

The Youth Employment Solution: From Universal Healthcare to Universal Employment

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Abstract

This short commentary examines youth unemployment in Canada and offers four solutions for increasing youth employment and creating a stronger, safer society: (1) increase participation rates in post-secondary education; (2) provide employment readiness and job placement through youth employment services programs; (3) enhance high school curriculums to better prepare youth for employment; and (4) adopt best practices and policies from leading nations and organizations.

Special Issue Commentary

The Youth Employment Solution: From Universal Healthcare to Universal Employment*

TIMOTHY LANG[†]

This short commentary examines youth unemployment in Canada and offers four solutions for increasing youth employment and creating a stronger, safer society: (1) increase participation rates in post-secondary education; (2) provide employment readiness and job placement through youth employment services programs; (3) enhance high school curriculums to better prepare youth for employment; and (4) adopt best practices and policies from leading nations and organizations.

Ce court article analyse le chômage des jeunes au Canada et propose quatre solutions pour accroître l'emploi des jeunes et bâtir une société plus forte et plus sûre : (1) augmenter les taux de participation aux études postsecondaires; (2) offrir une formation de préparation à l'emploi et des services de placement dans le cadre de programmes d'emploi pour les jeunes; (3) améliorer les programmes d'études du secondaire afin de mieux préparer les jeunes à l'emploi; et (4) adopter les politiques et les pratiques exemplaires des organisations et des pays les plus avancés dans ce domaine.

I.	PROMOTE HIGHER EDUCATION IN BOTH STEM AND LIBERAL ARTS	1129
II.	YOUTH EMPLOYMENT SERVICES	1130
III.	HIGH SCHOOL PREPAREDNESS.....	1131
IV.	REPLICATING BEST PRACTICES TO REDUCE YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT.....	1132

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IN CANADA, WE NEED IMMEDIATE ACTION ON KEY ISSUES, one of which is youth unemployment, lest we risk harming our future through an ever increasing number of unemployed and desperate youth. Thankfully, all levels of government are currently committed to increasing youth employment, and now we simply need to act to ensure we have the right solutions to help the guardians of our future. I discuss below several key solutions that would help increase youth employment and create a stronger, safer society.

The occupy movement, an increase in crime, and, in the worst case, the radicalization of youth are just some of the outcomes of young people's unemployment or feeling of disenfranchisement. Simply put, when the economy and employment levels are strong, crime declines. When the economy is weak and prolonged, unemployment persists, crime increases. A strong economy is the surest way to reduce crime and leads to more stable employment.¹ The Occupy movement was a response to growing inequity. With youth unemployment at 22 per cent in Toronto, it is clear that more must be done to help resolve this issue and ensure a safer, stronger society.²

The good news is that Canada has among the lowest youth unemployment rates in the world and the Citi Foundation named Toronto as the world leader for youth economic opportunity.³ Although there are wealthier cities and bigger economies, Toronto had the right combination of wealth, economy, social services, and a safety net for its citizens. Youth unemployment, like all unemployment, will grow and decline with the economy, so the best way to reduce unemployment is through a strong, vibrant market economy with fair competition that drives innovation and research to produce better products, services, and jobs. However, the health of the Canadian economy is out of our control and we are often at the mercy of global conditions. For this very reason, great nations like Canada ensure that key services, such as healthcare, will always be provided. Social democracies have created a social safety net to ensure stability when there are economic downturns or other events that cause

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1. See e.g. Sandra Ajimotokin, Alexandra Haskins & Zach Wade, "The Effects of Unemployment on Crime Rates in the US" (2015), online: <smartech.gatech.edu/bitstream/handle/1853/53294/theeffectsofunemploymentoncrimerates.pdf>; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Monitoring the Impact of Economic Crisis on Crime" (2012), online: Global Pulse <www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/crime/GIVAS_Final_Report.pdf>.
 2. YES: Youth Employment Services, "Donate," online: <www.yes.on.ca/donate>.
 3. Alex Ballingal, "Toronto ranked best economy for young people in new study," *The Star* (23 November 2015), online: <www.thestar.com/news/gta/2015/11/23/toronto-ranked-best-economy-for-young-people-in-new-study.html>.

job loss or hardship. With so much out of our control, what can Canada do to help ensure that more youth are employed and have a path to personal and career growth throughout their lives? The surest way to drive employment is through a strong economy, but as CNN's Fareed Zakaria pointed out at the Rotman School recently, recovering economies are slower and slower to recover job loss.⁴ Citing U.S. numbers, Zakaria showed that in the first few decades after World War II, once growth returned after a recession, job levels returned six months later. But in the early 90's, post-recession job recovery took fifteen months. After the 2000 downturn it took twenty-five months. After 2008 it has been closer to sixty-five months.⁵ So, as much as Canada is in a strong position compared to most nations, we still must do all we can to help our youth be full participants in society through employment.

Canada has been a stronger and safer nation since universal healthcare.⁶ In an ideal world, we would have a society where all basic necessities are universal and available, including healthcare, adequate housing, nutrition, education, and employment. Investing in these areas produces a return on investment for Canadians, and there is hope that we can eventually eliminate poverty through adequate services for all—while still ensuring we have a highly competitive market economy and taxation system that attracts business and trade, and creates employment and wealth for all Canadians. Youth employment is critical, not only for the mental well-being of the individuals and of the nation, but for our economic future. Employment is a cornerstone of ensuring the worth and dignity of each individual. It is vital that we prepare youth to lead our nation into the future.

Canadians were pleased to see Prime Minister Trudeau's commitment and funding to help youth employment in the last election.⁷ Before that, the Ontario Government had committed and followed through on an increase in youth employment programs.⁸ The additional funding has proven effective.

4. Fareed Zakaria, "Canada's Role in a Post-Trump World," (Big Ideas Speaker Series, delivered at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, 1 February 2017) [unpublished].

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. "Justin Trudeau lays out \$1.5B youth employment strategy," *CBC News* (11 September 2015), online: <www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-election-2015-trudeau-youth-employment-jobs-1.3224237>.

8. Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, "Ontario Launches New Youth Employment Program: Province Connects At-Risk Youth with Jobs," (2 September 2015), online: <news.ontario.ca/maesd/en/2015/09/ontario-launches-new-youth-employment-program.html>.

Canada's leading youth employment agency, Youth Employment Services (YES), has helped youth gain employment and change their lives over the years.⁹ I can speak first-hand to the positive affect this funding has had on so many youth and communities. Services like ours were one of the reasons Citi Foundation named Toronto the youth economic opportunity world leader. It is critical that organizations like YES have passionate, results-driven teams, as we can change an individual's outlook on life forever. I tell my organization all the time how proud I am of their work to make such an impact on so many youth day in and day out. YES's motto is "Changing Lives...Forever." Since leaving the private sector and a national university to lead YES, I have been inspired by the work we do. If we could replicate our high success rate across Canada, we would further reduce youth unemployment.

In this article, I describe four solutions that could have an impact on youth employment and create a stronger nation for generations to come: education, youth employment services, high school preparedness, and the replication of innovative policies. As a leader, I have always prided myself on my ability to get things done quickly. When the cause is right, it is enjoyable to inspire others to make great change for the betterment of all. In my experience, however, even governments that are well intentioned often waste time and money gathering various opinions on issues. The problem is that when a government has little experience with specific issues, it may take incorrect information at face value. Some would rather hear themselves talk than listen and gather proven solutions. Government could save time and money by gathering best practices from around the nation and world in order to replicate successful programs more quickly. Why should anyone in need wait a day longer than they have to?

So what are the possible solutions to youth unemployment? While I believe the best way to improve employment is through a strong economy, the following are other solutions that can help improve employment. The following solutions are based on my experience in youth employment and working with a world-class team that has hundreds of years of combined experience working with hundreds of thousands of youth. I will discuss four solutions: (1) increase participation rates in post-secondary education; (2) provide employment readiness and job placement through youth employment services programs; (3) enhance high school curriculums to better prepare youth for employment; and (4) adopt best practices and policies from leading nations and organizations.

9. YES: Youth Employment Services, "About YES," online: <www.yes.on.ca/about>.

I. PROMOTE HIGHER EDUCATION IN BOTH STEM AND LIBERAL ARTS

Higher education produces a far better chance at employment. This is simple and well documented—university, college, or some form of trade or higher learning can double or triple your chances at employment.¹⁰ Governments should work to improve accessibility to higher education. Organizations like Pathways to Education¹¹ are important, as they help underprivileged youth go on to university or college. We need more of this kind of support, and integrating what they do into the high school curriculum would have a major impact.

Beyond simply promoting participation in higher education, we must also consider what kind of education our youth is receiving. First, the importance of an increase in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) programs is well documented and understood.¹² We need more youth involved in these key areas to meet the growing demands and changing needs of society. This has to start in high school, and be more accessible. And along these lines, there are other important areas one can prepare oneself for the changing needs in society today. Meeting with Maor Daniel, one of the Canadian leaders at Microsoft's Bing organization, he emphasized the well-known importance of and demand for youth with coding ability. But he also noted other skills in high demand, including Microsoft, Google or digital media certification. Clearly, there are numerous areas that we need to promote in order to fill unfilled jobs.

At the same time, having worked as a Vice President at a Canadian university, I was discouraged by increased disdain for liberal arts courses amongst the media and public. It is true that there is an important and growing need for more STEM graduates, but we should not undervalue the importance of the critical and lateral thinking that comes from many of the traditional liberal arts courses. Having run billion-dollar organizations and interviewed, hired, and worked with thousands of people, I recognize the incredible value of critical thinking, adaptability, and the ability to communicate effectively. These skills are developed through education in political science, English, philosophy, history,

10. Youth Opportunities Ontario, "Do I need more school after high school?" (5 February 2013), online: <www.youthconnect.ca/htdocs/english/learn/index.asp>.

11. Pathways to Education, "Home," online: <www.pathwaystoeducation.ca>.

12. See e.g. Elaine J Hom, "What is STEM Education?" (11 February 2014), online: LiveScience <www.livescience.com/43296-what-is-stem-education.html>; US Department of Education, "Science, Technology, Engineering and Math: Education for Global Leadership," online: <www.ed.gov/Stem>.

and other liberal arts disciplines. It is disappointing that many employers have accepted the media falsehood that some of these degrees are useless. The hard truth is that outside certain key job areas that require specific skills, like medicine, accounting, or law, most positions require only that the employee be a quick learner, adaptable, an effective communicator, and a hard worker. In an ideal world, business students would opt not just for easy electives, but also for classes in history, philosophy, political science, English, and other subjects. Similarly, post-secondary institutions should make available more business electives for arts students, since many of them will ultimately end up in some sort of business environment. Understanding important areas of business and our economy will always be worthwhile. Adapting our institutions to changing realities will further help youth preparedness and employment. I am concerned, however, that such developments will not occur at our post-secondary institutions, as there is often resistance to change. In the face of this resistance, we must remember that it is important that we always question the status quo in an open and constructive manner. In sum, education is key; we need to increase the number of students in higher education, including colleges and trades, and STEM programs. Further, we must improve our understanding of the importance of all degrees so employers and students alike have confidence in their abilities to contribute to the workforce.

II. YOUTH EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

As President and CEO of Canada's founding youth employment service provider, and a leader in the field, I have the benefit of YES's fifty years of experience and knowledge of what works and what does not. Current government-funded programs have proven highly effective and have helped millions of youth over the years. Setting and achieving targets is important in all areas of society to ensure we are constantly moving forward and achieving results. Some areas of government or institutions do not have any way to measure themselves, but thankfully, in the youth employment area, governments have mandated clear youth employment targets and outcomes. From our experience, the government staff who oversee the programs have vast experience and are passionate about achieving success, because these results affect real people. Although some providers do not meet their targets, government should fund the strong providers to ensure higher youth employment. So what do the youth employment services provide? In sum, they provide career counseling, workshops and training that help youth become employment ready. Then, through strong partnerships with

thousands of businesses and organizations, the Job Development team places these youth into employment. Further, current funding pays youth to attend the program. The career counseling includes working with youth to help them realize their potential. It has been inspiring to open up a world of opportunities to so many youth and alert them to job types they never knew existed. Services also include workshops on a variety of topics: communication skills, resume writing, interview skills, teamwork, adaptability, worker rights, equity, mentorship programs, in-depth entrepreneurial programs, and programs for people with mental health issues and disabilities. Strong service providers like YES work with all youth, and in particular with disadvantaged youth, indigenous youth, and new Canadians—we have recently helped many Syrian refugees. It is truly inspiring to see lives changed through this service. Above all, our strong staff provides a new sense of hope and optimism. We set the expectation that changing one's life takes work and persistence, and that it will pay off in a world of possibilities. A successful outcome for service providers includes employment, going back to school, or going into a trade. This strong solution is proven and is an important part of increasing youth employment rates.

III. HIGH SCHOOL PREPAREDNESS

I have always said that it would be a wonderful world if organizations like YES were not needed. Unfortunately, this is not the case, but we hope that they will be required less and less. And one way to enhance youth employment is to provide some of these services in high school. Although YES goes into hundreds of high schools and works with thousands of students in workshops on resume writing, interview skills, and more, in an ideal world these services would be part of the regular curriculum. This is where we need action and resolve. Evidence continues to show that curriculums should adapt to new realities, and many teachers adapt the curriculum in their own way to help students. But a real change would be tremendously helpful to many youth. Despite an increase in youth unemployment, some jobs are left unfilled. One issue we find at YES is that many students are still unaware of the thousands of various types of employment. At YES we work with youth and create profiles to see what kinds of employment they might be interested in: Do you like working with computers, or with people, or outdoors, or with your hands? From this process, we have placed youth in amazing jobs that they would have never foreseen. One recent example includes a young person who is now a successful baker. He never dreamed he would be baking, but he loves it and it has changed his life. While there has been some

work on this in schools, we must work to replicate what youth employment services do: teach communication skills, teamwork, discipline, how to operate in a work environment, and how to dress for success. And above all, an area YES is very proud of is its ability to inspire and lift people up. YES deals with tens of thousands of youth, most from disadvantaged backgrounds. YES provides important skills and inspires clients to believe in themselves. We need better preparedness for employment. The impact is massive and we have seen it first hand—young people who come to us down and out, hopeless, and helpless, leave our program full of vigor, purpose and resolve. The task is daunting, but to repeat two ancient proverbs that I display in our training facilities: “get knocked down seven times, get up eight,” and “talk doesn’t cook rice.” Failure leads to success. Persistence leads to extraordinary achievement. When youth have a better picture of what to expect and how to overcome obstacles through perseverance and hard work, it makes an incredible difference and opens up a whole new world of possibilities. One recent example is Darryl Hobbs, vice principal of Westview Centennial High School, who has taken real initiative with his team to help some of Toronto’s most underserved youth. He has done so much to help and this has had an impact. We are so lucky to have teachers who on their own time provide this help, simply because that is who they are: They want to help young lives and they do. But it needs to be a part of the program, and school boards should adapt their curriculum to include it. Further, the need for STEM graduates is increasing rapidly, and schools should work to include more accessibility to STEM. Many schools across the world are now including coding as part of the curriculum.¹³ We must adapt or we will be left behind. Change must occur, but it seems slow in coming.

IV. REPLICATING BEST PRACTICES TO REDUCE YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Benchmarking and replicating best practices is common practice in the private sector, where time and money are critical. If something works, why recreate the wheel; this is a mantra I have used throughout my life in terms of leadership or running effective organizations. While Vice President at a university the first thing I did was visit Notre Dame, Yale, Boston College, and Harvard to see how the world’s best universities did things in my particular area. Subsequently,

13. Beth Gardiner, “Adding Coding to the Curriculum,” *The New York Times* (23 March 2014), online: <www.nytimes.com/2014/03/24/world/europe/adding-coding-to-the-curriculum.html>.

my university had record results in reputation, brand, fundraising, alumni affinity, student and faculty engagement and more, thanks in part to replicating best practices. It is an easy way to make great gains. Government would be well served to do more benchmarking and replicating best practices in many areas. While the best solution is not always easy to implement, where there is a strong will, there is often a way.

Canada has one of the lowest youth unemployment rates in the world,¹⁴ but like the poverty level, any is too high. Further, some nations have youth unemployment rates half that of Canada.¹⁵ Nations cannot always replicate each other's programs due to history, culture, location, and other factors, but many aspects can be copied. Germany, for example, has a youth unemployment rate of 6.7 per cent, half of Canada's and almost a quarter of Toronto's.¹⁶ Canada would be well served to replicate what works in Germany. In short, this would require a change in the high school curriculum and a new initiative to work with the business, trade, and union sectors. But is it all doable? Yes. When one sees 6.7 per cent youth unemployment versus Toronto's 22 per cent, why would we not try? It will not be easy, but why would we not want to replicate the best? It amazes me the number of people who still try to find reasons why they can't do something, instead of finding solutions and why they can. I saw this first hand in the university and government sector, and for Canada to enhance its productivity, we really must become a 'can-do' culture.

So what is the German model? Without going into too much detail, it includes high school students working with their counselors to review future life opportunities. Some pursue higher education, while others begin working in a trade. In harmony with businesses across the nation, German students who opt for a trade can go into an apprenticeship program during high school, which gives them invaluable experience and when completed, they have a full time and satisfying career in areas like the aerospace industry, auto industry, or anything from bakers and car mechanics to carpenters, pipe fitters, digital media experts, and various other professions.¹⁷ As individuals are paid to attend, these programs serve as a valuable alternative to increasingly expensive university

14. Trading Economics, "Canada Youth Unemployment Rate" (2017), online: <tradingeconomics.com/canada/youth-unemployment-rate>.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy & the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, "Prospect of vocational training," online: <www.make-it-in-germany.com/en/for-qualified-professionals/working/prospect-of-vocational-training>.

education.¹⁸ Britain and other nations have expressed interest in adopting such a model and Canada should examine best practices or models that work and look at its implementation. I often wonder why, with some federal government encouragement, Canada does not opt for more provincial tests with things like guaranteed annual income, or education changes, as within our federal system we could test various ideas in a particular province. In a sense, Medicare was tested in Saskatchewan, and who knows if Prime Minister Pearson, who did the heavy lifting to get it passed across the country, would have gone forth had he not had some indication of success from Saskatchewan. This is but one area that could be replicated to help youth employment and prepare our young citizens for fulfilling careers.

In sum, Canada is a noble and shining light in the world, and an example of a modern nation that is peaceful, open, diverse, follows the rule of law, and has social systems to protect our most vulnerable people. At the same time, we still have many people who need support, and with a simple hand, can become full participants in society. Canada is small enough that, with the right leadership, the nation and various institutions or departments could run like a proverbial Swiss watch. We should match our strength of ideals with a strength of operational efficiency and productivity. We can do more with less if we are more action oriented. There is so much that can be achieved to help our young people and we need immediate and constant action and adaptation. In the end, positive results mean people's lives are changed. We should not wait to make a difference, and the good work Canada is doing in youth employment should continue, be expanded, and look for new innovative solutions to make Canada greater still.

18. *Ibid.*