YOUTH RESEARCH: THE ESSENTIALS

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth

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" *Dear readers,*

We are pleased to present "Youth research: the essentials". This short text aspires to help the reader gain a better and immediate understanding of the purpose, scope and usefulness of research on youth. It also describes how various stakeholders in the youth field, and beyond, can make use of youth research. It does not intend to present the state of contemporary youth research, nor showcase youth research projects, but focuses on addressing the following questions.

- ► *What is youth research?*
- ► *How do we define "youth"?*
- ► *What are the theoretical influences of youth research?*
- ► *Why do we need youth research?*
- ► *What are the main types and methodologies of youth research?*
- ► *What is participatory youth research?*
- ► *What is the relation between youth research and policy making?*
- ► *What ethical elements are we to consider when doing youth research?*
- ► *What do the Council of Europe and the European Union think about youth research?*
- ► *What are the current challenges in youth research in Europe?*

The first paragraphs are short and sharp, while further down the text is more specific, yet concise. This narrative aims at guiding the reader through a short, incremental – and hopefully intriguing – discovery process.

We hope you will enjoy reading it!

What is youth research?

Youth research is a multidisciplinary area of scientific inquiry into the condition of young people that uses social, psychological, economic, political and cultural perspectives. "Youth" is a temporary phase in a person's life course, but it also exists permanently as a demographic category with special and unique characteristics, and as such it is worth study in its own right. This is where youth research comes in. While many perspectives on youth exist, youth researchers challenge the idea that young people are "adults in the making". Instead, most researchers study young people as they are, and not as who they will be, in terms of their social identities, cultures and relations with society's main structures: family, school, labour market, politics, media, market, religions and so forth.

The original focus of youth research was almost entirely on addressing problems associated with young people, such as crime and unemployment. While a particular strand of research continues to focus on "youth as a problem", this has largely been surpassed by an agenda which seeks a comprehensive understanding of young people's experiences, roles, relationships, power and transitioning within society. Both the Council of Europe and the European Commission have supported the development of youth research, not least through the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership, established in 1998, and which strongly encourages a close relationship with the policy and practice environment.

How to define "youth"

Youth is often understood as a period of transitioning to autonomous life: from learning to working, from dependent to independent living, etc. It is a socially constructed concept: this means that it is not something fixed and definite, but instead it is created and understood each time that it is used. What we define as "youth" varies in time and space; different societies have defined "youth" in highly contrasting ways. We only have to think about how the age that certain activities become legal, such as voting, drinking alcohol, having consensual sex, being deemed criminally responsible and so forth, varies by country. Today, the age-range 15 to 29 is often used across Europe. Under the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, various opportunities are available for young people aged 13 to 30. Most activities of the youth sector of the Council of Europe are available to young people aged 18 to 30, with justified exceptions. For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines youth as people between the ages of 15 and 24.

Why do we need youth research?

First of all, young people are an important part of our societies and we have an ethical obligation to understand their reality in a systematic way. Second, to understand broader social change it is necessary to know how young people contribute to societal transformation, and how external circumstances influence their lives. Third, when designing policies, interventions, programmes, projects, activities and so forth, professionals need to know whether what is being done is likely to be of some help, and if so, to what extent. That extent may then be monitored to illustrate the impact. Without being naïve about the ways in which policy and practice interventions are actually shaped, we assert that sound evidence on and from young people offers a better base than ideology or intuition.

Theoretical influences in youth research

Youth research is genuinely multidisciplinary: psychology, sociology, political science, social policy, cultural and gender studies, anthropology and pedagogy have all contributed to its development in some way. It is informed by a myriad of theories and approaches, of which we list a few here, so that you can deepen your knowledge by doing some research. Early psychological theories tended to focus on child development but also contained ideas about life stages beyond childhood. More recent approaches have focused on individualisation, risk, resilience and agency, for example the sociological theories of Beck and Giddens have had a profound influence on youth studies.

What are the main types of research influencing policy making?

R esearch can be based on knowledge collected through direct observation and human interaction, known as primary empirical research, or it can be based on the analysis of various texts, referred to as secondary research. When answering questions posed by policy makers in regard to the effects of policy interventions, the outcomes are often called evaluation, monitoring or impact studies.

Research designs aim to inform policy makers about what works, what sounds promising and what does not work. That is to say that each research issue can be addressed in a variety of ways and that the uses and limitations of the evidence collected need to be understood. Researchers often have a preference for a particular type of evidence and will specialise in a particular methodology. Methodologies such as questionnaire surveys, focus groups, semi-structured interviews are all legitimate ways to collect data and they all can help us understand youth-related issues. Each method produces a different form of data (put simply, statistics versus quotes) and consequently the research questions they address tend to vary. Each, however, produces an evidence-based result. This is sometimes described as "evidence supported", "research based", "evidence informed" or "knowledge based".

▬▬ Youth research has both quantitative and qualitative methodological traditions.

▬▬ Quantitative research often verifies predefined hypotheses. Data collection comes after careful preparation and piloting of the tools chosen, for example a questionnaire. Quantitative research provides numerical information and, if conducted in a specific way, produces results that can be generalised to the wider population, beyond the group of people who answered the questions. It is also possible to conduct quantitative research on pre-existing data that are collected for administrative purposes, such as data on education performance, health and taxes. National governments routinely collect such data, which are increasingly being used by researchers, sometimes also linked to additional survey data. Lastly, the developing field of "Big Data" uses large datasets, generated through processes such as social media or geo-coded records (for example on crime), and complex mathematical models to dig into the data and search for patterns.

▬▬ Qualitative research is often exploratory and generates hypotheses; it tends to be more open to unanticipated findings than survey research. It can have an interactive design: data collection and interpretation are often simultaneous processes that can influence each other. However, a qualitative research design should not be an excuse for lack of structure or the confirmation of pre-existent ideas. Researchers need to identify and become aware of their biases, which are ideas that we all possess and which determine our way of thinking and looking at the world without our being aware of them, and actively search for opportunities to eliminate pre-existent biases during the fieldwork.

Some qualitative data collection methods which could also be used in youth research are presented below.

▶ **Interviews** are a particular type of conversation with one or two persons (pair interviews) that have an agreed purpose, structure and time frame. These can be semi-structured – following a set of pre-stated questions or themes, or more open and conversational.

▶ **Focus groups** are organised discussions among a limited number of people. They allow researchers to explore how members of a group think about an issue, the existing range of opinions and ideas, and the inconsistencies and variations that exist in a particular community in terms of beliefs and their experiences and practices. A focus group is often designed to have a common set of member characteristics (age, sex, class, etc.) and this may serve to produce less diversity.

▶ **Case studies:** are in-depth descriptions of a process, experience or structure at a single organisation or community. Case studies generally involve a mix of quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to answer a combination of "what" and "why" questions.

When the amount of data is high, software can help in their analysis. No matter how useful the chosen tools, software programmes do not provide an interpretation themselves. The researcher remains "the main instrument" in qualitative research.

No method can ensure quality by itself. Both qualitative and quantitative research designs need to be carefully described in the analysis to ensure that readers can fully understand what was done and why, and in some instances maybe even to replicate the research. A mandatory section of any research report refers to its limitations, answering the question: in which ways might our interpretation be incorrect?

Participatory research

In many cases, and after accurate analysis of the opportunities and risks of such a choice, youth researchers can opt to engage in participatory research. The aim of participatory research is to empower young people to take an active part in all phases of a research process. A participatory research process aims to first identify the problems that a community is facing, and their roots and causes, and then to define the change that the research project would like to generate. With unbiased guidance, participants will gradually gain control over the research agenda, define the research questions and choose the most appropriate research methodologies, such as participatory action research, photo voice, storytelling, participatory theatre or elements of social theatre. More than this, with training and the support of a research team, the participants can be shown how to analyse the data gathered and draft the conclusions of the research process. These conclusions will then help when approaching different stakeholders – public authorities, other community members, etc. – to ask for support for the planned change process.

Monitoring and evaluation of youth policy and practice

Monitoring and evaluation are research-based processes that assess the implementation of programmes and policy goals and objectives. While monitoring is a continuous process that ensures adequate implementation of youth policy and practice, evaluation is usually conducted at different specific phases.

▬▬ **Ex-ante evaluations** take place at the early stages of a process and analyse its anticipated impact with the aim of optimising its implementation.

▬▬ The **midterm evaluation** should preferably be carried out by an external team of experts, who assess the progress of the process. A midterm evaluation can recommend, if appropriate, adjustments or revision of goals based on experiences learned, or on external factors.

▬▬ A **final evaluation** is an independent assessment, which must be carried out by an external team of experts. Its purpose is to assess the extent to which the goals and objectives of the process have been achieved.

▬▬ Governments often develop national youth strategies, which are based on **ex-ante evaluations** and include features of monitoring, midterm and final evaluation.

▬▬ **Impact assessment** evaluates the effect of youth policies, structures and services. Impact studies can draw conclusions on the actual state of the youth sector in a country or territory and provide concrete recommendations for improvement.

▬▬ **Experimental research and randomised controlled trial** (or randomised control trial) can also be used to evaluate policy interventions.

Ethics

E thical issues are closely associated with data protection and informed consent, which means that participants in research projects must be well, and appropriately, informed of the scope and effects of the enquiry[1] and their participation, as well as of the possibility to withdraw during the research process. Ethical principles should be incorporated into the entire research process: from the choice of its theme and research questions, to decisions on methods, interpretation and the use of results. Major ethical challenges arise when carrying out research with disadvantaged groups, including children, minorities and young people with disabilities. Despite claims of objectivity, researchers may bring to each study their experiences, ideas, prejudices and personal philosophies, which we presented already earlier as bias. Research bias has to be acknowledged and mitigated. Ethical considerations also include the avoidance of any breach of research integrity, which means, in particular, avoiding fabrication of data, falsification of material, and plagiarism, that is, using somebody else's work without acknowledging authorship.

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1. Informed Consent Form Templates, www.who.int/rpc/research_ethics/informed_consent/en/, accessed 29/01/2019.

European level: policy context and relevance

The Council of Europe formally identified a need for youth research in 1967 in Parliamentary Assembly Order No. 265. It reaffirmed the role of youth research as a principal element of the youth sector's approach to generating knowledge on the situation of young people in Europe within the Declaration on the Future of the Council of Europe Youth Policy – Agenda 2020,[2] and the Committee of Ministers Resolution CM/Res(2008)23 on the youth policy of the Council of Europe.[3] The Council of Europe promotes knowledge-based youth policy and co-operation between youth researchers, policy makers and practitioners.

▬▬▬ The European Commission set a "greater understanding of youth" as one of the four priority areas in its White Paper "A new impetus for European youth",[4] adopted in 2001, the aim of which, among other, was to increase knowledge of youth-related issues through peer learning and co-operation among the EU Member States. The importance of better knowledge on youth was reaffirmed by the EU Strategy for Youth: Investing and Empowering[5] for 2010-2018, when the first EU Youth Reports were issued. The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027[6] also recognises evidence-based policy making and knowledge building as valuable strategy implementation measures.

▬▬▬ The EU-Council of Europe youth partnership's role related to knowledge on youth originated from the 2003 research agreement between the European Commission and the Council of Europe. The EU-CoE youth partnership now has "better knowledge" on youth as one of its specific and permanent objectives, focusing on collection and analysis of data on young people, using knowledge to contribute to quality development in youth policy and practice and making it available online and in research publications in the *Youth Knowledge* series.

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2. www.coe.int/en/web/youth/agenda-2020.
3. https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016805d2245.
4. COM(2001)681, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3Ac11055.
5. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52009DC0200&from=EN.
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Challenges and open questions

Many networks and organisations are working to create a European youth research space, through direct intervention or networking in projects: from the above-mentioned EU-Council of Europe youth partnership,[7] to the European Sociological Association and its group RN30 – Youth & Generation,[8] to the International Sociological Association and its committee RC34 Sociology of Youth,[9] to RAY – Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of Erasmus+: Youth in Action Programme.[10] As most youth researchers remain located at the national or local level, it is important to invite especially, but not exclusively, the younger generation of youth researchers to take part in dialogue at the European level. This can provide motivation for researchers from central, eastern and southern Europe where youth research is either novel, underfunded or limited by reduced possibilities for international co-operation.

The fields of youth policy and practice in Europe are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of embracing a knowledge-based approach, and that solid research must sustain decisions and provide evaluation of policy and practice implementation. Applying stricter methodological approaches, involving more young people in relevant research projects on youth and co-operating with youth researchers in all phases of policy making and practice, from the analysis of needs and designing the guiding questions through implementation to evaluation, may further advance this agenda.

7. https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/research.
8. https://www.europeansociology.org/research-networks/rn30-youth-generation.
9. https://www.isa-sociology.org/en/research-networks/research-committees/rc34-sociology-of-youth/.
10. https://www.researchyouth.eu/.

Further reading

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Research on youth is becoming increasingly recognised as an indispensable companion of effective, impactful policy and practice. To make it more accessible and better understood, this short text, written by members of the Pool of European Youth Researchers, co-ordinated by the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership, aspires to help the reader gain a better and immediate understanding of the purpose, scope and usefulness of research on youth. It also describes how various stakeholders in the youth field, and beyond, can make use of youth research. It does not intend to present the state of contemporary youth research, nor showcase youth research projects, but focuses on addressing specific questions such as: What is youth research? What are the theoretical influences of youth research? Why do we need youth research?

It is the authors' wish, through this publication, to make research on youth closer and more accessible to all actors in the youth field in Europe and beyond.

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

www.coe.int

The Member States of the European Union have decided to link together their know-how, resources and destinies. Together, they have built a zone of stability, democracy and sustainable development whilst maintaining cultural diversity, tolerance and individual freedoms. The European Union is committed to sharing its achievements and its values with countries and peoples beyond its borders.

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