

# Benton County profile



by Ajsa Suljic, regional labor economist - *updated September 2017*

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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.

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### Geographic facts

(Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts)

	<b>Benton County</b>	<b>Rank in state</b>
Land area, 2010 (square miles)	1,700.38	22
Persons per square mile, 2010	103	9

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### Outlook

The Benton County economy is moving right along towards new horizons in economic growth and expansion. County economy increased by 3.0 percent or 2,506 jobs from 2015 to 2016. Industry growth in 2016 occurred in construction, retail trade, transportation and warehousing, educational services, healthcare, 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, the construction, transportation and warehousing, and wine production and utilization industries are expected to play a big role in Benton County's future prosperity. One of the examples of continuous growth is in educational services, which expanded by 5.9 percent over the year, and is marching forward with growth to accommodate ever increasing demand.

Nonfarm employment projections are done for Benton and Franklin Counties combined and two counties together are expected to grow at the rate of 2.0 percent a year through 2020. Industries that are projected to add the most jobs include private and public education, health care, and leisure and hospitality.

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## Labor force and unemployment

(Source: Employment Security Department)

Current labor force and unemployment statistics are available on the [Labor area summaries page](#).

The Benton County resident labor force was estimated at 94,454 in 2016, an increase of 3.0 percent from 2015. The county's unemployment rate averaged 6.5 percent in 2016, which was 0.2 percent lower than in 2015. Total resident employment increased by 3.2 percent or 2,721 over the year.

The most recent numbers released for July 2017 show the unemployment rate at 4.8 percent, which is 1.4 percent less than that in July 2015. The Benton County resident labor force was 98,799, employment was 94,104 and unemployment was 4,695. The resident labor force is expanding as more workers are participating in workforce activities, while at the same time employment is increasing as more residents are finding jobs in expanding economy.

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## Industry employment

(Source: Employment Security Department)

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

Benton County total covered employment was 84,797 in 2016, an increase of 3.0 percent or 2,506 jobs since 2015. The County's total covered payroll was \$4.5 billion, an increase of 4.9 percent over 2015. As the result, the covered average annual wage in Benton County was \$52,594 in 2016, an increase of 1.8 percent from the average annual wage of \$51,676 in 2015. In 2016, according to the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, there were 5,391 total firms in the county.

## Top 10 Industries in Benton County

(Source: Employment Security Department, QCEW)

Rank	Industry	% of Total
1	Government	15.2%
2	Health care and social assistance	13.0%
3	Professional and technical services	11.3%
4	Administrative and waste services	11.5%
5	Retail trade	11.4%
6	Accommodation and food services	8.4%
7	Agriculture	6.9%
8	Construction	6.0%
9	Manufacturing	4.7%
10	Finance and insurance	2.1%

Goods-producing industries, which include natural resources, mining, construction and manufacturing, increased in employment from 2015 to 2016 by 1.9 percent, or 274 jobs. Average monthly employment in 2016 was 14,901 workers and annual wages totaled \$671.4 million, which translates to a \$45,060 average annual wage for goods-producing workers.

- The manufacturing industry declined in employment over the year by 0.3 percent. The averaged employment was at 3,996 jobs in 2016, with average annual pay of \$55,701. Manufacturing represented 4.7 percent of total covered employment in Benton County.
- Construction accounted for 6.0 percent of the total average annual employment in the county with 5,081 jobs.
  - The average annual wage in construction was \$57,040 in 2016.
  - Construction employment in the county increased for the fourth year in a row, with a 10.5 percent change over the year.
- Agriculture is one of the base industries in the area, representing 6.9 percent of total employment. It is, however, highly seasonal and volatile from year to year.
  - Average annual employment in agriculture in 2016 was 5,820, a decline of 3.3 percent from 2015.
  - The average annual wage in agriculture was \$27,298, mainly due to the seasonality of agricultural activities. The average annual wage has increased by 6.1 percent over the year.

Service-providing industries are a major share (82.2 percent) of the county's economy. There was an average of 69,744 jobs, which increased 3.3 percent, or by 2,232 jobs. Service-providing industries paid an average annual wage of \$54,133 in 2016, up by 1.4 percent over the year.

- Healthcare and social assistance employment in the private sector was 11,005 jobs, which represented about 13.0 percent of total employment in 2016 and the second largest industry cluster in the county. Healthcare and social assistance increased by 5.0 percent from 2015, with increases in different segments including hospitals and ambulatory health care services. Healthcare and social assistance industry is the fourth largest payroll in the county with \$504.4 million. The average annual wage in this industry was \$45,836.
- Accommodations and food services increased by 8.0 percent over the year, with total employment at 7,114. Total payrolls were at \$121.6 million with average annual wage at \$17,099. A major contribution to growth comes to accommodation services, as new hotels are built and offer their services. This industry continues to expand at the rate of 2.7 percent a year since 2010.
- Government employment, which includes both public education and health care totaled 12,903 in 2016, which is the largest industry in the area with an increase of 2.8 percent from 2015.
  - Over 83.3 percent of total employment in government was in local government, 10.8 percent in state government and 6.0 percent in federal government.
  - It had the second largest payroll in the county at \$786.5 million, with an average annual wage at \$60,953.
- The administrative support and waste management and remediation industry in Benton County represented 11.5 percent of total employment. The average annual employment in this industry was 9,710 in 2016 with an increase of 3.8 percent from 2015. Total covered payrolls were \$772.0 million in 2016, with an increase over the year of 1.4 percent. The average annual wage for this industry was \$79,512.
- The professional, scientific and technical services industry is the fifth largest private industry in Benton County with an 11.3 percent share of total employment.
  - This industry had an average annual employment of 9,593, with an increase of 0.2 percent from 2015.
  - Total payroll for this industry was \$904.2 million, with an over the year increase of 2.0 percent. Average annual wages were \$109,460 for the industry workers.

- Retail trade is the fourth largest employing industry in Benton County, representing 11.4 percent of total employment.
  - In 2016, this industry had an average of 9,625 jobs, with \$273.0 million in payroll and an average annual wage of \$28,365.
  - The largest contributors of growth were furniture and home furnishing stores with an increase over the year of 27.7 percent, followed by the health and personal care stores increase of 27.1 percent and clothing and clothing accessories stores, which increased by 8.8 percent.
- The fastest growing industry over the year has been transportation and warehousing with a 9.3 percent increase from 2015. This industry makes up only 1.1 percent of total employment, but it is expanding rapidly. Total payrolls in this industry were \$40.1 million, with an average annual wage of \$42,287.

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

### *Industry employment by age and gender*

(Source: The Local Employment Dynamics)

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 2016, the largest share of employment was held by 25 to 34 year-olds at 22.0 percent, which is close to the state's figure of 22.9 percent. The age group of 35 to 44 year-olds had a 21.2 percent share of employment, followed by those 45 to 54 years-old at 20.2 percent.

- The county's employment showed male workers at 51.3 percent and females at 48.7 percent.
- Male-dominated industries included construction (81.5 percent), utilities (75.4 percent), wholesale trade (75.1 percent), transportation and warehousing (74.8 percent) and administrative and waste management (68.8 percent).
- Female-dominated industries included healthcare and social assistance (80.6 percent), educational services (73.0 percent), finance and insurance (68.3 percent) and accommodation and food services (55.2 percent).

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### Wages and income

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

In 2016, there were 84,797 jobs in Benton County covered by unemployment insurance, with a total payroll of over \$4.4 billion.

The average annual wage was \$52,594 in 2016 for Benton County, while for the state it was \$59,073 and the state less King County was \$46,771. The Benton County average annual wage was third highest in the state. The median hourly wage in 2016 was \$22.89, below the state’s median hourly wage of \$23.91.

*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 2015, Benton County’s personal income totaled at \$8.3 million and per capita personal income was \$43,507, less than the state (\$51,898) and the nation (\$48,112).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts, the median household income was \$60,251 in 2011-2015. The county’s median was slightly less than that of the state (\$61,062) during the same period.

Benton County’s poverty rate of 14.2 percent was above Washington state’s rate of 12.2 percent and the nation’s rate of 13.5 percent in 2015, according to U.S Census Bureau QuickFacts.

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**Population**

(Source: U.S. Census Bureau)

In 2016, Benton County’s population was 193,686 with a 10.6 percent growth from 2010 to 2016 compared to the state’s growth rate of 8.4 percent over the same time period.

The largest city in Benton County is Kennewick with a population of 80,454 in 2016. The second largest city is Richland with population at 54,989. Third largest is West Richland with population of 14,198.

*Population facts*

(Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts)

	<b>Benton County</b>	<b>Washington state</b>
Population 2016	193,686	7,288,000
Population 2010	175,177	6,724,540
Percent change, 2010 to 2016	10.6%	8.4%

*Age, gender and ethnicity*

(Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts)

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 (22.4 percent) in 2016.
- 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 2016.
- In 2016, Benton County’s population 65 years and older made up 14.1 percent of the total compared to 14.8 percent of the state’s population.

The gender split in the county was 49.9 percent female compared to 50.0 percent in the state in 2016.

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 21.4 percent of the population compared with 12.4 percent in the state.

### Demographics

(Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts)

	Benton County	Washington state
<b>Population by age, 2016</b>		
Under 5 years old	7.2%	6.2%
Under 18 years old	26.8%	22.4%
65 years and older	14.1%	14.8%
<b>Females, 2016</b>		
	49.9%	50.0%
<b>Race/ethnicity, 2016</b>		
White	90.7%	80.0%
Black	1.7%	4.1%
American Indian, Alaskan Native	1.2%	1.9%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander	3.4%	9.4%
Hispanic or Latino, any race	21.4%	12.4%

### Educational attainment

(Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts)

About 88.9 percent of Benton County’s population 25 years and older were high school graduates, 2011-2015. This graduation rate compares to that of the state’s rate of 90.4 percent.

Those holding a bachelor’s degree or higher made up 29.4 percent of Benton County residents age 25 and older compared to 32.9 percent of state residents.

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### 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](#)

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