



The Netherlands Institute  
for Social Research

## *Summary*

# Increased participation does not necessarily benefit young people



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*Original title:*

Meer meedoen is niet per se goed voor jongeren

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## Summary and conclusions

Young people are faced with great expectations. Above all, they are expected not only to reach their optimal potential academically, but also to make a direct contribution to society – for example by carrying out paid or voluntary work or by providing informal care to an ill loved one. In this respect, policymakers appear to depart from the assumption that increased participation is beneficial to young people. But is this assumption correct? The main conclusion in this report is that increased participation is not necessarily always a good thing for young people, depending on the nature, intensity and diversity of their participation. As an example, young people who engage in a variety of activities have reported that they feel that they contribute to society relatively often, but they also experience a relatively large amount of time pressure. When it comes to intensive informal care, which is usually combined with an education and/or work (or a job on the side), there appear to be mostly downsides. Young people who provide intensive informal care have reported a large amount of time pressure and relatively low well-being. The findings of this study highlight the importance of taking an integrative view of all areas in which young people are active when making policy aimed at enhancing young people's participation and well-being. On top of that, attention should be paid to the disadvantages of participation. In that sense, it is vital to provide adequate support to young informal carers and ensure that there is a limit to their exertions. This summary delves deeper into the main findings of this study.

### **The main focus of policy is participation in education**

In terms of participation among young people, the main policy ambitions are ensuring their participation in education and a smooth transition between education and the labour market (VVD et al. 2021). In addition, the government supposes (often implicitly, i.e. as a not explicitly mentioned part of generic policy) that young people, in addition to getting an education and working to obtain a starting qualification, engage in activities for the benefit of others, such as informal care and voluntary work (TK 2022/2023a). Due to a shrinking workforce, a tight labour market and doubts about the viability of long-term care, it is becoming ever more urgent that they take part in such activities (Van Campen and Olsthoorn 2022). For this reason, current policy is geared towards encouraging young people to become active in various areas. It is assumed in this context that increased participation is good for their well-being – except where intensive informal care and pressure to do well academically are concerned – with little consideration seemingly given to how young people should balance all of these activities in their daily lives (Rijksoverheid 2022; TK 2021/2022a; TK 2022/2023b).

### **Little coverage in the scientific literature of participation on multiple fronts**

The existing scientific literature yields few clues as to the extent to which young people taking on voluntary work or informal care in addition to their education and work (or a job on the side). Moreover, little is known about whether these activities are inconsistent with each other or, on the other hand, complementary (De Boer and De Roos 2022; Schmeets and Arends 2020; Van der Werf et al. 2022). What we do know is that young people have been experiencing increased pressure to do well academically and to perform in recent years. This is associated with higher levels of stress and emotional problems among young people. It may also be associated with an increased demand for youth healthcare services (Boer et al. 2022; De Looze et al. 2020; Dopmeijer et al. 2023; Van Yperen et al. 2023). Finally, there is a lack of insight into social inequalities with regard to participation (De Boer and De Roos 2022; Schmeets and Arends 2020; Van der Werf et al. 2022).

### **Research questions and added value**

The central question in this study is whether increased participation benefits young people. In order to find the answer, we first looked into how often young people take part in a variety of activities and what differences in participation rate there are between different groups of young people. We then investigated whether there is a connection between participation and young people's well-being. To conclude, we looked at the role that formal support plays in the well-being of young people who provide informal

care. Our study is based on a survey (IZG'19, see Appendix A) among more than 1,400 young people in adolescence and early adulthood (ages 16–24) – a stage of life in which they face ever more demands and engage in activities increasingly autonomously. The current number of people in the Netherlands aged 16–24 is almost 2 million.

This publication follows earlier SCP studies into informal care and other types of participation among young people (De Boer and De Roos 2022; De Roos et al. 2020; Verbeek-Oudijk et al. 2023). Given its focus on a comparable age category and well-being, it has aspects in common with the upcoming youth study by Maslowski and Turkenburg (yet to be published). That study will concentrate on expectations for the future and ideals, particularly with regard to society. This publication builds on *Kerncijfers jonge mantelzorgers in Nederland* (Key figures on young carers in the Netherlands, De Boer and De Roos 2022) in relation to the well-being of young people who combine multiple tasks and the role formal support plays in this.

Following up on this publication, the SCP is investigating the role of resilience in the participation rate and well-being of young people aged 12–18. The outcomes of this study, which is currently in progress, are likely to be published in early 2024.

### **For young people, broad participation can be a blessing as well as a curse**

Almost all young people in the Netherlands aged 16–24 are engaged in one or multiple types of participation (work, education, voluntary work, informal care). Three-quarters of young people combine multiple types of participation – usually education and work. The young people who are engaged in multiple types are mainly those who have access to more socio-economic resources, i.e. young people who have completed senior general secondary, pre-university, senior secondary vocational, higher professional or university education. Young people aged 16–20 and those without a migration background are also over-represented in this more active group (cf. Vrooman et al. 2023).

The survey results show that combining multiple types of participation is not necessarily a good thing. This is because more active young people experience more time pressure than those who are less active. The well-being of young people whose participation is more diverse is comparable to that of young people whose participation is less diverse. However, young people who are more active feel that they are making a positive contribution to society more often than those who are less active. It is impossible to infer from our data whether they feel that the activities also benefit them personally.

In sum, the notion that increased participation is beneficial requires nuance. If we want to understand what participation in multiple areas means to young people, it is essential that we not only take into account its positive aspects, but also its negative ones.

### **Young people who do not participate experience relatively low well-being**

A small group of young people (3%) do not take part in any of the types of participation covered by this study. This group numbers around 50,000 young people in the Netherlands aged 16–24. They have access to relatively few resources<sup>1</sup> and are often somewhat older (aged 21–24). Young people in this group experience lower well-being, including reduced life satisfaction and happiness as well as increased loneliness, compared to young people in the group who take part in at least one type of participation. In this context, it should be noted that it is unclear from our cross-sectional data whether non-participation negatively affects well-being, whether low well-being is the cause of non-participation or whether another factor is in play. For example, poor health and poverty can lead to both reduced participation and low well-being (cf. Franke and Mateman 2019). In addition, our research offers only limited insight into the skills, competences, health, mental health problems, pressure to perform and social support experienced by this group. It is therefore open to question whether those who do not participate – according to our definition – have access to the necessary personal and social resources they need to do what they want to do. It turns out that a small proportion of these young people have a child in their care. Another proportion may be active in types of participation not covered by this study, such as

<sup>1</sup> Relatively often, these young people do not have a starting qualification, i.e. at least a senior general secondary, pre-university or senior secondary vocational education diploma.

politics, sports, travel and meeting friends. Further research may shed more light on the underlying mechanisms that explain why certain young people do not participate. This may make it possible to formulate points of departure for policy that will not only improve their opportunity to take part, but also their well-being.

### ***Intensive helpers are worse off – support improves their well-being***

More than four in ten young people carry out voluntary work. Those who do so regularly have reported a relatively large amount of time pressure, but also a relatively strong feeling that they are contributing to society. More than one in four young people provide care to an ill loved one (see also De Boer and De Roos 2022). Both voluntary work and informal care are usually combined with other activities. Young people who provide intensive informal care (four hours per week or more, 10%) are at risk of becoming overburdened. They experience a relatively large amount of time pressure and low well-being. More than half of them have reported less spare time as a result of their care responsibilities.

One in five young informal carers have told us that they would like to be appreciated more for the support they provide. Those who would like to be appreciated more and give up some of their spare time to take on care responsibilities have relatively low well-being scores. A lack of knowledge or skills to provide support are also associated with lower well-being among young people, as well as more time pressure and a less well-developed feeling that they are making a positive contribution to society.

Being open about their care responsibilities at work is associated with higher well-being among young informal carers. Among this group, making use of formal support with informal care as provided by the municipal authorities is associated with a stronger feeling of making a contribution.

### ***Informal care policy: three discussion items***

Based on the findings of this study, we have identified three discussion items for policymakers and society. The first one is fundamental in nature. This is about setting boundaries for informal care provision by young people, because providing intensive informal care in particular poses a risk to their own development and quality of life. What do we deem acceptable and unacceptable in terms of informal care provision by young people? Do we find it desirable and normal that young people provide intensive informal care? How do we delineate ‘regular care’ – defined as the daily care tasks that children and young people are able to perform for the loved ones they live with once they reach a certain age, such as household chores (see e.g. CIZ 2006)? And whose job is it to delineate this?

If we decide that it is self-evident for young people to provide intensive informal care, the next discussion item is whether dedicated policy should be developed for this group. Recent, broadly defined Dutch youth policy (TK 2022/2023b) did not identify young informal carers as a key interest group, in contrast with earlier policy (TK 2020/2021). The UK Care Act 2014 takes an integrative approach to participation (Hoefman et al. 2022; Leu et al. 2023).<sup>2</sup> It might serve as an inspiration for policy with the aim of identifying young informal carers, supporting them and protecting them sooner and better. The Care Act takes into account young people’s development goals, wishes (including when it comes to participation) and perceived obstacles. Obviously, the effectiveness of such an act hinges on whether sufficient financial resources and support services are available. In the UK, this currently does not appear to be the case (Hoefman et al. 2022).

The third discussion item relates to social inequality in informal care. Informal care is mainly provided by young people who are themselves vulnerable, and by young women. SCP studies have shown that standards of care and feelings of guilt present a heavy burden to women (Portegijs 2022; Vliek et al. 2023). This makes it imperative to pay more attention to gender and young people with a disability in informal care policy, and to bring about cultural change in terms of gender norms and expectations (see also De Boer et al. 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Can be viewed at [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/section/64/enacted](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/section/64/enacted).

### **Formal support for young informal carers**

If we accept that young people can also provide intensive informal care, it is to be recommended that changes be made to the formal support networks that surround young informal carers. The SCP has already emphasised the importance of discussing the care responsibilities of intensive helpers at school and at work (De Boer and De Roos 2022). This publication underlines this finding and adds that feeling appreciated, having sufficient knowledge and skills and having enough spare time are key to improving the well-being of young informal carers. Offering training courses in caring for ill loved ones, organising respite care and showing appreciation for informal carers, for example in the form of an informal carer reward, are the responsibility of municipal authorities. They are in a position to remove (or partially remove) the obstacles that young people perceive in these areas.

### **Draw up integrative participation policy, taking account of the perspective of young people**

In summary, it can be concluded that current government policy is relatively fragmented and principally focused on ensuring young people's participation in education as well as a smooth transition between education and the labour market. As a consequence, little attention is paid to young people's role in other types of participation. This approach also overlooks the risks associated with young people's participation, or lack thereof, in various areas. One of these risks is the reduced well-being of both young people who do not take part in the types of participation covered by this study and young people who act as intensive informal carers – almost always combining this role with an education or work (or a job on the side). In order for policy to be effective when it comes to improving participation opportunities and the well-being of young people, it is important to take the wishes, perceived obstacles and resources of young people – particularly young informal carers – into account when providing them with support. A more integrative approach to participation among young people, in line with the appeal in the letter to the House of Representatives *Herstel en Perspectief van de Jeugd* (Respite and perspectives for young people, TK 2020/2021), would be consistent with this. The letter argues that a more cohesive approach should be taken to addressing the challenges that young people face. Although the fourth Rutte cabinet appears to have stepped away from such an approach, the findings of this publication underscore its importance.

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Cover photo: Hollandse Hoogte | Sabine Joosten  
Translation: Metamorfose Vertalingen, Utrecht