

## Children's right to the city: the emergence of youth councils in the United States

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### ABSTRACT

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) spells out many rights, including the right to participate in decision-making. Within an urban context, a child's 'right to the city' includes the opportunity to participate in local governance. Youth councils (YCs) provide such opportunities. Using a nationwide survey in the United States, this paper describes YC characteristics and accomplishments. Findings show that YCs generally operate with little funding and are commonly administered within parks and recreation departments or city council offices. In addition, YCs created prior to the 1990s primarily addressed youth-related problems, whereas those created after 2000, focused more on leadership skills. Significant accomplishments reported by YCs include the development of leadership skills and knowledge of government, and community-based service projects. The conclusion considers the impact of YCs on furthering the goals of the CRC and giving youth access to decision-making.

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### Introduction

Historically, city planning and development have facilitated the production and consumption of goods and services (Weber 1921; Sjoberg 1965; Pirenne 1927), along with the efficient operation of auxiliary systems, such as transportation and communication. The management and spatial patterns of contemporary cities reflect these priorities. Chief producers and consumers – often paid adult workers and their employers – have been the primary beneficiaries, short-changing those who cannot translate their needs into an effective market demand, including children and youth.

Attempts by local governments to address unmet needs of their young populations follow two broad approaches. The first, and most typical, is to determine service and facility requirements through needs assessments. More recently, a second, rights-based approach has gained ascendancy, shifting the deficit-oriented process to one that treats children and youth as capable participants and partners in decision-making, rather than passive recipients of services.

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted by the General Assembly in 1989, provides the basis for a rights-based approach to address the underrepresentation of children in urban development.<sup>1</sup> Defining children as those under age 18, it spells out many rights, including the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them (Article 12) (United Nations Human Rights 1989). National governments of the 195 countries that ratified the CRC have a mandate to support implementation at the local level. Although most city governments

have been slow to establish participatory processes with children and youth, in many countries there is growing interest in making cities more ‘child-friendly’ (e.g. Malone 2006).<sup>2</sup>

The child-friendly city movement builds on renewed and growing attention to the ‘rights to the city’ (e.g. Mitchell 2003; Harvey 2008), and comes in the wake of new normative frameworks and action plans on human rights that emerged out of several world summits during the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, rights to the city refers not only to individual access to resources, but also to the exercise of collective power to shape urban development and structure. In other words, child-friendly cities not only welcome children by providing safe and accessible streets and public spaces, and supporting independent mobility, but also by creating opportunities for their participation in local governance and decision-making. Although, the United States is one of only two countries not to have ratified the CRC,<sup>4</sup> a number of US cities have embarked on promising initiatives that promote child-friendly policies and practices, often with strategies that support participatory decision-making. One such strategy involves creating a youth council.

Youth councils (YCs) are community-wide entities connected with *local* decision-making, made up primarily of young people. They are not to be confused with councils consisting of adults interested in youth issues, such as those established under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 to create job training for youth (Oloff 2003).

Several publications with instructions for creating YCs exist. For example, the *National League of Cities* offers templates and tips (Abdus-Sabur et al. 2001; Maker and Karpman 2007), the *Forum for Youth Investment* provides advice for forming effective YCs (Martin et al. 2007), and the Hampton, Virginia Youth Commission developed a manual on starting a YC (Carlson et al. 2007). Despite these how-to guides, there is no empirical research on YCs in the United States to understand the impetus behind their creation, their composition and responsibilities, and their accomplishments. This study aims to address this knowledge gap.

This paper briefly reviews research on YCs in various countries to provide an international context. This is followed by an overview of characteristics and a discussion of major accomplishments, based on interview and survey data gathered through a nationwide study. The conclusion considers the impact of YCs on furthering the goals of the UNCRC Article 12. Implications for future research are also discussed.

### **International context**

YCs exist in numerous countries and operate at several levels of government. Many countries have a national YC to provide a coordinating or supportive structure for local or regional councils, often recommending guiding principles and implementation strategies.

Viewed as exemplary, the ‘Connect Youth’ program in Scotland was launched in 1995 through a partnership between the Scottish Community Education Council, Youth Link Scotland and the Principal Community Education Officers Group to promote effective youth involvement in decision-making processes and provide guiding principles for local organizations. A network of youth forums throughout Scotland was an outcome of this program (Matthews and Limb 1998). Subsequently, the Scottish Youth Parliament, formed in 1999, consists of democratically elected youth aged 14–25 who represent 32 local authorities. It is a fundamentally rights-based organization grounded in the UNCRC, particularly Article 12.<sup>5</sup>

Northern Ireland also has a long history of YCs, including the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF), created in 1979 by the Department of Education to represent the views of youth in government, raise awareness of youth rights, and make senior leaders aware of youth views (York Consulting Limited 2005). Later changes addressed NIYF’s top-down approach and to recognize the value of young people’s views more readily (Matthews and Limb 1998). The national government provides funding via the Youth Council for Northern Ireland.<sup>6</sup>

The *Funky Dragon*, formed in 2002, is the Children and Young People’s Assembly for Wales, to give 0–25 year olds a voice on issues that affect them (York Consulting Limited 2005). Its Grand

Council includes elected youth representatives from most of the 22 Welsh Local Authorities and supports input into decision-making at the national level, provides training, presents the case of young people to service providers, and plans events. A key objective is to '[f]acilitate the involvement of children & young people in the monitoring and reporting process of the UNCRC, holding duty bearers to account' (Funky Dragon 2015).

France also has a national network of YCs, with some councils established as early as the 1970s. In the 1990s, France experienced a major push for YCs, leading to over 2000 children and youth councils in existence today (Cicchelli 2009), 400 of which are coordinated by the *Association Nationale des Conseils d'Enfants et de Jeunes* (ANACEJ) (ANACEJ 2012). Established in 1991, ANACEJ, provides implementation strategies for local councils to focus on the expression of youth values and the acquisition of citizenship skills (Matthews 2001). The YCs consist of people aged 16–26 who coordinate meetings, festivals, debates, and information campaigns (Cicchelli 2009). However, in recent years, YCs have been increasingly abandoned as doubts are raised regarding their capacity to influence decision-making (Cicchelli 2009).

There are also approximately 1200 local YCs for younger children, ages 9–18 years, in France. Cicchelli (2009) suggests these councils represent four engagement models, ranging from simple inclusion without capacity to impact chance, to meaningful engagement that recognizes young people as partners with a unique worldview and capacity for action.

A trans-national network of European YCs was established in 2011 with representatives from Estonia, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden. Called the *European Network of Local Youth Councils* (ENLYC), this umbrella organization focuses on networking between councils, the exchange of ideas and experiences, and strengthening the political position of YCs in Europe (ENLYC 2012). Each of the member countries has a national YC. For example, the *Estonian National Youth Council* (ENL), established in 2002, is an umbrella organization for 57 regional and local YCs (<http://www.enl.ee/en/ENL>). It promotes cooperation between youth organizations and participation by young people, focusing on legislation and financing. In 2010, the ENL organized and hosted training seminars for establishing YCs, member events and dialogues, International Youth Day celebrations, and a shadow election, among others (Estonian National Youth Council Annual Report 2011).

In Nepal, a growing desire to implement the CRC coincided with the emergence of child clubs in the late 1990s, managed in varying degrees by children themselves (Rajbhandary, Hart, and Khatiwada 1999). Nepal's policies promote participation by girls and boys at key levels of government. For example, some 76,000 child club representatives (half of whom are girls) now have a voice in the government's 35,000 ward citizen forums nationwide (UNICEF 2014).

In South America, again facilitated through implementation of the CRC, young people in several countries have been extensively involved in participatory budgeting through various local governance mechanisms, including YCs (Cabannes 2005). For example, in Barra Mansa (Brazil), 18 boys and 18 girls are elected by their peers to ensure that the municipal council addresses their needs and priorities. Every year since 1998, more than 6000 children have taken part in discussions and assemblies to elect their child councilors and discuss their own priorities. The elected children learn how to represent their peers within democratic structures, to prioritize based on available resources, and develop projects within the complex and often slow bureaucratic government process (Guerra 2005).

The interest in YCs around the world demonstrates wide-spread recognition of the perceived importance of youth voice and youth participation in local decision-making. Yet, we lack a comprehensive profile of basic characteristics that hinders an examination of key trends and national variations. In addition, a review of the integration of children's rights into municipal action concluded that, in spite of significant innovation and commitment to making cities better places for children, there was generally more interest in showcase projects than in broader changes in awareness and inclusion; more interest in the development of projects than in sustaining them; and very little

attention to monitoring and evaluation, or to child impact assessment (Bartlett 2005). These issues remain as relevant today as they were ten years ago and highlight the need to better understand YCs.

In addition, the US case is of interest because as one of only two countries not to have ratified the CRC, its YCs resulted from local initiatives which, unlike YCs elsewhere, were not supported by higher level policies, legislation and resources. The next section describes the methods used in this study.

## Methods

Unlike the ENLYC and the ENL, there is currently no umbrella organization or national registry of YCs in the United States from which to identify local YCs. Therefore, cities with YCs were identified through internet searches and websites of organizations, such as the National League of Cities, the California League of Cities, and the Youth Council Institute, as well as querying staff at various organizations.

For this study, the term city was defined loosely to represent an urban or suburban area in which children and youth live and go to school. A majority of the responding YCs represented a single city. However, a few represented regional areas, such as a county or school district. For each YC, we identified a contact person, most often the YC adult supervisor or a relevant staff person, such as a city manager or parks and recreation director, to whom we sent the questionnaire. All respondents indicated they were knowledgeable about the establishment, structure, and accomplishments of the YC.

The data for this study were collected in 2011 through an online questionnaire. A total of 225 cities were contacted. Initially, 92 responded. A follow-up email resulted in 24 additional responses. A final reminder email produced a further 23 responses, bringing the total to 139, representing a 61% response rate. Two cities declined to participate, one indicated that its YC was defunct, and 83 did not respond. The study was approved as exempt by the Institutional Review Board at the authors' University because it gathered data from public officials and did not ask respondents for personal information. However, data collection, analysis, and presentation conformed to ethical research practices. A comparison of YCs included with those that did not respond did not reveal significant differences in terms of population size or regional location. It is plausible that our findings are representative for YCs across the United States today.

After piloting, the questionnaire was revised into a final version with 31 questions about background; impetus for establishment; YC responsibilities; adult roles; member eligibility and composition; funding; recommendations; and Youth Master Plans.<sup>7</sup> Questions were selected in order to obtain a wide-ranging profile of YCs in the United States. The survey responses were supplemented by census data on city size, median household income, and population composition. Quantitative data were analyzed in SPSS statistical software. Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed with NVivo™ content analysis software. The answers to four such questions were double-coded by a trained external researcher to test inter-coder agreement and assess interpretative validity. The average agreement was 99.4% and the calculated Kappa coefficient was 0.95, indicating a high level of inter-observer agreement to warrant confidence in the validity of the content analysis (Landis and Koch 1977; Fleiss 1981).

## Findings: a profile of youth councils in the United States

For an initial understanding of how YCs in the United States support children's rights to the city, the next sections describe characteristics such as the geographical location and organizational home of YCs, why they were established, their annual budget and funding sources, their composition and responsibilities, and the roles of adults. We follow this overview with an assessment of significant accomplishments.

## Establishment and impetus

YCs are a relatively new phenomenon in the United States, with a majority of those surveyed (57%) established after the year 2000. Less than one-third (29%) were created in the 1990s, and relatively few have earlier origins (14%). Responses to an open-ended question asking why they established a YC fall into three main categories: to solicit youth input on community issues (62%); to provide skill-building and leadership opportunities that encourage youth to become civically involved (41%); and to address specific youth-related problems (17%).

Further analysis shows a relationship between the impetus for the creation of YCs and when they were established. Respondents for older YCs more frequently cited the *existence of problems* as precipitating factors. For example, the earliest documented YC in the United States, the Manhasset Youth Council, created in 1943, was a 'justly famous pattern of community coordination for youth service which may be adapted to meet the needs of many American communities seeking a solution for their *youth problems*' (Jostyn 1945, 417; italics added). The emphasis on service provision to address problems is clear.<sup>8</sup> It was 'basically a program for developing wholesome spare-time activities for young people' (Jostyn 1945, 419).

The Manhasset YC deserves mention because it attracted national attention and inspired similar efforts in other localities. It was widely publicized in a brochure that sequeled a report in *Life Magazine*, tellingly titled 'Our Kids Are in Trouble,' and featured in 'Youth in Crisis,' a film shown in more than 14,000 US theaters in 1943. It was also recommended as a model by the American Women's Voluntary Services, an organization that supported youth-serving programs. Other emblematic examples of a pre-occupation with youth problems include: Simi Valley, CA, whose YC was established in 1970 to curb teenage delinquency; Fort Collins, CO, which in 1994 wanted to counter a gang presence; and Cary, NC, which formed a YC in 1989 to address the 'lack of things to do' for teens.

The intent to address problems as a motivation for establishing YCs declined from 41% for YCs formed between 1960 and 1989 to just 4% for those created after 2004 (Table 1). Conversely, the importance of skill-building, leadership development, and civic engagement as a YC goal steadily increased, from 35% to 81%. For example, Olathe, KS, created a YC and two associated youth programs, mirroring the three branches of US government 'to help youth learn about local government and affect local affairs.' Similarly, Wichita, KS, established a YC to 'give youth an opportunity to weigh in on community issues and learn about city government,' and Syracuse, UT, formed a YC to 'enable youth to make a positive difference in their community.'

This rise in salience of programs to develop youth leadership skills and promote active citizenship coincided with the advancement of positive youth development frameworks, such as the Search Institute's 40 developmental assets in 1990 (Mannes, Roehlkepartain, and Benson 2005). In much the same vein, recent findings showed that 66% of US cities used the Search Institute's framework or a similar model, such as 'Communities that Care' or 'Ready by 21,' when creating a youth master plan (Cushing 2014).

**Table 1.** Impetus for the creation of YCs by year (1960–2009).

Year when YC was created	Impetus for creation of YC						N
	Youth-related problem <sup>a</sup>		Skill-building, leadership, civic engagement <sup>b</sup>		Youth input into decision-making <sup>c</sup>		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	
1960–1989	41%	59%	35%	65%	53%	47%	17
1990–1999	17	83	40	60	60	40	30
2000–2004	16	84	49	51	68	32	37
2005–2009	4	96	81	19	62	38	26

<sup>a</sup> $\chi^2 = 12.4$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .006$

<sup>b</sup> $\chi^2 = 10.1$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .018$

<sup>c</sup> $\chi^2 = 1.29$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p = n.s.$

Some cities recognize that addressing youth problems and giving youth a voice are not mutually exclusive. For example, in 1980, Tempe, AZ, created a YC to advise the mayor and city council, after city government recognized that effective solutions to teen problems – such as substance abuse, pregnancy, and violence – required the involvement of youth themselves.

City size was not associated with the impetus for creating YCs, but there was some relation with their organizational home. When YCs were affiliated with a city council or administrative department, providing youth with a voice in the community (81%), and providing skill-building and leadership opportunities (65%) were more likely reasons for their creation. A quarter of the communities (25%) also indicated that their YC was created due to the knowledge, passion or interests of a community leader.

Only 5% of the respondents indicated that youth specifically initiated or requested the YC. This is echoed in research from the UK, ‘Adults often establish youth councils largely because they are perceived to provide tangible opportunities deemed to enable ongoing participation by young people rather than because of a demand from young people themselves’ (Matthews 2001, 93).

### Location

The 139 YCs included in this study are located across 35 states. A high concentration in California (36%) is likely related to that state’s implementation of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 which encouraged leadership development and job training programs for youth (California Department of Education 2012). This is significant in that it suggests the importance of higher level normative, technical, and financial support for establishing YCs in local communities. A pilot study of Michigan YCs also found that a permanent charter can afford stability, whereas an informal structure can make YCs vulnerable (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway 2010).

Within local government structures, departments of parks and recreation are the most common administrative home for YCs (33%), while city council and mayoral offices house 25% of YCs, followed by 18% located in human- and community services departments. However, in large cities (population greater than 500,000), more than one-half of YCs operate in specialized contexts such as a university cooperative extension, a public and media affairs office, a volunteer center, and a leisure services department. Large cities represent greater institutional completeness (Breton 1964) with specialized organizational niches, made possible by a larger critical population mass (Fischer 1995). Large cities, therefore, would appear capable of providing more support for YCs than smaller cities. Yet, they may also function more in departmental silos. Whereas departments in smaller cities, with limited staff, may be less insular because they must rely more on coordination and collaboration for greater effectiveness, and thus reduced fragmentation.

Comments from respondents regarding lessons learned speak to this point of intersectoral cooperation and interorganizational communication. When asked what they would change about their YC to increase its effectiveness, the most common response included building more partnerships with community leaders or other stakeholders (reported by 32%). One respondent wrote, ‘I would like to see more interaction with City Council. The Council and Mayor recognize [the youth council members] as assets, but don’t solicit information enough in my opinion.’

### Funding and expenditures

Most YCs operate with very little funding. More than one-third (41%) operate with an annual budget of less than \$5000, while an additional 17% received no funding. For the remaining YCs, budgets varied widely: 26% received between \$5000 and \$19,000; 9% received between \$20,000 and \$59,000 annually; and a small number (6%) received more than \$60,000 annually. Budget size is unrelated to city size or how long YCs have been in existence. However, YCs tend to be located in somewhat more affluent communities. The average median household income for communities with YCs was \$64,632 and 65% are located in cities with median incomes above the 2010 US median

household income of \$50,046 (US Dept of Commerce 2012). City median income is, however, unrelated to YC budget size.

The most common funding source is a city's general fund (57%), followed at a considerable distance by fundraising activities (18%), and grants or donations from organizations, such as the United Way, the Surdna Foundation and State Farm Companies Foundation (17%). Most YCs (74%) receive money from only one of these sources. In addition, some YCs generate a portion of their own funding by activities, such as hosting a pay parking lot during a community event.

Although it was outside the scope of this study to analyze budget expenditures, it is important to note that one-fifth of YCs use available funds to award grants to local organizations or individuals offering youth-oriented activities or programs. For example, Homer, AK's YC operates an annual grants program to fund programs addressing issues important to Homer's youth. This program was recognized by the Association of Fundraising Professionals, Alaska Chapter with the 2008 'Outstanding Youth in Philanthropy award.' A recent study shows that youth participation in grant-making is a promising strategy for empowering youth voice, especially when youth serve on advisory councils to assess community needs (Richards-Schuster 2012).

### Eligibility

Almost all YCs have eligibility requirements, such as age or school year. A majority of councils (65%) comprise high-school age youth only, sometimes including all high-school grades and other times only select grades, such as 11 and 12. One-third of YCs are open to middle- and high-school age students, while only 1% are limited to middle-school students. In addition, 1% allow any student to participate regardless of age, and 7% include youth beyond the age of 18, sometimes up to 24. Traditional measurements of academic achievement do not play a significant factor in determining which youth can become YC members, as only a few YCs (9%) require a minimum grade point average for eligibility.

Most YCs target youth in a specific location: 63% require their members to live within the community they serve, 24% require that their members either live in the community or attend school in the appropriate service area, and 5% use attendance in a specific school or district as their criteria. Only 8% of YCs do not have a requirement related to location of residence.

Nearly all YCs (99%) require youth to submit a membership application. Interviews are also a common part of the application process; adults interview youth applicants for 47% of councils, while current YC members interview youth applicants for 43% of councils. Less common steps include: being nominated by peers or current YC members (24%) or by adults (20%); and submitting a resume (18%). For 33% of YCs, adults decide which youth are accepted; adults and youth share the decision for 32%; and current YC members make the final decision for 21% of councils.

### Composition and size

The representation of racial minorities on YCs is greater than would be expected according to local population compositions. On average, minorities account for 46% of YC members in cities where minorities make up less than 20% of the total population. This finding suggests that YCs are a deliberate effort to give voice to youth typically underrepresented in local decision-making. This attention to diversity notwithstanding, the proportion of Whites in the overall population of a city and the share of Whites on YCs strongly correlate (Pearson's  $r = 0.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In other words, while all cities appear to foster racially and ethnically diverse YCs, those with larger minority populations do so more strongly.

YCs vary greatly in size, from three to 600 youth members (average: 21). The most common size is 15 youth (non-adult) members (14% of YCs). Females make up a greater percentage of YC members than males, representing, on average, 60% vs. 38% for males.

### Youth council responsibilities

Responses to a list of 19 possible YC responsibilities revealed that YCs participate in an average of ten different tasks ( $SD = 3.8$ ). Most YCs (46%) reported between 10 and 14 responsibilities. The task mentioned most frequently was the participation in community service and/or outreach projects (84%). Yet, Hampton, Virginia's manual for creating a YC specifically cautions taking on extensive community service, since doing so will make it like any other youth club, rather than an organization specifically geared to giving input into the community governance. For this same reason, the Hampton manual also warns against organizing social activities, such as dances. Nonetheless, organizing such events is a common activity for YCs.

Other common responsibilities include organizing events (79%), providing feedback and advice on community initiatives (78%), and seeking informal feedback from other young people to advocate on their behalf (76%) (Figure 1). Noticeably absent are significant responsibilities in helping shape local government decisions.

### Adults – roles and responsibilities

Research has identified the importance of adult leaders with diverse skill sets who can effectively support youth participation in a community (Campbell and Erbstein 2012). Not surprisingly, YCs are frequently supported by adult mentors who support youth in their efforts. A majority of YCs are overseen by one adult (88%), with the rest overseen by an adult board. One-third of YCs have adults who officially serve as members alongside youth, ranging from one to 15 adults per YC (average: 4 adults).

Adults serve in many capacities, including mentoring, assisting with special projects, and providing skills training, among other roles (see Figure 2). Similar research found that adults working with one YC expressed strong commitment and strengthened its legitimacy within city government and the public (Richards-Schuster and Checkoway 2010). It was beyond the scope of this study to inquire into the types of training, skills, and beliefs that adults bring to YCs, yet these are topics worthy of further investigation.

The preceding sections have described YCs as mechanisms established by local governments, consistent with a rights-to-the-city approach. However, it is important to distinguish between the potential for exercising city rights, created by such mechanisms, and the actual outcomes they produce.

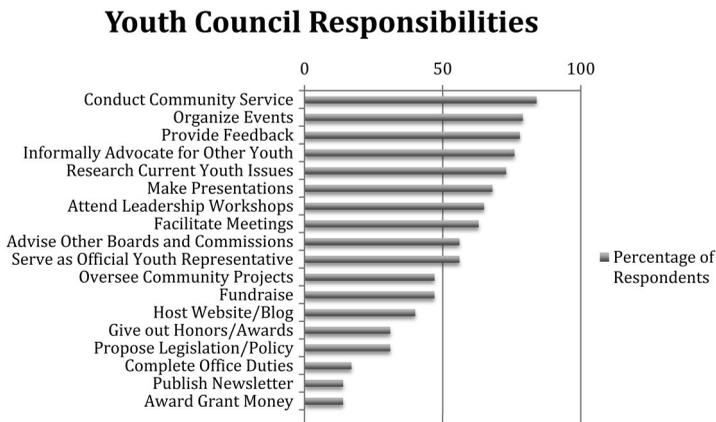


Figure 1. Common youth council responsibilities.



**Figure 2.** Main roles for adults associated with youth councils.

### Significant accomplishments of youth councils

Our analysis of the YCs' most significant accomplishment(s), as described in open-ended responses, occur in three general categories: opportunities for youth to develop leadership skills and learn about government processes (50%); opportunities to host activities targeted at local teens (45%); and service projects targeted at the entire community or a specific population other than youth (37%)<sup>9</sup>. To capture greater diversity of the responses, we further divided each outcome category, using a multi-step content analysis. Additionally, we analyzed the outcomes in relation to other factors but found no significant relationship between the accomplishment and city size, administering department, year of establishment, or annual budget.

#### Opportunities for leadership skills development

One-half of the respondents reported their most significant accomplishment as the provision of opportunities to develop leadership skills and learn about government processes. This accomplishment was statistically associated with YCs created purposely to provide opportunities for youth input into decision-making ( $X^2=3.72$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

More specifically, we sub-divided the accomplishments in this category into four sub-categories:

1. Hosting or attending youth conferences and forums (12% of the total).
2. Participating in governance processes (11% of the total).
3. Creating youth-focused policies and regulations (10% of the total).
4. Providing leadership skills training (5% of the total).

The first three of these categories, comprising 33% of accomplishments cited, focused on youth action, enabling the youth to develop leadership skills while also actively contributing to their city. For example, Waco, TX reported a youth forum, and Tempe, AZ reported an annual Youth Town Hall as opportunities for youth to actively participate in governance processes.

The creation of youth-focused policies and regulations also follows a learning-through-engagement approach. For example, Columbus, GA reported,

The Youth Advisory Council (YAC) championed a change in the school-wide dress code policy. They gathered all policies from each school and saw the inconsistencies. They drafted a policy and took it before the school board, who allowed input from the principals. They came back with very little tweaking, and unanimously approved a new school-wide dress code policy, as presented and drafted by the YAC.

A small percentage of YCs reported accomplishments focused more on the training aspects, than the contribution to the community. For example, Lodi, CA, cited their development of Teen Lead, a leadership training program.

### *Teen-focused activities*

The second most common type of accomplishment reported was the provision of activities targeted to teens (reported by 45%), which we divided into two sub-categories:

- (1) Offering a service or event to help the teen community (reported by 77%). For example, Burbank, CA's 'Pack for Success' program provides backpacks for youth in need, and Holland, MI's fundraising event helps combat youth homelessness.
- (2) Participating in or organizing community projects to improve the physical environment (reported by 33%). For example, St. Paul, MN's YC helped create a teen center and several communities reported efforts that led to the creation of a skate park.

### *Service projects for other community groups*

The third most commonly mentioned accomplishment included service projects for the entire community or a specific population group other than youth (reported by 37%). Again, the responses fell into two sub-categories:

- (1) Services or events. For example Riverside County, CA held successful book and canned food drives to help community members in need; and Gilroy, CA hosted the local senior citizens ball.
- (2) Improvements to the physical environment. A smaller number of YCs reported community improvements related to the physical environment, such as planting trees in Olmsted County, MN; and building a home with Habitat for Humanity in Stoughton, MA.

In the following section, we discuss implications of our findings in an international context and consider how YCs can help accomplish goals of the CRC and support the fulfillment of children's rights to the city.

## **Discussion**

This study offers an overview of YCs in the United States to understand if and how they help fulfill young people's rights to the city. This overview includes key characteristics and perceived accomplishments, as well as select correlates. The analysis produced several findings of interest.

### *Rationale, responsibilities and accomplishments*

The motivation for establishing YCs in the United States has shifted over time. Once a mechanism for addressing youth problems, today YCs are formed primarily to develop youth leadership skills and provide opportunities for youth to voice their opinions and organize or participate in community initiatives. In this regard, YCs can be a mechanism for furthering the goals of the CRC, specifically Article 12, which provides that government 'shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child.' Indeed, over half of YCs were established to solicit youth input on community issues.

Yet, questions remain regarding the extent to which YCs actually advance the intent of Article 12 and related rights. Our findings bring out differences in YC responsibilities divided between giving input into community decision-making (youth voice) and participating in or coordinating

community events and projects (youth action). Just over half of YCs are responsible for formally advising local commissions or boards, and over three-quarters are responsible for providing advice on community initiatives. Yet, youth action, such as coordinating community service and outreach projects was more commonly cited as a responsibility.

Similarly, YC accomplishments parallel these variations. Youth action was more commonly cited as an accomplishment compared to those focused on giving input into decision-making. In practice, youth action and youth voice are not mutually exclusive and can support each other. Participants in the Growing Up in an Urbanizing World project developed an array of methods to that end (Chawla 2002; Driskell 2002). These methods can be used by cities seeking to adopt a rights-based approach to becoming more child-friendly (e.g. Derr et al. 2013).

### *Enabling approaches*

Because coordinating events and serving others may teach young people important leadership skills before they can effectively participate in decision-making, our findings suggest scaffolding young people's involvement in local governance. For example, adult mentors can work with youth on smaller activities to teach them specific skills before they take on large projects by themselves. Others have similarly pointed to the value of scaffolding and the need to accommodate young people's values, skill levels, and knowledge; and build on ways in which they are already participating (Chawla 2001).

Without including specific steps to enfranchise them, policy will stop short of 'relinquishing any significant political power to young people' (Bessant 2003, 94). Providing young people with leadership skills and a better understanding of community governance is a useful first step to enfranchise them. Yet, only 10% of YCs actually create youth-focused policy, limiting their direct contributions to community governance. If YCs are to meaningfully provide young people with a voice in community governance, their impact on policy and decision-making must become more wide-spread and integrated into local processes. As experienced by the ANACEJ network in France, the lack of influence on community decision-making was a critical issue that led to some YCs being considered tokenistic (Cicchelli 2009). More broadly, genuine participation entails information sharing, consultation, shared decision-making, and opportunities for joint initiation and implementation of policy actions (Bhatnagar and Williams 1992). Further research needs to identify factors hampering or enhancing meaningful participation by YCs in all of these aspects. Of particular interest in the United States, is the question of whether a top-down approach to YCs will result in greater quantity (more YCs getting established) or greater quality (YCs becoming better integrated in local governance).

Nevertheless, the emphasis on youth action in the United States, YCs shows a recognition by cities that they must enable youth to contribute in the present, rather than merely train them as future contributors. This suggests that YCs can be effective mechanisms to promote youth as competent members of society, capable of improving their city. This enabling approach will benefit youth by fostering feelings of belonging and connectedness, as well as a heightened sense of community responsibility (Matthews 2001). The recognition of children's rights to the city stands in reciprocal relationship to local governments' responsibility to create structures and processes that support the fulfillment of those rights and the development of children's capabilities (Chawla and van Vliet— *in press*).

Consistent with enabling approaches is the need for adults to see youth as competent citizens with assets to contribute, rather than as a source of problems or passive recipients of community services (Carlson 2006). When adults narrowly focus attention on youth deficits, youth may question their own legitimacy and ability to participate (Checkoway 2011). Aligned with an asset-based approach, YCs can assert to community adults that youth deserve the right to express their opinions and often have something meaningful to share.

Although the CRC does not explicitly advocate the creation of YCs, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has designated Article 12 as one of the 'general principles' of the Convention,

indicating that it should guide interpretation of the other articles and all aspects of its implementation. Our brief review of the international context revealed that the Funky Dragon, the Children and Young People's Assembly for Wales, and the Scottish Youth Parliament, among others, specifically reference the CRC in their mission statement. Ratification of the CRC similarly supported youth participation in local governance in Nepal, Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela. Further research should investigate if ratification of the CRC contributed to the more advanced status of youth councils in Europe and other parts of the world.

A recent legislative initiative in the US Congress, endorsed by more than 120 youth-focused organizations, proposes a Children's Bill of Rights, including specifically 'the right to a voice in matters that affect the child, and the right to participation in age-appropriate forums, including representation on youth councils and other decisionmaking bodies.'<sup>10</sup> If enacted, further research should examine how this bill, and eventual ratification of the CRC, would impact YCs in the United States.

At the same time, although outside the scope of this study, it is important to recognize that official venues are not the only or even most important participation settings, and some researchers have questioned the value of politically oriented approaches that advocate youth councils as a structured form of participation, conforming to mainstream democratic practice (Taft and Gordon 2013). As noted in the guide for youth participation in development (Department for International Development – CSO Youth Working Group 2010), aside from formal participation and representation, children's rights to the city are also linked to, for example, capacity building, youth livelihoods, and evidence base (age-disaggregated data).

Hart (2014) recently called attention to the importance of non-formal processes for children's participation. Similarly, Taft and Gordon (2013) highlight the need to recognize youth activism and its role in enabling youth voice. Therefore, further research is warranted to compare formal and non-formal forms of participation in urban governance.

### *Questions of representation and impact*

The CRC advocates opportunities for all young people without discrimination, yet, children and youth are often underrepresented in the political process (Checkoway 2011). Therefore, questions of representation and equity need to be raised. An Australian study recommends limiting calls for youth to represent others, instead encouraging youth from diverse backgrounds to speak from their own experiences (Bell, Vromen, and Collin 2008). Although a representative democracy is standard practice for the US political system, it is unclear if this model is most effective to support young people's needs, aspirations, and capabilities.

Our findings suggest that communities foster racially and ethnically diverse YCs across the board, but those with larger minority populations do so more strongly. In addition, female youth make up a slightly greater percentage of YC members than males. These patterns suggest that YCs in the United States are deliberate efforts to give voice to youth populations that are typically underrepresented.

However, the average number of youth on a YC is only 21. Therefore, the direct impact of the YCs on all youth is modest. A review of youth councils in Scotland similarly found that although participating youth consider YCs beneficial, they only enable a select few to have their voices heard (McGinley and Grieve 2009). Effective youth participation strategies depend on opportunities for all young people, not just those who are articulate or typically get involved (Matthews 2003). Therefore, despite generally positive implications for young people's rights to the city, important questions of representation remain and warrant further examination.

In addition, limitations on the scope of this study precluded involving youth respondents. Therefore, further research should investigate youth perceptions of YCs, while also recognizing that children and youth are not homogeneous categories, but show divisions along lines of social class, age, race, and ethnicity. Moreover, in today's globalizing cities, they can be seen to enact distinct roles as

consumers, users, entrepreneurs, and co-producers of the urban environment (van Vliet— and Karsten 2015).

## Conclusion

This study found outcomes of YCs across the United States that point to benefits for youth and the cities in which they live. Through leadership development and direct action, young people are gaining skills to improve their cities. Although questions remain about the extent to which youth participation in YCs impacts local decision-making, the finding that at least some cities report progress in this regard demonstrates the potential of a rights-based approach to produce positive outcomes for children, youth and cities at large.

## Notes

1. Concurrently, there is growing support for the creation of a similar Convention on the Rights of Older Persons (CROP). See Van Vliet—(2011).
2. Throughout the paper, we use 'children' and 'youth' interchangeably. Although, the UNCRC refers to children as those under 18 years, most communities in this study use the term 'youth' to describe teenagers.
3. For example: World Summit for Children (New York, 1990), UN Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), World Summit for Human Development (Copenhagen, 1995), 4th World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), and 2nd UN Conference on Human Settlements (Istanbul, 1996).
4. The other country is South Sudan.
5. See [http://www.syp.org.uk/about\\_syp](http://www.syp.org.uk/about_syp).
6. See <http://www.ycni.org/index.html>.
7. This paper does not report findings from all questions.
8. The initial name, Manhasset Youth Council for the Prevention of Delinquency, further illustrates the focus on youth-related problems.
9. Percentages do not equal 100% because many communities reported more than one accomplishment.
10. See H.Res.476 – 114th Congress (2015–2016), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-resolution/476/text> and <https://campaignforchildren.org/resources/fact-sheet/childrens-bill-of-rights/>.

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