Building Bridges: Connecting Youth Skills to the Future of Work

Taking a deep dive into youth data insights and stories from the DEVlab project

YOUTHFUL CITIES

TAMARACK INSTITUTE

Canada

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We also acknowledge the Government of Canada's National Essential Skills Initiative program for their financial support, which was instrumental in making this project a reality.

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We also highly appreciate the contributions of the many community organizations, employers, and educational institutions who supported this project. Your partnership and collaboration have been essential in ensuring that this research reflects the diverse needs and perspectives of young people across Canada. Let us carry forward the momentum and lessons learned, and continue to champion the potential of youth as agents of change in their communities and beyond.

We would like to thank all the photographers who worked with us across Canada whose photos are showcased in this report.

Finally, we acknowledge that the DEVlab project took place on the traditional territories of Indigenous peoples across Canada. We recognize their historical and ongoing stewardship of the land and their enduring presence in urban centres:

On the West coast, the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), səl̓ilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Katzie, Kwantlen, Kwikwetlem, Matsqui, Qayqayt, Semiahmoo, Stó:lō, Tsawwassen, W̱SÁNEĆ, and the lək̓ʷəŋən (Lekwungen) People, today known as the Esquimalt and the Songhees Nations. In the North, Interior, and on the Prairies, the territory of the syilx (Okanagan Nation); Chief Drygeese Territory to the north, traditional home of the Yellowknives Dene and the North Slave Métis; Treaties 1, 4, 6, and 7, the lands of the Blackfoot Confederacy (including the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations), the Tsuu T'ina, Anishinaabeg, Cree, OjiCree, Dene, the Nakota / Lakota / Dakota Peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation. In what is known as Ontario and Quebec, a territory encompassing many treaties, including the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, the Between the Lakes Purchase (1792), the Haldimand Tract, Upper Canada Treaties, Williams Treaties, Robinson-Huron Treaties, the Wabanaki Confederacy, the territories of the Anishinaabeg, Attawandaron, Erie, Haudenosaunee, Kanien'kehá:ka, Lūnaapéewak, Mississaugas, Oneida of the Thames, Six Nations of the Grand River, Wendat, and the Abenaki peoples. On the East Coast, the traditional unceded territory of the Maliseet, the Mi'kmaq People, and the Beothuk, the land of the Peace and Friendship treaties.

We are committed to honouring Indigenous knowledge, cultures, and rights as we work towards a more just and equitable future for all.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report offers key insights and actionable recommendations based on the DEVlab project, a collaboration between Youthful Cities and the Tamarack Institute, with the aim to develop a dynamic, engaged, and vital young workforce in cities through a deep investigation into the skills youth need to succeed. This project was funded in part by the Government of Canada's National Essential Skills Initiative program. We used a community action research approach with emphasis on eight Canadian cities: Toronto, Montréal, Calgary, Vancouver, Regina, Moncton, Yellowknife, and Whitehorse. The project focused on youth aged 16-30, investigating workforce challenges and opportunities, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key Takeaways of the Report

1. Transitioning from Education to Work

The pandemic negatively impacted skills acquisition for 72% of youth, with equity-deserving groups, including Indigenous and racialized youth, facing disproportionate setbacks.

To bridge the gap between education and employment, youth expressed a strong demand for experiential learning opportunities, such as mandatory co-op placements.

2. Barriers in Post-Pandemic Work Ecosystems

Affordability challenges and declining mental health are significantly hindering youth participation in the workforce.

Nearly 25% of youth reported being unemployed or underemployed, with marginalized groups facing even higher rates.

3. Skills for Success

There is a disconnect between the "Skills for Success" framework and youth-perceived employability needs, with youth prioritizing advanced competencies such as leadership and technical skills over foundational skills.

Financial barriers to skills training persist, underscoring the need for accessible and targeted skill development programs.

4. Envisioning Ideal Organizations

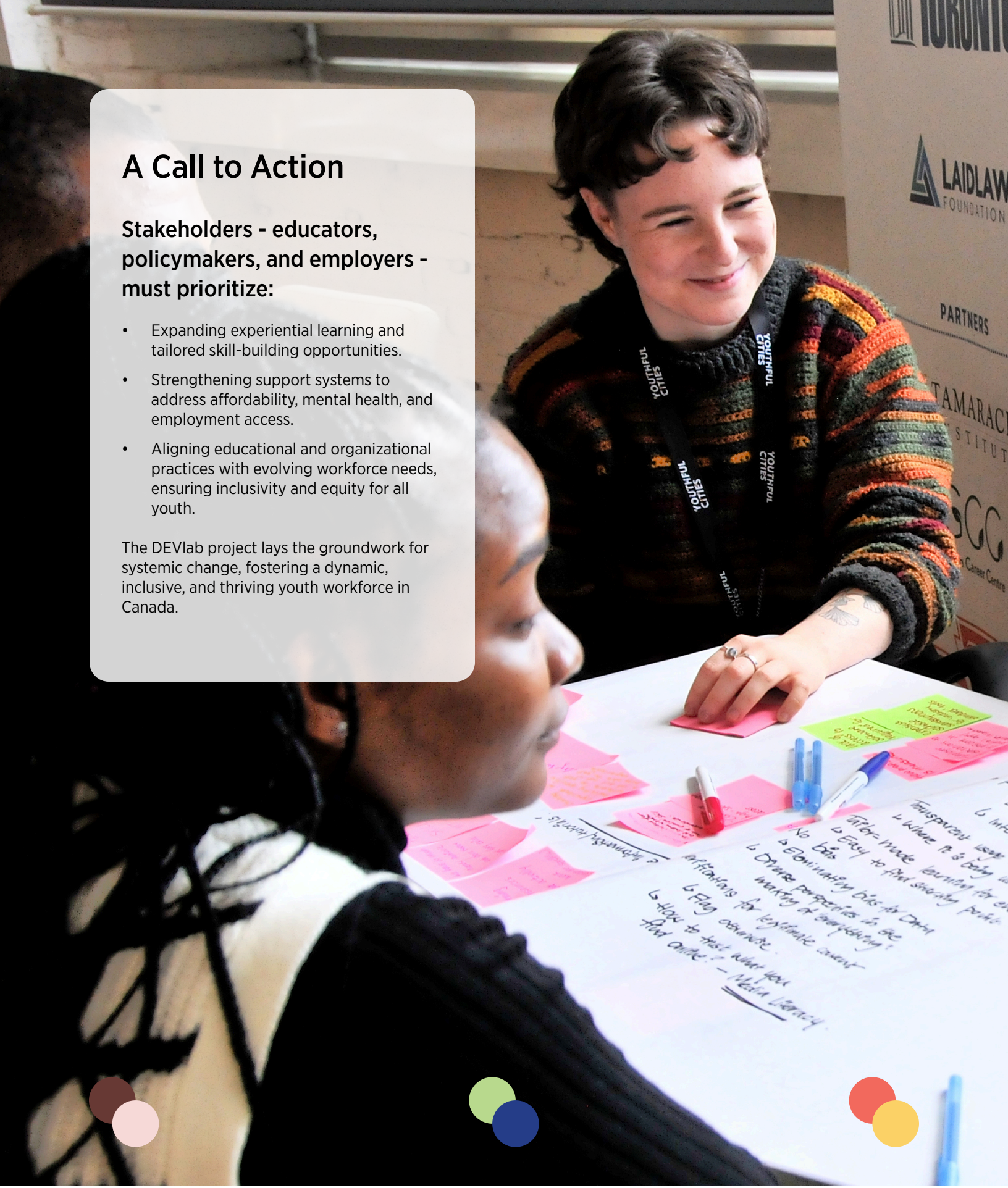
Youth value workplaces that offer flexibility, fair compensation, mentorship, and strong diversity and inclusion practices.

Work-life balance and meaningful organizational missions aligned with social accountability are pivotal for attracting young talent.

5. Future of Work in Cities

Youth increasingly favor large organizations in fields like business, finance, and tech for their **stability and growth potential**.

Digital and AI skills are deemed essential. Black and Racialized youth are especially concerned that automation may displace current roles.



A Call to Action

Stakeholders - educators, policymakers, and employers - must prioritize:

- Expanding experiential learning and tailored skill-building opportunities.
- Strengthening support systems to address affordability, mental health, and employment access.
- Aligning educational and organizational practices with evolving workforce needs, ensuring inclusivity and equity for all youth.

The DEVlab project lays the groundwork for systemic change, fostering a dynamic, inclusive, and thriving youth workforce in Canada.

INTRODUCTION

Young people have the transformative potential to shape the future of our communities and economies. This report represents a collaborative effort to address the unique challenges and opportunities facing youth aged 16 to 30 in today's workforce, particularly as they navigate the enduring impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report delves into the findings from the DEVlab project, a joint initiative by Youthful Cities and the Tamarack Institute, dedicated to uncovering insights on youth skills development, employment barriers, and the critical transition from education to work. By exploring these themes alongside the evolving landscape of the future of work, we provide a thorough analysis that reflects the lived realities, challenges, and aspirations of youth across Canada.

In part two of this report, "Building youth skills pathways through community engagement", we will dive deeper into community engagement efforts. It will underscore a shared commitment to fostering a vibrant and inclusive youth workforce. We will explore how collaborative initiatives can create meaningful pathways that empower youth to thrive in their careers and contribute significantly to their communities and society at large.

Through this collaboration, our goal is to inform and inspire key stakeholders—policymakers, educators, and employers—by presenting actionable insights that can drive systemic change. This report also offers recommendations for future research, paving the way for continued innovation and partnership in addressing the pressing needs of youth.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The DEVlab project, developed by Youthful Cities in partnership with the Tamarack Institute, investigated the challenges young people (aged 16 to 30-years old) face in the workforce, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The project highlighted youth and professional perspectives on foundational and transferable skills development and related challenges, the transition from education to the labour market, work preferences, and the future of work. It aimed to identify ways to enhance the uptake of the 'Skills for Success Model' developed by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) to strengthen skills development for young adults across Canada. These skills are important for thriving at work, learning, and life. They overlap and interact with each other, along with other technical and life skills.They are inclusive, can be adapted to different contexts, and are critical for employers, workers, training providers, governments, and communities.[1]

Skills for Success Model (Source: Employment and Social Development Canada)

[1] "Importance of the Skills" Employment and Social Development Canada

Our ultimate goal is to support the development and nurturing of a dynamic (D), engaged (E), and vital (V) youth workforce across cities in Canada. We draw our insights from data and information focused on eight Canadian cities: Calgary, Moncton, Montréal, Regina, Toronto, Vancouver, Whitehorse, and Yellowknife.

BACKGROUND

What do we already know?

As part of our research on youth skills development, and barriers young people face, we conducted a review of existing literature on youth employment challenges, skills mismatch, youth mental health, and the overall impact of the pandemic in Canada. The following findings from the literature supported in contextualizing the DEVlab project: 1) Youth Employment Challenges, 2) Skills Mismatch, 3) Youth Mental Health, 4) Overall Impact of the Pandemic.

1. Youth Employment Challenges

- *Unemployment and Job Security:* The pandemic contributed to significant job losses and shortage in opportunities. These factors led to long-term impacts on youth employment pathways.[2]
- *Job Scarring:* Prolonged unemployment can result in unfavourable labour market outcomes, affecting youth's future job prospects and earnings.[3]
- *Gig Economy Growth:* Increased competition and the need for supplemental income have pushed youth towards gig work. This form of work is often precarious, lacking stability and benefits.[4]

2. Skills Mismatch

- *Soft Skills Gap:* The lack of interpersonal opportunities during COVID-19 created a notable gap in soft skills among Gen Z. Youth reported wanting to improve their interpersonal skills, effective communication skills, conflict resolution, and problem solving skills. There were fewer opportunities to engage interpersonally during the pandemic, along with less work experience for youth to refine these critical attributes.[5]
- *Mismatch with Employer Expectations:* Disconnect between the skills youth are acquiring through education and those that employers require, particularly in tech and problem-solving areas.[6]
- *Stigma Against Non-University Pathways:* Literature from our review notes that young people avoid trade work due to perceived stigma, contributing to a shortage of skilled workers in essential industries.[7]

[2] Lives Put on Hold: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Canada's Youth

[3] Entering the Labour Market During Recession Can Leave Lasting Scars

[4] The Daily — Defining and measuring the gig economy using survey data: Gig work, digital platforms, and dependent self-employment

[5] Skills gaps and recruitment difficulties in Canada: Findings from the Survey of Employers on Workers' Skills

[6] Employer and Employee Perceptions of Micro-Credentials

[7] Gen Z and the Uncertain Future of Skilled Trades | Blue Collar Report

3. Youth Mental Health

- *Mental Health Crisis:* Youth are experiencing unprecedented levels of anxiety and mental distress. The pandemic and concurrent economic challenges exacerbated this crisis.[8]
- *Challenges to Accessing Care:* Despite children's hospitals and clinics overall reporting higher youth appointments and emergencies during the pandemic, there was still a significant percentage of youth that reported unmet mental health care needs. The uptick in young people seeking mental health assistance, along with noting that these facilities were unable to service them reflects systemic barriers to accessing support.[9]
- *Impact of Socioeconomic Factors:* In addition to existing resource accessibility challenges, racialized and marginalized youth face discrimination and historical trauma, which compound their mental health struggles. Our review includes a breakdown of Black[10], Indigenous[11], racialized[12], 2SLGBTQIA+ youth[13], and youth with disabilities[14] that outlines their negative mental health impacts, and further barriers.

4. Overall Impact of the Pandemic

- *Economic and Social Atrophy:* The pandemic contributed to a severe decline in social and economic opportunities for youth, resulting in a collective loss of vitality in urban areas.[15]
- *Long-term Consequences:* The compounding factors of job loss, skills mismatch, and mental health issues may leave a lasting impact on youth economic stability and overall well-being.[16]
- *Need for Inclusive Solutions:* Addressing these challenges requires collaboration with equity-deserving communities to develop effective wrap-around support systems and policies.[17]

[8] Mental disorders in Canada, 2022

[9] Mental disorders and access to mental health care | Statistics Canada

[10] Black Business Owners in Canada

[11] Postsecondary educational attainment and labour market outcomes of Indigenous peoples, 2021

[12] CPHO Sunday Edition: The Impact of COVID-19 on Racialized Communities - Canada.ca

[13] 2STNBGN Perspectives on Access to Justice: A Legal Needs Assessment

[14] View of Health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic among Canadians living with disabilities

[15] So long Toronto: COVID-19 pandemic hastens Canada's urban exodus

[16] Lives Put on Hold: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Canada's Youth

[17] CPHO Sunday Edition: The Impact of COVID-19 on Racialized Communities

METHODOLOGY

How did we investigate?

Overview of approach: Community Action Research

Our overarching methodology for the project was grounded in a **community action research framework**[18]. This approach was chosen to ensure that the research was not only responsive to community-identified issues but also actively involved youth as co-creators of knowledge and solutions. By embedding collaboration at every stage—problem identification, research planning, data collection, analysis, action, and evaluation—we aimed to foster shared ownership and empower those affected to drive meaningful change.

This methodology aligns with the project's goals: to address real-world challenges in a way that leads to practical, sustainable outcomes. Community action research emphasizes participation and collaboration, ensuring that those most affected by an issue have a voice and a role in shaping the solutions. This participatory approach to knowledge production enhances trust, strengthens community capacities, and results in more relevant and impactful solutions. Ultimately, we selected this methodology to bridge the gap between research and action, fostering social change that is informed by and benefits the youth community.

THE RESEARCH TOOLS

We adopted a mixed methods approach by including quantitative and qualitative research tools as detailed below.

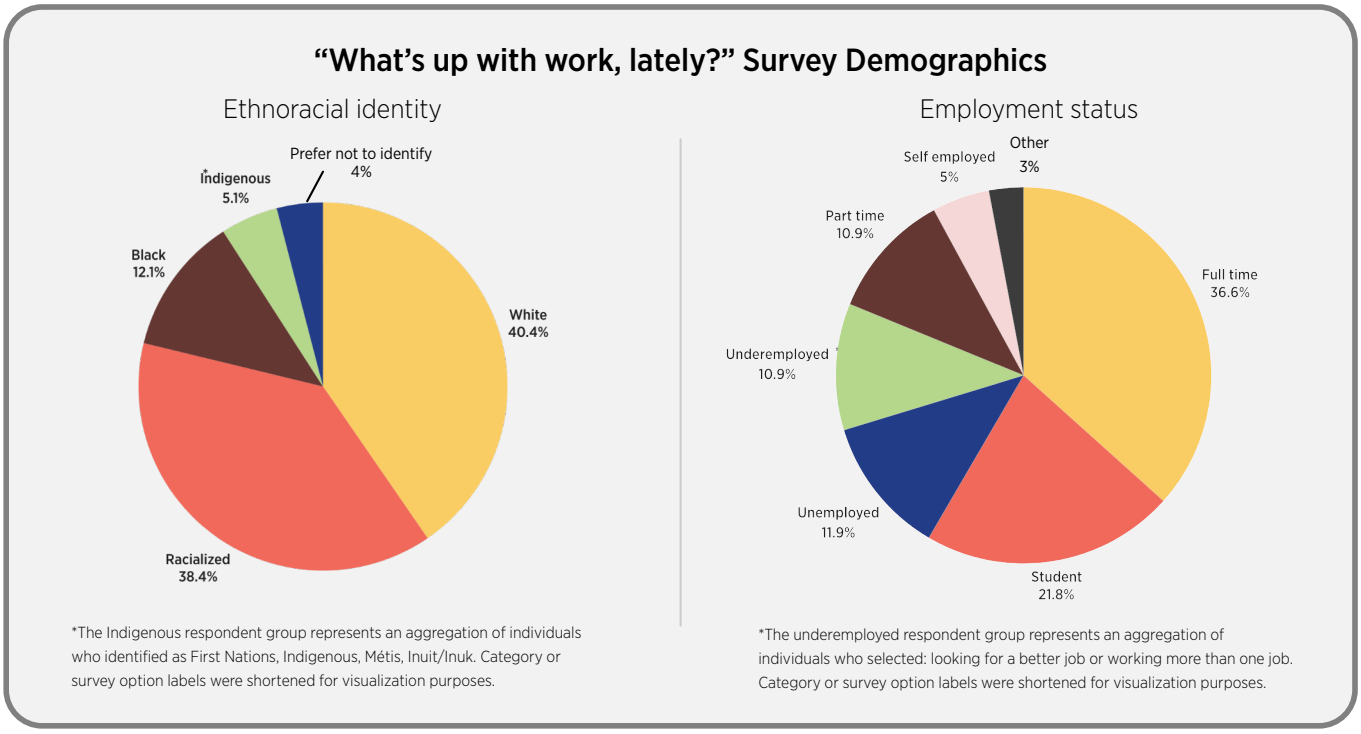
Survey 1 : "What's up with work, lately?"

The bilingual survey investigated how Canada's youth workforce and work ecosystems changed after the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary objective of this survey was to collect insights from youth nationally, to support the development of evidence-based solutions focused on improving community-specific pathways towards skills development and meaningful employment. It was designed in collaboration with policy experts and local actors to ensure that the questions were relevant and aligned with the project's goals. The Equity, Diversity, Inclusivity, Justice and Reconciliation team (EDIJR) at Tamarack Institute validated the survey design. It ensured the content was inclusive and suitable for youth of different identities and lived experiences.

16-30
Age of participants

1626
Respondents

[18] A Short Guide to Community Based Participatory Action Research | KT Pathways



Sampling Design

The survey targeted a representative sample of young people aged 16 to 30, reaching 1626 respondents across Canada. The sampling frame was designed based on Statistics Canada Census 2021 data. Respondents were identified using voluntary sampling through promotion on the Youthful Cities and Tamarack Institute media channels. To align with the values and scope of the DEVlab project, the sample focused on eight cities—Toronto, Vancouver, Montréal, Calgary, Regina, Moncton, Yellowknife, and Whitehorse—where solutions based on the findings were implemented. Furthermore, the survey design prioritized increasing the representation of equity-deserving groups within the sample.

Data Collection

The survey was in the field between November 2023 and May 2024, exclusively through online collection. It was hosted on Typeform, a common data collection platform. The data collected through Typeform is protected by leading Canadian and international cybersecurity and data protection standards. While the survey was in the field, Youthful Cities purchased a panel sample, totalling 1090 respondents (pre-exclusion and data cleaning), from CICIC research, a Canadian, Dynata-affiliated and ESOMAR-recognized market research organization.

The survey complied with ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. All participants were provided with an informed consent form detailing the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. Respondents were informed of their right to withdraw from the survey at any point without penalty, and the data collection process was designed to minimize any potential discomfort or risk to participants.

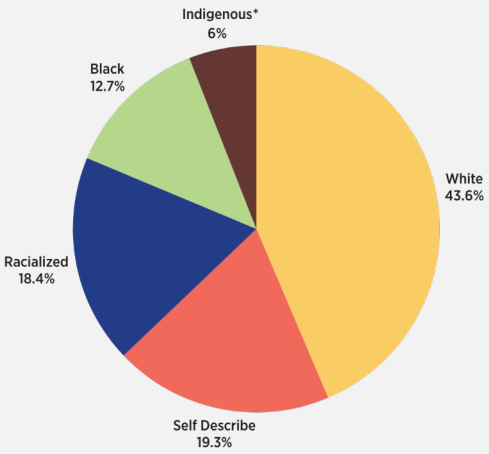
After the survey was closed, responses were aggregated and stored as open-access data by Youthful Cities and Tamarack Institute for future research and use. The aggregated survey data is hosted on Youth Data Lab (YDL).

Survey 2 : State of Housing for Young People

Affordability emerged as a critical theme of interest from the "What's up with work, lately?" survey. Youth identified the interconnectedness between mental wellbeing and affordability challenges, particularly housing security, as a critical factor influencing their skills development journeys and access to employment. Socio-economic circumstances are limiting access to growth opportunities and the costs of both post-secondary

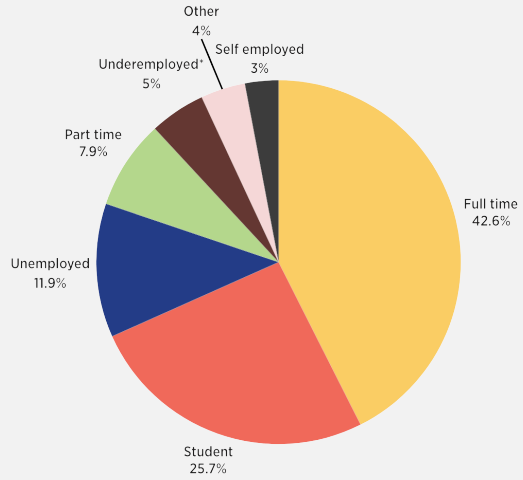
"State of Housing for Young People" Survey Demographics

Ethnoracial identity



*The Indigenous respondent group represents an aggregation of individuals who identified as First Nations, Indigenous, Métis, Inuit/Inuk. Category or survey option labels were shortened for visualization purposes.

Employment status



*The underemployed respondent group represents an aggregation of individuals who selected: looking for a better job or working more than one job. Category or survey option labels were shortened for visualization purposes.

education and upskilling programs continue to be prohibitive for many youth from equity-deserving backgrounds. To evaluate the state of housing for young people nationally this survey on affordability of housing and evaluation of potential solutions was designed in April 2024.

The bilingual survey investigated the national housing crisis—both about the availability and affordability of homes. The primary objective of this survey was to collect insights from youth nationally, to support the development of evidence-based solutions focused on the housing needs of young people. A secondary objective included the evaluation of co-living as a solution to affordable housing supply challenges in Canadian urban centres.

18-33
Age of participants

1546
Respondents

Sampling Design

The survey targeted a representative sample of young people aged 18 to 33, reaching respondents across Canada focusing on the 15 largest urban centres. The sampling frame was designed based on Statistics Canada Census 2021 data. Respondents were identified using voluntary sampling through promotion on the Youthful Cities and Tamarack Institute media channels. Furthermore, the survey design prioritized increasing the representation of equity-deserving groups within the sample.

Data Collection

The survey was in the field between April 2024 and July 2024, exclusively through online collection. It was hosted on SurveyMonkey, a common survey data collection platform. SurveyMonkey has implemented governance, risk management, and compliance practices that align with the most globally recognized information security frameworks; SurveyMonkey has achieved ISO 27001 certification. The data collected through SurveyMonkey was encrypted and accessible to only the Youthful Cities enterprise account holder. While the survey was in the field, Youthful Cities purchased a panel sample, totalling 1500 respondents (pre-exclusion and data cleaning), from CICIC research, a Canadian, Dynata-affiliated and ESOMAR-recognized market research organization. To achieve a more proportionate representation of the Canadian population distribution, the final sample was

regionally weighted. The impact of the weighting approach was evaluated and determined to have a non-tangible impact on response frequencies. The final sample size reported on was 1546 youth respondents.

Limitations Across Surveys

While steps were taken to ensure the sample was representative of the youth population in Canada, and ethical considerations were met, some biases may be present within the data.

Sampling bias: Although the sample was designed to be representative, certain identities may have been underrepresented or overrepresented, which can impact insights and findings.

Response bias: The survey relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or recall bias, particularly for questions related to sensitive topics.

Conversations: Interviews, Focus Groups, and Dialogues

As part of the qualitative research, our team conducted over 300 conversations including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and dialogues. We conducted them with youth, employers and community actors working in the youth sector. These structured conversations allowed us to capture key perspectives on youth preparedness and experiences relevant to skills for success. The questions captured important information on youth skills, education, strategies to improve workplaces, the impact of the pandemic, and the future of work.

These conversations took place between January and September of 2024. In total, we gathered around 11,000 minutes of conversation. The anonymized transcripts and coded segments from these conversations are stored on the Youth Data Lab platform.

Consent and Confidentiality

We received informed written consent from all interviewees for participation and recording of the conversations. All interviewees had their names anonymized, along with other overly identifying information removed from the coded segments.

Structure

We followed the interview guidelines from the Canadian Tri-Research Council[19], in order to construct our interview guide for interviews, focus groups, and discussions.

The interview guide included questions on the following workplace and city level topics:

[19] Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans – TCPS 2 (2022)

Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews were conducted in-person and virtually depending on participants' preferences, and they ranged between 30 to 45 minutes. City teams ran the interviews with youth delegates who participated in the Solutions Summits organized as part of the DEVlab project. In turn, these delegates conducted interviews with youth and community leaders before the summits. There were interviews in both French and English. Prior to the interviews, interviewees attended a training session to learn how to interview well. Youthful Cities provided guidance for running the interviews, using transcription software, and outreach for interviewees. While these semi-structured interviews were focused on the cities primarily targeted by this project, they did include youth from other cities. 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted with industry leaders, community actors working in the youth sector, and employers. The same questions were asked in order to compare across both groups.

Focus Groups Discussions

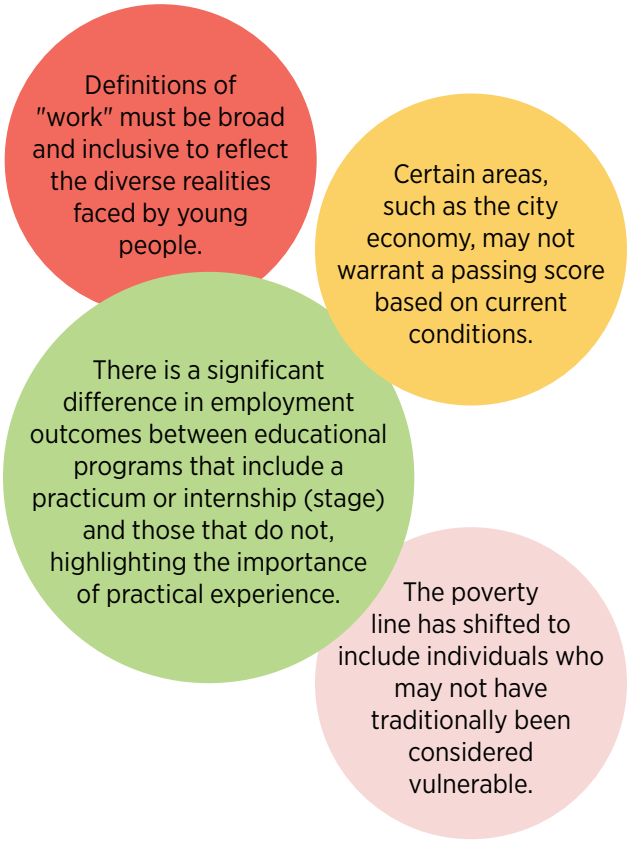
Between April and September 2024, city teams and Tamarack Institute held 13 focus groups in total across Moncton, Calgary, Whitehorse, Yellowknife and Toronto with youth between the ages of 17 and 26 years old. Participants included students, employed youth, and unemployed youth searching for work. Additionally, some of the focus groups included employers and community actors working in the youth sector across Canadian cities. Three to ten participants joined each of these focus groups discussions.

DEV Dialogues

The aim of the DEV Dialogues was to enrich our investigation of the structural and systemic factors influencing work ecosystems. These events involved gathering young people, employers, local actors, and governments to discuss their dynamic, engaged, and vital perspectives, brainstorm, and finally, map the problem and solution spaces around the future of work. The problem space focused on understanding the current situation of youth workforce development and work ecosystems at a city level. Specifically, we wanted to understand what the local-level perceptions, challenges, and barriers young people face as they plan for their future and explore the solution space in more depth.

In February 2024, the Montréal City Team hosted a two-hour dialogue to explore the mismatch between employer expectations and youth perspectives. The discussion included an Urban Studies professor, and two members of the Conseil Jeunesse de Montréal. During the discussion, they examined the city's performance across different areas and reflected on the role that racial dynamics influenced within the city. Participants debated whether the ratings were too high or too low, offering insights into these discrepancies.

The key takeaways of the dialogue included:



Analysis

All conversations were transcribed using the software Notta.ai. We analyzed the transcripts using MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis software, and followed a deductive thematic analysis approach.[20] Initially, the team divided the transcripts by city and manually coded a subset to establish baseline codes. Team members then reviewed and discussed these codes to confirm shared interpretations and develop exploratory codes. Next, we compared these city-level codes and shared interpretations with the suggestions provided by MAXQDA's AI assistant, which analyzed all transcripts and proposed codes at the national level. We found significant alignment between our findings and the AI-generated codes. Using this alignment, we finalized and structured the city-level codes, which were then integrated into broader national-level themes for analysis.

Limitations

Technological challenges were encountered since we initially used Airgram, then it merged with Notta.ai, and we had to switch software, which required some adaptations. A core limitation was the number of interview transcripts we could download at once for further analysis.

The interviews ranged between **30 and 45 minutes of length**, with typically limited follow-up questions to allow for interviewees to clarify what they conveyed. Due to factors such as time constraints, the volume of scheduled interviews, and a shortfall in interviewers asking clarifying questions, interviewees did not always provide specific responses to personal skills they wanted to improve, or skills in which they felt confident.

While cities such as Toronto, Vancouver, Montréal, and Calgary had considerable pools of participants for qualitative research, there was a comparatively smaller number of interviewees in Moncton, Regina, Yellowknife, and Whitehorse. These are reflective of some realities in those smaller cities, but perhaps having the opportunity to interview more local actors would have given a better understanding.

[20]Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

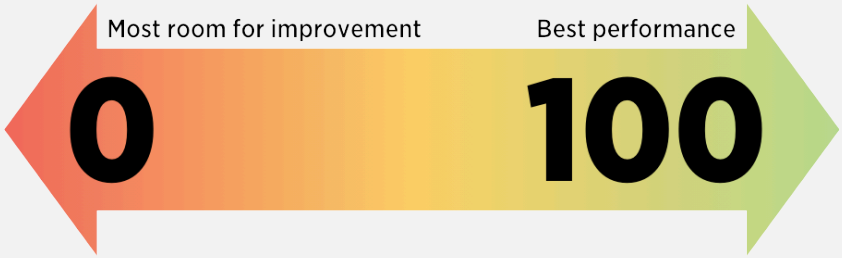
Urban Work Index 2024

The Urban Work Index (UWI) 2024 represents a rigorous and youth-centric approach to evaluating cities, offering actionable insights for policymakers, employers, and educators. By addressing limitations in data representation and topic balance, this iteration of the index provides a robust framework for fostering thriving urban work ecosystems tailored to youth needs.

Index Topics

The ten topics assessed in the index were initially identified through consultations with youth at the Urban Work Summit Edmonton 2019. These topics—spanning climate action, equity, diversity and inclusion, education, and good youth jobs, among others—have been refined over time to remain relevant to youth needs. For 2024, greater emphasis was placed on the ecosystems of work, specifically education and skills development, city economy, and good youth jobs, to align with the research scope of the DEVlab project. This prioritization ensured these topics received a larger share of the data, though care was taken to maintain a balance across all ten areas.

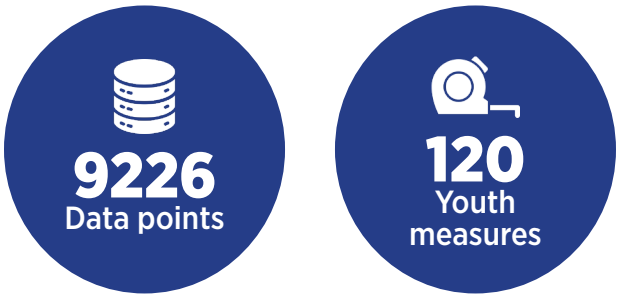
Topic	Number of measurements
Affordability	15
City Economy	59
Climate Action	13
Digital Access	6
Education and Skills Development	67
Entrepreneurial Spirit	9
Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion	19
Good Youth Jobs	35
Health	28
Transportation	9



The figure depicts the range of UWI 2024 scores in relation to the average performance of a city within a given index topic. It is essential to note that a score of 100 does not indicate a city's flawless performance; creating the ideal city for youth is an ongoing process that requires continuous improvement.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted by a trained youth research team, adhering to standardized protocols to ensure consistency across 30 Canadian cities. The dataset for 2024 includes **9,226 data points** across **248 unique measures**, representing a **64% increase in data volume** compared to the previous year. Measures were selected based on their relevance, as well as, data source recency, availability, and accuracy. Where gaps in data existed, alternative proxies were explored, and documented. To ensure youth-specific priorities were adequately captured, 120 measures were designed to reflect their experiences and needs.



Data Processing

To enable fair comparisons across cities of different population scales and economic conditions, the data was normalized[21] controlling for variances in population size, city budgets, median income levels, and unemployment rates. Once the normalization models were applied the data were re-evaluated to ensure that cities were not disproportionately scored.

Weighting

The scoring system combined data quality and youth priorities to ensure fairness and relevance:

Data Quality Weighting

- Data were prioritized if it was recent (after 2021), consistent, and directly relevant to youth.
- Measures were weighted individually based on these factors within each topic.

Youth Priorities Weighting

- Topic importance ratings (10-point scale) from the "What's up with work, lately?" were used to adjust weights at the topic level.

Scoring

Cities were scored on each measure using a min-max normalized scale of 0 to 100:

- 100: Indicative of the best performance across cities evaluated.
- 0: Indicative of the areas with the most improvement potential.

[21]Kratochvíl, L., & Havlíček, J. (2024). The fallacy of global comparisons based on per capita measures. Royal Society open science, 11(3), 230832. https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.230832

Scores for individual measures were combined into topic scores, and these were used to assess cities' overall performance. Where possible, the analysis also highlighted how different subgroups of youth performed within each city, offering deeper insights beyond the averages.

Limitations

While the designed methodology is comprehensive and improves on previous iterations of the Urban Work Index, there are clear limitations to this approach:

Data Availability

- While Statistics Canada represents a centralized source for many key measures included in the index, there are many gaps in regional data coverage, recency of data and city-level data availability. City and provincial-level data sources are decentralized leading to methodological and reporting differences when computing key statistics which can limit comparability.
- The data quality assessment highlights gaps in key prosperity metrics and opportunities for improvement within targeted regions. Future efforts could benefit from greater collaboration and access to additional data sources. The Urban Work Index 2024 focused on open-access data to identify gaps affecting young people's ability to make informed decisions about their city ecosystems.

Limited existing metrics for equity, diversity, inclusion, resource accessibility and other social equity factors.

- Acknowledging the high diversity of identities and lived experiences of youth in Canada, there are limited data standards in place to evaluate the systemic differences in resource accessibility, representation and support system quality for key groups. Most notably, these gaps were prevalent in the health, transportation, affordability, education and skills development, and city economy categories.
- This limitation was addressed through some of Youthful Cities' proprietary youth-focused measures which attempted to combine multiple data points to fill these gaps. However, this needs to be a part of a broader discussion around data representation and the development of metrics.

KEY FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS

What did we discover?

We will delve into four themes* from our findings below: 1) Navigating the transition from education to work, 2) Engaging with post-pandemic work ecosystems, 3) Envisioning an ideal organization, and 4) Paving the way for the future of work in cities.

The explanation box below provides a summary of youth sentiments on the current education system and what they would like to see improved within it:

Navigating the transition from education to work

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Youth discussed the significant impact of the pandemic on their educational experiences, particularly during their transition as postsecondary students to the workforce. **72% of youth experienced a gap in their education or career skills acquisition** due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and **only 1 in 5 youth have fully recovered. Racialized, Black, and Indigenous youth reported experiencing up to 15% greater disruption** to their education during the pandemic compared to their peers. Similarly, **only 12% of youth with disabilities reported feeling caught up** academically post-pandemic,

Job Awareness:

Many youth expressed a lack of awareness about available experiential learning programs, indicating a need for better marketing and communication from educational institutions regarding these opportunities.

Preference for Practical Skills:

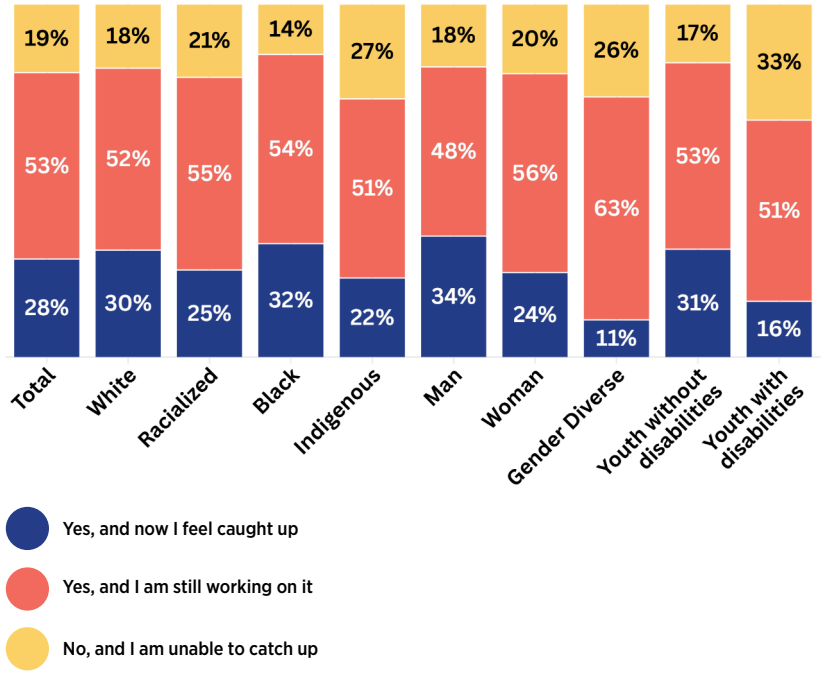
A trend among youth shows an interest in further exposure to microcredentials and skilled trades access compared to traditional degrees, as these platforms offer immediate job opportunities and higher satisfaction, highlighting a shift in how young people view education and career readiness.

Diverse Learning Approaches:

There is a call for integrating various forms of knowledge, including Indigenous perspectives, to enrich educational experiences and broaden students' worldviews.

*The quotations presented in this report have been edited for clarity and brevity.

Youth assessment of their post-pandemic skills and education gap



This figure is representative of national trends from all 1626 respondents to the "What's up with work, lately?" survey. Youth assessed their capacity to recover any education or skills gaps. An answer of "Yes, and now I feel caught up" is indicative of youth who have bridged the gap entirely, while "No, I am unable to catch up" represents youth who cannot make progress and feel they will not be able to recover the gap. Differences between key segments (x-axis) demonstrate how pandemic impact varied greatly among youth.

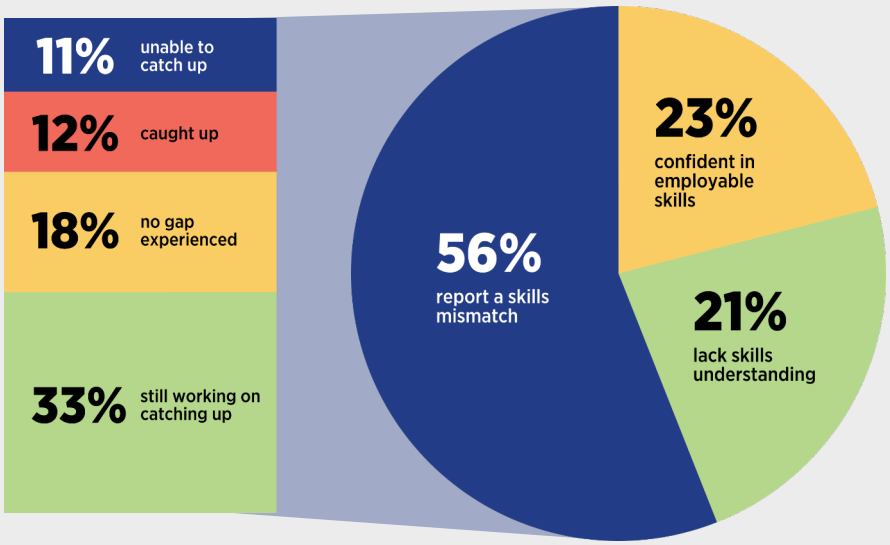
highlighting significant challenges faced by equity-deserving groups.

The pandemic's impact on learning was especially severe for youth who reported being underemployed or unemployed. Among these individuals, **nearly 1 in 4 indicated that they were unable to recover from the educational gaps caused by the pandemic**, the highest rate among all comparison groups. This disparity underscores the critical equity concerns arising from the pandemic, with likely long-term implications for youth employment prospects. Additionally, the findings suggest that youth already disadvantaged in the labour market lacked the financial resources or time to address the learning deficits incurred during this period.

Many interviewees detailed their challenges related to online learning such as a lack of engagement, gaps in instruction, and a loss of in-person experiences. While noting the flexibility of online learning, interviewees typically alluded that the loss of in-class experiences also translated to detrimental impact on skills reinforcement, and access to work experience pathways, such as co-ops and internships to further bolster their skills and networking capacity. Youth interviewees discussed the impact the pandemic had on their education and development as evidenced by the following quotes:

> "I think a big thing when I started working was just like personal relationships with other people, or just personal interactions and I think I wasn't so much prepared for that from schooling just because during school and during COVID you have a very small circle, and the time that you spend in class is a lot of independent work and even if it's group work it's very focused on the school work. Whereas when you're in a work environment, you're really just meeting someone just right away, I found it hard for a little bit to interact with that, it wasn't usual for me." - Youth, Regina

COVID-19 Impact on youth perceived skills mismatch



This figure is representative of national trends from all 1626 respondents to the "What's up with work, lately?" survey. Among the 56% of youth who are aware of their current skills mismatch, 1 in 3 are still working to catch up from education and skills development gaps due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"In the online learning years, the world was crumbling around us, myself and many of my friends were crippled by anxiety and very distracted and unhappy. And honestly, my retention probably was below 30%. I barely remember what I learned. So I think we're all currently trying to understand the ways in which COVID impacted our education and what we end up actually knowing how to do. Now, having a positive network of mentors and support systems is very predictive of how successful I am in basically every other part of my life." - Youth, Vancouver

"I had a little bit more difficulty adapting to remote learning and classes. So that was more difficult. That's what made it a little bit more difficult to develop skills as well." - Youth, Regina

"I think the biggest challenge was that I started university when COVID kind of hit. So my first and second year was mostly online, which kind of limited the opportunities I could do compared to if we were back in person." - Youth, Toronto

The effect of the pandemic persists as youth experience significant barriers at critical stages in skills and career development during their postsecondary to work transition. They highlighted difficulties in finding internships and entry-level positions due to increased competition and a limited job market, exacerbating their concerns about entering the workforce post-pandemic.

A call for enhanced experiential learning

Overall, young people emphasized that experiential learning is crucial for bridging the gap between education and the job market. They contended that work-integrated learning should be part of curriculum at earlier stages, advocated for more hands-on experiences, such as internships and co-op programs, to help students gain practical skills and relevant work experience. **56% of youth surveyed reported an employable skills mismatch to suitable roles** in the job market, and **21% lacked an understanding of employable skills.** Notably, racialized, **Black and Indigenous youth reported higher gaps in hard skills** correlated to increased educational gaps and reduced access to education and skills development resources. Further recommendations included more collaboration with local workplaces, and modes for skills development. Youth that did identify work-integrated learning (WIL) options tended to discuss the health and technical sectors as more viable options for youth to gain work and mentorship experience.

The following are some quotes from interviewees discussing the challenges of the job search, with an emphasis on more work-integrated learning opportunities, such as school internships that can best support in optimizing the transition from education to the workplace.In addition to youth interviewees discussing the key benefits of practical skills and knowledge as part of their development through calls for experiential learning, they also advocated for an expansion in equitable and diverse knowledge systems, mental health support, improvements in the promotion of career resources, and networking events as part of the curriculum.

"I wish I had a work study opportunity [in high school] where while going to school, you'll go out and experience other jobs. Similar to a job fair, but more of you go twice a week or something? And actually work with whoever is mentoring you and just get experience in fields, because a lot of times when you're applying for a job, they ask you for experience. But how are you supposed to get experience if it's your first time having a job? You're just out of high school!" - Youth, Whitehorse

"So a program that would basically place university students on paid internships, during their summers, or at the tail end, kind of like a fellowship." - Youth, Toronto

"[Schools should] really emphasize career pathway sessions, like having organizations come in, offer. internships and summer positions, but really just give an opportunity for students to meet companies or meet people, representatives from the companies and organizations to give them a sense of who they are and maybe if it seems like a good fit for them. It's so much easier to network and connect with people when you are able to just have that in person." - Youth, Vancouver

"So flexibility and that kind of course material, and even just those connections to these opportunities, whether it's volunteering or co-ops or these placements where [youth] are paired up with organizations that maybe are a little bit less structured" - Professional, Calgary

"Post secondary programs can better help students by offering placements where you actually need to work in your field, and making that mandatory. So I feel like now. It's like your own doing: You need to go, and look for an internship, but I feel that they should have internship positions available. In my first year, I didn't learn anything about how to apply what I am reading in the textbooks and what I'm writing. I'm just taking in information. But I feel like it will be great if we take that information, and we actually apply it." - Youth, Toronto

Gaps in support systems

Interviewees identified several gaps in support systems: In addition to a lack in practical skills training for job readiness, they also identified inadequate career education that only promotes a limited number of professions. **Youth reported approaching friends or former employers for career support** (38% and 32%, respectively) **more readily than government and community career centres** (9% and 10% respectively). Furthermore, only 1 in 4 youth felt that government or community career support resources improved their understanding of education gaps in their desired career path or connected them to relevant skill development resources.

Youth noted insufficient mental health support as a considerable gap. Additionally, they advocated for improved access to updated job postings and resources for skill development. Specifically, **Canada Job Bank usage was low among young people with 21% having reported using the job portal nationally.** Interviewees discussed gaps in the education system, and employment programming in the following quotes:

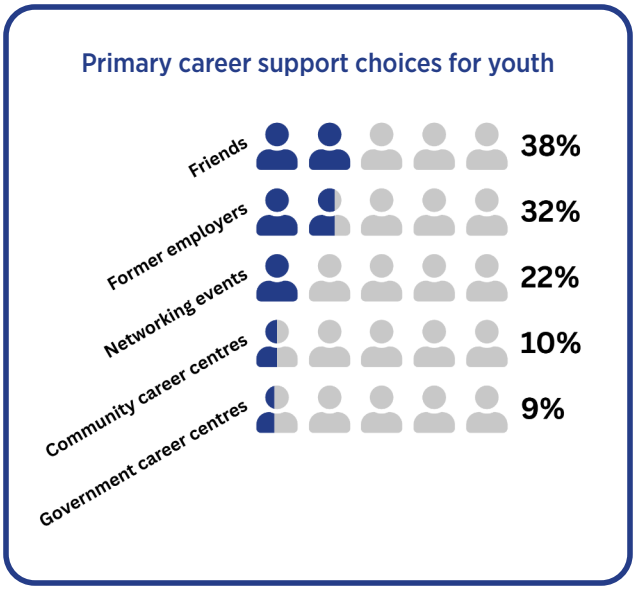
"Let's say if schools had some opportunities where we could explore some careers. I won't say like all, but let's say schools had some opportunities. I know some schools do have it, but I haven't seen it much here in Canada. If schools provide us with some opportunities, for example, managing or public speaking, [skills] which we could use to crack the interview or something. But what if you're just not getting your resume scanned with the employer, they don't want to hire freshmen or something like that." - Youth, Vancouver

"I feel like we didn't learn about careers. We learned about two or three of them. I think it was like a police officer, lawyer and doctor...those were the career options presented to us in that class." - Youth, Toronto

"There's some really good employment programming that focuses sort of on pre employment skills and those kinds of things. Interview skills, resume building, job searching, and then there's employers. There's a bit of a gap between those two." - Professional, Calgary

"There's not a lot of time or support with helping kids figure out who they are. Who are you as a person? Yes. We're trying to get you a job. But it's not just about employability skills. It's about that culture fit and that culture fit can't really be determined unless you know who you are and your values. And what you're looking for in an employer. So I think there's often a mismatch there, because, honestly, so many skills can be taught, I'm never worried about that." - Youth, Calgary

Overall, youth discussed how to bridge the gaps in these support systems by recommending improvements such as better resume writing guidance, more job placement opportunities, and comprehensive workshops on the job hunting process.



Barriers to Employment:

Youth highlighted critical barriers such as affordability challenges, declining mental health, and a lack of quality job opportunities. They were significant reports of unemployment or underemployment, particularly among marginalized groups.

Skills Perception:

Disconnect between the skills youth believe are necessary for success and the existing frameworks, with a preference for advanced competencies like leadership and technical skills over foundational skills.

Need for Employer Engagement:

Important to strengthen partnerships with employers in order to better align youth with industry needs, ensuring ongoing communication, and fostering a supportive environment for youth employment.

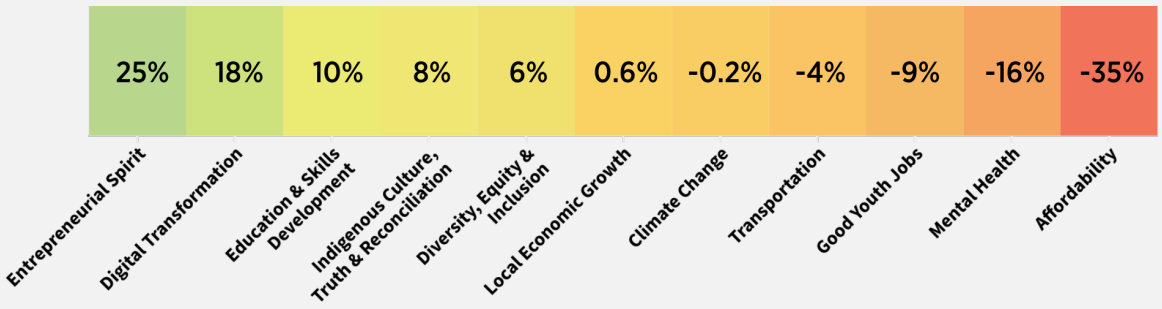
Engaging with post-pandemic work ecosystems

Barriers facing youth in Canada

At a systemic level, young people highlighted affordability challenges in cities, declining mental well-being, and the lack of good youth jobs as major barriers to meaningful engagement within work ecosystems. Nearly half (47%) of youth identified affordability as the top priority to improve quality of life and work in cities nationally, with this figure rising by up to 10% in Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver. On average, young people rated cities' performance in addressing the affordability crisis below 5 out of 10, emphasizing the urgent need for policy reforms targeting the rising costs of living and housing in Canada.

Youth perceived these challenges as interconnected and compounding. Many reported that the lack of affordability directly impacts their mental well-being. Similarly, the difficulty in transitioning from education to sustainable employment contributes to feelings of uncertainty about navigating work ecosystems. 25% of youth surveyed identified as either unemployed or underemployed, while 25% were looking to switch industries within the next five years. Among these youth, rates of self reported mental distress and depression were up to 15% greater, representing a significant mental wellbeing impact. Black, Indigenous

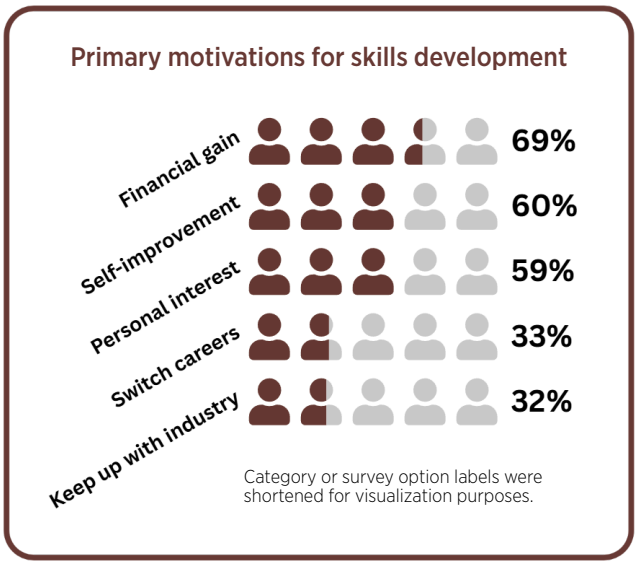
This figure is representative of national trends from all 1626 respondents to the "What's up with work, lately?" survey. A negative gap score indicates that youth feel the topic is important and that their city is underperforming in this area. A positve gap score indicates that youth feel the topic is less important and that their city is exceeding their expectations in this area.



Category or survey option labels were shortened for visualization purposes.

and youth with disabilities reported even greater rates of unemployment and underemployment nationally by up to 10%.

The lack of good youth jobs contributes to fierce competition for roles that meet both affordability and well-being needs. This further reinforces the perceived need for additional education and skills development to achieve career milestones. Notably, **69% of young people cited financial gain as their primary motivation for pursuing new skills**, surpassing self-improvement and personal interest by nearly 10%. However, many struggled to fund their skills development or post-secondary education, hindering their progress toward meaningful employment.



As an alternative path to sustainable employment, **60% of youth surveyed indicated that they are willing to start their own business.** However many youth expressed that they feel the upfront capital resources and risk of starting a business is a major deterrent. Under immediate and intense affordability pressure, they did not feel confident straying from traditional pathways to employment. In the quotes below, interviewees discussed the challenges they faced in navigating the job market, finding employment, and starting their own businesses.

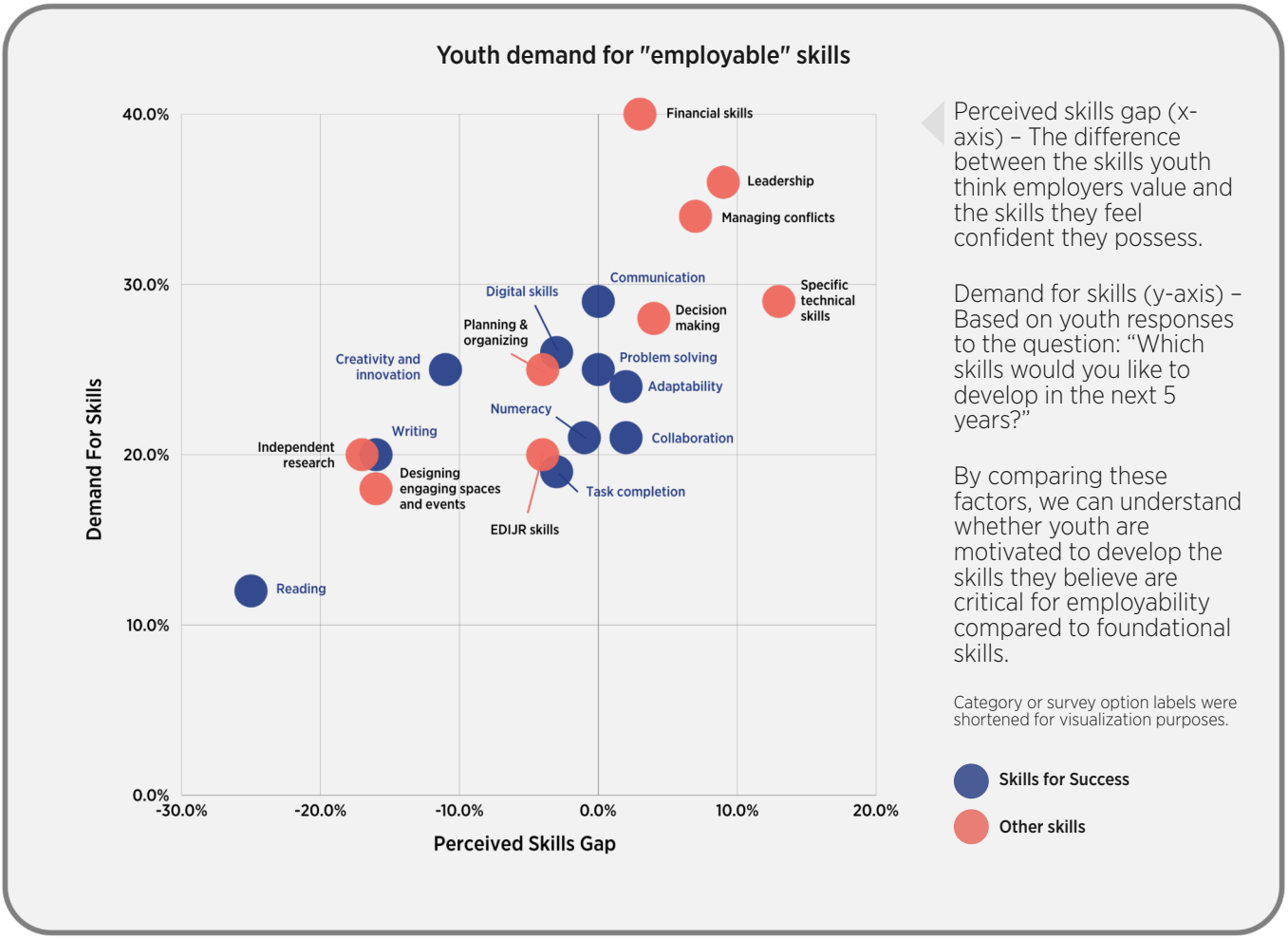
"I applied for all the jobs I could with the experience and everything I had, but never heard a thing back." - Youth, Vancouver

"It'd be nice if companies could show that they understand people have mental health issues and that they're open to kind of working around it...they actually voice it in their job positions that they're posting. And I find that that makes me, and other people I talk to more inclined to work there." - Youth, Regina

"I think just because I don't have experience doesn't mean I have to live below the poverty line. It doesn't mean that I shouldn't be able to afford groceries. And I think valuing transferable skill sets [is important]. I don't have a communications degree, but that doesn't mean that my, let's say English minor doesn't apply to communications. I think it should."- Youth, Vancouver

"I wanted to start my own business when I was 20. But it was so expensive. And then if you start a business, you have to have a backup plan as well. What if it fails? Do you have enough expenses to manage your housing, rent, in the meantime while you're just focusing on your business? But because everything is so expensive, either you focus on your business or you focus on paying your rent." - Youth, Vancouver

"When I apply for a position, there's such a long window until the hiring manager contacts me back, and I feel like within that long window, I don't know what to do. I don't know if I got a job or if I didn't get it, so I feel communication between the hiring manager and the person who applied [can be improved]." - Youth, Toronto



Perceived skills for success

Youth expressed a clear awareness of a perceived mismatch between the skills they possess and those they believed were prioritized by employers in the current job market. When asked to identify the skills they need to learn in the next five years, many youth de-prioritized competencies outlined in the "Skills for Success" framework. This framework, while offering valuable educational principles, did not resonate with youth who view employable skills as those explicitly mentioned in job postings—skills that align with their criteria for sustainable employment. Instead, youth prioritized competencies in people management, leadership, and specific technical areas, often associated with senior-level roles. This suggests two critical insights: **(1) entry-level positions now require more specialized or experience-based skills, moving away from foundational competencies; and (2) rising living costs and stagnant entry-level wages might be pushing youth to aim for senior roles earlier in their careers.** These findings underscore the need to reframe foundational skills as relevant to employability and to align educational frameworks with the realities of the evolving labour market.

Many youth identified short-term bootcamps or workshops as potential pathways to acquire the skills they felt they were missing. However, most available resources are perceived as generic and young people noted that organizations have their own preferences and processes towards problem-solving approaches or the application of technical skills. While many certified micro-credential programs are widely recognized by employers, the cost of these programs is often inaccessible for youth without grant funding or additional financial support resources. Youth discussed the perceived skills gap between their own skills and educational background and that of what is highly desirable in the labour market in the following quotes.

"So my major challenge is I am a third year sociology student, and I'm realizing now, that once I graduate, I may not be able to break into the job market in the way that I thought I would be able to because my degree doesn't really lend itself well to what the economy prefers. For example, we always know business and finance and all things tech are more 'employable' compared to these humanities. Which is basically why I'm trying to pivot a little bit and basically learn more skills on my own so that I can at least surmount that challenge, and come through the gaps in my education." - Youth, Toronto

"We come with our own unique skill sets. Like I was talking about earlier with, like I have a research background, so I have a strong copy, but I don't have a credential to show that I have a strong copy. I just know that I have it. And if the employer isn't okay with that they need something that shows that you are not lying. I think employees want to be given an opportunity to learn. And I think jobs are being gatekept almost. It's like having to be rich enough to get a job. It's not like you can just get a job because you need one." - Youth, Vancouver

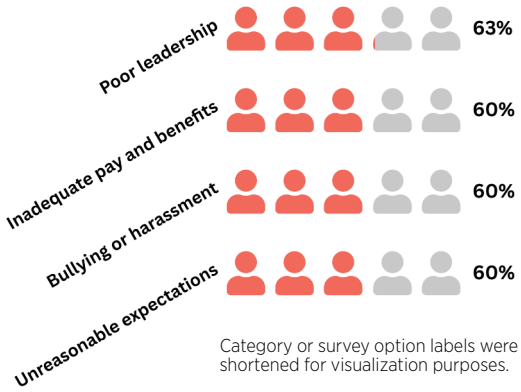
"I've been very particular in preparing for this role for this company, and that's why I'm the best fit and there just is no clear understanding of which approach is the best, because I get the same results, which is at most, I'll get an interview, and then it's left at that. And then whatever opportunities you do get, they're either unpaid or not very challenging. That kind of sends you in this spiral of, like, where do I belong in this market? What does my future look like? If I can't even figure out how to learn outside of the school" - Youth, Toronto

"So I feel like Canada's landscape, when it comes to the workforce, the labour market is rapidly changing. And I don't know if the universities are keeping up, except for a few universities. However, with the influx of immigration and the changing landscape, I feel the universities need to spend more time and their funds into research to ensure that they are able to build a curriculum that can connect with the skill sets or the gaps that are required for the betterment of Canada, actually." - Youth, Vancouver

Intergenerational differences

Intergenerational challenges in workplace ecosystems are reflected in gaps between young people and older colleagues or leaders regarding communication standards, organizational culture, and attitudes. Young people placed significant emphasis on transparent communication in leadership, with **58% agreeing that poor communication from leaders is a top factor making organizations unattractive to work for.** Poor leadership was ranked alongside long work hours, discrimination, and bullying as reasons for disengagement in the workplace. This suggests that youth view leadership as a key driver of organizational culture and hold leaders accountable for creating a supportive, inclusive environment.

Top four characteristics that make an organization an unattractive place to work



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Communication gaps were another significant challenge. Some youth interviewees shared feelings of being

unheard and undervalued by older employers. They described situations where their skills were unrecognized or where older colleagues judged their experience levels, causing a loss of belonging in the workplace. Instead of bridging these gaps into learning opportunities, these interactions often left youth feeling isolated.

Young employees also reflected on generational differences in workplace attitudes. They emphasized prioritizing work-life balance and flexible work arrangements, which they felt contrasted with the traditional views of older generations. Perspectives on company loyalty also differed: while younger workers believed loyalty must be earned by organizations, they perceived older workers as expecting inherent company loyalty. More than one in two young people stated they would leave their role within six months if a better opportunity arose. Unlike older generations, youth are less willing to compromise their needs for the potential benefits of loyalty.

This sense of agency, while challenging traditional norms, contributes positively to workplace culture. Many young people actively seek to drive change within their teams, as evidenced by their support for collaborative mentorship programs. Such programs, which emphasized two-way learning, were highlighted as a promising solution to bridge generational divides and foster mutual growth across age groups. The lived experiences of young people with these intergenerational differences are shared in these quotes.

"Older management seems to expect employees to have a level of loyalty to the company that they never really earned." - Youth, Calgary

"I'm hoping that as more millennials and more of my generation get into charge, workplaces become more accepting [saying] 'yeah, you can work from home if you need to and we can move your hours around to better suit your schedule,' right?" - Youth, Whitehorse

"My management tended to be members of an older generation, so they were a little bit less willing to see things from the perspective of younger employees. So you do need to communicate. You do need to assess: 'Okay, I'm looking to hire a junior staff member, and they're probably going to be a graduate or like a couple of years into their career. What would they need to actually thrive in this role? Am I willing to keep them? Am I willing to teach them?' Companies would need to do a little bit more soul searching, I think." - Youth, Toronto

"I've worked with organizations that have very high expectations of younger kind of workforce, people in the workforce versus other organizations are very much willing to build up someone who's new in the industry or kind of a younger" - Employer, Calgary

"I've now come to the realization that maybe jumping around is the way to go... With Gen. Z, I've noticed that by jumping around, they've been able to increase their salaries, broaden their skill set, and broaden their network. And I don't see the negativity surrounding that. I guess with companies, they want people to stay for the long term. And I did. I stayed five and a half years with this company, and I just left, but I explained this to [the company]: 'I'm very honest and authentic with every space that I occupy. You're not giving me any opportunity at your company to grow, so I had to look elsewhere.'" - Youth, Toronto

"I think a lot of young people have really mastered this way of separating work from our identity...I think that [workplaces are] beginning to change, having that better work life balance." - Youth, Toronto

Characteristics of Good Youth Jobs:

Youth define ideal jobs as those offering flexibility, supportive work culture, fair compensation, and opportunities for personal and professional growth. Emphasis on work-life balance.

Stances on Organizational Accountability:

Youth fall on a spectrum regarding social accountability within organizations. Highlights include youth noting transparency and authenticity from organizations as important, favouring genuine actions over performative gestures, as well as the need for alignment between personal values and organizational missions.

Value Proposition:

A significant portion of youth prioritize equity, diversity, and inclusion in organizations, stating that a commitment to sustainability and social good makes a workplace more attractive.

Envisioning an ideal organization

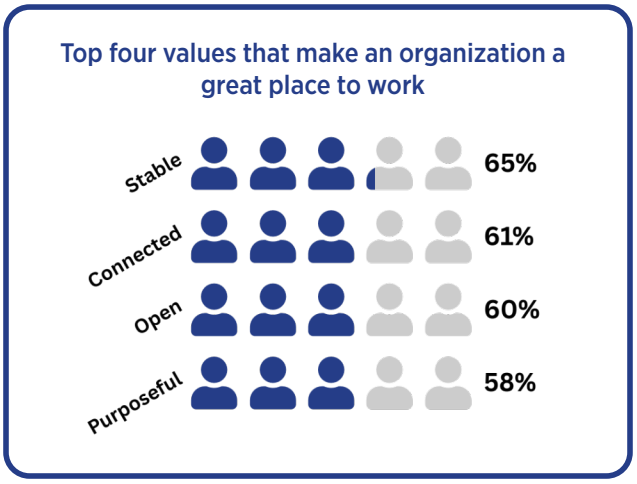
What is a Good Youth Job?

Based on interviews conducted, the conceptualization of "good youth jobs" included positions that offer flexibility, supportive work culture, fair compensation and benefits, along with personal and professional growth opportunities. Youth emphasized the importance of work-life balance, where jobs fit into their lives. Additionally, good youth jobs are characterized by open communication, mentorship opportunities, fair compensation, and a sense of belonging, where employees feel valued and respected for their contributions.

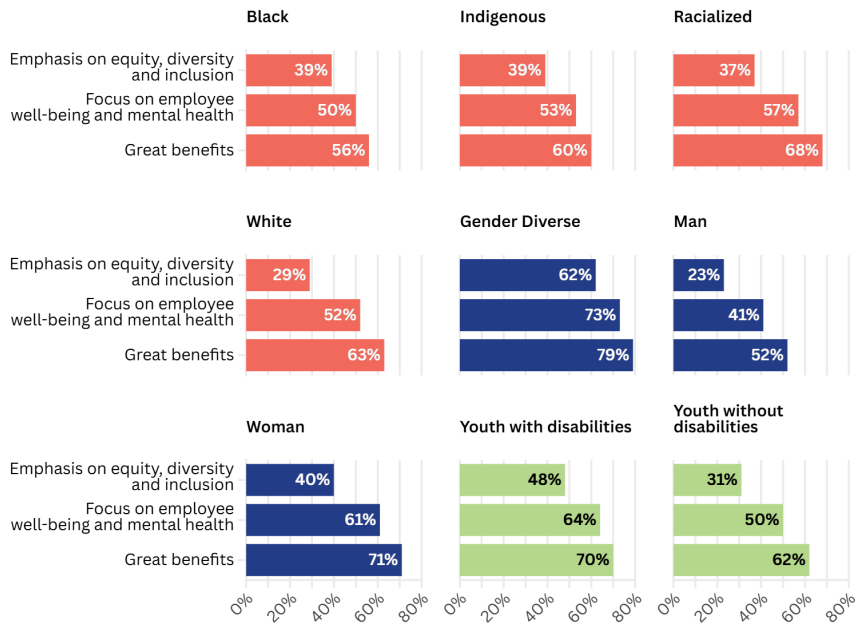
1. Youth preferences

In their responses on the ideal workplace and organization, young people discussed several attractive factors an organization can commit to in order to attract, support, and sustain youth employees as they develop their careers. These aspects of an ideal organization included **flexibility in work arrangements (top factor for 63% of youth surveyed)**, such as remote work options and adaptable hours, as this structure allows for young employees to effectively balance their personal and professional lives. **60% of youth highly valued open communication between management and staff**, as they emphasized that this positive communication would foster a culture of trust and collaboration, and therefore enable employees to voice their ideas and concerns in a more supportive environment.

Furthermore, **youth discussed the importance of a positive work environment with 56% highly prioritizing it.** As open communication is an element to cultivating this environment, youth also envisioned an organization that prioritizes diversity, equity, and inclusion, as these commitments help create a sense of belonging and respect among team members. Youth with disabilities highlighted a need for increased autonomy and additional professional development opportunities at work.



Characteristics of an organization that is a great place to work by youth demographic



This figure is representative of national trends from all 1626 respondents to the "What's up with work, lately?" survey. Great benefits packages that increase access to physical and mental health resources were prioritized compared to organizational policy initiatives across all demographics. Gender diverse youth and youth with disabilities emphasize EDI and mental health policy more strongly indicating the need to broaden organizational policy centering the needs of these youth groups.

Interviewees noted compensation and benefits, such as physical and mental health plans and growth opportunities as significant factors that would influence their job satisfaction, with 63% of youth placing high value on these aspects of work. Overall, organizations that emphasized open communication, flexibility, positive workplace dynamics, innovation, and employee well-being were more likely to attract and retain young talent, as these factors align with the values and aspirations of the younger workforce.

"For me, I expect organizations to have competitive wages, mental health support, good insurance plans, and professional development opportunities to gain new skills." - Youth, Calgary

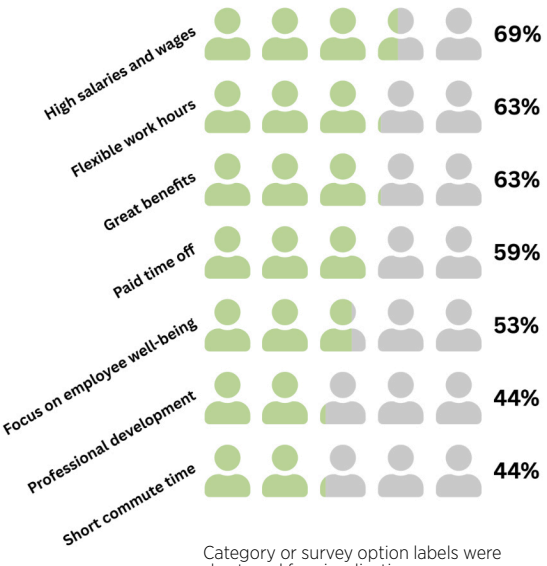
"Going back to flexibility would be essential, maybe hybrid options. The job that I'm doing right now is actually hybrid. I come in person two to three times a week when needed and we discuss what needs to be done throughout the week. And then I have my individual time remotely where I'm able to count my hours into the job and I feel very lucky and [it's] very helpful in the sense of flexibility because I do commute over one and a half hours to the job when in person." - Youth, Toronto

"Yeah, I think just like flexibility in terms of being able to maintain a work life balance. So I think flexible hours, more of the hybrid model, or maybe even the ability to work remotely. And just accommodations in general. My oldest is almost twelve, and when he was born, if they were sick or whatever like that, I dreaded telling my employer because. It wasn't as acceptable to take care of your family, and now, it's probably also who I'm working for, but I find a lot of the employers that we work for, it's the same thing." - Professional, Calgary

"I think a hybrid and flexible work arrangement, especially for us as younger, recent graduates coming out of university, right into COVID-19. I was so used to working from home, and my only real adult work experience was all from home and then having to kind of flip that quickly to be in person was a little bit confusing and really shifted the complete pattern of work. So I really appreciate when supervisors are flexible and allow for some freedom in terms of working from home, working in the office. I also think open communication with teams and supervisors is something that can eliminate so much stress and so much uncertainty about roles." - Youth, Vancouver

"A lot more people are looking for remote accessibility for their work, higher paying wages to combat the unaffordability of housing, food, and other services in this day and age." - Youth, Regina

Top characteristics of attractive organizations



Category or survey option labels were shortened for visualization purposes.

2. Value proposition

40% of young people surveyed emphasized the importance of equity, diversity and inclusion within organizations as the most attractive factor for them, and 58% agreed that feeling purposeful would make their organization feel like a great place to work. Many young people seek alignment between their personal values and the organizational mission, preferring workplaces that actively promote overall social good. One of the most prevalent examples youth provided on the ways in which workplaces can enable social good was the organization promoting and facilitating efforts to support environmental sustainability. This was a recurring point in interviews, and **40% of youth agreed an organization promoting sustainability would make it a great place to work**.

In addition, youth noted that transparency and accountability were also crucial aspects for a workplace, as young people call for organizations to demonstrate their commitment to equity through meaningful actions and policies. Overall, they discu ssed the importance of challenging traditional practices and advocating for positive change, reflecting their desire for workplaces that resonate with their values.

"I think it should be one of the main factors that they decide to do, because I feel like what a company likes, like the stances that a company takes is really reflective of the workplace attitude, or just the values." - Youth, Vancouver

"Of course, now we're seeing all the corporate equity initiatives of different things, companies that maybe weren't interested in it ten years ago are interested in it now because they know they have to be. They're not really doing it because it's the right thing anymore. They're just doing it because it's going to make business sense interesting." - Professional, Calgary

"I'm interested in just taking my labour to people who value that already. Because if you haven't already learned. And if you haven't already caught up, that's your problem." - Youth, Vancouver

3. Social accountability and action

During interviews, various perspectives emerged around organizational accountability and responsibility in response to social and political issues. Several young people emphasized the critical importance of companies being socially accountable, particularly in addressing pressing social justice concerns, promoting diversity and inclusion, and safeguarding employee well-being. These youth highlighted a preference for organizations that openly articulated their stances on significant social issues, citing value alignment as a key factor in considering employment opportunities. For them, working with an organization that not only stated but consistently demonstrated its commitment to social accountability enhanced their sense of purpose and fulfillment.

On the other hand, some youth acknowledged the nuanced challenges organizations faced when taking definitive stances on complex social and political issues. They emphasized that expectations varied depending on the organization's sector. For instance, while non-profit organizations were expected to advocate for socially responsible positions, these youth were more accepting of neutrality from industries such as non-renewable energy. Concerns about performative actions were prominent, with a preference for authenticity over symbolic gestures. Additionally, some youth expressed apprehension about potential polarization, noting how taking strong public stances could inadvertently influence community dynamics and behaviours.

Overall, the interviews reflected a diverse spectrum of opinions, showcasing that young people's expectations around organizational social accountability are far from monolithic. While many value proactive engagement with social issues, others prioritize neutrality and authenticity, highlighting the importance of context and sincerity in organizational practices. Interviewees shared their stances on organizational social accountability and responsibility in the following quotes:

"If we talk about politics, I would think, organizations should abstain from most cases, or it can be more conflicting because you'll have employees who have opinion a) other employees will have opinion b) and if the organization is supporting opinion a), there is going to be clash between the employer and employees. So there is going to be negative effect on how you perceive the workplace" - Youth, Calgary

"It's just as we have become aware in recent years of the greenwashing campaigns that certain companies will have. It's Earth Day, we love our planet, we're environmentally friendly, etc. But in the company's practices, this is not reflected in any way. There is no structural change to lessen its impact. But it seems that, precisely, there is also a sort of, I don't know if it's an adequate term used, but of wokewashing where companies go publicly display their support in the face of social struggles" - Youth, Montréal [Originally in French]

"I feel like it's a bit of both: Organizations should be held accountable, however, I do understand the political dynamics that play in these roles. It can be very difficult when you are getting funding from the government, to navigate that role of, 'hey, we're getting funding from this place, and they told us if we talk about this topic, then we can get in trouble.' So maybe as a company, they can advocate for everyone to have their own opinions. I feel like this shouldn't be any limitation of speech for anybody, everyone's allowed to believe what they say" - Youth, Toronto

"[Social accountability] is important because as a young person, it can be really frustrating when there is something major going on in the world, and you find that your workplace kind of rolls over it." Youth, Vancouver

"I definitely think that is important. In my workplace, especially when we talk about things like mental health and homelessness and politics, these all kind of come together to provide a larger social commentary. I do think it is important for organizations to be socially aware and to be accountable both to their employees and stakeholders or clients or whoever they're interacting with." - Youth, Vancouver

"Having a positive network of mentors and support systems is very predictive of how successful I am in basically every other part of my life." - Youth, Toronto

"I would like to see more companies, like offering mentorship to people who might not have the experience, but the people that are committed to learn and willing to learn and have a passion." - Youth, Moncton

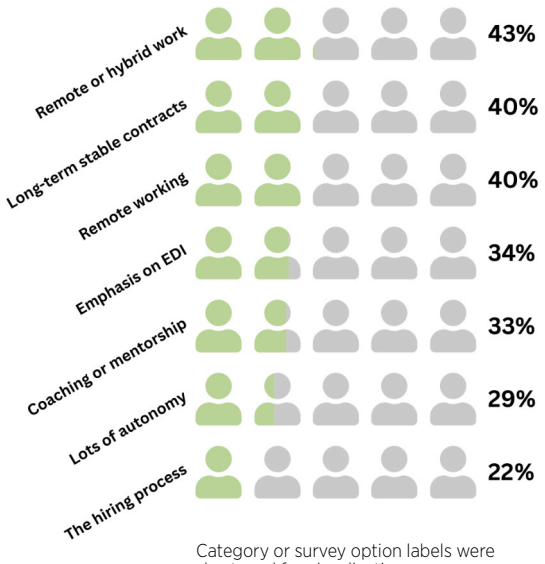
"I'm interested in just taking my labour to people who value that already. Because if you haven't already learned. And if you haven't already caught up, that's your problem." - Youth, Vancouver

4. Mentorship and growth opportunities

Youth perspectives on mentorship amplified its critical role as a source of guidance, support, and networking, which can significantly influence their success in the workplace. Notably, **33% of youth identified mentorship or coaching as key factors in making an organization more attractive to them**. Participants shared that having access to mentors helps them navigate workplace challenges, set realistic expectations, and build confidence in their roles.

Growth opportunities were also highlighted as crucial for young workers. They expressed a strong desire to develop new skills, gain practical experience, and advance their careers. Examples of impactful initiatives included professional development programs, targeted training sessions, and flexible project assignments tailored to individual interests. These opportunities would not only enhance skillsets but also foster engagement and loyalty, as they align with youth aspirations for meaningful career progression.

Top characteristics of attractive organizations (cont.)



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Integration of AI:

The report underscores the importance of incorporating artificial intelligence into workforce development strategies, as it can enhance job creation and improve efficiency in various sectors, while also preparing youth for future job demands.

Wrap-Around Support:

Emphasizing the need for comprehensive wrap-around support, the report advocates for integrated services that address affordability, mental health, and job readiness, ensuring that youth have the necessary resources to thrive in the workforce.

Collaborative Ecosystems:

The creation of collaborative ecosystems involving government, businesses, and educational institutions is essential to foster innovation, provide mentorship opportunities, and facilitate youth engagement in shaping the future of work in urban environments.

Paving the way for the future of work in cities

Managing industry-to-youth match/ mismatch

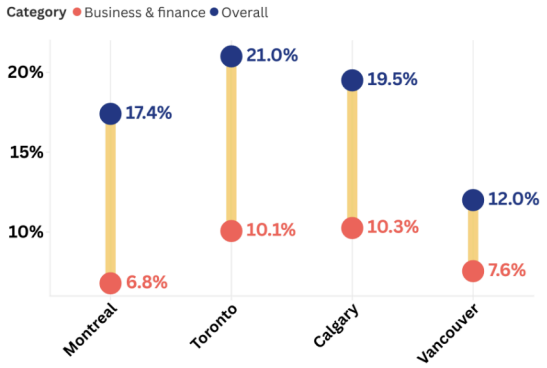
Youth job preferences increasingly shifted toward large for-profit companies, with o**ver 33% of young people indicating a desire to move away from academic institutions, small for-profit businesses, and non-profit organizations.** This trend reflected a pursuit of sustainable wages, benefits, and stability, which were often associated with larger organizations. Youth also demonstrated a strong interest in industries such as business, finance, and administration, the green economy, and digital technology. Although entry-level compensation in business and finance roles was below the national median, these fields offered higher wages at senior or management levels, aligning with youth aspirations for long-term career growth.

The focus on developing soft skills like leadership, communication, and conflict resolution suggests that young people see these industries as offering clearer pathways to advancement and fewer barriers to career growth, particularly in larger organizations. However, urban centres lack sufficient capacity in these high-demand sectors, limiting sustainable employment opportunities for youth and highlighting the need for robust post-education career support.

Using the Urban Work Index 2024 as a foundation, it was evident that the business and finance sector in a city of Toronto's scale demonstrated a significant capacity to support youth employment. This sector was identified as the largest by per capita employment for the general population and the second largest for youth, trailing only behind Vancouver. However, this capacity was constrained by relatively high unemployment rates, placing Toronto in the middle range nationally.

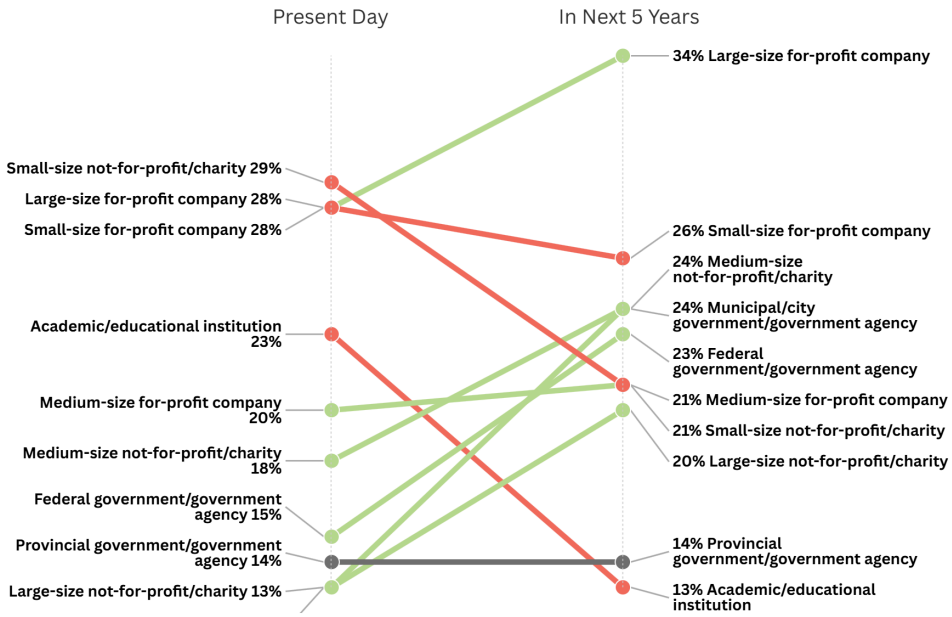
Although youth unemployment rates in this sector were slightly lower compared to the general population, the level of competition remained high, reflecting the challenges of navigating an already crowded industry.

Unemployment in the business, finance and administrative industries relative to total youth unemployment (2021)



This figure depicts data from the UWI 2024, comparing 2 measures from the Good Youth Jobs topic: youth unemployment in the business, finance and administration industry and total youth unemployment across Calgary, Montréal, Toronto, and Vancouver. Montréal has the lowest relative unemployment in the business, finance and administration industry.

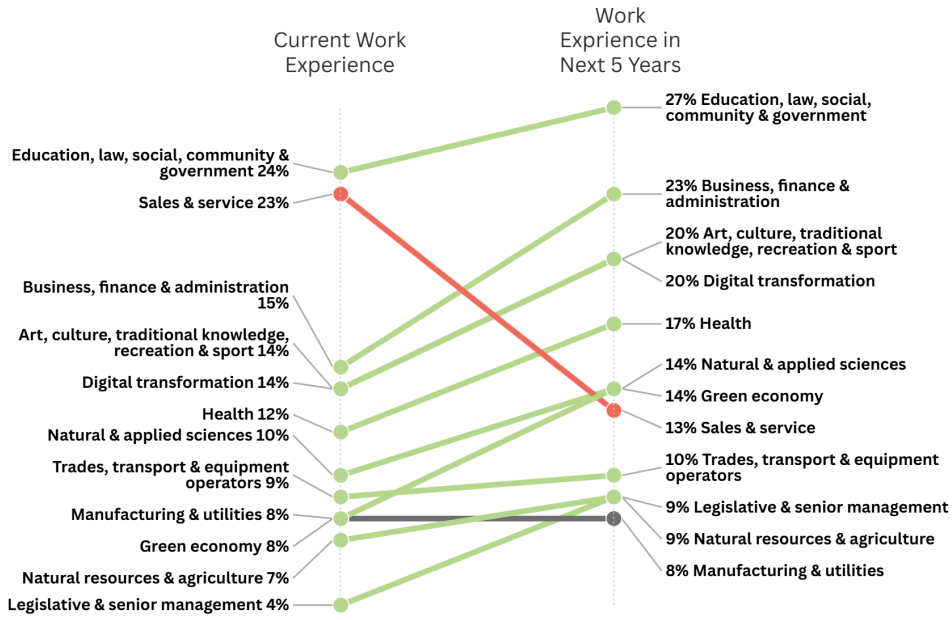
Alignment of youth work experience with organizational structure types



This figure is representative of national trends from all 1626 respondents to the "What's up with work, lately?" survey.

Illustrates the alignment of young people's current work experience with various organizational structures now, compared to their anticipated alignment 5 years in the future.

Alignment of youth work experience with National Occupation Classifications and key emerging industries



This figure is representative of national trends from all 1626 respondents to the "What's up with work, lately?" survey.

Illustrates the alignment of young people's current work experience with National Occupation Classification (NOC) categories and emerging industries, compared to their anticipated alignment 5 years in the future.

Category or survey option labels were shortened for visualization purposes.

In Vancouver, the situation appeared more severe from a youth employment perspective, with the city recording the 24th worst-ranked youth unemployment rate in the sector.

Conversely, Montréal exhibited stronger performance, ranking 5th in terms of youth unemployment within the business and finance sector and securing a position within the top five nationally for sector size. This highlighted Montréal's comparatively favorable employment conditions for youth in the sector.

These differences in the dynamics of city economies illustrate the impact of the perceived availability of good youth jobs and will likely influence the willingness of young people to relocate. The evaluation of the city economy from the perspective of good youth job availability has the potential to inform proactive policy decisions to help youth unable to break into a particular sector, identify transferable skills and pivot to industries with more opportunities. As work ecosystems across Canada are dynamic, the development of programs to enable young people navigate non-linear career paths and uncertainty is imperative.

Embracing the impact of digital tech and AI

Canadian work ecosystems have been evolving rapidly due to disruptive technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI). Youth are key primary adopters of these new technologies and possess critical insights regarding their early impact on labour markets. **86% of young people reported that it is important for AI and related technical skills to be part of their education.** With Black and Racialized youth having identified these skills as critically important at a higher rate. This finding correlated with **49% of Black youth** and **43% of Racialized youth reporting a likelihood that their current role will be eliminated by automation or AI technologies within the next 10 years.**

In many cases technical proficiency is experiential and integrating it into early education curriculums is recommended for two key reasons: (1) it increases exposure and access to many technologies which can be financially out of reach for equity-deserving groups, (2) it contributes to digital safety practices and critical thinking for youth to carry through into later life stages. This need is evidenced by youth aged 16 to 21 years old who reported both decreased confidence in their digital technology skills and increased demand to acquire these skills over the next 5 years, compared to older age cohorts. Youth discussed AI and the future of work in the following quotes:

"For the future of work, I think we're seeing it, through embracing more accessible options. So whether it's being able to work hybrid versus in person, or being exposed to brand new job occupations that didn't exist before. At my workplace, we actually explore the use of AI, not really to replace jobs, but augment them. How do we make sure that people are knowledgeable about that skill area to use that, rather than to just focus on replacement arguments. Focus on changing job occupations, creating new jobs, things like that." - Youth, Toronto

"It is everything that influences the political, economic, scientific, technological and environmental industries. Technologies, at the moment, are super strong. Yeah, in the handicraft industry, I think how big will it become technologically? Like, the world is not going to lose its footprint because of technology. But AI will set the points for everything. Be it magazine, clothing, design, whatever. The AI is thought to pose problems. But honestly, I see it in every industry." - Youth, Montréal [Originally in French]

"They'll have a VR training where they deal with the fire. If they're going to be a doctor, they could do a surgery or they're a computer scientist. Maybe they're going to code in the VR world. So I do think that virtual reality will pick up a lot. I don't think robots will take over right away necessarily." - Youth, Calgary

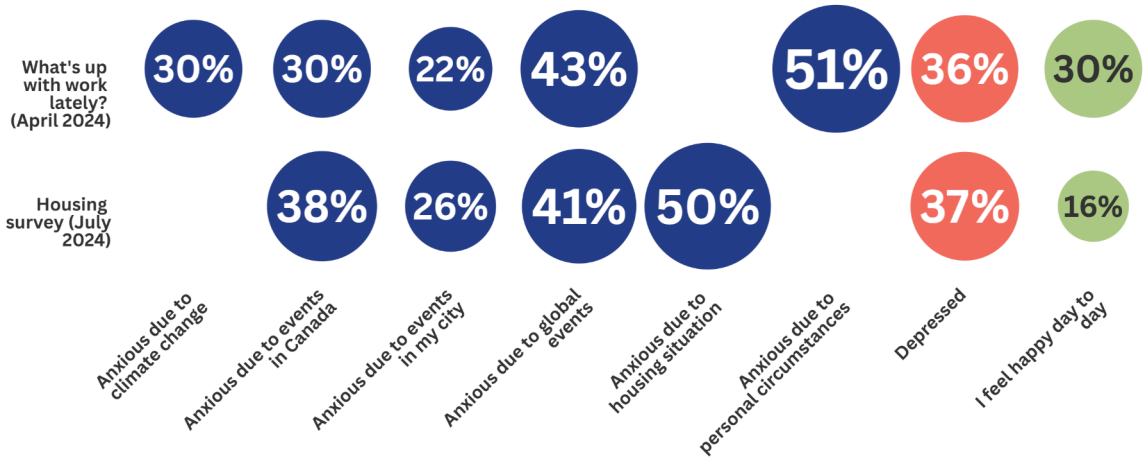
"And now looking at AI, a lot of these more monotonous tasks, and preparing drafts can be done by working smarter and more effectively and efficiently with technology." - Youth, Vancouver

"I think that there's going to be a lot more of a focus on science and technology. There was already a huge embrace in the past and it's going to continue to be so, especially with the rise of AI. And I think that people with other degrees may continue to find that their labour is undervalued" - Youth, Toronto

Addressing affordability with emphasis on housing

Housing affordability represents a critical factor in the affordability crisis in Canada. Based on UWI 2024, the **median deficit in monthly budget across youth reached $800.00 per month nationally**, when evaluating median monthly income against cost of living. **Over 1 in 2 youth reported feelings of mental distress related to housing affordability on a regular basis**, as high as 55% among youth in the Prairie provinces. 68% of youth reported that finding an affordable rental situation is the most challenging part of their housing search. This significant socio-economic pressure combined with the limited availability of good youth jobs is creating extreme financial strain, such that **53% of youth returned to their family home after moving out for the first time.** While this represents a critical safety net for young people it is important to consider this fall back a privilege not equally accessible to all youth due to various circumstances. At the same time, even having such a fall back can represent a form of mental distress as **59% of**

Self-reported mental state April 2024 versus July 2024



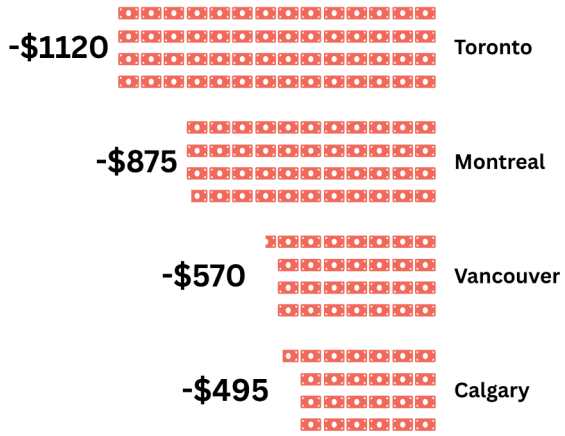
This figure is representative of national trends from all respondents to the "What's up with work, lately?" and "State of housing for young people" surveys. Anxiety due to housing situation represented a dominant factor in mental well-being among youth. A consistent rate of depression reported underscores the critical state of youth mental health.

Anxious
Depressed
Happy

young people associated moving out on their own as a critical part of their adult identity.

The outlook on home ownership is even worse, as **only 2.8% of youth reported that they independently own their home.** Of those fortunate enough to own housing, over 50% reported that they owned a three or more bedroom home shared with parents and family members. With large urban centres offering both the greatest opportunity to secure a good youth job and also the highest cost of living, many youth are forced to take on debt, multiple jobs or precarious work to survive contributing to the high rates of mental distress reported. When evaluating the reported rates of mental distress across both surveys, **the reported rate of depression remained consistent at nearly one third of all young people, and was even greater in 25-27 year olds who represent largely new professionals starting their careers.** This group was identified as a particularly vulnerable age group to the systemic challenges around affordable housing and navigating labour markets.

Average monthly deficit according to Urban Work Index 2024



It is critically important that affordable housing is approached with a critical equity lens, as women, Racialized, Black, Indigenous and youth with disabilities, all reported up to 15% greater difficulties finding affordable housing. Designing a solution grounded in the needs of these community groups will represent the strongest collective impact among young people. Youth discuss their affordability concerns in the following quotes:

"But I think that's number one, it's really the price of housing, that's what's difficult for a young person. Because that means, if you're a city and you want to develop this or that industry, you mean economic development, but like...It's not very attractive when you can't afford to live, right? So, that's really the, yeah, that's really the big thing." -Montréal Youth [Originally in French]

"Another factor is the cost of living. I mean, housing prices are much higher now than when we bought the house, but back then, we chose this area because it was affordable for us. I hope this helps explain my connection to the community." - Toronto youth

"[To address affordability] recognizing which parts of the city have more young people living in them, and then making transit plans based around that so that people would be more easily able to get to work. And then even in regards to housing, recognizing where young people would be most likely to work and then building apartment plans are based around that." - Calgary Youth

"I think affordability. I don't know how it relates, but I feel like let's say if a city is affordable, many people would try to open their businesses. Simple as that. Which creates more employment. More people would like to come and operate in your city first because it's low cost and there are a lot of youth available." - Vancouver Youth

Providing wrap-around support

To address these challenges, policymakers should prioritize initiatives such as industry-aligned education programs, targeted upskilling in transferable, and regional economic diversification to expand job opportunities. Enhanced partnerships between educational institutions and industries, combined with mentorship and placement programs, can bridge the gap between youth aspirations and labour market realities. By addressing these systemic issues, policymakers can create an environment where youth are better equipped to access meaningful and sustainable careers, ultimately contributing to a more resilient and equitable labour market.

By extension the concept of wrap-around support must consider the integration of support systems in both the private and public sectors to holistically address the top three challenges facing young people: affordability, good youth jobs, and mental health. Young people discussed existing wrap-around supports that they would like to see expanded:

"Cities can better meet the needs of young people by maximizing the number of spaces that we like from third [spaces], where people are encouraged to come to exchange. For example, in Europe, there is really this tradition, when you finish your working day, you go to the pub, you go to the restaurant, you go for a beer, all the people meet up all the time before going home." - Youth, Montréal [Originally in French]

"Cities can provide more community houses. And more publicly funded and provided workshops for training that offer practical work, and I think that should be included with the city council itself." - Youth, Vancouver

"Require jobs with a certain number of entry level employees in each hiring circle. Like a minimum of five to give young workers a chance to prove themselves and develop skills. Toronto is a big city and a lot of resources are centred in the downtown core, and it can be inaccessible for people who live in areas such as North York and Etobicoke. I found out about employment programs very late. The city does a poor job of advertising these opportunities and makes me feel like they aren't worth anything." - Youth, Toronto

"Mental health support should be a must for funding. I know for example, that some companies now install a panic room where you can go and just scream. I don't think that that really serves a positive purpose, because I believe that doesn't help me solve it. That's just me expressing it, which, yes, is an important step, but I shouldn't be in need of a panic room if I get to the stage where I need to scream into an empty room. It means that something's gone wrong beforehand." - Youth, Vancouver

"It would be cool if they had pop ups around the city to provide career advice. I think pushing that message to youth would be helpful. I know that a lot of public libraries also do advising they don't have any career coaches at the moment, but they usually do, and they can help with resumes and things like that" - Youth, Toronto

LESSONS LEARNED

Expanding data collection outreach:

Future research should ensure that outreach strategies are relevant and effective for youth and stakeholders. There were challenges in engaging with youth that were not already connected to organizations partnered with Youthful Cities, along with difficulties recruiting youth that were in high school in part due to school board restrictions, and the required approval process for participation in research.

Refining qualitative research:

To improve interview data, city teams should receive additional training on encouraging interviewees to elaborate on their responses for greater clarity and insight. For instance, when interviewees mention "skills development" or "professional development," interviewers could ask follow-up questions like, "What specific skills are you looking to develop? Can you provide an example?" While interviewees may struggle to articulate specific skills due to a skills knowledge gap, this difficulty should be noted as part of the findings, highlighting that youth recognize the need for skills to enhance employability but often cannot clearly identify which skills they require.

Enhancing the engagement of Indigenous youth communities:

To better resonate with Indigenous youth, research and outreach methods should incorporate more collaboration with Indigenous leaders, organizations, and consultations with Indigenous youth in order to help tailor processes that reflect their needs and values. Furthermore, creating safe spaces for dialogue and fostering trust through relationship-building is essential for meaningful engagement.

Improving the engagement of employers:

Deepening our engagement with employers as part of the research process is crucial for capturing their insights and expectations regarding youth skills and competencies. Establishing stronger partnerships with industry stakeholders can facilitate ongoing communication and collaboration, ensuring that employer perspectives inform policy and action plans for youth employment. Regular feedback loops and forums for discussion can help align employer needs with youth training and development initiatives.

Future efforts should continue to focus on addressing systemic barriers that hinder youth access to education and employment opportunities. This includes advocating for policies that promote equity and inclusion, particularly for marginalized groups. Additionally, ongoing evaluation of programs and initiatives is necessary to adapt to changing workforce dynamics and ensure that they remain effective and relevant.

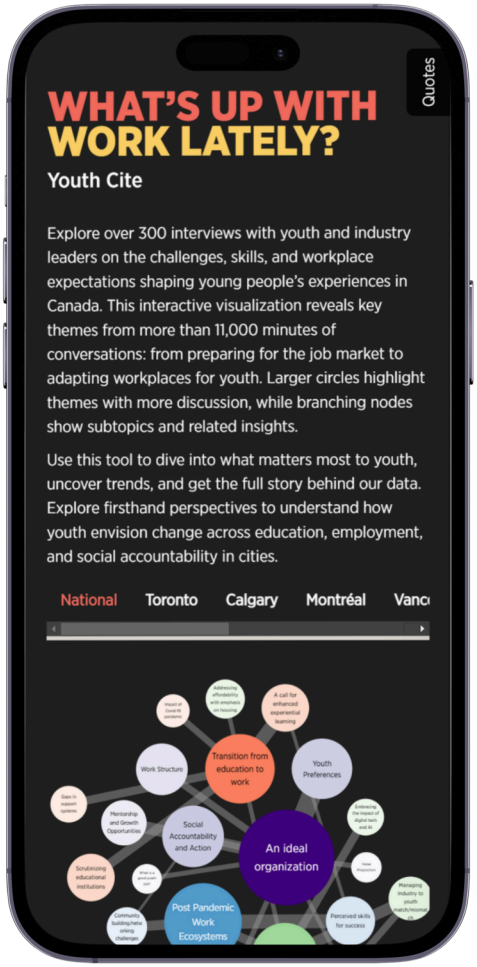
FUTURE WORK

Ongoing research is critical for more breadth and depth of our understanding of youth employment challenges and the evolving workforce landscape. This includes gathering data from employers through conversations and surveys while continuing to engage youth from diverse demographics. By exploring the unique barriers faced by different youth populations, we aim to develop innovative solutions that address these challenges and empower youth to leverage their skills development journeys and employment opportunities effectively.

Future research will prioritize experiential learning pathways through sectoral collaboration to design broadly accessible frameworks. This could include surveys to identify preferred sectors for work experience, interviews to gather insights on improved work-integrated learning opportunities, and assessments to optimize the structure of youth workforce development strategies and programs. These efforts will help refine frameworks for effective implementation and foster greater alignment with youth preferences and needs.

To address specific skills gaps and improve youth employment, targeted Skills Innovation Labs will provide practical, hands-on training focused on emerging industries and technologies. Workforce development strategies, and the co-design of these strategies between youth, employers, educational institutions, and community organizations will represent a key outcome from the Skills Innovation Labs. These labs will equip youth with the skills needed to meet current job market demands, and this ecosystem of support will enhance youth employment readiness and success. A hybrid model of implementation would increase accessibility, attainment of deliverables from youth, and improve the engagement of youth from racially diverse and marginalized communities.

As part of our commitment to dynamic, and community-driven research, we created the Youth Data Lab (YDL)—an open data platform offering over 7,000 youth survey responses, 31,000 minutes of interviews, and 35,000 data points across 65 Canadian cities and 23 topics. The YDL enables policymakers, organizations, researchers, and individuals to access reliable data for informed decision-making on youth-focused policies and programs. A key feature of YDL is a generative AI chatbot designed to simplify interaction with qualitative interview data, advancing the analysis of long-form responses at scale. Future development aims to integrate partner data, facilitate insights generation, and enhance reporting capabilities. YDL also emphasizes equity-deserving groups, centering their narratives in local solutions and policy design to ensure inclusive and impactful outcomes.



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this report highlights research from the DEVlab project, offering key insights into the challenges and opportunities youth face in the workforce. The COVID-19 pandemic further contextualizes these challenges, particularly in navigating the transition from education to employment. Through a mixed-methods approach—surveys and qualitative discussions—we identified critical barriers such as skills mismatches, affordability issues, and mental health struggles. Youth emphasized the need for more holistic practices that streamline entry into meaningful careers, including work-integrated learning, mentorship, and workplaces that value progressive, equitable practices. They also advocated for improved city resources, environmentally conscious spaces, and better access to affordable housing and transportation. Ultimately, youth seek opportunities to develop their skills and contribute to a more equitable, accessible, and innovative future.

Looking ahead, future research must expand on these findings. It should also prioritize exploring innovative strategies to bridge the gap between education and industry, ensuring that youth are equipped with relevant skills and sustained support to thrive in an ever-evolving job market. Strong collaborations will help institutions better align with the needs of youth while empowering young people to continuously develop their skills, advocate for systemic change, and contribute fresh, creative ideas to the workforce. By doing so, we can lay the foundation for a more inclusive, dynamic, and future-ready workforce that amplifies the potential of the next generation.