Civic Engagement: A Mechanism For Economic Mobility?

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The percentage of low-income individuals and families in the United States (those at or below 200% of the federal poverty threshold) has been on the rise, growing from 30% to 34% between 2002 and 2011 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Many policies designed to improve economic outcomes for low-income individuals are short-term solutions to promote self-sufficiency instead of long-term strategies directed toward improving economic mobility. For example, short-term individualistic focused labor supply programs have proven inadequate to address the rising number of low-income individuals in the United States. More innovative research is needed to inform long-term, structural strategies toward low-income individuals attaining upward economic mobility.

While civic engagement previously has not been framed as a mechanism for economic mobility, in recent years scholars and policymakers have begun to recognize that civic engagement not only provides social and economic benefits to communities, but also to the individuals participating in civic acts. An emerging body of literature suggests that civic engagement activities such as volunteering, political involvement, and philanthropic activities can help facilitate connections and develop skills that may affect participants’ employment and income statuses (Corporation for National and Community Service [CNCS], 2008, 2013; National Conference on Citizenship [NCoC], 2011; Wilson, 2000). However, the relationship between civic engagement and economic outcomes has not been adequately examined in the context of low-income individuals, a population that participates in a variety of civic activities and could particularly benefit from economic opportunities (Bolland & McCallum, 2002; McBride, Sherraden, & Pritzker, 2006; Messias, DeJong, & McLoughlin, 2005).

This paper uses a mixed methods research design to examine the immediate and long-term effects of civic engagement on economic mobility, specifically whether, how, and under what conditions civic engagement may serve as a pathway toward economic mobility for low-income individuals living in the United States. In this paper, civic engagement is defined as individual or collective actions that address issues of public concern or unmet needs (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Carpini, 2004), and the types of civic engagement that are explored include volunteering, giving money, political action, school involvement, religious participation, and neighborhood action.

Economic mobility is measured by changes in employment status, employment characteristics, and income over a person’s lifetime (Urahn et al., 2012). The paper is grounded in an asset-based theoretical approach that emphasizes the importance of acquiring and leveraging social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001; Putnam, 2000) and human capital (Becker, 1964, 1993) assets for economic mobility. This approach also recognizes that access to and opportunities for civic engagement activities that may build social capital and human capital assets are not equal for all, which may affect one’s economic mobility.

The quantitative portion of the study uses survey data from the ten-year longitudinal Making Connections initiative to examine the long-term impact of civic engagement on economic mobility across seven cities in the United States from 2002-2011. These data examine the ways in which the relationship between civic engagement and economic mobility changes by type of civic engagement over time. The qualitative portion of the study involves 30 semi-structured interviews with low-income individuals who have participated in civic engagement activities and are living in one of the Making Connections cities. The interviews explore whether and how participation in civic engagement develops social and human capital assets for low-income individuals, the ways these assets may influence economic mobility, and the role access to and opportunities for civic engagement play for low-income individuals in relation to social capital, human capital, and economic mobility.

This paper contributes to a greater understanding of the relationship between civic engagement and economic mobility among low-income individuals in the United States, but also has
implications for future research in other countries. The results of this study add to the small but growing body of literature that examines the economic effects of civic engagement on individuals and communities, and have the potential to inform policies and programs in both the civic engagement and poverty policy arenas.