Occupational Segregation, Labor Market Disruptions, and The Gender Pay Gap

Sophia Vukadinovich, Rose (Mesina) Healy, & Dan (dk) Kuang

Resolution Economics, LLC

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Introduction

Differences in earnings between men and women, commonly referred to as the gender pay gap, have been a persistent feature of the U.S. labor market for over a century. Rather than being explained by a single cause, the gender pay gap reflects a combination of factors including workforce composition, labor market structures, occupational segregation, educational attainment, and workplace practices. This study focuses on one of the most important factors: occupational segregation, defined as the uneven distribution of men and women across occupations. Women and men have consistently been concentrated into different occupations. Women have traditionally been more likely to work in education, healthcare support, clerical, and caregiving occupations, while men have been more likely to work in skilled trades, construction, transportation, engineering, and repair occupations.

There are many explanations for why men and women remain concentrated in different occupations. Our aim is not to explain the underlying causes; rather it is to explore how occupational segregation impacts pay equity and shapes the interpretation of pay differences, emphasizing the importance of proper analytic design.

Because occupations vary widely in market value, educational requirements, working conditions, and compensation; aggregate comparisons of male and female earnings may reflect differences in occupational distribution rather than differences in pay for comparable work. Analysis of the occupational distribution, or segregation, shows the potentially misleading nature of simple aggregate pay comparisons.

Adjusted & Unadjusted Pay Gap

Central to understanding occupational segregation is the distinction between the adjusted and unadjusted pay gap, which must also be considered. The unadjusted, or raw pay gap measures the overall average difference in earnings between men and women across entire organizations or the broader economy. It reflects more general societal and organizational issues, such as higher concentrations of women in lower paying industries or roles, and fewer in more senior positions; often drawing attention to a lack of access to equal opportunity. The unadjusted pay gap does not control for differences in jobs.

In contrast, the adjusted, or controlled, pay gap compares pay for similar roles. This takes into account factors including experience, education, occupation level, and location in an attempt to isolate potential inequities or discrimination. The adjusted pay gap is often a smaller gap as it measures how pay differs among workers who have similar measured characteristics. However, on its own, adjustment does not establish whether a remaining difference in pay reflects discrimination. Both pay gap measures are important; they answer different questions.

Historical Context

History and social events can exert considerable influence on workforce and occupational segregation, which then affects the gender pay gap. For that reason, it is important to gain a foundational understanding of the history of the gender pay gap to then analyze occupational-

level data, including the impact of labor market disruptions (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic, generative AI).

A Brief History

Economist Claudia Goldin describes women's labor force participation as a "U-shaped" curve where participation was relatively high in agrarian economics, lower during the transition to industrialization, and rising again with the growth of service-sector and professional occupations (Small et al., 2025). Legal and social change followed. The birth control pill, introduced in the 1960s, gave women the newfound ability to delay marriage and childbirth, providing them with the opportunity to make other career choices. Following this, the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, and the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 all influenced the gender pay gap. The gap has narrowed since, but occupational distribution remains central as to why it persists.

Two Recent Labor Market Disruptions

The historical importance of occupational segregation provides a meaningful framework for examining two more recent labor-market disruptions:

1. **COVID-19 pandemic** brought unprecedented mass closures, layoffs, and a spike in unemployment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022), but its effects varied widely by occupation, depending on daily tasks, proximity to other people, and workplace environment.
2. **Generative AI** raises a separate set of questions. It has increased productivity and efficiency for certain occupations, while raising the fear of automation in others. Because occupations differ in tasks and exposure, shocks like these should affect them unevenly, which is why pooling them together can be misleading

This study investigates how salary and job-posting patterns shifted across occupations during these periods. Those differences have meaning for pay interpretations between male and female-dominated occupations as set forth below.

Data and Methods

To see how occupational segregation shows up in practice, we compared advertised salaries and job-postings volumes for ten highly female-dominated and ten highly male-dominated occupations in the Los Angeles metropolitan area (MSA 31080) from 2019 through 2023.

Selecting Occupations

To select occupations, we ranked occupations each year by the share of women employed, using Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey data for 2019-2023. Initial lists of highly female-dominated occupations were more than 90% female; many more occupations were highly male-dominated, so we selected ten strongly male-dominated occupations (all more than 97% male) with enough postings for each year. The lists were then

refined to identify occupations that consistently demonstrated highly gendered concentrations, while simultaneously maintaining sufficient labor market representation for the following salary analysis.

Female-Dominated Occupations	O*NET Code	Male-Dominated Occupations	O*NET Code
Preschool Teachers, Except Special Education	25-2011.00	Bus and Truck Mechanics and Diesel Engine Specialists	49-3031.00
Childcare Workers	39-9011.00	Mobile Heavy Equipment Mechanics, Except Engines	49-3042.00
Dental Assistants	31-9091.00	Heating, A/C, & Refrigeration Mechanics & Installers	49-9021.00
Dental Hygienists	29-1292.00	Electrical Power-Line Installers and Repairers	49-9051.00
Medical Assistants	31-9092.00	Brick masons and Block masons	47-2021.00
Medical Records Specialists	29-2072.00	Electricians	47-2111.00
Secretaries & Administrative Assistants[1]	43-6014.00	Plumbers, Pipefitters, and Steamfitters	47-2152.00
Executive Secretaries & Executive Admin. Assistants	43-6011.00	Automotive Service Technicians and Mechanics	49-3023.00
Receptionists & Information Clerks	43-4171.00	Carpenters	47-2031.00
Hairdressers, Hairstylists & Cosmetologists	39-5012.00	Construction Laborers	47-2061.00

Notes: [1] Except Legal/Medical/Executive

Considerations

A few cautions apply. Advertised salaries do not reflect actual earnings, and posting counts are not a measure of employment or vacancies. The study covers one metro area and twenty occupations, so it does not represent all male- or female-dominated work. Some occupations have small posting counts (childcare workers had about 1,000 postings in 2019, and brick masons 462 in 2023), so their percentage change can be large. Changes in pay-transparency requirements during this period, like California's SB 1162 effective January 2023, may have also changed how many postings list a salary. Finally, the comparisons are descriptive; they show how these occupations moved during COVID-19 and the rise of generative AI, not what caused the movement, and they do not estimate the overall pay gap.

Results

COVID-19 (2020-2021)

The U.S. labor market experienced a time of historic turbulence during the COVID-19 pandemic. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics surveys (2022) demonstrate a record decrease in employment between March and April of 2020, followed by a significant increase in employment from May to June 2020. If occupational segregation carries as much weight as we claim, we expect labor-market disruptions to affect occupations differently during this period rather than producing uniform changes across all workers. The selected male and female-dominated occupations are analyzed below.

Female-Dominated Occupations Moved in Different Directions

***Dental Hygienists*—**Dental hygienists conduct procedures that were classified under the non-essential category early in the pandemic. Both the American Dental Association and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services recommended delaying any non-essential dental procedures due to the close physical proximity involved (Otto, 2020). Advertised salaries for Dental hygienists fell 5.9% from 2019 to 2020, then rose 22.9% from 2020 to 2021. The dip is consistent with reduced patient volume and practice closures due to health risks early in the

pandemic (Gurenlian et al., 2021). The 2021 salary rebound may reflect ***renewed*** demand as distancing measures eased, although this study cannot isolate the pandemic as the cause. Postings for dental hygienists rose throughout the period, from 1,816 in 2019 to 9,421 in 2023 (an increase of 418.78%), including a 57% increase in 2020 (Figure 2).

Figure 1
Advertised Salary—Dental Hygienists

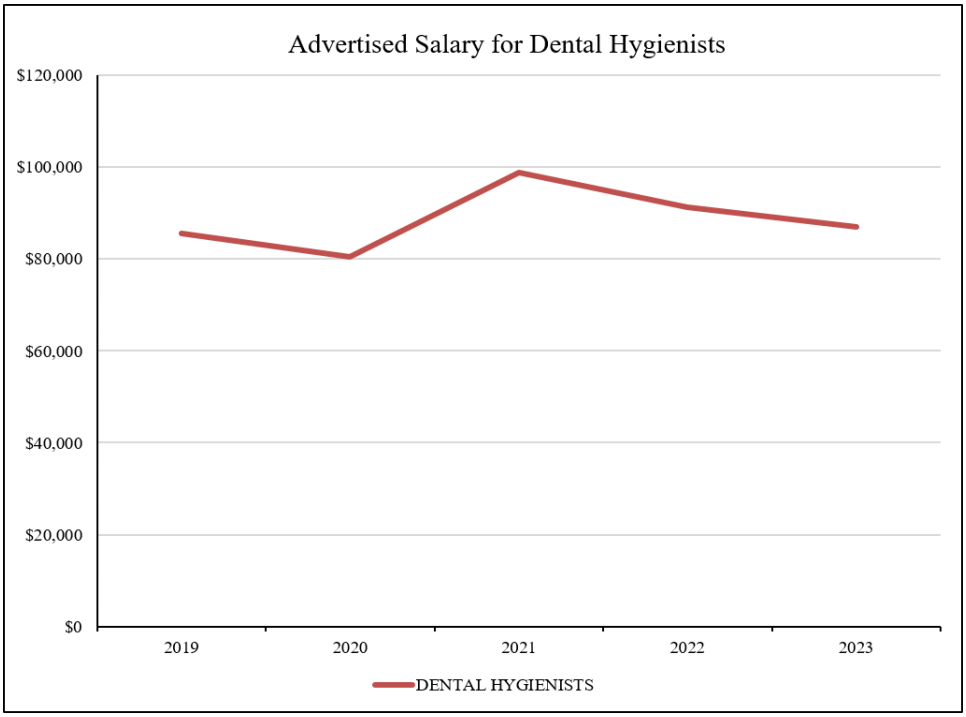
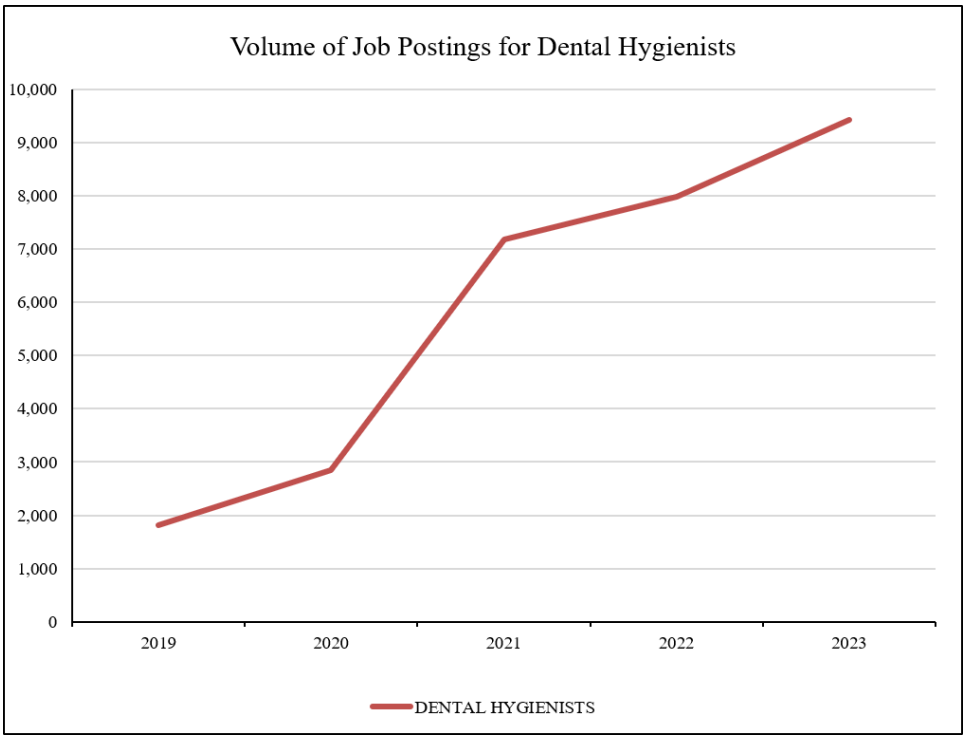


Figure 2
Job Posting Volume—Dental Hygienists



***Childcare Workers*—**Childcare workers experienced a 28.2% advertised salary increase from 2019 to 2020, consistent with research showing that during the COVID-19 pandemic, employers made changes to employee wages, including increases in base wages as incentives for working under pandemic conditions (Cooksey & Thomas, 2024). Their advertised salary then fell 7.1% in 2021, before rising 22.1% in 2022, and 12.0% in 2023, an overall increase of 62.9% over the 2019-2023 period. Job postings increased 196.7% over the same period, with the sharpest increase occurring between 2019 and 2020, though from a small base of about 1,000 postings in 2019. Rising advertised salary alongside the rising job posting-volume may suggest that employers faced a shortage of personnel to meet the demand for services, leading to increased pay and recruitment efforts.

Figure 3

Advertised Salary—Childcare Workers

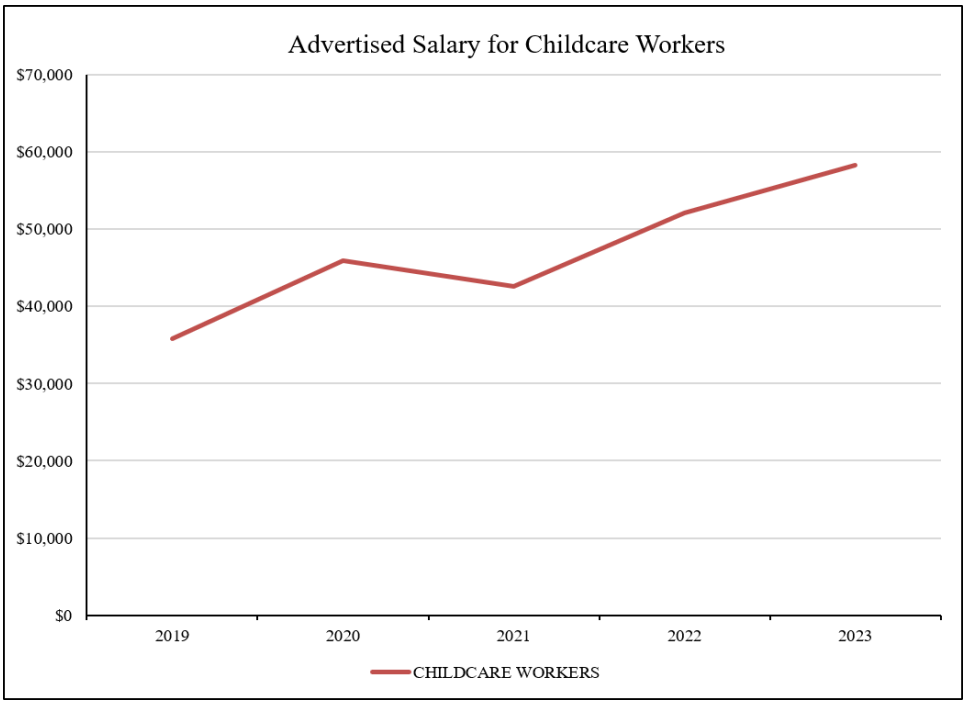
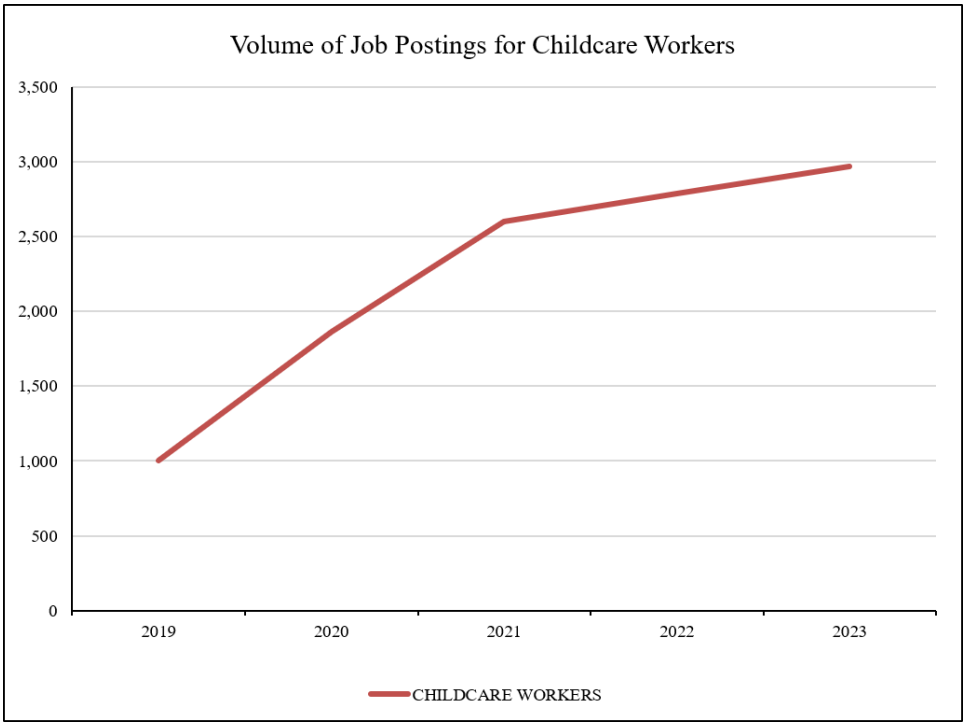


Figure 4

Job Posting Volume—Childcare Workers



Overall, female-dominated occupations did not experience a uniform response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each occupation analyzed has distinct characteristics that are unique to

that occupation, and that are impacted by external factors differently. These occupation-specific responses illustrate how aggregate measures of female-dominated occupational advertised compensation can fluctuate because of occupation-specific factors.

Male-Dominated Occupations Moved in Different Directions

The posting-weighted average advertised salary for the ten occupations fell 1.1% from 2019 to 2020, then fell another 6.0% in 2021. Beneath the average, individual occupations moved in different directions. Electrical power-line installers and brick masons saw advertised salaries fall 16.9% and 8.9% in 2020, while Carpenters rose 5.0%, Electricians rose 3.3%, and Plumbers rose 4.4%. Seen just by examining these occupations, there is not a uniform pattern. Posting volume for male-dominated occupations moved even more. Total postings across the ten occupations fell 8.4% in 2020, then rose 40.3% in 2021, which is 28.6% above 2019. Individual occupations displayed more movement, but at the risk of over-analyzing the data; it can be generally concluded that the male-dominated occupations, like the female-dominated ones, did not experience a uniform response around COVID-19.

Both measures show that overall averages can hide meaningful occupation-level movement, which is why these roles should be analyzed separately rather than pooled. As with the female-dominated occupations, the data cannot isolate the pandemic as the cause.

Generative AI (2022-2023)

Female-Dominated Occupations

Following the themes explored in relation to COVID-19, not all female-dominated occupations experienced uniform effects related to the rise of generative AI. Occupations that involve considerable amounts of routine clerical work, routine information-processing, and scheduling functions are increasingly subject to automation due to AI (Septiandri et al., 2024).

Of the occupations focused on in this study, clerical occupations showed the greatest shifts. The advertised salary peaked in 2021, then fell 19.3% in 2022, coinciding with the growing prevalence of generative AI tools in late 2022, and then partly recovered in 2023. However, the advertised salary did not fall below its 2019 level, so the 19.3% drop may be a fall from the 2021 spike. Job postings fell 34.7% from 2022 to 2023, consistent with the BLS (2026) projection that overall employment of secretaries and administrative assistants will decline 2% from 2025 to 2035. Researchers explain that as AI technologies become more integrated into contemporary workplaces, the secretarial occupation has experienced considerable shifts, including layoffs and cutbacks, in addition to shifting job responsibilities and skill requirements (Lingel & Crawford, 2020; Musty, 2024).

Figure 5

Advertised Salary—Secretaries and Administrative Assistants

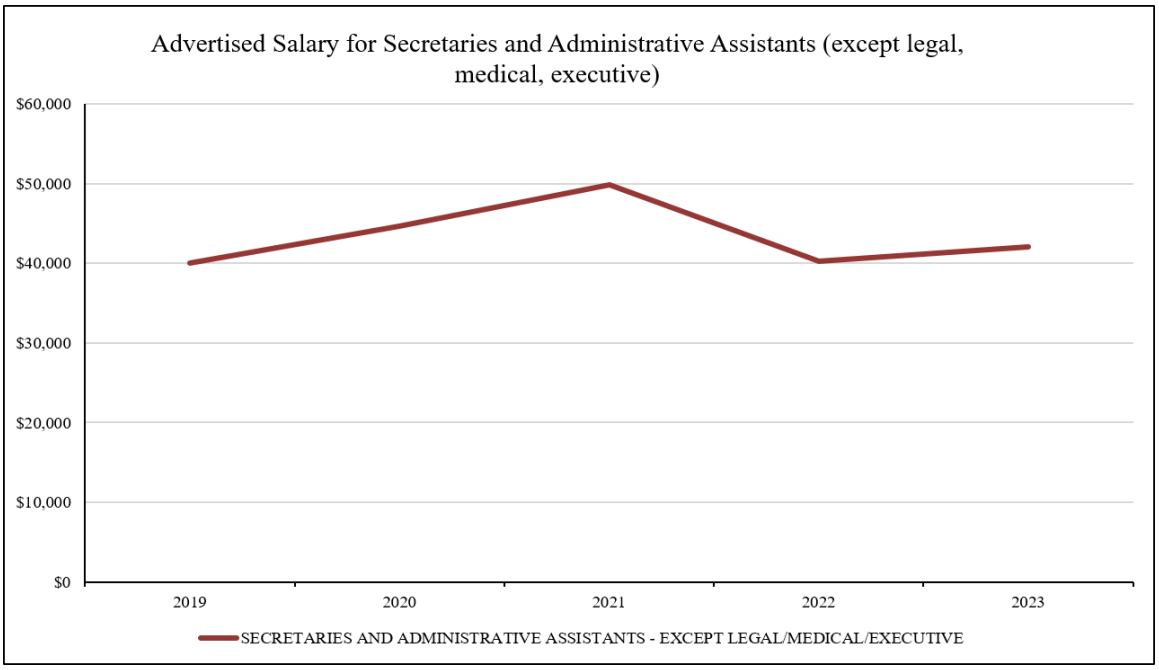
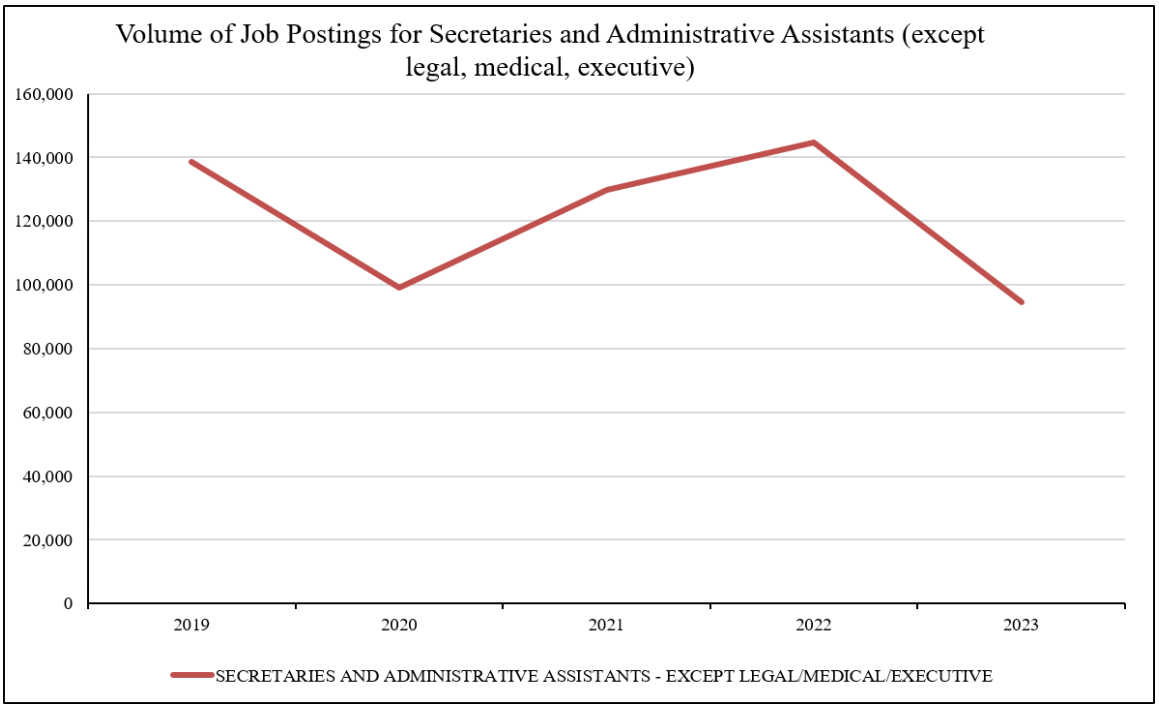


Figure 6

Job Posting Volume—Secretaries and Administrative Assistants



Receptionists and information clerks also experienced a 37.4% decrease in the volume of job postings in 2023, another female-dominated role that involves tasks highly exposed to AI.

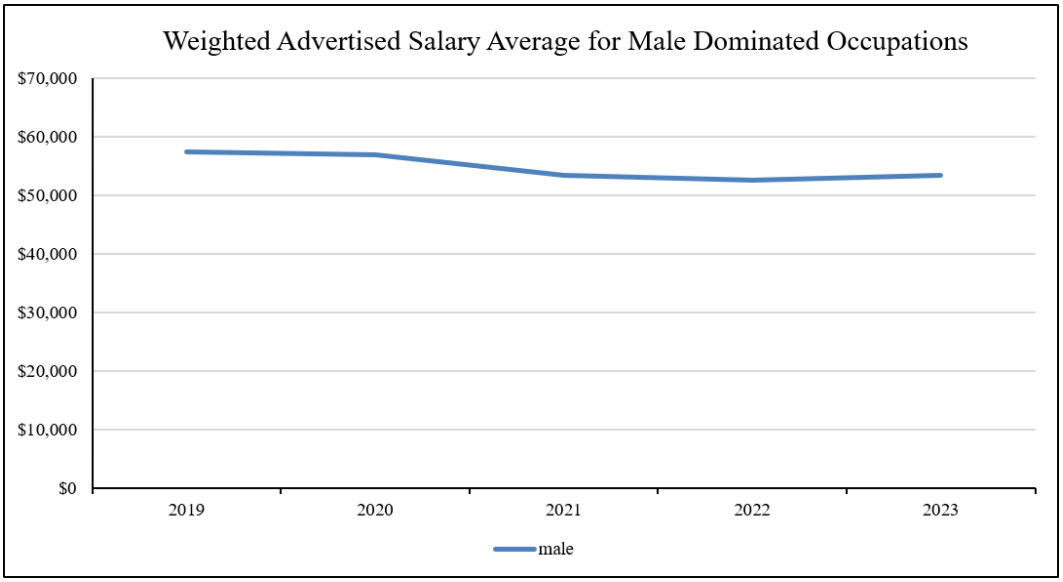
Chaturvedi & Biswas (2026) describe how the advancement of AI, specifically AI-based customer interaction tools allow organizations to provide personalized, around the clock interaction with customers; providing the organization with more time to allocate resources to other tasks.

However, although the increasing adoption of generative AI may influence administrative and clerical occupations, the data examined in this article cannot establish a causal relationship between generative AI adoption and changes in advertised salaries or job postings. These trends may therefore be interpreted as potential indicators of changing labor-market conditions rather than direct evidence of AI-driven displacement.

Male-Dominated Occupations

Male-dominated occupations also did not move uniformly during the period surrounding the emergence of generative AI (2022-2023). The posting-weighted average advertised salary for the male-dominated occupations reviewed fell 1.5% in 2022, and rose 1.5% in 2023, ending 7.0% below its 2019 level. The volume of job postings for these same occupations rose 8.4% in 2022; total postings declined 29.1% in 2023, ending 1.2% below 2019. Because many of these occupations involve physical, hands-on tasks that are less directly affected by current generative AI technologies (*Michigan Journal of Economics*, 2026), the limited change in advertised salaries between 2022-2023 is broadly consistent with the literature suggesting lower direct AI exposure among skilled trades and construction occupations, despite substantial changes in posting volume. The decline in job posting volume observed in 2023 may instead reflect broader labor-market factors that cannot be isolated within the scope of this study. However, individual occupations did experience shifts in both advertised salary and volume of job postings.

Figure 7
Advertised Salary—Male-Dominated Occupations



Male/Female-Dominated Occupational Trajectories: Overall Comparison

So, what does all of this mean for interpreting the gender pay gap? Two figures and a table help to answer that (see Table 1, Figure 8, Figure 9). Three major findings stand out.

Table 1

Advertised Salaries and Analysis

Year	**Male-dominated** Average ($)	**Female-dominated** Average ($)	**Difference** (M-F)	**Pay Ratio**[1] F:M
2019	$57,522	$40,455	$17,067	70.3%
2020	$56,891	$42,156	$14,735	74.1%
2021	$53,455	$45,937	$7,517	85.9%
2022	$52,673	$40,999	$11,674	77.8%
2023	$53,470	$42,823	$10,647	80.1%

Note: [1]Pay Ratio = $\frac{Female\ Pay\ (\$)}{Male\ Pay\ (\$)}$

Finding 1: Changes in Advertised Salary Trends

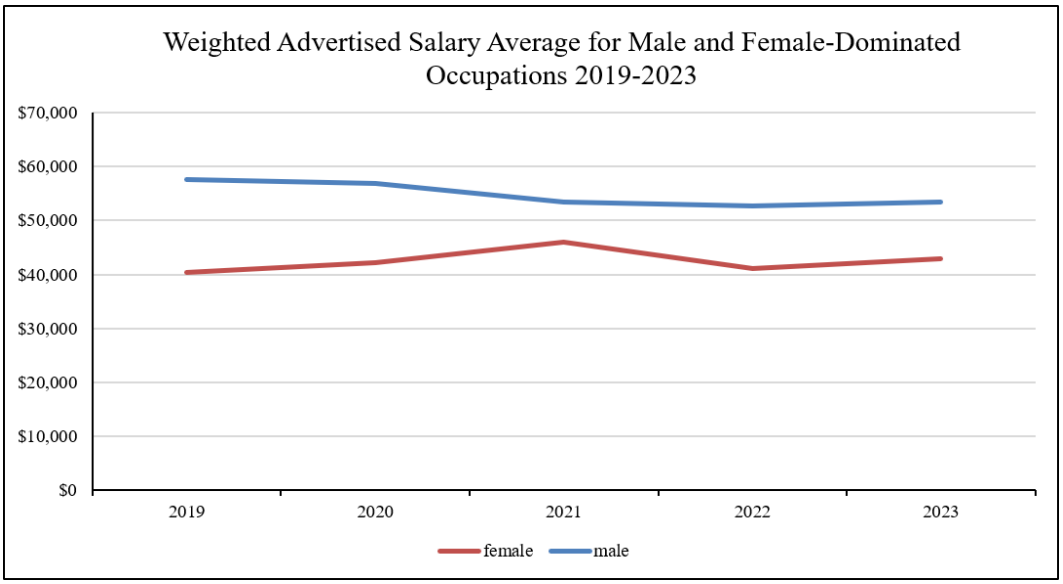
Two trends emerged from Table 1 and Figure 8. First, the averaged advertised salaries for male dominated occupations are higher than those for female dominated occupations, year over year (2019 to 2023). The fact that male dominated occupations advertise higher salary than female dominated occupations is not surprising. What is notable, however, is the second trend among advertised salaries between 2019-2023: the advertised salaries for male dominated occupations diminished between 2019-2023, while the advertised salaries for female dominated occupations increased between 2019-2023. This difference is clear in Table 1—in 2019 the computed difference was $17,067 but in 2023, that difference dropped to $10,647.

Finding 2: Difference Between Male/Female Dominated Occupations

The difference in advertised average salaries between male and female dominated occupations narrowed between 2019 (70.3%) and 2023 (80.1%). The movement can be explained by the advertised salary trends observed in Finding 1; average advertised salaries among male dominated occupations dropped while average advertised salaries among female dominated occupations increased. These are comparisons between groups of occupations, not between men and women in the same occupation.

Figure 8

Advertised Salary (Table 1 Data)—Male and Female Dominated Occupations



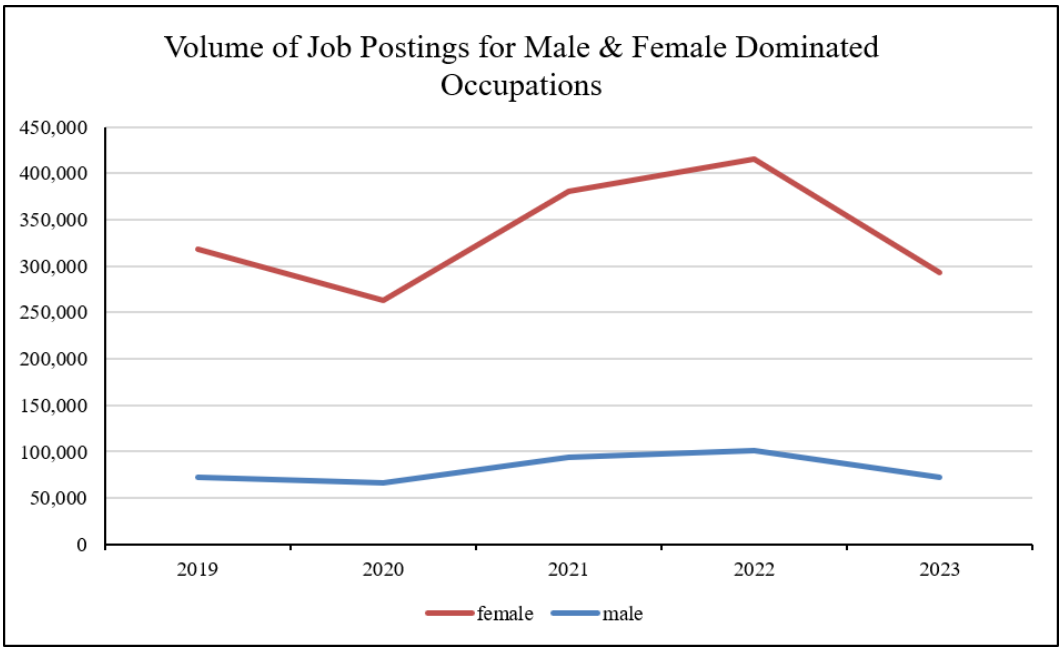
Finding 3: Group Averages Reflect Many Complex Factors

The third finding is that the average advertised salaries for each group reflect a combination of many factors. Differences in average salary postings reflect both shifts in the available jobs and underlying labor market forces. For example, the 2021 rise in the averages salary postings for female dominated occupations was driven in part by dental assistants and dental hygienists, whose share of postings grew significantly. It appears that female-dominated occupations moved in ways consistent with proximity and essential-worker status during COVID-19. After the pandemic, some clerical and administrative occupations experienced trends that coincided with increasing adoption of generative AI technologies, however, this study cannot establish a relationship between AI adoption and the observed labor market outcomes.

Taken together, group-level comparisons like this one can be highly sensitive and exposed to labor market conditions and occupational composition. Adjusted analyses may be less sensitive to occupational composition because occupation is often included as a control variable. However, controlling for occupation can also mask unequal sorting into occupations, so adjusted and unadjusted views should both be read. Consequently, it is important for employers to be mindful of the sensitivity of aggregate group-level comparisons, or the unadjusted pay gap if they intend to use it in their pay equity program.

Figure 9

Job Posting Volume—Male and Female Dominated Occupations



Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the importance of considering occupational segregation when examining gender pay differences. Men and women remain unevenly distributed across occupations, and differences in occupational composition can contribute to broader earning differences. Lumping occupations together and generalizing gender averages does not account for the underlying occupational characteristics and driving factors that influence observed shifts in pay between genders.

Additionally, this study shows that advertised salaries and job-posting volumes can change considerably across occupations and over time. The male-dominated and female-dominated occupations in this study did not experience uniform patterns in changes during the 2019-2023 period. This highlights the importance of considering occupational characteristics and wider labor-market conditions when interpreting aggregate pay-gap claims. It is crucial to examine these factors and occupational characteristics when conducting pay equity analyses and to avoid drawing conclusions about the pay gap simply based on gender. This study does not examine pay within occupations; that question requires worker-level data.

To better understand labor market dynamics, it is important to continue to monitor and review advertised salary and job posting data regularly as conditions change and may shift with current events. Occupational segregation should therefore be viewed as a dynamic labor-market phenomenon that may influence pay-gap measures as occupations respond differently to social and economic shocks.

These patterns point to practical steps for pay equity work. The next section describes how to apply these ideas in practice.

Practical Takeaways

Employers seeking to address observed pay gaps in their workforce should avoid relying solely on aggregated and high-level comparisons between demographic groups. Instead, employers should apply a comprehensive and data-driven approach to pay equity:

Evaluate job architecture and compensation philosophy

A meaningful and actionable pay equity analysis hinges on accurately identifying comparable employees and jobs. Employers should first understand the skills, responsibilities, and organizational value associated with each position before assessing any pay differences across demographic groups. Comparisons that reflect the employer's compensation philosophy and legitimate business factors (e.g., performance, experience, seniority) help isolate compensation differences that may require further evaluation. Without a well-defined job architecture, comparisons may result in misleading pay disparities arising from comparing dissimilar positions.

Conduct regular pay equity audits

Because salary adjustments, movements within the company, employee turnover, and other organizational changes can alter the composition of a company over time; pay equity results are static. As the workforce evolves, observed pay gaps can also change. Employers should therefore conduct periodic pay equity audits, typically coinciding with the annual merit review cycle, to monitor new or previously observed pay gaps. In addition to an annual review, a pay equity audit after significant workforce events (e.g., a big hiring push, mergers, or a RIF) may be warranted. Regular pay equity audits enable employers to proactively identify new risks, monitor progress in existing risk areas, and make informed decisions to improve pay equity over time.

Conduct broader workforce analytics

As mentioned above, movements within the company and other workforce changes can impact pay equity outcomes. Employers should therefore look beyond compensation decisions alone and also closely monitor employment practices that affect workforce composition, such as hiring, promotions, and terminations. Employers should also look at other employment decisions that feed into these employment actions, such as performance evaluations, disciplinary actions, and training opportunities that impact promotional or termination decisions. Examining these employment practices will help the employer determine whether observed pay disparities reflect inequities in other employment practices rather than in the pay-setting process itself.

Data and Methods Details

Postings and Salaries

Occupational titles were matched with their corresponding O*NET codes, a U.S. Department of Labor standardized classification number to categorize and describe distinct occupations within the labor economy, to then facilitate the extraction of job posting data from Lightcast. Lightcast is a comprehensive global labor market intelligence and economic data platform that contains billions of data points, including job postings, which have information including job posting title, company, advertised salary, skill requirements, educational requirements, location, etc.

Real Dollars

Salaries were converted to 2019 dollars using the annual-average Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U), all items, U.S. city average, from the BLS (2026). The national CPI-U was used rather than the Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim CPI-U due to the local index having a much smaller sample size and therefore being subject to more sampling and measurement error than the national index (BLS, 2026).

Weighting

Group averages were then weighted by posting volume: each occupation's average advertised salary is multiplied by its share of that group's number of job postings in the year, and the products summed.

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Author Bios

Sophia Vukadinovich is a Research Assistant at Resolution Economics, where she supports complex projects through the development and maintenance of extensive databases. She brings an interdisciplinary background in psychology, public health, and bioethics, complemented by strong quantitative and qualitative research skills and a culturally informed perspective. She holds a B.A. in Psychology from Loyola Marymount University, where she graduated magna cum laude and conducted research with the Neuropsychology Across Cultures Lab.

Rose (Mesina) Healy is a Director based in Resolution Economics' Washington, D.C. Office. She has extensive experience in labor and employment litigation support, data consulting, forecasting, and predictive analytics. Her expertise includes managing complex databases, developing statistical models in disparate impact matters, conducting pay equity analyses, providing support for federal contractor compliance, non-discrimination assessments, and other compliance activities. She frequently provides consulting on discrimination matters, wage and hour issues, AI audits, pay transparency, and DEI. She is additionally skilled in data analysis and litigation support for disparate impact claims in fair housing and voting rights matters.

Dan (dk) Kuang, Ph.D. specializes in investigating workplace discrimination (e.g., hiring/selection, compensation, promotion, termination, algorithm bias) in both litigation and proactive situations. Dr. Kuang's experience in litigation support ranges from single plaintiff arbitration to complex federal class action matters. He has served as a defense consultant and expert against federal and state enforcement agencies and private plaintiffs. Dr. Kuang is an expert in applied statistics, quantitative methods, and I/O psychology in the personnel, EEO diversity, and equity context. As an expert in pay equity, he has served on the California Equal Pay Taskforce and testified before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.