Measuring Shortages Since 1900

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Motivation & Research Question

- Shortages: lack of sufficient supply of goods, services and factors of production to meet demand in a particular market.
- Shortages have been a recurring feature of economic life
- Limited research on their long-term evolution and effects
- Our approach:
  - Construct long-run shortage index—global and for six advanced economies
  - Examine its relationship with economic activity

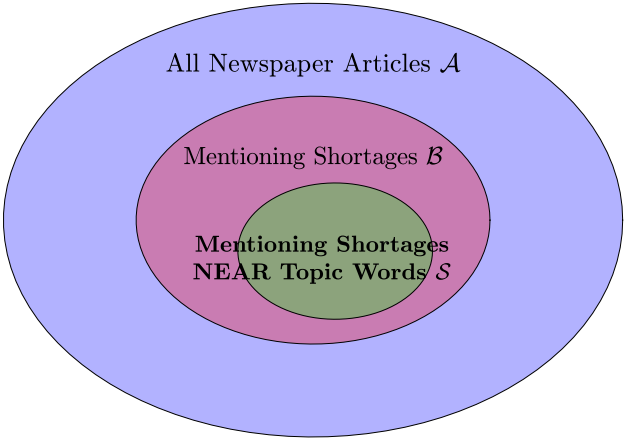
Related Literature

- News-based indicators of shortages:
  - Lamont (1997): Hand-coded indicator using WSJ headlines
  - Chen and Houle (2023): Index for Canada since 2000
  - Burriel et al. (2023): Index for advanced economies since 2000
- Supply chain pressure measure based on transportation costs:
  - Benigno et al. (2022)
- Shortages and inflation during COVID-19 pandemic:
  - Pitschner (2022): corporate filings
  - Bernanke and Blanchard (2023): Google Trends-based shortages
- Contributions of our study:
  - First comprehensive measure of shortages spanning 125 years
  - Univariate regressions, forecasting regressions and structural VAR analysis show persistent effects of shortages on inflation
  - News about shortages combine reflect demand and supply forces as well as “exogenous” shocks

Constructing the Shortage Index

- Sample: Text of 25 million news articles from NYT, WaPo, CT, BG, LAT, WSJ, analyzed at monthly frequency (about 20,000 articles per month)
- Search query: 'shortage' words near 'topic' words (energy, food, industry, labor) + economic terms
- Index is proportional to the share of articles discussing energy, food, industry, and labor shortages each month
- Validation: Audit of articles, comparison to other shortage measures

Grouping of Articles for the Construction of the Index



Search Query for the Shortage Index

Energy Shortages : (*shortages* N/5 *energy*) AND *economics*

Food Shortages : (*shortages* N/5 *food*) AND *economics*

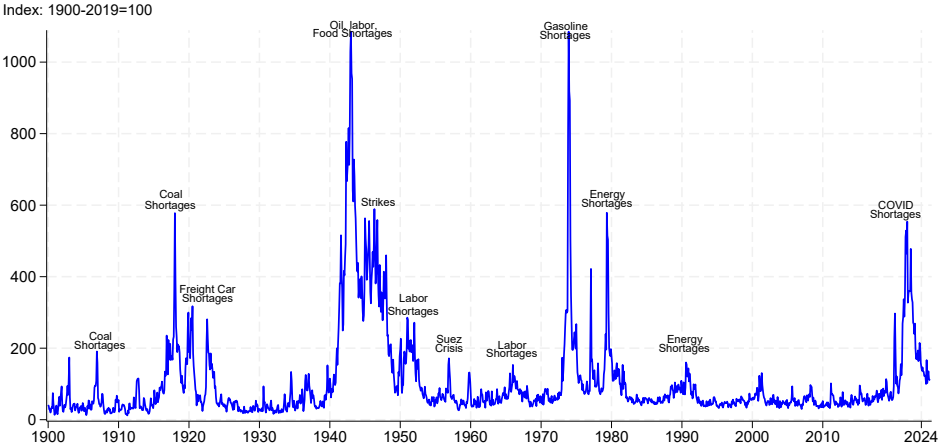
Industry Shortages : (*shortages* N/5 *industry*) AND *economics*

Labor Shortages : (*shortages* N/5 *labor*) AND *economics*

shortages : shortage, bottleneck, scarcity, rationing
energy : oil, gas, coal, electricity, ...
food : food, wheat, meat, agriculture, ...
industry : steel, automotive, machinery, ...
labor : labor, workers, employment, ...
economics : economic, production, market, ...

Table: Search query and topic sets used to construct the shortage index.

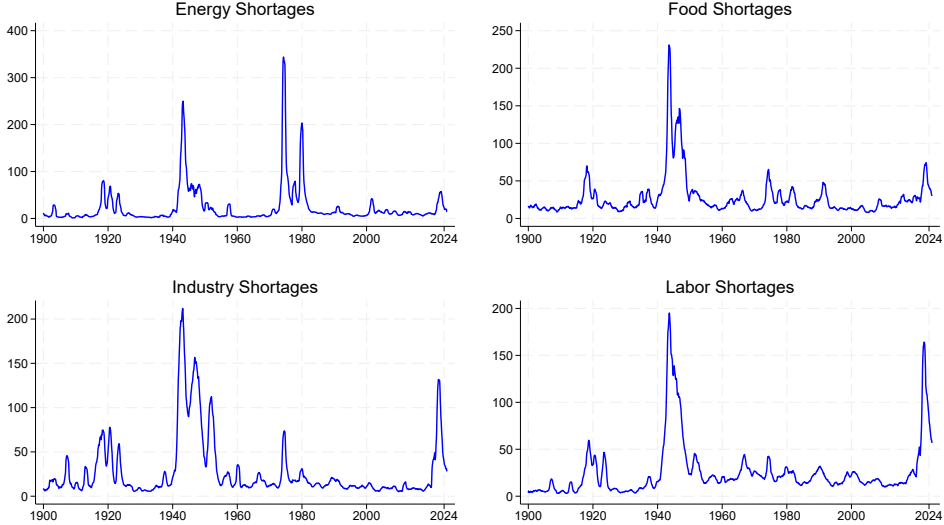
The Shortage Index, 1900-2024



Monthly Data through April 2025.

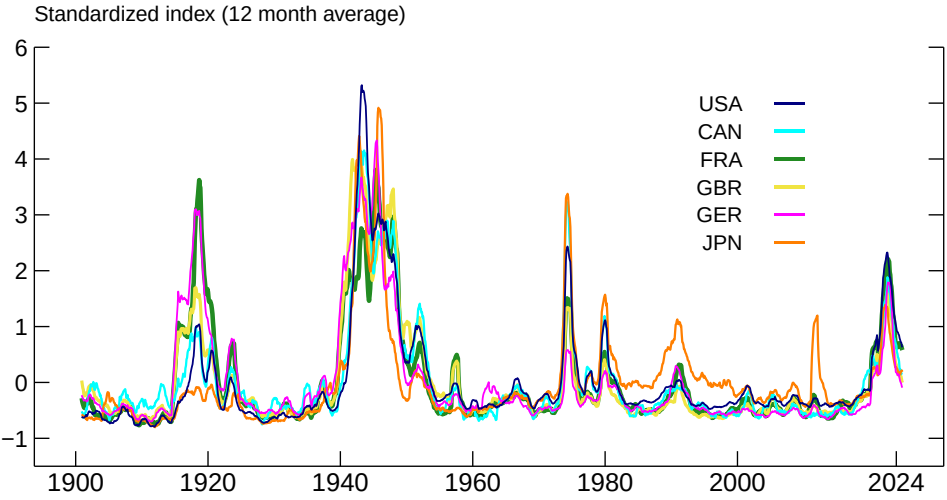
Updated data at `https://www.matteoiacoviello.com/shortages.html`.

The Shortage Index: Decomposition by Category

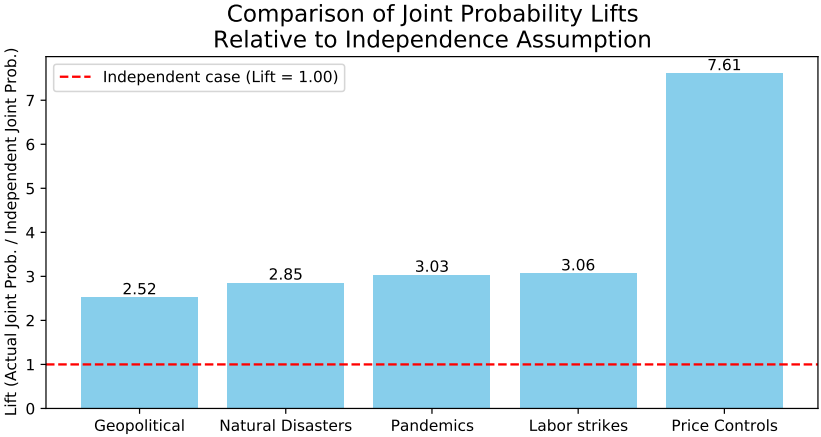


12-month moving average. Scale Equal to Contribution to Total Index.

Shortage Indexes by Country



Phenomena Associated with Shortages

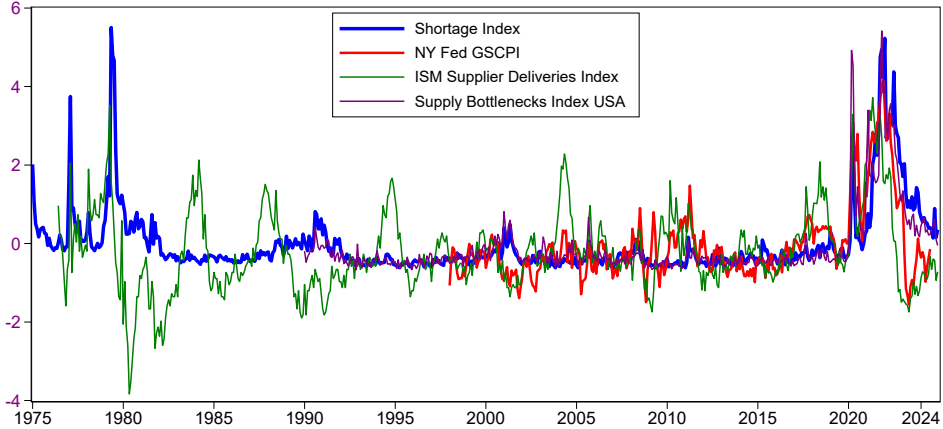


Category	***P(Shortage)***	***P(Category)***	***P(Joint)***	***P(Indep.)***
Geopolitical	1.27%	2.63%	0.084%	0.033%
Natural Disasters	1.27%	2.85%	0.103%	0.036%
Pandemics	1.27%	1.23%	0.047%	0.016%
Labor strikes	1.27%	2.69%	0.104%	0.034%
Price Controls	1.27%	0.80%	0.077%	0.010%

Validating the Shortage Index

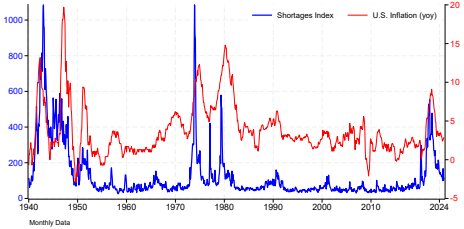
- Used Claude AI assistant to perform the audit
  - Extracted snippets of text from each article;
  - Provided training examples to guide Claude's analysis;
  - Claude classified articles 1/0 and provided explanations
- Sampled 872 articles included in the index
  - 93.7% of articles correctly mention shortages (False positives: 6.3%)
- Sampled 298 articles not included in the index
  - Only 1 article mentioned shortages (False negatives: 0.33%)
- Proximity of shortage words to topic words improves accuracy
  - Without proximity restriction, false positive rate rises to 15.8%

Comparison to Other Measures (starting after 1975)



All Indexes Standardized to have zero mean and unit standard deviation over 2000-2023 Period

Shortages and Economic Activity



Will show three exercises:

- 1. Predictive Regressions
- 2. Forecasting Exercise
- 3. VAR Analysis

1. Predictive Regressions

- Rolling regressions:

$$\Delta Y_{t+h} = \alpha + \beta\, SHORTAGE_t + \sum_{i=0}^{p} \gamma_i' \mathbf{X}_{t-i} + \varepsilon_{t+h}$$

where:

- ΔY_{t+h}: change in real pc GDP, or GDP deflator between t and $t+h$
- SHORTAGE_t: shortage index at time t
- $\mathbf{X}$: control variables (oil, commodities, wages, inflation expectations)

Effects allowed to vary over time.

Generally positive for inflation, negative for activity.

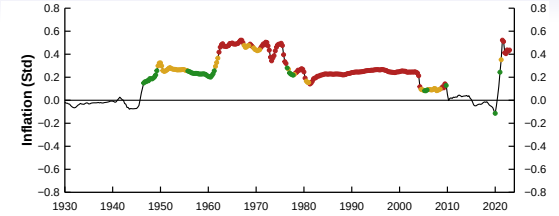


Figure: Effect of Shortages on 1-year ahead GDP Deflator (30-Year Window)

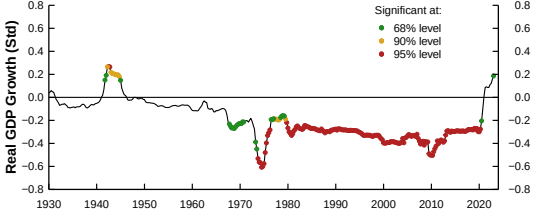


Figure: Effect of Shortages on 1-year ahead Real GDP (30-Year Window)

2. Can Shortages Help Forecasting Inflation?

Forecasting Model for 3-month ahead, 12-month inflation π_{t+3}:

$$\pi_{t+3} = c + \beta\pi_t + \gamma u_t + \delta o_t + \zeta S_t$$

- π_t: 12-month CPI inflation
- u_t: Unemployment (3-mo MA)
- o_t: 12-mo. change in oil prices (3-mo MA)
- S_t: Shortage Index (3-mo MA)

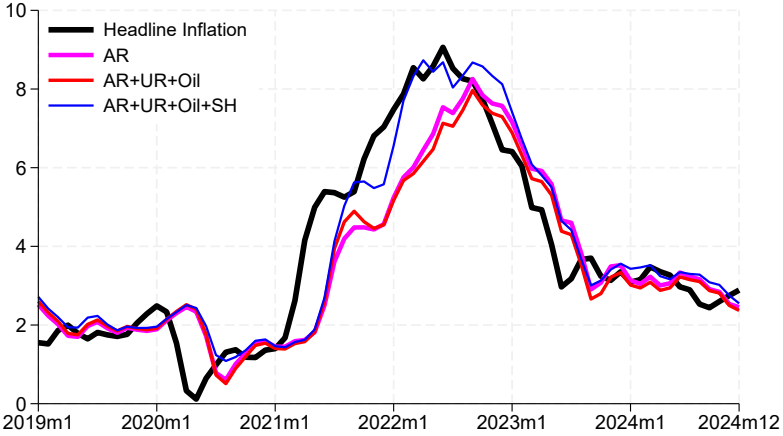
Methodology:

- Rolling forecasts: 1990:M1 - 2024:M9
- Start in 1960:M1. 30-year fixed windows

Results:

- Shortages model (S) outperforms no-shortages (NS) and AR model (AR)
- 1990-2024: RMSE 0.86 (S) vs 0.92 (NS) vs 0.89 (AR) $\downarrow$ 6.5%
- 2020-2024: RMSE 1.04 (S) vs 1.31 (NS) vs 1.31 (AR) $\downarrow$ 20.6%

Forecast Comparison around the Pandemic



Each month plots actual inflation against the expectation calculated 3 months before for the same period

Model with shortages better predicts inflation in 2022-23

3. VAR Analysis

Structural VAR to identify causes and consequences of shortages.

$$\pi = [\mathbf{b}^S]'\mathbf{z}_{t-1} + \kappa y + u^S$$
$$y = [\mathbf{b}^D]'\mathbf{z}_{t-1} - \delta\pi + u^D$$
$$h = [\mathbf{b}^H]'\mathbf{z}_{t-1} + \theta_S u^S + \theta_D u^D + u^H$$
$$c = [\mathbf{b}^C]'\mathbf{z}_{t-1} + \chi_D u^D + \chi_S u^S + \chi_H u^H + u^C$$
$$r = [\mathbf{b}^R]'\mathbf{z}_{t-1} + \alpha_\pi \pi + \alpha_Y y + \alpha_H h + \alpha_C c + u^R$$

where $\mathbf{z}_{t-1} = (\mathbf{X}'_{t-1}, \mathbf{X}'_{t-2}, \ldots, \mathbf{X}'_{t-p})'$ and $\mathbf{X}_t = (y_t, \pi_t, c_t, h_t, r_t)'$:

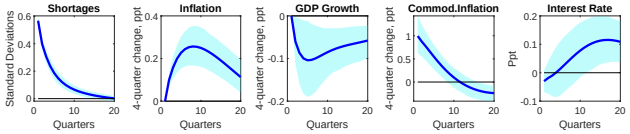
- y: 4-quarter % change, GDP
- π: 4-quarter % change, CPI
- h: shortages
- c: 4-quarter % change in commodity prices
- r: 3-month interest rate
- u^S, u^D, u^C, u^H, u^R : shocks

VAR Analysis: Identification

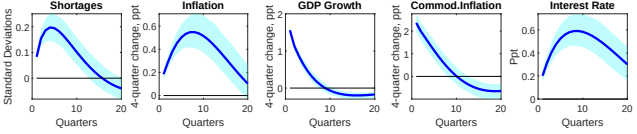
$$\pi = \kappa y + u^S$$
$$y = -\delta\pi + u^D$$
$$h = \theta_S u^S + \theta_D u^D + u^H$$
$$c = \chi_D u^D + \chi_S u^S + \chi_H u^H + u^C$$
$$r = \alpha_\pi \pi + \alpha_Y y + \alpha_H h + \alpha_C c + u^R$$

- System above is under-identified (would be just-identified if κ was known and other parameters were unrestricted)
- To aid identification, we impose priors as in Baumeister and Hamilton (2019) priors
  - Restrict κ, δ to be positive
  - Restrict θ_S, θ_D (and χ_D, χ_S, χ_H) to be positive
  - Restrict α_π, α_Y to be positive
  - Estimate VAR with Bayesian methods (and with Dynare) posteriors

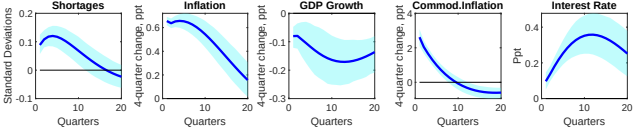
Impulse Responses



Shortages Shocks

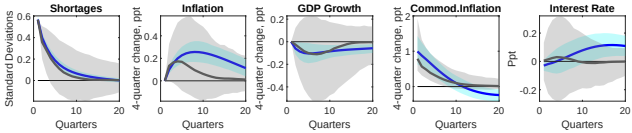


Demand Shocks

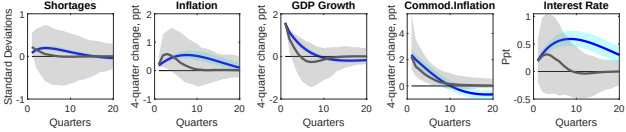


Supply Shocks

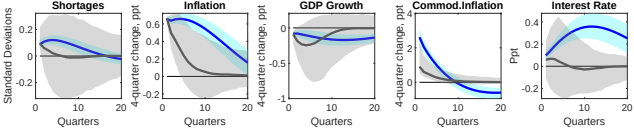
Impulse Responses, Prior vs Posterior



Shortages Shocks



Demand Shocks

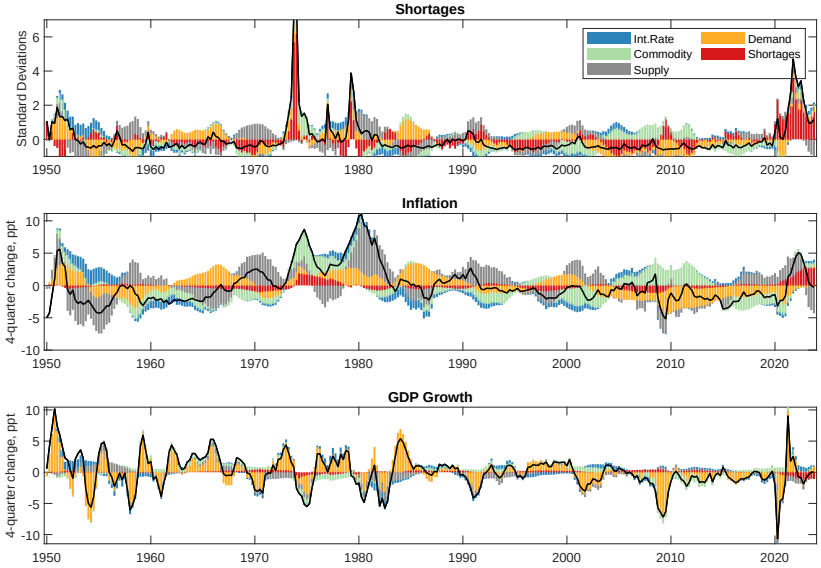


Supply Shocks

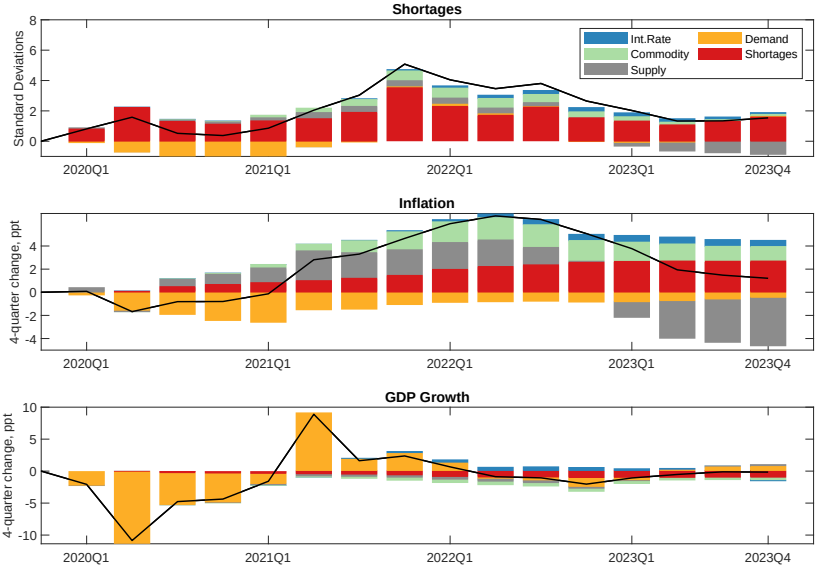
What are Shortage Shocks?

- Fluctuations in shortages reflect:
  - Business cycle-induced movements (supply, demand, commodities)
  - Exogenous Shortage Shocks (major disruptions to flow of goods, services, and factors of production)
    - Atypical adjustment to sudden shifts in economic conditions, e.g.: demand reallocation causing temporary bottlenecks
    - Geopolitical, trade shocks slowing flow of goods
    - Surge in demand causing rationing when social norms prevent large price adjustments
    - Shocks to regulation (price ceilings, quantity rationing)
- Assumption: All 'exogenous' shortage shocks have same effects
- Result: Shortage shocks relative more 'contractionary' and less 'inflationary' than a typical supply shock

Historical Decomposition: Full Sample

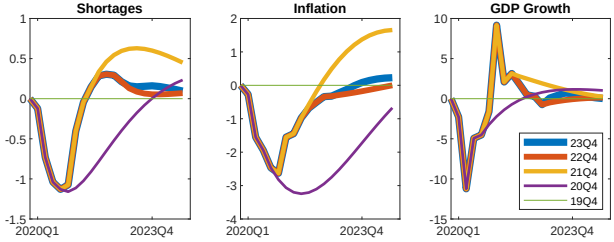


Historical Decomposition: 2020-Present

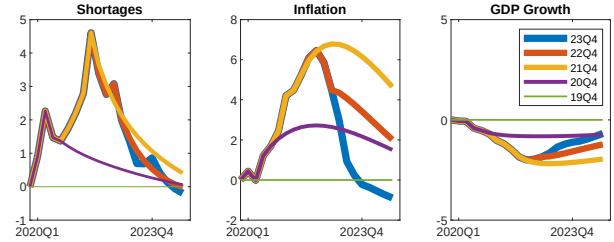


Demand-side and Supply-side Forces: ’20-’24

Demand Shocks (pure demand + monetary shock)



Supply Shocks



Summary & Implications

- New long-run shortage index captures historical trends
- Shortages reflect both supply and demand forces, with relative importance varying over time
- Shortages shocks can have persistent inflationary effects, but are relatively less inflationary than a typical supply shock
- Index provides new tool for researchers and policymakers to understand shortage dynamics

APPENDIX

Validating the Index: Prompt

Prompt for Claude AI

"I give you 872 snippets of text each about 110 characters long. For each of them, can you tell me whether they mention current or perspective shortages or rationing or scarcity or bottlenecks related to goods, labor, materials, food, water? Just return a table with yes=1, no=0, unsure=99, and a brief explanation.

For instance.

Article 1 mentions that steel shortages will prevail in the near future, so it is a 1.

Article 2 says steel shortages caused a plant closure, so it is coded 1.

Article 329 says no shortage of cars has been experienced, so 0."

Back

Validating the Index: Outcome

Articles coded as mentioning Shortages


Steel Shortages To Hit GM Plants If Strike Goes On: A
A WALL STREET JOURNAL News Roundup
Wall Street Journal (1923-); Sep 21, 1959; ProQuest Historical Ne
pg. 3

Steel Shortages To Hit GM Plants If Strike Goes On

Auto Maker Faces Shutdown In Month; Others Said to Have Adequate Steel

First Closings Due in 10 Days

A WALL STREET JOURNAL News Roundup

Strike-caused steel shortages are beginning to hit General Motors Corp.

"strike caused steel shortages are beginning to hit general motors corp. so.."

Claude: 1: Steel shortages are hitting General Motors


Canada Suspends Meat Rationing: OPA Cuts Pork and Beef Points for U. S.
Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960); Mar 1, 1944; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Boston Globe
pg. 1

Canada Suspends Meat Rationing

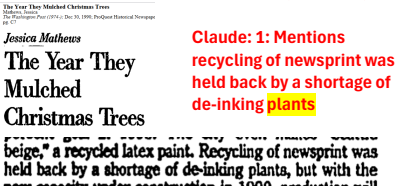
OPA Cuts Pork and Beef Points for U. S.

WASHINGTON, Feb. 29 (AP)—[watch. Canada's action today in The OPA slashed ration costs of [suspension suspending meat ra pork and several beef cuts, but cleaning.

"canada s action today in temporarily suspending meat rationing.."

Claude: 0: Canada temporarily suspending meat rationing

Article coded as NOT mentioning Shortages


The Year They Mulched Christmas Trees
Mathews, Jessica
Los Angeles Post (1974-); Dec 30, 1990; ProQuest Historical Newspape
pg. C7

Jessica Mathews

The Year They Mulched Christmas Trees

beige," a recycled latex paint. Recycling of newsprint was held back by a shortage of de-inking plants, but with the

Claude: 1: Mentions recycling of newsprint was held back by a shortage of de-inking plants

Note

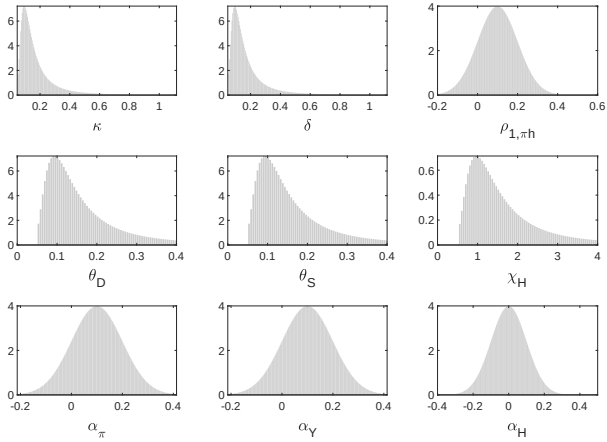

Brighten Up Indoors With Colorful Plants
JOEL RAPP SPECIAL TO THE TIMES
Los Angeles Times (1996-); Feb 4, 1996; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times
pg. K1

Brighten Up Indoors With Colorful Plants

There's no shortage of plants with brightly colored foliage to liven up your kitchen, living room or den during the dark days of winter, either.

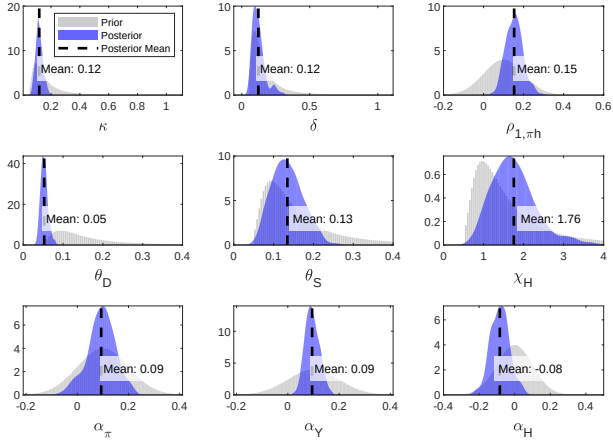
Back

Priors: Baseline Model



Back

Priors and Posteriors: Baseline Model



Back

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