Civic Engagement + Health

Supporting young people’s civic engagement, empowerment, and health

Parissa J. Ballard, Ph.D.
Asst. Professor, Family & Community Medicine
Wake Forest School of Medicine

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Why civic engagement?

Research is “me-search”

this flyer is to try to get the message across to everyone to help save the Earth. All it takes is 5 minutes a day just take time to pick up some litter!
My research is on the function of civic engagement in healthy youth development.
Particular moment in time

US health and health care are a mess: now what?

The report of the latest Commission on Public Policy and Health in the Trump era is a tour de force as a chronicle of the failings of both the health-care system in the USA and the society and public institutions that create and perpetuate these failings. This Commission’s report is likely to serve as a reference document on these matters for years to come. In surfacing the ideologically and systemically causes of US health-care problems, this Commission confronts the challenge of correcting them. In that respect, its analysis still leaves deep uncertainty about a path forward.

The Commission’s critique of US health care is broad, deep, and innovative. It provides a thorough review of the presidency and administration of Donald Trump and the many, destructive, executive orders he signed, which have led to, among other things, loss of health coverage for millions of US residents. The report could serve as a starting point for the corrective actions and policies of the new administration of President Joseph Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris.

The Commission comprehensively document the inadequate support of the US public health apparatus, including the fatal decrease in public health funding between 2002 and 2019 from 2.1% to 2.6% of national health spending, and the resulting loss of about 50,000 public health positions nationally, just when they were most needed to confront COVID-19.

Also compelling is the Commission’s framing of reduced life expectancy in the USA compared with other high-income nations. In 2018, the Commission states that 465,000 US residents “went missing” as a result of the nation’s reduced longevity. This silent epidemic of shortened lives suggests that hundreds of thousands of avoidable deaths could be added to the close to 500,000 deaths that COVID-19 will have claimed in the USA by the middle of February, 2021.

But in correctly linking the US health-care crisis to broader political and social causes, the Commission calls only implicitly for a deep analysis of how to address them. The USA is not a health-care outlier by chance, and there have been vigorous reform efforts in the past. Yet reformers face major obstacles. Some of these obstacles are political and cultural, and none are easy to overcome. Voter suppression remains a huge issue in the USA, adversely affecting voting among people of colour, especially in the conservative southern states. The US Electoral College and the allocation of two Senate seats to each state, irrespective of population, give disproportionate political weight to conservative, rural, and sparsely populated parts of the country. The requirement for 60 Senate votes to overcome deliberate delays to the progress of legislative action stands in the way of major social and political reforms.

Patricia McKnight/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Blumenthal &amburg, 2021
Civic engagement and health at both the individual and community level

Figure from Ballard (2019) report with Philanthropies for Active Civic Engagement (PACE)
Civic Engagement

“collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern”
—American Psychological Association

• Political action
  – Voting, campaigning
  – Student government

• Activism
  – Protesting/rallies
  – Community organizing

• Volunteering
  – Tutoring
  – Mentoring
What does civic engagement have to do with health?

https://soundcloud.com/replyall/9-the-writing-on-the-wall
Discrimination

Do nothing → headache → die

Do something about it → ?
Civic Engagement → Health

✓ Cope with stress
✓ Makes you feel good, lifts mood
✓ Active
✓ Social connections
✓ Can help develop a sense of purpose and meaning
✓ Make healthy changes in community
Developmental Psychology Theory

- Positive youth development (Hershberg et al., 2015; Schreier et al., 2013)

- Sociopolitical development (Ballard & Ozer, 2016; Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011)
My own research: A multi-method approach

1. Survey methods
2. Interview methods
3. Clinical, community, and school-based interventions
Impacts of Adolescent and Young Adult Civic Engagement on Health and Socioeconomic Status in Adulthood

Parissa J. Ballard
Wake Forest School of Medicine

Lindsay T. Hoyt
Fordham University

Mark C. Pachucki
University of Massachusetts

The present study examines links between civic engagement (voting, volunteering, and activism) during late adolescence and early adulthood, and socioeconomic status and mental and physical health in adulthood. Using nationally representative data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, a propensity score matching approach is used to rigorously estimate how civic engagement is associated with outcomes among 9,471 adolescents and young adults (baseline $M_{\text{age}} = 15.9$). All forms of civic engagement are positively associated with subsequent income and education level. Volunteering and voting are favorably associated with subsequent mental health and health behaviors, and activism is associated with more health-risk behaviors and not associated with mental health. Civic engagement is not associated with physical health.

Many adolescents and young adults participate in civic life by joining with others to address social issues, caring for others in their communities, and fighting for social change. Voting, volunteering, and activism are forms of civic engagement, which can be defined as "individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern" (American Psychological Association n.d.). Civic engagement, a multidimensional construct that includes attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, is critical to the positive development of individuals, communities, and democracies (e.g., Youniss & Levine, 2009). However, the impact of civic engagement on positive developmental trajectories across adulthood is not clear. In particular, young people who participate in civic activities may already be...
Research Questions

- Does civic engagement during late adolescence and early adulthood predict health later in adulthood?

- Do the effects of civic engagement differ across three types of health outcomes (mental health, physical health, and health behaviors)?

- Do outcomes differ depending on the form of civic engagement (voting, volunteering, and activism)?
Study design

- Sample
  - 9,471 participants
  - $M_{\text{age}} = 15.9$ (Wave 1)
- Propensity score matching

Harris et al., 2009
Matched on 37 background variables:

**Demographics**
- Male
- Age
- Agesq
- White
- Black
- Hispanic
- Asian
- Native
- Other
- Foreign born
- Parental education
- Region1
- Region2
- Region4
- College aspirations

**Health**
- General health
- Symptoms
- Physical limitations
- Depression
- BMI
- Physical activity
- Screen time
- Marijuana use
- Cocaine use
- Inhalants use
- Binge drinking
- Smoking regularly

**Social connections**
- Neighbors look out
- Neighborhood not safe
- Feel safe in school
- Teachers care
- Parents care
- Friends care
- Family understands
- Religiosity

**School Performance**
- Grade in English
- Grade in math
- Grade in social studies
- Civic extracurriculars
Volunteering

Activism

Depression

Risky health Behaviors

(Ballard, Hoyt, & Pachucki, 2019)
Volunteering → Depression
Volunteering → Risky health behaviors
Activism → Depression
Activism → Risky health behaviors

(Ballard, Hoyt, & Pachucki, 2019)
Voting

Activism

Depression

Risky health Behaviors

(Ballard, Hoyt, & Pachucki, 2019)
Conclusions

1. Volunteering and voting predict better health
   - lower depressive symptoms and risky health behaviors

2. Activism predicts worse health
   - *more* risky health behaviors
   - did not predict depressive symptoms
Volunteering → Health

• Directly helping people
• Doing good feels good
• Improves mood, lifts spirit
• Biological benefit (oxytocin; improve immune function)

Can volunteering be used to promote better mental health?
“Prescribing” volunteering as part of treatment for adolescent depression

Depression is characterized by:

- Social isolation/withdrawn
- Low confidence, competence
- Hopelessness about future

Depressive Symptoms
(sum score on Beck Depression Inventory)

Before volunteering: Minimal

After Volunteering: Moderate

Severity Levels:
- Severe
- Moderate
- Mild
- Minimal
Meaning/purpose

Before volunteering

After volunteering

Self-efficacy

Before volunteering

After volunteering
**Key Qualitative Findings**

- **All study participants reported a positive volunteer experience.**
  > "Well, I really liked — I love dogs. I love working with them and learning how they communicate towards other dogs, and since when I'm older I wanna be a dog trainer, volunteering at the Humane Society has really put a good foundation how — what I need to do to help the dogs."

- **Volunteering gave participants a sense of purpose.**
  > "It helps you get out of bed and also doing something productive, so it helps with depression and stuff 'cause you're actually doing something and seeing other people. Interacting with other people."

- **Volunteering decreased anxiety.**
  > "I think it helped my anxiety because I had to push myself to get out there and talk."

- **Volunteer experiences improved participants' moods.**
  > "My mom noticed that when I volunteer at the Humane Society, when I'm done, she always sees my happy smiles, and then I'm like — I just look like I feel so much better."

- **Participants felt like they were making a difference through volunteering.**
  > "You think about what this is gonna do for someone in the long term. With the food drive, we usually feed over 2,000 people with the food that we have because a lot of people don't eat. That's keepin' people from bein' hungry. That's fillin' people's stomachs. You think to yourself, 'I never really had to deal with that.' ... It's like, 'Wow. We're really making a difference for someone.'"
Voting → Health

• Making voice heard
• Doing my part/civic duty
• Joining with others
• Taking action on something that is meaningful
The intersections of voting and health: Review of research findings

• Elections can be stressful (Hagan et al., 2020; Hoyt et al., 2018)

• Poor health is related to lower voting behavior (Pacheco & Fletcher, 2015)

• Poor health and specific health conditions can motivate political behavior including voting (Peterson & Gabbidon, 2007)

• Interventions can increase voter participation (Brown, Raza & Pinto, 2020)

• Electoral engagement might help people cope with sociopolitical stress (Ballard et al., in prep)
Sociopolitical Stress, Coping, and Well-being among College Students during the 2020 Election

- There is so much we don’t know!

Strategies for Coping with Sociopolitical Stress

- Increased election participation as a way to cope with sociopolitical stress?

Ballard, Hoyt, Yazdani, Kornbluh, Davis, Cohen & Hagan (in prep)
Why should healthcare providers care about patients’ civic engagement?

- As a trusted community member, you can provide an invitation to civic life
- It can be good for individual patients’ health and well-being
- It can improve representation in health/well-being related policies
- It can improve community health, improving health/well-being
Civic Engagement is important for Community
Thank you!

Collaborators
Stephanie Daniel
Grace Anderson
Lindsay Till Hoyt
Mark Pachucki
Alison K. Cohen
Mariah Kornbluh
Melissa Hagan
Amanda Davis

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Please be in touch!
Parissa J. Ballard
pballard@wakehealth.edu