

STRENGTHENING AND SUSTAINING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT



Introduction

Community engagement is the active and sustained process of ensuring that community members are the leaders and producers of the work that happens in their communities—not just for one specific issue but for many issues and opportunities over time. Engagement usually includes a combination of:

- listening to a diversity of perspectives within communities;
- collaboration between public leaders and community members, as well as among community members themselves, to review information, learn, share opinions about important issues, and identify solutions together; and
- participation from community members in important decisions and policy outcomes.

Engagement is often initiated by public institutions or community-serving organizations, but it is more authentic when it is multidirectional and mutually beneficial. Public officials, organizational leaders, and community members should share power in generating decision options and making important decisions. Engagement can also refer to how people in a community come together to achieve a goal, such as community organizing or volunteering for a cause. Key values behind community engagement are inclusion—encouraging a welcoming culture for a diverse array of voices, particularly groups that have historically been marginalized—as well as equity, which ensures that processes are fair and accessible for everyone.

Why Does Good Engagement Matter?

Because productive engagement results in better policies. When people come together in well-structured processes—where they can talk in small groups about what they have learned and what they want to recommend—the resulting policies and plans are smarter, they are more broadly supported, and they better reflect what citizens want.

Because productive engagement strengthens civic life. People become more knowledgeable about issues, they sometimes change their opinions, and they become more likely to vote and volunteer.

Because productive engagement strengthens our communities. When the whole system of community engagement is working well, there are a number of benefits:

- **Improved collaboration.** When there are stronger connections between people and groups in the community, they are more likely to work together to solve problems.
- **Stronger social networks.** Communities with stronger networks and higher social capital have higher rates of economic growth, lower levels of unemployment, and lower crime rates. Residents are physically healthier, and communities are more resilient and better able to deal with natural disasters and other crises.¹
- **Greater equity.** Structural racism, socioeconomic disparity, unequal opportunity, and other factors have shaped our communities and nation. Community engagement allows a path to address and mitigate such factors. When people with diverse backgrounds and points of view have opportunities to learn from each other and work together, the outcomes tend to be more equitable and responsive to a broad spectrum of community needs. Not all communities are the same, and so engagement will need to change based on the cultures of communities.

Because unproductive engagement can be damaging. Conventional public meetings are frustrating to citizens, officials, and staff, and they seem to decrease trust in government.

Advancing Pretrial Policy and Research is committed to achieving fair, just, effective pretrial practices, every day, throughout the nation.

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Developed in partnership with **Public Agenda**.



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Types of Engagement: Conventional, Thin, and Thick

Conventional engagement is what happens in most public meetings today. Citizens and officials are separated from one another, there are no breakouts or small-group discussions, and citizens have brief opportunities (typically limited to two or three minutes) to address the whole group.

¹ Nabatchi, T., & Leighninger, M. (2015). *Public participation for 21st century democracy*. Jossey-Bass.

Thin engagement is faster, easier, and more convenient. It includes a range of activities that allow people to express their opinions, make choices, or affiliate themselves with a particular group or cause.

Thick engagement is more intensive, informed, and deliberative. Most of the action happens in small-group discussions. Organizers assemble large and diverse numbers of people; give participants chances to share their experiences; present them with a range of views or policy options; and encourage action and change at multiple levels.

One way of summarizing the difference between thick and thin engagement is to say that thick engagement empowers small groups while thin engagement empowers individuals. Thick engagement is more likely than thin engagement to build personal or community connections.

Thick participation opportunities are more likely to be face to face and thin ones are more likely to happen online. However, many thick processes include both online and face-to-face elements, and some examples of thin participation (signing a petition, for example) certainly existed long before the internet.

Thick, thin, and conventional engagement have different strengths and limitations, and they complement each other well. All of them could be part of an effective “multichannel” system for engagement.

Common Settings for Engagement



Discussions in the community



Town meetings



Community policing programs



One-on-ones



Pretrial workgroups



Local online networks



Youth initiatives

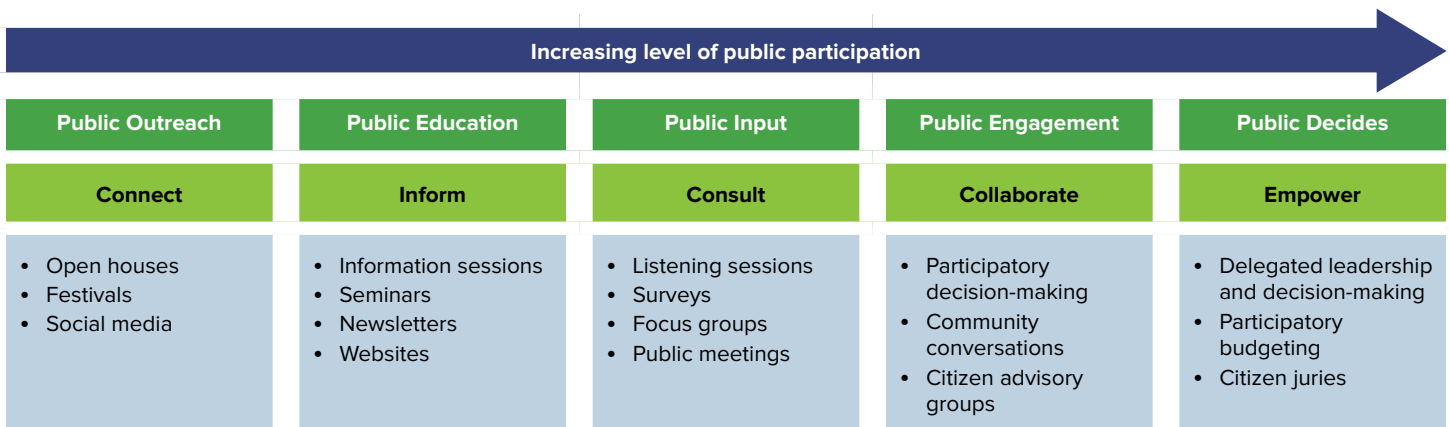
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Engagement Works Best When It Is...

Interactive	Everyone has a chance to contribute.
Timely	It happens at a point when people can have an influence on important decisions.
Inclusive	It brings together a wide range of people, including people who may have been excluded or not engaged before.
Authentic	People value one another’s input and know the process will have meaningful results.
Transparent	It is open, honest, and understandable.
Informed	Everyone has access to the knowledge and data they need, and there is balanced information describing the pros and cons of different options.
Accessible	The barriers to participation (including location, time, language, and other factors that might deter people) are as low as possible.
Responsive	What people say is documented, and decision-makers report back to participants on the outcomes of engagement.
Network-building	Engagement helps build relationships and networks over the long term.
Evaluated	People are able to track and measure how engagement is working.

The Spectrum of Engagement²

There are many forms of community engagement, and these different forms are appropriate in different contexts. In general, deeper community engagement is represented by activities on the right-hand side of the diagram below. However, sometimes communities may need to structure engagement processes to draw on a range of approaches, such as pairing public education—so that the community can learn about a concept, like pretrial improvements—with public engagement—so that the community has a say in identifying ways to respond to this issue.



2 Adapted from the International Association for Public Participation’s [Spectrum of Public Participation](#).