

CIRCLE'S WORK ON THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF NON-COLLEGE YOUTH: A SUMMARY

As previous research has found, about half of young (18-to 29-year-old) Americans have never attended college. They are less than half as likely to vote and to volunteer as their college educated peers. These youth have left academic settings and have few other opportunities to develop civic skills and participate in civic life. By default, society misses their potential contributions as citizens, and the youth lose opportunities to learn from civic experiences and networks.

Over the past few years, CIRCLE has worked to better understand this cohort, as well as gauge what steps are being taken to close the civic engagement gap. We hope that our research will provide the data needed to make institutional reforms that will better engage non-college youth in the civic and political arenas. The following gives a summary of this work and a brief overview of the findings. Our work is divided into four areas: analysis of national surveys, focus groups with non-college youth, partnerships with organizations working with non-college youth, and finally, an agenda-setting convening of organizations working with non-college youth.

CIRCLE'S QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

We have published a series of fact sheets and occasional papers on the civic engagement of non-college-attending youth, including "The 'Forgotten Half': Education Disparities in Youth Voter Turnout" (2010), "Civic Engagement of Non-College Attending Youth" (2009), and "Civic Engagement and the Changing Transition to Adulthood," by Constance Flanagan, Peter Levine, and Richard Settersten (2009). These studies have used data from the United States Census and other surveys to track differences in civic involvement by formal educational background.

We have also influenced national surveys by developing and pilot-testing questions about informal contributions. In some of our early focus groups, described below, young people who said they did not participate or give back to their communities also told stories about feeding and giving free housing to peers who were not family members. As a result of that testimony, questions about sheltering and feeding neighbors were included on the National Conference on Citizenship's 2009 *Civic Health Index* survey, which demonstrated that such contributions are

most common among low-income Americans and Americans with less formal education.

NON-COLLEGE YOUTH FOCUS GROUPS

In 2008, CIRCLE began talking directly with youth who were between the ages of 18 and 25 and not in college, as well as nonprofits who work with these youth. In total, we conducted 19 focus groups that included 147 participants in four cities: Baltimore, MD, Little Rock, AR, Lowell, MA, and Richmond, VA. In the coming months, we will be conducting formal analysis of the focus group transcripts and analyzing them in the light of a comprehensive literature review that is underway at CIRCLE. Below are preliminary observations from the groups.

Generally, respondents did not think that electoral politics makes serious change in their communities – especially, increasing jobs or reducing violence.

THE YOUNG PEOPLE INDICATED THAT THEY WOULD BE MORE LIKELY TO GET INVOLVED IF THEY FELT THE POLITICAL SYSTEM WAS ACCESSIBLE (IF THEY KNEW HOW TO HELP) AND TRANSPARENT (IF THEY KNEW HOW DECISIONS WERE MADE AND HOW TO CONTRIBUTE TO DECISION-MAKING).

The young people indicated that they would be more likely to get involved if they felt the political system was accessible (if they knew how to help), transparent (if they knew how decisions were made and how to contribute to decision-making), and if elected officials could be counted on to follow through on what they say. Shortly before the 2008 election, a Baltimore youth from our focus group said, "You have these politicians who sit up there who get flown around the country in private jets and probably waste more money in a day than we could make in a day. Just drive around saying hi to people, I mean, when they could be actually working on issues, just because they want to get their name out there. There's no connection at all...And then you know we are going to see in November the same thing happen all over again."

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The two most prominent issues that youth reported facing in these communities were the lack of jobs and hostile interactions with the police.

Not having a job seemed to influence the perception of participants' self-worth and significantly influenced how some viewed their potential contribution to their own community. But these young people report having a positive impact on other individuals, in ways that would be rare among college students, such as allowing family, friends or strangers to stay in their home. In addition, some respondents said that acting intentionally as role models was something they have done to help the community.

Research shows that young people are more likely to get involved if they are directly asked to participate. Many of the respondents, however, had never been asked to participate. This was the case for many of the youth in these cities and especially the case for the young men.

In reflecting on this, one participant stated, "It's so weird how, like, people look at Little Rock and they say 'why is Little Rock like this?', but yet all of us at this table, couldn't even like name an opportunity where we were asked to do something for the community."

The most common reasons young people gave for participating included: (1) they had a desire to help the community, and/or (2) they were asked by someone they trusted. Young people who were involved with community-based organizations and who trusted the staff at those organizations were also more likely to be and stay engaged.

CIRCLE WORKS WITH UNITED TEEN EQUALITY CENTER IN LOWELL, MA

An example of a community-based organization working primarily with non-college youth is the United Teen Equality Center (UTEC), located in downtown Lowell, MA.

THE CENTRAL PHILOSOPHY OF UTEC PLACES YOUTH AT THE CENTER OF EVERYTHING—YOUTH-LED POLICY MAKING, YOUTH-LED BUSINESS, AND YOUTH-LED EVENTS, ALL OF WHICH ARE SUPPORTED BY A STRONG AND SUPPORTIVE STAFF.

UTEC's mission and promise is to ignite and nurture the ambition of Lowell's most disengaged young people to trade violence and poverty for social and economic success. In 1999, UTEC was founded as the result of an organizing movement driven by young people to develop their own teen center in response to gang violence. Today, UTEC's nationally recognized model begins with intensive street outreach and gang peacemaking, reaching out to the most disconnected youth by meeting them "where they're at" and facilitating a peace process between rival gang leaders. Each young person in the target population (16-to 23-years-old, dropped out of school, homeless, and in a gang and/or criminally involved) receives at least three years of intensive case management. UTEC engages youth in *workforce development* programming that blends transitional employment with social enterprises in food services, multimedia, and maintenance/cleaning. UTEC provides *educational options* through GED preparation and an alternative diploma program. Values of social justice and *civic engagement* are embedded in all programming, with special emphasis in organizing and policymaking work both locally and statewide. Ultimately, UTEC's model can provide a pathway from the street to the state house for older youth most often overlooked and considered disengaged. The central philosophy of UTEC places youth at the center of youth-led policy making, youth-led business, and youth-led events, all of which are supported by a strong and supportive staff.

UTEC has been an important partner for CIRCLE and Tufts University. To give perspective to our previous qualitative research, CIRCLE has benefited from UTEC staff's input about how youth become engaged. Starting this fall, CIRCLE and UTEC will conduct a joint research project on how disconnected youth become engaged and remain engaged



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from late adolescence to young adulthood. UTEC has a capacity to follow youth through transitional coaches up to two years after they complete a program at UTEC; thus CIRCLE has a unique and important opportunity to understand the role that a community-based organization can play in civic development of disconnected youth.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES IN ENGAGING NON COLLEGE YOUTH

An additional component of research about non-college youth focuses on what practitioners feel are the best and most effective strategies for engaging this group. To learn more about this, CIRCLE met with 11 organizations that work directly with this cohort, including: Hip Hop Caucus, Public Allies, The Corps Network, United Teen Equality Center, YouthBuild USA, Usher's New Look Foundation, America's Promise, League of Young Voters Education Fund, Gathering for Justice, and Generational Alliance. All of these groups engage their participants in civic

or political work. The meeting was intended to learn from each other's work, identify possible collaborations and inform current research. As part of the continued research, CIRCLE plans on continuing to work closely with these groups to write a collaborative statement about the state of civic opportunities and resources available, and to generally learn more about this population.

Practitioners cited several program components that successfully reach out to non-college youth. Crucial to an effective strategy were team-based learning leadership development, an emphasis on young people as change makers (while addressing the cultural issues associated with powerlessness), adult allies and role models, and in general, maximizing the young person's opportunities and networks. ★



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