

Washington State Self-Sufficiency Standard Report Updated with 2020 Data

Study finds rising and disparate cost of living based on geography and family composition

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Seattle, WA – The Washington State Self-Sufficiency Standard report has been released with 2020 data, providing an in-depth look at the cost of supporting a working family in Washington state. The Self-Sufficiency Standard is a measure of income adequacy based on the cost of basic needs, including housing, childcare, food, healthcare, transportation, and more.

For nearly two decades, the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County has partnered with the University of Washington’s Center for Women’s Welfare to publish the report, which is used to evaluate policy, target job training resources, counsel and evaluate outcomes for clients in work training programs, and assist grant-makers with needs analyses and impact assessment. The report incorporates a wide variety of validated national, state, and local data to determine individual cost of living and account for variation by geography and family composition.

Here are some of 2020’s key findings:

- In every year since the report began publishing data in 2001, the cost of living for all Washington counties has increased faster than median wages. That increase averaged 72% across the state.
- Cost of living is considerably higher for families with children. One adult living in King County (City of Seattle) needs \$36,065 per year to cover basic needs, but one adult with one preschooler needs \$69,215 to cover the additional cost of childcare, a larger housing unit, and increased food and healthcare.
- The cost of living in King County (City of Seattle) is higher than many comparable cities. Seattle’s cost of living is most similar to Portland, OR, but higher than Chicago, IL, Phoenix, AZ, and Denver, CO.
- Federal poverty guidelines are set well below the minimum basic needs for a family with children.

According to Lisa Manzer, Director of the Center for Women's Welfare: “Average wages from four of the top ten occupations in the Seattle region don’t even cover half the cost of the basic needs for a single parent with two children (a preschooler and a school-age child).”

Dr. Diana Pearce, Report Author and Self-Sufficiency Standard Founder Emerita, notes: “The Self-Sufficiency Standard documents that Washington’s families face a growing crunch as costs are rising faster than wages, even in a pandemic. In addition, the economic shutdown reveals that many of Washington’s jobs do not provide enough even to meet basic needs, forcing families to make impossible choices between housing, health care and food.”

“For decades, the Seattle region has had great economic prosperity and high-wage job growth, but the economic divide has widened as low-wage jobs have expanded and middle-wage jobs have steadily declined,” says Marie Kurose, Chief Executive Officer of the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County. “Many workers can no longer afford the high cost of housing, childcare, and transportation, and workers of color are hit the hardest. As we rebuild from the economic devastation wrought by COVID-19, we must prioritize jobs and economic supports that meet the higher costs of our region.”

In addition to the report, the Self-Sufficiency Calculator (TheCalculator.org) puts the updated standard data to use in a convenient tool, which was refreshed in 2019 with an improved user interface. The calculator integrates standard data with basic budgeting, career and vocational planning, along with embedded information about work supports, such as food stamps or subsidized healthcare, to invite users and career counselors to plan, budget, explore, test, and determine next steps towards self-sufficiency.

Ms. Kurose adds, “The Self-Sufficiency Calculator, combined with the updated report, helps us to understand the wages needed to achieve financial stability as we work to connect job seekers to careers.”

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The *Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County* is a nonprofit workforce grant-funding organization that oversees employment-related programs for youth, the adult workforce, and employers in Seattle and King County, with the goal of a strong economy and self-sufficiency for every resident.

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