

Wahkiakum County profile



By Scott Bailey
Regional labor economist
Updated January 2021

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

Overview

Regional context

Wahkiakum is a small, heavily forested, beautiful county located on the Columbia River roughly 15 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean. Logging is the main industry, and local government is a major source of jobs and wages. The county is an attractive place to retire, and more than a quarter of the county's personal income comes from transfer payments such as Social Security and Medicare.

Local economy

Wahkiakum County has an ideal climate for growing Douglas fir trees on a short rotation. It is relatively isolated in terms of transportation infrastructure, linked by Highway 2 to the Longview area (eastward) and Ilwaco (westward). In addition, the county operates a ferry from Cathlamet to Westport, Oregon. As a result, the county has kept a largely rural feel, with much of its land devoted to forests.

Geographic facts

	Wahkiakum County	Rank in state
Land area, 2010 (square miles)	263	37
People per square mile, 2010	15	30

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Outlook

Wahkiakum County had the largest percentage drop in employment of any county in the state during the 2008 to 2009 recession. Since hitting bottom in 2012, there has been a modest increase in jobs, making up about a third of that loss. The COVID-19 recession brought more lost jobs, in line with the state average, with a small recovery in the latter months of 2020. That slow improvement will likely continue in 2021.

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 county labor force was estimated at 1,375 in 2019, with an unemployment rate of 6.7 percent, down a tenth from 2018. Unemployment peaked most recently at 15.3 percent in 2010, after rising from the cyclical low of 7.2 percent in 2006. The COVID-19 recession pushed the rate up to 13.8 percent in April 2020, but by November the rate was back to a normal level.

According to the Census Bureau, just over half (53.0 percent) of the county's employed residents worked outside the county in the 2012 to 2016 period. One out of six worked in Cowlitz County, while 9.0 percent worked in Pacific County and 7.0 percent commuted to Clatsop County, Oregon. About 40.0 percent of the workers who held jobs in Wahkiakum lived outside the county, with 17.0 percent living in Cowlitz County.

Bureau of Economic Analysis data shows that 62.0 percent of earned income in the county in 2019 came from residents holding jobs outside the county, while 23.0 percent of wages at county employers went to workers who lived outside of the county.

Source: Employment Security Department

Industry employment

Current industry employment statistics are available on the [Labor area summaries](#) page.

Wahkiakum County employment grew steadily during most of the 1990s, and then stabilized around 850 jobs from 1998 to 2008. Job growth came in construction, logging, manufacturing, local government, and non-retail services.

Employment fell to 700 nonfarm jobs in 2012, and before rising slowly to 760 jobs in 2019. Logging employment, at 80 jobs in 2019, was about half of its mid-2000s level. Construction (60 jobs) and manufacturing (70 jobs) were a bit higher than before the recession. Most of the job loss was in the "all other services" category, which dropped from 260 jobs in 2008 to 180 jobs in 2019. Part of the decline was due to the closure of the Columbia Care Center nursing home. Government employed 290, mostly in K-12 schools (90) and other local agencies like the county government (200). In 2020, the recession led to small job losses in the service sector and in local government.

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

Source: Employment Security Department

Industry employment by age and gender

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

[Wahkiakum County highlights:](#)

For jobs located in Wahkiakum County in 2019, about 52.0 percent were held by males, and 48.0 percent by females – while the state was split closer to 51/49. Two industries in the county were dominated by male workers: agriculture/logging (81.0 percent male) and construction (88.0 percent). Women were predominant in hospitality (69.0 percent) and education (67.0 percent). The average wage for female workers was 70.0 percent of the average for male workers.

Wahkiakum's workforce was much older than the state average, with 31.0 percent aged 55 and older, versus 23.0 percent statewide.

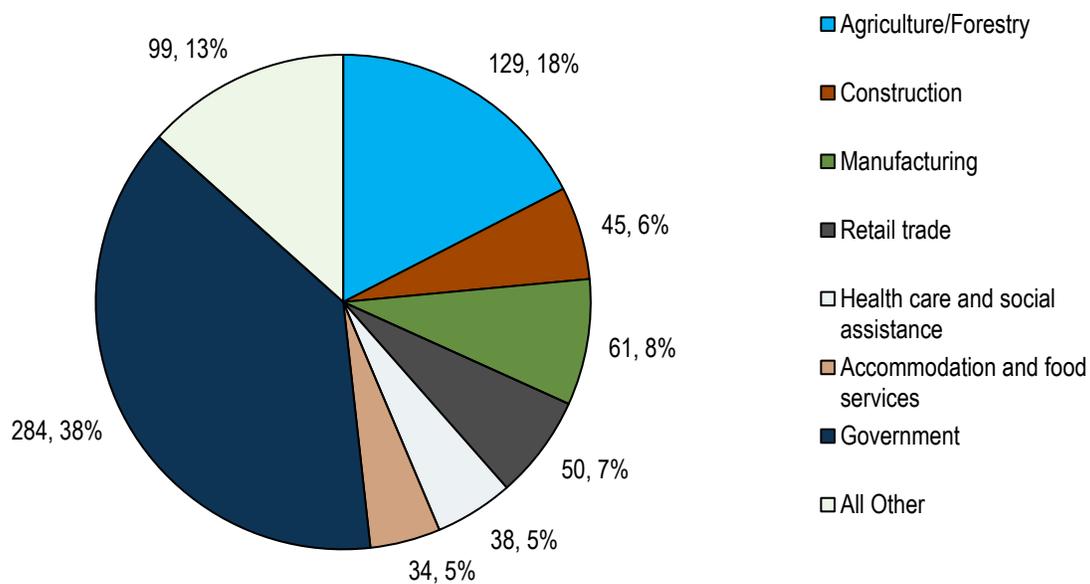
Source: The Local Employment Dynamics

Wages and income

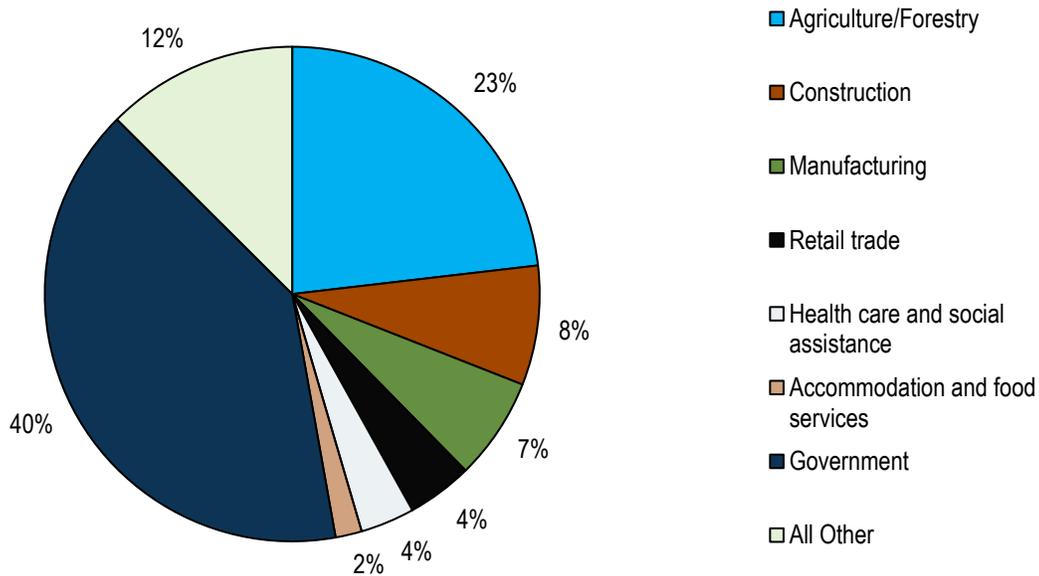
In 2019, Wahkiakum employers paid out \$28.2 million in wages, a 2.5 percent increase over 2018. The average annual wage for jobs in the county rose less than a percent to \$38,518, the highest on record.

The charts below contrast industry shares of employment and wages covered by unemployment insurance in the county. The biggest difference: agriculture/forestry (primarily logging) supplied 18.0 percent of the jobs in the county, and 23.0 percent of total wages.

Covered employment in 2019



Covered wages in 2019



The median hourly wage for non-federal jobs in Wahkiakum County was \$22.16 in 2018, 1.0 percent above the 2017 level. Wahkiakum’s median was almost \$7.00 per hour below the median for the entire state. Wahkiakum matched the state median back in 1998, but wages have grown slowly since then.

Median household income averaged \$53,277 for the 2015 to 2019 period – substantially higher than the \$47,538 inflation-adjusted median for the 2009 to 2013 period. Median family income was up 25.0 percent (to \$66,169) over the same period.

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 2019, county per capita income was \$44,522. That was 31.0 percent below the state average and 21.0 percent below the national average. The gap between the county and the state and nation narrowed after the Great Recession hit. Since then, the gap with the nation has stabilized and the gap with the state has resumed widening.

Wahkiakum residents are much more dependent upon investment income and transfer payments like Social Security and Medicare than most areas. Thirty percent of county income came from transfer payments in 2019, almost twice that of the state’s 17.0 percent. On a per capita basis, the differences were mostly due to Wahkiakum’s older population: higher Social Security and Medicare payments.

Per capita transfer payments, 2019

Per Capita Transfer Payments	U.S.	State	Wahkiakum
Total	\$9,521	\$8,962	\$13,471
Social Security benefits	\$3,140	\$3,102	\$5,890
Medicare benefits	\$2,388	\$1,929	\$3,749
Public assistance medical care benefits	\$1,909	\$1,768	\$1,768
Income maintenance benefits	\$819	\$630	\$648
Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits	\$176	\$138	\$178
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	\$167	\$159	\$160
Unemployment insurance compensation	\$86	\$145	\$72
Veterans' benefits	\$399	\$478	\$672
All Other	\$439	\$613	\$335

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

Population

Wahkiakum's population was estimated at 4,210 in 2020. Over the past decade the county has grown at a slightly slower rate than the national average (0.6 percent per year, vs. 0.7 percent).

Population facts

	Wahkiakum County	Washington state
Population 2020	4,210	7,656,200
Population 2000	3,978	6,724,540
Percent change, 2010 to 2020	5.8%	13.9%

Source: Washington Office of Financial Management

Age, gender and ethnicity

Wahkiakum's population is much older than the state and nation. In 2019:

- 17.0 percent of the county was below the age of 20, versus 25.0 percent statewide.
- 14.0 percent was aged 20 to 39, a little more than half the statewide average of 27.0 percent.
- 23.0 percent was aged 40 to 59, almost the same as the state's 25.0 percent.
- 46.0 percent was aged 60 or older, double the state average of 23.0 percent.

The county is also less diverse: in 2019, 90.2 percent of the population was white and non-Latinx, compared with 67.7 percent in Washington and 60.0 percent in the U.S.

Source: Office of Financial Management

Demographics

Population by age, 2019	Wahkiakum County	Washington state
Under 5 years old	3.5%	6.0%
Under 18 years old	15.6%	22.3%
65 years and older	35.9%	16.3%
Population by race/ethnicity, 2019		
White, non-Hispanic	90.2%	67.7%
Black	0.3%	3.9%
American Indian, Alaskan Native	1.1%	1.2%
Asian	0.9%	9.0%
Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander	0.2%	0.7%
Two or more races	3.3%	4.4%
Latinx, any race	4.0%	13.2%

Source Office of Financial Management

Educational attainment

Wahkiakum residents are less likely to have a college degree, and also less likely to have dropped out of high school, than the state and nation. Only 9.0 percent of adults in the county failed to finish high school (vs. 12.0 percent nationally), and 19.0 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher (vs. 32.0 percent nationally).

Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey

Useful links

- [County data tables](#)
- [Census Bureau Profile](#)
- [Wahkiakum County on ofm.wa.gov](#)
- [Wahkiakum County on ChooseWashington.com](#)
- [Wahkiakum County History](#)
- [Wahkiakum County home page](#)
- [Port of Wahkiakum County No. 2](#)
- [Wahkiakum County Chamber of Commerce](#)
- [Southwest Washington Economic Development Commission \(SWEDC\)](#)
- [Self Sufficiency Calculator for Washington State](#)
- [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts](#)
- [Washington Ports](#)

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.