

Labor

## Study: Union Construction Training Has Economic, Social Benefits on Par With College Degree

Contractor employees in union apprenticeships achieve equivalent salaries, goals as college grads



On union work sites, training occurs on the job. *Photo by Jeff Yoders/ENR*

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Union apprenticeship programs in the construction industry produce salary and social outcomes for workers equivalent to the jobs and social situations of those with four-year college degrees, [a new uni backed study](#) of 10 years of federal statistics concludes.

The Illinois Economic Policy Institute, a pro-labor non-profit based in LaGrange, Ill., analyzed data from the U.S. Census Bureau and federal Bureau of Labor Statistics from 2010 through 2020. The dataset reports individual-level information on about 98,000 households over the past decade.

The analysis found union construction workers who graduated joint labor-management apprenticeship programs earn an average income of about \$58,000 per year, about halfway between all workers with a two-year associate's degrees (\$48,200) and all workers with bachelor's degrees (\$68,600). Union construction workers also have a private health insurance coverage rate of 89%, higher than workers with the associate's degree (84%) and on par with those with a four-year bachelor's degrees (90%).

Frank Manzo, institute policy director and a co-author of the study, said that labor-management apprenticeship programs are, economically and socially, a good alternative to a four-year college degree.

"These programs offer workers alternatives to college and create pathways into middle-class trades that are in high demand," he said. "In 2016 and actually 2020 we did similar studies that focused on apprenticeship programs in the state of Illinois and how they potentially increase access to the middle-class and offer pathways to upward economic mobility in the state. We thought it was important to take a look and see if the same was true across the country."

The study found that non-salary outcomes recorded by the Census Bureau and US Dept. of Labor also aligned with what it found for salaries.

Only 4% of union construction workers interviewed for the survey lived in poverty, 4% relied on Medicaid for health care, and 60% were married. By contrast, 10% of non-union/open shop construction workers lived in poverty, 10% relied on Medicaid for Health Care, and 48% were married. Only 2% of workers with bachelor's degrees lived in poverty, 3% relied on Medicaid, and 56% were married.

Manzo said employer-only construction apprenticeship programs, which are administered by companies and rely entirely on voluntary contributions from contractors, were identified in the federal data. as well as joint labor-management apprenticeship programs.

Associated Builders and Contractors, a trade group that represents mainly non-union contractors, did not immediately analyze and respond to the study, but said all efforts to train more people to enter the construction industry are necessary.

"The right type of workforce development efforts include government-registered and industry-recognized apprenticeships as a key part of a broader and inclusive all-of-the-above development strategy because our industry desperately needs more qualified skilled workers from multiple workforce development pipelines tied to community, education, employer, union and associatic stakeholders," said Alicia Martin, president of ABC Illinois in a statement.

“ABC of Illinois is working hard to recruit, educate and upskill the nation’s future construction workforce through apprenticeship programs and a national network of more than 800 apprenticeship, craft, safety and management education programs—including more than 300 government-registered apprenticeship programs across 20 different construction occupations,” Martin said.

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ENR Midwest Editor and Associate Technology Editor Jeff Yoders has been writing about design and construction innovations for 16 years. He is a two-time Jesse H. Neal award winner and multiple ASBPE winner for his tech coverage. Jeff previously launched Building Design + Construction's building information modeling blog and wrote a geographic information systems column at CE News. He also wrote about materials prices, construction procurement and estimation for MetalMiner.com. He lives in Chicago, the birthplace of the skyscraper, where the pace of innovation never leaves him without a story to chase.

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