

Focusing on interactions with the criminal justice system can promote high school students' interest in civics education.

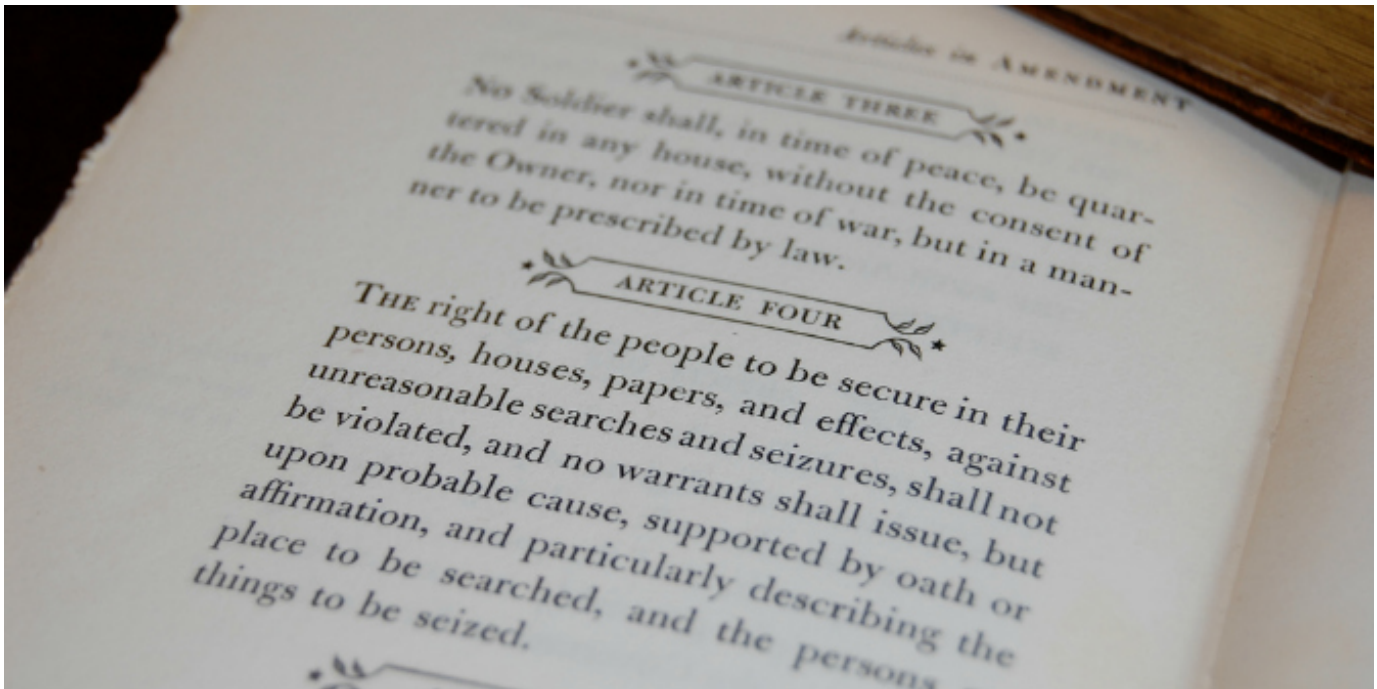
*Recent years have seen growing concern over the apparent lack of civic knowledge and participation in the US, with education seen as one potential means to address this civics gap. But how can educators encourage greater interest in civics among students? In new research which examines the effects of a course which addressed inner-city students' constitutional rights, **Lynn A. Addington** finds that students' regular contact with the criminal justice system, and schools' own security programs, motivated them to learn more about their own rights.*



Civic knowledge and participation are low among all students in the US. This trend is even more pronounced for students who are poor, belong to a [racial or ethnic minority group](#), or live in [high poverty, urban neighborhoods](#). A long-term consequence of this disparity is the “[civic empowerment gap](#)”, which reduces – or even silences – their future political voice as citizens and can contribute to inequality and a [perpetuation](#) of the cycle of poverty.

Schools, specifically those in urban areas, play an important role in improving civic knowledge and engagement. Students from disadvantaged communities appear to receive a [greater benefit](#) from formal civics classes and school-based programs as compared to their suburban counterparts. Fully capitalizing on this benefit is not a matter of quantity (more classes) but [quality](#) (more effective instruction).

One feature of effective classes is drawing on topics that resonate with students, which can include ways of bringing routine aspects of their lives into the classroom. This technique has been [successful](#) in the creative arts, writing and literature. It also can be useful tool for teaching civics in disadvantaged schools, especially when texts and curricula rely on paradigms familiar to students for whom effective engagement in government is a norm. Many low-income, urban students do not share these experiences and are more likely to encounter disenfranchisement and a lack of political power in their neighborhoods. As such, it is important to identify relevant, shared experiences that could trigger initial student interest. These interests could be connected with civics topics that could serve, in turn, as a foundation for building broader discussions about government and citizen engagement.



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One such example could tap into students' frequent and disproportionate contact with the police and criminal justice system, which may occur directly or indirectly. In general, adolescents – especially young men of color living in poor, urban neighborhoods – experience these interactions as [negative and adversarial](#) and as ones where youth are viewed with suspicion. Acknowledging these encounters with police, for example, might spark student interest. These tangible contacts with state actors then could be used as a basis for a more in-depth discussion about citizen-government relationships.

My recent research supports this use of student interactions with the police and criminal justice system as a tool for teaching civics. I examined a program designed to engage inner-city students in Washington DC who were learning about constitutional law issues. It was an elective course for upper-level students and one taught by local law school students in several urban high schools. All of the schools included in my study served almost exclusively racial and ethnic minority students and those living in high poverty. While civics played an important role in the class, the course addressed the constitutional rights of public school students. The specific topics ranged from civil liberty issues including freedom of speech, press, religion, unreasonable searches and seizures as well as civil rights and privacy.

One aspect of the study focused on the topics that garnered the most student interest. Of all the constitutional law areas covered, issues about the 4th and 5th Amendments emerged as the most popular among the students for four main, and not surprising, reasons. Regular encounters that students experience with searches and police in their daily lives accounted for the most common explanation for their interest. In addition to contact in their neighborhoods, their schools contribute to these common encounters. All of the schools included in my study employed security programs that include daily use of metal detectors and the presence of uniformed police officers. Other common reasons focused on these encounters more specifically in terms of students believing that their rights had been violated and their general suspicion of the police. Finally, learning about their 4th and 5th Amendment rights resonated with students because of their own interaction with the criminal justice system or their knowledge of others who have had these experiences.

Overall I found that students' experiences with the police in particular appear to motivate them to want to learn more about ways to empower themselves by better understanding the rights they have. These findings can be built upon

for future considerations of curricular development. My work echoes recommendations by other researchers about the importance of acknowledging these students' experiences as a way to understand and overcome students' paradigms when trying to teach classes about the importance of engaged citizenship.

An additional finding from this study was that staff and students encounter police and metal detectors on a daily basis at school, but that they view these security measures as having with questionable effectiveness. The ineffectiveness of security may signal a lack of care to students, which also may make them question their value as citizens and power as stakeholders. Understanding these feelings and incorporating these aspects of the school environment present another opportunity to bring common experiences into the classroom and leverage these to connect students more directly with civics lessons.

In addition to acknowledging these experiences, they can be integrated into a critical social capital framework to challenge students to redefine their specific issues into ones that could be addressed through [civic engagement and community advocacy](#). One illustration would be encouraging students who report being negative encounters with police to reframe the individual issue into a larger concern for better communication between police and citizens or alternative forms of crime prevention policies. This issue could lead to an opportunity to identify solutions that incorporate civic engagement such as engaging in outreach with the local police district, working with neighborhood advisory boards, or contacting local representatives.

Improving civic knowledge is a critically important problem to address, but the solutions are not quick fixes. My results suggest one avenue to pursue with regard to finding ways to better connect students with civics materials and promoting engaged future citizens.

This article is based on the paper, 'Using Constitutional Law Classes to Address the "Civic Empowerment Gap" Among Inner-City Public High School Students' in Education and Urban Society.

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About the author

Lynn Addington – American University

Lynn A. Addington is an Associate Professor in the Department of Justice, Law & Criminology in the School of Public Affairs at American University. Her research focuses on violent victimization with an emphasis on adolescents and school environments. One of her areas of interest focuses on policy responses to school violence and the implications for students' civil liberties. She also has worked with the US Department of Education on its data collection efforts to study school crime.



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