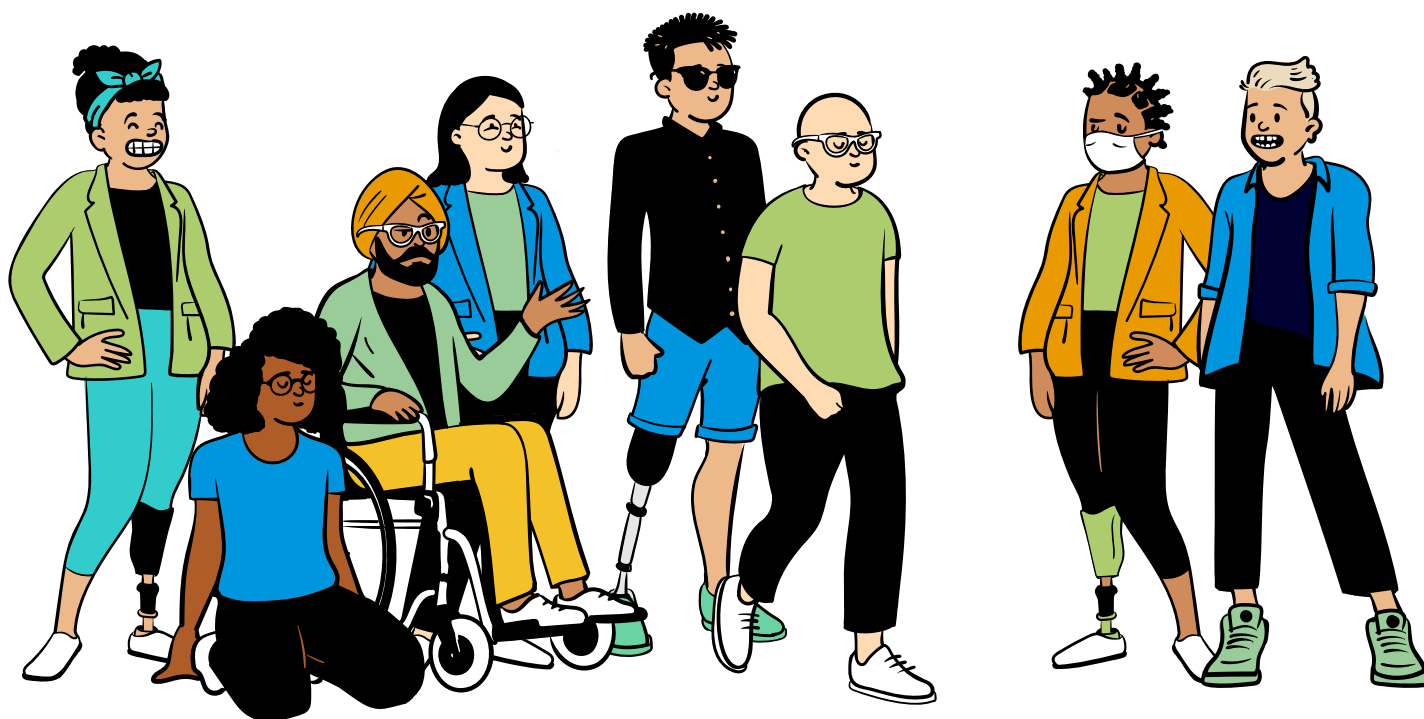# YOUTH SURVEY REPORT

PROVINCIAL EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

ESYD

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DISCLAIMER

The following report was prepared by the Provincial Employment Strategy for Youth with Disabilities project team at CanAssist at the University of Victoria. It contains summaries of the opinions, experiences, and perspectives of Youth Survey respondents who self-identify as having disabilities (including mental health and substance use challenges).

CONTENTS

DEFINITIONS

This section describes key terms, as understood in the context of this report.

A **gap** is the absence of something needed for employment support. It also describes the inability to access something needed.

A **barrier** is an obstacle that prevents someone from accessing and navigating employment support. Barriers can be caused by environments, attitudes, practices, policies, information, communications, and technologies. They are often exacerbated by intersecting forms of discrimination.

Impairment describes a reduction or loss of ability impacting physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication, or sensory function. Impairments can be permanent, temporary, or episodic.

Disability means an inability to participate fully and equally in the workforce due to the interaction between an impairment and a barrier. By this definition, mental health and substance use challenges can lead to disability.

Youth describes young people between 15-30 who live, learn and work in a variety of community settings across BC. This includes youth who attend school or distributed learning programs, vocational training programs, and/or post-secondary education/programs. It also includes those who are employed, underemployed, or unemployed.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Provincial Employment Strategy project team at CanAssist at the University of Victoria is developing the *Provincial Employment Strategy for Youth with Disabilities*. This strategy will provide the framework for a more consistent approach to supporting youth with disabilities in their employment in BC. It will be grounded in a set of guiding principles that highlight best practice for supporting youth-specific needs.

With support and guidance from a Provincial Network, the project team is consulting the following groups to understand the gaps, barriers, and best practices in the current employment support landscape:

» Youth with disabilities
» Caregivers of youth with disabilities
» Employment service providers
» Teachers/educators
» Employers

The strategy will address gaps and barriers and highlight best practices.

In May of 2022, the project team released the Employment Strategy for Youth with Disabilities in BC: Youth Survey. The survey questions were designed to capture youth perspectives on the above topics. The survey was open to youth ages 15 to 30 who reside in BC and self-identify as having a disability (including mental health and substance use challenges). Over three months, 463 survey responses were collected.

The following are key findings from these responses.

1. **Most respondents had never accessed employment support programs.**

And many were unaware that this type of support existed. The respondents who had accessed employment programs were part of specific demographic groups that had clear and direct pathways to employment support (e.g., newcomer/refugee youth who are connected to settlement services with employment programs). When youth with disabilities are connected to an organization or system that provides a clear and direct pathway to employment support, they are more likely to access that support. For youth without this connection, employment support is largely inaccessible. To increase access into employment

programs for all youth with disabilities, clear and direct pathways need to be established for the following demographics:

    a. LGBTQIA2S+ youth with disabilities,
    b. racialized/POC youth with disabilities, and
    c. youth with self-declared mental health challenges.

2. **Much of the employment support being offered in the province is well received by youth with disabilities who are accessing support.**

However, certain needs are not being met. Youth need employment support that:

    a. Is flexible and responsive to changing environments/situations,
    b. Can adapt to each youth's specific needs and contexts—and that can change and transform as each youth changes and transforms,
    c. Has a greater focus on life-skills and mental wellness.

3. **Employers play a vital role in a youth's employment journey.**

There is much that they can do in the recruitment process and on the job to create a safe and welcoming space for youth with disabilities. Further work is needed to understand specific practices for supporting youth during the recruitment process, but on-the-job, employers can ensure youth feel supported, understood, included, and valued in their role.

The findings presented in this report will inform the development of the *Provincial Employment Strategy for Youth with Disabilities.*

INTRODUCTION

Youth with disabilities face many barriers to employment. They also struggle to access appropriate employment support. This is because the availability and accessibility of employment programs vary from place to place. Different programs are available in different communities across BC. And each of these programs have different rules for who they can serve based on how they are funded. To further complicate things, most programs are designed for adults, who have different needs than youth. It is difficult for youth with disabilities to get the help they need to find a job and keep it.

There is opportunity to improve employment support for youth with disabilities in BC. A provincial strategy can provide the framework for a consistent approach to support youth-specific needs. It can also highlight best practices to supporting youth with disabilities in their employment. This will help employment programs better serve youth to find and keep jobs.

The BC Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction has given CanAssist at the University of Victoria funding to develop this provincial strategy. In collaboration with a Provincial Network of Stakeholders (the Network), CanAssist is building the *Provincial Employment Strategy for Youth with Disabilities (ESYD).*

APPROACH

With support and guidance from the Network, CanAssist is collecting information from the following groups to understand the gaps, barriers, and best practices in the current support landscape:

YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES	CAREGIVERS OF YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES	EMPLOYMENT SERVICE PROVIDERS	TEACHERS/ EDUCATORS	EMPLOYERS

With understanding of the support landscape, CanAssist will develop a Strategy that addresses gaps and barriers and highlights best practice.

SURVEYS

In May of 2022, the project team released the Employment Strategy for Youth with Disabilities in BC: Youth Survey. The survey was open to youth between ages 15 to 30 who reside in BC and self-identify as having a disability, including mental health and substance use challenges. The survey questions explored gaps and barriers that youth faced in British Columbia's employment support landscape, and the best practices that have helped them navigate this landscape. There were also questions that addressed the impact of COVID-19 on these experiences. The survey was open from May 15 to July 15.

The survey engaged a diverse range of respondents including youth with disabilities who identified as belonging to the following groups:

- » LGBTQIA2S+
- » Indigenous
- » Newcomer/refugee
- » Racialized/POC
- » Youth with experience in government care
- » Youth with experience in the youth justice system

The survey collected both quantitative and qualitative data. The data was imported into the open-source data analysis software, R. This software was used to analyze the relationships between groups of respondents and different survey themes (e.g., the top barriers to accessing employment support for youth living in a certain region of BC). Relationships were coded and analysed based on the percentage of youth from a specific category who had chosen each answer.

**For a detailed overview of the statistical analysis, **

Recruitment

Three main strategies were used to recruit youth responses for the survey:

1. **Network Distribution**
2. **Social Media Campaign**
3. **Purchased Responses**

Network Distribution

First, the project's Network members were asked to distribute the survey through their personal and organizational networks. All Network members represented different employment service agencies across BC. With their support, youth who were connected to community and/or employment supports were recruited.

Social Media Campaign

Social media advertisements were used to recruit responses from youth who self-identified as having mental health and/or substance use challenges. Due to eligibility criteria, most youth connected to employment support agencies have a diagnosed intellectual or physical disability. Although the project recognizes mental health and substance use challenges as disabilities and does not wish to separate them from the term disability, this concept is not widely understood by youth across the province. To successfully target youth with these types of disabilities, it was necessary to reach them with targeted language.

Purchased Responses

To ensure further representation of youth with mental health and/or substance use challenges who were not connected to any kind of support system, guaranteed responses from SurveyMonkey were purchased. These responses helped to capture the perspectives of a wide range of youth participants, most of which had never heard of or accessed employment services.

In addition to the above recruitment strategies an incentive was also offered. Youth who took the survey were entered in a draw to win one of three sets of Apple AirPod Pros or one of five $50 Amazon gift cards.

Participants Overview

463 eligible respondents completed the survey. All participants were between the ages of 15-30, resided in BC, and self-identified as having a disability, mental

health, or substance use challenge.

Disability Type

Respondents self-identified as having a disability, mental health, substance use challenge, or combination of the three. The intent was not to separate mental health and substance use challenges from the term disability. However, as stated above, mental health and substance use challenges are not always widely acknowledged as disabilities in BC. The terms were separated to ensure perspectives from a wide variety of disability categories were captured. For the duration of this report, these types of disabilities will be referred to separately.

Below is a breakdown of the type of disability that respondents identified experiencing.

Substance use challenges
13%

Mental health challenges
54%

Disability
33%
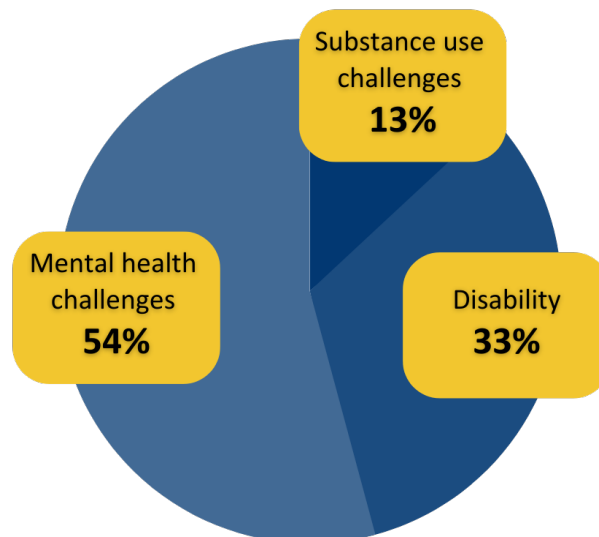
Age

All respondents were between 15 and 30. On the next page is a breakdown of respondents' age.

Ages 15 - 18
26%

Ages 24 - 30
39%

Ages 19 - 23
34%
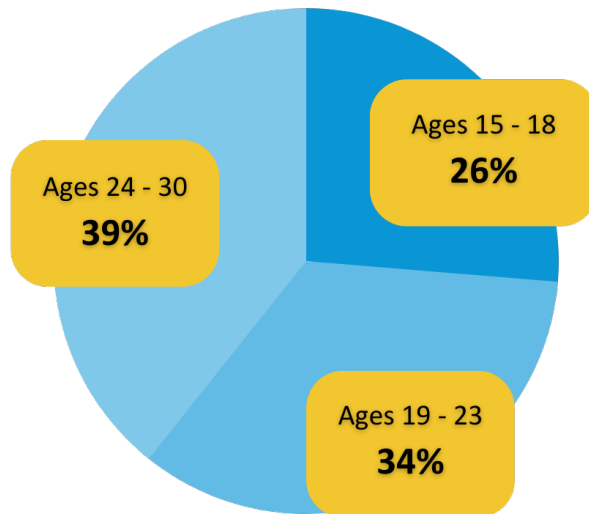
Gender Identity

Respondents could choose to self-identify as one of four gender categories. To the left is a breakdown of respondents' identified gender.

Other
8%

Non-binary
9%

Male
34%

Female
50%
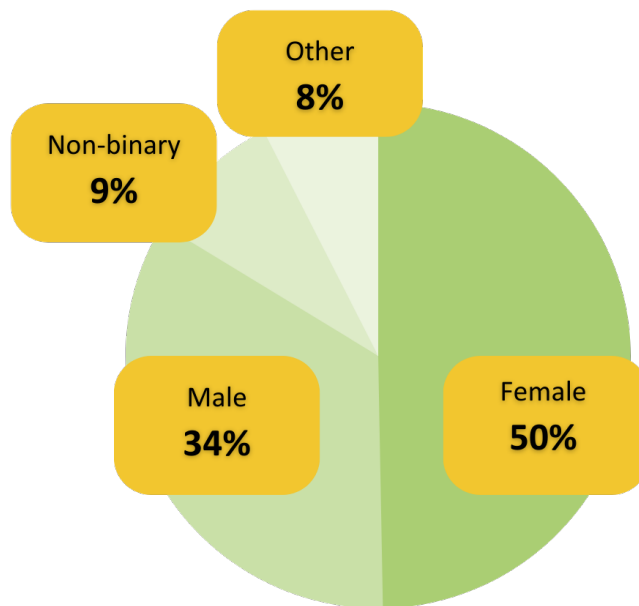
Geography

Survey responses were received from every region across the province. Below is a geographic breakdown of responses.
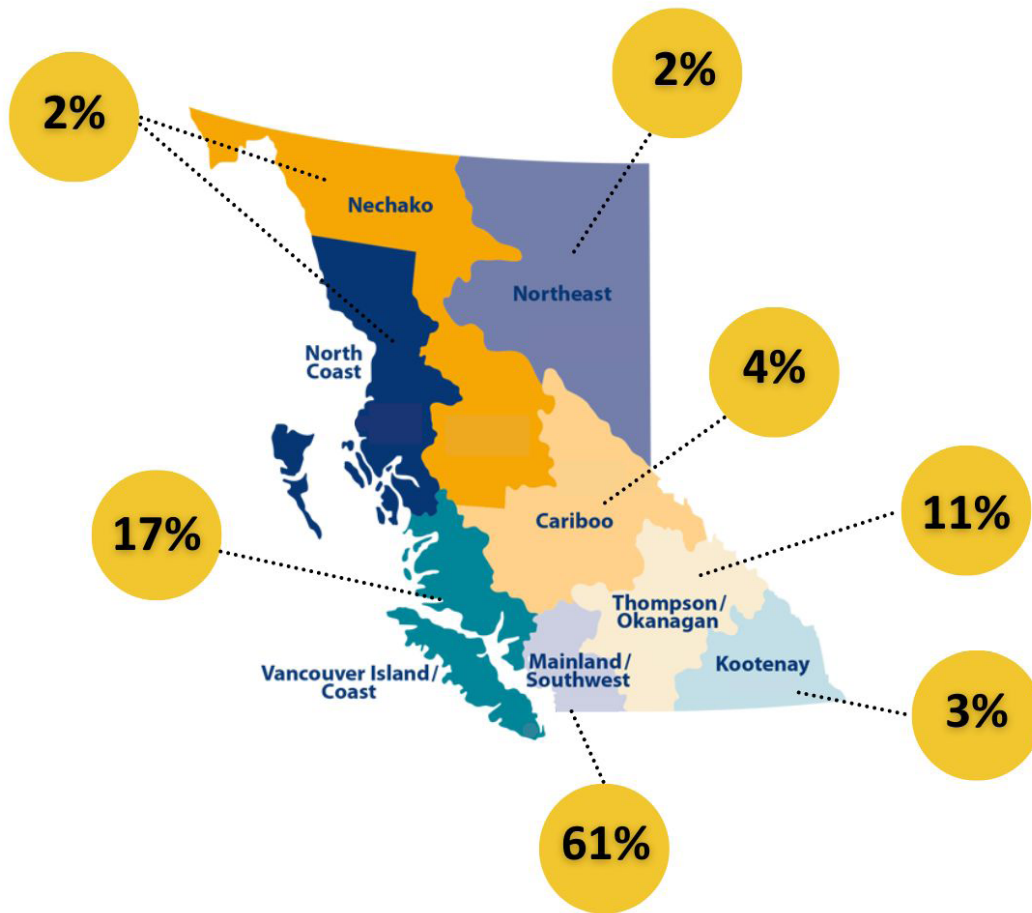
Representation of Equity-Deserving Groups

The survey engaged a diverse population of youth. Many respondents identified as belonging to one or more equity-deserving groups. The next page shows a breakdown of this representation.

38% LGBTQ2IAS+

26% Racialized/POC

11% Experience in government care

9% Indigenous

7% Experience in the justice system

5% Newcomer/refugee
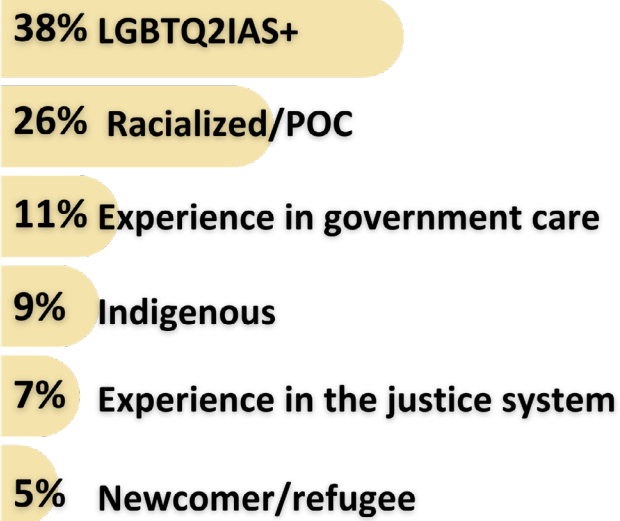
Participant Employment Status

Most respondents (88%) had experience working. There was fairly equal representation of youth currently working full-time, part-time, or not working.

Not working
33%

Full-time
30%

Unpaid work
4%

Part-time
34%
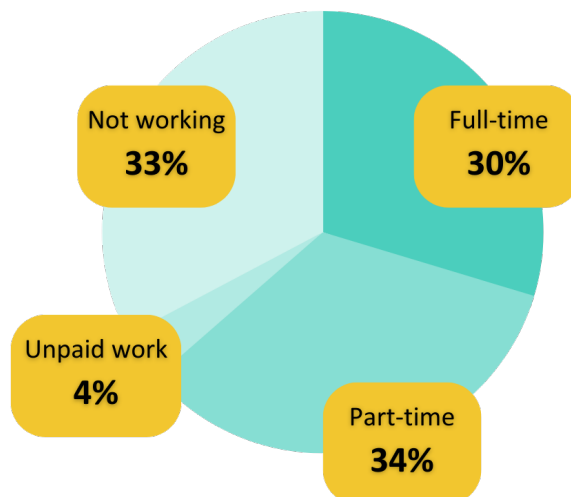
Disability Category

Current employment status differed with disability category:

» Those who self-identified as experiencing mental health challenges were the most likely to be working full time

» Those who self-identified as experiencing disability were the least likely to be working full-time

■ Full-time ■ Part-time ■ Not working

Disability
- 21%
- 48%
- 29%

Mental health challenge
- 37%
- 29%
- 31%

Substance use challenge
- 18%
- 54%
- 18%
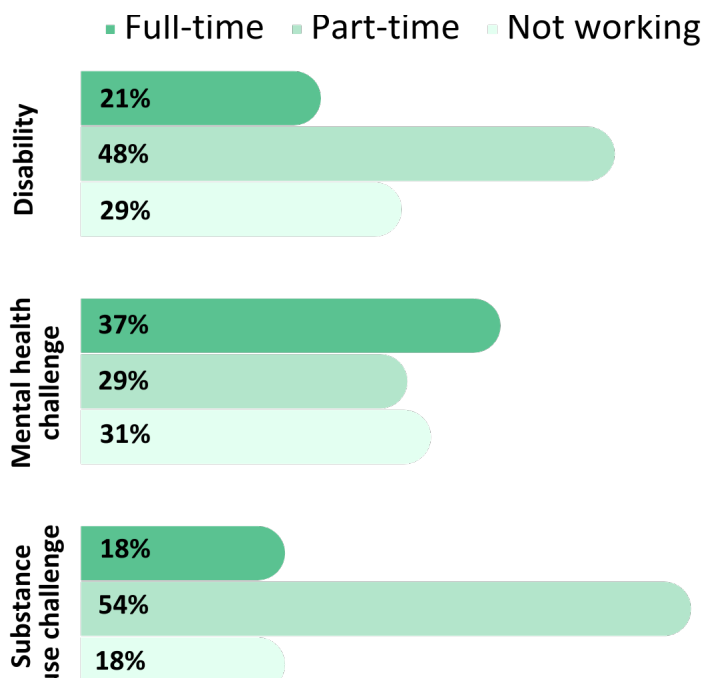
Age

Current employment status also differed with each age group:

» Youth between 24-30 were the most likely to be working full time

» Youth between 19-23 were the most likely to be working part time

» Youth between 15-18 were the most likely not to be working

On the next page is a breakdown of the employment status for each age group at the time of the survey.

AGES

15-18
- Full-time: 5%
- Part-time: 39%
- Not working: 51%

19-23
- Full-time: 27%
- Part-time: 42%
- Not working: 27%

24-30
- Full-time: 47%
- Part-time: 24%
- Not working: 26%

Legend: ■ Full-time ■ Part-time ■ Not working
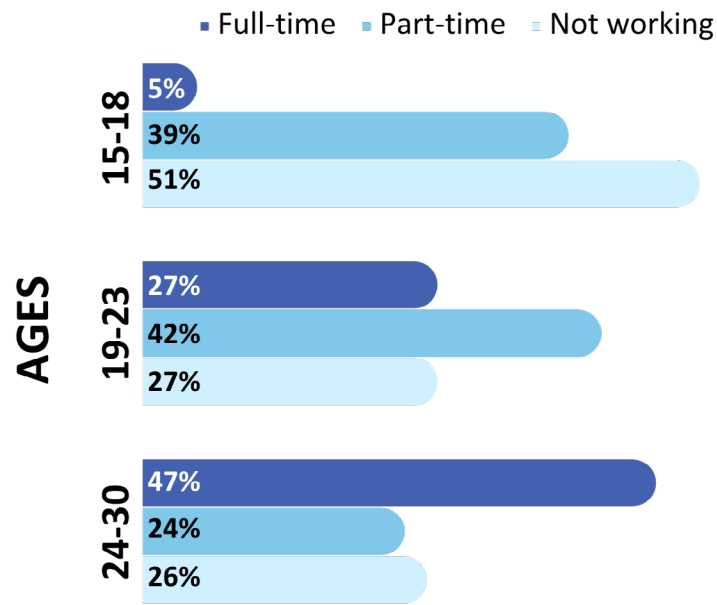
Gender

Rates of employment were different for different gender identities. For instance, those who identified as male were the most likely to be working full-time.

Below is a breakdown of employment status and gender:

Legend: ■ Full-time ■ Part-time ■ Not working

Female
- Full-time: 26%
- Part-time: 33%
- Not working: 36%

Male
- Full-time: 39%
- Part-time: 35%
- Not working: 23%

Non-binary
- Full-time: 19%
- Part-time: 30%
- Not working: 49%

Other
- Full-time: 6%
- Part-time: 53%
- Not working: 41%
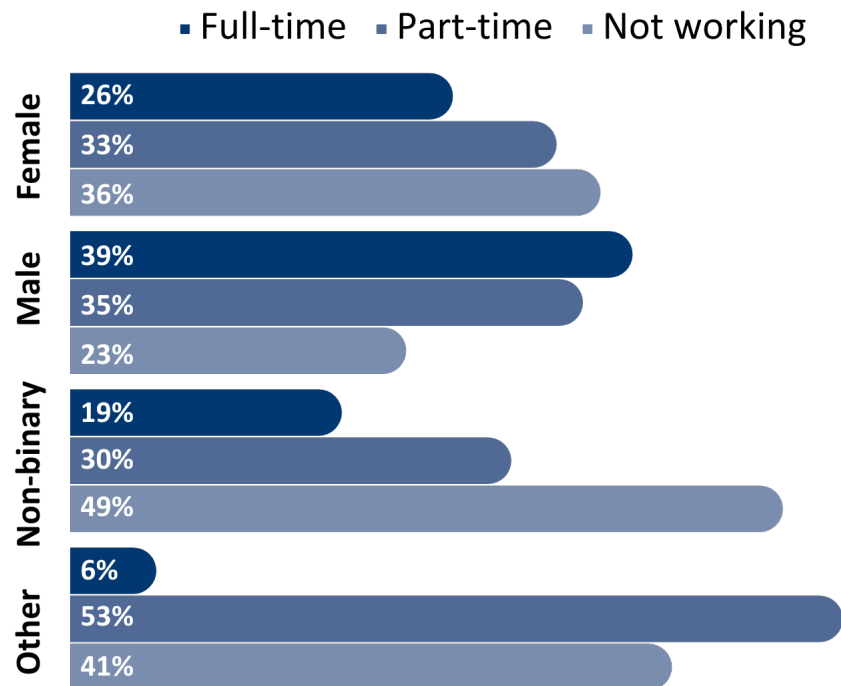
Geography

There was no substantial difference in part-time employment of youth across BC regions. However, rates of full-time employment did vary in some regions:

» Respondents living in the Cariboo region were the most likely to be employed full time.

» Respondents living in the Vancouver Island/Coast region were the least likely to be employed full time.

Here is a breakdown of **full-time employment rates** across the province:
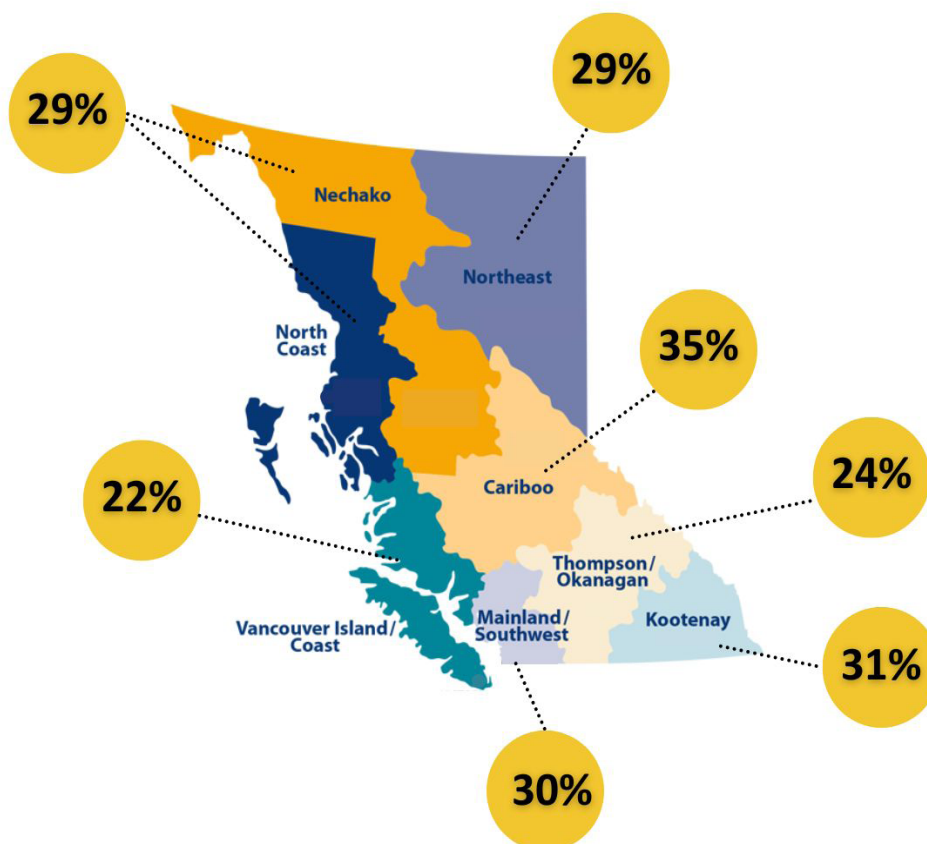
Equity-Deserving Groups

Employment status also varied between some equity-deserving groups. Below is a breakdown of employment status for each group:

Legend: ■ Full-time ■ Part-time ■ Not working

Group	Full-time	Part-time	Not working
LGBTQ2IAS+	20%	40%	38%
Indigenous	44%	39%	17%
Racialized/POC	35%	40%	20%
Newcomer/refugee	39%	28%	26%
Experience in government care	20%	30%	50%
Experience in the justice system	50%	50%	0%
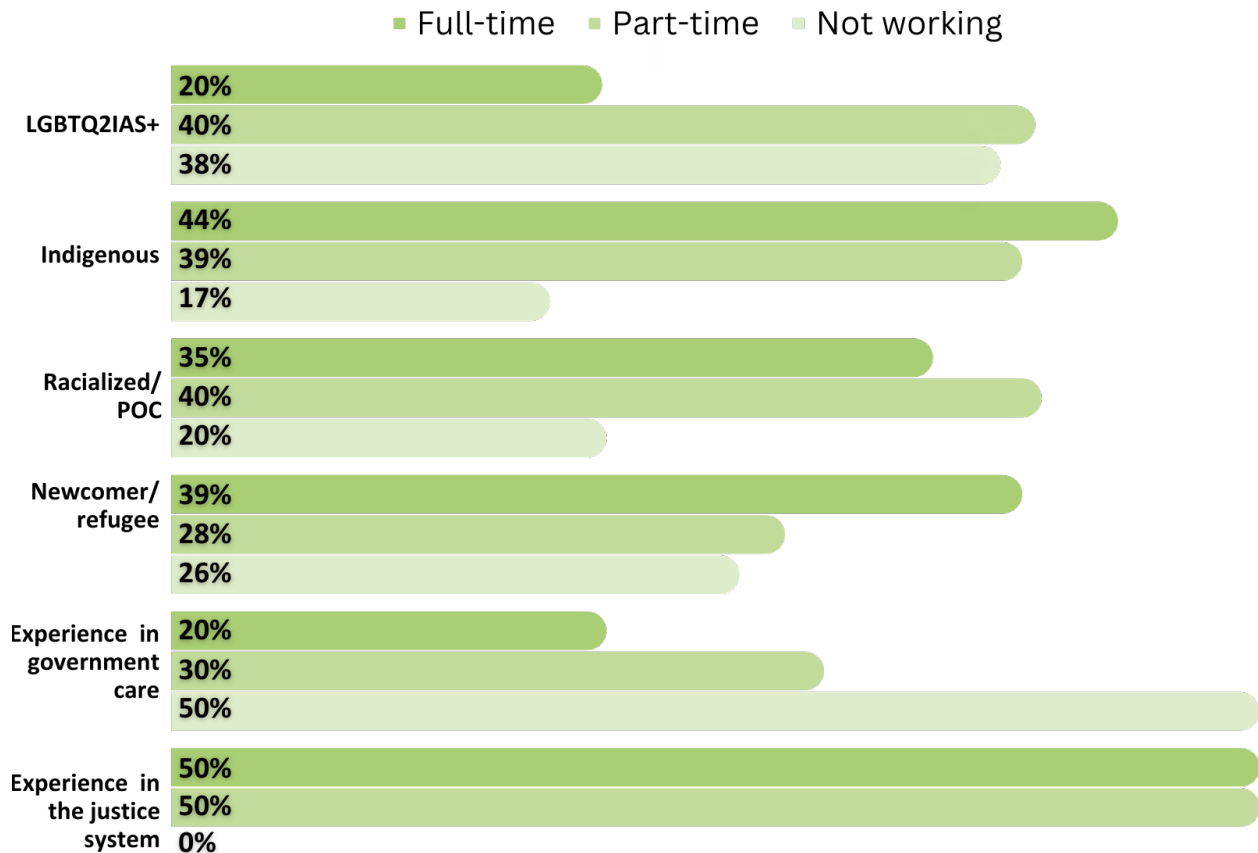
PART 1: EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM ACCESS

PROGRAM ACCESS

To better understand who is accessing employment support, respondents were asked to identify if they had ever been part of an employment program. Only one-third (29%) of all respondents reported that they had. Most of these respondents had accessed the program through a community-based organization (versus their school).

Program Access and Disability Type

Respondents who self-identified with certain disability types were more likely to have accessed employment programs than others:

» Those who experienced substance use challenges were the most likely to have accessed employment programs, when compared to other disability types.

» Those who experienced mental health challenges were the least likely to have accessed employment programs, when compared to other disability types.

Program Access and Equity-Deserving Identities

Respondents belonging to certain equity-deserving groups were more likely to have accessed employment programs than others:

» Those who identified as female, LGBTQIA2S+, non-binary, or racialized person/a person of colour were the least likely to have accessed employment programs, when compared to other equity-deserving groups.

Data Spotlight: Interestingly, those with experience in the youth justice or government care system were more likely to have accessed an employment program.

Program Access and Gender Identity

Respondents belonging to certain gender identities were more likely to have awareness of employment programs than others:

» Those who identified as male were the most likely to be aware of employment programs, when compared with other gender identities.

Data Spotlight: Respondents who identified as male were more likely to have accessed employment programs, when compared to any other gender identity. They were also more likely to be working full-time.

Program Access and Geography

Employment program access was different across the eight regions of the province. See the graphic below:

100%

0% accessed

Nechako

Northeast

North Coast

56%

71%

58%

Cariboo

Thompson/ Okanagan

80%

Mainland/ Southwest

Kootenay

Vancouver Island/ Coast

75%
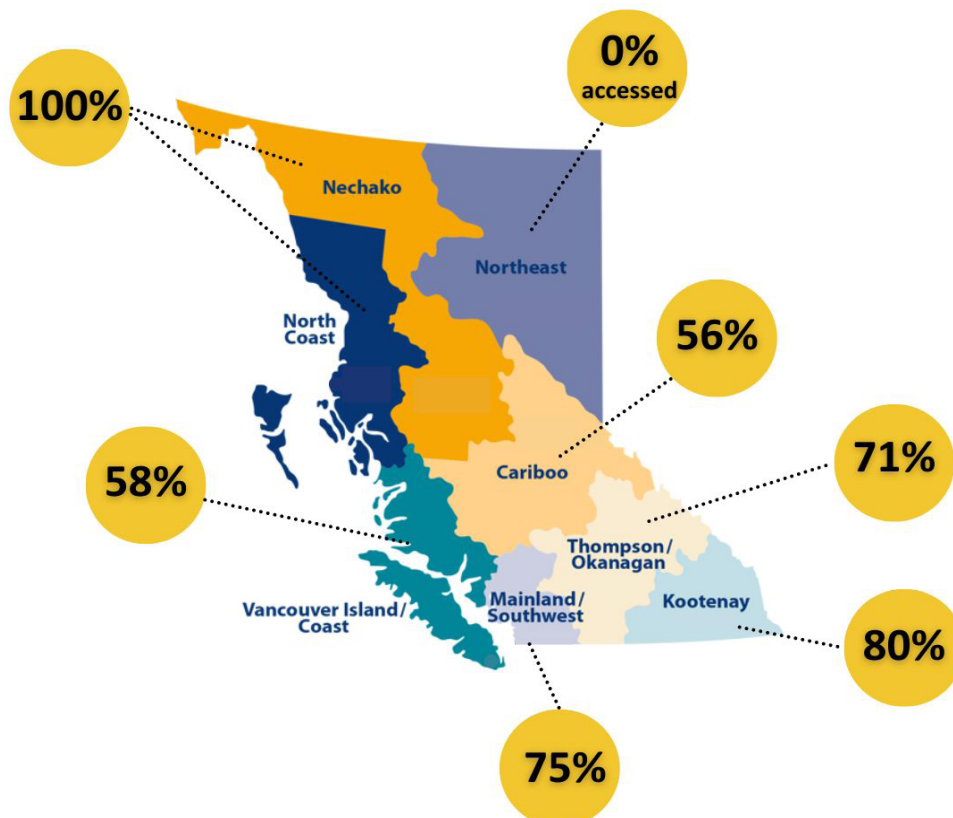
Regions also had differences in the rates at which youth accessed employment programs through community organizations versus schools.

Respondents who accessed support did so...	Cariboo	Kootenay	Mainland/ Southwest	North Coast & Nechako	Northeast	Thompson/ Okanagan	Vancouver Island/ Coast
...through community	24%	44%	16%	15%	0%	18%	14%
...through school	24%	6%	5%	28%	0%	8%	5%
...through school & community	5%	6%	6%	0%	0%	7%	7%

There were also differences in the percentage of respondents who had accessed employment programs in rural/remote versus urban areas. Respondents living in rural/remote regions had greater access to employment programs (40.4%) than those living in urban areas (26.5%).

40%
Rural/remote

26%
Urban
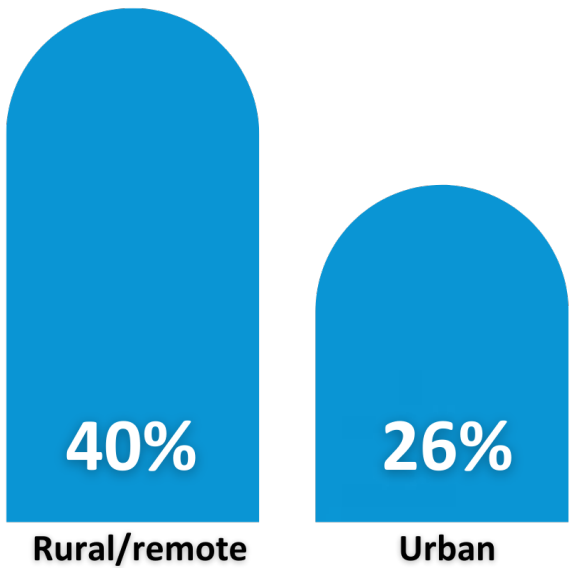
BARRIERS TO PROGRAM ACCESS

To better understand why the majority of youth had not accessed employment support, those who had never accessed an employment program were asked to identify the barriers they faced. Most selected "unaware of employment programs" as their top barrier.

68% **Unaware of employment programs**

20% **Ineligible for employment programs**

14% **Transportation challenges**

12% **Scheduling challenges**

8% **No employment programs in my area**
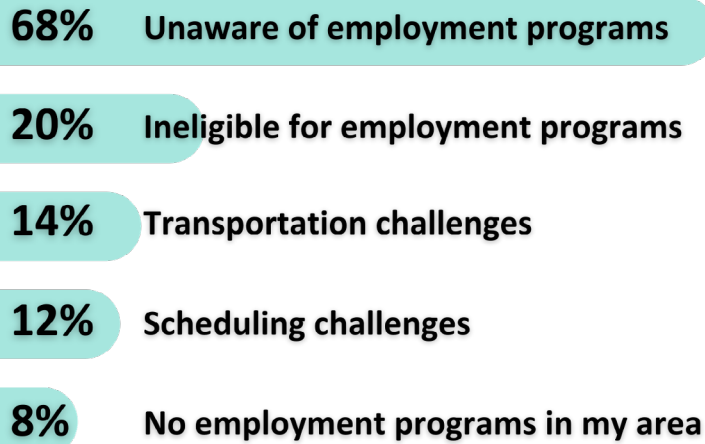
Additional Barriers

When asked about additional barriers to accessing employment programs, respondents identified the following:

1. Difficulty accessing employment programs
2. Personal capacity posing barriers to program access
3. Lack of knowledge of employment programs

Difficulty Accessing Employment Programs

Respondents discussed how difficult it can be to access employment programs in their community. Things like the location of the program, lack of transportation, and program schedules pose barriers. Here are some quotes from the survey:

> The grid system in BC doesn't work in everyone's favour. Technically I live in one city, but I am just a street over from the next which makes it hard to access help in my area because transportation is twice as long.

> Transportation is the biggest one. Also lack of advertising/knowledge and there isn't much available from what I know.
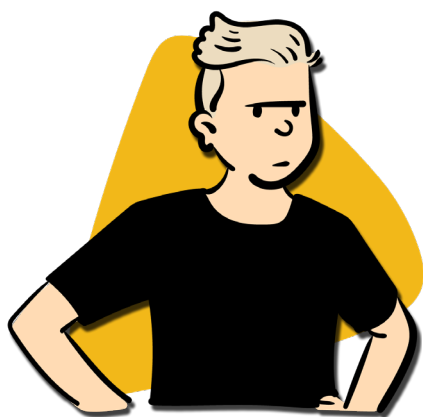
> Employment programs in my area demand 6–8 hour days 5 days a week for an extended period of time, which is emotionally and physically inaccessible to me due to the workload. Further, I attend 4 crucial medical appointments a week, and would not be able to attend any of them if I were participating in an employment program.

Personal Capacity Posing Barriers to Program Access

Many respondents expressed reservations about attending employment programs due to anxiety, fear of stigma, and confusions around eligibility. Some were unsure if they qualified for programs, as their disability was invisible (e.g., chronic pain, mental health challenges, etc.). Others expressed concern that their disability was not seen as severe enough to necessitate employment support.
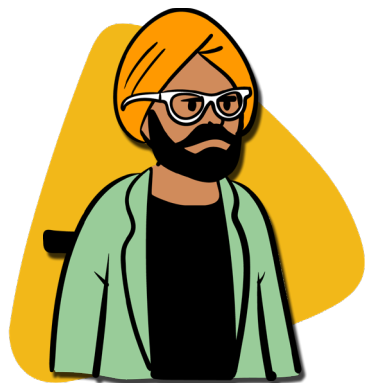
> I feel judged. I'm an ambulatory wheelchair user so some days I use mobility aids and some days I don't. People need more education to understand how different disabilities affect different people.

> Internalized ableism; feeling like the programs are for people with something more severe; embarrassed, ashamed for needing support.

> My anxiety makes searching for programs hard.

Lack of Knowledge of Employment Programs

Many respondents did not know where to go to access support, what type of support was available, or what type of support they would benefit from. Some reported being unaware that employment programs even existed.

> I didn't know [employment programs] existed.

> I am not sure what kind of employment programs are available, or what I would be eligible for.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many employment programs to make changes to the way they offer support (e.g., shifting to virtual programming). In some cases, it also caused programs to change the kind of support that they offer (e.g., offering virtual workshops instead of in-person, on-the-job support).

Respondents identified the impact that these changes had on their ability to access employment programs. Some reported a positive impact, others a negative. Some reported a positive and a negative impact. See the graphic on the next page.

■ How COVID-19 affected employment program access

49% Made it harder

43% Made it easier

8% Did not change it

Respondents were then asked to explain how the pandemic impacted their ability to access employment programs. The following themes were pulled from these answers:

1. Health concerns and stress
2. Limited program options
3. Barriers of virtual programming
4. Benefits of virtual programming

Health Concerns and Stress

Many respondents felt worried or stressed about their health during the pandemic. They also felt their access to employment programs was effected by pandemic restrictions.

" I am immunocompromised, and the majority of employment programs have switched back to in person with little COVID regulations and online class aren't the most accessible due to lack of captioning on video and zoom [sic] calls."

> "Restrictions as well as juggling school and other commitments and the stress that came from pandemic related things."

Limited Program Options

Many respondents also noted how the pandemic limited the amount of employment program options available.

> "There were no gatherings or job fairs for 2 years."

> "Limited hands-on experience, or programs have been cancelled for the time being."

> **I don't see options for them even being shown due to so many things being shut down.**

Barriers of Virtual Programming

Some respondents found that virtual programming made accessing and experiencing employment supports more difficult. Many struggled with virtual program formats.

> **Virtual meetings with my employment counsellor instead of 1 to 1 was a challenge.**

> **When the pandemic was here the program was online and I was lacking the support I would receive in an in person program.**

> " Almost all the programs I applied for were online, which for many people I think that made it more accessible, but for me it made it more difficult."

Benefits of Virtual Programming

Some respondents found that virtual programming made accessing and experiencing employment supports easier. Many benefited from the flexibility of virtual program formats.

> " Virtual classes are easier to attend regularly.

> " It made online offers more plentiful meaning I don't have to hand out resumes in real life which is nice because I have generalized anxiety disorder.
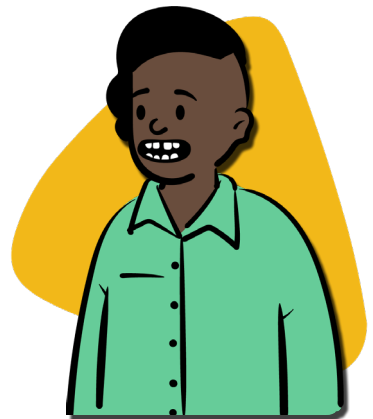
PART 2: EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM EXPERIENCES

PROGRAM EXPERIENCES

To better understand the experience of those who had accessed employment support, respondents were asked if they found the employment program they participated in helpful. Most (79%) respondents reported that the program did help them. And when comparing youth who had accessed employment programs and youth who had not accessed employment programs, a higher percentage were working. See below:

» Of the youth who had accessed employment programs, **37% were working full-time.**

» Of the youth who had not accessed employment programs, **24% were working full-time.**

■ Full-time   ■ Part-time   ■ Not working

Had accessed employment programs

- 37%
- 29%
- 30%

Had not accessed employment programs

- 24%
- 37%
- 35%
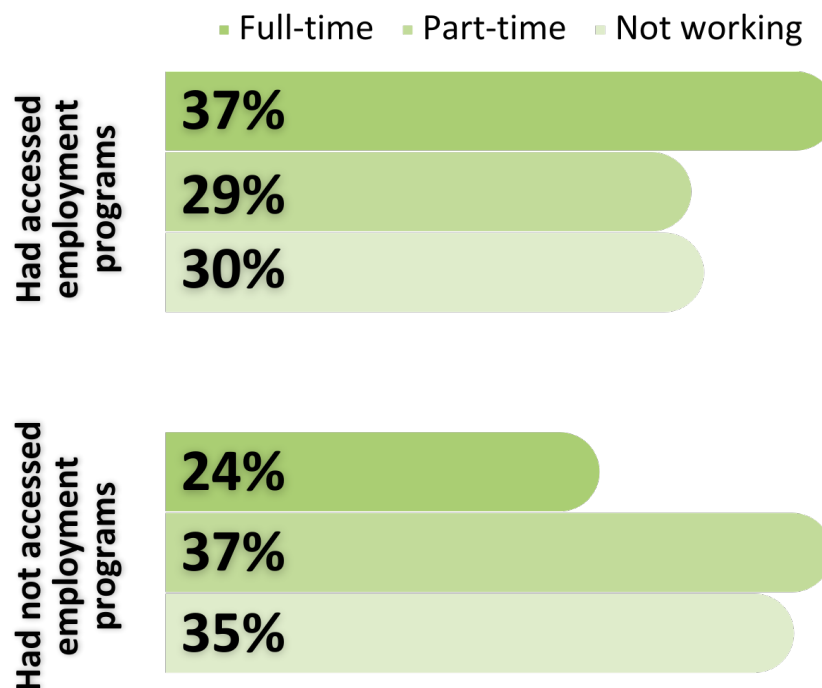
Program Experiences and Disability Type

Respondents who identified as experiencing certain disability types found employment programs more helpful than others. Below is a breakdown:

■ Helpful ■ Not helpful

Disability
84%
16%

Substance use
50%
50%
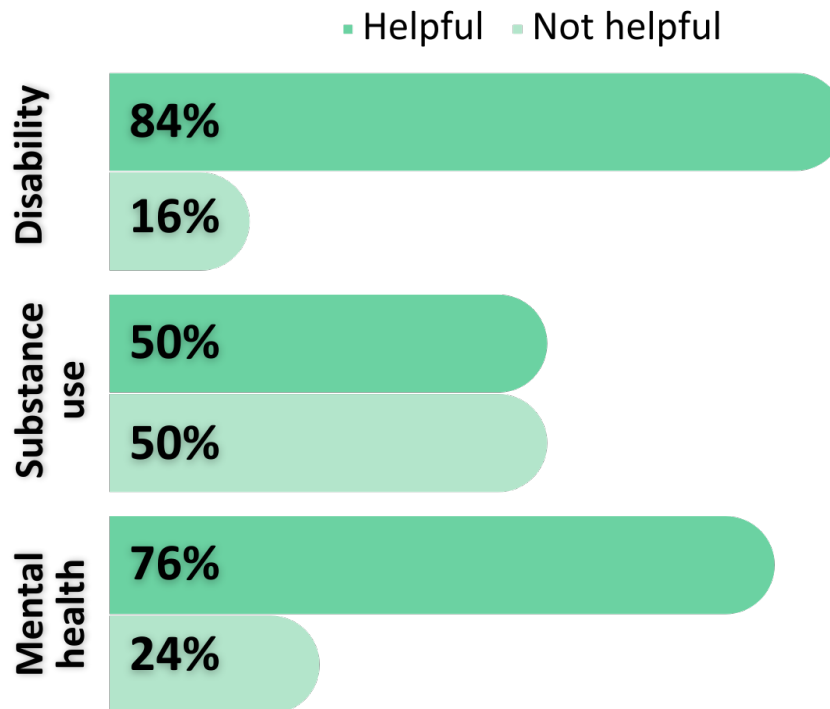
Mental health
76%
24%

Data Spotlight: Respondents who self-identified as experiencing mental health challenges were the most likely to rate employment programs as "Not Helpful," when compared to other disability types.

Program Experiences and Equity-Deserving Identities

Respondents who identified as belonging to different equity-deserving groups had different experiences with employment programs. See the graphic below:

■ Helpful ■ Not helpful

LGBTQ2IAS+
65%
35%

Indigenous
79%
21%

Racialized/POC
80%
20%

Newcomer/refugee
72%
28%

Experience in government care
85%
15%

Experience in the justice system
54%
46%
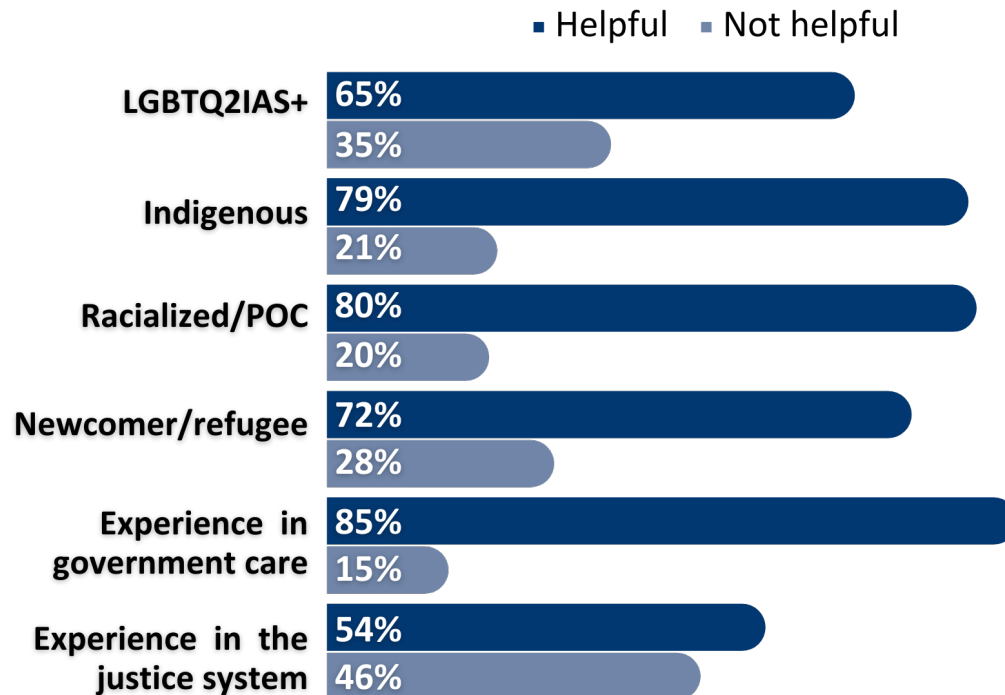
Data Spotlight: Although most Indigenous and newcomer/refugee respondents rated employment support as helpful, they were most likely to identify that they were not receiving culturally-sensitive support.

Program Experiences and Geography

Respondents from certain regions were more likely to find employment support helpful, when compared with respondents from other regions. See graphic below, illustrating the percentage of respondents who had accessed programs in each region:
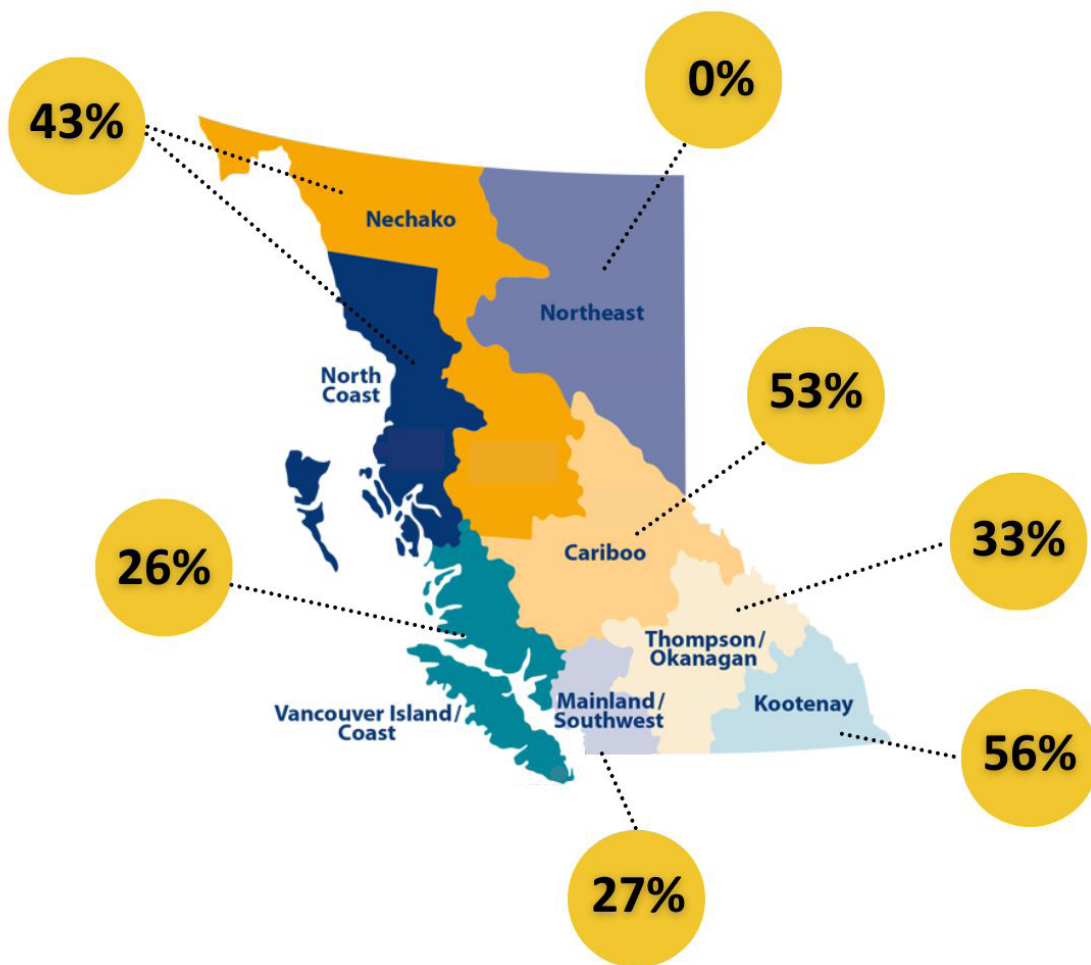
BEST PRACTICES IN EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT

To better understand what type of employment support is most helpful for youth, respondents who had accessed employment programs were asked to identify the most helpful supports they received. The table on the next page summarizes youth responses:

50% Support with resume writing and interview skills

45% Support with the job search process

31% Support with setting employment goals

25% Support understanding the rights of employees with disabilities

23% Support learning job-specific skills

23% Personalized support from a job coach

22% Access to job/career fairs

21% Support finishing an internship/co-op

19% Ongoing support from a job coach once employment has been found

15% Customized employment development/job carving

Respondents who had not accessed employment programs rated the following as supports that would be most helpful:

60% Support with resume writing and interview skills

59% Support with the job search process

57% Support with setting employment goals

50% Support understanding the rights of employees with disabilities

39% Support learning job-specific skills

18% Personalized support from a job coach

Additional Best Practices

Respondents were asked what additional supports they felt were/would be helpful. The following themes were pulled from their responses:

1. Additional support with the job search
2. Support to build personal capacity
3. Financial subsidies

Additional Support with Job Search

Respondents shared that additional support with the job search process is/would be helpful. For instance, support to find accommodating jobs and prepare for and complete interviews, and support during the hiring process. This support needs to include finding accommodating jobs and negotiating accommodation needs with employers. On the next page are some quotes from respondents:

" Help to find jobs that offer accommodations and support for employees.

" Help to find jobs that fit my specialized skill set and pay enough to live.

" Finding jobs where I am accommodated to be able to work part time (as limited by my disability) but still get access to benefits programs offered to full time employees. I am constantly left out of this because I am physically not able to work full time. I receive these accommodations at school to take a reduced course load while still accessing the same resources as full time students but have never had this same accommodation in a workplace.

Support to Build Personal Capacity

Respondents highlighted the value of having support to build their personal capacity to manage employment along with other challenges they face in their lives. For instance, support to learn advocacy skills and build motivation and self-confidence. Emotional support was also mentioned as something that would be helpful.

> How to advocate for myself in a way that isn't read as disrespectful."
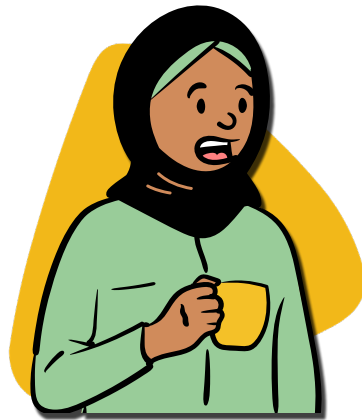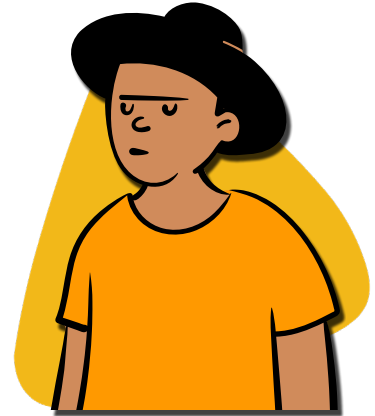
> Honestly, I just need support. It feels like every day is a struggle to keep going. There're [sic] not enough doctors, especially in the psych department. I'm trying to work, pay bills, and make something of my life.

> Help me be more self confident."
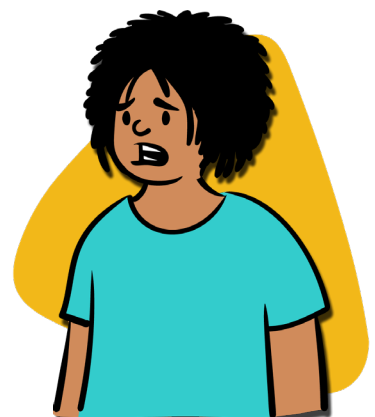
Financial Subsidies

Respondents highlighted the value of financial subsidies (e.g., allowances, transportation subsidies, and financial support) offered by employment programs.

"I would love for an employment program to help folks who are required to complete UNPAID practicums (not co-ops) for their university degrees. As a student with disability, there are no accommodations or financial supports specific to my unpaid practicum."

"Provide a living stipend to support living costs during the program.

"Being paid while searching for a job? Free or reduced transit tickets.

GAPS IN EMPLOYMENT SUPPORTS

Although most respondents who participated in employment programs found them helpful, there were supports they still felt were missing. Here is a breakdown of these supports:

57% **Support navigating mental health challenges at work**

37% **Learning life-skills**

33% **Job shadow**

33% **Learning job-specific skills**

31% **Support obtaining certifications**

29% **Ongoing support once employment is found**

27% **Culturally-sensitive support**

PART 3: JOB SEARCH AND EMPLOYMENT

BARRIERS

To better understand the specific employment support needs of youth with disabilities, respondents were asked to identify barriers faced during job search and in the workplace. These barriers highlight opportunities for service providers to cater their programs to the needs of these youth who are on their employment journey.

Job Search Barriers

The table below summarizes the job search challenges of respondents:

66% Intimidated by the job search process

57% Difficulty finding an accommodating job

46% Difficulty with the job search process

32% Unable to find diversity/inclusion statements

25% Unsure where to go for employment support

20% No motivation to work

14% Lack of reliable transportation

5% Experiencing barriers due to gender identity
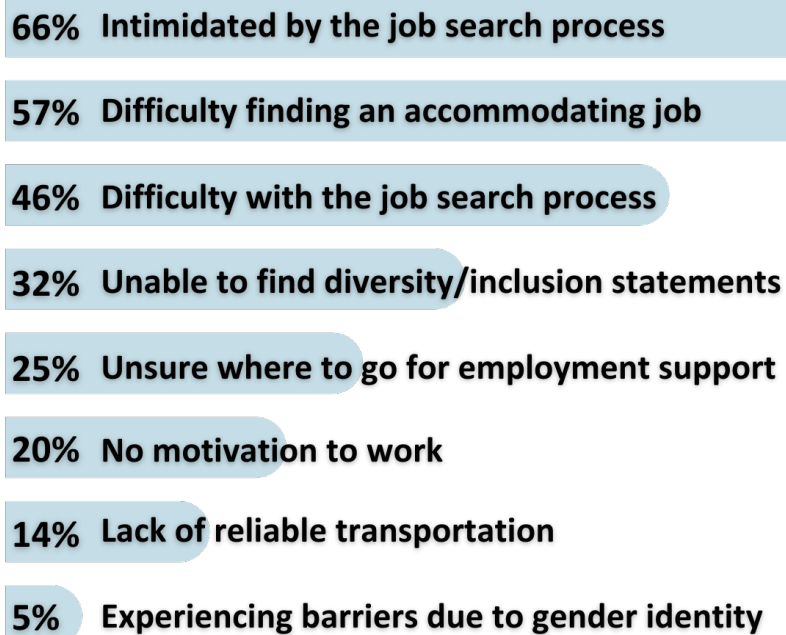
Respondents were asked to describe any additional barriers faced during job search. Responses centered around the following themes:

1. Anxiety and fear of stigma
2. Discrimination
3. Difficulty finding jobs that accommodate disability

Anxiety and Fear of Stigma

Respondents expressed reservations about the job search process due to anxiety and fear of stigma. Some were unsure if employers would be accepting of their disability.

> "I'm young (16) with no job experience and a disability on top of that. I feel like people won't give me a chance due to the accommodations that will likely have to provide.

Discrimination

Many respondents shared that they have been judged because of their disability throughout job search. They felt that because of their disability, employers were less likely to hire them.

> "People who just straight up don't want to hire you due to your disability. They just won't consider you as a candidate."

Difficulties Finding Jobs that Accommodate Disability

Respondents shared how difficult it is to find jobs that suit their needs and provide necessary accommodations.

> Nowhere is accessible, and I am not allowed to wear headphones while working. I am autistic with severe sensory issues, so I need my headphones or some sort of hearing protection in order to function. The process of looking for jobs is overwhelming and it makes me anxious. There are no teenage jobs that don't require next to perfect social skills.

Workplace Barriers

The table below summarizes common workplace barriers that youth face:

41% No workplace accommodations

38% Feeling unappreciated at work

30% Employers making assumptions about disability

30% Feeling unincluded at work

25% Unsure where to go for employment support

24% No motivation to work

21% Inadequate workplace training

18% Lack of reliable transportation

Respondents were asked to describe any additional barriers they experience in the workplace. Responses centered around the following themes:

1. Lack of support for challenges in the workplace
2. Discrimination
3. Personal capacity posing barriers in the workplace

Lack of Support for Challenges in the Workplace

Respondents shared how they often lack support to deal with the challenges they face in the workplace. Things like navigating the uncertainty of interacting with co-workers, performing work tasks, and requesting and advocating for needed accommodations.
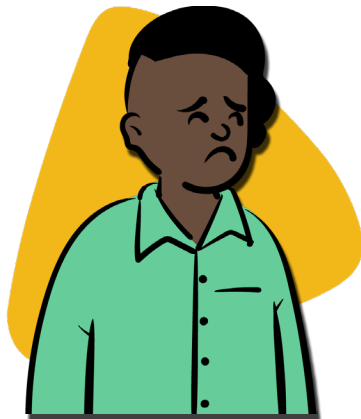
> Learning things [is a barrier] because it has takes longer and taking longer to process it frustrates employers (bosses have fired me due to this). Loss of opportunities due to not being able to learn well, and lack of resources given for more work options. Being let go of due to not being able to keep up with other employees because of medicine making me groggy, tired etc.

> Long shifts, overwhelming sensory environment, difficulty with the social aspect of customer service.

> Struggling with extreme anxiety and my employer not understanding that it can be crippling.

Discrimination

Respondents described being judged by employers and co-workers because of their disability, age, or identity. Many also felt that because of their disability, employers were more likely to make assumptions about their abilities and give them less responsibility and opportunities.

" Sometimes I feel as though employers wrongly assume young people are automatically more irresponsible.

" Employers being ableist, assuming everyone is neurotypical and people that can't complete tasks or take sick days aren't 'trying' hard enough.

" Discrimination due to being trans and queer. Gaslighting and other forms of psychological abuse from higher-ups.
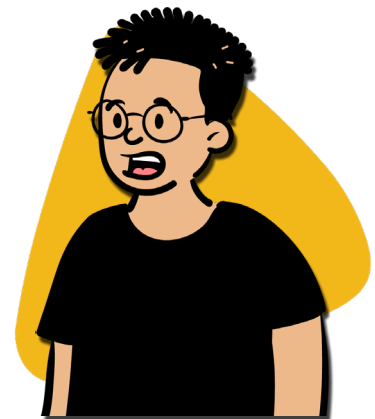
Personal Capacity Posing Barriers in the Workplace

Many respondents identified personal capacity challenges as posing barriers to employment. Capacity challenges included reservations and anxiety around employment, and lack of confidence and motivation.

" I am shy so finding noncustomer [sic] service employment is a challenge.

" Mostly just anxiety. I constantly dread having to work but obviously need an income. There's not a single moment where I'm not feeling work anxiety, even when I'm not there.
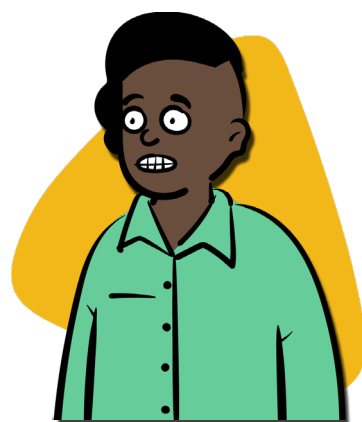
" Lack of motivation or emotional support.

HELPFUL SUPPORTS

To better understand the quality supports that are currently being implemented in the employment support landscape, respondents who had experience working were asked to identify which on-the-job supports were most helpful. The table below summarizes these findings:

54% Flexible hours
53% Supportive & accommodating employers
44% Supportive coworkers
36% Mental health days
36% Professional development opportunities
29% Employers who understand disability
26% Access to reliable transportation
20% Workplace mentor
20% Continuous on-the-job training

Respondents who had no experience working were asked which supports would be most helpful on-the-job. The following graphic summarizes their responses:

67% Flexible hours
66% Supportive & accommodating employers
63% Mental health days
52% Employers who understand disability
48% Supportive coworkers
41% Professional development opportunities
33% Access to reliable transportation
28% Continuous on-the-job training
17% Workplace mentor

Respondents were asked to describe any additional on-the-job supports that they found helpful. Responses centred around the following themes:

- » Workplace accommodations
- » Supportive workplace environments
- » Disability awareness and acceptance

Workplace Accommodations

Respondents highlighted workplace accommodations as the most helpful support. Specific accommodations were consistently mentioned, including mental health days, tools to manage disability, remote work options, flexible tasks, and benefits.

> A better understanding and more accommodation to my mental health issues. I'd like to be allowed to step away when it's necessary for me, so I can gather myself again and come back and be able to effectively preform my tasks.

> Flexibility to work from home or work several hours.

> Acceptable tools to use in the workplace (ear defenders, stim toys, etc).

> Being able to wear my medical alert bracelet and my Apple Watch as tracking my heart rate is vital for my condition.

> I think more paid sick time or mental health days with no stigma attached.

Supportive Workplace Environments

Respondents highlighted the importance of a supportive workplace environment that feels physically and mentally safe. Specific factors that contribute to this type of environment include understanding employers, supportive co-workers, and an inclusive and social workplace culture.

" I would like it if the work environment facilitated a culture that prioritized uplifting its workers and promoting comradery."

" Mostly the social aspects and being included in things."
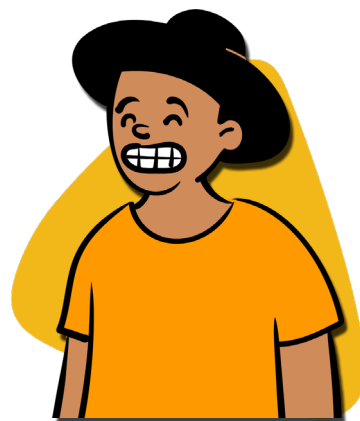
" People being generally aware of my autism and how it affects me. I want it to be common knowledge, so people will be patient with me."

Disability Awareness and Acceptance

Respondents described how open awareness and acceptance of disability in the workplace contributes to a positive working experience. It leads to reduced stigma and judgement from employers and co-workers and facilitates a proper accommodation process. Many respondents also shared that they felt more

comfortable applying to jobs that are advertised by employers who are visibly inclusive, accommodating, and supportive.

"Recognition of mental health issues and their occasional impact on the ability to participate in work."

"Workplaces having explicit rules/guidelines/standard procedures for people with disabilities so I can know that it is safe to be open and honest with my employer about my invisible disability. (Like the employer itself explicitly stating they support people with disabilities and how)."
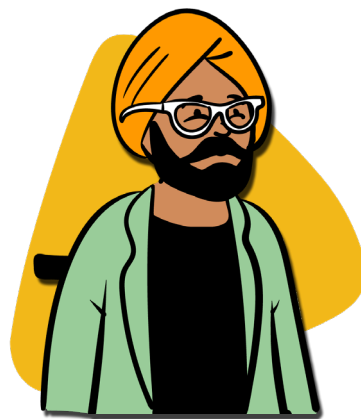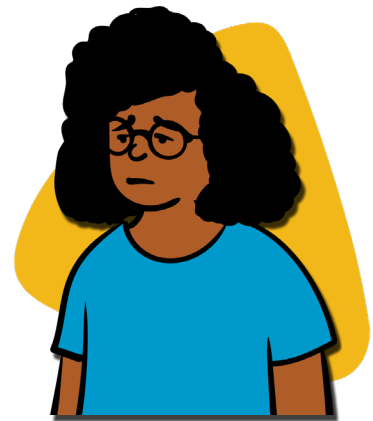
"An employer and job coach that can work together to really customize and carve out a role that uses my strengths. It would also be great to have some support to think about self-employment or starting my own business.

PART 4: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM ACCESS

Survey findings highlighted three themes related to youth experiences accessing employment programs:

1. **There are no clear and direct pathways** to employment support for most youth with disabilities in BC.
2. **Transportation, scheduling needs, and personal capacity challenges** pose barriers for many youth with disabilities who are looking to access employment support.
3. **The COVID-19 pandemic changed the employment support landscape** in ways that some youth found helpful, and others found challenging.

THEME 1: PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

Among all disability types, **respondents with substance use challenges had the highest rates of employment program access.** One possible explanation is the availability of a clear and direct route for youth experiencing substance use challenges.

Substance Use Challenges and Connection to Government Systems

Youth with connection to government systems (e.g., the youth justice system) can have direct referrals to employment programs. The impact of this was demonstrated in the survey responses, as **respondents with experience in government care or the youth justice system had accessed employment programs at higher rates than the average of all respondents**. Youth who are part of government systems are also more likely to experience substance use challenges (Fletcher, 2019) (Patterson, Moniruzzaman, & Somers, 2015). This relationship helps to explain why respondents with substance use challenges had higher access to employment programs.

Youth with no Connection to Government Systems

Aside from those with substance use challenges and those connected to government systems, **most respondents had not accessed an employment program.** And many were not aware that this type of support existed. Some

who were aware of employment programs did not know where to go to access support. Others weren't sure how to find programs that suited their needs. There was a general lack of awareness and understanding surrounding employment support.

Although most respondents were unaware of employment support, many employment programs do exist in British Columbia. The challenge is there is **little consistency and coordination** among them. **What is available is highly fragmented, and mostly catered to adults,** who have different needs than youth. For youth with disabilities, it is very hard to find employment programs that they can access. This is particularly true for those without a diagnosed disability. Programs generally have **strict eligibility** for who they can serve based on how they are funded. Common requirements include:

HAVING A FORMAL DISABILITY DIAGNOSIS	BEING BETWEEN 12-24	BEING OUT OF SCHOOL

Most youth with self-declared mental health challenges do not meet all these requirements. Because this demographic makes up a large portion of survey respondents, it makes sense why most respondents had little knowledge or understanding of employment programs and the support they offer.

In contrast, **clear pathways** that connect youth to employment programs exist **for those with diagnosed developmental disabilities, autism, and fetal alcohol syndrome disorder (FASD).** Community Living British Columbia (CLBC) is a provincially-funded program that provides funding to individuals with these diagnoses who have support needs. In many cases, this funding connects youth directly to employment programs. For youth with self-declared mental health challenges, no such pathway exists.

Inaccessibility of the Mental Health System

Mental health support in Canada has traditionally been seen as the responsibility of the public health care system and community organizations (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2010). The public health care system is stretched to capacity and often unequipped to offer the long-lasting and on-going mental health

support that many youth need. And community organizations rely on funding that can limit their capacity to offer flexible and long-term support. Most support also requires a formal mental health diagnosis, which can be difficult for youth to acquire (especially when they are already struggling with symptoms of a mental health challenge). As a result of the above challenges, **the mental health support system is inaccessible to many youth** (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2022). And without access to a formal support system, there is no clear and direct pathway to employment programs.

The School System as an Entry Point to Services

When considering systems that most youth with self-declared mental health challenges are connected to, the public school system stands out. There is great opportunity to use this system to raise awareness of employment support services among this demographic and increase access to programs. The public school system also has a responsibility to promote career development (BC Laws, 1996), making it a **logical entry point to employment services.** For youth who are not connected to the public school system, utilizing the healthcare system is an additional entry point to explore.

Establishing clear and direct pathways to employment services for youth with self-declared mental health challenges is an important step to helping youth get the employment support they need. **Mental health is a leading cause of disability in Canada**—and youth aged 15-24 are more likely to be affected by mental health challenges than any other age demographic (Center for Addiction and Mental Health, 2019).

There is no clear pathway to employment support for youth with self-declared mental health challenges. A pathway could be established by leveraging the education and healthcare systems, which most youth with disabilities will be connected to at some point in their lives.

Pathways for Certain Demographics of Youth with Disabilities

There were noticeable differences in employment program access for certain demographics of youth with disabilities. For instance:

a. Respondents who identified as **newcomer/refugee or Indigenous** youth with disabilities **accessed employment programs at higher rates** than the average of all respondents.

b. Respondents who identified as **LGBTQIA2S+ or racialized/POC** youth with disabilities **accessed employment programs at lower rates** than average of all respondents.

c. Respondents residing in **rural regions accessed employment programs at higher rates** than respondents residing in urban regions.

Equity-Deserving Identities and Employment Program Access

Respondents who identified as Indigenous or as newcomers/refugees had accessed employment programs at higher rates than the average of all respondents. In contrast, respondents who identified as LGBTQIA2S+ or as racialized/POC youth accessed employment programs at lower rates than the average. Higher program access for Indigenous and immigrant/refugee youth with disabilities could be due to the **widespread availability of Indigenous and settlement organizations across BC.** These organizations offer a direct pathway to employment programs.

Availability of Employment Programs for Indigenous Youth with Disabilities

Canada's genocide against Indigenous peoples has left many lasting barriers for the Indigenous population (Indigenous Corporate Training, 2019). In attempts to combat these barriers, federal and provincial governments have invested in tailored Indigenous programming to support decolonization and serve Indigenous peoples who are disadvantaged by colonial injustice. Many of these programs offer employment support, creating clear and direct pathways that connect youth to employment services.

Indigenous youth with disabilities are overrepresented in demographics with connection to government systems. For instance:

» In 2021, 53.8% of children in government care were Indigenous (Government of Canada, 2021)

» In 2018, 48% of youth admitted to the justice system were Indigenous

(Government of Canada, 2018)

» In 2015, Indigenous youth were more likely than non-Indigenous youth to have used substances—with the onset of substance use beginning at a younger age (which is an early predictor for continued substance use challenges) (Government of Canada, 2015)

Tailored programming for Indigenous youth and **overrepresentation** of Indigenous youth in demographics with connection to government systems **likely contribute to greater program access rates.**

Availability of Employment Programs for Newcomer/Refugee Youth with Disabilities

In British Columbia, job vacancies have grown 80% since the pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2022). The population is also steadily aging, which contributes to the labour shortage (Statistics Canada, 2022). The Canadian Government believes in the strength of a diverse workforce and outlines immigration as a key strategy to addressing this shortage (Government of Canada, 2022). To support this, the BC government invests in settlement programs to support newcomers and refugees. Since immigration is often tied to employment, most of these programs offer employment programs as part of their service catalogue. **The availability of settlement agencies and the strong tie between immigration and employment likely outline a clear and direct pathway for newcomer/refugee youth with disabilities to connect with employment programs.**

Lack of Availability of Employment Programs for LGBTQIA2S+ and Racialized/POC Youth with Disabilities

Provincially, there aren't as many government-funded organizations that specifically serve LGBTQIA2S+ youth and racialized/POC youth. The organizations that do exist tend to not focus on employment services. As a result, **there are fewer clear and direct pathways into employment programs for youth with disabilities from these demographics.** It is also important to note that many employment support models and evidence-based practices have been criticized for their **lack of attention to the needs of LGBTQIA2S+ and racialized/POC job seekers** (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2010).

Lack of clear and direct pathways and the general lack of attention to the needs of LGBTQIA2S+ and racialized/POC youth likely contribute to the low program access of respondents from these demographics.

Regional Differences in Employment Program Access

Respondents living in rural/remote regions of the province had accessed employment programs at higher rates than those in urban areas. The directness and clarity of pathways connecting individuals to employment services in these communities provides a possible explanation. Rural regions often have one or two centers that act as a hub for employment support. Urban regions can have many centers, each specializing in a different type of support. **This type of system can be overwhelming and confusing to navigate, deterring youth from seeking out and accessing support.**

Another related factor could be the **higher sense of community reported by those living in rural regions** (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011). A model by McMillan and Chavis (1986) outlines four components that make up community, one of which is Integration and Fulfillment of Needs. This refers to the idea that members of a community will expect to have their needs met by resources available in that community. This can be interpreted to mean that those who feel a higher sense of community will be more likely to lean on community resources for support. Since those living in rural regions feel a greater sense of community (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011), it is logical to assume that they are more likely to rely on the employment services that are available to them. **The simplicity and directness of pathways to employment support in rural/remote regions—and the greater sense of community felt by those in these communities—likely contributes to the greater program access observed in the survey.**

Although respondents living in rural/remote regions had accessed employment programs at higher rates, almost no respondents from the Northeast, North Coast, and Nechako regions had accessed programs. These regions are made up almost exclusively of rural/remote communities, which have fewer available employment programs.

THEME 2: TRANSPORTATION, SCHEDULING NEEDS, AND PERSONAL CAPACITY AS BARRIERS TO PROGRAM ACCESS

Youth with disabilities who were aware of employment support faced three major barriers to accessing programs:

    d. **Transportation**—Many respondents shared that they did not have access to a motor vehicle. They relied on public transit, which posed barriers for getting to and from employment programs. For some youth, public transit was

not widely available in their area. For others, pick-up locations were difficult to access. Scheduling, length of travel, and safety were additional concerns. For many respondents, relying on transit meant missing programming or not participating in employment programs altogether.

e. **Scheduling conflicts**—Respondents also shared that many employment programs are only accessible during regular business hours. For those in school, or those who rely on their parents/guardians for transportation, such programs are inaccessible to them.

f. **Limited personal capacity**—Many respondents described how their personal capacity posed barriers to accessing employment programs. Things like low confidence, anxiety, low self-esteem, and fear of stigma make it difficult for youth with disabilities to access support to pursue employment.

Employment programs can be more accessible to youth by being flexible to youth's scheduling and travel needs, and responsive and understanding to the internal barriers they face.

THEME 3: IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM ACCESS FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

Respondents had varied experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic. For some, it had a positive impact on their ability to access employment programs, as virtual programming options made support more accessible. For others, it had a negative impact. **Youth reported that the reduction in practical, hands-on support options** (e.g., in-person workshops, one-the-job support, etc.) **reduced their ability to get the help they need.** Virtual programs were not helpful to these youth, as support was less practical and more difficult to engage with. For many respondents, **personal capacity challenges** (e.g., low self-confidence, anxiety, low self-esteem, fear of stigma, etc.) were also exacerbated by the pandemic and posed additional barriers to accessing support.

These findings demonstrate that youth with disabilities need support that is flexible, adaptable, and responsive to changing environments and situations— and that can be accessed virtually and/or in-person.

Employment Program Experiences

Although most respondents had not accessed employment support, the majority (79%) of those who had found it helpful. Further, a greater percentage (37%) of these youth were working full time—when compared to youth who had

not accessed support and were working full time (25%). This shows that the **employment services that are currently available to youth with disabilities are helpful.** Youth who had accessed employment programs highlighted the following as the most helpful supports:

SUPPORT WITH RESUME WRITING	**SUPPORT TO PREPARE FOR/ MOVE THROUGH THE JOB SEARCH PROCESS**	**SUPPORT TO LEARN INTERVIEW SKILLS**	**SUPPORT TO SET EMPLOYMENT GOALS**

Although youth found these supports helpful, they identified the following as supports that were missing from programs:

SUPPORT TO LEARN AND PRACTICE LIFE SKILLS *(E.G., BUDGETING, ETC.)*	**SUPPORT TO LEARN HOW TO MANAGE MENTAL HEALTH** *(E.G., EMOTIONAL REGULATION WHILE ON THE JOB, MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE, ETC.)*

Responses from youth who had not accessed employment programs followed the same themes. They shared that a mix of **support with practical employment skills and general life skills,** including mental health management, would be most helpful.

Although effective supports are being offered in employment programs, survey findings highlight an opportunity to better serve youth with disabilities by **incorporating a greater focus on general life skills and overall mental wellness.** This makes sense, as youth with disabilities are experiencing a critical transition period.

They are gaining independence and learning what it means to build a life for themselves in community. **This is a time of growth, learning, and constant change.**

All youth approach this critical transition from a different place. They come from different environments, have different mixes of personal and life experiences, and a different set of intersecting identities that shape their experiences. Employment support for youth with disabilities needs to be **flexible and adaptable to each**

unique context and situation. It needs to change and transform as each youth changes and transforms. It must also be flexible and adaptable to meet youth needs as the environment and context surrounding that youth changes. **Support should ebb and flow as needed and be accessible on multiple formats and from multiple spaces** (e.g., in-person, online, etc.).

Job Search and Employment

Respondents faced barriers during the job search process and in their employment. These barriers highlight the specific employment support needs of youth with disabilities.

Job Search Barriers

Respondents shared how difficult it is to navigate the job search process. They found it highly intimidating. They also reported how difficult it is to find an employer who will accommodate their disability. When searching and applying for jobs, **there are no obvious indicators that employers are inclusive and open to accommodating their needs.** Youth shared that they do not trust diversity statements alone.

Personal capacity challenges (e.g., anxiety, low confidence, low self-esteem, fear of stigma, etc.) **are prominent factors that intensify these job search experiences.** And prior experiences of discrimination exacerbate personal capacity challenges. Having to navigate an already intimidating job search process with personal capacity challenges and experience of discrimination—and needing to find an accommodating employer who is open and inclusive—is too much for many youth with disabilities to manage. As a result, they are deterred from applying to jobs altogether.

There is opportunity for employers to alter their recruitment strategies to better appeal to youth with disabilities. **With visible indicators that communicate a commitment to hiring inclusively and supporting employees with needed accommodations, employers can create a safer space for youth with disabilities to apply.** These indicators must go beyond diversity statements, as these alone do not showcase this commitment. Perhaps stories of previous accommodations being made or a badge showing that the employer has participated in learning or training around fostering an inclusive workplace would help. Further exploration is needed to better understand what these indicators should be. Regardless of what this looks like in practice, these findings communicate the significant role an

employer plays in creating a safe and welcoming space for youth with disabilities during the recruitment process.

Employment Barriers

Respondents who had worked faced barriers on the job that impacted their employment experience. They identified the following as the most significant:

LACK OF WORKPLACE ACCOMMODATIONS	NEGATIVE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THEIR ABILITY *(FROM EMPLOYERS AND COWORKERS)*	FEELING UNAPPRECIATED BY THEIR EMPLOYER/ COWORKERS AND NOT BEING INCLUDED IN THE WORKPLACE CULTURE

The mix of all these barriers had a negative impact on youth's personal capacity challenges.

Youth with disabilities need to feel that they belong in the workplace. They want to feel supported, understood, included, and valued in their employment. This reinforces the key role employers play in creating a supportive and positive work experience for youth with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

Youth with disabilities face many barriers to accessing employment programs. Those with **self-declared disabilities** (including mental health challenges) have **no clear and direct pathways** to employment programs. This causes a general **lack of awareness and understanding** of the types of support that are available. Certain **equity-deserving demographics** of youth with disabilities (e.g., LGBTQIA2S+ and racialized/POC youth with disabilities), are **also missing pathways**. Direct pathways provide a clear entry point into employment services.

These entry points seem to be important for exposure and accessibility of employment services, as they are **correlated with an increase in program access** (survey respondents with connection to government systems and affiliation with settlement or Indigenous organizations that have direct routes to employment programs were more likely to have accessed employment programs).

To increase employment program access for all youth with disabilities, clear and direct pathways need to be established for youth with self-identified mental health disabilities, and youth with disabilities who identify as LGBTQIA2S+ and/or as racialized/POC.

Transportation, scheduling needs, and personal capacity challenges also pose barriers for many youth with disabilities who are looking to access employment support. There is a need to make employment programs more accessible by being **flexible to youth's scheduling and travel needs,** and responsive to their **personal capacity challenges.** The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the need for flexible and adaptive support that is responsive to the changing environments and situations of youth with disabilities.

Although effective supports are being offered in the current landscape of employment support, there is opportunity to better serve youth with disabilities by incorporating more of a focus on **general life skills and mental wellness.** Support must also be **flexible and adaptable** to each youth's specific needs and contexts. It must change and transform as each youth changes and transforms.

Lastly, employers play a major role in creating a safe and welcoming space for youth with disabilities during the recruitment process and on the job. Further

work is needed to understand how employers can better appeal to youth with disabilities in the recruitment process. But on the job, employers can ensure youth feel **supported, understood, included, and valued** in their role.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The survey collected both quantitative and qualitative data. The data was imported into the open-source data analysis software, R. This software was used to analyze the relationships between groups of respondents and different survey themes (e.g., the top barriers to accessing employment support for youth living in a certain region of BC). Relationships were coded and analyzed based on the percentage of youth from a specific category who had chosen each answer.

The validity of the relationships was tested using chi-squares. Relationships with a value greater than zero were considered valid. The statistical significance of relationships was tested using two methods: chi-squares and Fisher's test. Two methods were used to ensure confidence in the accuracy of results. A p-value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

While the majority of the relationships analyzed were statistically significant, some were not. However, **all relationships analyzed were valid and provide valuable insight** on the employment journey experiences of youth with disabilities living in BC.

The chart on the following page illustrates validity and statistical significance of the relationships included in the Youth Survey Report.

> For more information on the statistical analysis of survey data please contact: **youthstratresearch@uvic.ca.**

RELATIONSHIP (IN ORDER THEY APPEAR IN REPORT)	CHI-SQUARE (> 0 = VALID)	VALIDITY	CHI-SQUARE (P-VALUES < 0.05 = STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT)	FISHER'S TEST (P-VALUES < 0.05 = STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT)	STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE
Age and Employment Status	68.075	Valid	3.627e-1	0.0004998	Significant
Disability type and employment status	59.818	Valid	0.0009684	0.0004998	Significant
Equity-deserving identity and employment status	39.497	Valid	0.2923	0.06347	Not significant
Gender identity and employment status	29.941	Valid	0.007881	0.004998	Significant
Region and employment status	19.285	Valid	0.5669	0.5552	Not significant
Disability type and employment program access	31.175	Valid	0.0005489	0.001999	Significant
Equity-deserving identity and employment program access	18.477	Valid	0.07115	0.06547	Not significant
Experience in government care/the justice system, and employment program access	53.955	Valid	1.147e-11	0.0004998	Significant
Gender identity and employment program access	8.6792	Valid	0.06964	0.06847	Not significant
Region type and employment program access	7.9314	Valid	0.01895	0.008996	Significant
Disability status and employment program helpfulness	59.257	Valid	9.276e-06	0.0004998	Significant
Employment status and employment program access	29.016	Valid	6.043e-5	0.00004998	Significant

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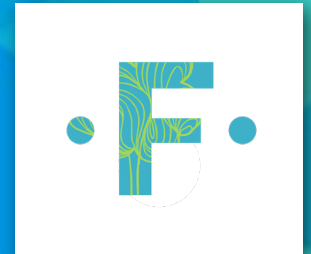

ASSOCIATION OF SERVICE PROVIDERS FOR EMPLOYABILITY AND CAREER TRAINING (ASPECT)

BC ABORIGINAL NETWORK ON DISABILITY SOCIETY (BCANDS)

DIVERSECITY

FOUNDRY BC

IMMIGRANT SERVICES SOCIETY OF BC

INCLUSION BC

INCLUSION LANGLEY

JOHN HOWARD SOCIETY

PLANNED LIFETIME ADVOCACY NETWORK

PRESIDENT'S GROUP