

# CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE TO ADVANCE HEALTH EQUITY

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## *Civic health in the 2023 CHR National Findings Report*

*Elizabeth (Pollock) Blomberg, Ph.D.*



# LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR TODAY

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Understand the concept of civic health, including civic infrastructure and civic participation, and how it impacts the health of our communities.

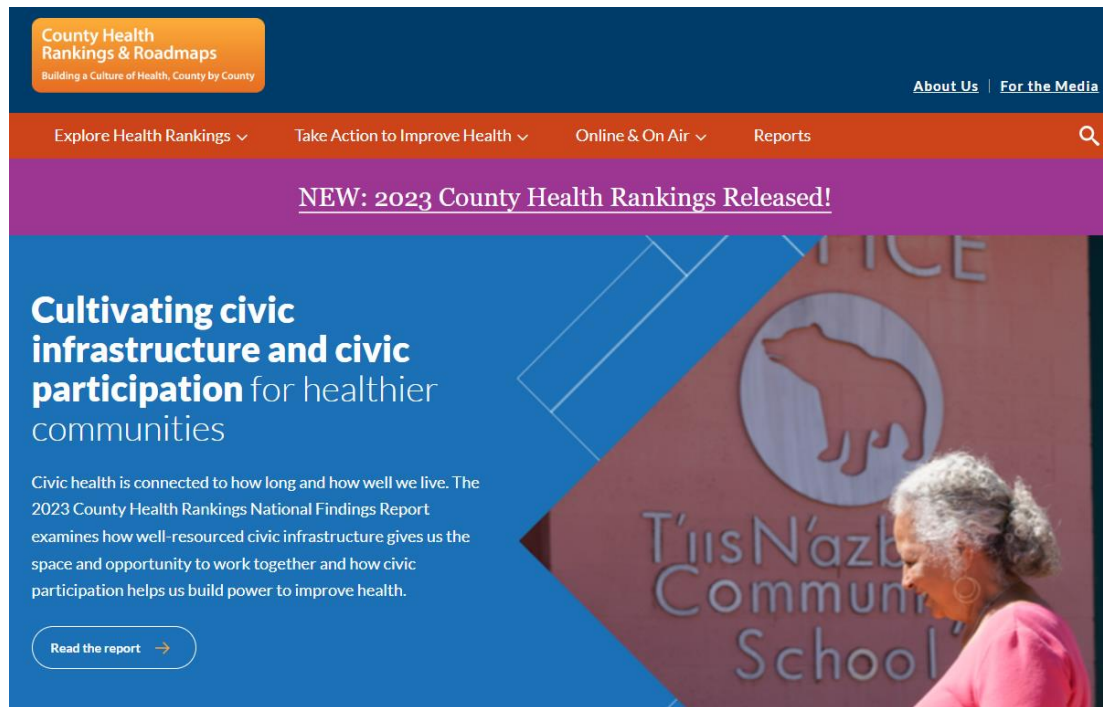


Discuss what we in public health can do to improve civic health and what policies have been proven to work in communities.



Learn about resources CHR&R can offer to support people and places working to advance civic health and ensure all residents have the opportunity to thrive.

# ABOUT COUNTY HEALTH RANKINGS



# HOW WE SUPPORT COMMUNITIES

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## 2023 County Health Rankings

# National Findings Report

Cultivating Civic Infrastructure and Participation for Healthier Communities



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**Civic health reflects the opportunities people have to participate in their communities.** It starts in our local communities and is the cornerstone of our democracy, representing promise, opportunity, belonging, and shared responsibility.

**We look at two elements of civic health:**



• **CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE**, which includes the spaces such as schools, parks, and libraries that help us stay connected and policies and practices that foster belonging, making civic participation possible.



• **CIVIC PARTICIPATION**, which includes the ways people engage in community life to improve conditions and shape the community's future, whether through political activities such as voting and advocacy, or community activities such as volunteering and mentoring.

## History shows that when previously disenfranchised groups built power and expressed their will through voting and advocacy, the policies that followed benefited the health and well-being of all.

- After women won the right to vote in 1920, infant mortality rates dropped dramatically when lawmakers passed a law that set up maternal and child health units in every state health department, expanded birth and death data collection, and supported home-visiting initiatives.
- The passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 fundamentally shifted electoral power in the U.S. and ushered in a new era of government responsiveness to Black voter participation and marginalized populations.

### People closest to community problems advocate for solutions that benefit everyone.

This was the case when people with disabilities advocated successfully for curb-cuts, ramps cut into street curbs to provide access between sidewalks and streets. Curb-cuts enable better mobility for people who use wheelchairs. People with baby strollers, runners, people moving heavy carts and others benefit too. Safe streets and sidewalks support good health for all.





# Civic Infrastructure

creates opportunities for civic participation

County Health  
Rankings & Roadmaps  
Building a Culture of Health, County by County







# Civic Spaces to Connect, Learn and Collectively Act

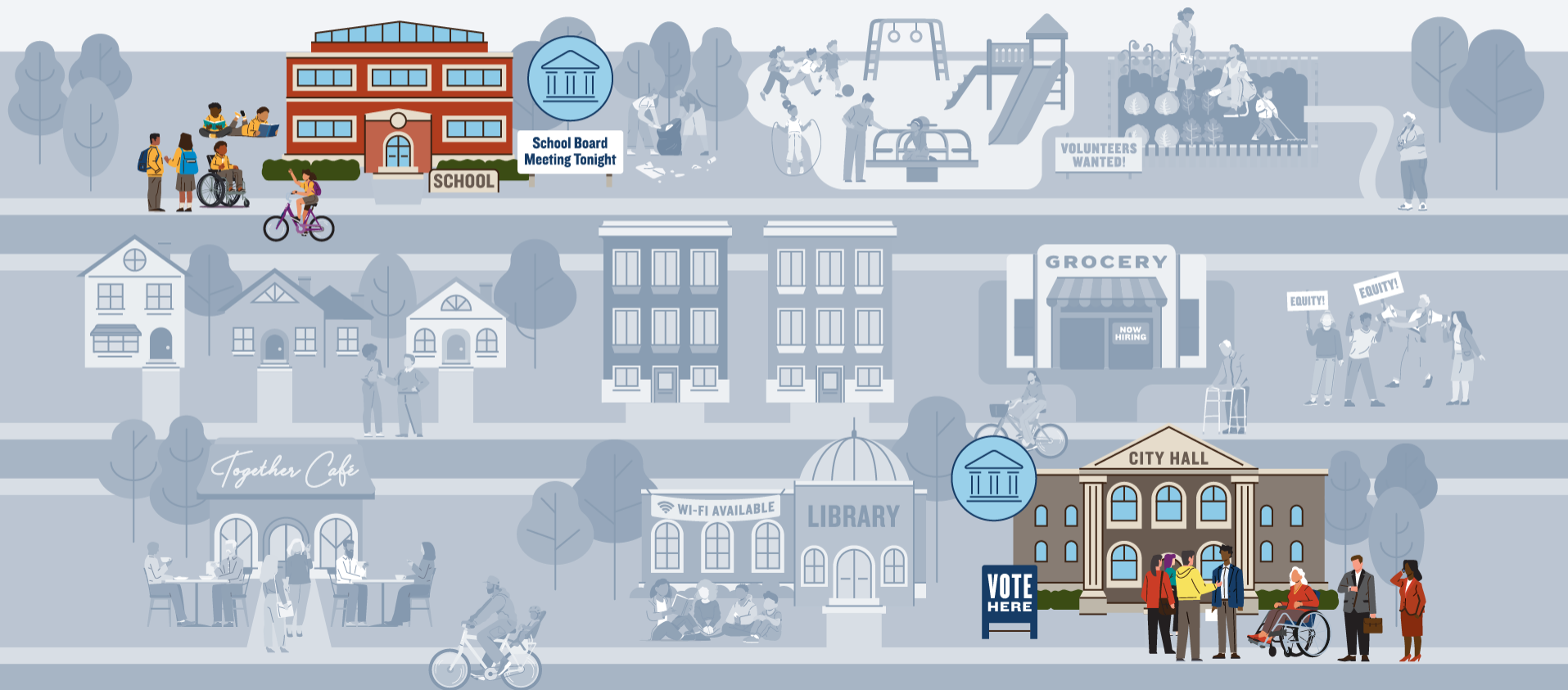
County Health  
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# Governance & Resources

County Health  
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# Social Networks & Shared Culture

County Health  
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## Civic Participation: Shaping Our Communities

Participation in civic life in communities takes many forms, including:

- Community-building activities, like volunteering, mentoring, and more
- Political and electoral participation, through voting, advocacy, and more

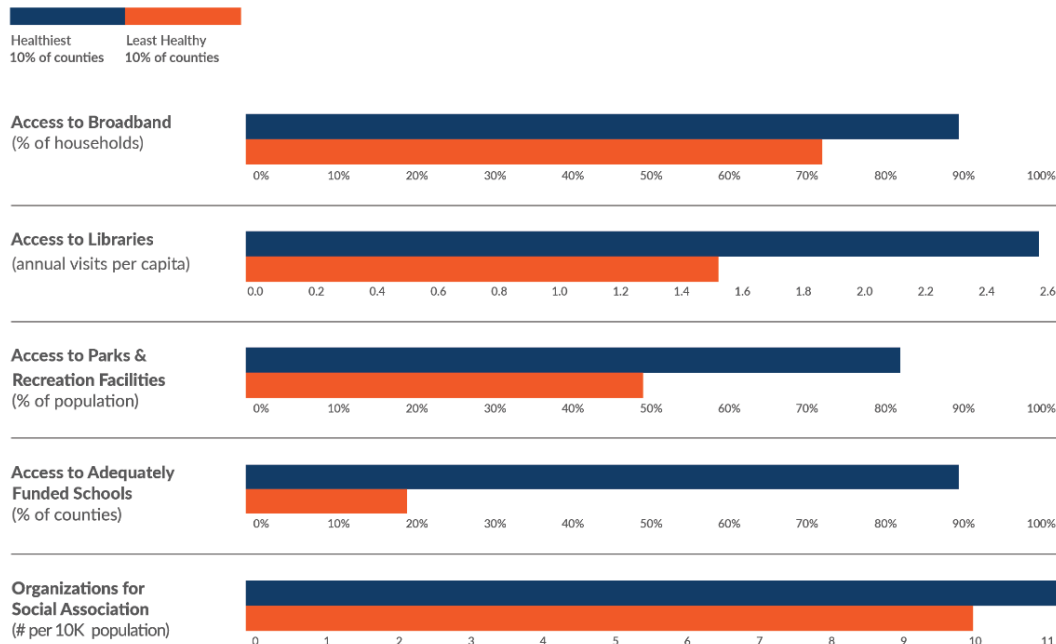


- Voting is a form of civic participation that symbolizes a commitment to democratic processes.
- Voting can influence policies that create opportunities for health, including safe spaces to live and work or funding for public health initiatives.

# RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CIVIC HEALTH AND HEALTH

- Healthier counties have more available and better-resourced civic infrastructure, including access to information via broadband internet, libraries and local newspapers, and access to civic spaces, including adequately funded schools, parks, and social associations.
- Areas with well-resourced civic infrastructure have more civic participation, including higher rates of U.S. census participation and voter turnout, than areas with under-resourced or restrictive civic infrastructure. Both civic infrastructure and participation are tied to how well and how long we live.

Civic Infrastructure and Civic Participation Among Healthiest and Least Healthy Counties

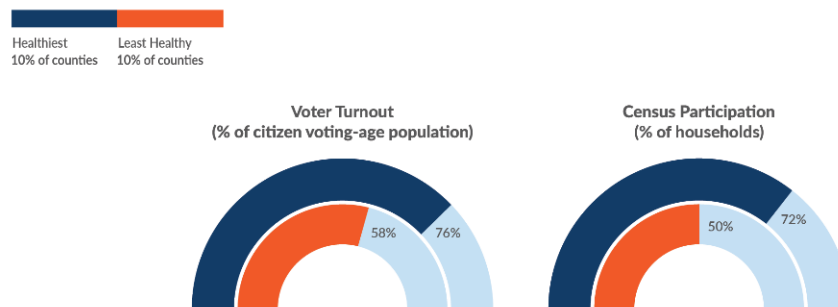


Data sources: American Community Survey; Public Libraries Survey; Environmental Public Health Tracking Network; School Financial Indicators Database; County Business Patterns; Census Operational Quality Metrics; MIT Election Data and Science Lab; 2023 CHR&R Dataset

# RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CIVIC HEALTH AND HEALTH

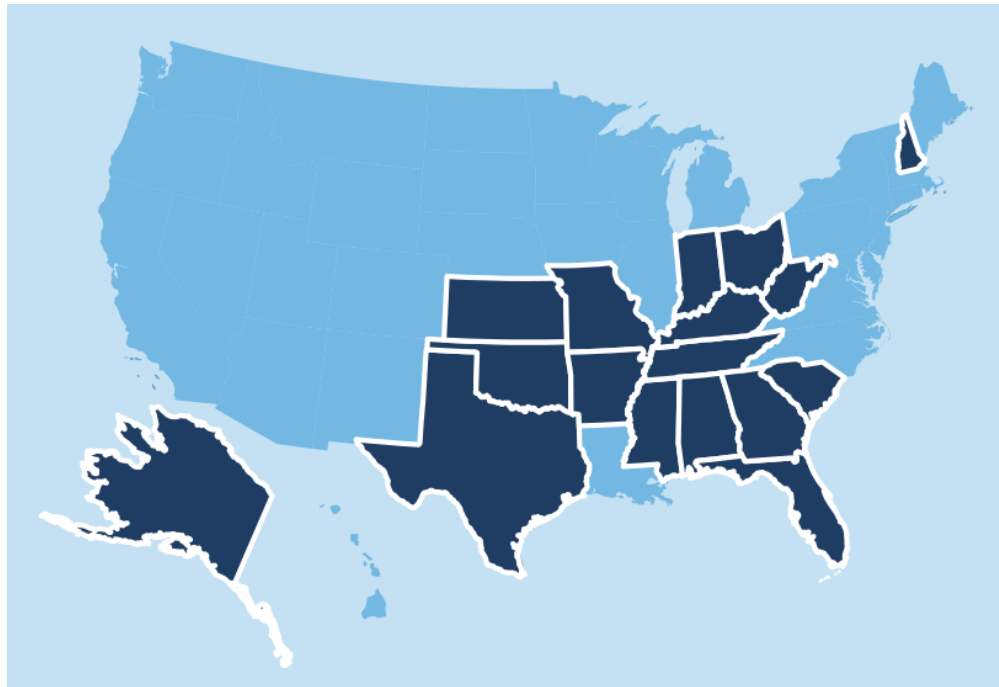
- Healthier counties have substantially higher rates of voter turnout and census participation than among the least healthy counties.
- An average of 60% of households participated in the U.S. census by mail, internet or phone. Census participation was 72% in the healthiest counties, while it was only 50% in the least healthy counties.
- Approximately 66% of the citizen voting age population cast a vote in the 2020 election. This ranged from 76% voter turnout in the healthiest counties in the country to only 58% in the least healthy counties.

Civic Infrastructure and Civic Participation Among Healthiest and Least Healthy Counties



Data sources: American Community Survey; Public Libraries Survey; Environmental Public Health Tracking Network; School Financial Indicators Database; County Business Patterns; Census Operational Quality Metrics; MIT Election Data and Science Lab; 2023 CHR&R Dataset

# STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO HEALTH



Data source: 2020 Cost of Voting Index

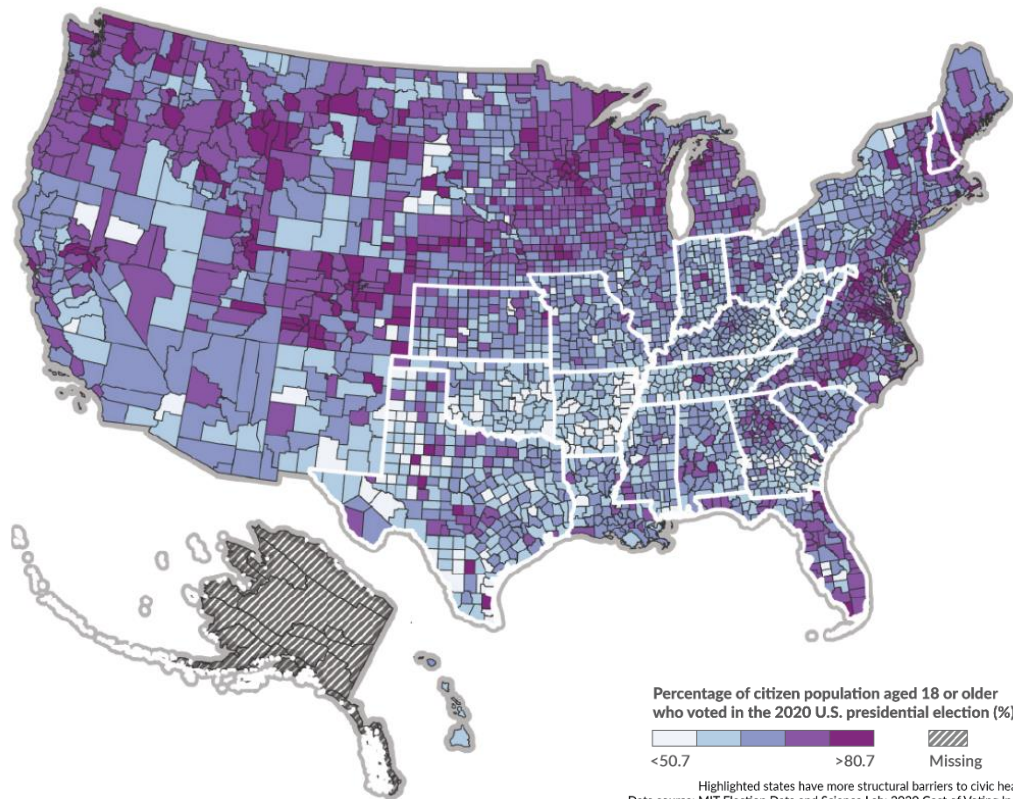
- Some states have more structural barriers to civic health. Structural barriers are policies and practices that create or maintain unfair and unjust outcomes.
- Examples of structural barriers to civic health include gerrymandered districts, laws and practices that create obstacles to voting such as registration restrictions or voter ID laws, as well as disinvested civic infrastructure.
- More structural barriers largely overlap with regions of our country, particularly in the Southern states, with specific histories of structural racism and disinvestment.



A familiar geographic pattern of structural barriers to civic health overlaps with signs of diminished civic participation.

- In states with more structural barriers to civic health (highlighted borders), rates of voter turnout, census participation, and volunteering are lowest. Civic infrastructure, such as parks, libraries and school funding is also less available and under-resourced among counties in these states.

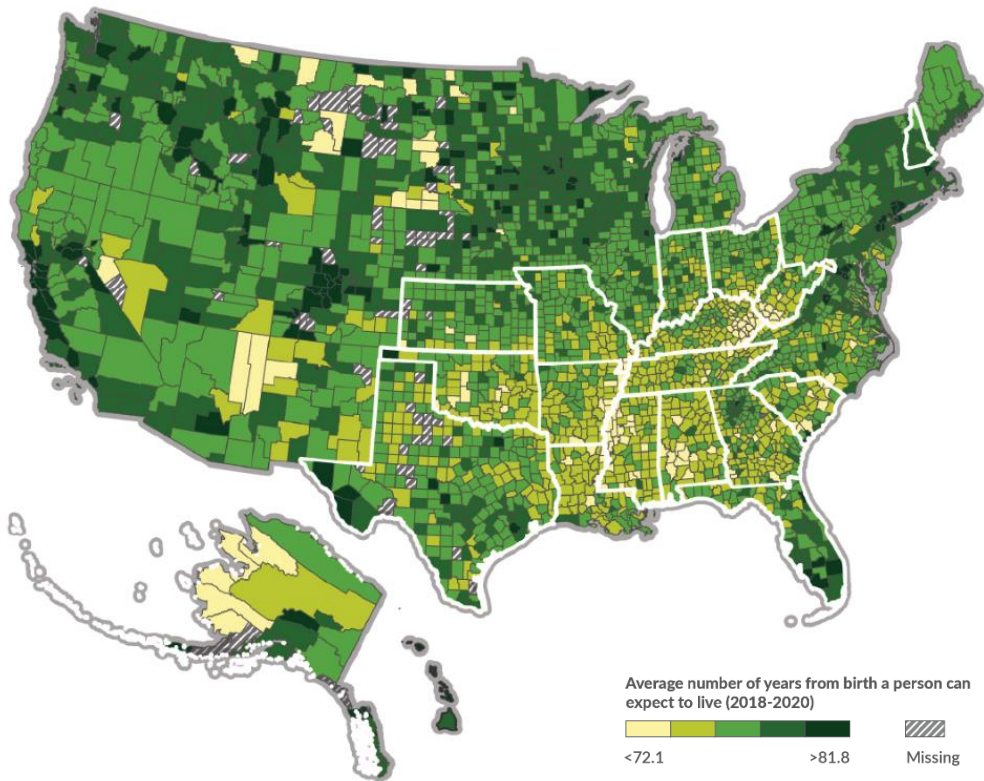
## Voter Turnout Across U.S. Counties and Among States with More Structural Barriers to Civic Health



**Structural barriers to civic health also overlap with fewer social and economic opportunities and worse health outcomes and health disparities.**

- At 75.4 years, life expectancy from birth in counties with greater barriers to civic health is, on average, more than three years shorter than in counties experiencing fewer structural barriers (78.5 years).

## Life Expectancy Across U.S. Counties and Among States with More Structural Barriers to Civic Health



# WHAT WORKS FOR HEALTH- POLICIES THAT WORK

## What Works for Health



Evidence matters. Our What Works for Health tool will help you find policies and programs that are a good fit for your community's priorities.

### Find Strategies by Topic

#### Health Behaviors

-  [Alcohol and Drug Use](#)
-  [Diet and Exercise](#)
-  [Sexual Activity](#)
-  [Tobacco Use](#)

#### Clinical Care

-  [Access to Care](#)
-  [Quality of Care](#)

#### Social & Economic Factors

-  [Community Safety](#)
-  [Education](#)
-  [Employment](#)
-  [Family and Social Support](#)
-  [Income](#)

#### Physical Environment

-  [Air and Water Quality](#)
-  [Housing and Transit](#)

Search [all strategies](#) by keyword



## Civic Spaces to Connect, Learn & Collectively Act

•Nurture civic knowledge and skills, including leadership, collaboration and critical thinking through [youth civics education](#) and [youth leadership programs](#). Students with quality civics education are more likely to vote, discuss politics at home, work on community issues and volunteer.



## Governance & Resources

•Increase democratic processes through [voter registration initiatives](#) and [voter turnout initiatives](#). Communities that make civic participation more accessible can also advance health-promoting policies and stronger public health outcomes.



## Social Networks & Shared Culture

•Enhance opportunities for people to engage, build shared values and work toward a common purpose. People can do this through community service in networks such as [neighborhood associations](#), [community arts programs](#) and [community fitness programs](#). Community service opportunities such as [intergenerational activities](#) and [mentoring programs for high school graduation](#) also enhance civic engagement.

•Ensure that all people can afford to stay and invest in communities they love by assuring their ability to support their families and live in safe and healthy housing. To address employment, invest in [transitional and subsidized jobs](#), [career and technical education for high school completion](#), [career pathways programs](#) and [adult vocational training](#). Increase the availability of affordable housing through [community land trusts](#), [land banking](#), [housing trust funds](#) and [housing reparations](#).

### Evidence Rating

Some Evidence



Strategies with this rating are likely to work, but further research is needed to confirm effects. These strategies have been tested more than once and results trend positive overall.

### Health Factors



[Family and Social Support](#)



[Education](#)

### Decision Makers

[Funders](#)

[Educators](#)

[Government](#)

## Youth civics education



[Print this strategy](#)



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Civics education is the instruction of the political and practical aspects of living in a democracy, and the rights and responsibilities that come with it. In K-12 schools, civics education aims to teach students attitudes, skills, knowledge, and behavior needed to participate in and contribute to a democracy<sup>1</sup>. The content and format of civics education varies by state and school district because there are no mandatory federal standards. Traditional civics courses deliver factual knowledge on the founding fathers, systems, and structure of federal and local government. Non-traditional courses include student participation and discussion of current social issues<sup>2</sup>, such as simulations engaging students in debates and mock elections or experiential and service-learning assigning students to a project to address community issues<sup>3</sup>. Civics education policies and requirements vary by state; in some cases requiring a civics course or exam for high school graduation.

## What could this strategy improve?

### Expected Benefits

*Our evidence rating is based on the likelihood of achieving these outcomes:*

- Increased political participation
- Increased civic participation
- Increased civic knowledge

### Potential Benefits

*Our evidence rating is not based on these outcomes, but these benefits may also be possible:*

- Decreased political polarization



## Civic Spaces to Connect, Learn & Collectively Act

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## Social Networks & Shared Culture

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•Ensure that all people can afford to stay and invest in communities they love by assuring their ability to support their families and live in safe and healthy housing. To address employment, invest in [transitional and subsidized jobs](#), [career and technical education for high school completion](#), [career pathways programs](#) and [adult vocational training](#). Increase the availability of affordable housing through [community land trusts](#), [land banking](#), [housing trust funds](#) and [housing reparations](#).

### Evidence Rating

Scientifically Supported



Strategies with this rating are most likely to make a difference. These strategies have been tested in many robust studies with consistently positive results.

### Health Factors



[Family and Social Support](#)

### Decision Makers

[Government](#)

[Community Members](#)

## Voter registration initiatives



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Voter registration initiatives are efforts to increase the number of registered voters and can include automatic voter registration (AVR), registration drives, policies that ease registration requirements, and efforts that expand the type and number of registration sites. Initiatives like AVR automatically register individuals to vote using data collected through state or local government departments and agencies<sup>1,2</sup>. Alternatively, electronic registration gives individuals the opportunity to register when they engage in business with a government agency (e.g., renewing a driver's license, applying for benefits)<sup>2</sup>. Initiatives that make registration more convenient include same-day registration, which allows individuals to register the same day they cast a ballot, as well as secure, online registration. Voter registration drives help eligible individuals register to vote and connect with voting resources<sup>3</sup>. Voter registration drives can be organized anywhere and commonly take place at college campuses, hospitals, workplaces, and income tax assistance centers<sup>4,5</sup>.

## What could this strategy improve?

### Expected Benefits

*Our evidence rating is based on the likelihood of achieving these outcomes:*

- Increased voter registration
- Increased voting

### Potential Benefits

*Our evidence rating is not based on these outcomes, but these benefits may also be possible:*

- Increased political participation



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[Family and Social Support](#)

### Decision Makers

[Educators](#)

[Government](#)

[Community Members](#)

## Voter turnout initiatives



[Print this strategy](#)



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Voter turnout initiatives are efforts to increase voter participation by making voting options more convenient and more accessible. Voter turnout initiatives can include get-out-the-vote campaigns that share election information through door-to-door canvassing, phone calls from campaign staff or automated calls, mailed reminders and resources, or electronic text and email messages. Early in-person voting, vote-by-mail, or adding polling locations and expanding voting hours are often part of efforts to make voting more convenient<sup>1</sup>. Vote-by-mail, also known as absentee ballots and mail-in ballots, can be returned by mail or in secure drop boxes, often located at polling places. Voters complete ballots at home and have time to research ballot requirements and candidates while filling out the ballot<sup>2</sup>. State governments may pass no-excuse absentee voting policies in which voters can apply for absentee ballots without providing a reason (e.g., overseas military service) and permanent absentee voting, in which voters will automatically receive all future ballots by mail<sup>3</sup>.

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## Public Health has a role to play

- Data & Research
- Using Trusted Voices
- Mobilizing the Field

### Public Health 3.0



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## **STORIES: LEARN FROM OTHERS**

Sharing stories ignites possibilities and inspires action



## County Health Rankings & Roadmaps

Building a Culture of Health, County by County

### CORNELIUS, OR



*Photo Courtesy of the Cornelius City Library*

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