

## Introduction

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the economy, leading to the largest and steepest declines on record in Vermont employment. Between February and April of that year 20.8% (65,800) jobs were lost. The state's labor force (the sum of employed and unemployed Vermonters) fell from 355,409 in February to a pandemic-era low of 326,828 in January of 2021, a decline of 28,581 or 8.0%. The unemployment rate reached 14.3% in April 2020 but had fallen to 3.8% by the end of that year.

Since early 2021 both employment and the labor force have been growing somewhat slowly and unsteadily. The labor force has grown by 6,747 since its January 2021 low but remains 21,834 (-6.1%) below February 2020 figures. Employment has increased by 49,800 since April of 2020 but there are still 16,000 fewer jobs than in February 2020.

The very slow return of the labor force mirrors national trends that have prompted much research and discussion. Early Vermont declines were discussed in a January 2021 Kevin's Corner that can be found [here](#). Since May 2020 the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the United States Census Bureau have added a series of questions to the Current Population Survey in order to understand the impact of the pandemic on businesses and the employment situation. That data can be found [here](#).

In March of 2022 the Vermont Department of Labor contributed a series of questions to a statewide poll in order to learn more about the population of Vermonters that were in the labor force prior to the pandemic but have yet to return. In particular, we were interested in why people have not returned. The results of that survey are reported in the following section.

## Sources

The data for this survey was collected by the Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont as part of the annual Vermonter Poll survey. The survey was conducted using email-based outreach in March and April of 2022. The random sample was drawn from commercially-available email lists. Only Vermonters over 18 years of age were eligible to participate.

631 people responded to the survey while 616 responded to the questions submitted by the Department of Labor. The results were demographically weighted to ensure survey responses are as representative as possible of the known population characteristics of Vermont.

The overall study results have a margin of error of plus or minus 3.8% at a confidence level of 95%.

## Results

Our first question on the survey asked respondents if they or anyone in their household had quit working or lost employment during the pandemic and remained out of work ever since. Twelve percent of respondents met that definition. See Table 1 below for a breakdown of responses.

*Table 1: Have you or someone in your household either left a job or been laid off in the last 2 years and remained out of work?*

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	74	12.0%
No	541	87.8%
Don't know	1	0.1%

*n = 616*



Kevin's Corner is a continuing series of brief reviews of Vermont Economic and Demographic data. It is written by Kevin Stapleton, Assistant Director of Economic and Labor Market Information for the Vermont Department of Labor with support from other E&LMI staff. Kevin can be reached at [kevin.stapleton@vermont.gov](mailto:kevin.stapleton@vermont.gov). For more information visit our website at [www.vtlmi.info](http://www.vtlmi.info)

No additional questions were asked of those responding “no” to this question #1. Individuals responding “yes” were asked two additional questions. The responses to those questions are discussed below.

*Question 2: What is the primary reason for remaining out of work ever since?*

Given the selection of responses listed below, a plurality (31%) of respondents chose to provide another reason. Those other reasons ranged from low pay to individuals returning to school and acting as a caregiver to family members. The next most common response was “retirement”, chosen by 23.9% of respondents. This was followed by “health or safety concerns” (15.5%), “can’t find a job” (14.1%) and “childcare or school uncertainty” (11.3%). See table 2 below.

*Table 2: What is the primary reason for remaining out of work?*

	Frequency	Percent
Can't find a job	10	14.1%
Retirement	17	23.9%
Health or safety concerns	11	15.5%
Child care or school uncertainty	8	11.3%
Taking a career training or education program	2	2.8%
Another reason (write in)	22	31.0%
Don't Know/Unsure	1	1.4%

*n = 71*

*Question 3: What is the likelihood you will return to work in the next 1-2 years?*

Finally respondents were asked about the likelihood they will return to work. Just under 22% responded that they are not likely to return to work in the next two years. A similar number (23.2%) responded that they are likely to return to part-time work. 29.0% responded that they are likely to return to full time work. 26.1% were unsure. See table 3.

*Table 3: What is the likelihood the person will return to work in the next 1-2 years?*

	Frequency	Percent
Not likely	15	21.7%
Likely for part--time work	16	23.2%
Likely for full-time work	20	29.0%
Don't know/unsure	18	26.1%

*n = 69*

Nearly a quarter of respondents in this survey report they are unlikely to return to the labor force. Approximately another quarter of respondents are unsure of their return to the labor force. This underscores the challenges seen in early 2022 with attempts to return the labor force to pre-pandemic levels.