



SOCIAL POLICY
**RESEARCH
BRIEF**

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH POLICIES

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Highlights

- The trend towards an extended youth phase has become widespread in industrialized countries over the last 30 years.
- Delaying the passage to adulthood has created relatively more complex transition models.
- Youth policy analysts should go beyond static “target groups” to adopting a more dynamic approach that is based on the life-course and reinforces the ability that youth have to manage the risks they face.
- Policies must also fit coherently within a broader framework so as to not only provide youth with direct support, but also to facilitate the key (if not crucial) roles that family, community and workplace play in their lives.

This research brief summarizes the highlights of the recent PRI publication, *Current Realities and Emerging Issues Facing Youth in Canada*, by Sandra Franke.¹

Given the increasingly complex conditions and realities characterizing today’s youth and their transition to adulthood, thought should be given to the method of designing government policies aimed at youth. This paper seeks first to summarize the challenges, opportunities and realities facing young Canadians. Subsequently, it proposes an analytical framework to assess current youth issues and to support further thought on new public policy development for youth.

Challenges, Opportunities and Realities Facing Canadian Youth

Youth is a period of the life-course when transitions and key moments are concentrated and follow each other in rapid succession. The form and length of these transitions vary with each young person’s aspirations and the particular conditions in which they live. These aspects are developed in the analytical framework proposed below.

Challenges and Opportunities for Youth

The main challenges facing today’s youth are associated with the following realities:

- Conditions for workplace integration are not always favourable. For example, the current economic situation combined with the decline in income observed since the 1980s among successive cohorts of young people under the age of 25.
- The vulnerability of certain youth subgroups, for example Aboriginal youth. For some youth from modest socio-economic backgrounds, the dropout rate remains very high.
- A multiethnic context that produces social inequalities. Certain visible minorities are more likely to be affected by unemployment and to receive lower wages.

Education levels and gaps represent a particularly important factor to consider: it is estimated that 35% of the new jobs that will be created in Canada by 2015 will require a university degree.²

Population aging represents a challenge and an opportunity for youth, the challenge being that the tax burden resulting from the public services for Canada's aging population could directly impact young workers' finances.³ Conversely, however, population decline is expected to produce a significant increase in employment opportunities for youth (although this could be accompanied by an increased discrepancy between the quality of the jobs available to them and their level of education).

Youth Policy in Canada

In Canada, there are very few federal policies aimed specifically at youth, since they mainly come under provincial and municipal jurisdiction.

Further, a recent study⁴ reports that the youth service sector in Canada is fragmented and sometimes characterized by inconsistency between intervention measures, policies and funding sources. This observation seems to apply to all levels of activity, which means that inconsistencies exist at the provincial and municipal levels as well as at the pan-Canadian policy level.

Analytical Framework

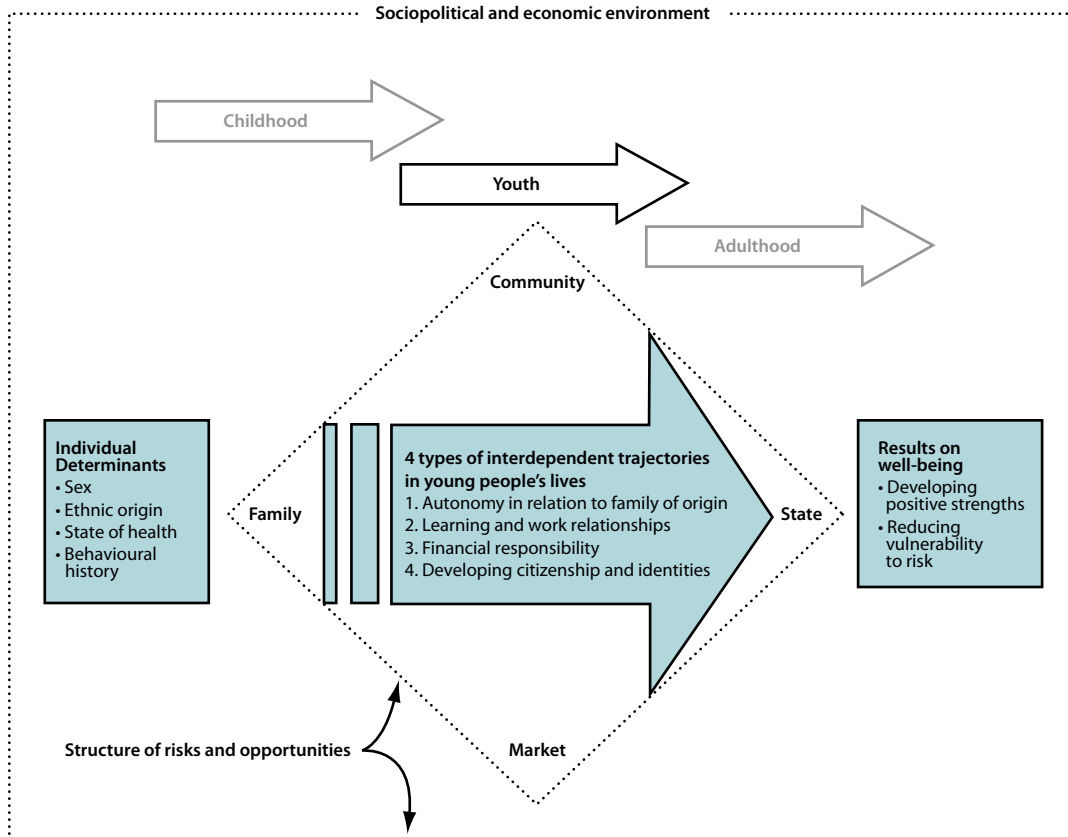
Main Trends in Youth Research and Policy

Over the years, the conceptualization of youth has been influenced by a variety of approaches. Recently, we have arrived at a more holistic approach that focuses on all of the living conditions affecting youth, and recognizes that youth not only "experience" the effects of structures and circumstances, but that they actively take part in transforming the social system throughout their life-course.

The contemporary perception of youth suggests the need to develop new theoretical frameworks, structured around:

- individual attributes
- interdependent trajectories
- a structure of opportunities and risks
- results in terms of well-being

Diagram: Conceptual Framework for Understanding Youth based on a Life-course Approach



Individual Attributes

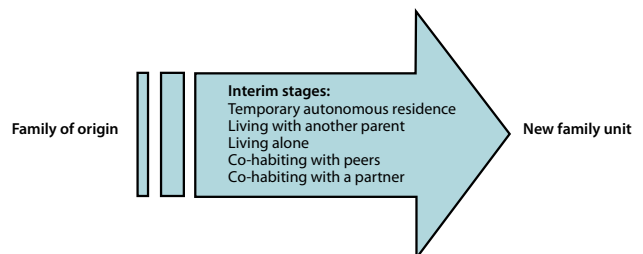
Individual attributes like socio-economic status (poverty in particular), health and/or behavioural history are determinants when it comes to the nature and scope of the challenges and opportunities facing youth.

Key Trajectories on the Road to Adulthood

The speed and form of the separation from one's family of origin affects all of the other aspects of the young person's trajectory of autonomy.⁵

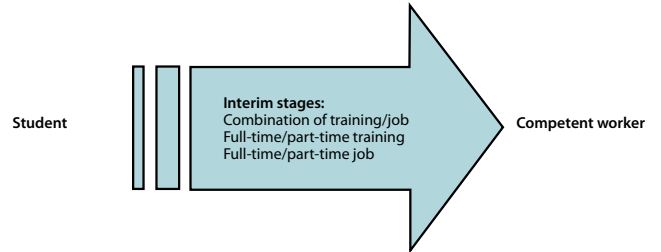
- The **transition from family of origin to a new family unit** typically occurs through various interim stages, such as temporary autonomous residence, living with one or the other parent, living alone, co-habiting with peers and co-habiting with a partner. The proportion of young adults living with their parents has increased considerably since the 1980s: in 1986 fewer than 50% of youth aged 20–24 lived with their parents, compared with 60% in 2006.

From one's Family of Origin to Forming a new Family Unit

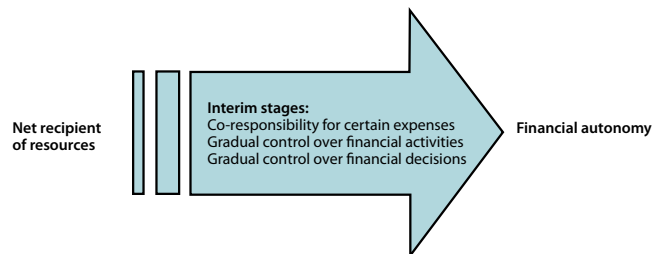


- The **transition from student to competent worker** occurs through various interim stages, such as the combination of training/employment, full/part-time training and full/part-time employment. Entering an occupation means having not only economic, but also social status. Today the education-work combination is increasingly frequent among youth and the learning process is less linear and more complex.
- The **transition from net recipient of resources to financial responsibility** also occurs through various intermediary stages, such as co-responsibility for certain expenses and gradual control of financial activities, although these days, youth are often heavily in debt: in 2006, university graduates left the education system with an average debt of \$24 000.
- **From passive citizenship to active citizenship**, youth experience a temporary attachment to various social groups, exploration of multiple viewpoints and identities, and experimentation with multiple forms of social and civic participation. Only 40% of youth under 25 voted in 2004, compared to 75% of the 58–67 year-olds. However, Molgat (2010) notes significant youth participation in the political process through other means.

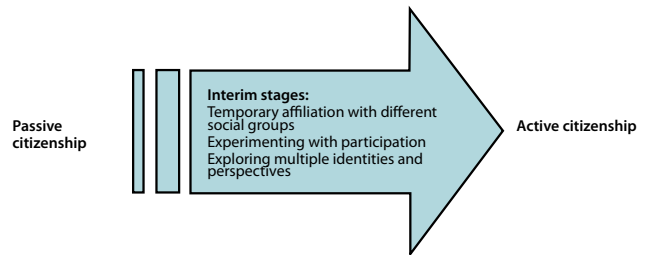
From Student to Competent Worker



From Net Recipient of Resources to Financial Responsibility



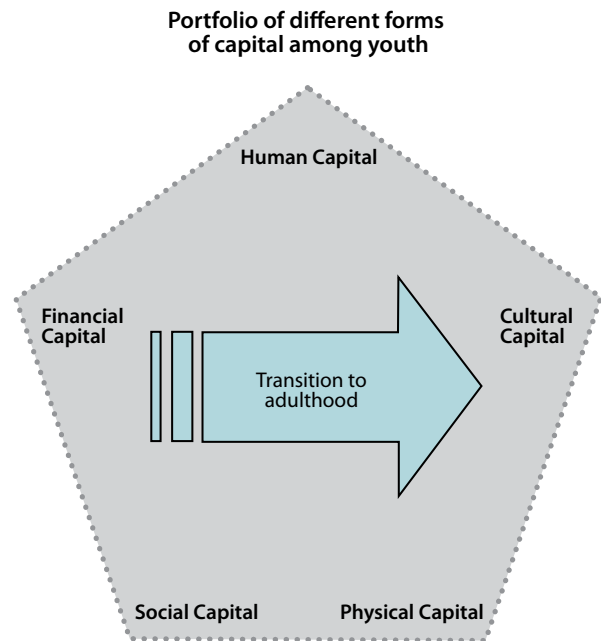
From Passive Citizenship to Active Citizenship



Structure of Risks and Opportunities

In Canada, the problem of risk among young people is often examined using the “target-group” approach (Murray, 2004). Target groups include for example, homeless or disabled youth, but risk exposure often has a dynamic nature. That is why risk, just like the interventions to address it, must be approached from a life-course perspective. Further, it is essential that when approaching the question of risk, one bear in mind the context of heterogeneous populations, i.e., that “vulnerable youth” are not reducible to a single, uniform social group with the same attributes and experiences.

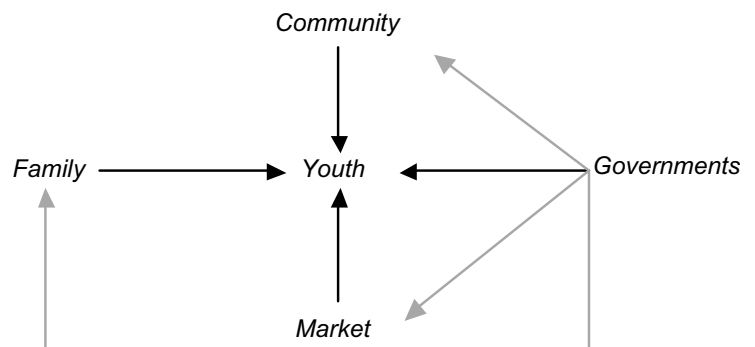
Examining the question of risk among youth involves a double perspective. The idea is not simply to offset transition failures with compensatory policies, but, to the extent possible, to prevent these risks or, if that is not possible, mitigate their impacts. This can require policies aimed at building young people’s capacity to deal with life-course difficulties by, among other things, giving them a resource portfolio that will allow them to take advantage of opportunities that come their way. This portfolio could contain various forms of capital (such as human, financial, social, physical and cultural capital, as illustrated by the diagram) and be built by youth themselves, inherited from their family or obtained through social or community networks as well as through government support.



Social Support for Youth Well-being

Government policies aimed at ensuring young people’s well-being fit within a broader social architecture framework in which family, the community and markets (especially the labour market) play an equally important, if not crucial, role.

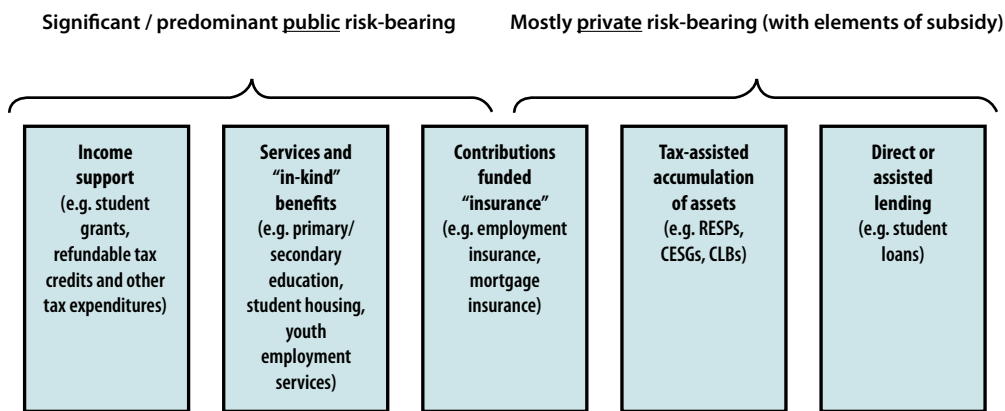
Each society has a “social architecture”⁶ of its own, composed of four main categories of social actors: governments, the community, the market and family. This is a veritable web of agents that interact with youth, offering them various forms of support and benefiting in turn from their contributions. Governments support youth not only directly, but indirectly as well – in particular, by facilitating the role played by their family and community and by the institutions with which they interact. Through social architecture, a set of different mechanisms of direct and indirect support (a “welfare mix”) is activated, and the question that policy-makers must often ask themselves is which social actors are best positioned to support youth, and through which combination of instruments.



There are a variety of policy instruments available to governments to support youth. These instruments can be analysed according to their nature (types of goods or services provided), the vehicle used to deliver goods or services (loans, financial contributions, direct provision, taxes, etc.), the delivery system (actors involved whether private sector or community organizations, families or government agencies), and the formal or informal rules that regulate the relationships between these actors.⁷

The following diagram provides a typology of instruments based on the mechanisms for youth support. Without being exhaustive, this typology illustrates the various ways in which different actors share the responsibility of supporting youth: some involve direct intervention on the part of government (income support, delivery of certain goods and services), while others involve indirect support aimed at building the capacity of families and communities to provide youth with the resources they need. Lastly, other indirect mechanisms seek to build the capacity of youth themselves to construct their own safety net throughout the various stages of their life-course.

Typology of Policy Instruments in Support of Youth



Areas for Future Research

In examining youth through the lens of the various dynamics at work in Canada, the framework described here takes account of the new realities and ever-changing challenges facing Canadian youth, while suggesting avenues for further exploration:

- To what extent are Canadian youth more exposed to risk than they were in the past?
- Is the concept of “mainstream youth” outmoded?
- Is the human capital that youth acquire during their mandatory period of intensive schooling still a guarantee of successful socio-professional integration?
- While the role family plays is crucial in helping youth successfully navigate their transitions, how much can today’s youth really count on their parents’ support?
- Can a balance be developed between the more traditional approaches targeting at-risk youth and the social investment approaches that target youth as a whole?
- Does the diversity of young people’s life situations in today’s Canada require more flexible and better coordinated programming?

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1 The study in question and the present paper are part of the interdepartmental project "Investing in Youth: Evidence from Policy, Practice and Research", as well as the PRI project on "Social Management of Risk".

2 Lapointe *et al.*, 2006

3 Maxwell, 2007

4 United Way of Toronto, 2008

5 Mitchell, 2000

6 Jenson, 2004

7 Salamon, 2002