**Jobless Gen Y: Young, Unemployed, and Giving Up Hope:**

**Alyshah Hasham, Toronto Star**

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“Set the bar low,” is the advice Ron Sly would give himself a year and a half ago, when he started looking for work in Toronto.

But back then it was a city of opportunity, where he’d get a stable job and become upwardly mobile. Instead the 26-year-old, armed with a useless B.Sc. in biology, spent months job-hunting while working at a bar.

“I couldn’t go back to school, I couldn’t take on any more debt,” he said. For the last year he’s worked on short-term contract as communications coordinator at [First Work](http://www.firstwork.org/), a not-for-profit organization helping youth find employment.

He likes his job, but it would be nice to live like you know where next month’s rent is coming from.

“There is still the stress of being unsure about the future. There just isn’t the stability and job security that was enjoyed by previous generations. That is for me the biggest let down.”

Sly is part what could become a “lost generation,” says TD economist Francis Fong. “There is the threat of it taking half a decade to a decade or even longer to get these people back to where they should have been had they been the same age in an economic boom year.”

In a [report](http://www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/ff0312_younger_workers.pdf) released Thursday Fong points out that the economic recovery, which has seen slow job growth overall, has been practically non-existent for workers between the ages of 15 and 24. That age group accounted for more than half of the 430,000 net job losses during the recession, although they make up 16.5 per cent of the workforce.

Employment for those over 25 is now at 400,000 jobs above pre-recession levels. But just 1,300 net jobs have been added over the last two and a half years for the 15 to 24 year old cohort.

And about 175,000 young Canadians have left the workforce since the recession began.

With a youth jobless rate of 14.5 per cent, Canada is actually doing pretty well compared to the 50 per cent youth unemployment rate in [Spain](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/spain/9044897/Spains-lost-generation-youth-unemployment-surges-above-50-per-cent.html).

And historically, youth have always been hit hardest by recessions. Compared to the downturns in the 1980s and 1990s, this generation isn’t doing too badly.

Young workers in the nineties bore 77.5 per cent of the job losses, and it took until late in that decade for an employment recovery to even begin, said Fong.

But this generation does face some unique competitive pressures, like [delayed retirement and retirees coming back to work, sometimes in jobs that would have gone to young people just starting out in the workforce.](http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorialopinion/article/1138312--young-workers-sidelined-as-retirees-stampede-back-into-workforce). Young people are also competing against older workers who lost their jobs in the recession.

“We aren’t just competing with new grads. It’s a nasty economy out there, and we are competing with experienced candidates who have upwards of five years experience, who are willing to take an entry level job. Some employers are taking chances, but there are too many candidates and too few positions,” says Jackie Stephens, 23.

She graduated in engineering last year from Carleton University, with about two years of work experience including part-time jobs and a co-op placement.

But like many in her graduating class, she is working outside her field as a patient transfer attendant and is concerned about keeping her skills sharp – something a recruiter warned her about.

Fong says research has shown that first few years are critical for rising in the ranks and establishing yourself.

“In a lesser job the skills you did get erode and your competiveness becomes diminished. The poor footing ripples through the rest of your career.”

That means it takes longer to earn a good salary, facing young people with a paradox.

“On one hand they are being told to start saving early because that will help them in retirement,” says Fong. “But if you want to buy a home or start a family without going significantly into debt, it’s basically impossible to do both.”

Nancy Schaefer, president of non-profit [Youth Employment Services](http://www.yes.on.ca/get-informed/about-yes/what-we-do/), says this round of youth unemployment is “alarming because it affects university and college graduates as well as high school students.”

But young people are learning to manage their expectations, she says, and that’s why many of them are choosing to go back to school.

Fong sees the increase in young people enrolling in post-secondary educations as a silver lining for the future. They’ll be a highly skilled labour force that can be competitive in the knowledge economy, and useful when the baby boomers retire.

Still, the rapid advancement of technology has already dumbed-down many entry-level positions, said Matt Wood, executive director of First Work. “I believe we’re just at the tip of the iceberg… The potential for efficiencies and productivity gains is so huge through technological innovation that no one can see where entry level jobs are going to be.”

In the meantime, part of the answer for young people is Go West, towards the booming oil and gas industry.

Sly has considered it, and his two brothers have done it. There are also smaller communities in Ontario with a lower cost of living and better chances of landing that stable job.

It’s what they’ll have to do if he and his partner want to start thinking about the next stage of their life, he says.

“Right now we’re treading water until the economy comes back.”