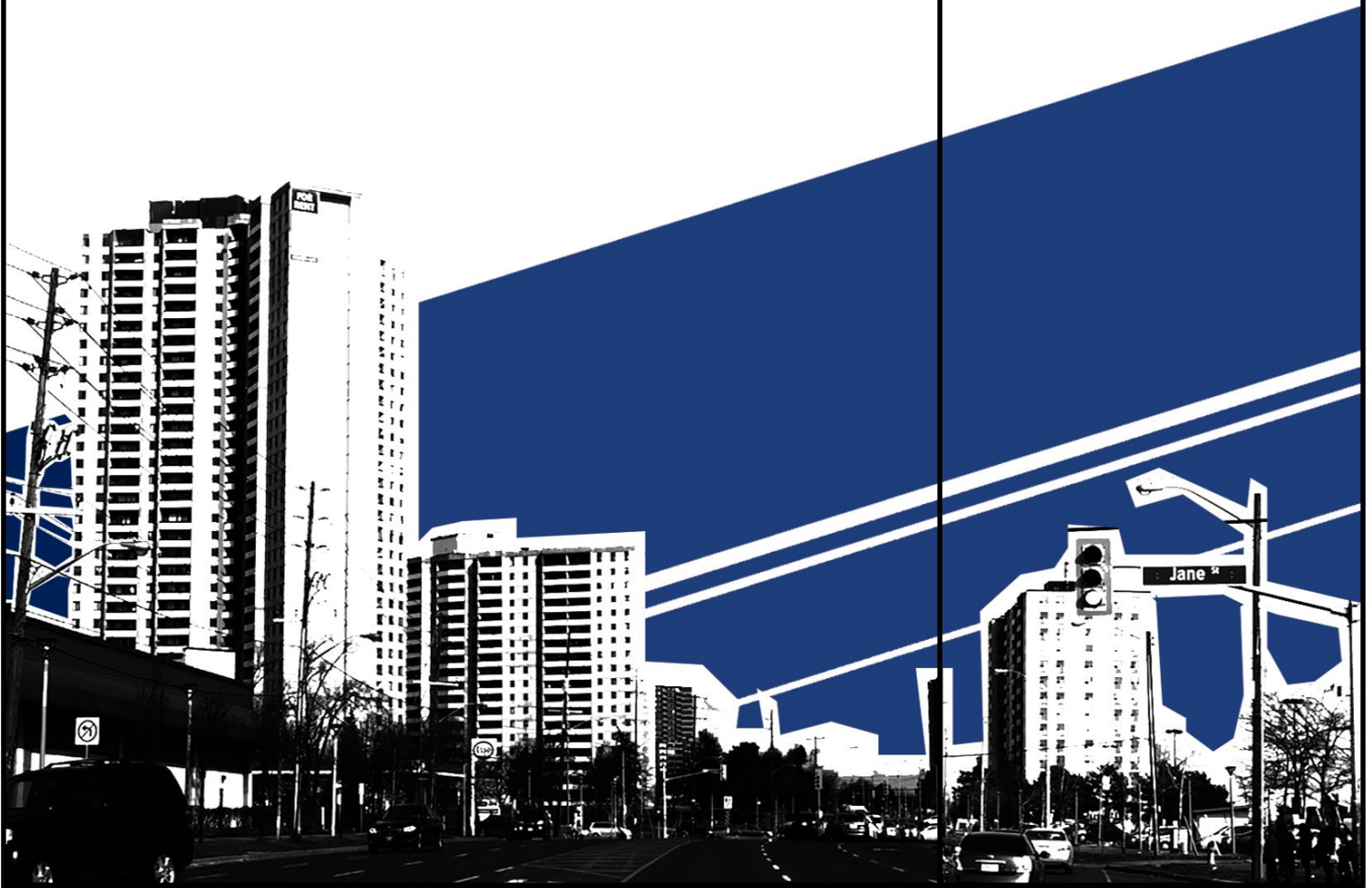


TIRED OF THE HUSTLE:

**YOUTH VOICES ON
UNEMPLOYMENT**
*a youth-led community-based
research project in Toronto's
Jane Street neighbourhoods*



St. Stephen's
Community House



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research report was prepared by the Core Team of the Youth Unemployment Research Project at St. Stephen's Community House and Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services.

We would like to thank all the focus group and interview participants, our partner agencies, and their dedicated staff for their time and effort in contributing to the development of this report. We also want to thank our Steering Committee for their ongoing feedback and support.

Research for this report was funded by a grant by the Healthier Cities and Communities Program from the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto.

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Please cite this report as: St. Stephen's Community House and Access Alliance (2016) Tired of the Hustle: Youth Voices on Unemployment. Toronto, ON, October 2016.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth joblessness in Canada appears to be getting worse over time. Based on 2012 data from the Labour Force Survey, the unemployment rate for youth (15-24 years) in Canada was 2.4 times higher than adult unemployment rate (14.3% compared to 6%); this is the widest gap since 1977 (Bernard, 2013). Moreover, many of the youth who are employed are “poorly integrated” and increasingly working in jobs that are low-wage, non-unionized, part-time and/or temporary, and which often provide no benefits (Canada’s Public Policy Forum, 2012). Youth are not just having a hard time finding and keeping a job but also are withdrawing or getting pushed out of the labour market. Thus, there is growing concern about youth who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). According to Statistics Canada (2012), 13% of Canadian youth (age 15-29) were NEET in 2011. This represents a 2% increase following the economic downturn of 2008.

Youth are twice as likely to be laid off during recessions than their adult counterparts (Bernard, 2013). As of February 2016, Ontario had recouped all of the jobs lost during the 2008-09 global economic recession. Jobs now exceed by 4.9% the pre-recession peak. Young people, however, are not necessarily benefiting from Ontario’s current recovery.

Youth joblessness appears to be particularly high in Toronto. Based on Labour Force Survey data from Statistics Canada, the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area has one of the lowest rates of youth employment (43.5% compared to the national rate of 60%) and highest rates of youth unemployment (18% compared to national rate of 14.3%) (Geobey 2013). Racial disparities in labour market outcomes for youth are also most starkly apparent in Toronto. Based on 2011 National Household Survey data, the employment rate for youth from Toronto who identified as being racialized (“visible minority”) was only 34.2% compared to 49.2% for non-racialized youth. Similarly, the unemployment rate for racialized youth in Toronto was 23.9% compared to 19.5% for non-racialized youth. The unemployment rate for Black youth in Toronto (and Ontario) stood at 28% which is two times higher than the national average. Many of these racialized youth live in low-income neighbourhoods located within inner suburbs of Toronto. This fact highlights the need to pay close attention to the link between racialized inequalities in youth joblessness and patterns of urban geo-spatial inequality in metropolitan cities like Toronto.

Policy makers at federal, provincial and municipal levels have introduced a number of targeted employment and training programs, including ones for youth from low-income and at-risk backgrounds. However, these programs appear to have had minimal positive impacts, or worse, are failing to reach the target low-income, vulnerable youth groups.

There is limited Canadian evidence on the increase in youth unemployment and underemployment rates. Furthermore, we know very little about the reasons why growing numbers of Canadian youth are getting pushed out of the labour market and becoming NEET. While there is growing Canadian evidence on the rise of precarious employment and the socio-economic and health impacts from this, most research on this topic is focused on adult workers. The relationship between patterns of urban inequality

and youth unemployment and underemployment also remains poorly understood. Crucially, very few studies have examined the root causes and impacts of racialized disparities in youth unemployment and underemployment.

To help fill these gaps in evidence, St Stephen's Community House teamed up with Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services and the University of Toronto in the summer of 2015 to conduct a youth-led, community based study: the Youth Unemployment Research Project (YURP). The study was focused on youth living in low-income neighbourhoods along Jane Street who are NEET or at risk of being NEET. We hired, trained and engaged three youth from the area in a leadership capacity as peer researchers during all phases of the study from research design, ethic, data collection, analysis and the writing of this report. We conducted focus groups and interviews with 63 youth; all youth were from racialized backgrounds. We also conducted focus group discussions and community participants interviews with 24 service providers and policy makers. The key goals of the research project were to (i) investigate systemic barriers to employment and employment services that NEET youth in low-income neighbourhoods in Toronto face; and, (ii) in the voices of young people, provide evidence for policy and service solutions, including recommendations on how to make employment services more youth-friendly.

Drawing on this study, this report, *Tired of the Hustle: Youth Voices on Unemployment*, presents important qualitative evidence on how racialized youth from low-income neighbourhoods in Toronto become NEET, how being NEET impacts youth and their families, and how these youth hustle in response to the systemic barriers they face to employment and employment services.

Study results show that youth in low-income neighbourhoods become NEET or at risk for NEET for diverse reasons that are closely linked to their specific socio-economic circumstances. These unique barriers that fall into one or more of the following categories:

- **NEET youth with an education gap:** These youth are early-leavers from the school system, unprepared school graduates, or are youth in precarious post-secondary education.
- **NEET youth in conflict with the law:** These youth have a criminal record or face criminalization and stigmatization in their communities.
- **NEET youth caring for family:** These youth are typically females caring for their own children or looking after their siblings to support the household.
- **NEET youth with a long-term disability or health condition:** These youth are excluded workers who are often unaware of supports or what is required of them to access employment, education and training opportunities.

While different groups of NEET youth face unique challenges and have distinctive needs, our study also captured four systemic cross-cutting barriers facing racialized NEET youth living in low-income neighbourhoods:

- 1) **Lack of caring adults** including mentors, role models, and supportive teachers and community members;

- 2) **Discrimination** based on race, culture, age, sexual orientation, and area of residence;
- 3) **Socio-spatial inequalities** associated with school inequality, investment gaps, economic decline, derelict housing, insufficient infrastructure and neighbourhood stigma; and
- 4) **Ineffective employment services** that do not meet young people's needs.

Study findings show that being NEET can result in damaging social and health impacts including high levels of stress, anxiety, sleeping disorders, lack of motivation, depression, and family tensions/breakdown. These social and health impacts, in turn, can further discourage and prevent youth from participating in employment or education/training programs, including those targeted to low-income youth.

THE HUSTLE

In the absence of meaningful, stable employment, research participants told us about their *hustle*, a variety of strategies to get by while unemployed/underemployed. These include:

- **Informal economic activities** such as babysitting and other occasional jobs;
- **Short-term work** through temporary staffing agencies or through 'gig economy';
- **Taking debt** through credit cards, payday lenders, family or friends; and
- **Risky activities** including potentially illegal activities.

Our evidence on these strategies of hustle and informal work among NEET youth helps to fill an important evidence gap. Study results highlight that while some NEET youth may be disengaged from the formal labour market or formal education/training, it is inaccurate and problematic to assume that they are economically inactive or that they stop their learning/training process. A closer look at why youth are forced to, or choose to, hustle can provide valuable insights about (i) how to overcome some of the limitations within formal labour market and education system; and (ii) what kinds of out-of-the-box supports are needed to enable youth to make informed decisions about these hustling activities.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS BY YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

We asked youth participants for their recommendations. Study results highlight that youth who are NEET are very knowledgeable about root causes of youth unemployment and underemployment and are able to clearly articulate solutions and supports required to enable youth like them to get meaning, stable employment. Youth recommendations included:

- 1) **Improving high school experience** and/or curriculum to prepare students to graduate and transition to the world of work;
- 2) **Securing sustainable funding** from government for services for youth that address poverty and unemployment;

- 3) **Providing better employment services** that are youth-friendly and are designed to meet youth needs;
- 4) **Extending second chances** to young people and improve community relationships with the police;
- 5) **Promoting youth leadership**, advocacy and political action; and
- 6) **Promoting local economic development** and job creation in low-income neighbourhoods.

As captured in these youth experiences and their recommendations, many of the barriers NEET youth face to employment and employment services are social, and fall outside of the labour market. This key finding cautions against the prevailing models of employment programs that tend to operate in silos and/or offer generic one-size-fits-all types of services (resume clinic, job boards etc). Instead, what is urgently needed are employment programs that are firmly grounded on *equity and an inter-disciplinary framework* capable of proactively addressing the diverse and cross-cutting labour market and socio-economic needs that NEET youth face.

Specifically, employment agencies need to work collaboratively with the education, health, police, community housing, and community development sectors to seamlessly provide vital wrap-around supports geared at overcoming root barriers/determinants to employment and employment services including family poverty, food insecurity, challenges faced in the school/education system, institutional racism and discrimination, social isolation, health issues, family tensions, and lack of mentors and caring adults. Even simple supports like providing nutritious food or childcare during employment programs can mean a lot for NEET youth struggling with food insecurity and poverty related challenges to participate in these services. Proactive steps like providing mental health counselling support or connecting socially isolated NEET youth to other youth/mentors can make a big positive difference, not just in employment success but also for their long-term wellbeing.

In particular, youth participants emphasized the need to make employment services more youth-friendly by hiring more youth workers, creating a “youth vibe,” and/or training staff (starting from the front desk receptionists) on how to communicate and support NEET youth in accessible, non-judgemental ways. As captured in the youth recommendations, these individual and program/service level supports need to be complemented with macro-level interventions including promoting local economic development, targeted job creation programs, “second chance” opportunities, and poverty reduction in low-income neighbourhoods.

Crucially, we need to build youth leadership and meaningfully involve them in research, policy development and advocacy, and program planning. Our experience working with youth peer researchers shows that, with relevant opportunity and mentorship, youth can become knowledge producers and agents of change.

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INTRODUCTION

Current Context: Youth Unemployment and Urban Inequality	Unemployment, Underemployment and the Health Outcomes
NEET Youth	Current Policies and Programs

My thing is, it's like every employer wants work experience, but how do we give them work experience if no one's hiring us? It's always like, 'I need to be hired to get hired' but I'm never getting hired.

(Youth participant, focus group, 04/11/15)

Getting one's foot in the door of the job market has never been easy for young people. Lacking experience, professional references, and connections, youth may have a tough time securing that first job, and creating successful employment pathways. Even when youth find employment, these jobs tend to be low-wage and precarious (temporary, part-time, contract, on-call) with little or no job security, benefits and protections. Certain groups of youth – youth living in low-income neighbourhoods, youth with low education levels, youth with criminal records, for example – face more structural barriers to getting and keeping a decent job. As captured in the introductory quote from a youth participant, many marginalized youth find themselves caught in a vicious joblessness cycle of not having work experience because no one is hiring them in the first place.

Canadian labour market data shows a worsening trend in youth joblessness, particularly in metropolitan cities like Toronto. There is also growing concern in Canada and around the world for youth who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) (Statistics Canada, 2012; Canada's Public Policy Forum, 2012). Following the 2008 economic crisis, the NEET rate for Canadian youth (age 15-29) increased by 2 percentage points and stood at 13% in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2012).

Compared to other groups, racialized youth in Canada persistently face disproportionately higher levels of joblessness and are more at risk of becoming NEET. Many of these racialized youth live in low-income neighbourhoods in the inner suburbs of Toronto. Thus, there appears to be a strong link between racialized inequalities in youth joblessness and patterns of urban geo-spatial inequality in Toronto.

Policy makers at federal, provincial and municipal level have introduced a number of targeted employment and training programs, including for youth from low-income backgrounds or neighbourhoods. However, the worsening rates of youth joblessness and NEET youth calls into question the accessibility and effectiveness of these youth employment and training programs, including those targeting marginalized and low-income youth.

Since the Labour Force Survey does not systematically collect information about people not in the labour force and not enrolled in formal education/training, we know very little about why people get pushed out of the labour market or from educational pathways, how they make ends meet, what kinds of informal income-generating activities or informal learning activities they are engaged in, and how being NEET impacts them. Analysts at Statistics Canada (2012, pg. 11) admit that it is “difficult to identify” what NEET youth do, particularly youth who are not in the labour force.

During the last decade, we have seen a growth in Canadian research on precarious employment its socio-economic and health impact. However, most research on this topic is focused on adult workers. There is an implicit assumption among policy makers, researchers, and advocacy agencies that youth may voluntarily prefer precarious types of employment (part-time, contract, flexible jobs) or are satisfied with doing low and minimum wage jobs. Very few studies have looked at how taking up low-wage, precarious jobs can stream youth into the long-term precarious employment trajectory. We also know very little about how precarious, low-wage jobs can affect

socio-economic status, health and even educational outcomes for youth.

Crucially, very few studies have examined the root causes and impacts of racialized disparities in youth unemployment and underemployment. For example, we have very little evidence on why racialized youth in metropolitan cities like Toronto persistently face disproportionately lower rates of employment and higher rates of unemployment and underemployment compared to other youth groups. Moreover, the relationship between current patterns of urban inequality in Toronto and these racialized disparities in youth joblessness also remains poorly understood.

This report, *Tired of the Hustle: Youth Voices on Unemployment*, helps to fill some of this evidence gap. It is based on a community-based research project focused on youth living in low-income neighbourhoods along Jane Street in Toronto who are NEET or at risk for being NEET. The project was jointly led by St Stephen’s Community House and Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services. The study is motivated by the urgent need in social and employment services to understand the barriers and daily struggles NEET youth face in the city of Toronto. The study focus is informed by institutional challenges and concerns that employment programs face in reaching NEET youth in Toronto and delivering effective employment services to them.

The research team conducted focus groups and interviews with youth (all participants were from racialized backgrounds), as well as service providers and policy makers whose field of work focuses on youth, to understand who

NEET youth are, the composition and diversity within NEET youth groups, the everyday personal histories and circumstances facing NEET youth (e.g. family dynamic, access to adult role models and mentors), the structural factors that push youth to become NEET and the socio-economic and health impacts of being NEET. The study also explored how NEET youth hustle to get by in spite of barriers they face in the labour market and employment services.

This report includes a summary of key findings from our study. Following a discussion of current literature and research methods, the study results are discussed in four broad sections:

- 1) A typology of four different cohorts of NEET youth, including the specific services and policy interventions each cohort requires;
- 2) Cross-cutting systemic barriers to employment and employment services identified by all NEET youth in our study;
- 3) Strategies NEET youth use to cope and hustle in response to barriers they face in the labour market and employment services; and
- 4) Recommendations suggested by NEET youth and the specific implications for different levels of government and service providers.

Current Context: Youth Unemployment, and Urban Inequality

With limited work experience and networks, youth tend to have a harder time than adults in securing a job, especially well-paying, full-time and permanent types of jobs. Thus, in general, youth

unemployment tends to be higher than it is for adults. Labour market data shows that youth joblessness in Canada appears to be getting worse over time. Based on 2012 data from the Labour Force Survey, the unemployment rate for youth (15-24 years) in Canada was 2.4 times higher than the adult unemployment rate (14.3% compared to 6%); this is the widest gap since 1977 (Bernard, 2013).

**youth
unemployment
is 140% higher
than adult unemployment**

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternative – Ontario argues that the worsening rates of youth employment and unemployment in Ontario and Toronto are not just cyclical trends that ebb and flow with economic changes but rather, are indicative of chronic and deeper structural problems in the labour market (Geobey 2013).

Specific macro-economic policies and trends during the last couple of decades are making it harder for more and more youth to find or keep a job, or are systematically pushing them out of the job market. These deeper economic restructurings include the shift away from manufacturing to resource extraction, a rapid increase in temporary foreign workers, and the cutbacks and disinvestments in employment and training programs for youth (Geobey, 2013; Toronto Public Health, 2015).

In a “slack” labour market (a condition in which there are fewer jobs than workers), youth may find it even more difficult to find employment because of

their limited work experience. Moreover, data shows that youth are twice as likely to be laid off during economic downturns and recessions than their adult counterparts (Bernard, 2013).

Compared to adult unemployment, the recovery process for youth unemployment can be much slower. Only 19% of the job loss among youth in Canada during the recession had been recovered by August 2011 (Canada's Public Policy Forum, 2012). Seven years after the 2008-2009 economic recession, Ontario's economy has been through a slow but steady recovery. The Ontario government recently announced that as of February 2016, the province has recouped all of the jobs lost during the recession. Jobs now exceed the pre-recession peak by 4.9% or 324,600 (Ontario Labour Market Statistics, 2016). Youth, however, have not benefited from Ontario's current recovery with youth unemployment and underemployment continuing to rise (Geobey 2013).

Crucially, labour market outcomes and economic inequalities tend to be highly racialized in Canada. When it comes to youth, the racial disparities are more pronounced. The percentage of youth active in the labour market is only 37.6% compared to 54% for non-racialized

employment
for **racialized youth**
is **44% lower**
than non-racialized youth

youth – a difference of 16.4 percentage points. In contrast, racialized adult workers had almost the same rate of employment as non-racialized adult worker.

The unemployment rate for racialized youth stood at 20.5% compared to 15.7% for non-racialized youth, a difference of 4.8 percentage points. A similar difference in unemployment rate is observed between racialized adult workers compared to their non-racialized counterparts.

Certain racialized youth groups face elevated levels of unemployment. Youth from Black, South Asian, Arab, West Asian and Korean backgrounds all had unemployment rates higher than 20%, with Black youth having the highest rate at 25.3%. The unemployment rate for Black youth in Toronto stood at 28% (Geobey 2013).

Income and poverty rates mirror these racialized inequalities in unemployment levels. In 2005, racialized families were three times more likely to live in poverty (19.8%) compared to non-racialized families (6.4%) (Block and Galabuzi, 2011). Families who identified as Black, Latin American, Arab, West Asian and Korean had poverty rates above 20% (Block and Galabuzi, 2011).

What is of particular concern is the way that racialized inequalities intersect with, and get structurally (re)produced as geographical inequalities, particularly in urban contexts. Nowhere is this more starkly apparent than in Toronto. While the quality of life in Toronto is often portrayed as one among the highest in the world, there are persistent and worsening spatial inequalities between central Toronto and its inner suburbs such as the Black Creek area (includes Jane and Finch), Weston-Mt. Dennis, Crescent Town, Rustic, and Scarborough Village (Hulchanski 2010; Young & Keil 2014).

In the past decade, Toronto embraced creative city policies as an economic development approach oriented to attract talent to downtown locations. The rationale is that attraction and retention of highly-skilled workers would ease and accelerate the city's transition into the New Economy (new industries characterized by cutting edge technology and high growth) (Florida 2002). Thus, Toronto's core locations have been the focus of vibrant policy: infrastructure investments, revitalization plans, densification, transit improvements and new amenities. The 905 areas of the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area region are enjoying some success as well, with some of the highest population growth rates in the country.

In-between these two realities are Toronto's inner suburbs. Home to the city's largest concentrations of low-income households, they have benefited little from the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area's booming success. Neighbourhoods like Black Creek (which includes Jane and Finch), Weston-Mt. Dennis, Rockcliffe Smythe, Oakridge, Malvern, and Scarborough Village have seen a persistent decline in income levels and economic investments. As Idil Burale and John Lorinc noted,

(...) the local economies of the inner suburbs have become depleted, which means workers are traveling further away from their homes for job opportunities. Residents living in areas like Mt. Dennis have seen prosperity by-pass them as it transferred between the booming downtown core and 905 region.
(Burale I. & Lorinc, J., 2015, n.p.)

Even within the prosperous downtown core of Toronto, there are neighbourhood pockets of extreme poverty including in the Regent Park, Parkdale, and Thorncliffe Park neighbourhoods.

There is a very direct racial undertone in these geographic inequalities in the city. Racialized groups and recent immigrants (two-thirds of who are from non-European backgrounds) tend to be over-represented in these inner suburb and downtown areas of economic decline in Toronto. For example, in the Black Creek neighbourhood, 71% of residents are from racialized backgrounds and 63%

71% of residents
**have racialized
backgrounds**
in the Black Creek neighbourhood

are immigrants. Similarly, in Weston-Mt. Dennis, 64% are racialized and 54% are immigrants. In Regent Park, 75% are racialized and in Thorncliffe Park, 77% are racialized and 70% are immigrants. According to the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy action plan report, most of the 31 neighbourhoods in Toronto that fall below the Neighbourhood Equity Score (based on a number of measures such as unemployment rate, low-income rate, high school graduation, post-secondary completion, premature mortality, and mental health) tend to be the very neighbourhoods with high proportions of racialized families and immigrants.

Location and race intersect in Toronto to produce a very unequal city in which racialized people, and the neighbourhoods that have high proportions of racialized

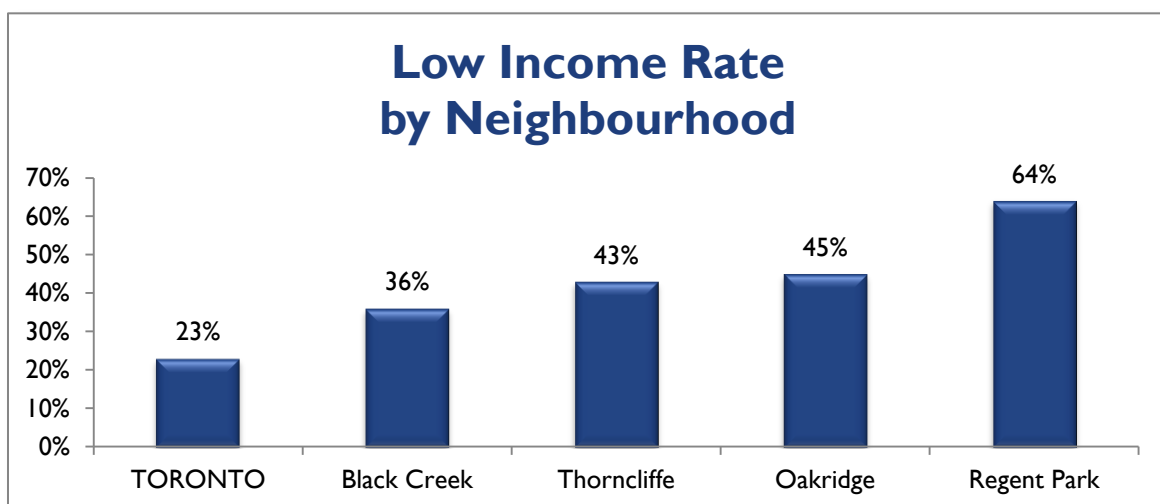
residents, are subject to persistent patterns of economic disinvestments, infrastructure and service gaps, social and political exclusions, and social stigma. To reverse this, city planners have joined forces with community agencies/ foundations, such as the United Way Toronto & York Region and Toronto Community Foundation, to implement a number of targeted strategies (such as the Priority Neighbourhoods strategy, Neighbourhood Investment Areas, and most recently the Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy). While these targeted strategies have helped to overcome some service and resource gaps, they have been insufficient to fuel the level of local economic development, private sector investment, local job creation, and infrastructure development required to overcome the root causes of poverty and inequalities facing these neighbourhoods, particularly by racialized residents who live in these neighbourhoods.

In contrast, these neighbourhoods have seen a rise in police presence which unfairly exposes residents in these neighbourhoods – particularly Black youth – to disproportionately high rates of criminalization, including in cases where residents are experiencing mental health issues.

These structural inequalities (lack of jobs, low economic development, infrastructure gaps, high criminalization) have direct negative impacts in terms of labour market outcome and economic well-being for its residents in those areas.

Unemployment rates and low income rates in these inner suburb neighbourhoods and marginalized neighbourhoods in the downtown core can be anywhere from 2 to 5 times higher than the city average. Compare, for example, the average low income rate for Toronto at 23% to the strikingly high low-income rates in Regent Park (64%), Oakridge (45%), Thorncliffe Park (43%), and Black Creek (36%). In terms of the youth unemployment rate (for youth 15-29 years), one third of the neighbourhoods in Toronto have a rate higher than the city's average (18%), with some of the neighbourhoods in the inner suburbs and downtown core having a rate of 25% or more (Toronto Public Health, 2013; Work-based Learning Works).

There is an urgent need to better understand these deep structural causes of worsening youth joblessness in Toronto, with attention to the role of race and these geographical patterns of urban inequalities.



NEET Youth

Since the 1990s, many countries including Canada have begun paying close attention to another indicator related to youth labour market outcomes called the NEET rate. NEET represents the youth who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training. The NEET indicator includes youth who are not employed, or not in the labour force (NILF), and also are not in school or taking any formal training programs. This term was coined by analysts in UK who were concerned about the rising number of older youth who were leaving school but ending up jobless for long periods of time (Statistics Canada, 2012).

According to Statistics Canada (2012), the NEET rate for Canadian youth (age 15-29) increased

There are at least
83,000
NEET youth
in the Greater Toronto
and Hamilton Area

by two percentage points since the 2008 economic crisis. In 2011, 13% of Canadian youth (15-29) fell into the NEET category; of this 5.7% were unemployed and 7.5% were not in the labour force (Statistics Canada 2012). According to Civic Action (2015), it is estimated that there are at least 83,000 youth in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) who fall into the NEET category.

Researchers and analysts in Canada and around the world recognize the difficulty in collecting data about NEET youth since many are engaged in activities outside the formal labour market and formal education system. Thus, not much literature about NEET youth exists. Existing evidence shows the NEET rate

varies considerably by gender, age, education level and family status. For example, compared to youth with a university degree, youth with less than a high school diploma were twice as likely to be NILF (Statistics Canada 2012). Among youth with less than a high school education, women were much more likely to be NILF, 42.3% compared to 24.1% for men (Statistics Canada 2012).

Data about non-student youth reveals that, compared to being single, married youth with children significantly increases the likelihood of women being NILF while it decreases for men (Statistics Canada 2012). In other words, non-student female youth with children tend to become excluded from the labour market while non-student male youth with children tend to become active in the labour force. According to Statistics Canada data, 33.2% of non-student female youth with children are NILF, compared with 6.3% of their male counterparts.

When we look at youth who are active in the labour market but facing long-term unemployment (for more than six months), we see some variations by gender, age and education level as well. Data from Statistics Canada (2012) shows that 88% of youth who are long-term unemployed were older youth between the ages of 20-29; of this two thirds (66%) were male. Youth with a high school diploma or less were more likely than youth with a higher education to be long-term unemployed, with the highest rate (58%) for males with a high school diploma or less (Statistics Canada 2012).

The NEET indicator was introduced with good intentions to raise awareness and support for vulnerable youth who are neither in school nor employed.

However, the NEET concept has come under some criticism. Some analysts have cautioned that lumping youth under a single NEET category may mask the heterogeneity and complexities in the ways youth participate or do not participate in the labour market (Chen, 2011; Maguire, 2013, 2015; Marshall, 2012; Stoten, 2014; Tamesberger & Bacher, 2014). To this extent, researchers have highlighted the need to pay attention to the varied reasons different groups of youth may end up being out of school and jobless. Reasons may include childcare responsibilities, criminal record, health issues, disability, youth engaged in volunteer work or taking time off (Tamesberger and Bacher, 2014; Maguire, 2015).

Others have raised concerns that the NEET label may further stigmatize and marginalize youth due to the negative connotation associated with it (Chen, 2011; Maguire, 2015; Stoten, 2014). For instance, people may presume NEET youth to be poorly educated, lazy or involved in illegal activities (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2013; Stoten, 2014). Perhaps even more troubling is that the term may attribute NEET status as personal failure rather than draw attention to larger systemic causes (Stoten, 2014).

There is also growing concern about youth who are educated and work-ready but are facing persistent levels of under-employment or precarious employment (Canada’s Public Policy Forum, 2013; Frenette, 2003; Oreopolous, 2006). Analysts refer to this sub-group of youth as “Poorly Integrated New Entrants” (Canada’s Public Policy Forum, 2013). These youth are not necessarily NEET in that they may have some form of employment. However, the jobs they hold may be very precarious, low-wage,

and unrelated to their education. To this extent, these youth may face similar levels of economic and employment insecurity as that of NEET youth. International and Canadian studies show that experiences of being stuck in low-wage, precarious and unrelated occupations can lead to long-term economic “scarring” for educated youth making it persistently difficult for them to find decent, wellbeing employment. (OECD, 2011; Canada’s Public Policy Forum, 2013; Oreopolous, 2006). Some of these educated and work-ready youth may eventually be pushed out of the labour market and become NEET.

During the last decade, we have seen a growth in Canadian research on precarious employment and the socio-economic and health impacts from this. Precarious forms of employment have been rising

40% of all jobs in the GTHA are precarious
 three times faster than permanent, stable forms of employment. A study by the Precarious Employment

and Poverty in Southern Ontario (PEPSO, 2012; 2015) research group found that over 40% of jobs in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area were precarious. A growing number of studies, including research conducted by Access Alliance (2010, 2012, 2015) and the Workers Action Centre (2007; 2015), have documented the everyday experiences and struggles of Canadians stuck in precarious jobs.

However, most research on this topic is focused on adult workers. We also know very little about how precarious, low-wage jobs can affect socio-economic status, health and even educational

outcomes for youth workers. There is an urgent need to better understand how being stuck in precarious jobs impacts youth, including how it might push them to become NEET.

Unemployment, Underemployment and Health Outcomes

There is a strong body of evidence that shows that unemployment and insecure employment creates serious negative health effects for individuals, families and communities. For instance, employment affects income, which directly affects one's access to nutritious food and secure housing. Unemployment contributes to social and material deprivation, stress, mental health problems such as depression, and anxiety, and harmful coping behaviours, including alcoholism and other addictions (Murphy and Athanasou 1999; McKee-Ryan, Song et al. 2005; Paul and Moser 2009; Mikkonen and Raphael 2010). Similarly, the social development effects of unemployment have an impact on effective parenting and personal relationships (Pelzer, et. al. 2014).

Furthermore, underemployment and being stuck in precarious jobs have been linked to:

- poor general mental and physical health (Benach et al, 2010; Smith and Frank 2005; Dean and Wilson 2009; Chen, Smith et al. 2010; de Castro, Rue et al. 2010; OECD 2013);
- occupational injuries and illnesses (Benavides et al, 2006; Kerr, Frank et al. 2001; Premji and Smith 2013); and

- chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and cancers (Benach et al, 2010; Ferrie, et al, 2010; Kumari et al, 2004; Friedland and Price 2003; Peter, Gässler et al. 2007).

A growing number of studies have documented the specific mechanisms and risk factors through which conditions of job insecurity lead to damaging social and health impacts. Evidence shows that workers stuck in precarious jobs and underemployment face very high levels of what is referred to as “employment strain” due to uncertainty about their next job, or work hours or earnings. The stress of having to constantly look for jobs can itself be stressful as well and take a lot of effort. Many end up juggling multiple low-paying, precarious jobs that involve travelling across long distances and working very irregular schedules.

Studies also show that workers in precarious jobs face greater exposure to occupational risk but have fewer protections, minimal access to workplace training and employee benefits, including extended health benefits, paid sick days and emergency leave (Quinlan, Mayhew et al. 2001; Chaykowski 2006; Benach and Muntaner 2007; Malenfant, LaRue et al. 2007; Law Commission of Ontario, 2012; Lewchuk and Clarke 2011; Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services 2012; OECD 2013; Workers Action Centre, 2015).

Current Policies and Programs

In the last couple of decades, reducing youth unemployment has become a policy priority. Policy makers at all jurisdictions in Canada (federal, provincial and municipal) have introduced a number of policy strategies and programs to improve youth employment. For example, the federal government's Youth Employment Strategy invests over \$330 million annually on three program areas geared at creating jobs for youth and improving their access to job training and employers. Similarly, the Ontario government has dedicated programs under their Youth Jobs Strategy and Youth Employment Fund. The City of Toronto's innovative Partnership to Advance Youth Employment program is specifically geared at getting more employers to hire youths from priority neighbourhoods.

The fact that youth joblessness is getting worse in Canada calls into question the effectiveness of these government funded youth employment programs. Frontline service provider agencies, including St. Stephen's Community House, have raised concerns that many of these government funded employment programs are not accessible to vulnerable youth. Service providers have also criticized the constantly changing and unsustainable nature of government funded youth employment programs.

Even if the youth employment programs are accessible to vulnerable youth, they lack the effective wrap-around social supports and interventions required for vulnerable youth to benefit from these programs. Policy makers in Canada have introduced action plans to tackle broader socio-economic challenges facing youth including violence and social isolation.

Government-initiated youth action plans have tended to be reactionary and symptoms-focused, often in response to a spike in youth violence. For example, the province introduced the Ontario Youth Action Plan in 2012 in response to recommendations from the Roots of Violence report. While it includes youth employment and training programs, most of the focus in this action plan is on reducing violence. Bold, proactive government actions to tackle root causes like poverty, systemic racism, excessive criminalization of youth, and growing urban/geographical inequalities are still missing.

RESEARCH METHODS

In the summer of 2015, St. Stephen's Community House teamed up with Access Alliance and the University of Toronto to initiate the Youth Unemployment Research Project (YURP). The key goal of this research project was to help overcome knowledge gaps about barriers to employment and employment services that youth in low-income neighbourhoods face, and use the research evidence to inform community-based, youth-friendly employment policies and services.

In line with community-based research principles, seven youth from communities in Toronto, including within our catchment area of Jane Street, between Steeles Avenue and St. Clair Avenue West, were trained, engaged and supervised as Peer Researchers and Youth Advisory Council Members to help design and conduct the study, analyze the data and contribute to its dissemination. As Access Alliance is a recognized leader in community-based research, we tapped into their expertise in training and engagement tools to involve community members as peer researchers in knowledge production and knowledge sharing for effective change.

Peer researchers attended four training sessions: (1) Research design and ethics; (2) Conducting interviews and focus groups; (3) Coding; and (4) Data analysis.

Following the research design and ethics training, the team engaged in a Collaborative Research Design process developed by Access Alliance. During

this process, one of the two principal investigators began by providing a broad institutional context of the labour market sector and employment services. This was followed by peer researchers sharing lived experience perspectives about important issues related to employment and barriers to employment services for youth living in marginalized neighbourhoods.



Youth peer researchers at work

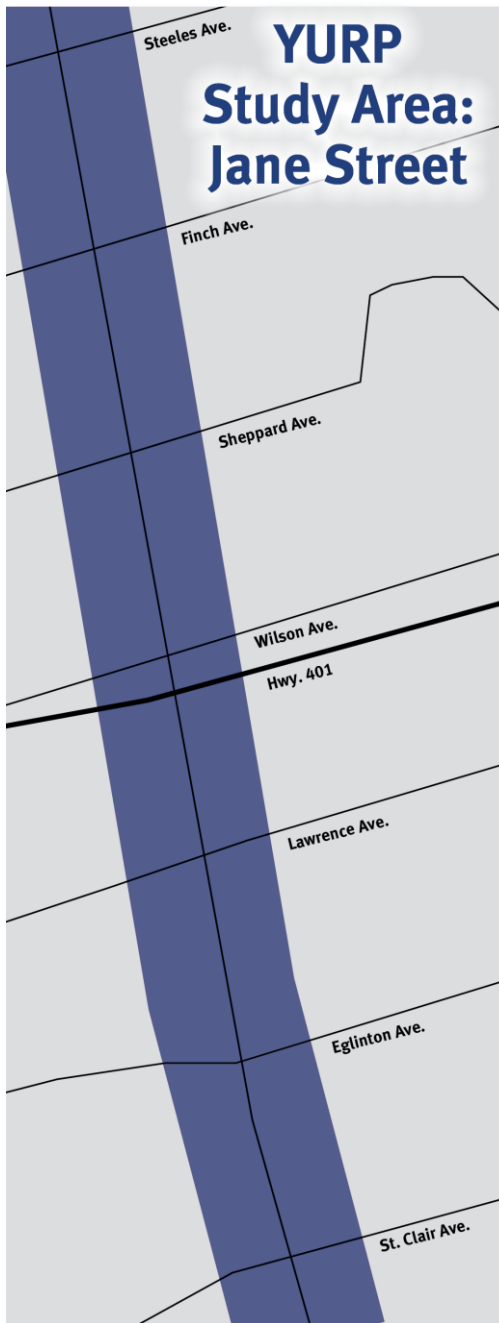
Drawing on a preliminary literature review, the team discussed existing evidence and gaps in knowledge. Specifically, the team explored the definition and indicators related to NEET. Informed by these discussions about institutional context, lived experience perspectives and current evidence, the team then developed the specific research questions, methodology and ethical protocol for the YURP study.

Following approval from University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board (REB), the team began implementing the study.

Research Questions

The team jointly came up with two main research questions to guide the study:

- 1) What are the barriers for NEET youth in accessing and retaining employment?
- 2) What are community-based youth-friendly solutions for overcoming these barriers?

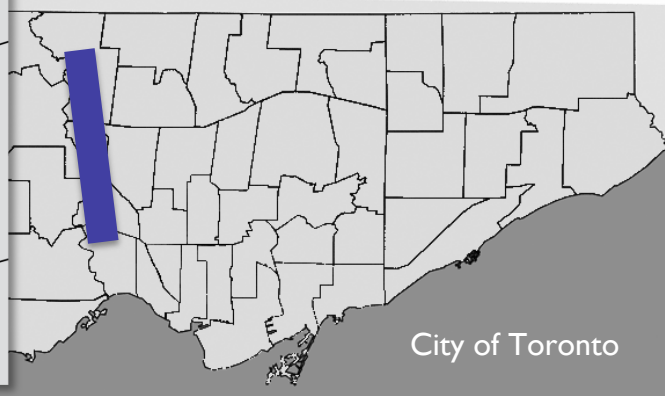


The team felt that it was important to understand barriers that youth face not just in finding a job but keeping a job. Peer researchers highlighted that many youth who are pursuing post-secondary education may also be struggling with joblessness. Thus, the team decided to include people who are at risk of being NEET. Moreover, the team was interested in determining the kinds of solutions and supports needed to overcome the barriers marginalized youth face to employment and employment services.

YURP Study Area: Toronto's Jane Street

The YURP was focused on the areas just off Jane Street – Jane Street & St. Clair Avenue West (South) to Jane Street & Steeles Avenue (North) and Keele Street (East) to Humber River (West). The team identified this area as an underserved low-income community with a high concentration of priority youth and pre-teens.

This area was selected based on St. Stephen's Community House's own experience and client databases, which indicated that many marginalized young clients who visit the Employment & Training Centre (located at Bathurst & St. Clair) reside in low-income neighbourhoods along Jane Street. Thus, the assumption is that there is



a larger than average number of NEET youth with low-income status in the neighbourhoods selected.

The majority of neighbourhoods in that area fall below the Neighbourhood Equity Index and are categorized as one of the 31 Neighbourhood Improvement Areas under the Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy of the City of Toronto. Compared to the city average, these neighbourhoods along Jane Street, including Black Creek, Glenfield-Jane Heights, Downsview, Weston-Mt. Dennis and Rockcliffe Smythe, have disproportionately high rates of unemployment and low-income, and low rates of high school and post-secondary completion.

Most residents living in low-income neighbourhoods along Jane Street are immigrants from racialized backgrounds. As noted earlier, 71% of residents from Black Creek neighbourhood are from racialized backgrounds and 63% are immigrants. Similarly, in Mt. Dennis, 64% are racialized and 54% are immigrants.

Our area-based approach makes our study unique in understanding the implications of neighbourhood dynamics, enabling us to conduct a grounded and contextual analysis of youth unemployment, neighbourhood marginalization, and urban inequality.

Outreach and recruitment

A recruitment flyer/information was circulated widely in youth drop-in centres, employment/community agencies, residential buildings, bus stops, and other public places of interest to youth. The team also drew on partner

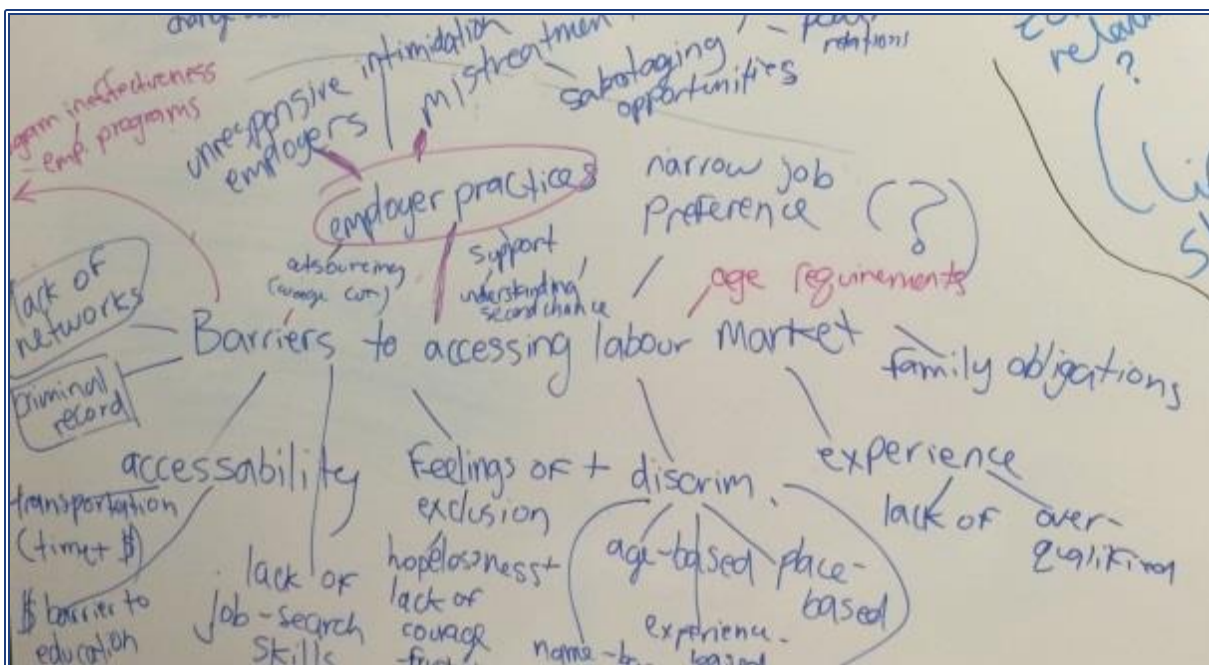
agency contacts and social media to recruit potential youth participants. Most importantly, peer researchers used in-person communication and networking to reach out and recruit NEET youth who are socially isolated. Participants were invited to express interest by calling or emailing, and signing-up for a particular focus group date.

Focus groups with NEET youth

We conducted six focus groups with a total of 63 NEET youth, ages 16-24 who reside within our catchment area. Out of these participants, 39 were males and 24 were females. All focus group participants were from racialized backgrounds. Focus groups were two-hours long, and were digitally audio-recorded. Focus groups took place in community spaces across our catchment area, such as youth drop-in spaces, community health centres, and partner employment and social agencies. Peer researchers facilitated the focus group discussions with support from the research coordinator or the principal investigators. All participants received a \$30 honorarium, a full meal, refreshments, and two TTC tokens to cover transportation.

Follow-up interviews with NEET youth

Six selected participants (four females and two males) were invited to participate in an in-depth follow-up interview to inquire more deeply into some of the youth's particular experiences. Follow-up interviews were also employed to redress gender disparity in focus groups in which females were underrepresented. Interview participants received a \$15 honorarium and two TTC tokens to cover transportation.



YURP brainstorming exercise

Focus groups with service providers and allies

We also conducted two focus groups with a total of 15 youth outreach workers, service providers, and administrators serving youth in the Jane Street neighbourhoods. The focus groups took place at a local community health centre.

Interviews with community participants

We conducted a total of nine interviews with professionals, including academics, funders, policymakers, and community stakeholders.

Analysis

Following data collection, all data was fully transcribed. The team jointly developed a coding framework by reading three representative transcripts. All transcripts were then coded and systematized using Nvivo 8.0 software. Three collaborative data analysis sessions took place in February-March of 2016 in which the team reviewed coded data summary reports

to identify key findings using a detailed narrative analysis and grounded theory.

The findings were thematically organized around key themes (NEET experiences and needs, barriers, solutions) for closer analysis of cross-cutting patterns with attention to varied experiences and outcomes based on critical intersections like race, gender, and education level. Peer researchers took a leadership role in identifying themes, patterns and links. Visual diagrams were often used to map these patterns and links.



Team's analysis meeting

Our analysis was complemented with peers' written reflections. Youth peer researchers worked collaboratively to produce an analytical blog post that reflected on current issues relevant to YURP.

Finally, preliminary results were shared in three separate meetings with members of YURP's Steering Committee in October 2015, January 2016 and March 2016 to get their feedback on the institutional context and framing of policy recommendations and solutions.

DIVERSE TRAJECTORIES AND DISTINCTIVE NEEDS

Youth with an Education Gap	Youth Caring for Family
Youth in Conflict with the Law	Youth with a Long-term Disability or Health Condition

In line with emerging evidence, results from our study show that NEET youth are a very diverse cohort. Some NEET youth may face short-term unemployment; others may be employed on-and-off; other NEET youth are economically inactive for long periods. Since their economic conditions and personal trajectories are so varied, not all NEET youth may benefit from the same types of employment programs and policy interventions. The following four NEET types were identified as facing distinctive challenges in the Jane Street area:

- 1) youth facing an education gap;
- 2) youth in conflict with the law;
- 3) youth caring for family; and
- 4) youth with a long-term disability or health condition.

This typology is for analytical purpose. In reality, these categories may be quite fluid with some youth straddling more than one group.

Youth with an Education Gap

Early-leavers

A large number of NEET participants in our study told us they had left high school before completion. These early-leavers become systematically excluded from an increasingly competitive job market where a high school diploma and post-secondary education have become a mandatory entry-level requirement. Early-leavers mentioned leaving school for various reasons. Many of them talked about school disengagement, lack of relevance of curricular activities to their personal circumstance, and the opportunity costs of being at school given pressures on them to bring income to support their struggling families. In the words of one youth:

I don't think at the time school was what I needed. What I needed was money, so.
(Youth participant, focus group, 27/10/15)

Other youths conferred a high value to education but got discouraged due to negative experiences with teachers. Youth recalled how practices such as unfair academic streaming into applied streams and rash disciplinary actions by teachers insensitive to the challenges youth face gradually pushed them out of school:

[I dropped out] cause I was always getting in trouble, and my teachers would tell me “just get out of the class”.

And I wouldn’t even go to class; so sometimes I’ll just stay at home.

(Youth participant, focus group, 27/10/15)

Youth emphasized that the common practice by teachers of kicking students out of class is what leads young people to become associated with people and actions that are “bad”:

I don’t think of stuff to do bad, they just turn out bad. I’ll be sitting there I’ll end up talking, laughing, you get kicked out of class, then you get bucked up into other people, and it turns out to be bad, you end up doing things that wouldn’t have led to that if you weren’t put out of class.

(Youth participant, focus group, 19/11/15)



Local community school

Many youth highlighted the critical role that teachers play in determining whether students succeed, or fail and drop out. They mentioned that if teachers tried a little more to understand students’ social context and “obstacles” they are facing, there would be fewer youth left behind in school:

If teachers were to give students chances, like as someone said about things going outside in the real world, teachers do not know where that student is sleeping or where they are coping after school, what if school is the only shelter that person has? You know what I am saying? They never ask why you need help with this; because once you do not hand in an assignment they shut you off.

(Youth participant, focus group, 19/11/15).

I do not feel like teachers connected with students at all in the community, especially coming from the Jane and Finch area, umm, we wake up with a lot of obstacles every morning, and I think that they never really see it, they never really focus on one child at school, you have to either go with the flow or be left behind.

(Youth participant, focus group, 19/11/15)

A combination of family circumstances, such as single-headed households and unaffordable childcare, or unattended mental health issues, such as trauma and depression, and, more broadly, the effects of living with unmet basic needs, sidetracked some youth from completion. Common to all the early-leavers who shared their personal stories with us, were experiences of poverty as a deterrent to participate in school. One youth sadly recalled how he had to leave school because he could not afford lunch, other school programs, and transit costs:

I took a different kind of transit, when the back door opens, I was that guy that would hop on the back, because I didn't have money to get to school. I was that guy.... this is just the life that was given to us, I do not have money to afford, no lunch program, no programs like this, I would have graduated a long time ago, I think I would have been okay.

(Youth participant, focus group, 13/11/15)

Youth from recent immigrant families face additional challenges to stay in school. Trying to integrate themselves within the school environment and fit in with their peers is not easy for teens. Cases of bullying and discrimination, based on race, culture, family income, and immigration status, create tense and stressful situations in Toronto's highly diverse schools. With funding cuts, there is limited professional support in schools for immigrant students. For instance, a newcomer youth to Canada told us how he could not handle all the stresses and challenges in school (social isolation, bullying, language barrier, pressure from teachers) and so decided to go off "into the real world":

It was too much for me, even like, I was not born here, I cannot get the things that normal Canadian citizens get, I am an immigrant, that alone is hard. I used to get bullied; no one would understand what I was saying... I needed to learn proper English, I got stressed with teachers... Holy!! my head was spinning so I just went off into the real world and I never looked back.

(Youth participant, focus group, 11/19/15)

Crucially, our study results show that, despite the challenges and difficulties, most early-leavers are very interested in pursuing re-entry or alternative opportunities and have strong aspirations of completion:

I want to be that person in my family to get their diploma, no one has one yet. You know, so I wanna be that one. I am the only Jamaican born, coming to Canada, they think I won't be able to get it, but I just want to get it so I can just be like, HERE! Look!

(Youth participant, focus group, 19/11/15)

I mean, to be honest, I would love to get school out of the way, cause school is just, it doesn't really take up your time in the day, but you still have to attend it, you know? And I feel like if I get it out the way, not just high school, I feel like everything would be better. I think work would be much better.

(Youth participant, focus group, 21/10/15)

However, many youth continue to face multiple barriers to re-entry or are discouraged to find limited education and training programs that are sensitive and accommodating to the challenges they face.

Aside from the benefits of a high school diploma, most early-leavers miss out as well on high school co-op programs. Youth agreed that co-op programs provide important experience to transition to work because it opens the door to future jobs and may provide new career perspectives. In the words of one youth who benefited from a co-op program:

Yeah, I would say co-op, co-op does help you get a job, and like especially if it's something that you've always wanted. Like for me like, um, I did co-op at a court house, um. At a law firm. They pretty much hired me like the following year, for the summer. So, you could pretty much say I'm doing something in that kind of field that's really close, you know what I mean? At least you have experience, just to slap on your resume. And be like hey, I have some sort of experience, you know?

(Youth participant, focus group, 13/11/15)

Even when high school co-op experiences do not lead to formal employment, some youth see them as valuable opportunities to learn about the labour market and guide them in future career paths:

I did co-op...but like, I don't think it necessarily helped me get a job? But it helped me to learn about a career that I wasn't too sure if it was for me.

(Youth participant, focus group, 13/11/15)

It is clear that education plays a substantial role in employment outcomes for youth. As the demand for higher levels of qualifications increase, so do the disadvantages faced by NEET youth who lack basic high school level credentials and basic skills like literacy and numeracy. Compared to youth with a university degree, youth with less than a high school diploma are twice as likely to be not in the labour force (Statistics Canada 2012). Even for those who are active in the labour market, the

unemployment rate among high school early-leavers in Canada has risen from 15.9% in 2006/2007 to 23.2% into 2009/2010 (Statistics Canada, 2010).

23.2% **unemployment** among early leavers

Our findings are consistent with the literature examining the relationship between education and employment outcomes. Employers are increasingly seeking candidates with high academic qualifications and skills (Kelly and McGuinness 2013; Amyot and Fairholm Mader, 2015; Pilz, Schmidt-Altmann and Eswein 2015). The factors leading to dropping out of school are varied among youth and include financial struggles, learning disabilities, mental health issues, trauma, addiction, family obligations and family breakdown, housing instability or homelessness, involvement in the criminal justice system, as well as pregnancy, parenting and childcare (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2013; Rennie-Hill et al., 2014; Shier et al., 2014; Simmons, Thompson, & Russell, 2014).

Furthermore, these factors may lead to poor school performance and disengagement prior to dropping out (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2013). Youth who face such barriers often place less priority on school and education, and greater priority on meeting immediate needs such as food, shelter and safety (Shier et al., 2014). Consequently, youth who have not completed high school have been identified as having long-term employment struggles since they have limited opportunities to further their

education and training beyond high school (Archambault et al., 2009; Rumberger & Lamb, 2003).

Unprepared graduates

Although having a high school diploma increases the chance of success in the job market for youth, graduation is not nearly sufficient even for jobs that might be considered as low-skilled. Workers in all jobs need a variety of skills, experience, or job training to thrive. In fact, many NEET youth who participated in our focus groups had finished high school but had little exposure to a work environment. These youth believed they had relatively few tools to compete for jobs.

Most troubling is the cohort of youth who have not formally left the education system and are enrolled but have few credits, and do not regularly participate in school activities. These youth, who are not formally counted as NEETs may actually be so:

I am sort of in school, but I do not attend, does that make sense?

(Youth, follow-up interview, 03/12/15)

As an educational expert told us the concern for youth who may eventually gain a high school diploma is the quality of the education they received and the fact they may not have acquired essential skills including basic literacy (Community participant interview, 21/01/16). Given Ontario's promotion and retention policies, youth are now graduating in higher numbers than ever before (<http://www.tdsb.on.ca/HighSchool/GraduationRate.aspx>). However, the school system is not always equipping these students with meaningful skills and diverse experiences, and despite their graduation, these youth have low-

expectations of employment success. Although not early-leavers, they face many challenges finding jobs and many of them end up falling into NEET circumstances.

Community marginalization and existing inequities that are reproduced in the public education system play a big role in creating unprepared graduates who become part of the generational poverty cycles in low-income neighbourhoods:

If [Jane and Finch] were a different community where youth failed grade 9, their parents would be all over that. Here, youth are getting to grade 11 and they are still not able to read and write, and still no one has intervened.

(Community participant, interview, 21/01/16)

Indeed, basic skills such as literacy and numeracy have been linked to employment outcomes for youth. (Lundetrae, Gabrielsen and Mykletun 2010). This evidence supports our finding that the quality of skills acquired in education determines employment outcomes for youth.

Youth in Precarious Post-secondary Education

Our study included youth from low-income families who are in-between post-secondary education paths. These youth have planned to obtain college or university degrees but employment takes priority over school because of family poverty and the expenses they incur while they study. Many of these youth are often responsible not only for their personal and education costs, but are also expected to contribute household income to pay for rent and

other expenses. For instance, a study participant talked about her heavy economic responsibility in her household that directly hindered her school work:

I guess my, my biggest deal at [post-secondary] school was the money. So when I was making the money things were a little bit easier, but then I lost the time to, to do the work, the school work and stuff. So what would, make things easier? Uh, if I didn't have to pay for school; if I wasn't the breadwinner in the family. I think that would make things easier, if there was someone else in the family who was making money too.

(Youth participant, focus group, 13/11/15)

Youth may also choose to take on part-time jobs while pursuing post-secondary education. The difference, however, is that for low-income youth, taking on jobs while in post-secondary education is not a choice but rather a necessity to pay for their school and/or make ends meet while in school. Not surprisingly, some NEET youth are pressed to skip or push off a semester in order to work, increasing the duration of their education:

I had to budget my education with OSAP. Basically working, scholarships, family, and when I couldn't afford it, I wouldn't go to school, I would take that semester off (...) or I would push a semester back, instead of going to school one semester, I would push it off, raise the money and then go back.

(Youth participant, follow-up interview, 03/12/15)

Youth mentioned challenges in balancing work and school and periods of inactivity they face as they try to find decent jobs to cover their educational costs:

I want, I need a job too, like – cause like, I'm planning to go back to school in January and, like, this is the first semester that I've never been in school, or haven't been employed, you know? So, I don't really know what to do with all the free time. Like it's, it's - I don't really like wasting time? I hate the fact that like, I don't have anything to do, and I'm just sitting at home or like hanging out with friends it's like, I want to put my time into something useful, you know? I don't just want to be there. So, yeah.

(Youth participant, focus group, 13/11/15)

Such challenges put youth in very precarious situations both in terms of their post-secondary education and employment pathway. A few mentioned that they had to quit post-secondary education because of this, and consequently, are also struggling to find a good job. In other words, low-income youth who are in precarious situations in terms of their post-secondary education appear to be at risk of becoming NEET.

Ontario has recently made a promising step in the right direction in terms of educational attainment. Ontario's 2016 budget has promised to make attending post-secondary education more affordable and accessible for low-income students. Beginning in the 2017-2018 school year, students from families whose incomes are \$50,000 or below will attend university or college tuition-free (Government of Ontario, 2016). This will help to

overcome the financial burden of attending and completing post-secondary education for many low-income youth.

However, this initiative needs to be accompanied by early intervention and reengagement strategies at the high school level to decrease school dropout rates among youth from low-income communities.

Youth in Conflict with the Law

Having a criminal record is one of the most significant barriers to employment (John Howard Society of Ontario, 2014). As the labour market slacked during the 2008-09 economic recession, hiring requirements and screening methods intensified. Seven years later, these hiring practices have lingered through Ontario's moderate economic recovery.

Screening policies have had immediate impacts for youth who have been in conflict with the law, even if innocent or have been just randomly stopped:

Whether you're innocent or not, if you're charged, your record is tainted, something will pop up because you are in the system.

(Youth participant, focus group, 05/11/15)

We heard from youth with criminal records being denied work at warehouses, and as cooks, janitors, in-grounds maintenance, and even in after-hours office cleaning positions. These impediments are familiar to job developers at employment agencies, who told us they find it increasingly hard to find employment for youth with criminal records. Regardless of the seriousness or

the type of offence committed, youth with a criminal record are last in the line.

Nevertheless, youth in this cohort would like a second chance. Social workers agreed that jobs are necessary to help youth in conflict with the law reinvent themselves. They need a fresh start but are rejected again and again:

Basically, it all goes back to jobs. If they have criminal records, it is difficult for [the employer] to look at this person. The young person has changed, but still can't get a job?

(Community participant, focus group, 11/12/15)

A study conducted by the John Howard Society of Ontario (2014) found that in Hastings and Prince Edward Counties, Ontario, 51% of surveyed organizations required a criminal record check; the most frequent reasons were liability/risk management, company policy, legal requirement for vulnerable sector checks, and the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Additionally, many

respondents in this study had negative perceptions of youth with

15%
of **organizations**
would never hire
youth with a
criminal record

criminal records. Nearly half of all participants reported negative and stigmatizing perceptions of youth with criminal records. For instance, they perceived them as not being honest, being less reliable, and being more of a

liability compared to youth with no record. As a result, more than 60% reported never having knowingly hired someone with a criminal record and 15% reported that they would not consider hiring an applicant with a criminal record, regardless of the nature of the record, the amount of time that has passed since it was acquired, or its relevance to the job position (John Howard Society of Ontario, 2014).

Systemic Criminalization of Low-income Youth

We found that high prevalence of criminalization, racial profiling, and negative relationships with the police along the Jane Street neighbourhoods exacerbates young people's vulnerability with the law. Youth, particularly males, complained extensively about police harassment. Young people's responses to police harassment are diverse. In some cases, being defiant towards authorities can be met with aggressive responses from authorities, as described to us by a social worker:

Just the other day, a young boy, 16 years old, came to me and said "boy, they grabbed me and punched me in my face just because I said I want to call my mother."

(Community participant, interview, 20/02/16)

A service provider with strong knowledge about vulnerable youth living in neighbourhoods along Jane Street lamented the worsening relationship between police and community:

Historically, relationships with police have not been good and I think that mistrust has grown with the rise in you

know, people videotaping, incidences of police brutality, discrimination, whatever you want to call it, the carding that has happened over the last few decades that has caused a lot of mistrust with communities and police. I think in 2005/06, when they brought the TAVIS [program] into communities, I think that caused a great deal of damage and caused an even bigger rift with communities and police. The level of mistrust is through the roof.

Community participant, interview, 20/02/16)

He mentioned how cuts to innovative programs like the "neighbourhood resource officer program" has decreased trust and positive exchanges between police and community, and consequently led to a rise in criminalization and carding practices. Due to increased frequency, youth have begun to normalize and internalize racial profiling practices by police:

RESEARCHER: Are you afraid of encountering a police officer?

YOUTH: I am not really afraid of them, but I kind of feel like they have to do to their job, if they say I fit a description, I just tell them it's very false. I've been hit with a lot of "you fit the description of such and such, we are just checking if you do not have weapons on you."

RESEARCHER: How often does it happen?

YOUTH: First time I got stopped in grade 9, the last time I got stuck was a couple of months ago. The last time they kind of had a reason, I was walking

with my hands in my hoodie, with my hoodie on, I kind of understand that.

(Youth participant, follow-up interview, 03/12/15)

This internalization deeply affects youth's overall confidence and self-esteem and they often start blaming themselves, even for wearing a hoodie.

Worse, some employers have negative assumptions about youth in these communities being prone to gangs and violence. As such, employers may reject job applications irrespective of whether youth have or don't have criminal records:

Um, the thing is like I tried apply for this, uh, for a part time job there, and he pretty much, uh, denied me 'cause of, he, 'cause the owner thinks you know I was associated with, you know gangs and such... and like at the end of the day, everyone has their own opinions, so like, we can't really stop them.

(Youth participant, focus group, 13/11/15)

Our research indicates that systemic criminalization of racialized low-income youths is a key reason why these youth, especially Black youth, face higher risks of being unemployed or NEET.

Youth Caring for Family

Some youth, particularly female youth, are also parents caring for their own children, and would like to secure a job or go back to school to overcome poverty. However, they are discouraged workers who need social assistance for extended periods. Challenges for these youth include childcare affordability, and difficulties balancing family, work and school responsibilities:

My son is one year old... I cannot go to school and raise my son to deal with.

(Youth participant, focus group, 19/11/15)

Data from Statistics Canada (2012) indicates 33.2% (one third) of non-student female youth with children are not in the labour force. Interestingly, non-student male youth with children tend to become more active in the labour force. According to Statistics Canada data, only 6.3% non-student male with children are not in the labour force.

33%
of non-student female youth with children are unemployed

Unlike male participants, female youth participants in our study also mentioned that they often have a lot of caregiving responsibilities for their younger siblings. These expectations often take away females' opportunity to study, participate in training opportunities, or find jobs. We heard about female youth who cannot attend job interviews because of their babysitting schedule at home, and the impossibility of attending school because they are required at home to provide care for others.

I was a babysitter and a mom. Sometimes, I didn't go to school for weeks, because my mom didn't have money for a babysitter, [my siblings] do not go to daycare, it was only me and my sisters. I had to make sure my little siblings went to school, then walk up to my school with my other sister. After, I had to make sure I went early to pick them up, and then I got use to that, caring for them and not going to school.

(Youth participant, focus group, 19/11/2015)

I had to keep dropping my siblings to school, I rather be late because my mom is telling me to do something, than to be late on my own terms, I would avoid getting beat up, my mom worked a long shift and we don't have a daddy around, I took care of my siblings, my mom wouldn't have money for daycare or babysitter, [I had to] make sure my little siblings got to school, I finally got used to not going to school, I dropped out and other drama.

(Youth participant, focus group, 05/11/2015)

These demands are not equally imposed on males, and female youth are sometimes pressured harder:

Like, there's, there's just times where she [mother] would put too much pressure on me to raise my little sisters. I would have to like, not go to school, just to like, take care of my siblings... but like, a lot of times, like, just the pressure was put on me, even though I had two older siblings, but they were guys. So, like, because I was a female, everything was put on me, and that kind of like affected me a lot? And like, just - so like, I branched out from my mom, like I left. Um, I kind of moved out, I left her when I was 17.

(Youth participant, focus group, 04/11/15)

On some occasions, family conflict over demands placed on female youth pushed youth to abandon the household. For instance, a research participant faced intense pressures and family conflict to the point she decided to flee her home at age 14, forcing her to leave school early:

Well, basically for me, when I was in grade 9, I had to pick up her kids, I have four siblings, so what happens, I used to bring them to daycare, everywhere, every single day, I have school to do!! It's like she doesn't understand that. Around 14 years old, I left home, I told her I am gone, told her I cannot deal with her anymore, I went to Niagara Falls, I did what I had to do.

(Youth participant, focus group, 11/19/2015)

Ironically, some female youth, especially those in single parent households, had to drop out of school in order to meet their obligations of getting their younger siblings to school:

Youth with a Long-term Disability or Health Condition

Some NEETs have a long-term condition, such as a mental health issue or a physical or learning disability. These youth are excluded workers; many are unaware of what is required of them to access opportunities:

YOUTH: I never think about a job yet, because now, I am on disability, I have been on it for a long, long time, I am not thinking about work right now...

RESEARCHER: At the end of the month, are you okay with money? Or is it sort of difficult?

YOUTH: I would like a little bit more, but I got to talk to my social worker about that to see if I can work... the government gets angry if they see that I am working and they are losing money... I know it is hard to get a job in this world.

(Youth participant, follow-up interview, 03/12/15)

Some youth with long-term conditions are actually ready to work. However, these NEETs often feel judged by hiring managers and typically require advocates and personalized supports to help open up opportunities. Many of them face barriers such as discrimination and exclusion due to false assumptions by potential employers about people on disability:

(...) If you're good at retail, you should be able to walk into a store that's hiring and get a job. I feel like a lot of, like, stores would just, off the bat assume that, oh, like, she looks like this, she's probably not a hard worker.

(Youth participant, focus group, 04/11/15)

BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Lack of Caring Adults	Socio-Spatial Inequalities
Discrimination	Ineffective Employment Services

While different groups of NEET youth face unique challenges and have distinctive needs, our study captured four systemic cross-cutting barriers facing racialized NEET youth living in low-income neighbourhoods along Jane Street. This section discusses these systemic barriers that reduce employability chances for NEET youth. These barriers result from deep structural causes linked to intergenerational poverty, systemic forms of discrimination and social exclusion, and urban inequality. Bold policy and programmatic interventions are required to overcome these barriers including proven poverty reduction strategies, local economic development initiatives, demand-side workforce development programs, as well as actions against systemic discrimination.

Lack of Caring Adults

Our study results indicate that many low-income NEET youth lack mentors and social networks that well-off youth tap into to access opportunities. As a social worker we interviewed highlighted, lack of mentors and role models can be a significant problem for youth since youth need adults to develop trusting relationships, and provide encouragement

to succeed through education, and in their transition from education to work (Community participant, interview, 20/02/16). Young people greatly benefit from building relationships with more established workers who can help youth initiate their careers, gain awareness of opportunities, and navigate difficult situations.

More broadly, the literature typically refers to social capital and not just caring adults as a determinant of access to employment. Social capital refers to the social resources such as knowledge, abilities and connections, that friends, family and others can draw on to support one's life chances and challenges (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2013). Many youth grow up relying on these social supports in order to help them during their transition into adulthood. For example, youth rely not only on their families, but also on friends, neighbours, teachers and counsellors. Additionally, these relationships ideally provide love, guidance, encouragement and a positive model of adult behaviour. These types of supports allow youth to learn day-to-day skills, and to fulfill a life that includes meaningful employment (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2013).

Most youth from privileged backgrounds can count on these networks, mentors and supports to guide them through successful education and career paths.

However, many of the youth participants in our study spoke about absent fathers or limited parental presence in their lives, insensitive teachers and counsellors, (who were more quick to penalize rather than support), and general lack of caring adults, mentors and role models in their lives. They also had insular social networks limited to other youth and adults who themselves were struggling with school, poverty and employment. Many youth were surrounded by adults who had low expectations of young people like them.

This lack of caring from adults, mentors and social networks is one of the key reasons why many youth from low-income neighbourhoods leave school early, face challenges completing post-secondary education, get in trouble with the criminal justice system, and/or have difficulty finding and keeping a decent job.

Service providers working with youth from low-income neighbourhoods underscored the importance of caring adults and a healthy social network as a determinant of employment success for NEET youth. For instance, a youth worker who supports youth in conflict with the law in the neighbourhoods along Jane Street told us that caring adults can make a big difference helping youth navigate the complexities of the justice system; a system that is hard for anyone to understand and that can weigh so heavily in determining a youth's future. As a youth worker asserted:

Every youth should have a caring adult that goes the extra mile.

(Community participant, focus group, 11/12/16)

Many NEET youth from neighbourhoods along Jane Street, however, have grown up in family environments where parents were absent due to broken households or because they were working multiple jobs to make ends meet. For many NEET youth, family conflict and limited adult supervision resulted in stress and anxiety which affects educational outcomes, engagement with school, and young people's overall health and wellbeing.

For youth, mentors who can relate to their own ethnic/racial backgrounds and community experiences are important:

I do see the value and importance of youth working in places where they can look up to someone who looks like them or is from the same community or ethnic background, especially if they are in a higher position, someone they can look up to, there is a lot of representation from people they can not necessarily look up to.

(Youth participant, follow-up interview, 26/01/16).

We also heard that teachers and school staff can be a great resource to youth. In a few cases, inspirational teachers were mentioned as providing support for building resilience. Some youths had positive things to say about their teachers or administrators, in terms of increasing their engagement with school, helping students find appropriate co-op placements, and providing tools with specific aspects of a job search:

Some of the teachers like helped me like fix my resume or like, um, prepped me for like interviews or something like that.

(Youth participant, focus group, 13/11/15)

However, most participants complained about unsupportive teachers:

[School] was bad, I blame my teachers, they have a lot of kids to focus on, they do not focus on each student, look how much hours are in school time, they should focus on us singly.

(Youth participant, focus group, 19/11/15)

Youth expressed that, paradoxically, institutions that should be leveling the field are instead providing limited support and sometimes reproducing exclusions. As discussed in the previous section, youth expressed concerns about how teachers and school administrators often rushed to penalize youth for coming late or handing assignments late, instead of trying to understand and address the root causes for these delays (for example, having to work or take care of siblings). Some young people said they felt like they were swimming against the tide when encountering institutions and agencies that turn their back on them, or become a barrier to improve their qualifications and overcome unemployment.

Some youth mentioned overcoming low expectations from teachers, job developers, social workers, police officers, and guidance counsellors. We heard often about how youth believed some adults perceive them and treat them as a “waste of time,” gave them little attention, looked down on them, or are generally distrustful towards young people:

I guess it was...I feel like when I went [to school], the people, like the people I hanged out with, and how I dress. The teachers would like, reflect on it and like they would say, it was like be like, oh “this guy is a waste of time” or something - not like say it to me but that’s how it felt.

(Youth participant, focus group, 13/11/16)

My guidance counselor put me down, about university, during my last semester of high school... that my intellectual level wasn’t there.

(Youth participant, focus group, 19/11/15)

Local community participants we interviewed highlighted that promoting employment success for NEET youth requires a community of caring adults and professionals who youth can trust and draw on. This support system needs to be built across family, allies, teachers, older youth, and employment service professionals in order to address the complex needs they face. In the words of one of our community participants:

We need help with cover letter, resume, workshops, placements that will get to a certain group of young people. If there is not room for programming, trips, building those relationships, really knowing who is who, and having young people know you. And your job is way more than employment: it should be about building relationships, having time and space for youth in the community, that is the number one priority

(Community participant, interview, 21/01/16)

Discrimination

Many of the barriers to access employment that we heard about from NEET youth are the result of systemic exclusion involving recent immigration status, age, race, and the effects of living and growing up in poverty in an inner-suburban low-income neighbourhood. NEET youth understand that they can overcome some of the barriers that prevent them from securing jobs. However, they were acutely aware that systemic roadblocks, such as discrimination and criminalization were “things they cannot change.” As one youth participant put it:

If you're not being hired because you went to the interview not dressed properly, then, all you just have to do is just, fix yourself. Look presentable when you're going to an interview... Stuff like that we can change. But if I never got hired because I was Black, or he never got hired because the manager thought he was a gangbanger or whatever, that's stuff we can't change.

(Youth participant, focus group, 13/11/15)

Experiences of discrimination and criminalization were widely referenced as a barrier to employment. In some cases, it is clear to youth the basis of the discrimination they are facing. We heard about race, culture, age, looks, attire, body size, and address. For some, the discrimination experience started with their names. These are some of the experiences we heard about:

My name is [a muslim name], I would never end up getting the job. A lot of places when I started to use my English

name, people started to hire me. The moment I took my middle name out of the equation they started giving me chances after that.

(Youth participant, focus group, 19/11/15).

When I first arrived in Canada I applied to so many jobs, I dropped off a lot of resumes, and a lot of applications. I was just like wondering, like why am I not getting any calls. I never got any jobs, I asked a friend from Brampton and she told me that since I live in Jane and Finch it would be difficult, at that point I was saying, “maybe it is my address is the reason why I am not getting the job,” because any time I tell someone I live in Jane and Finch, it was like no... It's like, they want us to live in the suburbs, I live in Etobicoke, it's hard for me to get a job anywhere.

(Youth participant, focus group, 19/11/15)

One youth shared his experience as a young Black male:

And I went to my interview... And so they looked at me with that surprised face like, what is he doing here? And I said I'm here for my interview. And a lady sat me down and started talking to me. And, the way how the conversation was going, if like she was coming up with every excuse not to hire me. So, she'll be like, “you live kind of far, isn't that a problem for you? “like no, it's okay, if it was an issue I wouldn't have applied for the job”. “You go to school, are you going to be able to handle

school?” and stuff like that. “Yeah, I’m okay, like if I had issues I wouldn’t be looking for a job”. And, I walked out. Maybe like the same night or a couple days after? I text the person and I’m like “was I successful in getting the position?” and she said “no you did not meet our requirements”. And I said “What were your requirements?” And she didn’t respond back to me.

(Youth participant, focus group, 13/11/15)

As a response to these barriers, some youth feel compelled to what they described as “white-washing” their resume including changing their names or using English middle names. Similarly, some youth may fake some aspects of their resume, such as using a friend’s or family address, among others.

Discrimination and systemic barriers to employment among youth (marginalized youth and NEET youth in particular) have been described throughout existing literature. For instance, researchers have uncovered negative perceptions of prospective employers with respect to a range of identifying factors, including:

- race or skin colour;
Access Alliance, 2010; Greater Toronto Civic Action Alliance, 2015; Lauer et al., 2012; Zaami, 2015; Yan, Lauer, & Chan, 2012
- religion;
Zaami, 2015
- immigration status;
Zaami, 2015
- age;
Zaami, 2015
- place of residence;
Zaami, 2015

- lack of Canadian credentials or experience;
Access Alliance, 2012; Lauer et al., 2012; Zaami, 2015
- language ability; and
Lauer et al., 2012
- accent.
Lauer et al., 2015

Socio-Spatial Inequalities

RESEARCHER: Let’s talk about transit.

YOUTH1: Say you have an interview at Vaughan, you have to pay double fare, \$4 to go, \$4 to come back. Or more, \$4.50, I’d rather work in my area.

YOUTH2: Money that’s a lot of problem, to be going two and from that job every day, the little paycheck you get every day is gone.

(Youth participants, focus group, 05/11/15)

NEET youth referred to various aspects of the build environment in their communities as barriers to access jobs and other opportunities: disrepair in social housing, food deserts, low level of transit service and high fares to travel the neighbouring 905 areas where jobs are increasingly available, lack of infrastructure, and lack of local jobs.

In the neighbourhoods along Jane Street, financial services are also scarce. Following the economic downturn, banks have gradually pulled out of the area, and payday lenders and cash-for-gold businesses are proliferating. These businesses are characterized by predatory practices that can quickly draw vulnerable populations into spirals of debt.

The lack of local economic opportunities, in particular, the lack of employers in economic sectors that would typically hire youth, such as retail, puts Jane and Finch youth at a disadvantage when competing for jobs:

When in a neighbourhood that has two malls the only place that hires youth is [one fast food restaurant], that's it. No other store is hiring, it is all Ma and Pa shops. Why? The median income in the community means that [sports retailer] does not want to be here, [clothing retailer] does not want to be here, [big retailer] doesn't want to be here. They like to be in malls, but they do not like to be in these malls. They are big hirers of youth elsewhere.

(Community participant, interview, 21/01/16)

Indeed, neighbourhoods along Jane Street are characterized by a high degree of socio-spatial inequalities and injustices that fall below the livability standards in which the City of Toronto prides itself.

Economic inequality

In 2008, Toronto lost 38,000 jobs. Out of these, 4,000 were lost in Rexdale and 2,000 were lost in Jane and Finch. By 2012, Toronto had recovered the total number of jobs lost, but youth have reported that none of those jobs had returned to Rexdale or Jane and Finch. Thus, the new jobs were created and redistributed throughout the city.

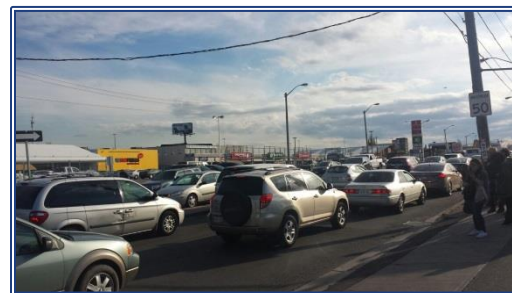
Transit inequality

Jane and Finch is a high-density area. Subways are typically planned according to densities and travel demand. In this area, however:

The political gravity of York University which is getting it, [negotiated] two stops on the university campus. The only Jane Street stop is north of Steeles, where you have to pay an additional bus fare to cross, and this part is not something that a lot of people talk about, but that stop is across the street from a cemetery that anybody and everybody in Jane and Finch has at least one if not more people that they have lost. So, the only stop is past Steeles, you have to pay more for it, and it is next to a cemetery which reminds you of the people you know that are not there. This is convenient for who?

Not Jane and Finch.

(Community participant, interview, 21/01/16)



Rush hour traffic along Jane Street

School inequality

All of the schools in the Jane and Finch community are at the top of the Learning Opportunities Index (LOI), which the education board uses to rank household incomes as a proxy for opportunity. There have not been significant improvements or outcomes since 2005 – the “summer of the gun” – when governments and the United Way Toronto (& York Region) convened for greater investment geared to support young people in priority areas. Closing the opportunity gap may take more than that:

The education board is talking about closing the opportunity gap, it is a three billion dollar budget, the opportunity gap is hurting a lot of students. You have an 80% provincial graduation rate, some populations are graduating at 50%, how much money are they working to close the opportunity gap? They are fighting to get money, they might get one million or two, do you really think you are closing the opportunity gap, in a three billion dollar system, you will only put one to three million max in that? It is pitiful, why are so many young people falling into that, it is that intersections of that.

(Community participant, interview, 21/01/16)

Investment gaps

The Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy, an urban index, ranked the 140 neighbourhoods of Toronto according to government investments. The highest level in Toronto is to be found in Lawrence Park West. The lowest in Toronto is Jane and Finch at 21.5. There is over a 70-point gap between Lawrence Park West and Jane and Finch. This means

that there is significantly less government investment in the Jane and Finch neighbourhood. The gap represents the historic building of Toronto, expressed by municipal, federal, and provincial funding invested in local neighbourhoods. The results of such inequality are visible in transportation, buildings, walkable space, green space, employment, amenities, and quality schools.

The difference is also expressed in “the number of youth who are failing”.

(Community participant, interview, 21/01/16)

Neighbourhood Stigma

Overall, the Jane and Finch area is characterized by low income levels, low levels of education, high numbers of single-parent families and high immigrant populations (Zaami, 2015). As such, the



Rental high-rise housing

area is often negatively branded by people from other parts of Toronto as being characterized by social ills such as high crime, youth deviant behaviours, and substance abuse (Zaami, 2015). Results from their study suggest that these labels have substantial consequences for youth residents, as one youth reported:

...when people hear the name Jane and Finch it's like a dump...we're all druggies. It's like we're all nuts...

(Zaami, 2015, 81)

Such stigma can have far reaching consequences in terms of employment prospects, with some participants indicating that a resume with a Jane and Finch postal code was in itself problematic. As one participant stated:

As soon as you tell potential employers of your postal code that's enough...you start to feel that your chance of landing that job is next to nothing.

(Zaami, 2015, 81)

Many studies have been conducted that illustrate the link between place of residence and likelihood of employment. For instance, a study conducted by Bunel, L'Horty and Petit (2016) examined 2988 applications (including six fictitious candidates who were identical in terms of qualifications and individual characteristics; the only characteristic that differed was place of residence) responding to 498 job offers within the restaurant industry in Paris. Results indicated a significant neighbourhood effect whereby a favourable address tripled the chances of being invited to an interview.

Ineffective Employment Services

The overwhelming majority of NEET participants in this research had at some point or another accessed employment services. Youth reported visiting employment agencies, meeting for a consultation with a job developer, or attending employment-training programs.

Youth had generally positive experiences with training programs that focus on skills development, professionalism, communications, expanding social networks, and gaining job-specific

qualifications. NEETs understand their value and would like to see more of them:

Workshops that help kids learn skills... because...um...if you are gonna go for a job interview, you need to be prepared, especially on how you speak to someone, you will have to deal with people, you have to know how to speak to them right, I think it would be best.

(Youth participant, focus group, follow-up interview 03/12/15)

Just having a program where youth can go into different like, organizations or corporations, and meet with people who they would potentially get to work with. Something that's like networking, basically.

(Youth participant, focus group, 05/11/15)

They would also like longer and more expansive programs:

Make the programs bigger, letting more in, say if one of us leaves the program, someone else will easily take your place, so if this program was bigger, everyone who applies will get in. People that did not get into the programs are sitting at home doing nothing, if they could come in the program and it could expand.

(Youth participant, focus group, 19/11/15)

YOUTH1: Six months is better than five weeks, you gotta be realistic.

YOUTH2: You have a good point, long-term programs would be better.

(Youth participants, focus group, 13/11/16)

In order to overcome distinctive barriers, some youth would like more comprehensive programs:

Basically have like programs to like, help you with daycare if you can't afford it, and all the extra, basically, when they teach you how to actually conduct in, an interview. Like, proper procedures, how to write your resume, cover letters or whatever. How to like, state your qualification, how to dress and how to speak, then that's probably exactly how we need it. And basically like, just like I said like, have like, more than one person interview you.

(Youth participant, focus group, 05/11/15)

Some employment services, nonetheless, were described as too tight and inflexible. Some restrict youth participation or placements to one time only. Youth complained this may not be enough for all youth, particularly for those who are experiencing short-term, part-time precarious employment. Others think there is a mismatch between what employment services have to offer and youth's specific likes and aspirations:

A lot of the programs are like: "here are the jobs!" and it's like, what if I don't want these jobs? So youth often get turned away from actually that.

(Youth participant, follow-up interview, 28/01/16)

Other youth would like to improve their long-term situations by starting careers:

Yeah exactly I feel like, like - I believe in...education, like and having a career instead of just a job. Because, at the end of the day, so much jobs just require a degree, you don't have to like, specialize in anything it's just, a degree. And like, people are going to want you, then. And like, you can actually wake up and have something to, look forward to?

(Youth participant, focus group, 13/11/16)

Some successful services are not given continuity and staff turn-over can break some successful processes. This may be the result of discontinuities in funding and lack of program sustainability:

YOUTH: I have seen this with youth programs, you need to build trust, but I have seen huge turn overs, it kind of pisses people off.

RESEARCHER: Do you think it affects youths' ability to continue to search for jobs?

YOUTH: Yes I think so, I feel like youth feel that if that worker is gone, then that opportunity is also gone.

(Youth participant, follow-up interview, 11/12/15)

Recently, I was supposed to get a job at [a retailer], right? And one of my youth workers was actually really helping me. Like, one of the youth workers in, um, Jane and Finch was actually really helping me. And then he, he lost his job or whatever. And then, um, so next I went to the guy who's replacing him, and they're like, I am like, "oh, I'm

pretty sure I got the job”, because he told the next guy I got the job. They were like, “well, the guy is gone and so is your job”. And I’m like, “excuse me?”

(Youth participant, focus group, 04/11/15)

Similarly, youth expressed a concern about what they believe is a lack of fairness in eligibility criteria. Often, these criteria are reduced to “who needs the job the most” thinking, which can translate into quick judgment by job developers and other staff. In turn, this forces youth to develop a strategy to lie or selectively disclose information in order to prove eligibility:

YOUTH1: People would have to lie about their entire lives, make it look like they've been through hell and back to get it. You know what I mean?

YOUTH2: Exactly!

YOUTH1: And that's, that's what we have to go through sometimes. Even though we have been through the worst, like, you know what I mean? I feel like employment services don't really help people, to be honest. I feel like I have better chance to like, actually like, go there with a fake resume.

(Youth participants, focus group, 04/11/15)

In these regards, summer placement programs were widely criticized. Many youth mentioned that they did go prepared for the interview, had a good resume, and were denied a placement because their eagerness made them look less “vulnerable” or deserving of help. In the meantime, they saw unprepared

youth, or those who felt comfortable telling dramatic personal stories, being given a chance.

There are kids who like, go in, literally to the point and act dumb.

(Youth worker, focus group, 13/12/15)

According to a community participant, eligibility evaluation needs to take place on an ongoing basis and should be based on long-term connections with young people at the personal level or through community partners but agencies lack such connections:

If a youth comes into the interview, well-prepared, great resume, that does not mean that they don't need that opportunity, so, models that work in that, one of the models I think of when I talk about things that don't work for what youth need, but work for someone else's interests, [employment program], after-school jobs for people, trying to avoid nepotism, trying to make it fair, they have all of these qualifications that are based off of distrust, distrusting people, community partners, um, so that's a big piece.

(Community participant, interview, 26/01/16)

Youth pointed out a lack of cultural sensitivity by counsellors and job developers working in ethnically diverse communities. For example, a young female who wears a niqab shared the following experience:

I was working with an employment counsellor, she brought up the way I dress, my attire, and said that was

the reason why I wasn't having much success. I felt discouraged, but it is not going to change who I am.

(Youth participant, follow-up interview, 11/12/15)

Young users of employment services expect that job developers and counsellors would focus on the skills – not the looks, and that counsellors can be allies that help reducing discriminatory practices in the labour market towards youth of all backgrounds, regardless of attire.

Finally, many youth complained about employment service agencies not being “youth friendly,” but rather cold and impersonal. Youth provided many examples of situations where staff in employment agencies made the youth feel unwelcome, such as the following:

But like um, as soon as you walk in you're like, you can just be like, “Hey I am just looking for a job, looking for any openings”? And they'll probably look at you, like what? And I am, and then I'm just like, is this employment services? Like, you know? Aren't you guys supposed to help people?

(Youth participant, focus group, 04/11/15)

They, the people at the [employment agency] I was working with, I felt like they weren't taking the matter seriously. Until, I got real upset and yeah, things happened. Um. And. I just felt like, I just left. I felt like, through all, I just felt upset about the whole process.

(Youth participant, focus group, 13/11/16)

I go there, and I'm like ok, “Looking for a job in so and so and so?” And they be like, okay, hum. They give this hefty binder. And you just go through it and, and that's all they do to you, like. They just give you a binder. They say “Select the jobs you want, and then call them”, and that's all they do. Like what, what's the point in that? It's, basically, I might as well just go on the Internet or take a newspaper and search it myself.

(Youth participant, focus group, 21/10/15)

Canada's current approach to employment training may work as a fundamental barrier to NEET labour market integration. In fact, billions of dollars are spent each year on ineffective job training and skills development initiatives (MacMillan & Young, 2014). The current system operates and is funded to supply skills and talent to the labour market resulting in employers viewing jobseekers as their customers. This model focuses on the supply side in terms of skills that individuals already have, instead of the skills that companies actually need. This results in a disconnect between the demand for talent and the supply of job ready youth.

Furthermore, even though employers have the greatest understanding of current and future labour market needs, they are typically disengaged from the design of training programs and funding decisions. This can lead to significant spending on employment and training programs aimed at building skills and capabilities that are not in demand by employers (MacMillan & Young, 2014).

THE HUSTLE

Informal Economic Activities	Taking Debt
“Temp.” Agencies	Risky Activities

In the absence of meaningful, stable employment, research participants talked about a variety of strategies to get by while not in education, employment or training. NEET youth develop innovative tactics to “hustle” and adapt to tough economic situations in their daily lives. In doing so, they also create alternative group identities and instances of social belonging. Sometimes, however, the roadblocks they confront lead youth to take risks or go in harmful directions.

Informal Economic Activities

Many opportunities are often available to NEET youth for a small sum of “quick cash”. NEET youth reported working occasionally in a variety of activities, such as babysitting for a family friend, helping homeowners with moving and packing, cleaning houses, helping in home renovation projects or doing occasional construction work. These jobs may be available intermittently:

YOUTH: I had a job, like on and off, you know? Like right now I work with my, with my, my auntie’s husband. Like once in a while, you know?

RESEARCHER: Where?

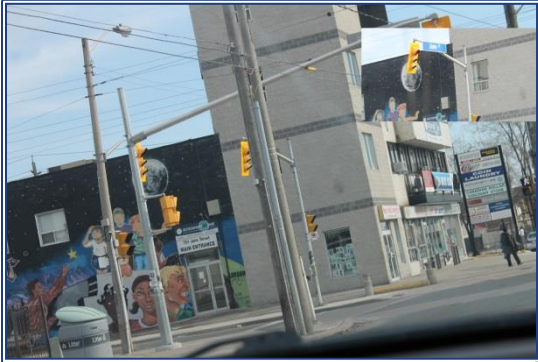
YOUTH: Construction. Once in a while, I worked yesterday, I worked Sunday. It's like, if they need someone to help I just, you know, work.

(Youth participant, focus group, 05/11/16)

Informal economic activities may thus include hourly paid work helping out in family businesses, babysitting, or carrying out a small job for a neighbour. In addition, informal work may also involve under the table deals – offering remunerations below the legal minimum wage. We heard about occasional jobs being offered to youth in call centres paying lump sums as opposed to an hourly rate. Youth also reported being hired informally by legal businesses to distribute flyers and to sell or promote products door-to-door.

The “gig” economy

Unemployed youth with a particular talent in arts or technology may participate in the “gig” economy. These generally tend to be short-term and occasional work assignments. For example, we learned from a female artist getting occasional gigs. She talked about how these gigs enabled her and some of her friends to get some income.



Art in neighbourhood intersection

“Temp.” Agencies

One surprising finding of this research is the growing use of Temporary Help Agencies or “temp agencies” whereby an employment agency is contracted by an employer to supply them with temporary labour in their workplace (Longhurst, 2014). The worker is supervised by the employer, but remains an employee of the temporary agency, which takes a percentage of the workers’ wage. Employment through temp agencies is short-term with a high risk of termination. Further, workers have little control over their working conditions, have limited protection under the Employment Standards Act, and are usually paid low wages (Longhurst, 2014).

Most of our NEET research participants actively looking for employment have resorted at least once to temp agencies.

Youth apply to temp agencies because it is a relatively quick and easy alternative to getting a job. Youth just have to “sign-up”:

RESEARCHER: Can you tell us a little bit more about why, why you decided to go to Temp Agencies versus a community agency, like employment services?

YOUTH: Because a community thing means I gotta go get an interview, I gotta do a resume. So if I just do Temp, I just gotta just sign up and that’s it. I don’t have to talk or anything.

(Youth participant, focus group, 04/11/16).

RESEARCHER: Has anybody else used temp agencies?

YOUTH: Yeah, to get quick money for like, before Christmas. But yeah, I’ve been and you just, you literally do nothing. Like you just sign it off, and then they’d be like, “Ok when are you ready to start”? And I’m like, “as soon as possible”. And like, you know? And then you just sign it off and you’re like, you’re literally ready to go.

(Youth participant, focus group: 05/11/15)

Temp agencies are thus seen by youth as a short-term strategy that can help them get quick cash, including emergency money when youth are desperate. Youth are well aware that temp agency work is unstable and can often involve hard manual labour jobs that may be a risk to health. Often people don’t have a choice as to the kind of work they can do. In the words of one female youth:

YOUTH: But the hard thing about it is just the fact that, obviously I can't carry a lot. So it's like, as soon as it became a problem for me, like a back problem? I just, I'm just like, no I can't. It's not healthy.

RESEARCHER: So the jobs you got were carrying things?

YOUTH: Yeah. Yeah. Factory.

RESEARCHER: Can you tell them, I'd like to work in this kind of area? Can you tell them, I don't want like, heavy lifting jobs?

YOUTH: I guess no. No, because I remember when I was standing here, they just asked if I could pick 60, was it 60 kilos? Yeah.

(Youth participants, focus group, 05/11/15)

There are other inconveniences for youth in working through temp agencies. They can be assigned to remote or inconvenient locations without notice, and be frequently re-assigned to new workplaces, so there is never enough time to build networks or gain meaningful experience:

Like, like right after you're done, like, a month or whatever with one place, they'll relocate you somewhere else. So it's like, ongoing, you always know you have a job. But it doesn't have to like it's not technically the same place all the time, unless you're like hired through them.

(Youth participant, focus group, 04/11/15)

The following excerpt from a focus group discussion highlights that low-skilled youth feel they have no other choice but to work in the precarious environment that temp agency jobs provide:

RESEARCHER: Sounds like about four people have used temp agencies here, right?

YOUTH1: (and several): Yeah.

YOUTH2: We would say the majority.

YOUTH3: Me, I use it because of general labour there, because you don't have no choice, like you have to go and -

YOUTH4: You have no choice.

YOUTH1: you have to go to them. You just, can't refuse that.

YOUTH2: A lot of times, a lot of times we're not qualified to get anything else, better jobs, so, that's like the easiest road to getting money.

YOUTH5: Yeah, exactly!

YOUTH2: And we have to do it because, y'know, we got bills to pay

YOUTH1: A lot of times, it's temporary.

YOUTH3: I hustle with two jobs anyways, I'm tired.

(Youth participants, focus group, 27/10/15)

Taking Debt

To make ends meet and pay the bills, some youth take debt in their credit cards or have borrowed from family and friends. Sometimes they resort to payday lenders, cash-for-gold, and other types of alternative credit. Often lacking financial literacy skills, NEET youth (and their family members) can easily assume financial

responsibilities they are not in a position to manage. Debt can put youth in really dire circumstances. As this youth explained:

So like, my phone bill had come up to like 280 [dollars], and they cut it off. So I went to my bank, and that was the first time I took a credit card, so I took one for 500 [dollars]. And then yeah, I used 280 [dollars], and then, my mom she actually took money off of me, and said she would pay me back? But then she didn't pay me back, so that's the money that I took out of my credit card to give to her. ... And the longer I don't pay it off the more interest, like, I get because I did not pay off my bill. Yeah.

(Youth participant, focus group, 04/11/16)

Another NEET youth lived off the credit card for a whole summer of 2015 while she was waiting to get a job. Easy access to credit without good financial literacy can put marginalized youth at risk for becoming dependent on debt. By November of the same year, this youth was still unemployed and was concerned about her large debt:

It's \$2,200 right now... it's like, it's like, things that I really needed, you know what I mean? So it's like, it covered me the whole summer. So like, it was just, me thinking, hey, like, if I had a job? I, like, I wouldn't have gone through with it.

(Youth participant, focus group, 04/11/16)

Unemployed youth can sometimes access credit cards through financial services offered through supermarkets and other large businesses as this youth continued:

RESEARCHER: How did you get the card? How were you approved?

YOUTH: Cause like, I did the whole, what it's called? You know [Drugstore retailer]? So they seen like, me with my thing, I never used my credit card. I had it, so I guess they thought that I had, I was good with my payments, or stuff like that? So then they gave me a bigger limit, and knowing me, like you know, I'm like, oh my god a bigger limit! Like, it went from 500 [dollars] to 2,000 [dollars], I'm like yes! So I got the whole 2,000 [dollars] thing, and then the last couple days of summer, like, it declined and then my, I had a heart attack and like, ever since then, like interest keeps picking up. So it was really weird, cause like last time I checked it was like 2,000 [dollars]. And now, it's 2,200 [dollars]. And it sucks because like, it keeps going higher and like, it's me like, I'm trying to get a job, but it's like. I don't know. And day in, day out.

(Youth participant, focus group, 04/11/16)

Debt can add a significant amount of stress and anxiety to youth who are already in a very precarious situation due to unemployment:

Knowing you have debt is often the worst... Just, just knowing you owe someone a cent is, it's - I didn't know the meaning of money until I actually had to owe back money and it's like, it's terrible. I'm stressed out all the time.

(Youth participant, focus group, 05/11/16)

Risky activities

After looking for a job for extended periods and not being successful, a few NEET youth talked about how they fell into informal income-generating activities that are high risk or not legal:

Five months was the longest I was unemployed, unemployed for five months, then you end up selling drugs, I sold drugs.

(Youth participant, focus group, 19/11/16)

Another youth disclosed that he was working as a “street pharmacist.” Although he knew it was illegal, the youth mentioned that he was comfortable doing this activity because he felt more in control of his economic situation and his health.

I was not looking [for employment], I was quite alright, I was a street pharmacist, I was an entrepreneur, I started my own business for two years of my life, for two years of my life, I did not try a job, I was quite alright, I ate well, people around me ate well, I did not have bad dreams and everything was nice.

(Youth participant, focus group, 19/11/16)

Currently in probation after serving jail time, this youth talked about the disincentives to play by the rules when there are so many barriers for youth with a criminal record. He shared that he has sleeping problems, stress and anxiety. With persistent barriers to formal employment, NEET youth hustle to get by, including getting pushed into or becoming comfortable taking up high risk and “illegal” income generating activities.

Employment in “risky activities” is reflective of a system-level failure to offer marginalized youth access to decent, meaningful jobs. Criminalizing youth involved in risky income-generating activities to make ends meet is a flawed response. It is important to address the root structural causes of why marginalized youth are getting excluded from formal labour market and are getting pushed into these high-risk income generating activities.

Recommendations

We asked youth participants for their recommendations. Study results highlight that NEET youth are very knowledgeable about root causes of youth unemployment and underemployment, and are able to clearly articulate solutions and supports to enable youth like them to get meaningful, stable employment. We also gathered recommendations from staff at service agencies and other experts to complement youths' suggestions. All preliminary recommendations were coded and analyzed jointly by the core research team.

Prioritizing Action: “Tired of the Hustle” Community Forum

We presented preliminary findings and recommendations at a community forum on May 25th, 2016 at the *Jane Street Hub*. Approximately 120 people attended the forum out of which, at least 60 were young people. Other participants were staff from community organizations, partner agencies, residents from the area, and government officials.

The purpose of the forum was to present our findings and broaden the conversation in a participatory way to gather feedback and prioritize actions. During the forum we heard questions and reactions from the community as well as reflections by a panel of community participants in community services. Most crucially, the forum enabled us to build on the expertise of participants to prioritize, reorganize, assess and refine the initial list of

recommendations based on a facilitated table discussion exercise. There were nine working tables in total.

The six recommendations listed below reflect both short-term and long-term priorities for change as articulated jointly by a wide community of young people, practitioners, and experts across social service and public organizations:

- 1) **Improve high school experience** and/or curriculum to prepare students to graduate and transition to the world of work;
- 2) **Secure sustainable funding** from government for youth services that address poverty and unemployment;
- 3) **Provide better employment services** that are youth-friendly and are designed to meet youth needs;
- 4) **Extend second chances** to young people with criminal records, and improve community relationships with the police;
- 5) **Promote youth leadership**, advocacy and political action; and
- 6) **Promote local economic development** and job creation in low-income neighbourhoods.

Improve high school experience and/or curriculum to prepare students to graduate and transition to the world of work



Pretty much every young person we deal with from grade 8 and up tell us: “I need a job! I need a job!” A lot of people from the outside would say there are resources to promote high school graduation. If you want to deal with high school graduation, you need to deal with the job, that’s what youth are coming to you for. There are resources out there, but the resources are not often matched to what young people are going through, what they need, or want. (Community participant, interview, 21/01/16)

Although secondary education and employment policies are typically addressed from separate policy standpoints, our conversations with young people and community participants in community services highlight the need to closely link the employment and education sectors. For youth, particularly low-income youth, employment and educational needs and challenges go hand-in-hand. Thus, education boards, employment agencies, community

agencies, and police need to work together to increase high school retention and educational and employment success for youth living in low-income neighbourhoods.

Crucially, we need to pay attention to the quality and equity in secondary education. Many youth participants argued that an inclusive, equitable, engaging and culturally-relevant high school education can increase their chances of success in the labour market. In fact, the call for improving high school experiences for low-income, racialized, and other marginalized youth was expressly voted as the top priority during our community forum and working-group sessions.

- Youth, service providers and sector community participants agreed on the urgent need to close the opportunity and achievement gaps for marginalized youth in the school system. These gaps perpetuate social inequality when accessing employment and other opportunities.
- Youth want schools to focus on student engagement. This includes promoting a more socially diverse representation of caring education professionals willing to build trusting relationships with young people, proactively overcoming structural barriers to education, and mentoring youth for educational and employment success.
- Community participants expressed that caring teachers, administrators and other staff should have the resources and

capacity to intervene early and provide better supports to retain and equip students facing poverty, systemic discrimination, mental and social issues, and exclusions.

- Literature we reviewed pointed to the critical importance of re-engaging youth who have left school early, particularly youth with criminal records, as a critical strategy to improve employment for marginalized youth (Amyot & Fairholm Mader, 2015; Carcillo et al., 2015; Maguire, 2013, 2015; OECD, 2010; Rennie-Hill et al., 2014).
- Youth want high schools to provide better information on careers and how early streaming choices may affect their future access to work opportunities and post-secondary education. Streaming academic and applied programs are particularly difficult to navigate for immigrant youth and their families. Therefore, it should be the school boards' responsibility to make sure students and their parents can make informed decisions.
- Participants want the education system to increase meaningful opportunities for youth to participate in education governance systems including policymaking and budgeting decisions.
- High schools, boards of education, and employment agencies should collaborate towards better integration of co-op, vocational high school

programs, and resources available from employment agencies that can improve youths' transition to good jobs after leaving education.

Secure sustainable funding from government for youth services that address poverty and unemployment



We heard that many youth and their families in the Jane Street neighbourhoods are struggling to make ends meet. Poverty and economic insecurity directly prevent youth from focusing on their education and accessing new opportunities. Policy experts agreed with the importance of well-funded and sustainable programs with flexibility to address specific needs. Youth asked for long-term and immediate solutions to poverty, including:

- Affordable childcare;
- Better-paid, sustainable jobs;
- Income supplement supports;
- Investments and repairs in social housing units; and
- Affordable transit.

Similarly, youth would like to see more supports for young people and their families who are struggling to move towards long-term career goals due to poverty, disability, lack of child-care, conflict with the justice system, mental

health issues, trauma, behavioural difficulties, or family conflict. This means that, not only should employment programs focus on the development and training of hard skills, these programs need to be complemented with policies and supports to help address challenges faced outside of the workplace or training that may impact a youth's ability to find and retain work.

So basically, have a lot of newcomers' things, help them integrate, getting good jobs. Have programs to help you with daycare if you can't afford it, and all the extra [supports].

(Youth participant, focus group 21/10/15)

Wraparound supports may include coaching and mentoring, addressing family issues, providing settlement support for newcomers (including overcoming language and information barriers), providing help with addiction treatment and recovery, securing housing and childcare support, reducing barriers such as transportation costs, and helping young people navigate services and keep appointments such as parole requirements, court appearances, and those for the bank and doctor. Even what may appear like simple wraparound supports, like helping cover transportation costs and providing healthy food during youth programs, can make a huge difference for low-income youth.

Youth mentioned that they have seen many good initiatives on which they depend, such as employment training, suddenly disappear or have reduced staff (especially youth workers). Similarly, some programs are hard to access because of limited quota or highly restrictive eligibility criteria (e.g. age

restrictions). Thus, youth and service providers jointly highlighted the need for sustainable funding for programs that are proven to be successful:

A big issue for me, especially with community organizations, I have seen this with youth programs, you need to build trust, but I have seen huge turnovers, it kind of pisses people off. Youth feel that if that worker is gone, then that opportunity is also gone.

(Youth participant, follow-up interview, 11/12/15)

Overall, participants called for integrated evidence-based supports that proactively address poverty and systemic inequities including:

- Youth-centred individualized programs;
- Programs delivered in a community based, youth-friendly environment;
- Accessible programs through school and in the community;
- Sustained funding and permanent staff who can develop trusting relationships with youth;
- Programs that are built on best practices and evidence;
- Regular evaluations to make sure that supports respond and adapt to youths' changing needs; and
- Organizations that represent and champion the diversity of the communities in which they work, and are committed to equity and social justice.

Provide better employment services that are youth-friendly and are designed to meet youth needs



We heard that employment agencies and community programs are not always hospitable to young people. A highly structured office environment combined with staff who are not always friendly or empathetic to youth can deter young people from seeking help from employment agencies:

Put your job aside, and actually connect with the youth, you know? I feel like that would be more beneficial for both, like, the worker and the youth. To like, even, just like, motivate the youth as well.

(Youth participant, focus group 04/11/15)

Participants reported that they often feel judged and not welcome by staff members. Youth mentioned that they would like to be “approached with an open mind”. Participants also stressed they want to be treated with equity, respect, and fair expectations.

A mental health practitioner recommended some youth-friendly alternatives to connecting with youth and not restricted to in-person office environment:

We recognize youth communicate around text, youth do not pick up the phone, we text, it makes us more accessible, we don't need an office, I go where they want to meet.

(Community participant, interview, 26/01/16)

In order to improve employment programs, youth and community participants provided several ideas:

- Improve training and promote organizational diversity that includes staff reflective of the youth they work with or with whom youth can readily relate;
- Ensure follow up and continued support for youth beyond their first job/placement to ensure long-term success in their employment/career;
- Involve young people when determining the content, scope and evaluation of employment services to make sure these programs are relevant to youth;
- Provide individualized, youth-centred (as opposed to employer-centred) and flexible programming;
- Increase networking and mentoring opportunities with youth, employers and people who are successful;
- Increase coordination among employment agencies and service providers to provide clear information about existing programs, wraparound supports, where to access them, and how to navigate them;

Building Better Employment Programs

What NEET youth said:	What is missing
<p><i>“Ask the youth what they want to work in, and actually help them try to get that”</i> Youth participant, focus group 04/11/15</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth-centred (vs. employer-centred) • Better indicators tracking job success
<p><i>“Honestly? We need advocates. I didn’t really have an advocate.”</i> Youth participant, focus group 21/10/15</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued service and support after placement • Advocacy and mediation with employers; address challenges and discrimination they face in the labour market
<p><i>“But, some [programs] will not help you if you are not 18, some jobs won’t hire you if you are let’s say 16, 17.”</i> Youth participant, focus group 19/11/15</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility of eligibility criteria • Supporting needs of different age groups
<p><i>“In terms of hiring like, workers in the employment services should really look at how passionate they are to help people to look for jobs, it’s like, if they’re just hired to do nothing, it’s like, you are just there creating a bigger problem for the economy.”</i> Youth participant, focus group 04/11/15</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building quality relations with youth that are genuine and lead to trust
<p><i>“They just need to make things more accessible. [Employment agencies] should have a meet up spot, they should have their own mini-van, having kids from like 16 that don’t want to go back to school, help them get jobs, pick them up and drop them off. It is not hard, it is pretty easy.”</i> Youth participant, focus group 19/11/15</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactively remove access barriers with innovative ways to overcome transportation barriers or by creating youth friendly spaces.

- Engage sector-specific industries and connect youth to prospective employers as part of training;
- Provide better logistics that adjust to what youth need, including scheduling and timing of services/programs, and remove barriers through the provision of food, transit tokens, and childcare;
- Implement better indicators for tracking job success that include quality and youth satisfaction;
- Provide youth with advocacy, support and mediation tools with employers so they can address discrimination and exploitation faced in the workplace; and
- Support the needs of different age groups within the youth cohort.

Extend second chances to young people with criminal records and improve community relationships with the police



Youth from racialized low-income backgrounds are more likely to have police records than other groups given the systemic exclusion they face and the racialized dimensions of criminalization practices in Canada. At the same time, police records are one of the highest barriers to employment, higher education prospects, and volunteering for young people (John Howard Society, 2014).

Youth with criminal records want second chances from all sectors of society and seek opportunities to work hard and learn from previous mistakes. Promoting societal change that prevents conflict with the law and boosts reintegration includes improved community relationships with the police to reduce criminalization, reduced use of police record checks to unfairly exclude marginalized youth, and education of employers and human resources departments about the use of screening practices that do not stigmatize and further marginalize youth with criminal records who are job ready. NEET youth with criminal records mentioned that they would like employers to not exclude them just because of their record, and consider them for the skills and realize that they are job ready.

The John Howard Society raised key areas of action in its 2014 report, “Help Wanted: Reducing Barriers for Ontario’s Youth with Criminal Records”:

- The Province of Ontario should continue to invest in training and employment programs that suit the needs of youth with criminal records and consider bid incentives and tax incentives models for employers to hire youth with criminal records. Similarly, all levels of government should lead by example by implementing evidence-based and rights-based hiring approaches that do not discriminate against youth with criminal records.
- The Province of Ontario should regulate the demand for police record checks so that these do not become a barrier to reintegration and inclusion when evidence has demonstrated these checks are often unnecessary in most sectors.
- Service agencies, civic organizations, community groups and NGOs need to promote public education campaigns to reduce the stigma and correct false assumptions about people with police records. Similarly, we need to promote campaigns like “ban the box,” which invites employers not to ask for police record disclosures when not relevant for a particular area of work.

More generally, NEET youth without specific barriers want to ask employers to give them a second chance if they initially do not perform their best. Youth talked about being fired at the first fault. Managers often lack patience while young people are on training in a new job. Promoting second chances give workers an opportunity to learn from feedback and improve. One youth participant characterized this approach with a rationale of investing in the future:

I feel like, like at the end of the day, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50 years from now? The people who are running the government now won't be running it again, it's us, youth, who are going to be stepping up. And I feel like if you guys don't invest in us now, you can't be screaming about how the youth turn out later on in life...
(Youth participant, focus group, 04/11/15)

Promote youth leadership, advocacy and political action



Although young people recognized that there are increased opportunities for them to get involved in community change and advocacy, they also raised several complaints. First, racialized NEET young people are currently being invited to participate in a number of research projects and government initiatives with no clear outcomes. Instances of ongoing consultation are frustrating and exhausting to them:

Cause we go to like, 20 meetings, you know what I mean? So it's just like, us sitting there saying the same thing over and over. And then coming like, 'oh this is the next meeting?' And we'll say the same thing... Different people are coming and talking about us, like talking to us, but I don't think you guys understand that we are saying the same thing to just different people, and nothing's going to ever change.

Youth participant, focus group, 04/11/15)

In terms of youth leadership, participants complained that in many cases, community programs, agencies and funders are not getting youth leadership right. Many youth talked about examples of tokenism without meaningful consideration to what youth involvement and leadership can bring to the table. They also

expressed frustration over the fact that their opportunity cost to be consulted, involved and engaged in research, governance, and other decision-making processes is seldom acknowledged. While youth participation looks good on established community organizations, sustained and genuine youth involvement must be considered to transform institutions. Participants brought up the fact that in the social service sector youth are often not involved in governance or career advancement opportunities. The question then, is how do we build long-term youth leadership?

Youth suggested not taking age as an all-encompassing category. In their words, "age is tricky". Differences between the needs of younger and older youths must not be overlooked. Similarly, youth talked about their youth identity as a temporary thing.

In the neighbourhoods along Jane Street, there are successful examples of youth-led organizations that are service providers for youth, such as the For Youth Initiative, and agencies particularly serving young people, such as PEACH. Both of these models have been successful in generating opportunities for youth leadership and "communities of practice" where older youth train the younger youth in advocacy efforts. For other service agencies with the need to become more youth friendly, involvement of youth in governance and in career advancement opportunities are important steps.

In terms of political action, youth complained that they often do not feel represented in the political system. At the same time, they are reticent

to vote. Encouraging learning about democratic practice, voting during elections, and raising their voices to participate in political debates as electors or candidates are necessary to make sure their interests are represented.

To overcome barriers:

- Community organizations, service agencies and NGOs should open up governance spaces for youth to be involved as leaders in organizational governance such as youth councils and participation in executive boards.
- The school system should promote a culture of democratic participation and awareness of political participation opportunities for young people.
- Community-based, youth-led organizations should receive ongoing funding support for youth engagement and advocacy activities.

Promote local economic development and job creation in low-income neighbourhoods



Youth said that they would like to access more jobs locally or within a reasonable distance from their homes. They called for increased public and private investment in infrastructure, affordable housing, and other developments necessary to support a better quality of life. Moreover, young people want solutions to close the gaps between high-income and low-income neighbourhoods in Toronto.

To promote local economic development in neighbourhoods along Jane Street, social investments, community agreements, and infrastructure upgrades are necessary.

- Ongoing investment in education and training of local youth and other residents is a must, as human capital will continue to be a key component of economic development along Jane Street neighbourhoods.
- Local Business Improvement Areas, community groups and politicians should partner with local anchor institutions, such as York University or the new Humber River Hospital, to reach community benefits agreements and to expand partnerships and opportunities for local youth.

- The Province of Ontario, along with funders and employment agencies, should proactively mobilize a campaign among employers prohibiting “postal code discrimination” against job candidates of low-income or stigmatized neighbourhoods.
- In response to the alternative pay-day lenders and their predatory practices, the City of Toronto needs to encourage regulated banking institutions and credit unions to open branches along Jane Street and to develop products that suit the local needs.
- Neighbourhoods along Jane Street require infrastructure upgrades, such as pedestrian amenities, improved public spaces and better transit connectivity. In particular, the frequency, connectivity and reliability of transit service in those areas should be improved to increase access to jobs.
- Transit authorities in the City of Toronto and the 905 regional municipalities should consider fare integration to remove double-fare barriers for low-income residents in the inner suburbs seeking to access jobs across the GTHA.
- The City of Toronto, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation and the Province of Ontario should continue to find solutions to finance needed repairs and upgrades for social housing. Investment in social housing contributes greatly to neighbourhood economic vitality.

Recent advocacy campaigns by a broad coalition against poverty concentration in Ontario were successful in mobilizing a framework for Community Benefits Agreements. In response, there is a new law in Ontario that requires new provincial infrastructure construction must consider community benefits when planning for infrastructure investments and collaborate locally to build community wealth. This bill has important potential to generate new jobs and amenities in the Jane Street neighbourhoods (Atkinson Foundation and Mowat Centre, <http://communitybenefitsagreements.ca>).

Other opportunities exist with the City of Toronto’s Tower Renewal Initiative, which can draw reinvestment and better urban planning to private high-rise rental buildings along Jane Street. Overall, the City of Toronto should consider developing an economic development strategy to create new jobs and support investments in Toronto’s inner suburbs.

Future Research

Our research shows that NEET youth are a diverse cohort composed of young people across a range of personal circumstances that face barriers in their transition after leaving education. A key finding from our study is that irrespective of the diversity within NEET youth, poverty, urban inequality and systemic discriminations are the root causes for the labour market barriers they face.

Based on our research, we highlighted the most common themes among youth participants but some voices and perspectives have had less representation given their level of exclusion in the labour market and in society in general.

Thus, we recommend two key areas of future research:

- Barriers and strategies to access jobs for people with both visible and/or undiagnosed physical and intellectual disabilities: The Province of Ontario has now committed to close sheltered workshops, which have functioned with public funding for decades as day programs across the Province for people with intellectual disabilities. Instead, current policy aims to promote work for people with disability that includes them as valuable members of the community. This policy switch will require further research on current barriers and best practices of inclusion among employers. Currently, there are no specific training or placement programs in employment agencies for this population other than occasional placements.
- “Hustling” practices of young people. With only limited sources of information available, more research is necessary to understand both the strategies and outcomes youth use to cope with unemployment.

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