

Youth and Citizenship: Overview

Based on Caroline Beauvais, Lindsey McKay, Adam Seddon,
A Literature Review on Youth and Citizenship (CPRN, 2001).

What is “Citizenship”?

Citizenship is a status traditionally reserved for adults. By contrast, the status of young people, even many over the age of majority, can best be described as “precarious.” They may possess certain formal, legal rights such as the right to drive, to work and to vote, but are not generally regarded as *full citizens*, but as “citizens-in-becoming.”

Citizenship is composed of three dimensions: (1) rights and responsibilities, (2) access to these rights and responsibilities, and (3) feelings of belonging, that is, identity. Being a citizen, therefore, is more than possessing formal, theoretical rights to citizenship. It involves the capacity of the individual citizen to exercise actively the three dimensions of citizenship. Being a citizen is defined as having the *resources, capacity and opportunity to participate* in the different areas of adult life.

The capacity to exercise full citizenship, therefore, is necessarily dependent on two factors:

Independence is a key element of citizenship because it helps gain – and indeed underpins – each of the three dimensions of citizenship. The longer that young people remain dependent, the longer it will take them to become full citizens.

Equality is another key principle of citizenship. Indeed, there is no genuine citizenship without the notion of equality among citizens. If rights, responsibilities and access are unequally distributed among young people the citizenship status of some is limited.

In reality, the extent to which young people can achieve the independence required to be full citizens varies. Many, and perhaps an increasing number, of young people over the age of majority and well into their twenties have only a limited capacity to exercise full citizenship. While they possess the formal, legal rights of citizenship, their social and economic circumstances cause them to be excluded from full citizenship.

What is “Youth”?

The category of youth has been extended in recent years to include those aged 12 and older. The status of youth is commonly prolonged until the age of 29 or even older. As the boundaries of the category are so fluid, “youth” is often identified as an “unstable sociological category.”

Researchers generally describe youth either as a period of *transition* to adulthood (a “rite of passage” occurring at the *end* of adolescence), or as a time to make important *choices* (decisions that will have significant consequences in adult life). Both approaches treat youth as a time of being “in between” or of “becoming,” that is, as a preparation for the future, not as a time important in itself.

However, in light of current social and economic conditions, the notion of “between-ness” provides an inadequate perspective from which to examine the citizenship status of youth. As a result of high unemployment levels and economic

uncertainty, many young people face the prospect of prolonged periods of dependency, thereby reducing their capacity to be independent and to become full citizens.

Accordingly, the notion of citizenship has changed significantly. It is therefore desirable to go beyond the perspective of youth as a time of transition to examine instead the citizenship status of youth in the here and now, as well as their capacity to achieve full citizenship.

Description of the Framework

These research notes are based on a detailed CPRN analysis of current literature on youth and citizenship. The literature review was undertaken in 2001 to describe the current citizenship status of young people, as well as the capacity of young adults to become full citizens. It sought answers to the following questions:

- ❖ What rights and responsibilities do young people currently possess and how do they gain access to them?
- ❖ From which rights and responsibilities of citizenship are young people excluded?
- ❖ What social and economic inequalities exist among young people, as well as between younger and older people?
- ❖ To what extent are youth from different groups able to achieve the independence required to become full citizens?

Four additional Research-in-Brief notes consider these questions from the points of view of Education; Economic Independence and Security; Discrimination and Personal Security; and Identity, Belonging and Independence.

Key Conclusions

- ❖ Dropping out of school reduces a young person's ability to achieve independence and to cope successfully in society later in life.

- ❖ Discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation and ability exists within the education system and has the effect of isolating and excluding certain students.

- ❖ Labour market conditions, access to education and student debt are delaying the economic independence of youth, thereby fundamentally altering when and if full citizenship is achieved.

- ❖ As well as economic independence, full citizenship status includes the right to be free from discrimination, to have adequate access to health care and social services and to have the ability to be politically active.

- ❖ Many young people experience a precarious citizenship status due to various "holes" in government policy. Changes in the labour market, difficulties in accessing higher education, a lack of affordable housing, and limited access to health and social services, as well as declining social assistance benefits, are all increasing the number of gaps through which young people may fall. As a result, many youths are en route to exclusion.

- ❖ Participation is a key component of citizenship education and is not adequately emphasized in school curricula. Moreover, school systems are not empowering youth to make informed and healthy choices regarding sexuality and substance use, areas where young people want more complex and inclusive discussion.

- ❖ The lack of political participation among youth is due in large measure to the failure of mainstream politics to address issues that concern young people. There is no evidence that young people are apathetic. On the contrary, they are participating in political affairs in different ways – in schools, youth organizations and through political protests.