“Civic Engagement and Young Adults”

Source: [http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/20_01_08.pdf](http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/20_01_08.pdf)

A little background…

The volunteering rate for young adults rose during the 1990s and is higher today than it was during the 1970s and 1980s. Today young adults are about as likely as their contemporary elders to volunteer, raise funds for causes, and say they have worked on local projects with other people in their communities.

Why is this so?

- Young adults today are more likely to participate in citizenship roles such as volunteering, probably as a result of deliberate efforts over the past several decades by schools, colleges, and community groups to encourage volunteering.

How does this help the community?

- When younger Americans have a voice in community affairs, they can contribute their insights to public debates and their energies to addressing public problems.
- During late adolescence and young adulthood, people chart a course for their future and “take stock” of the values they live by and the kind of world they want to be part of. Moral and political issues become salient concerns.
- Stable patterns of civic engagement become prevalent after individuals have settled into adults roles such as steady jobs, marriage, and parenting.
- Young people are most likely to become civically engaged when they are in settings, such as faith-based institutions, workplaces, schools, and community organizations, where they become knowledgeable about issues and about how to take action on them, where they are asked by someone to join an organization or attend a meeting, or where normative pressures encourage them to participate in civic affairs.
- Both students’ engagement in extracurricular activities in high school and their feelings of social connectedness to community institutions predict voting and other forms of civic engagement in young adulthood.

Youth and jobs

- As the transition to adulthood lengthens, community volunteer work may allow youth to become more relaxed about finding the “right job,” at least “right away,” and may help them to reevaluate what they are looking for in a job.
- Young adults who are civically engaged are more likely to accept less paying jobs during an unstable job market and economy as opposed to those who are not.
- Youth today are more likely than their contemporary elders to engage in global activism, to use the Internet for political information and action (which was impossible thirty years ago), and to engage in lifestyle and consumer politics.
- Engaging with fellow members of a community-based group also helps youth form social networks, build social capital, and connect to educational and occupational opportunities.
How do these positions help the youth as individuals?

- The personal and psychological benefits of civic engagement for young adults include fulfillment of the human need to belong and to feel that life has a purpose beyond the pursuit of individual gain.
- Civic engagement is a key part of the transition between adolescence and mature adulthood.

Factors we cannot control

- Young adults from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds, however, do not have equal access to such opportunities for civic engagement. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to lag behind their more advantaged peers in opportunities to be civically involved.

More things to think about…

- As young adults move into and out of institutional settings such as school or work their involvement tends to be sporadic.
- Young adult years are a formative period when civic values and political ideologies crystallize.
- Opportunities for young adults to engage with others to address civic concerns make it more likely that in the long run they will identify with and contribute to the common good.

Barriers

- Two specific events during a young person’s life are associated with reduced rates of adult civic engagement: dropping out of high school and being arrested.
- A felony conviction is a profound barrier to civic engagement because a convicted felon loses his/her right to vote; therefore he or she is less likely to be motivated to become civically engaged.

New generations get recruited into civic life by being in settings that offer opportunities to get engaged, to develop civic competencies, and to connect their lives with others.