Engaging Youth in Municipal Government: Moving Toward a Youth-Centric Practice

Astraea Augsberger, Mary Elizabeth Collins & Whitney Gecker

To cite this article: Astraea Augsberger, Mary Elizabeth Collins & Whitney Gecker (2017): Engaging Youth in Municipal Government: Moving Toward a Youth-Centric Practice, Journal of Community Practice, DOI: 10.1080/10705422.2017.1413023

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2017.1413023

Published online: 26 Dec 2017.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 1

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Engaging Youth in Municipal Government: Moving Toward a Youth-Centric Practice

Astraea Augsberger, Mary Elizabeth Collins, and Whitney Gecker
School of Social Work, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

ABSTRACT
Youth councils are one mechanism to engage youth in community governance; yet, there is scant research to guide practice. This study examined the extent to which youth are engaged in the origin, structure, and activities of municipal youth councils. Interviews were conducted with 24 adult stakeholders involved in the operations of youth councils. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Results demonstrated that youth-centric practice builds upon theoretical frames of positive youth development, social justice, and civic engagement. Youth-centric practice consists of youth representation, leadership, initiative, and decision-making. Results can assist practitioners and policy makers in engaging youth in municipal government.

KEYWORDS
youth participation; youth council; civic engagement; social justice; positive youth development

Youth participation in community governance is a specific type of youth participation that is situated within a larger scholarly context related to youth development and civic engagement. Youths’ role in discussion, debate, and decision-making provides a mechanism to further social justice if this opportunity allows for authentic engagement and representation of youths’ voice in the community. Youth councils affiliated with local governments may provide a formal opportunity to facilitate youth engagement in the community, thus reducing social isolation, and may offer the opportunity for youth to voice their interests, thus resulting in more effective policy. This may be particularly important in contemporary society when youth are facing many challenges related to the economy and unemployment (Coalition on Human Needs, 2010) that exacerbate existing social inequality. Yet, despite the general acceptance of the idea of youth council as a way to engage youth, insufficient research is available regarding the prevalence and operations of these entities.

No national data are available on youth councils; however, one report identified 120 local youth councils in 19 states (Martin, Pittman, Ferber, & McMahon, 2007). Richards-Schuster and Checkoway (2009) described some
examples of youth councils, but noted that “such efforts are exceptional” (p.26). There are additional detailed reports of the operation of several municipal youth councils in the United States and elsewhere; yet, we agree that “youth participation in public policy is neither an established field of practice nor a subject of study, although it has promise in both realms” (Richards-Schuster & Checkoway, 2009, p. 26). Much more research is needed to identify the range of practices and the level of youth engagement that is found within councils. Our study aimed to contribute to the knowledge base in this field. The purpose of the study was to provide information about youth engagement in the origin, structure and activities of municipal youth councils in several cities and towns in one metropolitan area in the United States. Because we included multiple youth councils, we were able to identify variations in practice and to distinguish councils that described more robust and authentic youth engagement from those that were less so. We utilize the term youth-centric to describe councils at the more engaged end of the continuum.

Background and significance

**Defining terms: Youth council and youth-centric**

We use the term youth council to denote decision-making bodies focused on youth issues in local communities. Other titles are also used (particularly youth commission or youth advisory board). Youth councils are found in many settings (e.g., government, community nonprofits agencies, schools). Our focus is in regard to community governance through active citizenship and civic engagement. Zeldin, Camino, and Calvert (2007) defined “engagement in community governance” to “refer to those places and forums within local organizations and public systems where youth are meaningfully involved in significant decisions regarding the goals, design and implementation of the community’s work” (p. 77). Youth councils are an important example of engagement in community governance, as these entities most often exist within municipal government and explicitly aim to serve youth in the community (Collins, Augsberger, & Gecker, 2016). They are one form of civic engagement, characterized within Checkoway and Aldana’s (2013) typology as “citizen participation” in which the basic strategy is to “participate through formal political and governmental institutions” (p. 1896). Typically, they are comprised solely of youth members of a certain age. Martin et al. (2007), for example, defined youth councils as “formal bodies made up of youth (typically ages 16–18) who advise high-level decision makers and elected officials” (p. 8). Our definition is somewhat different; we defined youth councils broadly to include a membership of adults and/or youth. As described in our methodology, this is largely because our
respondents identified their adult-only councils as youth councils. Moreover, extending our study beyond youth-only entities allows for a fuller range of description and captures development processes for moving toward youth-centric practice.

As described in our findings, the term *youth-centric* was used by some of our respondents. The literature provides some support for this term, particularly in health care. For example, Barry, Ensign, and Lippek (2002) addressed the healthcare needs of homeless youth through “youth-centric programming,” including demonstrating respect for youth, taking youth views seriously, creating a welcoming atmosphere for youth, establishing collaborative relationships between youth and adults, and upholding client confidentiality (p. 148). The authors stressed the importance of understanding the “culture of homeless youth” and providing services to meet the unique needs of this group (p. 148). Thus, borrowing from the healthcare literature and our respondents views we operationalized youth centric practice as: (a) Youth are represented on the council; (b) youth are provided opportunities to express their unique needs, wants, and views; (c) youth provide direct input into decision-making; (d) youth demonstrate leadership and initiative; and (e) youth partner and collaborate with adult allies.

**Relevant theoretical frameworks**

Several bodies of scholarly literature are relevant to the research we present and many of these literatures are integrated and overlapping. Briefly, we identify three scholarly traditions that inform our analysis of youth councils: social justice, youth development, and civic engagement. Variability in youth councils may relate to the predominant orientation toward one or more of these traditions.

Social justice frameworks emphasize youth rights within current inherently unfair systems. Youth as a group, often discriminated against because of their age, have a right to participate in making decisions that impact their lives (Checkoway, 2011). Moreover, youth are experts on the youth perspective and thus their inclusion in processes can result in relevant information that can lead to better decision-making (Cashmore, 2011). As a consequence, organizational and community practice becomes more effective and just. Sutton’s (2007) mixed-methods research provides a social justice perspective on 88 community-based youth programs. She reported that the approach an organization uses in working with youth reflects both current ideas regarding youth in society but also the meaning of a just society. Thus, participatory process can be expected to be variable across organizations. A social justice perspective is well-suited to community-based youth programming but may be less aligned with councils embedded in formal structures of government.
The positive youth development approach (Damon, 2004) sees young people as vital resources with innate capacities to thrive. Through their participation in youth councils, youth gain information about their options and rights, develop decision-making skills, develop an understanding of the decision-making process, and gain a sense of control in the process (Checkoway, 2011). Positive youth development approaches are in contrast to deficit-oriented models which still exist and focus primarily on preventing youth problems (Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009). In many cases, the two forms are not always clearly distinguishable. In an interesting example, the earliest written account of a youth council in the United States, dating back to 1943, identified The Manhasset Youth Council that originated to provide a space and leisure-time needs for youth, in part to deter petty vandalism and unwholesome activities (Jostyn, 1945).

Civic engagement encompasses several activities and is often connected to governmental functions. Youniss et al. (2002) noted that definitional elements of civic engagement are “open to debate” and that there are many “viable” definitions, which include: knowledge of government structure and functions; attitudes toward proper political behavior; and behaviors such as voting, commitment to society, and actions that comprise participation in civil society (p. 124). Youth councils are not the only form of civic engagement, but when affiliated with municipal governments fit within this description. Challenges remain, however. Even when youth are invited to participate in community governance, they are often expected to conform to settings and processes determined by adults. With some exceptions, there are few policy structures to support youth participation in community governance (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Zeldin et al., 2007).

Municipal youth councils, therefore, may sit at the nexus of these three traditions: their role in governance is a form of civic engagement; the participation of youth in the process furthers normative processes of social engagement and skill development consistent with positive youth development; and, in many cases, the efforts of the council are targeted toward social justice activities.

**A Global perspective on youth councils**

Relevant to other countries, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) emphasizes the importance of adults soliciting, listening to, and considering children’s views in decision making. Although the United States has not ratified the UNCRC, there are examples of cities in the United States (e.g., San Francisco, Portland, Milwaukee) that have long traditions with municipal youth councils and have developed appropriate policy structures. Yet, the policy infrastructure for youth councils is more visible and widespread in Europe, in part due the UNCRC, which
guides policy and practice toward young people. One report, produced by Finnish and German scholars, states that the national reporting obligations required by the UNCRC have “triggered a worldwide best practice movement in child and youth participation” (Feldmann-Wojtachnia et al., 2010, p. 15). The report further states that it is “hard to overestimate” the role of the UNCRC in strengthening youth rights to participation. In the case of Finland, the 2006 Youth Act made youth participation and the right of young people to be heard in the municipalities a legal obligation. More broadly, Matthews, Limb, and Taylor (1999) described and compared a range of youth councils across several European countries, also noting the impact of the UNCRC on the formation and promotion of these activities.

Other examples can be found across the globe. For example, in South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League is a body open to all persons between the ages of 14 and 35, which aims to unite and lead young people in confronting and dealing with the problems that face the youth, and which operates at both national and local levels. The ANC is well known for its role in ending apartheid. The Youth League operates autonomously within the ANC and has its own infrastructures (Constitution, rules and regulations). Political engagement with the ANC is expected of youth (ANC Youth League, 2016).

Youth councils are becoming more widespread, as many municipalities have started to mandate them. The UNCRC certainly has been a force in furthering the launch of youth councils in a number of nations across the global and within various cultural settings. Research on youth councils has not kept pace with their development. Documenting and understanding the variation is a critical next step to advance the field.

Research on municipal youth councils: Key themes

The research on municipal youth councils is dominated by case studies. In the United States, Checkoway, Allison, and Montoya (2005) studied the San Francisco Youth Commission. They provide a detailed descriptive account of this Commission—its origins, activities, and effects. In particular, they described the positive effects on the youth participants but also concluded that the youth commissioners do actively participate in public policy at the municipal level by reacting to policies, proposing their own, advocating for policy positions, and organizing for political action. The authors also identify a dearth of information on municipal youth councils in the research literature, finding no systematic research in this area that addresses even basic questions such as: “Which participation methods do municipalities employ?” More recently, Richards-Schuster and Checkoway (2009) reported on municipal youth councils in three Michigan cities. Again, with description, the authors provided observations from this work (e.g., youth participation
differs in its institutional structures—formal vs. informal and temporary vs. permanent), but identify the “need for more knowledge of youth participation in public policy at the local level” (p. 30). Similar rich descriptive case studies have included Carlson (2005) and Luluquisen, Trinidad, and Ghosh (2006). Carlson (2005) reported on Hampton, Virginia’s Youth Planner initiative, where youth and adults worked together to foster young people’s skills and experiences to develop the city’s comprehensive plan. Luluquisen, Trinidad, and Ghosh (2006) described the development of the Sariling Gawa Youth Council in Hawai’i, where marginalized college-age students created leadership forums, cultural awareness, and networking opportunities that eventually solidified as a powerful, youth-led, nonprofit organization.

There has been considerably more attention to youth councils internationally; they are also predominantly case-study based. Faulkner’s account (2009) is particularly detailed and theoretically rich (based on political interest group theory). Faulkner conducted a strategic case study, utilizing multiple methods and interviewing several types of participants (e.g., youth members, workers, councilors, and members of partner agencies). One notable finding was that youth members operated under two opposing pressures: to demonstrate that they could be taken seriously by policymakers they might underscore how different they were from other young people, but acting as representative of youth they stress their similarities with other youth. Thus, they could be criticized from either perspective. Curran (2011) studied three youth councils in New Zealand using multiple methods including key informant interviews with adult stakeholders and surveys of youth. Perspectives of the young people were generally positive (e.g., youth opinions were considered relevant and useful). However, positive views did not necessarily influence perspectives on their role. As a whole, these descriptive case studies often aim to identify the key lessons from the particular case and the critical contextual and structural factors.

Effectiveness and impact of councils is generally assessed through subjective perceptions of participants or other constituents. Often the literature pertaining to youth councils points to the imbalance of power between youth and adults that is perceived to hinder the overall impact (Matthews, 2001; Matthews & Limb, 2003). Inequitable representation of youth participating on councils has been noted, as well (Nairn, Sligo, & Freeman, 2006). Matthews (2001) also challenged the notion that one-time involvement in a youth council has much impact on the individual, noting that only through regular participation will young people develop a sense of competence and effectively participate and enact change in their communities.

A number of themes are common within the literature on youth councils: perception of youth, relation to adults, and authenticity of participation. Perceptions and approaches of adults are identified as being fundamental to successfully engaging young people (Bessell, 2009). Youth councils can
face unyielding cultural attitudes that regard youth as deviant or problems, and institutional inflexibility can make it difficult for youth to take interest (Bessell, 2009). Bessant (2004) found that popular political discourse, in Australia and western countries, encourages youth voice and political participation; however, these messages are contradictory. The policy narrative of youth engagement and development fails to “acknowledge or address the daunting array of discriminatory practices that thwart or preempt the capacity of young people to act as citizens” (p. 392). Frank’s (2006) summary of the literature notes that adults develop a range of perspectives about young people’s abilities, which devalue their engagement based on cognitive development, emotional vulnerability, legal status, and a romantic view of youth.

Authentic youth participation—defined by Checkoway (2011) as active engagement, rather than passive presence or tokenism—can result in benefits to both youth and the communities they serve. However, youth engagement often hinges on the interest and willingness of adults. Thus, the fate of youth councils, the means of recruiting youth, and the extent of their impact rely heavily on the balance between youth and adult interests. The creation of youth councils is seldom in response to youth demands; often adults see these councils as a mechanism to deal with youth-related issues (Matthews, 2001; Matthews & Limb, 2003; Matthews et al., 1999). Adults often take charge when it comes to selecting youth for these councils (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006).

This brief overview of youth council research positively asserts that young people are capable of participation in youth councils and the experience is often viewed as a success by the youth and community. However, these councils rely a great deal on the local context in regards to structure and recruitment methods. The process of forming and supporting youth councils seems to have the potential to shift the paradigm of adult-only political decision-making and thus amplify youth voice and result in the meaningful implementation of youth power.

**Study rationale**

Most research on youth political participation in governance examines a specific case study. To provide a clearer descriptive understanding of the range of youth council structures and operations, our research explored multiple youth councils within a concentrated metropolitan area in the United States. Our theoretical frameworks guided our research question: To what extent are youth engaged in the origin, structure, and activities of municipal youth councils? Study findings identified extensive variation in the areas of origin, structure, and activities, as well as other components of practice. Using an inductive approach to analysis, we developed a typology
of youth engagement placed on a continuum moving from adult-centric practice to youth-centric practice.

**Methods**

This analysis reports on semistructured interviews with adult stakeholders involved in the operations of 24 youth councils. Adults are typically gate-keepers in selecting and allowing youth engagement in the operation of youth councils. Adults also tend to remain involved in the councils over several years. Youth, in contrast, are often engaged for one year or less. Therefore, this phase of our project focused on adult stakeholder perspectives on youth councils. The Boston University Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol.

**Sample recruitment**

Our study of youth councils began with compiling a listing of towns and cities in the metropolitan region \((N = 85)\) and identifying via web search those municipalities with youth councils, youth commissions, or other youth bodies attached to city governments. Those councils with online contact information received an e-mail, letter, and/or telephone call providing study information and requesting an interview with the adult liaison to the youth council. To further verify the existence of youth councils, we contacted the mayor or town manager of each town/city. Using a snowball sampling method, we also asked study participants to identify other towns/cities with an operating youth council. Of the potential pool of 85 towns/cities initially identified, 41 reported a youth council, 5 of which were defunct. Of the 36 towns/cities with an operating youth council, respondents from 24 towns/cities participated in interviews, representing a 66% response rate.

As noted earlier, our definition of youth council is inclusive of those with solely adult membership. This reflects our research question and method. Our recruitment e-mail stated that we were “conducting a research study examining the scope, structure, functioning and impact of youth councils.” As the findings will describe, the respondents identified a wide range in their structures and operations. This included variation in the number of youth involved and their level of engagement. Describing this variation is helpful in understanding the reality of existing youth councils.

**Data collection and analysis**

Semistructured interviews were conducted with 23 key informants involved in the operation of each youth council. One additional respondent chose to provide a written response to questions and these data were also included in
our analysis \((n = 24)\). All interviews were conducted by one of the three authors. A predesigned interview guide was used, with questions pertaining to the youth councils’ origin, development, and structure; the recruitment, selection, and roles of youth; and the perceived influence of the youth council on policy, programming and practice. Interviews lasted between 30 min and 1 hr. Interview notes were hand written and subsequently typed up for analysis. Interview data were supplemented by publicly available data such as mission statements, website information and meeting minutes.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). All authors reviewed the interview transcripts and developed initial categories, based on questions in the interview guide. During a research meeting, the authors agreed upon three broad categories for analysis: origins, structure, and activities. We independently returned to the data coding for these three categories. One author developed a word table for origins focusing on: who created the council, when the council was created, and why the council was created. Another author created a word table for structure including the type of council (e.g., commission, advisory board) and its position and function within municipal government. Another author coded the type of activities (e.g., meetings, education and prevention, youth summits, recreation, community service, community assessments, counseling, and policy-specific actions) and the factors that influenced youth engagement in these activities (e.g., mission and purpose of council, number of youth on the council, support and guidance from adult stakeholders). After organizing the data into these three categories, we wrote memos to further define, describe, and develop them. The memos were reviewed and discussed by all members of the research team and served as an intermediary step between data analysis and writing the findings (Charmaz, 2006).

An important theme identified during data analysis was the degree to which youth were engaged in the origin, structure, and activities of the council. Based on multiple discussions with the research team, it was agreed that youth were not involved in creating the councils; in fact, adults started all of the youth councils. Youth were also not involved in determining the type of council, or the position and function within municipal government. Although youth did not define the origin and structure of the councils, there was great variation in the degree to which youth were engaged in the activities of the council. We identified four factors influencing youth engagement: (a) youth representation, (b) youth decision-making, (c) youth initiative, and (d) youth leadership. Based on these four factors, typologies of youth engagement, moving from adult-centric to youth-centric practice, were developed.
Ensuring quality data

We took various measures to reduce researcher bias and ensure quality data. Peer review and debriefing sessions were held on a regular basis with the research team throughout data collection and data analysis. Memoing was used to define and develop the codes and connect them to the existing literature (Charmaz, 2006). Interview data was triangulated with online materials, agency documents and the empirical literature to corroborate and substantiate the findings. To ensure confidentiality of the respondents, the towns/cities were given letter pseudonyms (A, B, C, etc.).

Findings

Origins

Youth councils originated in various ways. Often there was a community crisis; teen drug use or suicides were mentioned most frequently. For example, respondent A reported that there had been some tragic teen suicides and drug overdoses, mixed with a lot of reported youth stress, depression, and anxiety. Some councils were started within the government (by the mayor or a council member); others councils were started by “concerned citizens.” None reported being started by youth themselves.

The exact reason and timing for the start of the council is often murky; one respondent noted that there were several people in the community who had “taken credit” for the idea of the council; several people have told her it was their idea. Several youth councils are long-standing; others are fairly recent. At one end of the spectrum, Council H began 50 years ago. Council M was in existence for nearly as long—begun in 1967. Councils J and P were reported to have originated in the 1970s. Many youth councils have started since 2000, including A, C, G, N, O, Q, W, and X. Few had just started in the last couple of years.

The existing councils have not always had a continuing existence. Respondents in some towns identified that the youth councils “fizzled out” at some point and more recently were reconvened. In regard to both the initial start of the council and its on-going development, issues of community crisis (substance use, suicide), leadership, and funding were key factors. Like most community-based entities, on-going commitment by a person or persons is needed to steer the course of the organization. Funding can be part of the ability to provide leadership. Some respondents discussed the movement from a volunteer position to a paid position; this provided more stability. In contacting youth councils, we noted that five were no longer in operation. This, too, appears to be a part of the development process of youth councils.
Although a common theme, it is not always the case that a community crisis was a driving force. Other councils reported a broader focus to their mission and activities. We identified these to have more of a youth-development orientation. Three examples are provided here:

- The purpose of the council is to give youth in the city a chance to make a difference amongst each other. It teaches youth that their opinion matters and they learn to voice their opinions to their peers. It also allows youth to discuss important issues in the city and the schools (Q).
- The youth council is the “go-to people” regarding youth-related issues for the city (C).
- The purpose of the youth council was to give young people a voice within their community, as well as civic engagement (W).

Structure

Youth councils operated in a variety of ways with particular distinction as to their position within municipal government. Often the name of the council gave insight into its particular position and function within the town or city government. Coalitions were most often semiformal organizations that formed around a particular mission and had interdepartmental support. Town D and Town N are examples; both groups were collaboratively structured with representatives from within local government, police and school representatives, and outside businesses and youth-centered organizations.

Advisory boards and councils were often, though not exclusively, embedded into pre-existing governmental departments such as Youth and Family Services. The main function for these councils was to assist, support, and advise larger departments; typically they had limited formal decision-making power and small or nonexistent operating budgets. The youth councils in O, Q, and Z had no formal mechanisms in place to report to the town, though they provided governmental leaders with information regarding youth issues. Similarly, the advisory board in L supported and aided the Youth and Family Services Department in its programming and future planning. The advisory board in K functioned more along the lines of other youth commissions, in its stand-alone structure with voting authority and membership that had to be sanctioned by the town Board of Selectmen.

In B, H, and T, the commissions were singular entities with town residents as voting members. These commissions could speak directly to Board of Selectmen, though in T the political milieu made this incredibly difficult, whereas in H the all-youth led commission was allocated a small budget.
Despite the considerable variation of council structure, name, and primary function, respondents perceived their organizations to be youth councils. In the next section, we examine the extent to which these councils engaged in youth-centric practice. This term was used by one of the respondents; we find it a helpful concept illustrative of a multivariable continuum. It is important to keep in mind the various contextual factors (e.g., municipal, community, individual) that shaped council formation and structure, as these greatly shaped the four components of youth-centric practice.

**Typologies of Practice**

A consistent theme from the data analysis was the degree to which adults working with youth were youth-centric. The respondent from Town H defined youth-centric as “adults believing that young peoples’ ideas matter, not just organizing stuff for them, and adults who want input from youth.” Similarly, the respondent from Town S described youth-centric practice as “adults provide resources and information, . . . listen and give input. In general the adults try to stay in the background and try not to dissuade youth from projects, even if the adults think the project will fail.”

Each council embodied a slightly different approach to incorporating youth into the activities of their council. We identified four interconnected factors of youth-centric practice: (a) youth representation, (b) youth decision-making, (c) youth initiative, and (d) youth leadership.

**Youth representation.**

This included the number of adults on the council versus the number of youth (e.g., adult/youth ratio), and the degree to which youth were provided full benefits of membership. In other words, were youth granted privileges (e.g. voting) equal to adult members, or were youth in the role of advisor, consulting with adults on select issues?

**Youth decision-making.**

No youth councils in our sample were started by youth themselves. Adults formed the council and invited youth to participate. Therefore, decision-making relates to decisions made by the council about the activities they engage in.

**Youth initiative.**

This focused on who determined the ideas and issues of the council. Within a council, initiative ranged from youth input on issues to youth deciding on issues, with or without adults present, and planning the next steps. Initiative was tightly connected to leadership, since the skills and ability to initiate have to do with youth capacity.

**Youth leadership.**

In our sample, there was always a full- or part-time adult leader, so this was focused on the degree to which adults shared leadership with youth, and/
or allowed youth to lead. It was also focused on opportunities for youth to develop knowledge, skills and capacity.

Weighing these four factors together was not a precise science; it was iterative and individual for each council. We assessed each council along these bases to determine the extent to which the council engaged in youth-centric practice. Councils that leaned closer to a youth-centric practice appear to have had the greatest potential to both engage youth in meaningful ways within government and create effective policy and programming that addresses the well-being of young people. All 24 councils were placed on a continuum moving from adult-centric to youth-centric practice based on these four components (see Figure 1).

**Adult-Centric practice**

**Adult led councils**

These councils were easy to identify, as they had no youth members; thus, adults made all of the decisions, set the agenda, and held all leadership positions. The adult-led councils aligned with the principles and mission of many other youth councils (i.e., well-being of youth, positive engagement, and education for healthy lifestyles). The narratives of council origins and development suggest that these municipal bodies change over time, and eventually (though not necessarily) see a stronger need for youth involvement and guidance regarding programming and policy.

We identified seven councils (F, J, N, P, T, V, W) that fell into this category. The adults on these councils were generally full-time staff members

![Figure 1. Youth-centric practice continuum.](image-url)
running entire departments and the youth council was one of their many responsibilities (e.g., T and V). Although the youth/adult ratio of the council was null, there were various explanations. For Councils T and W, town rules did not allow persons under 18 to participate on official municipal bodies. In Town P, youth were allowed to join, but the council did not appear to actively recruit youth members.

The leaders and facilitators on these councils often led youth programming, which enabled them to keep up with current youth issues and struggles. Participant V advised the high school Gay-Straight Alliance and oversaw a youth group working on substance use prevention. Participant P co-advised a volunteer club with over 200 student members and met with the club leaders (who are students) regularly. In this sense, adult stakeholders on adult led councils believed that council initiatives were influenced by young people.

Council capacity is vital to the focus and adult-centric practice of these six councils. For instance, in Town F the Youth Advisory Board was founded to help create a court diversion program for youth in the town. Although Town F is helping to alter life trajectories for troubled youth, their focus and capacity is not aimed at building youth leadership or engagement. For Town J, the Youth Commission is at the top of the coordinating hierarchy for several projects aimed at youth. The leadership of the Youth Commission is the direct link to the mayor and town council, manages large grants, and initiates policy; as such the commission extends many arms into the community—one of which is an all-youth advisory board. However, the youth advisory board is one of many “constituent-based focus groups” in Town J that promote special issues but do not “shape or impact the Commission.”

Whereas the following continuum categories illustrate how youth are engaged in leadership, initiative, and decision-making, the adult-led councils either were unable or uninterested in direct youth engagement on the council. However, it is important to note that these councils still perceived themselves to be youth councils and aimed to support and develop youth skills through activities and programming.

**Mixed-membership/adult led councils**

The configuration of these councils was predominately adults with select youth representatives. We identified eight councils (A, B, D, E, L, M, Y, Z) that fell into this category. A few stakeholders noted that the original configuration of the council was all adults and then the mayor (e.g., Z) and/or other adults on the council determined they needed youth representation (e.g., A, E, Y). For example, the youth council in Town Y began with all adult members, but within 5 years it became clear they needed youth representation. Respondent Y reported, “It is very difficult to engage youth, and if you
want to really engage youth you need to include them in on the planning process.”

The mixed-membership groups were generally part of pre-existing governmental departments, such as Department of Health, and therefore had a prescribed function (e.g., substance abuse prevention). Although respondents noted the importance of soliciting the youth voice, and in some instances youth held voting power (e.g., B, M), the disproportionate adult-to-youth ratio generally meant that adults controlled decision-making practices. In Town L, the council acts as a sounding board for the director of a human services department. Final decisions are made by the director or sent to the town selectmen for approval. Council members, adults and youth, provide input but do not make decisions.

The mixed-membership councils are distinct from adult-(only)-led councils because they have youth members and make space for youth input in decision-making and planning activities; however, adults almost always determined the priorities of the council. Town Y’s council organizes day-long forums targeted toward parents. The programming and facilitation are conducted by all members of the council. In this case, youth have input into what topics will be covered in the forum and take an active role in planning, as well as leading workshops.

In some cases, grants and external funding sources guided councils. For instance, councils A, D, and E were primarily concerned with substance use prevention, which was partially determined by their funding. Although youth were able to contribute input regarding specific events and programming, the larger mission of the council was predetermined.

Often the structure of the council impacted its categorization, such as councils like L and M, whose primary aim was providing free mental health services to residents. Likewise, councils E and Z were designed primarily as steering committees and advisory boards; although select youth were present on these councils, the structure and organizational function of such councils seemed to limit the capacity to promote authentic youth engagement.

**Youth-Centric practice**

**Youth membership/adult facilitated councils**

The membership of these councils consisted of majority youth with adult facilitators. Youth were viewed as full members of the council, meaning they participated, to some degree, in all activities of the council: attending meetings, participating in education and prevention efforts, conducting community service and outreach efforts, and engaging in policy advocacy. The role of the adult facilitators was to oversee council activities and to provide youth with information, training and guidance to develop their leadership skills. Six councils (G, K, O, Q, R, X) fell into this category.
The adult facilitator was central to engaging youth in decision-making. Participants noted that one important venue for youth decision-making was youth council meetings. The facilitators organized the meetings, including setting the agenda with input from youth members. Respondent Q reported there was an open forum in each meeting where members bring up topics for discussion at the next meeting. Based on this discussion, the facilitator developed the agenda. The meetings were generally focused on discussing issues relevant to youth such as improving civic life (e.g., transportation, youth center), youth issues (e.g., youth violence, mental health, substance use), and upcoming activities/events.

Regarding initiative, youth had an opportunity to meet with elected officials to inform them of topics they perceived to be relevant to youth in their community. Respondents in towns R and Q reported that the mayor attends some of the meetings and listens to youth concerns. Respondent O reported that youth meet with the city manager to educate him or her on issues relevant to youth. One year, the youth in Town O raised awareness of the importance of transportation for youth. They worked with the state/local transit authority to create a youth route for the bus. This route would travel from the high school to the movie theatre or the mall. Respondent O reported, “If enough youth are passionate about a certain issue, they have the ability to come together to speak out and create positive change in their community.”

In terms of youth leadership, youth had an opportunity to participate in planning events for the community. Two of the six councils (Q and R) planned and executed annual Youth Summits. The mayor attends the youth summit and is able to get a pulse on the youth in the town. Respondent Q reported their Mayor’s Youth Summit is open to any youth in town or the surrounding towns that wants to attend. They have outside facilitators who run workshops and breakout groups on topics important to youth. Youth also collaborate with adults to organize educational activities focused on youth issues such as youth violence, substance abuse, and mental health. They also host recreational activities such as sports events and community fairs.

Youth were provided opportunities to develop leadership knowledge and skills including teamwork, public speaking, communication strategies, decision-making, and time-management. A few respondents held orientations and/or trainings during council meetings that were focused on developing leadership skills. For example, Council R was engaged in a youth-led participatory budgeting project. Youth council members were responsible for overseeing the participatory budgeting process, including collecting ideas from youth, turning the ideas into projects, and encouraging youth in the city to vote. The youth council met with the adult facilitator regularly throughout the entire process and received training.
and guidance focused on the participatory budgeting, community outreach, and voting procedures.

In sum, in the youth membership/adult-facilitated councils the council consisted of a majority of youth. Members were provided opportunities to engage, to varying degrees, in decision-making, and demonstrated initiative and leadership with the support of adults. Adults, however, maintained the final say regarding the priorities and activities of the council.

**Youth-led councils**

These councils embodied most or all of the youth-centric components: Membership was majority youth, youth made independent decisions, youth decided what issues to focus on, and youth held leadership positions. We identified three councils (C, H, S) that fell into this category. The adults that supervised these councils were hired by the municipality to do so; they provided support, encouragement, and information to help the young people succeed. These councils had the structural support and capacity to do so—often existing as stand-alone entities employing a youth development framework.

In Councils H and S, the mayor was a central figure in promoting and supporting youth engagement in municipal government. In Town H, the purpose of the council was to look at challenges, needs, and gaps in regards to youth in the city, and to meet those needs in conjunction with youth organizations. The council collects information from all over the city and then makes decisions on important issues using public/private partnerships, as well as making policy and ordinance suggestions to the mayor and Board of Alderman. Participant H referred to the council as “the youth voice” within the city. The mayor was a strong force behind providing youth with a voice; in fact, he granted them voting rights, comparable to adult commissions. Similarly, Council S created and presented a Youth Bill of Rights to the mayor and, in turn, the mayor developed a proclamation affirming the document.

Regarding initiative, youth-led councils addressed a variety of topics throughout the year. Mental health and drug awareness campaigns were common. For example, Council S took an active role in planning events and activities; they did social media campaigns and social marketing, and sometimes were politically active, as well. Council members were engaged in a social marketing campaign, about the number of kids in high school dealing with depression or who have thought about suicide. The council made posters and information to hand out in school, put together a mailing for parents, had a biweekly ad in the local paper, and were doing an online hashtag campaign to raise awareness around depression and suicide. All of these initiatives were youth-led. Council C worked on issues regarding the state/local transit authority and projects that eased the transition from
middleschool to high school. Participant C referred to the youth council as the “go-to people” for people in the city regarding youth related issues. The city invested a lot into the council, recently funding a trip to Washington DC for 13 youth.

Overall, adult stakeholders overseeing youth-led councils firmly believed that a youth-centric strategy was crucial to the success of their mission. They discussed the importance of youth engagement; however, they also acknowledged challenges associated with a youth-led council. Participant C reported that although youth decision-making is critical, it is sometimes challenging for the adults when they disagreed with youth decisions. Although adults can provide education and guidance, it is ultimately up to the youth to make the final decision. Participant H reported:

The youth council can have a huge impact, but they need adults that believe in them, and needs to be real buy-in from adults. Youth need allies because they can do planning and such on their own, but they have school and other stress, so the youth need staff and organizational support.

As demonstrated by Councils H and S, the mayor can be a key ally in terms of supporting youth engagement in municipal government and sending a message to adults that youth are valued and worth listening to.

Discussion

Most research to-date on youth councils have been single case studies (e.g., Checkoway et al., 2005; Faulkner, 2009; Matthews, 2001). Our study of multiple councils within a metropolitan area expands the empirical literature. Additionally, the study furthers the work of Martin et al. (2007) by providing additional examples of the extensive variety of youth council characteristics and identifying the significance of local context in the formation and operation of councils. Our analysis identified four typologies, which were placed on a continuum moving toward youth-centric practice. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to assess impact of councils, we believe youth-centric practice best embodied the ethos of positive youth development and civic engagement, which enabled the development of youth skills through direct involvement with governmental decision-making.

The local context significantly influenced the origin, structure, and activities of the councils. Issues of community crisis, leadership, and funding were key factors in the start and on-going development of the councils. A council’s position within municipal government was also important in terms of how the council operated and the types of activities performed. The variation of council structure across a relatively small geographical area points to the power of local government to both prioritize and meaningfully engage young people in decision-making.
The continuum of adult-centric to youth-centric practice highlights the philosophical differences of approach. We identified nine councils operating consistent with youth-centric practice, meaning that the majority of members were youth, and they were afforded opportunities for decision-making, leadership and initiative. The youth-centric approach aligned with the positive youth development literature that aims to invest in, and support, resiliency in young people through providing opportunities and meaningful relationships (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004) to create more just institutions. Although adult-centric youth councils expressed interest and concern for youth in their community, they missed an opportunity to engage with these youth. When youth are excluded from direct input and leadership, a message is sent: “Adults do not view them as competent citizens” (Richards-Schuster & Checkoway, 2009, p. 26).

Although we favor youth-centric practice as best engaging youth in municipal government, we acknowledge that this structure requires significant attention to fully support. To date, empirical studies on youth councils do not measure community-level impact and thus support for youth-centric practice is tied to philosophical perspectives. Given what we do know about youth councils, communities with no currently existing youth council may find it difficult to fully implement a youth-centric practice. There was ample evidence that councils change and develop over time. Several councils moved toward a youth-centric practice as adult members recognized the need to engage youth and became more skilled at doing so.

Additionally, councils must be adept at responding to both changes in the community (political leadership, community problems identified by data or crises), potential opportunities (particularly around funding), and the expressed needs of the members (particularly youth). As our sample attests, adult stakeholders value the well-being of youth, but there are often institutional and political factors that may make youth-centric practice difficult to implement. In some cases, in small towns with minor budgets or dwindling youth populations, youth-centric practice may be viewed as impractical. Thus, the specific structure of the council needs to appropriately fit with the needs of the community.

Limitations and future research

Given the research design, our study could not ascertain whether youth-centric practice results in better youth, community, or societal outcomes. Empirical knowledge would benefit from developing a measure of youth-centric practice and using quantitative and/or mixed methodology to determine whether there is a relationship between youth-centric practice and positive outcomes.
Although we intentionally focused this analysis on adults who are responsible for the operation of youth councils, it is critical to understand youth perspectives on why they join youth councils, what they expect to gain from their experience and whether they believe youth councils are encouraging youth civic engagement. Future research would benefit from examining youth and other stakeholder perspectives (i.e., alumni, mayors).

We did not ask specific questions pertaining to diversity of membership on the council (e.g., race/ethnicity, economic status, immigrant origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ability/disability). Some participants reported that youth tended to be academically successful which is supported by previous research (Wyness, 2009). Participants also noted the need to include more diversity and/or engage a wide variety of youth, including youth in vocational programs or home school, and youth at risk for dropping out of high school. Diversity and representation of membership on the council are areas in need of additional research, as it is crucial to understand how youth councils can act as a mechanism to reduce and/or perpetuate social inequality (Augsberger, Collins, & Gecker, 2017).

One final suggestion for further research would be to examine other regions and their approach to youth councils. Given the extensive variation we saw within this limited area, expansion of research to other area to compare and contrast these findings would be fruitful.

**Conclusion**

Youth councils provide a realistic opportunity for engaging young people at the community level. Many municipalities engage in this work in one form or another. Within a large metropolitan region, it is conceivable that several variations of youth council models will exist in towns/cities directly adjacent to each other. Although there is no one right way to do a youth council, our findings suggest that youth-centric practice is most closely aligned with the positive youth development, civic engagement, and social justice literatures, and thus has the greatest potential to meaningfully engage youth in civic life. Our typologies of youth councils are useful for researchers and practitioners interested in understanding elements that promote authentic youth engagement. Although individual councils incorporated youth voice in various ways, the most effective means of providing youth with a legitimate voice in government is to engage in youth-centric practice.

**References**


学霸图书馆

www.xuebalib.com

本文文献由“学霸图书馆-文献云下载”收集自网络，仅供学习交流使用。

学霸图书馆（www.xuebalib.com）是一个“整合众多图书馆数据库资源，
提供一站式文献检索和下载服务”的24小时在线无限IP图书馆。
图书馆致力于便利、促进学习与科研，提供最强文献下载服务。

图书馆导航：

图书馆首页 文献云下载 图书馆入口 外文数据库大全 疑难文献辅助工具