

This issue snapshot is excerpted from [Unmasking the Future](#) (2021), a scan of major current socio-economic trends and developments, at local, provincial, national and international scales, authored by James Stauch of the Institute for Community Prosperity, commissioned by the Calgary Foundation.



THE EXPERIENCE(D) CITY:

From a Place to Work to a Place to Live

While 2020 is epochal in many Canadians' lives, it has impacted Calgary in particularly profound and permanent ways. For much of the past 20 years, indeed 50 years, significant economic growth, population growth, and material prosperity has defined the city. It grew fast, far and wide, and seemed forever young, with a swagger and a chutzpah that other mid-sized cities could only envy. With an influx of young workers, especially during boom times, it maintained one of the most youthful demographics in all of urban Canada.

Then, like a series of biblical plagues befalling the city – the flood, the recession, the rejection of a half-hearted Olympic bid, the seeming death spiral of the petroleum industry – Calgary seemed to be getting stuck in a serious civic funk. And then a real plague hit. These days, downtown streets are hollowed-out canyons, floors of empty commercial space like geologic strata marking the fossilized remnants of fossil-fueled prosperity. Unemployment is at epically high double-digit levels, home prices are stagnant or falling, and many local businesses and community groups are beginning to disappear.

But another troubling trend has been quietly unfolding for a while. Shortly before the full brunt of the pandemic hit Canada, an article appeared on CBC News observing that, despite Calgary's population having grown by over 20% over the past decade, there was one demographic that actually shrunk during the same period: The age group 20- to 24-year-olds declined by 4,400, a decline of 5.5 per cent.²²⁷ Over the past three years, there has been an even sharper drop in the 25-30 year range. It is not clear why this happening, or whether it's connected primarily to economic hardship or to other factors.²²⁸

At the Institute for Community Prosperity, we interviewed twenty twenty-somethings (current and recently former students) to dig into this. Albeit anecdotal, these conversations uncovered almost no mention of jobs or the economy, but rather questions of artistic and cultural vitality, accessibility (especially transit and food accessibility), inclusivity, disconnection from the corporate downtown culture, and a perceived reactionary political climate that caters to an older generation.²²⁹

"I feel like Calgary is still a young city; it is still going through a lot of growing pains. I attribute Calgary to someone between the age of 25-30 trying to figure out who they are. They know they are grown and know what they are capable of but haven't figured out how to get there."

Anonymous citizen respondent, Calgary on Purpose (2020)²⁴⁰

"...humanity is no longer moving towards a future anymore that will allow our communities locally, nationally, and globally to flourish together. If we're moving anywhere at all, we seem to be sliding down a slippery slope towards a treacherous place, with unreason, self-righteous anger, and racism greasing our shared descent."

Thomas Homer-Dixon, *Commanding Hope: The Power We have to Renew a World in Peril* (2020)

So why is this happening? Calgary has long been a net exporter of post-secondary students, and certainly the job picture is not nearly what it was a decade ago, but is there a connection between the broader malaise that the city finds itself in, and this particular trend? Are young Calgarians, more globally networked through social media and more racially and ethnically diverse than previous generations, having difficulty reconciling Calgary's narratives with the dynamics sweeping the globe and defining the near future? How might the city adapt and evolve to become a place that 20-somethings can see themselves living and thriving in, well into the future?

Paradoxically, a recent poll by ThinkHQ showed a sharp generational divide in Calgarian's levels of optimism about the city.²³⁰ And when you look at the city centre, it's almost like there are two sides of the track: North of the CPR, the downtown nine-to-fivers tend to be older, and more likely to be homeowners. They are pessimistic about the direction the city is headed. South of the railroad, in the beltline, the population is younger, more likely to rent, and to work in other sectors. This is the demographic that is positive about the future of the city, and yet many of them are leaving.

Fundamentally, this is a community prosperity challenge – how can Calgary create the conditions (cultural, economic, social and ecological) to attract and retain talent, and for human potential to flourish? There are many entities, municipal, civic, and grassroots that are digging into aspects of this question – working to spark, steward, connect, understand, or measure. It is why Calgary's anti-poverty coalition is called "vibrant communities", and why Calgary's municipal arts development authority speaks not of "funding arts organizations", but of "living a creative life". Calgary Economic Development's mission statement centres on "embracing shared prosperity and building a strong community for Calgary". The Calgary Foundation is interested in this challenge itself through its *Vital City*, *Jane's Walks* and *Neighbourhood Grants* initiatives. Grassroots entities like CivicTechYYC, Imagine Cities, and the UCalgary student-powered NextCalgary have sprung up in the past couple of years, as have initiatives to create new vehicles for local investing and venture promotion (e.g. Platform Calgary, LocalInvestingYYC, BeLocal, BestofCalgaryFoods). *Calgary on Purpose* is a new platform for Calgarians to share with each other what it means to be a Calgarian and what they want their city to be in the future – What is our new narrative?

The new CityxLab, created under the auspices of the Institute for Community Prosperity, will study the relationship between a city's experiences and its capacity to attract, retain, and develop human capital. Under the leadership of Dr. David Finch, CityxLab brings together aspects of the "experience economy" – Arts and culture (CreativeCity)²³¹, sport and recreation (ActiveCity)²³², learning (LearningCity)²³³, and hospitality and tourism²³⁴ – alongside an effort to profile and strengthen collective efforts to measure community prosperity and indicators of well-being, sustainability, quality of life and civic vitality.

It is not as if Calgary has not gone through major transitions in the past, and our narrative continues to shift and evolve based on who lives here, gathers here, and the stories they imprint on the landscape.

Four dominant epochs, in particular, stand-out: Framed by Indigenous stories, then British colonial stories, then American, then cosmopolitan. Version one – "Calgary 1.0" – was *Mohkinstsis*, "the Elbow". "Calgary 2.0" began with Fort Brisbois (later Fort Calgary), the era beginning with the BNA Act, the signing of Treaty 7 and permanent settlement of British (especially Scottish), French, Irish and other European settlers. "Calgary 3.0" was the era of cowboys, oilmen (yes, "men" is deliberate), and even academics (as the first university was established), with the dominant cultural influence coming from the US, with the iconography of American impresario Guy Weadick's Stampede at the centre. "Calgary 4.0" is now upon us, and while we'll continue to honour these other "Calgaries", the 21st century will be as different as each of these previous eras were from each other. But we're not quite there, and the birthing pains of this new epoch are still all around us. Consider just one small piece, but also a symbolic piece – the transition required for governance: The energy services and mining sectors are at the bottom of all sectors in Canada in terms of women on boards or in executive positions. On the other hand, pipeline and utilities companies are doing better than other industries. Still, as the vast majority of companies with defined diversity targets are in Toronto, Vancouver or Montreal, it's hard not to conclude that Calgary's corporate culture remains male, pale and stale.²³⁵

An important piece of the puzzle will be a much stronger connection between the municipal government, post-secondaries and other learning organizations (library, science centre and so on). For this, we can draw inspiration from Singapore's NUS Resilience and Growth Initiative²³⁶, Vancouver-based CityStudio²³⁷, now franchised to many other cities in Canada and beyond, or from CivicLabTO, "an opportunity to address civic challenges and opportunities by leveraging the resources, expertise and skills of Toronto's post-secondary institutions" The City-Academic partnerships aim to develop human capital, promote the exchange of research and develop new approaches to City services and programs."²³⁸ We can also expect to see, as Jeb Brugmann from the Resilient Cities initiative has pointed out, much closer alignment between municipal government and community economic development tools and approaches, especially at the neighbourhood level.²³⁹ The City's sustainable and ethical procurement strategy is a good example of this, but it might also include new local venture or loan funds, or efforts to build on and add to business improvement areas. The kind of opportunities that Sunalta or Crescent Heights Community Associations, for example, have been pursuing are in this vein. Some cities in the UK are also starting to identify and protect community assets that are too important (for community vitality) to fail – think indie cinemas and live music venues, for example.