

2008 Salary Survey: Sunlight on Coders' Compensation

Ask coders what they do and how much they make, and their answers are as varied as how sensitive to the sun they are. Some are easy burners, with salaries and careers that show the results of outside forces quickly. Some are seemingly immune to the forces that buffet our careers. All-in-all, we're doing pretty well; and, it appears that average salaries have **increased more than 11 percent** since our survey in 2007.

Sunning the Fruit Trees

This year's survey was completed by more coders than ever and conducted via the internet during July and August. Over 12,000 coders participated. Like trees in the sun, the information continues to bear fruit, but here are some highlights.

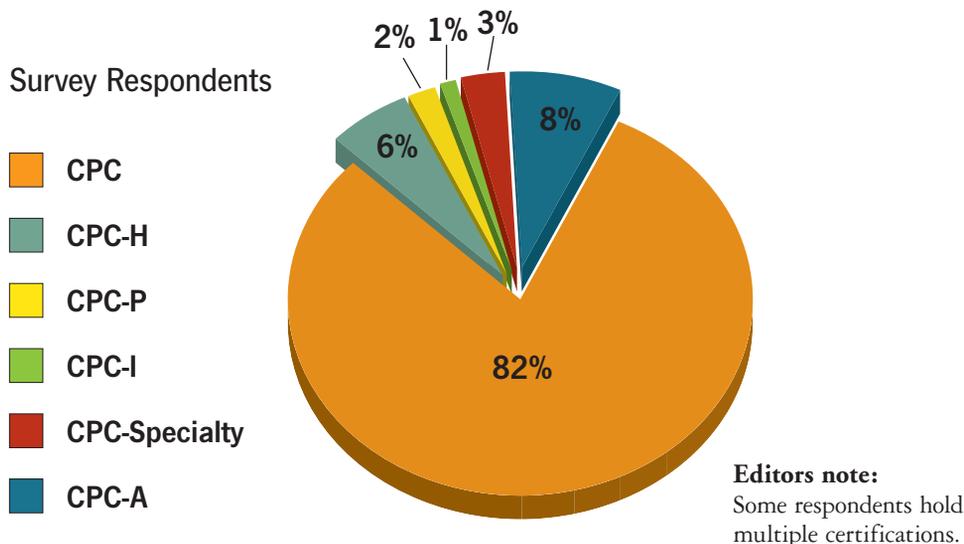
More than 45 percent of respondents bear titles indicating they are coding professionals. Those who coordinate, manage, or supervise billing make up 13 percent. Practice managers represent 10 percent of the survey while those who assure accuracy and compliance make up five percent of those responding to the survey. The remainders were consultants and a wide variety of other titles.

How qualified are we? A striking 89 percent of respondents have a CPC®, CPC-H®, CPC-P®, or CPC-A®. We are educated, too, as shown below:

- 18 percent having a bachelor's degree or above
- 69 percent having attended some college

While CPCs® made up 82 percent of the survey's respondents, members also exhibited other certifications. Those with specialty certification include three percent of those surveyed. Other certifications respondents hold include CCS, RHIT, CTR, and others.

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Some of the results were surprising:

- **Certification is still optional for many.** Certification is required for only half of us in our current jobs; however, up from the 42 percent reported in the 2007 survey.
- **We stay at our desks.** Two-thirds of us aren't allowed to work from home but nearly a third may work from home some of the time.
- **Most of us still code from paper.** Those who code all procedures from medical records make up 64 percent and those who code from a paper billing forms make up 25 percent of the respondents. In fact, only 10 percent of our respondents code from electronic health records. This fits with CMS's report that only 13% of physicians had an electronic health records system.
- **We are working average weeks.** Although some days it may not seem like it, 60 percent of coders work less than 40 hours a week. But that means 40 percent work more than 40 hours a week.
- **Coders still do most of the coding.** Fifty four percent of our respondents do not use computer assisted coding (CAC). A growing number—27 percent—do.
- **We're working regular schedules.** The number of members who have opportunities for flex-time is down to 50 percent this year compared to 52 percent last year.

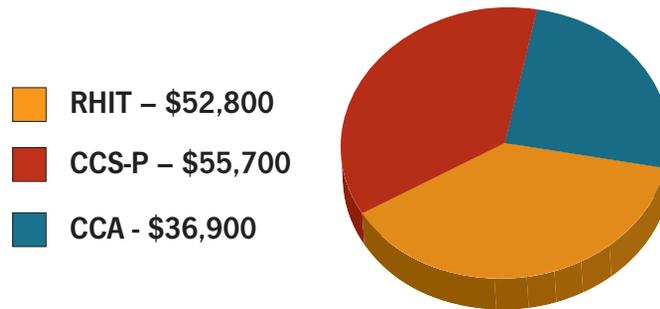
\$43,100 in a Sunny Market

The average annual wage for a credentialed coder is **\$43,100**, compared to **\$36,500** for a noncredentialed coder. But when we consider other factors, the complicated forces yield a surprisingly narrow range of results. Overall, the average range for most coders is \$39,400 to \$46,500.

The survey indicated that compensation differences result from several influences: employer, training, work sites, schedules, complexity of the coding being done, and geographical location. For example, business size impacts your average salary, certified or not. Those who work for larger employers tend to get paid more.

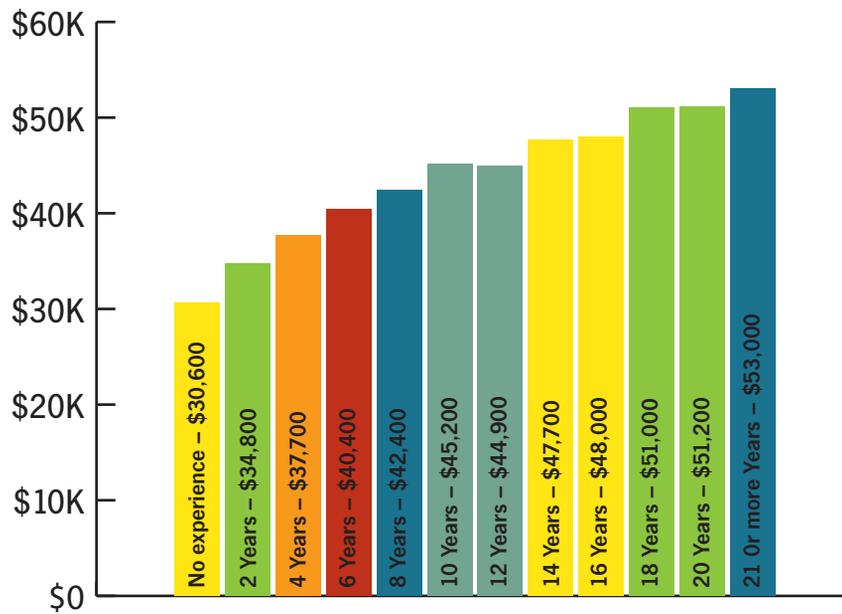


By comparison, the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) shows average salaries for AHIMA-credentialed coders, most of whom work in hospitals, as below:



How Hot is Your Specialty?

Experience in our field also matters with almost a steady increase as years of experience are gained; as shown in the table below:



Average salaries by hour to use as a comparison are as follows:

- \$14.73 per hour when your start
- \$19.33 per hour after five years in the field.
- \$21.75 per hour after 10 years in the field.
- \$23.37 per hour after 15 years in the field.

Which Side Gets the Most Sun?

It's no surprise that the specialty for which you code influences average salary levels. There are a lot of factors that impact your salary. But based on our data, the top five earners may surprise you.

- 1. Neuropsychiatry\$62,500
- 2. Rheumatology.....\$57,800
- 3. Nephrology\$50,900
- 4. Plastic surgery.....\$47,200
- 5. Interventional radiology.....\$47,100

Wait! That can't be right! We've always believed physicians paid coders based proportionally on what the physicians earned. Yet, according to our survey, the range of compensation for most specialties is within a few thousand dollars of their peers. Here are some examples in Table 1.

What's the Sunniest Region?

Our salaries prove to be as affected by our location as our exposure to the sun. Some states provide more sun to coders. Not only is this a function of cost of living and population, it results from the mix of workplaces and specialties that make up the coding workforces in a particular state. Regions rank by average salary Shown in Table 2.

Table 1

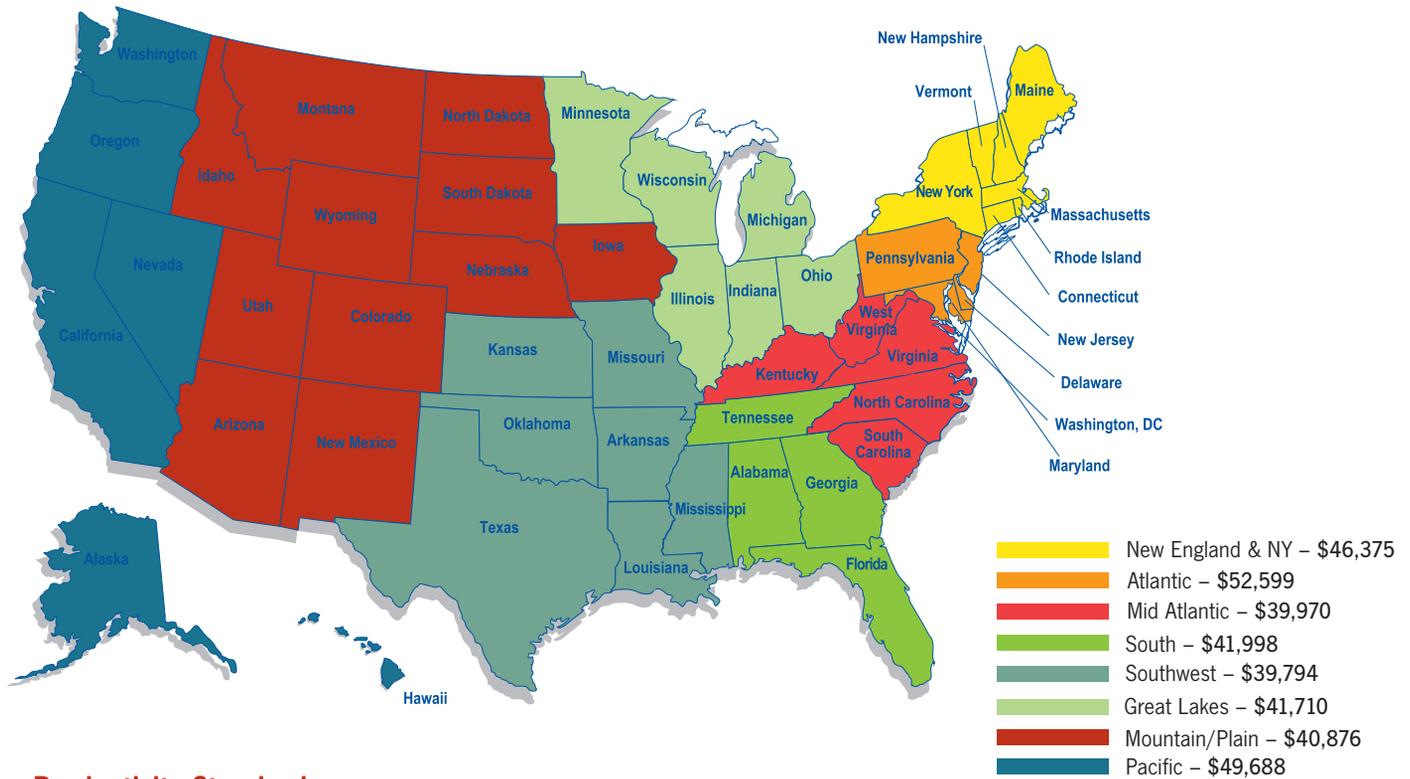
Specialty	Average Salary coder	Average salary physician*
Anesthesia	\$42,200	\$344,691
Cardiology	\$44,100	\$370,295
Dermatology	\$41,500	\$316,473
Emergency medicine	\$42,068	\$255,530
Family practice	\$40,850	\$185,740
Gastroenterology	\$41,000	\$356,388
General surgery	\$43,500	\$327,902
Hematology/oncology	\$44,246	\$280,339
Internal medicine	\$43,750	\$193,162
Neurology	\$43,200	\$222,998
Obstetrics/gynecology	\$42,343	\$297,887
Ophthalmology	\$43,950	\$295,510
Orthopaedic surgery	\$42,850	\$436,481
Otolaryngology	\$42,971	\$327,399
Pediatric	\$44,700	\$185,913
Urology	\$45,300	\$365,999

American Medical Group Association 2007 physician salary survey
http://www.cejkasearch.com/compensation/amga_physician_compensation_survey.htm

Table 2

Region	2007 Avg. Salary	2008 Avg. Salary	% Increase
Atlantic	\$45,000	\$52,599	17%
Pacific	\$42,333	\$49,688	17%
New England and NY	\$39,000	\$46,375	19%
South	\$35,250	\$41,998	19%
Great Lakes	\$35,667	\$41,710	17%
Mountain/Plain	\$36,273	\$40,876	13%
Mid Atlantic	\$36,000	\$39,970	11%
Southwest	\$34,714	\$39,794	15%

This map details the regions and their average salaries:



Productivity Standards

Our respondents say productivity isn't typically measured. Eighty-three percent of respondents aren't required to meet productivity standards for coding from operative reports, and 85 percent don't have to code a minimum number of evaluation and management visits.

We can present average benchmarks by specialty in those specialties where we received sufficient responses to be statistically accurate. While the data was not as voluminous as desired, below are a few specialties where we received enough responses on the benchmark standards for coding and billing operative reports per hour.

Your own work may vary from these, however, we believe we received enough responses to help assist your personal productivity goals.

As we learn more from this data, we will make it available. Whether you're a starting or experienced coder, moving from one venue to another, or just curious about where you compare with the averages, this information is important.

"This information is very helpful to employers and coders," Reed Pew, CEO and President of AAPC said. "I was surprised by some of it – for example, that the Atlantic region is the highest compensated region, and that for most specialties, the pay amounts were quite comparable. However, most important was the 18 percent difference between non-certified coders and certified coders and the increase in wages for coders since last year. It is our belief that employers that employ certified coders improve their accuracy of billings and cash flow and reduce their risk of audit by engaging certified coders; and by more than 18 percent. There is a solid return on investment for those that certify their coders." Visit www.aapc.com for more information about this survey. 

Operating Reports Coded Per Hour

