

HDRC Southampton

**The impact of
civic engagement,
volunteering projects
and schemes for children
rapid review**

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1. Methodology

To inform this rapid review, a scoping search was conducted to identify any existing relevant evidence reviews.

A key resource was the [Youth Social Action: Rapid Evidence Assessment](#) conducted by Alma Economics for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in 2021. This assessment systematically reviewed 87 studies published after 2012, focusing on children and young people aged 10–20 across the UK, OECD, and EU-27 countries. It explored both the causes of participation in youth social action and its impacts on outcomes for young people. Relevant findings from this assessment were extracted and integrated into the current review.

To supplement this, further targeted Google engine search was conducted to identify additional relevant grey literature and peer-reviewed studies.

Extracted findings were then grouped thematically according to three key outcome areas: Mental health & wellbeing, crime & anti-social behaviour and education & employment outcomes.

1.1 Mental Health & Wellbeing

Evidence consistently shows that civic engagement and youth participation projects can contribute positively to young people’s mental health and emotional wellbeing. Volunteering, social action, and structured extracurricular activities often help foster a sense of purpose, belonging, and personal growth.

For example, a school-based volunteering intervention studied in Lithuania demonstrated increases in empathy, prosocial behaviour, and the “Five Cs” of youth development — competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. These outcomes were linked to improved peer relationships and emotional wellbeing. [Direct and Mediated Long-Term Effects of the Positive Youth Development Intervention Program Try Volunteering on Empathy and Prosocial Behaviour](#) by Inga Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė (2016) and [Promoting positive youth development through a school-based intervention program Try Volunteering](#) Inga Truskauskaitė et al. (2020)

In the study [Socially Vulnerable Youth and Volunteering in Sports: Analyzing a Brussels Training Program for Young Soccer Coaches](#) Buelens et al. (2015) found that sports-based civic engagement helped improve adolescents’ emotional regulation and social interaction, especially for migrant youth, by creating safe, inclusive environments. Similarly, in the report [Connecting, belonging: Volunteering, wellbeing and leadership among refugee youth](#), S. Carlton (2015) reported enhanced self-esteem, life satisfaction, and a sense of identity among refugee youth participating in volunteering roles after a crisis.

The UK Home Office's [Evaluation of the Early Intervention Youth Fund: Impact report](#) (2025) provides additional support for the mental health benefits of targeted youth interventions. Several funded projects, such as [Infobuzz in Gloucestershire](#), reported reductions in anxiety, sadness, and anger alongside improved resilience and peer relationships.

[Leaders of the Future: Youth Social Action & its Role in Youth Work](#) - UK Youth (2021) highlighted that social action projects particularly benefited girls and marginalised groups, with participants reporting improved confidence, reduced isolation, and greater optimism about their futures. Projects that allowed for youth leadership, reflection, and creative expression were especially effective.

These findings suggest that the mental health benefits of civic engagement are most significant when young people feel their contributions are meaningful, when participation is voluntary, and when there is space for reflection and skill-building.

1.2 Crime & Anti-Social Behaviour

Several studies highlight the protective role that youth projects and civic engagement can play in reducing anti-social behaviour and involvement in crime.

A study, [the effects of youth clubs on education and crime](#) by C. Villa (2024) examined the consequences of youth club closures across England between 2010 and 2019. The research found that the loss of local youth provision led to a 14% increase in youth drug offences and violent crime and contributed to a noticeable decline in educational performance at Key Stage 4. This strongly suggests that access to youth services plays a critical preventative role.

[The Early Intervention Youth Fund \(EIYF\) evaluation](#) (2025) offers robust evidence of targeted youth interventions reducing offending behaviour. Projects working with young people at risk of criminal exploitation — particularly in areas affected by county lines and knife crime — reported reductions in drug-related and public order offences. Interventions that included youth workers, mentoring, and education about the justice system were particularly effective.

In addition, in [Can we help improve wider school outcomes through youth social action?](#) By Gorard et al. (2020) found that participation in structured, uniformed youth activities such as Scouts, Fire Cadets and Police Cadets led to improvements in teamwork, self-confidence, and emotional resilience — all traits linked to a reduced risk of anti-social behaviour. Although the effects were modest, the study indicated that these activities could foster a sense of purpose and reduce behavioural problems.

Even small-scale, school-based interventions, such as after-school learning clubs' study [Can learning beyond the classroom impact on social responsibility and academic attainment? An evaluation of the Children's University youth social action programme](#) by Siddiqui et al. (2019), contributed to

improved classroom behaviour and discipline. While not explicitly anti-crime interventions, such projects help build emotional regulation and reduce the likelihood of disruptive or harmful behaviour.

These findings underline that civic engagement works best as a crime prevention strategy when it provides structure, mentoring, and opportunities for youth to develop positive identities, particularly for those most at risk of marginalisation or exploitation.

1.3 Education & Employment Outcomes

The evidence linking civic engagement to educational and employment outcomes is mixed but promising. Many studies report improved attitudes toward learning, increased engagement with school, and development of transferable skills that support future employability.

In the study, [the effects of youth clubs on education and crime](#) by C. Villa (2024) which tracked youth club closures also found a significant decline in exam performance following the withdrawal of services. This underscores the role that youth projects can play in supporting educational attainment, particularly in deprived communities.

Research from [Can learning beyond the classroom impact on social responsibility and academic attainment? An evaluation of the Children’s University youth social action programme](#) by Siddiqui et al. (2019) into Children’s University after-school clubs and [Does participation in uniformed group activities in school improve young people’s non-cognitive outcomes?](#) by See et al. (2017) on uniformed youth groups showed modest improvements in school engagement and academic attitudes among primary and early secondary school students. However, the impact on formal academic attainment (e.g., grades) was inconsistent.

A common theme across studies is the development of soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving, which are highly valued by employers. In the study [Youth social action: What are the benefits for careers education?](#) Shaw & Angus (2020) found that social action programmes helped participants, including disadvantaged young adults, build stronger career aspirations and develop core employability competencies.

The [Leaders of the Future: Youth Social Action & its Role in Youth Work](#) - UK Youth (2021) literature review reinforced these findings, showing that participants in youth-led volunteering and activism reported increased confidence, civic identity, and skills applicable to both academic and employment settings. However, the report also noted that such benefits are often more readily accessed by young people who are already engaged and supported, pointing to a need for outreach and inclusion strategies.

[The Early Intervention Youth Fund \(EIYF\) evaluation](#) (2025) also found that youth interventions helped improve understanding of the criminal justice system and raised aspirations, especially

among pupils at risk of exclusion. Yet long-term tracking of employment or education outcomes remains rare in these evaluations.

2. References

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