

# Volunteering among Australian adolescents

## Findings from a national study

Ninety-three young Australians were interviewed about volunteering as part of a larger three-stage study on youth spirituality and social concern. The results indicate that young people who were older, better educated and had access to networks and mentoring were more likely to be engaged in social-cause service than those without these resources. Social-cause service involves volunteers having direct involvement in causes or activities that help people who are in need, are disadvantaged or marginalised. In comparison, standard-cause service involves volunteers working in activities which assist other people but do not involve direct exposure to them or to issues of inequality or injustice in society. Respondents who engaged in social-cause service saw clear benefits for themselves as well as for the group with whom they were serving.

by Ruth Webber

**V**olunteers are typically people with higher incomes, higher education and more social resources (Wilson 2000). Many young people are deprived of the opportunity or the resources to volunteer. People volunteer more as their willingness, capability and availability increase (Meijs & van der Voort 2006).

Young people become engaged in volunteering for many different reasons and via many different paths (Friedland & Morimota 2005). They volunteer through clubs, churches, church-based agencies, community service, schools, family connections, friends, and broadly through interest (Andolina et al. 2003, p.279; Hartley 2001; Planty & Regnier 2003). These people and organisations provide opportunities for young people to develop civic attitudes and values, which in turn promote attitudes and practices conducive to democratic life (Scales et al. 2004).

Parents who volunteer are likely to have children who volunteer. Parents pass on civic values by being role models, espousing communitarian values and assisting their children to connect with organisations requiring volunteers (Youniss et al. 2002). Schools play a crucial role in fostering civic development in students. Research has shown that voluntary experience is correlated with the likelihood of future involvement in civic participation. In the US National Educational Longitudinal study of 1988 it was found that 42% of adolescents who performed volunteer service in high school in 1990–1992 volunteered again eight years

later in 2000, whereas 26% of those who did not volunteer in high school volunteered in 2000 (Planty & Regnier 2003).

Friends are also very important sources of information and influence regarding volunteering. Andolina et al. (2003) found that a simple invitation to participate can make a critical difference to volunteering for those aged 15 to 25. There is a three to four times increase in volunteering among people who receive personal requests from associates (Wymer 1997). Key factors that contribute to people becoming and staying involved in volunteering are the provision of assistance, information, and emotional or social support (Wymer 1997, p.11). Youth who actively interact with non-parent adults with pro-social values are more likely to say it is highly important to volunteer. Without assistance in the form of a mentor, youth are inclined to restrict their community service to friends, family and existing networks (Roehlkepartain et al. 2006).

Smith (2009) contends that because religiously active youth have more friends who volunteer and thus more networks, these friends encourage them to become involved in civic participation, creating a snowball effect. Robert Putnam said:

People become social joiners and contributors when they have friends who pierce their isolation and invite their participation. And religious friends ... are "more powerful, super-charged friends". (Gerson 2009)

The link between civic engagement and religious commitment has been well established (Wymer 1997; Clary et al. 1998; Mason, Singleton & Webber 2007; Crystal & DeBell 2002). The propensity to participate actively in society in a manner that is intended to benefit others was found to be greater if young people are church members (Wuthnow 1996). Putnam (2000) argued that, in the USA, religion is a crucial source of civic engagement. He observed that religion rivals education as a powerful correlate of most forms of civic engagement, and it is an especially strong predictor of volunteering. In a national study, the third-highest motivation for volunteering was expressing religious beliefs or responding to normal obligation based on religious beliefs

(McEwin & Jacobsen-D'Arcy 2002; Smith 2005, 2009). Wuthnow (1996) found that the Christian values learned in childhood continued to influence young people's attitudes to the less fortunate into young adulthood and later life.

Young people will continue to volunteer if they are not coerced to do so in their early years. An Australian study (Warburton & Smith 2003) found that many young people were seeking to learn or develop skills through volunteer programs, but when they were compelled to do community service, like "work for the dole" schemes, they did not develop positive community attitudes and were often left feeling exploited. Warburton and Smith (2003) go on to say that young people want to gain experience from their volunteer experience so that they can gain good paid work: "They'll volunteer if it means they gain experience but it has to be beneficial for their future" (p.782).

Young people's orientation is often to have fun, but individualism and communalism are not mutually exclusive. A desire for self-realisation reinforces their interest in civic engagement (Weidenfeld 2003). Benn's (2000) findings indicate that citizenship is not learnt through the formal curriculum but through positive experiences. Young people prefer to learn through doing rather than learn from "others". Those who are motivated at first by self-development can acquire positive attitudes to volunteering.

### **Social-cause and standard-cause service**

While volunteering when young is a predictor of volunteering as an adult, not all types of service are associated with the same long-term outcomes in respect to future volunteering or increased civic values; some types of volunteering have better long-term outcomes than others. Metz, McLellan and Youniss (2003) found that secondary school students in the USA who are engaged in volunteer work that involves social-cause service (helping people in need, the disadvantaged or marginalised) show more social concern than those who are involved in standard-cause service (activities which assist other people but don't involve exposure to them or to issues of inequality or injustice in society). Standard-cause service

did not promote interest in larger social issues and civic activity to the same extent as social-cause service. Longitudinal studies support the finding that those who volunteer in support of moral or political causes continue to be civically engaged as adults (Youniss, McLellan & Yates 1997). Roehlkepartain and Benson (1993) claim that civic service has its greatest impact on young people's civic values when it takes them out of their comfort zone because they have the opportunity to see the world from a different perspective.

Several studies have shown that young people who volunteer exhibit a higher sense of self and are more self-efficacious, and those whose service involved helping the needy or solving problems were more concerned about social issues than those who engaged in standard-cause service (Metz, McLellan & Youniss 2003; Yates & Youniss 1998; Reinders & Youniss 1999, Schmidt, Shumow & Kackar 2007).

Why is this so? Through such service young people are given meaningful experiences that have a long-lasting impact by exposing them to ideologies, values and norms of the sponsoring organisations, and providing them with opportunities to put them into practice (Smetana & Metzger 2005). Voluntary experience has been found to correlate with the likelihood of future involvement in volunteering (Planty & Regnier 2003).

## The study

This paper reports on young people aged between 13 and 24 and was part of a larger study on The Spirit of Generation Y.<sup>1</sup> It analyses the experiences of respondents who undertook social-cause volunteering, the ways in which they entered this type of volunteering and how it impacted on their lives.

## Method

The larger project was focused on youth spirituality and social concern. It had three year-long phases; the first and third phases comprised lengthy, face-to-face interviews, while the second phase was a survey of a large, nationally representative sample, which was obtained through a national telephone sample.

Stage 1 of the project consisted of extended interviews with a "strategic" sample of 93 young people from a diverse range of backgrounds, including private and public school students, tertiary students, young workers, the unemployed and people from both high and low socioeconomic backgrounds. The average age was 17.4 years, with over half being under 18 years. We endeavoured to have equal numbers of male and female informants, from an appropriate mix of rural and urban locations. Interview informants were recruited from a range of organisations; over half were recruited through schools, and one-quarter from 'Youth Voice'<sup>2</sup>, a program devoted to the development of civic consciousness and skills among youth as well as being an international youth organisation. Youth Voice strongly encouraged and promoted volunteering. The rest of the sample was recruited through a young women's collective, a juvenile justice diversion program ('Spin Cycle'<sup>2</sup>) and a bible college.

Stage two consisted of a telephone survey in which respondents from all Australian states and territories were selected randomly using both listed and unlisted telephone numbers. A total of 1,619 respondents aged between 13 and 59 completed a survey interview; 1,219 were between 13 and 24 and 400 between 25 and 59 years. The third stage involved interviewing five young people who had filled out the internet survey and re-interviewing three young people who we had previously interviewed in Stage 1. These eight young people were targeted to enable us to clarify issues that had arisen in the analysis of the data obtained in the previous stages.

A mixed-method approach was adopted in which pre- and post-survey interviews were conducted. Mixed-method approaches use both qualitative interviews and quantitative data and allow researchers to follow up leads arising from the quantitative data, make field observations of the informants in their natural settings, and explore family and social networks and relationships with the wider society. The interviews endeavoured to elicit narratives of personal experiences and life stories to explore personal orientation,

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values and commitments through the stories informants told about themselves (Berg 1995). This paper is based mostly on an analysis of the qualitative interviews.

## Results

The national telephone survey found that 71% of 1,219 young people (aged 13–24) had not done any volunteering or community service in the past month. Out of the 29% who had done at least an hour of volunteer work, 17% had done between one and five hours and 12% had done more than five hours. Only 1% of respondents engaged in over 70 hours of community participation per month. The average number of hours per month was 3.3. The main areas of volunteer work were as follows: fundraising/sales (21%) followed by befriending/supporting/listening/counselling (18%); repairing/maintenance/gardening (16%); personal care/assistance (9%); teaching (7%); clerical work (6%) and coaching or refereeing sport (6%).

### Social-cause service

In the face-to-face interviews we were able to explore the types of volunteering in which respondents were involved. Many young people from all types of backgrounds were involved in organisations that encouraged or organised volunteers. For example, a 15-year-old girl from Spin Cycle occasionally worked at an opportunity shop. Out of the 93 people we interviewed, 36 had done at least one episode of volunteering in the previous year. However, those with fewer civic skills, less contacts and/or who had left school early tended to engage in standard-cause service.

There were 20 young people involved in social-cause service, four through a school-based service program and 16 through other organisations. Several of these young people were involved in Youth Voice. The range of activities included involvement in: soup kitchens, youth hostels, camps for disadvantaged children, political activism, leadership and training, public speaking, needle exchange services, camps, environmental groups, riding for the disabled, homeless shelters, youth referral centres, food distribution outlets, State

Emergency Services, national disasters, and aged care or disability residential facilities. Some of the young people were involved in a range of different volunteering ventures across a broad spectrum. Mark, aged 24, was involved in camps, marches, youth training and advocacy. He was widely read and knowledgeable about the local political scene as well as global issues:

*I haven't had a lot of free time in the last few years because mainly I spend most of my time volunteering, running camping programs and doing youth development stuff and training, and that has sort of woven itself in and out of jobs.*

### National and international volunteering

A small proportion of young people who were involved in social-cause service took their civic participation to national or international levels, for example through an aid organisation, church-based group or through an advocacy group. Each of them had started their volunteering involvement at a local level and gradually moved into the larger arena. Some started through a particular skill or interest they had before moving on to other areas:

*The first time I ever did volunteer work was as an assistant tutor at a music camp and I was basically imparting my knowledge to younger people who weren't as skilled as I was in playing lower brass instruments. (Male, 18)*

Some young people involved in social-cause service focused on national or international issues, but their areas of interest varied greatly. There were those who were concerned about matters of principle in the national and international arena, for example conservation, the environment, globalisation, the war in Iraq, children in detention centres and politics. Others preferred to focus on local issues and concentrated on doing their bit in one or more organisations that involved personal contact with the recipients of their service.

Volunteers operating nationally or internationally tended to be well educated and have a reasonable knowledge of human rights and civic concerns. Results indicate that these volunteers were able to assess complex social

and moral issues and that the volunteering experiences had assisted them in this process via a feedback loop. This was especially so for those who were involved in environmental and political causes: "I joined Greenpeace recently and certainly supported my friends sitting up in the trees" (Male, 20). The following comment indicates long-term commitment to social change at an international level:

*... what I did in my speech was state that to the Youth Governor ... I talked about AIDS, and poverty and landmines, child slave labour, and that sort of thing. And me, you know, sort of presenting the big picture to young people so that when we get older, and we get into positions of power. We can really work, you know, to sort of address these problems. That's the way, I think that it is the best way from me to tackle these sorts of problems. (Male, 18)*

### **Out of their comfort zone**

In the face-to-face interviews, we came across a number of young people engaged in volunteer activities that required a great deal of skill and confidence. Five of the people involved in social-cause service mentioned without solicitation the words "comfort zone". This was in the context of explaining how difficult they initially found social-cause service, particularly at the hard end. One young man said that, initially, he was "incredibly nervous and intimidated at having to work on a kids' holiday program for a week". From this shaky start, he became "addicted" to volunteering. A female respondent aged 18 noted that volunteering in this arena can be quite intimidating:

*It was quite scary because there were people there that were not only old but mentally disabled too. There was this one lady and you had to make sure you had your hands in your pockets because she would just walk up to you, wouldn't even look at you, just grab your hand and wouldn't let go and just walk around with you all day. It was excellent but really hard to start off with.*

A 16-year-old youth involved in a range of challenging activities talked about how

challenging experiences helped him develop and grow: "... you just get your mind going, puts you under pressure, get out of your comfort zones" (Male, 16).

Getting out of their comfort zone challenged volunteers' value systems and made them confront issues within themselves as well as look at parts of society they would not under other circumstances come into contact with:

*Even though I had such a great time volunteering there were times that I did get really down too because it really made you look back on life because you were really out of your comfort zone and it made you think very hard about your values and what is going on and stuff like that. (Female, 18)*

Breaking through the barrier of the "comfort zone" brought with it a feeling of satisfaction and achievement and influenced the type of service they did later:

*I think it is good because you get out of your comfort zone and you meet new people and when you go back you always feel like, "Oh my God if I just did that I can do anything". I used to be really shy and stuff and I just didn't do anything like this ever, but then I went to Youth Parliament. It took me a couple of years but I think I am finally starting to mellow out. (Female, 18)*

### **Routes to social-cause service**

We were interested in exploring how and why respondents became involved in social-cause service while others remain in standard-cause service. Respondents who engaged in social-cause service tended to have a "career" in volunteering, starting with less challenging volunteer experiences and incrementally taking on more demanding tasks:

*But I think in my volunteer career ... it's really important that I commit myself to stepping out of my comfort zone and doing things like this. Even though I can bring my skills to it. Yes, it will encourage me to move on a bit. [To assess] what I want to get out of it, what I hope to get out of it, a new set of skills I can take with me as a volunteer, add to that stockpile of experience. (Male, 22)*

Breaking through the barrier of the 'comfort zone' brought with it a feeling of satisfaction and achievement.

While a few jumped almost straight into social-cause service, this was the exception. In reflecting on their volunteer journey, most involved in social-cause service saw their involvement as getting progressively more challenging. One university student expressed it this way:

*The first volunteer work I started was when I was about seven. I became involved with a school group that was sponsored by the Lions Club, and the idea of it was that any international disaster which came up, earthquake or flood, it was our responsibility to organise some sort of volunteer campaign to collect things or raise money or what[ever] the case may be that we decided we thought we should do. That was probably my first experience in volunteer work and from that it progressed into community radio and being a member of Rotaract, which is part of Rotary International. I guess you could say I started fairly young at seven, but ever since then anything that came up, whether it be Amnesty International or Red Cross, I was usually there with bells on. (Female, 18)*

Young people are more likely to move out of their comfort zone and into social-cause types of service if they have a well-organised and supported entry point. Having a family member or friends who are active volunteers is an important route to volunteering. Service clubs, schools, church or church-based agencies, university clubs and youth organisations geared to service were common entry points.

Schools were important in assisting young people to gain access to volunteering sites and exposing them to the values that underpin volunteerism. Katherine, aged 15, was awarded an “all-rounder medal” for community service at her school and was involved in a range of volunteer activities within and outside the school:

*I initiated a knitting group to knit for the less fortunate, down at the community service, the kindergarten and, yeah, just being recognised and all the extracurricular stuff, helping out within the school community and being very friendly to everyone. It just felt really nice, people who were disabled and what you are doing to make a difference, it's great.*

Michael, aged 22, became involved at school and continued post school, particularly with marginalised groups:

*I started volunteering in the theatre ... through school about Year 10 doing school shows and that led to doing community amateur theatre from there. So I am involved in a lot of youth shows and met a lot of the friends I've got now from theatre and stuff like that. I have given that up a little bit just to make room for other kinds of volunteering ... But I think in my volunteer career, I think it's really important that I commit myself to stepping out of my comfort zone and doing things like this.*

Interviews revealed that training, debriefing, and mentoring young people seemed to be important factors in involving and maintaining their involvement in these more demanding types of service.

### **What do they get out of social-cause service?**

There were multiple benefits cited by young people who engaged in social-cause service including acquiring new skills, positive affirmation about self, meeting new people and gaining career direction, in addition to the personal rewards of being altruistic and assisting others:

*I love being part of camps, and kids' camps, and adult mental disability camps and whatever. You get such a buzz, such a great feeling. It gives it back to you from you helping. I probably wouldn't be part of this if I hadn't done one camp. So now I did really know I could get this kind of joy. (Male, 19)*

It not only made them feel good, but also had the added advantage of improving their skill set:

*That made me feel good because I was helping them improve their skills. Recently I have been more involved with, the thing that our school does a lot is help the underprivileged children in our community, we take them to the movies maybe once every two months, then maybe two months later we will have a picnic for them and play games and stuff like that. That has been really fun and I have enjoyed doing that. (Male, 18)*

Having a family member or friends who are active volunteers is an important route to volunteering.

Volunteering in social-concern service was rewarding and exhilarating. It not only made young people feel good about themselves and the positive impact of their service on others, for many it was also fun:

*I think the last one was an adult mental disability camp, and I never worked with mental disabilities before. I worked with acquired brain injuries, which are from car accidents and stuff like that. Just like a family camp, like the families came along. And I loved it. Yeah that was just so good. (Male, 18)*

Those who were involved in political activism tended to view their involvement as long term rather than a one-off experience. Some talked about trying to have a career in politics or in advocacy. As one 18-year-old female respondent involved in social cause service said: "I really want to be a politician one day ... just to make a difference."

## Conclusion

The study supports previous research, which found that clear entry points and emotional and practical support can facilitate youth volunteering (Planty & Regnier 2003; Kerestes, Youniss & Metz 2004). Youth who are involved in church, school welfare, community or political groups have a greater opportunity to be involved in social-concern service than youth who are not affiliated with such organisations. A welfare-oriented group provides an opportunity for young people to interact with others who are already doing hard-edged volunteer work and who can pass on values and attitudes that encourage altruism. Young people are more likely to move out of their comfort zone and engage in this kind of hard-edged volunteering if they are introduced to it by a mentor, family member or established organisation, and if they have had prior experience of standard-cause service.

In this study it was uncommon for a young person to become involved in social-cause service without having done any standard-cause service at some point. Most young people involved in social-cause service already had a strong sense of social justice and were ideologically committed to helping

the poor or disadvantaged or to working to change policies to meet this ideological stance. For others, the ideological position came later. Some young people engaged in social-cause service for self-directed reasons, but most found a great sense of personal satisfaction and, in time, developed a greater sensitivity to social justice concerns. Respondents perceived social-cause service as challenging and anxiety producing; it exposed them to people, situations and environments that were foreign to them.

## Notes

1. The SGY project was carried out by Professor Ruth Webber and Rev. Dr Michael Mason (Australian Catholic University), Dr Andrew Singleton (Monash University) and Rev. Dr Philip Hughes (Christian Research Association).
2. Youth Voice and Spin Cycle are pseudonyms.

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## AUTHOR

**Ruth Webber** is the Director, Quality of Life and Social Justice Research Centre, at Australian Catholic University. Her research has focused on youth spirituality, youth violence and substance abuse, intellectual disability, family breakdown and social policy. She has published extensively on 'at risk' youth. She has postgraduate qualifications in education, psychology and sociology.

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