

Do Urban Workers Earn More Than Their Country Cousins?

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"God made the country, and man made the town."—William Cowper

In the past, workers tended to receive lower wages in nonmetropolitan areas than in metropolitan ones.¹ But, is this still true, occupation by occupation? What kinds of jobs earn the highest premium for working in metropolitan areas? A look at recent data from the Occupational Compensation Survey Program (OCSP) gives interesting answers to these questions. While data from the 1994 national survey show that workers in nonmetropolitan areas typically average about 90 percent of what their metropolitan counterparts earn for comparable jobs, pay relationships vary considerably from job to job.

Although the main focus of the OCSP is providing wage and salary information for major metropolitan areas, the program does include the nonmetropolitan portions of the country in its national database. There are about 2,300 nonmetropolitan counties in the United States, and almost 10 million workers, 16 percent of the U.S. workforce, work in them. To represent this segment of the country, BLS selected a sample of 70 nonmetropolitan counties. This sample was split in half, each half of which is surveyed on a 2-year rotating basis.

Of the 144 occupational work levels studied, 65 yielded comparable data for metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. Pay rates were higher in metropolitan areas for 61 of the 65 jobs. Among professional occupations (accountants, engineers, and nurses), pay in nonmetropolitan areas averaged 90 to 97 percent of that in metropolitan areas. Excep-

tions to this pattern were registered nurses II, who averaged 81 percent of the rates recorded in metropolitan areas, and entry-level engineers where rural workers enjoyed a 1-percent pay advantage over their urban counterparts. A similar pattern held for administrative workers (buyers/contracting specialists, computer programmers, computer systems analysts, and personnel specialists), where rural pay averaged 88 to 96 percent of urban pay.

Metropolitan pay advantages were slightly larger among comparable technical occupations (computer operators, drafters, civil engineering technicians, licensed practical nurses, and nursing assistants), where rural pay averaged between 81 and 92 percent of urban pay.

Among the occupational groups surveyed, the largest pay variations were noted for protective services jobs.

Table 1. Protective services occupations, average weekly earnings, 1994

Occupation	Metropolitan areas	Nonmetropolitan areas	Ratio of nonmetropolitan to metropolitan
Corrections officers	\$564	\$491	0.87
Firefighters	651	475	.73
Police officers I	684	520	.76

Workers in these jobs are virtually all employed by State and local governments.

Fifteen clerical jobs yielded comparable data, and average pay rates were higher for each job in metropolitan areas. The pattern was similar to that of professional, ad-

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ministrative, and technical occupations: Average pay rates in rural counties ranged from 83 percent of urban pay for general clerks IV to 95 percent for personnel assistants II; accounting clerks II and IV, general clerks II, key entry operators I, and switchboard operators-receptionists all averaged 89 percent.

Data were published for both types of geographic areas for 16 blue-collar jobs. The predominant pattern noted for white-collar workers applied to maintenance and toolroom workers. Nonmetropolitan averages expressed as a percentage of metropolitan averages ranged from 79 percent (motor vehicle maintenance mechanics) to 97 percent (maintenance machinists).

A different pattern emerged for custodial and material movement workers. Drivers of tractor-trailers for establishments based in nonmetropolitan areas averaged \$9.83 per hour, 70 percent of the \$14.14 per hour recorded for their city counterparts. On the other hand, guards I averaged \$7.43 in rural settings, 11 percent above the \$6.71 paid to guards in urban worksites. Guards was the only occupation where rural workers enjoyed a significant pay advantage over urban workers. The other jobs in this group ranged widely as the following table shows:

Table 2. Custodial and material movement occupations, average hourly earnings, 1994

Occupation	Metro-politan	Nonmetro-politan	Ratio of nonmetro-politan to metro-politan earnings
Forklift operators	\$11.56	\$ 8.91	0.77
Guards 1	6.71	7.43	1.11
Janitors	7.80	7.34	.94
Material handling laborers	9.71	7.34	.76
Shipping and receiving clerks	10.31	9.08	.88
Truckdrivers:			
Light truck	8.89	8.42	.95
Medium truck	13.96	13.21	.95
Heavy truck	12.96	11.11	.86
Tractor-trailer	14.14	9.83	.70
Warehouse specialists	12.09	11.10	.92

Looking across occupational categories, some interesting results are found. Health services jobs tended to show nonmetropolitan to metropolitan ratios in the 80 to 90 percent range. Registered nurses level I and nursing assistants level III in nonmetropolitan areas earned about 90 percent of their metropolitan counterparts, while registered nurses level II, licensed practical nurses level II, and nursing assistants level II earned closer to 80 percent.

Data for individual counties met publication standards for about 20 of the 70 nonmetropolitan counties surveyed in 1993-94. Although the counties yielding publishable data should not be construed as representative or typical counties, a look at individual county data shows wide pay differences across the country. Janitors, the most populous job surveyed, earned \$7.57 per hour nationwide, and \$7.12 in nonmetropolitan areas in 1993. Among the counties surveyed in 1993, average hourly earnings for janitors in San Luis Obispo County, California were \$10.27, nearly double the \$5.16 rate for janitors in Acadia Parish, Louisiana.

Protective services jobs also showed wide dispersion in pay rates. For the nonmetropolitan sections of the Nation as a whole, weekly earnings for firefighters averaged \$475 in 1994. Among the counties surveyed in 1994, firefighters in Greenwood County, South Carolina earned \$363 per week on average, about half the \$660 weekly earnings recorded for such personnel in Sweetwater County, Wyoming.

Clearly, when workers in similar jobs are examined, workers in urban workplaces typically earn more than their rural compatriots. What this study cannot say, however, is whether one class of worker is better off. The differences in occupational earnings mentioned here are based only on pay rates. Because this study does not compare other factors, such as nonwage benefits, cost of living, and differences in amenities between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas, the findings cannot be extended to gauge the relative well-being of urban versus rural workers.

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¹ The Bureau's Covered Employment and Wages program annual average pay news releases indicate that historically workers tend to receive lower wages in nonmetropolitan areas than in metropolitan ones.

Ratio of rural pay to urban pay, selected occupations, 1994

