

Youth Views on Volunteering and Service Learning from the Chicago Area Youth Poll

Karen J. Popowski

Ed. Note: This article is an excerpt reprinted with permission from a booklet entitled, "Chicago Area Youth Poll: Youth Views on Volunteering and Service-Learning," by Karen J. Popowski, Cook County (Illinois) Sheriff's Youth Services Department, 1985. The Cook County Sheriff's Office has pioneered a unique program of delinquency prevention through the encouragement of youth volunteering.

INTRODUCTION

Several hundred teenagers participated in this first Chicago Area Youth Poll to discuss their opinions and experiences with volunteerism and service-learning. Our goal is to provide a comprehensive and insightful look, from the adolescent's point of view, at the conditions and factors that are important to giving time and talents to others -- both in the community and at school.

To explore this concept, high school students were asked about their image as teenagers in general, and more specifically about their image as providers of service. Specific issues about motivation, recruitment, management, external influences (family and friends), and receptivity by others are considered as well as specific types of volunteer activities provided by teenagers in the community.

The Cook County Sheriff's Youth Services Department was prompted to conduct this study for several reasons. First, to provide a process wherein Chicago area teenagers have a forum to express their views and opinions to adults who make decisions and provide services that affect their lives. Based on the very successful Minnesota Youth Poll, which was first conducted in 1979 and has explored numerous topic areas since that time, the Chicago Area Youth Poll strives similarly to "expand factual and

theoretical understanding of youth by learning how they perceive and understand issues significant to them."¹

Second, there is an increasing demand for volunteers to assist in the continuance of human services within our communities. Youth have often been described as an untapped resource; yet, most community organizations and services do not utilize youth as volunteers in their program. Before encouraging program chairpersons and administrators to consider greater youth participation, asking youth themselves to provide insights to the feasibility of youth volunteerism seems an essential first step in program planning.

Third, some local school districts, individual classroom teachers, as well as recent reports such as the 1983 study on the American high school prepared by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, have included "community-service components" in the high school curriculum. Such service-learning plans are based on meeting both the educational needs and civic obligations of the student as well as meeting the service needs of individuals and organizations within the community. Learning by doing or learning better by teaching others is the basis for experiential education. Learning good citizenship through personal investment and involvement of time and talents creates, not only a more responsive citizen and a more respon-

sible young adult member of the community, but also a student who feels better about himself or herself. These assumptions will be checked out with the students whose learning depends on them.

Fourth, low self-concept, a feeling of alienation or a sense of not belonging and boredom are frequently described as significant factors contributing to juvenile delinquency. The Cook County Sheriff's Youth Services Department is committed to reducing delinquency through creating conditions that promote the healthy development of youth. Volunteering in community service activities may be regarded as a strategy for delinquency prevention through positive youth development.

We anticipate that through the exploration of the issues involved in youth volunteerism, we will be provided with valuable insights into understanding those conditions that promote psychologically healthy, contributing young members of the community.

This report is divided into four parts. Part One describes the responses to group discussions on the image of teenagers and the pros and cons of various factors of volunteer involvement in the community. Part Two focuses on service-learning as a component of the high school curriculum. Part Three is a statistical summary of the results of an individual survey completed by each student. Part Four is a summary of the findings with some recommendations and implications for school and community program planners.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

To assure greater youth involvement in designing this youth poll, a small group of students from three Chicago area high schools were selected to attend the Great Lakes National Leadership Conference (NLC). This unique ten-day experiential-leadership program offers its participants the preparation needed for developing service projects in

their home communities. NLC is based on the philosophy of Servant Leadership which recognizes effective leaders as people who are granted genuine authority and allegiance because of their ability to serve others.

Designing a youth poll on volunteerism and service-learning became the designated back home service project for this Chicago group. The students met regularly to design the poll, having lengthy discussions on the definition of volunteerism and whether to include such school activities as sports and entertainment which "helped create a better community spirit." After a spirited debate, the final decision was made not to include these school activities into our definition but to acknowledge the contribution of the time and talents freely given by those participating in these extra-curricular school activities. The students were invaluable in refining questions and selecting words to more clearly express the Youth Poll questions. Of critical importance was their caution against our use of the word "community service" in the poll, fearing it might be negatively associated with military or mandatory service.

In addition to their own discussion of the design, they conducted an informal pre-test among their friends, made the proper revisions, and then arranged with their school administrators to conduct a formal pre-test with another student group. After the Chicago Area Youth Poll was conducted in each of their respective schools, the students assisted in entering the data from the individual survey into the computer and coding the responses from the Youth Poll discussions.

Because of the many hours of time and energy invested in this project, the students were very interested in seeing the tabulated results of the survey which they played such a key role in designing. With their school administrators, they attended a luncheon to discuss the ini-

tial findings of the poll and to receive well-deserved certificates of appreciation in recognition of their significant contributions to this study.

METHOD

Approximately 440 students in 90 discussion groups from 3 Chicago Area high schools participated in the study. The three schools represent a diversity of student bodies in the Chicago metropolitan area -- an inner city, all black public school; a suburban, integrated public school; and a private Catholic, all girls school, drawing students from the city and surrounding suburban communities.

Each school administered the questionnaire among classes which would provide the broadest range of opinions through a diversity of experiences, age and abilities of the students. The students were asked to form self-selected groups of four to seven persons. One member of the group assumed the role of discussion leader and recorder and was instructed to write down as much of the discussion as possible, even including comic remarks.

As each group completed their discussion of the final question, the recorder read the instructions and distributed the individual survey for each group member to fill out anonymously and in silence.

The group questionnaires were analyzed using qualitative methods and also treating each school separately. Answers to each question were then analyzed for recurring themes and patterns of responses. They are reported in order of the frequency of students' responses. Several questions required the recorder to poll the members and report the actual number of "yes" or "no" responses to that item. Exact percentages are therefore reported for this data as well as for all the information obtained on the individual surveys. Students' opinions and perceptions

gathered from the group discussion on several questions are compared to the actual quantitative data obtained from the individual survey responses and charted on graphs or tables whenever possible.

Listening to the opinions of youth, however, is most effectively done by carefully reading the actual quotes from the Chicago Area Youth Poll participants. The reader will be treated to a smorgasbord of honest, thoughtful humorous, and at times, poetic and sad, words of teenagers.

A discussion of each section of the survey is presented in the complete booklet. Only the summary follows. For more information, contact the Cook County Sheriff's Office, Youth Services Department, 1401 South Maybrook Drive, Maywood, IL 60153.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

ON VOLUNTEERING

1. Even though many of the Youth Poll respondents were above average students and involved in many positive activities at school and in the community, more than 97% of their comments indicated that these students felt people held a very negative image of teenagers. They felt teens were viewed as lacking in maturity, responsibility and respect for others as well as lacking in caring and concern for others. Others felt perceived as being excessively involved in partying, drinking, using drugs and having sex. Some felt labeled as troublemakers, delinquents or simply BAD.

Hopefully, these young people have a better and more positive perception of themselves than the negative stereotype they think others have of them. Hopefully their responses would have been more positive if they were asked how others perceived them as individuals, rather than as part of a group called "teen-

agers." Fortunately for society, all teenagers don't live up to the negative image they think others have of them.

2. Every student polled expressed some plea to shake this negative stereotype and be seen in a positive light. While the normal developmental process through adolescence includes a strong association with peers and a persistent questioning of societal values and ideas, teenagers nevertheless clearly asked to be considered, first of all, in a positive regard and secondly, as individuals and as persons who are emerging beyond childhood and growing into adulthood.

Through discussion groups and brainstorming sessions with young people, the challenge of finding ways to promote a more positive image of teenagers can be pursued.

3. Forty-five percent of the students said they thought that most teenagers would want to be involved in helping others in their community. There were significant variances among the participating schools: 72% of city school students, 56% of private school students and 29% of suburban school students perceived their peers to be willing to help. However their perceptions clearly underestimated the actual willingness of teenagers which is almost 75% , as reported in the individual survey.

Students and adults alike need to be made aware and assured that the great majority of teenagers are willing to volunteer and therefore put to rest the negative stereotype of teens being labelled as lazy and unconcerned about their community.

4. Self-esteem, caring about others and community pride were the major themes expressed as motivators for why teens would get involved in service. Feeling self-confident and responsible, feeling proud and needed, recognized and trusted or simply feeling better about yourself accounted for nearly one-half of the

responses. Enhancing self-esteem and promoting personal growth are extremely important to these young people. Other personal benefits included new learning, new experiences, and new friends, as well as preparation or exploration for future careers and a better image or positive perception by others.

Since the perceived benefits of volunteering are often similar to the ideal image hoped for by teens, a discussion relating these two issues may be a useful strategy for program planners, teachers, youth workers and counsellors who are concerned with improving the general image of teenagers in the community or the self-esteem of an individual adolescent.

It is interesting to note that although the majority of students had not been involved in volunteer activities, they have very definite, clear expectations of the intrinsic benefits that are gained from serving others.

5. Eighty percent of the comments from students who had previously performed some volunteer work clearly affirmed positive feelings about their involvement. They felt their work was meaningful, important, and needed as reflected in the appreciation shown by those whom they directly helped. Other volunteers were more aware of how their services assisted the community or organizations with which they were involved.

Once again, the students used their own personal feelings of recognition as a barometer of the meaningfulness and importance of their work.

6. Reasons given for why teenagers might avoid volunteering were either external or personal factors. Limitations of time was an especially frequent reason given by private school students. Negative peer pressure and the need for money, especially among juniors and seniors, were equally problematic. Simply being "not interested," self-centered, or the lack

of prestige, recognition or parental support, as well as a list of fears such as failing, feeling humiliated, feeling stupid, or afraid of not knowing what to expect or of not being able to handle the pressure, were also seen as obstacles by the students.

Some of these factors can be handled quite easily in creative problem-solving sessions dealing with managing time and responsibilities. Special attention, however, needs to be given to issues of peer pressure and the real fears of failing or getting involved. It is important that prospective youth volunteers be made to feel a part of a group, preferably of other peers and supported by a host organization. A genuine promise of clear expectations, adequate pre-service and on-the-job training, and supportive supervision will help allay some of the fears of failing.

7. Almost one-fourth of the students polled indicated that they had been involved in a volunteer project but subsequently quit. Time conflicts were reasons given by 50% of the private school students but only 10% of the suburban school students. Boredom, unrewarding or uninteresting work or not enough responsibility topped the list of juniors and seniors. Lack of respect, impatience, adults being too bossy and overworking the volunteers were used to describe the negative treatment leading to their termination as volunteers.

Aside from problems of time, most reasons for leaving were internal to the organization: i.e., management, the attitudes of the adults, the nature or pressures of the tasks, or the lack of responsibilities. Program administrators need to apply the same standards of quality management to their youthful volunteers as they do for adults. Also, adults may need special preparation in dealing with adolescent development needs and

schedules as well as a sensitivity to avoid becoming too personal with them.

8. Respect, Recognition and Reward were offered as primary motivators for making volunteering more popular among teenagers. Greater diversity and interesting jobs as well as greater peer involvement - the chance to make new friends and have fun - were other suggestions. The principles of sound management again are seen as absolutely essential among teens.

Unique, however, to recruitment among young people may be the attention that needs to be given to "popularizing" the concept. Marketing strategies that use popular people, adults and teens, as positive role models or welcome groups of friends to become involved may well increase the ranks of volunteers. Some schools require that a service component be included in each and every school sponsored club or organization. Therefore, athletic, musical, drama, and other students' groups, certainly can help promote the notion of service.

9. Sixty-eight percent of the comments reflected a positive or neutral reaction from their friends regarding the students' potential volunteer involvement.

While the majority of students do not expect negative peer pressure, the fear of being teased, ridiculed or ignored by friends cannot be treated lightly since some teens seem far more affected by peer reaction than others. Group discussions on the benefits of volunteering as well as promoting facts and statistics on student involvement and reactions may serve to reduce these fears.

10. More than ninety percent of the students' comments reflected a positive or neutral response when

asked about parental influence on decisions to volunteer. Less than 10% predicted a negative reaction from parents.

Since, for most students, parents are seen as setting the example or at least providing the encouragement to volunteer, time and attention might well be given to soliciting the help of parents in reinforcing the values of such activities. As one student commented, "if parents don't volunteer or at least talk about it, the kids won't care." This message can be rather easily promoted through school notices and newsletters, PTA meetings, and parent and community education programs as well as public service announcements. To avoid a rebellious response, especially among teenagers, care must be taken to support and encourage rather than absolutely insisting on such activities.

11. Students were split on the issue of whether they felt informed and welcome to volunteer in their community. Although nearly 70% of private school students reflected an attitude of acceptance, only 25% of their suburban counterparts felt so. About 50% of both city and private school responses indicated a lack of information about volunteer opportunities.

As especially evidenced among suburban school students, there appears to be a strong correlation between students' perception of peer involvement in helping others and their perception of the community's receptivity to them. This should signal a warning to planners to look at both sides of the supply and demand of volunteerism. Are students reluctant to become involved because they don't feel welcome? Are organizations reluctant to create roles for youth because they feel the students won't respond? And, where would students go to find out about volunteer activities?

A notice in the school bulletin or high school newspaper may indeed provide a communication link to the students. If students are to be genuinely invited to volunteer, a central resource or clearinghouse would be most helpful. At least, students need to be certain of where to go to obtain this information. Making it hard to find out certainly makes it hard to volunteer.

ON SERVICE-LEARNING

1. By a margin of 2 to 1, students reflected on the positive advantages to the recommendation of the Carnegie Foundation Report, to set up service learning programs in high schools. Students clearly saw the educational value of this experiential learning. They also considered job readiness, civic contributions, increased self esteem and social opportunities as advantages of the plan. Disadvantages listed included time conflicts, too much work, or fears that the experience might not be helpful to the student or the recipient.

2. Three-fourths of the responses indicated that receiving credit would certainly boost participation among students. The secondary personal benefits that come from the recognition given by the school and the long-term lesson in learning to serve others were articulated. Some students, however, felt the program may be viewed as an "easy" class or for slower students.

3. Forty-seven percent of the students indicated that they had performed some type of service as part of a class assignment. However, there is a significant difference among the students: 72% of city school students, 56% of private school students and 30% of suburban school students reported these class projects. This difference is similar

to the students' perception of their peers' willingness to get involved in helping others.

Perhaps class projects which include service to others may either help to create an image of volunteerism among students or, conversely, it may reflect the teachers' assessment of the attitudes of their students to be either positively or negatively disposed to these activities.

In light of the previous discussion regarding the benefits of service-learning and credits, teachers can feel encouraged to incorporate the concept of service-learning within the curriculum.

4. As a graduation requirement, 58% of the students reacted negatively to a mandatory service-learning component. However there was again much diversity among the participating schools: 40% of city school, 53% of private school and 63% of suburban school responses were negative.

The diversity of reactions and the intensity of feelings would suggest the need for a clearly defined educational program with many options and objectives to suit the diverse needs and interests of the students if such a plan were mandated. On the other hand, a strong reaction to any additional mandatory requirement might well be expected.

In either case, care must be taken to assure that both educational and service objectives are met and that both student and client, organization or community, benefit from and are better because of this plan of learning to serve while serving to learn. Some schools have introduced the service learning program as an elective course before mandating its enrollment. Other schools have required that each school-sponsored club, organization or sports team must include a service component among their approved activities. Tapping into the untapped resource -- i.e., the community as an extension of the classroom, or youth as fully par-

ticipating and concerned citizens of the community - can provide an exciting challenge for the educational system today.

INDIVIDUAL SURVEY

1. Nearly 75% of all high school students either are or would consider volunteer involvement. 26% of the students are currently performing volunteer work.

2. City school students report a higher level (40%) of current volunteer service than their suburban (24%) or private (22%) student counterparts.

3. Teens significantly underestimate, by 29%, the willingness of their peers to get involved in helping others.

4. No clear patterns of volunteerism emerge among the four classes at the survey schools. However for seniors at least 75% at each school can be seen as current or potential volunteers.

5. Male students at the city school are just as likely as their female counterparts to volunteer. While there was no difference among the schools in the females' responses, the males at the suburban school were considerably less likely to volunteer. Still, the majority of young men (57%) were willing to consider volunteer involvement.

6. The better the student performs academically, the more likely that he or she will be involved in a volunteer service. However, the correlation does not exist for potential volunteers. Students at all performance levels indicate a willingness to be involved.

7. Students who perform well academically are also more likely to be involved in extra-curricular activities as well as volunteer involvements.

8. While every student group had a level of current volunteer involvement that was well below that of their family members and friends, their potential interest would be greater than the current level of family and friends.

9. When considering specific skills, females were nearly three times as likely to be a pre-school aide or day-care aide as their male counterparts. Almost twice as many females than males also felt they could provide patient care, companionship or chore service to seniors, assist in church or religious education, and be a hotline listener.

Males, however were 1-1/2 times more likely to want to coach and more willing to donate blood. While females were 1-1/2 times more willing to be a tutor or teacher's aide or provide clerical or telephone services.

10. On specific areas of service there was somewhat less divergence between the genders, although the results again supported current sex role distributions. Males were extremely reluctant to become involved in areas dealing with the handicapped or senior citizens as compared to the willingness of their female counterparts. Assisting in emergency service, i.e., food, transportation and housing, and in the areas of cultural programs and correction services saw a significant gender gap where female involvement was far more likely. Recreation, arts, crime prevention, music, alcohol and drug programs, theater, school, church, ecology, legal aid, and consumer affairs are areas where there seems very little gender preference among teenagers.

11. More than 90% of the students felt that volunteering should begin by age 16 and more than 60% suggested that by age 14, children should begin getting involved in helping others.

¹Details on the philosophy and methodology of the Minnesota Youth Poll are available in The Center Quarterly Focus, "The Minnesota Youth Poll" by Diane Hedin and Howard Wolfe, Spring 1979. Copies may be obtained by contacting the Center for Youth Development and Research, 386 McNeal Hall, 1985 Buford Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108. (612) 376-7624.