

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civic engagement—that is, community service, political activism, environmentalism, and other volunteer activities—provides needed services to community residents and psychological, social, and intellectual benefits to participants. A small but growing body of research suggests that giving young people opportunities to become engaged in civic activities increases the likelihood that they will become healthy, active citizens. This synthesis of civic programs for youths provides specific information on the role that civic engagement plays in helping young people develop a broad array of strengths and capacities. It focuses on youth outcomes in four domains: educational achievement and cognitive attainment, health and safety, social and emotional well-being, and self-sufficiency.

Moreover, the synthesis seeks to address the following questions: What do civic engagement programs look like? What resources do civic engagement programs provide for promoting youth development? What impacts do civic engagement programs have on youth outcomes? What characteristics of the programs seem to constitute effective civic engagement?

All of the programs in this synthesis have been evaluated, but not all of them with the same scientific rigor. Studies that use an experimental design to test the impact of programs are emphasized because only experimental studies can yield causal evidence about what works or does not work to promote desired youth outcomes. Few such studies exist, however, so rigorous quasi-experimental and nonexperimental studies are also included. Although they provide valuable insights into effective program practices, the results of quasi- and nonexperimental studies can only be considered suggestive. Therefore, they are referred to as “best bets” for programs.

Experimental evaluations of the following programs are included:

- Across Ages
- Quantum Opportunities Program
- Teen Outreach

Quasi-experimental evaluations of the following programs are included:

- K-12 Service Learning in California
- Kids Voting USA
- Learn and Serve America

Non-experimental evaluations of the following programs are included:

- Appalachian Project
- Community-Based Planning Project
- Public Works Mapping Project

Part I. Characteristics of Civic Engagement Programs

The methods employed by civic engagement programs vary, but most programs have some approaches in common. For instance, all of them involve at least one group component that emphasizes the social nature of civic engagement activities, and most combine life skills or civics curricula with opportunities to become engaged. Few programs have civic engagement as their primary goal or activity.

Part II. Outcomes Positively Affected by Civic Engagement Programs

Experimental Studies

Combining engagement in civic activities with increased civic knowledge results in positive impacts on youths' attitudes toward others and the likelihood of their becoming involved in community service. Participants in Across Ages, which combines mentoring with a positive youth curriculum and visits to a nursing home, and the Quantum Opportunities Program, a community-based service learning program, were more likely than youths in control groups to volunteer for community service. In addition, participants in Across Ages had increased knowledge of and improved attitudes about older people. Participants in the Quantum Opportunities Program had more positive attitudes about the future and were less likely to become involved with the police than youth in the control group.

Combining a life skills curriculum and interactions with mentors has positive impacts on educational outcomes. Both Across Ages and Teen Outreach, which use mentors and life skills training, had positive impacts on school engagement and attendance.

Only one program with a civic engagement component measured outcomes in the health and safety domain. Across Ages, whose curriculum offers youths strategies for coping with situations in which they are offered drugs, positively affected participants' reactions to such situations.

Engaging youths in community service while tutoring and educating them about positive life skills can reduce teen pregnancy. The Quantum Opportunities Program and Teen Outreach, both of which combine education and life skills training with community service, lowered participants' pregnancy rate.

Quasi-Experimental and Nonexperimental Studies

Quasi- and nonexperimental evaluations of programs that combine classroom study and discussion with hands-on civic activities corroborated the findings of the experimental evaluations. Positive effects of the programs included improved educational competence, increased engagement with school, increased rates of civic participation, and lower rates of teen pregnancy. In addition, the quasi- and nonexperimental evaluations suggest that civic engagement programs result in a positive orientation

toward work and increased attention to news.

Civic engagement programs may have effects beyond participants, both in the community at large and in the social relations of participants. Kids Voting USA, aimed at increasing children's political knowledge, also appears to improve the political knowledge of their parents.

Part III. Program and Participant Characteristics Associated with Positive Outcomes

Although based on quasi-experimental analyses, research indicates that personal and environmental characteristics of participants, such as educational ability and socioeconomic status, may interact with program characteristics and render them more or less effective. Several studies showed that effects were stronger for some demographic subgroups than others. In the case of Kids Voting USA, children from economically disadvantaged families benefited more from the program than children from affluent families. In evaluations of community leadership programs, however, youths who were doing well in school fared better than those who were not doing well. Clearly, a "one size fits all" model of civic engagement is unlikely to yield positive results for all participants. An approach that takes into account the nuances of various population subgroups would be ideal; however, it is not yet clear what works best for whom.

Increasing participation opportunities may increase actual participation. Students in the experimental evaluations of the Quantum Opportunities Program and Across Ages and the quasi-experimental evaluations of Learn and Serve America and K-12 Service Learning in California showed a greater likelihood than nonparticipants of taking part in community service. A key component of each of these programs was making community service opportunities readily available to participants.

Increasing civic efficacy and knowledge may increase civic engagement. Findings from quasi-experimental and nonexperimental evaluations of Kids Voting USA and the Community-Based Planning Project, respectively, suggest that exposure to a rigorous civics curriculum, particularly one with exercises that mimic real-world experience, can increase students' interest in the news and the likelihood that they will participate in the community in the future.

Civic engagement programs targeted at community service and the acquisition of civic knowledge can be effective if paired with opportunities to engage in service. Of all the programs evaluated, whether experimentally or in correlational studies, those that appeared to have the greatest success were those that involved both a behavioral and a learning component. Providing a theoretical grounding for the political or community service activities that youths undertake seems to imbue their actions with greater meaning and produce better results.

Part IV. Unanswered Questions

Currently, much of the information available on programs that focus explicitly on improving civic engagement is correlational or retrospective—not experimental or longitudinal.¹ Although the body of research in this area is growing, rigorous longitudinal studies of community service and civic education programs are clearly needed, as are experimental evaluations of the impacts of programs. Experimental evaluations should examine not only impacts on youth outcomes in educational attainment and health and safety, but also the degree to which certain types or quantities of community service by young people translate into service in adulthood.

One component of designing effective civic engagement programs will involve tracking the antecedents of civic engagement, such as parental participation, peer involvement, and students' motivation, and examining the ways in which these interact with individual characteristics and citizenship opportunities to forge positive citizenship.

This synthesis identifies program practices that are associated with positive youth outcomes. To make confident and practical program suggestions for practitioners, however, experimental studies are needed. Moreover, few of the programs included have civic engagement as their primary focus. Research is also needed on programs of this kind.

¹ Longitudinal studies track changes in populations across time and allow one to make stronger inferences about the impacts of interventions than single session, cross-sectional evaluations.