Youth as Important Civic Actors: From the Margins to the Center

BY JEE KIM AND ROBERT F. SHERMAN

Public opinions polls and extensive research on attitudes held about young people (teenagers, primarily) in the United States portray a consistent, and troubling, point of view: that teenagers are plagued by expensive problems (crime, addiction, pregnancy, dropping out) and contribute little of positive value to our society. As Shepherd Zeldin notes, there is an emerging body of research indicating that, at a minimum, contemporary beliefs and narratives about adolescents convey the implicit message that youth are a source of worry, not potential. At worst, they contribute to a fear of adolescents, especially racial and ethnic minorities. The dominant view, only recently challenged, is that youth are problems to be fixed, not the sources of solutions to social ills. Society loves their attractive bodies, youthfulness, and commercial firepower but at the same time vilifies adolescents as a noncontributing drain on the economy and our democracy. In the mainstream media, young people are most often portrayed as self-absorbed and apathetic, disinterested in the common good or in advancing social goals.

Thankfully, a significant challenge to these views is gathering momentum in the press, within philanthropy and schools and other community-based youth-serving institutions. In our work at Surdna Foundation's Effective Citizenry program, we find repeated refutation of negative and dismissive views of teenagers and young adults. Through our funding of programs that train young people to come together to improve their schools and community institutions, we have seen firsthand how, with proper supports and organizations to help them plug in, young people are not apathetic and disengaged at all. In fact, young people are powerful contributors to solving some of the country's most intractable problems: failing schools, unfair juvenile justice policies, environmental degradation, and a commercially soaked media environment, to name just a few.

A growing literature on youth civic engagement is documenting this inspiring body of youth-led work. We hope that this issue of the *National Civic Review,* which we have guest edited, contributes to the national conversation about the power and roles claimed by youth as they seek to influence our democracy and improve their own lives.

There are two critical components to generating favorable conditions for meaningful youth civic engagement. First, solving serious public problems is not an individual activity. Just as with adults, it takes groups of like-intentioned young people to address failing public systems and catalyze more responsive institutions. Though youth development has more consistently studied the skills and habits acquired by individuals, much current thinking focuses on the positive power of collective public work. Second, teenagers and young adults don't seek superficial busywork or participation on the margins of thorny problems. They increasingly choose consequential involvement on the core issues that matter most to them: education, jails and detention halls, crumbling communities, and lack of equity and dignity in the society. Meaningful work can lead to meaningful solutions, as you will read in this issue of the *National Civic Review.* In our view, conditions are ripening for young people to move from the margins—marginalized by negative stereotypes about their interests and capacities—to the very center of engaged civic life.

Two broad trends have converged to set the stage for this renewed view of youth and their abilities to participate meaningfully and deeply in community life. The first is the signal shifts in the youth devel-

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opment field itself that have promoted new ways of viewing teenagers and young adults, a trend that has been labeled "positive youth development." The second is the uneven development of social movements and leadership of the last half century.

Youth Development: From Preventing Problems to Promoting Full Engagement

Beginning in the early 1990s, a group of youth development theory builders and practitioners initiated the positive youth development movement, designed to counter negative stereotypes of youth that were not supported by psychological or developmental theory, formal research, or public data. (Positive youth development has also been called "assets-based youth development.") A paper by K. Pittman and coauthors, "Preventing Problems or Promoting Development," based on work begun in 1990, recapped a sensible progression: from seeing youth as problems to be fixed (youth as "clients" of social service) to viewing them as assets ("youth as resources" was the new moniker), and to embracing young people as full partners in community life. The stated goals of youth programs across the country (and within schools) have reflected this progression: from a focus on specific outcomes to be avoided (pregnancy, incarceration) to promoting community service on an individual basis, to inclusion of groups of young people as stakeholders and actors in serious community decision-making. Surdna's Effective Citizenry program priorities and guidelines followed a similar trajectory. We now support projects that build civic engagement skills so that groups of young people can tackle meaningful community challenges as full partners.

As part of this positive youth development wave, specific disciplines began to articulate new views of and roles for young people:

- Service-learning researchers began to identify how academic approaches yield varying types of active citizens: from the *personally responsible* to the *participatory* and the *justice-oriented* citizen.
- K–12 schools, as well as colleges and universities, are increasingly viewed as places where civic capacities and motivations can be generated for and by young people through a broad array of strategies that help schools reclaim their traditional civic missions.
- Youth organizing emerged as a growing field, a marriage between traditional community organizing and positive youth development. Through youth organizing, teens and young adults are able to take on the serious political challenges of the day: reforming policies that directly affect their lives and communities. Engagement through youth organizing has been shown through a growing body of research to achieve tremendous youth development outcomes—that is, participating in youth organizing helps young people grow up with a firm identity, strong motivation to participate, and a host of important life skills (public speaking, conflict resolution, developing habits of sustained involvement, policy analysis, creating community change). Importantly, youth organizing and more contemporary youth engagement strategies promote collective, not just individual, action. Consolidating group identity, a major task of adolescence and young adulthood, is well advanced by these strategies.

Social Movements: Diving Headfirst into a Generational Gap

The second significant influence in the emergence of a new view of young people is the broader social and political backdrop against which it arose. The role of youth in energizing the diverse social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s has been widely celebrated. However, despite the prominence of young people in shaping and defining the civil rights, antiwar, women's liberation, and third-world solidarity movements of that era, little attention was paid to intentionally developing the next generation of social justice leaders. Many competing explanations have been offered, but the result was unanimous: a deep generational gap.

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The personal experience of one of the authors reflects this process. After becoming active in the mid-1990s, fresh out of college and working on immigrants rights and racial justice issues in New York City, he *saw* veteran organizers and older activists at rallies, meetings, and around offices; but he can remember only a select few who deliberately reached out to and spent time or energy on attending to the next generation of activists. Most notable was Richie Perez (1944–2004), a former Young Lord and lifelong community organizer. Through his immense personal generosity and relative uniqueness in his commitment to developing youth leadership, there is now an entire community of social justice organizers and activists that name Richie as mentor. Unfortunately, he was an exception to the rule.

At the same time, conservative forces ushered in an era stretching through the 1980s and 1990s, marked by the criminalization of young people, especially low-income youth of color. Images of young brown and black "superpredators" proliferated in the media, enabling and supporting antiyouth policies such as Proposition 21 in California, which passed in 2000 and pushes juveniles into adult courts and prisons (they can be locked up in an adult prison at age fourteen) and gives police broad, almost unchecked discretion to label, carry out surveillance on, and prosecute youth as alleged "gang members." Young people committed to addressing the problems that plagued their communities were in a difficult situation, as described by the Movement Strategy Center: "Community leaders and elders of the 1960s and 1970s were not present. Still reeling from the trauma of crushed social movements and focused on efforts to build their own power and influence, many community leaders disconnected from the younger generation. Without mentors, young people were left on their own to deal with these attacks" (p. 10).

In low-income, urban communities of color, two prominent sides of this generational gap were the "old guard" civil rights organizations and a newer form of civic engagement called "Hip Hop activism," which consciously integrated culture and expression into its social change work. As noted Hip Hop historian Jeff Chang explains: "Hip Hop activism offers the same kind of space to articulate and address the issues of the time as civil rights and Black Power once did for a previous generation. Hip Hop activism is the natural expression of a post-civil rights generation's desire for social change" (p. 2).

The importance of developing new leadership as well as mentoring young people for the long-term sustainability and continued relevance of social justice movements is becoming more broadly acknowledged, and not only by civil rights and racial justice organizations. The gap in leadership development is being felt today in the deliberation and anxiety expressed by a range of social justice movements—reproductive health, environmental justice, and others. Fortunately, young people have not passively waited for an older generation to eventually come around.

In the past decade, youth-driven and youth-led models of civic engagement and political activism have proliferated rapidly around the country. Seeking to fill the void of this generational gap, young people are developing their own unique decision-making processes, organizing and campaign strategies, and ultimately, models of civic engagement. At the same time, more and more adult-led organizations, from service providers to advocacy and community organizing projects, are taking notice and beginning to embrace young people as partners in both their internal decision making and external social change work.

Closing: This Issue of NCR

Many of us working in the youth civic engagement field believe that the time has now arrived for the payoffs that arise from the convergence of these two trends: the development of the mid- and late-twentieth-century's major social movements, and

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the maturation of the positive youth development approach. As stated earlier: youth are coming off the margins and injecting themselves into the very core of the democratic enterprise. This issue of the *National Civic Review* takes up some dramatic and hopeful examples of the positive and central roles that can be seized by well-supported and trained young people:

- Shepherd Zeldin and Carole MacNeil document a host of ways in which community-based nonprofit organizations adapt to and are positively transformed by equal and full participation of youth.
- Kavitha Mediratta takes us right inside a new initiative through which young people are combining their youth organizing efforts into a large citywide reform initiative to improve high schools in New York City.
- Barbara Cervone brings us the voices of young people themselves who are working to make their schools better places to learn and grow.
- Tobi Walker describes the tidal wave of activity that emerged out of innovative efforts to increase the youth vote in 2004, with great results.
- Elisabeth Soep uses youth media, and the Youth Radio program in Berkeley in particular, to identify how young people are raising their voices around important social concerns and growing up stronger in the process.
- Shawn Ginwright makes a strong case for the power of full engagement of minority youth as they work to consolidate positive identities and at the same time rebuild their disadvantaged communities and institutions.

Many additional perspectives could certainly be offered to complement the ones found in this issue of *NCR*. But we hope these pieces sufficiently inspire readers to deepen their appreciation of this new and emerging perspective on young people—out of the periphery of stereotypes and marginalization and into the bright and very public center of civic life.

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