

Three Core Measures of Community-Based Civic Engagement: Evidence from the Youth Civic Engagement Indicators Project

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Abstract:

Using data derived from an extensive study of civic and political engagement in the U.S. with a special emphasis on youth, this paper documents 15-19 year-olds' involvement in civic life. We address the importance of youth civic engagement for later involvement in public life and document the extent to which youth ages 15-19 are involved in activities broadly construed as community centered. Specific attention is paid to engagement in community problem solving, volunteering, and group or organizational membership. We describe the process used to select the indicators used to measure these behaviors, and address the methodological problems associated with proper measurement. Finally, we provide evidence regarding the reliability and validity of our indicators.

Introduction

Adolescents and young adults are less interested and engaged in politics and public life than their elders (Associated Press 2000; Meinert 2000). Much of the focus of their lives is on the development of social relations and on school – only a small part of which is devoted to preparing citizens for the responsibilities that lie ahead. Youth lack an attachment to the larger world which is fundamental to fostering interest and engagement. Add to that a basic cynicism toward politics and politicians (National Association of Secretaries of State 1999), and it is not surprising that many youth are tuned out and disengaged from what's going on around them.

But youth are not equally disengaged from all forms of participation in public affairs. Youth involvement in community and charitable work is greater than it is with election campaigns and other traditional forms of political participation. Community based civic involvement is a natural and age-appropriate means of activity for many youth, and schools in the United States are increasingly encouraging and facilitating such activity. Taking a closer look at these activities among youth calls into question the legitimacy of such labels as “tuned out” and “disengaged.”

This paper examines three measures of community based civic engagement: informal group activity to solve community problems, volunteering, and group membership. Because these concepts are somewhat broad and amorphous, their reliable measurement presents challenges to survey research.

Research on youth and community involvement

Those who have examined the engagement patterns of youth today confirm the obvious: they are not engaged in electoral politics and demonstrate relatively little interest in political affairs. Surveys conducted prior to the 2000 election found that only 50 percent of 18-24 year olds said they were registered to vote; just 46 percent said they were “absolutely” certain they would vote in the upcoming election (Kaiser Family Foundation 2000). These fall short of the averages for all adults, 75 percent of whom claim to be registered and more than three-quarters of registered voters (84 percent) who said they were absolutely certain to vote in the fall (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2000).

Youth are also not inclined to see voting as a civic duty, and they eschew traditional political activities and orientations. They do not view politics as relevant to their daily lives, consider political leaders to be “out of touch” and government to be “too slow” (National Association of Secretaries of State 1999; Freyman and McGoldrick 2000). Almost half (46 percent) of 15-24 year olds never or almost never talk about politics and government or current events with their parents (National Association of Secretaries of State 1999).

Despite the aversion to politics prevalent among youth, the same cannot be said for community-centered involvement. High rates of volunteering suggest that youth believe they can make more of a difference in the community than in the voting booth. In fact, 58 percent of 18-24 year-olds who weren't certain to vote in 2000 said that they could make more of a difference through community involvement than in turning out on election day (Kaiser Family Foundation 2000).

Part of the reason why youth are more active in civic than political work is because high schools and colleges increasingly facilitate community involvement among their students. Our data found that 75 percent of high school students say that their school arranges or offers service activities or volunteer work for students; 65 percent

of college students report the same thing. Youth are taking advantage of these opportunities to get involved. Close to half (45 percent) of those who attend high schools where community work is arranged report volunteering in the recent past, and 38 percent of college students at service oriented universities are motivated to volunteer.

While the apparent disconnect among youth between civic and political behavior is troubling, it should not overshadow the importance of high incidences of civic behavior and the possibility that this foreshadows very high levels of engagement as youth eventually become more established in their communities. As the larger project from which this research is drawn has shown, *civic* activity is not necessarily *nonpolitical* activity (Jenkins et al., 2003). Many people who engage in volunteering and community problem solving also attempt to influence governmental policy as a part of their work in this arena. Although some of them have rejected or are indifferent to electoral politics as the best way to get problems solved, even these individuals have not necessarily eschewed the use of governmental power and resources. Consequently, youth who are active in their community may become more likely to understand the complexity of public issues and to recognize political solutions to problems. Their community work has the potential to put them in contact with elected officials and to learn the best means for communicating with them. It's reasonable to expect that civic behavior in early adulthood will lead to political engagement in later years.

Measuring civic engagement among youthData for this paper were collected during a two-year project funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts. The research had two principal goals: 1) to develop a reliable but concise set of indicators of civic and political engagement, with a special focus on youth ages 15-25; and 2) to assess the civic and political health of the nation from a generational perspective. We began the project with exploratory work using a pair of expert panels and a series of focus groups with citizens in various age groups during 2001. In the fall of 2001, we conducted several small surveys to test specific items. In winter 2002, we conducted a large national survey among youth aged 15-25 using Knowledge Networks' panel of web-enabled households. In spring 2002, we conducted a large national telephone survey, which provides most of the data reported here. Two focus groups to

help us provide validation for our measures were held during the summer of 2002, and another national telephone survey in fall 2002 provides additional evidence about the reliability of the indicators.

Data used in this paper come primarily from the spring 2002 national telephone survey, conducted April 4-May 20. The total sample size was 3,246. Owing to our focus on youth, people aged 15-25 were oversampled (N=1,001). For this paper, we focus primarily on the 461 respondents who were aged 15-19.¹

Key concepts for measurement

Civic activity can be viewed as one element of a broader concept of *civic and political engagement*, itself a variant of a core topic in political science, *political participation*. Political participation is typically defined as actions undertaken by citizens to influence government and public policy. Civic and political engagement is a broader notion than political participation in at least two important respects. First, it also includes *cognitive engagement* – paying attention to government and public affairs, following the news in newspapers, on television, radio, or the Internet, talking about politics with friends and family, and expressing interest in the subject. Second, it broadens the object of the activity and the arena in which it occurs beyond the government to non-governmental organizations.

A key debate about the study of *civic engagement*, which includes most of the community-centered activity we focus on in this paper, is the extent to which it is political in nature. This debate is important because of disagreement about the consequences of civic activity. One perspective fears that civic activities such as volunteering serve as substitutes for political activity, displacing the essential work citizens need to do to keep a democracy healthy. This debate is seen even among proponents of programs explicitly designed to involve youth, such as service learning. More broadly, the controversy is now evolving into a debate between liberals and conservatives over the degree to which the nonprofit sector can and should take over social welfare activities that the government has performed since the creation of the modern welfare state in the 1930s and 1940s.

¹ The sample was weighted to reflect national population parameters on sex, age, race, education, and ethnicity.

Apart from the debate over the proper scope of government, there is a more neutral question regarding the extent to which civic activity has value as an element of the political system. Political scientists in the U.S. have long observed that groups and associations not only provide important services to their communities but also function as important players in the political game (Bentley 1908; Truman 1951). They serve as a means of mobilizing citizens to influence government and a place for the training of citizens in the tools of collective action that can be turned to more explicitly political activity. Especially for youth, who find certain avenues of the political system closed off due to age restrictions and cultural norms, civic involvement in the community may be the best and most appropriate means for developing good skills for citizenship. More generally, Verba and his colleagues (1995) have shown that civic institutions are a critical locale for skill building.

Beyond these theoretical and normative questions, there is the empirical question of the degree to which active citizens engage in both political and civic activities. That is, how correlated are these two dimensions of activity? As we show in detail below, the survey provides evidence of the multi-dimensionality of engagement. Items related to electoral politics – voting, donating money to campaigns, trying to persuade others – correlate with one another better than they correlate with other kinds of activities. Similarly, civic activities, defined as organized voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others, also cluster together. Other activities that entail the use of what we call “political voice” – things people do to give expression to their political and social viewpoints – correlate with both the electoral and the civic activities, but also tend to cluster with one another. And although these dimensions are both theoretically and empirically distinct, the picture is not an entirely clear one, for several reasons.

Challenges to good measurement

One difficulty faced by those who develop measures of political and civic engagement is that there is a limited number of key activities in which citizens engage, and these tend to be discrete events (voting is, for many, the most important activity and perhaps the best example of this problem). Consequently, unlike orientations such as attachment to siblings or parents, life satisfaction, or knowledge about a specific domain, it is difficult to create a

highly reliable measure using a battery of indicators. One can ask many questions about attitudes toward voting, but there is a limit on how many different ways we can ask about voting in a specific election, or even the regularity of voting in general.

A second problem is that for most citizens, explicitly political activity is episodic – either because the opportunities are episodic, as with the case of elections, or because politics in general has a low salience and people tend to be roused to action by events or by friends or organizations who recruit them for a particular purpose, such as signing a petition. One result is that many of the activities that fall within the domain of political activity have low incidences. Given low incidences, and a phenomenon that is driven at least in part by factors external to the citizen (the rise and fall of certain issues, the schedule of elections), even a relatively large battery of items reflecting a range of activities will not produce a scale with a high degree of internal consistency.

Since highly reliable scales are not likely to be achieved, the challenge in developing good measures of civic and political engagement is somewhat different from that faced in other domains of behavior and attitude. *Content validity* is especially important. Ensuring that the full range of relevant behaviors is covered is particularly challenging when the focus is on youth, who may be finding or inventing new means of engagement. Our project devoted several months of intensive study to this issue, including a pair of expert panels and a series of focus groups conducted in four locations around the country. A principal goal of this exploratory research was to map the full range of political and civic activity currently going on among young people.

One other challenge faced by all researchers, but especially relevant to our work, is the tradeoff between greater coverage and perhaps reliability from the use of multiple measures, and the financial costs of a long survey and the respondent burden that accompanies it. Our mission was to develop an index that would cover the most important forms of civic and political engagement, but that was short enough for use as a tool for needs assessment or evaluation by nonprofit groups, community-based researchers, and academics working with very limited budgets. This need for both broad coverage and concision mitigated against the development of lengthy batteries of indicators.

Exploratory research and subsequent item testing during 2001 yielded a core set of 19 dichotomous indicators, not including measures of cognitive engagement.² Factor analysis indicated that these items could be sorted comfortably into three dimensions of activity corresponding to the theoretical categories of electoral work, civic work, and political voice. Although the analysis was cleaner for the adult population, a similar pattern was evident with youth ages 15-19.

The remainder of our discussion will focus on the civic dimension of youth engagement, and will do so primarily through three indicators we consider to be most appropriate for assessing youth involvement in their communities. We focus on civic, as opposed to other forms of engagement, because the opportunities for civic engagement are more abundant among youth relative to electoral and political voice behavior. Voting is limited to those 18 and older, and contributing money to a political party or candidate is skewed toward older cohorts with greater economic resources. But volunteer activity, working informally with others to solve a problem in one's community, and group activity are not dependent on money and other age-related resources.

In general, our questions were derived from items in use on surveys commonly used to assess civic engagement in the U.S. We provide comparisons of our questions with similar items on other instruments as well as a description of the logic and evidence used in developing the version we recommend.

The Measures

The exact wording for each of the three measures can be found in Table 1. Community problem solving is measured with a two part item asking about informal collective work to solve a problem in the community. This question is derived from a standard indicator used on political participation surveys. The American National Election Studies (ANES) and the 1990 American Citizen Participation Study both include a variant of this question, although the question wording is slightly different.³ American Citizen Participation Study: Aside from

²For complete question wording of all items, and a guide to the use of the indicators, see our report entitled "A Guide to the Index of Civic and Political Engagement," available at <http://civicyouth.org>.

³ American National Election Studies: In the last twelve months, have you worked with others or joined an organization in your community to do something about some community problem?

membership on a board or council or attendance at meetings, I'd like to ask also about informal activity in your community or neighborhood. In the past twelve months, have you gotten together informally with or worked with others in your community or neighborhood to try to deal with some community issue or problem? The important elements to this question are the informal nature of the work and the 12-month time frame.

First, the informal nature of the work is critical because of the need to “make sure that survey research does not miss those cases where people get together on their own to solve community problems” (Brady, 2001: 779). Community problem solving is often accomplished through loose and informal networks of people getting together for a single purpose, rather than through the organized activity of groups or citizen involvement in town boards or city councils.

Second, the two part question is used here (and in our volunteering measure) to help distinguish community centered work in the recent past from more distant efforts. This also helps to reduce social desirability bias, or the tendency for respondents to offer a socially appropriate response even if that is not a true reflection of their behavior. In this case, an individual has an opportunity to say “yes” to the question about informal community work and thus “get credit” for having done this before answering the more important part of this question that anchors the behavior in the more recent past. The 12-month time frame was adopted as a reasonable compromise between the desire to provide a span long enough to include people who do not do this activity on a regular basis and yet short enough that people might reasonably remember having done it.⁴

*****TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE *****

Regular volunteering for a non-electoral organization is measured with a three-part item that first asks if the respondent has spent any time in community service or volunteer activity; those saying “yes” are asked if they have done it in the past 12 months. If detail about the type of volunteer work is needed, a series of types of groups are mentioned and the respondent is asked about volunteering with each of them. For each of these, the respondent is

asked if they do this work on a regular basis or just once in a while.⁵ (If detail about the types of groups is not needed, everyone who said they volunteered in the past year can be asked about the regularity of the activity.)

This complicated series is needed because volunteering has proven to be a very problematic concept. It can include “random acts of kindness” and regular, lengthy, intensive work for organizations or groups. To some extent, the vast array of volunteer opportunities complicates a respondent’s ability to remember all that they may have done. For example, the context in which the volunteering question is asked in a survey could affect how easily a respondent remembers an activity. Another problem is social desirability bias, since volunteer work is thought to be a praiseworthy activity. Differences in question wording, or in survey context, may elicit different degrees of overreporting. Thus it is not surprising that survey estimates of volunteer activity differ greatly.

Our question attempts to balance the need to be inclusive with the need to explicitly exclude some types of activities. We offer a definition of what is meant by volunteer activity in order to ensure respondents do not equate paid work with volunteering. As with informal community work, we opted for a “gatekeeper” question to reduce the impact of social desirability bias. But the most critical element of the question is the item asking about the regularity of the activity. Extensive testing suggests that the gatekeeper question, even when limited to 12 months, produces unreliable results (with estimates ranging from 33% to 55% in surveys by highly reputable survey research firms).

By contrast, *regular* volunteering appears to be more amenable to reliable measurement. Regular volunteers almost certainly will answer “yes” to the gatekeeper questions, and then need only to judge their degree of regularity. Episodic volunteers may pass the gate but will have little difficulty realizing that they are not regular volunteers. The result is more stable incidences from survey to survey. Our spring survey yielded an estimate of 24 percent among those 18 and older. The same questions on an omnibus survey in August 2002 yielded an estimate of 26 percent among those 18 and older. For our younger respondents (age 15-19), 25 percent were regular volunteers.

⁴ The differences between 15-19 year olds and those 20 and older in community problem solving are not statistically significant. This was true even after transforming the community problem solving indicator into a dummy variable.

⁵ An additional type of volunteer opportunity included in the list is “a political organization or candidates running for office.” This type of work forms the basis of one of the political indicators and is not coded as civic volunteering. It is also important to note that the volunteering measure can be used effectively without the follow up items asking about specific types of organizations.

The 1996 NHES survey found 24 percent regular volunteers among those in grades 9-10, and 32 percent in grades 11-12.⁶

Active membership in a group or association is measured with a pair of items that ask about belonging to or donating money to groups or associations. This broad question is followed up with a question that asks if the respondent is an active member of any of the groups. This simple approach is the result of extensive testing and some degree of compromise between the need for efficiency in the survey and the hope that the measure is comprehensive. It is well documented that providing respondents a long list of group types, rather than a single generic question about “groups,” spurs recollection and leads to a higher estimate of overall group membership (Walker and Baumgartner 1988). Going through a long list of groups on a survey, however, is cumbersome and time consuming. In pretests prior to the spring national survey, and in an experiment embedded within it, we attempted to assess the effectiveness of a shorter method of measuring group activity, one that does not include a long list of groups. Thus, we tested a longer list of groups as well as a single “gatekeeper” version of the group membership question. Our measure also probes about the level and type of activity in groups in order to differentiate between those who are merely members and those who take a more active role. Active membership is self-defined -- those who say they are active members.

The long form question in our experiment asked about membership in each of seven types of groups (e.g., national or local charities, labor unions, business or professional associations, etc.), plus an additional “other” category to capture anything not included in the seven. In the sample as a whole, 78 percent of those asked the long form of the question indicated they belonged to at least one group; in the short form, 55 percent did so. In the long form, 39 percent indicated active membership, while 28 percent did so in the short form. To evaluate the performance of the long and short versions as indicators of engagement, we correlated them with an overall index of participation; there was no significant difference in the correlations for the long and short form. Thus we have a classic question of validity: the short form clearly underestimates the incidence of the behavior, but it provides

⁶ Differences in the rate who report any volunteering in the past year among 15-19 year olds versus those 20 and older are statistically significant; age differences in the rates of *regular* volunteering are not statistically significant.

comparable explanatory power in an analysis of the relationship between group activity and other relevant behaviors.⁷

Data Quality: Reliability

Civic and political activity is a peripheral concern for many people -- and this is especially the case among young people. One consequence of this is that measures of community based civic activity are not as reliable as one would hope. People may have difficulty remembering activities that are not especially salient to them. Moreover, to the extent that people are unsure whether certain activities fit within the definitions stated or implied in survey questions, the measures will be unreliable. These problems may be especially severe with younger respondents whose lives are busy and who have not yet developed the types of mental categories used by the adult population for sorting activities.

We assess reliability in three ways: (1a) the extent to which our measures yield similar results with the same population at two different points in time or (1b) by two different survey organizations asking the same questions at the same time; (2) the extent to which our measures yield similar results with the *same individuals* at two points in time; (3) the extent to which our items scale with one another, as measured by coefficient *alpha*.

For the population of greatest interest -- youth ages 15-19 -- we have only one survey at one point in time, the spring 2002 survey. However, our survey work in the fall of 2002, which replicated the spring survey in two different field houses, provides an opportunity to examine the consistency of response among all adults, and among a comparable group of the youngest respondents, those aged 18 to 29 years. In addition to this replication, we also have panel data for some earlier versions of the volunteering measure, plus several other participation items such as voting, contacting officials, and protesting. These data permit an analysis of the stability of the indicators over time for the same individuals.

Our measure of working with others informally to solve a community problem in the last 12 months provides a reliable estimate of how often this behavior is done. Nineteen percent of respondents aged 18 to 29 report

⁷ Differences in group membership and active group membership among 15-19 year olds versus those 20 and older are statistically significant.

doing this in the spring 2002 survey. When this question was repeated in fall 2002 by two different survey organizations, they found incidences of 19 and 18 percent. We do not have panel data on this question.

As described above, the general question about volunteering produced widely divergent numbers on different surveys. Even the same question with the same respondents produced a relatively low level of consistency in our panel study of New Jersey residents during the fall of 2001. A question asking about volunteer activity for a civic or community organization found only 62 percent of respondents providing the same answer three months later. By contrast, 84 percent gave the same answer to a question about the regularity with which they vote, and 92 percent gave the same answer in both waves when asked whether they had voted in the 2000 general elections.

Although we did not test the measure of regular volunteering with a panel survey, regular volunteering for a non-electoral group or organization registers similar estimates across surveys of independent samples. The spring 2002 survey found 22 percent of 18-29 year-olds saying that they regularly volunteer for non-electoral groups, with 23 and 25 percent from the fall 2002 surveys saying that they do so.⁸

We did not test the reliability of group membership measures with our panels, but in independent samples of the full population, estimates of active membership in a group or organization were relatively stable, with a 23 percent estimate in the spring 2002 survey, and slightly fewer reporting the same in the two fall 2002 surveys (18 and 20 percent).

Item analysis and scaling

An index comprised of all 19 indicators of civic and political engagement provides one criterion for assessing the performance of each of the three indicators (data not shown). Overall, this 19-item index has an *alpha* of 0.69 for the 15-19 year old sample (and 0.76 for those 20 and older). The corrected item-total correlations for each of the three civic items meet or exceed all of the other items in the index: .36 for active membership in groups, .33 for regular volunteering, and .32 for community problem solving.

⁸ Recall that these estimates are derived from identical questionnaires administered by two different survey organizations.

Item Analysis for Indexes

	Age 15-19		Age 20+	
	Corrected item-total correlation	Alpha if item deleted	Corrected item-total correlation	Alpha if item deleted
Three item index				
Regular volunteer for non-electoral organization	0.41	0.45	0.48	0.43
Worked with others to solve community problem	0.38	0.48	0.41	0.52
Active member of group	0.37	0.50	0.38	0.58
<i>Alpha</i>		0.58		0.61

For an index of just the three civic items, coefficient *alpha* is .58 for the youth sample and .61 for those 20 and older. The relatively low alpha indicates that while these three items are tapping a common dimension (especially in relation to other measures of engagement), each behavior has distinct elements as well (in addition to whatever unreliability exists in the measures themselves). Adding an additional item for general fund raising for charity does not raise the alpha of the three item index, but neither does it lower the value. (By contrast, adding the item on fund raising runs or walks reduces the alpha to .54.) Including *both* the run/walk item and the general fund raising item increases the alpha marginally to .59.

We see participation in fund raising as a potential precursor to other civic behaviors, and thus an activity that may be worth monitoring. But the case is hardly a compelling one, and the inclusion of these items – as with any additional survey questions – comes with a cost.

The additive index of the three civic engagement items does not display an ideal distribution, with over half of the cases among both youth and adults scoring zero. About one quarter (24 percent) receive a score of one, while only 13 percent receive a score of two. Among youth, 7 percent get a score of three (8 percent among adults). The mean score for youth is .71.⁹

Frequency Distribution of Three-Item Civic Index			
Score for age	Unweighted		Percent
	Frequency		
15-19			
0		262	56
1		111	24
2		56	13
3		32	7
Total		461	100
Age 20+			
0		1419	54
1		696	25
2		392	13
3		239	8
Total		2746	100

Validity

The index correlates with several variables to which it is theoretically related, thus providing evidence of validity. The correlations are not high, a result partly attributable to the skewness of the distribution.¹⁰

Some of these associations, viewed as joint frequency distributions, are more compelling. Youth who have done any of the activities are more likely to attend religious services at least weekly, to have grown up in a household where someone volunteered, to say that they follow what’s happening in public affairs, and to feel that they can make a difference in their community.¹¹

We also have some qualitative evidence regarding validity. In the summer of 2002, we conducted focus groups with individuals who had done two or more of the activities in a four item civic scale (using the three core items, plus a single item that included both the run/walk and general fund raising for charity). One group consisted of individuals who were active on this civic index, but not active on an electoral index (comprised of the five electoral activities). The other group was composed of “dual activists”: people who scored two or higher on both indexes.

		Score on Three-Item Civic Index			
		0	1	2	3
Someone in household volunteered	Correlation of Three-Item Civic Index with Theoretically Relevant Variables				
	Follow government and public affairs				.25
	Someone in household volunteered				.29
	Heard discussion of politics in household while growing up				.18
	Attendance at religious services				.29
	Ability to change things in your community				.24

⁹ Differences on the three-item civic index between 15-19 year-olds versus those 20 and older are not statistically significant. The same holds true even after transforming the civic index into a dummy variable (1=1 or more activities; 0 = no activities).

¹⁰ The correlations are, however, all statistically significant at the .01 or lower level.

¹¹ The differences between youth scores on the three-item civic index and their engagement in other theoretically relevant behaviors are all statistically significant [see text box on following page].

Yes	34	48	57	87
No	66	52	43	13
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Follow government and public affairs				
Most of the time	13	29	25	52
Some of the time	46	47	51	30
Rarely	30	19	21	14
Never	11	5	3	4
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Sample size	261	110	56	32

Although the standard may seem low (simply having done two or more things among the four activities: active group membership, community problem solving, regular volunteering, or some type of fund raising), the people who attended these two groups were clearly engaged and active. Both groups engaged actively in the discussion and were reluctant to leave at the end. Individuals in these groups described their civic activities in considerable detail, and it was clear that civic engagement was an integral part of their lives. The civic specialists (those who did not score two or higher on the electoral index) tended to reject the electoral sphere as a way to address problems in the community, but they were nevertheless very political. The dual activists were very close to the model of the ideal citizen: highly engaged in both the electoral world and the world of direct action and organizing. Our conclusion from these groups was that the indexes discriminated very well. We have not tried to validate other “cut points” along the indexes, but could see very clearly that people who scored two on the civic dimension were highly engaged.

These groups were comprised of adults, and so the relevance of the findings to youth 15-19 is uncertain. But there is no reason to believe that youth would be significantly different from adults. Given that these activities

may be more difficult in some respects for young people to undertake, the activists on this measure may be even more distinctive.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Community-based civic engagement is an important behavior to foster among young people (as well as their elders), but measuring it reliably poses challenges. There is a reasonable consensus that volunteering and community problem solving are two central ways in which people participate in civic life. Schools increasingly encourage and even require volunteer work, which often involves community problem solving in addition to direct assistance to others. Our work, as well as research by others, indicates that these civic activities can have significant political relevance and contribute to the development of well rounded citizens who are able to contribute to the health of our democracy. There is less consensus that participation in groups *per se* is a civic activity, but empirically it is clear that much group activity is related to civic participation – or, at the least, that it helps individuals develop skills that transfer readily to civic and political work.

Thus, we believe that all three activities are worth measuring, but as our analysis has shown, this is not an easy task. Part of the problem is conceptual ambiguity; bringing greater clarity by narrowing the definitions or specifying certain kinds of activities would increase the reliability of the measures but could reduce the validity by producing an underestimate of the incidence. With lengthy lists of activities, this problem could be minimized, but the cost in terms of real estate on the surveys would be considerable.

Although people who do any one of the three activities are more likely to do the other two, the correlations are not high. Combining the three measures into an additive index provides a reasonable gauge of civic engagement, but the skewed distribution and uncertain reliability of the items makes it less than an optimal tool. In many situations, it may be just as useful to analyze the component items separately as to combine them into an index.

Efforts by schools to promote volunteer activity have been demonstrably successful, and service learning courses, when properly designed and taught, can help students make the critical linkages between civic life and the broader political world. Although there are many warning signs about the growing disengagement of young people

from public life, these measures of civic involvement suggest that the problem may not be as bad as it appears from voting statistics or other indicators of electoral activity. Community based civic engagement among youth is an activity well worth monitoring.

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Table 1. Item Wording and Marginal Percentages**Community problem solving**

Have you ever worked together informally with someone or some group to solve a problem in the community where you live? IF YES, Was this in the last 12 months, or not?

<i>Percent who said...</i>	<u>15-19</u>	<u>20+</u>
Yes, within the last 12 months	23	21
Yes, but not within the last 12 months	18	19
No, have not done it	58	60
Don't know	*	*
Total	461	2746

Volunteering

Have you ever spent time participating in any community service or volunteer activity, or haven't you had time to do this? By volunteer activity, I mean actually working in some way to help others for no pay. IF YES, Have you done this in the last 12 months?

<i>Percent who said...</i>	<u>15-19</u>	<u>20+</u>
Yes, within the last 12 months	52	33
Yes, but not within the last 12 months	16	27
No, have not done it	31	40
Don't know	1	1
Total	461	2746

IF YES: I'm going to read a list of different groups that people sometimes volunteer for. As I read each one, can you tell me if you have volunteered for this type of group or organization within the last 12 months? An environmental organization; A civic or community organization involved in health or social services. This could be an organization to help the poor, elderly, homeless, or a hospital; An organization involved with youth, children, or education; Any other type of group.

<i>Percent who report regular volunteering...</i>	<u>15-19</u>	<u>20+</u>
Thinking about the work for (type of group) over the last 12 months, is this something you do on a regular basis, or just once in a while? NOTE: Respondent is coded as regular if he/she reported regular activity with any of the types of groups asked about.	25	237

Active group membership

Do you belong to or donate money to any groups or associations, either locally or nationally? Are you an active member of this group/any of these groups, a member but not active, or have you given money only?

<i>Percent who report...</i>	<u>15-19</u>	<u>20+</u>
Membership in a group or association	36	63
Active membership in a group or association	23	32

NOTE: Summary measures of short and long form group membership questions