

# ADDRESSING AND OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*Youth civic engagement—and particularly youth participation in properly designed youth programs—has indisputably favorable outcomes for the young people involved (Saito, 2006; Pancer et al., 2002; Flanagan et al., 2002). This research reviews the wide-ranging literature available on youth civic engagement in urban communities. Using content analysis, we identify organizations involved in youth engagement as well as barriers faced by organizations engaged in this policy arena. Our research also identifies 15 broad types of barriers that organizations seeking to encourage youth civic engagement encounter in building and delivering successful youth engagement programs. In addition, we discuss the emergent social and political barriers that are prevalent among the identified service organizations. Ultimately, we argue that such barriers are important influences in determining the ability of organizations to effectively serve their clients.*

**Key words:** youth engagement, youth involvement, community-based organization

## INTRODUCTION

In an effort to move the country forward through economic uncertainty, President Barack Obama's *Call to Service* invites citizens to help solve the nation's problems through public service. The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, signed into law in 2009, expands service opportunities for all people by providing new resources to increase the capacity of community organizations to take on more volunteers. In addition, this legislation targets specific groups, including youth who are "disadvantaged," to address core societal problems in a sustainable manner. The act provides a unique opportunity for organizations dedicated to improving levels of youth civic engagement within their communities. The focus on organizations that work with youth establishes a compelling argument for further study of, and contribution of new knowledge about, effective practices and interventions utilized by these organizations to help achieve the goals and objectives of the provisions in the presidential call to service.

Research has shown that the active participation of young people in their communities—known as "youth civic engagement" in the literature—is linked to a variety of beneficial outcomes at both the individual and community levels. These outcomes include higher self-esteem, a greater sense of community ethos, greater community pride, and lower crime rates. Studies indicate, however, that urban youth, especially those living in economically distressed communities, do not participate in youth programs at the same levels as their suburban counterparts (Brown and Evans, 2002; Davalos et al., 1999; Duffett and Johnson, 2004; Saito, 2006). This lower level of participation by urban youth has been linked to a variety of personal and socioeconomic issues particular to the urban context, including high rates of unemployment, crime, and

violence, as well as lack of access to affordable housing and health services (Perkins et al., 2007). The risks associated with low-income urban settings also function as barriers to participation in youth programs for ethnic minorities, making it especially important for youth to have access to structured community-based programs (Villarruel et al., 2005).

Why is the lack of civic engagement and participation among youth a cause for concern? Young people between the ages of 15 and 24 are at the greatest risk of being either the victims or the perpetrators of homicide, the second leading cause of death among this population (Guterman and Cameron, 1997; Prothrow-Stith and Weissman, 1991; Whitaker and Bastian, 1991). In 2006, 28.9 percent of all persons arrested for robbery in cities were under the age of 18. Young people between the ages of 15 and 24 constituted substantial percentages of those arrested for forcible rape (15.1%), for aggravated assault (14.3%), and for murder or non-negligent manslaughter (10.8%). Juveniles under the age of 15 constituted 31.8 percent of all persons arrested for arson. In suburban areas, the statistics were comparable: 26.4 percent of all persons arrested for robbery were under the age of 18, as were 20.1 percent of those arrested for forcible rape, 14 percent of those arrested for aggravated assault, and 7.5 percent of those arrested for murder or non-negligent manslaughter. Juveniles in suburban areas under the age of 15 comprised 51 percent of all persons arrested for arson (Zeldin, 2000).

This profile of youth involved in crime has raised serious concern and has led many scholars and advocates to argue that youth civic engagement can help to positively influence these statistics. Zeldin maintains that involving youth in their communities is an effective strategy to prevent aggressive behavior and to help young people at risk to develop life skills, self-confidence, and a sense of belonging — all necessary competencies for a successful transition into adulthood (2004). As support for youth civic engagement and new models for such engagement continue to be developed in policy and in practice, however, a variety of scholarly case studies are providing insight into social, cultural, and political barriers to increasing youth participation in urban communities (Saito, 2006). Nonetheless, very little is known about opportunities that exist for youth and barriers faced by youth-serving organizations within this policy system. Given the current emphasis placed on public service by the Obama administration, expanded study of the challenges faced by organizations seeking to increase participation of youth in civic engagement opportunities becomes an important interdisciplinary imperative with the potential for real-world impact.

The purpose of this study is to examine the available delivery structures for youth engagement and the associated challenges these organizations face in reaching and working effectively with urban youth. Specifically, the study focuses on two primary research questions: (1) What are the organizational barriers involved in youth engagement? And (2) what are the barriers these organizations face in serving urban youth? We begin by defining civic engagement within the urban context and providing an overview of three types of opportunities for urban youth to engage in their communities as outlined in the existing literature. We then undertake a content analysis to explore specific barriers, including challenges to service delivery these organizations face in reaching and effectively serving youth across three primary dimensions: social, cultural, and political.

## YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE URBAN CONTEXT

The last two decades have seen an increase in academic research on youth and youth civic engagement. Studies in this area are often interdisciplinary and can be found in political science, public administration, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and development literature, generating “a steady stream of work based on youth assets, youth as community builders, and youth leadership that emphasizes strengths, participation, and the importance of youth having their voices heard” (Pancer et al., 2002: 83). These studies have helped to articulate the central role of youth services in policy planning, programming, and community development activities. As a result, policymakers have begun to see young people as critical clients of and active participants in administrative decision-making processes. Evidence for this new emphasis can be found in substantive intergovernmental documents, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, creating a political and administrative stage on which youth are seen as social actors — and, more important, as citizens whose representation and participation is crucial, in policy and program decisions that will affect their lives and the lives of their peers.

Because of increased interest in and study of “civic engagement,” many definitions of this term have been posited. From simple community engagement to active participation in community groups and activities, working definitions have ranged from descriptions of one-dimensional interactions with people in the community to active participation in organizational operations and decision-making processes. This study has adopted a notion of civic engagement rooted in Nakamura’s understanding of vital engagement: a type of involvement in which an individual experiences “enjoyed absorption over a sustained amount of time, activity [that] provides a link to the individual and the world, and [is] meaningful and significant to the individual” (Nakamura, 2002: 82). Building on the notion of civic engagement as meaningful, enjoyable, and significant, this study also integrates the definition of civic engagement advanced by Pancer et al., in which “meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity [that] has a focus outside himself or herself” (2002: 49).

Civic engagement has been linked to a variety of benefits for young people. Pancer et al. argue that civic engagement leads to higher levels of self-esteem, self-confidence and awareness, interpersonal and social skills, academic achievement, and a reduction in problematic behavior (2002). Flanagan et al. note that “communities are critical arenas for developing a transcendent self—a valuing of the community collective and civic life” (2002: 500). These attributes are associated by the authors with increased levels of political participation. In addition, Youniss et al. posit that civic engagement results in an increased level of civic competence, as demonstrated by “an understanding of how government functions and the acquisition of behavior that allows citizens to participate in government and permits individuals to meet, discuss, and collaborate to promote their interests within a framework of democratic principle” (2002: 124).

Of particular interest to this study is civic engagement among urban youth. Studies in developmental psychology contend that youth of color often feel alienated from their communities and have a lower sense of political efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Torney-Purta, 1990) despite the fact that, as some scholars argue, urban communities are often targeted for additional resources to improve opportunities for civic engagement (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). Political scientists document a “participation gap” between those of

high and low socioeconomic status (Schlozman et al., 1999). Such phenomena must be understood in the context of the social ecology that surrounds urban youth. Urban areas are the loci of greater levels of job loss and income stratification, with few institutions except public schools and churches connecting youth to their local communities (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Kirshner et al., 2003). Urban youth are nonetheless more likely to be motivated to engage in civic participation through their own experiences of growing up in neighborhoods and attending schools with insufficient resources (Ginwright and James, 2002; Kirshner et al., 2003). But, as Saito notes, these young people are affected by a variety of barriers, including access, opportunity, quality, and awareness (2006).

## **YOUTH ENGAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS**

Existing literature suggests that there are three primary avenues through which youth are commonly able to engage with their communities. These include opportunities to serve their communities through the schools they attend, opportunities to get involved in their communities through activities that are facilitated by religious organizations and other community-based opportunities that may be provided by outside entities, including nonprofit organizations (Torney-Purta, 2000; Grossman et al., 2001; Jeavons, 1997; Eccles et al., 2002). These opportunities are most easily accessed by students because they are offered through institutions that are known to and more likely to be trusted by the youth they serve. Given that the majority of a young person's time from ages five to 18 is spent in school, school-based opportunities are among the most frequently utilized resources for young people (Torney-Purta, 2002). In addition, opportunities rooted in religious organizations are also widely used, depending on the participation of youth in religious institutions and, oftentimes, such organizations' commitment to their surrounding communities (Unruh and Sider, 2004). Finally, community-based organizations (CBOs) provide yet another common outlet for students to participate in civic engagement, given that many young people are familiar and comfortable with these organizations, which typically provide school programs, youth activities and programs, clubs, community programs, and other programs during non-school hours (Eccles et al., 2002).

## **METHODOLOGY**

We undertook a content analysis of available youth civic engagement literature addressing the central research questions of our study. Content analysis is a commonly used qualitative research method that can be effectively employed to analyze a body of text. Through content analysis, elements of a body of text are assessed empirically to establish and document specific aspects of their characteristics and the relations among them. Elements of content analysis can include words, idioms, sentences, paragraphs, articles, or entire papers and reports. Based on a specific sequence of steps, content analysis allows the researcher to meaningfully interpret the content presented to make inferences about the patterns of the content within specific elements of a given text (Bowen and Bowen, 2008). The basic premise of this research methodology is to use established empirical methods to answer research questions by drawing inferences from the frequency with which words, sentences, or paragraphs appear within various categories that emerge through the study of the content under review.

A purposive data set for this study was gained through a recursive process. We began by using Boolean phrases such as “youth engagement” to search electronic databases and journals, such EBSCO and Academic Search Premier, at our respective universities. We restricted the search to published writings (including journal articles, books, and reports) by both government agencies and established organizations because these provide the best representation of established thinking in the field. Initial database searches produced a total universe of data of close to 1,000 results. These results were then filtered according to the relevance of the given title or abstract and whether or not the subjects of articles found in the search were related to the nature of the study. We also followed up on references cited within the various documents. Specifically, we sought to identify case studies and analyses of organizations that seek to encourage youth civic engagement within urban communities—that is, any programs that have service, volunteer, or civic action components directed at young people. We included case studies and organizational analyses written between 1990 and 2009. This time frame was established to take account of the introduction of federal service programs, including AmeriCorps, during this period and to make sure that literature referencing the recent policy emphasis on public service would be included. These searches and reading of the actual documents generated a data set of 127 articles, book chapters, and reports.

Based on the data above and the nature of our research questions, we then created coding schema. We first identified six content categories, including three that correspond to the typology of organizations identified in the literature and three that identify specific types of barriers to youth engagement programs. We then identified elements (i.e., words, sentences, and paragraphs) from the various bodies of text and assigned each element to two of the six categories. For example, if a report indicated that there were transportation issues related to the servicing of an after-school program that took place within a school setting, then the data was coded under the *social barriers* category as well as the *school-based opportunities* category.

**Table 1: Content Areas and Definitions Framework**

Category	Definition
Social Barriers	Barriers that occur as the result of constraints placed on individuals, due to societal stratification and distribution of power, that influence intergroup trust and cooperation (World Bank, 2005), as well as social distinctions (hierarchy) between youth and other groups within society (i.e., adults) influenced by social norms aimed at preserving the status of one group over the other.
Cultural Barriers	Barriers that emerge as the result of interpretation, use and perceptions of symbols, and intangible aspects of human societies (Banks and McGee, 2001), such as familial obligations and notions of community, safety, and gender.
Political Barriers	Barriers that may prevent access, opportunity, or support

	for funding and youth's participation in organizational decision making (Dachler and Wilpert, 1978; Farrell and Peterson, 1982).
Community-based Organizations (CBOs)	Organizations that seek to engage youth via after-school programs, youth programs, youth activities, community programs, extracurricular activities, and programs during non-school hours (Eccles et al., 2002) that are not based in a school or within the context of one of the faith-based programs.
Faith-based Organizations	Organizations that are supported by or funded through religious institutions. This category includes faith-secular partnerships as well as any organization that encompasses religious activities such as prayer, worship, the study of sacred texts, religious teachings and testimonies, and invitations to religious activities or faith commitments (Unruh, forthcoming).
School-based Organizations	Opportunities for civic engagement that occur within schools. Typically, these include two types of programs: service-learning opportunities and after-school programs (Saito, 2006; Torney-Purta, 2000; Grossman et al., 2001)

To achieve reliability of the data set, to test coding schema, and to check for intercoder reliability, we estimated a kappa coefficient on a random sample of 25 articles and reports from the larger data set of 127 documents and allowed both coders to code the articles and the data within them independently. Each coder read the articles twice and then assigned the various elements of the text to their respective categories. Kappa coefficients were calculated for each categorical variable. This random sample test confirmed that in each category the kappa coefficient was .95 or higher, indicating substantial agreement between both coders for the analysis of categorical variables. The level of agreement between coders allowed us to proceed to use the coding schema as the tool with which to organize our findings and on which base our analysis and discussion.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of our research was to examine the available delivery structures involved in youth engagement and to ascertain the types of barriers associated with different types of service organizations. Based on our framework, we were able to identify 15 broad types of barriers encountered by organizations that seek to encourage youth civic engagement. In addition, we found notable social and political barriers that emerged as prevalent among the identified service organizations. The 15 barriers experienced by organizations seeking to encourage youth civic engagement were assigned to the respective categories as identified in the initial framework (Table 2).

**Table 2: Social, Cultural and Political Barriers**

Category	Elements
Social Barriers	Transportation and access Lack of information and knowledge regarding the programs Adult stereotypes Access to/support for opportunities in urban areas Stereotypes Feelings of being unwanted Nature of students engaged in programs
Cultural Barriers	Cultural concerns over mixed-gender activities Familial obligations Notion of community and vision Cultural norms and environment
Political Barriers	Nature of local decision-making Access to funding Access and support for encouraging opportunity in urban areas

### Social barriers

The first group includes social barriers, which emerge as a result of various social organizational patterns. Here, we are concerned with where youth are placed within the societal hierarchy and the impact of that placement on their ability to access and participate in programs. Our data analysis identified seven specific social barriers that pose significant implications for youth civic engagement (Table 2).

According to the literature, the social barrier of *transportation and access* limits access to civic engagement programs for the young people for which they are designed (Saito, 2006). For example, Saito argues that there are direct out-of-pocket costs to parents associated with their children's traveling to and from youth programs (2006). For example, if parents must take off work to provide transportation or if they are required to provide transportation for students. Such constraints on resources and the inability of young participants to secure transportation or funds for transit becomes an obstacle to participation.

The social barriers of *adult and peer stereotypes*, as well as the feeling of being unwanted, are also supported by the literature (Perkins et al., 2007). Young people sometimes refrain from taking advantage of programs offered because the youth hold negative opinions of the providers, perceive programs as boring, view programs as being for "little kids," or anticipate certain negative peer perceptions (i.e., they run the risk of being teased [Perkins et al., 2007]). Such stereotypes, when combined with feelings of being unwelcome and a lack of interest or knowledge regarding available programs, become additional significant barriers to participation. These social barriers are exacerbated by an additional identified barrier, *lack of information and knowledge regarding the program*, also supported by Perkins et al. (2007). This type of barrier exists where a program's purpose is not clearly understood or communicated and there is a general lack of knowledge or dearth of information available to students to help them understand the range of opportunities available to them (Perkins et al., 2007). It is important to note that these factors are shaped by the specific contexts in which they occur, as well as being influenced by the life experiences and choices of young people. Administrators typically stress these factors as being salient in determining the receptivity of young people to program participation and their response to opportunities

to engage.

### **Cultural barriers**

We identify the second group of barriers as cultural barriers. These barriers are defined as those obstacles to service delivery that emerge as a result of the various interpretations and the uses of perceptions and symbols among various human groups. Our analysis found four specific types of cultural barriers, including (1) *cultural concerns over gender-specific activities that preempt participation in youth civic engagement programs*, (2) *familial responsibilities and obligations*, (3) *limited or distorted understanding and perception of organizational and broader community vision*, and (4) *the cultural norms of specific environments*.

Cultural concerns over gender-specific activities present themselves as culture-specific barriers and contribute to significant differences in levels of participation among youth (Perkins et al., 2007); for example, young Chaldean women have cited not being able to participate in coed swimming as a barrier to their involvement.

Other cultural barriers likewise limiting participation include *familial responsibilities and obligations*, as when young Arab men identify priorities related to employment and study as reasons for not participating in youth programs; *limited and distorted understanding and perception of organizational and broader community vision*, including high levels of dissatisfaction with adult facilitators; and *the cultural norms of specific environments*, as when Chaldean men cite parental concerns over their safety or their being at risk for “something happening to them.” Such cultural barriers, often rooted in traditions and particular cultural practices and beliefs, may create specific challenges to program design and implementation, requiring organizations to be attentive and responsive to the needs of all participants. Acquiring such cultural sensitivity, however, can be a difficult task for administrators and organizations (Perkins et al., 2007).

### **Political barriers**

The third group of barriers identified, political barriers, are obstacles that may impede access, opportunity, or support required to engage in programs designed to foster youth civic engagement. Our data focus on four specific types of barriers that relate to the central issues of youth voice and efficacy: (1) *local decision-making processes*, (2) *access to funding*, (3) *the nature of local decision-making*, and (4) *support for programs within their respective urban communities*. Even though previous research indicates that young people have a desire to engage in activities that provide them with leadership and decision-making opportunities and that enable them to create a sense of efficacy and empowerment in their lives, the findings of these studies also point to the challenges of involving young people in the complex processes of organizational and community decision-making (Zeldin, 2000).

The *context of local decision-making process* is often believed to be a source of strong disincentives for youth engagement. Scholars have highlighted the particularly negative effect on incentive when multiple agencies are involved in youth programming and, as a result, the community-based decision-making process is highly complex (Freeman et al., 1999). Zeldin argues, however, that there currently exists a push within the organizational development field for youth to become involved not only with



organizational decision-making at all levels but with the overall governance of organizations as well. Thus, youth governance or youth decision-making “is a fundamental and core strategy of youth infusion [ . . . ] where youth work—often in partnership with adults—to set the overall policy direction of organizations, institutions, and coalitions” (2000: 5). Young people can be engaged in decision-making at the administrative level, including having input into hiring staff, designing programs, or conducting needs assessments, or at the operational level, where youth can be involved in activities such as leading groups or training volunteers (Zeldin, 2000).

Based on well-grounded, Zeldin found that when the conditions are right, involving youth in decision making can serve as a powerful vehicle for change (2000). Most significant is that mutual contributions by young people and adults may result in a synergy that increases the commitment of both groups to the organization. In practice, young people are rarely involved in decision making at any level in most organizations. The inclusion of young people does not occur naturally and is not among the management strategies and practices of most organizations and communities (Zeldin, 2000). Unfortunately, adult attitudes and existing organizational structures do not support working partnerships for shared decision-making involving both young people and adults. According to Calvert et al., if youth are to be included in the decision-making process, there needs to be strong evidence that communities and individuals have more to gain from involving youth than from excluding them (2002). Therefore, as Whitlock notes, if communities are to become “critical arenas for developing a ‘transcendent self,’” then “youth [must] feel that communities offer them opportunities to be engaged” (2007: 500, 506).

### ORGANIZATIONS AND BARRIERS

Using the barriers identified above, we analyzed how various types of organizations experienced each of the social, cultural, and political barriers (Table 3). A review of the whole table leads to the impression that the majority of the barriers faced by these organizations fall within the categories of social and political barriers. This reinforces the findings of the established literature that the placement of young people within society as well as challenges to integrating youth into the governance and structure of organizations clearly remain significant sources of tension within organizations (Zeldin, 2000; Freeman et al., 2002).

**Table 3: Barriers Encountered by Organizations**

	CBOs (%)	Faith-based organizations (%)	School-based organizations (%)
Social	37.5	45.1	17.6
Cultural	46.1	20.5	33.4
Political	40.3	26.8	32.9

N=25 A random sample of 25 articles and reports were coded.

CBO= Community-based Organizations

A closer look at findings across organizations shows that CBOs (37.5%) and faith-based organizations (47.1%) experience challenges posed by social barriers more frequently than school-based organizations do (17.6%). Unruh and Sider suggest that resource

capacity is a substantial constraint for faith-based organizations, which must consistently deal with limited resources (2004). Lack of resources specifically limits the ability of faith-based programs to provide transportation, which in turn limits participation by imposing both financial and time constraints on young people, particularly when they must depend on parents or public transit. Because faith-based programs usually explicitly convey a religious mandate or vision, they may face additional selection issues; as a result, they may suffer from stereotypes and biases held by teenagers against being involved in religious activities (Unruh and Sider, 2004).

CBOs face similar challenges in encouraging youth to become civically engaged within their communities. CBOs, like faith-based organizations, are often limited in organizational capacity and resources and are thus unable to offer participants free transportation to and from programs (Grossman et al., 2001). Transportation is further complicated when CBOs are not located near schools or other settings where young people spend most of their time, making access to CBO-based programs difficult. CBOs are also forced to confront peer-based stereotypes, which can hinder participation in programs when service to the community is viewed negatively or as being “uncool” (Perkins et al., 2007). Perkins et al. (2007) found that youth in the communities in their study generally possessed a poor understanding of types of opportunities available to them because of limited organizational resources for advertising as well as apathetic attitudes toward civic engagement among youth (Grossman et al., 2001).

While our results show a significant number of CBOs and faith-based organizations facing social barriers, our data suggest that school-based organizations have achieved some successes in overcoming these barriers. According to our research, school-based programs face social barriers to youth participation at a rate (17.6%) that is almost half as low as that experienced by community-based and faith-based programs. Such a disparity suggests that school-based opportunities are at an advantage when compared with community-based and faith-based opportunities. Our findings are consistent with Grossman et al., who note that schools can and do offer the appropriate facilities to engage students in a wide range of activities (2001). Schools also are natural contexts in which to access and interact with members of the enrolled student body. This offers both a broad base for recruitment and provides legitimacy for programs that can help ease the concern of hesitant parents about their child’s participation. School-based programs also tend to have built-in support mechanisms and motivating factors that positively affect participation (Saito, 2006).

At the same time, however, our research indicates that student recruitment for school-based civic engagement opportunities is complicated by a variety of factors. One of the biggest barriers to engaging students remains the challenge of transportation. While school districts often provide the resources for students to travel from one school to another to engage in programs continuing cuts to education budgets may make providing transportation to after-school or off-site programs a lower priority. In addition, having access to the broad base of the student body often leads to a need for more targeted, resource-intensive efforts to attract specific groups, such as the most disadvantaged students and older students, who are often less likely to participate in these programs (Saito, 2006).

As shown in Table 3, cultural barriers also are significant challenges to youth civic

engagement. According to our findings, CBOs show the highest rate of reported references to having to address or showing concern about cultural barriers to program participation (46.1%). School-based organizations rank second in the measure of cultural barriers, with 33.4 percent of organizations being documented as coping with this obstacle to program participation. This variation in the data may be easily explained by the variances in types of student populations served by different organizational types. Interestingly, according to our data, faith-based organizations rank lowest in cultural barriers. This may be due to the fact that faith-based programs are often identified with a particular denomination or congregation, constituting a substantial degree of homogeneity that may mitigate cultural barriers within these organizations. Such homogeneity limits the potential for conflict over organizational values and missions and may make service delivery easier for faith-based organizations.

In contrast, CBOs and school-based opportunities are likely to engage a more diverse group of participants, as these organizations recruit participants from multiple neighborhoods and communities. As a result, these organizations must seek to balance diverse views and traditions and integrate them within curriculum and service delivery. Schools may lack a sense of cultural sensitivity, as they are often pushed to move away from religious or cultural specificity and serve populations as if they were one homogenous unit (Grossmen et al., 2001). Thus, culturally sensitive and responsive programming, such as anticipating the challenge of mixed-gender activities, gender roles, and family responsibilities that may influence student willingness and ability to participate in civic engagement programs, are often overlooked. Similarly, our data indicates that CBOs also must face this concern, but, as Saito notes, this does not result from a lack of diversity awareness but is the consequence of goal misplacement as the drive to serve increased numbers of youth is often associated with the added cost of addressing cultural variants or traditions, which in turn, may hinder participation (2006).

The final category in Table 3 addresses political barriers to youth participation. It is evident that CBOs indicate a higher incidence of having experienced these barriers (40.3%), followed by school-based opportunities (32.9%) and, last, by faith-based organizations (26.8%). Of particular interest in this finding is the potential discrepancy—as previous organizational theory and research suggest (Zeldin, 2000)—that CBOs exist independently and outside of common organizational structures and may therefore be more capable of adapting governance structures and opening opportunities for youth in leadership positions. This further suggests that these organizations are more likely to be capable of overcoming political barriers to youth programming and participation.

It should be noted that our findings do not necessarily negate this theoretical premise. Rather, the three barriers that were identified throughout our data set center primarily on issues of resources and funding. CBOs often receive funding from multiple sources, requiring them to be responsive to multiple agencies, goals, and measures of reporting. It could be that the specific types of political barriers associated with CBOs hinge more on the need to maintain funding support, which may require that CBOs focus more effort in retaining funding than in opening up and facilitating youth leadership within their organizations. To strengthen the ability of CBOs to invite youth to engage in leadership roles, CBOs may need to generate internal support and capacity and to enlist

the support of their external funders to do so.

The high incidence of political barriers among school-based organizations may result from the same factors faced by CBOs. Facing limited resources and high levels of competition, school-based programs may also face a type of goal displacement within their organizations. It may be more likely, however, that these institutional structures are not conducive to youth governance, as public schools are unlikely to engage youth in decision making or to privilege their voices in policy and programmatic discourse (Mitra, 2001; Saito, 2006).

## CONCLUSIONS

Over the last two decades, scholars and practitioners have advanced the notion that participation in youth programs and within communities is good for young people (Saito, 2006). With the recent implementation of President Obama's *Serve America Act*, the role of youth civic engagement within the community has once again become a focal point of policy. Given the challenging economic, demographic, and social realities of many American urban environments, civic engagement may be an important vehicle for having a positive impact on the future of urban youth, as well as enriching their communities through their service activities and contributions. Yet, while there is consensus in the literature on the importance of civic engagement for young people, there remain significant cultural, social, and political barriers to the organizations that offer programs and opportunities for youth. As our research has shown, no particular organizational type, whether community-, school-, or faith-based, can show a measurable advantage over the others in being able to overcome barriers to effectively reaching and successfully serving.

Our findings suggest a unique opportunity to extend and build on this preliminary research to help promote the efficient, equitable, and effective implementation of the aims of the *Serve America Act*. Further study can examine and contribute new knowledge about cultural, social, and political barriers to youth participation as these barriers specifically affect service and organizational missions. This preliminary study strives to address the gap between theory and practice, targeting the specific challenges facing youth-serving organizations. Further scholarship has the potential to close this gap and to provide research-based tools to help build the capacity of these programs to adequately and effectively provide services for the young people who will soon become their communities' citizens and leaders—a key focus of the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act.

At the same time, the limits of this study must be acknowledged. As with all studies that rely on results of previously published data, it is difficult to escape the influence of interpretation and to fully acknowledge and dissect the reflexive and interpretive patterns used by each author to present his or her data. This article has, however, worked with, and distilled data from, a vast number of research studies by multiple authors in order to identify patterns and develop conclusions. Our interpretation of previous research represents a carefully considered understanding of the current state of youth civic engagement programs and strives to conceptualize broader implications for programs and organizations as well as policy initiatives within contemporary American society.

It will be interesting to build upon the categories and groups addressed here through further applied research. It is hoped that this and future studies can serve as resources to researchers and practitioners so they can better use theory to effectively promote youth civic engagement. Moreover, the study offers an evaluation of the current literature to show that the divide between practitioners and researchers, so often felt in the public administration and policy fields, is not as wide as it is perceived to be.

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