

An Overview of Volunteering in Adolescence:

Predictors, Outcomes, and Time Trends

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### Abstract

The Youth Development Study is a longitudinal study that began in 1988, unique in its focus on the outcomes of volunteering in youth. An extensive literature search was conducted in hopes of finding evidence to support the hypotheses of the Youth Development Study. Sources include longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, as well as national surveys. While few studies analyzed the same variables as the Youth Development Study (such as mental health and well-being outcomes), their findings provide support for theoretical justification that volunteering in youth results in beneficial outcomes in terms of mental health and well-being. This literature review provides an overview of known research on youth volunteers, the impacts of volunteering, and time trends associated with volunteering. Although few studies specifically address the mental health and well-being outcomes of volunteering in adolescence, it goes to show that the Youth Development Study is delving into unexplored territory.

*Keywords:* youth, volunteering, outcomes

The Youth Development Study is a longitudinal study that began in 1988, looking at the development of youth from adolescence to early adulthood. Using data from high school students in the late 1980s and early 1990s and their children, the study looks at a wide range of trends in volunteering and its impact on self-concepts, well-being, and academic achievement. More than a thousand high school students in the St. Paul Minnesota Public School District were randomly selected. The original respondents have been followed up on regularly throughout the years by mail. They are currently in their mid-thirties. Although respondents have dropped out of the study over the years, response rates continue strong at nearly 75 percent. Starting in 2008, the children of the YDS participants ranging from ages 11-20 joined the study.

There were a few key findings from the study. First off, while there was a decrease in youth employment rates, there was also an increase in youth volunteering. Children volunteered more than twice as much as their parents did; over half of the parents reported being employed in ninth grade, compared to only 7 percent of their children today. Secondly, females, older children, and those with more highly educated parents are more likely to volunteer. Third, there are academic and personal benefits to volunteering in youth. Volunteering is linked to higher grade point averages, academic self-esteem, and well-being.

The literature review specifically addresses the health outcomes of volunteering in adolescence. Areas of focus include outcomes such as mental health, well-being, aspirations, and hope for the future. Extensive literature searches have been conducted in an attempt to find research that supports the findings of the Youth Development Study. While plenty of research has been conducted on volunteering in youth, little to none

address the desired variables. And while plenty of research has been conducted on the effects of volunteering in adulthood, little to none fit the desired demographic.

Nonetheless, these results can be used to broaden our understanding of the precursors and outcomes of volunteering.

### **Precursors of Volunteering**

One prevalent topic in our literature search includes the predictors of volunteering. A wide range of factors predict volunteering in youth. In a 21-year-long longitudinal study by Rosenthal, Feiring, and Lewis (1998), social and cognitive development from infancy to young adulthood was examined. Measures of volunteer involvement, cognitive and social development, adjustment, stress, and family cohesion were measured from 105 white middle class participants. Family environment was measured with the Cohesion and Moral-Religious Emphasis scales from the Family Environment Scale. Data on volunteering were collected at 18 and 21 years of age. Adolescents were asked to describe their volunteer activities in detail. The study concluded that adolescent factors such as cognitive ability, family coherence, and membership in a prosocial organization are the strongest indicators of volunteering.

In a cross-sectional study of about 18,000 Canadians aged 15 years and older, Reed and Selbee (2000) profile the characteristics of active volunteers. Using data from the 1997 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating, the study listed nine determinants: generosity and caring, household characteristics, religious background, education, occupation, assessment of one's life situation, motivation, region, and community size. It was found that adults with above-average educations and occupations, children between ages 13 to 17, and are involved with religious activities (such as going

to church and giving religious donations) were more likely to volunteer. Although there is no single distinctive pattern of traits for active volunteers, they are distinguished by a combination of individual traits and sociodemographic characteristics.

In a longitudinal study by Atkins, Hard and Donnelly (2005), the relationship between childhood personality type and volunteering during adolescence was examined. A sample of more than 5,000 children of 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth respondents were assessed on a biennial basis starting in 1986. Measures of the study included personality, maternal educational attainment and income, cognitive achievement, and home environment (using the Home Observation Measurement of the Environment Short Form) for Time 1; religious participation and team/club membership for Time 2; and volunteering for Time 3 and 4. The study found that resilient individuals, characterized by high levels of empathy, emotional regulation, and positive emotionality, are more likely to volunteer.

### **Identity**

Another popular topic regarding volunteering in adolescence is identity. A substantial amount of literature indicates a strong relationship between identity and civic engagement. Those with a strong sense of identity are more likely to volunteer and those who volunteer develop a strong sense of identity (Crocetti, Jahromi, and Meeus, 2012). The literature search found studies that focused on a variety of perspectives on identity, which can be considered as both a precursor and outcome to volunteering.

In a cross-sectional study by Goethem and colleagues (2012), volunteering, moral reasoning, general moral thought, and personal identity were measured from a sample of 698 Dutch students aged 12 to 20. Moral reasoning was measured using a Dutch

translation of the short version of the Defining Issues Test (DIT; Rest, 1979); general moral thought was measured using the Children's Rights Evaluation Questionnaire (CREQ; van Hoof & Raaijmakers, 2010); personal identity was measured with the Spatial Continuity of Identity Questionnaire (SCIQ; van Hoof & Raaijmakers, 2002) while identity contexts were assessed in number and content. Adolescents participate in societal contexts that include school, home, religion, and politics. Identity integration, a sense of being the same person over different contexts and over time, was calculated by taking the mean of correlations between each adolescent's general description of identity and their context-specific identities. The study found that moral commitment was positively related to the number of identity contexts in adolescents. The higher the number of identity contexts define identity context, the more likely adolescents were to volunteer. However, while adolescents' identity integration predicted their volunteering involvement, it did not predict how likely they were to volunteer.

In addition to identity context, identity achievement is connected to volunteering in adolescents. Identity achievement essentially means having found one's true self. According to a cross-sectional study of 392 Italian high school students by Crocetti and colleagues (2012), scores on identity achievement were positively correlated with prosocial behaviors such as volunteering. It is shown that civic engagement and identity formation stem from and enable one another. This comes as little surprise, considering volunteering allows adolescents to develop work skills, interact with adult models, and explore new roles.

Although it focuses on the elderly, Thoits' study (2012) also indicates a clear relationship between identity and volunteering. Thoits cites role accumulation hypothesis,

which states that the more social roles individuals possess, better their sense of well-being. The more important a volunteer identity is to an individual, the more frequently they act in that role.

### **Outcomes**

Many studies also focused on outcomes. As found in the Youth Development Study, a wide range of positive outcomes stem from volunteering. Not only does volunteering benefit the community and those in need of help, but it also benefits the volunteers themselves.

From the literature search, studies have shown that outcomes of volunteering in adolescence include learning new skills, social responsibility, and contribution to self, others, and the community (e.g. Atkins et al., 2005; Crocetti 2012; Cemalcilar 2009; and Yates and Youniss, 1996). In addition, youth volunteerism is a strong predictor of adult volunteerism (Atkins et al., 2005). The Giving and Volunteering in the United States 2001 survey, conducted by Independent Sector, found that 67.3% of volunteers (over the age of 18) did volunteer work in youth.

Another positive outcome of volunteering includes well-being. In 2012, DoSomething.org, an organization that promotes volunteering in youth, conducted a national survey of teens and volunteering. Respondents range from age 13-22. Out of the 4,363 respondents, 10 percent were of middle school age, 55 percent were high school age, 30 percent college age, and 5 percent post-college age. The study found that young people who volunteer are happier. Those who volunteer scored 24 percent higher on a life satisfaction scale. The level of happiness varied depending on activities such as volunteering with a sports program, cultural group, fundraising for charity, working with

sick or old people, and working with a political campaign. However, they all scored higher happiness scores than those who did not volunteer.

Most of the studies concerned with mental health and well-being were conducted with adults, however it is possible that these outcomes apply to adolescents. Thoits' cross-sectional study examined the relationship between volunteering, identity salience, and well-being. Analyses of survey data from Mended Hearts visitors participated in questionnaires measuring well-being and mental health. Results show that volunteering benefits those in late adulthood in terms of mental health and well-being. Because of role accumulation hypothesis, volunteers have higher levels of well-being. Thoits found that volunteer work and well-being are related over time. The greater the volunteer's perceived time spent in the volunteer role, the greater their reported happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and sense of mastery over time. In addition, the more time spent volunteering, the greater the salience of that role for self-conception, which in turn relates to more positive consequences for psychological well-being.

Another finding that supports Thoits' findings is a study by Muller and colleagues (2014). Using longitudinal data from the German Ageing Survey (DEAS) from the years 1996, 2002, 2008, and 2011, they measured volunteering, self-efficacy, and subjective well-being. Participants were aged 45 – 54, 55 – 56, 65 – 74, and 75 – 84, at the times of data collection. Longitudinal structural equation modeling was used to calculate levels of self-efficacy, negative affect, and positive affect. Findings show that in all four waves, volunteering predicted lower levels of negative affect. In the three older age groups, volunteering predicted higher levels of self-efficacy.

In addition, a study by Piliavin and Siegl (2007) found positive effects of volunteering on psychological well-being and self-reported health. The study used all four waves of the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, with a sample of women and men who graduated from Wisconsin high schools in 1957. Follow up surveys were conducted in 1964, 1975, 1992, and 2004. Independent variables included volunteering and intensity and diversity of activities. Dependent variables included psychological well-being and self-reported health, while moderating and mediating variables included social integration and moderating. Controls for social participation, past psychological well-being, other sources of well-being, and measures of health behaviors were also considered. The study revealed that volunteering is positively related to psychological well-being. Continuous volunteering for a variety of organizations had more positive effects on psychological well-being.

### **Time Trends**

A variety of national surveys indicate that the role of volunteering has been evolving since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 2002 Giving & Volunteering in the United States Survey conducted by Independent Sector provides detailed information on time trends in volunteering; the impact volunteering in youth has on future volunteering; and the generational impact of volunteering.

One key finding of the survey indicated that a majority of adult volunteers today (66.8%) volunteered as a youth. This supports the conclusions of others study that indicate that those who volunteered in youth are more likely to continue to do so in adulthood. In addition, youth volunteers become more generous donors in adulthood. The study also shows a dramatic change in volunteering in high school. In the school years

between 1952-1956, 51.4 percent of high school students volunteered. Between 1982 and 1986, 61.3 percent of high school students volunteered and between 1992 and 1996, the rate jumped up to 67 percent. Lastly, adults are more likely to volunteer if they did so with their family as youth. The adult volunteering rate was 58.5 percent in families where both parents and youth volunteered. These families also contributed more money, with an average of \$2,895.

Trends from Monitoring the Future data concur with the Giving & Volunteering in the United States survey. Since 1989, volunteer rates in eighth, tenth, and twelve increased. In 1989, 25.8 percent of eighth graders volunteered, compared to 27.1 percent in 2014. In 1989, 26.8 percent of tenth graders volunteered, compared to 34.4 percent in 2014. And lastly, in 1989, 26.8 percent of twelfth graders volunteered, compared to 38.8 percent in 2013.

The rising youth volunteer rates coincide with the decrease of teen employment. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, teen employment has fallen with every decade since the 1970s. In July 1974, nearly 57 percent of 16- to 19-year-olds were employed. In July 2014, less than 35 percent were employed. These findings show a potential connection between volunteering and employment. Because jobs are more difficult to find for teenagers, they develop work their skills through volunteering.

## **Conclusion**

Although the literature search was unable to find much data on mental health, well-being, and aspiration outcomes of volunteering in adolescence, it goes to show that the Youth Development Study is venturing into unexplored territory. There is a substantial amount of evidence for theoretical justification that volunteering in

adolescence is beneficial to mental health, well being, and aspirations. Time trends over the past forty years indicate that volunteering plays a much more integral part of adolescents' lives today. It is important to continue investigating the outcomes of volunteering in adolescence because of its importance to youth development.

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