

2020

Democracy Beyond the Campus:

**Civic Engagement Among
Youth with No College Experience**

CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND – TEXAS

MAGGIE STERN

CDF MISSION STATEMENT

The Children's Defense Fund Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

CDF provides a strong, effective and independent voice for all the children of America who cannot vote, lobby or speak for themselves. We pay particular attention to the needs of poor children, children of color and those with disabilities. CDF educates the nation about the needs of children and encourages preventative investments before they get sick, drop out of school, get into trouble or suffer family breakdown.

CDF began in 1973 and is a private, nonprofit organization supported by individual donations, foundation, corporate and government grants.

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INTRODUCTION

On a basketball court in Los Angeles, teenaged spectators pledge to vote as the price of admission before tipoff. In New Jersey, youth spend their summer building community gardens, enrolling their neighbors in federal public benefit programs, and running a mobile feeding site at a local playground. Young Houstonians advocate for restorative justice and youth development programs in the child protective and juvenile justice systems in which they were once involved. In parks, neighborhoods, and cities around the country, similar programs deliberately engage young people who are not in school, inviting them to participate in and lead civic engagement efforts in their communities.

Young people with no college experience make up a significant proportion of the youth population. Across the United States, 16.2 million young people aged 16- to 24-years-old were not enrolled in school in 2019 (about 43 percent of this age group).¹ In Texas, 48 percent of youth aged 18- to 24 – nearly 1.4 million young Texans – have no college experience.² Yet these youth are too often ignored or locked out when it comes to voting and other forms of civic engagement. In part, inequitable access to comprehensive civic education means that college may be the first place that youth are exposed to civic information and opportunities.³ Higher education also remains inaccessible for many young people from underrepresented communities who face additional barriers to engagement related to their race or class.⁴ No matter the reason, the consequence is clear: over a third of 18- to 29-year-olds with no college experience identify as “almost completely disengaged from civic and political life” – 20 percentage points higher than their peers with college experience.⁵

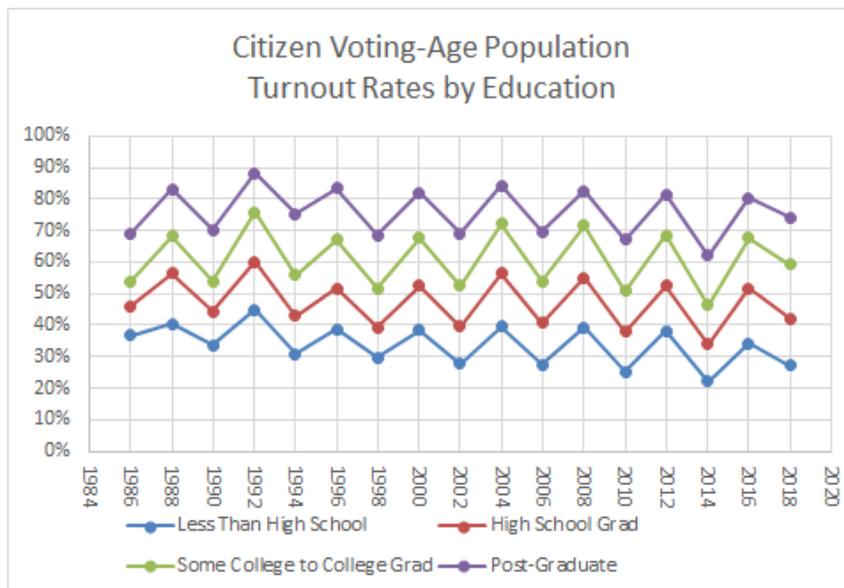


Figure 1. Courtesy of the United States Election Project.

When young people with no college experience are left out of civic life, they miss the personal and psychological benefits that civic engagement can help develop, such as stronger relationships and a deeper sense of purpose.⁶ When they are underrepresented in civic activities, their voices are silenced in elections, public agenda setting, and policymaking. The rest of the community also loses out – not only on the perspectives of these youth but also on the higher levels of employment, healthier residents, and stronger schools that correlate with higher rates of civic engagement.⁷

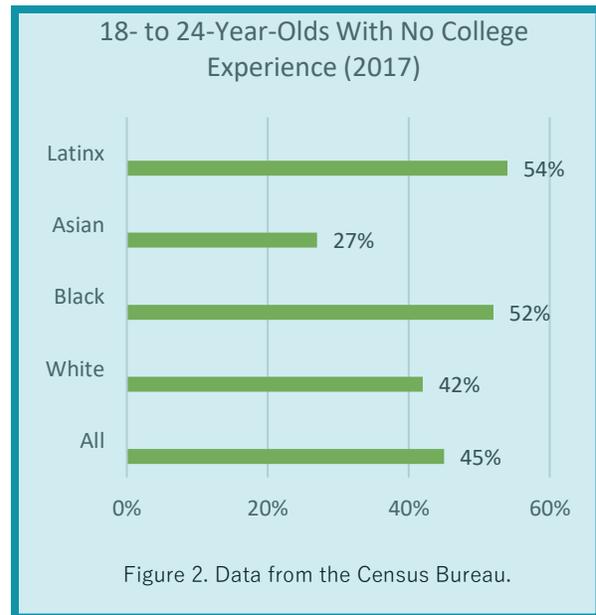
Stories from Los Angeles, New Jersey, Houston, and more illustrate that many youth with no college experience have overcome the obstacles to vote, volunteer, and advocate for themselves. Yet many more still experience heightened barriers to engagement through both policies and practices that discourage or prevent their participation.

To understand how to better engage young people with no college experience, Children's Defense Fund – Texas has conducted a series of interviews with organizers and practitioners who work directly with these youth. We planned to also conduct focus groups with young people directly, but COVID-19 unfortunately prevented these conversations. From our interviews, we have created a list of recommendations to overcome barriers to civic engagement that disproportionately harm unenrolled youth. We have also considered how the pandemic, the resultant economic crisis, and the ongoing protests against systemic racism may affect strategies and means of engagement. A functioning democracy requires the participation of all its members, and we hope that these recommendations can make it easier for young people with no college experience to be actively engaged in their communities.

YOUTH, EDUCATION, AND BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

The millions of young people with no college experience represent a broad scope of the national population. However, several groups are also overrepresented in this population:

- The largest group of unenrolled youth are white,⁸ yet over 50 percent of **Black and Latinx youth** have no college experience, compared to just under 42 percent and 27 percent of their non-Hispanic white and Asian peers.⁹ **Native youth** have lower rates of high school graduation, and only 17 percent go on to higher education.¹⁰
- Young people growing up in the **lowest socioeconomic quintile** are 50 percentage points less likely to be enrolled in college when compared to their peers in the highest quintile.¹¹
- **Rural youth** are less likely than urban and suburban youth to enroll in college or complete a post-secondary degree.¹²
- While young people who are not enrolled in school have a higher labor force participation rate, they also experience **higher rates of unemployment** – over 18 percent as compared to 11 percent for recent high school graduates enrolled in higher education.¹³
- Over a quarter of youth with no college experience have **children of their own** – ten percentage points higher than their peers who are enrolled in college.¹⁴
- Young people with no college experience are also more likely to belong to **vulnerable groups** such as:
 - **Youth who are unhoused:** Just 15 percent of young adults who had been unhoused in the past year were enrolled in college.¹⁵
 - **Youth who are systems-involved:** Around half of youth in foster care do not graduate from high school by 18, while two in three justice-involved youth leave high school early. Just 8% percent of former foster youth and 1% of justice-involved youth graduate from college.¹⁶



- **LGBTQ+ youth:** Recent research suggests that gay women and bisexual people of all genders have lower rates of college enrollment than their heterosexual peers, while gay men had higher rates of enrollment than heterosexual men.¹⁷ More research is needed on transgender and non-binary people in higher education, but one survey found that nearly one-third of trans respondents reported having been unhoused in the previous year and 17 percent of transgender students had left school due to harassment – both risk factors for lower rates of college enrollment. Rates of discrimination were higher for transgender respondents who were people of color, undocumented, or disabled.¹⁸
- **Undocumented youth:** 4 in 10 undocumented youth end their formal education before college – five times higher than youth born in the US.¹⁹ Programs such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) have made it easier for undocumented students to enroll in higher education, as have policies such as expanding in-state tuition and financial aid to include these students. However, in states where in-state tuition is not available, undocumented Latinx students are less likely to be enrolled in higher education and may even be at higher risk for leaving high school early.²⁰
- **Youth with physical or mental disabilities:** While covering a wide range of disabilities, research suggests that youth served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) on average have lower rates of high school completion and were nearly four times less likely than nondisabled youth to attend a four-year university.²¹

There are of course young people in all these demographic groups who do graduate college, just as there are young people with no college experience who are highly civically engaged. Yet these patterns of college enrollment and civic engagement are not random. They are driven by policies and practices that can either encourage participation or restrict access to both higher education *and* civic engagement.

So what explains lower rates of civic engagement among young people with no college experience? People report three kinds of barriers that lead them to not participate in civic life: **they can't**, **they don't want to**, and **nobody asked**.²² All three are more likely to affect young people with no college experience.

“THEY CAN’T”

Young people with no college experience too often lack access to the money, time, and information that facilitate civic engagement. This cohort is more likely to grow up in low-income communities and homes with caregivers who also have no college experience,²³ and both family income and parental education are strong predictors of college attendance.²⁴ Moreover, growing income disparities leave young people with even less access to high-income jobs if they do not have a college degree. Jobs that are available are more likely to be low-paying, with hours that are inflexible and often part-time, and lacking benefits such as health insurance or paid sick leave.²⁵ And financial instability is only exacerbated for the 18 percent of this population who are unemployed.²⁶ Many youth – including those who work multiple jobs to support themselves – consequently lack financial security and time flexibility, limiting opportunities for civic engagement.²⁷

Interviewees repeatedly identified lack of money as a barrier to increased civic engagement among youth. Many program participants struggle to afford food, clothes, and other necessities, while some do not have stable housing. Often unable to provide for these basic needs, few participants have the disposable income to participate in civic activities. Financial instability can limit opportunities for civic engagement in several ways.

First, money can purchase materials necessary for some civic activities, such as an identification card that 36 states, including Texas, require that citizens have in order to vote.²⁸ Voter ID laws can therefore create an institutional barrier for those facing financial constraints, including young people with no college experience.

“How do you expect anyone to pay attention to you when they’re hungry?”

*- Program manager,
interviewed February 2020*

Second, financial limitations and time constraints can work together to limit opportunities for participation. Two program directors referenced the unique challenges facing their program participants with children who cannot afford full-time or after-school childcare. Other youth have additional responsibilities at home and with family members. Several interviewees mentioned participants who cannot afford a car and therefore depend on slow and unreliable public transportation. Interviewees at Opportunity Youth United – an organization led by young people who are not enrolled or employed – conducted a get-out-the-vote campaign in

2018 and found that 40 percent of the youth they contacted needed a ride to their polling place. These barriers disproportionately affect young people with no college experience and make it more difficult for them to participate in civic life.

“If we’re not addressing basic needs, we’ve failed. Then there’s no way a kid will feel like their voice matters.”

*- Director,
interviewed February 2020*

Third, the majority of civic opportunities are themselves unpaid, with some exceptions such as serving as a poll worker. It is difficult enough to forgo income if young people must take time off work or pay for transportation in order to go vote or volunteer. Sustained endeavors such as leadership development or advocacy training should offer compensation to facilitate participation by young people with no college experience.

Fourth, organizations serving this population can also experience funding and staffing constraints that limit the scope and sustainability of their programs. One interviewee worked with ten youth-serving organizations that focused on young people with no college experience in 2009. Today, half are no longer operational because they have lost funding. In the interviewee’s experience, donors tend to focus on civic engagement projects targeted at students in high school and college, while funding for unenrolled youth more often emphasizes educational accreditation or workforce development. While these programs can also incorporate civic skill development and promote civic activity, a few interviewees cautioned that they had seen similar programs shy away from emphasizing civic engagement because managers feared that they failed to address the educational and employment metrics in their grants. In some cases, the terms of their funding explicitly prohibit voter registration or raise concerns that voter education efforts could be viewed as partisan. These organizations need additional support to provide nonpartisan information and opportunities for civic engagement.

A final resource barrier that several interviewees cited was civic knowledge or skills. Young adults with no college experience often attend high schools without a robust civic education program, with less exposure to discussions of controversial issues or access to community service projects.²⁹ Comprehensive civic education can increase civic knowledge and participation rates, especially among groups who are currently underrepresented in civic activities.³⁰ Opportunity Youth United found that participants were uncertain about how to

vote, often related to confusion about voter ID. They also reported misinformation that led them to question their ability to participate. Twenty percent believed that if they were convicted of a misdemeanor they would be unable to vote, while another 40 percent were unsure if this made them ineligible. Others were unaware that they could vote early to avoid long wait times on Election Day – potentially interacting with time and money constraints to prevent working youth from voting at all.

Interviewees acknowledged that a lack of formal civic education presents a barrier, especially when participants recognize knowledge gaps and feel ill-equipped to be civically engaged. But they also overwhelmingly reported that young people do already possess valuable civic skills both similar to and unique from their peers with college experience. For example, interviewees spoke about young participants who readily recognize issues in their neighborhoods or support other community members by providing food and shelter to those in need. They emphasized that youth participants need more support identifying skills that they already have, supplemented by civic knowledge that can help them use their skills in the community.

“People are struggling. They want to be involved but they need support.”

*- Researcher,
interviewed February 2020*

“THEY DON’T WANT TO”

Eligible non-voters often report that two reasons they do not cast a ballot are not liking the candidate or feeling like their vote doesn’t matter – in short, that they don’t want to vote. Without this sense of “civic purpose,”³¹ non-voters are less likely to prioritize overcoming barriers to the ballot box.

Civic purpose develops throughout childhood and adolescence as young people experience or observe injustice and want to act to fix the problem. Children who have the opportunity to engage in these conversations from a young age and see their efforts lead to change are more likely to develop a healthier sense of civic purpose that leads them to be lifelong civic participants.³²

On the other hand, young people who directly experience injustice and inequity often recognize a disconnect between the expressed values of their community and their personal experiences. These youth can still develop a strong sense of civic purpose when they have the opportunity to act in community with others facing similar problems. However, many others run up against social structures that have not served them well or have actively discriminated against them, resulting in lower levels of trust and participation in those institutions.³³

Young people with no college experience, particularly those who are also discriminated

“They’re often so ignored...There’s so many barriers the system puts up – and young people are aware of all these things – they start to feel that the system is rigged”

*- Researcher,
interviewed February 2020*

against due to their race, ethnicity, or other identities, can be powerful civic actors when they feel welcomed into civic spaces and empowered to work along with others who have had similar life experiences. Unfortunately, they can also be further marginalized when they feel stereotyped, mistreated, and ignored. One researcher who works with young people with no college experience found that they overwhelmingly feel deliberately rejected from civic life. They recognize the resource barriers confronting them and are profoundly frustrated by the narrative that they are lazy or ignorant for not being able to overcome those barriers.

Youth with no college experience – especially Black youth – are also more likely than their white or college-going peers to have negative interactions with the criminal-legal system³⁴ due to over-policing of their neighborhoods and other discriminatory practices.³⁵ The school-to-prison pipeline and policies such as felony disenfranchisement create systemic barriers that disproportionately remove Black and brown youth from schools,³⁶ limit their employment and housing opportunities,³⁷ and frequently exclude them from the voting-eligible population.³⁸ Even those who are not legally disenfranchised can develop a justified distrust of government authority that leads them to feel disempowered and less likely to take action.³⁹

Multiple interviewees described working with participants to overcome these stereotypes and barriers through leadership training and efforts to celebrate everyday civic activities that

young people already engage in. Interviewees found that once participants begin to see themselves as powerful civic actors – as people who could make change in the systems operating against them – they start to develop a newfound civic purpose. They see activities such as protesting, voting, and talking to their peers about civic engagement as a way to advocate for themselves and their communities. While they still need support to overcome resource constraints, they are able to integrate their desire for change into active civic participation.

“NOBODY ASKED”

Finally, young people – especially those with no college experience – are simply less likely to be asked to be involved in civic activity. With limited resources, campaigns often decide to target demographic groups with historically higher turnout levels or who have more resources for donations and volunteer work. Perhaps for these reasons, 66 percent of Texans below the age of 40 were never contacted by a campaign in the six months prior to the February 2020 primary election – with Latinx voters even less likely to be contacted than their white peers.⁴⁰

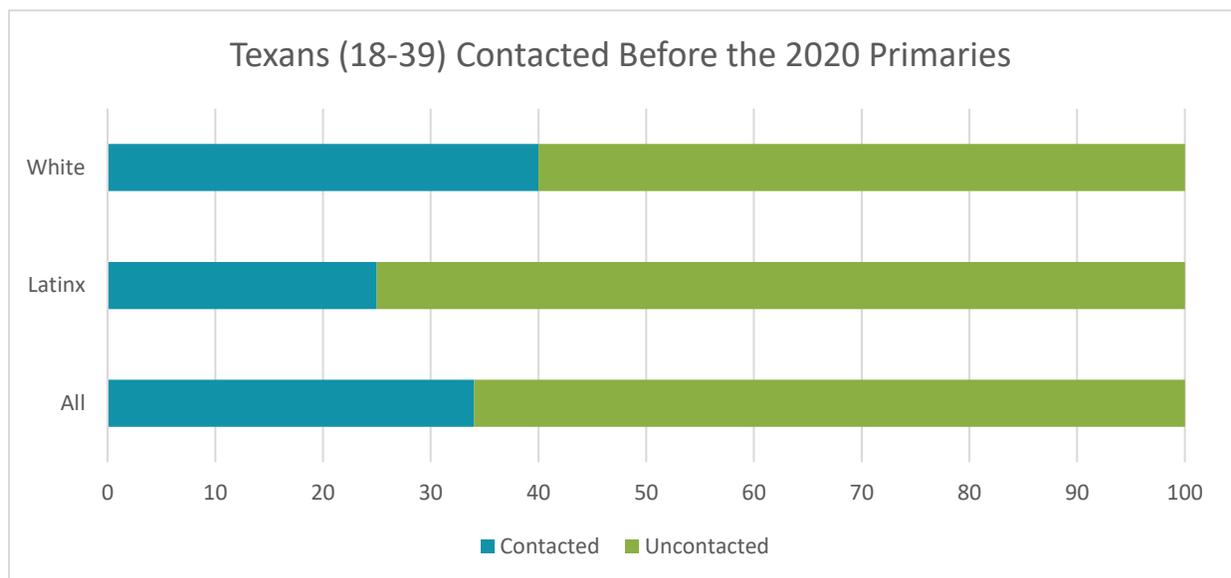


Figure 3. Data from CIRCLE/YouGov 2020 Texas poll.

When outreach efforts do target young people, they often focus on college campuses. There are fewer institutions that reliably reach young people who are not in college, particularly as religious participation and union membership has declined over the years.⁴¹ Consequently, young people with no college experience consistently report lower levels of formal mobilization.⁴² However, multiple interviewees focused on the ability for communities to mobilize themselves, with trusted adults acting to recruit and engage young people. In this

smaller relationship network, young people with no college experience are more likely to know and trust adults who are asking them to participate.

These strategic mobilization efforts can support civic purpose development and help mitigate resource barriers by creating social networks that teach and support civic engagement. However, it can be difficult to intervene and confront under-mobilization because civic participation is often cyclical, since youth with no college experience are more likely to grow up and live in communities with adults who are also under-mobilized because of their socioeconomic status and previous levels of civic engagement. Despite these barriers, youth with no college experience who do participate in civic life consistently report that they were invited to join a civic activity by a community member they respect and trust.⁴³

OVERCOMING BARRIERS: RECOMMENDATIONS

CDF-Texas believes that every young person deserves the opportunity to participate in their community through voting, advocacy, and other forms of engagement. We continue pushing for policy changes to give young people resources and tools that make it easier for them to get involved. However, there are also immediate steps to ensure that we are encouraging and empowering young people with no college experience to be active civic participants because somebody asked, because they want to, and because they can.

SOMEBODY ASKED

“Once they start pulling in their peers, it’s a whole different ball game.”

*- Project Director,
interviewed March 2020*

Engaging youth with no college experience starts by recognizing that youth are the best ambassadors for civic engagement programs as they share information with each other and create informal ‘word of mouth’ networks. These often occur organically but they can also be supported by explicitly training young people to use their knowledge and skills to mobilize others. Not only does this encourage youth to view themselves as civic leaders, it can also increase outreach efforts among often-undermobilized communities.

Effective mobilization extends beyond campuses and institutions of higher education. Some interviewees used traditional methods of outreach such as canvassing or tabling, but they deliberately invested in neighborhoods or community spaces that have often been ignored in these efforts. They mentioned parks, community centers, and neighborhood events such as job fairs or events targeting young families as places to reach potential participants where they are. Refocusing traditional outreach methods on excluded communities can help break the cycle of under-participation. Moreover, young people who are recruited through these methods have the opportunity to be civic leaders who encourage both older and younger generations to get involved.

Other organizations partnered with institutions where young people with no college experience spend time or are disproportionately represented. Local churches and gyms are all places where interviewees recruit mentors or share information that recipients can pass through their own networks. Partnerships with the criminal-legal and foster-care systems can also be successful, especially when the city or county deliberately creates structures for youth engagement. Supportive allies in these institutions help recruit participants, provide space for voter education forums, share civic opportunities, and more.

THEY WANT TO

Asking young people to vote and be civically engaged is one way to demonstrate that their voices matter. This empowerment has to continue at every level of programming to ensure that young people with no college experience want to show up in civic spaces.

First, candidates, campaigns, and organizations must emphasize the issues that young people care about. Young people with no college experience are already having conversations about the issues facing their communities, and in many cases are forming mutual aid groups, organizing protests, and pushing for policy change. Multiple interviewees emphasized following young people's lead and connecting the issues they care about to civic activity such as voting. On the other hand, they criticized negative messaging that shames and judges youth who are not engaged.

**“We use [voting]
as a way to uplift
the issues they
care about.”**

*- Project Director,
interviewed March 2020*

“They feel like they’re doing it for their families, they’re doing it for their communities”

*- Organizer,
interviewed February 2020*

Second, interviewees stressed that young people need to be involved in daily decision-making, from research to communication strategies to program development. For example, during the 2018 Opportunity Youth United voter mobilization campaign, young leaders researched common misconceptions about voting within their communities, created a communications campaign based on their findings, and planned events like a basketball tournament

where people ‘paid’ to attend by pledging to vote. Youth in vulnerable populations particularly benefit from regaining authority in systems that traditionally have suppressed their voices. Interviewees who work with vulnerable populations such as systems-involved youth or youth who are unhoused relied on current and former participants to help develop programming and give feedback.

When young people help develop programs, they feel increased ownership and accountability for their success. By emphasizing youth empowerment and leadership development, organizations can help young people develop their confidence and civic skills, helping them strengthen their civic purpose and become lifelong civic participants.

THEY CAN

Mobilization and motivation are powerful tools to engage young people with no college experience, but organizations also need to support youth to overcome resource barriers. Every interviewee emphasized that most young people with no college experience need financial stability and other supports before they could commit to sustained engagement opportunities.

Policies to support working and unenrolled youth can help remove resource barriers. A majority of interviewees also agreed that youth participants need to be paid as staff members or with stipends for long-term engagement efforts to be successful. One interviewee noted that paying participants not only mitigates the financial resource barrier, but it also helps young people recognize their work as meaningful and deserving of compensation.

Several interviewees mentioned additional resource barriers that their organizations help address. Two organizations use a case-manager model to help young people coordinate a variety of services including reliable transportation, safe and stable housing, and affordable clothing. One interviewee noted that case managers also often need to help young participants obtain IDs – a prerequisite for civic activities such as voting in Texas.

Some interviewees faced constraints that prevented them from being able to offer resources directly. These organizations instead partnered with external groups to connect young people with employment and other services. Community partnerships allow organizations to conserve their own resources for civic engagement while helping participants with financial stability and other basic necessities. Another strategy is to recruit young people for paid civic opportunities, such as serving as poll workers.

Basic needs often encompass more than physical resources, especially for marginalized and vulnerable populations. Interviewees who work with systems-involved youth and youth who are unhoused all spoke about the need for trauma-informed counseling, given that traumatic experiences – such as poverty, discrimination, and violence – are more common among the youth they serve and can radically affect their brain development and behavior. One interviewee noted that young people often operate in ‘survival mode’ that protects them from trauma but can deter the kind of community-building that facilitates civic engagement. Another organization incorporates group therapy sessions to help young people build connections and work through trauma.

“Everyone else is getting compensated. Why do we expect young people to do this work for free?”

*- Executive Director,
interviewed February 2020*

Finally, asset-based leadership development programs help young participants develop and practice civic skills. Interviewees focused on both explicit and implicit skill development. One organization pays young people with no college experience to participate in service-learning projects. Another holds formal education sessions that teach young participants about resource mapping, goal setting, and local governance structures. A third trains participants to teach skills back to their peers and communities.

An important element of leadership development programs is that interviewees consistently framed conversations around assets rather than deficiencies. Language that stigmatizes educational attainment, socioeconomic status, or systems-involvement – for example, phrases such as “disconnected” or “disengaged” – wrongly assumes that young people with no college experience are not interested in civic engagement or lack the skills to be civic leaders. Interviewees combined this asset-based mindset with educational initiatives to help young people recognize the skills they already possessed in addition to developing new skills. For example, one organization runs “voter education healing circles” where facilitators acknowledge barriers to engagement, recognize ongoing civic activity in communities, and offer education to address gaps in knowledge identified by participants.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Youth with no college experience are a powerful but underrepresented contingent of young voters. Making up just under half of the 18-29 year-old population, these youth need additional supports to ensure that they can participate fully in our democracy. The practitioners and researchers interviewed by CDF-Texas provided a series of recommendations that organizations, campaigns, and candidates can follow to encourage participation among young people with no college experience. Again and again, interviewees emphasized that young people with no college experience need the **resources**, **motivation**, and **mobilization** to translate their energy and passion into action.

Interviews were conducted in early 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the concurrent economic devastation, and the nationwide uprising against police brutality and systemic racism. As the 2020 election cycle continues, the recommendations listed here must be considered in this context, particularly as young people with no college experience are especially likely to be affected by all three crises. Given the unprecedented scope of this moment, it is difficult to predict long-term consequences, but there are four important considerations to watch in the coming months:

First, access to higher education and the decision to attend college will be affected as a result of the pandemic, especially as institutions turn to virtual learning. Following the Great Recession, college enrollment increased overall due to growing rates of part-time enrollment, although full-time enrollment decreased.⁴⁴ While an imperfect comparison, this data at the very least suggests that COVID-19 may also change patterns in higher education, particularly

among marginalized communities who are more likely to be affected by the pandemic and are already overrepresented among young people with no college experience.

Second, young people with no college experience are disproportionately likely to be Black, Latinx, or native, and therefore more likely to face increased threats of illness, economic instability, and racism. There is a risk that marginalized youth will be further disempowered as they watch government leaders and institutions fail to protect them or their communities. However, the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests – often led by young people of color – demonstrate that marginalized youth are also exercising their power and demanding change. Organizations and campaigns can support this energy by uplifting the issues that young people champion and helping connect protest and advocacy to other forms of civic engagement such as voting.

Third, the economic consequences of COVID-19 will affect access to resources. An early analysis of jobs lost during the pandemic finds that individuals without a college degree have experienced a 19 percentage point decline in employment – about 4 points higher than their peers with college experience.⁴⁵ However, workers aged 18- to 29-years-old have actually experienced a smaller decline than older workers – a contrast to previous US recessions where young people were more likely to lose their jobs.⁴⁶ Employment shapes access to resources – time, money, civic skills, and civic knowledge – and rising rates of unemployment are likely to reduce resources that are available for civic participation among youth with no college experience.

Finally, inequitable access to the Internet has been exacerbated by the need to social distance and turn to virtual engagement. Public health guidelines and closures prohibit many traditional civic activities, requiring increased reliance on digital advocacy and online engagement efforts. While interviewees did not discuss how technology and social media can be used to engage participants, the Pew Research Center reports that 18- to 29-year-olds are the most likely age group to use the internet but there are persistent gaps in usage for low-income respondents and those with no college experience.⁴⁷ Without reliable internet access, there will be fewer avenues to access safe and increasingly-prevalent civic activities.

It remains to be seen how youth without college experience will experience the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic, social, and civic consequences, but we must not leave these young people behind as we work to increase youth civic engagement in 2020 and beyond.

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