

Adams County Profile

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Overview

Regional context

Adams County is the 14th largest county in Washington state, and covers 1,925 square miles. Located in southeastern Washington, it is bounded by Lincoln County on the north, Whitman to the east, Franklin to the south and Grant on the west. Two-thirds of its population is rural as its low population density of 9.4 people per square mile indicates. Since its creation in 1883, the area has been known as an agricultural and livestock ranching area that continues to prosper today. Wheat, corn, apples and potatoes (among other crops) are grown in Adams County.

The Palouse tribe was well established as the dominant indigenous tribe. They traveled the county, ranging their horses. The first white settlers began arriving in 1869. They found the area suitable to raising cattle, horses and sheep. Others followed, seeking land for ranching and farming.

James G. Bennett harvested a small wheat crop near Ritzville in 1880. Russian-German settlers (Volga Germans) who arrived in Adams County in 1883 had farmed wheat in Russia and planted it in Adams County. Seeing their success, other settlers also planted wheat. Adams County wheat farmers soon found that the region was so dry that they must let their fields lie fallow every other year to conserve enough moisture in the soil to raise profitable crops.

In 1897, Adams County produced its first bumper crop of wheat, marking the beginning of wheat farming's eclipse over cattle ranching in the county. The 1897 crop inspired a major influx of new settlers. In 1901 Ritzville exported more wheat than any other town in world – two million bushels filling nearly 2,000 boxcars. By 1904, Ritzville was the largest initial shipping point for wheat in the United States. By 1909, giddy with prosperity, Adams County published a pamphlet distributed at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle. The pamphlet read, "Adams County, Washington, the bread basket of the world." However, a severe drought from 1928 to 1931 resulted in dustbowl conditions and many people left the area. The remaining wheat farmers consolidated the abandoned farms and worked thousands of acres to produce a commercial crop.

In addition to its agriculture and livestock ranching, Adams County has some unique recreation and tourism draws. Othello hosts an annual Sandhill Crane Festival the third weekend in March, where thousands of bird watchers attend. The refuge is an excellent environment for wintering ducks, geese and many other varieties of waterfowl. The Sandhill Crane Festival takes place at the Columbia National Wildlife Refuge, and is supported by the Othello Chamber of Commerce. The refuge includes 23,200 acres immediately downstream from Potholes Reservoir, and another 6,000 acres of scattered tracts toward the Columbia River.

Local economy

Adams County started as an agriculturally based area, and is still agriculturally based today. There are both dry-land based crops, such as wheat, along with irrigated farming that supports apple orchards and potato fields. Today, Adams County is one of the largest wheat producers in the state. Even many manufacturing operations in Adams County are categorized in the “non-durable goods” versus “durable goods” manufacturing sector, specifically in vegetable and fruit processing. For example, French fry production provides many of the county’s manufacturing jobs. The transportation (primarily truck transportation) and warehousing sector is another major employment category, which is heavily dependent on the fortunes of the local agricultural industry.

According to the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), the national recession occurred from December 2007 through June 2009. Many counties in Central Washington lost jobs following the recession. Even Adams County saw total covered employment dip from 6,834 jobs in 2008 to an average of 6,771 in 2009. Nevertheless, an analysis of total covered employment trends in Adams County during the most recent ten-year period (2008 to 2018) for which average QCEW data are available shows:

- Total covered employment – increased by 1,797 jobs (up 26.3 percent)
- Agriculture – jumped by 1,355 jobs (up 96.0 percent)
- Private health services – generated 210 new jobs (up 43.5 percent)
- Local government – expanded by 159 jobs (up 11.1 percent)
- Accommodation and food services (NAICS – lost 54 jobs (down 11.9 percent)
- Other services – plummeted by 171 jobs (down 67.6 percent)

It is apparent that the agricultural industry has accounted for the lion’s share of covered employment growth in Adams County in the past ten years. Specifically, 1,355 (or 75.4 percent) of the 1,797 jobs added to the local job market between 2008 and 2018 were in the agricultural sector.

Geographic facts

	Adams County	Washington state
Land area, 2010 (square miles)	1,924.98	66,455.52
People per square mile, 2010	9.7	101.2

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Outlook

As reported in the “Local economy” section above, total covered employment (which includes agricultural jobs) fared well in Adams County during the past ten years (2008 to 2018). Total covered employment rose from 6,834 jobs in 2008 to 8,631 in 2018, a 1,797 job and 26.3 percent upturn, for an annualized growth rate of 2.4 percent. By comparison, total nonfarm employment rose from 5,640 jobs in 2008 to 5,980 in 2018, a modest 340 job and 6.0 percent upturn, for an annualized growth rate of 0.6 percent. The dichotomy in the Adams County economy from 2008 through 2018 was that nonfarm employment expanded at a “snail’s pace” while agricultural employment “sprinted” ahead.

Adams County's agricultural employment and total covered employment figures for 2019 will not be available until approximately June 2020. However, preliminary nonfarm employment estimates for 2019 are, but they are not encouraging. Estimates indicate that total nonfarm employment slipped by 20 jobs between 2018 (5,980 jobs) and 2019 (5,960 jobs), a 0.3 percent downturn. Transportation, warehousing, and utilities averaged 30 fewer jobs in 2019 (down 7.5 percent) while wholesale trade businesses contracted by 20 (down 4.8 percent). Also, construction, manufacturing and retail trade firms each averaged 10 fewer jobs in 2019 than in 2018. Conversely, health services netted 40 more jobs (up 5.8 percent) while leisure and hospitality expanded by 10 (up 2.4 percent), but these gains were insufficient to counter downturns in the previously mentioned industries.

According to the Employment Security Department's ten-year nonfarm employment projections, the North Central Workforce Development Area's (Adams, Chelan, Douglas, Grant and Okanogan counties) labor market is expected to grow an average annual rate of 1.3 percent between 2017 and 2027, a little slower than the projected average annual growth rate of 1.5 percent for Washington.

Labor force and unemployment

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

In Adams County, unemployment rates were in the six percent range during the three-year period from 2006 to 2008 (before the recession). Then the recession hit, and the local unemployment rate rose to 9.0 percent in 2009 before peaking at 10.5 percent in 2010. During each of the next eight consecutive years (2011 through 2018, inclusively) average annual unemployment rates in Adams County not only declined but fell to historic lows in calendar years 2017 (5.7 percent) and 2018 (5.4 percent). In fact, the average annual 5.4 percent reading for 2018 in Adams County was the lowest average annual unemployment rate recorded since electronic records were implemented by ESD in 1990 (28 years ago). Between 2018 and 2019 however, the rate rose six-tenths of a point, from 5.4 to 6.0 percent, respectively.

What about 2018 to 2019 CLF and unemployment rate trends in Adams County? At the time of report preparation, preliminary average annual 2019 CLF data show that between 2018 and 2019, the labor force expanded by 1.1 percent, from 9,479 residents to 9,581 (meaning that 101 more Adams County residents entered the labor force). Unfortunately, the number of unemployed Adams County residents increased more rapidly by 13.3 percent, rising from 511 in 2018 to 579 in 2019 (meaning that 68 more Adams County residents were unemployed). The result was that the unemployment rate rose from 5.4 to 6.0 percent between 2018 and 2019.

Estimates indicate that Washington's CLF grew by 119,123 residents (a 3.1 percent upturn) from 2018 to 2019. The state's labor force has expanded year over year for the past 71 months (February 2014 through December 2019). In December 2019, Washington's CLF tallied 3,972,769 residents versus 3,833,101 in December 2018, equating to 139,665 more Washingtonians in the CLF (up 3.6 percent). On an average annual basis, Washington state's not seasonally adjusted unemployment rate stabilized at the historically low rate of 4.5 percent in 2018 and 2019.

Source: Employment Security Department

Industry employment

Current industry employment statistics are available on the [Covered employment \(QCEW\)](#) page on ESD’s labor market information website.

The North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) is an industry classification system that assigns every businesses and government organization in America a six-digit NAICS code based primarily on the activities in which that business or government organization is engaged. All business and government organizations are also more broadly categorized into one of 22 two-digit NAICS sectors. Nineteen sectors are in private enterprise and three sectors are in government service – either at the federal, state, or local level.

Top five Adams County industry sectors in 2018 in terms of employment were:

Industry sector	Number of jobs	Share of employment
1. Agriculture, forestry and fishing	2,767	32.1%
2. Local government	1,594	18.5%
3. Manufacturing	1,103	12.8%
4. Health services	693	8.0%
5. Retail trade	662	7.7%
All other industries	1,812	21.0%
Total covered employment	8,631	100%

The “big kid on the block” in the Adams County economy is agriculture. In 2018, QCEW data showed that Adams County’s labor market provided 8,631 jobs with approximately 79.0 percent of all local jobs tallied in just five (agriculture, local government, manufacturing, health services and retail trade) two-digit NAICS industries or sectors. In 2018, nearly one-third (or 32.1 percent) of all covered jobs countywide were categorized under “agricultural, forestry and fishing” – in which the lion’s share of jobs were provided by the local agricultural industry.

In 2018, three industries – agriculture, local government and manufacturing (particularly food processing) – accounted for more than six in every ten (63.3 percent) covered employment jobs in Adams County.

Covered employment and wage trends for the 10-year period (eleven years, inclusive from 2008 through 2018) were analyzed using ESD’s annual average Quarterly Census of Employment and Wage (QCEW) data for the 22 two-digit NAICS sectors in Adams County. Following are two of the findings:

- Between 2008 and 2019, the industry in Adams County which by far added the most jobs was agriculture. In 2008, local agricultural employers provided 1,412 jobs, 20.7 percent of total covered employment. By 2018, this industry tallied 2,767 jobs and accounted for 33.1 percent of all covered employment countywide. This 1,355 job and 96.0 percent uptrend, (with an annualized growth rate of 7.0 percent) indicates not only is the agricultural industry key to the Adams County economy, but that its “share” of jobs in the local labor market has grown substantially during this recent ten-year period. By comparison, total covered employment in Adams County rose from 6,834 jobs in 2008 to 8,631 in 2018, a 1,797 job and 26.3 percent upturn (with an annualized growth rate of 2.4 percent).

- Between 2008 and 2018, the industry which lost the most jobs was “other services (NAICS 81).” This sector provided 253 jobs and 3.7 percent of total covered employment in 2008. By 2018, other services accounted for only 82 jobs and 1.0 percent of all covered employment countywide. However, this 171 job and 67.6 percent downturn was primarily caused by a NAICS “code change” directed by the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The short story is that many of these jobs were simply transferred in 2014 from NAICS 814 (private households) to NAICS 624 (social assistance) – not just in Adams County, but also all counties statewide.

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

Source: Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW)

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.

Adams County highlights:

The largest job holder group in Adams County in 2018 was the 55 and older age group with 24.6 percent of the workforce. They were followed by the 25 to 34 age group with 22.0 percent of the workforce.

In 2018, 52.0 percent of all industry jobs were held by men and 48.0 percent were held by women. Industry differences are discussed below.

- Male-dominated industries included construction (84.9 percent), transportation and warehousing (83.5 percent) and utilities (75.8 percent).
- Female-dominated industries included healthcare and social assistance (78.1 percent), finance and insurance (71.8 percent) and educational services (71.1 percent).

Source: The Local Employment Dynamics

Wages and income

The Adams County median hourly wage for all industries (adjusted for inflation) was \$17.36 in 2018, which was 66.8 percent of the state’s median hourly wage of \$25.98.

In 2018, there were 8,637 jobs in Adams County covered by unemployment insurance, with a total payroll of nearly \$340.4 million. The county average annual wage was \$39,412 in 2018, which was 59.5 percent of the state’s average annual covered wage of \$66,195. In 2018, Adams County was ranked 30th (out of 39 counties) in the state for its average annual covered wage.

The top five Adams County industry sectors in 2018 in terms of payrolls were:

Industry sector	Payroll	Share of payrolls
1. Agriculture, forestry and fishing	\$88,549,054	26.0%
2. Local government	\$68,742,927	20.2%
3. Manufacturing	\$60,272,909	17.7%
4. Health services	\$29,974,822	8.8%
5. Wholesale trade	\$23,660,472	7.0%
All other industries	\$65,965,930	20.3%
Total covered payrolls	\$340,166,114	100%

Source: Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW)

In 2018, approximately \$340.2 million of wage income was paid countywide. Agricultural employers provided 26.0 percent of it, or \$88.5 million. Local government placed second by accounting for 20.2 percent or \$68.7 million. Manufacturing ranked third by providing 17.7 percent of total payroll and \$60.3 million in wage income. Therefore, agriculture, local government and manufacturing combined provided 64.0 percent of all wages earned countywide, and 63.3 percent of total covered employment. Clearly, these sectors were the “Big 3” in the Adams County economy in 2018.

Personal income

Personal income includes earned income, investment income and government transfer 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.

Inflation-adjusted per capita personal income in Adams County was \$42,800 in 2018. This figure is below the state’s figure of \$62,026 and the nation’s figure of \$54,446. A general personal income trend for Adams County residents over the last 40 years (primarily between 1978 and 2018) is that the percent of residents’ personal income originating from earnings has been shrinking, while the percent of income from transfer payments has been rising. The following are Adams County personal income data in ten-year increments:

- In 1978, 71 percent of personal income in Adams County came from earnings, 20 percent from investments and 9 percent from transfer payments.
- In 1988, 64 percent of personal income came from earnings, 21 percent from investments and 15 percent from transfer payments.
- In 1998, 57 percent of personal income came from earnings, 23 percent from investments and 20 percent from transfer payments.
- In 2008, 59 percent of personal income came from earnings, 19 percent from investments and 22 percent from transfer payments.
- In 2018, 54 percent of personal income came from earnings, 24 percent from investments and 23 percent from transfer payments.

According to U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts, the median household income in 2018 dollars was \$49,142, which was 72.7 percent of Washington’s 2018 median household income of \$70,116 (using ACS data from 2014 to 2018). During this period, 15.6 percent of the county’s population was living below the poverty level, which was greater than 10.3 percent for Washington state and 13.1 percent for the nation, according to U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts.

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

Population

Adams County’s population was 18,728 in 2010. From April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2018, the county’s population grew 5.5 percent – less robust than Washington state’s 12.1 percent growth rate.

The largest city in Adams County is Othello with an estimated population of 8,270 in 2018. The second-largest city is Ritzville with an estimated population of 1,660 in 2018. Othello is growing much faster than other, smaller cities in Adams County.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis; Washington of Financial Management

Population facts

	Adams County	Washington state
Population 2018 estimate	19,759	7,535,591
Population 2010 (April 1) estimates base	18,728	6,724,540
Percent change, April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2018	5.5%	12.1%

Age, gender and ethnicity

Adams County, as a percent, had a much younger age demographic than the state or nation in 2018.

- Adams County’s population age 65 and older was 11.1 percent in 2018 compared to the state’s 15.4 percent.
- The largest age group, those under 18 years of age, was 35.4 percent in 2018 compared to the state’s 22.1 percent.
- The youngest age group, those under 5 years of age, was 9.7 percent in 2018 compared to the state’s 6.1 percent.

Females’ made up 49.3 percent of the population in Adams County in 2018, which is slightly below the state’s 50.0 percent.

The county has a much higher percentage of people of Hispanic or Latino origin, 64.3 percent, compared to the state’s 12.9 percent. White people who are not of Hispanic descent made up 33.1 percent of the county’s population compared to 68.0 percent of the state’s population.

Demographics

	Adams County	Washington state
Population by age, 2018		
Under 5 years old	9.7%	6.1%
Under 18 years old	35.4%	22.1%
65 years and older	11.1%	15.4%
Females, 2018	49.3%	50.0%
Race/ethnicity, 2018		
White	88.9%	78.9%
Black	2.0%	4.3%
American Indian, Alaskan Native	6.0%	1.9%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander	1.4%	10.1%
Hispanic or Latino, any race	64.3%	12.9%

Educational attainment

Over the period 2014 to 2018, 64.6 percent of individuals age 25 and older were high school graduates in Adams County. This figure is considerably lower than that of Washington state (91.1 percent) and the nation (87.7 percent).

Over the same period, 13.6 percent of Adams County residents 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher compared with the state (35.3 percent) and nation (31.5 percent).

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Useful links

- [County data tables](#)
- [Census Bureau Profile](#)
- [Adams County on ChooseWashington.com](#)
- [Adams County on ofm.wa.gov](#)
- [Adams County History](#)
- [Adams County home page](#)
- [Othello Chamber of Commerce](#)
- [Adams County Development Council](#)
- [North Central Workforce Development Council](#)
- [Self Sufficiency Calculator for Washington State](#)
- [Census Bureau QuickFacts](#)
- [Port of Othello](#)
- [Washington Ports](#)
- [Workforce Development Areas and WorkSource Office Directory](#)

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