

INTRODUCTION

On a basketball court in Los Angeles, teenaged spectators pledge to vote as the price of admission before tipoff. In New Jersey, youth spend their summer building community gardens, enrolling their neighbors in federal public benefit programs, and running a mobile feeding site at a local playground. Young Houstonians advocate for restorative justice and youth development programs in the child protective and juvenile justice systems in which they were once involved. In parks, neighborhoods, and cities around the country, similar programs deliberately engage young people who are not in school, inviting them to participate in and lead civic engagement efforts in their communities.

Young people with no college experience make up a significant proportion of the youth population. Across the United States, 16.2 million young people aged 16- to 24-years-old were not enrolled in school in 2019 (about 43 percent of this age group).¹ In Texas, 48 percent of youth aged 18- to 24 – nearly 1.4 million young Texans – have no college experience.² Yet these youth are too often ignored or locked out when it comes to voting and other forms of civic engagement. In part, inequitable access to comprehensive civic education means that college may be the first place that youth are exposed to civic information and opportunities.³ Higher education also remains inaccessible for many young people from underrepresented communities who face additional barriers to engagement related to their race or class.⁴ No matter the reason, the consequence is clear: over a third of 18- to 29-year-olds with no college experience identify as “almost completely disengaged from civic and political life” – 20 percentage points higher than their peers with college experience.⁵

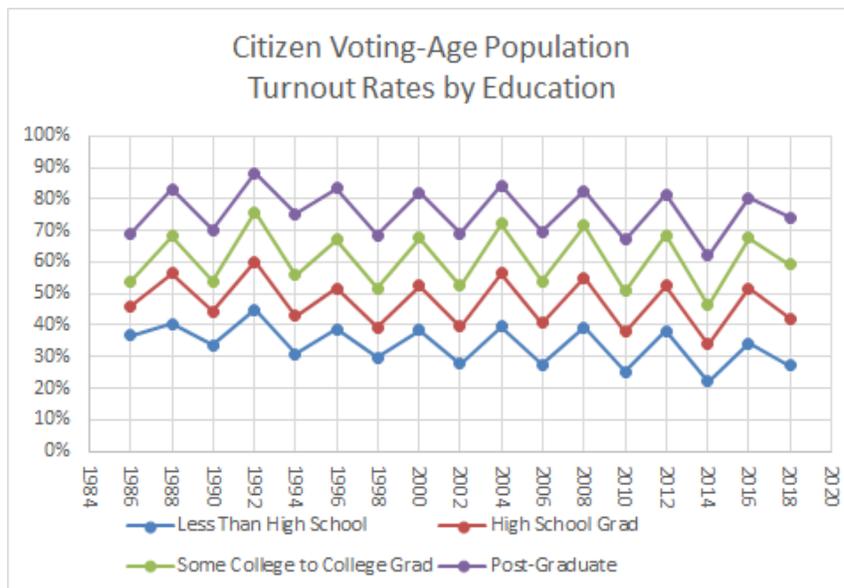


Figure 1. Courtesy of the United States Election Project.

When young people with no college experience are left out of civic life, they miss the personal and psychological benefits that civic engagement can help develop, such as stronger relationships and a deeper sense of purpose.⁶ When they are underrepresented in civic activities, their voices are silenced in elections, public agenda setting, and policymaking. The rest of the community also loses out – not only on the perspectives of these youth but also on the higher levels of employment, healthier residents, and stronger schools that correlate with higher rates of civic engagement.⁷

Stories from Los Angeles, New Jersey, Houston, and more illustrate that many youth with no college experience have overcome the obstacles to vote, volunteer, and advocate for themselves. Yet many more still experience heightened barriers to engagement through both policies and practices that discourage or prevent their participation.

To understand how to better engage young people with no college experience, Children’s Defense Fund – Texas has conducted a series of interviews with organizers and practitioners who work directly with these youth. We planned to also conduct focus groups with young people directly, but COVID-19 unfortunately prevented these conversations. From our interviews, we have created a list of recommendations to overcome barriers to civic engagement that disproportionately harm unenrolled youth. We have also considered how the pandemic, the resultant economic crisis, and the ongoing protests against systemic racism may affect strategies and means of engagement. A functioning democracy requires the participation of all its members, and we hope that these recommendations can make it easier for young people with no college experience to be actively engaged in their communities.