

Cowlitz County profile



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Overview

Regional context

Cowlitz County is located on the Columbia River, adjacent to the Portland metropolitan area. The county has two active ports, is on north-south interstate freeways and railways, and is close to eastbound freeways and railways. It has a highly productive wood products industry, two paper mills, a diverse manufacturing base and good rail and interstate linkages. The county is a metropolitan area and is a regional center for health care, retail trade and other services.

Economic history

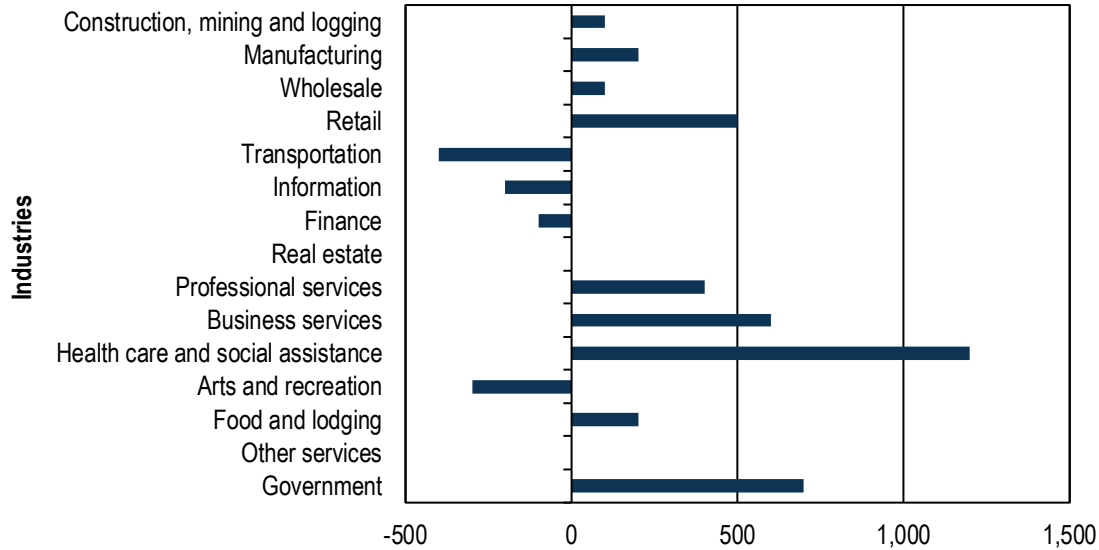
What became Cowlitz County was the home since time immemorial of the Cowlitz and Chinook tribes. The first white settlers came in 1825, and a farm was established by representatives of the Hudson's Bay Company. The Indigenous people who survived smallpox were forcibly removed in 1855 to reservations in other parts of the state. After a long legal battle, the Cowlitz was recognized as a tribe by the federal government.

White settlers continued moving in throughout the century and into the next, but population and economic growth accelerated in the 1920s when R.A. Long built the world's largest sawmill. Weyerhaeuser built another sawmill, and the Longview Fiber paper mill opened as well. The city of Longview was developed as a planned community to support timber workers. After slowing during the Great Depression, the economic boom resumed with the onset of World War II, when an aluminum smelter was constructed. After the war, Cowlitz continued to be a prosperous county with a large share of its employment in high-wage unionized manufacturing jobs.

By the late 1970s, there were 6,400 timber jobs in the county, and a third of all jobs were in manufacturing. The county's per capita income was close to the state average and above the national average. Beginning in the 1980s, timber and manufacturing employment declined, and wage and income growth slowed. The county has had some success with diversification, particularly over the past decade.

During the Great Recession, Cowlitz lost 8 percent of its nonfarm employment, slightly more than the state and nation. Its unemployment rate topped out at 12.8 percent (seasonally adjusted) before easing downward at the end of 2010. By fits and starts, employment growth turned positive in 2010, helped by construction projects on new investments: a new grain terminal, a new steel pipe plant and two new Walmarts, before finally taking off in mid-2013 and accelerating in 2017. Employment as of February 2020 totaled 40,800 jobs, which was 1,800 jobs – 4.6 percent – above the pre-recession peak. There were fewer construction jobs in 2020, and diversification of manufacturing almost offset job losses in wood and paper products. Health care, professional and business services, and local government (including K-12 education) all had solid growth.

Net change in employment by industry, August 2007 through June 2022*



*Note: Both real estate and other services were unchanged.

COVID-19 had a milder economic impact on Cowlitz County than on many other areas. In April 2020, when national employment had fallen by 14 percent, Cowlitz County was down “only” 8 percent. The county also recovered quicker, matching its pre-COVID-19 job level in June 2021.

In 2021, one-sixth of Cowlitz County’s employment base was in manufacturing, including two paper mills, several sawmills, a large chicken processor, as well as numerous smaller producers in machinery, fabricated metals, chemicals and other segments. The county has excellent transportation connections, including two active ports, rail connections, Interstate 5 and close proximity to Interstate 84.

Geographic facts

	Cowlitz County	Rank in state
Land area, 2022 (square miles)	1,141.16	28
People per square mile, 2022	98.45	12

Source: Washington State Office of Financial Management

Outlook

Starting in 2013, Cowlitz County had seven years of steady job growth. Wages rose thanks to hiring in higher-wage industries like manufacturing and professional services. The county had a less severe recession during the pandemic, and a faster recovery than the state and nation, and in 2022, job growth continued. The county looks poised for growth in the long term, with macroeconomic conditions being the biggest threat in the short term.

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.

Over the past two decades, Cowlitz County's unemployment rate has run about two percentage points higher than the national average during good times, and three or four points higher during recessions. The average annual rate in the county was 13.5 percent in 2009, before easing down almost a point a year through 2017, when the annual rate was 6 percent. In 2018 the rate inched down to 5.9 percent, the lowest rate on record going back to 1980. Health-related restrictions on economic activity pushed the rate up to 16 percent in April 2020, before the county's strong recovery led to the lowest rate on record, 4.9 percent, in December 2021. Preliminary rates for 2022 indicate this year will have the lowest annual rate ever.

The county's labor force participation rate in 2019 was estimated at 52.5 percent, and has been below 60 percent over the last decade. The rate was substantially lower than the national mark of 63.4 percent and the state's 64.7 percent. The rates for women (50.1 percent) and men (55 percent) were 7 to 15 percentage points below the comparable state and national figures.

Source: Employment Security Department/DATA Division; American Community Survey

Industry employment

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

When COVID-19 hit in April 2020, the county lost 8.3 percent of its jobs. Cowlitz County recovered much faster than the state and nation, returning to its pre-COVID-19 level in July 2021. Preliminary estimates had county employment at an all-time high of 42,000 in June 2022. The latest data:

- Construction, mining and logging employed 3,800 in 2021, over 9 percent of total county nonfarm employment. About 500 of those jobs were in logging. Job counts were running about 200 higher in the first half of 2022.

Much of the county's construction employment has been focused on industrial projects. Historically, the county averaged about 500 housing permits a year. The bubble years drove that number up to 700 units in 2006. The market for new homes bottomed out in 2011 (113 permits), with 2016 being the first decent year of late with 308 units permitted, and 484 units in 2017 looking almost normal. Since then, permits have averaged 340 per year. Multifamily units remain in short supply, with only about 30 units a year built over the past nine years. There were 62 units permitted in 2021, hopefully a sign that more apartments will be built going forward.

- Logging employment was unchanged at 500 jobs in 2021. Timber harvest in the county was just shy of 230 million board feet in 2018 and dropped to 208 million in 2019. Harvest averaged about 750 million board feet back in the 1970s, and has gradually declined over time. Most of the logs come from privately owned land, with only 30 million board feet coming from public lands in 2019.
- Manufacturing employed 6,900 in 2021, up 100 jobs from 2019 and the most since 2007. Gains came primarily in "other durables," such as fabricated metals and machinery, and "other nondurables," such as food processing, chemicals and plastics, as the county has successfully diversified its manufacturing base. Some 17 percent of Cowlitz County employment was in factories, twice the national average. Preliminary estimates show another 200 jobs were added in the first half of 2022.

- Trade, transportation and utilities payrolls increased by 1,000 jobs from 2013 to 2021, adding 300 jobs since the pandemic began. This sector has averaged 8,300 jobs in 2021. Transportation and utilities has employed close to 1,600 jobs for more than a decade.
- Wholesale trade has held steady at 1,500 jobs since 2014.
- Retail trade expanded from 4,400 jobs in 2013 to 5,200 in 2021. General merchandise stores employed 1,400, recovering from the 2017 closure of Macy's, while other retail segments added 800 jobs. Taxable sales at retail stores have grown by an average of 6.7 percent after adjustment for inflation over the past 10 years. That included a huge run-up during the pandemic, as consumers shifted spending from services to goods. Sales declined in the last two quarters of 2021, reverting to a still-positive upward trend.
- The financial services sector employed 1,400 in 2021, a gain of 100 jobs over 2018 and 300 over 2013. Employment has been steady since dropping during the Great Recession. Roughly two-thirds of total employment was in finance and insurance, the remainder was in real estate, rental and leasing.
- The county's professional and business services sector has grown steadily since 2011, at a 3.2 percent clip, from 1,900 to 2,600 jobs. Professional services has expanded by almost 50 percent, from 800 to nearly 1,200 jobs, over the past four years.
- Education and health services was one of the county's largest sectors in 2021, with 6,500 jobs. After gaining 600 jobs from 2015 to 2019, the sector shed 200 jobs over the past two years. PeaceHealth St. John Hospital in Longview is the largest employer in health care.
- Leisure and hospitality was the hardest-hit sector in the COVID-19 recession, with the 2021 average employment of 3,300 jobs still 400 jobs short of the 2019 average.
- The arts, entertainment and recreation industry had already been shedding jobs before the pandemic, falling from 500 jobs in 2017 to 200 jobs, due in large part to the closures of two gaming centers. Payrolls in this industry fell further during the recession, but most of the loss had been made up midway through 2022.
- Accommodations employment fell from 300 to 250 jobs during the pandemic, and was still far from recovery in employment even though sales had mostly bounced back.
- The 2018 opening of the Kalama Harbor Lodge, a hotel/motel/restaurant/entertainment center, continued an expansion of the food service industry that began in 2013. That expansion ended abruptly with COVID-19. The industry shed 1,000 jobs early in 2020, before recovering at the end of 2021. Restaurant sales, after steadily climbing through the decade, dropped sharply in the pandemic, but had fully recovered in the last half of 2021.
- Government was the third largest sector in 2021, averaging 6,200 workers, 300 fewer than in 2019. Federal and state government job levels have changed little over the past decade. Local government added 800 jobs from 2013 to 2019, evenly split between K-12 public education and other local government entities. Early in the recession, public sector payrolls fell by 300 and then slid by another 300 in the fall, with most of the cuts coming in K-12 public education. By mid-2022, most of those cuts had been erased. Government's proportion of total jobs in the county has been around 16 percent going back to 2002.

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

Source: Employment Security Department/DATA Division

Industry employment by age, gender and race/ethnicity

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.

Cowlitz County highlights:

In 2020, 12 percent of the jobs in Cowlitz County were held by workers under the age of 25, while 25 percent of jobs were held by those aged 55 and over. The rest of the jobs were split between those age 25 to 34 (20 percent), 35 to 44 (22 percent), and 45 to 54 (22 percent). The county's age profile was close to the state, with more younger and older workers and fewer in the 25 to 54 age range.

More jobs were held by men (54 percent) than by women (46 percent). There were substantial differences in gender predominance by industry.

- Male-dominated industries included construction (85 percent), transportation and warehousing (85 percent), manufacturing (78 percent), wholesale trade (73 percent) and business services (69 percent).
- Female-dominated industries included health care and social assistance (81 percent), finance and insurance (78 percent) and educational services (public and private combined, 74 percent).

Industry employment by race/ethnicity

The following table shows estimated employment by industry by the race or ethnicity of the worker holding the job. For the most part, employment patterns by race roughly conform to the average for all workers. Some exceptions: African Americans held 2.2 percent of jobs in the county, and held 6.4 percent of jobs in transportation and warehousing (mostly in high-wage port-related industries). Native Americans, with 1.7 percent of jobs, had 5.4 percent of the jobs in public administration. Asian Americans made up 5.0 percent of the professional services workforce, versus 3.2 percent of all jobs. Pacific Islanders held 1.1 percent of the jobs in transportation and warehousing and business services, almost double their 0.6 percent share of all jobs. Latinos were 8.5 percent of the workforce, and 14.0 percent of jobholders in business services, 13.7 percent in accommodations and food services.

Jobs by industry by race/ethnicity of employee, 2020

NAICS	Total*	White Non Latino	African American	Native American	Asian American	Pacific Islander	Two or more races	Latino
Total	37,088	30,456	811	632	1,193	212	1,147	3,162
11	954	771	18	15	21	4	30	112
21	180	166	0	0	0	0	4	7
22	297	280	0	0	0	0	0	11
23	2,831	2,456	46	46	34	11	71	198

NAICS	Total*	White Non Latino	African American	Native American	Asian American	Pacific Islander	Two or more races	Latino
31-33	6,609	5,325	107	111	240	54	185	701
42	1,371	1,168	31	17	29	6	33	109
44-45	4,048	3,245	100	64	159	28	147	371
48-49	1,960	1,564	126	33	43	22	89	112
51	216	161	5	4	3	0	5	42
52	932	802	14	12	25	3	26	62
53	443	371	11	5	6	2	13	43
54	864	731	15	11	43	0	31	43
55	110	95	0	0	1	0	5	7
56	1,426	1,061	54	36	35	16	61	200
61	3,219	2,926	22	27	42	9	62	142
62	6,084	4,936	158	78	288	37	170	493
71	107	88	0	1	2	0	3	10
72	2,629	1,951	71	56	128	12	107	361
81	968	797	11	12	67	3	33	60
92	1,842	1,563	22	100	23	3	72	79

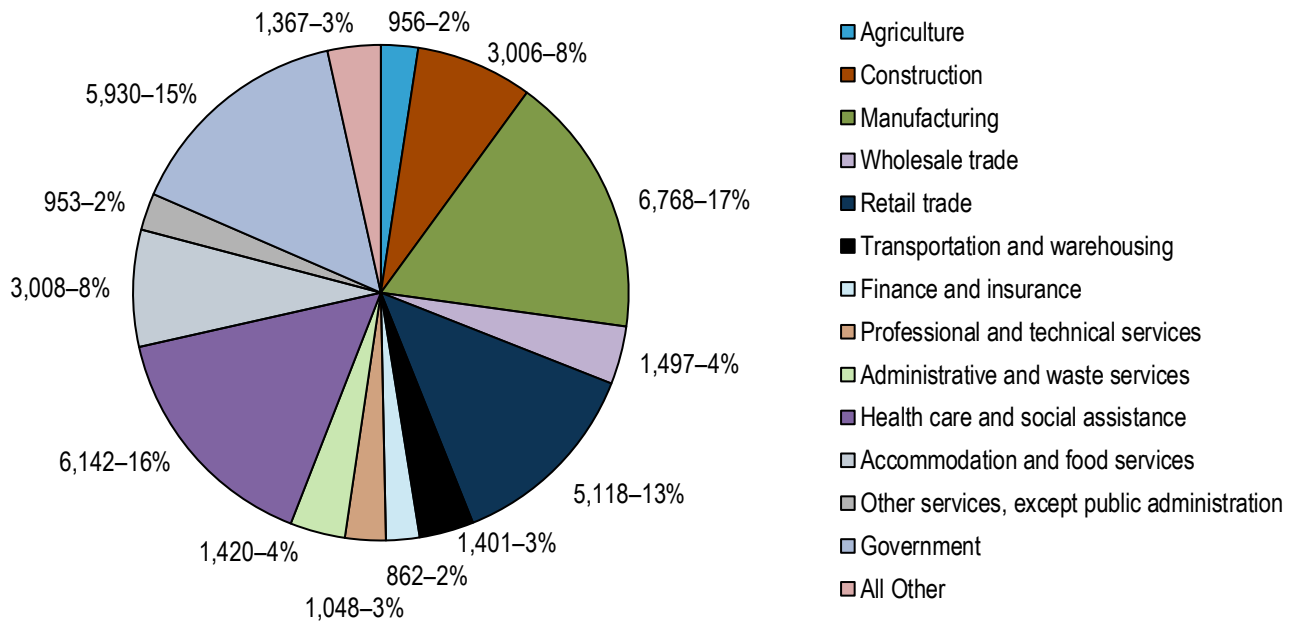
* Includes all non-federal jobs covered by unemployment insurance.

Source: The Local Employment Dynamics Database

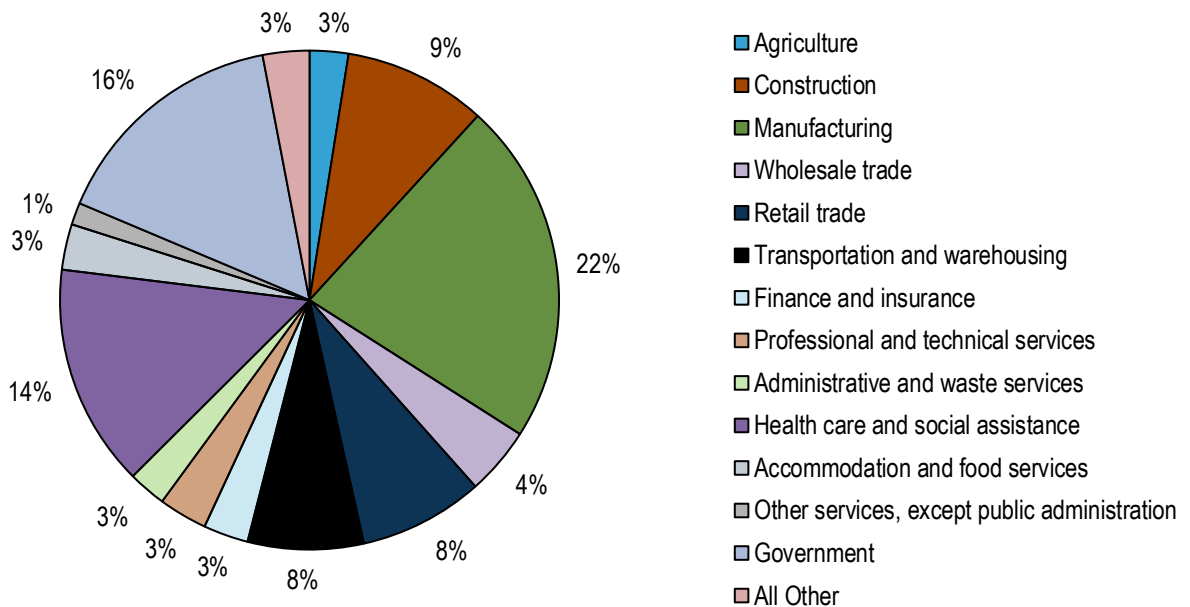
Wages and income

The following charts contrast industry shares of employment and wages covered by unemployment insurance in the county. The biggest differences: manufacturing supplied 17 percent of the jobs in the county, and 22 percent of total wages; and transportation and warehousing, with 3 percent of the jobs and 8 percent of total wages. That's a different way of saying that those two industries paid well above the average for all jobs, which was \$59,169 in 2021. Transportation and warehousing averaged \$125,051, while manufacturing was also in six figures at \$112,044. In contrast, the averages for retail trade (13 percent of jobs but only 8 percent of payroll) and accommodation and food services (8 percent of jobs, 3 percent of payroll) were well below the county average for all industries. The county's average wage has been trending up over time, in line with the average for the rest of the state if King County is excluded.

Covered employment in 2021

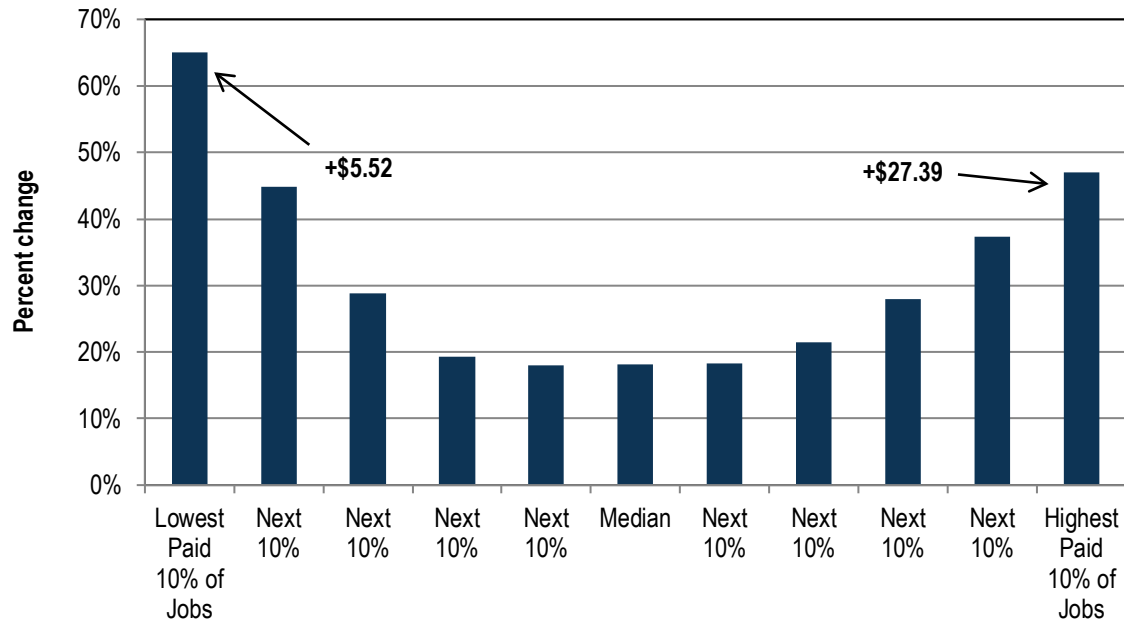


Covered wages in 2021



The median hourly wage for jobs in Cowlitz County in 2021 was \$26.69. The median increased by 5.4 percent in 2020, in part because job losses were concentrated in lower-wage industries, and in part because of the last hefty increase in the minimum wage approved by voters several years ago. In 2021, the median declined by 2.1 percent, due to the recovery of jobs in lower-wage industries. The bottom 10 percent of jobs averaged \$13.99 per hour, a slight drop from 2020 but still well above the 2019 figure of \$12.81. Comparing 2019 to 2021, to factor out the influence of the pandemic, average wages increased across the board, but at a higher rate for the lower-paid 30 percent of jobs.

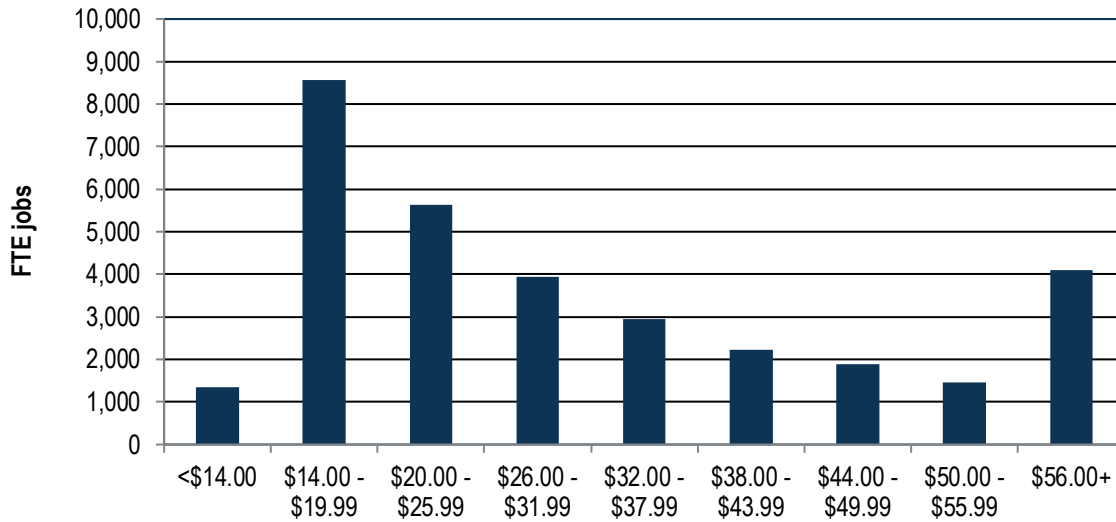
Percent change in average hourly wage by decile, 1990 through 2021



The chart above shows the average wage for the lowest 10 percent of jobs has increased faster than any other segment of the wage spectrum – by 46 percent. The average for the highest 10 percent of jobs rose by 37 percent. The actual dollar increases were more disparate since the average for the higher end was about seven times that of the lower end of the pay scale. The middle of the wage spectrum had a much smaller increase.

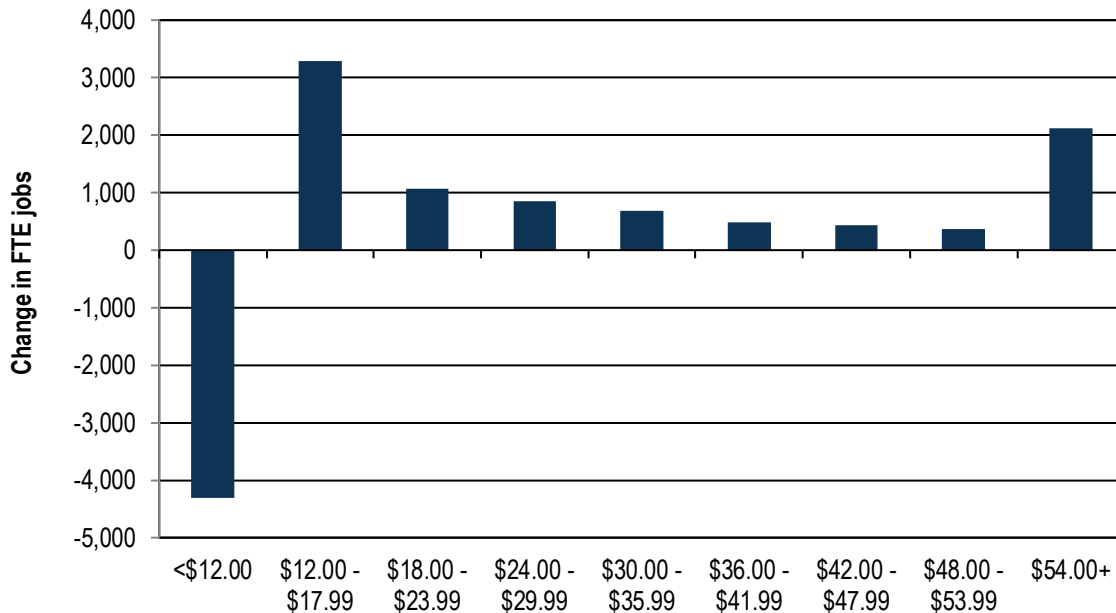
In 2020, 31 percent of the jobs in Cowlitz County paid below \$20 per hour versus 24 percent statewide and 31 percent for the state when King County is excluded. Almost a quarter (24 percent) of these lower-wage jobs were in retail trade, and another 16 percent were in health care. On the upper end, 39 percent of the jobs in the county paid \$32.00 per hour or more, more than the 37 percent for non-King counties, but less than the 47 percent when King is included. Higher-wage jobs were found primarily in manufacturing (25 percent), local government (16 percent) and health care (14 percent).

Full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs by hourly wage range, 2021



Since 2010, there have been three noticeable shifts in the wage distribution. First, the increase in the minimum wage has helped push jobs out of the below \$14 per hour category into the \$14 to \$20 range. Second, the number of jobs paying between \$20 per hour up to \$56 per hour increased by roughly 30 percent. Finally, the number of jobs in the highest-paying range increased by more than double (+107 percent). Overall, this is a very positive story.

Change in FTE jobs by hourly wage range, 2010 to 2021



Finally, the following tables show the average monthly wage for jobs in Cowlitz County by the education, race or ethnicity and gender of the job holder. The gap between workers of color and the all-worker average has changed little over the past three decades, with the exception of Asian American workers, whose average shifted from 95 percent to 104 percent over the past five years.

Female workers averaged 65 percent of male average earnings, compared with 50 percent back in 1990. The male/female wage disparity was consistent across education level.

2020 average monthly earnings by race/ethnicity and sex of the job holder

Race/ethnicity/gender	Average employment	Average monthly wage	Percent of total
All workers	32,742	\$4,932	100%
White non-Latino	27,006	\$5,072	103%
African American	681	\$4,586	93%
Indigenous	542	\$4,797	97%
Asian American	1,076	\$4,577	93%
Pacific Islander	184	\$3,924	80%
Two or more races	991	\$4,546	92%
Latino	2,705	\$3,931	80%
Male	17,575	\$5,907	120%
Female	15,163	\$3,785	77%

Includes all non-federal “full-quarter” jobs covered by unemployment insurance. “Full-quarter” jobs are jobs held by the employee at an employer in the current quarter that existed in the previous quarter and persisted into the next quarter.

2020 average monthly earnings by education/gender of the job holder, and percent of both gender average.

Education	Both genders	Female	Male	Both genders	Female	Male	Female as a percent of male
Total	\$4,932	\$3,785	\$5,907	100%	77%	120%	64%
Less than high school	\$4,263	\$3,173	\$5,023	86%	64%	102%	63%
High school only	\$4,827	\$3,494	\$5,797	98%	71%	118%	60%
Some/AA	\$5,176	\$3,960	\$6,301	105%	80%	128%	63%
BA +	\$6,265	\$5,023	\$7,453	127%	102%	151%	67%
Under the age of 25	\$2,441	\$1,945	\$2,914	49%	39%	59%	67%

Includes all non-federal “full-quarter” jobs covered by unemployment insurance. “Full-quarter” jobs are jobs held by the employee at an employer in the current quarter that existed in the previous quarter and persisted into the next quarter. For a specified education level, job holders are aged 25 and older.

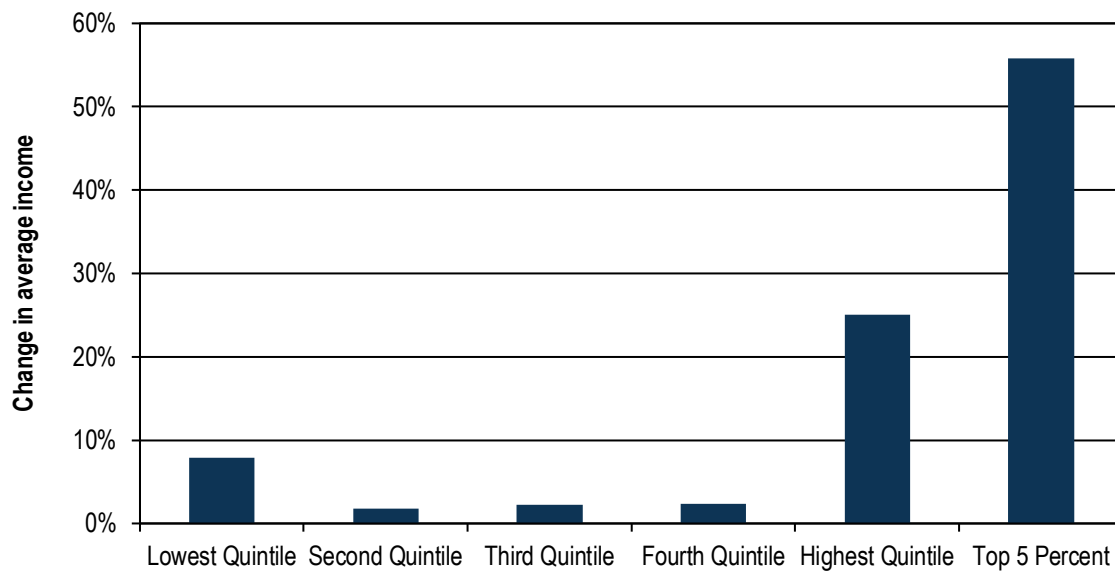
Household income

Not surprisingly, household income declined sharply in the 2008 recession. Household income estimates from the American Community Survey since have occasionally been unreliable, with significant sample error contributing to swings that don’t align with other economic data. That occurred in 2014 and again in 2018, when the reported median household income rose by 17 percent. The 2019 estimate of \$55,497 – 8 percent below 2018 – looks to be a more accurate representation. The overall trend: a sharp drop in income in 2010 to 2011 and a gradual recovery, with 2019 finally topping the 2008 estimate.

Unfortunately, data for 2020 was not available due to the low response rate to the American Community Survey during the pandemic.

While the median household income may not have changed much, the distribution around that median has changed substantially. The following chart shows that average income for households with the lowest 20 percent of income increased by just over 8 percent from 2006 to 2019, after adjustment for inflation. However, this was within the margin of error, so statistically we can't say there was any improvement. The three middle quintiles had a negligible change. There was a significant increase for the top 20 percent of households that increased by 25 percent, and within that group the average income for the top 5 percent of households increased by 56 percent. The average for the top 5 percent in 2019 – \$331,080 – was almost 23 times that for the bottom 20 percent – \$14,447. Research has shown that household surveys (like the Census) do not accurately capture incomes at the upper end – average incomes for the top 20 and 5 percent are likely substantially higher than stated here.

Change in average household income by quintile, Cowlitz County, 2006 through 2019



Poverty was estimated at 12.2 percent in 2019, not statistically different from 2018's 11.2 percent. Both rates were several points lower than any estimate going back to 1999. The relatively low rates (at/below the national average) is contradicted by the much higher poverty-related transfer payments (see below) received by county residents.

Personal income

Household and family income from the Census Bureau generally define income as money received from work or investments. Personal income goes one step further by including transfer payments such as Social Security and Veterans Benefits. Investment income is also defined more broadly to include income imputed from pension funds and from owning a home. Per capita personal income equals total personal income divided by the resident population.

In 2020, Cowlitz County per capita personal income was \$48,232, a 5.6 percent increase over 2019. In comparison, per capita income rose by 5.3 percent statewide and 4.9 percent nationally. There was little change in per capita earned income (-0.1 percent), while investment income declined slightly (-2.2 percent). Transfer payments had a huge increase due to various COVID-19 relief

programs (+22.2 percent). Transfer payments to residents of Cowlitz County totaled almost \$1.7 billion in 2020, 31 percent of total income and an average of \$15,063 per resident. That was substantially higher than the \$12,872 per capita figure nationally. Much of the difference had to do with the county's older population – Social Security and Medicare payments were 38 percent and 13 percent, respectively, above the nation. Poverty also played a role: Medicaid, income maintenance benefits (which includes Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, more popularly known as welfare, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [a.k.a. food stamps]) were all above average, as were disability payments and veterans' benefits. Unemployment benefits were lower, however, reflecting the relatively mild impact of the pandemic on the local economy.

Per capita transfer payments, 2020

Per capita transfer payments	U.S.	Washington state	Cowlitz County
Total	\$12,872	\$12,112	\$15,063
Social Security benefits	\$3,272	\$3,272	\$4,507
Medicare benefits	\$2,486	\$2,008	\$2,809
Public assistance medical care benefits	\$2,035	\$1,814	\$2,540
Income maintenance benefits	\$918	\$771	\$1,267
Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits	\$176	\$137	\$258
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	\$254	\$226	\$398
Other income maintenance	\$488	\$407	\$610
Unemployment insurance compensation	\$1,630	\$1,599	\$1,254
Veterans' benefits	\$442	\$526	\$609
Refundable tax credits (e.g., stimulus payments)	\$1,232	\$1,100	\$1,248
All other	\$783	\$1,062	\$829

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

Population

According to state estimates, Cowlitz County's population reached 112,350 in 2022. The 0.8 percent increase over the year matched the average over the past decade. The county has grown slower than the state and faster than the nation over that period. Longview was the largest city in the county, at 37,780, with adjacent Kelso the next biggest at 12,720.

Cowlitz County had strong net in-migration in 2017, 2018 and 2019. After a dip in 2020, it rose again in 2021. The number of births jumped in the 2016 through 2019 period, but declined in the past two years.

Population facts

	Cowlitz County	Washington state
Population 2010	102,410	6,724,540
Population 2020	110,730	7,707,047
Percent change, 2010 to 2020	8.1%	14.6%

Age and ethnicity

When compared with the state and nation, Cowlitz County had about the same proportion of children (aged 0 to 19), fewer younger adults (20 to 39), about the same middle-aged adults (40 to 59) and more older residents.

The county was much less diverse in terms of race and ethnicity than the state. In 2021, 79 percent of Cowlitz County's population was white non-Hispanic compared with 64 percent at the state level. The county's Latino population has doubled since the 2000 Census, and makes up 10 percent of the population, versus 14 percent at the state level.

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

Demographics

Population by age, 2021	Cowlitz County	Washington state
Under 20 years old	24.9%	24.1%
20 to 39 years old	21.9%	27.5%
40 to 59 years old	24.2%	24.8%
60 years and older	29.0%	23.6%
Population by race/ethnicity, 2021		
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	79.4%	63.7%
African American	0.8%	4.3%
American Indian, Alaskan Native	1.9%	1.9%
Asian-American	1.7%	9.9%
Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander	0.7%	0.9%
Multi-racial	8.6%	10.2%
Hispanic or Latino, any race	10.3%	14.0%

Source: Office of Financial Management

Educational attainment

Compared with the state and nation, Cowlitz County's adults 25 years and older were more likely to have only a high school diploma or some college education, versus attaining a bachelor's degree or higher. In 2019, 15 percent of adults in Cowlitz County had a bachelor's or advanced degree, as opposed to 33 percent nationally and 37 percent statewide. The difference was due in large part to the occupational structure of the county, which has substantially fewer jobs that require a four-year degree or higher.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey

Useful links

- [County data tables](#)
- [Census Bureau County Profile](#)
- [2020 Census State Profile](#)
- [Cowlitz County on ofm.wa.gov](#)
- [Cowlitz County home page](#)
- [Cowlitz County on ChooseWashington.com](#)
- [Cowlitz Economic Development Council](#)
- [History of Cowlitz County](#)

- [City of Castle Rock](#)
- [City of Kalama](#)
- [City of Kelso](#)
- [City of Longview](#)
- [City of Woodland](#)
- [Self Sufficiency Calculator for Washington State](#)
- [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts](#)
- [Port of Kalama](#)
- [Port of Longview](#)
- [Port of Woodland](#)
- [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.