FOR THE RECORD

Introduction to Enhanced Wage Records

What are Wage Records?

Wage records are administrative data collected by state Unemployment Insurance (UI) programs. Employers report wages for nearly all employees each quarter, creating a dataset that covers approximately 90% of U.S. employment.

What's Included in a Wage Record?

CATEGORY	DATA ELEMENTS	PROVIDES INSIGHTS ABOUT...
Employee Identifier	Social Security Number	Who worked?
Employer Identifier	Federal Employer Identification Number (FEIN) / UI Account Number	Who employed them?
Earnings	Quarterly wages	How much did they earn?

Why are Wage Records Important for Research?

While wage records are critical for administering the UI program, they are also widely used to understand employment outcomes and inform policy and program decisions. Wage records provide longitudinal data about individuals, making them one of the nation's most comprehensive sources of employment and earnings information. When linked with data from other programs and sectors, wage records provide powerful insights into workforce outcomes, program effectiveness, and long-term economic mobility.

EMPLOYMENT • Did someone find a job? • Are they still employed?	**EARNINGS** • How much did someone earn? • Are earnings increasing over time? • How stable are earnings?
EMPLOYERS • Which employers hire program participants? • Are workers changing employers, and does this increase earnings?	**PROGRAM & POLICY** • Which programs improve employment outcomes? • Which investments have the biggest impact, and for whom?

Wage records provide a foundation for understanding outcomes, but they also leave gaps. For instance, they cannot tell whether a salary increase was due to a raise or more hours worked, nor can they show whether a job matches a person's training. Basic wage records provide little to no insight into labor market trends across occupations and industries. These gaps are why states are seeking to enhance their wage records to provide richer insights into the nature of work.

What are Enhanced Wage Records?

Enhanced wage records (EWRs) are wage records that include additional data elements beyond those required for UI administration. While the specific elements vary by state, they generally provide more granularity and context about the job itself, such as occupation, hours worked, and work location.

CATEGORY	DATA ELEMENTS	PROVIDES INSIGHTS ABOUT…
Occupation & Job Identity	Job title, Standard Occupation Classification (SOC) code	• Career pathways • Skills alignment
Work Location	ZIP code, County, City, Worksite, Address, Site code	• Regional labor markets • Geographic mobility • Local workforce demand
Hours and Time	Hours worked, Hours paid, Weeks worked, Weeks paid	• Work patterns • Employment intensity
Wage Rate	Hourly wage, Rate of pay	• Wage progression • Economic mobility
Employment Characteristics	Full-/part-time status, Seasonal status, Monthly employment indicators	• Employment continuity • Job characteristics

Implementation Considerations

No two states are the same. Data elements and definitions depend on each state's need or business case, so there's no standard for what's included in an EWR, which affects cross-state comparisons.

Collection adds employer burden. Enhanced elements ask more of employers and payroll systems each quarter, affecting both compliance and data completeness. Engaging employers early and often can help ease this burden and improve long-term data quality.

Data validation and quality require significant capacity. Wage records, especially new data elements, often need substantial cleaning and validation before they're ready for analysis. This requires dedicated staff time from labor market information experts familiar with traditional sources of occupational and wage data, as well as technical capacity to sustain.

Enhanced wage records can't answer some types of research questions. Even with enhanced data elements, UI wage records have limitations. They don't cover self-employed, federal, or military workers. Evaluating the effectiveness of policies or training programs usually still requires experimental designs and linking UI earnings data to other datasets.

Enhanced data requires intentional data governance. Decisions about data governance directly shape how enhanced wage records can be accessed, shared, and used for analysis. Efforts to enhance wage records for research purposes should not impede states' ability to administer the UI program.

What do EWRs Make Possible?

EWRs help states move beyond knowing whether someone worked to knowing the type of employment they achieved. With this additional context, states can:

- ✓ **Understand career pathways:** Connect education, training, and other services to the occupations workers enter and how they progress over time.
- ✓ **Begin to assess job quality:** Understand core characteristics of employment, including wages, hours, and employment patterns.
- ✓ **Strengthen workforce planning:** Better align programs and investments with regional labor markets and employer demand.
- ✓ **Improve decision-making:** Evaluate programs, identify effective strategies, and target resources where they can have the greatest impact.

Together with other linked, administrative data, EWRs provide a more complete picture of workers' pathways through education, training, and employment, helping states make more informed decisions about programs, policies, and investments.