

THE PREMIER'S FORUM ON YOUTH: Backgrounder

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Someone once said that youth is wasted on the young. Perhaps, though, the truth is that the young are wasted on their elders. Young people as a group are often unemployed, unrepresented and just plain unappreciated within North American society. Some commentators have referred to the young as the last great underclass, the one segment of the population that still faces unapologetic and largely unchallenged discrimination, even in this age of all-inclusive political correctness. Youth is often associated with irresponsibility, apathy, even criminality. Assorted concerned and condemnatory parties often ask, rhetorically, "What's wrong with the kids?" Better, perhaps, to ask what's wrong with the world young people inhabit, and to concentrate on making it a more healthy and hospitable place for both today's youth — and generations yet to come.

In many respects, Prince Edward Island's young people face the same opportunities and obstacles as youth anywhere else: according to statistics, young people aged 15–19 in the early 1990s are much more likely to be unemployed, seldom find full-time work, are often relegated to positions requiring little education or experience, and usually make much less money than older workers. Most working young people live below the poverty line, and the young are more likely to be either participants in or victims of crime.

Consider these figures:

- PEI has a population of roughly 137,000 residents; 19,395 are between the ages of 15-24.
- Youth aged 15–19 account for 6.8% of all Canadians.
- Youth population has been dwindling since the mid-1970s as birth rates fall.
- A disproportionate amount of young people come from visible minorities.
- Most youth aged 15–19 live with their parents.
- Youth aged 15–19 have the highest unemployment rate in Canada, almost 20% in 1992.
- PEI's youth unemployment rate was almost 17.6 % last year.
- Youth living in the Atlantic provinces face even higher rates of unemployment than in the rest of Canada.
- Youth usually have low incomes; families headed by teens averaged an annual maximum income of \$15, 559 in 1992, roughly a third of the income enjoyed by their adult counterparts.

- Youth are generally in good physical health; the leading causes of youth fatalities are motor vehicle accidents and suicide.
- Less than half of youth aged 15–19 drink alcohol. Most youth are non-smokers.
- Youth constitute a disproportionate segment of Canada's criminal activity, about 25%.
- Youth drug abuse is declining.
- Most young offenders receive light sentences, well under a year.
- 36% of young people fall victim to criminal acts.

In addition to the broader issues facing youth everywhere, young people on Prince Edward Island face circumstances unique to their environment. The province's small population supports few major industries beyond the strictly seasonal staples of agriculture and tourism, so jobs are scarce, especially for young people starting out. As such, many young people leave the Island in search of long-term work, or to attend schools other than the few institutions here on PEI. What's more, the sheltered, self-contained nature of Island society makes many young people eager to leave, to broaden their horizons by experiencing other cultures; on the flip side, many Islanders, young and old, are determined to stay here forever since the Island's strong sense of family and community is so uniquely comforting. Despite that, though, many people are convinced that they have to leave the province if they want better lives for themselves, be it through schooling unavailable here or expanded job opportunities. However much they love or scorn this place, young people who grow up on PEI eventually have to face the question of whether or not they can afford to stay.

Given the relative rarity of long-term, full-time work on PEI, Island residents have long grumbled about the "brain drain" afflicting the Atlantic provinces, the notion that our best and brightest young people leave to seek their fortunes elsewhere. This generalization doesn't always hold true, though. A recent Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission report indicates that graduates of the University of Prince Edward Island are now enjoying high levels of employment and personal satisfaction. Compiled during July and August 1997, MPHEC's survey data indicate that 87% of 1996 graduates found work after graduation. Moreover, almost half the 1996 graduates did not need to borrow money to finance their education. Graduate unemployment went down a full percentage point from 14.5% to 13.4%, and graduates earned more money, \$25 a week more on average. Most encouraging of all, MPHEC's figures indicate that 76% of Island residents remained on PEI after graduating — so not all the brains are draining away, it seems.

While post-secondary education is faring better than we might think, there is still no cause for complacency. Consider these 1996 MPHEC figures:

- 53% of students borrowed money to finance their education, up from 1995's 49%.
- 88% of students held down jobs to finance part of their education costs.
- The average student debt incurred was \$16,667, about \$4,000 more than 1995.
- About a quarter of student debtors have trouble making loan payments after graduating.

As governments cut transfer payments to universities, tuition fees at UPEI and elsewhere climb steadily upward, as do student debt loads. Some critics cite student loans as a major contributing factor in early personal bankruptcies, while others denounce the student loan system as too

vague, complex and impersonal for many of its clients to truly understand what they're getting into. Regardless, higher education is rapidly becoming less affordable and less accessible. The number of full-time students has increased at PEI's high schools, the Atlantic Veterinary College and Holland College, but the province's university, UPEI, has been losing students for years, since enrolment peaked in 1992–93. Fewer and fewer young Islanders seem to think they can afford higher education. Unfortunately, they may not be able to afford going without it, either.

Consider these facts:

- In 1992, youth accounted for 16.6% of UI recipients.
- Youth currently represent 21% of all social assistance cases.
- High youth unemployment is directly linked to deficiencies in skills, education and training.
- It is predicted that 45% of all jobs created in this decade will require at least sixteen years of education and training.

The picture is even bleaker for those who do not finish high school, let alone university. The high school dropout unemployment rate is more than double that of university graduates.

Jobs and education are obviously major concerns for young Canadians, most especially here in the cash-strapped Maritimes, but the situation is by no means hopeless. There are many options and alternatives (both proposed and existing) available to Canadian youth, such as the ten-point youth employment action plan tabled by the federal government's Ministerial Task Force on Youth:

1. Government should work in concert with business, non-governmental organizations, community groups and young people themselves to prepare young Canadians for work and help them find jobs.
2. Relevant and useful employment information should be made available.
3. Existing employment opportunities should be better promoted.
4. The private sector should provide leadership in the creation of youth employment.
5. Young entrepreneurs should be encouraged and assisted.
6. International opportunities (seeking work and education abroad) should be considered.
7. New technologies should be made available.
8. Federal employment programs should concentrate on young people.
9. Student loans should sustain current support levels but lighten the immediate debt load of new graduates.
10. Support should be made available to "youth at risk," young people who are more likely to be alienated or mistreated due to race, disability, poverty, geography and so on.

On the other side of the coin, young people themselves have responsibilities in their search for employment:

- Young people should have useful knowledge of their career prospects and a good idea of what they want to do for a living.
- Young workers should try to develop marketable skills.

- Young workers should show a positive attitude and a willingness to learn.
- Young people should remember that knowledge is power: in an information-saturated world, the ability to isolate data, draw conclusions from it and act on those conclusions will be an essential asset. Such skills define an educated person in the information age.
- Modern society requires adaptability and lifelong learning. That doesn't necessarily mean more school; it means being willing and able to learn when you need to understand new things.
- Young people should not regard all change as bad or beyond their control; instead, they should seek opportunities stemming from change and adapt to take advantage of them.

Whether they come from government, business, the community or young people themselves, there are many potential and actual initiatives designed to secure a brighter future for youth. This Youth Forum is all about such initiatives, whether that means evaluating existing systems and situations or proposing brand-new alternatives.

This is a chance for Island youth to gather as a group, discuss the world they inhabit, and envision the world they'd like to create for themselves. In the process, we as young people hope to gain new insights into who we are, what we need and how we can get it.

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