Promoting Employment Participation for Youth with Disabilities in Canada

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Executive Summary

Youth with Disabilities are Underemployed and Underrecognized for their Work Potential

Persons with disabilities in Canada have faced longstanding barriers to employment. In response, advocates have fought for the rights of persons with disabilities in the labour market and wider society. While their efforts have resulted in important advances for workers with disabilities, youth with disabilities have often been overlooked.

Only recently has youth participation in the workforce been measured and reported. The 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability found that 88.7% of youth with disabilities who were not in school or work had the potential to work. Youth with disabilities continue to face systemic, institutional, interpersonal, and individual barriers, including stigma and discrimination; school and familial challenges; financial precarity; smaller social networks; and a lack of access to crucial early career development opportunities. In this report, we discuss these and other barriers to employment equity for youth with disabilities in Canada, from historic challenges to the current landscape of youth employment.

Although Challenges Continue, Attention is on Improving Workforce Participation for Youth with Disabilities

In the 21st century, greater political, cultural, and research attention has been given to employment equity for youth with disabilities. To maintain this momentum, there are things parents and caregivers, employment professionals, and youth with disabilities can do.

Growing evidence has shown the benefit of practices and initiatives like early work experiences and mentorship for improving employment outcomes for youth with disabilities. In the second half of this report, we discuss evidence-based strategies to support youth with disabilities in their employment journey, including recommendations for parents and caregivers, employment professionals, and self-advocates, including career exploration and skills training, on-the-job supports, and resources to support youth in navigating transitional periods like school-to-work. Through these strategies, the full potential of youth with disabilities can be unlocked, allowing young people in Canada to thrive in employment.

Introduction

The employment of youth with disabilities in Canada is an issue with historical, social, economic, and legislative dimensions. People with disabilities in Canada continue to be employed at lower rates than those without disabilities (Hébert et al., 2024). Among youth with disabilities aged 15-24 in the labour force, 73% are employed, compared to 82% of their peers without disabilities (Statistics Canada, 2024a). Importantly, youth aged 15-24 also experienced the largest increase in disability rates of any age group between 2017 and 2022, yet remain unrecognized for their potential to work (Statistics Canada, 2024b).[1]

This position paper offers a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities faced by youth with disabilities in employment. We begin by providing a condensed history and summary of disability and work advocacy from the 1950s to the present day. This includes the integration of people with disabilities into society, the establishment of anti-discrimination and other laws, and the ongoing efforts to improve accessibility and data collection. We then present national data on employment, highlighting the disparities between youth with and without disabilities. Following this, we discuss barriers to employment faced by youth with disabilities, ranging from systemic and institutional obstacles to interpersonal and social challenges. Finally, we discuss best practices for fostering a more inclusive and supportive employment landscape and offer recommendations for parents, caregivers, employment professionals, and youth with disabilities themselves. Throughout this paper, we draw on key findings from scholarly and community research, CCRW's research projects, and data and testimonials from CCRW Employment Services.

Disability- and age-related stigma – **ableism** and **ageism**, respectively – and their intersections with other forms of discrimination are central to understanding these challenges. Every person has multiple aspects of their social identity, such as age, race, cultural and religious background, or gender and sexual identity, that may be favoured or marginalized in society (Willson et al., 2024). The interactions between these aspects of identity and with systems of power – the social, economic, and political structures that shape society – is known as intersectionality, a concept introduced by Black feminist researcher Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 2015).

Youth with disabilities experience unique barriers resulting from ableism (Center for Disability Rights, 2016) and ageism (International Federation on Ageing, 2020). In addition, youth with disabilities who are members of other marginalized groups may experience racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination (Willson et al., 2024), which may cut across all domains of life, including employment.

Many ageist and ableist stereotypes are similar or intertwined (WHO, 2021), and can be directed at both the youngest and oldest members of society. For example, people with disabilities, youth, and older people can all be perceived as less competent. However, youth with disabilities may also experience uniquely damaging stigma, as the presence of disability can undermine others' expectations about young people's health, independence, and activity levels (WHO, 2021). Youth

[1] The age range associated with 'youth' is defined inconsistently across research and measurement tools. Statistics Canada considers youth to be those aged 15-24 (Hébert et al., 2024). However, youth is defined differently across research studies, sometimes referring to those aged 14-22 (LaPoint et al., 2024), 14-24 (Awsumb et al., 2022), 14-25 (Hirano et al., 2018), 15-29 (Lindsay & Ahmed, 2021), 15-30 (Lindsay et al., 2024), 15-34 (Lindsay et al., 2019), and other age ranges. CCRW Employment Services programs serving youth have typically been offered to young adults between the ages of 15 and 30.

with disabilities are sometimes treated like children or not taken seriously (Toft et al., 2019). Some people may not believe that young people can have disabilities, especially if their disability is not visible, and treat youth with disabilities and their requests for supports with hostility (Wayland et al., 2022). This is a serious challenge, as the most common disability types among youth are mental health-related and learning disabilities, both of which are typically not apparent to observers (Hébert et al., 2024). Mental health-related disabilities are especially stigmatized in our society (Woodgate et al., 2020) and in workplaces (Santuzzi et al., 2014).

In this paper, we focus on the intersection of age (youth) and disability by discussing barriers to employment where ageism and ableism intersect.

Historic and Current Challenges: The Path to Employment Equity

To fully understand the current state of employment for youth with disabilities, it is helpful to first review the historical developments that have shaped this landscape. While many of these developments were the result of advocacy aimed at the disability community generally, they nonetheless had a significant impact on employment for youth with disabilities as well.

Since the 1950s, disability advocates have played a key role in changing views and policy on disability and work and creating new work opportunities for people with disabilities across Canada. This section summarizes some of the most significant milestones in disability and work in Canada across the past 70 years.

1950s-1970s

Prior to the 1970s, disability was largely understood through the **medical model:** as a problem or 'impairment' to be addressed with medical treatments. Disability activists in the 1950s-1970s advocated for the inclusion of persons with disability in society, but disability was still seen as something to be 'fixed'.

In the 18th century in Canada, it was common for persons with disabilities, especially intellectual and mental health disabilities, to be separated from their communities and placed in institutions that offered them little control or agency over their lives (Inclusion Outreach, 2023). In the 1950s-1970s, family groups and rehabilitation professionals challenged the belief that persons with disabilities should be separated from society and advocated for their inclusion and participation (Galer, 2018). These advocates helped to create work opportunities for persons with disabilities in their community (Galer, 2018). Sheltered workshops emerged to provide work sites for persons with disabilities, but were exploitative, as they did not follow employment laws such as minimum wages. These sheltered workshops also prevented persons with disability from participating in the mainstream labour market (IRIS, 2021).

1970s-1990s

While these early disability advocacy groups aimed to integrate persons with disabilities into Canadian workplaces, disability was still seen as a problem to be solved medically (Galer, 2018). In the 1970s and 1980s, young disability rights activists pushed back against this idea and promoted the **social model of disability** (Galer, 2018). The social model defines disability as resulting from the combination of an individual's condition and barriers in their environment (Pianosi et al., 2023).

Disability advocates were involved in many accomplishments during this period that deeply changed the employment landscape for persons with disabilities in Canada. For example, in 1982, persons with disabilities were enshrined as a designated group for rights protection in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1983). To this day, the Charter protects youth with disabilities from discrimination and harassment as they enter the workforce (McColl et al., 2017; Prince, 2023).

In 1985, federally regulated employers became obliged to provide reasonable accommodation under the Canadian Human Rights Act (Canadian Human Rights Act, 1985). In 1986, the Employment Equity Act was established to address disadvantage based on disability and other protected identities; the act was amended in 1995 (Employment Equity Act, 1995). In the same year (1986), the governmental Special Committee on the Disabled and Handicapped urged Statistics Canada to collect data about persons with disabilities, leading to the development of the Health and Activity Limitation Survey (Special Committee on the Disabled and the Handicapped, 1981; Statistics Canada, 1988).

2000 to Present

Since the 20th century, disability advocacy has evolved significantly, and the social model has been embedded in critical legislation, including the Accessible Canada Act (ACA) (SC 2019, c. 10).

The ACA aims to realize a barrier-free Canada by 2040 (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2025). As Canada's first national accessibility legislation, the ACA requires the proactive identification, removal, and prevention of barriers across multiple priority areas that impact youth with disabilities, including employment (ACA, SC 2019, c. 10). The ACA also introduces modern concepts into legislation, including intersectionality, which acknowledges that different elements of a person's identity impact how they experience barriers. This is significant for youth with disabilities, who are a fast-growing, diverse demographic in Canada (Hébert et al., 2024).

Today, there is a significant and growing emphasis on making policies, legislation, and social participation – including employment – more inclusive through improved accessibility. This focus on accessibility, combined with improved disability data collection strategies, has made it easier to identify and address the barriers faced by youth in employment.

What Gets Measured Gets Done: Improving Disability Data Collection

Until relatively recently, Canada's national disability data strategy was not effective for tracking the experiences of youth with disabilities. In fact, the term 'youth' was not often used in national data collection publications, such as the Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD), until around 2017. Before this, data about youth were typically combined with working-age adults.

The use of the term 'youth' from 2017 onwards in CSD publications reflects an increasing awareness of their unique experiences. According to Canada's first State of the Youth Report, published in 2021, 'youth' refers "to those in the stage of life from adolescence to early adulthood" (Canadian Heritage, 2021). The age range for youth as Statistics Canada defines it (15-24 years) overlaps with an important phase in human development, which has only been recognized recently. This phase, which psychologist Jeffrey Arnett called 'emerging adulthood', is a period of change, exploration, and increasing independence, including in work (Arnett, 2000). The growing recognition of youth as a unique demographic also reflects trends like later marriage and parenthood, and longer periods spent in education (Arnett, 2000).

The 2017 and 2022 CSD also include more detailed questions related to disability. For example, the Disability Screening Questionnaire, introduced in 2017, more effectively identifies persons with mental health-related disabilities (Furrie, 2018). This is especially important for understanding disability among youth, as the 2022 CSD has revealed that over two-thirds of disabilities among youth are mental health-related (Vergara & Hardy, 2024). The 2022 CSD has also incorporated data on sex and gender, sexual orientation, food security, and homelessness, allowing a richer understanding of the diversity of barriers faced by youth with disabilities across various domains of life (Pianosi et al., 2023). Finally, the addition of variables around accessibility barriers promises to provide insight into the barriers experienced by youth with disabilities in employment.

Modernized data collection through the CSD enables policymakers and community advocates to better plan and evaluate services, programs, and policies pertinent to youth with disabilities in Canada. For example, existing measures—such as educational grants for youth with disabilities like the Canada Student Grant for Students with Disabilities (Government of Canada, 2024a), or employment and skills initiatives like the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy Program (Government of Canada, 2024b)—can be expanded and improved by strategies and initiatives tailored to the needs of youth with disabilities.

To turn these insights into action, it is critical to understand the state of youth participation in the workforce. The next section presents national employment data for youth with disabilities from 1986 to 2022, highlighting employment and labour force participation rates and offering insights into progress and remaining challenges.

Data on the Employment of Youth with Disabilities

Statistics Canada has been gathering information on disabilities for over 40 years, starting with the Canadian Health and Disability Survey in 1981, followed by the HALS in 1986 and 1991; the Participation and Activity Limitations Survey (PALS) in 2001 and 2006; and, most recently, the CSD in 2012, 2017, and 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2014). As our understanding of disability has improved, concepts and methods for measuring disability statistics have changed as well (Statistics Canada, 2014). One of the most notable changes introduced in the CSD was the Disability Screening Questionnaire, a survey tool that takes a de-medicalized approach to identifying disability-related barriers, and which uses a more consistent approach to screening across disability types compared to previous tools (Grondin, 2016; Statistics Canada, 2014).

Our confidence in employment participation data for youth with disabilities is somewhat limited by the fact that disability surveys were not designed with comparability in mind until 2017 and 2022 (Pianosi et al., 2023). For example, changes in the definition of disability and survey methodology over the years make it impossible to use these surveys to report changes in disability rates over time (Statistics Canada, 2023a). In other words, not all youth with disabilities in the 1980s-2000s would have been identified by the data collection tools in the HALS and PALS; in particular, many or most youth with mental health disabilities were likely unrecognized.

In the following section, we present employment data from 1986 to 2022 that suggests youth with disabilities consistently experience lower employment rates compared to their peers without disabilities. With the above cautions about data comparability in mind, Figures 1 and 2 below show estimated employment and labour force participation rates among youth with disabilities across most survey years, based on available data from comparable variables (1986, 2001, 2006, 2012, 2017, 2022). While differences across data collection tools make comparisons

challenging, the data suggest this gap has not decreased, and in fact may have widened over time.

Historic Employment Rates and Labour Force Participation of Youth with Disabilities – What We Do and Don't Know

Microdata from the 1986 and 1991 HALS and the 2001 and 2006 PALS were publicly available through the Borealis Canadian Dataverse Repository, and all datasets except the 1991 HALS contained the necessary data to compare employment rates for youth aged 15-24 (Statistics Canada, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d). The age group variables in the 1991 HALS microdata file were limited to the 15-34 range, and as such, this reference year was excluded from our analysis. Statistics from the 2012, 2017, and 2022 CSD for the 15-24 age group were published online, except for the employment rate of youth without disabilities from the 2012 CSD (Statistics Canada, 2015, 2024a).

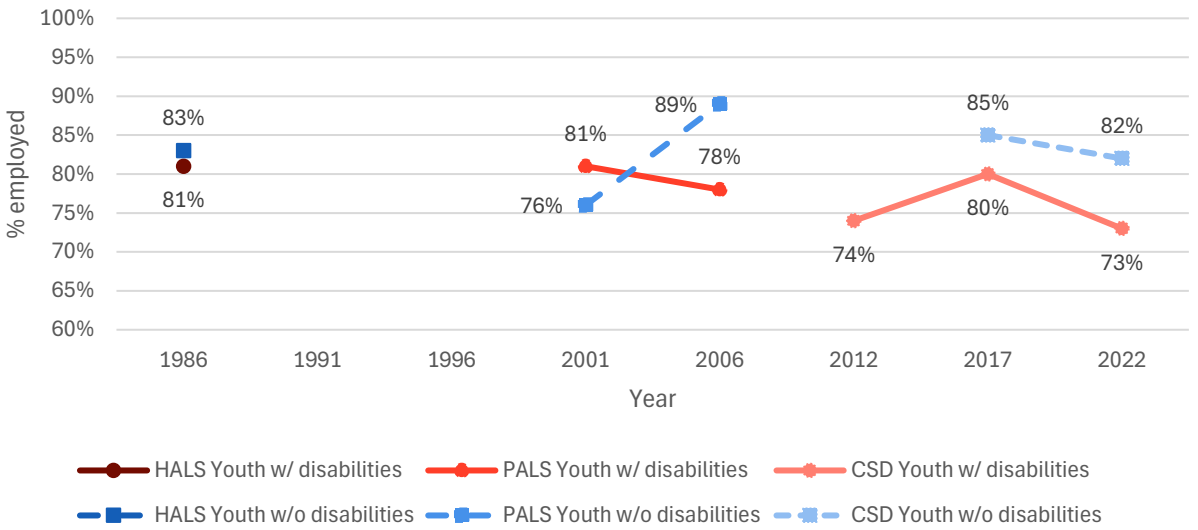
To compare employment rates across reference years, microdata from the 1986 HALS and the 2001 and 2006 PALS were analyzed in R using the *survey* package (Lumley et al., 2024) to calculate weighted estimates of employment rates for the population of youth aged 15-24 with and without disabilities.[2]

The lack of a mental health-related disability category prior to the CSD is a challenge for interpretation, especially given the now-acknowledged prevalence of mental health-related disability. The introduction of mental health disability measures and the reclassification of other types disrupt the continuity of the data collected across the HALS, PALS, and CSD. We have illustrated this discontinuity by showing each survey's data as a discrete line. Additionally, Statistics Canada notes that many comparisons between the 2012 CSD with the 2017 and 2022 CSD are likely inaccurate, due to methodological changes in the filter questions used in the Census to identify potential CSD respondents (Cloutier et al., 2018; Pianosi et al., 2023). The data below are presented as-is, but we caution against using these data to draw firm conclusions about historic youth employment and labour force participation. We nonetheless believe the data are valuable to support our understanding of general trends in youth employment over time, and that they also help illustrate changes in Canada's national approach to measurement.

Figure 1 shows estimated employment rates of youth in the labour force with disabilities (solid red lines) and without disabilities (dashed blue lines) between 1986 and 2022, noting that no data were available for the years between 1986 and 2001. Except in 2001, the data suggest that employment rates for youth with disabilities have typically been lower than their peers without disabilities (a comparison rate for youth without disabilities was unavailable for 2012).

[2] A weighted estimate accounts for potential sampling biases by assigning a population 'weight' to individual respondents, which is meant to indicate the number of people in the general population represented by the individual respondent. Weighted estimates help ensure estimates reflect the real statistics of the population of interest.

Figure 1. Estimates of employment rates of youth in labour force, 1986-2022.



Statistics Canada (2024a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023d; 2015)[3]

Because previous data collection tools likely excluded many youth with disabilities – particularly youth with mental health disabilities – it is possible that the employment gap from 1986-2006 is wider than the above data suggest. The employment rate for youth with mental health-related disabilities, as of 2023, is 5.1 percentage points lower than the rate for all youth with disabilities, indicating this demographic faces more severe barriers to employment (Vergara & Hardy, 2024). Because of the lack of mental health-specific questions in previous screening tools, it is possible that youth with mental health disabilities were grouped as youth without disabilities – a factor that may have lowered the reported employment statistics of youth without disabilities, and inflated them for youth with disabilities.

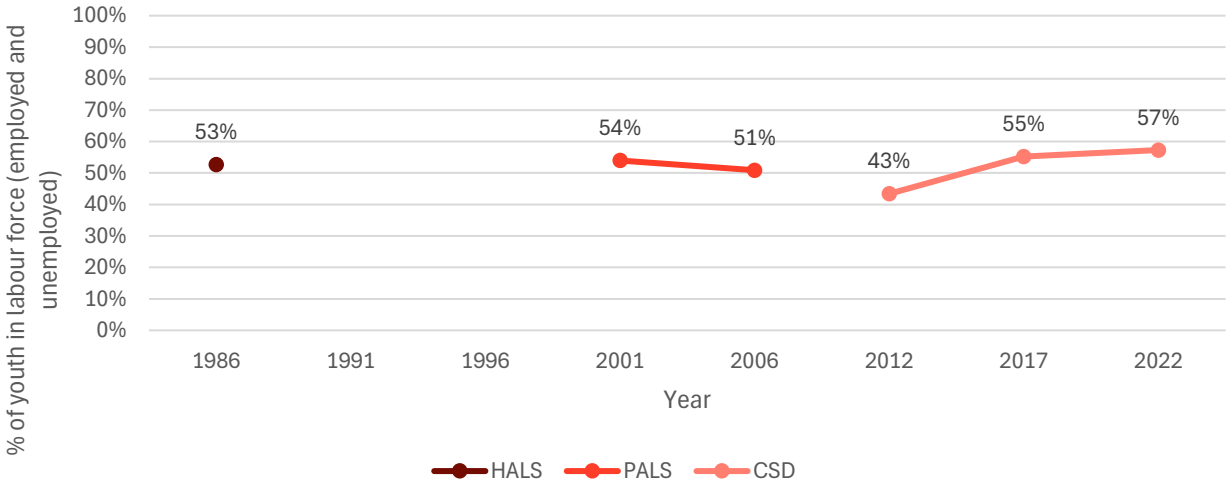
The above data represent employment rates for youth who were *in the labour force*.[4] Of course, there are many reasons why youth might not participate in the workforce, such as choosing to pursue education and training. However, youth with disabilities in the labour force consistently report lower employment rates than youth without disabilities (except in 2001). The reported employment gap has widened over time from 2% in 1986, to an all-time high of 11% in 2006, and most recently sits at 9%.

[3] The findings presented here represent the views of the authors. This does not constitute an endorsement by Statistics Canada of this product. All data are reproduced and distributed on an "as is" basis with the permission of Statistics Canada.

[4] The labour force status variable in the in HALS, PALS, and the CSD comes from the Labour Force Survey. Persons *in the labour force* are persons who are employed or unemployed; remaining persons are considered not in the labour force (Usalcas and Kinack, 2017; The Canadian Labour Force Survey, May 1976). Persons are considered unemployed but still in the labour force if they are demonstrably looking for work, are not looking for work but are laid off under certain conditions, or are not looking for work but have a new job which will start in the next four weeks or less and are available to work.

For context, Figure 2 below shows the estimated labour force participation rates for youth with disabilities between 1986-2022. These data suggest labour force participation has been relatively consistent (between 51% and 57%) throughout this period, except for the year 2012. Participation dipped to 43% in 2012, which may, at least in part, reflect the changes in disability screening tools discussed above. Reported participation rates reached all-time highs in 2017 and 2022.

Figure 2. Estimates of labour force participation of youth with disabilities, 1986-2022.



Statistics Canada (2024a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023d; 2015)[3]

More information is still needed about labour force participation and the needs of youth with disabilities with intersecting marginalized identities, including racialized youth, newcomers to Canada, and gender and sexual minority groups. For example, we know from the 2022 CSD that persons with disabilities broadly are less likely to be employed than those without disabilities and, when broken down by racialized groups in Canada, this employment gap is largest for West Asian (23.2% gap), Black (21.2% gap), and Filipino (20.3% gap) persons with disabilities (Vergara & Hardy, 2024), but these data have not been broken down by age group at the time of writing. We also know that young people with disabilities are more likely to identify as 2SLGBTQ+ than older persons with disabilities (Rabinowitz, 2024), and that 2SLGBTQ+ youth with disabilities are more likely to have multiple disabilities than non-2SLGBTQ+ youth (Rabinowitz, 2024). To support the inclusion of diverse youth with disabilities, a better understanding of this data is necessary.

Recent Employment Data for Youth with Disabilities

In recent years, the employment rate of youth with disabilities continues to be lower than their peers without disabilities. Between the 2017 and 2022 CSD – which were designed to be directly comparable – employment of youth in the labour force fell 7 percentage points, and the gap between youth with and without disabilities increased from 5% to 9%. Including those not in the labour force, there was little change in total employment rates for youth with disabilities between 2017 and 2022 (44% compared to 42%), but the percentage of those unemployed increased from 11% to 16% (Statistics Canada, 2024a). About 282,850 or 89% of youth with disabilities who are neither employed nor in school have the potential to work (Statistics Canada, 2024b).

Youth disability rates are also increasing. In 2017, 13% of youth aged 15-24 had a disability (Morris et al., 2018), which increased to 20% in 2022 – the largest increase of any age group (Hébert et al., 2024). Mental health disability is a significant concern for youth in Canada. The most common disabilities among youth in 2022 were mental health-related, and the prevalence of mental health-related disabilities also increased the most of any disability type (Hébert et al., 2024). Youth with mental health-related disabilities have a lower employment rate compared to youth with disabilities on average (Vergara & Hardy, 2024).

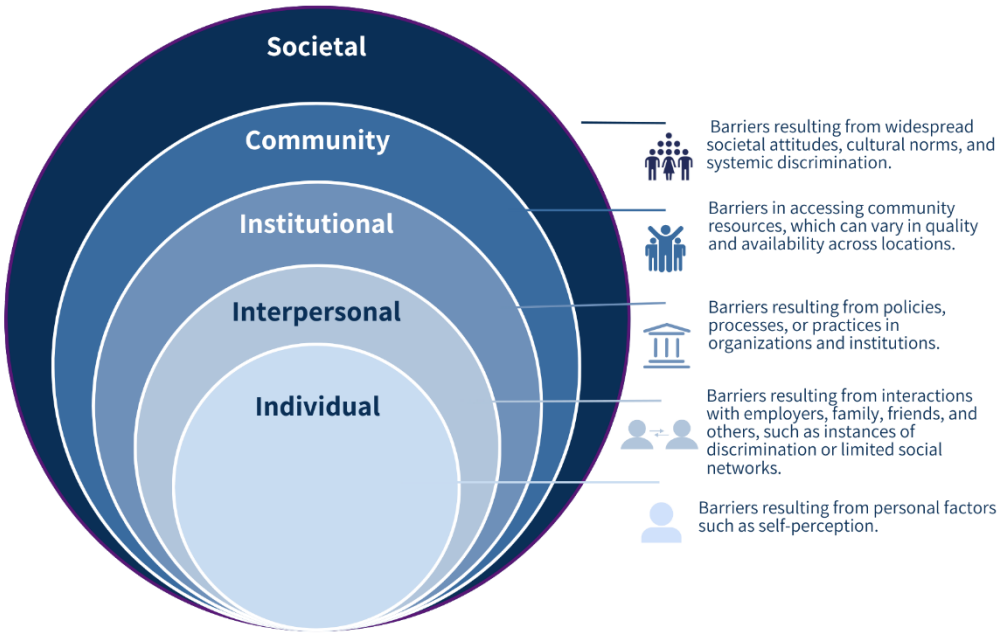
Mental health disabilities are very common among post-secondary students in particular, with an estimated nearly one in five students experiencing them (Wiens et al., 2020). Ongoing longitudinal research conducted by CCRW on post-secondary students in Canada has found that approximately 43% of students with disabilities have a mental health-related disability. In this study, preliminary results have also shown that mental health-related disability is correlated with job search expectations post-graduation, such that students with mental health disabilities expect to take longer to find their first job (r = .20, p = .001).

Barriers to Workforce Inclusion

In this section, we discuss barriers to employment faced by youth face across five interrelated systems: the individual, their interpersonal relationships, institutions, communities, and society (Pike et al., 2015).

Barriers driven by ableism and ageism affect all domains of life, including employment, and barriers at different levels can influence each other. For example, widespread ableist misconceptions in media and culture – a societal barrier – can influence individuals' self-perception; or individual biases and discrimination can become embedded in institutional policies and practices. Figure 3 illustrates and defines the five levels of barriers discussed throughout this section.

Figure 3. A diagram describing five levels of barriers to employment.



Societal Barriers

Poverty

Financial precarity is one of the most pernicious employment barriers faced by youth with disabilities. Compared with almost all other wealthy, developed countries, Canada provides little financial support to persons with disabilities, with only South Korea, Turkey, and Mexico spending less of their GDP on disability benefits (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019; Raphael et al., 2020). According to the 2022 CSD, youth with disabilities are more likely than any other age group of persons with disabilities to live in poverty, and they are more than twice as likely to live in poverty than seniors with disabilities (Hébert et al., 2024). Poverty is also more prevalent among visible minority youth with disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2023a). This has significant repercussions for employment, as prerequisites like post-secondary education and employment training, as well as many health services (e.g., prescription medication, allied health services) are not publicly funded (Raphael et al., 2020).

Cultural attitudes and norms

Other societal barriers include widespread ableist attitudes, beliefs, and norms. Ableism is embedded in media and culture, appearing in blatant forms on social media or in inaccurate portrayals in television, movies, and advertisements (Hughes, 2017; Loeppky, 2021; Nario-Redmond et al., 2019). Ableism is also perpetuated through language, including the use of explicit ableist slurs, but also through common words like ‘dumb’, ‘lame’, and ‘crazy’ (Cousens, 2020; Hughes, 2017; Loeppky, 2021). In the workforce, norms and conventions in recruitment and hiring processes as well as job requirements (e.g., requiring access to a vehicle; rigid expectations for lifting and standing; and ambiguous requirements like ‘strong communication skills’) can create barriers to work, especially when they are not bona fide[5] job requirements (CAN/ASC-1.1:2024 - Employment, 2024; Loeppky, 2021).

Community Barriers

Public education

The availability and quality of community resources and infrastructure varies across provinces, regions, and municipalities. Elementary and secondary school are crucial in that they are publicly funded institutions which support learning as well as early skills development and career exploration. In Canada, secondary schools sometimes offer employment preparation through career curricula, career counseling, pre-apprenticeship programs, cooperative education, dual credit programs, specialist diplomas, and technical/vocational training programs (Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, 2020). However, these offerings vary in availability between provinces and school boards and may not be offered in underfunded and understaffed schools (Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, 2020) or where partnerships between schools and organizations (e.g., employers, volunteer organizations) are lacking (Awsumb et al., 2022). A lack of access to career preparation resources in curricular or extracurricular offerings is a barrier to employment for many youth.

Even when these resources are available, for youth with disabilities, there may be additional challenges to accessing them. For example, career counselors are not always trained to work with youth with disabilities (Awsumb et al., 2022; LaPoint et al., 2024; Lindsay et al., 2015);

[5] ‘*Bona fide*’ refers to requirements which are genuine and necessary for performing work tasks.

providers may make assumptions that students with disabilities are uninterested or unable to take part in employment preparation activities (Awsumb et al., 2022); co-op or other career-prep placements may be inaccessible or employers may be reluctant to take on youth with disabilities (Awsumb et al., 2022; Lindsay et al., 2019); and educators may lack knowledge about the availability and offerings of vocational services for youth with disabilities (Awsumb et al., 2022; Carter et al., 2021; LaPoint et al., 2024).

Community services

Beyond secondary school, youth with disabilities may experience obstacles to accessing job services, including physical accessibility barriers (Lindsay et al., 2015). These challenges can intersect with other barriers, such as a lack of culturally competent services (Castruita Rios et al., 2023; Lindsay et al., 2023a). Youth who are newcomers to Canada may also find it more difficult to navigate the system and find available supports (Hirano et al., 2018).

Transportation

Lack of accessible transportation options may prevent youth from travelling to work or taking part in volunteering or job placement activities (Awsumb et al., 2022; Lindsay, 2011). Youth with certain types of disabilities, including some cognitive, visual, and medical disabilities, may be unable to drive a motor vehicle, and must rely on alternative modes of transportation (O. Reg. 340/94 Drivers' Licenses, n.d.). However, the availability and accessibility of public transportation varies. In addition to physical accessibility challenges, youth with disabilities are sometimes harassed, refused service, or treated as an inconvenience on public transportation (Wayland et al., 2022).

Institutional Barriers

Barriers also exist for youth with disabilities at the institutional level, such as within post-secondary institutions and workplaces.

Postsecondary institutions

Post-secondary education is frequently a requirement for employment in Canada (Dolmage, 2017). Though the post-secondary attainment gap between youth with and without disabilities is narrowing, labour market inequities for graduates with disabilities persist (Chatoor, 2021). Students with disabilities experience stigma, discrimination, and other institutional barriers to accessing accommodations, and frequently must self-advocate to obtain necessary supports (Ball & Traxler, 2024; Kreider et al., 2015; Owenz et al., 2024). Those with non-apparent disabilities may face even greater stigma than those whose disabilities are visible to others (Santuzzi et al., 2014). Ongoing longitudinal research conducted by CCRW's research department suggests over half (~56%) of post-secondary students with disabilities have a non-apparent disability.

The quality and availability of career services varies between institutions (Goodall et al., 2022). Accessibility efforts in post-secondary career services and co-curricular spaces lag behind those in classrooms, hindering early professional development opportunities for students with disabilities (NEADS, 2018). School-to-workforce transition supports for new graduates with disabilities are also lacking (Goodall et al., 2022; NEADS, 2018).

School-to-work transitions

Barriers in post-secondary institutions often trickle down into the workplace (Dollinger et al., 2024). Youth with disabilities may be less likely to be hired due to inaccessible or discriminatory job application processes, a lack of resources to support workers with disabilities (especially in

small and medium enterprises), a lack of workplace accessibility policies and procedures, and low availability of accessible jobs (Lindsay et al., 2015, 2024; Lindsay & DePape, 2015; Vincent & Fabri, 2022). Once hired, youth with disabilities may experience pay discrimination (Lindsay et al., 2023b). With the growth in part-time, temporary, and contract-based job opportunities in Canada that do not provide benefits, some youth with disabilities who cannot access permanent, full-time employment may choose to apply for governmental disability benefits rather than engage in precarious work (Lewis & Dijkema, 2022).

Interpersonal Barriers

Stigma, stereotypes, and discrimination from peers, families, employers, community members, service providers, and educators can also be an employment barrier for youth with disabilities (Graham et al., 2015; Lindsay et al., 2024; Lindsay & DePape, 2015; Wehman et al., 2015). Ableist stereotypes, such as the belief that people with disabilities are incompetent, and stigmatizing attitudes, such as experiences of being 'othered' due to their disability, impact young people with disabilities in daily lives and job search (Lindsay, 2011).

Employer stigma and misconceptions

Employer prejudice, discrimination, and lack of knowledge of people with disabilities is a barrier to hiring and retaining all workers with disabilities, including youth (Lindsay, 2011; Lindsay et al., 2015; Lindstrom et al., 2013; Woodgate et al., 2020). Employers are frequently reluctant to hire persons with disabilities, fearing (despite evidence to the contrary) that it will be costly to accommodate them, that they will be less productive, and that employers may open themselves up to legal action (Bonaccio et al., 2020).

Parental and caregiver expectations and involvement

Parents and caregivers can create employment barriers for youth with disabilities through over- or under-involvement, as well as inaccurate assumptions that their children lack the potential to work (Awsumb et al., 2022; Blustein et al., 2016; Carter et al., 2011; Lindsay et al., 2012; Trainor et al., 2008; Wehman et al., 2015). Compared to youth without disabilities, families of youth with disabilities tend to have lower expectations for their children's workforce participation (Lindsay et al., 2015; Lindstrom et al., 2013).

Parental overinvolvement can include attending interviews alongside youth, calling employers on their behalf, and requesting that youth stay close to home even when employment opportunities are elsewhere (Lindsay et al., 2015, 2017). Youth with overinvolved or overprotective parents and caregivers can become less independent in their job search (Awsumb et al., 2022). Evaluative research with CCRW Employment Services clients has also found that youth with highly involved parents or caregivers are less successful in finding work. Among CCRW clients, parental overinvolvement was found to be especially common among jobseekers with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Other research has also found that parental overprotection has negative consequences for the employability and self-determination of jobseekers with IDD (Callus et al., 2019; Meral et al., 2023).

Young women with disabilities may also experience more parental overprotection compared to young men with disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2017a). Parents may be concerned about young women's safety at work or when using public transportation, perceiving them as more vulnerable (Lindsay et al., 2017a).

Personal and professional networks

Peer and employer networks can help facilitate work opportunities. However, youth with disabilities may have smaller peer networks than youth without disabilities. Peer networks may be smaller because of disability-related stigma and inaccessible settings for youth-to-youth interaction (Paul et al., 2022). Youth with vision disabilities and newcomer youth are particularly likely to have small social networks (Heppe et al., 2015; Lindsay et al., 2024). Smaller peer networks can also limit youth's knowledge about volunteer opportunities (Lindsay, 2016; Lindsay et al., 2015). Barriers to volunteer opportunities can limit future opportunities to network with potential employers (Graham et al., 2015). Young persons with disabilities may also lack access to experienced mentors who could suggest relevant opportunities and provide guidance (Lindstrom et al., 2013).

Individual Barriers

Individual-level barriers, or personal factors like what youth with disabilities know, believe, feel, and have experienced, can also make it hard to find and keep a job. Importantly, attitudinal barriers like internalized ableism are often created or amplified by the types of social interactions and cultural beliefs discussed above. Other individual barriers stem from managing disability-related challenges like pain, which can also be compounded by social and systemic obstacles to accessing treatment.

Internalized ableism, disclosure, and self-advocacy

Youth with disabilities commonly experience discrimination and stigma. Youth may internalize this social stigma, leading to negative self-perception, hopelessness, discouragement, and low self-confidence (Lindsay et al., 2015, 2024; Lindstrom et al., 2013; Woodgate et al., 2020). A lack of self-confidence can be a barrier to obtaining and maintaining employment (Lindsay et al., 2015). For example, youth may lack confidence in their ability to disclose their disabilities to employers, fearing further discrimination (Jetha et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2015, 2019). Youth may fear ableist responses from co-workers and managers, such as concerns that others will think they are less capable (Lindsay et al., 2024; Woodgate et al., 2020). This concern is particularly prevalent among youth with mental health-related disabilities, who may fear disclosure will result in biased perceptions of their competence, reliability, and abilities (McGrath et al., 2023). Racialized persons may also be more likely to mask or hide their disability, and avoid disclosure out of fear of stigma, discrimination, or differential treatment (Lindsay et al., 2024).

Gender differences also impact disability disclosure (Lindsay et al., 2017a). Young men with disabilities may hide their disability more often than young women with disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2017a). Due to gendered expectations of masculinity and invulnerability, young men, especially those with mental health disabilities, may find it more difficult and uncomfortable to ask for help (Staiger et al., 2020). As such, young men with disabilities might find self-advocacy in the workplace more challenging, especially as it relates to disability disclosure and workplace accommodations (Lindsay et al., 2017a).

The impact of early work experiences on skill development

The benefits of early work are significant. Working during adolescence can support the development of work identity, personal goal setting, educational interests, and self-confidence (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). As previously discussed, youth with disabilities face barriers to accessing early work experiences as early as high school (Lindstrom et al., 2013). This can mean that they lack necessary life and work skills such as adaptability, boundary-setting, asking for help, job searching, and networking skills (Awsumb et al., 2022; Lindsay, 2011;

Lindsay & Ahmed, 2021). Developing strong life skills, as well as transferable skills like communication, leads to higher-quality employment (Achterberg et al., 2009; Carter et al., 2011; Lindsay et al., 2024; Wehman et al., 2015), while difficulty with social and communication skills can lead to lower success in the workplace (Awsumb et al., 2022; Blustein et al., 2016; Noel et al., 2017).

Disability-related barriers

For some youth with disabilities, managing their condition can be a barrier to employment, especially as it relates to physical tasks (i.e., lifting or standing for long periods) and managing self-care (e.g., fatigue, medication management; Lindsay et al., 2017a). Youth with episodic disabilities report that the unpredictable and dynamic nature of their disabilities can make retaining employment challenging (Jetha et al., 2024).

For some youth with disabilities, managing their condition can also challenge their ability to obtain pre-requisites for employment, such as education. For example, adolescents with chronic pain or chronic illnesses may have a high number of school absences, leading to lower academic performance and, in some cases, needing to repeat grades (Leite et al., 2023; Logan et al., 2008; Milton et al., 2006), which can ultimately impact youth's ability to finish high school (Hakulinen et al., 2019). These challenges also mean that youth with disabilities may have less opportunity to take part in career activities offered in high school, or may fall behind their peers without disabilities in terms of early work experiences and skill development.

Best Practices for Supporting the Employment of Youth with Disabilities

Although there are many barriers to employment for youth with disabilities, there are promising directions to improve employment participation and support youth throughout their careers. This section explores effective strategies including mentorship, skills training, and on-the-job supports.

Mentorship

Mentorship has well-documented benefits for youth with disabilities. Mentorship can be formal or informal, and mentors can be well-established professionals or peers. In career mentoring, a type of mentorship focused on employment and career development, mentors assist mentees in developing career planning and job skills, as well as support them in achieving employment milestones like resume-building and interviewing (Timmons et al., 2006).

Mentorship programs have been shown to help youth with disabilities make more effective career planning decisions and support the transition to adulthood (Lindsay & Munson, 2018), as well as improve social skills and self-esteem among youth (Lindsay et al., 2016). As parents and teachers may not have the knowledge or experience to meet the unique needs of youth with disabilities, mentorship programs can play an important role. Mentorship programs connect youth with mentors who can guide them through their career journey (Bell et al., 2016). Mentors are role models, providing valuable insights, advice, emotional support, and encouragement (Bell et al., 2016; Lindsay et al., 2016). They help mentees navigate work experiences and pathways, including internships, co-op placements, and volunteer opportunities (Lindsay et al., 2016).

Developing and implementing successful mentorship programs begins with having a structured program where objectives are clearly defined and tailored to meet the needs of participants (Dennison, 2023). When designing mentorship programs, providers should prioritize accessibility

and ensure program parameters are flexible to evolving needs (Dennison, 2023). A successful program also requires both dedicated mentors and mentees. Mentors must have the time and resources to contribute, while mentees should have clear goals (Dennison, 2023). Clear communication is essential throughout the planning and execution of the program, including opportunities for feedback to ensure continuous improvement (Dennison, 2023). Longer programs (lasting more than six months) can help mentors and mentees develop stronger relationships, which can improve the experience for youth with disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2016).

E-mentoring

E-mentoring through interactive websites, virtual worlds, email, and mobile apps is becoming increasingly popular (Lindsay et al., 2017b). E-mentoring can help youth with disabilities improve their career decision-making, self-determination, self-advocacy, self-confidence, self-management, social skills, and attitudes toward disability (Lindsay et al., 2017b). E-mentoring has added benefits like greater availability and accessibility for building mentoring relationships (Lindsay et al., 2017b). Despite challenges such as the need for digital skills, maintaining engagement, and potential miscommunication due to the virtual environment, e-mentoring provides another flexible and inclusive option for youth with disabilities.

Skills Training and Self-Advocacy

For youth with disabilities who face barriers to early work experiences and skill development, soft skill training can improve employment outcomes (Lee et al., 2023). The Government of Canada via Employment and Social Development Canada has identified soft skills like adaptability, collaboration, communication, creativity and innovation, and problem solving as necessary employment skills in their Skills for Success model (Government of Canada, 2021). At CCRW, ongoing research on soft skills training has found that skills like communication, collaboration, and adaptability are also highly valued by employers (CCRW, 2024b).

Training in self-advocacy and independent living skills, alongside wraparound supports like transportation assistance, are also effective for promoting employment for youth with disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2017a; Schutz & Carter, 2022; Wehman et al., 2015). Developing self-advocacy and independent living skills can help youth with disabilities ask for accommodations, navigate workplace challenges, set career goals, and promote job retention (Thomas & Morgan, 2021).

A testimonial from Alex, a past client of CCRW, illustrates how navigating workplace accommodations can be unfamiliar territory for many young jobseekers:

“What I was really surprised about was when I mentioned I need accommodation - I was nervous to mention this … I later learned that asking for accommodation in the workplace is something that is common whether to do with disability, religion, health, etc. CCRW was very understanding of who I am … making me comfortable to share how I feel and aware of what can help me in pursuing my job search and career.” - Alex

Workplace Accessibility and On-the-Job Supports

Two well-established strategies to address workplace inaccessibility for youth with disabilities are job coaching and workplace accommodations.

Job coaching

Job coaches provide skill training, tailored assistance with resume writing, interview preparation, job search strategies, and ongoing support in the workplace to deal with challenges that arise (O’Day et al., 2016). They build strong, supportive relationships with jobseekers or employees

(Nicholas & Mitchell, 2024), regularly checking in to understand their needs and concerns. Job coaches communicate with both employees and employers to ensure mutual support as workers with disabilities enter the workplace. They also assist employers in creating a more inclusive work environment by educating them about disability and accommodations.

Inclusive workplace cultures and access to accommodations

Canadian employers have a legal duty to accommodate workers with disabilities (Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.). Accommodations are changes to workplaces, schedules, tasks, equipment, or objectives that enable workers to participate and help them do their jobs safely and well (Government of Canada, 2011a, 2011b).

Effective job accommodations start with workplace policies and procedures informed by legislation, internal stakeholders, and external experts like disability advocacy groups (Job Accommodation Network, n.d.; Workable, 2024). These policies should ensure that all accommodation requests are implemented and documented consistently, and that accommodation plans are regularly reviewed and updated (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2024; Job Accommodation Network, n.d.).

The accommodation process often begins with a jobseeker or employee telling their employer that they need an accommodation (Government of Canada, 2011a), underscoring the importance of fostering youth's self-advocacy skills and knowledge of employment rights. Employers are responsible for creating an inclusive environment where workers feel safe disclosing a disability or making a request (Lindsay et al., 2021). Unfortunately, many workers do not feel their workplace culture is supportive or inclusive, which can deter workers from disclosing a disability or requesting accommodations (Accenture, 2023). Fostering a culture of belonging and psychological safety has been shown to promote proactive disclosure, workplace performance, and career development (McIntosh et al., 2022; Yousif et al., 2024).

Recommendations

To promote employment inclusion for youth with disabilities, strategies and initiatives are needed to support career development and early work experiences; foster youth autonomy; and challenge widespread ageist and ableist stigma. Building on the review of barriers and the best practices discussed above, in this section, we outline concrete recommendations for families, employment services professionals, and youth jobseekers to help young people with disabilities unlock their potential in the workforce.

Parents & Caregivers of Youth with Disabilities

Career development begins early in life. Families, peers, and schools play important roles in helping youth determine their talents and interests. As described in the section on *Interpersonal Barriers,* family dynamics can help or hinder children and adolescents' early career development.

When youth begin their search for work, parents and caregivers must strike a balance between supporting youth and encouraging their independence. Overinvolved or overprotective caregivers can hinder youth from developing confidence and crucial professional skills, while uninvolved caregivers may fail to provide critical support and resources that would help youth succeed.

In addition to providing encouragement, parents can help youth in the job market by providing tangible support, like professional connections or access to transportation. They can also teach young adults about the 'hidden curriculum' of work: the norms and unspoken expectations for

navigating situations like job interviews. Parents should avoid taking over responsibility for their children's job search. Behaviours such as calling potential employers or even attending interviews with their children undermine youth's autonomy as well as perpetuate misconceptions that youth with disabilities are incapable.

Employment Professionals

Effective career planning, strong professional networks, and early work experiences are critical to employment success. Community organizations and employment service providers serving youth with disabilities can help jobseekers build their professional toolkits and identify career mentors, as well as connect youth directly with opportunities to work with accessible, disability inclusive employers.

Supporting Career Exploration and Early Work Experiences

Early work experiences form the foundation of future employment success. Not only do many employers look for work experience when evaluating applicants – even for entry-level roles (Lyons, 2023) – first jobs impart essential skills, networking opportunities, and opportunities for career exploration. A lack of access to early work experiences continues to be an employment barrier for youth with disabilities.

Adolescents and young adults are in a critical phase of identity formation (Branje, 2022). This includes determining their talents and interests and evaluating the career opportunities available to them. This period can be a time of excitement, but also of anxiety. Youth may experience real or perceived pressure from families, friends, and society at large to commit to a career pathway quickly. Many young people are also not aware of the wide variety of careers available to them.

One jobseeker, a young adult named Jason, found what he called his dream career path after working with CCRW Employment Services. Importantly, Jason discovered a pathway to meaningful work that he previously did not know was possible:

"I thought work was just labour, I didn't think it could be enjoyable. I've learned that I can be myself, and have fun while working. Currently, I'm on a path (from working with CCRW) to work in disability support which has been my dream. I didn't realize that I could do this type of work without a degree." - Jason

To support career exploration and provide access to early work experiences, employment professionals can help youth with disabilities recognize their potential and provide information on careers they may not have considered. They can also connect youth with opportunities to 'try out' careers through internships, hands-on training programs, summer jobs or other temporary roles, and volunteer experiences. These can provide channels for youth to explore different work environments without the pressure of committing to a career before they're ready.

Mentorship can be a powerful tool, enabling youth to connect with experienced mentors who provide advice and emotional support, facilitate new connections, and act as career role models. Employment professionals can help connect young jobseekers with disabilities with experienced mentors through mentorship fairs or other platforms; INNoVA's Disabilities Mentoring Day, for example, connects jobseekers with disabilities with industry professionals (INNoVA, 2024). Service providers can also offer structured career-focused mentorship programs.

Supporting Skill Development and Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy skills are critical for jobseekers and workers with disabilities to communicate effectively, access needed supports, and ensure equitable treatment both in and out of the

workplace. However, these skills are rarely formally taught, and barriers like stigma can discourage youth with disabilities from advocating for themselves.

Job coaches, career counselors, and other service providers can help youth develop these crucial skills by providing resources on employment rights and employer responsibilities for inclusion and accessibility, as well as building their clients' confidence through training sessions, roleplaying exercises, and positive feedback. For example, role-playing scenarios and Virtual Reality (VR) simulations of challenging situations like workplace disclosure conversations can help jobseekers practice self-advocacy in a safe environment (CCRW, 2024a).

Life Transitions: Critical Periods for Support

Emerging adulthood is a time of significant change across life domains, including education and work. The transition from secondary to post-secondary education or to the workforce is full of both opportunities and challenges; however, for many youth with disabilities, these transitions are complicated by service and support gaps, such as changing eligibility requirements or coordination issues between providers.

Navigating different support systems can be a confusing and time-consuming process. Community organizations can serve as sources of information and liaisons between resource providers, helping youth with disabilities secure support and adapt to changing circumstances. In addition to offering job coaching, skills training, and employment opportunities, service providers can facilitate communication between stakeholders like schools, employers, and other organizations, or provide referrals to appropriate resources for their clients. Service providers can improve transitional periods for youth with disabilities by building partnerships with these stakeholders and collaborating to implement initiatives. For example, service providers can engage secondary and post-secondary schools to develop accessible career development programs, tutoring, or other extracurricular activities tailored towards youth with disabilities. They can also partner with local employers to identify or create new job or internship opportunities, ensuring employers are supported with knowledge and resources to foster disability inclusive work environments.

Considerations for Service Design

Effective service design must address and mitigate social and systemic barriers. For youth with disabilities, who are disproportionately likely to live in poverty, this includes reducing financial barriers to entry and providing wraparound supports to address complex challenges like housing precarity and food insecurity. It also means ensuring services are implemented through an intersectional framework, reflecting the diverse needs of youth with disabilities, many of whom are members of other marginalized communities.

To address financial barriers to entry, employment service providers can offer subsidized employment opportunities, connecting youth with work while offsetting the costs of wages and training for employers. Service providers can also help to mitigate the costs associated with the job search process and support the procurement of assistive technologies and other accommodations. For example, community organizations can provide access to digital technologies needed to search and apply for jobs, such as a laptop, internet access, or printer; they can also seek to secure funding to help youth cover the costs of accessibility needs like mobility aids, communication software, or ergonomic supports. Indirectly, offering training in areas like budgeting and financial literacy can also support youth from low-income households in overcoming financial barriers.

A testimonial from a young adult named Daven, a previous CCRW client, emphasizes the difference financial and wraparound supports can make for young jobseekers with disabilities:

"…the driving lessons I was provided … assisted me in obtaining my class 5 license, achieving a goal of mine which I set at the start of the program, which now allows me to efficiently travel to and from school and work, and the first aid course and food safety course I did … improved my resume and opened up many more opportunities for me … I have learned money management skills and have gained independence which I did not have prior, as the financial support gave me the boost I needed." - Daven

Providers must also ensure that services are designed to meet the needs of the diverse communities they support. This requires taking a holistic, client-centered approach to service delivery that considers the effects of intersecting barriers on work and wellbeing. Culturally informed and trauma-informed service delivery begins with recognizing the sociocultural context of the community, including values, norms, and other factors that may influence the design and implementation of services. Collaborating with partner organizations representing diverse communities helps ensure service offerings are informed by community voices. Additionally, ongoing training and education should be provided to all staff – especially those on the frontline of service delivery – to ensure providers are equipped with the tools to provide comfortable, respectful, and effective service.

It is often said that 'what gets measured gets done'. Evaluation and monitoring are critical to the success of any initiative. Concrete objectives should be identified at the outset of service design, along with a comprehensive measurement and reporting plan. Doing so ensures organizations can identify opportunities for continuous improvement and course correction, allocate resources effectively, and measure their impact.

Youth with Disabilities

Youth with disabilities can take charge of their careers by learning and implementing career management strategies, developing confidence and self-advocacy skills, and gaining experience. Youth can also engage community service providers for help with all of these strategies and more, including job search support, identifying new resources, obtaining financial assistance or accommodations, and growing their professional networks.

Career management is a continuous process of goal setting, planning, and decision-making informed by one's skills, interests, and available work opportunities (King, 2004). Youth with disabilities, who may be in the midst of choosing a postsecondary program or searching for a first job, are in a critical decision-making period. Learning about available career options and assessing their own abilities and preferences can foster more effective decision-making. Fortunately, many career assessment and planning tools are available through service providers, school career counseling offices, and online. Youth with disabilities can use career aptitude tools and vocational assessments to determine suitable fields and occupations.

Working with a service provider and/or a career mentor are effective ways to develop self-advocacy skills and knowledge about the world of work. Youth with disabilities can build on these supports and further grow their confidence through practice and self-reflection. For example, youth can practice self-advocacy techniques like clear communication and negotiation skills by rehearsing scenarios with a trusted peer or family member, seeking feedback to improve.

As discussed in the section on *Best Practices*, mentorship can be formal or informal. Outside formal mentorship programs, youth with disabilities can seek out informal mentors, such as more experienced peers, relatives, or coworkers. Because they operate outside the structure of a formal program, these informal relationships have the advantage of flexibility (National Institute for Health and Care Research, 2023). Informal mentoring may even be more effective than formal mentoring, as it allows mentors and mentees to connect over shared values, interests, and lived experiences (Underhill, 2006). Youth with disabilities may find it beneficial to connect with mentors who share similar experiences (such as disability) who can provide perspective and serve as role models. This may take the form of in-person mentoring, or e-mentoring through websites, email, or mobile apps (Lindsay et al., 2017b).

Conclusion

Youth with disabilities continue to be employed at lower rates than youth without disabilities. However, we are in a pivotal time of societal transformation, with government and community attention on improving employment outcomes for youth with disabilities. The Canadian government has expressed its commitment to removing employment barriers, and community organizations are actively promoting strategies and best practices for creating inclusive workplaces. With improved strategies for measuring the workforce participation of youth with disabilities, we will be able to measure change and promote continued progress. However, more information is still needed about the needs of youth with disabilities with intersecting marginalized identities, including racialized youth and newcomers to Canada.

Supporting the inclusion of youth with disabilities in the workforce is a shared responsibility. Parents and caregivers are uniquely positioned to pass on their knowledge of workplace norms, connect youth to their established networks, and offer their encouragement. Employment professionals can support youth by providing career exploration, mentorship, and skill development opportunities, as well as helping youth build their self-advocacy skills and confidence. Employment professionals can also build connections with partners like schools, employers, and other community organizations to support the unique needs of youth during transitional periods, including offering wraparound supports to mitigate complex barriers like poverty and transportation inaccessibility. Finally, youth with disabilities can take charge of their employment journey by seeking out community resources and mentors, and learning career self-management strategies.

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