

## Youth Participation as Social Justice

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**Y**outh participation is a process of involving young people in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives. It includes initiatives that emphasize educational reform, neighborhood improvement, and other issues; that involve populations distinguished by class, race, gender, and other characteristics; and that operate in rural areas, small towns, suburbs, and neighborhoods of large cities. It is found in developing areas and industrial nations worldwide.

As expressions of participation, young people are mobilizing resources around issues; organizing groups for social action; planning programs at the local level; and advocating their interests in public agencies. They are raising consciousness and educating others about their common concerns, and providing services of their own choosing. No single strategy characterizes all approaches to practice.

These initiatives have the potential to produce outcomes at multiple levels. Studies show that youth participation has the potential to increase individual involvement, and build organizational capacity. It can strengthen personal confidence, contribute to civic competencies, and serve as a source of leadership development. Although the benefits are not well established by a great deal of systematic research, there is enough knowledge to substantiate its benefits.

These initiatives can strengthen social justice in the ways that improve conditions for all people while emphasizing resources and opportunities for those lacking in both, and expanding the mechanisms of representation and

accountability of traditionally excluded people in the institutions that affect them. They have the potential to address poverty and racism as factors in society, and to reduce disparities between rich and poor.

Youth participation is about the real influence of young people in institutions and decisions, not about their passive presence as human subjects or service recipients. Although studies often assess activities in terms of their scope—such as their number, frequency, and duration—quality is the most significant measure of youth participation. Just because a number of young people attend a number of meetings and speak a number of times, is no measure of their effect on outcomes. Quality participation shows some effect on outcomes, including its effect on community change.

Youth participation is growing, and can be expected to grow even more in the years ahead. Several private foundations have increased funding for community organizations and civic agencies; national associations have expanded their support for local initiatives; and intermediary organizations have broadened their training and technical assistance. Recent conferences and publications have increased awareness among popular and professional audiences, and there is talk of a “youth participation movement” in the making.

The articles in this issue suggest that community youth violence prevention is catching up with the youth participation movement. The authors draw upon experiences in various locations—from San Diego to Flint—and document efforts by adults to involve young people in writing stories about violent episodes, taking pictures in neighborhoods, assessing victim services, forming youth councils, and participating in other activities that differ from the more prevalent punitive approaches to addressing violence.

The articles also document efforts that share some similarities with other forms of youth participation. For example, they are consistent with the view of “youth as resources” and contrast with the image of “youth as problems” that permeates the popular media, social science, and professional practice. This pervasive view assumes that young people are “troubled or troubling” members of society who are too often neglected, abused, or victimized by poverty, racism, or other forces beyond their control.

Indeed, news media too often portray young people as perpetrators of crime, drug takers, school dropouts, or other problems of society. Social scientists reinforce this view with studies of poor housing, broken families, and worsening social conditions that result in violence and other phenomena that require intervention. Professional practitioners adopt this view of young people and seek to “save,” “protect,” and “defend” them. They attend schools whose curricula construct youth as problems and prepare workers to treat their deficits or manage them through the “adolescent pathology system.”

In contrast, however, the present articles assume that young people can address causes and prevent violence rather than merely treating its symptoms. Rather than criminalizing young people or sending them to jail, these initiatives build on their strengths by enabling them to take positive actions in community-based organizations, neighborhood centers, school groups, and other institutions in which they are viewed as resources rather than as problems.

More knowledge of youth participation in community youth violence prevention as a subject of study will contribute to its quality as a field of practice. We know that community participation has several strategies—such as organizing, advocacy, education, and services—whose activities have effects at multiple levels, and thus welcome studies like these that offer new ideas for applying them to youth violence.

Such studies, however, are only a start; and while the authors in this edition describe a number of promising activities, they say little about their actual effects in violence prevention. Writing stories and taking pictures are different from sending people to jail, to be sure, but do they prevent problems and change environments? Adopting standards of practice sounds promising, but what difference do they these standards make? They might make a difference, but then again they might not, and if not, then by what measure can it be said that they do?

If activities like those discussed in this volume do have a measurable effect, then they might indeed strengthen social justice in a system known more for its punishment of young people victimized by poverty and racism than for its proactive steps to prevent the violence. However, if they have no measurable effect—and if instead they absorb youth in activities that enable adults to reduce their efforts to address complex social problems—they might actually function as a diversion from responsibility and as an unjust form of blaming the victim.

These articles are a start, and the Centers for Disease Control should be congratulated for supporting their publication. But they are only a start, and should be read with this in mind.

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