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HEADLINE: Sports & civics: a new report shows that participation in sports might make students better citizens.

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It is a commonly held belief that participation in school sports helps build character. Students can learn everything from teamwork to good sportsmanship from their time on the playing field, the theory goes. A new report from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement shows that these assumptions might be correct.

Young people who are involved in sports report higher levels of voting, volunteering and news attentiveness than their peers who do not participate in sports, according to data gathered for Participation in Sports and Civic Engagement. Research Director Mark Hugo Lopez says the data came from "a nationally representative survey of young people done in the fall of 2002 ... designed to measure civic engagement." More than 1,100 people took the survey, but Lopez limited his analysis to those ages 18 to 25, which reduced the sample to 860, with 360 reporting organized sports participation.

Lopez explains that he selected the age range so they were "only looking at post high school civic engagement, not within high school civic engagement," thus limiting the chances of picking up organized volunteer activities.

According to the data gathered, young people who participated in sports were more likely than non-sports participants to have volunteered (32 percent vs.. 21 percent), registered to vote (58 percent vs.. 40 percent), voted (44 percent vs.. 33 percent in 2000), and followed news closely (41 percent vs.. 26 percent).

In addition to age, the researchers also considered gender, race/ethnicity, income, other high school activities, region and educational attainment. Even with those controls in place, sports participants were more engaged in civic activities. For instance, 24 percent of sports participants reported

volunteering, compared to 18 percent of non-participants.

Whether or not there is a direct correlation between sports participation and civic engagement, any good influence sports has will be growing. According to data from the National Federation of State High School Associations, during the 2004-05 school year approximately 7 million high school students participated in athletic programs, up from 5.3 million in 1990. Of course, most of them were boys. According to the 2002 survey, 49 percent of the males and 35 percent of the females aged 18-25 responding said they participated in high school sports, with an overall 42 percent reporting sports participation.

The small sample size caused the researchers to look at the respondents as a whole, rather than breaking them down by gender, but a few points stood out. Female athletes were more likely to volunteer than male athletes (36 percent vs.. 28 percent), but the males watched more news, especially sports news (37 percent vs.. 42 percent).

The researchers were not able to draw any direct conclusions as to why student athletes were more engaged in their community, and considered the possibility that people who choose to do sports might naturally be more inclined to participate in civic affairs. "However, I think that sports participation helps to develop a set of civic skills that are transferable to other areas," Lopez says. "For example, being part of a group, and learning to work with other people could lead to a lifetime of group membership."

Lopez plans to continue exploring the relationship between sports and civic engagement. Aspects he hopes to investigate include comparing whether some sports, such as football, have more impact on civic engagement than other sports, such as tennis, and whether there is a link between a student's position on a team (a leadership role as opposed to a general player role) and his or her civic activities. He also wants to look at the link between extra-curricular activities in general and civic engagement, and to see whether there is a correlation between participation in certain types of activities, such as school paper, student government, band, cheerleading and sports, and being more civically active.

www.civic.youth.org

Ann McClure is associate editor.

Participation

49% of males and 35% of females
participate in extramural sports teams while in high school

Sports & Voting

High school students involved in sports
were more likely to be registered to vote

	Registered to vote
Sports	59%
No sports	44%

News

High school students involved in sports were more likely to watch news programs

	Sports	No sports
Follow the news closely	41%	27%
Follow sports news closely	28%	10%
Follow political news closely	4%	3%

Sports & Civics

Generally, high school and college students who have participated in high school sports are also more civically engaged than young people who have not participated in sports.

Civic Indicators	Sports	No sports
Volunteer	24%	18%
Regular volunteer	10%	7%
Worked to solve community problem	5%	4%
Political Indicators		
Registered to vote	60%	44%
Voted in 2000	43%	33%
Voice Indicators		
Wrote letter	3%	4%
Boycott	12%	12%
Participated in town meeting	3%	4%
Signed e-mail petition	6%	10%
Feel comfortable making public statement	38%	30%

Source: National Youth Survey of Civic Engagement, 2002