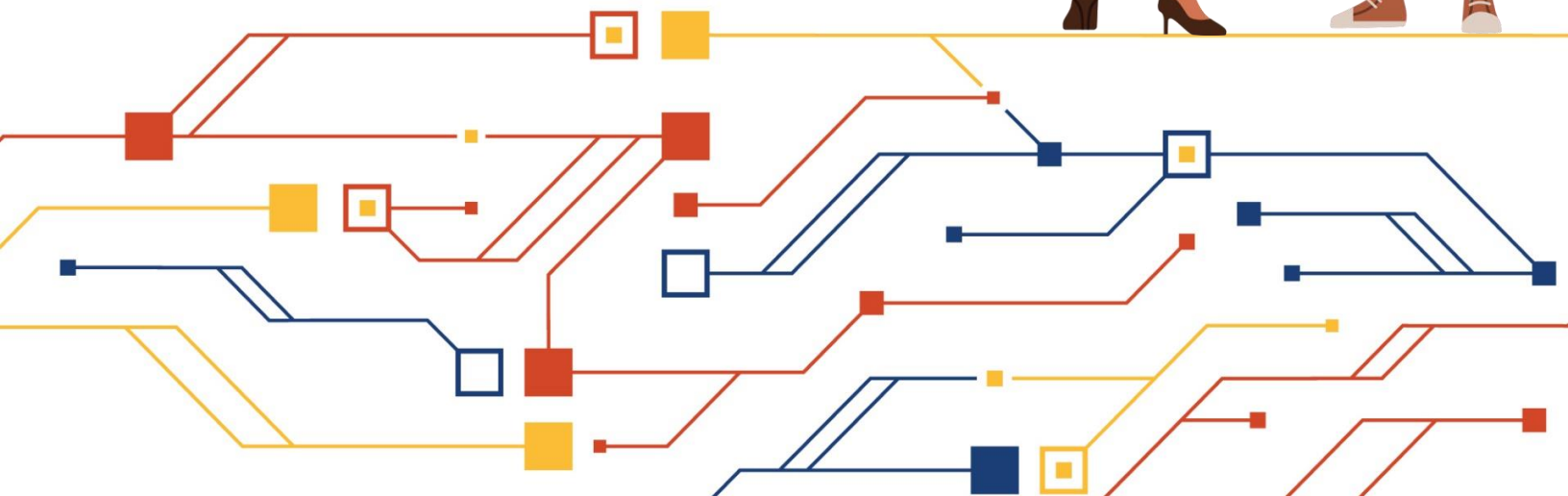


# Hidden Talent:

## Unlocking the Employment Potential of Newcomer Youth in the Toronto Region

### *Summary Report*



Funded by: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada  
Financé par : Immigration, Réfugiés et Citoyenneté Canada

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# Acknowledgements

This report is the result of a research project led by the [Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council](#) (TRIEC), [WoodGreen Community Services](#) (WoodGreen) and [JVS Toronto](#) (JVS). The project team included:

- Sugi Vasavithasan, Research and Evaluation Manager, TRIEC
- Neda Farahmandpour, Research Manager, JVS
- Rachele Molto, Research Assistant, JVS
- Farzana Propa, Research and Evaluation Coordinator, WoodGreen
- Alma Betancourth, Research and Evaluation Coordinator, WoodGreen
- Rebeka Darvas, Project Coordinator, WoodGreen
- Karin Deane, Program Design, Learning and Evaluation Manager, WoodGreen

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- [R.A. Malatest & Associates](#), plus the cognitive testers and youth surveyors, who conducted the survey of youth.
- [KMA Consultants Inc.](#) and H.E.R. Consulting & Services Inc. who facilitated English- and French-language focus group discussions with newcomer youth, respectively. Calience Research and Consulting completed a supplementary literature review.
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- [KDP Consulting Inc.](#) who initiated an agency mapping exercise and conducted some interviews of service providers.
- The [Blueprint ADE](#) team who led the workshops with youth and service providers to help validate key findings and co-develop recommendations.

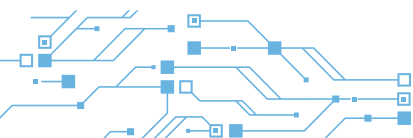
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Report template design: Randal Boutilier at [Openly Inc.](#)



# Introduction

Employment is an important need that newcomer youth have as they settle into life in Canada. Preparing for work, finding a job and building their careers in Canada are also critical challenges. Although newcomer youth possess many strengths and skills for employment, they have a lower employment rate than youth born in Canada and earn less despite high levels of education.<sup>1</sup>

The underutilization of newcomer youth's human capital is both detrimental to their well-being and a significant missed economic opportunity for Canada. Newcomer youth are critical for filling labour market gaps due to an ageing population and low birth rate. But, more than that, they are the potential leaders of tomorrow.

With funding from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) through the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS) program, the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC), JVS Toronto (JVS) and WoodGreen Community Services (WoodGreen) jointly led a research project to better understand the assets newcomer youth bring to the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) workforce, as well as the barriers they encounter.

The project was an opportunity for us to learn from newcomer youth about their diverse employment experiences and what can be done to ensure all youth are able to realize their full potential. This summary report highlights the data and insights gathered by TRIEC, JVS, WoodGreen and our partners and offers actionable recommendations to foster better outcomes for newcomer youth in the GTA at each stage of their employment journey.

For a complete description of the research, including methods, findings and recommendations, please see the [full report](#).

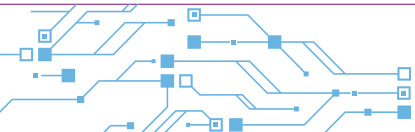
## Methodology Overview

The primary purpose of this exploratory, mixed-methods research was to engage newcomer youth's voices on their employment experiences and their advice for policymakers and organizations. We also involved key stakeholders, including employment-related service providers and employers, in the research. The following tools were used:

- literature reviews on education and career decision-making among newcomer youth, influences on newcomer youth's employment experiences, and the future of work;
- surveys of employers (240 hiring managers) and youth aged 16 to 30 years (646 newcomers; 1,619 Canadian-born);<sup>2</sup>
- 27 focus groups with 132 newcomer youth (54% women+; 80% aged 21 to 30);
- 38 key informant interviews with agencies and individuals with in-depth knowledge of newcomer youth's employment journeys; and
- 3 workshops with 51 newcomer youth (54% women+; 68% aged 21 to 30) and a workshop with 11 service providers to validate findings and co-develop recommendations.

***"If you're not hiring young people now, you're joining the train in the last car. Youth are the future. We have to create pipelines for diverse groups of young people across the country."***

– Key informant  
(employer/funder)

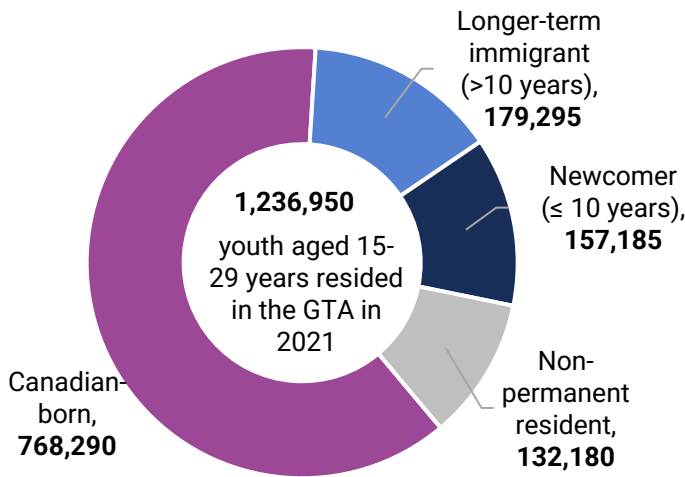


# Key Findings

## Profile of Newcomer Youth

According to the 2021 Census, there were more than 1.2 million youth aged 15 to 29 years in the Toronto region. Of these youth, 13% were newcomers, landing in Canada between 2011 and 2021. Nearly half (48%) of newcomer youth were aged 25 to 29 years and more than half (52%) were women+.<sup>3</sup>

13% of youth (15 to 29 years) in the GTA are newcomers to Canada



### Newcomer youth in the GTA are a diverse group

**48%**  
aged 25 to 29<sup>†</sup>

**52%**  
women+<sup>†</sup>

**87%**  
Racialized<sup>‡</sup>

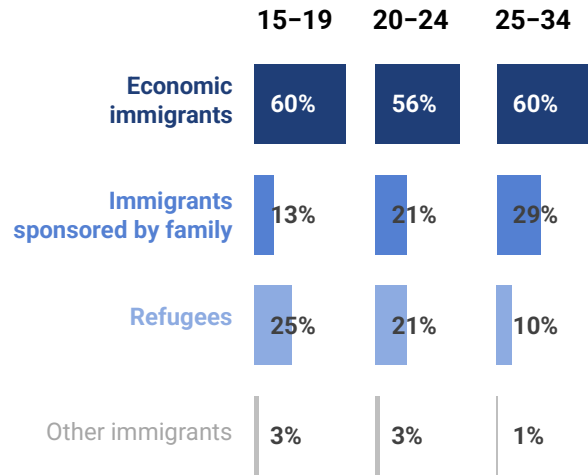
**162+**  
birth countries<sup>‡</sup>

**80%**  
non-English/French “mother tongue” (126+ languages)<sup>‡</sup>

<sup>†</sup> Based on the newcomer youth population aged 15 to 29 years.

<sup>‡</sup> Based on the newcomer youth population aged 15 to 24 years.

**Most newcomer youth (15 to 34 years) came to Canada as economic immigrants, either as a principal applicant or secondary applicant.**

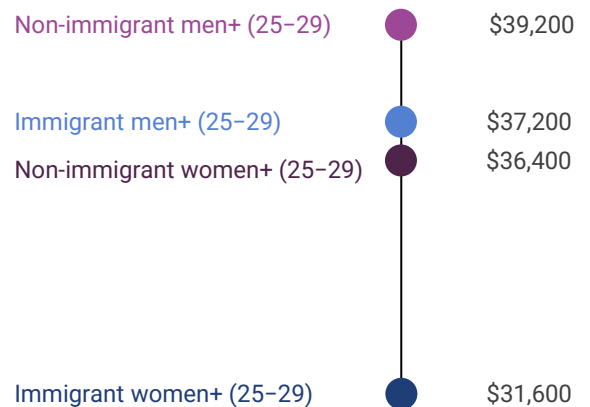


Newcomer youth are **highly educated**, with 61% of women+ and 52% of men+ aged 25 to 29 years holding at least a bachelor’s degree.

Young newcomers (15 to 29 years) accounted for 12.5% of the GTA labour force in 2021.

**More than half of newcomer youth were in the labour force** (55%), either employed or unemployed, compared to 62% of Canadian-born youth.

Median employment income (2020 calendar year) differed only between older immigrant and non-immigrant youth. **Young immigrant women+ aged 25 to 29 years had the lowest median income among their peers**, as shown below.



## Pre-Employment

Pre-employment involves a range of activities newcomer youth engage in to get ready to work in Canada. This may include discovering their interests and talents, exploring careers, establishing goals and charting a career path, as well as education, skills training, work exposure and professional licencing.

Overall, newcomer youth **lack a formal system of support to help shape their career choices.**

Relatively few focus group participants said they had any engagement with career services. Career aspirations were instead inspired by a course taken in high school or university, or by the influence of parents, siblings, relatives or friends. One focus group participant mentioned the role of job shadowing in motivating her career choice.

Despite this, most surveyed newcomer youth had clear career interests and goals and reported being knowledgeable about their respective fields. Newcomer youth participants in focus groups and workshops expressed a **wide range of career interests and aspirations.** They also **identified many individual assets** that they can leverage to help them with their transition into the labour market and to achieve their career goals – including adaptability, resilience and a strong work ethic. Many focus group participants highlighted their education, work experience from their countries of origin and volunteer work both in Canada and internationally as assets contributing to their readiness for the workforce.

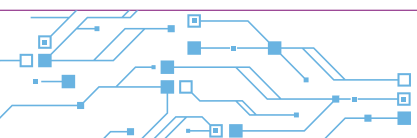
While many **newcomer youth expressed confidence in their essential workplace skills,** employers were less optimistic. Although about half of surveyed hiring managers felt that newcomer youth have a strong work ethic and loyalty, fewer understood the potential of newcomer youth to bring new ideas and perspectives, and to help better serve the immigrant/refugee population and the global marketplace. Further, surveyed **hiring managers had concerns about newcomer youth applicants'** possible lack of soft skills, English language skills and familiarity with Canadian business culture, practices and norms.

Age and experience shape how newcomer youth understand their individual assets and preparedness for work. The younger age cohort (16 to 20 years) for whom schooling is the main current activity expect that their education and work placements will lead them to successful employment in the future. The older age cohort identified several challenges. Many of them started their education outside of Canada and, therefore, are less likely to have field-relevant work exposure in Canada before leaving school compared to Canadian-born youth. Additionally, newcomer youth in focus groups and workshops – especially those who arrived in Canada at an older age – said they faced **difficulties and frustrations when preparing for employment,** including:

- a complex system of programs and services in Canada (e.g., credential recognition, education, employment, housing, health), which can be difficult to navigate alone
- a lack of social connections that can help with preparing for a career, especially as they and their parents may have limited knowledge of the Canadian education system and job market
- a lack of access to appropriate career guidance and information on local labour market conditions
- limited occupation-specific employment supports, including mentorship, aligned with their skill levels, backgrounds and fields of interest

### Defining Newcomer Youth:

For the purposes of the primary research, newcomer youth were defined as individuals between 16 and 30 years of age<sup>4</sup> who were born outside of Canada to parents neither of whom was a Canadian citizen, who landed in Canada within the last ten years and were at least 13 years old at the time of their arrival. These young people<sup>5</sup> first arrived in Canada as the principal applicant or dependent under any immigration or temporary resident status, and currently live in the GTA.





- credentials not being fully recognized by Canadian employers, institutions and professional associations
- employers who are ill-equipped to recognize the strengths and transferable skills newcomer youth bring to the workforce

While there are several employment-related programs and services in the Toronto region, many struggle to connect with newcomer youth. **Low awareness of employment-related programs and services** was the main reason for why surveyed newcomer youth do not use them, followed by not thinking they would be helpful and not knowing how to access them. Key informants highlighted some of the structural challenges that can contribute to a **lack of flexibility in program delivery and other gaps in services**, including unpredictable funding, restrictive funder-specified eligibility criteria, and ineffective coordination and collaboration across the newcomer-serving sector.

## Job Search and Entry

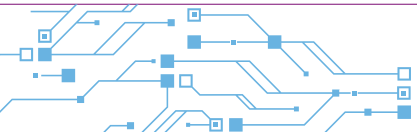
The job search and entry stage involves a number of activities, including building job search knowledge and skills, networking, applying for jobs and accepting offers. Some activities may overlap with those in the pre-employment stage.

Since graduating from their most recent education, **69% of all surveyed Canadian-born youth and 39% of surveyed newcomer youth have worked in career-relevant jobs in Canada**. Differences in the proportions of Canadian-born and newcomer youth with career-relevant work experience in Canada are seen even when age group and highest level of education are considered. However, the time it took to find their first job after their most recent graduation was similar between surveyed newcomer youth and Canadian-born youth, with 60% of both reporting being able to find employment within six months of graduating.

The majority of surveyed youth, newcomer (87%) and Canadian-born (89%) alike, experienced at least one challenge when searching and applying for jobs in Canada. Among newcomer youth, the most frequently identified challenge was the **devaluing of their non-Canadian work experience by employers**. This is a well-known problem in Canada with harmful consequences. Although newcomer youth have valuable transferable skills and strengths for employment, they struggle to “sell” employers on their capabilities due in part to cultural differences and employer bias. The “Canadian experience” barrier has bred feelings of frustration, self-doubt, depression, loss of confidence and eroding motivation among newcomer youth as they begin to question the value of their existing skills and knowledge. As a result, newcomer youth may return to school, volunteer or accept jobs below their qualifications. Though what employers see as deficiencies can easily be addressed through on-the-job training, at present, newcomers have borne the costs of gaining work experience in Canada.

Besides the ask for Canadian experience, newcomer youth encounter other forms of discrimination in the labour market. Focus group participants and interviewees spoke about the **stigmatization** newcomer youth confront during the job application process on the basis of their foreign-sounding names, their race or ethnicity, the neighbourhoods in which they reside, and other factors.

The good news is that **many employers want to improve their newcomer youth recruitment and retention practices**. Nine in ten respondents to the hiring managers survey said they would use services or resources to assist with hiring and retaining newcomer youth — such as employer tax credits and participating in events to help better understand newcomer youth’s expectations and assets.



Another reason for job search challenges facing newcomer youth is their **limited professional networks**. For many newcomer youth, the lack of networks was felt when they started to search for jobs. Without appropriate connections, newcomer youth were challenged to learn about job opportunities and workplaces (beyond what is advertised), access the “hidden” job market, obtain references to support their job applications, and bypass automated applicant tracking systems. While newcomer youth participants recognized the value of building their networks, they felt that networking requires more effort and time than they can dedicate. For some, a lack of confidence, including in their English language skills, also holds them back from joining networking events. Others expressed frustration that networking events organized by settlement or employment services focus on entry-level jobs in a limited number of industries.

Only a **small share of newcomer youth had used services** from employment centers, career centres, staffing agencies, work placement programs or foreign credential recognition services to help find work. **Newcomer youth mostly relied on online job searches** or used their personal or professional networks, where available. Those who have used employment programs found them useful for learning how to prepare resumes and cover letters and build interviewing skills.

## Building a Career

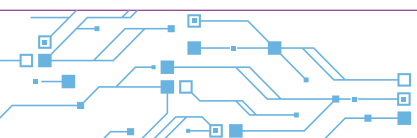
Career paths are not always linear. Often youth’s interests shift, or they experience setbacks that make it difficult to settle into one career or the career that they initially envisioned. That aside, the final phase in the employment journey has to do with career building. Building a career involves performing on the job, continuing to learn and develop, and advancing within a profession or occupation.

Though participation in the workforce is often taken as a measure of labour market integration, **youth may not feel a sense of belonging in their work environments**. While both surveyed Canadian-born and newcomer youth reported experiencing discrimination at work because of their ethnicity, race or culture, newcomer youth had also been discriminated for their language or accent. Discrimination faced by newcomer youth in the work environment negatively affects their full acceptance – a value that they said was important to them.

Among youth with employment experiences, surveyed **newcomer youth may be finding themselves in lower-quality jobs compared to Canadian-born youth**. Pay was one aspect where newcomer youth’s ratings were significantly less positive than that of Canadian-born youth. Youth in precarious employment are especially vulnerable to being exploited through low pay, unpaid work, lack of benefits and security, harsh conditions and a lack of care for safety.

Although having opportunities for learning and growth was stated by newcomer youth in focus groups and workshops as a key feature of their preferred working environments, **employers may not feel responsible for skills-building**. Hiring managers we surveyed largely view employers as consumers of the education system and secondary in terms of preparing young people for work. As such, youth may have limited opportunities for on-the-job learning and development. Remote/hybrid work environments may also mean fewer chances to make connections.

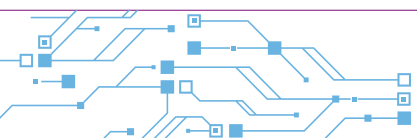
At the same time, there are **few programs and services to support newcomer youth’s job retention and career advancement**. Employment-related training and supports, including mentoring, often end when clients find a job and do not have adequate post-hire follow-ups. Programs typically require youth to be in school, unemployed or working part-time; there are few programs for youth who are underemployed in jobs not matched to their skills. There are also **few opportunities for newcomer youth to access financing and business connections to pursue entrepreneurship** after gaining some work experience.



# Recommendations

Overall, the research points to a lack of programs and services for newcomer youth that span their employment journeys, from career planning to building a career, and recognize their diverse experiences and needs. The actions listed below will help strengthen newcomer youth’s employment outcomes. Details on these recommendations can be found in the [full report](#).

	PRE-EMPLOYMENT	JOB SEARCH AND ENTRY	BUILDING A CAREER
PROGRAMS & SERVICES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide high-quality, tailored information about services upon arrival</li> <li>• Increase advertising and promotion of employment interventions</li> <li>• Provide more and better mentorship opportunities</li> <li>• Tailor interventions to industries/occupations</li> <li>• Improve career guidance</li> <li>• Offer more flexibility in program delivery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide more support with the hiring process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand opportunities for ongoing training</li> <li>• Provide more resources and training focused on entrepreneurship</li> </ul>
COMMUNITY & SERVICE NETWORKS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance community outreach</li> <li>• Ensure service providers have knowledge of a wide range of other service opportunities</li> <li>• Strengthen community connections and networks</li> <li>• Enhance connections between organizations offering newcomer services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand options for validating credentials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide information and connections on worker rights</li> </ul>
LABOUR MARKET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner with employers to create high-quality on-the-job experiences</li> <li>• Build broad awareness on the strengths and challenges of newcomer youth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage employers to give newcomer youth the opportunity to prove themselves</li> <li>• Offer employer incentives to hire newcomer youth</li> <li>• Require employers to have dedicated placements for newcomer youth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide training and incentives for employers to create more inclusive workplaces</li> </ul>





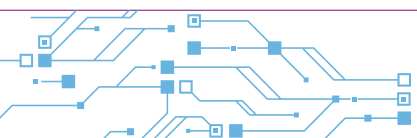
## Closing Remarks

Youth are essential to the growth of the GTA economy. However, the employment journey is undoubtedly a challenge for many youth. Newcomer youth in particular face additional challenges, such as their experiences not being recognized by Canadian employers, facing discrimination, and having to learn and navigate a different environment and a different set of systems. Newcomer youth are less likely than youth born in Canada to use available employment supports. They are likely to have less work or volunteer experience and poorer-quality jobs when employed. At the same time, many newcomer youth are resilient and confident in their skills and career directions.

This report presented results of a mixed-methods study conducted by TRIEC, JVS and WoodGreen as part of a collaborative YESS research project, funded by IRCC. Findings have elaborated on the above-mentioned assets that newcomer youth possess and the barriers they face when preparing for employment, searching for jobs and when working. They also point to a key gap: the lack of a coherent continuum of programs and services that covers the employment journey from career planning to succeeding in a job and recognizes the diversity among the youth population.

Youth have a breadth of experiences and characteristics that shape their perceptions and needs from employment-related resources. Whether it be their immigration status, age, gender or a combination of factors, these differences must be understood and considered in how employment-related information, tools and resources are delivered to newcomer youth.

Actioning the recommendations in this report, which were co-developed with newcomer youth and service providers, can become a great opportunity to realize the full potential of an underserved but important segment of the Canadian workforce.



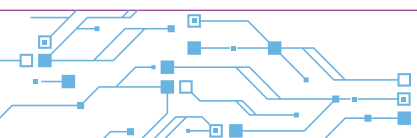
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# Endnotes

1. Lauer et al. (2012); Nichols, Ha & Tyyskä (2020); Febria & Jones (2023); CCYP & LMIC (2023)
2. See the full report for details on the socio-demographic profile of youth survey respondents. In short, among newcomer youth, 58% were women+ and 74% were between the ages 21 and 30 years. In comparison, proportionally fewer Canadian-born youth were women+ (50%) and more were aged 21-to-30 years (82%). However, the median age did not differ between the two groups (24.3 years for newcomer youth; 24.5 years for Canadian-born youth).
3. Statistics Canada, Data Tables, 2021 Census of Population. Retrieved from: <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/dt-td/index-eng.cfm>
4. Primary data collection targeted youth aged 16 and above who, in Ontario, are able to give free and informed consent for their participation in minimal risk research on their own behalf.
5. The terms “newcomer youth” and “young newcomers” are used interchangeably in this report.



For questions or more  
information about this summary  
report, please contact:

[research@triec.ca](mailto:research@triec.ca)

