



Federal pay ahead of private industry

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By Melissa Golden, Getty Images

Federal pay has become a hot political issue in recent months because of concerns over the federal budget deficit and recession-battered wages in the private sector.

Federal employees earn higher average salaries than private-sector workers in more than eight out of 10 occupations, a USA TODAY analysis of federal data finds.

Accountants, nurses, chemists, surveyors, cooks, clerks and janitors are among the wide range of jobs that get paid more on average in the federal government than in the private sector.

Overall, federal workers earned an average salary of \$67,691 in 2008 for occupations that exist both in government and the private sector, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data. The average pay for the same mix of jobs in the private sector was \$60,046 in 2008, the most recent data available.

CHART: Federal salaries compared to private-sector

These salary figures do not include the value of health, pension and other benefits, which averaged \$40,785 per federal employee in 2008 vs. \$9,882 per private worker, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

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Sen. Scott Brown, R-Mass., made federal pay an issue in his successful campaign to fill [Edward Kennedy's](#) seat and is fighting for a pay freeze.

The federal government spent about \$224 billion in 2008 on compensation for about 2 million civilian employees.

"The data flip the conventional wisdom on its head," says [Cato Institute](#) budget analyst Chris Edwards, a critic of federal pay policy. "Federal workers make substantially more than private workers, not less, in addition to having a large advantage in benefits."

But [National Treasury Employees Union](#) President Colleen Kelley says the comparison is faulty because it "compares apples and oranges." Federal accountants, for example, perform work that has more complexity and requires more skill than accounting work in the private sector, she says.

"When you look at the actual duties, you see that

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very few federal jobs align with those in the private sector," she says. She says federal employees are paid an average of 26% less than non-federal workers doing comparable work.

[Office of Personnel Management](#) spokeswoman Sedelta Verble, says higher pay also reflects the longevity and older age of federal workers.

USA TODAY used Bureau of Labor Statistics data to compare salaries in every federal job that had a private-sector equivalent. For example, the federal government's 57,000 registered nurses — working for the Veterans Administration and elsewhere — were paid an average of \$74,460 a year, \$10,680 more than the average for private-sector nurses.

The BLS reports that 216 occupations covering 1.1 million federal workers exist in both the federal government and the private sector. An additional 124 federal occupations covering 750,000 employees — air-traffic controllers, tax collectors and others — did not have direct equivalents, according to the BLS.

Federal jobs have more limited salary ranges than private-sector jobs, some of which have million-dollar payouts.

Key findings:

- **Federal.** The federal pay premium cut across all job categories — white-collar, blue-collar, management, professional, technical and low-skill. In all, 180 jobs paid better average salaries in the federal government; 36 paid better in the private sector.
- **Private.** The private sector paid more on average in a select group of high-skill occupations, including lawyers, veterinarians and airline pilots. The government's 5,200 computer research scientists made an average of \$95,190, about \$10,000 less than the average in the corporate world.
- **State and local.** State government employees had an average salary of \$47,231 in 2008, about 5% less than comparable jobs in the private sector. City and county workers earned an average of \$43,589, about 2% more than private workers in similar jobs. State and local workers have higher total compensation than private workers when the value of benefits is included.

Job comparison

Average federal salaries exceed average private-sector pay in 83% of comparable occupations. A sampling of average annual salaries in 2008, the most recent data:

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, USA TODAY analysis

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