



Labour Market Bulletin

British Columbia

May 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

Employment was relatively unchanged (-1,900 or -0.1%) for the month of May, as tighter COVID-19 restrictions remained in place to fight the pandemic's third wave. The restrictions appear to have had a direct impact on part-time workers, as job losses were predominantly in part-time employment (-23,200 or -4%). In comparison, full-time employment increased moderately over the month (+21,300 or +1%).¹ The province's month-over-month change in unemployment rate was relatively flat (-0.1 percentage points), remaining around 7.0% for May, but still well below the national rate of 8.2%.

In the past year, recovery for most industries has been strong. Indeed, employment across the province has increased by 15.1% (+343,600), offsetting the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The provincial employment recovery is now just 1% below the pre-pandemic level of February 2020.²

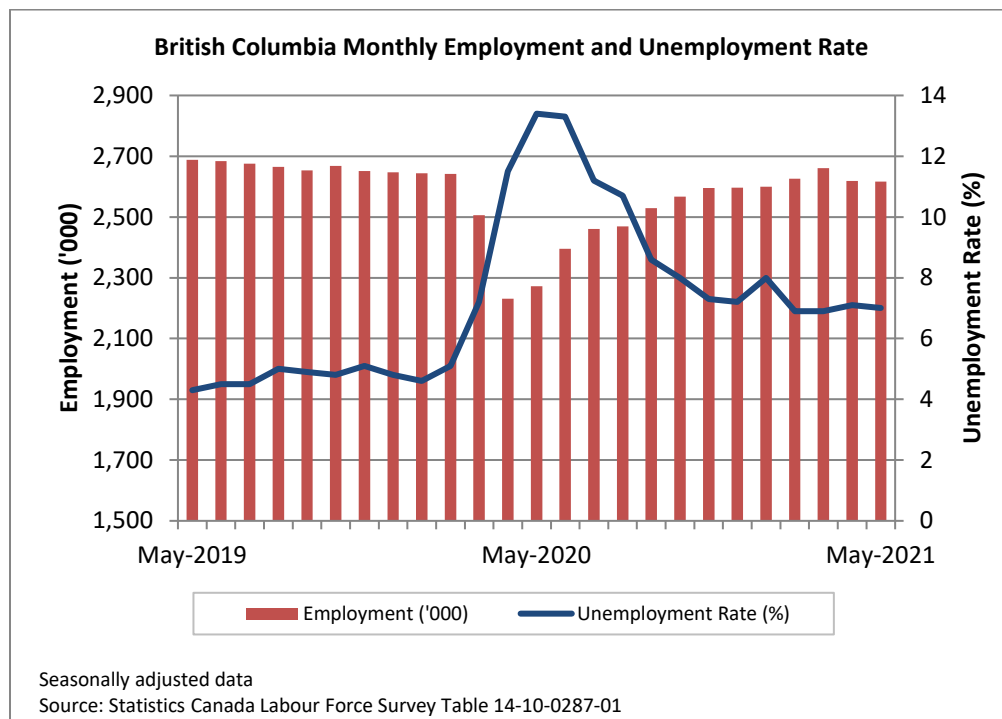
Despite the pressure the pandemic measures had on the province's labour market, they appear to be working, as the number of COVID-19 case counts and hospitalizations have declined. Increased vaccinations have also helped curb the curve of the third wave. Already, the province has announced their four-step restart plan, and aims to lift almost all restrictions by September 2021 at the earliest.³ The province eased some restrictions on May 25th under Step 1, and should be moving into Step 2 by mid-June, which includes the lifting of the regional travel restrictions across the province. Indeed, things are looking up, as more British Columbians become eligible for their second vaccination dose, which will help accelerate the province's recovery in the long-term.

British Columbia Monthly Labour Force Statistics

Seasonally Adjusted Monthly Data	May 2021	April 2021	May 2020	Monthly Variation		Yearly Variation	
				Number	%	Number	%
Population 15 + ('000)	4,334.5	4,329.2	4,291.5	5.3	0.1	43.0	1.0
Labour Force ('000)	2,812.9	2,817.0	2,624.6	-4.1	-0.1	188.3	7.2
Employment ('000)	2,616.2	2,618.1	2,272.6	-1.9	-0.1	343.6	15.1
Full-Time ('000)	2,063.2	2,041.9	1,874.9	21.3	1.0	188.3	10.0
Part-Time ('000)	553.0	576.2	397.7	-23.2	-4.0	155.3	39.0
Unemployment ('000)	196.7	198.9	352.0	-2.2	-1.1	-155.3	-44.1
Unemployment Rate (%)	7.0	7.1	13.4	-0.1	-	-6.4	-
Participation Rate (%)	64.9	65.1	61.2	-0.2	-	3.7	-
Employment Rate (%)	60.4	60.5	53.0	-0.1	-	7.4	-

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding

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



Unemployment in B.C. remained relatively unchanged over the month (-1.1 percentage points); yet, on a positive note, fewer people are unemployed compared to a year ago (-155,300), when the pandemic drove unemployment to one of the worst levels in 2020. Over the year, the recovery has been predominantly among those who are 25 years and over, as their employment increased by roughly 12% (+246,500).⁴

The unemployment rate for B.C. youth (15 to 24 years) worsened to 15.1% in May, an increase of 3.5 percentage points from April. The ongoing pandemic restrictions affected some young people, as the number of unemployed youth increased by 33% (+14,500) over the month.⁵ Yet, the youth unemployment rate has dropped 13.6 percentage points below what it was a year ago, as more young people joined the labour force (+62,300) and were able to find work (+97,100 employed).⁶

British Columbia Monthly Unemployment Rates, by Gender and Age

Seasonally Adjusted Data	May 2021 (%)	April 2021 (%)	May 2020 (%)	Monthly Variation	Yearly Variation
				(% points)	(% points)
Total	7.0	7.1	13.4	-0.1	-6.4
25 years and over	5.7	6.3	11.2	-0.6	-5.5
Men - 25 years and over	5.8	6.8	10.4	-1.0	-4.6
Women - 25 years and over	5.6	5.8	12.2	-0.2	-6.6
15 to 24 years	15.1	11.6	28.7	3.5	-13.6
Men - 15 to 24 years	13.0	10.9	28.5	2.1	-15.5
Women - 15 to 24 years	17.6	12.3	29.0	5.3	-11.4

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 decreased slightly (-1.3%) between April and May, with job losses predominantly in **agriculture** (-7.9%) and **manufacturing** (-2.1%). Over the month, only **utilities** saw employment increase (+3.4%).⁷ Overall employment in the goods sector continues to recover with 31,000 more workers employed than a year ago. However, the sector remains well below pre-pandemic levels (-2.3%), as 11,600 fewer people are working compared to February 2020.⁸

The **forestry** sector continues to adapt to ongoing challenges, including trade tariffs from the United States (U.S.) and a shrinking timber supply. However, lumber prices remain at record highs as demand continues to outpace supply. The U.S. is Western Canada's largest customer for dimensional lumber used in home framing construction, and demand in the U.S. remains strong because of fewer pre-owned homes on the market and increased residential improvement projects. This trend is expected to continue through the year, although lumber prices appear to have peaked.

With the ongoing Fairy Creek protests on Vancouver Island, the provincial government announced their intent to modernize their forest policy and protect old growth forests. The province aims to ensure sustainability and competition across the sector, including participation with local communities.⁹

The **construction** sector's recovery is ongoing, and is above last year's employment level (+6.0%), with nearly all subsectors recovering jobs, most notably specialty trade contractors. However, the monthly decline in employment (-0.5%) is likely due in part to the significant drop in housing starts for the month of April (-47%), particularly among multiples, including condominiums (-53%).¹⁰

Though housing demand has been high across the province, driving up sales and prices through the year, recent changes to the mortgage stress test may further curb residential construction, as buying a home has become more challenging.¹¹ Exceptionally high lumber prices continue to drive up housing prices and have caused some construction delays, as supply is unable to meet demand. Looking forward, exceptionally high housing prices and reduced buying power will likely further reduce housing starts over the summer, as fewer people will be able to buy homes.

Across the province, stimulus programs from all levels of government continue to support employment in the construction industry. For instance, several municipalities announced infrastructure upgrades that will be ongoing over the summer months. Meanwhile, the Government of British Columbia announced multimillion-dollar seismic upgrades to schools in Langley¹² and Vancouver¹³. The province has also started on the \$11.4M expansion of Sunnyside Elementary in Surrey.¹⁴

Year-over-year, B.C.'s **services** sector recovery has been strong, as employment increased by 17.3% to over 2.1M jobs. Job growth was largely due to significant gains in industries that have adapted to the ongoing health restrictions; particularly, in **accommodation and food services** (+49.3%), **information, culture and recreation** (+38.8%), and **wholesale and retail trade** (+15.9%). Meanwhile, industries such as **professional, scientific and technical services** (+16.2%) and **health care and social assistance** (+13.0%) have also grown.¹⁵

Over the month, **business, building and other support services** accounted for the largest employment decline among the Province's major industries, with roughly 5,500 jobs lost (-5.0%). The job losses were primarily among those that provide business support services, such as preparing documents and telephone call centres.

Meanwhile, employment in **education** declined by more than 4,000 jobs (-2.2%) over the month. Across the province, school divisions are facing budget shortfalls, particularly in the Lower Mainland, where school districts have lost revenue from fewer enrolled international students during the pandemic. As such, teachers and other support staff have been laid off in order to balance budgets. Looking forward, it is unclear at this time if international students will be returning for the new school year next fall.

Though the **accommodations and food services** industry remained relatively unchanged (+1.0% over the month), demand for these services remains low due to fewer international travelers, cancellation of the cruise season until February 2022, and with the continued travel restrictions at the Canada-U.S. border. Of note, the long-term outlook for coastal communities that rely on the cruise industry became a bit more uncertain, as the U.S. government passed legislation allowing cruise ships to bypass Canadian destinations between Alaska and Washington state.¹⁶ However, in the near-term, local tourism activities should improve in the coming weeks once the provincial travel restrictions are lifted.

Information, culture and recreation led employment growth in May (+12.3%). The job gains were due in part the return of filming productions across the province.¹⁷ Yet, most of the gains over the month were due to hiring in the publishing industries, including software.

Looking forward, the music industry will benefit from the recently announced 3-year \$22.5 million Amplify BC fund. The provincial funding will support BC-based artist sound recordings, live events, venues, and training programs for music industry professionals.¹⁸

British Columbia Monthly Labour Force Statistics, by Industry

Seasonally Adjusted Data ('000)	May 2021	April 2021	May 2020	Monthly Variation		Yearly Variation	
				Number	%	Number	%
Total employed, all industries	2,616.2	2,618.1	2,272.6	-1.9	-0.1	343.6	15.1
Goods-producing sector	491.0	497.6	460.0	-6.6	-1.3	31.0	6.7
Agriculture	21.1	22.9	28.8	-1.8	-7.9	-7.7	-26.7
Forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying, oil and gas	54.7	55.1	42.3	-0.4	-0.7	12.4	29.3
Utilities	21.1	20.4	19.9	0.7	3.4	1.2	6.0
Construction	217.4	218.6	205.0	-1.2	-0.5	12.4	6.0
Manufacturing	176.7	180.5	164.1	-3.8	-2.1	12.6	7.7
Services-producing sector	2,125.3	2,120.5	1,812.6	4.8	0.2	312.7	17.3
Trade	396.5	397.4	342.0	-0.9	-0.2	54.5	15.9
Transportation and warehousing	140.1	137.4	120.9	2.7	2.0	19.2	15.9
Finance, insurance, real estate and leasing	166.4	167.3	161.9	-0.9	-0.5	4.5	2.8
Professional, scientific and technical services	259.5	261.2	223.3	-1.7	-0.7	36.2	16.2
Business, building and other support services	103.9	109.4	81.6	-5.5	-5.0	22.3	27.3
Educational services	182.5	186.6	176.2	-4.1	-2.2	6.3	3.6
Health care and social assistance	348.0	351.1	308.1	-3.1	-0.9	39.9	13.0
Information, culture and recreation	129.2	115.1	93.1	14.1	12.3	36.1	38.8
Accommodation and food services	157.4	155.8	105.4	1.6	1.0	52.0	49.3
Other services	111.7	108.0	85.0	3.7	3.4	26.7	31.4
Public administration	130.1	131.2	114.9	-1.1	-0.8	15.2	13.2

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, yet employment in all the regions has increased over the last year.¹⁹ This success likely reflects the different approaches British Columbia has taken in response to the pandemic in comparison to the other provinces across western Canada. The province continues to bend the curve since implementing the most recent round of provincial restrictions.²⁰ Indeed, the province's outlook is bright, as further restrictions may be lifted in the coming weeks.

British Columbia Monthly Labour Force Statistics, by Economic Region

3-Month Moving Averages Seasonally Unadjusted Data	Employment			Unemployment Rate		
	May 2021 ('000)	May 2020 ('000)	Yearly Variation (%)	May 2021 (%)	May 2020 (%)	Yearly Variation (% points)
British Columbia	2,618.9	2,324.0	12.7	7.1	10.7	-3.6
Economic Regions						
Vancouver Island and Coast	404.8	371.3	9.0	6.6	11.1	-4.5
Lower Mainland - Southwest	1,684.6	1,458.7	15.5	7.3	10.6	-3.3
Thompson - Okanagan	276.1	271.2	1.8	7.5	9.6	-2.1
Kootenay	83.1	71.6	16.1	6.5	14.7	-8.2
Cariboo	87.0	77.5	12.3	6.5	10.7	-4.2
North Coast and Nechako	44.7	39.1	14.3	6.5	11.9	-5.4
Northeast	38.6	34.6	11.6	4.5	11.1	-6.6

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding

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

Vancouver Island and Coast's employment increased by 9.0%, and the unemployment rate improved to 6.6% down from 11.1% compared to a year ago.²¹ The ongoing provincial non-essential travel restrictions continue negatively affecting the tourism sector, as most people are not allowed to visit the Province or move between health regions until June 15th, at the earliest.²² In support of the provincial travel restrictions, BC Ferries continues to prohibit non-essential travel between the different regions, the region's tourism season will likely be subdued.²³

After about a year of downtime, the region's forestry sector will benefit from Catalyst's Powell River's Mill producing paper products again, as about 200 employees have returned to work.²⁴ Roughly, 320 employees lost their jobs at the mill last year at the height of the pandemic.²⁵

At the time of writing, protestors continue to defy a court injunction allowing logging in the Fairy Creek watershed. The RCMP have arrested more than 170 protesters for breaching the injunction or obstruction.²⁶ Teal-Cedar Products controls the logging area in question, and stated that any decision to prohibit logging old growth would cause job losses across the industry. The company reported that it has around 400 employees on Vancouver Island.²⁷

Year-over-year, the Lower Mainland – Southwest has lead the province's recovery, as employment increased by 15.5%.²⁸ The outlook for the region's construction industry should improve in the short-term with several new non-residential construction projects, including three Amazon facilities in Vancouver, Pitt Meadows, and Delta.²⁹ In addition, construction has begun on AbCellera Biologics new Vancouver campus³⁰, and the University of British Columbia's new \$23M renewable energy hub.³¹

The Vancouver Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) is benefiting from several community residential development projects, however the CMA saw a slight decline of roughly 7% in the valuation of building permits between the months of February and March.³² Looking forward, the valuation of building permits will rebound, as further condominium development projects are anticipated along SkyTrain stations in the CMA.

Meanwhile, the federal government awarded Seaspan Shipyards in North Vancouver a contract to design and build a new polar icebreaker. As part of the National Shipbuilding Strategy, the project will support 1,400 jobs at the shipyard.³³

Employment in **Thompson-Okanagan** improved by 1.8% over the year, and the unemployment rate decreased to 7.5%.³⁴ The outlook for the region's summer tourism season is looking better, as the provincial order restricting non-essential travel between regions may soon be lifted. With fewer restrictions in place, the tourism sector will likely see improved employment activity over the short-term.

Meanwhile construction activities across the region are ramping up, particularly in regards to road improvements. For instance, the city of West Kelowna approved \$35.6M in construction projects for road works and active transportation infrastructure as a part of this year's budget.³⁵ In addition, the government of BC awarded a \$32M contract for the next phase of the Trans-Canada Highway four-laning project through the Village of Chase. Construction will begin this July and is scheduled to be complete in the fall of 2023.³⁶

In the past year, employment in the **Kootenay** region recovered from the initial impact of the pandemic (16.1%), and unemployment decreased sharply by 8.2 percentage points to 6.5%.³⁷ Employment in construction will likely improve over the short-term as several road and infrastructure improvements are now underway, including the anticipated construction of a \$6.2M replacement bridge spanning the Kaslo River along Highway 31. Construction on the bridge is to be finished by the end of the year.³⁸

The outlook for the region's forestry sector is looking up. Interfor announced a \$35-million project to improve productivity at its mill in Castlegar. The company will be rebuilding and replacing their planer mill, work is expected to be complete by July 2022.³⁹

Year-over-year, employment in **Cariboo** improved by 12.3%, and the unemployment rate fell to 6.5%.⁴⁰ Construction activity will soon be ramping up across the region. Initial work has begun on improvements to Highway 97 east of Quesnel. The \$19M project will also improve traffic safety at two key intersections. Major construction is will begin this August and run until late 2022.⁴¹ In addition, Trans Mountain announced that it would be providing \$2.3M in funding for infrastructure upgrades in the Village of Valemount. The upgrades will help provide services to the nearby worker accommodations camp.⁴²

Meanwhile, the Mount Polley Mine, located about 50km northeast of Williams Lake, is looking to restart operations by September. Reopening of the copper and gold mine could add around 300 full-time jobs to the area.⁴³ Though mining and milling operations have been closed since 2019, the company has continued remediation work of the surrounding area.⁴⁴

Over the year, employment in **North Coast and Nechako** increased by 14.3%, and the unemployment rate decreased to 6.5%.⁴⁵ The region's employment outlook is expected to improve over the coming months, as the LNG Canada and Coastal GasLink projects continue to ramp up their workforces.

Aside from the ongoing mega-projects, construction has begun on a number of buildings at Coast Mountain College in Terrace. The \$35M project includes new student housing, as well as renovations to the library and academic and registration hub.⁴⁶

Compared to a year ago, employment within **Northeast** increased by 11.6%, and the unemployment rate dropped sharply to 4.5%.⁴⁷ Construction work continues on the Site C Hydroelectric project, according to most recent employment data, there were more than 4,500 workers on the Site C project in April 2021.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, construction activities in Dawson Creek and Fort St. John will be ramping up. Construction on a new \$28M bridge in Dawson Creek will begin this June⁴⁹, while the North Peace Regional Airport, located in Fort St. John, will undergo \$8.2M in runway rehabilitation work. Construction is expected to take three months to complete and will begin this July.⁵⁰

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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