

Connecting Crisis and Community: A Nation in Crisis Needs Civic Engagement

A summary of research prepared by CSR Communications, the Do Good Institute, and PACE (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement)

The United States has endured - and continues to battle - many crises affecting communities across the country. In addition to the havoc they wreak on individual lives and communities, these crises expose cracks in the foundations of our democracy, economy, and social fabric. But they also spark greater desires for generosity and community engagement among individuals. Human nature compels compassion, connection, and generosity in times of tragedy.

Civic engagement often increases after a crisis, and an opportunity exists to elongate that response to strengthen and reimagine communities over time. Two complementary resources aim to explore this phenomenon and what we can do about it:

- [Community in Crisis: A Look at Charitable Activity and Civic Engagement in Times of Crises, from the Do Good Institute.](#)
- [Crisis as Catalyst: A Conversation Starter for Reimagining What's Next, from PACE and CSR Communications.](#)

What We Know

Civic and charitable behaviors tend to rise following a crisis, especially in the areas most heavily affected. A [look](#) at the September 11 attacks, Hurricane Katrina, and the Great Recession shows that in all three crises, rates of volunteering, charitable giving, working with neighbors and attending public meetings all increased. For example:

- Volunteer rates reached peak levels nationally, and in the New York City metropolitan area, in the years directly after 9/11 (2003-2005). In fact, volunteer rates from 2006 to 2015 have never been as high as the rates from those early post-9/11 years.
- Metro New Orleans exhibited a surge in informal charitable behavior (working with neighbors to fix or improve something) and civic behavior (attending public meetings) in the years after Katrina, which happened in 2005. Participation rates peaked for these activities even through the Great Recession, and stayed at high levels into the early 2010s.

The data tell us that while there tend to be civic surges, they are almost never sustained:

- In 2006, after the sustained post-9/11 peak in the volunteer rate, the national U.S. volunteer rate suffered its first large and statistically significant decline, falling by more than two percentage points to 26.7 percent. If not for this decrease in the volunteer rate, almost 5 million more adults would have volunteered.
- Participation rates for all four charitable and civic activities declined significantly in the years following the Great Recession, both nationally and in New Orleans and New York City, where they had recently seen their rates surge in the aftermath of a crisis or disaster in their respective geographic areas.

What Else We Know

Inequities are exacerbated by crisis and crisis exacerbates inequity. Communities of color are often disproportionately impacted during disasters, the COVID-19 [pandemic](#) being just one recent example.

Further, while there are historic surges of giving surrounding crisis and disasters, only 2 percent of philanthropic disaster dollars raised goes to resilience and preparedness (64 percent goes to direct response and relief). While meeting basic needs, taking the time to reimagine what healthy and vibrant civic life can look like on the “other side” of any disaster or community crisis can feel like a luxury, but not doing so can compound the problems we are trying to solve.

As the nation fights the current pandemic *and* plans for recovery, our challenge will be to sustain the likely increases in Americans’ impulse to engage in charitable and civic activities for the long haul. Which begs the question: *How will donors and institutional funders with the means to contribute to community solutions respond to the challenge?*

What We Can Do

Civil society organizations have the opportunity to proactively envision what our nation’s “future state” can be, rather than be pushed into a “new normal.” This starts with a [conversation](#).

Questions like these can help envision and imagine community well-being on the other side of the crisis, and what civic leadership looks like to help get there:

- What kind of team/organization/community do we want to be (or be known as) on the “other side” of this?
- With the status quo in upheaval, what things are now possible that seemed impossible before?
- How do we invest for resilience, not just survival?
- How can we help people find a sense of civic agency or efficacy right now, especially if recovery feels structural or institutional?
- What can we do to avoid perpetuating under-investment in some communities? Why does this under-investment take place and who is best positioned to correct for it?

About the Partners

The [Do Good Institute](#) serves as the catalyst to transform the University of Maryland into the nation’s first Do Good Campus, where students are inspired to take action and spur innovations and solutions that tackle today’s social issues.

[PACE](#) (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement) is a member-centric philanthropic laboratory for funders seeking to maximize their impact on democracy and civic life in the United States.

[CSR Communications](#) works with leaders of big change within established organizations to help them get unstuck, create a clear vision and goals, and design a path to realize them.

