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Civic Engagement Among California High School Teens

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“Higher rates of civic engagement are associated with better health status.”

SUMMARY: This policy brief describes civic engagement among California adolescents in high school. Using data from the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS), the study found that the most common civic engagement activity among California high school teens is volunteering. Latino teens and those from low-income families have lower rates of civic engagement. Higher rates of civic engagement are associated with better health status, fewer days of missed school due to health, better

grades, and greater perceived likelihood of attending college. Strategies to increase adolescent civic engagement could help promote healthy development. Policymakers, schools, and community organizations can promote civic engagement among all youth by expanding programs, encouraging youth participation in school and community organizations, and engaging youth who have not traditionally been included in civic activities.

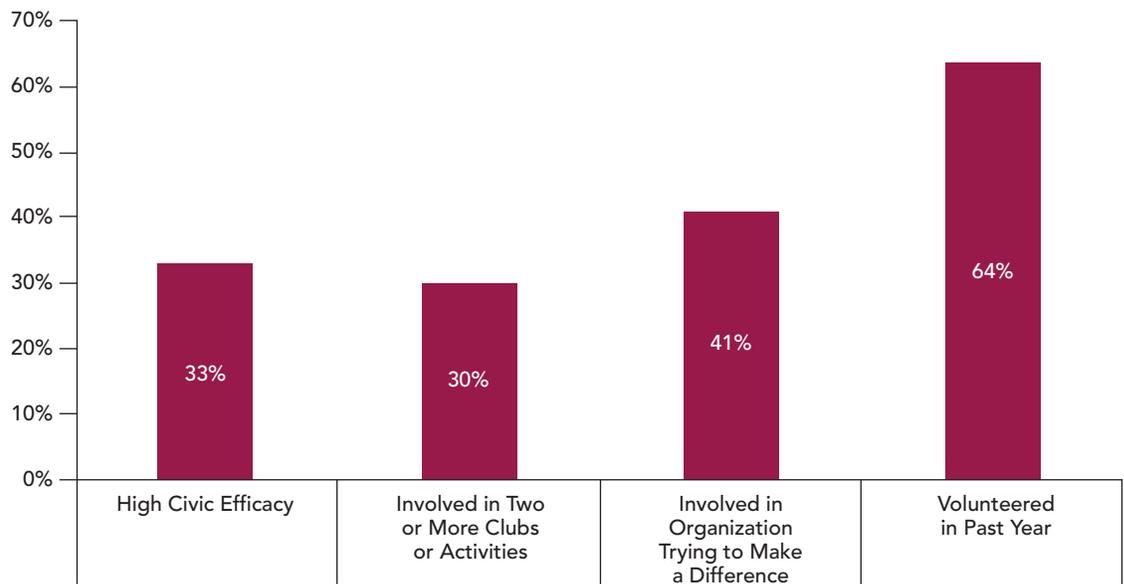
Civic engagement” refers to individual or group actions intended to address issues of concern to the public. Civic engagement includes a range of activities such as volunteering, voting, and participating in school, community, or political organizations. Civic engagement can help promote healthy youth development by providing opportunities for social interaction, influencing intentions to engage in positive health behaviors, contributing to a sense of self-efficacy, increasing leadership and communication skills, and providing access to resources and services.¹⁻³ Previous research suggests that greater youth civic engagement is associated with positive outcomes that include better health outcomes and development indicators, as well as higher levels of education and income as adults.⁴ For example, greater social participation—specifically, the extent to which people participate in formal and informal groups or organizations—is associated with academic

achievement and reduced risk of alcohol and drug use among youth.^{5,6} In addition, volunteering is associated with better academic performance, reduced likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors, and greater likelihood of attending college.^{7,8}

There are disparities in rates of civic engagement among youth.^{9,10} Some population groups are more likely to participate in civic engagement activities.^{9,11} Adolescents from higher-income families are more likely to volunteer or to be involved in clubs or organizations than are adolescents from low-income families.¹¹ Youth of color are less likely to volunteer or to participate in school or community organizations.⁹ Research suggests that these differences may occur, in part, because opportunities for youth civic engagement vary by socioeconomic status.¹² These inequalities are of concern because of the positive benefits associated with youth civic engagement.¹⁰

Exhibit 1

Prevalence of Civic Engagement Indicators, Adolescents in High School, California, 2013-14



Source: 2013-14 California Health Interview Survey

“Nearly two-thirds of teens had volunteered in the past year.”

This policy brief uses data from the 2013-14 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) to describe the prevalence of four indicators of civic engagement among high school-aged California adolescents: high civic efficacy (which refers to caring about issues, feeling connected to others engaged in civic activities, and feeling able to make a difference), participating in activities in and out of school, volunteering, and being involved in an organization that is trying to make a difference at school or in the community. This policy brief examines variations in civic engagement indicators by gender, family income, race/ethnicity, and citizenship status. It also examines the association of civic engagement with four health and education-related outcomes: health status, missed school days due to health, school grades, and likelihood of attending college. These measures are described in more detail under “Data Source and Methods” at the end of this policy brief.

Civic Engagement Among California Adolescents

The prevalence of adolescent involvement in civic activities varied depending on the type of activity (Exhibit 1). One-third (33 percent) of

adolescents of high school age had high civic efficacy. Thirty percent were involved in two or more clubs or activities in or outside of school. Forty-one percent of high school-aged teens were involved in an organization that was trying to make a difference in their community or at their school, and nearly two-thirds (64 percent) had volunteered in the past year.

Civic Engagement Varies by Gender, Income, Race/Ethnicity, and Citizenship Status

Civic engagement varies across demographic groups. Female high school-aged teens were more likely than males to have high civic efficacy, participate in two or more activities, and be involved in organizations that were trying to make a difference (Exhibit 2). Approximately 25 percent of male teens had high civic efficacy and participated in two or more activities, compared to 40 percent and 35 percent of females, respectively. Similarly, 37 percent of male adolescents participated in organizations trying to make a difference, compared to 45 percent of females.

Low-income high school teens were less likely to participate in two or more activities,

Indicators of Civic Engagement by Gender, Family Income, Race/Ethnicity, and Citizenship Status, Adolescents in High School, California, 2013-14

Exhibit 2

	High Civic Efficacy %	Two or More Clubs or Activities %	Volunteered in Past Year %	In Organization Making a Difference %
Gender				
Female	40	35	37	45
Male	25**	24**	36	37**
Income				
Below 200% FPL	31	24**	45**	34**
200-299%	35	36	71	38*
300% and above	34	34	80	50
Race/ethnicity				
Latino	33	23**	55**	41
Asian	35	44	66	51
African-American	–	–	68	–
White	31	36	78	41
Multiracial	26	32	66	40
Citizenship Status				
U.S.-born citizen	33	29	66	40
Naturalized citizen	45	42	66	61**
Non-citizen	19*	24	38**	39

Source: 2013-14 California Health Interview Survey

* Significantly different from Female, 300 percent and above, White, U.S.-born, $p < 0.10$

** Significantly different from Female, 300 percent and above, White, U.S.-born, $p < 0.05$

– Not available due to small sample size

FPL refers to Federal Poverty Level. In 2014, 200% FPL for a family of four was \$47,700.

volunteer, or participate in organizations that work to make a difference (Exhibit 2). Less than one-quarter of adolescents in households with incomes below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) participated in two or more activities, compared to just over one-third of those in households that were at least 300 percent FPL. Only 45 percent of teens in the lowest income group volunteered, compared to 80 percent of those in the higher income category. Approximately one-third of the lowest-income adolescents participated in groups that try to make a difference, compared to half of those in the highest income category.

Among adolescents in high school, Latinos were the only racial/ethnic group that varied significantly from whites in activities related to civic engagement (Exhibit 2). Less than one-quarter of Latinos participated in two or more

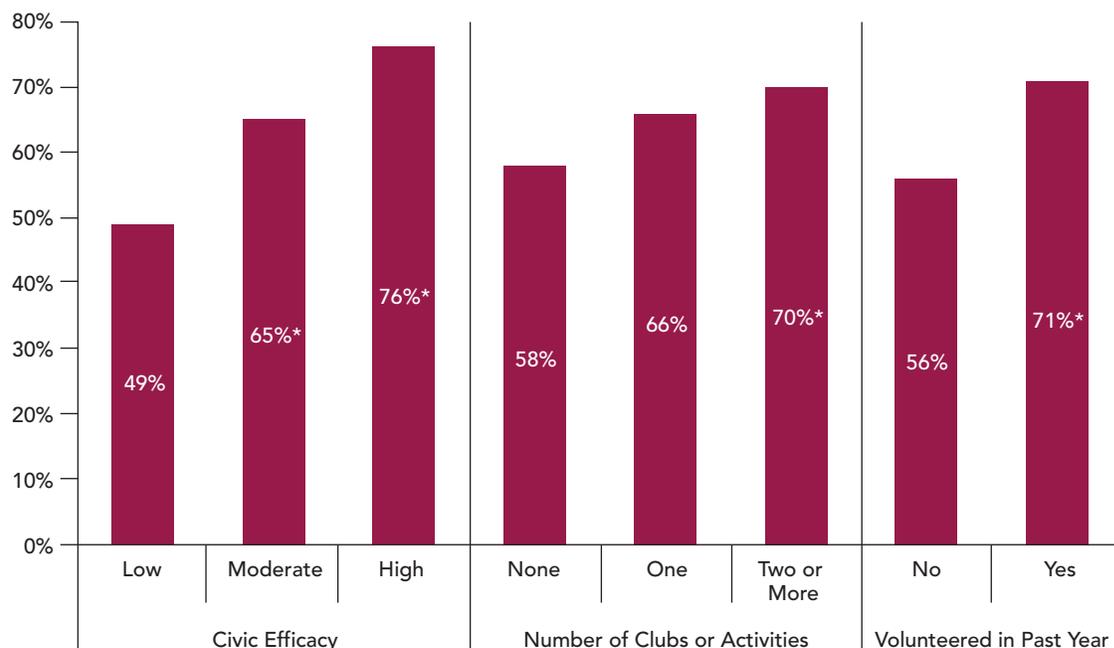
activities, compared to over one-third of whites. Just over half of Latinos volunteered in the past year, compared to more than three-quarters of whites. These differences may be related to income and citizenship. The majority (65 percent) of Latino teens are from families with incomes below 200 percent FPL, a proportion that is considerably higher than that among white teens (20 percent). Although 85 percent of Latino teens were U.S.-born, this proportion is still lower than that for white teens (97 percent).

Activities related to civic engagement varied by citizenship status among adolescents in high school (Exhibit 2). Non-citizens were less likely to be involved in civic engagement activities than U.S.-born citizens, but not all differences were statistically significant. Thirty-eight percent of non-citizens volunteered, compared

“One-third of the lowest-income adolescents participate in groups that try to make a difference, compared to half of those in the highest income category.”

Exhibit 3

Percent Reporting "Excellent" or "Very Good" Health Status by Civic Engagement Indicators, Adolescents in High School, California, 2013-14



Source: 2013-14 California Health Interview Survey

*Significantly different from low civic efficacy, no clubs or activities, no volunteering, $p < 0.05$

“Naturalized citizens had higher rates of involvement in an organization trying to make a difference than either U.S.-born citizens or non-citizens.”

to 66 percent of U.S.-born and naturalized citizens. Fewer than one in five non-citizens had high civic efficacy, compared to one-third of U.S.-born citizens, but this difference was only marginally significant. Naturalized citizens had higher rates of civic efficacy and volunteering than non-citizens. In addition, naturalized citizens had higher rates of involvement in an organization trying to make a difference than either U.S.-born or non-citizens, although the difference with non-citizens was marginally significant.

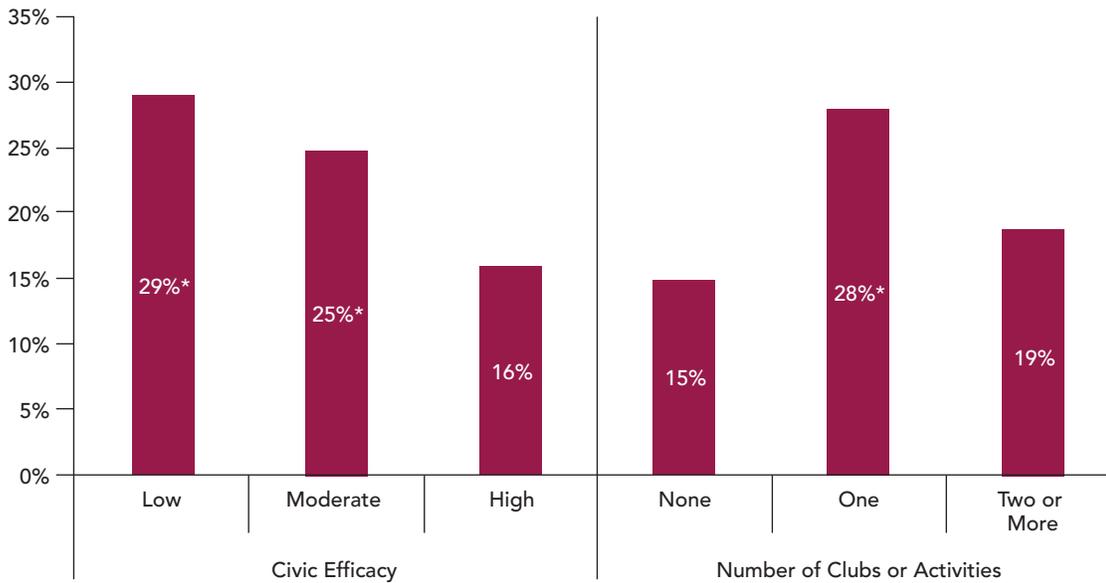
Adolescent Civic Engagement Related to Better Health Status, Fewer Missed School Days, Better Grades, and Higher Likelihood of Attending College

Among adolescents in high school, civic engagement was related to better health status (Exhibit 3). More than three-quarters (76 percent) of high school-aged adolescents with

high civic efficacy said their health status was excellent or very good, compared to less than half (49 percent) of those with low civic efficacy. Similarly, 70 percent of high school teens who were involved in at least two clubs or activities reported excellent/very good health status, compared to 58 percent of adolescents not involved in any clubs or activities. The percent of adolescents reporting excellent or very good health status was higher among those who volunteered in the past year than among those who did not (71 percent vs. 56 percent). There were no statistical differences in health status by participating in an organization trying to make a difference (data not shown).

Percent Who Missed One or More School Days Due to Health in the Past Year by Civic Engagement Indicators, Adolescents in High School, California, 2013-14

Exhibit 4



Source: 2013-14 California Health Interview Survey

*Significantly different from high civic efficacy, no clubs or activities, $p < 0.05$

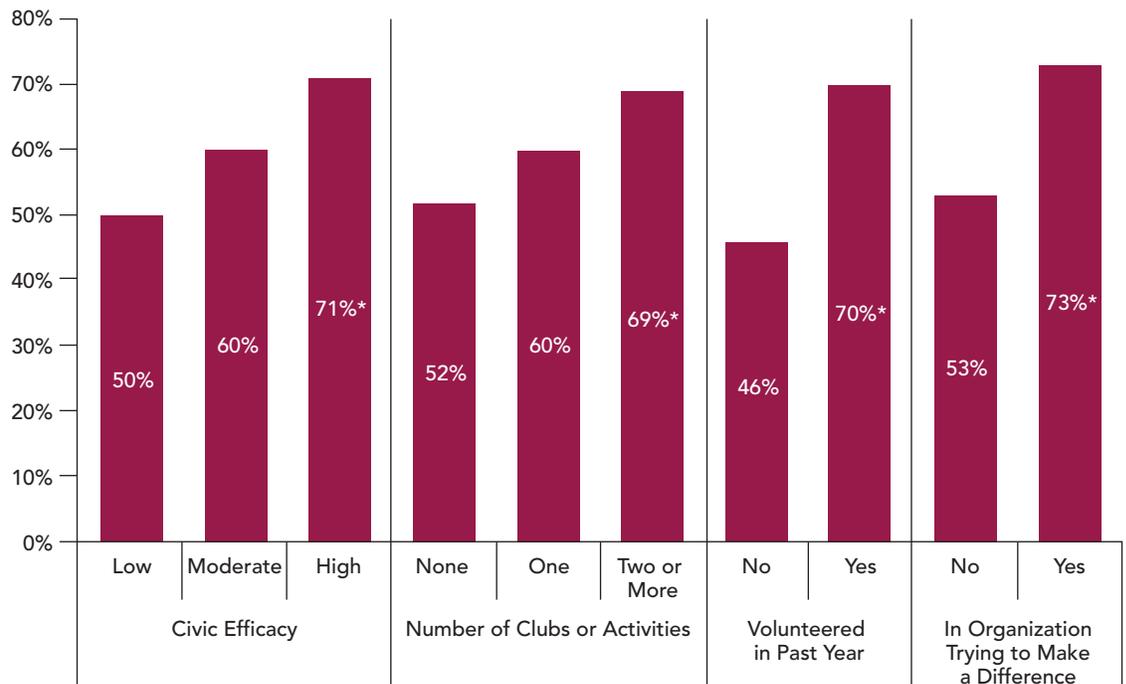
Among high school teens, missing school due to health was associated with low civic efficacy and the number of clubs or activities they were involved in (Exhibit 4). Twenty-nine percent of teens with low civic efficacy missed at least one school day due to health in the past year, compared to 16 percent of those with high civic efficacy. When looking at the number of clubs or activities, the highest rate of missing school due to health was among adolescents participating in one club or activity (28 percent), significantly higher

than the rate among those participating in no clubs or two or more clubs (15 percent and 19 percent, respectively). Missing one or more days of school did not statistically differ by volunteering or participating in an organization trying to make a difference (data not shown).

“Missing school due to health was associated with low civic efficacy.”

Exhibit 5

Percent Reporting Grades Are Mostly A's and B's by Civic Engagement Indicators, Adolescents in High School, California, 2013-14



Source: 2013-14 California Health Interview Survey

*Significantly different from low civic efficacy, no clubs or activities, no volunteering, or not involved in organization trying to make a difference, $p < 0.05$

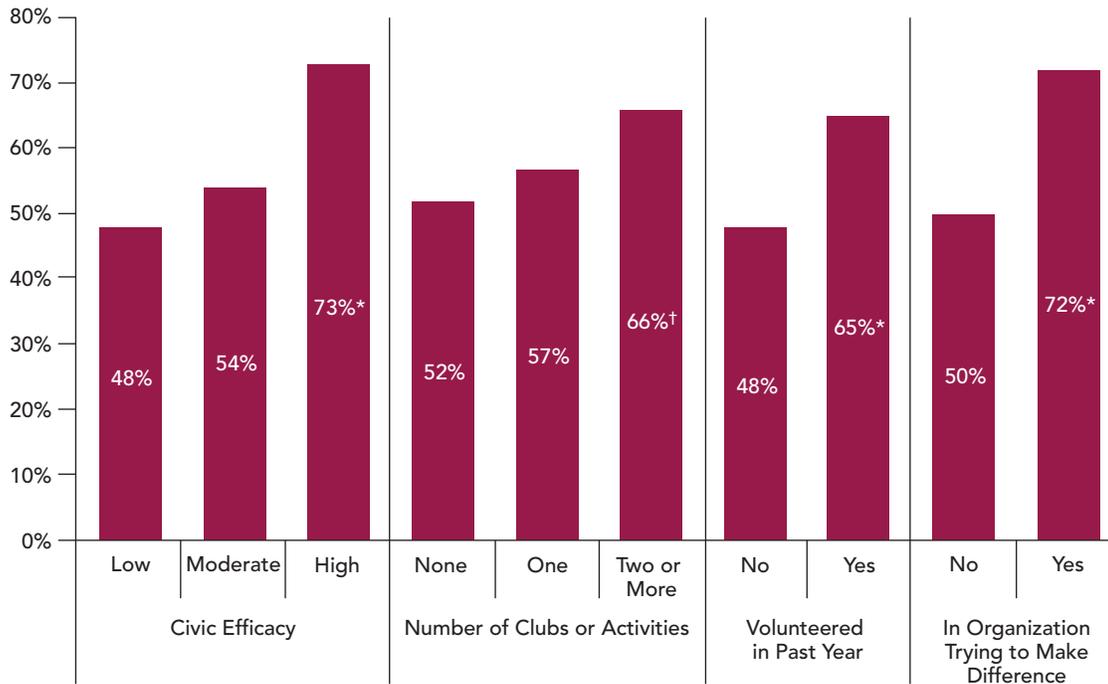
“Adolescents involved in volunteering ... were more likely to have mostly A's and B's than those not involved.”

Being more civically engaged was associated with having better grades among adolescents in high school (Exhibit 5). High school-aged teens with high levels of civic efficacy were more likely to report having grades of mostly A's and B's than those with low civic efficacy (71 percent vs. 50 percent). A similar pattern was observed for number of clubs and activities, with 69 percent of adolescents involved in two or more clubs having mostly A's and B's, compared to 52 percent of those involved in

no clubs/activities. In addition, adolescents involved in volunteering (70 percent) or in an organization trying to make a difference (73 percent) were more likely to have mostly A's and B's than those not involved (46 percent and 53 percent, respectively).

Percent Indicating High Likelihood of Attending College by Civic Engagement Indicators, Adolescents in High School, California, 2013-14

Exhibit 6



Source: 2013-14 California Health Interview Survey

*Significantly different from low civic efficacy, no clubs or activities, no volunteering, or not involved in organization trying to make a difference, $p < 0.05$

† Significantly different from no clubs or activities, $p < 0.10$

Higher levels of education are strongly related with better health outcomes.¹³⁻¹⁵ Among high school-aged adolescents, greater civic engagement was related to a higher perceived likelihood of attending college (Exhibit 6). Seventy-three percent of teens with high civic efficacy indicated they were highly likely to attend college, compared with 48 percent of those with low civic efficacy. Perceived likelihood of attending college was also higher among adolescents participating in two or more clubs or activities (66 percent) than among those not participating (52 percent). Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of teens who had volunteered in the past year indicated a high likelihood of attending college, compared with less than half (48 percent) of those who did not. Teens involved in an organization trying to make a difference were more likely to say they were highly likely to attend college than those not involved (72 and 50 percent, respectively).

Conclusions

Higher rates of adolescent civic engagement, as measured by civic efficacy, participation in clubs or organizations in and out of school, volunteering, and being involved in an organization trying to make a difference, were associated with better health and educational outcomes among California adolescents in high school. Previous research suggests that involvement in these civic engagement activities can provide a number of benefits to youth, as well as helping them avoid behaviors that put them at risk for adverse health outcomes.^{4,5} In addition, participation in these civic engagement activities predicts later participation as adults.¹⁶ However, 67 percent of high school-aged teens have low or moderate civic efficacy (including 21 percent with low civic efficacy); 22 percent are not involved in any clubs, organizations, or other activities in or out of school; 59 percent are not involved in an organization trying to make a difference; and

“Teens involved in an organization trying to make a difference were more likely to say they were highly likely to attend college than those not involved.”

“High civic efficacy did not differ by family income or race/ethnicity... lower rates of civic engagement may not be due to a lack of interest.”

36 percent have not volunteered. Strategies to increase civic engagement among youth may help promote healthy youth development and healthy behaviors, as well as preventing risky behaviors among youth.

The indicators of civic engagement vary by gender, race/ethnicity, income, and citizenship status. Male teens are less likely than females to have high civic efficacy, to participate in two or more clubs or activities, or to be involved in an organization trying to make a difference. Teens who are not citizens are less likely than U.S.-born citizens to have high civic efficacy or to have volunteered in the past year. However, naturalized citizens are as likely as U.S.-born citizens (and in some cases more likely) to have high civic efficacy, participate in two or more clubs or activities, to have volunteered, or to be involved in an organization trying to make a difference.

Adolescents from low-income families were less likely to participate in two or more clubs or activities, to have volunteered in the past year, or to be involved in an organization trying to make a difference. Latinos were less likely to participate in two or more clubs or activities and to volunteer.

Interestingly, high civic efficacy did not statistically differ by family income or race/ethnicity. This suggests that lower rates of civic engagement among low-income or Latino teens may not be due to a lack of interest, but rather to a lack of resources or opportunities to participate in civic engagement activities.^{9,12} Because civic engagement is associated with benefits for youth, these differences in civic engagement may contribute to health and education disparities among youth. Targeting efforts to increase civic engagement toward groups with lower rates of engagement may be an effective strategy to help reduce disparities among youth.

Recommendations

Strategies to increase civic engagement among youth could help to promote healthy development, particularly in terms of health and education outcomes. These strategies could include:

- *Expanding and bolstering programs that involve youth in improving their own communities.* Community-based organizations can provide opportunities for youth to become involved in improving their communities.³ Youth involvement in community groups can benefit both the youth themselves and the organizations: Young people can develop and improve leadership and communication skills, while organizations can gain valuable insight into the needs of adolescents. After-school programs can also provide opportunities for youth to participate in clubs or organizations outside of school.

However, many youth face barriers to participating in such programs—for example, cost or lack of availability. Reducing such barriers could help increase participation. Lowering costs, subsidizing fees for low-income participants, or introducing programs in underserved areas can all reduce barriers to participation.

In addition, raising awareness of volunteer opportunities could increase participation in volunteer activities. For instance, community organizations can provide information about these opportunities and promote them directly to youth. Promoting volunteer opportunities that can lead to part-time or temporary student employment may be particularly helpful for increasing participation in volunteer activities among low-income youth.

- *Encouraging participation in civic engagement activities at middle and high schools, particularly in low-income areas and communities of color.* Low-income and Latino individuals had lower rates of participation in civic engagement activities. However, they did not differ in civic efficacy,

indicating that these groups are just as likely as other groups to care about issues and want to make a difference. One explanation for the lower rates of participation is that members of these groups lack opportunities for participation. Schools and organizations could provide opportunities to participate in civic engagement activities that these groups may not otherwise have. Community organizations can also partner with schools to provide information and promote opportunities for involvement to young people.

- **Placing particular emphasis on engaging young people who have not traditionally been included in community and school civic activities.** Efforts to encourage and promote civic engagement activities among adolescents should emphasize involving those youth who have not traditionally been included in such activities. In this study, adolescents who were from low-income families, were Latino, or were non-citizens had lower rates of civic engagement. Other research suggests that African-Americans also have lower rates of civic engagement.^{17,18} Recognizing and valuing diversity (including ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic) can help youth in these groups feel welcome to become involved. Actively recruiting and encouraging the participation of youth in underrepresented groups by expanding opportunities for them can help promote civic engagement among youth who have not traditionally been included in civic engagement activities.

Data Source and Methods

The findings in this brief are based on data from the 2013-14 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS). CHIS 2013-14 completed interviews with 2,253 adolescents, drawn from every county in the state. Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, Chinese (both Mandarin and Cantonese), Vietnamese, Korean, and Tagalog. Adolescents in high school (N=1,436) were asked a series of questions related to civic engagement. Adolescents were asked to rate how strongly they agreed (1= strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree) with the following statements: *I am being raised by someone who follows what is going on in government; I care deeply about issues in my community; I care deeply about health issues in my community; I believe*

that I can make a difference in my community; I feel connected to others who are working to make a difference. Responses to these questions were averaged to create the civic efficacy measure.

Participation in two or more clubs was determined by tallying the number of the following activities in which adolescents reported being involved: arts, dance, drama, music, newspaper, yearbook, honor society, student government, debate, youth center or Boys & Girls Club, religious group, political group, or any other activity not mentioned. Volunteering was measured by asking: "In the past 12 months, have you done any volunteer work or community service that you haven't been paid for?" To determine involvement in organizations that were trying to make a difference, interviewees were asked: "Have you taken part in a club or group that tried to make a difference at your school, in the community, or in broader society?"

Adolescents also reported their health status (excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor), the number of days in the past year that they had missed school due to their health, the kind of grades they had received on their last report card, and how likely they were to attend college (by indicating a number on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being highly likely). Adolescents who responded with a 5 were considered highly likely to attend college.

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This publication contains data from the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS), the nation's largest state health survey. Conducted by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, CHIS data give a detailed picture of the health and health care needs of California's large and diverse population.

CHIS is a collaboration of the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, California Department of Public Health, California Department of Health Care Services, and the Public Health Institute. Learn more at: www.chis.ucla.edu

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Endnotes

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