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# School and Employment-Related Barriers for Youth and Young Adults with and without a Disability during the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Greater Toronto Area

Sally Lindsay<sup>1,2,\*</sup> and Hiba Ahmed<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bloorview Research Institute, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON M4G 1R8, Canada; hahmed@hollandbloorview.ca

<sup>2</sup> Department of Occupational Science & Occupational Therapy, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON M5G 1V7, Canada

\* Correspondence: slindsay@hollandbloorview.ca; Tel.: +1-416-425-6220 (ext. 3654)

**Abstract:** Purpose: Youth and young adults are particularly vulnerable to the socio-economic impacts of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). The purpose of this study was to explore barriers to school and employment for youth with and without a disability during the pandemic. Methods: This qualitative comparison study involved in-depth interviews with 35 youth and young adults (18 with a disability; 17 without), aged 16–29 (mean age 23). An interpretive, thematic analysis of the transcripts was conducted. Results: Our findings revealed several similarities and some differences between youth and young adults with and without disabilities regarding barriers to school and employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Key themes related to these barriers involved: (1) difficult transition to online school and working from home (i.e., the expense of setting up a home office, technical challenges, impact on mental health), (2) uncertainty about employment (i.e., under-employment, difficult working conditions, difficulty finding work, disability-related challenges) and (3) missed career development opportunities (i.e., canceled or reduced internships or placements, lack of volunteer opportunities, uncertainties about career pathway, the longer-term impact of the pandemic). Conclusion: Our findings highlight that youth and young adults with disabilities may need further support in engaging in meaningful and accessible vocational activities that align with their career pathway.



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**Keywords:** employment; pandemic; qualitative comparison; youth

## 1. Introduction

The World Health Organization declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020 [1]. As of 30 March 2021, there were over 127 million confirmed cases and over 2.7 million deaths globally [2]. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which is caused by SARS-CoV-2, has had a significant global economic impact [3] where many people have lost their jobs or had reduced hours, creating financial uncertainty [4]. Public health precautions addressing the spread of the virus included physical distancing, travel restrictions, and closed or reduced hours of non-essential businesses [5]. Government responses to the pandemic, such as in Canada, where this study was conducted, have revealed there are differential vulnerabilities among certain groups and highlighted the extent to which they are marginalized in society, such as younger workers and those with pre-existing medical conditions or disabilities [4,6]. Indeed, people with disabilities are more often impacted by economic crises compared to other groups [7], which can result in employment inequities. The post-COVID-19 economy is expected to significantly affect the employment of individuals with disabilities [8].

Youth and young adults are at particular risk of experiencing pandemic-related impacts because they encountered many changes during this period, such as disruptions in

routine, limited face-to-face social interactions, remote schooling, increased screen time, and employment uncertainty [9–11]. The pandemic had an impact on youth's ability to work, volunteer, and go to school. Focusing on youth and young adults is important because the period of adolescence is a stage of development characterized by increased sensitivity to social stimuli and an enhanced need for peer interaction, which is crucial for their brain development and self-concept construction [11].

### *1.1. Impact of COVID-19 on Youth's Employment*

Recent research shows that disadvantaged workers, such as youth and young adults and those with pre-existing conditions, are at great risk of experiencing negative outcomes from COVID-19 [12]. At a global level, youth aged 15–24 were nearly three times more likely to be unemployed compared to adults aged 25 and older [13]. During the pandemic, employment rates within Canada declined faster among those aged 15–19 (–40.4%) than among those aged 20–34 (–31.1%), indicating less secure jobs in the younger age group [14]. Additionally, one in four youth aged 15–24 who were employed during the pandemic lost all or the majority of their usual hours worked [14]. During the pandemic, youth and young adults with a long-term condition or disability were more likely to report that their work situation changed from employed prior to the pandemic lockdown to unemployed or not in the labor force [12,14].

Youth and young adults are particularly vulnerable to the economic impacts of COVID-19 because they are more likely than adults to hold temporary, non-unionized, casual positions, and they often work in industries considered high risk during the pandemic, such as in food services, hospitality, and accommodation, which cannot be done from home [14,15]. Working in such positions could put youth at further risk of catching the virus [12]. The pandemic may further exacerbate unemployment and social exclusion for people with disabilities because they are more likely to work in precarious positions with less job security and protection than workers without disabilities [13]. Youth and young adults with disabilities may experience more challenges associated with the pandemic because job supports and resources were reduced or canceled [10,16]. Therefore, it is important to explore their employment experiences so we can better understand areas where they may need further support.

### *1.2. Impact of Pandemic on Volunteering*

Volunteering is an important way that youth can develop experience and relevant skills while exploring career interests [17]. Those who volunteer, including youth and young adults with disabilities, often experience many social and health benefits such as enhanced quality of life, social skills, inclusion, community engagement, and self-confidence [17]. Youth who volunteer often have higher levels of educational aspirations and self-esteem and are more likely to earn post-graduate degrees [18]. A recent review of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic found that volunteers were mostly women, middle-class, highly educated, and working-aged [19]. Strong social networks, local knowledge, and social trust were associated with volunteering during the pandemic [19]. For example, a recent study exploring the experiences of healthcare students volunteering during the pandemic reported many benefits, including a high degree of satisfaction and attaining professional skills [20]. However, little is known about the volunteer experiences of youth with and without disabilities during a pandemic.

### *1.3. Impact of COVID-19 on School*

The pandemic caused disruptions to youths' education, which could have both short- and longer-term impacts on school and employment [15]. Further, the loss of routine that school provides can affect the development of mental health disorders (e.g., depression and anxiety) [21–23]. For example, one study found that university students with a disability or health condition were more worried about online classes compared to their peers without disabilities [24]. Specifically, youth and young adults with disabilities were concerned

about performing poorly with online classes, not meeting academic requirements, facing more financial burdens and discrimination [24].

Most of the research on the pandemic-related impact on employment has focused on adults and especially those without disabilities. Of the research exploring those with a disability, the emphasis is on their health vulnerabilities, risk of infection, or likelihood of employment [6]. Relatively little is known about school and employment-related barriers among youth and young adults with disabilities during the pandemic. Understanding their perspectives is important because youth with disabilities often encounter many challenges in finding and maintaining employment in normal (non-pandemic) circumstances. Exploring their experiences can help shed light on areas where youth may need further support and important lessons learned among those who worked or were in school during the pandemic. Further, focusing on youth and young adults is salient because this developmental period represents a critical window of opportunity to optimize work-based identities. There are currently no qualitative comparisons regarding school and employment experiences between youth with and without a disability during the pandemic. Qualitative exploration is important for uncovering the challenges to achieving school and work goals [25,26].

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Objective and Design

Our objective was to understand the barriers to school and employment for youth and young adults with and without disabilities. Our design involved conducting individual interviews with youth and young adults with a disability using a qualitative comparison design (i.e., youth without disabilities) [27]. A research ethics board at a pediatric rehabilitation hospital approved this study (#20-0129). We followed the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research guidelines [28].

### 2.2. Recruitment

We used a purposive sampling strategy to recruit participants, aiming for representation from youth with and without disabilities. We recruited participants through invitation letters, referrals, or advertisements that were posted through a pediatric rehabilitation hospital list-serves and newsletters and through disability-related social media networks (for youth with disabilities) and social media platforms relevant to youth (without disabilities). Participants met the following inclusion criteria: aged 15–29, with a self-reported disability (i.e., defined as impairments of the body or mind making it difficult for a person with the condition to do certain activities and interact with the world around them (e.g., vision, movement, thinking, remembering, learning, communication, hearing, mental health, social relationships)) [29], or without a disability (for the comparison group), who are currently employed or have work experience. We included those aged 15–29 because this was aligned with Statistics Canada's [30] definition of youth and also emerging adulthood, a distinct period where youth often encounter instability [31]. Those interested in the study received an information letter and consent form and a \$10 gift card for participating. After obtaining written (i.e., e-consent during the pandemic), 2 female researchers, who have backgrounds in public health and child disability, conducted the one-to-one interviews (approximately half each). The researchers did not have a prior relationship with any of the participants. No participants dropped out of the study.

### 2.3. Data Collection

Interviews were conducted over Zoom videoconference ( $n = 30$ ) or phone ( $n = 5$ ) from July 2020 to January 2021 (before vaccines were available and there were many restrictions and lockdowns) and audio recorded. Although in-person interviews were not permitted during the pandemic, recent research indicates that online interviews can be just as effective in terms of developing participant rapport and can generate the same number of themes as in-person or phone interviews [32–34]. The majority of participants were from the Greater Toronto Area, Ontario area, which had a high proportion of COVID-19 cases and

deaths [35,36]. The researchers took notes during and shortly following the interview. Our interview guide (Supplementary File S1) was informed by the recent literature on school-work transitions [37] and employment, volunteering, and schooling during pandemics and similar disruptive events [12,19,20,38–41]. Questions were asked about school and employment status, career plans before the pandemic, and how COVID-19 affected them, including psychosocial issues (see Supplemental File). We pilot tested the guide with a young adult who has a physical disability to ensure it was comprehensive prior to implementation to all participants. The interviews lasted an average length of 31 min.

#### 2.4. Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researchers who conducted the interviews, then checked for accuracy by the first author and a research assistant. We used an interpretive descriptive methodology to understand youth's experiences [42]. This approach was worthwhile because it intends to go further than describing a phenomenon by exploring the importance of the findings and clinical implications [42]. The first step of analysis involved reading all of the transcripts together, then separately by group (i.e., youth with and without a disability) [27]. We used a 2-stage, inductive comparative analysis [27] using an open coding, a constant comparative method to assess all possible codes [42,43]. We each independently developed a list of preliminary codes across all participants while noting key patterns. Next, we met to discuss and compare the preliminary codes and revised or merged them as needed while re-reading the transcripts. Any discrepancies in the codes were discussed until consensus was reached. After comparing our codes, we then grouped them under higher-order headings to generate categories and subcategories. Next, we developed a coding tree describing each of the codes before applying them to all of the transcripts. Then, we compared and contrasted the codes within and between the groups (i.e., youth with and without disabilities) [27]. Two authors applied the coding scheme to the transcripts. We then extracted quotes representative of each theme and sub-theme. A second researcher reviewed a sample of the coding to check for accuracy and reviewed all the extracted quotes to confirm that they represented the codes and participants' experiences.

Approaches to enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of the findings included having a rich variation in participants' perspectives. Our team assessed thematic saturation and we agreed it was achieved within our study [32] because no new codes were identified after the 15th interview for youth with disabilities and 12 for youth without. We verified that saturation was reached by conducting a few additional interviews for each group. In regard to the credibility of our findings, we had multiple coders during the data analysis, and we discussed the findings at team meetings. For the dependability of our analysis, we had a consistent interview guide across all participants, and we kept notes of key decisions made [43]. For confirmability of our analysis, we drew on participants' verbatim quotes. We also considered the potential influence of our roles on the interpretation of the data. To address the transferability of the findings, we had representation from 2 different groups of youth (i.e., a comparison group), which helps to address bias and subjectivity while aiming to enhance credibility of qualitative research findings [27,44].

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Sample Characteristics

Our sample consisted of 35 participants aged 16–29 (mean age 23), 6 men, 29 women, which included 18 with a disability (mean age 24.4), 17 without a disability (mean age 21.6) (see Table 1 for an overview of participants). A total of 17 participants were employed, 20 were enrolled in school during the pandemic. Our sample size was considered suitable for a qualitative study to capture the breadth and depth of issues on this topic [32].

**Table 1.** Overview of participants and overview of themes.

ID	Age	Gender	Disability	School and Employment Status	Theme 1 Difficult Transition to Online School and Working from Home	Theme 2 Uncertainty about Employment	Theme 3 Missed Career Development Opportunities
1	24	Man	Physical disability	Employed part-time (home)	Technical challenges Unclear expectations working remotely, cost	Under-employed Lack of job searching experience	Lack of opportunities Uncertainty about career pathway
2	29	Woman	Physical disability	Unemployed (seeking work)	n/a	Difficulty finding work Difficult working conditions (quit due to health risks)	n/a
3	25	Woman	Learning disability	Employed full-time (home)	Technical (communicating with co-workers)	Worried about job security Physical health and safety	Volunteer position canceled
4	22	Woman	Mental health condition	Unemployed (looking for work), volunteering, in school	Technical Impact on mental health (boredom)	Summer job canceled Difficulty finding work	Volunteer position canceled Uncertainty about career pathway
5	19	Woman	Learning disability	Unemployed (looking for work), volunteering, in school	Impact on mental health (boredom)	Difficulty finding work	Lack of volunteer opportunities
6	25	Woman	Mental health condition	Employed (part-time), volunteering, in school	Impact on mental health	Reduced hours Difficult working conditions	Uncertainty about career pathway
7	22	Woman	Physical disability	Employed then Unemployed (looking for work), in school	Technical difficulties	Difficult working conditions (did not receive accommodations) Difficulty finding work	Lack of volunteer positions Limited clinical placement Uncertainty about career pathway Longer-term impact on career
8	28	Woman	Physical disability	Employed	n/a	Difficult working conditions (discrimination)	Uncertainty about career pathway
9	23	Woman	Physical disability	Unemployed (looking for paid or volunteer work)	n/a	Difficulty finding work	Lack of volunteer positions Uncertainty about career pathway
10	20	Woman	Mental health condition	Unemployed (looking for online work)	n/a	Difficulty finding online work	Lack of volunteer positions Lack of job searching skills
11	27	Man	Physical disability	Employed (part-time)	Impact on mental health (boredom)	Under-employed Difficulty finding work	Uncertainty about career pathway

Table 1. Cont.

ID	Age	Gender	Disability	School and Employment Status	Theme 1 Difficult Transition to Online School and Working from Home	Theme 2 Uncertainty about Employment	Theme 3 Missed Career Development Opportunities
12	25	Man	Physical disability	Unemployed (not looking during a pandemic)	Impact on mental health (boredom)	Difficulty finding work	Lack of volunteer opportunities Uncertainty about career pathway
13	27	Woman	Physical disability	Unemployed (looking for work), volunteering, in school	Impact on mental health (social isolation and boredom)	Difficulty finding work	Reduced clinical placement Lack of volunteer opportunities Longer-term impact on career
14	29	Woman	Physical disability	Unemployed (looking for work)	Impact on mental health (boredom) Technical (staying focused)	Difficulty finding work (health and safety)	Uncertainty about career pathway
15	23	Man	Physical disability	Unemployed (looking for work)	Impact on mental health (boredom)	Difficulty finding work	Lack of volunteer opportunities Uncertainty about career pathway
16	27	Woman	Mental health condition	Employed (part-time), in school	Impact on mental health (less productive) cost/expense	Working conditions (difficult to disclose and ask for accommodations)	Lack of volunteer opportunities
17	26	Man	Physical disability and mental health condition	Unemployed (looking for work), volunteering	Impact on mental health (boredom and social isolation)	Difficulty finding work (lack of job searching skills and experience)	Longer-term career impact
18	19	Woman	Speech and language condition	Unemployed (looking for work), in school	Technical (participating in school)	Difficulty finding work Summer job canceled	Longer-term career impact Canceled internship
<b>Without disabilities</b>							
19	20	Woman	n/a	Employed (part-time), in school	n/a	Difficult working conditions	Lack of volunteer opportunities
20	18	Woman	n/a	Employed (part-time), volunteering, in school		Difficult working conditions Reduced hours	Lack of volunteer opportunities Longer-term career impact
21	16	Woman	n/a	Unemployed (looking for work), internship, in school	Impact on mental health (social isolation)	Difficulty finding a job (Summer job canceled)	Lack of volunteer opportunities
22	26	Man	n/a	Employed (full-time)	Technical and confidentiality	Difficult working conditions	Uncertainty about career pathway
23	23	Woman	n/a	Unemployed, Volunteering, in school	Cost/lack of computer access Technical (learning online)	n/a	Lack of volunteer opportunities Longer-term impact on career pathway

Table 1. Cont.

ID	Age	Gender	Disability	School and Employment Status	Theme 1 Difficult Transition to Online School and Working from Home	Theme 2 Uncertainty about Employment	Theme 3 Missed Career Development Opportunities
24	25	Woman	n/a	Employed (full-time), volunteering	n/a	Reduced hours Difficult working conditions	Lack of volunteer opportunities Longer-term impact on career pathway
25	18	Woman	n/a	Unemployed (seeking employment), Volunteering, in school	Impact on mental health (social isolation) Technical (challenges learning online)	Difficulty finding work	Longer-term impact on career pathway
26	25	Woman	n/a	Employed (part-time), in school	n/a	Difficult working conditions Difficulty finding employment	Lack of volunteer opportunities Longer-term impact on career pathway
27	20	Woman	n/a	Unemployed (seeking employment), in school, volunteering	Impact on mental health (productivity)	Difficulty finding work (summer job canceled)	Longer-term impact on career-pathway
28	19	Woman	n/a	Unemployed (looking for work), volunteering, in school	Technical (challenge learning online)	Difficulty finding work (summer job canceled)	Longer-term impact on career-pathway
29	17	Woman	n/a	Unemployed (seeking employment), in school	Impact on mental health (boredom)	Difficulty finding work (summer job canceled)	Lack of volunteer opportunities
30	24	Woman	n/a	Unemployed (seeking employment), in school	Technical (difficulty learning online) Impact on mental health (social isolation)	Difficulty finding work	Lack of volunteer opportunities Longer-term impact on career pathway
31	16	Woman	n/a	Employed (internship) in school	Lack of home office space Technical (online communications)	Difficulty finding work (Lack of job experience)	Lack of volunteer opportunities Reduced clinical placement
32	24	Woman	n/a	Employed (part-time), in school	n/a	Reduced hours Difficult working conditions	Reduced clinical placements Longer-term impact on career pathway

Table 1. Cont.

ID	Age	Gender	Disability	School and Employment Status	Theme 1 Difficult Transition to Online School and Working from Home	Theme 2 Uncertainty about Employment	Theme 3 Missed Career Development Opportunities
33	25	Woman	n/a	Employed (full-time)	Impact on mental health (adjusting to online routine)	Worried about job security	Uncertainty about career pathway
34	23	Woman	n/a	Employed (part-time), seeking further employment, in school	n/a	Reduced hours Difficulty finding work Difficult working conditions	Longer-term impact on career pathway
35	29	Woman	n/a	Employed (full-time), volunteers	Lack of home office set-up Cost Technical (online communication)	Difficult working conditions	n/a



Our findings highlight several similarities and some differences between youth with and without disabilities regarding barriers to school and work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth with and without disabilities experienced the following barriers: (1) difficult transition to online school and working from home, (2) uncertainty about employment, and (3) missed career development opportunities (see Table 1 for an overview). Many of these challenges appeared to be more exacerbated for youth with disabilities, especially those with limited employment experience before the pandemic. Additionally, youth with disabilities that had pre-existing health conditions often expressed concern about catching the virus and took extra precautions compared to youth without disabilities.

### 3.2. *Difficult Transition to Online School and Working from Home*

Most youth with and without had challenges with transitioning to online school and working from home, which included the expense of setting up a home office, where youth with disabilities often reported additional costs associated with setting up an accessible workspace. Both groups of youth experienced technical challenges, however, youth with disabilities often reported additional communication-related barriers. Additionally, slightly more of the youth with a disability described a negative COVID-19-related impact on their mental health. It seemed a particularly difficult transition for those who had nothing to do, and more so for youth with disabilities (i.e., not in school, work, or volunteering), where they reported that boredom affected their mental health. For those with pre-existing mental health issues, the pandemic seemed to worsen their condition.

#### 3.2.1. Expense of Setting up a Home Office

Youth with and without disabilities reported that cost affected their ability to have an appropriate home office set up and especially sufficient internet access. Youth with disabilities often reported additional costs associated with setting up an accessible workspace and/or additional equipment or software. A youth without a disability, shared, “not everyone may have a computer, or not everyone may even have access to regular internet” (#23, woman, without a disability, aged 23). Another youth with a physical disability employed part-time explained:

“The Internet is a lot of money. Don’t just rely on using the person’s own personal internet for them to get their job done. Maybe you provide a subsidy or some sort of accommodation where they can actually do it properly. Don’t let that be a barrier for the people you hire—somebody that happens to be privileged to have high speed internet.” (#1, man with a disability, aged 24)

For others, cost-related barriers arose from the rising housing prices and insufficient space for a home office. A woman with a mental health condition who worked part-time from home mentioned:

“I don’t have enough space in my apartment to work from home . . . I didn’t have Wi-Fi before the pandemic at my apartment . . . We have to pay \$90 a month for Wi-Fi . . . We also had to buy webcams, which were pretty expensive. We had to buy a monitor and we had to buy a desk and chair.” (#16, woman with a disability, aged 27). Of the youth with disabilities who reported that cost was a barrier they worked from home part-time and often did not receive financial help from their employer to purchase office equipment.

#### 3.2.2. Technical Challenges

Youth with and without a disability mentioned that technical challenges (i.e., delays in communications, slow internet, lack of appropriate technology) prevented them from participating fully in school or work. For example, a young woman with a physical disability shared: “A lot of technical difficulties came out because of online courses being new for a lot of professors . . . A lot of students get down on themselves and think they’re not doing enough and there’s a limit to how much you can do during the pandemic”

(#7, woman with a disability, aged 22). Another youth without a disability explained the complexity of taking a course remotely:

“It gets a little frustrating because things that would normally take 10 min in a classroom now take 20–30 min. And sometimes it could be more stressful because if you are planning on just showing up for a test . . . Now, you have to also worry about is my Wi-Fi going to be okay? Did I download the right software? Is my battery charged? Is my computer is functioning properly?” (#25, woman without a disability, aged 18)

Some participants explained their technical challenges in working with technology enabling them to work from home:

“Debriefing after brainstorming over a project is a lot harder to do. You have to do it all online and set it up through that. And I think creativity wise, it’s a little bit more jarring to do online. You don’t really have the same brainstorming feeling and bouncing back ideas because it’s hard to tell when someone wants to talk . . . It’s a little bit awkward.” (#3, woman with a disability, aged 25)

Youth with disabilities often reported additional technical challenges related to communicating with their co-workers or classmates, especially if they needed accessible software or features such as closed captioning, which were not always available or turned on during their zoom meetings or online lessons.

### 3.2.3. Impact on Mental Health

Slightly more youth with a disability (10/18) than youth without (6/18) reported that the transition to being home all day impacted their mental health (mainly resulting from boredom and social isolation). For those who were unemployed, they told us how boredom negatively impacted their overall mental health, while those who were working often experienced stress and anxiety because it was difficult to focus on their work and be productive. For example, a young woman with a disability described the monotonous nature of their new at-home routine: “It is almost like a repetitive cycle of waking up and trying to do school work, but I am also getting distracted because I am in my bedroom and it doesn’t feel like I am at school . . . My psychological well-being kind of went down a bit” (#4, woman, with a disability, aged 22). Some youth experienced mental health-related challenges, some of which arose during the pandemic, while for others with pre-existing mental health issues found their condition was exacerbated due to pandemic-related stress. For example, a youth mentioned,

“Everything was super stressful. I wasn’t able to see my partner. I wasn’t able to leave my apartment except to get groceries and even then that was really anxiety-inducing. Social media was making everything a lot more impactful just because they constantly have that idea of fear . . . There was a lot of anxiety at the beginning. In fear of the unknown with this whole virus no one knew what to expect.” (#6, woman with a disability, aged 25)

Some youth, especially those with pre-existing mental health conditions, worried about their employers not addressing their increased need for mental health support during the pandemic. A youth shared: “in terms of mental health, I don’t think that was considered. So, a lot of extra projects would be dumped on us, but we weren’t really able to communicate what exactly is happening because you’re not seeing your employer in the building” (#3, woman with a disability, aged 25).

### 3.3. Uncertainty about Employment

All youth and young adults in our study expressed uncertainty about employment, which was a second main theme in our findings. Both groups of youth encountered difficulties in finding employment—mainly due to the lack of jobs. For youth without disabilities, challenges with finding employment were often a result of their summer job being canceled or reduced hours, whereas for youth with disabilities, they often had

additional difficulties because of a lack of job searching skills and other disability-related challenges. Those who worked onsite during the pandemic often reported difficult working conditions. Youth with disabilities sometimes reported they could not disclose their condition or receive workplace accommodations during the pandemic.

### 3.3.1. Under-Employed, Reduced Hours, and Concerns about Job Security

Youth with disabilities (4/18) and those without (4/17) described the stress they experienced related to layoffs, reduced hours, or fear of job loss during the pandemic. For example, a woman with a learning disability working full-time in the non-profit sector explained: “For a little while there were concerns about having to shut down certain areas and layoff a lot of staff” (#3, woman with a disability, aged 25). Others worried about the stability of their job. Specifically, a woman employed part-time in retail said: “At the beginning when the stores shut down everyone was told to apply for EI (employment insurance) . . . They were trying not to let me go because we all didn’t know how long this was going to last” (#6, woman with a disability, aged 25).

### 3.3.2. Difficult Working Conditions

Youth with and without disabilities described several challenges regarding working conditions during the pandemic, which included worrying about catching the virus, risks of returning in-person, and lack of employer support for mental health. Of the 5/18 youth with a disability and 8/17 without who were employed, a main challenge with working in-person during the pandemic included the risk of catching the virus. Some youth with disabilities felt they had no other option but to quit their job because they worked in an industry considered high risk for catching COVID-19 and they did not want to worsen their current health condition. For example, a woman with a physical disability explained: “I got a job at (retail store) during COVID and then I couldn’t take it because I have a chronic illness and my immune system would have been compromised” (#2, woman with a disability, aged 29).

Another young woman with a physical disability, employed in a high-risk sector (i.e., long-term care home), was denied workplace accommodations (i.e., wearing a mask worsened her breathing condition) during the pandemic. As a result, she decided she had little choice but to quit her job. She explained:

“My chest injury made it difficult to breathe and the policy about the mandatory mask was bit of an issue . . . I talked to my doctor about all my symptoms she was able to make a recommendation that I could get a break . . . I got frustrated with how long everything was taking . . . that aspect also made me decide to quit. Just because it was too difficult to maneuver everything and I still had to call in every day to say I wasn’t coming into work.” (#7, woman with a disability, aged 22)

Another youth with a physical disability also considered quitting her job because she felt unsafe working in a high-risk sector. For instance, she explained her employer told her she was not allowed to quit: “they told me that because I got hired on as a temporary urgent (employee), we have to fulfil our contract, which says we’re supposed to work until the end of COVID . . . So, everything is up in the air right now” (#8, woman with a disability, aged 28).

Other youth, working from home during the pandemic showed apprehensiveness about returning to work back onsite. For instance, a woman with a physical disability explained, “I’m absolutely terrified to return. I don’t want to go back in the building” (#3, woman with a disability, aged 25). Others shared their concerns: “we don’t know what is coming and how bad things will get even though some people are not as serious about the quarantine thing, or even the mask thing, but there are a lot of people feeling very uncertain” (#9, disability).

Youth without disabilities often experienced difficult working conditions as well. However, they did not express the same level of concern about the risk of catching the virus and impact on their current health.

### 3.3.3. Difficulty Finding Work

The majority of youth with (13/18) and without disabilities (9/17) reported challenges finding employment during the pandemic. Youth with and without disabilities expressed frustration over the lack of available jobs during the pandemic, and particularly ones that could be done from home. For example, a youth declared: "I feel like our opportunities are very limited and strained" (#17, man with a disability, aged 26). A youth with cerebral palsy shared a similar experience, "I'm still looking at the moment, but it is difficult to find work in my field. A lot of that has to do with COVID" (#13, woman with a disability, aged 27). Another youth described a similar experience:

"I didn't get a call back for anything, even though some of the jobs I applied for were the exact same position I've been doing for three summers . . . I've settled for a retail job that's close by that could earn me enough money to help pay for school." (#7, woman with a disability, aged 22)

Some youth, notably those with disabilities, also mentioned they lacked job searching experience and particularly how and where to look for work: "It's more challenging for sure just because there's probably less out there...I'd say there's a bit of a mixed confusion happening . . . I don't have a lot of experience job hunting. So, usually the first opportunity that has come for me I accepted it" (#1, man with a disability, aged 24).

### 3.3.4. Canceled Jobs

Some youth with a disability (2/18) and those without (4/17) described how their job was canceled because of the pandemic. Typical summer jobs that youth are employed in, such as camp counselors and swim instructors, were canceled, making the few remaining available jobs very competitive and often risky for catching the virus (e.g., grocery stores or health care). For example, a youth with a learning disability explained her experience: "right before it (pandemic) started I had a summer research position . . . it was a great opportunity and I was super excited and because of COVID they had to cancel the program" (#21, woman without disability, aged 16). Some youth had secured a summer job or had planned to find work during the summer months; however, once the pandemic started many summer jobs were canceled. For example, a youth mentioned, "The original plan was to get a summer job and start seeking out possible research opportunities for next year as well. Obviously getting a summer job in the beginning was hard with everything being closed down; So, I decided to do more school" (#4, woman with a disability, aged 22).

### 3.3.5. Lack of Opportunities to Work from Home

Both groups of youth described the difficulty of looking for work during the pandemic and particularly the lack of jobs they qualified for that they could do from home. For example, a youth explained: "it was hard to find work, but I would say seeing if there are opportunities to work from home that would be the only thing I would be comfortable with" (#4, woman with a disability, aged 22). Other youth said they had trained in an area that could not be done remotely. To illustrate, a young man with muscular dystrophy shared, "with my kind of work it is not something you can do online; It's not that easy. There is no way to work from home or anything during COVID . . . My profession's nature requires me to be in a place, not online or through zoom or anything. So, that was challenging for me because everything was closing and everything slowing down" (#15, man with a disability, aged 23).

### 3.3.6. Disability-Related Challenges in Looking for Work

Many youths with disabilities disclosed additional obstacles with finding employment during the pandemic (e.g., job searching skills, perceived discrimination and health risk).

For example, a young woman with a physical disability described: “before COVID-19 I didn’t have a job. I was still looking for work. So, it was hard. It’s still difficult for me to find employment because I have a disability” (#2, woman with a disability, aged 29). Similarly, a woman with cerebral palsy experienced a similar situation: “It’s been really hard for anyone to find work, but I feel like it’s been doubly hard for people with disabilities to find work because we know that even during pre-COVID times people with disabilities struggled to find work and I feel now, given COVID, it’s only made it even harder for people with disabilities to find work” (#13, woman with a disability, aged 27).

Some youth, notably those with disabilities, reported they lacked job searching and networking skills, which created challenges in finding employment during the pandemic. To illustrate, a young woman with a physical disability noted: “I have the goal of trying to get stable employment; So that’s my driving factor . . . I don’t really get callbacks. I even got my counselling certificate, but I don’t have any connections; So, I don’t know how to start that process” (#8, woman with a disability, aged 28).

Additionally, some youth with a compromised immune system explained how their disability affected their ability to take a job during the pandemic. A young woman with a physical disability explained:

“Everybody will have a different comfort level in terms of how they choose to deal with a pandemic. Some people will have no issues applying for frontline jobs, whereas others might feel a little more apprehensive. I think those who have a greater comfort level, to not be afraid to apply for everything, they’ll probably have a better shot.” (#7, woman with a disability, aged 22)

### 3.4. Missed Career Development Opportunities

A third key theme in our findings involved missed career development opportunities which impacted the majority of youth with a disability (17/18) and without (16/17) and involved canceled or reduced placements or internships, lack of volunteer opportunities, uncertainties about career pathway and concerns about the longer-term impact on their career pathway. Both groups of youth described how the lack of volunteer opportunities could affect their career pathway. Many youths without disabilities already had volunteer positions that were paused during the pandemic, whereas youth with disabilities often looked for a position—and particularly ones that could be done online. More of the youth with disabilities expressed uncertainties about their career pathway during the pandemic, especially struggling for direction, whereas more of the youth without disabilities reflected on the longer-term impact on their career plans.

#### 3.4.1. Reduced or Canceled School Placements or Internships

Both groups of youth (3/18 youth with and 2/17 without a disability) described the impact of the pandemic on their school placements or internships and specifically that they had fewer opportunities to learn essential skills for their career pathway, fewer networking and professional development opportunities. A youth without a disability described her experience:

“It’s definitely impacted because of COVID because everything is virtual and it’s my 4th year now . . . when you get back in touch with those nursing skills. So, if you’re not in placement and actually doing those things . . . You can read about putting in an IV, but you don’t really know until you actually do it. So, that’s definitely a negative impact of COVID . . . you can’t really learn as much until you get actual hands-on experience.” (#32, woman without a disability, aged 24)

Another youth with a physical disability described: “I have a practical component of my degree . . . part of the requirement is that we get enough clinical experience . . . the limited opportunities because of COVID also doesn’t help” (#7, woman with a disability, aged 22). Others explained the limitations of their online placement: “I don’t want to say watered down, but less of an experience because it is going to be from home . . . I won’t

exactly be able to make those real connections or be able to actually see how the researchers collect data and stuff" (#31, woman without a disability, aged 16).

### 3.4.2. Lack of Volunteer Opportunities

Both groups of youth (9/18 with and 9/17 without a disability) shared their disappointment about the lack of volunteer opportunities during the pandemic, which affected their ability to develop relevant practical skills and networks. Other youth expressed the importance of volunteer opportunities for developing skills. To explain, "I wish there were more volunteer opportunities during COVID especially for young adults. Even if you can't make any money, just gaining the experience is worth a lot for somebody who's trying to build their resume" (#7, woman with a disability, aged 22). A youth without a disability explained, "in terms of the volunteering what I was a little worried about was that I'm trying to apply for professional school; So, having volunteering is really important. So, if I wasn't doing any volunteering that obviously would not bode well for my application" (#23, woman without a disability, aged 23). Others showed concern about the lack of volunteer positions and the impact it would have on their future opportunities: "I needed the experience for (professional) school . . . I wanted that experience, that recommendation. I did want to grow in the healthcare field so that I can apply to more relevant positions that matter for school" (#34, woman without a disability, aged 23). Some high school-aged youth worried about completing their required volunteer hours: "even finding a volunteer placement is really hard. Before the pandemic I volunteered at 4 different places at the same time, which I enjoyed and now I can't even find a volunteer placement. There are no opportunities because it is closed . . . . We need 40 h to complete for graduation" (#21, woman without a disability, aged 16).

Some youth who volunteered regularly before the pandemic, expressed that they missed having somewhere to go and also contributing to society. A youth with a learning disability explained: "the one thing I do miss is volunteering because all those kinds of organizations have shut down and I'm unable to go and do those, and they were always a nice distraction from everyday life" (#3, woman with a disability, aged 25).

### 3.4.3. Uncertainty about Career Pathway

Another aspect of missed career development opportunities was how the pandemic led to uncertainties about career pathways (particularly for 10/18 youth with a disability, 2/17 without). Some youth with disabilities reported struggling with their career pathway in general, whereas youth without disabilities more often reflected on their career pathway. A youth shared, "I'm really trying to find myself in in terms of my career" (#1, man with a disability, aged 24). Some described how their career advancement opportunities paused during the pandemic:

"I was actually planning on leaving this job soon to be honest. It is a field in which you have to hop around a lot to really advance your career . . . even late last year I was trying to find another job, but with COVID everything seems so uncertain that it would be risky that I should take another job where I could be laid off; whereas this job where I have a lot of a security." (#33, woman without a disability, aged 25)

### 3.4.4. Longer-Term Impact on Career Pathway

More of the youth without disabilities (10/17) reflected on the longer-term impact of the pandemic on their career pathway compared to youth with disabilities (4/18). Some youth recognized there would be longer-term pandemic-related impacts on their career, but they were unsure of what that would entail. For example, a youth revealed, "they definitely said there would be a lot of lost opportunities because of COVID, but we just have to see now. It is hard to predict" (#5, woman with a disability, aged 19). Some youths were aware of how the limited placement and volunteer opportunities might affect their ability to pursue post-secondary opportunities. To illustrate a youth shared, "the references

I'll need for grad school, specifically having to do with my summer job. I feel that might be impacted . . . and I didn't get enough volunteer hours to get a reference" (#7, woman with a disability, aged 22). Meanwhile, some worried about the availability of jobs once they finished school. For example, a youth said, "in terms of social work I worry that social services will continue to experience cut-backs as a result of the pandemic, which could affect my job prospects in the future" (#13, woman with a disability, aged 27).

#### 4. Discussion

Our study explored barriers to school and work during the COVID-19 pandemic for youth and young adults with and without disabilities. Assisting youth on their path towards adulthood and particularly employment or post-secondary education is important because there are significant negative longer-term consequences in adulthood regarding employment and socio-economic functioning [45,46].

Employment and post-secondary education are important social determinants of health and essential components of healthy youth development [25]. Having paid employment and post-secondary education credentials are viewed as key indicators of a successful transition to adulthood [26,37]. Post-secondary education is important because it is linked with improving well-being, enhancing employment outcomes, reducing poverty, and social isolation [37].

Understanding youth's perspectives are important because the employment rate for people with disabilities is often lower than those without disabilities, leaving them vulnerable to the negative consequences of unemployment and poverty [8], especially during periods of economic instability. Some researchers argue that employers might be reluctant to hire people with disabilities during a recession and other times when the supply of workers exceeds the demand [8].

Our findings showed that both groups of youth and young adults experienced challenges with transitioning to online school and/or working from home, which included expenses of setting up a home office and technical challenges. Other studies similarly emphasize that the success of working remotely depends on an organization's ability to provide employees with the necessary technology, training, and support [47,48]. As we noted in our findings, some youth experienced challenges with having an appropriate home office set-up. Research shows that marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities, often have less access to information technology [47]. Cost is often a major barrier for people with disabilities in accessing the Internet because they often need assistive devices and adapted technology [47]. Such costs are often exacerbated by the fact that people with disabilities often have lower incomes compared to people without disabilities and the cost of adapted computer equipment could be prohibitive for them [47]. Further research is needed to explore the accessibility of such technology (i.e., usability, cost-effectiveness, universal design), enabling people with disabilities to work from home.

Our results highlighted that more of the youth and young adults with disabilities experienced an impact on mental health during their transition to being at home, particularly for those who were not in school or working especially struggled with boredom and mental health issues. Youth without disabilities often have a greater variety of sources of activities compared to youth with disabilities [48]. Meanwhile, youth with disabilities could use support with connecting to opportunities that align with their interests and abilities to engage in meaningful vocational activities. Our results are consistent with other research on mental health during the pandemic, indicating that depression can result from social isolation during the pandemic [9,49]. Indeed, pandemic-related boredom is associated with psychosocial stressors and can also trigger pre-existing disorders [5,49].

Our findings showed that both groups of youth and young adults had employment uncertainty during the pandemic. For youth without disabilities, challenges with finding employment was often a result of their summer job being canceled or reduced hours. In contrast, youth with disabilities often had additional difficulties because they lacked job searching skills and experienced other disability-related challenges (e.g., job searching

skills, perceived discrimination, and health risks). Although many people, both with and without disabilities, experienced challenges with unemployment, our study has shined a light on inequalities in the labor market regarding income and working conditions [50]. Some researchers argue that there is a need for more of a disability-inclusive COVID-19 government response [6]. For example, employer policies related to opening up workplaces during and shortly following the pandemic should pay attention to the consequences of socio-economically disadvantaged workers [12]. Our findings suggest that it might be helpful to advise youth on their employment options during a pandemic, including the risk of exposure to the virus, in addition to the various available government supports. Job counselors and other disability service providers should consider how they can engage and help connect youth with disabilities to potential employment opportunities or career-building opportunities such as volunteer placements [17], especially during the pandemic when many in-person services were reduced or canceled [10]. It may be worthwhile to offer more accessible and online vocational services, a viable approach helping to reduce barriers that exist with traditional face-to-face vocational programming [25]. Supporting youth with disabilities with how and where to find employment, especially accessible positions that could potentially be completed from home, is needed.

Meanwhile, those who worked onsite during the pandemic often reported difficult working conditions (i.e., health and safety, inability to disclose or request accommodations). Other recent research similarly shows that barriers to working during a pandemic include the ability to work, limited access to adequate and safe transportation, childcare obligations, and lack of awareness of the risks and expectations during a pandemic [51]. For some, working from home may be impossible or impractical, and the threat of layoffs might lead low-income workers accepting workplace exposure hazards despite fears of infection and job loss [12]. Vulnerable populations, such as younger workers with disabilities, could be adversely affected if they do not have a paid sick leave or an ability to work from home [50,52,53]. Some research shows that working from home is more prevalent in industries involving more highly educated and higher-paid workers and is less prevalent in lower-paid positions and in certain sectors (i.e., manufacturing, health care, retail) [54]. Youth with disabilities who are employed often work in entry-level positions such as restaurant and retail jobs, which were among the first industries to close down during the pandemic [39]. Those who remained employed in in-person positions during the pandemic often worked in high-risk sectors such as grocery stores or in health care [39]. Additionally, recent evidence shows the influence of the pandemic on people's mental health, resulting from a fear of catching the virus, dying, confusion, anger, and loss of employment [49], which is consistent with our findings.

Our results highlighted the impact of the pandemic on career pathways for both groups of youth and young adults who described that lacking volunteer opportunities could affect their career pathway. Volunteering is important because it can help optimize youth's educational potential [20]. Youth with disabilities may need further support with finding volunteer opportunities that align with their career interests, and especially ones that are accessible or could be completed online.

Our findings also showed that more of the youth and young adults with disabilities expressed uncertainties about their career pathway during the pandemic, especially struggling for direction, whereas youth without disabilities often knew what they wanted to do and used the pandemic time to reflect on the longer-term impact on their career plans. These findings are consistent with other research demonstrating that youth with disabilities often encounter many challenges in accessing higher education and paid employment [37] and thus, may be focusing on immediate barriers rather than longer-term goals. It is important for educators and service providers to help support youth on their career pathway, including developing relevant skills through volunteering or job experience. Other research shows that having occupational, educational, family, and professional supports can help facilitate school and work experiences for youth with disabilities [37].



### *Limitations and Future Directions*

The limitations of this study include that it was a qualitative study within one metropolitan area, and, therefore, it is not generalizable to the wider population. It is, nevertheless, critical to understanding the lived experiences of marginalized and under-represented groups, such as youth and young adults with disabilities. Further, our study was also limited in that the participants consisted of a higher proportion of female participants. Therefore, caution should be used in interpreting the findings. Future studies could consider the intersection of gender and other socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., social class, ethnicity, age) on school and employment during the pandemic. Additionally, our study also included a wide variety of disability types (e.g., physical, mental health conditions, etc.), making it difficult to determine whether any differences in experiences were due to their particular condition and also the impact of people's mental health state during the pandemic on their perceived experiences. More research on specific types of disabilities would be worthwhile, and especially comparing any differences in experiences based on physical versus non-physical conditions. Our study included various types of employment and settings and, therefore, it is difficult to compare to what extent youths' experiences were based on their type of work versus pandemic-related impacts. It would be worthwhile for further studies to explore this in greater depth. Future research could consider exploring the longer-term implications of the pandemic on youth and young adults and how these implications may be different or similar to previous economic disruptions such as recessions.

### **5. Conclusions**

Our study explored how youth and young adults within the Greater Toronto Area may be particularly vulnerable to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. The findings highlighted several similarities and some differences between youth with and without a disability regarding barriers to school and work transitions. Key barriers included: (1) difficult transition to online school and working from home, (2) uncertainty about employment, and (3) missed career development opportunities. Youth with disabilities may need additional support with a smoother transition to virtual learning and working remotely. They may also need further support in engaging in meaningful and accessible vocational activities that align with their career pathway.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following are available online at <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/adolescents1040034/s1>, File S1: Interview guide

**Author Contributions:** S.L. conceived the study, oversaw the recruitment and data collection; led the data analysis, and drafted the manuscript. H.A. assisted with recruitment, conducting interviews, transcribing and analysis; critically revised and approved the final manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital (20-0129).

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**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are not publicly available due to privacy concerns aligned with our research ethics board. The data are available upon request from the corresponding author and approval from the Bloorview Research Institute research ethics board.

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