

Federal paychecks top private in county

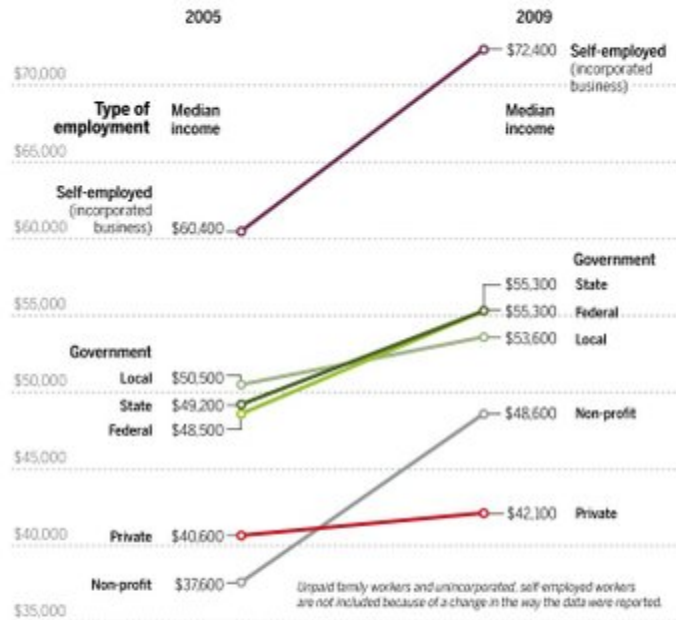
Median income was one-third higher, says 2009 Census analysis

BY DANIELLE CERVANTES

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Median annual pay for workers in San Diego County

The latest American Community Survey data show federal employees in San Diego earning almost one-third more than the private sector. Self-employed, incorporated business owners had the highest median salaries overall, as well as the biggest increase in income between 2005 and 2009. The most growth in the actual number of workers in the county was seen in local government, followed by non-profits, according to the survey.



Number of workers

Sector	San Diego County			California			United States		
	2005	2009	Change	2005	2009	Change	2005	2009	Change
Private	572,780	626,353	+9%	7,004,408	7,487,260	+7%	60,394,582	65,298,094	+8%
Local Government	52,250	58,538	+12%	754,437	908,350	+20%	6,200,277	7,654,532	+23%
Self-employed (unincorporated)	55,060	53,932	-2%	742,723	750,886	+1%	5,060,407	4,857,981	-4%
Non-profit	42,500	57,697	+21%	571,885	713,553	+25%	6,060,695	7,462,663	+23%
Self-employed (incorporated)	34,669	36,385	+5%	362,253	384,640	+6%	3,621,278	3,679,446	+2%
State government	25,157	32,744	+30%	357,534	457,761	+28%	3,790,531	4,730,794	+25%
Federal government	49,428	46,120	-7%	264,470	273,288	+3%	2,895,355	3,007,741	+4%
Unpaid family workers	643	556	-14%	11,793	11,633	-1%	122,841	91,993	-25%
Total	837,487	912,305	+9%	10,069,503	10,987,371	+9%	88,135,976	96,783,224	+10%

Source: 2009 American Community Survey

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More than 46,000 [San Diego County](#) residents are employed by the [U.S. government](#) and they generally earn more than private-sector counterparts who do comparable jobs, according to an analysis of several federal datasets.

The data comes from federal workers themselves — analysts at the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the [U.S. Census Bureau](#). It shows:

- Median income for year-round, full-time federal workers in San Diego County is nearly one-third higher than the median income for private employees — \$55,300 compared with \$42,100, according to the Census Bureau's 2009 American Community Survey.
- The same local data shows median federal income increased by about 14 percent from 2005 to 2009, while private earnings increased 4 percent.
- In almost every industry where there are federal and private sector jobs in San Diego County, federal workers earn more — that includes construction, manufacturing, financial, professional and business services, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The exception is jobs in the information sector.

The data analyzed excluded military service members but included civilian military employees.

Labor advocates say the data fails to account for the higher education level and years of service prevalent in the federal workforce.

[The San Diego Union-Tribune](#) has been collecting data about federal pay since [President Barack Obama](#) announced a freeze in one category of federal pay raises late last month.

None of the sources includes a comparison of federal and private pay for workers with similar education or years of experience.

Larry Mishel, labor expert and president of the liberal [Economic Policy Institute](#) in [Washington, D.C.](#), pointed to an annual report published by the President's Pay Agent, a committee of executives from labor, budget and personnel offices.

The report suggests to the Federal Salary Council and president how much federal workers' pay should be adjusted for local markets.

In December 2009, the group reported that federal employees in the San Diego area earned 54 percent less than private equivalents.

Asked how multiple federal datasets could show salary trends so differently, Mishel said the Pay Agent uses a complex model that matches public jobs to federal salaries and factors in the job knowledge needed.

Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the libertarian [Cato Institute](#) in Washington, D.C., calls the President's Pay Agent report a "black box" with no published methodology.

The Watchdog contacted the Office of Personnel Management several times in the past two weeks for an explanation of how the Pay Agent arrives at its estimates, or a breakdown of job-by-job comparisons used for the region. Neither calls nor e-mails were returned.

The point of the Pay Agent's report is to advise the government on how to ease the gap between federal pay levels and the local market for workers. To offset the disparity, the government provides locality pay. Once factored in, San Diego's gap closes to about 30 percent for workers, according to the study.

Jason Richards, a supervisory park ranger at Cabrillo National Monument, said news of the salary freeze has been difficult. He said that he will be able to make ends meet because his wife works too, but, "Man, I tell you, we have people here who struggle payday to payday.

"People are unfairly putting the government down."

Richards would not disclose his salary, but supervisory park ranger jobs with the [National Park Service](#) are advertised in several locations as Grade 11. In San Diego County, the salary range for that grade is \$62,451 to \$81,184.

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