



GOODTalk

Gathering Indigenous Youth
Voices across British Columbia



CFBC

Building foundations
for empowered futures



MEET THE AUTHOR

Justin Young is a remarkable individual who walks a profound path of healing, self-development, and love. As a Heart Speaker and Circle Keeper, he embodies wisdom and compassion, dedicating his life to supporting others on their journeys of growth and transformation. Justin's innate ability to connect deeply with people allows him to create sacred spaces where individuals can be heard, seen, and embraced. He serves as a guide, listener, and facilitator, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment within communities. Through his gentle and nurturing presence, he encourages individuals to explore healing and embark on inner journeys to discover their true potential.

As a Circle Keeper, Justin understands the power of community and the significance of shared experiences. He creates safe and inclusive circles where individuals can gather, share their stories, and collectively navigate life's challenges. In these circles, he cultivates trust, respect, and vulnerability, allowing participants to access their inner wisdom, find solace, and forge meaningful connections.

Justin is committed to his growth and self-development. He continually seeks knowledge, practices self-reflection, and embraces various healing modalities. He is an inspiring example of authenticity, resilience, and self-love. Justin's work extends beyond the boundaries of personal healing and growth. He recognizes the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of collective well-being. He advocates for social justice, environmental stewardship, and honouring indigenous wisdom and traditions. His deep reverence for the Earth and all its inhabitants drives him to be an agent of positive change and an advocate for harmony and balance.

In summary, Justin, a Heart Speaker, Circle keeper, and advocate for healing and love, has dedicated his life to creating healing, growth, and connection spaces. Through his nurturing presence, he supports individuals on their journeys, facilitates transformative circles, and embodies the values of authenticity and compassion. Justin's commitment to personal and collective well-being inspires us, reminding us of the power of love and community in healing and self-discovery.

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REPORT SUMMARY

This report discusses the importance of establishing meaningful connections with Indigenous youth and ensuring they are included in the conversations and decisions that will impact the trajectory of their lives. This report is written by Justin Young, a Heart Speaker and Circle Keeper with over 13 years of experience working with Indigenous youth in their communities. Justin has made youth advocacy his life passion after his living through his own challenging experiences as an Indigenous person. He has spent years on a transformative healing journey which has enabled him to grow into the incredibly compassionate and empathetic mentor he is today.

Justin spent much of 2022 establishing a Youth Advisory Group with the support of *The Construction Foundation of British Columbia* and *Two Eyed Seeing Consulting CCC Inc.* Justin initially worked with this Youth Advisory Group to understand barriers the youth are facing when engaging in training and employment opportunities. While working with this group, Justin quickly realized that more in-depth conversations needed to take place, with a larger number of youth - in order to grasp the full dynamics of their experiences.

Justin started working on a project called *Gathering Youth Voices* where he pledged to talk to hundreds of Indigenous youth throughout the province of British Columbia. The initial, simplified version of the *Youth Questionnaire* was developed and Justin began traveling to meet with groups of youth within their communities throughout July of 2022. By August 2022 Justin was engaging with communities on a regular basis and the project became known as *Good Talk* and contained a much more comprehensive *Youth Questionnaire*.

The findings of this project have highlighted the unique challenges among Indigenous youth while exploring their exposure and knowledge of career and training options that are available to them. *Good Talk* examines the youths' goals, passions, cultural connectivity, and their desire to stay within their communities. We have seen that many youth feel inclined to work within service-oriented professions such as health care, education and computer and technology industries. The youth expressed a desire to help improve the wellbeing of their communities with some even reported they hoped to, one day, become Chief.

We explored their knowledge of skilled trades and quickly learnt that only a small proportion had ever been exposed to this industry, however approximately half of the youth were eager to learn more.

Through his work, Justin recommends focusing on four key areas in the continuing support of Indigenous youth across the province. These recommendations include: establishing a youth network; creating an annual youth camp; developing a Cultural Apprenticeship program; and gathering Indigenous community members to form a network for community development.

INTRODUCTION

My name is Justin Young Pinaysih Keeshik Intihshinikas Kinew Intootaym. I am Thunder Sky - a Heart Speaker and Circle Keeper. I have been honored to have had the opportunity to spend time over the last 13 years connecting with Indigenous youth. This is a role that I have evolved into throughout my own formative healing journey. During this time, I embarked on a transformative 2300km, seven and a half month long walk from Kamloops, British Columbia, to Bloodvien, Manitoba, 300k north of Winnipeg. I did this walk because I desperately needed a change within my life, I was so sick and tired of feeling like a nobody, a loser who was always lost and addicted.

Through hard work, I found help, made a commitment, and followed through to become the person I am today. I am Thunder Sky, an Anishinaabe warrior filled with love, healing and passion to be a part of the rising of all Nations.

I am so deeply committed to being a part of the rising of our Nations. I have grown up in foster homes, experiencing child abuse and so much trauma and addiction. I cannot change what has happened to me, however, I choose to have the power over how it makes me feel today. I have learned through healing that I have the ability to transform this mountain of trauma that was once on my back into small pebbles that I can carry with me in my pocket, as teachings. I am now becoming the change that I always wished to see in my own life. It starts within me.

I have been invited to gather Indigenous youth voice through our work with The Construction Foundation of British Columbia and Two Eyed Seeing Consulting CCC Inc.. It is such an honor to do this work as our youth desperately need to have their experiences heard. For us to truly build a future with the youth at the centre of all that we do, it is imperative that we create spaces where we can connect with the youth. Spaces where they feel supported, included, and able to talk freely without judgment. We must listen mindfully, as their voices are sacred.

Our youth face many challenges with identity, addiction, and trauma. The residential schools have and continue to affect our people through each generation, which has resulted in loss of culture, tradition, and has created many broken families. Youth struggle with simply showing up. They are challenged with the complex questioning of who they really are while facing daily tasks that most adults might assume come naturally. In Canada, Indigenous youth are highly disadvantaged in contrast to non-Indigenous youth populations and must navigate through a disconcerting number of barriers throughout the course of their lives. Unfortunately, these struggles typically start early on in childhood.

In 2022, the number of Indigenous children in BC government care outnumbered non-Indigenous children by a ratio of almost three to one, even though they make up only 10 percent of the total population of children in BC. In addition, a disproportionate amount of Indigenous youth will grow up living in inadequate housing arrangements which includes homes that are overcrowded and in need of major repairs. Indigenous people are overrepresented in populations who are found living in low-income homes, with 22 percent falling into this category and climbing to as high as 30 percent of the population living on reserve. Outside of the home, Indigenous youth are left behind early on in their educational journey. A recent study through C.D. Howe Institute found that only 48 percent of youth living on reserve completed high school and while this amount increased to 75 percent when living off reserve, it still falls short of the overall average of 90 percent of youth who graduate high school in BC.

Indigenous youth also face considerable disparities in both their physical and mental health, which ultimately leads toward poorer overall health outcomes. An investigation by The World Health Organization “now recognizes European colonization as a common and fundamental underlying determinant of Indigenous health.” (ICTINC, 2019). While some improvements have been made in recent years, Indigenous people still remain at a disproportionately higher risk for illness and early death from chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease. Poor mental health outcomes are linked to the intergenerational effects of Residential Schools, government programs that remove autonomy from Indigenous communities, and policies that create and perpetuate social determinants of mental illness, including poverty, unemployment, housing, and food insecurity. The statistics are alarming. The number of Indigenous youth who take their own lives every year in Canada continues to far exceed national averages. Suicide rates among Indigenous youth are six times higher than non-Indigenous populations in Canada while approximately 25 percent of Indigenous people in Canada suffer from addiction.

These considerable disparities amongst Indigenous youth have highlighted the importance of our work and fuelled me to fight for change. In June 2022, I gathered a small group of youth workers from around the Province of BC, to collaborate with, who would later turn into our main **Youth Advisory Team**. Members of *the Youth Advisory Team* needed to meet the specific criteria of having Indigenous ancestry and who were either currently working with youth or were themselves a youth. We started meeting with the group virtually and engaging in many difficult but much needed conversations surrounding the realities that our Indigenous youth face here in our province. The **Youth Advisory Team** shared their own experiences as well as those of the youth they work with. They assisted in providing us with valuable feedback which was incorporated into a larger conversation with *The Two Eyed Seeing Network*. As these conversations evolved, I established a goal to connect with as many youth as I possibly could in hopes of hearing as many unique stories and perspectives from as many Indigenous youth as achievable.

OUR EXPERIENCE

We developed a practical way to gather the stories we heard which would translate into collectable data. Through the use of the **Youth Questionnaire** – which consisted of four main themes; *Getting to know you, Current Situation, Envisioning the Future and Helping you get there*, we started hearing from the youth and understanding more about them.

In Sept of 2022, I was invited to meet with my first group at Ness Lake Youth Camp. I provided a workshop called Heart Speaking with the youth, where I shared my journey of becoming who I am today. I shared my experience of turning my hurts and pains into teachings of courage and passion. I then carried out a workshop *called What Makes ME, ME*; a self-reflective workshop that encourages participants to look within themselves with hopes of self-discovery of who they are. After this workshop I discussed the purpose of the **Youth Questionnaire**, making sure the group was comfortable with the topics discussed and that they understood how their feedback would be used. After the youth completed the **Youth Questionnaire**, I held the words on their papers up and said a prayer. I thanked the youth for kindly sharing their thoughts, their words, and their experiences in this journey we call life. I then asked Creator to please guide me in the delivery of those words to the next people who hear them and support this process. I have continued this with every group of youth I meet with as I truly believe that we must first develop a relationship with our young people if we are to be trusted with

their thoughts about who they are and their hopes and dream in life. Gathering youth voice has been such an honorable way of life.

I have a dream to one day gather up as many youth workers as we can to inspire and honor them for all the work they continue to do with our young people. I believe youth workers are the key connection to our young people and we need to prioritize supporting youth workers through ongoing training, self-development and funding opportunities. Further to this, supporting and creating more opportunities for cultural connection is integral to the overall wellbeing of youth workers and the youth they support. I would like us to inspire and support youth workers in the process of becoming champions within their communities, embodying the role of a student, mentor and teacher from within.

As this role has continued to evolve, I have now had the privilege to meet with youth and youth workers across the entire province of BC. I have visited many Nations across the province including Teltahan Nation, St'at'imc Nation, Nisga'a Nation, Tl'etinqox Nation, Blueberry First Nations, Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc, and the Métis Nation. This work is not something I am doing for myself, more so I am doing this for we; we the Indigenous people who are working on healing, learning, and connecting to our ways of life. We have such a beautiful way of life that is not meant to be assimilated into the western ways of knowing. Colonization and residential schools have taken a toll on our hearts, our minds, and our souls. We have lost so much of our identity, our families, our communities, and our culture. We are here today, doing our absolute best to rebuild our inner selves through such a horrifically bleak chapter in our history.

We still very much impose a western way of being upon our youth. Western society sends the message that in order to be a person of value, you must complete your education, obtain a respected job, surround yourself with important people and own houses, cars, and other materialistic possessions. Failing to meet these standards results in a person not being viewed as a successful or productive member of society.

In contrast, our way of life places a high value on connectivity and each playing an important role to keep our communities functioning. We are all sacred humans connecting and doing our best to learn what it means to be living the gift of life. We are good people and we live a good way of life. We hold strong connections to the land. We live, love and learn through walking, talking and connecting with the land. We find our strength in song, prayers and ceremonies, praying for ourselves and for each other. We find our strength in the beat of the drum. We are reconnecting with our families despite all that we've been through. We are strong, we are resilient and we are still here. We are proof that our ancestors prayers have come to truth. Here we stand, learning and relearning our way of life. We must keep remembering that our Great Spirit will take good care of us.

QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS

Through the Youth Questionnaire, we have been able to observe key themes that have appeared across the four sections we explored: *Getting to know you*; *Current situation*; *Envisioning the future*; and, *Helping you get there*.

First, under the *Getting to know you* theme, we focused on who the youth are, where they come from, the Nations they belong to and various things they are interested in. We invited them to explore and share the things they are grateful for and passionate about and address any changes they would like to see within themselves and their communities.

The average age of the youth we have worked with is 17 years old. Over three-quarters of these youth live within their communities with approximately 86 percent of them living with their family members. The youth reported that one of their favorite activities was enjoying time with their friends and also highlighted the importance of spirituality and cultural activities within their lives. The youth were asked what they were most passionate about and many of them shared that family and art were of high value to them. When asked what they were most grateful for answers of family, friends and their lives were continuously reported.. We asked the youth “if you were Chief for the day, what would you do?” and the majority of feedback revolved around community improvements with an emphasis on developing better housing, creating more programs for their community and simply listening to their community members and helping out where needed.

Under the *Current situation* theme, we explore what life currently looks like for the youth in terms of employment, volunteer, and training experiences. As the average age of the youth we met with was only 17, many were still in secondary school and have yet to complete any formal post-secondary education or training programs. Approximately 15 percent reported receiving on-the-job training while roughly 10 percent have completed a short-term training program or mentoring with an Elder. Almost 80 percent of the youth that we spoke with had some form of work experience, however only one-third were currently employed. While youth found their current employment through a variety of ways, many of them indicated that the job was either offered to them or was found through family and friend connections.. When asked what their favorite job experience has been, childcare, youth work and various summer jobs were repeatedly mentioned. Over 72 percent of the youth had volunteer experience, mainly in community support roles, helping Elders and a variety of childcare and youth work.

In the next section, *Envisioning the future*, we invited the youth to share their dream jobs, and explore industries and settings where they might be interested in working. We also tried to gain an understanding of their interest and knowledge in both the skilled trades and entrepreneurship. The top reported dream jobs were actors, lawyers and teachers. An overwhelming majority of youth reported that being able to help others was incredibly important and fulfilling to them, and something that they consider to “light them up”. Approximately one-third of the youth indicated they would like to work within the healthcare industry, followed closely by education and computer and technology industries. Close to half of the youth indicated that they would ideally stay and work within their own community, although over half said they would also be willing to relocate. Many of the youth indicated that given the chance, they would choose to work in an outdoor setting, while approximately one quarter reported a desire to work within a large company.

We surveyed the youth's knowledge of the skilled trades and asked them to identify which trades they were aware of. Approximately 5 percent of youth reported a strong understanding of the skilled trades, while one-third said they had some general knowledge and almost half reporting having little to no knowledge at all. While the youth reported not being extremely familiar with skilled trades, one-third indicated that they would be interested in working in a trade. Common skilled trades that the youth could identify included carpentry, welding and electrician. We then asked the youth about their interest in entrepreneurship, where over half indicated that they are interested in this type of work. The top reported entrepreneurship categories were businesses geared toward helping people and creativity.

The last theme we discussed was *Helping you get there*, where we explored what types of support youth felt they needed to help them pursue their goals. We also asked the youth how connected they felt to their culture and if they would like to become more connected. The youth reported that mentorship, education advice and help with finding employment would be beneficial during this process. During the training period of employment, the youth highlighted the value of hands on, in-person training over flexible, remote options. We asked what youth would value from their employers in the workplace and many of them indicated that mentorship, flexibility in scheduling and friendly, encouraging environments were important to them. Lastly, we asked the youth if they felt connected to their culture. Only a small percentage of the youth actually answered this question, of the answers we received, close to half of the youth indicated that they felt connected, while even more indicated they would like to feel more connected with their culture. A very small percentage said they had no interest in connecting with their culture at this time. We then invited the youth to share anything they wanted us to know. Some youth shared their personal experiences of overcoming homelessness and addiction, while others shared their desire for self-improvement and helping their communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I strongly believe that investing in our youth workers is fundamental to the process of understanding the needs of Indigenous youth across British Columbia and have defined four key recommendations in support of this goal:

1. Establishing a youth worker network;
2. Hosting annual regional youth camps; and,
3. The development of a cultural apprenticeship program.
4. Indigenous community development network.

The most practical way to support Indigenous youth starts with our youth workers who fill an incredibly essential and powerful role. Youth workers provide a safe space for youth to turn to when their worlds feel confusing and chaotic, oftentimes being the one consistent thing in their lives and acting as a protective factor for vulnerable youth. In an Australian youth study, one youth worker reported that their relationship with the youth was “central, foundational and a prerequisite to making other things happen. It is the foundation to the achievement of other youth work goals.” (Rodd and Stewart, 2009) This unique relationship holds both educational and therapeutic value and provides the youth a more positive experience into adulthood.

Recognizing this integral relationship motivates me to ensure proper supports are in place for our youth workers who engage with young people. In order to do this, I would like to establish a Network for youth workers that offers opportunities for training, mentorship, and networking. This Network will act as a central resource system where youth workers can access additional training workshops to supplement their pre-existing knowledge and compliment the unique needs of the groups of youth they work with. In addition, youth workers will be able to receive mentorship and support through connecting with other youth workers and have the support of Elders who are there to help guide and support them in the work they do. As their work is so instrumental in the trajectory of the lives of the youth they work with, we need to focus on honoring, encouraging, and inspiring our youth workers.

Gatherings will be built on our traditional ways of knowing and being and incorporate skill development and connectivity. Research has found that “the most important resiliency factor for youth is the connectedness with people who are able to model caring and respective pro-social behavior,” (Rodd, and Stewart, 2009) echoing just how impactful this role is.

The second recommendation is organizing a youth camp that would be held annually within each of the province’s five regions. These camps would host both youth and youth workers collectively and offer the opportunity to connect with one another, their communities and to explore their cultures. Community members would be invited to collaborate in the creation of the camps so that they are curated to fit the traditional knowledge and experiences unique to their region. Local Elders and knowledge keepers would be invited to speak and encourage cultural continuity and mentorship. Youth camps would occur over approximately four days, offering a completely immersive experience with workshops, activities, team building and cultural connectivity to both youth and youth workers.

In addition, both the network and camps would offer places where industry and training providers could connect with youth to share information and help inform youth what opportunities are out there – as an addition to the important activities of building supports, community and personal and professional development mentioned above.

The third recommendation is a dream I have of developing a Cultural Apprenticeship program that is focused solely on developing cultural awareness and connectivity to our ways of life. This would be a fully funded program that combines a holistic approach to life and cultural learning over the course of four years. The curriculum would be developed with the support of local knowledge keepers alongside each Nation, integrating traditional teachings and understanding. The program would follow traditional Master/Apprenticeship models that our Nations have utilized for centuries and would ensure communities would be supported to pass along their cultural teachings and, importantly, have new leaders arise in culture, language, songs, stories, artforms and so much more.

Lastly, the final recommendation is creating a network of Indigenous individuals who are involved within their communities. This network would consist of individuals living in communities throughout the province who would meet monthly in a virtual setting to discuss specific topics that are collaboratively determined in advance. This network would act as a space for likeminded individuals who are heavily involved within their communities to connect, support, and encourage growth amongst one another. The main purpose would be community development among our nations.

Carrying out this type of work myself, I know just how disconnected and defeated you can feel at times and see the vast need for connectivity and encouragement from individuals involved in the

same experiences. We would cultivate relationship building, gain an understanding of each other and explore what motivates us to do this type of work. The network would be a central space where resources and supports are accessed. It would be a network consisting of movers and shakers who are out there, doing the work in their communities.

CONCLUSION

As I reflect on where this journey has taken me, it's clear how much we have been hurt. Many of the youth did not know which Nation they belong to, appearing despondent when asked about their culture and ways of knowing. I do my best to encourage, and I love the idea that we are continuing to grow and learn and have the ability to make a difference. It is so tough because we have been torn from our families and endured so much trauma. We have so much to heal from and such an incredibly long way to grow. We are still here; our hearts are still beating and we still have breaths to take and moments to live. I ask myself, "Who am I, to think I can make a difference in this world? Who am I to think that I can elevate our youth's voices at the tables within our society, where they hold the recourses to help us?" Then I grapple with the thought, "How is it that we are asking those who are our takers, to give to us?" We are walking with our Great Spirit and learning as best as we can, though so many of us become lost in the idea that we must have money to fix our problems. What we need is love and support. We need to build connections, inspire each other and above all, love each other. This is such a difficult, up-hill battle to face, but I do believe we can get there. Every human deserves love, we are all beautiful in our own ways, we all have a life to live. I am going to keep on doing my best to be a part of the solutions, to be a part of the change. We are the ones our ancestors have prayed for.

Megwitch

APPENDIX A – Data Charts

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

279 AMOUNT OF YOUTH ENGAGED

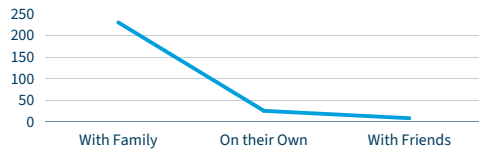
17.4 AVERAGE AGE

76 NATIONS ENGAGED

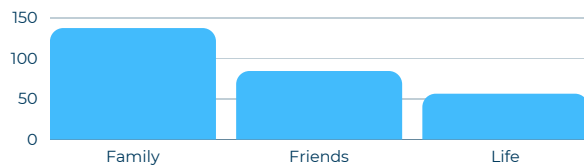
3 IN 4 YOUTH LIVE WITHIN THEIR COMMUNITIES



86% OF YOUTH LIVE WITH THEIR FAMILIES



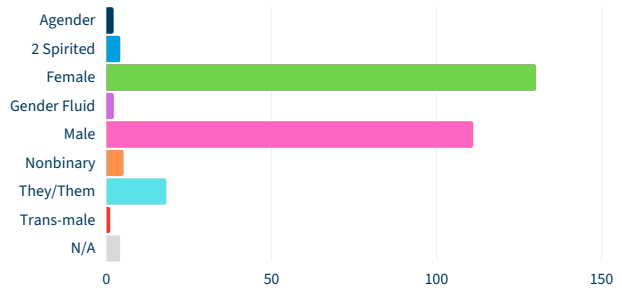
THINGS YOUTH ARE GRATEFUL FOR



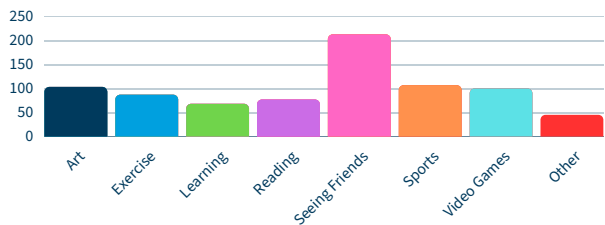
IF THE YOUTH WERE CHIEF FOR A DAY, THEY WOULD:

- 1 CREATE BETTER HOUSING
- 2 HELP AROUND THE COMMUNITY
- 3 CREATE MORE COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

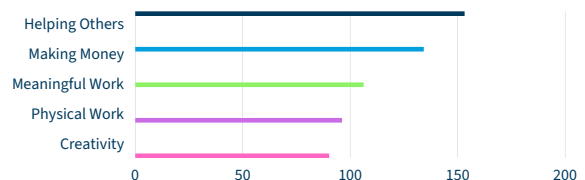
HOW YOUTH IDENTIFY



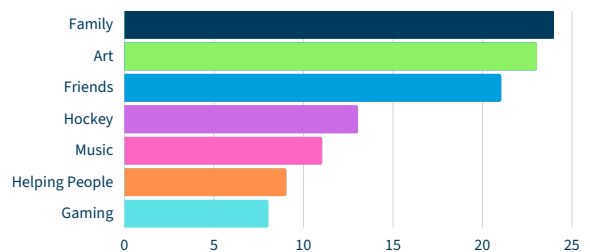
ACTIVITIES YOUTH ENJOY



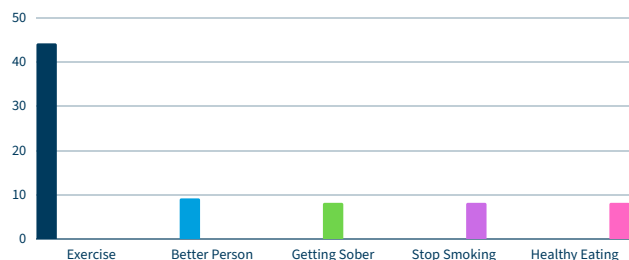
THINGS THAT LIGHT THE YOUTH UP



THINGS YOUTH ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT

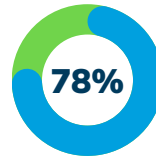
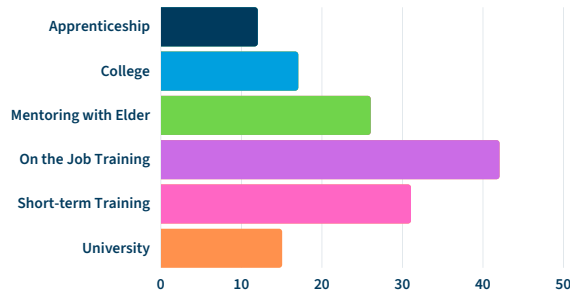


30 DAY COMMITMENTS YOUTH WANT TO MAKE

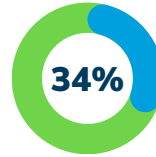


CURRENT SITUATION

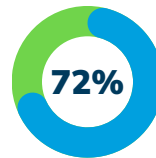
TRAINING YOUTH HAVE RECEIVED



78% OF YOUTH HAVE SOME FORM OF WORK EXPERIENCE

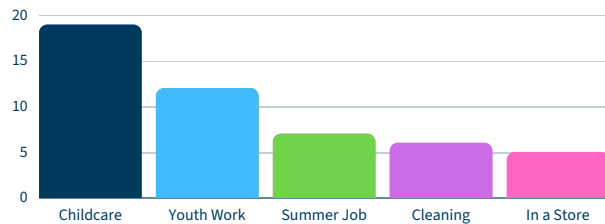


34% OF YOUTH ARE CURRENTLY EMPLOYED

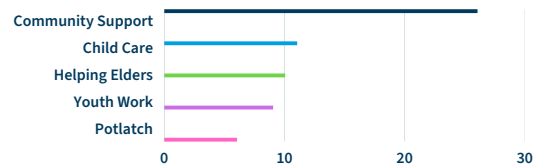


72% OF YOUTH HAVE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

FAVOURITE JOB POSITIONS YOUTH HAVE HELD



FAVOURITE VOLUNTEER POSITIONS



HELPING YOU GET THERE

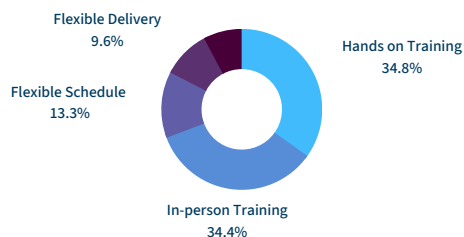
SUPPORT YOUTH NEED TO REACH GOALS



1 IN 2 YOUTH FEEL CONNECTED TO THEIR CULTURE



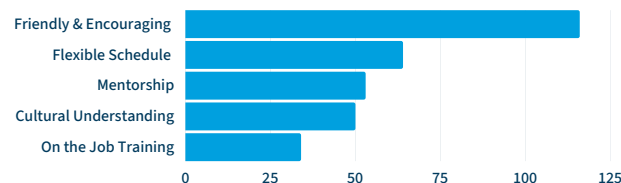
SUPPORT NEEDED WHILE TRAINING



2 IN 4 YOUTH WISH THEY WERE MORE CONNECTED WITH THEIR CULTURE



SUPPORT NEEDED FROM EMPLOYERS



WAYS YOUTH CONNECT WITH THEIR CULTURE

- ① LEARNING THEIR LANGUAGE AND HISTORY
- ② SONG AND DANCE
- ③ CEREMONIES

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

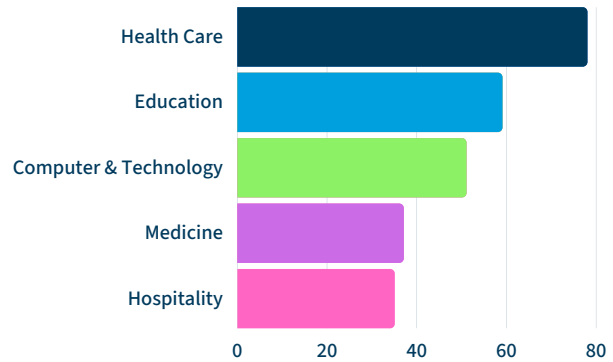
7 IN 10 YOUTH HOPE TO STAY AND WORK WITHIN THEIR COMMUNITIES



6 IN 10 YOUTH WOULD CONSIDER RELOCATING FOR THE RIGHT CAREER



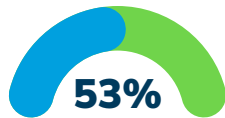
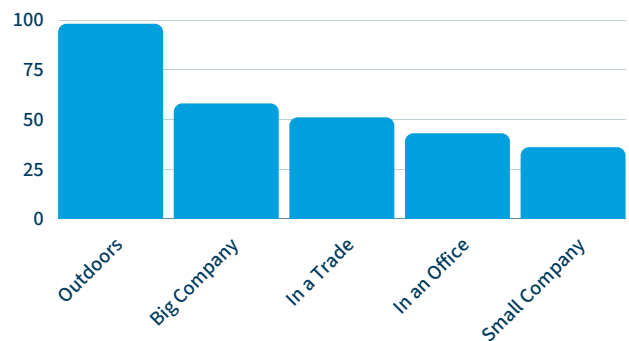
INDUSTRIES YOUTH ARE INTERESTED IN



YOUTH'S TOP 3 DREAM JOBS

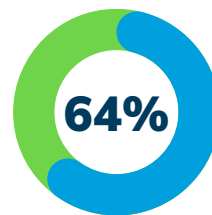
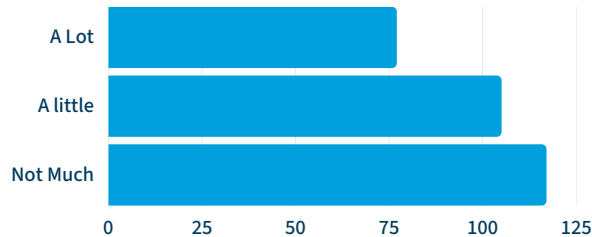


SETTINGS THAT YOUTH WANT TO WORK IN



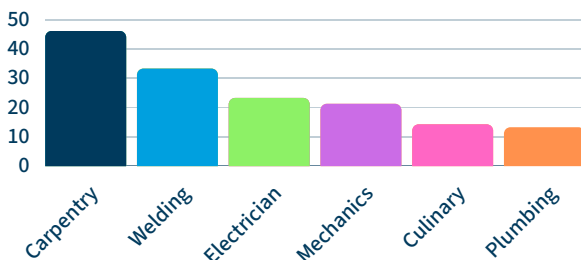
YOUTH INTERESTED IN SKILLED TRADES

YOUTH KNOWLEDGE OF SKILLED TRADES

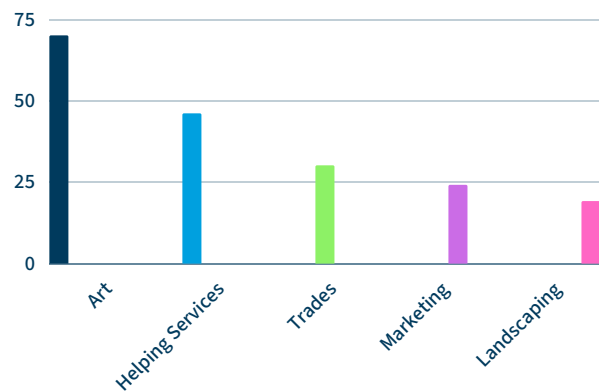


64% OF YOUTH ARE INTERESTED IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

SKILLED TRADES YOUTH ARE FAMILIAR WITH



TYPES OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP YOUTH ARE INTERESTED IN



CITATION

ICTINC. (2019) Key Issues for Indigenous People in Canada. Indigenous Corporate Training Inc.
<https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/8-key-issues-for-indigenous-peoples-in-canada>

Rodd, H., & Stewart, H., (2009) The glue that holds our work together. Youth Studies
Australia, 24(4), 4-10.
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