

Whatcom County Profile

By Anneliese Vance-Sherman, Ph.D.
Regional labor economist
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Overview

Regional context

Whatcom County is bordered to its north by British Columbia, Canada, Skagit County to its south and Okanogan County to its east. The Salish Sea lies to the west and the Cascade Mountains rise to the east. Whatcom County ranges in elevation from sea level to a high point at 10,781 feet at the active volcano Mount Baker, also known as Kulshan. In geological times past, the Fraser River in the lower mainland of British Columbia had one arm extending down to Bellingham Bay, creating the flat geography of a delta plain in that area that makes for productive farmland for dairies and berry growing.

Local economy

For thousands of years, Whatcom County has been home to people of the Lummi, Nooksack, Samish and Semiahmoo tribal groups. Fur trappers and traders from the Hudson's Bay Company were the first non-native residents of the county. In the 1850s, Whatcom County experienced an economic and population boom propelled initially by coal mining, timber and agriculture.

Northwest Normal School, the predecessor to present day's Western Washington University (WWU) was established in Lynden in 1886. The northwest's first high school was built in Whatcom County in 1890. This boom came to a halt in 1893 due to the national recession and the population in the Bellingham dropped to fewer than 50 individuals.

The 20th century brought in more prosperous times with increasing national demand for the abundant timber and salmon. Fish canning operations were a mainstay of the Whatcom County economy. The towns of Whatcom, Sehome, Bellingham and Fairhaven joined together to form the county seat of Bellingham. Whatcom County is now a regional hub for northwest Washington. Bellingham is the biggest city (both by population and area) in the region.

Agriculture is a steady influence in the northern parts of the county. Today, farms in Whatcom County make up 4.0 percent of Washington's agriculture sales. Whatcom County's agricultural production is diverse, with notable berry and milk production.

The largest contributors to GDP in Whatcom County include manufacturing (especially nondurable goods), real estate, government and healthcare.

Like the national economy, Whatcom County’s largest job-providing sector is in private services, making up a 61.1 percent share of nonfarm jobs. Following national trends and due to the Great Recession, goods-producing jobs fell to a greater extent than private services but has been gaining strength in the post-recession years. Private goods-producers supplied 19.6 percent of all nonfarm jobs in Whatcom County in 2019.

Whatcom County is home to Western Washington University as well as two community and technical colleges. The university and colleges are in their own right major employers, and Bellingham consistently draws a large student population which contributes to the local service economy.

The proximity to the Canadian border is a strong influence on the economy. When the Canadian dollar is strong, it creates demand for Canadian shoppers seeking retail bargains and real estate in Whatcom County. The past few years have been characterized by a weak Canadian dollar in large part as a consequence of low oil prices.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the international border between Canada and the U.S. has been closed to nonessential traffic. The specific impacts have yet to be seen, however, businesses in the region that are dependent on Canadian customers such as retail, the Bellingham airport, and area hotels have lost access to an important part of their market. Other sectors such as manufacturing may actually benefit from investments by Canadian businesses who want to secure a physical U.S. presence.

Geographic facts

Land area, 2010 (square miles)	2,106.9	12
People per square mile, 2020	108.22	11

Source: Washington State Office of Financial Management

Outlook

In the lead-up to the previous recession (2003 to 2007), Whatcom County’s annual employment growth rate averaged about 3.0 percent. From peak to trough (2008 to 2010), 6,100 jobs (about 7.0 percent) were lost. Whatcom County’s employment situation reached its low point in 2010 – on track with much of Washington state. From 2010 to 2019, Whatcom County recovered 16,000 jobs; exceeding the pre-recession peak in 2014.

Whatcom County has some favorable factors that aided early job recovery. In particular, the proximity of Whatcom County to Canada and the appreciated Canadian dollar during the jobs recession and early recovery created a draw for Canadian shoppers. Low cost flights to U.S. destinations has also created a draw for Canadian travelers. As the recovery has progressed, the value of the Canadian dollar relative to the U.S. dollar has slid, reducing the draw of cross-border retail.

Whatcom County generally has lower wage rates for many occupations compared to nearby counties along the I-5 corridor. This is partially due to the presence of a large student population and arguably makes the county attractive to manufacturing and service-providing firms to relocate or expand in the county.

As the recovery matured, most industries have registered employment gains. Average annual employment in 2019 was 10,100 jobs above Whatcom County's pre-recession peak. From 2018 to 2019, most major industries reported year-to-year growth. Government, manufacturing and professional and business services added the largest number of jobs over the year (300, 200 and 200 jobs respectively). Year-over-year losses were observed in Whatcom County's construction and retail trade industries.

2020 changed everything for Whatcom County and the rest of the world. The sector that was impacted most severely was leisure and hospitality, which shed more than half of all jobs in the sector from March to April. As of the November report, Whatcom County's total jobs tally remains more than 6,000 jobs (6.4 percent) shy of the previous November report.

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.

Whatcom County's 2019 resident civilian labor force averaged 115,413, with an unemployment rate of 5.0 percent. Within this estimate, 109,672 Whatcom County residents were counted among the employed and 5,741 were counted among the unemployed (i.e., active job seekers).

During the recent period of recession and recovery, the peak unemployment rate in Whatcom County (11.1 percent) was observed in February 2010. The average unemployment rate that year was 9.5 percent. The unemployment rate had been falling slowly but consistently since then, until April. The 2020 pandemic led to an all-time high unemployment rate of 17.7 percent in April. As of November, the preliminary unemployment rate was 7.0 percent.

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.

Whatcom County averaged 95,900 nonfarm jobs in 2019, up from the 2018 approximation of 94,900. From 2018 to 2019, total employment increased an average of 1.1 percent or 1,000 jobs. Payroll employment growth in Whatcom County has generally hovered in the 2.0 percent range since emerging from the recession but has been slowing. For comparison, Washington state nonfarm employment growth over the year was 2.0 percent, also having slowed over time.

- Goods-producers contributed an average of 18,800 jobs to the Whatcom County economy in 2019, registering no net change over the year.
 - Construction employment tumbled from 2007 to 2010 and more or less remained flat from 2010 to 2014, fluctuating by only about 200 jobs in any given year. Employment in construction took off, expanding every year from 2015 to 2018, when employment levels finally exceeded the pre-recession peak. Average annual employment dipped by 300 in 2019.
 - Manufacturing employment increased 200 jobs in 2019, bringing average annual employment to 10,700. For reference, the pre-recession peak was 9,300 manufacturing jobs in 2007. Whatcom County's manufacturing base is diverse. The four largest manufacturing industries in terms of employment are activities related to food, wood products, petroleum, and transportation equipment manufacturing.

- Private service-providing employment averaged 58,600 in 2019. From 2018 to 2019, private service providers collectively added 700 jobs or 1.3 percent. In 2019, all private sector service-providing industries that are broken out in the nonfarm employment report expanded payrolls, with the exception of retail trade and, more broadly, trade, transportation and utilities.
- Government employment in Whatcom County is concentrated in local and state government and includes public K-12 and post-secondary education. Tribal government is also included. Total government employment expanded by 300 or 1.9 percent from 2018 to 2019.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic-induced recession arrived early in 2020, Whatcom County's employment situation has shifted a great deal. From March to April, total nonfarm estimates plummeted from 96,400 to 83,100. Since April, employment gains have been observed in every report at a broad level. As of November 2020 (preliminary), total nonfarm employment was estimated at 90,600 jobs; this is 6,200 fewer jobs (6.4 percent) relative to November 2019.

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.

Whatcom County highlights:

Whatcom County's labor market tends to reflect higher concentrations of youth than Washington state. More than 14.0 percent of the employed workforce in Whatcom County was between age 14 and 24. Compare to 11.0 percent statewide. This reflects the high student population residing in Bellingham.

Employment was split almost evenly between men and women in 2019, with 50.5 percent of jobs being occupied by men and 49.5 percent occupied by women.

- Male-dominated industries included mining (91.9 percent), construction (83.1 percent), wholesale trade (72.3 percent), and manufacturing (71.7 percent).
- Female-dominated industries included healthcare and social assistance (78.9 percent), educational services (68.5 percent) and finance and insurance (67.8 percent).

Source: The Local Employment Dynamics

Wages and income

In 2019, Whatcom County averaged 92,172 jobs covered by unemployment insurance, with a payroll of nearly 4.6 billion dollars.

The county's 2019 average annual wage was \$49,662; below the statewide annual average wage of \$69,615 and below the national average wage of \$59,209.

In 2018, the county's median hourly wage was \$22.12, lower than the state median of \$25.98 per hour.

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.

Average per capita personal income in 2018 was lower in Whatcom County (\$48,792) than either the state (\$62,026) or the U.S. (\$54,446), according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis. Of Washington's 39 counties, Whatcom County ranked 13th for per capita income.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Whatcom County's 2019 median household income was \$65,712, less than Washington state (\$78,687) and less than the U.S. (\$69,372).

In 2019, 12.9 percent of Whatcom County's resident population was living below the official poverty line, higher than the state (9.8 percent) and similar to the nation (12.3 percent).

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

Population

Whatcom County's estimated population was 228,000 in 2020. Total population growth from 2010 to 2020 was 13.4 percent, below the percentage growth rate for Washington state over the same period.

The largest city in Whatcom County is Bellingham (91,610 in 2020, up 13.3 percent in 10 years). The next largest cities are Lynden, Ferndale, Blaine and Everson.

Population facts

	Whatcom County	Washington state
Population 2020	228,000	7,656,200
Population 2010	201,140	6,724,540
Percent change, 2010 to 2020	13.4%	13.9%

Source: Washington State Office of Financial Management

Age, gender and ethnicity

The proportion of very young children is less in Whatcom County than the state, however due to the presence of Western Washington University, Bellingham Technical College and Whatcom Community College, the population of residents between the ages of 15 and 24 make up about 17.0 percent of the total population in Whatcom County; compared to about 13.0 percent statewide.

There were proportionately more residents aged 60 years and older in Whatcom County relative to the whole state.

Females made up 50.6 percent of the population, slightly higher than the state in 2019.

Whatcom County has a larger percentage of American Indian and Alaska Native residents than the state. Otherwise, it is slightly less racially and ethnically diverse than the state.

Demographics

	Whatcom County	Washington state
Population by age, 2019		
Under 5 years old	5.1%	6.0%
Under 18 years old	19.2%	21.8%
65 years and older	18.0%	15.9%
Females, 2019	50.6%	49.9%
Race / ethnicity, 2019		
White	86.2%	78.5%
Black	1.3%	4.4%
American Indian, Alaskan Native	3.4%	1.9%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander	5.1%	10.4%
Hispanic or Latino, any race	9.8%	13.0%

Educational attainment

In 2019, 92.8 percent of Whatcom County residents age 25 and older graduated high school compared to 91.3 percent across Washington state.

For Whatcom County residents, 34.3 percent have bachelor's degrees or higher levels of education, which is proportionally lower than the state (36.0 percent) but higher than the nation (32.1 percent).

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Useful links

- [County data tables](#)
- [Census Bureau Profile](#)
- [Center for Business and Economics Research, Western Washington University](#)
- [Choose Whatcom](#)
- [Whatcom County history](#)
- [Northwest Washington Labor Market Review \(Monthly\)](#)
- [Northwest Workforce Council](#)
- [Port of Bellingham](#)
- [Census Bureau QuickFacts](#)
- [Whatcom Council of Governments](#)
- [Whatcom County home page](#)
- [Whatcom County on ofm.wa.gov](#)
- [Whatcom County on ChooseWashington.com](#)
- [Workforce Development Areas and WorkSource Office Directory](#)
- [Self Sufficiency Calculator for Washington State](#)
- [Whatcom County Agriculture Census](#)
- [Whatcom Conservation District](#)

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.