



*Section 1:*

# Executive Summary



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

A vibrant and thriving democracy requires a deeply engaged and active citizenry. “Civic engagement” encompasses all the ways we identify and understand common problems in our communities, nation, and world. Robust civic engagement not only creates healthy societies; it benefits the individuals who engage, through the development of skills and knowledge, networks and relationships, and feelings of purpose and meaning.

Survey data show that civic engagement is highly unequal among young Americans. One of the primary divisions is between young people who have ever attended college and those who dropped out of high school or did not continue their educations beyond high school (about 42 percent of the youth population in 2012). The college-attending population is much more civically engaged.

“Non-college youth” are highly diverse in terms of demographics, life circumstances, and levels of civic engagement, and some will go to college later. Still, studying them as a group is valuable because college attendance is a powerful predictor of engagement, and because strategies for engaging any population must take into account the institutions that can reach them. For college students and alumni, higher education provides institutional opportunities that are missing for all non-college youth. Participation in other institutions that may reach youth outside of formal educational settings—such as labor unions, political parties, and religious congregations—has steeply declined over the past half-century.

National survey data show that a majority of non-college youth are basically disengaged from civic life, with 37 percent completely disconnected, and only 13.5 percent engaged in forms of civic leadership. (Our model includes family and locally-based informal leadership, along with more traditionally recognized employment and organizational leadership.) But standardized survey questions may not capture the contributions and opinions of poor and working-class youth, who may find words like volunteering and civic engagement inapplicable or confusing, even though they may engage in their communities. Also, survey research is not ideal for determining why young people do or do not participate. Thus we chose to discuss civic engagement (without using that term) in semi-structured conversations with non-college youth. In all, we interviewed 121 non-college youth in 20 focus groups in 4 cities between fall 2008 and June 2010. Compared to the national population of non-college youth, participants in our study were much more likely to be urban and African American. In this report, we combine our own focus group data with national statistics and summaries of other relevant research.

In all the focus groups, with the exception of the first ones (in Baltimore), we began the conversations by asking in an open-ended way whether participants had “given back, helped their community, or tried to make positive change.” A few individuals offered examples, but the most common response was silence. Sometimes the silence lasted 30 seconds or longer. That initial response reinforced the basic survey finding that non-college youth are not very engaged. Asking general questions about engagement in various ways did not elicit many more responses.

However, as the conversations proceeded, they provided evidence that the initial response was not the whole story:

- *Most participants saw concrete barriers to civic engagement.* For example, they perceived that institutions did not want their engagement, that their communities provided few positive role models and that they lacked the money and connections to contribute.



National survey data show that a majority of non-college youth are basically disengaged from civic life, with **37% completely disconnected**, and only **13.5% “broadly engaged”**

- *Many participants believed they had skills to make a difference in their communities, but they lacked opportunities to use those skills.*
- *Nevertheless, many participants served or helped other individuals in their own families and neighborhoods, although they did not think of these forms of helping behavior when asked about community-level change.*
- *Participants were highly aware of social and political issues, concerned about them, and likely to discuss them critically in their own social networks, even if they did not see how they personally could address such issues.*
- *A small minority of participants had been recruited into civic organizations, and they generally expressed strong support for these groups.* Most other focus group members believed that such institutions were missing in their communities and reported never having been asked to participate.

In addition to telling us about their civic engagement (or disengagement), the respondents also reflected on the various settings in which they had come of age. They had grown up in a nested set of contexts, including families and neighborhoods, as well as formal institutions like schools and workplaces. They reflected on whether those settings had promoted or discouraged their interests, motivations, and skills for civic engagement. In general, their opinions were highly distrustful and critical, although we uncovered some positive assessments, especially of family members.

---

Participation in other institutions that may reach youth outside of formal educational settings—such as labor unions, political parties, and religious congregations—has steeply declined over the past half-century.

---

Overall, this study finds that non-college young people lack organized and institutional opportunities to address large-scale social issues —reinforcing previous research. They often report helping individuals, and they discuss social issues in their own networks, but generally they do not connect these activities to making systemic or societywide changes.

---

We offer insights into promising strategies for reengaging poor and working-class young adults. Many respondents expressed interest in education for younger people (most often their own children or siblings), including both K-12 schooling and community-based opportunities. Recruiting

---

This study finds that non-college young people lack organized and institutional opportunities to address large-scale social issues

---

non-college youth into organizations that assist and improve education would be worthwhile. They felt that they owed the next generation help and guidance, and they personally valued making contributions. Opportunities to move from critical talk (which is common in their circles) to constructive collective action is the key to transforming both these individuals and their communities.