

Digging in dirt, Arbor Day planting, may help build citizenship: study

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Digging in the ground to plant trees may be an excellent gateway to further involvement in politics and civic affairs, concludes a new University of Maryland study, based on work with New York City environmental volunteers.

"The more a person is involved in environmental stewardship, the more s/he engages with other types of civic and political activities," says the report, "[Digging Together](#)", which the researchers released to coincide with Arbor Day.

The study finds that participants in the [MillionTreesNYC](#) project are significantly more active civically than other New Yorkers and other Americans. This is especially true among the veteran volunteers, suggesting that environmental stewardship bears fruit in other civic arenas.

"Getting off the couch and doing a real activity is infectious and frequently leads to additional civic involvement," says Principal Investigator Dana R. Fisher, a University of Maryland [sociologist](#) who directs the new Center for Society and the Environment. "Digging in the dirt seems to be an excellent pathway to greater involvement."

Research has shown a general decline in political, social and civic involvement over the past couple decades, Fisher adds. "Environmental stewardship may prove to be something of an antidote, and our next step is to look more closely at this relationship."

Fisher and her team surveyed a random sample of hundreds of adult volunteers who came out to plant trees in four of New York City's five boroughs in the spring and fall of 2010. The MillionTreesNYC project is a public-private collaboration launched by New York City. It aims to plant a million trees throughout the city by 2017.

The survey reveals the New York volunteers to be atypical demographically compared to the general population - predominantly women, relatively young, and well-educated. Minorities are under-represented. The volunteers also tend to be more liberal than the general U.S. population. The researchers say this general pattern is consistent with national trends in voluntarism.

The vast majority were newcomers to environmental stewardship - roughly 80 percent. Most heard about the activities through their social networks, friends and families.

"City managers and civic groups are hungry for this information," says Erika Svendsen, a co-author of the report and a research social scientist with the U.S. Forest Service. "We've heard plenty of anecdotal stories of why people get involved, but we really haven't had the type of city-wide data we would like to better understand what motivates these people to take action."

Community-based programs around the nation can benefit from this kind of information, Svendsen adds.

"Although the results of this analysis of volunteer stewards in New York City provide some support for the claim that planting trees leads to better citizenship, more research is needed to understand the relationship between civic engagement and environmental stewardship. Future research will address this issue," the report states.

Provided by University of Maryland

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