

# Making it in Construction

“Making it in Construction” is the Year 2 report for “An ethnographic study of Black and Racialized WISE participants, and their post-WISE employers in the construction industry in Winnipeg, Toronto, and Saskatoon” aka the WISE Project. The WISE Project is a four-year study of construction social enterprises and racialized participants entering the trades.

The Year 2 Report focuses on the perseverance needed to make it in the trades and the challenges equity-seeking groups (racialized workers, immigrants and/or refugees, and Indigenous people) face in construction.



# Summary

Beyond training and job experience, construction social enterprises support participants through “grit work” – offering knowledge about employment in construction and providing multiple buffers against industry volatility, improving the odds for marginalized workers to find long-term success in the trades.

Grit work prepares participants to think long-term and see past short-term hurdles like layoffs or industry slow-downs. Participants learn how to navigate a sector known to be difficult to survive in.

The grit work construction social enterprises do to support participants includes ongoing employment coaching, temporary hiring practices, and direct links to employers. immigrants and refugees.

“Grit work” may make trades-based training more durable: Construction social enterprises provide networks, ongoing coaching, links to pre-screened employers and extended employment to help participants enter and remain in the trades.



“Grit work” includes providing the soft skills and planning needed to work in the trades, which can be subject to project-based hiring.

Connections and networks matter for entry into the construction labour market: having a valued job reference can increase access to first opportunities in Canada. Construction social enterprises provide that first link for immigrants and refugees.

At the same time, participants in our study who were immigrants and/or refugees had a 50/50 chance of being employed whereas participants who were born in Canada had a 3:1 chance of being employed.

## Employment by Citizenship Status (%)

	Citizen (n=19)	Immigrant and Refugee (n=17)
Employed	68%	53%
Unemployed	26%	47%

*nb. Citizen column does not equal 100% because the long participant school is not shown*



# Study Participants



The Year 2 Report looks specifically at the employment outcomes of participants in the previous year. 61% of participants were employed. Interviews, however, revealed that participant's employment status was volatile – some had jobs the week prior and some had jobs starting the next. This volatility was a reflection of employment in construction. Plus, the number of job openings at the time of the interview were in a downward trend (Labour Force Survey).



## Study Participants, Year 2 (N=102)

Study Participants by Category	Number
<i>Participants</i>	61
First Interview in Year 1	51
Second Interview in Year 2	36
Recruited in Year 2	10
Attrition	15
<i>Industry</i>	10
Staff at Construction Social Enterprises	23

*nb. N is number of unique participants*

### Participant Employment Status at Time of Interview by Race / Ethnicity (N=36)

	Black	Brown	Asian	Indigenous	Mixed	Total	Percent
<b>Employed</b>	10	4	3	4	1	22	61%
<b>Unemployed</b>	8	3	0	2	0	13	36%
<b>In School</b>	0	0	1	0	0	1	3%

*nb. Ethnic and racial categories generated from participant interviews*



# Wage and Occupational Analysis

The report includes a wage and occupational analysis of study participant's employment in the last year. The qualitative and quantitative analysis suggested that wages were largely influenced by the fact that entrants were new to their particular occupation at the time of the second interview.



Participant Wages and Z Score of Occupational Market

Participant Wage	Median Wage by NOC	Z Score
\$15.00	\$21.60	-1.05
\$17.55	\$28.00	-0.92
\$18.00	\$17.20	0.21
\$18.55	\$28.00	-0.85
\$18.80	\$18.00	0.09
\$18.95	\$22.50	-0.39
\$19.00	\$23.00	-0.50
\$20.00	\$20.00	0.00
\$20.00	\$35.00	-1.12
\$20.00	\$28.00	-0.74
\$20.00	\$35.00	-1.12
\$20.00	\$35.00	-1.12
\$20.00	\$28.00	-0.74
\$20.00	\$21.00	-0.14
\$22.00	\$35.00	-1.01
\$23.00	\$28.00	-0.49
\$24.00	\$28.00	-0.40
\$24.00	\$33.00	-1.09
\$24.99	\$34.19	-0.89
\$25.00	\$35.00	-0.82
\$25.00	\$32.96	-0.65
\$26.00	\$40.00	-1.22
\$27.00	\$28.00	-0.10
\$27.00	\$21.60	1.03
\$28.67	\$28.00	0.07
\$35.00	\$28.00	0.72
\$36.00	\$28.00	0.76
\$37.45	\$35.00	0.21

Source: Participant Interviews (2nd Interview) and Government of Canada



# Occupations

Study participants who shared occupational data are finding employment in the trades (81%) and adjacent sectors like maintenance or handyman.

Although trades-based jobs offer more wage growth potential, not everyone can or wants to weather the volatility of construction jobs. Employment as building superintendents or handymen often offer more stable employment, even though the wage potential over the long term is much narrower.



## Participant Employment by Occupational Category (N=102)

NOC Code	Occupation	Number
14400	Warehouse Receiver	1
22310	Electrical Technician	1
54100	Lifeguard	1
64100	Retail Sales Representative	1
65312	Custodian	2
72102	Sheet Metal Workers	1
72310	Carpenter, Framing or Form Builder	7
72320	Brick and Stone Mason	1
73201	Handyman	2
74200	Maintenance of Way Employee - Railway	1
75110	Construction Worker	9

Source: Participant Interviews (2nd Interview) and Government of Canada (2025)



# Context

Construction is a tough industry. Many workers face exploitation — especially those who don't yet know how to price their labour or who lack the technical skill to make piece-rate work viable. Success takes real training, mentorship, and perseverance.

The sector's project-based nature means stable, long-term jobs are hard to come by. Previous research has found that for Black and racialized workers, immigrants, and people from low-income backgrounds the volatility can be harder to navigate as these entrants often lack the financial resources and support networks (including within the sector) to successfully navigate employment cycles.

Construction social enterprises help bridge this gap. They build the skills, confidence, and resilience workers need to thrive and develop the grit that keeps them moving forward. They also offer short-term employment opportunities and support exiting participants to get linked to employers.



# Grit Work as a Systemic Response

By engaging in grit work, construction social enterprises provide a systemic response to barriers facing new entrants in construction — barriers that have been shown to have a greater impact on racialized workers compared to their counterparts.

*“The biggest obstacle is just getting laid off. Construction is a good job and good pay. When you lose that pay, it's a big obstacle because that's what you're working towards. I would say job security is an obstacle”  
(WG13, 2nd Interview).*



# Why This Study Matters



Construction jobs offer good pay but labour market volatility can make remaining in the sector a real challenge, and equity-seeking groups have additional barriers that make remaining in the sector more difficult.

Construction Social Enterprises provide training and supports aimed at teaching participants the basics of making it in construction over the long-term.

*“Laid off, hired, laid off, hired”  
- Experienced tradesperson,  
describing what it is like to  
work in construction and one  
of the major barriers to  
pursuing a career in the trades.*



# Construction Social Enterprises Teach Grit to Participants

**All participants who were interested in a career in the trades (whether employed or unemployed) identified with the need to continue to build skills, connections and a reputation as a good worker. Beyond training, what they got from construction social enterprises was “the grit.”**

*Thank you to all participants in the WISE Study for sharing your experiences and thoughts about Construction Social Enterprises, as well as your experiences in the trades and job market.*



Sponsored by the  
Social Enterprise Centre  
with funding from ESDC.

*Writing and analysis by Dr. Jonah Pearce  
Research interviews by Tamara Bailey,  
Ralph Lee, Rosty Othman, Jonah Pearce,  
and Jaleal Wright.*

*To quote material from this  
document use the following citation:  
Pearce, Jonah, “Making it in Construction”  
WISE Project - Year 2 Report, Short Report.  
Sixteenth Letter Collaborative, Winnipeg, 2026.*



Sixteenth Letter  
Collaborative

Read the full report at

[Sixteenthletter.ca](https://Sixteenthletter.ca)