Tips for Students

I usually suggest students pick sources where they can:

1. Download data directly as CSV/Excel (avoid PDF tables!)
2. Get multiple years or regions for comparison
3. Find clear documentation about variable definitions
4. Access the data without special permissions

Economic Databases

FRED (Federal Reserve Economic Data)

URL: https://fred.stlouisfed.org/

The gold standard for US economic time series. Great API access, clean downloads, and students can easily grab unemployment rates, inflation, interest rates, GDP components. The graphing tools help students visualize before downloading.

World Bank Open Data

URL: https://data.worldbank.org/

Perfect for cross-country comparisons and development economics questions. The World Development Indicators are particularly useful, and the data comes pre-cleaned with good documentation.

IPUMS

URL: https://www.ipums.org/

Harmonized census and survey data. IPUMS USA gives access to American Community Survey microdata, while IPUMS International covers 100+ countries. Excellent for questions about income, education, demographics.

Labor & Prices

Bureau of Labor Statistics

URL: https://www.bls.gov/data/

Consumer Price Index, employment statistics, wages by occupation/industry. The Employment Situation reports and CPI databases are particularly student-friendly.

OECD Data

URL: https://data.oecd.org/

Clean, comparable data across developed countries. Excellent for questions about inequality, education spending, healthcare costs, productivity.

Specialized/Interesting Sources

Our World in Data

URL: https://ourworldindata.org/

Beautifully curated datasets on long-run trends - perfect for students interested in health, environment, technology adoption, or historical economics. The data comes with context articles that help students understand what they're analyzing.

Google Trends

URL: https://trends.google.com/

For students interested in revealed preferences or information-seeking behavior. Works well paired with economic events or policy changes.

Census Bureau

URL: https://data.census.gov/

Beyond the decennial census, the American Community Survey and Current Population Survey offer rich microdata. The new data.census.gov interface is much more student-friendly than the old American FactFinder.

Elections & Political Economy

MIT Election Data and Science Lab

URL: https://electionlab.mit.edu/data

Comprehensive US election data from federal, state, and local races. Includes historical presidential elections back to 1789, congressional elections, and voter turnout data. The data comes in clean CSV format with consistent variable naming across years.

Perfect for students interested in political economy questions - analyzing economic conditions and voting patterns, turnout and demographics, or the effects of voting laws. The county-level presidential data pairs beautifully with FRED's county-level economic indicators for difference-in-differences or panel analyses.

Key datasets include county presidential election returns (2000-2020), state legislative election results, and voting method data (mail, early, election day).

Local/Regional Data

Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center

URL: https://www.wprdc.org/

Pittsburgh and Allegheny County's open data portal. Incredibly rich local data including property assessments, crime reports, 311 requests, transit data, and budget information. Real-time and historical data with good API access.

Excellent for students who want to analyze local economic issues - housing prices and neighborhood characteristics, the relationship between transit access and property values, or how city services correlate with economic indicators. The geographic detail (often down to parcel or block level) allows for sophisticated spatial analysis.

Notable datasets include property sale transactions, building permits, neighborhood demographic profiles, and Port Authority ridership.

Sports Data

Baseball Reference / Basketball Reference / Pro Football Reference

URL: https://www.sports-reference.com/

The Sports Reference family offers comprehensive statistics downloadable as CSV. Baseball Reference is particularly rich with 150+ years of data including player salaries, attendance, and advanced metrics. Great for labor economics questions about wage determination, discrimination, or productivity measurement.

FiveThirtyEight Data

URL: https://github.com/fivethirtyeight/data

Clean datasets from their sports articles including NFL Elo ratings, NBA player projections, and soccer match predictions. Well-documented with example analyses. Perfect for students interested in prediction markets or forecasting.

Stathead (Sports Reference API)

URL: https://stathead.com/

More systematic access to Sports Reference data with better bulk download options. The free tier is limited but useful. Excellent for panel data analysis of player performance, team economics, or competitive balance.

College Sports

URL: https://www.collegefootballdata.com/

Free API with play-by-play data, recruiting rankings, and team statistics. Good for analyzing college athletics economics, recruiting as investment, or conference realignment impacts.

Property Values & Real Estate

Zillow Research Data

URL: https://www.zillow.com/research/data/

Zillow Home Value Index (ZHVI) and Zillow Observed Rent Index (ZORI) at various geographic levels. Monthly time series data going back to 1996. Clean CSV downloads with consistent methodology. Perfect for analyzing housing bubbles, gentrification, or rent vs. buy decisions.

Redfin Data Center

URL: https://www.redfin.com/news/data-center/

More granular than Zillow with weekly updates. Includes median sale prices, inventory, days on market, and price drops. Metropolitan and neighborhood level data helps students analyze local housing markets.

CoreLogic / Case-Shiller (via FRED)

URL: https://fred.stlouisfed.org/

The Case-Shiller Home Price Indices are available through FRED. These are the gold standard for housing economics research - quality-adjusted repeat sales indices that control for housing characteristics.

Inside Airbnb

URL: http://insideairbnb.com/

Scraped Airbnb listings data for major cities. Excellent for analyzing short-term rentals' impact on housing markets, tourism economics, or platform economy questions. Updated quarterly with historical snapshots.