This country’s 16.3 million labor union members accounted for only 13.5% of all workers in 2000, continuing the downward trend from the 20.1% membership rate reported in 1983 (the first year in which comparable data were available). Today, union membership is highest in protective services (39.4%) and government (37.5%). Geographically, higher membership rates are concentrated in the Midwest, Northeast, and Pacific regions, where rates are far above the national average of 13.5%.

Except for workers 65 and older, union membership dropped in all age groups throughout the 1990s, but the largest drop occurred in the 55–64 group between 1990 and 1995. This presumably resulted from workforce reductions, since companies that wish to downsize frequently offer early retirement to employees in this age group.

Union members’ median weekly earnings consistently outpace those of nonunion workers. In general, workers who are unionized earn $154 per week more than those who are not. In every category of gender or race, union members earn more than their nonunion counterparts. Women and Hispanics seem to benefit the most from union membership, with female members earning an average of $144 more each week than female nonmembers, and Hispanics gaining an average of $207 per week with union membership.