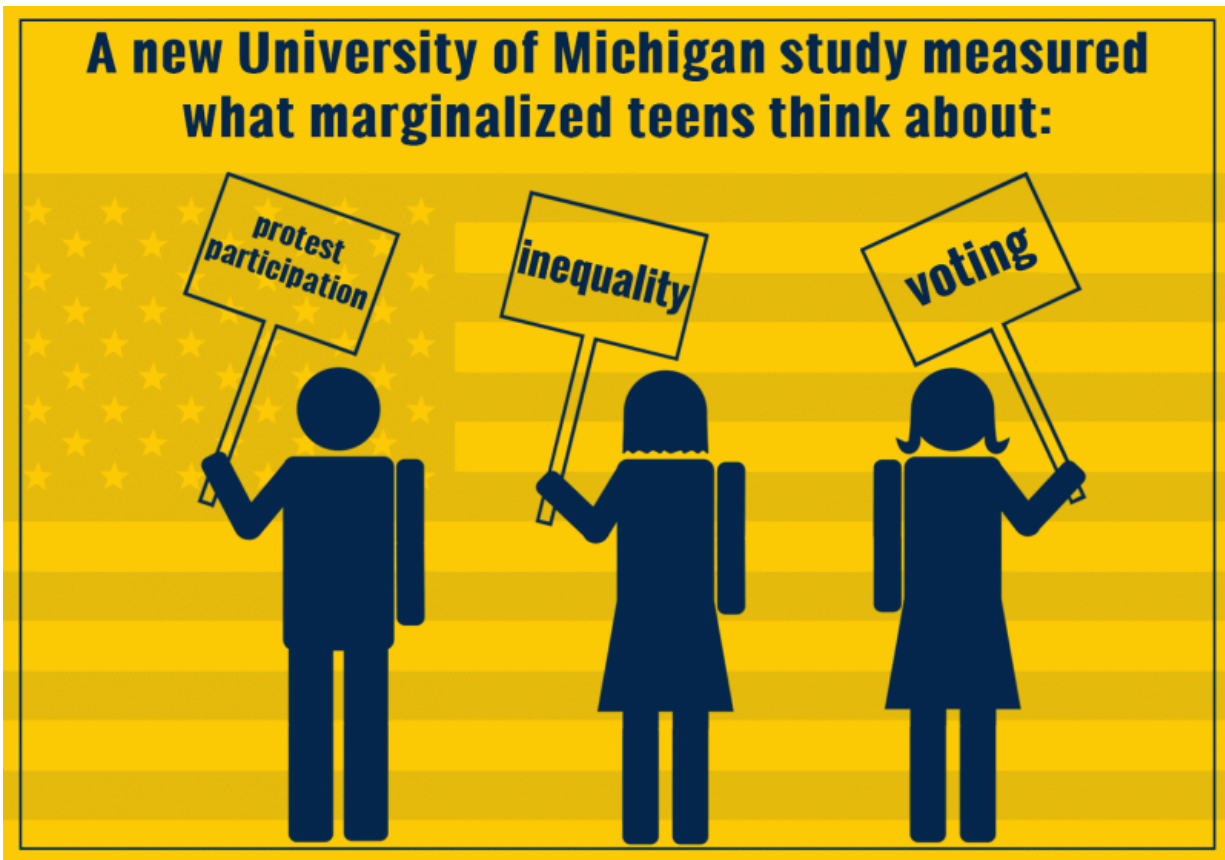


Marginalized ninth-graders think critically about inequality, political power

October 30 2015, by Ted Montgomery



How youth of color and poor and working-class youth think about social inequality plays a vital role in their taking action through protests and

voting against a political system that does not seem responsive to their interests, a new study indicates.

This University of Michigan research captures how marginalized young people—poor and working-class African-American and Latino [youth](#) think about social inequalities, said the study's lead author Matthew Diemer, U-M associate professor of education.

"The public and political candidates are now paying greater attention to different forms of [social inequality](#), such as widening income disparities and racialized police brutality," he said.

Diemer, along with colleague Luke Rapa, a doctoral candidate at Michigan State University, examined how critical consciousness—thinking about the root causes of and taking action to change inequality—may lead marginalized adolescents toward political change efforts.

Researchers analyzed data from a nationally representative sample of 2,811 ninth-graders, which included about 760 African-Americans and Latinos from poor or working class families, who participated in the Civic Education Study.

The study measured what teens thought about inequality, protest participation and voting.

Internal political efficacy, which is a perceived ability to understand and participate in political processes, played an important role in conventional political participation—such as writing letters to elected officials—and voting among marginalized youth.

"While these relations are well known among middle-class whites, confirming them here underscores internal political efficacy for

marginalized youth," Diemer said.

Unexpected ethnic-racial distinctions also emerged. Analysis of social inequality may lead African-American youth to conventional political participation while beliefs in equal status for all people may lead Latino youth to vote. Researchers say the latter is important due to the cultural significance of citizenship and enfranchisement among Latinos, who are more likely to be from immigrant families.

Young people who explained social inequality more in terms of social causes, such as educational access differing based on economic situations (poor versus wealthy), were more likely to view themselves as activists and as engaged to change societal inequalities.

"Because this population of youth is one that is often estranged from the political system, this may suggest one lever or inroad to foster participation," Diemer said.

Overall, this study showed that "ninth-grade students exhibited fairly sophisticated thinking about social inequality and their role as political actors," Rapa said.

The findings appear in the latest issue of *Child Development*.

More information: Matthew A. Diemer et al. Unraveling the Complexity of Critical Consciousness, Political Efficacy, and Political Action Among Marginalized Adolescents, *Child Development* (2015). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12446](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12446)

Provided by University of Michigan

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