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Research Demonstrates Impact of StoryCorps' One Small Step Initiative On Polarization in the United States

Tuesday, September 5, 2023 (Brooklyn, NY) – Recent research demonstrates that its One Small Step (OSS) Initiative is helping people with opposing political views see the humanity in each other and seeding hope for civil communication across the political divide. OSS brings strangers with different political views together to record a 50-minute conversation—not to debate politics—but to learn about each other as people. Currently, the initiative is working intensively in three Anchor Communities nationwide (Fresno/Central Valley, CA; Richmond, VA; and Wichita, KS) and to date, more than 4,100 people in 40 states have participated. A fourth community will be announced later in September.

Over the last few years, StoryCorps' One Small Step has been evaluated by accomplished scientists and pollsters including **Dr. Jennifer Richeson, a MacArthur “genius” fellow and social psychologist at Yale**, who is one of the nation's leading experts on intergroup relations; **Tim Dixon, co-founder of More in Common**, the acclaimed nonprofit research organization that works to address polarization and division; and **Joel Benenson, founder and CEO of Benenson Strategy Group**, and a political strategist who played a leading role in three winning presidential campaigns. Each researcher is assessing different aspects of the effort: the conversation experience, the impact of the audio-visual content created from these conversations, and the impact of OSS on individuals and communities. The researchers also serve on an OSS advisory board, working closely with StoryCorps leadership on program strategy by lending their advice and expertise.

“This research shows us that OSS is working by shifting American beliefs and behaviors and hopefully, putting us on a path to a better future where seeing people across the divides as human beings is normalized,” said StoryCorps Founder and President Dave Isay. “We look forward to continuing to learn from this ongoing research as we grow and evolve this important work.”

The Conversation Experience

Yale University’s Social Perception and Communication Laboratory, led by Richeson, is assessing the impact of the OSS conversation experience on participants. This high-level research examines changes in interpersonal empathy and perceptions before and after someone participates in an OSS conversation. After analyzing the experiences of more than 400 participants, Yale found that **both liberal and conservatives felt more empathetic toward their interview partner after their OSS conversation. The most recent results suggest that participating in OSS may generalize levels of empathy for people on the other side of the partisan divide, beyond their conversation partner.**

One Small Step Content

More In Common, the renowned research organization studying the drivers of polarization globally, is working to measure reactions to the content the organization creates and distributes as part of the intervention. The content, tested across a broad cross-section of Americans, includes advertising campaigns and messaging, as well as excerpts of OSS conversations that are made into short animations and shared on social media and elsewhere. After polling more than 1,000 research participants, More in Common found that certain **OSS content and messaging can convince most people (over 60 percent) that it is possible to have meaningful conversations with someone who holds different political beliefs. Exposure to our most compelling content can increase Americans’ willingness to record an OSS conversation with people who hold different political beliefs by almost 50 percent.**

Community Impact

Benenson Strategy Group is measuring the awareness of OSS in Anchor Communities where StoryCorps has focused its efforts, as well as shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of residents who have been exposed to OSS. In our most recent poll conducted in December 2022, they surveyed more than 500 Wichitans and found that after just two years, OSS has reached a significant level of awareness in Wichita: 1 in 5 residents (21%) reported being aware of the program. **Wichitans who are aware of OSS** (who participated in a conversation, saw an ad, or experienced the content) **are more hopeful that civil communication across the political divide is possible** than those who are unaware. In addition, **Wichitans who are aware of OSS report less division locally and nationally, compared to those**

who aren't, and they are also significantly more likely to respect—and feel respected by—those with whom they disagree politically.

For more information on OSS, visit takeonesmallstep.org.

About StoryCorps

Founded in 2003, StoryCorps has given over 645,000 people, in all 50 states, the chance to record interviews about their lives. StoryCorps helps people believe in each other by illuminating the possibility and humanity in all of us—one story at a time. The award-winning organization preserves the recordings in its archive at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, the largest single collection of human voices ever gathered, and shares select stories with the public through StoryCorps' podcast, radio broadcasts, animated shorts, digital platforms, and best-selling books. These powerful human stories reflect the vast range of American experiences, engender empathy and connection, and remind us how much more we have in common than what divides us. StoryCorps is especially committed to capturing and amplifying voices least heard in the media. The StoryCorps MobileBooth, an Airstream trailer that has been transformed into a traveling recording booth, crisscrosses the country year-round gathering the stories of people nationwide. 2023 marks the 20th anniversary of StoryCorps. Learn more at storycorps.org.

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