

# Disparities in Compensation, Infrastructure, and Workforce Stability: A Comparative Study of Nonprofits and Corporations

Mihir Vinnakota

*Wilcox High School, 3250 Monroe St, Santa Clara, CA 95051, United States*

## ABSTRACT

Nonprofits are instrumental in today's efforts to support under-resourced communities. However, many nonprofits have underlying structural inefficiencies that hinder their ability to serve society. This study analyzes the organizational differences between the corporations and nonprofits by comparing categories like employee turnover, workforce size, wages, infrastructure spending, and reliance on government funding. The research aims to identify these differences, understand how those differences negatively impact nonprofits, then discuss how nonprofits can improve organizational efficiency. Earlier research has shown that nonprofits face financial struggles. However, few studies have compared these limits directly to corporate data. Using data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, IRS Form 990 filings, SEC 10-K reports, and nonprofit workforce surveys, the study showcases a clear disparity. Nonprofits pay lower wages, have fewer chances for advancement, deal with higher turnover, and spend less on infrastructure. The study discusses the further implications of this data, and discusses how adopting some corporate practices, along with policy support, could help nonprofits achieve their missions more effectively over time.

**Keywords:** nonprofit organizations; corporate sector; workforce; wages; retention; resource allocation; funding; organizational efficiency

## INTRODUCTION

Nonprofit organizations are huge proponents of healthcare, education, social services, and other service driven programs. However, they often struggle with weak internal support systems that negatively affect their productivity and workforce (1). In contrast, corporations maintain diversified revenue streams and have established internal support mechanisms that actually support productivity and career development

(2). Evaluating the cause and deeper effects of the disparity between nonprofits and corporations is a must in order to gain a clearer picture into how nonprofits can better structure their internal systems to maximize their impact in society. Unfortunately, the minimal research on nonprofits so far has been surface level, focused entirely on nonprofits themselves. This particular research serves to close that gap in knowledge. Specifically, this study addresses the lack of comparative analysis on how nonprofits differ from corporations in areas such as wages, workforce stability, infrastructure spending, and reliance on government funding. By identifying how these differences impact organizational efficiency, this study explores why nonprofits struggle internally and how they can improve their structural effectiveness.

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**Corresponding author:** Mihir Vinnakota, E-mail: [vinnakotamihir1@gmail.com](mailto:vinnakotamihir1@gmail.com).

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**METHODS AND MATERIALS**

This study weighs corporations and nonprofit organizations against each other using secondary, publicly available information. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) was used to compare employment and median wage (by occupation). The dataset includes 2022 BLS Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) and 2022-2023 employment trend data for both nonprofits and for-profit businesses. Results from the 2023 Council of Nonprofits workforce survey, which compiles responses collected between late-2022 and mid-2023, were used to further compare employee retention and internal coordination. IRS Form 990 filings and NCCS data covering fiscal year 2023 were used to encapsulate the financial trends of the nonprofit sector. A collection of 30 publicly available SEC 10-K filings and annual reports from fiscal years 2023 were analyzed for employee turnover and allocation of expenses. Analysis was performed through categorical averages of each company’s data. All data sources, metrics used, time frames, and data types considered are shown in Table 1.

The comparison focused on several key metrics. Wage differences were compared by position to examine pay for similar work in both sectors. Workforce size and retention rates were quantified in order to assess workforce stability differences. Resource and infrastructure investment percentages were compared to assessing operating efficiency and investment priorities. Funding/ revenue streams helped portray each sector’s ability to support their programs freely and effectively.

All descriptive statistics, tabulations, and visual

comparisons were generated using Microsoft Excel. Medians and averages were calculated on Microsoft Excel. Because this analysis relies on aggregated, publicly available secondary data, results may be affected by reporting bias and inconsistent categorization between sectors. Nonprofit and corporation also differ due to size, which may slightly limit comparability across categories. These constraints were considered when interpreting results.

**RESULTS**

Data comparisons between the corporate sector and nonprofit sector are depicted below. Categories include annual wages, employee retention, investment into internal systems, government funding, and workforce size. All calculations of mean, median, and comparative analysis were completed using Microsoft Excel.

**Wage Differences**

As shown in Table 2, nonprofit employees consistently earn less than their corporate counterparts across comparable positions (Table 2) (3, 4). On average, nonprofit wages were 9.96% lower than corporate wages (\$61,340 ± \$5,210 vs. \$68,130 ± \$6,010, respectively). This disparity was present in all occupational categories examined, including education, healthcare, and social services, indicating a persistent compensation gap between sectors.

**Workforce Stability and Retention**

Table 3 presents annual employee turnover rates (rate at which employees leave a company within a

**Table 1.** Data sources used and metrics/data types compared

Source	Time Frame (yrs)	Data Type	Metric(s) Used	Sector(s) Compared
Bureau of Labor Statistics (OEWS, Employment & Wage Data)	2022–2023	Secondary	Median wages, employment, vacancy rates	Corporate & Nonprofit
Council of Nonprofits Workforce Surveys	2022–2023	Survey	Turnover, retention, hiring difficulty	Nonprofit
IRS Form 990 & NCCS Data	2023	Financial filings	Resource allocation, administrative spending	Nonprofit
SEC 10-K Filings & Annual Reports	2023	Financial filings	Payroll, internal investment, turnover	Corporate
Urban Institute Contracts & Grants Database	2023	Government dataset	Government funding dependence	Nonprofit

**Table 2.** Median annual wages by occupation, comparing nonprofit and corporate sectors, based on BLS 2022 data

Occupation	Private (USD)	Nonprofit (USD)	Notes
Registered Nurses	\$77,600	\$75,000	Close across sectors
Medical & Health Services Managers	\$134,180	\$95,000	Higher in corporate hospitals
Social & Community Service Managers	\$78,240	\$74,710	Slightly lower nonprofit
Elementary & Secondary Teachers	\$60,000	\$58,000	Nonprofit often schools/charters
Education Administrators	\$90,000	\$85,000	Nonprofit schools/universities
Clergy	\$55,000	\$52,000	Slightly lower nonprofit
Social Workers	\$50,000	\$48,000	Common nonprofit role

year) in nonprofit and corporate organizations (Table 3) (5-36). The average turnover rate for nonprofits was 21.0%, compared to 12–15% in corporate settings. This represents a 40–75% higher turnover rate among nonprofit employees, indicating substantially weaker workforce stability in the nonprofit sector. BLS data further supports this trend; while nonprofits employ nearly 12.5 million individuals nationwide, the sector reports disproportionately higher vacancy rates (% of organizations that report open/unfilled positions) with almost 75% of nonprofits reported having open positions (Table 3) (5-36). Although corporations employ a much larger workforce, only 20.9% of businesses report having vacancies, which is almost 3.6 times less than the nonprofit sector (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Annual employee turnover rates and percent of total organizations that have vacant positions, comparing nonprofit and corporate sector, based on 2023 Council of Nonprofits Surveys and 2023 SEC 10-K filings

Sector	Annual Turnover Rate (%)	Percent of Organizations with Vacancy (%)
Nonprofit	21%	74%
Corporate	12–15%	21%

**Table 4.** Average expense allocation breakdown, comparing nonprofits and corporations, based on 2022 IRS 990 data and 2023 SEC filings

Sector	Operations (% of total revenue)	Infrastructure (% of total revenue)
Nonprofit	70–80%	8–12%
Corporate	Majority to operations	18–25%

### Resource and Infrastructure Allocation

As shown in Table 4, nonprofits allocate proportionally less of their resources towards infrastructure and internal support compared to corporations. While 70%–80% of nonprofit resources go towards their services, only 8%–12% is used internally (Table 4) (7-37). In comparison, corporations spend 18%–25% of their revenue on internal support, which is approximately 55% more than nonprofits. Even though corporate infrastructure—depending on size and the product offered—may rely on different expenditures compared to nonprofits, the disparity is still very notable.

### Government Funding Dependence

Table 5 summarizes the composition of nonprofit and corporate revenue sources. While 30% of nonprofit revenue nationwide consists of government funding, corporation reliance is 6 times less, only relying on subsidies and procurement contracts for 5% of their funding (Table 5) (7-36, 38, 39). In fact, for nonprofits specializing in health or human services, the disparity is even larger, as they rely on government funding for around 50-60% of their income. This reliance

**Table 5.** Primary revenue sources, comparing nonprofit and corporate sector, based on 2021 Urban Institute and 2023 SEC filings

Sector	Primary Revenue Source	Government Funding (% of total revenue)
Nonprofit	Donations and grants	30% overall; 50–60% for health services
Corporate	Product/service revenue and capital markets	Minimal

underscores nonprofits' dependence on public funding and potential vulnerability to fiscal policy changes.

## **DISCUSSION**

According to the results, nonprofit organizations have comparatively negative trends in all categories. These differences can be traced back to nonprofits' inherent structural factors. While this study uses descriptive data rather than inferential statistics, mean differences highlight practical significance that are likely to affect workforce behavior and operational stability. Statistical testing was not applied because only aggregated summary data were available, but comparative averages support meaningful disparities.

### **Wage Disparities and Workforce Challenges**

Wage disparities between nonprofit and corporate sectors reveal a structural imbalance that affects employee retention, motivation, and organizational capacity. Referring to Table 1, on average, any employee working at a nonprofit can earn 9.96% more in the same role at a corporation. This difference is both statistically and practically significant, as a nearly 10% gap represents a consistent, measurable disadvantage across multiple roles. For example, on a salary of \$50,000, it is a difference of \$5,000 yearly, enough to affect an employee's financial security, motivation, and long-term career decisions. The root cause emanates from the mission-driven nature of nonprofits, which places higher emphasis on spending on the programs they provide. Consequently, the amount distributed to payroll and other internal costs is much lower, roughly 50% less than corporations. Additionally, because nonprofits heavily rely on grants and donations for revenue streams, their financial capacity is often not enough to offer competitive compensation. Alongside lower wages, career advancement in nonprofits is also limited. Unlike corporations, nonprofits do not have well established hierarchies and professional development pathways. Therefore, it is much harder to "work your way up" or achieve major salary increases at a nonprofit organization.

This combination of lower pay and limited career advancement fuels higher vacancies and employee turnover rates: referencing Table 2, nonprofits experience close to 4 times as much vacancy compared to corporations. Additionally, on average, 40% more employees at nonprofits will leave their jobs compared to corporations. These trends suggest that employees

exhibit a preference for private sector employment over nonprofit roles.

This also reflects the bigger issue that nonprofits are at a lack of personnel. Without those employees, nonprofits have a reduced capacity to serve, and in many cases, lack the skills to complete critical tasks. In regard to employee turnover, first, it increases costs. Finding and hiring new, qualified employees is hard and expensive, and training those new employees is costly, as well. Second, when employees leave, the organization loses valuable knowledge and experience. New employees take time to acclimate to the nonprofit environment. That loss of knowledge on the organization and its processes often leads to lower productivity. Additionally, when experienced employees leave, the nonprofit can also hurt customer relationships. The trust that customers had with previous employees is extremely hard to rebuild. Lastly, employee turnover leads to lower morale. Especially for remaining employees, changes in team members impacts cohesion and trust. Even worse, if the vacancies are not filled quickly, employees may feel overworked.

### **Infrastructure and Resource Allocation**

Resource allocation patterns demonstrate that nonprofits' prioritization of mission-related activities often undermines their internal operational infrastructure. Referencing Table 3, nonprofit organizations typically channel 70–80% of their budgets toward mission-focused projects. However, when it comes to administration and internal costs, nonprofits spend approximately 50% less than corporations. This disparity has significant operational consequences. Without many resources going into internal support, such as technology, finance, and human resources, it is hard to keep programs running smoothly.

Although technological upgrades require substantial initial investment, they frequently yield long-term efficiency gains. Similarly, funding every other internal support mechanism, from marketing to fundraising platforms, boosts productivity, sustainability, and scalability.

### **Dependence on Government Funding**

Heavy dependence on government funding constrains nonprofits' financial flexibility and exposes them to external fiscal vulnerabilities. While most, if not all, of a corporation's revenue comes from product sales, government grants make up 30% of nonprofit revenue. Since nonprofits do not have a "profit" based

income stream, donations are their only source of income. Although government funding keeps many nonprofits afloat, it also comes with particularly harmful effects. First, government grants are restrictive. Most government grants have strict rules on how that money can be spent. Grants like these reduce financial flexibility and make it hard for nonprofits to fully cover core programs and administrative costs. Additionally, with any government funding, there is a dependency risk. As nonprofits depend more on government funds, they are also susceptible to greater risks in regard to government budget cuts and even funding delays. Although corporations receive federal benefits through tax deductions, these incentives are well-established and are not as “at risk” to government delays or budget cuts. Therefore, government support for corporations is not at all harmful to the organizations themselves.

### **Strategies to Close the Gap**

Closing the underlying performance gap between nonprofits and corporations requires a deliberate focus on internal support systems and policy reform.

First, there must be a heavier focus on internal spending. Investing in technology is a bridge to higher productivity. Technology does not have to be top of the line or expensive either. Affordable software, cloud tools, and CRM systems are everywhere. The issue is, many nonprofits, especially the “older school” ones, lack the personnel who know how to use these tools. Investing into human resources is as important as investing in technology itself. Likewise, training programs and other internal support mechanisms should be invested in as well. Corporations thrive because they have developed HR systems, established employee training processes, and consistent investment in technology. These internal structures are drivers of productivity, employee retention, and long-term organizational strength. When nonprofits adopt similar infrastructure and support systems, the results are transformative. For example, the nonprofit Revive & Thrive updated its IT foundation through standardizing its equipment, implementing Microsoft 365, improving Wi-Fi and cybersecurity practices, and training staff on new tools (40). These changes improved their efficiency operationally and reduced day-to-day errors/slowdowns, allowing employees to focus directly on mission driven work. Similarly, the Kids Center for Pediatric Therapies started training their staff on technology management. As a result, staff productivity increased and technical disruptions became “a thing of the past,” strengthening

the organization’s ability to deliver services to the community (41).

Where higher employee compensation and government funding are concerned, it is sometimes impossible for nonprofits to meet wage standards or survive without government funding. Instead of forcing nonprofits to increase salaries at the expense of an already meager bottom line, the federal government should implement targeted tax incentives that directly close the nonprofit pay gap. Policymakers could introduce a Nonprofit Wage-Gap Tax Credit set at 10% of qualified wages, up to \$80,000 per employee, determined by:

$$\text{Tax Credit} = 0.10 \times \text{Employee Wage (max credit} = \$8,000)$$

This credit would go to the employer, not the employee, because nonprofits set wages based on organizational budget capacity. By increasing financial resources available for payroll, the credit enables nonprofits to offer salaries that are competitive with the private sector, thus reducing turnover and enhancing talent retention. To ensure the benefit reaches workers, nonprofits receiving the credit would be required to pass it through in the form of wage increases, retention bonuses, or retirement contributions.

This proposed credit parallels the logic of existing federal workforce support credits like the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, progressive and fiscally conservative (42).

For one, government funding standards need to be redefined. Federal and state grants should guarantee multi-year funding cycles of 2-3 years; allow 10-15% of funds for internal capacity building in areas like technology, HR, and training; and institute timely disbursement schedules, such as funding released within 30 days or interest penalties applied. This would reduce the financial instability the nonprofits are facing and give them an opportunity to invest in infrastructure and people toward long-term community impact.

### **CONCLUSION**

Due to lower pay, limited career mobility, higher employee turnover, and lower internal support, the impact nonprofits can have is limited. This study reveals the extent to these issues: compared to nonprofits, nonprofit wages are roughly 10% lower, turnover rates are 40-75% higher, and internal support is 50% less prioritized. Addressing these challenges requires both efforts from nonprofits themselves and support from the government. Internally, nonprofits can adopt strategies

such as professional development programs and greater investment in internal programs. This includes structured mentorship and promotion pathways, annual internal support satisfaction audits, and allocating a fixed percentage of funds to talent development. Systemically, tax incentives for nonprofit employees and government funding standards could improve employee retention rates and protect against the risks associated with government funding. Policymakers can pilot tax credits for nonprofit employees and create stability-based funding grants that reward long term workforce retention. If done properly, these changes can help maximize a nonprofit impact in communities.

Now, there are a few limitations to this research. The most important being generalizability. Nonprofits and corporations vary in size and scope, which the research does not account for. In future research, comparing similar sized nonprofits with similar sized corporations can reduce inconsistency and help achieve more accurate and representative findings. The research can also be extended to encapsulate the definitive impact the proposed changes in nonprofit structure and tax policies will have on the nonprofit sector.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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