



THE CURRENT STATE AND TRENDS OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG UNORGANIZED YOUTH: EVIDENCE FROM DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

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Abstract

This study examines the current state and evolving trends of social engagement among unorganized youth in developed countries. Unorganized youth—defined as young people aged 15 to 29 who are not affiliated with formal institutions, organizations, or structured civic platforms—constitute a significant yet underexplored segment of contemporary societies. Drawing on cross-national datasets, including PISA and comparative national studies from Europe, North America, and Oceania, the paper analyzes patterns of civic participation, digital engagement, educational involvement, and community-based interaction. The findings indicate a structural shift from traditional, institution-based participation—such as political party membership and voting—toward hybrid and digitally mediated forms of engagement, including online activism, informal volunteering, and issue-based mobilization. Socioeconomic status, educational attainment, labor market integration, and cultural identity factors significantly influence participation levels. While formal engagement rates have declined in many developed democracies, alternative modes of participation have expanded, reflecting diversification rather than simple disengagement. The study highlights persistent barriers related to inequality, digital access, and institutional inclusivity. It concludes that effective youth policy must recognize unorganized youth as active civic actors and develop inclusive, context-sensitive strategies that bridge formal and informal participation spheres while strengthening social capital and democratic resilience.

Keywords: Unorganized youth; Civic engagement; Digital participation; Social capital; Developed countries.



1. INTRODUCTION

Youth aged 15 to 29 who lack active participation in civic organizations, political parties, informal groups, or clubs are defined as unorganized [1]. Their engagement in community life occurs without being connected to any formal platform, organization, youth group, or association. Civic and political involvement is critical for youth development and growth worldwide. Social engagement enables young people to build networks and improve their life skills while contributing to society. Studies show that participation is decreasing among young people today and there are reports of unorganized youth disengaging from their communities. There is increasing concern that young people are being deprived of the opportunities to express themselves [2].

Documenting the current state of civic and social engagement among unorganized youth across developed countries will develop a better understanding of the barriers they face and the trends that have evolved. The focus on unorganized youth is important as they represent a significant proportion of young people and their disengagement may seriously impair their development. Young people are often the ones who change the world and youth participation is critical for the future. The literature on social engagement sometimes presents conflicting findings and comparisons across countries broaden the scope of inquiry, clarifying whether the trends are local or universal.

1.2. Conceptual Framework and Definitions

Adolescents and young adults aged 15 to 29 years are defined as unorganized youth when they are outside the education system, do not have a formal job, are not employed in domestic work, or do not belong to associations, groups, or organizations [2]. Furthermore, these young people should not be in a training, apprenticeships, or substitution period. This group constitutes a large share of the population and is especially prevalent among individuals with low levels of education. Their social engagement becomes a serious public policy issue. Unorganized youth exhibit social engagement behavior similar to that of organized youth, but the issue of social engagement among unorganized youth remains less well defined compared to that of organized youth. Since social engagement is often closely linked to feelings of belonging and well-being,



ensuring that unorganized youth remain socially engaged becomes important for all developed countries. More than 80% of youth between 15 and 29 years of age exhibit engagement behavior even though they are unorganized. Youths form bonds through channels such as informal group gatherings, mobilization by a friend, or participation through online platforms while remaining unorganized. Through these engagements, youths influence each other and establish a sense of belonging where they reside.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Youth not engaged in formal institutions or organizations are referred to as “unorganized.” This category is especially relevant for analyzing civic engagement, since unorganized youth are less visible in the democratic process and more difficult to reach with traditional civic education initiatives [2]. Unorganized youth are also more vulnerable to social ills, such as radicalization or victimization. Engagement can sensitize youth to social issues and foster social skills. These defaults reflect gaps in civic engagement among unorganized youth. Data were gathered from 17 developed countries (EU15, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, and the USA) participating in the second wave of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The PISA dataset includes information on school-related civic engagement from nearly 300,000 15-year-old students. The participation levels of youth involved in either activities inside or outside the school context were examined separately. The PISA countries were selected to provide sufficiently comparable cross-country data on civic engagement.

2.1. Patterns of Social Engagement Among Unorganized Youth in Developed Countries

The premise of this cross-country study is that, to understand the social engagement of unorganized youth in developed countries, one needs to examine both the relative magnitude of their involvement and the types of their participation. The relations outlined earlier about how certain forms of engagement condition higher-level involvement must be taken into account. The predominant patterns of social engagement emerging from this survey of



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evidence, which is drawn from national datasets for Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, can be categorized along both lines.

Unorganized young people in these six countries—to be precise, those aged 15–29 who are neither in formal education nor in employment again—tend to connect with others primarily through family ties and paid work. Beyond these two dominant modalities, the next most widespread activities represent a mix of social and civic engagement in community settings: participation in sports clubs or organizations, for example, and taking part in volunteer work through local institutions and associations. Such opportunities enable young people not only to forge new contacts with peers whom they would not connect with through family, employment, or friendship networks but also to enhance their civic engagement through informal leadership roles—assisting the local Pétanque club, for example, or coaching youngsters in sports. [2]

Social Networks and Civic Participation

Youth participation in civic activities has been declining across several developed nations [3]. Young people aged 15 to 29 participate in civic associations, social movements, or volunteer activities less than their older counterparts. However, there is an increasing interest among young people in civic issues like climate change, violence prevention, racism, and gender discrimination. This situation raises a vital question about how contemporary youth participate socially and whether the modes and volumes of their participation differ from previous generations. Young people participate in informal leadership roles, but measuring such forms of participation requires an accurate understanding of civic engagements and social-network typologies [4]. Factors such as employment, education, and community involvement affect youth participation levels. Young people with time-consuming jobs may have limited resources for commitment to civic activities. The nature of employment prospects also matters; participation drops after schooling if opportunities are scarce. Community involvement through school, training, apprenticeship, and job placements can lead to greater participation [5].



Digital and Offline Engagement Modalities

While offline and exposure to formal community structures appear to limit social-action-based engagement, hybrid forms of participation using digital and other modalities seem to lower barriers for youth to get involved [3]. Compared to youth engagement activities, social ties to fellow students and wider acquaintances attract considerable participation through online channels. On social-media platforms, they tend to engage in limited activities like liking, sharing, or commenting rather than producing original content such as posts, videos, or memes. Availability of good broadband internet, affordable devices, digital abilities, and support from parents or other adults can significantly enhance communication among peers and broader networks and encourage youth to interact with local community.

Focusing on online platforms and community activities reveals the sustained significance of both digital and offline modes for broad youth and their engagement. Outside school settings, more youth express interest in creative projects, sporting endeavors, volunteer events, and special community occasions that directly share with community, co-organize them through offline networks, and resonate further on social media. Offline community events provide social occasions to meet peers and new mates—themed festivals that incorporate creative contests, exhibitions, and performances attract much of youth populace. Given how youth, often yet remain under the radar from conventional deliberative venues, an emphasis on hybrid modes along with such composition is essential to bridge the gap between offline community ties and online exchanges.

Education, Employment, and Community Involvement

Educational advancement, availability of training opportunities, and perceived job prospects wield considerable influence on unorganized youth's social engagement in developed countries. Young people who have completed upper-secondary education (or an equivalent level of vocational training) are more likely to participate in civic associations, volunteering, community leadership, political activities, and other informal engagements. Access to apprenticeships and internships also bolsters participation by facilitating transitions into the labour market, yet the numerous young people who lack such opportunities often report



a low likelihood of engaging in various civic and non-civic activities. Participation in work-related or civic service-learning during formal education generally enhances engagement later in life, while unpaid work loads on young people's time and engagement. Regular engagement in civic acts and local community work at ages 15–16 strongly correlates with informal participation at ages 17–19. Having a job typically occupies a substantial share of unorganized youth's daily time, creating opportunity costs that may curtail other forms of engagement.

Young people frequently perceive other activities as more engaging or important than social participation whether engaged in employment or education. Prior analyses reveal no evident linkage between completion of upper-secondary schooling and participation in other engagement-boosting occupations such as sports and the arts. Nevertheless, obtaining an upper-secondary certification seems to enhance the opportunity and motivation for engagement-related occupations first.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Civic engagement among unorganized youth has shifted significantly in recent years. Many young people are engaging online or in ways that do not align with traditional definitions of civic engagement, such as participating in public demonstrations rather than voting or joining civic organizations. Understanding how these changes impact youth engagement across countries continues to be an important priority [2].

The literature points to engagement in diverse types of social networks, organizations, and activities that contribute to social capital; the use of digital and offline modalities for communication and participation; and connections between education, employment, and community involvement as these pertain to engagement. Social and economic factors are influential in determining participation. The analysis of trends in engagement for different cohorts points to important developments influenced by broader social, economic, and political trajectories.

Civic and political engagement include soft, weak types of engagement (public protests, digital activism) and hard, strong types (social movements, party



politics). Online activism and demonstrations have risen substantially among youth. While political activity such as voting and party membership has continuously declined in developed democracies, more young people now frequently engage in soft protests than hard protests. Constructive participants also exercise diverse social capital across relaxation, academic, peer support, church, commuting, and leisure [6].

3.1. Determinants and Barriers to Engagement

Unorganized youth in developed countries' take-up rates for social engagement activities are unevenly distributed, with socioeconomic factors exerting considerable influence on participation. Factors such as household income, parental education level, neighbourhood context, and housing stability exercise a clear impact on levels of social engagement among young people [2]. In contexts such as these, poverty and the absence of socio-cultural capital can severely restrict or impede youth participation. At the policy and institutional level, the characteristics of youth services, funding opportunities, governance structures, and entry points for participation critically delimit the range of social engagement options available [7]. Although many institutions offer study grants and job opportunities for young people, several youth service providers are not focused on youth and the services they provide are therefore not easily accessible. Government departments across different jurisdictions sometimes administer policies and funding vehicles to youth services in ways that are not well coordinated, thereby creating further entry barriers. Finally, cultural and identity considerations—including ethnicity, gender, migration status, language, and perceived sense of belonging to the mainstream—also play an important role in shaping social engagement opportunities. Youth-serving institutions can facilitate participation by embracing diversity and equality as well as adopting an inclusive approach to service delivery, while in contrast, discrimination and segregation directly exclude young people from engaging activities.

Socioeconomic Factors

Youth participation in civic society is central to democratic consolidation and youth development worldwide [1]. Participation fosters youth agency and social



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inclusion, builds social networks, nurtures skills and competencies, deepens systemic knowledge, encourages volunteering and service-learning, and cultivates civic literacy, accountability, and responsibility [8]. During periods of economic uncertainty, the civic engagement of unorganized youth becomes especially pressing. Economic downturns severely affect youth employment, social integration, and skill development [9]. Moreover, youth who are economically deprived are also more likely to be isolated from the social and educational processes deemed relevant to their active and responsible participation. Socioeconomic factors such as household income, parental educational attainment, neighborhood context, and housing stability typically influence youth engagement patterns. Other dimensions of poverty—such as limited access to basic services, inadequate physical and social infrastructures, and restricted social, spiritual, and human capital—further inhibit active participation. Such circumstances encourage the adoption of alternative engagement processes that may or may not facilitate civic development. Hence, a systematic understanding of determinants and barriers to engagement among unorganized youth represents a critical first step toward effective policy and practice.

Policy and Institutional Context

Young people are more socially engaged than ever, but a proportion of youth continue to face barriers that exclude them from engagement in influential policies or mainstream civic actions. Despite policy, institutional, and civil initiatives to include all youth based on education, socio-economic status, and life experiences, the steadily vigilant number of disengaged youth across various countries suggests that barriers are still significant. Enduring consideration of these factors in policy and institutional arrangements may mitigate disengagement and encourage youth activism, participatory accountability, and demand for conducive settings.

Significant differences exist across developed countries in youth social engagement, with differing social ties to education, employment, and community involvement influencing participation. Diversified approaches, programs, and populations require tailored youth-centred action. Cross-country comparisons



may facilitate governments and stakeholders in reforming programs and transition to youth-centred approaches, ultimately enhancing youth and broader society outcomes. A second phase of research can pinpoint specific relevant governmental and other institutional macro-level aspects with existing frameworks employed for substantive detailed insights [2].

Cultural and Identity Considerations

Factors such as ethnicity, gender, migration status, and language influence young people's engagement and sense of belonging, with discrimination and exclusion acting as barriers. In Iceland only 13% of youth with a migrant background believe they belong, while in France the corresponding percentage is 29%—far lower than among their peers [4]. Gender also remains influential. Engagement in cultural activities is twice as high among girls (49%) compared to boys (20%) in Sweden, and young men in France are far less likely to feel they belong to their school or community [10]. Diverse cultural practices and age of arrival further complicate the situation. Young people with a mixed cultural background display higher engagement scores than those with either a solely local or migrant background, an effect possibly linked to past experiences in other countries. Various inclusive engagement practices aim to make young people with a migrant background feel welcome, yet issues persist. Ignoring these considerations incurs high costs, eroding social cohesion, wellbeing, and willingness to engage.

3.2. Trends Over Time

Youth engagement in unorganized groups and decentralized organizations reflects a structural shift in patterns of civic and political engagement in developed countries. A longstanding debate about whether youth political participation is declining or diversifying fails to recognize that few authoritative indicators gauge participation among unorganized youth. Although economically advanced democracies share many socioeconomic and environmental characteristics, longitudinal studies reveal marked variation in long-term youth engagement trends. For instance, recent analyses of four European countries suggest that Italy, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands all exhibit differing trajectories and segmentation of engagement since the early 1980s [11]. Young



Italians and French adults increasingly signal reduced political interest, whereas certain political, civic, and consumer-engagement forms gain ground among Belgian and Dutch youth. An emerging yet disparate literature similarly suggests sub-group trends in Canada [3] and Australia [12].

Differences arise from the accessibility of national data and the time allocation of researchers. Cohort studies reveal massive communication-network disruptions across multiple dimensions. In addition to cohort effects, the timespan permits inferring whether non-standard conventional or GAN (Global Affairs Network) participation has actually increased during youth. Time-varying measures of technology diffusion and media access also facilitate analyses of these factors' influence on participation.

Substantial Internet and mobile-technology diffusion occurred among youth in all countries between the early to mid-1990s and the early 2000s, producing young-adult and reflection-lag cohorts. Application-level data indicate generalized access by the early 2010s; however, mid-1990s data isolated leadership among the general Internet community actual country timing, after policies had been elaborated. The extraordinarily rapid global uptake of digital platforms-songwriter delivery suggests that the tendency toward more individually-defined participation and disaffection from transient participatory angles—less-organized political engagement—continue to operate after broad 03 Anderson state—supply Internet diffusion. Moreover, on- and off-line differential access and device discrepancy generally reflect traditional media parallel but decrease across cohort permutations.

Temporal Shifts in Participation Rates

Engagement in formal political activities, voting in elections, and taking part in organized activities, such as political parties and unions, are continuously decreasing. The presence of unorganized youth (young people aged 15-34) in formal associations is limited. Engagement nevertheless remains a vital element of youth development as it develops young people's social and civic competence. Far from exhibiting the same disengagement tendencies as structured engagement, the degree of engagement and how unorganized youth engage with the rest of society and politics has been changing. Even so, it is known that youth



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participation varies significantly. International comparisons of youth engagement patterns between countries and regions are rare.

Data from different developed countries show how unorganized youth social engagement patterns fluctuate in time without a change in the general trajectories. Although the concentration of unorganized youth engagement remains constant in the time shapes, the favored modalities of engagement have strongly changed. Engagement expectedly concentrated strongly on digital modalities, but in developed countries some are already reporting decreases in this domain significantly prior to the pandemic. Some unorganized youth exhibit a strong upward trend in engagement while others an overall descent in participation. The overall situation of unorganized youth and the changes they went through over the past few decades allow fostering a composite public policy approach that supports their active incorporation to societal discourses.

Paradoxically, young people's equity of access to formal associations has widened while their individual opportunities for participation have reduced. The same holds true for informal youth participation perceived through social and civic content. Policy measures to stimulate informal youth engagement are available. The degree to which governments operate services and maintain an involvement in youth-oriented sectors conveys a minimal degree of direct involvement from informal youth engagement. The rise of more networked approaches with fewer driving authorities favors informal systems. The tendency toward limited incorporation of participation options likely supports the rise of alternative avenues of public articulation segregating it from governance discourse.

The Role of Technology and Media

Technological advancements and media penetration have significantly accelerated since the turn of the last millennium. The advent of personal computers, mobile phones, and devices such as video game consoles alongside rapid internet expansion redefined leisure behaviours and created new ways to connect with other individuals. Today, technology stimulates social curiosity and fosters a global perception of interconnectedness. Many regard it as an essential ingredient for any form of social engagement. Technology introduces a state of



constant cyber-connectivity among users, who keep in touch with family, peers, and others around the world throughout the day. All forms of contemporary political, civic, and leisure-based action are now often accompanied by a digital prefix, and all offline social activities happen concomitantly with online ones. Youth display continuous concerns about loss of online access or current contact with others, and they undertake larger financial investments in broadband internet, mobile phone, video game, personal computer and related computing activities than older generations [3]. Technology also renders distant, video-mediated and virtual-informative togetherness more practicable and enticing. The comfort of remaining at home, the fear of real-life contact, and pre-war norms about the need for considerable social contact are replaced by a wide spectrum of long-distance technologies offering various possibilities that nevertheless constitute a form of engagement – activities that might have once been regarded as strictly private or diverted into leisure, entertainment or play have become politicised, and the need for human socialisation does not diminish, even if personal and household records have been shown to be ambiguous and often contradictory [13].

3.3. Implications for Social Policy and Youth Development

Most evidence indicates that modern youth engagement is often facilitated by organized social gatherings. Therefore, it is essential to study unorganized youth, which are youth who neither belong nor want to belong to recognized groups but are motivated to participate within certain gatherings. Unorganized youth do fulfil needs in different ways, and the findings of unorganized youth engagement has information on the process of other youth engagement. Getting access to groups and activities takes effort, and extra interactions with peers are needed to indicate sufficient social capital is available and willing to engage. Unorganized youth are often located in countries with sufficient recognition and governance of these groups. Enabling groups is an important part of policy to increase group formation and agenda building. Service learning, training programs, internships, and non-job-linked courses offered by education establishments were generally linked to higher engagement across countries. The quality of these programs



influence time affordable for non-job-linked activities covering community involvement and volunteering [1].

Enhancing youth access to the job market and relevant education avoiding engagement of unorganized youth on national policies is a first pathway to ensure they are less engaged after education. Strengthening education establishments to further encourage higher education and vocational training makes unorganization youth still able to access those gatherings so that policy has been successful. Training setup below higher education becomes more reliable and policy aimed at shaping their education and working title and further accessing community would remain useful. During education, training gatherings held by other organization for apprentices have little effect because they are still engaged in other gatherings that are not yet recognised.

3.4. Case Comparisons Across Developed Countries

Drawing on three in-depth studies of unorganized youth engagement in Canada, Finland, and the Netherlands, several best practices and transferable lessons can be identified. In Canada, the priority is to improve the accessibility of voluntary youth services and to coordinate the various programs offered through schools, youth organizations, municipalities, and community agencies. A recent national longitudinal survey of education, skills, and labour market participation suggests a positive linkage between youth training or work experience and civic engagement in post-secondary education, participation in formal work, and supply of informal services or volunteer work [1]. Similar patterns are observed in the Netherlands, where a greater emphasis on access by fostering engagement opportunities appears beneficial to participation in wider civic activities [9] [14]. Effective youth engagement requires a full understanding of hydroclimatic interactions, including the climate-soil-plant system, biogeochemical cycles, and the local social context in which they operate. In Finland, several key factors are identified that are crucial to encouraging youth to become socially engaged. These include moderated levels of parental control, encouragement to participate in youth initiatives on a voluntary basis, personal experience of social exclusion, and actual participation in social activities. Broadly, linked frameworks stressing the interplay between engagement and education may yield insights as youth



collectively tackle the myriad of today's challenges through social, technological, and political activism.

Youth engagement in offline activities builds social competence and a wide repertoire of social contacts, capital, and resources that help youths when they enter the labour market. In Canada and the Netherlands, several youth networks offer workshops, contests, and meeting spaces that allow formal organization of the knowledge economy to maintain offline engagement and participation. The Canadian Voice of Youth YouthWise Network and the Dutch Youth Voice Foundation are examples of youth-led initiatives that provide access to networks on which to build other seminars and activities.

4. CONCLUSION

The ongoing transformations of youth engagement are strongly influenced by changing digital environments, social networks, and the policy context. Yet public attention, and research agendas, have largely fixated on organized youth participation in formal associations and institutions. However, a significant proportion of youth remain engaged outside of these organized structures, which are characterized by institutional boundaries and the expectation of a certain commitment or involvement threshold. 'Unorganized youth' are therefore defined as attentively engaged young people who are participating through free-form and discretionary social action, rather than organized and obligatory engagement through youth associations. This situation is call for cross-national examination, as current processes of digitalization, the construction of social spaces, and youth engagement policies still vary considerably between countries.

Social participation through engagement by youth outside structured institutions needs careful definition. Different types of participation frames and specifications warrant systematic specification. Acquisition of accurate participation indices for youth engagement necessitates a comprehensive measure of both the quality and intensity of engagement involvement. As a survey instrument, the International Civic and Political Engagement (ICAP) survey, employed in multiple OECD countries, was designed to assess youth engagement well beyond institutional frameworks [2]. The survey included both extensive questions about diverse categories of participation and combination of events in youth programs with



same-set and different-set types of participation to derive maximum index detail. The design further permits deeper examination of unorganized engagement when required.

The Government of Canada has initiated an engagement action project aimed at a better understanding of youth involvement. Youth engagement is thus defined, constructed and measured, even though the focus lies primarily on structured youth associations. During the whole of the ICAP survey, specific interest has been on defining and specifying unorganized engagement as an emerging important theme for youth involvement.

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