



AmeriCorps

Strategic Learning and Evidence Building Plan: Fiscal Years 2022-2026

Office of Research and Evaluation

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Critical Context

Today, America faces a series of unprecedented and interlocking challenges that require a renewed commitment to civic engagement. These challenges include a once-in-a-century global pandemic; an economic crisis that has left millions out of work and struggling to shelter and feed their families; learning loss among students spanning from early childhood to post-secondary education; a national reckoning on racial inequity centuries in the making; and the growing threat of climate change for sustainable community resiliency. This moment of crisis is also a moment of opportunity. America has a once in a generation opportunity to not just return to the way things were before, but to build a better, stronger, and more inclusive nation.

Agency Overview

AmeriCorps' mission is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. AmeriCorps is based on the following smart, common-sense principles:

- Engaging the American people to solve problems.
- Partnering with local leaders to support local community solutions.
- Bolstering existing nonprofit, faith-based, and voluntary organizations.
- Leveraging private sector resources to increase outcomes and stretch the taxpayer dollar.
- Using evidence and evaluation to inform decision-making.
- Uniting Americans from different backgrounds to achieve common goals for communities.

AmeriCorps Strategic Priorities and Goals

To ensure agency resources are focused on addressing Administration priorities and the evolving needs of communities, AmeriCorps is aligning its planning and programming under a core set of priorities where national service can have the greatest impact. These strategic priorities are detailed in the AmeriCorps 2022-2026 Strategic Plan. The following strategic goals will guide how we focus AmeriCorps resources and prioritize the agency's learning and evidence building opportunities.

- Goal 1: Partner with communities to advance racial equity and alleviate poverty
- Goal 2: Enhance the experience for AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers
- Goal 3: Unite the country by bringing people together in service
- Goal 4: Effectively steward federal resources

The agency has also prioritized a set of objectives that will inform the strategies and tactics necessary for attaining agency goals. For example, objectives like "Prioritize Investments in Underserved Communities", "Recruit Diverse Corps of Members & Volunteers", and "Expand Education & Economic Opportunity" will guide the implementation of the agency's strategic plan and inform its strategic learning and evidence building priorities.

AmeriCorps' Strategic Learning and Evidence Priorities

As the country grapples with the social, economic, and public health crises generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, AmeriCorps will be responding with evidence-based national service interventions and systematically assessing new initiatives. The agency will use its new strategic priorities and initiatives as learning opportunities to test and demonstrate ways to improve organizational, operational, and programmatic effectiveness. In alignment with the goals and objectives of the agency's five-year strategic plan, AmeriCorps will prioritize the following lines of inquiry:

- How can the agency increase access to AmeriCorps resources in underserved communities¹?
- How can national service and volunteering be used most effectively to expand educational and economic opportunity in underserved communities?
- What new or improved organizational capacities are needed to achieve the agency's strategic goals and objectives?

The agency will systematically assess these lines of inquiry using the following principles.

AmeriCorps' Learning and Evidence Building Principles

The agency's emphasis on evidence is meant to support, not inhibit, innovation, improvement, and learning. The intent is to integrate the use of evidence and opportunities for further learning into all activities. Where an evidence base is lacking, evidence will be developed through systematic analysis. Where evidence exists, it will be used to encourage replication and expansion of effective solutions. As a learning organization, AmeriCorps uses many types of evidence² and understands that a culture of continual improvement relies on multiple sources of information. AmeriCorps uses the following principles to guide its evidence building activities³:

- *AmeriCorps adheres to rigorous scientific and data standards.*
- *AmeriCorps prioritizes relevant evidence.*
- *AmeriCorps makes findings from its evidence building activities broadly available and accessible.*

¹ As defined in the President's Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through Federal Government (13985), and as also referenced in the President's Executive Order on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce (14035), the term "underserved communities" refers to populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life. Communities denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social and civic life can include Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.

² Evidence can be defined as the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid as defined in the OMB Circular No. A-11 Section 200 page 13. Recent budget guidance (See OMB *Analytical Perspectives, Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2020*, page 59) further states "A portfolio (of evidence) can and should include many different types of evidence, including results from program evaluations, policy analyses, performance measurements, and statistical analyses."

³ Please refer to the agency's Evaluation Policy for a more detailed description of these principles, available at <https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/CNCSEvaluationPolicy.pdf>.

- *AmeriCorps protects the independence and objectivity of its evidence.*
- *AmeriCorps conducts its evidence building activities in an ethical manner and safeguards the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of participants in these activities.*

The agency will also maintain its commitment to equitable research and evaluation practices. Participatory approaches to research ensure that community members are engaged as critical stakeholders in the learning and evidence ecosystem. More specifically, the agency will build on the successes of its participatory action research grant program [insert link to grantee profiles,] as well as its participatory program lifecycle evaluation project [insert link to AmeriCorps Opportunity Youth Evaluation Bundling Project as an example]. Participatory principles of inclusion and equity will guide the evidence building activities designed to assess the prioritized lines of inquiry highlighted in this plan [insert PAR video].

AmeriCorps’ Strategic Learning and Evidence Building Plan

The agency’s learning and evidence building plan (see current Strategic Evidence Plan⁴) provides a roadmap for generating credible, relevant, and actionable information about organizational effectiveness, operational performance, and the outcomes of national service programs. The AmeriCorps learning agenda is designed to provide the agency’s senior leadership and staff with the information needed for strategic learning and decision making to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the agency and its programs.

Evidence at the organizational, programmatic, and operational levels will maximize agency performance. Given limited resources, senior leadership will need to prioritize the agency’s most important information needs given current strategic goals. Based on the agency’s FYs 2022-2026 strategic goals and objectives, the following questions will guide FYs 2022- 2026 evidence building priorities:

- How can the agency increase access to AmeriCorps resources in underserved communities⁵?
- How can national service and volunteering be used most effectively to expand educational and economic opportunity in underserved communities?
- What new or improved organizational capacities are needed to achieve the agency’s strategic goals and objectives?

A robust set of evidence building activities can and will be built for each line of inquiry. Illustrative questions, theories of change, and empirical strategies are described next for each learning priority.

⁴ https://americorps.gov/sites/default/files/documents/CNCS%20Strategic%20Evidence%20Plan%20FY2020_508.pdf

⁵ As defined in the President’s Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through Federal Government (13985), and as also referenced in the President’s Executive Order on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce (14035), the term “underserved communities” refers to populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life. Communities denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social and civic life can include Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.

How can the agency increase access to AmeriCorps resources in underserved communities?

Nested within this line of inquiry are a range of related empirical questions about organizational and individual access to AmeriCorps resources in underserved communities. Existing evidence and experience offer insight into strategies that may facilitate successful access and use of the agency's grant funds and program participant benefits.

More **equitable grant making models** have the potential to increase access to the agency's resources by removing various barriers often faced by community-based organizations working to advance racial equity and alleviate poverty in underserved communities. The agency has learned from various grant making strategies that involve a more collaborative, developmental, organizational-capacity building framework. Lessons learned from VISTA, the Social Innovation Fund, Community Conversations Participatory Action Research Grants, and State and National Planning Grants offer empirical evidence that building a National Service grantmaking pipeline of diverse community-based organizations in underrepresented communities is possible [[insert links to Paxton, SIF National Assessment](#)]. In addition, the agency's American Rescue Plan funding has created opportunities to increase access to its resources by implementing more targeted tactics such as waiving or replacing cash match grant requirements. Furthermore, engaging organizational leaders in underserved communities will require new partnership, outreach, and development strategies.

Related Questions

- What organizational and community capacities are needed to access agency resources?
- What evidence-based strategies can be used to increase capacity and access?
- What strategies are most effective for increasing capacity and access?

Systematic assessment of the implementation and effectiveness of new outreach, partnership, development, and grant making strategies designed to increase the agency's footprint in underserved communities remove barriers to agency resources will rely on the use of relevant performance data [[data on \\$ investmented in underserved communities, data on # of new grantees/sponsors in underserved communities?](#)] and research. For example, [[insert brief description of planned PAR lifecycle bundle? Insert reference to anticipated recruitment campaign performance metrics/market research metrics for awareness? New grantee/sponsor metrics?](#)]

How can we ensure that those who serve in national service programs represent all the communities the agency strives to serve and increase the opportunity to volunteer for all interested Americans?

The agency also seeks to increase opportunities for all Americans to participate in AmeriCorps programs.

Recruiting and retaining more representative and diverse participants to serve in AmeriCorps programs will require reimagining and recalibrating organizational, operational and programmatic practices. For example, dedicated staffing, external

expertise, and new technologies will be needed to launch a sustained outreach and recruitment effort tailored to different segments of the country's population. Understanding what motivates different groups of citizens to apply for, and enroll in, a national service program - and what may prevent them from doing so despite a desire to do so - will be

essential for increasing the numbers and diversity of Americans who sign up to serve. For example, the American Rescue Plan has created an opportunity to increase living allowances and stipends. Assessing how this may facilitate participation in national service programs for more Americans will be important. Similarly, systematically assessing how the agency redesigns and refines the service experience across AmeriCorps programs will provide evidence needed to strengthen and sustain a robust pipeline of diverse individuals committed to serving their country and their communities through national service.

What prevents and facilitates participation in national service programs?

AmeriCorps has a strong body of evidence and data collection infrastructure to build on for these empirical efforts. Research on member motivations and outcomes indicate that those who serve do so for a variety of reasons [insert link to Flege] but consistently report positive civic, educational, and employment outcomes both in the short term [insert recent MES report/snapshot, Tufts study] and over time [insert link to Alumni outcomes study, ASU study]. Research also empirically demonstrates that older Americans who volunteer in national service programs, as compared to similar volunteers who do not do so through national service, report better health and well-being outcomes [insert link to longitudinal study].

Despite these consistent patterns of positive outcomes for members and volunteers who have served in national service programs to date, the agency will need to recalibrate its data

What strategies are most effective for more customized outreach, recruitment, retention, and alumni engagement?

collection strategy if it is to credibly and accurately assess individuals' journeys from initial interest to alumni status across different segments of the population. For example, the agency expects to collect additional demographic information as well as modify the types and timing of questions asked about

the service experience and associated outcomes. Additional data collection points mapped more intentionally to individual interest and participation journeys will be developed. This will require dedicated staffing resources, new working relationships with partners responsible for different parts of individuals' journeys, and new technology solutions.

How can national service and volunteering be used most effectively to expand educational and economic opportunity in underserved communities?

Empirical and experimental evidence confirms the effectiveness of various national service programs in improving the educational, health, and employment outcomes of those served by these programs [insert links to 3 evidence briefs].

AmeriCorps has also demonstrated the effectiveness of innovative social interventions for improving the economic, social and health conditions for individuals living in underserved communities [insert links to SIF info fact sheet or scaling meta synthesis]. In some cases, these interventions have a national service component and in others, the opportunity exists for integrating a national service component and evaluating the extent to which similar outcomes are achieved. Furthermore, the evidence base for national service programs addressing environmental issues is growing [insert new research brief] and the agency expects to build additional evidence for how national service can mitigate

What are the most effective national service solutions for mitigating the disproportionate impacts of climate change on underserved communities?

disparate environmental, social, and economic costs associated with climate change as priority initiatives are developed and implemented.

Similar to the ways in which evidence generated by the **AmeriCorps NCCC** longitudinal study on leadership development is expected to have cross-program implications, evidence building activities for initiatives like **Public Health**

How can AmeriCorps programs create stronger pathways to education, employment and civic engagement for those who serve in them?

AmeriCorps may be informative for deepening agency understanding of how to develop effective workforce pathways for Corps members. Lessons learned about how to meet the training and professional development needs of Corps members, creating effective Corps member roles [insert Opioid evaluation, bundles as an example], recruiting members with relevant interests and entry level skills, and providing the needed supervision will be applied across programs as pertinent.

As another example of how the agency anticipates learning from priority initiatives, the **AmeriCorps VISTA Food Insecurity Initiative** will provide an opportunity to assess the value-add of a cohort model for VISTA sponsor organizations. It will be possible to explore how a cohort model may or may not enhance the collective success of tackling a specific issue like food insecurity. The Food Insecurity Initiative can also be assessed for other programmatic improvement implications such as how the deployment of a cohort of VISTAs to a state, strategically partnering with state or local leaders in an issue area, and more intentionally integrating VISTAs into a service system or network may or may not more effectively address an issue like food insecurity. Findings may be relevant for other national service programs and could be used to make cross-program improvements.

ACS Research Questions

- How has older adult volunteering changed due to the pandemic?
- What was the experience of AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers during COVID-19?
- How did COVID-19 change volunteerism at the volunteer station-level and what are the impacts of that change?

AmeriCorps Seniors has a program-specific learning agenda that could generate information relevant for both national service programming and volunteering more generally. It is anticipated that new innovative interventions - activities in which volunteers are meaningfully engaged and in which beneficiaries saw meaningful outcomes - will be identified as well as new modalities for volunteers. The research will look to identify impactful interventions that can be shared broadly, with the goal of encouraging replications and expansion of effective solutions. In addition, volunteering pivoted during the pandemic to safe volunteering activities. The research will look to identify how safe volunteering practices during COVID-19 impacted volunteer's health, feelings of

depression, isolation, and volunteer satisfaction levels. AmeriCorps Seniors also seeks to catalogue and analyze the impact of the new ways that grantees pivoted in their relationships with their community partners during COVID-19.

Evidence generated by the AmeriCorps Seniors research will build the agency's knowledge about volunteering among different age groups and may identify new best practices for recruiting and managing older adult volunteers. Any positive findings will compliment recent

research findings on effective volunteer recruitment and management practices [insert Hager et al] as well as anticipated findings from a new evaluation of the agency's **Volunteer Generation Fund** that will begin in FY2022.

What new or improved organizational capacities are needed to achieve the agency's strategic goals?

Successful implementation of the AmeriCorps 2022-2026 Strategic Plan will require sufficient numbers of dedicated and qualified staff who are supported with the resources needed to fully execute the responsibilities associated with their assigned roles. New initiatives, interventions, and ongoing innovation necessitate a careful analysis of the agency's existing workforce. A workforce analysis will be conducted in FY2022 and used to identify staffing gaps and redundancies. The information will also be used to inform strategies and practices needed to build a more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible workforce. Lastly, the analysis will provide important information about workloads of regional staff which will supplement findings obtained from a systematic assessment of the agency's reorganization. Lessons learned from the first year of implementing new regional offices reinforced the importance of investing in data-driven continuous improvement efforts. AmeriCorps will continue to commit time and resources to data-driven management practices. In addition, the agency will design, implement and administer a new AmeriCorps Partners survey to begin collecting regular feedback on the customer experience.

Evergreen learning and evidence building activities.

In alignment with the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Pub. L. 115-435) and President Biden's Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking, building and using empirical evidence is a central agency priority. Access to credible, actionable, and timely information about programmatic performance creates opportunities for innovation, improvement, and increased impact. Given the breadth of focus areas national service programs are legislatively mandated to address, the range of projects developed in response to this mandate, and the national scale at which national service and community volunteers serve, it is important that the full range of relevant evaluation questions and strategies is considered when building evidence.

AmeriCorps maintains a robust evidence pipeline by using systematic inquiry and credible data to address the following evergreen learning goals:

- Deepen understanding of who, how, and why individuals volunteer
- Expand opportunities for all Americans to participate in national service programs and volunteer for community service projects
- Develop innovative national service strategies and interventions
- Improve national service strategies and interventions
- Demonstrate positive outcomes and impacts of national service strategies and interventions
- Document the social and economic returns on investment in national service strategies and interventions

See Appendix for more detail on evaluation questions and research strategies underway to address them. We commit to sharing what we learn with the public and to using what we learn to better serve America [insert link to impact page or evidence exchange].

APPENDIX

Evaluation Question	Research Strategy/Source of Evidence
People (Members/Volunteers)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do we deepen the knowledge base about volunteering/civic participation behaviors and outcomes? How do we translate this research into practice (e.g., the recruitment, development, and retention of volunteers for our national service programs)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sponsor basic research in the fields of civic engagement and volunteering to advance the knowledge base for behaviors and associated social, economic and health outcomes that represent the foundation of national service and the agency's mission. (e.g., CPS CEV supplement, portfolio of research studies designed to examine these issues)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the common outcomes we want national service program members/volunteers to achieve? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Member exit survey administered to ASN, NCCC and VISTA members - Revise this survey to capture additional outcomes of interest, shared and program-specific NCCC Leadership Longitudinal Survey - What are we learning from this survey that could inform a revised exit survey across programs? AmeriCorps Seniors (FGP, SCP) volunteer survey - Planning for another administration of this survey and developing a schedule for a more regular administration cadence Alumni Outcomes Survey - Plan for another administration/develop a strategy for keeping alumni engaged for follow up surveys
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who is volunteering for our national service programs and who isn't? Why or why not? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Member exit survey - Update the motivation questions; Identify a way to systematically survey those who apply but decline Research grantee findings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do we prepare and develop those who serve/volunteer to achieve desired outcomes (e.g., meaningful and lifelong contributions to their communities)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify a way to assess the common experiences national service programs provide that would lead us to predict common civic and appropriate life course experiences and outcomes
Service Projects (Interventions)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can the agency develop evidence-based innovative national service strategies and interventions? 	<p><i>Integrating research and evaluation at the early stages of a program's development ensures that theories of change can be tested early and that any necessary adjustments or refinements can be made, increasing the likelihood of achieving desired results.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sponsor community research teams that include a research-to-action component (e.g., research grant program/2018 cohort - FY22 competition for 4th cohort of grantees) Develop research strategies with program colleagues that can inform new or untested programmatic goals (e.g., NCCC's research plan) A multi-year contract was awarded in FY20 (<i>Program Lifecycle Evaluation</i>) to help evaluate new projects as they are developed and implemented. Two evaluations are underway.

Evaluation Question	Research Strategy/Source of Evidence
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss how national service programs/grant making can be used to scale effective evidence-based interventions identified through the Social Innovation Fund initiative – EEI Fund Concept
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can the agency use evidence to improve national service strategies and interventions? 	<p><i>Incorporate evidence into strategic and operational decision-making. Building and using evidence at the organizational, programmatic, and operational levels will maximize agency performance.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A multi-year contract was awarded in FY20 (<i>Program Lifecycle Evaluation</i>) to help evaluate how projects and initiatives being implemented can be improved. One builds on the agency’s exploratory evaluation of the opioid recovery coach model and one will focus on evaluating the Volunteer Generation Fund. Evaluate the six national service programs. Use the findings to refine.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can the agency use evidence to demonstrate the results of national service strategies and interventions? 	<p><i>An infrastructure (staffing and contracts) has been built to identify and invest in what works. We have 32 consistently effective evidence-based program models that could be taken to scale with confidence. We have another ~50 that are promising and could be further tested.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A multi-year contract was awarded in FY20 (<i>Program Lifecycle Evaluation</i>) to help evaluate the effectiveness of programs replicated in different locations and to evaluate promising programs (reducing the burden on grantees to do so). Future evaluations may focus on the replication and adaptation of evidence-based interventions. NCCC service project database and community impact case studies EEI Fund Concept
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can the agency empirically document the social and economic returns on investment in national service strategies and interventions? Conduct targeted return on investment analyses 	<p><i>The agency has demonstrated positive economic and social returns on investment (ROI) for 4 national service programs.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A multi-year contract was awarded in FY20 to conduct annual targeted ROI analyses for different evidence-based national service interventions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the most equitable and inclusive way to partner with communities to address local needs and create effective national service solutions? 	<p><i>Engage all relevant stakeholders through participatory methods in the identification of issues and the development of solutions.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participatory Action Research and Evaluation Reliance on Field Working Groups Commitment to Peer Collaboration