Letting In the Locked Out: Empowering Marginalized Youth through Community Solidarity

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Abstract: The term “positive youth development” may refer to any of a number of strategies designed to provide youth with increased opportunities to develop the personal resources necessary for healthy maturation. Although many initiatives target exclusively those marginalized youth at risk of involvement within the juvenile justice system, the success of such strategies will remain innately compromised if they fail to fully acknowledge the ways in which large-scale systemic conditions, sustained by a neoliberal cultural climate that champions individual competitiveness and free market values, have eroded the practice of community solidarity across classes and backgrounds that is essential for marginalized youth to experience authentic community integration. The author argues that this climate may be successfully challenged through the conception of development initiatives for socially excluded youth that do not operate within such structural restraints but rather, are born of grassroots social movements that fundamentally and unconditionally endorse respect for, and solidarity with, all community members. Examples of US development initiatives that could be considered to fit this model are provided to illustrate specific strategies for rebuilding community solidarity.

While the development of nondiscriminatory juvenile justice practices has been the subject of considerable restorative justice discourse in recent decades, there remains a considerable lack of literature adequately taking into account the role that key structural and multifaceted issues, such as youth marginalization, homelessness, and child poverty, play in accounting for the overrepresentation of lower-class youth in the juvenile justice system (Arrigo and Schehr, 1998; Elliott, 2011; Immarigeon, 1999; Morris, 2001; Pranis, 2001). Because systemically generated conditions are inherently outside the control of individual persons, it is
arguable that a juvenile justice system based on the holding of young offenders accountable for the harms caused by their individual actions while disregarding the harms caused by social inequities does not practice justice at all but instead, sends a powerful message of injustice to those youth who so frequently find themselves threatened, punished, and rejected by their own communities due to their assumed personal deficits (Bazemore & Terry, 1997; Boyes-Watson, 2009; Gaetz, 2004; Giroux, 2009; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; MacDonald, 2008; Nakkula et al., 2010). Community change models, rooted in positive youth development ideology, may provide an alternative venue for adequately addressing issues such as these that continue to remain absent from youth justice system reform.

This essay will provide an argument in support of positive youth development initiatives rooted in grassroots community development frameworks by examining the issues that affect socially excluded youth and delinquency through a critical perspective. I begin my discussion by first examining the circumstances that place disenfranchised youth at risk of delinquency and the obstacles they struggle to overcome in their unrewarding search for legitimacy, and follow by situating them within the much broader theoretical context of a political, economic and social climate characterized by individualism, privatization and the erosion of community solidarity – an ideology frequently described as Neoliberalism (Giroux, 2003/2009; Grossberg, 2001/2005). In accordance with community youth development ideology, I then analyze the particular strategies employed by three development initiatives based in the United States – Roca, Take The Time, and GivEm40 – in order to illustrate the benefits such initiatives yield in combating the
large-scale factors responsible for the growing abandonment of socially excluded youth, particularly through their efforts to rebuild and practice community solidarity. Ultimately, this examination hopes to provide an appropriate foundation from which one may explore further the practical development and implementation of youth development initiatives in a variety of community settings.

YOUTH AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

The process of maturation from disenfranchised child to young offender, typified by instability, insecurity, circularity, and a lack of progression, has been recounted many times over by researchers working within the area of youth crime prevention (Bell, 2007; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Gaetz, 2004; Giroux, 2003; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; MacDonald, 2008; Pranis et al., 2003; Walker & Walker, 1997). An understanding of the concept of “social exclusion”, defined by Alan and Carol Walker (1997) as “the process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political, or cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society”, is crucial to understanding the large-scale societal conditions that give rise to the disproportionate overrepresentation of lower-class youth in the juvenile justice system. As the evidence will suggest, the inevitable criminalization of socially excluded youth can be viewed as the end result of an escalating process of isolation bred by fundamentally unjust societal conditions that do not adequately provide the resources necessary for legitimate community acceptance (Boyes-Watson, 2008; Gaetz, 2002; Gaetz, 2004; Giroux, 2003; Giroux, 2009; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; MacDonald, 2008).
Youth living in poor and disenfranchised neighborhoods must cope with a wide variety of challenging obstacles rooted within their home environments. Socially excluded youth frequently come from homes characterized by domestic violence, drug use, physical and sexual abuse, parental abandonment and neglect, and displacement, all of which may compel one to run away from home in order to escape (Alder, 1991; Bell, 2007; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Gaetz, 2004; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). In their research on Vancouver and Toronto street youth, Hagan and McCarthy (1997) found that 60% of participants they surveyed had been physically abused at home; another study by Rotheram-Borus, Mahler, Koopman, and Langabeer (1996) estimated that street youth may be up to five times more likely than domiciled youth to report having been sexually abused within their homes as children. Traumas such as these subsequently place youth at increased risk of suffering a variety of consequences injurious to healthy development and integration, including low self-esteem, an inability to form trusting relationships with adults, depression (Gaetz, 2004; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Whitbeck et al., 1997), and aggression (Gaetz, 2004; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). All of these factors are responsible in part for the conception and sustainment of the highly aggressive and often illegal “street rules” that characterize the lives of homeless youth and make them ideal targets for law enforcement officials (Anderson, 1996; Gaetz, 2004; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997).

For those youth for whom both race and class weigh heavy in their lives, marginalization is frequently a defining factor in their development as well (Bell, 2007; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Giroux, 2009; Miller, 1996; Schissel, 1993). Legalized
desegregation and anti-discrimination laws alone cannot reverse the effects of the United States’ still-recent history of post-slavery racial discrimination on its youth: a mere 42 percent of black youth today who enter high school graduate (Giroux, 2009; Herbert, 2007), and black students across the nation continue to be suspended and expelled at nearly three times the rate of white students (Giroux, 2009; Witt, 2007). The legacy left by a history of enduring residential schools and colonization has created a similarly troubling context for Aboriginal youth in Canada; much of the crime committed by Aboriginal youth under 25, who remain greatly overrepresented in court populations across the country (Schissel, 1993) and attempt suicide at a rate six times higher than non-Aboriginal youth of the same age (York, 1990), stems largely from the apathy and despair they feel as a result of living on impoverished reserves (Bell, 2007). Immigrant youth whose families have fled violent and war-torn countries face a particularly unique obstacle to development which Carolyn-Boyes Watson (2008) terms “double” alienation: Alienation first from their own troubled families and homes, and further alienation from dominant, mainstream culture on account of their foreign status.

Youth who lack key resources for survival go on to suffer exclusion from countless other physical spaces in society as they mature, including schools, foster homes, traditional youth and youth development programs, public shopping centers, and places of employment (Bell, 2007; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Gaetz, 2002; Gaetz, 2004; Giroux, 2009; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; MacDonald, 2008; Polk, 2001; Walker & Walker, 1997; White, 1990). Their inability to access and maintain safe and affordable housing due to attributes such as their age, inexperience, and poverty
is a particularly crippling obstacle which limits their ability to exert control over many other important aspects of their lives, such as securing stable employment and applying for financial aid (Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; White et al., 1997). Within school systems, socially excluded youth are particularly likely to display a lack of commitment to educational achievement due to frequent and disruptive displacement, language barriers, or simple perceived irrelevance of course material to their own lives (Bell, 2007; Boyes-Watson, 2010; MacDonald, 2008; Greenberg, 1977). Youth with particularly complex needs frequently do not meet eligibility requirements for inflexible community programs and resources, and the few societal entitlements they do manage to retain are often, in accordance with zero-tolerance policies, rescinded immediately as soon as they fall below expectations (Bazemore & Terry, 1997; Bell, 2007; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Gaetz, 2004; MacDonald, 2008).

For those youth with the resources to remain in school and obtain higher-level qualifications, the transition into full-time work remains relatively smooth and uninterrupted (Polk, 2001). In contrast, those employment opportunities available to socially excluded youth are often casual, unstable, and limited in training or advancement opportunities, leaving many applicants feeling despondent and permanently trapped at the bottom of the labour market (Boyes-Watson, 2008; Duster, 1995; Giroux, 2003; Giroux, 2009; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; MacDonald, 2008; Polk, 2001; Walker & Walker, 1997). Employment education and assistance programs are typically ill equipped to offer the appropriate intensive support these youth need and thus frequently prove to be of little assistance (Boyes-Watson, 2008;
Unable to find and retain legit, secure employment, it is unsurprising that so many socially excluded youth resort to partaking in illegal and quasi-legal activities such as theft, panhandling, drug dealing, and prostitution in order to meet immediate financial needs (Bell, 2007; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Gaetz, 2004; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997).

Given that the above factors frequently work in conjunction with each other, causing their consequences to increase in a cumulative nature (Boyes-Watson, 2008; Gaetz, 2004; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997), it is readily apparent that structural restrictions to basic amenities such as housing, employment, and public spaces affect marginalized youth and their attempts to attain a sense of legitimacy immensely. Yet to focus attention simply on those tangible class-based inequities that allow for millions of youth to experience poverty, homelessness, and abuse on a daily basis captures only half the story underlying the continuing plight of this population today. Within the past several decades, enormously shifting social conditions have allowed for a much more one-sided public view of young people as dangerous, distrustful, and out of control to emerge, and socially excluded youth are bearing the full brunt of this unwarranted assault due to the particular political and economic conditions that are allowing such a discourse to thrive (Bauman, 2000; Bell, 2007; Giroux, 2003; Giroux, 2009; Grossberg, 2001; Pranis, 2001). It is these conditions that will be discussed next.
NEOLIBERALISM AND THE EROSION OF COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY

Any understanding of the current crisis of socially excluded youth must be understood in terms of the current cultural climate of Neoliberalism. As described in great detail within the works of sociologists such as Zygmunt Bauman (2000), Lawrence Grossberg (2001/2005) and Henry Giroux (2003/2009), “Neoliberalism” refers to a market-driven ideological approach to economic and social policy which seeks to maximize the role of the private sector in determining political and economic state priorities through supporting such values as efficiency, consumer choice, transactional thinking, commodification, and individual autonomy (Bauman, 2000; Best & Kellner, 2003; Giroux, 2009; Grossberg, 2001). These are the very same values that, as will be discussed, are largely responsible for gradually eroding public concern regarding the welfare of young people through the ongoing legitimization of social distance (Bauman, 2000; Giroux, 2009; Pranis, 2001).

Described by Kay Pranis (2001) as “the degree to which people do not identify with other community members or feel connected to them by common interests or a sense of common fate”, lasting social distance between individuals results in those same individuals progressively losing interest in one another’s well being. Neoliberal culture nourishes and sustains this social distance via the consistent championing of free-market fundamentalism, cutthroat competitiveness, and individual success, the latter largely measured through the acquisition and disposability of consumer goods (Bauman, 2000; Giroux, 2009; Grossberg, 2001/2005; Kenway & Bullen, 2001). The indifference that social distance breeds is illustrated in particularly grim detail via the near-total abandonment of societal
responsibility toward marginalized youth today. Governments demonstrate their unwillingness to address the needs of disenfranchised and vulnerable populations through such measures as decreased funding for training and employment opportunities, weakened labour unions, endless attacks on public and higher education, and ever-increasing punitiveness on the part of juvenile justice systems (Bell, 2007; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Giroux, 2009; Grossberg, 2001/2005; Polk 2001). In a political and economic climate where the logic of short-term private investments overwhelms that of long-term social investments, it is not a stretch to suggest that marginalized youth, in this day and age, have been rendered redundant and disposable.

Intensifying the detrimental effects of Neoliberalism on the lives of socially excluded youth is the enormous pressure the current global recession has placed on governments to reduce spending and "balance the budget", an economic measure which typically takes the form of reducing spending in such areas as healthcare, education, welfare and housing while allocating available government funds toward those already economically advantaged, such as major corporations and banks in need of loans (Best & Kellner, 2003; Giroux, 2009; Grossberg, 2001/2005; Polk, 2001). It is particularly telling that the United States ranks first among industrialized nations in billionaires and in defense expenditures, yet continues to houses millions of young people who lack health insurance, affordable child care and decent early childhood education (Giroux, 2009). Governments consumed with the task of cutting costs and appeasing key stakeholders are hardly in a position to consider new options in terms of welfare and social assistance for those youth
barely registering on the economic radar as existent.

While past decades found a much higher demand for the work of young people, the widespread adoption of various profit-maximizing business practices in recent years has played a significant role in the collapse of the full-time work market for this population, particularly those youth who are also low-skilled and possess minimal education (Duster, 1995; Giroux, 2009; MacDonald, 2008; Polk, 1997/2001). These practices include the acquisition of new technologies rendering redundant the need for manufacturing labour, the relocation of manufacturing facilities by numerous major corporations to overseas countries where low-skilled labour is both cheaper and easier to obtain (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982; Polk, 2001), the increasing practice within retail environments of employing primarily part-time or casual staff at minimum-wage level with few or no benefits, and the overall downsizing of many major industries in light of the current global recession (Giroux, 2009). The outcome for youth in light of these revolutions is dismal: In Australia, for example, while over two thirds of all young people between the ages of 16 and 19 were employed full-time 25 years ago, this figure dropped swiftly to below 20% by the 1990s (Polk, 2001). These same general trends hold for most developed countries (Dwyer, 1995; Polk, 2001).

The growing influence of consumer culture, first emergent in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a natural consequence of the profit-driven ideology of Neoliberalism, shoulders significant blame for the dehumanization of socially excluded youth as well (Giroux, 2009; Polk, 200). As confirmed by Miles, Cliff and Burr (1998), a primary reason young people in developed countries consume is to
facilitate social participation and cultivate what they believe to be a personal sense of self-worth. These self-perceptions are further reinforced through the various means by which consumer culture assigns material worth in the form of "social capital" to young people based on dehumanizing market-driven calculations of their spending power (Bauman, 2000; Giroux, 2009; Kenway & Bullen, 2001; Polk, 2001). These results do not bode well for the social standing of those youth lacking the basic resources necessary to participate in a consumer culture, and those who fall short are punished through their subsequent portrayal as a criminal class (Giroux, 2003/2009; Grossberg, 2001/2005; Polk, 2001). Further, it is this very logic that justifies the increasing privatization and commodification of not merely superficial material goods but the many basic services and securities necessary for youth to lead a decent quality of life (Bauman, 2000; Giroux, 2009).

One of the most dangerous consequences of this free-market culture, with its steadfast assertion that meaning and value are found only through the everlasting acquisition of wealth and material goods, is the continued acceptance of the now-outmoded myth that by simply persevering and working hard, anyone can achieve financial success. Also known as "The American Dream" (Weiss, 1988), there is perhaps no other Neoliberal principle more destructive in its justification of policies and programs that blame the poor, jobless, uninsured, and homeless for their social and economic situations (Boyes-Watson, 2008; Giroux, 2003/2009; Grossberg, 2001). The continual indoctrination of entire societies to believe that socially excluded youth who lack the resources and wealth necessary to lead a decent quality of life have no one to blame for their circumstances but themselves occurs,
among other means, via mass media outlets which systematically refrain from sharing stories about the hardships faced by marginalized youth and instead reinforce the public perception of this population as unintelligent, unproductive, manipulative, immoral, and dangerous (Giroux, 2009; Schissel, 1997). The media portrayal of disenfranchised populations as greedy parasites undeserving of attention or sympathy not only justifies the indifference of privileged populations (Giroux, 2009; Pranis, 2001), but is also used as ammunition by conservative advocates seeking to dismantle the social state when they point to this alleged generation of disorderly and dangerous youth as justification for their actions (Giroux, 2009).

MacDonald (2008) captures the shame and embarrassment felt by marginalized youth as a result of the internalization of the “American Dream” myth in his studies of working-class youth growing up in Teesside, one of the poorest communities in Britain. In contrast to the aforementioned societal perception of marginalized youth as lazy and parasitic, many of the adolescents he interviewed held highly negative views regarding the prospect of welfare-dependency, expressing extreme embarrassment and resentment over the prospect of being dependent on unemployment benefits. In fact, it was often a refusal to collect such benefits, and all others to which they were entitled, that was responsible for many of the participants’ hardships and lack of progression in the first place. This finding is highly indicative of an inherent valuing of work not just as a source of income but of self respect as well. MacDonald (2008) thus concludes that outdated, ‘respectable’ working-class views prioritizing full-time employment and self-reliance collaborate
with systemic factors limiting employment and educational opportunities to sideline these youth from mainstream society.

Despite the mounting evidence demonstrating the ways in which this current Neoliberal climate has rejected any and all obligations to provide socially excluded young people with legitimate prospects for community integration, the ongoing reproduction and normalization of this ideology throughout all aspects of daily life has constructed a social context in which the abandonment of marginalized youth is rarely challenged. Indeed, the very logic of Neoliberalism, in its insistence that individual free will determines all, actually denies prejudice against marginalized youth, a disquieting affirmation that long-term exposure to these principles essentially cultivates a willful blindness within the populace to the true politics, ideologies, and mechanisms of power at work in the construction of social injustices (Giroux, 2009). What is required from communities now in order to challenge the social, political, and economic conditions that have led to the erosion of community solidarity and resulting crisis of abandoned youth is a serious commitment to this long-mistreated population rooted in awareness, education, compassion, and mutual responsibility (Giroux, 2009; Pranis, 2001). It is here that positive youth development ideology becomes relevant.

THE LOGIC OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Today, most dominant intervention strategies utilized by juvenile justice professionals can be classified as individual treatment programs that typically respond to youth crime on a case-by-case basis and in accordance with...
each young offender's particular needs and deficits (Bazemore & Dooley, 2001; Bazemore & Terry, 1997). On the basis of their administrative categorization within various bureaucratic “slots”, youth undergoing such intervention strategies either find themselves subjected to punishment intended to deliver obedience or the submissive recipients of arbitrarily determined needs and treatments (Bazemore & Dooley, 2001; Bazemore & Terry, 1997; Bazemore & Dooley, 2001); both options ultimately doom them to inescapable positions of passivity and powerlessness. In recent years, research has begun to recognize that by their very design, however, individual treatment models for juvenile offenders are fundamentally incompatible with their desired goals of rehabilitation. For one, highly professionalized responses to youth crime arguably perpetuate the relegation of such youths to experts and legal officials, leading to (Bazemore & Terry, 1997; Bazemore, 1999; McKnight, 1995), resulting in their alienation from the very communities they hope to eventually return to—and they have hurt and sending a clear message to communities to “leave it to the experts” (Bazemore & Dooley, 2001; Bazemore and Terry, 1997). In addition, empirically-driven individual treatment—the individual-level factors typically regarded as the most important indicators of delinquency within individual treatment models tend to comprise only a small subset of the factors contributing to delinquency on the part of marginalized youth criminal behavior, at best (Bazemore & Dooley, 2001; Bazemore & Terry, 1997).

Positive youth development initiatives, first emergent in the late 1960s and 1970s and again in the 1990s (Bazemore & Terry, 1997; National Commission on
Resources for Youth, 1974; Pearl & Reissman, 1966; Polk & Kobrin, 1972), are proving to be a viable alternative to these deficit-focused practices. The positive youth development movement is grounded in the belief that delinquency is caused by a systemic failure on the part of social institutions to provide all youth with legitimate identities during the course of maturation (Bazemore & Terry, 1997; Nakkula et al., 2010; Polk & Kobrin, 1972), primarily though the denial of opportunities to develop socially valued skills or to be productive in socially valued ways. As the absence of a legitimate identity poses a significant challenge to any youth’s development and eventual community integration (Bazemore & Terry, 1997; Nakkula et al., 2010; National Commission of Resources for Youth, 1974), social exclusion and, subsequently, delinquency, is a natural and expected response (Bazemore & Terry, 1997; Nakkula et al., 2010; Polk & Kobrin, 1972). Further, positive youth development initiatives combat this exclusion by providing youth with opportunities to find purpose and belonging by encouraging their active involvement within the very programs designed to benefit them. Perception of young offenders as valuable people with desirable resources to contribute to their communities. By reinforcing attitudes and practices oriented toward a view of youth not as inherently problematic but as fundamentally responsible and capable of making constructive contributions to their communities, these initiatives aid significantly in cultivating the community attachments, social capital, and self-esteem vital to youth seeking to make healthy transitions into adulthood (Bazemore & Terry, 1997; Benson, 2006; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Nakkula et al., 2010; Polk & Kobrin, 1972; Polk, 2001).
PRACTICING COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY FOR POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

The "resource" lens (Bazemore & Terry, 1997) that current development initiatives adopt today is not an entirely novel concept. The dawning of the 20th century brought major reforms within many developed countries in social policy affecting the lives of young people, including the fundamental transformation and expansion of development institutions such as schools and training organizations and the formation of new forms of juvenile courts and correctional programs (Bazemore & Terry, 1997; Giroux, 2009; Polk, 2001). Understood to be vulnerable beings in need of care, education, and protection, youth were viewed as a symbol of the collective responsibility all citizens held to provide the environment and resources necessary to ensure their eventual maturation into productive and worthy members of society. Such enduring commitment reflected not simply a obligation on the part of communities to care for youth but a large-scale social investment in the delivery of a healthier, more democratic future itself by the next generation of adults (Giroux, 2009; Grossberg, 2005; Polk, 2001). In contrast to these policies and attitudes of past decades, it is now safe to say there is a virtual absence of any systematic attempts to address the developmental needs of socially excluded youth in a positive way. There are few major state-funded educational initiatives being put in place, nor are there many vocational or work preparation programs being proposed and implemented (Giroux, 2009; Polk, 2001). Indeed, it is difficult to view such actions as reflective of anything other than a society that no longer takes its responsibility to young people seriously.
Furthermore, there remain very few advocates for abandoned youth in this present day. Neoliberal culture has created a climate of public discourse that responds to those pleading for compassion and collective responsibility on behalf of society’s most vulnerable populations with intolerance, ridicule, and hatred (Bauman, 2000; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Giroux, 2009; Pranis 2001). Although professionals working on behalf of the justice system and social service sector - such as police, outreach workers, and probation officers - represent a constant presence in the lives of socially excluded youth, they are prone to depression and burnout due to their routine inability and subsequent failure to adequately meet the vastly complex needs of their clients. Charged with the overwhelmingly impossible task of “fixing” the youth they work with, many struggle to negotiate with the unsympathetic bureaucratic systems they work within for more adequate tools, resources and partnerships, typically with little luck (Boyes-Watson, 2008; Polk, 2001; Pranis, 2001). Even if such negotiations are successful, the unavoidable location of the intervention within the constraints of a narrow, inflexible justice system raises serious concerns that such attempts will constitute merely another means by which those with power are able to exercise coercive control via subtle yet insidious mechanisms, thus continuing to sustain and perpetuate social injustices (Boyes-Watson, 2010; Elliott & Chatterjee, 2003; Polk, 2001).

Simply put, it is not sufficient to campaign merely for the implementation of systematic changes within major institutions. Neither amendments in governance nor the removal of physical barriers to rights and resources guarantees a significant shift from the dominant cultural ideologies of Neoliberalism, the large-scale social
effects of which are omnipresent and deeply influential – often, even blinding. The powerlessness that socially excluded youth feel over the major forces shaping their lives is further exacerbated by their inability to resist consumer culture’s pervasive and relentless message that self-respect and social capital are attained through the acquisition of wealth and material goods. Many who succumb to mainstream advertising’s promise that consumption will immediately enhance the quality of their lives end up spending far beyond their means, eventually accumulating crushing debts which erode their self-esteem and dignity even further (Giroux, 2009). The allure which wealth carries as a quick-fix to nearly all life’s problems also shoulders significant blame for the widespread and debilitating addiction to gambling that is all too frequently witnessed within poor communities (Schissel, 2001). By socializing disenfranchised youth to see meaning only in affluence and material success, Neoliberalism renders them sightless to the personal resources they already possess, effectively keeping them in their place at the far margins of society.

Although many of those who live with the crisis of socially excluded youth are not unfamiliar with public outcries to help this population, such efforts typically take the form of uninvolved, detached acts of charity that do not seriously challenge donors’ underlying contempt for the disenfranchised and vulnerable, nor promote the practice of genuine community solidarity (Pranis, 2001). No matter how many efforts are made to provide aid and support, socially excluded youth will never find respect and empowerment within a culture in which the populace continues to accept the conviction that their own personal choices alone are liable for their fates
and that one’s social standing is the ultimate determinant of their self-worth. Strategies for youth development must be born of moralities that do not dehumanize marginalized youth but instead actively challenge and resist Neoliberalism’s adversarial convictions by campaigning for compassion, unconditional acceptance and love. Put simply, community members of all classes and backgrounds must relearn how to practice solidarity with marginalized youth.

Key to a democracy that takes its commitment to the well-being of all citizens seriously, social activist bell hooks (2000) describes community solidarity as “not the same as empathy… genuine solidarity with the poor is rooted in the recognition that interdependence sustains the life of the planet”. Agents working on behalf of social institutions who respond to perceived short fallings on the part of youth with support, encouragement, and patience rather than exclusionary and retributive practices are practicing solidarity through unconditional acceptance. Consensus decision-making processes challenge traditional notions of authority and abridge social distance by shifting the balance of power toward inclusive arrangements that welcome the insight and problem-solving abilities of all stakeholders. The creation of innovative and abundant opportunities for youth to contribute in meaningful ways to their communities facilitates their transformation, as viewed by the populace, from liability to respected and appreciated asset (Bazemore & Terry, 1997; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Nakkula et al., 2010; Pranis, 2001). Clearly, the number of strategies available to assist in the restoration of solidarity to communities are varied and numerous.
If social distance disempowers and separates individuals, solidarity empowers and brings them together (Boyes-Watson, 2008; hooks, 2000; Pranis, 2001). It is easy for people to justify their support for policies that harm, punish, and dehumanize marginalized youth when they continue to perceive the circumstances and events those youth struggle with as occurring in isolation and having little to no effect on their own lives. Because the practice of community solidarity is inherently linked to a shared commitment to unconditional collective responsibility, this indifference collapses in the presence of youth development initiatives rooted in these values. For this reason, those initiatives which begin with grassroots community development and target broad patterns of institutional change hold far more promise than structured, conventional approaches in addressing those issues of diversity, injustice, and inequity long-neglected by the formal youth justice system (Bell, 2007; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Nakkula et al., 2011; Polk, 2001; Pranis et al., 2003). The true power of democracy has always lain in the collective capability of ordinary citizens to mobilize in support of a shared vision and engage in mutual struggle in order to reclaim power from political and corporate elites and returns it to the public. Involvement within community youth development initiatives provides one way in which these same citizens may demonstrate their true potential to act as agents of real social change.

What follows are accounts of three successful positive youth development initiatives, all based in the United States and each illustrating a strategy available to communities to facilitate community change through the rebuilding of community solidarity. These case studies are not to be viewed as a set of fixed strategies
intended for replication. Youth development initiatives cannot simply be “plugged in” to populations but rather, must reflect and acknowledge individual community needs and be willing to adapt and innovate accordingly (Nakkula et al., 2010). However, they do each serve as powerful portrayals of the unique and promising results that may be produced when shared community concerns about youth and a larger vision of social justice are united with concrete action plans.

**Consensus Decision Making**

The lack of opportunities seemingly available to all members of the populace to participate in authentic and egalitarian dialogue exchanges, and the benefits such exchanges hold to promote group cohesiveness and community solidarity, has been written about extensively in community justice and youth development discourse (Boyes-Watson 2008; Giroux, 2009; Pranis, 2001; Pranis et al., 2003). Though individuals living within developed countries are typically educated to think of their societies as highly democratic, these majority-rule democracies are typically far less inclusive than they seem. The ability political representatives wield to gain absolute control through the simple outvoting of all opposing positions leaves those individuals on the losing side of the vote at serious risk of victimization by harmful policies due to a perceived needlessness on the part of those in power to understand or attempt to meet their needs (Giroux, 2009; Pranis, 2001). Even more worrying is the frequency by which certain key demographics comprising a substantial part of the citizenry, such as the young and disenfranchised, not only find themselves outvoted in this system (Pranis, 2001) but forcibly silenced by powerful professionals who are then trained to speak on their behalf and against their will.
This increasing concentration of power and control in the hands of an elite few, legitimized under the guise of equity and inclusiveness, raises serious questions about the health of democracy today – particularly, with regards to its failure to fairly represent the vulnerable and powerless (Boyes-Watson, 2010; Giroux, 2009; Pranis, 2001).

Consensus decision-making processes such as those utilized by Roca, a youth development organization based in Chelsea, Massachusetts, are fundamentally more democratic than those made by elected representatives alone because such decisions are inherently always representative of all participants (Boyes-Watson, 2008). As part of Roca’s strategy to provide valuable development opportunities for at-risk youth living within some of the most dangerous and impoverished urban neighborhoods in the state, Roca utilizes a restorative conflict resolution practice derived from Aboriginal and Native justice traditions known as the Peacemaking Circle (Pranis et al., 2003; Stuart, 1996). Circles draw upon various democratic and egalitarian practices to reveal the knowledge, experience and competencies of all participants: They never contain a “leader”, they guarantee all participants equal opportunities to speak and be heard, and no person is ever forcibly included or excluded from the process (Boyes-Watson, 2008; Pranis et al., 2003). Because everyone involved in the process has an equal voice, and because consensus decisions must be acceptable to all participants, it follows that resolutions must always address the interests of everyone to a fair degree. Ultimately, the Peacemaking Circle epitomizes a social order based on mutual respect and
inclusiveness, parity for all participants, and respect (Boyes-Watson, 2008; Pranis et al., 2003).

Having been adopted as a staple within their organization, Peacemaking Circles are now utilized by Roca staff to engage the youth they work with on a routine and daily basis (Boyes-Watson, 2008). Though still too young an organization to yield practical evidence in support of long-term, sustained resistance against risk factors, several evaluation reports published by the organization have delivered persuasive verification that Roca's unique development-focused strategy is having a tangible impact in combating many of the developmental difficulties that marginalized youth in Chelsea struggle with (Roca, 2011), and the organization's achievements have inspired other community initiatives who populations to utilize the Circle process as a strategy for youth development, as well (Boyes-Watson, 2008). Learning to practice consensus decision-making in a way that is truly fair and effective admittedly requires a significant investment in time and resources on the part of communities to develop the requisite skills, but the widespread adoption of this approach promises social justice in the form of a more complete representation of interests. Without the assurance of open lines of communication for all community members regardless of class and backgrounds, the voices of those marginalized by unequal access to resources and power will continue to remain unheard.

New Opportunities for Youth Participation

For those young people whose primary status is "delinquent," the availability of positive youth development interventions have been sporadic at best. In many
instances, even the most open-minded diversion programs exclude offenders from direct participation under the pretense that such youth are “not ready” to take active responsibility for their actions (Bazemore & Terry, 1997; Halperin et al. 1995), a profoundly disempowering sanction that then risks said offenders suffering the to passive recipients of punishment detrimental effects on development of prolonged helplessness and isolation (Bazemore & Terry, 1997). In contrast to these practices, recent positive youth development discourse seeks to demonstrate that those youth who have been excluded, oppressed, or forcibly silenced throughout their lives may benefit particularly when granted opportunities to display their unique assets and abilities. While adversarial, retributive practices based on the principles of control and fear, because they may have some success in reducing problem behaviors, they are fundamentally incompatible with goals of development and community integration because they do not encourage communities to view youth as allies and equals but instead as inherent troublemakers incapable of conventional behavior without threat of punishment (Bazemore & Terry, 1997).

Ultimately, it is through the granting of opportunities to contribute in productive and meaningful ways that communities gain the ability to truly appreciate the individual worth of all youth (Bazemore & Terry, 1997; Boyes-Watson, 2010).

Portland, Oregon’s Take The Time Initiative, launched by The Commission on Children, Families, and Community of Multnomah County on October 29, 1997, exemplifies just one grassroots project that arose from Search Institute’s invitation to American communities to interpret and apply their rigorously developed Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth (HC • HY) Developmental Assets framework in any
way suitable to their own particular needs and resources. Among many others, Take The Time’s goals included amending negative community attitudes toward youth by targeting what was perceived to be a major source of such portrayals: the media. After successfully convincing the *Oregonian* to investigate the assertion that news coverage of youth in Portland was primarily negative, community advocates on behalf of the initiative successfully lobbied for the newspaper to hire a writer willing to cast a more positive light on the city’s youth by seeking out stories of young people’s accomplishments. Participating youth also became involved in creating and contributing to “The Zone,” a weekly front-page feature on youth in the Friday Living section of the *Oregonian*. The goal of these media efforts was to reintroduce Portland - and the larger country as a whole - to the positive image of young people denied the public for so long, choosing to empower youth in the process by allowing them to speak for themselves (Nakkula et al., 2010).

Although it may seem simple enough at first glance for news outlets to report positive stories of young people, shifting the media’s focus proved surprisingly challenging. As numerous studies on youth crime reporting have demonstrated, features which endorse stereotypical portrayals of youth as dangerous and immoral see notable increases in public demand once the public has begun to internalize these very same portrayals, a process which essentially amounts to a dangerous cycle of fear, distrust, and disempowerment (Critcher, 2003; Schissel, 1997). Take The Time’s virtuous endeavor to break this cycle serves as merely one of the myriad possible ways youth may be afforded novel means of civic participation. It illustrates powerfully the impact that young people, when granted legitimate opportunities to
contribute in creative and self-directed ways to their communities, can affect in negating irrational public fears regarding youth crime true. By proving to the larger public that they share the same concerns as adults and can be just as committed to improving their communities, Portland’s youth were able to construct a foundation of common ground and solidarity from which these previously conflicting groups could regain their respect and appreciation for one another (Nakkula et al, 2010).

**New Patterns of Education and Training**

As illustrated, the widespread adoption of neoliberal and consumer culture on the part of communities has resulted in a gradual withdrawal of both government and public support from efforts to support radical transformations to the way development institutions operate, with social control solutions – and, in particular, the juvenile justice system – being replaced in the eyes of the public as key funding priorities (Giroux, 2009; Polk, 2001). Further exacerbating this crisis is the unwillingness many teachers and social workers within schools and training programs display to treat "difficult" youth, drawing on the excuse that resources are too scarce to accommodate the alterations that would need to be made to rigid school and training processes in order to accommodate what amounts, ultimately, to a very small percentage of the entire youth population (Polk, 2001). As advocates of critical pedagogy such as Paulo Friere (1970) and bell hooks (2010) have implored, any discourse about youth development should raise serious questions about the social responsibility of educators in addressing the plight of young people today, particularly with regards to how effectively higher education truly provides the intellectual foundation necessary for all young people to understand, integrate, and
transform the world in which they live. The final community youth development initiative described in this essay differs from its predecessors in its illustration not of a particular program but rather, a strategy to facilitate the fundamental restructuring of youth service and development sectors that is needed in order to accommodate the diverse set of pathways that would prepare all youth from all backgrounds for adulthood in a modern economy.

GivEm40, a youth development initiative which aimed to improve student performance within the rural-low income communities surrounding the resort town of Traverse City, Michigan, represented a unique, community-based approach to reorganize and restructure many of the ineffective strategies and policies characteristic of public school curriculums. Another initiative born of a collective endeavor to interpret and apply Search Institute’s Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth (HC • HY) Developmental Assets framework to their own community in a way suitable to their own particular needs and resources, the GivEm40 initiative commenced their approach by, first and foremost, mobilizing those people and organizations commonly uninvolved in youth development work via the creation of a complex cross-sector coalition. The coalition’s primary focus during this mobilization stage remained on the recruitment of community leaders rooted deeply in the schools who occupied roles critical to youth development. Through the collective power of this coalition, the Developmental Assets framework was then able to be applied to local schools through its integration within each school’s individually tailored Improvement Plan, a guide written by school representatives
containing specific goals and strategies in place intended to improve student achievement (Nakkula et al., 2011).

GivEm40’s story illustrates not simply the power that grassroots initiatives wield to generate substantial systemic change within the educational sector, but the value of implementing such initiatives in careful, strategic ways in order to attain full commitment to a vision to solidarity with socially excluded youth on the part of both professionals and the public. The limited shelf life that characterizes many unsuccessful attempts at community mobilization is partially a result of a failure to acknowledge that many people remain highly resistant toward programs that promote a positive orientation toward youth, and such programs’ premature and poorly-articulated efforts to expand and mobilize easily run the risk of alienating, rather than engaging, potential allies. In marked contrast, the GivEm40 coalition was particularly thoughtful in its targets for conscription right from its inception, aiming to first create a deep, lasting impact within the education sector via the recruitment of key stakeholders - including all 19 area superintendents - and then gradually spread out in more complex ways from that simple starting point. In addition to this precise targeting, members of the GivEm40 coalition were particularly careful to align, rather than overwhelm and replace, existing curriculums already in place within public schools with the Developmental Assets framework, a practice that proved successful in encouraging existing systems to become advocates of youth development ideology. Although the GivEm40 coalition disbanded several years ago once the initiative's funding ran dry, its influence remains evident in those schools and youth-serving agencies in the Traverse Bay Area still drawing upon the
Developmental Assets in their work (Nakkula et al., 2010), and the initiative itself remains an illustration of just one of many practical strategies for reinvigorating solidarity among community members in support of a common cause.

**CONCLUSION**

While many communities may be eager to join the effort to community youth development initiatives, it must be acknowledged that significant bureaucratic obstacles continue to stand in the way of a widespread agenda to implement these approaches. Governments may be unable or unwilling to fund community initiatives due to barriers which arise from program costs, concerns regarding which government departments community development initiatives are the purview of, or specific funding arrangements which restrict reform efforts to the specific areas of government bureaucracy and policy (Hillian et al., 2004). One recommendation arising from findings such as those found in Search Institute's (2010) work would be the implementation of policy reforms that allow for governments to increase funding to small communities and nonprofit organizations for the development and implementation of community-based youth development programs which would meet the unique needs of both offenders and community members. To attain community support and combat opposition from traditionalists, this move must be accompanied by further changes in social policy that discourage narrow, reactive responses to delinquency and at-risk behaviour as a first resort. Unfortunately, a democratic reform of this scale and importance remains unlikely to occur in the near future.
Community youth development advocates are well aware that knowledge gaps pose a significant barrier to program development and legislative reform. Although the body of empirical evidence currently supporting the viability of community youth development initiatives as a form of front-end diversion for young offenders is rapidly growing, the reality is that the total body of research in this area remains scarce. As of this essay's writing, there has yet to be located anything resembling a universal positive youth development "strategy" at all - Search Institute’s Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth (HC • HY) Developmental Assets framework (Nakkula et al., 2010), while providing just one example of a widely recognized and highly promising model (Benson, 2006), is intended to serve only as a loose set of guidelines to be tailored and modified in accordance with individual community needs (Boyes-Watson, 2010; Nakkula et al., 2010). Although this approach, and others like it, may be appropriate given the assumption that it is individual communities that are most qualified to develop effective responses to youth crime, it makes a highly difficult task of defining any sort of universal evaluation criterion that may be utilized to generate legitimate support for community development initiatives. For the time being, substantially more long-term research on youth development initiatives for delinquency prevention is needed before any meaningful conclusions regarding their sustainability can be drawn.

REFERENCES


