



Labour Market Bulletin

British Columbia

February 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 provincial labour market remains resilient against the ongoing pandemic, as some industries have recovered from the impacts of the pandemic. Employment in British Columbia (B.C.) increased slightly (+1.0%) between January and February. The job growth was largely due to strong gains in part-time employment (+4.1%), with slight gains in full-time employment (+0.2%).¹ Employment is just below pre-pandemic levels (-0.6% or -15,100) to what it was a year ago.²

The province's unemployment rate improved in February, falling 1.1 percentage points to 6.9% over the month. In comparison, the national unemployment rate improved by roughly the same rate, 1.2 percentage points to 8.2%, over the same period³

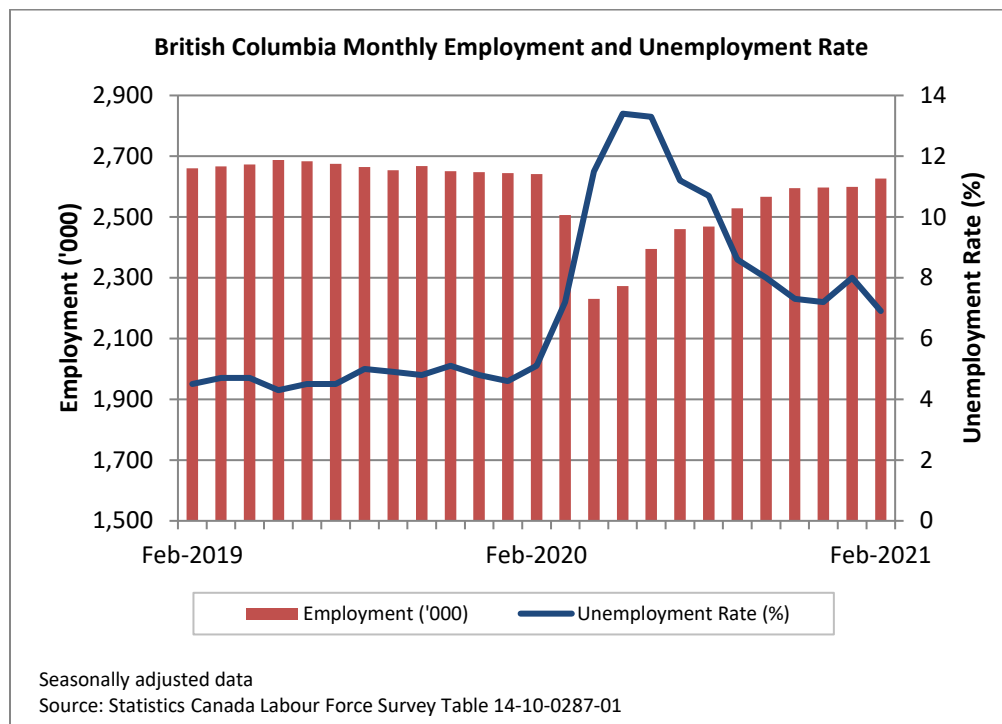
The province's outlook is looking up, as it moves into Phase 2 of its COVID-19 Immunization Plan. Already, provincial restrictions on gathering outdoors have eased.⁴ However, British Columbia remains cautious as the number of cases of COVID-19 are on the rise.⁵ The restriction on all non-essential travel through the Canada-U.S. has again been extended, now until March 21.⁶ In addition, as some travellers may avoid flying into Canada to avoid the requirement of providing a negative COVID-19 test,⁷ all non-essential travellers entering Canada through land borders will also need to provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test effective February 15.⁸

British Columbia Monthly Labour Force Statistics

Seasonally Adjusted Monthly Data	February 2021	January 2021	February 2020	Monthly Variation		Yearly Variation	
				Number	%	Number	%
Population 15 + ('000)	4,323.3	4,320.6	4,281.5	2.7	0.1	41.8	1.0
Labour Force ('000)	2,821.9	2,825.8	2,783.2	-3.9	-0.1	38.7	1.4
Employment ('000)	2,626.2	2,599.6	2,641.3	26.6	1.0	-15.1	-0.6
Full-Time ('000)	2,054.3	2,050.4	2,087.3	3.9	0.2	-33.0	-1.6
Part-Time ('000)	571.8	549.2	554.1	22.6	4.1	17.7	3.2
Unemployment ('000)	195.8	226.2	141.9	-30.4	-13.4	53.9	38.0
Unemployment Rate (%)	6.9	8.0	5.1	-1.1	-	1.8	-
Participation Rate (%)	65.3	65.4	65.0	-0.1	-	0.3	-
Employment Rate (%)	60.7	60.2	61.7	0.5	-	-1.0	-

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) fell from 16.8% to 15.0% in February, as more youth joined the labour force (+2.2%), and nearly twice as many were able to find work.⁹

Current pandemic restrictions continue to create barriers for some women, particularly those between the ages of 15 to 24 years. Over the month, the unemployment rate for young women improved slightly from 20.3% to 17.6% but remain well above that of young men. As restrictions remain in place, employment opportunities for

young women, particularly in face-to-face occupations, remain challenging; however, opportunities may improve over the coming months as vaccinations ramp up.¹⁰

British Columbia Monthly Unemployment Rates, by Gender and Age

Seasonally Adjusted Data	February 2021 (%)	January 2021 (%)	February 2020 (%)	Monthly Variation (% points)	Yearly Variation (% points)
Total	6.9	8.0	5.1	-1.1	1.8
25 years and over	5.6	6.6	4.4	-1.0	1.2
Men - 25 years and over	5.7	6.1	4.3	-0.4	1.4
Women - 25 years and over	5.5	7.1	4.6	-1.6	0.9
15 to 24 years	15.0	16.8	9.4	-1.8	5.6
Men - 15 to 24 years	12.5	13.4	11.7	-0.9	0.8
Women - 15 to 24 years	17.6	20.3	6.9	-2.7	10.7

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 9,800 jobs (-2.0%) between January and February primarily due to losses in **manufacturing** (-6,600), and **construction** (-2,100).¹¹ Employment in **agriculture** remained relatively unchanged over the month, and employment edged downwards in the other industries. Overall, employment in the goods sector has worsened over the last 12 months, with 22,200 fewer workers (-4.4%) from a year ago.¹²

The **construction** industry is employing 33,100 fewer workers (-13.2%) compared to a year ago.¹³ Nearly all the subsectors in the industry have lost jobs, most notably among residential builders and trade contractors. On a positive note, according to the January 2021 data, housing starts in B.C. were up 36.4% when compared to January 2020.¹⁴ Already, housing demand outside of Metro Vancouver is on the rise, driving up sales and prices, especially as new homes have yet to compensate for the dwindling supply of resale homes on the market. Year-over-year, the value of building permits dropped sharply to roughly \$1.2B (-37.5%) in January, primarily as the value of multiple dwelling building (e.g. condominiums) permits fell by roughly \$737.5M (-53.5%).¹⁵ The decline was the result of a number of related factors, including a drop in immigration and mobility across Canada¹⁶, more buyers looking outside of metro areas for more living space¹⁷, and increased construction costs due to health and safety concerns during the pandemic.

While **construction** employment remains well below that of February 2020, the industry will likely recover over the long-term with a rebound in residential construction. In addition, several multi-billion dollar non-residential projects are ramping up in Metro Vancouver, including the \$7B Lougheed Town Center development, and the new \$2.2B St. Paul's Hospital.

Despite ongoing challenges, including a shrinking timber supply, the **forestry** sector is benefiting from record high lumber prices.¹⁸ Demand from the U.S. remains strong because of fewer pre-owned homes on the market and this trend is expected to continue over the year. The U.S. is Western Canada's largest customer for dimensional lumber used in home framing construction.

Looking forward, forestry will benefit from Paper Excellence's plans to recall around 200 employees and restart their Number 11 Paper Machine at its Catalyst Powell River mill around May 1.¹⁹ Roughly, 320 employees lost their jobs at the mill last year.²⁰

Compared to February of 2020, B.C.'s **services** sector employment increased slightly by 7,000 (+0.3%). The increase was largely due to significant gains in **public administration** (+20.6%) and **professional, scientific and technical services** (+15.6). The **professional, scientific and technical services** industry has been able to take advantage of the challenges associated with pandemic. Businesses in this sector have largely remained open, and some have even expanded, as demand for software and technological support from employers are needed for their employees to work from home. Meanwhile, **accommodation and food services** (-13.2%) and **business, building and other support services** (-9.9%) remain among the most affected by public health measures to contain the pandemic.²¹

On a monthly basis, **wholesale and retail trade** are showing signs of recovery, as employment increased by 14,500 (+3.8%). Retailers continue to operate under restrictions, including the requirement that masks be worn in all indoor retail spaces. According to most recent data, monthly retail trade sales eased slightly to \$7.8B last December, well above the \$5.7B in April 2020 when many stores closed due to the pandemic.²² Uncertainty clouds the future of some stores, as the pandemic has changed consumer behaviour towards spending more time and money online.^{23,24}

Month-over-month, **accommodation and food services** remain relatively unchanged. Indeed, the recovery in B.C. will take time as restaurants continue to limit capacity amid the ongoing public health orders. Additional health and safety costs, as well as reduced revenue continue to place some restaurants at risk of closing permanently. Meanwhile, international travel restrictions and border closures have led to fewer visitors in the past year, cutting demand for **accommodations**. As of January 23, 2021, hotel occupancy across the province had fallen to barely 30%.²⁵

British Columbia Monthly Labour Force Statistics, by Industry

Seasonally Adjusted Data ('000)	February 2021	January 2021	February 2020	Monthly Variation		Yearly Variation	
				Number	%	Number	%
Total employed, all industries	2,626.2	2,599.6	2,641.3	26.6	1.0	-15.1	-0.6
Goods-producing sector	480.4	490.2	502.6	-9.8	-2.0	-22.2	-4.4
Agriculture	25.2	25.0	28.7	0.2	0.8	-3.5	-12.2
Forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying, oil and gas	49.5	50.3	42.4	-0.8	-1.6	7.1	16.7
Utilities	19.8	20.4	15.4	-0.6	-2.9	4.4	28.6
Construction	216.8	218.9	249.9	-2.1	-1.0	-33.1	-13.2
Manufacturing	169.0	175.6	166.3	-6.6	-3.8	2.7	1.6
Services-producing sector	2,145.8	2,109.4	2,138.8	36.4	1.7	7.0	0.3
Trade	397.7	383.2	410.8	14.5	3.8	-13.1	-3.2
Transportation and warehousing	138.7	139.0	143.5	-0.3	-0.2	-4.8	-3.3
Finance, insurance, real estate and leasing	163.0	160.5	173.8	2.5	1.6	-10.8	-6.2
Professional, scientific and technical services	257.8	250.4	223.0	7.4	3.0	34.8	15.6
Business, building and other support services	103.3	109.4	114.6	-6.1	-5.6	-11.3	-9.9
Educational services	192.2	182.9	181.0	9.3	5.1	11.2	6.2
Health care and social assistance	341.5	341.0	330.9	0.5	0.1	10.6	3.2
Information, culture and recreation	124.4	126.6	124.8	-2.2	-1.7	-0.4	-0.3
Accommodation and food services	174.5	174.8	201.1	-0.3	-0.2	-26.6	-13.2
Other services	114.3	106.4	120.6	7.9	7.4	-6.3	-5.2
Public administration	138.3	135.3	114.7	3.0	2.2	23.6	20.6

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 continues, yet employment in some regions are recovering. At this time, 41,500 jobs were lost are in the most populated Lower Mainland – Southwest region (-2.5%), when compared to the same time last year.²⁶

British Columbia Monthly Labour Force Statistics, by Economic Region

3-Month Moving Averages Seasonally Unadjusted Data	Employment			Unemployment Rate		
	February 2021 ('000)	February 2020 ('000)	Yearly Variation (%)	February 2021 (%)	February 2020 (%)	Yearly Variation (% points)
British Columbia	2,580.0	2,619.2	-1.5	7.5	4.8	2.7
Economic Regions						
Vancouver Island and Coast	398.6	401.6	-0.7	7.1	5.3	1.8
Lower Mainland - Southwest	1,649.1	1,690.6	-2.5	7.6	4.4	3.2
Thompson - Okanagan	285.7	285.9	-0.1	7.5	6.4	1.1
Kootenay	78.6	77.7	1.2	6.9	4.1	2.8
Cariboo	85.5	82.1	4.1	7.9	8.0	-0.1
North Coast and Nechako	42.8	41.8	2.4	8.5	4.6	3.9
Northeast	39.7	39.4	0.8	4.3	0.0	4.3

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 declined slightly (-0.7%) in **Vancouver Island and Coast**. The unemployment rate is 7.1%, up from 5.3% one year ago.²⁷ Looking forward, the region's construction sector employment will benefit from several projects, including the new \$10.4M Hornby Island Community School²⁸ and a new \$41.5M intensive care unit at Nanaimo Regional General Hospital.²⁹ In addition, Nanaimo's Duke Point Terminal is slated for a \$105M expansion to increase its container shipping capacity. The construction project is expected to last over the next one to two years.³⁰

The outlook for the region's aquaculture sector appears grim, as seafood company Mowi has begun laying off workers at its salmon farms in the Discovery Islands. The company estimates it may lay off up to 170 people, or about 30% of its B.C. workforce.³¹ Last December, the federal government announced that all open-net fish farms in the Discovery Islands are to cease operations by June 30, 2022.³²

Employment in **Lower Mainland - Southwest** decreased by 2.5% compared to February 2020 and the unemployment rate increased from 4.4% to 7.6%. Looking forward, employment in the region is expected to benefit from construction of the \$1.4B Pattullo Bridge this summer. Already work on the tower foundation was completed this February.³³ Meanwhile, demolition and geotechnical work has already begun in preparation for construction of the Broadway Skytrain extension.³⁴ In addition, the region's residential construction sector may ramp up in the coming months, as teleworking during the pandemic continues to drive demand for more spacious homes.

Thompson-Okanagan employment remained relatively unchanged over the past year.³⁵ The region's residential construction sector is beginning to show more activity. Green Square Vert development in Kelowna has broken

ground on the final phase of its project, with two condominiums to be completed by summer 2022.³⁶ In addition, two affordable rental projects are moving forward—construction of a 29-unit complex in Vernon has already begun, with a 46-unit complex in Oliver expected to begin in the coming months. They will cost around \$3M and \$4.6M respectively.³⁷

Meanwhile, the region's tourism sector continues to face challenges. Hockey Canada announced that it will be cancelling its spring championships due to the pandemic, including the Centennial Cup scheduled in Penticton.³⁸ Meanwhile, Big White Resort, near Kelowna, has temporarily laid off some of its staff, as business has been slow at the resort due to the pandemic.³⁹

Despite the pandemic, employment in the **North Coast and Nechako** region increased slightly (+2.4%) due in part to workers returning to the LNG Canada and surrounding megaprojects.⁴⁰ Employment is expected to rise in the coming weeks as the LNG Canada and Coastal GasLink projects are approved for a gradual increase in their on-site workforce. Earlier this year, a COVID-19 public health order limited the workforce on several megaprojects in the region, including the LNG Canada, Coastal GasLink, and Rio Tinto Kemano projects.⁴¹

Year-over-year, employment in **Northeast** remained relatively stable (+0.8%) despite the pandemic. The unemployment rate is identical to that of February 2020 (4.3%), and is the lowest in B.C.. With the booming U.S. housing market, the health of the region's forestry sector may improve as Louisiana Pacific announced plans to restart production at its Peace Valley oriented strand board mill in Fort St. John later this year. The mill was curtailed in June 2019 due to a decline in U.S. housing starts and low OSB prices. Nearly 200 mill workers and hundreds of contractors lost their jobs when the mill closed.⁴²

Meanwhile, site preparation work is underway for the Clarke Lake Geothermal Project at Fort Nelson. The project, owned by the Fort Nelson First Nation, plans to offer employment and training opportunities for its members.⁴³

In addition, the province of B.C. announced its commitment to move forward on the Site C Hydroelectric project. The multi-billion dollar project was under review due to several challenges, including rising costs, and construction delays due to the pandemic. The project's revised cost is \$16B with completion delayed from 2024 to 2025.⁴⁴

***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

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