

Fletcher Engagement Services

360.489.9680 | adamfletcher.net

Understanding the Breadth of Youth Services

By Adam F.C. Fletcher

(June 28, 2024) Across North America, there are a lot of different services being provided for youth. They are offered by a variety of organizations for many different purposes. What unites them is that the focus on these services are young people themselves— although the question of who is young or a youth varies from place to place, too! If you're a parent, a youth service provider, a funder, a government worker or just an interested human, you might appreciate the following article which is a brief explanation of the breadth of youth services.

As a longtime professional youth services consultant, following is my scan of what youth services are and what they do. Over the course of my career, I've had the opportunity to serve many organizations offering literally hundreds of different types of youth services. As a global thinker who understands systems design, it often boggles my mind how much is being done. It also perplexes me that these different services rarely interact with each other! It seems to me that every youth service provider would be more effective if each one understood what was out there. So I offer this in order to help each of us go further, do better and make a bigger difference in the lives of young people we serve.

The Breadth of Youth Services

There are several ways to see youth services. Sorting them by age, purpose, types of activities, funders, providers and identities is a common approach to understanding what is out there. Following is my overview of the breadth of youth services. Surely this list isn't complete though! If you want to tell me what I'm not considering please share your thoughts in the comments.

Framing Youth Services

Two main perspectives drive all youth services. The first perspective sees youth as a problem to be solved. The second perspective sees youth as resources to be developed.

Extending from those perspectives, there are three major frames for understanding youth services.

1. **Youth development:** Any activity of any kind intended to foster any type of growth within young people, and to stop any bad things happening.
2. **Positive youth development (PYD):** Activities designed to intentionally uplift, empower or otherwise help young people move forward with their lives.
3. **Community youth development (CYD):** These are activities designed to mutually benefit young people and their communities at the same time.

Of these three frames, the most prevalent type of youth services are focused on youth development. However, using PYD to help plan, implement and assess activities is increasingly popular. CYD came to prevalence in some communities in the 2000s, but has receded in popularity over the past 10-15 years.

Youth Services Areas

Following are some of the different areas of youth services at work across the U.S. and Canada. Each of these are present in each of the frames above, and many criss-cross between them. Each youth service area can serve any youth in any place at anytime; rarely is any single youth served by all of these at the same time.

Some of the main youth services areas are detailed on the following list.

Prevention and Intervention Youth Services

– These are activities, programs, projects and organizations committed to either preventing bad things from happening to youth, or to stopping bad things that are already happening to youth. Youth services related to prevention and intervention can focus on many issues, including

Substance abuse, Pregnancy, Violence, Teen dating violence, Victimization, Homelessness, Sexual abuse and Bullying, as well as Family stability and more.

Education Youth Services

– Building the skills and knowledge of youth, educational youth services can focus on many issues and use a lot of different kinds of activities to change the lives of youth. The youth services in education focus on Tutoring, Mentoring, Basic education services, Libraries, Outdoor education, Community service, Service learning, Technology education, Life skills, Independent living skills, Soft skills, Leadership, Homeschooling, School reform, Sex education, Students rights in schools, School climate, Teaching about social change in school, Unschooling, Reflection, Critical thinking, Financial literacy, Service learning and Democratic education, among other issues.

Identity Youth Services

– Whether chosen, assigned, taken away or innate, the ways young people identify are the targets of these activities, programs, projects and organizations. The focuses of these youth services include Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgendered, Queer, and Questioning youth, or LGBTQQ+ youth, Youth, Adults, Adulthood, Native youth, Homelessness, Intergenerational partnerships, Parents, parenting and families, Rural youth, Urban youth, Youth in the media, Gender equity, Children of incarcerated parents, Neurodivergent youth, Youth with disabilities, and Transition-age youth, among other identities.

Civics and Democracy Youth Services

– Focused on the health and well-being of governance, these youth services build communities, support consensus, develop belonging and educate young people. The issues addressed by youth services focused on civics and democracy include Community development, Community youth involvement, Government youth involvement, Nonprofits, Research representation, International development, Nation building, Youth activism, Service learning, Community organizing, and Youth voice.

Culture and Society Youth Services

– Youth services that build culture and society are focused on creativity, growth and development of various practices, behaviors, and expressions of a particular group or community that reflect shared values, beliefs, traditions, and ways of life. The youth services focused on culture and society include Immigration and migration, Gun control, School reform, Grantmaking and philanthropy, Sex education, Anti-war and nonviolence, Education, Community building, National service, Politics, White supremacy terrorism and racism, Online communities, Family youth engagement, Environment and the climate catastrophe, Artificial intelligence, Sustainable agriculture and Community youth engagement, among many other issues.

Rights and Freedoms Youth Services

– Youth rights, civil rights and human rights are the focuses of these youth services, whether they are taught, advocated, expanded or simply shared. Some of the youth services focused on rights and freedoms focused on Adultism, Xenophobia, Ephebiphobia, Food security, Curfews, Defining youth rights, Housing, Job discrimination, Incarceration, Immigration, Citizenship, Lowering the voting age, Youth liberation, Youth rights in schools, Youth rights in general, and many other issues.

Youth-Specific Youth Services

– These youth services primarily focused on youth-specific issues and activities that almost singularly focus on young people themselves. Some of the issues in youth-specific youth services are focused on Youth-led organizing, Youth on boards, Holistic youth development, Reconnecting youth to communities, and many others.

Public Health Youth Services

– Affecting the health and well-being of populations, youth services that focus on public health can be social, environmental, or economic, and commonly teach youth about these issues while sometimes engaging them as agents of change. Youth services in public health include Afterschool programs, Teen driver safety, Corporal punishment, Community belonging, Juvenile justice, Sex trafficking, Gun safety, Mental health, Addiction awareness and more.

Personal Health Youth Services

– Personal health focuses on mental, physical, emotional, social and other personal health areas. Youth services in this area can focus on Mental health, Healthcare, Peer support, Personal safety, Period positivity, Nutrition, Physical activity, Body positivity, Basic needs, Addiction treatment, Pregnancy care, Suicide prevention, Counseling and Residential care, along with many other issues.

Economy Youth Services

– Whether learning to work, developing their capacities to contribute to the economy, or investing in what matters to them, youth services focused on the economy acknowledge youth as economic actors, provocateurs and entrepreneurs. Youth services focused on the economy can focus on Economics, Commercialism, Globalization, Illegal child labor, Poverty, Consumerism, Exploitation, Work, Entrepreneurship, Workforce development, Youth sex trafficking, Money management and Housing, among other issues

Crisis Support Youth Services

– Services for youth in crisis are for homeless youth, runaway youth, abused or neglected youth, youth who've been abandoned by a parent or guardian, and young people with a mental disorder or substance abuse issue. There are many youth services focused on supporting youth in crisis, including Adoption, Assessment and referral, Behavioral consultation, Case management and services coordination, Youth day care, Youth protection, Community housing and shelters, Community transition, Counseling, Crisis intervention, Crisis stabilization, Day treatment, Detoxification and withdrawal support, Diversion and intervention, Early childhood development, Foster family and kinship care, Group homes, Outpatient services, Home and community services, Intensive family-based services, Intensive outpatient treatment, Residential treatment, Respite, Specialized or treatment foster care, and general youth support, among other services.

Recreation Youth Services

– Focused on enjoyment, engagement, challenge and relaxation, recreational youth services work to enhance young peoples' well-being and healthy development, enrich community life, and provide learning opportunities. Recreational youth services can include Athletics participation, Sports fandom, Video gaming, Board games, Reading, Hobby collecting, Group participation,



Fitness, Social media consumption, Social media creation, Camping, and Outdoors appreciation, among other issues.

Arts Youth Services

– Whether youth are making them, appreciating them or engaging with them, the Arts include any creative, cultural, or expressive activities. Youth services focused on the Arts can focus on Hip hop, Media, Free speech, Censorship, Dance, Theater participation, Self-expression, Theater appreciation, Music appreciation, Music performance, Movie watching, Media making and many other approaches.

Personal Development Youth Services

– Focused on intentionally growing the abilities of individual youth, personal development is all about individual health, wellness, sustainability and growth. These activities can increase the mental, physical, spiritual, moral, intellectual, cultural, and other capabilities of youth. Youth services focused on personal development can focus on Emotional growth, Continuous learning, Spirituality, Cognitive development, Social engagement, Resiliency and Time management, along with many other issues.

Empowerment Youth Services

– These activities make good things happen throughout the lives of youth, whether they happen in their own lives or throughout the lives of the people around youth. They increase the capacity of youth to lead, learn, grow and build with purpose, power, passion and possibilities. When it comes to empowerment, youth services can focus on Leadership, Activism, Service, Involvement, Employment and Culture, among other issues.

No matter which perspective they take, which frame they use or what issues they address, each of these youth services can change lives and communities.

Our Engagement Services

For more than two decades, Fletcher Engagement Services has been supporting youth services improvement with nonprofits, K-12 schools and government agencies. In the process of doing that, we have gained a great deal of insight about the ways these programs succeed and how

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they fail; which ways young people want to be served; and which adults are most effective in youth services.

Our driving philosophy is that every outcome of every youth services activity, project, program or organization can be improved by consciously, purposefully and sustainably engaging youth. This can happen through programming, interpersonal interactions and systems. When every youth is engaged in every way, everywhere, all of the time our society will truly and magnificently be a better place for everyone.

Contact & Connect

I want to work with you, support your project, program, or organization, write for you, and speak or facilitate at your event. For more information on what Fletcher Engagement Services can do to help your youth services program, project or activity, [contact us today](#).

(360) 489-9680

adam@commonaction.org

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