



# University of Georgia, Indiana University Indianapolis

## Examining the Influence of Civic Infrastructure on Rural/Urban Volunteering and Civic Engagement

### What is the background for this study?

This study investigates the impact of a community’s institutional civic infrastructure—including nonprofits, voluntary associations, businesses, schools, and government employment—on volunteering and other civic behaviors, focusing on the varying dynamics between rural and urban communities. This inquiry is prompted by shifting socio-demographic characteristics and increasing disparities between these community types. Building on earlier research highlighting a more pronounced decline in volunteering in rural areas compared to urban ones, the researchers utilize the AmeriCorps-sponsored Current Population Survey (CPS) Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement merged with county-level data from multiple sources to describe local civic infrastructures and understand their impact on civic engagement.

### What are the research questions?

This study aims to identify how a community’s civic infrastructure influences civic engagement. For the purposes of this study, the researchers define community civic infrastructure as the variety and density of local institutions, such as the number and types of nonprofits, the number of churches and schools, the number of small businesses, and government employment. The study’s specific research questions include:

1. How does a community’s civic infrastructure influence volunteering and other forms of civic engagement (e.g., attending community meetings, voting in local elections)?
2. Are there differences in the relationship between community civic infrastructure and individual volunteering/civic engagement across rural and urban places?

### What data and methods are used in this study?

The researchers gather contextual data, such as the number of schools and churches, density of different types of nonprofit organizations, government salaries, and local businesses. They obtain permission from the U.S. Census Bureau to access the confidential-level CPS Civic Engagement and Volunteering dataset within a secure research data center. The researchers then leverage and enhance data from their previous AmeriCorps grant to create a comprehensive dataset consisting of the CPS data merged with community-level socio-demographic and civic infrastructure data from sources like the Decennial Census, the American Community Survey, the

**Study At-A-Glance**

**Study Title**  
Examining the Influence of Civic Infrastructure on Rural/Urban Volunteering and Civic Engagement

**Researchers**  
Rebecca Nesbit, PhD  
Laurie E. Paarlberg, PhD

**Grant Cohort** 2022

**Timeline** 2022-2025

**Study Location** Athens, Georgia

**Study Topic Area(s)**  
Community Development  
Social Equity  
Volunteering, Nonprofit Studies, and National Service

National Center for Charitable Statistics nonprofit data, the Census of Government and Census of Business, and CQ Press' Elections and Voting Data. This new dataset represents individual-level volunteering and civic behaviors, demographic details, and community socio-demographic and civic infrastructure on a national scale.

The researchers employ various statistical methods, such as logit regressions, to examine how specific community traits explain variations in individual volunteering behavior over time within counties. In particular, they use an Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition to understand how the influence of socio-demographic conditions and civic infrastructure varies across rural and urban places. The data analysis encompasses multiple dependent variables to gauge civic engagement, including individual volunteering, attendance at public meetings, collaboration with neighbors to enhance their community, and making charitable donations.

### What are potential opportunities to apply study findings and/or build on this research?

This study explains how and why volunteering and civic engagement are changing, particularly in rural areas. The researchers identify which community institutions nurture civic engagement and which ones dampen engagement. Policymakers and community leaders can use these findings to support and sustain civic engagement and tailor that support to meet the specific needs of rural and urban communities. The study's findings also enhance understanding of which institutions impact civic behaviors most, allowing policymakers to develop policies and programs that strengthen those institutions and encourage civic engagement within their communities.

#### For more information on the study:

<b>Study Contact(s)</b>	Rebecca Nesbit	Professor of Nonprofit Management	University of Georgia	<a href="mailto:nesbit7@uga.edu">nesbit7@uga.edu</a>
	Laurie E. Paarlberg	Charles Stewart Mott Chair on Community Foundations, Professor of Philanthropic Studies	Indiana University Indianapolis	<a href="mailto:lpaarlbe@indiana.edu">lpaarlbe@indiana.edu</a>

#### About AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation Research Grants

AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation holds grant competitions to foster scholarly research on civic health, address knowledge gaps in civic engagement and volunteerism, and identify new ideas and methodological approaches to service.

- Learn more about [AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation Research Grants](#).
- See a [Snapshot of Research Grantee Activities and Insights](#).
- Explore the [AmeriCorps Open Data Research Grantee Dataset](#).

#### About the Office of Research and Evaluation

The [AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation](#) assists AmeriCorps and its partners in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data and insights about AmeriCorps programs and civic life in America. For more information on this study and other studies funded by AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation, please contact [evaluation@americorps.gov](mailto:evaluation@americorps.gov).

#### About AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism, provides opportunities for Americans to serve their country domestically, address the nation's most pressing challenges, improve lives and communities, and strengthen civic engagement. Each year, the agency places more than 200,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in intensive service roles; and empowers millions more to serve as long-term, short-term, or one-time volunteers. **Learn more at [AmeriCorps.gov](http://AmeriCorps.gov).**