

# Child TRENDS FACT SHEET

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## WHAT WORKS FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Programs and Interventions

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### OVERVIEW

Civic engagement and participation are central to the functioning of a democratic society.<sup>1</sup> In addition, young people who are involved in civic activities are more engaged in academics, are less likely to participate in risky behaviors, and more than likely continue on to adulthood as contributing members of their communities.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Rates of young people's civic participation in American society have been on the decline.<sup>5</sup> Greater engagement of young people would benefit the larger society as well as youth themselves.

### WHAT WORKS

This review is based on five experimental studies from the Child Trends database of experimental evaluations of social interventions for children and youth – LINKS (Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully).<sup>6</sup> The small number of studies limits our conclusions; nevertheless, several conclusions appear warranted.

- **Connecting children with needy populations and/or providing community service opportunities is effective in increasing helping behavior and perceptions of social responsibility.** This finding was observed in all four programs that contained a service component and measured civic engagement.<sup>7</sup>
- **Monetary compensation was not found to undermine future helping behaviors in either experimental evaluation that provided payment for performing community service.**<sup>8</sup> In fact, the only experimentally evaluated program that did not compensate children for service work, Across Ages, noted losses in helping behavior over time.
- **All three programs that incorporated mentoring, tutoring, or life skill training components in tandem with service learning had positive impacts on civic engagement.**<sup>9</sup> An experimental evaluation of the successful Across Ages program found that when the mentoring component of the program was removed, children's attitudes toward helping behavior did not increase. This evidence suggests that community service by itself may not be sufficient to affect civic engagement and that supporting components such as mentoring are important for a successful program.<sup>10</sup>
- **Many more programs may be "effective" in improving civic engagement outcomes for children, but they need to be evaluated in randomized trials to provide evidence of program impacts.**

### NEEDED RESEARCH

This small number of studies limits our conclusions and also highlights the need for more experimentally evaluated programs and interventions that target civic engagement outcomes or an increased focus on assessing civic engagement outcomes in future program evaluations.

## CONCLUSION

Review of the rather sparse randomized, experimental program literature in this area suggests several factors to consider when creating or choosing a successful program aimed at developing civic engagement. Depending upon its purpose, an “ideal” program may provide children with the opportunity to interact directly with needy populations and will allow children to take part in community service activities. In addition, an ideal program will include mentoring, tutoring, or life skills training to complement service learning.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Gibson, C. (2001). From inspiration to participation: A review of perspectives on youth civic engagement. Berkeley, CA: The Grantmaker Forum on Community and National Service.

<sup>2</sup> Glanville, J. (1999). Political socialization of selection? Adolescent extracurricular participation and political activity in early adulthood. *Social Science Quarterly*, 80(2), 279-290.

<sup>3</sup> Youniss, J., McLellan, J., Su, Y., & Miranda, Y. (1999). The role of community service in identity development. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 14(2), 248-261.

<sup>4</sup> Zaff, J. F., & Michelsen, E. (2003). Encouraging civic engagement: How teens are (or are not) becoming responsible citizens. In *American Teens: A special look at “what works” in adolescent development[should there be a comma here?] in partnership with John S. and James L. Knight Foundation*. Washington, DC: Child Trends Inc.

<sup>5</sup> Gibson, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.childtrends.org/links>

<sup>7</sup> Conclusions based on randomized, experimental evaluations of four programs: [Across Ages](#), [Adolescent Social Action Program](#), [Quantum Opportunities Program](#), and [Youth Corps](#).

<sup>8</sup> Based on evaluations of [Youth Corps](#) and the [Quantum Opportunities Program](#).

<sup>9</sup> Based on evaluations of [Across Ages](#), [Quantum Opportunities Program](#), and [Youth Corps](#).

<sup>10</sup> Students who did not receive mentoring as part of the [Across Ages](#) community service program did not show increases in community service participation or attitudes toward helping; those that were mentored show significant gains in both of these areas.

**Experimental Evaluations of Social Programs that Examined Impacts on One or More Civic Engagement Outcomes and Whether They Were Found to Work, Not Proven to Work, or Had Mixed Findings**

(Source: <http://www.childtrends.org/links>)

OUTCOME AREA	NOT PROVEN TO WORK	MIXED REVIEWS	FOUND TO WORK
<b>Political Involvement</b>			<p><i>-Multi-component intervention programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-<a href="#">Youth Corps</a>, a paid community service program that also provided a range of life skills training and tutoring. The program had lasting positive impacts on youth voting rates.</li> <li>-<i>Media/canvassing campaigns to increase voting rates:</i></li> <li>-<a href="#">Canvassing Program</a>, a phone canvassing program targeting young adults. The program increased voting rates of young adults under the age of 30.</li> </ul>
<b>Community Service</b>			<p><i>-Multi-component intervention programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-<a href="#">Quantum Opportunities Program</a>, an intervention program for disadvantaged teens with several components: life skills training, tutoring, mentoring, and community service with financial incentives. The program had long-term impacts on youth participation in community service activities.</li> <li>-<a href="#">Across Ages</a>, an intervention program for teens at high risk for substance abuse with multiple components: mentoring, community service, and life skills training. The program had positive post-test impacts on rates of participation in community service.</li> </ul>
<b>Helping Behavior/Social Responsibility</b>		<p><i>-Multi-component intervention programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-<a href="#">Across Ages</a>, an intervention program for teens at high risk for substance abuse with multiple components: mentoring, community service, and life skills training. The program had initial positive impacts on helping behavior, but these impacts were not maintained at the 6-month follow-up.</li> </ul>	<p><i>-Multi-component intervention programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-<a href="#">Adolescent Social Action Program</a>, a drug prevention program with a classroom component and visitations to hospitals and detention centers. The program increased youth self-efficacy related to helping and intentions to participate in collective action.</li> <li>-<a href="#">Youth Corps</a>, a paid community service program that also provided a range of life skills training and tutoring. The program had lasting positive impacts on personal and social responsibility.</li> </ul>