

**Reflective blog – Civic Engagement**

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## Introduction

I volunteered at a foodbank in East London. The essay explores the concept of civic engagement in East London, focusing on the local population, the cost-of-living crisis, and personal experiences at the foodbank. The essay uses various theories related to civic engagement and discusses the impact on the community. As a volunteer at the foodbank, my role was to distribute food to people from diverse backgrounds and ethnic groups who were in need. Blog 1 will define and explore civic engagement, examining its theoretical roots and how foodbanks serve as a major avenue for civic engagement in East London. Blog 2 will delve into the author's feelings towards civic engagement. Blog 3 will provide an in-depth analysis of available services in East London, focusing on how they benefit or fail to benefit local citizens. Blog 4 will explore the application of civic engagement to professional practice.

These four blogs will focus on examining Civic Engagement in East London. I volunteered at my local foodbank in East London. The foodbank provides food to people from diverse backgrounds and ethnic groups. The blogs will draw on theories from various social and psychological approaches. Through the exploration of the local population and ethnicity of the area, the cost-of-living crisis within the area, and my personal experience of visiting my local foodbank, the blogs will provide insight into the impact of civic engagement in East London. The blogs will critically explore ways of applying civic engagement to professional practice. Civic engagement can be viewed as taking part in activities that contribute to the well-being of a community (Chan and Mak, 2020). Such activities include volunteering, voting, attending public meetings, or becoming involved in advocacy. Civic engagement is a concept that has become increasingly important in our society today as it empowers citizens to be actively involved in their communities (Sved et al, 2023).

## **Blog 1: Defining and Exploring Civic Engagement**

The concept of civic engagement is rooted in various theories across various disciplines. For example, according to the psychological theory of volunteering, volunteering can be viewed as an element of sustained helping in which people look for opportunities to assist people in need (Scheepers and Ellemers, 2019). Volunteers are committed to assisting people with no prior bonds. Haldane *et al*, (2019) defined civic engagement as individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Such actions include volunteering, protesting, campaigning and engaging in critical dialogue. People engaging in civic engagement aim at fostering the development of the greater good within a community. Spyridakis *et al*, (2019) demonstrated that foodbanks are a major avenue for civic engagement. Food banks are organizations or communities of people that provide free food to people in need.

I engaged in a foodbank in East London which created an opportunity to engage the local community. The food bank will be the basis for this analysis. City Monitor (2022) demonstrated that Tower Hamlets, which is located in East London is the local authority with the highest level of child poverty. The region is 25 per cent above the national rate. In the East London borough, 56% of children live in poverty, more than double the rate in other areas like Kensington and Chelsea. This demonstrates the high rates of poverty in East London boroughs.

According to Homeviews.com (2023), the average rent in London boroughs has increased by 15.8% over the past year while the supply of rental properties dropped by 35%. Additionally, energy prices have been significantly increasing over the year. The situation has been worsened by the UK inflation hitting 10.3% in March 2023. This shows that the cost of living has significantly increased which has resulted in numerous people being exposed to poverty. I,

therefore, engaged in the distribution of food to poor people through a local foodbank. East London is also a diverse and rapidly changing area.

One of the psychological theories relevant to my exploration of civic engagement in East London is the social identity theory. Social identity theory is based on the idea that individuals seek to form and maintain a positive social identity, by improving themselves in comparison to others (Brown, 2020). I engaged various populations in East London where I understood how the different ethnicities are impacting civic engagement. For example, those from a minority group may aim to improve their social identity by engaging in various activities like art and empowering other community members and small businesses. Based on the experience, I learned that civic engagement can enhance unity and collaboration between community members from different religious and cultural backgrounds. We served the needy people equally regardless of their racial, religious and cultural backgrounds.

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## **Blog 2: Examining My Feelings towards Civic Engagement**

I have been considering what civic engagement means and how it impacts my view of the surrounding area since I visited the local foodbank in East London. I have come to understand that civic engagement is more than simply providing support to those in need. I have noticed that civic engagement also encompasses the feeling of empowerment (South & Stansfield, 2018) and belonging which comes from being actively involved in a community. According to Health Matters.com (2018), Positive health outcomes can only be achieved by addressing health and well-being factors at the community level.

In this blog, I will explain my emotions and reactions to visiting the local foodbank. The first emotion I felt when visiting the foodbank was compassion and empathy. After considering

the diverse stories of struggle and hardship that the recipients of the food aid shared with us I felt a deep sense of sadness for those who were unable to access the discounted food necessary for survival. I also had a profound feeling of belonging after seeing how the volunteers and members of the community came together to make a difference. According to the Social Identity Theory, individuals derive their self-concept from the social groups they belong (Scheepers and Ellemers, 2019). Civic engagement evaluates how individuals from diverse backgrounds come together to support a common cause at the foodbank and can showcase the role of social identity in motivating collective action. The second relevant theory is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The theory proposes that individuals are motivated by a hierarchy of needs, starting from physiological needs like food and shelter then to safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. The civic engagement I was engaged in in which the foodbank is addressed the basic physiological needs of the community.

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My second emotion was a sense of despair at the lack of resources available. I felt helpless in the face of the overwhelming need for support that was presented. Despite the charitable efforts of both the foodbank and its volunteers, I felt a deep sense of frustration as to why people were forced to use services like this in the first place. This feeling was exacerbated by the knowledge that the support provided by the foodbank was barely enough to help those in need.

Social Activism Theory plays a crucial role in understanding and promoting community involvement. Social Activism Theory focuses on how individuals and groups mobilize to bring about social and economic change (Davis, Love and Fares, 2019). Utilising theories and concepts related to civic engagement, I was able to analyse my feelings of sadness, pride, helplessness and frustration to gain an understanding of how civic engagement affects the lives of East Londoners.

According to Dang *et al*, (2022), civic engagement leads to an increase in companionship, trust, and belonging among members of a community. The foodbank demonstrated how volunteers and members of the community can come together to support those in need. Self-determination theory suggests that all humans have three basic psychological needs which include autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Autin *et al*, 2022). These needs lead to the growth and development of individuals. I learned that the needy community have the zeal to work and meet their own needs. However, various challenges including lack of skills and opportunities and disability hinder them from engaging in such activities. I was motivated by the strong community ties formed by the recipients of the food aid. They respected each other, this created a feeling of hopefulness and compassion. My journey to the foodbank not only highlighted the importance of assisting those in poverty but has also made me appreciate the sense of belonging and contribution that comes with being civically engaged.

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### **Blog 3: In-Depth Analysis of Services Available to Local Citizens**

In this blog, I will provide insight into the available services in East London. I will also explain how services benefit or fail to benefit local citizens as well as examine the needs of service users. Civic engagement is a broad concept which refers to any action taken individually or collectively by citizens that promote the improvement of public life and the well-being of the targeted person or group (Bricout *et al*, 2021). Numerous governmental and non-governmental entities deal with civic engagement in East London. The Whitechapel Mission is an organization that provides various services to homeless people in East London (Whitechapel Mission 2021). The organization has been offering services since 1876 (Whitechapel 2023). The entity offers various services including a day centre, skills training and a place where the homeless can live. Mercato Metropolitano is an organization that offers free meals to kids below the age of 18, mostly

from vulnerable communities (Mercato Metropolitano 2021). FoodCycle East Ham also runs a food bank for vulnerable people in East London.

A major proportion of the people living in East London are from ethnic minority groups. According to the 2021 census, the majority of the residents in Newham are Asian, which accounts for 42.2%. Non-white minorities represent 57.8% of the population. According to (Varbes.com 2023), white people were the largest minority group in Newham accounting for 30.8% of the population. The data showed that the Black community accounted for 17% of the Newham population. According to the Office of National Statistics (ONS), 44.4% of Tower Hamlets residents, one of the boroughs in East London, were Asian, 39.4% of people in Tower Hamlets identified as White, while 7.3% were from the Black racial group (ONS, 2023). A total of 5 per cent of the residents were from mixed racial groups. East London, therefore, has a large proportion of minority populations who have limited access to quality jobs, food and shelter. During the foodbank activity in Newham, I also noticed that the majority of the vulnerable people were from minority racial backgrounds. I would therefore propose an increase in the number of organizations that cater for the needs of minority groups. Numerous organizations assist people from minority groups in East London. For example, Human Rights Watch is an organization that advocates for the rights of minority groups in East London (Human Rights Watch 2023). Another major entity that supports the vulnerable population is the NEWway, which is a small Newham-based charity. The organization supports the homeless or vulnerably housed (Newwayproject.org 2023). While at the foodbank, I had an opportunity to work with representatives from the organization. The organization also helped to finance the foodbank.

Minority Matters is an organization involved in community engagement through educational projects (Power et al, 2020). The organization empower young people from isolated

communities through projects that empower the parents and inspire the young. The organization achieves its purpose by inspiring young children and providing parents with the necessary tools and skills to support their children. The organization provides various educational programs to vulnerable children in East London. There is a need to develop civic engagement programs that target vulnerable children.

#### **Blog 4: Applying Civic Engagement to Professional Practice**

Civic engagement has been identified as a way to create a sense of belonging within a local community (Kiss *et al*, 2022). Civic engagement involves local communities hence creating a strong relationship between citizens and their neighbourhoods (Wamsler *et al*, 2020). This relationship leads to an increased feeling of communal responsibility and trust.

A starting point when considering the role of civic engagement in East London is to analyze the local population within the area. East London has a diverse and varied demographic, with people from various socioeconomic backgrounds living there. The socio-economic difference creates a gap between the haves and the have-nots. Similarly, cultural capital can influence engagement, with people from certain economic backgrounds being more likely to participate in civic activities than others (An and Western, 2019). By understanding and acknowledging these dynamics, nurses can utilize civic engagement techniques to support service users and foster a sense of community. Volunteering at my local foodbank recently has provided me with an insight into how civic engagement can impact the lives of East Londoners. On arrival, I was struck by the warmth and trust visible amongst the volunteers and users of the service. Through their shared social and economic struggles, a sense of shared endeavour and understanding had been established, fostering trust and an environment where it was clear that everyone was there to help each other.



From this experience, it was evident that understanding and responding to the needs of more vulnerable local citizens is paramount to engaging the community in positive community activities. I also understood the need for service providers to understand the complexities of their local area. Nurses must recognize their power in service delivery and understand the implications of their actions on both the service users and the local community (Sicilia et al, 2019). Nurses can develop meaningful relationships and engage service users in activities which can provide opportunities for networking, self-advocacy and skills-building if they understand their local environment. For example, local networks and shared activities within the area can form the basis for long-term support, allowing for user-led initiatives and mutually beneficial relationships between nurses and service users.

Professionals should develop innovative solutions to various issues facing communities (Marston, Renedo and Miles, 2020). My experience demonstrated the need for collaborative efforts geared towards a given objective. It is important to ensure a smooth collaboration between the multi-disciplinary teams (MDT) and create a common goal that incorporates the skills and expertise of various stakeholders. I also learned the need to adopt a person-centred approach towards civic engagement. Including vulnerable community members in making decisions and developing solutions is critical in ensuring that their needs and values are considered.

## **Conclusion**

Through the exploration of this blog series, I have gained an in-depth understanding of civic engagement in East London. I have analyzed the demographics of the local population and the cost-of-living crisis and discussed my experience of volunteering at my local food bank. I have highlighted the importance of considering the complexities of East London and the needs of local citizens when approaching civic engagement from a professional perspective. My analysis has

shown the remarkable impact civic engagement can have on the lives of East Londoners, providing them with an opportunity to develop meaningful relationships and take ownership of their communities. I believe that the services currently available provide essential support to local citizens and offer an inspiring model of collective action and responsibility. I plan to adopt the insights gained from exploring civic engagement in East London to enhance my role in the healthcare field. I will be culturally sensitive and inclusive in my interactions with patients from diverse backgrounds. I will actively seek opportunities for civic engagement within the healthcare community, such as participating in outreach programs or advocating for improved access to healthcare resources for vulnerable populations.

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