



Labour Market Bulletin

British Columbia

August 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 increased by 14,400 jobs (0.5%) in August. The gains were exclusively in full-time employment (+0.8% or 16,900 jobs), offsetting slight losses in part-time employment (-0.4% or -2,400 jobs). The province's month-over-month unemployment rate was down 0.4 percentage points to 6.2% for August, still well below the national rate of 7.1%.

In the past year, recovery for most industries has been strong. Year-to-date employment has increased by 8.1% (+200,900) across the province, offsetting the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Provincial employment is now slightly above (+1.0%) the pre-pandemic level of February 2020 for the third month in a row. Also for the third consecutive month, British Columbia was the only province in Canada where employment levels were higher than they had been before the pandemic.

Relaxed public health measures and pent-up demand for regular activities seem to have had a positive effect on employment levels this summer. However, COVID-19 cases continued to increase from yearly lows, particularly in B.C.'s Interior. The Interior was the first to re-implement a mask mandate and rising cases forced the rest of the province to follow suit by the end of the month.^{1,2} For now, the rest of the province remains in Step 3 of its Restart plan, with the criteria to move into Step 4 not yet met.³

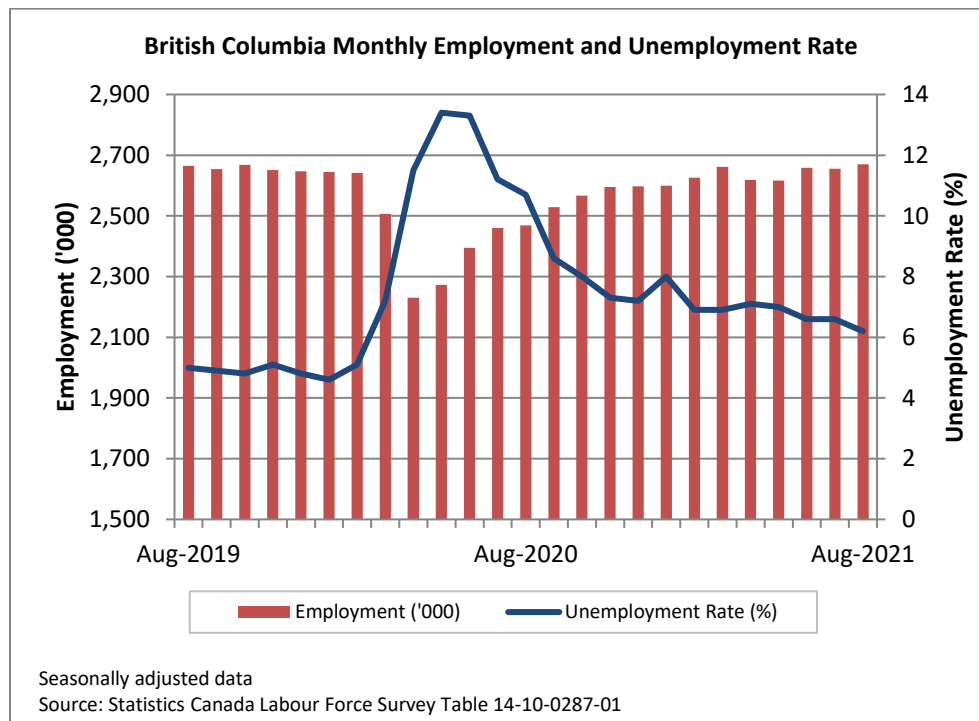
Meanwhile, B.C.'s wildfire season has been fierce this year. The province issued a state of emergency on July 20th that lasted through to September 14th. This season was one of the worst on record, with 1,585 fires having burned 8,686 square kilometers. Only the 2018 and 2017 wildfire seasons were worse. During the most intense wildfire period, 3,631 workers from across Canada, Australia, and Mexico were fighting fires.⁴ Sadly, the White Rock Lake wildfire destroyed the community of Monte Lake in early August.⁵

British Columbia Monthly Labour Force Statistics

Seasonally Adjusted Monthly Data	August 2021	July 2021	August 2020	Monthly Variation		Yearly Variation	
				Number	%	Number	%
Population 15 + ('000)	4,357.6	4,347.4	4,306.9	10.2	0.2	50.7	1.2
Labour Force ('000)	2,845.5	2,843.3	2,765.9	2.2	0.1	79.6	2.9
Employment ('000)	2,669.6	2,655.2	2,468.7	14.4	0.5	200.9	8.1
Full-Time ('000)	2,074.7	2,057.8	1,920.3	16.9	0.8	154.4	8.0
Part-Time ('000)	594.9	597.3	548.4	-2.4	-0.4	46.5	8.5
Unemployment ('000)	175.9	188.1	297.2	-12.2	-6.5	-121.3	-40.8
Unemployment Rate (%)	6.2	6.6	10.7	-0.4	-	-4.5	-
Participation Rate (%)	65.3	65.4	64.2	-0.1	-	1.1	-
Employment Rate (%)	61.3	61.1	57.3	0.2	-	4.0	-

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. edged lower over the month to 6.2%, 0.9 percentage points below the national average, and second lowest in the West behind only Manitoba. As with the province as a whole, employment for youth aged 15 to 24 has recovered beyond pre-pandemic levels. Youth employment rose from February 2020 levels by roughly 3.4% (+11,700) vs. the 25 and older demographic at 0.7% (+16,600).

The unemployment rate for B.C. youth (15 to 24 years) worsened to 10.7%, an increase of 0.2 percentage points from July. The unemployment rate for young women (9.8%) decreased over the month (from 11.8%), meaning that the increasing youth unemployment rate was due entirely to an increase in the unemployment rate among young men (increasing 2.4 percentage points). Indeed, the lingering impact of the pandemic continues to affect some young people; yet compared to a year ago, the youth unemployment rate has dropped 11.9 percentage points to 10.7%.

British Columbia Monthly Unemployment Rates, by Gender and Age

Seasonally Adjusted Data	August 2021 (%)	July 2021 (%)	August 2020 (%)	Monthly Variation (% points)	Yearly Variation (% points)
Total	6.2	6.6	10.7	-0.4	-4.5
25 years and over	5.4	6.0	8.8	-0.6	-3.4
Men - 25 years and over	5.6	6.4	9.1	-0.8	-3.5
Women - 25 years and over	5.2	5.5	8.5	-0.3	-3.3
15 to 24 years	10.7	10.5	22.6	0.2	-11.9
Men - 15 to 24 years	11.6	9.2	24.7	2.4	-13.1
Women - 15 to 24 years	9.8	11.8	20.1	-2.0	-10.3

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

Employment in the province's goods producing sector increased 5.3% between July and August, with job gains in **manufacturing** (+10.1%), and **construction** (+3.7%). Over the month, employment decreased in both **utilities** (-2.7%) and **agriculture** (-5.0%). Year-over-year employment in the sector did not increase (-0.9%) for the first time since February, and the sector remains below pre-pandemic levels (-3.1%), with 15,700 fewer people working compared to February 2020.⁶

The **forestry** sector continued to adapt to ongoing challenges, including wildfires, trade tariffs from the United States (U.S.) and a shrinking timber supply. Recently, lumber prices declined as the supply of milled wood increased and demand eased, although prices seemed to have hit a floor as suppliers who had been waiting for the bottom of the market started buying as the month closed.⁷

In response to the aforementioned challenges, West Fraser Timber⁸, Canfor⁹, and Interfor¹⁰ announced in July that they would be curtailing production at their mills. Conifex followed suit with a two-week curtailment at the Mackenzie sawmill in August.¹¹ Canfor provided an update in August that all but one of its B.C. sawmills would run at 80% capacity beginning August 30.¹² As lumber production is closely tied to the U.S. housing market, an increase in construction permits in the U.S. allows for some optimism in the sector. However, ongoing price volatility and changing weather will still affect the market moving through the end of the year.¹³

Wildfires, drought, and bouts of extreme heat all contributed to stunted employment in the **agriculture** industry. Indeed, employment in the industry was down 45% (-15,700) year-over-year. Volatile weather conditions exposed some of the vulnerabilities of the sector. For instance, temperatures of 41.5 Celsius and above in the Okanagan region caused cherries to cook on the trees, and sunburns to apple crops.¹⁴ Ranchers in the province were offered some relief through the AgriRecovery fund for cattle relocated by wildfires, and a Wildfire Emergency Feed Program for commercial livestock businesses affected by drought.¹⁵

The **construction** sector's recovery is ongoing, as employment increased for the month of August, yet remains below last year's employment level (-2.0%). Employment in many subsectors had declined, though the residential building and engineering construction subsectors drove employment through the summer months. Although housing demand has been high across the province, driving up sales and prices through the year, the market may cool in the second half of the year as it appears pandemic-driven demand may have mostly settled down.¹⁶

Following an outbreak of COVID-19 at the Site C dam, B.C. Hydro announced that the approximately 5000 workers would require vaccination, vaccination exemption, or negative COVID-test to return to their jobs. Other B.C. Hydro worksites will follow provincial guidelines, which do not currently require that workers to be vaccinated.¹⁷

Year-over-year, B.C.'s **services** sector recovery has been strong, as employment increased by 10.4% to nearly 2.2M jobs. The recovery was largely due to significant gains in industries that were able to adapt to changing work environments, or trade heavily in providing in-person services; particularly, in **business, building and other support services** (+18.4%), **professional, scientific and technical services** (+14.5%), and **information, culture and recreation** (+29.9%). Meanwhile, **health care and social assistance** (+16.3%) has also grown.¹⁸

Employment in the **accommodation and food services** industry increased by 4.0% in August, reaching its highest level this year. The Canada/U.S. border opened for fully vaccinated Americans in August¹⁹, and may have helped employment in this industry. However, the recent introduction of vaccine passports requiring all patrons of restaurants and bars to be vaccinated, combined with rising cases of COVID-19, mean that the industry faces an uncertainty in the months ahead. In the meantime, restaurants continue to open in Vancouver, and large chains announce new locations, such as six new Chipotle locations to be opened by the end of the year.^{20,21}

The Delta variant continues to threaten the tourism industry, as seen in the Central Okanagan in August. Rising cases led to implementation of a new set of public health measures. The number of overnight visitors to the area dropped 20% for the week of August 1 to 8 compared to 2019 as the provincial government advised against travel to the area due to wildfires. Tourism activity in the rest of the province increased compared to pre-pandemic levels.²²

Healthcare and social assistance is beginning to show the effects of the pandemic as the fourth wave began in August. While the number of workers increased over the month (+2.7%) and year (+16.3%), many employees have reported burnout and fatigue from the long hours and extra demands of providing care in a pandemic. Emergency departments and health clinics across the province have been forced to permanently or temporarily close due to staff shortages among nurses and physicians.^{23,24} The combined pressures of increasing cases of COVID-19 and surrounding wildfires were reported to have caused a number of emergency room nurses in Kamloops to leave their jobs.²⁵ Across the health sector, cleaners, lab assistants, pharmacy assistants, and medical imaging technologists are all dealing with shortages.²⁶

British Columbia Monthly Labour Force Statistics, by Industry

Seasonally Adjusted Data ('000)	August 2021	July 2021	August 2020	Monthly Variation		Yearly Variation	
				Number	%	Number	%
Total employed, all industries	2,669.6	2,655.2	2,468.7	14.4	0.5	200.9	8.1
Goods-producing sector	486.9	462.5	491.5	24.4	5.3	-4.6	-0.9
Agriculture	18.9	19.9	34.6	-1.0	-5.0	-15.7	-45.4
Forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying, oil and gas	50.2	48.7	45.4	1.5	3.1	4.8	10.6
Utilities	18.1	18.6	22.2	-0.5	-2.7	-4.1	-18.5
Construction	219.5	211.6	223.9	7.9	3.7	-4.4	-2.0
Manufacturing	180.3	163.7	165.6	16.6	10.1	14.7	8.9
Services-producing sector	2,182.7	2,192.7	1,977.2	-10.0	-0.5	205.5	10.4
Trade	403.6	398.7	372.8	4.9	1.2	30.8	8.3
Transportation and warehousing	139.7	139.2	134.4	0.5	0.4	5.3	3.9
Finance, insurance, real estate and leasing	169.9	172.7	160.7	-2.8	-1.6	9.2	5.7
Professional, scientific and technical services	258.2	264.9	225.6	-6.7	-2.5	32.6	14.5
Business, building and other support services	105.4	114.7	89.0	-9.3	-8.1	16.4	18.4
Educational services	177.0	187.9	165.3	-10.9	-5.8	11.7	7.1
Health care and social assistance	376.2	366.3	323.5	9.9	2.7	52.7	16.3
Information, culture and recreation	126.4	120.7	97.3	5.7	4.7	29.1	29.9
Accommodation and food services	184.9	177.8	185.1	7.1	4.0	-0.2	-0.1
Other services	108.8	115.2	105.4	-6.4	-5.6	3.4	3.2
Public administration	132.5	134.6	118.0	-2.1	-1.6	14.5	12.3

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 unemployment rate declined in every region compared to August 2020. Employment numbers also rose in each region, except for the **Kootenays** (-2.0%) and **Northeast** (-4.0%). The drop in the unemployment rate observed in these two regions was therefore entirely due to people leaving the labour force. The **Lower Mainland – Southwest** region had the highest employment gains compared to August 2020 at 12.8%.²⁷ Though restrictions have eased over the past few months, the province's outlook remains uncertain as the number of COVID-19 cases continues to rise, with the more transmissible Delta variant driving a potential fourth wave. Rising cases have meant that plans to advance to the final phase of BC's reopening plan will be delayed, and, as the **Thompson - Okanagan** region has already experienced, some restrictions may be re-implemented if there is a need.

British Columbia Monthly Labour Force Statistics, by Economic Region

3-Month Moving Averages Seasonally Unadjusted Data	Employment			Unemployment Rate		
	August 2021 ('000)	August 2020 ('000)	Yearly Variation (%)	August 2021 (%)	August 2020 (%)	Yearly Variation (% points)
British Columbia	2,692.6	2,469.8	9.0	6.7	11.7	-5.0
Economic Regions						
Vancouver Island and Coast	417.9	405.8	3.0	5.1	10.6	-5.5
Lower Mainland - Southwest	1,727.5	1,531.0	12.8	7.3	12.5	-5.2
Thompson - Okanagan	302.0	290.6	3.9	5.4	10.0	-4.6
Kootenay	79.9	81.5	-2.0	6.7	11.5	-4.8
Cariboo	86.8	83.2	4.3	6.2	10.6	-4.4
North Coast and Nechako	42.4	40.3	5.2	8.8	12.2	-3.4
Northeast	35.9	37.4	-4.0	4.8	7.0	-2.2

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 3.0%, and the unemployment rate improved to 5.1%, down from a 10.6% unemployment rate a year ago. The region's tourism sector got a boost in August, as many British Columbians re-booked their plans to avoid re-instated health restrictions and wildfires in other regions of the province. However, businesses in accommodation and food services faced staff shortages. For example, tourism operators in Tofino had lost some employees to other industries. This, combined with a lack of international workers, meant that some businesses were forced to modify their hours or offer signing bonuses to attract staff.²⁸

Looking ahead, the region's construction industry will be busy, as the Province announced \$42.9M to replace the Cedar Mill Middle school in Victoria, and the City of Campbell River approved a \$15.5M developmental permit for a new regional compost facility.²⁹

Year-over-year, the **Lower Mainland – Southwest** continues to lead the province's recovery, as employment increased by 12.8%. Air Canada³⁰ and Air Transat³¹ resumed some domestic and international flights in anticipation of a return to normalcy when international travellers who are fully vaccinated are permitted into the country in September. Accommodation and food service venues have been opening across the region, and winter tourist destinations such as Whistler anticipate a busy season.³² Many in the tourism industry rely on foreign workers that will be in short supply this year; therefore, operators expect labour shortages in tourism-related industries to persist.³³ Eased restrictions, more travellers, and the return of cruise ships give tourism operators reason for optimism over the winter months. Indeed, Transport Canada will end the prohibition on cruise ships in Canadian waters on November 1, clearing the way for the first full cruise ship season since the pandemic began.³⁴ Prior to the pandemic, the Port of Vancouver welcomed nearly 520,000 visitors during the 2019 cruise season.³⁵

Construction activity will also pick up in Metro Vancouver, particularly on several public transit projects including the \$2.8B Broadway Subway project, upgrades to the SkyTrain SkyBridge between New Westminster and Surrey³⁶, and the much-anticipated Surrey Langley SkyTrain extension project.³⁷

Employment in **Thompson-Okanagan** improved by 3.9% over the year, and the unemployment rate decreased to 5.4%. The outlook for the region's summer tourism season took a drastic turn for the worse as wildfires and smoke raged across the region. Wineries in the Okanagan Valley suffered financially from the surrounding wildfires, with some tourists forced to evacuate, while others cancelled future visits.³⁸ Unfortunately, there was also a surge of COVID-19 cases leading to additional restrictions for several communities within the region.³⁹ The Government of British Columbia officially requested that residents avoid non-essential travel to the area.⁴⁰

Year-over-year, employment in **Cariboo** improved by 4.3%, and the unemployment rate fell to 6.2%. As mentioned above, B.C.'s wildfire situation has led several forest companies to curtail production at their mills, which may have an impact on employment across the region in the coming months. Despite the risk of the wildfires, several road and bridge projects got underway in August, which will bolster construction jobs in the area.⁴¹

Meanwhile, the Province of British Columbia has approved an early works permit for the Blackwater Project, a mining operation located to the west of Prince George. Site preparation and land clearing for the mine may now begin. The project is expected to create more than 450 jobs over the 23-year operating life of the mine, with roughly 825 jobs during the construction and expansion phases.⁴²

Over the year, employment in **North Coast and Nechako** increased by 5.2%, and the unemployment rate decreased to 8.8% from 12.2% in August last year. The region's employment outlook may improve over the coming months as construction has begun on the new \$622.6M Mills Memorial Hospital in Terrace. The hospital will feature 78 beds and is expected to open in 2025.⁴³

Meanwhile, Pacific Northern Gas has been granted approval to begin its nearly three-year long maintenance project on a section of the Western Transmission Gas Line between Terrace and Prince Rupert. Work is expected to begin this year, with a completion date in 2023. More than 250 jobs are expected to be created over the duration of the project.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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