations that send items through USPS and that rely on the mail to maintain contact with their customers; preparers of the mail, including printers and businesses that send and/or receive mail on behalf of another party; and, vendors and suppliers of the hardware, software, and labor related to mail, such as companies who help mailers improve the accuracy of their mailing lists.

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<sup>27</sup> For further discussion of these and other approaches, see USPS OIG, *Options to Reduce Unfunded Retirement Liabilities*, [19BG010FT000-R20](#) (Arlington, VA: Mar. 6, 2020) and GAO, *Postal Retiree Health Benefits: Unsustainable Finances Need to Be Addressed*, [GAO-18-602](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 31, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> [H.R. 756](#), [H.R. 6076](#), and [S. 2629](#), 115<sup>th</sup> Cong.; [H.R. 5714](#), 114<sup>th</sup> Cong.; and [S. 1486](#), 113<sup>th</sup> Cong.

<sup>29</sup> For example, see USPS's [Aug. 21, 2020 testimony](#) as well as its [Apr. 30, 2019 testimony](#).

- *Private delivery competitors:* UPS, FedEx, DHL, and Amazon compete with USPS on a nationwide basis but also are among USPS's biggest customers, entering many packages at post offices for "last mile" delivery. USPS competitors also include regional and local delivery companies.
- *USPS contractors and suppliers:* USPS relies on [many contractors and suppliers](#) for mail transportation, technology, and other supplies and services. For example, most long-distance transportation of mail is provided by contractors that include FedEx, UPS, domestic airlines, and trucking companies. USPS also contracts for some postal retail services, often located in privately owned stores, as well as some delivery services.
- *The government:* The federal government owns USPS. OPM administers postal benefits such as health insurance and pensions to postal employees and retirees. The Treasury Department handles USPS banking and borrowing. Federal, state, and local governments rely on USPS for secure communications with citizens, voting by mail, and the Census.
- *Local communities:* Local elected officials and community residents often view USPS as playing an essential role in their communities. In many cases they have strongly opposed closing post offices and other postal facilities, in part because of the perceived impact on access to postal services, jobs, and community identity.
- *General public:* [U.S. households](#) received about three-quarters of the mail volume in FY 2019. They sent only 6 percent of volume. Household mail use generally increases with income, education, and age. About half of U.S. households visited a post office at least once a month in FY 2019.

## Appendix: Selected Sources of Postal Information

### Postal Law, Regulations, and Related Statutes

- [Title 39, U.S. Code](#) – Postal law
- [Title 39, Code of Federal Regulations](#) – Postal regulations
- [Title 18, U.S. Code](#) – Criminal law (e.g., mail theft)
- [Title 5, U.S. Code](#) – Government law (e.g., postal health and pension benefits)

### U.S. Postal Service (USPS)

- [Election Mail](#) – Information on election mail, advice for voters, and resources for election officials
- [FAQ](#) – Frequently Asked Questions, USPS COVID-19 updates, and how to contact USPS
- [Financials](#) – USPS reports (e.g., Annual Report to Congress, annual and quarterly financial reports)
- [Glossary](#) – Defines many postal terms
- [Government Services](#) – Election mail, political mail, passport services, and federal government mail
- [History](#) – Postal history, photo galleries, postage rates, and historical statistics
- [Leadership](#) – USPS Board of Governors and Executive Leadership team with organizational chart
- [Newsroom](#) – News releases, statements, testimony, speeches, local news, alerts to service disruptions, and media contacts
- [Postal Inspection Service](#) – Reporting a mail-related crime, victim help resources, tips and crime prevention information, and Inspection Service reports
- [Service Performance](#) – Targets and results for types of market-dominant mail and services

### Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC)

- [Consumer Assistance](#) – Rate and service inquiries, appealing a post office closure, and filing a complaint
- [Daily Listings](#) – Filings organized by the date they were filed
- [Newsroom](#) – PRC news releases, speeches, papers, testimony, and submissions to Congress
- [PRC reports](#) – e.g., Annual Report to Congress, Annual Compliance Determination Report, Analysis of USPS's Annual Performance Report and Performance Plan, and Financial Analysis of USPS's Financial Results and 10-K Statement
- [USPS reports](#) – for example, annual, quarterly, and monthly financial reports

U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (USPS OIG) – Reports, white papers, news releases, and other documents

U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) – For reports on USPS, use the [search](#) or [advanced search](#) function.

Congressional Research Service (CRS) – For reports on USPS, use the [search](#) function.

## Major Postal Labor Unions

- [American Postal Workers Union](#) (APWU)
- [National Association of Letter Carriers](#) (NALC)
- [National Rural Letters Carriers' Association](#) (NRLCA)
- [National Postal Mail Handlers Union](#) (NPMHU)

## Postal Management Associations

- [National Association of Postal Supervisors](#) (NAPS)
- [United Postmasters and Managers of America](#) (UPMA)

## Selected Mailing Industry Groups

- [Alliance of Nonprofit Mailers](#) (ANM)
- [American Catalog Mailers Association](#) (ACMA)
- [Association for Postal Commerce](#) (PostCom)
- [Association of Magazine Media](#) (MPA), formerly the Magazine Publishers Association
- [Association of United States Postal Lessors](#) (AUSPL)
- [Coalition for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Postal Service](#) (C21)
- [DMA Nonprofit Federation](#) (DMANF)
- [Envelope Manufacturers Association](#) (EMA)
- [Greeting Card Association](#) (GCA)
- [International Mailers' Advisory Group](#) (IMAG)
- [National Association of Presort Mailers](#) (NAPM)
- [National Newspaper Association](#) (NNA)
- [National Postal Policy Council](#) (NPPC)
- [National Star Route Mail Contractors Association](#)
- [News Media Alliance](#) (NMA)
- [Package Coalition](#)
- [Parcel Shippers Association](#) (PSA)