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A Literature Review on Youth and Citizenship

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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Citizenship is a status traditionally reserved for adults. Therefore, while many people might accept that youth are *citizens*, at the same time they might be skeptical of the notion that youth, even those over 18, are *full citizens*. Somehow it seems that they cannot be more than “citizens-in-becoming.”

In fact, examining their situation shows youth to have a precarious citizenship status. While they may have their own passports and driving or marriage licenses, and they can form couples and families, take up full-time work, be put into jail and vote, they also seem caught between statuses. Some young people are the backbone of and big earners in the “e-economy,” sometimes becoming very rich before they are old enough to drink alcohol. Yet, many still live at home, and more are returning home after time at university or living as a couple.

Youth unemployment rates are high, and many young people remain for years in part-time jobs or internships. Some governments show little compunction about denying social assistance benefits to young people who have reached the age of majority, and forcing their families to maintain “responsibility” for them, even though they are old enough to vote. HIV/AIDS and other health menaces can make sexual activity a frightening prospect, even as the age of menarche is dropping. While there is increasing evidence that, on average, girls do much better than boys in formal education, young women heading lone-parent families have one of the highest poverty rates in the country.

At the same time, the category of “youth” has been extended considerably in recent years. Younger children are now included, since the category is sometimes applied to those aged 12 and older. More commonly, however, is the prolongation of the status until the age of 29 or even older.

Given all of these real but contradictory characteristics of young people’s lives in Canada today, attention to their citizenship status is in order. This literature review represents an effort to create some order out of this confusion. It reviews in detail the literature on youth, re-reading it so as to answer the question: *What is the citizenship status of young people today and, in particular, where are the inequalities across social and economic categories, as well as between younger and older people?* It also assesses whether young adults have the capacity to achieve full citizenship. As they gain formal civil and political rights, are they also gaining social and economic rights? *Do they have the necessary independence to construct the full citizenship that most older adults enjoy?*

This review covers only the published, and for the most part academic, literature on the subject. It provides a careful reading of the literature available in English and French, dealing with young people in Canada and a few other countries. In order to carry out this review, we consider that citizenship is composed of three analytical dimensions: (1) rights and responsibilities, (2) access, and (3) feelings of belonging (that is, identity). All three dimensions must be present in order for someone to be a citizen, although not everyone has the same rights, responsibilities, access or feelings of belonging.

The extent to which people enjoy these three dimensions of citizenship establishes a certain citizenship status, often one that is less than *full citizenship*. This is the case for many youth, either because they are not yet old enough or because their social and economic circumstances cause them to be excluded from full citizenship. Being a full citizen, therefore, means having the capacity to exercise the three dimensions of citizenship. It is more than having theoretical rights to citizenship, it means *actively seeking to engage* so as to realize one's rights, exercise one's responsibilities, have access to political institutions, be empowered, and share a sense of belonging to the community – national as well as local. Being a full citizen means having the resources and opportunity to participate in different areas of life.

Independence is a key element of citizenship because it helps gain – and indeed underpins – each of the three dimensions of citizenship. Following this argument, the longer that young people stay dependent, the longer it takes to become a full citizen. Equality is another key principle of citizenship since theorists agree that there is no real citizenship without the notion of equality among citizens. Therefore, if rights, responsibilities and access are unequally distributed among young people of the same age or between young adults and older adults, then the citizenship status of some is limited. If there is a consensus that it is normal for a 16-year-old not to have full citizenship rights, the situation is quite different for young people over 18. Many and perhaps an increasing number of young people over the age of majority and well into their twenties have the formal, legal rights of citizenship but do not enjoy full citizenship.

While there is a great deal of literature on youth, it has not been analyzed from a citizenship perspective. It is thus through a “citizenship lens” that connections are made between two sets of literature, that on youth and that on citizenship. This review has two goals: (1) to revisit the literature on youth using a citizenship lens, and (2) to thereby describe the current citizenship status of young people, as well as the capacity of young adults to become full citizens.

This is important to do because research on youth citizenship issues in Canada, especially in English, remains rare. In contrast to the United Kingdom and France, the matter of youth and citizenship has rarely been taken up. Some thinking about the matter has taken place in Quebec. Nonetheless, this remains the “exception that proves the rule” that insufficient attention has gone to the vital matter of young people's rights, responsibilities, current citizenship status, and possible access to full citizenship.

This paper is divided into four sections. Section 1 unpacks the concept of *youth*, which is an unstable sociological category that varies in space and time. Whereas in the past, there were certain rites of passage that marked the transition from being a child to being an adult, the current situation is one of prolongation of youth. In addition, the markers of adulthood are increasingly “out of synch” in the sense that young people may demonstrate some of the signs of autonomy – forming a couple, for example – while still being dependent on their parents, perhaps even living with a spouse at their parent's home. This means that it is important to understand the citizenship status of youth in the here and now, and not simply treat young people as “citizens-in-becoming” who pass through certain transitions.

Section 2 provides a description and assessment of the treatment of youth and citizenship by a range of authors, and then proposes an analytical grid. The framework used to read the literature on youth and citizenship pays attention to the capacity of young people to achieve *independence*. This has been described as one of the fundamental principles of being a full citizen, yet little attention has gone to young people's capacity for independence. The extent to which youth from different groups can achieve the independence required to be full citizens varies. So, the second foundational principle is that of *equality*. Some youth enjoy a better citizenship status than others do, and we will seek to uncover patterns of discrimination and higher barriers to full citizenship. Another approach is to examine intergenerational inequalities. If independence is an essential component of the definition of full citizenship, there are consequences of prolonging young people's period of dependency in terms of intergenerational inequalities.

Section 3, by far the longest in the paper, provides an overview of several areas where youths exercise and apply their citizenship. In this section, we use the literature to assess young people's capacity to be independent, as well as patterns of equality and inequality. By using the yardsticks of *independence* and *equality*, it is possible to track the citizenship status of youth in the here and now, as well as their capacity to become full citizens. The findings of the literature review are very rich, but can be summarized for each of the parts of Section 3 as follows:

Education – An Avenue to Exclusion?

For young people, many routes to exclusion still exist in Canadian society. Despite declines in the high school drop-out rate, a full 20 percent of young people fail to graduate. In the past, those with low levels of education could find employment, but those who now fail to complete high school face the very real prospect of being unemployed or finding poor paying jobs and insecure work. They are therefore more likely to live in poverty, without the economic independence considered key to achieving full citizenship. This problem particularly affects Aboriginal youth and those from disadvantaged families, perpetuating inequality across generations.

While young people who quit school are likely to experience social exclusion and a corresponding segregation from full citizenship status, exclusion can also exist within the school system itself. Schools continue to stream young women into "traditional" career paths and gender roles. The in-school presence of racism and discrimination based on ability is well documented, having the effect of isolating young people who are deemed "different."

Education – A Route to Independence and Equality?

While there is a growing concern that young people must "learn" to become good citizens, citizenship education is not taught in a direct or consistent manner. Rather, the focus remains on the study of the social sciences more generally, or on political institutions. Observers fear that even an explicit citizenship education curriculum does not encourage young people to think critically. Moreover, the institutions most responsible for teaching citizenship, the schools, are insufficiently democratic. Therefore, the school environment may not reinforce good citizenship practices.

Studies have found a relationship between volunteering or extracurricular activities and political involvement later in life. Therefore, some observers are alarmed about the effects that budget cuts may have on access to extracurricular activities. These trends may therefore have long-term implications for political engagement and the social exclusion of disadvantaged members of society.

Overly simplistic messages promoting abstinence from alcohol, tobacco and recreational drug use fails to provide young people with the proper tools and resources to make informed decisions. Abstinence is rejected as hypocritical since substance use often reflects an attempt to explore issues of personal identity, and in part represents a young person's shift to a more mature adult status.

Insufficient information is also a concern regarding health education. Researchers and young people themselves observe that the teaching of sexuality in school is often inadequate. Failing to provide young people with the knowledge and capacity to make informed and intelligent choices can be detrimental in a world characterized by fatal sexually transmitted diseases. Compounding this lack of appropriate education is the limited and declining access to preventive health services.

Education, Economic Independence and Security

Access to education, student debt and labour market conditions are delaying the economic independence of youth. While those who have a good education (that is, a post-secondary degree or diploma) fare much better in the labour market than their less-educated counterparts, general trends in the youth labour market are negatively affecting many young people. There has been a 20-year trend of declining real and relative earnings of young people, occurring in most industries and for most educational groups.

Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in post-secondary enrolment. While in absolute terms access to post-secondary education has increased for all groups, it has been at a slower pace for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In short, there is polarization along socioeconomic lines. This trend likely reflects the increase in tuition rates since the early 1980s, and studies suggest that lower-income families are most sensitive to such increases. Concomitantly, the incidence and depth of student debt have increased markedly over the past two decades, and there has been a corresponding increase in repayment difficulties.

The ability to leave home is also a major indicator that young people are close to attaining independence. However, the age at which the majority of young people are leaving the parental household has been increasing, an outcome that reflects factors such as tight housing markets, a decline in relative wages, high levels of unemployment, prolonged education, and high student debt levels. Yet another indicator of the attainment of independence is the timing of family formation. With both the lengthening school-to-work transition and delays in leaving the parental home, young women may find themselves "squeezed out" of their prime childbearing years.

Justice and Freedom from Discrimination

There are several areas in which youth face discrimination. This occurs directly and indirectly on the basis of age and due to membership in a particular category (gay or lesbian, for example) or community (for example, newcomers to Canada). As well, if youth come into contact with the criminal justice system, harsh treatment is likely as a result of the shift to a more punitive approach in thinking about youth and the justice system.

Youth encounter discrimination when they enter the labour force a tier lower than their older, more established co-workers. Such measures disproportionately affect young people because they represent the majority of new entrants to the labour market.

Not having a home or material wealth to rely on from parents can contribute to a weakened citizenship status due to problems in accessing health and social services. Youth are not treated equally with respect to social assistance requirements. For young people, receipt of this entitlement is conditional upon obligations such as workfare or training. In matters of reproductive health, contraception may be difficult for young people to obtain, and there are significant barriers for young women in accessing health care services should they seek to terminate a pregnancy.

In several policy spheres, the treatment of young people can be seen as inconsistent – youth are both treated as adults and as children. Rights and responsibilities are not granted in tandem but, instead, are uneven and inconsistent.

Personal Security and Well-being in the Community

This subsection addresses the health of youth in terms of the causes of morbidity and mortality, as well as through recreation and leisure. The ways that youth interact with their environment has an important relationship to their citizenship status. The literature on youth and health indicates that the right of youth to protection from harm is infringed upon most by the transportation system and societal problems related to gender, poverty and marginalization.

At the most fundamental level, youth morbidity and mortality is highly affected by injuries in motor vehicle crashes, sports, and intentional violence. Systemic discrimination against young women and Aboriginal youth has a disproportionate effect on the rates of sexual violence and suicide they experience. These findings suggest that the context in which youth live put certain young people in a position of lacking access to basic citizenship rights such as personal and environmental security. Research also reveals that young people may be the perpetrators of violence. As such, they fail to uphold the citizenship responsibilities to obey the law and refrain from causing harm to others.

Youth participation in recreation is a form of engagement in the community. It, too, is mediated by differential access since income, transportation and parental rules serve as barriers to participation. There is a significant difference in leisure activities between male and female youth, and among some youth of colour.

Opportunities for extracurricular activities in sports and culture also vary significantly by school or school district, and by young people's access to material resources. The introduction of user fees and the high cost of recreation equipment have made class differences increasingly significant. Inadequate physical activity among young people may undermine their access to health and well-being in the future, as well as in the present.

Identity, Belonging and Participation

Youth citizenship is about identifying with and feeling a sense of belonging to one's community. This would logically translate into political participation at all levels of government. However, the literature examining this aspect of young people's lives identifies areas in which young people feel excluded, and do not fully participate.

While there are several research gaps in this literature from a citizenship perspective, the context in which young people live their lives emerges as an important factor accounting for patterns of participation. Societal problems such as racial discrimination and unemployment affect the outlook of youth. Having hope for the future and feelings of belonging influence both youth participation in mainstream politics and their resistance to marginalization through the formation of subcultures and via political protest.

Section 4 of the paper provides a set of summary questions and presents a list of possible directions for future research based on the major conclusions of the paper. Overall, the survey of the literature finds that youth possess a citizenship status that might best be characterized as *precarious*. Many young people are arriving at full citizenship, enjoying its fruits, and contributing to their communities. Nonetheless, the picture is not equally positive for all youth. Problems still remain.

For young people who have passed the age of majority and therefore have attained "citizenship," precariousness in this status comes from the gap between formal and substantive rights. Many youths have not attained full citizenship, because they have not yet achieved *independence*. For younger Canadians, their citizenship rights are limited by their age, to be sure, but we have also observed that there are frequently contradictions between the responsibilities expected of young people and the rights conferred on them. Moreover, for both older and younger groups, we have found significant patterns of *inequality* related to the economic, social, and cultural circumstances of youth subgroups. Therefore, the notion of precariousness best captures the experience of youth citizenship with respect to the exercise of rights and responsibilities, as well as access and belonging.