

The Washington Post

Federal officials fight back over criticism about salaries

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Election season and a bad economy are making roadkill out of federal workers' salaries. Some newspapers, Republicans and conservative think tanks are inveighing against feds they say are cleaning up in salaries and benefits compared with their private sector counterparts.

The government is fighting back. After *USA Today* published another in a series of articles reporting a growing salary gap between private-sector and federal workers, top officials from the Office of Personnel Management dialed up the news media to make the opposite case.

Federal employees made on average 22 percent less than workers in similar private-sector jobs, officials said in a briefing late Friday. The government's personnel experts have made the argument before, but the salary debate keeps popping up.

USA Today reported last week that civil servants received average pay and benefits of \$123,049 last year, while private workers made \$61,051 in total compensation. The report, using data released by the Bureau of Economic Analysis, also said the federal compensation advantage had grown from \$30,415 in 2000 to \$62,000 last year.

The lack of clarity might result from differences in how such comparisons are made. The government relies on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which show that when federal and non-federal jobs are compared by level of work in different regions, the private sector makes more.

"These stories have compared apples to oranges" John Berry, the government's personnel chief, said Monday in a statement, calling the federal workforce a "highly specialized" group that includes doctors and cybersecurity professionals who could be earning far more at private companies. "We should be applauding these hard-working civil servants, not mischaracterizing them."

The data critics are using include low-skill restaurant, retail and other service jobs that the government workforce, which skews toward highly educated employees, doesn't

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include, officials say.

"If you average in some of the largest job categories in the private sector, it will make the private numbers look low," said Sheldon Friedman, a salary expert who heads an OPM panel that reviews labor management issues of blue-collar federal workers.

The survey by the Bureau of Economic Analysis includes a disclaimer that because its statistics do not measure the level of work in a particular profession -- a lawyer litigating multimillion dollar malpractice lawsuits vs. one conducting government audits -- the data cannot be used to compare federal and nonfederal workers.

"The numbers are in the eye of the beholder," Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst and blogger for the Cato Institute, said. The institute, which argues for smaller government and lower taxes, weighed in last week on the BEA data. The relatively high level of education among federal workers "can't explain away such a wide disparity" with the private sector, DeHaven said. Union leaders also deride the comparisons for leaving out skill-level, age, experience and geography.

An OPM fact sheet says that a worker in the contracting field for the federal government, a GS-11, makes on average \$18,000 less than someone with a similar private-sector job. But the gap is only in straight salary and does not include the generous federal benefits. Many private-sector workers do not

receive benefits. Friedman said there is no reliable comparison of benefits.

"We would argue that any employee in any occupation should be given basic things like health benefits," said Colleen Kelley, president of the National Treasury Employees Union.

A comprehensive study that might help settle the issue -- or not, given strong passions on both sides -- appears to be a way off. Berry pledged in June to bring in statisticians from the OPM, the Bureau of Labor Statistics and "neutral parties" such as the National Academy of Public Administration to develop a formula that could settle the question. But his spokeswoman, Sedelta Verble, could not provide an update on the initiative. Friedman, however, said he has advised Berry that the data the agency is using are "the best we're aware of."

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