

Still working for too little in Ohio

Michael Shields and Bryce Springfield

All work should pay enough to live a good life. All working people should be able 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 Ohio'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 share of Ohio's 10 most common jobs paying the median worker so little had fallen from six (in 2019) to three. The change represents two major shifts. Pay is rising in half of the most common occupations and at the median considering all jobs; and better-paying jobs have displaced some of the low-paying jobs that until recently dominated Ohio's labor market. Both changes enable Ohio workers to finally secure somewhat better pay for their work after decades of rising productivity but stagnant compensation; but the progress is not yet enough to move workers in these jobs into real economic security. Only three of the 10 most common jobs pay enough to qualify a family of three as "economically stable," wages at or above 200% of the poverty level (\$46,060 in 2022).

The most common jobs ranking is based on the latest Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, a survey that uses a 3-year sample to construct an estimate of jobs and wages for 2022. Since three years are used, changes may be smoothed out over time and new trends may take some time to appear, but there are some clear changes to the makeup of Ohio's most common jobs. Coupled with more recent data through May 2023 from the monthly Current Employment Statistics, we now also know that Ohio has fully regained the jobs lost to COVID-19, though not in all regions. As Ohio builds on this recovery, legislators must ensure that the job market enables all people in our state to find a job if they want one, and to earn a wage that enables them to thrive.

Jobs restored, but not to all communities

COVID-19 displaced more than 1 million Ohioans from work in March and April 2020. In May of 2023, those jobs were fully recovered for the first time. A federal policy response scaled to the size of the problem helped to drive this recovery in less than half the time it took to restore the jobs lost to the Great Recession, when state and federal policymakers responded with austerity cuts that slowed job creation and prolonged the hardship.

Both the mix and location of jobs changed in Ohio. As of May 2023, jobs were fully restored in Ohio because Columbus, Cincinnati and Springfield recovered more than they lost: Dayton has nearly recovered all jobs lost. Meanwhile, other parts of the state remained at a job shortage, with Cleveland, Toledo and Akron missing the most jobs. A full recovery must include all Ohio communities.

A few metro areas account for most job gains

Jobs restored in Ohio and 3 Metropolitan Statistical Areas

Region	May 2023 jobs	Change in jobs since Feb. 2020	Percent change in jobs since Feb. 2020
Ohio	5,614,600	3,500	0.1%
Columbus	1,156,800	31,700	2.8%
Cincinnati	1,158,000	30,600	2.7%
Springfield	50,100	1,000	2.0%
Dayton	391,700	-900	-0.2%
Canton-Massillon	171,500	-2,200	-1.3%
Weirton-Steubenville	39,800	-600	-1.5%
Akron	333,500	-6,800	-2.0%
Mansfield	50,800	-1,200	-2.3%
Youngstown-Warren-Boardman	210,100	-5,100	-2.4%
Cleveland	1,054,800	-28,700	-2.7%
Toledo	303,100	-8,600	-2.8%
Lima	51,300	-1,800	-3.4%

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, with Ohio Department of Job and Family Services Labor Market Information, Current Employment Statistics, February 2020 and May 2023, seasonally adjusted data, available at: <https://bit.ly/3XLuoAP>

A changing jobs mix

COVID-19 disproportionately destroyed the jobs of low-paid Ohioans, occupations that were precarious even before the pandemic. Black and brown Ohioans, and women are more likely to be in these jobs than their white or male counterparts. The disproportionate loss of these jobs directed much of the harm caused by COVID-19 to those Ohioans who had the fewest resources on hand to withstand it.

Some of the once-dominant jobs in Ohio no longer appear among the top ten: These include waiters and waitresses (now 14th, with 71,300 jobs), and home health aides (11th, with 91,180 jobs). These jobs pay \$11.25 per hour and \$13.19 per hour, respectively; had they not been displaced from the state's most common jobs list, typical pay for that list would be much worse. Both are among the state's lowest-paying jobs, spotlighting the need to improve job quality in these industries. Job-quality improvements are particularly important to growing the home care workforce by bringing women, who are often the default caretakers of aging family members and of children, back to the paid workforce if they want to be in it. Improving and restoring home health jobs, as well as child care jobs, should be a priority for state policymakers. Both have been identified as priority jobs by the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation, because both meet vital needs of Ohioans and both rank poorly in pay.¹

Fast food and counter workers top the list of common Ohio jobs despite a loss of 40,150 jobs since before the pandemic. Jobs in this category pay just above the poverty level for the typical (median) worker and leave many workers struggling. Registered nurses rank second and are paid \$76,810 per year at the median. The number of general and operations managers nearly doubled from 67,230 in 2019 to 128,650 in 2022. Managers were largely exempt from COVID layoffs, and companies added many more in the recovery. Service jobs and jobs in the transportation and warehousing industry and manufacturing round out the list.

¹ Ohio Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation, "Top Jobs in Ohio," <https://topjobs.ohio.gov/top-jobs-list/overview>, accessed June 27, 2023.

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Pay growth recovered lost ground in most common Ohio jobs

Top 10 occupations 2022	Job growth			Pay growth			Pay level	
	2022 rank	2022 jobs	Change since 2019	2022 median hourly pay	Change since 2019	% change since 2019	2022 median annual pay	2022 pay as a share of poverty
Fast Food and Counter Workers	1	136,220	-40,150	\$11.44	\$1.05	11.6%	\$23,790	103%
Registered Nurses	2	130,370	-2,820	\$36.93	-\$1.87	-5.5%	\$76,810	334%
Stockers and Order Fillers	3	129,050	37,910	\$16.60	\$1.56	11.8%	\$34,520	150%
General and Operations Managers	4	128,650	61,420	\$42.29	-\$8.74	-19.5%	\$87,970	382%
Cashiers	5	121,950	9,290	\$12.21	\$0.16	1.5%	\$25,390	110%
Retail Salespersons	6	114,170	-32,680	\$13.93	\$1.51	13.9%	\$28,980	126%
Laborers and Freight, Stock & Material Movers, Hand	7	111,210	-3,720	\$16.94	\$1.05	7.6%	\$35,240	153%
Customer Service Reps	8	104,820	-14,020	\$18.30	-\$0.93	-5.5%	\$38,060	165%
Miscellaneous Assemblers & Fabricators	9	96,090	13,590	\$18.17	-\$1.01	-6.0%	\$37,800	164%
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	10	91,240	12,080	\$23.95	-\$1.31	-5.9%	\$49,820	216%

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) Survey, May 2019, and May 2021. 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.

Rising pay, but still too low for too many

From 2019 to 2022, wages rose overall by 8.1% for the median Ohio worker, accounting for all jobs. Among the state's 10 most common jobs, median wages rose in five, with changes ranging from a loss of 19.5% for general and operations managers (-\$8.74 per hour in 2022 dollars), to a gain of 13.9% for retail salespeople (+\$1.51 per hour). The largest hourly increase was \$1.56 per hour for stockers and order fillers. The change in general and operations manager pay accompanied the large increase in the number of operations managers, who appear to have been hired at lower pay than their counterparts already in management jobs: It is unlikely that a large share of managers experienced pay cuts.

Especially important is that pay rose in all three of the 10 biggest jobs that pay Ohioans wages near poverty — fast food and counter workers, cashiers, and retail salespeople — though not enough to lift them out of economic precarity. Those jobs still paid so little that the middle worker would qualify for, and likely need, food aid to feed a family of three. Wages

below 130% of the poverty level — \$29,939 in 2022 — meet that threshold. The increase for cashiers was a mere \$0.16 per hour.

These pay increases account for inflation — meaning workers' wages in general rose more than consumer prices. This is vital because employers, through government policy and industry practice, have managed to decouple productivity gains — which have continued to rise, along with profits — from the wages paid to the workers who make those gains possible.² Policymakers have enabled this capture of wealth by neglecting to protect workers' efforts to form unions against illegal employer union busting; looking the other way or explicitly allowing employers to reclassify employees as "gig" workers not subject to formal labor protections; letting inflation cut the value of the minimum wage; and other policy failures.

Ohio was once a stronghold for industrial unionism, where everyday people were paid among the highest wages in the nation. The state was a destination for immigrants from around the world and from across the nation. Ohio drew formerly enslaved people and their descendants to a better life in the Great Migration from the Deep South and enticed Appalachian people of all races north on Route 23 for unionized work in factories. But policy decisions by state and federal lawmakers over decades have eroded Ohio's manufacturing base, shrunk its unions, held wages flat, and in some cases pushed them down. They have also meant that Ohio recovered from recessions slowly, or not at all.

A federal policy response scaled to the size of the crisis caused by COVID-19 helped drive a recovery of Ohio jobs in less than half the time it took to restore jobs from the Great Recession, and to at last approach the number of jobs held before the early 2000's recession. Today's rising wages have accompanied the recovery from COVID-19. The disruption the pandemic caused to daily life helped policymakers and the public to recognize how much we depend on the work of essential workers, from caregivers to grocery stockers. Some of those workers are finding better-paying opportunities in other fields, while others are demanding and winning overdue pay gains. Still others have left the workforce — which remains reduced by 121,000 people compared with February 2020 — over factors including lack of access to child care, long term illness, and low pay.³ So far, overall wage gains have slightly outpaced inflation, making the possibility of an overreach by the Federal Reserve in its attempt to curb inflation by slowing the economy a bigger risk; since it could cause a recession that would reduce available jobs and quash wage growth. That would be especially harmful in the majority of Ohio regions that have still yet to fully recover jobs from before COVID-19.

Wages at all jobs should cover the basics, so people and their families can thrive. Recent wage growth is a positive trend following decades of wage suppression and stagnation. Policymakers must ensure it is able to continue, and to reach people in all occupations. This means passing a minimum wage that meets the cost of living, and protecting workers from wage theft by their employers; classifying all jobs to maximize workers' protection under labor laws; ensuring access to work: for parents, by deepening state commitments to child care, and for those harmed by the criminal legal system, by opening new pathways to jobs barred to them; providing robust unemployment benefits to all Ohioans laid off from work; and enabling Ohioans to best advocate for themselves on the job by forming a union.⁴

² Michael Shields and Annie Volker, "State of Working Ohio 2022," Policy Matters Ohio, September 5, 2022, <https://www.policymattersohio.org/research-policy/fair-economy/work-wages/state-of-working-ohio/state-of-working-ohio-2022>

³ Stephanie Ferguson, "Understanding America's Labor Shortage," U.S. Chamber of Commerce, June 9, 2023, <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/understanding-americas-labor-shortage>

⁴ Michael Shields, "A New Way Forward: 10 Ways to Support Working People and Restore Prosperity and Democracy to Ohio," Policy Matters Ohio, May 1, 2023



Everyone deserves the opportunity to earn a living at a job that enables them and their families to thrive. While fewer working Ohioans are struggling on the brink of poverty, many jobs still pay too little for financial security. Policymakers must step up to ensure that every Ohio job is a good job that enables the person doing it to thrive.