Pathways to Civic Engagement among Urban Youth of Color

Laura Wray-Lake & Laura S. Abrams

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Pathways to Civic Engagement Among Urban Youth of Color

Laura Wray-Lake and Laura S. Abrams

Abstract Through civic engagement, adolescents can increase community vitality, challenge injustices, and address social problems. Positive youth development (PYD) theory and research has generated knowledge of ecological assets (resources and supports in everyday environments) that foster youth civic engagement. Yet, assets and opportunities are not equally available to all youth. Youth of color in urban high-poverty neighborhoods merit more concerted attention in research on civic development to inform theory, policy, and practice. A primary goal of this monograph is to broaden academic and public discourse about what civic engagement looks like and how it develops for urban youth of color who live in high-poverty neighborhoods.

We conducted one time, face-to-face interviews and brief quantitative surveys with 87 youth of color (90% Black and Black multiracial; 59.8% male; ages 12–19) recruited from five youth centers in Rochester, New York, from 2015 to 2016. Interviews elicited youth's perspectives on how they define and experience civic engagement, community problems, connections and discussions to community, and adult supports. We used an inductive qualitative methodology.

In Chapter I, we review what is known about civic engagement among urban youth of color. We lay out evidence for ecological assets that support youth civic engagement, aligned with a PYD perspective, and articulate ways to expand beyond PYD to understand youth empowerment and urban contexts.

In Chapter II, we summarize national and local contexts that may shape the experiences of urban youth of color in our study. To set the stage for the empirical chapters that follow, we describe our sample, study design, and methodology.

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In Chapter III, we examine how urban youth of color in Rochester experience community violence and discuss the implications of these experiences for civic development. Youth articulated violence as a serious community problem and powerfully discussed frequent, personal, direct and indirect exposures to violence. Due to fear and lack of safety, some youth strategically disconnected from community and relationships and experienced disempowerment. Others reacted to violence with a tendency toward self-protection. For some, community violence was a catalyst for civic action.

In Chapter IV, we investigate how youth defined and experienced civic engagement. Youth's civic participation spanned helping community, engaging politically, participating in school or community organizations, engaging in social and leisure activities, and taking personal responsibility. Youth's civic actions were largely informal and localized. Some civic participation was contextualized as a response to community violence, such as intervening to protect peers from harm. Some youth were not civically engaged.

In Chapter V, we map out what civic empowerment looks like for these youth and how civic empowerment links to civic action. Supporting prior theory, we found evidence for emotional, relational, and cognitive dimensions of civic empowerment and experiences of civic disempowerment. Emotional empowerment was most closely aligned with civic action, although any expressions of civic empowerment suggest youth are developing building blocks for civic participation.

In Chapter VI, we investigate ecological assets that support youth's civic development. Safe community spaces such as youth centers provided familiarity and comfort, opportunities to forge connections with others, and places to help and be helped. Adults supported youth by enabling youth to feel heard, not judging them, serving as role models, and offering guidance and support. Youth were equally articulate about how adults fail to support or empower them. We conclude that some assets generally support positive development and others specifically foster civic development.

In Chapter VII, we integrate findings across chapters into a conceptual model of four distinct pathways of civic development. We systematically examined differences among youth who are disengaged, personally responsible, safely engaged, and broadly engaged. All pathways are adaptive, and youth found different ways to navigate community violence and other adversities.

As summarized in Chapter VIII, our study informs theory and future research on civic engagement among urban youth of color in contexts of adversity. We put forward four important elements needed for theory of civic development to be relevant for urban youth of color. Then we offer policy and practice recommendations: (a) investment in safe spaces and violence-reduction policies should be a top priority; (b) youth should be involved in decision-making about solutions to issues of concern to them; (c) civic engagement programs and opportunities should center on local issues and allow for multiple forms of engagement; (d) all youth should be heard and taken seriously by the adults in their lives.

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Pathways to Civic Engagement among Urban Youth of Color

In this monograph, Wray-Lake and Abrams examine what youth civic engagement looks like and how it develops among youth of color in high-poverty urban neighborhoods. The authors conducted and analyzed qualitative interviews with 87 youth of color in Rochester, New York. Exposure to violence was a prevalent adversity for these youth. While some youth responded to violence by disconnecting from community, others responded by becoming more civically engaged. For these youth, local, informal community helping was an especially common form of civic engagement. The authors identified four pathways of civic development: disengaged, personally responsible, safely engaged, and broadly engaged. The key factors distinguishing among pathways were civic empowerment and feeling heard and supported by adults. The findings from this work should be useful for a broad audience of scholars, practitioners, and policymakers with interests in civic engagement, positive youth development, and empowerment in urban communities.

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Laura Wray-Lake, PhD is an associate professor in the Department of Social Welfare at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her program of research focuses on understanding how and why youth from different backgrounds and settings come to be civically engaged.

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