



# Labour Market Bulletin

British Columbia

January 2021



This Labour Market Bulletin provides an analysis of Labour Force Survey results for the province of British Columbia (B.C.), including the regions of Northern B.C., Vancouver Island and Coast, Lower Mainland, Thompson–Okanagan and the Kootenays.

## OVERVIEW

The province's labour market continued to struggle under public health measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, and employment in British Columbia (B.C.) remained relatively unchanged between December and January. The slight increase in job growth was due to gains in full-time employment (+0.2%) being offset by losses in part-time employment (-0.3%).<sup>1</sup> Though the provincial labour market remains relatively resilient against the ongoing pandemic compared to other large provinces, employment remains well below (-1.7%) what it was a year ago.<sup>2</sup> To date, some industries have recovered from the impacts of the pandemic, while others continue to suffer.

The province's unemployment rate rose to 8.0% over the month, up from 7.2% in December.<sup>3</sup> In comparison, the national unemployment rate increased by 0.6 percentage points to 9.4% over the same period.

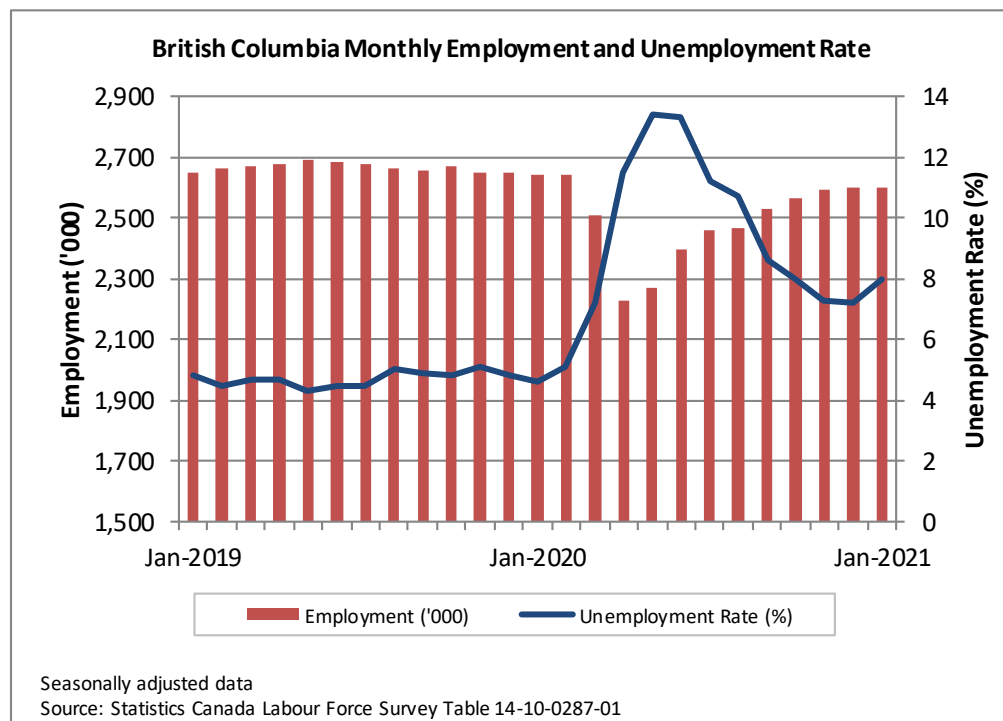
In spite of improved testing capacity, and greater use of personal protection equipment by the public, further restrictions from the provincial public health office are now in effect until further notice.<sup>4</sup> In addition, effective January 7, 2021 travellers are required to provide negative COVID-19 tests before flying into Canada.<sup>5</sup> The restriction on all non-essential travel through the Canada-U.S. border is in place until February 21.<sup>6</sup> At the time of writing this report, all non-essential travellers entering Canada through land borders will need to provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test effective February 15.<sup>7</sup> The decline in visitors is detrimental to B.C.'s tourism sector.<sup>8</sup>

## British Columbia Monthly Labour Force Statistics

Seasonally Adjusted Monthly Data	January 2021	December 2020	January 2020	Monthly Variation		Yearly Variation	
				Number	%	Number	%
<b>Population 15 + ('000)</b>	4,320.6	4,319.2	4,277.3	1.4	0.0	43.3	1.0
<b>Labour Force ('000)</b>	2,825.8	2,798.2	2,772.7	27.6	1.0	53.1	1.9
<b>Employment ('000)</b>	2,599.6	2,596.8	2,644.2	2.8	0.1	-44.6	-1.7
Full-Time ('000)	2,050.4	2,045.9	2,075.8	4.5	0.2	-25.4	-1.2
Part-Time ('000)	549.2	550.9	568.4	-1.7	-0.3	-19.2	-3.4
<b>Unemployment ('000)</b>	226.2	201.4	128.4	24.8	12.3	97.8	76.2
<b>Unemployment Rate (%)</b>	8.0	7.2	4.6	0.8	-	3.4	-
<b>Participation Rate (%)</b>	65.4	64.8	64.8	0.6	-	0.6	-
<b>Employment Rate (%)</b>	60.2	60.1	61.8	0.1	-	-1.6	-

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding

Source: Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey – Table 14-10-0287, formerly CANSIM 282-0087



The unemployment rate for B.C. youth (15 to 24 years) rose from 14.2% to 16.8% in January, as more youth joined the labour force (+6.3%), but less than half were able to find work.<sup>9</sup>

Current pandemic restrictions continue to create barriers for some women, particularly those between the ages of 15 to 24 years, as employment in retail and in food services remain depressed. Over the month, the unemployment rate for young women spiked by 7.1 percentage points to 20.3%. As restrictions remain in place, employment opportunities in the service sector and/or for primary childcare providers will be challenging.<sup>10</sup> Looking forward, the unemployment rate for youth will likely stay in the double-digits this year.

## British Columbia Monthly Unemployment Rates, by Gender and Age

Seasonally Adjusted Data	January 2021 (%)	December 2020 (%)	January 2020 (%)	Monthly Variation (% points)	Yearly Variation (% points)
<b>Total</b>	8.0	7.2	4.6	0.8	3.4
<b>25 years and over</b>	6.6	6.1	4.0	0.5	2.6
Men - 25 years and over	6.1	6.0	3.8	0.1	2.3
Women - 25 years and over	7.1	6.3	4.2	0.8	2.9
<b>15 to 24 years</b>	16.8	14.2	8.8	2.6	8.0
Men - 15 to 24 years	13.4	15.1	9.0	-1.7	4.4
Women - 15 to 24 years	20.3	13.2	8.5	7.1	11.8

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding

Source: Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey – Table 14-10-0287, formerly CANSIM 282-0087

## EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY

The province's goods producing sector lost 7,900 jobs (-1.6%) in January primarily due to job losses in **agriculture** (-5.8%), **manufacturing** (-1.5%), and **construction** (-0.7%).<sup>11</sup> Overall, employment in the goods sector has worsened, with 14,500 fewer workers (-2.9%) from a year ago.<sup>12</sup>

The **construction** industry remains sluggish, as it is employing 30,900 fewer workers (-12.4%) when compared to a year ago.<sup>13</sup> Based on the most recent December data, housing starts in B.C. were down 5% when compared to December 2019.<sup>14</sup> The value of building permits increased to over \$1.5B (+6.9%) year-over-year in December, primarily as the value of commercial building permits increased by roughly \$177M (+89.1%).<sup>15</sup>

While **construction** employment remains well below that of January 2020, the industry may recover over the long-term as several non-residential projects will be ramping up. For instance, demolition work is scheduled to begin soon in preparation for construction of the \$1.72B Broadway Subway Project in Vancouver.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, the workforce on five major industrial projects across northern B.C. are slowly staffing back up following public health orders in late December temporarily reducing the number of workers on site. The Site C hydro project (near Fort St. John), LNG Canada project (Kitimat), Coastal GasLink pipeline (Dawson Creek to Kitimat), Rio Tinto's aluminum smelter tunnel project (Kitimat) and Trans Mountain project (Edmonton, AB to Burnaby, B.C.) are permitted to increase their workforces gradually between January and the end of February, in an effort to contain COVID-19 transmission within capacity of the Northern Health Authority.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, the Trans Mountain project announced that it would be restarting work after a two-month shutdown due to several serious safety incidents. Roughly 7,000 workers will be returning to the project across Alberta and B.C. following rigorous safety training. Going forward the project will be subject to more thorough safety standards and inspections.<sup>18</sup>

The **forestry** sector continues to adapt to ongoing challenges, including U.S. trade tariffs and a shrinking timber supply. Lumber prices hit a historical high in September 2020, and at the end of January 2021, remained above prices from one year ago. Demand from the U.S. remains strong; a result of fewer pre-owned homes and consequently a significant increase in new housing builds.

Looking forward, forestry will benefit from the Forest Enhancement Society of BC allocating \$3M in new grants to 15 different wood fibre projects across the province. The projects will allow about 250,000 cubic metres of post-harvest wood waste to be used in the production of pulp, wood pellets, electricity, and compost for soil remediation.<sup>19</sup>

Compared to January of 2020, B.C.'s **services** sector employment decreased by 30,200 jobs (-1.4%). The decline was largely due to significant losses in **accommodation and food services** (-12.8%) and **wholesale and retail trade** (-5.3%), both which employ people in predominantly face-to-face occupations that have been the most affected by public health measures to contain the pandemic.<sup>20</sup>

On a monthly basis, **wholesale and retail trade** continues to struggle, as employment declined slightly by 2,500 (-0.6%). Retailers continue to operate under restrictions, including the requirement that masks be worn in all indoor retail spaces. Yet, according to most recent data, retail trade sales continue to increase as the province reported over \$8B in retail sales last November, well above the \$5.7B in April 2020, when most stores were closed due to the pandemic.<sup>21</sup> As the pandemic drove consumers towards spending more time and money online, some bricks and mortar stores continue to either lay off staff or close permanently.<sup>22</sup> For instance, the Hudson Bay announced more than 600 employees will be laid off across Canada due to the pandemic.<sup>23</sup>

With reports of new cases of the more highly transmissible COVID-19 variants, the outlook for B.C.'s **tourism** sector remains grim for the new year, especially as non-essential interprovincial travel restrictions remain in place.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the Government of Canada announced that cruise vessels are now banned from Canadian waters until February 28, 2022 to help limit the spread of COVID-19.<sup>25</sup> The extension will be a blow to businesses in coastal communities that rely on tourism.

Recovery in the **transportation** industry continues to be held up by challenges in foreign and domestic air travel. WestJet and Air Canada announced further layoffs and flight reductions as a result of the new federal rules requiring COVID-19 testing before flying into Canada and in anticipation of further rules on international travel.  
<sup>26, 27, 28</sup>

At the time of writing this report, Air Canada announced that it would soon be temporarily laying off around 1,500 unionized workers and an unspecified number of management positions across Canada due to new travel restrictions and a decline in demand for flights.<sup>29</sup> As the two airlines reduce operations across the country, it is unclear at this time how many employees in B.C. are affected.

## British Columbia Monthly Labour Force Statistics, by Industry

Seasonally Adjusted Data ('000)	January 2021	December 2020	January 2020	Monthly Variation		Yearly Variation	
				Number	%	Number	%
<b>Total employed, all industries</b>	2,599.6	2,596.8	2,644.2	2.8	0.1	-44.6	-1.7
<b>Goods-producing sector</b>	490.2	498.1	504.7	-7.9	-1.6	-14.5	-2.9
Agriculture	25.0	30.8	28.7	-5.8	-18.8	-3.7	-12.9
Forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying, oil and gas	50.3	50.1	44.2	0.2	0.4	6.1	13.8
Utilities	20.4	18.5	12.9	1.9	10.3	7.5	58.1
Construction	218.9	220.4	249.8	-1.5	-0.7	-30.9	-12.4
Manufacturing	175.6	178.3	169.1	-2.7	-1.5	6.5	3.8
<b>Services-producing sector</b>	2,109.4	2,098.7	2,139.6	10.7	0.5	-30.2	-1.4
Trade	383.2	385.7	404.5	-2.5	-0.6	-21.3	-5.3
Transportation and warehousing	139.0	139.9	145.1	-0.9	-0.6	-6.1	-4.2
Finance, insurance, real estate and leasing	160.5	161.4	173.2	-0.9	-0.6	-12.7	-7.3
Professional, scientific and technical services	250.4	240.3	225.6	10.1	4.2	24.8	11.0
Business, building and other support services	109.4	110.7	110.6	-1.3	-1.2	-1.2	-1.1
Educational services	182.9	190.6	185.0	-7.7	-4.0	-2.1	-1.1
Health care and social assistance	341.0	337.2	329.8	3.8	1.1	11.2	3.4
Information, culture and recreation	126.6	116.4	126.9	10.2	8.8	-0.3	-0.2
Accommodation and food services	174.8	182.4	200.5	-7.6	-4.2	-25.7	-12.8
Other services	106.4	103.6	121.9	2.8	2.7	-15.5	-12.7
Public administration	135.3	130.4	116.3	4.9	3.8	19.0	16.3

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding

Source: Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey – Table 14-10-0355, formerly CANSIM 282-0088

## REGIONAL ANALYSIS

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic remains widespread, yet employment in some regions are recovering. At this time, 52,900 jobs were lost are in the most populated Lower Mainland – Southwest region (-3.1%), when compared to the same time last year.<sup>30</sup>

**British Columbia Monthly Labour Force Statistics, by Economic Region**

3-Month Moving Averages Seasonally Unadjusted Data	Employment			Unemployment Rate		
	January 2021 ('000)	January 2020 ('000)	Yearly Variation (%)	January 2021 (%)	January 2020 (%)	Yearly Variation (% points)
<b>British Columbia</b>	2,579.2	2,630.8	-2.0	7.4	4.8	2.6
<b>Economic Regions</b>						
Vancouver Island and Coast	401.7	402.1	-0.1	7.1	5.1	2.0
Lower Mainland - Southwest	1,644.7	1,697.6	-3.1	7.5	4.5	3.0
Thompson - Okanagan	289.9	287.4	0.9	7.4	5.6	1.8
Kootenay	75.8	78.3	-3.2	7.2	4.4	2.8
Cariboo	84.9	83.5	1.7	8.8	7.5	1.3
North Coast and Nechako	42.1	42.9	-1.9	6.3	3.6	2.7
Northeast	40.1	39.0	2.8	4.1	4.2	-0.1

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding

Source: Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey – Table 14-10-0387, formerly CANSIM 282-0122

Year-over-year, employment remained relatively unchanged in **Vancouver Island and Coast**. The unemployment rate is 7.1%, up from 5.1% one year ago. Looking forward, health care services across the region will improve once a \$6.25M redevelopment to the emergency department at Port Alberni's West Coast General Hospital is completed in summer 2022.<sup>31</sup> In addition, construction has begun on the new intensive care unit (ICU) at Nanaimo Regional Hospital and is expected to create 200 direct jobs.<sup>32</sup>

The outlook for the region's tourism sector remains dire as non-essential travel restrictions continue to affect ferry travel. As well, many communities such as Victoria will continue to suffer following the cancellation of the Canadian cruise season until February 2022.<sup>33</sup> As such, the region's accommodation and food industry will likely face a challenging year without the thousands of tourists that would normally visit.

Employment in **Lower Mainland - Southwest** decreased by 3.1% compared to January 2020 and the unemployment rate increased to 7.5%. The region's construction industry is expected to benefit from the province of B.C. investing in \$31.2M for seismic upgrades to two schools in Richmond. Construction will begin in 2022 and is scheduled to finish mid-2023.<sup>34</sup> The provincial government is also providing \$24.7M for the construction of Eagle Mountain Elementary school in Abbotsford. The new 460-seat school will also feature a childcare centre with nearly 100 spots to provide before and after-school care.<sup>35</sup>

Meanwhile, construction of a replacement electrical substation by BC Hydro in North Vancouver will begin this March.<sup>36</sup> The project is expected to take around three years to complete and cost up to \$100M.<sup>37</sup>

**Thompson-Okanagan** employment increased by 0.9% over the past year.<sup>38</sup> The City of West Kelowna has awarded a design contract to Johnston Davidson Architecture to design the new \$18M city hall and library

building.<sup>39</sup> Construction of the new building is set to begin later this year.<sup>40</sup> Looking forward, the province of B.C. is providing \$34.8M for the construction of a new elementary school in Kamloops. Construction of the new 510-seat school is expected to begin in summer 2022.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the pandemic, the **North Coast and Nechako** region employment remained relatively unchanged due in part to ongoing megaprojects. The unemployment rate in January was 6.3%, up from 2.7% over the same period. The LNG Canada construction project continues to make progress, despite the COVID-19 public health order limiting the workforce in January.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, the province of B.C. is providing \$25M towards the expansion of the Port of Prince Rupert. In addition to other public and private funding, a new 28-hectare transload platform will be created, including the installation of new rail tracks and storage facilities. Once complete, the project is expected to create 200 jobs in transloading, and an additional 2,000 jobs in transportation and warehousing.<sup>43</sup>

Year-over-year, employment in **Northeast** increased slightly (+2.8%) despite the ongoing pressures of the pandemic. The unemployment rate (4.1%) is nearly identical to that of January 2020 (4.2%), and is the lowest in B.C. Although construction continues on BC Hydro's Site C hydroelectric project, albeit slowly under the public health order, the future of the project is uncertain. The project will undergo a yet unscheduled provincial cabinet review due to growing concerns over the project's cost overruns and schedule delays.<sup>44</sup>

**Note:** In preparing this document, the authors have taken care to provide clients with labour market information that is timely and accurate at the time of publication. Since labour market conditions are dynamic, some of the information presented here may have changed since this document was published. Users are encouraged to also refer to other sources for additional information on the local economy and labour market. Information contained in this document does not necessarily reflect official policies of Employment and Social Development Canada.

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**For information on the Labour Force Survey,** please visit the Statistics Canada Web site at: [www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca)

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- <sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0287-01 Labour force characteristics, monthly, seasonally adjusted and trend-cycle, last 5 months, February 5, 2021 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410028701>
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