

GETTING THE LOWDOWN ON EMPLOYMENT

Rahul Gupta

A report from the Centre for Urban Research and Land Development (CUR) at **Toronto Metropolitan University** (TMU) is renewing calls for the **Province of Ontario** to lead coordination of an annual employment survey for Greater Golden Horseshoe municipalities.

Advocates for the value of employment surveys say they help identify existing job growth on a local scale. However, currently, the task of undertaking employment surveys is left entirely to individual municipalities, resulting in a piecemeal process that often results in missing or unreliable data and infrequent reporting schedules, the CUR report finds. Meanwhile, a number of Ontario regional municipalities that conducted annual employment surveys in the past are examining how to resume a more frequent schedule of employment surveys now that the most significant disruptions of the pandemic appear to be largely behind us.

Published in mid-October, CUR's "The Case Strengthens for an Annual Employment Survey of the Greater Golden Horseshoe", is the fourth in an

annual series of reports dating back to before the pandemic that compiles data collected from municipal employment surveys as well as from Census area estimates in an effort to locate and quantify employment growth.

Analyzing employment survey data from 2019, as well as the early pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, the report finds that compared to the Greater Toronto Area municipalities, the Greater Golden Horseshoe had more stable overall employment numbers during the pandemic at a time when hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost as a result of lockdowns and other measures undertaken to curb the spread of COVID-19. Job growth in the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) would eventually return to pre-pandemic levels in mid-2021, and has stayed relatively stable ever since.

But the report also finds that over the course of the pandemic, very few municipalities in the GGH — with the exceptions of the **City of Toronto** and **Halton Region** — were able to organize regular employment surveys for those challenging years, leading to gaps in local employment data that ultimately present analysts with an unreliable regional snapshot of changes in employment in various municipalities from 2019 to 2021, study author and CUR senior research fellow **Frank Clayton** says. Clayton believes that if the province takes the lead on establishing a region-wide employment survey, it could convey a more accurate picture of employment in the Greater Golden Horseshoe and other regions.

"The province should be very invested in this because they are already monitoring municipal growth policies and

population projections," Clayton told *NRU*, noting private sector companies are not likely to be interested in undertaking such a Horseshoe-wide survey or if they were interested, they would likely be too expensive for municipalities to hire for carrying out the survey work.

In a statement, Ontario **Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development** spokesperson **Jennifer Rushby** said the province is working closely with **Statistics Canada**, municipalities and other stakeholders to ensure

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Figure 1: GGH Employment Change* by Geographic Sub-area, January 2019-June 2022



Infographic showing year-to-year changes in employment in Southern Ontario's Greater Golden Horseshoe region between January 2019 and May 2022 as compared to geographic 'sub-areas' such as the Greater Toronto Area. The data is part of a report by Frank Clayton of the Centre of Urban Research and Land Development at Toronto Metropolitan University that examines recent Ontario employment data collected through a variety of sources, including census estimates and municipal surveys of local employers. Clayton is advocating for a provincially coordinated annual Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) municipal employment survey to ensure better standardization of employment data and more reliable and complete information on municipal employment growth in Ontario's GGH.

SOURCE: CENTRE FOR URBAN RESEARCH AND LAND DEVELOPMENT, TORONTO METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

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better access to reliable employment data.

“To this end, the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development is working with local planning boards in the GGH (and across the province) to improve Labour Market Information (LMI) and local workforce planning,” Rushby told *NRU*. “We will provide an update on this initiative in the coming months.”

Hemson Consulting partner **Russell Mathew** has some 35 years of experience preparing growth forecasts, long-range strategic plans and other research for a wide list of municipal as well as provincial clients. According to Mathew, the information collected by municipalities for employment surveys tends to be fairly standardized. However, Mathew notes that he sees wide variations by municipality in the amount of employment data made public and the frequency of reporting. Those variations have only grown more significant during the pandemic.

“I’ve noticed several regional municipalities have gone to reporting every second year, Mathew told *NRU*. “It’s not quite the same as what you would get [pre-pandemic], but they basically did the best they could in a very difficult circumstance.”

But Mathew isn’t convinced that reporting of employment numbers would improve even with more guidance shown by the province for conducting surveys. He thinks that in its zeal for efficiency, the province might fold in employment data with other data collection efforts that might result in skewed findings that misrepresent the regional picture for employment.

“There’s always a risk of that,” Mathew said.

In response to the pandemic, **York Region** reduced its employment survey data collection to every two years instead of undertaking the survey annually, as was the case pre-COVID. In the years during the pandemic that employment surveys were carried out in York Region, they consisted of door-to-door interviews with businesses between May and August. Attempts were made to follow up with missed or closed businesses and missed respondents can now complete surveys online. Questions asked include the type of business, number of employees, whether they work in-person or remotely and contact information.

“Once collected, the data is verified, checked for accuracy, and compiled over the fall months,” York Region manager for policy, research and fore-

casting **Paul Bottomley** said in a statement to *NRU*.

York Region’s most recent employment survey effort ended in September according to Bottomley, with the region working on processing and analyzing the results now. Early survey findings suggest a high turnover in York Region businesses since the last employment survey was completed in 2019, and growth in the professional, scientific and technical services job sectors, along with construction and real estate.

Inversely, York Region employment in the arts, entertainment, recreation, and food services sectors has dropped. All of these sectors were hard hit across the country during the pandemic due to public health measures restricting the assembly of large groups of people in public indoor settings.

“A comprehensive data analysis and comparison will be published in the 2022 Employment & Industry Report in Spring 2023,” Bottomley said, noting that Regional staff is reviewing the merits for reinstating an annual employment survey.

“Results will be announced following internal discussions and consultation with our local municipal partners over the coming months.”

Until recently, **Niagara Region** had not conducted an employment survey since the start of the pandemic due to safety and logistical concerns, but as recently as 2019, the survey was conducted annually. According to Niagara Region manager for long-range planning **David**

Heyworth, this year, the Region opted to resume employment data collection, returning to its pre-pandemic practice of recruiting post-secondary students to conduct the surveys.

“The Region’s team of post-secondary students visited over 12,000 businesses in person during the months of May to September. The team conducted door-to-door interviews with local business contacts across all twelve local municipalities to collect data on the types and sizes of businesses operating in Niagara,” Heyworth told *NRU* in an email. “Responses were also collected through the Region’s automated e-mail campaign.”

Like York Region, Niagara Region is planning to issue a report on the findings of its employment survey in 2023, Heyworth said.

“The data collected has become vital to monitoring the Region’s economic health, as well as aiding in decision and policy making.”

Mathew believes that when it comes to uncovering jobs, the data collected by municipalities will always be more accurate than census estimates or other surveys.

“They are quite nimble in what they are able to do,” Mathew said.

To read CUR’s full report recommending instituting a provincially-coordinated annual employment survey for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, please visit the TMU website [here](#). 🌱