



Appalachian State University

Civic Engagement, Health, and Community: A Nationally Representative Study on the Long-Term Impacts of Civic Engagement during Emerging Adulthood

What is the background for this study?

This study investigates whether civic engagement during emerging adulthood impacts a broad array of health outcomes in middle adulthood, and if associations vary across demographic groups. This study uses two sources of information: (1) a nationally representative sample of over 20,000 respondents surveyed multiple times over 22 years; and (2) primary data collection from AmeriCorps members to examine the relationship between AmeriCorps service and positive health outcomes throughout the life course.

What are the research questions?

This study aims to evaluate the role of empathy as a mediator between civic engagement during emerging adulthood and health outcomes later in life. Research questions include:

National study:

1. Does civic engagement during emerging adulthood predict physical, mental, and behavioral health outcomes in middle adulthood?
2. Are these associations moderated by race, gender, or other demographic factors?
3. Does civic engagement during emerging adulthood promote higher levels of empathy, which in turn promote positive health outcomes?

AmeriCorps Member study:

1. Does AmeriCorps service during emerging adulthood predict positive physical, mental, and behavioral health outcomes?
2. Are these associations moderated by race, gender, and other demographic factors?
3. What are the mediating mechanisms that allow AmeriCorps service to promote positive health outcomes?

What data and methods are used in this study?

This study uses restricted data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, a nationally representative sample of over 20,000 respondents surveyed five times over a period of 22 years. A prospective research design examines if civic engagement during emerging adulthood predicts outcomes 15 years later.

Study At-A-Glance

Study Title

Civic Engagement, Health, and Community: A Nationally Representative Study on the Long-Term Impacts of Civic Engagement during Emerging Adulthood

Researchers

Martie Thompson, PhD
Matthew Hudson-Flege, PhD

Grant Cohort 2022

Timeline 2022-2025

Study Location Boone, North Carolina

Study Topic Area(s)

Education Across the Life Course
Health and Social Wellbeing
Volunteering, Nonprofit Studies, and National Service
Youth Development

Civic engagement is measured during Wave 3 of the survey when participants were about 22 years old. The measure of civic engagement captures unpaid volunteer or community service work for youth organizations, service organizations, church or church-related groups, organized volunteer groups in hospitals or nursing homes, community centers, neighborhood improvement associations, social-action groups, educational organizations, and/or conservation, recycling, or environmental groups.

The national study’s analytic sample includes over 9,000 participants from Waves 1, 3, 4, and 5 of the survey. The study will test the associations between different types of civic engagement and outcomes of mental health, substance use, criminal behaviors, and healthy behavior. It will also examine whether that association varies for groups based on gender, race, urbanicity, and sexual orientation, and whether empathy mediates the relationship between civic engagement and health outcomes.

The AmeriCorps Member study also involves surveying young adult AmeriCorps members (ages 18-26) at three time points during and after their service. The study will examine the relationship between AmeriCorps service experience, civic engagement, health outcomes including healthy behaviors and mental health. It will test the how AmeriCorps member demographic characteristics moderate these associations and whether empathy, optimism, sense of community, career-oriented soft skills, and career pathways mediates these associations.

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

Based on study findings that civic engagement was associated with lower levels of substance use, criminal behaviors, and depressive symptoms, and higher levels of healthy behaviors 15 years later, efforts by parents, schools, and communities to promote civic engagement among emerging adults are warranted. Further, policymakers, AmeriCorps programs, and other organizations interested in promoting civic engagement among emerging adults may wish to consider their work through a health promotion lens. The study’s conceptual framework may also be extended to include family and community outcomes in addition to health.

Study resources for more information				
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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.

- Learn more about [AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation Research Grants](#).
- 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

AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism, provides opportunities for Americans to serve their country domestically, address the nation’s most pressing challenges, improve lives and communities, and strengthen civic engagement. Each year, the agency places more than 200,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in intensive service roles; and empowers millions more to serve as long-term, short-term, or one-time volunteers. **Learn more at AmeriCorps.gov.**