



Evidence That Civic Engagement Starting in Adolescence May Improve Health and Economic Wellbeing

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Lately, teenagers have been making headlines for active and public civic engagement. Most prominently, after surviving a high school shooting, students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, have organized events, galvanized support for gun control, and shifted the public conversation over gun control laws. Such civic engagement by Parkland students has left many people wondering how they were so well-prepared to mobilize and what effects engagement might have on their own coping and health.

Adolescents and young adults have long been encouraged to get involved in their communities through voting, volunteering, or engaging in activism for important causes. Observers assume that individuals and societies alike benefit when young people become civically engaged. Research has shown that civic activities can help people feel more connected to others and confident that they are making a difference. Volunteering, in particular, is associated with positive outcomes for the volunteers themselves and has been connected to health improvements.

Understanding Civic Engagement's Long-term Consequences

In a recent study, published in the journal *Child Development*, my colleagues and I set out to test the relationship between civic engagement and positive outcomes for young people. Most importantly, we asked whether civic engagement during adolescence and young adulthood promotes health, education, and higher incomes over the course of later adulthood.

Answers to this question matter for two reasons. Many early-life events can have lasting impact later in the life course, so it is important, especially in a time of increased civic participation, to understand how young people's civic activities link to other outcomes. Second, it is important to know which specific types of civic activities – such as voting, volunteering, or activism – promote specific desirable outcomes like good health and higher educational attainment. Information about specific links could inform the efforts of people working to improve public health, educational achievements, and of course, youth civic engagement.

To explore linkages, we used a nationally representative sample of 9,471 adolescents from an ongoing study called the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 26 when their civic engagement was measured. Some 49.4% identified as female. And 68.9% identified as white; 15.7% as black; 3.2% as Asian; 10.6% as Hispanic; and 2.4% with another race or ethnicity. We used a statistical approach that gave us greater confidence that it was, in fact, civic engagement that was affecting respondents' health and education later in life – and not some other factor such as their parents' level of education. For example, we were able to match adolescents who volunteered with adolescents from similar backgrounds who did not volunteer, and then compare the two groups' health, education, and incomes six years later. We examined three different types of civic engagement: voting, volunteering, and activism.

- All three forms of engagement, we found, are positively associated with subsequent gains in income and educational attainments.
- Volunteering and voting were favorably associated with subsequent mental health and with lower substance use and risky health-related behaviors. Interestingly, activism was not associated with improved mental health, but was associated with more risky health-related behaviors in adulthood.
- None of the three forms of civic engagement were associated with improved physical health, measured through things like blood pressure.

We were not able to test precise hypotheses about why various forms of civic engagement are related to later positive outcomes, but we have some ideas. Civic engagement might affect educational attainment and

income by plugging people into networks that help them get jobs and mentorship. Voting and volunteering might promote improved mental health and health behaviors by changing the way people think about themselves and their futures. Voting and volunteering can be empowering and make people feel satisfaction in contributing to their communities. Previous research suggests that feelings of empowerment can positively affect health-related behaviors, and also suggests that feeling good about contributing to others can positively affect people's mental health. On the other hand, activism to push for social change can often feel frustrating when things are slow to improve. Such frustration could explain why activism might further risky behaviors like substance abuse.

Encouraging Civic Engagement to Promote Positive Life Outcomes

Adolescents and young adults should be given meaningful opportunities to contribute to their communities – and they should take advantage of such opportunities. Civic engagement may improve young people's career and health trajectories – even though our current study cannot say exactly how this happens. Nor did our study assess participant specific experiences. Future studies should examine such experiences, which are sure to matter for future health, education, and income. Many questions remain about how and why various types of civic engagement are linked to later life outcomes. And societal effects also matter, because even forms of activism that are controversial and yield mixed effects for individuals can propel salutary social change.

A key question in our research is how adults can best support engagement by young people. When efforts become stressful, adults can encourage young people to take breaks to care for themselves. Furthermore, activists organizing for long-standing causes, such as gun control should familiarize those they draw in, especially young people, to the history of the movement. Such a perspective can help currently engaged people manage expectations and taken a longer view of their contributions. This can make civic engagement more rewarding and help young people sustain activism and optimism even in the face of inevitable setbacks.

Participating in civic life is worthwhile for many reasons – to build community, meet social needs, change policies, and ensure a healthy democracy. Our research suggests that civic participation may also be good for those who become engaged, including at a young age.

Read more in Parissa J. Ballard, Lindsay T. Hoyt, and Mark C. Pachucki, “Impacts of Adolescent and Young Adult Civic Engagement on Health and Socioeconomic Status in Adulthood” *Child Development*, (2018): 1-17.