

Youth Employment through Accessible and Healthy Communities in Canada – YEAH Canada!

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Shikako et al., Childhood Disability Collaborative, McGill University

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1. Purpose of the Project

What the project looked at: This project looked at youth job programs in Canada and other countries. It aimed to understand what helps young people with disabilities get a job and prepare for work. The project included:

- A review of **10 Canadian youth job programs** that are seen as strong examples or best practices
- A review of **40 programs from other countries**, including the United States, South Africa, Brazil, India, Australia, the European Union, and Japan
- A detailed review of selected Canadian programs that help young people move from school to work
- Community inclusion assessments using the **CHILD-CHII**, a tool that measures how inclusive a community is based on rights
- Interviews with people involved in youth employment programs

Why this matters: Having a job is not only about earning money. It is also connected to:

- Health and well-being
- Independence and making your own choices
- Taking part in social activities
- Feeling included in the community
- Having stable housing, enough food, and a good quality of life
- Fairness and full participation in society

For young people with disabilities, getting a job is not only about skills. It also depends on whether communities, employers, services, transportation, and policies are accessible and work well together.

2. What Works in Youth Employment Programs

Successful programs use more than one type of support. They work best when several supports are offered together, such as:

- Personalised planning for each young person
- Building job and life skills
- Training to prepare for work
- Work placements and internships
- Mentoring and guidance
- Working with employers to create opportunities

- Matching young people to suitable jobs
- Changes at the workplace to meet different needs
- Ongoing support after someone is hired
- Help with transportation
- Access to assistive devices or technology when needed
- Connections to education, health, social services, and community supports

Strong partnerships are essential. Successful programs depend on strong partnerships between:

- Federal and provincial governments
- National organizations
- Schools and colleges or universities
- Rehabilitation centres
- Community organizations
- Employers
- Families and young people
- Health and social service providers

These partnerships help connect young people to real job opportunities. They also help employers create workplaces that are more inclusive and welcoming.

3. Key Community Factors That Support Employment

Employment depends on accessible communities. The project found that young people with disabilities are more likely to find and keep a job when they live in communities that are welcoming, inclusive, and accessible. Important factors include:

- Accessible public transportation
- Safe and reliable ways to get around
- Accessible buildings and workplaces
- Clear signs and directions
- Information available in different formats so everyone can understand it
- Opportunities to join social, recreational, and community activities
- Access to health and mental health services
- Community programs and supports
- Employers who understand disability and know how to provide support
- Schools, health care providers, community services, and employment programs working well together

Programs in cities have some advantages as they often have:

- Public transportation
- More accessible buildings and public spaces
- Better access to education, health, and employment services
- More community organizations and employers

However, even strong programs in cities still had gaps. Many need to improve accessibility, provide better mental health support, and make information available in formats that everyone can use.

4. Main Gaps Identified

4.1. There are not enough clear rules and standards for youth employment programs. Many programs show promise, but there are not always clear standards for what an accessible and inclusive program should include. As a result, programs can be very different depending on where they are located and who they serve.

4.2. Moving from school to work can be difficult. Many young people face challenges when moving from school to adult services and jobs, such as:

- Support and rehabilitation services stopping when youth leave school or children's services
- Limited coordination between schools, job services, health care, and community supports
- Different rules and services depending on the region or school board

4.3. Transportation barriers. Transportation is one of the biggest barriers to finding a job and taking part in community life. Challenges include:

- Limited accessible public transportation
- Transportation services that are not reliable or do not meet people's needs
- Few transportation options in rural and remote areas
- Relying on parents or school transportation that may no longer be available in early adulthood

4.4. Mental health support is not always included. Many young people with disabilities experience mental health challenges. However, mental health support is not always available through the health care system or included in employment programs. Many programs do not include:

- Activities that support mental health in the workplace
- Support that takes past difficult experiences into account
- Access to, or connections, with mental health services
- Help with stress, anxiety, or adjusting to a new job

4.5. Programs are not always accessible for everyone. Even programs designed for people with disabilities may not meet everyone's needs. For example, some programs may have:

- Accessible buildings, but limited communication supports
- Information online, but no braille or plain-language printed materials
- Limited access to sign language interpretation or information in ASL/LSQ
- Few supports for young people with sensory disabilities
- Few supports for young people with more than one disability

As a result, some young people with disabilities may still be left out of programs that are meant to support them.

4.6. Programs need to consider people's different experiences. Each young person has different experiences and may face different barriers. Many programs recognize this, but they do not always address it in their services. These experiences may include:

- Race or ethnicity
- Gender
- Indigenous identity
- Language
- Poverty
- Immigration status
- Living in a rural or remote community
- Mental health challenges
- Having more than one disability

Programs should consider these different experiences when they are designed, funded, evaluated, and improved. This helps make sure they are fair, inclusive, and meet the needs of all young people.

4.7. More information is needed about what works. Many publicly funded programs do not collect enough information to show how well they are working. Important information that is often missing includes:

- Whether young people keep their jobs over time
- How satisfied young people are with the program
- Whether the program improves quality of life
- Whether people feel included at work
- Whether the program supports or improves mental health and well-being
- Employers' experiences with the program
- Which young people are not being reached or are left out

Without this information, it is difficult to know which programs work best, who they work best for, and under what circumstances.

Helping young people with disabilities find work is not only about preparing them for a job. It is also about making sure communities, services, and workplaces are ready to include them. To improve inclusion, Canada needs to do more than provide individual accommodations. It also needs connected, accessible systems that support young people as they move from school to work and help them succeed over the long term.