

Unemployment in Fresno County reaches 8-year low

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Unemployment in Fresno County continued to show year-over-year improvement, as the unemployment rate in September dipped to 8.1 percent, its lowest point in eight years.

That rate represents a drop from 8.8 percent in August and 9.7 percent in September 2014, the [California Employment Development Department](#) reported Friday. It was the fifth consecutive month in which [Fresno County's unemployment](#) rate has been below 10 percent, and extended a run of 49 straight months in which the county's monthly jobless rate has improved from where it was a year earlier.

The number of people out of work in the county also fell last month to levels not seen since late 2007, in the earliest stages of economic recession. About 35,700 people in the available labor force were unemployed in September, according to EDD estimates. The last time there were that few people out of work was in October 2007, when the number was 34,400. A year ago, in September 2014, about 45,500 people were out of work.

Steven Gutierrez, an EDD labor market consultant in Fresno, said the September numbers likely represent the lowest rates that Fresno County will see this year before they start edging upward in the fall and winter.

"It's going to be interesting next month" when the October figures are reported, Gutierrez said. "We may stay in the single digits, but historically we usually see losses of 10,000 to 12,000 jobs, in a month-to-month change, in farm employment between September and October."

During the worst of the recession, in February 2010, Fresno County's unemployment rate stood at 18.4 percent, while the out-of-work population peaked at almost 81,000 in January 2011.

Similar patterns were reported in neighboring Valley counties, with unemployment rates ranging from a low of 7.7 percent in Madera County to a high of 9.9 percent in Tulare County. Both counties' rates were a full percentage point lower than August.

In Fresno County, seasonal farm employment fell by about 4,100 positions from August levels, coinciding with a wind-down in crop harvests including table grapes and the end of nectarine production. Those seasonal losses were partially offset by a net gain of about 2,700 jobs in non-farm industries.

The largest month-over-month gains from August to September were about 2,200 jobs in government, most from the return of public school and college instructors to classrooms after the summer break; about 600 jobs in the leisure/hospitality sector; and 500 positions in private-sector education/health services.

The construction sector saw a decline of about 200 jobs between August and September, while trade/transportation/utilities lost about 300 positions, the EDD estimated. The state's industry employment figures are based on surveys of employers.

On a year-over-year basis, Gutierrez said the leisure/hospitality industry – a sector that includes hotels, restaurants, bars and other recreation services – gained 2,300 jobs since September 2014, bringing the total number of workers in that field to nearly 33,000. That represents the largest year-over-year gain so far this year in the sector as well as the biggest September since 2006.

"Usually we see those gains in trade/transportation/utilities, which includes retail, but maybe we're seeing in leisure a shift with people having a little more discretionary income to spend," he said.

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Steven Gutierrez, EDD labor market consultant

Retail stores continued to show year-over-year improvement for the 41st consecutive month, Gutierrez added, and that potentially could continue through the rest of the year as the holiday season approaches.

"There are some national reports that suggest we may not see as big a gain as in the past because more people are shopping online and less in brick-and-mortar stores," he said. "We had a pretty strong October, November and December last year (in retail), so we'll have to see how it works out this year."

Unemployment rates are based on a federal survey of about 5,500 California households to estimate the size of the workforce and numbers of people working and out of work. Fresno County's workforce was estimated at 441,400, about 6,000 fewer than in August. The number of people working was about 405,700, a reduction of 2,100 from the previous month. But the number of jobless people fell even faster, forcing the unemployment rate lower.

The unemployment rate and figures don't account for how many people may be working part-time instead of full-time, or people who have given up their search for work and are no longer counted as part of the workforce.

[California's statewide unemployment rate](#) fell to 5.9 percent for September, down from 6.1 percent in August and the first time it dropped below 6 percent since November 2007. A year earlier, in September 2014, the state unemployment rate was 7.3 percent. Nationally, the U.S. unemployment rate for September was unchanged at 5.1 percent.

Despite California's falling unemployment rate, the pace of employment growth statewide was considerably slower last month. The EDD reported that the state added about 8,200 non-farm jobs between August and September, compared to a gain of about 42,000 jobs between July and August. The number of jobs has grown by about 444,300 in California since September 2014, bringing the number of people working to almost 17.9 million, including about 16.2 million in non-farm jobs. An estimated 1.1 million are out of work across the state.

About 343,400 people in California were receiving unemployment insurance benefits last month, down by more than 24,000 from August. New claims for unemployment also declined by about 2,500 between August and September.

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