



# AmeriCorps 2023 State of the Evidence Executive Summary

September 1, 2023

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**AmeriCorps**

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## Executive Summary

In the past decade, AmeriCorps,<sup>1</sup> its grantee organizations, and AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) research grant recipients have generated a wealth of evidence on AmeriCorps programs, interventions, civic engagement, and national service. In 2017, AmeriCorps ORE released the first State of the Evidence Report, which was one of the agency's first large-scale efforts to synthesize a growing body of evidence across the various AmeriCorps funding programs and grants. That report used evidence obtained from October 2014 to June 2017. The purpose of this report is to synthesize key themes from studies produced by or for AmeriCorps from 2017 to 2022 with the goal of describing the state of the evidence where the agency seeks to make an impact.

This 2023 State of the Evidence report is based on the investments AmeriCorps regularly makes in evidence building through several avenues. The agency provides funding and technical support to AmeriCorps State and National grantee organizations to conduct independent evaluations of their interventions. Other programs, such as AmeriCorps NCCC, AmeriCorps VISTA, and AmeriCorps Seniors, also generate evidence that aligns with the agency's learning agenda. AmeriCorps ORE funds research grants, third-party evaluations, systematic reviews, and meta-synthesis analyses, and it also conducts its own research to generate credible and relevant evidence on AmeriCorps programs, successful interventions, and civic life in the United States.

### 2017 State of the Evidence Report

The 2017 State of the Evidence Report is a precursor to the current report. The 2017 report synthesizes the body of evidence produced by or for AmeriCorps from 2014 to 2017. See the [2017 State of the Evidence Report](#) for a discussion of AmeriCorps' earlier evidence findings, which are not included in this 2023 State of the Evidence Report.

## A. State of the Evidence framework and research questions

In collaboration with ORE, Mathematica developed a State of the Evidence framework that defines where the agency seeks to build evidence in pursuit of its mission to "improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering." This framework guides how we approach the evidence synthesis and the structure of this report.

The four domains in this framework represent where AmeriCorps seeks to make an impact through its investments in national service and volunteerism: participants, partners, communities, and society. Each domain also includes the specific research questions this report addresses:

- **Participants** are the individual AmeriCorps members and volunteers who join AmeriCorps to serve local communities through AmeriCorps programs.

### What does AmeriCorps know about AmeriCorps participants? More specifically ...

- What are the characteristics of participants who serve with AmeriCorps?
- What outcomes and impacts, if any, do AmeriCorps participants experience?

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to 2020, AmeriCorps operated as the Corporation for National and Community Service (or CNCS).

- **Partners** are the AmeriCorps grantees and sponsoring organizations that receive AmeriCorps program funding to implement service projects in their local communities using AmeriCorps members and volunteers.

**What does AmeriCorps know about AmeriCorps partners? More specifically ...**

- In what ways, if any, has AmeriCorps helped build the capacity of grantees and sponsor organizations to achieve their missions and better serve their communities?

- **Communities** are the individuals, groups, and local areas that experience or receive services from AmeriCorps-funded grantees or sponsors delivered by AmeriCorps members and volunteers.

**What does AmeriCorps know about communities served by AmeriCorps-funded grantees or sponsors and their members and volunteers? More specifically ...**

- What outcomes or impacts, if any, do communities served by AmeriCorps-funded grantees or sponsors and their members and volunteers experience?
- What does the research say about investments in and scaling of effective interventions?

- **Society** represents national service, volunteering, and civic engagement in the United States more broadly.

**What does AmeriCorps know about national service, volunteering, and civic engagement in society? More specifically ...**

- What are the societal rates of volunteerism, participation in national service, and civic engagement? How do these rates vary by demographic characteristics?
- What new insights has AmeriCorps-funded research generated to advance the field’s understanding of national service, volunteering, and civic engagement?

Mathematica began this synthesis by identifying a total of 116 studies eligible for review based on the AmeriCorps Evidence Exchange as the primary source for compiling studies reviewed for this document. Studies produced through AmeriCorps ORE research grants were compiled through the [grantee profiles](#) published on the agency’s website or obtained directly from ORE. We then used this framework and a structured review process to extract key information from those 116 studies, including their design and key findings. See Appendix A for a full list of studies reviewed and Appendix B for the rubric used to review the studies in this report.

It is also important to know that this report is meant to capture the state of the evidence produced or supported by AmeriCorps during a specific timeframe (2017 to 2022). Evidence and knowledge building are ongoing processes, especially as the agency continues to generate new research. As a result, themes discussed within this report should be viewed as characterizing the evidence as it exists at the time of this report, with the understanding that the interpretation of that evidence can evolve as new evidence emerges.

## **B. Summary of key findings**

Most of the reviewed studies (95 percent) were conducted by evaluators external to AmeriCorps, and the most common study designs used by AmeriCorps-funded evaluators facilitate drawing causal conclusions about intervention impacts (43 percent). In addition, the majority of studies (71 percent) focused on the AmeriCorps State and National program. Of the four domains in the framework, the majority of the reviewed studies provided evidence that focused on the communities served by AmeriCorps-funded grantees or sponsors and their members and volunteers (61 percent).

### **1. The state of the evidence on AmeriCorps participants**

We reviewed 16 studies (14 percent of 116 studies) that examined AmeriCorps participants' characteristics and the benefits participants experience through serving or volunteering with AmeriCorps. Three studies showed how these members possess the cultural competency to work and interact with communities of people who are different from themselves and showed that they enter their service term with unique backgrounds and motivations to serve. The 14 studies that examined benefits to participants paint a mixed picture on how AmeriCorps members and volunteers benefit from their service or volunteer experience. Only five studies of those 14 studies used a quasi-experimental design (QED) or randomized-control trial (RCT) design, and of these, only three found positive impacts on AmeriCorps members' employment, education, and civic engagement (Anderson et al. 2019; Frazier et al. 2018; Hudson-Flege 2018). Two of the 14 studies focused on AmeriCorps Seniors; they were a QED and a meta-synthesis of extant literature on the program, provided evidence on how AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers experienced improved physical and psychological well-being due to their service experience (Frazier et al. 2019; Georges et al. 2018).

### **2. The state of the evidence on AmeriCorps partners**

We reviewed 10 studies (9 percent of 116 studies) that examined whether AmeriCorps helped build the capacity of partners—grantees and sponsor organizations—to achieve their missions and better serve their communities. Emerging themes from two grantees' QED evaluations suggested that AmeriCorps partnerships can help grantees meet their project goals (McCreary et al. 2020; Viola et al. 2018). Other outcomes studies highlighted how AmeriCorps partners experienced increases in their capacity to better serve their communities. However, these studies did not include a comparison group in the study design, so it is difficult to attribute these promising outcomes to partners' AmeriCorps involvement.

### **3. The state of the evidence of AmeriCorps on communities**

We reviewed 71 studies (61 percent of 116 studies) that examined how communities and the individuals within them benefit from AmeriCorps-funded interventions, the value generated from investing in AmeriCorps-funded interventions, or how to scale interventions to increase the scope of their impact. Fifty-one of those studies explored impacts or outcomes associated with AmeriCorps-funded interventions, most of which were in AmeriCorps' education focus area (31 studies); the other focus areas (disaster services, economic opportunity, environmental stewardship, healthy future, and veterans and military families) had eight or fewer studies.

Our review of 15 return on investment (ROI) and benefit-cost studies (two of which also examined outcomes or impacts) highlighted how AmeriCorps-funded interventions across the six focus areas can

generate additional value that exceeds the initial investments necessary for implementing the interventions. An additional seven studies discussed important prerequisites to successfully scale an intervention.

#### **4. The state of the evidence of AmeriCorps on national service, volunteering, and civic engagement in society**

We reviewed 25 studies (22 percent of 116 studies) that furthered evidence on national service, volunteering, and civic engagement in the United States. One descriptive study helped generate new insights on the civic health of society with regards to the levels of formal volunteering in the United States and the variations in individuals' characteristics among volunteers (AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation 2021). Another study also identified the importance of exploring the multifaceted nature of civic engagement and how trends can differ based on how civic engagement is measured (Weiss et al. 2019). Nine studies also explored factors that may affect civic engagement among individuals. Eight studies highlighted how participatory research can be successful in engaging individuals in the strategy design and research processes to help address those individuals' own or local community needs. Finally, five studies highlighted how organizational practices can influence how successful organizations are in engaging and maintaining volunteers to support their goals.

### **C. Implications of the findings**

Based on this report's findings, we propose the following recommendations that can help AmeriCorps and its evidence-building ecosystem, which includes AmeriCorps ORE, AmeriCorps program offices, and State Service Commissions, to further its evidence-building efforts.

#### **1. The state of the evidence on AmeriCorps participants**

The findings from this report detail opportunities for AmeriCorps to strengthen its efforts to build evidence on AmeriCorps members and volunteers:

- Consider expanding efforts to analyze data on the characteristics of AmeriCorps members and volunteers who apply for and serve with AmeriCorps.
- Explore avenues for collecting data from AmeriCorps members and volunteers when entering and exiting the program to help generate new evidence in this domain.
- Provide additional supports to grantee evaluators to support developing new evidence on AmeriCorps members.

#### **2. The state of the evidence on AmeriCorps partners**

Findings in this domain offer strategies for how AmeriCorps can gather additional evidence on its partners.

- Explore avenues for collecting data from AmeriCorps partners at the beginning and end of their grant period.
- Consider linking partner survey data with other data sources.
- Consider avenues for facilitating impact studies on AmeriCorps partners.

### **3. The state of the evidence of AmeriCorps on communities**

Findings in this domain offer considerations for how AmeriCorps can continue to build evidence on AmeriCorps' impact on communities.

- Consider what additional supports and trainings would help build evidence in focus areas that had fewer studies.
- Utilize meta-analytic approaches to further identify how AmeriCorps-funded interventions impact communities.
- Continue efforts in developing additional ROI studies and build grantee evaluator capacity to include these or other cost-related analyses in the evidence they produce.

### **4. The state of the evidence of AmeriCorps on national service, volunteering, and civic engagement in society**

Findings in this domain identify approaches where AmeriCorps can grow and apply the evidence on building national service, volunteering, and civic engagement in society.

- Continue designing future rounds of AmeriCorps ORE research grant funding that prioritize specific topics of interests to programs, agencies, and the field to build more evidence in those areas.
- Explore ways to help partner organizations incorporate new evidence on national service, volunteering, and civic engagement into their own practices and identify opportunities for service and volunteering that do not currently exist. As new innovations occur, seek to identify opportunities to test new approaches with impact studies.