

The Center for
Community Inclusion and
Reflective Collaboration
(CIRC Center)

What Is Community Participation?

OCT 2024

The **Center for Community Inclusion and Reflective Collaboration (the CIRC Center)** is a research and training center that aims to significantly advance community participation outcomes among young adults (14–26) with serious mental health conditions from populations that have been marginalized or minoritized. The term **community participation** is used in mental health services and research to refer to community-based activities that promote overall health and wellness. However, many people find this concept to be confusing, vague, and hard to understand.



This tip sheet will define **“community participation,”** describe relevant experiences of young adults (ages 14–26) with serious mental health conditions (SMHC) from populations that have been marginalized, and provide reflections from our various advisory boards of young adults, family members, and professionals in the field.

In research, “community participation” is defined as the “choice and action individuals make to be active in valued roles in the communities of their choice, across a variety of domains in their life.”¹

“Community participation is important for everyone. It is a strategy to building social connection and reducing isolation.”

— Professional Advisory Board Member

“Community participation sounds like a fancy term some sociologist made up to refer to how we interact with people and spend our free time.”

— Young Adult



“It’s important to acknowledge that ‘choice and action’ arise only from ‘knowledge and opportunity.’ If a young person doesn’t have knowledge and opportunity for community participation, their community participation choices and actions will be limited.”

— Family member

These community participation “domains”² include:



Social relationships (online or in-person)



Education (taking classes) and employment (working for pay)



Religious participation (going to places of worship, spiritual activities)



Civic participation (e.g., marches, demonstrations, voting, volunteering)



Leisure (watching sporting events, concerts, artistic activities, physical activities)

“Communities of choice can’t be overstated. A central piece to young adulthood is leaving part of life that is organized school, but after high school, they have to find their own people and communities to be a part of. Some of these communities they didn’t know existed as a teen. It’s not a guarantee that they will find friends at their jobs. It’s important to help young adults find things that interest them and they have fun doing.”

— Family Member



Community participation is important for young adults with SMHC because it:

- Has positive mental and physical health benefits.¹⁻⁶
- Offers young adults the chance to discover who they are (i.e., their identity),⁷ make their own decisions,⁸ and build confidence in taking on adult roles.⁹

“When my son goes out (of the house) and comes back, he comes back much happier as compared to being in his room alone all day. He gets the energy of all those people, feels accepted and OK. Interaction with others, being in the presence of others, is important rather than just being online all the time.”

— Family Member

“I’ve been doing online gaming for 10-15 years now. Depending on what game you are playing, you might have a headset with a mic on. You become friends with other players on there. Two of my groomsmen I met while playing Call of Duty. Gaming is a coping mechanism, when I lost my aunt, gaming helped me grieve.”

— Young Adult

Young adults with SMHC from populations that have been marginalized experience unique challenges navigating community participation:

- Young adults of color, LGBTQIA+ young adults, and young adults involved in the foster care system experience barriers to social connection (e.g., lack of understanding from others, stigma, and feelings of shame and inferiority).¹⁰
- Economically disadvantaged young adults and those from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely than the general student population to graduate from high school.¹¹

“Domains of community participation need to be trauma informed. Trauma informed really needs to be acknowledged if you are talking about youth of color with mental health conditions, especially in school settings.”

— Family Member



- Justice-involved young adults often struggle to find and keep jobs because they lack the necessary skills and work experience, and face extra difficulties because of their criminal record.¹²
- Youth in rural areas often have fewer opportunities for job training, employment, and other community participation.¹³
- Marginalized young adults face structural inequities and barriers that prevent them from being as involved in civic activities as their more privileged peers.¹⁴

The CIRC Center will conduct rigorous research, dissemination, and technical assistance activities to improve community participation outcomes among young adults with SMHC from populations that have been marginalized! Follow along and join the conversation!

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Recommended Citation: Sabella, K., & Thomas, E. (2024). *What is Community Participation?* Worcester, MA: UMass Chan Medical School, Implementation Science and Practice Advances Research Center (iSPARC), Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research, The Center for Community Inclusion and Reflective Collaboration (CIRC Center).

The contents of this tip sheet were funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), ACL Grant #90RTCP0010, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Grant #90RTCP0010. NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this tip sheet do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, SAMHSA, or HHS and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government

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