



University of California, Los Angeles

Examining Today's Social Change Agents and Their Opportunities to Grow and Thrive

What is the background for this study?

This study explores young social change agents' civic agency, knowledge, actions, and purpose. It examines how these dimensions of engagement develop across diverse gender, racial, ethnic, and sexual identities. Additionally, the study investigates the effectiveness of various opportunities and supports in sustaining these engagement dimensions. The research uses cross-sectional, intervention, and longitudinal data to advance understanding and inform policies to boost and sustain youth involvement in social justice advocacy.

What are the research questions?

This study examines young social agents' experiences, opportunities, and identities to deepen understanding of civic engagement and guide practices that support its sustainability in the United States over the long term.

Research questions include:

1. How do civic agency, knowledge, action, and purpose go together and change over time?
2. What opportunities and supports in organizations and communities support young people's civic development?
3. How do youth's social identities relate to unique configurations of civic agency, knowledge, action and purpose, developmental change in civic engagement, and differential opportunities and costs in civic contexts?

What data and methods are used in this study?

The researchers collect and use data from three different studies, each with its own methodological approaches: (1) a cross-sectional sample of young social change agents, (2) an intervention pre-post survey design with a comparison group, and (3) a three-year longitudinal study of young social change agents and a general youth sample.

Study 1 examines a cross-sectional sample of young social change agents using existing data from around 600 youth who completed surveys prior to attending the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) National Advocacy Institute in 2021 and 2022. The goal of the institute is to offer training, inspiration, and social support to young social justice activists. The survey includes demographic information and measures of civic engagement such as

Study At-A-Glance

Study Title

Examining Today's Young Social Change Agents and Their Opportunities to Grow and Thrive

Researchers

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Grant Cohort 2022

Timeline 2022-2025

Study Location Los Angeles, California

Study Topic Area(s)

Education Across the Life Course

Social Equity

Volunteering, Nonprofit Studies, and National Service

Youth Development

civic agency, civic knowledge, civic actions, civic purpose, organizational access, support, and social identity. In analyzing these data, researchers fit models to develop different “profiles” of civic agency, knowledge, and action. The study uses profiles to identify predictors associated with each profile. It employs content analysis to code and analyze open-ended survey responses about civic purpose, examining whether they remain consistent or change across years.

Study 2 utilizes the ACLU’s pre- and post-test survey data from the National Advocacy Institute starting in 2021. The researchers build on these data by surveying 2022 participants after six months to better assess sustained civic growth and adding a matched comparison group to compare to 2023 participants. The researchers recruit the comparison sample using Instagram advertising to recruit a demographically similar sample of young social change agents. The study explores the institute’s role in increasing civic agency, knowledge, and action by examining differences between the treatment and comparison groups.

Study 3 is a three-year longitudinal study of institute alumni and a general sample. The first wave comes from the ACLU institute alumni survey and a general sample recruited in spring 2023, with both samples surveyed again in spring 2024 and 2025. The study examines growth in civic engagement and civic developmental processes.

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

The study enhances researchers’ and practitioners’ understanding of young social change agents’ civic actions and purpose. The findings can help improve policies, practices, and other forms of support to maintain civic engagement among US youth and assist their development into civic leaders.

For more information on the study:

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