

Thurston County Profile

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Updated May 2019



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Overview

Regional context

Thurston County is located on the southern end of Puget Sound in Western Washington, referred to as the South Sound. It is the seventh smallest county in the state, but the sixth most populous with 349.4 people per square mile.

In 2017, Forbes Magazine ranked the Olympia-Tumwater MSA (Thurston County) #32 for the [best places](#) in the nation for business and careers. The ranking acknowledges the county's favorable performance in the areas of cost of living, job growth, recreational and cultural opportunities and educational attainment.

Local economy

Thurston County was carved out of Lewis County in 1852, named after Samuel R. Thurston, the first delegate to Congress from the Oregon Territory, which later became Washington. The county seat is Olympia, the state capital and the largest city in the county. In 1851, Olympia became the port of entry for Puget Sound. A year later, it became the county seat.

Native Americans date back to roughly 3,000 years ago. Nisqually and Squaxon tribes established themselves in this area. In 1833, the first Europeans settled in the area, and in 1845, the first white American settlers arrived.

Lumber, coal and sandstone mining were the dominant sources of industry in 19th century Thurston County, and remained so into the 1920s. In 1896, Leopold Schmidt established a brewery that was a significant industry in Tumwater. It operated until Miller closed it in 2003.

State government began to increase its employment share when the state capitol was completed in 1927. By the 1950s, state government surpassed lumber employment. Logging mills were closed in the 1960s. Thurston County then grew rapidly over the decades, fueled by employment in state government and trade. Tribal casinos also took off during this time.

The local economy continues to be dependent upon government employment as 32.5 percent of all nonfarm employment can be attributed to federal, state and local government jobs. Looking back to 2010, federal government employment has declined by 12.4 percent, with overall state government employment up only 4.6 percent.

Moving forward, many of the government-related budget questions remain unresolved as the state, local municipalities and school districts continue to look for ways to fully fund education while maintaining other government services.

Geographic facts

	Thurston County	Rank in state
Land area, 2010 (square miles)	721.96	32
People per square mile, 2010	349.4	6

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Outlook

The year 2018 continued the run of positive news for the Thurston County economy. The unemployment rate has remained low and nonfarm payrolls expanded consistently over the year.

Government employment in the county has remained steady and strong with no reason to see this trend not continuing into 2019. Ground has been broken on many new projects, including a craft brewing and retail sector in Tumwater, which will include craft brewing space, distillery space and South Puget Sound Community College classrooms, as it launches new craft brewing and distillery classes. New hotels have been built or renovated and rooms are being filled on a regular basis. New residential downtown projects have sprouted up in place of vacant lots and long abandoned office buildings. The general tone of this data supports a belief in continued prosperity as we march into 2019.

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 average annual unemployment rate in the county has dropped every year since 2011, when the rate was 9.0 percent. In 2018, the rate averaged 4.8 percent.

In 2018, there were on average 6,553 county residents unemployed as 131,144 received paychecks. That compares to 6,633 unemployed in 2017 with 127,427 at work. The civilian labor force has been increasing since 2013, demonstrating a continued confidence in the local labor market.

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.

Thurston County average annual nonfarm employment totaled above 100,000 jobs from 2007 through 2009 before dropping below that level in 2010 through 2012. In 2018, employment in nonfarm categories averaged 120,000 jobs. This 2018 total is 4,100 jobs above 2017 and 8,200 better than the 2016 total.

Since the year 2000, nonfarm payrolls in the county have expanded by an average annual rate of 1.8 percent. This compares favorably to the state (1.2 percent) and the nation (0.7 percent) over the same period.

Government is by far and away the largest employer, with 39,000 jobs in the 2018 employment total. Retail trade and professional business services also provide large numbers of jobs.

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.

Thurston County highlights:

In 2017, the two largest employed age categories were those 35 to 44 years old with 22.0 percent of the jobs, and those 55 and older with 24.9 percent of the jobs.

Men held 46.3 percent of the jobs in the county and women held 53.7 percent of jobs in 2017.

- Male-dominated industries included mining (82.0 percent), construction (83.9 percent), and transportation and warehousing (74.7 percent).
- Female-dominated industries included healthcare and social assistance (78.4 percent), education (67.6 percent), and finance and insurance (66.7 percent).

Source: The Local Employment Dynamics

Wages and income

In 2017, there were 113,071 covered employment jobs in Thurston County. The total payroll for 2017 was over \$5.5 billion dollars.

In 2017, the average annual wage was \$49,176, compared to the state average of \$62,077.

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.

Per capita income in Thurston County in 2017 was \$48,845 compared to the state at \$57,896, and the nation at \$51,640. It ranks 11th for per capita income in Washington state.

Median household income over the period 2013 to 2017 was \$66,113, lower than that of the state (\$66,174) but higher than the nation (\$57,652), according to the U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts.

The percent of the county's population below the official poverty rate in 2017 was 10.5 percent compared to the state's rate of 11.0 percent and the nation's at 12.3 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts. 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

Thurston County's estimated population in April 2018 was 286,419. The population of the county at the 2010 census was 252,260.

The largest city in the county is Olympia followed by Lacey and Tumwater

Population facts

	Thurston County	Washington state
Population 2018	286,419	7,535,591
Population 2010	252,260	6,724,540
Percent change, 2010 to 2018	13.5%	12.1%

Age, gender and ethnicity

Thurston County had an older population than the state in 2017. Thurston County's population of those aged 65 and older was 16.7 percent compared to the state's 15.1 percent.

Those under 18 years old were 21.6 percent of the county population, slightly less than that of the state's 22.2 percent. Those under five years old made up 5.9 percent of Thurston County's population compared to the state's 6.2 percent.

Thurston County showed somewhat less diversity in 2017 than the state in racial/ethnic categories, with whites making up 82.2 percent of its population compared to 79.5 percent of the state's population. There was 5.5 percent of the county's population reporting two or more races in 2017 compared to 4.7 percent at the state level. The county's population had slightly more native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders (1.0 percent) than the state (0.8 percent).

Demographics

	Thurston County	Washington state
Population by age, 2017		
Under 5 years old	5.9%	6.2%
Under 18 years old	21.6%	22.2%
65 years and older	16.7%	15.1%
Females, 2017		
	51.1%	50.0%
Race/ethnicity, 2017		
White	82.2%	79.5%
Black	3.4%	4.2%
American Indian, Alaskan Native	1.8%	1.9%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander	7.1%	9.7%
Hispanic or Latino, any race	9.0%	12.7%

Educational attainment

Most Thurston County residents age 25 and older (93.8 percent) were high school graduates, which compares favorably with 90.8 percent of Washington state's residents and 87.3 percent of U.S. residents in the period 2013 to 2017.

Those with a bachelor's degree or higher made up 34.4 percent of Thurston County residents age 25 and older compared to 34.5 percent of state residents and 30.9 percent of U.S. residents during the same period.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Useful links

- [County data tables](#)
- [Pacific Mountain Workforce Development Council](#)
- [Self Sufficiency Calculator for Washington State](#)
- [Thurston County Chamber of Commerce](#)
- [Thurston County Economic Development Council](#)
- [Thurston County History](#)
- [Thurston County home page](#)
- [Thurston County on ChooseWashington.com](#)
- [Thurston County on ofm.wa.gov](#)
- [Thurston Regional Planning Council](#)
- [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts](#)
- [Port of Olympia](#)
- [Washington Ports](#)
- [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.