

Unemployment and underemployment statistics for December 2020 – February 2021

According to the latest labour force statistics (i.e. provisional figures for December 2020 – February 2021) released today (March 16) by the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD), the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate increased from 7.0% in November 2020 – January 2021 to 7.2% in December 2020 – February 2021. The underemployment rate also increased from 3.8% in November 2020 – January 2021 to 4.0% in December 2020 – February 2021.

Comparing December 2020 – February 2021 with November 2020 – January 2021, the unemployment rate (not seasonally adjusted) increased across almost all the major economic sectors, with more distinct increases observed in the import and export trade sector; postal and courier activities sector; education sector; and arts, entertainment and recreation sector. As to the underemployment rate, increases were mainly seen in the retail sector; food and beverage service activities sector; and arts, entertainment and recreation sector.

Total employment decreased by around 20 500 from 3 630 600 in November 2020 – January 2021 to 3 610 100 in December 2020 – February 2021. Over the same period, the labour force also decreased by around 12 300 from 3 884 000 to 3 871 700.

The number of unemployed persons (not seasonally adjusted) increased by around 8 300 from 253 300 in November 2020 – January 2021 to 261 600 in December 2020 – February 2021. Over the same period, the number of underemployed persons also increased by around 6 400 from 148 200 to 154 600.

Commentary

Commenting on the latest unemployment figures, the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, said, "The labour market remained under notable pressure in December 2020 – February 2021. However, the situation tended to stabilise in the latter part of the three-month period alongside the improvement in epidemic situation. The unemployment rate (not seasonally adjusted) rose by 0.3 percentage point over November 2020 – January 2021 to 6.8% in December 2020 – February 2021, and after seasonal adjustment it rose by 0.2 percentage point to 7.2%. Both are the highest since 2004. The underemployment rate also increased by 0.2 percentage point to a post-SARS high of 4.0%. Meanwhile, total employment fell by 0.6% from the preceding three-month period to 3 610 100, and the number of unemployed persons increased by 3.3% to 261 600.

"Analysed by sector, the unemployment rate of the consumption- and tourism-related sectors (viz. retail, accommodation and food services

sectors) combined stayed elevated at 11.1% in December 2020 – February 2021, but it was 0.2 percentage point lower than November 2020 – January 2021. Among these sectors, the unemployment rate for food and beverage service activities declined from 14.7% to 14.1%, while that of the retail sector rose from 8.9% to 9.1%. The unemployment situation in most other sectors deteriorated, particularly in import and export trade; postal and courier activities; education; and arts, entertainment and recreation."

Looking ahead, Dr Law said, "The labour market will still face challenges in the near term as the epidemic has yet to be fully contained and inbound tourism remains frozen. With the launch of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme, the threat of the epidemic may gradually recede and this will help ease the pressure on the labour market later in the year. The Government will continue to monitor the situation closely."

He noted that the Youth Employment and Training Programme of the Labour Department (LD) continues to implement the employment project Career Kick-start which targets at young people with special needs in the 2020/21 programme year. Participating non-governmental organisations will receive subsidy from the Government in offering 12-month on-the-job training to the trainees with a view to enhancing their employability. In order to allow more young people in need to benefit from the project, the eligibility criteria of prolonged unemployment has been relaxed in this new phase. Furthermore, the Greater Bay Area Youth Employment Scheme has been launched, providing 2 000 on-the-job training places for university graduates.

On large-scale job fairs, the LD will organise the Greater Bay Area Youth Employment Scheme Job Expo on March 23 and 24, 2021 at the MacPherson Stadium with a virtual job fair launched in parallel. Over 30 employers participating in the Greater Bay Area Youth Employment Scheme will participate. Meanwhile, the LD continues to receive and release information on vacancies from various industries. In February 2021, the LD recorded a total of 56 227 vacancies from the private sector, representing an increase of 28.2% over the figure in January 2021 and a year-on-year increase of 57.1%. Job-seekers may make use of the LD's online platforms such as the Interactive Employment Service website for obtaining such vacancy information.

Further information

The unemployment and underemployment statistics were compiled from the findings of the continuous General Household Survey.

The survey for December 2020 – February 2021 covered a sample of some 26 000 households or 74 000 persons, selected in accordance with a scientifically designed sampling scheme to represent the population of Hong Kong. Labour force statistics compiled from this sample represented the situation in the moving three-month period of December 2020 to February 2021.

Data on labour force characteristics were obtained from the survey by interviewing each member aged 15 or over in the sampled households.

In the survey, the definitions used in measuring unemployment and underemployment follow closely those recommended by the International Labour Organization.

Statistical tables on the latest labour force statistics can be downloaded at the website of the C&SD (www.censtatd.gov.hk/hkstat/sub/sp200.jsp?productCode=D5250021). More detailed analysis of the labour force characteristics is given in the "Quarterly Report on General Household Survey" which is published four times a year. The latest issue of the publication contains statistics for the quarter October – December 2020 while the next issue covering the quarter January – March 2021 will be available by end May 2021. Users can also download this publication at the website of the C&SD (www.censtatd.gov.hk/hkstat/sub/sp200.jsp?productCode=B1050001).

For enquiries about labour force statistics, please contact the Household Statistics Analysis Section of the C&SD (Tel: 2887 5508 or email: ghs@censtatd.gov.hk).