

Leveling the Path to Participation: Volunteering and Civic Engagement Among Youth From Disadvantaged Circumstances



Research suggests that youth who engage in volunteering and other positive activities are more likely to be successful at school and to avoid risky behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, crime, and promiscuity. The Corporation for National and Community Service has developed a strategic goal to engage more youth from disadvantaged circumstances in volunteering. To support this effort, between January and March 2005, the Corporation, in collaboration with the U.S. Census Bureau and the nonprofit coalition, Independent Sector, conducted the Youth Volunteering and Civic Engagement Survey, the first major national study of volunteering among teenagers in more than a decade. The survey gathered information on the volunteering habits and civic attitudes of youth between the ages of 12 and 18. This issue brief summarizes the major findings of "Leveling the Path to Participation," a report based on that survey and the difference in volunteer behavior among youth from differing economic backgrounds. The report is the third in the Corporation's Youth Helping America Series. Previous reports, issue briefs, and other materials on volunteering by Americans can be found at www.nationalservice.gov. (For purposes of this analysis, youth were considered to be from disadvantaged circumstances when their family's income was less than or equal to 200 percent of the poverty level, following the 2005 federal poverty guidelines.)

- ◆ **A "class gap" exists in teenage volunteering.** The volunteer rate of youth from disadvantaged circumstances (DAC) is 16 percentage points lower than the rate for other youth (43% and 59%, respectively). Similarly, youth from DAC are less likely to indicate that they engage in positive civic behaviors or hold positive civic attitudes.
- ◆ **Although youth from DAC are less likely to volunteer than other youth, when they do volunteer, they do so with the same level of intensity.** Among all youth volunteers, 38% devote at least 52 hours a year to volunteer activities.
- ◆ **Teachers play a key role in motivating youth from DAC to volunteer.** Regardless of their economic circumstances, youth are most likely to volunteer because they are asked—and when they are asked, a teacher is the most likely person to make the request.
- ◆ **Youth from DAC who volunteer demonstrate more positive civic attitudes and behaviors than youth from DAC who do not volunteer.**

- Youth from DAC who volunteer are almost 40% more likely than youth from DAC who do not volunteer believe that they can make some difference or a great deal of difference in their community (70% and 51%, respectively).
- 76% of youth from DAC who volunteer are nearly 50% more likely than youth from DAC who do not volunteer (51%) to say they are very likely to graduate from a four-year college.
- Youth from DAC who volunteer are twice as likely to discuss politics with their parents or other adults (42% of youth from DAC who volunteer vs. 19% of non-volunteers) and with friends (48% of volunteers vs. 25% of non-volunteers).
- Youth from DAC who volunteer are three times more likely than youth from DAC who do not volunteer say they are very likely to volunteer in the next year (52% to 15%, respectively).

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◆ **Youth from DAC are less likely than other youth to experience most "pathways" to civic engagement, such as service-learning and school clubs.**

- 31% of youth from DAC report past or current participation in school-based service or service-learning, compared to 40% of other youth.
- 35% of youth from DAC participate in youth groups or school clubs, compared to 53% of other youth.
- 27% of youth from DAC have at least one parent who volunteers, compared to 44% of other youth.

◆ **Religious organizations and spiritual beliefs play a key role in volunteering among youth from DAC.**

- 48% of youth from DAC say they volunteer because of their religious or spiritual beliefs, compared to 36% of other youth volunteers.
- 39% of youth from disadvantaged circumstances who volunteer do so through religious congregations, compared to 33% of other youth.
- Among youth from DAC, volunteers are nearly 60% more likely to attend religious services about once a week than are non-volunteers (63% vs. 40%, respectively).

◆ **Youth from DAC who volunteer are less likely than other youth volunteers to do so through youth civic or leadership organizations (such as 4-H and Girl Scouts).**

- 7% of youth from disadvantaged circumstances who volunteer do so through a youth civic or leadership organization (such as 4-H or Boy Scouts/Girl Scouts), compared to 12% of other youth.

◆ **Youth from DAC who volunteer are more likely than other youth to be motivated to volunteer to gain skills.**

- 55% of youth from DAC say they volunteer to gain experience for school or work, compared to 40% of other youth volunteers.

◆ **Volunteering among youth from DAC is tied to their parents' education level.**

- 53% of youth from DAC who have at least one parent who has attended college volunteer, compared to 33% of youth from DAC with parents who have never attended college.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The hope is that the findings contained herein will help nonprofits, schools, and others gain greater insight into the volunteer preferences of youth in order to: 1) close the gap between youth from disadvantaged circumstances who volunteer, and youth from non-disadvantaged circumstances who volunteer; and 2) engage more youth, particularly youth from disadvantaged circumstances, in volunteer service.

- Since youth from disadvantaged circumstances are highly influenced to volunteer by their religious beliefs, religious organizations can be an important partner to nonprofits seeking to engage youth from DAC in service.
- Nonprofits should rethink how they can attract and use youth as volunteers. Youth can be assets to nonprofits, as they have much to offer; they come with high levels of enthusiasm and are looking to develop skills that could prove useful in their education and future work or career.
- As youth are more likely to volunteer if asked (especially by a teacher), education institutions need to help more youth find a path to a lifetime of service by providing youth of all backgrounds with opportunities to engage in service and service-learning on campus, as well as helping to connect those youth with service opportunities with nonprofits.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The 2005 Youth Volunteering and Civic Engagement Survey surveyed 3,178 American youth ages of 12 to 18 by telephone between January-March 2005. The U.S. Census reports that the overall response rate was 44 percent.

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