

The Assessment of Youth Policies and Services in the United States from the Perspectives of Youth and Youth Professionals

Alkida Lushaj

Institute of Political Studies, alkida.lushaj@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The dynamic development in the world causes young people to encounter challenges in economic, social and political areas. Therefore interest in academic studies on youth is increasing. It is only possible to reveal the relationship and connection between youth policies and youth as a social group when youth studies are examined. This research paper aims to contribute to the development of youth policies and services from a social work perspective. Within the scope of the research, 12 youth and 6 youth professionals were interviewed. Qualitative research method was used and data were collected through in-depth interviews. Youth participants emphasized the inadequacy of policies and services provided to them in areas such as education, employment, health, economy, technology, and security. It was determined that this inadequacy and accessibility problems have a negative impact on the capability of youth. Furthermore, young people stated that policies and services were not designed in line with their needs and recommendations. Youth professionals stated that the fragmented and disorganized youth policies and services, which are designed without the participation of young people, could not be effective and efficient in the field. As a result, one of the main recommendations in this research paper is to plan youth welfare services in line with the needs of youth. The importance of systematic, coordinated and sustainable youth policies and services was emphasized.

KEYWORDS: Youth Empowerment, Youth Policies, Development, Youth Work

Introduction

Youth represents the most dynamic force in society and has an important contribution to the progress and prosperity of any country, particularly the United States (US), which statistically (Statista 2024) has approximately 21.64 million young people between the ages of 15 to 19 years old. The slight increase of young people in 2022, from the previous year (21.57 million young people) shows that investing in the needs of young people is critical for promoting a more active and sustainable society (Statista 2024).

The energy, creativity and enthusiasm of youth are catalysts for innovation, economic and social development. Identifying and addressing their needs in the right way equips them with the necessary tools to meet the challenges of today and the future, foster a generation capable of leading the country toward development. Conversely, neglecting the aspirations and concerns of young people can lead to insecurity, frustration and the loss of opportunities. Therefore, appreciating the importance of youth and addressing their needs with policies and support mechanisms is not only a moral obligation, but also a strategic and sustainable investment for the long-term, well-being and progress of the country. This research paper shows that despite progress in youth policy and funding mechanisms, the US still needs to further enhance its efforts to develop a fully functional youth system which responds to the needs of young people, ensures inclusivity, and creates an enabling environment for youth participation and empowerment. Inter-institutional and cross-sectorial cooperation in the area of youth and related issues is essential.

Overview of Youth Legislation in United States

Youth legislation and policies in the United States cover a wide range of laws and regulations designed to address the rights, welfare, development of young people and juvenile justice. Unlike some other Western European countries (Council of Europe 2024) as Germany or Ireland, the United States does not have a single federal agency dedicated to the youth. The governments of Ireland and Germany have created dedicated youth structures at the central level, such as Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (Germany), Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Ireland) that design, oversee and ensure the effective implementation of youth policies at all levels in the country. Instead, in the US the youth is a cross-departmental issue, meaning federal agencies and departments, as well as through collaboration with state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and community groups, each addressing different aspects of youth policy and services.

Thus, there are several actors, governmental and non-governmental, that work and address youth issues. Therefore, there is no holistic youth policy agenda (IJAB 2022). This is partly due to the federal constitution of the USA, which assigns different powers to the federal government and the states. Each state has additional laws and regulations that further address the needs of youth in their communities. Federal laws often set minimum standards, while states may have additional regulations or programs designed to meet local needs and conditions. This means that youth welfare traditionally falls under state jurisdiction and each state and county has its own systems and legislation in place. Therefore, policies and practices at national, state, and local levels are often very different in terms of funding and focus as well. By providing public funding and federal programs, the federal government can influence state policy and set specific youth policy priorities.

At the federal level, laws and policies provide broad frameworks and minimum standards that states and local levels must follow, including:

- Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA 2023) addresses child abuse and neglect, providing financial assistance for demonstration programs for the prevention, identification, and treatment of child abuse and neglect and establishing a National Center on Child Abuse.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1975) is a federal law in the United States that ensures children with disabilities have access to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) tailored to their individual needs.
- Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP 1974) is a federal law that aims to improve juvenile justice systems and prevent delinquency. It provides formula grants to states that meet certain federal standards for the care and treatment of youth in the criminal and juvenile justice systems.
- Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA 1974) is another federal law that governs access to educational information and records by public entities such as potential employers, publicly funded educational institutions, and foreign governments.
- Violence Against Women Act of 1994 (VAWA 2000) is a federal law that aims to protect young victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking.

State governments have a significant role in enacting youth legislation to meet local needs and opportunities. This can lead to considerable variation across states. Key areas of state jurisdiction include:

- Legal age which determines when a person is considered an adult with full legal rights and responsibilities. The legal age is set by state law and can differ from state to state. However, almost all states in US set the base legal age of 18 years old.
- Each state has its own juvenile justice system with specific rules and procedures for dealing with youth offenders. These can vary in terms of age thresholds, rehabilitation approaches, and the treatment of juveniles as adults (National Academies Press 2001).

- States set compulsory education ages and standards for school attendance and curriculum. They also often have specific laws addressing issues like school discipline, bullying, and student privacy.
- Child Labor Laws (FLSA 1938) regulate the types of work and the hours that minors are allowed to work, aiming to ensure that work does not interfere with their education and well-being.

Meanwhile, local governments and school districts have the authority to implement and enforce policies designed for their specific communities, concerning:

- Youth Programs and Services – local policies might govern community programs, after-school activities, and recreational opportunities for youth.
- School Policies – individual schools and districts may have specific rules regarding student conduct, dress codes, and safety procedures.
- Public Health and Safety – local ordinances can impact youth through regulations on curfews, public spaces, and substance use.

Moreover, the US has a long and well-established tradition of addressing social issues through the philanthropic sector rather than the government (bottom-up vs. top-down) (IJAB 2022). This approach is rooted in the country's historical, cultural, and economic contexts. There are many organizations working to provide an even playing ground for youth from all backgrounds. While there are some government departments that promote youth policy priorities, these departments tend to have strong partnerships with non-profit and philanthropic entities.

Challenges and Perspectives for Change

Due to the lack of a holistic youth policy agenda, programs for youth in the United States rely on a wide range of different policies and funding streams. This results in inconsistencies in the resources available to youth, which largely depend on their geographical location. Youth living on the east and west coasts are more likely to have access to a wider range of opportunities compared to their counterparts in the South or South-West. The challenges of youth policy in the US are derived from the lack of public and social services at the federal level. As a result of this, different states, cities, towns, and local communities have varied levels of programming and support for youth.

Desk research data about the youth in USA showed that fragmented policies across different sectors like education, healthcare and employment may result in gaps and/or overlaps that do not address youth needs. Moreover, fragmented policies can create barriers to accessing services, especially for those coming from marginalized communities.

On the other hand, the field research through direct interviews showed that policies and services may not sufficiently involve young people in their design and implementation processes, resulting in a gap between what is provided and what is actually needed. The feedback from young people in the US indicates that services might be based on outdated assumptions about youth preferences or circumstances, and may not adjust to current societal changes or technological advancements.

According to the youth experts, to address these concerns it is required a more inclusive approach that actively involves youth in policymaking processes, ensures services to be flexible and responsive to their evolving needs, allocates adequate resources, and fosters better communication channels between policymakers and young citizens. By doing so, policies and services can better represent and meet the expectations and requirements of the younger generation.

Recommendations

On an overall note, this paper shows that despite progress in youth policy and funding mechanisms, the US still needs to further enhance its efforts to develop a fully functional youth system that

responds to the needs of young people, ensures inclusivity, and creates an enabling environment for youth participation and empowerment. Inter-institutional and cross-sectorial cooperation in the area of youth and related issues is essential. Below are outlined some key priorities for policy makers, the donor community and youth:

Recommendations for policy makers at central and local levels:

- It is necessary to further improve efforts for evidence-based youth policy making through the use of data, evidence and research, and through structured and continuous dialogue and cooperation with youth, civil society, and academia.
- Public institutions, NPOs, academia, research centers and other organizations should gather, analyze and publish youth-specific disaggregated data in a holistic and comprehensive way. This will help with consistency and comparability of data sets, thus contributing to research on youth and evidence-based youth policy based on their needs and challenges.
- A dedicated program budget for youth is necessary to be set up, in addition to current provisions across different levels as a cross-cutting policy issue. It would be an added value to the development of a youth if other sources of funding from public institutions such as funding for civil society, culture, art, sports, employment, entrepreneurship, innovation, research, and science would also be dedicated to youth.
- Further support will be needed with capacity development, infrastructure, technology upgrading and other resources in youth centers so they can fully function as empowering platforms for youth.
- Better coordination between formal (central and local government, donors, the business sector, NPOs, the media, academia) and non-formal actors (families, youth groups, community leaders) should be ensured.

Recommendations for youth (NPOs, networks, informal groups):

- Youth organizations should enhance efforts for networking, cooperation and partnership building with one another and other civil society actors.
- Well-established youth organizations and networks should provide peer-to-peer support, guidance, and mentorship for smaller, grassroots organizations and youth initiatives from rural and remote areas.

Recommendations for donors:

- Intensify direct support for the youth sector (organizations, associations, groups, networks and other forms) in priority and emerging areas such as employment, income generation, start-ups, digital skills, rural youth, media, data and digital literacy, health and social protection, youth and science, youth migration/brain drain/brain circulation.
- Provide institutional funding for youth sector (organizations, associations, groups, networks, and other forms) to ensure sustainability of operations through supporting with financial means and skills development.
- Continue direct support to youth by evaluating progress, identifying best practices, and customizing support based on assessed needs and demands from the youth sector.

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