

Volunteering Matters: Young People's Perspectives

Martina McKnight and Dirk Schubotz

Individuals volunteer for a range of complex and varied reasons, and while motivations were once defined in purely selfless terms it is now accepted that these can be both instrumental and altruistic. This continuum is evident in both public policy and discourse, as successive governments have, with differing emphasis, promoted volunteering in terms of revitalising communities, building a skilled workforce, developing active citizenship and, more recently, enhancing wellbeing (see Davis 2017 for discussion). Given volunteering's potential to deliver both individual and societal benefits, it is important that the factors that encourage or inhibit participation are explored to enable the development and delivery

of appropriate and targeted strategies and schemes.

This Research Update examines attitudes to and involvement in volunteering from the perspective of sixteen year olds living in Northern Ireland. Of particular interest is the influence gender and family financial background may play in these and the potential of volunteering to enhance community relations and cross community contact. Understanding the motivations of this age group is particularly interesting. While it is widely accepted that pressures from schoolwork, aspects of social media and increased economic uncertainty are negatively affecting the emotional and mental wellbeing of many young

people, they are, concomitantly, often portrayed, disparagingly, as troublemakers, self-absorbed, or part of the 'snowflake generation'. What is often overlooked is the valuable contribution that many young people make to society and their communities, and the role that volunteering can play in facilitating and encouraging them in this.

The findings presented in this report are, primarily, drawn from a module of questions included in the 2017 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey which was funded by Volunteer Now; where relevant, these are compared with responses to similar questions funded by the Northern Ireland Youth Council, in YLT 2009. YLT is, primarily, a postal survey but may be completed online or by phone. In 2017, the volunteering questions were completed by 626 young people; a response rate of 24%.

The 2017 volunteering module began by providing the following definition of volunteering:

Volunteering is the commitment of time and energy to help other people in society, the community or the environment. It is time given freely and without pay and can be done online or in person. This can involve unpaid work or activities for the benefit of a cause or with a local community group, sports organisation, arts and cultural group or religious group as well as activities associated with the environment or animals. Volunteering excludes things you do for your relatives.

As in YLT 2009, respondents were asked if they had volunteered during the preceding twelve months (**Table 1**). Reflecting recognised trends in volunteering, gender emerged as



a significant determining factor as over half of females had volunteered formally for an organisation, compared to just one third of males, with males much more likely than females to say they had not volunteered. The proportion of respondents who had not volunteered was significantly lower in 2017 than in 2009 - this is almost completely due to the higher proportion of females who said they had volunteered formally.

However, gender was not the only influential factor. Respondents from well-off backgrounds were significantly more likely (77%) to have volunteered than those from not well-off backgrounds (56%); this was particularly noticeable in relation to formal volunteering in one or more organisation where the difference was fourteen percentage points. In terms of formal volunteering, differences between those living in urban areas (40%) and those in rural areas (49%) were also significant, and some became more so in combination with family financial wellbeing. For those respondents from not well-off backgrounds, almost three quarters (73%) living in urban areas had not volunteered in the previous 12 months compared to one third (32%) from rural areas; while one third of well-off urban respondents had not volunteered, just 13% of rural respondents had not done so.

Respondents were asked to assess the amount of time they had spent volunteering in the preceding four weeks, and the location/context of their volunteering. The most common commitment was one to five hours (42% in both years). Mirroring the previous survey, in 2017 weekly volunteering was most likely to occur in school or a local community/youth group (36%); the next most frequent was connected to sports/exercise (21%). A notable difference between the surveys was that while 31% of respondents in 2009 volunteered weekly in religious organisations in 2017 this was just 21%, while the proportion that never volunteered in this context had increased from 41% to 54%. A partial explanation could be an increasing trend of secularisation,

Table 1: Over the last 12 months have you volunteered in any way? By gender and year of survey (%)

	Males		Females		All	
	2009	2017	2009	2017	2009	2017
Yes, I have volunteered for one or more than one organisation	27	33	33	53	30	45
Yes, I have volunteered informally (not for an organisation)	19	12	17	16	18	15
Yes, I have volunteered both for an organisation and informally	4	8	9	8	7	8
No, I have not volunteered	50	47	42	23	45	33

indeed while in 2009 only 20% of YLT respondents indicated they were not affiliated to any religion in 2017 this figure had risen to 30%.

Questions concerning motivations to volunteer were asked in both surveys, and, as **Table 2** details, overall there has been little change. The main reasons continue to be career/skills focussed, albeit that these remain closely followed by a desire to help others; again there are a higher proportion of females in each of these categories. Findings also highlight that respondents from well-off financial backgrounds are much more career/skills driven in their motivations,

whereas for those from not so well-off backgrounds it is having family/friends who volunteer or meeting people/making friends. Interestingly, in 2017 the personal importance of a cause has become more influential, particularly for young women.

Unsurprisingly, schools continue to be the main source of information on volunteering opportunities - 71% in 2017, an increase of fourteen percentage points from 2009; this was followed by word of mouth (57%). Surprisingly, the proportion of respondents selecting the Internet and social media had fallen by eleven percentage points in the period (40%

Table 2: Why did you become involved in volunteering? By gender and year of survey (Multiple response table)

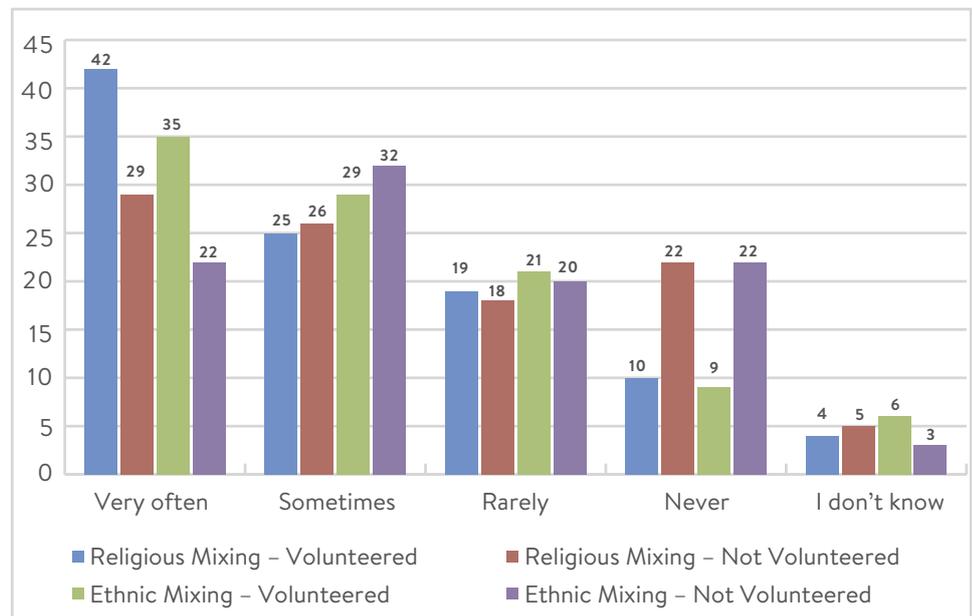
	%					
	Males		Females		All	
	2009	2017	2009	2017	2009	2017
I wanted to improve things/help people	54	57	63	70	60	65
I wanted to meet people/make friends	33	34	39	37	37	36
The cause was really important to me	16	21	21	32	19	28
My friends/family volunteer	26	25	28	24	28	24
Chance to learn new skills/use existing skills	52	55	57	65	55	61
I was asked to help	44	35	34	38	38	37
Help to get on in my career or build my CV (e.g. support my UCAS application)	62	67	75	78	70	74
It is part of my religious belief or philosophy	21	13	19	19	20	17

to 29%). This could be linked to the increasing demands on young people's time; in 2017 41% of respondents compared to 29% in 2009 agreed that it was difficult to balance volunteering with their other commitments. These time constraints may necessitate a more instrumental approach, whereby they volunteer in recognised projects that help build a CV and where time may be allocated in school; whereas in using the Internet the onus is on them, or their parents, to make decisions on the validity of projects and/or to satisfy safeguarding concerns.

Respondents felt that volunteering added to friendship networks and cross community contact; with over six in ten (63%) agreeing that their network of friends had increased, and over four in ten that there had been an increase in their contact with people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds (48% and 44% respectively). Respondents who volunteered (38%), particularly those involved in formal volunteering, were also more likely than those who had not volunteered (21%) to have taken part in cross community projects, used joint community facilities or attended government/council funded summer camps. Furthermore, when questions on how often respondents socialised or played sports with people from a different religious or ethnic background were analysed the positive potential of volunteering was evident. As Figure 3 shows, around two thirds of those who volunteered reported socialising/playing sport 'very often/sometimes' with people from different religious or ethnic backgrounds to themselves compared to 55% who did not volunteer; while around one in ten young people who volunteered said they never had contact in these ways just over one fifth of those who did not volunteer reported this.

It is equally important to understand why young people do not engage in or stop volunteering. Focusing on 2017, the main prohibitive factors selected were high levels of school work (56%) and too many other commitments (43%), while 24% said they had never considered volunteering, a decrease of 14 percentage points from 2009.

Figure 3: How often do you socialise or play sport with people from different religious or ethnic backgrounds. By respondents who volunteer and those that do not – YLT2017



Gender was significant, with females (70%) being much more likely than males (39%) to state high levels of school work, while males (34%) were more than twice as likely as females (15%) to say that they had never thought about volunteering. Males (21%) were three times more likely than females (7%) to say this was because their friends did not volunteer; a response that was much more likely to be selected by respondents from not well-off financial backgrounds.

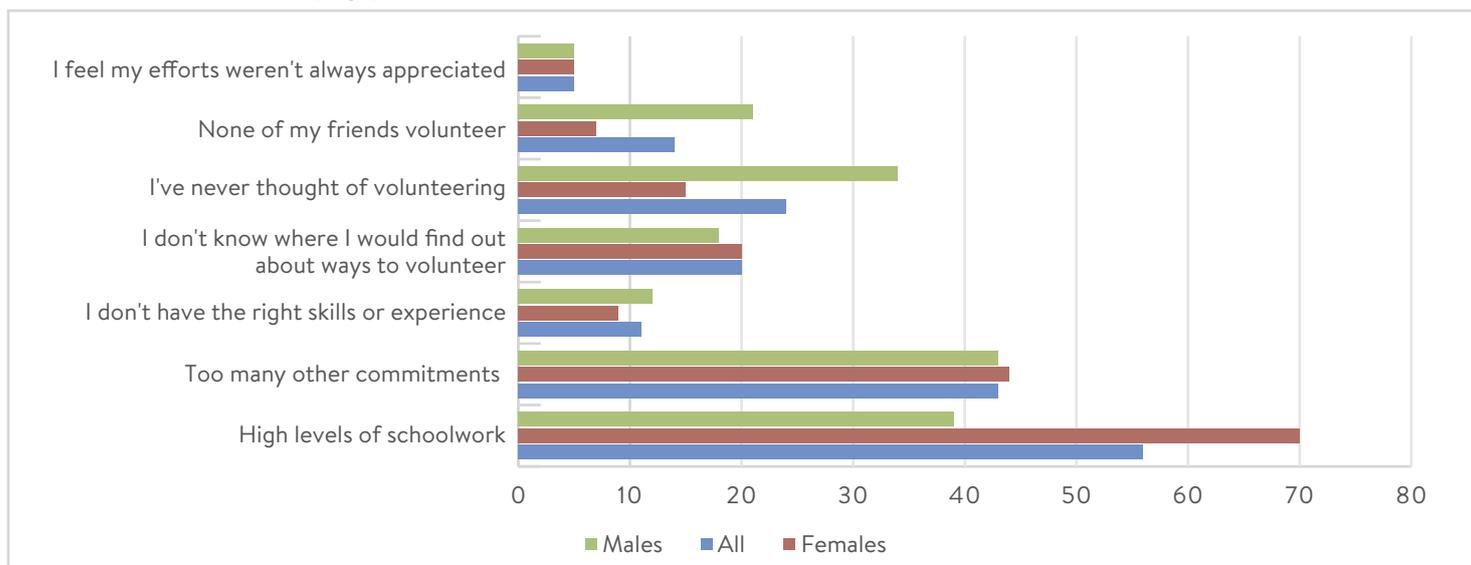
When asked about the factors that would encourage them to begin volunteering or to return to volunteering the most frequent response (61%) was greater flexibility in relation to their free time, a factor that was more likely to be selected by females (70%) than males (51%) and those from not well-off financial backgrounds (69%) than those from well-off backgrounds (55%). Gaining experience in things that would be useful to them was the next most popular inducement (53%), a factor which was much more likely to be chosen by respondents from not-well-off and average financial backgrounds (59% and 57% respectively) than those from not well-off backgrounds (39%). The most affluent respondents (39%) were, however, more likely than their counterparts (32%) to say

that recognition of their volunteering efforts by universities/businesses would encourage them to volunteer more.

Lastly, all respondents were asked about their knowledge of the Millennium Volunteer scheme. In 2017, one in four (24%) said they had heard about the Programme, which was a notable increase from 2009 when only 13% of respondents had heard about it. While school remains the key source for finding out about the scheme (75%), the proportion of respondents hearing through youth clubs and community groups (33%) had almost doubled from 2009.

The 2017 YLT survey data shows that two thirds of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland have volunteering experience; an increase of thirteen percentage points from 2009. The main difference with regard to volunteering activity remains gender, and females are significantly more likely to volunteer than males. Females are also more likely than males to say that they would volunteer more if, for example, volunteering could be organised flexibly around their other commitments; for males friendship groups are a more important factor in this regard. Family financial background is also important, with

Figure 1: YLT 2017 factors explaining why respondents do not volunteer, have stopped volunteering or reduced the time committed to volunteering by gender (%)



well-off respondents being more likely to volunteer than others. School commitments remain the main reason why 16 year olds do not volunteer more, and the evidence clearly suggests that balancing volunteering demands with other commitments is increasingly difficult. Despite these difficulties levels of volunteering have increased, however, what emerges is the complex nature of the motivations of these young people as they seek to balance a strong desire to help others with more pragmatic concerns around career planning and skills building.

References

Davies, J. (2017) ‘Young People & Volunteering: A literature review.’ University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. Volunteer Scotland.

Irvine, C. and Schubotz, D. (2010) ‘Youth Volunteering: Making a Difference to Community Relations.’ Research Update 69, August 2010. Belfast: ARK http://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2018-08/update69_0.pdf

Key points

In YLT 2017 68% of respondents said they were involved in volunteering, an

increase of thirteen percentage points from 2009.

Gender is the most significant determining factor volunteering activity. In 2017 53% of female respondents formally volunteered compared to 33% of males, and males (47%) were much more likely than females (23%) to say they had not volunteered.

In 2009 31% of respondents volunteered weekly in religious organisations compared to 21% in 2017, while the proportion that never volunteered in this context had increased from 41% to 54%.

Around two thirds of young people involved in volunteering socialised or played sport with people from a different religious or ethnic background to themselves compared to 55% of those who did volunteer.

Family financial background is also a strong predictor for volunteering activity and motivations. Respondents from not well-off backgrounds were nearly twice as likely as their well-off counterparts to say they had not volunteered (44% and 23%

respectively). The key inhibiting factor to participation is high levels of schoolwork.

Dirk Schubotz is lecturer at the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen’s University Belfast. He has been ARK’s YLT Director since 2003.

Martina McKnight is an ARK Research Fellow and works primarily on the Young Life and Times and Kid’s Life and Times surveys.

The questions on Volunteering were funded by Volunteer Now and we are grateful to them for their support

The **Young Life and Times** survey (YLT) is carried out annually and documents the opinions of sixteen year olds living in Northern Ireland on a wide range of social issues. YLT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities. Check the website for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/ylt), or call the survey director on 028 9097 3497.

In collaboration with Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences
Jordanstown campus, Ulster University
Shore Road, Newtownabbey BT37 0QB
Tel: 028 9036 6339
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen’s University Belfast
Belfast BT7 1NN
Tel: 028 9097 3034
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk