

# Columbia County profile

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*[Overview](#) | [Geographic facts](#) | [Outlook](#) | [Labor force and unemployment](#) | [Industry employment](#) | [Wages and income](#) | [Population](#) | [Useful links](#)*

## Overview

### **Regional context**

Columbia County was carved out of Walla Walla County in 1875. The county covers only 868.59 square miles of land, ranking 31st in size among Washington's 39 counties. Columbia County is located in southeastern Washington, borders the Oregon state line to its south, Whitman County and the Snake River to its north, Walla Walla County to its west and Garfield County to its east. Columbia County has the third-smallest population in the state with population density of 4.5 people per square mile. The County is mostly agricultural land that has specialized in farming, especially wheat, asparagus and green peas as well as ranching and logging. Today, agriculture and food processing are still dominant along with food manufacturing and local government.

### **Local economy**

The Columbia County area was home to many tribes including Palouse, Nez Perce, Yakama, Wanapum, Walla Walla, and Umatilla. Breeding, trading and selling horses was a central part of tribal existence. Later, trading became one of the primary economic activities as fur and goods trading companies moved into the area with pioneers. As pioneers started settling in the area, agricultural and ranching activities prospered as demand for produce and meats grew with new influx of gold rush pioneers.

Due to employment activities primarily centered in agriculture and government, Columbia County has had a marginally stable economy. Nevertheless, employment activities have developed a small seasonal pattern for the past five years mainly due to new wind projects such as Hopkins Ridge, Marengo and the Dayton wind farms. Recent work has been started to reestablish food processing in the county with the new Blue Mountain Station project. This project will serve as a food processing business incubator, blending sustainable, locally grown produce with food and organic food production.

Ski Bluewood, the local ski area, changed in ownership to ensure the local ski area continued to operate. This local skiing facility is an important source of tourism and seasonal employment for residents across the region. Local micro manufacturing and retail sectors are bouncing back and sprouting a new entrepreneurial environment, which is greatly contributing to local economic stability. One of the largest developments in the County has been the Columbia Pulp manufacturing plant. Columbia Pulp is North America's first tree-free market pulp mill, using wheat farmers' waste straw to create pulp for paper products as well as bio-polymers for a variety of industrial uses. This will be the staple of the Columbia Pulp employment growth in the near future.

## Geographic facts

	Columbia County	Rank in state
Land area, 2020 (square miles)	868.59	31
People per square mile, 2020	4.5	36

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

## Outlook

In Columbia County, health care and social assistance is a dominant industry in both public and private sectors. Per U.S. Census estimates, about 18.9 percent of civilian employed residents 16 years and older are working in the health care and social assistance industry, regardless of which county they work in, Columbia or nearby. This industry has continued to grow at a 5.6 percent rate per year for the past three years. Demand for the health care and social industry sector continues to grow, and it will be one of the front-runners of county economic growth. However, there are some changes in health care service delivery that will be changing workforce structure and demand for the industry.

Over the years, commodity-based industries have contributed to Columbia County growth. The agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting industry has expanded for three of the past four years, increasing its employment share in the county. It was estimated that about 10.9 percent of total resident labor force is employed in the agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting industry per U.S. Census estimates. The wheat crop is in high demand and has been very profitable in the past couple of years. Commodities across most markets have continued to benefit from changing levels of global trade, demand and monetary valuations. Over the year there were slight decreases in agricultural employment, however there are many self-employed farmers that did the work themselves instead of hiring a crew.

Construction was another expanding industry with three-year average annual growth of 21.2 percent. Most of the three-year job growth was in 2019, which added 79 new jobs to the county.

Columbia County is part of the Eastern Washington workforce development area, which has annual projections for employment growth at 2.0 percent through 2022.

Source: Employment Security Department/DATA Division; County data tables

## Labor force and unemployment

Current labor force and unemployment statistics are available on the [Labor area summaries](#) page on ESD's labor market information website.

In 2021, Columbia County's civilian labor force totaled 1,812, which is an increase of 1.5 percent from 2020. The number employed increased by 3.4 percent to 1,717 in 2021 from 1,661 in 2020. The Columbia County unemployment rate decreased by 1.8 percent over the year.

## Industry employment

Current industry employment statistics are available on the [Labor area summaries](#) page on ESD's labor market information website.

Columbia County hosted some 1,399 jobs in 2020, a 6.0 percent decrease from 2019. Total covered payrolls were \$68.0 million, which increased by 1.4 percent from 2019 figures.

The goods-producing industry made up 27.7 percent of total employment. Goods-producing employment averaged 387 in 2020, posting an increase of 3.1 percent when compared to 2019.

- Agriculture industry has a large presence in the county, which represents 10.9 percent of total covered employment. Agriculture had an average of 152 workers with total payrolls at \$5.6 million.
- Manufacturing represents 6.1 percent of total employment and provides about 85 jobs in the area with \$5.0 million in total wages. Columbia County has held steady in recent years mainly due to wind farm projects, such as the Columbia Pulp Manufacturing facility, which offers new small manufacturing initiatives and combines efforts with the Blue Mountain station.
- Construction makes up 9.3 percent of total county employment with 130 jobs in 2020. Construction decreased by 32 jobs or 19.8 percent from 2019, with \$12.1 million in covered payrolls. On average, construction workers in Columbia County took home over \$92,793 in 2020 with 17.9 percent increase over the year.

Service-providing employment averaged 1,012 in 2020, with a decrease of 4.8 percent over the year. Columbia County service-providing employment is comprised of many industries including government.

- Government employment, which represents 40.1 percent of total covered employment, increased by 3.1 percent in 2020 and had an average annual wage of \$53,647.
- Accommodation and food services decreased over the year by 13.4 percent or 13 jobs and represented 6.0 percent of total employment. Accommodation and food services had a total of \$1.42 million wages, contributing to average annual wages in this industry of \$16,919.
- Retail trade industry grew by 2.4 percent over the year or two jobs after slowing and decreasing employment due to closures. Total payrolls were at \$2.3 million, which is translated to a \$26,948 average annual wage. Retail trade represents 6.0 percent of total covered employment in the county.
- Health care and social assistance industry grew in 2020 by 1.3 percent or 1 job. Health care industry represents 5.7 percent of total employment in the county. Health care and social assistance total payroll was at \$2.3 million, which pays on average \$28,269 a year.

For historical industry employment data, [contact an economist](#).

Source: Employment Security Department/Data Division; County data tables

### ***Industry employment by age and gender***

The Local Employment Dynamics (LED) database, a joint project of state employment departments and the U.S. Census Bureau, matches state employment data with federal administrative data. Among the products is industry employment by age and gender. All workers covered by state unemployment insurance data are included; federal workers and non-covered workers, such as the self-employed, are not. Data are presented by place of work, not place of residence.

### ***Columbia County highlights:***

The largest job holder group in Columbia County in 2020 was the 55 to 64 year-olds group with 21.8 percent of the workforce. They were followed by 35 to 44 years of age with 19.9 percent of the workforce.

In 2020, 53.1 percent of all industry jobs were held by men and 46.9 percent were held by women. Industry differences are discussed below:

- Male-dominated industries included construction (91.2 percent), agriculture (82.9 percent), utilities (80.2 percent), manufacturing (75.5 percent) and wholesale trade (75.0 percent).
- Female-dominated industries included real estate (80.0 percent), health care and social assistance (76.2 percent), information (74.5 percent), accommodation and food services (70.9 percent), finance and insurance (69.4 percent), and educational services (65.1 percent).

## Wages and income

In 2020, Columbia County had 1,399 jobs covered by unemployment insurance, with a total payroll of over \$68.0 million.

The county average annual wage was \$48,607 in 2020, which was below the state’s average annual wage of \$73,504.

The Columbia County median hourly wage was \$22.13 in 2020, an increase of \$0.15 over the year. The median hourly wage in Columbia County was well below the state’s median hourly wage of \$29.28, which increased by \$2.14 over the year.

Source: Employment Security Department/DATA Division; County data tables

### Personal income

Personal income includes earned income, investment income, and government payments such as Social Security and Veterans Benefits. Investment income includes income imputed from pension funds and from owning a home. Per capita personal income equals total personal income divided by the resident population.

In 2020, the per capita income in Columbia County was \$57,249, which was well below the state’s per capita income of \$67,126.

Median household income in 2020 was \$61,779, well below the state’s \$77,006.

During the same time, 12.6 percent of the population was living below the poverty level in Columbia County, compared to 9.5 percent for the state and 11.4 percent in the nation.

Source: Employment Security Department/DATA Division; County data tables; U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

## Population

According to the Census estimate for 2021, the Columbia County population was 4,042. The population of the county is expected to remain somewhat stable.

The Columbia County seat and largest city is Dayton, with a population of 2,448 in 2021. The second notable city is Starbuck, with a population of 120.

### Population facts

	Columbia County	Washington state
Population 2021	4,042	7,738,692
Population 2010	4,078	6,724,540
Percent change, 2010 to 2021	-0.9%	15.1%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

## Age, gender and ethnicity

Columbia County has a large retirement community with 28.5 percent of population being 65 years and older in 2020.

- Columbia County's population 65 and older was 28.5 percent in 2020 compared to the state's 15.9 percent.
- Those under 18 years of age made up 18.0 percent in 2020 compared to the state's 21.8 percent.
- The youngest age group, those under 5 years of age, was 4.7 percent in 2020, much smaller when compared to the state's 6.0 percent.

Females made up 51.2 percent of the county's population, which is slightly above the state's 49.9 percent.

Diversity in the county shows 91.1 percent of residents are white, with 7.9 percent people of Hispanic or Latino origin, compared to the state's 78.5 percent and 13.0 percent, respectively.

## Demographics

	Columbia County	Washington state
<b>Population by age, 2020</b>		
Under 5 years old	4.7%	6.0%
Under 18 years old	18.0%	21.8%
65 years and older	28.5%	15.9%
<b>Females, 2020</b>	<b>51.2%</b>	<b>49.9%</b>
<b>Race/ethnicity, 2020</b>		
White	91.1%	78.5%
Black	0.7%	4.4%
American Indian, Alaskan Native	1.8%	1.9%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, & other Pacific	3.4%	10.4%
Hispanic or Latino, any race	7.9%	13.0%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

## Educational attainment

In the period 2016 to 2020, it was estimated that 88.1 percent of individuals age 25 and older were high school graduates, which is lower than that of Washington state (91.7 percent).

Over the same period, it's estimated that 25.3 percent of people in Columbia County 25 and older had attained a bachelor's degree or higher. This does not compare favorably with the state (36.7 percent).

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

## Useful links

- [County data tables](#)
- [Census Bureau Profile](#)
- [Columbia County on ofm.wa.gov](#)
- [Columbia County on ChooseWashington.com](#)
- [Columbia County History](#)

- [Columbia County home page](#)
- [Port of Columbia](#)
- [Census Bureau QuickFacts](#)
- [Self Sufficiency Calculator for Washington State](#)
- [Southeast Washington Economic Development Association](#)
- [Dayton Chamber of Commerce](#)
- [Walla Walla Community College Wind Energy Technology Program](#)

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