

**HOW MIGHT HAMILTON COUNTY LEADERS DEVELOP A SUSTAINABLE AND  
IMMERSIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT CULTURE AMONG LOCAL YOUTH? ‘**

Matthew Grady,<sup>1</sup> Laci Mitchiner,<sup>2</sup> Shiva Rajbhandari<sup>3</sup>

Morehead-Cain Civic Collaboration Summer

July 18, 2024

---

<sup>1</sup> [migrady@unc.edu](mailto:migrady@unc.edu)

<sup>2</sup> [limit9497@unc.edu](mailto:limit9497@unc.edu)

<sup>3</sup> [shiva.rajbhandari@unc.edu](mailto:shiva.rajbhandari@unc.edu)

## Abstract

It is widely agreed that youth civic engagement is essential to building a highly-engaged citizenry necessary for vibrant and resilient pluralist democracies. In the 2022 midterm elections, Tennessee saw the lowest youth voter turnout (ages 18-29), a proxy for civic engagement, in the United States, with only 12.7% of eligible citizens under 30 voting.<sup>4</sup> This is a problem that Hamilton County government and civil society leaders have long sought to address. To characterize the local status of youth civic engagement and identify barriers to civic participation, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 16 Hamilton County policy professionals, government teachers, and civically underengaged youth. Using an Artificial Intelligence model to transcribe and code these interviews, we thematically analyzed interviews identifying six problems and needs for Hamilton County youth civic engagement: poor communication of offerings, promoting social capital, lack of perceived efficacy, thick education, low stake in Hamilton County, and accessibility. Then, using a cluster-based analysis to find peer metropolitan statistical areas with higher youth voter turnout rates than Hamilton County. We examined case studies from five of these peer cities that addressed the problems and needs identified by interviewees then provided five recommendations for implementation by Hamilton County local governments, public schools, and civil society groups: (1) Conduct direct physical outreach in K-12 and postsecondary schools to distribute content and build relationships with students; (2) build youth-exclusive third places that offer resources, opportunities for relationship building, mentorship, and safe environments where young people can meet, discuss issues, and drive change; student autonomy on civics-focused work creates stake in civic culture, innovates

---

<sup>4</sup> CIRCLE, “State-by-State Youth Voter Turnout Data and the Impact of Election Laws in 2022.” April 6, 2023.

<https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/state-state-youth-voter-turnout-data-and-impact-election-laws-2022>.

unique solutions; (3) incorporate ‘thick’ education that promotes student autonomy into civics curriculum (4) rather than resisting youths’ desire to leave in pursuit of career opportunities, support their development while maintaining a connection to their hometown so they retain stake in their community; (5) provide voter education and registration resources in all interactions with youth. By implementing youth civic engagement initiatives using human-centered design, we are confident that Hamilton County local governments, public schools, and civil society can develop a sustainable and immersive culture of youth civic engagement.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Literature Review.....</b>	<b>4</b>
General Drivers of Youth Civic Engagement.....	6
Federal and State Policy Interventions.....	8
Contextualizing Youth Civic Engagement in Hamilton County.....	10
<b>Methods.....</b>	<b>17</b>
Definitions.....	18
Research Design.....	22
Data Analysis.....	24
Identifying Peer MSAs.....	25
Research Ethics.....	26
<b>Thematic Analysis.....</b>	<b>26</b>
Poor Communication of Offerings.....	28
Promoting Social Capital.....	35
Lack of Perceived Efficacy.....	47
Thick Education.....	52
Low Stake in Hamilton County.....	61
Accessibility.....	65
<b>Peer MSA Analysis.....</b>	<b>67</b>
Huntsville, AL — Capitol Scholars Program.....	67
Winston-Salem, NC – Dash Corps.....	68
Salem, OR — Salem Drop.....	70
Reno, NV — Automatic registration during agency interactions.....	73
Lexington, KY — Civic Lex & Kentucky Student Voices.....	75
<b>Recommendations.....</b>	<b>79</b>
Direct physical outreach in schools.....	79
Build youth-exclusive third places.....	80
Student autonomy on civics-focused work.....	82
Support youths’ development.....	83
Voter education and registration resources.....	84
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>88</b>

## Literature Review

It is widely agreed that a civically engaged populace is integral to the vibrancy and resiliency of communities and the maintenance of democratic ideals in pluralist democracies. Alexis de Tocqueville famously wrote that “the health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens.”<sup>5</sup> Scholarship of civic engagement largely focuses on children and young adults because, as Youniss, et. al. theorize, youth civic engagement instills civic identity during an “opportune moment” in life and introduces young people to the “practical roles and processes required for adult civic engagement.”<sup>6</sup> Further, youth engagement is often the fulcrum of societal transformation, as youth frequently spearhead social movements. Additionally, research has causally tied civic engagement to other measures of youth well-being, including mental health, educational attainment, and social mobility.<sup>7</sup>

In the early 2000s, academics had significant concerns about declining civic engagement. Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*, a keystone text on the status of civic engagement in western civilization, urged that suburbanization, digital communication, and breakdown in the nuclear family were reducing social capital and causing young people to become disillusioned with democracy.<sup>8</sup> Delli Carpini found that young people were less trusting of their fellow citizens, less

---

<sup>5</sup> Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: In Two Volumes*. Translated by George Lawrence and Jacob-Peter Mayer, Doubleday, 1969. 2 vols. Pg. 67

<sup>6</sup> James Youniss, Jeffrey A. McLellan, and Miranda Yates, “What we know about engendering civic identity.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 40.5 (1997): 620-631.

<sup>7</sup> Natalie Fenn, et. al., “Examining the relationship between civic engagement and mental health in young adults: A systematic review of the literature.” *Journal of Youth Studies* 27.4 (2024): 558-587; Wing Yi Chan, Suh-Ruu Ou, and Arthur J. Reynolds, “Adolescent civic engagement and adult outcomes: An examination among urban racial minorities.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 43 (2014): 1829-1843; Dawinder S. Sidhu, “Civic education as an instrument of social mobility.” *Denv. UL Rev.* 90 (2012): 990.

<sup>8</sup> Robert D Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital.” *Culture and Politics: A Reader*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2000.

interested in politics or public affairs, and less likely to feel a sense of identity, pride, or obligation associated with American citizenship.<sup>9</sup> Later scholars suggest alternative explanations, for example, that civic engagement wasn't declining, only changing in response to a global culture dominated by the Internet, as Bermudez theorized.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of the ways civic engagement was changing, the research of this period is dominated by a "youth deficit model" which according to Maher and Earl, "casts young people as deficient and requiring benevolent adult tutelage," simultaneously undermining the collective efficacy of young people and discounting conscious systematic decisions such as restrictive voting laws, limited access to civic education, and the marginalization of youth voices in policy-making, that may disincentivize youth civic engagement.<sup>11</sup> Current scholarship now focuses on the means of engaging youth in civics, not as a homogenous bloc, but within the context of the communities they live in and the lives they lead, for which we will seek to provide recommendations for Hamilton County, Tennessee government and civil society leaders.

### *General Drivers of Youth Civic Engagement*

Extant literature shows that factors influencing youth involvement can be categorized into several key areas: psychological factors, family influence, educational strategies, and participation in extracurricular and community activities.

---

<sup>9</sup> Michael X. Delli Carpini, "Gen. com: Youth, civic engagement, and the new information environment." *Political communication* 17, no. 4 (2000): 341-349.

<sup>10</sup> Angela Bermudez, "Youth civic engagement: decline or transformation? A critical review." (2012): 529-542.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas V. Maher and Jennifer Earl, "Living Down to Expectations: Age Inequality and Youth Activism." In *The Politics of Inequality*, vol. 28, pp. 215-235. Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021.

As adult-associated roles, such as acquiring a steady job and starting a family, occur later in life than in previous generations, the natural formation of civic identity and engagement in civic activities has become delayed, as it is often associated with other adult roles.<sup>12</sup> Flanagan and Levine argue that this phenomenon may be a primary contributor to current low national youth civic engagement metrics.<sup>13</sup> The researchers claim that young people view themselves as ‘future citizens’ rather than active participants in society today. This perception undermines their internal efficacy—the belief in their ability to affect change in their lives and the world—which, according to McIntosh and Muñoz, is a key predictor of youth civic engagement.<sup>14</sup>

According to Diann Kelly, parental civic behaviors are directly transmitted to their children, establishing the home as “a gateway to the civic engagement of families in society.”<sup>15</sup> Her research indicates a very strong correlation between parents’ involvement in voting, community service, external efficacy, and political volunteering, and the level of civic engagement their children show, especially in families of color.<sup>16</sup> For example, youth of color are nearly three times more likely to vote if their parents vote in most elections compared to youth of color with parents who did not.<sup>17</sup> Kelly’s study also indicates that youth of color who discuss

---

<sup>12</sup> Constance Flanagan and Peter Levine, “Civic engagement and the transition to adulthood.” *The Future of Children* (2010): 159-179.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Hugh McIntosh and Marco A. Muñoz, “Predicting civic engagement in urban high school students.” *Journal of Character Education* 7, no. 1 (2009): 41.

<sup>15</sup> Diann Cameron Kelly, “Parents’ influence on youths’ civic behaviors: The civic context of the caregiving environment.” *Families in Society* 87, no. 3 (2006): 447-455.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

politics with their parents are nearly 3.5 times more likely to highly value voting than those whose parents discuss politics less or not at all.<sup>18</sup>

According to Gistered Muleya, schools can significantly impact the development of an individual's civic identity, most effectively through a combination of 'thin' and 'thick' methods of civic education.<sup>19</sup> While 'thin' civic education focuses on imparting facts about the history, setup, and functions of government and civil society, "thick" education involves immersive activities that allow youth to actively engage with societal issues.<sup>20</sup> Muleya further argues that effective civic education not only encompasses the existing social, cultural, political, and economic structures but also emphasizes the interconnections between access, equity, and active participation in civic life.<sup>21</sup> Swalwell and Payne agree, urging that educators should begin fostering children's understanding of local injustices, encouraging them to envision ideal societies, and equipping them with strategies for civic action in early adolescence.<sup>22</sup>

McIntosh and Muñoz state that extracurricular civics programs are also intermediate predictors of youth civic engagement, as these activities offer this 'thick' education to students who partake in them.<sup>23</sup> However, Kahne and Middaugh find that while extracurriculars are well-intentioned, they are more accessible to students who are white, attend higher

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Gistered Muleya, "Re-examining the concept of civic education." (2018).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Katy Swalwell and Katherina A. Payne, "Critical civic education for young children." *Multicultural Perspectives* 21, no. 2 (2019): 127-132.

<sup>23</sup> McIntosh and Muñoz, 2009.



socioeconomic schools, and are college-bound.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Kahne and Middaugh state that these programs, exacerbate the civic engagement gap between privileged students and low-income students, those not planning to go to college, and students of color.<sup>25</sup> Considering that the latter demographics are underrepresented in civil society and American politics, interventions are needed to equitably engage underserved youth communities in civics.<sup>26</sup>

### *Federal and State Policy Interventions*

Since the civil rights movement, there have been numerous policy interventions at the federal level seeking to reduce civic inequality and increase civic engagement across the country. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, The National Voter Registration Act of 1993, and The Help America Vote Act of 2002 sought to reduce barriers to voting, especially for minorities and disadvantaged communities.<sup>27</sup> Volunteers In Service to America (VISTA) and AmeriCorps were founded in 1965 and 1993, respectively, to engage young people in volunteer work solving societal programs in American communities.<sup>28</sup> The Congressional Award and President's Volunteer Service Award were established in 1979 and 2003, respectively, to incentivize

---

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, "Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School. Circle Working Paper 59." *Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)* (2008).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> "Voting Rights Act (1965)." National Archives and Records Administration, February 8, 2022. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/voting-rights-act>; National Voter Registration Act of 1993. Bill, Congress.gov § (1993). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/house-bill/2>; Help America Vote Act of 2002. Bill, United States Election Assistance Commission § (2002). [https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac\\_assets/1/6/HAVA41.PDF](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/6/HAVA41.PDF).

<sup>28</sup> AmeriCorps, "About AmeriCorps." Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://americorps.gov/about>.

Americans to be involved in their communities.<sup>29</sup> Despite these efforts, which have all been celebrated and expanded as successful federal interventions, overall engagement in electoral politics, volunteering, and social movements from 1976 to 2009 either stayed the same or decreased across different socio-demographic groups, particularly among young people (ethnoracial, socioeconomic status, and gender).<sup>30</sup>

In Tennessee, youth voter turnout (ages 18-29) is the lowest in the nation with only 12.7% of eligible youth voting in the 2022 midterms, compared to the 23% national mean. This represents a 57% decline in eligible Tennessee youth voter turnout since 2018.<sup>31</sup> In 2020, Tennessee also implemented policy that placed regulations on voter registration drives, potentially discouraging voting from youth and other underrepresented groups or enabling voter roll purging.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, some programs, like the Tennessee Governor’s Civic Seal program, indicate that the state is interested in promoting civics education. That program, according to the state’s Department of Education, “recognizes schools and districts that prioritize teaching our

---

<sup>29</sup> The Congressional Award, “The Program.” August 17, 2023. <https://www.congressionalaward.org/the-program/>; “About the President’s Volunteer Service Award.” The President’s Volunteer Service Award. Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://presidentalserviceawards.gov/about>.

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Gaby, “The civic engagement gap (s): Youth participation and inequality from 1976 to 2009.” *Youth & Society* 49.7 (2017): 923-946.

<sup>31</sup> CIRCLE, 2023.

<sup>32</sup> “SB 1967.” Tennessee General Assembly Legislation. Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/default.aspx?BillNumber=SB1967&GA=113>; Acts Purging Registration — Notice. TN Code § 2-2-106. 2021.; Joseph Greaney, “Two States with Republican Trifectas Adopted New Requirements for Voter Registration Drives.” Ballotpedia News, July 15, 2024. <https://news.ballotpedia.org/2024/07/15/two-states-with-republican-trifectas-adopted-new-requirements-for-voter-registration-drives/>.

nation’s history and civic values.”<sup>33</sup> Among other things, schools must submit at least five civics-related lesson plans, provide opportunities for students to participate in at least one “real-world learning activity,” and have all students earn an 85% or above on the mandatory 100-question civics exam similar to the U.S. naturalization exam.<sup>34</sup> Fifty-nine schools and two school districts in Tennessee were recognized with the seal in the 2022-2023 school year.<sup>35</sup> State law also requires that students take at least one semester of government class.<sup>36</sup>

### *Contextualizing Youth Civic Engagement in Hamilton County*

Hamilton County is located in southeastern Tennessee on that state’s border with Georgia and near the borders with Alabama and North Carolina. The county’s position between the Appalachian Mountains and the Cumberland Plateau along the Tennessee River made it geographically significant as a critical battleground during the American Civil War and as a vital rail and barging transportation hub connecting the Deep South with the rest of the country.

Chattanooga travel blogs describe the community’s history as one of reconciliation, referencing the Civil War memorial on Lookout Mountain, the site of the Chickamauga Battle, showing Union and Confederate soldiers shaking hands, and The Passage, a Trail of Tears

---

<sup>33</sup> “Governor’s Civics Seal.” Tennessee Department of Education. Accessed July 15, 2024. <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/governor-s-civics-seal.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> “Tennessee State Board of Education High School Policy.” Tennessee State Government, 10AD. <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/stateboardofeducation/documents/2023-sbe-meetings/february-10%2C-2023-sbe-meeting/2-10-23%20IV%20C%20High%20School%20Policy%202.103%20Clean.pdf>.

memorial featuring a cascading stream which children splash in at the waterfront.<sup>37</sup> Despite the white apologist attitude these references may connote, the city has the mark of several social movements, including the first high school student lunch counter sit-in of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>38</sup> More recently, students at Tyner High School, which has 96% minority enrollment, were also involved in a successful organizing effort targeting the Hamilton County school board to build a new school after a portion of their schools was condemned in 2021.<sup>39</sup>

The county has an estimated population of 379,958, the fourth greatest in Tennessee, with nearly half of all residents living in Chattanooga, the county seat. According to the 2020 Census, Hamilton County is approximately 70% non-Hispanic white, 18% Black, and 7% Hispanic/Latino, though Chattanooga itself is more diverse with almost 45% of residents identifying as non-white and/or Hispanic/Latino.<sup>40</sup> The county is home to three postsecondary education institutions: the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Chattanooga State Community College, and Southern Adventist University. Lee University and Covenant College, two private Christian schools, are also proximal, with many students enrolled in those

---

<sup>37</sup> John R. Bruning, “The Message on Lookout Mountain.” *The American Warrior*, August 12, 2017. <https://theamericanwarrior.com/2017/08/12/the-message-on-lookout-mountain/>; “Native American History in Chattanooga: A Trail of Tears.” Visit Chattanooga, November 2, 2021. <https://www.visitchattanooga.com/blog/post/native-american-history-in-chattanooga-a-trail-of-tears/>.

<sup>38</sup> PBS, “History Makers 2008: Howard High School, Class of 1960.” June 30, 2008. <https://www.pbs.org/video/special-presentations-history-makers-2008-howard-class-sit-ins/>.

<sup>39</sup> WDEF News, “Tyner Academy Seniors Walk out of School in Demand of Better Building Conditions.” September 2, 2021. <https://www.wdef.com/tyner-academy-seniors-walk-school-demand-better-building-conditions/>.

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. “Hamilton County.” [data.census.gov/profile/Hamilton\\_County,\\_Tennessee?g=050XX00US47065](https://data.census.gov/profile/Hamilton_County,_Tennessee?g=050XX00US47065). Accessed July 15, 2024.

institutions residing in Hamilton County. As such, postsecondary educational attainment exceeds the state average and high school graduation rates are roughly on par with the rest of the state.<sup>41</sup>

Upward mobility is limited in Hamilton County. According to the Opportunity Atlas, the average child raised in the Chattanooga commuting area by parents in the bottom income quartile has an annual household income of \$27,000 by age 35, placing the Chattanooga area at the 10th percentile nationally for upward mobility for low-income youth.<sup>42</sup> At a neighborhood level, there are clear disparities in mobility as well. For example, while the average low-income child in Lookout Mountain, TN has an annual household income of \$54,000 by age 35, their peer 2.5 miles away in the Piney Woods neighborhood of Chattanooga earns an annual household income of \$17,000 by the same age.<sup>43</sup> This reflects a long history of racial and socioeconomic segregation in Hamilton County. According to the 2020 Census, the county has a Black/white dissimilarity index of 59, meaning that 59% of Hamilton County Black residents would have to move for Black people to be evenly distributed across census tracts.<sup>44</sup> The 90th percentile household income was 15.71 times that of the 10th percentile in 2022 compared to a national average of 12.6.<sup>45</sup> These statistics are typified in the comparison of Lookout Mountain and Piney Woods, which, respectively, are 96.9% white and 81% Black and have a median household

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> *Opportunity Atlas*, Opportunity Insights, [www.opportunityatlas.org/](http://www.opportunityatlas.org/). Accessed 14 July 2024.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

income of \$181,000 (242% of the county median) and 15,900 (21% of the county median).<sup>46</sup>

Public school test scores, go-on rates, homeownership, tree canopy coverage, and other measures of quality of life also vary greatly across the county and are strongly correlated with racial makeup. There is also a large gap in the demographic makeup of the three prestigious private high schools and the public schools in the region.<sup>47</sup>

The political landscape in Hamilton County is perceived by many locals to be characterized by a liberal-leaning government in Chattanooga and a conservative-leaning county government. The Hamilton County School District receives funding appropriated by the county government. Currently, that district has over \$1 billion in deferred facilities maintenance, though the county government has taken steps to reduce this figure.<sup>48</sup> Past gaps in coordination between the city and county governments may have limited the possibility of joint initiatives to tackle problems like low youth civic engagement. However, the current city and county administrations, which are both relatively younger and claim to be more closely aligned than

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.; Shannon Coan, “High School Graduation Rate Increases in Hamilton County: Chattanooga Times Free Press.” *Times Free Press*, 25 Nov. 2023, [www.timesfreepress.com/news/2023/nov/25/high-school-graduation-rate-increases-in-hamilton/](http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2023/nov/25/high-school-graduation-rate-increases-in-hamilton/).

<sup>47</sup> U.S News Education, “Baylor School in Tennessee.” U.S News. Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/tennessee/baylor-school-311359>; Niche, “McCallie School Students.” Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://www.niche.com/k12/mccallie-school-chattanooga-tn/students/>; Niche, “Girls Preparatory School Students.” Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://www.niche.com/k12/girls-preparatory-school-chattanooga-tn/students/>; U.S. News Education, “Hamilton County Schools.” U.S. News. Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/tennessee/districts/hamilton-county-104113>.

<sup>48</sup> David Floyd, “Hamilton County Working Group Aims to Address \$1 Billion School Facilities ‘Crisis.’” Chattanooga Times Free Press, September 23, 2022. <https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2022/sep/22/hamilton-county-group-facilities-tfp/>.

their predecessors, specifically around education, embrace new shared duties and collaborative local efforts, which is promising.<sup>49</sup>

According to CIRCLE, Hamilton County youth voter turnout in the 2022 midterm elections was 15.4%.<sup>50</sup> Hamilton County governments have made some efforts to engage young people in civics. The Hamilton County School District encourages social studies teachers to strive for the Governor’s Civic Seal, which 15 schools in the district earned in 2021, accounting for 28% of statewide awardees that year.<sup>51</sup> To achieve this and to meet state civics standards, the district urges teachers to partake in Project Soapbox, a capstone-style civics project where students make an extemporaneous speech arguing for a relevant local social issue. School clubs are also significant agents in creating opportunities for students to get involved in active civic education, with many Hamilton County public schools offering Model UN and Youth in Government. Government initiatives to both hear the students’ concerns and educate them on civics include the Superintendent’s Advisory Council and student school board members, which serve as a representative voice between the high school students and school district policymakers, and the Mayor’s Youth Council with a similar goal of connecting students to the city officials.

---

<sup>49</sup> City of Chattanooga Mayor’s Office, “Chattanooga and Hamilton County Unveil Partnership to Strengthen Education, Enhance Affordable Housing, and Revitalize 300 Acres on City’s Westside.” May 26, 2023.  
<https://mayor.chattanooga.gov/chattanooga-and-hamilton-county-unveil-partnership-to-strengthen-education-enhance-affordable-housing-and-revitalize-300-acres-on-citys-westside/>.

<sup>50</sup> CIRCLE, “Youth Data,” n.d.

<sup>51</sup> Anika Chaturvedi, “15 Hamilton County Schools Earn Governor’s Civic Seals.” Chattanooga Times Free Press, August 12, 2021.  
<https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2021/aug/11/15-hamilton-county-schools-earn-governors-civic/>.

Despite low voter turnout and extreme socioeconomic disparities, Hamilton County has a large civil society. There are approximately 1000 IRS-registered non-profit organizations and many cultural institutions and third spaces.<sup>52</sup> Wealth from Coca-Cola bottling plants, and brands such as Krystal Hamburgers and MoonPies, as well as the presence of elites such as the billionaire founders of FedEx, Pilot Oil, and LifeCare Centers of America, have created a rich philanthropic environment in Chattanooga.<sup>53</sup> The Benwood Foundation (with assets of \$102 million as of 2018) and the Lyndhurst Foundation (\$140 million as of 2018), which both were started by Coca-Cola bottling titans, were particularly influential in funding the Sustainable Chattanooga urban revitalization and the development of the downtown innovation district.<sup>54</sup> They are currently heavily involved in the Chattanooga 2.0 framework which seeks to finally address some of the inequities across the city.<sup>55</sup> Other significant local civil society groups include the United Way of Greater Chattanooga, which is focused on education and social mobility, River City Company, an economic development and redevelopment entity, the Public Education Foundation, which supports Hamilton County Public Schools with teacher recruitment and postsecondary attainment, the Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga, which provides grants focused on affordable housing and hunger and college scholarships to underserved Hamilton County youth, and the Enterprise Center, a privately and publicly-funded

---

<sup>52</sup> United Way Chattanooga, “Starting a Nonprofit in Tennessee.” 2021. <https://unitedwaycha.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NonprofitStartupGuide.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Dave Flessner, “Three Chattanoogaans among America’s Billionaires.” Chattanooga Times Free Press, April 10, 2023. <https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2023/apr/10/three-chattanoogaans-among-americas-billionaires/>.

<sup>54</sup> Ben Gose, “Chattanooga.” The Chronicle of Philanthropy, December 4, 2018. <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/chattanooga/>.

<sup>55</sup> “Who We Are.” Chattanooga 2.0, June 5, 2024. <https://chatt2.org/who-we-are/>.



nonprofit that promotes digital equity, innovation, civic engagement, and smart communities in coordination with which this study was conducted.

Several initiatives aim to enhance youth civic engagement within Hamilton County. Youth Leadership Chattanooga, which develops leadership skills in high school juniors through workshops and community service projects, YMCA Youth and Government, which provides students with firsthand legislative experience, Chattanooga Youth Council, which offers a platform for young people to influence local government decisions, and The Enterprise Center's Our Voices initiative, which creates educational civics content on a variety of social media platforms, are instrumental in fostering leadership skills and civic awareness among young residents. However, despite the initiatives' efforts and the quality of content produced, challenges persist in engaging local youth effectively. For instance, Our Voices struggles with low viewership metrics on their content, highlighting the gap between program efforts and community participation.

Though organizations such as the National League of Cities have created some policy tools to improve youth civic engagement culture, extant scholarly literature addressing youth civic engagement, in the interests of maintaining generalizability, has largely steered clear of programmatic recommendations.<sup>56</sup> This may undermine the adequacy with which local government leaders and civil society implement the broad recommendations provided in the literature reviewed above. Though our programmatic recommendations are narrowly tailored to Hamilton County, Tennessee, they may be applicable in other communities across the country as Hamilton County's demographic trend of high racial and class segregation despite increasing diversity and immigration and political trend of attrition between a liberal urban municipality

---

<sup>56</sup> National League of Cities, "Authentic Youth Civic Engagement." March 2019. <https://www.nlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/authentic-youth-engagement-gid-jul10.pdf>.

within a conservative county and state encapsulates much of the strife regarding civics in many American communities. Additionally, despite its socioeconomic challenges, the presence of extensive social infrastructure means that potential levers for youth civic engagement are highly accessible, making this community an easy choice for a case study.

## **Methods**

We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with six policy professionals, four government teachers, and seven civically under-engaged youth to understand the status, drivers, and potential needs or areas for improvement of youth civic engagement culture in Hamilton County. Transcribing and coding these interviews using AI, we then applied an inductive method of thematic analysis to draw out shared themes across the interviews. Next, based on emergent themes and drawing on extant literature and case studies from peer communities, identified via cluster-based analysis, we generated programmatic recommendations for Hamilton County Public Schools, the City of Chattanooga officials, and Hamilton County civil society leaders to improve youth civic engagement.

### *Definitions*

The Tufts University Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) considers youth voters to be between the ages of 18 and 29, inclusive. For this study, we defined ‘youth’ to be all individuals less than 30 years of age.

Barrett and Brunton-Smith distinguish ‘participation’ as “behavioral in nature whereas ‘engagement’ is “psychological rather than behavioral” and is “used to denote having an interest in, paying attention to, or having knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes or feelings about either

political or civic matters.”<sup>57</sup> Drawing on Verba, et. al., Barrett and Brunton-Smith define ‘political participation’ as “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing either regional, national or supranational governance, either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of individuals who make that policy.”<sup>58</sup> Drawing on Zukin, et. al., Barrett and Brunton-Smith define ‘civic participation’ as “voluntary activity focused on helping others, achieving a public good or solving a community problem, including work undertaken either alone or in cooperation with others... to effect change.” This definition fits a functional need in our study as it encompasses participation in the three activities of civic engagement identified in the framework of McIntosh, et. al. which “parallel the service, electoral, and citizen-oriented classifications of civic engagement defined by the National Conference on Citizenship (2008)”: civil and political systems and problem-solving activity.<sup>59</sup>

In his book *Politics for Hire: The World and Work of Policy Professionals*, Stefan Svallfors writes that policy professionals are “experts on how to access politically relevant information, how to frame political problems, how to navigate the nooks and crannies of political machinery.”<sup>60</sup> For a functional definition of policy professionals, we look to Joanna Mellquist who bases her definition on Svallfors’ behavioral description: individuals who “are recruited and appointed to pursue policies within the state, lobbying organizations and civil society, and their

---

<sup>57</sup> Martyn Barrett and Ian Brunton-Smith, “Political and civic engagement and participation: Towards an integrative perspective.” In *Framing Civic Engagement, Political Participation and Active Citizenship in Europe*, pp. 5-28. Routledge, 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> McIntosh and Muñoz, 2009, 41.

<sup>60</sup> Stefan Svallfors, *Politics for hire: The world and work of policy professionals*. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), 127.

particular skills are ‘the ability to frame problems, to know the game and to access information.’”<sup>61</sup> In Hamilton County, this includes policy researchers employed or consulted by policymakers, including public policy academics, special interest non-profit lobbyists, and policy liaisons for executive offices like those of the county and city mayors.

To develop a functional definition of civically under-engaged youth, we relied on CIRCLE’s metrics for youth civic engagement:

- Voting
- Belong to a group
- Volunteering
- Make consumer choices for political reasons
- Work with neighbors to do something positive for the community
- Do favors for a neighbor
- Discuss political/social issues with neighbors
- Discuss political/social issues with friends or family
- In the past 12 months, how often did you have a conversation or spend time with your neighbors (CIRCLE defines this as talking to or spending time “with people from a racial, ethnic or cultural background that is different than yours”)
- Share views about news/politics on social media
- Contact or visit a public official to express an opinion<sup>62</sup>

To ensure these metrics encompass each of the four forms of youth civic engagement as cataloged by Checkoway and Aldana, we sorted CIRCLE’s metrics into the basic behaviors of each of these forms as Checkoway and Aldana describe them:

**Table 1.** CIRCLE metrics sorted into four forms of youth civic engagement

Basic Behaviors	CIRCLE Metrics
-----------------	----------------

<sup>61</sup>Joanna Mellquist, "Role orientation and organizational strategy among policy professionals in civil society." *Interest Groups & Advocacy* 11, no. 1 (2022): 136-156.

<sup>62</sup> CIRCLE, “Youth Data,” n.d..

“Participate through formal political and government institutions.” <sup>63</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Voting</li> <li>• Contact or visit a public official to express an opinion</li> <li>• Volunteering</li> </ul>
“Organize a group for social and political action.” <sup>64</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Belong to a group</li> <li>• Volunteering</li> </ul>
“Facilitate critical discussion that enables people to communicate, promote understanding, explore issues, and create changes.” <sup>65</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss political/social issues with friends or family</li> <li>• Share views about news/politics on social media</li> <li>• Discuss political/social issues with neighbors</li> </ul>
“Promote critical consciousness for societal involvement, especially individual and structural factors that affect involvement.” <sup>66</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share views about news/politics on social media</li> </ul>

This leaves the following CIRCLE metrics out of the four forms defined by Checkoway and Aldana:

- Make consumer choices for political reasons
- Do favors for a neighbor
- Have a conversation or spend time with your neighbors

We inferred that consumer choices for political reasons and doing favors for a neighbor both fit our functional definition of civic participation because they are voluntary activities focused on helping others.<sup>67</sup> However, we did not believe that having a conversation or spending

<sup>63</sup> Barry Checkoway and Adriana Aldana, “Four forms of youth civic engagement for diverse democracy.” *Children and Youth Services Review* 35.11 (2013): 1894-1899.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Martyn Barrett and Ian Brunton-Smith, 2017.

time with one's neighbors is adequately encompassed within this definition. Thus, neglecting, "In the past 12 months, how often did you have a conversation or spend time with your neighbors?", we will use CIRCLE's survey questions associated with these metrics to identify civically under-engaged individuals. If someone under 30 years of age answers yes to less than four of these criteria, then they are civically under-engaged:

- Voting: "Have you voted in the past two years?"
- Belong to a group: "In the past 12 months, have you belonged to any groups, organizations, or associations?"
- Volunteering: "In the past 12 months, have you volunteered?" (On their own, at school, with an organization, etc.)
- Make consumer choices for political reasons: "In the past 12 months did you buy or boycott products or services based on the political values or business practices of that company?"
- Work with neighbors to do something positive for community: "In the past 12 months did you get together with other people from your neighborhood to do something positive for your neighborhood or the community?"
- Do favors for a neighbor: "In the past 12 months did you and your neighbors do favors for each other such as house sitting, watching each other's children, lending tools, and other things to help each other?"
- Discuss political/social issues with neighbors: "In the past 12 months did you discuss political, societal, or local issues with your neighbors?"
- Discuss political/social issues with friends or family: "In the past 12 months did you discuss political, societal, or local issues with friends or family?"
- Share views about news/politics on social media: "In the past 12 months did you contact or visit a public official – at any level of government – to express your opinion?"
- Contact or visit public official to express opinion: "In the past 12 months did you contact or visit a public official – at any level of government – to express your opinion?"<sup>68</sup>

We defined high school government teachers as people who taught at least one section of a course that fulfills the Hamilton County Public Schools U.S. Government high school graduation requirement (e.g. Government and AP U.S. Government) in the 2023-2024 school year and plan on teaching at least one section of this course in the 2024-2025 school year or, in

---

<sup>68</sup> CIRCLE, "Youth Data." n.d.

the case of Mary Beth Browne, a Hamilton County private school teacher who leads a program expressly focused on youth civic engagement.

### *Research Design:*

Our data collection follows three broad categories of inquiry:

- 1) *What* is the status of youth civic engagement culture in Hamilton County, Tennessee?
- 2) *Why* is this the culture? How did this culture develop? What are its drivers?
- 3) *What should be done* to build a more sustainable and immersive culture of civic engagement? What are the needs of youth and youth civic engagement practitioners (namely government teachers and youth-focused civil society groups)? What action can Hamilton County leaders take to meet these needs?

To answer these questions, we conducted a total of 16 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Hamilton County residents, selected using a combination of purposive and snowball recruitment. We identified three areas of expertise: government teachers, civically under-engaged youth, and policy professionals.

Government teachers, we inferred, had an understanding of how Hamilton County schools teach civics and how well this curriculum and extracurricular pedagogy are preparing high school students for citizenship in adulthood. Due to their experience working with young people across the spectrum of civic engagement and academic interest, government teachers might also have clarity as to the most effective means of engaging youth across a diverse set of backgrounds. We identified government teachers from a list of high school social studies faculty provided by the Hamilton County School District and from recommendations from recent high school graduates with whom we interacted.

We elected to interview civically under-engaged youth to understand the barriers, both personal and systemic, that are inhibiting youth civic engagement in Hamilton County. In our interviews, we sought to draw out background information such as academic interest, parentage, and sense of efficacy, which, extant literature shows, are chief predictors of civic engagement, as well as the ways that young people were slipping through the cracks despite the civic pedagogy provided in Hamilton County schools. We identified these interviewees by approaching young people in public areas and asking them the questions listed above to determine if they fit our definition of civically under-engaged.

The third expert group, policy professionals, was most diverse occupationally. In these interviews, we sought to understand the existing programs offered by Hamilton County Public Schools, the City of Chattanooga, and civil society that are focused on engaging young people in civics and how they might be improved or built on to enhance their effectiveness, equity, and reach within the community. Policy professionals were able to provide small recommendations and a situational understanding of youth civic engagement initiatives in Hamilton County relative to other places that enabled the emergence of specific programmatic recommendations. We identified policy professionals by researching large organizations, government agencies, and academics that inform civic engagement initiatives in Hamilton County.

We followed the semi-structured interview design template presented by Harrell and Bradley.<sup>69</sup> We followed a standardized set of guiding questions for each expertise group, probing to clarify answers and reciprocate interest where needed. Though all three of the categories of inquiry (*what*, *why*, and *what should be done*) were addressed with each expertise group,

---

<sup>69</sup> Margaret C. Harrell and Melissa Bradley, “Data collection methods: Semi-structured interviews and focus groups.” (2009).



questions were tailored to the expertise of each group. For example, to understand *what should be done*, policy professionals will be asked about policy action for civically engaged youth and will be more focused on needs and barriers to civic engagement. Interviews were conducted in person or over Zoom, and we relied on Dovetail's online AI transcription software to transcribe interviews.

### *Data Analysis*

We relied on Looppanel AI to code interview transcripts. Looppanel summarizes transcripts into bullet points based on guiding questions and then assigns tags that identify transcript themes, providing quotes from the interview transcripts as evidence. We input the following questions for Looppanel to respond to in its coding:

- What is the current status of youth civic engagement culture in Hamilton County, Tennessee?
- Why is the current culture of youth civic engagement in Hamilton County, Tennessee the way it is? How did this culture develop? What are its drivers?
- What should be done to build a more sustainable and immersive culture of youth civic engagement in Hamilton County, Tennessee?

Looppanel also provides an unstructured notes section for themes that do not fit into any of the guiding questions. We reviewed each of the over 2000 notes that Looppanel created, relying on the AI program's coding for sorting, we then grouped these notes into themes that we independently induced. We ultimately identified six broad themes addressing the problems and needs of youth civic engagement culture.

### *Identifying Peer MSAs*

We used the Idaho Policy Institute-City of Boise ‘Peer City Profiles’ tool to conduct a cluster-based analysis to identify peer U.S. metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) to Chattanooga based on six variables pulled from 2022 Census Bureau American Community Survey data (except population density, which is from 2019), in addition to total population and metro area population: median age, growth rate, population density, percent nonwhite residents, education, and poverty rate.<sup>70</sup> This yielded a list of 23 peer MSAs shown in Table 2 in order of similarity with their associated youth voter turnout rates. Defining aspirational MSAs to be MSAs with higher youth voter turnout than Hamilton County, we then omitted MSAs that saw less than 15.4% of eligible people under age 30 vote in the 2022 midterm general elections. We then selected the top five most similar MSAs for case study analysis.

**Table 2.** Peer MSAs to Chattanooga, TN

1. Huntsville, AL	9. Charleston-North	16. Eugene-Springfield, OR
2. Little Rock-North Little Rock-Conway, AR	Charleston, SC	17. Salt Lake City, UT
3. Winston-Salem, NC	10. Knoxville, TN	18. Boise, ID
4. Amarillo, TX	11. Des Moines-West Des Moines, IA	19. Anchorage, AK
5. Salem, OR	12. Springfield, MO	20. Durham-Chapel Hill, NC
6. Fort Wayne, IN	13. Greensboro-High Point, NC	21. Madison, WI
7. Reno, NV	14. Lexington-Fayette, KY	22. Lincoln, NE
8. Spokane-Spokane Valley, WA	15. Lubbock, TX	23. Raleigh-Cary, NC

### *Research Ethics*

Participation in this study was anonymous by request. All participants received an overview of our research objectives and methods and guiding interview questions prior to their

<sup>70</sup> For more on this method of cluster analysis, see Benjamin Larsen, Vanessa Crossgrove Fry, Mackenzie Moss, and Lantz McGinnis-Brown, “City of Boise Peer Cities Selection 2020.” Idaho Policy Institute, August 8, 2022. <https://www.boisestate.edu/sps-ipi/our-research/city-of-boise-peer-cities-selection-2020/>.

interview. Participants were informed that they could skip a question during any point in the interview and, following their interview, could request that a response or part of a response be omitted from their interview transcript until the time of publication. As compensation for their time, participants were offered \$25 after completing their interview. Minors will not be allowed to participate in this study.

## **Thematic Analysis**

In sum, we spoke with 16 Hamilton County residents about the status, drivers, and needs of the local youth engagement culture: three teachers, seven civically under-engaged young people, and six policy professionals. An inductive thematic analysis by Dovetail AI identified 15 subcodes grouped into four larger codes shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Dovetail AI transcript coding results

1. Engagement barriers
a. Mistrust in government: Distrust towards federal and local government (58)
b. Lack of knowledge: Unawareness of civic processes and roles (72)
c. Disillusionment: Feelings of hopelessness about effecting change (41)
d. Accessibility Issues: Challenges in accessing voting and engagement opportunities (27)
2. Cultural influences
a. Political climate impact: Political environment shaping engagement perceptions (13)
b. Role of education: Impact of educational content and approach on engagement (75)
c. Community norms: Local norms and values influencing civic participation (10)
3. Drivers of engagement
a. Youth-oriented programs: Initiatives and programs targeting young demographics (172)
b. Community role models: Influence of community leaders and mentors on youth (29)
c. Institutional support: Schools and organizations facilitating civic activities (126 notes)
4. Recommendations

- a. Enhance educational content: Improve civics education in schools for engagement (115 notes)
- b. Increase accessibility: Make civic participation more accessible and inclusive (32 notes)
- c. Leverage technology: Use social media and digital platforms for engagement (34 notes)
- d. Community collaboration: Foster partnerships among civic groups and schools (13 notes)
- e. Policy adjustments: Advocate for policies that lower barriers to participation (13)

Taking note of these identified codes, we grouped interview quotes within subthemes to extract four themes of policy problems and two families of solutions suggested by interviewees: poor communication of offerings, promoting social capital, lack of perceived efficacy, thick education, low stake in hamilton county, and accessibility.

### *Poor Communication of Offerings*

A chief concern that interviewees registered was a lack of awareness of the existing opportunities to become civically engaged in Hamilton County.

**Table 4** Under-awareness of existing opportunities for young people to engage civically in Hamilton County

Interviewee	Quote
Phil Trammell (P)	You know, not that I know of. It doesn't mean they're not there, I'm just not aware of them.
Phil Trammell (P)	I'm not aware of anything that any nonprofit organization or the city government is actively pursuing. I could be wrong about that. It's not a space that I run around in a lot these days, but I'm not aware of any. Do you know some?
Anonymous (T)	I think there's a lack of awareness about some of the opportunities that exist. The biggest surprise for me with civic scholars is I'll get an email, forward it to the kids, and realize it's something that's existed forever, like the mayor's youth council. There's also a cool thing called Supreme Court in My Hometown that just wrapped up at UTC, where a national organization

	talked about the famous Supreme Court case from Hamilton County—the Ed Johnson case at the Walnut Street Bridge, the only criminal case from Tennessee to go before the Supreme Court. How would you know about it if you didn't get an email? I'm lucky to have a group of kids interested that I can tell about it. But what if you don't go to Baylor? What if you don't go to a school where you're on an email list or frequently checking email on a required device? A lack of awareness is probably one of the biggest stumbling blocks to youth engagement. The opportunities are there, but there's always room for more.
Kim Thurman (T)	I don't know of any specifically that they already are. I think there is one lawyer group that helps fund a day where your students can go downtown and listen to some of the federal court cases and things like that. Other than that, I'm not really familiar with any. I would like to see, you know, them find ways for us to have more interaction with politicians, especially local politicians.
Elijah Haygood (Y)	I haven't really seen a program for this that has really caught my attention but I also think that they're not really being advertised to the folks since they could—partly because I feel like a lot of politicians and political people, once again they, like, favor finance and economics and money and stuff, so allowing a lot of young voters to, like, really see into someone's past and be able to do this research could be harmful to a lot of candidates, you know? So that's why I feel like it's not really being expressed as much.
Ronald Elliott (P)	You know, a lot of our civic culture has been preset by a lot of more powers that be. And it's been honest. So it's kind of, to put it plainly, an old boys club, and if you didn't have the right name or the right relationships, it was hard to tap into those circles and you still kinda see some tailwinds of that even today.

As shown in Table 4, many interviewees believe that youth civic engagement initiatives are not adequately disseminating information about opportunities offered. Additionally, local civil society stakeholders struggled to even identify nonprofit or City of Chattanooga efforts specifically focused on engaging young people that are well established within the community.

This problem is not unique to Hamilton County. A 2014 content analysis of literature on youth civic engagement in urban communities by researchers at the City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice identified a lack of information and knowledge regarding

programs to be a significant barrier to participation.<sup>71</sup> An unrelated 2016 pilot study of six teenagers “recognized by their teachers and peers for being highly engaged in their schools and/or communities,” each from different provinces in Canada found that “availability of information about civic affairs and opportunities to become directly involved, played a role in their socialization as engaged citizens.”<sup>72</sup> In that study, “Participants expressed a clear preference for concise, visually structured information presented online and on mobile-friendly platforms, and identified the Internet, including social media, as their most frequent source of information.”

Our experience in Chattanooga, comments from other interviewees, and resources online show that there are opportunities geared towards engaging young people in civics including JROTC, YMCA, Sunrise Movement, Young Republicans, Lion’s Club Junior Lions, Model UN, Youth in Government, Tennessee Intercollegiate State Legislature, Mock Trial, the Chattanooga Mayor’s and Hamilton County Schools District Superintendent’s advisory councils, and The Enterprise Center’s Our Voices initiative. We also have attended several civics education forums and events, though we often found ourselves among the only youth in attendance.

**Table 5.** Initiatives seeking to engage young people should seek to ‘meet youth where they are at’

Interviewee	Quote
Ronald Elliott (P)	The thing that I think will be more realistic, tackling the barrier, I would say our institutions and people of power talking and engaging around young people and their issues and just them in general. Right? I think that's the barrier right there. That communication. It goes a long way, right? I think you people can get inspired when they start seeing people like, ‘Oh, snap,

<sup>71</sup> Maria J. D'Agostino and Anne Visser, “Addressing and overcoming barriers to youth civic engagement.” *International Public Management Review* 11, no. 3 (2014): 88–103. <https://ipmr.net/index.php/ipmr/article/view/89>

<sup>72</sup> Alieda Blandford, Dominique Taylor, and Mike Smit, "Examining the role of information in the civic engagement of youth." *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 52, no. 1 (2015): 1-9.

	that resonates with me.' Right? And I think that goes a long way. But I think that is easier to do because it's just shifting people's priorities and it's not really around a divisive issue.
Elijah Haygood (Y)	For me they definitely more events, more getting out there—just because that's the way I joined the SCC because they're always posted up in High Point with a table talking about information handing out stickers and stuff. I feel like if there were more people, a part of these organizations showing up to public events where they know there's gonna be a lot of people that could help. Like there's a lot of, for example, there will be a lot of gatherings over at Coolidge Park and stuff like that, like for random events. They had this seafood thing a couple months ago. There could be a lot of people there helping out and help getting their message across, whatever their organization's message would be.
Ronald Elliott (P)	But you know, figuring out what young people want, right? People are have the tenacity to support development and lobbying issues. They need to have that tenacity for young people as well, and their priorities look different depending on where you are, right? But it starts with that and it starts with meeting people where they are, understanding what are the priorities, and how do we leave this into the rest of our agendas.
Ronald Elliott (P)	Chattanooga has three universities here. UTC, Southern Adventist, Lee University, you got a community college here, you got all those are young people that go to those schools. Talk to them. Go in the, go to the Dean of Students office, Jim Hicks, Dean of Students at UTC. They welcome people that Chancellor Chancellor Angle there. He welcomes people engaging with his students. Go to the high schools. Figure out what people congregate. Right? Don't just be isolated with saying, 'Oh, I don't know where to find them.' They should go to high schools. Talk to those young people. Don't just overlook them because they haven't hit this arbitrary age when you think their opinions matter. Right? A lot of them about to vote soon. So you're gonna wait till they hit 18 and say, ok, we'll consider your vote. What is your opinion? Go to some of these or these places that bring other young people in whether that's the young professionals organization or—you know, Chattanooga doesn't have a great social scene but it is, it's this, it's this group here that has dating for people, ton of young people in there. It's like, 'Are you single in Chattanooga?' Go there, go to some of these more, uh, places that have hiking or outdoor Chattanooga, these trails or whatnot. We have young people come to hike on Sunset Rock. Say, 'Hey, can I talk to you about something?' You can't be scared to engage people in that manner. There's people who throw events for young people, like social events. They had this something over there at the Chattanooga. There was a ton of young people. I saw it. I was like, 'Dang!' It was, it was younger Black people. I was like, where have y'all been? I've never seen half of y'all

	around here. I didn't know y'all existed. I was like, for a while, I'm thinking I was the only one. Talk to young people that are engaged in the community and ask them, 'Where should I look?' Right? Find those people that can help point you 'OK. Start here.' See if they can open the door and make some introductions.
--	---

To better recruit young people, interviewees recommend initiatives that “meet people where they are at,” tabling and canvassing at local schools, colleges, and places where young people congregate. This strategy, common to college campuses, is frequently used by local businesses, setting up booths at weekend events such as Nightfall, a weekly concert series in downtown Chattanooga during the summer months, the annual Riverbend Festival in June, and on weekends near the Walnut Street Bridge and in Miller Plaza. In our experience, it was rare to find civic groups recruiting in these places.

Another means of meeting young people where they are at is by engagement on social media, which most Hamilton County youth civic engagement initiatives are on, but are not reaching their target audiences, as discussed in Table 6. Elijah Haygood, an under-engaged young person who grew up in Hamilton County and now attends UT Chattanooga, attributes this to a lack of specialization, pointing out that many political content creators post edited videos from content previously produced for a different audience, such as the presidential debates. He suggests that creators should personalize their social media accounts, particularly TikTok, and that not all content should directly address the content creator’s goals. He uses independent presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy as an example, referencing a TikTok Kennedy made capturing a snake from someone’s backyard and the direct-to-camera content Kennedy deploys on TikTok and Instagram reels which speaks specifically to the problems facing young Americans. Haygood’s assertion is supported by professional content creators. According to



creative agency Marketing Partners, brand social media accounts should employ the rule of thirds:  $\frac{1}{3}$  of content should promote products or services,  $\frac{1}{3}$  should be interacting with others, and  $\frac{1}{3}$  should “share industry news and tips you believe your followers could benefit from.”<sup>73</sup>

Kyle Carrasco, a government teacher at the STEM School Chattanooga, a public magnet school, also emphasizes the value of TikTok in reaching young people. Carrasco references local civics education content produced by Chattamatters, an Enterprise Center initiative, but urges that despite its quality, to most young people, the content feels uncool or irrelevant. Phil Trammell suggests that one way to better reach a youth target audience would be for civic engagement initiatives to employ young people to run their social media accounts. Though self-representation in branding is integral to Kapferer's Brand-Identity Prism Model, ownership of social media entirely by young people, which Trammell suggests, goes beyond representation.<sup>74</sup> According to Alison Battsby, a Social Media Consultant at Avocado Social and writer for the Digital Marketing Institute, many memes originate on TikTok and trends progress more quickly on that platform.<sup>75</sup> A social media manager who is in the target demographic an initiative seeks to reach may be able to best understand the current trends and content interests of that demographic, especially on TikTok.

**Table 6.** Use of social media to find and engage young people

Interviewee	Quote
-------------	-------

<sup>73</sup> Change Conversations. “How to Use the Social Media Rule of Thirds.” Marketing Partners, February 6, 2016.

<https://www.marketing-partners.com/conversations2/how-to-use-the-social-media-rule-of-thirds>.

<sup>74</sup> J. N. Kapferer, “Kapferer's Brand-Identity Prism Model.” *European Institute for Brand Management* 24 (2009): 2014.

<sup>75</sup> Alison Battsby, “An In-Depth Look at Marketing on TikTok.” Digital Marketing Institute, August 30, 2023.

<https://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/blog/an-in-depth-look-at-marketing-on-tiktok>.

Casper Kittle (Y)	<p>I fear we're feeding into the thing that I'm worried about— if social media platforms are designed with addictive tendencies in mind and the algorithms are designed to keep us on them, then it's the best way to engage people to also feed into the system. That's the best way to engage people, to feed into the system that's broken that you're concerned about; but then also, how do you engage people if they're part of that system and you know that they're there? So you have to sometimes be willing to be part of the broken system because that's where everyone's at and try to meet people where they're at. I've been thinking about this a lot lately.</p>
Elijah Haygood (Y)	<p>I'm not sure I feel like it's kind of hard to figure out because right now there's a big push with, with young voters on TikTok especially Robert F. Kennedy's campaign because that's what he's building his campaign on right now. Especially because he's using TikTok. I feel like for me, it's good to know that there is a candidate that really cares about the youth and wants us, and his goals are to get us involved and help us become adults and be able to buy our own houses and stuff like that. It's good to see that there's someone that's focused on that because that means a lot to the people that want that a lot. That's really impactful because a lot of other candidates and stuff, although they mention young voters and trying to get involved with young voters, they're not really directly trying to impact them. It's kind of just like an overall thing where they're trying to help everyone. But it's nice to see someone that has a specialty that's really trying to convince young voters.</p> <p>I think the difference between his TikTok and the other, like, for example, comparing his TikTok and Joe Biden's TikTok, I feel like Joe Biden's Tiktok is strictly about tearing down Trump's campaign and just like spreading out information, true or not—just information that could be misleading in some ways. Where Robert F. Kennedy's campaign is about—he's, getting out in the community a lot. He's getting his voice out there. He did his own separate debate, um which I thought was really cool. I thought that was a great idea. And also his TikToks, he shows personality. He has TikToks that aren't just about his campaign. I watched a TikTok of him the other day, like, catching someone's snake in their backyard or something like that. And I was like, this guy is cool, you know? This guy has personality, and I feel like that's different than a lot of the other ones because it's just like clips from their debates. Like, they're not actually involved on TikTok, they're just getting clips re-uploaded that they're part of, like, speeches and stuff.</p>
Kyle Carrasco (T)	<p>Maybe ChattMatters or Civic Chatt something. I don't know. Civics is the name somewhere but they, um, have been making a lot of videos just about like, what is the Tennessee House do? What is the Tennessee? Like? A lot of kids don't even know that we have a Tennessee legislature. Um, and yes, I should teach them that as my, I do teach them that as my job,</p>

	<p>but they don't, they're not gonna hear it from me. You know what I mean? They're gonna hear it. They will, he, they will are way more likely to listen to that on a TikTok than they are to me if that makes sense. So I think making more content that is a little bit more educational just about how kids can be involved, the opportunities that there are to be involved specifically. Um you know, kids are very concerned with these social issues, but they don't know how to connect those dots.</p> <p>Now, how can that content break through? Because often on social media, as you know, there's kind of a selection bias where students who already are interested or engaged in civics are going to be offered those videos and then students who aren't and perhaps need that civic education more are not receiving those and Chattamatters is a good example where there's pretty low engagement despite what you said was pretty quality content.</p> <p>It's not cool. It is not cool to be—I mean, I'm just being real, it's nerdy. It's not very trendy, it's not very—and they do a good job. They do like you said they make good, high-quality stuff. But I think that there is like a sense kids, especially high school kids, they still wanna be cool. They wanna be, you know? There's a whole dynamic, and I just think like personally if it doesn't have anything to do with the music that they're listening to or TikTok getting banned or like the big heavy hitter issues, you know what I mean?</p>
Phil Trammell (P)	<p>I hate to go here because it's kind of the stereotype but technology-related things, you know, the appropriate use of social media um for organizations is a real challenge. I always tell people, you know, it's really difficult if you engage in some kind of conversation with people on social media that you'll never get the last word, you know, it's, it's, you don't get to um moderate in that way, but it's a very effective way to build a tribe around a cause. And so understanding what the platforms are and where the demographics you're trying to reach live, you know, in, in that world, it would be, uh, something that I think we've seen, uh, in a couple of instances that I'm aware of. Much stronger marketing and social engagement awareness out of nonprofit organizations that have taken younger people and put them... and made them responsible for that.</p>

### *Promoting Social Capital*

Ultimately, social media is only one means to reach young people and may be more inefficient than in-person efforts because it relies on virality or advertising. Additionally, the

effectiveness of tabling or canvassing may be limited by the social circles of people present at large Hamilton County events, which likely skews wealthier, older, and whiter. As documented in the high degree of racial and socioeconomic segregation discussed in our literature review, social stratification ultimately inhibits other means of well-resourced groups from interacting with the majority of Hamilton County youth, particularly the most disadvantaged young people. Breaking into the “old boys club” as Ronald Elliot, a policy professional at the Touch of Grace Foundation, which supports homeless residents of greater Chattanooga, characterizes it in Table 4. Other interviewees also identified a lack of social capital among local youth.

**Table 7. Social capital in Hamilton County**

Interviewee	Quote
Anonymous (T)	<p>So speaking specifically for me, I think that my colleagues at Baylor are more engaged than some other people—and, and even in that peer group, I think that everyone is very community-minded. I think to be an educator, you have to sort of believe in the future. And I think you have to care maybe, maybe a little bit more than like average. And I don't think I'm wrong to say that. So that element is certainly there for folks that are paying attention. And then, as I mentioned, I'm in, I'm involved in my church. We have a young adult group that is very, very active and also very, like, progressively-minded, so we'll make each other aware of things that are going on or things we've heard about and check in about, ‘Hey, have you heard about this?’ or ‘Is anyone else going to this?’ or ‘I'll be here.’ So I think that that's been, that's been good for me.</p> <p>During the pandemic... I also worked part time at a wine shop and I met a ton of young people there—also a pretty progressive space. And so those folks as well help connect me to things that might be missed by my school colleagues or even my church friends a little bit more on a little bit more on the ground. So I think for me hitting that trifecta of pretty young people that are working, you know, a retail job in a cool industry. Wine, spirits, the service industry-adjacent folks tend to have a really good ear to the ground. Then, my church and then my educated friends, I feel like I've been really lucky to have people in a lot of different places that are hearing about different things.</p>
Keith White (P)	I'm a Gen Xer. So for my generation, it's shocking, right? Because we're sandwiched in between—we had these, these Boomers who, that's all they

	talked about, right? Is this stuff. And then, so we kind of absorbed that and then we had kids and kind of assumed, oh, you know, everyone's connected now it's even better and it turns out that that's not the case at all.
--	---

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam defines social capital as “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”<sup>76</sup> Putnam writes that “social capital is closely related to what some have called ‘civic virtue.’ The difference is that ‘social capital’ calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.”<sup>77</sup> In his 1999 New Yorker essay, Malcom Gladwell famously describes how this capital is accumulated in a case study of Chicago socialite Lois Weisberg.<sup>78</sup> In Table 7, an anonymous government teacher demonstrates what this process looked like for them in Hamilton County, describing the relationships they have built with civically virtuous individuals through various occupations and unintentional interactions.

This stumbling upon social capital was perhaps more rare of an experience for the teacher, who is Gen Z, than it was for Weisberg. According Keith White, a policy professional at the Public Education Foundation, there has been a generational decline in the connectivity that the government teacher describes within youth communities in Hamilton County. Putnam first documented this decline at a nationwide scale in 2000.<sup>79</sup>

**Table 8.** Civil society can promote social capital with intentional outreach to youth

Interviewee	Quote
-------------	-------

<sup>76</sup> Putnam, 2000, 19.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, “Six Degrees of Lois Weisberg.” The New Yorker, January 4, 1999. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1999/01/11/six-degrees-of-lois-weisberg>.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<p>Phill Trammell (P)</p>	<p><i>Are there Hamilton County-specific barriers to entry for young people interested in getting involved in civil society?</i></p> <p>Networking. You know, I think one of the, it's, and it's not just Hamilton County, but I think it, it is prevalent here where it's who, you know, and who you're connected to. And so sometimes you have to build your own networks and find ways into um organizations that have been built by people from, you know, 50 years ago and are still that way. And it's not that they're not polite and welcoming and would be interested, but finding your way into those circles can be challenging in Hamilton County, I think. So, I think there's been some work done around trying to provide avenues for younger people to get uh connected to each other. But then how you connect those circles to some of the existing ones in the county would be, I think a helpful step.</p>
<p>Kyle Carrasco (T)</p>	<p>I think having more nonpartisan groups like the League of Women Voters, for instance, is a phenomenal group in Chattanooga. It's old ladies and they come to my school and they talk to my kids about voting. I don't know how much the kids get out of it, but I get a lot out of it because I think that, you know, they're doing that out of just because it's something that they're passionate about and they come in and they just talk to the kids. They're nonpartisan. They are very vocal and open about that, and I think that they are able to make a lot of headway because of that. I think if we had more groups—I'm seeing, there's like a group on, I've seen groups on like Instagram, like Chatt Civics and stuff. There's a couple of little groups on Instagram that's kind of popping up in, in the community. And I think having more of those incorporating social media locally and things like that, like about just civic issues and things like these are the things that you can do about, you know, making the connections for kids really and truly is kind of what organizations should be doing, I think.</p>
<p>Kyle Carrasco (T)</p>	<p><i>I'm curious about at City of Chattanooga level, at Chattanooga public schools level. What do you think can be done?</i></p> <p>I think the district needs to be open and honest about the systemic injustices that has happened and that are continuing to happen as a result of our doing. You know? I think being able to have open and honest conversations about the disparities in our district as they currently stand now—and I don't think we need a new program for that. I think we literally just need to have a sit down and have a conversation. You know what I mean? I think that's where I think a lot of times people get so caught up in like a new program or new curriculum or a new, something that we can do to kind of like to kind of facilitate this. And those are good. And I don't think that there's anything wrong with it, but I don't think that that's the solution. I think people should—I think we need to have more opportunities to have these kind of</p>

	more in-depth conversations about these civil issues that we have here in Chattanooga, talking about segregation. That's something that I have yet to hear the district talk about in a, in an official way, you know, about how segregated our school is.
--	--

In Table 8, Trammell recognizes the effect that social stratification (also referenced by Ronald Elliott, the Chief Operating Officer at the Touch of Grace Foundation, a nonprofit that provides wraparound services for greater Chattanooga homeless people and the anonymous teacher in Table 4) has on the ability of youth to accumulate social capital, recommending more opportunities for young people to connect with the gerontocracy that leads much of Hamilton County civil society. Carrasco agrees pointing to the League of Women Voters as a gerontocratic organization that has effectively worked with his students and urges that helping young people build social capital is a valuable role for civic society. Carrasco also alludes to the significant barrier that school segregation poses equitably promoting social capital in local youth, referencing the Hamilton County School District's historical reluctance to address this issue.<sup>80</sup>

In his seminal paper of social network theory, "The Strength of Weak Ties," Stanford sociologist Mark Granovetter shows how weak ties, relationships between people in different social groups characterized by infrequent interaction and low emotional intensity, provide individuals with new information and opportunities not previous available in social circles and build a more resilient and adaptable social network across a community.<sup>81</sup> Granovetter describes how a working class community in Boston fragmented into ethnoracial groups each bound by

---

<sup>80</sup> Meghan Mangrum, "School Board Members Denounce Unified's Plan for Integrating Hamilton County Schools." Chattanooga Times Free Press, May 11, 2018. <https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2018/may/11/denounce-unified-plan/>.

<sup>81</sup> Granovetter, Mark S. "The strength of weak ties." *American journal of sociology* 78.6 (1973): 1360-1380.

strong ties, was unable to form effective organizations to resist urban renewal, lending support to Carrasco's concern about segregation in schools.<sup>82</sup> In contrast, Gladwell's 1999 piece, which references Granovetter, describes how Weisberg developed significant leverage over Chicago cultural and political affairs by developing weak ties with a wide assortment of individuals.<sup>83</sup> In Table 8, Trammell and Carrasco suggest developing these weak ties between gerontocratic civic groups and Hamilton County youth, perhaps not to recruit young people into their membership, as is often the intention of these groups' engagement with youth, but rather to acquaint students with Hamilton County civil society, which they can rely on for development of their own autonomous civic initiatives, something Elliott explicitly identifies as a goal and Hamilton County Deputy Mayor of Education and Workforce Development Tucker McClendon and Carrasco suggest is the most necessary form of youth civic engagement as shown in Table 9. One way some groups facilitate this is through youth constituency organizations such as Lion's Club Junior Lions and Rotary Interact, and initiatives such as the Mayor's Youth Council and the Superintendent's Student Advisor Council.

**Table 9.** Goal of youth civic engagement is autonomous youth civic initiatives.

Interviewee	Quote
Ronald Elliott (P)	I don't know if anybody can just say, oh, it should look like X, Y, and Z, right? I don't think anybody should tell anybody what their advocacy should look like, but it does need to look like more of the youth, taking a more active approach into how they want their societies to navigate.
Tucker McClendon (P)	I think one thing empowerment wise, like it's been probably one of the most important things that we've seen as a community in 2021ish: Tyner High School—which is one of our oldest schools built in the late forties or early fifties—part of the building was condemned, and the students staged a walk out and came to the school board and all that kind of stuff. Well, now they're getting \$100 million brand new school. I mean, it was kind of 'we're

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Gladwell, 1999.



	doing this, we're showing up,' they contacted the media, that kind of stuff. They came to the board and, I mean, within four months we were voting on a brand new school for them. And we knew it needed Tucker to be done, But government acts slowly and so it just didn't... they finally said enough is enough. We got rain falling in on us and can't use half of our building.
Kyle Carrasco (T)	A lot of times what I was doing there was teaching kids how to advocate for themselves while kind of already being a part of the judicial system and learning a lot of the work that I was doing was more rehabilitative. I felt like the civic interest there, there was a lot of interest, but I was teaching a lot of black students and they don't have— especially in Chattanooga, I feel like there's like a lot of racism and structural racism kind of built in. A lot of the time I feel like I was trying to kind of show my students then where their position was in civic society, I guess that we exist in and how they can [be] conscious of that initially and then like [learn] how to be more active within that kind of setting.

When information about offerings has been disseminated across a diverse set of social circles, youth civic engagement initiatives can rely on peer relationships to bring in individuals who lack many weak ties. In the lecture notes of *Organizing: People, Power, and Change*, Harvard sociologist Marshall Ganz' famous course, Ganz states that “emphasis on relationships, especially relationships among members, is a key building block of a civic association.”<sup>84</sup> Ganz writes that in addition to recruiting individuals out of new relationships (e.g. by tabling), organizations can recruit networks by seeking individuals who can bring others in through pre-existing relationships, as Caesar Chavez to launch the United Farm Workers.<sup>85</sup> In Table 10 (below) a government teacher and an under-engaged young person describe processes of peer recruitment. Like Trammell recommended for social media marketing, the young person

---

<sup>84</sup> Marshall Ganz, *Organizing: People, Power and Change: Organizing Notes, Charts, Reflection Questions. Trying to Thrive Not Just Survive*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government, 2006.  
<https://tryingtothrivenotjustsurvive.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/x-organizing-people-power-change-2006.pdf>.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

suggests employing well-connected youth ambassadors to leverage their networks for this purpose.

**Table 10.** The importance of peer relationships

Interviewee	Quote
Anonymous (T)	It's also, it's very peer-to-peer. It's very relational as I think it is pretty much everywhere. But if your friend tells you about something like you're gonna show up if you're encouraged to go to, like the march to end gun violence, um, you're probably gonna go because you have a friend to go with you. And so I think that, um, I'm a transplant. I'm not from Chattanooga, but I have found a great community here of people that are, you know, showing up for each other, but also showing up for the city. Um and trying to make each other aware of opportunities, even if you don't avail yourself of all of them, knowing about them and telling others about them is the, is the first step.
Anonymous (Y)	If one of my friends invited me, I would be way more likely to go than if someone. If I saw a post about it from, like, the Chattanooga civil whatever, I would just, 'oh, that's not for me.' But if someone invited me that was like me or similar to my age and was like, 'oh, it'll be fun,' then I would go.
Anonymous (Y)	Like if there were to be like an event or something, I feel like it would be good to like, have people in the community, like maybe get like representatives, like from someone people my age to like, get their friends to come with them. You know, like they would have to have some like advocates of the event because they just can't, you can't just put it on and expect everyone to be there. But more like, have a couple like ambassadors that are like planning the event and that are young and know that it, they could get people there and then getting those people to, like, get it out to their community.

Another way civil society can support youth civic engagement is through mentorship. City of Chattanooga Director of Policy Planning and Implementation, Dylan Rivera, describes a need for mentorship on two separate occasions in his interview. Casper Kittle and John Hooker, two civically under-engaged young people who grew up in Hamilton County, both suggest that they have mentors who encouraged them to become more civically engaged. Extant literature shows that mentorship can support the development of a civic identity, particularly during

adolescence. According to Finlay, Wray-Lake, and Flanagan, “Mentoring programs can empower youth to participate politically. Furthermore, mentoring can provide positive social relationships for young people, build their cognitive skills through informal conversation as well as direct instruction, and promote identity development.”<sup>86</sup> This appears to be especially true for underserved youth. In a review of youth empowerment initiatives in New York and San Francisco for low-wealth, minority, and immigrant youth, Youniss and Hart identified leader-mentors with “high expectations” that served as “human scaffolding” as key to the success of these programs.<sup>87</sup> Mentorship does not have to be led by adults, however. In her dissertation at the Northeastern University Graduate School of Education Melissa Jacobs analyzed a high school civics peer mentorship program in New York finding that the program “supports democratization as it illustrates equity, provides social capital and aids in identity development, and creates a unique community of learners.”<sup>88</sup> Additionally, mentorship by youth rather allows mentors to hone civic engagement skills. One study of a collegiate mentorship program found that student-mentors showed improved “civic attitudes, community service self-efficacy, self-esteem, interpersonal and problem solving skills, political awareness, and civic action” following the completion of the program.

**Table 11** The importance of peer relationships

Interviewee	Quote
-------------	-------

<sup>86</sup> A. Finlay, L. Wray-Lake, & C. Flanagan, (2010). Civic engagement during the transition to adulthood: Developmental opportunities and social policies at a critical juncture. *Handbook of research on civic engagement in youth*, 277-305.

<sup>87</sup> J. Youniss, & Hart, D. (2005). Intersection of social institutions with civic development. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2005(109), 73-81.

<sup>88</sup> Melissa Jacobs, “Building Adolescent Peer Mentorship Relationships in Support of Sustainable Global Civic Engagement,” PhD diss. (Northeastern University, 2022).

Dylan Rivera (P)	<p>I led a group called Every Child Initiative. It was a Harvard Bloomberg innovation track that tasked us with finding innovation solutions for specifically at that time youth gun violence. And so what we did was we went and spoke with uh high schoolers, middle schoolers, elementary school students, spoke with principals, teachers, parents, guidance counselors—you know, people who have programs or nonprofits that work in the space—and first heard from them, what they sort of, you know, what their needs are, where there are still gaps that they need filled, where there are still issues that are happening that they would like to have addressed, but just haven't really had an opportunity to have that or they don't really know where to go to for those things. Out of that work, we spoke to, I think it was over 200 plus people to just do data collection and then we took all of their thoughts and summarized it into portfolio of initiatives that includes everything from creating a mentor hub that connects potential mentors to mentees. Then, we created a uh trauma informed training that is provided to resource providers, but then also teachers, principals, anyone who works in the school system. Um And that's actually been going on for a couple of years.</p>
Dylan Rivera (P)	<p><i>So it sounds like you have a lot of initiatives going, but what were the gaps that you identified when talking to the students? Can you talk a little bit more about that?</i></p> <p>Yeah, I mean, everything from food insecurity, um, housing insecurity and, uh, you know, for a lot of them there was a lack of a positive mentor in their lives—someone that can really be there for them in the good and the bad, you know, be that, you know, it might be a single parent household and that parent is having to work all the time to be able to pay the bills or um the influences that are in the home are not necessarily positive. It's going to lead them down a track that is less than ideal.</p>
Casper Kittle (Y)	<p>I had to do a Capstone project and that's like when I did my GSA, but maybe there's a way to give students some credit for some type of civic engagement project, right? So, rather than just do whatever type of Capstone you feel like, reflects what you're interested in which, for me, that experience was really meaningful. I mean getting the chance to have a mentor that was a queer mentor and trying to start a club was like, I had never done that before.</p>
John Hooker (Y)	<p>There are definitely younger people in Chattanooga that are doing a lot of good, you know, community work. There is this um woman named Marie Mott who I don't know. I followed her on Instagram for a while, and then I feel like at this point, maybe it's just kind of gotten buried in the algorithm or got lost from my algorithm or, I don't know. But she seems like a person who's like, out kind of actively in the community</p>

	and kind of um yeah, I don't know, talking to people shaking hands and kissing babies. Not really. No, I'm joking. Um uh Yeah, I don't know.
--	--

Beyond individual outreach efforts by initiatives seeking to engage youth in civics, third places are integral to the development of a community's social capital on a system-wide level. First coined in his famous 1989 book *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg defined third space as “a generic designation for a great variety of public spaces that host regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.”<sup>89</sup> For young people, these often include cafes, bookstores, bars, community centers and recreation centers, libraries, shopping malls, and clubs. According to Oldenburg, these places help to build social capital and promote civic culture by promoting the development of social networks, creating opportunities for civil discourse, allowing cultural exchange, and leveling inequalities between members of community.<sup>90</sup> This is supported in our findings. In Table 12 (below), a government teacher describes the role that third spaces played in their political socialization growing up in a conservative family, mentioning church, a history club, and a bakery as places that built the foundation for their civic engagement today. While under-engaged, it is worth noting that Haygood and Hooker also both identified third spaces, Haygood referencing his recruitment to an environmental group for climbers, the Southeastern Climbers Association, at the local climbing gym, High Point, and Hooker suggesting that his engagement over the last 18 months as a musician at a local restaurant has made him feel that he is making a difference in the community.

**Table 12.** Third spaces as the root of civic engagement

<sup>89</sup> Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. New York, NY: Hachette Books, 1999, 16.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

Interviewee	Quote
Anonymous (T)	I grew up going to church three times a week minimum. And that was a big part of my early political socialization is um learning, learning right and wrong, but also learning the way that right and wrong relates to the world around us via my pastor and my Sunday school teacher and my parents um church was a big part of my early political socialization.
Anonymous (T)	I was also a member of the Jesse Franklin Junior Historians Club. So I had, I was lucky to have parents also that were very into making sure that my sibling and I knew about what was going on in the world. I was devastated when Tom Brokaw was replaced by Brian Williams because I hate change, Um, and my routines — or I did at that time. Um, so I always watch the news and, yeah, so I felt like I was as a child in North Carolina, very engaged in high school. I also felt very engaged. I was a frequent visitor at a coffee shop um in Winston-Salem. And I would often sit at the community table and talk to whomever. And I learned that's I think where I had my political awakening was talking to strangers at the community table at Camino. So it was like it was at Camino Bakery in Winston Salem and it was just, it was just this big table and so I learned a ton from them there.
Elijah Haygood (Y)	I joined the SCC because they're always posted up in high point with like a table talking about information handing out stickers and stuff.
John Hooker (Y)	<p><i>Do you believe that you're making an impact on society?</i></p> <p>Being in these different spaces is different. Just kind of having different pockets of the city that I rotate through or like or hang out with a decent amount on a consistent basis. That just makes me feel very involved with the city and I feel like I'm not doing a whole lot, like, on a very grand scale but, this jazz gig that— so I've been doing this thing for like a year and a half, I guess now every Wednesday. And it's always at the same place. It's just like a little— have you all been to the wood shop?</p> <p>We don't charge people to get in or anything and we were just playing for tips for a long time. They have recently started paying us a little bit just. I guess the idea was for it just kind of to be like not like a jam-in, too casual of a sense, but I guess just like a free thing for people. Well, I guess you're bringing people together. And like, bringing people to the Woodshop and, and, uh, they also do trivia afterwards. I don't know if you are into trivia.</p>

Hamilton County is already home to many third places. There are coffeeshops, bars, museums, community centers, and libraries. Several non-profit organizations including The

Enterprise Center, Public Education Foundation, and the Nonprofit Resource Center (as Trammell describes in Table 13) provide free reservable-spaces for individuals to gather for a common purpose. Nevertheless, many of these spaces cost money and are not particularly oriented towards youth. While groups like Chattanooga 2.0's Out-of-School Alliance provide afterschool enrichment, these services decline as children reach adolescence.<sup>91</sup> Shown in Table 13, anonymous government teacher stated that more third places for young people would be their chief policy recommendation for the community and is something that Rivera is aware is needed.

**Table 13.** Need for more third places

Interviewee	Quote
Anonymous (T)	I think my biggest recommendation would be like, create opportunities for kids to like be off their phones and be together with each other and like with, you know, in, in safe environments with trusted adults or monitored environments with adults to, and, but especially each other to like have conversations and create those spaces um that are low barrier to entry. Like, you know, there's a great, there's, there's great chances to chill and hang out at, at Baylor and at McCallie and at GPS and at the other private schools, but not everyone's at a private school. You know what, I don't know what it necessarily looks like at a public school, But from, from what I hear in bookclub, there's not a ton of opportunities to just sit and be together. It's a little bit more structured. And so I think that having an opportunity for unstructured non screen time with the youth would be great.
Phil Trammell (P)	We provide space for people to use for free. So when they have a meeting or they need a, a classroom space or a board meeting space, a lot of places don't have the money to— you've got space up here as an example on the fifth floor, but it's booked all the time. So this is another option and parking is a little more accessible for us out there in midtown than it is downtown for people. So it's used all the time
Dylan Rivera (P)	And then, you know, going into that safe space is a lot of the youth didn't feel like they had a place that they could go to um where they didn't have to always be looking over their shoulders or that they could actually just go hang out with their friends because neighborhoods may be a certain, you know, may not necessarily be the greatest or most conducive for hanging out outside of the classroom or outside of school, there's all

<sup>91</sup> Chattanooga 2.0, "Out-of-School Time Alliance." January 22, 2024. <https://chatt2.org/ost/>.

	<p>sorts of factors that go into it, but it just, you know, for the kids, they didn't really feel like they had a place that they could be a kid. So they were forced to grow up a lot faster. And so we've been very intentional about making sure that we can actually provide those spaces for them um throughout the city, it's not something that they, you know, they have to come downtown in the middle of, you know, the urban core if we can meet them where they're at and host events in their neighborhoods and make it. So, you know, it's understood that this is, this is a space that is specifically for you to hang out in and just enjoy yourself and just be a kid.</p>
--	--

### *Lack of Perceived Efficacy*

**Table 14** Government officials commenting on weaknesses of government

Interviewee	Quote
Dylan Rivera (P)	I think some of the bureaucracy around working with different levels of government can slow things a lot. You can slow to a halt, sometimes to the point where the need may have already been addressed by the time you actually gain access, or you may have just needed to move on because it was moving so slow. But I don't think that's anything different than any other form of government. It's really just the processes and procedures. You know, when you're working around youth, things are gonna take a little bit of time.
Tucker McClendon (P)	Everyone thought I was crazy for running for school board when I was 23. I ran against a 40 year educator – a two term incumbent. Everybody was like, 'why the hell are you doing this?' Like, 'it's not your turn'. I'm 23. I don't have anything to lose. And I did it and won by 132 votes. And so, you know, when you have someone like our mayor Weston who runs against a multimillionaire accountant, a person that's been in office for eight years and [Weston]'s never held office before, and he's the youngest by, you know, 10, 15 years, they're like, 'why is this guy running?'. 'It's not his turn'. 'He needs to go do some other things before he runs for office'. Well, you're never gonna get young people involved if they can't see themselves in these offices.
Cory Gearrin (P)	<p>Whether it's on the political side or on a civic side... It ends up being an organization or an older population coming in and trying to be 'the hands and the feet', as opposed to equipping students or people in their twenties with the tools.</p> <p>Part of the challenge is that we have huge swaths of our community that are facing hopelessness and don't see a way for them to change their own life.</p> <p>I think you have to fundamentally have a belief that your voice matters, that your actions matter in a democracy to be like, 'yeah, I wanna go be a part of</p>



	that conversation because I think it matters, my voice can create change'... But for so many students, in particular, whose voice isn't heard and don't feel like they have the ability to create a change in their life or in their community, it shouldn't be shocking to find a lack of youth engagement.
Martin Granum (P)	Some of the biggest change agents in our culture just emerge organically around an issue and then provide sort of the impetus. And then, cities can get on board, businesses can get on board, and other civic groups can get on board, but it has to start somewhere and typically it's not in a local government setting.
Martin Granum (P)	<p>If you're trying to win an election, you gotta go to the senior center and hand out your campaign brochures to all the elderly people in the senior center because they're all gonna vote. If you spent your time as a candidate trying to engage youth, frankly, you're wasting your time because they're not gonna vote. And that's just the unfortunate reality of it.</p> <p>Basically, the prevailing political sensibility in Hamilton County is decreased turnout except for the people who are gonna vote for you.</p>

As shown in Table 14, according to government officials Rivera, McClendon, Cory Gearrin (Hamilton County Deputy Mayor of Economic and Community Development), and Martin Granum (City of Red Bank City Manager), American government, in general, tends to be inefficient at making immediate change and unwelcoming toward young candidates. These characteristics can lead to discouragement and hopelessness regarding the prospect of youths becoming involved in government or making meaningful change through political processes.

Research suggests that resistance to young candidates and youth political voices comes from a wide host of factors. Eric M. Uslaner, Professor Emeritus of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland-College Park, argues that 'social capital is both a product and a prerequisite of democratic governance'.<sup>92</sup> It follows that young people are less equipped to run for office and thus less trusted to do so because they tend to lack the social capital of their older

---

<sup>92</sup> Eric M. Uslaner, "Democracy and social capital." *Democracy and trust* 121 (1999): 150.

counterparts. This pattern has, to some extent, created a stigma against youth in government because they are assumed to be ill-equipped. This stigma has contributed to a severe existing underrepresentation of young demographics in government.<sup>93</sup> Notably, according to the Pew Research Center, despite making up over 25% of the voting population, as of 2021, only 7% of the 117th Congress were millennials.<sup>94</sup> Local youths' perception of personal civic responsibility and efficacy is also impacted by this stigmatic environment, as displayed in Table 15.

**Table 15.** Some youth don't see themselves having a role in politics

Interviewee	Quote
Anonymous (Y)	Yeah, I mean, I am 25 but I honestly still feel like a kid. So it's like, I feel like those decisions are for older people to care about.

While some youth are content with leaving civic responsibilities to older generations, others are left hopeless by their lack of perceived efficacy. Youth disapproval of government and doubt of their own influential ability ultimately leading to hopelessness is a well-documented relationship among academics. Researchers such as Heather Evans from the Department of Political Science at Sam Houston State University note a general decline in American youth political efficacy and an increase in political apathy in recent years and reference these concerning trends as key drivers behind the urgent need for improved civic education and interactive activities.<sup>95</sup> Table 16 presents students' recognition of the aforementioned governmental flaws and their resulting feelings toward civic involvement.

---

<sup>93</sup> Megan Lam, "What the Research Says: Youth Running for Office." Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. Tufts University, October 26, 2022.

<sup>94</sup> Katherine Schaeffer, "The Changing Face of Congress in 8 Charts." Pew Research Center, February 7, 2023.

<sup>95</sup> Heather Evans, "Service-learning and political engagement, efficacy, and apathy: A case study at Sam Houston State University." *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 10, no. 2 (2015): 107-117.

**Table 16.** Students' mistrust of government

Interviewee	Quote
Kim Thurman (T)	[Students] will say things like, they don't think their vote counts, they don't know enough about the candidates, or, heartbreakingly enough, their families have such a negative view of government and the engagement of government – they think the government doesn't care, or they don't trust the government, or they don't like politics. Those kinds of negative views about the government have seemingly been the biggest obstacle to [students] becoming engaged.
Kyle Carrasco (T)	Over the last few years, I've noticed that in each of my classes, it's pretty consistent that they don't trust the government. It's kind of split if they see themselves as a political person, that's pretty diverse. But when it comes to trusting the government... it's overwhelmingly that they don't.
Cory Gearrin (P)	I do know that hopelessness and the perspective that, 'well, it doesn't really matter', 'governments this and politicians are that' and, 'I could never do that' or 'I wouldn't want to be a part of a campaign because it's so gross and ugly' – those are real perceptions in American society today.
Cameron McDaniel (Y)	Well, the government is not really the best... I don't really enjoy hearing about it or being around it.
Rian Murphy (Y)	<i>Why do you think voter turnout is so low for this age group?</i> Politics are so prevalent and always in your face and it can be really depressing at times. So I could definitely see burnout or maybe a feeling of hopelessness, like you're not gonna make a difference so [young people] don't want to take the time to go and vote.
Elijah Haygood (Y)	I feel like we have grown up with a notion of 'voting doesn't really impact that much', and when a lot of people are in agreement with that, people don't vote and nothing really happens. Especially because a lot of politicians that we've grown up with have made a lot of promises that haven't been kept up with.
Phil Trammell (P)	It's different now. When I was [in politics], it was always about the art of the deal—figuring out how to get things done. And you were never gonna get everything you wanted, but you didn't let it get in the way of accomplishing things. And the parties were pretty good about bringing forth candidates that inspired people. [Now], the art of compromise has kind of been lost and I think that just turns off kids... If you don't feel like you're gonna, no matter who you vote for, have it turn out to make a difference, then it's hard to feel like you should be engaged and try to make change.
Keith White (P)	We're in the American South. There's a lot of mistrust in general of the federal government. And it's not a new mistrust, it's historical... it's baked in for a

	<p>long time. A lot of emphasis on states rights, local values, and local governance.</p> <p>A lot of it is just the skepticism of the federal government — anything to do with the federal government. And I will say it's not just from a conservative point of view... people I know who are extraordinarily left wing, they have the same kind of mistrust.</p> <p>It handcuffs [local governments], and definitely weighs down any kind of progress or larger initiative.</p>
--	--

The resounding sentiment of distrust toward the government evident in Table 16 is not unique to Hamilton County, as national figures reflect these trends. A 2024 study conducted by the Harvard Kennedy Study Institute of Politics found that since 2015, youth trust in the government has decreased starkly.<sup>96</sup> Specifically, among youth ages 18-29, trust in the President has declined 60% (it now stands at 20%), trust in the Supreme Court has declined 55% (now at 24%), trust in Congress has declined 34% (now at 12%), and trust in the federal government has decreased 38% (now at 17%).<sup>97</sup> Beyond distrust, various experts, including Trammell and White, cite national and local cultural influences as additional drivers behind Hamilton-County-specific youth apathy toward government and civic involvement. Among these referenced influences are hyper-polarization in modern American politics and historically-rooted Southern federal-government-critical sentiments on both ends of the political spectrum.

### *Thick Education*

**Table 17.** Reflections on high school experiences from civically under-engaged youth

Interviewee	Quote
-------------	-------

<sup>96</sup> The Institute of Politics at Harvard University. “Harvard Youth Poll Spring 2024.” Harvard University Kennedy School, April 18, 2024.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

Jillian Joubert (Y)	Jillian mentioned that her high school experience "was more just lecture-based." When asked if having more information about civics and government, as well as seeing an issue she cared about, would motivate her to get involved, she responded, "Yes, for sure."
John Hooker (Y)	I went to public high school, and there wasn't really a lot of emphasis on government or political science. I remember friends talking about being in social science or social studies, and I was like, what is that? Maybe it wasn't a priority or something.
Elijah Haygood (Y)	I attended public school, and we never really got any real education. I had to take a government class in my senior year of high school, but it wasn't about what to do now and what I can be doing. It was more about the history of everything and wasn't really informative on what to do going forward.
Rian Murphy (Y)	I think we only had one class that we took senior year for civics, so it wasn't super expansive." When asked if the class was effective, she replied, "Not really. There are definitely more important things that could have been focused on. Now that I'm an adult, I would say it could have been better. There could have been more relevant things discussed.
Keith White (P)	Right now, I will once again, I'll use my kids as case study or as use cases, you know I think my 16 year old takes social studies, right? And the, the 12 year old takes world history and that's the closest they get to civics, right? So if I ask them questions about branches of government, that stuff I am responsible for filling in. They're not gonna have any idea. The school is not teaching them that stuff. They can't tell me about the flag. They can't tell me about military service and the history of military service.

As referenced in the literature review, while ‘thin’ education focuses on imparting civic facts, ‘thick’ education involves immersive activities that allow youth to actively engage in current, relevant social issues.

The youth interviews referenced in Table 17 told the same story: a lack of effective education about civics. A ‘thin’ high school education led many of our interviewees to feel that they were not prepared for adulthood and citizenship. Jillian, when asked about her high school civics education, could not remember her high school civics education clearly, referring to it as

“brief” and “probably more just lecture based.” She explained that actually learning about and getting more involved in civics would make her feel like she had more of a say in her local government, which she says would make her more civically engaged. John Hooker could not recall learning about civics until his senior year of high school— a national presidential election year— and, despite the increase in talk about civics, Hooker’s only civics education was a split semester combined with economics. Elijah Haygood attended public school in Chattanooga and explained that he “never got any real education.” Though he received information about the history of the government, he did not feel adequately prepared to move forward with his civic identity. He describes youth as “uninterested or just uneducated” about civics. Rian Murphy, a civically under-engaged young person who works in pharmacy, attended a very “politically active” school in Chattanooga that hosted many student activist groups, yet still labeled her civics education as ineffective. She explains that, though there were opportunities to get involved in civic-related clubs and activities such as a walk out, her actual civics course could have contained more relevant topics.

Policy professional Keith White, though not directly seeing the civics education first-hand, mentioned his concern for the civics curriculum as he watches his children obtain their public school education claiming he often has to fill gaps in their knowledge on what he considers essential civics education such as details about the American flag, or military service and its history. He says he is recurrently shocked by the lack of teaching and describes how, as a policy professional, he feels even worse about the lack of education because he sees that it spans to multiple subjects including art, music, and physical education.

Literature shows that political knowledge indirectly increases the chance that a citizen will participate in politics by increasing political efficacy, which, based on action theory, is a key

predictor of high civic engagement.<sup>98</sup> Psychol citing Carpini defines political knowledge as “the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory,” and states that acquiring political knowledge contributes to a more stable and consistent political attitude, helps citizens achieve their own interests and make decisions that conform with their attitudes and preferences, promotes support for democratic values, facilitates trust in the political system, and motivates political participation.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, by acquiring political knowledge, one not only satisfies a self-interest, but also creates a motivating force to be civically engaged.

**Table 18.** Recommendations for how to improve civic education

Interviewee	Quote
Cory Gearrin (P)	<p>It's one thing to ask [students] to be engaged; it's another thing to equip them with the tools to activate the change.</p> <p>When we can empower students, whether it's through student government that actually has teeth—like, ‘your voice matters’—those kinds of structures within schools or in communities are crucial.</p> <p>I think empowering and giving authority to those who can't vote is meaningful, because if you create that kind of engagement at a young age, it carries through.</p>
Cameron McDaniel (Y)	<p><i>If you could create a program or initiative that would encourage young people to get involved or vote in this upcoming November election, what would it look like?</i></p> <p>[An organization] that would show how decisions impact the future. Show what your decision is going to change in 5-10 years and what you can do to make it better.</p>

<sup>98</sup>Frank Reichert, “How internal political efficacy translates political knowledge into political participation: Evidence from Germany.” *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 12, no. 2 (2016): 221.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

Kim Thurman (T)	Sometimes [students] don't understand... in the next 5 to 10 years, what's gonna be important and relevant. What they're doing right now is just forming their ideas. I'm not asking them to know exactly what they feel about everything, but just to engage and understand what's going on now so they can make informed decisions later.”
Phil Trammell (P)	<p>You could do after school programs, I think with people and get them acquainted with the process. What does it take to register people to vote? Um, why can't felons vote? You know, should felons be able to vote? Kind of get involved in all that process and how things become laws and how you can have an impact on that.</p> <p>You'd have to have qualified people to teach it. Uh But uh you could probably do a ‘train to train’ or, you know, kinds of things. Um And then I think first of all classroom work to understand the process, but then field trips where you get to go to council meetings or maybe you address city council about something that's important to you and your school and your neighborhood.</p>
Keith White (P)	Even to my ears, civics, a civics class, it sounds like something that would be offered in like 1954 you know, like so rebranding, even though that's what it is, right? It's civic engagement. It's a civics class. Um, I don't think that younger students and upcoming generations, hear the same thing when, when I use those words or someone uses those words, I don't think they understand because there has been, you know, 10 to 20 years of, um, accountability, right? Accountability-based education and civics was not part of that

Our interviewees offered a range of recommendations for how to address the issue of a lack of effective civic education, as shown in figure 4.1.2.

Cory Gearrin expressed ideas about empowering and equipping students so that they can “activate the change.” Gearrin and Tucker McClendon discussed an instance when students staged a walk out and came to the school board demanding improved facilities and, within a matter of months, the board was voting on a brand new school that ended up being a \$100 million project. Gearrin claimed that by both empowering and giving youth authority, their level of engagement will carry through as they get older.



Cameron McDaniel, a recent Hamilton County high school graduate and under-engaged young person studying to be an HVAC technician, claims that he would be more likely to be civically engaged if he could see the effects of his engagement. Though he is not currently involved, he finds interest in a local environmental organization that takes care of the mountains in Chattanooga, claiming he is more motivated to join it because he can see the direct impact of the organization.

Kim Thurman, a government teacher at Sale Creek Middle/High School, has a similar idea about civic education, claiming that, though students don't need to have a fully-formed civic identity while they're in school, but that by engaging them and creating understanding of both history and current events, they will be prepared to make informed decisions later. As a high school government teacher, she aims to teach her lessons based on issues affecting her students, finding that students are much more engaged in topics that relate to these issues.

Phil Trammell believes an effective civics education would include gaining understanding of the process of civics in the classroom, while taking field trips to government-related events that relate to the students. He also believes that finding a space where students can ask hard questions about the government and political process is essential and recommends after school programs with this goal.

Keith White expresses the need for a "rebranding" of civic education, claiming that it is no longer a part of the core curriculum and has not been for a significant period of time. He expresses worries about the lack of civics education in his children's history and social studies classes, perhaps expressing the need for civics to be integrated into other subjects.

A common theme across our interviews and literature review was the implementation of a 'thick' education, which could address previously identified issues of an ineffective civics

education by creating long-term political knowledge. Literature shows that students who participate in service learning— a form of experiential education where students take something that they have learned in class and apply it to a real-world situation— lead to increased political engagement, efficacy, and decreased apathy.<sup>100</sup> Interviews and research have both revealed that effective civic education that leads to the formation of civic identity should emphasize current social events and equip students to have the access and education needed to actively participate in civic life through active participation.

**Table 19** The Importance of Government and Youth Relationships

Interviewee	Quote
Ronald Elliott (P)	So when it comes to elected politicians and elected policymakers, I think the disconnect is that they don't see a need to engage with them because 'they don't vote for me' — it's like that invisible constituency... It's a two-way street, you know, if young people aren't out there making sure their priorities are put on the forefront, no one's gonna listen... oftentimes they just find themselves hitting walls of miseducation or at least abstract thoughts that, you know, 'oh yeah, we have a Mayor's Youth Council', or 'that's us engaging with the youth; and that's about it. And that's the extent to which we prioritize those issues or even think about them.
Kim Thurman (T)	... the principal will also ask for student input. So what I do see a lot of is listening to the students as well. But we also have had opportunities for some of our local politicians to come and speak to the students or we've gone to Nashville and met with some of our local politicians. It doesn't happen every year and it hasn't happened for every student which is unfortunate mostly just because of time constraints and mostly money constraints.  ... when that does happen, you see a, when they can recognize the person that they hear about, they hear the name or really, they just see the name on the placard as they go down the road during election time and it means nothing to them. But when they met them and had a conversation with them, that makes a huge difference.
Cory Gearrin (P)	We need to implement structured programs in schools that teach students not just about their rights, but also how to engage with their local

<sup>100</sup> Evans, 2015.

	<p>government effectively. This could include workshops on public speaking, advocacy, and understanding the legislative process.</p> <p>Offering internships and volunteer positions specifically for high school and college students in local government can give them firsthand experience. This exposure can spark interest in civic engagement and leadership roles.</p> <p>Encouraging local governments to hold youth forums where young people can express their concerns and suggestions is vital. These forums can help bridge the communication gap and make government more responsive to youth needs.</p> <p>By partnering with community organizations focused on youth engagement, we can create comprehensive outreach strategies that target underrepresented populations and help them understand their political rights.</p>
Tucker McClendon (P)	<p>Local governments should consider adopting youth advisory boards that have real decision-making power. This would not only give youth a voice but also ensure that their perspectives are integrated into policy development.</p> <p>Creating mentorship programs that connect young people with local leaders can empower youth. When they have someone to guide them and advocate for their interests, it can foster a sense of belonging and motivate them to get involved.</p>

One method to increase interest in civics among students while simultaneously bridging the current gap between youth and government through education is creating more opportunities for direct student interaction with government officials.

Table 19 highlights the significance of fostering relationships between government officials and youth. Ronald Elliott contends that current initiatives aimed at engaging youth in government often fail to compel officials to prioritize youth issues. He proposes that the most effective approach is for the government to grant youth a seat at the decision-making table. Kim Thurman supports Elliott's idea on a smaller scale, noting that fostering principal-student

relationships enhances student efficacy within schools. Thurman observes that student interactions with government officials during field trips foster a stronger connection to both individuals and the political environment. Cory Gearrin suggests implementing programs that teach students effective methods of engaging with local government. Gearrin also advocates for offering internships and volunteer positions that expose students to local governance. Additionally, Gearrin proposes organizing forums facilitated by government officials to address youth needs and partnering with community organizations focused on engaging underrepresented youth populations. Tucker McClendon suggests that youth advisory boards with authority would not only empower youth, but also allow government officials to ensure their perspectives are integrated into policy development.

To et. al., referencing Chekoway, Jennings, Mitra, and Wond, claims that “a welcoming social environment that enables youth to make decisions that affect their lives and wellbeing... is more conducive to building young people’s confidence in their abilities to become active agents of change and innovation,” and that environments where youth are included in the social environment and ignored decreased their self-efficacy.<sup>101</sup> Additionally, the study showed that pluralist youth-adult partnerships involving the shared power between youth and adults was ideal for empowering youth and fostering both organizational and community development.<sup>102</sup>

Creating a variety of opportunities for students to connect with government officials, such as through direct interaction, educational programs, internships, forums, and advisory boards, can significantly enhance their sense of self-efficacy and engagement in civic life. This

---

<sup>101</sup> Siu-ming To, et. al., “Youth empowerment in the community and young people’s creative self-efficacy: The moderating role of youth–adult partnerships in youth service.” *Youth & Society* 53, no. 6 (2021): 1021-1043.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

approach not only empowers youth but also ensures that their perspectives are integrated into policy development, fostering a more inclusive and responsive political environment.

Opportunities for a ‘thick’ civics education can extend beyond schools into broader communities, allowing 18-29 year olds who did not receive effective civics education in high school or who aren’t in an education environment anymore to continue forming a civic identity. Communities, organizations, and local governments can play a large role in educating this age group through their services.

### *Low Stake in Hamilton County*

High-achieving youth in Chattanooga who receive effective civic education and/or participate in civic engagement programs often have low stakes in Chattanooga due to a common mindset of success being leaving Hamilton County. Table 20 reveals this issue from a variety of perspectives. Dylan says that youth in Chattanooga struggle to envision a future due to limited opportunities, leading to a talent drain; Kyle says many engaged students leave for better prospects elsewhere, while those who stay often feel disconnected from local issues; Cory Gearrin highlights a perception that young people must leave to thrive, facing barriers like economic disparities; Tucker McClendon notes that when survival is a priority, civic engagement becomes a low concern, resulting in a lack of representation and hope among local youth.

The Opportunity Atlas data reveals that individuals who remain in the Chattanooga community area earn, on average, \$25,000 a year, whereas those who leave the community earn an average of \$27,000 annually.<sup>103</sup> This difference indicates that there is a financial incentive for individuals to leave Chattanooga, as those who move elsewhere tend to earn slightly more on average. This supports the observations of local stakeholders like Dylan, Kyle, Cory Gearrin, and

---

<sup>103</sup> *Opportunity Atlas*, n.d.

Tucker McClendon, who highlight the challenges and mindsets contributing to a talent drain in the area. Specifically, high-achieving youth may feel compelled to seek opportunities outside of Hamilton County due to perceived or actual limited prospects locally, economic disparities, and a sense of disconnection from local issues. The modest income difference underscores the broader issue of how economic factors and perceived opportunities influence the decisions of young people to leave their community in search of better prospects.

**Table 20.** Youth leaving hamilton county for better opportunities

Interviewee	Quote
Dylan Rivera (P)	For young people here, it's hard to picture a future... A lot of our young people leave. We have a big talent drain because there's a perception that there are not a lot of opportunities to further their careers after school... For our 18 to 29 age group, the city doesn't always cater well to that demographic... They don't see themselves here as much as they would in larger municipalities like Nashville, Atlanta, or Memphis... It's sad to say, but I went to school here, and many of my friends left as soon as they could, moving to Atlanta or Nashville for job opportunities or just to be in a bigger city with more going on... Until we start creating more spaces designed for everybody — cool places that people actually want to be — we're going to keep having that talent drain. That's what keeps people from being engaged in Chattanooga.
Kyle Carrasco (T)	We're losing a lot of kids who should stay local... If they go off to college or move, those are the kids that are civically engaged... They move away because they don't feel like they're getting what they need here... Unfortunately, the kids that stay here are not bothered by what's happening in their communities or the issues they see... They don't feel the need to engage with it... A majority of my students are not staying local. The ones that are staying don't care about this stuff.
Cory Gearrin (P)	One of the things you can often see in a community like ours is a real feeling that you have to leave to thrive and then come back to start your family and settle down... There isn't a lot of opportunity

	for young people to break through... That's a real perception, particularly for parts of our community... When people don't see themselves represented in leadership or positions of opportunity, they feel like they have to leave, creating a catch-22... We're looking for people to elevate, but often, they're looking for bigger markets and better opportunities elsewhere.
Tucker McClendon (P)	If you're worried about what you're gonna eat, where you're gonna stay, if there's gas in your car, you don't care who the mayor is or who your county commissioner is or who's running for office... If you're 18 in this community and you're going straight to work and not going to UTC, Chatt State, or the technical school TCAT, you're going to work because you have to work and probably have already been doing that for the last three years... If you have other crises in your life, like what am I gonna eat? Where am I gonna stay? Bills and all that kind of stuff, you just don't care... We have a lot of that in this community... We have a lot of hopelessness... You have the poorest zip code in Tennessee right under the richest zip code in Tennessee: Lookout Mountain and Alton Park... They run into each other and you have the richest and the poorest... So that gives you, like, you also see the health outcomes disparity in terms of life expectancy... It's exactly what you would expect with the income inequality, but it makes it real.

As for the youth that remain in Hamilton County, they often feel that local politics do not significantly impact their lives, resulting in a lack of engagement in civil society. Table 21 highlights the perspectives of young people who perceive social issues as irrelevant to their personal daily experiences, which contributes to their disengagement and diminished participation in civic activities. John Hooker claims his lack of engagement is due to privilege that allows him to not be bothered by social issues— what he identifies as a driver for civic engagement. Jillian Joubert, a civically under-engaged young person from Chattanooga who is surgical technician, feels minimal passion towards social issues, including issues directly related to the healthcare field where she works. Rian Murphy acknowledges that in order for Hamilton

County residents to feel particularly passionate about a specific issue a tragic event often has to take place.

Literature on place attachment and civic engagement does not support our interviewees point of view, revealing that place attachment – involving positive bonds that form over time from ties between an individual and their environment– are “powerful motivators” for civic engagement with the goal of improving communities.<sup>104</sup> Mihaylov states that through “translating place attachments to social capital and collective action at the community level... the full benefits of attachments to cherished places and people are realized.”<sup>105</sup>

The contrast between the common sentiment among Hamilton County's youth and the established literature on place attachment highlights a significant disconnect. While many young individuals in Hamilton County feel that local politics and social issues are irrelevant to their daily lives, the research suggests otherwise. According to the literature, place attachment fosters a sense of belonging and emotional connection to one's community, which in turn serves as a powerful motivator for civic engagement. This suggests that positive bonds formed between individuals and their environments can lead to greater involvement in efforts aimed at community improvement.

**Table 21.** Youth lack of interest in civics

Interviewee	Quote
-------------	-------

<sup>104</sup> Nikolay Mihaylov and Douglas D. Perkins, "Community place attachment and its role in social capital development." *Place attachment: Advances in theory, methods and applications* 61 (2014).

<sup>105</sup> Ibid



John Hooker (Y)	I think it's a privilege not to have to care about many political issues. I have a hard time thinking of something that affects me on a day-to-day basis, which is a significant privilege. It seems too positive to call it privilege, but there may be a higher concentration of similar people in these areas."
Jillian Joubert (Y)	When asked about a particular social issue she feels passionate about, Jillian responded, "Not really. The healthcare system kind of gets on my nerves, but I guess I don't have the answer to all that."
Rian Murphy (Y)	"Yes, I think sometimes it takes something really tragic for people to realize [issues are] a problem. But once that happens, I do think there's change and people start to advocate for it."

### *Accessibility*

Once young adults are equipped with the knowledge and efficacy to be civically engaged, they need access to resources that allow them to become civically engaged and get to key locations in the first place. Table 22 shows a few barriers to civic engagement, as well as interviewees' recommendations for how to provide these opportunities.

**Table 22.** Commentary on limiters and solutions for creating equitable civics

Phil Trammell (P)	<p>"How should youth civic engagement initiatives be targeted to socioeconomically and demographically disadvantaged groups?"</p> <p>I like to simplify things and I kind of simplify all of that socio-economic divide down to access. You have to have access in order to start to bridge that huge gap that exists. So access to transportation, access to decent jobs, access to housing, access to health care.</p> <p>You know, it's a travesty that if I need to go to the doctor, I take some time off from work and I go to the doctor and I drive my car to get there and I sit in a waiting room for God knows how long. And I'm still getting paid and I'm not getting fired because I didn't show up to work today. And I'm gonna drive back when I'm done and I've done it in three hours.</p> <p>[In contrast,] if I have to go to public transportation and there's not a</p>
-------------------	---

	<p>stop anywhere near me, then I gotta figure out how I'm getting to the bus stop. I gotta ride a bus for an hour to get to the doctor's office. I gotta figure out how I'm gonna pay for it because I don't have the kind of insurance that I might have if I worked somewhere else. I'm taking time off work, So I'm not getting paid to do it. Now, I gotta get back. It's a day to go to the doctor. That's not right.</p> <p>I mean, I shouldn't be able to just leave work and go to the doctor because I need to and I'm getting most of it paid for, and somebody else has got to take all day to do it and they're losing a day of work, which they can't afford to do.</p>
Dylan Rivera (P)	I think that's how we actually drive folks out [to participate] is that we intentionally meet them where they are through nontraditional channels and really make sure that we're putting information out there that needs to be shared. So for example, through the Enterprise Center... Chattamatters is great. Those guys help inform people of what's coming up on city council agendas, commission agendas.
Cameron McDaniel (Y)	So when you're looking for it, you can definitely find something, but I don't think there's any [organizations] that put themselves out there to people who aren't not looking for them. Like, if you just walk across the street, you probably won't see it or know what it is.
Anonymous (T)	<p>I think my biggest recommendation would be, create opportunities for kids to be off their phones and be together with each other in safe environments with trusted adults, or monitored environments with adults to have conversations and create those spaces that are low barrier to entry.</p> <p>Like, there's great chances to chill and hang out at Baylor and at McCallie and at GPS and at the other private schools, but not everyone's at a private school. I don't know what it necessarily looks like at a public school, but from what I hear in book club, there's not a ton of opportunities to just sit and be together, it's a little bit more structured.</p>
Phil Trammell (P)	To boost voter turnout in Chattanooga, it could be as easy as what they do in Bradley County—shutting down the whole county for Voter Day and voting in schools. Why don't we do that here in Chattanooga? We don't close down for voting days at all. I would shut down any publicly funded entity and as many private companies as possible so that people could easily vote.
Cory Gearrin (P)	It's not a perfect union. It's a more perfect union. It's a process, this whole experiment is about everyone coming to the table, being

	engaged, working together to ultimately land in a place where we can move forward together. And the more that we don't bring others into that conversation and they feel disenchanting, that's where I think the trouble is. That disenchantment, the withdrawal from the conversation, is the concern part, not necessarily whatever project it is that you're trying to get done. The project is not the important thing in the American experience. It's the engagement.
--	---

Renowned researcher Kip Holley from Ohio State University's Kirwan Institute developed a comprehensive framework titled, the Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement.<sup>106</sup> Holley's guide is modeled after the notion that "civic engagement is more than just a set of practices; it is also a set of conditions. The civic engagement environment is not only informed by what we practice, but by how we are positioned in our communities."<sup>107</sup> Table 22 highlights key community needs to bring people of all backgrounds 'to the table' (and provide them with spaces to do so), bridge socioeconomic gaps through access, and use unconventional channels to reach groups that haven't historically been reached. These principal needs all reflect the importance of developing human capital and eliminating power imbalances, both of which are foundational pillars of Holley's framework. As mentioned by an anonymous teacher in Table 22, it is critical to lower barriers of entry for those that have previously struggled to incorporate their voices in order to share the "wealth" that is human capital.

---

<sup>106</sup> Organizing Engagement, "Six Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement," November 1, 2019.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid

## Peer MSA Analysis

### *Huntsville, AL — Capitol Scholars Program*

The Capitol Scholars Program provides “exceptional” University of Alabama System students who plan to pursue a career related to government with “intensive internships and experiential learning opportunities with members of the Alabama congressional delegation” in Washington DC. Selected students may also “intern with congressional offices outside Alabama, congressional committee offices, and government agencies.”<sup>108</sup> This newly-launched program creates an opportunity for upward mobility for young adults while still serving and staying connected to their home community. This concept addresses a key Hamilton County issue, identified by Dylan Rivera, Cory Gearrin, Keith White, and others, of youth seeking to leave the area in pursuit of better career opportunities, creating a ‘talent drain’ out of the region. Instead of the traditional practice of resisting youths’ desire to move, successful strategies might prioritize maintaining strong ties while offering flexible support systems. It is critical to balance support for their ambitions while simultaneously fostering a connection to their roots. This balance is achieved by the Capitol Scholars Program as it offers elevated professional development opportunities while maintaining direct connection to Alabaman roots.<sup>109</sup>

For reference, Huntsville, AL youth voter turnout for 2022 midterm elections was 20.4%, compared to Hamilton County’s turnout of 15.4%.<sup>110</sup>

---

<sup>108</sup> The University of Alabama System, “Capitol Scholars Program,” 2024.

<sup>109</sup> Laura Chappell and Alex Glennie, “Show Me the Money (and Opportunity): Why Skilled People Leave Home — and Why They Sometimes Return.” Migration Policy Institute, April 22, 2010.

<sup>110</sup> CIRCLE, “Youth Voting and Civic Engagement In America.” Accessed July 18, 2024. <https://circle.tufts.edu/explore-our-data/youth-voting-and-civic-engagement-america>

### *Winston-Salem, NC – Dash Corps*

Dash Corps, an organization that partners with Wake Forest’s Office of Civic & Community Engagement, pairs undergraduate students with various local non-profit and civic organizations for a year-long project aimed at community development.<sup>111</sup> Classes take place in the fall semester to educate the students in nonprofit management and social identity and evolve into capacity building projects with specific focuses such as economic development or food insecurity. Throughout the year-long program, students engage directly with nonprofits such as Neighbors for Better Neighborhoods and Samaritan Ministries, where they undertake practical projects with measurable impacts. They have developed and implemented initiatives like marketing campaigns, educational materials, and research studies, which directly benefited organizations by enhancing their outreach, improving program effectiveness, and addressing community needs such as economic development and food insecurity. Among the initiatives that made it all the way to community-wide implementation was a deliberately-designed marketing framework fueled by researched micro-credentialing to promote the Leadership by Design summer camp<sup>112</sup>.

This program addresses the lack of efficacy among the young population in Hamilton County, TN by educating youth on civics, while simultaneously giving youth a platform for tangible change in their communities. Cory Gearrin acknowledges that, while students are provided opportunities to interact with civil society through initiatives like the Mayor’s Youth council, there is a lack of power in the programs youth are involved in, saying communities “can

---

<sup>111</sup>Rubin, “Dash Corps Student Groups Present Final Projects,” Office of Civic and Community Engagement.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

empower students, whether it's through student government that actually has teeth, like ‘your voice matters’, those kinds of structures within schools or in communities.”

Hamilton County could use Dash Corps as an example to implement programs or allow existing programs to give students more agency to create measurable, positive change in their community, increasing youth efficacy while simultaneously giving students a platform to address the barriers their peers face in getting involved in civic society.

Winston-Salem, NC youth voter turnout for 2022 midterm elections was 23.6%, compared to Hamilton County’s 15.4%.<sup>113</sup>

### *Salem, OR — Salem Drop*

Salem Drop is a teen center in Salem, Oregon that seeks to support 14-21-year-olds in their transition to adulthood.<sup>114</sup> Funded by PacificSource, a not-for-profit insurance provider in the Northwest, the center is administered by Youth ERA, an Oregon nonprofit organization that has built similar third places across that state.<sup>115</sup> Salem Drop is open between 3 and 9pm on all weekdays and is staffed by Youth Peer Support Specialists who lead events daily such as meditation, tournaments, art labs, and musical instrument courses. “With brick walls decorated with succulent plants and photos clipped to thin wire, the downtown drop-in center looks more like a trendy café than a mental health program,” writes Rachel Alexander, a journalist at the

---

<sup>113</sup> CIRCLE, “Youth Voting and Civic Engagement In America.” n.d..

<sup>114</sup> “Salem Drop Services.” Youth Era. Accessed July 18, 2024.  
<https://www.youthera.org/salem-drop-services>.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

Salem Reporter, in describing the center.<sup>116</sup> Additionally, it offers a study space, support with resume and cover letter writing and job interview prep, snacks, billiards and video games, and 3D printers.<sup>117</sup> Perhaps most significantly, Salem Drop offers the opportunity to “engage in outreach and activism at the community and state level.”<sup>118</sup> Youth Era leads an annual state-funded 4-day virtual experience called Uplift where young people work with certified mental health peer specialists to build skills for mental health response and to tackle community-wide mental health challenges.<sup>119</sup> In this manner, the organization takes youth, many of whom may be struggling with mental health and provides them with the skills and agency needed to lead their peers and change the culture about mental health around them.<sup>120</sup> In 2019, the total funding of the drop center was \$279,000.<sup>121</sup>

There is evidence that community centers like Salem Drop support the development of youth civic engagement culture. Further, these community centers can be influential in reducing youth violent crime rates by providing young people with a supervised place to congregate and be productive. It’s notable that the Salem Drop is open between 3pm and 9pm—the time school

---

<sup>116</sup> Rachel Alexander, “At Youth Era, Salem Teens Find Peers to Talk about Mental Health, Suicide.” Salem Reporter, April 11, 2019. <https://www.salemreporter.com/2019/04/11/at-youth-era-salem-teens-find-peers-to-talk-about-mental-health-suicide/>.

<sup>117</sup> “Salem Drop Services,” n.d.

<sup>118</sup> “Salem Drop Services,” n.d.

<sup>119</sup> “Uplift Model.” Youth Era. Accessed July 18, 2024. <https://www.upliftpeers.com/uplift-model>.

<sup>120</sup> Alexander, 2019.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

ends to when working class parents might finish work. These are also the hours of the greatest amount of crime committed by minors, according to the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.<sup>122</sup>

Though there are many third places in Hamilton County, the need specifically for safe, adolescent and young-adult-focused third spaces was identified in our interviews. Beyond a conference room or a place to gather, Youth Era actively provides a low-barrier-to-entry space where youth can socialize and access resources for social mobility. This differs from neighborhood community centers, which exist in both Hamilton County and Salem, in several ways:

1. Centralized Location: While Hamilton County community centers are located in each neighborhood, Salem Drop is only one space in a central location. This forces young people from different schools and neighborhoods to interact, which can support development of weak ties and build social capital, particularly in highly-segregated communities.<sup>123</sup>
2. Focus on adolescents and young adults: Whereas Hamilton County community centers are available for all ages, with some featuring senior centers on-site, Salem Drop is also only open to 14-21-year-olds. This forces Salem Drop to maintain its third place status, as

---

<sup>122</sup> "Comparing Offending by Adults & Youth." Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Statistical Briefing Book, April 18, 2022.  
<https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/offenders/qa03401.asp>.

<sup>123</sup> Mark S. Granovetter, "The strength of weak ties." *American Journal of Sociology* 78.6 (1973): 1360-1380.



parents and guardians are prevented from supervising their children but can trust that they are safe thanks to the adult staff at the center.

3. Nonprofit Administration: Salem Drop is organized and administered entirely by a nonprofit organization, Youth Era. Based on our findings, there is a strong mistrust of government in Hamilton County. Additionally, the State of Tennessee has recently enacted and proposed legislation that may compromise the security of highly-vulnerable young people in government-run schools and programs such as S. 1810, signed into law in May 2024, which requires that teachers inform a parent or guardian if a child uses pronouns that differ from those assigned at their birth and S. 7002, introduced in August 2023, which would banned broadly-defined mass threats of violence.<sup>124</sup> Critics said that these bills would harm transgender and non-binary youth and mentally disabled youth disproportionately and would fail to address the underlying issues named in their purpose statements.<sup>125</sup> In this policy environment, having a third place that is independent from the government may promote its longevity and make youth feel more safe. It also allows greater flexibility to implement programs related to diversity, equity, and inclusion and/or

---

<sup>124</sup> S. 1810, 113th TN General Assembly (2024); S. 7006, 112th TN General Assembly (2023)

<sup>125</sup>Blaise Gainey. “Gov. Bill Lee Signs Law Requiring Tennessee Schools to out Transgender Students.” WKMS, May 7, 2024.

<https://www.wkms.org/government-politics/2024-05-07/gov-bill-lee-signs-law-requiring-tennessee-schools-to-out-transgender-students>; Anita Wadhwani, “Tennessee Youth Advocates Concerned about Bill to Criminalize Threats of Mass Violence.” Tennessee Lookout, August 23, 2023.

<https://tennesseelookout.com/2023/08/21/tennessee-youth-advocates-concerned-about-bill-to-criminalize-threats-of-mass-violence/>.

social-emotional learning, both of which Youth Era is involved in and have become politically polarizing topics in Tennessee.<sup>126</sup>

### *Reno, NV — Automatic registration during agency interactions*

Nevada has implemented numerous initiatives aimed at increasing accessibility to voting and lowering barriers to access for civics in general. One particularly innovative measure that the state has enacted is automatic voter registration when interacting with state agencies<sup>127</sup>. Many Hamilton County stakeholders, including Phil Trammell, Dylan Rivera, Kyle Carrasco, and others, emphasized a local need for more convenient access to voter registration and casting votes on election day. While Nevada’s solution originates from a statewide policy, Hamilton County could implement a localized rendition of the same concept. For example, civil society groups such as The Enterprise Center’s Tech Goes Home initiative, Tennessee Democracy Initiative, among others, as well as popular local attractions such as the Chattanooga Public Library, the Chattanooga Aquarium, etc. could all provide relevant resources, such as voter registration forms, upon interaction with local youth. While structurally different, the two solutions share common themes of convenience and accessibility. Reno alone saw the registration of over 140,000 voters in its first year after implementing the AVR system between 2020 and 2021.<sup>128</sup> Additionally, residents believe the solution heightens overall civic engagement

---

<sup>126</sup> See e.g. Keely Quinlan, “Parents Bring Questions about Critical Race Theory, Social-Emotional Learning to School Board.” *ClarksvilleNow*, August 24, 2021. <https://clarksvillenow.com/local/parents-bring-questions-about-critical-race-theory-social-emotional-learning-to-school-board/>.

<sup>127</sup> Sean Golonka, “Automatic Voter Registration System Adds Thousands of New Voters, despite Security Concerns from Critics.” *The Nevada Independent*, February 2, 2021.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

culture by encouraging participation.<sup>129</sup> While a Hamilton County version of the initiative would be more programmatic and civil-society based, getting registration forms in the hands of those who wouldn't typically seek them out could certainly improve youth voter turnout figures. Additionally, security concerns<sup>130</sup> raised by critics of the Nevada AVR initiative wouldn't be relevant to the aforementioned Hamilton County solution, as no auto registration would take place, only the distribution of registration materials in settings that are convenient for new voters.

Reno, NV youth voter turnout for 2022 midterm elections was an impressive 31.9%, again compared to Hamilton County's 15.4%.<sup>131</sup>

### *Lexington, KY — Civic Lex & Kentucky Student Voices*

Civic Lex, a nonprofit with a clear mission of strengthening civic culture in Lexington-Fayette County, Kentucky, serves as a true model for how nonprofit civics groups nationwide can more effectively reach their target demographics and establish ties between youth, government, and civil society. Civic Lex's mission includes "not waiting to help young folks understand local government. [They're] bringing our workshops covering local government, municipal budgeting, planning, and more into classrooms across Fayette County."

<sup>132</sup> Acting on this mission, in 2023, led by Director of Civic Education Stephanie Mobley, Civic Lex launched an official partnership with Fayette County Public Schools.<sup>133</sup> The program, which

---

<sup>129</sup> The Nevada Independent. "Automatic Voter Registration Is Convenient, Efficient and Cost-Effective," October 28, 2018.

<sup>130</sup> Golonka, 2021

<sup>131</sup> CIRCLE, "Youth Voting and Civic Engagement In America," n.d.

<sup>132</sup> CivicLex, "K12 Programs." Accessed July 18, 2024. <https://www.civiclex.org/k12-programs>.

<sup>133</sup> Sabriel Metcalf, "Lexington Public Schools Ensuring Civic Opportunities for High Schoolers." Spectrum News 1. Accessed July 18, 2024.

includes six different K-12 schools, helps students explore careers, become voters, learn about local civic nonprofits, follow and draft proposals on real city issues, and interact meaningfully with government outlets<sup>134</sup>. The partnership also features frequent ‘civic expos’ which “bring community organizations, city departments/divisions, and Councilmembers together to connect with students on a personal level about their work and impact in Fayette County. Set up similarly to job fairs, they instead focus on civic and community engagement.”<sup>135</sup> In the 23/24 school year alone, Civic Lex and Fayette County Public Schools jointly hosted six Civic Expos, connecting over 2,850 students and 129 community organizations.<sup>136</sup> The program also features in-classroom workshops centered around local government, municipal budgeting, planning, and more.<sup>137</sup> Beyond students, the partnership also helps teachers. In tandem with national nonprofit Generation Citizen, the program works with Fayette County teachers to “develop curricular resources” that tailor civics content to be taught in direct relation to local government and current events.<sup>138</sup> After this three-year pilot is concluded, the partnership expects to have a “fully-fledged high school civics curriculum that helps young people understand how to make their voices heard in local government.”<sup>139</sup> Civic Lex also extends their outreach beyond K-12 environments,

---

<https://spectrumnews1.com/ky/louisville/news/2023/08/31/lexington-students-learning-about-civic-duties->

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> CivicLex, “K12 Programs”

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

as they've partnered closely with the University of Kentucky. UK announced Civic Lex as its Cornerstone Community Innovation Partner (CIP) for the 23/24 academic year, establishing Civic Lex's full-time presence at The Cornerstone, a brand new 23,000 square foot of mixed-use space that serves as innovation hub to "anchor UK's role at the intersection of creativity, technology, entrepreneurship, and economic development."<sup>140</sup> Outside of these groundbreaking partnerships, Civic Lex hosts frequent events such as a rendition of "The Price is Right" based on actual city budget items aimed at giving students fun, hands-on experience with government and civic-related operations.<sup>141</sup>

Kentucky Student Voice (KSVT), an independent youth-led nonprofit, effectively spans a wide range of civil society, including students, organizations, and government with the mission of "co-creating more just, democratic Kentucky schools and communities as education research, policy, and storytelling partners."<sup>142</sup> With humble beginnings as seven high school students and one adult volunteer, the initiative was soon partnered with local non-profits focused on education, participating in the Mayor's Youth Council, equipping students to publish research and share their findings about education with local government officials through partnerships with the University of Kentucky, and mobilizing students from across the state to be better engaged in activism. In direct relation to government through programs such as the Mayor's Youth Council and advocacy work through rallies, testimonies, op-eds, media events and more,

---

<sup>140</sup> Ashley Castorena. "UK Announces CivicLex as 2023-24 Cornerstone Community Innovation Partner." UKNow, August 21, 2023. <https://uknow.uky.edu/campus-news/uk-announces-civiclex-2023-24-cornerstone-community-innovation-partner>.

<sup>141</sup> CivicLex, "K12 Programs"

<sup>142</sup> "Kentucky Student Voice Team: A Voice for Kentucky Students." Kentucky Student Voice Team | A voice for Kentucky students. Accessed July 18, 2024. <http://www.ksvt.org/>.

KSVT equips its members with the motivation and knowledge to research, write, and present a testimony on change they want to see and points students in the right direction for where to share these findings. Additionally, KSVT interacts with local organizations such as the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, the Partnership for the Future of Learning, and other non-profits focused on education, as well as schools to hear students feedback and encourage them to get involved.

Civic Lex and KSVT could serve as great templates for Chattanooga civil society nonprofits, as many programs with similar goals already exist in Hamilton County, but fail to concretely connect with young people and build social capital. Numerous interviewees noted this shortcoming, acknowledging nonprofits that produce quality content but fail to effectively reach youth. Kyle Carrasco, a local educator, noted, “there's this one account that I follow and they are doing a good job about it. I forget exactly what it's called. Maybe ChattaMatters or Civic Chatt-something. I don't know... they've been making a lot of videos about, like, what does the Tennessee House do? But, a lot of kids don't even know that we have a Tennessee legislature. They make good, high quality stuff, but ...you know, kids are very concerned with these social issues, but they don't know how to connect those dots.” Mr. Carrasco's concerns highlight the fact that educational content must be complemented with direct presence in physical youth environments to allow students to ‘connect the dots’ between big-picture issues and their everyday lives. Other local stakeholders, such as policy expert Ron Elliott, shared similar thoughts. “The thing that I think will be more realistic is tackling the barrier [of a lack of communication]. I would say our institutions and people of power [should be] talking and engaging around young people and their issues and just them in general. I think that's the barrier

right there. That communication goes a long way... These are your kids, these are young people that go to college here that you may hope go to the jobs that you're trying to bring here.”

Chattamatters/OurVoices, an initiative anchored around similar goals as these two Lexington-based organizations, as well as other Hamilton County civil society groups, could adopt some of the practices utilized by Civic Lex and KSVT. By extending beyond media production and implementing more instances of physical presence in youth environments, Chattanooga nonprofits could establish a more tangible relationship with youth and bridge gaps between local government, youth, and civil society, all of which have previously been relatively disconnected. Notably, Hamilton County government officials such as deputy mayor Cory Gearrin openly expressed their desire to establish channels for youth to communicate their needs to local government.

Lexington, KY youth voter turnout for 2022 midterm elections was 22.6%. Again, Hamilton County’s was 15.4%.<sup>143</sup>

## **Recommendations**

Based on our findings of how needs identified in our interviews with Hamilton County policy professionals, government teachers, and under-engaged youth were addressed in peer cities, we synthesized five general programmatic implementation recommendations for Hamilton County governments, public schools, and civil society groups to feasibly promote a more sustainable and immersive local youth civic engagement culture.

---

<sup>143</sup> CIRCLE, “Youth Voting and Civic Engagement In America,” n.d..

*Conduct direct physical outreach in K-12 and postsecondary schools to distribute content and build relationships with students.*

The issue addressed here is significant as numerous interviewees referenced a significant disconnect between civil groups and government aiming to promote engagement opportunities and the youth that were intended to receive the information. This solution is feasible for implementation in Hamilton County as local stakeholders from student, teacher, and government standpoints alike all expressed willingness and desire to form more solid partnerships with one another. Government officials also spoke to newly-found cohesiveness between county government, city governments, and public education, indicating an opportune moment for developing partnerships similar to those seen in model peer city Lexington, KY. Local civil society can spearhead this movement by following models referenced in peer city analysis and establishing physical presence, workshops, fairs, and similar outreach efforts in youth environments including K-12 and postsecondary schools. City and county governments can join in this collective effort by establishing roles in the partnership between civil society and schools. This includes implementing opportunities into the programming for youth to work with, shadow, and/or communicate needs with government officials. Finally, Hamilton County public schools can mirror the behavior of Fayette County, KY public schools by actively welcoming civil society groups into classrooms to host workshops, tailor and contextualize civics curriculum, and present opportunities for youth to work with local government.



*Build youth-exclusive third places that offer resources, opportunities for relationship building, mentorship, and safe environments where young people can meet, discuss issues, and drive change.*

Interviewees identified a need for safe youth-focused third spaces in Hamilton County. Extant literature shows that third places allow young people to build both social capital and stake in their community, which are both key predictors of civic engagement and associated ancillary benefits to community vibrancy such as improved upward mobility, mental health, and academic outcomes, particularly for young people.<sup>144</sup> Though Hamilton County civil society groups already have many adult-focused third places such as free meeting spaces at The Enterprise Center, Public Education Foundation, and Nonprofit Resource Center, none are supervised, young adult and adolescent-focused, or provide enrichment and resources that might attract and retain young people. Hamilton County governments also have general third places such as neighborhood community centers, though, as previously discussed these places are not youth specific, do not promote integration across the community, and are subject to state regulation, which may compromise the safety and undermine the effectiveness of youth-focused programs, particularly for highly vulnerable young people.

Based on Salem Drop, a third place in Salem, OR, an aspirational peer MSA of Chattanooga, we recommend that Hamilton County civil society groups create new centrally-located third places or repurpose existing adult-focused meeting spaces to provide enrichment opportunities and community resources to Hamilton County youth. These spaces should be staffed with trained youth practitioners ideally only removed in age from the target age group by several years. These spaces can also act as community resource hubs providing food,

---

<sup>144</sup> Granovetter, 1973; Oldenburg, 1999.

mental health support, and focus groups for youth in need similar to a community schools model except led by civil society rather than public schools.<sup>145</sup> Coordinating through organizations such as the Nonprofit Resource Center and the Chattanooga 2.0 Because of budgetary constraints, community mistrust, and risks to youth posed by recent regulations imposed by the State of Tennessee, we recommend against government administration of these places. Instead, local government can provide physical spaces (which should be free standing, not attached to an existing government building), low-barrier grant funding, and enrichment resources such as Medicaid enrollment, mobile library access, educational workshops, and certification of youth practitioners. This models the relationship between Youth Era, the nonprofit group that administers the Salem Drop and local and state government. The Hamilton County School District can support this third place in the following ways:

1. Advertising widely about services offered at the third place: schools can organize class field trips to visit the place, post fliers throughout the school district, and share events occurring at the third place in morning announcements, email lists, and district-run social media accounts.
2. Creating opportunities for youth practitioners at third places to serve within schools: allowing youth practitioners to mentor clubs, substitute teach, provide supplementary educational content, and coach extracurricular teams can enable relationship building that will allow youth to trust and use the third place.
3. Partnering with the third place for disciplinary intervention led by groups such as the 423 Chain Breakers as an alternative to police involvement. This can
4. Providing after school transportation to the third place.

---

<sup>145</sup> Jeannie Oaks, Anna Maier, and Julia Daniel, “Community schools: An evidence-based strategy for equitable school improvement.” *National Education Policy Center* (2017).

In 2019, Salem Drop received \$273,000 in philanthropic funding.<sup>146</sup> Given the similar cost of labor and property values between Chattanooga and Salem, OR, we anticipate a similar cost of administration by a third place initiative in Hamilton County.

*Student autonomy on civics-focused work creates stake in civic culture, innovates unique solutions.*

In Hamilton County, local government officials expressed open consideration to programs that give students greater agency, creating an easy pathway for organizations to empower students to make their voices heard. Additionally, a number of nonprofits and initiatives in Chattanooga aim to increase youth civic engagement. With both the existing programs already aimed at achieving student autonomy for civic engagement and a receptive local government, this recommendation is feasible for Hamilton County.

Civil society can structure its organizations aimed at increasing youth civic engagement and agency to empower students to engage in civic-focused work with the education and resources to communicate their ideas with local stakeholders and government officials. The city of Chattanooga can be receptive to youth ideas, listening to their thoughts and prioritizing them. By allowing for room for youth needs and perspectives in local politics, youth will build efficacy and, as a result, be more likely to participate in and encourage youth civic engagement. Hamilton County Public schools can aim to educate students on local government and empower students to use their agency to communicate their needs and initiate change in their community. Familiarizing students with the possibilities to take stake in civic culture and encouraging their

---

<sup>146</sup> “Salem Drop Services.” Youth Era. Accessed July 18, 2024.  
<https://www.youthera.org/salem-drop-services>.

participation can empower them to become active and informed citizens who contribute positively to their communities.

*Rather than resisting youths' desire to leave in pursuit of career opportunities, support their development while maintaining a connection to their hometown so they retain stake in their community.*

Interviewees resoundingly identified a “brain drain” out of Chattanooga, or youth leaving the area and abandoning any stake in the community in order to pursue career development opportunities. Solutions similar to Alabama’s Capitol Scholars Program, for example, would be feasible and impactful for Chattanooga as it is home to a member of the UT system, UTC. While the proposed model originates from a state-wide initiative, Hamilton County nonprofits, government, and schools can all strive to implement their own respective versions of the same concept. Civil society groups can establish programs that identify bright youth and offer career development workshops, travel opportunities, and more to support career-building while keeping a connection to the region. City and county governments can identify and support aspirational youth in a more similar manner to the Capitol Scholars Program by pushing for programs that work directly with local universities. Hamilton County Public schools can draw from their own district of K-12 youth, again offering elevated opportunities to pursue desired career fields while retaining local stake. This could resemble Capitol Scholars’ state government internship offerings, for example.

*Provide voter education and registration resources in all interactions with youth.*

Currently, Hamilton County youth struggle with a lack of knowledge relating to where to find civic resources including voting information and registration and other opportunities to become civically engaged. This issue can be addressed by strategically placing these resources around the community to meet youth where they are in places that are not necessarily related to

civics. Though Reno, Nevada's solution to this dilemma involved a state-wide law for automatic voter registration interactions that Tennessee may not be equipped to implement, Hamilton County can use the same general idea by equipping public spaces and organizations throughout the community with physical resources related to voter registration and participation. With a variety of heavily-visited community spaces and organizations, Hamilton County is a feasible location for residents to become informed on civic engagement via this particular avenue.

This solution relies heavily on civil society, requesting they take initiative to provide informative documents, registration forms, and similar resources as they physically interact with local youth. Organizations and initiatives that reach a far across the Hamilton County population, such as the Enterprise Center's Tech Goes Home initiative or the Chattanooga Aquarium, can equip young people with the physical engagement resources that may not have otherwise sought out or had easy access to. The City of Chattanooga can mirror this initiative where possible, providing government issued resources including registration forms and other necessary documents to civil society and local organizations so that they may distribute them themselves. Finally, Hamilton County Public Schools can educate students on the importance of the documents civil society and organizations would be handing out, creating a higher likelihood of youth interacting with the resources provided to them. This solution, overall, would establish more physical sites for youth to register and learn about voting, compared to the current environment in which students have to actively seek out necessary documents from a limited number of mainly government-related locations.

## **Conclusion**

Our interviews, literature review, and personal experiences suggest that Hamilton County is well-situated to become a model American community for youth civic engagement culture during an era of declining social capital. The county has a rich and diverse civil society and ample philanthropic support for new initiatives. Within local governments, there is an environment that is willing to collaborate across partisan differences, innovate policy solutions, and focus on real outcomes and equity. The residents exude a culture of exceptionalism and a resilient entrepreneurial spirit. Our recommendations show that these factors have already created a strong foundation for youth civic engagement initiatives, with current needs generally enhancing of the efficacy of already existing offerings. Our findings suggest that these initiatives could broadly benefit from a coordinated focus on human-centered design, as popularized by Donald Norman, wherein government leaders, schools, and civil society jointly consider the broad range of needs of Hamilton County youth across demographics, socioeconomic status, and geographies and seek to shape a cohesive network of wrap-around services that are tailored to the specific needs of certain groups rather than layered general needs that are met by a plurality of initiatives.<sup>147</sup> The means to implement this model, as well as additional conversations with Hamilton County stakeholders and further examination of peer city approaches to youth civic engagement are subjects that can be explored in future research.

## **Acknowledgments**

We first want to acknowledge our interviewees: Mary Beth Browne, Kyle Carrasco, Ronald Elliott, Cory Gearrin, Martin Granum, Elijah Haygood, John Hooker, Jillian Joubert,

---

<sup>147</sup> Donald A. Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*. MIT Press, 2013.

Casper Kittle, Tucker McClendon, Cameron McDaniel, Rian Murphy, Dylan Rivera, Kim Thurman, Keith White, and others. We also want to thank the various institutions and organizations that supported this work including the Morehead-Cain Foundation, the Public Education Foundation, the Lyndhurst Foundation, Hamilton County School District, the City of Chattanooga, Hamilton County, and all the staff and supporters of our community partner, The Enterprise Center. We appreciate the contributions of Dr. William Goldsmith and Dr. Helen Rose Meisner of UNC-Chapel Hill, as well as Dr. Vanessa Fry of Boise State University, for their support of our methods development and research ethics. We especially want to appreciate our Civic Collaboration colleagues Samantha Chavis and Allyson Horst and our mentors at the Enterprise Center, Mary Helen Montgomery and Goeff Millener who supported and collaborated with us throughout every step of this process. Finally, we want to express gratitude to the greater Chattanooga area for hosting us over the past eight weeks as we have explored the dilemma of youth civic engagement.

## Bibliography

- Chaturvedi, Anika. "15 Hamilton County Schools Earn Governor's Civic Seals." *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, August 12, 2021.  
<https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2021/aug/11/15-hamiltcounty-schools-earn-governors-civic/>.
- Gaby, Sarah. "The civic engagement gap (s): Youth participation and inequality from 1976 to 2009." *Youth & Society* 49.7 (2017): 923-946.
- S. 1810, 113th TN General Assembly (2024); S. 7006, 112th TN General Assembly (2023)
- "About AmeriCorps." AmeriCorps. Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://americorps.gov/about>.
- "Capitol Scholars Program," The University of Alabama System, 2024.
- "Chattanooga and Hamilton County Unveil Partnership to Strengthen Education, Enhance Affordable Housing, and Revitalize 300 Acres on City's Westside." City of Chattanooga Mayor's Office, May 26, 2023.  
<https://mayor.chattanooga.gov/chattanooga-and-hamilton-county-unveil-partnership-to-strengthen-education-enhance-affordable-housing-and-revitalize-300-acres-on-citys-westside/>.
- "Comparing Offending by Adults & Youth." Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Statistical Briefing Book, April 18, 2022.  
<https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/offenders/qa03401.asp>.
- "Governor's Civics Seal." Tennessee Department of Education. Accessed July 15, 2024.  
<https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/governor-s-civics-seal.html>.
- "History Makers 2008: Howard High School, Class of 1960." PBS, June 30, 2008.  
<https://www.pbs.org/video/special-presentations-history-makers-2008-howard-class-sit-ins/>.
- "Salem Drop Services." Youth Era. Accessed July 18, 2024.  
<https://www.youthera.org/salem-drop-services>.
- "SB 1967." Tennessee General Assembly Legislation. Accessed July 16, 2024.  
<https://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/default.aspx?BillNumber=SB1967&GA=113>
- "State-by-State Youth Voter Turnout Data and the Impact of Election Laws in 2022." CIRCLE, April 6, 2023.  
<https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/state-state-youth-voter-turnout-data-and-impact-election-laws-2022>.



“Tennessee State Board of Education High School Policy.” Tennessee State Government, 10AD. <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/stateboardofeducation/documents/2023-sbe-meetings/february-10%2C-2023-sbe-meeting/2-10-23%20IV%20C%20High%20School%20Policy%202.103%20Clean.pdf>.

“The Program.” The Congressional Award, August 17, 2023. <https://www.congressionalaward.org/the-program/>; “About the President’s Volunteer Service Award.” The President’s Volunteer Service Award. Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://presidentalserviceawards.gov/about>.

“Tyner Academy Seniors Walk out of School in Demand of Better Building Conditions.” WDEF News, September 2, 2021. <https://www.wdef.com/tyner-academy-seniors-walk-school-demand-better-building-conditions/>.

“Uplift Model.” Youth Era. Accessed July 18, 2024. <https://www.upliftpeers.com/uplift-model>.

“Voting Rights Act (1965).” National Archives and Records Administration, February 8, 2022. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/voting-rights-act>;

“Youth Data.” CIRCLE. Accessed July 15, 2024. <https://youthdata.circle.tufts.edu/>.

Acts Purging Registration — Notice. TN Code § 2-2-106. 2021.

Alexander, Rachel. “At Youth Era, Salem Teens Find Peers to Talk about Mental Health, Suicide.” Salem Reporter, April 11, 2019. <https://www.salemreporter.com/2019/04/11/at-youth-era-salem-teens-find-peers-to-talk-about-mental-health-suicide/>.

Barrett, Martyn and Ian Brunton-Smith. “Political and civic engagement and participation: Towards an integrative perspective.” In *Framing Civic Engagement, Political Participation and Active Citizenship in Europe*, pp. 5-28. Routledge, 2017.

Battisby, Alison. “An In-Depth Look at Marketing on TikTok.” Digital Marketing Institute, August 30, 2023. <https://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/blog/an-in-depth-look-at-marketing-on-tiktok>.

Bermudez, Angela. “Youth civic engagement: decline or transformation? A critical review.” (2012): 529-542.

Blandford, Alieda, Dominique Taylor, and Mike Smit. “Examining the role of information in the civic engagement of youth.” *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 52, no. 1 (2015): 1-9.

Bruning, John R. “The Message on Lookout Mountain.” *The American Warrior*, August 12, 2017. <https://theamericanwarrior.com/2017/08/12/the-message-on-lookout-mountain/>;

- “Native American History in Chattanooga: A Trail of Tears.” Visit Chattanooga, November 2, 2021.  
<https://www.visitchattanooga.com/blog/post/native-american-history-in-chattanooga-a-trail-of-tears/>.
- Castorena, Ashley. “UK Announces CivicLex as 2023-24 Cornerstone Community Innovation Partner.” UKNow, August 21, 2023.  
<https://uknow.uky.edu/campus-news/uk-announces-civiclex-2023-24-cornerstone-community-innovation-partner>.
- Chan, Wing Yi, Suh-Ruu Ou, and Arthur J. Reynolds. “Adolescent civic engagement and adult outcomes: An examination among urban racial minorities.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 43 (2014): 1829-1843
- Change Conversations. “How to Use the Social Media Rule of Thirds.” Marking Partners, February 6, 2016.  
<https://www.marketing-partners.com/conversations2/how-to-use-the-social-media-rule-of-thirds>.
- Chappell, Laura and Alex Glennie. “Show Me the Money (and Opportunity): Why Skilled People Leave Home — and Why They Sometimes Return.” Migration Policy Institute, April 22, 2010.
- Checkoway, Barry and Adriana Aldana. “Four forms of youth civic engagement for diverse democracy.” *Children and Youth Services Review* 35.11 (2013): 1894-1899.
- Coan, Shannon. “High School Graduation Rate Increases in Hamilton County: Chattanooga Times Free Press.” *Times Free Press*, 25 Nov. 2023,  
[www.timesfreepress.com/news/2023/nov/25/high-school-graduation-rate-increases-in-hamilton/](http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2023/nov/25/high-school-graduation-rate-increases-in-hamilton/).
- D'Agostino, Maria J. and Anne Visser. “Addressing and overcoming barriers to youth civic engagement.” *International Public Management Review* 11, no. 3 (2014): 88–103.  
<https://ipmr.net/index.php/ipmr/article/view/89>
- Delli Carpini, Michael X. “Gen. com: Youth, civic engagement, and the new information environment.” *Political communication* 17, no. 4 (2000): 341-349.
- Evans, Heather. “Service-learning and political engagement, efficacy, and apathy: A case study at Sam Houston State University.” *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 10, no. 2 (2015): 107-117.
- Fenn, Natalie, Allegra Sacco, Kathleen Monahan, Mark Robbins, and Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz. “Examining the relationship between civic engagement and mental health in young adults: A systematic review of the literature.” *Journal of Youth Studies* 27.4 (2024): 558-587

- Finlay, A., L. Wray-Lake, & C. Flanagan (2010). Civic engagement during the transition to adulthood: Developmental opportunities and social policies at a critical juncture. *Handbook of research on civic engagement in youth*, 277-305.
- Flanagan, Constance and Peter Levine. "Civic engagement and the transition to adulthood." *The Future of Children* (2010): 159-179.
- Flessner, Dave. "Three Chattanoogaans among America's Billionaires." *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, April 10, 2023.  
<https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2023/apr/10/three-chattanoogaans-among-americas-billionaires/>.
- Floyd, David. "Hamilton County Working Group Aims to Address \$1 Billion School Facilities 'Crisis.'" *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, September 23, 2022.  
<https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2022/sep/22/hamilton-county-group-facilities-tfp/>.
- Gainey, Blaise. "Gov. Bill Lee Signs Law Requiring Tennessee Schools to out Transgender Students." *WKMS*, May 7, 2024.  
<https://www.wkms.org/government-politics/2024-05-07/gov-bill-lee-signs-law-requiring-tennessee-schools-to-out-transgender-students>
- Ganz, Marshall. *Organizing: People, Power and Change: Organizing Notes, Charts, Reflection Questions. Trying to Thrive Not Just Survive*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government, 2006.  
<https://tryingtothrivenotjustsurvive.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/x-organizing-people-power-change-2006.pdf>.
- Gladwell, Malcolm. "Six Degrees of Lois Weisberg." *The New Yorker*, January 4, 1999.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1999/01/11/six-degrees-of-lois-weisberg>.
- Golonka, Sean. "Automatic Voter Registration System Adds Thousands of New Voters, despite Security Concerns from Critics." *The Nevada Independent*, February 2, 2021.
- Gose, Ben. "Chattanooga." *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, December 4, 2018.  
<https://www.philanthropy.com/article/chattanooga/>.
- Granovetter, Mark S. "The strength of weak ties." *American Journal of Sociology* 78.6 (1973): 1360-1380.
- Granovetter, Mark S. "The strength of weak ties." *American Journal of Sociology* 78.6 (1973): 1360-1380.
- Greaney, Joseph. "Two States with Republican Trifectas Adopted New Requirements for Voter Registration Drives." *Ballotpedia News*, July 15, 2024.

<https://news.ballotpedia.org/2024/07/15/two-states-with-republican-trifectas-adopted-new-requirements-for-voter-registration-drives/>.

Harrell, Margaret C. and Melissa Bradley. "Data collection methods: Semi-structured interviews and focus groups." (2009).

Help America Vote Act of 2002. Bill, United States Election Assistance Commission § (2002). [https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac\\_assets/1/6/HAVA41.PDF](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/6/HAVA41.PDF).

Jacobs, Melissa. "Building Adolescent Peer Mentorship Relationships in Support of Sustainable Global Civic Engagement," PhD diss. (Northeastern University, 2022).

Kahne, Joseph and Ellen Middaugh. "Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School. Circle Working Paper 59." Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) (2008).

Kapferer, J. N. "Kapferer's Brand-Identity Prism Model." *European Institute for Brand Management* 24 (2009): 2014.

Kelly, Diann Cameron. "Parents' influence on youths' civic behaviors: The civic context of the caregiving environment." *Families in Society* 87, no. 3 (2006): 447-455.

Larsen, Benjamin, Vanessa Crossgrove Fry, Mackenzie Moss, and Lantz McGinnis-Brown. "City of Boise Peer Cities Selection 2020." Idaho Policy Institute, August 8, 2022. <https://www.boisestate.edu/sps-ipi/our-research/city-of-boise-peer-cities-selection-2020/>.

Maher, Thomas V. and Jennifer Earl, "Living Down to Expectations: Age Inequality and Youth Activism." In *The Politics of Inequality*, vol. 28, pp. 215-235. Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021.

Mangrum, Meghan. "School Board Members Denounce Unified's Plan for Integrating Hamilton County Schools." *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, May 11, 2018. <https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2018/may/11/denounce-unified-plan/>.

McIntosh, Hugh and Marco A. Muñoz. "Predicting civic engagement in urban high school students." *Journal of Character Education* 7, no. 1 (2009): 41.

Mellquist, Joanna. "Role orientation and organizational strategy among policy professionals in civil society." *Interest Groups & Advocacy* 11, no. 1 (2022): 136-156.

Metcalf, Sabriel, "Lexington Public Schools Ensuring Civic Opportunities for High Schoolers." *Spectrum News 1*. Accessed July 18, 2024. <https://spectrumnews1.com/ky/louisville/news/2023/08/31/lexington-students-learning-about-civic-duties->

- Mihaylov, Nikolay and Douglas D. Perkins, "Community place attachment and its role in social capital development." *Place attachment: Advances in theory, methods and applications* 61 (2014).
- Muleya, Gistered. "Re-examining the concept of civic education." (2018).
- National Voter Registration Act of 1993. Bill, Congress.gov § (1993).  
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/house-bill/2>
- Norman, Donald A., *The Design of Everyday Things*. MIT Press, 2013.
- Oaks, Jeannie, Anna Maier, and Julia Daniel. "Community schools: An evidence-based strategy for equitable school improvement." National Education Policy Center (2017).
- Oldenburg, Ray, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. New York, NY: Hachette Books, 1999, 16.
- Opportunity Atlas, Opportunity Insights, [www.opportunityatlas.org/](http://www.opportunityatlas.org/). Accessed 14 July 2024.
- Putnam, Robert D. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Culture and Politics: A Reader*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2000.
- Quinlan, Keely. "Parents Bring Questions about Critical Race Theory, Social-Emotional Learning to School Board." *ClarksvilleNow*, August 24, 2021.  
<https://clarksvillenow.com/local/parents-bring-questions-about-critical-race-theory-social-emotional-learning-to-school-board/>.
- Reichert, Frank. "How internal political efficacy translates political knowledge into political participation: Evidence from Germany." *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 12, no. 2 (2016): 221.
- Rubin, J. "Dash Corps Student Groups Present Final Projects," Office of Civic and Community Engagement.
- Schaeffer, Katherine. "The Changing Face of Congress in 8 Charts." Pew Research Center, February 7, 2023.
- Sidhu, Dawinder S. "Civic education as an instrument of social mobility." *Denv. UL Rev.* 90 (2012): 990.
- Svallfors, Stefan. *Politics for hire: The world and work of policy professionals*. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), 127.
- Swalwell, Katy and Katherine A. Payne. "Critical civic education for young children." *Multicultural Perspectives* 21, no. 2 (2019): 127-132.

To, Siu-ming, Johnson Chun-Sing Cheung, Xiaoyu Liu, Cheryl Danielle Lau, Hera Junfei Zeng, and Adam Man-yuk Chan. "Youth empowerment in the community and young people's creative self-efficacy: The moderating role of youth–adult partnerships in youth service." *Youth & Society* 53, no. 6 (2021): 1021-1043.

Tocqueville, Alexis De. *Democracy in America: In Two Volumes*. Translated by George Lawrence and Jacob-Peter Mayer, Doubleday, 1969. 2 vols. Pg. 67

U.S. Census Bureau. "Hamilton County." [data.census.gov/profile/Hamilton\\_County,\\_Tennessee?g=050XX00US47065](https://data.census.gov/profile/Hamilton_County,_Tennessee?g=050XX00US47065). Accessed July 15, 2024.

Uslaner, Eric M. "Democracy and social capital." *Democracy and trust* 121 (1999): 150.

Wadhwani, Anita. "Tennessee Youth Advocates Concerned about Bill to Criminalize Threats of Mass Violence" *Tennessee Lookout*, August 23, 2023. <https://tennesseelookout.com/2023/08/21/tennessee-youth-advocates-concerned-about-bill-to-criminalize-threats-of-mass-violence/>.

Youniss, James, Jeffrey A. McLellan, and Miranda Yates. "What we know about engendering civic identity." *American Behavioral Scientist* 40.5 (1997): 620-631.

Youniss, J. and Hart, D. (2005). Intersection of social institutions with civic development. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2005(109), 73-81.

"Out-of-School Time Alliance." *Chattanooga 2.0*, January 22, 2024. <https://chatt2.org/ost/>.

"Authentic Youth Civic Engagement." National League of Cities, March 2019. <https://www.nlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/authentic-youth-engagement-gid-jul10.pdf>.

"Automatic Voter Registration Is Convenient, Efficient and Cost-Effective," *The Nevada Independent*, October 28, 2018.

"Baylor School in Tennessee." U.S News Education. Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/tennessee/baylor-school-311359>

"Girls Preparatory School Students." Niche. Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://www.niche.com/k12/girls-preparatory-school-chattanooga-tn/students/>; "Hamilton County Schools." U.S. News Education. Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/tennessee/districts/hamilton-county-104113>.

"Harvard Youth Poll Spring 2024." The Institute of Politics at Harvard University, Harvard University Kennedy School, April 18, 2024.

“K12 Programs.” CivicLex. Accessed July 18, 2024. <https://www.civiclex.org/k12-programs>.

“Kentucky Student Voice Team: A Voice for Kentucky Students.” Kentucky Student Voice Team | A Voice for Kentucky Students. Accessed July 18, 2024. <http://www.ksvt.org/>.

“McCallie School Students.” Niche. Accessed July 16, 2024.  
<https://www.niche.com/k12/mccallie-school-chattanooga-tn/students/>

“Six Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement,” Organizing Engagement, November 1, 2019.

“Starting a Nonprofit in Tennessee.” United Way Chattanooga, 2021.  
<https://unitedwaycha.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NonprofitStartupGuide.pdf>.

“Who We Are.” Chattanooga 2.0, June 5, 2024. <https://chatt2.org/who-we-are/>.

“Youth Voting and Civic Engagement In America.” CIRCLE. Accessed July 18, 2024.  
<https://circle.tufts.edu/explore-our-data/youth-voting-and-civic-engagement-america>.