



CANADA'S Hidden Youth Crisis

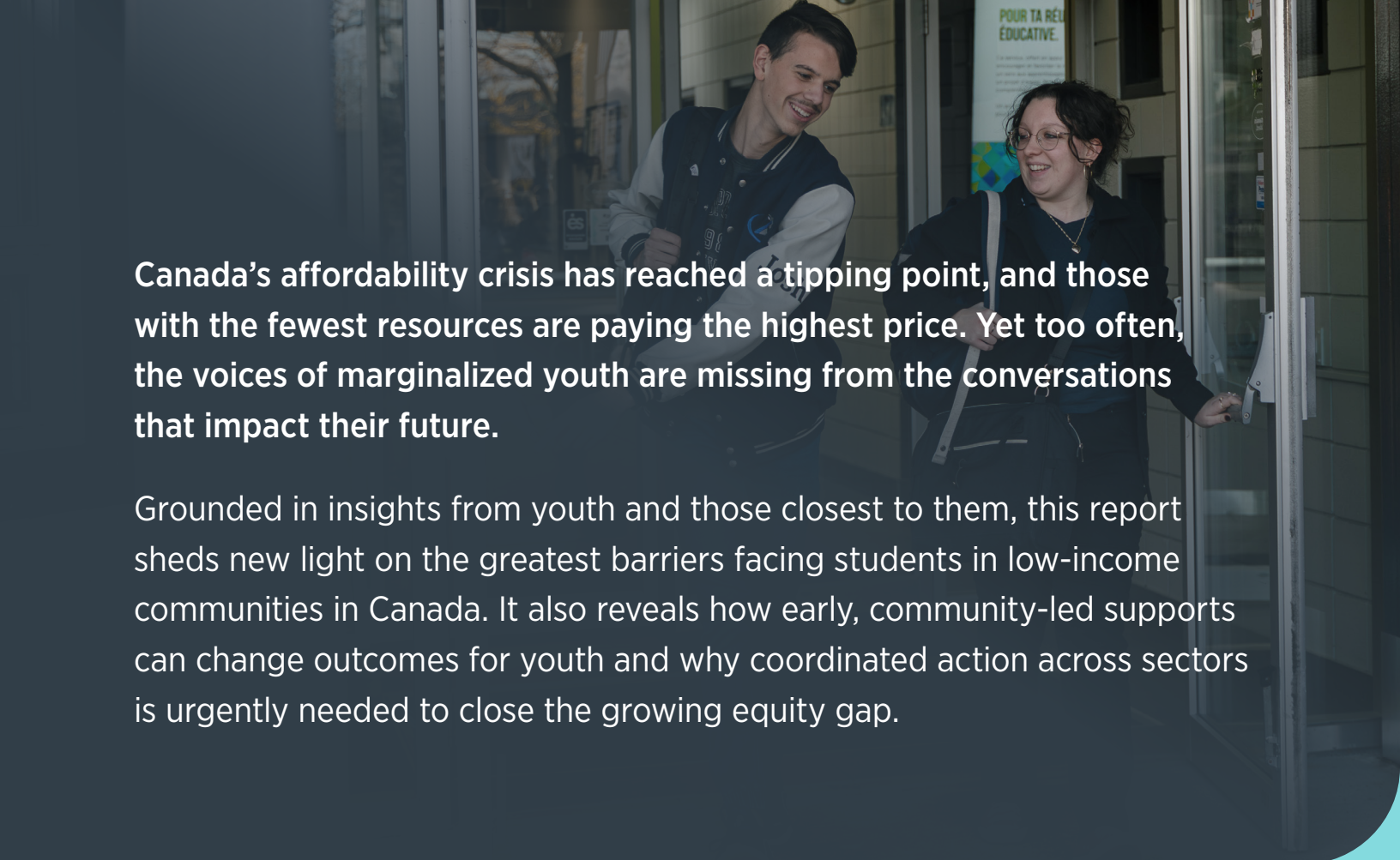
Community insights on the growing
equity gap—and how to close it.

Pathways
to Education

In partnership with:



The Students
Commission
of Canada
Centre of Excellence for
Youth Engagement



Canada’s affordability crisis has reached a tipping point, and those with the fewest resources are paying the highest price. Yet too often, the voices of marginalized youth are missing from the conversations that impact their future.

Grounded in insights from youth and those closest to them, this report sheds new light on the greatest barriers facing students in low-income communities in Canada. It also reveals how early, community-led supports can change outcomes for youth and why coordinated action across sectors is urgently needed to close the growing equity gap.

Pathways to Education

About Pathways to Education Canada

Pathways to Education is a national, charitable organization breaking the cycle of poverty through education. The award-winning Pathways Program provides youth with a holistic combination of academic, financial, social, and one-on-one supports proven to help them overcome the barriers they face. What began as a single program in Toronto’s Regent Park has grown into a national social innovation, supporting over 9,000 students in 31 low-income communities across Canada. The program is brought to life through a network of 29 community-based Program Partners who have the knowledge, expertise, and relationships to meaningfully support local youth in their respective communities.

Foreword from the Students Commission of Canada

Crisis compounding crisis. One rolling in after another. A world experiencing profound change, chronic issues, new threats, immense anxiety and a sense of powerlessness. We are all experiencing this to some degree, and as I travel across Canada, I hear and recognize the stress in the voices and faces of the young people inheriting this world.

Yet, hope and aspiration are also there in their voices, their actions and the actions of those who work tirelessly to support them. At the Students Commission of Canada (SCC), we are committed to staying small, partnering with others in supporting young people to access their strengths, celebrate their childhoods and adolescence, and transition successfully into adulthood, no matter the challenges they face.

So, it’s no surprise that Pathways and the SCC have had a long and enduring partnership. We share a mission.

While this report describes a Canada in which youth, particularly those living in marginalized communities, are falling further behind, it also provides a solution: partnership. After all, “it takes a village to raise a child.”

Pathways is hope, a proven one—an evidence-based, community-supported program that gives youth on the cusp of something great the boost

they need: high school graduation. A solution that changes the odds of growing up disadvantaged.

The Pathways Program review (2024-2025), conducted by the SCC in partnership with Pathways, provided students, their families, and youth workers the opportunity to share their voice and describe their changing contexts and needs.

We got a glimpse into the communities and partners across Canada that deliver the Pathways Program, the challenges they face, the work they do, and the impact they make. It’s no small feat. Despite being faced with a crisis within a crisis, students are succeeding.

Pathways grew from one pilot in one community almost 25 years ago to this broad partnership of directed, focused effort on a single lever of system change in 31 communities, anchored in principles of shared commitment and sustained collaboration. The Pathways coalition has been, is, and will be, a model for addressing and overcoming both chronic and emerging challenges. There is much to learn from this report that can be applied to the many negative forces swirling about us; there is hope in success and continuing to strive together for it.

Sharif Mahdy
Chief Executive Officer,
The Students Commission of Canada

About the Students Commission of Canada (SCC)

SCC is a national, intergenerational charitable organization that ensures young people’s voices are heard, valued, and acted upon. Since 1991, SCC has championed youth engagement through partnerships, research, and programming that supports young people in creating positive change and transitioning successfully to adulthood. Its national initiatives include Take Our Kids to Work™, the #CanadaWeWant Conference, and a range of youth-led projects across the country.

Executive Summary

As the cost of living rises and stable employment opportunities decline, young people today find themselves navigating an increasingly uncertain future. For the approximately 300,000 youth in low-income communities across the country, these pressures are magnified. The result is an accelerating opportunity gap where vulnerable youth are at risk of being left behind.

Pathways to Education is uniquely positioned to surface and address the evolving needs of these young people. For nearly 25 years, we have worked alongside a dedicated network of community-led Program Partners to help students living in low-income communities overcome barriers and build the foundation for long-term success. The Pathways Program’s holistic approach is proven to support positive academic and social development during the critical years of high school. Core to the program’s success is a commitment to listening to young people and honouring their lived experience as a source of knowledge.

We recently partnered with the Students Commission of Canada (SCC) to conduct a comprehensive Program Review designed to understand how the needs of the young people we serve are changing. Youth, families, and youth workers in Pathways Program locations across the country gave insights that revealed three concerning trends:

- 1

Academic needs are intensifying as systems struggle to keep up. Students are falling behind in core subjects and struggling to focus. A stretched education system makes it difficult to feel seen, and there is a need for greater individualized learning supports.
- 2

Growing financial strain is impacting every part of student life. Rising costs limit access to essentials, and students are questioning their ability to afford a future. They need access to paid work opportunities and financial literacy support.
- 3

Social and emotional well-being needs are escalating. Youth are feeling increasingly anxious and disconnected. They need guidance in navigating their futures and access to safer spaces to connect with peers and adult role models.

We also heard that these challenges were amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted learning, strained family finances, and limited social connection in ways that many students are still working to overcome.

These findings reveal a breaking point, with young people in low-income communities being left even further behind.

Grounded in the lived experiences of Pathways youth and communities, this report offers deeper insight into each of these challenges and sheds light on how the Pathways Program’s community-led approach is helping students navigate them.

We also make an urgent call to action for policymakers, funders, and other youth-serving organizations to stand with us in coordinated action to strengthen the systems that support youth amid a shifting fundraising landscape. We’re calling for:

- **Governments and policymakers** to centre equity and youth voice in policy and funding decisions to ensure education, employment, and well-being strategies reflect the realities of all youth.
- **Funders and corporate partners** to commit to long-term, unrestricted investment in upstream, community-led programs that help youth build an early foundation for long-term stability.
- **Educators and youth-serving organizations** to strengthen collaboration and knowledge sharing across the sector to create a unified voice that amplifies collective impact in communities and beyond.

To close the equity gap, we need to start by listening to the people living within it. This report amplifies the voices of marginalized youth and those closest to them and shines a light on their lived experiences as they navigate an increasingly uncertain future. We invite you to help us turn these insights into action to build a fairer, more equitable Canada for *all* young people.

Subagini Sivapatham
Chief Impact Officer
Pathways to Education Canada

A Crisis Within a Crisis:

The Growing Equity Gap

Youth in Canada are entering adulthood under conditions that are more complex and uncertain than ever before. The cost of living has outpaced wage growth, eroding financial stability for many families.¹ And while all young people are feeling the strain, those furthest from equity are being disproportionately impacted.

Young people living in low-income and marginalized communities already face deep, intersecting barriers outside of their control, including limited economic mobility, systemic discrimination and racism, and fewer support networks compared to their more affluent peers.

When everyday costs rise, this equity gap widens and puts significant pressure on already struggling families. In 2022, 2.7 million Canadian households faced food insecurity.² According to Food Banks Canada, 33% of visits to food banks in 2024 were children, representing 700,000 visits—an increase of over 300,000 visits per month compared to five years ago.³

Housing costs are also rising sharply. Research shows immigrant and racialized youth in particular face barriers to shelter affordability, with many spending more than 30% of their income on housing costs.⁴

At the same time, youth unemployment rates continue to climb. In June 2025, the unemployment rate for students aged 15 to 24 years was 17.4%, up from 15.8% in June 2024.⁵ These numbers increase for youth facing greater barriers, with racialized youth being disproportionately represented among youth not in education, employment or training (NEET). For Indigenous youth, unemployment rates are consistently higher than their non-Indigenous peers.⁶ These inequities are compounded by geography, with those in rural or remote regions often lacking basic infrastructure such as reliable internet or transportation.⁷

1. Statistics Canada. (2025). Research to Insights: Wages in Canada, 1981 to 2024 (11-631-X2025003)
2. Li T, Fafard St-Germain AA, Tarasuk V. (2023) Household food insecurity in Canada, 2022. *Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity*Food Banks Canada. (2024). *HungerCount 2024*.
3. Food Banks Canada. (2024). *HungerCount 2024*.
4. Desjardins. (2024). The impact of housing affordability on youth.
5. Statistics Canada. (2025). Youth unemployment rate edges up in June; school aged youth see the largest year over year increase. *The Daily*. Government of Canada.
6. Employment and Social Development Canada. (2024). *Horizontal evaluation of the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy*. Government of Canada.
7. Ibid

Young people in low-income communities also face greater barriers to long-term financial stability, limiting their opportunities later in life.⁸ In some communities in Canada, the number of young people without a high school certificate or diploma can be double or triple the national average, and in some areas reach up to 50%.⁹ Leaving high school remains one of the strongest risk factors associated with reliance on social assistance,¹⁰ resulting in a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty that is difficult to break.

The emotional and psychological toll of this uncertainty is becoming harder to ignore. Food insecurity is associated with higher risk of mood disorders and suicidal thoughts,¹¹ while two-thirds of Canadians blame worsening youth mental health on the rising cost of living.¹² Not having enough money to pay for basic needs can also cause feelings of stress, shame, and isolation, and lead to social exclusion.¹³

The research paints a stark picture of life growing up in Canada's lowest-income communities. But behind every statistic is a young person. For over two decades, we have worked in partnership with community organizations, youth, and families who live these realities every day. Our recent Program Review involved deep engagement with the communities we serve to help us better understand their evolving needs, and find out what it will take to build a fairer future.

8. Tilleczeck, K., Ferguson, B., Roth Edney, D., Rummens, A., Boydell, K., & Mueller, M. (2011). A contemporary study with early school leavers: Pathways and social processes of leaving high school. *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth*, 3(1), 1-39.
9. Based on 2021 Canadian Census data.
10. Hankivsky, O. (2008). Cost estimates of dropping out of high school in Canada. Prepared for Canadian Council on Learning, 1-85.
11. Fang, D., Thomsen, M. R., & Nayga, R. M. (2021). The association between food insecurity and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *BMC Public Health*, 21, 607.
12. Westoll, N. (2025). Canada's youth mental health crisis worsened by skyrocketing cost of living: Experts. *Global News*.
13. Government of Canada. (2018). *Tackling Poverty Together: The Government of Canada's Second Report on Poverty Reduction, Employment and Social Development Canada*.

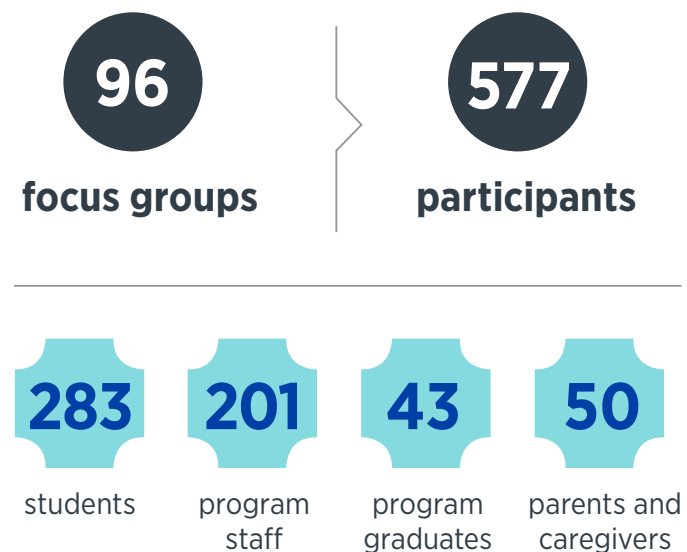
Beyond the Numbers:

The Pathways Program Review

To better understand and respond to the challenges facing young people today, we partnered with the Students Commission of Canada (SCC)—an independent charitable organization with broad experience in developing innovative and educational processes and products with and for youth—to conduct a comprehensive review of the Pathways Program.

The Program Review was designed to identify evolving needs, uncover best practices and successful strategies, and highlight gaps and opportunities to better support youth. The process involved gathering quantitative and qualitative data to shed light on the challenges facing Pathways students and the impact the program has on the lives of young people and communities.

Over four months, SCC held:



750 participants also completed supplementary quantitative surveys.

To strengthen the analysis, SCC also used three guiding lenses to better understand youth experiences. These guiding lenses were *Truth Leading to Reconciliation*, *Addressing Structural Racism*, and *Youth in Rural, Remote, and Northern Communities*. This approach acknowledged that communities across the country are not homogeneous and allowed us to intentionally examine the distinct experiences of Indigenous and newcomer youth.

At the heart of the review was a commitment to hearing directly from youth in a way that was interactive and grounded in trust. Wherever possible, youth shared their perspectives in person through facilitated workshops and focus groups. These sessions created space for open dialogue, allowing participants to reflect together on what barriers persist and what young people need most today.

Wider community voices were central at every stage. Local program staff, parents, and caregivers provided context on the pressures families are facing, while program graduates offered valuable perspectives on what helped them succeed beyond high school. Surveys were used to supplement the workshops, ensuring that every participant had the chance to contribute their views. Feedback from 28 Pathways communities was analyzed to identify national trends and local nuances.

This Program Review was a reflection of our shared belief that young people are experts in their own lives. Their insights offer a unique lens into the challenges they face, and what it will take to close the growing equity gap.

What We Heard:

The Top 3 Challenges Facing Youth in Low-Income Communities

Through this Program Review, we heard an unfiltered view of the realities young people are facing today. What emerged from these conversations was a consistent picture across the country of growing academic, financial, and social pressures that are defining what it means to grow up in Canada's low-income communities.

Key Findings

- 1** Academic needs are intensifying as systems struggle to keep up
- 2** Growing financial strain is impacting every part of student life
- 3** Social and emotional well-being needs are escalating

1 Academic needs are intensifying as systems struggle to keep up

Students are struggling to keep up in key subjects such as language, math, science, and history. Many said the curriculum assumes a uniform starting point that does not reflect the range of learning needs in their classrooms. Teachers are doing their best under difficult circumstances, but overcrowded classrooms and strained resources make it hard to provide the individualized attention students need to succeed.

We also heard that students with additional learning needs, including **neurodivergent youth**, are facing added challenges with focus, organization, and motivation. Students reported often feeling unseen or unsupported in classrooms under-resourced for their needs. Families, too, reported frustration with limited communication from schools and a lack of access to extra help when their children start to fall behind.

Indigenous students reported academic challenges compounded by systemic barriers. Many attend schools outside of their home communities, leading to culture shock and limited support. The effects of colonization continue to influence learning environments, where a lack of culturally relevant curriculum and resources leaves many Indigenous youth feeling disconnected from their education.

Similarly, **newcomer students** face barriers related to language and unfamiliarity with the Canadian school system. Some become translators for their parents, which adds to emotional strain and reduces time for schoolwork.

We heard that the **pandemic compounded academic gaps**. When learning moved online, many students lost motivation and focus, with noticeable declines in reading, writing, and overall academic performance. For some students, poor internet access and limited technology made online participation even harder. These setbacks widened existing disparities and left many students struggling to catch up once in-person learning resumed.

Excerpt from SCC's review

Students face a range of academic challenges, particularly in language classes (English and French), mathematics, science, and history classes. Many students feel that the curriculum assumes a uniform level of proficiency, which does not match their diverse needs. This one-size-fits-all approach often makes it difficult for students to receive the tailored support they need.

Community Voices

We have observed several students who have advanced through grades during COVID but who have not acquired the necessary knowledge, which is very demotivating for young people.

– Pathways Program staff

Many newcomers graduate or age out of high school before attaining a level of English that will allow them to enter meaningful work or post-secondary.

– Pathways Program staff

It's normal to fail because you haven't seen the subjects you're learning.

– Pathways student

There is a culture shock when young people go to schools outside their community.

– Pathways Program staff

Classrooms are overcrowded so individualized support doesn't exist there.

– Pathways student

What Youth Need to Close the Gap

Top Academic Needs

- ✓ **Individualized resources:** Increased access to 1:1 tutoring and mentoring to help students catch up in areas they are struggling with and stay motivated toward their academic goals.
- ✓ **Targeted resources for diverse learners:** Additional supports for those with additional learning needs including neurodivergent youth, as well as newcomer youth and their families who are adjusting to a new language and school system.
- ✓ **Cultural and land-based learning:** Access to culturally relevant supports, including a curriculum that integrates Indigenous knowledge, languages, and traditions to strengthen cultural identity and connection.



2

Growing financial strain is impacting every part of student life

The cost of daily life is becoming a defining barrier for students and families across Pathways communities. We heard that young people are struggling to afford necessities such as food, transportation, clothing, and school supplies. Many are taking on part-time work to contribute financially at home or feel pressured to work full-time after graduating from high school, which limits their ability to focus on long-term goals such as post-secondary education.

In **Indigenous communities**, we heard poverty, food insecurity, and inadequate housing remain persistent challenges. Limited infrastructure, including the absence of local grocery stores, makes daily life more expensive and challenging.

For **newcomer families**, financial stress often intersects with other immediate needs when arriving in Canada such as housing, healthcare, and employment. Newcomer youth also discussed increased financial difficulties due to cuts to bursaries and other forms of financial support, which have left them with fewer resources to cover educational and living costs.

For many families, the month of September is particularly difficult, with the cost of new clothes, footwear, and school materials adding to the burden. Celebratory milestones like graduation and prom have also become sources of financial pressure, as rising costs make participation difficult for many families. In terms of career and goal planning, **some students are self-censoring their aspirations due to perceived financial limitations**. The result is a growing divide between students who can afford to fully participate in school life and those who cannot.

Excerpt from SCC's review

Some students are shouldering the heavy responsibility of contributing financially to their families, which creates an overwhelming pressure on them. For these students, immediate needs like getting food on the table and meeting basic family expenses take priority over academic concerns such as getting good grades or completing assignments on time.

Community Voices

The rising costs that students have to pay in school fees is challenging...that's what stops a lot of our young people from fully participating in this exceptional time they worked for. Because you have to pay school fees and graduation fees.
– Pathways Program staff

I feel stressed about what will happen after high school, like if I fail or can't find a job.
– Pathways student

Nobody understands this, but September is the worst season for our family. Changing seasons, new clothes and footwear, school fees.
– Parent or caregiver

We have a significant number of students who are living in extreme poverty...
– Pathways Program staff

I worry about making enough money to support myself after high school.
– Pathways student

What Youth Need to Close the Gap

Top Financial Needs

- ✓ **Basic essentials:** Access to bus passes, food, clothing, and school supplies to reduce day-to-day stress for students and families.
- ✓ **Long-term financial resources:** Help navigating long-term supports like scholarships to help make post-secondary education and training more accessible for young people.
- ✓ **Education on financial literacy:** Workshops and one-on-one support to help youth and their families understand budgeting and post-secondary costs.



3

Social and emotional well-being needs are escalating

Isolation and disconnection emerged as a major theme in every Pathways community. **Students described feeling lonelier and less supported since the pandemic**, with fewer opportunities to build relationships outside the classroom. The shift to virtual learning disrupted their ability to connect with peers, but even after returning to in-person learning, many staff observed lingering changes in how young people interact. Students are socializing less, with fewer opportunities to participate in sports or extracurricular activities. Some communities reported an increase in interpersonal conflict and bullying. Pathways staff observed that this lack of social connection spills over into academics, with students feeling less motivated to attend school or participate in learning. Financial pressures and emotional well-being are also intrinsically linked, with students describing financial anxiety about the future.

For **Indigenous students**, we heard the absence of community-based and culturally relevant supports has deep roots in colonization. Many Indigenous communities lack local recreational spaces or clubs, and youth often have to travel outside of their home communities to attend school. This can lead to culture shock and make it harder for youth to stay engaged. Intergenerational trauma also has a significant impact on the well-being of Indigenous communities.

For **newcomer youth**, social isolation often stems from language barriers, cultural differences, and the emotional strain of relocating to a new country. Many arrive still processing difficult experiences and find it challenging to integrate socially or seek help for mental health concerns. Staff across program locations highlighted long wait times for mental health services—often longer than students' time in the Pathways Program.

Excerpt from SCC's review

A lot of young people today are dealing with social anxiety and isolation, which got worse after the pandemic. Many students struggle to find ways to connect with others outside of school, especially since schools mostly offer competitive sports and don't provide many options for fun recreational activities. This lack of engagement can lead to feelings of loneliness, making it even harder for young people to feel supported in their social lives.

Community Voices

Their social life, their home life, their life in general is not as good post-pandemic. They feel very lonely and don't know how to express themselves.

– Pathways Program staff

There is a great need for mental health support; it's difficult. With social media and everything we see, mental health is very difficult for children.

– Pathways Program staff

There's a lot going on under the surface.

– Pathways Program staff

Schools and the community are not prepared to offer newcomer youth the level of intensive language supports and system navigation coaching they need.

– Pathways Program staff

Indigenous students also carry a lot of trauma... a lot of grief.

– Pathways Program staff

What Youth Need to Close the Gap

Top Social Needs

- ✓ **Safer, inclusive spaces:** Access to welcoming environments where youth can connect and belong, giving them a break from the pressures of daily life.
- ✓ **Mental health resources:** Access to essential services to help students and their families manage stress and reduce isolation.
- ✓ **Culturally relevant supports:** Integrated supports that help youth connect to their culture and community and build a sense of belonging.



The Pathways Program:

A Blueprint for Youth Success

While this Program Review surfaced significant challenges facing Pathways youth, it also revealed clear evidence that the Pathways Program's community-led approach is helping students overcome them.

Across the country, students, families, and staff described the impact of strong, trusted relationships and access to wraparound supports that are tailored to the unique needs of individual students. Specifically, the Program Review validated the following successful practices:

Successful Practices

1

Helping students learn how to learn

2

Reducing financial barriers to participation

3

Building social and cultural connection

Successful Practices

Helping students learn how to learn

Staff and students described the Pathways Program's personalized supports as essential to helping youth meet their academic goals. One-on-one tutoring and mentorship help students manage their time and work toward their academic goals. Quiet, structured spaces promote focus and confidence, while consistent encouragement from staff reinforces classroom learning and keeps students engaged. We also heard the program helps bridge gaps in the education system for students with additional needs by complementing existing school supports such as language learning programming.

Excerpt from SCC's review

Pathways provides personalized support tailored to individual learning needs. Through one-on-one tutoring and mentorship, students receive help with specific academic challenges and also develop critical skills like organization, time management, and self-directed learning. Pathways assists students in developing essential academic strategies... empowering them to become more independent learners who can navigate academic and transitional challenges.

Community Voices

It's not just tutoring, you give students options and show them all the open doors available to them.
– Parent or caregiver

It's a question of motivation... knowing that there are people around you who are there to help you.
– Pathways Program staff

The program helps my kids a lot. It's been four years now, and it reinforces what they learn... and it allows them to socialize. Pathways helps them with the subjects they struggle with at school.
– Parent or caregiver

Teachers can't answer all our questions or help us because they have a heavy workload. Pathways is there to answer our questions and takes time with us.
– Pathways student

Successful Practices

2 Reducing financial barriers to participation

Pathways students and program staff confirmed financial supports are essential to helping youth stay engaged in school. We heard that assistance with transportation, food, clothing, and school supplies through the Pathways Program reduces the stress families face and allows students to focus on learning. Families said these resources, provided directly from Pathways or through community partnerships, reduce the economic barriers that prevent academic participation.

Excerpt from SCC's review

Pathways' financial support ensures that students have the resources they need to fully participate in their education, reducing the stress and distractions that come with financial hardship. By offering these resources, Pathways helps make sure that all students, no matter their financial situation, have the same chance to succeed academically. This approach helps to break down the barriers that often limit access to educational opportunities.

Successful Practices

3 Building social and cultural connection

Many young people reported viewing the program as a safety net for their emotional well-being, seeing Pathways staff as some of the few trusted adults they can rely on. Staff reported that spaces for recreation and social interaction are critical to well-being and motivation, particularly as youth continue to navigate post-pandemic isolation. We heard culturally relevant supports help youth, including newcomers, navigate systems and adjust to new environments. Access to spaces that integrate land-based learning and cultural practices also foster a sense of belonging for Indigenous youth.

Excerpt from SCC's review

Pathways fosters a safe and supportive environment where students can develop key social and interpersonal skills, such as communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence, which are essential transitional skills. The program also helps students build social networks and community connections, which are particularly important in a post-pandemic world where many students face social isolation.

Community Voices

We provide food and clothing, and that really helps because some families can't afford it, so it takes away some of the costs!
– Pathways Program staff

Thank you for all your efforts. I would like to think that if things ever get really difficult, we can count on financial assistance in extreme cases.
– Pathways student

Community Voices

The experiences we have here inspire us and help us discover things about ourselves. I didn't know I wanted to be a counsellor one day, but here I met someone and it helped me realize that's what I wanted to do.
– Pathways student

I had a lot of anxiety issues, and the Pathways volunteers are attentive and help us throughout the process.
– Pathways student

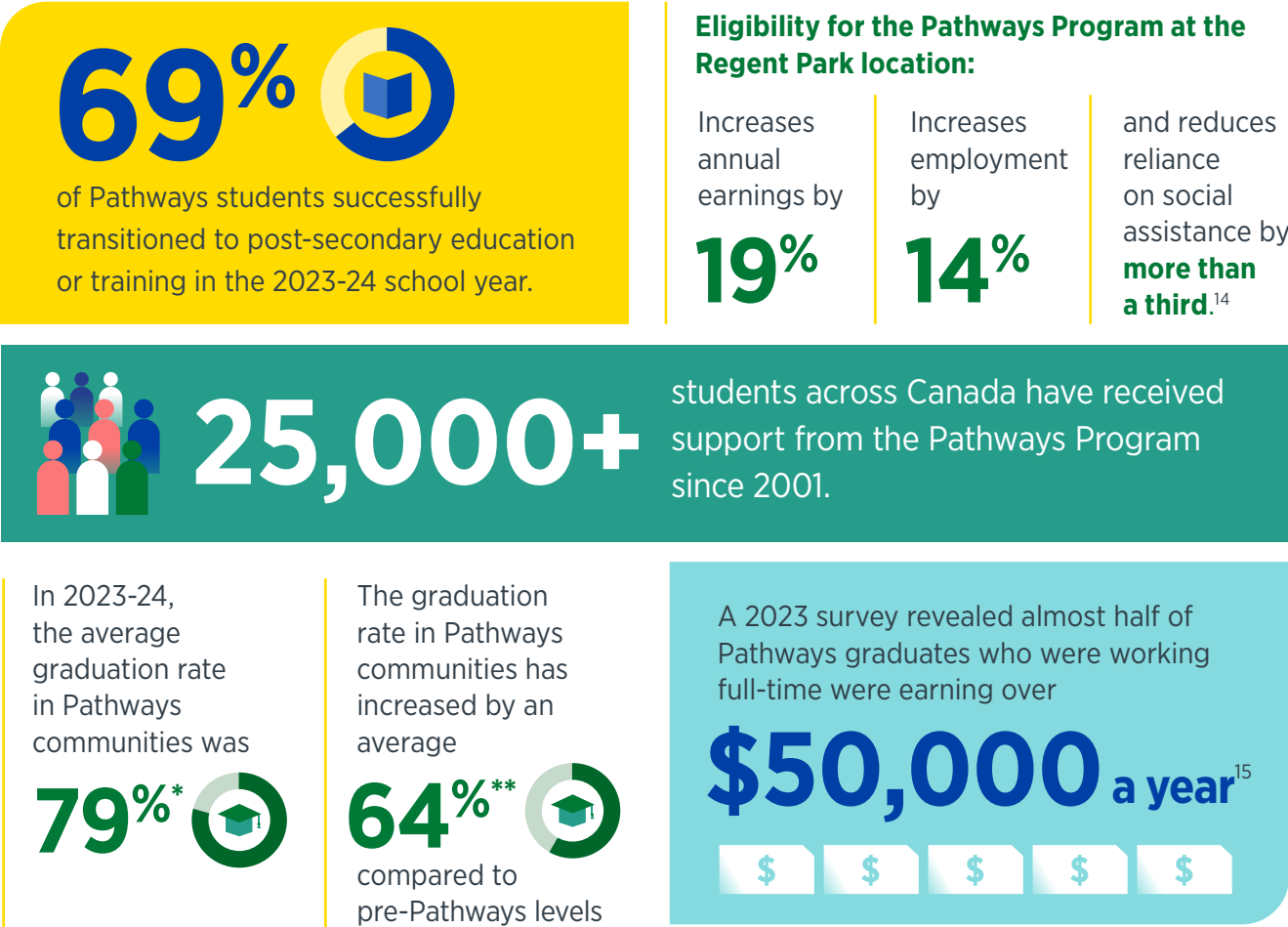
We have time to talk to each young person and remind them that they exist, that they are important, and that we are here to help them.
– Pathways Program staff

Without Pathways, our Indigenous students wouldn't have graduated on time. Some wouldn't have made it to Grade 10.
– Pathways Program staff

Demonstrated Outcomes:

A Proven Track Record of Success

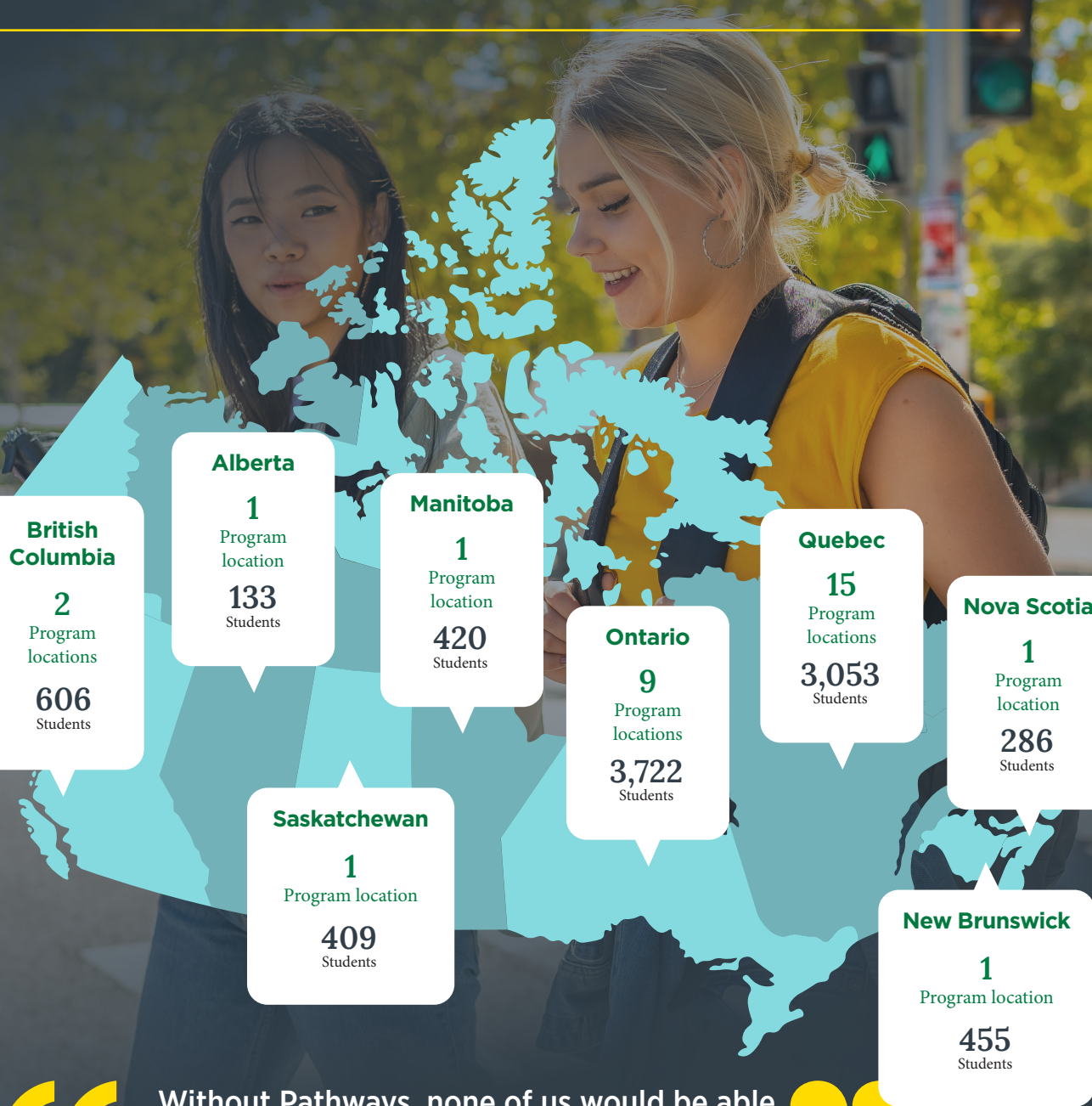
The insights gathered through the Program Review are supported by almost 25 years of evidence-based impact:



These results have far-reaching impact for Canada. Research shows education is the first step toward poverty reduction, with high school graduates being more likely to gain skilled employment, achieve food security, and live longer, healthier lives.¹⁶ Research from 2019 also shows if high school graduation rates in Ontario rose by just 3.7%, the province would save, on average, a total of \$16.4 million—or \$2,767 per additional graduate—across social assistance, public health care, and criminal justice spending. Over the course of two decades, this can compound into a total of \$3.5 billion in savings by 2040.¹⁷

* This rate represents 18 Pathways communities with at least one graduating cohort by 2023-24.
** Of 18 Pathways locations where graduation rates are applicable, 15 also have pre-Pathways graduation rates available.
14. Lavecchia, Adam M., Philip Oreopoulos, and Robert S. Brown. (2020). Long-Run Effects from Comprehensive Student Support: Evidence from Pathways to Education. *American Economic Review: Insights*, 2 (2): 209-24.
15. Pathways Canada. (2023). *Alumni Impact Survey*.
16. Fortin, P. (2016). L'obtention d'un diplôme d'études secondaires rapporte un demi-million de dollars au diplômé. Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM).
17. McArthur-Gupta, A. (2019). The Economic Case for Investing in Education. The Conference Board of Canada.

The Pathways Program's national footprint is made possible through a strong network of community-based Program Partners, who deliver the program on the ground in 31 communities across eight provinces. In each community, the program is adapted to reflect the unique realities, cultures, and strengths of local students.



“Without Pathways, none of us would be able to do what we are doing, helping our most vulnerable students, giving them a voice.”
– Pathways Program staff

A Network Under Pressure

The Pathways Program operates within a broader ecosystem of community-led organizations and youth-serving partners whose combined efforts are essential to addressing inequity at scale. Also known as the third sector, these mission-driven organizations work to strengthen communities and advance social outcomes. This work is supported by dedicated staff, volunteers, and community leaders, who represent a collective commitment to strengthening the systems young people rely on.

But these supports are at risk. Across the country, the third sector faces growing demand for services amid a declining funding landscape. This financial unreliability is threatening long-term sustainability.

We’re seeing this impact firsthand. Many Pathways Program locations now face waitlists, and funding constraints make it increasingly difficult to meet growing community needs. This impacts the ability to retain staff and often forces difficult trade-offs between providing essential supports and maintaining core programming.

The Program Review confirmed this reality. Across communities, staff described rising demand and funding that has not kept pace with the realities young people are facing.

Community Voices

We are stretched thin.
– Pathways Program staff

We want to celebrate our students, and we think they deserve it, but it’s really expensive to celebrate a group of 50 young people.
– Pathways Program staff

Without these community-driven supports, the equity gap will continue to grow—leaving young people in low-income communities even further behind. Addressing this challenge will require a willingness to listen to the people living these realities and coordinated action between the public, private, and third sectors.

Excerpt from SCC’s review

To effectively support students, there is a clear need for more dedicated resources, funding, and staff to handle 1:1 support. Smaller caseloads, better access to trained professionals, and more volunteers could make a significant difference in how much attention and guidance each student receives. The Pathways Program stands out because it allows staff to build strong relationships and take the time needed to understand and support each student’s unique needs. However, without more capacity and resources, the ability to prevent problems and give students the support they need for long-term success remains a major challenge.

An Urgent Call to Action:

Recommendations for Coordinated Effort

Canada’s future depends on how we respond to the growing equity gap.

Across the country, Pathways youth and communities have spoken openly about the barriers in their way and the supports that make a difference. Their voices have given us a clearer understanding of what equity must look like today and what it will take to achieve it. Now, we must turn these voices into action.

For governments and policymakers

With more than 300,000 young people in Canada living in low-income communities, their futures depend on a renewed commitment in their success and the systems that support it. We’re calling for governments and policymakers to:

1 Prioritize consistent, long-term investments in community-based supports

Sustain and expand funding for community-driven organizations that provide upstream, evidence-based supports to marginalized youth. Funding from sources like the federal government’s Supports for Student Learning Program allows these organizations to bridge the gap between schools and families, offering consistent, wraparound supports that prevent long-term instability.

2 Include marginalized youth voices in policy decisions

Create mechanisms that give youth a seat at the table in decisions that affect their futures. Policies that inform education, employment, and youth well-being must be informed by the perspectives and lived experiences of young people, especially those facing systemic barriers.

3 Integrate education into federal and provincial poverty reduction strategies

Breaking the cycle of poverty starts with high school graduation. Education and youth development must remain a central pillar in federal and provincial poverty reduction plans, with an increased focus on early intervention, high school completion, and equitable access to post-secondary and labour market options.

The overall cost of youth dropping out of high school in Quebec alone is estimated at nearly \$14 billion per year.¹⁸

18. Laurin, F. (2024). Décrochage scolaire : impact sur le développement économique et régional de la Mauricie, Institut de recherche sur les PME, Université de Québec à Trois-Rivières.

For donors and corporate partners

Real change happens when the private and charitable sectors work together. Donors, including individuals, foundations, and corporate partners have a critical role to play in expanding access and opportunity for young people. We’re calling for donors and corporate partners to:

1 Invest in community-led organizations supporting marginalized youth

Provide long-term, unrestricted funding to community-driven organizations that support marginalized youth. These organizations deliver evidence-based, culturally responsive supports that address structural inequities.

78% of Canadians say businesses have a responsibility to partner with community charities and non-profits.¹⁹

2 Support the essentials that make learning possible

Help remove everyday barriers to participation by funding access to food, transportation, school supplies, and financial aid. These basic needs are the foundation of academic success and long-term stability for youth and families.

3 Amplify awareness and advocacy for youth equity

Use your platforms, partnerships, and networks to raise awareness of the challenges facing Canada’s most vulnerable youth and to champion investment in the community-driven programs that support them.

19. Imagine Canada. (2024).

For education, youth-serving, and community-based organizations

Those closest to youth are best positioned to advance meaningful change. Strengthening our collective voice and aligning resources will ensure the systems surrounding youth are as strong as the potential within them. We’re calling on the sector to:

1 Continue to work in partnership to broaden the continuum of care for youth

Strengthen collaboration across community programs, schools and school boards, and local service providers to ensure youth receive consistent, coordinated support. Shared planning, communication, and referrals can help close gaps and build a more connected network of care.

2 Strengthen collective advocacy for youth equity

Partner with other organizations to continue advocating for the policies, funding, and systemic change needed to make community-led supports sustainable. When the sector speaks with a unified voice, it can influence how youth success is defined and resourced.

3 Share learnings and align approaches across the sector

Continue to share best practices, data, and lessons learned to strengthen the impact of what’s already working. Coordinated knowledge sharing and collaboration amplifies collective action and helps ensure programs remain responsive and relevant to evolving youth needs.

Conclusion:

A Shared Vision for the Future

The findings of this report make it clear that the growing challenges facing young people in marginalized communities today are deeply complex and rooted in systemic inequities. Yet they also affirm something equally as powerful: *effective solutions already exist.*

The success of the Pathways Program to date is clear evidence of what is possible when those closest to youth are trusted and resourced to lead. And across Canada, an entire ecosystem of community-led organizations is working alongside us to support youth furthest from equity. This upstream approach to breaking the cycle of poverty has far reaching benefits to communities and society. But without these supports, we risk reversing decades of progress toward improving long-term outcomes for marginalized youth.

We're now at a critical moment where the cost of inaction is far greater than the cost of investment. Through the Program Review, we heard loud and clear what challenges young people are facing and what they need to close the equity gap. We now need urgent, coordinated action across the public, private, and third sectors to make it a reality.

Governments, policymakers, supporters, educators, and youth-serving organizations all play a critical role in creating conditions where every young person has access to the resources they need to succeed. This collaboration will allow us to create a future where community organizations are funded sustainably so they can prioritize the most urgent needs. Where we listen to young people and co-create relevant solutions with them, for them. Where youth-serving programs and services exchange information and work together to amplify impact and build a stronger continuum of care. Where every young person, regardless of postal code or income, has access to the supports they need to overcome the barriers they face and achieve long-term success.

Because when we invest in *all* youth, we invest in a stronger, more equitable Canada.

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We are also immensely grateful to the Pathways students, families, graduates, and program staff whose perspectives and lived experiences informed this report and provided a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing youth today.

We also recognize the dedication of our 29 Program Partners across 31 communities, whose local expertise and collaboration continue to drive meaningful change for Pathways youth. Their ongoing commitment to equity and community-led action remains at the heart of this work.



Our Commitment to Indigenous Youth

We are committed to building honourable relationships and partnerships with Indigenous students, families, and communities. We understand our role is to continue to build our competency to act on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action that are relevant to our role in education and youth programming. We acknowledge the significant responsibility we have been granted by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities as a resource that will support Indigenous students to graduate from high school and realize their true potential. We understand that this must be done with a culturally respectful and relevant approach, and we will continue our learning, engagement, and relationship-building so that our practice is the very best it can be.



Pathways to Education

For more information about Pathways to Education
and the work we do to close the equity gap, please visit

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