Furloughed Workers

*Data from the American Community Survey*

Sentier Research

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The total number of furloughed federal workers is not precisely known. These days we hear most often a figure of 800,000 and that more workers are being called back to work without pay. Very little data have been available that describe the demographic and economic characteristics of those on furlough. While far from ideal by any means, the American Community Survey (ACS) may provide some useful insights.

The ACS is a huge nationally representative annual household survey. It is conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. This data collection effort is designed to replace the “long form” data once associated with the Decennial Census. The long form was removed years ago. The most recent data available from the ACS relate to 2017. This data source is publicly available. The estimates in this report were derived from ACS survey data files provided by IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. The sample available for public access includes 1.2 million households and three million household members (both adults and children) nationwide.

Identifying the Population of Federal Workers

Among the broad spectrum of information collected by the ACS are employment characteristics and earnings amounts. Within the detailed array of work-related information is a data item commonly referred to as “class of worker”. It applies to sample persons working at the time of the survey. The categories identified by the ACS are shown below:

- Self-employed
- Employer
- Working on own account
- Self-employed, not incorporated
- Self-employed, incorporated
- Works for wages
- Wage/salary, private
- Wage/salary at non-profit
- Wage/salary, government
- Federal government employee
- Armed forces
- State government employee
- Local government employee
- Unpaid family worker
The ACS survey sample respondents are asked to self-identify as belonging to one of these categories. In this case we are interested in isolating those workers classifying themselves as a “federal government employee.” Additional survey information was used to identify some of these federal employees that are largely immune/excluded from the furlough. These include 1) employees of the Postal Service, 2) “active duty” Armed Forces members living “off base” or with their families “on base”, and 3) other small groups that are unlikely to be furloughed. The sample underlying the statistics presented here was further restricted to full time workers. This resulted in a sample of more than 18,000 observations in which respondents identified themselves as federal government employees.

These survey respondents translate into an estimated 1,762,000 federal workers after applying sample weights. It is reasonable to suggest that those 800,000 federal workers currently on furlough are represented in a statistical sense within the 2017 ACS sample. We have no information that allows us to precisely identify them.

**Creating a Subsample Representing Furloughed Workers**

Given the lack of information, we chose to select a random subsample from the sample representing all 1.8 million federal workers. This random subsample served to represent the 800,000 workers now on furlough. The resulting subsample contained 833,000 “simulated” furloughed workers. Given this was a random sample the characteristics of this subsample align very closely with those based on the complete sample.

**Earnings of Furloughed Workers**

- The median earnings of all furloughed workers was about $67,000, the mean was $73,200
- For men, the median was $70,000 and for women $60,000
- The median earnings for White men was $77,000 and for White women $62,000
- Black men and Black women both had a median earnings of $60,000

**Wages Lost or Deferred**

Using the subsample we estimate that, on average, furloughed workers are now owed $7,035 for lost wages. In total, the 833,000 are now owed about $6.0 billion. These estimates are based on respondents’ reports of annual wage and salary income in the 2017 ACS. These figures reflect an estimated five weeks of work. Previous estimates were based on four weeks of work.

**Households and Demographics**

- Census estimates indicate a total of about 120 million households in the United States
- There are 790,000 households with at least one worker on furlough
- Of these 530,000 households are headed by a furloughed worker
- About five percent of households with a furloughed worker actually contain more than one
• In about half of the households with a furloughed worker, that furloughed worker is the only earner
• About 62 percent of households with a furloughed member are married couples
• Fifty-six percent of the furloughed are men and 44 percent women
• Overall 68 percent of the furloughed workers are White, 18 percent Black, and 14 percent of other races.
• Hispanics make up 11 percent of furloughed workers
• Among Whites 60 percent are men and 40 percent women while for Blacks 44 percent are men and 56 percent are women
• Of the households with a furloughed worker 38 percent have one or more children under age 18
• Fourteen percent of these households have a child under age 5
• Sixty-seven percent of children under age 18 are White and 14 percent are Black
• About 21,000 households with furloughed members are headed by single women with children

Housing Tenure and Monthly Payments

• About 74 percent of households with a furloughed worker are home owners
• The remaining 26 percent are renters
• For home owners about 18 percent are “free and clear” of a mortgage while 82 percent have a monthly payment
• The median monthly mortgage payment is $1,400. The average is $1,600.
• Those households occupying rented housing quarters have a median monthly rental payment of $1,270. The average is $1,440
• Home owners with a mortgage (470,000) owe on average of $1,600 per month.
• Doing the math, these households owe a total of $752 million per month.