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The Impact of High School Mandatory Community Service Programs on Subsequent Volunteering and Civic Engagement

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Abstract:

In 1999, the province of Ontario, Canada, joined a number of other jurisdictions in requiring its high school students to complete a period of community service as a condition for graduation. All students entering high school in Ontario must now complete 40 hours of community service before they graduate.ⁱ The primary objective of this program and others like it around the world is to address declining civic engagement within society. Civic engagement is a multi-dimensional concept reflecting people's psychological and associational attachment to their communities. It incorporates such aspects of good citizenship as a sense of civic responsibility, a network of social connectedness, attentiveness to public life, and a willingness to contribute to achieving society's collective goals. It is believed that mandating community service in adolescence will develop these civic orientations and motivate young people to continue volunteering after they have graduated. But to what extent or under what circumstances do mandatory community service programs accomplish these goals? In this research report, we venture preliminary answers to this question.

Using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, we examined the high school community service experiences of the first cohort of students to complete Ontario's mandatory community service program in 2003. To do this, we interviewed a sample of these students in the fall of 2004 to capture their experiences and to assess their levels of civic engagement at that time. We also surveyed students who graduated in the same year but who had not been mandated to volunteer.ⁱⁱ Using this non-mandated group for comparison, we assessed the apparent impacts of the mandatory program 15 months after graduation. We then conducted follow-up interviews with a sub-sample of the mandated cohort to attempt to identify features of the high school volunteer experience that seem to influence students' overall evaluation of and perspectives on volunteering.

Our findings suggest that Ontario's mandatory community service program has introduced a significant number of university-bound students to the voluntary sector who would probably not otherwise have had that experience. Moreover, the fact that these students were mandated to volunteer appears to have had no negative impacts on the quality of their high school experience, on their subsequent civic engagement, or on their attitudes concerning philanthropy. Our findings also suggest that volunteering in high school has positive impacts on a student's subsequent civic engagement but that those impacts are largely conditional on two features of the volunteering experience: high school volunteering makes a difference when the student has made a sustained commitment to one volunteer placement and especially when the volunteer placement provides a positive experience to the student.
