



Sectoral Profile

Retail Trade

Ontario

2018-2020



Sectoral Profiles provide an overview of recent labour market developments and outlooks for some of the key industries in various regions of the country.

ALL EYES ON E-COMMERCE

- Retail employment expected to grow by about 1.0% annually between 2018 and 2020
- Spending may be limited by lower consumer confidence and rising household debt levels
- CUSMA is likely to have little positive impact on Canadian e-commerce sales
- Retail employment continues to be curbed by increased technology-use and online platforms

Ontario's retail trade employment stood at 821,300 in September 2018,¹ making up 11.3% of total employment in the province. Retail is the second largest industry in Ontario, after health care and social assistance, and accounted for 4.93% of Ontario's GDP in 2017.² The sector includes store retailers and non-store retailers. Store retailers make up close to 98% of employment in the overall sector,³ and include establishments such as motor vehicle and parts dealers, electronics and appliance stores, food and beverage stores, clothing stores, general merchandise stores and gas stations. Non-store retailers generate the remaining 2.2% of employment, and include companies selling goods and services through non-store methods such as the Internet (e.g., Amazon), infomercials, e-catalogues, direct selling and vending machines.

The retail industry has a significantly higher proportion of youth employees compared to the rest of the Ontario workforce. About one-in-four retail workers are 15 to 24 years old.⁴ This is mainly due to low educational and skills requirements for many retail positions. The greater availability of part-time work also provides flexibility for youth to work outside of typical school hours.

The following occupations make up the large majority (about two thirds) of the retail workforce:

- Retail salespersons (NOC 6421)
- Retail and wholesale trade managers (NOC 0621)
- Cashiers (NOC 6611)
- Store shelf stockers, clerks and order fillers (NOC 6622)
- Retail sales supervisors (NOC 6211)

- Other customer and information services representatives (NOC 6552)
- Material handlers (NOC 7452)

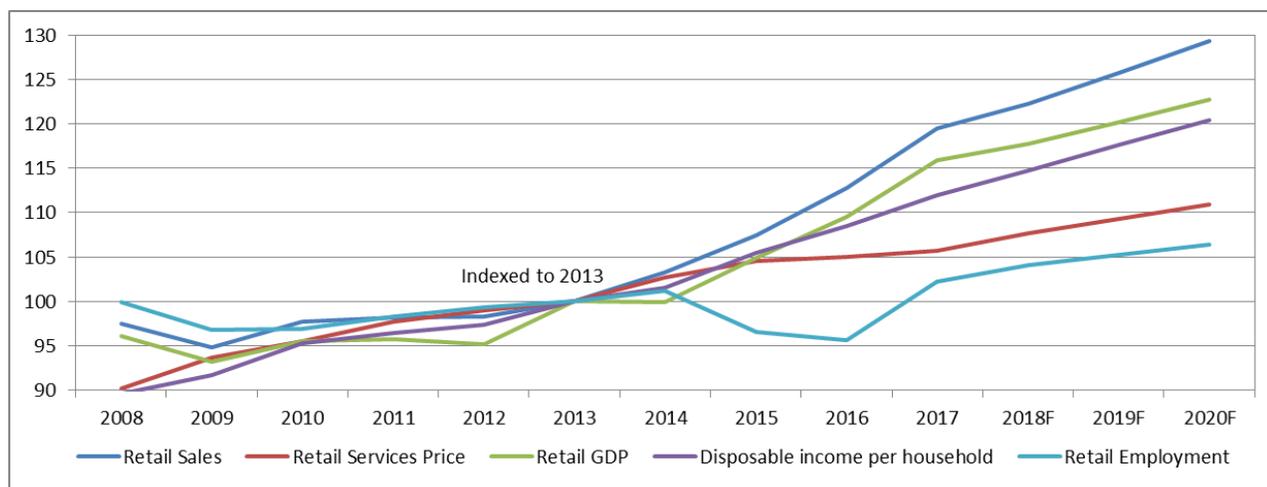
Some occupations form a smaller share of retail employment but are primarily found in retail:

- Other medical technologists and technicians (except dental health) (NOC 3219)
- Pharmacists (NOC 3131)
- Opticians (NOC 3231)

Recent employment growth in retail trade expected to return to historical rates

Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey reported steady retail employment between September 2017 and September 2018.⁵ Retail employment saw an uptick of 0.1% over the year,⁶ and other employment indicators, based on payroll records, suggest weak but positive growth of 1.3% between 2016 and 2017.⁷ The industrial employment outlook for 2018-2020 is expected to be slow but positive over the term, with growth averaging about 1.0% yearly.⁸

Figure 1: Indexed Ontario retail sales, retail services price, retail GDP, disposable income and Retail Employment, 2008 to 2017 and 2018 to 2020 Forecasted



Sources: Statistics Canada Tables: 20-10-0066-01, 18-10-0251-01, 36-10-0402-01, 36-10-0588-01, 14-10-0023-01

Retailers growing in size amid large consolidations

Large retailers are the biggest employers in the industry. Close to one half of retail employees in 2017 worked for large companies with 500 or more employees.⁹ Over a third worked for small companies with between 5 and 99 employees. Medium companies employing 100 to 499 and micro employers with 4 or fewer workers accounted for only about 17.4% of employment. Recent industry employment growth has been driven more by medium retailers than smaller ones. Medium retail firms with between 100 and 499 employees grew at a faster rate than other size retailers between 2008 to 2017.¹⁰

Private labels and polarization of high-end and value-conscious consumption

Facing competitive pressures, retailers are also consolidating along their supply chains. Especially amongst larger companies, more and more are producing their own product lines or contracting out the manufacture of private-label goods under a retailer's own brand. These offerings are growing in importance due to their higher

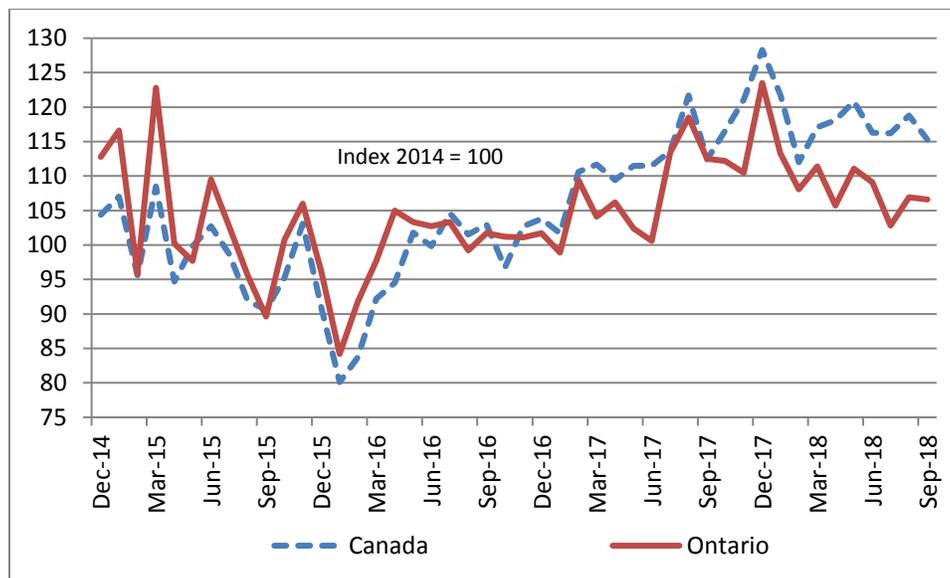
profit margins and lower cost to the retailer,^{11,12} spreading from groceries to over-the-counter drugs¹³ and mass merchandise.¹⁴ Lower cost of generic and in-store lines can also increase pressure on external suppliers to offer lower wholesaler prices. Diversity among store-brands means they are no longer limited to being lower-quality alternatives, forcing aggressive discounting by national brands to keep up.¹⁵ Some in-house lines are positioned as premium products and can command prices comparable to, and in some cases higher than, their name-brand counterparts. Own-brands are popular in the apparel sub-industry, where ‘fast-fashion’ giants like Zara and H&M have expanded their market share by controlling and shortening their design and production cycles.

At the same time, Ontario retail markets have become more polarized by demand for high- and low-end consumer goods. More price-conscious households following the 2008-2009 downturn¹⁶ and growth in purchasing of premium brands^{17,18,19} from the millennial cohort,²⁰ have adversely affected traditional middle-market stores while boosting the demand for both discount sellers and premium retailers. Thus while Sears Canada Inc. has shuttered,²¹ low-cost stores such as The Great Canadian Dollar Store,²² and Giant Tiger^{23,24,25} are expanding, as are luxury retailers such as Versace²⁶ and Nordstrom Inc.^{27,28} Toronto’s upscale Yorkdale Mall, with its many luxury retailers, boasted the highest mall sales per square foot in Canada in 2016²⁹ and 2017.³⁰

A positive effect of the restructuring in retail has been to spur on retail productivity in Ontario, through greater competition and the entrance of larger retailing companies.³¹ These established and typically larger players bring with them more efficient supply management, and supply chain integration practices; as these spread into the market, they help boost average efficiency in the industry. Both the province’s labour productivity overall and in retail were higher in 2017 compared to the previous five years.³² Higher productivity led growth in real value-added dollars in Ontario to outpace growth in the number of hours worked in retail over 2013–2017.³³

Some risks from dipping consumer confidence, rising debt levels, and changing demographics

Ontario retail spending grew by about 4.6% over August 2017 to 2018.³⁴ Controlling for rising prices shows sales volume growth rising over time.³⁵ Retail spending may also be intensified by the increase in consumer confidence in Canada as of late.³⁶ Throughout 2017 and 2018, Ontarians have maintained a cloudier outlook on their financial and economic prospects compared to the rest of Canada³⁷. This is likely partially a result of higher housing costs, wage uncertainty, and rising trade tensions. The settlement of a new North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), now called Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) should alleviate some of these concerns.³⁸

Figure 2: Consumer Confidence in Ontario and Canada, December 2014 to September 2018

Source: Conference Board of Canada

Household disposable income is expected to continue its pattern of growth through the 2018- 2020 period.³⁹ Moreover, average household net worth rose as real estate values climbed in the relatively low interest rate environment since 2009, especially in Toronto.⁴⁰ However, the 2017 federal introduction of new mortgage rules has since somewhat cooled the heated market. Recent interest rate increases by the Bank of Canada has also been pinching some of the disposable income which could be spent on retail items going forward.

Changing household demographics in Ontario are also expected to affect retail as aging consumers favour spending on services over goods. In fact, as the province's population skews older over time,⁴¹ the share of household spending on retail goods is likely to continue to decline.⁴² As such, seniors (age 65 years and over) tend to spend less per household on goods such as clothing and transport, than people younger than 30.⁴³ However, older shoppers spend more on health care, domestic and other custodial services and horticultural services, snow and garbage removal.⁴⁴ This could support labour demand in health-related stores, such as pharmacies and optical retail stores. On the other hand, as the 'Boomer' generation exit the workforce and restrain spending habits, the 'Millennial' generation has become a leading driver of retail sales.^{45,46} This makes this cohort a significant powerhouse in instituting market change. As a result of changing demands over the course of the past few years, shifts have developed in the retail landscape.

Weakness in exchange rate cutting cross-border shopping leakage

Prices have generally risen for consumers due to the tanking global crude prices and the subsequent weakening of the Canadian dollar. This was compounded for food prices by global supply tightness, forecasting 2017 food expenditure growth from 3.0% to +4.0%.⁴⁷ Higher food costs will challenge grocers' bottom lines and likely tighten household budgets in other retail categories. As a saving grace, Ontario consumers who have long crossed into the US to take advantage of lower prices may travel south less now, as they face a stronger USD. Cross-border shopping, as measured by Ontario same-day car trips, historically tracks USD exchange rates closely.⁴⁸ The number of these trips to the U.S. from Ontario has declined between August 2014 and August 2018. Furthermore, under CUSMA, Canada's duty-free *de minimis* levels will change from \$20 CAD to \$150 CAD for U.S. goods shipped from online retailers; but does not extend to border crossings.⁴⁹ This means that Canadians buying goods online from the U.S. will not have to pay duty on products shipped that are under

\$150 CAD. The U.S. *de minimis* threshold in comparison, remains at \$800 USD and should have little effect on Canadian retailers.

Retailers in Ontario are also catering to consumers, by adjusting store hours and dates of discount sales to match the U.S., encouraging spending north of the border.⁵⁰ Though this may also benefit U.S. shoppers, they are less likely to follow the cheaper exchange rate north to Ontario retailers.⁵¹ Even after falling significantly, cross-border shopping trips by Ontarians were still four times the number of trips from the U.S. to Ontario.⁵² Despite the US population being much larger, border-hopping to shop appears to change less with exchange rates there than here.⁵³

E-commerce is here to stay

E-commerce continues to affect the retail industry and is seen as a threat to retail store profits and employment. This is especially true for Ontario, as domestic online retailers are dwarfed by internationals. The province's close proximity to several large U.S. commercial and population centres lowers shipping costs relative to other provinces and stimulates cross-border e-sales. E-commerce remains a fraction of overall retail spending, at about 2.7% of national sales in 2017; with a higher proportion (about 3.5%) leading up to the holiday season.⁵⁴ A survey of online Canadians in 2018 found that over half of them use the internet to shop,⁵⁵ and about 86% said that they have made an online purchase in the past year, with most buying clothing, flight or travel packages, household goods, books, and show or game tickets.⁵⁶ In 2017, food sales became more competitive as Amazon, the warehousing and storage giant, bought out Whole Foods⁵⁷ and almost immediately dropped the prices of some of their staple goods.⁵⁸ Between 2016 and 2018, the proportion of Canadians purchasing food online has jumped from 14% to 24%.⁵⁹

Amazon is no doubt the key driver for the growth of online sales in Ontario and in Canada.⁶⁰ The company has created its 'Amazon Marketplace', an online platform for sellers, brand owners and entrepreneurs to reach a customer base around the globe. As such, it continues to employ large numbers of employees at their five distribution facilities in Ontario, plus another yet to be built in Caledon.^{61,62}

However, firms with existing physical store networks may have a leg-up by leveraging this infrastructure to fill online orders.⁶³ In fact, the separation between online and physical retail presence may not be absolute, as about 59% of consumers still prefer making retail purchases from a traditional 'bricks and mortar' store.⁶⁴ However, the concept of 'showrooming' also comes into play, meaning that about 36% of Canadians browse a traditional store and then purchase the item online in order to get the best deal.

As such, increased online sales are likely to moderate growth in front-line sales staff and support an increase in retail distribution and logistics employment, such as customer service, information and related clerks (NOC 1453), web designers and developers (NOC 2175), and business development officers and marketing researchers (NOC 4163), and shippers and receivers (NOC 1471), as well as higher skill occupations such as trade managers (NOC 0621 and 0015). Moreover, smaller retailers are also focused on reaching shoppers online as more of them search the internet for information before a purchase. Though larger companies are better able to invest in digital offerings, an online presence enables independent retailers to increase their market reach and focus on a niche product.

Sector growth outlook, 2018-2020

Over the 2018–2020 period, employment in the provincial retail sector is expected to be challenged by heightened competition in retail and economic restraints on consumers. Tightening household budgets may benefit discount retail stores and dollar stores in particular. Although not a large part of the market, luxury goods are likely to be another bright spot. E-commerce will continue to create uncertainty in the industry as

retailers adjust to the impacts of online shopping. Given the size of this industry, even lower growth rates translate into a significant number of jobs. Industry employment is expected to grow by 32,760 positions by 2020.⁶⁵

Sub-provincial Trends

Close to half of retail employment is found in the **Toronto** economic region with another tenth in each of the **Hamilton–Niagara Peninsula**, **Kitchener–Waterloo–Barrie**, and **Ottawa** economic regions (ER).⁶⁶ Large changes across the industry are therefore likely to affect these regions more. However, retail openings and closures within an ER are likely to have a sharper impact where local employment is more concentrated in the industry. ERs with higher concentrations are **Stratford–Bruce Peninsula**, **Northwest**, **Muskoka–Kawarths**, and **London**.⁶⁷

A number of significant and recent retail closures will impact Ontario's ERs over the forecast period. The majority of Sears Canada locations lost in the company's restructuring plan in 2017 were located in small urban and rural areas.⁶⁸ Smaller urban centres and rural areas are less able to absorb the employment loss due to decreased potential for alternative retailers to enter the market. Shortly after undergoing a hiring campaign in early 2018,⁶⁹ Lowe's Canada announced an ongoing strategic reassessment that resulted in the closure of nine underperforming stores in Ontario under the Lowe's and RONA brands.⁷⁰ Three of the closures were located in northern Ontario, which is uniquely challenging. Traditionally, northern communities have a slightly greater reliance on retail trade to support overall employment than southern regions in Ontario.⁷¹

The distribution of retail establishment size in terms of number of employees also varied somewhat across ERs. By the end of 2017 for example, **Toronto's** population and density meant that about two-thirds of the companies in Ontario with 500 or more employees were located in the region as well half as those with 1 to 4 employees.⁷² However, **Ottawa** had the highest proportion of medium-sized businesses (100 – 499 employees), while **Hamilton-Niagara Peninsula** had the highest proportion of large-sized businesses (those with 500 or more employees), compared to the other regions. Both the **Northeast** and the **Northwest** regions had the largest proportions of small businesses (5-99 employees) compared to the other ERs. Across Ontario, most retail establishments (about 47%) were single-run businesses or had an undetermined number of employees.⁷³

Retail employment growth is expected to vary somewhat across the province. Due to their proximity to the U.S. border, the retail sectors in the **Hamilton-Niagara Peninsula** and **Windsor-Sarnia** regions may stand to benefit from the strengthening U.S. economy and lower CAD, which is likely to increase U.S. tourism and spending in border communities. The legalization of cannabis is expected to have a positive impact on the retail sector over the forecast period. In particular, regions with physical retail cannabis stores may see an increase in foreign tourism when retail stores are rolled out after April 1, 2019,^{74,75} and again when edible cannabis products are legal in late 2019.⁷⁶ **Toronto** and **Kitchener-Waterloo-Barrie's** relatively young and fast growing populations, as well as their robust economies, will likely contribute further to employment growth in their retail sectors in the 2018-2020 forecast period. Communities with a growing young adult population, which includes **London**, may support increased retail spending on family essentials. The **Northeast** economic region's population has been in decline over the last several years which is likely to temper growth in the industry. The number of youth aged 15-24 has steadily decreased year-over-year, while those aged 70+ has increased. However, in general, more rural areas with declining or stagnant populations, such as in the **Northwest**, **Windsor-Sarnia** and **Stratford-Bruce Peninsula**, will likely see fewer employment opportunities in the sector.⁷⁷ Employment in tourism-dependent economic regions, such as **Kingston-Pembroke** and **Muskoka-Kawarths**, may be supported by stronger international consumer confidence and a weaker CAD.

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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- ⁷¹ As of October 2018 (IND823.IVT)- In the Northeast, the retail trade industry accounts for about 12.6% of employment, and the Northwest 13.3%. In the Toronto region for example, retail accounts for 11.3%, Kitchener-Waterloo-Barrie sits at about 10.2%, and most other regions hover around 12%.
- ⁷² Statistics Canada, December 2017 Establishment Counts by ER, NAICS, and Employee Size Ranges: comparisons relative to each ER's share of total firms; 1 -4 category also includes the '0' indeterminate number of employees.
- ⁷³ Statistics Canada, December 2017 Establishment Counts by ER, NAICS, and Employee Size Ranges: comparisons relative to each ER's share of total firms
- ⁷⁴ George-Cosh, D. (2018, August 21). Canada could eventually get \$2B boost from pot tourism: Expert. *BNN Bloomberg*. Retrieved from <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/canada-could-eventually-get-2b-boost-from-marijuana-tourism-expert-1.1126567>
- ⁷⁵ Finance Minister. (2018, October 17). Statement from the Finance Minister on the Passage of the Cannabis Statute Law Amendment Act, 2018. *Ontario Government*. Retrieved from <https://news.ontario.ca/mof/en/2018/10/statement-from-the-finance-minister-on-the-passage-of-the-cannabis-statute-law-amendment-act-2018.html>
- ⁷⁶ Department of Justice. (2018). Cannabis Legalization and Regulation. Retrieved from <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/cj-jp/cannabis/>
- ⁷⁷ Statistics Canada. Table 17-10-0081-01 Annual demographic estimates by economic region, age and sex, based on the Standard Geographical Classification (SGC) 2011. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1710008101>