Construction Laborers

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**Significant Points**

- Many construction laborer jobs require a variety of basic skills, but others require specialized training and experience.
- Most construction laborers learn on the job, but formal apprenticeship programs provide the most thorough preparation.
- Job opportunities vary by locality, but in many areas there will be competition, especially for jobs requiring limited skills.
- Laborers who have specialized skills or who can relocate near new construction projects should have the best opportunities.

**Nature of the Work**

Construction laborers can be found on almost all construction sites performing a wide range of tasks from the very easy to the potentially hazardous. They can be found at building, highway, and heavy construction sites; residential and commercial sites; tunnel and shaft excavations; and demolition sites. Many of the jobs they perform require physical strength, training, and experience. Other jobs require little skill and can be learned in a short amount of time. While most construction laborers specialize in a type of construction, such as highway or tunnel construction, some are generalists who perform many different tasks during all stages of construction. Construction laborers, who work in underground construction, such as in tunnels, or in demolition are more likely to specialize in only those areas.

Construction laborers clean and prepare construction sites. They remove trees and debris, tend pumps, compressors and generators, and build forms for pouring concrete. They erect and disassemble scaffolding and other temporary structures. They load, unload, identify, and distribute building materials to the appropriate location according to project plans and specifications. Laborers also tend machines; for example, they may mix concrete using a portable mixer or tend a machine that pumps concrete, grout, cement, sand, plaster, or stucco through a spray gun for application to ceilings and walls. They often help other craftworkers, including carpenters, plasterers, operating engineers, and masons.

Construction laborers are responsible for oversight of the installation and maintenance of traffic control devices and patterns. At highway construction sites, this work may include clearing and preparing highway work zones and rights of way; installing traffic barricades, cones, and markers; and controlling traffic passing near, in, and around work zones. They also dig trenches, install sewer, water, and storm drain pipes, and place concrete and asphalt on roads. Other highly specialized tasks include operating laser guidance equipment to place pipes; operating air, electric, and pneumatic drills; and transporting and setting explosives for tunnel, shaft, and road construction.

Some construction laborers help with the removal of hazardous materials, such as asbestos, lead, or chemicals. (Workers who specialize in and are certified for the removal of hazardous materials are discussed in the *Handbook* statement on hazardous materials removal workers.)

Construction laborers operate a variety of equipment including pavement breakers; jackhammers; earth tampers; concrete, mortar, and plaster mixers; electric and hydraulic boring machines; torches; small mechanical hoists; laser beam equipment; and surveying and measuring equipment. They may use computers and other high-tech input devices to control robotic pipe cutters and cleaners. To perform their jobs effectively, construction laborers must be familiar with the duties of other craftworkers and with the materials, tools, and machinery they use.

Construction laborers often work as part of a team with other skilled craftworkers, jointly carrying out assigned construction tasks. At other times, construction laborers may work alone, reading and interpreting instructions, plans, and specifications with little or no supervision.

**Work environment.** Most laborers do physically demanding work. They may lift and carry heavy objects, and stoop, kneel, crouch, or crawl in awkward positions. Some work at great heights, or outdoors in all weather conditions. Some jobs expose workers to harmful materials or chemicals, fumes, odors, loud noise, or dangerous machinery. Some laborers may be exposed to lead-based paint, asbestos, or other hazardous substances during their work especially when working in confined spaces. To avoid injury, workers in these jobs wear safety clothing, such as gloves, hardhats, protective chemical suits, and devices to protect their eyes, respiratory system, or hearing. While working in underground construction, construction laborers must be especially alert to safely follow procedures and must deal with a variety of hazards.

Construction laborers generally work 8-hour shifts, although longer shifts are common. Overnight work may be required when working on highways. In some parts of the country, construction laborers may work only during certain seasons. They may also experience weather-related work stoppages at any time of the year.

**Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement**

Many construction laborer jobs require a variety of basic skills, but others require specialized training and experience. Most
construction laborers learn on the job, but formal apprentice-
ship programs provide the most thorough preparation.

**Education and training.** While some construction laborer
jobs have no specific educational qualifications or entry-level
training, apprenticeships for laborers require a high school di-
ploma or equivalent. High school classes in English, mathe-
matics, physics, mechanical drawing, blueprint reading, weld-
ing, and general shop can be helpful.

Most workers start by getting a job with a contractor who
provides on-the-job training. Increasingly, construction la-
borers find work through temporary help agencies that send
laborers to construction sites for short-term work. Entry-level
workers generally help more experienced workers. They per-
dom routine tasks, such as cleaning and preparing the work-
site and unloading materials. When the opportunity arises,
they learn from experienced construction trades workers how
to do more difficult tasks, such as operating tools and equip-
ment. Construction laborers may also choose or be required
to attend a trade or vocational school or community college to
receive further trade-related training.

Some laborers receive more formal training. A number
of employers, particularly large nonresidential construction
contractors with union membership, offer employees formal
apprenticeships, which provide the best preparation. These
programs include between 2 and 4 years of classroom and
on-the-job training. In the first 200 hours, workers learn ba-
cic construction skills such as blueprint reading, the correct
use of tools and equipment, and safety and health procedures.

The remainder of the curriculum consists of specialized skills
training in three of the largest segments of the construction
industry: building construction, heavy and highway construc-
tion, and environmental remediation, such as lead or asbestos
abatement, and mold or hazardous waste remediation.

Workers who use dangerous equipment or handle toxic
chemicals usually receive specialized safety training. La-
borers who remove hazardous materials are required to take
union or employer-sponsored Occupational Safety and Health
Administration safety training.

Apprenticeship applicants usually must be at least 18 years
old and meet local requirements. Because the number of ap-
prenticeship programs is limited, however, only a small pro-
portion of laborers learn their trade in this way.

**Other qualifications.** Laborers need manual dexterity, eye-
hand coordination, good physical fitness, a good sense of bal-
ance, and an ability to work as a member of a team. The
 ability to solve arithmetic problems quickly and accurately
may be required. In addition, military service or a good work
history is viewed favorably by contractors.

**Certification and advancement.** Laborers may earn cer-
tifications in welding, scaffold erecting, and concrete finish-
ing. These certifications help workers prove that they have the
knowledge to perform more complex tasks.

Through training and experience, laborers can move into
other construction occupations. Laborers may also advance
to become construction supervisors or general contractors.

**Employment**

Construction laborers held about 1.2 million jobs in 2006.
They worked throughout the country but, like the general
population, were concentrated in metropolitan areas. About
67 percent of construction laborers work in the construction
industry, including 30 percent who work for specialty trade
contractors. About 17 percent were self-employed in 2006.

**Job Outlook**

Employment is expected to grow about as fast as the average.
In many areas, there will be competition for jobs, especially
for those requiring limited skills. Laborers who have special-
ized skills or who can relocate near new construction projects
should have the best opportunities.

**Employment change.** Employment of construction la-
borers is expected to grow by 11 percent between 2006 and 2016,
about as fast as the average for all occupations. The construc-
tion industry in general is expected to grow more slowly than
it has in recent years. Due to the large variety of tasks that
laborers perform, demand for laborers will mirror the level of
overall construction activity.

Construction laborer jobs will be adversely affected by au-
tomation as some jobs are replaced by new machinery and
equipment that improves productivity and quality. Also, la-
borers will be increasingly employed by staffing agencies that
will contract out laborers to employers on a temporary basis,
and in many areas employers will continue to rely on day la-
borers instead of full-time laborers on staff.

**Job prospects.** In many geographic areas there will be com-
petition, especially for jobs requiring limited skills, due to a
plentiful supply of workers who are willing to work as day
laborers. In other areas, however, opportunities will be better.
Overall opportunities will be best for those with experience and specialized skills and for those who can relocate to areas with new construction projects. Opportunities will also be better for laborers specializing in road construction.

Employment of construction laborers, like that of many other construction workers, is sensitive to the fluctuations of the economy. Workers in these trades may experience periods of unemployment when the overall level of construction falls. On the other hand, shortages of these workers may occur in some areas during peak periods of building activity.

**Earnings**
Median hourly earnings of wage and salary construction laborers in May 2006 were $12.66. The middle 50 percent earned between $9.95 and $17.31. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $8.16, and the highest 10 percent earned more than $24.19. Median hourly earnings in the industries employing the largest number of construction laborers were as follows:

- Nonresidential building construction: $13.62
- Other specialty trade contractors: $12.93
- Residential building construction: $12.82
- Foundation, structure, and building exterior contractors: $12.41
- Employment services: $9.90

Earnings for construction laborers can be reduced by poor weather or by downturns in construction activity, which sometimes result in layoffs. Apprentices or helpers usually start out earning about 60 percent of the wage rate paid to experienced workers. Pay increases as apprentices gain experience and learn new skills. Some laborers belong to the Laborers’ International Union of North America.

**Related Occupations**
The work of construction laborers is closely related to other construction occupations. Other workers who perform similar physical work include persons in material moving occupations; forest, conservation, and logging workers; and grounds maintenance workers.

**Sources of Additional Information**
For information about jobs as a construction laborer, contact local building or construction contractors, local joint labor-management apprenticeship committees, apprenticeship agencies, or the local office of your State Employment Service. You can also find information on the registered apprenticeships together with links to State apprenticeship programs on the U.S. Department of Labor’s Web site: [http://www.doleta.gov/atels_bat](http://www.doleta.gov/atels_bat) Apprenticeship information is also available from the U.S. Department of Labor’s toll-free helpline: (877) 872-5627. For general information on apprenticeships and how to get them, see the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* article “Apprenticeships: Career training, credentials—and a paycheck in your pocket,” online at [http://www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2002/summer/art01.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2002/summer/art01.pdf) and in print at many libraries and career centers.

For information on education programs for laborers, contact:
- Laborers-AGC Education and Training Fund, 37 Deerfield Rd., P.O. Box 37, Pomfret Center, CT 06259.
  Internet: [http://www.laborerslearn.org](http://www.laborerslearn.org)
- National Center for Construction Education and Research, P.O. Box 141104, Gainesville, FL 32614-1104.
  Internet: [http://www.nccer.org](http://www.nccer.org)