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http://www.crainsnewyork.com/article/20160710/BLOGS01/160709914/how-much-does-a-construction-worker-in-new-york-make-crane-operators?utm_content=insider&utm_campaign=socialflow&utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social

GREG DAVID ON NY

How much does a construction worker in New York make?

New York Building Congress found the average wage was \$76,300, but that is where the unanswered questions begin



Photo: Buck Ennis

It's hard to calculate how much construction workers earn.

By [Greg David](#)

How much do construction workers in New York make? It ought to be an easy question to answer, but it is not, which is why it is so hard to settle the controversy over whether builders should have to use union labor when they receive tax breaks or other government help, especially to create affordable housing.

Let's start with what we know. The average wage of a construction worker in New York City reached \$76,300 last year, up modestly since 2011, according to a recent report from the New York Building Congress. The study broke out wages into three broad categories with the best paid being heavy construction and civil

engineering (think of those [unionized crane operators who can make \\$400,000 a year](#)). The report is based on a reasonably reliable quarterly census of employment and wages.

Builders say those figures don't reflect their costs for using union labor. During 2015, for example, the carpenters' contract called for an hourly rate of \$49.88 plus \$44.10 in supplemental benefits. By extrapolating those numbers, an employer-circulated chart put the total compensation for a carpenter at just under \$200,000 a year.

Union leaders like Gary LaBarbera label this fantasy math and insist union construction workers earn between \$80,000 and \$100,000 a year in part because they don't work year-round.

One problem here is that the developers are talking about costs and unions are focused on pay.

The second problem is that no one seems to be able—or maybe willing—to be upfront about how much nonunion construction workers are being paid and to what extent they receive benefits. A consultant to the unions at recent *Crain's* real estate conference blithely suggested nonunion workers make only \$12 or \$13 an hour, which seems highly unlikely but may be the pay for some of them.

Every September, the Joseph S. Murphy Institute at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism publishes a comprehensive report called the State of Unions using data from the American Community Survey.

The 2015 report, for example, showed that union workers accounted for 28% of all the construction workers in the city. It also dived into demographics to show that unions sharply narrowed the wage disparity for African-American workers. A good economist using this data could do the same kind of work on union and nonunion wages.

Given the importance of the issue, what I can't figure out is why no one has done this study.

NYC Construction Wages

Sector	2015	2011	% workforce
All	\$76,300	\$72,100	
Heavy, Civil Engineering	\$120,700	\$101,600	6%
General Construction	\$73,300	\$70,600	29%
Specialty Construction	\$73,800	\$68,300	65%

Source: New York Building Congress