

Clark County Profile

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Overview

Regional context

Clark County is located in southwest Washington on the Columbia River, roughly 100 miles upstream from the Pacific Ocean. It is the fifth most populous county in the state, and has a large employment base that has been diversifying into headquarters and upper-end services. Clark has had the strongest recovery of any county in the state since the onset of the 2008 recession.

The county is part of the Portland Metropolitan Area, and its economy can be understood only in that context: about a third of the county's labor force commutes to Portland on a daily basis, while only about 11,000 commute in the opposite direction. The county is also in a unique position tax-wise: Washington has a sales tax but no income tax, while Oregon has an income tax but no sales tax. Clark County has excellent transportation linkages, including proximity to Portland International Airport, location on east-west and north-south rail lines, and immediate access to Interstate 5 and 205 north-south and Interstate 84 heading east.

Local economy

Before the advent of Europeans, the area around Clark County was part of a densely settled region of native tribes (primarily the Chinook) along the Columbia River. The area was rich in salmon, the high-protein camas root, wapato, bitterroot and berries, along with deer, elk and waterfowl. There was an active trade network with tribes throughout the Northwest. Between 1820 and 1850, diseases brought by traders and fur trappers killed off many natives (up to 90 percent in some cases), and from 1850 onward, U.S. troops forced natives to move to reservations. Fort Vancouver served as a holding center for Indians captured in wars in other parts of the Northwest, before they were forcibly settled elsewhere.

White settlers began arriving in large numbers in the 1850s, initially drawn by farmland and timber. In fact, the first apple tree in the state is still standing there. The Camas paper mill was started in the 1870s. The cheap power from damming the Columbia helped spur industrialization, including an aluminum smelter built in the late 1930s that closed in 2001 following the Enron energy price manipulation.

In the 1970s, the county began to attract investment in electronics, which became its most important industry in the 1990s and remains so today, despite the loss of one-third of its employment base in the 2001 recession. Wafertech, Hewlett Packard, SEH America and Linear Semiconductor remain important employers.

Employment grew rapidly in all sectors during the 1990s, but slowed after the 2001 recession. Construction and homebuilding remained strong until the housing bubble burst in 2006 to 2007. The county lost 6 percent of its employment base in the downturn, about the same as the state and nation, but by late 2018, it was 21 percent above its pre-recession peak compared with 14 percent for the state and 8 percent for the nation. Growth has been spurred by the relocation of the headquarters of both PeaceHealth and Banfield Pet Hospital, the expansion of Fisher Investment and the opening of the Ilani Casino. A major new development on the Columbia River waterfront is changing the face of Vancouver. The plan includes two hotels, 3,300 condominium and apartment units (along with office space), retail and restaurants and a public park with a pier stretching 90 feet out over the river. A public market is also a possibility. Construction of the first phase is well under way, and the pier has been completed.

Major industry sectors in Clark County include healthcare and social assistance (24,600 jobs in 2018), professional and business services (20,200), retail trade (19,000 jobs), leisure and hospitality (16,000 jobs) and manufacturing (14,200 jobs). In addition, government employed 27,100, over half of which were in public education.

Geographic facts

| | Clark County | Rank in state |
|--------------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| Land area, 2010 (square miles) | 629 | 35 |
| People per square mile, 2017 | 748.81 | 2 |

Source: Washington State Office of Financial Management

Outlook

Clark County’s labor market had another good year in 2018, although employment growth was slowing at the end of the year. After four years of 4 percent gains, 2018 growth was revised to 3.2 percent. Almost every sector added jobs. With the national economy in good shape, there is nothing to indicate that 2019 will not be a good year for the county as well. The year started out on a positive note with the announcement that Vigor Industrial would be investing \$1 billion into the former Christensen yacht building facility, turning it into a production facility for a military barge contract that will eventually employ up to 400 workers onsite. In addition, Intel’s plans to build another fabrication plant west of Portland, while not directly affecting Clark County, will have positive spillover effects for the entire metro area.

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.

Clark County's unemployment rate was below the state and national averages throughout the 1990s, but above both since 2000. The financial meltdown and subsequent recession widened the gap to four percentage points in 2010. Unemployment has dropped since then due to job growth, but remains higher than average, with a preliminary average of 4.8 percent in 2018.

Estimates of the county labor force and employed residents should be used with caution, since their trend is significantly different – much weaker growth – than has been shown by nonfarm employment, a more trustworthy data series. For example, official estimates show the number of employed residents increasing by 0.9 percent in 2018, well below the 3.8 percent for nonfarm employment. Similarly, for the 2008 to 2018 period, the number of employed residents officially grew by 9 percent, while nonfarm employment rose by 22 percent. If the number of employed residents were indeed higher than the official count, the unemployment rate would be lower.

The labor force participation rate, as measured through the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, was 64.9 percent in 2017, somewhat lower than a decade earlier. The decline was probably due to demographic trends – labor force participation declines sharply over the age of 54, and so the overall rate would drop as more baby boomers reached that age. The participation rate for the prime-working-age population – those aged 25 to 54 – has been fairly steady at 82 percent since 2005.

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.

From 2000 to 2018, Clark County nonfarm employment grew more than three times faster than the nation, and 64 percent faster than the state. During the 2008 to 2009 recession, employment fell by 6 percent, closely tracking the state and nation. A slow recovery started in 2010, and in early 2013, hiring accelerated and has been exceedingly strong ever since.

- Construction and mining employed 14,200 in 2018, well over the peak employment in the housing bubble years. Construction has boomed over the past seven years, averaging over 9 percent growth per year. Multifamily housing has been particularly strong. Single-family housing has recovered from recession lows, while still being well below the levels observed back in the 1990s. A variety of commercial and industrial projects have kept contractors busy, pushed costs up and led to labor shortages.
- Manufacturing was harder hit by the 2001 recession than the one in 2008. By 2018, employment levels had fully recovered. Employment continued to expand in 2018, adding 500 jobs (3.6 percent) despite a staffing reduction at the Georgia Pacific paper mill in Camas.
- Wholesale trade employment grew by 1 percent (100 jobs) in 2018, as Clark County continued to develop as a distribution center. Total employment reached 7,000 jobs.

- Despite the increase in online shopping, employment in retail trade rose by 400 jobs (2 percent) to 18,900 in 2018. Taxable retail sales slowed in the first half of the year due to a drop in auto-related sales, but otherwise continued to expand.
- Transportation and warehousing had its best year in over a decade, with a 5 percent increase in jobs. Total employment reached 4,300.
- Information services declined 300 jobs in 2018 due to a major layoff. Employment fell to 2,800 jobs.
- Finance and insurance continued its expansion in 2018, employing 6,000, a gain of 200 jobs over the year (5 percent).
- Real estate, rental and leasing grew by 7 percent in 2018: +200 jobs to a total of 3,100.
- Professional services added 400 jobs this past year for a total of 9,000 jobs.
- The fastest-growing sector in the county over the past decade has been corporate offices, due in large part to the relocation of PeaceHealth and Banfield Pet Hospital. Employment in this sector was unchanged at 3,300 in 2018.
- For the past four years, business services has been growing slightly slower than the average for all industries. In 2018, the industry was unchanged at 7,700 jobs.
- Private educational services has grown steadily for more than a decade, nearly doubling its payrolls in that time period. Employment reached 2,100 in 2018.
- Healthcare and social assistance added 600 jobs (+2.5 percent) in 2018. Job growth in the past few years has come mainly at hospitals and clinics.
- Leisure and hospitality employed 15,800 in 2018, up 2.6 percent. Almost all of the 400 new jobs were in full-service (+300) or limited-service (+200) restaurants. Arts, entertainment and recreation has held steady at 2,300 to 2,400 jobs for a number of years. Accommodations employed 1,000 in 2018, and is poised for rapid growth as a number of hotels are in the planning process.
- Public sector payrolls grew by 800 jobs in 2018. The bulk of the increase was in local government, almost evenly split between K-12 education and other local government entities.

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.

Clark County highlights:

In 2017, 14 percent of the jobs in Clark County were held by workers under the age of 25, while 21 percent of jobs were held by those aged 55 and over. The rest of the jobs were evenly split among those aged 25 to 34, 35 to 44 and 45 to 54 with each about 21 to 22 percent of the total. The county's age profile closely matches that of the state. After big demographic changes in the 1990 to 2007 period due to the aging of the baby boomers, the share of employment by age has been relatively stable over the past decade.

Jobs were almost evenly divided between men (49 percent) and women (51 percent) in 2017. There were substantial differences in gender dominance by industry.

- Male-dominated industries included construction (81 percent), manufacturing (74 percent) and wholesale trade (67 percent).
- Female-dominated industries included healthcare and social assistance (80 percent), educational services (public and private combined, 73 percent), corporate offices (64 percent) and finance and insurance (57 percent).

Source: The Local Employment Dynamics

Wages and income

When it comes to average wages:

- The inflation-adjusted average has risen almost every year for the past two decades.
- The 2017 average annual wage for jobs in the county was \$50,856, well below the state and national averages.

Average wages vary widely by industry in Clark County

| Industry | NAICS | Average annual wage | Median hourly wage |
|------------------------------------|-------|---------------------|--------------------|
| All industries | | \$50,586 | \$22.43 |
| Higher-wage industries | | | |
| Corporate offices | 55 | \$106,263 | \$43.38 |
| Finance and insurance | 52 | \$87,091 | \$30.12 |
| Professional services | 54 | \$75,026 | \$30.82 |
| Wholesale trade | 42 | \$72,445 | \$26.52 |
| Lower-wage industries | | | |
| Accommodations and food services | 72 | \$19,466 | \$13.08 |
| Arts, entertainment and recreation | 71 | \$22,589 | \$15.39 |
| Private educational services | 62 | \$28,214 | \$20.56 |
| Retail trade | 44-45 | \$31,572 | \$15.28 |

With rising wage inequality, it's important to look beyond the average to get a more detailed look at wage distribution. The four major conclusions:

- Wages paid by Clark County employers have been increasing across the wage spectrum.
- Wage inequality has also increased.

- The number of higher-wage jobs has been growing faster than average.
- The minimum wage has pushed wages up on the low end faster than average.

The median hourly wage for jobs in Clark County in 2017 was \$22.43, a solid increase (2.2 percent) over 2016. Clark’s median was more than \$2 per hour below the state median. The county median for the private sector rose by 2.4 percent.

The county has been seeing an increase in the number and pay of higher-wage jobs. From 2001 to 2017, the total number of jobs increased by 34 percent, while the number of those paying above \$48.00 per hour more than doubled. The average wage for the top 10 percent of jobs rose by 22 percent over that period, while the median hourly wage rose by 9.5 percent. The rapid growth in higher-wage jobs was welcome news, the growing disparity in wages, not so much.

During the recession, there were substantially higher losses for low- and medium-wage jobs than for higher-wage jobs, as shown in the following table. For example, the number of jobs paying below \$12 per hour fell by 11 percent, while the number of those paying above \$30 per hour declined by only 2 percent. In the recovery, the number of jobs paying below \$12 per hour continued to decline, as the minimum wage crept upward, while there was a substantial increase in jobs in higher-wage categories. Overall, from 2007 to 2017, jobs paying below \$12 per hour declined by a third, as the increase in the minimum wage pushed jobs into the next highest wage bracket, which grew faster than average. Jobs around the median wage grew at an average pace, while those paying \$30 per hour and higher increased by more than a third. The industries with the largest change in higher-wage jobs were healthcare, finance and corporate headquarters (NAICS 55).

Percent change in number of full-time-equivalent jobs by hourly wage in Clark County

| | All jobs | <\$12.00 | \$12.00 - \$17.99 | \$18.00 - \$23.99 | \$24.00 - \$29.99 | \$30.00+ |
|-----------|----------|----------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------|
| 2007-2010 | -7.8% | -11% | -11.8% | -8.2% | -8.2% | -2% |
| 2010-2017 | 26.9% | -25.3% | 44.9% | 26.3% | 33.7% | 39% |
| 2007-2017 | 17.1% | -33.5% | 27.8% | 16% | 22.7% | 36.2% |

Note: percentages are not additive because of the change in base year (2007 vs. 2010)

Focusing again on wage disparity, the table below shows that the average wage for lowest-paid 60 percent of jobs rose by around 14 percent from 2007 to 2017. The average wage for jobs in the middle rose by 8 to 9 percent. Meanwhile jobs at the upper end of the wage spectrum paid 17 percent higher on average.

Percent change in the average hourly wage in Clark County

| | Lowest-paid 20 percent of jobs | Next 20 percent of jobs | Middle-paid 20 percent of jobs | Next 20 percent of jobs | Next 10 percent of jobs | Highest-paid 10 percent of jobs |
|-----------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 2007-2010 | 1.2% | 2.2% | 2.6% | 3.5% | 4.5% | 3.9% |
| 2010-2017 | 12.5% | 6.3% | 5.3% | 5.7% | 6.6% | 12.3% |
| 2007-2017 | 13.9% | 8.7% | 8% | 9.4% | 11.4% | 16.6% |

Not surprisingly, median household income declined sharply in the recession, falling 9.7 percent from 2007 to 2010 – compared with 4.4 percent for the state and 5.8 percent nationally. From 2010 to 2017, however, the median rose by 22.8 percent, the state by 15.1 percent, and the U.S. by 8.8 percent. Clark’s 2017 median household income of \$74,747 was higher than both the state (\$70,979) and the U.S. (\$60,336).

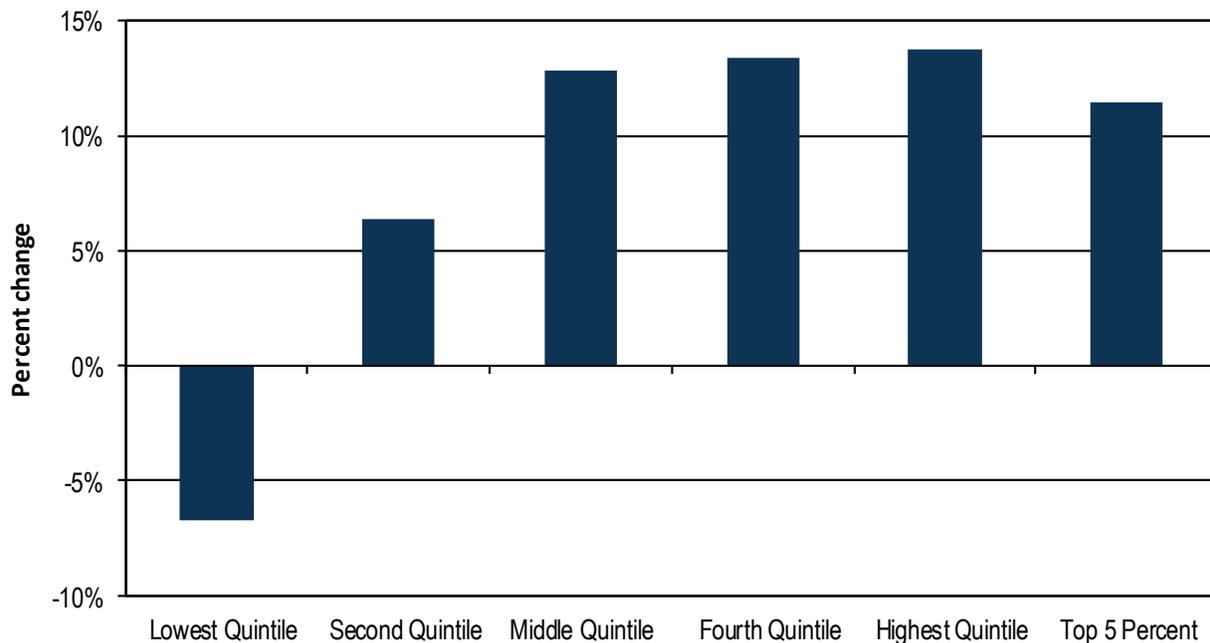
Household income became increasingly unequal over the past decade. Income for the poorest 20 percent of households was estimated at \$17,183 in 2017, a decline of -6.7 percent from 2006 to 2017. In contrast, the average for the top 5 percent of households was \$344,858 in 2017, and grew by 11.4 percent over the past ten years.

Average household income by quintile, Clark County, 2017

| | Lowest quintile | Second quintile | Middle quintile | Fourth quintile | Fifth quintile | Top 5 percent |
|-----------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------|
| | \$17,183 | \$45,754 | \$73,438 | \$106,811 | \$208,605 | \$344,858 |
| 2016-2017 | -10.9% | 2.3% | 5.8% | 4.1% | 0.5% | 6.8% |
| 2006-2017 | -6.7% | 6.4% | 12.8% | 13.4% | 13.7% | 11.4% |

Clark County’s poverty rate rose from 9.3 percent in 2007 to 13.7 percent in 2011, before falling to 10.3 percent in 2017 (not statistically different from the 2016 rate), below the state (11 percent) and nation (13.4 percent). The poverty rate for children was higher, but followed the same pattern, going from 11 percent to 18 percent then down to 14.4 percent.

Change in average household income by quintile, Clark County, 2006-2017



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 2017, Clark County per capita personal income was \$50,078, the highest on record. Both per capita earned income and per capita investment income reached an all-time high.

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

Population

Clark County's population was estimated at 479,500 as of April 1, 2018. The county was the fastest growing in the state in the 1990s and one of the faster ones in the 2000s until the recession hit. Growth in the past was spurred by in-migration of new residents, but in 2010, more people moved out of the county than moved in for the first time since 1984. In-migration turned (barely) positive in 2011, and then roared back in 2014 to 2018. Vancouver was the largest city in the county, and the fourth largest in the state, with a population of 183,500 in 2018.

Population facts

| | Clark County | Washington state |
|------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Population 2018 | 479,500 | 7,427,570 |
| Population 2000 | 345,238 | 5,894,121 |
| Percent change, 2000 to 2018 | 38.9% | 26.0% |

Source: Office of Financial Management

Age, gender and ethnicity

When compared with the state and nation, Clark County's population has a greater proportion of its population between the ages of 5 and 19 years old, a smaller proportion aged 20 to 34, and somewhat more in the 40 to 59 age group and only slightly more elderly.

The county is much less diverse in terms of race and ethnicity than the state and nation, but has been slowly getting more diverse. In 2017, 79.0 percent of Clark's population was white and not Latino, compared with 69 percent statewide and 61 percent nationally. Just over 9 percent of Clark County's population was Latino, versus 13 percent of the state and 18 percent nationally.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; Office of Financial Management

Demographics

| | Clark County | Washington state |
|---|--------------|------------------|
| Population by age, 2017 | | |
| Under 5 years old | 6% | 6.2% |
| Under 18 years old | 23.9% | 22.6% |
| 65 years and older | 15.6% | 15.3% |
| Race/ethnicity, 2017 | | |
| White alone, not Hispanic or Latino | 79.2% | 69.2% |
| Black, not Hispanic or Latino | 2% | 3.7% |
| American Indian, Alaskan Native, not Hispanic or Latino | 0.7% | 1.3% |
| Asian, not Hispanic or Latino | 4.6% | 8.2% |
| Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander, not Hispanic or Latino | 0.8% | 0.7% |
| Two or more races, not Hispanic or Latino | 3.7% | 4.2% |
| Hispanic or Latino, any race | 9.1% | 12.8% |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Office of Financial Management

Educational attainment

In 2017, 31.6 percent of Clark County residents age 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or higher. That was lower than the nation (32 percent) and state (35.5 percent). As Clark continues to attract more managerial and professional jobs, the county's educational attainment will move closer to the state and nation.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Useful links

- [County data tables](#)
- [Clark County home page](#)
- [Clark County on ofm.wa.gov](#)
- [Port of Camas-Washougal](#)
- [Port of Ridgefield](#)
- [Port of Vancouver](#)
- [Washington Ports](#)
- [Clark County Profile from ChooseWashington.com](#)
- [Clark County History](#)
- [Columbia River Economic Development Council](#)
- [Self-Sufficiency Calculator for Washington State](#)
- [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts](#)
- [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.