

Briefing Paper 102

What factors predict volunteering among youths in the uk?

Matthew Bennett and Meenakshi Parameshwaran

Introduction

This research uses data from Wave 2 of Understanding Society to provide the first comprehensive analysis of the factors predicting the frequency of volunteering among 4,760 youths aged between 10 and 15 years in the UK. In order to understand youth participation, we analyse the extent that human, social, and cultural resources available to youths encourage them to volunteer. Academics, politicians, and policy makers have raised concern over the apparent apathy among youths in their interest in, and levels of, various forms of civic engagement including volunteering. It is typically thought that an alienated and disengaged generation of youths today is detrimental to a flourishing civic society tomorrow. Disengaged youths and their apparent lack of volunteering is all the more relevant given the importance placed on civic skills, and the links between forms of civic engagement and social cohesion.

The empirical literature regarding the predictors of volunteering using large-scale representative survey data is non-existent among the youth demographic in the UK, which is particularly striking for

two reasons. First, the British Government has made great efforts to encourage volunteering and civic engagement among youths, including Millennium Volunteers (2000), Active Citizens in Schools (2001), Giving Campaign and Giving Nation (2006), Young Volunteers Challenge (2003-2005), and Vinspired (2006), and compulsory citizenship classes (CountinYou, 2010). More recently, the Conservative party established the National Citizen Service, signalling their commitment to, and involvement of, young people in the “Big Society”. However, given the efforts made by successive governments on policy initiatives, and reports, it is surprising that the factors predicting youth civic involvement and the descriptions of such behaviours using nationally representative data have not featured.

Second, youth civic engagement has been linked to a number of positive outcomes in the American and European empirical research. Such outcomes include voluntary and political activity in later life, reduced incidence of problem behaviours (such as substance use), higher wellbeing, higher academic/career aspirations and achievement, higher

levels of citizenship, and a greater sense of community.

We contribute to the UK literature by describing voluntary activity among youths, whilst documenting the household and background characteristics salient to these behaviours.

Methods

We use data collected in 2010 and 2011 from Wave 2 of Understanding Society, which contains a large nationally representative sample of young people, who completed a youth survey.

Wave 2 was selected as it contains a battery of questions measuring civic engagement (including voluntary activity). The data capture self-reported demographics, attitudes, and behaviours of respondents, including questions on family background and civic activities.

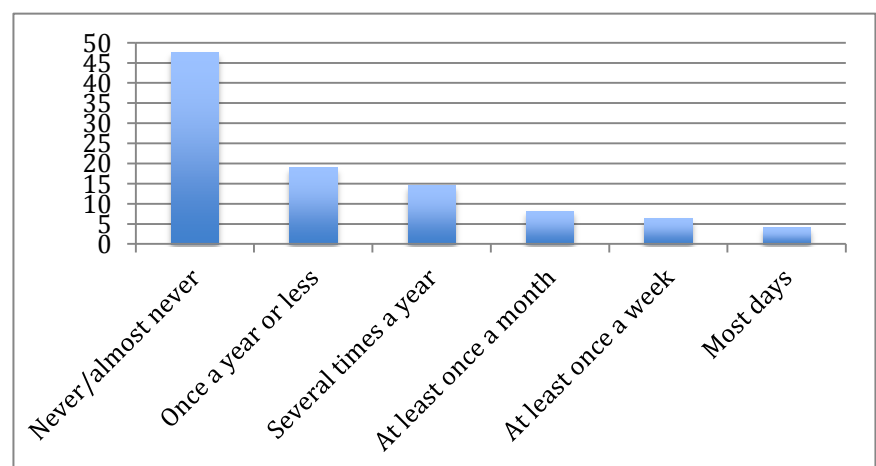
Our sample consists of 4,760 in 3,626 households. According to the data, 52% of youths volunteer at least once per year, of which 19% do so at least once per month or more and 6% do so at least once per week (Figure 1).

In our models predicting youth volunteering we control for relevant individual-level demographic variables that may be associated with civic engagement, capturing gender, age, ethnic minority status, household structure and living in a rural area. We then look at the specific effects of a number of key independent variables, which are organised into human, social, and cultural

capital resources and can be seen summarised in Table 1.

We make a novel contribution to the worldwide youth literature by investigating the role of youth cultural activity. Cultural activity was based on the following measures: frequency of adults taking youth to the theatre, dance performances, or classical music concerts; frequency of adults taking youth to live sports events; frequency of adults taking youth to museums or art galleries; and frequency of discussing books at home.

Figure 1: Frequency of volunteering per year among youths in the UK



Results

We find significant differences across social classes in the likelihood of volunteering. Higher classes are more likely to be engaged than lower classes. However, social class effects become insignificant in the model once social and cultural capital measures are included. Specifically we see that the number of close friends that the youth has is positively associated with the likelihood of increased volunteer activity. Youths who attend religious classes are also more

likely to volunteer. Surprisingly, there are no effects of parental service attendance, suggesting extra-curricular religious classes and service attendance are differentially effective in terms of the effects of adults engaging youth in civic activities. Role-modelling effects of parental volunteering are very important and are positively associated with volunteering. **Our composite measure of youth cultural capital has the largest and most significant positive effect, suggesting that youths who are high in cultural capital are also more likely to volunteer.**

There are no differences in participation across religious groups, and **ethnic minority youth are more likely to volunteer than white British youth. Such results show a positive picture of ethnic minority civic integration.** Females are, on average, more likely to volunteer than males, and rural youth more likely than urban youth. There were no differences across household structures, with youth from single-parent households just as likely to volunteer as youth from two-parent households.

Table 1: Summary of regression results predicting frequency of youth volunteering

Variable	Result
Human capital	
Parental social class	*
Gross household income	n/s
Youth's health status	n/s
Youth's self-esteem	n/s
Social capital	
Household size	n/s
Number of children in the household	n/s
Number of youth's close friends	+
Cultural capital	
Parental religious affiliation	n/s
Parental religious service attendance	n/s
Youth extra-curricular religious class attendance	+
Parental volunteer activity	+
Parental interest in politics	n/s
Cultural activity	+
Other factors	
Female	+
Age	+
Youth lives with both parents	n/s
Youth belongs to an ethnic minority group	+
Youth lives in a rural area	+

Source: Understanding Society

*= Initial class differences disappear adjusting for social and cultural capital.

+ = variable is positively associated with increased youth volunteering.

n/s = variable is not associated with youth volunteering

Conclusion

Our paper uses representative youth and household data from Understanding Society Wave 2 to test various predictors of youth voluntary activity. We find strong effects of cultural capital resources, which are associated with more frequent youth volunteering. These cultural capital effects render social class differences in youth civic engagement insignificant. Therefore, we speculate that an investment in civic engagement may also potentially signal the same 'superior' tastes and preferences as the more traditional forms of cultural capital typically accumulated by higher social classes. We wonder whether youth civic engagement is potentially used as a signal by more socially advantaged youth to differentiate themselves from others. Parental role-modelling effects in the form of parental volunteering are also positively associated with youth civic engagement, thereby emphasising the role played by significant adults in moulding the behaviour of young people and the potential transmission and reproduction of behaviour within social classes.

In terms of policy implications, the results demonstrate that more needs to be done to engage lower social class urban white males in their early teenage years (as mentioned, earlier models demonstrate large class differences when included separately). Mentoring programs could be introduced to substitute for parental involvement for those youths lacking civically engaged role models. Given the positive associations between civic engagement and later life outcomes, it is essential that this increasingly socially excluded youth sub-group is encouraged to participate in civic activities.

We hope this study, given its power, provides a benchmark for future research, particularly in terms of descriptive findings and analytical explanations. With an ageing population and shrinking of the welfare state under the current Conservative Government, resources will become scarcer and younger generations may need to volunteer more to meet needs that cannot be met by the state. This study provides politicians and policy makers with analytical explanations that can be used to develop and civically engage the next generation of citizens.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

© TSRC 2013

This paper is part of the Third Sector Research Centre – Briefing Paper Series see www.tsrc.ac.uk for more details.

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Office for Civil Society (OCS) and the Barrow Cadbury UK Trust is gratefully acknowledged. The work was part of the programme of the joint ESRC, OCS Barrow Cadbury Third Sector Research Centre