Encouraging Civic Engagement: How Teens Are (or Are Not) Becoming Responsible Citizens

By Jonathan F. Zaff, Ph.D., and Erik Michelsen

October 2002

Overview
The United States depends on its citizens as voters, volunteers, and general participants in the civic life of the nation. Yet only 32 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds voted in the 2000 presidential elections. Also, despite a professed desire to become involved, less than half of American adolescents participate in community service activities. What leads young people to become involved, less than half of American adolescents participate in civic activities? What factors keep them from taking part? And what can program developers do to ensure that projects seeking to help adolescents become responsible citizens are successful in attracting and retaining youth?

In an effort to address these questions, Child Trends conducted a review of 60 studies on civic engagement. We focused particularly on studies that pertain to political involvement and volunteerism. This Research Brief brings together key findings from those studies. For example, some research suggests that young people who are involved in civic engagement programs are likely to be more involved in school, to graduate from high school, to hold more positive civic attitudes, and to avoid teen pregnancy and drug use than those who are not. Other research shows that teens who take part in civic activities during high school or participate in an extracurricular activity are more likely to engage in these activities in adulthood. Evidence also suggests that teens’ participation in civic activities can result in benefits not only for teens but for their parents as well by boosting their civic knowledge and involvement. However, few studies have examined whether civic engagement programs continue to foster adolescents’ civic engagement after the programs have ended, and most studies have not evaluated program impacts on other outcomes, such as educational attainment, over a long period of time.

Throughout our review of the existing studies, we were struck by the dearth of high-quality, rigorous research on civic engagement among youth. Moreover, only two of the evaluation studies of civic engagement programs reviewed for this brief used experimental designs, the gold standard for assessing whether a particular intervention caused a particular result. Given these limitations, readers should regard the findings we present in this brief as preliminary. This caution also applies to the information included in the What Works table on page 5. The What Works table details some of the programs and approaches that are most likely to succeed in encouraging teens to become more active in civic life. Only experimentally evaluated programs are included in the review of “what works.” Also included in the table are some “best bets,” promising practices drawing on both experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations, other research, and wisdom from practitioners.

This is the sixth in a series of Research Briefs based on a comprehensive review of adolescent development research. The American Teens series covers reproductive health, physical health and safety, social skills, education, mental and emotional health, and civic engagement as they relate to adolescents.

Involving Adolescents in Their Communities
Teens can be contributing members of their schools, neighborhoods, and communities. They can volunteer in community or political organizations, vote (after they turn 18), or perform individual acts that express their concern for others, such as helping a disabled person cross the street. Through such positive social acts, teens can provide needed services to the community and society. But such acts can also benefit teens themselves, helping them grow psychologically, socially, and intellectually. Adolescents who are involved in civic affairs have been found to have better work ethics as adults, to be more likely to
volunteer and vote, and to have more socially responsible attitudes. As teens, they are less likely to become pregnant and use drugs, and they tend to do better in school as well.\textsuperscript{1, 17, 26, 39, 15} Participation in civic activities may not be the only reason for these favorable findings, of course. They may also reflect the self-selection of motivated, responsible teens into these activities.

Despite the positive values associated with civic engagement and a trend toward greater community service and volunteerism among teens,\textsuperscript{9} fewer than half of young people say that they are involved in such activities. Participation in community service activities ranges from 30 to 50 percent nationally.\textsuperscript{18, 29, 37} But these relatively low numbers do not mean that adolescents are not “joiners”; in fact, more than three-quarters of American teens have joined a club, sports team, or other school group.\textsuperscript{27, 29}

Voting rates, another barometer of civic engagement, are also low among young adults, hovering under 40 percent in presidential election years and dropping to less than 20 percent in other years. Moreover, rates have been declining. For example, 50 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds voted in the 1972 presidential election (the first year that 18-year-olds could vote), compared with 41 percent of the same age group in 1984, and 32 percent in 2000.\textsuperscript{36} Reasons suggested for these low rates range from insufficient time and apathy to lack of knowledge and transportation. Young people also have limited involvement in political groups, with only 14 percent of 15- to 24-year-olds taking part in a club or organization dealing directly with politics or government.\textsuperscript{29} On the other hand, U.S. teens seem to have a general knowledge about civic matters, and many say they want to participate in civic activities, such as voting, collecting money for a social cause, or collecting signatures for a petition.\textsuperscript{37, 18, 35}

One might assume that this awareness about civic matters and expressed interest in participating in civic activities might translate into more active civic engagement. That this has not happened suggests that other factors may be coming into play. As Child Trends searched for answers to this puzzle, we found little research to guide us, particularly little rigorous research, which makes it difficult to reach definitive conclusions. Moreover, researchers know little about the sorts of environmental and intrapersonal characteristics that lead youth to become civically engaged. For example, researchers do not yet know whether young people who choose to participate in community service do so for the same reasons as those who participate in politics or environmental activism.

**Why Do Teens Become Engaged in Civic Activities?**

Available research indicates that a variety of factors may play a role in adolescents’ participation in community service activities:

- **Gender:** Some cross-sectional studies (those based on survey data that were collected at one point in time) suggest that girls participate in civic activities more than boys,\textsuperscript{10, 21} vote more, and are more knowledgeable about the political system.\textsuperscript{37, 38} Although the reasons for these findings are not completely clear, researchers have found consistent ties between empathy, positive social (or “prosocial”) behaviors, and civic engagement. It may be that parents and society socialize girls to be more empathetic and therefore more prosocial.\textsuperscript{8, 3}

- **Ethnicity and culture:** Research suggests that the ethnic or cultural background of adolescents’ families seem to have little, if any, bearing on the extent of adolescents’ participation in civic activities.

- **Motivation:** Not surprisingly, being motivated appears to be a good predictor of civic engagement as expressed in community service and environmentalism. Yet research has not yet uncovered a particular reason that links the two.\textsuperscript{30, 31, 2, 20} More research focused on teens is needed before definitive conclusions can be drawn.

- **Parents:** Also not surprisingly, it appears that parents can influence the civic engagement of their children by acting as role models and reinforcing volunteerism.\textsuperscript{10, 11, 19, 22}

- **National and world events:** What is going on in the world at a particular time, whether famine in Africa, conflict in the Middle East, or the threat of terrorism at home can also have an effect on teens’ civic activities,\textsuperscript{22} but we know little about the influence of these events on individual teen behavior.

**Programs That Encourage Civic Engagement**

Quite a few programs have been created to engage young people in community service or other volunteer activities. However, few of these programs have been evaluated rigorously to determine whether they contribute to civic engagement after involvement in the programs. Instead, most evaluations focus on other positive outcomes, such as boosting school engagement and rates of high school graduation and decreasing teen pregnancy and drug use. Here we focus more closely on particular program approaches to encourage civic engagement among young people.
One Program’s Success

One program that has been experimentally evaluated is the Quantum Opportunity Program, a multi-service, four-year, year-round demonstration project conducted in five cities. Part of this evaluation includes taking a short-term look at how participants fare after they have left the program. Through the program, disadvantaged high school-age teens were given a safe and supervised place to do homework, listen to speakers, interact with mentors, and learn life skills. Research shows that adolescents taking part in the program were more likely to graduate from high school and attend college and more hopeful about the future than nonparticipants. They also donated significantly more time to a nonprofit, charitable, school, or community group in the six months after leaving the program than teens who did not participate. And in the six months before the program ended and the six months after it ended, participants were more likely to serve as volunteer mentors, tutors, or counselors than nonparticipants. No data were reported beyond the six-month follow-up.16

Service Learning

Volunteering is just one strategy for promoting civic engagement. Integrating community service into school curricula has attracted growing interest in the United States. Through service-learning programs, schools couple civics lessons with required community service, but requirements vary greatly across the nation. As of December 2000, Maryland was the only state that required service learning for high school graduation. In seven states, service-learning activities could be applied toward graduation requirements. Eleven states encourage schools to use service learning to increase student achievement and engagement. Six states include service learning within their educational standards. And six other states have appropriated funding to create service-learning activities and programs.7

How effective are service-learning programs? Little experimental research has been conducted; however, a national quasi-experimental evaluation of Learn-and-Serve America, service-learning programs that are funded by the Corporation for National Service, found that adolescents in the programs had better school engagement, grades, civic attitudes, and service leadership attitudes in the short-term. The evaluation of the programs at one year was less encouraging, with all of the effects dissipating.4

A quasi-experimental evaluation of “We the People... Project Citizen,” a civics education program, found that students in the program had higher scores on civic knowledge, better self-perceptions of civic skills, and a greater likelihood that they would take part in civic and political life than nonparticipants.5 The program seeks to involve middle-school students in their communities by teaching them about the political process, researching local problems, and developing ideas on how to solve them. A couple of years after youth left the program, adolescents who took part were voting more frequently than their peers.33

Voter Participation

Another type of program that aims to boost civic involvement works by reaching out to voting-age young people specifically to encourage them to vote. Experimental evaluations of two such programs found that contacting young people by phone produced an increase in voter turnout among this population; contacting them in person proved even more successful.14

Programs that seek to increase adolescents’ awareness about the importance of voting and increase their overall levels of civic engagement may have a secondary effect of boosting parents’ knowledge about and involvement in civic issues. A nonexperimental evaluation of Kids Voting USA, a school-based curriculum focused on voting in a democracy, is instructive in this regard. The study found that the parents of students whose schools used the curriculum talked more about the upcoming election and had higher levels of civic knowledge than parents of students whose classes did not use the curriculum.24 Other nonexperimental studies have also supported this concept, but an experimental study has not been done.25

Research Results

Overall, experimental studies and quasi-experimental evaluations indicate that adolescents who take part in service-learning or service and mentoring programs are more involved in civic activities up to six months after their participation in the programs has ended. Additionally, research shows that teens who take part in election campaigns are more likely to continue to be involved in politics after the campaigns have ended. Teens who participate in service-learning programs may also bring home knowledge about civic matters to their parents. More experimental and longitudinal evaluations are needed before we can make definitive conclusions about the effectiveness of these programs over the long term.

Nonexperimental research findings shed light on those parts of civic engagement programs that
have been found to be most successful in involving adolescents. Studies suggest that those looking to design effective civic engagement programs should provide opportunities for activities in which teens feel appreciated for their work and can see the impact that they are having on their communities. In addition, this body of research suggests that, where appropriate, students should be involved in the initial development of these programs so that they can have a voice in deciding the types of activities they provide and in designing school-based curricula. Teens should also be involved in assessing their communities’ needs for programs, share responsibility in planning activities, help with budgeting and fundraising, and apply what they have learned in the classroom to implementation and evaluation.

**CONCLUSION**

Based on our review of the research currently available, we suggest that programs seeking to encourage civic engagement among young people:

- **Adopt multiple strategies to promote civic engagement**, keeping in mind the many and varied factors related to teens’ lives that influence their engagement in community activities, including family, school, and neighborhood.

- **Involve adolescents in activities**, from the design of the program at the start to the evaluation at the end, so that teens are fully engaged and do not find civic activities boring.

- **Continue efforts over time to extend program effects**. Promoting civic engagement is not a one-shot event. The effects appear to last while teens are involved in the program, but short-term evaluations show that these effects generally dissipate over time.

**NEXT STEPS FOR RESEARCH**

Given the many limitations of the available research on civic engagement among youth, and the importance of the issue for the continuing vitality of American democracy, next steps for research include:

- **Develop basic measures of civic engagement**. Currently, there is no consensus on how to define or measure civic engagement. Without such a definition, it is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of programs accurately. Comparable measures across projects also will allow for better comparisons of results across studies.

- **Develop data resources**. Once measures are created, short questions can be placed in large, nationally representative surveys. With the richness of contextual and individual variables in many of these surveys (such as demographic and relationship characteristics), more long-term analyses involving several variables could be done to determine, more definitively, what leads teens to become engaged in civic activities.

- **Focus specifically on adolescents**. There is a dearth of research on civic engagement among young people, as this brief mentions. Although much more research exists on civic engagement among adults, it is difficult to draw conclusions for teens from this research because of social, psychological and economic differences between the two populations.

- **Conduct more rigorous experimental studies on the impact of civic engagement programs**, as well as on the effects of varied intervention strategies, on civic engagement. Although this brief makes tentative recommendations in this area, more evaluations would support more definitive conclusions about why teens become and remain involved.

- **Conduct more long-term follow-up studies to test programs’ effectiveness**. Since available evidence indicates that the effects of civic engagement programs tend to dissipate within a year of the end of the program, evaluations of programs need to last longer to determine if program effects persist.

This Research Brief summarizes a longer report, *Background for Community-Level Work on Positive Citizenship in Adolescence: Reviewing the Literature on Contributing Factors* (2001, Child Trends: Washington, D.C.), by Jonathan F. Zaff, Ph.D., and Erik Michelsen, which was prepared for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Kristin Anderson Moore, Ph.D., is the Principal Investigator and Jonathan Zaff is the Project Director. The brief was prepared by Anne Bridgman and was edited by Amber Moore, Kristin Moore, Harriet J. Scarupa, and the study’s authors. For more information on the reports, call the Child Trends’ publications office, 202-362-5580. Publications may also be ordered from Child Trends’ Web site, www.childtrends.org.

Child Trends, founded in 1979, is an independent, nonpartisan research center dedicated to improving the lives of children and their families by conducting research and providing science-based information.

*For example, the Saguaro Project at Harvard University and the National Association of Secretaries of State study of civic engagement.*
to the public and decision-makers. For additional information on Child Trends, including a complete set of available Research Briefs, please visit our Web site.

Child Trends gratefully acknowledges the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for support of this special series of Research Briefs on American Teens.

References

Table: Review of the Research Literature and Implications for Targeted Activities to Improve Adolescent Positive Citizenship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AREAS FOR TARGETED INTERVENTION ACTIVITIES</th>
<th>Experimental Research Studies</th>
<th>Non-Experimental Research Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>WHAT WORKS</strong></td>
<td><strong>WHAT DOESN’T WORK</strong></td>
<td><strong>MIXED REVIEWS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Involvement</td>
<td>- Programs that use door-to-door and phone canvassing directed toward youth.</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Service</td>
<td>- Programs (Quantum Opportunities) that combine life skills training with mentoring and rewards for participation in programs (Increase is apparent 6 months post-program participation).</td>
<td>- Service-Learning programs (e.g., Learn-and-Serve America) that combine civics education with a community service component.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Activism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For a more detailed version of this table, with links to research and program descriptions, consult Child Trends’ Web site at www.childtrends.org.


3Hahn, A., Leavitt, T., & Aaron, P. (1994). Evaluation of the quantum opportunities program did the program work? Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, Heller Graduate School Center for Human Resources.


