

The Conundrum of Youth Unemployment

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Career Foundation's Youth Job Connection Program

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Abstract

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Cover Page Footnote

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Special Issue Commentary

The Conundrum of Youth Unemployment*

HARPREET GILL[†]

This commentary explores issues surrounding youth employment in Toronto from the point of view of a social worker with the Youth Job Connection program. The author highlights issues with the program and the need for reform—from within both government and communities—by drawing on her personal experiences with a typical client.

Ce commentaire examine les problèmes concernant l'emploi des jeunes à Toronto, tels qu'ils sont rencontrés par les travailleurs sociaux œuvrant dans le cadre du Programme d'accès à l'emploi pour les jeunes. En s'appuyant sur son expérience personnelle auprès d'un client type, l'auteure met en évidence les problèmes liés au programme et souligne le besoin de réformes, tant au sein du gouvernement que dans les collectivités.

ONE DAY IN 2015, I arrived at my office in the west end of Toronto, where I serve as the Team Lead for the Youth Job Connection program (YJC), a fairly new program funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities in an effort to address the increasing and alarming issue of youth unemployment rates in Ontario. I was anticipating the start of the early morning grind. Like most days, I received a call from a fellow social worker who was referring a

* An earlier version of this commentary was presented at the Creating Opportunities Summit. The Summit took place on 26-27 January 2017 at Osgoode Hall Law School, Toronto.

† Team Lead with the Career Foundation's Youth Job Connection Program. I have dedicated the past fourteen years to my community, Jane and Finch, particularly to combat against the misrepresentation of the community and the social systems that are designed to keep people trapped in their circumstances. I would like to thank all my leaders and mentors—those who have come before me, who have shaped me to become the woman I am today and for opening doors of opportunities for me. None of this would have been possible without your support. There are too many names to list, but to those who have greatly impacted my life for the better: you know who you are.

young man to our program as he desperately sought assistance to secure full-time employment. After getting some more information about the young man—let's call him Justin Smith—I received his contact information and scheduled him for an intake meeting in my office.

We met for the first time on 11 November 2015. As he walked through my office doors, I was alarmed to see that Smith's clothes were torn and his eyes puffy with deep dark circles. That part of his skin almost appeared bruised and sunk under his bones. It was clear that he was under severe stress. During our hour together, I discovered that he'd been cycling in and out of various systems since the age of seven. He candidly disclosed to me that his mother left him when he was five and his father had been deported back to his home country shortly thereafter. Left homeless with no other family member to take him in, Smith bounced around from foster homes to shelters, which greatly impacted his attendance in school. Smith ultimately dropped out of school and by the time we sat across from each other, he had accrued about five charges at the mere age of twenty. When I prompted him about his living situation, he told me he was living in a shelter where he was not treated like a human being, especially during a time when he wanted help finding resources and options to transition his life in a new direction. It was as clear as day that Smith was well qualified for a program like mine and so I accepted him to join us in the next open session.

Providing my experience with Smith as context, this commentary explores the intricacies of youth issues and what it means for young people like Smith when they seek out employment opportunities in their communities but are not adequately served in holistic ways to meet their multifaceted needs. Designed for individuals between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine, who face a wide spectrum of systemic barriers, YJC in theory is supposed to offer financial, emotional, and employment support from staff. However, the everyday experience of working with youth like Smith has shown that many in the field of employment services may not always be so qualified to provide such intensive services.

By highlighting how our young people feel stigmatized and misrepresented even within the structures that are meant to support them, I aim to show how unsuitable policies intended to address employment issues in Toronto fail to dissect the root causes of systemic unemployment, including racism and ageism, and miss key opportunities to deconstruct oppressive discourses and ideologies that manifest themselves through programs like YJC. Touching on the realities of programs and policies through my personal experiences living and working in a

“priority” neighbourhood,¹ I assess what happens when we as professionals fail to show unconditional care for the people we work with and the ways in which the bureaucracy and policies themselves deeply shape such pitfalls. Addressing this issue can, I believe, better help front-line workers and other stakeholders devise strategies to effectively teach and guide our young people to become productive members of society.

It is relevant here to give you a sense of the kind of work I and other YJC programmers engage in. Structurally speaking, a majority of the counseling is meant to take place within a two-week period, which inconveniently is also designated for pre-employment training. During the course of an intake, professionals such as myself are required to conduct an assessment to ensure clients qualify for services by meeting a minimum of four out of twelve employment barriers that the Ministry uses to deem individuals worthy of receiving employment support. And while these individuals need to meet barrier counts, they also need to be self-motivated and not allow their personal issues to interfere with their employment, as the success of the program is measured through retention by maintaining their job placements for at least a year. One of the major issues in the screening process, even with rigorous criteria in place, is that it tends to neglect a wide range of individuals who fall on the light end of the at-risk spectrum. For instance, consider the following two individuals: One lives at home with his single mother in a working-middle-class neighbourhood, is twenty years old, and has a criminal record. The other is a single parent, has no source of income, but has a bachelor’s degree. Would you qualify them as worthy of receiving support? I would. Unfortunately, in the eyes of the Ministry, neither of these individuals would be qualified for the program. The first individual has only two barrier counts, his age and his criminal record, and the second individual also has two barrier counts, as she’s a single mother and has no source of income, but would automatically be disqualified because she has a post-secondary degree. In many cases it is extremely challenging to label individuals to be “at-risk”; as we can see in this example, many people are already excluded before anyone listens to and understands their narrative. Policy makers need to take more of a bottom-up approach to get a true understanding of what front-line workers face and to be able to develop a more inclusive plan to combat the issues of youth unemployment.

1. Neighbourhoods identified by Toronto city council and the United Way to reduce crime, provide more opportunities for youth, and improve services for underserved inhabitants. “What are priority neighbourhoods?” *Toronto Star* (19 July 2008), online: <www.thestar.com/news/crime/crime/2008/07/19/what_are_priority_neighbourhoods.html>.

Last year alone, my small team, which includes a Facilitator, a Job Developer, and me, had conducted over 350 intakes and served 170 youth in total. Many of these candidates were referred to other services, which usually aren't suitable to the individual's needs, due to the simple fact that on paper they don't appear 'barriered.' For instance, individuals who attain post-secondary education are generally not qualified for the program and are turned away, as they're expected to know how to compete in the working world. In reality, however, I encounter countless individuals who have their degrees but are clueless on how to navigate the labour market. Those same individuals feel shameful and hopeless because they don't see any employment opportunities in their communities; they feel as though the education system has failed them by not equipping them with life skills needed in the labour force, and now they are being denied an opportunity to further develop or enhance their employability skills.

The concern over unemployment within priority neighbourhoods is multifaceted. While YJC relies heavily on the support of its surrounding community to offer opportunities to local youth, there is a vast disconnect between business owners and employment opportunities for people within the community. For one, there are many small businesses that do not typically require a massive number of employees, which creates a shortage of opportunities to place youth with employers. Furthermore, I have encountered many employers who hold the same negative biases towards community members that outsiders perpetuate, subsequently ignoring an entire population of prospective workers. This is just one reason young people become despondent when seeking work within the community.

But more importantly, long stretches of unemployment can be a catalyst for a host of byproducts that spur feelings of hopelessness in youth. Depression, anxiety, and self-esteem issues are just a few symptoms that begin to manifest when one is unemployed.² And even when employed, the youth I encounter are constantly struggling with daily living expenses that become unaffordable due to their limited sources of income. How do we equip service workers like me to deal with these issues? What are the kinds of training that can be provided to service workers in an effort to ensure that young people accessing these services not only receive employment support but also intensive individual counseling?

2. Arthur Goldsmith & Timothy Diette, "Exploring the link between unemployment and mental health outcomes" (April 2012), online: American Psychological Association <www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/indicator/2012/04/unemployment.aspx>.

Maybe this means revamping the entire structure of the program, particularly lowering numerical targets and expanding the length of counseling. This way workers have time to focus on each person's individual struggles and emphasize counseling rather than employment alone. Once individuals feel liberated and empowered to be able to handle their personal issues in a more meaningful and constructive manner, they become self-sufficient. For instance, I design pre-employment training specifically to help youth get to know themselves better through personal reflection, which can lead to discovering suitable career options. This format has been extremely effective, as individuals who go through my training feel they have progressed after their two weeks.

However, once the two weeks are over and we're still in search of a job placement, they are back in their usual environments where negative influences tend to put youth in the same situation from which they came to us. In the case of Smith, he loved the pre-employment training and expressed that he learned more in the two weeks with me than his entire life in school, but other systems of supports like the shelter were failing him and made him lose sight of his long-term goals. Although Smith was eligible for counseling support for up to a year, he did not have any financial support to keep his phone on so he could contact me or employers, nor did he have the means to travel to visit me on a regular basis. Even though clients also receive financial support, they are not eligible to access that money unless they have an offer of employment. This is another issue with the structure of the program: In many ways, it sets youth up to fail before they even get access to employment. Long before they secure employment, most clients need financial support for things such as transportation, interview clothing, and sometimes even food. Consequently, service workers must think of alternative interventions on the fly. But in the context of resource shortages and an already limited staff, it becomes increasingly difficult to ensure that the youth who walk through our doors can realistically see success within the program.

There have been many cases where I conducted an intake and the client informed me that they had already completed the YJC program at another employment agency. When I ask them why they haven't found a job, many of those young people tell me their employment worker just did not care or didn't teach them anything useful. Sometimes I'll ask what they learned in the pre-employment training and they look at me blankly, as though they don't even know what that is. Others inform me that their pre-employment training consisted of a take home package where they had to complete assignments at home. This stuns me given how seriously I take my role as a Team Lead, and because I am passionate about working with young people. I ensure that every

possible avenue is exhausted to help all individuals to succeed. Statistics show that many of the YJC host agencies are failing to meet their targets, and will not be receiving further funding. This isn't just the results of the cracks in the system itself, but it's also because we have agents within the system that have become deeply apathetic, lacking sincere care for the people they work with.

I have spoken at many conferences and lectures and I receive numerous questions about my approach to engaging the young people I work with. Although a common question, it shocks me every time. My response is always: If we just strip the labels that we place on people and treat everyone as human beings with respect, care, and empathy this wouldn't seem like such a complex question. When an individual feels trapped in their situation because everyone else has failed them, they become resentful. However, all it takes in many cases is one decent human to genuinely help to give that person some hope for a brighter future. When I work with people, I don't just want to equip them with tangible tools and skills but also to give them everlasting hope that someone cares and has their best interest at heart.

Although programs like YJC seem to be a great place to start to repair the damage young people experience in marginalized communities, there are many layers that need to be reexamined to ensure more holistic approaches are implemented in transformative ways. Justin Smith and countless others like him serve as a testament to the multiple needs that youth bring to service workers—it is simply not enough to offer employment counseling to ensure the success of youth in the labour market. Policy makers need to incorporate a bottom-up approach to combat the systemic issues with the structures of the program. This includes thoroughly training staff operating within the YJC program, working with employers within the community to break down stereotypes that plague youth in marginalized communities, and providing education to employers on the benefits of hiring young people from their local communities. All stakeholders need to be in conversation with one another to fill in the missing gaps and ensure that programs like YJC reach their full potential, rather than acting as flimsy and temporary Band-Aid solutions to a complicated issue.