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Community Survey Brief, Civic Engagement, 2012

Community Research Institute-Johnson Center

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Community Survey Brief Civic Engagement

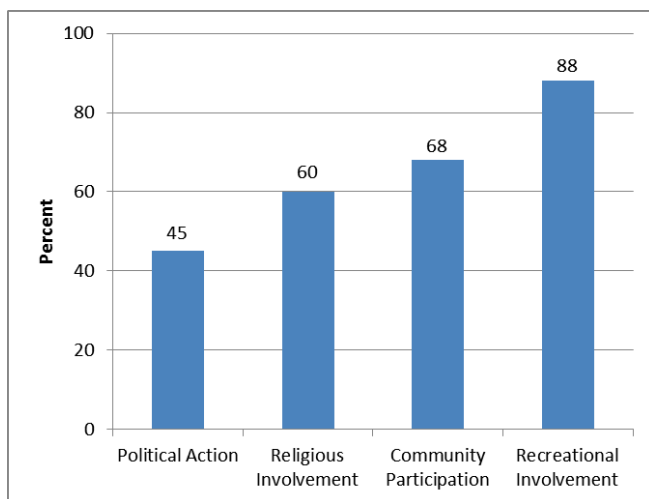
Introduction

Civic engagement is a valuable way to measure community wellbeing. The Greater Grand Rapids area provides a variety of opportunities in which residents can get involved. Because of the diverse population of this area, it is worthwhile to examine whether different segments of the population are engaging with these opportunities.

We have created four indicators by which to measure civic engagement: Political Action; Community Participation, Recreational Involvement, and Religious Involvement. These indicators consist of questions asked in the 2011 Greater Grand Rapids Community Survey, of which there were 500 respondents. Each indicator represents an important aspect of civic engagement; Political Action, Community Participation, and Recreational Involvement indicate different ways in which an individual can become involved in their community. Religious Involvement is also included as a form of civic engagement as research shows that Americans who are active in a religious organization are “more involved in more organizations of all kinds, and devote more time to the groups to which they are active.”¹

If a respondent answered “yes” to any of questions in the indicator, s/he was counted as fulfilling that indicator.

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Political Action | <p><i>In the past year, have you:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contacted or visited a public official to ask for assistance or to express your opinion? • Contacted a newspaper, magazine, radio, or television station to express your opinion on an issue? • Taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration? • Signed a petition about a political or social issue? |
| Community Participation | <p><i>Do you currently, or in the past year have you:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worked formally or informally with someone or some group to solve a problem in the community where you live? • Done any volunteer work for a charitable organization for which you did not receive pay? • Been involved or belong to any local group, clubs, or associations? |
| Recreational Involvement | <p><i>In the past week, have you:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gone to a movie, play, concert, restaurant, sporting event, club meeting, card game, or other social activity? • Gotten together with friends or neighbors in any other setting? <p><i>In the past year, have you:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gone to a museum or a performance of the opera, theater, symphony or ballet in Kent County? |
| Religious Involvement | <p><i>In the past week, have you:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gone to a church, temple, or another place of worship for services or other activities? |



Overview

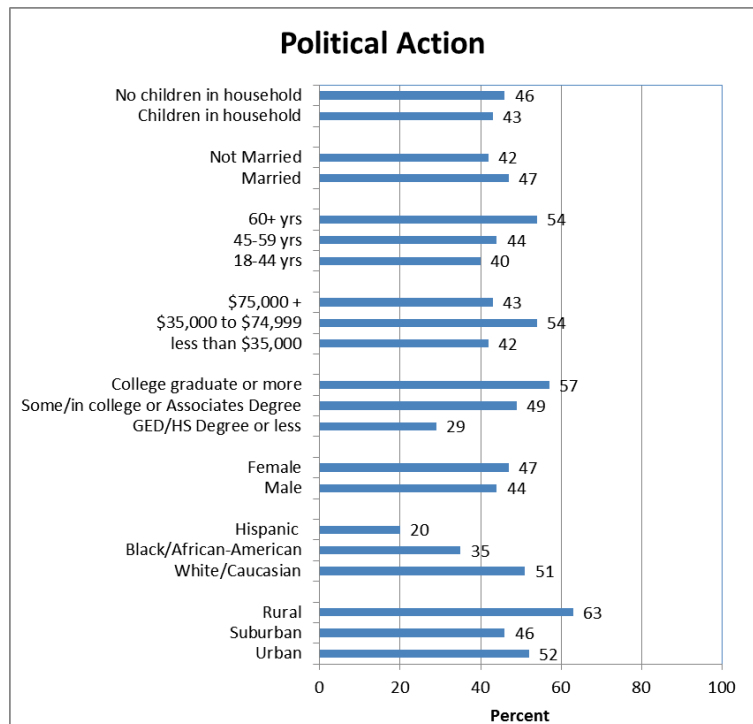
In examining the entire sample of survey respondents, there is clear ranking regarding citizen fulfillment of the different indicators. Political Action has the lowest level of fulfillment, while Recreational Involvement as the highest. We compared these indicators to different demographic categories: children in household, marital status, age, income, education, gender, race/ethnicity*, and urban/city.

1. Jansen, J. (2011). The civic and community engagement of religiously active Americans. Pew Internet & American Life Project. Retrieved from <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Social-side-of-religious.aspx>



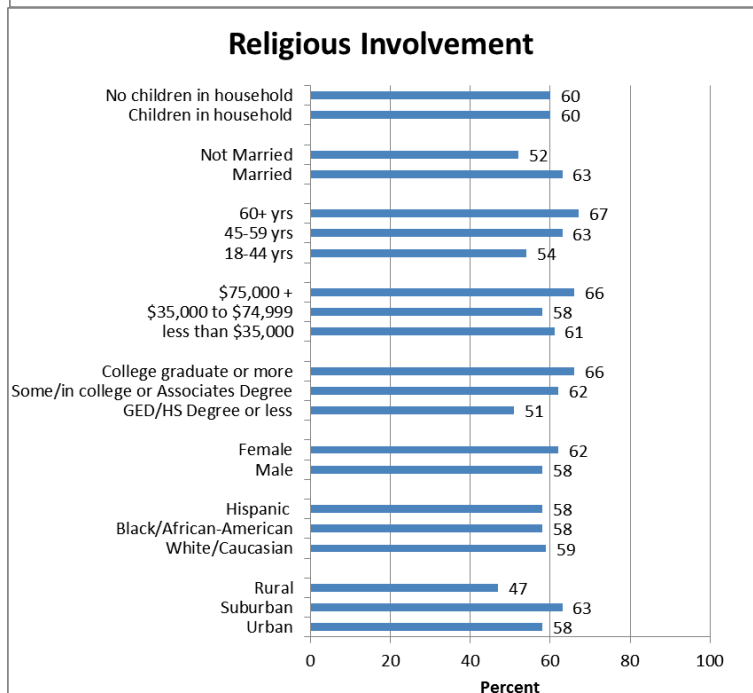
Political Action

Among the indicators, Political Action had consistently lower levels of fulfillment across all the demographic categories. At the lowest end, 20 percent of Hispanics fulfilled this indicator; at the highest end of the range, 63 percent of those in a rural region qualified as politically active. The widest gaps within demographic categories occurred within *race*, with a 31 point spread between White/Caucasian and Hispanic; *education*, with a 28 point spread between those with a college degree or more and those with a GED/High school degree or less; and *urban/city*, with a 17 point spread between rural and suburban regions.



Religious Involvement

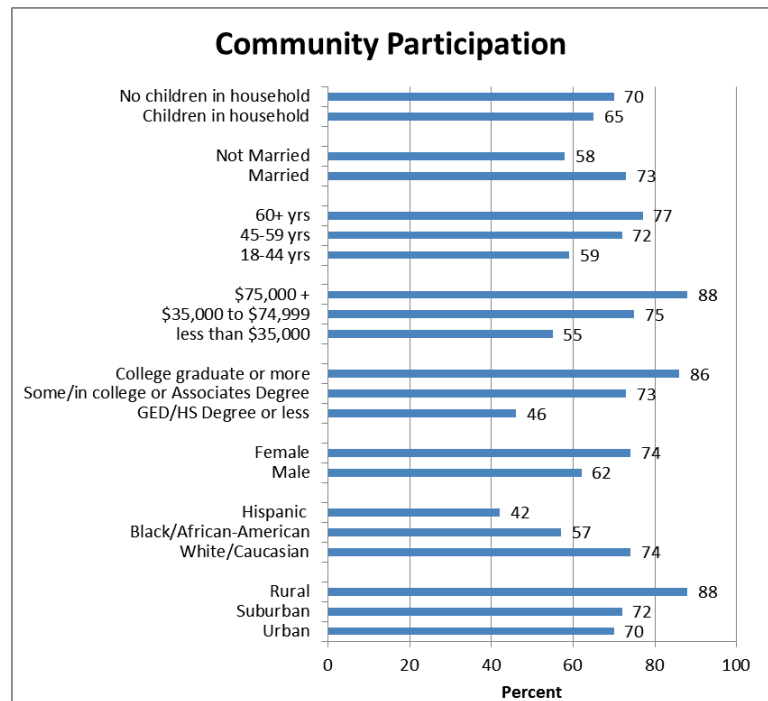
Religious involvement remained fairly steady among the different demographic categories, with levels of engagement mostly in the 50 and 60 percentile ranges. Additionally, engagement stayed rather consistent within the demographic categories as well; the greatest disparities occurred within *education* (66% religious involvement for those with a college degree or more vs. 51 percent religious involvement for those with a GED/High school diploma or less) and *age* (67% of those 60+ years of age vs. 54% for those 18-44).





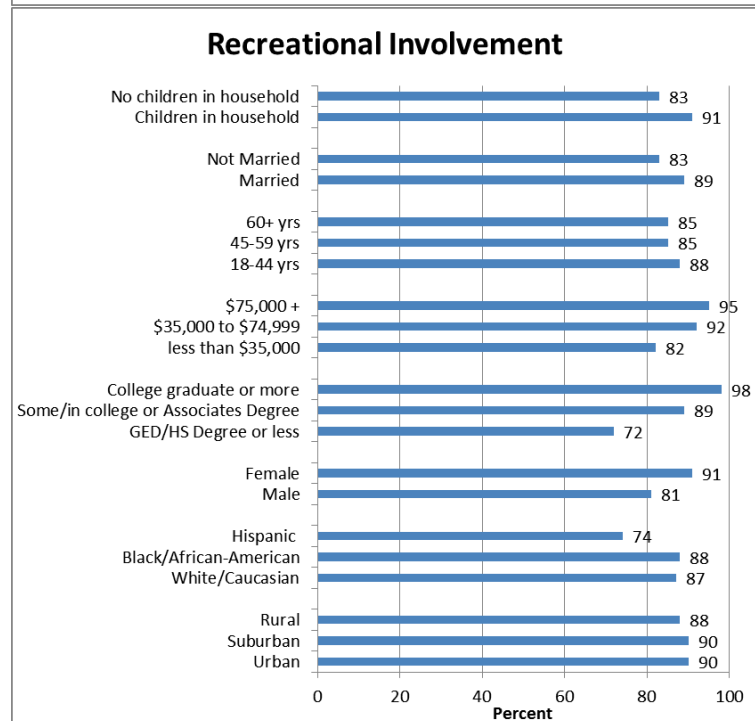
Community Participation

Community participation among the different demographic categories was varied. There appears to be wide disparities within almost every category. The greatest gap occurred within *education* (college graduate or more: 86 percent; some/in college or Associates degree: 73 percent; and GED/High School degree or less: 46%). Large disparities also appeared in *income* (those with higher income showing higher levels of community participation) and *race*, with 75 percent of White/Caucasians fulfilling the indicator, compared to 57 percent of Black/African Americans and 42 percent of Hispanics.



Recreational Involvement

This indicator showed the highest level of engagement among all the demographic categories, with fulfillment almost exclusively in the high 80 and low 90 percentile range. The largest differences emerged within *education*, with those with the most education showing the highest percentage of recreational involvement in that category, and within *income*, with those with the highest income also showing the highest level of recreational involvement within that category.





Summary and Discussion

These results show that levels of engagement vary across the different indicators, as well as across and within the demographic categories. Specifically, education seems to play an important role in whether someone is civically engaged. Those with higher education had higher levels of political action, community participation, recreational involvement, and religious involvement. Income and race also appear to have an impact across a couple of indicators. Those with more income show more community participation and recreational involvement; White/Caucasians show the highest levels of political action and community participation, followed by Black/African Americans, then Hispanics. This information unfortunately cannot tell us the reasons behind these findings, but as a general snapshot of the Greater Grand Rapids population, it provides a good starting point in examining the strengths and disparities in civic engagement across the region. Undoubtedly, opportunities for civic engagement should be diverse and accessible in order to ensure that all residents have a voice in public affairs and the welfare of their community.

Community Leader Perspective

For each issue brief CRI invites a community leader with knowledge of the brief's subject matter to share their perspective on the survey data and how it relates to current community efforts.

The results of the Community Research Institute's survey on civic engagement revealed that the Greater Grand Rapids community was most engaged in the areas of Recreation and Community Participation. Political Action showed the lowest amount of engagement. The City of Grand Rapids encourages citizens to participate in all aspects of civic engagement, as we recognize that engaged citizens are critical in creating and sustaining a healthy community. The need to further promote civic engagement and effectively deploy scarce resources has prompted the City to create two community programs: a partnership with Friends of Grand Rapids Parks and myGRcitypoints.

Founded in 2008, Friends of Grand Rapids Parks is an independent, citizen-led, nonprofit enterprise whose goal is to protect, enhance and expand parks and public spaces. The organization works with volunteer residents and businesses to clean, maintain and improve our local parks. This creates an opportunity for citizens from different parts of the community to get involved in an important cause. Additionally, through improving our public spaces, the hope is that more citizens will become engaged with and participate in community activities.

myGRcitypoints is an innovative, web-based program that allows Grand Rapids residents to earn points simply by using their City-issued, single-stream recycling carts.

The purpose of this program, introduced in August 2010, is to encourage the City's nearly 42,000 households that now have single-stream recycling carts to recycle instead of throwing away recyclable products. Earned points are redeemed through vouchers that can be spent within locally owned businesses. When we recirculate money within our local business community we strengthen our local economy.

The highly successful recycling program has increased the amount of recycling by 81 percent and lowered the refuse collected in the city by 13 percent. myGRcitypoints will soon be expanded to award points to those who participate in additional volunteer activities in the city, such as working with Friends of Grand Rapids Parks to improve public green space, shoveling a neighbor's sidewalk, attending a parent-teacher conference, or participating in other ways to strengthen community.

Public systems and structures are essential to the quality of our lives. Programs like myGRcitypoints and Friends of Grand Rapids Parks offer us opportunities to increase, improve and enhance our public spaces and our human experience. The City of Grand Rapids is working hard to incentivize social capital to make Grand Rapids a "City for People"!

*Ruth E. Kelly
City Commissioner
Second Ward, City of Grand Rapids*