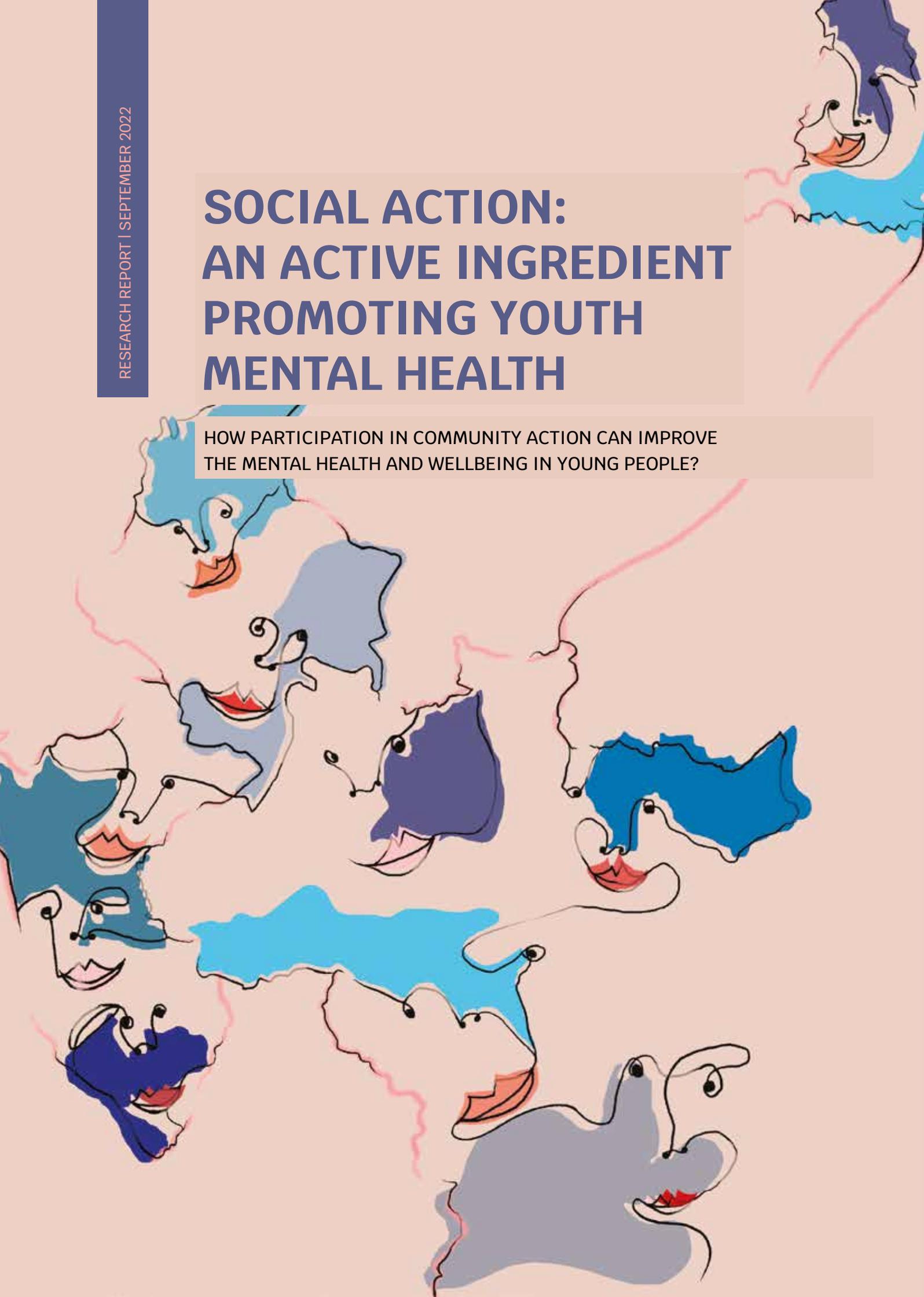
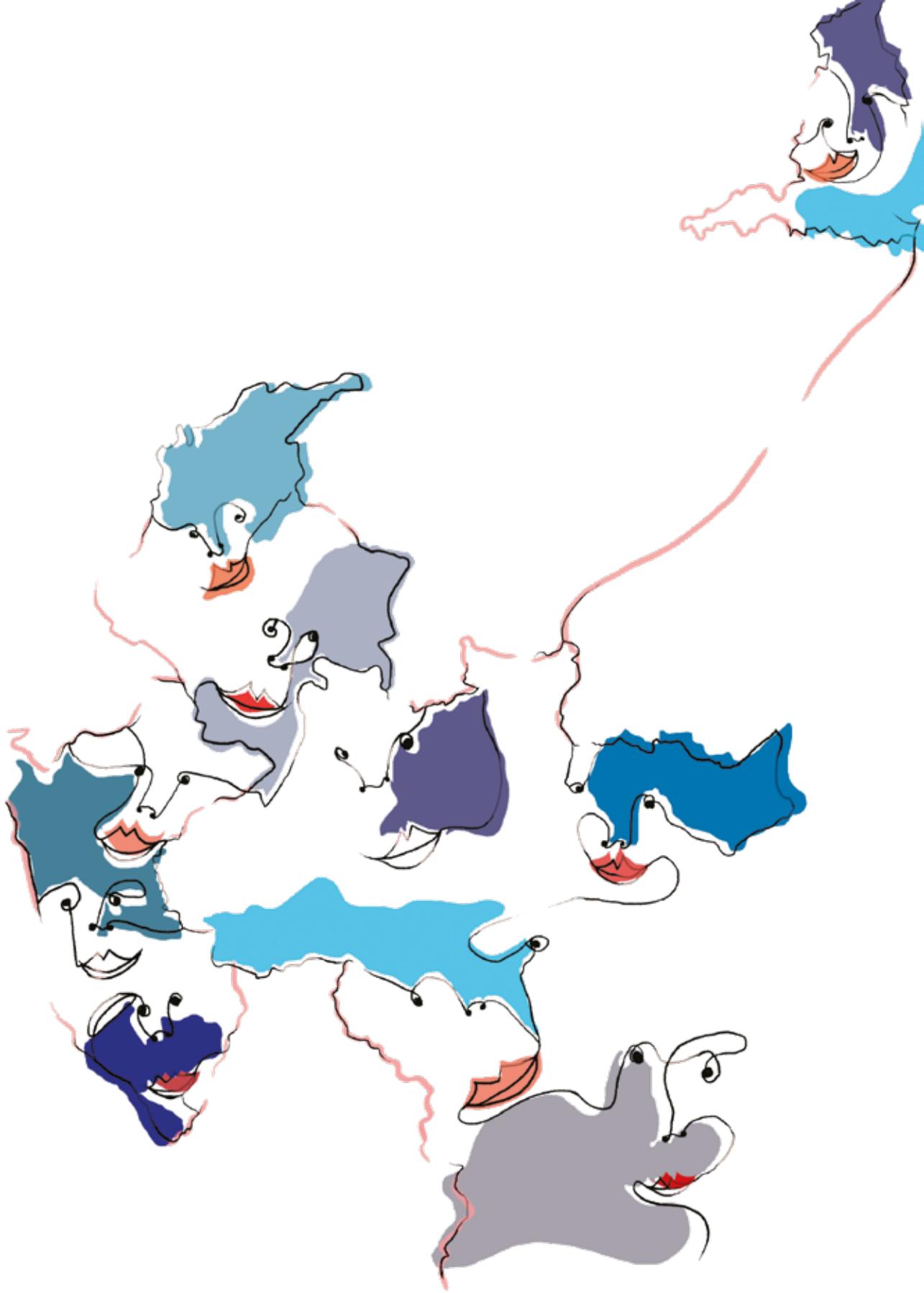


SOCIAL ACTION: AN ACTIVE INGREDIENT PROMOTING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

HOW PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY ACTION CAN IMPROVE
THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN YOUNG PEOPLE?







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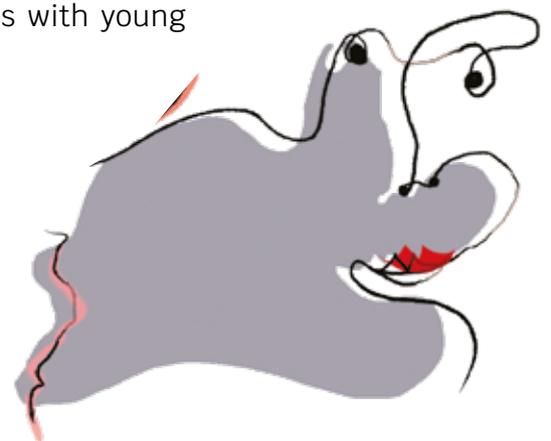
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INTRODUCTION

In 2019, 74% of young people in the UK believed they could make the world a better place and 53% were engaged in social action. They were activists, volunteers, participants of local campaigns, all seeking to promote positive change on an issue important to a community and to young people themselves. While youth engagement in social action positively impacts communities, it can potentially also be a powerful way to support young people's mental wellbeing. Social action: an active ingredient promoting youth mental health looks into evidence of how engagement in social action can provide benefits to young people (14 - 25 years old). It raises important insights about the role of community-based organisations and contextual factors on the impact of social action in youth mental wellbeing.

The current report is a result of a research project commissioned by the Wellcome Trust (WT) as part of the second round of the Active Ingredient series*. It presents summarised findings tailored to policymakers, stakeholders and the general public. As part of the research project, we have also produced an academic paper², a [short animation](#) and an [infographic](#) (see Appendix A).

Social action: an active ingredient promoting youth mental health was conducted by People's Palace Projects do Brasil in partnership with People's Palace Projects, the Youth Resilience Unit and the Unit for Social and Community Psychiatry, which are all based at Queen Mary University of London. The research team was composed of 4 academic researchers and 2 young co-researchers from Brazil and the UK. To explore 'social action' as an active ingredient, we conducted a systematic review of relevant literature, consultations with stakeholders and workshops with young people to inform the findings.



* The Active Ingredient series investigates the aspects of interventions that make a difference in preventing or managing anxiety and depression. For more information, visit Wellcome Trust website: <https://wellcome.org/news/finding-next-generation-mental-health-treatments-and-approaches>

BACKGROUND

Mental health directly affects how people think, feel and behave. The World Health Organisation refers to mental health as a state of wellbeing in which individuals are able to realise their abilities, cope with stress, work effectively and make meaningful contributions to their communities. Poor mental health impacts an individual's ability to live a fulfilling life at work, school or with family and can lead to physical and social problems. This report adopts a broad definition of mental health, including terms such as wellbeing and mental wellbeing. This broad use of terms allows for the gathering of evidence from different areas of knowledge and contemplate the diversity of individual testimonies. Mental health is a subject of interest for many disciplines and discourses, from psychology to psychiatry, sociology to the arts and politics. The outcomes of the research in this report relate to relief from mental distress (including depression and anxiety) and achieving good mental health, which may include young people's satisfaction with life, psychological adjustment and emotional, social, or psychological wellbeing.

There is now robust data showing that the large majority of mental health issues arise in youth, between the ages of 14 and 24³. Young adults also suffered the most significant decline in mental health during the pandemic⁴. Clinical services, however, have been pressured by the increasing demand, causing a growing interest to find new approaches to prevent and treat mental health problems. In the UK, there has been a focus on social prescribing, which aims to connect people who have ongoing mental health conditions with services like volunteering and community-based groups. Often people are supported by a link worker while they participate in these activities. Some of these programmes could be social action ones where people engage with 'what matters to them'⁵. The current report focuses on social action as a way of improving young people's wellbeing, not only through systems like the British model of social prescribing, but also through engagement in diverse social action programmes beyond the UK.

Social action refers to a set of coordinated actions that seek to promote positive change on a social or political issue important to a community. These include volunteering, activism, or participation in local campaigns. Given the significant number of young people committed to taking action over social issues, emerging research has been exploring the positive outcomes of these actions for participants. These outcomes involve stimulation of an interest in integrating with others and a growing sense of belonging. Becoming agents of change also develops critical thinking and a sense of responsibility, important for future employment. Despite some studies finding positive outcomes of youth engagement in social action, there have been no reviews that summarise across the findings of individual studies. This report aims to fill this gap by reviewing all current studies that explore the impacts of participation in social action to youth mental wellbeing. It also aims to provide understanding of the experiences of young people and stakeholders in the UK and in Latin America.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

- **To investigate the impacts** of participation in social action to young people's mental wellbeing
- **To explore the different ways in which** social action is beneficial to mental health and wellbeing
- **To identify who** could benefit from participation in social action, and **in which contexts** could it be more beneficial

METHODOLOGY

Systematic review* (July until September 2021): the research team conducted a systematic search of studies in English, Spanish and Portuguese that explored the relationship between engagement in social action and youth mental wellbeing. A total of 27 studies were found and used to address the research questions (see Appendix B).

PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES:

Consultations with stakeholders (July until September 2021): 16 stakeholders were interviewed to collect their experiences working with young people and their perceived impacts of social action programmes on mental wellbeing. They were youth workers, producers, community leaders, artists and policymakers from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, the US and the UK.

Workshops to engage young people in the research (August until October 2021): a series of 9 workshops were conducted in Latin America and the UK with 11 young advisors (20–24 years old) engaged in varied social action programmes. Two youth facilitators guided the sessions to establish a safe space where young people could share experiences and give feedback on the research.

*A systematic review identifies, selects and synthesises all relevant studies published on a particular topic.

FINDINGS

Is social action associated with mental health in young people?

'I feel happy and confident being with all these people, making the world a better place [...]. When I'm involved in these actions I feel well, like I'm taking care of my mental health [...], and like things are getting back on track' (R.M, LATAM female young advisor)

- **Social action promotes well-being:** both the systematic review and participatory approaches expressed positive impacts on youth well-being in relation to their engagement in social action. They indicated that whilst young people worked toward positive collective changes, they felt happier, more confident, stronger, and capable to act when facing a problem.
- **Social action reduces symptoms of poor mental health:** the literature shows that social action is related to lower levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms. Workshops and interviews also indicate that young people can feel less stressed and helpless, as well as feeling a psychological 'relief' by addressing systemic inequity.
- **There are short-term and long-term effects:** the systematic review showed positive impacts to mental health while young people were involved in social action as well as after long periods of time since their participation (between 6 months and 21 years) (though some of these effects were small).
- **There are potentially negative effects:** in some cases, social action engagement can be harmful. These negative outcomes are perceived contexts, where young people feel unsafe or under excessive pressure. In addition, young advisors indicated that being so close to social inequities can be frustrating and emotionally taxing. Most of the negative impacts the research has found are related to systemic inequities and oppressions, rather than to social action itself. These will be further explored in the *to whom and in which contexts?* section.

HOW DOES SOCIAL ACTION BENEFIT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN YOUNG PEOPLE?

'Through volunteering I am building a social network, meeting new people and new lifestyles, and forming many friendships. These bonds we create go beyond the scope of social action and allow us to support others in the personal sphere.' (I.T, LATAM male young advisor)

The retrieved studies, young advisors and stakeholders identified the different ways in which engagement in social action can be beneficial to mental well-being:

Creating important relationships: When engaged in social action, young people have the opportunity to meet others and make connections with peers who have similar interests. Also, they can build relationships with adults, experiencing meaningful mentoring connections. Developing these relationships while acting towards the same purpose can allow young people to feel seen and heard and alleviate feelings of isolation.

Developing a sense of community: young people involved in social action may recognize similarities with others and their interdependence. It can promote a sense of community, where young people feel like they belong to a group and matter to one another.

Establishing a space for healing: If a young person is engaging with an issue they face personally, they might be able to affect positive change within their own life and experience a process of collective healing.

Experiencing empowerment: youth realise their potential and become individually and collectively empowered. They may experience feelings of power over their actions and realise their impact in the world.

Learning new skills: young people may develop skills that are going to accompany them over their lives. These can be practical (public speaking, organising), relational (leadership, working with others), emotional (resilience) and intellectual (improved academic performance, learning from failures, critical consciousness).

FOR WHOM AND IN WHICH CONTEXTS DOES IT WORK?

'I would say communities affected by systems of oppression are the ones who would benefit the most from engaging in social action. Learning ways to tackle and resist the conditions that affect us can have an empowering effect and bring about a sense of solidarity and community that is very beneficial in my opinion'. (T.P, UK female youth facilitator)

FOR WHOM

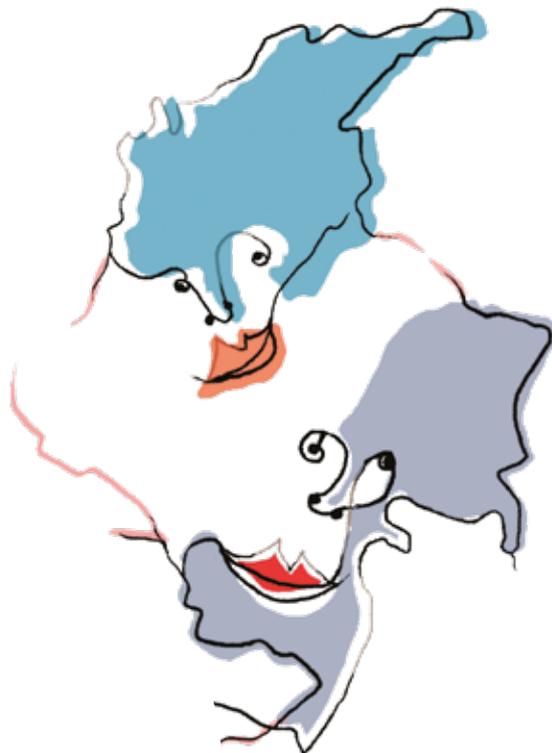
- Both the literature and participatory approaches indicated that engagement in social action has the potential to improve the lives of young people from various backgrounds. However, it can be especially beneficial to marginalised youth given its reported ability to act on systemic inequities. Studies retrieved from the systematic review highlighted programmes targeting racial and ethnic discriminations, economic injustice, gender-based violence, heterosexism and genderism. Most of these programmes helped improve the wellbeing of women, young people of colour, LGBTQ+ or indigenous youth. Both workshops and interviews also indicated that inequities can largely affect youth mental health, but participation in social action can alleviate feelings of isolation and hopelessness.

IN WHICH CONTEXTS

- Studies and advisors highlighted that programmes can produce excessive internal pressure if young people assume great responsibilities without appropriate support. Also, there can be exposure to external pressure if participants are rushed to constantly act and react over social issues. Therefore, it is important for organisations to create supportive environments where youth's mental wellbeing is taken into consideration.
- Contexts where young people feel safe can be more effective. The literature showed that significant positive impacts were associated with low-risk actions, whereas projects involving high-risk activities were less effective in promoting youth wellbeing.
- Young advisors pointed out the importance of being credited and financially compensated for their participation in social action projects. Young people can feel stressed by the pressure of managing other commitments and their work in social action. Getting paid for their work shows that their time, skills, and experiences are valued within social action organisations. Also, it can allow individuals to support themselves and their families.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

- Studies have varied in how they define social action so studies varied from those measuring one-off volunteering events to those following up young people deeply engaged in political campaigns. This makes it hard to draw strong conclusions when considering these studies together. It also makes it difficult to know which social action activities are most beneficial.
- The notion of ‘positive change’ in social action is subjective. This report explored only moderate engagements with society and social structures, but radical movements that could arguably fit the definition of social action (e.g. trans-exclusionary radical feminist groups) were not investigated. Therefore, it was not possible to define if participation in these movements also impacts youth mental wellbeing.
- Few studies explored depression and anxiety.
- Most studies were correlational, focusing on the relationship between social action and mental health. No studies could directly track causality between participation in social action and mental wellbeing.
- No relevant studies were conducted in Latin America, a continent that has 20% of its population composed of young people and is home to well-established community-based programmes. Research is still mainly limited to experiences of the Global North, and only two studies captured data from Asia.



RECOMMENDATIONS

RESEARCH

- Develop a better understanding of what social action is, preferably through mixed methods and consultations.
- Promote intervention studies that measure how mental health changes across social action programmes. Such studies enable us to infer causality but also more directly highlight the mental health benefits as a consequence of social action.
- These intervention studies could include social prescribing programmes focusing on social action.
- Prioritise conducting studies on the Global South.

YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

- Programmes should ensure the existence of a safe and welcoming environment.
- These spaces should provide opportunities for young people to learn and reflect on mental health.
- Actions should focus on training current staff in mental health awareness, developing secure safeguarding policies.
- Organisations should advise on how to seek further mental health support and available resources.
- Creating paid opportunities for young people to work on social action programmes.

POLICYMAKERS

- Invest in social action programmes that young people feel strongly about.
- Support youth organisations to promote discussions on mental health issues.
- Open and maintain dialogues with social action programmes about how best to support young people with emotional difficulties.
- Create financial certainty and stability for organisations that promote youth engagement in social action.

CONCLUSIONS

This report shows how participation in social action can improve and support wellbeing and mental health in young people. Through systematic review complemented by participatory approaches, it was possible to synthesise and analyse what was found in literature so far and combine these findings with reflections from young advisors and stakeholders. While current research literature mainly focuses on Global North experiences, the participatory approach in this report also identified many positive outcomes of social action for young participants from Latin America.

Results from both research methods demonstrate that engagement in social action can positively impact young people even years after their participation, and it works in two ways: improving wellbeing and reducing symptoms of poor mental health. Young advisors preferred a more positive approach to mental health identifying positive impacts such as feelings of happiness, confidence and relief. While the literature also explored improvements in wellbeing, a few studies identified reduced levels of mental distress. Future research could contribute to understanding how social action also impacts on young people suffering from depression and anxiety.

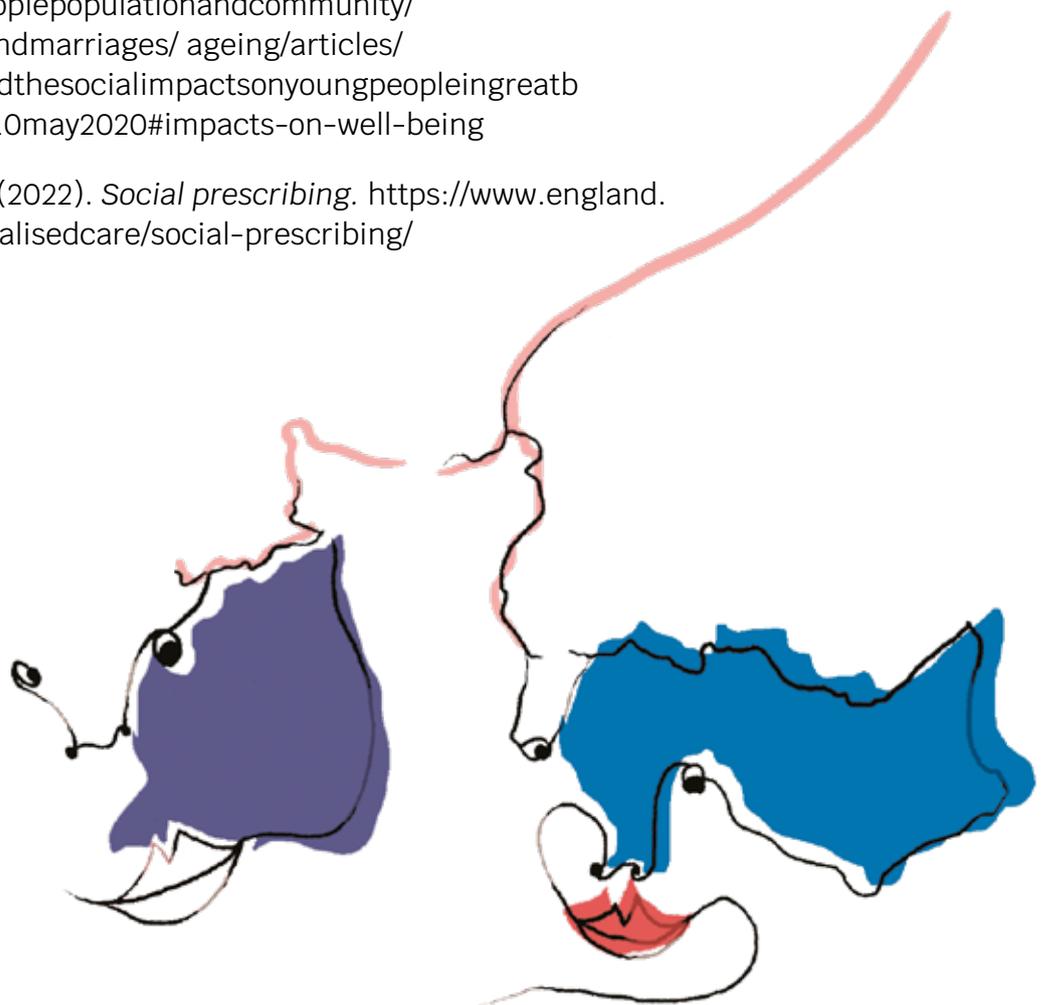
A set of routes by which engagement in social action works indicate the efficacy of collective actions over solitary activities. Positive impacts of engagement are mediated by a sense of community and the creation of valuable relationships. Collective healing and empowerment are also related to the presence of a group of people working towards positive change. In this sense, youth organisations are vital to create spaces where young people can meet others and integrate with their community.

For those who are most affected by systemic inequities, social action creates opportunities to take action over these issues and reduces feelings of hopelessness. In this sense, paid opportunities could allow young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to engage in actions that matter to them. Also, the contexts in which these actions happen play a significant role promoting benefits to young people. Organisations should seek to offer supportive and safe environments, where mental health is discussed and appropriately approached.

Young people are likely to continue engaging in social action all over the world, and projects that promote healthy spaces for them are crucial. This report has provided important insights to discuss, develop and implement programmes that consider social action as an effective alternative to enhance youth mental wellbeing.

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SOCIAL ACTION

an active ingredient promoting youth mental health

Social action refers to a set of coordinated actions that seek to promote positive change on a social or political issue important to a community

- Activism
- Participation in local campaigns
- Volunteering

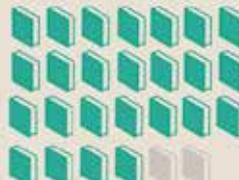
Research methodology

Systematic review  +600 papers screened
27 papers analysed

Participatory methods  9 workshops with 11 young advisors

 16 consultations with stakeholders

DOES IT WORK?

92% studies  Found **positive** impacts in diverse aspects of well-being OR indicated **lower** levels of **depressive symptoms, anxiety, stress or feelings of helplessness** for young participants in social action

These associations are persistent even after long periods of time

 "I feel happy and confident being with all these people, making the world a better place [...]. When I'm involved in these actions I feel well, like I'm taking care of my mental health [...], and like things are getting back on track"

Going forward and taking action generates wellbeing because you feel like you are someone who acts when facing a problem" 

HOW?

When engaging in social action with a critical consciousness a young person can

- | | |
|--|--|
| experience: | and develop: |
|  Empowerment |  Valuable relationships |
|  Collective healing |  Stronger self-confidence |
| |  Sense of community |

FOR WHOM?

Social action can be especially beneficial to marginalised youth

Some studies found that social action benefits may vary across different minority groups but more research is needed on this

IN WHICH CONTEXTS?

Safe and supportive environments and organized collective actions showed more positive impacts

Potential harms

- Excessive pressure
- Increasing frustration
- Higher levels of anxiety

Most of the negative impacts are related to systemic inequities and oppressions, rather than to social action itself



Advantages of promoting social action as an active ingredient

-  Can take pressure off of clinical services
-  Strongly engaging for young people
-  Keeps costs low
-  Allows young people to be involved in targeting and promoting change in relation to the issues that they believe are the root cause of how they feel



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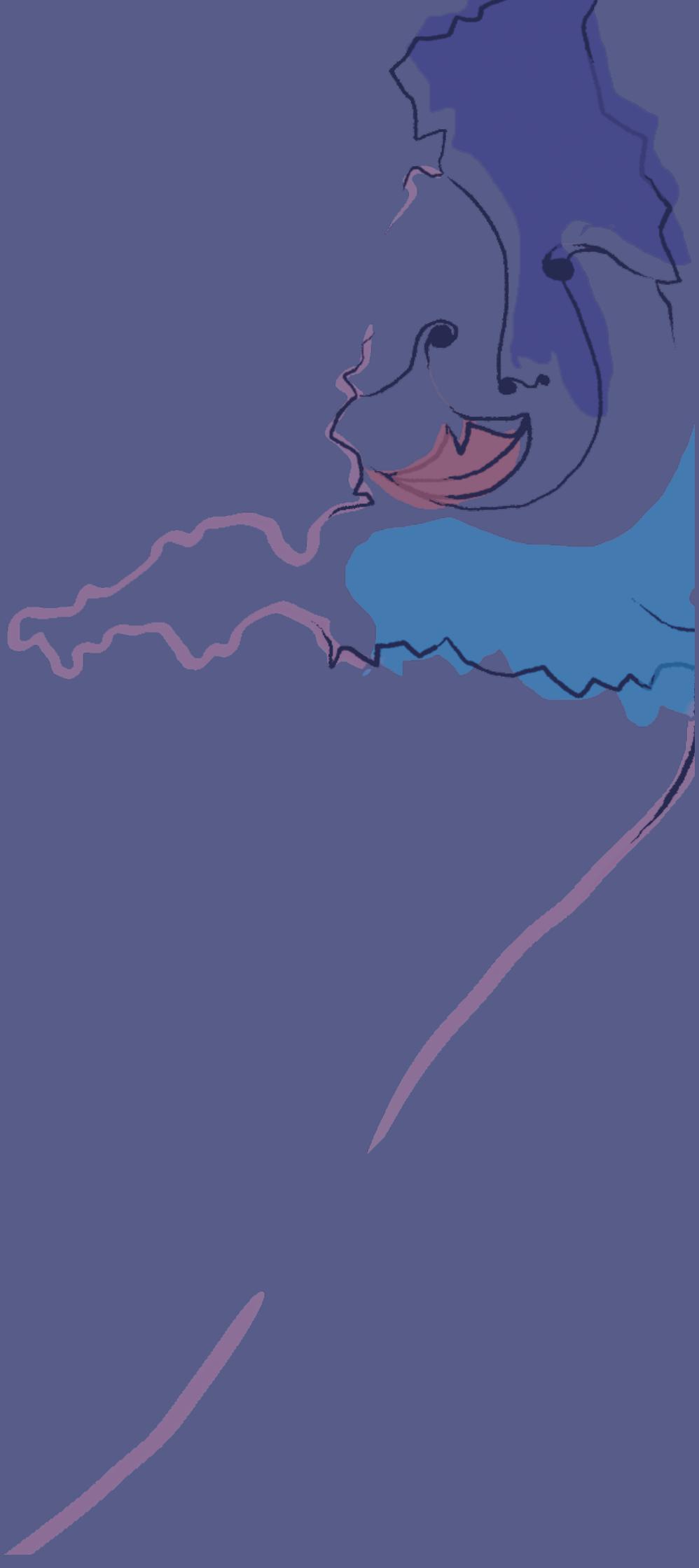


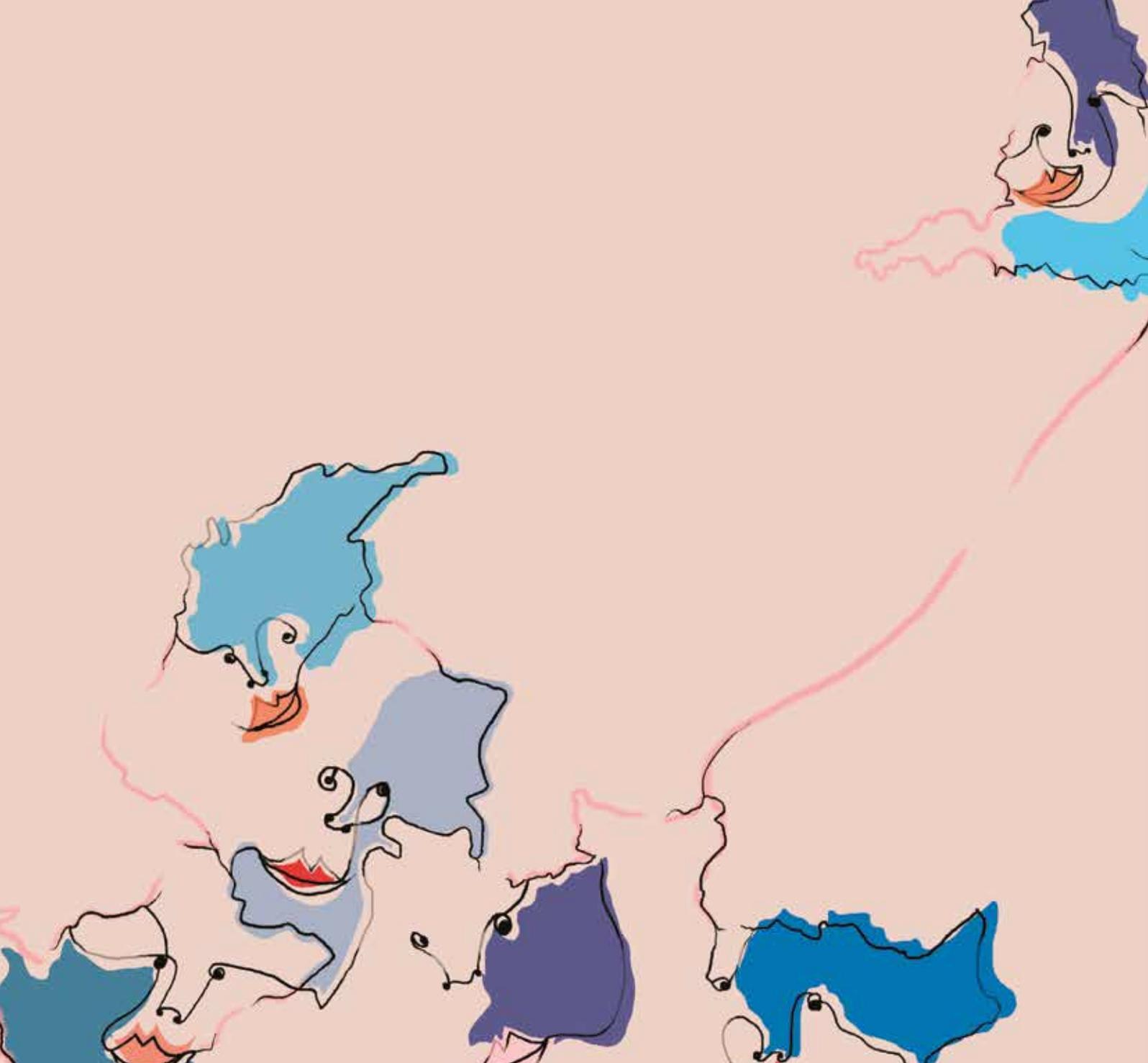
APPENDIX B

TABLE 1 – GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ALL INCLUDED STUDIES

Authors (date)	Year	Country	Aspect of social action	Measure of social action
Albanesi et al., 2007	2007	Italy	Civic engagement	Frequency of involvement in 10 forms of social activities
Ballard et al., 2019	2019	US	Civic engagement	Participation in volunteering and activism
Boehnke and Wong, 2011	2011	Germany	Activism	Participation in a peace movement (1985)
Bundick et al., 2011	2011	US	Volunteering	Frequency of participation and meaningfulness
Chan and Mak, 2020	2020	Hong Kong and Mainland China	Civic engagement	Active and engaged citizenship scale (multiple item)
Chan et al., 2014	2014	US	Civic engagement	Indication of participation in 5 activities
Chan et al., 2021	2021	Hong Kong	Social movement	12 items that described different types of participatory actions during the Umbrella Movement
Cicognani et al., 2015	2015	Italy	Civic participation	Frequency of participation in volunteer and charity groups
Fredricks and Eccles, 2006	2006	US	Prosocial activities	participation in volunteer service activities or civil rights activities over the past 12 months
Hayhurst et al., 2019	2019	New Zealand	Civic engagement	Sub-components of civic engagement: community belonging, generosity, social trust, civic intentions, helping a neighbour, volunteering
Hope et al., 2017	2017	US	Political activism	Youth Involvement Inventory (YII)
Hutchinson et al., 2016	2016	Australia	Care orientation (i.e Civic awareness; civic engagement; volunteering)	Australian Temperament Project; IYDS developed item
Kim and Morgül, 2017	2017	US	Volunteering	Frequency of participation in any volunteer or community service work

Landstedt et al., 2016	2016	Sweden	Civic engagement	Frequency of participation in associational activities
Pancer et al., 2007	2007	Canada	Community and political involvement	30-item Youth Inventory of Involvement (YII)
Toomey and Russel, 2011	2011	US	Social justice	4 items that described the presence of Gay-Straight Alliances at school and participants' level of involvement.
Zalewska and Zawadska, 2016	2016	Poland	Change-oriented activity	Indication of participation in any activities or protests that might lead to change
Zimmerman et al., 1999	1999	US	--	--
Klar and Kasser, 2009	2009	US	Activism	Shortened version of the Activism Orientation Scale (intentions of participation in activism)
Becker et al., 2011	2011	Germany	Collective action	Collective action intentions
Cargo et al., 2003	2003	Canada	Active community participation	Member of social action programme/project
Lee, 2002	2001	US	Involvement in social alliance	Member of social action programme/project
Wernick et al., 2014	2014	US	Social change-oriented theatre	Member of social action programme/project
Fernández et al., 2018	2018	US	Activism	Member of social action programme/project
Montague and Eiroa-Orosa, 2018	2018	UK	Activism	Member of social action programme/project
Freeman, 2019	2019	US	Culture-based activism	Member of social action programme/project
Ortega-Williams et al., 2020	2020	US	Youth-led community organizing	Member of social action programme/project





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