

Still working for too little in Cincinnati

Michael Shields and Bryce Springfield

All work should pay enough to live a good life. All working people should be paid enough to provide for their families, no matter their race or gender, the kind of job they do, or where they live and work. For years, too many of greater Cincinnati's most common jobs paid so little the typical worker would qualify for — and likely rely on — food aid to feed a family of three. By May 2022, the number of greater Cincinnati's 10 most common jobs paying the median worker so little was four, a decrease from five in 2019 before COVID-19.

New statewide data show that 1) wages overall and in a majority of the state's most common occupations grew since 2019, and 2) some of the lowest-paying common jobs have been displaced in the top 10 by better-paying ones. The Cincinnati Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) has experienced wage growth in six of the 10 most jobs, compared with five for the state, but not enough to lift most workers in them out of economic precarity. These data are from Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics gathered over a three-year survey and using a model to estimate wages for 2022.

Jobs restored

A full recovery must include all Ohio communities. With 1,158,000 people working as of May 2023, the Cincinnati metro area had recovered all jobs lost to COVID-19 and added 30,600 jobs as compared with February 2020, making it one of three metropolitan areas in Ohio where jobs had fully recovered. These data are from the monthly Current Employment Statistics survey gathered by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and released with the unemployment rate.

Rising pay, but still too low for too many

From 2019 to 2022, wages rose overall by 8.1% for the typical (median) Cincinnati MSA worker, accounting for all jobs. Among the Cincinnati area's 10 most common jobs, wages rose in six. The number of jobs in the 10 biggest occupations that are still paid so little that the middle worker would qualify for, and likely need, food aid to feed a family of three fell to four in 2022, a drop from five in 2019. Wages below 130% of the poverty level, \$29,939 in 2022, meet that threshold. Just two occupations paid enough for financial security: a wage at least 200% of the poverty level (\$46,060).

Still working for too little

Pay growth recovered lost ground in most common Cincinnati MSA jobs

| Top 10 occupations 2022 | Job growth | | | Pay growth | | | Pay level | |
|--|------------|-----------|---------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | 2022 rank | 2022 jobs | Change in jobs since 2019 | 2022 median hourly pay | Pay change since 2019 | Percent pay change since 2019 | 2022 median annual pay | 2022 pay as a share of poverty |
| Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers, Hand | 1 | 27,460 | -1030 | \$17.68 | \$1.64 | 10.3% | \$36,760 | 160% |
| Stockers and Order Fillers | 2 | 27,020 | 7690 | \$17.32 | \$2.13 | 14.0% | \$36,020 | 156% |
| General and Operations Managers | 3 | 26,440 | 11830 | \$43.19 | -\$8.06 | -15.7% | \$89,840 | 390% |
| Registered Nurses | 4 | 24,750 | -1010 | \$37.75 | -\$1.68 | -4.3% | \$78,520 | 341% |
| Fast Food and Counter Workers | 5 | 24,100 | -9290 | \$12.23 | \$0.91 | 8.0% | \$25,440 | 110% |
| Retail Salespersons | 6 | 22,650 | -6130 | \$14.01 | \$1.50 | 12.0% | \$29,150 | 127% |
| Cashiers | 7 | 21,680 | 1560 | \$12.60 | \$0.47 | 3.9% | \$26,210 | 114% |
| Customer Service Representatives | 8 | 21,260 | -3440 | \$18.11 | -\$1.24 | -6.4% | \$37,680 | 164% |
| Waiters and Waitresses | 9 | 16,200 | -2750 | \$11.13 | \$0.55 | 5.2% | \$23,160 | 101% |
| Office Clerks, General | 10 | 15,560 | -5770 | \$18.44 | -\$0.87 | -4.5% | \$38,350 | 167% |

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) Survey, May 2019, and May 2022. Estimates, available at <https://www.bls.gov/oes/tables.htm>, updated April 24, 2023. Largest detail occupations in Ohio by employment. Median annual pay shown as a share of the poverty threshold for a family of three in 2022 (\$23,030). The gross monthly income threshold for food assistance is 130% of poverty (\$29,939) or less. Note that BLS implemented a change to the data classification methodology between 2019 and 2022. See Bureau of Labor Statistics, Survey Methods and Reliability Statement for MB3 Research Estimates of the Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics Survey. We have used the updated MB3 method. Wages in red are less than 130% of the poverty level for a family of three. Figures in orange represent a decrease in either jobs or pay.

Wages at all jobs should cover the basics, so people and their families can thrive. While fewer working Cincinnati residents are struggling on the brink of poverty, many jobs still pay too little for financial security. Policymakers must step up to ensure that every Cincinnati area and Ohio job is a good job that enables the worker to thrive.