

## Diversity and Equity in Civic Engagement: Two Background Papers for the Corporation for National and Community Service

J. Foster-Bey, James B. Hyman, and Peter Levine

In order to support volunteer and national service efforts to more effectively and successfully engage groups that are underrepresented in volunteer and service programs, we present two background papers that examine rates of voluntary service and other forms of civic engagement among various subgroups of Americans.

As shown in these papers, volunteering and other forms of civic engagement benefit those who participate as well as those whom they serve. It is therefore our position that we should be concerned if any groups of Americans may not be accessing these benefits. But we should also be particularly concerned if any groups whom we believe to be disadvantaged by reason of income, education, class, race or gender are underrepresented in these programs. These are the groups whom recent research suggests stand to gain the greatest individual and community benefits from their engagement and service.

The papers we have prepared draw upon and summarize current empirical evidence. They do not determine what positions stakeholders in the volunteer and national service networks should take. By examining recent data and reviewing the literature, we provide explanations for why volunteering rates may differ along with strategies that various stakeholders may consider as they pursue the goals of recruiting and engaging volunteers from all backgrounds. Our recommendations are guided by two hypotheses that are major conclusions of our research:

1. When activities such as volunteering in formal organizations, participation in national service projects and membership in civic organizations are used to measure “civic participation,” there are substantial differences in measures of civic engagement between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged individuals.
2. There is little difference in civic engagement between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged people when other civic activities such as “working on community problems” and “social protest” are examined.

Interestingly, there is no conflict between these hypotheses and therefore both could be true. For example, if true, the first hypothesis could suggest that disadvantaged persons may be *less interested* in volunteering and similar forms of civic participation. This implies that there may be a need for greater education and outreach. That is, we may need to show disadvantaged Americans why these more formal modes of civic engagement create value for them and their communities. But it might also mean that disadvantaged persons may have *fewer opportunities* or *face more barriers* to participating in volunteer programs and similar forms of civic participation. This suggests an additional need to examine possible barriers to participation and to pursue strategies aimed at removing these barriers.

The second hypothesis, if true, suggests that funders, policymakers and program managers should expand their thinking about what constitutes legitimate civic participation and begin exploring more creative approaches to support and recognize these alternative forms of civic participation.

The two papers provide empirical data to inform discussion of these issues. The first paper, by J. Foster-Bey, uses the single most reliable and current dataset to estimate rates of volunteering and civic engagement by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (defined in terms of family income and educational background). Foster-Bey's source is the Current Population Survey (CPS) Annual Volunteering Supplement for 2005-7. The CPS Volunteering Supplement was sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service. Sixty-thousand households were surveyed: a very large and high-quality sample, compared to any other survey of voluntary participation in America. The CPS asks about several forms of civic engagement, not only volunteering but also attending community meetings and working on community problems. There are questions, too, about the venue of volunteering and whether and how volunteers were recruited. The CPS offers rich information about respondents' backgrounds.

Foster-Bey uses this dataset to show that race and ethnicity and socio-economic status are each predictors of voluntary participation. Whites and people of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to say that they "volunteer" and are somewhat more likely to say they engage in the other civic activities measured in the CPS.

But for all of its strengths, the CPS does not measure many activities that have also been defined in the literature as "civic engagement." These activities—voluntary contributions of money and/or time—include voting, protesting, contacting the news media, participating in religious congregations, and working for political candidates, among others. The CPS Volunteering Supplement has two other limitations: it began recently and it does not ask questions about volunteers' motives or opinions.

Therefore, a second paper by James B. Hyman and Peter Levine draws on a wide variety of surveys and published studies to set a broader context. Their paper summarizes historical trends since the 1970s and provides hypotheses about why we may see different rates of participation in various specific forms of civic engagement by race, ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic status. This paper concludes with recommendations for volunteer and national service stakeholders to consider as it refines its strategy for inclusion.

Overall, we ask readers to consider the following questions:

- What disparities exist in civic engagement by race, ethnicity, education, wealth, and immigrant status? Should we care about these disparities and why?
- What are the obstacles, barriers and circumstances that contribute to these disparities?
- Are there cost/consequences associated with these disparities?
- Who are the injured?
- What are the remedies?
- How do we mount the remedies?