



Comparing Government and Private Sector Compensation in Alberta, 2021

by Milagros Palacios, Nathaniel Li and Ben Eisen

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

■ Using data on individual workers from January to December 2021, this report estimates the wage differential between the government and private sectors in Alberta. It also evaluates four non-wage benefits for which data are available to quantify differences in compensation between the two sectors.

■ After controlling for factors like gender, age, marital status, education, tenure, size of firm, job permanence, immigrant status, industry, occupation, and full- or part-time status, the authors found that Alberta's government-sector workers (federal, provincial, and local) enjoyed a 5.6% wage premium, on average, over their private-sector counterparts in 2021. When unionization status is factored into the analysis, the wage premium for the government sector declines to 2.6%.

■ Available data on non-wage benefits suggest that the government sector enjoys an advantage over the private sector. For example, 70.7% of government workers in Alberta are covered by a registered pension plan, compared to 19.2% of private-sector workers. Of those covered by a registered pension plan, 94.9% of government workers enjoyed a defined-benefit pension compared to 33.0% of private-sector workers.

■ In addition, government workers retire earlier than their private-sector counterparts—about 1.5 years on average—and were less likely to lose their jobs in 2021.

■ Moreover, full-time workers in the government sector lost more work time in 2021 for personal reasons (14.4 days on average) than their private-sector counterparts (8.9 days).

Introduction

Despite a windfall of resource revenue that has brought Alberta into an operating surplus, the province continues to face long-term fiscal challenges. Specifically, independent expert analysis suggests the province's finances are currently unsustainable over the long term, which means that absent policy change and given realistic economic assumptions the province's debt-to-GDP ratio will increase over time (Finances of the Nation, 2022). Given that spending on the wages and salaries of government employees is the largest expenditure for all provincial governments, the extent to which Alberta's government can address this challenge hinges in large part on its management of the public-sector wage bill.

With heightened interest in how wages and non-wage benefits in the government sector compare with those in the private sector, this report builds on previous research by the Fraser Institute comparing government- and private-sector compensation in Alberta (Lammam, Palacios, Ren, and Clemens, 2015a; Lammam, Palacios, and Ren, 2017; Palacios, Jacques, Lammam, and Lafleur, 2018; Palacios, Li, and Lafleur, 2019). Using data on individual workers from January to December of 2021, the report updates past estimates of the wage differential between government-sector workers in Alberta (including federal, provincial, and local government workers) and their private-sector counterparts. It also evaluates four non-wage benefits for which data are available in an attempt to quantify differences in the

compensation offered by the two sectors. This update makes use of methodological approaches developed in the reports listed above.

It is important to emphasize that wages are only one component of overall compensation. Various non-wage benefits such as pensions, health and dental insurance, vacation time, life and disability insurance, and so forth affect overall compensation levels. In this report, we are unable to estimate the overall total compensation premium in the government sector as there is a lack of data on many non-wage benefits. We do present the data that are available on non-wage benefits to shed some light on the differences between the benefits received in the government and private sectors.

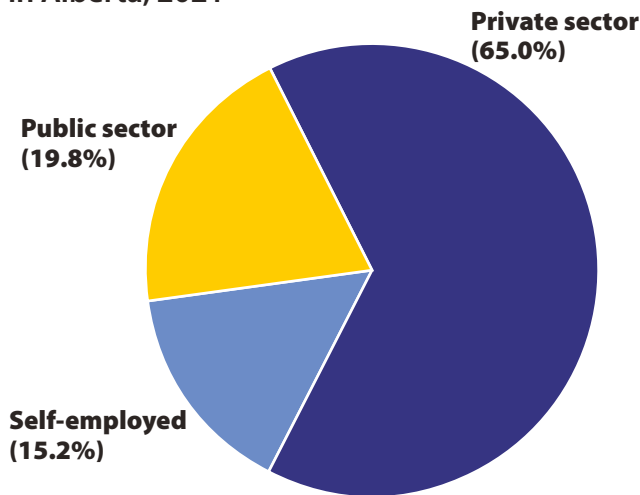
The first section of this report provides some basic statistics on government- and private-sector employment in Alberta. The second section presents the results of calculations used to determine the wage premium in the government sector. The third section assesses the data available on non-wage benefits to ascertain the likelihood that there is a premium for non-wage benefits in the government sector compared to the private sector.¹

1. Comparing the size of Alberta's government and private sectors

Before analyzing compensation in the government and private sectors, it is useful to compare the two sectors in a more general way. **Figure 1** displays the composition of total employment

¹ Lammam, Palacios, Ren, and Clemens (2015b) discuss possible solutions to the disparities in compensation between the government and private sectors. The options they propose include: (1) gathering better data on wage and non-wage benefits for government and private-sector workers; (2) recognizing that total compensation is what matters, not wages alone; (3) ensuring that the information about government-sector wages and benefits is transparent, accessible, and disclosed regularly; and (4) instituting mechanisms, such as wage boards, for setting compensation. For more details, see Lammam, Palacios, Ren, and Clemens, 2015b.

Figure 1: Components (%) of total employment in Alberta, 2021



Sources: Statistics Canada, 2022g; calculations by the authors.

in Alberta in 2021. In that year, about 444,000 Alberta workers, representing 19.8% of total employment, were employed in the public sector. This includes the federal, provincial, and local governments, as well as government agencies, crown corporations, and government-funded establishments such as schools (including universities) and hospitals (Statistics Canada, 2020).² In contrast, there were 1.5 million workers employed

in the private sector in 2021, representing 65.0% of total employment (Statistics Canada, 2022g). The remaining 15.2% were self-employed.

2. Comparing wages in Alberta's government and private sectors

A number of studies have empirically quantified wage differences between similar occupations in the private and public sectors. Nearly all of these studies measure just the wage differences between the public and private sectors; this is because there is a lack of data on non-wage benefits. The Canadian research examining wage differences between the two sectors over the past three decades consistently indicates a premium for government-sector workers.³ The wage premiums vary depending on the data source and time period. What is clear, however, is that a premium exists.⁴

Methodology and data sources

This report provides new calculations for the government-sector wage premium in Alberta. It uses aggregated monthly data on individual workers from the *Labour Force Survey* from January to December of 2021 (Statistics

² Unless otherwise stated, data used in this section come from Statistics Canada's *Labour Force Survey*. This is a household survey completed by a representative sample of the civilian population 15 years of age or older. Excluded from the survey's coverage are persons living on reserves and other Aboriginal settlements in the provinces, full-time members of the Canadian Forces, and the institutionalized population (for example, inmates of penal institutions and patients in hospitals or nursing homes who have resided in the institution for more than six months). These groups together represent an exclusion of approximately 2.0% of the population aged 15 and over (Statistics Canada, 2020).

³ For a thorough review on wage differentials in the public and private sectors in Canada, see Lammam, Palacios, Ren, and Clemens, 2015b.

⁴ The reason for the premium in the government sector is twofold. The process of determining wages in the public sector is markedly different from that in the private sector. The process of setting wages in the government sector is largely determined by political factors, while in the private sector it is largely guided by market forces and profit constraints. These differences are amplified by the monopoly environment in which the government sector operates while the private sector faces a competitive environment. For a more detailed explanation of the causes for the compensation premium observed in the public sector, see Lammam, Palacios, Ren, and Clemens, 2015b.

Canada, 2022d).⁵ One advantage of data from the *Labour Force Survey* is that public-sector workers are explicitly identified, whereas they are not in the data from the *National Household Survey*.⁶ The *Labour Force Survey* includes data about workers' hourly wage rate, age, gender, education, marital status, type of work, and other characteristics are available. The analysis covers paid government- and private-sector employees only (persons 15 years of age and over with employment income). It excludes the self-employed, unemployed persons, and persons not in the labour force. The *Labour Force Survey* breaks down the data by sector (public and private) but does not provide data for different levels of government. Therefore, the public-sector wage premium in this section contains workers from the federal, provincial, and local governments in Alberta.⁷

The public-sector wage premium— results from empirical analysis

The analysis in this section updates the analysis done by Palacios, Li, and Lafleur (2019) and follows earlier academic work by Gunderson, Hyatt, and Riddell (2000). An ordinary least squares (OLS) model was employed to determine if a wage premium exists between the government and private sectors and how large it might be. For details

on the methodology used to compute the public-sector wage premium in this section, please see Lamman, Palacios, Ren, and Clemens, 2015a.

Table 1 summarizes the results of the comparison of public and private wage sectors in Alberta. The column labelled “Model 1” provides the calculation of the public-sector wage premium without controlling for any factors. In other words, Model 1 represents a calculation that does not account for variables like age, experience, education, and so forth, which we know influence wages. The estimate under Model 1 indicates that wages in Alberta's public sector (including federal, provincial, and local public-sector workers) are 23.1% higher, on average, than in the private sector.

A more appropriate way to determine if there is a wage premium in the public sector is to control for different factors such as sex, age, level of education, tenure, type of employment (seasonal, contractual), part-time or full-time work, establishment size, immigrant status, industry, and occupation, which affect individual wage levels. Model 2 in table 1 controls for these personal characteristics. Controlling for these factors reduces the public-sector wage premium in Alberta to 5.6%, on average.⁸ When unionization is included in Model 2, the premium falls to 2.6%.

⁵ The *Labour Force Survey* is a monthly survey. However, the data used for the empirical analysis in this report is aggregated data over the 12-month period from January to December 2021.

⁶ The *Labour Force Survey* has a “class of worker” variable that designates whether the employer is a government or privately owned enterprise, whereas the *National Household Survey* does not have a variable to distinguish government from private employers.

⁷ Specifically, the *Labour Force Survey* considers the public sector as those working for federal general government (that is, federal public administration), federal government business enterprises, provincial general government, provincial health and social service institutions, universities, colleges, vocational and trade institutions, provincial government business enterprises, local general government, local school boards, and local government business enterprises. Those in the armed forces are excluded from the survey.

⁸ Model 2 also provides details on the differences in hourly wages across various personal and job characteristics (not shown on table 1). For instance, after controlling for other wage-determining factors, men, on average, earn 9.0% more

Table 1: Summary of the public-sector wage premium in Atlantic Canada, 2021

Dependant variable = log of hourly wage.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 2, controlling for unionization
	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient
(Private employee)			
Public employee	23.1	5.6	2.6
N	51,295	51,295	51,295
Adjusted R ²	0.04	0.60	0.60

Notes: [a] The control variables used in the regressions include sex, age, marital status, education, tenure, type of employment (seasonal, contractual), part-time or full-time work, establishment size, immigration status, industry and occupation. [b] Self-employment is not included. [c] Estimates are significant at 99%.

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2022d; calculations by the authors.

3. Comparing non-wage benefits in Alberta’s public and private sectors

Although public-sector workers in Alberta enjoy a wage premium, this does not tell us whether their overall compensation is higher than, comparable to, or lower than that of workers in the private sector. That is because wages are only a part of total employee compensation. Unfortunately, individual-level data on non-wage benefits, such as pensions, vacation time, and health benefits, are not readily available in Canada, which explains the lack of research on this aspect of employee compensation. It is critical that Canada’s statistical

agency, Statistics Canada, augment its current survey in order to begin collecting and analyzing data on non-wage benefits.

Fortunately, there are some aggregated data about non-wage benefits that can be examined to roughly compare how Alberta’s public-sector non-wage benefits compare to those of the province’s private sector. Four types of non-wage benefits data are examined: registered pensions, average age of retirement, job loss (as a proxy of job security), and the absence rate of full-time employees.

Registered pensions

The pension benefit is the first non-wage benefit to consider. The benefit has two important dimensions. The first is the percentage of workers in both sectors who have a registered pension; the second is the type of pension plan in each sector. **Table 2** summarizes the pension data for Alberta and Canada.

There is a dramatic difference between the registered pension coverage in the public and private sectors. In 2021, 19.2% of private-sector workers in Alberta were covered by a registered pension plan, compared to 70.7% of public-sector workers. This gap between the two sectors is also evident when we consider the second dimension, the type of pension plan in each sector.

A defined benefit plan provides workers with a guaranteed benefit in retirement. A defined

than women. As expected, higher education levels (particularly with post-secondary certificate or higher) lead to higher wages. In fact, those who graduate from high school earn 5.3% more than those with elementary education or less. A university graduate, earns 14.0% more than those with only elementary schooling, on average, whereas those with a post-graduate degree earn 19.6% more. Recent immigrants, defined as those landed 10 or fewer years ago, and established immigrants (landed more than 10 years ago) earn, respectively, 12.4% and 7.7% less than non-immigrants. Moreover, those with full-time, permanent jobs, and longer tenure, earn, on average, higher wages than those with temporary, part-time jobs, and shorter tenure. On average, those with seasonal, contract, and casual work earn between 4.6% and 7.4% less than those with permanent jobs. The hourly wage of those who work part time is 8.0% less than the wage of those with full-time jobs.

Table 2: Registered pension plan (RPP) members in Alberta and Canada, by type of plan and sector, January 1, 2021

	Alberta			Canada		
	Total (public and private)	Private sector	Public sector	Total (public and private)	Private sector	Public sector
Total number of members who have:	628,420	314,920	313,500	6,593,256	3,055,417	3,537,839
<i>Defined benefit plans</i>	401,293	103,849	297,444	4,425,506	1,219,256	3,206,250
<i>Defined contribution plans</i>	122,947	116,793	6,154	1,215,472	1,052,464	163,008
<i>Other pension plans</i>	104,180	94,278	9,902	952,278	783,697	168,581
Total employment, 2021	2,086,100	1,642,500	443,600	17,414,500	13,331,500	4,083,000
Percentage of employees covered by pension plans	30.1	19.2	70.7	37.9	22.9	86.6
As a % of total number of members						
<i>Defined benefit plans</i>	63.9	33.0	94.9	67.1	39.9	90.6
<i>Defined contribution plans</i>	19.6	37.1	2.0	18.4	34.4	4.6
<i>Other pension plans</i>	16.6	29.9	3.2	14.4	25.6	4.8

Notes: [a] Total employment includes workers in the public and private sector as well as self-employed workers in incorporated business (with and without paid help). Self-employed incorporated businesses are included in the private sector because, like their public and private sector counterparts, they are able to have a registered pension plan (RPP). [b] The registered pension plan data comes from the annual survey, *Pension Plans in Canada* (PPIC). Meanwhile, total employment data comes from Statistics Canada's *Labour Force Survey* (LFS). Although these two data sets (PPIC and LFS) are comparable, there are some conceptual differences that should be pointed out. First, members of Canadian Registered Pension Plans (RPP) living on Indian reserves (in any province or territory) as well as those working outside Canada (less than 1% of total RPP membership) are included in the pension plan membership but these groups are excluded from *Labour Force Survey's* estimates. Second, labour force estimates are annual averages while pension plan membership refers to the number of active, employed participants as of January 1, 2021. Finally, the *Labour Force Survey* does not cover full-time members of the Armed Forces. [c] Because of some conceptual differences between the PPIC and LFS, the percentage of employees covered by a pension plan might be lower than the numbers shown in this table. [d] Numbers may not add up to the total because of rounding.

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2022e, 2022f, 2022g; calculations by the authors.

contribution plan, on the other hand, provides employees with a benefit that is based on their contributions, their employer's contributions, and earnings on the pension savings over time. A defined benefit plan is increasingly scarce in the private sector because of its high costs and risks for employers. The comparative data presented in table 2 illustrate the scarcity of defined benefit pensions in the private sector compared to the prevalence of these pension plans in the public sector. In 2021, of the workers in Alberta who were covered by a pension plan, 94.9% of those in the public sector held a defined benefit

pension compared to 33.0% in the private sector. Public-sector workers in Alberta are much more likely to be in a registered pension plan, and are much more likely to receive a defined benefit pension, than their private-sector counterparts.

Average age of retirement

Public-sector employees in Alberta not only earn more and are more likely to be covered by pension plans, but they also tend to retire earlier. **Table 3** presents data on the average age of retirement for public- and private-sector workers between 2017 and 2021, for Canada as a

Table 3: Average retirement age (years), 2017–2021

	Total	Public-sector employees	Private-sector employees	Difference (years)
Canada	64.1	62.1	64.5	2.4
Newfoundland & Labrador	63.0	59.9	64.3	4.4
Prince Edward Island	64.9	63.1	66.3	3.3
Nova Scotia	64.0	61.7	64.7	3.0
New Brunswick	63.9	61.3	64.5	3.3
Quebec	63.2	61.1	63.9	2.8
Ontario	63.9	61.9	64.4	2.5
Manitoba	64.2	62.6	64.7	2.1
Saskatchewan	65.2	63.6	64.7	1.0
Alberta	65.1	63.4	64.9	1.5
British Columbia	64.8	63.4	64.8	1.4

Notes: [a] Total includes workers in the public and private sector, and self-employed individuals (including unpaid family workers). [b] The difference in years may not equal the difference as displayed by the data because the retirement-age years for both the public and private sectors are rounded. [c] Numbers may not add up to the total because of rounding.

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2022b; calculations by the authors.

whole and for individual provinces.⁹ On average, Alberta’s public-sector employees retire 1.5 years earlier than their private-sector peers.¹⁰

Job loss as a proxy for job security

Another way to compare government- and private-sector employees is to consider how likely each group is to experience job losses. **Table 4** presents data on job losses in 2021 (excluding workers with temporary employment) for Canada as a whole and for the provinces. There are several reasons for job loss, including firms moving

location, firms going out of business, changing business conditions, and dismissal. In 2021, 5.0% of those employed in the private sector experienced job loss in Alberta, compared to only 1.8% of those employed in the public sector.

Absence rate of full-time employees

Table 5 presents a measure of the absence rate in the two sectors: total days lost per worker in 2021. Among full-time employees, an average of 8.9 days was lost for personal reasons in Alberta’s private sector, compared to 14.4 days in the public sector.

⁹ Statistics Canada notes that the data on age of retirement should be used with caution because of small sample sizes, especially for the provinces. Five-year averages were used (2017–2021) in an attempt to mitigate this problem.

¹⁰ The authors also examined median retirement age. Regardless of whether the average or median age of retirement is used, public-sector workers in Alberta retire at an earlier age than their private-sector counterparts. If the median retirement age is used, the difference in years is slightly smaller. For instance, Alberta’s public-sector workers retire 1.0 year earlier than the private-sector employees if the median rather than the average is used.

Table 4: Job loss by sector, 2021

	<i>Job losses (thousands)</i>			<i>Job losses (% of employment)</i>			
	Total	Public sector	Private sector	Total	Public sector	Private sector	Difference (percentage points)
Canada	617.9	42.4	575.5	3.8	1.0	4.8	3.7
Newfoundland & Labrador	10.9	0.8	10.2	5.4	1.1	7.8	6.6
Prince Edward Island	2.1	0.2	1.9	3.1	0.9	4.2	3.3
Nova Scotia	13.2	0.9	12.3	3.3	0.8	4.3	3.6
New Brunswick	10.7	0.6	10.1	3.3	0.6	4.5	3.9
Quebec	121.4	6.7	114.7	3.2	0.7	4.2	3.5
Ontario	282.5	19.2	263.3	4.5	1.3	5.5	4.2
Manitoba	17.7	1.8	15.9	3.1	1.1	3.9	2.9
Saskatchewan	13.0	1.5	11.5	2.8	1.0	3.6	2.5
Alberta	80.8	7.8	73.0	4.3	1.8	5.0	3.3
British Columbia	65.6	3.0	62.6	2.9	0.6	3.7	3.1

Notes: [a] Total employment includes workers in the public and private sectors. Self-employment is not included. [b] Reasons for losing a job include (1) company moved, (2) company went out of business, (3) business conditions and (4) dismissal by employer. Job losses as a result of an end of temporary, casual, and seasonal employment are not included. [c] The difference in years may not equal the difference as displayed by the data because the job-loss percentages for both the public and private sectors are rounded.

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2022c, 2022g; calculations by the authors.

Table 5: Total days lost per full-time employee, by sector, 2021

	Total	Public sector	Private sector	Difference (days)		Total	Public sector	Private sector	Difference (days)
Canada	11.1	14.9	9.8	5.1	ON	10.0	14.0	8.8	5.2
NL	12.2	16.5	10.0	6.5	MB	10.1	12.9	8.9	4.0
PEI	11.4	15.6	9.3	6.3	SK	11.2	14.4	9.7	4.7
NS	12.4	15.2	11.3	3.9	AB	10.1	14.4	8.9	5.5
NB	11.9	15.6	10.2	5.4	BC	11.2	15.7	9.8	5.9
QC	13.1	16.4	12.0	4.4					

Notes: [a] Absence data are for personal reasons only; that is, illness or disability, and personal or family responsibility. [b] Days lost per worker are calculated by multiplying the inactivity rate (number of hours lost as a proportion of the usual weekly hours worked by full-time workers) by the estimated number of working days in the year (250). The estimated number of working days in the year (250) is in line with other research in the field. This number assumes that the typical full-time employee works a five-day week and is entitled to all statutory holidays (around 10 days a year). Thus, the potential annual labour supply of a typical worker would be 52 weeks multiplied by 5, less 10 statutory holidays, or 250 days. This allows the days lost per worker in a year to be calculated.

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2022a; calculations by the authors.

Conclusion

In 2021, Alberta's government-sector workers earned a wage premium of 5.6%, on average. When unionization is accounted for, the wage premium is 2.6%. While there is insufficient data to calculate or make a definitive statement about the differences in non-wage benefits between the public and private sectors

in Alberta, the available data suggest that the public sector enjoys more generous non-wage benefits than the private sector, including higher rates of pension coverage, higher rates of defined benefit pensions, earlier ages of retirement, lower rates of job loss, and more days lost per worker.

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of authors of earlier versions of this study, including Jason Clemens, Charles Lammam, and David Jacques. They also thank the anonymous reviewers of earlier drafts of this paper. Any remaining errors or oversights are the sole responsibility of the authors. As the researchers have worked independently, the views and conclusions expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of the Board of Directors of the Fraser Institute, the staff, or supporters. This publication in no way implies that the Fraser Institute, its directors, or staff are in favour of, or oppose the passage of, any bill; or that they support or oppose any particular political party or candidate.

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