

COMING HOME

After looking for work across the country, Atlantic Canada's youth are home—and still unemployed

By PETER BOISSEAU

André Miro was two weeks away from finishing high school in Moncton when he was offered a job in Montréal in 1981. The 20-year-old jumped at the opportunity.

"That was foolish," he says. "I was passing everything [at school]."

By September he was out of work in Montréal and headed West. "I went out there because I knew people out there. I landed a job at Sunco [oil company in Alberta] almost right away. When I was laid off, I had another job within three days."

But the tide was turning. In 1983 the giant Allsard oil project collapsed, as did Alberta's economy. Boom towns such as Fort MacMurray, once a Mecca for young unemployed easterners, were not prepared for the high unemployment.

"I went to the government to ask for social assistance," said André. "All they did was offer me a bus ticket to Edmonton, with a referral to a youth hostel."

Their indifference made him angry. "I felt that since I paid into [the social welfare programs] they should have the decency to help me out in a time of need. Instead, I got the understanding that if you weren't married and didn't have a kid, they didn't give a shit."

"All they wanted was to get me out of town so they wouldn't have another problem on their hands."

Most of the unemployed were easterners, he said, and they all talked of one thing—going home.

But home is the Atlantic, which suffers the highest youth unemployment in the country, although British Columbia is closing the gap. Atlantic youth have never had a healthy job market. Most have to choose between a job elsewhere or staying at home and taking their chances.

The MacDonald Royal Commission on the economy said in its findings the burden of the recession is not borne equally by all Canadians. The region with more than its share of unemployment is the Atlantic, and the age group most affected is 15 to 25 year olds.

But you don't have to tell that to André. Statistics Canada reports there are 495,000 unemployed youth in Canada, but many peg that number much higher. The Metro Toronto Planning Council estimates there are 750,000 unemployed people between the ages of 15 and 24, because many young people have simply stopped looking for work and have become part of the hidden numbers of unemployed.

Victims of the hard economic times range from college graduates to high school drop-outs. Many are forced to live at home, a mixed blessing that raises serious family problems for some. Others haunt the streets and parks of Canadian cities, scratching out a living. Some turn to crime to support themselves.

Most have never known the boom of days past, when careers were mapped out and applications for post-secondary education meant months, not years of waiting.

This generation finds prosperity hard to imagine.

Options for the young unemployed are scarce. In New Brunswick, the province's 17,000 youth can receive a maximum of \$108 a month to eat, find shelter and clothe themselves. The situation in other provinces is similar.

There are more than 1400 young people under 25 drawing welfare in New Brunswick, according to provincial government statistics.

At the Fredericton Emergency Shelter, Joe Cormier sees the results of these statistics.

"Some of them are trying to live on \$108 a month," he says incredulously. Cormier is a worker at the shelter, which provides 30 beds and lodging for people who have simply run out of options. He notes many of the shelter's clients are young.

Young faces are showing up in breadlines and shelters in most Canadian cities these days, down and out in a system that has forgotten them. Like missions and shelters in Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver, the eight month old Fredericton shelter is operated by church and volunteer groups. Before it opened, Cormier said many who now use the shelter led skid row lives on park benches and in doorways. This upset many residents.

"Too many residents of this city think our clients are the scum of the earth," says Gordon Doherty, a shelter volunteer.

A lack of confidence and self-respect comes from the feeling that nobody could care less about them and from living hand to mouth, says Cormier. He says restoring self-respect is not easy, but this is what shelter workers try to do.

"We try to make a person feel like a person," says Cormier, "not just like a number. They do little things like you would do at home—make beds, tidy up, help with chores."

"If they aren't clean at least people don't go around saying 'Look at those bums'. And Sally Ann's good for a couple bowls of soup. They might be a little hungry most of the time, but if you have to, you can get by on it."

Low income and jobless youth often lack self-respect and a positive self image. Michèle Richard and Janice MacNeil run a youth employment outreach program for the federal government which services youth with little education and fewer options.

"Very few of our clients have trades," says MacNeil. "They are qualified for jobs mainly in the service sector. If you are an unemployed university grad you at least have the confidence in your abilities to keep going. But poor people come in here with no confidence."

"Our clients have very basic worries," MacNeil says, "like keeping a roof over their heads and shoes on their feet. They have more life pressures than the average kid at home. They are not worrying whether Dad is going to give them the car."

MacNeil and Richard say it is difficult to keep track of their clients because many have no fixed address. Of the 350 young people originally registered at their office, only 140 are still in touch.

"We lost 107 people for no apparent reason," says MacNeil. "They could be sleeping on park benches."

"It's hard for us to put ourselves in their predicament," says outreach's Richard. "A lot of them are illiterate. They come out of grade 10 and they still can't communicate. To upgrade yourself in New Brunswick, for them, is almost impossible."

Relief for the legions of jobless youth is not coming soon. The conference board of Canada, a private economic forecasting agency, predicts almost 20 per cent youth unemployment throughout 1985 and remaining high until 1990, even if the economy strengthens.

For unemployed 23-year-old high school graduate Dave Knight, the news is demoralizing.

"My zest for life is going down. I hate to say it, but I really don't care about the rest of the world anymore. Now it's just the job. I want to get along. I feel I'm not contributing to anything anymore, not even myself."

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