

Knowledge Synthesis Report

ABORIGINAL YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN NORTHERN CANADA

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Main Message

Observers of the northern Canadian labour market note a persistent mismatch: on the one hand, many young northern Aboriginal people are without suitable paid employment, while on the other, employers are struggling to develop a skilled and self-renewing local workforce. Our synthesis of existing knowledge about this mismatch led to the following observations:

- The reasons for the labour market outcomes of young Aboriginal people in northern Canada are not fully understood, though the existing research suggests that certain factors such as early school leaving, early parenthood and an overemphasis on distance-limited employment opportunities are important barriers to their full participation.
- Another important factor, incompletely investigated, is the apparent imbalance in policy attention and program funding. These emphasize training for natural resource sector employment over post-secondary education to prepare youth for work in the public and para-public sectors.
- The complex opportunity structure facing northern youth is created by many intervenors –all levels of government, small and large corporations, educational facilities at the primary, secondary and post-secondary levels, non-governmental organizations—and finally by large scale economic forces. The net effect of all these interventions on the life prospects of northern Aboriginal youth or the wellbeing of the northern communities where they live is generally not comprehensively evaluated.
- Variation across northern regions, and within regions across localities, means that labour force planning and programming must take into account the distinctive features of local as well as regional northern labour markets so that they can contribute to sustainable and balanced economic development and self-sufficiency. Institutional innovation and devolution of capacities to the local level is required to empower northern communities to implement their own long-term educational and labour force development plans in a holistic and integrated fashion. The education system and the system for post-secondary academic and vocational training must be linked at the local and regional level in a manner appropriate to the conditions in each place.
- Government programming should be extended from attracting northern Aboriginal youth to resource sector jobs to opening practical paths to sustainable public and para-public sector jobs as well. This would not only expand the range of career options available to young people but also support democratic development and Indigenous self-determination.
- Federal and territorial governments should continue to work to improve access to post-secondary academic education, which is generally required for careers that offer steady employment.

Executive Summary

The knowledge synthesis presented in this report is based on an analysis of publicly accessible research on northern Aboriginal youth employment. We investigated the possible sources of the apparent mismatch between employment opportunities in northern Aboriginal communities and the hopes and needs of the people who make up the northern Aboriginal youth labour force.

Our report outlines what is known about the sources of the mismatch, and the measures currently being taken to address it. We comment on the quality of the available evidence. Where possible, we have supplied missing information from primary sources. Finally, we offer recommendations for further research.

Key Findings

What is known about the academic preparation, employment success and career aspirations of young Aboriginal people living in the north?

- As a group, young Aboriginal people in northern Canada are less likely to be part of the labour force, and more likely to be unemployed, than either non-Aboriginal people in the north or Canadians as a whole.
- Academic preparation, especially at the postsecondary level, is seriously hindered by the orientation of some local educational facilities and the geographical and cultural distance between home and the southerly centres where universities are located. A significant proportion of youth have not completed high school.
- How young Aboriginal people in the North understand their own situation is unclear: we found scant research based on young Aboriginal people's own account of their career experiences or aspirations. A small amount of excellent and suggestive qualitative research has been published, particular to specific locations, but to our knowledge no statistical data or wide-coverage studies exist.

What is known about the recruitment and retention activities of employers operating in the north?

- The existing research suggests that federal programming and industry activity are heavily focused on attracting northern Aboriginal youth to resource sector jobs.
- Very little published research deals with ways to match potential young northern Aboriginal workers with suitable employment in the public and para-public sectors that exist in their communities and in larger centres.
- There is little discussion of issues related to worker retention and turnover, although these are matters that frequently come up for discussion in regulatory hearings. There is also scant independent analysis of the role that publicly supported training programs play in matching workers with long-term employment.

What is known about the quality of information used to portray the state of the labour markets in the north?

- Most published statistical analyses of the working age population in the North are based on Canadian Census, related post-censal surveys and the federal Labour Force Survey. Although useful, these data sources involve problems with counting the Aboriginal population over time as well as some under-coverage and non-participation of some reserves.
- With a very few exceptions, published research that mentions Aboriginal youth employment relies upon descriptive statistics (mainly from federal sources) and expert opinion, generally accumulated through a combination of key informant interviews, focus groups and workshops. This work is helpful, but incomplete: reliance upon the collected opinions of experts is unlikely to challenge or overturn generally held misconceptions. Also, expert interviews rarely achieve representativeness, as “experts” are generally of a particular age and occupational vantage point, and generally those interviewed are not drawn evenly from all socio-economic and age groups.
- We conclude that understanding is hampered by a lack of community-based quantitative studies, and wider scope research based on interviews with northern Aboriginal youth themselves.

What is known about the state of government intervention, including the effectiveness of public policy and programming to assist the functioning of the labour market in the north?

- Government intervention is characterized by remarkable complexity, where multiple agencies and governments have an uncoordinated impact on the employment prospects of Aboriginal youth, with little capacity for the communities and regions to link primary, secondary, post-secondary and vocational training in ways that would improve the progression of students and young adults into viable occupations.
- There is no research on how the opportunity structure thus formed is understood by or used by northern Aboriginal youth.

Policy Implications / Lessons Learned

As a group, young Aboriginal people in northern Canada are less likely to be part of the labour force, and more likely to be unemployed, than either non-Aboriginal people in the north or Canadians as a whole. The reasons for this are not fully understood, though it is likely that distance-limited employment opportunities, as well as early school leaving and early parenthood are factors. But such factors probably provide an incomplete explanation.

There may be a problem of overly constrained choice. The long-term emphasis on vocational training for natural resource extraction in public policy and programs is not balanced by similar emphasis on education and training for the public sector and para-public sector jobs that in fact provide the most stable employment. Given the limitations of many community schools and the availability of lower skilled but relatively highly paid resource sector jobs, students may have

incentives to leave school. At the same time, resource extraction jobs may not be attractive in the medium or longer term, either because the work is boring and repetitive or because workers begin to have qualms about the environmental impact of their work. Resource sector work is definitely attractive to some individuals, but perhaps not in the numbers envisioned in federal policy and programs.

Labour force planning and programs must take into account the distinctive features of local as well as regional northern labour markets in order to contribute to sustainable and balanced economic development.

Very little published research deals with ways to match potential young northern Aboriginal workers with suitable public sector employment, preparing them to work in what might be described as “society-building” employment in the offices of public and Aboriginal governments and non-governmental organizations. Since such jobs, in communities and in larger centres, offer stable (indeed, potentially life long) employment. More research and innovation is needed, to consider how public sector jobs might be adapted to make them more attractive and more accessible to northern Aboriginal youth, and how potential employees might be prepared for them.

The elementary, secondary, post-secondary and vocational education systems in many parts of the north must be better linked, so that academic and non-academic vocational paths are visible and available to northern young people.

Variation across northern regions, and within regions across localities, suggests there is a need for transition-to-work programs that are flexible enough to respond to local requirements. There is a need for community-based and community-led labour force planning, and for programs that create ample “space” (both financial and psychological) for community plans to be realized.

We found no research that focuses specifically on youth *employment success*: that is, what are the circumstances and attributes that make it possible for young Aboriginal people in northern Canada to find suitable work and to build satisfying careers? Such knowledge would improve the capacity of employers and policy-makers to provide employment opportunities efficiently.

Multiple agencies and governments have an impact on the employment prospects of Aboriginal youth, both directly (through labour market participation programs) and indirectly, through numerous federal, provincial and territorial decisions. Yet there is almost no publicly available research that assesses the overall impact of the opportunity structure thus created, or about how it is perceived by northern youth. This in turn hampers policy and program changes to improve the overall system.

ABORIGINAL YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN NORTHERN CANADA

INTRODUCTION

Many observers of the northern labour market note a persistent mismatch: on the one hand, many young northern Aboriginal people are without suitable paid employment, while on the other, employers are struggling to develop a skilled and self-renewing local workforce. In this knowledge synthesis report we address this mismatch by examining publicly accessible research on northern Aboriginal youth employment. We describe the nature of the “mismatch” and measures currently being taken to connect northern Aboriginal workers with the best possible employment opportunities in the north. We comment on the quality of the available evidence on this question. Where possible, we have supplied missing information from primary sources. Finally, we offer recommendations for further research to address the important gaps in knowledge.

CONTEXT

As do adults in all human societies, northerners see children and young adults as the builders of the society of the future, those who will ensure social continuity and wellbeing. Young people’s role is particularly important in the rapidly changing north: it is at once the site of bold initiatives for realizing democratic development and Indigenous self-determination that have transformed the institutional and political map of Canada, and the focus of international domestic pressure for natural resource development. Large pressures and responsibilities bear on the relatively small populations of the North. In these circumstances, making high quality, reliable wage employment available to northern youth is understood by many northerners as essential to future social wellbeing. They see that the young workers will continue to build the institutions of self-government and economic self-sufficiency, while their wages will support families and stabilize community economies. Their roles as providers will add meaning and respect to their lives.¹ Young people naturally seek a fulfilling way to make a living, and many wish to do this in their home communities or home regions. Some will choose a career path built upon a foundation of specialized education and steady paid employment. Others, who may wish to continue primarily as harvesters, recognize that some wage income is needed to support and complement hunting and fishing. Waged employment is important to all.

At the same time, private and public sector employers hope that northern Aboriginal youth will form a stable, local workforce.² For the private sector, local employment is a practical advantage and often, a regulatory requirement. Mines, forestry companies and other business aim to find workers in the rapidly growing population of northern Aboriginal youth. For the public sector, it is clear that full development of self-government requires an Aboriginal and local workforce; democratic development of the new Aboriginal and public governments in many parts of the north requires more skilled local Aboriginal personnel than these institutions are now able to recruit.

Potentially matching the hopes and needs of potential employees and employers are industry and public sector recruitment efforts, and an array of federal, territorial and provincial programs aimed at creating opportunities for Aboriginal people in the workforce. There have been such programs for over fifty years.³ Yet in many parts of the north, youth unemployment rates remain disproportionately high, while many employers have difficulty filling positions.⁴

What is the source of the persistent gap between the available jobs in the north and the potentially available Aboriginal youth work force residing there? In approaching this question, we have taken a wide geographic focus. Given similarities in economic base and demography, for our purposes the north is defined to include three territories and Labrador, as well as the northern portions of Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia.⁵ Given the length of this paper, we are not able to cover these ten jurisdictions (comprising 2/3 of Canada) exhaustively, but we have tried to ensure that the experience in each region is reflected to some extent in our analysis and bibliography.⁶ We define youth to be individuals aged 15-24 years, following Statistics Canada and international practice. Individuals in this age group are establishing the productive practices and relationships that will shape their adult lives. They are often in the process of forming their attachments to the labour market, and for many occupations, making the transition from school to work. The extent to which the people in this group are able to build the basis for stable and productive lives will have a distinct impact on the economic and social health of the country.

Studies based on aggregate statistics about the northern Aboriginal labour force are an essential foundation for policy-making. However, they do not provide all of the necessary information and certain features of the most commonly used sources of data mean that they must be used with caution. For reasons of population size, global statistical analyses have difficulty taking into account pronounced regional and even local differences in the labour market. For example, in wage centres, such as the capital cities or resource boom towns, there are often ample skilled workers, more jobs and lower unemployment rates for all ages; in most of the many smaller, more isolated and predominantly Aboriginal communities, there are fewer skilled workers, far fewer jobs, and higher unemployment rates – yet little uncertainty: most people living in the smaller communities know which steady jobs are available. These tend to be public sector jobs.⁷ Such differences, which are important to effective program design, are obscured by aggregate statistical indicators. Further, in different regions of the North, such non-waged productive activities as harvesting and the commercial production of art are pursued to varying degrees; these ways of making a living have an important effect of how people choose to allocate their time, particularly since on-the-land activities bring more than material benefits to communities (see Theme 2 below). Program design and labour market policy should take these dynamics into account, so that the true base and strength of each community economy can be reinforced.

IMPLICATIONS

As a group, young Aboriginal people in northern Canada are less likely to be part of the labour force, and more likely to be unemployed, than either non-Aboriginal people in the north or Canadians as a whole. The reasons for this are not fully understood, though it is likely that distance-limited employment opportunities, as well as early school leaving and early parenthood are factors. It is clear that these do not provide a complete explanation.

There may be a problem of overly constrained choice. The long-term emphasis on vocational training for natural resource extraction in public policy and programs is not balanced by similar emphasis on education and training for the public sector and para-public sector jobs that in fact provide the most stable employment. Nor is a similar level of policy attention and vocational training support afforded harvesting and other traditional pursuits. Given the limitations of many community schools and the availability of lower skilled but relatively highly paid resource sector

jobs, students may have incentives to leave school. At the same time, resource extraction jobs may not be attractive in the medium or longer term, either because the entry level work for which school leavers are qualified is boring and repetitive or because workers begin to have qualms about the environmental impact of their work. Resource sector work is definitely attractive to some individuals, but perhaps not in the numbers envisioned in federal policy and programs.

Very little published research deals with ways to match potential young northern Aboriginal workers with suitable public sector employment, preparing them to work in “society-building” employment in the offices of public and Aboriginal governments and non-governmental organizations. Federal programming and industry activity emphasizes attracting northern Aboriginal young people to resource sector jobs. Since public sector jobs exist in communities and in larger centres, and since they tend to offer stable (indeed, potentially life long) employment, their relative neglect in both policy and research is striking and puzzling.

More research is needed, to consider how public sector jobs might be adapted to make them more attractive and more accessible to northern Aboriginal youth, and how potential employees might be prepared for them. Such measures would expand the range of options available to young people; many may simply not be suited for or interested in the employment options provided by natural resource development, while they could find satisfying work, as many have, in the public or para-public sector.

Some northern Aboriginal youth are constrained from finding opportunities to build a career requiring post-secondary academic education leading to steady employment by institutional weaknesses. For example, in smaller centres, the academic path to post-secondary (university or college) education is limited by local educational facilities and the geographical and cultural distance between home and the southerly centres where universities are located. There exist some programs that mitigate these obstacles, and such programs should be supported and replicated.

Variation across northern regions, and within regions across localities, suggests there is a need for transition-to-work programs that are flexible enough to respond to local requirements. To take just one example, bearing in mind the importance of harvesting in many communities, rotational work opportunities will be suitable for some potential workers, but not all. Some may strongly prefer steady part-time work in their communities, so that they may combine wage-earning with harvesting, a strategy that would provide a stable source of high quality food and adequate cash income. And although evidence is scarce, it appears that the various employment related social transfers (including rent for the social housing that is common in many parts of the north) do not readily support individual choices of such strategies. All of these factors suggest a need for community-based and community-led labour force planning, and for programs that create ample “space” (both financial and psychological) for community plans to be realized.

We found no research that focuses specifically on youth employment success: that is, what are the circumstances and attributes that make it possible for young Aboriginal people in northern Canada to find suitable work and to build lifelong careers? Greater systematic understanding of the sources of "employment success" of northern Aboriginal youth would advance the capacity of employers and policy-makers to provide employment opportunities efficiently.

Multiple agencies and governments have an impact on the employment prospects of Aboriginal youth, both directly (through labour market participation programs) and indirectly, through numerous federal, provincial and territorial decisions. Such decisions include, for example, certain forms of support for natural resource development, or the federal decision not to support the development of a northern university system. Such decisions (along with many others, some taken long ago) create the complex opportunity structure that faces northern youth. Yet there is almost no publicly available research that assesses the overall impact of this opportunity structure, or captures information about how young people may be viewing it. This limits sharply the information base available to potential employers and policy-makers who wish to attract these young employees. To be of practical use, assessment of the overall opportunity structure must take into account local and regional differences and avoid generalizations that obscure local opportunities and obstacles.

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The research reported here responds to one simple research question: what are the possible sources of the apparent mismatch between employment opportunities in the northern Aboriginal communities and the hopes and needs of the people who make up the northern Aboriginal youth labour force? We sought an answer to this question in published academic and nonacademic sources, guided by four more specific research questions, which asked:

- What is known about the academic and vocational preparation, employment success and career aspirations of young Aboriginal people living in the north?
- What is known about the recruitment and retention activities of employers operating in the north?
- What is known about the quality of information used to portray the state of the labour markets in the north?
- What is known about the state of government intervention, including the effectiveness of public policy and programming to assist the functioning of the labour market in the north?

One of the challenges of synthesizing knowledge in this field is the need to bring together knowledge from primarily qualitative and methodologically disparate studies with published statistical analyses in a way that permits some degree of generalization. The approach we took to this matter and the methodological considerations related to this approach are described in Appendix C. In all cases, we selected research reports for methodological strength and pertinence to the four questions listed above. Then, taking these factors as well as geographical and temporal context into account, we identified common themes, complementary analyses and apparent contradictions to develop answers to the four specific research questions, cross-checking empirical claims to the extent that this was possible.

Undoubtedly we have overlooked some important analyses, or failed to recognize their pertinence in time. Fortunately, the present report is only the first instalment in a planned series of publications on the topic of northern Aboriginal youth employment. We will be grateful for readers' reactions, suggestions and criticisms.

RESULTS

The results of our synthesis of available research on Aboriginal youth employment are presented here first as answers to the four specific questions listed above. As a second step, we reflect on the key themes that emerged from our review.

Question One: What is known about the academic preparation, employment success and career aspirations of young Aboriginal people living in the north?

Research shows that generally in Canada, young people have more difficulty finding jobs than older workers. Aboriginal people, as a group, are less likely to be employed than the general population. Thus young Aboriginal people experience a kind of double disadvantage, a fact that is reflected in employment statistics. How young Aboriginal people understand their own situation is less clear: we found no statistical information about young Aboriginal people's career aspirations, either in the north or in the rest of Canada. There is some published research pertinent to this question that is particular to specific locations, generally based upon in-depth interviews and focus groups. We have included the results of this work, but in this section we provide, primarily, a statistical portrait of labour market engagement of northern Aboriginal youth relative to their non-Aboriginal counterparts living in the same regions. We present the relevant rates in terms of the gaps between these two groups.

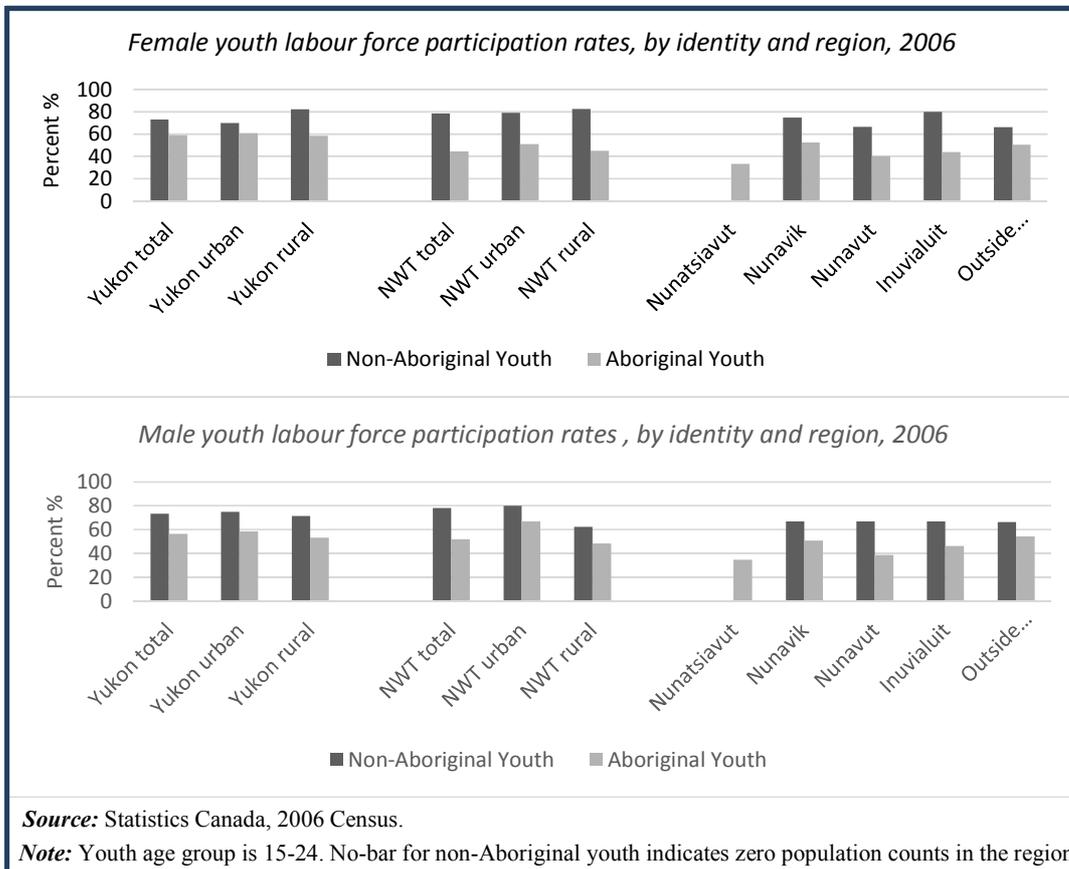
In 2012, the unemployment rate of Canadian youth aged 15 to 24 was 14.3%, compared to a rate of 6% for workers in the prime age category (35-54).⁸ Among the younger group, Aboriginal youth are at a particular disadvantage, experiencing unemployment rates much higher than the national average for young workers.⁹ In 2006, for example, the unemployment rate for all Aboriginal youth in Canada was 22%, compared to a national average for youth of 13%.¹⁰ At the same time, the labour force participation rates and the employment rates for Aboriginal youth were much lower than those of the non-Aboriginal youth, with the partial exception of Métis.¹¹ In 2009, for example, the employment rate for Aboriginal youth was 45.1%, while for non-Aboriginal youth it was 55.6%.¹²

The comparison of Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal youth employment experience in the north is particularly revealing. As shown in summary Figure 1, in 2006, as a group northern Aboriginal youth were less likely to participate in the labour force than were their non-Aboriginal counterparts. They were also less likely to be employed, as shown in Figure 2.

The presented figures show that there is significant regional and gender variation. For example, from Figure 1, we can see that in Inuit Nunangat (the Inuit territories) the participation rate *gap* between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth varies from region to region. With the exception of Nunavut, the participation rate gap in all regions is higher among female youth than among male youth. In Nunavut, the male youth participation gap is 28.0 percentage points compared to 26.6 points for female. Among Inuvialuit (who live in the north-western Northwest Territories) the male youth participation rate gap is 20.4 percentage points, while female youth participation rate gap is 36.0 percentage points. In Nunavik, the participation rate gap is 15.7 percentage points for male and 22.4 percentage points for female. In Nunatsiavut, the participation rates for male and female youth are 34.8% and 33.3%, respectively. Finally, the participation rate gap

between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth living outside of the Inuit homeland territories amounts to 12.0 percentage points for men and 15.9 percentage points for women.¹³

Figure 1: Labour Force Participation Rates among Northern Youth, by Identity and Region, 2006



Similar patterns appear in employment rates statistics. As shown in Figure 2, in each region, the employment rates of Aboriginal youth are lower than those of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Employment rate gaps appear prominent in all regions, both for male and for female youth; the only exception appears to be Yukon urban areas where the employment rate gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal female youth is negligible.¹⁴

In the NWT region, the employment rate gaps are much larger, especially for female youth, and there is some variation across different Aboriginal identity groups. For the total area, the employment rate gap for female youth is 41.6 percentage points and 34.1 percentage points for male youth. The gaps in urban and in rural areas are not much different, although there is some variation across Aboriginal identity groups and across gender. These details are presented in Appendix E, Table E1.

The employment rates for Aboriginal youth living in Nunatsiavut are particularly low, 15.2% for male youth and 25.5% for female youth. In Nunavik, the employment rate gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth are 32.4 percentage points for males and 34.4 percentage points for females. Similarly, in Nunavut, the employment rate gap for male youth is 33.2

percentage points and for female youth it is 31.1 percentage points. The employment rate gaps in Inuvialuit region amount to 28.3 percentage points for male and 35.9 percentage points for female youth. For Inuit living outside of Inuit Nunangat, the employment rate gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth are smaller, amounting to 15.8 percentage points for male and 18.0 percentage points for female youth.

Figure 2: Employment Rates among Northern Youth, by Identity and Region, 2006

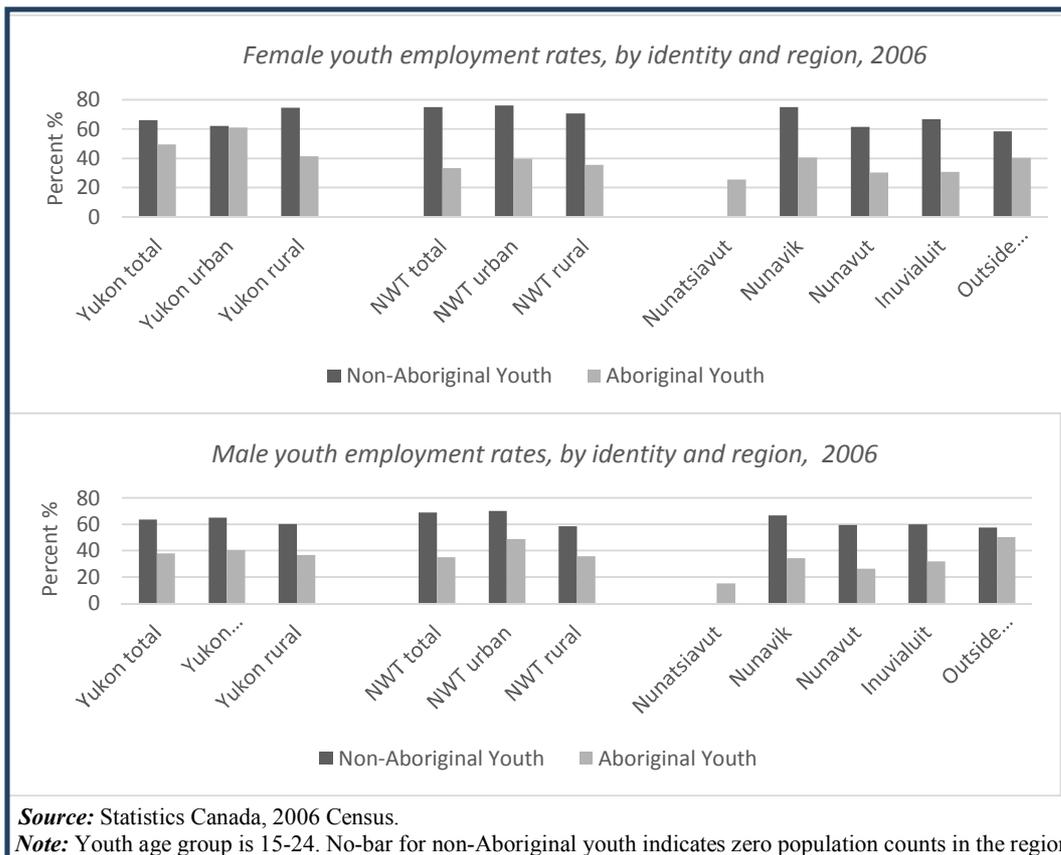
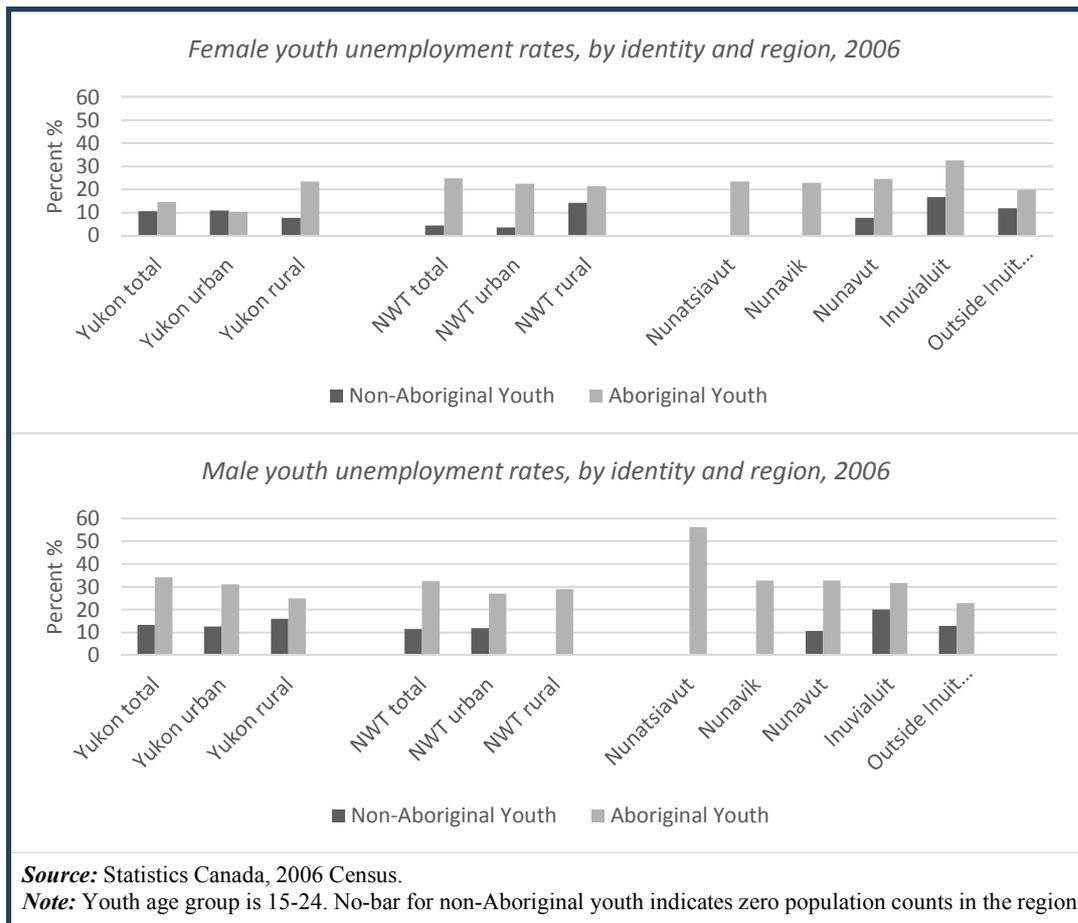


Figure 3 presents the 2006 unemployment rates for northern youth, by region. It shows that in all examined northern regions, the unemployment rates of Aboriginal youth are much higher from those of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Again, female youth living in the Yukon urban area are an exception, with relatively negligible unemployment rate gap of 0.6 percentage points. The unemployment rate gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal male youth living in the urban Yukon areas is much higher, 18.5 percentage points, and the unemployment rate gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal female youth living in the rural Yukon areas is sizable, amounting to 15.8 percentage points; the gap for male youth living in rural Yukon is 9.1 percentage points.

The unemployment rate gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth living in the NWT total area are large, amounting to 21.1 percentage points for male and 20.3 percentage points for female youth. The additional information in Table E1 reveals important variations across Aboriginal identity groups and across gender. For example, the unemployment rate gap for North

American Indian male youth in NWT is 29.3 percentage points while for Inuit male youth it is 11.7 percentage points. For female youth, the unemployment rate gap for Metis is 8.8 percentage points while for Inuit the gap is 22.5 percentage points.

Figure 3: Unemployment Rates among Northern Youth, by Identity and Region, 2006



Regional differences in unemployment rates are important as well. The highest unemployment rates among northern Aboriginal youth are in Nunatsiavut, amounting to 56.2% for men and 23.5% for women. In Nunavik, the unemployment rates of Aboriginal youth are 32.7% for males and 24.6% for females. In the other two regions, the unemployment rate *gaps* between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth are significantly high. In Nunavut, the unemployment rate gap for male youth is 21.3 percentage points and for female youth it is 16.9 percentage points. In Inuvialuit region, the unemployment rate gap for male youth is 11.6 percentage points and for female youth it is 15.8 percentage points. The unemployment rate gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth living outside of Inuit regions are somewhat smaller, amounting to 9.8 percentage points for male youth and 8.0 percentage points for female youth.

Many scholars have explored the sources of this disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal labour market outcomes.¹⁵ Some emphasize the fact that young Aboriginal people are less prepared for waged work, because as a whole they have lower education and skill levels than the general population.¹⁶ Other factors proposed include geographic remoteness from major employment opportunities and generally disadvantaged living conditions in Aboriginal communities and the effects of colonialism, contributing to a possible lack of motivation and consequent success in the labour market.¹⁷ While available statistics show a correlation of some of these factors with lower employment success, we have found no direct investigations of young Aboriginal people's motivations or understandings of their situation, and no studies that would lead to firm conclusions about causes for all northern Aboriginal youth as a group.¹⁸

What are the reasons for the differences in employment among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth? We investigated three frequently offered explanations: (1) northern Aboriginal youth have lower educational attainment; (2) young Aboriginal people in the north become parents earlier than the general population, and there are more lone parent families; (3) young Aboriginal people are unwilling to relocate to take a job, though many live in communities where work is scarce.

Educational Attainment

Many stable jobs – and certainly career advancement – require at least high school graduation, or an apprenticeship that requires senior high school levels of mathematics and English reading and writing.

In 2006, the proportion of northern Aboriginal youth who have not graduated from high school is much higher than the proportion of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. According to the 2006 Census, the gap between the proportions of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth without a high school diploma in Yukon, was 16.9 percentage points for men and 9.6 percentage points for women. In the NWT it was 37 percentage points for men, and 45.2 percentage points for women. For Inuit the gaps are greater: in Nunavut, they are 46.5 percentage points for men and 45.5 percentage points for women; in Nunavik, they are 49.5 percentage points for men and 41.8 percentage points for women; and in Inuvialuit, they are 26.0 percentage points for men and 41.4 percentage points for women. Among Inuit youth in Nunatsiavut, 65.2% of men and 68.6% of women have not graduated from high school.¹⁹ Table F1 and other figures in Appendix F provide more details on variations among individual Aboriginal identity groups as well as further geographic classification.

The importance of high school graduation for employment success is recognized in a number of northern and northern-focused publications. The Government of the Northwest Territories 2011 Aboriginal Student Education Achievement Action Plan emphasizes the importance of literacy and educational success, as does the report of the National Committee on Inuit Education. A 2007 study by the Nunavut Literacy Council probes the reasons for lower literacy levels about Inuit youth in Nunavut. Each of these studies is discussed more fully in Theme One below.²⁰

Parenthood and Employment

It is sometimes observed that single parents will face more difficulties in completing school, relocating for employment, and remaining in employment than parents in two-parent families, or

the childless. We found little research that investigates the truth of this proposition. Some large scale generalizations may be made. As shown in Table F1, in Yukon, the gap between the proportions of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal female lone parents is 17.0 percentage points for First Nations and 19.2 percentage points for Métis women. A possible consequence of this is that Aboriginal women in Yukon are substantially more likely than non-Aboriginal women to rely upon government transfers: according to the 2006 Census, for non-Aboriginal young women about 9% of the total income comes from government transfers, while for Aboriginal young women, this proportion is nearly double, at 17%.

As in Yukon, the proportions of lone parents in the NWT are higher among Aboriginal than among non-Aboriginal youth, with a 7.6 percentage points gap for female youth. Similarly, larger proportions of government transfers are evident in the total incomes of Aboriginal than of non-Aboriginal youth. For example, while only 4.5% of the total income of non-Aboriginal female youth living in the NWT comes from government transfers, for Aboriginal female youth the proportion is 17% for the total Aboriginal identity and 22.6% for Inuit female youth. This gap is not as pronounced among young men.

In the Inuit territories, the 2006 Census data show that the proportions of young Aboriginal women who are lone parents ranges from a low of 7.7% in Nunatsiavut to 12.4% in Nunavik. The data also show that there is a greater reliance upon government transfers among Inuit youth, reaching 32% of the total income for women and about 26% of the total income for men living in Nunatsiavut. Among the non-Aboriginal youth living in the Inuit region, the highest proportion of government transfers in the total income is about 10%, and that is for women living in the rural areas.

These figures are only suggestive. While it appears reasonable that young sole parents will have more difficulty finishing school and holding a job, research that establishes that this is the case, or assesses the magnitude of the difficulties posed, is hard to find. The disadvantages might be mitigated for First Nations, Dene, Metis, Inuit and Inuvialuit parents because their families may be more available, and may provide more support, for lone parents than is common in other parts of Canada. Possibly, it is not sole parenthood that causes people to leave school, but rather, people leave school because they have not been able to find personal meaning and a sense of accomplishment there, for a variety of reasons. We found no research on these questions that documents the degree of family support or its impact on either employment prospects or educational attainment –or any indication of how these patterns might be changing over time.

Mobility Patterns

The northern population is widely dispersed, with many people living in communities that are not connected by roads, and accessible by winter road, air and/or water. At the same time, larger sites of employment tend to be localized –either at mine sites far from population centres or in the capital cities and regional centres that are far from many of the smaller communities. In recognition of the economic and political implications of this situation, the Government of Nunavut adopted a decentralization policy, locating major government offices in ten communities outside of the capital city of Iqaluit, with mixed results.²¹

Some employers and observers have commented that the “remoteness” of northern communities represents a serious challenge for business development, and for the employment of Aboriginal

youth who are reluctant to relocate for work.²² Of course “remoteness” is a function of distance, but it is also a matter of infrastructure; once transportation and communication improvements have been made, remoteness recedes as a factor. We have found it impossible to substantiate or disprove the impression that some have about the reluctance of Aboriginal youth to relocate for work.²³ This is a matter that bears further investigation.

Question Two: What is known about the recruitment and retention activities of employers operating in the north?

Northern private sector employers have been very active in recruiting northern workers, including northern Aboriginal youth. In various localities, we found a similar measures to recruit workers and to contract with northern businesses. For example, the Diavik mine in the Northwest Territories implemented a "communities" plan, formalized in a series of agreements with Aboriginal communities and implemented by consultants hired to support small northern enterprises (a good source of local employment). Many mining companies also negotiate local and Aboriginal hiring targets, attempt to provide country food at work camps, and make special efforts to recruit workers from northern fly-in communities. Some have collaborated with local high schools to advise students of employment opportunities, while refusing to hire applicants who have not completed high school, as a means of encouraging high school completion.²⁴ While special measures are documented, we found few independent evaluations of their effectiveness or long-term impact on either individual careers or community labour force development.²⁵

In many parts of the north, the relationship between northern workers and industries are partly structured by the provisions of land claims agreements (also known as modern treaties). Since 1976, twenty of these agreements have been negotiated by Aboriginal peoples concerning their original territories in northern Quebec, Labrador, Nunavut, Northwest Territories and Yukon. The modern treaties provide Aboriginal peoples with capital compensation for lands ceded, secure control of portions of their original territories, an array of new governance institutions -- and some important levers to address matters of employment and small business development. The agreements establish regulatory frameworks for major project decision-making, and some mandate the negotiation of Impact Benefit Agreements between companies and local Aboriginal authorities. Employment targets and small business preferences are often included in Impact Benefit Agreements or included in conditions placed upon development after regulatory; for lands not covered by modern treaties, IBAs are becoming more common as requirements of the regulatory process and effective devices to ensure community-corporate collaboration.²⁶

In the prairie provinces, where there are no land claim agreements, provincial governments have encouraged the formation of multilateral partnerships, such as the All Parties Core Agreement (APCA) among the federal, provincial and municipal governments, several oil sands industry companies, and the First Nations in the northern Alberta district of Wood Buffalo. The Agreement funds the establishment of Industry Relations Corporations that report to First Nation Chiefs and Council on issues related to industrial development, including the negotiation of socio-economic agreements (similar in many ways to Impact Benefit Agreements) that are reported in turn to the provincial regulatory body, the Energy Resources Conservation Board. Among other issues, the APCA is intended to address issues of employment and training. A survey of potential workers conducted by this body identified a number of barriers to

employment: a lack of the required level of education, a lack of skills, not having a driver's licence, no transportation, and responsibilities of family care.²⁷

Industry associations and corporations have shared information concerning labour force development efforts, some of which has been published in government reports or reports from non-governmental organizations.²⁸ A Conference Board of Canada study published in 2011, *Building Labour Force Capacity in Canada's North*, synthesizes a thorough canvas of labour force issues from private sector employers' point of view. There is no specific focus on youth, but most of the study's conclusions (based upon expert interviews) are pertinent. The study highlights the need to make employment opportunities more accessible by increasing high school graduation rates, ensuring that community high schools offer the courses necessary for students to pursue apprenticeship or post-secondary academic education, improving infrastructure to make training and employment more accessible, and providing adequate funding for vocational training.²⁹ The study advocates a process of mutual learning and adjustment in the relationship between communities and industries: "Businesses must understand the goals and culture of the communities where they operate, and communities must understand the working culture and goals of their employers." Concrete measures taken by businesses in various parts of the north in recognition of the goals and culture of the communities where they operate include personal support for new workers adjusting to more urban environments and flights home for family events. Workers are enjoined to understand and adjust to "the working culture of their employers as well as the goals of the organization."³⁰

The delivery of vocational training in Canada has been restructured over the last two decades to incorporate public-private partnerships and the administration of vocational training funding through regional councils and agencies at arm's length from line departments. This change in the administrative arrangements led to the formation of many small, Aboriginally controlled training delivery agencies. Over time, these arrangements also tied funding for vocational training more tightly to employers' needs, a shift of great consequence for northern communities.³¹

While there is good published information about the factors that structure northern labour force planning, and some documentation of measures taken by employers (though few independent assessments of these) there are gaps in the existing literature. We found little discussion of issues related to worker retention and turnover, although these are matters that frequently come up for discussion in regulatory hearings. There is also scant information on the role the publicly supported training programs play in matching workers with long-term employment. While individual programs are evaluated, it is difficult to get a clear understanding of the interaction of various measures over the long term. There is a problem (of indeterminate magnitude) with "revolving door" training programs: individuals who are out of work will tend to enrol in whatever training program is on offer, in order to gain access to income, regardless of whether they believe that the program will lead to long-term work, or to a job that they wish to keep.

Finally, we found few independent assessments of measures to prepare people for the stable, long-term public sector jobs that exist in virtually every community in all regions of the North. There is little analysis of even for such visible and long-standing programs as the Northern Teacher Education Program (NTEP).³² This lack of attention is puzzling, considering the importance of training of northern Aboriginal health and education professionals, as well as

managers, administrators and leaders for the public and Aboriginal bureaucracies that provide the most stable employment opportunities in the North.

Question Three: What is known about the quality of information used to portray the state of the labour markets in the north?

With a few important exceptions,³³ published research that mentions Aboriginal youth employment relies upon descriptive statistics (mainly from federal sources) and expert opinion, generally accumulated through a combination of key informant interviews, focus groups and workshops. Most studies thus summarize informed opinion, and then situate it in the context of available statistical knowledge. This is helpful, but incomplete: since such an approach relies upon aggregated opinion, in the absence of further research it is unlikely to challenge or overturn misconceptions, at least not those held by a majority of respondents. Furthermore, expert interviews rarely achieve representativeness, as “experts” are generally of a particular age and occupational vantage point, and generally those interviewed are not drawn evenly from all socio-economic groups. The large generation of young people who are the focus of this discussion are particularly likely to be overlooked and not interviewed directly. There is also a problem of scale: for reasons of population size, it is very difficult to find statistical information that reflects realities at the regional or community level, while informed opinion is always specific to a particular place and time – the place and time in which the person who is interviewed finds herself.

Most published reports draw their information about the availability of the working age population in the Aboriginal communities from established official data sources such as Canadian Census and Labour Force Survey. Employers generally rely on these data sources when planning to meet their labour force requirements. For this reason, in Appendix D, we offer a detailed critical review of the main data sources that are routinely consulted to enumerate and examine the readiness of the potential labour force in the northern Aboriginal communities: the Canadian Census and related special surveys such as the Aboriginal Peoples Survey and the Canadian Labour Force Survey.³⁴ Territorial data sources are only briefly addressed here as they will be analyzed in detail in a subsequent publication.

The *Canadian Census*, until recently the largest and most inclusive source of information about the Canadian population – and the Aboriginal population in Canada – has limitations. Questions inquiring about ethnic origin, ancestry, race or identity has been included in the Census for decades, but these have varied over time, making it difficult to discern trends.³⁵ There have in addition been problems of under-coverage and non-participation of some reserves. With the 2011 replacement of the mandatory long form questionnaire with a voluntary, self-administered questionnaire, called the National Household Survey (NHS), problems of comparability over time, as well as under-coverage, have been made worse.

The *Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS)* is a special national, post-censal survey that since 1991 has surveyed Métis, Inuit, and North American Indians, as they were identified in the Census and by registration status under the Indian Act of Canada.³⁶ Due to relatively large sample sizes and measures taken to generate policy-relevant information, the APS is a rich source of information. Being a post-censal survey, though, it is affected by the under-coverage and under-representation that characterize the Census. These limitations are even more present in the public-use versions of these data files, because in the public-use versions, if a question is of a sensitive nature or if it

entails a relatively small sample size, even the available indicators are suppressed to protect confidentiality of the individual respondents.³⁷ The survey master files, however, allow for a more precise and detailed exploration, even if small geographic areas are involved.³⁸ Judging the representativeness and generalizability of research findings for any of the regions, however, remains a challenge due to the sampling problems.

The arctic component of APS contains rich statistical information that pertains particularly to northern Aboriginal Canadians and is published separately in the *Survey of Living Conditions in the Arctic (SLiCA)*. The SLiCA is a new international survey, the results of which were first released in 2007.³⁹ The survey contains unique and comprehensive information that can be used to examine a range of specific issues related to Arctic lifestyles and living conditions in Arctic Inuit and Inupiat communities of Canada, Alaska, Russia's Chukotka region, and Greenland. It does not include other Aboriginal peoples of the Canadian Arctic. The primary strengths of the SLiCA lies in the relevance and the range of the variables included in the survey, allowing comparison of living conditions across the Circumpolar North on household and harvesting activities, personal and community wellness, and social participation.⁴⁰ Because the SliCA is based upon the post-censal APS, it incorporates the sampling and under-representation limitations discussed above.

Statistics Canada has recently added Aboriginal identity indicators to the *Canadian Labour Force Survey (LFS)*, the labour market specific source of information that it produces for the general population. For the general population, the LFS is a national household survey conducted each month by Statistics Canada to provide information on major labour market trends. In 2004, an Aboriginal identity question was added to the national file of the LFS, which permitted Aboriginal people living off-reserve in four provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia) and all people living in the three territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut) to identify themselves as North American Indian, Inuit, or Métis. As of January 2007, Statistics Canada has started collecting comprehensive information on labour market conditions of the off-reserve Aboriginal population in all provinces and of all Aboriginal people living in the territories.⁴¹

The LFS does not capture any aspect of non-wage labour activity, making it hard to determine whether the low labour force participation of a particular Aboriginal group of workers indicates poverty or heavy participation in traditional pursuits –or perhaps both. Over the past two decades, a number of researchers have emphasized that the strong presence of a “mixed economy” in the northern Aboriginal communities is not merely a residue of an old and fading way of life, but a unique aspect of the adaptation process in which a subsistence economy continues to coexist with the modern market economy.⁴² In this mixed economy model, the household functions as a “micro-enterprise” and individuals move strategically between subsistence and market activities depending on opportunities and preferences.⁴³ In such communities, both the income-in-kind obtained from traditional economic activities, and cash income obtained from wages and social transfers, are readily shared among households and community members.⁴⁴ Thus, relying on this data source alone can lead researchers to make narrow policy recommendations for different groups of Aboriginal workers.

Each of the territorial statistical agencies collects labour market relevant information through a variety of surveys. In 2010, the Yukon Bureau of Statistics conducted the *Yukon Social Inclusion Household Survey* in an attempt to collect information related to the socioeconomic wellbeing of

vulnerable groups in Yukon society. The survey targeted population aged 18 and over and questions covered a number of social issues, including child care.⁴⁵ Similarly, the Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics conducts a variety of community surveys that collect important information on labour force, including information on regional employment and traditional pursuits.⁴⁶ Finally, the Nunavut Bureau of Statistics publishes its own labour force and employment data.⁴⁷

Aside from the main sources of data collected by Statistics Canada and by the territorial statistical agencies, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) also collects a variety of statistical data, though most of it concerns only the registered Aboriginal population. These data range from basic departmental data⁴⁸ to a series of national surveys of First Nations people living on-reserve.⁴⁹ Though not labour specific, these surveys collect useful information on general attitudes of the registered Aboriginal population towards priorities and satisfaction with service delivery. The surveys also collect information on the views about education of the registered Aboriginal youth, both on and off reserve.

AANDC has also developed two special tools for measuring the quality of life.⁵⁰ The first tool, the *Human Development Index (HDI)*, relates to Inuit and to the registered Indian population. It is designed to compare the average well-being of Registered Indians and Inuit with the average well-being of other Canadians on national and regional levels. The second tool, *Community Well-Being Index (CWB)*, is more labour specific and applies to the Inuit population as well as to the registered Indian population. This index is developed to help measure the quality of life of First Nations and Inuit communities in Canada relative to other communities, over time. The four indicators include education, labour force, income, and housing.

All of these data sources are discussed in more detail in Appendix D.

Question Four: What is known about the state of government intervention, including the effectiveness of public policy and programming, to assist the functioning of the labour market in the north?

Federal, territorial and provincial programs create the institutional linkages between young people who are looking for jobs and careers, and the opportunities that are available to them. Aboriginal people in Canada are eligible for all of the employment and training programs available to the general population, and in addition to a number of targeted programs. The array of institutions and purposes is complex; to supplement the overview below, see Appendix B.⁵¹

Primary and secondary schools in Canada have an important role in preparing young people for adult life and for full citizenship. They are also the foundational institutions preparing young people to enter the labour market. There is no single system for providing primary and secondary education to Aboriginal people in Canada. In the territorial north, Aboriginal students attend public schools along with other residents; targeted funding for Aboriginal education was long ago folded into the general transfers from the federal to territorial governments. Many Aboriginal students in the northern parts of provinces also attend public schools, while First Nations citizens living on reserve may attend reserve schools or nearby public schools, according to local arrangements.⁵²

Aside from the Census and Aboriginal Peoples Survey, no single database tracks secondary school completion in the territories and northern parts of provinces, or other aspects of educational performance. That said, it is clear that for northern Aboriginal students as a whole, school dropout rates are higher, and high school completion rates are lower, though for some groups (Metis in the Northwest Territories for example) the gap is narrowing.⁵³ While in 2006, a relatively large proportion of the Aboriginal population (33%) reported college and trade certificate as their highest level of educational attainment, the proportion of university degree holders among Aboriginal populations is much smaller (8%).⁵⁴

For individuals who have completed primary and secondary school, the next step in education is often attendance at a university or college. There is one college in each northern territory, but no publicly funded university. Each territorial college offers some university transfer programs under arrangements with southern universities. A number of non-profit, non-governmental organizations also offer post-secondary education, including the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, Akitsirag Law School, Nunavut Sivuniksavut, among others.⁵⁵ These arrangements, and the increasing number of distance education programs located all over Canada and in the circumpolar region (University of the Arctic) enable territorial residents to start university education in the north; generally, however, northern students must relocate to southern universities to complete their degrees. Although a number of authors have commented on the likely impact of this situation for the career prospects of northern students, we have not located research that documents the impact.⁵⁶

Post-secondary education is – to a variable degree – more accessible for Aboriginal students living in the northern parts of some provinces. The University of Northern British Columbia, for example, offers courses at the home campus in Prince George and other northern BC locations, while Lakehead University serves Thunder Bay and a portion of northern Ontario. Each of these universities has programs designed to attract and support Aboriginal students from the region in which they are located. In Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba, universities and colleges have developed distance education and satellite campuses to make their programs more accessible.

For young Aboriginal people who do not choose to attend university, there are other paths. The three colleges in the territorial north play a central role in pre-employment preparation, adult upgrading, and vocational training, as do community colleges located in the northern portions of provinces. Private sector employers in particular industrial sectors also provide training for entry level and advancing employees. Much of this training is subsidized by the federal government, with funds dispersed mainly through two federal departments. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) administers two youth-oriented proposal-based programs, the *First Nations and Inuit Skills Link Program* and the *First Nations and Inuit Summer Work Experience Program*, each of which is delivered by First Nations and Inuit governments and organizations. Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) delivers one AANDC-funded program, the *First Nations Job Fund*, a new (2013) program that links social assistance funding to employment. ESDC also delivers two large and longer-standing labour force programs, the *Skills and Partnership Fund* and the *Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy* (ASETS). ESDC also houses the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) that funds national projects dealing with literacy and essential skills for work-related purposes.⁵⁷ These last four are not targeted to youth, though youth are eligible.

Programs targeting youth are grouped under the Youth Employment Strategy, which includes initiatives of eleven federal departments that provide information and various forms of subsidized work experience to Aboriginal youth. Programs vary in focus, and some, for example Canadian Mortgage and Housing's Housing Internship Initiative are restricted to First Nations and Inuit youth.⁵⁸

In addition to these programs, *Federal – Provincial/Territorial Labour Market Agreements* support employment training and skills programs through federal funding administered by the federal department of Employment and Social Development Canada. These agreements seek to increase the participation of groups, such as Aboriginal peoples, that are under-represented in the labour market. Funded programs implement federal government labour market priorities, but are designed and delivered by provincial and territorial governments. Thus the proportion of federal funding under this program (a reported \$3 billion during 2008-2014) directed towards young Aboriginal workers varies with jurisdictions and it not reported. Although the program explicitly targets Aboriginal people (along with other groups disadvantaged in the labour market, he most recent available data (2009-10) indicates that of the 350,234 clients served via the agreement funded services, nearly 4% self-identified as Aboriginal –a proportion approximates Aboriginal people's proportion of the overall Canadian population.⁵⁹ The proposed federal *Canada Job Grant* will have an important impact on federal-provincial/territorial collaboration in the support of employment training, but at this writing its fate in unknown.⁶⁰

Although we do not have space here to discuss all of them, it is important to note that each provincial government, and some coalitions of northern governments, intervene in the labour market to create opportunities for northern Aboriginal youth. For example, in 2010, the Northern Development Ministers Forum focused on Aboriginal youth entrepreneurship, identifying education, training and job experience, ease of securing business financing, business information, mentoring, networking within the community, and community support for entrepreneurship as important, inter-related factors affecting the success of young Aboriginal entrepreneurs. The Ministers Forum approach recognizes the importance of taking a holistic approach to understanding factors affecting the economic future of young people, a matter that is also recognized from a somewhat different angle, in academic research. Taylor et al, Stern 2005, and Davison and Hawe 2012 explore, in different ways, the range of choices and constraints confronting young people in northern communities. The themes that emerge from this work are discussed in the next section of our report.

KEY THEMES

In this section we present a synthesis of the key themes found in selected Canadian academic and non-academic publications relevant to northern Aboriginal youth employment.

Theme One: Educational attainment and the school to work transition

Many observers draw a connection between overall educational attainment and the “mismatch” between unemployed northern Aboriginal youth and unfilled northern jobs.⁶¹ School dropout rates for northern Aboriginal people are higher than the Canadian norm, and the proportion of northern Aboriginal people who hold high school graduation certificates or their equivalent is

lower. Most of the unfilled jobs in the north appear to be those requiring at least high school graduation, or qualifications earned after high school graduation.⁶² The connection is obvious and it has been affirmed in key public policy documents.

The Government of the Northwest Territories' 2011 Aboriginal Student Achievement Education Plan identifies improvements in Aboriginal education attainment as the solution to youth unemployment and territorial labour shortages. Through a process of research, reflection and consultation, a group of citizens and officials led by the territorial Minister of Education identified four goals:

Early Childhood Development and Child Care: Develop early childhood programs, services and initiatives that optimize the healthy development of Aboriginal children.

Student and Family Support: Provide a variety of support services for Aboriginal students and families to ensure academic success.

Aboriginal Language and Culture Curriculum and Resource Development: Support Aboriginal students in reaching their full potential by becoming proficient in their Aboriginal language and strong in their culture.

Literacy: Eliminate the literacy gap between Aboriginal and other students.

A number of other publications make recommendations that reflect a similar analysis.⁶³ For example, the National Strategy on Inuit Education notes:⁶⁴

There is a gathering storm in Inuit education. Inuit are among Canada's youngest citizens, with a median age of 22 — nearly half the Canadian median age of 40. The bulk of this population is now moving through the education system, yet too few are graduating. Although data on graduation rates is limited and education outcomes by community vary widely, the stark reality of Inuit education today is that roughly 75% of children are not completing high school, and many who do find that their skills and knowledge don't compare to those of non-Aboriginal graduates.

Low educational outcomes are associated with adverse social implications, including greater unemployment, greater numbers of youth entering the criminal justice system and greater incidences of illness and poverty. Existing socio-economic conditions will worsen unless more Inuit children graduate from high school with opportunities to succeed in post-secondary education.

These observations appear in a National Strategy report prepared by a committee of all provincial, territorial and Aboriginal education authorities, chaired by Inuit leader Mary Simon. The National Strategy identifies specific goals in three "core" areas: (1) supporting children to help them stay in school; (2) providing a bilingual curriculum to achieve literacy in the Inuit language and at least one of Canada's official languages, and learning resources that are relevant to the Inuit culture, history and worldview, and (3) increasing the number of education leaders and bilingual educators in our schools and early childhood programs.

Clearly these two policy documents that address northern Aboriginal educational attainment see education in broader terms than simply a means to provide young people with better jobs, though each document recognizes the central importance of paid employment for individual and social wellbeing. Interestingly, each makes a connection between the incorporation of a significant cultural component (such as Aboriginal language instruction in addition to English and French; history from an Aboriginal perspective) and academic success, based upon the contribution that the former makes to individual self-esteem and confidence.

There is surprisingly little empirical research that assesses this analysis, though it is intuitively persuasive and appears to reflect a convergence of expert opinion and the experience of educators.⁶⁵ For example, the Nunavut Literacy Council reports the results of a careful and thorough sequence of focus groups and expert interviews, identifying the impact of colonization and resulting community “wellness” and a lack of individual self-esteem as key factors in high dropout rates and low academic achievement.

Another strong theme in the literature is the importance of recognizing the special circumstances of many young Aboriginal students. For example, while early childhood programs are likely to benefit all children, they are perhaps particularly important for families in which parents are very young and/or in situations where there is only one parent. Research has showed that lone parenthood is more prevalent among Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal women.⁶⁶ In 2006, 18% of Aboriginal identity women in Canada aged 15 and over were lone parents, compared with 8% of non-Aboriginal women. For individual Aboriginal identity groups, these proportions were 20% for First Nations women, 17% for Inuit women, and 14% for Métis women. In addition, the single parent households headed by Aboriginal single parent women in Canada tend to be larger than those headed by non-Aboriginal single parent women; in 2006, 22% of Aboriginal single parent women had three or more children, compared to 10% of non-Aboriginal single parent women. For individual Aboriginal identity groups, these proportions were 25% among First Nations, 23% among Inuit, and 16% among Métis single parent women.⁶⁷

Early parenthood is particularly pronounced among Aboriginal teenage girls, aged 15-19 years. According to the 2006 Census, 8% of Aboriginal teenage girls were parents, compared to 1.3% of non-Aboriginal teenage girls; among individual Aboriginal identity groups, First Nations and Inuit teenage girls are more affected (9% for each group) than Metis teenage girls (4%). However, the highest proportion of teenage girls who were parents (12%) was found on reserves among First Nations teenage girls.⁶⁸

A Canada-wide study of Aboriginal education reports findings that converge with these recommendations. Noting that most Aboriginal children in Canada attend provincially run public schools, Richards and Scott recommend the introduction of early childhood education programs, changes to curriculum and hiring of teachers that build a stronger Aboriginal presence in the school system, and the engagement of local Aboriginal organizations in educational governance.⁶⁹ For First Nation students living on reserve (as is the case for many in the northern provinces) there are some other barriers arising from the institutional context, including inadequate funding and consequent difficulties in recruiting and retaining experienced teachers.

One of the few reported surveys of student opinion was published by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges in 2010. This study, which includes but is not specific to the north, reports a number of factors that students identify as creating barriers to their education:

- lack of financial assistance for students in adult upgrading
- amounts that do not recognize the costs of the diverse range of support services and upgrading needed by Aboriginal students before starting post-secondary programs;
- project-based funding for Aboriginal program development and delivery;
- of funding for student supports in community-based programs;
- insufficient coordination among federal funding agencies.

Colleges identified lessons learned related to four main themes:

- community engagement is fundamental for the effective delivery of Aboriginal programs and services.
- Aboriginal voice must be heard within and across institutions through Aboriginal representation at the governance and senior administrative levels;
- curriculum which is culturally relevant and embeds Aboriginal world views and traditional knowledge;
- purposeful hiring practices to increase Aboriginal faculty and staff recruitment; intercultural training for college faculty and staff; and
- providing Aboriginal students with a welcoming environment that allows them to celebrate their culture.
- services are key for Aboriginal student retention and success as they address the barriers many Aboriginal students must overcome to succeed. These services are pivotal in creating a culturally-appropriate, welcoming and supportive learning environment.

Theme Two: Building policies that “see” and understand the mixed economy and community social systems

A substantial proportion of young northern Aboriginal people live in communities that are small by southern standards (fewer than 3000 residents), and also relatively homogeneous, with Aboriginal people being by the far largest proportion of the population. Many of these predominantly Aboriginal communities are not connected by all-weather roads, relying upon winter roads, water and air transportation. They have a strong harvesting sector, and limited opportunities for wage employment. Many of these communities have a distinctive economic base and social structure that requires a different approach to labour force development.

An academic literature of long duration has established the main characteristics of the northern ‘mixed economy.’⁷⁰ In mixed economy communities, it is helpful to think of the household as a basic unit of production where cash income, harvested food and materials, and artistic and craft labour is combined. Individual members of the household pool their resources and their labour. There is customarily exchange, cooperation and sharing among households in the community. The essence of the mixed economy is that the individuals and households within it do not rely upon a single source of income for their livelihood, but rather upon several. These may include small business activity, wage employment, gathering, hunting, and trapping, domestic care of others, service to the community, and other activities. Because sources of cash and in-kind

income and resources are plural, and because risk is shared among members of the household, the mixed economy provides protection from the discipline of the market, and—a notable feature given the modern structure of the northern economy—from the boom and bust cycles of the resource frontier. Faced with unemployment, within the framework of the extended family and the community, individuals may undertake essential non-waged activities, such as child and elder care, hunting, fishing, gathering, food preservation, and making products based on the gifts of the land. These are not only satisfying activities, but they provide families with high quality food and an opportunity to make their living in a manner that has continuity with their heritage.

The mixed economy emerged with the earliest opportunities for exchange and wage employment in the North. It has proven to be enduring and resilient, surviving fluctuations in the fur market, the changes in living conditions that came with the establishment of permanent northern communities, and increasing if cyclical wage economy opportunities.

The dynamics of community economies are thus quite different from those of more urban centres. There is an essential role for wage employment, not only as a source of income and satisfaction for individuals but also as an aspect of the mixed economy that provides stability and resilience to northern families. This reality brings an important policy and program challenge. All employers and all education and training programs can have a role to play in supporting the stable economies of the North's smaller, predominantly Aboriginal communities. This goes beyond accommodating “cultural” differences until workers adapt to the new regime of wage employment; rather it opens the prospect that employment opportunities and the education and training systems can be structured to support and develop the skills and social practices necessary to maintenance of the mixed economy. This, in turn, probably requires that communities have more control over the programs and terms of employment that affect them.

There is a strong body of research, now covering several decades, that empirically demonstrates the persistence and the dynamics of the northern mixed economy. There is much less research on how the policy and program environment could adjust to take the mixed economy into account, to reinforce its protective features, and to make it possible for communities to develop education and labour force strategies that build on the strengths of their economies. It is known that some adjustments are made in territorial policies, that some land claim agreements include harvesting supports, and that at the community level there are customary informal practices that support the viability of the mixed economy. Generally, though, these are not documented or studied and so they tend to be invisible to policy and decision-makers.

Theme Three: Getting the role of the natural resources sector right

The expansion of Canada's resource extraction industries is central to the federal government's northern economic development strategy, and also to the economic futures of most provinces. In a context where the federal government has identified a shortage in skilled workers as “the biggest challenge our country faces” for Canada's future economic growth,⁷¹ this sector is surely a promising source of employment for Aboriginal youth. A recent report claims that labour market indicators point to a “crisis” in the mining industry forecasting a shortage of 4,816 skilled workers by 2018 and 16, 060 workers by 2023. According to the Mining Industry Human Resources Council, Aboriginal people “represent the greatest potential as a source of future labour supply for the industry”.⁷²

To what extent is this a realistic aspiration? There are reasons to expect the natural resources sector to play an important role in the future of northern Aboriginal youth. Employment in the natural resources sector is well paid and relatively accessible in terms of entry level job requirements; overall the sector relies upon a range of skill levels, making entry and then advancement within the sector over time feasible.⁷³ The expansion of natural resource development which has accompanied rising commodity prices contributed to a significant increase in employment of Aboriginal workers.⁷⁴ Currently, Canada-wide, the sector provides a disproportionate number of jobs to Aboriginal workers.⁷⁵ So far, however, these workers are generally employed in the less skilled and lower paid positions relative to the non-Aboriginal population.⁷⁶ There are also indications that work in this field is not attractive to all. In interviews with workers, former workers and others in the Wood Buffalo area, for example, Taylor, Freidel and Edge found a significant degree of ambivalence, concluding that for some, "while dependency and economic underdevelopment are unacceptable, a future characterized by unfettered resource extraction is also unacceptable." As one of their interviewees put it, "We have to move forward, but do we have to move forward at the expense of our planet?"⁷⁷

Several federal Aboriginal employment development programs are focused on increasing the opportunities in the energy and mining sector. For example, the Skills and Partnership Fund, discussed above, is specifically tied to preparing Aboriginal workers for employment in the energy and mining sectors.⁷⁸

The opportunities associated with resource extraction have been posed as a solution to the economic challenges facing Aboriginal peoples⁷⁹ but tying employment opportunities for youth to meeting the labour market demands in support of the expansion of the energy and mining industries raise a number of issues for policy makers and Aboriginal communities.

Recent reports have questioned the premise that Canada is indeed facing a shortage of skilled workers, concluding that the shortages that do exist are regional, temporary and related to the cyclical nature of resource extraction booms as indicated by the current surplus of resource sector workers relative to employment opportunities.⁸⁰ Employment in the energy and mining sectors is also subject to the volatility of commodity prices and the finite nature of non-renewable resource extraction – mining employment fluctuates with commodity prices⁸¹ and only lasts until a mineral deposit is depleted.

Forecasting employment opportunities in resource extraction is difficult and subject to overly optimistic projections given the need for the extractive industries to forecast employment benefits for First Nations communities at the project appraisal stage to overcome opposition based on the social and ecological disruption associated with the expansion of energy and mining exploration, extraction and transportation on Ancestral lands. The capacity of Aboriginal communities to take advantage of potential employment opportunities is also contingent upon first addressing deficiencies in, for example, educational infrastructure and broader systemic challenges faced by Aboriginal peoples. For example, an internal federal government document recently questioned the capacity of First Nations communities to fulfil the employment opportunities being promoted as benefits to Aboriginal communities should they accept the development of the "Ring of Fire's" vast mineral deposits in Northern Ontario. As many have argued, improvements to primary, secondary and post-secondary education systems and their effectiveness should come before the expansion of mining if Aboriginal communities are to benefit.⁸²

An additional complication concerns transferable skills. Aboriginal workers are disproportionately in sectors such as energy and mining, in which many of the skills developed are not directly transferable to other sectors of the economy;⁸³ thus as a recent report noted,

while income levels can be quite high ... one could argue that this degree of concentration [on employment in this sector] is not necessarily the most sustainable outcome. These industries can be quite cyclical in nature, following resource ... boom-bust cycles. Thus, any gains made in closing the gap relative to non-Aboriginals could be lost quickly ... commodity prices pullback significantly. Furthermore, during economic downturns, Aboriginal peoples might have increased difficulty finding jobs in other sectors given their lower education and skill levels.⁸⁴

This poses a problem for policy makers seeking to balance specific training and skills for the mining sector with the need to develop a well-educated workforce supportive of the development of diversified and sustainable northern economies.

In many Northern communities, natural resource extraction is a mainstay in the local economy. Among Aboriginal communities, there has been a variety of responses to the prospect of resource development. Some communities have been eager to partner with industry to provide much needed jobs to community members and additional revenue for chief and council. Some of these relationships have been mutually beneficial and allowed many community members to acquire well-paying jobs, for others, such as the James Bay Cree, although jobs were promised, these positions never appeared. In the context of resource development, it is important to mention, that in the majority of cases, employment opportunities are short term in nature; the boom and bust cycle endemic to natural resource development creates a particular problem for communities whose young labour force requires both versatility and stable economic prospects.

In this regard, the resource industry development model that characterizes the Canadian economy creates a particular problem for communities seeking to establish a stable economic base. Projects are proposed and pass through the regulatory process one at a time, encouraging decisions that fail to take into account cumulative and longer term impacts, be they positive or negative.⁸⁵ This is mirrored in the way that training and education programs are funded, with the funding “tap” turned off and on depending upon projected local demand for labour associated with particular projects or industries. This in turn creates an imbalance in the overall educational system, and one that creates important vulnerabilities to the cycles of the global resource economy.

Theme Four: “Remoteness” and the Infrastructure Deficit

“Remoteness” is often cited as a prominent feature of northern communities, one that has to be taken into account in planning for their labour force development. The term refers to the distance of many northern communities from southern markets, from sites of potential employment, and from sources of supply. A 2010 briefing paper prepared for the Northern Development Ministers Forum asserts that “it is well-documented that economic development in northern communities will always be very difficult because of the inherent challenges of the North’s geography, remoteness, small dispersed population, poor infrastructure and high living costs.” While the conditions that are referred to here obviously exist, the report actually provides no “documentation” for the view that these conditions must necessarily last forever, or even for a

long time. As some of the studies we reviewed implicitly recognize, remoteness is not simply a matter of distance; rather it is a function of infrastructure and public expenditure.⁸⁶ To take an example from Canadian history, the construction of a transcontinental railway in the nineteenth century reduced the travel time between the capital in Ottawa and British Columbia from a matter of months, to a matter of days, rendering the Pacific coast much less "remote." Similar principles would seem to prevail in northern Canada, so that improved transportation and communication infrastructure could be expected to have an important impact on the remoteness of particular communities and therefore on the educational and vocational opportunities available to their workforces. With strategic improvements in transportation and communication infrastructure, remoteness of northern communities will diminish..

Another way to consider the interaction of remoteness and infrastructure is through the lens of labour force mobility. It is a fact that for great portions of northern Canada, employment opportunities are localized at natural resource extraction sites or in the capital cities and regional administrative centres, while the northern population lives in well over one hundred dispersed predominantly Aboriginal communities, distant from sites of employment and sometimes accessible only by air or winter road. Sometimes it is observed that even in the face of this reality, northern Aboriginal workers are reluctant to relocate for employment. Whether this generalization is true for most potential Aboriginal workers is not known.

Some research suggests that caution is warranted because there may be other factors at play besides a reluctance to move or a readiness to bail out of vocational experiments. One factor may be the tension that many Aboriginal workers feel about the nature of the work they are being asked to do. As Taylor, Freidel and Edge explained: "while dependency and economic development are unacceptable, a future characterized by unfettered resource extraction is also unacceptable." In the words of one of their interviewees, who had experimented with work in the Alberta oil sands: "We have to move forward, but do we have to move forward at the expense of our planet."⁸⁷ While few forms of natural resource exploitation have a footprint and impact as large as the Alberta oil sands, it is plausible that similar tensions exist for members of Aboriginal communities where harvesting and life on the land is highly valued.⁸⁸ This should draw attention to the importance of research that listens carefully to the reasoning of young Aboriginal workers themselves. It also suggests that work opportunities that offer alternatives to natural resource extraction should be welcome.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The research synthesis reported here includes published quantitative analyses as well as research that combines quantitative information with knowledge gathered using other methods. We assess the adequacy with which this body of work takes into account regional and other diversities in the northern labour force and economy, all potential employment opportunities, gender differences, patterns of educational attainment, vocational training, apprenticeship and post-secondary educational opportunities and effects. Besides the present report, we have prepared a publicly accessible database (Zotero) of pertinent research resources. The Zotero (open access) bibliography has been created and is operating now. The bibliography is listed under the group named, Aboriginal Youth Employment Northern Canada, and can be accessed at:

https://www.zotero.org/groups/aboriginal_youth_employment_northern_canada/items

We are completing a series of short papers that deal with specific aspects of northern youth employment in more depth, and a website (still under construction) that will provide ready access to this and future work on northern labour issues conducted at the Carleton Centre for Community Innovation.

FURTHER RESEARCH

1. What do the young potential workers think?

With one or two important exceptions, there is a surprising dearth of information about how young Aboriginal people themselves understand their situations, and what their aspirations are for the future. No doubt there will be important regional and local variations on these matters; the variations as well as the common themes are important to all employers and policy-makers.

2. How is the overall system working?

Taken together, the educational, vocational and employment programs offered by all orders of government, along with employment opportunities themselves, create the opportunity structure facing northern youth. There is a need for a panoptic assessment of the opportunity structures facing northern Aboriginal youth in various provinces and territories, to enable cross-regional learning and comparison. Included in 'the system' should be the many programs directed toward youth that may not have an immediate and obvious labour market linkage, such as recreational sport or artistic expression.

3. How can we better educate people for the permanent stable jobs?

Most of the permanent jobs in northern Canada are found in the public or para-public sector, yet neither government programs nor independent research has focused on these. This should be remedied. For the portions of the population who wish to make their lives in one of the over one hundred dispersed, predominantly Aboriginal communities, there is a need to consider education, training and the structuring of jobs to understand how the jobs in the communities and the individuals who might seek them be best matched. Here too there is a great opportunity for inter-regional mutual learning, and for developing a better understanding of the interaction of available training funds and the mixed economy, to maximize benefits accruing from each.

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- ⁷⁴ Natural Resources Canada. (2010). *Mining Sector Performance Report 1998-2008*. Ottawa: Natural Resources Canada. <http://www.nrcan.gc.ca/node/8770#soc-per3>.
- ⁷⁵ TD Economics. (2013a). *Employment and Education among Aboriginal Peoples: A New Perspective from the 2011 National Household Survey*. Toronto: TD Bank. <http://www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/EmploymentAndEducationAmongAboriginalPeoples.pdf>.
- ⁷⁶ Natural Resources Canada (2010) p.26; TD Economics (2013a) p. 2.
- ⁷⁷ Taylor, Freidel and Edge (2006) p. 7.
- ⁷⁸ Government of Canada, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. (2013). *Skills and Partnership Fund (Aboriginal) | HRSDC*. April 6.
- ⁷⁹ Edge, J., Howard, A. and D. Watt. (2012). *Understanding the Value, Challenges, and Opportunities of Engaging Métis, Inuit, and First Nations Workers*. Ottawa: Conference Board of Canada.
- Capeluck & Sharpe (2013).
- ⁸⁰ See for example BMO. (2013). *Skills Shortages? We've Seen Worse...Much Worse*. Toronto: Bank of Montreal. www.bmonesbittburns.com/economics/amcharts/apr0213.pdf. and Halliwell, C. (2013). *No Shortage of Opportunity*

Policy Ideas to Strengthen Canada’s Labour Market in the Coming Decade. Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP). A recent TD Economics study indicates that “job conditions for resource workers have remained relatively loose compared to the heydays of the pre-recession” (TD Economics 2013b, p. 32).

⁸¹ Capeluck & Sharpe (2013, p. 64).

⁸² McKie, D. (2013). Ring of Fire Mining May Not Benefit First Nations as Hoped. June 27. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/ring-of-fire-mining-may-not-benefit-first-nations-as-hoped-1.1374849/>. The challenge is to ensure that the education infrastructure is in place before the mine is developed to ensure that Aboriginal youth have the general education skills in advance of the development of the mines so that they are able to take advantage of the opportunities (McKie, 2013).

⁸³ Natural Resources Canada (2010) p. 26).

⁸⁴ TD Economics (2013a, p. 2).

⁸⁵ Environment Canada (2009) Foundation for a Sustainable Future. Final Report of the Joint Review Panel for the Mackenzie Gas Project. Ottawa.

⁸⁶ See for example, Martin 2011.

⁸⁷ Taylor, Alison, Tracy L. Friedel, and Lois Edge (2006) Pathways for First Nations and Metis Youth in the Oil Sands. Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks. p. 7.

⁸⁸ See for example Zacharias Kunuk (2012) My Father’s Land. <http://www.isuma.tv/en/DID/MyFathersLand>

