



Research Report

YOUTH ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM

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**PRUDENTIA
INSTITUTE**

YOUTH KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

Authored by:

Kristin S. Williams, PhD
Principal Researcher, Prudentia Institute

www.prudentia.institute.ca
info@prudentia.institute.ca

ABOUT PRUDENTIA INSTITUTE

Prudentia Institute is a purpose-driven, charitable research and development organization dedicated to empowering and supporting the development of youth in Atlantic Canada. The Institute advances education through youth-centred research, knowledge mobilization, and the design and delivery of educational programs for youth and youth-serving organizations. At the heart of its work is a commitment to inclusive development and to nurturing self-belief, autonomy, personal power, and independence in young people, enabling them to reach their full potential.

Founded in 2020 and incorporated as a registered charity in 2024, Prudentia Institute conducts primary research and develops evidence-informed programs and resources that strengthen youth confidence, foster community connection, and advance equity and inclusion. The Institute is home to the award-winning Student Research Lab, where young people act as peer researchers using participatory action research to study issues that affect their lives and communities. Through its research and development work, Prudentia Institute focuses on some of the most pressing challenges facing youth today, including equity, security, health, connection, and protection.

For more information, visit www.prudentiainstitute.ca.

ABOUT THE STUDENT RESEARCH LAB

The Student Research Lab is a youth-led research program that positions young people as knowledge creators rather than research subjects. Hosted by Prudentia Institute, the Lab was created to address a persistent gap in youth research: young people are frequently studied, but rarely meaningfully involved in producing, interpreting, or sharing knowledge about their own lives. The Lab offers a structured, ethical, and supportive environment where youth are trained as peer researchers and engage directly in real-world research on issues that matter to them.

Through a youth participatory action research approach, students take part in all stages of the research process, including developing questions, conducting interviews, analyzing data, and sharing findings. Research conducted in the Lab has examined youth empowerment, engagement, and employment. This report highlights findings from our study on youth advocacy and activism. Across our studies, findings consistently show that youth are thoughtful, capable, and deeply aware of the systems shaping their lives, while also facing structural barriers that limit their voice, inclusion, and opportunity. The Student Research Lab produces rigorous, youth-informed evidence that supports more inclusive policies and practices, while also contributing to young people's confidence, skills, and sense of agency. In this way, the Lab functions as both a research initiative and a developmental space, generating knowledge and strengthening youth leadership at the same time.



ABOUT THE STUDY

We were inspired to talk with young people about advocacy and activism because youth are often described as disengaged or apathetic, despite facing and or being affected by many of the social, political, environmental, and economic issues shaping our world today. Through this study, we wanted to better understand how young people think about social change, what motivates them to speak up, and what barriers make it difficult for them to participate fully in advocacy and activism. Our intention is to share what we learned from youth themselves in order to inform educators, community organizations, policymakers, families, and other young people navigating similar questions about voice, participation, and change.

We took a youth participatory action research (YPAR) approach, which means youth were involved not only as participants, but also as peer researchers helping to shape the study, conduct interviews, analyze findings, and share knowledge with broader audiences. Through the Student Research Lab, high school students worked alongside university researchers to explore how young people experience advocacy and activism in their everyday lives and communities.

Our findings suggest that youth are deeply aware of social issues and care strongly about what is happening around them. Many described feelings of frustration, anxiety, anger, and passion connected to issues affecting their lives and futures. At the same time, youth frequently spoke about not being taken seriously because of their age, even when they are directly affected by the issues being discussed.

Rather than reflecting disengagement, many of the barriers youth described point to forms of structural exclusion that limit their influence and participation. Young people often feel they are expected to wait until they are older before their perspectives are considered legitimate or meaningful. We describe this tension as “insight without influence,” where youth possess important lived experience and awareness but have limited access to decision-making power.

Our findings also suggest that advocacy and activism exist along a developmental pathway. For many youth, advocacy begins with learning about issues, developing confidence, and finding supportive environments where they feel safe speaking up. Activism may emerge later through opportunities for action, organizing, and collective engagement. This highlights the importance of creating environments where youth voice is genuinely welcomed, supported, and acted upon rather than dismissed or tokenized.

Ultimately, this study contributes insight into how young people experience civic engagement today and identifies pathways to strengthen youth participation, voice, and inclusion. Our hope is that this work encourages communities and institutions to move beyond listening to youth in symbolic ways and toward creating meaningful opportunities for shared dialogue, participation, and social change.



ALIGNMENT WITH THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

Sustainable Development Goal 3 **Good Health and Well-Being**

This study highlights how youth voice, belonging, and supportive environments can positively shape wellbeing and resilience. It also recognizes that exclusion and limited opportunities for participation may negatively affect how young people experience themselves and their futures.

Sustainable Development Goal 4 **Quality Education**

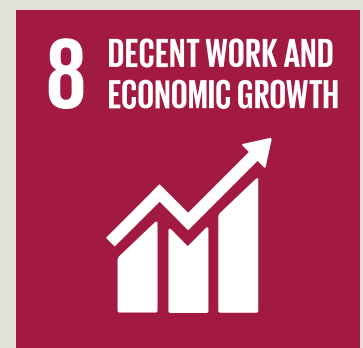
Through the Student Research Lab's Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach, youth are positioned as active co-researchers and knowledge creators. The study promotes critical thinking, leadership, civic literacy, and experiential learning grounded in real-world issues affecting youth and their communities.

Sustainable Development Goal 5 **Gender Equality**

This study explores how power, representation, and inclusion shape youth participation in advocacy and activism. By incorporating equity-deserving principles, the research recognizes that young people may experience different opportunities and barriers to civic engagement.

Sustainable Development Goal 8 **Decent Work and Economic Growth**

Youth discussions of advocacy and social change often reflect broader concerns related to fairness, economic opportunity, and future pathways. The study also builds on prior Student Research Lab research exploring youth employment and underemployment in Atlantic Canada.



ALIGNMENT WITH THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

Sustainable Development Goal 10

Reduced Inequalities

This study examines how access to voice, influence, information, and supportive environments is not equally available to all youth. By centering youth perspectives, the research seeks to better understand the barriers that shape participation and engagement.

Sustainable Development Goal 11

Sustainable Cities and Communities

The study explores how young people engage with issues affecting their communities, including inclusion, wellbeing, and sustainability. It emphasizes the importance of creating communities where youth perspectives are welcomed and valued in decision-making processes.

Sustainable Development Goal 13

Climate Action

Youth advocacy increasingly intersects with environmental and climate-related concerns. The study recognizes that climate issues can shape how young people think about responsibility, collective action, and their future.

Sustainable Development Goal 16

Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

This study strongly aligns with SDG 16 through its focus on youth voice, inclusive participation, and civic engagement. The findings highlight the importance of supportive environments and meaningful opportunities for young people to contribute to social and institutional change.



ABOUT THE STUDY

This study explored the following overarching research question: **How do youth experience advocacy and activism, and what does this reveal about youth voice, participation, influence, and pathways to social change?** This study was conducted using a youth participatory action research (YPAR) approach, which means young people were actively involved in the research process rather than being treated only as research subjects. Youth participated as peer researchers, helping to shape the research questions, collect data, interpret findings, and contribute to the development of a youth-informed theory of change related to advocacy and activism. This approach allowed us to centre youth perspectives and generate insights grounded in lived experience, while also supporting learning, confidence, leadership, and critical reflection among the youth involved.

The study took place in Atlantic Canada between Fall 2025 and Spring 2026. A team of 13 youth researchers, aged 15 to 21, conducted 35 in-depth interviews with other young people about their experiences, perspectives, and understandings of advocacy, activism, and social change. Interviews explored topics such as the issues youth care about most, barriers to participation, experiences of being heard or dismissed, pathways into advocacy and activism, and the role of schools, communities, institutions, and social relationships in shaping engagement.

A central goal of the study was to better understand how young people move from awareness and concern about social issues toward advocacy, participation, and, in some cases, activism. Through the analysis process, youth researchers helped identify the conditions that support or constrain engagement, contributing to the development of a youth-informed theory of change focused on strengthening youth voice, participation, and influence within communities and institutions.

All participants provided informed consent, and the study received formal research ethics approval through our university partner, Acadia University. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a qualitative approach focused on understanding lived experience and meaning-making. Youth researchers worked collaboratively to identify key themes, patterns, and shared experiences across the interviews. This process emphasized dialogue, reflection, and collective interpretation, ensuring that findings remained grounded in youth voice and experience.

Our findings suggest that youth are deeply aware of social issues and often highly motivated to contribute to change, but many experience barriers that limit meaningful participation and influence. The study highlights that advocacy and activism are not fixed categories, but developmental and relational processes shaped by confidence, proximity to issues, supportive environments, and access to credible information. These insights informed a broader theory of change aimed at creating more inclusive systems and more meaningful pathways for youth participation and social change.



OUR FINDINGS

Youth Helplessness

Youth express a sense of helplessness rooted in the present moment, despite possessing lived experience and knowledge of social issues. Engagement with change is perceived as deferred to a future time when greater power, resources, and legitimacy are anticipated. Adult-controlled structures, dismissal by adults, and perceived lack of progress on social issues reinforce feelings that meaningful action is currently beyond reach.

Contested Youth Capability

Youth describe a tension between their own sense of competence and how they believe adults perceive youth as disengaged, immature, or not yet full citizens. Age is experienced as a barrier to being taken seriously, producing a paradoxical sense of having insight and stake without corresponding influence. Youth feel directly affected by social harms while simultaneously dismissed by those in power.

Affective Intensity Toward Social Issues

Youth articulate strong emotional responses to pressing social issues and perceived inaction, including frustration, anger, anxiety, fear, and irritation, alongside passion and deep concern. These emotions reflect care and investment in issues that youth see as shaping both their present lives and future possibilities.

Distributed Responsibility for Social Change

Youth frame social change as a shared responsibility involving individuals, governments, business and organizational leaders, families, and especially those with greater power. Responsibility is viewed as proportional to power, with an ethical expectation to act even when issues do not affect one directly and even when outcomes are uncertain. Youth position themselves as potential contributors within broad and diverse social networks.

Status, Voice and Inclusive Power

Youth perceive status and experience as shaping who is heard and who is silenced in social change processes. Those with greater status, including youth with platforms or experience, are seen as having both influence and responsibility to act on behalf of others. Meaningful change is envisioned as creating inclusive and accepting conditions marked by open dialogue, reduced stigma in raising concerns, and the ability to be oneself.



OUR FINDINGS

Perceived Barriers to Social Change

Youth identify a wide range of interconnected barriers to social change, including exclusion from decision-making, limited opportunities for engagement, unequal access to resources, political and ideological conflict, institutional norms, and age-based discrimination. Social and relational barriers, such as polarization, peer pressure, lack of accountability, and normalization of inaction, further constrain collective effort and reinforce limited youth participation.

Advocacy as Developmental

Advocacy and activism are understood as evolving processes rather than fixed identities or single actions. Youth describe engagement as developing gradually over time through awareness, learning, conversation, confidence-building, peer interaction, and participation in increasingly visible or collective forms of action. This theme within the data captures the idea that advocacy often begins with small or personal acts before potentially progressing toward broader activism or systemic engagement.

Everyday Advocacy and Small Acts Matter

Advocacy is conceptualized through everyday actions, interpersonal care, and small-scale efforts rather than only formal political activism or protest. Youth describe advocacy as helping others, speaking kindly, supporting peers, volunteering, raising awareness, setting boundaries, caregiving, or intervening in moments of harm or injustice. This theme within the data captures ordinary, relational, and localized forms of advocacy embedded within daily life.

Advocacy vs. Activism

Youth differentiate between advocacy and activism as related but distinct forms of engagement. Advocacy is often described as speaking up, raising awareness, supporting causes, or educating others, while activism is framed as more visible, organized, or action-oriented efforts aimed at creating social or political change. Youth conceptualize similarities, differences, overlaps, and progression between these two forms of participation.

Social Media as Opportunity and Threat

Youth describe social media as both enabling and constraining advocacy, activism, identity, and participation. On one hand, social media is viewed as a powerful tool for awareness-building, organizing, communication, education, and collective engagement. On the other hand, youth also describe harms associated with social media, including misinformation, overexposure, bullying, performativity, pressure to conform, loss of originality, and emotional strain. This theme captures the tension, ambivalence, and dual role of digital platforms in youth life and engagement.



OUR FINDINGS

Advocacy as Care and Relational Responsibility

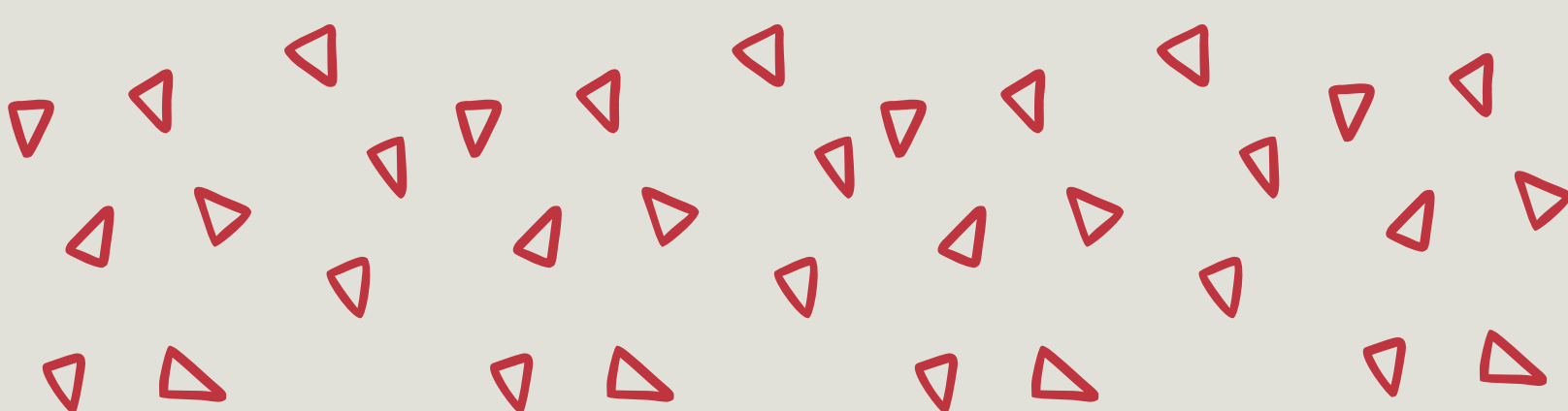
Advocacy emerges through acts of care, protection, empathy, and relational responsibility toward others, communities, animals, the environment or other social issues. Youth describe feeling morally compelled to respond when witnessing harm, injustice, neglect, or suffering. This theme emphasizes advocacy as grounded in caregiving, emotional connection, solidarity, and relational ethics rather than solely political ideology or formal activism.

Relational Pathways to Advocacy

Youth advocacy and activism are shaped by personal relationships, lived experience, identity, and social proximity to issues. Young people often become engaged because an issue affects them directly, impacts someone they know, or connects to their community, family, friendships, or identity. Closeness to social issues influences advocacy readiness, emotional investment, and participation.

Collective Efficacy and Power in Numbers

Youth describe advocacy and activism as more effective, legitimate, or possible when undertaken collectively rather than individually. Youth believe that group action, solidarity, shared voice, and collective participation strengthen influence, visibility, credibility, and the likelihood of social change. Youth often contrast individual powerlessness with collective strength.



YOUTH VOICES

Youth Helplessness

“It’s not something that we can control on like... So I feel very powerless.” (Jennifer)

Contested Youth Capability

“A lot of older people have this mindset of ‘you’re a child, you’re wrong,’ or ‘you’re a child, you don’t know what’s right yet.’” (Willow)

Affective Intensity Toward Social Issues

“There are people dying that don’t need to be dying, and we have the money, the resources, the ability to prevent them from dying, but we are too selfish, we are too greedy, we are too caught up in ourselves to do anything about it so they just die meaninglessly, uselessly, because we didn’t do anything.” (Harper)

Distributed Responsibility for Social Change

“Everybody’s [responsibility]... especially with the more power you have, the more responsibility you have.” (Harper)

Status, Voice, and Inclusive Power

“If you’re younger, you have to speak way louder.” (Mark)

Perceived Barriers to Social Change

“If nobody else speaks up or anything, then you’re on your own... and even if a lot of them do speak up, some of these huge corporations are so huge and rich that they can just get rid of all those employees that spoke up and hire new ones almost instantly to replace them.” (Lucas)

Advocacy as Developmental

“Conversation starts conversation, which can create something bigger.” (Alice)

Everyday Advocacy and Small Acts Matter

“I go out and I feed [the cats] and give them water to make sure that they’re actually somewhat taken care of... because no one else takes responsibility for it.” (Ava)



YOUTH VOICES

Advocacy vs. Activism Distinction

“Being an advocate means...talking even when it’s hard, standing up for the things that you believe in, even when it can be uncomfortable.” (Jane)

“[Being an activist means] getting involved with a movement...actively participating. Actually getting involved with the grassroots movement and or using your platform to promote a cause” (Brock)

Social Media as Opportunity and Threat

“Social media has a very big platform to get out that message... they could create a social platform and advocate for stuff to do on there.” (Ava)

Contrasting with:

“Social media is quite literally brainwashing entire generations. It’s making everyone act the same, want to be the same... there’s no originality left.” (Lucas)

Advocacy as Care and Relational Responsibility

“To speak up for those whose voices [that] will not be as heard as yours, to listen to problems even if they don’t affect you personally, and to care about others... and to do your best to create change in your day to day life, and in a broader sense, in the world as well.” (Harper)

Relational Pathways to Advocacy

“When things personally happen to you... your eyes are more open to the problem.” (Alecia)

Collective Efficacy and Power in Numbers

“There’s power in numbers. So if you group together with a whole bunch of people who want the same thing for the better, then it will be heard and understood in a much more powerful way than if it were just one person who stood up for a whole bunch of people.” (Lucas)



THE ISSUES YOUTH CARE ABOUT

What Youth Care About

Youth spoke about a wide range of social issues affecting their lives, communities, and futures. While the specific issues varied, participants consistently described feeling emotionally connected to concerns that shaped their everyday lives and sense of possibility for the future. Several key themes emerged across the interviews:

Social and Economic Inequality

Youth frequently discussed:

- Housing affordability and access
- Food insecurity
- Disparities of wealth and economic inequality
- Access to health care

Many participants expressed concern about rising costs of living and the growing difficulty young people face in building stable and secure futures.

Rights, Equity, and Inclusion

Youth also spoke passionately about:

- Human rights
- Indigenous rights
- LGBTQ2IA+ rights
- Black Lives Matter (#BLM)

These conversations often reflected broader concerns about fairness, discrimination, representation, and belonging within society.

Wellbeing and Safety

Participants highlighted:

- Mental health
- Bullying
- The impacts of social media

Youth described how these issues affect confidence, relationships, identity, and daily wellbeing, particularly within schools and online environments.

Environmental and Collective Futures

Many youth were deeply concerned about:

- The climate crisis
- Wastefulness and overconsumption

Participants often connected environmental concerns to feelings of anxiety about the future, while also expressing a strong desire for collective responsibility and action.



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YOUTH ARE PAYING ATTENTION.

They care deeply about the issues shaping their world—and they want to be part of the solutions.



Listening to youth is the first step.
Creating change *together* is the next.

PATHWAYS TO ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM

Our findings suggest that advocacy and activism are connected, but distinct, forms of engagement that often develop over time. Advocacy involves speaking up or standing up for a cause or issue you care about in order to help make things better, while activism involves taking action, such as organizing events, protests, or campaigns, to create change within communities or society. Youth described movement along this pathway as shaped by several important conditions, including personal connection to an issue, access to relevant and credible information, supportive social and institutional environments, and a growing readiness to engage. These conditions can help youth move from passive awareness, to active voice, and, for some, toward collective action and activism.

Two Ways to Create Change



ADVOCACY

Speaking up or standing up for a cause or issue you care about, to help make things better.



Share your opinions



Raise awareness



Support others and a cause



Start conversations

Your voice can inspire change.



ACTIVISM

Taking action—like organizing events, protests, or campaigns—to create change in your community or society.



Organize events



Lead campaigns & initiatives



Protest & advocate



Create change in your community & society

Your actions can transform the world.

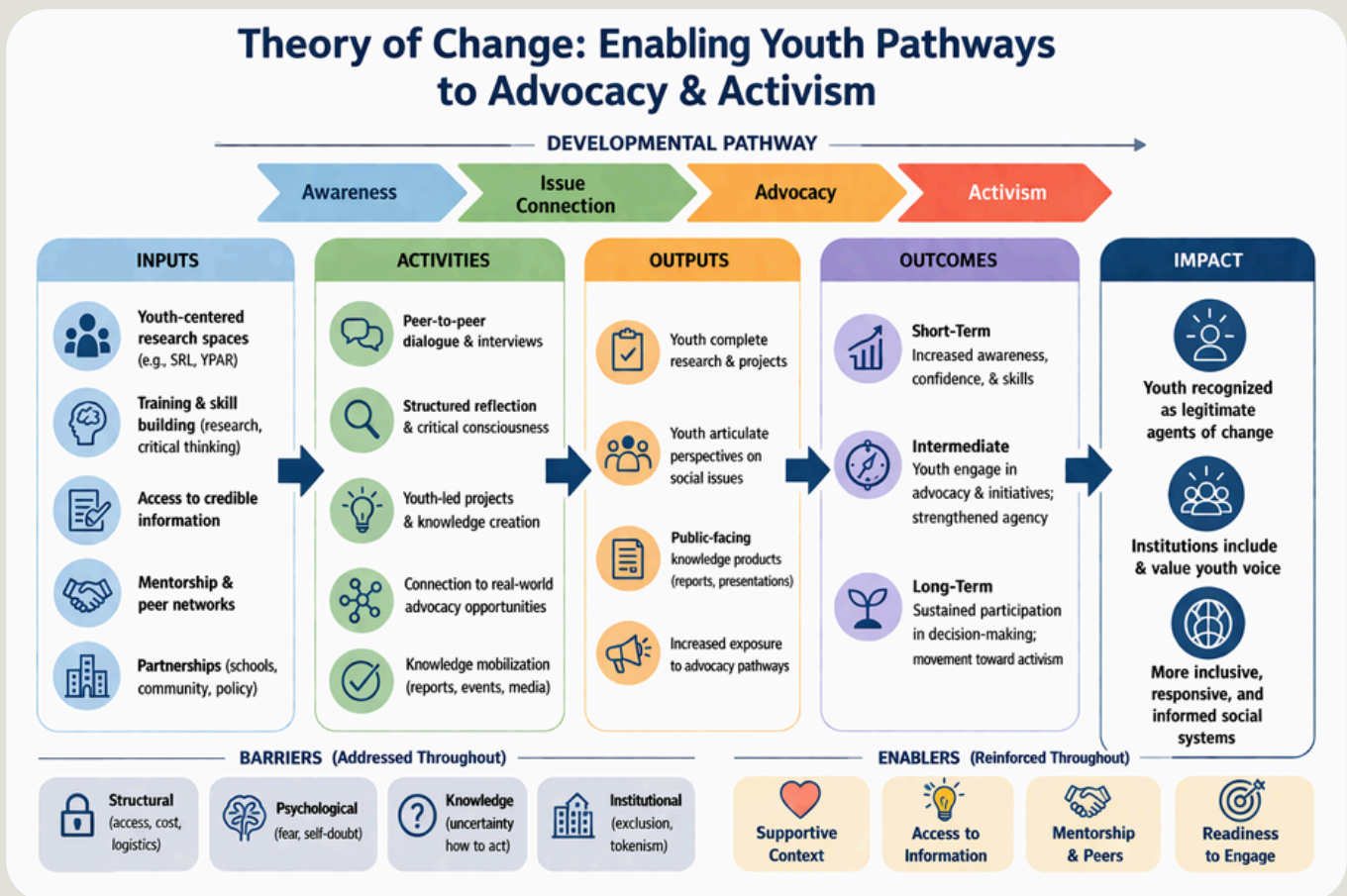


Both advocacy and activism are powerful. Together, they drive lasting change.



A YOUTH-INFORMED THEORY OF CHANGE

Our findings suggest that youth engagement in advocacy and activism develops over time and is shaped by a range of personal, social, and institutional conditions. Drawing directly from the experiences and perspectives shared by youth participants, we developed a youth-informed **Theory of Change** that illustrates how young people may move from awareness of social issues, to advocacy, and, for some, toward activism and collective action. The framework highlights the importance of supportive environments, access to credible information, mentorship, opportunities for participation, and a growing readiness to engage. At the same time, it recognizes that many young people encounter structural, psychological, and institutional barriers that can limit participation and influence. Rather than viewing youth as disengaged, this model positions young people as capable and thoughtful contributors whose participation grows when meaningful pathways, support, and opportunities are made available.



SUPPORTING YOUTH ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM: WHAT ADULTS CAN DO

One of the clearest findings from this study is that young people care deeply about the issues shaping their lives and futures. However, many youth also described feeling dismissed, underestimated, or excluded from meaningful decision-making because of their age. Participants did not simply ask adults to “listen” to youth more often; they emphasized the importance of adults creating genuine opportunities for participation, support, mentorship, and shared responsibility. Across the interviews, youth consistently identified several ways educators, organizations, policymakers, communities, and businesses can better support youth advocacy and activism.

Take Youth Seriously

Youth repeatedly described feeling that their ideas, concerns, and experiences were minimized because they were perceived as “too young” or lacking experience. Adults can support youth engagement by recognizing young people as legitimate contributors with valuable insight and lived experience, even when their perspectives challenge existing assumptions or systems.

Create Safe and Supportive Spaces

Many youth explained that advocacy becomes possible when they feel emotionally and socially supported. Schools, organizations, and workplaces can foster environments where young people feel safe asking questions, expressing concerns, exploring ideas, and making mistakes without fear of ridicule or dismissal.

Move Beyond Tokenism

Youth were clear that participation must be meaningful rather than symbolic. Inviting youth to attend meetings or consultations is not enough if decisions have already been made or youth input is ignored. Adults can strengthen trust by involving youth early, sharing decision-making power where possible, and demonstrating how youth perspectives shape outcomes.

Improve Access to Information and Pathways for Engagement

Participants highlighted that many youth care about social issues but do not always know how to become involved or where to begin. Adults can help by providing accessible information, mentorship, opportunities for civic learning, and practical pathways for participation in schools, workplaces, communities, and public institutions.



SUPPORTING YOUTH ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM: WHAT ADULTS CAN DO

Support Mentorship and Intergenerational Collaboration

Youth often described advocacy and activism as easier to navigate when supportive adults, peers, or mentors were present. Intergenerational collaboration can help youth build confidence, strengthen leadership skills, and better understand how systems and institutions operate while also allowing adults to learn from youth perspectives and experiences.

Recognize Structural Barriers

Young people emphasized that participation is shaped by more than motivation alone. Transportation, finances, scheduling, mental health, discrimination, and unequal access to opportunities can all limit engagement. Supporting youth advocacy requires recognizing and reducing these barriers so that participation is accessible to a broader range of young people.

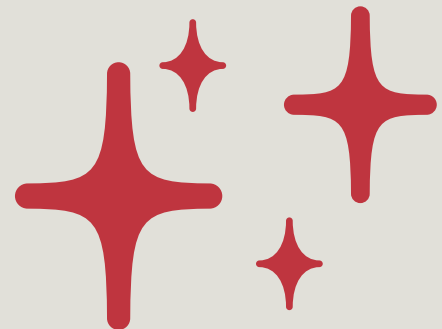
Create Opportunities for Real Participation

Youth want opportunities not only to discuss issues, but also to contribute to solutions. Educators, policymakers, organizations, and businesses can support youth engagement by creating advisory groups, youth-led initiatives, collaborative research opportunities, mentorship programs, and community partnerships that allow young people to participate in meaningful ways.

Understand Advocacy as Developmental

Our findings suggest that advocacy and activism often emerge gradually. Small acts of participation, such as asking questions, sharing opinions, supporting a cause, or joining conversations, can represent important developmental steps toward greater confidence and collective action. Adults play an important role in encouraging and validating these early forms of engagement rather than dismissing them as insignificant.

Ultimately, supporting youth advocacy and activism requires adults and institutions to shift from seeing youth as future contributors to recognizing them as contributors in the present. When young people are provided with support, information, trust, and meaningful opportunities for participation, they are far more likely to develop the confidence and capacity to engage in advocacy, leadership, and social change.



TO CITE THIS REPORT

Please cite this report as follows:

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AUTHOR BIO

Kristin S. Williams, Ph.D. (she/her) is an Associate Professor in Management at Acadia University in Canada. She is also the Managing Director at Prudentia Institute, and Principal Investigator at the award-winning Student Research Lab. She is an interdisciplinary scholar engaged in activist writing and narrative methods. Her work has been published in a wide range of international journals, edited books and monographs. She serves in editorial roles with the Journal of Canadian Studies, Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management, and the Journal of Management History. Dr. Williams has received several academic awards, and she is a recipient of the Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee Medal. Please contact via email at kwilliams@prudentiainstitute.ca or kristin.williams@acadiu.ca.

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FURTHER READING FROM THE LAB

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