

Benton County profile

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Overview

Regional context

Benton County, named after Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton, was created from eastern Yakima and Klickitat counties in 1905. The county is located in southeastern Washington at the confluence of the Columbia, Snake and Yakima rivers. The Columbia River defines the north, south and east boundaries, making the county part of the semi-arid river basin in the rain shadow of the Cascade, Blue, Wallowa and Rocky mountains. Ranching and dry-land farming made up the bulk of its economy in the 1800s. Today, it is the ninth most densely populated county in the state with 103 persons per square mile due to its nuclear-related and other research and development industries. Agriculture is still a large producer in the area.

Local economy

Deer and elk, along with fishing, seeds, roots and berries provided food for the indigenous people in the area even though there was little rainfall. Migrations of white settlers into the area in the 19th century disrupted this tribal world, and the Indian Wars of the 1850s resulted in tribes being moved to reservations.

The gold rush of 1858 in British Columbia brought the first large group of whites through the area. By the 1870s, cattle and horse ranchers occupied the majority of land in the area. In the 1880s, major settlements along the Columbia River were connected by steamboats and railroads, allowing farmers and ranchers to get products to market. Farming included corn, wheat, alfalfa, potatoes and fruit, especially apples. Many farmers were successful in dry-land farming. However, in the 1890s, the Yakima Irrigation and Improvement Company built the first irrigation canals. With irrigation, railroad and electricity development, there were accompanying expansions of orchards, vineyards, farming and ranching.

World War II brought the Hanford Project into the county to develop the plutonium used in the first nuclear bomb. Continued federal investment has led to scientific diversification and nuclear and chemical cleanup, with skilled engineers and scientists following the jobs. In the late 1980s, Washington State University expanded into the area, offering advanced degrees. The well-educated, trained workforce has made many contributions in agricultural production, processing and research. Over time, the county has attracted a variety of manufacturers, including production of chemicals, fertilizer and zirconium tubing and titanium, along with supporting storage and distribution centers.

Growth and prosperity have continued with population growth and development centering in Kennewick, Richland and Prosser. Recreational industries and tourist attractions are developing along with the popularity of the wine industry. The economy is tied to agriculture, food processing, medical equipment manufacturing, energy production, nuclear-fuel fabrication, wine production and wine tourism.

Geographic facts

	Benton County	Rank in state
Land area, 2010 (square miles)	1,700.38	22
People per square mile, 2010	103	9

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Outlook

The Benton County economy is moving right along towards new horizons in economic growth and expansion. The county's economy increased by 3.1 percent or 2,664 jobs from 2016 to 2017. Industry growth in 2017 occurred in construction, manufacturing, agriculture, finance and insurance, real estate, healthcare, professional and business services, administrative and support services, accommodation and food services and government. Local service-providing industries continue to expand to accommodate local and regional demand.

As the economy becomes more stable and moves forward with new markets, new products and technology in research and development, construction, transportation and warehousing, and wine production and utilization are expected to play a big role in Benton County's future prosperity. One example of continuous growth is in construction services, which expanded by 20.8 percent over the year, and it is marching forward with growth to accommodate ever growing demand. Accommodation and food services is another industry expected to contribute to the county's overall economic growth in the years to come.

Nonfarm employment projections are done for Benton and Franklin counties combined, and the two counties together are expected to grow at the rate of 1.6 percent a year through 2021.

Industries that are projected to add the most jobs include private and public education, healthcare, construction, information, and leisure and hospitality.

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.

Benton County's civilian labor force was estimated to be 99,084 in 2018, an increase of 2.4 percent over 2017. The annual average unemployment rate for 2018 was 5.2 percent, which was 0.3 percent lower than in 2017. Total civilian employment increased by 2.7 percent, or 2,458 workers over the year.

The county's labor force has expanded every year since 2014, as more workers participate in workforce activities, while at the same time residents are able to find jobs in an expanding economy.

Industry employment

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

Benton County's total covered employment was 87,513 in 2017, an increase of 3.2 percent, or 2,705 jobs, since 2016. The county's total covered payroll was \$4.7 billion, an increase of 5.6 percent over 2016. The average annual wage in Benton County was \$53,815 in 2017, an increase of 2.3 percent over the average annual wage of \$52,587 in 2016.

Source: Employment Security Department

Top 10 industries in Benton County

Rank	Industry	Percent of total
1	Government	15.1%
2	Healthcare and social assistance	12.9%
3	Administrative and waste services	11.4%
4	Retail trade	11.0%
5	Professional and technical services	10.6%
6	Accommodation and food services	8.3%
7	Agriculture	7.3%
8	Construction	7.0%
9	Manufacturing	4.8%
10	Finance and insurance	2.1%

Goods-producing industries, which include natural resources, mining, construction and manufacturing, increased in employment from 2016 to 2017 by 12.3 percent, or 1,837 jobs. Average annual employment in 2017 was 16,734 workers and annual wages totaled \$791.9 million, which translates to a \$47,323 average annual wage for goods-producing workers.

- The manufacturing industry increased in employment 5.5 percent over the year. The average employment was at 4,216 jobs in 2017, with average annual pay of \$56,101. Manufacturing represented 4.8 percent of total covered employment in Benton County.
- Construction accounted for 7.0 percent of the total average annual employment in the county with 6,138 jobs.
 - The average annual wage in construction was \$61,459 in 2017.
 - Construction employment in the county increased for the fifth year in a row, with a 20.8 percent change.

- Agriculture is one of the base industries in the area, representing 7.3 percent of total employment. It is, however, highly seasonal and volatile from year to year.
 - Average annual employment in agriculture in 2017 was 6,380, with an increase of 9.6 percent from 2016.
 - The average annual wage in agriculture was \$27,925, mainly due to the seasonality of agricultural activities.

Service-providing industries are a major share (80.8 percent) of the county's economy. There was an average of 70,727 jobs, with an increase of 1.2 percent, or by 827 jobs. Service-providing industries paid an average annual wage of \$55,364 in 2017.

- Healthcare and social assistance employment in the private sector was 11,282 jobs, which represented about 12.9 percent of total employment in 2017, and the second largest industry cluster in the county. Healthcare and social assistance increased by 2.5 percent from 2016, with increases in different segments including hospitals and ambulatory healthcare services. The average annual wage in this industry was \$47,833.
- Accommodations and food services increased by 1.5 percent over the year, with total employment at 7,240. Total payrolls were \$133.8 million with an average annual wage of \$17,354. This industry continues to expand at the rate of 4.0 percent a year for the past five years.
- Government employment, which includes both public education and healthcare, totaled 13,207 in 2017, which is the largest industry in the area with an increase of 2.4 percent from 2016.
 - It had the second largest payroll in the county at \$834.7 million, with an average annual wage of \$63,198.
- The administrative and support and waste management and remediation industry sector in Benton County represented 11.4 percent of total employment. The average annual employment in this sector was 9,930 in 2017, with an increase of 2.3 percent from 2016. Total covered payrolls were \$796.1 million in 2017, with an increase of 3.1 percent over the year. Average annual wages for this sector was \$80,172.
- The professional, scientific and technical services industry is the fifth largest private industry in Benton County with 10.6 percent share of total employment.
 - This industry had an average annual employment of 9,259, with a decrease of 3.5 percent from 2016.
 - Total payroll for this industry was \$879.3 million, with a decrease of 2.7 percent over the year. Average annual wages were \$94,970 for this industry.
- Retail trade is the fourth largest employing industry in Benton County, representing 11.0 percent of total employment.
 - In 2017, this industry had an average of 9,664 jobs, with \$282.5 million in payroll and an average annual wage of \$29,227.

- The largest contributors of growth were clothing and clothing accessories stores, which increased by 14.1 percent, followed by health and personal care stores (increased 4.6 percent) and food and beverage stores (increased 3.6 percent).

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

Source: Employment Security Department, 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. Some highlights:

In 2017, the largest share of employment was held by 25 to 34 year-olds at 22.2 percent, which is close to the state's figure of 23.1 percent. The age group of 35 to 44 year-olds had a 21.5 percent share of employment, followed by those 45 to 54 years-old at 19.6 percent.

- The county's employment showed male workers at 51.5 percent and females at 48.5 percent.
- Male-dominated industries included construction (81.9 percent), utilities (75.8 percent), wholesale trade (74.7 percent), transportation and warehousing (74.0 percent) and administrative and waste management (67.9 percent).
- Female-dominated industries included healthcare and social assistance (80.6 percent), educational services (72.9 percent), finance and insurance (67.1 percent) and arts, entertainment and recreation (57.3 percent).

Source: The Local Employment Dynamics

Wages and income

In 2017, there were 87,461 jobs in Benton County covered by unemployment insurance, with a total payroll of over \$4.7 billion.

The average annual wage was \$53,826 in 2017 for Benton County, while for the state it was \$62,077 and the state, less King County, was \$48,424. Benton County average annual wage is the third highest in the state. The median hourly wage in 2017 was \$23.94, below the state's median hourly wage of \$24.89.

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

Personal income

In 2016, Benton County's personal income totaled at \$8.8 billion and per capita personal income was \$45,329, less than the state (\$54,579) and the nation (\$49,246).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts, the median household income was \$61,147 in 2017. The county's median household income was less than that of the state (\$62,848) during the same time period.

Benton County's poverty rate of 12.0 percent is above Washington state's rate of 11.0 percent and below the national poverty rate of 12.3 percent in 2017, according to U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Population

In 2017, Benton County's population was 198,171 with a 13.1 percent growth from 2010 to 2017, compared to the state's growth rate of 10.1 percent over the same time period.

The largest city in Benton County is Kennewick with a population of 80,280 in 2017. The second largest city is Richland with a population of 54,150. The third largest is West Richland with a population of 14,660.

Population facts

	Benton County	Washington state
Population 2017	198,171	7,405,743
Population 2010	175,177	6,724,540
Percent change, 2010 to 2017	13.1%	10.1%

Age, gender and ethnicity

Benton County has a younger population than does the state.

- Benton County's largest population was under 18 years of age (26.8 percent) compared to the state (22.2 percent) in 2017.
- Residents under the age of 5 years old made up 7.2 percent of the total population compared to 6.2 percent in the state in 2017.
- In 2017, Benton County's population 65 years and older made up 14.4 percent of the total compared to 15.1 percent of the state's population.

The gender split in the county was 49.9 percent female compared to 50 percent in the state in 2017.

Benton County is not as racially or ethnically diverse as the state except in its Hispanic or Latino residents, who can be any race. Hispanics or Latinos were 21.9 percent of the population compared with 12.7 percent in the state.

Demographics

	Benton County	Washington state
Population by age, 2017		
Under 5 years old	7.2%	6.2%
Under 18 years old	26.8%	22.2%
65 years and older	14.4%	15.1%
Females, 2017	49.9%	50%
Race/ethnicity, 2017		
White	90.4%	79.5%
Black	1.8%	4.2%
American Indian, Alaskan Native	1.2%	1.9%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander	3.3%	9.7%
Hispanic or Latino, any race	21.9%	12.7%

Educational attainment

About 89.6 percent of Benton County's population 25 years and older were high school graduates, 2012 to 2016. This graduation rate compares to that of the state's rate of 90.6 percent.

Those holding a bachelor's degree or higher made up 29.4 percent of Benton County residents age 25 and older compared to 33.6 percent of state residents.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Useful links

- [County data tables](#)
- [Benton County home page](#)
- [Benton County on ChooseWashington.com](#)
- [Benton County on HistoryLink.org](#)
- [Benton County on ofm.wa.gov](#)
- [Benton-Franklin Workforce Development Council](#)
- [City of Kennewick](#)
- [City of Prosser](#)
- [City of Richland](#)
- [City of West Richland](#)
- [Self Sufficiency Calculator for Washington State](#)
- [Prosser Economic Development Organization](#)
- [Tri-City Industrial Development Council](#)
- [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts](#)
- [Port of Benton](#)
- [Port of Kennewick](#)
- [Washington Ports](#)
- [Washington State University Benton/Franklin County Extension](#)
- [Workforce Development Areas and WorkSource Office Directory](#)

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.