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Money in America: Want to make big money, or will Mom and Dad disapprove?

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Skilled trade union workers in St. Louis make some of the best money in the country, yet they're in short supply.

"There is a shortage. There are only so many crews available, and it lengthens the time it takes to build a house," said Tom Hughes of T.R. Hughes Homes, which built more than 70 homes last year in three residential developments.

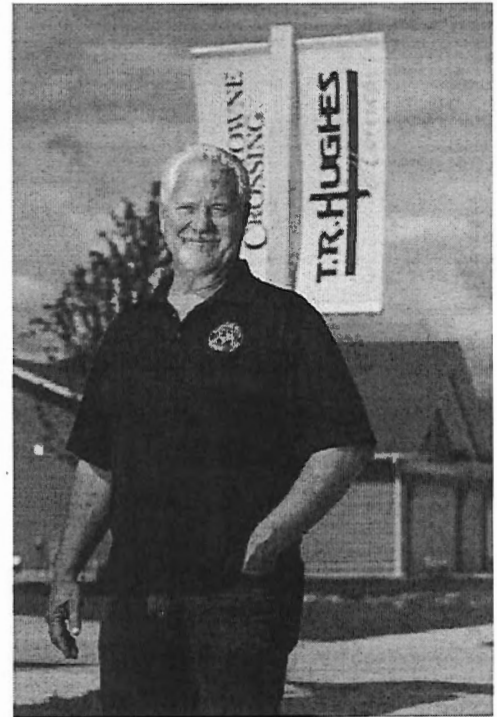
The average pay of St. Louis carpenters is the ninth highest of any major market in the country, \$59,490, compared with \$48,340 nationally, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. And when adjusted for cost of living and buying power, St. Louis is first nationally, at \$65,730. Local pay for plumbers and pipe fitters, at an average of \$73,450, compared with \$56,030 nationally, ranks sixth, and their adjusted average pay of \$81,160 also is first.

Pay for other construction jobs here far exceeds the national averages, too, according to BLS data. Laborers make \$49,240 on average, compared with \$37,890 nationally. Electricians make \$66,950, compared with \$56,650 nationally. Painters, \$53,360 versus \$41,510; plasterers, \$67,470 versus \$44,070; roofers, \$47,190 versus \$42,080; and bricklayers, \$66,220 versus \$51,770.

So why aren't people lining up for these jobs?

"I don't get it," said Ryan Hemmele, a 33-year-old electrician with Aschinger Electric, who said he makes as much as \$80,000 or more in a good year. Married with three young daughters, he loves his job. "People seem to think it's too hard. It's a Monday through Friday job, 7 to 3:30, with good union benefits. It's not that hard." Hemmele said his union hall was shorthanded many days last year, despite lots of electrical work needed on construction projects at BJC HealthCare and Washington University.

John Eilermann Jr., chairman and CEO of McBride & Son Homes, said during the housing collapse, new home starts here dropped from about 12,000 in 2008 to 3,000 in 2011. "We lost many good people to



DILIP VISHWANAT | SLBJ

Tom Hughes of T.R. Hughes Homes said a shortage of work crews is lengthening the time it takes to build a house.

other industries," he said. That also means there aren't enough journeymen to train apprentices on the job. McBride, with 155 employees, had revenue of \$210 million in 2016.

For example, apprentice carpenters in St. Louis dropped from 2,600 in 2004 to 1,100 this year, and a low of 400 in 2007, said John Gaal, director of training and workforce development for the Carpenters' District Council of Greater St. Louis.

Changing landscape

Parental expectations and shifts in educational priorities are big reasons more young people don't go into the trades. "There's an expectation that has grown over the years among parents that their kids have to go to college, that you are somehow less if you don't," Hughes said. "If they don't go to college, the kids think they have let down their parents. Another factor is that it's hard work. I don't think that kids today want to do work that hard, but there is plenty of opportunity."

Gaal, a carpenter by training who has a doctorate in education, agreed. "America is obsessed with a college degree as a ticket to the middle class," he said. "But many kids who have graduated since 2010 have figured out that's not the case."

Would-be plumbers and pipefitters are among those who have figured it out, said John O'Mara, business manager and secretary-treasurer of Plumbers & Pipefitters Local 562, which is not having a problem attracting workers. "We had that problem years ago. We lost several hundred members during the recession, but a lot came back," he said. One attraction is the technical and computer skills needed for today's HVAC and welding work. "In the last six or seven years, kids have changed their mindset, especially those with dads in the industry. They see their family's living standard."

Since 2015, the union, with 2,700 active members, has started 110 pre-apprentices, who go on to become full apprentices and journeymen. Its HVAC and welding applicants train at schools such as Ranken Technical College and Southwestern Illinois College. The union is scouting sites in St. Louis County to build a new, advanced training center, at a cost of \$10 million to \$20 million, O'Mara said.

Celeste Rueter said shortages are a frequent topic at meetings of the Home Builders Association of St. Louis & Eastern Missouri, where she is executive vice president. "There was an educational shift 25 or 30 years ago. Most high schools don't even have shop classes or other vocational training," she said. "Students aren't aware there are good salaries in these jobs. They can earn as an apprentice, and the money goes up from there. If you are in college, that's negative earnings."

With skyrocketing student debt, students and parents may start looking at alternatives, she said. The Home Builders Association has plans for a student chapter at a local high school by next school year. The school has not been chosen, she said, but interviews are under way, and "by the fall, we will have a chapter and a curriculum."

To address the dilemma of college versus a trade, St. Louis Community College has started a program in cooperation with the carpenters for apprentices to earn journeyman certification and an associate's degree at the same time. "We will be able to tell parents their kids will earn a degree, make \$30 an hour, and won't be living in the basement," Gaal said.

Pay grade

As for why is union pay so high in St. Louis: "I don't have an answer, other than the unions have negotiated successfully," Hughes said.

Eilermann said, by and large, they deserve it. "McBride & Son has worked in four other markets outside of St. Louis. I truly believe St. Louis has a better quality workforce than any other market. The training the unions and contractors provide is second to none. Productivity and quality are important to the true cost."

Improved productivity is one of two general strategies for higher labor union wages, William Rogers, an economist and associate professor at Lindenwood University, said. The other is trying to move more company profit into wages. "It's the old AFL-CIO model," he said. "The two models are not mutually exclusive, but some unions have more focus on one than the other. St. Louis unions have more of a history of battling with management than, say, Wisconsin, which has less problem attracting new business."

Read: Money in America: What do our jobs pay?

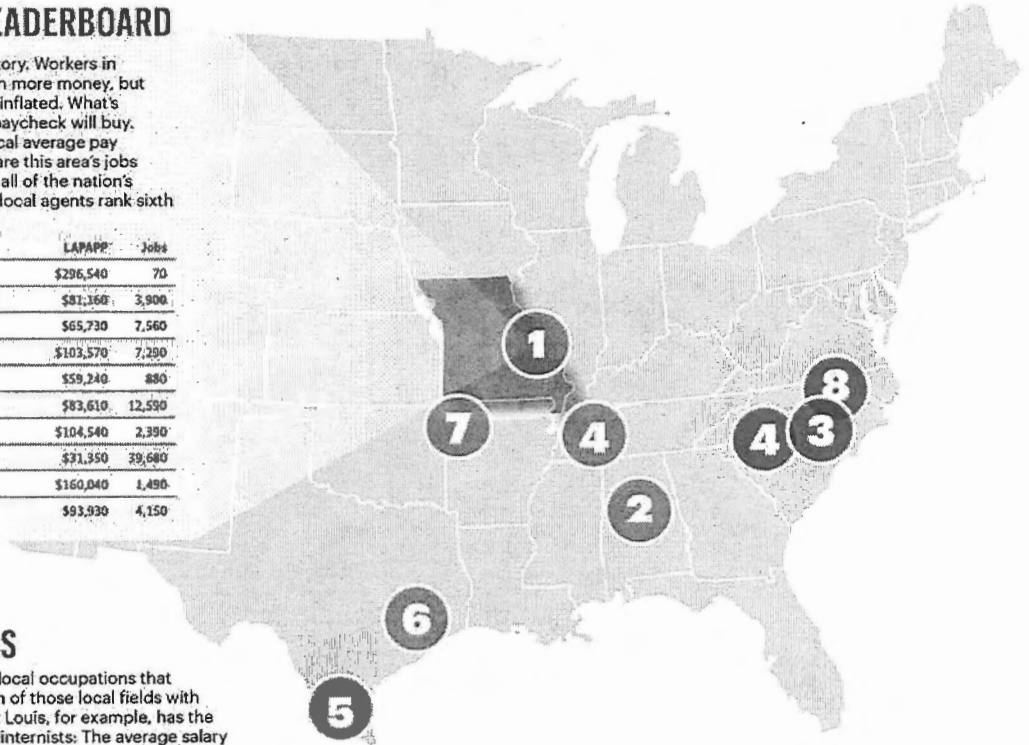
Want to make big money?

WANT TO MAKE BIG MONEY?

BANG FOR THE BUCK LEADERBOARD

Raw dollar figures don't tell the whole story. Workers in bigger metropolitan areas generally earn more money, but their living expenses tend to be equally inflated. What's really important is what an employee's paycheck will buy. That's why we came up with LAPAPP (local average pay adjusted for purchasing power). Below are this area's jobs with the strongest LAPAPP. If we look at all of the nation's accountants and auditors, for example, local agents rank sixth in purchasing power.

Local Rank (National rank) Field title	LAPAPP	Jobs
1. (3) Internists, general	\$296,540	70
2. (3) Plumbers, pipefitters and steamfitters	\$81,360	3,900
3. (1) Carpenters	\$65,730	7,560
4. (3) Computer systems analysts	\$103,570	7,290
5. (3) Meeting, convention and event planners	\$59,240	880
6. (3) Accountants and auditors	\$83,610	12,530
7. (3) Financial analysts	\$104,540	2,390
8. (5) Retail salespersons	\$31,350	39,680
9. (5) Architectural and engineering managers	\$160,040	1,490
10. (7) Computer programmers	\$93,930	4,150



NATIONAL LEADERS FOR ST. LOUIS' TOP JOBS

The previous page's wheel displayed 10 local occupations that pay especially well. Here is a comparison of those local fields with their corresponding national leaders. St. Louis, for example, has the highest locally adjusted average pay for internists: The average salary of \$268,370 here climbs to \$296,540 after we make adjustments for the cost of living. The profile for each occupation compares this area with the national leaders in LAPAPP.

► INTERNISTS, GENERAL

1 ST. LOUIS

Local Average Salary in Field
\$268,370

Local average pay adjusted for purchasing power
\$296,540

TOP 5 MARKETS

Market	LAPAPP	Jobs
1. St. Louis	\$296,540	70
2. Wichita	\$290,460	50
3. Raleigh	\$289,820	210
4. Indianapolis	\$285,240	490
5. New Orleans	\$284,080	50
6. Little Rock	\$280,680	140

► SALES MANAGERS

5 MCALLEN-EDINBURG

Local Average Salary in Field
\$153,330

Local average pay adjusted for purchasing power

► CHIEF EXECUTIVES

2 BIRMINGHAM

Local Average Salary in Field
\$250,750

Local average pay adjusted for purchasing power
\$278,920

TOP 5 MARKETS

Market	LAPAPP	Jobs
1. Birmingham	\$278,920	270
2. Winston-Salem	\$267,730	270
3. Durham	\$265,790	340
4. Houston	\$257,670	1,580
5. Greensboro	\$256,470	380
71. St. Louis	\$187,460	2,940

► Architectural and Engineering Managers

6 HOUSTON

Local Average Salary in Field
\$189,140

Local average pay adjusted

► DENTISTS, GENERAL

3 CHARLOTTE

Local Average Salary in Field
\$271,240

Local average pay adjusted for purchasing power
\$289,790

TOP 5 MARKETS

Market	LAPAPP	Jobs
1. Charlotte	\$289,790	840
2. Greensboro	\$283,630	170
3. Fayetteville	\$273,770	150
4. Winston-Salem	\$266,410	270
5. Durham	\$266,350	90
45. St. Louis	\$187,450	1,090

► MARKETING MANAGERS

7 FAYETTEVILLE

Local Average Salary in Field:
\$157,080

Local average pay adjusted for purchasing power

► FAMILY AND GENERAL PRACTITIONERS

4 GREENVILLE

Local Average Salary in Field
\$261,130

Local average pay adjusted for purchasing power
\$289,500

TOP 5 MARKETS

Market	LAPAPP	Jobs
1. Greenville	\$289,500	760
2. Little Rock	\$267,250	300
3. Des Moines	\$266,650	410
4. Youngstown	\$265,870	170
5. Augusta	\$265,530	260
80. St. Louis	\$169,850	2,610

► FINANCIAL MANAGERS

8 WINSTON-SALEM

Local Average Salary in Field:
\$151,400

Local average pay adjusted for purchasing power.

net purchasing power
\$178,910

TOP 5 MARKETS

Market	LAPAPP	Jobs
1. McAllen-Edinburg	\$178,910	190
2. Winston-Salem	\$175,210	300
3. Fayetteville	\$174,140	970
4. Durham	\$169,550	490
5. El Paso	\$167,590	280
8. St. Louis	\$162,110	3,430

net purchasing power
\$188,570

TOP 5 MARKETS

Market	LAPAPP	Jobs
1. Houston	\$188,570	4,520
2. Baton Rouge	\$164,570	340
3. Austin	\$163,180	1,020
4. Portland, Ore.	\$161,630	3,500
5. St. Louis	\$160,040	1,490
6. San Jose	\$157,750	6,450

net purchasing power
\$174,340

TOP 5 MARKETS

Market	LAPAPP	Jobs
1. Fayetteville	\$174,340	620
2. San Antonio	\$170,820	710
3. Richmond	\$167,530	700
4. Birmingham	\$166,820	290
5. Houston	\$166,330	2,610
10. St. Louis	\$159,460	1,540

net purchasing power
\$168,220

TOP 5 MARKETS

Market	LAPAPP	Jobs
1. Winston-Salem	\$168,220	990
2. Charlotte	\$165,110	7,080
3. San Antonio	\$164,660	2,420
4. Houston	\$162,800	8,780
5. Denver	\$159,770	4,270
10. St. Louis	\$156,940	4,900

Greg Edwards
 Reporter
 St. Louis Business Journal

