

2022 Youth Outlook: An Essay from Youth Staffers at CCYP Research & Policy and the CCYP Youth Council



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As 2022 started, Canada was experiencing yet another wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, this time driven by the Omicron variant, with most provinces implementing a range of physical distancing measures. As the Omicron variant became more widespread in December, there was a lot of speculation and uncertainty in the science of it, as well as around the steps that governments would take to deal with the spread.

It goes without saying that in 2022 the Covid-19 pandemic is the biggest challenge for Canadians as a whole (including youth aged 15-29), so every issue presented here will be within the “covid context”. Some were present before and have been exacerbated by the pandemic, but by the time this goes to publishing we will be two calendar and academic years into the pandemic and in modified lockdowns across the country, hence the focus on the youth issues exacerbated by and stemming from Covid-19. The biggest theme for youth in 2022 will be unpredictability and its negative effects on all stakeholders in youths’ labour & economic development. The potential for newer and more transmissible variants makes it difficult for youth, their parents/support systems, schools and employers to make economic plans because of uncertainty over how the virus might evolve. Trying to keep up with the changes and updates is also tiresome, with fatigue being another recurring theme from the past year and half and going into 2022. The uncertainty & fatigue that stem from it are themes not just for responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, but also for youth labour, education and economic development as a whole, with most solutions—including those proposed here—, essentially temporary ones pending the end of the pandemic.

The pandemic as a whole has forced youth to delay plans and goals they had in place for themselves, especially at a point in their lives that is supposed to be for development, exploration and career & personal growth. Despite our relatively good record on vaccinations, the Omicron variant and the lockdown measures that followed it have dampened the mood and any optimism youth may have had coming into 2022. To get a better picture of how youth feel, the CCYP Research & Policy team spoke with CCYP Youth Council members, and their sentiments and responses have been included throughout this essay.

"I'm just not hopeful. I don't want to get my hopes up for anything because I think last year was a lot of disappointment... Even trying to plan anything, it's hard to look to the future," - Paige, CCYP Youth Council

Included in these delayed life plans are career plans and goals as well. People graduating into or [starting their careers in a recession loss almost 10%](#) in their initial earnings, compared to those that graduate or start in more stable times. While it is no longer a recession at the time of writing, the class of 2020 is a cohort which graduated during one, and will need time and support to recover from the recession's effects, as will the graduate classes of 2021 and 2022 to varying extents. Natalie, a CCYP Youth Council member with an accounting degree ('21), recounts going through accounting recruitment feeling like there were too many qualified applicants for a limited number of opportunities. As a result, she decided to "to apply for everything to broaden my opportunities... just kind of going for it". She eventually decided to delay full time employment after graduation because of the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on her schooling and work prospects, essentially trying to wait out the pandemic before committing to a decision while figuring out her options.

"I've changed the job search too to look at things I wouldn't really like to do...entering the gig economy kind of feels like the only option"- Paige

Another pertinent issue in 2022 affecting youth as a result of the pandemic is the rising cost of commodities like food and other necessities i.e., inflation in Canada, as well as supply chain & logistics breakdowns across the world. [With inflation \(consumer price index\) standing at 4.8%](#) at the time of writing in January, the most obvious effect of this inflation is the reduction of youths' spending power, as things are even costlier. In addition to affecting youths' direct earning and spending power, inflation also affects youths' support systems. With [youth taking longer to independently establish themselves](#), they often rely on support from parents and/or other family members. As such, the higher costs of everything from groceries to appliances to gasoline means youths' support systems are less able to support them like they otherwise might because their own costs have increased. While inflation applies to everyone, with the youth it has not only an outsize effect because of their being at the beginning of their respective earnings paths, but different groups of youth face different challenges/outlooks based on their particular group vulnerabilities.

Youth in education

For the subset of youth in education, the biggest challenges stem from the adjustments to the pandemic. The most common grievance for students is having all the classes and essentially their education experience be entirely virtual, although this arrangement works for some due to disability (accessibility) and cost concerns stemming from commuting.

For those in high school, too much time off has set them back by limiting their educational experience and [causing learning losses](#) that may have [lingering effects](#) on their later educational progress & attainment. Furthermore, with the easily spread Omicron variant, teachers could call in sick so even if there is a return to in-class schooling before winter ends, the teaching and structure will be disjointed, making for a bad experience for everyone involved. For post-secondary students, what has been called 'Zoom University' is tedious and harder to stay engaged/motivated in than in-person learning. It is also more difficult for youth to build up their social and academic networks through 'Zoom university' than in person, because the same kinds of connections formed from sitting in the same section of the classroom and going to libraries together, are not as easily formed through a screen. The restrictions to in-person events also mean that youth who may have relied on job/career fairs and town-halls to network or apply for jobs are unable to, making it even harder to get a foot in their desired sectors. Another issue with 'Zoom University' is that students feel underserved, as they pay the same costs for school, despite only getting a fraction of the services and less of the non-academic experience.

This is also an issue from both a personal and career perspective because outside class is essentially where one gets most of the ‘university or college experience’, as well as “networking across” i.e., with peers. This is also the case for international students, who in 2020/21 [paid on average, five times the domestic tuition fee](#), essentially subsidizing Canadians’ education while also getting less of the Canadian and university experience. This may make it even harder for them to get desired employment in Canada post-graduation, should they decide to stay, as employers often favour Canadian work experience.

“I didn’t have the ability to build a sense of community online... As an Indigenous youth working in Indigenous communities, we don’t have good internet access there and that became a barrier to doing any work there” -Tristen, CCYP Youth Council

The experience of the pandemic has shown students that while universities and colleges did adjust their hybrid/remote technological capacities, do deliver instruction remotely, warts and all, they did not receive the desired type and quality of instruction. To students, it seems apparent that universities and colleges adjust their revenue-expenditure models if students are getting worse-than-usual services.

Youth in employment

The hardest hit sectors by the pandemic and the ensuing restrictions are ones that hire the most youth and in which youth often gain their first work experience i.e., Accommodation & Food Services and Retail Trade. Although the most recent [2021 \(3rd quarter\) job vacancy data](#) from Statistics Canada shows that job vacancies went up for almost all sectors, compared to the same period in 2019, three of the main sectors driving the growth in job vacancies are the two aforementioned sectors that employ the most youth (15-24) and construction, all also contact intensive roles. This inability of employers to fill jobs in those mentioned sectors despite the [increase in average wages](#) offered for these roles, may reflect an increased preference from youth for jobs that allow them to work from home, due to the dangers of occupying the roles normally occupied by youth e.g., cashier, retail sales associate, waiter.

It may also reflect youths' dissatisfaction with terms of employment at many of these roles in their current forms, which often pay on average more than minimum wage (\$17.35) but still less than the [average hourly average \(\\$30.03\)](#) and in some cases, not enough for a living wage.

True, the increase in remote work has been beneficial for some in rural areas because they now have access to a wider jobs pool than before the pandemic.

"Being remote has opened up a lot of opportunities. I live on the East Coast in a rural community, so there usually is not a lot of opportunity in my field, but I've been able to get a lot of jobs in my field, because I've been able to work remotely." - Elizabeth, CCYP Youth Council

On the other hand, it has also contributed to youths' sense of despair over their careers. Youth council members Nabeel, Paige and Natalie shared feeling like the competition for positions they felt qualified for has increased because employers have a much wider and sometimes more qualified selection pool than before, and as a result were considering applying to sectors they had overlooked or otherwise were not considering, as well as roles in the gig economy, just to have something doing.

So far we have discussed students and employed youth. We do need to address the issues faced by a portion of youth whose population increased during the pandemic because they are essentially disconnected from schooling and sometimes the job search as well i.e., youth who are not in education, employment or training or NEET youth.

NEET Youth

The onset of the pandemic coincided with the number of youth not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) increasing substantially which signalled both low job market prospects and low confidence in the job market and educational opportunities due to the strong impact of the pandemic on youth employment and education.

While the NEET rates have recovered since then and youth labour market prospects have improved, there still remain some gaps. First of all, youth enrolment in educational institutions have seen an increase in part-time enrolment while the halt in in-person brought by the latest Omicron wave has put a dent in student's graduation plans particularly those with an in-person learning component. Moreover, while reopening and ensuing exodus of labour from some sectors have increased job prospects in those sectors, other sectors are seeing increased competition due to remote work enabling job applicants across the country to apply. Moreover, on-campus networking events such as jobs fairs and company presentations have moved online which takes away a key component of youth's passage to employment from postsecondary education as these events played a crucial role in securing youth employment.

The authors' personal experience of online education in spring of 2020 and being a NEET youth in the summer and fall of 2020 are concomitant with the above mentioned points, as the lack of in-person career events have hardened the task of obtaining post-graduation employment while online education does not enjoy the complete confidence of students. The author's experience suggests that while being NEET comes with its own set of frustrations, learning new skills and perseverance come handy in this situation. Being steadfast and persistent in circumstances like these can support the attainment of career goals.

Addressing these challenges

Up to this point only the challenges and issues facing youth have been mentioned. Now we look at the possible approaches to addressing or at least mitigating them. For youth in high school, many of the best solutions have already been proposed by teachers' unions, and also overlap with the best measures for managing the pandemic into an endemic stage. These include ensuring that air filtration systems (HEPA) in schools are up to date and providing staff and students with N95 masks. While the actions of school boards alone will not end the pandemic, they will help make staff and students alike feel more protected and more confident in leaving their homes. Lastly, Ontario recently passed the [Working for Workers Act that reduces certification barriers](#) for foreign trained professionals, including teachers, thereby making it easier for them to work in Canada. This Act could be applied to address any teacher shortages or illnesses as mentioned before, while also helping bring some of those foreign trained professionals out of un(der)employment.

As highlighted in CCYP's [State of the Sector report on post-secondary education](#), since the start of the pandemic there has been an increase in part-time post-secondary education enrolment compared to full-time education. This shows that youth are adjusting to the quality and delivery methods of the education available to them by dividing their time between school and employment and as such, need to be better supported as they toggle between school and employment. To further help youth at various stages of their education, there should be increased public funding to institutions to support them in expanding programmes that correspond to those sectors or roles within sectors facing demographic changes e.g., nursing within the healthcare sector, transportation and warehousing sector (trucking) and real estate and rental & leasing. [1]

[1] For more on this see CCYP's [December 2021 snapshot](#) on labour shortages.

While the youth remain quite enthusiastic to pursue a career in nursing, the reduced availability of spots in nursing programs owing to limited academic funding has put a dent in those ambitions contributing further towards the shortage experienced in nursing. More specifically, these efforts could be put into promoting and supporting colleges as they are cheaper to attend than universities and are more directly related to career preparation than universities. Recent [Statistics Canada studies](#) have also shown that people with university degrees have attained college degrees to enhance their careers. By improving linkages between colleges and employers, the labour market outcomes for individuals can be improved and a source of labour market mismatch can be removed.

To get more youth interested in the aforementioned sectors, one thing that needs to improve across the board is the terms of employment. Terms of employment refers to the agreed responsibilities and benefits of a job, between employee and employer e.g., wages/salary, overtime, benefits & insurance. Jobs in sectors like Accommodation & Food Services, Retail and Health care roles like nursing often see [complaints from workers](#) about the terms of employment, ranging from insufficient pay to being overworked. The minimum wage increase for federally regulated sectors implemented in 2021 is a step in the right direction, although it does not cover many youths because so few of them work in these federally regulated sectors. As such, provinces have to do their part by increasing minimum wages to reduce the gap between provincial minimum and liveable wages. Barring a wholesale policy change, businesses/employers themselves could play a role. Temporary measures like the hazard pay/bonus (hero pay), a \$2-an-hour pay bump for grocery workers introduced in 2020 and then withdrawn, should be made permanent. The bigger grocery chains e.g Loblaws, can keep that in place as an incentive for people to stay and apply to these high-contact and high risk roles, given [employee demand](#) for it and the executives raking in record profits and bonuses. However, this will be much harder for many businesses/employers to do if they now have less traffic and profits as of January 2022, face rising supply costs and are unable to confidently plan and forecast due to the pandemic.

Another step that could be taken to help youth find their feet in 2022 is reducing barriers to entry both for training and for employment. For Tristen, this may look like improving internet connection in more rural areas and Indigenous reserves—perhaps even having internet access be designated an essential service—to give them equal access to the wider opportunities now available remotely i.e., closing the digital divide. Additionally, it could be made easier for youth looking to go into aging industries with high labour demand like trucking & logistics, or industries experiencing expansion like finance & insurance. With truck-driving training costing between \$6,000– \$12,000, more subsidy programmes like [Trucking HR's Career ExpressWay programme](#) would make it easier for youth to enter the industry, as would making it easier for newer/younger truckers to afford the insurance premiums, the high cost of which has [been cited as a turn-off](#) for companies looking to hire younger drivers.

In addition to these steps, the perception of opportunities in the aforementioned sectors and other roles in the construction and utilities sector needs to be improved amongst youth 15–29, who tend to view them as less desirable, financially rewarding and respectable than white-collar roles in other industries. Such roles help give youth transferrable life and social skills that we may not otherwise pick up working behind a screen; an experience (and the security) of working in a unionised setting and even get some travelling done! Through awareness particularly at secondary education level of career choices available in trades, more youth could be directed to a sector experiencing shortage of labour that can provide a financially rewarding career.

Improving health care systems across the country is another way to support youth and improve their outlook on this year. Within Canada, given health care is provincial, increasing the federal transfer amounts to provinces (currently about \$42 billion) would be beneficial for all Canadians, not just youth. It would be understandable given the initial messaging and driving reason for restrictions was to ease the system's burden—remember flattening the curve? –, improve the capacity to provide treatment, allow for the expanded hiring of health care professionals and by extension, make youth and businesses feel safer about resuming their activities. Such a transfer would also allow the provinces to expand and improve much needed mental health services, which youth need to get through the pandemic now, and also deal with the longer term effects of the pandemic induced isolation, loneliness and increased substance use.

For CCYP Youth council member Emily, the easier access to health care through virtual consultations or bookings like [New Brunswick's evisitNB](#), is something she would like to see maintained going forward, citing the accessibility benefits, ease, speed and convenience with which she can now do certain things like refill prescriptions or get a consultations.

Thankfully we at CCYP are self-aware, so we understand that it is rather ironic that some of our proposed recommendations, like the mental health services expansion, involve hybrid or remote solutions. We do recognize that the remote arrangement, especially for schools/PSIs, has been identified as mostly being a problem in its current form, not a benefit. Hybrid solutions to youth-specific problems can fill in gaps and address specific problems that youth face, because they are flexible. But the key problem that youth face is uncertainty in 2022, which solely a solutions-based framework as one offered by hybrid solutions cannot solve. This is because the pandemic and the virus itself are ever changing, again reflecting that previously mentioned uncertainty. The ultimate solution is that the pandemic ends through more widespread and equitable vaccination not just within Canada, but globally to avoid the mutation of dangerous variants in different parts of the world. The pandemic situation in Canada in January 2022 is not where we thought we might be when we looked ahead in July or November 2021, and who can say where we will be in another 3,6 or 12 months? We, the youth, are hoping for a better year than the last, with more room to maximise our potential and exert our agency.

"I think a lot of young people have lost personal power. they have to live at home and that results in a lack of power and control over their lives (what they eat, who they see, what they can do). Or they have to live so virtually that they lose access to community. So...allowing young people more control or power would be really important"- Paige, CCYP Youth Council.

With Canada getting older-the 2016 Census places the country's average age at 40 years old- it is imperative considering the youth population as we recover from the pandemic. Positioning youth for a future of prosperity or at least stability also means they will be in a better economic position to support Canada's aging population through their payments into the social security system. Therefore Canada's shrinking youth population, often touted as the future, need to be listened to and better positioned to maximise this oft-mentioned future potential.