



CIVIC VITALITY

Civic vitality refers to the strength of social networks within a community, region, province, and country. It is reflected in the presence of institutions, organizations, and informal practices that people create to share resources and build attachments with others.

KEY INDICATORS:

- Participation in elections
- Participation in volunteer activities
- Charitable donations

INTRODUCTION

Civic vitality encompasses the social and cultural environments of children and youth – the world beyond their families, where they experience their day-to-day lives. It includes their local communities, schools, churches, organizations, and all of the public spaces they use. Civic life can be as close as the neighbourhood, or as extended as the workplace for a first job; it can be as simple as the quality of casual contact, or as profound as the presence of a life mentor. Civic vitality means that there are people beyond the family who contribute to children's lives and their well-being.

The civic vitality of a community is reflected by a number of things. It includes the value placed on children and the people who value them, the expectations for the future – both for the children themselves and for the larger community – and levels of collective support which focus on or include children. A vital community is one which provides young people with opportunities to grow and develop to their full potential; it encourages them to participate in local initiatives, and advocates on their behalf through organizations like the Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada.

To measure the extent to which Canadians participate in civic life, *Progress* tracks indicators of adults' commitments – such as their level of charitable giving and voting rates. *Progress* also tracks indicators of youth's opportunities for participation in civic life through their own voting patterns and memberships in community organizations and groups.





YOUTH VOTING

Youth vote at lower rates than older Canadians. About 25% of eligible voters aged 18 to 24 voted in the 2000 federal election: 22% of those aged 18 to 20 and 28% of those aged 21 to 24. Among the Canadian population overall, 61% voted, as did 83% of seniors aged 68 or older.

In the June 2004 federal election, it was the first opportunity for young people aged 18 to 21½ to vote; 39% of them did so. The Chief Electoral Officer warned that these results could not be compared to other elections due to differences in methodologies. He believed that the problem of low voter turnout among youth had not necessarily been resolved. Young people continue to vote at rates nearly 35 points lower than adults aged 57 and older.

Studies of the 1993, 1997, and 2000 federal elections found that age was the strongest predictor of voter turnout: young people were less likely than older Canadians to vote, and their voting rate was declining over time. Between 1990 and 1998, the reported voter turnout dropped significantly – from 88% to 81% – with most of the decline occurring among young people.

An analysis of the nine federal elections held between 1968 and 2000 showed that average voter turnout was 74% for the six elections prior to 1990; this dropped to 67% for the three elections after 1990. The study concluded that most of this decline was the result of a “generational effect.” Voter turnout was two or three points lower among baby-boomers (those born between 1945 and 1959) than among people born before 1945; it was 10 points lower among Generation X (those born in the 1960s) than among baby-boomers; and it was another 10 points lower among people born since 1970 than it was among Generation X.

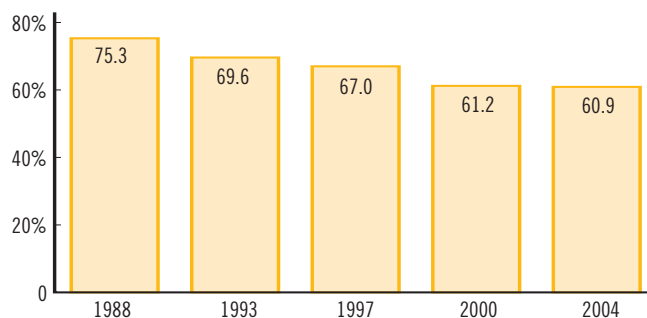
Other studies indicate that many youth who don't vote remain uninvolved in the electoral system, and they do not vote when they get older.

The falling youth vote is a worldwide phenomenon. The U.K. Electoral Commission concluded that low voter turnout in the 2001 election was primarily due to youth not voting. In the U.S., only 36% of youth aged 18 to 24 voted in the 2000 presidential election.

In a recent survey, young people aged 18 to 24 were asked why they did not vote. The most common response was that they were not interested, didn't care, or were apathetic. Others cited being too busy with work/ school/ family. Overall, the reasons given for not voting appeared to fall into two broad categories: those related to the lack of integration of young people into the political system, and attitudes of apathy or political distrust among young people.

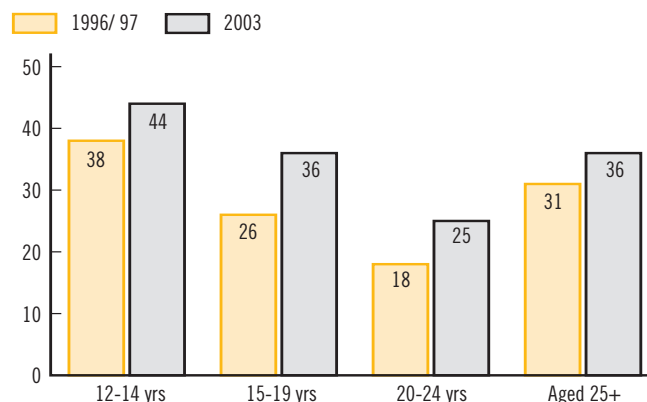
KEY INDICATORS

CANADIAN VOTER TURNOUT RATE FOR FEDERAL ELECTIONS



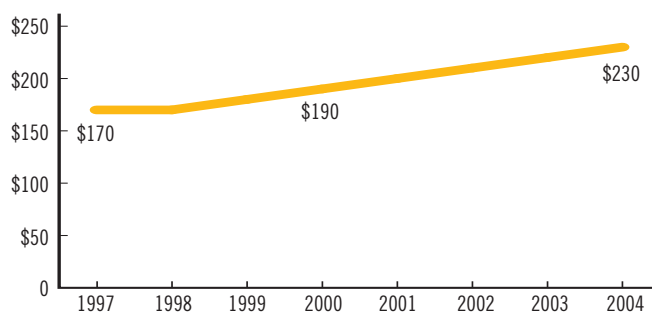
Source: Elections Canada website: www.elections.ca.

PARTICIPATION AS MEMBERS OF A VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATION/ ASSOCIATION, BY AGE GROUP



Source: Calculations by the Canadian Council on Social Development using data from Statistics Canada's National Population Health Survey, 1996/1997 and the Canadian Community Health Survey, 2003.

MEDIAN CHARITABLE DONATIONS, CANADA



Source: Statistics Canada, Cansim Table 2005111017101233539.

When asked what should be done to get young people more interested in politics, about half the young people surveyed identified strategies to improve education and information. Other suggestions involved changes to the political system that would encourage more youth involvement.

REASONS GIVEN BY YOUTH AGED 18 TO 24 FOR NOT VOTING, 2000

Not interested; don't care; apathy	28.0%
Too busy with work/ school/ family	22.6%
No appealing candidates/ parties/ issues	13.9%
Away from riding/ province/ country	7.9%
Problems with registration	7.4%
Vote is meaningless; doesn't count; election is foregone conclusion	6.5%
Lack of faith/ confidence in candidates/ parties/ leaders	6.3%
Lack of information about candidates/ parties/ issues	6.3%

Note: Open-ended questions were asked and multiple reasons could be given. Percentage of respondents who cited each reason.
 Source: J.H. Pammett and L. LeDuc, Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters, 2003. www.elections.ca

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO GET YOUNG PEOPLE MORE INTERESTED IN POLITICS?

SUGGESTIONS FROM 332 YOUTH AGED 18 TO 24

Improved education, information	47.7%
More education in the schools	23.0
More dialogue/ exposure/ general education	9.0
More emphasis on personal relevance, benefits, jobs	8.0
More advertisements, media exposure	7.7
More education in the home	0.0
Political system change, involvement	42.7%
More issues relevant to youth	26.7
Recruitment, involvement of youth	7.3
Younger candidates, politicians, leaders	4.7
Better politicians, leaders, parties	2.3
Electoral reform, democratic reform	1.7
Changes in conduct of politicians	24.3%
Government relate better to/ understand youth	10.6
More honesty, responsibility, accountability in politics	6.1
Make politics less complicated, more interesting, fun	7.6
Other	1.8%
Nothing/ don't know	3.2%

Note: Multiple suggestions could be given. Percentage of respondents who cited each suggestion.
 Source: J.H. Pammett and L. LeDuc, Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters, 2003. www.elections.ca



VOTER TURNOUT

There has been a steady decline in voter turnout from one federal election to the next. For Canada overall, the rate of voter turnout fell by 19% from the 1988 federal election to the one in 2004, and the rate declined in every province and territory. In the Northwest Territories, voter turnout dropped by 40%, and in Newfoundland and Labrador, by 27%. The smallest decline was in the Yukon.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF IMMIGRANT YOUTH

Our growing diversity raises important questions about the well-being of newcomers to Canada. Are immigrants – and young immigrants in particular – actively engaged in their communities? Do they have opportunities to participate in meaningful ways?

Canadian immigrants may have very different understandings of what is meant by social and civic engagement. There may also be structural and cultural barriers that limit their participation. Here we look at different measures of civic engagement to see some of the ways in which immigrant youth contribute in their communities.

Overall, there is a growing trend towards greater community involvement among immigrant youth. This is a positive indication of commitment, particularly in light of the economic challenges faced by many new Canadians. Growing levels of civic engagement help foster more dynamic and more inclusive communities.

PARTICIPATION IN CIVIC AND COMMUNITY LIFE

IMMIGRANT AND CANADIAN-BORN YOUTH AGED 15 TO 24

	IMMIGRANTS		CANADIAN-BORN	
	2000	2003	2000	2003
Volunteer rate	18%	35%	31%	39%
Donation rate	71%	n/a	65%	n/a
Group membership rate	36%	62%	48%	64%

Note: Questions about these issues in the two surveys were different, so direct comparisons should not be made. Data in the 2003 GSS under-represents the number of donors, so are not used.

Source: Calculations by the Canadian Council on Social Development using data from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating and the 2003 General Social Survey.

Volunteering

Volunteering is on the rise in the general population after a decline in the late 1990s. According to the General Social Survey, 35% of immigrant youth volunteered for nonprofit or charitable organizations in 2003, almost double the rate in 2000.

Giving

The vast majority of Canadians make charitable gifts, either directly to individuals or to organizations working to improve the quality of life in their communities. This is certainly true of Canadian immigrants. In 2000, 82% of immigrants made charitable contributions, a slightly higher proportion than among Canadian-born residents (80%). The donation rate was also higher among immigrant youth than Canadian-born youth: over two-thirds of immigrants aged 15 to 24 made financial contributions in 2000.



Participating

A third way in which Canadians support their communities is by joining nonprofit and charitable organizations and participating in their work. In 2000, just under half of all immigrants (48%) and one-third of immigrant youth were members of an organization, group, or club, including unions. By 2003, the youth membership rate was considerably higher: 62% of young immigrants aged 15 to 24 participated in community groups or associations.

INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Young people are becoming more active in community life. Between 1996/97 and 2003, there was a 41% increase in the participation of youth aged 15 to 19 as members of voluntary organizations or associations. Among young adults aged 20 to 24, the increase was 39%, and for adults over age 25, their participation in community groups rose by 16%.

Young women were more likely than men to participate in voluntary organizations or associations, and the increase in young women's participation rate exceeded that of men.

Participation rates varied across Canada. Quebec had the lowest rates in 2003 among all age groups. For teens aged 15 to 19, the rates were highest in Ontario and British Columbia, and for young adults, the rates were highest in B.C. and the Atlantic.

The rate of increase also varied. Between 1996/97 and 2003, over 80% more B.C. teens participated in voluntary groups and associations, and for teens in Ontario, the increase was 44%. In the Prairies, the rate of increase among teens was 16%. For young adults, the greatest rate of increase was in Quebec (65%), while Ontario had the lowest (22%).

How much time do young people spend in these activities? The majority participated at least once a week: 71% of those aged 12 to 14; 66% of teens aged 15 to 19; and 57% of young adults aged 20 to 24.

MEMBERSHIP RATES IN VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS/ ORGANIZATIONS, BY AGE AND GENDER

	AGED 12 TO 14		AGED 15 TO 19		AGED 20 TO 24	
	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE
1996/ 1997	40%	37%	24%	27%	17%	18%
2003	38%	50%	31%	42%	22%	27%
Percentage change						
1996/1997 to 2003	-3.5%	35.9%	28.5%	52.6%	30.0%	47.8%

Source: Calculations by the Canadian Council on Social Development using data from Statistics Canada's National Population Health Survey, 1996/1997 and the Canadian Community Health Survey, 2003.

MEMBERSHIP RATES IN VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS/ ORGANIZATIONS, BY REGION

	AGED 12 TO 14		AGED 15 TO 19		AGED 20 TO 24	
	1996/ 97	2003	1996/ 97	2003	1996/ 97	2003
Atlantic	41%	53%	33%	41%	18%	29%
Quebec	30%	22%	14%	19%	10%	17%
Ontario	36%	49%	30%	43%	21%	26%
Prairies	42%	49%	32%	36%	20%	27%
British Columbia	52%	53%	23%	42%	18%	29%
Northern Territories	n/a	40%	n/a	27%	n/a	28%

N/A: Young people in the Northern Territories were not surveyed in 1996/97.

Source: Calculations by the Canadian Council on Social Development using data from Statistics Canada's National Population Health Survey, 1996/1997 and the Canadian Community Health Survey, 2003.

NONPROFIT AND VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS

Nonprofit and voluntary organizations are an integral part of Canadian life. They provide a wide variety of services, in areas such as sports and recreation, religion, social services, grant-making and fundraising, arts and culture, and development and housing. They help millions of Canadians get involved in efforts to address vital community needs.

The first National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations identified about 161,000 organizations across Canada in 2003. Of these, 23% served children or youth.

Virtually all such organizations rely on volunteers to some degree, and more than half rely solely on volunteers. Many nonprofit groups today are experiencing problems fulfilling their missions. Among the areas posing the greatest problems were those that involved recruiting and retaining volunteers (cited by about 57% of organizations), planning for the future (58%), and obtaining funding (48%).





CHARITABLE DONATIONS

Canadians have been giving increasing amounts of money to charities. According to income tax data, taxpayers claimed more than \$6.9 billion in donations in 2004. This was the highest amount ever contributed, 6.3% higher than in 2003.

In addition, more people are giving. Just over 5.8 million Canadians made a donation in 2004, an increase of 3.5% over the previous year. The number of donors rose in every province and territory; the greatest percentage increase was in the Yukon (16%), followed by Nunavut (10%) and British Columbia (6%).

The median amount contributed per donor was \$230, with variations among the provinces and territories. Nunavut reported the highest median donation at \$390, followed by Prince Edward Island (\$340) and Newfoundland and Labrador (\$310). The Northwest Territories reported the lowest median donation, at \$210. This pattern has been consistent since 2000.

The median donation has increased by 35% since 1997. It has risen everywhere, with the Yukon leading the way, followed by Alberta.

ENGAGING YOUTH IN VANCOUVER

In 2003, the City of Vancouver hired four youth to move forward a Civic Youth Strategy. Bringing young people on staff at City Hall and recognizing their expertise has been credited with generating progress on a number of youth issues in the city.

This Civic Youth Strategy is Vancouver's 1995 policy commitment to support youth and involve them in municipal decision-making.

The Youth Outreach Team works in partnership with youth-based organizations, service providers, and young people themselves to ensure that civic resources are used as effectively as possible to support Vancouver youth in leading healthy and fulfilling lives. The Team also provides opportunities for youth to get involved in civic issues that are important to them, through local action and policy development.

The Youth Outreach Team has worked with a variety of groups:

- the Mayor's Office, to provide education and support about how to effectively engage youth in public forums;
- the Planning Department, on how to tap into the assets of local youth using a community asset mapping tool;
- the Engineering Department, on how to design and deliver interactive discussions on graffiti;
- the 2010 Olympic Bid Corporation, on how to engage youth in consultations and decision-making;
- secondary school staff, on how to engage youth and local community members in discussing and improving school safety.

City officials cite the young people on staff as the key factor in moving its strategy ahead. Staff no longer ask *why* they should engage youth, but rather *how to*, and they turn to the Youth Outreach Team for suggestions.

As a result of this work, all residents of Vancouver have the opportunity to witness and celebrate youth achievements.



CIVICALLY ENGAGED?

A Commentary on Youth Civic Engagement

by Peter Amponsah



As I sit here and write, I cannot forget that six months ago, a very close friend of mine was murdered. Jason Huxtable was 18 years of age, employed, college bound, and loved by his family and friends alike. His accused killer is a 15-year-old youth.

Jason's family had lived in a low-income neighbourhood of Toronto, known for its crime and violence, but they managed to relocate to another area with comfortable living and a "peace of mind" aura. Jason was visiting a friend in another low-income neighbourhood close to where he used to live. He was murdered for being "an outsider."

Much can be said about Jason's death, his killer, and the events that transpired that afternoon of August 30th, 2005. However, what I'd like to draw attention to is the fact that both Jason Huxtable and his accused killer were children – Canada's children.

* * *

In November 2005, I went to Parliament Hill in Ottawa with an organization that serves youth. I wanted to talk about the low rates of civic engagement among people my age. I believe that civic engagement is low because there are too few civic and social activities to help stimulate a sense of community among youth. I wanted to tell them that my experience shows there is a direct relationship between well-organized activities, ongoing youth programs, and a willingness to include youth as meaningful community members.

I met with a room full of politicians who were very aware of the impending federal election. Toronto had just experienced its "Summer of the Gun," and politicians of all stripes were staking out their territory. Some felt that the law – and only the law – would provide the answers to the escalating gun violence. I made the case that these issues are more complicated, and that answers must come from many different collaborative efforts, including the promotion of youth civic engagement.

Civic engagement means the active participation in public affairs. It requires that a person be interested in public issues. It involves the notion of belonging, the experience of investment and ownership in your community.

My own route to civic engagement came through political action. As an adolescent, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to be part of various youth groups, and it was through those influences that I developed my sense of citizenship and social awareness. I became increasingly comfortable in discussions about democracy, rights, and responsibilities. I devoted time to civic issues and services to better my community. I saw that my actions had an effect on the larger vision of an inclusive community, and it is this value that has kept me active and involved.

In my experience, one of the keys to youth activism and participation is information. It is the catalyst that spurs action. Youth – and particularly those from disadvantaged homes, who would benefit enormously from engagement in civic activities – do not come forward because they don't have the information. They don't see their

actions as having any chance of influencing change, and they don't see any way to make their voices heard. The result is alienation. Their presence and actions seem minuscule compared to the systems that surround them.

It is clear that the types and forms of relations among people have been altered by the technological revolution of the 20th century. I've heard people cite this as the source of the decline in civic engagement. But I don't blame technology.

One of the problems I see is organizations competing to try to attract youth participation, trying to outdo each other to be youth-friendly. Some may be driven by funders looking for the latest innovation in youth programming, who see an increase in participation as proof that their programs are succeeding. There are also organizations that engage youth in a token fashion in order to improve their public image. These kinds of motives detract from the effectiveness of real relationships between organizations and youth – and if the relationships aren't genuine, they won't last.

There are many benefits to be gained from youth civic engagement. Young people can gain a sense of solidarity and learn from their participation; and as a society, we all gain from youth's contributions to building a better future. If too few youth are civically engaged, where does the responsibility lie: the individual or the society? I think it should be viewed as a collective responsibility; if a society has a vision for the future, the onus is on all of us to ensure that there *will* be a future.

Engaging today's youth in activities helps give them hope that the society believes in them, and sees the value in investing in them and working for a better future. It's also a way to give hope to disadvantaged communities that are struggling with a variety of social ills. Civic engagement is a powerful tool that can help disadvantaged youth develop a sense of belonging, and it can help revitalize relations between citizens and their society.

I think the first priority should be to listen to the youth who are actively engaged in working for change. Youth activism is a huge untapped resource. In Toronto, many youth groups have come together to voice their concerns about violence and its many causes. Working for real social change is not easy; sometimes it's difficult to see progress. But if we continue to pride ourselves on the Canadian principles of democracy, rights, responsibility, and freedom, then youth – the future of Canada – must be encouraged to have a greater say and a larger influence on the affairs of our society, including its structures of governance.

Peter Amponsah was born in Ghana, West Africa and moved to Toronto at the age of three. He is currently in his fourth year of the bachelor of social work program at Carleton University in Ottawa. In 2004, he was Vice President of the Ghanaian Student's Association at Carleton, and he is currently Vice President of the Carleton Black Student's Union. Peter has been involved with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Ontario for six years, serving on their Provincial Youth Council, and volunteering at his home club, the Albion Boys & Girls Club, and with other youth programs. In 2002, he served on the Board of the Albion Neighbourhood Services, a community service agency in North Etobicoke. Peter spends his time coaching, mentoring, and counselling youth in his home town of Rexdale.

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