Negotiating the Barriers to Employment for Vulnerable Youth in British Columbia

Prepared for the BC Centre for Employment Excellence by McCreary Centre Society

September 2014

This project is funded in whole or in part by the Government of Canada and the Province of British Columbia.
Negotiating the Barriers to Employment for Vulnerable Youth

This research has been prepared by McCreary Centre Society for the BC Centre for Employment Excellence (a division of the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation) as part of the research project, Understanding Current Employment Programming and Services for BC Youth. It has been undertaken independently and solely on the basis of information collected and analyzed by the researchers with reasonable care to ensure its reliability.

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Introduction

Background and Context of the Project

In light of the widening gap in rates of unemployment between adults and youth in British Columbia (BC), it is vital that data on the experiences of young people entering or wishing to enter BC's job market be available. Youth from specific marginalized populations face additional barriers to employment, and are at a greater risk of unemployment than their peers without these barriers (e.g., Leadbeater, Smith & Clark).¹

As yet, there is limited data concerning the experiences of young people from marginalized populations in finding and keeping employment, and what is available has rarely included the input of youth. Our own past research at the McCreary Centre Society has indicated that youth from vulnerable populations continue to face challenges accessing employment.

For example, Aboriginal youth who completed surveys and attended focus groups to discuss youth health issues in their communities indicated that finding stable employment was a source of anxiety for many. Youth across BC revealed they were unsure about the availability of job opportunities or their ability to achieve stable employment in their communities. This was especially the case for youth living on reserves where unemployment rates were high and available jobs were often short-term and low-waged.²

McCreary’s recent report about the health of youth in custody³ found that only 31 per cent of those youth reported having legal employment prior to entering into custody, yet 92 per cent indicated having some source of income. Significantly, over half of youth in custody identified more job training and employment opportunities as something that would prevent them from re-offending, and 61 per cent indicated having future job aspirations.

Solutions to youth unemployment must be informed by the voices of young people who are experiencing significant barriers to meaningful, stable and successful placements in BC’s workforce. This will ensure that policy and program reform reflect the lived experiences of these young people. Additionally, marginalized youth who have successfully negotiated access to employment can offer important information about practices and programs that have contributed to their success.

While little data exists cataloguing the success rate of programs aimed at supporting vulnerable youth into employment, a study was conducted by the United Way in Calgary, asking vulnerable youth about what they needed to succeed in the workforce.⁴ The results of the study led the United Way to engage employers in creating strategies to provide vulnerable youth with training, mentorship and employment opportunities. Based on the research findings, they also funded Calgary’s Youth

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¹ Listening to youth transitioning to adulthood in British Columbia, 2008, BCCYHN.
² See Raven’s Children III, 2012, at www.mcs.bc.ca
³ Time Out III, 2013.
⁴ Towards resiliency for vulnerable youth, United Way, 2011.
Employment Centre to provide pregnant and young mothers with opportunities for skills training, personal development and practical work experience, combined with ongoing individualized coaching.

**Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this project was to engage vulnerable young people from rural and urban communities across BC to identify the barriers they face in finding and keeping employment. It also aimed to canvass the experiences of young people who have been supported in securing employment, in order to identify best practices of existing employment support programs.

**Project Methodology**

The project used participatory research methods to engage key vulnerable youth populations in understanding the challenges they face when trying to enter the labour market. These populations included youth from rural and remote BC communities, Aboriginal youth, homeless and street-involved youth, young people who have been involved with the criminal justice system, youth with government care experience, young people with disabilities, youth with mental health conditions, and youth with substance use challenges.

A mixed-methods approach was used to canvass the perspectives of youth. Integrating quantitative survey data and qualitative focus group information allowed us to identify barriers for youth in gaining employment, as well as examples of how those barriers have been successfully negotiated.

Young people who had faced barriers to employment but did not otherwise take part in the project assisted in the design of the survey and focus group questions. They also helped to disseminate information about the project.

The intention was to conduct a minimum of 10 focus groups and 50 paper surveys with youth from identified populations vulnerable to increased rates of unemployment. The project proved to be of great interest to marginalized youth in communities across BC, and resulted in a total of 150 youth taking part (127 took part in a focus group, and 128 completed a survey).

**Focus groups**

Focus groups and interviews were scheduled across the province in at least one large urban centre and one rural or small community in each of the five Health Authority regions. Participating communities were Abbotsford, Burnaby, Courtenay, Kelowna, Merritt, Nanaimo, Penticton, Prince George, Quesnel, Squamish, Surrey, and Vancouver.

**Recruitment**

McCreary partnered with local organizations, including employment centres and youth resource centres, to recruit youth through flyers, social media, and word of mouth (see Appendix 1 for recruitment poster and list of participating agencies). Programs for youth who may face additional barriers to employment were specifically sought out, and included youth in care, youth in alternative education, Aboriginal youth, youth in conflict with the law, and youth who were homeless or street-involved.
Participants were invited to attend a focus group and to complete a survey. Eligible youth who were not able to attend a focus group were given the opportunity to participate in an interview and to complete the survey.

**Focus group participants**

A total of 19 focus groups were held with 127 youth (72 males and 55 females) in 12 different communities. An additional four males and four females participated in individual interviews. Four focus groups were held with only males, and two groups with only females. The remainder of the groups were mixed gender. Focus groups ranged in size from two to thirteen youth, and the average group size was seven.

**Table 1  Focus Group Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health Authority</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Number of focus groups</th>
<th>Number of interviews</th>
<th>Locations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fraser</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Alternate schools, programs for youth in care, programs for youth with disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Island</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Programs for at-risk youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Program for youth in care, youth drop-in centre, employment centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Aboriginal Friendship Centre, Youth Custody Centre, Employment centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver Coastal</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Programs for at-risk youth, programs for street-involved youth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants came from across the province, and many had moved to the communities which hosted focus groups in order to look for work, attend school, or access programs that were not available in their home community.

Many participants had faced multiple challenges in their lives, including housing instability, involvement with the justice system, mental health and/or substance use issues, and a range of health conditions and disabilities. While only one focus group was specifically for youth in care, the majority of participants in the other groups had been in government care at some point in their lives.

**Obtaining informed consent**

At the beginning of each focus group and interview, participants were provided with information about the project and their rights as participants. Information about the project included the goals of the project, the length and format of the discussion, and contact details for McCreary Centre Society and the BC Centre for Employment Excellence. Participants were also informed that their participation in the
Negotiating the Barriers to Employment for Vulnerable Youth

project was voluntary, and that they were free to choose not to participate, to not answer questions, or to stop at any time (see Appendix 2 for Informed Consent Form). Names were not recorded, and participants were asked to not write their names on their surveys. To thank youth for their contributions to the project, they received a $20 gift card.

Focus group format

Focus groups ranged in length from one to two-and-a-half hours. The focus groups were facilitated by two McCreary staff who engaged participants in a semi-structured discussion about their experiences finding and keeping employment. Through activities and group discussion, participants discussed the effectiveness of current employment supports, the accessibility of employment programs in their communities, and ways in which programs could better serve young people. They also offered recommendations for improving access to employment for young people. An outline of the focus group, and a sample of an activity to stimulate discussion, can be found in Appendix 3.

Survey

The survey was available both online and in hard copy. The paper survey was given to youth at focus groups and interviews, and the online survey was made available for interested youth who were unable to participate in the project in person or who did not wish to complete a pencil and paper survey at the focus group. The online survey was created using Fluid Surveys and was advertised through social media and flyers at local youth centres and employment centres.

The survey included 22 forced-choice questions which asked about the respondent’s background, health, housing stability, substance use, income, education, employment experiences, employment supports accessed, and future aspirations.

A total of 128 surveys were completed: 113 youth completed a survey at the time they took part in a focus group, and 15 youth who were unable to attend a focus group completed a survey online or in person. Eight surveys that did not fit within the age criteria (i.e., where the respondents were younger than 15 or older than 29) were removed.

Among youth who completed a survey, 67 per cent were from urban areas and 33 per cent were from rural communities across the province.
Figure 1  Participant Breakdown by Health Authority

Limitations of Methodology

Many of the anticipated limitations of this project did not materialize, in that there was such interest in the topic that targets for participation and representation were exceeded. However, there were some limitations. For example, the short timeline for data collection included spring break, which meant that some communities were unable to accommodate a focus group despite interest in the project from youth participants.

Additional limitations were that a small number of focus group participants had literacy challenges, which prevented them from completing a survey. Finally, the perspectives of youth who were most successful in securing employment or who had moved out of province to seek work were not captured.

Youth could participate in the project either by attending a focus group, completing a survey, or both. It is therefore not known exactly how many of the youth who attended a focus group also completed a survey.

Analysis

Within this report, quantitative and qualitative evidence are presented, including separate analyses for marginalized populations of youth. The qualitative analyses involved categorizing the information collected through focus group notes into various themes, and comparing and contrasting the experiences of different groups of youth. Quantitative analyses of the survey data were conducted using SPSS statistical software (e.g., frequencies, cross-tabs and chi-squares; \( p < .05 \)). All group differences described in this report were significant at \( p \leq .05 \), which means there is a 5 per cent likelihood that the results occurred by chance.
Terms Used in this Report

Job or employment refers to a legal, paid job unless otherwise stated.

Youth refers to young people aged 15–29.
Profile of Participants

Youth who completed a survey (54 per cent males) were between 15 and 29 years old, and the average age was 19.5. They were most commonly 17 to 19 years old (46 per cent).

Seventy-three per cent identified as heterosexual, while 19 per cent identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual. The remaining participants indicated not having attractions or that they were questioning their sexual orientation.

Young people most commonly identified as European (59 per cent) and/or Aboriginal (50 per cent), and 4 per cent identified as African (they could select more than one background on the survey). Twelve per cent indicated a background not included among the list of options, and most of these youth specified that they were “Canadian.” Four per cent did not know their ethnic or cultural background.

The majority of participants (95 per cent) were born in Canada, and the rest were permanent residents or refugees.

Living Experiences

Almost all youth had lived with their relatives, and most youth (72 per cent) reported living in their own place (either alone or with roommates) at some point. More than half (55 per cent) had been homeless (e.g., on the street, couch surfing), and 40 per cent had stayed in a shelter or safe house. Youth most commonly reported currently living in their own place (48 per cent) or with their relatives (39 per cent), while the rest were at that moment staying in precarious housing (safe house, shelter, SRO, on the street, or couch surfing).

Not surprisingly, older participants were more likely than younger ones to be currently living on their own, and less likely to be living with their parents or other relatives. For example, 56 per cent of participants aged 19 or older were living on their own, compared to 34 per cent of those aged 18 or younger.

Youth also reported having stayed in a foster home (46 per cent) or group home (34 per cent) at some point in their lives, and 9 per cent were currently in one of these types of government care. As well, 32 per cent had been on a Youth Agreement (10 per cent were currently on one) and 23 per cent had stayed in a custody centre.

When asked how often they currently went to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food at home, 48 per cent indicated never having this experience, while 41 per cent went to bed hungry sometimes, and 11 per cent often or always.

Health

Sixty-four per cent of youth reported having at least one health condition or disability. The most common was a mental or emotional health condition (64 per cent of females vs. 32 per cent of males). Percentages for males and females were comparable for the other conditions. Among youth with health conditions or disabilities, 52 per cent had multiple conditions.
Table 2  Health Indicators of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Common Health Conditions or Disabilities</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental health or emotional condition (e.g., depression)</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol or other drug addiction</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural condition (e.g., conduct disorder, anger problems)</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning disability (e.g., dyslexia)</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term/chronic medical condition (e.g., diabetes, asthma)</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory disability (e.g., hearing impaired, vision impaired)</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Participants could mark all that applied.

Figure 2  Number of Health Conditions among Youth with at Least One Condition

[Graph showing percentages for one condition (48%), two conditions (22%), three conditions (14%), and four or more conditions (17%).]

Note: Percentages exceed 100 per cent due to rounding.

School

The survey allowed participants to indicate if they were currently in high school, post-secondary education (trade school, college, university, medical school, etc.), or not in school. Sixty-one per cent of youth were not attending school, whereas 29 per cent were in high school and 10 per cent were attending post-secondary education. Among those not in school, around half had stopped attending before graduating from high school.
Younger participants were more likely than older ones to be currently attending school; 66 per cent of those aged 15 to 18 were currently in school, compared to 20 per cent of participants aged 19 and over.

**Sources of Income**

Participants reported receiving income from a variety of sources in the past month. The most common sources were their parents or other relatives (30 per cent) and/or a legal job (28 per cent). Other sources included Income Assistance (23 per cent), disability benefits (11 per cent), and illegal activity (10 per cent).

Youth also identified income sources that were not in the list of options, including babysitting, Youth Agreements, training programs, and other programs they were attending.

**Employment Experiences**

The majority of both male and female youth (84 per cent) reported having had at least one job at some point. Not surprisingly, 15-year-olds were less likely than older youth to have ever worked. Participants had most commonly held five or more jobs previously.
There was no difference among groups of youth in the rate of ever having worked. For example, youth with government care experience, youth who had been in custody, those with a mental health condition, substance use addiction or behavioural problem were all equally likely to have worked as those without these challenges in their lives.

Among those who had worked at all, some young people were more likely to have had five or more jobs. These included youth with a health condition or disability (e.g., mental health, substance use or behavioural challenge; 51 per cent vs. 20 per cent of youth without such a condition), those who had stayed in a custody centre (65 per cent vs. 35 per cent), and youth with homelessness experience (64 per cent vs. 14 per cent of youth who were never homeless).

The longest time participants had stayed at the same job ranged from less than one month to a year or more. Older youth were generally more likely to have stayed in one job for a year or longer.

Forty per cent of youth were currently employed. Those who worked in the past month most commonly reported doing so between 13 and 20 hours each week.
Around half of youth who had ever had a job (51 per cent) received minimum wage at their current or most recent job, while 39 per cent were paid above minimum wage, and the rest were paid below minimum wage or were unsure about the pay they received. Most participants (63 per cent) who worked more than 40 hours in a week, at an hourly paid job, received over-time pay.

**Multiple Barriers**

Youth participants experienced multiple, overlapping barriers. For example, more than 1 in 5 participants (22 per cent) reported having a mental health condition, drug addiction, and having lived in precarious housing (ever homeless or on the street). Similarly, 22 per cent indicated having any condition (mental health, substance use, etc.), government care experience and precarious housing experience.
Experiences Accessing Employment

Barriers to Accessing Employment

All participants had experienced some difficulties in accessing or maintaining employment. Although there were regional differences in the type and availability of employment, there were many common themes that emerged across the province.

Survey findings

Participants identified a number of challenges when it came to finding a job. The most common were transportation-related, not having the needed job skills or education, and/or a shortage of jobs in their community. Some identified other reasons that were not among the list of options, including a lack of motivation, family issues, or illness which prevented them from seeking a job. Ten per cent of youth reported that they never had trouble finding a job.

Figure 7  Challenges Finding a Job

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transportation challenges</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn't have the needed skills/education</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shortage of jobs in my community</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn't know how to look for jobs</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health challenges</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug addiction</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal record</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn't have SIN or other ID</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn't have a CV</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Participants could mark all responses that applied.

Some youth were more likely than others to identify certain challenges when finding a job. For example, youth with government care experience were more likely than those who were never in care to have experienced obstacles because they had a criminal record. Also, youth who had stayed in a custody centre were more likely to report not getting the support they needed to find a job than youth who had never been in custody (46 per cent vs. 25 per cent).

Youth who identified as having behavioural, mental health, and/or substance use challenges were more likely than their peers without such challenges to have experienced obstacles to employment. These included their mental health and substance use issues, as well as other factors such as not getting the support they needed.
In both urban and rural settings, females were more likely than males to report difficulties finding a job due to mental health challenges (29 per cent vs. 8 per cent) and because of a shortage of jobs in their community (47 per cent vs. 28 per cent of males).

There were no rural/urban differences in challenges finding a job although youth from Vancouver Island and Vancouver Coastal were more likely than those from Fraser to have had difficulty finding a job due to challenges related to transportation (58 per cent vs. 19 per cent in Fraser).

**Focus group findings**

In the focus groups, youth expanded on the barriers they identified in the survey, and identified others not captured in the survey.

**Transportation**

“You need a job to get a vehicle, but you need a vehicle to get a job.”

Youth who completed a survey most commonly identified challenges related to transportation as a barrier to accessing employment, and it was also a major topic of discussion in the focus groups.

Youth from communities across the province gave examples of being offered a job which they subsequently could not take because they were reliant on public transit and no transit ran at the times they would need to get to and from work. Even those in the larger urban centres such as Vancouver and Surrey noted that most employment opportunities which were available to youth, such as construction and food industry jobs, started before public transit was running. Some youth also stated that jobs in the labour industry required them to have their own vehicle or a driver’s licence. This was especially an issue for youth in communities where construction or landscaping were major employers.

Several youth had been fined for riding transit without paying but had been unable to pay the fine so were subsequently not using transit for fear of being caught. As such they did not want to risk applying for jobs that required travel. This also created problems for jobs that required youth to have a driver’s
licensure, as some youth feared applying for their driver’s test because they would have to first pay their transit tickets.

**Needing qualifications, skills, and experience**

“You need a GED for most jobs.”

“It’s so hard to find something that you have enough [qualifications] for.”

“We have no skills, no experience and no references.”

“It’s like you don’t have experience so you can’t get a job, so then you can’t get experience.”

Participants shared many examples of how they had not been able to access employment opportunities because they lacked a needed qualification. For example, one youth had applied for a position where a GED was not required but several certifications were (such as FoodSafe). He was able to meet all but one of the certification requirements. He had to wait three months for the certificate to be offered again in his community and subsequently missed out on the employment opportunity.

Youth who had dropped out of school or had been expelled talked about wanting to complete their GED in order to improve their employment prospects, but had experienced difficulties getting back into school, and had found it difficult to be self-directed enough to complete courses online.

Even when they had achieved their GED, youth noted that an undergraduate degree was often the minimum requirement on a job posting, even when this was not necessary to do the job. One example was an advertisement for a cashier which required the applicant to have an undergraduate degree. The cost of pursuing post-secondary education was considered prohibitive for most youth who participated in the focus groups.

Youth talked about the lack of recognition employers gave to skills they acquired from non-traditional sources. For example, one youth discussed how he had many skills in engine repair that he thought could lead to a good career. However, because he was self-taught and had not studied through a formal program, he did not know official names for some of the engine parts and was not taken seriously by employers or training programs.

Other youth talked about completing courses required for employment but being unable to prove it because they had lost their certificates or had never received them.

Youth who had completed some training in equipment usage realized that the training by itself was not enough to acquire job because they also need associated skills. For example, youth who had acquired a forklift licence noted that they also needed a driver’s licence before they could get a job in their community.

Participants also noted that that even when they did have the skills and qualifications for a position, a lack of experience prevented them from being hired ahead of candidates with experience. Youth who were trying to get labour jobs were particularly frustrated with this situation.
Youth reported often being stuck in a situation where they had to choose between gaining employment experience in a low-paying menial job and obtaining training or educational qualifications. This was particularly an issue for youth who were supporting themselves.

In addition to the challenges of applying for a position with no relevant work experience, youth discussed the challenges they had accessing employment if they had been fired from a previous job. They felt that having previous experience and having been fired made finding a job more challenging than having no experience.

**Interpersonal skills**

Not only did participants encounter challenges around acquiring job-related skills, but at least one participant in every focus group felt that they did not have the coping skills or interpersonal skills to apply for and be successful in a job. Mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, as well as anger management problems made youth reluctant to put themselves in stressful situations such as applying for or starting a new job. Additionally, they did not think they would be able to get along with co-workers or customers, and did not want to risk trying.

Youth who had left school as well as those currently attending noted that little attention had been paid at school to the transition into employment. They received limited or no assistance with interview skills and with the interpersonal skills that would be needed to successfully hold down employment.

Participants thought that schools needed to ensure students had both the hard and soft skills required to be employed and to successfully transition into adulthood. One participant commented “Schools don’t go into résumés and personal interactions. They don’t teach you to do your taxes.” Another said “High school sets you up for more school, they don’t think that you won’t go to university.”

**Personal motivation and peer pressure**

“In a small town, you just hang out at a friend’s house.”

“Nobody wants to work at a gross fast food place.”

The survey did not ask about youth’s motivation to be employed, but this topic was raised by youth in every focus group. Participants spoke of feeling demoralized after taking qualifications, attending employment programs and still not being able to find employment. After applying for a number of jobs which they felt they were qualified for, they began to feel that there was little point in trying anymore. They felt that however qualified they were, there would always be another candidate with more experience.

There appeared to be a stigma attached to some of the positions that are traditionally available to young people with no experience or qualifications. Younger youth in particular spoke of specifically not wanting to take a job in a fast food restaurant; in fact, in all focus groups which included youth under 19, a number of participants said that they preferred to be unemployed rather than work in such an environment. Participants often struggled to articulate why they did not want to work in fast food outlets, but remained adamant that they would not take such a position even when older youth who
were present at the focus groups spoke of the benefits of getting this type of employment on their résumé.

For youth whose friends were not working, finding the motivation to look for employment was difficult. For example, one group of youth aged 19 and under spoke of using their time to hang out together, play video games and be online. They did not want to give this up to look for employment.

**Self-confidence**

“My résumé is lame, I don’t have a lot to put on it.”

“The interview process was scary because I worried I would say something wrong.”

Many young people spoke about feeling insecure in their skills and abilities. This prevented them from applying for positions, as they thought they would not be able to do the job as well as other candidates. Young people who identified that they lacked self-confidence reported that they did not feel they had the skills to approach a potential employer and ask for a job or even an application form. They also said they would not know how to behave in an interview.

One youth recounted handing out “hundreds of résumés” and only getting two job interviews as a result of her efforts. She was so desperate for the jobs she interviewed for that she was overwhelmed by nerves, and felt she was unsuccessful in the interview as a result.

**Employers discriminating against youth**

“They [workplaces] don’t take people with piercings, coloured hair or bad records.”

“Employers really do discriminate against how you look.”

More than one-quarter of youth who completed a survey cited discrimination as a challenge they had faced when trying to access employment. In every focus group, there were participants who felt they had been discriminated against because of their age, including older youth who felt it was harder to get work the further they were away from school age without having had a job.

For many, the discrimination related to their appearance, and there were a number of examples of employers telling youth that they were not being hired because of their clothing, hair, tattoos or piercings. Youth felt that having tattoos discouraged employers from hiring them, especially if the tattoos were violent in nature or gang-related, or could not be covered by a uniform or other work outfit.

Some groups of youth felt they experienced additional discrimination. These included youth who identified as Aboriginal, Lesbian Gay Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, or Two Spirit (LGBTQ2S), young parents, individuals with a disability, a criminal record, or challenges related to substance use and addictions. Examples of the discrimination they had experienced included: youth with a disability not being hired because they could not do something that other potential employees could do; youth who were Aboriginal being subjected to offensive racial stereotyping; and females not being hired for work which the employer considered to be more suited to a male, such as dish-washing.
Youth from small communities talked about being negatively stereotyped either because of their own previous problems or because a family member had a bad reputation. In one small community, youth felt that there was such a disconnect between the young people and adults that all youth were stereotyped as ‘difficult.’ They felt they were not given a chance at employment by any of the town’s employers, who were all interconnected.

Youth who identified as lesbian, gay or transgender who had experience looking for work in small communities felt that they faced greater discrimination in these communities than they had or would in larger urban centres. Fear of being discriminated against on the grounds of their sexual orientation was also cited as a barrier for youth accessing jobs in the trades or construction field in all communities.

The survey results showed that youth who identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual were twice as likely as those who identified as straight to report that discrimination has been a barrier to finding a job (48 per cent vs. 24 per cent).

Restricted opportunities

“[A forty-hour work week] is very rarely available.”

“The rule of thumb in Penticton is if you have a job you keep it.”

“Employers like hiring older people because it’s a time-saver, you only have to explain the job [to older people], not explain how to have a job.”

In addition to feeling discriminated against because of their age and appearance, youth felt strongly that entry-level jobs were being filled by adults who were not able to get other jobs. For example, immigrant adults whose qualifications were not recognized in Canada were being employed in entry-level jobs which would otherwise be available to youth.

Youth in all focus groups felt that the jobs that were available to them were generally low-paying and part-time. Many youth felt that there were no opportunities to obtain anything other than a minimum-wage job because when other positions became available, those who got them held on to them. As a result, these jobs rarely came up and when they did, many qualified and experienced older people applied, meaning that youth did not get the opportunity to interview for them.

In one community, the largest local employer was in the process of shutting down and was laying off the least experienced (younger) employees first. There were no alternative employment opportunities available, and the young people felt that if an opportunity did arise it would be given to an adult with more work experience.

Many of those who were working had gained their employment either directly through family or by being recommended by family. Without local networks, young people who had moved to a new community or did not have employed family members struggled to access employment. One youth said: “Half the town is owned by wealthy people. They hire their own. You have to know someone they know.”
Need identification, a phone and an address

“Not having a phone is a problem looking for work and keeping it.”

“Most young people don’t know where to start [getting ID].”

Youth spoke of the need to have a phone and an address so that prospective employers could contact them when they applied for a job. Homeless youth talked about feeling caught in a trap where they could not get a job because they had no address or phone, but they could not obtain either because they had no job to pay for them.

One participant said that he tried to access an employment resources centre but was denied because he did not have any formal identification. Others had not been able to verify who they were to a prospective employer because they did not have any picture identification. Several were unsure about how to get identification and what steps they should take to get a SIN card.

Access to job postings

“There is not enough opportunities here and what is around is only for students.”

“Online applications are no good. You can’t look someone in the eye, let them meet you.”

Not knowing where available jobs would be posted was an issue in several communities. Some youth said they wanted to look for work but did not know where to start looking as there seemed to be few available jobs listed in their local newspaper.

Youth in towns with a college or university reported that students were given employment opportunities ahead of local youth. For one-off events, part-time positions or short-term opportunities, the employer would often only advertise at the college, or would require youth to be enrolled at the college to apply. This was particularly frustrating for other local youth who knew they had the qualifications required for the position.

Participants felt that online job applications detracted from the connection between employer and applicant, and additionally felt there was no way to stand out in an online application, which made it difficult to get an interview.

The process of completing online applications was considered tedious by some youth who noted they “could not be bothered” to complete an application for a position if it meant doing so online. One youth gave an example of having an interview which he felt went well, but he did not take it further because the employer asked him to complete an online application form as part of the interview process.

Although some youth had found jobs through websites such as Craigslist and Kijiji, others said they would not use these sites as there were a lot of fake employment scams online, and they did not always know which job postings were real and which were not. In one focus group, youth reported answering an odd-job advertisement online, where they were never paid for the work they did.

Other youth found it difficult to use online resources because they were not entirely familiar or comfortable with computers. They were frustrated by the assumption that young people want to do everything online, because that created barriers for youth with challenges related to literacy or
comprehension. For example, youth with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and associated cognitive challenges spoke of issues like forgetting the passwords and which websites they needed to access for online applications. As one person said, “People think because I am young I know about computers and looking for things online but I’m not on the computer very much. I just use it for Facebook.”

Youth across several of the groups raised their feeling of frustration at needing to have regular access to the Internet to create and submit résumés, find job postings, and correspond about interviews. It was also noted that some youth did not know how to write a professional email.

**Lack of accessible employment programs**

“There’s never enough programs.”

“You need Grade 10 to do [trades] training.”

“Once you hit 25 a lot of that stuff goes away.”

Many youth felt they lacked the skills or knowledge to apply directly for jobs, or did not yet know what they might want to do or what might be available to them. As a result, they wanted to access employment training programs first. Several gave examples of programs that had helped them to find employment but had subsequently shut down or were no longer youth-focused. The lack of specialist help was commonly cited as a barrier to finding employment.

Youth in several communities spoke of the barriers that existed to accessing employment training programs in their particular community, including long waiting lists, a difficult interview process and not having completed a Grade 10 education.

In addition, age limits on employment programs presented barriers for both the youngest and oldest youth. Many youth with custody or government care experience said the age limits did not take into account that some youth were living on their own at a young age, whereas for older youth (aged 23 and above) there was concern about ageing out of services before they had been able to secure a place in an employment program, as many had long waiting lists, and only served youth up to 24 years of age.

**Additional Barriers Faced by Some Groups of Youth**

While youth shared many common experiences in terms of barriers to employment, some youth also faced additional challenges.

**Childcare responsibilities**

“It’s scary how little resources there are [for young parents].”

Having a small child to care for was a barrier to employment for young parents, as childcare was prohibitively expensive. Youth who were parents and had been through the government care system reported that they often did not have a trustworthy and willing adult in their lives that they could leave the child with. This meant they could not apply for work.
Young parents in one focus group felt that the lack of affordable childcare was their biggest barrier to employment. They did not receive enough government assistance with childcare expenses to allow them to access employment. One person noted that they only received support from the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) towards childcare if there was a current child protection file open, so they felt they were punished for providing good care for their child.

**Government care experience**

*“You don’t see the big picture.”*

*“You are a product of your environment.”*

Living in government care created additional challenges for young people. In one focus group where all participants had been in care, it was felt that young people in care had difficulty seeing the importance of staying in school in terms of securing employment, when they were in the middle of dealing with immediate concerns about their home and family.

Staying connected to school was particularly challenging for young people who were moving around and lacked a stable home. It was also difficult to complete the coursework or homework necessary to attain qualifications when youth were moving from one foster placement to another.

Without parents to support them financially, many youth in care reported they would neglect their schooling if the opportunity for employment came up, even if it was only very short-term or casual work. They talked about the cycle of working while in school out of necessity, then as a result missing too much school to get the qualifications which were required to get a better paying job.

Young people who had been taken into care because of family problems such as addiction talked about not learning basic work skills from their family because their parents had been unemployed. They also talked about using substances to numb the pain of their problems, which often led to their own addictions. They then focused on their addictions rather than employment.

One group with in-care experience said that youth under 19 could not work anywhere cigarettes were sold, like gas stations, without a parent's signature. Being in care made this complicated and they felt it was unlikely they would be able to get a signature, or did not want to ask their social worker for one.

A Youth Agreement supports independent living for 16- to 18-year-olds (and occasionally 15-year-olds) who are homeless and cannot live with their family, and for whom government care would not be a viable option. Participants on Youth Agreements had very diverse experiences with regards to employment. Some were working full- or part-time, while others viewed the Youth Agreement as a barrier to employment because getting a job would result in reduced income.

In one focus group, a couple of youth on Youth Agreements talked about moving from one community to another while their social worker remained in their home community and administered their Youth Agreements from there. This meant that their only contact with their social worker was to receive a cheque, and they felt they could not talk through the implications of being on a Youth Agreement as it related to employment.
The criteria for some employment programs created a barrier for youth in care or on Youth Agreements who were trying to go to school and work. As one participant on a Youth Agreement noted, “[The program] had a bunch of loop holes. To be in the program, you couldn’t be in school and couldn’t have any sort of work.”

One youth who was receiving funding from MCFD through the Agreement with Young Adults program talked about the pressure to acquire all the qualifications he would need to achieve employment in his field of interest before the funding expired when he turned 24. He explained that the fact that some programs only had start dates once a year was particularly worrying because if he failed to get in, he felt he would have wasted the time he spent gaining the other qualifications to that point.

Poverty

“You need enough food at work so you have energy.”

Youth with experience of homelessness in particular spoke about poverty as a barrier to employment. For example, even if they were successful at securing employment they were not able to afford things like a uniform or tools which were requirements of starting the position. Not having money for food also stopped them from applying for jobs as they did not feel they would have the energy to work a shift when they were hungry.

Health conditions and disabilities

“If you have a bad knee, can’t do certain things, they won’t hire you.”

Several participants mentioned how health conditions or disabilities hindered their ability to find a job. Examples included cognitive challenges, mental health issues, behavioural problems and physical disabilities.

Indeed, having a physical disability was identified by a number of youth as a significant barrier to finding a job. One participant mentioned that she hid the fact that she had a physical disability from a potential employer because she felt it was the only way she would be hired. She noted “It’s best if you don’t say those kinds of things.”

Some youth with physical or mental health issues shared experiences of having been supported to get work experience by a job coach or employment program but that the employer had not hired them when the support was withdrawn at the end of the work experience.

On the survey, youth who identified their mental health challenges as a barrier to finding employment were more likely to have accessed a job coach (36 per cent vs. 13 per cent), but were less likely to find it helpful, compared to youth who did not identify mental health challenges as a barrier to finding employment. Also, youth with a mental health condition were less likely than their peers without such a condition to report as helpful the employment services they accessed (62 per cent vs. 91 per cent) and services to get ID (71 per cent vs. 100 per cent).
Youth in conflict with the law

“It’s tough knowing that there are easier ways [than working a legal job] to get what you need.”

“Kids think they are gangsters and they can make a living out of selling drugs rather than actually working.”

Peer group

Many youth identified peer pressure as a barrier to employment, and this was especially true among youth who had experience of criminal activity and had stayed in a custody centre. These youth said they found it hard to think about accessing a legal job when everyone in their social group was involved in illegal employment — partially because they wanted to feel included in their social group, but also because it was difficult to see others earning significantly more money through illegal activity than they were able to earn at a minimum-wage job.

Participants also felt that it was nearly impossible to change their peer group when they returned to their home communities after leaving custody, as they were stigmatized and non-criminally involved peers did not want to hang out with them. They talked about not being able to follow through with their plans to find legal employment or go back to school once they returned to the friends they had been hanging out with before entering custody. One youth said “I started hanging out with the people I was hanging out with and I came right back [to the custody centre].”

Lack of qualifications and legal work experience

“It’s the only way to make money because you can’t get a job if you’re young.”

“It’s all cash. It's immediate.”

Several youth said they made money through illegal means because they lacked qualifications and legal work experience. As a result, they were either unable to secure legal employment or were unable to collect an income from a legal job that matched the money they could make illegally. Being taxed on their legal income further decreased their motivation to work at a legal job. Some youth also said they preferred illegal work because they could receive cash immediately, when they needed it, and did not have to worry about budgeting their income between pay cheques.

One youth spoke of wanting to move from making money illegally to making it legally. However, she became discouraged after going into many retail stores and handing in her résumé only to receive no call-backs. The experience made her reluctant to put herself through this process again.

The legacy of a criminal record

“I would be wasting my time and getting my hopes up.”

“Even in four or five months you can grow and change so much, but they don’t see that, they don’t care.”

Youth who had been in conflict with the law reported not applying for jobs where a criminal record check might be required because they felt there was no point. One youth said that because of her past
criminal record she only tried to get employment through people she knew and who were aware of her past. Others commented that they would lie about their criminal record and hope that the prospective employer would not find out.

Youth who were no longer involved in criminal activity were frustrated because employers did not seem to understand that youth could change in a short period of time, and that becoming employed was a step in that process.

Having a criminal record was thought to be a particularly challenging barrier for youth in small communities, where there were a limited number of employers and employment options, and where people were more likely to have known each other all their lives. As one youth said “If you have a bad reputation, especially in a town like this, no one will hire you.”

Youth who had tried to turn away from criminal activity reported that it had been difficult to get back into school once they had dropped out or had been expelled. Those who had been accepted back into school often struggled because they felt alienated and stigmatized, and could not relate to the other students in their classes. They felt that their teachers and other students were waiting for them to fail, and this pressure led them to drop out again.

Youth in rural communities

“You can’t leave your family to get a job in Alberta.”

“A lot of people leave for work.”

Youth from rural communities were often faced with the choice of staying in their community with no employment prospects, or leaving their home and family to find employment. The latter was not a viable option for those who, for example, were co-parenting with an ex-partner in that community.

One focus group in Quesnel was made up of youth who had moved from smaller communities. They had moved to Quesnel hoping to work, but without success, and they now felt that they would have a better chance of finding employment if they were to move to a larger community. This was worrying to them because they had no contacts or supports, no income and no place to live in BC’s larger communities so would have to find employment immediately to avoid homelessness. In another group, a youth from Quesnel was seriously considering moving to Saskatchewan because she had family there and she had heard there were more jobs available.

Employment Supports

Survey findings

Survey participants with employment experience (84 per cent) identified various factors that have helped them to find a job. They most commonly listed getting a job through someone they knew (e.g., a relative). Some identified factors not included among the list of options, such as persistence and motivation when it came to job hunting.

Among participants who had worked at all, those who were currently employed were more likely than those not currently working to indicate that learning interviewing skills helped them to find a job
(56 per cent vs. 30 per cent), as well as getting support from a one-on-one worker or other professional (38 per cent vs. 20 per cent), and having stable housing (49 per cent vs. 25 per cent).

**Figure 9  What Has Helped Youth Get a Job (Among Those Who Had Ever Worked)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Help Provided</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I got a job through someone I know</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I got help writing a CV</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned interviewing skills</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I got help with job searches</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had stable housing</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I got support from a 1:1 worker/professional</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had access to online job banks</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I got job training</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I got support to address challenges I had</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I completed a school/trades program</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Participants could mark all responses that applied.

Youth reported accessing a variety of employment-related services in the past year. They most commonly accessed employment services or supports that assisted with job searches and writing a résumé.

Those currently working were less likely to have accessed employment services (e.g., help with job searches, writing a résumé) in the past year than those who were not currently working (43 per cent vs. 63 per cent).

**Figure 10  Employment-related Services Most Commonly Accessed in Past Year**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service Provided</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employment services (help with job searches, etc.)</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services to get ID</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job training</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life-skills training</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job bank</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trades program</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job coach</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Participants could mark all responses that applied.
Participants indicated that some services were not available in their community, including access to job coaches (12 per cent), job banks (10 per cent), life skills training (8 per cent), employment services (7 per cent), and trades programs (7 per cent). Youth in rural areas were less likely to have access to life skills training.

The majority of youth who accessed services found them helpful. For example, 87 per cent of those who accessed job training, and 79 per cent who accessed a trades program, felt they were helpful.

However, some youth — for example, those who had stayed in a custody centre — were less likely to feel that the services they had accessed were helpful. Females were less likely than males to feel that the services they accessed were helpful, as were youth in urban areas compared to their rural-based peers.

**Figure 11  Youth Who Found Employment Services Helpful (Among Those Who Accessed Them)**

When asked about job banks, youth with substance use addictions were less likely than their peers without addictions to deem these helpful (40 per cent vs. 90 per cent). Those with addictions who accessed services to obtain ID were also less likely to find these helpful than those without addictions (82 per cent vs. 100 per cent).

**Focus group findings**

In the focus groups, youth acknowledged that their own attitude was one of the most important factors in getting a job. If they were not motivated, no amount of available help would make a difference. Nonetheless, they were able to articulate what had worked well and less well in the employment programs they had accessed.

Participants felt that the most helpful employment supports they had received had been youth-focused and individualized to their specific needs. Many expressed frustration at services that only helped them create a résumé or shared job postings. One summed up the feelings of many when he said "They provide resources, but don’t give instructions. They expect that you will know what to do with the..."
resources without helping." Another said "No one asked if I needed help, they just uploaded my résumé and printed it off."

This theme was particularly common among youth with cognitive and other challenges which made literacy and comprehension difficult. Older youth felt that they were expected to know details about applying for jobs which they had never learned.

Youth who had attended employment workshops felt that these had often not been individualized enough. For example, one participant had attended an employment workshop where she learned about résumés and interview skills, but she felt it focused specifically on how to get jobs in the fast food industry. As a result, she did not get what she wanted out of the workshop or know how to generalize what she was taught to other jobs.

Youth also said that the employment support available was sometimes not relevant to the local economy. One example was that the majority of jobs available to youth locally were in retail, yet none of the local employment training programs taught relevant skills such as operating a cash register.

The most common complaint about the employment supports that participants had accessed was that they had wanted to learn how to cope with anger and have healthy professional relationships but these topics had not been part of the program. Youth were appreciative of employment programs that offered the services of a career counsellor who could relate to young people, would listen to their questions, and would talk through the available job opportunities and what was required in them. Having an assigned worker at an employment program was helpful for youth. They explained that they wanted to build a relationship and work with the same individual rather than having to tell their story repeatedly to a new person each time they went to the centre.

Participants spoke highly of employment supports that were located in buildings with other supports they were accessing. One said "I'd be less motivated if I had to go to a second place."

Employment programs that assisted youth to gain skills which were not specifically employment-based but were key to being able to take a job were especially helpful. Examples included programs that supported youth to get their driver's licence.

Government grants to train in trades through the Government Action Plan were praised by those who had accessed them, because they provided the financial support necessary for them to succeed.

Casual work programs were particularly welcomed by youth struggling with homelessness, mental health issues and substance use problems because they allowed youth to work when they were able but did not pressure them to come in on days when they were not up to it.

Employment programs which allowed youth to return and do a refresher were helpful. One youth reported taking FoodSafe three times and finding this a really valuable experience in keeping her knowledge current.

Youth with a cognitive disability such as FASD spoke of the support of a job coach being crucial to them in securing employment. Examples of helpful supports they had received included learning interview skills, how to developing a professional cover letter, and create a résumé. Some participants mentioned
learning by observing others, role-playing interviews, and practicing interviewing skills. One participant said “It’s always good to have a job coach.”

Aboriginal youth were appreciative of programs that focused on Aboriginal participants because they felt it created a safer and more welcoming atmosphere for them to learn and participate in, and where they could build relationships and a support network.

Youth currently in custody were optimistic that the skills and certifications they were learning there would be helpful to them in securing employment when they were released. Youth felt FoodSafe and the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) were particularly helpful, as were trades and forestry training in the custody centre. As one said, “You can go to [the custody work]shop and do work, like small engine repair.”

In addition to specific employment programs, some youth had received employment support at school. For example, one group had been at a school in which their Planning classes had emphasized learning skills to access employment, which they said had proved very useful. One youth stated “I learned about employment standards and rights in high-school Planning class. I learned about writing a résumé and cover letter, and about interview skills.”

Schools that offered pre-employment programs were found to be very useful by those who attended, as they not only taught employment skills, but also offered youth the opportunity to practice these skills, and an opportunity to get a reference which related to a field they were interested in.

**Additional Supports for Accessing Employment**

Youth said that they had often needed the support of a youth worker, social worker, drug and alcohol counsellor or other worker from outside an employment service in order to navigate the services offered at an employment support service. For example, one youth said “They [the local employment support service] provided a résumé template and [offered] no help after that, but my own support worker was with me so she helped.”

Many youth had been pleasantly surprised by the assistance they had received from staff at recovery houses, drug and alcohol services, or within the government care or custody systems who had provided them with much needed employment support, motivation and advice. They had also received practical support such as rides to interviews, opportunities to practice interview skills and assistance to write and print out their résumé.

Youth with government care experience were particularly grateful for the help of their youth worker. They felt that unlike some workers at employment support programs, youth workers understood the challenges faced by youth in care. There were many examples of youth workers driving young people to interviews and providing other support and encouragement around finding employment.

With the help of a youth worker, one youth had worked out a step-by-step approach to reaching her goal of working as a hairdresser. Her youth worker helped her to create a résumé that highlighted her skills specific to that position, and as a result, she felt she had learned how to prioritize what to include in her résumé and how to format it to look professional.
Youth who received financial support through Persons with Disabilities, and MCFD’s Agreements with Young Adults programs, reported that the funding allowed them to pursue the qualifications they needed to secure employment in their field of interest.

Programs like Katimavik were considered useful as employment preparation programs. The program taught job skills and was considered to have a good reputation, which would impress employers. One youth reported that living with other people in the program had given her good skills for the workplace: “I was learning that I don’t always need to give others my opinions, and learning how to have boundaries and not take on other people’s issues.”

Youth with a supportive family had been able to receive help from them to work through their concerns about interacting with co-workers and customers. They also received tips and advice about how to deal with difficult situations. “My mom gave me a lot of advice about how to listen to people, like angry customers or people who don’t understand things,” said one participant, adding that she had trouble listening to people sometimes, and without this support would prefer “to tune them out or walk away from them.”

**Youth’s Suggestions to Increase Access to Employment**

When asked what would help to improve youth’s access to employment opportunities, many focused on individual factors such as self-motivation, reduced substance use, and dealing with their mental health problems. Other suggestions were:

- Offer one-on-one individualized support to help youth search for and apply for a job – many youth do not know what to do when they are simply handed resources;
- Ensure employment support services are offered on a drop-in basis rather than by appointment only;
- Have employment programs that offer paid job placements where youth can try different careers and learn employment skills;
- Keep youth and adult employment supports separate;
- Help youth to buy clothes suitable for an interview or a uniform and tools if they are required for a job;
- Reduce waiting lists and offer youth-specific job training programs in every community;
- Offer employment training that reflects the employment opportunities available in the local community;
- Advertise job shops and other employment services more widely so that youth who are not in school or connected to services learn about them. Suggestions for where to advertise included the mall, the gym, and grocery stores;
- Have a central place for youth to go and sign up for odd jobs when they are balancing school, another job and other commitments, or as a way for youth to get their first employment experience;
Allow all youth to access employment centres, employment programs and trades training at no charge. Consider paying youth minimum wage while they train to ensure they can meet their basic needs;

Have short and longer programs running at each employment centre and offer them regularly. Offer different courses so that youth can find a program to meet their needs;

Ensure career classes are mandatory and are delivered across different educational settings and to different age ranges (as they are currently an optional class in some school settings only);

Ensure school Planning classes teach life skills and social skills which are usable in the workplace and at an interview;

Teach youth how to file their taxes and similar skills they need to know when they are employed;

Assist youth in getting picture identification;

Have employment training and support organizations work together so that if there is a waiting list or a youth is not a good fit for one program they can be referred to another program;

Inform agencies like Income Assistance about the efforts youth are making to find employment to reduce youth feeling harassed to find work;

Offer incentives to employers to hire local youth, and support them to provide on-the-job training to youth;

Ensure all youth in custody get the opportunity to attend a job fair. Also have an employment support program in each custody centre to assist youth in learning skills to ensure they are work-ready and can transfer to employment training or a job when they are released. This program could also support youth to create a résumé that would include the certifications and training they completed in custody;

Assist youth with challenges related to literacy to undertake hands-on employment training for positions that do not require a GED. Youth in custody felt there should be such programs in the custody centres, as many youth got involved in criminal activity because they felt they would be unable to attain a legal job due to their literacy challenges;

Ensure youth in government care have a stable home, because without housing stability, it is difficult to make employment feel like a realistic goal or a priority;

Ensure youth in care have a supportive adult in their lives who is employed. This person can act as a role model and let youth see the benefits of working;

Offer childcare that is safe and affordable. Also ensure childcare benefits are available for youth, and that young people know how to access these benefits; and

Offer targeted job fairs. One example was to advertise at LGBTQ drop-in centres so that non-heterosexual youth would know that the employer would not discriminate against them because of their sexuality or gender orientation.
Experiences Maintaining Employment

Barriers to Maintaining Employment

Survey findings

Survey participants identified reasons for not having kept a job (among the 73 per cent of participants who had ever worked and left a job). Reasons for quitting included: they were not treated fairly (36 per cent), they felt the job was not interesting or meaningful (27 per cent), or they found another job that paid better (25 per cent). Twenty-six per cent reported they had been terminated (fired) by their employer, while 22 per cent had been laid off, and 21 per cent indicated that their contract ended.

Youth also added reasons that were not included in the list of options, such as quitting due to moving to another city, to return to school, for medical reasons, to take care of their child, or because they felt the conditions were unsafe.

Youth with mental health challenges were more likely than those without such challenges to have quit a job because they felt they were not treated fairly (51 per cent vs. 24 per cent). This was also the case among youth with behavioural conditions: 65 per cent quit because they were treated unfairly vs. 28 per cent of those without behavioural conditions.

Finally, youth with substance addictions were more likely than their peers without such addictions to have been fired from a job (52 per cent vs. 20 per cent).

Focus group findings

“Getting a job in this economy isn’t the hardest part, it’s keeping a job.”

Many of the barriers identified by youth for accessing employment were repeated when asked about maintaining employment. However, some were specific to maintaining employment and were common across different groups of youth in the province.

Staying motivated

“Motivation is a challenge: it depends on how much weed you smoke. More pot smoked equals less motivation.”

“The longest I’ve stayed [at a job] is eight months, I get bored easily.”

“I’m not passionate about coffee and doughnuts.”

Most youth with employment experience only had experience with low-income work, and commonly this was in retail, food service or construction. Youth reported that it was difficult to stay motivated to attend a low-paying job, and most who had been employed had only worked for a few months in the positions they had held. Many of the positions available to youth were monotonous and they had struggled with boredom while working. This had made it difficult to feel motivated to keep going to
work especially if it was a long journey, clashed with activities their friends were doing or if they used substances regularly or ahead of their shift.

The routine of getting up for work five days a week was a challenge to many youth who had struggled to attend school or who had dropped out altogether. One noted, “It’s hard to get used to because you can’t behave the way you do in school. I had to learn that it was important to show up,” while another said, “It was difficult to transition into the job market after having a gap between school and work.”

Making friends at work who were not motivated in their job or who encouraged young people to not work hard was a challenge for youth who wanted to do well in their job but also wanted to fit in. Across several of the groups, youth gave examples of being encouraged to take longer breaks and “be lazy” by co-workers. Even though they knew that doing so would lead to them losing their job, youth did not feel they had the skills to decline, or did not want to decline because they wanted to fit in.

**Shift patterns**

“You never have the same schedule three weeks in a row.”

Youth spoke about often getting the worst shifts because they were the newest employees then finding it difficult to maintain their commitment to those shifts. Some of the challenges they encountered when committing to those shifts included changing circumstances (such as moving) or transportation not running when they were trying to get to or from their job.

Across several groups, youth spoke about being discriminated against in terms of their work schedule. They reported that their shifts were changed regularly and they never knew when they would be working. As a result, they could not make plans for their days off because they did not know when they might occur, and even if they did, there was the chance that they could be changed at the last minute. They felt that this affected their quality of life and their ability to get or maintain a second job.

The reality of working many hours each week was difficult for youth who were trying to balance school or other commitments with their job responsibilities. For example, one talked about having to choose between work and school when the two clashed, and as result falling behind with school and homework, until deciding to give up his job.

**Transportation**

“I had to take three buses to get to work.”

“If I got sent home early, I had no way to get home.”

Youth reported using a number of different means to get to work when they had a job, most commonly walking, cycling and public transit. A job with a long commute was hard for youth to maintain, especially in winter, when there were clashes with school and when they were working early mornings or at night.

In the Interior and Northern regions, youth described experiences such as arriving at work two hours before a shift because that was when the bus arrived. Others talked about being reliant on other people to get a ride to work, and the strain that this put on relationships.
One youth would arrange a ride to and from work with a co-worker but would often be sent home early and be either forced to take a cab home or wait until a co-worker had finished their shift to get a ride. If co-workers were sent home first, she would be left with no option but to call a cab, and the cost to get home would be half her wages from her shift.

The cost of using public transit was an issue for young people in low-paying jobs. Youth in the Lower Mainland who felt they were only able to maintain a low-paying job by fare evasion were concerned that when the new Compass system is introduced they will have to give up their employment as they will not be able to afford the transit fares.

**Poor working conditions**

“They treat you like slaves overnight.”

“[Employers] don’t want people working full-time so they don’t have to give you benefits.”

Youth felt that employers would hire young people to do jobs no one else wanted to do. For example, participants who had worked in positions that required a lot of physical activity reported that their supervisors and older workers expected them to do a greater share of the lifting or heavy manual work because they were younger, but this was not always possible. For example, one was expected to move large objects by himself, but they were too heavy for him to carry.

Many youth felt that employers would give them enough hours so they were just under full-time, or make them take breaks in the day so they would not qualify for overtime. This meant that youth would not qualify for certain benefits and could not apply for Employment Insurance (EI) if they lost their job.

**Low wages**

“I’d be stoked to make $15 per hour.”

“It’s hard [to work two jobs], sometimes you just have to.”

All participants who had experience working had been employed in low-wage positions at some point, and most had been employed part-time. The financial reality of living on such income proved too much for many young people and they were often unable to maintain their employment as a result. They instead sought to claim benefits if they were entitled.

Most participants felt that raises were rarely given in minimum-wage jobs. They agreed that if an employee pressed for a raise the employer might find a reason to let them go. One summed up the feedback of many participants when he said, “There are other people looking [for work], so they’ll get rid of you.”

Participants also spoke about being paid below minimum wage or having money withheld from them. Some youth said they had been paid as little as $6.75 an hour while other youth said employers had withheld their tips.
Negotiating the Barriers to Employment for Vulnerable Youth

Relationships with co-workers

“Communication has always been my downfall.”

“It wasn’t the money that made me quit, it was the people.”

Youth across most of the focus groups said that one of the reasons that they had not sought employment was due to concerns about how they would interact with co-workers and customers. Similarly, all of those who had employment experience agreed that lack of communication skills, professional boundaries and conflict resolution skills were barriers to maintaining employment.

Youth talked in detail about not feeling respected by co-workers and not knowing how to deal with different colleagues’ personalities. Youth also did not understand or know how to establish workplace boundaries. For example, one group identified that one of their biggest struggles in keeping a job was not knowing what a healthy professional relationship would look like with their supervisor, co-workers, or customers.

Hostile work environment

“The younger you are the more you’re belittled in your job.”

“Employers take advantage of young people who aren’t knowledgeable to stand up for themselves.”

Youth spoke about experiencing hostile work environments, particularly in the restaurant trade. There was also a lack of training and instruction, which made it difficult for the youth to complete the tasks required of their position.

One youth spoke about a place he had worked where employees were divided based on ethnicity. One ethnic group were employed as front-of-house staff, while he and others of similar ethnic and cultural groups were employed to do tasks such as taking the garbage out. He felt that this level of discrimination made the workplace intolerable.

Many youth felt that co-workers’ attitudes changed towards them when they found out they had a history of addiction. One youth commented that she tried to hide her past addiction, but did not know how to navigate certain situations such as when co-workers asked her to go for drinks with them.

As well, most youth felt that co-workers had discriminated against them because of their age; for instance, co-workers referred to them as “kiddo” or “the kid.” Other examples of being discriminated against were provided by Aboriginal youth, as well as youth with chronic health problems and mental illness.

One youth said he had never had a job for more than three months because of the discrimination he encountered. Others with a chronic health condition reported not taking time off when they were sick, for fear of being judged when they returned to work.

Having health problems that they could not afford to deal with had resulted in some youth losing their employment. For example, one needed dental care he could not afford, and had missed a lot of work due to dental pain, which had led to him losing his job.
In several of the focus groups, there was at least one youth who had the experience of being let go towards the end of their probationary period. In each case the youth felt that this was not because of poor performance but because they were approaching a point where they would be entitled to a pay rise. They were then replaced by another youth on probation, which kept the cost down for the employer.

**Harassment**

“I always get hired for my looks, then my boss will hit on me.”

“It wasn’t just the boss, it was the customers.”

Harassment was particularly common among female youth. In one focus group, for example, eight out of nine female participants reported that they had been sexually harassed at their workplace. This had occurred in a wide range of job positions, including working as a cleaner, in a grocery store, as a bartender, and as a server and chef. Perpetrators of the harassment had included supervisors, business owners, co-workers and customers.

Female participants said it was generally accepted as a part of the culture in the restaurant/bar industry that young women would have to deal with sexual advances from their employers, co-workers, customers, or all three. Two young women said they had met people at their workplace who had later stalked them. All female participants who had experienced sexual harassment said they had left a job before because of it.

**Safety concerns**

“They want you to do more, faster so you take risks to be fast.”

“I was turkey catching one summer. They didn’t make me wear the face mask and I ended up getting a lung infection.”

Youth spoke about working in unsafe environments and felt that, particularly during their probationary period, they could not voice their concerns as they would be let go immediately. None of the youth in the focus groups had approached an employer with their concerns, even when seriously worried for their personal safety.

Some youth who had worked on construction sites said that the sites took safety concerns seriously, but most said they had worked jobs where employers were not concerned with safety. They felt that on the surface, places said you had to follow the safety guidelines, but unofficially they pressured workers to ignore the rules because it was the only way to complete the amount of work they were assigned in a short period of time.

Young men in particular described being pressured to work quickly and ignore basic safety requirements when employed in labour positions. Participants felt safety rules that were applied to older people were ignored by their supervisors when it came to youth.
Not getting proper training created safety risks for youth. Most participants felt that employers did not have time to teach young people on the job, even though they looked for people who were willing to learn.

Getting injured at work had led some youth to lose their employment. For example, one youth broke her arm and was then terminated by her employer as she was unable to do all tasks required of her position.

When strict safety rules were imposed, having to adhere to these was challenging for some youth once they got comfortable in their positions. They spoke of wanting to cut corners in order to relieve boredom or to ensure they got the job done in the way they saw as most efficient.

**Seasonal and short-term employment**

“There are jobs in the summer...”

For youth in some communities, employment was not available year-round. In some areas labour jobs or tourism-related jobs were available in the summer and retail jobs were available in the build-up to the holidays. In other places, short-term opportunities arose when a local industry had a large order or got behind and needed extra labour for a few weeks to catch up.

Youth in tourist resorts in particular spoke of the challenges of maintaining a job — not only in the winter, when there were many layoffs, but also in the summer when there was an influx of non-local people ready to work for lower wages. They felt that if they made a mistake or refused to take a shift, they would be replaced by someone who would.

There were examples given of employers hiring youth on back-to-back short-term contracts but never making them full-time employees. This meant that youth were responsible for paying their own income tax at the end of the year, which was challenging for young people.

**Additional Barriers Faced by Some Groups of Youth**

**Government care experience**

Living in government care created additional challenges for young people trying to hold down jobs because they were often moved from one foster home to another, often resulting in them no longer being able to keep their job. Additionally, the stress of moving and of dealing with their historic and current family problems made it difficult to keep attending work on a regular basis.

Many youth with care experience talked about the lack of structure in their lives and how this affected their ability to hold down a job. Without parents or other family members to ensure they attended school, youth got into a pattern of behaviour that made it difficult to deal with structure. One said, “People aren’t supported to thrive in life according to the Ministry, only to survive.”
**Pregnancy**

Becoming pregnant was identified as a barrier to maintaining employment. Reasons included youth no longer being able to perform their job requirements because they were too tired or because their employer discriminated against them for being pregnant.

**Employment Supports**

On the survey, youth identified factors that have helped them to keep a job. The most common were working hard and getting along well with co-workers. Some added comments both on the survey and in the focus groups that having a positive attitude was helpful in maintaining employment.

**Figure 12  What Has Helped Youth Keep a Job (Among Those Who Had Ever Worked)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I've worked hard</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting along well with co-workers</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I've had the needed skills</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-the-job training</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My boss/supervisor has been fair</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive family/friends</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from a 1:1 worker/professional</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support to address challenges I had</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Participants could mark all responses that applied.

In the focus groups, youth who were currently employed were asked to identify supports that helped them to keep their current position. Many listed things they had learned, such as communication skills, positive workplace relations, and teamwork. Others noted factors such as a liveable wage, opportunities for advancement, and having their basic needs (like housing and food) met.

Youth who were employed in jobs they found menial or boring reported that having a plan helped to keep them employed. For some, the plan involved simply having a period of stable paid employment and a good reference on their résumé, while for others it involved working with their employer to have a plan for advancement within their workplace or to build their transferable skills.

Whether youth were looking to advance within their job or to simply maintain the position they had, they found it helpful and motivating when they got the opportunity to check in regularly with their supervisor. This either reassured them that they were doing a good job or gave them the opportunity to improve aspects of their work that they would not otherwise have known needed improvement.
Additional Supports for Maintaining Employment

“It’s not the one-on-one support worker’s job to help you keep your job.”

As noted earlier, the ability to get along with co-workers, employers and customers was identified in every focus group as one of the major barriers to getting and keeping a job. It was therefore not surprising that when asked about the supports which were helping youth to stay employed, participants mainly focused on building relationships.

For youth with mental health concerns, behavioural problems or a history of family problems, ongoing counselling had helped them to learn to work through issues that were bothering them and learn to separate their work life from the other pressures they were facing. One youth noted, “Counselling can be helpful. It matters how you treat customers and co-workers. You have to be able to smile.”

For youth with mental health concerns, having an ongoing support worker was instrumental in them being able to maintain employment. If they had someone they could speak to if they were having a bad day, or who could remind them of skills to manage conflict in the workplace, they were better able to continue their employment without getting so overwhelmed that they quit.

For many youth, high school or post-secondary institutions such as Douglas College and BCIT were identified as having offered support for them to learn the social skills necessary to keep a job. One youth reported he was, “learning these [social skills] through school, through interacting with friends or being in the community and talking to people.” The specific skills he felt were most helpful to keeping his job were “kindness and patience [so that] when you don’t get along with someone you can still show them respect.”

For youth who had struggled to develop and maintain positive relationships in mainstream schools, attending an alternative education program had been helpful in building transferable skills. Just by attending, they had built their interpersonal and conflict resolution skills by spending a lot of time in the same classroom with a small group of people they did not always get along with.

Youth’s Suggestions for Maintaining Employment

“Get it into kids’ heads that work and school really mean something.”

Participants suggested services that supported youth in transitioning from school into employment. These could begin in school and continue through a young person’s early years in the job market. By starting such programs in school, participants could see the importance of attending school even if they did not feel they were getting any immediate rewards.

All youth agreed there needed to be more of an emphasis on teaching them the skills they needed to keep jobs once they had them, which one youth described as, “Knowledge programs that show you how to keep a job, like if you get angry to walk away but not walk out.”
Other suggestions were:

- Teach youth organizational and budgeting skills so they do not get overwhelmed trying to juggle their job and other responsibilities. That way, they could keep on top of tasks such as laundry and purchasing transit tickets;

- Assist youth with accessing the practical supports that they need, such as an alarm clock and access to laundry facilities;

- Offer funding to youth who are supporting themselves in a low-paying job to allow them to upgrade their skills. For example, offer time off or financial support to help youth without a GED to upgrade while they are employed, “as this would stop them feeling stuck in a dead-end job and give them something to look forward to;” and

- Ensure that employers who hire youth with learning disabilities undergo training to understand the challenges these youth face. One youth thought employers could help them to learn by modelling rather than telling them how to do the job. She said, “Don’t give up on us, we learn differently. Be patient, take time and show me.”
Looking Forward

When asked on the survey where they saw themselves in one year, most youth envisioned having a job in their community (79 per cent), being in school or graduated from school (76 per cent), and on their way to having a career or in a career (75 per cent). A little under half (47 per cent) expected to have a job outside their community (57 per cent of males vs. 33 per cent of females).

However, when asked where they saw themselves in five years, youth were less likely to anticipate having a job within their home community, and were more likely to foresee having a job outside their community and to be on a career path (or in a career). Youth in rural areas were more likely than their urban-based peers to expect to be on a career path or in a career in five years (100 per cent vs. 86 per cent).

**Figure 13  Participants’ Expectations**

In the focus groups, the vast majority of youth remained optimistic that they would find employment that paid well in a field that interested them.

Participants’ plans included returning to school, completing advanced education, taking specialist training and moving to communities where opportunities were perceived to be more abundant. Many felt that this would happen for them when they were more financially stable and/or when they were connected to a supportive adult who could help them navigate entrance requirements and other hurdles.

Interestingly, almost none of the youth in the focus groups were interested in owning their own business. The primary reasons were not wanting to manage employees and to deal with workplace conflict, as well as not feeling qualified to run a business or not feeling that they could afford to do so.
Case Studies and Examples of Other Useful Programs

Focus group and interview participants discussed a variety of programs that had helped them to overcome barriers to employment. Five of the programs that youth spoke about are included in this section as case studies. These five were selected because they were praised by youth as positive and concrete examples of programs that helped them to negotiate barriers to employment. The programs all target different populations of youth and have different specialities but also address the core common barriers that marginalized young people face. All provided individualized mentorship and support throughout the program, as well as the opportunity for youth to learn practical skills in an employment setting.

Each of the case studies describe youth’s experiences in the program, the challenges it helped them to overcome, and the elements of the program they found most helpful. Further details about each program were provided by program staff, online resources, and where possible from evaluation reports.

BladeRunners

“It’s really good, it helped me get back to work when I needed it.”

BladeRunners is an employment program designed to assist out-of-school, unemployed, at-risk youth between the ages of 15 and 30 to enter into the labour force. The program is open to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth and includes Aboriginal cultures, practices, and traditions within the program. BladeRunners is currently delivered through three organizations (ACCESS, Ktunaxa Nation and PGNAETA) and their partner agencies in 34 regions across British Columbia. The majority of these partner agencies are Aboriginal-focused.

While programs vary across the province, all participants are taught life skills such as budgeting, time management, and conflict management, as well as employability skills such as résumé/cover letter development, interview skills, professional conduct and workplace communication. By the time youth complete the program they will have gained provincially certified skills, practical knowledge, and documented work experience.

Coordinators of the program assist participants in finding appropriate work placements, and then continue to support them to maintain their placement — for example by providing assistance with workplace conflict resolution, and occasionally, assistance with transportation to and from the workplace.

Work experience placements are coordinated primarily within the trades industry but are also available in other fields such as tourism, retail and clerical.

Evaluation findings

Although no outcome data was available, a case study evaluation of the BladeRunners program in 2001 noted the financial incentive combined with the support of a mentor knowledgeable about the work the youth was undertaking was helpful in ensuring youth stayed engaged in the program. Testimonials
from recent youth participants also show the value of the support received through the program in assisting them to address substance use and other issues.

Elements of the program youth found most helpful in negotiating barriers to employment

Youth in focus groups in Nanaimo and the Lower Mainland all selected BladeRunners as a program they felt should be highlighted as helping youth negotiate barriers to employment. They described a number of ways in which they had been assisted, including the following:

• Youth receive a $150 stipend during their training, and a wage during the work experience component of the program (the employer receives a subsidy for the youth’s wages). For example, a young parent was able to participate in the program because he received some income which he could use to help support his family.

• All participants receive certified health and safety training. Youth spoke about obtaining certificates such as WHMIS, FoodSafe and First Aid, and how useful these were when applying for employment. One said “[BladeRunners] helps us get tickets which we can use in lieu of experience.”

• Support with transportation is available through the program in the form of bus tickets, gas cards and occasionally rides. Some youth who had participated in the program had been supported to get their learner’s licence, which had helped them to find and maintain employment in communities where alternative transportation options were not readily available.

• Youth are supported to access resources for job searches. For example, youth described being supported to access online job search sites. They were also given assistance in building their résumés, which was helpful because they were able to include information they would not have otherwise thought of on their own.

• The program provides life skills training. The BladeRunners program at Nanaimo Youth Services Association focuses specifically on life skills for the first two weeks. One youth commented that this helped him understand himself better and address problems that were affecting his ability to find and keep employment.

• The program offers employment skills training and experience. Participants felt they learned useful skills like carpentry and how to be safe on a work site. They liked that the teaching was “hands on,” such as building mock houses, and felt they learned a lot this way.

• The program offers support with mental health challenges. For example, one youth who identified as having mental health issues, which had impacted his ability to maintain employment, felt that the caring, nurturing environment created within the program and work experience sites had helped him to learn to better regulate his emotions within a work setting.

• The program provides equipment and apparel. Participants found it invaluable that they were provided with items that would be required to wear on a job site that they may not have otherwise been able to access, such as boots a hardhat, and a vest.

• The program’s Aboriginal focus was seen as a strength. For example, some Aboriginal youth felt safer and more engaged because the program specifically sought to engage Aboriginal youth and is
often run by Aboriginal organizations. They felt that the organizations understood the specific barriers they faced, such as racism on job sites and from employers.

**Career Path**

*“[It was] one of the best work programs I’ve been in.”*

Career Path is a Vancouver-based employment program operated by PLEA Community Services since 2010. It targets youth aged 15 to 18 who have been in conflict with the law, and who are considered gang-involved or at high risk of becoming gang-involved.

Youth are referred to the program through their probation officer. The program aims to place youth into a full-time ten-week job placement where they receive intensive one-on-one support and supervision from a Career Path staff.

Employers receive training on how to support the youth, and assist them to integrate with the other staff at the job site. Career Path staff also provide support to employers if issues arise during a youth’s work placement.

Ideally youth begin their job placement immediately, although some have to wait for a placement opportunity. During this time, they participate in job skills training, such as First Aid courses and résumé writing.

Youth are placed in a meaningful job placement that matches their career interests. These have included automotive repair, construction, landscaping, real estate, restaurant industry, and retail. Youth receive on-the-job training, minimum wage of $10.25 (half paid by the employer and half by Career Path), as well as certificates that relate directly to their job placement.

**Evaluation results**

McCreary Centre Society’s independent evaluation of the Career Path Program, which took place between 2010 and 2013, indicated that the program was targeting the intended gang-involved youth, and that the majority had not been engaged in legal employment previously. Discharge data showed that many of these youth were successfully employed in legal jobs following their involvement in the program, and 40 per cent had been hired as an employee at the site of their placement.

Employers praised the program for the support they received and also appreciated that the youth were paid by Career Path through their placement. This allowed the employers to train and assess youth, and get to know them, which was helpful if they wished to hire them when an opening became available.

Many youth noted in the evaluation that one of the main reasons for their gang involvement had been financial, but as result of participating in the Career Path program, 50 per cent of youth said that their income had increased.

The majority of youth provided positive feedback about the program, with 95 per cent reporting that they felt treated fairly by their employer, 90 per cent indicating they had learned new skills, and 84 per cent feeling that they were accepted by the other workers at their job placement. Sixty-three per cent of...
youth reported a decrease in their gang involvement due to their involvement in Career Path, and 70 per cent felt they had found their career path because of the program.

**Elements of the program youth found most helpful in negotiating barriers to employment**

- Youth receive current minimum wage payment throughout their work placement. Youth appreciated that they were paid throughout the program because it allowed them to meet their basic needs and be able to participate fully in the program.

- Youth receive relevant certificates through the program. Youth appreciated that they got work-related certificates that they could immediately use in their job placement. They also liked that they could start their job placement as soon as they entered the program, as this helped them to realize the relevance of completing certificates.

- Employers are trained to work with youth. Youth identified that having a supportive employer had a significant effect on their ability to be successful in the program. Youth thought that employers were more willing to take a chance on youth who they might not have otherwise hired. This was because they got to work with them for ten weeks and got to know them as individuals instead of from their criminal records or previous gang involvement.

- Receiving one-on-one support from a PLEA worker was key in the youth’s success. Youth could phone the worker for support if needed, and the worker helped participants to navigate challenges that arose, such as conflicts with co-workers and their employer.

**Gastown Vocational Training**

*“It’s been the most helpful, outside of recovery.”*

Gastown Vocational Training is an employment centre in Vancouver which provides support to youth and young adults with mental health challenges to find employment or enter into school programs. Their youth and young adult program is open to young people between the ages of 16 and 30. The program provides one-on-one support; group counselling; job skills training, such as résumé preparation and practice with interviews; and job placements or job shadowing in a variety of industries. The program focuses on addressing mental health concerns that may be keeping youth from finding and maintaining employment, and assists them to gain skills in a supported environment. The program is flexible in length, tailoring the pace and duration to the needs of the individual.

**Evaluation findings**

Although no program evaluation has been conducted, recent data provided by the program indicated that between April 2013 and March 31 2014, 62 per cent of young people who entered the program were placed in either paid employment or into education programs, and a further 32 per cent participated in unpaid work placements and volunteer placements.
Elements of the program youth found most helpful in negotiating barriers to employment

- Youth receive support for mental health challenges while in the program. For example, one youth spoke of how one-on-one counselling helped her to identify ways in which her own mental health challenges had influenced her attitude toward work and her ability to maintain employment.

- The program is tailored to youth’s individual needs. Youth reported that they felt more engaged in the program than they had in others they had attended because staff took the time to get to know them. They also felt that taking aptitude tests as part of the program had helped them find out what line of work might be a good fit for them.

- The program has connections to employers. Participants felt the program is well connected to a diverse range of employers, which ensures that job placements take into account young people’s personality, strengths, interests and goals.

- The program offers meaningful job placements for short periods of time. Participants commented that the eight week placements are ideal because it is a short enough time frame that they could commit to without feeling overwhelmed, and this increased their chances of success.

Rutland Senior Secondary Pre-Employment Program

“*It gets you references for jobs you like.*”

The Pre-Employment Program at Rutland Senior Secondary School in Kelowna is designed for students aged 15 and older who struggle academically and are interested in developing job-related skills. Youth alternate a week in school with a week of unpaid work experience. Students have a Modified Individualized Education Plan and complete course work in math, science, social studies and English. Upon completion of the program, students obtain an Evergreen School Leaving Certificate which demonstrates that their skills have been developed to a level for early entry into employment. Work placements last a minimum of four weeks, after which youth can change jobs if they wish, giving them the opportunity to try a variety of jobs with different employers. Up to 60 employers are involved in the program every year, with many having taken part for over 15 years.

Evaluation findings

Although results of a formal evaluation of the program were not available, program staff reported that nine out of every ten students enrolled in the program succeed in completing it. These youth improve academically because they see the value of schooling as it relates to their job placement, and ultimately many successfully transition to employment which they enjoy and are well suited to.

Elements of the program youth found most helpful in negotiating barriers to employment

- The program offers employment skills training and experience. By taking part in work placements, youth can learn valuable skills and experience in a variety of employment areas.

- Youth gain references for their résumé. The combination of school and a variety of work placements gives youth the opportunity to accumulate references on their résumé that can help
them with future job applications. One youth thought this had given him an edge over others when applying for positions.

- Young people can make connections in their field of interest. With work placements lasting a minimum of four weeks, youth are able to try out different jobs that they are interested in. For one youth who enjoyed doing physical work outside, taking part in the program meant he could work with a landscaping company and make important connections in an industry he wished to pursue as a career.

- Youth can continue and complete school. For example, one youth was encouraged by teachers to transfer to the program “because they were worried I wasn’t going to pass.” The Pre-employment Program allowed him to continue with his schooling in a way that was more tailored to his needs and abilities.

**Street Youth Job Action**

“I’m not gonna lose a job if I miss a day.”

“If you have a bad day or if you don’t show up you will still be able to work when you are ready.”

The Street Youth Job Action (SYJA) program at Directions Youth Services Centre in Vancouver supports at-risk and homeless youth to gain employment skills and experience through paid work.

For four hours every day, between 9 am and 1:45 pm, youth aged 15 to 24 can be paid to do jobs such as street beautification (street garbage removal, graffiti paint-over, posted bill removal), needle sweeps/condom pick-up and safe disposal, event clean-up, and other community enhancement services. Through this work experience, youth learn about punctuality, teamwork, a work ethic, and communication.

**Evaluation findings**

No formal evaluation of the program has been completed.

**Elements of the program youth found most helpful in negotiating barriers to employment**

- The program provides employment skills training. SYJA allows youth to gain valuable experience that enhances their résumé, and includes the option of working toward becoming a Team Leader. Participants said that knowing they could progress to Team Leader within the program was motivating to them.

- The program is low barrier and flexible. Youth voiced appreciation that SYJA did not penalize them if they did not attend. This flexibility and lack of barriers means the program is accessible and accepting of young people from a variety of backgrounds, including those living a more transient lifestyle.

- The program provides meaningful employment experience. For example, one youth said he enjoyed SYJA because it allowed him to do a job that made a difference. Through picking up needles and improving the environment, he felt that he was doing something meaningful with his time.
Other Programs

Other programs highlighted by at least one participant as good examples of programs that helped them to negotiate employment barriers included:

- **ACE-It program**, which is an introductory trades program.
- **Access**, which pays youth to train in the trades.
- **Career Zone**, which is low barrier to access, offers one-on-one supports, free school upgrading, wages to attend, provides bus tickets, and provides work training and follow up once the youth is placed with an employer.
- **Culinary program at Mount Boucherie Secondary School in West Kelowna**, which assists youth to get a place at culinary college.
- **Custody Centre Work Program**, which allows youth to use their time in custody to build their work skills.
- **Frog Hollow Youth Employment Centre**, which offers youth a caseworker and one-on-one help with employment preparation, including help with writing cover letters and résumés.
- **Get Youth Working program**, which connects youth to jobs by providing employers with an incentive to hire youth.
- **Jumpstart**, which is a 12-week program that allows youth to earn wages while learning about finding and keeping a job and gaining interview skills.
- **Milieu**, which is a program that offers youth volunteer opportunities to get work experience. After a “trial run” at the job, the employer will decide whether or not they will hire that person.
- **Mission Possible**, which is a six-month transition program to support people experiencing homelessness into work. The participant who took part in this program appreciated that it was 15 hours a week of work, as it got him into the habit of working without being overwhelming.
- **Work BC**, which provides resources for youth to look at wanted ads, and provides assistance with writing résumés and cover letters. They also put on a three-day program that youth said helped with interview skills.
- **YMCA work program**, which is another program that pays participants to train in a trade.
Designing an Employment Support Program

Focus group participants were asked to design their ideal employment support program. Some youth struggled to design their ideal program because of what they saw as their own limited experience in securing employment or because of cognitive and comprehension challenges. However, among those who did participate in this activity, many common themes emerged.

Programs youth designed were typically six months to one year long, although some designed programs up to five years in length, while others thought they should last “as long as they are needed.” One group designed a program where youth did not have to commit to a timeframe but could drop in when they needed support, and then build up to more regular attendance if they needed it or could handle it.

All programs kept youth separate from older adults. Some did offer support to young adults up to 29 years of age.

Participants agreed that the ideal employment support centre would be tailored to youth specifically, and to their individual needs. It would offer concrete employment planning and skills development, as well as on-the-job experience. It would also offer ongoing support and mentorship once youth were employed, would teach communication and conflict resolution skills, and would teach life skills such as budgeting.

Most programs that youth designed ensured youth’s basic needs were met by providing a training wage, food, support with transportation, and in some examples also a link to housing. As one youth said, the ideal program would ensure that “all needs [are] cared for so you can direct your focus on finding a job.”

Many of the programs that youth designed focused on giving youth the opportunity to try different jobs and work environments. Having a variety of job placements for youth who were still looking for a career path was considered key to a successful program. Experiencing different job placements would allow youth to learn what their skills and strengths were, and figure out what they wanted to do. It would also ensure they did not pursue qualifications for a line of work they ultimately did not like or were not suited to. As one suggested, “You could find out what you can’t handle. I think that’s really important.”

Youth designed programs that not only ensured they got the qualifications they needed but also taught them how to use these qualifications, as many had experience of attaining certifications but not knowing how to apply them to the job market.

Employment support programs were also designed to provide youth with information about the available industries and jobs in a community, including information about what qualifications were needed for each position and how these might be achieved, and other information such as how often positions became available. Regular job fairs were a component of several of the programs youth designed.

Youth felt programs should address individuals’ specific needs, such as by providing childcare for young parents, offering more hands-on support and experiential learning to those with literacy
challenges, and supporting youth with mental health challenges to take time off from the program if needed, without losing their place in the program.

Youth with FASD and literacy challenges incorporated special services for youth with these challenges into their ideal program. Participants also recommended increasing hands-on learning opportunities rather than focusing on training in a classroom setting. They felt this would improve the opportunities that are available to youth who struggle in a school setting.

Some young people with a criminal record designed a program that worked with youth to help them overcome their negative reputations in their community and with employers, including a job placement where they could demonstrate they were trustworthy and get a reference to that effect.

“If it was community-based then you’d be able to try out things in the community. Careers as well.”

Youth’s ideas:

- Youth should be paid to attend programs.
- Provide childcare or a childcare subsidy for young parents.
- Programming should be flexible and individualized based on the youth’s career goals.
- Programming should be specific for each trade.
- Programs should teach youth how the job skills they learn are transferable.
- The program should also provide support around housing, mental health and substance use, or be located with these services nearby.
- An employment project needs to include a component that addresses the fears, anxieties and uneasiness that exists around re-entering the work force, or entering for the first time.
- Programs should include work placements with local employers.

Staff at the employment support centre would:

- Enjoy working with youth.
- Be relatable and understand the challenges youth are facing. Ideally, staff would be people who have been through similar experiences and have come out the other side.
- Spend time finding out what the youth’s interests, skills and career goals are.
- Be honest with youth about their possibilities of finding employment and about how to improve their résumé.
- Have contacts with employers and be knowledgeable about job opportunities and vacancies.
- Assist youth to create a résumé.
- Teach youth interview skills and practice with them.
- Take youth to interviews.
Be non-judgmental if youth lose their job or get fired.
Teach youth other life skills, including “how to speak to people.”

Potential Demonstration Project

As part of an employment symposium held at the conclusion of this project, the ideas generated by youth were incorporated to create a potential employment support pilot project for the BC Centre for Employment Excellence and its stakeholders to consider. The proposed project included the following elements:

- Offer a program that lasts six to 12 months (with some flexibility)
- Target youth aged 15 to 24 (with some flexibility)
- Offer a training wage/subsidized travel/provided necessary equipment and clothing
- Provide a mentor/key worker who worked with youth on an ongoing basis to support them with their individual challenges and goals
- Provide additional support a youth may need such as childcare, learning modifications
- Offer concrete relevant employment skills
- Offer a realistic assessment of available jobs locally
- Offer interpersonal skills training
- Offer a variety of work placements and other hands-on experience
- Offer the opportunity to gain qualifications relevant to youth's field of interest and available local jobs
- Teach skills relating to finding employment such as résumé writing, interview skills, and how to apply qualifications and skills
- Program staff must be professionals skilled in working with vulnerable youth
- Have minimal entrance requirements and rolling admission dates to offer flexibility to participants

Two of the case studies which were cited by youth as examples of successful employment support programs were able to provide evaluation data. Both programs contained the elements listed above. However, some of the components of this potential project would not meet the needs of all groups of youth who participated in this study. For example, some youth were not able to commit to a program of six to 12 months duration due to mental health challenges or homelessness, and these youth would benefit from a program with a more individualized and flexible structure. This suggested program would therefore be recommended only as one of a range of options.
Conclusion and Discussion

Youth who took part in the project had experienced significant challenges in their lives. For example, 46 per cent had stayed in a foster home, 34 per cent in a group home, 32 per cent had lived on a Youth Agreement, 23 per cent had stayed in a custody centre, and 64 per cent had at least one health condition or disability.

Youth identified barriers to accessing employment which included transportation challenges, concerns about interpersonal interactions within the workplace, and a lack of accessible employment support services. Additional challenges which some youth experienced included dealing with the upheaval of having been in government care, childcare issues, poverty, and having been involved in the criminal justice system.

Similar barriers were identified to maintaining employment, as were additional ones such as safety concerns, inconsistent shift patterns and a lack of available full-time year round positions.

Youth identified supports that had helped them to find and maintain employment. These supports were often specific individuals, such as job coaches, employment support workers, family, youth workers and school counsellors. School programs and employment programs that provided individualized and specialized support, and which taught youth additional skills such as conflict resolution and managing interpersonal relationships, were also particularly valuable.

Participants provided recommendations for policy and practice in BC which would support marginalized youth in finding and maintaining employment. These included:

- Offer paid employment training programs, which allow youth to meet their basis needs.
- Have employment programs which include work experience and allow youth to practice what they have learned.
- Provide childcare or a childcare subsidy for young parents.
- Offer employment programs which are flexible and individualized based on the youth’s career goals.
- Have programs to teach youth interpersonal skills and how to manage conflict.
- Ensure that programs not only teach skills but also teach youth how to apply those skills in different settings.
- Ensure youth with government care experience have a mentor to support them into employment.
- Increase the age limit and length of youth employment support programs.
- Offer more employment training and support programs in every community to reduce waiting lists for current programs.

Marginalized youth across British Columbia voiced their interest in joining the labour force and having a career, and many are doing everything they can to ensure this happens. They face significant barriers but were able to identify helpful supports which are currently available, or which could be made
available. Including their perspectives in service and policy planning can assist them to overcome the barriers they face.
Appendices

Appendix 1: List of Participating Agencies and Recruitment Posters

List of Participating Agencies

We would like to sincerely thank the following agencies for allowing us to host a focus group at their site, and for assisting us to recruit participants.

Northern
Prince George Native Friendship Centre, Prince George
Prince George Youth Custody Centre, Prince George
Quesnel Employment Services, Quesnel

Fraser
St. Leonard’s Youth and Family Services, Burnaby
Totally Beautiful and the C.R.E.W., Surrey
Abbotsford Community Services, Abbotsford

Vancouver Coastal
Directions Youth Services Centre, Vancouver
Watari Counselling and Support Services Society, Vancouver
Sea to Sky Community Services, Squamish

Vancouver Island
Nanaimo Youth Services Association, Nanaimo
Nanaimo Youth Services Association, Courtenay

Interior
The Bridge Youth and Family Services Society, Kelowna
Interior Community Services, Merritt
YMCA WorkBC Employment Services Centre, Penticton
Are you a young person between the ages of 15 and 29? Have you experienced barriers to finding or keeping work?

We want to hear from you

What do young people need to find and keep meaningful employment?

McCreary Centre Society and the BC Centre for Employment Excellence are looking for feedback from BC youth about their experiences finding and keeping employment.

What: Take part in the focus group or interview & fill out an anonymous survey.
When: __________________________
Where: __________________________

To thank you for taking part, you will receive a $20 gift card, and snacks will be provided.

Share your experiences and ideas and help us to improve employment opportunities for youth in BC.

This research is being undertaken on behalf of the BC Centre for Employment Excellence (www.cfebc.org). If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please contact Shaun de Raat, the Centre’s Research Coordinator at 804-782-4077 or shaun@cfewa
Are you between the ages of 15 and 29?
Have you experienced barriers to finding or keeping work?

We want to hear from you!

McGeeary Centre Society and the BC Centre for Employment Excellence are looking for feedback from BC youth about their experiences finding and keeping employment.

YOUR IDEAS Participate in a short online survey. Share your experiences and make a difference!
YOUR CHANCE Youth between the ages of 15-29 can take the survey.
YOUR PRIVACY The survey is anonymous. This means no one will be able to connect what you say back to you personally.

Fill out the survey by April 1 at http://fluidsurveys.com/s/Employment-Survey/
Share your experiences and ideas and help us to improve employment opportunities for youth in BC!

If you have questions, please contact Stephanie at stephanie@mcs.bc.ca or 1-604-291-1596 ext. 222.

This research is being undertaken on behalf of the BC Centre for Employment Excellence (www.ccee.org).
If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please contact Shawn de Raaf, the Centre’s Research Coordinator at 1-604-401-4077 or sdeas@cee.org.
Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form

McCreary Centre Society Youth Health — Youth Research — Youth Engagement

Spring 2014

You have been invited to take part in a survey and focus group or interview with staff from the McCreary Centre Society. McCreary is a non-profit organization that aims to improve youth health in BC.

We are working with the BC Centre for Employment Excellence to see what barriers youth face to finding employment and to highlight examples of how these barriers have been successfully negotiated.

It is up to you if you want to take part. You can choose not to participate, to not answer questions, or to stop at any time.

The survey takes about 15 minutes to complete, and the interview/focus group might take up to 2 hours.

Everything you write on the survey or say out loud is confidential and anonymous. We will not record your name and nobody will be able to link your answers to you personally. Only staff connected to McCreary will get to see your answers. Data will be stored in locked files and on computers with passwords.

You will receive a $20 gift card for taking part. Your answers will help make sure young people have a voice in planning employment services and programs. There might be risks, as you may feel some questions are stressful or sensitive, or if you share personal information in a focus group which another participant does not keep confidential.

If you tell us that you were abused, or you plan to harm yourself or others, we cannot keep this a secret. We would have to tell the proper agencies to keep you or/and others safe.

If you have questions or do not understand what you are being asked to consent to, please talk to McCreary staff.

If you would like more information about this project or about McCreary Centre Society, you can contact Annie Smith at 604-291-1996 or annie@mcs.bc.ca, or visit our website (www.mcs.bc.ca). You can also contact the BC Centre for Employment Excellence by phone at 604-658-2141 or by email at info@cfeebc.org.
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

IF YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT BEING A PARTICIPANT IN THIS PROJECT MEANS, AND YOU AGREE TO TAKE PART, PLEASE FILL THIS IN:

Your name or initials: ___________________________

Signature: ____________________________________

Date: ________________________________________

Consent forms will be stored separately from the surveys, and will not be shared with anyone outside of McCreary.
Appendix 3: Focus Group Outline and Sample Activity

Welcome and introductions

- Facilitators, the McCreary Centre Society, and the BC Centre for Employment Excellence
- Purpose of the project and what will be done with participant’s feedback
- Review agenda

Informed consent

- Voluntary, anonymous and confidential
- Honoraria
- Collect consent forms
- Respecting each other and ourselves
  - Not sharing what others talked about outside of the group
  - Respecting differences of opinion
  - Right to pass
- Questions from the group

Icebreakers and energizers

- Share your name, where you are from, and what your dream job is

Thermometer game

- Generate discussion around employment opportunities for youth in the community

Job goals activity

- In small groups or individually, complete the job goals activity
- Share back with the group

My ideal employment program activity

- In small groups, complete the ‘My ideal employment program’ activity
- Share back with the group
Negotiating the Barriers to Employment for Vulnerable Youth

Recommendations and priority areas

- As a large group, consider responses from the activities and identify priority areas and recommendations to improve youth employment opportunities

Survey

- Complete survey

Closing

- Thank you's and honoraria
- How youth can view the report
- Reminder of how to contact McCreary and the BC Centre for Employment Excellence

Sample Focus Group Activity

![Focus Group Activity Diagram]

- **Getting a job**
  - **Job goal**: Fill in the goal area with a job or career. This could be a job you would like to have one day, a job you currently have, or a job you have had in the past.
  - **My team**: The players on your team represent the people, places, or things that help you to get the job you want.
  - **Opposing team**: The players on the opposing team represent the things that stand in the way of you getting the job you want.

Think about resources, supports, skills, training, opportunities, commitments, networks...
Negotiating the Barriers to Employment for Vulnerable Youth

Opposing team

My team

**Keeping a job**

*Job goal* Fill in the goal area with a job or career. This could be a job you would like to have one day, a job you currently have, or a job you have had in the past.

*My team* The players on your team represent the people, places, or things that help you to keep a job once you’ve been hired.

*Opposing team* The players on the opposing team represent the things that stand in the way of you keeping a job once you’ve been hired.

Think about resources, supports, skills, training, opportunities, commitments, networks...