



Labour Market Bulletin

British Columbia

December 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 proved resilient to ongoing pressures over the fourth quarter, specifically unprecedented devastation from extensive rains and floods. Indeed, employment in British Columbia (B.C.) increased by 1.0% over the quarter, and +4.2% compared to a year earlier. Employment growth over the quarter was led by full-time employment (+2.3% or 46,900 jobs), offsetting part-time employment losses (3.4% or 20,300 jobs). The province's unemployment rate improved to 5.5% (-0.7 percentage points) from the previous quarter. However, concerns remain over the province's economy in the short term, particularly as the province re-imposed strict restrictions in December to combat the surging number of COVID-19 cases associated with the new Omicron variant.

Looking forward, the new wave of COVID-19 cases and ongoing recovery efforts from extensive rain and flooding across southwestern B.C. has created further challenges for many industries. As of early January, the province's COVID-19 restrictions were in place until January 18, 2022¹, and the state of emergency is in place until January 18, 2022².

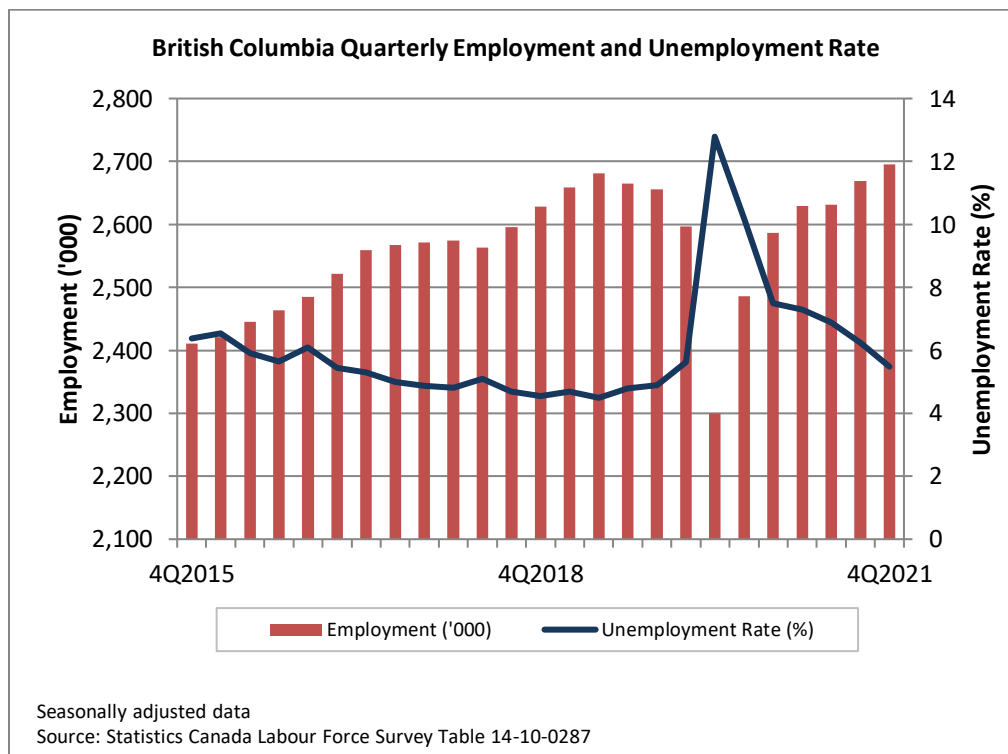
To support businesses affected by the strict COVID-19 restrictions, the province is making a one-time grant of up to \$10,000 available to ease some of the financial pressures.³ In addition, the province is once again expanding its vaccination program to deliver booster shots.

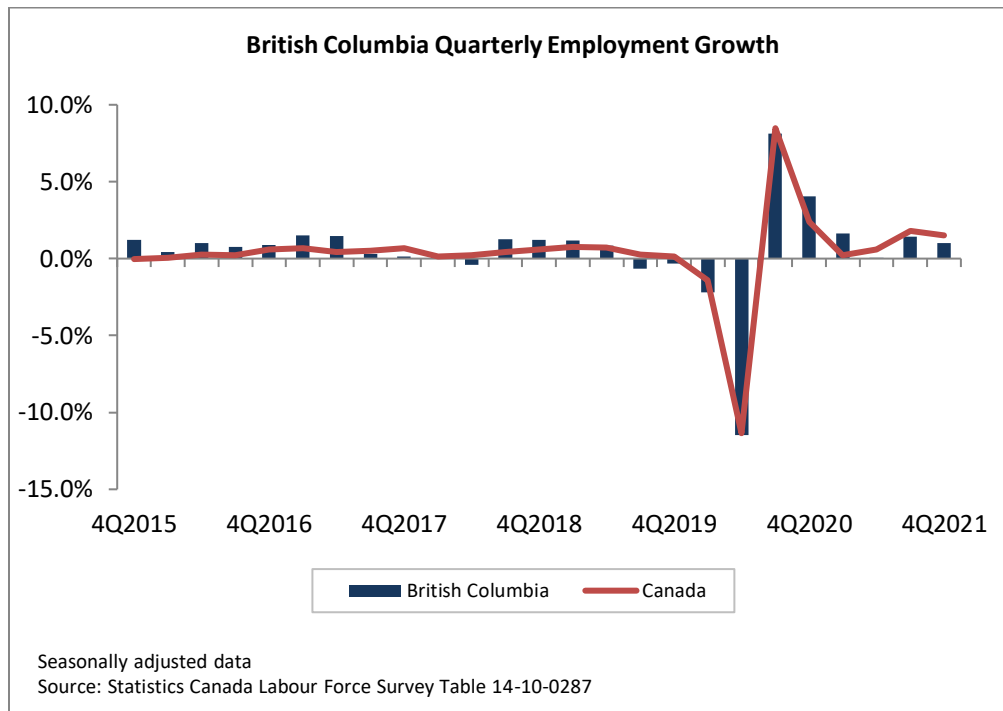
British Columbia Quarterly Labour Force Statistics

Seasonally adjusted data	4th Quarter 2021	3rd Quarter 2021	4th Quarter 2020	Quarterly Variation		Yearly Variation	
				Number	%	Number	%
Population 15 + ('000)	4,383.6	4,357.4	4,317.1	26.2	0.6	66.5	1.5
Labour Force ('000)	2,852.0	2,846.4	2,796.1	5.6	0.2	55.9	2.0
Employment ('000)	2,695.5	2,668.9	2,586.3	26.6	1.0	109.2	4.2
Full-Time ('000)	2,114.9	2,068.0	2,013.6	46.9	2.3	101.3	5.0
Part-Time ('000)	580.6	600.9	572.8	-20.3	-3.4	7.8	1.4
Unemployment ('000)	156.5	177.5	209.8	-21.0	-11.8	-53.3	-25.4
Unemployment Rate (%)	5.5	6.2	7.5	-0.7	-	-2.0	-
Participation Rate (%)	65.1	65.3	64.8	-0.2	-	0.3	-
Employment Rate (%)	61.5	61.2	59.9	0.3	-	1.6	-

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding

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





While the unemployment rate in B.C. improved greatly over the quarter, it was still the second lowest in the west, behind only Manitoba (5.2%). Unfortunately, B.C.'s youth (15 to 24 years) unemployment rate increased by 1.2 percentage points to 11.8%. Over the quarter, the number of youth in the labour force remained relatively unchanged (+600), whereas more youth became unemployed (+5,300).⁴

However, employment for youth in December 2021 remained above pre-pandemic levels, up 1.6% (+5,700) from February 2020.⁵ In comparison, employment for workers 25 years and older increased by roughly 2.2% (50,400) since February 2020.

British Columbia Quarterly Unemployment Rates, by Gender and Age

Seasonally adjusted data	4th Quarter 2021 (%)	3rd Quarter 2021 (%)	4th Quarter 2020 (%)	Quarterly Variation (% points)	Yearly Variation (% points)
Total	5.5	6.2	7.5	-0.7	-2.0
25 years and over	4.5	5.5	6.4	-1.0	-1.9
Men - 25 years and over	4.8	5.7	6.8	-0.9	-2.0
Women - 25 years and over	4.1	5.4	5.9	-1.3	-1.8
15 to 24 years	11.8	10.6	14.8	1.2	-3.0
Men - 15 to 24 years	15.0	10.6	16.7	4.4	-1.7
Women - 15 to 24 years	8.5	10.5	12.7	-2.0	-4.2

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 was stable during the fourth quarter of 2021 (+1.8%). However, there were significant job losses in **utilities** (-16.3%) and **forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying, oil and gas industry** (-9.4%). Those job losses were offset by gains in **agriculture** (+21.7%) and **manufacturing** (+7.9%). Overall employment in the goods sector declined slightly over the year (-1.1%).⁶

Despite the employment growth in **agriculture**, severe rain and flooding devastated most of the province's industry, particularly in the Fraser Valley in November. Crop production in the Fraser Valley will likely be hampered in the short to medium-term, as fields will need to be tested for contamination and, if needed, remediated before being replanted. Due to the contaminated floodwaters, perennials such as flower bulbs and rhubarb could take longer to re-establish themselves.⁷

Employment in the **construction** industry declined slightly (-0.9%) over the quarter, and remained comparable to last year's employment level.⁸ Compared to a year ago, November's new housing starts were down significantly (-22%).⁹ However, the outlook for the sector looks promising, particularly as the number of building permits for November increased slightly compared to a year ago (+6.8%). Over the 12-month period, the value of permits was up significantly (+44.4%), based on strength in residential construction (+80.4%).¹⁰

Following November's floods and rains, significant infrastructure repairs were quickly completed across southwestern B.C. However, some repairs and emergency work may be delayed due to the recent colder weather. With such an immediate need, there will be a demand for skilled and experienced workers to help rebuild the flooded communities. The job market for construction workers will likely be competitive in the short and medium-terms, especially when factoring in the continuing need for workers at major energy projects across the province.

The province's **mining** sector is also facing an uncertain future, as the Gitxaala First Nation filed a B.C. Supreme Court challenge in October on how mineral rights are granted in the province. The First Nation is arguing that the current process does not require the provincial government to consult with First Nations and that claims are granted automatically to applicants. The First Nation is also asking the court to cancel seven claims on Banks Island and to suspend claim staking within their territory.¹¹

The **forestry** sector remains a key economic driver in many B.C. interior, coastal, and northern communities. Recent flooding affected lumber deliveries across most of southwestern B.C., and temporarily reduced production at some mills across the province. West Fraser¹² and Canfor Pulp¹³ temporarily curtailed several operations across the province due to supply chain issues worsened by the November rains and floods. Fortunately, supply chain issues are improving and should soon return to normal. Lumber prices surged in December due to the ongoing supply chain issues and higher demand from U.S., and may continue to rise into early 2022.¹⁴

Meanwhile, uncertainty looms over the forestry sector. The U.S. roughly doubled its combined anti-dumping and countervailing duties on Canadian softwood to 17.9%. In response, the Government of Canada is pursuing legal action against the U.S under the Canada, U.S.A, Mexico Agreement.¹⁵ The increase in duties is detrimental to

B.C.'s forestry sector, as the U.S. is western Canada's largest customer for dimensional lumber used in home framing construction. In addition to trade issues, the province continues to move forward with its old-growth deferral policy. If implemented, the deferrals would affect harvesting within an estimated 2.6 million hectares of the most at-risk old growth forests. Reactions to the announcement from industry stakeholders have been mixed, but employers across the sector have warned that permanent deferrals could have significant job impacts.¹⁶

Employment in the province's overall service sector was stable over the fourth quarter of 2021 (+0.8%). Year-over-year, B.C.'s **services** sector employment increased by 5.5% to over 2.2M jobs. Compared to a year ago, job growth occurred in almost all industries in the sector, particularly in **public administration** (+12.0%), healthcare and social assistance (+11.8%), and **information, culture and recreation** (+10.8%). The lingering impacts of the pandemic continued to affect employment in **accommodation and food services** (-5.0%) and **business, building and other support services** (-3.3%).¹⁷

On a quarterly basis, **accommodation and food services** employment decreased by 3.1% as the fifth wave of the pandemic prompted the return of strict public health measures. One of the main strategies to deal with the fifth wave is reducing seating capacity at events to 50% and prohibiting indoor organized events.¹⁸ Regretfully, some restaurants are reportedly either closing permanently due to the ongoing financial challenges, or temporarily due to the surge in COVID-19 cases among staff.

The long-term outlook for the industry is uncertain, especially as many businesses in the industry have reported staffing shortages. According to most recent data, there were 33,045 vacancies in the industry for the third quarter of 2021, an increase of nearly 82% from three months prior.¹⁹ Indeed, some employers continue to report challenges in hiring workers laid off earlier during the pandemic. For instance, the labour shortage is already having an impact on the ability of the province's ski resorts to hire international seasonal workers, as the pandemic has made it more challenging for workers to enter Canada.

For now, some businesses continue to limit operating hours or capacity, even as demand returned early in the fourth quarter. Because of the ongoing uncertainty, fewer people are returning to the industry as some have found more stable and secure employment elsewhere. As these shortages continue, the recovery for this industry will lag behind others.²⁰

Despite employment increasing only slightly over the quarter (+1.7%), the demand for labour across the **transportation and warehousing** sector is likely to remain strong, especially as supply chains remain strained. The recent rains, floods, and landslides damaged essential transportation corridors across the province and temporarily affected numerous supply chains.²¹ Rail routes to the Port of Vancouver were running with limited capacity at the tail end of the quarter. Fortunately, the Port of Prince Rupert provided partial relief to alleviate some of the growing backlog of goods.

Looking forward, the sector may be in for another shock as thousands of truckers who cross the Canada-U.S. border will no longer be exempt from COVID-19 vaccinations. Effective January 15, 2022 the Government of Canada will require all cross-border truckers to be fully vaccinated.²² At this time, it is unclear what the impact will be on cross-border supply chains.

The quarter was challenging for workers across the **healthcare and social assistance** industry, as many report being overworked, stressed out, and even harassed by people against mask and vaccine mandates. In response to the harassment, the province passed new legislation to protect essential workers at schools and healthcare facilities.²³

Though employment increased over the quarter (+2.3%), the pandemic is straining B.C.'s health system to the point that the province is considering to allow COVID-19 positive healthcare workers to continue working in some capacity.²⁴

Looking forward, social assistance services for some First Nations people in B.C. should improve in the long term, as the federal government is expected to invest roughly \$20B over the next five years to reform the First Nations Child and Family Services program. The funding is part of the Government of Canada's recently announced \$40B agreement-in-principle to compensate people harmed by discriminatory underfunding of First Nations Child and Family Services.²⁵

British Columbia Quarterly Labour Force Statistics, by Industry

Seasonally adjusted data ('000)	4th Quarter 2021	3rd Quarter 2021	4th Quarter 2020	Quarterly Variation		Yearly Variation	
				Number	%	Number	%
Total employed, all industries	2,695.5	2,668.9	2,586.3	26.6	1.0	109.2	4.2
Goods-producing sector	487.1	478.3	492.3	8.8	1.8	-5.2	-1.1
Agriculture	24.1	19.8	32.6	4.3	21.7	-8.5	-26.1
Forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying, oil and gas	45.5	50.2	49.7	-4.7	-9.4	-4.2	-8.5
Utilities	14.4	17.2	19.3	-2.8	-16.3	-4.9	-25.4
Construction	213.8	215.8	213.9	-2.0	-0.9	-0.1	0.0
Manufacturing	189.4	175.5	176.8	13.9	7.9	12.6	7.1
Services-producing sector	2,208.4	2,190.6	2,094.0	17.8	0.8	114.4	5.5
Trade	420.6	400.8	384.7	19.8	4.9	35.9	9.3
Transportation and warehousing	142.0	139.6	135.9	2.4	1.7	6.1	4.5
Finance, insurance, real estate and leasing	165.8	171.3	164.5	-5.5	-3.2	1.3	0.8
Professional, scientific and technical services	245.6	259.5	237.2	-13.9	-5.4	8.4	3.5
Business, building and other support services	104.1	110.0	107.6	-5.9	-5.4	-3.5	-3.3
Educational services	194.4	186.4	189.0	8.0	4.3	5.4	2.9
Health care and social assistance	376.9	368.3	337.1	8.6	2.3	39.8	11.8
Information, culture and recreation	132.6	125.3	120.4	7.3	5.8	12.2	10.1
Accommodation and food services	176.1	181.8	185.3	-5.7	-3.1	-9.2	-5.0
Other services	107.2	111.0	104.7	-3.8	-3.4	2.5	2.4
Public administration	143.0	136.5	127.7	6.5	4.8	15.3	12.0

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 continued to ease until early December, as employment in most regions increased over the last year, with the exception of **Kootenays** (-4.6%) and **Northeast** (-6.6%). Compared to the fourth quarter of 2020, the unemployment rate declined in all but one region, **North Coast and Nechako** (+0.6 percentage points).

The labour market will likely be negatively impacted in the weeks ahead, as provincial COVID-19 daily cases have reached new levels. It is unclear what effect the Omicron variant will have; but already the Provincial Health Officer has advised employers to plan ahead, for as much as one-third of their workforce may be sick and required to stay home.²⁶

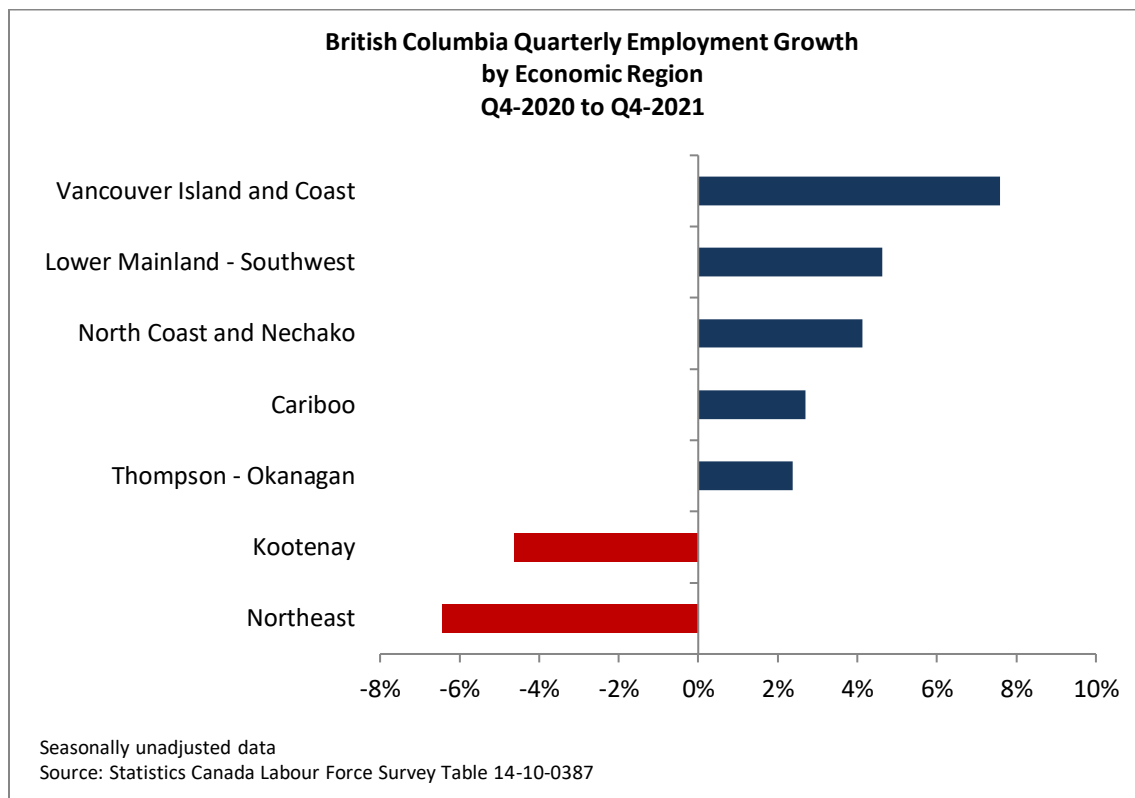
Please be aware that the statistics for the economic regions are not seasonally adjusted and should only be compared on a year-over-year basis. Employment is sometimes influenced by seasonal and calendar effects occurring at the same time and with the same magnitude every year, which can bring about changes in the data that make monthly comparisons difficult.

British Columbia Quarterly Labour Force Statistics, by Economic Region

Seasonally unadjusted data	Employment			Unemployment Rate		
	4th Quarter 2021 ('000)	4th Quarter 2020 ('000)	Yearly Variation (%)	4th Quarter 2021 (%)	4th Quarter 2020 (%)	Yearly Variation (% points)
British Columbia	2,696.1	2,584.9	4.3	5.2	7.2	-2.0
Economic Regions						
Vancouver Island and Coast	432.4	401.9	7.6	4.5	7.2	-2.7
Lower Mainland - Southwest	1,719.7	1,643.6	4.6	5.5	7.1	-1.6
Thompson - Okanagan	301.9	294.9	2.4	4.6	7.7	-3.1
Kootenay	74.0	77.6	-4.6	6.0	6.6	-0.6
Cariboo	87.5	85.2	2.7	4.5	9.4	-4.9
North Coast and Nechako	42.9	41.2	4.1	6.1	5.5	0.6
Northeast	37.8	40.4	-6.4	0.0	4.3	-4.3

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 economic recovery from the pandemic is ongoing. Employment improved by 7.6% compared to one-year ago, and the unemployment rate was 4.5%, down 2.7 percentage points from 7.2%.²⁷ However, the outlook for the region's forestry sector remains precarious. Protests continued at the Fairy Creek logging site,²⁸ and the province continued to engage with First Nation rights and title holders regarding the future of old-growth forest management.²⁹ In addition, Paper Excellence laid off over 200 employees after announcing on December 1st the indefinite curtailment of its Catalyst Paper tiskwat mill in Powell River. The company stated that it would offer its workers relocation or secondment opportunities at other facilities where possible.³⁰

Looking forward, the region's tourism sector is expected to improve greatly by the spring. According to the Greater Victoria Harbour Authority's draft 2022 cruise schedule, roughly 350 cruise ships are expected to return during the 2022 cruise season.³¹ Meanwhile, the region's construction sector should be steady, as construction has begun on expanding the emergency department at the West Coast General Hospital in Port Alberni. The \$6.25M expansion is expected to be complete in December 2022.³² In addition, a mixed commercial and residential rental development in Courtenay is now underway³³, and the City of Victoria approved a few projects for development, including a new tower that would include 20-storey hotel as well as commercial and office spaces.³⁴

The region's fishing sector continues to face strong headwinds. Already, most commercial fisheries for Pacific herring are closed for the season in order to support at-risk salmon stocks.³⁵ This comes months after the Department of Fisheries and Oceans shut down of many commercial salmon fisheries along the coast earlier this year.³⁶

The province's recovery rests largely in the **Lower Mainland – Southwest**. Year-over-year, the region led the province in job growth, adding 76,100 jobs (+4.6%).³⁷ As mentioned above, the region, particularly in the Fraser Valley, is recovering from extensive flooding and it will take time for communities, businesses, and farmers to rebuild. The short-term outlook for the region's tourism sector is unlikely to improve due to several challenges, including COVID-19 requirements for international travelers, a worker shortage in the food and accommodations sector, and ongoing barriers to attracting foreign seasonal workers.

The region's residential construction outlook remained positive as housing demand was relatively strong with a lack of housing supply driving up prices. Across Metro Vancouver, several high-rise housing projects are either now approved or under construction near several SkyTrain stations. In addition, the City of Port Moody approved plans for the redevelopment of Woodland Park. The project will include construction of more than 2,000 homes over the next 15 years.³⁸

Meanwhile, construction continued on several major projects across the region, including the Broadway SkyTrain extension in Vancouver³⁹, expansion of Electronic Arts' Burnaby offices⁴⁰, and a new sanitary sewer pump station has begun in Delta⁴¹.

Employment in **Thompson-Okanagan** increased by 2.4% over the year and the unemployment rate decreased by 3.1 percentage points to 4.6%.⁴² Overshadowing the region's recovery, the November rains hit the region hard, and flooding destroyed much of the city of Merritt and surrounding area. Evacuees can now return home; however, the city deemed 366 homes unliveable.⁴³ In addition, the rains damaged sections of some major highways and many were closed temporarily. Multi-million dollar highway reconstruction projects should begin soon.⁴⁴

The heavy rains also affected the region's dairy farmers, as they had to dump milk due to transportation disruptions between the Okanagan and the Lower Mainland. Much of the province's milk processing facilities are located in the Lower Mainland.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, conditions within the region's health care and social services industry are likely to worsen in the short-term as some health care workers failed to follow the provincial vaccination mandate. According to a media report, more than 900 health care workers were unvaccinated by the October 26, 2021 deadline.⁴⁶ Indeed, health care services were already showing further signs of stress, as some remote Emergency Rooms were closed temporarily due to staffing shortages.⁴⁷

Employment in the **Kootenay** region declined 4.6% over the year, and the unemployment rate dropped by 0.6 percentage points to 6.0%.⁴⁸ Looking forward, construction activity in the region should be steady as the Columbia Basin Trust secured \$7.6M in funding to expand its regional fibre optic network between Fruitvale and Nelson and between Kimberley and Wasa. Pre-construction work was expected to begin soon, and the project is set to finish by March 2024.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Selkirk College plans construction of two new student accommodation buildings: a 112-bed building in Castlegar and a 36-bed building in Nelson. Construction on the two buildings is expected to be complete by summer of 2023.⁵⁰

Parents in Nelson will benefit from the newly opened licensed 24-space childcare facility on Selkirk College's Silver King Campus.⁵¹ Whereas, those in Castlegar will soon have access to a new 20-space childcare facility.⁵² The new facilities will help alleviate childcare challenges for some parents.

Healthcare services have improved in Cranbrook, as a new urgent and primary care centre opened on December 8. The centre employs approximately 15 full-time equivalent (FTE) health-care providers. By April 2022, the centre plans to employ a full staff of approximately 28 FTE health-care providers.⁵³

Over the year, employment in **North Coast and Nechako** increased by 4.1% (+1,700) to 42,900 workers, and the unemployment rate increased slightly to 6.1%.⁵⁴ Construction has resumed on the Coastal GasLink natural gas pipeline after protestors abandoned another illegal blockade that began in late December.⁵⁵ The second blockade came a month after the RCMP enforced the removal of illegal blockades and protestors from the right of way around the Morice River.⁵⁶ The first blockade stranded more than 500 pipeline workers at two remote work camps.⁵⁷ The pipeline has provincial approval, and 20 First Nations have signed agreements in support of the project.

Compared to a year ago, employment within **Northeast** decreased by 6.4% to 37,800.⁵⁸ Looking forward, the Site C construction project may encounter a labour shortage in the coming months as BC Hydro announced a requirement for consultants and employees of contractors and sub-contractors to be fully vaccinated by January 10, 2022. Under previous requirements, more than 6,000 BC Hydro employees throughout B.C. were required to be fully vaccinated by November 22, 2021.⁵⁹ According to the most recent employment data, there were more than 4,600 workers on the Site C construction site in October.⁶⁰

The Province of British Columbia and Blueberry River First Nations reached an initial multi-million dollar agreement in October 2021. The Province agreed to compensate the First Nations for failure to consult on natural resource extraction projects. This agreement may have a significant impact on natural resource extraction activity within the region.⁶¹ As part of the agreement, nearly 200 forestry and oil and gas projects will continue, whereas twenty currently approved projects will not proceed without further negotiation and agreement from Blueberry River First Nations.⁶²

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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