

YOUR COMMUNITY, YOUR VOTE!

Part One of a Two-Part Document Series

**Why Voting Matters:
Exploring Personal and Community Impact**



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What is Civic Engagement?

Civic engagement includes a wide variety of activities that someone can do to improve the community in which they live. Civic engagement could look like fundraising for the local fire department, cleaning up a local creek, participating in a protest to prevent a new road change, going to your neighborhood town hall meeting, volunteering at a shelter, voting in your local election, and so on! Although all types of civic participation are important, this document will specifically focus on voting. We will explore how voting impacts both individuals and communities.

How can Voting Impact Individuals and Communities?

While many of us understand the political importance of voting, how often do we consider the ways in which voting impacts our overall health and wellness? It has been established that voting has indirect benefits to the well-being of individuals. For example, research has shown that communities with higher voter turnout(s) report lower violent crime and unemployment rates.¹ This is because voting has a direct impact on the ability of communities to meet their needs, access vital resources, and improve their community capital.

Elected officials, chosen based on how citizens vote, influence the availability of resources, which can then directly influence a person's overall health and wellness. Elected officials, particularly ones who influence budgeting, can influence how resources are allocated. For example, elected officials could decide how much of the budget (often from taxes) goes towards public parks and recreation programs, affordable housing, and other public services.

Each public official or politician has a platform which outlines their beliefs and priorities- where they stand on various policies and how they plan to use their time in office. It's important to understand how a candidate's platform will impact your community. Being an informed voter ensures that you can cast your vote for a candidate with a platform that aligns with your own priorities and desires for your community.

Often times, historically marginalized people could benefit the most from voting, but due to various reasons these individuals tend to vote at lower rates. Let's explore the specific ways that individuals may benefit from voting in elections.

Physical and Mental Health

Voting can also positively impact our physical and mental health. This is because the act of voting promotes feelings of self-efficacy and confidence, which has been shown to reduce mental illness within communities.¹ Furthermore, voting enables social connectedness, which has been associated with better mental and physical health outcomes. This is because voting reduces social isolation by connecting us with other people, particularly those who share similar

¹ Rome, S.H. (2022). Why Voting Matters. In: Promote the Vote. Springer, Cham.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84482-0_2

opinions and/or values. This social connectedness has been linked to increased physical activity, longevity, stronger immune systems, decreased anxiety and depression, and better emotional regulation in individuals.¹ Moreover, when communities exercise political power, they also increase community capital and improve their quality of life. ¹ In communities with strong social capital, individuals look out for one another and participate in community problem solving, which has been associated with better self-reported health, reduced rates of neighborhood violence and lower levels of unemployment.¹ Voting also improves community health by fostering a sense of trust and togetherness, which facilitates the acquisition of strong social capital and social cohesion within a community. Let's explore what else voting can impact!

Funding for Mental Health Programs

Voting can influence the allocation of state and federal funds to mental health services. When people experiencing mental health challenges vote, they can help elect candidates who prioritize mental health funding, ensuring access to necessary services like therapy, medication, and community support programs.

Housing and Support Services

Housing stability is critical for the health of people experiencing mental health challenges. Voting in local elections can influence the availability of affordable housing, supportive housing services and policies that address homelessness, which disproportionately affects people experiencing mental health challenges.

Public Health Campaigns

Voting in local elections can affect the implementation of public health initiatives that target mental health awareness, stigma reduction, and suicide prevention. For example, voting for local officials who prioritize mental health literacy and providing early intervention, can increase the availability and accessibility of these types of public health resources in your community.

Anti-Discrimination Laws

Your vote can help protect the rights of people experiencing mental health challenges when you support candidates and policies that enforce anti-discrimination laws in employment, housing, and education.

Education and Employment Programs

Voting can influence the availability of vocational training and education programs for people experiencing mental health challenges, helping them gain employment and improve their quality of life.

Economic Policies

Voting for policies that address income inequality, unemployment, and poverty can improve the social determinants of health which are critical for people experiencing mental health challenges. Economic stability can reduce stress, improve access to health care, and contribute to overall mental well-being.

Social Services and Support Programs

Voting for candidates who advocate for strengthening social services like food assistance, SNAP, disability benefits (SSI/SSDI) and other welfare programs can provide essential support to individuals struggling with poverty or a serious mental illness(es).

Criminal Justice Reform

Voting for candidates who support criminal justice reform can reduce the criminalization of mental illness and offer more appropriate treatment options.

Access to Healthcare

If you vote for a candidate who supports the expansion of Medicaid in your state, it could result in more people experiencing mental health challenges gaining access to affordable mental health care, including regular therapy sessions and prescription medications that may be critical for managing their conditions.

Transportation Services

For example, electing a mayor who prioritizes expanding public transit routes could ensure that individuals experiencing mental health challenges or those living in poverty have reliable transportation to medical appointments, jobs, community activities, and support services, reducing isolation and improving their quality of life.

Let's put this all together!

Imagine two neighborhoods: one neighborhood is well-maintained with parks, grocery stores, healthcare centers, and low crime rates, while the other is run-down with limited resources, high crime, and poor housing conditions.



In the first neighborhood, people have easier access to fresh food, safe spaces for exercise, and healthcare services, all of which can promote physical and mental wellness. Residents are also more likely to form supportive social connections and feel a sense of community, which can reduce stress and improve overall life satisfaction. In contrast, the second neighborhood's lack of resources can make it harder for people to eat healthy, stay active, or access healthcare, increasing the risk of chronic diseases. The unsafe environment and social isolation in this area can also lead to higher stress levels, negatively impacting physical and mental wellness.

Elected officials have a huge impact on many of the factors that contribute to our neighborhood environments and resources. Every person can make a difference in their community by voting for candidates they feel can bring about positive changes that align with their own priorities and desires for their community.

Framing the Issue: Lower Voter Turnout Among Individuals with Mental Health Challenges (Compared to Those Without)

Among the general population in the United States, disability significantly influences voting behavior. Among registered non-voters, disability was the fourth most commonly cited reason for not voting in the 2020 election.² Though individuals with mental, cognitive, and emotional impairments have historically been politically marginalized, the right to vote is fundamental in any democratic society.³

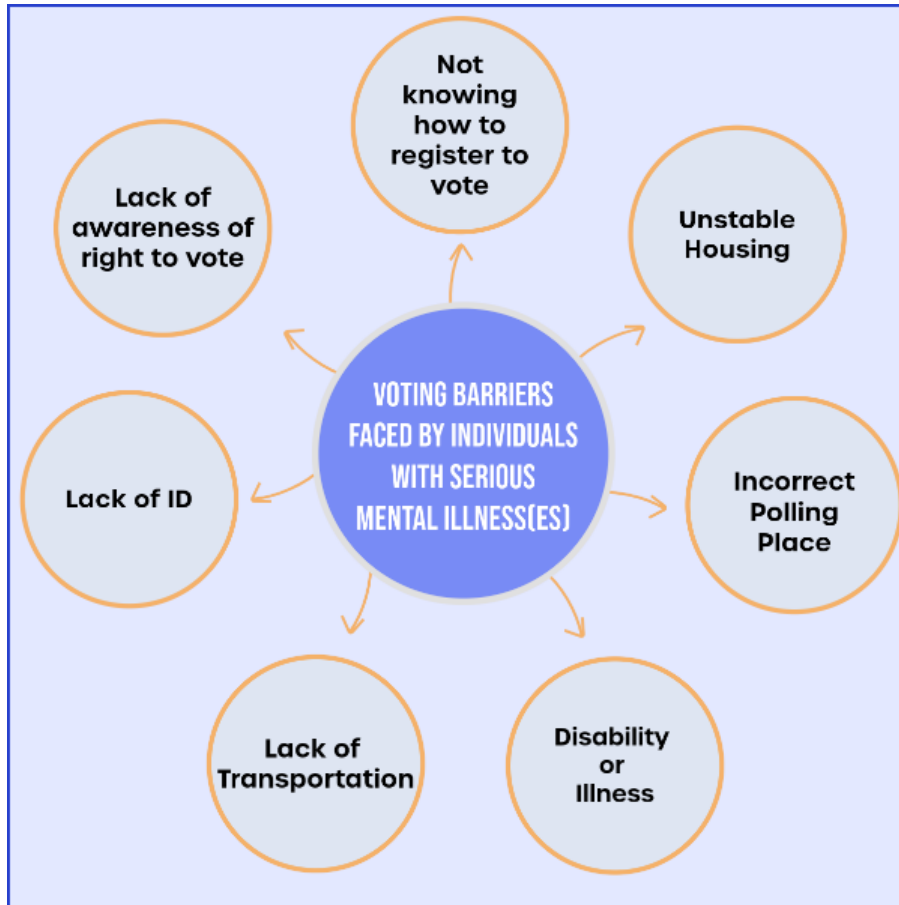


Figure 1: Voting Barriers Faced by Individuals With Serious Mental Illnesses. Developed by the Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute.

² Fabina, J., and Scherer, Z. (2022) *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2020* (P20-585), U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2022/demo/p20-585.pdf>

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2023 May 26. Health Disparities. CDC. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/disparities/index.htm>

Why do people experiencing mental health challenges vote at lower rates?

The most common reasons why an individual may abstain from voting include: not being interested in the election, disliking the candidates/campaign issues, or having schedules that conflict with voting poll times, etc. Studies done in other democratic countries (i.e., Ireland, United Kingdom, Finland) have also shown, that individuals experiencing mental health challenges especially those who are specifically receiving services from a psychiatric hospital/facility, were less likely than the average citizen to even be registered to vote. These individuals commonly cite not knowing how to register and/or a general lack of awareness regarding their voting rights, as reasons for not voting.^{4,5,6}

Why does this matter?

People experiencing mental health challenges deserve the opportunity to impact elections, to have their voices heard, and to have their values and interests represented by elected officials. Many people who experience mental health challenges could benefit from services and policies that largely depend on elected officials. So, by supporting people to vote, they could be engaging in self-advocacy and taking action AND could potentially benefit from the resulting policies.

Many mental health agencies recognize the importance of voting and focus on supporting the folks participating in services to get out and vote. One of the agencies that we collaborate with actively works on promoting voting among the folks receiving services- this is the [Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute \(PPI\)](#).

Check out the companion document on our website to learn more about how PPI promotes voting- and how you can promote voting as well!

This additional document is entitled [A Case Example of Promoting Voting from the Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute](#)

⁴ Kelly BD. Voting and mental illness: the silent constituency. *Ir J Psychol Med.* 2014 Dec;31(4):225-227. doi: 10.1017/ipm.2014.52. PMID: 30189506.

⁵ Siddique A, Lee A. A survey of voting practices in an acute psychiatric unit. *Ir J Psychol Med.* 2014 Dec;31(4):229-231. doi: 10.1017/ipm.2014.53. PMID: 30189507.

⁶ Sund R, et al. How voter turnout varies between different chronic conditions? A population-based register study. *J Epidemiol Community Health.* 2017;71(5):475–9.

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4. Raza D, Brown C, Pinto AD. Supporting patients to shape social determinants of health through democratic engagement. *Can Fam Physician*. 2020 Sep;66(9):639-641. Erratum in: *Can Fam Physician*. 2020 Oct;66(10):716. Erratum in: *Can Fam Physician*. 2020 Oct;66(10):716. PMID: 32933974; PMCID: PMC7491657.
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