

ABOUT THE CIVIC HEALTH CURATED STRATEGY LIST

This list of evidence-informed strategies strengthen opportunities for people to participate in their community. These solutions focus on civic infrastructure, or the spaces and policies that facilitate connection and make civic participation possible.

What is civic health?

Civic health reflects the opportunities people have to participate in their community.¹ It welcomes everyone's voice to set priorities, make decisions and share resources. Civic health starts with our local communities and is the cornerstone of our democracy, representing promise, opportunity, belonging and shared responsibility.

Civic health is shaped by civic infrastructure and civic participation. Civic infrastructure includes public spaces such as schools, parks and libraries where we meet, make our voices heard, engage in cultural activities and assure belonging. It also includes the policies and practices that determine how easy it is for everyone to participate.^{2,3} Civic participation includes the ways people engage in community life to improve conditions and shape the community's future, such as volunteering, mentoring, participating in unions and voting.⁴

People are healthier, more connected and have better access to resources such as education, health insurance and stable housing, in communities with more available and better-resourced civic infrastructure. They are also more likely to participate in the community, such as volunteering or voting.^{5,6}

How does civic infrastructure shape civic participation?

A community's civic health is shaped by civic infrastructure, which supports connection and makes civic participation possible. Physical and virtual public spaces, including libraries, the internet, schools and



community centers, help people access information, learn and collectively act.² These spaces are shaped and formed with intention through policies and practices to cultivate environments where everyone can exchange ideas and problem solve together. By supporting ways to participate, civic infrastructure is foundational to building healthy, thriving and equitable communities.

Civic infrastructure includes governance, which determines who has a say, what is prioritized and how resources are allocated.² This can include voter registration laws, open meetings, community advisory boards and processes such as participatory budgeting. Policies, laws, ordinances and practices determine how easy it is to participate in civic life and for whom. Examples include voting, volunteering and census participation.

Vibrant civic infrastructure is not a reality across the country. Many communities and groups of people, including women, immigrants, LGBTQ+ and racialized groups, such as American Indian, Black, and Hispanic populations have experienced a history of disinvestment in civic infrastructure and exclusionary policies and practices. These policies and practices have formed structural barriers to civic participation through restrictive voting laws, redlining, legal actions to terminate tribal culture and land rights, and disinvesting in rural economies.⁵

What is the connection between civic health and health?

People are more likely to participate in places with well-resourced civic infrastructure.⁵ Research shows that increased civic participation, such as voting and volunteering, is tied to better health, including improved public health outcomes, self-reported health, mental health and physical health.^{6,7,8,9} The social connections made through participating in civic life can also increase length of life.¹⁰

Healthier counties have more available and better-resourced civic infrastructure, including access to information via broadband internet, libraries and local news outlets, and access to civic spaces, including adequately funded schools, parks, and social associations. Healthier counties also have higher rates of voter turnout and census participation than the least healthy counties. Counties that have a long history of disinvestment and discriminatory policies and practices, such as redlining and racial segregation, are consistently among the least healthy in measures of length and quality of life.⁵

Some states have more structural barriers to civic health, or policies and practices that maintain unfair and unjust outcomes. Examples include gerrymandered districts and laws and practices that make it harder to vote and encourage disinvestment in civic infrastructure. Voter turnout, census participation and volunteering rates are lowest in states with more structural barriers.⁵ There are also impacts on health and equity, including increased premature death rates, particularly among people with lower incomes.^{11,12}

Which strategies will improve civic health?

Nurturing civic health requires individual actions in addition to local, state and federal solutions. Some strategies make it easier to participate in civic life, especially for people who have been excluded from making their voice heard in the past. Other strategies strengthen local ownership and community assets,



invest in public spaces, nurture civic skills, and improve opportunities to work toward a common purpose. All of these strategies can build community power and contribute to healthier communities.

References

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