



Policy Wise
for Children & Families

Improving Opportunity Youth Employment in Alberta:

Strategic Opportunities for Action

Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

Why focus on Opportunity Youth in Alberta?

Young people are the future. Economic and social prosperity in Alberta depends on their successful transition from training and education into work. However, a global pandemic on top of an economic recession has influenced youth's hope in the future of employment. They have experienced declines in mental health. Their education and training opportunities have been disrupted. Prospects for full-time paid work have declined.

The economic recession and pandemic have impacted groups of youth differently. Opportunity Youth (OY) are among the young people hardest hit. OY are 18-29 year olds not engaged in training, education, or employment, often due to structural and social barriers. These barriers include: housing or food insecurity, involvement in the justice or child intervention systems, experiencing disability, mental health concerns, lack of access to role models and mentors, caretaking responsibilities, and being a new immigrant or refugee.

There are opportunities, however, to intervene and support the successful transition of OY into work. Momentum is building across Canada. The federal government has committed to supporting youth transitioning to work through the Youth Employment Skills Strategy, Canada Summer Jobs, and the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training initiatives.

The Government of Alberta has made jobs a focus of pandemic and economic recovery. Yet, in their plans they have mostly overlooked young people, and OY in particular. Alberta lacks a youth employment strategy. Without it, opportunities are missed, cross-ministry collaborations are ad hoc, disjointed, and disconnected from system-level goals, there are a shortage of quality data on youth employment (including OY), employers are unsure how to get involved, and there is general pessimism about the future of work for youth in Alberta. In addition, there are also insufficient resources directed toward the root causes of the employment barriers faced by OY in Alberta. For example, to address systemic racism, ableism, classism, and sexism that exclude from work and training opportunities young people who are new immigrants, racialized, experiencing disability (including mental health issues), or parents among others.

In this report, you will find a summary of the key challenges and opportunities to support OY in Alberta. We recommend actions and highlight policy targets to improve employment prospects for OY. There are opportunities for policy-makers, youth-serving agencies, funders, and employers to be part of the solution. The time has come to build a hopeful and inclusive future for all youth in Alberta.

What can be done to improve the situation?

To make recommendations on how to support OY and identify policy opportunities for action we interviewed key stakeholders in Alberta and reviewed practice-based resources and documentation.

What do we recommend?

- Intervening early and preventing disconnection from education, training, and employment;
- Tailoring supports unique OY needs;
- Involving and incentivizing employers;
- Improving supporting structures; and,
- Involving OY in solution-generating activities.

What are the strategic policy opportunities?

Area 1: Integrate OY employment and education needs into existing provincial policy initiatives	Area 2: Build momentum and structures for province-wide collaboration on OY employment	Area 3: Build the foundation for collecting and analyzing OY employment data in Alberta
<p>ADVOCACY: Advocate for preventative supports through cross-ministry Child and Youth Well-Being Review</p> <p>ADVOCACY: Advocate for OY employment supports through Ministry of Jobs, Economy, and Innovation stakeholder engagement on Alberta’s Recovery Plan</p> <p>PILOT TESTING: Explore opportunity to integrate employment supports into provincially-funded integrated youth hubs</p> <p>POLICY INPUT: Advocate for enhanced career awareness and skill development in high school curriculum review</p> <p>ADVOCACY: Explore how to integrate OY supports into provincial government’s strategy for post-secondary education</p>	<p>CONVENING ENTITY: Create a lead entity to provide backbone structure for collaboration or network-building across sectors.</p> <p>LEVERAGE FUNDING: Coordinate employers and youth-serving organizations to apply for Alberta Jobs Now funding</p> <p>PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: Develop workforce partnership proposals in conjunction with Labour & Immigration focused on OY</p>	<p>AWARENESS-BUILDING/FUNDING: Amplify federal work on OY employment in the Alberta context to support building a provincial base of OY data.</p> <p>DATA COLLECTION: Explore data collection and analysis opportunities within the provincial government to build knowledge and interest in OY employment supports</p>

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Introduction

Young Albertans are discouraged about their economic futures. They face “stubbornly high” unemployment rates in a province struggling with long-term economic recovery (Government of Alberta, 2021, p. 58). Due to COVID-19, they have experienced multiple interruptions to work and education over the last 18 months, and an increase in mental health and anxiety issues.

These more recent challenges build on longer-term structural shifts in the world of work that make youth transitions from school to the workforce more complex, costly, and uncertain (Bell et al., 2016; Expert Panel on Youth Employment, 2017). These shifts include:

- More precarious work, characterized by temporary contracts, lower wages, few benefits, minimal training, and little opportunity for career advancement
- More automation, which will remove low-skilled jobs from across all sectors, but which jobs and when is unknown
- Higher costs for post-secondary education, and increased employer expectations for having post-secondary education

The new labour market realities create particular challenges for Opportunity Youth (OY). OY are young people aged 18-29 years who are not engaged in school or work, often due to structural and social barriers. These barriers include: housing or food insecurity, involvement in the justice or child intervention systems, experiencing disability, mental health concerns, lack of access to role models and mentors, caretaking responsibilities, and being a new immigrant or refugee. OY are considered to be the furthest away from the labour market and without support are at high risk of unemployment throughout their lives, reduced lifetime earnings, and ongoing mental health issues (Brown, 2021). Targeted action is needed to tackle the structural roots of these barriers as well as create and expand tailored work opportunities for OY.

This report presents a set of strategic policy opportunities to enhance and improve employment outcomes for OY in Alberta. These opportunities are directed at federal and provincial levels of government. There are also key roles for other stakeholders, including employers, non-profit organizations and youth. Please see Appendix A for an overview of the research methods used for this project.

Who are Opportunity Youth in Alberta?

Opportunity Youth are a heterogeneous, ever-shifting population, comprised of many groups with diverse needs based on personal and contextual circumstances. OY are also known in Canada and internationally as NEET youth, or Not in Education, Employment or Training¹. In Alberta, nearly 12% of young people aged 15-29 years are NEET. Compared with youth overall, OY in Alberta are more likely to be (Statistics Canada, n.d., 2018, 2019, 2021):

<i>Women with children</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 54% of NEET are female versus 46% for males · Higher NEET rate among females is due to higher proportion of females being inactive² than males (15% vs. 6%) · Inactive NEET closely associated with motherhood: females with children are more likely inactive than without (32% vs. 6%) · NEET unemployment³ is similar between females and males (5% vs. 6%)
<i>Looking for work</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 40% are unemployed (actively looking) versus 60% inactive (Not in Labour Force – NILF) · Higher proportion of females are NILF (40%) versus males (21%) · Limited data on whether inactive by choice or because of barriers (e.g. waiting for a school program to begin or caretaking for children)
<i>Indigenous</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 17% of Indigenous youth are NEET vs. 9.2% in the overall Alberta population (aged 15-24)
<i>Recent immigrant</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 15% of Alberta’s youth population (aged 15-24) identified as immigrants; 17% are NEET · Of immigrant youth under NEET, 41% were economic immigrants, 36% were sponsored by family, and 22% were refugees · Time in which immigrants moved to Canada also has an impact on NEET rates: Recent immigrants (5 years or less) had a higher NEET rate than immigrants who landed more than 5 years ago (18% vs. 13%)
<i>Living with a disability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 7.6% of young people with a disability in Alberta are actively looking for a job⁴ · There is limited NEET-specific data for Alberta youth living with a disability
<i>Low-income</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 16% of NEET youth live in low-income households compared to 10% of the overall youth population (15 to 24 years). · NEET youth groups receive a higher proportion of government transfers (19%) than overall youth aged 15 to 24 in Alberta (5%).
<i>High school or less</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 28% of NEET youth do not have a certificate, diploma or degree, 42% have a secondary school diploma, 30% have a post-secondary education · The higher the education level, the lower the NEET rate: youth aged 15-24 with high school or less have NEET rate of 22%, those with post-secondary education have 10% rate
<i>Not worked or worked part-time in the last year</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 49% of NEET youth did not work in the past year · Of those that had worked in the past, 41% worked part year and/or part-time. · The most common occupations for NEET youth were sales and service occupations (23%) and trades, transport or related occupations (24%).

¹ Age groups used for NEET across data sets may vary. Data from Statistics Canada sometimes uses ages 15-24 and other times uses ages 15-29; data provided in this report will reference the age range, and will sometimes break down into smaller age ranges for comparison, for example, 15-19, 20-24, and 25-29 years old.

² Inactive: those not looking for work

³ Unemployment: those actively looking for work

⁴ From Opportunity for All Youth (2019)

There are limitations to the NEET data referenced here. For example, the data does not give us understanding of NEET trajectories over time, and whether/how the characteristics listed are acting as barriers. For example, census data analysis cannot determine whether inactive OY were inactive by choice or because of barriers preventing attachment to the labour force. Is the higher level of women being inactive or NILF due in part to unaffordable childcare?

Other Canadian research has investigated risk factors associated with entering NEET status (Expert Panel, 2017; Henderson et al., 2017; Kutsyuruba et al., 2019). See Table 1 for details. These factors are not mutually exclusive as youth may face multiple factors simultaneously. Understanding these different factors is essential for developing effective policy approaches, as is understanding the related barriers to re-connecting with employment, education, or training.

Table 1: Potential risk factors for NEET Youth from

Risk Factors Associated with NEET Status		
Personal	Family	Social
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Low socio-economic status · Racialized/visible minority · Newcomer to Canada (less than 5 years) · Young parenthood · Homelessness · Disability · Mental health issues · Marginalized gender or sexual identity · Substance use · Experienced domestic violence · Low self-esteem and confidence · Low motivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Low household income · Poor housing · Live in rural or remote location · Single-parent family · Unemployed parents · Parents with low levels of education · Low parental interest and poor or no career guidance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Experience with foster care · Early school leaver · Negative experience of education (e.g. educational failures, low teacher expectations or interest) · Challenges with literacy and numeracy at school · Experienced bullying at school · Suspended or expelled from school · Lack of work experience · Lack of Canadian work experience · Experience in criminal justice system · Ineffective youth employment services

Impacts of COVID-19 on Opportunity Youth

The COVID-19 pandemic destabilized work, education, and training according to the youth we spoke to. They have lost jobs, experienced reduced hours at work, and had to cope with changes in duties such as shifting to a role focused on health and safety measures and moving to running programs online. For youth that were in school prior to COVID, they experienced periodic isolation periods when classmates tested positive for COVID, and also couldn't work. COVID also changed or extended work placements, with youth reporting that it is taking longer to graduate. Youth feel as though online learning was difficult for most with high levels of loneliness, less motivation, and less access to learning support.

Youth also reported experiencing increased feelings of hopelessness and helplessness and more mental health concerns as they are managing the impacts of COVID-19, echoing results on a national level.

Youth aged 15 – 24 reporting excellent or very good mental health dropped from 60% (pre-pandemic) to 40% by July 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2020).

Data tracking on unemployment shows that COVID-19 more strongly impacted the youth population in Alberta. The rate of unemployment for youth (aged 15 to 24) increased by 11.4% in Alberta and by 9% nationally between 2019 and 2020. Further, the ongoing impacts of COVID have created a bigger challenge for certain groups of OY over others. In Alberta, overall increases in unemployment were similar between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. In Canada, immigrant youth experienced a greater increase in unemployment rate than Canada-born youth (11.6% vs. 8.0%). Young females (aged 15 to 24) also had a greater increase in unemployment rate than males (13.5% vs. 9.5%). Table 3 provides an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on youth employment rates between 2019 and 2020 (using data from Statistics Canada, n.d.).

By June 2021, the unemployment rate had been reduced to 18.1% in Alberta (15-24 years old), but was still the highest in Canada (Johnson, 2021). The reason for the high rate remains unclear, with Alberta-based economists suggesting a number of possibilities: distortions from the CERB program, Alberta’s relatively high minimum wage, and more structural problems like a skills mismatch (Johnson, 2021).

Table 2: Youth employment rates before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

	Unemployment rates		Change 2019 to 2020
	Pre-COVID-19 (%) Jan-Dec 2019	During COVID-19 (%) Jan-Dec 2020	
Overall Youth			
Alberta	12.6	24.0	+11.4%
Canada	11.0	20.0	+9.0%
Indigenous Status (Alberta)			
Indigenous	19.8	31.5	+11.7%
Non-Indigenous	12.2	23.6	+11.4%
Immigrant status (Canada)			
Immigrant	12.3	23.9	+11.6%
Canada-born	10.6	18.6	+8.0%
Sex (Alberta)			
Females	10.3	23.8	+13.5%
Males	14.7	24.2	+9.5%

Emerging practices for supporting OY employment

The needs of OY go beyond those of youth more generally when it comes to employment supports. Supports should be targeted at young people facing the greatest barriers to employment. Policy research on how to best improve employment among OY is emerging. Existing evidence from across North America suggests policies and programs that (Bell et al., 2016; Henderson et al., 2017; Kutsyuruba et al., 2019; OECD, 2013; Maguire, 2020; McAuliffe, 2018; Public Policy Forum, 2013; Warland, Applegate, Schnur, & Jones, 2015):

Intervene early and prevent disconnection from education, training, and employment

- **Build bridging supports:** High school and bridging supports are considered particularly important for OY to reduce early disconnection from education, work, and social support systems. Youth to adult transitions are more difficult for OY, as they more often leave home at younger ages and do not have strong natural support systems to provide guidance and support. Once disconnected from support systems, it is challenging to find and reconnect OY to education and work. Other effective early supports include:
- **Provide mentorship:** Formal and informal mentorship in school and at work was described as a “game changer” for OY in successfully transitioning from school to work, and developing a career path.
- **Raising young people’s aspirations:** Building motivation and self-esteem supports OY to recognize their own strengths and skills, reduce early school leaving, and see more possibilities for their work futures.

Tailor supports unique OY needs

- **Provide individualized, flexible, long-term supports:** Create personalized OY programming. Include wraparound supports (basic needs, mental health support, etc.). Integrate employment and non-employment services and supports.
- **Active, persistent outreach:** Reach out to OY as they are less likely to have the information or skills to seek help by themselves. The outreach process can be supported by strong referral relationships within other systems (e.g., criminal justice, foster care, etc.).
- **Design for OY cycling in and out of supports:** OY employment supports require more time and intensity than those for less-barriered youth. Programming should be designed for “failure” in that OY may start and stop engagement with services multiple times as they move towards being employment-ready.
- **Build employment skills:** Giving young people pre-employment experience through part-time and summer work experiences, co-op placements, internships, and apprenticeships better prepares them for the workforce and makes them more attractive to employers. Pay youth for their participation in these programs.
- **Take a strengths-based, trauma-informed approach.** Build on existing strengths, interests, and skills of OY.

Involve and incentivize employers

- **Incentivize and support employers:** Employers often have pre-conceived notions about OY. Educate and engage employers in OY employment issues. Offer financial incentives to employers to hire OY, for example subsidies for wages or training. Once employer has taken part in initiatives that involve OY, they become more likely to hire youth with barriers to employment in the future.

Improve supporting structures

- **Enhance system coordination and collaboration:** Bridging gaps in OY support requires coordination across multiple services and collaboration across sectors. Creating space and capacity to share best practices and test innovations is also encouraged, as is establishing a convening entity or task force to provide overall leadership.
- **Improve data collection and accountability:** Effective policies that support flexible and holistic youth employment programs require longitudinal, high quality and timely data to support evaluation and learning. This is largely unavailable across jurisdictions.

Include OY voices in creating solutions

Different segments of the OY population have different employment support needs. Incorporating perspectives from current and previous OY into policy and program design ensure services are useful, but also give youth agency in charting their own futures.

Opportunity Youth employment in Alberta: Key issues

Alberta lacks a youth employment strategy

The Government of Alberta (GoA) does not have an overarching youth employment strategy, leading to what thought leader interviews described as a “disjointed” and “inconsistent” approach. Common objectives for youth employment, formal mechanisms for cross-ministry collaboration, and ministerial responsibility are lacking.

Currently, responsibility for labour market development is divided among five ministries: Labour and Immigration, Community and Social Services, Advanced Education, Indigenous Relations, and Jobs, Economy and Innovation. These ministries operate mostly independently, according to unique mandates. Thought leader interviews described little formal collaboration on OY employment across provincial ministries. The one exception was collective reporting to the ministry of Labour & Immigration, which was a requirement tied to the receipt of federal transfer funds. There were cases of public servants creating joint contracts for service provision when opportunities arose. However, there were no formal mechanisms to bring cross-ministerial stakeholders together nor connections to system-level goals.

Since 2019, the GoA has made economic recovery its main priority (Government of Alberta, 2020). Their main measure of success is getting people back to work fast (Government of Alberta, 2020). This approach has been criticized for focusing on quickly re-employing people at the expense of developing a longer-term workforce development strategy. In particular, it lacks focus on addressing barriers with labour market for excluded groups, such as OY (Business Council of Alberta, 2020; Momentum, 2019)⁵.

⁵ Alberta’s previous workforce development strategy came to an end in 2016 and has not been replaced.

Table 3: Government of Alberta ministries responsible for employment and labour market development

Ministry	Focus Areas
Labour and Immigration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Focuses on meeting employer and individual needs as part of building a skilled workforce, connects Albertans to job opportunities through contracted training and employment programs. · Individual supports focused on EI-eligible people who are generally closer to labour market attachment
Community and Social Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Focuses on income, employment, disabilities and community-based supports. Includes passive labour market policy through implementing the province’s social assistance program as well as active policy through career and employment programs to connect individuals to the labour market. · Individual supports focused more on people with barriers to employment and may be further from the labour market.
Advanced Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Focuses on the province’s adult learning system, providing education and training to get prepared for the workforce. Includes foundational learning and apprenticeship education, as well as financial support for adult students. · Spectrum of people supported, from those needing basic literacy skills to those getting advanced skills
Indigenous Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Works with Indigenous communities and organizations, the Government of Canada, industry and other stakeholders to connect Indigenous people to training and employment (e.g. through Employment Partnerships Program).
Ministry of Jobs, Economy, and Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Created to lead Alberta’s economic Recovery Plan. Aims to restore investor confidence and diversify and grow the provincial economy. · Focuses on coordination of ministries and working with businesses.

Alberta Jobs Now Program: A missed opportunities for OY

The Alberta Jobs Now program was a centrepiece of the government’s 2021 budget. It is the largest job training program in Alberta’s history, and will provide up to \$370M to help employers offset the cost of hiring unemployed Albertans (Government of Alberta, n.d). The program pays employers 25% of an employee’s salary, for up to 52 weeks for filling a vacant role or creating a new one.

Funding for Alberta Jobs Now came in part through a Workforce Development Agreement between the federal government and the Alberta government designed to support Albertans in underrepresented groups (including OY). This particular funding envelope (\$185M) was aimed at sectors hardest hit by the pandemic (e.g. construction, hospitality, and transportation). It could be used for a wide range of supports such as skills training, financial assistance and benefits, and employment counselling and services (Government of Canada, 2020). There were calls to target youth through this program (Business Council of Alberta, 2020). However, in the end the only underrepresented group specifically named were people who experience disability. Employers were eligible for 1.5 times the benefit for hiring among this group. A top-down youth employment strategy may have made a difference here.

Collaboration is ad hoc and not linked to system-level goals

Thought leader interviews described little formal collaboration on OY employment across provincial ministries outside of the reporting requirements to Labour & Immigration as the ministry receiving transfer funds from the federal government. Public servants create joint contracts for service provision when opportunities arise, but there are no formal mechanisms to bring these stakeholders together and this work is not linked to system-level goals. Interviewees from youth-serving agencies also noted increasing difficulties in leaders of their organizations being able to speak to government ministers, deputy ministers, and ADMs about issues of youth employment.

Currently, local service providers anchor cross-sector collaboration within communities in Alberta. They apply for funding from the federal and provincial governments, and deliver services locally, sometimes in partnership with employers and educational institutions. However, collaboration across communities and regions is limited. As well, the current funding structure can foster competition between service providers as they are applying for the same funding and delivering similar services in the community.

There is a shortage of quality data on OY employment

In Canada there is a shortage of high quality research in the area of OY and policymakers do not have access to the information required to develop policies aimed specifically at OY (Expert Panel, 2017; Kutsyuruba, 2019)). The same is happening in the Alberta context. There are a number of reasons for this:

- OY are furthest detached from the labour market, meaning they are often excluded from accessing employment and training services in the first place, or from sharing their needs. Government stakeholders also described how OY are highly mobile, making it challenging to sustain contact over time and assess how well interventions work over the long-term. As well, OY often need multiple services and there is little data on what combinations of services work best for which youth (McAuliffe, 2018).
- Statistics Canada uses different age ranges and time periods across different OY data sources (e.g. Labour Force Survey versus Census data), making it difficult to synthesize information and track outcomes for the NEET population over time. This is crucial because for some young people, their time outside of employment, formal education, or training is temporary. Results from a Labour Market Information Council (2019) study indicate that 47% of Canadian OY were planning to move back into employment, education, or training with 30% responding that they were looking for a job and 6% that they were waiting for education to begin. Data collection in Alberta should aim to explore these categories within OY to understand what prevents certain sub-populations from successfully transitioning into education, training, and the workforce.
- The NEET definition can erase the diversity and complexity of the youth that fall within it. For example, in our census data analysis, we were unable to determine whether inactive OY were inactive by choice or because of barriers preventing attachment to the labour force. For example, is the higher level of women being inactive or NILF due in part to unaffordable childcare?

This issue is compounded by the lack of an overarching OY employment strategy in Alberta. Without clear objectives, it is impossible to define outcomes and build a comprehensive data set to measure impact.

Opportunity Youth employment in Alberta: Emerging Directions

Research and experiences from different jurisdictions across Canada offer guidance for Alberta on improving OY employment outcomes; however, more assessment of impact is needed to build the evidence base on what approaches work for whom in which contexts.

Target OY through policy

Youth employment was described as a “massive priority for the federal government” in our thought leader interviews, with lots of public interest and growing levels of funding in response to the COVID pandemic. The Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS) is the Government of Canada’s flagship approach to help youth aged 15-30 prepare for, and transition to, the labour market (Government of Canada, n.d.), along with the Canada Summer Jobs (CSJ) and the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISET) programs. YESS is a horizontal initiative led by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) and includes 11 federal departments, agencies, and Crown corporations⁶.

YESS underwent a significant overhaul in 2019, with the new approach better aligning with best practices and policy recommendations aimed at OY. For example, document review and thought leader interview analysis revealed the following themes.

Target multi-barriered youth

For many years, federal programming “focused a lot on youth that didn't have barriers. The only barrier is their age, which, you know, they all share, we sort of see now that there are more programs being introduced or have been introduced to support multi-barriered youth.” Specific sub-populations of youth now receiving more focus include: youth who leave high school early, have recently immigrated, live with disabilities, live in low-income households, experience precarious housing, are single parents, or are from visible minority groups. The renewed YESS also now includes performance metrics for Indigenous youth, youth belonging to a visible minority group, and youth with a disability. However, OY still remain a small portion of all youth supported federal youth employment funding, and many Alberta youth-serving organizations report having waitlists for programs serving OY.

Other recent policy shifts to support youth with barriers include:

- **Expanding eligibility requirements for the Canada Summer Jobs program** (Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), 2020b): Shifted from students only to include all young

⁶ Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada; Global Affairs Canada; Canadian Heritage; Environment and Climate Change Canada; Indigenous Services Canada; Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada; National Research Council; Natural Resources Canada; Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation; and Parks Canada.

people between the ages of 15 and 30. As well, employers became eligible for increased wage subsidies and were able to hire youth outside a summer time frame for full- or part-time roles.

- **Interest eliminated on federal portion of Canada Student Loans and Canada Apprentice Loans:** Initially a response to COVID-19 and extended in the 2021 federal budget.
- **Income threshold for federal student loan payments:** People with incomes less than \$40,000 do not have to make federal student loan payments.

Provide flexible, holistic funding

Interviewees at Alberta organizations receiving YESS funding report being better able to tailor supports for the OY they work with, for example by providing more wraparound supports, being able to take a case management approach, and being able to meet emerging needs such as transportation or childcare.

Incorporate various stages of labour market attachment

Federal government interviewees emphasized that YESS focuses not only on finding youth jobs, but also on improving labour market attachment: “Even if it's just something about doing a CV, something about, helping them find childcare, like anything that we can do to keep them attached to either education or the labor force...because we know that once this is broken, like we, it's tough to get it back.”

In this vein, ESDC recently began a 5-year phase-in of a common measurement framework to measure a youth’s *progress* toward employment, job readiness, career advancement and employer engagement (ESDC, 2020a). Interviewed services providers agreed, saying there seems to be more understanding that some youth with barriers won’t gain a job right away, and positive outcomes can relate to building pre-employability skills, and the like. That said, however, they also report feeling pressure to show good outcomes, and pick youth with the most drive or motivation rather than those who need the most help.

COVID-19 has disrupted service delivery as well as the evaluation and reporting by ESDC. As such, the impacts of the shift in YESS are unknown. Initial impressions from service providers receiving funding are positive. Future data collection from Alberta-based organizations could provide an opportunity to paint a more holistic picture of OY outcomes in Alberta.

Prevent disconnection and provide transition support

Schools plays a critical role in supporting youth transitions into adulthood and the labour market by developing related skills and providing access to teachers, counsellors, and other mentors. Keeping youth in school as long as possible extends access to critical supports that may prevent them from falling into the OY category.

In the youth focus groups, the transition out of high school was described as “really scary” and there was a desire to learn life skills like doing your taxes, renting an apartment, and finding a job before being

in the moment having to do it. Youth recommended there be more employment supports available to them in high school, and that it shouldn't be up to them to find the supports on their own. Instead, stakeholders should be "targeting students by motivating them and exposing them" to an array of resources. Youth, as well as stakeholder interviewees, recommended the Career and Life Management (CALM) curriculum be improved, and more work-integrated learning and mentorship opportunities be made available.

Thought leader interviews described the high school CALM curriculum, which is designed to teach career and life skills, as hit or miss, with some schools and/or teachers taking it more seriously than others. They feel the general outcome is that youth are not being adequately prepared for the transition out of high school, and this is particularly harmful for OY. One youth service provider described it this way:

It's okay, I guess, if you are coming from that stereotypical loving family home who says come here Cindy and I'll take you out, we'll get you your first apartment together and we'll teach you all these things. But so many of our youth do not have that. They're pawning their stuff just to pay rent, and some of them are, you know, leaving home at age 16. They haven't a clue what's going on. And yeah, so unfair.

Two thought leaders from the non-profit sector described how they used to regularly be brought in to CALM classes to provide career-oriented workshops, but that they aren't financially supported to do so anymore, reducing the chances of youth connecting with mentors and supports outside the school environment. Thought leaders also recommended extending CALM across more grades and embedding it throughout the curriculum.

Improve access to employment information and services

The Expert Panel on Youth Employment (2017) described how young people in Canada need information about work opportunities and support that is easy to access and digest: "mobile-friendly, concentrated, concise and immediate" (Expert Panel, 2017, p. 20). Needed labour market information (LMI) includes industry projections, specific training requirements, and where and how to find help. Nationally, less than half of NEET youth (46%) described finding LMI easy, and only 58% said it was easy to understand (Labour Market Information Council, 2019). Beyond access to comprehensive information, both youth and the stakeholders that work with them, need support to make sense of the data and apply it to career planning (Bell et al., 2016).

Findings from our thought leader interviews and youth focus groups show the current Alberta structure for accessing information and services puts the onus on young people to: know where to go for information; how to decide what to do with it; and make the ultimate connection to programs and services happen. One interviewee said that although there is a "fairly comprehensive set of supports" available in Alberta, they are "not marketed and aimed" at OY. A similar sentiment was expressed about the federal level.

Youth focus groups and service provider interviews both described how youth rely on natural supports and networks for career-related information and connections. Both data sources also highlighted the view that generally parents aren't knowledgeable about current employment contexts and revert to

their own education and early career experiences when providing advice. OY, in particular, do not have the same access to networks or connections as other youth, which increases the challenge.

Government interviewees described LMI data in Alberta as generally being shared on outdated, 1990s style websites that are hard to navigate and not well-used by youth; ALIS was given as an example. Government employees and youth service providers described youth as being unsure of where to access to resources, information, and training in their community that can help them to prepare and apply for a job or gain the skills required to enter to workforce.

A key entry point for employment and career-related services from the provincial government are Alberta Supports offices, which are geared towards serving adults and may deter youth from accessing needed services. Thought leader interviews discussed a number of challenges with the current structure of accessing career and employment services, and training:

- Youth perceive Alberta Supports as welfare offices rather than a place to go to get employment training. Some youth also feel there is a stigma about receiving income supports.
- From the perspective of a service user, it can be challenging to figure out where to go. There are multiple service providers in each region with service delivery contracts offering different employment programs. As well, many agencies don't coordinate services so youth may get one service and then have to start all over again when looking for further ones.

Upcoming shifts in government funding for service delivery may make it more challenging for OY to receive supports:

- Regionalizing employment contracts means a single service provider will provide services across multiple locations. Service providers said this is linked to less individuals being served per contract. As well, that it may lead to more virtual services, and that regional service providers will have less direct ties to the community (which may impact outreach to OY).
- Service providers also talked about the ratio of people receiving career and employment information services changing so that 80% must be income support clients (rather than being able to serve walk-ins). This also impacts accessibility.

Assist employers to hire and retain OY

Alberta-based results mirror the federal Expert Panel's finding that a perception persists that employers are reluctant to hire youth, whether due to persistent myths about young people—e.g. “uncommitted, entitled, lazy”—or placing high value on previous work experience (Expert Panel, 2017, p. 20). Among employers interviewed for this project, there is little focus specifically on hiring OY, or youth in general, in Alberta. Youth are generally hired into entry level roles requiring little to no experience, including mass hiring for seasonal events. Employers felt there may be more opportunity for youth going forward in specific industries such as hospitality, tourism, and technology.

While not currently targeting OY, employers showed openness to hiring and mentoring OY. Some employers have attempted to decrease barriers to employment in the hiring process by making it easier

to apply for jobs through mobile phones and allowing resumes to be hand-written. The majority of employer interviewees also talked about developing diversity, equity and inclusion policies, and considered them an avenue for building the case to include youth in workforce development planning.

Overall, though, employers expressed uncertainty on how to support OY in practice. For example:

- Employers were unaware or unsure of available supports from different levels of government to incentivize youth employment. Further, understanding and completing application processes was considered burdensome and confusing, making employers less likely to access funds they knew of.
- Employers were not familiar with service providers that work with OY and are unsure of how to better collaborate with them. Given limited employer knowledge and capacity, these organizations are currently the main pathway for bringing OY into work settings: “you’re sort of relying on a non-profit to advertise and promote themselves and all that, and they don’t have resources, they don’t think to give me a call.”
- Some employers felt it was a provincial government responsibility to establish an infrastructure of support for OY hiring. This might include HR supports like screening processes as well as mental health supports. The current employment support structure was called “disorganized” and “decentralized”, and compared negatively to WorkBC in British Columbia, where there is one point of contact for employment information.

Build hope and optimism

All stakeholder groups involved in this research (employers, government representatives, service providers, and youth) expressed concern about youth employment futures in Alberta. Focus group youth feel like the odds are stacked against them in terms of employment in Alberta. They described feeling anxiety and a pressure to succeed at the same time as feeling like their work future is not under their control.

This was related to the economic downturn in the province as well as a perception that there has been a leveling up of minimum education and experience requirements for entry-level positions. Youth were questioning the return on investment of costly post-secondary education programs when they are likely to end up in a job that pays minimum wage. Employers and service provider interviewees also talked about youth feeling discouraged about the future of the labour market in Alberta, and making it more likely to leave the province (if they are able).

What are the strategic policy opportunities in Alberta?

In the current policy environment, the GoA creating a cross-ministry, OY-focused employment strategy is unlikely. However, an overarching strategy is needed in the long-term to most effectively support OY in their employment and education goals. This section briefly describes the long-term strategy goal, and

then outlines strategic policy opportunities that are more feasible and realistic in the shorter-term. These opportunities are designed to build evidence and momentum towards a long-term strategy.

Long-term goal: Build an inclusive workforce development strategy for Alberta, with OY as a key plank.

This goal builds on similar recommendations from the Business Council of Alberta (2020) and Momentum (2019) that call for a provincial workforce development strategy that is inclusive of underrepresented groups. A unified, provincial-level strategy that incorporates OY needs would enable the government to:

- Set long-term objectives/targets for OY employment
- Better align with work at federal level
- Build a relevant body of data on OY outcomes that can provide evidence on what's effective for whom in what circumstances
- Ensure individual ministry's activities reinforce and complement others'
- Create a framework of involvement for employers (one point of contact for support and connection, pilot programs)

Strategic Policy Opportunities

Table 4 outlines the strategic policy opportunities across three areas:

- Integrating OY employment and education needs into existing provincial policy initiatives
- Building momentum and structures for province-wide collaboration on OY employment
- Building a foundation for collecting and analyzing OY employment data in Alberta.

More details for each area can be found in Tables 5, 6, and 7.

Table 4: Strategic Policy Opportunities for OY Employment in Alberta

Area 1: Integrate OY employment and education needs into existing provincial policy initiatives	Area 2: Build momentum and structures for province-wide collaboration on OY employment	Area 3: Build the foundation for collecting and analyzing OY employment data in Alberta
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · ADVOCACY: Advocate for preventative supports through cross-ministry Child and Youth Well-Being Review · ADVOCACY: Advocate for OY employment supports through Ministry of Jobs, Economy, and Innovation stakeholder engagement on Alberta’s Recovery Plan · PILOT TESTING: Explore opportunity to integrate employment supports into provincially-funded integrated youth hubs · POLICY INPUT: Advocate for enhanced career awareness and skill development in high school curriculum review · ADVOCACY: Explore how to integrate OY supports into provincial government’s strategy for post-secondary education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · CONVENING ENTITY: Create a lead entity to provide backbone structure for collaboration or network-building across sectors. · LEVERAGE FUNDING: Coordinate employers and youth-serving organizations to apply for Alberta Jobs Now funding · PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: Develop workforce partnership proposals in conjunction with Labour & Immigration focused on OY 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · AWARENESS-BUILDING/FUNDING: Amplify federal work on OY employment in the Alberta context to support building a provincial base of OY data. · DATA COLLECTION: Explore data collection and analysis opportunities within the provincial government to build knowledge and interest in OY employment supports

Table 5: Area 1 Opportunities: Integrate OY employment and education needs in existing provincial initiatives

Opportunities	Example activities	Possible outcomes
<p>ADVOCACY: Advocate for preventative supports through cross-ministry Child and Youth Well-Being Review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expert panel is reporting in September 2021 on gaps in accessing mental health, social and educational supports and programs related to COVID-19 (up to age 18)⁷ Opportunity to advocate for OY supports that align with Panel’s well-being recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess alignment of Panel recommendations with OY promising practices Create key messages of support to share with contacts in Alberta Health, Children’s Services, and Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build awareness that OY are more at risk of mental health issues, and need prevention and early intervention supports More discussion of the link between well-being and successful youth to adult transitions, more understanding of the need for supports beyond age 18
<p>ADVOCACY: Advocate for OY employment supports through Ministry of Jobs, Economy, and Innovation stakeholder engagement on Alberta’s Recovery Plan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The first phase of engagement focuses on economic development issues in rural and remote areas There is an opportunity to highlight the barriers youth who live in rural and remote areas face when looking for employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create key messages about significant barriers youth face in rural and remote areas related to employment and education (lack of broadband internet access, lack of employment opportunities, lack of transportation, etc.) Share messages through engagement sessions Create a follow-up plan to engage Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integration of rural OY needs into implementation of Alberta’s Recovery Plan Build knowledge of Jobs, Economy and Innovation leaders in the area of OY employment supports and how OY can support economic development
<p>POLICY INPUT: Advocate for enhanced career awareness and skill development in the upcoming junior and senior high school curriculum review⁸</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum development for grades 7-10 continues until 2022; grades 11-12 in early 2022 to 2023 Advocate for LMI, and career and skill development to be integrated within CALM courses as well as throughout curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct research to develop options for CALM courses and broader curriculum Engage with OY to further explore gaps and needs in high school curriculum Engage with employers to contextualize and expand on curriculum options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integration of youth and employer voices into curriculum development More awareness that OY need career information and skill development in high school because they have fewer natural supports to guide them, often leave home at early ages, and are more likely to not go on to post-secondary education

⁷ See <https://www.alberta.ca/child-and-youth-well-being-review.aspx>

⁸ See <https://www.alberta.ca/curriculum-development.aspx>

ADVOCACY/LEVERAGE FUNDING: Explore how to integrate OY supports into provincial government’s strategy for post-secondary education (Alberta 2030: building skills for jobs⁹)

- The 10-year strategy that aims to develop a highly skilled workforce and strengthen relationships between employers and post-secondary institutions.
- Focus areas in the strategy that most strongly relate to OY include expanding digital infrastructure for online learning in rural and remote areas; improving foundational pathways, transitions, and access for Indigenous learners; and improving sustainability and affordability.
- Government has strong commitment to expanding apprenticeship and work-integrated learning (partnerships between industry and post-secondary institutions are due October 31st, 2021¹⁰)

- Examine flagship initiatives in the strategy to determine alignment with OY promising practices
- Explore how OY supports could be integrated into expansion of apprenticeship education (look for ways to integrate youth-serving organizations into industry-education partnerships)
- Explore details of related \$150M initiative on expanding broadband internet to rural and remote areas

- Details of strategy are still to be worked out – opportunity to put OY needs into development and implementation
- Expansion of apprenticeship opportunities means more open and diverse slots for students and potentially higher chance for OY to participate

⁹ See <https://www.alberta.ca/alberta-2030-building-skills-for-jobs.aspx>

¹⁰ See <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=79444743163C8-D64E-DBF1-5D047A3C6D66E2A8>

Table 6: Area 2 Opportunities: Build momentum and structures for province-wide collaboration on OY employment

Opportunities	Example activities	Possible outcomes
<p>CONVENING ENTITY: Create a lead entity to provide backbone structure for collaboration or network-building across sectors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Opportunity to spearhead OY employment work by convening stakeholders to identify areas of alignment for learning and action. · Lead entity could be a group or organization already working in this space that is able to take on more leadership. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lead entity could support system level action through: creating partnerships, enhancing alignment and coordination across systems, programs/services, and stakeholders; creating space/capacity to share best practices; and testing innovations among stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Beginning to develop a “made-in-Alberta” approach to support OY facing barriers to employment · Could lead to more coordinated advocacy on OY employment to GoA
<p>LEVERAGE FUNDING: Coordinate employers and youth-serving organizations to apply for Alberta Jobs Now funding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The program pays employers 25% of an employee’s salary, for up to 52 weeks for filling a vacant role or creating a new one. · Application window is Sept 16th to December 31st, 2021. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Youth-serving organizations and employers could work together to apply for this funding by sharing the HR responsibilities in a way that decreases risk for the business and increases wraparound support for youth · Potential for service providers to leverage existing federal YESS funding for the wraparound support piece 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · OY get supported work experience · New partnerships are built between employers and youth-serving organizations · Could support technology, hospitality and tourism industries to get back on their feet after COVID-19 (key sectors in GoA’s Recovery Plan)
<p>PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: Develop workforce partnership proposals in conjunction with Labour & Immigration focused on OY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · GoA’s Labour Market Partnerships program¹¹ supports regional workforce development projects that involve community partnerships. Priority given to increasing workforce participation of underrepresented groups, including youth. · Opportunity to develop OY-supporting proposals, for example sharing leading HR practices in OY employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Proposals for this program can take many forms: research and analysis of labour market trends; developing strategic plans to prepare for future skill requirements and/or prevent skills shortages; promoting current labour market needs or heightening awareness of labour market issues such as skills shortages; and sharing best practices in human resource development and career/employment training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · New knowledge about OY needs and gaps in specific regions of Alberta · New OY-focused collaborations between employers, government, and community partners · Employers build capacity to support OY workforce development · Regional stakeholders come together to create a strategic plan to increase OY workforce participation

¹¹ See <https://www.alberta.ca/workforce-partnerships.aspx>

Table 7: Area 3 Opportunities: Build the foundation for collecting and analyzing Alberta OY employment data

Opportunities	Example activities	Possible outcomes
<p>AWARENESS-BUILDING/FUNDING: Amplify federal work on OY employment in the Alberta context to support building a provincial base of OY data.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Alberta-based service providers can share experiences and outcomes with YESS funding · Funders outside government could also collaborate and broaden YESS-type work with OY in Alberta. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Convene Alberta-based service delivery organizations that receive YESS funding to highlight and share successes and challenges with one another. · Funders develop contracts that include YESS-style evaluation frameworks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Sharing data stories could build cross-sector awareness how best practices are being implemented in Alberta, and with what impact. · A foundation of OY-related employment data is created in Alberta. · IF OY outcomes are positive, this could eventually lead to advocating for provincial funds to do similar work.
<p>DATA COLLECTION: Explore data collection and analysis opportunities within the provincial government to build knowledge and interest in OY employment supports</p> <p>Starting points include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Work Outcomes Reporting Project: This work is being done through Community and Social Services (CSS). Data is available that examines outcomes of individuals who have received employment and income supports through CSS. PolicyWise has received CSS data on youth aged 18-29 and compare outcomes based on the number of barriers an individual is facing (e.g., literacy, mental health concerns, childcare needs, lack of employability skills, etc.). Data is also split by gender, and whether an individual identifies as Indigenous or as a visible minority. · Labour Market Partnerships program: Opportunity for employers and non-profit organizations to create an OY data collection and analysis project in partnership with interested employers to build knowledge of employment-related needs of OY youth. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Examine data set PolicyWise has received from CSS to look for patterns in barriers and supports for OY in Alberta · Explore OY-related research questions that could be explored through the Work Outcomes Reporting data · Convene stakeholders across sectors to explore options for a data collection and analysis project through Labour Market Partnerships program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Data analysis may identify unique needs in the Alberta context

Conclusion

Individually, the strategic policy opportunities outlined in this report will support better employment outcomes for OY in Alberta. However, they should be considered stepping stones to creating an overarching, provincial-level strategy for youth employment that incorporates the unique needs of OY.

A province-wide youth employment strategy is a necessary long-term goal to ensure sustainable and coordinated improvements for Alberta's young people. It would weave together the actions and partnerships that already exist regionally and those created through activating the policy opportunities outlined above. It would set long-term targets for OY employment and build a cohesive body of data on OY employment outcomes and promising practices. And it would help build a framework for employer involvement in OY hiring, making it easier and more attractive for businesses to include OY in their general hiring practices.

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Appendix A: Methods

The purpose of this project was to promote a comprehensive understanding of the current policy landscape and identify challenges and levers to advance opportunities for Opportunity Youth employment.

The following project summary details three phases of the work (Figure 1). Advisory roles, consultation, and engagement were important components of this work. A collaborative and iterative approach was used to promote a foundation of context and local knowledge, and specific content expertise.

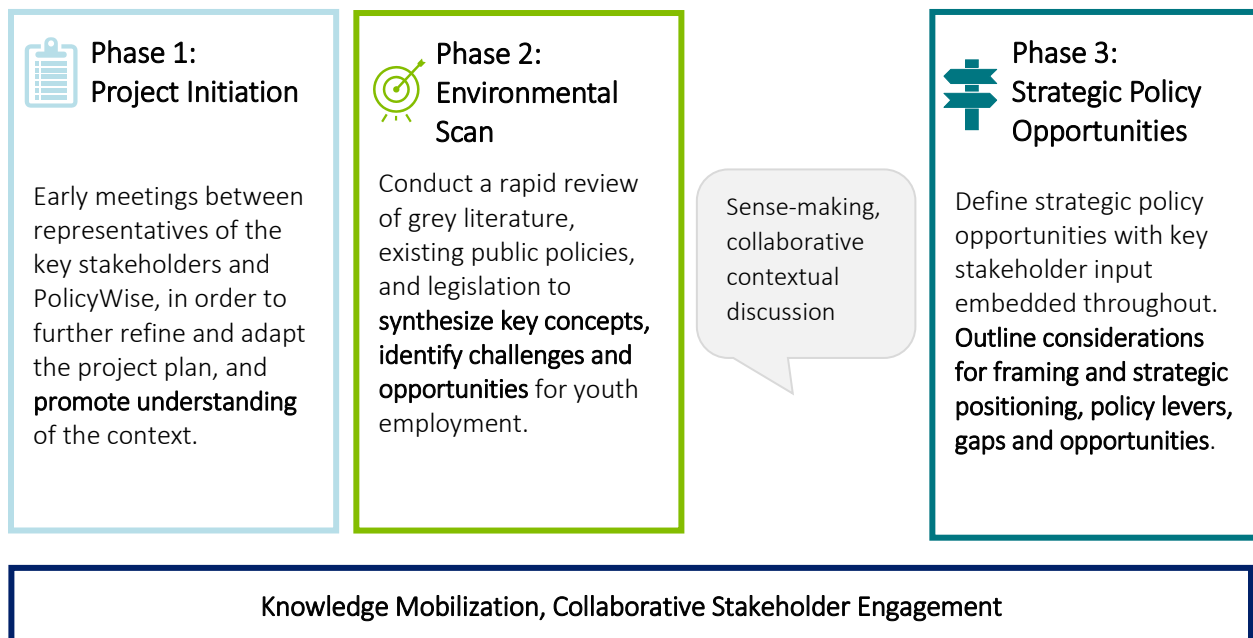


Figure 1. Overview of project phases

Project Initiation

The first phase built further understanding of the project objectives and refinement of the work plan. This process included five contextual interviews with Opportunity Youth employment stakeholders. The purpose of the interviews was to help understand and contextualize the key issues surrounding policy development for Opportunity Youth employment, and gather advice on how to refine our project design and methods.

Interview Questions: Contextual Interviews

Your background and experience

1. What is your current job title and role?

2. How did you come to work in the area of employment for Opportunity Youth?
3. What does the term “Opportunity Youth” mean to you?
 - a. What unique needs do Opportunity Youth have in the context of employment?

Developing policy for Opportunity Youth employment

4. In what areas have you seen success in developing and implementing policy to support employment of Opportunity Youth?
 - a. What factors led to this success?
 - b. Which stakeholder groups were critical to making it a success?
5. What are the most significant barriers to developing and implementing employment policy for Opportunity Youth?
6. Looking to the future, how do you see the needs of Opportunity Youth shifting (as a result of employment, economic, or political trends)?
 - a. How can public policy shift to best respond to these trends?

Approaches to researching Opportunity Youth policy

7. What advice would you give to a research team that is investigating and assessing policy opportunities and challenges at a state or provincial level?
 - a. Kinds of information to collect or topics to explore
 - b. Kinds of stakeholders to include, and in what ways
 - c. Approaches to data collection
8. In your experience, what are some meaningful ways to have youth contribute to a project like this one?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share with us about Opportunity Youth employment?

Strategic Advisory Group

For the purpose of this project, a nine-member Strategic Advisory Group was created to:

- Provide insight on strategic Alberta context to support realistic and feasible planning and strategy development
- Support contextualization and sense-making of findings through each phase of the project
- Serve as connectors within their systems, so that the project team is able to access the right people at the right time to move the project forward

The project team met with the Strategic Advisory Group collectively and individually throughout the project (March, August, and November 2021).

Environmental Scan

An environmental scan was conducted to identify key concepts, challenges and opportunities within the current state of public policy related to Opportunity Youth employment in Alberta. It had the following components:

Rapid review of grey literature

Google Advanced Search was used to conduct grey literature searches in three focus areas: OY-specific employment policies in Canada, OY-specific employment policies in the United States, and general youth employment policies in Canada. Table 8 outlines the search strategy and results, including inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Table 8 Search Strategy description

Search Topic	Search Strategy and Results
<i>OY-specific employment policies in Canada</i>	<p>Search terms: "Opportunity youth" *policy OR NEET OR "not in education, employment or training" OR "neither enrolled nor employed"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Conducted on Nov. 19/20 · Limited results by: English language, Canada, date range of 2015-2020 · Included research reports, policy documents, strategies · Excluded blog posts, job ads, news articles, research project lists <p>Details: 14 pages of results, screened each result until reached page with no relevant results (page 7). Then scanned results from page 8-14 to confirm none were relevant.</p>
<i>OY-specific employment policies in the United States</i>	<p>Search terms: "Opportunity youth" *policy OR NEET OR "not in education, employment or training" OR "neither enrolled nor employed"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Conducted on Nov. 26/20 · Limited results by: English language, USA, date range of 2015-2020 · Included research reports, policy documents, strategies · Excluded blog posts, job ads, news articles, research project lists <p>Details: 15 pages of results, screened each result</p>
<i>General youth employment policies in Canada</i>	<p>Search terms: Youth AND "employment policy" AND Canada</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Conducted on Dec. 8/20 · Limited results by English language, date range of 2015-2020 · Included research reports, policy documents, strategies · Excluded blog posts, job ads, news articles, research project lists <p>Details: 17 pages of results, screened all articles to page 4 (all exclude), scanned remainder for relevance.</p> <p>Search terms: Youth AND "employment strategy" AND Canada AND 2015..2020</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Conducted on Dec. 8/20 · Limited results by English language’ Included research reports, policy documents, strategies · Included research reports, policy documents, strategies · Excluded blog posts, job ads, news articles, research project lists <p>Details: 17 pages of results, screened all articles to page 3 (all exclude), scanned remainder for relevance.</p> <p>Search terms: Youth AND “employment strategy” AND Alberta AND 2015..2020</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Conducted on Dec. 8/20 · Limited results by English language · Included research reports, policy documents, strategies · Excluded blog posts, job ads, news articles, research project lists <p>Details: 16 pages of results, many duplicates.</p>
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Jurisdictional scan

In addition to the above Google searches, the research team also used the same search terms to scan the Government of Canada and Government of Alberta websites for reports, strategies, approaches related to Opportunity Youth employment and youth employment.

Statistics Canada target group profile analysis

A custom Target Group Profile was created by Statistics Canada. The Profile consisted of 2016 Census Data for males and females aged 18-29 in private households who were not employed and did not attend school, across Alberta Census Subdivisions. Analysis of the profile data explored population trends among 18-29 year olds (e.g. labour market participation, social assistance, level of education completed). Other Statistics Canada data from the Labour Force Survey and special research reports on the NEET population were also included in the analysis.

Interviews with business, policy and other thought leaders

Interviews were held with 41 thought leaders between March and June 2021 representing perspectives from industry, youth-serving organizations, and provincial and federal governments. The purpose of the interviews was to explore interviewee perspectives on:

- Programs and policies that impact and influence OY employment opportunities in Alberta
- Challenges, gaps, and opportunities within the current state of public policy for OY employment in Alberta
- Policy-related intersections, gaps, levers and opportunities to enhance and improve OY employment outcomes

Interview Questions – Federal Government

Barriers and enablers

The questions in this section explore the factors that impact youth, specifically OY, employment outcomes in Alberta.

1. **What are the biggest challenges that youth in Alberta face in accessing education or training and ultimately gaining employment?**
 - a. Are certain youth more at risk of falling into the OY category, not engaged in school or work, than others?
 - b. Are the challenges different for youth that are more at risk?
 - c. Are there enablers that specifically support youth that face more barriers?

Government programs and policies

The questions in this section aim to explore government approaches to OY employment, areas of success, and challenges.

2. **How would you describe the current federal government approach to support youth employment?**
 - a. Which government ministries are involved?
 - b. What kinds of tactics are used? (e.g., work-integrated learning, employer incentives, grants, funding available to non-profit organizations, etc.)
 - c. Outside of YESS, are there specific elements relevant to OY?
3. **In which areas has the current government approach to youth employment been most successful?**
4. **What are the main challenges the government currently faces in improving youth employment outcomes?**

Stakeholders and Roles

The questions in this section explore who the main stakeholders are working in the area, what role different stakeholders' play in supporting OY employment, and how these stakeholders work together.

5. **How does the federal government collaborate with the Alberta government to support youth, and specifically OY, employment?**
 - a. How does this compare with working with other provinces?
6. **How does the federal government collaborate with municipal governments in Alberta to support youth, and specifically OY, employment?**
7. **What non-governmental stakeholders does your department/federal government engage, consult, or collaborate with in work on youth employment? (e.g., social services, employers, businesses, etc.)**
 - a. Would you say these stakeholders work well together?

- b. If yes, can you give an example of how these stakeholders have worked together to support youth employment? (e.g., collaborative initiatives, sharing data and information, etc.)
 - c. If no, what prevents these stakeholders from working together?
8. **Based on the information we asked above, who else would you recommend we talk to?** (e.g., other ministries, departments, individual contacts working in this area)
9. **Do you have any final thoughts?**

Interview Questions – Provincial Government

Barriers and enablers

The questions in this section explore the factors that impact youth, specifically OY, employment outcomes in Alberta.

1. **What are the biggest challenges that youth in Alberta face in accessing education or training and ultimately gaining employment?**
- d. Are certain youth more at risk of falling into the OY category, not engaged in school or work, than others?
 - e. Are the challenges different for youth that are more at risk?
 - f. Are there enablers that specifically support youth that face more barriers?

Government programs and policies

The questions in this section aim to explore government approaches to OY employment, areas of success, and challenges.

2. **How would you describe the current provincial government approach to support youth employment in Alberta?**
- d. Which government ministries are involved?
 - e. What kinds of tactics are used? (e.g., work-integrated learning, employer incentives, grants, funding available to non-profit organizations, etc.)
 - f. Are there specific elements relevant to OY?
 - g. Is there an explicit strategy or policy framework? If not, why not?
3. **In which areas has the current government approach to youth employment been successful?**
- a. Are there particular populations or ages where there has been more success? (Explore whether the success has included OY or youth in general)
4. **What are the main challenges the government faces in improving youth employment outcomes?**
5. **How would you say the Government of Alberta's approach to youth employment has policy evolved over the last 5-10 years?**

Stakeholders and Roles

The questions in this section explore who the main stakeholders are working in the area, what role different stakeholders' play in supporting OY employment, and how these stakeholders work together.

6. **How does the provincial government collaborate with other levels of government to support youth, and specifically OY, employment?** (e.g., federal and municipal)
7. **What non-governmental stakeholders does your department/provincial government engage, consult, or collaborate with in work on youth employment?** (e.g., social services, employers, businesses, etc.)
 - d. Would you say these stakeholders work well together?
 - e. If yes, can you give an example of how these stakeholders have worked together to support youth employment? (e.g., work-integrated learning, employer incentives, grants, funding available to non-profit organizations, etc.)
 - f. If no, what prevents these stakeholders from working together?
8. **Based on the information we asked above, who else would you recommend we talk to?** (e.g., other ministries, departments, individual contacts working in this area)
9. **Do you have any final thoughts?**

Interview Questions – Youth-Serving Agency Staff

Barriers and enablers

The questions in this section explore the factors that impact youth, specifically OY, employment outcomes.

1. **What are the biggest challenges youth face in accessing education or training and ultimately gaining employment in Alberta?**
2. **Which groups of youth in Alberta are more at risk of falling into the OY category, not engaged in school or work, than others?** (e.g., youth experiencing homelessness, Indigenous youth, immigrant youth, youth living with a with disabilities)
 - a. Why? What unique challenges do they face?
 - b. Are there enablers that specifically support youth that may face more barriers?

Programs and Services

The questions in this section explore the factors that impact youth, specifically OY, employment outcomes.

3. **What kinds of employment services and programs does your organization offer?**
 - a. What is the eligibility criteria and who are the youth that attend or access these services and programs?

- b. What kinds of outcomes are you seeing?
- 4. **What may prevent OY from accessing your programs and services?**
 - a. What would it take to overcome these barriers?
- 5. **What kind of government funding/support do you receive to run your youth employment services and programs?**
 - a. What level of government provides this funding/support? (e.g., municipal, provincial, federal)
- 6. **What other non-government sources do you receive funding from to run your youth employment services and programs?**
- 7. **What are the parameters or restrictions that make it difficult to access funding for programs and services that support OY?**
 - a. How would you revise funding parameters or requirements to make them more accessible?

Stakeholders and Roles

The questions in this section explore who the main stakeholders are working in the area, what role different stakeholders' play in supporting OY employment, and how these stakeholders work together.

- 8. **Which stakeholders do you collaborate or work with to support youth employment?** (e.g., other social service organizations, employers, businesses, levels of government etc.)
 - g. Would you say these stakeholders work well together?
 - h. If yes, can you give an example of how these stakeholders have worked together? (e.g., collaborative initiatives, sharing data and information, etc.)
 - i. If no, what prevents these stakeholders from working well together?
- 9. **Who are the other stakeholders working in the area of youth employment that you don't currently collaborate or work with?** (e.g., other social service organizations, employers, businesses, levels of government etc.)
 - a. What prevents your organization from working with these stakeholders?
- 10. **Based on the information we asked above, who else would you recommend that we talk to?** (e.g., other non-profit organizations, individual contacts working in this area)
- 11. **Do you have any final thoughts?**

Interview Questions – Industry Representatives

Sector-level approaches to youth employment

1. **Within your industry sector, what are the main challenges that Opportunity Youth (or youth in general) face in gaining and maintaining employment in Alberta?**
 - a. How does this compare to challenges for people of older age groups that face multiple barriers to employment (e.g. living in poverty, experiencing mental health issues, etc.)?
2. **How much priority is given to hiring youth within your sector in Alberta?**
 - a. Are there sector-level initiatives or supports for hiring youth? If yes, please describe them.
 - b. What further sector-level supports could help employers in Alberta feel more comfortable in hiring Opportunity Youth?
3. **How much priority is given to hiring people of all ages that face multiple barriers to employment (e.g. living in poverty, experiencing mental health issues, etc.) within your sector in Alberta?**

Your organization's approach to youth employment

4. **Does your organization regularly employ Opportunity Youth?**
 - a. If yes, what are the most common barriers to employment they experience? How do you support them to succeed?
5. **Are Opportunity Youth (or youth more generally) an intentional part of your organization's approach to talent acquisition?**
 - a. **If yes, could you please describe your approaches to recruitment and retention of youth (and others with multiple barriers to employment)?** (e.g., accessing wage subsidies, partnering with educational institutions or youth organizations, other forms of government funding, etc.)
 - i. Why did your organization choose to include youth in your talent acquisition approach? What results was the organization hoping to see?
 - ii. What successes have you seen from these approaches?
 - iii. How do you see your approach shifting in the future?
 - b. **If no, do you see your organization including Opportunity Youth (or youth in general) you're your talent acquisition strategy in the future? Why or why not?**
 - i. What gets in the way of including Opportunity Youth into your talent acquisition strategy?

Stakeholder collaboration on supporting youth employment

6. **Which stakeholders, if any, do you collaborate with to support youth employment?** (e.g., social service organizations, other employers, different levels of government etc.)
 - j. In what ways do you work together? To what end?
7. **Are there other stakeholders you don't currently collaborate with, but would like to in the future?** (e.g., other social service organizations, businesses, government etc.)

- b. What would make it easier to collaborate with them?
8. Based on the topics covered in this interview, who else would you recommend that we talk to?
 9. Do you have any final thoughts?

Focus groups: Alberta youth

Focus groups were held in June 2021 with 21 youth aged 18-29 from eight communities across Alberta Calgary, Fox Creek, Cold Lake, Fort Saskatchewan, Falher, Camrose, Edmonton, and Mannville (three participants did not give their locations).

The purpose of the youth engagement sessions was to gather first-person perspectives from Alberta youth (aged 18-29) on their journeys toward stable and meaningful employment. These perspectives were used to support development of the strategic policy opportunities.

Facilitator Guide

OVERVIEW OF SESSION – Full group

Short overview of Opportunity Youth project

- PolicyWise for Children & Families has been hired for a project that is exploring how to better support youth to go to school or training and get a job in Alberta.
- For this project, we are speaking with youth, government, non-profits that work with youth, and employers that would be in charge of hiring. Youth voices are important to this project as your experiences and insights will support ways to which policies and programs can better support youth on the pathway to getting work and establishing a career.

Purpose of engagement sessions

- The purpose of this session to explore your perspectives on:
 - Your experiences with getting work and establishing a career – things that make it harder or easier to get the right education, training, and a job
- We will be asking you questions about school, training, and employment. When we talk about school this could mean things like going to high school, a university or college for degrees, diplomas, and certificates.
- When we talk about training this could be things like CPR/First Aid, lift operator training, certifications for handling food as a server, and more. There are many different options of training and education so try to think about all your different experiences when answering our questions.
- When we ask about jobs we would like to hear about your current and past experiences – about jobs you’ve actually had, or if you don’t have a job yet, the kinds you’re looking towards. All in all, a very wide-ranging conversation.

Process

- The engagement session will take approximately 90 minutes. Participation is voluntary. You can choose to end your participation at any time or not to answer certain questions. The focus group will be audio recorded; however, your name or other identifying information will not be included in the transcript.
- We will be splitting the group up into breakout rooms where we will have facilitators in each room.
- Focus group participants will receive a \$20 gift card to Amazon as a thank you for their participation. Your gift card will not be affected by leaving the focus group early or declining to answer any questions.

BREAKOUT ROOMS (Groups of 5-6)

Round table introductions

- Another quick welcome and thank you. Focus group is set up like a conversation.
- Want to make sure everyone is heard – will go person by person first, then open up to group conversation once everyone has had a chance to speak.
- Encourage comments in the chat box.

To get us warmed up for answering questions, let's do a round of introductions

- ***Could you tell us your name, how you heard about this focus group, and why you decided to participate?***

Thank you. We are also hoping to gather two quick pieces of information

In the chat box - Fill in your age and where you live.

Now we're going to move on to the main topic for our time together – your experience with school, training, and employment. [Description of remainder of session].

<p>PAST: What was your first job?</p>	<p>I want you to think about the first job you ever had....</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What do we mean by that? [Description of paid versus volunteer work, etc.] <p>MAIN QUESTIONS: Tell us about the experience of your first job.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · <i>What was the job?</i> · <i>How did you go about getting that job?</i> · <i>Why did you get a job at that particular time?</i> <p>PROMPTS: <i>What did you take away from that job? What did you like most about that job? What would have made that job better?</i></p>
<p>PRESENT: What are you up to now?</p>	<p>Now let's talk about your school and work life now, in 2021.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · It's been a challenging 18 months because of COVID...think about life before COVID and how it compares to now. <p>MAIN QUESTIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · <i>How has COVID-19 changed your school and/or work plans?</i> · <i>In other words, what was work and school life like before COVID? And how is</i>

	<p><i>it different now?</i></p> <p>PROMPTS: <i>How does your experience compare with your friends? What have been the biggest challenges to school and work because of COVID? What help/supports have you used to respond to these challenges?</i></p>
<p>FUTURE: Where do you see yourself going?</p>	<p>Now let's look forward to the future. Think about the kinds of careers/jobs you want to have (in the near future or farther along).</p> <p>MAIN QUESTION #1 <i>What are the biggest challenges that young people like you face today in achieving their school and career goals/dreams?</i></p> <p>MAIN QUESTION #2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · <i>What should governments, employers, or schools do to make it easier for young people to achieve their school and career goals/dreams? What solutions do you have?</i> <p>PROMPTS: <i>What education/training/career goals/dreams do <u>you</u> have for the next few years? What do you think could get in the way of achieving those goals/dream? What would make it easier for you get there?</i></p>

Phase Three: Strategic Policy Opportunities

Sense-making, collaborative discussions were held with Strategic Advisory Group members to situate and contextualize the findings. This process helped ensure that the strategic policy opportunities identified were feasible and realistic.