

Apples & Oranges

A Comparison of Public and Private Sector Occupational Employment and Wages

In today's media, it is not uncommon to hear assertions about government employment in the United States. The truth is, however, public sector employment is perhaps best evaluated in a greater economic context (i.e., with reference to the private sector) and those comparisons can be difficult to make. Despite such difficulty, data made available by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics (OES) program assists the comparison of occupational wages and employment between the public and private sectors. The OES randomly samples employers in both public and private sectors and asks them for information about their workforce job assignments and wages. Employers' reported job titles are then coded into the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) structure to aggregate common job duties and standardize response data. This information yields annual estimates of employment and wages for over 800 occupations nationally.

The Comparison of OES public and private sector employment by major occupational group reveals some immediate differences in the general occupational make-up of the two areas of economic ownership. The three largest occupational groups by employment in the public sector are education, training and library occupations; office and administrative support occupations; and protective service occupations, with employment shares of 29.9 percent, 15.3 percent and 9.4 percent, respectively. The large portion of employment in office and administrative support occupations actually exists in the private sector as well, but that is the extent of the similarities between the two groups. In the private sector, jobs in education and protective services sum to an employment share of only 2.9 percent. In terms of average wages, education occupations in the private and public sector seem to fare about the same, at \$23.41 an hour as compared to \$25.00 an hour, respectively. In protective services, workers earn an average of \$24.92 an hour, while private sector protective services workers average only \$13.56 an hour.

Despite core contrasts between private sector and government employment, the occupational mix at the detailed level heavily influence wage and employment estimates. For instance, public sector protective service occupations are primarily represented by police officers, whereas private sector protective service occupations generally consist of security guards. And since police officers earn more on average than security guards in both the public and private sectors, it is a natural consequence that the average wages of protective service workers are higher in the public sector.

Examining public and private sector occupational data at a detailed level can provide more granular insight into potential wage and employment disparities. In reviewing select detailed occupations that are well represented in both the public and private labor markets, it becomes apparent that in some cases the public sector average wage exceeds the private sector, in some cases the opposite is true and in other cases the average wages are nearly identical. Unfortunately, even at this most detailed definition, many factors that significantly contribute to public and private occupational compensation differences are unaccounted for in OES. Wage determinants, such as level of work performed, educational attainment and tenure in a position, are not explicitly captured by the OES program and can complicate comparisons of OES data by sector. Nevertheless, OES data conclusively illustrate the dissimilarity between public and private sector occupational employment compositions. Wage differences are also substantiated by OES, but all of the potential causes are not controlled. 



Private and Public Sector Employment and Wages by Major Occupational Group, National

Occupational Group	Private			Public			Public as a Percent of Private	
	Employment	Emp. Share	Avg. Wage	Employment	Emp. Share	Avg. Wage	Employment	Avg. Wage
Management Occupations	5,380,790	4.9%	\$53.66	1,009,630	4.7%	\$44.42	18.8%	82.8%
Business & Financial Operations Occupations	5,259,450	4.8%	\$33.74	1,159,920	5.4%	\$32.06	22.1%	95.0%
Computer & Mathematical Occupations	3,171,230	2.9%	\$39.23	406,990	1.9%	\$33.23	12.8%	84.7%
Architecture & Engineering Occupations	2,045,490	1.9%	\$38.02	311,040	1.5%	\$37.72	15.2%	99.2%
Life, Physical & Social Science Occupations	657,980	0.6%	\$34.30	446,120	2.1%	\$30.76	67.8%	89.7%
Community & Social Service Occupations	1,160,590	1.1%	\$19.03	721,480	3.4%	\$24.87	62.2%	130.7%
Legal Occupations	762,340	0.7%	\$49.59	260,680	1.2%	\$40.96	34.2%	82.6%
Education, Training & Library Occupations	1,983,340	1.8%	\$23.41	6,391,570	29.9%	\$25.00	322.3%	106.8%
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports & Media Occupations	1,556,700	1.4%	\$26.59	193,430	0.9%	\$23.03	12.4%	86.6%
Health Care Practitioners & Technical Occupations	6,482,800	6.0%	\$35.88	1,167,140	5.5%	\$32.43	18.0%	90.4%
Health Care Support Occupations	3,616,680	3.3%	\$13.26	298,790	1.4%	\$14.55	8.3%	109.7%
Protective Service Occupations	1,192,780	1.1%	\$13.56	2,015,010	9.4%	\$24.92	168.9%	183.8%
Food Preparation & Serving Related Occupations	11,006,660	10.1%	\$10.21	540,220	2.5%	\$11.77	4.9%	115.3%
Building/Grounds Cleaning & Maintenance Occupations	3,523,810	3.2%	\$11.88	722,450	3.4%	\$14.59	20.5%	122.8%
Personal Care & Service Occupations	3,328,940	3.1%	\$11.66	481,810	2.3%	\$12.75	14.5%	109.3%
Sales & Related Occupations	13,748,510	12.6%	\$18.28	86,580	0.4%	\$16.17	0.6%	88.5%
Office & Administrative Support Occupations	18,079,150	16.6%	\$16.13	3,276,200	15.3%	\$18.82	18.1%	116.7%
Farming, Fishing & Forestry Occupations	401,020	0.4%	\$11.22	26,650	0.1%	\$18.11	6.6%	161.4%
Construction & Extraction Occupations	4,499,670	4.1%	\$21.64	478,620	2.2%	\$21.37	10.6%	98.8%
Installation, Maintenance & Repair Occupations	4,534,860	4.2%	\$20.90	534,730	2.5%	\$22.73	11.8%	108.8%
Production Occupations	8,412,810	7.7%	\$16.43	181,360	0.8%	\$23.69	2.2%	144.2%
Transportation & Material Moving Occupations	8,118,650	7.5%	\$15.91	653,040	3.1%	\$19.12	8.0%	120.2%

Private and Public Sector Employment and Wages by Selected Detailed Occupations, National

Detailed Occupation	Private		Public		Public as a Percent of Private
	Employment	Avg. Wage	Employment	Avg. Wage	Avg. Wage
General & Operations Managers	1,762,660	\$55.74	136,800	\$48.52	87.0%
Accountants & Auditors	997,990	\$34.59	131,350	\$30.83	89.1%
Civil Engineers	182,630	\$41.13	75,480	\$38.83	94.4%
Lawyers	457,340	\$66.80	124,580	\$48.69	72.9%
Registered Nurses	2,168,910	\$32.72	465,070	\$32.35	98.9%
Janitors & Cleaners, Except Maids & Housekeeping Cleaners	1,594,690	\$11.29	502,690	\$14.03	124.3%
Cashiers	3,267,150	\$9.74	46,860	\$13.39	137.5%
Office Clerks, General	2,286,250	\$13.92	521,850	\$14.76	106.0%
First-Line Supervisors of Mechanics, Installers, & Repairers	359,340	\$30.03	62,310	\$30.28	100.8%
Water/Wastewater Treatment Plant & System Operators	21,590	\$21.20	86,840	\$21.52	101.5%