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Analysis in Brief

Workforce insights: Demographics in the food services and drinking places subsector, 2017 to 2023

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Businesses in the food services and drinking places subsector are directly influenced by economic conditions, seasonal factors and household discretionary spending. This subsector plays a significant role in the Canadian economy, enriches Canadian culture and has a substantial presence in the Canadian labour market. It has historically been a vital source of entry-level employment, offering flexible work schedules and seasonal opportunities, making it a critical segment of the labour market.

This paper, part of a broader series on employment trends across service industries,¹ explores the financial trends and demographic characteristics of employees in the Canadian food services and drinking places subsector. In recent years, this subsector has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, rising operational costs and changing consumer behaviours.

This paper leverages administrative data to examine the distribution of the workforce in the food services and drinking places subsector by gender,² age, full-time work status³ and residency status⁴ from 2017 to 2023. Results in this paper are based solely on employees who received a T4 slip from employers and exclude self-employed workers.

Food services and drinking places subsector

The food services and drinking places subsector comprises four industries: full-service restaurants, where customers receive table service and pay after eating; limited-service eating places, including fast food establishments, take-out restaurants and cafeterias, where payment is made before dining; special food services, such as caterers, food trucks and food service contractors, which provide meals in various settings; and drinking places, including bars, taverns and nightclubs, which are primarily engaged in serving alcohol.⁵ These industries rely heavily on in-person consumer traffic, tourism and travel, all of which were significantly impacted by the restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

The full-service restaurants industry experienced immense challenges throughout the pandemic. Given the industry's reliance on tourism, travel and in-person sales, the impact of the pandemic was severe and immediate. Operating revenues plummeted 33.1% from 2019 to 2020 and remained 20.0% below 2019 levels in 2021.⁶ With many dining rooms across the country closed, the industry pivoted to take-out, delivery and e-commerce options, wherever possible.⁷ As a result, e-commerce sales more than tripled at full-service restaurants (+228.6%) to \$3.9 billion, increasing the share of e-commerce sales from 3.7% in 2019 to 20.8% in 2020.⁸ However, while e-commerce provided a critical lifeline for full-service restaurants, recovery would not come until 2022, when restaurateurs could once again fill dining rooms and capitalize on increasing higher-margin sales, such as alcoholic beverages.⁹

1. The first paper, on the [arts, entertainment and recreation sector](#), was released on November 28, 2024; the second paper, on the [motion picture, video and sound recording industries](#), was released on December 18, 2024; the third paper, on the [publishing industries subsector](#), was released on January 9, 2025; and the fourth paper, on the [travel arrangement, reservation and accommodation services industries](#), was released on June 20, 2025.
2. Because of the low proportion of non-binary employees in this subsector, results are reported separately for women and men only.
3. Based on the definition of [full-time work](#), employees were classified as either full time or part time. With the average hourly wage by industry from the [Survey of Employment, Payrolls and Hours](#), a proxy value was established to represent a full-time salary. This approach is the same as that used in [Statistics Canada's AgZero modernization project](#) for agricultural employees.
4. Residency status distinguishes between permanent residents—including the Canadian-born population and landed immigrants—and non-permanent residents. Non-permanent residents can hold study and work permits, and they include international students and temporary foreign workers and their families, as well as refugee claimants.
5. North American Industry Classification System 2022 codes: 7223 (special food services), 7224 (drinking places), 722511 (full-service restaurants) and 722512 (limited-service eating places).
6. [Food services and drinking places, summary statistics](#).
7. [Food services and drinking places, methods used by businesses locations that reported e-commerce sales](#).
8. [Food services and drinking places, e-commerce sales](#).
9. [Food services and drinking places, distribution of total sales](#).

Operators of limited-service eating places were impacted to a lesser extent following the introduction of pandemic-related restrictions. Already equipped for take-out and delivery, limited-service eating places saw total operating revenues fall 12.0% in 2020. Recovery in the industry was also swift, with operating revenues fully recovering to pre-pandemic levels in 2021.¹⁰ Businesses rapidly expanded their e-commerce presence, leveraging third-party delivery services and mobile apps to enhance accessibility. By 2023, e-commerce sales in the industry had surged from \$2.0 billion in 2019 to \$4.5 billion in 2023.¹¹ This digital shift not only supported short-term recovery but also reshaped consumer habits, making online ordering a core aspect of future growth.

Within the food services and drinking places subsector, businesses in the special food services and drinking places industry groups were the most severely impacted during this period. In 2020, operating revenues were almost halved for both special food services (-48.3%) and drinking places (-49.4%), compared with 2019. Because of their reliance on large events and social gatherings, recovery was also slow, with operating revenues returning to pre-pandemic levels in 2023 for both industry groups.¹² Given the extent of revenue declines, the federal government introduced various support measures, including subsidies and programs such as the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy and Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy.^{13,14}

Employment across all four industries in the subsector had not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels as of 2023 and remained 2.4% below the 2019 level of employment in the subsector.¹⁵ Despite this, operators continued to face rising wage pressures, with salaries, wages and commissions increasing 22.2% over the same period. Furthermore, the increasing costs of food and operations drove up the cost of goods sold (+20.8%) and rental and leasing expenses (+15.9%) in the subsector, from 2019 to 2023.¹⁶ As a result, the operating profit margin in the subsector decreased to 3.6% in 2023, the lowest recorded profit margin since 2003 (3.2%).¹⁷ With falling margins and increasing wage and cost pressures in the subsector, restaurateurs responded by adjusting prices, ensuring operations remained sustainable. As of December 2023, compared with December 2019, the price of food purchased at a restaurant had increased by 21.2%.¹⁸ Despite 21.2% growth in revenues, the increase in prices underscores a decline in activity within the subsector. Cost-of-living challenges and shifting consumer habits, partly driven by the adoption of hybrid work, have contributed to lower economic activity, with real gross domestic product in the subsector down 7.8% from 2019 levels in 2023.¹⁹

Workforce trends in the food services and drinking places subsector: Gender composition

Across all years of the study and industries, women made up a greater share of the workforce, accounting on average for 57.9% of total employment. This proportion decreased slightly, from 59.0% in 2017 to 56.7% in 2023. The largest share of women employed was in the special food services industry group, where they made up 61.6% of the workforce, on average.

10. [Food services and drinking places, summary statistics.](#)

11. [Food services and drinking places, e-commerce sales.](#)

12. [Food services and drinking places, summary statistics.](#)

13. [Claims to date - Canada emergency wage subsidy \(CEWS\).](#)

14. [Claims to date - Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy \(CERS\) and Lockdown Support.](#)

15. [Employment by industry, annual.](#)

16. [Food services and drinking places, industry expenditures.](#)

17. [Food services and drinking places, summary statistics.](#)

18. [Consumer Price Index, monthly, seasonally adjusted.](#)

19. [Gross domestic product \(GDP\) at basic prices, by industry, provinces and territories.](#)

Table 1
Proportion of men and women employed in the food services and drinking places subsector, 2017 to 2023

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
	percent						
Special food services							
Women	62.6	62.4	61.7	62.2	62.2	60.6	59.3
Men	37.4	37.6	38.3	37.8	37.8	39.4	40.7
Drinking places (alcoholic beverages)							
Women	57.8	58.1	57.8	57.6	58.0	57.2	56.9
Men	42.2	41.9	42.2	42.3	42.0	42.8	43.1
Full-service restaurants							
Women	55.3	55.2	54.8	54.7	55.0	55.0	54.5
Men	44.7	44.8	45.1	45.3	45.0	44.9	45.5
Limited-service eating places							
Women	62.2	61.5	60.9	60.4	59.8	59.2	58.5
Men	37.8	38.5	39.1	39.6	40.1	40.8	41.4
Total							
Women	59.0	58.6	58.1	57.9	57.8	57.4	56.7
Men	41.0	41.4	41.9	42.1	42.2	42.6	43.3

Sources: Statistics Canada, Business Register and administrative data, custom tabulations.

Workforce trends in the food services and drinking places subsector: Age composition

The food services and drinking places subsector employed a predominately young workforce, with over two-thirds of employees under the age of 35 and 43.8% of employees under the age of 25 in 2023. This contrasts sharply with the overall Canadian workforce, where 36.2% of employees were under 35 and 13.1% were under 25.²⁰ The limited-service eating places industry had the highest share of young workers, with 49.8% under 25. Among employees under the age of 25, 94.3% worked part time, compared with 72.1% of those aged 25 and over. Across all years of the study, age composition varied across industries: the special food services industry group had the oldest workforce (44.8% aged 35 and over), followed by drinking places (34.8%), full-service restaurants (30.8%) and limited-service eating places (24.7%).

Table 2
Proportion of workers in the food services and drinking places subsector by age group, 2023

Age group	Special food services	Drinking places (alcoholic beverages)	Full-service restaurants	Limited-service eating places	Total
	percent				
0 to 17 years	3.9	1.6	5.7	9.6	7.1
18 to 24 years	27.1	30.6	35.7	40.2	36.7
25 to 34 years	24.3	33.0	27.9	25.4	26.7
35 to 44 years	15.7	15.5	13.3	10.9	12.5
45 to 54 years	13.0	9.6	8.8	7.1	8.4
55 to 64 years	12.2	7.0	6.7	5.2	6.5
65 to 74 years	3.6	2.4	1.8	1.4	1.8
75 to 84 years	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.2
85 to 94 years	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

Sources: Statistics Canada, Business Register and administrative data, custom tabulations.

20. [Labour force characteristics detailed age group, monthly, unadjusted for seasonality.](#)

Workforce trends in the food services and drinking places subsector: Work status

The food services and drinking places subsector relies heavily on part-time workers. Throughout the pandemic, this reliance became even more prevalent, with the proportion of part-time employees increasing from 84.6% in 2019 to 88.2% in 2020. However, as operations returned to normal in the subsector, the proportion of the workforce employed part time returned to pre-pandemic levels. This phenomenon was observed across all four industries and was likely due in part to the reduced availability of hours throughout the pandemic. Although work status was consistent across industries, the special food services industry group uniformly employed a larger proportion of full-time employees (18.1% on average).

Table 3

Proportion of workers in full-time and part-time positions in the food services and drinking places subsector, 2017 to 2023

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
	percent						
Special food services							
Full time	20.5	20.7	18.3	15.3	17.2	16.6	18.2
Part time	79.5	79.3	81.7	82.8	82.8	83.4	81.8
Drinking places (alcoholic beverages)							
Full time	14.0	14.0	14.3	6.0	8.4	11.8	15.9
Part time	86.0	86.0	85.7	94.0	91.6	88.2	84.1
Full-service restaurants							
Full time	15.4	15.4	15.3	10.1	12.8	14.3	16.1
Part time	84.6	84.6	84.7	89.9	87.2	85.7	83.9
Limited-service eating places							
Full time	15.6	15.4	15.0	13.3	14.0	12.9	15.2
Part time	84.4	84.6	85.0	86.7	86.0	87.1	84.8
Total							
Full time	15.8	15.8	15.4	11.8	13.5	13.8	15.9
Part time	84.2	84.2	84.6	88.2	86.5	86.2	84.1

Sources: Statistics Canada, Business Register and administrative data, custom tabulations.

As was the case in the accommodation services subsector,²¹ unmet demand for employees posed a significant challenge for the food services and drinking places subsector in the wake of the pandemic. Since a significant number of employees displaced by the pandemic opted not to return to the food services and drinking places subsector and demand for restaurant services rebounded as pandemic-related restrictions were eased or removed, job vacancy rates in the subsector soared throughout 2021 and 2022. Following a peak of 13.4% in the third quarter of 2021, the average job vacancy rate in the subsector remained elevated in 2022 (10.2%) and 2023 (7.1%), compared with the Canadian labour market average of 5.4% in 2022 and 4.2% in 2023.²²

Throughout this period, the share of non-permanent residents employed in the food services and drinking places subsector's workforce grew to 20.8% compared with 11.3% in 2019. This increase was most pronounced in the limited-service eating places industry, where the share of non-permanent residents in the workforce increased to 25.2% from 13.0% in 2019. The increased availability of non-permanent residents in the labour supply as a result of strong growth in temporary immigration throughout 2022 and 2023²³ helped lower the job vacancy rate and eased the labour supply shortage in the subsector.²⁴

21. Workforce insights: Demographics in the travel arrangement, reservation and accommodation services industries, 2017 to 2023.

22. Job vacancies, payroll employees, job vacancy rate, and average offered hourly wage by industry sub-sector, quarterly, unadjusted for seasonality.

23. The Daily—Canada's population estimates: Strong population growth in 2023.

24. Estimates of the number of non-permanent residents by type, quarterly.

Table 4
Proportion of workers in the food services and drinking places subsector by residency status in Canada, 2017 to 2023

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
	percent						
Full-service restaurants							
Permanent residents (including the Canadian-born population and landed immigrants)	92.9	91.2	89.4	90.1	90.3	86.9	82.0
Non-permanent residents	7.1	8.8	10.6	9.9	9.7	13.1	18.0
Limited-service eating places							
Permanent residents (including the Canadian-born population and landed immigrants)	92.7	90.4	87.0	86.8	85.8	81.3	74.8
Non-permanent residents	7.3	9.6	13.0	13.2	14.2	18.7	25.2
Food services and drinking places subsector							
Permanent residents (including the Canadian-born population and landed immigrants)	93.1	91.2	88.7	89.0	88.6	84.9	79.2
Non-permanent residents	6.9	8.8	11.3	11.0	11.4	15.1	20.8

Sources: Statistics Canada, Business Register and administrative data, custom tabulations.

Conclusion

The food services and drinking places subsector is a vital component of the Canadian economy. It is one of Canada's largest industries based on total employment; in addition, it makes significant contributions to economic growth, consumer spending and community engagement. Following significant negative impacts caused by the pandemic, the subsector has recovered in terms of revenue. However, employment levels in 2023 remained below 2019 levels in all four industries. Despite this, the composition of the workforce in terms of gender, age distribution and full-time work status remained largely unchanged from 2017 to 2023. The subsector continued to employ primarily young workers, the majority on a part-time basis. However, the residency status of the workforce shifted during and after the pandemic, with increased reliance on non-permanent residents—such as international students, temporary foreign workers and others without Canadian citizenship or permanent residency—because of their growing presence in the labour supply. In 2023, the food services and drinking places subsector employed a larger share of non-permanent residents than the accommodation services industry.²⁵

Operators in the food services and drinking places subsector are facing changing economic conditions over the near term. Economic implications of trade tensions with the United States reach far beyond businesses involved in cross-border commercial activities. Service providers, including restaurants, may experience changes in costs, wages and consumer spending.²⁶ Additionally, with one in five jobs in the food services and drinking places subsector filled by a non-permanent resident employee in 2023, the reduction in the targeted share of temporary residents to 5% of the total Canadian population by the end of 2026²⁷ may impact labour supply. As of April 1, 2025, there were 2,959,825 non-permanent residents in the country, or 7.1% of the population. This is down from 7.4% on October 1, 2024, with a decrease of 61,111 since the start of the year.^{28,29}

Finally, as technological advances continue to reshape various sectors, concerns about workforce reductions driven by automation and artificial intelligence (AI) have grown. However, recent empirical analysis³⁰ shows that employees in industries such as accommodation and food services face relatively lower exposure to AI-related job transformation and downsizing.

25. [Workforce insights: Demographics in the travel arrangement, reservation and accommodation services industries, 2017 to 2023.](#)

26. Shivani Sood. (June 9, 2025). [Impact of tariffs on businesses in Canada: Expectations and strategic responses, second quarter of 2025.](#)

27. Government of Canada. (Accessed June 19, 2025) [Notice – Supplementary Information for the 2025-2027 Immigration Levels Plan.](#)

28. [Estimates of the number of non-permanent residents by type, quarterly.](#)

29. [Population estimates, quarterly.](#)

30. Tahsin Mehdi and René Morissette. (September 3, 2024). [Experimental Estimates of Potential Artificial Intelligence Occupational Exposure in Canada.](#)