

Thurston County profile

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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.

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.

Local economy

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 33.0 percent of all nonfarm employment can be attributed to federal, state and local government jobs in 2021. Looking back to 2010, government employment has increased by 6.5 percent, while private sector employment increased by 28.4 percent.

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 2020 began quietly enough but all expectations of a continuation of positive economic growth came to a standstill as the calendar turned to March. The COVID-19 pandemic threw the world economy into a tailspin and the Thurston county economy was no exception. All sectors of the economy felt the impact immediately, with some sectors hit harder than others.

The 2021 numbers showed a certain amount of recovery from the punch delivered by the 2020 pandemic. Unemployment rates dropped from the spike of 2020, and nonfarm payrolls rebounded but fell short of completely filling the void left by COVID-19.

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 had dropped every year since 2011, when the rate was 9.0 percent. In 2020, the pandemic put an end to that streak, as data through December 2020 showed an average annual unemployment rate of 8.0 percent. This is a noticeable bump up from the 4.9 percent posted in 2019. The 2021 data saw that rate come down to 5.2 percent.

In 2021, the county averaged 7,544 unemployed residents and 137,617 with jobs. That compares to 11,869 unemployed in 2020 with 135,613 at work.

Source: Employment Security Department/DATA Division

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 in 2021 was 118,700 (it was 115,100 in 2020). After steadily rising for years, that streak came to an end in 2020. Currently, the average lags the 2019 average by more than 2,000 jobs.

Government is by far and away the largest employer with 39,200 jobs in 2021. The pandemic impact on the trade and leisure and hospitality industries was significant, as their 2020 employment numbers declined by 2,200 from 2019. The 2021 average shows a return of 600 of that job loss; this sector will continue gaining back into 2022.

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

Source: Employment Security Department/DATA Division

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 2020, the two largest employed age categories were those 35 to 44 years old with 23.2 percent of the jobs, and those 55 and older with 24.8 percent of the jobs.

Men held 46.7 percent of the jobs in the county and women held 53.3 percent of jobs in 2020.

- Male-dominated industries included mining (77.1 percent), construction (82.5 percent), and transportation and warehousing (75.6 percent).
- Female-dominated industries included health care and social assistance (78.4 percent), education (69.3 percent), and finance and insurance (65.1 percent).

Source: Employment Security Department/DATA Division, County data tables

Wages and income

In 2020, there were 113,019 covered employment jobs in Thurston County. The total payroll for 2020 was over 6.6 billion dollars.

In 2020, the average annual wage was \$58,433, compared to the state average of \$73,504.

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 2020 was \$56,007 compared to the state at \$67,126 and the nation at \$59,510.

Median household income in 2020 was \$75,867, slightly lower than that of the state (\$77,006) but higher than the nation (\$64,994).

The percent of the county's population below the official poverty rate in 2020 was 9.7 percent compared to the state's rate of 9.5 percent and the nation's at 11.4 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/DATA Division, County data tables; U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Population

Thurston County's estimated population in 2021 was 297,977. The population of the county at the 2010 census was 252,264.

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

Population facts

	Thurston County	Washington state
Population 2021	297,977	7,738,692
Population 2010	252,264	6,724,540
Percent change, 2010 to 2021	18.1%	14.6%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Age, gender and ethnicity

Thurston County had an older population than the state in 2020. Thurston County's population of those aged 65 and older was 17.9 percent compared to the state's 15.9 percent.

Those under 18 years old were 21.2 percent of the county population, slightly less than that of the state's 21.8 percent. Those under five years old made up 5.7 percent of Thurston County's population compared to the state's 6.0 percent.

Thurston County showed somewhat less diversity in 2020 than the state in racial/ethnic categories, with whites making up 81.5 percent of its population compared to 78.5 percent of the state's population. There was 5.8 percent of the county's population reporting two or more races in 2020 compared to 4.9 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, 2020		
Under 5 years old	5.7%	6.0%
Under 18 years old	21.2%	21.8%
65 years and older	17.9%	15.9%
Females, 2020	51.1%	49.9%
Race/ethnicity, 2020		
White	81.5%	78.5%
Black	3.6%	4.4%
American Indian, Alaskan Native	1.8%	1.9%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander	7.3%	10.4%
Hispanic or Latino, any race	9.4%	13.0%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Educational attainment

Most Thurston County residents age 25 and older (93.9 percent) were high school graduates, which compares with 91.7 percent of Washington state's residents and 88.5 percent of U.S. residents in the period covering 2016 through 2020.

Those with a bachelor's degree or higher made up 35.7 percent of Thurston County residents age 25 and older compared to 36.7 percent of state residents and 32.9 percent of U.S. residents during the same period.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Useful links

- [County data tables](#)
- [Census Bureau Profile](#)
- [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](#)

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