

Youth Activism and Civic Engagement



2021 Dane County Youth Assessment Report

Dane County Human Services Prevention and Early Intervention



Highlighting the Agency of Youth in Dane County

Over a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, middle and high school students in Dane County completed the 2021 Dane County Youth Assessment (DCYA). The DCYA is distributed every three years and captures the opinions, concerns, behaviors, attitudes, and experiences of youth on a range of topics. The 2021 survey included new high school questions pertaining to social justice, racial inequality, and civic engagement to better understand youth experiences in emerging social and racial justice issues.

Analysis of DCYA questions related to civic engagement indicates that Dane County youth were aware and actively engaged during this transformative time. A quarter of all youth who completed the survey said they have been involved in social activism such as marches or protests. Twenty-nine percent of students indicated interest in engaging in these activities. This means nearly half of surveyed youth have desires to engage with activism. The new 2021 survey questions highlighted the agency of youth. To better understand what impacts a student's choice to be engaged in activism, we must understand who these students are and what their experiences include.

Variables such as race, gender, sexuality, mental health, geographic location, and adult support correlated with youth civic engagement and activism. The DCYA captures a moment in time during the youth experience. The repetition of questions over the years allows researchers to identify trends to further explain the youth experience in Dane County. The new 2021 DCYA questions were presented during a pivotal moment defined by the COVID-19 pandemic and social justice movements in the United States. The unique circumstances of a global pandemic presumably impacted student behaviors and ultimately the survey results. Subsequent DCYA surveys will differentiate youth activism from an isolated event or upward trend. To better understand the agency of youth, it is important for the DCYA to continue asking questions pertaining to activism and civic engagement.

For more information on the Dane County Youth Assessment please visit:
<https://www.dcdhs.com/About-Us/Commissions-Boards-and-Committees/Youth-Commission/Youth-Assessment>



The Role of Identity in Youth Activism

According to the 2021 DCYA, youth identities such as age, race, gender, and sexual orientation influence social activism. BIPOC students were engaged with social activism at higher rates than their white peers. The DCYA reported 22% of white students engaged with social activism compared to 31% of BIPOC students who reported involvement with social activism such as participation in marches or protests. Furthermore, students were asked if they talked with friends or family about racial inequality. 83% of all surveyed students report they talked a lot with family and friends about racial inequality, whereas 17% said they never really talked about it. DCYA results indicate a positive relationship between racial inequality awareness and social activism rates. According to [Christens et al. \(2013\)](#), BIPOC community members are more aware of social injustices, and are likely to engage as leaders in sociopolitical change. They find that social justice activism can lead to psychological empowerment, greater community belongingness, and civic engagement for BIPOC youth. DCYA results and external research suggest greater awareness of racial inequality correlate with increased activism rates among youth.

Gender and sexual orientation also influenced youth social activism rates: 30% of females, 41% of gender non-conforming students, and 19% of males reported activism activities. As for sexual orientation, social activism rates more than doubled in students who identify as LGBTQ+ (42%). [Marx and Kettrey \(2016\)](#) state Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) organizations and/or policies in schools that specifically address LGBTQ+ discrimination and harassment are associated with lower levels of school-based victimization against LGBTQ+ youth. Their research coupled with the LGBTQ+ youth activism rates found in the DCYA should be used to expand opportunities for youth activism particularly for LGBTQ+ youth.

Youth Activism, Civic Engagement, & Mental Health

Youth mental health in Dane County continues to be a concern. Over the years, the DCYA has captured an upward trend in mental health issues among youth. In 2021, 21% of students reported being depressed, 32% reported having anxiety, and 6% reported having an eating disorder. Additionally, 20% of all 7th-12th grade youth reported having suicidal thoughts (ideation) during the past 30 days. Although youth mental health continues to be a concern, the agency of youth experiencing mental health concerns was evident when asked if they engage in social activism. One third of the students who reported feelings of depression also reported engagement with social activism; students who did not report feelings of depression were 13 percentage points less likely to be engaged in activism. Similar results were found for anxiety.

Activism is hard work and can have a significant impact on a person's mental health and wellbeing. This is especially true for BIPOC individuals and those from marginalized groups whose activism is strongly tied to their personal experiences ([Gorski, 2019](#)). Racial battle fatigue is a types of burnout that occurs when one is working towards a goal that involves emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion ([Gorski & Chen, 2015](#)). With significant rates of youth activism and growing mental health concerns, those who support youth should be aware of the possibility of activism burnout and racial battle fatigue. This will ensure the strength, impact, and longevity of youth activism.



Expanding upon Youth Activism and Civic Engagement in Rural Communities with Adult Support

The vast majority of youth attending rural school districts reported a lack of social activism engagement (85%). Among this population, 26% indicated a desire to participate in activism if given the chance. In comparison to youth in urban school districts, youth in rural communities experience unique barriers to participation such as transportation, proximity to city center, and access to resources. This is an area where adults can influence engagement by addressing these barriers. The DCYA asked students how many adults (other than their parents) they could rely on if they had a problem or need. On a scale from no trusted adults to having three adults, activism rates improved as the number of trusted adults in a youth's life increased: 79% of students who reported having no adults to rely on also answered "no" to social activism involvement. This suggests adult support is an integral component of youth activism and civic engagement.

Given the positive impact adult support has on youth activism rates, adults should be aware of their role in this work. Although adult involvement is crucial, it must be strategic in order to best support youth. [Kowasch, et. al \(2021\)](#), recommend that adults can avoid bureaucratizing youth activism, especially the efforts of BIPOC youth, by supporting youth activists' transformative learning processes. Transformative learning occurs when youth are supported to realize that their actions can have a positive impact on society. Kowasch et al., provide questions (right) for adults such as school administrators, teachers, and community leaders looking to support youth civic engagement in their community. These questions provide a framework that challenge power imbalances and introduce new ways of organizing that lead to greater youth empowerment.

Questions for adults to consider:

1. What is it that young people envision for themselves and their communities that makes me uncomfortable?
2. How does that affect my interactions with them? What specific tools are young people missing that I can provide?
3. How can I help them understand the context and political landscape, while still empowering them to make decisions that best support their visions?
4. How can I encourage and amplify the voices of youth and community members in ways that go beyond typical state-sanctioned bureaucratic solutions (e.g., taskforces, study groups, work groups, etc.)?
5. In what ways can I return decision-making power to youth and community members over public processes and decisions that extend beyond traditional civic engagement approaches?

Links and Resources

[2021 Dane County Youth Assessment Overview Report](#)

[2021 Dane County Youth Assessment Race Report](#)

[2021 Dane County Youth Assessment Gender Identity Report](#)

[2021 Dane County Youth Assessment Sexual Orientation Report](#)

[How to Cope with Racial Trauma and Racial Battle Fatigue](#)

[Here are 4 steps to get your GSA engaged in civic engagement and defending democracy](#)

[Colorado GSA Network: A Guide for Developing Gay-Straight Alliances](#)

References

2021 Dane County Youth Assessment, Dane County Youth Commission, Madison, Wisconsin

Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. (2020). _BMR4821. [Photograph]. University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Christens, B., Collura, J., & Tahir, F. (2013). Critical Hopefulness: A person-centered analysis of the intersection of cognitive and emotional empowerment. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 52(1-2), 170-184. doi.org/10.1007/s10464-013-9586-2

Gorski, P. (2019) Fighting racism, battling burnout: causes of activist burnout in US racial justice activists, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42(5), 667-687. doi: 10.1080/01419870.2018.1439981

Gorski, P. & Chen, C. (2015). "Frayed all over:" The causes and consequences of activist burnout among social justice education activists. *Educational Studies: Journal of the American Educational Studies Association*, 51(5), 385–405.

Kowasch, M., Cruz, J., Reis, P., Gericke, N., & Kicker, K. (2021). Climate youth activism initiatives: Motivations and aims, and the potential to integrate climate activism into ESD and transformative learning. *Sustainability*, 13(21). doi.org/10.3390/su132111581

Marx, R., Kettrey, H. (2016). Gay-straight alliances are associated with lower levels of school-based victimization of LGBTQ+ youth: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*. doi: 10.1007/s10964-016-0501-7