

Deep Dish #12
Results from the FRESHER Employee and Employer Survey
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Insert picture here: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/baked-pies-and-bread-in-baskets-4916562/>

As part of our study of the effects of COVID-19 on the food retail and food hospitality sector across Ontario, we surveyed employers and employees to understand the effect that the pandemic had on their employment status and personal well-being.

We had 490 completed surveys from June 2020 to June 2021: 290 from employees, and 200 from employers. Participants were working across all sectors of the industry, and represented fast food outlets, restaurant, bars and pubs, grocery and convenience stores. Of the participants, 53.5% were women.

Our survey results revealed a lot about financial hardship during the pandemic. Half of our sample (50%) experienced decreased weekly earnings, and over half of the sample (55.8%) had decreased hours of work. Over one-third (36.6%) of employees felt 'some' or 'a lot of' pressure to go to work sick or unwell.

As a result of decreased hours and income, many participants indicated that they were worried about being able to afford housing and food. Approximately 25% of participants overall were concerned about housing, and 10% worried about being able to afford food; the numbers show that more employees than employers reported these concerns. A restaurant worker Windsor, ON, said the following in the Spring of 2021: *"I have been laid off 7 of the last 12 months. Financially this has been pretty dramatic, pretty catastrophic"*

Insert picture here: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/coffee-and-clipboard-with-pen-in-therapist-office-5699516/>

Food hospitality businesses frequently had little or no warning of the rotating lockdowns put in place by the provincial government to control the spread of COVID-19. This inability for employers and business owners to plan for lockdowns caused substantial food waste and revenue loss. Consequently, many business owners reported major declines in business performance during the pandemic – more than 60% that had reported having excellent or 'good' performance pre-pandemic, reported that their performance had declined to 'satisfactory', or 'poor'. A restaurant owner in London, ON, reported in the Summer of 2020 that: "*...our sales dropped to 7% of a normal month...and this business has been profitable for 12 years.*"

Our survey also asked questions to learn about employee and employer wellbeing. Many employees experienced increased emotional and physical exhaustion throughout the pandemic as the demands placed upon them by both the public and their employers escalated. We asked the participants about changes in physical health, sleep quality, and mental health during the pandemic. Most participants reported slight declines in all three of these measures, with 37.2% reporting a 'great' or 'slight' decline in physical health, 47.7% reporting a 'great' or 'slight' decline in sleep quality, and 53.1% reporting a 'great' or 'slight' decline in mental health. Employers and owners were also under considerable pressure due to dealing with decreased revenues, mounting debt, and laying off staff.

Change in...	Greatly improved %	Slightly improved %	Stayed the same %	Slightly declined %	Greatly declined %	No response %
Physical Health						
Employees	4.5	11.7	32.4	29.7	9.3	12.4
Employers	2.5	10.5	31.5	25.5	9.0	21.0
All Types	3.7	11.2	32.0	28.0	9.2	16.0
Sleep Quality						
Employees	5.2	12.8	26.6	31.7	14.8	9.0
Employers	0.5	7.0	23.5	32.5	17.0	19.5
All Types	3.3	10.4	25.3	32.0	15.7	13.3
Mental Health						
Employees	4.1	5.2	23.5	43.8	14.5	9.0
Employers	0.5	7.5	27.0	35.5	10.0	19.5
All Types	2.7	6.1	25.0	40.4	12.7	13.3

Infrastructure was a major theme that came up in the interviews and surveys. Physical (e.g., patios) and digital infrastructure (e.g., new websites or ordering systems) changes were necessary during the pandemic for businesses to survive. This move resulted in unexpected costs, but those who had such systems already in place had less 'catching up' to do. Rotating lockdowns often made these changes and investments unexpectedly useless and ineffective, leading to even more strain. Those lucky enough to have existing or space for new patios were able to pivot and keep revenue coming in, despite indoor dining bans.

Twenty-six percent of participant employers reported that they began their delivery service because of the pandemic, and 32% reported that they began an online ordering and pickup service during the pandemic. Many businesses began to offer both services as a way of building business.

Finally, we asked participants where they saw themselves in a year. Most employers (63.8%) saw themselves remaining in the sector, and many reported having increased their own work hours and being more 'hands-on' by taking over activities that were once done by part-time staff. Conversely, many employees expressed a desire to find a job outside of the industry with 46.7% indicating a likeliness to do this within one year. Additionally reported 46.9% that they were thinking about going back to school, and 22.9% reported that they were contemplating retirement. These findings may explain the labour shortages many businesses are currently experiencing.