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Research Report

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Stitching the Threads Together

A Cross-Disciplinary Literature Review on Youth Arts Engagement and Well-Being

Summary

Purpose

Promoting the well-being of all youth today can lead to productive, successful, and healthy adults and the health of society tomorrow. But promoting the well-being of all youth is not simple: It requires a multifaceted set of pathways and strategies that are still being defined in the research literature. In particular, the literature on how arts engagement promotes child and youth well-being remains fragmented across many disciplinary areas and multidisciplinary fields. More-efficient and more-frequent synthesis of the literature is needed to illuminate these pathways and strategies across disciplinary areas and multidisciplinary fields to understand and support youth well-being. Recognizing the critical need to bridge disciplinary and multidisciplinary fields, we aimed to consolidate this dispersed evidence base by

- briefly summarizing the definitions of youth well-being and the dimensions that contribute to it
- examining how youth arts engagement has been defined and measured in the context of well-being
- identifying mechanisms, unique to and common across well-being dimensions and disciplines, by which various art forms facilitate youth well-being and how these mechanisms have been measured.

Key Findings

Research studies have found that arts engagement is an effective way to promote well-being. However, our review found that the literature on arts and youth well-being is not guided by a common framework and thus remains fragmented (approached differently by discipline, theoretical orientation, and level of rigor). Our review identified five complex and interrelated mechanisms that promote well-being through arts engagement and could be a starting point toward a common framework:

- building agency to make positive social change
- facilitating healing and wellness
- encouraging self-expression
- creating social connections and community
- developing skills and a mastery mindset.

These mechanisms were associated with nine well-being dimensions:

- academic and practical competencies
- productivity and employability
- cultural and spiritual beliefs and values
- economic stability
- civic engagement and community safety
- connectedness to others and one's environment
- positive state of mind
- physical health
- feelings of inclusion and justice.

Research specifically discussing the direction or sequence of the relationship between mechanisms and well-being dimensions was limited.

Recommendations

We identified seven gaps in the literature and opportunities to address those gaps to better understand how arts engagement promotes well-being:

Gap 1: Few articles discussed how the mechanisms were related to one another and how using multiple mechanisms amplified (or detracted from) the impact of arts engagement on well-being.

> **Opportunity 1:** Build cross-disciplinary partnerships to (1) bring together the diversity of approaches identified in the literature and (2) untangle and then weave back together the complex strands of research on youth well-being

and the arts. Use these partnerships to define what *research rigor* means for arts and well-being studies, when multisite and longitudinal research is appropriate, and which youth populations need support or study.

Gap 2: Few articles referenced how the arts build agency to make positive social change to promote well-being.

Opportunity 2: Improve partnerships with researchers and practitioners working in the areas of arts and community organizing to catalyze more development and study of arts engagement that is focused on the mechanism-building agency to promote positive social change.

Gap 3: Few articles referenced interpersonal and community-level mechanisms through which the arts promote well-being.

Opportunity 3: Bring together practitioners and researchers focused on interpersonal and community levels to set a shared agenda to advance efforts in this area. Bridge research and practice at the individual level and with expertise at the interpersonal and community levels to promote more-holistic approaches. Conduct more research to identify the characteristics that define an effective safe space and how communities with more (or fewer) safe spaces benefit.

Gap 4: People we interviewed had limited awareness of how the relationships between mechanisms and well-being vary by the type of art (e.g., reactive participation versus youth-led, different art forms); the literature was also limited in this area.

Opportunity 4: Define and test youth-led arts engagement approaches to determine whether having youth leadership translates into better (or worse) well-being outcomes. Conduct more research studies that quantify the relative contributions of art forms to well-being by mechanism. Conduct more research on the well-being impacts of less studied art forms, such as dance, theater, photography, and digital arts.

Gap 5: Few articles described the associations between arts participation and the well-being dimensions of economic stability and feelings of inclusion and justice.

Opportunity 5: Bring together academic institutions; arts organizations; and correctional, criminal justice, labor, and economic organizations to develop new efforts and better document existing ones.

Gap 6: Few articles described the associations between arts engagement, youth well-being, and equity.

Opportunity 6: Document how to equitably implement the mechanisms for arts engagement and their impacts on inequities in youth well-being.

Gap 7: Interviewees indicated that existing measures are limited in their ability to quantify the impact of the arts (and specific art practices), differentiate the mechanisms that are intrinsic (e.g., agency) from those that are instrumental (e.g., skills development), and capture impacts from the neurobiological level all the way up to the community level in ways that consider history and context.

Opportunity 7: Develop innovative study designs and measures and test whether they are reliable and effective through researcher and practitioner collaboration.

Conclusion

In the report that follows, we synthesize the diversity of literature that examines how arts engagement promotes youth well-being. By connecting the complex and interrelated literature on this topic, we create a fuller picture of the mechanisms through which the arts contribute to the well-being of young people. We also discuss in detail what is missing from this research, offering suggestions for how to fill these gaps. Addressing these gaps is paramount to move the science of arts and well-being forward and to find effective multilevel solutions and policies that help youth thrive.

Although the study of well-being is not new, building pathways to ensure that all youth can thrive is especially critical today because the well-being of youth today affects the socioeconomic health of society tomorrow. Youth will become the innovators and leaders who must grapple with increasingly complex issues facing society (such as the coronavirus disease 2019 [COVID-19] pandemic and growing concerns about social media, mass violence, natural disasters, and climate change) (Aspen Institute, 2023; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Youth will need to find solutions to reverse declining trends in well-being and promote social connectedness and mental health (Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023; Twenge et al., 2019). Promoting youth well-being using the best available science is essential to foster productive, successful, and healthy adults (Prinstein and Ethier, 2022). There have been several recent attempts to bring national attention to youth well-being. For example, in 2022, President Joe Biden released a National Mental Health Strategy that incorporated several strategies targeting youth specifically, such as promoting student wellness and expanding school-based and early childhood interventions (White House, 2022). In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General identified loneliness, social isolation, and declining youth mental health as a public health crisis (Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). Policymakers, funders, researchers, and practitioners are eager for information about how best to promote youth well-being to inform investments and interventions.

Despite its intrinsic value and association with many desirable social outcomes, including health, educational attainment, and employment (Huppert, 2017), well-being is a multifaceted construct without a universally agreed-on definition or a single pathway or set of strategies to promote well-being across disciplines. Research examining one approach to promoting well-being—engagement with the arts—has been well documented and is continuing to expand. (Fancourt and Finn, 2019; Tymoszuk et al., 2021). However, as with the challenges facing the broader well-being field, there is not a common framework showcasing how arts engagement promotes child and youth well-being, and the literature remains fragmented across many disciplinary areas and multidisciplinary fields. A more integrated approach outlining core concepts and metrics is needed for more-efficient and more-frequent synthesis across the literature to better understand and support child and youth well-being through the arts.

There is not a common framework showcasing how arts engagement promotes child and youth well-being, and the literature remains fragmented.

Aims of the Literature Review

Recognizing the critical need to bridge disciplinary areas and multidisciplinary fields, we aimed to consolidate this dispersed evidence base, focusing on how the arts can enhance child and youth well-being. To do so, we conducted a literature review to synthesize evidence from diverse perspectives and present it in a manner accessible to policymakers and practitioners. The scope of the literature review encompassed a wide array of disciplines and fields, including psychology, medicine, education, sociology, and political science. Within these diverse areas, the review had three aims:

1. Briefly summarize the definitions of **youth well-being** and the dimensions that contribute to it.
2. Examine how **youth arts engagement** has been defined and measured in the context of well-being.
3. Identify **mechanisms**, unique to and common across well-being dimensions and disciplines, by which various art forms facilitate youth

well-being and how these mechanisms have been measured.

Our findings and recommendations related to these three aims identify how to fill gaps in existing research and promote cross-disciplinary and cross-field collaboration. We anticipate that they will be of interest to practitioners, researchers, policymakers, community leaders, and youth.

We developed a new equity-centered method to support this literature review: the equity-centered environmental scan (EES) (Rogers et al., 2023). The foundation of the EES is an inclusive and iterative way to encourage continuous engagement and learning. In the context of the literature review, we applied the EES concept of inclusive learning to identify relevant publications for inclusion in the literature review. We incorporated both academic publications via a multidisciplinary literature search and the viewpoints of practitioners via interviews we conducted. We shared preliminary literature review findings with practitioners to elicit suggestions for additional publications to augment what was identified through our multidisciplinary search strategy, gather insights on gaps in understanding of how arts affect youth well-being, and gather recommendations to address gaps. Practitioners were initially identified as part of the search process, and then we used snowball sampling to add to our sample. By continuously engaging with and incorporating the insights of diverse stakeholders, the EES helps center the voices and perspectives of individuals outside dominant research spaces (Venkateswaran et al., 2023).

Here, we briefly describe the methods used in the EES as they relate to each of our research aims. We conducted an initial targeted literature search to summarize the definitions of *well-being* and well-being dimensions that we should focus on when abstracting the literature on youth arts and well-being (aim 1). Then, we searched and abstracted the literature on youth arts and well-being and interviewed practitioners to augment our search and provide key insights on youth well-being. We used the findings from this search and abstraction, supplemented with interview insights, to examine how *arts engagement* has been defined and measured (in the context of well-being) and identify the mechanisms by which arts engagement promotes well-being (aims 2 and 3). Finally, we conducted a targeted search of flagship journals (i.e., the journals officially published by each discipline's professional association) for five disciplines (psychology, medicine, education, sociology, and political science) to explore discipline-specific variations in the definitions of *youth arts engagement* and the mechanisms by which the arts promote well-being (aims 2 and 3).

Aim 1: How Is Youth Well-Being Defined, and What Dimensions Contribute to It?

To help inform the literature abstraction and interview analysis, we reviewed 11 of the leading youth well-being frameworks to characterize how *youth well-being* is defined and identify key dimensions that contribute to well-being. Frameworks originated from a variety of sources, including academic organizations, nonprofits, foundations, government agencies, and youth themselves. We conducted a rapid analysis of the definition and dimensions of youth well-being from these frameworks to try to identify common elements.

Definitions of *Youth Well-Being*

In our review of the *youth well-being* definitions across frameworks, we found that definitions generally centered around the things that children need and should be able to do to flourish, thrive, and overall live good lives in their youth, as well as to develop skills, abilities, and competencies needed for the future. Several definitions also described youth well-being as a pathway to promoting human rights for all youth and their future success. The World Health Organization (undated) defines *youth well-being* as adolescents having "the support, confidence, and resources to thrive in contexts of secure and healthy relationships, realizing their full potential and rights." Having well-being throughout one's life course is associated with being a well-educated, economically secure, productive, and healthy adult. Definitions of *well-being* highlighted two broad components: (1) subjective well-being and (2) objective or

external well-being. Although the literature did not necessarily use these terms, it generally defined these two components as follows:

- *Subjective well-being* refers to people's individual views of how they experience and evaluate their lives or specific domains of their lives. Concepts related to subjective well-being in the literature varied but included self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relationships, autonomy, purpose in life, personal growth, sense of control, contentment, resilience, cultural identity, and engagement. Subjective measures of well-being allow individuals to prioritize what is most important for them and evaluate their lives accordingly and are thus believed to be more "democratic" than objective measures of well-being.
- *Objective well-being* refers to external life conditions and can include factors related to community health, intergenerational trauma, sustainability, and social capital (i.e., resources that arise from social relationships to improve well-being), among other things. Objective measures of well-being are often called *social indicators* and are focused on visible and quantifiable social factors.

Dimensions of Youth Well-Being

Our review revealed nine dimensions of well-being that are common across one or more of the leading youth well-being frameworks we reviewed:

1. *Academic and practical competencies:* This dimension focuses on academic and practical knowledge and skills, the education and learning process associated with developing this knowledge and these skills, and the resulting competence.
2. *Productivity and employability:* This dimension focuses on work and job quality, work-life balance, and employability.
3. *Cultural and spiritual beliefs and values:* This dimension focuses on beliefs and values associated with culture and cultural connections, faith, and spirituality.
4. *Economic stability:* This dimension focuses on financial stability, income and wealth, economic capital, economic circumstances, and material needs.
5. *Civic engagement and community safety:* This dimension focuses on vibrant and safe communities, physically safe spaces, and other environmental conditions related to safety, civic engagement, and community self-efficacy.
6. *Connectedness to others and one's environment:* This dimension focuses on social connections, healthy relationships, a feeling of togetherness, social capital, and family and social environments.
7. *Positive state of mind:* This dimension deals with state of mind, emotions, and thoughts. Indicators associated with this dimension include mental health, happiness and fun, healing and joy, ability to recognize and deal with emotions, meaning-making, resilience, optimism, agency, positive identity, and self-worth.
8. *Physical health:* This dimension deals with physical health and access to health care and includes indicators that characterize access to and use of health services, a healthy environment, nature, and healthy foods.
9. *Feelings of inclusion and justice:* This dimension focuses on racial justice, equity, and inclusion.

Table 1 shows which of these dimensions appear in each of the frameworks we reviewed. A full list of the literature we reviewed on youth well-being is provided in Appendix A, in the annex to this report, available at www.rand.org/t/RRA3264-1.

These dimensions capture aspects of youth well-being outcomes for the individual, the family, and the community and are both objective and subjective. We used these dimensions of youth well-being as an organizing framework to extract the mechanisms through which arts engagement contributes to well-being.

TABLE 1

Youth Well-Being Dimensions, by Framework

Reference	Academic and Practical Competencies	Productivity and Employability	Cultural and Spiritual Beliefs and Values	Economic Stability	Civic Engagement and Community Safety	Connectedness to Others and One's Environment	Positive State of Mind	Physical Health	Feelings of Inclusion and Justice
Aspen Institute, 2023			♦	♦	♦	♦	♦	♦	
Ettinger et al., 2022			♦		♦	♦	♦	♦	♦
Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2023	♦			♦	♦	♦		♦	
Guthold et al., 2023	♦				♦	♦	♦	♦	
Halfon et al., 2022	♦	♦	♦	♦	♦	♦	♦	♦	
Helliwell et al., 2024							♦		
Kids Count Data Center, undated	♦			♦		♦		♦	
Ng and Vella-Brodrick, 2019	♦	♦	♦			♦	♦	♦	
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021	♦	♦		♦	♦	♦	♦	♦	
Ross et al., 2020	♦				♦	♦	♦	♦	
Scales, Boat, and Pekel, 2020	♦					♦			
Soffia and Turner, 2021							♦	♦	

NOTE: A red diamond indicates that the dimension was present in the framework.

Aim 2: How Is Arts Engagement Defined and Measured in the Context of Well-Being?

To identify publications for our review, we conducted a purposeful search of databases that reflected a wide array of disciplines and fields of study (e.g., EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Google Scholar), detailed in Table 2. We used keywords ("youth," "art," "art engagement," "wellbeing," "health") to identify publications that were published between 2014 and 2023. In addition, we asked experts and leaders to recommend key publications.

We also searched Google to capture public information more broadly. We used this multidisciplinary and multifield search strategy to understand the disciplinary and field variations in "youth," "arts," and "wellbeing" research that community stakeholders, practitioners, and researchers used across diverse disciplines and fields. We conducted keyword and Boolean searches using such search terms as "youth," "art," "art engagement," "wellbeing," and "health," detailed in Table 3.

We then conducted a title and abstract review of the 336 publications identified in our searches to ensure that the research identified was relevant (i.e., it discussed youth, arts, and well-being). We identified 196 publications as not relevant (i.e., they did not discuss youth, arts, and well-being). After the title and abstract review, we had reduced our sample to 140 publications.

We identified an additional 37 publications during interviews with experts and leaders (described below) or through email communications before or

TABLE 2

Description, Number, and Percentage of Publications, by Literature Review Source

Source	Brief Description	Number of Publications	Percentage of Total (*n* = 336)
Google search engine	Broadest search conducted; searched across hundreds of billions of public webpages to gather a set of relevant results across many disciplines and sources	67	20
Google Scholar search engine	Searched scholarly literature broadly across many disciplines and sources	68	20
Wallace Foundation publication database	Received 92 publications from Wallace Foundation staff; identified an additional 14 publications by searching the resources listed on the Wallace Foundation's website, specific to education and the arts	68	20
National Endowment for the Arts website	Searched research reports and initiatives on the National Endowment for the Arts website and that were sponsored by the Research Grants in the Arts program, specific to the impact and value of the arts	44	13
PubMed database	Searched the life sciences and biomedical literature to identify more–clinically based research publications	36	11
Snowball	A collection of papers and reports authored by or recommended by our interviewees	20	6
PsycINFO	Searched the psychology literature using the American Psychological Association's database	17	5
International Association of Empirical Aesthetics (IAEA) research journal	Searched IAEA's journal, which reflects research on aesthetic experience and aesthetic behavior in a wide variety of domains, including encounters with beauty, visual art, music, literature, film, theater, philosophy, and museum behavior	7	2
State Innovations report	Searched through citations in this state-by-state report on youth art programming	6	2
Google Books	Searched for the top five books on youth well-being and art using Google Books, which contains text from more than 40 million books across many disciplines and sources	3	1

TABLE 3
Literature Search Parameters

Type of Search	Search Terms Used
Keyword	• youth OR art OR wellbeing OR child or education OR program OR therapy OR health OR mental health OR social-emotional health OR public health OR development OR community OR culture OR policy OR initiative
Boolean	• (youth OR child) AND (art OR therapy) AND (program OR initiative OR class OR education OR community) AND (wellbeing OR development OR benefit OR health OR public health OR policy) • leverage AND (art OR art therapy OR art education) AND (youth OR child) AND (wellbeing OR development OR benefit OR health OR public health) • (psychology OR nursing OR public health OR education OR therapy OR medical OR community) AND (youth OR child) AND art AND (wellbeing OR development OR benefit OR health OR public health OR policy)

after the interviews with experts and leaders. In total, we reviewed 177 publications from the academic and grey literature. A full list of the multidisciplinary literature we reviewed on the arts and youth well-being is provided in Appendix B, in the annex to this report, available at www.rand.org/t/RRA3264-1.

Two research team members abstracted key information from each source using Microsoft Excel. The information we collected focused on definitions of *youth* and *well-being* and on mechanisms explaining how art affects well-being, critical areas for funding, and impact studies. Using this initial dataset, we began developing a list of central themes and gaps that arose across studies discussing why and how art contributes to well-being.

This literature review has several limitations related to the scope of the literature, the search strategy, and the analytic approaches used. Overall, this review details findings from a sample of 177 publications on youth, arts, and well-being and does not necessarily reflect the full breadth of literature available. Therefore, there may be additional gaps in insights that could be gleaned if we added more publications to this review. Additionally, because we used a cross-disciplinary approach to searching the literature, the literature we identified might not reflect a deep understanding of the literature for any single discipline. Although we conducted a targeted disciplinary literature search in flagship journals for psychology, medicine, education, sociology, and political science, our review was still limited in its discussion of any single discipline. Finally, limited attention was paid to the rigor of each study reviewed. Future literature reviews could focus more on separating out the empirical from the theoretical.

Defining *Arts Engagement*

We reviewed the literature to understand the definitions and measures of arts engagement. In this report, we define *arts engagement* broadly as the interaction between youth, the practice of art, and arts organizations. Ninety percent of the research articles we reviewed engaged youth through **active participation** in the practice of art or **reactive participation** in art performances or installations (e.g., watching a performance). Active participation included a variety of art forms, such as poetry, dance, music, theater, digital storytelling, painting, filmmaking, creation of comics, and mural-making. It also included arts education, such as after-school arts programs and music and art therapy. Reactive participation included tours of art museums and exhibits; digital cultural offerings, including streaming of live concerts; dance and theater performances; and movies.

There was very limited literature on engagement beyond participation, suggesting a gap in both research and practice on more engagement strategies. Adults also engaged youth by giving them leadership positions and responsibilities and encouraging youth to share their ideas, take ownership, and work collaboratively, although we found only two examples of these more collaborative approaches to engagement.

The first example of engagement through shared leadership is the Mental Health Youth Action Board (YAB), a Pediatric Mental Health Institute panel to educate youth about mental issues and treatment (Kennedy et al., 2020). YAB is intended to bring youth voices to the design of clinical programs and engage youth in arts-based social action. YAB members created a traveling photo exhibition and an

interactive art display and wrote, acted in, and edited a video encouraging viewers to be active in feeling and expressing their emotions. They also wrote six-word stories reflecting on their experiences with mental health issues and treatment. Adults served as facilitators, mentors, and partners on these projects, but YAB members led the planning, execution, and promotion. This leadership position promoted self-reflection and sharing of feelings, as the youth had to disclose their personal experiences to plan and create these projects. Collaborating with peers who shared a passion for the topic of mental health also encouraged disclosure and taught YAB members about diverse and unexpected experiences, broadening their personal and creative perspectives.

Archibald et al. (2018) was the other article we found that engaged youth with the arts through consultation. A research team gathered experiences and informational needs from parents of a child with asthma and used this information to create storybooks. The storybooks are in the first person and formatted like diary entries to come across as authentic and resonate more effectively with the reader. The characters in the storybooks have experiences that reflect those of the children the books are intended to reach, and the books educate readers on the nature of the illness and the diagnostic and treatment process in a sensitive and culturally appropriate manner. The use of an artistic medium allowed the researchers to advocate for children and their parents in a way that felt more personal and approachable than standard methods of providing health information.

We found little in the literature about how youth arts engagement opportunities are or are not equitably distributed across socioeconomic, geographic, and demographic dimensions (Daly, Coffey, and Pettit, 2024; Saxon et al., 2024). Additionally, there is little about how youth arts engagement provides culturally responsive and relevant programs to participating youth.

We found in our literature review that a more nuanced discussion of arts engagement was missing from the literature on youth. *Engagement* is a dynamic two-way process that is influenced by the type of engagement, including how youth negatively and positively experience the arts and contribute to them, and the ways in which different contexts amplify or attenuate youth experiences with the arts.

Measuring Arts Engagement in the Context of Well-Being

Surveys, interviews and focus groups, attendance records, observations, and analyses of the art itself were all used to measure arts engagement in the context of well-being (Table 4). Almost half of the research articles that reported measuring arts engagement used a survey asking about the frequency and types of active and reactive participation, satisfaction with arts programs, and reactions to or experiences while engaging with art.

Interviews and focus groups with youth participants, parents of youth participants, facilitators of arts programs, and board members of arts orga-

TABLE 4
Methods Used to Measure Arts Engagement Described in Research Articles

Method	Percentage
Survey (e.g., surveys to measure satisfaction with arts programs, music experience reports to measure music-induced emotions)	41
Interviews (e.g., with youth, parents, facilitators of arts programs, board members of arts organizations)	26
Attendance (e.g., number of art therapy sessions attended, number of hours spent practicing art, graduation rate from a music program)	11
Observation (e.g., observation of how style of play changed from before watching a theater performance to after watching it, therapist evaluation)	11
Focus group	6
Analysis of art (e.g., content analysis of digital storytelling, thematic analysis of youth journals)	5

nizations were also commonly used to assess arts engagement.

Observation and attendance records were also used to measure arts engagement. Attendance records tracked the frequency and completion rates for arts programs. Observation measures focused on how youth mastered the practice of art over time and the impacts that this mastery had on key dimensions of well-being. A few articles also used an analysis of the art itself as an indicator of engagement over time.

These measures begin to suggest some potential mechanisms for how arts engagement may promote youth well-being. For example, arts engagement may promote relaxation, lowering blood pressure and cortisol (Morris et al., 2019). Arts engagement may promote critical thinking, better preparing students for school (Catterall and Dumais, 2012). Arts engagement may help youth express themselves, resulting in increased happiness and resilience to stress (Keyes et al., 2024). Finally, arts engagement may empower youth by connecting them to shared experiences (Greene, Burke, and McKenna, 2013).

However, missing from the literature were measures of equity in arts engagement. Few studies disaggregated findings by youth race, age, gender, or other social determinants of well-being. One exception was a study of engagement in arts education at urban schools (Kraehe, Acuff, and Travis, 2016), which considered distribution of arts resources (e.g., supplies, space, time, trained art instructors), access to arts opportunities, participation in the arts (actual attendance or nonattendance), recognition or valuing of diverse cultural perspectives and expressions, and transformation or a revelatory intrapersonal moment that encouraged solidarity and inspired individuals and groups to "make the world a better and more just place" (p. 224).

Aim 3: What Are the Arts Mechanisms for Promoting Youth Well-Being?

Using the literature from the EES described in aim 2, we extracted key information from each article about the mechanisms through which arts engagement is related to youth well-being. For the purposes of this report, we define a *mechanism* as the means by which arts engagement promotes youth well-being. Consider a set of gears in which the application of force to turn one gear causes the other gears to move (Figure 1). Strength and amount of force are the mechanisms that determine how frequently and quickly the gears turn. In the case of arts engagement, we are exploring how the type and amount of participation in key arts activities promote specific dimensions of well-being (e.g., improve academic and practical competencies, promote a positive state of mind, increase connectedness to other youth).

We have defined and outlined the dimensions of well-being and defined and operationalized arts engagement (through the measures of arts engagement). Next, we share results from our literature review about the mechanisms through which arts engagement promotes well-being and how those mechanisms vary by well-being dimension (e.g., academic and practical competencies, economic stability) and by discipline.

We identified 129 articles (of the 177 articles we reviewed) that described mechanisms by which arts engagement promotes well-being. We categorized these descriptions into five mechanisms:

1. building agency to make positive social change
2. facilitating healing and wellness
3. encouraging self-expression
4. creating social connections and community
5. developing skills and a mastery mindset.

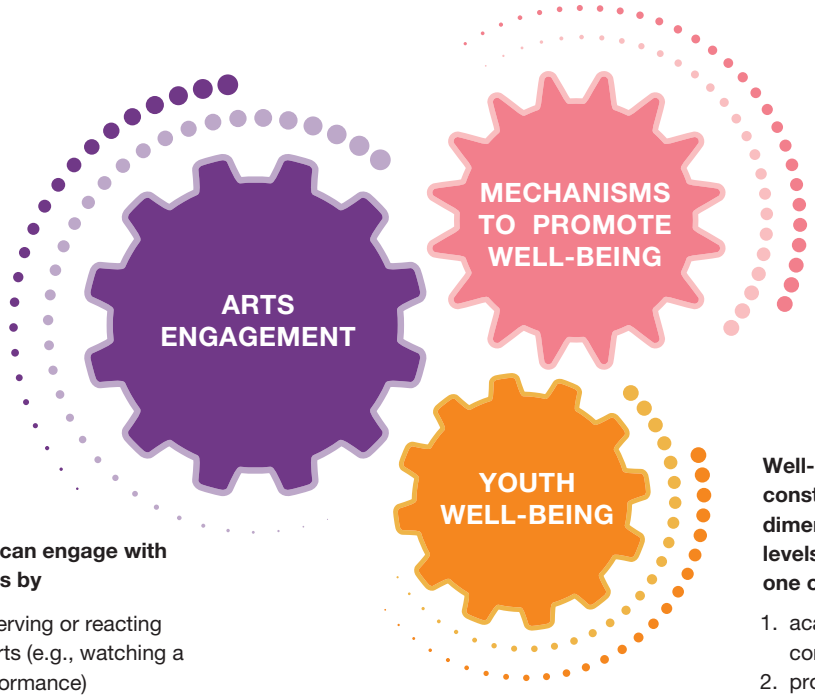
Articles about these mechanisms cut across the individual, interpersonal, and community levels but were predominantly at the individual level (Table 5).

A table showing the full list of references we reviewed by mechanism and level is available in Appendix C (Table C.1), in the annex to this report, available at www.rand.org/t/RRA3264-1.

We also explored whether there were specific disciplinary variations in the research on arts and youth well-being and found little to no research on youth well-being and the arts published in single-discipline journals (Appendix D, in the annex to this report). Not surprisingly, most of the literature is from interdisciplinary grey literature and academic publications.

FIGURE 1

Conceptual Model Linking Arts Engagement to Youth Well-Being



Mechanisms to promote well-being are

- building agency to make positive social change
- facilitating healing and wellness
- encouraging self-expression
- creating social connections and community
- developing skills and a mastery mindset.

Youth can engage with the arts by

- observing or reacting to arts (e.g., watching a performance)
- actively participating in the practice of the arts (e.g., youth theater)
- providing active voice and consultation (e.g., advocacy) to a specific activity
- sharing leadership (e.g., board member, leadership position) of a specific activity.

Well-being is a multifaceted construct composed of nine dimensions. Youth with high levels of well-being exhibit one or more of the following:

1. academic and practical competencies
2. productivity and employability
3. cultural and spiritual beliefs and values
4. economic stability
5. civic engagement and community safety
6. connectedness to others and one's environment
7. positive state of mind
8. physical health
9. feelings of inclusion and justice.

Next, we briefly summarize a subset of the literature on each of these mechanisms (Table 6). A table showing the full list of references we reviewed by the mechanism and well-being dimension is available in Appendix C (Table C.2).

It is also important to note that the literature we reviewed ranged from empirical studies that support causal links between arts engagement and well-being to conceptual literature that supports theoretical links. Therefore, the mechanisms included here reflect both those that have been found to predict well-being and those that are hypothesized to predict well-being but have not yet been empirically validated. Finally, although the literature on equity, arts engagement, and youth well-being was limited (i.e., we identified only three articles; Gordon-Nesbitt and Howarth, 2020; Rose, Daniel, and Liu, 2017; Sidman, 2019), we pulled literature on equity and well-being more broadly to provide a short description of how equity underpins each of the mechanisms described below.

Mechanism 1: Building Agency to Make Positive Social Change

The first mechanism we identified was building youth agency to make positive social change, which encompasses actions and interventions that empower

TABLE 5

Number of Research Articles Identified by Mechanism and Well-Being Dimension

Mechanism	Number of Articles, by Level		
	Individual	Interpersonal	Community
Building agency to make positive social change (*n* = 7 articles)	7	1	1
Facilitating healing and wellness (*n* = 53 articles)	53	3	6
Encouraging self-expression (*n* = 34 articles)	30	8	5
Creating social connections and community (*n* = 47 articles)	31	18	13
Developing skills and a mastery mindset (*n* = 41 articles)	37	10	4

NOTE: An article can identify one or more levels.

TABLE 6

Number of Research Articles Identified by Mechanism and Well-Being Dimension

Well-Being Dimension	Number of Articles, by Mechanism				
	Building Agency to Make Positive Social Change (*n* = 7 articles)	Facilitating Healing and Wellness (*n* = 53 articles)	Encouraging Self-Expression (*n* = 34 articles)	Creating Social Connections and Community (*n* = 47 articles)	Developing Skills and a Mastery Mindset (*n* = 41 articles)
Academic and practical competencies	2	4	10	8	31
Productivity and employability	—	4	3	4	10
Cultural and spiritual beliefs and values	1	4	5	11	5
Economic stability	—	2	—	3	3
Civic engagement and community safety	2	5	5	11	3
Connectedness to others and one's environment	2	12	19	42	22
Positive state of mind	4	37	28	33	19
Physical health	2	23	5	4	7
Feelings of inclusion and justice	2	—	1	2	—

NOTE: An article can identify one or more well-being dimension. Dashes indicate that no articles were found.

youth to develop innovative solutions, advocate for policy change, and take direct action to address social problems. Youth arts engagement that builds agency to make positive change was discussed in the literature as making a possible contribution to the following dimensions of youth well-being, shown in Figure 2: academic and practical competencies, cultural and spiritual beliefs and values, civic engagement and community safety, connectedness to others and one's environment, positive state of mind, physical health, and feelings of inclusion and justice. Abbs, Daniels, and Schillinger (2022) and Bentz and O'Brien (2019) described specific learning processes (e.g., experiential arts high school) that built academic and practical competencies needed for youth to educate others about type 2 diabetes and climate change, respectively. Youth connectedness to others was also promoted through the peer education approach used by Abbs, Daniels, and Schillinger (2022), which relied on youth poets of color creating artistic content to increase health literacy.

Walshe, Moula, and Lee (2022) described an arts and nature intervention (i.e., connecting with nature and then expressing the connection through arts using natural materials) focused on improving youths' beliefs and values related to nature and social justice through environmental sustainability actions. Both Bentz and O'Brien (2019) and Walshe, Moula, and Lee (2022) focused on building agency to address climate change and environmental sustainability as a pathway to promoting feelings of civic engagement and community safety.

Kennedy et al. (2020) engaged youth in an arts board focused on reducing stigma toward mental health. Youth board members developed self-worth and strengthened their identity, resulting in a more positive state of mind. Culturally sensitive storytelling was used to educate and empower youth to promote positive sexuality and physical health. Ibrahim et al. (2022) focused on using arts to build youth critical consciousness to promote feelings of inclusion and justice. These are a few examples of how building agency to make positive change was associated with the dimensions of youth well-being.

Bertrand, Durand, and Gonzalez (2017) found that it was especially important that arts engagement efforts that build agency for positive social change recognize that all youth are not starting at an equal place, and efforts will need to be tailored to be accessible and relevant to all youth. Giving youth the agency to critically examine and then change their surroundings is crucial to ensuring that arts engagement efforts are available to meet youth and community needs, enhancing the potential impact of these efforts (Kania et al., 2022).

Mechanism 2: Facilitating Healing and Wellness

Facilitating healing and wellness, the second mechanism we identified, reflects therapeutic, health-promoting, and resilience-building processes. Creative arts therapies were a primary approach used to facilitate healing and wellness (Feen-Calligan et al., 2020; Johnson-Pierce, 2022; Le Vu et al., 2022; Rowe et al., 2017). In creative arts therapies, clients and therapists use the creative and expressive process of art-making to improve and enhance physiological, psychological, and social well-being. For example, Feen-Calligan et al. (2020) described how a creative arts therapy intervention can help youth learn tactics for managing depression, anxiety, and stress and can lead to improved academic outcomes for trauma survivors. Creative arts therapies were also found to

FIGURE 2

Well-Being Dimensions Associated with Mechanism 1: Building Agency to Make Positive Social Change

improve mental health, sleep quality, and psychological well-being of children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic (Le Vu et al., 2022).

Other approaches to facilitating healing and wellness mentioned in the literature include aerobic activity (e.g., Atkins et al., 2018), listening to music (e.g., Lilley, Oberle, and Thompson, 2014), and practicing art (Berberian and Davis, 2020). These approaches work at the individual and community levels. At the individual level, these approaches promote well-being by encouraging relaxation (e.g., Vaillancourt et al., 2023), promoting coping skills (e.g., Sitzer and Stockwell, 2015), assisting with processing emotions and trauma (e.g., Art and Creativity for Healing, 2018), and connecting with other individuals with similar experiences and interests (e.g., Fenner et al., 2018). At the community level, these approaches promote safe spaces for healing (e.g., Farre et al., 2018). The literature we reviewed suggests that these processes may be associated with eight of the nine dimensions of youth well-being (Figure 3).

Available, accessible, and relevant wellness and care opportunities are essential to facilitating healing and wellness (Sotto-Santiago et al., 2021; Tierney, 2021). To produce the best possible outcomes, efforts to facilitate healing and wellness need to reflect the specific populations of focus and take into account the negative impacts of contemporary and historical racism, among other structural and social determinants of equity (Marmot and Allen, 2014).

Mechanism 3: Encouraging Self-Expression

The mechanism of encouraging self-expression involves encouraging youth to express feelings, thoughts, or ideas through painting, drawing, writing, or other arts. Self-expression can help youth to process difficult experiences, build autonomy, and build strong relationships. For example, African American youth residing in economically disadvantaged urban areas were trained in media production and personal storytelling (Anderson and Mack, 2019). The youth then applied these skills to gain insight and understanding into a personally difficult life event and share that insight through digital storytelling. This collective self-expression helped the youth transform their difficult life events into stories of possibility, promise, and potential, ultimately helping create a group narrative for positive identity development. Similarly, research has shown that music-based services for youth who are experiencing homelessness has helped these youth to express their strengths and foster connections with other youth (Kelly, 2017).

The mechanism of encouraging self-expression is unique from other mechanisms in that it often co-occurs with other mechanisms; much of the literature on self-expression overlaps with the literature on creating social connections and community (13 overlapping articles), developing skills and a mastery mindset (ten overlapping articles), facilitating healing and wellness (eight overlapping articles), and building agency to make positive social change (two overlapping articles). The literature that is uniquely focused on encouraging self-expression suggests that expressing feelings, thoughts, and ideas through arts engagement can help youth develop autonomy (e.g., Anderson and Mack, 2019), problem-solving skills (e.g., Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2016), and storytelling skills (e.g., Gotthardt et al., 2023) and, at the community level, can create a safe space for creative expression (e.g., Goldbard, 2018). Across the literature, encouraging self-

FIGURE 3

Well-Being Dimensions Associated with Mechanism 2: Facilitating Healing and Wellness

expression was associated with eight of the nine dimensions of youth well-being (Figure 4).

Self-expression has also been shown to create a space for understanding how youth conceptualize their environments and promoting more-accessible and more-relevant environments in which youth can thrive (Charest, 2020; Schmidt, 2022). For example, Meyers et al. (2024) described how reimaging an academic environment to be more focused on belonging collectively fostered authentic self-expression and academic growth in nursing students.

Mechanism 4: Creating Social Connections and Community

Mechanism 4, creating social connections and community, is characterized as youth feeling close and connected to others and to the communities in which they live. Compared with the other mechanisms, creating social connections and community had more research literature at the interpersonal and community levels, as shown in Table 5. The literature on this mechanism described how arts engagement helped improve intergenerational relationships (e.g., Anderson et al., 2017), relationships between youth and their parents (e.g., Armstrong and Ross, 2021) and other adult mentors (Conrad, 2015), and peer relationships (e.g., Deng, 2017; Holochwost, Goldstein, and Wolf, 2021). Stronger interpersonal networks have been shown to result in greater confidence (especially in social situations, e.g., Deng, 2017), sense of identity and purpose (e.g., Sampson and Gifford, 2010), and self-efficacy to achieve the goals youth set for themselves in life (Chak and Raponi-Saunders, 2021).

Literature at the community level described how youth who were more connected to others and to their communities had a stronger orientation toward the common good and were more willing to participate in community service. Engh et al. (2021) identified place-based art as a driver of community cohesion and a way to nurture youth's civic capacity for community organizing—an example of how creating social connections and community overlaps with building agency to make positive change, another of the mechanisms to promote well-being. Rose, Daniel, and Liu (2017) and Eglinton, Gubrium, and Wexler (2017) described how arts engagement helps promote understanding of the past and envisioning of the future; strengthens cultural identity; highlight positive aspects of life; and acts as a tool for community development, including shaping infrastructure, transportation, and access to healthy food. Beauregard et al. (2020) reported on how community art workshops can promote cultural awareness and challenge dominant discourses and identities. Gallant (2022) provides an example of this, describing how an art exhibit on suicide survivors' experiences started new conversations about mental health and suicide, reduced stigma, and encouraged community members to reach out to people struggling with mental health. Additionally, Gallant reported on how this art exhibit helped survivors process their experiences and express themselves—an example of how the arts can simultaneously facilitate healing and wellness and create social connections to community. Kim and Boyns (2014) described how arts engagement improved compassion toward others. An increased sense of community cohesion was associated with greater collective efficacy to create a safe and healthy community (Vettraino, Linds, and Jindal-Snape, 2017). Creating social connections and community was the only mechanism we examined

FIGURE 4

Well-Being Dimensions Associated with Mechanism 3: Encouraging Self-Expression

that was connected to all nine dimensions of well-being (Figure 5).

Arts engagement strategies for creating social connections and community can focus on bringing diverse groups together to discuss pressing issues, such as race, identity, culture, and well-being, and create more-inclusive environments (Bernstein et al., 2020; Drago-Severson, Blum-Destefano, and Brooks-Lawrence, 2020; Gube, Bhowmik, and Tang, 2022). For example, arts engagement strategies can bring youth together to not only share experiences but also work together to push for more-accessible, more-available, and more-relevant opportunities to thrive based on their shared experiences (Pastor et al., 2022).

Mechanism 5: Developing Skills and a Mastery Mindset

The beliefs that intelligence is not fixed and that youth can develop the skills needed to be happy and successful are the foundation for mechanism 5: developing skills and a mastery mindset. Literature on this mechanism focused on developing vocational skills (Montgomery, 2017), as well as skills in public speaking (e.g., National Endowment for the Arts, 2020), problem-solving (e.g., Hoffmann, Ivcevic, and Maliakkal, 2021), self-care (Elpus, undated), critical thinking (e.g., Bowen, Greene, and Kisida, 2014), communication (e.g., Gustafson, 2019), and cognition (e.g., improvement in academic subjects, such as reading, astronomy, and ecology—see, for example, Hardiman, 2016; Pantaleo, 2024). For example, a study by the National Endowment for the Arts (2020) found that participation in a poetry program that ended with a competition helped youth develop public speaking skills and consequently increased their self-confidence. Another National Endowment for the Arts study (Menzer, 2015) showed that participation in the arts helped build social skills, such as helping, sharing, caring, and empathizing, as well as the emotional regulation skills needed to control emotional affect and expression.

Antoni, Nutik, Rasmussen (2013); Lea, Malorni, and Jones (2019); and Kindekens et al. (2014) described how participation in after-school and summer art programming helped get youth engaged in school (e.g., spend more time in school, develop relationships with school personnel, like school more) and thus improved youth's academic and social outcomes. Johnson et al. (2017) found that integration of visual arts into educational activities improved youth memory and understanding of health concepts.

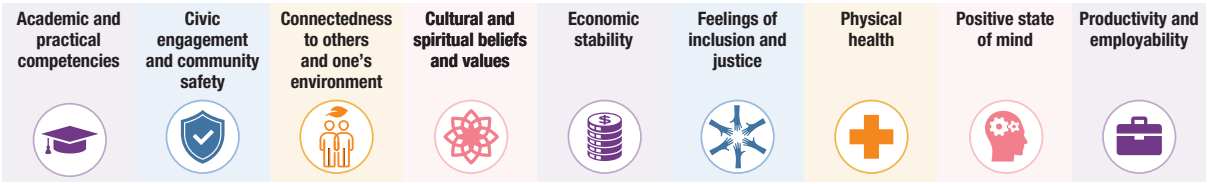
Rowe, Salo, and Rubin (2018) found that engaging in theater was associated with improved pretend play, creativity, and social cooperation skills, which are all important for healthy youth development. Borowski (2023) found that dance was related to enhanced social-emotional development through the development of nonverbal communication skills and self-intimation (i.e., understanding the messages sent through nonverbal gestures). Through the development of digital storytelling skills, Horner (2017) described how youth developed interpersonal communication skills that helped them with self-advocacy. As shown in Figure 6, overall skills development was associated with eight of the nine dimensions of youth well-being.

Associations Between Mechanisms and Dimensions of Youth Well-Being

As described above, the mechanisms interact and can be related to multiple dimensions of well-being. For

FIGURE 5

Well-Being Dimensions Associated with Mechanism 4: Creating Social Connections and Community



example, creating social connections and community can facilitate healing and wellness, although research specifically discussing the direction or sequence of that relationship is limited. More than half of the articles we reviewed (64 percent) discussed more than one dimension of well-being (Figure 7). Just over one-third (36 percent) of the articles described multiple mechanisms. Almost all of the articles that described multiple mechanisms also described multiple dimensions of well-being (31 percent of the 36 percent). Untangling this complexity will be an important next step to improve understanding of how to amplify these mechanisms and their influence on well-being.

Observing an arts activity and actively participating in practice of the arts were associated with three mechanisms: building agency to make positive social change, encouraging self-expression, and creating social connections and community. Through these mechanisms, youth may develop academic and practical competencies; become more connected to others and their environment; and develop cultural and spiritual beliefs and values, a positive state of mind, and physical health. These dimensions of well-being may be more closely related to each other than to the other dimensions and, thus, may be dependent on or amplify each other when targeted through arts engagement. For example, youth must develop competence in health literacy skills to become more

FIGURE 6

Well-Being Dimensions Associated with Mechanism 5: Developing Skills and a Mastery Mindset

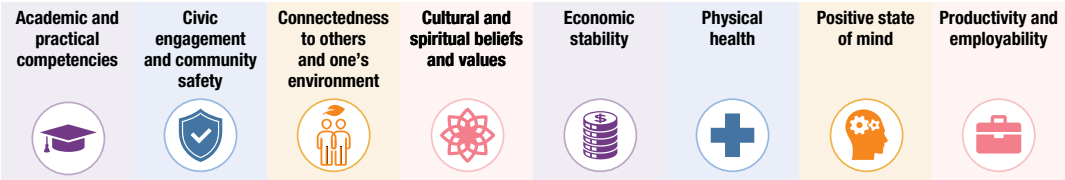
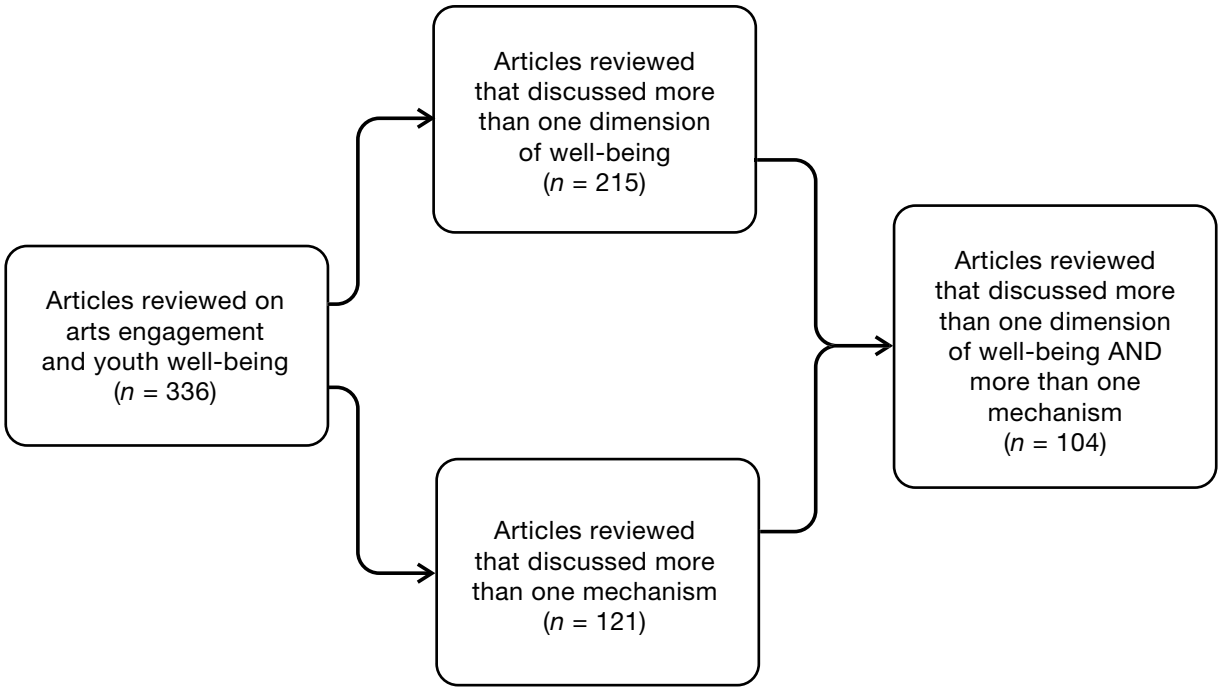


FIGURE 7

Articles Referencing One or More Mechanisms or Dimensions of Well-Being



physically healthy, and a positive state of mind can promote physical health.

The other three dimensions of youth well-being—economic stability, productivity and employability, and feelings of inclusion and justice—are each associated with a unique set of mechanisms. Economic stability may be developed through youth participation in arts programs that facilitate healing and wellness, create social connections and community, and/or develop skills and a mastery mindset. These three mechanisms are also related to the dimension of feelings of inclusion and justice. Youth who observe or actively participate in arts programs that focus on one or more of these mechanisms are more likely to be productive and employable. Two additional mechanisms are also related to feelings of inclusion and justice: encouraging self-expression and building agency to make positive social change.

Similar to the concept of well-being itself, the mechanisms that produce well-being are complex and interrelated. But our literature review suggests that there may be some combinations of mechanisms that are more associated with specific dimensions of well-being.

Interviewees' Insights on the Mechanisms

To supplement the literature from our multidisciplinary search and gain insights into gaps in the literature, we conducted 20 hour-long interviews with experts and leaders who had lived experiences in promoting well-being through arts engagement. We asked people about how they became involved with youth arts and well-being, how their fields define and use art to promote well-being, the mechanisms through which their art forms affect youth well-being and the indicators of this impact, and any gaps in their fields. Experts often reflected multiple perspectives, working in a disciplinary area (including education, public health, psychology, neuroscience, social work, philanthropy, human rights, and politics) and having lived experience as an artist (including songwriters, singers, actors, playwrights, musicians, dancers, and visual artists) and/or as a representative from a marginalized or underserved community.

As part of our commitment to centering equity in the research process through the EES, we developed the Equity-Centered Participatory Compensation Model, a novel compensation methodology (Rabinowitz, González, and Rogers, 2024). This model allowed us to elicit different levels of involvement from different participants, inviting participants who are typically underrepresented in the research space to have greater involvement and compensating them accordingly.

We took notes during the interviews and then used a rapid analytic abstraction form to analyze the notes for information similar to what we looked for in the literature review (e.g., information about arts engagement, youth well-being, and equity).

Most interviewees talked about well-being from a whole-child perspective, describing well-being in terms of thriving or flourishing; having healthy social, emotional, and physical development; and having creative development, school success, and civic engagement. Across the interviews, people identified that there was limited consensus on the specific definition of *well-being*. In the words of one interviewee,

> It depends on who is studying it. . . . [Well-being] is not fully operationalized. It depends on discipline.

When asked about the mechanisms through which their fields affect well-being, interviewees gave responses that aligned with the five mechanisms we identified in the literature review (see Table 7). Interviewees most frequently mentioned developing skills and a mastery mindset as a mechanism for promoting well-being (n = 13 interviewees), followed by encouraging self-expression and creating social connections and community (n = 11 interviewees each) and facilitating healing and wellness and building agency to make positive social change (n = 9 interviewees each). One interviewee noted,

> The great thing about the arts is there's so many mechanisms, since there's so many varied dimensions of [youth] well-being; it's remarkable in that regard.

One interesting distinction that interviewees made is that there are likely different mechanisms

TABLE 7

Interviewee Quotes for Mechanisms Through Which Arts Engagement Promotes Well-Being

Mechanism	Exemplar Quote from Interview
Building agency to make positive social change (*n* = 9 interviewees)	"Art gives youth a voice to speak up for things that are bothering [them] or build a way to connect to others or something greater than [themselves]."
Facilitating healing and wellness (*n* = 9 interviewees)	"Neurobiologically, we have so undervalued what we call the arts . . . they have resonance for us emotionally and practically . . . to share human values, beliefs, and ways to live. . . . They help us express ways we are. From a physiological perspective, we know the arts is incredibly healing . . . to recover from things we face every day."
Encouraging self-expression (*n* = 11 interviewees)	"You can use your voice to speak up for things that are bothering you or build a way to connect to others or something greater than yourself."
Creating social connections and community (*n* = 11 interviewees)	"Art creates spaces where people can thrive emotionally and feel well-being even under difficult circumstances, because there's a sense of connection, belonging and connection to ancestors and traditions. . . . There's also a lot of possibility for unity across identities in learning each other's practices. . . . If youth are educated with an intersectional lens of their identities, they will learn how to become allies with each other, and I think the arts are a really potent framework for that."
Developing skills and a mastery mindset (*n* = 13 interviewees)	"I think art-making is intellectually rigorous, engages identity, and requires young people to think about and understand representation-making, which is a core feature of being successful in any learning space—and joyful."

not only for different dimensions of well-being but also for different art forms and different levels of arts engagement (e.g., actively participating in an art form versus observing the arts). For example, one interviewee described how theater may help with creating social connections and community by improving perspective-taking and empathy, whereas music may facilitate healing and wellness by supporting emotional regulation and inhibition (e.g., one learns to hold back when playing music with others); see Table 7.

Notably, ten interviewees also discussed how organizations created safe spaces through arts engagement that, regardless of the art form, played an important role in promoting well-being:

> The power of being shoulder to shoulder with another teen and creating a story right in front of them. It needs the safety bubble and imagination. The mechanism of a just third space of incubation in order for things to be protected enough to bloom. . . . Where else do you get that [but with arts programs]?

We examined the literature to identify organizations that have taken the lead in promoting well-being among youth (Figure 8). Notably, two of the organizations mentioned were youth-led: a youth-led arts academy and a youth-led advisory committee that informed indigenous elders' decisionmaking.

As mentioned earlier, equity underpins all of the mechanisms. Six interviewees described the relationship between arts engagement and equity; for example, one interviewee noted,

> Nothing is more equitable than arts. . . . It gives [youth] more power and positions [them] as experts in their own lives.

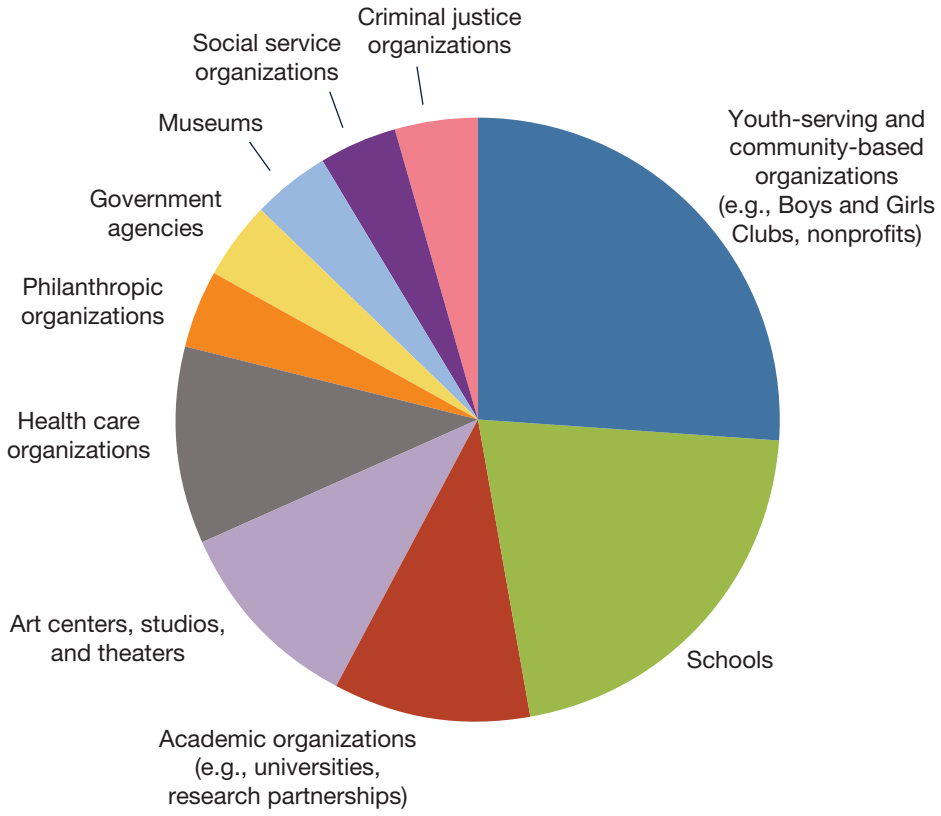
Interviewees also described how arts engagement can help with meaning-making among historically oppressed groups:

> For young people that come from historically oppressed groups, [the arts] is a way to give voice to something—that is often difficult to verbalize—through movement, sound, visual, or narrative.

When asked how their fields know whether their arts engagement has affected well-being, most interviewees described changes in individual youth outcomes (including work readiness, development of critical thinking skills, subjective well-being, civic engagement, and quality of life). Interviewees also described the challenges of measuring the impact of arts engagement on youth well-being:

FIGURE 8

Organizations That Took the Lead in Promoting Well-Being Among Youth



> I don't think there is a linear A-to-B situation . . . but creating safe spaces where things that are hard to talk about can be addressed visually and artistically.

Interviewees also described the trajectory of change as complex:

> Impact is not necessarily a straight line. Sometimes you see it right away . . . but you may have some bumps in the road, and those positive impacts may recede a bit and then . . . accelerate.

Interviewees talked about how sequencing measurement approaches—starting with exploratory or narrative stories to understand the specific mechanisms at play in the unique context and then moving to more-confirmatory quantitative measures—may be helpful in addressing the unique historical and social context in which arts engagement occurs:

> There needs to be an inside-out vision of what success looks like. It could be helping someone get what they need . . . being successful at doing the work you're asked to do.

Interviewees also described the importance of equity when considering success:

> Which [youth] get opportunities for which kinds of artistic experiences . . . is an important theme to think about when talking about equity and well-being.

Finally, when asked about gaps and opportunities for advancing the field of youth arts and well-being, interviewees discussed the need for better measures to quantify the impact of the arts, especially internal processes that occur in youth (e.g., building self-efficacy). For example, one interviewee indicated that studies should better differentiate mechanisms that are intrinsic (e.g., agency) from those that are instrumental (e.g., skills development):

> We could have a bigger impact if [researchers] could represent the impact better.

All of the interviewees also called for more collaboration and interdisciplinary partnerships across art forms, across qualitative and quantitative researchers, and across the art-versus-science divide. One interviewee stated,

> I'm tired of the arts versus science [rhetoric]. [It's] not useful. It's about "How can we collaborate?" Fields like neuroscience are helping pave the way to see how creativity and science can work hand in hand.

Interviewees also mentioned gaps in the literature, noting the need for impact studies that quantify the community-level impacts of arts engagement, considering both history and context; assess the neurobiological impacts of the arts; and quantify the relative impacts of specific art practices in comparison with more-traditional educational practices (i.e., what do art practices do better and worse than traditional educational practices). Interviewees indicated that more studies are needed to elevate understudied art forms, including dance, theater, photography, and digital arts, and to explore how to create an environment to facilitate arts-based self-care. Finally, interviewees suggested that future research use more-rigorous designs, including longitudinal studies, multisite studies, and studies designed to compare outcomes among more-diverse youth subpopulations (by, e.g., race, gender, age, and sexual identity).

The interviewees called for more collaboration across art forms, across qualitative and quantitative researchers, and across the art-versus-science divide.

Opportunities to Better Understand How Arts Engagement Promotes Well-Being

We identified seven opportunities to address gaps in the literature to better understand how arts engagement promotes well-being.

Opportunity 1: Build Cross-Disciplinary Partnerships to Untangle and Understand the Complex Ways in Which Arts Engagement Promotes Well-Being

We found that arts engagement promotes well-being in complex ways, and the relationship between arts engagement and well-being is defined, acted on, and studied in a variety of ways. Our literature review identified five mechanisms through which participation in the arts promotes youth well-being:

1. building agency to make positive social change
2. facilitating healing and wellness
3. encouraging self-expression
4. creating social connections and community
5. developing skills and a mastery mindset.

Interviewees described their work on promoting well-being through the arts as being aligned with these same mechanisms.

Many of these mechanisms were associated with multiple dimensions of well-being, and many of the mechanisms were related to one another, although research specifically discussing the direction or sequence of that relationship was limited. Academic and practical competencies, cultural and spiritual beliefs and values, a positive state of mind, and physical health—four dimensions of well-being—were associated with the same mechanisms, whereas the mechanisms associated with productivity and employability, feelings of inclusion and justice, and economic stability varied. These findings suggest

that there may be some combinations of mechanisms that are more associated with specific dimensions of well-being. Untangling this complexity will be an important next step to improve understanding of how to amplify these mechanisms and their influence on well-being.

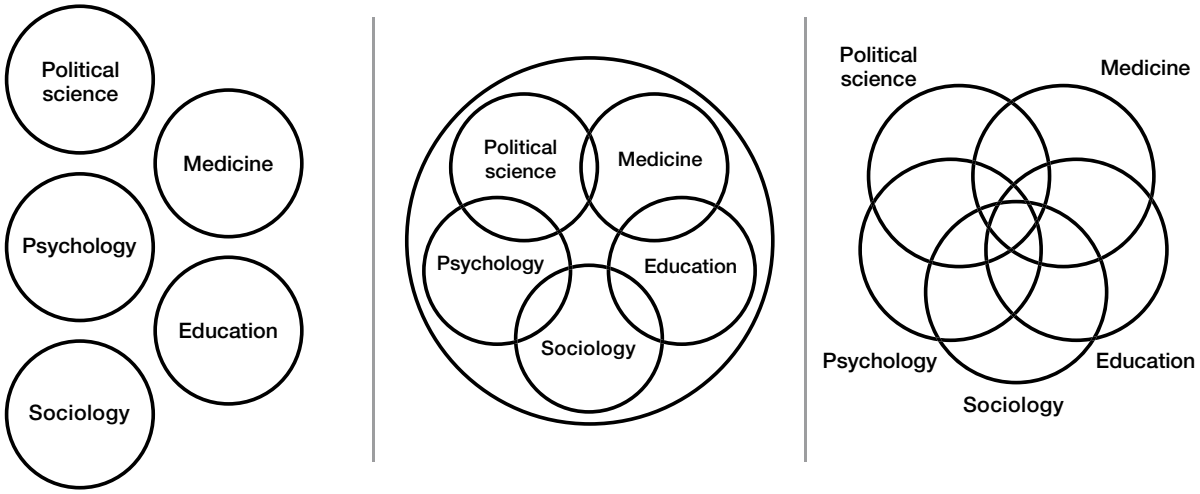
The call for interdisciplinary collaboration was prevalent in both the literature and the interviews. The diversity of the approaches identified in our literature review presents a compelling opportunity to leverage these approaches into more cross-disciplinary thinking (Figure 9). Merging definitions, approaches, and research methods and identifying areas in which alignment is beneficial can help push understanding forward and bring the fragmented efforts together.[1]

Cross-disciplinary partnerships could also define what more-rigorous research designs should look like for studies of art and well-being, when longitudinal and multisite studies are appropriate, and which youth populations (by, for example, race, gender, age, and sexual identity) need additional supports or study. Opportunity exists to find synergistic points across these approaches, but only if art and well-being scientists take the time to align and integrate these approaches.

Opportunity 2: Develop New or Expand Existing Arts Engagement Efforts That Focus on Building Agency to Make Positive Social Change

We found relatively fewer articles about building agency to make positive social change than there were for the other mechanisms. Partnerships are needed to catalyze more development and study of arts engagement efforts that focus on building agency to make positive social change. Bringing together researchers and practitioners working in the areas of arts, equity, and community organizing could help increase efforts focused on these mechanisms.

FIGURE 9
Multidisciplinary, Interdisciplinary, and Cross-Disciplinary Science



Multidisciplinary

One level; disciplines in isolation

Interdisciplinary

Two levels; disciplines interacting with an overarching set of higher-level concepts

Cross-disciplinary

Three levels; multiple interacting disciplines with an overarching set of concepts

SOURCE: Adapted from Acosta, Chandra, and Madrigano, 2017.

Opportunity 3: Expand Efforts to Look Holistically at How Mechanisms Operate Across Individual, Interpersonal, Organizational, and Community Levels

Our review found less research on the interpersonal and community mechanisms through which participation in the arts promotes youth well-being. Sociologists and political scientists, as well as public health practitioners and researchers, focus on community and environmental interactions, whereas social psychologists and family science and interpersonal communications researchers and practitioners focus on interpersonal relationships. More intentionally bringing together practitioners and researchers who are focused on the interpersonal and community levels to set a shared agenda could help advance efforts in this area. Bridging relationships between the existing pool of researchers and practitioners focused on the individual level and researchers and practitioners with expertise at the interpersonal and community levels could also foster more-holistic approaches to promoting well-being through the arts. Our discipline-specific literature review highlighted some examples of arts and well-being at the community level (e.g., changing college-going norms) that present opportunities for future study.

In addition, interviewees described how organizations involved with the arts and well-being provide a safe space that allows youth to thrive. Our literature review found a wide variety of organizations involved with arts and well-being, including youth-serving and community-based organizations, schools, academic organizations, arts centers, studios, theaters, health care organizations, philanthropic organizations, government agencies, museums, and social and criminal justice organizations. More research is needed to identify the characteristics that define an effective safe space and investigate how communities with more (or fewer) safe spaces benefit. For example, one interviewee suggested examining how these safe spaces create an environment that facilitates arts-based self-care.

Opportunity 4: Examine How Mechanisms and Their Impacts on Well-Being Vary Based on the Type of Arts Engagement

Our literature review found articles that almost exclusively focused on how active (e.g., acting in a play) and reactive (e.g., watching a play) participation in the arts contributed to well-being. More efforts to define and test youth-led arts engagement approaches are needed to determine whether having youth leadership translates into better (or worse) well-being outcomes.

Interviewees suggested that more research is needed to understand how mechanisms vary by type of arts engagement (e.g., reactive participation versus youth-led engagement, different art forms). Future research should examine how the type of engagement influences the size of the impact on youth well-being and the specific dimensions that are related to arts engagement. Understanding how the type of engagement varies by mechanism is important to determine whether specific mechanisms are more effective or can be strengthened by adjusting the type of engagement.

Interviewees also mentioned that more research is needed on the well-being impacts of dance, theater, photography, and digital arts. Future research studies should differentiate the relative contribution of each of these art forms to each mechanism. One approach to differentiating these contributions is to examine how the impact on the same set of well-being dimensions varies because of differential amounts of engagement and engagement with different art forms. Differentiating the relative contributions of art forms is necessary to better inform engagement efforts (such that they align art forms with the most-impactful mechanisms). Discerning relative effectiveness will require research study designs that test causality (e.g., randomized controlled trials) and measures that quantify the impact of the arts.

Opportunity 5: Document the Impacts of Arts Efforts That Promote Youth Economic Stability and Feelings of Inclusion and Justice

Participating in the arts was associated with nine dimensions of well-being: academic and practical competencies, productivity and employability, cultural and spiritual beliefs and values, economic stability, civic engagement and community safety, connectedness to others and one's environment, positive state of mind, physical health, and feelings of inclusion and justice. However, there were fewer articles describing the associations between arts participation and economic stability and feelings of inclusion and justice than there were for the other dimensions. It is unclear whether we found limited research because few efforts exist or because the efforts that exist do not document their impact. To fill this gap, we suggest both new efforts and better documentation of existing efforts. Bringing together academic institutions; arts organizations; and correctional, criminal justice, labor, and economic organizations to design and study new arts programming may help propel efforts in this area.

Opportunity 6: Document How to Equitably Implement the Mechanisms for Arts Engagement and Their Impacts on Inequities in Youth Well-Being

Despite finding literature on how the mechanisms support well-being, we were unable to find robust literature on how arts engagement strategies are equitably implemented and how arts engagement influences inequities in youth well-being. Interviewees indicated that arts engagement is inherently equitable because everyone has the capacity for self-expression through the arts, and the arts can play an important role in promoting social good. Given widening inequities, if research could demonstrate how arts engagement can address inequities in youth well-being, it would make a compelling case for the importance of arts engagement in reducing health care costs and increasing economic benefits, ultimately improving youth well-being.

In the research literature, equity is often linked to the social determinants of health, which reflect the conditions in which youth live, work, and grow (e.g., socioeconomic status, education, housing, transportation, access to and health care; see Gómez et al., 2021). But the arts address the limitations of perspectives focused on social determinants, looking beyond those conditions associated with ill health and inequity to leverage both tangible assets, such as shared space, and intangible assets, such as creativity and culture (Sheng, 2017). Additional research studies are needed to understand, for example, how the arts can help shape equitable environments that promote youth thriving, as well as the types of arts engagement that are effective in helping youth leverage individual and community assets to overcome or improve their social determinants of health and well-being.

Opportunity 7: Innovate on Study Designs and Measures That Quantify the Impact of the Arts

Development of arts engagement study designs and measures is another area in which cross-disciplinary approaches are needed. Interviewees called for better study designs and measures to quantify the impact of the arts (and specific art practices), differentiate the mechanisms that are intrinsic (e.g., agency) from those that are instrumental (e.g., skills development), and capture impacts from the neurobiological level all the way up to the community level in ways that consider history and context. Interviewees also discussed the limitations of relying solely on randomized controlled trial study designs and validated survey measures because these study designs and measures are limited in their ability to illuminate the mechanisms through which arts engagement affects well-being. Multiple interviewees indicated that mixed methods are needed to understand the impacts. For example, one interviewee suggested that starting with an exploratory assessment to identify the mechanisms and potential impacts and then conducting a confirmatory assessment using validated survey measures may be an effective approach. However, more innovation and research are needed to develop appropriate measures and test whether these

measures are reliable and effective. The development of study designs and measures will require researcher and practitioner collaboration to be effective. Without improved study designs and measures, it will remain challenging to document the impact that arts organizations are having on youth well-being.

Conclusion

There is a diversity of literature—originating from different sources, disciplines, and theoretical orientations and reflecting different levels of rigor—that examines how arts engagement promotes well-being. The mechanisms through which arts engagement promotes youth well-being are complex and interrelated and cut across an array of well-being dimensions. Cross-disciplinary partnerships are needed to untangle the complex strands of literature and weave them back together in a meaningful way. Additional research is needed on less studied areas (such as agency to make positive social change, community-level mechanisms, and arts engagement efforts that focus on the well-being dimensions of economic stability and feelings of inclusion and justice) and emerging areas (such as safe spaces to facilitate self-care through arts engagement). Specifically, our literature review identified seven research gaps and seven opportunities to fill them (Table 8). Addressing these gaps is paramount to move the science of arts and well-being forward and find effective multilevel solutions and policies that help youth thrive.

Note

[1] The field of resilience provides an example for how to move toward more-integrated science. Resilience research was splintered into efforts focused on psychological resilience (of individuals) (Masten and Monn, 2015), community and environmental resilience (Berkes and Ross, 2013; Chandra et al., 2011), and the interconnections between individuals and their environment (Koliou et al., 2020). As calls for more-integrated resilience grew (e.g., Acosta, Chandra, and Madrigano, 2017; Beichler et al., 2014; Masten, 2015), President Biden pulled together a leading group of experts to develop the *National Climate Resilience Framework* (White House, 2023), which calls for an all-hands-on-deck effort across all levels of the government; political leaders of all affiliations; and philanthropic, nonprofit, academic, and private-sector institutions and provides a common definition of *resilience*, fundamental principles for achieving resilience, and a list of six core objectives to protect the United States from the impacts of climate change and make communities safe, healthy, equitable, and economically strong. The mechanisms and dimensions of well-being described in this report reflect a place to begin merging definitions and core concepts related to arts engagement and youth well-being.

TABLE 8

Summary of Gaps and Opportunities

Gap	Opportunity
Few articles discussed how the mechanisms were related to one another and how using multiple mechanisms amplified (or detracted from) the impact of arts engagement on well-being.	Build cross-disciplinary partnerships to (1) bring together the diversity of approaches identified in the literature and (2) untangle and then weave back together the complex strands of research on youth well-being and the arts. Use these partnerships to define what *research rigor* means for arts and well-being studies, when multisite and longitudinal research is appropriate, and which youth populations need support or study.
Few articles referenced how the arts build agency to make positive social change to promote well-being.	Improve partnerships with researchers and practitioners working in the areas of arts and community organizing to catalyze more development and study of arts engagement that is focused on the mechanism-building agency to promote positive social change.
Few articles referenced interpersonal and community-level mechanisms through which the arts promote well-being.	Bring together practitioners and researchers focused on the interpersonal and community levels to set a shared agenda to advance efforts in this area. Bridge research and practice at the individual level and with expertise at the interpersonal and community levels to promote more-holistic approaches. Conduct more research to identify the characteristics that define an effective safe space and how communities with more (or fewer) safe spaces benefit.
People we interviewed had limited awareness of how the relationships between mechanisms and well-being vary by the type of art (e.g., reactive participation versus youth-led, different art forms); the literature was also limited in this area.	Define and test youth-led arts engagement approaches to determine whether having youth leadership translates into better (or worse) well-being outcomes. Conduct more research studies that quantify the relative contributions of art forms to well-being by mechanism. Conduct more research on the well-being impacts of less studied art forms, such as dance, theater, photography, and digital arts.
Few articles described the associations between arts participation and the well-being dimensions of economic stability and feelings of inclusion and justice.	Bring together academic institutions; arts organizations; and correctional, criminal justice, labor, and economic organizations to develop new efforts and better document existing ones.
Few articles described the associations between arts engagement, youth well-being, and equity.	Document how to equitably implement mechanisms for arts engagement and examine their impacts on inequities in youth well-being.
Interviewees indicated that existing measures are limited in their ability to quantify the impact of the arts (and specific art practices), differentiate the mechanisms that are intrinsic (e.g., agency) from those that are instrumental (e.g., skills development), and capture impacts from the neurobiological level all the way up to the community level in ways that consider history and context.	Develop innovative study designs and measures and test whether they are reliable and effective through researcher and practitioner collaboration.

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About This Report

A large and growing body of research on youth, well-being, and the arts exists, but it is fragmented across multiple disciplines (e.g., psychology, education) and areas (e.g., different art forms, different definitions of *youth well-being* and *arts engagement*). In this report, we summarize findings from a literature review we conducted to investigate global themes and gaps in the current multidisciplinary literature on the relationship between the arts and youth well-being. We used an equity-centered environmental scan to extract nuanced insights from the vast repository of information. Findings on the current strengths and gaps in the literature will be of interest to researchers and practitioners who do work related to youth, arts, and well-being. Policymakers, community leaders, and youth themselves may also be interested in these findings. Our recommendations offer ways to fill gaps in current research and promote the cross-disciplinary partnerships needed to untangle the complex strands of literature and weave them back together in a meaningful way.

An online annex to this report, with a full list of all references reviewed and summary tables containing key information about arts engagement and well-being for each reference, is available at www.rand.org/t/RRA3264-1.

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