

Is a seat at the table enough to safeguard mental health? A scoping review of the mental health and wellbeing impacts of youth participation and engagement

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Background:

There is a growing prevalence of youth participation initiatives including advisory groups, representative councils, advocacy or activism, but still little understanding on how young people can safely and effectively engage in these roles. Previous reviews have focused on specific aspects of youth participation (e.g., activism), whereas this scoping review is the first to comprehensively synthesise the existing literature on Youth Mental Health and/or Wellbeing (MHWB) outcomes associated with a variety of youth engagement activities.

Methods:

A scoping review was conducted, following Joanna Briggs Institute and PRISMA guidelines. The search strategy included databases including Scopus, PsycINFO, Embase, Medline, and grey literature, screening publications from 1999-2023 that explored the association between youth participation and MHWB outcomes of young people aged 15-24.

Results:

Of 2,251 peer-reviewed articles screened, three non-original and 69 original research studies were included which comprised in total 69,297 young people. Of the 69 original studies, 27 used a quantitative approach, 31 a qualitative approach, and 11 used mixed methodologies. Civic engagement (including activism and advocacy) and youth leadership and governance (including advisory councils and research settings) programs predominantly reported positive MHWB outcomes such as empowerment, increased self-esteem, self-efficacy, confidence, leadership, and decision-making skills. Negative outcomes were mainly described as frustration with lack of community change, resistance to youth engagement, burnout, hopelessness, or macro-worries (environmental destruction, world hunger). Five overarching components were discovered to positively impact MHWB outcomes: clear communication, program impact, support, content/structure, and skill-building. From these components, guidelines for supporting youth MHWB outcomes were developed for organisations providing youth participation initiatives.

Conclusions:

This scoping review provides valuable evidence for achieving safe and inclusive participation with positive MHWB outcomes and provides detailed assessments depending on the types of youth participation. Ultimately, many youth-relevant decision-making processes could benefit from meaningful youth participation drawing upon their perspectives and lived experiences.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

FY – none, DM – none