

Investing in Knowledge: Insights on the Funding Environment for Research on Inequality Among Young People in the United States

KEY FINDINGS

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To build a strong foundation for our society's future and ensure that all young people are able to thrive, it is increasingly important that we understand ways to respond to the widespread inequalities confronting our nation.

If we are to reduce the effects of today's inequality on tomorrow's society, then research on inequality among young people is essential.

Inequality is a complex problem, present in young people's outcomes and opportunities, and in the ways that resources are distributed and interactions are experienced. By broadening our thinking about inequality, we are more likely to understand how it is produced, maintained, and exacerbated.

Understanding different forms and distinctions of inequality, and the ways that they shape the way young people live, is the first step to conceptualizing how research might identify effective responses. What specific programs, policies, and practices might reduce inequality among young people? How might we limit the effects of today's inequality on the youth of tomorrow? What is currently being done to support research, and how can funding organizations maximize their efforts?

This brief summarizes insights on the current funding environment for research on understanding and addressing social and economic inequality among young people in the U.S. These insights emerged from interviews with social science researchers and staff from foundations and government agencies, and an examination of materials from 300 funding organizations that have either an explicitly expressed interest in inequality and young people or youth-serving systems, or a reputation for funding inequality research that affects young people as a population or in institutions.

[View the full report at www.williamtgrantfoundation.org](http://www.williamtgrantfoundation.org)

The Funding Environment for Research on Youth Inequality

THERE IS A RELATIVE SCARCITY OF FUNDING FOR RESEARCH ON YOUTH INEQUALITY

Of 300 foundations examined, just over 10% (33) support research on youth inequality on a national scale. For most foundations, advocacy and direct service provision are the foremost strategies for addressing inequality. Many foundations support local nonprofits and service agencies, and others partner directly with government agencies in providing services. Some foundation funders provide support to institutions, organizations, or research centers, in addition to individual researchers, fellows, or in-house staff. A number of foundations invest in research advocacy or social policy pilot programs to influence policy decisions and public opinion.

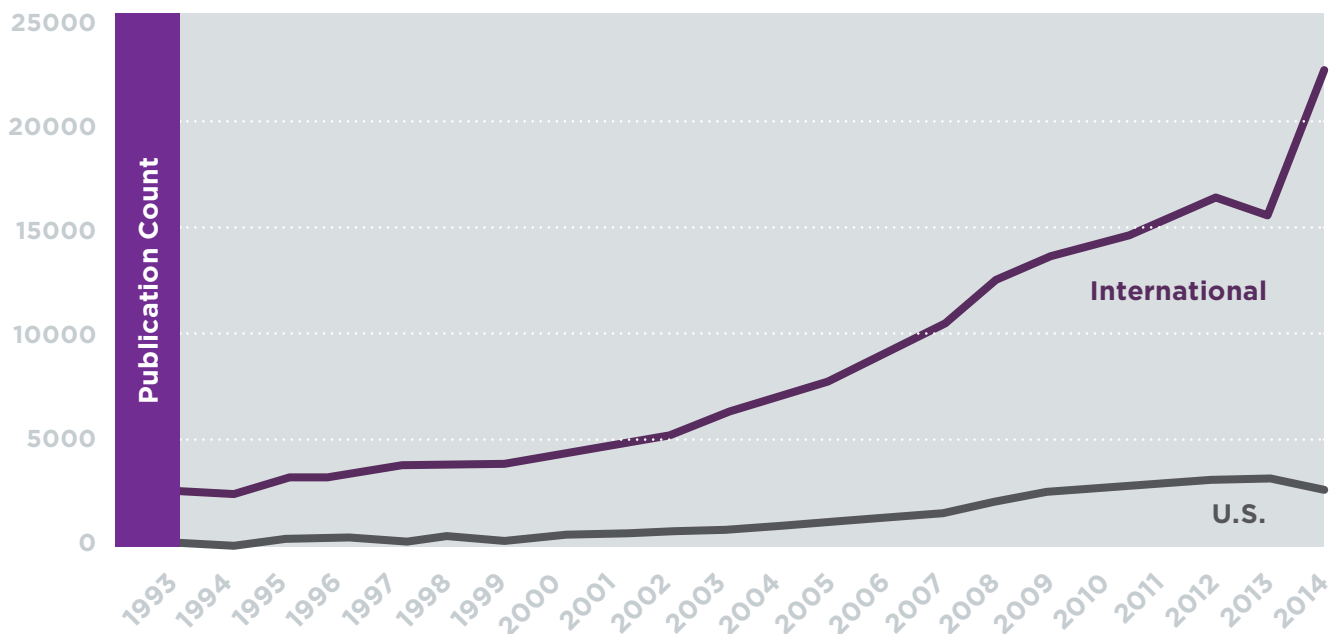
Government agencies such as the National Institutes of Health, National Science Foundation, and Institute of Education Sciences support research as the primary means to achieve their stated missions. Although the largest government funders primarily support basic research to build and develop theory, they also fund applied research, which is often directed toward program evaluations and intervention research. The majority of these agencies focus on improving outcomes for all, although targeted initiatives sometimes call attention to particular disparities.

The funding landscape for research on youth inequality in the U.S., that is, is relatively small.

FUNDING SCARCITY MAY BE SLOWING GROWTH IN U.S. RESEARCH ON INEQUALITY, ESPECIALLY YOUTH INEQUALITY

Despite an increase in research publications on inequality from 1993–2014, the U.S. has trailed far behind the international community. And while there has been modest growth in U.S. research publications on inequality, most focus on the general population, with less specific attention to youth.

Inequality-Related Social Science Research Published 1993-2014: US vs International



Source: Publication counts restricted to those within the social sciences. A topic search for terms related to inequality was used which identifies publications with this stem in the title, abstract, or keywords. For more information on specific search terms used in the analysis, see the methodological appendix in the full report.

Three Strategies to Advance Efforts to Understand and Reduce Youth Inequality in the United States

MORE RESOURCES

Given the breadth and complexity of inequality among young people, and the potential consequences it has on the future, it is essential that support for research keeps pace with the problem.

It is clear that in order to address inequality among young people, we need to support basic research that develops insights and theories that shape policy and practice decisions. We also need to support applied research that builds evidence and assesses programs, practices, and policies.

We may increase our understanding of inequality and advance efforts to reduce it by devoting resources to building capacity of research institutions; investing in specific investigators or research projects; leveraging collaborations among funding organizations to most effectively target promising research; or sustaining partnerships between government agencies that provide direct services, funding organizations, and researchers in order to coordinate intervention efforts.

NEW VOICES

Just as we know that equal opportunity is critical for youth to achieve their potential, so too do we know that expanding opportunity for new voices in the field of social research is critical to broadening the base of knowledge that is necessary to addressing inequality.

Providing funding opportunities for less established or under-represented scholars would maximize the breadth of our research insight. Having a more inclusive set of researchers focused on examinations of inequality would also allow for a wider range of perspectives and prior experiences to be leveraged in this pursuit. Such strategies could include broadening the pool of scholars who research inequality among young people, or targeting support or outreach efforts to ensure that the full range of experiences and expertise are represented in all phases of the research process.

BROADER AND MORE INTEGRATED APPROACHES

Inequality is not a single issue, and our responses won't be shaped by a single approach. By broadening our conception of inequality to include its full range—including opportunities, outcomes, the distribution of resources, and the relations and interactions that shape young people's experiences—we will be better prepared to develop effective responses.

The emphasis of this strategy is not simply increasing the number of scholars, but encouraging scholars to draw more deeply from a wider range of existing knowledge and previous scholarship. Supporting research that expands or integrates methodological approaches, disciplines, and theoretical perspectives could yield new ways of thinking. A broad and integrated approach to supporting research can focus attention toward overlooked or under-studied forms of inequality, and may provide a fuller understanding of the policies, programs, and practices that can reduce inequality among young people.

Understanding different forms and distinctions of inequality, and the ways that they shape the way young people live, is the first step to identifying effective responses.

Research has the potential to produce a body of knowledge that strengthens the systems in which young people grow, the schools where they learn, and the communities in which they develop. It has the potential to challenge assumptions about what works and what doesn't, revealing new interventions and improving existing programs, policies, and practices so that every child and family has a fair shot at getting ahead. And so, amid the stark but surmountable challenge of inequality, the time is ripe for new research to pave the way the forward.

Though our scan of the funding environment for research on youth inequality indicates a scarcity of funding opportunities for research, there exist rich and diverse efforts to understand and address what may well be the defining issue of our time. In the future, the field may consider the lasting value of devoting additional resources, including new voices, and taking broader and more integrated steps, both individually and as a community.

Given the complexity of inequality among young people, and the various approaches that funding organizations take to addressing it, there may be gaps in our knowledge. But by working together, organizations who are committed to understanding ways to reduce inequality may contribute to a collective effort that is greater than the sum of its parts.