Our Youth – Investing in Their Future

BACKGROUND PAPER 2
This paper provides a profile of youth in British Columbia between the ages of 15 and 24 years. It is one of a series of background papers being prepared for the Premier’s Forum on New Opportunities for Working and Living. The Forum will look at new ways we can renew British Columbia’s social safety net.

Other papers will provide profiles on children (ages 0 to 15) and their families, adults (ages 25 to 54) and their prospects for work, older adults (ages 55 plus) and adults with disabilities who are unable to participate fully in British Columbia’s labour force.
High School

More youth are recognizing that high school completion is a minimum requirement for entry into the work force and for qualifying for higher levels of education and training. Over the past 10 years, the number of students completing grade 12 has jumped from 62 per cent to 69 per cent. A substantial number of students who leave school before completion are returning to finish their education. Data show that almost 80 per cent of youth now complete grade 12 before the age of 20 years.

Among those who leave school before finishing grade 12, 77 per cent do so despite having passing grades of C average and above. When asked why they had left school, both men and women cited boredom as an important factor. Other reasons given for leaving school were problems with school work and with teachers. Male students also indicated a preference for work over school.

This year, the Ministry of Education surveyed 2,000 grade four to 12 students in eight of our province’s school districts. Findings showed:

- Students, on the whole, have good attitudes about school and good relationships with their parents.

- More than 90 per cent cared about school performance and believed that school helped them with life skills.

- Almost three quarters of students planned to go on to college or university and wanted employment in professions such as medicine and engineering.
Less than half of the students surveyed felt school was preparing them directly for a job after high school.

Increasing numbers of British Columbia’s youth are taking advantage of education and formal training beyond grade 12. Between 1979/80 and 1992/93, enrollment in colleges and universities jumped dramatically. University enrollment increased by 44 per cent. College and institute enrollment climbed by 85 per cent. Most of the growth in college and institute enrollment was led by a high demand for academic programs. Vocational enrollment declined by 58 per cent during the same period.

A 1992 study placed British Columbia’s post-secondary enrollment in a national and international perspective.

Women make up more than half of post-secondary enrollment in British Columbia. In 1991, women received 55 per cent of bachelor’s degrees, 49 per cent of degrees at the master’s level and 32 per cent of all doctorates. While women are well represented in total, they are still not well represented in some program areas. For example, women make up only 15 per cent of enrollment in engineering and applied sciences and one
quarter of enrollment in math and physics. These areas, where women are traditionally under-represented, generally lead to more highly paid jobs in the economy.

The number of persons in apprenticeship programs has fallen by one third since 1980. Many occupations requiring apprenticeship training are in the goods sector. With the exception of the construction industry, employment in this sector has been flat or declining since 1981.

On the whole, youth are not entering apprenticeship programs. The average age of apprentices entering the system is now 28 and most have been out of school for eight years before entering a program.

Women make up only five per cent of our province’s apprentices. In April 1993, 326 of a total of 13,977 apprentices working in male-predominant apprenticeship programs – those excluding hairdressing, cooking and baking – were women.

The European experience has shown that, properly targeted to growing labour markets, apprenticeships can provide young people with enhanced opportunities to learn job skills while providing training and employment opportunities.
Labour Force Composition

There are about 470,000 youth in British Columbia between the ages of 15 and 24 years. These young people make up about 13 per cent of our province's population.

The percentage of British Columbia's youth participating in the labour force peaked in 1990, just prior to the recession, at a level of 77.4 per cent for youth ages 15 to 19, and at 90.7 per cent for those aged 20 to 24 years. These participation rates fell dramatically during the recession, bottoming out in 1993 at 47.4 per cent for those 15 to 19 years of age and at 74.0 per cent for older youths.

Provincial studies indicate that the recession-induced decline in the labour force corresponded with higher student enrollment in educational institutions and this trend is continuing. Increases in enrollment are also due to overall population growth as a result of international and inter-provincial immigration.

During the 1980's, the proportion of youth working in the service sector increased from 72.2 to 81.8 per cent. Within this sector, youth are primarily employed in the retail trade and the accommodation and food industries. Fewer youth are employed in areas like public administration, health, social services, and in processing, technical, professional and managerial occupations.

Sectoral Employment
Youth constitute the largest age group employed in non-standard, part-time jobs. Part-time work is often used to supplement income while in school but, for many, it is taken because there are no other employment alternatives. In 1993, there were 277,000 people in BC working part-time, 94,000 of whom were youth between the ages of 15 and 24. Twenty-six thousand of these youth were working part-time because no full-time work was available. A further 58,000 were working part-time to support their education.

Unemployment among youth is consistently higher than that of other adult workers. Since 1981, unemployment for younger workers has remained above 10 per cent in British Columbia.

Despite high rates of unemployment, youth tend to remain unemployed for shorter periods of time than other adult workers. This may reflect higher education levels and more flexibility among youth to accept lower paying jobs, to relocate and to work shifts.
Within the general population, Aboriginal People, persons with disabilities and visible minorities have higher rates of unemployment. Among all Aboriginal Peoples living on reserve, only 35 per cent reported having a paid job in 1991. New British Columbians, whether from other parts of Canada or abroad, have experienced unemployment rates over the past three years that are three times our provincial average. Unemployment rates for the disabled are higher than that of the general population because of barriers to employment.

Wages for youth are lower than that of the rest of the working population and youth make up the largest component of the labour force earning minimum wages.

In relative terms, there has been a general decline in income for all workers since 1981. Earnings of youth, however, have declined more quickly than those of older workers. Between 1981 and 1988, the real earnings of Canadian youth between the ages of 17 and 24 declined by 18.1%. Nationally, real hourly wages for youth declined by 12.8 per cent between 1981 and 1988.

This decline is due to a number of factors. It is partially due to greater employment growth for young people in the lower-waged, traditional service sector. Young women tend to be more concentrated than young men in the lower-paying jobs in this sector.

The decline in real wages may is also due to a number of factors such as growth of lower paying part-time work and the decline in employment for youth.

Due to increasing numbers of family members in the labour force, real family incomes in Canada have increased slightly since 1981. Young families, however, have experienced a decline of 24 per cent in their
incomes. By comparison, families headed by someone 70 years or older have seen an increase in earnings of 19 per cent over the same period.

Today, families headed by someone between ages 45 and 54 have average annual incomes of $65,000. By comparison, the annual income for a young family averages only $26,000.
Living Arrangements

Teen Health Issues and Risk Taking Behaviour

Statistics Canada studies indicate that most young people between the ages of 15 and 24 live in the family home. More than 95 per cent of those aged 15 to 19 live with the family. Slightly less than half of those between 20 to 24 years of age live with their parents. Nearly 60 per cent of this older group live as members of couples and 29 per cent have children.

There is little research on the health and risk taking behaviour of youth in the 15 to 24 age group. In 1992, the McCreary Center Society, in conjunction with provincial Health Units, conducted a health status and risk behaviour survey with 15,549 students between grades seven and 12 in 48 of our province’s school districts.

The survey showed that most students in our province were healthy, happy, living in a nurturing environment, liked school and did not abuse drugs or engage in excessive risk taking. The major preventable health problems of youth fall into two main categories: injuries and violence which present immediate health risks, and lifestyles that may affect health in the future.

Some of the key findings were:

- Approximately five per cent of male students and 11 per cent of females students indicated they were emotionally distressed in the month preceding the survey.

- Among all students in our province, 16 per cent had considered suicide at least once in the last year.
More than half of grade 12 students report having engaged in sexual activity. The majority of students report having engaged in sexual activity for the first time in the 14 to 16 year age range. Overall, 84 per cent of students in our province indicated they have been taught about AIDS and 72 per cent know where to get information.

Eighty-five per cent of male students and 68 per cent of female students report no history of drug abuse. Two thirds of students have used alcohol.

The number one killer of youth in Canada today is accidental deaths, with three quarters of injury deaths due to automobile accidents and nearly one half of all car accidents involving alcohol.

In all of the regions of our province, more than 20 per cent of male students reported carrying a weapon, most often a knife, at some point during the month prior to the survey.

Nearly half of the young men and a fifth of the young women surveyed reported having a physical fight during the last year.
British Columbia’s students fare quite well on measures of health and risk taking as compared to other students in Canada and the United States. However, in a separate survey done on street youth in Vancouver, virtually every indicator of risky behaviour, from drug abuse to sexual activity, is dramatically higher.

Public opinion polls suggest that Canadians are growing increasingly concerned about criminal behaviour of youth. National figures indicate, however, that overall youth crime is increasing at a slower rate than adult crime.

Between 1986 and 1993, the number of youths charged under the Criminal Code increased by 17 per cent. Charges against adults increased by 27 per cent in the same period. Violent crimes are the exception. The number of young people between the ages of 12 and 17 charged with violent crimes rose by 140 per cent. By comparison, adults charged with violent offenses increased by 89 per cent. The above figures actually understate the severity of youth crime since youth have been declining as a percentage of the population throughout the period.

Most violent crimes committed by young people are in the area of common assault. In the most serious categories of violent crime, namely murder, attempted murder and aggravated assault, there has been little or no increase in the number of young offenders.

However, the McCreary Center Society Study found that more and more youths in schools across our province are carrying weapons.

Young people are also increasingly being victimized. The results of the B.C. Victimization Survey show that young people between 19 and 24 years of age are much more likely to be victims of violent crime than other, older adults.
Reliance on Income Assistance and Unemployment Insurance

Youth are very vulnerable to changing economic circumstances such as recession and economic restructuring. They often lack the experience needed to compete with older adults for scarce jobs. In periods of recession, they are often the first to face lay-off due to a lack of seniority.

Roughly 21 per cent of youth in British Columbia are in receipt of Unemployment Insurance or Income Assistance. The number varies across regions. In Nanaimo, the figure jumps to 34.2 per cent. In the Stikine region, the figure falls to 10.8 per cent. The data do not explain the causes for the regional variations.

Between 1982 and 1993, the number of young people on Income Assistance in British Columbia has doubled. Part of this increase is due to the federal introduction of more restrictive Unemployment Insurance rules which resulted in moving young people from Unemployment Insurance to Income Assistance. The changes are will cost our province an additional $25 million in 1994 in Income Assistance payments to persons of all ages.

Part of the increase is also due to present economic and labour market circumstances – recession, declining real incomes for youth and their families, and structural unemployment which make it difficult to match skills with new jobs in the economy.

Another reason for the increase can be attributed to changes in Income Assistance regulations which have made it possible for more young people
Youth on Income Assistance

Youth under the age of 19 year became eligible to receive benefits when concerns were raised that the denial of benefits would contravene human rights legislation which prohibits discrimination on the basis of age.

In reality, while the number of youths between 15 and 24 years receiving Income Assistance is growing, the number of youth less than 19 years old relying on the program remains quite small - 3,000 cases or 2 per cent of our province's total case load.

1982
At School or Working: 272,000
71%
29%
Not at School or Working: 111,000
Not on IA: 88,000
On IA: 23,000

1993
At School or Working: 279,000
83%
17%
Not at School or Working: 57,000
Not on IA: 11,000
On IA: 46,000

There are some indications that young people who become dependent on social programs at an early age are more likely to continue to rely on them later in life. A federal study found that in May 1992, 280,000 individuals between the ages of 30 and 40 years were Unemployment Insurance repeaters; that is, they had at least two claims over the previous three years. Of that group, 75 per cent had established a regular claim when they were between the ages of 20 and 24 years.
The Skills and Education Gap

Labour Force and Future Job Opportunities

Our province will be challenged to find ways to reduce dependency on the system and to find meaningful educational and employment opportunities for youth.

Although the high school drop-out rate is declining, a large portion of our students are quitting school before completing grade 12. Without further education, whether formal or otherwise, these youth will have to be content with predominantly unskilled, low paying jobs that will not provide a decent standard of living or support for a young family.

British Columbia employers, through repeated surveys, have expressed concern about the lack of skilled workers. Since 1987, 30 per cent of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business’s BC members have expressed concern over shortages of qualified labour. A survey conducted for our province found that 40 per cent of employers in British Columbia’s high and advanced technology sectors would hire more skilled workers if they were available.
Provincial research indicates that the demand for skilled workers will continue to grow. Projections show that nearly 75 per cent of BC's new and replacement job openings to the year 2001 will be in occupations requiring some post-secondary education or training.

Education, by itself, will not be enough to guarantee youth a good job in the labour market. Youth with high levels of education must still compete with more experienced adults for the new jobs in the new economy. British Columbia will be challenged to match education to the new jobs and to find ways of providing valuable work experiences and opportunities so that youth will have a good economic future.

Youth in British Columbia are generally happy and healthy. The two most significant and preventable health problems leading to higher mortality rates for youth are smoking and automobile accidents, particularly those involving alcohol. Risky behaviours leading to injury, violence or preventable illness have large long term social and economic costs. The provincial government has put in place a number of public information campaigns to reduce smoking and alcohol-related traffic deaths and to help improve the quality of life for youth now and in the future.
Provincial Priorities and Programs

There are numerous programs in British Columbia directed toward young people. For example:

- Our formal education system provides training and life skills for thousands of youth from high school through colleges and universities.
- Social service programs provide support both to families with adolescent children and to young people living on their own.
- The Ministry of the Attorney General works with young people and communities in the areas of crime prevention and working with young offenders.
- Our province’s Ministry of Health provides assessment and treatment for young people as well as developing prevention programs.

The provincial government, in its 1994/95 strategic plan, has made youth a strategic priority. Initiatives to deal with problems faced by youth will become an integral part of our province’s social and economic agenda.

The provincial government has committed itself to improving educational standards. Schools across our province will incorporate programs to help students make the transition from school to work. To this end, mandatory career planning will become a part of every high school students career experience.

Skills Now will ensure that more British Columbians get the training they
need in a cost effective manner and to ensure that this training prepares them for the real world. Part of this process will be steps to prepare high school students for the world of work by providing new apprenticeship opportunities, work experience participation, and new, alternate programs to encourage 'at risk' and other students to stay in school. In future, 50 per cent of students will graduate with work experience and experience outside the classroom will count for graduation credits.

The provincial government will create more opportunities and better choices in post-secondary education through more relevant training opportunities for students. New student spaces in colleges and universities will be tripled to 8,000.

Skills Now will also create new apprenticeship occupations in growing fields and develop new and innovative courses and delivery models.

Skills Now will increase participation and success of aboriginal people enrolled in post-secondary education by providing funding for further education under the Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education Program, which will: provide enhanced liaison and outreach services in colleges and institutes; strengthen partnership agreements between aboriginal institutions and post-secondary institutions; and, establish provincial aboriginal-controlled institutions.

British Columbia's Ministry of Health has identified the health issues facing young people and is attempting to deal with these challenges. Smoking remains the number one preventable cause of health problems and the Ministry is working with school to increase the number of schools with smoke-free policies. The Ministry is working with groups from across our province with the goal of reducing the amount of accidental death and injury faced by young people.
Key Challenges

1. While more young people than ever before are either in the labour force or in school, more are also relying on our social programs. Do we need to redefine the respective roles and responsibilities of youth, their families, our communities and government in ensuring opportunity and security for youth? If so, what should the new roles and responsibilities be?

2. The data indicates that there is an increasing trend among some young people towards reliance on the social safety net. What can we do to reverse this trend?

3. Nearly 20 per cent of our young people do not finish high school. Of those that complete grade 12, more than half go straight into the workforce without acquiring other needed skills. What can we do to ensure that young people have the skills, education and attitudes needed to succeed in the transition from school to work?

4. Young people today are challenged to find meaningful employment opportunities. For young people with few skills or education, the choices are worse. How should our social programs react when the economy is not producing enough good entry level jobs for young people? How do we address the problem that some young people may have lost faith in the
ability of our economy to provide adequate jobs?

5. While wages have been going up for older workers, they have been going down for young people. Yet young people will be left to pay debts run up older generations to pay for important programs.

How do we address this question of inter-generational equity in terms of the widening gap between our youth and older British Columbians?
If you would like to share your views on social safety net renewal with the Premier, you are invited to submit them, in writing, to the address below.

For more information, contact:

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