



# Youth Employment Postcard Report

## Executive Summary

***“A job would mean more than just money — it would be my lifeline. I've seen too many friends go down the wrong path with drugs and crime because they felt they had no other options. When you're surrounded by negative influences and your pockets are empty, it's easy to make choices you'll regret. A summer job would give me purpose, keep me focused, and show me there's a better way forward.” 20-year-old youth, Etobicoke***

Toronto is at a tipping point. Youth unemployment has surged to the highest levels seen since 2016, excluding the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2024). With reductions in youth-specific employment programs at every level of government, young people across the city are facing increasingly limited access to meaningful, gainful work.

This crisis does not impact all youth equally. Black, Indigenous, racialized, newcomer, 2SLGBTQ+, disabled, low-income, and justice-involved youth — along with those living in Toronto Community Housing and Neighbourhood Improvement Areas — face disproportionate barriers to employment. These include discrimination, lack of qualifications or experience, and systemic exclusion from stable pathways to opportunity.

Toronto's youth are not asking for handouts, they are demanding a fair shot. In response to the youth employment and violence crisis, the Toronto Youth Cabinet (TYC), in partnership with The Neighbourhood Group Community Services (TNGCS), heard directly from 7,265 youth who shared their experiences, aspirations, and challenges through a city-wide postcard survey, part of a broader

engagement that reached tens of thousands. The call to action was clear: young people want to work, grow, and contribute, but they need a system that sees their potential and sets them up to succeed.

Among the key findings:

- 64% of youth said a job would reduce their dependence on parents and help them take control of their financial lives to support with urgent needs like food, rent, and transportation.
- 75% of respondents said a meaningful job must align with their passions, values, or sense of purpose — including opportunities to give back to their communities
- 74% of youth cited structural, systemic, or logistical barriers — including transportation, inaccessible job locations, and competing responsibilities like school or caregiving.
- 77% reported that a lack of qualifications, prior experience, or training held them back from accessing opportunities.
- Nearly 60% said their identity or how employers perceive them (race, age, language, gender, disability) created barriers to employment — making discrimination the most cited challenge.

These challenges are compounded by a broader context of systemic exclusion and rising youth violence. Decades of research show that economic disconnection among youth — especially among those in underserved communities — increases the likelihood of involvement in serious violence and crime (McMurtry et al., 2008). This has been reinforced by the City’s own SafeTO plan, which emphasizes that employment is one of the most effective tools for preventing violence and fostering community well-being.

The Toronto Youth Employment Program (TYEP), and the commitment to create an additional 10,000 meaningful and gainful youth jobs by Summer 2026, is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to break this cycle. But to be truly transformative, the program must be more than a summer work initiative. It must:

- Center equity, youth voice, and long-term civic impact
- Remove the systemic and identity-based barriers youth face
- Invest in mentorship, paid training, and wraparound supports
- Build pathways into the careers of the future

This report offers youth-generated insights, challenges, and solutions to inform the development of TYEP. It closes with seven concrete recommendations — from scaling access to embedding equity, that reflect what youth say they need to succeed.

When youth thrive, Toronto thrives. Let this not be just another report — let it be a roadmap.

The image shows three identical survey cards arranged horizontally. Each card has a blue border and contains the following text and form elements:

- Question:** "What would receiving a meaningful and gainful job mean to you?"
- Form fields:** "Name:", "Age:", "I live in..."
- Location options:** Scarborough, York, East York, Etobicoke, North York, Downtown (each with a checkbox).
- Footer:** "Follow Us on Instagram @TOYouthCabinet"
- Response area:** A series of horizontal lines for writing an answer.

## Findings

The responses collected from the postcards were categorized into key themes that emerged from the data. The frequency of each theme was recorded to quantify youth perspectives in relation to the three guiding questions featured on the postcards.

## Income and Financial Priorities

For many youth in Toronto, a meaningful and gainful job is more than a paycheck, it's a gateway to financial security, independence, and dignity.

Over 50% of youth surveyed said a job would help them meet urgent financial needs, including covering essential costs like food, rent, and transportation. Similarly, more than half of respondents emphasized that a Toronto Youth Employment Program (TYEP) would be essential in creating access to paid opportunities that help relieve financial strain for youth across the city

But the impact goes even deeper. Beyond basic income, youth emphasized the value of independence and control. A combined 64% of respondents shared that a job would reduce their dependence on parents and help them take charge of their own financial lives, a key life skill that helps youth transition into adulthood with confidence. As one respondent noted:

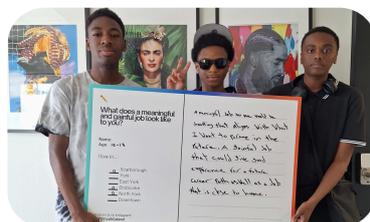
***“Receiving a meaningful and gainful job would give me freedom and independence. It would help me depend less on my parents and help me grow into the person I want to become. I would learn new experiences and life lessons.” - Youth respondent***

Beyond meeting their own needs, over 60% of youth also expressed a clear desire to support their families, plan for the future, and access opportunities they're often excluded from due to financial barriers. From saving for post-secondary education to building long-term financial habits and simply having the freedom to enjoy life, employment was consistently described as a tool for transformation.

***“I personally live in an apartment with a single mother. I have 2 siblings and I am the oldest. Receiving a meaningful and gainful job would mean a lot to me because I would give back to the community as they have to me, I would be able to support and provide for my family and this job would help me stay motivated.” - Youth respondent.”***

This is not just about income, it's about investment in youth potential.

## Strong Foundations for a Promising Future



Toronto is at a tipping point. Youth unemployment has surged to the highest levels seen since 2016, excluding the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2024). With reductions in youth-specific employment programs at every level of government, young people across the city are facing increasingly limited access to meaningful, gainful work.

This crisis does not impact all youth equally. Black, Indigenous, racialized, newcomer, 2SLGBTQ+, disabled, low-income, and justice-involved youth — along with those living in Toronto Community Housing and Neighbourhood Improvement Areas — face disproportionate barriers to employment. These include discrimination, lack of qualifications or experience, and systemic exclusion from stable pathways to opportunity.

Toronto's youth are not asking for handouts — they are demanding a fair shot. In response to the youth employment and violence crisis, the Toronto Youth Cabinet (TYC), in partnership with The Neighbourhood Group Community Services (TNGCS), collected over 7,000 postcards from youth across six regions of the city. These postcards reveal a clear call to action: youth want to work, grow, and contribute, but they need a system that works for them.

For youth across Toronto, a job isn't just a way to stay busy, it's a launchpad for growth, direction, and long-term success. Over two-thirds of youth (70%) said that a meaningful summer job would help build a strong foundation for their future, whether by gaining hands-on experience, developing real-world skills, or building competitive resumes. For young people across the city, employment is viewed as a key step toward adulthood. It's a way to prepare for what's ahead, not just financially, but personally and professionally.

Across the board, youth view a Toronto Youth Employment Program (TYEP) as a necessary investment in their future, not a luxury. Whether discussing income, independence, or experience, they believe a city-backed program is the tool to unlock opportunity at scale.

## **Building Skills, Confidence, and Competitiveness**

69% of youth said a summer job must offer more than a paycheque, it should build real-world experience and sharpen their future prospects. Whether it's gaining on-the-job skills, strengthening resumes, or learning the habits needed for long-term success, young people want opportunities that prepare them to thrive.

From time management and communication to money management and leadership, youth are asking for summer roles that teach, challenge, and empower.

***“I believe the City should create a summer youth employment program so we can start learning how to manage time and money at our age.” – Youth respondent***

***“Many people my age struggle to find jobs. Because of this, we're unprepared for the future and lack the experience essential to learning certain life skills.” – Youth respondent***

Youth also called for programs that provide resume support, interview coaching, and ongoing mentorship, supports that ensure they enter the workforce with both opportunity and confidence.

## Employment as Personal Growth

Over 60% of youth described employment as a tool for personal and professional growth — building confidence, independence, life skills, and a clearer sense of self. From mentorship and social connection to learning responsibility and time management, they want jobs that challenge and shape them into thriving young adults.

They want more than a job; they want a program that builds character, confidence, and clarity about who they are becoming.

***“Empowerment would teach me self-discipline and self-confidence. It would also provide good working experience, teamwork, problem solving, and how to manage money.” – Youth respondent***



## Values, Identity, and Purpose

Three out of four youth (75%) said that a meaningful job should align with their passions, identity, values, or community connection. For some, this meant work that fosters a strong sense of self or lets them give back to causes and communities they care about. For others, it was about doing something they love, spending their time meaningfully, and building confidence, self-worth, or a sense of direction. Whether through local impact, global giving, or values-based roles, youth are not just asking for jobs, they're asking for purpose.

Many also emphasized the importance of doing work that builds character and civic engagement, jobs that not only serve their own development, but benefit their neighbourhoods and the broader community. Whether it's working with nonprofits, supporting local programs, or contributing to causes they care about, youth want their summer to matter, for themselves and others.

***“A meaningful and gainful job is where my passion aligns with my values allowing me to contribute positively while achieving personal growth. To me it is about making an impact and fulfillment in my work.” – Youth respondent***

***“A meaningful job gives you a sense of purpose. It also helps your community. Good jobs develop you as a person. You can teach others your skills.” – Youth respondent***

This isn't just about summer employment, it's about giving Toronto youth the tools, experience, and support to build promising futures. A city-backed employment program would not only meet immediate needs, but unlock lifelong potential.

## Workplace Expectations: Culture, Respect, and Support

For young people across Toronto, where they work matters just as much as what they do.

Over half of all respondents (54%) said that a meaningful job must be rooted in respect, fairness, and a positive, supportive environment. They want more than tasks and wages — they want to feel valued. From fair pay and kindness to mentorship and safety, youth emphasized the importance of working in spaces where they are treated with dignity.

Youth described ideal workplaces as fun, inclusive, and empowering — places where their voice is heard, their wellbeing is prioritized, and their growth is supported. They also expect the City of Toronto's employment program to reflect these expectations, by vetting employers, offering training for supervisors on youth mentorship, and upholding fair labor practices.

*“Having work that pays well and fits my interests. I want to feel happy at work, help others and have a chance to learn and grow.” – Youth respondent*

*“It would mean being happy that I could get a job I enjoy while making money for liking what I do. It would mean having a life outside school and being responsible.” – Youth respondent*

## Challenges and Barriers to Employment

While youth strongly support the creation of a Toronto Youth Employment Program (TYEP), they also underscored the very real barriers that stand in their way.

From experience gaps to systemic inequities, youth made clear that meaningful work isn't equally accessible to all. Among the responses received to the question, “What are some challenges or barriers you've faced in finding employment?”, several key themes emerged, with identity-based discrimination standing out as the most cited obstacle.

### Identity-Based Barriers to Employment

A combined 59% of youth said aspects of their identity, or how employers perceive their identity, create barriers to employment. This number points to an urgent equity gap: for many, the barrier is not lack of ambition or ability, but bias.

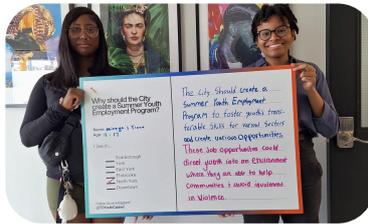
At the core, 41% of respondents explicitly named identity-related discrimination or exclusion as a key barrier, including age, race, disability, language, and gender identity. Young people shared stories of being passed over despite qualifications, feeling judged in interviews, and being excluded from workplaces that do not reflect or respect who they are. Their message was clear: employment programs must do more than offer jobs, they must confront the structures that prevent fair access in the first place.

*“I want a job where I can feel seen and respected. Sometimes it feels like people have already decided who I am before I even say a word.” - Youth respondent*

These barriers reinforce why a city-led employment program must be equity-centered by design, with inclusive recruitment, employer accountability, and built-in supports for youth facing systemic disadvantage. Addressing identity-based barriers is not just a moral imperative, it's essential to building a Toronto where every young person can thrive.

These experiences reaffirm that access to employment is about more than eligibility, it's about equity. Youth are asking for a city-led program that actively addresses these injustices by promoting inclusive hiring, employer accountability, and mentorship rooted in trust and representation.

***“A meaningful job gives you a sense of purpose. It also helps your community. Good jobs develop you as a person. You can teach others your skills. Being able to enjoy my life and having a stable living situation” - youth respondent***



## Experience and Skills Gaps: Breaking the Catch-22

Nearly 4 in 5 youth (77%) cited a lack of qualifications, skills, or prior work experience as key barriers to employment. For many, this created a frustrating and familiar cycle: they need experience to get a job — but need a job to gain that experience in the first place.

Youth respondents pointed to a lack of formal qualifications or skills as a major obstacle, including things like certifications, subject-specific knowledge, or training in basic tools and tasks. Many also said that the requirement for prior experience locks them out of opportunities they are otherwise eager and capable of taking on.

***“They think that people with no experience cannot work, but that is not always the case.” – Youth respondent***

Youth emphasized that even entry-level jobs often assume a level of preparation they've never been given the chance to build. Many asked for paid training, mentorship, and job placements designed with first-time workers in mind — opportunities that reward potential and effort, not just pre-existing credentials.

***“Competing with qualified adults for jobs that are usually done by teenagers.” – Youth respondent***

To truly open the door to meaningful work, youth said, the City must challenge this broken pipeline and invest in a youth employment program that creates accessible, skill-building roles, ones that nurture growth, not gatekeep opportunity.

## Structural & Systemic Barriers: When Access Is Out of Reach

Youth emphasized that securing a job isn't just about willingness to work, it's also about access. For 74% of youth, structural, systemic, and logistical barriers make employment feel out of reach, especially for those from low-income or equity-deserving communities.

Many spoke about the scarcity of jobs in their neighbourhoods, intense competition with adults, and the way broader economic systems exclude or deprioritize young people. Some pointed to invisible barriers, like policies that prioritize older students, or systems that favour those with connections over those with potential.

Others emphasized the daily logistics that turn job opportunities into missed opportunities. Whether it's unreliable transit, inflexible hours, or jobs located far from where they live, youth shared that even getting to work can be a challenge, especially without financial or family support. For newcomer youth, and those balancing caregiving or school, these barriers only multiply.

***“There is a job shortage in the area where I live.” – Youth respondent***

***“It's hard to find a job that would be flexible enough for a senior in high school.” – Youth respondent***

These insights make clear that youth unemployment is not a failure of effort — it's a failure of systems. If the Toronto Youth Employment Program is to succeed, it must address not only job creation, but also job access: removing transportation barriers, supporting flexible hours, investing in underserved areas, and designing for equity from the ground up.

## Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

The message from Toronto's youth is clear: they are not asking for handouts, they are demanding a fair shot. From thousands of postcards, a powerful truth emerges: youth want to work, grow, and give back. But the barriers they face, from identity-based discrimination to structural exclusion, are not of their own making. They are the result of systems that weren't built with them in mind.

Young people are calling on the City to not only create jobs, but to transform how access to those jobs is structured. A Toronto Youth Employment Program must be bold, equity-driven, and grounded in opportunity and respect. And it must be designed alongside youth themselves.

The Toronto Youth Employment Program (TYEP) offers a historic opportunity to answer that call. It must do more than offer seasonal work — it must remove barriers, build skills, and create clear, equity-focused pathways to employment. If implemented meaningfully, TYEP can reshape the city's relationship with its young people and ensure they are not left behind in our economy, or in our policies. This is not just about economic recovery, it's about civic renewal. It's about building a Toronto where young people can thrive, not just survive.

To succeed, the program must be bold, responsive, and accountable. It must reflect the lived realities of equity-deserving youth who are navigating a system that too often leaves them behind, and

it must meet them where they are, with the resources, respect, and opportunities they deserve. The City must deliver on the promise of an additional 10,000 meaningful, gainful, visible, and accessible jobs that transform lives, communities, and futures.

The following recommendations outline what it will take to make that promise real:

## **1. Center Equity and Inclusion in Design and Delivery**

- Prioritize youth from equity-deserving communities — including Black, Indigenous, racialized, newcomer, 2SLGBTQ+, disabled, low-income, and justice-involved youth.
- Ensure targeted outreach to youth facing systemic barriers, including those:
  - A. Living in Toronto Community Housing or Neighbourhood Improvement Areas,
  - B. Experiencing homelessness or housing precarity,
  - C. Most vulnerable to involvement in serious violence and crime, and
  - D. Underrepresented in the labour market due to discrimination or lack of access.
- Require inclusive hiring practices and anti-discrimination training for participating employers.
- Build in mechanisms for youth oversight, feedback, and continuous improvement throughout the program cycle.

## **2. Establish a Mayor's Youth Employment Council**

- Create a Mayor's Youth Employment Council to guide the development and implementation of TYEP through effective, collaborative, and accountable governance.
- Ensure the Council includes youth, Toronto Youth Cabinet members, private sector, non-profit, labour, academia, and key funding institutions.
- Task the Council with overseeing youth engagement, program evaluation, and measurement of TYEP's long-term impact.

## **3. Scale Boldly and Sustainably**

- Follow through on the commitment to create 10,000 + meaningful youth jobs by Summer 2026.
- Align citywide efforts across Divisions, Agencies, Boards, and Corporations.
- Leverage private sector, provincial, and federal partnerships to sustain and grow investments beyond one fiscal year.

## **4. Make the Program Accessible and Visible**

- Centralize job opportunities in a youth-friendly portal with simplified applications and mobile access.
- Offer local placements and flexible scheduling to meet the needs of students, caregivers, and those without transit access.

## **5. Create Future-Focused and Skills-Rich Roles**

- Embed skill-building into every opportunity, including leadership development, digital literacy, financial literacy, customer service, trades exposure, and creative arts.
- Partner with sector leaders to offer internships in emerging industries, such as tech, green jobs, finance, healthcare, and community services.

## 6. Invest in Wraparound Supports and Mentorship

- Pair jobs with mentorship, resume and interview coaching, paid training, and career navigation.
- Provide mental health, peer support, and transportation subsidies to ensure participation is possible for all.

## 7. Tie the Program to Civic Impact

- Create job streams that support Toronto's social and civic priorities, from climate resilience and public health to community safety and youth programming.
- Leverage major events like FIFA 2026 to provide once-in-a-generation access to civic jobs for young people.

**Note:** Short-term roles linked to events like FIFA 2026 should not count toward the 10,000-job target unless they provide multi-week, summer-based employment that includes skill-building and mentorship components.

## Call to Action: The Time to Act Is Now

Toronto's youth have delivered the blueprint. The question is whether we're ready to build. With thousands of voices behind this campaign, the City of Toronto faces a generational opportunity to lead with courage and vision. A Toronto Youth Employment Program would not only respond to rising youth unemployment and violence, it would invest in the leadership, well-being, and potential of an entire generation.

Toronto's youth are ready to contribute — to their communities, their families, and their futures. But too many remain locked out of opportunity because of who they are, where they live, or what they've experienced.

The Toronto Youth Employment Program is not just a policy, it's a promise:

- A promise to meet youth where they are.
- A promise to invest in their potential.
- A promise to build a city that works for the next generation.

Let's keep that promise. Because when we put youth first, the whole city moves forward.

