

South Africa's youth are a generation lost under democracy: Study

April 25 2024, by David Everatt



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South African president Cyril Ramaphosa recently [painted a rosy picture](#) in which the country's youth—"democracy's children"—had enormous opportunities for advancement, all thanks to successive post-apartheid governments led by the African National Congress (ANC) that he leads.

But what is the real state of young South Africans—defined as people below the age of 34—after 30 years of democracy?

I have more than [30 years' experience](#) in socio-economic and development research as well as political and governance reform. My recent research paper tracing [30 years of analyzing youth marginalization](#) has found that [youth](#) in South Africa, who make up [34.3% of the population](#), have not fared well under democracy. They are the hardest-hit by [unemployment](#) and the lack of opportunities, and show high alienation.

Fewer young people are doing as well as their counterparts from 30 years ago; most are muddling along, searching for opportunities.

Measuring marginalization

The idea of "marginalization," as used in my analysis, had its origins in the early 1990s. In 1992 a large survey, [Growing up Tough](#), was run by [Mark Orkin](#) and I among South African youth of all races so that the first democratic government could understand what they needed most. The survey recorded indicators like unemployment and level of education, as well as subjective views like feelings of alienation (not belonging in society).

The results were arranged on a scale of how far some young people had been pushed to the margins of society. Those who scored in the negative

on all, or almost all, indicators were labeled "lost." Those who barely featured or did not score at all on the negative indicators were labeled "fine." Others fell in between.

The survey was run again in later years, with amendments. The most recent, analyzed here, was in 2018, as part of a broader quality of life survey.

Comparing data from the 1992 and 2018 indices of youth marginalization, the same proportion (5%) is clearly "lost"—scoring off the chart on virtually every indicator. Sadly, at the other extreme, where 25% of youth were "fine" in 1992, this had dropped to 16% in 2018.

In the two categories in between—"marginalized" and "at risk"—the more worrying "marginalized" has shrunk, which is positive, while "at risk" has grown.

South Africa has changed profoundly since apartheid, and for some, including some young people, there are countless more opportunities than previously. But, analyzed as a generational cohort, youth today are only a little better off than when apartheid ended in 1994. And the share of young people are doing well now has fallen by 9 percentage points.

Looking at the 15-24 cohort in late 2023, using the ["expanded" definition of unemployment](#), a staggering 60.7% are officially unemployed; among the group aged 25-34, unemployment only drops to [39.8%](#).

Youth are meant to be a generation enjoying a democratic dividend and contributing to a [demographic dividend](#). Neither appears true. In terms of how much potential South Africa has squandered, they represent an entire generation of opportunity lost to the country.

Marginalized but not lost

In the 1980s and early 1990s, youth had taken on adult roles in political struggles. As ever, they demonstrated their instrumental value to the adults controlling violence on various sides. Those same adults and the media spoke of a "[lost generation](#)"—specifically, black, male, urban youth.

For the [South African Council of Churches](#) and [Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference](#) involved in organizing the youth in the 1990–94 interregnum through their NGO, the [Joint Enrichment Project](#), the lost generation discourse was anathema. Firstly, because in their view no-one is ever "lost" in spiritual terms; and secondly because of the stigmatizing and policy implications of writing off young (black) people entirely.

This gave rise to the "marginalized youth" movement, which sought to understand youth on their own terms, to identify those at risk, those who were doing fine, and those who were pushed right to the margins of society—and design policy responses accordingly.

Marginalization over time

In 1993, after first presenting to assembled youth organizations in 1992, we released the first iteration of the marginalization index, [Growing up Tough](#). It comprised 12 dimensions of concern and 32 variables. These included personal experiences of abuse, recidivism, exposure to violence, family status, attitudes to race, self-image, health, political alienation, social involvement, employment status, generational conflict and fatalism.

Despite the belief of our church sponsors that no-one is ever truly "lost,"

that became the central category of the index. In all, 5% of respondents scored high on all, or most, of the indicators in the 12 dimensions. "We use the term 'lost' with care," we wrote at the time, but some 500,000 people had "slipped through, or been shoved through, the [social net entirely](#)".

We found that a quarter of youth were "fine"—they only registered positive outcomes on the index. Four in ten were "at risk": they were showing signs of concern on a few dimensions in the index.

"Marginalized" youth were most in need of urgent intervention. They comprised more than a quarter (27%) of the 1992 sample and scored high on many of the 12 dimensions of concern. How to keep them from slipping further should have been a key policy challenge for the democratic period.

The index was changed after 1994, since some indicators were specific to the transition South Africa was going through and others, such as HIV and AIDS, had barely featured in the early iteration of the index.

It was rerun in 2000 (only on black African youth), and results suggested their status was improving: no respondent scored high on more than eight of the 12 areas of concern.

In other words, eight years after the first measurement, where 5% of youth appeared "lost," no urban black African youth in 2000 fell into the "lost" category. Four in 10 (44%) respondents were "at risk," scoring high on two or three areas of concern; another 33% scored high on slightly less than half the areas of concern. It seemed that progress was being made.

Most of the items in the index were later used by the [Gauteng City Region Observatory](#) in its early [Quality of Life survey](#), allowing analysis of marginalization across the entire [Gauteng province population](#).

The total of those who are were "fine" (using the 2018 data) fell to 16% of youth, from a high of 25% in 1992. At the other extreme, we found 5% of Gauteng youth were again "lost." The trend suggested that 2000 was a high point. After that, young respondents were doing less and less well, both objectively and subjectively.

Behind the overall data is a predictable racialization. For example, in the 2018 analysis, while a third of white (33.3%) and Indian (34.8%) youth were "fine," this was true for only 14.1% of African and 22.1% of [colored](#) youth. This pattern has remained true since the index began in 1992. In 2018, to be young, black and male in Gauteng was to have the highest likelihood of being marginalized. Only 0.3% of white youth (and 0.5% of Indian youth) showed signs of high marginalization.

Yet, despite having failed young people, the governing ANC's [2024 election manifesto](#) only manages anodyne promises to "create opportunities" for young people, suggesting South Africa will continue to waste the massive resource represented by our youth.

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