Canada's Youth - Citizens Minus?

September 10, 2001 – The status of Canada's youth as citizens is precarious at best. While some young adults enjoy the fruits of full citizenship and contribute to their communities, the picture is not as rosy for others.

That's one conclusion of a review of the situation of Canada's youngest citizens published today by Canadian Policy Research Networks. In ***A Literature Review on Youth and Citizenship***, authors Caroline Beauvais, Lindsey McKay and Adam Seddon find that, when it comes to the preconditions for full citizenship, there is significant inequality between different youth subgroups. Economic, social and cultural circumstances can determine whether citizenship is a mere formality or an active reality.

"The citizenship status of Canada's youth is precarious," says CPRN Family Network Director, Jane Jenson, "because of various 'holes' in social and other policies."

Abandoning the commitment to full employment, cuts in education funding and the rising cost of higher education, the lack of affordable housing, cutbacks to social assistance, Jenson argues, all increase the gaps through which young people may fall.

"And when they do fall, the effect is to *exclude* them from the exercise of full citizenship."

"Full citizens actively seek to realize their rights, to exercise their responsibilities, to access political institutions, be empowered and share a sense of belonging in the community – national as well as local," says Jenson. "Unfortunately, too many young Canadians are deprived of that capacity."

The CPRN paper breaks new ground. While there is a great deal of literature on youth, until now it has not been analyzed from a citizenship perspective. As a result, the status of young Canadians and the vital issue of their ability to become full citizens has received little attention. The current publication addresses that gap.

The authors identify *independence* and *equality* as key elements of citizenship. The longer young people stay dependent, the longer it takes them to become full citizens, and there is no real citizenship without equality among citizens. In both respects, they conclude, there are real, and in some instances, growing, barriers to full citizenship for significant numbers of youth in Canada.

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“Inequalities in access to education and to quality employment, along with the experience of discrimination for some groups, leave full citizenship beyond the reach of those affected,” Jenson says. “But this is not only an economic phenomenon. There seems to be a cultural ambivalence towards youth, making our treatment of their rights and responsibilities uneven and inconsistent.”

At the age of majority, young people may have the right to vote, be held legally responsible for their actions and pay taxes, for example. At the same time, they may be denied full access to social assistance, to health care services, to contraception and sex education, and may lack the economic independence necessary to act as full citizens.

“This review raises issues for us to debate as a society, points to areas for further research and raises questions about the appropriateness of some of our current policies, particularly as they affect access to citizenship on the part of our youth,” says CPRN President, Judith Maxwell.
“CPRN will being doing its best to pursue further initiatives on this front in the months to come.”

You can access or download a copy of the report by clicking here.

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