

# Afterschool Supports Service Opportunities from Youth to Young Adulthood

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Vibrant social connections and robust community involvement are part of what makes a strong America.<sup>1</sup> Yet, among our nation's young people, there are relatively low levels of community engagement.<sup>2</sup> Research shows that service learning is an established method to bring youth closer to their communities while also promoting positive youth development outcomes. Young adults are able to make similar personal and professional gains when participating in forms of service, like national service programs, that provide a substantive, experiential opportunity. Acts of service will look different depending on one's age, but individuals of all ages can engage in and benefit from service opportunities. The afterschool field is a critical partner to expand access and availability of service opportunities for youth and young adults alike and work toward the healthy development of both the next generation and our democracy.

## **The Problem: Youth and young adults are missing out on the benefits of service**

A study by the University of Maryland's Do Good Institute found that volunteering has declined across every age group since 2005, with the percentage of young people volunteering remaining relatively low and stagnant.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the study also found that civic drive among incoming college freshman is at an all-time high.\* Despite the positive impacts of community engagement, the desire to be a positive force in the community is not translating into action.

### **Service opportunities at school: for some, not all.**

While trends show an increasing number of service opportunities offered by schools and universities, there remain far too many who are not accessing these opportunities. For example, only 68 percent of principals of K-12 schools report that their students participate in community activities<sup>4</sup> and 69 percent of college seniors participated in a service-learning course in 2018.<sup>5</sup>

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\* Since the Census first began tracking these attitudes in the mid-1960s.

### The type of service matters.

Research shows the positive benefits associated with service learning, which is differentiated from volunteering in that there is a balance between thoughtfully structured learning goals and service outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Although 33 states mention community service in their state academic standards or frameworks<sup>7</sup>, only 11 states have standards or curriculum frameworks that explicitly incorporate service learning.<sup>8</sup>

### The equity divide.

Participation in opportunities for service varies across socio-economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, based on the availability and access to surrounding institutions that facilitate and encourage service.<sup>9</sup> Schools in low-income areas, often serving a larger percentage of minority students, are less likely to offer service learning when compared with other schools.<sup>10</sup> For low-income young adults, in school and in the workforce, monetary and non-monetary costs of service act as a barrier to participation.<sup>11</sup>

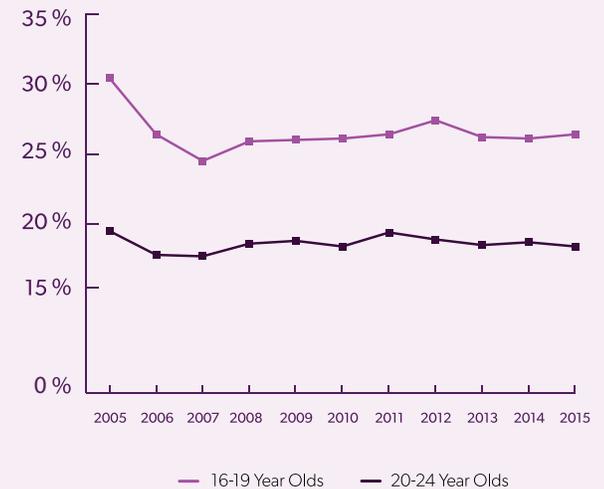
## Afterschool Can Help: Afterschool invests in the future of young America by promoting service opportunities for all ages

The Do Good Institute suggests that more accessible, quality opportunities for community engagement are needed for our youth and young adult population. The flexibility of the afterschool space makes it well placed to offer service learning opportunities for youth and to host young adults in meaningful service positions as staff. Through service learning in afterschool, youth feel empowered and develop a sense of agency, self-efficacy, and confidence as valuable contributors to the community.<sup>12</sup> This positive self-perception manifests in improved social skills, a positive attitude toward school and learning,<sup>13</sup> and improved academic outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

Under the guidance of afterschool programs, young adults explore and establish their identities as community members. Service generates a network of support for young adults that promote trust, community values, and relationships.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, young adults who complete a year of service experience a greater likelihood of bachelor's degree attainment<sup>16</sup> and better prospects at full-time employment.<sup>17</sup> It is clear that the afterschool space engages youth and young adults in service opportunities that place them on a path toward success.

Figure 1

### Volunteering rates by age: 2005-2015



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey 2005-2015





**Connecting underrepresented youth and young adults to service.** Afterschool is well positioned to reach youth and young adults from underserved and underrepresented communities.<sup>18</sup> The [Einstein Enrichment Program \(EEP\)](#) provides opportunities for minority and economically disadvantaged Bronx high school students to explore and excel in the sciences through service learning projects that use a practical application of medical or health research to benefit their communities. The program creates a pathway for students historically underrepresented in the medical and scientific professions to pursue these types of careers. Engaging young adults, [Breakthrough Cincinnati](#) attracts a diverse body of college undergraduates to serve as teaching fellows in a culturally relevant summer learning program for underserved middle school students. Breakthrough Cincinnati is intentional about diversity and inclusion in their recruitment of teaching fellows to create a supportive learning environment for students and increase the number of traditionally underrepresented minorities in the education field.

**Enhancing future prospects through foundational skills and competencies.** Opportunities for service in the afterschool space help youth and young adults develop the skills and experiences that are valued in school and in the workplace.<sup>19</sup> For example, [Civic Nebraska](#)'s Youth Civic Leadership afterschool program encourages elementary and middle schoolers to invest in their communities by way of service learning, encouraging youth to take initiative, collaborate with partners, and critically think through issues to solve community problems. Young adults who participate in a year of service through AmeriCorps VISTA at [OregonASK](#)—a statewide afterschool network that works to expand access to quality out-of-school time programs—acquire in-demand skills including cooperation and persistence in the face of difficulty. Recognizing the growth that accompanies a service year, OregonASK has hired several former VISTA members as full-time staff.

**Creating an avenue for career exploration.** Afterschool programs expand the horizons of youth and young adults by introducing them to a wide variety of topic areas through service projects. In northwestern Connecticut, Health360 provides a structured service-learning program, [Youth Health Service Corps \(YHSC\)](#), for underrepresented high school students to discuss critical topics—such as social determinants of health, cultural competency, and ethics—and apply lessons learned to better the community. Participation in YHSC strengthens student involvement in the community, sparks interest in healthcare fields, and molds future healthcare professionals. [City Year](#) offers young adults the opportunity to explore a career in education by means of a year of national service, and most City Year members reflect on their year of service as influential in shaping their career path.

## Conclusion

Engaging in service advances the success of youth and young adults by helping them achieve academic, social, and professional growth. However, the potential realization of these positive outcomes relies on the ability of youth and young adults to access and engage in service opportunities. Afterschool programs are a crucial part of this effort to invest in the future of America's young people.

To learn more, read the full issue brief and program spotlights at: <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/research.cfm>

## ENDNOTES

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