

# Social Change Impact Report

2011

## Introduction: Why Social Change Matters

In today's world, global issues such as economic uncertainties, political uprisings, changing climate conditions, poverty, health issues and more are constantly at the forefront of societal concerns. Positive social change, however, gives individuals and organizations the power to improve the world around them.

Positive social change refers to involvement in activities that make improvements in the lives of individuals and communities locally and around the world. It can include a range of activities, such as volunteering or service; donating money, goods or services; and educating others about a particular issue or cause.

Since its founding in 1970, Walden University has attracted students and scholars committed to leveraging knowledge to address challenges in their communities, professions and the world around them. Dedicated to its mission of effecting positive social change, Walden commissioned this study to assess the impact of social change and to learn more about the individuals who are creating and applying ideas, strategies and actions to promote the worth, dignity and development of society.

In 2011, several events related to social change have occurred, including protests in Egypt leading to the resignation of President Mubarak, protests in Libya that developed into armed conflicts and a massive earthquake in Japan that triggered a tsunami.

The Social Change Impact Report was designed to provide a barometer of who is engaged in social change, what is important to them and how they work together to advance social change issues of interest now and in the future.

The Social Change Impact Report explores the key findings from a national survey conducted online within the United States of 2,148 adults (ages 18 and older). The survey was conducted by Harris Interactive on behalf of Walden University between March 16 and March 24, 2011.

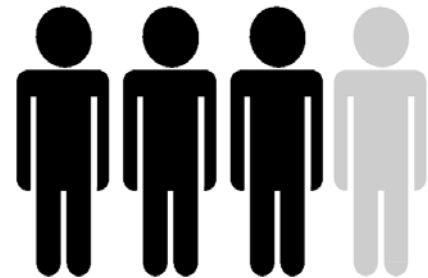
**The Social Change Impact Report provides a detailed picture of the state of social change engagement in America, including:**

- Americans' beliefs about social change
- The issues they care about
- The motivations behind their engagement
- The actions they are taking to further social change
- The tools they use

## Americans Believe in the Importance of Positive Social Change

**Americans believe that social change is important—for themselves and for society in general.** Three-quarters of Americans (77%) say it is important to them personally to be involved in positive social change, including 28% who say it is very important. Even more Americans (91%) say it is important to society as a whole that individuals are involved in positive social change, including 47% who say it is very important. With all the challenges that continue to face the U.S. and other nations around the world, the Social Change Impact Report reveals that Americans, through their beliefs and actions, are engaged in their local and global community.

**The belief in the importance of social change is grounded in people’s earliest experiences.** More than half of adults (58%) say that a major reason why positive social change is important to them today is because of what their parents taught them and how they were raised. This sentiment is significantly stronger among older generations, who are more likely to say that a major reason why social change is important to them is because of their parents and how they were raised (Matures, age 66+: 67%; Baby Boomers, age 47-65: 62%; Gen X, age 35-46: 52%; Gen Y, age 18-34: 51%) and their faith or religious beliefs (Matures: 43%; Baby Boomers: 41%; Gen X: 38%; Gen Y: 30%).



Three in four adults (77%) say it is important to them to personally be involved in positive social change.

**Americans believe that the future of social change lives in the power of one individual.** Looking toward the future of positive social change as a whole, Americans suggest that the “power of one” will grow even stronger than it is today. A plurality of Americans (43%) believes that individuals acting on their own or in informal groups will play a larger role in positive social change in the future, more than the number who believe individuals will either play the same or a smaller role in the future. An important role still exists for nonprofit organizations; one-third (35%) say that nonprofit organizations will have a larger role in social change in the future and half (49%) say that, in the future, they personally are most likely to get involved through a nonprofit. Three in 10 adults believe that elementary, middle or high schools (31%), or colleges and universities (31%) will have a larger role in positive social change in the future. Government, however, is predicted to have an increasingly smaller role in the years to come; more than a third of Americans say that government will have a smaller role in social change the future (34%), and less than 15% say they are most likely to get involved through government in the future.

92% of adults in the U.S. have taken action to engage in positive social change in the past year.

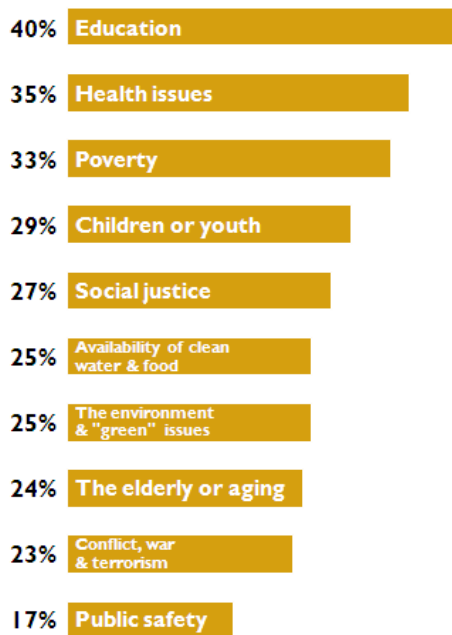
**Americans have a strong belief in their own power to effect change.** Nearly nine in 10 (85%) agree that they can make the world a better place by their actions, including a third of respondents (32%) who strongly agree. Adults with higher levels of education feel more empowered to make change than those with less education. The more education adults have, the more likely they are to agree they can make the world a better place with their actions (92% of those with at least some graduate education v. 86% of those with some college or a four-year degree v. 80% of those with a high school diploma or less). Americans are most likely to say that the top way they personally will get involved in social change in the future is as individuals acting on their own or in informal groups (52%).

## Education Is the Pathway to Social Change—Now and in the Future

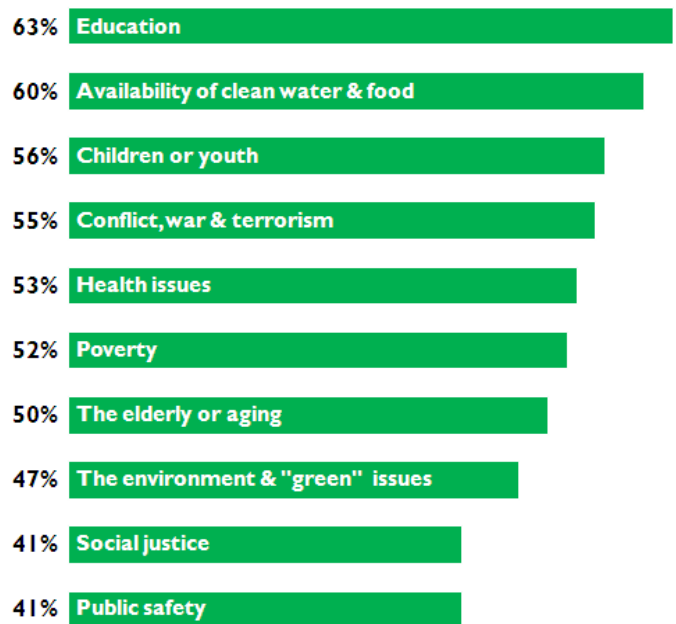
**Overall, education is the most important issue on Americans’ minds today when it comes to positive social change.** When asked which issues matter the most, more Americans say education is the most important positive social change issue to them (40%) than any other issue. Health issues (35%) and poverty (33%) are in second and third place on the list of most important issues. Interestingly, more men than women say education is the most important issue (45% vs. 36%), although education is among the top three issues for both men and women. Men’s top three issues are education, health and social justice, while women’s top three issues are health, poverty and education.

**Americans say education will remain in the forefront of social change issues in the future.** Education is most frequently cited as the most important area that positive social change should address in the future, with more than six in 10 (63%) saying education will be very important to address. Those adults who have a graduate degree or higher education are more likely to find the issue of education very important for social change to address in the future than those with a four-year degree or less, indicating that gaining additional education may drive an understanding of its importance (74% of those with some graduate education or more v. 59% of those with a four-year degree; 63% of those with some college education; 62% of those with a high school diploma or less).

**NOW:**  
What areas or topics of positive social change are most important to you?



**FUTURE:**  
5-10 years from now, how important will it be that positive social change addresses each of the following areas? (% Very Important)



## Social Change Engagement Is Motivated by Personal Benefits and Concern for the Global Community

**Educational institutions have a strong role in laying the foundation for a society of change-makers.** More than half of adults who find it personally important to be involved in social change report that a reason they feel this way is due to what they learned or activities they did in elementary, middle or high school (60%) or what they learned or activities they did in college (46%). The role of education and schools is expected to be critical in the future as well. Most adults believe that elementary, middle or high schools (80%) and colleges or universities (80%) will have the same or larger role in social change in the future.

**Younger generations are more likely to engage in positive social change to help get ahead in their careers.** Younger adults are more likely than older adults to say that their experiences in college or university (19% of Gen Y and 16% of Gen X v. 9% of Baby Boomers and 12% of Matures) are a major reason why positive social change is important to them. Members of Generations Y and X are more likely than older adults to say that a major reason they are involved in social change activities is to find a job or build their resume (11% of Gen Y and 7% of Gen X v. 2% of Baby Boomers and 0% of Matures) or because their job required it (7% of Gen Y and 5% of Gen X v. 2% of Baby Boomers and 0% of Matures). Younger generations are also more likely to credit the role of schools, particularly higher education, in fostering their belief in the importance of social change.

While it is clear that education is laying a foundation for social change to occur, much debate exists as to where the greatest change efforts should be focused: Should Americans help others before helping themselves or vice versa? In fact, when it comes to where social change should focus, today's adults appear to believe this is a false dichotomy and **that local is global and global is local.**

More than three-quarters of Americans (77%) agree that what happens to communities in other parts of the world affects their own local community. Furthermore, Americans believe that many events in other parts of the world have an impact on the United States. A majority of adults believe that in the next few years, conflict, war and terrorism (75%); natural disasters (58%); and the environment and “green” issues (56%) in other parts of the world will have a major impact on life here in the U.S.

**Most adults believe that the world will become more globally connected in the future.** More than eight in 10 Americans (83%) agree that the world will continue to become more integrated in terms of economies, trade, competition and cultures. This sense of interconnectedness may be why a majority of adults (66%) agree that to make a positive social change, it is most important to focus on the area of greatest need, no matter where it is in the world.

**Americans believe the best way to positively impact the world is to make a change at the local level.** Americans appear to support the motto, “**think globally, act locally.**” Nearly nine in 10 (88%) agree that making change on the local level is the best way to have an impact on the world, with a third of those adults (34%) strongly agreeing.



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## All Generations Are Taking Action on Social Change, with Digital Technology Leading the Future

While the belief in the importance of engaging in social change is strong across the current generations of American adults, it is interesting that **older adults are engaging in positive social change at the highest levels.** Members of the Mature and Baby Boomer generations are more likely than those in Generation X or Generation Y to have participated in activities to engage in social change in the past 12 months (99% vs. 93% vs. 89% vs. 90%, respectively).

**The Baby Boomer and Mature generations are more likely than younger generations to have engaged in a variety of actions to further social change in the past year,** including donating money, goods or services (Matures: 96%; Baby Boomers: 88%; Gen Y: 81%; Gen X: 81%); signing an online or written petition (77%; 69%; 64%; 60%); writing to or calling a politician at the local, state or federal level (65%; 65%; 47%; 41%); or expressing an opinion on positive social change by writing to an editor of a newspaper or magazine or calling into a radio or TV show (51%; 46%; 34%; 33%).

**Still, using digital technology to engage in social change has yet to supersede more traditional methods—even among Generation Y.** Young adults (age 18–34) are not engaging in social change primarily through the use of digital technology; instead, they are turning to traditional methods of getting involved, like making donations, educating others, volunteering, signing a petition or fundraising for a cause more often than blogging about it or joining or creating a group for a cause on a social networking site.

**Digital technology as a conduit for social change is making headway across the generations.** Eight in 10 adults, from the youngest to the oldest generations, agree that thanks to digital technology, people are getting involved in positive social change issues faster and more frequently than ever before, and this belief is even stronger among the older generations (Matures: 85%; Baby Boomers: 86%; Gen X: 84%; Gen Y: 80%). Sizable numbers of Americans have engaged in social change through digital means, such as expressing an opinion on a social change issue on a blog or Web site (36%; 49%; 47%; 52%); joining or creating a group on a social networking site that was dedicated to an issue (30%; 35%; 43%; 49%); or texting to make donations, vote, organize a demonstration, etc. (36%; 33%; 37%; 35%)

### The percentage of Generation Y (age 18–34) who have done each of these activities to engage in positive social change in the past 12 months:

81%	Donated money, goods or services
70%	Educated others about a cause or issue
68%	Participated in volunteer work or service
60%	Signed an online or written petition
56%	Fundraised for a cause
52%	Expressed an opinion on positive social change issue by posting a comment on a blog or other Web site
49%	Joined or created a group on a social networking site that was dedicated to a positive social change issue
45%	Organized or united friends or neighbors to work together for a particular cause or issue
43%	Provided leadership skills to a cause or organization related to positive social change
41%	Wrote to or called a politician
36%	Attended a political rally, speech or protest of any kind
35%	Texted to make donations, voted, organized a demonstration, etc., related to a specific cause or issue
33%	Expressed an opinion on positive social change by writing to the editor of a newspaper/magazine or calling a radio/TV show

**Digital technology is laying a foundation for individuals to empower themselves and create positive social change.** Americans are pointing toward individuals as key agents of positive social change in the future, and digital technology is the reason. Four in five adults (84%) agree that thanks to digital technology, people are getting involved in positive social change issues faster and more frequently than ever before.

**Digital technology is a game-changer in the world of positive social change.** More than four in five people agree that digital technology has created a fundamental shift in how positive social change occurs (81%). Underlying this shift are the improvements digital technology has made in simplifying and enhancing the communication required to get social change moving. Nine in 10 adults (88%) agree that digital technology can turn interest in a cause into a movement more quickly than anything else, and most adults (65%) do not believe that using social media to get involved in positive social change is ‘just a fad,’ indicating that Americans believe that the social change and social media connection are here to stay.

Number of Americans who have engaged in social change in the past year through digital technology:

- **110 million** expressed an opinion on an issue by posting a comment on a blog or Web site.
- **93.8 million** joined or created a group on a social networking site devoted to a cause.
- **82.1 million** texted to make donations, voted, organized a demonstration, etc. related to a specific cause or issue.

A majority of Americans (82%) agree that digital technology has made it easier for them to connect with others who are interested in the same causes or issues that they are. Adults believe that digital technology makes it easier to accomplish a variety of activities integral to positive social change, particularly following news and events related to positive social change (79%) and increasing awareness about a positive social change issue or need (77%). Interestingly, the notion that digital technology makes it easier to accomplish a variety of social change activities is not driven by younger, arguably more “tech savvy” adults, but by older generations. Baby Boomers and Matures are significantly more likely than Gen Y and Gen X to believe digital technology makes it easier to follow news and events related to social change, give direct help to those in need and make a positive change in local areas.

**The percent of adults who say digital technology makes it easier to:**

	Total	Gen Y (age 18 – 34) (A)	Gen X (age 35 – 46) (B)	Baby Boomers (age 47 – 65) (C)	Matures (age 66+) (D)
Follow news and events related to positive social change	79%	74%	73%	84% <sup>AB</sup>	84% <sup>AB</sup>
Increase awareness about a positive social change issue or need	77%	74%	71%	81% <sup>AB</sup>	78%
Get people involved in positive social change	69%	67%	64%	73% <sup>B</sup>	70%
Give direct help to those in need	65%	60%	58%	69% <sup>AB</sup>	71% <sup>AB</sup>
Make a positive change in another part of the world	63%	64%	62%	66%	60%
Make a positive change in local areas	63%	55%	60%	71% <sup>AB</sup>	67% <sup>A</sup>

*Superscript letters and boxes used in the chart above indicate significant differences at the 95% confidence level.*

When asked how methods of getting involved in positive social change will evolve over the next five to 10 years, adults believe that those methods backed by digital technology are the ones that will be used more often in the future than they are today. More specifically, a plurality of adults say that, in the future, joining or creating a group on a social networking site that is dedicated to an issue (44%); expressing opinions on social change via a blog or Web site (44%); or texting to make a donation, voting, or organizing a demonstration (42%) will be used more often—more than the number who say these methods of getting involved will have either the same or a smaller role in the future.

## Conclusion: Positive Social Change Looking Forward

A solid foundation has been laid for the future of social change and change-makers in America in both the strong belief in the importance of positive social change and the established pathways for getting engaged. As the world becomes increasingly connected and digital technology becomes ubiquitous, individuals will have more and more opportunities to connect with others interested in the same causes or issues that they are, whether within their local community or across time zones. It will become easier to learn about critical issues for social change that occur at home and around the world, increase awareness about any particular issue or cause a change-maker is interested in, or give direct help to those in need wherever they may live.

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### Methodology:

Harris Interactive conducted a national survey online within the United States of 2,148 U.S. adults (age 18 and over) between March 16 and March 24, 2011. The study was commissioned by Walden University. Data were weighted to be representative of the U.S. general population of adults age 18+ using targets obtained from the U.S. Census. Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with the proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online. A full methodology is available upon request.