

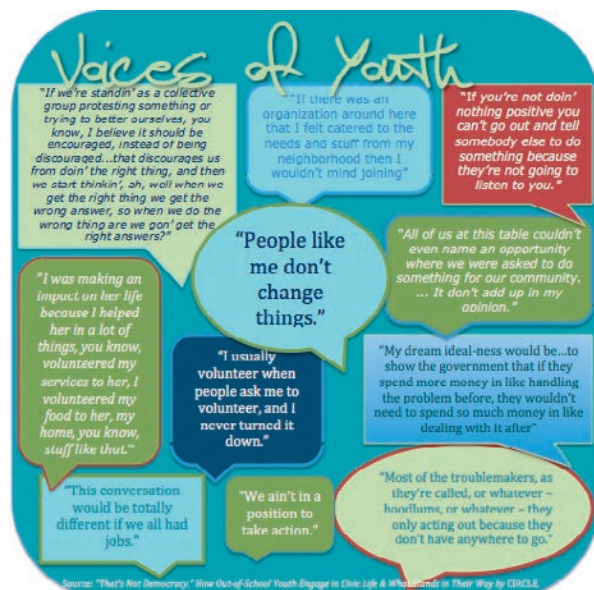
HOW DO OUT OF SCHOOL YOUTH ENGAGE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES AND WHAT STANDS IN THEIR WAY?

National survey data show that the majority of Americans who are 18-to-29 years old and without college experience are basically disengaged from traditional civic life. They are engaging in ways not captured by surveys, but significant barriers to engagement stand in their way. These are among the findings of a new CIRCLE report entitled, "That's Not Democracy: How Out-of-School Youth Engage in Civic Life and What Stands in Their Way" (Released in August 2012).

CIRCLE conducted semi-structured conversations with non-college youth to explore why they do or do not participate, and to identify forms of action and engagement that surveys may not capture. In total, we interviewed 121 non-college youth in 20 focus groups in 4 cities between the fall of 2008 and June 2010. We concentrated our focus groups in urban areas, and participants were relatively likely to be African American compared to the national population of non-college youth.

YOUTH HAVE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE, BUT LACK OPPORTUNITIES

Participants were highly aware and concerned about social and political issues. They were likely to say that they discussed these issues critically in their own social networks, but could not think of times when they had been asked to take action. They mentioned issues like gang violence, the safety of their children, neighborhood blight and homelessness in their communities.



IN THIS ISSUE

1. How Do Out of School Youth Engage in Their Communities and What Stands in Their Way?

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

4. The Economic Benefits of Civic Engagement
6. Election 2012: Information Needs of Young Americans, 18-29
8. Get the #YouthTruth on Young Voters
9. State Civic Education Standards and Requirements

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

10. Is There a Role for Higher Education in Reducing the Gap in Youth Civic Participation?

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UNIVERSITY

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OCTOBER 2012

THE RESEARCH ROUNDUP COLUMN HIGHLIGHTS RECENT RESEARCH FINDINGS COMMISSIONED OR GENERATED BY CIRCLE. ALSO INCLUDED IS AN UPDATE ON NEW CIRCLE PRODUCTS SUCH AS FACT SHEETS, RESEARCH ARTICLES, RESEARCH ABSTRACTS, BIBLIOGRAPHIES, AND DATASETS.

Continued from Page 1

Civic skills are necessary tools to engage effectively in the community. When asked to identify their own skills for making positive changes in their communities, participants most frequently cited communication skills (such as being able to offer a persuasive argument or listen well). Most often, they were unable to connect such skills with actual opportunities to participate. Yet if young people who had been recruited and asked to participate, they often agreed.

THEY WERE LIKELY TO SAY THAT THEY DISCUSS THESE ISSUES CRITICALLY IN THEIR OWN SOCIAL NETWORKS, BUT COULD NOT THINK OF TIMES WHEN THEY HAD BEEN ASKED TO TAKE ACTION.

Faced with a lack of opportunity, participants cited other ways that they were able to contribute to their communities. They were engaged in various “helping” behaviors, like providing food or shelter to strangers or family. More often, though, participants cited being role models for youth in their neighborhoods as the main way they contributed. Many did not think of these forms of helping when asked about community-level change.

MOST FELT THERE WERE CONCRETE BARRIERS TO THEIR ENGAGEMENT

Participants cited many barriers that prevented their participation in communities. For example, many felt that institutions did not want their engagement and said they had few positive role models in their communities who had asked them to get involved. Many felt they lacked the money and connections to contribute.

MANY FACED GANG-RELATED ISSUES AND POLICE HARASSMENT; THEY DOUBTED THEIR COMMUNITIES COULD CHANGE, OR THAT THEIR VOICES WOULD BE HEARD.

Several of the participants described their neighborhood’s issues as being daunting and deterring them from engagement. Many faced gang-related issues and police harassment; they doubted their communities could change, or that their voices would be heard.

Continued on Page 3

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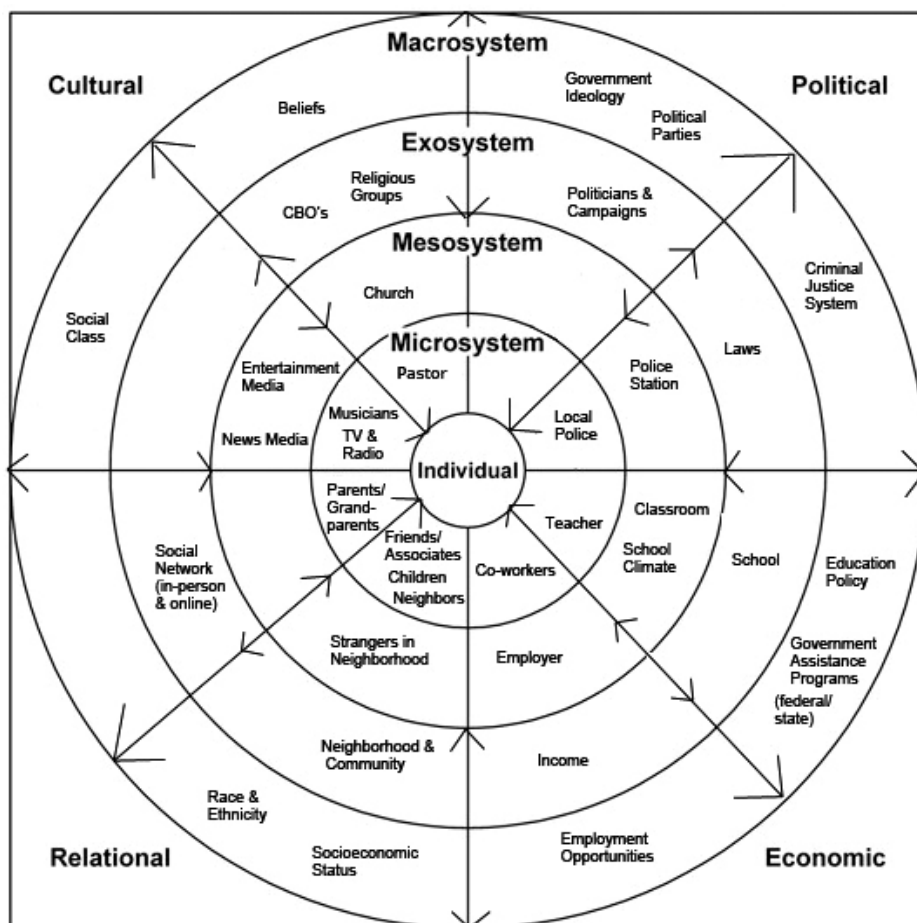
Continued from Page 2

CIVIC INFLUENCES COME FROM MANY PLACES

Based on CIRCLE's focus groups and a scan of previous literature, we explored what settings or contexts help out-of-school youth to develop civic skills and motivations as they move through young adulthood. Contexts included families and households, ethnic or cultural groups, neighborhoods, schools, government agencies, and workplaces, among others. For the most part, respondents were critical of the ways that these settings had engaged them or developed their skills.

Find the full report here: <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=4240> ★

Figure 1: The Contexts of Youth Development



Adapted from "An Illustration of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecosystemic model," by D. Fromme, 2011, *Ecosystemic Issues and Approaches. Systems of Psychotherapy* (401-427) (New York: Springer).