

Pierce County profile

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Overview

Regional context

Pierce County is a coastal area in the northwest part of the state that includes Puget Sound, the Puget Sound lowlands and the surrounding region west of the Cascade Range and east of the Olympic Mountains. Formed out of Thurston County in 1852 by the legislature of the Oregon Territory, it was named for U.S. President Franklin Pierce. The county has a total area of roughly 1,800 square miles, of which 1,670 square miles is land and 130 square miles is water. The highest natural point in Washington, Mount Rainier at 14,410 feet, is located in Pierce County.

Local economy

The founding of Pierce County encouraged a slow but steady stream of new settlements. Tacoma was founded in 1872. When the Northern Pacific Railroad announced in 1873 that its northwest terminus would locate in Tacoma, the city and surrounding county grew into a regional leader.

The lumber industry, at the time dominated by the St. Paul and Tacoma Lumber Co., helped the area to develop further. World War I brought an industrial boom as the region's lumber was used in local shipyards. The U.S. Army built Camp Lewis, which would later grow into Fort Lewis, on 70,000 acres of land on the Nisqually plain purchased by Tacoma voters. In 1918, the voters created the Port of Tacoma, which began improving industrial waterways and facilities.

In the years following World War II, economic significance within the region began shifting when the Boeing Company established Seattle as a center for aircraft manufacturing. Microsoft's 1979 move from Albuquerque, New Mexico to nearby Bellevue helped to develop Seattle as a technology center in the 1980s. A stream of new software, biotechnology and Internet companies into the area led to an economic revival. This development prompted the Tacoma-Pierce area to begin transitioning out of its wood and paper products manufacturing.

Many Pierce County residents commute to jobs in King County. This is partly due to the growing economy in King County, which has exerted upward pressure on housing costs. That has encouraged workers who might normally have lived in King County to reside in Pierce and other neighboring counties with a lower cost of living.

Pierce County has continued to be a leader in the greater Puget Sound regional economy. The Economic Development Board for Tacoma-Pierce County has published its 2020 Major Employers list – a list of the top employers in Pierce County, based on their full-time employees count. Health care service providers continue to be Pierce County's largest private employers. MultiCare Health System (8,264) and CHI Franciscan Health (5,682) are ranked number two and four overall in 2020. Safeway and Albertson's (2,153), Emerald Queen Casino (2,146), Boeing (1,550), Fred Meyer retail

and distribution center (1,802), Amazon distribution centers (1,800), Costco (1,318), State Farm (1,219), Walmart (861), Milgard Manufacturing (818), Home Depot (786), Target (709) and round out the top private sector employers for 2020.

As the state’s second-largest employer, the United States Military (Joint Base Lewis-McChord) remains Pierce County’s largest public employer with 54,000 full-time employees (FTEs). The state of Washington (7,859), city of Tacoma and Tacoma Public Utilities (3,623), Puyallup Tribe (1,274), Pierce County government (3,304), and the United States Postal Service (1,336) retained their places as the top non-education employers.

Public instruction is a large source of employment in the county, and many of the top places are held by school districts: Tacoma (3,649), Puyallup (2,711), Bethel (2,689), Clover Park (1,782), Sumner (1,270), Peninsula (1,284), and Franklin Pierce (1,161).

Higher education includes: Pierce College(822), University of Washington at Tacoma (703), University of Puget Sound (667), Pacific Lutheran University (620) and Tacoma Community College (560).

Other notable employers in the transportation, distribution and logistics sectors are Pierce Transit (858), Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad (450), Port of Tacoma and Northwest Seaport Alliance (269), US Foods (260), Associated Petroleum (275), Olympic Eagle Distributing (210), and U.S. Oil and Refining (197).

Geographic facts

	Pierce County	Rank in state
Land area, 2010 (square miles)	1,669.5	23
People per square mile, 2010	476.3	4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Outlook

The county was looking towards a fairly robust 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March. Now the outlook became less than predictable, with many factors playing a role in the pandemic recovery and the past impacts of the most recent recession. The county in 2021 experienced an average annual unemployment rate of 6.1 percent, a solid rebound from the 9.5 percent rate of 2020. The 2021 rate is nearly a point above the rate posted in 2019 of 5.2 percent. Nonfarm payrolls in 2020 suffered a decline of just under 15,000 jobs. The 2021 rebound was an increase of 6,900 jobs. The 2022 data should see further recovery as the county pushes to reach pre-pandemic benchmarks.

The 2020 COVID-19-related shutdown immediately slashed jobs in many sectors of the economy; the trade and leisure and hospitality sectors were particularly hard hit. The 2021 numbers showed a bounce back from those sectors however, the challenge was finding the workforce to match public demand for those services.

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.

The size of the Pierce County labor force in 2020 rose to an average of 453,641, up over 6,345 from 2019. In 2021 that total fell by 5,133 to 448,508. The average annual unemployment rate declined from the 9.5 percent rate in 2020 to 6.1 percent in 2021.

Source: Employment Security Department

Industry employment

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

Pierce County total nonfarm employment was humming along at a good pace leading up to 2020 before hitting the wall that was the pandemic. The 2021 nonfarm totals provided a recovery but still left space to match the pre-pandemic totals. Between 2018 and 2019, nonfarm payrolls grew over 5,900 jobs. There were strong gains in most sectors of the local economy. The middle of March 2020 put a brake on that growth.

- Pierce County had 319,300 nonfarm jobs on average in 2021; this total compared to the 2020 total of 312,400. In 2019, nonfarm jobs peaked at 327,300.
- Most of the jobs in Pierce County are private sector jobs, which made up a majority of nonfarm jobs in 2021.
- Trade, transportation and utilities (70,500 jobs), government (56,500) and educational health services (57,000) were the peak industries in the county in 2021.

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

Source: Employment Security Department

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.

Pierce County highlights:

In 2020, the largest job holder age group in Pierce County was the 55 and older category, making up 23.8 percent of jobs across all industries. The next largest share is among people age 35 to 44 with 22.3 percent of jobs.

Males held 48.3 percent of jobs and females held 51.7 percent of jobs in 2020.

- Male-dominated industries included mining (87.1 percent), construction (79.9 percent) and manufacturing (74.6 percent).
- Female-dominated industries included health care and social assistance (77.6 percent), educational services (72.3 percent), and finance and insurance (68.3 percent).

Source: The Local Employment Dynamics

Wages and income

In 2020, there were 301,941 jobs in Pierce County covered by unemployment insurance, with a total payroll of over \$17.5 billion. The average annual wage in 2020 was \$58,000, below the state's average annual wage of \$76,801.

The median hourly wage in 2020 was \$26.48, which surpasses the state's median hourly wage of \$25.01 when King County is excluded, but falls below the state's median hourly wage of \$29.28 when King County is included.

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 personal income was \$56,532, less than the state (\$67,126) and the nation (\$59,510).

In 2020, 8.7 percent of the population in Pierce County was living below the poverty level, compared to the state at 9.5 percent and the nation at 11.4 percent. The state and national rates are not directly comparable to the county rate because they each use different data sources.

Source: Employment Security Department; Bureau of Labor Statistics; Bureau of Economic Analysis; U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey

Population

Pierce County's population in 2021 was estimated to be 925,708. The county has added over 130,000 residents since 2010 and exceeds the state's growth rate.

The largest city in Pierce County is Tacoma, with 218,700 residents.

Population facts

	Pierce County	Washington state
Population 2021	925,708	7,738,692
Population 2010	795,225	6,724,540
Percent change, 2010 to 2021	16.41%	15.08%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Age, gender and ethnicity

Pierce County had proportionately more young people (below the age of 18) and fewer older residents (65 and older) than the state in 2019.

- Pierce County had 6.6 percent of its population under the age of 5 years compared to the state's share of 6.0 percent.
- Those under the age of 18 made up 23.3 percent of Pierce County's population compared to 21.8 percent of the state's population.
- The oldest age group, those 65 and older, made up 14.2 percent of Pierce County's population compared to 15.9 percent of the state's population.

Females made up 50.1 percent of the population in Pierce County compared with 49.9 percent of the population in Washington state.

Pierce County has been becoming more diverse along racial and ethnic lines. Black residents made up 7.7 percent of Pierce County's total population compared to 4.3 percent of the state's population.

Demographics

	Pierce County	Washington state
Population by age, 2021		
Under 5 years old	6.6%	6.0%
Under 18 years old	23.3%	21.8%
65 years and older	14.2%	15.9%
Females, 2021	50.1%	49.9%
Race/ethnicity, 2021		
White	74.3%	78.5%
Black	7.7%	4.3%
American Indian, Alaskan Native	1.8%	1.9%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander	8.9%	10.4%
Hispanic or Latino, any race	11.4%	13.0%

Educational attainment

Most Pierce County residents age 25 and older (91.8 percent) were high school graduates, higher than the state with 91.7 percent, compared with 88.5 percent of U.S. residents in the period 2016 to 2020.

Those with a bachelor's degree or higher made up 27.7 percent of Pierce County residents age 25 and older compared to 36.7 percent of state residents and 32.9 percent of U.S. residents during the same period.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Useful links

- [County data tables](#)
- [Census Bureau Profile](#)
- [History of Pierce County](#)
- [Pierce County home page](#)
- [Pierce County on ofm.wa.gov](#)
- [Pierce County on ChooseWashington.com](#)
- [Puget Sound Regional Council](#)
- [Tacoma-Pierce County Workforce Development Council](#)
- [Tacoma-Pierce County Economic Development Board](#)
- [Self Sufficiency Calculator for Washington State](#)
- [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts](#)
- [Port of Tacoma](#)
- [Northwest Seaport Alliance](#)
- [Workforce Development Areas and WorkSource Office Directory](#)
- [Economic Development Board for Tacoma-Pierce County](#)

Employment Security Department is an equal opportunity employer/program. Auxiliary aids and services are available upon request to individuals with disabilities. Language assistance services for limited English proficient individuals are available free of charge. Washington Relay Service: 711.