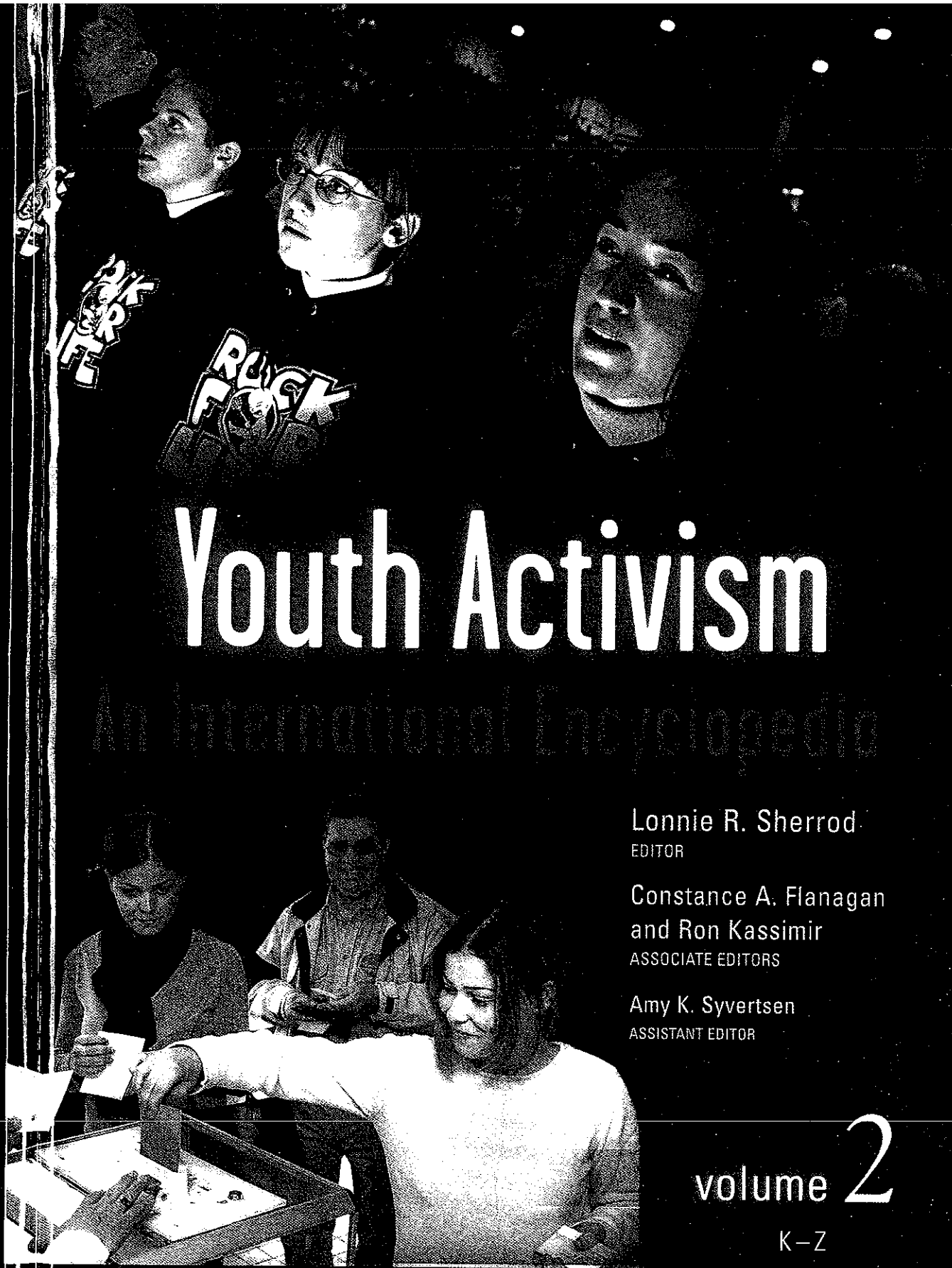# Youth Activism

An International Encyclopedia

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YLDI. *See* Youth Leadership for Development Initiative.

Youth Bulge. Youth bulge refers to a population of youth in a society that is large relative to the population of adults. One definition refers to the fraction of nonadults in a population. For example, according to data from the United Nations (Fukuda-Parr 2002), many countries at the beginning of the twenty-first century have very youthful populations. More than half of the population of Yemen is under the age of fifteen, and there are at least forty countries worldwide in which youth younger than fifteen constitute 40 percent or more of the population. In contrast, in the United States the percentage of the population is only half as large (22 percent), and in some other countries such as Japan and Italy youth under the age of fifteen constitute less than 15 percent of the total population. The former countries (Yemen) are usually characterized as having youth bulges while the latter (United States) are not.

Some analysts have suggested restricting the term youth bulge to populations in which youth—those between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four—are relatively numerous in comparison to the population of adults. Urdal (2002) has argued this narrower connotation of the term has many advantages, including greater clarity of the individuals to which it refers and greater explanatory power in empirical research. Because the notion of a youth bulge seems to have its most important applications in understanding warfare, activism, and revolution, all of which frequently involve youth but infrequently involve young children,

we believe that there are good reasons to restrict the term youth bulge to those in the ages of fifteen to twenty-four.

The explosion of interest in youth bulges in recent years (an Internet search returned nearly 50,000 hits) is largely a product of claims that these demographic phenomena are linked to warfare, revolution, and political and religious activism. The relation of youth bulges to warfare has received the most attention. Analysts in the United States believe that youth bulges are an important ingredient in political transformations. For example, John Helgerson, a former deputy director of intelligence for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), has claimed that "the inability of states to adequately integrate youth populations is likely to perpetuate the cycle of political instability, ethnic wars, revolutions, and antigovernment activities that already affects many countries" (2002, 4). Huntington (1996), Wiley (2000), and Cordesman (1998) have made similar claims concerning the relation of youth bulges to political instability.

There is good research to support such claims. Urdal (2002) examined the relationship between youth bulges and warfare, using historical data for the last half of the twentieth century. Urdal reported that "youth bulges increase the risk that a country will experience armed conflict" (30). Similarly, Mesquida and Wiener found in their analyses that the "relative abundance of young men is associated with occurrence of coalitional aggression and the severity of conflicts as measured by reported casualties." Not all of the research is supportive of this relationship, however. For

example, Goldstone and colleagues (2003) report that in their analyses the relation of youth bulges to political instability is minor or insignificant. There are formidable statistical problems involved in identifying a relationship between youth bulges and warfare (Goldstone et al. 2003), and definitional differences between research groups prevent an easy synthesis of the various studies. However, the findings to date suggest that the link of warfare to youth bulges is worthy of future research.

There is also considerable speculation that youth bulges are linked to political and religious activism. Moller (1968) has linked youth bulges to the Protestant Reformation and to revolutions in eighteenth-century France and twentieth-century Indonesia, and Huntington (1996) has suggested that youth are generally more attracted to such movements than are adults. Goldstone (1999) pointed out that youth may be less invested in the existing social and religious structures—they are less likely than adults to be married, have children, occupy prestigious positions in their communities and churches, and so on—and that as a consequence youth may be more open to movements which seek to overthrow or revise existing orthodoxies. Although there is a great deal of fascinating writing on the relation of youth bulges to the emergence of powerful social and religious movements (Moller 1968 is particularly thoughtful), there is as yet a dearth of systematic research of the type found in the study of youth bulges and welfare.

Why are youth bulges possibly associated with warfare, revolution, and activism? The following three broad answers have been offered:

Economic prospects. One explanation for activism, revolution, and warfare accompanying the maturation of a youth bulge focuses on the dismal economic conditions that may confront those entering the job market. Young adults in a maturing youth bulge are members of a large cohort seeking jobs, and there are likely to be too few opportunities in the existing workforce to accommodate the unusually large number of young adults. Inevitably, there is a collision between career expectations and the realities of an economy with too few openings for all young adults seeking jobs; many young adults are unable to obtain jobs, and those that do find employment may be paid poorly. The consequence for a young adult of the sharp contrast between expectation and reality is disillusionment in prospects for the future. For example, Wiley, a security analyst for the U.S. CIA, examined demographic trends in the Middle Eastern countries and concluded that "job markets in these countries are already severely challenged to create openings for the large mass of young people entering the labor force each year."

This disillusionment may be the emotional fuel for lines of action that are associated with activism, revolution, and reform. For example, disillusioned youth may join political movements that aim to reform society. Sayre has analyzed economic and historical data concerning the frequency of Palestinian suicide bombings and has concluded that these tragic events are most likely to occur when unemployment is high. If economists (e.g., Easterlin 1987) are correct in concluding that job prospects are poorer for those in youth bulges than for youth in smaller cohorts, then Sayre's research is consistent with claims that the economic conditions associated with youth bulges may lead to extreme forms of political activism. The economic explanation is undoubtedly the most popular, although not all studies find confirming evidence for it (e.g., Urdal 2002).

Sociobiological explanation. Mesquida and Wiener have suggested a sociobiological account for the relation of youth bulges to warfare. According to their theory, young men are particularly prone to violence, a propensity due to qualities selected in evolution for the successful competition of mates. Warfare is the societal consequence of the biologically-based tendency for young men to fight. Accordingly, whenever

there are large groups of young men in a society, warfare ought to be more common than when the fraction of the population constituted of young men is relatively small. Mesquida and Wiener (1996, 1999) analyze several different sets of historical data and generate results consonant with their theory. The sociobiological theory for the association of youth bulges with warfare has not gained many adherents, and it probably cannot be used at all to explain the influence of youth bulges on the emergence of social, political, and religious movements, if such an influence exists. Moreover, many wars are initiated by the leaders of states, and these leaders are often old men, not the young men central to the sociobiological accounts.

Socialization. Hart, Atkins, Markey, and Youniss have offered a third explanation for the relation of youth bulges to warfare and activism. These authors suggest that both the economic and sociobiological theories neglect the consequences of growing up from birth to adolescence in large cohorts of similarly aged individuals. Hart and colleagues suggest that those who grow up in communities and societies with large cohorts of children (*child-saturated contexts*) are less influenced by adults than are children who develop in communities and societies in which adults constitute large majorities (*adult-saturated contexts*). They hypothesized that growing up in adult-saturated contexts results in the transmission from adults to children of knowledge of and respect for the culture and society. This transmission is possible because in adult-saturated contexts many of a child's interactions will naturally involve adults, who typically possess knowledge about society and culture. In contrast, in child-saturated contexts children interact frequently with other children, and less transmission of cultural information can take place because children typically have little information about their societies. Hart and colleagues demonstrated that children living in child-saturated communities in the United States have less civic

knowledge than do children living in adult-saturated communities and showed as well that children in child-saturated countries possess less civic knowledge than do children in adult-saturated countries. Hart et al. suggested but have not proved that those who possess little civic knowledge are more likely to become involved in radical political and social activism than are those who possess more civic knowledge. In summary, Hart et al., argue that members of youth bulges have less civic knowledge than youth of the same age who were not socialized in large cohorts of children and that a deficit in civic knowledge can lead to participation in extremist political activities.

Because the socialization theory posits only that those maturing in youth bulges are more likely to be influenced by other youth than those who develop in adult-saturated environments, it is possible that in eras in which youth have *more* knowledge than adults that child-saturated contexts can better facilitate the transmission of ideas than adult-saturated ones. It might be argued, for instance, that the widespread activism of U.S. youth in the 1960s, associated with a nationwide youth bulge (Moller 1968), reflected the influence of knowledgeable, authority-challenging youth on each other.

In conclusion, blending demographic factors such as youth bulges into accounts of political movements, revolutions, and warfare offers the potential for genuinely synthetic, interdisciplinary accounts of important, enormously complicated human events. The research evidence to date concerning this particular synthesis of demography, history, and political science is promising but not conclusive. However, it is sufficiently promising that further investigation is warranted.

See also Child Soldiers; Demographic Trends Affecting the World's Youth.

Recommended Reading

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U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (2002). *The World Factbook 2002.* See http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/.

Wiley, W. P. (2000). *Agenda 2001: Middle East Policy Planning for a New Administration: Keynote Address.* See http://www.ciaonet.org/conf/wiw01/.

Daniel Hart, Robert Atkins, Patrick Markey, and James Youniss

Youth Commissions. The scene is the city council chamber of a medium-sized, racially mixed city in the Southeast on April 22, 2002. Sitting in the councilor seats are twenty-two youth commissioners, who meet here in open session every month and in a planning session again once each month. This night the chambers are packed to standing room only. One hundred and fifty-seven high-school students from the city's seven public and private high schools, along with various adult mentors and officials, have come together to consider how to develop joint strategies with the Citizens Unity Commission (CUC) on supporting diversity—especially racial diversity—in the city. An African American high-school senior, who is one of the "youth planners" hired by the city to work with the youth commission, coordinates breakout sessions with perfect poise. Groups of thirty or so move off to different rooms and corners of the chamber to deliberate about racial dynamics in classes, the role of teachers and other adults, the merits of neighborhood schools versus racial redistricting, and other issues. They are serious in their analyses and recommendations for further action, yet they laugh and give spontaneous high-fives even as they disagree about sensitive issues. Neither black nor white students take stereotypical positions on any issue or proposed remedy.

The city in this scene is Hampton, Virginia, which has one of the most ambitious citywide systems to support youth civic engagement of any municipality in the United States. But San Francisco also has a youth commission that is energetically engaged in a broad range of policy discussions and formal recommendations to the city's board of supervisors and mobilizes hundreds and sometimes several thousand young people to pressure for change. Likewise, Boston has a mayor's youth council that advises the mayor and various agencies on policies affecting youth and convenes more than one thousand youth at its annual youth summits and forums designed to share and celebrate best practices of youth empowerment, community health, and violence prevention. These three cities now have nearly a decade of experience with these innovations. And youth commissions and councils in other cities across the country are developing their own models for youth representation and policy development or youth philanthropy where youth commissioners play an active role in