

# According to the UN, Canadians with intellectual disabilities are being exploited

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Canada was [recently criticized by Tomoya Obokata, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery](#), in relation to the shortcomings of the temporary foreign worker program.

However, this was not the Special Rapporteur's only criticism. The [working conditions of persons with intellectual disabilities](#) also drew his attention.

As a researcher on issues related to the [financial security](#) and employment of persons with disabilities, and as someone who works in the field of public policy, I would like to shed some light on a controversial practice that is still widespread in Canada: sheltered work programs.

## What are sheltered work programs?

Relatively unknown to the general public, sheltered work programs are a [historical legacy of the longstanding segregation and exploitation persons with intellectual disabilities have experienced](#) throughout North America. Unlike institutionalization, which has been in relative decline, sheltered work programs are still thriving, despite repeated calls to end them [in both Canada and in Québec](#).

Sheltered work programs are [generally described](#) as programs in which:

- individuals with a disability (particularly those with an intellectual disability) are brought together, without being mixed with people who do not have a disability;
- people provide a form of work without being paid, or they receive a stipend (a few dollars a day);
- different labor laws and standards do not apply, including minimum wage standards.

Historically, the primary aim of these programs was [first and foremost, to offer a supportive environment in which to train people considered unemployable](#). The reasoning was that if these people were made to perform repetitive tasks in a non-competitive environment where they

were "protected" from the rest of society, they would be able to develop work skills and eventually enter the regular job market.

However, far from fostering inclusion in the workplace, the on-the-job training that starts out as temporary often becomes permanent. This raises ethical, political and social questions about the practice itself.

## **Programs used across Canada**

[In a research report published in 2022](#), the Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society outlined the situation regarding sheltered work programs in Canada. All the provinces studied (Ontario, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Québec and the Northwest Territories) had sheltered work programs in which people provided work without receiving fair compensation.

Worse still, in many cases the [participation of these people in sheltered work programs could be counted in years](#), or even decades. Far from being a temporary measure, sheltered work programs have become both a source of funding [for organizations that receive government subsidies](#) and a form of respite for families faced with a cruel shortage of services.

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to know exactly how many persons with an intellectual disability participate in sheltered work programs in Canada (statistics are hard to find, or simply non-existent). However, since Québec publishes up-to-date financial and [demographic data](#), it is possible to study the case of this province.

## **The case of Québec**

Québec has divided its employability programs for people with disabilities between the Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale

(Ministry of employment and social solidarity, MESS) and the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (Ministry of health and [social services](#), MSSS). In theory, the MSSS looks after people with disabilities deemed to be "further away from the labor market," while the MESS looks after people who are more job-ready.

However, in reality, what [community organizations](#) in the field are reporting and [what current research seems to be revealing](#) is that a significant number of people who should be using MESS services end up in sheltered work programs, instead. [The Auditor General of Québec's report on the employability of young people with disabilities](#) amply demonstrates this situation.

Ultimately, Quebec's Ministry of health and social services indirectly and significantly acts as a central driver of the province's disability employment strategy for individuals with [intellectual disabilities](#) via sheltered work programs.

## Expenditures related to socioprofessional programs in ID/ASD - MSSS - 2013-2023

This table presents the expenditures related to socioprofessional programs in intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder made by the Ministère de la Santé et des Services Sociaux between 2013-2014 and 2022-2023.

### Program description (in French):

- Sheltered Work Programs - Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder
- Support for individual internships - Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder
- Support des plateaux de travail - Déficience intellectuelle et trouble du spectre de l'autisme
- Employment integration - Intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorders

Program	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
Sheltered Work Programs - Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder	\$7 225 291.10	\$6 723 645	\$4 697 396	\$4 669 276	\$4 201 802	\$4 266 352	\$4 153 359
Support for individual internships - Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder	\$6 008 056	\$5 067 534	\$4 058 395	\$4 082 513	\$4 313 128	\$3 403 013	\$2 974 576
Support des plateaux de travail - Déficience intellectuelle et trouble du spectre de l'autisme	\$9 047 863	\$7 620 283	\$7 540 068	\$10 642 775	\$11 176 042	\$12 419 478	\$12 819 878
Employment integration - Intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorders	\$346 416	\$340 970	\$238 641	\$522 710	\$127 514	\$360 625	\$372 500
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$22 627 626.10</b>	<b>\$19 752 432</b>	<b>\$16 534 500</b>	<b>\$19 917 274</b>	<b>\$19 818 486</b>	<b>\$20 449 468</b>	<b>\$20 320 313</b>

Table: Samuel Ragot • Source: Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux - Contours financiers • Created with Datawrapper

Between 2013–2014 and 2022–2023, no less than \$187 million of public funds have been invested in these programs.

Another reason that may explain the prevalence of sheltered work programs in Québec is the fact that recipients of the Social Solidarity Program are not allowed to work for more than \$200 a month.

The fact that the social assistance check is reduced dollar for dollar after this limit is, itself, often cited as a justification for not paying people who participate in sheltered work programs.

## **Possible avenues for the future of sheltered work programs in Canada**

Although sheltered work programs can sometimes help reduce isolation and provide respite for parents, several organizations are calling for better oversight of sheltered work programs.

A first step would be to have [clear training objectives and time-limited participation](#), to ensure that these programs truly are meeting a person's needs with respect to bettering their social and professional skills.

In addition, [provincial and territorial legislation should be updated](#) to guarantee that all persons with disabilities enjoy the same rights as the rest of the population in all situations, including in employment.

As well, over time, governments should [redirect public funds](#) used for sheltered work programs toward inclusive hiring programs ([as has been done in New Brunswick, for example](#)) and stimulating activities for adults with disabilities across Canada. Community organizations that provide respite for families and create these spaces to socialize and learn should also receive fair funding, so as not to generate more pressure [for organizations that are already largely underfunded](#).

Other measures are crucial, such as ensuring that social assistance programs allow recipients to work, even if only part-time. The new Basic Income Program that came into force in Québec in 2023 is a good example of positive change in this area, as it [allows recipients to work part-time](#). Other provinces, such as [British Columbia](#) and [Ontario](#), have also started to make the rules of their programs more flexible, but there is still a long way to go.

Another important point is to ensure that there is a real, planned transition between school and working life for young adults with disabilities. Provinces that have worked on this, such as New Brunswick, [have shown that a well-executed transition can be of great benefit to the whole population](#). And although Québec has [its own transition from school to active life program \(TSAL\)](#), the [program](#) is still limited to "guides" whose implementation is largely left to the goodwill of school principals, notably [for lack of a "clearly defined interdepartmental structure"](#) and clear obligations.

## **Canada must respect its international obligations**

The situation is such that a growing number of organizations in Canada (including [Inclusion Canada](#) and People First of Canada, the two largest organizations representing people with intellectual disabilities in the country) are describing the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in sheltered work programs as ["exploitation."](#)

According to the various human rights organizations, Canada is therefore in breach of its international obligations. The [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) explicitly prohibits the exploitation of people with disabilities (article 16), and instead promotes the right to employment and work on an equal basis with other workers (article 27).

It is high time that the term "work" was no longer synonymous with "exploitation" for persons with intellectual disabilities across the country.

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