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Arkansas Wages Lower Than National Average

Gains In Local Counties May Mask Bad News

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FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. -- A new report by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics took a look at the average weekly wages in Arkansas, and there wasn't a single county in Arkansas that met the U.S. national average of \$918.

The highest average weekly wage in the area was \$844 in Benton County. Washington County was the next highest, with an average weekly wage of \$747.

The numbers show that some local counties are seeing gains in average weekly wages. But economists said that might not be as good as it sounds, and it's also not preventing some from looking for work elsewhere.

"I love Fayetteville, love the area. It's just that jobs aren't there, money's not there," said Erik Ahrens, a senior at the University of Arkansas who is studying public administration.

Ahrens is looking to get into law enforcement -- just, not in northwest Arkansas.

"I plan on going to the Dallas area in Texas and getting into the job market," Ahrens said.

Why the relocation? It's about compensation.

"Roughly, I would say \$30,000 to \$40,000 here -- \$40,000 being optimistic. Texas, I'm looking at \$50,000 to \$60,000 starting off, with better benefits," Ahrens said.

However, those lower Arkansas wages are climbing in some areas. In Benton County, average weekly wages jumped 6.3 percent. In Washington County, the increase was 2.2 percent.

But that might be bad news disguised as good news.

"The reason that your average wage is higher is because lower-income people are the ones who lost their jobs. That's not a good thing," said Jeff Cooperstein, an economist with the University of Arkansas.

So how does Arkansas close the wage gap?

"You've got to have a well-educated workforce to get good paying jobs -- that I think really is the bottom line," Cooperstein said.

Some are already taking that to heart.

"Specifically in law enforcement agencies, they pay a little bit more the more education you have," Ahrens said.

Another interesting note on those numbers is that Washington County's average weekly wage was about \$100 lower than Benton County's. Economists said that's largely due to Wal-Mart's resilience, and the various vendors that populate that county.

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