logo Image not found or type unknown

New BLS Data Show USVI Jobs Rose 1.2% in First Quarter as Wage Growth Lagged Nation

New BLS data show USVI jobs covered by unemployment insurance rose 1.2% to 34,900 in March, while average weekly wages increased just 1.5% to $1,054, trailing the 3.9% national wage gain and the U.S. weekly average of $1,654 in the first quarter of 2026.

Economy / **Published On September 05, 2026 07:21 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert September 05, 2026

Image not found or type unknown

Construction workers pour concrete at an active jobsite, illustrating a sector that has been a major driver of recent employment growth in the U.S. Virgin Islands as new BLS data show jobs rising 1.2 percent year over year. **By. GETTY IMAGES.**

The number of jobs captured by one of the federal government’s broadest employment datasets increased in the U.S. Virgin Islands during the first quarter of 2026, even as wage growth in the territory remained well behind the national pace.

New figures released Friday by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show approximately 34,900 jobs in the Virgin Islands in March, up 1.2 percent from March 2025. National employment measured through the same program increased just 0.1 percent over the year.

The figures come from BLS's Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, known as QCEW. The program primarily uses unemployment-insurance records submitted by employers and, in the Virgin Islands data, counts workers covered by unemployment insurance and the federal unemployment compensation program for federal employees. BLS refers to these jobs as "covered employment."

That means the 34,900 figure should not be interpreted as a count of every person working in the Virgin Islands. It is an employer-based measure of jobs within the programs covered by QCEW, which BLS uses as one of its principal sources for tracking employment and wages.

The latest figures nevertheless provide a more favorable reading of the territory's employment base than several other recent labor-market indicators: under QCEW, Virgin Islands jobs increased over the year and did so at a faster rate than the nation.

Wage Grew Much More Slowly Than Nationally

The wage numbers were less favorable.

Average weekly wages in the Virgin Islands stood at $1,054 during the first quarter of 2026, up 1.5 percent from a year earlier. Nationally, the average weekly wage reached $1,654 and increased 3.9 percent.

The Virgin Islands average was therefore $600 per week below the national figure, while the rate at which wages increased in the territory was less than half the national pace.

Those figures do not mean every mainland employee earned $600 more each week than a Virgin Islands worker, nor do they mean individual USVI employees received raises averaging exactly 1.5 percent. Average wages can move because of changes in pay, hours, employment levels and the mix of industries and workers represented in the data.

The figures also are not adjusted for differences in the cost of living. They therefore do not establish whether Virgin Islands workers gained or lost purchasing power during the period.

What they do show is that average pay increased considerably more slowly in the territory than nationally during the first three months of 2026.

Puerto Rico Lost Jobs but Recorded Faster Wage Growth

Puerto Rico presented a different combination.

BLS counted approximately 944,500 jobs there in March, down 0.8 percent from a year earlier. Average weekly wages were substantially lower than in the Virgin Islands, at $724, but increased 3.4 percent over the year — more than twice the 1.5 percent growth recorded in the USVI.

The comparison illustrates why employment growth and wage growth do not necessarily move together.

The Virgin Islands recorded more jobs under the QCEW measure and slower wage growth. Puerto Rico recorded fewer jobs but stronger growth in average weekly wages.

Separate Monthly Payroll Data Show a Weaker Trend

The new QCEW figures should also be considered alongside another BLS employment series that has recently shown a less favorable picture for the territory.

BLS's monthly Current Employment Statistics program, or CES, currently estimates that the Virgin Islands had 32,400 nonfarm wage and salary jobs in March 2026, down 3.9 percent from March 2025.

That monthly series shows the year-over-year decline becoming larger later in the year. Total nonfarm employment stood at 32,200 in June, down 6.1 percent from a year earlier, and a preliminary 31,800 in July, down 6.5 percent.

Those figures should not be treated as evidence that BLS is simultaneously declaring that the same employment measure both rose and fell.

The QCEW and CES programs are related, but BLS says they do not report exactly the same information or operate at the same frequency. QCEW relies primarily on unemployment-insurance administrative records and produces quarterly employment and wage counts. CES surveys businesses and government agencies to produce more timely monthly estimates of nonfarm payroll employment.

The two systems are closely connected. BLS uses QCEW administrative records extensively when it conducts its annual benchmarking of the monthly payroll estimates, effectively re-anchoring those sample-based figures to much fuller employer records once they become available.

For that reason, the separate monthly payroll data remain important context, but they do not negate Friday's QCEW finding. The programs have different coverage, timing and estimation procedures and can produce different readings before later revisions and benchmarking.

One-Year Growth Does Not Erase Longer-Term Decline

The 1.2 percent increase also does not contradict federal data showing that the Virgin Islands lost jobs over a longer period.

As the Consortium reported in August, an updated economic profile from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York showed Virgin Islands employment declining 5.7 percent over the five years through 2024. Puerto Rico recorded 8.4 percent job growth over the same period, while the United States grew 4.7 percent.

A labor market can decline substantially over several years and then register growth during a more recent 12-month period without recovering all of the jobs previously lost.

The New York Fed's five-year figure and Friday's QCEW release therefore describe different time periods. The former shows the longer trajectory through 2024; the latter indicates that jobs covered by the QCEW program increased between March 2025 and March 2026.

At the same time, the continuing decline in BLS's monthly payroll estimates suggests that the territory's labor-market direction remains more complicated than the new 1.2 percent figure alone might indicate.

A Mixed First-Quarter Picture

Taken together, Friday’s figures provide both encouraging and cautionary signals.

The Virgin Islands recorded 1.2 percent year-over-year job growth under QCEW, substantially better than the 0.1 percent national increase under the same measure. That represents a clear improvement over the March-to-March period captured by the newly released federal records.

But wages did not keep pace with the national trend. Average weekly pay remained $600 below the U.S. average and increased at less than half the national rate.

And outside the new quarterly release, BLS’s more timely monthly payroll estimates continue to show employment contracting through July, while the New York Fed’s longer-term analysis shows the territory entered the current period after losing jobs over the preceding five years.

The result is a labor market showing signs of growth under the newest quarterly employer records, but with weaker wage gains and other federal measures that continue to warrant scrutiny as additional 2026 data become available.