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Analysis in Brief

Workforce insights: Demographics in the retail trade sector, 2017 to 2024

by Adam Howe and Benjamin Tobin

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Workforce insights: Demographics in the retail trade sector, 2017 to 2024

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Introduction

The Canadian retail trade sector plays a pivotal role in the Canadian economy, employing over 2 million individuals, providing essential goods to households and supporting communities nationwide. As the final link in the distribution of goods to consumers, the retail trade sector is directly influenced by economic conditions, seasonal patterns and household discretionary spending. Retailers are especially exposed to supply chain disruptions and rising input prices, which can increase operational pressures and affect pricing and profit margins. As one of the largest sectors, in terms of employment, retail trade offers a vital source of employment for a wide range of Canadians. It serves as an entry point into the workforce for many young people and newcomers, offers flexible employment opportunities for students, and supports those remaining in the workforce beyond the traditional retirement age.

This paper, examining demographic characteristics of employees in the retail trade sector, builds on a broader series of studies on employment trends across service industries.¹ Over the study period, the retail trade sector was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as the effects of the pandemic subsided, retailers continued to face challenges, including rising energy prices, supply chain issues and shifting consumer behaviour.

This paper leverages administrative data to examine the distribution of the workforce in the retail trade sector by gender,² age, full-time work status³ and residency status⁴ from 2017 to 2024. Results in this paper are based solely on employees who received a T4 slip from employers and on self-employed individuals, excluding other employment types, such as contract workers.

The retail trade sector

The Canadian retail trade sector encompasses a wide range of activities involved in the sale of merchandise directly to the general public for personal or household consumption. It is divided into two segments. The first is store-based retailers, such as supermarkets, department stores, specialty shops, and motor vehicle and parts dealers, where purchases are made in physical locations. The second is non-store retailers, including e-commerce platforms and direct sales, where transactions occur remotely.⁵ As of 2024, more than two-thirds of total retail sales came from four subsectors: motor vehicle and parts dealers (27.4%), food and beverage retailers (18.4%), general merchandise retailers (12.7%), and gasoline stations and fuel vendors (9.9%).⁶ This concentration highlights the importance of consumption spending on essential goods and motor vehicles for the performance of the sector.

Canadian retailers faced significant challenges during the pandemic as public health measures, including temporary closures of non-essential businesses and capacity limits, constrained operations. Impacts varied widely across the sector. Essential businesses, such as food and beverage, general merchandise, and health and personal care retailers, saw sustained sales growth, while discretionary subsectors, including clothing, clothing accessories, shoes, jewellery, luggage and leather goods retailers and motor vehicle and parts dealers, experienced notable declines in 2020 before rebounding in subsequent years.⁷

1. The first paper exploring the demographic makeup of service industries, on the [travel arrangement, reservation and accommodation services industries](#), was released on June 20, 2025. The second paper, on the [food services and drinking places subsector](#), was released on September 23, 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. Based on 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 44 to 45, retail trade](#).

6. Statistics Canada, [Table 20-10-0083-01 Annual retail trade survey, summary statistics](#).

7. Statistics Canada, [Table 20-10-0067-01 Monthly retail sales, price, and volume, seasonally adjusted \(x 1,000,000\)](#).

Although retail sales have risen since 2020, sector growth has moderated as higher interest rates and widespread price increases have dampened purchasing power, shifting spending toward essential goods, such as food and automotive fuels,⁸ and away from discretionary categories, such as clothing and home furniture, furnishings, housewares, appliances and electronics.⁹ While nominal retail sales in 2024 were substantially higher than before the pandemic, real growth was much more modest once price increases are taken into account.¹⁰

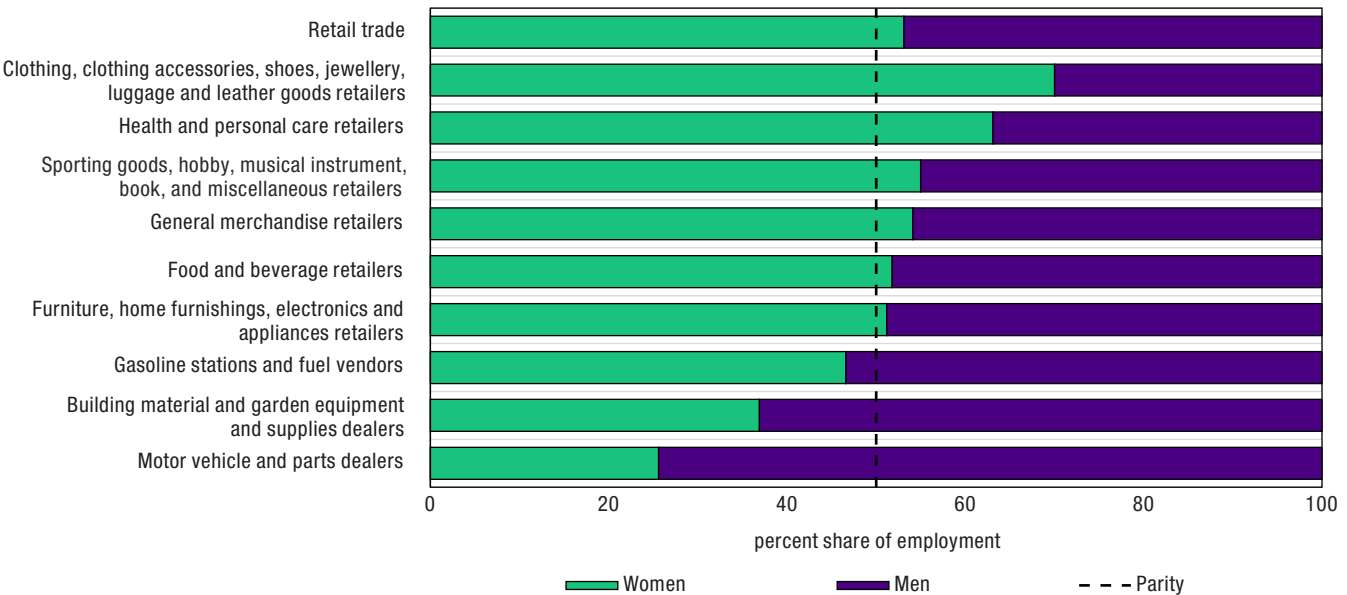
Data from the Survey of Employment, Payrolls and Hours show that while employment in the sector fell 8.2% in 2020 as a result of the initial pandemic disruptions, employment rapidly recovered, with most subsectors returning to pre-pandemic levels in 2021. However, with the growing shift toward e-commerce and changing consumer preferences, employment levels in certain retail trade subsectors remained below 2019 levels. Overall, employment in the retail trade sector has been relatively stable, increasing by 0.6% from 2019 to 2024. Food and beverage retailers remained the largest employer in the sector, accounting for 27.0% of the sector's 2.0 million employees in 2024. General merchandisers were the second-largest employer (13.2%), followed by motor vehicle and parts dealers (11.3%).¹¹

Labour market insights in the retail trade sector

Gender composition remains largely unchanged

Women consistently represented a slight majority (54.7% on average) of employees in Canada's retail trade sector throughout the study period. The proportion of women employees fell from 56.3% in 2017 to 53.1% in 2024. This decline was driven by a growing share of men employed in clothing, clothing accessories, shoes, jewellery, luggage and leather goods retailers (+7.8% from 2017 to 2024); health and personal care retailers (+6.3% from 2017 to 2024); and general merchandise retailers (+6.1% from 2017 to 2024).

Chart 1
Proportion of men and women employed in retail trade subsectors, 2024



Note: The parity line represents an equal distribution between women and men. Values to either side of the line indicate a higher share for one gender.
Sources: Statistics Canada, Business Register and administrative data, custom tabulation.

8. Statistics Canada, [Table 20-10-0071-01 Quarterly retail commodity sales \(x 1,000\)](#), and [Table 20-10-0016-01 Retail commodity survey, retail sales, inactive \(x 1,000\)](#).
9. Statistics Canada, [Table 18-10-0006-01 Consumer Price Index, monthly, seasonally adjusted](#).
10. Statistics Canada, [Table 20-10-0067-01 Monthly retail sales, price, and volume, seasonally adjusted \(x 1,000,000\)](#).
11. Statistics Canada, [Table 14-10-0202-01 Employment by industry, annual](#).

From 2017 to 2024, motor vehicle and parts dealers were the subsector most dominated by men, with men accounting for an average of 74.2% of the workforce. This was consistent across the subsector, with all industry groups employing predominantly men: automotive parts, accessories and tire retailers (77.3% on average); automobile dealers (74.4% on average); and other motor vehicle dealers (67.8% on average).

Over the same period, the clothing, clothing accessories, shoes, jewellery, luggage and leather goods retailers subsector recorded the highest share of women. Women represented an average of 74.2% of the workforce, despite the growing share of men employed in this subsector during the study period. Within the subsector, jewellery, luggage and leather goods retailers had the highest share of women employees, at 79.2% on average. This was the most pronounced gender difference across all retail trade industry groups.

Shifting age demographics reshape the workforce

From 2017 to 2024, the retail trade sector employed a relatively young workforce, with over half of all employees younger than 35 and almost one-third younger than 24. Across the subsectors, the age composition of the workforce varied significantly (Table 1).

Table 1
Proportion of employees in retail trade subsectors by age group, 2024

	15 to 24 years	25 to 34 years	35 to 44 years	45 to 54 years	55 to 64 years	65 years and older
	percent					
Retail trade	31.7	22.9	14.9	12.5	12.4	5.5
Motor vehicle and parts dealers	18.8	24.8	19.2	15.3	14.4	7.3
Building material and garden equipment and supplies dealers	24.9	18.3	14.9	14.5	17.3	10.0
Food and beverage retailers	33.0	21.2	14.4	12.8	13.1	5.3
Furniture, home furnishings, electronics and appliances retailers	25.5	26.8	17.2	13.2	11.8	5.4
General merchandise retailers	31.9	23.7	14.2	12.2	12.3	5.7
Health and personal care retailers	30.3	23.2	15.7	13.2	12.6	5.0
Gasoline stations and fuel vendors	29.9	21.6	15.4	14.2	13.5	5.1
Clothing, clothing accessories, shoes, jewellery, luggage and leather goods retailers	42.0	24.7	12.1	8.8	8.3	4.0
Sporting goods, hobby, musical instrument, book, and miscellaneous retailers	33.4	24.5	14.7	11.7	10.8	4.9

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

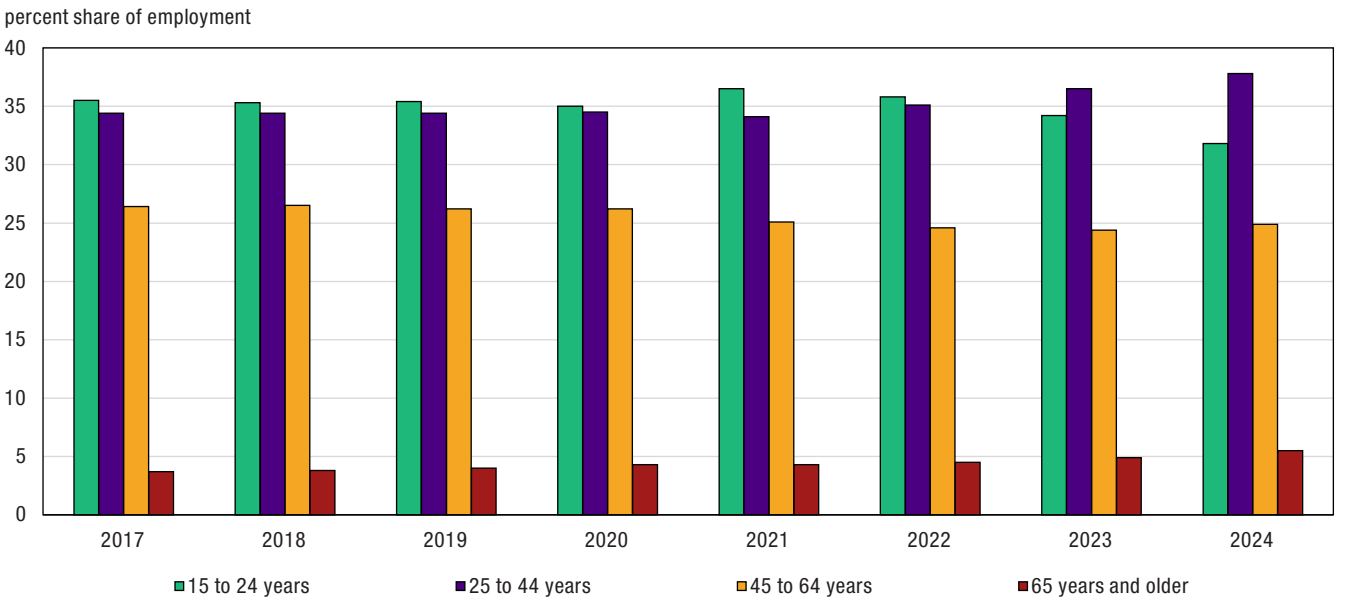
Retailers that traditionally offer flexible work arrangements had the highest shares of youth employment (ages 15 to 24), led by clothing, clothing accessories, shoes, jewellery, luggage and leather goods retailers (42.0%); sporting goods, hobby, musical instrument, book, and miscellaneous retailers (33.4%); and food and beverage retailers (33.0%). Conversely, motor vehicle and parts dealers and building material and garden equipment and supplies dealers had an older workforce, with the majority of employees in both subsectors aged 35 and older. Building material and garden equipment and supplies dealers employed the oldest workforce in the sector, with 10.0% of all employees aged 65 and older and almost one-third of the workforce aged 55 and older.

Starting in 2023, the age composition of the retail trade workforce changed (Chart 2). Most notably, the proportion of youth employment (those aged 15 to 24) declined from 35.5% in 2017 to 31.7% in 2024. This change was most pronounced in clothing, clothing accessories, shoes, jewellery, luggage and leather goods retailers, where the share of youth employment dropped from 51.7% in 2017 to 42.0% in 2024. This was partly because of declining employment in the subsector, which contracted 16.9% over the same period, resulting in fewer employment opportunities. Youth employment as a share of the workforce declined across all subsectors from 2017 to 2024.

A contrasting trend over the study period was the rising share of employees aged 65 and older, which increased from 3.7% of the workforce in 2017 to 5.5% by 2024. This trend was observed across all subsectors. The growing share of older Canadians in the workforce reflects a trend toward longer workforce participation. Labour Force

Survey data show that the overall labour force participation rate of Canadians aged 65 and older increased from 14.1% in 2017 to 15.0% in 2024.¹² In the administrative tax data for the retail trade sector, the largest increase in employment among those aged 65 and older was observed in building material and garden equipment and supplies dealers, nearly doubling from 6.2% of the workforce in 2017 to 10.0% in 2024.

Chart 2
Proportion of employment in retail trade, by age cohort, 2017 to 2024

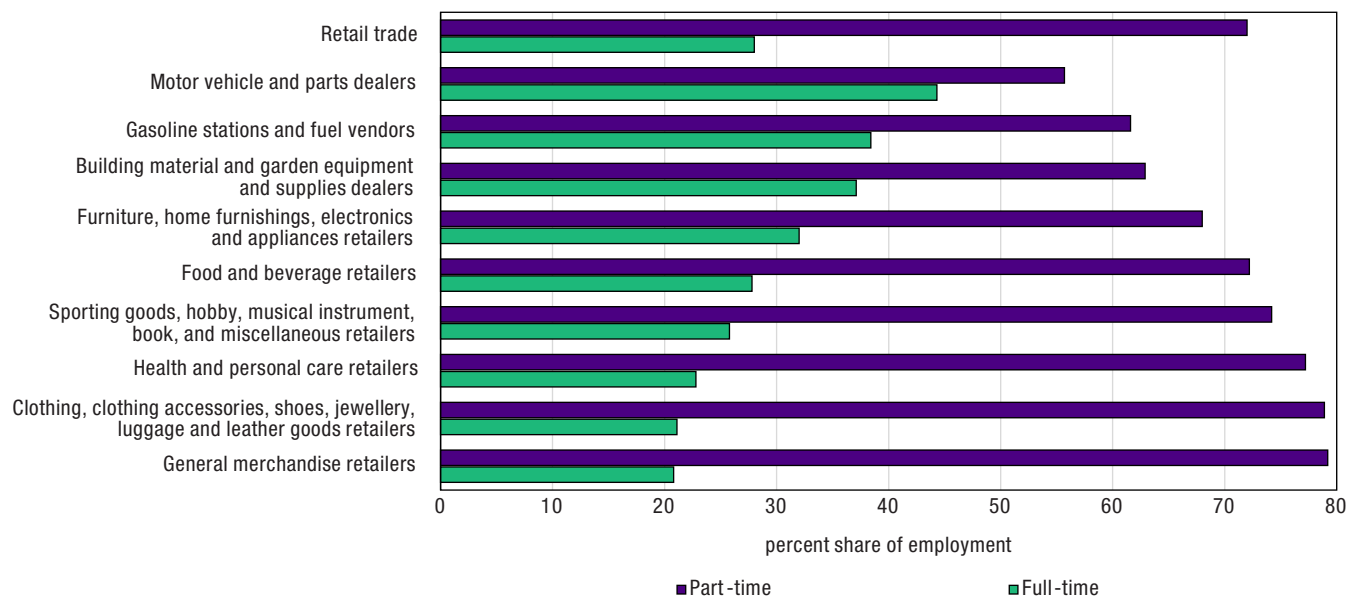


Sources: Statistics Canada, Business Register and administrative data, custom tabulation.

Part-time employment remains central to the sector

Given the need for both seasonal and flexible work arrangements, the retail trade sector relies heavily on part-time employees (Chart 3), who accounted for 72.0% of the workforce in 2024 and made up nearly three-quarters of the workforce over the study period.

12. Statistics Canada, [Table 14-10-0327-01 Labour force characteristics by gender and detailed age group, annual](#).

Chart 3**Proportion of workers in full-time and part-time positions in retail trade subsectors, 2024**

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

Across retail trade subsectors, the share of full-time labour varied over the study period. Motor vehicle and parts dealers employed the largest share of full-time staff (44.2% on average), followed by building material and garden equipment and supplies dealers (36.1% on average) and gasoline stations and fuel vendors (34.9% on average). The largest shares of part-time labour were seen in subsectors with traditionally higher seasonality and flexible work arrangements, including clothing, clothing accessories, shoes, jewellery, luggage and leather goods retailers (82.8% on average); health and personal care retailers (76.8% on average); and general merchandise retailers (76.4% on average).

General merchandise retailers saw the largest shift in work status over the period, with the share of part-time employees rising from 73.6% in 2017 to 79.2% in 2024. Meanwhile, gasoline stations and fuel vendors saw a growing share of full-time employment, increasing from 33.4% in 2017 to 38.4% in 2024. This trend was driven by the fuel dealers industry group, whose share of full-time labour rose 18.7% over the study period.

Shifts in residency status reflect evolving labour supply

Non-permanent residents made up an increasing share of the workforce in the retail trade sector in recent years (Table 2), up from 2.8% in 2017 to 13.7% in 2024.

Table 2
Proportion of workers in retail trade subsectors by residency status, 2017 to 2024

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
	percent							
Retail trade								
Permanent residents	97.2	96.4	95.1	94.7	94.1	91.9	88.4	86.3
Non-permanent residents	2.8	3.6	4.9	5.3	5.9	8.1	11.6	13.7
Motor vehicle and parts dealers								
Permanent residents	99.3	99.1	98.7	98.8	98.6	97.9	96.2	94.8
Non-permanent residents	0.7	0.9	1.3	1.2	1.4	2.1	3.8	5.2
Building material and garden equipment and supplies dealers								
Permanent residents	98.9	98.3	97.8	97.4	97.0	95.8	94.3	92.5
Non-permanent residents	1.1	1.7	2.2	2.6	3.0	4.2	5.7	7.5
Food and beverage retailers								
Permanent residents	96.8	95.9	94.4	94.0	93.7	91.0	86.8	84.0
Non-permanent residents	3.2	4.1	5.6	6.0	6.3	9.0	13.2	16.0
Furniture, home furnishings, electronics and appliances retailers								
Permanent residents	96.6	96.0	94.6	94.6	93.7	91.6	87.6	85.5
Non-permanent residents	3.4	4.0	5.4	5.4	6.3	8.4	12.4	14.5
General merchandise retailers								
Permanent residents	96.9	94.8	92.0	90.9	90.1	88.1	83.5	80.4
Non-permanent residents	3.1	5.2	8.0	9.1	9.9	11.9	16.5	19.6
Health and personal care retailers								
Permanent residents	98.3	98.0	96.5	95.6	95.5	93.5	90.2	88.3
Non-permanent residents	1.7	2.0	3.5	4.4	4.5	6.5	9.8	11.7
Gasoline stations and fuel vendors								
Permanent residents	95.5	94.8	94.0	93.7	93.0	90.7	87.7	85.4
Non-permanent residents	4.5	5.2	6.0	6.3	7.0	9.3	12.3	14.6
Clothing, clothing accessories, shoes, jewellery, luggage and leather goods retailers								
Permanent residents	96.1	95.1	93.6	94.1	92.8	89.4	85.3	83.5
Non-permanent residents	3.9	4.9	6.4	5.9	7.2	10.6	14.7	16.5
Sporting goods, hobby, musical instrument, book, and miscellaneous retailers								
Permanent residents	97.7	97.2	96.1	95.5	95.3	93.7	90.5	88.5
Non-permanent residents	2.3	2.8	3.9	4.5	4.7	6.3	9.5	11.5

Note: Permanent residents include the Canadian-born population and landed immigrants.

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

This pattern is similar to the growing share of non-permanent residents observed in the workforce of the food services and drinking places subsector.¹³ From 2017 to 2024, every subsector and industry group in the retail trade sector experienced an increase in the share of non-permanent residents in their workforce. Although the growth was widespread, the magnitude varied across retail trade subsectors. In 2024, the highest proportions of non-permanent residents were recorded in general merchandise retailers (19.6%); clothing, clothing accessories, shoes, jewellery, luggage and leather goods retailers (16.5%); and food and beverage retailers (16.0%). This upward trend coincides with strong growth in the number of non-permanent residents entering the Canadian economy throughout 2022, 2023 and 2024, the majority of whom were temporary workers responding to labour market needs.¹⁴ In contrast, motor vehicle and parts dealers (5.2%) and building material and garden equipment and supplies dealers (7.5%) recorded the lowest shares of non-permanent residents.

Conclusion

The retail trade sector experienced notable shifts in workforce composition over the study period. While the sector continued to employ a predominantly young workforce, the share of younger employees declined from 2017 to 2024, while the share of employees aged 55 and older increased, indicating a gradual aging of the workforce. The sector continued to employ slightly more women, and the majority of employees remained part-time workers. The residency status of the retail trade workforce shifted notably 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—reflecting their growing role in the available labour supply.

13. Statistics Canada, *Analysis in Brief*, “[Workforce insights: Demographics in the food services and drinking places subsector, 2017 to 2023](#).”

14. Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, “[Canada’s population estimates: Strong population growth in 2023](#).”

While employment has continued to grow in recent years, gains were uneven across the sector, with some subsectors yet to return to pre-pandemic levels.¹⁵ This may reflect businesses capitalizing on technological efficiencies, including self-checkout systems and a reduced reliance on brick-and-mortar locations as e-commerce continues to reshape how retailers interact with consumers. These technological shifts are occurring alongside the rapid expansion and use of artificial intelligence (AI) by retail trade businesses. Recent empirical analysis¹⁶ suggests that workers in the retail trade sector face moderate exposure to AI-related job transformation and displacement. Over the past two years, the proportion of businesses in the retail trade sector using AI has increased nearly fivefold, reaching 19.2%.¹⁷

Looking ahead, operators in the retail trade sector may continue to face challenges over the near term, including further integration of AI into operations, ongoing trade tensions and geopolitical developments, inflationary pressures, rising input costs, and evolving trends in domestic business investment and population growth.¹⁸

15. Statistics Canada, [Table 14-10-0202-01 Employment by industry, annual](#).

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

17. Statistics Canada, [Table 33-10-1167-01 Use of artificial intelligence by businesses and organizations in producing goods or delivering services over the last 12 months, second quarter of 2026](#).

18. Statistics Canada, *Analysis in Brief*, "[Impact of tariffs on businesses in Canada: Expectations and strategic responses, fourth quarter of 2025](#)."