

# Youth and Citizenship: Discrimination and Personal Security

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

## Justice and Freedom from Discrimination

Equal citizenship implies equality of treatment and freedom from discrimination. There are several areas in which young people's citizenship status is infringed upon: in the labour market, in the justice system, and in access to health and social services.

In the labour market, new employees are paid lower wages and receive weaker benefits than older and more established workers. Two-tier compensation arrangements act as a form of discrimination against many young people who are trying to integrate into the labour market. While no reference in such provisions is made to age, the majority of new employees are young people.

In the justice system, the trend in Canada is increasingly toward a more punitive response to youth crime. In this respect, some researchers argue that punishment contains a contradictory message. On the one hand, it treats young people as adults by making them more accountable. On the other hand, it treats them as children by reinforcing the authority of parents. Rights are being taken away while, at the same time, new responsibilities are added.

Experts generally relate the causes of youth crime to the environments in which young people live. Restricted opportunities characteristic of poor communities, such as lack of recreation, peer pressure, youth unemployment and poverty, create conditions that can lead to criminal behaviour among youth.

Young people also routinely experience discrimination in accessing health and social services. Programs designed to provide health services to low-income children may discriminate on the basis of age, suggesting that the public health principle to help those most in need is not being met.

Youth also encounter discrimination in exercising their sexual and reproductive rights. Legal ages for sexual relations are inconsistent. Barriers also exist in accessing contraceptives based on cost, availability and the societal double standard that inhibits young women's access to birth control. Knowledge of emergency contraceptive methods is low, and this medical service is not universally available in Canada. Young women are also denied the resources to exercise their legal right to abortion. Both the age of consent and access to abortion services vary across the country, thereby blocking female youth from achieving citizenship equality.

As in the justice system, the treatment of young people in accessing social services is inconsistent, with decreasing rights and increasing responsibilities. On the basis of age alone, youth are denied the right to social assistance. The level of assistance provided to young people who do qualify for support is insufficient to provide a decent standard of living. In addition, young parents (in particular, lone mothers) experience severe economic hardship because of age-based discrimination. Welfare payments well below the poverty level can block access to sufficient food, suitable housing, education, health care and transportation.

## Personal Security and Well-being in the Community

Full citizenship depends on the right of young people to be protected from harm. In reality, however, the right of youth to a safe environment free from both unintentional and intentional violence is not always present.

Both *unintentional injuries* – those received through the physical and social environment in which youth live – and *intentional injuries* – those resulting from violence against oneself or others – pose a serious threat to the health and well-being of young people.

Canada has one of the highest rates of injury-related deaths for children and youth, with motor vehicle crashes and suicide being the leading causes of death for youth. In neither case is there any difference in death rates based on economic circumstances; however, the rate at which male youths die of suicide is far higher than female youth. The suicide rate among Aboriginal youth is five times the national average. For other forms of injury and death, children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and Aboriginal backgrounds experience higher levels of injury than their peers. More than two-thirds of youth and recreation injury victims are male youth.

While young people have a right to safety and protection from harm, in accordance with the law, they also have the responsibility not to cause harm to others. Research reveals, however, that young people are themselves the perpetrators of violence. In this regard, there is a clear gender division. While both male and female youth are victims of physical violence, female youth are subjected to sexual violence at a far higher rate than their male counterparts. The perpetrators are overwhelmingly male adults and male youth. Sexual violence against female youth is a major problem in Canada, with serious repercussions for the mental and emotional health of the victim. Male youths are also subjected to sexual harassment, but the rates are much lower and they suffer fewer mental health problems.

A sense of well-being in the community is also developed through youth involvement in recreational and cultural activities. In these areas, too, there are a number of barriers limiting the participation of young people. Young people from better educated and wealthier families enjoy greater access to leisure activities. Conversely, youth from low-income backgrounds are less able to participate due to a number of factors, including lack of money and transportation, the introduction of user fees, and the high cost of recreation equipment. There are also gender differences. Male youth are more physically active than female youth, who have less opportunity to engage in recreation due to family obligations, fewer material resources and lack of time.

## Conclusions

- ❖ In terms of justice, as well as for access to social services and health care, young people experience a weakened citizenship status. Entitlements become privileges that are accessible only on the condition that young people fulfill obligations that do not apply to others.
- ❖ The citizenship status of youth who belonging to groups that experience discrimination in society is further weakened.
- ❖ In many instances, young people are too old to receive services targeted to children and too young to qualify for those provided to adults.
- ❖ Youth are blamed when they deviate from the norm, but are often denied equal access to the resources needed to live independently, act responsibly, and participate fully in society.