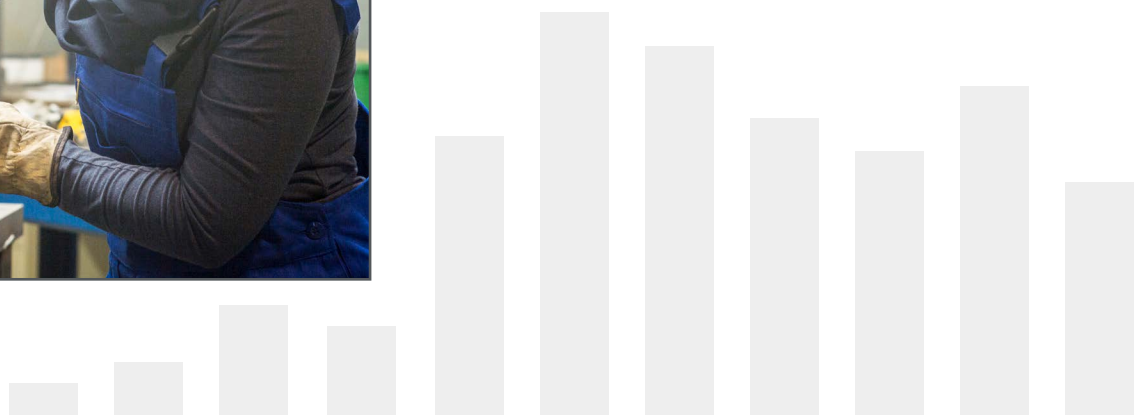




United Way
East Ontario

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN: BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR UNDERREPRESENTED YOUTH IN EAST ONTARIO





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Glossary of Terms

Employment Rate

The employment rate is the percentage of a given population, generally aged 15 and older, who are employed at the time of data collection. This includes full- and part-time workers as well as individuals who are employed and on leave (e.g. short-term disability leave, vacation, sick leave) (Statistics Canada, 2007). As this report focuses on youth, it often provides employment rates that are specific to youth aged 15 to 24.

Intergenerational Trauma

Intergenerational trauma refers to the passing on of trauma-related stress between generations, particularly within Indigenous communities harmed by colonial institutions and actions such as residential schools and forced displacement. These traumatic events affect not only the individuals who experienced them, but also their families and communities for generations to come. Intergenerational trauma can manifest as depression, anxiety, addiction, and other mental health concerns.

2SLGBTQ+

2SLGBTQ+ is an acronym used to designate those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two-spirit, or another marginalized sexual orientation or gender identity (e.g. asexual or non-binary). Other acronyms may be used to describe this community, such as LGBT, LGBTQIA (to include intersex and asexual people), but this report uses 2SLGBTQ+ throughout for the sake of consistency.

Additional information on each of these terms and identities is available in both French and English from Egalé (n.d.) in its “LGBTQI2S Glossary of Terms.”

Participation Rate

The participation rate of a given population includes those who are employed or unemployed (see the definition of unemployment rate). This reflects the proportion of the population currently working or actively seeking employment (Statistics Canada, 2007).

Trans*

Trans* is an umbrella term used to identify not only transgender individuals, but also those who may identify with the term transsexual and those who fall outside of the gender binary in general, such as those with non-binary, gender fluid, and agender identities (Steinmetz, 2018).

Unemployment Rate

The unemployment rate is the percentage of a given population, generally aged 15 and older, who is not currently employed but is actively seeking work and is available to work. This rate does not include people who are not working and are not seeking employment (e.g. retirees or individuals who are unable to work due to medical conditions) (Statistics Canada, 2007).

Visible Minority

Statistics Canada (2015) uses the “visible minority” definition from the Employment Equity Act, which includes “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” (Employment Equity Act, 1995).

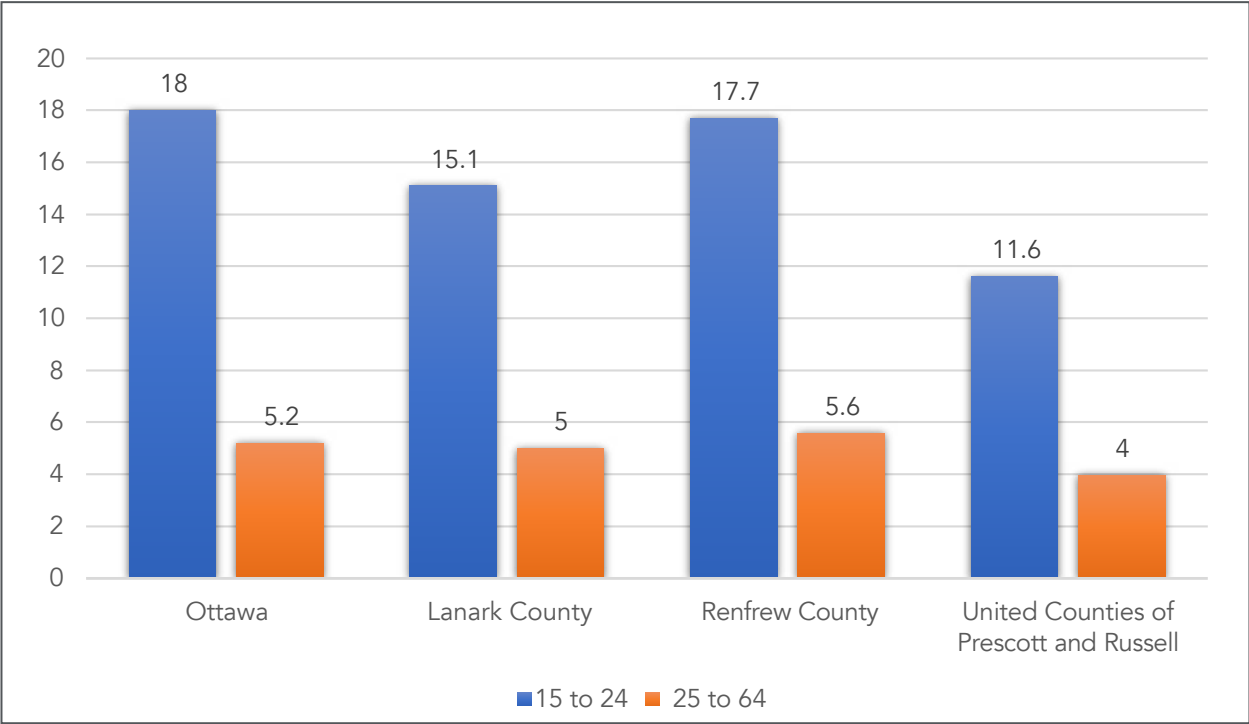
Work-Integrated Learning

A work-integrated learning program embeds practical workplace experiences within an academic program of study. Examples include apprenticeships, co-ops, clinical placements, and internships that are built into an academic workload.

Introduction

Youth unemployment has long been a concern in communities across East Ontario. In 2016, the unemployment rate for youth aged 15 to 24 years was approximately triple that of individuals aged 25 to 64 years in every region (Statistics Canada, 2017b).

Figure 1: Unemployment Rates by Age

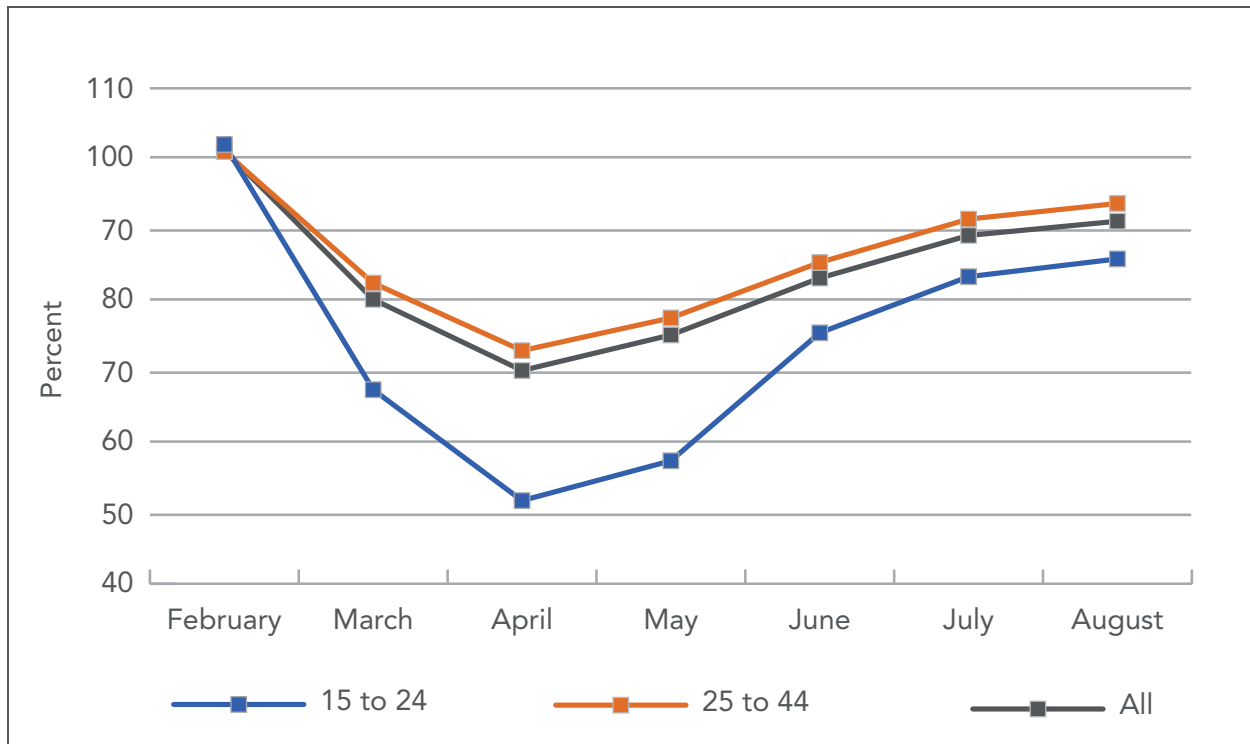


Source: "Focus on Geography Series, 2016 Census" (Statistics Canada, 2017b).

Young workers are more likely to hold unstable jobs that do not offer full-time hours or benefits, particularly in the retail, food service, and accommodations sectors (Ottawa Employment Hub, 2018). When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, these young workers bore a disproportionate burden of the economic consequences.

The industries that rely on a younger workforce also saw the highest levels of unemployment in the early months of the pandemic due to forced shutdowns and reduced revenues (Statistics Canada, 2020b). Canadians aged 15 to 24 saw a much sharper decline in employment and a slower rate of recovery than did older adults in the workforce (Statistics Canada, 2020b).

Figure 2: Percentage Change in the Proportion of Population Employed and Working at Least Half of Their Usual Hours by Age (February to August 2020)



Source: "Economic Impacts and Recovery Related to the Pandemic" (Statistics Canada, 2020b).

In 2021 and beyond, a successful and equitable economic recovery will rely on improved supports (social, educational, financial, etc.) and structures that serve youth in our communities. Many of the industries that laid off employees during the early months of the pandemic are also most likely to report they are planning to hire more employees in the near future (Zizys, 2020). Connecting job seekers with these openings will require educators, job seekers, service providers, and employers to align to ensure that youth have the tools, knowledge, and skills to succeed in their local labour market and in their future careers.

Methodology

In order to understand the underlying issues and barriers youth face in their journey to employment, this report relies on both the wealth of existing data and research in this field and primary research conducted through conversations and focus groups with local stakeholders, including employers, employment service providers, and interested community members in Ottawa, Lanark County, Renfrew County, and the United Counties of Prescott and Russell. This report also incorporates data from a survey of local youth conducted by the Ottawa Employment Hub in the spring of 2020, which has not been formally published.

Focusing on Marginalized Youth

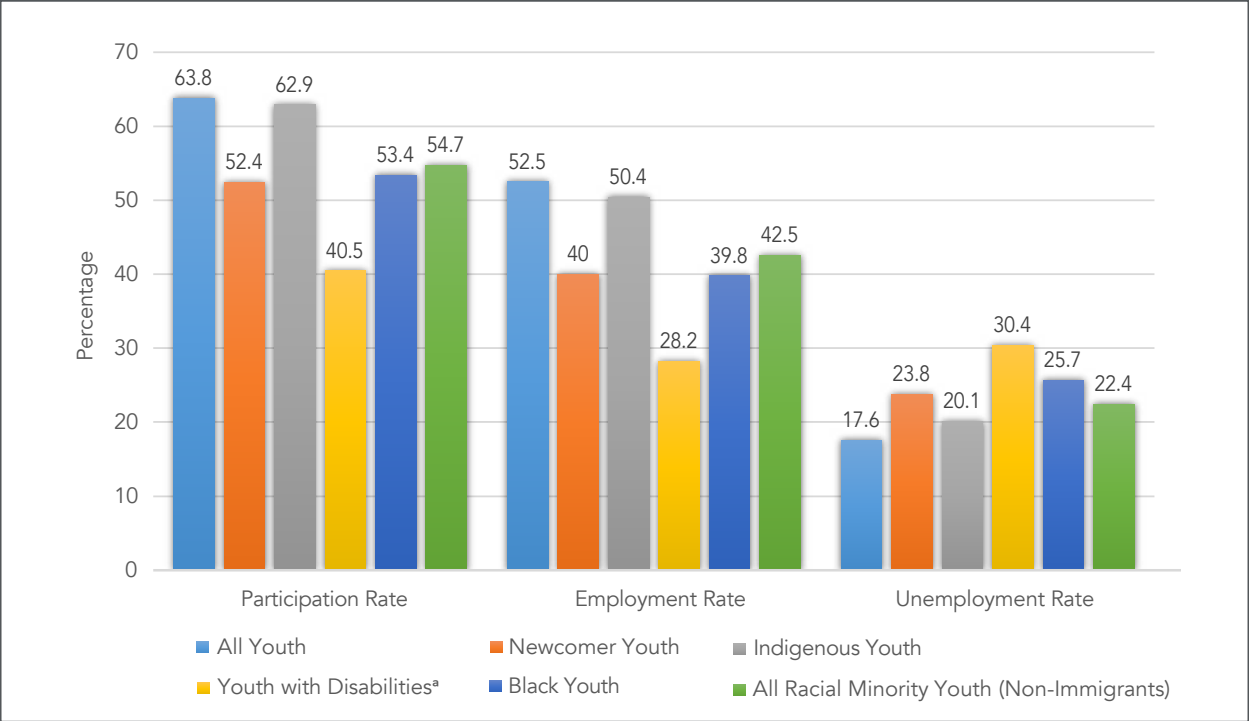
In this report, we focus specifically on youth who face additional barriers in their journey to employment. Understanding and addressing the needs of these young people will help improve overall youth employment and ensure that programs and strategies are created to engage those who can benefit the most. This report focuses on how different players in our communities across East Ontario can recognize and eliminate barriers rather than asking marginalized youth to shoulder the additional burden of surmounting them.

For purposes of data collection and research, it is important to define “marginalized youth.” Generally, 15 to 24 years is the age range that is used for data collected on youth, or 15 to 29 years for youth with disabilities. However, this range varies by research body, so it will be noted whenever data applies to a different age group.

Defining “marginalized” is more complex. Several marginalized identity categories are outlined below, along with the relevant employment statistics that demonstrate the existence of an employment gap for these groups compared with their peers. Yet it is important to note that this list is in no way exhaustive, and it would be reductive to paint everyone in any given category with the same broad brush. We cannot ignore the impact of intersectional identities across race, wealth, ability, and other factors on an individual’s experience in the world.

Local employment data demonstrates the need for action to improve opportunities, access, and employment outcomes for youth with disabilities, Indigenous youth, newcomer youth, and racialized youth, particularly Black youth. Figure 3 shows a gap not only in employment, but also in the participation rates for these populations—whether employed or actively searching for work—and whether they participate in the labour market at all.

Figure 3: Labour Market Participation Among Marginalized Youth — Ottawa

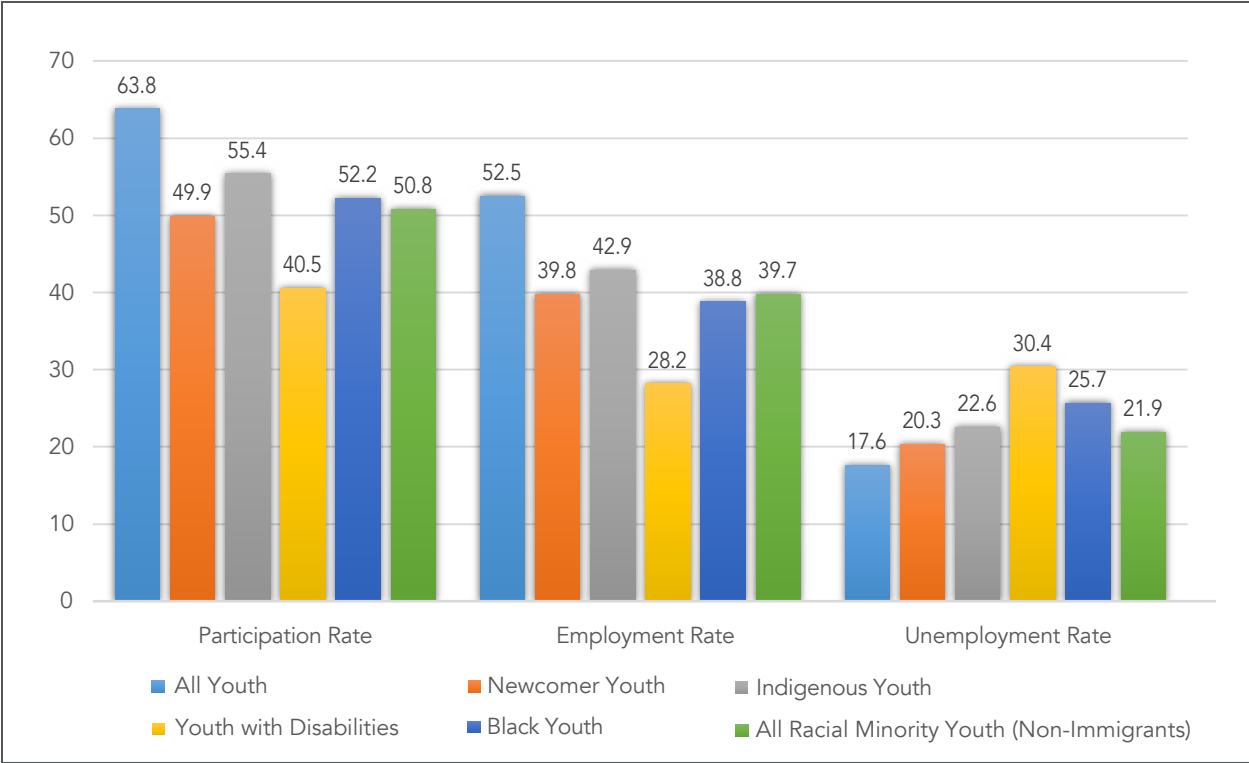


^a Youth with disabilities data is collected for all of Ontario.

Sources: “Community Labour Market Plan” (Ottawa Employment Hub, 2018); “Data Tables, 2016 Census” (Statistics Canada, 2017a).

Although data for these populations is not reported for every community in East Ontario, due to small sample sizes and to protect individual confidentiality, province-wide data suggests low labour market participation among marginalized youth is not solely an urban problem. Conversations with regional partners in East Ontario’s rural communities also confirmed that marginalized youth face challenges in the labour market regardless of geography.

Figure 4: Labour Market Participation Among Marginalized Youth — Ontario



Source: “Data Tables, 2016 Census” (Statistics Canada, 2017b).

While these numbers alone cannot tell the whole story, they are a useful starting point for a deeper understanding of where community support is most needed.

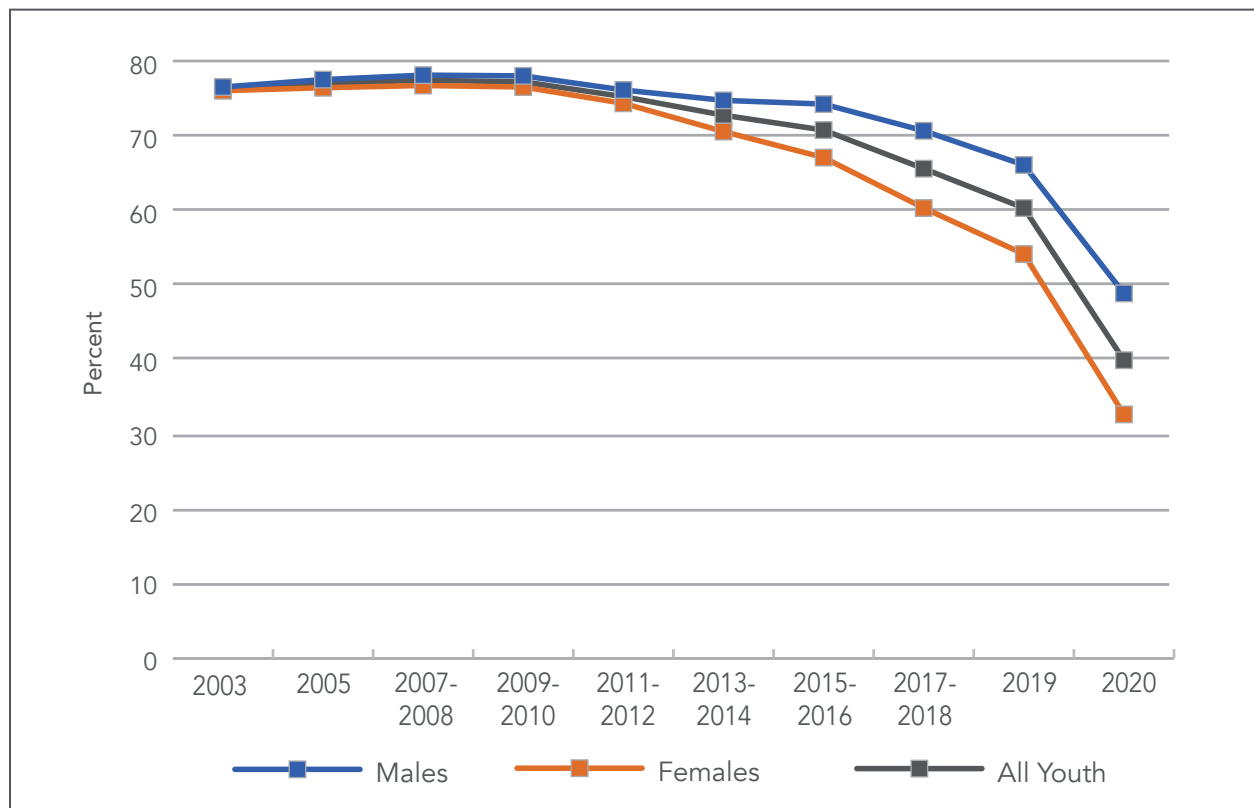
Youth with Disabilities

Previous research by United Way East Ontario has discussed the employment gap for individuals with disabilities, including both youth and adults (United Way East Ontario, 2020). In 2016, the employment rate among adults aged 25 to 64 years was 80.1 per cent for those without disabilities, whereas it was just 59.4 per cent for adults with disabilities (Morris et al., 2018). Furthermore, the gap widens significantly as the severity of disability increases. Those who rated their disability as mild had an employment rate of 75.6 per cent compared with those with very severe disabilities at 31.3 per cent (Morris et al., 2018).

Part of this gap may come from barriers in the education system. A recent Ottawa Employment Hub report found that people with disabilities were less likely than their peers without disabilities to have completed high school (80 per cent of those with disabilities completed high school versus 90 per cent for those without disabilities) or university degrees (16 per cent of those with disabilities obtained a degree versus 31 per cent of those without disabilities) (Ottawa Employment Hub, 2019). This holds true even when accounting for the age difference between these populations, given that older individuals are more likely to have a disability due to age-related conditions that often cause pain and affect mobility.

Within this greater population of persons with disabilities, it is important to note the particular characteristics of disability among youth. A total of 60 per cent of youth with a disability have a mental health-related disability compared with 7 per cent of all people with a disability aged 15 years or older (Morris et al., 2018). Young women are also disproportionately affected; the prevalence of mental health-related disability is twice as high for women aged 15 to 24 years compared with men in that age group (Morris et al., 2018). Unfortunately, the quality of the mental health of Canadian youth has been in decline over the past several years, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened this trend. Service providers shared that the youth they interact with also face the added pressures of social media and having a high level of connectivity with their peers. These platforms are often focused on highlighting positivity, which can create an illusion of isolation for individuals who are struggling. In the summer of 2020, only 40 per cent of youth aged 15 to 30 rated their mental health as very good or excellent (Garriguet, 2021).

Figure 5: Percentage of Canadian Youth Aged 15 to 30 Years Reporting “Very Good” or “Excellent” Mental Health



Source: “Portrait of Youth in Canada” (Garriguet, 2021).

The barriers to both education and employment for youth with disabilities have a stark effect. One in three youth with a severe disability are neither working nor studying in school; however, 77 per cent of this group were identified as having the potential to work (Morris et al., 2018). This suggests these youth could be successfully integrated into the labour market if given the right supports, guidance, and opportunities.

2SLGBTQ+ Youth

Employment data for youth in the 2SLGBTQ+ community is difficult to quantify, as many statistical surveys, such as the census, do not collect detailed information on sexual orientation or gender identities beyond the binary male/female. However, surveys of the 2SLGBTQ+ community reveal some distinct trends and concerns about the difficulty of finding stable employment. For instance:

- 2SLGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to be self-employed and unsalaried than those who are not part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community (CROP, 2017).
- Bisexual and trans* people are over-represented among low-income Canadians. A 2010 Ontario study found that as much as half of the trans population was living on less than \$15,000 a year (Canadian Mental Health Association, n.d.).
- 2SLGBTQ+ Ontarians are more likely than those in other provinces to move out of communities because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (CROP, 2017). This can lead to increased difficulties in finding new professional networks and contacts in a new location.
- Approximately one-third of gay, lesbian, and bisexual respondents surveyed in a 2014 Canadian study reported experiencing some form of discrimination within the previous five years, with the workplace being the most common environment for this discrimination (as cited by Camilleri, 2018).

Indigenous Youth

Statistics on Indigenous youth employment can be difficult to pin down, as the census is known to undercount Indigenous people, particularly in urban areas (Ottawa Employment Hub, 2018). Yet even with this caveat, there is a higher unemployment rate for Indigenous youth in Ottawa (20.1 per cent) compared with the overall youth population (17.6 per cent) (Ottawa Employment Hub, 2018).

An in-depth report published in 2019 provides a better look at the Indigenous youth population across Canada. There is a clear correlation between higher employment rates and higher levels of education, including post-secondary degrees (National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2019). However, Indigenous youth have lower rates of high school completion and post-secondary attendance, due in many cases to barriers in accessing education, lack of local opportunities, and lack of funding to pursue higher education (National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2019). Importantly, not all Indigenous youth are impacted by these barriers equally. Graduation rates for Métis youth have increased significantly in recent years and are approaching the rates for non-Indigenous youth. The same is not true for First Nations and Inuit youth. In Ottawa, the unemployment rate for Inuit youth in 2016 was more than twice that of either First Nations or Métis youth, and was the only one of the three rates to increase from 2006 (Ottawa Employment Hub, 2018).

Engaging Indigenous youth in the workforce should be a critical element of employers' recruitment, retention, and talent-management strategies. Given that the average age of the Indigenous population is eight years younger than non-Indigenous Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2017b), Indigenous youth will make up a large proportion of the next generation of workers and will be key to fulfilling the needs of the labour market.

Black and Racialized Youth

Data about the economic well-being of racialized youth and adults in Canada paints a stark picture.

An analysis of the 2016 census reveals that 26.3 per cent of visible minorities aged 18 to 24 are classified as low income, compared with 13.1 percent of their non-visible minority peers. (Statistics Canada, 2017a). In Ottawa, the gap is even wider: 32.7 per cent of the visible minority population is classified as low income compared with 13.4 per cent of non-visible minorities (Statistics Canada, 2017). A similar trend can be seen in the relative unemployment rates for Ontarian youth aged 15 to 24: 21.6 per cent of visible minorities were unemployed, compared with 16 per cent of non-visible minorities (Statistics Canada, 2017). While more education does help to reduce the unemployment rate for all youth, it does not address the racialized gap: visible minorities with a university degree had an employment rate equal to non-visible minorities with no degree or diploma.

Within the racialized youth population in Ottawa, Black youth make up the largest proportion (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Recent research focused on the Black community has shown that Black youth face additional barriers and stigmas within society even compared to other racialized youth. This begins from a young age, as Black children are 2.5 to 3 times more likely than other children to be classified as low income (Houle, 2020). As they get older, Black youth show a strong desire to pursue higher education, but many are doubtful that they will. In fact, 94 per cent of Black youth aged 15 to 25 reported they would like to get a post-secondary degree, but only 60 per cent thought they could do so (Statistics Canada, 2021). Not only is this gap far wider than the gap for non-Black youth but, in fact, it indicates that Black youth are more interested in pursuing post-secondary degrees than non-Black youth, just 82 per cent of whom report desiring a degree (Statistics Canada, 2021).

An analysis of 2016 census data found that Black youth were less likely than their peers to have earned a post-secondary degree, even when accounting for differences in socioeconomic status and family characteristics (Turcotte, 2020). This suggests that the issue is something not captured by census data but, rather, reflects societal discrimination and racism. Such discrimination and racism translates into fewer opportunities and continued barriers to entering the labour market as an adult. In the Ottawa-Gatineau region, the median annual wage for Black adult workers was \$23,000 less than the rest of the population. Unemployment rates for Black adults was more than twice that of non-Black adults (Statistics Canada, 2020a). The gap is particularly pronounced for men, as young Black men were nearly twice as likely as other young men to be unemployed or not participating in education or training, even when accounting for socioeconomic factors (Turcotte, 2020).

More recent data suggests the tide might be turning with regard to post-secondary education. Data from the Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey conducted in 2020 found that 42.8 per cent of Black Canadians aged 25 to 54 held a bachelor's degree or higher, a significant increase from 2016 and far more than the 33.6 per cent of non-visible minorities who held these degrees in 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2021). However, the increase in education has not yet corresponded with improved outcomes in employment or income. Black Canadians continue to be underrepresented in management and have been disproportionately unemployed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2021).

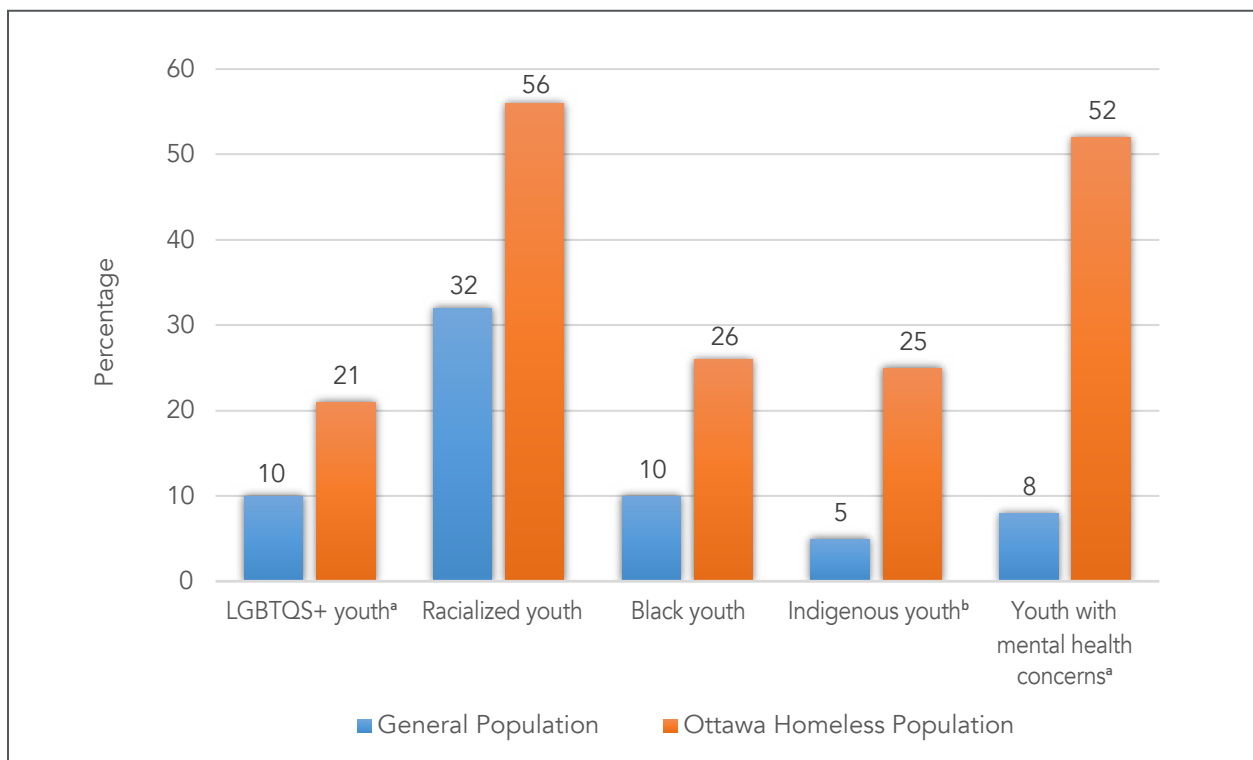
Newcomer Youth

Newcomers to Canada, many of whom are also racialized, face numerous challenges in the process of settling in Canada. Studies of newcomer youth, in particular, highlight the difficulties for those navigating multiple life transitions during this time—not only in acclimatizing to Canadian life but, in many cases, dealing with the transition between schools or from school to work. Immigrant youth are often faced with culture shock, language barriers, and discrimination, while also being less likely than their Canadian-born peers to have access to technology or to have work experience (Kilbride & Anisef, 2001). The impact of this is borne out in higher unemployment rates for immigrants compared with the general population, a phenomenon that is true for all age groups, but particularly pronounced for youth (Ottawa Employment Hub, 2018).

Recognizing the Impact of Intersecting Identities

It is impossible to discuss the experience of any one of these marginalized groups without also recognizing the impact of other intersecting identities. A person who is Indigenous and lives with a physical disability, for instance, experiences barriers and discrimination related to both identities, and their lived experience cannot be neatly compartmentalized into just one category.

Figure 6: Marginalized Identities as Proportion of All Youth (Percentage)



^a General population data for 2SLGBTQ+ youth and youth with mental health concerns available for Canada only.

^b General population data for Indigenous youth available for Ontario only.

Sources: “Everyone Counts: Ottawa’s 2018 Point-in-Time Count” (City of Ottawa, 2018); “The True North LGBT: New Poll Reveals Landscape of Gay Canada” (Carlson, 2012); “Labour Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2016” (Statistics Canada, 2017); “A Demographic, Employment, and Income Profile of Canadians With Disabilities Aged 15 Years and Over” (Morris et al., 2018).

Recognizing the existence of these intersecting identities is important, given that many marginalized groups are more likely to be low income and experience homelessness and mental health disabilities like anxiety and depression as a result of systemic discrimination and intergenerational trauma (City of Ottawa, 2018; Hahmann, 2021; Gilmour, 2019).

Understanding these intersecting identities is crucial for the service providers and support systems that aim to serve these populations. In Ottawa, many homeless youth reported that their schools did not have the appropriate resources or training to prevent homelessness or to support students experiencing it (Sauvé et al., 2018). Even population-specific resource centres, such as the 2SLGBTQ+ offices found on many university campuses, rarely include information on topics related to multiple marginalized identities (Schenk Martin et al., 2020). The lack of coordination with disability services, in particular, represents a lost opportunity to connect students with services that can best support all parts of their identity, since higher incidence rates of mental distress and suicidality among the 2SLGBTQ+ population are well documented (Gilmour, 2019).

Barriers to Employment

Each group mentioned above, and indeed each individual, faces a different set of challenges on their pathway to employment. However, several common themes emerged from the literature review and from conversations with service providers and local youth conducted as part of this environmental scan.

The Role of Post-Secondary Education

Any discussion of employment pathways and opportunities must include some mention of education, particularly post-secondary diplomas, certificates, and degrees. However, education is not a panacea, and a degree is not always enough to overcome other barriers to joining the workforce. Overall, as many as 20 per cent of Canadians with a degree have a precarious work situation, such as involuntary part-time jobs, contract work with limited or no benefits, and other unstable or unsafe working environments (Expert Panel on Youth Employment, 2017).

Some populations have specific challenges that are not solved by more education. For example, university graduates with a severe disability have an employment rate that is only half that of high school graduates without a disability (Quig, 2020).¹ One reason for this may be that their post-secondary credentials are not seen as equivalent to those of their peers without disabilities, as explored below. Trans* youth who earn a university or college degree may also face challenges in having their credentials recognized by employers. In a 2015 survey by The Trans PULSE Project, 58 per cent of trans* respondents reported they were unable to obtain their academic transcripts with the correct name or gender designation (as cited by Camilleri, 2018).

Moreover, a 2015 McKinsey study revealed a vast gap in the value of education as perceived by educational providers, their graduates, and employers. While 83 per cent of providers agreed that youth are prepared for the workforce, just 44 per cent of youth, and only 34 per cent of employers, said the same (McKinsey & Company, 2015). This points to a perceived mismatch between the skills and experiences that educational institutions value and the skills that employers are seeking. Without resolving this discrepancy, educational providers will continue to provide graduates with credentials that are not valued by local employers. In some cases, this mismatch may be due to a different set of priorities or a different understanding of the goals of education. When asked to rank their priorities, Canadian universities ranked “helping students find employment” eighth in a list of 10 priorities, far behind other goals such as “attracting students,” “increasing graduation rates,” and “maintaining [a] relevant curriculum” (McKinsey &

¹ The full report has not yet been published. The summary report, *Improving Employment Outcomes for Post-Secondary Graduates with Disabilities*, is available at <https://www.unitedwayeo.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/EARN-Youth-Disabilities-Employment-Report-EN.pdf>.

Company, 2015). Canadian colleges and other institutions, which often employ a more career-focused lens compared with universities, rate “helping students find employment” as their fifth-highest priority. There is much to be said about the intrinsic value of education and its myriad benefits, but students who choose a post-secondary program may be disappointed that it does not serve as a stepping stone to their ultimate goal of employment.

This is not to say that higher education is never valued in the workplace or that youth do not benefit from pursuing it. Indeed, holding a bachelor’s degree or higher is correlated with more successful, meaningful employment and higher income. For instance, a 2016 study found that a significant increase in employment rates for First Nations adults correlated with degree completion. Those without a high school diploma had an employment rate of 28 per cent compared with 49.2 per cent for high school graduates and 61.2 per cent for those with post-secondary degrees (National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2019). Similar increases in employment rates are found for youth with disabilities, and post-secondary graduates with mild disabilities find employment at approximately the same rate as their peers without disabilities (Quig, 2020). Therefore, higher education does serve as a key to success for some youth. The issue then becomes how to understand these disparate outcomes and how to understand the value added from post-secondary programs.

The discrepancy in outcomes for various groups with post-secondary degrees indicates that employers do not necessarily value all degrees equally. This could be for many reasons; consider the following:

- **The relevant labour market (by geography or field of work) does not require post-secondary credentials.** Education expectations vary widely between communities. A recent survey of employers in Lanark and Renfrew counties found that 50.4 per cent of employers say they usually require a high school diploma, and only 2.7 per cent require an undergraduate degree (Labour Market Group of Renfrew & Lanark, 2019). In contrast, the Ottawa Employment Hub found that the larger number of post-secondary students in Ottawa leads to a more competitive labour market for entry-level or low-skilled work (Ottawa Employment Hub, 2018). For entry-level applicants in Ottawa, a post-secondary degree may be seen as an essential requirement to be competitive in the labour market even if the technical skills needed for a position would not necessarily require that degree in other markets. It is critical that youth seeking local employment understand this distinction and how best to market their qualifications, as employers who are expecting high school graduates may understandably fear quickly losing new hires with post-secondary degrees to “better” opportunities.
- **The degree did not include enough hands-on workplace experience, such as co-ops, internships, or part-time jobs.** Practical work experience is in high demand by students, yet only 16 per cent of Canadian students reported this was a focus in their educational program (McKinsey & Company, 2015). Opportunities like co-ops, work-integrated learning, part-time jobs, and internships can provide invaluable skills to students to complement their academic studies. However, the most important skills gained may not be technical or practical skills, which rank lower in employers’ reported priorities for entry-level hires. Instead, students and educational providers should focus on how those experiences build the skills that employers are most looking for nationally and locally: work ethic, teamwork and communication skills (McKinsey & Company, 2015; Labour Market Group of Renfrew & Lanark, 2019).

- **A lack of coordination between employers and educational providers means that graduates are unable to showcase their credentials effectively.** We have already seen the disconnect between how educational institutions and employers evaluate graduate workforce readiness. This disconnect may arise from a lack of coordination between education providers and local employers, since only 10 per cent of Canadian employers coordinate frequently with education providers and 20 per cent report they never interact with education providers (McKinsey & Company, 2015). This leads to a silo effect that hurts graduates and makes their employment search more difficult. Students and recent graduates who have taken advantage of on-campus opportunities outside of class in an attempt to become more attractive job candidates may be disheartened to learn that 98 per cent of employers are unaware of “co-curricular” records, official documents provided by most Canadian institutions that lists non-academic activities during a student’s academic career (RBC Thought Leadership, 2019).
- **Employers have reservations about graduates who take longer to complete their degree, which includes those who take longer because of disability accommodations or caregiving.** Students with disabilities face barriers throughout their education, which often leads to a longer path to degree completion (Quig, 2020). Disability accommodations are not the only reason a student might prolong their educational journey. Students may take time off to provide care for family, save funds to continue to pay for tuition, or transfer between schools or degree programs. For example, local Indigenous communities noted that it is not uncommon for young Indigenous students to leave high school in order to have children and return to complete their post-secondary education as mature students. Extended training programs are also common for apprenticeships and trade programs. In Canada, as few as 16 per cent of students enrolled in apprenticeship training between 2008 and 2016 completed their certificate within the allotted program length (Jin et al., 2020). If an employer is searching for candidates who followed a straightforward and traditional pathway through their education, they may overlook a large portion of the available talent pool.

Understanding this broader picture of what post-secondary education can and cannot provide for its graduates is a critical first step toward better alignment of diverse student and employer expectations. This alignment will be even more critical in the wake of COVID-19 and its impacts on international student enrolment at Canadian post-secondary institutions, since many institutions rely on international student recruitment to grow both their student-body enrolment and tuition revenues (Statistics Canada, 2020c). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the enrolment of international students was on the rise, but domestic enrolment fell slightly across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2020c).

It is important to note that this trend is not necessarily a result of high tuition and fees as in the US. Research suggests that Canadian youth who do not pursue post-secondary degrees are more likely to say that they could afford the financial cost but choose not to pursue further education due to other factors such as family or cultural expectations or social norms about who belongs in educational institutions (Finnie et al., 2016). Therefore, improving educational access is not as simple as providing financial assistance through scholarships or sponsorships. Post-secondary institutions need to demonstrate that their campus environment is inviting and inclusive, and that their programs add real value that aligns with prospective students’ goals.



EMPLOYER SPOTLIGHT

One Ottawa-founded company has taken an active role in closing the gap between employers and post-secondary institutions. Shopify, a leading global e-commerce company, launched the Dev Degree program in 2016 in collaboration with Carleton University, with York University joining the program in 2018. This program takes a unique approach to melding on the job experience with academic studies by hiring students as Shopify interns from day one. In addition to their classroom training, students in the Dev Degree program work at Shopify for 20 to 25 hours a week throughout their four-year degree program. Not only does the program provide a scholarship to cover tuition costs, but students in this program receive a competitive intern salary that is in line with industry standards. This sets the Dev Degree apart from other traditional co-op or work-integrated learning programs, where students alternate semesters between school and work, which comes at an additional cost to the student.

The Dev Degree program is not merely an altruistic venture for Shopify; it is also a good business investment. Traditional computer science degree programs focus on hard skills and teach students to program (code). When these students graduate, they may have great technical skills, but they have not necessarily honed their skills in teamwork and collaborative time management. This is a big problem for companies like Shopify, which needs programmers with the interpersonal skills required to coordinate massive international programs. By investing in the future potential of young programmers, Shopify also ensures that it cultivates a strong future workforce not only at Shopify, but in the computer science field at large. That investment has certainly paid off: almost every member of Dev Degree's first graduating cohort in 2020 stayed on to work at Shopify after graduation.

Shopify works to ensure the program is advertised to traditionally underrepresented groups of potential applicants. The application process is completely blind: reviewers do not see an applicant's name, gender, race, or any other identifying factor when assessing their candidacy. The result highlights that diversity is what happens when barriers are removed. Unlike most science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs, which are disproportionately male, Dev Degree students are 50 per cent women and 50 per cent men, a trend that has been consistent in each cohort (Rubinstein, 2018). In short, the students in the program are more reflective of the general population.

Shopify is a leader in diversity, equity, and inclusion in employment. The company works closely with various employment initiatives led by United Way East Ontario, including the Employment Accessibility Resource Network (EARN), Partnering for Success in Youth Employment (PSYE), and Hire Immigrants Ottawa (HIO). In 2018, Shopify was awarded an HIO Employer Excellence Award for its leadership.²

Not Feeling a Sense of Belonging in the Workplace

Discrimination at work, whether conscious or unconscious, affects marginalized youth almost immediately, beginning with the recruitment and application process. Several service providers noted that even listing an address on a resume can be a barrier, due to the stigma attached to certain neighbourhoods or housing complexes. Youth may also be hesitant to seek the support of certain employment programs, afraid that merely enrolling in these programs would be enough to brand them as a potentially costly burden or as an undesirable candidate (van de Sande et al., 2019). Even if a job seeker can overcome these hurdles, barriers may exist

² Details of the award are available on the HIO website at http://www.hireimmigrantsottawa.ca/2018_award_recipient/shopify/

within the application process itself, especially as more employers use online databases to collect information. Partners in the disability community expressed frustration at job application systems that were incompatible with screen readers or timed out too quickly, erasing an applicant's answers. Some online applications also use drop-down menus, which constrains the allowable answers. For example, some systems ask for the name of a candidate's post-secondary institution, but list only Canadian institutions, thus disqualifying anyone with foreign credentials.

It can be difficult to separate the actual impacts of stigma and discrimination from the job seeker's fear of them. The history of discrimination and systemic barriers has led many job seekers to assume that, unless proactively stated and demonstrated otherwise, any specific field or employer will have these same biases and discriminatory practices. For persons with disabilities, 43 per cent considered themselves to be disadvantaged in the workplace and believed their current employer would also consider them disadvantaged because of their condition (Ottawa Employment Hub, 2019). In a survey of 2SLGBTQ+ Ontarians, 42 per cent of respondents reported experiencing discrimination in the workplace and one in three feared that coming out at work would inhibit their career advancement (CROP, 2017). However, for those who did come out at work, only 12 per cent reported this impacted their career and promotions, suggesting that the fear of discrimination is perhaps the greater barrier.

That said, there is a clear distinction to be made between the experiences of cisgender people and those of transgender job seekers. A 2016 general population survey found that two out of three respondents believed their workplace was safe and inclusive for lesbian and gay employees, but only 55 per cent believe this was true for transgender employees (Hixson-Vuple, 2017). Surveys and conversations with trans* youth and adults confirm that many job seekers experience transphobia and rejection based on their gender identity or expression, whether explicitly or veiled (e.g. coded as a "lack of fit") (Waite et al., 2019) (Camilleri, 2018).

Where marginalized job seekers and employees have reported they do feel a strong sense of belonging and inclusion, it is almost always due to visible representation in the workplace and mentorship opportunities offered by those in the same community. When a young person can see others like them succeeding in a specific career or company, it is both evidence of their own potential and a valuable community of support and mentorship. Members of the 2SLGBTQ+ and disability communities noted that this absence of visible representation, while sometimes due to a true underrepresentation of their peers, can also be exacerbated by societal pressures to remain in the closet or hide an invisible disability. In those cases, older adults being more open and outspoken about their identities could be a valuable resource for younger generations.

Lack of Accessible Services

In many cases, services are available to youth, but they are not accessible. This does not always mean a physical accessibility issue, although the physical location of services can certainly be a challenge, especially in rural areas and for Indigenous youth (National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2019). However, even when a service is physically accessible, some youth and their families may not use it due to concerns about cost (Chuang et al., 2011) or uncertainty about eligibility (van de Sande, 2019) (Expert Panel on Youth Employment, 2017).

Uncertainty about eligibility has been recently raised in relation to various COVID-19 supports, such as the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit, the Canada Emergency Student Benefit and the Canada Recovery Benefit. Much of the information about these programs is targeted at "Canadians," leaving others—such as permanent residents, international students, or newcomers on work visas—unsure whether they are eligible to receive these benefits.

More broadly, youth say they are not interested in accessing services that are not culturally relevant to them, whether this relevance relates to their race, ethnicity (van de Sande, 2019), native language, gender identity, or sexual orientation. That said, youth from marginalized communities are not advocating for better inclusion into *existing* systems, since these systems were not built for them or their needs. Instead, youth in these communities report a greater need for services built by and for people like them, whether this be through 2SLGBTQ+ community groups, Black professional mentorship programs, or other identity-specific supports. A push for a system that serves and includes all identities runs the risk of commodifying services and failing to recognize the unique needs of specific communities, thereby failing to meet those needs. This is not to say that service providers do not or cannot provide valuable services to members of marginalized communities, but rather to emphasize the importance of having greater representation from these communities.

Lack of Social Capital and Job Literacy

Both young job seekers and local service providers in urban and rural areas indicated that interpersonal networks were critical to success in finding employment, with word of mouth and referrals from family or friends described as the most effective way to find a job. The importance of personal networks was particularly emphasized in smaller communities in Lanark and Renfrew counties. Naturally, this points to a significant barrier for youth who cannot rely on their networks, either because they do not have these social connections or because their family and friends do not have relevant knowledge about the job seeker's intended field. Even for more formal application processes, most employers rely on references to make hiring decisions. This can be challenging not only for newcomers, who may not have professional references in the area or even in the country, but also for 2SLGBTQ+ youth, particularly trans* youth, who may have lost potential references as a result of coming out or transitioning. A 2015 survey of trans* youth in Ontario found that 28% of respondents could not get employment references using their current name or pronoun and over half (58%) could not get updated academic transcripts to reflect their name and gender designation (as cited by Camilleri, 2018).

There is also the broader issue of job literacy. Many local service providers said their clients need support in areas such as developing a job search strategy, writing resumes and cover letters, and practising job interviews. These are critical skills that are often targeted through employment skills training services and programs. However, relatively few programs are available for youth to learn about the vast array of fields and job titles that exist, and the strategies to understand whether a particular job opening is appropriate for them. This is important both on a macro level (What career do I want to pursue?) and a micro level (Am I a competitive applicant for this specific job opening?).

In cases where employers include preferred qualifications or experience criteria that may not be strictly required, youth without sufficient job literacy skills will be disinclined to apply, missing out on employment opportunities as a result. This has a gendered impact, as women are far less likely than men to apply for a job when they do not meet all of the qualifications, because they assume the employer is only interested in hiring someone who meets the listed qualifications (Mohr, 2014). In regions like Renfrew County and the United Counties of Prescott and Russell, where employers report difficulties in filling vacant positions, this miscommunication may be preventing employers from reaching all available job seekers.

Infrastructure Barriers

One of the primary themes to emerge in conversations and focus groups with community partners was the interconnectedness of employment supports and basic life needs. Many service providers reported their clientele had the job skills and interview strategies they needed to succeed, but did not have stability in areas like child care, housing, transportation, food security, or myriad other employment-adjacent needs. When supports for these life needs are not in place, job seekers simply do not have the resources or bandwidth to focus on improving their employment situation.

Rural communities face particular infrastructure issues related to transportation and internet connectivity. In addition to the cost of accessing services, which can be a greater barrier than for those in urban areas, youth in rural areas often have limited or no options with regard to public transportation and internet access. Several pilot programs have been launched to help address these access issues, notably the Social Planning Council of Ottawa's Digital Equity project and the Community Transportation Grant in the United Counties of Prescott and Russell. However, both of these ventures are relatively new and it may be some time before they achieve their end goals.

Often, infrastructural barriers create a vicious cycle of red tape. A service provider in Lanark County described a scenario that affects many of their young clients. A youth wants to get a job but does not own a car. This restricts their job search to opportunities within walking distance, as there is no public transportation in their community. Many jobs require the job seeker to have a driver's licence, which costs them \$90 to obtain, not to mention the logistical difficulties of arranging for a vehicle to get to the testing site, the cost to obtain the associated knowledge and road tests, and insurance. Many jobs also require a criminal record check, which costs the job seeker \$41. However, the only way to request a criminal record check is to bring the funds in cash to the police station in Perth. If a job seeker manages to get this money together and arrange transportation to the station, they will then wait for several weeks to receive the results. If there is an error on their criminal record check, such as an erroneous conviction listed, it will cost the job seeker an additional \$725 to correct the record. Service providers indicated that rather than overcome these hurdles, it was not uncommon for job seekers to lose motivation and withdraw from their job search.

In some ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new opportunities for technology to change the way we access services, the workplace, and community events. For some job seekers, this change has allowed them to access services and enter the workforce in ways they could not before because of challenges with transportation or workplace accommodations. However, technology is not a panacea, even for those who have access to reliable high-speed internet service. In conversations with community members with disabilities, several people remarked that online events often neglected to include accessibility accommodations like American Sign Language interpretation or closed captioning, even for events where this would have been standard practice in person. Yet, the pandemic is sure to have an impact on the employment readiness of many youth, because of its negative effect on existing mental health challenges and by exacerbating barriers to accessing medical care. An October 2020 survey of Canadians with disabilities found that about half of all youth surveyed reported they currently have "somewhat worse" or "much worse" health compared to pre-pandemic, and about 70 per cent reported a "somewhat worse" or "much worse" mental health state (Yang et al., 2020).

Opportunity Cost

In many cases, a pathway to more meaningful or desirable work carries too much of an opportunity cost for a young person to pursue it. In other words, pursuing better work would mean they would have to give up something of value, such as current wages, stable child care, or Ontario Disability Support Program benefits. This is true not only for post-secondary degrees, as discussed earlier, but also for programs that focus on job readiness, retraining, or other educational programs such as apprenticeships for trade work. In many of these programs, the job seeker must commit to participating for a period of time, often on a schedule that is prohibitive to maintaining other employment or providing care for family members. This can provide a disincentive for youth to attend these programs, even if they could be better off in the long run because of the job and income security they would gain as a result of participation.

This phenomenon is visible in the trades and the apprenticeship system. In Canada, the dropout rate for students in apprenticeship programs is high: on average, as many as one in three students discontinue their program (Jin et al., 2020). This figure is higher for low-income students and older students, many of whom cite financial and familial obligations that take precedence over their education. Although apprentices who complete their certification earn higher incomes, the programs' short-term costs are too high for many students.

These costs can be greatly offset by offering paid training or upskilling programs. Not only do paid apprentices have a higher retention rate (Jin et al., 2020), but the most successful job search and experiential learning programs discussed in our focus groups and community conversations were also paid; for example, Causeway's Solutions for Youth program and the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa's Youth Job Connection were upheld as examples of programs with good student retention.

Language Barriers

Newcomers and immigrants whose first language is neither English nor French face barriers to employment across Canada (Conference Board of Canada, 2020). However, the Ottawa region has a unique linguistic landscape, and many jobs and employers require competence in both of Canada's official languages. In Ottawa, 27 per cent of workers report using both languages at work compared with just 5 per cent of workers in the rest of Ontario (Ottawa Employment Hub, 2018). Thus, youth who are not bilingual are at a greater disadvantage in the local labour market than they might be in other regions.

The linguistic divide is evident not only for newcomers to East Ontario, but also for other marginalized groups. An analysis of student data from the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board revealed a widening gap between students streamed into French immersion and those in English-only courses. Although the programs should be academically equivalent, students in English-only programs were less likely to take academic-level courses in high school, which are typically prerequisites for a university track (Miller, 2019). This lack of academic preparation has a disproportionate impact on newcomers, low-income students, and students with special learning needs, all of whom are over-represented in the English programs. Furthermore, the negative perception of English-only education leads to lower enrolment in these programs, resulting in split-grade classrooms or the cancellation of programs, thereby creating additional barriers for the children in this stream (Miller, 2019).

Local Solutions and Programming

In conversations with service providers, employers, educators, and community members, several strategies for success and themes emerged.

Offer Mentorship

Mentorship, in many different forms, was cited as a key to success. Popular programs in schools include opportunities for youth to shadow different jobs for one to two days as well as community-specific groups for networking, funding, and support, such as the Afro-Caribbean Mentorship Program at Carleton University.³ During the COVID-19 pandemic, many employers reported that providing a formal mentor to new employees during their virtual onboarding was a valuable way to ensure continued support and connection during the employee's first days and weeks.

Incorporate Universal Design

Many employers and community members discussed the importance of universal design in all aspects of the employment cycle, from recruitment through evaluation and retention of employees. It is critical to note that no one practice or accommodation will suit every person. A universal design is a flexible design which allows job seekers to access information and support in a variety of ways, based on what is most useful for them. This can take the form of some simple actions, such as:

- providing interview questions in advance to allow job seekers to better prepare
- asking each new employee, "What do you need to be successful?"
- using technology such as Microsoft 365, which has built-in accessibility features such as closed captioning
- removing barriers or restrictions on application answers to allow text entry for things like gender, educational institution attended, or other demographic information
- streamlining job ads to include only the skills and experience required for the role or explicitly denoting which of these are preferred, but not mandatory, for applicants to have

Establish Partnerships

Several stakeholders noted that transitions can be difficult for job seekers, whether these changes are related to graduation, accessing a new service provider, or transitioning into a new job. Those who have successfully navigated these transitions credited programs that allowed for cross-service support, such as programs where employment service providers work in high schools with students who are about to graduate, or job coaches who accompany clients to their first week of work to assist their transition into a new role.

Several service providers also noted they have close working relationships with community partners that serve specific youth populations, such as Kagita Mikam Aboriginal Employment and Training or KEYS Job Centre. With these relationships, service providers can refer clients to more specialized supports for employment and employment-adjacent needs. Additional community-specific supports continue to be built, such as the recent initiative from Counselling Connect,⁴ which provides mental health services specific to the 2SLGBTQ+, Indigenous, and Black communities ("Community-specific mental health services coming to Ottawa," 2021).

³ See Afro-Caribbean Mentorship Program: <https://weareacmp.com>.

⁴ See Counselling Connect: <https://www.counsellingconnect.org>.

From an educational perspective, several local post-secondary institutions have invested in resources that allow their students to become better prepared for the workforce during their post-secondary education. For example, Algonquin College has built career readiness into its 2017–2022 strategic plan. Two of its six stated goals are to “lead the college system in co-op and experiential learning” (p. 61) and to “become an integral partner to our alumni and employers” (p. 65) (Algonquin College, 2017).

Areas for Future Research and Expansion

Although much of the public discourse is now turning to post-COVID-19 recovery, it is too early to know what the pandemic’s long-term impacts will be. Many extant social inequities have been exacerbated; the pandemic has disproportionately affected the health and incomes of racialized people, Indigenous communities, women, and people with disabilities (Hahmann, 2021; Statistics Canada, 2020a, 2020d, 2021; Yang et al., 2020; Zizys, 2020).

The future of work is also unclear. The massive shift to remote work has remained in place for many sectors, but employers and employees appear divided on their expectations about whether these arrangements will continue post-pandemic. An RBC report published in December 2020 found that while 80 per cent of employees expressed a desire to work remotely in some capacity, whether entirely or partially, only 14 per cent of the employers surveyed indicated that remote work was “likely” or “very likely” after COVID-19 (RBC Thought Leadership, 2020). The ultimate outcome may depend not only on the industry and the willingness of employers to pivot permanently, but also on improved and more equitable access to internet service and technology, particularly in rural regions.

Disaggregated data based on gender, race, ability, and other characteristics is needed, but many existing data collection mechanisms do not yet collect or report this information. However, recent reanalyses of data and new initiatives point to coming improvements. For example, Statistics Canada recently began to analyze its disability data with an intersectional lens and released a report entitled “A Profile of Canadians With a Mobility Disability and Visible Minorities With a Disability” in late 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2020d). Future reports in this vein could help to illuminate trends within communities for those with multiple marginalized identities.

Data on 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, particularly youth, is still sparse. Many surveys do not ask about sexual orientation or limit gender responses to the binary male/female. Some institutions have acted upon the need for better information to better serve this community. In 2019 and 2020, the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board conducted a survey to measure inclusion and diversity that collected data on race, religion, and feelings of safety and belonging in school, among other markers (Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, 2020). While the final report includes data about the sense of belonging and experiences with bullying in the aggregate only, the school board has an opportunity to dissect the data to better understand how inclusion experiences differ for different populations based on identity or ability.

At the federal level, the need for additional data on the 2SLGBTQ+ community has been acknowledged; as part of its LGBTQ2 Action Plan, the LGBTQ2 Secretariat recently conducted a survey to better understand “the daily realities and experiences of LGBTQ2 people in Canada in areas such as employment, healthcare, housing and homelessness, and safety” (LGBTQ2 Secretariat, 2021). Survey results and changes to federal policies or programming will be areas to watch.

Calls to Action

For Funding Agencies

- Invest in infrastructure that allows youth to fulfill their basic needs and focus on their career search, including infrastructure that supports internet access, child care, accessible transportation, and affordable housing.
- Ensure that policies and recommendations coming from government or other local institutions are funded, as service providers and agencies do not have the resources to create significant change without appropriate funding and staffing.
- Recognize the value in localized and culturally specific programming and resources instead of streamlining everything into one strategy. Local labour market conditions can vary significantly, even between parts of the same county, as noted by service providers in, for example, Arnprior and Renfrew, both located within Renfrew County.
- Invest in programs to help the youth most impacted by COVID-19 job losses—particularly in sectors like tourism, accommodation, and the service industry—whether through retraining in new industries or identifying skills that are transferable to more stable jobs within the sector.

For Employers

- Ensure that job postings and applications can be accessed by all job seekers, as required by the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. For example, this could be done by:
 - using application platforms that are compatible with screen readers
 - allowing for open-ended responses rather than using restricted drop-down menus
 - advertising new postings in a variety of media and formats—including social media—that can reach a broad audience.
- Consider community partnerships (with youth, service providers, and educational institutions) that allow employers to play an active role in setting expectations about job literacy, job skills, and career paths.
- Use existing resources and networks like EARN and HIO to stay informed on best practices and improve employers' ability to recruit from these underrepresented talent pools. This is particularly relevant for small and medium-sized businesses that may not otherwise have the resources to advertise and recruit widely.
- Encourage organizations to actively recruit underrepresented groups by signalling their accessibility and eagerness to include these potential employees, and to support these employees with relevant mentorship opportunities.
- Ensure that employees from marginalized groups are included in discussions and decisions made about diversity and inclusion, but do not expect them to carry the full burden of making change. Take advantage of existing resources and training programs that can help educate all staff and management on best practices.
- Assess the basic skills and aptitudes required for entry-level positions rather than relying solely on job experience in a specific role. This can enable employers to recruit quality candidates based on their potential for success.
- Provide training for managers on best practices in managing employees remotely. This should include training on how to measure and monitor output rather than the amount of time spent in the office in order to be better prepared for a post-COVID-19 work environment.

For Educational Institutions

- Partner with employers and apprenticeship programs that integrate with secondary schooling. Identify barriers to participating in these programs within existing curricula, such as, for example, mandatory courses that are held in a single time slot that conflicts with co-op opportunities.
- Focus on an array of job literacy skills, including awareness of different fields and positions and how to read and dissect a job posting to identify the key skills required. In addition to teaching self-marketing skills, such as writing resumes and cover letters, provide exposure to a variety of job trial programs like co-ops and internships.
- Pay students who enrol in apprenticeships or upskilling programs to offset the opportunity cost of losing income because they are unable to work during the program.
- Evaluate the impact of streaming in primary and secondary schools on marginalized children to ensure that all students have equal opportunities and that their learning streams, regardless French or English, or academic or applied, offer academic rigour.

For Service Providers

- Assess diversity within service provider staff, leadership positions, and board membership when filling vacancies, with the aim to reflect the demographics of the communities served.
- Build partnerships and connections with other local groups and experts so that appropriate and culturally relevant referrals can be made. Examples include the Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition and the Wabano Centre for the Indigenous community, Pflag Canada for the 2SLGBTQ+ community, and Culture Check for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) people.
- Ensure that clients can easily understand the eligibility requirements for various programs, including whether non-Canadian citizens or non-permanent residents can participate.
- Conduct programs to help youth explore a variety of career fields and positions as well as job literacy programs. Such programs should focus on helping youth parse job postings and create strong applications for jobs for which they may not meet every listed requirement.
- Consider collecting and reporting data on diversity within the organization to encourage transparency and accountability for equity goals.

Resources

- Ontario Disability Employment Network (ODEN): [Articles and business leader videos](#)
- AbleTo: [Infographics and statistics about disability inclusion](#)
- David C. Onley Initiative: [Disability inclusion resources for employers, service providers, students, and others](#)
- Conference Board of Canada: [Employer toolkit for accessible workplaces](#)
- Neil Squire Society: [Working Together webinar series](#)
- Ontario Chamber of Commerce: [Mental Health Toolkit for Employers](#)
- Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants: [Positive Spaces initiative for LGBTQIA+ newcomer support](#)
- Unearth Education Éveillée: [Programs for educators](#)
- Edge Factor: [Career information for educators and students](#)
- Algonquin College: [Inclusion & Diversity Blueprint](#)
- Culture Check: [Anti-racism corporate ally training and assessments](#)

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