HERE AND NOW:

Youth Homelessness, Employment and Covid-19 in Toronto

Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity
Conseil Canadien pour la Réussite des Jeunes

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A word from **Lina Pulido, Project Officer, the CCYP Fellowship Program**

The intention of the fellowship program was to provide a cohort of young people with a platform to conduct research, connect with, and advocate within the spaces that they were already operating in. This approach led us to four fantastic people that had a clear intention to make change. This being the first cohort of our fellowship program, was an excellent opportunity to learn from the fellows, I have had the privilege of being with them (virtually) throughout the entire process beginning November of 2020. I have seen them create their research plans, execute their focus groups, interview and connect with experts in their field, and provide insight into the spaces they move in that I truly believe is needed.

This would not have been possible without the help and support of our internal CCYP team as well as the partners that we have had, and have made along the way. I want to thank Howard Tam and Nate Gerber from Think Fresh group for their support in creating a well-rounded approach to advocacy, and the people that spoke and presented on a variety of topics including Scott Leon from the Wellesley Institute, Mariam Guled from Eva's Initiatives for Homeless Youth, Nika Lennox from Future Majority, and Amanda Noble from Covenant House.

I hope everyone reading these reports comes away aware, inspired, and knowing that these young people are making noise and actively working to push for the change they want to see.

Sponsors & Funders

The Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity is a non-profit organization supporting youth workforce development in Canada. We are a cross-sector, collaborative table of highly-skilled community and corporate leaders improving the sector through engagement, coordinated activities, research, and advocacy.

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Introduction

Youth homelessness is an intersectional issue frequently misunderstood by those who haven't experienced it, and even those who have. It is an integral part of my story and professional life; an admission that had I not experienced homelessness, I would not be in the place of opportunity that I am today.

The reason I am in a place of opportunity is because I was given a chance to work in a new industry: peer support. Working from this lens, as an emerging expert in an emerging field, I've drawn on my own lived experience of positive interactions with 'the system' to inform interventions and programming for other youth experiencing homelessness. The most impactful engagement I've seen is skills-based employment (like peer support) that increases young people's social capital, confidence and employability. A substantial difficulty in these interventions is making young people aware of the interventions and resources themselves. Being homeless at any time in your life is usually marked by fear, uncertainty and a lot of willpower. It is isolating and stigmatizing because of the negative stereotypes promoted by misunderstanding, yet anyone can become homeless at any time, sometimes through no fault of their own. Youth in particular are very susceptible to these stereotypes, and they are also amongst the most vulnerable. According to the National Youth Homelessness Survey, 40% of young people who have experienced homelessness in Canada had their first experience of homelessness before age 16. The longer a young person stays in the system, the more likely it is for them to be chronically homeless as an adult, thus perpetuating the cycle of homelessness in our city.

MARDI DALEY

This advocacy report focuses on the experiences of Toronto's youth homelessness population. I chose to focus on the intersection of Covid19 and employment because of the disproportionate effects the pandemic has had on Ontario youth. Taking a local approach was important because although Toronto is a well-resourced city, it is also dealing with significant challenges such as affordable housing, youth unemployment and a rising cost of living. Young people are often 'last through the door, first out' in times of crisis, and Covid19 is no different.

Although Canada has enacted a 10-year National Housing Strategy, homelessness must also be approached in a local context, as well. There is a significant research gap pertaining to youth homelessness and youth employment, but the pandemic has offered an opportunity to revisit the situation and collect new information about our changing socioeconomic ecosystem. This report is an exploration of the challenges and opportunities offered by Covid19 for youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto. Although I am a person with lived experience of homelessness, that experience is far removed from the situation young people are experiencing today. I hope that this report will provide a strong foundation for future research and employment interventions for youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto.

methods

The CCYP Fellowship program began its first cohort between November 2020 and May 2021. As fellows we were given regular professional development and supervision to build our capacity as community researchers. We were also paired with professional mentors through CCYP's community relationships to support the development of our individual projects. We attended regular workshops and trainings about the elements of design, community engagement and basic research methods throughout the Fellowship and were supported by Think Fresh Group in Spring 2021 to help build our individual stories and knowledge translation activities. In late April 2021, our preliminary findings were presented at CCYP's national Youth Summit to employers, youth and other diverse stakeholders. Finally, the advocacy report was drafted and reviewed by other community researchers before being copy-edited and finalized for distribution.

The research for this advocacy report used a mixed-methods approach with both qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative methods (online survey). An initial literature review was conducted in late Fall 2020 to narrow down the research question and scope of this report and the engagement activities occurred between February and April 2021. An analysis of the focus group and survey findings was conducted between March and April 2021 to define codes and themes associated with the data.

The qualitative data came from a series of focus groups with young people (aged 16-29) with either lived or living experience of youth homelessness in Toronto and experience accessing employment programs. Outreach was conducted through Covenant House Toronto, LOFT Community Services and Woodgreen between February and March 2021. Young people were given an honoraria via e-transfer for participating in one 1.5 hour Zoom focus group. There were 7 youth participants across 3 focus groups, but a few participants could not stay the entire time so a second individual meeting was set up at a time suitable to the young person to finish the interviews.

The focus groups were largely exploratory because of the changing conditions of Covid19 and lack of recent research about the state of youth workforce development as it pertains to youth homelessness in Toronto. The following were the guiding questions for the youth focus groups:

1. **How do young people define meaningful work;**

2. **What are the current conditions for young people seeking employment and where do employment programs fit in; and**

3. **What employment program features are most important for youth experiencing homelessness?**

The quantitative data was collected through a 15-item online survey which was promoted through e-mail, social media and word of mouth with a strong push through the Toronto shelter system to ensure representation from young people currently experiencing homelessness. The experiences of both housed and currently homeless youth were examined and the survey was available for 2 weeks between March 17 and March 31, 2021 and received 120 responses.

The initial study design included both youth and service provider focus groups, however the reality of Covid19 is that service providers are largely 'at capacity' and have very limited time to volunteer to research activities. While an initial focus group was done with 2 service providers, I was unable to do further groups within the project timeline because of recruitment difficulties. A second survey was distributed to replace a service provider focus group, however due to a low response rate, that data will not be included in the report.

survey data
Demographics

The survey had 120 respondents made up of young people aged 16-29 from the City of Toronto. The only requirement to participate was that youth lived in Toronto. The purpose of the survey was to try and understand the opportunities and barriers to employment for young people amidst the Covid19 pandemic. Using a control group, the survey compares employment experiences of youth currently experiencing homelessness to those who were not currently homeless in order to establish core differences in each demographic.

A variety of Likert scales were used while other questions asked youth to 'select all that apply'. The prompts asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with specific statements about their employability and their wants in an employment program. The questions were designed to explore how young people exist in the current ecosystem which has been marked by ongoing pandemic restrictions.

In this survey, and report homelessness was defined as: *any experience involving housing instability and/or having no fixed address.*

Our definition of homelessness included:

- **Couch-surfing** *(eg. staying at a friend/family's place)*
- **Using shelter services** *(emergency shelter, youth shelter, family shelter)*
- **Sleeping rough** *(having to sleep outdoors)*
- **Housing instability** *(periods of instability where you were forced to leave your home)*
- **Other experiences not defined**

Table 1: Survey Demographics

Gender	N (%)
Boy/Man	58 (49%)
Girl/Woman	59 (50%)
Another Gender	1 (1%)

Age	N (%)
16–19	13 (11%)
20–24	56 (48%)
25–29	47 (41%)

Ethnic Identity/Background	N (%)
White / Caucasian	57 (48%)
Latin American	19 (16%)
Black	12 (10%)
South Asian	11 (9%)
Chinese	7 (6%)
Another Identity	14 (12%)

The population sample in this survey was very consistent with the overall demographics of Toronto. For example, in the 2016 Census, there were slightly more women (52%) than men (48%) in Toronto and the leading visible minority groups were South Asian (13%), Chinese (11%) and Black (9%) who, with other visible minorities, make up about 52% of Toronto's population. In this survey, there was almost equal representation between men and women as well as those currently experiencing homelessness and those that are not. One unexpected outcome was over-representation in the Latin American-identified population who only make up 3% of Toronto's total population.

The limitation of this survey is that it did not get representation from Indigenous-identified peoples and people who are gender diverse.

Table 2: Past Experiences of Homelessness

Experiences of Homelessness	N (%)
Currently homeless	61 (51%)
Past experience of homelessness	77 (64%)
No experience of homelessness	42 (35%)
Know someone who has been homeless	17 (14%)

Table 3: Types of Homelessness Experienced

Type of Homelessness	N (%)
Couch-Surfing	35 (29%)
Using Shelter Services	41 (34%)
Housing Instability	26 (22%)
Sleeping Rough	38 (32%)
Other experiences not defined	9 (8%)
More than 1 type of homelessness	54 (45%)
More than 2 types of homelessness	12 (10%)

*note, the following section will use 'n' to elaborate on the number of participants that responded one way, or another in the survey. This is to illustrate raw participation numbers and to provide more context to the percentages that are discussed.

For those with past or current experiences of homelessness, using shelter services (n= 41, 34%) was the most common experience. However, almost half of respondents had experienced more than one type of homelessness. For those that had experienced more than 1 type of homelessness, couch-surfing with another type of homelessness (n= 21, 27%) was the most common.

Who experienced what?

The second-highest combination of types of homelessness experienced was using shelter services and sleeping rough (n=17, 22%) and all of these respondents identified as Caucasian/White. It is also interesting to note that of all respondents who identified sleeping rough as a past or current experience, 95% (n=36) identified as Caucasian/White.

58% (n=7) of Black respondents identified previous experiences of homelessness with **71%** (n=5) of experiences being couch-surfing.

53% (n=10) of Latin American respondents identified past experiences of homelessness with **60%** (n=6) of those experiences being couch-surfing.

Employment and Income during Covid19

Employment Status Change (since March 2020)
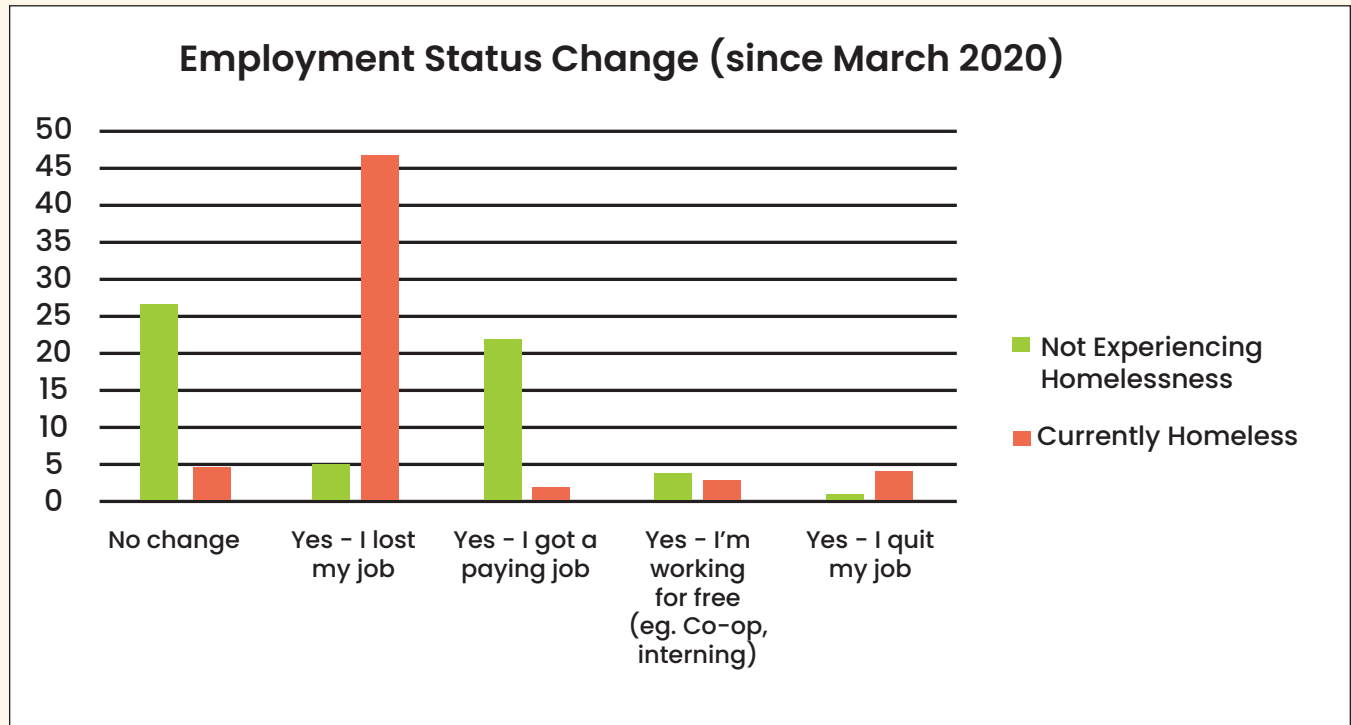
Figure 1: Employment Status Change (since March 2020)

Youth experiencing homelessness have been disproportionately negatively affected by the Covid19 pandemic. Figure 1/Table 4 compares employment status changes for youth experiencing homelessness to those who are not showing massively different experiences since the start of the pandemic.

Table 4: Employment Status Change (since March 2020)

Employment Status Change *(Since March 2020)*	Currently Homeless (61)	Not Experiencing Homelessness (59)	Total N (%)
No Change	5 (8%)	27 (45%)	32 (27%)
I got a paying job	2 (3%)	22 (37%)	24 (20%)
I'm working for free	3 (5%)	4 (7%)	7 (6%)
I lost my job	47 (77%)	5 (8%)	52 (43%)
I quit my job	4 (7%)	1 (2%)	5 (4%)

62% (n=37) of youth experiencing homelessness are currently unemployed and 77% (n=47) have lost their job since March 2020. Comparatively, 69% (n=41) of housed respondents have paid employment and 37% (n=22) obtained paying jobs since March 2020. Overall, 41% (n=49) of respondents are not currently employed, but are looking for work. Interestingly, youth experiencing homelessness were more likely to be doing unpaid work (eg. Volunteering) with only 15% (n=9) currently employed in paying jobs.

Latin American youth were outliers in the data set. 58% (n=11) experienced 'no change' in their employment since March 2020 and 79% (n=15) have paid employment. Of those currently experiencing homelessness, 75% (n=3) have paid employment and those who are unemployed (n=2) are currently housed. This population experienced the least amount of change in the data set and more research can be done to examine the circumstances which contributed to employment stability for this group.

Table 5: Types of Employment and Homelessness Status

Currently Employed	Currently Homeless	Not Experiencing Homelessness	Total N (%)
Yes - paid	9 (15%)	41 (69%)	50 (43%)
Yes - unpaid (eg. Co-op volunteering)	14 (23%)	3 (5%)	17 (14%)
No (but I'm looking for a job)	34 (57%)	15 (25%)	49 (41%)
No – I can't work	3 (5%)	0	3 (3%)

Table 5 shows the employment status of all of the survey respondents, and importantly, the inherent imbalance between those who are employed and housed and those who are not.
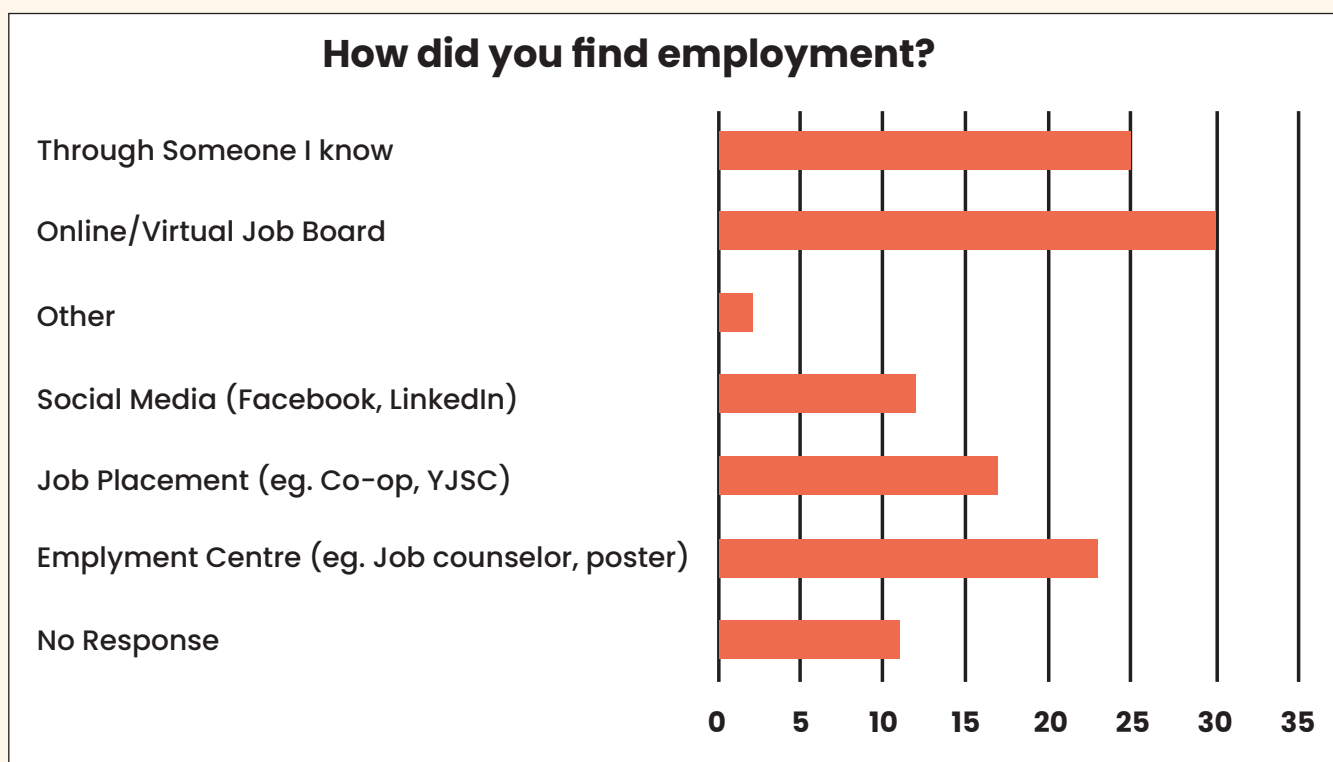
How did you find employment?

Category	Value
Through Someone I know	25
Online/Virtual Job Board	30
Other	2
Social Media (Facebook, LinkedIn)	12
Job Placement (eg. Co-op, YJSC)	17
Emplyment Centre (eg. Job counselor, poster)	23
No Response	11

Figure 2: How did you find employment?

Figure 2 shows how young people found employment during the pandemic. According to this figure, young people were most likely to find employment through a virtual job board (eg. Indeed), someone they know or an employment centre.

Young people currently experiencing homelessness are more likely to use an employment centre (31%) or job placement (28%) to obtain employment whereas housed youth may use social media (18%) more often. Getting a job through someone you know (21%) was commonly used in both groups.

One possible reason young people experiencing homelessness are more likely to be employed from job placements is the relationship to employment programs themselves. Many programs offer short-term training and placements and are specifically for youth who are not in school and not working (NEET: Not in Employment, Education/Training). Some shelters also run their own skills-based employment programs and offer paid placements to help young people build their resumes and get real-world experience while they look for housing.

Getting a job through someone you know is a facet of the times (as will be discussed in the focus group section) because of the difficulty of standing out from other applicants on virtual job boards. I believe social media is more likely to be used by housed young people because of their access to internet/wifi and that they have more resources to work virtually at this time. Young people experiencing homelessness may be less active on social media broadly because of the nature of their housing situations and privacy concerns, however more research is needed to explore these differences.

Lastly, for those who got a job through social media, 8 were girls/women while boys/men (n=17) made up the majority of people who used employment centres (77%, n=22) to obtain employment. Again, more research can be done to explore these differences and create more targeted programming.

Main Source of Income
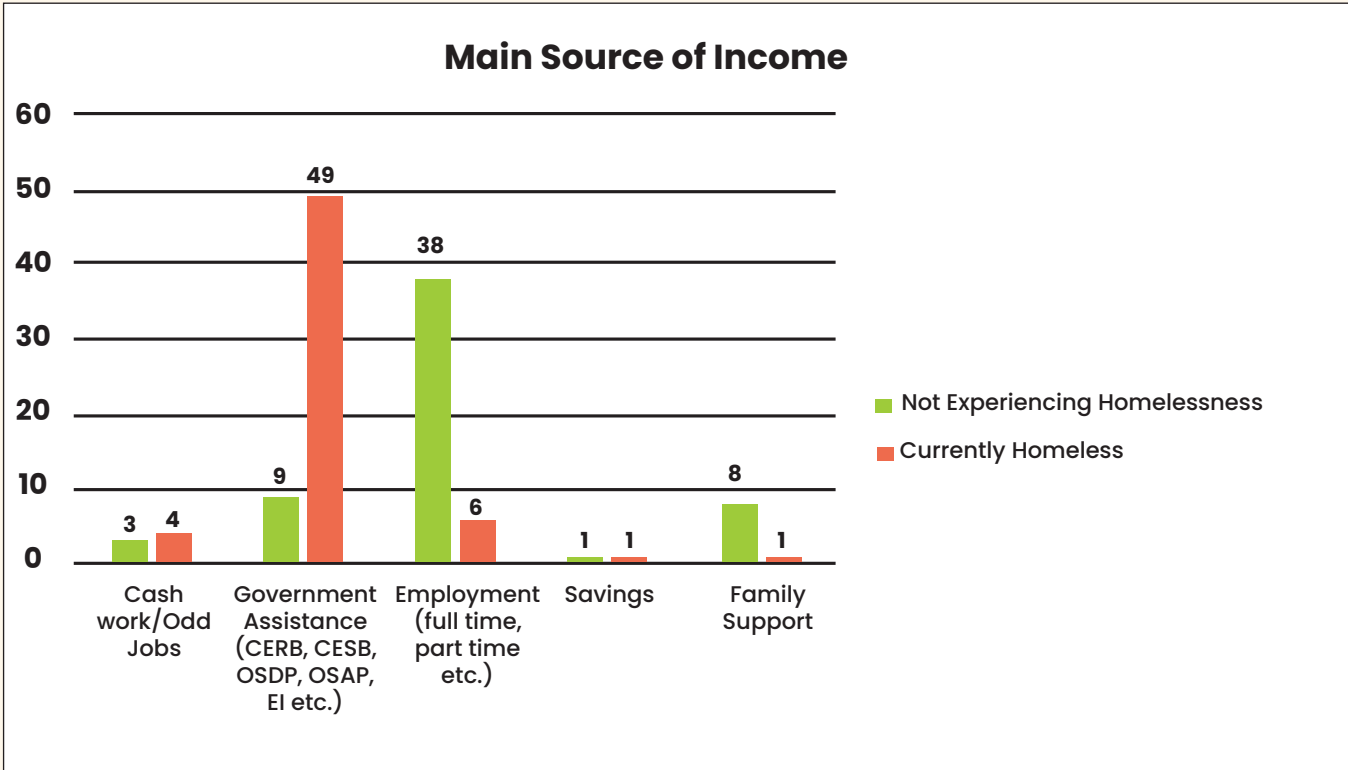
Figure 3: Main Source of Income

Figure 3 shows the main source of income for youth that are currently homeless and those that are housed. 80% of youth that are currently homeless use government assistance as their main source of income whereas 64% of housed youth use employment as their main source of income. Since the majority of unhoused youth are not currently employed, it isn't surprising to see they rely more on government assistance than other sources of income. Since family breakdown is an underlying cause of youth homelessness, it's also not surprising that only 2% of homeless young people relied on it as their main source of income whereas 14% of housed youth named family support as their primary source.

Youth experiencing homelessness typically rely on themselves or available government assistance to help them meet their basic needs if they are not employed, and it is unlikely for them to rely on savings because any extra money would be saved for immediate needs like a rent deposit. The survey did not examine student status in the population, however it is likely that many who currently rely on government assistance are also students with very diverse needs.

Youth Employment: Barriers and Opportunities

The survey gauged young people's perception of barriers and opportunities to employment by asking how much they agree or disagree with a series of statements. Many employment programs focus on 'pre-employment' skills such as resume writing and interview skills, and over 65% of young people stated they feel confident about writing resumes, cover letters and interviewing for a job, regardless of their housing status. Pre-employment skills are especially important for young people entering the workforce with no prior work experience, but are also a mandatory part of many employment programs which can cause it to lose significance for youth who regularly use these programs. **Below are some highlights from the survey:**

Barriers to Employment

Categories (top to bottom):
- None of the above
- Not finding work that interests me
- Covid19 restrictions
- Short-term job placement/contract not renewed
- Poor mental health and/or substance use
- Lack of time/availability
- Moving/Unstable Housing/No Fixed Address
- Lack of education, experience or training

Axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80
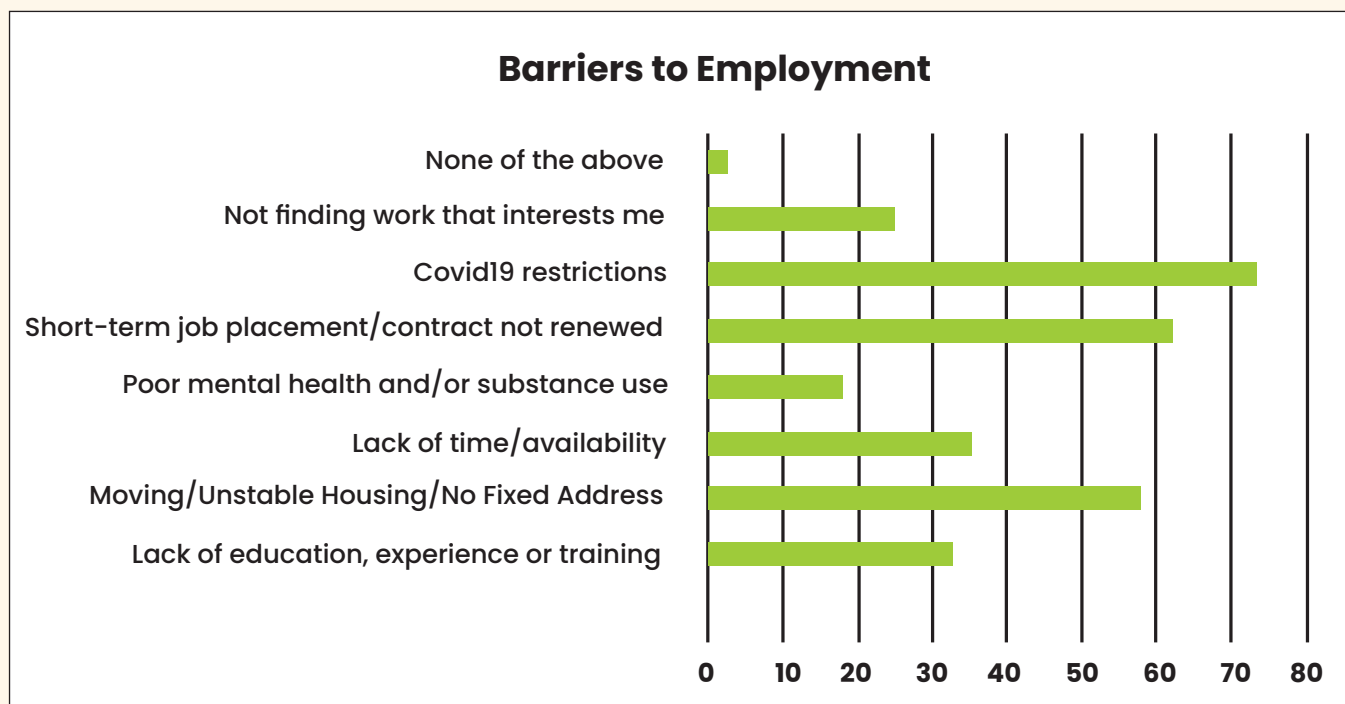
Figure 4: Barriers to Employment

The biggest barriers to employment for youth experiencing homelessness are a combination of Covid19 restrictions (63%), short-term job placements/contracts not renewed (50%) and moving, unstable housing or no fixed address (93%). These factors are largely not in young people's control and are environmental based on Toronto's lockdown restrictions and the decline of full-time work opportunities for youth. However, unstable housing is a significant barrier as 90% of youth experiencing homelessness agree or strongly agree their housing impacts their ability to find work. This could be because of perceived stigma from employers, but an uncomfortable reality is it is also extremely difficult to look for housing and employment simultaneously as both require a massive time commitment during 'regular business hours' forcing youth to choose one over the other.

The barriers to employment youth experiencing homelessness face are not imagined as 88% of these young people disagree or strongly disagree that they have the resources (eg. Laptop, clothing, space, Presto) they need to work. This doesn't account for new barriers that have emerged in the virtual workplace (eg. access to a stable internet connection, privacy) which present even more challenges than before. However, despite these barriers, young people experiencing homelessness want to pursue further education, have their own businesses and do not view 'lack of time' or 'lack of interest' as barriers to employment compared to housed young people. In fact, no currently homeless young people cited 'lack of interest' as a barrier to work even though they believe there are a lot of negative stereotypes from employers that surround their precarious housing status.

62% of youth experiencing homelessness strongly agree they have more obstacles to success than other youth, yet housed youth were more likely to cite lack of education, experience or training (87%) as well as lack of time (91%) as barriers to employment than those who are currently homeless. This shows that housed young people feel more freedom to choose and refuse work that doesn't fit with their lifestyle, and there is also a lack of urgency to obtain work as well. Even though youth with lived experience of homelessness tend to have less formal education than those who have not, they do not view it as a barrier and this shows a certain grit and resilience in this population that largely goes unnoticed by the general public. Although they are not satisfied by their employment situation, they are still willing to accept whatever jobs are available in order to change and stabilize their housing situations because the alternative would mean remaining homeless or precariously housed that much longer.

75% **of youth experiencing homelessness strongly disagree that they are satisfied by their employment situation.**

85% **of youth experiencing homelessness agree or strongly agree they want a chance to pursue further education.**

Figure 5: 84% of youth experiencing homelessness **want to** have their own business one day

Figure 6: 77% of youth experiencing homelessness **strongly agree** their housing situation impacts their ability to find work

Factors to help find employment

Factor	Most Important	Very Important	Not Important
Advice about long term career options	59	22	7
Acess to wifi/internet	57	22	26
Mental health support	43	25	24
Information about meaningful work	36	28	25
Peer Support	41	29	23
Mentorship/ Job Coaches	43	22	17
Job Matching	34	23	26
Access to a CPU/laptop	48	21	31
Access to a Phone	54	24	13
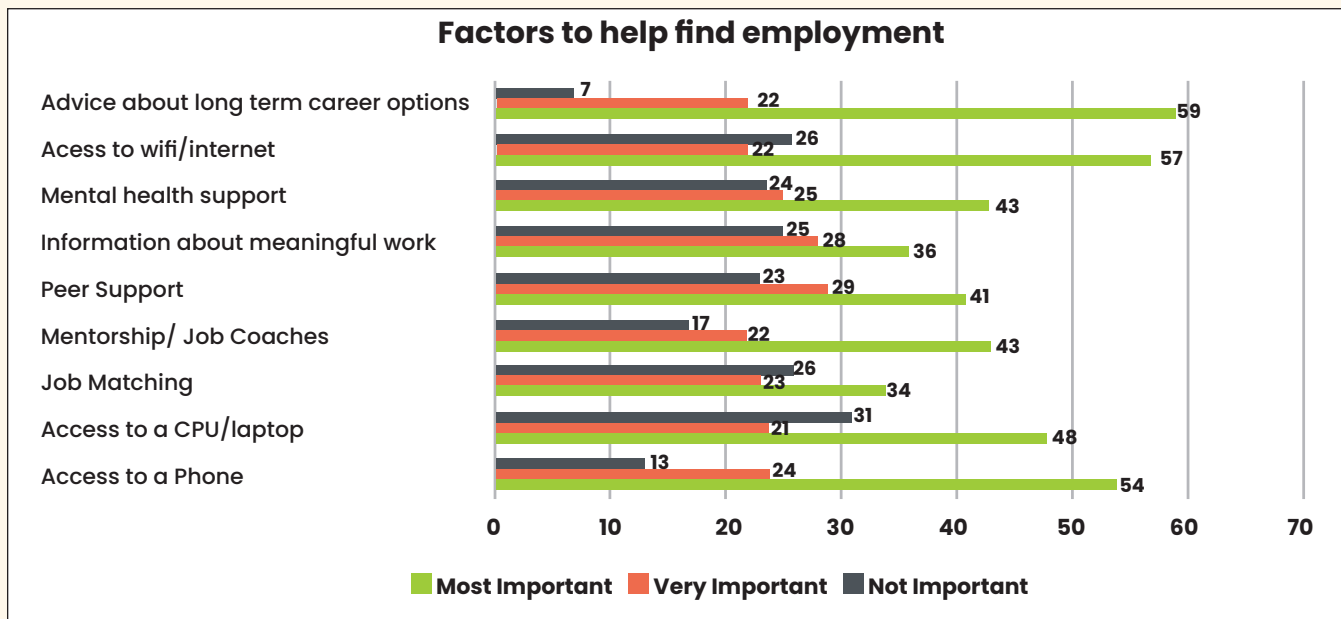
Figure 7: Importance of factors to help youth find employment

Youth experiencing homelessness listed advice about long term career options (77%), mentorship and coaching (64%) and access to a phone (62%) as most important or very important factors to help them find employment. At the same time, 49% of these youth said access to a laptop/ CPU was not an important factor in finding employment. Interestingly, (49%) stated access to wifi/ internet was most or very important while 39% cited it was not important. This divide speaks to the heterogeneity of young people experiencing homelessness; some youth are students and are able to access resources at their schools while others are able to afford phones and wifi, but just don't

have housing. The circumstances for young people change depending on their housing situation and what is available to them at these sites. For example, a young person staying in shelter may struggle with internet access, but someone couch-surfing may not.

Employment Program Considerations

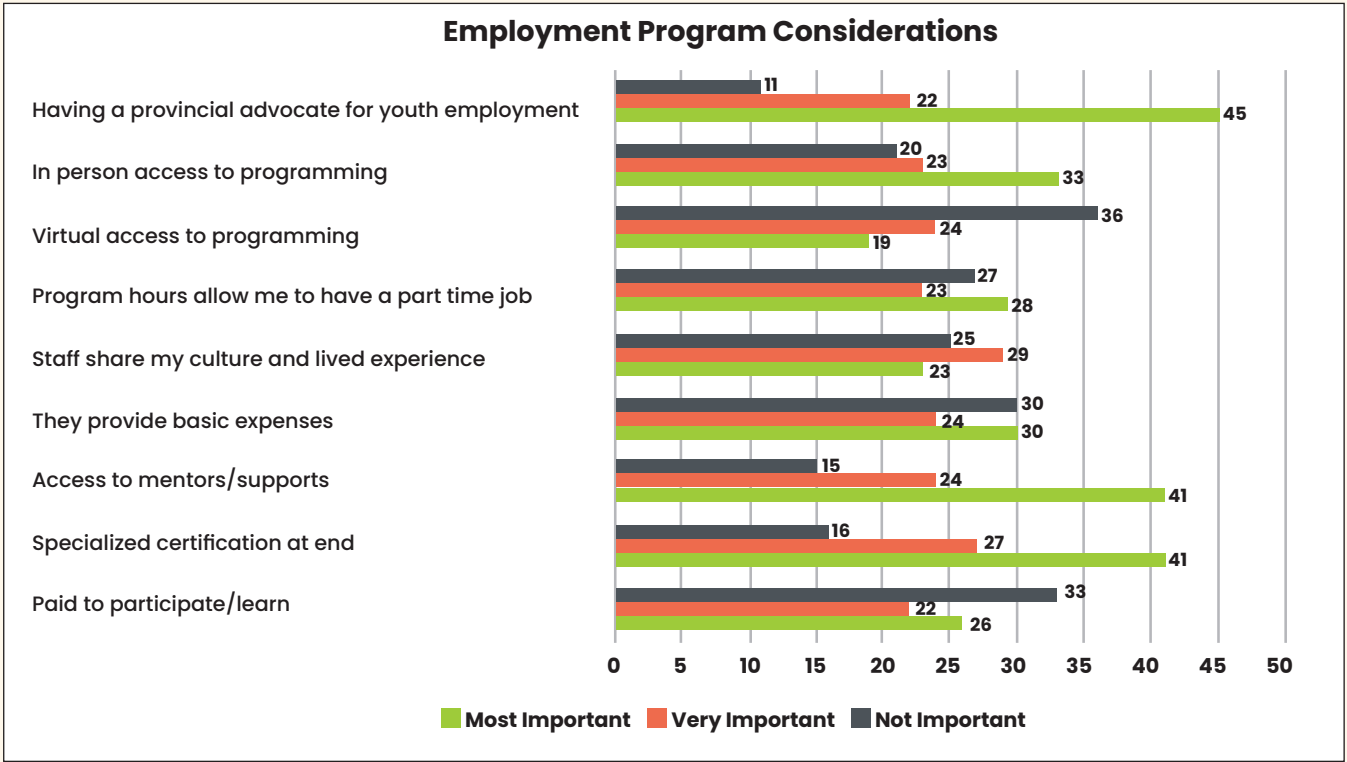| Consideration	Most Important	Very Important	Not Important
Having a provincial advocate for youth employment	45	22	11
In person access to programming	33	23	20
Virtual access to programming	19	24	36
Program hours allow me to have a part time job	28	23	27
Staff share my culture and lived experience	23	29	25
They provide basic expenses	30	24	30
Access to mentors/supports	41	24	15
Specialized certification at end	41	27	16
Paid to participate/learn	26	22	33

Figure 8: Importance of features in employment programs

This graph represents what types of programming young people believe are important in an employment program. What is most important to young people is having an advocate for youth employment, having access to mentors and other supports and receiving a specialized certification at the end of the program. Young people experiencing homelessness experience high rates of social isolation and lack of family support, so having access to advocates and mentors would help bridge the gap of support for these young people. As well, certifications can help bridge gaps in experience and education on young people's resumes.

54% of youth experiencing homelessness did not believe virtual access to programming was important and contrastingly 44% saw in-person access as most important. 42% of girls/women believed virtual access to programming was most or very important while 41% of boys/men believe it's not important. It is tricky to gauge the reasons for the divide between virtual and in-person program access, but historically this population has been most engaged when programs and people do outreach to them through workers and other community services. Before the pandemic, it was extremely difficult to deliver programming and services online to youth who are precariously housed and this has not necessarily changed - even if virtual access is the only access available right now.

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Many of the program considerations were almost evenly split between being 'most important' and 'not important' to young people experiencing homelessness including the provision of basic expenses, staff sharing their culture or lived experiences and program hours allowing them to have part-time jobs as well. Black youth (n=12) were more likely (75%) to prefer staff who share their background or lived experience as one of the most important aspects of programming and this could be in part due to an awareness of systemic oppression and lack of trust in service providers. Shared lived experience of homelessness was a recurring theme in the focus groups as these young people are used to being dismissed by service providers and employers and want to feel like 'someone has their back' as they try to move their lives forward.

In terms of other important considerations for employment programming not listed above, young people added:

- "The overall vibe and culture;
- Ongoing mentorship and support upon program completion;
- Quotas for women and non-binary folks;
- Mental health benefits;
- Opportunities for internships or employment (with a program partner);
- Psycho-educational and vocational assessments;
- An all-in-one app that makes these services and opportunities more visible;
- Good administrative support and communication – because if the staff support isn't strong, it doesn't matter how good the program is if the staff are unable to carry it through; and
- Possibly a job lined up after the program."

youth focus groups

Seven young people with lived experience of homelessness and experience accessing employment programs took part in the focus groups. Majority of the young people had experience accessing different shelter programming in Toronto and they referenced it throughout the interviews. A few young people were in transitional housing programs while others did not discuss their current housing situation. The questions did not focus on their experiences of homelessness. Rather, they focused on the youths' experiences with employment during the pandemic. The focus group questions gauged what youth understand as meaningful employment, how their perspective on employment has changed since the pandemic, barriers they're encountered looking for work while experiencing homelessness and what they've want out of employment programs.

Supporting Youth Employment

Young people are very aware of how the current conditions are affecting their ability to find and keep work. Although there are supports available through service providers and employment programs, these supports are not always accessible and the supports on their own are not enough to disrupt the systemic inequities at play. The following section reflects aspects of supporting youth employment, such as the role of meaningful work, finding employment and the role service providers and employers play in supporting young people with their careers.

1. Meaningful Work 📝

> *"Meaningful work is when I have a goal, and this work is helping*
> *me to reach my goal. My goals are not only work goals; it's also about my life."*

Young people recognize that having meaningful employment was a subjective experience, but agreed that even if it was not tied to their career goals, it was important to be in a workplace where you 'could get something sustainable' out of it, whether that was experience, money or just helping the community.

> *"The work that I've done, the kids that I've worked with, some of those kids have families...we all kind of like help families take care of their kids and get them off their mind for a bit. And it's kind of meaningful to [the parents] and the kids come and spend some time with us and it gets kind of meaningful overall."*

This quote reflects the altruism of the focus group participants. To them, meaningful work was tied to 'work that has purpose' and 'benefits society'; work that has meaning to other people. Meaning was also tied to working in community (eg. Working with children and families) and anything that enhanced the collective 'social good'. On an individual level, youth wanted to know the companies they worked for were contributing positively to people's lives. For example, a young person might choose to work in cosmetics and skin care because it is tied to promoting self-care.

2. More support from service providers 🗣

a. Compassion and Encouragement

> *"The workers weren't really encouraging you to pursue passion,*
> *they were encouraging you to pursue what was convenient and available."*
>
> *"I was telling them...I can definitely get a job nearby where I live. I can definitely get a job that I'm interested in. They just honestly didn't trust me or believe me...I guess, maybe because I've never had a job before and they don't know me as well as they should or something."*

The participants felt discouraged by service provider attitudes towards their employment. These quotes help illuminate that a client-centered approach is needed when approaching youth about their career and employment plans. Many expressed initial hesitation to ask for extra help with

employment because they felt like service providers were too focused on transitioning the youth out of shelter as quickly as possible – regardless of whether or not they were ready to engage with society.

Youth tied to the shelter system reported wanting more frequent, individualized support from service providers about their employment and expressed particular concern for young people experiencing poor mental health who may not be able to self-advocate.

> *"[The youth] have to look after their mental health, first and foremost, but some youth are unable to advocate for themselves and tell the worker how serious what they're going through is."*

b. More flexibility, less restrictions for youth who are employed while staying in shelter

> *"If you're working and you need to get your work clothes and stuff and then you're coming back from a work shift, you're exhausted. You're tired. You want to go to your room, you want to change, you want to shower and you want to you know rest in your room and want to relax not be out in the main areas and like kind of be still stressed out or like not being able to relax."*

Youth in shelters are subject to strict rules around wake up times, curfew and accessing their rooms. Youth believe shelter staff should offer more accommodations and flexibility to young people who are employed (eg. Accessing their rooms outside of normal times, different meal times) in order to support their employment. Having limited and timed access to their rooms can increase the young person's stress when, for example, they need to access their room to change into their uniform, but can't access it until a certain time risking them being late to work.

3. The Role of Employment Programs

> *"I was always hesitant to [go to the employment center]…because I thought it was going to be a waste of my time… because I know what they already offered and it wasn't in my interests."*

Participants had mixed experiences with employment programs. They appreciated the pre-employment training (eg. Resume writing) and emphasized its importance for youth entering the job market who did not have prior work experience. They liked when employment programs provided resources like casual business clothes, snacks and the ability to use service providers/staff as references.

> *"I was facing abuse, while I was holding a job. You know, those centers should be like, okay, how to maintain mental health or whatever, while being in a new space, while you're at work like while you're looking for a job."*

Youth mentioned it was difficult for them to buy-into what the employment programs were offering because it did not reflect their interests or they believed they could find a job on their own (which some did). Having incentives such as certifications (eg. Smart Serve) and paid placements was seen as valuable, but they wanted more mentorship from people with lived experience and skills around coping with mental health at work.

> *"I got the job, and they didn't know I had a job... They could just check up on me give me, like give me a little bit more energy to keep trying...like, text me and say hey how's your job process? Simple as that."*

A last notable aspect is that not all shelters provide robust employment supports to their populations, but offer other alternative programming. Although this programming is important and nurturing, enabling people on their employment journeys is equally important to them gaining stability outside of shelter.

> *"The [shelter] that I was staying in ...if they had an employment group for maybe one hour... like they usually have you know crafting, art therapy, all these type of different therapy things, but if they had one hour to just dedicate to the women for different employment options... maybe that would change my experience regarding being homeless and having no work."*

4. Challenging Inequity 🤝

> *"I found that because it was mostly young people, [managers] felt like they could just kind of replace us with other young people. So, like it was kind of like a threat every day in a way."*

Young people face a number of unspoken inequities in the labour force from employers. For example, participants mentioned having older colleagues who would pass down their work to younger employees even though the tasks were not included in the job description. When the younger employees would speak to their bosses, they were told that because they were there to gain experience, others were allowed to give them extra work. Youth said they often felt too intimidated by older employees to refuse the extra work out of fear of repercussions.

Other examples young people gave involved the difficulty of gaining work experience in the first place and that employers often employed youth at lower rates of pay (eg. Student wage) in order to save money – even if the youth were doing the same level of work.

> *"I started working from 16 so obviously if I'm searching for work at 16 I'm not going to have experience, but that doesn't mean that I cannot handle the work. I think, with good training like adequate training and a little bit of practice, I can also do the same work as an experienced person."*
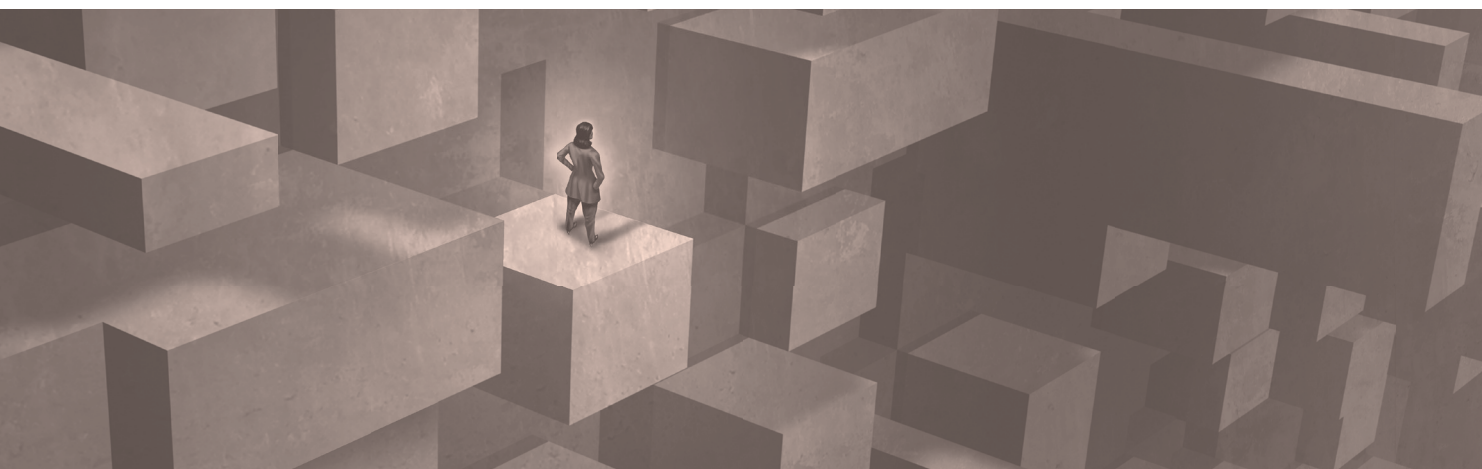
Barriers and Challenges for youth experiencing homelessness

Young people brought up a range of challenges and barriers unique to homelessness throughout the focus groups. Some challenges, like stigma from employers for example, existed before the pandemic, but have been exacerbated by the current circumstances which see youth under 24 years old most hard-hit by unemployment. Other challenges, like staying connected, reflect the current pandemic restrictions in Toronto.

5. Staying Connected ☎

a. Phones

> *"I mentioned I only have an email and they both asked me, are you getting a cell phone number anytime soon?... I'd be like yeah I'm getting one in a couple weeks…where I ended up getting it like three weeks or months after. Generally that's not a good idea to do towards like getting jobs."*

The issue of phones for youth experiencing homelessness is contentious. In the past, cell phones were difficult for youth to find and hold onto, however in the present day, young people are more likely to have a cellular device without a plan. The issue itself is that young people need a phone number that they can be reached at, especially when looking for employment. However, Ontario has the most expensive phone plans in Canada and young people who can't afford these plans are more susceptible to exclusion. For youth who are employed, this can still be a significant disadvantage when doing shift-work in particular. Even for work that hasn't gone completely virtual, there is still a reliance on virtual tools (like apps) for picking up and dropping shifts whereas before you could simply mark it on the schedule in-office.

> *"I think a lot of us even when we have a phone can't afford to keep a phone plan. Like, it's bills."*

b. Internet/Wifi

> *"I had the opportunity, but I didn't have the right set-up. Okay, so you need a phone, you need an Internet connection, you need on a safe space, but in the room that I was given they didn't have like an ethernet chord or Internet plugin or they didn't have like a landline so I'm like, how is this going to work?"*

A second issue related to staying connected is access to internet and wifi. Accessing the internet has been a vital part of staying connected to others throughout the pandemic, however youth staying in shelters report poor internet connections as a barrier to work. As many workplaces shut down and began to work from home, some young people were given hardware (eg. Laptop) but could not utilize it because the internet connection was not strong enough for them to do their required work.

6. Privacy and Space 🔗

> *"I always talk about the environment because you know, say if there's a fight going on in the shelter and you get a call back and then they hear some chaotic stuff they're definitely not going to call you back."*

Staying connected is closely tied to privacy and space for youth living in shelters. As public spaces have shut down, youth experiencing homelessness feel like their options for looking for work have decreased as well. These youth can't work in the common spaces because for some jobs, they would have to be on camera or having confidential conversations and it would be inappropriate to do so in the shelter common spaces.

> *"I used to work at a call center...so what they did was they provided me another opportunity to work from home...you know we like you trust you so here, take this computer...I was living at [shelter] and I didn't really have a safe space around me. I didn't have internet connection. I tried everything and it did not work."*

7. Stigma from employers 🗺️

> *"I'm sure some of these employers probably look at my address and be like Okay, he lives in a shelter. You know the stigma towards that. They're like is he going to steal?*
> *Is he going to show up late for work all the time? Is he going to be really mouthy and not gonna have manners...You know all the negative aspects that usually comes from stereotypes."*

Many participants felt there was a lot of stigma from employers towards the issue of homelessness. They felt like employers did not want to understand their situations and many chose not to disclose over fear of being discriminated against based on their housing status. Another issue tied to stigma is using the address of youth shelters. Employers do look up addresses and if an address is tied to a shelter, employers may discriminate based on negative stereotypes tied to youth homelessness.

8. Location, location, location – Toronto's geography 📍

> *"There's not really as many mcdonalds so...you have to venture out of where you live to find a job...*
> *I guess like you can find them close to you, but it's usually harder and they're usually occupied."*

Toronto stretches more than 40km east-west and youth who live in the periphery neighbourhoods usually have to travel significant distances to go to work. Finding employment can be contingent on where you live but there is also a lot of implicit bias that occurs when speaking about certain neighbourhoods in Toronto. Youth will choose not to disclose their address to potential employers to avoid stigma, but eventually have to justify that they have the ability to show up to the location.

As well, certain neighbourhoods can offer certain opportunities, however they can also provide specific challenges. For example, some neighbourhoods don't have a lot of 'big box stores' (eg. Danforth) so finding entry level work can be difficult – especially when there are a lot of small, family-run businesses.

> *"I worked in the west end and I lived on the opposite end of the city and when I went there they asked me, oh I don't see an address but you have very interesting experience, that's why we called you."*

Covid 19 Considerations

Covid19 has changed the way we look at work forever and this is no different for young people entering the labour force. The pandemic brought a lot of uncertainty, but also raised some important, emerging issues in the labour force that can no longer be ignored.

9. Finding Employment in the Virtual Age

> *"Before Covid, it was hard to find a job. Now... I think it's almost like next to impossible to find a job."*
>
> *"When you ask young people what they want to do or what they're interested in,*
> *they don't have any idea anymore...the question is what is available.*
> *It's not, what can I do, what do I want to do. It's: what is available?"*

Young people feel extremely hopeless about finding employment in the virtual age, regardless of whether they are homeless or not. Because of the shift to virtual, they are less able to approach an employer in-person directly in order to make an impression and get their foot through the door. The participants mentioned the importance of online platforms like LinkedIn and Indeed, but reiterated how difficult it was to be noticed from other applicants. Using 'back doors' through people they know to gain employment has become increasingly important.

> *"A lot of times [employers] do give you a chance, well it all just depends on how deep you talk to them.*
> *Like you don't just put your resume online; you go inside and go to the store...you have to make yourself*
> *stand out from the other like 1500 people who are trying to apply for whatever."*

10. Health and safety

> *"I decided to think about my health first because, first and foremost, honestly, if you don't have your health,*
> *then you can't live, right...you can't work if you're having bad health right?"*

Covid 19 changed a lot about how youth approach jobs. Young people value their health and the pandemic was especially dangerous for those who are immunosuppressed or living with older family members. Many young people chose to leave the labour force and pick their health over being an essential worker. Even those who recently graduated have re-thought their career paths with a new question of: will this job be safe during the next pandemic?

A second issue related to health and safety is that workplaces like factories and construction sites have shrunk their teams to fit with space regulations and this has decreased the amount of positions available for young people. There is fear about being replaced by people with jobs that are 'more essential' (eg. Nurses doing administrative assistant's work at a healthcare center).

> *"No matter how you look, you cannot find work because the people that are working right now,*
> *are essential right, so what is considered essential?*
> *TTC, you know hospital and also those some of those jobs are life and death."*

a. An unexpected break 📰

> *"I'm not gonna say it's good that a pandemic occurred, but it was good in the sense, where there was something that happened, where I actually like took some time away from work.*
> *We kind of got a breather and I got to sort through all this stuff in other areas that I needed to get done for a long time that I put to the side because I'm just trying to work to make money and save up."*

b. The rise of self-employment

> *"There's been an uprising during this pandemic regarding self-employment and that is because working your own hours you can guaranteed the hours that you put in, even at your house...*
> *You make your own employment for yourself."*

c. Moving away from grey income

> *"They just acquired another job like just to see if they would be able to like be able to like be accepted for employment insurance."*

Covid19 provided a few unexpected outcomes for young people. For some, the pandemic provided a rare opportunity for rest and financial security. A lot of young people with low social determinants are not able to afford time off from their busy lives of school and work because it would compromise their security. However, because the government provided subsidies that young people could take advantage of, they were able to put their health first.

Another unexpected outcome was the rise of self-employment and social media as its vehicle. Youth noted that they felt bad for small businesses that could not survive the economic conditions in Toronto, but noted that the businesses that were able to provide essential products survived and thrived during the pandemic, while another subset of people began their own businesses for a sense of control over their income.

Lastly, some youth noted that they were working in the cash industry before the pandemic started and doing well from it, however because of restrictions, they could no longer sustain that work and were not able to qualify for government benefits because of their grey income. This caused some youth to try and find 'above board' employment so they could qualify for assistance.

12. Looking ahead 🖥️

Young people had some suggestions for supporting their future employment:

a. Mental health in the workplace

"I need the employer to understand mental health issues and that when I ask for one day off of the week...
I need them to understand that I need that one day to devote to, or even a lunch hour or
lunch break to go to a counseling appointment."

Young people felt misunderstood by employers and found it difficult to approach them about their mental health needs. Psychological safety in the workplace is still an emerging best practice and more can be done to help employers understand the importance of providing small accommodations to their employees for the sake of their mental health.

b. Job-matching apps

When asked about what could be done to improve employment programs, a suggestion came up about treating employment like a dating app: swipe to connect. The suggestion was premised on clear terms of engagement for short and long term arrangements based on employer-employee values. However, it should be noted that youth experiencing homelessness are more likely to access information from their phones, so having apps-based options would be best for this audience.

"We would talk about our needs and our values and that's
gonna determine how long the contract is and it's going to
be based on projects. So let's say you want to
date me for the summer... you want to be in a relationship
in two months okay so, but once I get [the job] we're
working together, and so I get paid for two months, and
then I move on to another relationship."

conclusion and next steps

This report used a mixed-methods approach to explore the intersection between Covid19, youth employment and youth homelessness in Toronto. The results of the survey and youth focus groups offer a small lens into understanding the larger issue of youth unemployment, and they also provide some suggestions for the future.

Youth Homelessness

On any given night, 1500-2000 young people are homeless in Toronto, and this does not account for those who are 'hidden homeless'. The results of the survey show that it is not uncommon for young people and their families to experience more than one type of homelessness alongside couch-surfing. It is interesting to note that visible minority communities were more likely to have experienced couch-surfing than sleeping rough in Toronto. As a multicultural city with a significant amount of newcomers and refugees, it is not uncommon for these communities to help each other, especially when first coming to Toronto. Perhaps one of the reasons for higher instances of couch-surfing is that young people are more likely to live communally to split the expensive cost of living. More research can be done to explore why certain populations experience certain types of homelessness at higher rates than others.

It is also interesting to note that almost 15% of survey respondents who have not experienced homelessness know someone that has. This speaks to the untold and potentially increasing number of young people facing hidden homelessness in Toronto.

Employment

The survey results support the notion that youth experiencing homelessness have experienced significant employment losses during the pandemic compared to housed youth. One reason for this is that young people are more likely to work in the service, food and retail industries which have been hardest hit by pandemic restrictions. However, according to the survey, youth experiencing homelessness were significantly underemployed (ie. not having enough paid work or work that uses their skills) compared to housed youth. This could be because of the circumstances around pandemic restrictions such as the move to virtual work.

Youth living in shelters reported significant barriers such as lack of privacy, space and access to the internet as reasons why they remained unemployed or had to leave their jobs. These barriers

are directly tied to restrictions at the shelters themselves around timed entry to rooms and lack of private, quiet spaces for young people to work. Another interesting point is that 'getting your foot through the door' is a significant challenge to obtaining employment for this population. Youth experiencing homelessness reported stigma from employers around their addresses and housing situations, but also emphasized the difficulty in obtaining employment without the in-person element of job-searching. The survey results support this with both housed and unhoused youth obtaining employment through someone they know. Perhaps this is why more unhoused youth reported working for free compared to housed youth; in order to get their foot through the door.

The largest barrier to employment reported by youth experiencing homelessness was a combination of Covid19 restrictions, no fixed address and short-term placements/contracts not renewed. One possible reason for the correlation with short-term placements is that some employment programs can guarantee short-term employment, but it is up to the employer to extend those contracts. As well, there are many government subsidies that exist to employ youth, so employers may have a 'rotating door 'of young people they support in a time-limited fashion rather than long-term.

Young people experiencing homelessness did not have the same barriers to housed youth on an individual level. For example, many housed young people reported lack of time, education or experience as a barrier while currently homeless youth were more likely to report lack of resources. 'Not finding work that interests me' was largely reported by the housed population which shows selectiveness in job prospects compared to youth experiencing homelessness. These young people want to work and thrive in any way they can, and they are willing to do work that others might not be.

moving forward

The Role of Advocacy

When considering employment programs moving forward, special attention should be paid to the role of advocacy. Although this report does not include the perspective of service providers, they play an important role in supporting youth experiencing homelessness to find and maintain employment.

Based on the findings in this advocacy report, I propose the following recommendations:

For Employers

- More support from employers to give accommodations to young people when appropriate (eg. Mental health appointments, house-hunting).
- Increased education around the benefits of employing youth in long-term positions.

For Government

- Better incentives for employers to keep youth as employees long-term rather than short term.
- Installing an advocate's office youth can contact about potential cases of discrimination from employers.
- More app-based options for job-matching.

For Shelters and Service Providers

- Shifting policy around access and use of spaces at shelters to support youth working virtually and those who are currently employed.
- Client-centered approaches to employment goals for youth experiencing homelessness.
- Increased Internet/Wifi connectivity.

For Employment Programs

- Capacity-building with employers to de-stigmatize experiences of homelessness and poor mental health.
- Increased provision of basic resources for youth experiencing homelessness, with particular attention to phone plans and access to wifi.
- More focus on local employer relationships/partnerships to employment programs.
- Promotion of local employment opportunities that do not require youth to cross the city to obtain work.
- More attention and training around mental health/psychological safety in the workplace for youth and employers.
- More education for young people around the pros and cons of doing cash work.
- Flexible, drop-in style employment programs with strong mentorship from other people with lived experience.

limitations

This advocacy report relied heavily on the testimony of youth with lived and living experience of homelessness as well as my interpretation of the results from the lens of my own lived experience and work within this community. A large limitation of this report is that it did not use a significant amount of outside grey and academic research to situate the issue of youth homelessness in Toronto. This report also does not include the perspectives of service providers or employment programs. The survey did not receive responses from people who identify as gender-diverse or Indigenous populations and did not capture student status from respondents. Lastly, this is not an academic report and should instead be treated as community-based research captured at a specific point in time during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Works Cited

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