

Unequal pay: Gender gap is 27% for O.C. jobs, audit says

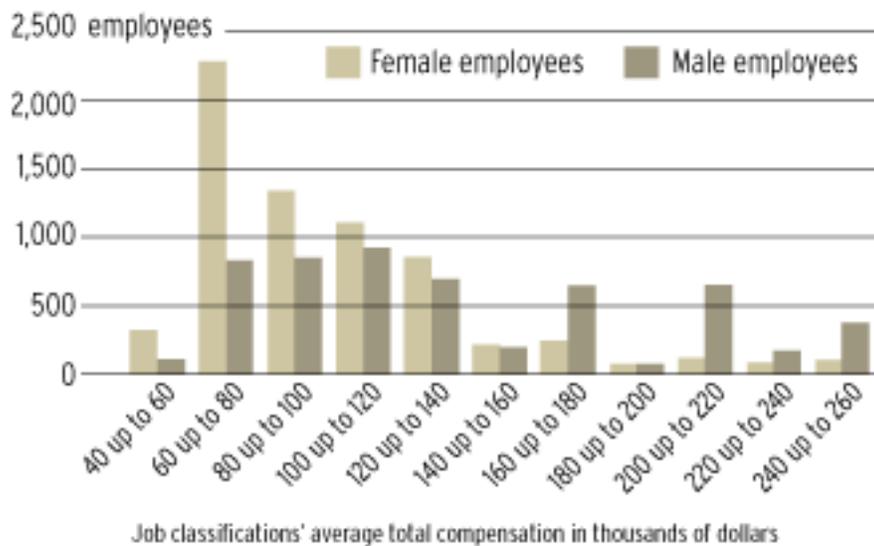
June 3, 2016 Updated 2:25 p.m.

The county of Orange's female public employees earn on average 27 percent less than its male workers, making its gender pay gap the worst among four large California counties studied in a state audit released this week.

By JORDAN GRAHAM / STAFF WRITER

O.C.'s salary gender gap

Distribution of female and male employees working in low-to high-paid job classifications, fiscal year 2014-15.



Source: California State Auditor

STAFF GRAPHIC

The county of Orange's female public employees earn on average 27 percent less than its male workers, making its gender pay gap the worst among four large California counties studied in a state audit released this week.

The report, published Tuesday by the California State Auditor, found that Orange County's top-paying public positions were overwhelmingly held by men, and most lower-level positions were filled by women. That discrepancy, along with a small pay advantage held by men over their female counterparts in similar positions, combined to create the county's large wage gap. County spokeswoman Jean Pasco said Thursday that officials will review the audit's findings and develop ways to better track and measure the county's workforce composition so it can address the gender wage disparity.

Even though women made up 55 percent of full-time county employees last year, they made up just 30 percent of the 3,025 workers who earned more than \$140,000 per year in total compensation, the audit found. Similarly, 60 percent of female county workers earned less than \$100,000 annually and 68 percent of male employees earned more than that amount. "Achieving greater levels of pay equality depends not only on men and women earning equal

amounts in the same classification; it also requires men and women to occupy equally both lower and more highly compensated positions,” the report states.

The gap between male and female county workers’ wages has widened slightly in recent years. In 2011, female county employees made an average of 25.5 percent less than male workers. The audit found similar results – of large pay gaps between male and female employees and a widening of those discrepancies in recent years – in Los Angeles, Fresno and Santa Clara counties. Santa Clara County has the lowest imbalance of the four, with women earning an average of 12 percent less than men.

In all four counties, the report also discovered women more often were hired at their job’s minimum salary and that those pay disparities were magnified when workers received raises based on a percentage of their salaries. Three of the counties studied, including Orange, kept no records documenting the reasoning behind hiring decisions, making it impossible for the auditors to “determine whether counties were using valid job-related criteria when deciding whether to employ particular male or female candidates.”

The audit found no evidence of direct discrimination in any of the counties studied.

County Supervisor Todd Spitzer said after the audit’s release that he asked CEO Frank Kim “to look at that issue specifically to determine ... whether this is a historical issue based on educational or experience factors or if we truly have a disparate promotional or hiring issue that we need to address.

“Holding a position should always be on merit irrespective of gender or any other personal distinguishing factor,” Spitzer said.

More than 40 percent of Orange County’s jobs paying over \$200,000 per year belong to high-ranking members of the Orange County Sheriff’s Department, according to the report, and large gender disparities in those roles contributed significantly to the county’s overall wage gap. Of the county’s 551 “deputy sheriff II” positions, which average total compensation of \$210,000 annually, 9 percent were women at the time the audit was conducted.

That imbalance is problematic, said Ariane Hegewisch, program director of employment and earnings at the Institute for Women’s Policy Research in Washington, D.C. Hegewisch said occupational gender segregation – a term used to describe the difference in jobs men and women hold or apply for – is one of the leading causes of public sector gender wage gaps and that the disparity between male and female public safety workers is a major factor. She said law enforcement and fire agencies generally need to do a better job of actively encouraging women to apply for positions.

“I do not know the circumstances in Orange County, but you need to be proactive on those issues. You can’t just say ‘We won’t discriminate,’” Hegewisch said.

Orange County Sheriff’s Department spokesman Lt. Mark Stichter said the sheriff’s academy has seen growth in the number of women who enter, called the department’s command staff “well-balanced,” and pointed out that the county’s top law enforcement position is held by a woman. Sheriff Sandra Hutchens earned total compensation of \$400,214 in 2015.

Jennifer Muir, general manager of the Orange County Employees Association, the county’s employee union, said she was unsurprised by the report because it is supported by what female employees see on the ground.

“This jolting report – supported by the real-life experiences of women in predominately female job classifications that our culture still wrongly considers less valuable – demonstrates there is much more work to be done,” Muir wrote in an email.

From April 2011 to June 2015, four female Orange County employees filed gender discrimination complaints relating to promotions, the audit said. The county determined all four were unsubstantiated.

Contact the writer: 714-796-7960 or jgraham@ocregister.com