



A POLICY BRIEF

# Build a Brighter Future: Opportunity Youth Employment in Alberta

January 2022

## Issue Summary

**Young adults in Alberta are struggling.** The pandemic has disrupted their training and education. It has limited their job prospects and hope in the future. Opportunity Youth (OY) are among the young people hardest hit. Economic and social recovery from COVID-19 depends on their successful transition into work. Yet, young adults and OY specifically, are not part of Alberta's Recovery Plan. Without immediate and strategic cross-sectoral action, OY as a group will continue to grow.

### Who are Opportunity Youth?

18-29 year olds not engaged in school or work due to structural and social barriers. These include housing or food insecurity, involvement in the justice system, experiencing disability, mental health concerns, caretaking responsibilities, and being a new immigrant or refugee.



**A made-in-Alberta youth employment strategy is required** to keep youth employed, engaged, and in the province throughout their working lives. Targeting the OY talent pool can address sector-specific gaps in skills and labour during COVID-19 recovery and beyond. It also presents a competitive advantage to businesses, expands workforce diversity, enhances employee satisfaction, and strengthens talent pipelines. It's time to build a brighter future for OY in Alberta!

# Recommendations



*Create an overarching, provincial workforce development strategy with OY as a key focus.*

Currently, Alberta does not have one. This has led to a **disjointed and inconsistent approach** to youth employment. There have also been few **formal mechanisms for cross-ministry collaboration** to target OY.

## Strategic Actions

*Include OY in Labour Market Partnership Programs, workforce development plans, and data collection on employment.*

There is a Canada-wide **shortage of quality research** on OY employment to guide policies and practices.

This is an opportunity for Alberta to lead by **linking quality data** collection to an over-reaching provincial youth employment strategy.

*Provide supports for OY in the implementation of employment programs such as Alberta Jobs Now.*

OY fit the mandate for the **Alberta Jobs Now** employment initiative. Yet, they were not explicitly named. This presents a key **opportunity to target OY employment**.

*Target OY needs in high school curriculum development and post-secondary strategy implementation.*

Opportunities within the **Alberta 2030 Skills for Jobs initiative** include:

- Expand **digital infrastructure** for online learning in rural and remote areas;
- Improve **foundational pathways, transitions, and access** for Indigenous learners; and
- Improving **sustainability** and **affordability**.

## Young people are the future.

The Government of Alberta has an opportunity to ensure all youth in the province, including OY, recover from the pandemic and thrive. Now is the time to take action and build a brighter future for Opportunity Youth in Alberta!

# Background

Young Albertans face “stubbornly high” unemployment rates. Pandemic-related employment challenges build on longer-term structural shifts in the world of work that make youth transitions from school to the workforce complex, costly, and uncertain. The new labour market realities create particular challenges for OY. Without support they are at high risk of unemployment, reduced lifetime earnings, and ongoing mental health issues. Targeted action is needed to address the roots of these barriers and expand tailored work opportunities for OY.

PolicyWise for Children & Families interviewed key stakeholders across government, industry, and the non-profit sector in Alberta. We also reviewed practice-based resources and documentation to make recommendations on how to support OY and identify policy opportunities for action. The needs of OY are unique and diverse. Research on policy opportunities to improve employment among OY is emerging.

## HIGH YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN ALBERTA

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.

Evidence suggestions:

- **Intervene early** to prevent disconnection from education, training, and employment: build bridging supports, provide mentorship, and raise youth people's aspirations and hope.
- **Tailor supports** to unique OY needs: provide individualized, flexible, long-term supports and plan for cycling in and out, undertake active, persistent outreach, provide employment information and services, build employment skills, and take a strengths-based trauma-informed approach.
- **Target employers:** provide incentives and supports, assist employers to hire and retain OY.
- **Improve supporting structures:** enhance system coordination and collaboration.
- **Involve OY** in identifying solutions.

## YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH DETERIORATION DUE TO COVID-19

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

## References

Bell, D., Benes, K. & Redekopp, D. (2016) Improving School-to-Work Transitions: A Scoping Review. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Career Development Foundation.  
[Expert Panel on Youth Employment. \(2017\). 13 Ways to modernize youth employment in Canada. Government of Alberta \(2021\). Budget 2021: Fiscal Plan Overview.](#)  
 Kutsyuruba, B., Deluca, C., Butler,...& Nesbitt, H. (2019). Needs of NEET youth: Pathways to positive outcomes. Report prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.  
[Maguire, S. \(2020\). Youth 2020 – Preventing Another Lost Generation?, Intereconomics, 55 \(6\), 356-360.](#)



*Click here for more information and the full research report.*