

Pathways to Civic Engagement among Urban Youth of Color: Using Research to Support Civic Engagement

INTRODUCTION

All youth deserve opportunities to thrive and be civically engaged (i.e., make prosocial and political contributions to their community and society). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) affirms that children and adolescents have the right to access healthy development and education, be protected from harm, and participate in decisions that affect them. The United States is the only country that has not ratified this UN CRCⁱ. In stark contrast to its principles, urban youth of color in high-poverty U.S. neighborhoods have heightened exposure to adversities such as poverty, community violence, racial/ethnic discrimination, and under-resourced schools and community institutionsⁱⁱ. These adversities are known to be detrimental for children and adolescents' health and well-beingⁱⁱⁱ, and although lesser known, also have implications for youth civic engagement. The lack of resources for youth civic engagement in lower-income communities is an injustice that warrants critical attention. Because urban youth of color are often studied and understood from a deficit lens, little attention is paid to identifying their strengths. This research brief summarizes original research by Drs. Laura Wray-Lake and Laura Abrams at University of California, Los Angeles, based on interviews collected with youth in Rochester, New York. Policies are suggested to reduce barriers and strengthen assets to shape urban youth of color's pathways to civic engagement.

BACKGROUND

Youth civic engagement is worthy of investment. Youth are essential assets for their communities through helping others, improving community infrastructure and services, advocating for social justice, and identifying and enacting solutions to community problems^{iv}.

Youth have unequal opportunities for civic engagement. Across the lifespan, civic participation is much more likely for individuals who are advantaged by income and education^v. Civic inequality is exponentially magnified in urban neighborhoods where poverty and related problems such as violence are concentrated^{vi}. The roots of civic inequality can be traced in part to differential access to programs and organizations, civic education, and social capital^{vii}.

Youth centers and after-school spaces are essential safe harbors for youth in low-income urban communities. Unfortunately, these youth spaces are often under-funded and the availability of programs does not meet the demands in low-income communities^{viii}.

The civic potential of youth of color is under-recognized. The media often present stereotyped views of youth, and youth of color especially, as rebellious, impulsive, and deviant^{ix}. Youth-focused policy initiatives often focus on reducing youth problems more so than building assets and strengths, especially in communities of color^x.

METHODS

We conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with 87 youth of color from five youth centers in Rochester, New York. Youth ranged in age from 12 to 19, were mostly Black (61%) and Black multi-racial (27%), and 60% were male. During these 30-60 minute interviews, we asked a range of questions, including youth's definitions and experiences of civic engagement, discussions of community problems and solutions, experiences of community connection and disconnection, and experiences and views on adult supports.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Community Violence

- Community violence was a prevalent adversity that led many youth to feel afraid and unsafe in their everyday environments.
- Community violence was a clear source of disconnection from community and disempowerment; some youth felt overwhelmed and unable to make a difference.
- Community violence restricted youth's movement in their communities. Youth limited where they went in the community and limited contact with peers to feel safe.
- A small group of youth spoke out to address violence in their communities, despite their fear and lack of safety.
- Police were often viewed as part of the problem, rather than the solution to urban violence.

Unique Forms of Civic Engagement

- Youth were primarily civically engaged in ways that focused on local, community helping.
- Youth viewed informal helping and community building activities as more meaningful than structured or formalized activities.
- Informal mentoring and intervening to protect others from harm were unique forms of community helping.
- Some youth expressed political voice and interest in current events, especially issues relevant to race, such as Black Lives Matter. A more common experience was political disengagement, arising from feelings that the government cannot be trusted.
- Staying out of trouble, making good choices, and focusing on personal goals defined civic engagement for some. This personal responsibility was a way that youth acted as good community members.

The Role of Empowerment and Ecological Assets

- When youth felt safe and strongly connected to adults in youth centers and other community spaces, they tended to be highly empowered and engaged in helping in those spaces.
- Youth felt disconnected and disempowered in unsafe spaces. They frequently viewed schools as unsafe spaces where youth did not feel supported or heard.

- Feeling empowered to make a difference in the community was related to engaging in various helping and community-building activities.
- Opportunities to feel heard by adults is a key asset linked to feeling civically empowered and engaged. Often, youth felt dismissed and not heard by adults.
- Youth identified an ethos of reciprocity as a community asset that strengthens communities and fuels civic engagement. Reciprocity refers to a culture of helping and being helped in a community and was identified in safe community spaces and in relationships with supportive adults.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Address Community Violence

- Community violence remains a public health problem and social injustice of epic proportions. The findings from our study support recommendations for policies and collective actions to address community violence in urban neighborhoods (e.g., stricter gun control legislation, community policing, and other initiatives developed by and for local communities).
- Youth should be given a voice in building community capacity to address community violence, such as participating in adult-partnered policy movements. In places where youth are leading anti-violence movements, we encourage community leaders and policymakers to listen closely and take them seriously.

Invest in Community Spaces for Youth

- Financial and social investments in safe community spaces for youth should be a high priority for cities and states. The recreation centers where we interviewed youth are primarily city run and represent a vital investment Rochester has made to protecting the lives of children and adolescents in these communities.
- A key aspect of investing in youth centers is investing in staff. Our study and others show that these staff members go above and beyond their job descriptions to nurture long-lasting supportive relationships and offer mentoring and guidance to many children and youth they serve. Staff should value youth and their contributions. Investments in the training, financial security, and well-being of these staff members will have long-term benefits for youth and the larger community.
- Youth centers and similar spaces provide opportunities to offer structured civic programming. Youth's passion and knowledge about local community problems and issues could be a fruitful entry point for civic action projects. We caution against adult-centered approaches to filling youth's time with structured programs, however. Instead, we encourage decisions about programming to be made through prioritizing youth voice and choice about their needs and interests. We also caution against approaches that attempt to increase youth's civic participation without also attending to their developmental needs for safety, belonging, and voice.

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