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# Youth Social Action

# Rapid Evidence Assessment

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Prepared for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)



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# Summary

## About this project

Youth social action refers to activities in the service of others designed and led by young people to benefit both the wider community and the young people taking part. These include campaigning, fundraising, volunteering, tutoring, or mentoring (Birdwell, Birnie, and Mhean 2013).

Given the significant number of young people involved every year in social action, funders and policymakers seek to understand the motivations/barriers to participation and the benefits in order to design social action that is inclusive and fosters positive outcomes.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), one of the main funders of social action programmes in the UK, commissioned Alma Economics to carry out a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) to collect evidence on the causes of youth social action participation and the impact of social action on outcomes for young people.

This work brings together recent international and UK-based evidence on children and young people's participation in social action. The studies included in this report were searched and selected by adopting a systematic approach (documented in the Appendix) to ensure the replicability of the results presented in this work.

## Participation in youth social action

The motivation for participation in social action is multidimensional. The main reasons include altruistic motives (e.g., helping the community), family and friends' influence, and developing skills that are valued by employers.

There is a consensus in the literature on the main barriers to participation in social action (e.g., lack of resources, opportunities, or confidence etc.) and the fact that they are stronger for certain groups. These include ethnic minorities, immigrants' children, and young people from lower socioeconomic

backgrounds. In this respect, most studies urge policymakers and organisations to encourage a more inclusive approach to social action that supports diversity and reduces the socioeconomic gap in participation.

With respect to youth engagement, recent studies focused on the role of the internet and social media in social action. The great use of social media created new opportunities for organisations to engage with young people. Findings show that social media has encouraged participation in social action and raised awareness about social issues among young people.

Moreover, the diffusion of new organisations offering online platforms to engage young people in shaping political discourses made possible new forms of participation in social action (e.g., online activism, mobilisation). However, some evidence highlights that online engagement might be more effective with people already engaged in social action and marginalise young people without access to technology.

## The impact of youth social action

One of the biggest challenges of exploring the impact of participating in social action on children and young people's outcomes is related to self-selection. Participation is voluntary and young people that generally have better outcomes are more likely to participate. Therefore, it is difficult to identify whether social action drives improvements in outcomes or simply attracts children and young people who already possess a predisposition for these outcomes.

Although causality cannot be established in many cases, the evidence suggests a positive relationship between personal characteristics and social action. In particular, younger participants (below the age of 16) and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds seem to benefit the most in terms of improving personal characteristics.

Findings also highlight that hands-on programmes that provide a friendly and welcoming space for everyone to participate can be effective at nurturing a sense of belonging and integration, especially among minorities and marginalised individuals.

The benefits derived from social action rely heavily on the programme design and on individual and family attributes. Programmes that foster a sense of responsibility, provide exposure to friendly interactions, and encourage critical thinking are likely to lead to enhanced civic engagement and political participation. However, evidence suggests that often programmes do not target those who would benefit the most. This is particularly true among girls with less-confident disposition, who are less likely to participate but the most likely to benefit.

Both the relationship between social action and political participation and that of social action and social capital seem to be mediated by personal or family characteristics. Social action is particularly beneficial in increasing political participation when an individual already possesses a sense of political efficacy. In addition, individuals from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds and those with already established networks are more likely to benefit from social action (e.g., in terms of social capital accumulation, better education, and employment outcomes). However, more

research is required to understand why this is the case and how programme designs can ensure that social action is narrowing rather than widening socioeconomic gaps.

### **Policy recommendations**

The research findings from the review informed the development of a Theory of Change (ToC) framework that illustrates the pathway between social action and young people's outcomes. The ToC framework sets out the chains linking policy interventions with positive change and benefits in key areas. Lessons learned from successful programmes are incorporated into the mechanisms of the ToC to provide a starting point for programme design, depending on the desired outcome and impact.

Based on the evidence collected in the review, the final chapter provides policy recommendations for fostering youth involvement in social action and increase benefits from participation in the future. These include (i) prioritising social action programmes that focus on diversity and inclusion, (ii) ensuring that children and young people have an active role in shaping social action programmes, (iii) using the internet and social media platforms to engage young people in social action.

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# Scope of the Rapid Evidence Assessment

## Background

Youth social action refers to practical activities in the service of others designed and led by young people themselves and benefiting both the wider community and the young people taking part (Birdwell, Birnie, and Mhean 2013). Youth social action, such as campaigning, fundraising, volunteering, tutoring or mentoring, is a multi-part process driven by a sense of agency: young people take ownership of issues that matter to them, take steps to learn more about them and to make a difference. Most young people participate in social action embedded in existing institutions such as school, university, or work. However, social action can also take place in informal environments through family and community networks.

In 2012, a review published by the UK Government described how government, business, voluntary organisations and educational institutions could support young people engaging in social action.<sup>1</sup> As a result, DCMS and The National Lottery Community Fund partnered, through the investment of £25 million seed funding each, to create 'the #iwill Fund' that supports the creation of an additional 1.4 million youth social action opportunities through the #iwill campaign (coordinated by the charity Step Up To Serve).<sup>2</sup> Several funds were also launched to support social action initiatives with a focus on improving the quality of available opportunities to participate in social action and reducing the socioeconomic participation gap. These include the National Youth Social Action Fund (now the #iwill Fund), and the Journey Fund the Youth Social Action Fund in Birmingham and Kent.

Recent research from the UK and abroad emphasises the benefit of participation in social action activities. More specifically, youth social action positively affects cognitive skills, character capabilities, emotional wellbeing, school engagement, and other dimensions of active citizenship, such as formal political engagement, social cohesion, lower crime, and anti-social behaviour (Birdwell 2013). This may have important spill-over effects on education and employment: social action is associated with growth in self-confidence, self-worth, marketable skills, and life skills, leading to higher academic achievement and career development (Birdwell 2013). In this regard, previous research also points to youth social action's potential to narrow down socioeconomic inequalities by providing development opportunities to disadvantaged children and youth, which might have been otherwise inaccessible (Birdwell, Birnie, and Mhean 2013; Step Up to Serve, n.d.).

## Objectives

The objective of the present Rapid Evidence Assessment is to carry out a comprehensive review of the evidence related to the participation of children and young people in social action. This REA centres on two key aspects:

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<sup>1</sup> The review "In service of others: a vision for youth social action by 2020" is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-vision-for-youth-social-action-by-2020>

<sup>2</sup> The #iwill campaign was coordinated by Step Up To Serve between 2013 and 2020. It has now grown into a self-organising movement and after consultation with partners and young people, the proposal is for #iwill to continue up to the end 2025. More information about #iwill is available at: <https://www.iwill.org.uk/about-us/about-iwill>

- **Causes of participation in youth social action and policy implications:**

This REA seeks to understand the level of engagement of children and young people in social action, the main determinants of participation, the demand for social action, and the main barriers to participation. This review also aims to interpret the demand for social action for specific groups that might experience more barriers to participation (e.g., ethnic minorities and young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds). In addition, it explores the evidence on the impact of digitisation and social media on youth participation in social action and the implications for the design of social action in the future.

- **The impact of youth social action on outcomes for young people:**

This review focuses on evidence on the impact of youth social action on children and young people's outcomes. In particular, this review investigates the impact of youth social action on young people's characteristics, education, and employment outcomes. Furthermore, this REA includes evidence of the impact of youth social action on the sense of belonging, civic engagement, and political participation.

To ensure the REA is comprehensive in its coverage of existing research, we developed a protocol agreed upon with the DCMS project team for collecting the evidence. The protocol set out the research questions, the inclusion criteria, the search strategy, including the searched databases, the study selection processes, outcomes, and how they were prioritised (more details on the content of the protocol and the methodology adopted can be found in the Appendix).

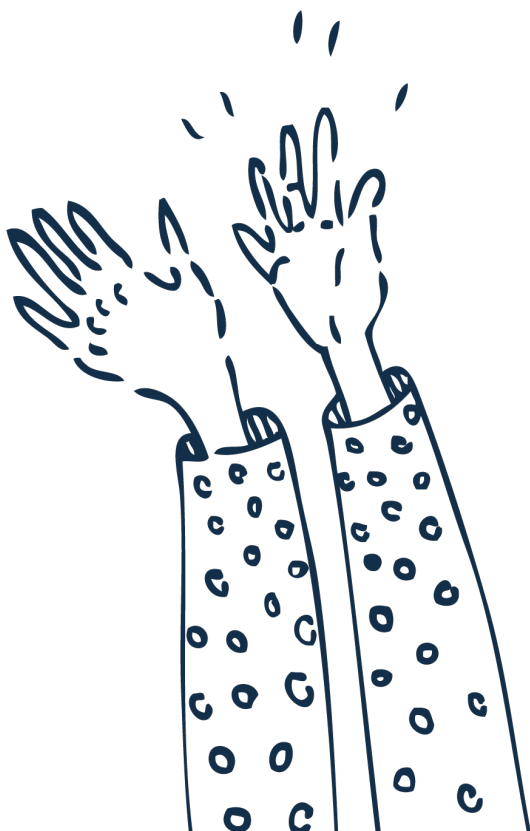
We designed the search strategy to ensure it thoroughly answered the key research questions. Based on the research questions, we selected keywords to identify relevant evidence sources in the databases (the complete list of databases searched is included in Appendix). Regarding the grey literature, we carried out a targeted internet search of relevant interventions by manually searching websites of organisations involved in youth social action.

The screening process to shortlist papers was carried out according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria listed in the protocol. The criteria set ensured evidence answers the research questions, type of social action, sub-populations covered (e.g. children, young people, BME etc.), outcomes, evidence type (e.g. RCT, modelling impacts, proposed outcomes), the geographical focus of study, language of research, and time-period covered. The final list of studies selected includes 87 studies published after 2012, focusing on children and young people aged 10-20.

The report is organised as follows: Part I synthesises existing evidence on the causes of participation in youth social action and the policy implications. Part II summarises findings on the impact of youth social action on outcomes for young people. Moreover, it develops a Theory of Change (ToC) to illustrate the mechanisms through which youth social action impacts skill development, health and wellbeing, and the society at large. The concluding chapter of this report provides policy recommendations.

## Part 1

# Causes of participation in youth social action and policy implications





## Key findings

The first part of this work seeks to understand the level of engagement of children and young people in social action, the main determinants of participation, and the main barriers to participation. It also explores existing evidence on the impact of digitisation and social media on youth participation in social action and the implications for the design of social action in the future. The key findings from the review of the literature are highlighted below.

### Key findings

#### Participation motives

- The motivation for participation in social action is often multidimensional and relates to both self and other-oriented motives.
- Gaining new skills, being influenced by family or friends, and helping the community are the reasons most frequently mentioned by young people for participating in social action.

#### The role of the internet and social media in participation in social action

- The diffusion of social media opened up new opportunities for organisations to engage with young people and encourage participation in social action. Moreover, online platforms and social media ensured that organisations continued operating and engaging with young people throughout the pandemic.
- New forms of participation in social action are possible through the diffusion of the internet and social media (e.g., online activism and mobilisation). The success of organisations offering online spaces to engage young people in the political discourse challenges the view that young people are disengaged from politics and social movement.
- However, online engagement might create barriers to participation for marginalised youth who do not have access to technology.

#### Barriers to participation and socioeconomic participation gap

- Barriers to participation are often related to lack of confidence or self-esteem, lack of opportunities, lack of resources, and lack of time.
- Among young people, ethnic minorities and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are the two most underrepresented groups involved in social action. In the UK, the socioeconomic participation gap in youth social action has been relatively constant over the last five years.
- Interventions suggested to reduce the gap include (i) targeting schools located in more deprived areas, (ii) collaborating with local organisations already in contact with young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to encourage participation, and (iii) ensuring that participation is financially sustainable for young people from less affluent families.

#### The role of young people in social action

- Social action is often presented to young people as a pattern to employment which prevents participants from developing a sense of responsibility towards the community and reflecting upon the meaning and the role of social action in the community.
- Top-down approaches to social action might create barriers to effective participation. When young people perceive that their voice is not listened to, they are more likely to disengage and less likely to reflect the benefits of their action on themselves and the wider community.

# Motivations and enablers to social action

## Understanding participation motives

The National Youth Social Action Survey is commissioned by the DCMS and it is conducted annually since 2014. It collects information on young people's participation in social action in the UK to inform the #iwill campaign (Brasta, Mollitor, and Stevens 2019). The data show that the involvement in social action has dropped over the last five years. In 2019, 53% of young people aged 10 to 20 participated in social action compared to 59% in 2015. The proportion of respondents who decide not to participate because not interested and the proportion of those who feel there are fewer opportunities in their area has increased. In addition, the percentage of young people who joined in meaningful<sup>3</sup> social action in 2019 is 36% compared to 39% in 2018.

A considerable body of literature investigates the motivations behind participation in youth social action. Research finds that the motivation behind youth social action is often multidimensional. Cornelis et al. (2013) illustrate that motivations underpinning participation in volunteering activities relate to both self and other-oriented motives. The authors argue that people's inspirations are complex and challenge the view that altruistic and egoist motivations are opposed. The study also highlights that understanding the motives behind volunteering is instrumental to designing programmes that increase volunteers' satisfaction and long-term participation.

Willems and Walk (2013) analyse the relationship between 2,000 young volunteers' motives and preference for tasks. They find that specific volunteers' motives are only satisfied when assigned a specific set of tasks. Like Cornelis et al. (2013), the authors argue that delving into volunteers' motives would help organisations design targeted programmes. This approach would increase volunteers' satisfaction and young people's likelihood to continue volunteering.

In analysing the motivations for youth environmental volunteering for children and young people aged 18 and younger, Puckett (2015) finds that incentives to participation vary substantially and include social, altruistic, and individual motives. The author underscores that untangling youth motives is crucial to designing programmes that can attract different volunteer audiences.

The studies mentioned above converge that understanding participation motives is essential to support young people's involvement and design inclusive programmes. The section below provides an overview of the most common motivations and enablers to social action participation. The last section addresses schools' role in encouraging participation in social action.

## Main reasons to participate in social action

### Skills and career enhancement

Skill development is one of the most common reasons for participating in youth social action, especially for young people in the process of applying to university or college. Hyams (2012) examines the motivation towards volunteering for young people aged 18 to 27 in the USA and reveals that younger adults are more likely to volunteer to improve their resumes or college application and gain skills to use in the labour market.

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<sup>3</sup> Social action is defined as meaningful if (i) young people participated at least every few months over the last 12 months or were involved in a one-off activity lasting more than a day (ii) participants recognised that their activities had some benefit for both themselves and others.

In the context of the UK, Taylor-Collins (2019) explores the main determinants for involvement in social action. The study focuses on participation in social action of young girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The study finds that most of the interviewees feel that participating in social action is useful insofar it enhances their resume and helps with future academic and job applications. Programmes such as National Citizen Service (NCS) or The Duke of Edinburgh's Award were perceived by the young girls as ways to enhance their resumes.

With respect to motives for participation, Dean (2013) conducts a study involving interviews with volunteering professional in England. The study highlights that the current structure of volunteering policy has been conceptualised mainly as a pattern to employment. Subsequently, young people might get involved in volunteering solely to gain skills and qualifications to help them transition into employment.

### **Family influence**

Previous studies focus on the family's role in children and young people's participation in social action. Mainar et al. (2014) investigate the factors determining volunteering across young people in Spain. The study finds that children's participation rate is higher when the family is also involved in social action. The study provides three possible explanations for this result: (i) parents act as a role model for their children, (ii) parents can integrate their children into the community, which in turn makes them more likely to be exposed to social action opportunities, and (iii) parents and children share the same socioeconomic status; hence, parental social status facilitates volunteering.

Similarly, Nursey-Bray et al. (2020) analyse the determinants of volunteering in Australia and find that when parents are involved in volunteering, children are more likely to volunteer too. Like in the study by Mainar et al. (2014), the authors note that families largely account for young people's participation in volunteering. This is because they act as a role model and a source of motivation for participating. Indeed, the study identifies that following one's parents' example is one of the main reasons for participating in volunteering activities.

Exploring the relationship between families and volunteering in the UK, Paine et al. (2020) discover that the number of families participating in volunteering programmes together is increasing. Due to the vital role families play in encouraging children and young people to participate in social action, supporting organisations that design family volunteering programmes could help increase young people's participation. The study also recommends that the approach to family volunteering should be based on flexible and inclusive programmes that balance volunteering with family life.

Relatedly, a recent report published by Dartington Service Design Lab (2019d) highlights that participation in social action implies having knowledge about social roles, and parents play a critical role in teaching these roles to young people. According to the socialisation theory, "young people 'inherit' the role of social action participant through their parents' actions and words". In particular, young people are more likely to volunteer when parents teach them that social action is important and worthwhile.

The study by Voorpostel and Coffé (2015) also demonstrates that family composition helps explaining young people's engagement in social action. Using data from the Swiss Household Panel Survey on young people aged 18 to 26, the authors find that young people who experienced parents' separation are less likely to show civic engagement (measured as volunteering and voting). The authors explain that parental separation reduces young people's exposure to and participation in political discussion with parents.

## Friends

According to the 2019 National Youth Social Action Survey results, the most common factor motivating young people to participate in social action is their friends (Brasta, Mollidor, and Stevens 2019). 29% of young people aged 10 to 20 participating in the survey responded that they would participate in social action if they could do it with their friends. This was mentioned especially by young people aged 10 to 15.

Similarly, a recent study conducted by Volunteer Scotland (2020) identifies the main routes into volunteering. Among other reasons, the study reveals that 20% of young respondents entered volunteering programmes thanks to the help of friends. When asked about the most powerful enablers to influence children and young people to engage in volunteering activities, 27% of respondents reported that being able to volunteer with their friends would encourage them to start or increase volunteering.

In addition, Šerek and Umemura (2015) highlight the importance of friends on young people's civic engagement. The study finds that interacting and discussing with friends has a stronger impact (in the short term) on civic engagement than debating with family members or being exposed to the news. Indeed, young voters' intention to vote is predicted by having political discussions with peers, while discussion with parents does not seem to impact voting decisions.

## Altruism

Another reason why young people decide to volunteer relates to altruism. Among the determinants for participating in social action identified in Nursey-Bray et al. (2020), wanting to help the community was predominantly mentioned by young people surveyed, followed by the participation of family and friends.

With respect to altruistic motives to social action, Vézina and Poulin (2020) find that young people with strong civic and altruistic attitudes are more likely to participate in social action. The study analyses a sample of young people transitioning into adulthood to explore the characteristics of young people more likely to be civically engaged. Based on these findings, the study recommends that designing early interventions targeting attitudinal dispositions (e.g., civic responsibility, political interest and contribution etc.) could serve to promote greater civic participation for young people during their transition to adulthood. However, the study does not provide specific recommendations on the type of programs that should be implemented and what age group they should target.

## The role of schools in encouraging participation in social action

The 2019 National Youth Social Action Survey provides an overview of the main enablers to participation in social action. According to the findings, schools and colleges are key enablers for participation (Brasta, Mollidor, and Stevens 2019). The survey shows that one of the most common enablers to social action is "being asked". In particular, 11% of children and young people participating in the survey responded that they joined social action because someone asked them to get involved. More than 50% of the participants—a significant increase from 2018 (30%)—reported that a teacher/member of the staff asked them to get involved.

Hogg and de Vries (2018) help explaining the role of schools in engaging young people in social action, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Using four waves of the National Youth Social Action Survey (2014-2017), the authors find that during Key Stage 3 (when schools represent the main pathway into volunteering), the difference in engagement across young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds is relatively small. However, after Key stage 3, young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to be engaged. The authors argue that after Key Stage 3, schools are less involved in social action. When encouraging participation is left to

organisations and formal groups, a participation gap emerges, with young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds being less likely to participate in social action.

It has also been shown that schools can play an important role in encouraging participation in social action during adulthood. The study conducted in the US by Hill and Dulk (2013) confirms that the type of school attended can affect the likelihood of continuing volunteering in adulthood. In particular, the study finds that young people educated in Protestant schools are more likely to be involved in volunteering activities after leaving school. The study does not attribute this to the number of volunteering opportunities provided by the schools, but rather to the type of organisations they connect students with. Indeed, Protestant schools are more likely to connect young people with volunteering organisations that are more effective in involving volunteers from teen years to adulthood.

This chapter identified the primary motives for youth participation in social action. The literature illustrates that altruistic motives, gaining new skills, and the encouragement of family and friends figure at the top of participation motives. In addition, school is an important enabler to social action. By connecting young students with organisations offering social action programmes, schools play a vital role in encouraging youth involvement in social action and ensuring that participation is as inclusive as possible.

# Barriers to participation in social action

## Main barriers to participation

The literature on social action identifies several barriers that might prevent children and young people from participating in social action. These mainly include lack of opportunity, lack of confidence, lack of resources, lack of time, and lack of interest.

Leonardi et al. (2020) carry out an evaluation of the Sport England Volunteering Fund to identify new ways to engage groups of young people currently underrepresented in social action (e.g., young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds). The study analyses survey responses of a sample of young volunteers and locates several barriers. These include lack of interest and identification with volunteering activities, lack of confidence or self-esteem, language barriers, poor IT skills, lack of flexibility in existing opportunities, and lack of time or resources to undertake volunteering activities.

The National Youth Social Action Survey asks respondents who had not been involved in any social action why they decided not to participate. Results from the 2019 survey show that among the main barriers to social action participation were the fact that (i) none of the respondents' friends was involved and (ii) it never occurred to them (Brasta, Mollidor, and Stevens 2019). Another reason mentioned was the lack of opportunities in the area. Indeed, in 2019 19% of respondents stated that there were few/less opportunities in their area compared to 12% in 2018 and 4% in 2017.

In relation to barriers to participation, a study conducted by Garnelo-Gomez and Money (Forthcoming) suggests that geographical location might represent a barrier to participation. In particular, the authors emphasise that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are often involved in activities close to home that are not currently recognised as social action (e.g., caring for family members), while they might be further away from formal social action. The findings of the study are based on focus groups conducted with a small sample of young people aged 10 to 18 based in Manchester, Newcastle, and London.

Fumagalli and Fumagalli (2019) explore the impact of neighbourhood segregation on adolescents' participation in purposeful activities versus hanging out with friends in England. The study indicates that adolescents living in ethnically segregated neighbourhoods are more likely to hang around with friends and less likely to engage in purposeful activities (e.g., sport or volunteering activities). Indeed, the authors explain that adolescents prefer spending time locally with friends, often of the same ethnic group. Therefore, young people who live in segregated neighborhoods have more chances to meet up with their friends. Based on their findings, the authors suggest that desegregation policies, combined with policies improving the supply of purposeful activities locally, could increase social participation in more segregated neighbourhoods.

Since 2016, the National Youth Social Action Survey also explores (i) the intention of participating in social action (for young people who have not previously been involved) and (ii) the intention of continuing being socially active. Young people are classified into three groups based on their current and intended participation in social action: committed, potential, and reluctant (Pye and Michelmore 2016). The proportion of committed individuals (i.e., those who have a history of participation in social action and are determined to participate the following year) decreased from 34% to 29% between 2016 and 2019. The percentage of the reluctant subjects (i.e., those unlikely to participate in social action and those who do not intend to participate in the future) increasing from 17% to 25%. Males, people aged 16 to 20, Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic individuals (BAME), and young people from less affluent families are less likely to participate/intend to participate in social action.

With respect to barriers to continuing participation, a recent study investigating the factors associated with adolescents who have made a habit of social action (i.e., declared that they will continue participating in social action). The study identifies four key barriers to participation: lack of time, perceived lack of confidence, perceived lack of skills, and lack of opportunities (Taylor-Collins et al. 2019). The authors argue that barriers to participation might be the same barriers that prevent young people from continuing participating in social action. The study recommends enhancing access to resources to support adolescents' participation in social action in the short and long-run.

## **Participation gap across demographic groups**

Previous studies illustrate that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic minorities, and young people living in urban areas are less likely to participate in out-of-school activities, such as sports clubs (Whalen et al. 2016). Similarly, the literature on social action reveals that the same groups mentioned above are consistently less likely to participate in social action. The following sections examine in greater detail the participation in social action and barriers for young people belonging to ethnic minority groups and young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (two of the most underrepresented demographic groups in social action in the UK and worldwide).

### **Ethnic minorities and immigrants' children**

Darmody and Smyth (2017) analyse the social engagement of children of immigrants in Ireland. Using information collected from one-third of primary schools in Ireland, they unveil that immigrant-origin children are less likely to socially engage in structured activities (e.g., sport or cultural activities) compared to their Irish peers. Two factors explain the gap. First, language proficiency represents a barrier to participation for children who do not speak good English. Secondly, affordability plays a role in low-income families, as they cannot afford to pay fees associated with out-of-school sport and cultural activities.

In the context of the US, Lin et al. (2015) highlight that civic opportunities, defined as service learning and volunteering, are less accessible to the youth of colour living in high-poverty communities. The authors evaluate the impact of the Word Generation Program on civic engagement—this being a cross-country literacy programme encouraging students enrolled in middle schools to discuss controversial issues in class. Their findings suggest that the gap in civic learning opportunities between schools located in more affluent districts and those situated in deprived ones, might be reduced by investing a relatively low number of resources in programmes that integrate studies on social issues in the curriculum.

Ishizawa (2015) explores the volunteering levels of young children of immigrants aged 15 to 20 in the USA. The study indicates that children of immigrants are less likely to participate in volunteering activities. Findings suggest that socioeconomic background, low rates of parental participation in volunteering activities, and low level of engagement in extracurricular activities are the main factors that hinder children from being socially active. However, the study highlights that participation varies across race/ethnic groups and immigrant generational status. For this reason, the author suggests that future research accounts for migration factors when considering immigrant civic engagement.

In the context of England, Leonardi et al. (2020) map different approaches to encourage young people in BAME communities to participate in social action. The report highlights that some of the projects analysed established partnerships with community transport to remove transportation costs. They also worked with BAME females to help them overcome confidence issues while using the public transport. The study also reports that providing female-only sessions and engaging families of BAME young girls served to engage them by enhancing social trust in the community.

Parker et al. (2014) explore the opinions, attitudes, and perceptions of young people, project leaders, and community stakeholders towards the Gamechangers initiative. Gamechangers was a UK youth volunteering project reaching out to youth in Black and Minority Ethnic communities to encourage them to participate in volunteering initiatives to develop skills and lead their own projects. The aim of this study is to explore (i) the personal impact of youth volunteering, (ii) its impact on communities, and (iii) whether sports settings can effectively recruit youth volunteers, especially those from BME communities with high levels of socioeconomic deprivation. Findings indicate that locally-focused engagement strategies (responsive to the needs of the targeted communities and leveraging local knowledge) were the most effective. Motivations to get involved varied; being a mentor was one of the main participation motives. Civic responsibility was also acutely felt by the volunteers; they had a strong sense of duty to contribute to their communities.

### **Socioeconomic status**

The National Youth Social Action Survey shows that young people's participation in social action varies according to their socioeconomic status (Brasta, Mollitor, and Stevens 2019). Young people from more affluent families are more likely to participate than those from less affluent families. In 2019, data indicated that, while 41% of children and young people from more affluent families participated in meaningful social action, only 29% of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were involved in similar activities. The socioeconomic gap in participation has been relatively stable since 2014.

Low levels of engagement of young, disadvantaged people in social action have also been reported outside the UK. Gil-Lacruz et al. (2016) explore the variables that relate to youth volunteering among the European Union member states. Using data from the European Values Survey (EVS), the study analyses similarities and differences in youth engagement across countries. The study shows that young people with a low level of education (often used as a proxy for low socioeconomic status) are less likely to volunteer. Interestingly, countries that spend more on unemployment benefits have a higher participation rate. Because expenditure on unemployment influences the welfare of those with fewer resources, the authors suggest that such a policy could boost youth participation in social action.

Several studies focus on the determinants of the socioeconomic gap in social action participation and outline actionable steps to support more inclusive participation. For example, a study conducted by Hogg and Vries (2018) explores the relationship between volunteering and the socioeconomic status of young volunteers. The authors reveal that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are significantly more likely to participate in volunteering activities when schools actively facilitate participation (i.e., Key Stage 3). The authors recommend that schools and organisations work together to encourage and support young people to continue volunteering post-18.

A report published by Dartington Service Lab (2019d) analyses the socioeconomic gap in social action participation in the UK. It presents different approaches to increase the engagement of more disadvantaged young people. One such promising intervention is the Team London Young Ambassadors programme, which decreased the participants' socioeconomic gap by targeting schools located in the most deprived areas. The program organises assemblies and workshops, and invests resources to support pupils' community engagement through social action. Another apt example is the National Citizen Service (NCS), which increased the participation of Free Schools Meals (FSM) pupils by providing bursaries to cover the sign-up fees, food, and extra costs. The report concludes that, while adopting different approaches, both programmes enhanced the participation of young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and narrowed the socioeconomic gap.

Relatedly, Brady et al. (2020) conduct interviews with different programme policymakers, public officials, and youth work practitioners in London, Belfast, and Dublin to identify strategies to increase



the civic engagement of marginalised young people living in urban contexts. The study outlines six mechanisms currently implemented (whether in isolation or combined) to increase marginalised people's civil engagement: (i) youth work, (ii) deliberative forums, (iii) volunteering, (iv) art, (v) sport and media, (vi) non-formal education (e.g., local-level trainings), technology, and social media. The authors also highlight that some of the programmes currently in place to engage young people, such as volunteering or deliberative forums like the UK Youth Parliament, struggle to engage marginalised youth. This is because they tend to attract young people who are already interested in civic and political issues and active within their schools and communities. Among the different approaches analysed, youth work is found to be the cornerstone of youth civic engagement, providing "*a starting point from which trust and further engagement could be build*".

Drawing on interviews with volunteers' recruiters, a study conducted by Dean (2016) explores the reasons for the lack of class diversity in UK volunteering settings. The study highlights that the lack of resources and family support play an important role in discouraging youth volunteering. Recruiters also point out that the policy delivery in place makes it hard to recruit disadvantaged young people. The pressure to meet policy targets and lack of resources prevent recruiters from targeting young people who would benefit the most from volunteering. The study recommends planning targeted investments to address this inequity (e.g., targeting schools and communities where young people are generally less likely to engage in volunteering).

Analysing labour market data, Damelang and Georgi (2013) explore whether financial constraints restrict participation in extracurricular contexts for the German youth. They consider three outcomes; being active in at least one organisation, being active in music, sport, or culture, and being active in the church community. They find that poverty does restrict participation in organisations that are fee-based. The constraint on social participation also limits informal learning opportunities. However, there is no evidence that poverty reduces participation in non-contributory activities (captured by church communities); in other words, there is no evidence of social withdrawal. This is especially true for young people who do not receive unemployment benefits, suggesting that social deprivation most likely occurs by protracted financial constraints. The main limitation of this paper is relying exclusively on church participation as a determinant of non-contributory extracurricular activities, which fails to capture the full extent of such activities.

Fox (2019) uses the UK's Household Longitudinal Study to assess the impact of volunteering on social capital and wellbeing. He spotlights three areas: the rates of volunteering in the UK, the benefits of volunteering on wellbeing, and the benefits of volunteering on social capital. While the study does not focus explicitly on youth, an age dimension is considered for the different outcomes. The study demonstrates that, on average, 20 to 40 per cent of adults in the UK take part in volunteering activities each year on a regular basis (at least once a week). Generally, youth in full-time education and those who are recently retired are the most likely to volunteer; the least likely are those who just left education. Education and occupation affect the likelihood of participation; people who are well educated and people who are in professional, managerial, or technical occupations are the most likely to volunteer. Those in poorly paid, insecure employment are the least likely to volunteer. These findings are corroborated by Taines (2012), who reveals school activism to be effective in enhancing children's relationships with the community and the school. However, school activism proves more effective for students who are already integrated and less lonely.

Surveying the distribution of adult voluntary action among primary schools in England, Body et al. (2017) establish significant differences in voluntary actions across schools. In particular, schools with a higher proportion of Free School Meals (FSM) experienced less volunteer time per child. While volunteers support children and school staff alike, they can also provide a role model for the children and young people they work with. Indeed, one of the headteachers interviewed in the study, stressed

that volunteers offer children a powerful role model, and this is crucial, especially for those children who “might lack that elsewhere in their lives”.

This chapter showcased the main barriers to participation in youth social action. It was revealed that the main barriers to participation are lack of time, perceived lack of confidence, perceived lack of skills, and lack of opportunities. The international and UK-based literature established that barriers to participation are greater for ethnic minorities and young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Indeed, these two groups are less likely to participate in social action and out-of-school activities mainly because of lack of resources and lack of social action opportunities at the local level.

# Aims and provision of social action

## Aims and provision under the current social action policy

According to the definition of #iwill campaign, youth social action indicates “activities that young people do to make a positive difference to others or the environment. There are lots of ways in which young people can take practical action to make a positive difference. It can take place in a range of contexts and can mean formal or informal activities. These include volunteering, fundraising, campaigning, or supporting peers”.<sup>4</sup>

The term social action is relatively recent and was created to describe a range of activities that benefit both young people and the community. The fact that “social action” is a capacious term—referring to diverse activities, ranging from volunteering to activism—makes it challenging to draw conclusions and recommendations about its benefits and opportunities (Dartington Service Design Lab 2019e).

#iwill campaign identified six core principles that define high-quality social action. According to these principles, youth social action should be youth-led, challenging, have a social impact, allow progression to other opportunities, be embedded in a young person’s life, and enable reflection about the value of the activity.<sup>5</sup>

The National Youth Social Action Survey, conducted every year in support of the #iwill campaign, identifies as social action the following activities: fundraising/sponsoring events, giving time to charity/cause, tutoring/coaching/mentoring someone, supporting peers, campaigning for something, and participating in young advisory groups (Brasta, Mollidor, and Stevens 2019).

According to the Youth Social Action toolkit, developed by the Careers & Enterprise company, activities that count as youth social action include volunteering, campaigning, tutoring and mentoring, fundraising, and any other action or programme that motivate people to work collaboratively to bring positive change to the wider community.<sup>6</sup>

Youth social action programmes are varied. A recent work by the Dartington Service Design Lab (2019e) identifies three types of programmes: (i) school-based opportunities for helping the local area (ii) tutoring, coaching, and mentoring in the community (iii) community-based work to help restore, maintain, and improve young people’s local natural and built environment. Volunteering is the most common social action supported through the #iwill Fund, followed by tutoring/coaching/mentoring and helping to improve the local area.

In addition, organisations involved in youth social action differ in terms of scope and impact focus. A recent analysis categorises the different types of grantees of 12 Match Funders within the #iwill Fund based on (i) their impact focus (whether on children, community, or both) and (ii) potential market gaps (Dartington Service Design Lab 2019c). The study reports that only a small proportion of organisations focus on both individual and community impact. Almost 30% of the organisations do not have an impact focus on young people or use social action in the service of another focus. The report suggests that close monitoring of organisations and their impact focus could help identifying the untapped potential to generate benefits for young people and the wider community.

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<sup>4</sup> #iwill website: <https://www.iwill.org.uk/about-us/youth-social-action>

<sup>5</sup> The six principles are listed on the #iwill website <https://www.iwill.org.uk/about-us/youth-social-action>

<sup>6</sup> The toolkit is available at: <https://www.youth-social-action.careersandenterprise.co.uk/understanding-youth-social-action>

## Reflections on the current policy design

As highlighted in the previous section, social action should be designed to provide benefits to young people and the wider community and enable them to understand the meaning and value of the activities they are involved in. However, some studies have questioned how social action is currently designed, the ways it incentivises young people, and its potential benefits for participants.

A study conducted by Dean (2013) reports some criticisms on the ways in which volunteering activities are presented to young people. Based on interviews with volunteering professionals in England, the study suggests that the current volunteering policies often do not prioritise instilling in young people a sense of responsibility when participating in social action. According to the interview findings, current policies appear to fail in bringing about behavioural changes and raising young people's sense of civic responsibility, since volunteering programmes are presented mainly as a path to employment.

Some scholars contend that young people should have a more active role in shaping social action opportunities. For example, Leyshon et al. (2021) investigate young people's participation and engagement in volunteering activities. Using survey and qualitative data, the authors reflect on the current environmental volunteering activities for young people in the UK. Like Dean (2013), the authors argue that volunteering is often not encouraged for altruistic ends, such as supporting the community, but for social and economic purposes. It is frequently designed to train people for the future workforce rather than encouraging the individuals' sense of responsibility. When young people are not involved in discussions over the role of volunteering in the community, the distance between young volunteers and their communities is further increased.

Similarly, in the study conducted by Brady et al. (2020), many of the interviewees, including programme policymakers, public officials, and youth work practitioners, state that the engagement of young people in social action is characterised by a top-down approach. This approach might create barriers to effective participation, as youth engagement is perceived more as a ritual rather than real. Indeed, practitioners notice that young people often feel that their contribution is not listened to, which reinforces disillusion and disengagement from social action, especially for more marginalised and disadvantaged individuals.

Mills and Waite (2017) explore the National Citizen Service (NCS) in the UK that is aimed at 15 to 17-year-olds to investigate what type of citizenship is fostered and why. The research undertaken is a mixed-methods project comprising eight research methods, including archival fieldwork, policy analysis, an online survey of NCS graduates from 2011 to 2015, an ethnography of one NCS team of 9 young people in 2015, a participatory animated white-board video of this team's NCS "journey", and three sets of semi-structured interviews. They argue that the programme is designed to encourage the development of a particular type of "good" citizen; one who is interested in civic engagement insofar as it is safe or complacent. It does not encourage or teach civic actions like protest, democratic participation, or even voting, which are not unexpected from a government-funded programme, given its priorities at the time. They also demonstrate that the NCS programme is designed to promote national values and encourage participation at the local level instead than fostering a sense of global or cosmopolitan citizenship.

Nichols et al. (2014) explore the role of the UK Government in promoting civic activism by considering engagement in sports youth clubs. Using qualitative surveys with stakeholders and youth, the authors find some paradoxes between the government's desire to increase volunteering and civic action, on the one hand, and to cut youth clubs funding and promote professionalism, on the other. The survey confirms that the clubs' main challenges are the increase in facility hire cost from the local government and the heavy reliance on hard-to-recruit and retain volunteers. Government cuts also mean that civic

activism opportunities are concentrated in socially advantaged areas, where volunteers have the time and resources to participate. They recommend that the government rebalances funding and involvement, depending on the targeted area.

This chapter provided an overview of the main programmes offered to young people and the variety of organisations involved in social action. Organisations are characterised by impact focus (whether they focus on individual or communal benefits, or both). This said, some of the organisations offering social action programmes do not currently have an impact focus (Dartington Service Design Lab 2019c). With respect to this, recent evidence reveals that, when youth social action follows a top-down approach instead of involving participants in the programme design, young people perceive participation as a kind of ritual and are less likely to appreciate the individual and collective benefits of their action.

# The role of the internet and social media in social action

## Using social media to engage young people in social action

The diffusion of social media has changed how people communicate. Through social media, users can access a substantial amount of free and real-time information (Birdwell, Birnie, and Mehan 2013). In the context of social action, the great use that young people make of social media could open new avenues for organisations to engage with young people and encourage participation in social action. However, social media research is a relatively new discipline, and the potential and benefits are yet to be revealed.

Recent studies explored how social media can be used to increase young people's interest and participation in social action. For example, Birdwell and Miller (2013) examine youth's engagement in social action and consider the role of social media. The report presents findings from Demos' Centre's research on how social media platforms shape the way young people discuss social action. Using data of Twitter and Facebook users, the study finds that young people use social media to raise awareness and talk about social action. The study suggests that social media can be a powerful tool to raise recognition of the role of social action in the UK.

The recent contribution of Dartington Service Lab (2020a) focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the delivery of social action. The use of the internet and social media during the pandemic reduced geographical barriers. It encouraged the participation of young people located across the country in online events, particularly of those with disabilities and those living in rural areas. The study suggests that social media and online platforms enabled wider engagement in social action during the pandemic and that they could be used more intensively to engage with young people in the future. Importantly, the study reveals the unintended consequences of youth engagement through social media. In particular, it argues that a transition to digital engagement should not create new barriers for those who do not have access to technology.

A recent study conducted by Milošević-Dorđević and Žeželj (2017) explores the relationship between online activism and participation in real-life activism of young people living in Western Balkans. The study analyses participation of young people aged 13 to 18 in social action and shows that online activism does not reduce offline activism and vice versa. Rather, online activism is positively correlated with offline activism. Based on these findings, the authors suggest that online engagement could indeed boost youth social action, rather than being a substitute for offline participation. For example, raising participation via online media could make young people more aware of and interested in social problems within the community.

The study conducted by Sloam (2018) highlights some potential limitations in the use of social media to engage young people. The study evaluates the impact of #Votebecause, an online-offline initiative encouraging young people to vote in the Brexit referendum. As part of the project, young people were encouraged to post a picture of themselves holding a placard stating why they believe young people should vote and post it on social media. However, only a small proportion accepted to do so. Those who decided not to post argued that they did not feel comfortable expressing their opinion, as they thought they were not informed enough, and this could form the basis of an attack by others. These findings might be taken to suggest that social media represent a space for self-expression and civic engagement to the extent young people feel confident in sharing their opinion.

## New forms of participation in social action

The previous section discussed ways in which the internet and social media could be used to engage young people in social action. This section reviews recent studies looking at new ways in which young people contribute to social issues. As described in the previous chapter, social action traditionally refers to activities such as volunteering, campaigning, or fundraising (see Section 'Aims and provision under the current social action policy'). However, recent literature identifies new types of social action made possible by the diffusion of the internet and social networks (e.g., online activism and mobilisation).

Technology and social networks affect how children and young people civically engage and contribute to their community. Some studies indicate that young people's engagement in the political discourse and contribution to social issues is different compared to the previous generations. For example, Grasso (2013) analyses the political activism of young and older people in the UK. The paper distinguishes between cause-oriented (e.g., voting, being a member of a political party etc.) and citizen-oriented activities (boycotting, signing petitions etc.). The study illustrates that younger people aged 18 to 30 are less involved than older people in both cause-oriented and citizen-oriented activities. While the level of involvement is overall lower than the previous generations, the study highlights that young people seem to be more involved in new forms of activism, such as signing petitions or boycotting, compared to citizen-oriented activities.

Using data from the European Social Survey, Acik (2013) explores the civic engagement of European citizens across (i) political activism (e.g., political party affiliation, demonstration), (ii) involvement in voluntary associations, and (iii) political consumerism (e.g., "boycotting", signing petitions). The author also investigates the socio-demographic profile associated to each aspect of civil engagement. The study reveals that women, young people, and those living in urban areas (who are usually found to be less involved in civic matters) are more likely to engage in political consumerism. In addition, while the participation gap (in terms of education and social class) exists in political activism and association involvement, this gap is less evident in political consumerism. The author suggests that one reason for this might be that political consumerism requires less knowledge, skills, and financial resources. This suggests that political consumerism might help to reduce the participation gap for certain groups.

McInroy and Beer (2020) explore the role of Internet-Mediated Social Advocacy Organisations (IMSAOs) in supporting youth civic engagement. IMSAOs create platforms where young people can participate in social debates overcoming traditional barriers to youth participation (e.g., geographic location). The study suggests that, while young people are considered disengaged from politics and social movement, they do engage in social justice, yet in internet-mediated environments. The report provides an example of IMSAO, the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA). The HPA is a non-profit organisation with social media features that involve young people worldwide in initiatives related to education, gender, sexuality, violence, etc. The authors suggest that IMSAOs like the HPA could provide new opportunities for young people to engage in social action and develop skills and experience to better society.

Hopkins and Todd (2015) look at the 17-day student occupation of a lecture hall in Newcastle University, in 2010, to protest a government proposal to modify higher education funding. The purpose of the study is to understand social activism by exploring how the protesters organised, used social media, and communicated throughout the occupation. The method used was interviews with 27 students who took part in the protest. The findings indicate that the methods and engagement in social activism were much more sophisticated than portrayed by the media or politicians; the students were indeed knowledgeable, insightful, and organised. They knew how to engage politically, negotiate action, and create space for dialogue. The students used social media and the internet to advertise

and promote their campaign and generate support and were able to challenge the decisions of those in power.

Finally, a study conducted by Honda (2016) explores youth participation in the 'It Gets Better Project' (IGBP), an international LGBTQ anti-bullying and suicide prevention social movement made of video messages of hope for young people at risk. The author finds that the reasons leading young people to upload their video were multivalent and include recognising their stories in those of the viewers and having gone through similar life experience. According to the study, the campaign's success was due to its inclusive design that allowed participants to express their voices through videos. Based on this successful initiative, the author recommends that to succeed in the digital era, organisations should move away from using online tools to teach out to young people. Rather, they should let young people using them to have their voices heard and stories told.

This chapter established that the internet and social media affect the participation of young people in social action. Findings indicate that social media and online communication have encouraged participation and discussion about social action. This offers a great opportunity to organisations involved in social action to leverage new ways of engaging with people and encouraging participation. However, some studies stressed that online participation might be more effective with people already engaged in social action and that it might further marginalise young people who do not have access to technology.



# The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social action

The COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions introduced since March 2020 have impacted how young people participate in social action. Recent studies show that organisations involved in social action have tried to adapt to social restrictions by moving online and engaging young people through digital platforms.

A report by the Dartington Service Design Lab (2020a) explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the delivery of #iwill-funded youth social action. Using survey data collected among funders, the report investigates how organisations managed to adapt and continue operating throughout the pandemic. The report observes that most organisations moved partially online using online platforms to run group and events, phone calls and text message to stay engaged with young people. The study also highlights that, in some cases, new online resources were created to maintain engagement and entertain young people confined at home. However, some funders reported that a “less diverse” audience participated in lockdown activities. According to the funders, this was due to barriers in accessing technology (experienced by more disadvantaged young people) and the fact that school closure led to less inclusive participation.

Beatfreaks (2020) recently published a report on the impact of COVID-19 on young people in the UK. The report is based on data collected among young people aged 16 to 25. The study documents successful experiences of young people who were able to set up their own social action projects using Twitter, WhatsApp, and Zoom to tackle loneliness during the lockdown. However, the study also reports that some of the young people in the study were often not able to access information to participate in social action. The report's recommendations highlight the importance of developing communication systems to reach young people and give them space to play a positive and civic role and engage in social action during the pandemic and in the future.

Finally, a paper published by the #iwill campaign (2020) provides helpful recommendations on how to shape future investment in social action, ensuring that young people play a key role in the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The study highlights that the impact of the pandemic was acutely felt by children and young people due to the restrictions in place (i.e., social distancing, school closures etc.). However, the report argues that social action can help accelerate the recovery. More specifically, it offers four recommendations: (i) develop collaborative strategies and partnerships to support young people to take positive action and enhance their skills as part of the recovery, (ii) invest in youth social action as a core component of the recovery, (iii) target young people of primary school age and from disadvantaged backgrounds to nurture inclusivity in youth social action, and (iv) work with children and young people to shape decisions at a national and local level.

As documented in the previous chapter, social media and digital communication have gained traction in supporting social action participation. The use of digital tools was vital during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most organisations switched to online forms of engagement. Some of the findings discussed above indicate that most organisations have been able to continue their activity and adapt to online tools. However, the pandemic might have further exacerbated the socioeconomic participation gap, due to disadvantaged young people's limited access to technology.

## Part 2

# The impact of youth social action on outcomes for young people



## Key findings

The second part seeks to understand the impact of social action on young people's outcomes, including sense of belonging, civic engagement, political participation, personal characteristics, and education and employment. It also discusses active citizenship, wellbeing, and social capital accumulation. The studies provide rich evidence and use a variety of methods, from randomised control trials to qualitative assessments. The impact of social action on civic engagement, political participation, and social capital accumulation is well-researched and understood. However, the impact of social action on one's sense of belonging has the weakest evidence for it relies on participants' subjective views. Key findings from the review of the literature are highlighted below:

Key findings	
<h3 style="margin: 0;">Type of social action</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The type of social action matters. Programmes that promote friendly interactions in a diverse setting, give space for self-directed action, encourage political discussion, and provide room for critical thinking and reflection are more likely to increase civic engagement, political participation, and youth's sense of belonging.</b></li> <li>• <b>Longer, sustained programmes are more likely to lead to positive outcomes.</b></li> <li>• <b>Programmes work best when they are less 'transactional' and focus more on critically engaging children in the importance of the cause and impact of altruism. This is specifically true for young children.</b></li> </ul>	<h3 style="margin: 0;">Social action and socioeconomic background</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Socioeconomic background can dictate the relationship between social action and outcomes. Children and young people from privileged backgrounds have more access to social action and volunteering opportunities and, as a result, are more likely to reap their benefits.</b></li> <li>• <b>Because of the differences in the type and quality of programmes that they have access to, children and young people from lower socioeconomic are less likely to benefit from social action, especially in terms of education and employment outcomes.</b></li> <li>• <b>However, there is some evidence that children who are eligible for free school meals benefit more from participation in social action programmes in terms of personal characteristics, such as communication and</b></li> </ul>
<h3 style="margin: 0;">Social action and family/individual characteristics</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Family and individual characteristics can affect the relationship between social action and outcomes. Among girls, self-confidence increases participation in social action. However, the benefits from participation are relatively small as girls who would benefit the most (those who are shy or less confident) are less likely to participate in social action.</b></li> <li>• <b>The impact of social action on civic engagement (especially voting) is stronger for young people from politically disengaged families.</b></li> </ul>	<h3 style="margin: 0;">Gaps and weaknesses</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>While there is some evidence that volunteering improves cognitive abilities and marketable skills, the evidence on the direct impact of volunteering on employment and educational attainment is weak.</b></li> <li>• <b>Identifying the causal impact of social action on outcomes is problematic due to self-selection in social action. Indeed, often young people who participate in social action are likely to have good outcomes. However, evidence shows that those who are less likely to participate are the ones</b></li> </ul>

## Sense of belonging

Social action can enhance sense of belonging both by affirming bonds to one's own community and by creating a platform where volunteers can form external connections and widen their networks. This is critical for minorities and marginalised people as social action can help them integrate with wider communities and erode stereotypes. Evidence presented in this chapter supports the link between volunteering and enhanced integration. It also discusses the mechanisms and conditions for programmes to be able to achieve these goals. Some of the studies relate to other countries and may, therefore, not be completely transferable to the UK. However, the socio-political context of most countries tackled (Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) is comparable to that of the UK; hence, crucial lessons can be learned.

Johns et al. (2014) evaluate whether the experience of sport-based mentoring can facilitate integration, focusing on young Muslim male youths (aged 15 to 25) in Australia. Specifically, the paper examines whether the encounters and emotions experienced in team sports can (i) help remove obstacles of cultural and religious difference between young people, (ii) facilitate experiences of respect, trust, social inclusion and belonging, and (iii) counter forms of violent extremism. The method used combines focus groups with a short survey. The results indicate that participation in sport-based programmes increases confidence, which helps in the process of negotiating cultural differences and stereotypes. Participation also teaches discipline, which contributes to self-control when conflict arises. Importantly, the mentors (in this case, the coaches) played a crucial role in defining the participants' experience; mentors who showed effort, care, and respect were vital in creating a positive experience for mentees. The study is limited in its ability to capture impact since it was commissioned after the start of the programme and did not use a control group. It also relies on subjective answers, which can be affected by a desire to please the interviewers. The findings are difficult to scale to the community level and have an unclear impact on violent extremism since "you can't measure what hasn't happened".

Fewtrell (2018) studies the context of youth volunteering in Muslim communities in Birmingham, UK. His research is a mixed-methods approach, including a survey of 382 respondents and interviews with 45 Muslim youths aged 18 to 25. The benefits of volunteering reported by young Muslims include providing a sense of belonging, erosion of stereotypes, and breaking down barriers within society. Families play an important role in how youth approach participating; some actively encourage engagement while other exercise restriction and control to limit the types of project that the youth are involved in. A limitation of the research is that it only engages with youth who are already volunteering, leaving a critical sample underexplored. Potential barriers to participation include lack of opportunities, restrictions from family or community, fear of discrimination, or a lack of interest.

Analysing socioeconomic data on migrants and refugees, Gambaro et al. (2020) study the effect of afterschool extracurricular activities (such as sports clubs and leisure activities) on the integration of refugee children and adolescents in Germany. The findings show that the integration of 12-, 14-, and 17-year-old refugees improves as they feel a sense of belonging in their school and community. This is partially due to an increase in participation in afterschool activities, which leads them to spend more time with their peers who lived in Germany for longer. However, participation in school-based extracurricular activities among young refugees is still relatively low; so is the time spent in organised leisure, sport, and youth groups outside the school. The authors conclude that taking part in afterschool activities increases integration and a sense of belonging, but more can be done to include more refugee children in these activities. It is worth noting that integration is measured by whether the refugee children speak to their peers in German, which may not accurately reflect the whole picture.

Carlton (2015) looks at the impact of volunteering on mental wellbeing and sense of belonging for young refugees in New Zealand. The author interviews refugee volunteers about their experience taking part in relief efforts following an earthquake. The findings indicate that the volunteers were able to contribute by playing to their strength and skills, which helped them improve their wellbeing, increase their sense of belonging, and enhance their leadership skills. These benefits were especially strong given the particular post-disaster context, which allowed marginalised individuals to take on leading roles. However, participants and the wider community benefit from social action if some conditions apply. It is not possible for young people or those from marginalised communities to contribute if they feel that volunteering spaces are not accessible or that their actions go unrecognised. Volunteering opportunities for youth are often restricted to handling certain tasks or dealing with certain client groups, which may not push participants to develop new skills and gain new experiences. Therefore, for volunteering to be effective, programmes should (i) be established and run by young people, (ii) require volunteers to take on their preferred roles, and (iii) involve taking on responsibilities.

Coyne-Foresi et al. (2019) consider the benefits of being a youth mentor to younger peers, focusing on the experience of an indigenous high school in Canada. Through interviews and data analysis, the authors report that the participants cited a large array of benefits that can be grouped into three categories: making cultural connections, benefits to self, and relationship with friends and family. The participants felt that the programme taught them more about their culture, improved their self-image, and strengthened their connection with friends and family. The study relies on self-reported measures and on participants who self-selected into the study, which may bias the results. Mentoring was also found to be beneficial for youth mentors in another study by Lim and Park (2014) in Korea. In this case, the participants reported improving their communication skills and experiencing self-growth to challenge prejudices in a multicultural setting.

Buelens et al. (2015) look at the impact of volunteering in sports activities on socially vulnerable young people (mostly from migrant backgrounds and living in deprived areas) in Belgium. The methods used include interviews with participants and organisers (with the former being mostly non-native males). The participants reported several benefits to the programme, including self-development and improved relationships with peers. Additionally, they could apply key takeaways to other facets of their lives. The mechanisms for these improvements, however, depend on the characteristics of the volunteering programme and include ensuring that (i) the activities are hands-on (or experiential), (ii) those who participate do so voluntarily (emphasis on free-will), and (iii) there is an element of personal development, self-reflection, and collaboration built into the programme.

Most papers that study the impact of social action on sense of belonging tend to do so using qualitative assessments of specific programmes that rely on participants' subjective views. This is likely because of the difficulty in capturing sense of belonging using an objective scale. Also, because most studies evaluate an on-going or recently completed programme, it isn't easy to establish long-term relationships. This results in the studies mainly being observational, making causal relationships challenging to develop, especially with the absence of control groups.

The findings of this chapter indicate that social action can be an effective way of nurturing a sense of belonging and integration, especially among minorities and marginalised individuals. However, for this to be achieved, some important conditions should be met. These include ensuring inclusivity and providing a friendly, welcoming space for everyone to participate. Additionally, the programmes need to be hands-on, play to the strength of the participants, allow them to self-reflect, and put them in a position of responsibility.

# Civic engagement and active citizenship

Civic engagement refers to any action or activity performed by an individual that addresses the concerns, interests, and common good of a community (Brady et al 2020). For the most part, the literature finds a positive link between social action and civic engagement/ active citizenship. This is especially true for afterschool programmes that aim to engage children with the wider community outside their circle of family and friends. However, the characteristics of the social action programmes and the individuals partaking in them determine to what extent this relationship exists and whether it is sustained.

Torres-Harding et al. (2018) evaluate the impact of participating in a school-based social activism programme on civic engagement, self-efficacy, and positive development. The study is based on focus group discussions with 32 children aged 5 to 14. The programme requires children to reflect on a social problem, research it, and discuss solutions. The findings indicate that, even at a young age, children develop knowledge and awareness around socio-political issues and contribute to the discussion around community problems. They are also able to act, achieve positive change for themselves and their communities, and reflect upon their own efforts. The children were excited to take part in these activities and developed a sense of community. They also felt more empowered, which, as the authors point out, is particularly important for children since they are generally disempowered and dependent on their parents. The study does not tackle long-term effects and is limited to the children's perception rather than observed changes.

These benefits, however, are only accrued if the programme actively engages the students. Body et al. (2020) explore the nature of philanthropic action aimed at school-aged children (up to age 10). They find that most children recognise charity symbols (such as Pudsey Bear, the poppy, and the Comic Relief red nose) and associate these with the charitable activities they have undertaken. However, most children do not critically grasp the reasons behind these activities and the causes or issues that these charities are tackling. This means that charitable actions, while perceived to be fun, are viewed at a surface-level and understood to be transactional. These activities do not give children the opportunity to independently explore ideas and values, such as those pertaining to social, environmental, and political issues. This observation leads the authors to argue that this missed opportunity can be rectified by giving the children space to take a more active, leading roles in such events and actions.

Weiler et al. (2013) examine the benefits that college students gain from mentoring at-risk youth within a structured course in the US. The study focuses mainly on civic-related outcomes. The results show significantly higher scores post-intervention regarding mentors' civic attitudes and community service self-efficacy. The study's findings have some shortcomings, the most important of which is self-selection. Indeed, students were not randomly assigned, which means the results could be driven by students who have better civic attitudes and awareness prior to joining the programme. Relatedly, the sample was homogeneous, comprised mostly of white women. Finally, the data used relied on self-reported measures rather than independently observed behaviours.

Similarly, Bonnesen (2020) evaluates the impact of a youth programme in Denmark to promote children's citizenship outside of the home and school settings. The programme, which is implemented by the Danish Red Cross Youth, aims to introduce children and adolescent to local community networks and support citizenship learning through afterschool activities (e.g., communal eating and cooking, sports, online gaming, and youth clubs). To assess the programme, three populations were compared: the participant group (who self-selected into the programme), the non-participant group,

and past participants of the programme. The results indicate that participation in the programme does not have long-term effects, but there are several short-term benefits. These include interacting with friends outside of school and a positive attitude towards future volunteering. However, these outcomes seem to only be true for boys; girls reaped lower or no benefits at all. The author theorises that the reason behind this gender imbalance is the programme's self-selecting nature. Put differently, girls who are already good at socialising join the programme, creating a "Catch 22", whereby girls who are less socially inclined and would benefit the most opt out of this programme. Among boys, non-participation in volunteering is more likely to result from a lack of interest, while, among girls, it is mostly due to a lack of confidence and not being invited.

The link between social action and civic engagement seems to be deteriorating over time, as shown by Šerek (2017) in Czechia. Survey data from two different generations of Czech middle adolescents were analysed using quantitative modelling, comparing a sample in 1995 and one in 2010 (the post-communist generation and the current generation). The results indicate that the relationship between young people's involvement in civil society and their stronger psychological connections and sense of responsibility to their fellow citizens was present and strong in the 1990s. However, this relationship no longer exists in the current generation. This is attributed to the way that civic society evolved in the past two decades, namely by advancing professionalism. Professionalism is defined by (i) labour specialisation and centralisation that limit opportunities for friendly interactions among members, and (ii) limited organisational democracy, which creates unequal member status. The author concludes that advanced professionalism creates an environment that is psychologically unfavourable for the development of civic identity.

Henderson et al. (2014) collected data and interviewed university students who took part in mandatory community service programmes when in high school in Canada. The aim is to understand why some volunteers evaluated the programme positively, while others rated it negatively, as this has implications on subsequent civic engagement. Most students rated their experience positively, especially those who did it for a longer time (e.g., one year or more) and those who chose to volunteer on their own accord (although this also reflected in demographic differences). The type of activities that students pursued while volunteering affected their perception of the experience. For example, students who found it difficult to secure placement, those who thought that the programme's administration was sloppy, or those who felt tired or emotionally overwhelmed from the assigned tasks gave the programme lower scores. Positive evaluations were linked to experiences that allowed students to make a difference and gain personal benefits. Given the prevalent negative perception of mandatory volunteering, the authors recommend that these programmes need to be refined.

As evidenced in this chapter, studies that look at the impact of youth social action on civic engagement tend to utilise a wide range of methods, including data analysis, randomised control trials, and qualitative assessments. While some of the studies suffer from certain limitations, they provide rich evidence not only on the youth social action's impact but also on the mechanisms and conditions that make it feasible. Indeed, the variety of methods used makes this relationship one of the most well-established and well-understood in the literature.

This chapter highlighted the role of social action in enhancing civic engagement and active citizenship. While most studies report a positive relationship, there are some important caveats. Firstly, the programmes should be designed to allow children, especially very young ones, to critically engage with and reflect on the activities they undertake. This would allow them to understand their role and internalise the importance of volunteering beyond mere enjoyment and transactions. Secondly, there should be a shift towards equal opportunities and friendly interactions, accompanied by a step away from professionalism and favouritism. There should also be an effort to design and implement well-organised programmes, creating a positive experience, to ensure that civic engagement is sustained

in the long run. Thirdly, the evidence suggests that programmes do not target those who would benefit the most from them. Because of the self-selecting nature of volunteering and social action, it is likely that those who are already sociable and confident will participate. This is especially true among girls; those with shy or less-confident disposition will be least likely to participate but the most likely to benefit.



## Political participation and social capital

The literature evidences a strong link between social action and political participation. This is especially important in the context of the UK, given the generational decline in political participation and interests (Fox, Forthcoming). There also seems to be a positive relationship between social action and social capital. However, this association is highly linked to social privileges and may widen existing inequalities.

Starting with political participation, Fox (Forthcoming) studies the link between childhood volunteering and adult political participation and assesses whether youth volunteering schemes can rectify the generational decline in voter turnout and the widening socioeconomic inequalities in political representation in the UK. Specifically, the author studies the voting turnout of 18 to 22-year-olds during the 2015 election. The results indicate that children who volunteer are more likely and feel a duty to vote in elections. This is because they are more politically interested and bound to feel that they can influence the political process. Volunteering schemes can be particularly effective in increasing generational voter turnout because they target young people with politically unengaged parents. Having politically unengaged parents leads to receiving fewer cues that spark political interest, such as news media consumption and political discussions. Volunteering can rectify this by exposing young people to political news and discussions.

Hope (2016) examines whether youth social responsibility and political efficacy beliefs are directly related to civic engagement among Black adolescents in the US. The study finds that political efficacy is related to four dimensions of civic engagement: helping, community action, formal political action, and activism. The relationship between youth social responsibility and activism is stronger for Black youth with firmer political efficacy beliefs. Participants who firmly believed that Black youth should be engaged in civic behaviour and felt positively about their own ability to participate in civic and political action were more involved in activism. However, the study has two main limitations. First, causality cannot be inferred. Second, given the sample size and composition, these findings may be limited and not generalisable.

Lau and Body (2020) consider the potential of participatory action research as a mechanism for engaging students with the political aspects of social action. Participatory action is a research method where the researchers and the participants work together to understand and resolve a problem. In this context, the participatory action research involved 160 undergraduate student researchers working with 400 young children on causes represented by local community organisations. The findings illustrate that social action can raise political awareness by engaging the students in real experiences of social issues and giving them the responsibility to advocate on behalf of another group (i.e., the children). The participatory action research approach allowed students to better comprehend the socio-political environment they work in and enabled them to view issues from children's perspective. These findings are confirmed by Garcia et al. (2014), who observe that homeless youth who took part in participatory action were able to successfully engage with and challenge policies regarding recreation, juvenile justice, and education.

Storr and Spaaij (2017) examine young people's experiences and pathways into UK sports volunteering programmes. The paper uses semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 38 teenagers aged 16 to 18 to critically assess how social, cultural, physical, and other forms of capital affect participation and its outcomes. Most respondents were from middle-class families with professional and semi-professional parents. They were encouraged from an early age to partake in sports and were chosen to participate in the programme by PE staff in their schools. The results

indicate that social privilege boosts volunteering participation through exclusivity and selection criteria. Consequently, the beneficial effects of participation (in terms of mobilising cultural and social capital) are to an important extent reserved for privileged youths. While there was no objective measure of benefits, the participants perceived that engaging in sports volunteering gave them opportunities and experiences that they can use to access educational and professional opportunities.

The thesis that volunteering can drive social privilege is also supported by Fox (2019). Using the UK's Household Longitudinal Study, the study assesses the impact of volunteering on social capital and wellbeing. The findings bring no evidence that wellbeing is causally linked to volunteering. Indeed, the strongest evidence suggests that people with better mental wellbeing are more likely to volunteer. However, there is evidence that volunteering increases social capital, and this correlation serves to widen existing inequalities. This is evident when investigating differences in social capital between those who volunteered and those who did not. Those who have more social capital are more likely to volunteer in the first place and are also bound further increase their social capital.

The evidence on the impact of social action on political participation and social capital accumulation is well-established as it is diverse. Many of the studies reviewed in this chapter not only attempt to establish a causal relationship but to also unpack the 'black box', looking at factors that mitigate the the impact of social action, such as family characteristics and socioeconomic background. While none of the studies make use of experimental designs, the wide use of household surveys and in-depth interviews provide compelling evidence and a nuanced picture.

Both the relationship between social action and political participation and that of social action and social capital seem to be mediated by personal or family characteristics. Social action is particularly beneficial in increasing political participation when an individual already possesses a sense of political efficacy. It also helps children and young people who have politically disengaged parents to be exposed to political discussions and news, increasing awareness and, consequently, voter turnout. As for the relationship between social capital and social action, this is strongly mediated by privilege. Those already possessing a strong social network are more willing to engage in social action and, in so doing, they are also more probable to strengthen existing networks.

## Personal characteristics

The relationship between social action and personal characteristics is, remarkably, the most studied relationship in the literature. Existing research overwhelmingly finds a positive correlation between engaging in volunteering or community service and higher empathy, confidence, empowerment, prosocial behaviours, and other desirable outcomes. The literature's greatest limitation is due to self-selection—those who are already predisposed for these characteristics are more willing to join volunteering programmes. Subsequently, the studies might exaggerate the causal effect of social action. Nevertheless, the literature deals with this self-selection in different ways and provides valuable insight into social action's benefits.

Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė (2016) evaluates a short-term school-based Positive Youth Development (PYD) intervention programme called “Try Volunteering in Lithuania”. The aim is to gauge its effect on empathy and prosocial behaviour 16 months after the programme. The study follows a quasi-experimental design collecting data pre-test and post-test, as well as 4-months and 16-months after the end of the programme. The results indicate that empathy increased more in the intervention group than the control group. The results also reveal that the positive change in empathy fully accounts for the relationship between participating in the programme and an increase in prosocial behaviour. Girls scored better than boys in both empathy and prosocial behaviour. The observation that increasing empathy contributes to increased prosocial behaviour suggests that youth interventions may indirectly benefit the communities.

An evaluation of the same programme was also conducted by Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė et al. (2020). The study assesses the programme's ability to help develop the Five Cs among adolescent (Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring). In the study, 615 adolescents aged 13 to 17 were assigned to treatment and control groups, with data collected before and after the intervention. The results imply that most participants showed an increase in Competence, Connection, and Caring (which remained stable for the control group) and maintained stable levels of Confidence and Character (which declined for the control group). The limitations of this study include (i) using self-report measures for the evaluation and (ii) testing very soon after the intervention (4 months). Therefore, the long-term effects of the programme cannot be established.

Gorard et al. (2020) conduct a randomised control trial in the UK to test the effect of participation in uniformed activities on young people's social and behavioural outcomes. According to teachers', staff's, parents', and students' reports, there is a positive association between participation and personal outcomes, such as self-confidence, teamwork, resilience, work aspiration, and empathy. However, the size of these effects is small; this is possibly because only a small number of students in treatment schools take part in uniformed activities and they do so for a short period of time. The intervention also provides opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in and learn from social action and volunteering activities. Importantly, the effect on pupils eligible for school meals is bigger. Since these effects are still present when comparing with survey volunteers and pupils in treatment schools, they are unlikely to be driven solely by self-selection.

Cicognani et al. (2015) study the effect of civil participation and involvement in youth organisations on youth development and wellbeing in Italy. Using a sample of 835 individuals aged 16 to 26, the authors conduct regression analysis to disentangle the effects of youth social action on the sense of community, empowerment, and social wellbeing. They find that participating in civic-oriented organisations is linked to enhanced social wellbeing. Organisations that focus more on leisure and recreation improve other outcomes (e.g., skill-building and empowerment). The degree of involvement also matters. Occasional participation in charity volunteering or youth associations is beneficial, but only long-term involvement in religious groups produces any positive effects. Age and gender are also

important. For example, participating in civic engagement and youth organisations increases empowerment and social wellbeing only for male youths. One limitation of the study is that it relies exclusively on quantitative measures that overlook the important nuances of young people's experiences and (self-)perceptions.

UK Youth (2021) carries out a literature review and an evaluation to capture the personal benefits of youth social action and how it affects long-term participation (the focus being on women and girls aged 8 to 25). The findings indicate that several factors are required for social action to become a habit. Starting at a young age and having friends and parents who are also engaged in social action are probable to result in sustained social action among young people. Additionally, young people are more willing to stay involved in social action, when they feel they have the right skillset and confidence to participate and recognise the benefits of undertaking these activities. Importantly, long-term engagement also requires opportunities to be available and widely advertised to ensure that young people can access them. Regarding personal benefits, the findings indicate that participating in social action can improve character building and non-cognitive skills, employability skills, wellbeing and mental health, active citizenship, sense of belonging, and to a lesser extent, academic achievement.

The impact of social action on wider communities remains poorly explored and understood. None of the studies in this rapid evidence assessment explores the direct impact of social action on society or the economy. In Dartington Service Design Lab (2019a), community benefits are mostly conceptualised as a result of improvements in personal characteristics. For example, a young person who participates in social action will benefit in the variety of ways explored in this chapter; subsequently, the wider community will benefit from the positive changes to the young person's characteristics.

The indirect impact outlined above is explored in Birdwell (2013). The author looks at the extent to which social action reduces crime levels through improving empathy and social awareness among young people. He cites an evaluation of the National Citizen Service (NCS), which discovers that social action not only offers access to meaningful activities but may also help changing mindsets. For example, the attitudes to anti-social behaviour improved more among NCS participants than the comparison group. Similarly, Birdwell (2013) examines the work conducted by Urban Devotion with young people, which potentially resulted in a reduction in crime rates and anti-social behaviours. It did so by providing an opportunity to engage young people who socialise on the streets and are therefore at risk. Urban Devotion is a faith-motivated organisation that works to recruit disillusioned youths to various clubs and programmes and ultimately inspire them to volunteer. However, the positive outcome discussed was solely based on individual perceptions and was not formally tested.

Most of the papers reviewed in this chapter utilise experimental designs to establish the causal relationship between social action and personal characteristics. However, because of the voluntary nature of social action, self-selection remains an issue that hinders the establishment of certain causal links; those with positive personal characteristics or those more inclined to improve in personal characteristics may be self-selecting into social action. Nevertheless, some papers attempt to mitigate this effect and reveal a positive relationship between social action and personal characteristics. Additionally, the use of experimental designs ensures that any other intervening factors are controlled. We can thus safely conclude that social action has a positive impact on personal characteristics.

The literature does detect a degree of heterogeneity in benefits across demographic and programme characteristics. For example, younger participants and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds seem to benefit the most. The effect of gender is more ambiguous. Civic engagement programmes, afterschool activities, and youth clubs result in more advantages than religion-based programmes. There is also some evidence that long-term participation is more likely to bring these positive outcomes than short-term participation.

## Employment and education

The relationship between social action, on the one hand, and employment and education, on the other, is one of the most contentious and underexplored in the literature. Evidence from previous literature reviews suggests that volunteering may improve marketable skills (e.g., confidence, teamwork, and career aspiration). These, in turn, may lead to better employment and education outcomes (Birdwell 2013; Birdwell, Birnie, and Mehan 2013). This mechanism, however, has not been accurately tested. This chapter (i) assesses research that directly tests the effect of social action on employment and education and (ii) explores the potential pathways to these outcomes.

Shaw and Angus (2020) study how youth social action can benefit the participants' career education. Using qualitative research methods (focus groups, interviews, and surveys with university students), they illustrate that participating in youth social action might increase the skills valued by employers (such as empathy, problem solving, grit and resilience, sense of community, and educational attitudes). However, the programme seems to have a positive impact only if the students take ownership of their actions. They can do so by identifying the social issues they want to address and by being actively involved in the project conceptualisation and implementation. This is essential to ensure that the programme is accessible and inclusive to students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

See et al. (2017) evaluate a youth social action programme in the UK. The study aims to assess whether participating in social action affects academic attainments and wider outcomes for students aged 13 to 14. The programme established units of the Scout Association, Fire Cadet, Sea Cadet, or St John's Ambulance in the participating schools, where trained staff held sessions and activities for students in treatment schools. The findings do not indicate that the intervention benefited academic performance. However, there were small improvements in other outcomes, including self-confidence and teamwork. For students eligible for free school meals, there was no evidence that the intervention had a positive impact on any characteristic, academic or personal. The authors attribute these results to the data quality. A quarter of the schools chosen for the treatment did not implement the programme due to lack of resources. However, the feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive, as they felt that the programme enhanced their skills and behaviours.

Siddiqui et al. (2019) appraise a school programme for primary school students in England, called Children's University (CU). CU combines outdoor activities, after-school clubs, and community social action. The evaluation focuses on outcomes for disadvantaged students through a Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT). The results indicate small gains in attitudes towards communication, teamwork, and feelings of responsibility towards peers and the local community. The gains in these areas are much greater for poorer children. As for academic achievement, the scores of volunteers were higher in the treatment group, but this was not true for the poorer pupils. This type of intervention can therefore increase the poverty gap. The main limitation of the study is that some schools that were randomly assigned to treatment and control group lacked the resources and support to implement several of the programme activities. In addition, as in most other studies, this work also relies on evaluating the outcomes of students who self-select into volunteering.

Jorgensen (2013) provides a quantitative analysis of US data to examine volunteering as a pathway to employment at times of high unemployment, when the positive effects of volunteering are emphatically relevant. The study explores various age groups, including young adults aged 18 to 25, and estimates non-working individuals' probability of being employed a year after their volunteering experience. The estimated marginal effects of volunteering are relatively large but insignificant. The authors attribute the lack of significance to the small sample size and admit that their findings are not conclusive.

Hoskins et al. (2020) analyse the relationship between youth volunteering and employment in the UK using a mixed-methods approach. In particular, they explore access to unpaid work and the relationship between different forms of unpaid work for different social groups. They authors use survey data from the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Survey and supplement them with qualitative interviews. The results indicate that family characteristics determine access to unpaid work. For example, those who grow up with more books in their homes have greater access to volunteering while those with highly educated fathers had more access to unpaid work in the private sector. However, findings reveal no evidence that unpaid work experience or volunteering have any effect on getting a job. The interviews demonstrate that those who can utilise their capital to gain volunteering experiences in their chosen field view these opportunities more favourably. Participants who engage in volunteering activities not related to their career paths report gaining personal benefits but poor gains in terms of labour market outcomes. The qualitative results back quantitative findings in terms of social background. Participants who have well educated, middle-class parents, are given the opportunity to undertake unpaid work to explore career options. Participants from more deprived families undertake unpaid work with less agency and/or sense of entitlement. They are more likely to engage in compulsory volunteering for young people with complex needs, usually in the public sector or in charities.

Using RCTs, Kirkman et al. (2016) from the Behavioural Insight Team (BIT) evaluate four social action programmes to explore their impact on young people's outcomes. The findings indicate that the programmes successfully improve, if unevenly, participants' outcomes, especially empathy and communication. Participants express a desire to undertake future volunteering, although they are less likely to donate money than non-participants. Social engagement's effect on future employability is also tested, including whether participants have better interview skills than non-participants. The results show a small improvement, although the result is only significant at the 10% level. Based on other studies conducted by the BIT, the #iwill campaign (2019) states that employers prefer employees who have undertaken social action, since they demonstrate better skills. Accordingly, 81% of young people who have participated in social action believe that this will help them develop new skills. The link, however, is not directly tested.

Pavlova and Silbereisen (2014) investigate whether people who face occupational uncertainty drop out of volunteering in Germany (measured by the question "the risk of losing my job / not finding a new job has increased"). The authors observe that among young people facing occupational uncertainty, those who are willing to exert effort to find a solution (meaning they use goal engagement to deal with occupational uncertainty) are more probable to engage in volunteering. The link between present and future volunteering and occupational uncertainty is negative for people who are not goal-engaged. The authors conclude that labour market entrants' individual agency (i.e., their beliefs and behaviours) is a crucial link between occupational uncertainty and volunteering.

The literature reviewed in this chapter on the impact of social action on employment and education outcome uses various methods and finds mixed results. The studies range from randomised control trials to qualitative assessment. Mixed results can be significantly explained by the variety of mechanisms explored, some of which yielded a positive relationship (such as privileged background as a mediating factor). In contrast, others show little correlation (improvement in interview skills). In general terms, the evidence reflects the nuanced mechanisms through and conditions in which this relationship succeeds or fails.

The findings indicate that this relationship exists solely when socioeconomic backgrounds are taken into consideration. Social action is likely to lead to better employment and education outcomes when the participants are from more privileged backgrounds. This was explained by the opportunity to access opportunities relevant to their career paths.

On the contrary, underprivileged schools often lack the resources or support or fully implement social action programmes. Therefore, it might be argued that the kind of social action discussed in this chapter widens existing socioeconomic inequalities. However, more research needs to be undertaken to clarify the type of social action programmes, interventions, or funding that can reduce the educational and professional gap between disadvantaged and privileged youth.

## Theory of change

The research findings presented in the second part of this report informed the development of a Theory of Change (ToC) framework that illustrates the pathway between social action and outcomes for young people. The ToC framework sets out the chains linking policy interventions with positive change and key benefits. However, as evidenced in the preceding chapters, not all social action programme designs lead to the desired impact. In many cases, this results from a breakdown in the mechanisms for youth engagement, as the programmes fail to provide the space or experience required for a positive impact.

We distilled the lessons learned from successful programmes and incorporated them into the mechanisms of the ToC. The ToC illustrated in Figure 1 incorporates the most successful programme elements according to evidence from the literature review. The four elements are:

- 
- **Activities:** including different types of social action undertaken by young people.
  - **Mechanisms of change:** representing young people's lived experiences of social action participation. The mechanisms of change determine the outcomes.
  - **Outcomes:** representing the intermediate results of youth participation in social action.
  - **Impact:** representing the long-term effects achieved through participation in social action.
- 

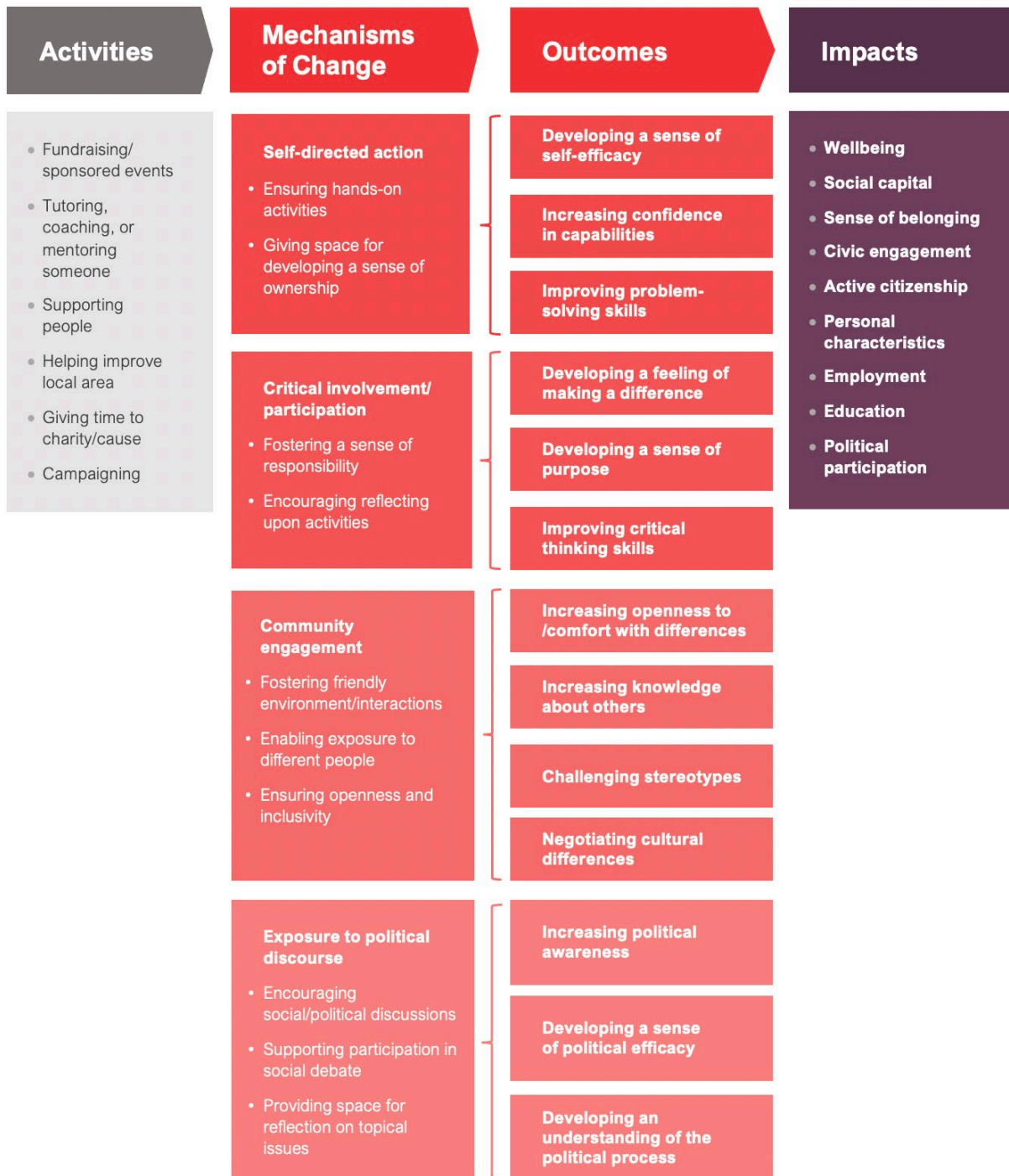
As a result, the ToC framework shown in the diagram below can act as a point of departure for programme design, depending on the desired outcome and impact.

For example, programmes designed to enhance young people's sense of belonging and civic engagement should (i) include a level of community engagement that promotes friendly interactions in a diverse setting, (ii) ensure that they are inclusive and accessible to minorities and marginalised communities, and (iii) offer space for self-directed action for participants to develop a sense of self-ownership (Carlton 2015; Šerek 2017; Fewtrell 2018; Dartington Service Design Lab 2019a; 2020b).

Similarly, programmes encouraging political discussion and providing room for critical thinking are more likely to lead to political awareness that can have tangible impacts, such as increasing political engagement and voter turnout among youth (Hope 2016; Dartington Service Design Lab 2019b; Alison Body, Lau, and Josephidou 2020; Lau and Body 2020; Fox Forthcoming).



Figure 1. Theory of Change



**Youth  
Social  
Action**

**Rapid  
Evidence  
Assessment**

**Conclusions and  
recommendations**



# Conclusions and recommendations

The DCMS commissioned this work to carry out a comprehensive review of the evidence related to the participation of children and young people in social action. Following a systematic approach that ensures the replicability of the results, this report brings together recent international and UK-based evidence on children and young people's participation in social action. This REA centres on two key areas: (i) causes of participation in youth social action and policy implications and (ii) the impact of youth social action on outcomes for young people.

## Causes of participation in youth social action and policy implications

This REA seeks to understand the level of engagement of children and young people in social action, the main determinants and barriers to participation, and how the demand and participation differ across demographics (e.g., ethnic minorities and young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds). In addition, this REA explores the evidence on the impact of digitisation and social media on youth participation in social action and the implications for the design of social action in the future. The key findings are listed below:

- The **motivation for participation** in social action is often multidimensional and relates to both self and other-oriented motives. Gaining new skills, being influenced by family or friends, and helping the community are the reasons most frequently mentioned by young people for participating in social action.
- **Barriers to participation** often relate to lack of confidence or self-esteem, lack of opportunities, lack of resources, and lack of time. Among young people, ethnic minorities and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are the two most underrepresented groups involved in social action. In the UK, the **socioeconomic gap in youth social action participation** has been relatively constant over the last five years. Interventions suggested to reduce the gap include (i) targeting schools located in more deprived areas, (ii) collaborating with local organisations already in contact with young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to boost participation, and (iii) ensuring that participation is financially sustainable for young people from less affluent families.
- The diffusion of social media opened new opportunities for organisations to engage with young people, encourage participation in social action, and ensure that organisations continued operating and engaging with young people throughout the pandemic. Moreover, **new forms of participation** in social action are possible through the popularisation of the internet and social media (e.g., online activism and mobilisation). However, online engagement might create barriers to marginalised youth who do not have access to technology.
- Social action is often presented to young people as a pattern to employment which prevents participants from developing a **sense of responsibility** towards the community and reflecting upon the meaning and role of social action. Top-down approaches to social action might create barriers to effective participation. When young people perceive that their voice is not listened to, they are more likely to disengage and less willing to consider the benefits of their action on themselves and the wider community.

## The impact of youth social action on outcomes for young people

This review focuses on evidence on the impact of youth social action on children and young people's outcomes. It selects evidence on the impact of youth social action on young people's personal characteristics and education and employment outcomes. Additionally, this REA includes findings about the impact of youth social action on the sense of belonging, civic engagement, and political participation. The key findings are listed below:

- **Socioeconomic background** can dictate the relationship between social action and outcomes. Children and young people from privileged backgrounds have more access to social action and volunteering opportunities and, as a result, are more likely to reap their benefits. Even when children and young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds undertake social action, they are less probable to benefit from them, especially in terms of education and employment outcomes. This is partly due to the differences in the type and quality of programmes they have access to.
- **Family and individual characteristics** can affect the relationship between social action and outcomes. Among girls, self-confidence increases participation in social action. However, the benefits from participation are generally relatively small as girls who would benefit the most (those who are shyer or less confident) are less likely to participate in social action. The impact of social action on civic engagement (especially voting) is stronger for youths from politically disengaged families.
- The type of social action matters. Programmes that promote friendly interactions in a diverse setting, give space for self-directed action, encourage political discussion, and provide room for critical thinking and reflection are more likely to enhance civic engagement, political participation, and a sense of belonging. In addition, programmes are more efficient when focusing on **critically engaging the children** in the importance of the cause and impact of altruism.
- While there is some evidence that volunteering improves **cognitive abilities and marketable skills**, the evidence on the direct impact of volunteering on **employment and educational attainment** is weak. However, identifying the causal impact of social action on outcomes is problematic due to self-selection. Indeed, those who chose to volunteer are bound to have good outcomes regardless. However, some evidence shows that those who are less probable to participate are the ones most likely to benefit.

Based on the evidence collected in the review, the following box includes policy recommendations for key areas to focus on in the future to boost youth involvement in social action and participation benefits. These include (i) prioritising social action programmes that prioritise diversity and inclusion, (ii) ensuring that children and young people have an active role in shaping social action programmes, and (iii) using the internet and social media to engage young people in social action.

## Policy recommendations

### **Prioritising social action programmes that focus on diversity and inclusion**

- Targeting schools located in disadvantaged areas and young people living in deprived neighbourhoods to encourage the participation of marginalised youth in social action. Social action should be designed to reduce inequality rather than exacerbate it.
- Supporting collaboration between organisations offering social action activities and local organisations already in contact with disadvantaged young people.
- Investing resources to reduce barriers to participation due to financial constraints. For example, participation fees and extra costs for young people from less affluent families should be covered by organisations.
- Schools are crucial to encourage inclusive participation; hence, all levels of schooling should be equally encouraged to and involved in supporting participation in social action.

### **Children and young people should have an active role in shaping social action programmes**

- Designing programmes that involve hands-on activities shaped by young people's needs and ideas by including young people in the design of social action.
- Ensuring that programmes provide a friendly and welcoming space for everyone to participate and include activities that play to the strengths of the participants and place them in a position of control.
- Encouraging programmes that allow young people to develop a sense of responsibility and reflect on the meaning and value of the activities they participate in. Young people should be encouraged to take ownership of their actions and appreciate their consequences for themselves and the community.
- Designing programmes that inspire altruistic acts and a feeling of community. Often charitable actions are perceived as fun and understood to be transactional by children and young people. Social action should be used as an opportunity to explore ideas and foster social and political discussion.

### **Using the internet and social media to engage young people in social action**

- Using social media and digital space to reach out to young people. Online spaces could be used to provide young people spaces to stimulate discussion and raise awareness about social issues.
- Other forms of engagement should complement online recruitment and engagement. Social media should not be the primary way to engage young people. This would create new barriers to participation for marginalised young people who do not have access to the internet.

## Areas for future research

- New research should be conducted to assess the wider effect of social action on communities and the economy, not just through improvements in personal outcomes of participants but as a direct result of the social action.
- More studies should explore the experience of youth volunteers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Specifically, studies should focus on what drives them to take part in voluntary activities. Findings can be used to design policies that encourage underprivileged youth to participate in and benefit from social action.
- Research that evaluates the effectiveness of social action programmes should also assess the quality of the programmes, explore how this leads to different outcomes, and identify which programme characteristics create the desired impacts.



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# Appendix

## Methodology

To ensure that the REA is comprehensive in its coverage of existing research, we developed a protocol agreed on with the DCMS project team for collecting the evidence. The protocol set out the research questions, inclusion criteria, and search strategy. The sections below provide details on the research questions, information sources, search strategy, and selection process.

## Research questions

This REA seeks to provide evidence-based answers to the following research questions:

### Causes of participation in youth social action and policy implications.

- Why have levels of engagement in youth social action not increased? Are certain demographics and geographic locations affected in different ways? What was the impact of funding on the level of participation?
- How have the youth social action sector and the type of social action evolved since the #iwill campaign was formed?
- Have recent developments like COVID-19, global social justice movements, and the proliferation of online activities impacted on the participation of young people in social action? If so, how?
- How is the demand and/or availability for youth volunteering roles split across sectors (public/private/charity)? What is driving this?
- What are the main challenges in the context of youth social action?
- What are the policies and programmes that should be prioritised and why? What are the funding allocation implications?
- What are the main barriers to increased participation (e.g., information, social context etc.)?
- How have the government, business,

voluntary organisations, and educational institutions supported young people engaging in social action?

- What are the existing frameworks and data sources used to measure the outcomes of youth social actions (e.g., National Youth Social Action Survey)?

### The impact of youth social action on outcomes for young people.

- What is the impact of social action on the development of young people's professional and personal skills?
- What is the impact of social action on improved mental and physical health and wellbeing?
- What is the impact of youth social action on wider society and the economy (e.g., impact on attitudes towards anti-social behaviours, civic engagement, the hidden boost to the economy through volunteering and the social impacts on those they assist etc.)? What are the implications on value for money and return on investments?
- What is the impact of youth social action on integration and community cohesion?
- What are the spill-over effects of youth social action in education and employment?
- How does youth social action support young people at risk (e.g., young people at risk of violence)?

## Information sources

We retrieved evidence from the academic literature, as well as from policy documents and other grey literature. For this purpose, we focused on the following sources to search for evidence:

- Databases of published and unpublished academic literature including ABI/Inform, Google Scholar, IDEAS, JSTOR, NBER, Project Muse, SAGE, Science Direct, SpringerLink, SSRN eLibrary.
- Websites of organisations involved in youth social action programmes such as British Youth Council, Centre for Education and Youth, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, Envision, National Youth Agency, UK Youth, The Young Foundation, #iwill Fund Learning Hub, Chartered College of Teaching.
- Websites of relevant datasets, such as National Council for Voluntary Organisations' Time Well Spent survey, and the National Youth Social Action Survey.

Additional papers provided by stakeholders engaged during the evidence search (and unavailable in the sources outlined above) were added to the list of evidence reviewed.

## Search strategy

We designed the search strategy to ensure it could thoroughly answer the key research questions. Table A1 contains the keywords that were used to identify relevant sources of evidence. During the scoping review, we tested different combinations of keywords to arrive at the final list of keywords. These keywords were combined into search strings, using Boolean operators (AND/OR/NOT) and other database-specific search operators. Thereby, we arrived at a long list of materials, which was then screened to confirm they meet the inclusion criteria.

**Table A1. List of keywords**

<b>Social action</b>	social action; volunteer* [volunteer; volunteers; volunteering]; campaign* [campaign/ campaigning]; activism; tutoring; mentoring; fundrais* [fundraise/ fundraising]; supporting peers; *#iwill; advisor
<b>Outcomes</b>	impact; effect* [effect/ effects]; outcome* [outcome/ outcomes]; benefit* [benefit/ benefits]; behaviour; character; barriers; participati* [participating/ participation]; engage* [engage/ engagement]; evaluation  National Council for Voluntary Organisations' Time Well Spent survey, the Cabinet Office's Community Life Survey, National Youth Social Action Survey
<b>Socio-emotional/character</b>	communication; empathy; self-confidence; resilience; psychological [benefits/ wellbeing]; wellbeing; happ* [happy/ happiness]; self-worth; leadership; problem solving; cooperation; teamwork [team-work/ team work]; health; mental health; self-efficacy; empowerment; skills; soft skills
<b>Societal impact</b>	civic [engagement/ participation]; social engagement; voting; political action; network; integration; community; workforce; care; cohesion
<b>Employment</b>	income; earnings; job opportunit* [opportunity/ opportunities];

	employment; job security; job skills; management; entrepren* [entrepreneur/ entrepreneurship]
<b>Education</b>	academic [attainment/ performance]; educational outcome* [outcome/ outcomes]; learning; aspiration; goals
<b>Age groups</b>	young people, youth, adolescen* [adolescent/ adolescents/ adolescence]; teen* [teen/ teens]; children
<b>Demographic groups</b>	gender, girl*[girl/ girls], boy [boy/ boys], BAME, low income; disadvantage; at risk; deprived
<b>Time period of interest</b>	Covid-19; pandemic

## Selection process

We first compiled a “long list” of relevant research papers and reports. Two members of our interdisciplinary team screened the titles and removed duplicates. They next screened the abstracts to decide which to include in the short list. The screening process to shortlist papers was carried out according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria listed in Table A2. The team identified approximately 800 studies to include in the long list.

**Table A2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Inclusion Criteria</b>	<b>Exclusion Criteria</b>
Population characteristics	Individuals aged 10 to 20 years old	Those below age 10 and those above age 20
Areas of impact/outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studies that focus on the impact of youth social action on young people’s outcomes</li> <li>• Studies that investigate the level and determinants of young people’s participation in social action.</li> </ul>	Studies focusing on programmes not considered social action
Methods	All (experimental, quasi-experimental, descriptive, qualitative etc.)	
Date of research	Post-2012 research	Pre 2012 peer review and grey literature
Language	English	Research in any other language
Geographic location	Priorities to the UK, other OECD countries or EU-27	Non-OECD or EU-27 countries

Type of studies	Peer-reviewed journal articles, non-peer-reviewed academic outputs, government-commissioned research, publications by research organisations, evidence by providers of interventions/support, government publications	Newspaper articles and editorials/opinion pieces, magazine articles
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The screening process resulted in a final short list of papers to include in the review, which were read in full. At this phase, the long list was narrowed down to a short list of approximately 130 studies. In order to assess the quality of the studies included in the short list we used the criteria listed in Table A3. The quality assessment of the evidence is based on the (i) credibility, (ii) methodology, and (iii) relevance of the study. For each category, we assigned a score of 1 to 3 (where 1 is the lowest score and 3 is the highest).

**Table A3. Quality assessment criteria**

Category	Description	Score
Credibility	Is the study coherent? Can findings be trusted? Does the author consider study limitations or alternative interpretations of the analysis? Has the study been peer-reviewed?	1-3
Methodology	Is the research design/methodology adopted appropriately to answer the research question(s)?	1-3
Relevance	Does the study help to answer the research question(s)?	1-3
Overall judgment	Considering the above categories, what is the overall judgment?	3-9

Table A4 shows the selection process and the total number of studies reviewed in each phase. The total number of papers included in the reading list (the list of papers included in this report) was 87.

**Table A4. Selection process**

Step	Criteria	Number of papers
From search list to long list	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exclude studies that are not in English</li> <li>Exclude studies that are not related to the countries of interest</li> <li>Exclude studies that are not remotely relevant to the topics</li> </ul>	From 1800 to 600
From long list to short list	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exclude studies that are prior to 2012</li> <li>Exclude blog posts and journal articles</li> <li>Exclude studies that do not tackle the age range of interest</li> </ul>	From 600 to 130

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From short list to reading list

- Rank studies according to coherence, relevance, and methodology (each out of 3 for a total of 9)
- Exclude studies that have a lower rank than 7 (mostly due to methodology or narrow scope)

From 130 to 87

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