

FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE, A COLUMN DEDICATED TO RECOGNIZING SUCCESSFUL “BRIDGES” BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS, REPORTS ON RESEARCH WITH PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

STATE CIVIC HEALTH REPORTS ARE UNCOVERING INEQUALITY AND PUSHING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

This past fall, 17 states each released their own versions of a Civic Health Index (CHI) with the assistance and support of the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) and CIRCLE. For the majority of these states, theirs was the first report of its kind, assessing levels of civic involvement among all residents and various demographic groups. Each state’s CHI planning group is different, as are each state’s results, leading to a variety of applications of CHI data. But all of the reports are indeed pushing conversations about how to broaden participation in communities.

MISSOURI

Mike Stout, professor of Sociology at Missouri State University (MSU), has coordinated the group working on the *Missouri Civic Health Index*. The ultimate goal of the *Missouri CHI*, according to Stout, is to introduce into policy discourse how regular people are thinking and talking about policy issues. At the same time and through the development and dissemination of the *Missouri CHI*, Stout and his MSU colleagues are actively trying to reframe the role of sociology at MSU as a publicly- focused discipline.

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The central assumptions of the *Missouri CHI*, as Stout explains, are that “in order to do effective economic development you have to have a strong civil society,” and that the “civic sector” plays a large role in community development. As a result, the *Missouri CHI* will be distributed to policymakers and civic leaders to use when making decisions so that they can “make better decisions on behalf of communities that they are representing.” Additionally, Stout thinks the *Missouri CHI* shows how “process matters, [and that] our process is broken.”

According to Brian Fogle, President of the Community Foundation of the Ozarks, the *Missouri CHI* continues the important work of using research on social capital to help “us understand what’s going on in communities.” The MSU Sociology Department has been doing additional surveys of social capital that go into even greater detail about Missouri communities. Fogle believes that this research is having an impact, and states that “in many conversations I’m in these days people are talking about social capital.” In particular, he says, this research is helping to reveal the relationships between specific communities in Missouri and government.

While the *Missouri CHI* indicates that “less-educated Missourians are participants and leaders at higher rates than residents of other states,” there remains a large income gap in some forms of participation. For example, “Missourians with family incomes above \$75,000 are more than three times [as] likely to have attended a public meeting than those with family incomes lower than \$35,000, and they are almost two times more likely to have attended a public meeting compared with those whose family incomes are between \$50,000-74,999.”

NORTH CAROLINA

The key findings of the *North Carolina Civic Health Index* show crucial gaps in participation and leadership that worry participating organizations. Two such findings are that young people in North Carolina “are the least civically engaged of any age group” in the state and that North Carolina’s civic organizations are “led by a small group of older, churchgoing, college-educated, mostly white residents.” The *North Carolina CHI* is a collaboration between five organizations that had not worked together before, representing diverse civic organizations within the state: Democracy North Carolina, North Carolina Campus Compact, North Carolina Center for Voter Education, North Carolina Civic Education Consortium and the Department of Public Policy at Western Carolina University. The breadth of the coalition will promote action on the key findings.



North Carolina Campus Compact and the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium asked college students to discuss what can be done to increase the participation of young people. The discussion occurred at North Carolina Campus Compact's annual student conference, which gathered almost 300 students from around the state. (North Carolina Campus Compact is a coalition of 46 higher education institutions.) Students broke up into small groups at the event to discuss the *North Carolina CHI* research, what may contribute to low youth participation rates in North Carolina, and what they themselves can do individually and collectively to increase engagement.

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To Kelley O'Brien, the *North Carolina CHI* shows how civic engagement is not just about developing a "spectrum" of opportunities. O'Brien explains that the *North Carolina CHI* shows that "people need prompting and constant education and support" and that "there's clearly a need for out-of-school work to build a pipeline of diverse leaders." In her own work with the Civic Education Consortium, O'Brien says she wants to "think more about how we engage young people of all socio-economic levels in leadership opportunities."

These and other state civic health indices can be found at <http://ncoc.net/states>. ★



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Examples of How Others Use CIRCLE Research

1. House Resolution 181, now pending before the US House of Representatives, cites CIRCLE research in three clauses.
2. The State of Washington was inspired by CIRCLE's research to:
 - Develop a K-12 mock election and an accompanying curriculum book to encourage the formation of early voting habits.
 - Invite teachers to the capitol for civic education training
 - Organize college students at 65 campuses
 - Focus on civic education for minority students and low-income students in vocational programs
 - Host an annual panel of legislators to discuss civility in politics with students
3. Rev. Lennox Yearwood, Jr. President of the Hip Hop Caucus, writes, "CIRCLE is a critical resource for groups like the Hip Hop Caucus and others who are trying to engage young people in the political process. Research directs our strategy for our work in the community, and the team at CIRCLE is always willing to provide us with the data and analysis that we need in order to have real impact and to reach the young people who are the least civically engaged."