

# A Report to the Senate of Canada

Commissioned by Senator Nancy Hartling of New Brunswick

Completed by Wil Robertson

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## C.E.R.B. and Labour Shortages in Canada

This report was created on the traditional territory of the Wolastoqiyik, Wəlastəkewiyik / Maliseet whose ancestors along with the Mi'Kmaq / Mi'kmaw and Passamaquoddy / Peskotomuhkati Tribes / Nations signed Peace and Friendship Treaties with the British Crown in the 1700s.

## Executive Summary:

During and after the implementation of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), a narrative arose that the economic relief measure was causing labour shortages. This narrative was largely seen in the news media but also included anecdotes from business owners. To the public, this seems like a reasonable conclusion. CERB gave low-income members of society some sense of economic security and enough money to pay their bills, so they simply chose not to work. To many who were aware of the Canadian economy's position prior to the pandemic, particularly with an already existing labour shortage, this seemed like a bit of a leap. Thus, this report seeks evaluate the existing evidence and information on this important topic to provide an answer to this question:

Did CERB and other economic relief measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic contribute to labour shortages currently afflicting the Canadian economy?

What the report finds through a deep analysis of statistics and reputable data related to the Canadian labour market before and during COVID-19 is that no, CERB and other benefits did not cause a labour shortage. In the lack of compelling evidence for a CERB impact on labour supply, we should be focusing on other systemic issues facing the Canadian labour market. The author hopes this report is impactful and effective in demonstrating this conclusion.

- Wil Robertson

## Introduction:

COVID-19 has been a part of our lives for nearly two years now and is showing little sign of going away anytime soon. However long this pandemic may grip our society is yet to be determined, but thus far it has exacerbated and brought to light various systemic issues within our economy and labour market. Many different social and economic inequalities have been made increasingly clear in Canada because of COVID-19, most of which have already been well documented.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as the Coronavirus epidemic continues, lots of questions and points have been raised about how the pandemic and economic relief measures created by federal and provincial governments to respond to it have affected Canadians. One of these questions that has developed over the last several months is whether the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) has contributed to labour shortages during its implementation period.

This report, commissioned in September of 2021, aims to answer this question through an analysis of the longstanding issues within the Canadian labour market, the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, how CERB impacted Canadians and the economy at-large, and ultimately what lessons there are to learn from the on-going labour crisis.

Let us first define our terms and set this report into context. According to the Collins English Dictionary, a labour shortage is “a shortage or insufficiency of qualified candidates for

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<sup>1</sup> “COVID-19 in Canada: A One-Year Update on Social and Economic Impacts.” Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, March 11, 2021. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-631-x/11-631-x2021001-eng.htm>.

employment (in an economy, country, etc)”<sup>2</sup> Another definitive element of a labour shortage is often that labour is not available at a livable wage. It is beyond doubt that Canada currently faces a serious labour shortage. Further to this, in certain sectors and regions, it has for some time now and these sectors within the economy will likely continue to face a labour shortage beyond the pandemic.

In an online survey of 993 members of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, conducted in May of 2021, it was found that the worst cause of limitations on sales or production growth for enterprises was a shortage of skilled labour (38% of respondents). A shortage of un/semi-skilled labour came in as a limitation for 23% of survey participants.<sup>3</sup>

The Bank of Canada’s *Business Outlook Survey* for the Spring of 2021 shared similar insights. The survey summarizes interviews conducted by the Bank’s regional offices with the senior management of about 100 firms selected in accordance with the composition of the gross domestic product of Canada’s business sector. This survey was conducted by phone and video conference from February 16 to March 8, 2021. In said survey, it was reported that:

The number of firms that would have difficulty meeting an unanticipated increase in demand is near its historical average, with several businesses citing significant difficulties. This suggests that capacity pressures are moderate. Businesses facing strong demand—especially those linked to housing and household goods—often noted capacity constraints. The most common bottlenecks are related to labour. Many firms reported difficulties finding new workers at the current wage or that their workforce is now fully utilized. Similar to before the pandemic, these constraints are

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<sup>2</sup> “Labour Shortage Definition and Meaning: Collins English Dictionary,” Labour shortage definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary (HarperCollins Publishers Ltd), accessed November 4, 2021, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/labour-shortage>.

<sup>3</sup> Bourgeois, Andrea. “Business Barometer: May 2021 SME Business Outlook Survey Results.” Canadian Federation of Independent Business, May 2021. <https://www.cfib-fcei.ca/sites/default/files/2019-06/business-barometer-Canada-2019-05.pdf>.

namely in skilled trades and information technology, as well as rural or remote regions lacking sufficient qualified labour. Many firms expect these constraints to persist.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to this, in a short note published through the EconoFACTS section of BMO's website, Senior Economist and Managing Director Economics, Jennifer Lee reported that "All surveys have shown that **finding qualified workers, or any workers, is one of the biggest problems businesses face.**"<sup>5</sup> She went on to note that in the American context, she had heard from various businesses and industries, almost all of them had:

Mentioned labor and supply problems (or some combination of the two), higher prices, and how these issues are having an impact. One interesting one worth sharing was from the *Professional, Scientific & Technical Services* industry..... 'Small businesses in the area are reporting stimulus checks and extension of unemployment are hampering their ability to hire workers'.<sup>6</sup>

The Business Development Bank of Canada echoed concerns of labour shortages in Canada in a study released in September of 2021, titled *How to Adapt to the Labour Shortage Situation:*

*Hiring Difficulties Are Not Going Away.* In that study, Pierre Cl  roux, Vice President, Research and Chief Economist of BDC sagely stated the following:

Labour shortage is not a new phenomenon in Canada, yet the pressure has intensified in recent years. More than half (55%) of Canadian entrepreneurs are struggling to hire the workers they need, leaving them with no choice but to work more hours, as well as delay or refuse new orders. In addition, more than a quarter (26%) are having difficulties retaining their employees. As the economy recovers, this scarcity of workers is reaching worrying heights, putting economic growth at risk and compromising the competitiveness of Canadian businesses. What's even more alarming is that labour scarcity is here to stay. The growth of Canada's labour force will continue to slow for years as the country's population ages. Entrepreneurs will have to spend more time hiring and retaining workers than they did before. This underscores the importance to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) of adopting new solutions to sustain their growth and productivity in the long run.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> "Business Outlook Survey-Spring 2021." Bank of Canada. Bank of Canada, April 12, 2021. <https://www.bankofcanada.ca/2021/04/business-outlook-survey-spring-2021/>.

<sup>5</sup> "All Our Representatives Are Busy; Please Hold. Your Call Is Important to US." All Our Representatives Are Busy; Please Hold. Your Call Is Important To Us. Accessed November 4, 2021. <https://economics.bmo.com/en/publications/detail/78a13c3b-7aff-45f7-a469-b0788bdd0005/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "How to Adapt to the Labour Shortage Situation: Hiring Difficulties Are Not Going Away." BDC.ca. Business Development Canada, September 29, 2021. <https://www.bdc.ca/en/about/analysis-research/labour-shortage>.

BDC has elucidated that not only is the current labour shortage indeed a crisis, but one that has existed and grown for quite some time, and that will be here for some time after COVID-19 due to factors enumerated above. This point will be expanded upon and discussed at greater length in due course.

Having now established that Canada is perceived to be facing an on-going labour shortage across various sectors and regions across the country, we will now turn our focus to the second element of this discussion: the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, or C.E.R.B.<sup>8</sup>

The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) provided financial support to employed and self-employed Canadians who were directly affected by COVID-19. If you were eligible, you could have received \$2,000 for a 4-week period (the same as \$500 a week). [...] The Benefit was available to workers: residing in Canada, who were at least 15 years old; who stopped working because of reasons related to COVID-19 **or** were eligible for Employment Insurance regular or sickness benefits **or** have exhausted their Employment Insurance regular benefits or Employment Insurance fishing benefits between December 29, 2019 and October 3, 2020; who had employment and/or self-employment income of at least \$5,000 in 2019 or in the 12 months prior to the date of their application, and; who did not quit their job voluntarily.

When submitting a first claim, you could not have earned more than \$1,000 in employment and/or self-employment income for 14 or more consecutive days within the four-week benefit period of your claim. When submitting subsequent claims, you could not have earned more than \$1,000 in employment and/or self-employment income for the entire four-week benefit period of your new claim.<sup>9</sup>

CERB was initially implemented March 25, 2020, two weeks after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic.<sup>10</sup> CERB was eventually closed in early October of 2020. At that point, those receiving CERB were transitioned to a modified version of Employment Insurance and

<sup>8</sup> Service Canada. "Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB): Closed." Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) - Canada.ca. Service Canada - Government of Canada, April 30, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/cerb-application.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> "COVID-19 in Canada: A One-Year Update on Social and Economic Impacts." Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, March 11, 2021. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-631-x/11-631-x2021001-eng.htm>.

three new benefits introduced by the federal government.<sup>11</sup> These included the Canada Recovery Benefit, the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit, and the Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit.<sup>12</sup>

EI regular benefits provides assistance to employees who lose their jobs involuntarily and are actively looking for work. Those who were eligible received a minimum of \$400 for up to 26 weeks, or \$240 per week for extended parental benefits.<sup>13</sup>

The Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) gives income support to employed and self-employed individuals who are directly affected by COVID-19 and are not entitled to Employment Insurance (EI) benefits. The CRB is administered by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA).

Depending on when you start applying for the CRB, you can either receive \$1,000 (\$900 after taxes withheld) or \$600 (\$540 after taxes withheld) for a 2-week period.

If your situation continues, you will need to apply again. You may apply for up to a total of 27 eligibility periods (54 weeks) between September 27, 2020, and October 23, 2021.<sup>14</sup>

The CRB ended October 23, 2021.<sup>15</sup> The second relief program introduced to replace CERB was the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit (CRSB).

The Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit (CRSB) gives income support to employed and self-employed individuals who are unable to work because they are sick or need to self-isolate due to COVID-19 or have an underlying health condition that puts them at greater risk of getting COVID-19. The CRSB is administered by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA).

If you are eligible for the CRSB, you can receive \$500 (\$450 after taxes withheld) for a 1-week period.

If your situation continues, you will need to apply again. You may apply for up to a total of 4 weeks between September 27, 2020, and November 20, 2021.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Syal, Richa. "Cerb Is Transitioning to EI. What Does That Mean?." CBCnews. CBC/Radio Canada, August 22, 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/cerb-ei-covid-benefits-1.5695448>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> "Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB)." Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) - Canada.ca. Canada Revenue Agency, October 29, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/benefits/recovery-benefit.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit (CRSB)." Canada.ca. Canada Revenue Agency, October 22, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/benefits/recovery-sickness-benefit.html>.

The CRSB was recently extended until November 20, 2021, with a further proposed extension until May 7, 2022.<sup>17</sup>

The third and final direct offshoot of CERB was the Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit (CRCB). It too has received the same proposed extension by the federal government as the CRSB.<sup>18</sup>

The Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit (CRCB) gives income support to employed and self-employed individuals who are unable to work because they must care for their child under 12 years old or a family member who needs supervised care. This applies if their school, regular program or facility is closed or unavailable to them due to COVID-19, or because they are sick, self-isolating, or at risk of serious health complications due to COVID-19. The CRCB is administered by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA).

If you are eligible for the CRCB, your household can receive \$500 (\$450 after taxes withheld) for each 1-week period.

If your situation continues, you will need to apply again. Each household may apply for up to a total of 42 weeks between September 27, 2020, and November 20, 2021.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the continued devastation caused by COVID-19, of which we are currently facing a fourth wave, the amount of money provided to those in need has diminished. CERB, as seen above, provided \$2000 a month, \$500 a week, to those who were eligible for it and applied. Whereas EI provided eligible applicants a minimum of \$400 a week. The CRB provided either \$900 or \$540 after taxes withheld, for a two-week period. The applicant would have to reapply every two weeks for up to 54 weeks. In contrast, the CRSB provides \$450 after taxes withheld, for a one-week period that applicants can re-apply for up to four times. More substantially, the CRCB provides \$450 after taxes withheld for a one-week period, in which applicants need to re-apply weekly for up to 42 weeks. In this particular example, we can see that not only has the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> "Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit (CRCB)." Canada.ca. Canada Revenue Agency, October 22, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/benefits/recovery-caregiving-benefit.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

amount given to those in need diminished but has been made more inaccessible. Everyone knows that outside of the already specific conditions of these targeted stimulus programs, extensive paperwork through CRA on a regular basis can be reasonably described as a disincentive to access the aforementioned programs. In addition to this, the actions of the federal government taken in implementing CERB means that for those who utilized the CERB benefit in need will have it clawed back in taxes. The claw back of CERB on the following year's taxes results in an effective marginal tax rate on earnings of 100%. So even if CERB benefits decline, taking them makes working a costly choice.

Over the course of its existence, CERB provided needed funds to roughly 8.5 million Canadians.<sup>20</sup> At the time of the program's closing, roughly 4.5 million Canadians were receiving CERB.<sup>21</sup> It was estimated that three million Canadians would transition to EI, and another one to two million were expected to access the three benefits introduced to somewhat replace CERB.<sup>22</sup> The government said then that the three new recovery benefits, which have been taxed at source, were expected to cost \$22 billion; the extension of CERB another \$8 billion; and added EI costs were estimated at \$7 billion.<sup>23</sup> These transitory benefits were also structured to encourage folks to return to work.<sup>24</sup>

In the Statistics Canada report, *COVID-19 in Canada: A One-year Update on Social and Economic Impacts*, released March 11, 2021, we had a first glimpse at what the effects of CERB

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<sup>20</sup> Syal, Richa. "Cerb Is Transitioning to EI. What Does That Mean?." CBCnews. CBC/Radio Canada, August 22, 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/cerb-ei-covid-benefits-1.5695448>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

and pandemic relief measures were for the people receiving them. According to Statistics Canada:

The emergency support measures more than compensated for lost wages and salaries during the initial lockdowns, irrespective of household income levels. Households in the bottom income quintile saw their disposable income rise by 33% in the second quarter, while incomes in the top quintile grew by 7%. Over the first three quarters of 2020, the value of government COVID-19 support measures represented 16.4% of disposable income for the lowest-income earners, compared with 4.3% among the highest earners.<sup>25</sup>

For all intents and purposes, the Government's aim to assist low-income workers who had lost their jobs due to COVID-19 related impacts was achieved, at least in part, due to the implementation of CERB. What remains to be seen is if CERB was enough, and if its unintended effects warranted its implementation. The former is a question for another place, but the latter will be examined in part in this report regarding labour shortages in Canada.

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<sup>25</sup> "COVID-19 in Canada: A One-Year Update on Social and Economic Impacts." Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, March 11, 2021. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-631-x/11-631-x2021001-eng.htm>.

## A Note on CERB:

There are a few important points that must be made regarding CERB before this report continues. As employment numbers improved, and COVID infections declined, the average amount requested by regular CERB applicants also declined. If CERB was the main cause of labour shortages in Canada during its implementation period and beyond, we would have seen a much more catastrophic impact on our economy as a result. Lastly, CERB and its associated programs showed that they were not an economic injection of a work disincentive on a mass scale, but rather an economic tourniquet which was needed at the time for people to survive and to allow the economy a chance to bounce back when it could. This report will briefly touch on each point in turn.

While the pandemic raged on, in July of 2020, Jennifer Robson, an associate professor of political management at Carleton University took to tracking the CERB benefit, and trends in its uptake. At that time, CERB was entering its fifth claim period. What Robson showed was that as the pandemic dragged on, a declining share of CERB recipients were regular users of the program.<sup>26</sup> Average cumulative benefits received by each program user were just below the maximum by the end of the second claim period (May 9), about \$800 below the maximum at the end of the third claim period (June 6) and were nearly \$1,500 below the maximum near the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> claim period. According to Robson, this suggested that, compared to April of 2020, a declining share of CERB recipients were regular users of the program, consistent with the modest improvements in [May's employment indicators](#), particularly for male workers.<sup>27</sup> What

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<sup>26</sup> Robson, Jennifer. "Tracking the Canada Emergency Response Benefit." Finances of the Nation, February 23, 2021. <https://financesofthenation.ca/2020/07/15/tracking-the-canada-emergency-response-benefit/>.

<sup>27</sup> Robson, Jennifer. "Tracking the Canada Emergency Response Benefit." Finances of the Nation, February 23, 2021. <https://financesofthenation.ca/2020/07/15/tracking-the-canada-emergency-response-benefit/>.

this data tells us is that at the height of CERB's use in the Spring and Summer of 2020, the average cumulative benefits received by each program user fluctuated downward as employment numbers improved. As the brunt of the emergence of the first wave of COVID-19 subsided, CERB was used less, and employment numbers began to improve. If it was indeed the case that people who had lost their jobs wished to take advantage of CERB instead of working, it would make logical sense that they would claim the maximum amount possible from the government program. As the data discussed above shows, this is not what happened, even at the height of CERB's implementation and usage.

The second point in this section is to point out that if it were the case that CERB was the key factor exacerbating labour shortages across the country during its implementation period, we would have faced a much more significant negative economic impact. Between March 15 and October 3, 2020, 8.9 million Canadians applied for the CERB benefit.<sup>28</sup> The total value of the benefits given out by the federal government were \$81.6 billion. \$74.08 billion of that was CERB alone.<sup>29</sup> Of all Canadian workers who earned at least \$5,000 in 2019, 35.2% received CERB payments in 2020.<sup>30</sup> Of all workers earning at least \$5,000 in 2019 and employed in accommodation and food services that year, two-thirds (66.6%) received CERB payments in 2020, the highest rate among all sectors. The corresponding percentage for their counterparts employed in arts, entertainment, and recreation was 62.7%. In contrast, relatively few workers

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<sup>28</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada. "Canada Emergency Response Benefit and EI Statistics." Canada.ca. / Gouvernement du Canada, February 16, 2021.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/claims-report.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada. "Canada Emergency Response Benefit and EI Statistics." Canada.ca. / Gouvernement du Canada, February 16, 2021.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/claims-report.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Morissette, René, Martin Turcotte, André Bernard, and Eric Olson. Workers receiving payments from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit program in 2020. Statistics Canada, June 2, 2021.

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/45-28-0001/2021001/article/00021-eng.pdf?st=E0qH6FJW>.

employed in utilities (7.0%), public administration (11.7%), or finance and insurance (12.3%) received CERB payments in 2020.<sup>31</sup> This data regarding the hardest hit sectors of our economy during the pandemic lines up with data utilized later in this report from the BDC. Industries hit hardest by COVID-19, its risks, and associated public health restrictions had the highest percentage of workers applying for CERB. These sectors also lost the highest numbers of jobs in the economy, as shown by BDC.<sup>32</sup> Data also shows that low-wage earners were most likely to receive the CERB benefit, along with young people and marginalized populations.<sup>33</sup> While there is certainly a point to be made about low-wage industries suffering the most during the COVID-19 pandemic and having the most CERB applicants of any industry, one thing is sure. If it were the case that CERB acted as the main catalyst for disincentivizing work, over a third of the Canadian labour force (who had earned \$5000 or more in 2019) would have been inclined not to return to work for the duration of the program. This did not occur, rather, many left low-wage industries highlighted above entirely, pointing to the reality that they may need to improve their offer to the average worker. Largely, “The recruitment challenges [later] faced by restaurants, retailers, and other low-wage employers reflected Canadian workers moving to other sectors and occupations, not them abandoning work altogether.”<sup>34</sup> If folks claiming CERB had suddenly been infused with a desire to abandon work altogether, our economy would have collapsed.

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<sup>31</sup> Morissette, René, Martin Turcotte, André Bernard, and Eric Olson. Workers receiving payments from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit program in 2020. Statistics Canada, June 2, 2021.

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/45-28-0001/2021001/article/00021-eng.pdf?st=E0qH6FJW>.

<sup>32</sup> “How to Adapt to the Labour Shortage Situation: Hiring Difficulties Are Not Going Away.” BDC.ca. Business Development Canada, September 29, 2021. <https://www.bdc.ca/en/about/analysis-research/labour-shortage>.

<sup>33</sup> Morissette, René, Martin Turcotte, André Bernard, and Eric Olson. Workers receiving payments from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit program in 2020. Statistics Canada, June 2, 2021.

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/45-28-0001/2021001/article/00021-eng.pdf?st=E0qH6FJW>.

<sup>34</sup> Stanford, Jim. “Income Security and Workers’ Power: Work, Wages, and Basic Income after COVID.” Centre for Future Work. Centre for Future Work, January 2022. <https://centreforfuturework.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Income-Security-and-Workers-Power-Jan2022.pdf>.

Instead, all indicators point to programs like CERB having saved many people and allowed them to re-enter the labour force, helping to maintain the stability of the Canadian economy in a time of unprecedented crisis.

In closing this section, this report must emphasize the reality that CERB and its associated benefits were a necessary step to stop the bleeding of the Canadian economy and Canadian citizens at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Dr. Jim Stanford recognized recently in a briefing note that agrees in principle to the conclusions of this report:

The timely provision of CERB income was a life-saver for millions of Canadians. It helped Canada avoid a much worse economic and social catastrophe. It allowed families to buy food and pay their rent or mortgage (thus keeping their homes), and supported consumer spending and aggregate demand as the pandemic took hold.<sup>35</sup>

What Dr. Stanford points to is that it was not CERB that was the labour disincentive which businesses cried a foul about and labelled CERB as, but rather their aptitude for providing low wages and a general lack of benefits, particularly in the food and service industry.<sup>36</sup> Dr. Stanford's conclusion is supported by the data and arguments compiled in this report, that ultimately:

The claim that CERB (and successive programs) destroyed the “incentive” to work was disproven by the surprisingly quick rebound in overall labour force participation and employment in Canada after the pandemic: both of which regained and then exceeded pre-COVID peaks by late 2021. Some evidence suggests that thanks to the income stability provided by CERB, workers were able to consider changing to more appealing jobs as the economy re-opened (rather than returning to their old jobs out of desperation). This may have exacerbated supposed “shortages” experienced in low wage sectors like hospitality and retail; but it did not interfere with the recovery in overall participation and employment. The recruitment challenges faced by restaurants, retailers, and other low-wage employers

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<sup>35</sup> Stanford, Jim. “Income Security and Workers’ Power: Work, Wages, and Basic Income after COVID.” Centre for Future Work. Centre for Future Work, January 2022. <https://centreforfuturework.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Income-Security-and-Workers-Power-Jan2022.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

reflected Canadian workers moving to other sectors and occupations, not them abandoning work altogether.<sup>37</sup>

In the end, what has been highlighted in this section is that as Canadian employment numbers improved, and COVID infections declined, the average amount taken by CERB applicants from the program also declined. If CERB was the main exacerbation of labour shortages in Canada during its implementation period and beyond, we would have endured a much harsher impact on our economy as a result. CERB and its associated programs showed that they were not an economic injection of a work disincentive on a mass scale, as claimed mistakenly by many, but rather an economic emergency measure taken in a moment of unprecedented social and economic crisis to allow people to survive and to enable the economy with the opportunity to bounce back when it could.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

## The Controversy:

Over the course of the implementation period of CERB, March 25, 2020 – October of 2020, and indeed through to the summer of 2021, into the recent federal election, a narrative has developed within the media, business sphere, and politicians. This narrative is that recipients of CERB and its offshoots simply “just don't want to work” and have therefore caused a critical labour shortage across several sectors of the Canadian economy.<sup>38</sup> There's only one small problem with this thinking, it simply is not true. This narrative is a political red herring, and this section of the report will aim to display how this is unequivocally so. This will be done in analyzing a few significant factors: the root causes of the ongoing labour shortage, the shocking reality that the current labour shortage was reliably predicted decades ago, and that the current labour shortage points to fundamental flaws in the Canadian economy that can and must be addressed by policy makers in the immediate future.

“Canada’s labour problems, though exacerbated by the pandemic, did not start in the pandemic. In its spring business outlook survey, the Bank of Canada in April [warned](#) that ‘Pre-pandemic labour constraints are starting to return.’”<sup>39</sup> What were these constraints? According to Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), in a report titled *Addressing Labour Shortages*, unemployment rates had been falling and job vacancies increasing in most regions,

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<sup>38</sup> Poshnjari, Iva. “Employer Frustrated at Canadians Who 'Just Don't Want to Work' .” BNN. BNN Bloomberg, June 29, 2021. <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/employer-frustrated-at-canadians-who-just-don-t-want-to-work-1.1623217>.

<sup>39</sup> Edmiston, Jake. “‘It's Not Going to Change’: The Long and Short of Canada's Job Vacancy Problem.” financialpost. Financial Post, June 4, 2021. <https://financialpost.com/news/economy/canada-worker-shortage-problem>.

leading to labour shortages at the time of the release of the report in February of 2020, with data current as of September of 2019.<sup>40</sup> At that time, the report produced some startling data:

- **30.3 million** – Size of the total working age (15 and above) population in Canada
- **19.8 million** – Size of the labour force, reflecting a **65.4% participation rate**
- **18.7 million** – Number of employed, reflecting a **61.6% employment rate**
- **1.16 million** – Number of unemployed, a **5.8% unemployment rate**
- **527 thousand** – Number of vacant jobs, reflecting **3.2%** of labour demand
- **0.6 percent** – Average real hourly wage growth in 2018. Suggests there is little evidence of significant upward pressure, despite higher shortages in some regions.<sup>41</sup>

As these statistics show, Canada was facing labour shortages long before the pandemic. Not to mention, the above statistics recognize the reality of wage stagnation across the country. Indeed, according to the data from ESDC, the number of job vacancies began to rise sharply in 2016, in contrast the falling unemployment rate.<sup>42</sup> This was particularly true in British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec. One of the main reasons for this trend of a heightening labour shortage is Canada's aging population. According to the ESDC data, population aging will continue to put downward pressure on labour force participation and labour force growth.<sup>43</sup> In 2018, the share of the working age population aged 55+ was roughly 67%.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, the labour force participation rate was 65.4%.<sup>45</sup> ESDC projected that by 2028 the share of the working age population aged 55+ would reach roughly 68%, while the labour force participation rate would fall by 1.5% to 63.9%.<sup>46</sup> In short, ESDC recognized that the Canadian labour force is aging and

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<sup>40</sup> "Government of Canada." Canada.ca. Employment and Social Development Canada, February 21, 2020. <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/reports/briefing-binder-2019/book-1/addressing-shortages.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

retiring at a higher rate than our working age population can grow, whether through immigration or the education of those young people currently on track to enter the workforce. ESDC went on to determine that in following pathways to solutions like increased immigration, better access to adequate education and training, increasing the participation in the work force of underrepresented groups, and embracing technological innovation, Canada would be more than capable of eliminating the current labour shortages.<sup>47</sup> At no point was the elimination of economic supports to those unemployed or in poverty suggested as even a possibility of improving the labour shortage situation. If it did not make sense then, why would it make sense now?

In addition to the findings of the ESDC in 2019, the September 2021 study by the Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC), *How to Adapt to the Labour Shortage Situation: Hiring Difficulties Are Not Going Away*, echoed similar concerns, findings, and solutions amidst the trials and tribulations of the COVID-19 Pandemic.<sup>48</sup> Their report noted that job retention was most difficult in Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia, and in the Arts, entertainment, and recreation sector, followed by the agriculture, fishing, and forestry industry.<sup>49</sup> Their survey of employees “found that a desire for **higher wages** is by far the main reason explaining why workers want to change jobs in the next year, followed by a desire for **more benefits**.”<sup>50</sup> Some of the difficulties that these factors of the labour shortage have caused include limiting growth for 64% of entrepreneurs surveyed by BDC.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> “How to Adapt to the Labour Shortage Situation: Hiring Difficulties Are Not Going Away.” BDC.ca. Business Development Canada, September 29, 2021. <https://www.bdc.ca/en/about/analysis-research/labour-shortage>.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

The BDC report also highlighted that COVID-19 has exacerbated the labour shortage crisis for particular industries due to high levels of job mobility during the pandemic. According to their survey, 20% of workers who lost their jobs during the pandemic changed fields of employment.<sup>52</sup>

“The pandemic has allowed (or forced, in certain cases) workers who lost their jobs to look for jobs in new sectors, so mobility between sectors has risen significantly [during the pandemic].”<sup>53</sup>

The most significant negative changes in employment were seen in accommodation and food services ( decrease of 153 600 jobs ) and construction ( decrease of 62 100 jobs ).<sup>54</sup> In contrast, the most significant positive changes in employment were seen in professional and business services ( increase of 202 100 jobs ) and educational services ( increase of 72 900 jobs ).<sup>55</sup> This extreme increase in job mobility between sectors, rather than people not wanting to work, is what caused the reactions of those in the sectors named above. This, at least according to BDC, is one of the main ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated Canada’s labour shortage crisis.

BDC’s report then comes to some of the root causes of the labour shortage at-large. Mirroring the findings of ESDC, BDC identified the following factors contributing to the labour shortage:

The aging population will continue to put downward pressure on labour force participation and growth. There are four reasons explaining this long-term trend.

1. The working population is aging, and baby boomers are leaving the labour market in such large numbers that entrants are unable to fill all the gaps.
2. Retirements are expected to remain high until at least 2026.
3. Young people are taking much longer to complete their education and begin their careers.
4. Immigration helps compensate for the number of people leaving the labour force, but it is not enough to maintain labour force growth.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

Projections show that labour force growth will continue to slow for years. Given the downward trend, entrepreneurs must adapt their business practices to sustain their growth over the long run.<sup>56</sup>

BDC highlights long-term systemic issues at the heart of Canada's society which have caused and will continue to cause labour shortages and elongate this crisis in the future. Keeping in mind that this report was written during the fourth wave of COVID-19, it makes no reference whatsoever to pandemic relief programs like CERB or its offshoots having a causal effect on the labour shortages businesses are facing in Canada. Rather, it highlights the fact that the labour shortage existed prior to the pandemic and will exist long after it is over.

What are the solutions to this problem? BDC stipulates there are a multitude of ways in which Canada can overcome the crisis of the current labour shortage: from better integrating more immigrants and including underutilized groups in the workforce, we could gain roughly two million workers.<sup>57</sup> They also suggest embracing technology and automation, implementing formal hiring processes, and offering better wages and benefits.

Companies that had automated certain areas of the business are **2.0 times** more likely to find hiring easy and **1.9 times** more likely to see sales growth above the industry average, compared to companies that had not automated.<sup>58</sup>

Companies that had put a formal hiring process in place are **1.4 times** more likely to find hiring easy, compared to companies that had not put in place a formal process.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Companies that offer competitive salaries and benefits are **1.4 times** more likely to find retaining workers easy and **1.7 times** more likely to have sales growth above the industry average, compared to companies that do not offer such salaries and benefits.<sup>60</sup>

Other measures like offering flexible work arrangements and providing mentorship opportunities were also shown to ease employers' difficulties relating to job retention.<sup>61</sup> What these solutions from BDC suggest, echoing the suggestions of ESDC prior to the pandemic, is that we have long-term, systemic issues within the labour market in Canada that we have been aware of for some time now, COVID-19 merely exacerbated them and brought them into the public and political foreground. Additionally, we are fully aware of possible solutions that can and should be developed to better not only the living conditions of workers themselves, but to alleviate and eliminate the labour shortage so many sectors, industries, and entrepreneurs are facing today. We merely require the political will, and the cooperation of the private sector to make these adjustments happen for the betterment of the economy and society at large.

The pandemic didn't create Canada's labour shortage — it just made an existing problem worse. While COVID-19 certainly disrupted the Canadian labour market by temporarily cutting off the flow of immigrants to the country and by prompting some workers to quit rather than risk being exposed to the virus on the job, [BDC's Chief Economist,] Cl  roux said the key problem is simple demographics. "Today, 16 per cent of Canadians are over 65. In the next five years, many Canadians are going to retire," Cl  roux said. "And not a lot of young people are entering the job market."<sup>62</sup>

In addition to the findings of ESDC in 2019, and BDC in the fall of 2021:

In a report released in August, the Business Council of Alberta also concluded that pandemic-era support programs like CERB are not the driving factor behind the labour force shortage. About one quarter of businesses surveyed by the council said that income supports are a barrier to finding

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Stephenson, Amanda. "Widespread Labour Shortage Not Going Away Any Time Soon: BDC Report." thestar.com. The Toronto Star, September 29, 2021. <https://www.thestar.com/business/2021/09/29/widespread-labour-shortage-not-going-away-any-time-soon-bdc-report.html>.

workers, but only seven per cent said they are the most significant obstacle. The group said “increased compensation, more remote work flexibility, improved skills training and micro-credentialing” may be necessary for employers seeking to attract workers and reduce job turnover.<sup>63</sup>

In summation, neither the COVID-19 pandemic, nor the economic relief efforts implemented in response to it caused the labour shortages the Canadian economy faces today. Rather, the pandemic exacerbated long-term, systemic flaws within the Canadian labour market and our economy, particularly with regards to increased levels of retirement, a spike in job mobility, and a lack of immigration and inclusion of underrepresented folks in the workforce. Not only were we aware of the labour shortage and its effects prior to the pandemic, but many also knew how to mitigate and eliminate them. In examining this evidence, it is disingenuous to state as a matter of fact that CERB and other pandemic relief efforts hold a causal effect to the ongoing labour shortages in Canada. While lower wage employers have been hit hardest by these economic supports, in that low-wage earners were given the economic security to change their career path or leave the workforce temporarily, it is not the case that CERB caused some sort of labour supply crisis. The following section will further add to this conclusion, in explaining that we were not only aware of the labour shortage prior to the pandemic, but that it was predicted reasonably, decades ago.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

## The Current Labour Shortage was Predicted Long Ago

Another factor to consider when examining the narrative that economic pandemic relief efforts caused labour shortages is that not only were we aware of alarming spikes of job vacancies in 2019 according to the ESDC, but these shortages had been predicted over a decade ago. Dr. Rick Miner, former President of Seneca College, wrote a report entitled “People Without Jobs - Jobs Without People: Ontario’s Labour Market Future”.<sup>64</sup> Published in February of 2010, the report was written in the midst of the recession but warned of “a looming demographic and labour market crisis which has the potential to shake the very foundations of our society and economy.”<sup>65</sup> In this report, Dr. Miner identified that the impending labour shortage was set to be caused by a number of factors.

The first main cause he enumerated was that of an aging population:

Our population is aging; as the baby boomer generation advances into the age of normal retirement, there will be a significant decline in the proportion of our population in the prime working years (15 to 64). Using Ontario Ministry of Finance data, the projected shortfall in the availability of workers is shown to rise to at least 200,000, and to as high as 1.8 million by 2031, depending on our levels of population growth.<sup>66</sup>

The second main cause he described was a lack of recipients of a post-secondary education:

At the same time as our population is aging, the requirements of the labour market are changing. With the emergence of our knowledge economy, the proportion of the labour force requiring some form of education or training beyond high school will increase dramatically. Using a variety of Canadian and U. S. estimates, it is concluded that by 2031 we will need 77% of our workforce to have post-secondary credentials (apprenticeship, university, college, industry, professional). Overall, we now stand at about 60%, with our younger population (25 to 34 years of age) at just over 66%.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Miner, Rick. “People Without Jobs - Jobs Without People.” [workforcecoalition.ca](http://workforcecoalition.ca/downloads/people-without-jobs-jobs-without-people-final.pdf). Miner Management Consultants, February 2010. <http://workforcecoalition.ca/downloads/people-without-jobs-jobs-without-people-final.pdf>.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

Seeing Dr. Miner’s two main causes of the impending labour shortage crisis, one may be intrigued to hear his suggestions for solutions to mitigate or eliminate the shortage. His suggestions were increasing immigration with a focus on attracting skilled workers, increasing the participation rates of those underrepresented in the labour force, accelerating the completion of post-secondary education for students, increasing employer-provided training, and easing access to post-secondary education, to list a few.<sup>68</sup>

**One may recall that these recommended solutions are nearly identical to the solutions proposed by ESDC nine years later, and by BDC eleven years later.** In addition, the causes Dr. Miner places the most emphasis on for causing the incoming crisis are also those identified by BDC (an aging population, and a lack of skilled labour).

What is truly chilling is the prediction Dr. Miner made as to how bad the labour shortage would get:

By 2011, the high growth assumption yields a deficit of just 40,000 workers. This would swell to over 250,000 if the slow growth assumption were to materialize, but this is probably still a manageable situation. The situation changes dramatically, however, as we move farther into the future and the impact of the aging boomers cuts more deeply. By 2021, for example, the medium growth assumption yields a workforce deficit of some 600,000. By 2026, this rises to 800,000, and by 2031 it passes the one million mark. A high population growth rate modifies this projection considerably, but the deficit in the labour supply still reaches more than 300,000 by 2031.<sup>69</sup>

In Ontario, the number of job vacancies has increased from 234,000 in October of last year to almost 316,000 vacant jobs in September of 2021, according to Statistics Canada.<sup>70</sup> This comes as the Ontario government calls on the federal government to double the number of immigrants

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Alhmidi, Maan. “Ontario Government Seeking to Double Skilled Immigrants to Address Labour Shortage.” Global News. Global News, November 4, 2021. <https://globalnews.ca/news/8349542/ontario-double-skilled-immigrants-labour-shortage/>.

allowed into the province under a program aimed at boosting the skilled workforce.<sup>71</sup>

Meanwhile, in the national context, [according to Statistics Canada](#), there were 731,900 job vacancies in the second quarter of 2021. StatCan said these vacancies can be seen across all provinces, with the largest increases in Quebec, Ontario, and B.C.<sup>72</sup> Seeing these numbers, we have been able to mitigate the labour shortage slightly by closely mirroring Miner’s ‘high population growth’ model, but this still results in an extreme labour shortage.

Yet, the worst is yet to come. According to the Royal Bank of Canada, we are in for a surge in retirements in the coming months and years.

Retirements have also started to tick higher already, and we expect a return to long-term trends to be continued into the second half of the year, driven by the large cohort of aging baby boomers.

A surge in retirements will worsen Canada’s already declining labour force participation rate—which has bounced-back from pandemic declines but is still at a level not seen since the mid-90s. Coupled with a rise in demand where job vacancies are back at pre-crisis levels, we expect this increase in voluntary job turnover to exacerbate post-pandemic labour shortages.<sup>73</sup>

What we can conclude from this is disheartening and troublesome at the least. Seeing Dr. Miner’s report shows us that we had reasonably predicted the labour shortage we are now facing, over a decade ago. While Miner’s most optimistic estimates are where we currently lie in terms of numbers of job vacancies, the labour shortage is still a significant crisis that is only going to get worse before it gets any better. Policy makers and economists alike were aware that this shortage was coming long ago, knew the entire time, and yet government has not done enough to mitigate or eliminate the possibility of a crisis level labour shortage. We knew the causes, we

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Neustaeter, Brooklyn. “These Canadian Industries Are Currently Facing the Biggest Labour Shortages.” CTVNews. CTV News, October 5, 2021. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/these-canadian-industries-are-currently-facing-the-biggest-labour-shortages-1.5612004>.

<sup>73</sup> Agopsowicz, Andrew. “Will a Return to Pre-Pandemic Retirement and Job Quitting Levels Worsen Emerging Labour Shortages in Canada?” RBC Thought Leadership. Royal Bank of Canada, August 10, 2021. [https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/will-a-return-to-pre-pandemic-retirement-and-job-quitting-levels-worsen-emerging-labour-shortages-in-canada/?\\_ga=2.58032937.262026192.1626118138-2113611206.1626118138](https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/will-a-return-to-pre-pandemic-retirement-and-job-quitting-levels-worsen-emerging-labour-shortages-in-canada/?_ga=2.58032937.262026192.1626118138-2113611206.1626118138).

knew what possible solutions were, and yet we face a labour shortage that could decimate the livelihoods of countless Canadians and their businesses for years to come.

## Conclusion

The Canadian economy is facing a severe crisis. Businesses and sectors across the nation face increasing job vacancies, as there are simply not enough people to fill the jobs that remain available. As demonstrated in this report, the labour shortage is indeed here. Yet, in the same breath, we knew it was coming over a decade ago, and we had every indication prior to the pandemic that a severe labour shortage was already here and would only worsen with time. With the introduction of CERB and other economic relief measures to help Canadians survive and afford to live through the COVID-19 pandemic, a narrative arose within the media and elsewhere that CERB and its offshoot benefits had caused the drastic labour shortage we currently face. There is currently no reputable data which shows that CERB or its offshoot programs have solely contributed to the ongoing labour shortage. CERB's impact on labour supply that has exacerbated the labour shortage for certain sectors is a dramatic increase in job mobility, that is, workers altogether changing sectors during the pandemic. The sectors of the economy hit hardest by this were skilled labour-intensive industries like construction, and generally low-wage work in the food and service industry. The work cited in this report makes it abundantly clear that the most anecdotes from business owners and operators that were reaching the media and promoted the notion that CERB was keeping people from working were from those in industries hit hardest by the spike in job mobility during the pandemic. What's more is that there is no data to suggest that CERB had a causal effect on the spike of job mobility during its implementation. It may be reasonable to suggest that CERB gave folks benefitting from it the economic stability to reconsider their sector of employment or career path but found no data supporting this logical assumption.

CERB did not cause the ongoing labour shortages in the Canadian economy. COVID-19 exacerbated the pre-existing crisis, particularly through its effects on job mobility, lowered immigration, and an impending spike in retirements. The labour shortage we now face was predicted years ago and existed long before COVID turned all our lives upside down. Thus, the implication that somehow CERB and other economic relief efforts implemented to support Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic has solely caused the labour shortage we face is simply not true. It is dangerous to distract the voting public from deep, systemic issues in our economy and labour market through a political narrative and red herring.

Retirements are set to increase, with not enough young people entering the workforce to replace them. Post-Secondary education is now more necessary for employment in more circumstances and contexts, while it is becoming increasingly inaccessible, and students are taking longer to complete their programs and degrees. Immigration levels, particularly in attracting skilled labour and talent to the Canadian economy, simply are not high enough to address the labour shortage. Immigration cannot address the shortage on its own either way. Additionally, there remain millions of underrepresented Canadians who are willing to enter the workforce, we merely need to adopt the will and inclusive practices required to allow them to do so. We are aware of many more solutions to the current labour shortage, identified by the BDC earlier in this report. What is deeply concerning is that rather than work to implement those solutions in a manner suitable enough to deal with these deep-rooted, systemic flaws in our labour market and economy, much of the media and public aptly turned to a political, false narrative. These systemic issues must be addressed by public policy at the highest levels of our government and society at large.

Otherwise, we risk allowing an existing crisis to worsen and continue the disastrous economic impacts inflicted on Canadians and the economy by the COVID-19 pandemic. In closing, the

warning of Dr. Miner, writing amidst the 2008 recession, seems an apt point for the current moment.

Right now, it is perhaps understandable that the world has its attention focused on the prospects of economic recovery, after the calamity of the recent recession. As understandable as it may be, it would be truly unfortunate if the focus on economic recovery were to blind us to the demographic reality that lies just around the corner. [...]

We know that the recession will pass, as all recessions do, but what we have to accept is that the demographic changes that are coming cannot be wished away. They are real, and their implications are both imminent and frightening. The current recession may affect the timing of our response, but it cannot affect it by very much. [...] And if we delay our response, then we will find that when we are ready to grow we will be constrained by a workforce that is out of balance with the needs of our economy. The time for action is now.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Miner, Rick. "People Without Jobs - Jobs Without People." workforcecoalition.ca. Miner Management Consultants, February 2010. <http://workforcecoalition.ca/downloads/people-without-jobs-jobs-without-people-final.pdf>.

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