



2026 Washington State

Employee Compensation Survey Methodologies Overview

This methodology overview is intended for use with the 2026 Washington State Employee Compensation Survey (WSECS) state report and 2026 WSECS applied range results.

How we chose states to participate in this survey

- **Economic Criteria:** states that fell within one standard deviation (+/-) of where Washington's survey data landed in specifically identified economic criteria (i.e. our state population, number of state government employees, and the regional price parities calculation – see more detail in the paragraph below)
- **Geographic Location:** all states located within the western continental region (except Alaska and Hawaii, unless they also met the economic criteria)

Economic criteria we used:

1. 2025 population from Census Bureau midyear population estimate from Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) SAINC¹ tables;
2. 2024 state government employment stats from US Bureau of Labor Statistics Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) NAICS² tables; and
3. 2025 regional price parities from BEA Regional Price Parities all items index³ (see definition below).

Geographic adjustments

We geographically adjusted the state government data used in the survey using the 2025 Regional Price Parities (RPPs). **RPPs measure how much the price levels of goods and services differ geographically relative to the national average.** We express RPP as a percentage of the overall national price level for each year, which is equal to 100. For example, if the RPP for area A is 120 and for area B is 90, then on average, prices are 20% higher and 10% lower than the U.S. average for A and B. States within one standard deviation (+/-) of Washington's RPP have similar buying power in a given year, and therefore comparable state government salaries.

Published data sources

We used these published data sources to represent in-state private employers:

- Economic Research Institute 2026 Salary Assessor
- Milliman 2025 Northwest Engineering/Scientific/Project Management Survey
- Milliman 2025 Northwest Healthcare Compensation Survey
- Milliman 2025 Northwest Management and Professional Survey
- Milliman 2025 Northwest Technology Survey

¹ [BEA Interactive Data Application](#)

² [QCEW Data Files : U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)

³ [Regional Price Parities by State and Metro Area | U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis \(BEA\)](#)

- Milliman 2025 Northwest Utilities Salary and Wage Survey
- Milliman 2025 Puget Sound Regional Salary Survey
- PayFactors 2026 Compensation Database
- Salary.com 2026 CompAnalyst Database
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) data, Washington state, May 2024

Aging factors

We did not apply an aging factor to the in-state public or participant state government salary data since the effective survey date was January 1, 2026.

However, we aged all in-state private (published) market salary data with survey effective dates more than 12 months prior to January 2026 to a common effective date, January 1, 2026, using a factor of 3.5% per year. This factor reflects the actual and projected median salary budget adjustment reported in WorldatWork's 2025-26 Salary Budget Survey for Washington employers. In other words, the 3.5% factor represents the prevailing market trend in salary growth from 2025 to 2026 among these employers.

Benchmark result calculations

We calculated the following summaries for salary data (which doesn't show specific participant data):

Median annual salary range minimum

Represents the middle salary rate of the minimum range data points (i.e., half the salary rates are below this level).

Annual salary range midpoint

Represents the estimated market value. Refer to the calculation methodology provided below.

Median salary maximum

Represents the middle salary rate of the maximum range data points (i.e., half the salary rates are below this level).

Salary range midpoint for each respondent

Salary range minimum plus salary range maximum, divided by two.

Estimated market value

We calculated an overall estimated market value (EMV) using the aggregated salary data from each market sector surveyed. Then, we calculated benchmark EMVs using the following approach:

1. In-state public sector: Median of the calculated range midpoint values for all benchmark jobs.
2. Other state governments: Median of the calculated range midpoint values for all benchmark jobs.
3. In-state private sector: Market median (50th percentile) of actual salary values for all benchmark jobs.

We combined the in-state public sector, other state governments and in-state private sector aggregates and averaged them to calculate the overall market information.

We followed the Federal Trade Commission and the U.S. Department of Labor guidelines to use five or more responses from participants for each benchmark and benefit questions to draw reliable conclusions. Therefore, we did not calculate statistics (means, medians, etc.) for benchmark jobs with fewer than five job matches.

Total compensation calculations

The law requires the Office of Financial Management to conduct a salary and fringe benefits survey to reference when the state considers classification and salary schedules ([RCW 41.06.160](#)). The WSECS includes salary data in other public and private employment in the state, and comparisons related to total compensation. Total compensation is calculated by benchmark job. Total compensation considers both salaries and benefits when calculating the value employees receive in exchange for their contributions. **Total compensation is made up of three components:** estimated market value, health care value, and retirement value.

Health care is subject to collective bargaining for most represented employee groups as part of a coalition of unions instead of with each exclusive representative. While retirement benefits in Washington are not subject to collective bargaining for most employees, these benefits are valuable components of total compensation and provide important context when we compare the state's compensation practices with those of other governments or private employers.

1. Estimated market value

The estimated market value component reflects base compensation determined from participants and published in-state private sector market data as defined in the benchmark result calculations and information technology sections above.

2. Health care value

Health care value is the “value received by the employee” and is how much you can expect your plan to pay for your health care costs. Health care value is *not* what the employee pays or what the employer pays for this plan.

For total compensation calculations, we found the health care value using:

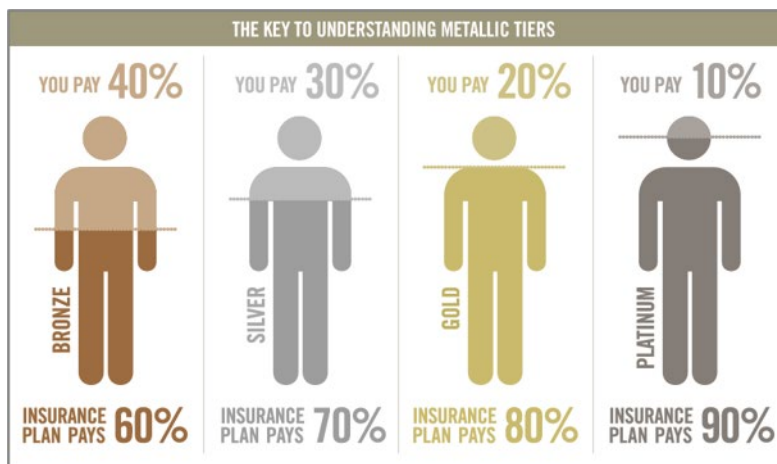
- Proxy health plan cost; and
- Participant-reported Affordable Care Act (ACA) metal tier.

Proxy health plan cost. In previous years, the state contracted with Willis Towers Watson to produce a biannual Health Care Financial Benchmarks and Network Efficiency Report which assisted with determining the proxy health plan value for use in total compensation calculations. In 2025, this report was discontinued. We now use data directly from the Health Care Authority to calculate proxy healthcare plan value portion of the Total Compensation calculation.

Participant-reported metal tier. Actuarial value is the estimated average percentage of total health care expenses that an employee can expect their plan to pay (health plan value). The metal tier (see image below) is a similar measure that the Affordable Care Act (ACA) established to easily compare health plan value.

We calculated health care value by multiplying the ‘proxy health plan cost’ by the ‘participant-reported ACA metal tier of their most populated health care plan.’ The metal tier definition is in the graphic below.

The key to understanding metal tiers



For example, Washington's 2025 PEBB health care plans are in the platinum metal tier (90%+) in the graph above⁴.

Example calculation:

2025 Washington employee health care value = \$21,711 (the average PEBB member plan value from the report) x 90% = \$19,540

3. Retirement value

We calculated the retirement value for participants based on a model developed in partnership with the Office of the State Actuary (OSA). This framework calculates the lump-sum present value for the retirement benefit that a participant earned.

We used the median retirement value by benchmark job to make total compensation calculations.

We asked participants to report on their most populated retirement plan offered to new hires. This included DB, DC and hybrid plans. For this calculation, we used the following considerations/assumptions from the methodology that the OSA uses.

DC plan, calculation method 1:

The lump-sum present value of a DC benefit that the employer provides is the amount they contributed into the retirement account year.

As the percentage of private sector workers covered by a traditional DB pension plan has steadily declined over the past 25 years⁵, we applied DC calculation methods to the in-state, private sector actual salary values.

As we described in the benchmark result calculations section above, we used published data sources to represent in-state, private employers for estimated market values. To follow suit, we gathered private sector retirement data for DC plans from the 2025 Milliman Northwest Benefits survey and applied the data as appropriate.

⁴ <https://mnjinsurance.com/understanding-the-metal-levels-in-aca/>

⁵ <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v69n3/v69n3p1.html>

DB plan, calculation method 2:

We calculated a single-life annuity⁶ accrued for a single and current year of service. A typical DB plan is based on salary and a multiplier. For example, an EMV of \$50,000 accrues a \$1,000 single-life annuity under the Washington's Plan 2 formula for a single year of service credit. For example, $\$50,000 \times 2\% \times 1 \text{ year} = \$1,000$.

Then, we determine the portion of that single-life annuity that the employer paid based on the plan's cost-sharing policy. We multiply the accrued single-life annuity value (\$1,000 for this example) by the employer cost-sharing percentage to calculate the amount of the annuity value that the employer paid. Washington's Plan 2 cost-share formula is 50% paid by the employer and 50% paid by the employee. For example: $\$1,000 \times 50\% = \500 .

Then, we multiply the employer-funded dollar amount of the single life annuity (\$500 for this example) by the relevant annuity factor developed and certified by the Office of the State Actuary according to actuarial standards⁷. The OSA annuity factors determine the lump-sum present value amount. For example, $\$500 \times \text{annuity factor of } 12.66616 = \$6,333$.

- a. The annuity factor is determined from various inputs:
 - i. The participant's typical cost of living adjustment percentage, i.e., the typical percentage increase in a retiree's post-retirement pension benefit per year;
 - ii. The participant's normal retirement age;
 - iii. A current age assumption of 46 years; and
 - iv. An assumed investment rate of return with a 2.75% risk-free assumption⁸.

Hybrid plan (DC, DB), calculation method 3, hybrid plan: In the case of a hybrid plan, we calculate the DC lump-sum present value amount (see DC plan, calculation method 1 above) and the DB lump-sum present value amount (see DB plan, calculation method 2 above). The sum of those amounts is the lump-sum present value amount.

Job classifications excluded from this year's survey

- Represented University of Washington classifications that the general government or other higher education institutions do not use and that are independently surveyed by the University of Washington
- Apprentice jobs that are paid a percentage of the journey-level job class
- Certified teacher positions
- Job classes that are surveyed separately (e.g. WSP, DOC, etc.)

⁶ A single-life annuity is a periodic benefit payment paid over the life of a plan member.

⁷ An annuity factor can estimate the value of a lifetime benefit in today's dollars. It requires assumptions such as how long the benefit will be paid and how investment income will be earned each year to make all future payments. In short, annuity factors represent how much money is needed today to pay \$1.00 per year for the rest of a member's life, starting at the normal retirement age, if all the assumptions are realized.

⁸ Derived from the returns of a 30-year U.S. treasury bond. While this rate fluctuates, the Office of State Actuary believes 2.75% to be a reasonable current proxy for a risk-free rate of return when the returns for the past 10 years are considered.

Definitions

Benchmark job – The state's version of a comparable job in the market. Benchmark jobs are positions that remain consistent across the industry in terms of duties and responsibilities, which can therefore be compared from one organization to another.

Percent (%) responses – Ratio of number of responses divided by the total number of survey participants.

Defined-benefit (DB) plan – An employer-sponsored retirement plan where employee benefits are computed using a formula that considers several factors, such as length of employment and salary history. The employer administers portfolio management and investment risk for the plan. There are also restrictions on when and by what method an employee can withdraw funds without penalties. Benefits paid are typically guaranteed for life and rise slightly to account for the increased cost of living.

Defined-contribution (DC) plan – A type of retirement plan in which the employer, employee or both contribute on a regular basis. Individual accounts are set up for participants and benefits are based on the amounts credited to these accounts through employee contributions and, if applicable, employer contributions, plus any investment earnings on the money in the account.

Hybrid plan – Any retirement plan that combines some elements of a traditional defined benefit pension plan and a defined contribution plan with an individual retirement savings account to which the employee and employer contribute money.

In-state private sector – Refers to published survey data.

In-state public sector participants – Refers to all in-state Washington participants who submitted responses to the custom survey.

Market – Refers to the combination of in-state public sector participant responses, other state government participant responses and in-state private sector data. See benchmark result calculations and total compensation calculations below for additional information.

Mean – The value obtained by adding a set of numbers and then dividing the sum by the number of items in the set.

Median – The middle value in a set of ranked data points, i.e., half the data points are below this level.

Nonrepresented – Responses related to employees who are not represented by a labor organization.

Number of no responses – Number of participants who did not respond to the survey question.

Other state governments – Refers to out-of-state custom survey participants, i.e., state government participants who submitted responses to the custom survey.

Total compensation – Base compensation plus the employee dollar value of health care and retirement benefits received. See total compensation calculations below for additional information.

Union Represented – Responses related to employees represented by a labor organization.