

Average Distance to Work

Distance to work is an area of interest for the central Puget Sound region due to its impact on vehicle miles traveled, the environment and general quality of life. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that many households, particularly first-time and lower-income homebuyers, are being priced out of the more expensive, economically centralized areas of our region, leading to more residents locating further out and to longer commutes. Actual data corroborate that people are, on average, living further away from work. Further research indicates that distance to work is related to income and the number of working adults in a household. Distance to work increases with income up to a point, but residents in higher income brackets have more choice in where to live and can afford to live closer to work. Distance to work also increases with the number of working adults in a household.

Data for this analysis is derived from the PSRC's Household Travel Surveys from 1999 and 2006, and includes persons age 16 and older who live and work within the central Puget Sound region; the analysis excludes individuals who work from home. These data sources allow us to investigate recent distance to work trends and characteristics at a detailed sub-county geographic level. This analysis compares the change in average commute distance in the region between 1999 and 2006 for 10 regional sub-areas, and relates the distance to work trends to income and the number of working adults in a household.

Between 1999 and 2006, the average commute for the region's residents increased by 5 percent, from 12.2 to 12.8 miles. Sub-regionally, the average commute distance for most areas experienced an increase in distance to work, although some areas did not reflect a statistically significant difference. However, we can conclude that three sub-areas did significantly increase distance to work. The NW/Central Snohomish, the East Rural areas, and the Tacoma/SW Pierce sub-areas increased in average distance to work by over a mile each. NW/Central Snohomish residents increased their distance 11 percent, from 15.0 to 16.7 miles to work. The residents of the East Rural area added 13 percent to their average distance to work, from 22.0 to 24.9 miles. The distance to work for Tacoma/SW Pierce residents increased 13 percent, from 10.8 to 12.3 miles.

The distance to work data are based on distances measured by the shortest travel time path on the road between home and work. These are not self-reported values and do not represent trips to work, which could include errands on the way to work and more possible routes.

Table 1. Mean Distance to Work, 1999 and 2006

Sub area	1999	2006	Change	% Change
Region*	12.2	12.8	0.6	5%
NW/Central Snohomish*	15.0	16.7	1.7	11%
SW Snohomish	13.4	13.1	-0.3	-2%
Seattle-Shoreline	8.2	8.4	0.2	2%
East King	10.9	10.9	0.0	0%
South King	12.4	12.7	0.3	2%
Tacoma/SW Pierce**	10.8	12.3	1.4	13%
Central Pierce	15.1	15.1	0.0	0%
East Rural*	22.0	24.9	2.9	13%
North/Central Kitsap	11.7	12.0	0.3	3%
South Kitsap/Peninsula	18.8	19.9	1.2	6%

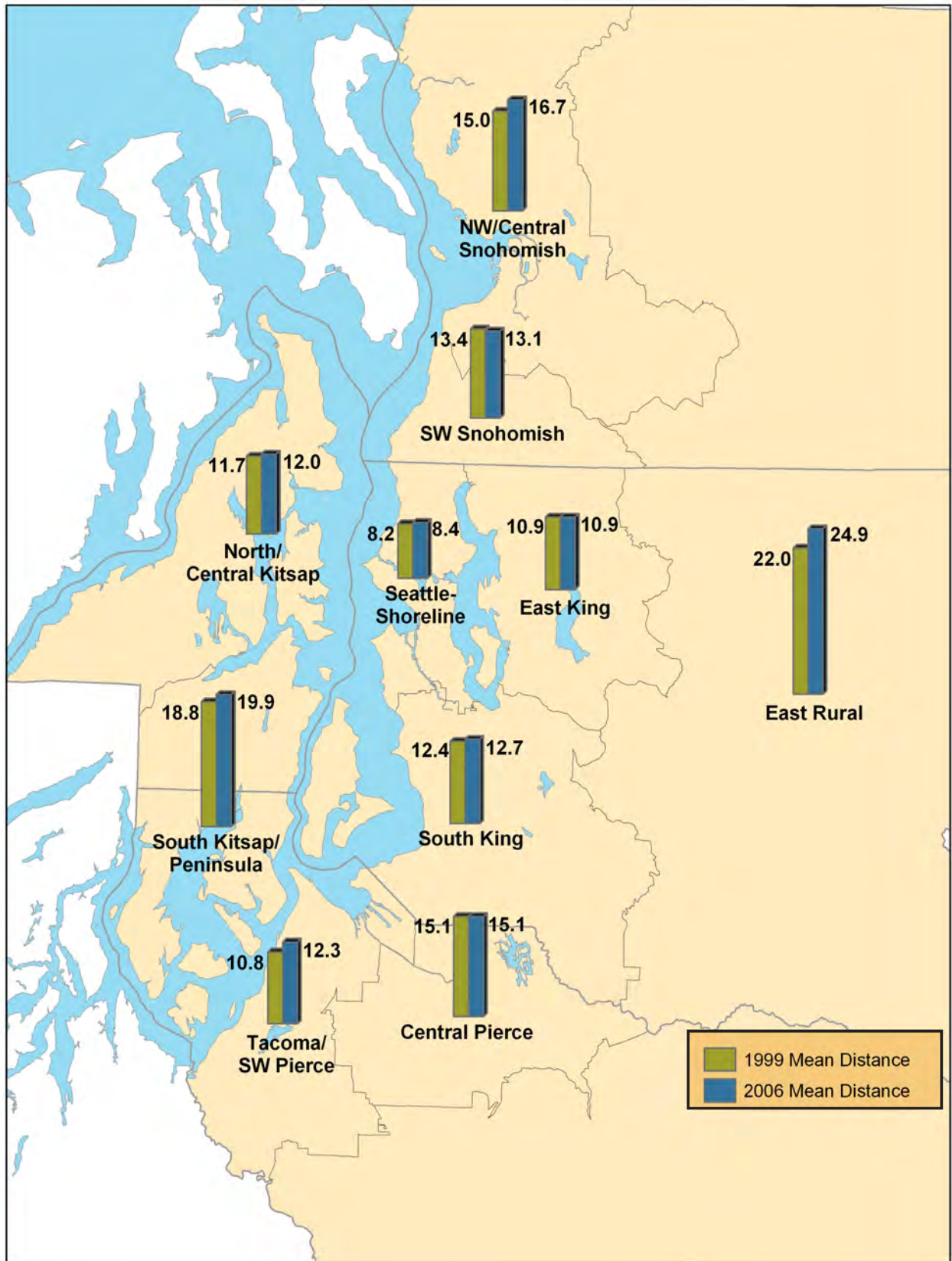
* Statistically significant increase at a 90% confidence level.

** Statistically significant increase at an 85% confidence level.

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Figure 1. Average Distance to Work for 10 Sub-areas, 1999 and 2006



Mean distance to work increases as incomes rise, as indicated by the graph below, up to \$100,000 annual household income. In 2006, residents in the lowest income category experienced the lowest average distance to work, at just less than 10 miles. The increasing trend continues and peaks at the \$70,000 to \$100,000 income bracket, at approximately 14 miles to work. Average distances begin to fall slightly above \$100,000 annual household income as residents in higher income brackets have more options for home locations and can move closer to centers of employment.

Additionally, mean distance to work increases along with the number of working adults in a household. One working adult is more able to live in proximity to work, on average 12 miles in 2006, whereas two working adults have two workplaces to accommodate. This drives up the average distance to work for two worker households to 13.4 miles in 2006. The distance declines for three or more workers in a household to 12.3 miles in 2006, as this type of household can take many forms. This could include a family with a young adult child working close to home, or several young adults who choose to live together and have options to live closer to work.

Overall, the data indicate that the central Puget Sound region experienced lengthened distances to work over the 1999 to 2006 time period. These increases were most pronounced in areas further from the region's main employment centers. Income and the number of working members in a household impact distance to work by constraining or opening up more options to residents in their choices for home locations.

For more information about distance to work data, contact Ashley Harris at 206-971-3283 or aharris@psrc.org.

Figure 2. Mean Distance to Work by Income Category, 2006

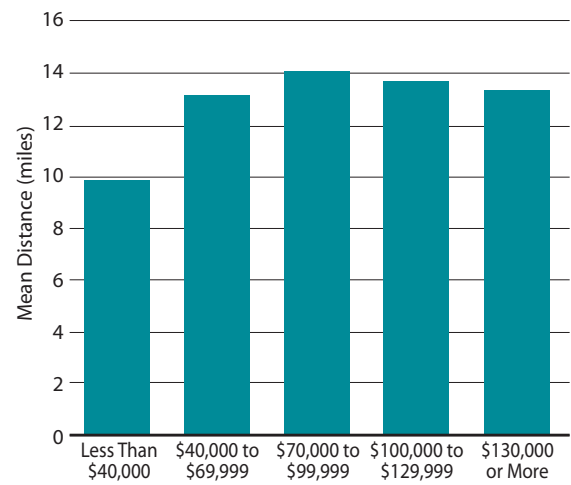


Figure 3. Mean Distance to Work by Number of Working Adult Household Members, 1999 and 2006

