

Disconnected Youth in Urban Areas: Can Youth Councils Enhance Connections to School and Work?



JUST SIX
QUESTIONS
RESEARCH
SUMMARY

“There are multiple policy strategies for addressing disconnection. Core among these are efforts to strengthen systems of education, employment, and training ... important components of addressing this problem. ...civic engagement mechanisms of including youth voice in local decision-making may also be a strategy that has not yet received due attention” (p. 224-25).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Disconnected youth are those who are not engaged in employment, education, or training, often referred to as NEET youth in Canadian contexts. These young people require policy and practice attention to facilitate opportunities, as there is a risk of increased justice involvement, lower future earnings, and lower educational attainment.

Policy strategies for addressing youth disconnection often focus on enhancing educational and employment opportunities for youth. **Municipal youth councils** are a popular form of civic engagement that aim to bring young people’s perspectives into governmental decision-making at the local level.

This study examines whether youth councils impact youth disconnection, and the potential of municipal youth councils to support youth and facilitate connection to school and work.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

This research took place in the United States.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about disconnected youth and the potential for youth councils to facilitate connection to school and work.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

Researchers analyzed the mission statements of youth councils to offer suggestions that might contribute to more substantial impacts. But first, they accessed the rates of youth disconnection in the 94 largest metropolitan areas in the United States. They then identified whether or not a youth council existed in each of these 94 areas, tracking:

- a) whether a youth council exists;
- b) the stated mission of the council;
- c) how long it has been operating (based on the year started);
- d) how many youth members participate; and
- e) any indication that the youth council addresses issues of education and employment.

Analysis of *qualitative data* (describing qualities, characteristics, processes or experiences) was conducted to examine what the mission statements of existing youth councils reveal about their purpose and to test the relationship between a youth council’s existence and the youth disconnection rate in the metropolitan area. The mission statements were copied *verbatim* (word-for-word), and keywords related to the youth councils’ activities and priorities were picked out and coded to identify themes.

Three primary theoretical frameworks provided the foundation for researchers assessing youth council operations:

- i) **Policy Process:** Engaging in the policy-making process, such as identifying issues, framing arguments, and making and implementing policy decisions.
- ii) **Positive Youth Development:** Acknowledging strengths, promoting positive outcomes, and engaging youth in the context of their families and communities.
- iii) **Social Justice:** Bringing attention to power dynamics by addressing the oppressive forces of ageism, racism, and economic inequality that impact the lives of youth and their contributions to civic life.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

The research found that municipal youth councils are common across metropolitan areas, and that the **youth disconnection rate was lower among those areas with youth councils than those without**. Researchers describe **five themes** consistent across many of the youth council mission statements that address youth engagement and connection to school and work, in order of prominence:

- i) **Youth Input:** An opportunity for ‘youth voice’ in city government; youth provide advice and recommendations to the Mayor, City Council, and other elected officials on youth policy.
- ii) **Educate and Empower:** Youth are connected to city government and to training opportunities, and are therefore educated and empowered to participate in civic life.
- iii) **Youth Impact:** Youth are involved in decision-making processes related to policies that improve the lives of youth.
- iv) **Plan/Organize Activities:** Youth lead activities and programs, including youth summits, youth conferences, service projects, fundraising events, social events, cultural events, and recreational events.
- v) **Partnerships:** Youth partner with government and with leaders/agencies/organizations across communities.

The structure, function, and activities of youth councils vary depending on the context, membership, and community needs. While most youth councils do not articulate a specific framework guiding their youth engagement strategies, this research suggests that **positive youth development** was reflected in many youth council mission statements, particularly when focused on empowerment and education, including leadership and skill development, and that **social justice** was also reflected, as many mission statements described amplifying youth voices and providing a way for youth to feel empowered.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

Youth disconnection is a critical policy issue; improvements in educational and employment opportunities for young people would facilitate positive outcomes and improve youth wellbeing.

Municipal youth councils are a common strategy for engaging youth in policy and programming, and they **may be a mitigating factor in lowering youth disconnection rates**. Intentionally designing these councils to facilitate connection to school and work **can re-engage those youth who may be disconnected** from these opportunities. Youth workers may direct underrepresented youth to opportunities for participation on youth councils to ease the risk of disconnection.

The existence and robustness of a youth council are often related to municipal leadership and whether they value and champion youth engagement. Consistent with positive youth development principles and young people’s right to participate in civic life, municipal youth councils are reflective of a pivot away from discussions of youth ‘problems’ and toward **opportunities with a positive, prosocial, normative, and universal emphasis**. Youth councils can also benefit young people by supporting youth in securing employment, liaising with potential employers regarding the benefits of engaging with youth, advocating to funders to develop more substantial supports, increasing access to programs in both urban and rural settings, and conducting youth participatory action research to inform further development and institutionalization of youth-led and youth-serving programs.

- Q Collins, M. E., Augsberger, A., & Levine, B. (2023). Disconnected youth in urban areas: Can youth councils enhance connection to school and work? *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*, 6(4), 213-226.