

Pierce County Profile

By Jim Vleming
Regional labor economist
Updated February 2020



[Overview](#) | [Geographic facts](#) | [Outlook](#) | [Labor force and unemployment](#) | [Industry employment](#) | [Wages and income](#) | [Population](#) | [Useful links](#)

Overview

Regional context

Pierce County is a coastal area in the northwest part of the state that includes Puget Sound, the Puget Sound lowlands and the surrounding region west of the Cascade Range and east of the Olympic Mountains. Formed out of Thurston County in 1852 by the legislature of the Oregon Territory, it was named for U.S. President Franklin Pierce. The county has a total area of roughly 1,800 square miles, of which 1,670 square miles is land and 130 square miles is water. The highest natural point in Washington, Mount Rainier at 14,410 feet, is located in Pierce County.

Local economy

The founding of Pierce County encouraged a slow but steady stream of new settlements. Tacoma was founded in 1872. When the Northern Pacific Railroad announced in 1873 that its northwest terminus would locate in Tacoma, the city and surrounding county grew into a regional leader.

The lumber industry, at the time dominated by the St. Paul and Tacoma Lumber Co., helped the area to develop further. World War I brought an industrial boom as the region's lumber was used in local shipyards. The U.S. Army built Camp Lewis, which would later grow into Fort Lewis, on 70,000 acres of land on the Nisqually plain purchased by Tacoma voters. In 1918, the voters created the Port of Tacoma, which began improving industrial waterways and facilities.

In the years following World War II, economic significance within the region began shifting when the Boeing Company established Seattle as a center for aircraft manufacturing. Microsoft's 1979 move from Albuquerque, New Mexico to nearby Bellevue helped to develop Seattle as a technology center in the 1980s. A stream of new software, biotechnology and Internet companies into the area led to an economic revival. This development prompted the Tacoma-Pierce area to begin transitioning out of its wood and paper products manufacturing.

Many Pierce County residents commute to jobs in King County. This is partly due to the growing economy in King County, which has exerted upward pressure on housing costs. That has encouraged workers who might normally have lived in King County to reside in Pierce and other neighboring counties with a lower cost of living.

Pierce County has continued to be a leader in the greater Puget Sound regional economy. The Economic Development Board for Tacoma-Pierce County has published its 2019 Major Employers list – a list of the top employers in Pierce County, based on their full-time employees count. Healthcare service providers continue to be Pierce County's largest private employers. MultiCare Health System (8,264) and CHI Franciscan Health (5,682) are ranked number 2 and 4 overall in 2019. Safeway and Albertson's (2,106), Boeing (1,550), State Farm (1,461), Fred Meyer retail and

distribution center (1,364), Amazon distribution centers (1,200), Costco (1,200), Milgard Manufacturing (880), Target and Walmart (878 each) round out the top 10 private sector employers for 2019.

As the state’s second largest employer, the United States Military (Joint Base Lewis-McChord) remains Pierce County’s largest public employer with 54,000 FTEs. The State of Washington (7,745), City of Tacoma and Tacoma Public Utilities (3,653), Puyallup Tribe (3,422), Pierce County Government (3,118), and United States Postal Service (1,336) retained their places as the top non-education public sector employers.

Public instruction is a large source of employment in the county, and many of the top places are held by school districts: Tacoma (3,481), Puyallup (2,690), Bethel (2,565), Clover Park (1,680), Sumner (1,323), Peninsula (1,221), and Franklin Pierce (1,135).

Other notable employers in the transportation, distribution and logistics sectors are Pierce Transit (985), Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad (457), Port of Tacoma and Northwest Seaport Alliance (269), US Foods (260), Associated Petroleum (275), Olympic Eagle Distributing (210), and U.S. Oil and Refining (197).

Geographic facts

	Pierce County	Rank in state
Land area, 2010 (square miles)	1,669.5	23
People per square mile, 2010	476.3	4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Outlook

The county can now look past the impacts of the recession and look forward as nonfarm employment continues to expand and the unemployment rate shrinks. The county pre-recession nonfarm employment high was 285,400 jobs in 2007. The preliminary 2019 totals show 2019 averaging 328,700 nonfarm jobs with government and educational and health services leading the way.

Local businesses are expanding, and new businesses are coming to the county and bringing jobs. AIM Aerospace, Tool Gauge and Carlson Paving Products are expanding operations and adding jobs. In Frederickson, Best Buy is building a 400,000 square foot warehouse center, and Chicago-based Logistics Property Company will add five new buildings to the landscape. San Diego-based ScaleMatrix opened a facility in early March on the South Hill Puyallup Center’s campus, bringing new technology that will attract even more companies and jobs to the region. The Puyallup Tribe is expanding its emerald Queen Casino with a hotel planned to be added soon.

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.

The size of the Pierce County labor force in 2018 was 424,137, up 8,846 from 2017 (2.1 percent).

The average annual unemployment rate continues to decline from the 10.4 percent rate for 2010. The average annual rate in 2019 of 5.4 percent was slightly higher than the 5.2 rate posted in 2018. The large expansion in the labor force was a key component of the slight unemployment rate increase.

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.

Pierce County total nonfarm employment bottomed out from the effects of the recession in 2010 and has continued expanding through 2019. Between 2018 and 2019, nonfarm payrolls grew over 14,000 jobs. There has been strong growth in most sectors of the local economy.

- Pierce County had 328,700 nonfarm jobs on average in 2019, making it the state's second largest labor market behind King County.
- Most of the jobs in Pierce County are private sector jobs, which made up the majority of total nonfarm jobs in 2019 (269,500).
- Trade, transportation and utilities (67,900), government (59,200) and educational health services (56,800) were the peak industries in the county in 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.

Pierce County highlights:

In 2018, the largest job holder age group in Pierce County was the 55 and older age category, making up 22.5 percent of jobs across all industries. The next largest share is among people age 25 to 34 with 22.1 percent of jobs.

Males held 48.8 percent of jobs and females held 51.2 percent of jobs in 2018.

- Male-dominated industries included mining (87.7 percent), construction (80.7 percent) and manufacturing (75.8 percent).
- Female-dominated industries included healthcare and social assistance (78.1 percent), educational services (72.3 percent), and finance and insurance (68.6 percent).

Source: The Local Employment Dynamics

Wages and income

In 2018, there were 310,996 jobs in Pierce County covered by unemployment insurance, with a total payroll of over \$16 billion.

The average annual wage in 2018 was \$51,676, below the state's average annual wage of \$66,156.

The median hourly wage in 2018 was \$23.85, which surpasses the state's median hourly wage of \$22.37 when King County is excluded, but falls below the state's median hourly wage of \$25.98 when King County is included.

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 2018, the per capita personal income was \$52,114, less than the state (\$62,026) and the nation (\$54,446). It ranks tenth among Washington state counties in per capita personal income.

The median household income in Pierce County was \$75,407 in 2018. This figure was above the median household income of the state (\$74,073) and the nation (\$61,937).

In 2018, 8.5 percent of the population in Pierce County was living below the poverty level, compared to the state at 10.3 percent and the nation at 13.1 percent. The state and national rates are not directly comparable to the county rate because they each use different data sources.

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

Population

Pierce County's population in 2018 was estimated to be 891,299. The county has added over 92,000 residents since 2010, and matches the state's growth rate.

The largest city in Pierce County is Tacoma with 211,400 residents, over 12,000 more residents than 2010.

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

Population facts

	Pierce County	Washington state
Population 2018	891,299	7,545,478
Population 2010	795,217	6,724,540
Percent change, 2010 to 2018	12.1%	12.1%

Age, gender and ethnicity

Pierce County had proportionately more young people (below the age of 18) and fewer older residents (65 and older) than the state in 2019.

- Pierce County had 6.7 percent of its population under the age of 5 years compared to the state's share of 6.1 percent.
- Those under the age of 18 made up 23.5 percent of Pierce County's population compared to 22.1 percent of the state's population.
- The oldest age group, those 65 and older, made up 13.8 percent of Pierce County's population compared to 15.4 percent of the state's population.

Females made up 50.3 percent of the population in Pierce County compared with 50.0 percent of the population in Washington state.

Pierce County has been becoming more diverse along racial and ethnic lines. Black residents made up 7.6 percent of Pierce County's total population compared to 4.3 percent of the state's population.

Demographics

	Pierce County	Washington state
Population by age, 2019		
Under 5 years old	6.7%	6.1%
Under 18 years old	23.5%	22.1%
65 years and older	13.8%	15.4%
Females, 2019	50.3%	50.0%
Race/ethnicity, 2019		
White	75.2%	78.9%
Black	7.5%	4.3%
American Indian, Alaskan Native	1.7%	1.9%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander	8.4%	10.1%
Hispanic or Latino, any race	10.9%	12.9%

Educational attainment

Most Pierce County residents age 25 and older (91.3 percent) were high school graduates, higher than the state with 91.1 percent, compared with 87.7 percent of U.S. residents in the period 2014 to 2018.

Those with a bachelor's degree or higher made up 26.4 percent of Pierce County residents age 25 and older compared to 35.3 percent of state residents and 31.5 percent of U.S. residents during the same period.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Useful links

- [County data tables](#)
- [Census Bureau Profile](#)
- [History of Pierce County](#)
- [Pierce County home page](#)
- [Pierce County on ofm.wa.gov](#)
- [Pierce County on ChooseWashington.com](#)
- [Puget Sound Regional Council](#)
- [Tacoma-Pierce County Workforce Development Council](#)
- [Tacoma-Pierce County Economic Development Board](#)
- [Self Sufficiency Calculator for Washington State](#)
- [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts](#)
- [Port of Tacoma](#)
- [Northwest Seaport Alliance](#)
- [Workforce Development Areas and WorkSource Office Directory](#)
- [Economic Development Board for Tacoma-Pierce County](#)

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.