# Balancing the Equation: Communities Supporting Youth, Youth Supporting Communities

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***In this chapter, the author reflects on 40 years of changes in approaches to working with and for marginalized young people. Despite the progress we have achieved during this time, the author reminds us that young people must not only have access to resources and opportunities, but also must become active in sharing and exercising power if we are to achieve our vision.***

The decades between 1960 and 2000 have seen tremendous shifts in youth policy and practice in the United States. These shifts have altered the definition of young people's responsibilities, rights, competencies, and needs, as well as those of their families, institutions, and communities. Changes are evident in the way youth, family, and community issues are framed—for example, how the "deficits" language has been softened by the concept of "assets." We've witnessed a shift in the roles that young people, families, and community residents are encouraged to play as stakeholders in their own development. In addition, we've seen increases in the youth, family, and community fields' understanding of how much the well-being of their respective populations co-varies. Most importantly, and most recently, there has been a growing awareness of the synergy created when young people, families, and community stakeholders plan and implement projects together. As we think about where this can take us, let us begin by examining the past four decades in greater detail.

**Looking Back**

**1960s.** The sixties witnessed a growth in public and political attention to identifying and understanding youth with serious problems, such as dropouts, runaways, unwed parents, abused children and youth, and delinquents. Who were they? Why were they in trouble? What did they need? The numbers of youth with problems was rising, as were the associated direct costs, and recognition that the indirect costs associated with the loss of skilled human capital was emerging. Dollars began to flow to increase the capacity to work with these populations in public institutions.

**1970s.** The birth of a response to these young people focused on alternative youth services in the seventies. The growth of these programs, made possible by increases in federal and state dollars for "troubled" youth, marked a shift in thinking about working with young people in difficult circumstances. Though these youth were in need of help, they were seen as capable of making decisions and helping themselves. The programs built on, rather than squelched, young people's sense that they could make a difference. By the end of the seventies the calls for programs that addressed young people's needs before they ran away, dropped out, or became pregnant began to grow. It was during this time that the National Network for Youth was established.

**1980s.** A new emphasis on primary prevention took hold in the eighties. Practitioners and policymakers honed in on the high cost and modest effectiveness of crisis programs, but the focus remained on reducing problems. Hundred of programs and curricula emerged to stop teens from drinking, smoking, having sex (or unprotected sex), being truant or violent. As the redundancies became clear (multiple programs targeting the same young people), the calls for comprehensive prevention programs grew louder.

**1990s.** It was in this decade that the youth development approach began to take root. The idea that "problem-free is not fully prepared" took hold. This sparked calls for increased funding of non-problem-focused programming, in addition to changes in approach and funding among programs and practitioners who traditionally worked with vulnerable youth. The National Collaboration for Youth grew in members and visibility. Youth-worker training received attention. The idea that "young people grow up in communities, not programs" also gained currency, encouraging a new call for greater community investment in youth development. A renewed emphasis was placed on the establishment of the National Commission on Youth and Community Service. It was also during this time that the National Network for Youth coined the term "Community Youth Development" (Pittman, 1996, pp. 4-8) to signal a new approach to youth development. This approach was powered by the belief that young people and adults could work together to change their communities into places where young people could grow up healthy.

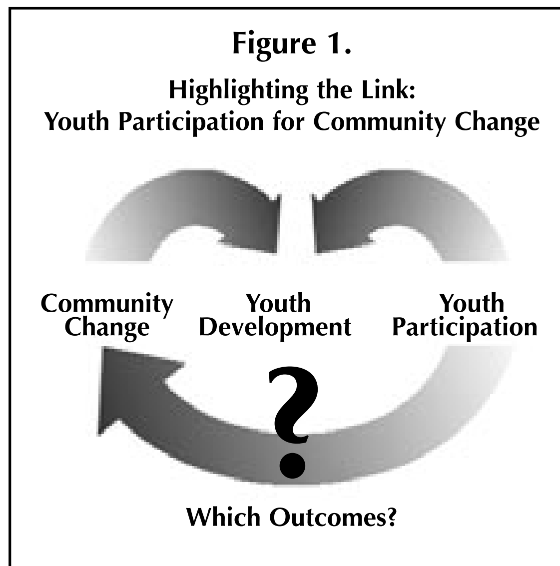

**Figure 1.**
**Highlighting the Link: Youth Participation for Community Change**

**Looking Forward**

The good news is that youth participation is in.[1] It has emerged as a powerful strategy for engaging older youth. It holds the promise of instilling a sense of civic and social responsibility in adolescents and young adults and bringing new energy and optimism to community problem solving. But balancing the goals of individual youth development and youth and adult action for community change will require significant work. And staying committed to the young people most in need will require constant vigilance.

**The Next Paradigm Shift: From Youth Participation for Youth Development to Youth and Adult Partnerships for Community Change**

As noted, significant progress has been made in promoting the argument that community change is critical to youth development—indeed, young people do not grow up in programs, but in communities. And the argument that meaningful participation is critical to youth development has been well documented—especially among older youth who are ready not only for more choice and voice, but for more opportunities to have a visible impact. But the idea that youth participation is critical to community change has not been firmly embraced (see Figure 1). Without persistent advocacy, youth participation will be promoted as a community program rather than as a community principle.

Data from Community Change for Youth Development—a multiyear demonstration project undertaken by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) to assess the capacity and impact of a community's ability to increase the "core vitamins" for youth development—can be used to demonstrate this point.[2] Youth surveys in three communities revealed that young people are aware of their own needs as well as the needs of their communities (Sipe & Ma, 1998). The data confirm that young people know what the problems are and have a sense of how to address them and, with the right support and resources, can make a positive change. Consider the following:

- Young people feel the effects of crime and violence
- They see the results of idleness and lack of supervision
- They frequently participate in structured activities as young teens, but participation declines with age
- They lack work and employment opportunities
- They want adult support
- They want to help make things better

The P/PV project hopes to help fill these voids by providing communities with technical assistance and leveraging dollars to increase five core "vitamins" for youth: adult supports, positive activities in the non-school hours, meaningful work and service experiences, opportunities to be involved in shaping their own environments, and support through transition periods (e.g., middle school to high school).

Equally important is that the list above cries out for solutions. This is where definitions of youth participation become critical, for they determine the timing and extent of youth engagement in solving

problems. For a moment, let's fast-forward two years to the future and assume that the surveyed communities have put a range of responses in place: community policing, citizen patrols, extended-hours youth centers, apprenticeships, mentoring programs, school-based service and a youth service corps, for example. Presumably, young people are the beneficiaries. But which initiatives did they suggest or help plan? For how many did they advocate? How many have youth volunteers or employees?

If the phrase "they [the youth] want to help" were interpreted narrowly by the adults in power, the answer would be probably just a few. In this scenario, while youth participation is likely in many programs, youth will only volunteer or be hired in those programs that have youth service or employment as their goal. In contrast, if the phrase "they want to help" were interpreted broadly as "they want to help address each of the issues they raised," the answer could be quite different. Young people, suddenly, become "at the table" stakeholders in planning and implementing every response from community policing to mentoring. The numbers of youth involved—not just as participants, but as staff, planners, organizers, and volunteers—skyrockets when participation is seen as a principle rather than a program.

We must echo Barry Checkoway's warning:[3]

> *There is a tendency in the youth development field to accept all notions of youth participation and to embrace all forms of practice. Some of what passes today as "youth participation" actually may be a new form of agency service delivery in disguise.*

Youth participation for youth development. Youth participation for community change. Different goals, different strategies; maybe even different proponents and funders. This isn't semantics: it's a critical distinction that I, for one, have been slow to grasp. It is a distinction that, if grabbed, will shape the way youth development ideas are marketed in the years ahead. It took a decade of work to move the idea that young people don't grow up in programs, they grow up in communities. Perhaps we can accelerate the learning curve for the next challenge—participation shouldn't occur just in programs, it should occur in communities.

**The Next Definition Shift:**
**From "Problem Youth" to "Problem Solvers"**

While most would agree that there have been positive shifts during the last 40 years of youth policy, these changes have had some unexpected consequences. Slowly but surely, we have shifted the focus and resources away from older, marginalized youth to elementary and middle school youth who are "at risk" of, but not struggling with, the problems that caught the public's attention several decades ago. The younger/lower risk group is where "smart investments" are now being made, investments that are seen as having a pay-off in both problem reduction and work-force preparation. The rapid growth of federal and state funding for after-school programming (e.g., the 21st Century Schools program) is a testament to this. While these investments are clearly needed, many in the youth field feel that once again one age group—this time elementary and middle schoolers—is being pitted against older, non-college-bound youth in the competition for public attention and public dollars.

There is reason to be concerned that the next 40 years will see a quiet reversal of progress for young people in the most vulnerable situations. While the idea of promoting the development of "fully prepared youth" will continue to take hold, it will be realized through strategies in policy-reinforced practices that reach young people earlier—with the expectation that they will thrive on relatively light but constant doses of support. Those who do not—those who are "on track" at age eight but begin to slip at 12 and are clearly "off track" at 15—may not receive the supports and opportunities they need to regain their position.

There is a real danger that the "early investment" push, combined with the lingering "fix then develop" mentality, will make it less likely that the young people most in need of services and supports and opportunities will get them. Even as it becomes clear, not only that "problem-free isn't fully prepared" but that "fully prepared isn't fully participating," it is possible that young people on the margins—especially those 15 and older—will remain there. Evidence is mounting that those who, at 16, have not connected with something—school, work, sports, activism—are at high risk of remaining "disconnected." Recent research reveals that older youth have fewer supports and opportunities than younger adolescents and that the consequences of this disconnection are dire. The set of studies, spearheaded by Douglas Besharov at the American Enterprise Institute, concludes that young people who are disconnected during three or more transitional years between ages 17 and 23 are significantly more likely to end up poor, on welfare, in prison or unemployed as adults.[4]

We will do a disservice to all young people if we do not find ways to create a public idea of youth as change agents: one that starts rather than concludes with the engagement of young people whose lives

and communities are most in need of change. The nineties brought us perilously close to promoting youth development strategies that fail to address the realities of those most in need. We cannot repeat this mistake as we promote youth participation.

**Next Steps: Youth Engagement for Community Change as a Public Idea**

Community Youth Development promises to be a powerful tool for transforming organizations that currently work with youth. Dedicated organizations have made enormous strides over the past few years in making this goal a reality through the articulation of good organizational practice. But there is a larger challenge: reaching those organizations and individuals who do not have youth problems or youth development as a priority. These audiences need a simpler and cleaner message about the power of youth participation for community improvement and community change.

Former U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich (1998) talks about the power of public ideas—ideas that are promoted through public policy, implemented through mission-driven organizational practice, and rooted in individual beliefs and expectations. It seems almost impossible to achieve gains engaging young people as agents of change without making Community Youth Development an idea that is well ingrained in the public consciousness. This lesson is brought home clearly when youth participation is viewed through an international lens.[8]

Along with colleagues in seven countries, Connie Flanagan, a researcher at Penn State, conducts comparative research on adolescent views of the "social contract." She underscores the importance of "collective responsibility," a concept embodied in two key youth institutions: family and school (1998, pp. 457-475):

> *Youth who hear an ethic of social responsibility emphasized in their families are more likely than their compatriots to be engaged in some type of service to their communities. They are also more committed to public interest goals such as helping their country, preserving the environment, and assisting the less fortunate. Likewise, feelings of student solidarity and identification with the institution of the school are related to adolescents' civic commitments across countries, despite the fact that the school's role as a training ground for democracies is less developed in some countries than others.*

Flanagan goes on to talk about the importance of broader public policies:

> *I've been struck by the extent to which national and state policies shape the contexts in which adolescents make decisions. Through minimum wage and child labor laws, the structure and funding of school systems, or subsidies for higher education, to name a few, the state's policies inform widespread beliefs about what are functional choices and normative behaviors for teens. In fact, such policies even define the boundaries of adolescence.*[5]

We will have to work carefully in this country to identify or create the public ideas that undergird a sustained effort to bring *all* young people into the civic, social, and economic arenas of their communities as lifelong learners, workers, and change agents. We must recognize that this public idea, like any stable platform, must have at least three legs: one in policy, one in public opinion and values, and a third in organizational practice. We could argue for the importance of a fourth leg in youth culture, for this idea must resonate with young people, tap into their resources, and unleash their potential.

The convergence of interest in youth participation creates a window of opportunity to promote the quality and quantity of supports and opportunities for young people and adults to work together as effective citizens committed to social and community change (see Figure 2). This opportunity could be wasted, however, if the expectations of those who can potentially fund, plan, implement, participate in, and evaluate these efforts are not raised significantly. To maximize impact, youth participation must be seen as:

- Critical to the immediate well-being of communities and institutions, not just the youth involved. There is a need to define and maintain a balance between individual development and civic or community change.

- Occurring everywhere, not just in separate youth-specific projects. There is a need to define youth participation as an integral part of community planning and problem solving rather than as a series of discrete, compartmentalized projects.

- Occurring in many forms—service, governance, advocacy, organizing.

- Involving learning and work, as opposed to uncompensated volunteering that is detached from career interests.

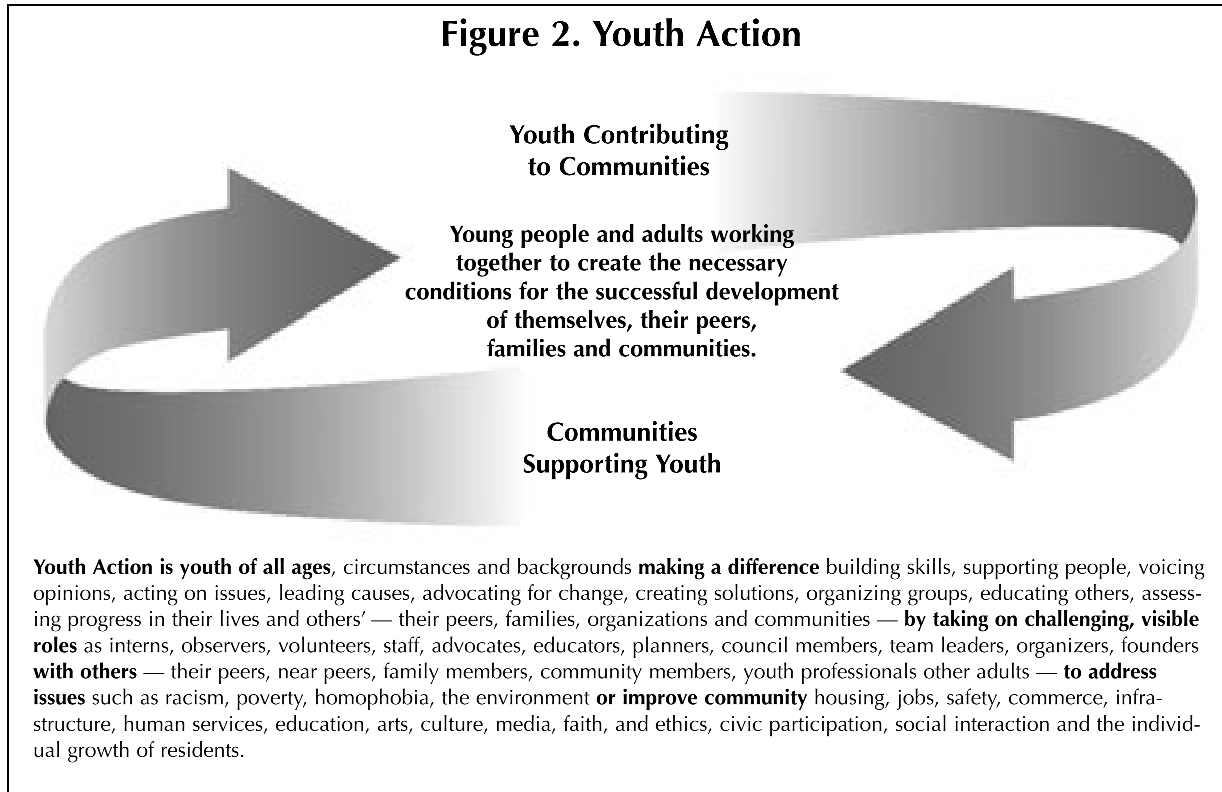


**Figure 2. Youth Action**

- The right and responsibility of all young people, not just those well positioned to "give back" because of income, education, or family background.

In pursuing this vision we need to find a balance between the rights and responsibilities of young people. Insights gained from conversations with young people and practitioners in other countries suggest that youth participation for community change is sometimes the easiest part of the equation. The hard part is ensuring that young people can not only access resources and opportunities, but also become active in sharing and exercising power. Without this affirmation of basic rights for all young people, we are in danger of sponsoring another call to service, where young people are not full partners in their own development or that of their communities. ❏

*This article draws from the writing on youth development, youth participation and youth leadership by The Forum for Youth Investment staff over the past year, with support from the Ford Foundation, the Haas Jr. Fund, and the Surdna Foundation.*[6] *While I take full responsibility for this presentation, the ideas reflected were developed jointly with Merita Irby, Thad Ferber, Steve Mokwena, and Jules Dunham.*

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1. But opportunities to participate are not evenly distributed among the youth population. Younger teens have more opportunities than older teens; white youth have more opportunities than nonwhite youth. Research conducted for Independent Sector in 1996 makes clear that there are differences in participation between different population groups. For example, the survey found that while 63.3 percent of white teenagers reported volunteering in the past year, only 42 percent of black teens and 44.1 percent of Hispanic teens reported such activity. This is a *lower* rate of volunteering than was reported for blacks in 1992 (down from 52.8 percent). The same research also reveals that black and Hispanic youth are less likely to be asked to volunteer than their white counterparts. See *Volunteering and Giving among Teenagers 12 to 17 Years of Age: Findings from a National Survey.* Survey conducted by The Gallup Organization for Independent Sector. Washington, DC: Independent Sector (1997).
2. For further discussion on the core vitamins for CYD see the article, "Avenues to Adulthood or Avenues to Civic Anemia?" (Astroth et al) in this Volume, pp. 12-18.

3. Barry Checkoway is a professor of Social Work and Urban Planning and director of the Center for Community Service and Learning at the University of Michigan. See "Involving Young People in Neighborhood Development," *Children and Youth Services Review,* Volume 20. (1998). pp. 765–795.
4. *America's Disconnected Youth* (CWLA Press, 1999), a study edited by Douglas Besharov of the American Enterprise Institute, reveals that young adults who are idle for six months out of a year (not in school, not working, or not married to someone who is working or in school) during three or more transitional years, between ages 17 and 23, are significantly more likely to end up poor, on welfare, in prison, or unemployed as adults.
5. See C. A. Flanagan, in In J. Jovanovic (Ed.), "The Value of Comparative Research for Understanding Adolescent Development. *Newsletter of the Society for Research on Adolescence,* Vol. 3, No. 10. (1999) For an updated report, refer to C. A. Flanagan & N. Faison. "Youth Civic Development: Implications of Research for Social Policy and Programs." "Social Policy Report," Volume XV (1). Ann Arbor: Society for Research in Child Development. (2001).
6. "Developing and Deploying Young Leaders", background paper and recommendations to the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund (2000), and *Youth As Effective Citizens*, background report and recommendations to the Surdna Foundation (2000).

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