

Can Social/Civic Engagement Boost Youth Life Satisfaction and Reduce Inequalities in Subjective Well-being?

A Quasi-Experimental Test of a Nationwide Youth Engagement Intervention in the UK

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Research Aim

Subjective well-being (SWB) is considered highly important, both as an objective good itself, but also for wider positive impacts on people's lives, such as physical health, co-operative behaviours, and economic success. This paper aims to explore the efficacy of youth social/civic engagement programs for improving mental well-being. To test this, we study a nationally-implemented, government-sponsored youth social/civic participation scheme. Theoretically, such schemes could affect improvements in well-being, through building social capital and boosting psychological-resources (such as greater internalized locus of control), as well as help reduce social inequalities in SWB between more and less disadvantaged groups.

The key questions of this study are:

- Does participation in young engagement schemes lead to an improvement in mental well-being? How far is any impact of participation driven by changes in young people's social capital and locus of control?
- Does participation have stronger effects for young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds? How far is any stronger impact driven by reducing deficits in social capital and locus of control among these groups? And, how far can participation close the gaps in well-being between those from more and less disadvantaged backgrounds?

Data and Methods

To study the impact of the scheme we employ a quasi-experimental research design, undertaking a pre-test/post-test analysis among a sample of participants and control group. A unique set of purpose-delivered surveys were conducted amongst a sample of participants (the 'treated') and an 'intention to treat' control-group (who expressed an interest in participating on the scheme but ultimately did not participate). Surveys were conducted prior to participation and then three to five months after the scheme had completed; the control group was surveyed over an identical period. The surveys measured adolescent mental well-being, as well as indicators of locus of control, social capital (neighbourliness and social ties), and socio-demographic characteristics. Respondents were linked to the communities they live in providing measures of community social and economic composition. The data were analysed using a match difference-in-difference approach to robustly test the causal effects of participation relative to the control-groups.

Results

The results demonstrate how participation leads to a significant improvement in mental well-being among young people, evident at least three to five months after participants completed the scheme. Participation also leads to improvements in social capital and generates more internalised loci of control. Mediation analysis shows these posited mechanisms account for a large part of the improvements in SWB after participation. However, the effectiveness of participation is highly conditional on the level of community disadvantage young people live in. Young people from low-disadvantaged communities see no impact of participation on their SWB, which remains high and stable over time. Young people from high-disadvantaged communities report substantially lower SWB *pre*-participation. However, they experience a much stronger positive impact of participation on their SWB. In fact, participation almost completely closes the community disadvantage SWB gap that existed pre-participation. This is primarily driven by improvements in young people's locus of control and a reduction in negative social interactions for those from disadvantaged areas.