

King County profile

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Overview

Regional context

King County's current boundaries situate it between Puget Sound to the west and the crest line of the Cascade Range to the east. It borders Snohomish County to the north and Pierce County to the south. King County is very geographically diverse, with points at sea level and a high point of nearly 8,000 feet. The human geography of King County is also diverse, characterized by high-density urbanization along the shores of Puget Sound, suburban communities to the east of Lake Washington, rural communities to the southeast and remote towns in the Cascade foothills. There are 39 towns and cities located in King County.

King County and Seattle, the county seat, are the most populous county and city in Washington state, respectively. King County ranks 11th in the state in terms of total land area and first in the state for population density.

King County is the central county in the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), consisting of King, Pierce and Snohomish County, belongs to the Seattle-Bellevue-Everett Metropolitan Division (MD), and is part of the nine-county Seattle Consolidated Statistical Area (CSA).

Local economy

King County is situated on the homeland of several indigenous tribes, including the Muckleshoot, Snoqualmie and Duwamish peoples. Prior to the arrival of European-American settlers, the economy and culture of the region was sustained by hunting, freshwater and saltwater fishing, and gathering plants for food and medicine. The primary means of transportation was provided by waterways.

European-American settlement of the area now known as King County began in the 1840s. Natural resources – especially timber – played a major role in King County's early history. Maritime trade spurred the development and growth of Seattle, which was established in 1869. Seattle became an important stopping point for those hoping to prospect for gold in Alaska and the Yukon Territory at the close of the 19th century.

The early 20th century was a time of population growth and industrial diversification. In more recent decades, the regional economy became highly dependent on the aerospace industry, which was centered on the Boeing Company.

Throughout the 1990s, the county underwent extraordinary gains in employment, population and wages. Despite the county’s increasing cost of living, especially in housing, the high-tech job boom lured well-educated newcomers to the area; a pattern that has continued to the present day. King County continues to hold a strong national reputation as a hub for information technology development.

King County is culturally diverse and aims to be a place where people from a variety of backgrounds can feel at home. The geographic orientation of King County on the Pacific Rim and the presence of an active natural deep water port reinforce strong economic ties to East Asian markets.

In 2008, King County nonfarm employment reached a peak in excess of 1.2 million jobs before joining the rest of the nation in recession. Job growth was strong and stable from 2010 to 2019. Total nonfarm employment in King County climbed to nearly 1.47 million over the long economic expansion.

The pandemic-induced recession of 2020 interrupted the long arc of local employment growth. From February to April 2020, total nonfarm employment plummeted by about 166,600 jobs – more than 11.0 percent. Total employment since April 2020 has shown remarkable recovery, with a great deal of variation by industry. Total employment continues to expand. As of March 2022 (preliminary), businesses located in King County collectively supplied nearly 1.46 million jobs – about 10,000 shy of pre-pandemic levels.

King County is characterized by a diverse economy. Major industry sectors in King County supplying more than 100,000 estimated jobs in 2021 include professional and business services, education and health services, retail trade, government, information, and leisure and hospitality.

Geographic facts

	King County	Rank in state
Land area, 2010 (square miles)	2,115.6	11
People per square mile, 2021	1,081.23	1

Source: Washington State Office of Financial Management

Outlook

Prior to the pandemic-induced recession of 2020, King County was well-situated, with long-term growth observed in all major industry sectors. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted all industries at a local level, with employment patterns varying substantially from one industry to the next. Leisure and hospitality lost the largest number of jobs of any sector (65,100 jobs from February to May, not seasonally adjusted). As of March 2022, this set of industries was still down 44,000 jobs or about 30 percent. At the other end of the continuum, industries such as information and professional and business services, maintained or even expanded employment levels, even early on, insulated by the ability to establish telecommuting arrangements for their workforces. King County’s information sector added 700 jobs during the initial months of the pandemic. As of March 2022, employment in the information sector was 15,500 above the level observed in March 2020.

Comparing March 2022 against March 2020, the following industries have fully recovered or expanded total employment: professional and business services (up 15,600 jobs), information (up 15,500 jobs) retail trade (up 9,000 jobs), financial activities (up 4,000 jobs), and construction (up 1,400 jobs).

Referencing the same time frame, the following industries have yet to recover the number of jobs lost in the pandemic recession: leisure and hospitality (down 19,400 jobs), manufacturing (down 9,900 jobs), government (down 9,200 jobs), other services (down 8,600), wholesale trade (down 3,700 jobs), transportation, education and health services (down 2,800 jobs), and warehousing and utilities (down 1,400 jobs).

At this point, all industry sectors are building their employment bases. However, King County's recovery will depend on the interplay between sectors. While innovations such as telecommuting directly reduced the total number of potential job losses, they simultaneously contributed to indirect job losses from sectors that rely on in-person service delivery in King County's downtown areas (e.g., restaurants and coffee shops). Looking ahead, King County is poised for widespread industry growth led by high-tech industries.

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.

King County's average annual labor force in 2021 was nearly 1.28 million, with an average annual unemployment rate of 4.3 percent. Within this estimate, about 1.22 million county residents were counted among the employed and 54,571 were counted among the unemployed.

The unemployment rate in King County declined quickly after reaching an all-time high of 15.3 percent in April 2020. As of March 2022 (preliminary), the unemployment rate for King County was 2.5 percent.

The labor force in King County dipped by about 4.0 percent at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic-induced recession. It took two years for the labor force to return to pre-pandemic levels. The relatively slow return of the workforce has contributed to the low unemployment rate.

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.

King County is the largest labor market in the state. In 2021, nearly 42.0 percent of all nonfarm jobs in Washington state were reported from King County-located businesses.

King County averaged nearly 1.41 million nonfarm jobs in 2021. From 2020 to 2021, average annual employment increased by 24,800 jobs or 1.8 percent. By comparison, Washington state as a whole saw the addition of about 74,700 jobs over the same time period, an increase of 2.3 percent.

- Goods-producing industries supplied an average of 168,700 jobs in 2021, making up 12.0 percent of the total count of nonfarm jobs. Over the year, employment declined by 3,700 or 2.2 percent. Beneath the surface, King County-based construction employment expanded while manufacturing employment contracted.
 - Employers in the construction industry added 2,700 jobs (3.5 percent) from 2020 to 2021. Construction growth was barely affected by the pandemic. Demand for built projects remained strong, buoyed by existing projects and a strong real estate market.

- Manufacturing employment contracted by 6,300 from 2020 to 2021. Pandemic-related impacts to manufacturing – especially the aerospace sector – were delayed relative to most other sectors. Employment in manufacturing dropped throughout most of 2021.
- Service-providing employment accounted for 88.0 percent of all nonfarm jobs in King County in 2021. From 2020 to 2021, service-providing industries collectively added 28,500 jobs or 2.4 percent, following average annual losses of 71,200 jobs or 5.6 percent in 2020.
 - Average annual employment in all major private sector service-providing industries (except wholesale trade and other services) expanded over the year. The largest year-to-year employment gains were made in professional and business services (11,200 jobs), retail trade (7,000 jobs), and information (6,500). In King County, the three industries that added the largest number of jobs are all characterized as “high tech” and were able to recover relatively quickly from the pandemic recession as workers were able to telecommute. In contrast, service industries that rely on face-to-face contact, and, in many cases, the presence of office workers from other industries expanded to a lesser extent after suffering devastating blows from the pandemic.
 - Professional and business services, which includes professional scientific and technical services, management, and administrative and support services, added 11,200 jobs or 4.8 percent over the year.
 - Retail trade is an extremely diverse sector. Job growth was observed in general, but was prominent among essential service providers (e.g., grocery stores) and online retail.
 - The collection of industries that make up the information sector added 6,500 jobs or about 5.1 percent. More than one-third of the observed job gains were attributable to hiring by software publishers.
 - Public sector employment contracted by 1,300 jobs over the year. Losses were concentrated among state government educational services (i.e., state colleges and universities).

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.

King County highlights:

King County has a young workforce, relative to the rest of Washington state. In 2020, workers age 25 to 44 made up 50.2 percent of the workforce. For comparison, the statewide proportion of workers age 25 to 44 was 46.1 percent. The proportion of workers younger than 24, as well as those age 55 and older in King County, is lower than observed statewide.

In 2020, men held 53.3 percent and women held 46.7 percent of the jobs in King County. There were substantial differences in gender dominance by industry.

- The proportionally male-dominated industries included goods producers such as mining (85.1 percent), construction (80.4 percent), and manufacturing (70.2 percent). Among service-providing industries, information and wholesale trade stand out as the most male-dominated industries (68.1 and 67.5 percent respectively).
- The most female-dominated industries included health care and social assistance (75.1 percent), educational services (67.2 percent), other services (60.0 percent) and finance and insurance (57.4 percent).

Source: The Local Employment Dynamics

Wages and income

In 2020, there were nearly 1.35 million jobs covered by unemployment insurance, with a total annual payroll of approximately \$142.4 billion. Interestingly, total wages paid continued an upward trend despite one-year losses in total covered employment.

The 2020 average annual wage in King County was \$105,520. For comparison, the statewide average annual wage was \$73,504.

The median hourly wage in 2020 was \$38.86, above the state's median hourly wage of \$29.28.

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 2020, per capita personal income was \$96,647, more than both the state (\$67,126) and the nation (\$59,510).

According to the American Community Survey, the median household income was \$128,694 in 2019. The county's median household income was greater than the state (\$94,709) and the nation (\$80,944).

In 2019, 7.6 percent of the population residing in King County was living below the poverty level, lower than the state at 9.8 percent. Of King County's children under 18, 7.1 percent were living below the poverty level, compared to the state's 12.9 percent.

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

Population

King County's estimated population was nearly 2.3 million in 2021. The county's population grew at a faster rate (1.6 percent per year) than the state (1.4 percent per year) over the most recent decade. Over the past year, however, King County's population expanded by 0.8 percent – the same as the state.

The largest city in King County is Seattle (742,400 in 2021). Other large cities include Bellevue, Kent, Renton, Federal Way, Kirkland and Auburn.

Population facts

	King County	Washington state
Population 2021	2,287,050	7,766,975
Population 2011	1,945,686	6,781,551
Percent change, 2011 to 2021	17.5%	14.5%

Source: Washington State Office of Financial Management

Age, gender and ethnicity

The age distribution of King County residents compared to the state and the nation reflects a relatively large working-age adult population and smaller resident populations at either end of the age spectrum. Residents age 25 to 49 have a proportionally high presence in King County, while residents age 0 to 24 and 55+ have a less prominent presence relative to shares seen at the state and national levels.

King County has proportionally larger Black and Asian, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander populations than the state as a whole, but a smaller Hispanic or Latino presence.

Demographics

	King County	Washington state
Population by age, 2019		
Under 5 years old	5.7%	6.0%
Under 18 years old	20.0%	21.8%
65 years and older	13.5%	15.9%
Females, 2019	49.7%	49.9%
Race/ethnicity, 2019		
White	66.2%	78.5%
Black	7.0%	4.4%
American Indian, Alaskan Native	1.0%	1.9%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander	20.9%	10.4%
Hispanic or Latino, any race	9.9%	13.0%

Educational attainment

Overall, King County has a more highly educated population than the state or the nation.

During the period 2016 to 2020, 93.4 percent of King County residents age 25 and older graduated from high school, which is higher than Washington state residents (91.7 percent) and higher than the nation (88.5 percent). More than 53.4 percent of King County residents had a bachelor's degree or higher education, substantially higher than the state (36.7 percent) or the nation (32.9 percent) in the same period.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Useful links

- [County data tables](#)
- [Census Bureau Profile](#)
- [History of Seattle and King County](#)
- [King County home page](#)
- [King County on Choose Washington.com](#)
- [King County on ofm.wa.gov](#)
- [Puget Sound Regional Council](#)
- [Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council](#)
- [Seattle Office of Economic Development](#)
- [Self Sufficiency Calculator for Washington State](#)
- [Census Bureau QuickFacts](#)
- [Port of Seattle](#)
- [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.