Office of Research and Evaluation
Research Grantee Study Summary

University of Texas at Austin

How Nonprofits Create Civic Infrastructure

What is the background for this study?

This research explores the dynamics of nonprofit organizations and their role in strengthening communities. It investigates the timing, reasons, and methods through which nonprofits engage with community issues, particularly in addressing problems like addiction. The study examines grassroots (bottom-up) demands and institutional (top-down) pressures on nonprofits that influence when and why they adopt new programming or more inclusive practices. The researcher plans to establish a comprehensive 25-year longitudinal database of measures of nonprofit finances, expenditures, mission, capacity, and leadership, covering the period from 1998 to 2022. These data will provide deeper insights for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars into how nonprofits contribute to strengthening communities and developing civic infrastructure.

Study At-A-Glance

Study Title
   How Nonprofits Create Civic Infrastructure

Researcher
   Pamela Paxton, PhD

Grant Cohort 2022

Timeline 2022-2025

Study Location Austin, Texas

Study Topic Area(s)
   Community Development

   Volunteering, Nonprofit Studies, and National Service

What are the research questions?

This study builds on prior research funding from AmeriCorps to better measure and assess, longitudinally, the civic infrastructure nonprofit organizations provide to communities.

Research questions include:

1. How, when, and why do nonprofits undertake work that strengthens communities?

2. When and why do nonprofits begin to tackle a community problem like the opioid epidemic?

3. How do nonprofits approach community problems like violence or addiction?

4. Do bottom-up or top-down pressures lead nonprofits to become more inclusive in their work?

What data and methods are used in this study?

This study collects and analyzes data from the National Center for Charitable Statistics, Citizen Audit, and IRS data nonprofit reporting forms (Form 990). Data collection involves optical character recognition and computational text analysis to create a 25-year linked database of administrative and text data on tens of thousands of nonprofit service and advocacy organizations. The resultant database combines multiple measures of nonprofit finances, expenditures, mission, capacity, and leadership over the period from 1998 to 2022.

This study also employs innovative methodologies, such as event history analysis and other statistical techniques, to assess why some nonprofits begin to work on specific community problems earlier than others by comparing the internal and external pressures these organizations face.

Additionally, using topic modeling, the researcher examines how nonprofit organizations define community problems and their solutions and how those solutions have changed over time. The researcher leverages computational text analysis, statistical analysis, and interviews with nonprofit leaders to understand how nonprofits become more inclusive in their programming by acknowledging and combating sources of marginalization in communities.

What are potential opportunities to apply study findings and/or build on this research?

The study's findings provide a more comprehensive understanding of how nonprofits support civic infrastructure and strengthen communities. Study findings can provide practical and useful information for AmeriCorps decision-making and programming. The findings of this study can also inform the development of strategies for effective community engagement and the promotion of inclusive practices within nonprofits. Given the diversity of fields in which nonprofits operate—from the arts to education, advocacy, and religion—the insights derived from their practices of inclusivity can influence every facet of society.

For more information on the study:				
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About AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation Research Grants

AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation holds grant competitions to foster scholarly research on civic health, address knowledge gaps in civic engagement and volunteerism, and identify new ideas and methodological approaches to service.

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- See a Snapshot of Research Grantee Activities and Insights.
- Explore the AmeriCorps Open Data Research Grantee Dataset.

About the Office of Research and Evaluation

The AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation assists AmeriCorps and its partners in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data and insights about AmeriCorps programs and civic life in America. For more information on this study and other studies funded by AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation, please contact evaluation@americorps.gov.

About AmeriCorps

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