*Original Research*

# Young People in Newfoundland and Labrador: Community Connectedness and Opportunities for Social Inclusion

Paul Alhassan Issahaku[1] [iD] and Anda Adam[2]

## Abstract

Globally, young people are a major demographic group and a key constituency in socioeconomic policy considerations. However, in a neoliberal era, the social inclusion of youth is in jeopardy. This qualitative study explored young people's connectedness to community and opportunities for social inclusion in Newfoundland and Labrador. The perspectives of social capital, social exclusion, and sense of community provided a theoretical framework for the study. A purposive sample of 23 youth aged 15 to 24 years provided data through interviews, which we analyzed inductively, using thematic analysis. We found that young people connected to their communities through informal associations and non-profit organizations. These structures provided networks of supportive relationships and inclusive spaces, where young people felt a sense of belonging, and had opportunities for participation. Opportunities took the form of resources and activities that promoted personal growth and community building. For example, through associations and non-profit organizations, participants engaged in general educational development, entrepreneurial training, part-time and volunteer work, and advocacy. However, participants also reported some barriers to inclusion in their communities. Personal level factors, such as illness and environmental level factors, such as low-income and social stigma were barriers to inclusion. These findings provide a basis for policymakers and practitioners to promote youth social inclusion in Newfoundland and Labrador.

## Keywords

young people, community connectedness, social inclusion, social exclusion forces, Newfoundland and Labrador

Young people or youth (15–24 years) are a significant demographic group, as they constitute 1.2 billion or 16% of the global population (United Nations, 2019). Canada ranks high in this global picture, as youth have become a large segment of the national population. The 2020 estimates by Statistics Canada (n.d.) show that youth constituted over 4.5 million or 12.06% of an estimated 38 million Canadians. In the midst of current social and economic changes and increases in their share of the population, concerns about young people's social integration, that is, the extent to which they are socially included or excluded and how much they feel a sense of belonging in their communities, have also risen. There is concern that young people suffer marginalization from politics and policy-making and that they experience a crisis of citizenship—rights, identity, and social participation (Bellamy, 2008; Macedo et al., 2005; Sloam, 2012a, 2012b). An increasingly diverse group, young people inhabit multiple identities and preferences, including nonorthodox gender, sexual, ideological, and cultural orientations for which they may experience different levels of exposure to the risk of social exclusion (Beck, 1992). As some scholars have pointed out, young people experience risks related to the labor market, such as increased unemployment (Schilling et al., 2019; Sloam, 2012a, 2012b). According to Schilling et al. (2019), unemployment or "Instable work affects other resources like housing, property, citizenship and partnership" (p. 1334). Youth unemployment creates conditions of "precarity" (Standing, 2011) that deny them critical assets for social participation. The global economic crisis, which has often necessitated austerity social and economic policies by neoliberal regimes in the form of increased university tuition fees, cuts to youth-development programs, and suspensions of the transition to adulthood (Furlong, 2009; Hart & Henn, 2017; Sloam, 2012a, 2012b) have exacerbated the social disconnection of many young people.

The purpose of this study is to explore the sense of connectedness to community and the challenges and opportunities for social inclusion and wellbeing among young people

[1]Memorial University of Newfoundland School of Social Work, St. John's, NL, Canada
[2]Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, St. John's, NL, Canada

**Corresponding Author:**
Paul A. Issahaku, Memorial University of Newfoundland School of Social Work, 230 Prince Philip Dr., St. John's, NL A1C 5S7, Canada.
Email: pissahaku@yahoo.com

in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL), Canada. The questions that drive the study are, to what extent do young people feel connected to community, and what challenges and opportunities do they experience for social inclusion that promote wellbeing? This question is relevant for youth studies scholarship in the global arena, and builds on extant research on the subject. One way in which some scholars have asked this question is by focusing on how the growing unemployment among young people in sub-Saharan Africa (Anosike, 2019; Dolan & Rajak, 2016; Hilson & Osei, 2014; Muiya, 2014) and elsewhere (Rose et al., 2012: Schilling et al., 2019) shapes their sense of social inclusion. For example, in many impoverished regions of sub-Saharan Africa where youth unemployment is rife, many young people feel disconnected from their communities or excluded from the market economy (Dolan & Rajak, 2016; Schilling et al., 2019). Other scholars have highlighted the importance of conducting research to illuminate the social inclusion prospects of youth who experience mental illness (e.g., Kermode et al., 2021), whereas others have investigated how formerly street-involved youth experience processes of reintegration into their communities (e.g., Olsson et al., 2018). The question of inclusion is especially important for youth who are experiencing mental illness, as they may be misunderstood and face isolation by various social networks in the community (Kermode et al., 2021). Existing research indicates that, globally, there are growing threats to youth social inclusion, but that we can learn from young people about ways in which they could be supported to feel connected to and included in their communities (Dolan & Rajak, 2016; Hilson & Osei, 2014; Kermode et al., 2021; Korkiamaki & O'Dare, 2021; Tettey, 2019). The present study extends the literature by focusing the gaze on young people in NL, Canada.

Although the population of NL is relatively small, about half a million, young people constitute 11% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2017). In 2001, the Government of NL set up a Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) whose vision was to ensure "that all youth in the province enjoy the highest level of safety and security, have a high standard of education and health and are engaged in the economic and social life of the province" (Newfoundland & Labrador Youth Advisory Committee, 2009, p. 6). The YAC would accomplish this by bringing the voices of youth to government through advice on youth-related policy matters. Again, in 2017, the Premier's Youth Council (PYC, 2019) was created as another layer of youth engagement in the province. The mandate of the PYC is "to provide advice to the Premier and the Provincial Government, bringing a youth perspective to topics important to youth and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador" (PYC, 2019, p. 2). Obviously, young people are an important demographic group for socioeconomic policy decisions and community building in NL. However, the unique experiences of young people for social inclusion and wellbeing remain unexplored and under-theorized in the NL context. This study, therefore, fills a gap in the current

literature on the social integration of youth in Canada through the perspectives of youth in NL. Using a qualitative exploratory approach, the study positions young people as actors who help us understand their community connectedness and the everyday challenges and opportunities that shape their social participation and wellbeing.

## Literature Review

Young people are an important subject in discussions about education and training (Ainley, 2011; Fleury & Bentley, 2020; Giroux, 2003, 2009; Morch, 2003), employment and the labor market (Larson, 2003; Spatarelu, 2015; Vasile & Anghel, 2015), and the life course transition to adulthood (Antonucci et al., 2014; Berrington & Stone, 2014; Hamilton et al., 2014; Statistics Canada, 2017; United Nations, 2019). Youth are therefore an important subject of research, as they are for socioeconomic and criminal justice policy decisions. Current research on youth can be categorized into three forms; those that focus on problem behaviors or risk and protective factors for problematic behaviors among youth, studies that explore youth disengagement or marginalization from civic engagement, and research that highlights youth resistances and actions for social inclusion. There is emerging research that draws attention to the social processes of alienation or marginalization experienced by young people in neoliberal regimes and the options they consider for social inclusion (Bellamy, 2008; Macedo et al., 2005; McCormick & Barthelemy, 2021; Mycock & Tonge, 2012; O'Loughlin & Gillespie, 2012; Sloam, 2012a, 2012b). Neoliberal governmental policies, through their effects on families and communities, disadvantage and exclude many young people from participating both in the economy and in politics; even access to and sustenance in the educational system is made difficult for some young people (S. Brown et al., 2013; Hart & Henn, 2017). P. Kelly (2003) has referred to the phenomenon of generalized anxiety and mistrust of young people, which works to exclude them from social spaces by constructing them as risk (S. Brown et al., 2013; Hughes, 2011). According to P. Kelly (2003), increasingly, there is a "generalized and institutionalized anxiety and mistrust in relation to the capacities of today's young people to make the transition to adulthood" (p. 166). The consequence is to criminalize young people for policing in order to keep public spaces sanitized (D. M. Brown, 2013; Brunson & Miller, 2006; Francis, 2021; Kennelly, 2011; Murray et al., 2021; Ricciardelli et al., 2020; Sharp & Atherton, 2007).

Contrary to the above, a growing body of research focuses on problem behaviors or anti-social behaviors (ASB) among young people (Basen-Engquist et al., 1996; Childs et al., 2011; Childs & Sullivan, 2013; Chun & Mobley, 2010; Dembo et al., 2010; Hair et al., 2009; Ward et al., 2021). Research on risk and protective factors for problem behaviors among young people holds that youth is characteristically a time of problematic behavior (C. Sullivan et al.,

2010). This type of literature has explored how some young people run away from home and become street-involved or homeless (Hail-Jares et al., 2021; Glowacz et al., 2020; Karabanow, 2003, 2008; K. Kelly & Caputo, 2007; O'Grady et al., 2020; Owen et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2002). Young people are constructed as having failed to master control over drives for rule violation and sexual activity. As a result, they indulge in problem behaviors, which include risky sexual activity, alcohol and drug use, criminal activity, and dropping out of school (Farrington & Welsh, 2006; Goldsmith, 2008; Ochoa et al., 2005; Pape & Rossow, 2004; Sadler, 2008; Smith et al., 2021; C. Sullivan et al., 2010; Ward et al., 2021; Werb et al., 2008). Anti-social behaviors make young people either a vulnerable, at-risk group that needs protection (Gangamma et al., 2008; Heerde et al., 2020; Hughes, 2011; Liljedahl et al., 2010; Munford & Sanders, 2008) or a dangerous group that needs surveillance and control (D. M. Brown, 2013; Crawford & Lister, 2007; Francis, 2021; Goldsmith, 2008; P. Kelly, 2003; Kennelly, 2011; Manders, 2009; Murray et al., 2021).

Research on youth problem behaviors builds on the theory that youth is a transitional period marked by "pubertal maturation, mood fluctuations, emotional dysregulation, and conflict with parents" (Arnett, 1999; Childs & Sullivan, 2013, p. 61). However, what this type of research fails to emphasize is that environmental factors, including community and family support and involvement, are important determinants of young people's behavior (Bacchini et al., 2011; Lenkens et al., 2021; Marzerolle et al., 2021; Richards et al., 2004; Robertson et al., 2005; Romer, 2003). Support does not only correlate negatively with antisocial behavior among young people (Bacchini et al., 2011; Lenkens et al., 2021; Marzerolle et al., 2021), it also gives them a new perspective of themselves (Hoyne, 2020; Kulbok et al., 2015; Ngo et al., 2017; Nicholas et al., 2019; Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2013; Shaw et al., 2014). For example, it has been shown that school dropout or poor performance is linked to low connectedness to or barriers to inclusion in the school community (Esbensen & Carson, 2009; Henry, 2009; Muschert & Peguero, 2010; Payne, 2008; Peguero, 2011). Studies using a positive youth development perspective provide support for the findings on the effect of environmental factors on youth behavior, showing that when young people are or feel connected to the community they develop assets, strengths, and competencies for prosocial behavior (Benson & Scales, 2009; Heck & Subramaniam, 2009; Olson & Goddard, 2015). These studies build on developmental psychology, which posits that young people require a nurturing environment to shape the development of their personal and social identities (Adamson et al., 1999; Bandura, 1997; Crockett & Crouter, 1995; Evans, 2007; Pretty, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978), including self-concept (Yates & Youniss, 1998) and personal efficacy (Bandura, 1997). According to Evans (2007), young people require an environment "where

adults, peers, and opportunities for exploration play key roles" (p. 694).

An important dimension of current literature consists of studies that identify programs that promote youth social inclusion and the benefits of social inclusion for young people. For example, research has stressed the importance of engaging young people in various forms of entrepreneurship activities in order to enhance their social inclusion and well-being, including entrepreneurship education (Anosike, 2019), self-employment opportunities (Dolan & Rajak, 2016), and artisanal and small-scale mining (Hilson & Osei, 2014). These studies show that support for youth entrepreneurship is a great way to empower young people to pursue careers in the informal economy and to contribute to building their communities. In addition, research by Tettey (2019) has shown that engaging youth in culturally grounded activities such as music and dance enables young people to develop artistic talents and stay connected to their communities. Further, research has found that formal interventions targeted to youth, such as peer-led wellness groups, do well to in promoting a sense of social inclusion among youth who are mentally ill by reducing social isolation (Kermode et al., 2021). Intergenerational research also shows that youth sense of social inclusion is promoted in an environment where social connections, such as friendships, are encouraged across generations (Korkiamaki & O'Dare, 2021). In such an environment, according to Korkiamaki and O'Dare (2021, p. 304), "Access to diverse company, distinct support, broader networks, and alternative identities lead to increased experiences of social inclusion at a personal and societal level". Regarding the benefits of social inclusion for young people, Olsson et al. (2018) and Rose et al. (2012) have done some important work. Olsson et al. (2018) have noted that a sense of inclusion builds young people's capacity to make healthy decisions, build trusting relationships, face the challenges of transitioning to adulthood, and take chances in life. Similarly, Rose et al. (2012) found that inclusion builds young people's agency, promotes hope for the future, and enables them reconcile contradictory societal messages on what to prioritize in life.

It is clear from the literature that many factors work to constrain young people's behavior and options for social inclusion. However, young people show resilience, resistance, and resourcefulness by devising alternative forums for social engagement, both in the economic and political spheres of their communities (Schuch, 2018; Schilling et al., 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2011), and there are various ways in which we can promote youth social inclusion. The current study aligns with the type of scholarship that focuses on young people's strengths and creativity for social inclusion in their communities. The study seeks to learn from young people (1) how connected they are to their communities and (2) what challenges and opportunities for social inclusion they experience in everyday life.

## Theoretical Perspective

A number of perspectives inform the analysis on young people's connectedness to community and their inclusion/exclusion in their communities. Drawing from the literature, we define the term community expansively as a context for mutual association that helps not only with fulfillment of basic needs, but also with finding meaning in life (J. D. Brown & Hannis, 2014; Christenson & Robinson, 1980). Community is also defined as a network of relationships that provides a sense of belonging (Skinner, 2020), or as Somerville (2011) has put it, "Community is about connectedness among persons, and the connectedness has to be meaningful for the persons concerned" (p. 7). These conceptions of community coincide with Gusfield's (1975) idea of community where, beyond the geographical, community refers to the character and quality of "human relationship" (p. xvi). We therefore conceptualize community to include schools, friendships, afterschool programs, neighborhood groups and associations, and nonprofit agencies that provide educational and wellness resources to youth. This broad view of community is consistent with the concept of sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974). According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), sense of community "is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). McMillan and Chavis (1986) identified membership—who belongs/does not belong, influence—having a say, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection as the four dimensions of sense of community. Research shows that sense of community shapes young people's civic participation, social development, and well-being (Albanesi et al., 2007; Cicognani et al., 2008; Evans, 2007; Talo et al., 2014).

We also draw on Flanagan et al.'s (2012) perspective that institutional forms of participation are important in getting youth connected to other citizens in their communities. Flanagan et al. (2012) argue that youth social inclusion is contingent on the availability of organizational structures that provide opportunities for civic engagement. Flanagan et al. (2012) have pointed out that these forms of communities have the potential to help overcome the current "dearth of organizational opportunities to practice civic and social skills" and help young people "get recruited into civic life" (p. 29). Social capital theory (Lin, 1999; Putnam, 2000) and the asset-based community development perspective (ABCD; Kretzman & McKnight, 1993) where networks of associational and organizational relationships are important for personal and collective growth and development support the point made by Flanagan et al. (2012). Social capital theory explains that networks of interpersonal and intergroup relationships are conduits through which material resources, skills, and talents are mobilized and put to use for the collective good of the community; therefore, these are capital in the economic sense (Halpern, 2005; Lin, 1999; Putnam, 2000). Youth connectedness to community through organizational structures is important for their inclusion, as these structures help to overcome barriers to inclusion (Axford, 2008). Youth connectedness connotes being accepted, respected, and valued (Campbell et al., 1999; Rose et al., 2012), while inclusion is defined to encompass their participation in education and employment as well as in care work, volunteerism, friendships, and leisure activities (Axford, 2008).

The social generations perspective (Blatterer, 2007; Wyn & Woodman, 2006) is also useful for this study. This perspective posits that the social category of youth, along with associated experiences, are created not only by social and economic change, but also by policy decisions. Thus, the generations perspective, where the meaning and experience of youth are contingent on and shaped by current social conditions, seeks to understand the challenges and opportunities for social inclusion among youth by paying attention to the interrelationships between young people and their social contexts (Woodman & Wyn, 2013). A perspective that supports the social generations approach to studying youth social inclusion is the youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) framework (Zeldin et al., 2013). The Y-AP focuses on the nature and quality of relationships and exchanges among youth and adults as a route to understanding youth connectedness to community (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007; Wong et al., 2010; Zeldin et al., 2013). This perspective holds that when youth are given opportunities for active participation in community organizations, such as in areas of governance, organizing, activism, and self-enhancement, their civic engagement is promoted (Christens & Peterson, 2012; Flanagan & Faison, 2001; P. J. Sullivan & Larson, 2010) because they experience "shared leading and learning" (Zeldin et al., 2013, p. 385). The Y-AP framework speaks to community connectedness as it points to interpersonal interactions and civic engagement. Research by Brady et al. (2020) provides support for the Y-AP approach to youth inclusion. In three European cities, Brady et al. (2020) found that policymakers, public officials, and youth work practitioners used strategies such as youth work, deliberative forums, volunteerism, arts, sports and media, non-formal education, and technology and social media to promote youth civic engagement.

Finally, this study draws on social exclusion theory (Levitas et al., 2007). Social exclusion, according to Levitas et al. (2007, p. 9), "involves the lack or denial of resources. . . and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society. . ." Factors that are generally associated with social exclusion include lack of income, poor health, and discrimination (Gee & Walsemann, 2009; Levitas et al., 2007). For the purposes of this study, the concept of social exclusion will be useful in exploring barriers to inclusion among young people. The combination of the foregoing perspectives, therefore, provides a comprehensive framework to

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

| Characteristic | N | Minimum | Maximum |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Age | 23 | 15 | 24 |
| Age range | | | |
| 15–19 | 13 | | |
| 20–24 | 10 | | |
| Education | | | |
| High school | 10 | | |
| Post-secondary | 13 | | |
| Sex | | | |
| Male | 9 | | |
| Female/other | 14 | | |
| Ethnicity/race | | | |
| Black/other | 3 | | |
| White | 20 | | |

understand the social integration of young people by exploring their connectedness to community as well as their opportunities and barriers to inclusion.

## Method

### Participants

A convenient sample of 23 youth was recruited from St. John's, Mount Pearl, and Paradise for the study. The primary criterion for inclusion in the study was an assessment that the person fell within the required age range (15–24), was voluntarily participating, and could be interviewed in English. Posters inviting interested youth to participate in the study were displayed at various locations, including community centers, entrances to malls, and premises of youth serving organizations. The posters included contact details of the principal investigator (PI) so that prospective participants could call to express their interest. We also went on field outreach to community centers and other locations and made personal solicitations to prospective participants. The final sample of 23 consisted of 8 youth who called to express interest and assessed as suitable, and 15 youth recruited during field outreach. Five of the participants had part-time employment, one identified as a sex worker, and one was a nursing mother. Table 1 provide details of the sample.

### Data Collection

Research data collection spanned the period of April to August 2019. The PI conducted all interviews and a trained assistant did transcription. The PI conducted semi-structured interviews with research participants in English. The interviews focused on two main questions. The first question posed to participants went like this: how would you describe your connectedness to your community or communities? You can talk about this in relation to your membership in groups, associations, or organizations where you feel a sense of belonging, inclusion, and fulfillment of your needs. The second question was divided into two parts; (1) what do you identify as opportunities for being connected and participating in your community or communities and (2) what do you identify as challenges or barriers to being connected and participating in your community or communities? Interviews lasted between 45 and 55 minutes. Two youth-friendly agencies provided private rooms for the interviews.

### Data Analysis

All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and the PI audited the transcripts for accuracy and completeness. Both authors closely read the transcripts to familiarize with the contents and to initiate coding of the data. The NVivo 12 software package aided thematic coding of the data. With a focus on the research questions and using thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Holloway & Todres, 2003; Miles et al., 2014; Tuckett, 2005), the data were deductively and inductively coded to identify thematic categories and subthemes. Subsequently, some codes were merged to establish meaning patterns or themes that were formulated into statements of findings of the study. This was in consonance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) explanation that thematic coding helps to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes in the data. As Braun and Clarke (2006) point out, themes capture "something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represent some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82). For example, from the data on community connectedness, the theme of "citizen associations and non-profit organizations' emerged. This theme captured participants" descriptions of their connections to associations and organizations and how important these are to them. The theme of "social exclusion forces" emerged from data on everyday challenges, and captured participants' descriptions of difficulty getting around town timely and safely, homophobia, health problems, difficult relationships, and time and income constraints. Finally, the theme of "social participation" emerged from data on everyday opportunities. This theme captured descriptions of opportunities to engage in activities that promoted personal development and contribution to community building.

## Ethical Considerations

For ethical accountability, the audio recordings and transcripts served as an audit trail throughout the analysis and writing process. A neutral third party, who gave feedback after auditing the transcripts, reviewed a draft of the paper. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants provided written informed consents. We assured participants that no identifying information of theirs would be included in the reports. To honor this promise, we used only age and gender to qualify the quotes from participants' transcripts. The

PI's home institution provided ethics clearance for the study (ID #2018353-SW).

## Findings

Three themes (a theme for each of the three questions posed to participants) emerged as findings of the study. These themes are citizen associations and non-profit organizations, social participation for personal development and community building, and social exclusion forces. We present each of these themes, using quotes to illustrate the points made.

### Citizen Associations and Non-Profit Organizations

On the question of youth's connectedness to community, we found participants talking about citizen associations and non-profit organizations. This finding showed that the contexts of young people are citizen associations and non-profit organizations, some of which are multicultural, multi-sexual, and non-binary and therefore deemed as inclusive spaces. On a daily basis, associations and organizations constitute networks of supportive relationships that create a sense of community for participants. According to participants, these important connections provide inclusive spaces to feel safe and have the freedom to express yourself.

> They foster a closeness, unity amongst people that help you to go through certain stuff together. You know, things get rough and in extreme cases, they rally together to help you. It is almost like an ideal community, trying to work together for the common good of everyone in many different aspects. (18-year-old male participant).

> It is like a family where you can be yourself and where you feel comfortable or you can, I don't even know how to word it. It's where you feel at home. You can express how you feel, or if you are feeling like, or you have a bad day and you come here. I feel like I have somewhere I belong and everything makes the vibe really good. (19-year-old female participant).

We further established that these groups, associations, and organizations do not only make participants feel at home; more importantly, they provide resources for health and wellness, educational development, and employment for the young people. In effect, they serve as key assets for personal and collective growth among young people, as illustrated in the following:

> I work at a charity place. It is important to me that I work in a place where they not only pay enough to put myself through school, but I also work at a place where my form and sense of community get to improve because I know that what I am doing is helping people in my community. (20-year-old female participant).

> I will say the women's center is part of my community, and a bunch of programs that I am involved in. They are my little

bubbles. With them, I have somewhere safe and comfortable, like people you can rely on for support, people who want you to achieve your goals in the future. (21-year-old female participant).

It was really a consistent theme among participants that their connections are a social support system that is there to help with their everyday activities pertaining to school, work, and outside of school and work. Participants indicated that in these associations and organizations, they have people who will bring them groceries, give them a ride to the doctor, and listen to their concerns about emotional and mental health challenges.

### Social Participation: Personal Development and Community Building

Indeed, given their connectedness to community, participants identified opportunities for social inclusion in their everyday lives. These opportunities promoted personal development and enabled them contribute to community building efforts. Some of the opportunities identified by participants included getting help with schoolwork for their educational advancement. Participants indicated that within their local community structures, they received help in subject areas where they were struggling so they could succeed in school. Even those who had dropped out of school had opportunities to advance by receiving support to pursue general educational development (GED) programs.

> Yes, there are opportunities. Like being able to do a GED program instead of going or being on the waitlist. Like, they help you get your stuff faster and stuff. So that is good for me. Also, meeting a whole different variety of people, learning new skills in some of the programming that I am in are all opportunities I experience. (19-year-old female participant).

> Like, it is not all the time that I have classes. But I know that there are always people here and there if I need support to be able to figure out some things. The classes that I am taking right now are for my GED. It is towards my education, so that is the main thing in my life right now. It is to focus on my educational development and I get help to do so. (20-year-female participation).

Employment coaching and support to secure employment provided by community agencies were other opportunities available for the youth to participate in their communities. The fact that there were many avenues for these types of support was important for the youth. According to one participant:

> I would say, these agencies are an opportunity I have taken advantage of. I go to visit some of them twice a week. I recently started a new job, so I will be working full time as well. The same thing with that entrepreneur program. I am in a local entrepreneurial program, so I am learning how to start my own

business as well. I am typically for programs like that. I like to take advantage of all the opportunities that are in my community. (23-year-old female participant).

Another participant highlighted the importance that employment coaching provided by a non-profit agency was for him and how he anticipated things to work out in the coming days:

I got help to develop and print a couple of resumes and we are going to go out to the area and put out the resumes to local businesses. Obviously, the idea is for me to get employment. I mean, I am on assistance. I am not proud of it. I am not so proud that I suffer nothing before I take it. Even if you just pay a couple of bills at home, knowing that you earned that money and you are putting it to good use is very satisfying. (22-year-old male participant).

In addition to the opportunities to succeed in school and to secure employment, participants had support for housing as well as access to support and counseling groups that catered to their mental health and addictions issues. The youth described support groups as forums that helped them to grow, mature, and get inspired because they learn more and experience more. As one participant noted:

During the week, I get the opportunity to work. I work twice a week. Then I will come to the agency and they help me with my schoolwork. I get help with housing down at another agency. I also get help with other programs providing groups for mental health and addictions counselling. (20-year-old male participant).

In addition to the above, we found that participants had opportunities to contribute to community building which brought them personal fulfillment. Some participants described working with charities and volunteering with other organizations as an opportunity to be involved and contribute to their communities. According to one participant:

I will say, being able to do what I do at a charity place is an opportunity to contribute to my community. I work to improve my community. I volunteer with other organizations and again give to my community. I have opportunities here and there to show support and improve myself. (20-year-old female participant).

Some participants identified their involvement in advocacy activities as an opportunity to contribute to shaping their communities. Among others, participants had engaged in protests and demonstrations to make demands on politicians and community leaders and to draw attention to oppression experienced by some community groups. In the words of one participant:

There are many open doors. For example, there are opportunities for me for advocacy. You know, going to Gender Sexuality Alliances' activities and matches that are happening here in town, which is really big. Even opportunities for just getting outside and going for a walk with others and escaping the challenges and negativity. There are opportunities to learn new things, to meet new people as well and make new connections. (24-year-old male participant).

Protests against university tuition fee increases and participation in "Take Back the Night" and "Pride Parade" events were other ways in which participants were involved in advocacy activities in the community. One participant described pride parades as events that celebrate lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and queer (LGBTNQ) social and self-acceptance, achievements, legal rights, and pride. Another indicated that, because Take Back the Night is a movement that aims to end all forms of domestic and sexual violence against women, she was passionate about it.

We noted, however, that not all participants felt there were enough opportunities for their inclusion in the community. Some participants felt that, even though there were some opportunities, they were not big enough, although it was not clear what a big enough opportunity would mean. To the question about opportunities for inclusion, one participant's response was:

Opportunities! I don't see any big opportunities, more so than small opportunities for me to grow as a person, such as, oh, there is an event going on locally and I will go to that. I will go and learn more about things. Yes, there was a job fair that I attended through one organization that helped me to grow a little more. (23-year-old male participant).

### Social Exclusion Forces

Despite the community connections and opportunities, there were some challenges or barriers to inclusion reported by participants. Some of the challenges identified as social exclusion forces were personal level factors while others were interpersonal and environmental. Some personal level factors that limited the extent of participants' involvement in the community included health, income, and skill deficits that made it difficult for them to go out and get involved. Depression and diabetes were prominent among the health problems that acted as barriers to inclusion. Although those with these issues made efforts to reach out, they still interfered with their social involvement. The following illustrate the point:

I will say depression is a challenge I have. It has been getting better, which I will have to say, but it is still something that I struggle with. Depression really makes it hard for me to enjoy things that I usually like. It takes twice as much effort to do things that normally wouldn't be that hard to do. (18-year-old female participant).

I have got a lot of problems with diabetes and digestion and it has been very difficult to manage, and it puts a bit of dumper on my routine and everything else. Because it keeps me up at night.

I will come over to the agency, have a cup of coffee and a little snack, and then I have my sugars and insulin checked. So, for the moment, it is basically dealing with the health issues and trying to keep my house livable and it is not easy. There are days that, I have really depressing kind of days, and it will usually take a positive interaction with someone at the agency to change such a depressing day for me. (21-year-old male participant).

Limited income was a barrier to social inclusion for some participants. Either income constraints made it difficult for participants to pay dues or fees to be involved in some community groups, or it made them work multiple jobs while also in school and, therefore, had little time and energy to get involved in other community activities. A university student made the point succinctly as follows:

Currently, I am in a summer student position, but I have two other jobs. My weeks are busy. When I am not here, I am in school and I work 2 jobs. So my week is fragmented. I have a hard time settling into any one of my communities. I find it difficult to feel like I am a part of any of them. And, of course, financial challenges are a big one. It is hard to fully participate in the community if you cannot afford it. For instance, I am an undergraduate student, but I don't participate in social communities that cost money. My money is allocated for food and books, but to be part of those communities you have to be able to pay for events. I like to write. I am actually an artist, but I am also a writer. So, there is Art NL and also the Writers Alliance which I consider myself to be part of, and it is a community that you pay a yearly subscription fee to be a member. I have never joined it because I cannot afford to pay the subscription fee. (20-year-old female participant).

Difficult interpersonal relationships were another barrier to inclusion among participants. Participants indicated that relationships at one's place of residence or at the workplace were important for them; however, they had difficulty navigating some of these interpersonal relationships on a daily basis. Interpersonal relationships which participants found discouraging for social participation included dealing with people who do not keep to their word, who act abusive, and who have poor business practice and thus are difficult to live/work with. One participant illustrated this point as follows:

Hmm! Challenges for me. I work in retail, so, challenges are from people and I don't know if they are from my community or a different community, but for challenges, most of mine are from other people. Some of them, they don't necessarily agree with things that I can't control at work. And I don't know if it makes where I work bad but some of those things happen and just make things difficult for me. (23-year-old female participant).

In addition, there were what we defined as environmental level factors that acted as barriers to participants' social inclusion. These factors included the weather, transportation, and social stigma. On the weather, a number of participants explained that, sometimes, there are events they would like to join in, but because the weather is not the best, such as being extremely cold in the winter, with sidewalks buried in snow, they find it difficult to go out. According to one participant, ". . .the first challenge is the weather here. It is very difficult to be able to get out when the weather is not the most ideal in some cases". Many participants described transportation to get to places as a barrier, because of the difficulty doing so timely and safely. Some participants indicated that, without their own car, they daily had to figure out how to be at places. Although they would use the public transit bus system, they felt it was not a very good system. The following quotes illustrate the point:

Challenges! Ah! Transportation is a big challenge for me. Like, I walk almost everywhere I go right now. Transportation at nighttime is especially a huge issue. I am always worried about like crossing a road and stuff like that. I am always worried about that, especially when I see the lights are off. I am always worried about that. Getting around town. (18-year-old male participant).

I will say, getting around town. Like the bus route and transportation stuff. The challenge for me within the week is getting to places feeling safe enough. That is my biggest challenge. (16-year-old male participant).

Transportation is a daily challenge for me. It is really a bother. Sometimes the bus doesn't come at the right hour for me to get to work on time or even here in time. My mom or dad is working, and they can't drop me off on time. (18-year-old female participant).

For some participants, being a new-comer and not knowing their way around the city very well exacerbated the transportation challenge. They described the difficulty familiarizing with the city transit system to be able to go to places, such as shopping malls, community centers, and organized events. According to a 15-year-old female participant, "I don't really know my way around well and sometimes I get lost". Finally, social stigma and homophobia, both in the wider community and in school, were barriers to inclusion for some participants. For example, a 24-year old female participant, who identified as a sex worker, indicated that the social stigma about sex work is a barrier to inclusion in the community. She explained that many people frown on sex work as not legitimate work. For this reason, anybody identifying as a sex worker faces stigma and discrimination, which makes it difficult for you to come out and engage in the community. "People are not ready to listen to you, your truth of what your sex work looks like and how it is important. It is always as if you are a carrier of STDs". The other issue is homophobia, which serves to exclude some students from the school community, as illustrated in the following:

Hmm! I guess challenges that I would face in my school, there is a bit of slur usage which isn't great to hear, especially if you

are a part of the LGBT. The slurs affect you. So, hearing this regularly is a bit of a challenge, especially getting to school and then you hear these negative things. I have been bumping up against sexism and homophobia every single day. Hmm, so burnout. When I get home, I just lay there and do nothing, even though I have things to do. (17-year-old male participant).

## Discussion

This study explored young people's connectedness to community and the challenges and opportunities they have for social inclusion. The study combined a number of conceptual perspectives as a theoretical framework to explore these questions. The perspectives included social capital and institutional forms of participation (Flanagan et al., 2012; Lin, 1999; Putnam, 2000), social exclusion (Levitas et al., 2007), sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), the social generations approach (Woodman & Wyn, 2013; Wyn & Woodman, 2006), and the Y-AP concept (Zeldin et al., 2013). Twenty-three young people provided data through interviews, which we analyzed deductively and inductively, using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We found that young people connected to their communities through informal groups and associations and through non-profit organizations. Connection to associations and organizations was a shared experience by female and male participants; however, female, more than male, participants described these connections as safe havens. The associations and organizations acted as networks of supportive relationships and provided inclusive spaces where young people felt accepted, a sense of belonging, fulfillment, and respect. Through these community-based structures, young people had opportunities to experience social inclusion. We found that opportunities took the form of resources and participative activities that promoted personal growth and community building. The narratives provided by participants indicated that they participated in activities and decisions that affected them on a daily basis. For example, through citizen associations and non-profit organizations, participants engaged in personal growth and community building activities, such as GED classes, entrepreneurial training, part-time and volunteer work, and advocacy. These opportunities were a shared experience among both female and male participants, although they were used for different purposes. For example, female participants talked about pursuing their GED and employment, while male participants referred to employment and advocacy opportunities. The perception of opportunity, although commonly shared, was not uniform among participants. While some saw many opportunities, a few others felt the opportunities were not big enough. Despite the opportunities, participants reported some barriers to inclusion in their communities. These challenges took the forms of personal level experiences, such as illness, and environmental level factors, such as low-income and social stigma, that threatened to exclude the youth from their connections

or to weaken these connections. Health problems, transportation difficulties, and homophobia/stigma were commonly shared challenges among female and male participants, while a female university student prominently highlighted the income challenge. A few new-comer youth, who were mostly Black or other, seemed to have more difficulty with the city transit system for their commute to and from places.

The findings of this study can be understood through the theoretical framework adopted for the study. To begin, these findings build on and emphasis the importance of sense of community and what makes for this feeling among young people, and corroborate findings of other studies informed by the sense of community framework (see Albanesi et al., 2007; Chiessi et al., 2010; Cicognani et al., 2008; Evans, 2007; Talo et al., 2014). For example, there was a strong sense of community among our participants because they had places or people they could go to for support to figure things out or to have a positive interaction that would change a depressing day. This corroborates the study by Evans (2007), which suggests that young people have a stronger sense of community in spaces where they have a voice and receive adequate adult support. Further, the finding supports the study by Korkiamaki and O'Dare (2021) where they find that intergenerational social networks promote young people's sense of inclusion. These findings suggest that, although their world may be imperfect, young people have a sense of community through their associational and organizational connections, which give belonging, shared emotional bonds, and fulfillment of needs. The findings also build on social capital theory (Halpern, 2005; Lin, 1999; Putnam, 2000), which identifies social support networks as capital in promoting well-being. For example, participants described some of their community connections as resources that are always there to draw upon.

We can also understand the findings in light of the ABCD framework (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993), the institutional forms of participation concept (Flanagan et al., 2012), and the Y-AP model (Zeldin et al., 2013). All these perspectives show that citizen associations and non-profits are key assets and relational structures that promote youth development in the community. As captured in the findings, associations, and non-profits play a significant role in young people's daily lives by connecting them to or acting as sources of material and emotional support as well as educational, employment, health, and recreational resources. Finally, social exclusion theory (Levitas et al., 2007) helps us to understand the finding on barriers to inclusion among participants. Exclusion from social participation is a product of either personal level difficulties or socio-cultural—environmental—level factors (Gee & Walsemann, 2009; Levitas et al., 2007). As reported in this study, illness (physical and mental), inadequate income, difficult relationships, homophobia, stigma, and difficult commute are personal and environmental factors which work to exclude participants from social activities. For example, managing diabetes and depression is a daily

struggle, which is hard to deal with. Again, limited income and transportation difficulties make it difficult for young people to be in certain places or do certain things. The findings on challenges and opportunities in this study suggest that social exclusion-inclusion experiences are not absolute categories that are mutually exclusive (Levitas et al., 2007). While in some ways, participants experienced exclusion, in many other ways they created or connected to inclusive spaces and networks.

The findings of this study add to the existing literature. Although research has pointed to marginalization of young people from civic engagement (Bellamy, 2008; Macedo et al., 2005; Sloam, 2012a, 2012b), our findings suggest that young people in the NL context are connected to community and have opportunities for social participation. Multicultural and non-binary associations and non-profits provide the institutional structures through which young people participate in their communities. Strangely, however, we did not find evidence that young people are connected to or participate in any government-created structures. Although NL has the YAC, the PYC, and the Office of the Youth Advocate (OYA), participants did not indicate involvement with these forums. This is in contrast to Brady et al.'s (2020) study that found, among others, that public officials, policy-makers, and youth practitioners used deliberative forums to promote youth engagement. It is possible that class and other privileges play a role in determining who is selected to be on these government-initiated youth forums in NL, for which reason participants of this study might have had no chance of being on board. It is also possible that some of the participants chose not to be part of these publicly directed forums because they do not have faith in them. Since neoliberal governments are bent on adopting policies that increase tuition fees, cut funding to community programs, limit access to housing, and make employment more precarious (Breman, 2013; Furlong, 2009; Hart & Henn, 2017; Sloam, 2012a, 2012b; Standing, 2011), it is possible that young people have no faith in any forum created for them to advise government on policy. What the foregoing suggests is that, to promote youth civic engagement, there is need to invest in grassroots community structures, such as self-help groups and associations, multicultural and non-binary organizations, and non-profits that engage young people on their own terms. This point echoes Brady et al.'s (2020) finding that youth work, volunteerism, and non-formal educational resources are important for promoting youth participation.

A couple of issues, which the existing literature has highlighted, did not come up in our findings. For example, research has shown that policing practices affecting young people, such as stop-and-search, constitute barriers to their social participation (D. M. Brown, 2013; Brunson & Miller, 2006; Francis, 2021; Kennelly, 2011; Murray et al., 2021; Ricciardelli et al., 2020; Sharp & Atherton, 2007). However, participants of this study did not mention any encounters with law enforcers, such as the police, in describing barriers to inclusion. This finding seems to support the literature which finds that community supports have a positive effect on youth behavior (Bacchini et al., 2011; Lenkens et al., 2021; Marzerolle et al., 2021; Richards et al., 2004; Robertson et al., 2005; Romer, 2003). It suggests that the support and involvement participants experienced in their communities gave them a new perspective (Hoyne, 2020; Kulbok et al., 2015; Ngo et al., 2017; Nicholas et al., 2019; Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2013; Shaw et al., 2014) and ensured they had no trouble with law enforcement. Again, although studies have shown that adolescent-parent conflicts are a common issue in young people's lives (Arnett, 1999; Childs & Sullivan, 2013), none of the participants referred to problems with parents/guardians as challenges to deal with in their lives. This last point is made with the caveat that family dynamics was not a focus of the study.

## Study Limitations

A convenient sample of 23 was used for the study. Apart from the small size of the sample, participants were drawn from three adjourning cities in the Newfoundland part of the province. We did not cover the whole of NL for this study. In addition, the sample is predominantly White and urban, with only three participants identifying as Black/other. Therefore, the sample is not representative of youth in the whole of NL. Furthermore, we collected data in one-session interviews; we did not include participant observation. Therefore, readers should interpret the findings with caution. There is a call for further research that uses larger, more representative samples and a combination of interviews with participant observation to expand on our findings.

## Conclusion and Implications

This study adds to the growing scholarship on young people's social exclusion-inclusion and civic engagement tensions, in both the global North and South. The study bridges the gap between research that draws attention to problem behaviors that make young people the subject of policing instead of freely engaged actors in their communities (Glowacz et al., 2020; Hail-Jares et al., 2021; Murray et al., 2021; O'Grady et al., 2020; Ward et al., 2021), research that highlights how neoliberal governments' austerity policies expose young people to problematic civic engagements (Francis, 2021; Hart & Henn, 2017; McCormick & Barthelemy, 2021; Ricciardelli et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2021), and research that explores innovative ways in which civil society works with young people to create inclusive spaces (Anosike, 2019; Dolan & Rajak, 2016; Kermode et al., 2021; Korkiamaki & O'Dare, 2021). As other scholars have reported (Schilling et al., 2019; Schuch, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2011), we find that despite notable challenges, young people in NL find ways to connect to and participate in their communities. Although there are personal and environmental level social exclusion factors, such

as ill health, limited income, social stigma, and transportation difficulties, young people are resilient, creative, and innovative enough to identify and take advantage of opportunities for social inclusion. Formal and informal networks that afford and support access to different identities and resources (Brady et al., 2020; Kermode et al., 2021; Korkiamaki & O'Dare, 2021; Tettey, 2019) are means by which young people participate in activities that promote personal growth and community building. The findings suggests that, to some extent, young people in NL derive the benefits of social inclusion, including the development of personal and interpersonal skills (Korkiamaki & O'Dare, 2021; Olsson et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2012), to help navigate the transition to adulthood.

Findings of this study suggest the need to address youth poverty by creating more employment opportunities for young people. Drawing on the international literature on factors that enhance youth social inclusion, we suggest that government consider investing in entrepreneurship programs for young people to develop skills for self- or gainful-employment. Non-profit organizations help young people with employment coaching and job search skills, but they are not themselves employment avenues for these young people. In addition, policies that encourage and support youth to discover and develop their artistic talents, such as in music, dance, painting, and sculpting, and programs that encourage intergenerational bonding, would be important in promoting youth social inclusion and well-being. The findings further imply there is need to improve the city transit system to make commute safer and timely. Participants' experiences of stigma and discrimination also suggest the need for policies that fight these exclusionary practices, such as stigma against sex work, and homophobia, especially, in the public school system. Finally, the findings suggest that government and community leaders should allocate more resources to support youth mental health programs, as these would reduce isolation and build capacity for social participation. Further research using larger and more diverse samples of rural and urban youth is needed to explore the barriers to and enablers of youth social inclusion in NL.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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## Ethical approval

## ORCID iD

Paul Alhassan Issahaku ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3726-2277

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