

Youth volunteering on the rise

Frank Jones

In contrast to other age groups, more Canadians aged 15 to 24 are becoming volunteers. The volunteer participation rate of most of the population changed little between 1987 and 1997, but that of young people almost doubled, growing from 18% to 33%. Their share of the volunteer pool also grew—from 13% to 18%. For many young people, volunteer experience is an important link to the job market. As a form of civic education, volunteering is valuable not only to those involved, but also to the future workforce and to social cohesion (Sundeen and Raskoff, 1995).¹

Why has the youth volunteer rate risen? Using the National Survey of Volunteer Activity (a supplement to the October 1987 Labour Force Survey [LFS]) and the National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (a supplement to the November 1997 LFS), this article examines some sources of the growth. It also looks at the types of volunteer organizations most able to attract young people, and some factors that may have encouraged volunteering, including changes in the labour market.

School enrolment and volunteering

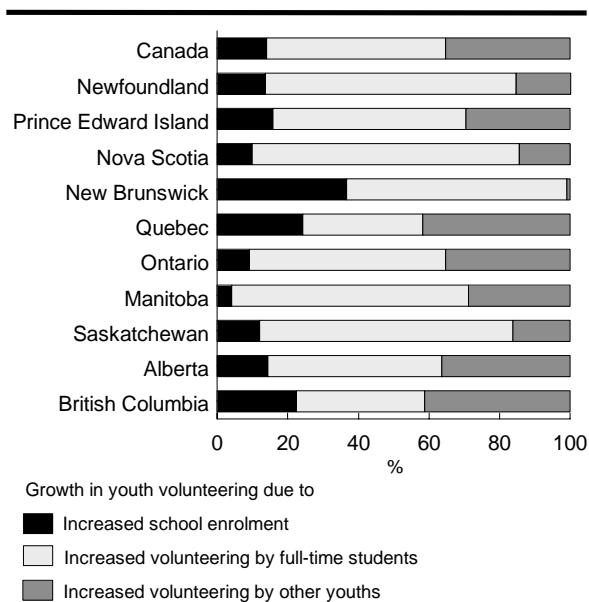
Full-time school enrolment has risen notably in the last few years—from 48% in 1989 to 58% in 1997 (Sunter and Bowlby, 1998). This rise has implications for youth volunteering, because full-time students are much more likely than either part-time students or non-student youths to volunteer. In 1997, the youth volunteer rate was 39% for full-time students, 25% for part-time students and 24% for non-students. Full-time students may have been more likely than the others to view volunteering as “a way of acquiring and asserting competence” (Serow, Ciechalski and Daye, 1990). Also, schools may have directly or indirectly encouraged this activity. Whatever the reason, increasing full-time enrolment boosted the youth volunteer rate between 1987 and 1997.

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Not all of the surge in volunteering can be attributed to the rise in full-time school enrolment, however. This factor accounted for only 14% (see Appendix). It was much more important in New Brunswick (37%), Quebec (24%) and British Columbia (22%) than in Nova Scotia (10%), Ontario (9%) or Manitoba (4%) (Chart).

The remaining 86% of the rise can be attributed to a growing inclination of both full-time students and other youths to volunteer. Full-time students' increasing volunteerism (which grew from 23% to 39%) accounted for just over half of the total rise in the youth volunteer rate. It was the most important

Chart: The rising youth volunteer rate is due to three factors.



Sources: National Survey of Volunteer Activity, 1987; National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 1997

factor in all provinces except Quebec and British Columbia, and was extremely important in Newfoundland (71%), Nova Scotia (76%) and Saskatchewan (72%).

The rise in the tendency of other youths to volunteer accounted for the remaining 35% of the increase. This factor was most important in Quebec (42%) and British Columbia (41%).

Factors underlying the rise in youth volunteering varied considerably by province. This may reflect in part the differences in provincial education systems, especially their encouragement of community service by students.²

What youth volunteer rates grew?

Among 15-to-24 year-olds the volunteer participation rate increased by 15 percentage points between 1987 and 1997 (Table 1). Increases ranged from 8 points in New Brunswick and British Columbia, to about 20 points in Ontario and Saskatchewan.

Few youth subpopulations showed unusually high increases in volunteer rates. Married youths, part-time students, and "very religious" youths recorded lower-than-average increases (by at least 9 points).

The volunteer rate of "teens" grew by 17 percentage points, to reach 37%, while that of "mature youths" increased by 13 points, to 29%. This difference in growth reflects in part the higher full-time school enrolment rate of teenagers.

The increases for both groups of young people ranged from slight to very large, for some subpopulations. Growth in the teen rate was very marked in Ontario and

	Rates			Change since 1987		
	All youths	Age 15-19	Age 20-24	All youths	Age 15-19	Age 20-24
	%			% points		
Total	32.9	37.0	28.8	15.1	16.5	13.3
Province						
Newfoundland	34.6	38.1	--	17.4	19.8	--
Prince Edward Island	39.0	--	--	--	--	--
Nova Scotia	42.8	46.5	39.1	17.9	19.4	16.5
New Brunswick	32.8	43.2	22.8	7.6	13.7	1.7
Quebec	25.7	25.8	25.6	11.6	9.3	13.3
Ontario	34.7	39.1	30.4	20.5	23.2	17.6
Manitoba	43.9	53.7	34.2	17.7	19.9	14.6
Saskatchewan	42.7	50.9	33.8	19.7	27.1	11.4
Alberta	38.1	42.9	33.2	10.2	10.6	9.1
British Columbia	28.2	35.3	21.4	8.3	11.9	4.6
Area of residence						
Urban	32.5	35.8	29.4	15.3	16.0	14.3
Rural	34.6	41.8	24.8	14.4	19.1	7.4
Sex						
Women	34.9	40.3	29.6	15.4	17.5	12.8
Men	30.9	33.8	27.9	14.8	15.6	13.7
Marital status						
Married or common-law	20.1	--	19.6	3.8	--	2.6
Single or other	34.5	37.0	31.2	16.4	16.2	16.5
Labour force status						
Not employed	31.7	36.1	24.1	13.5	16.6	8.0
Employed	34.0	38.4	31.5	16.6	17.0	16.3
Type of school attended						
Primary or secondary	36.8	36.9	--	15.0	14.9	--
Community college/CEGEP	39.2	37.3	41.0	18.8	14.8	23.2
University	42.2	62.1	39.1	12.8	27.7	11.5
Student status						
Full-time	38.6	38.7	38.6	15.2	15.4	14.5
Part-time	25.3	--	33.0	6.1	--	11.8
Non-student	24.4	32.4	22.5	11.6	21.3	9.3
Perceived health status						
Fair or poor	28.4	38.0	19.8	11.7	16.5	7.0
Good or excellent	33.2	36.9	29.5	15.3	16.6	13.6
Perceived religiosity						
Not "very religious"	31.7	35.9	27.6	14.1	15.1	12.7
Very religious	47.7	53.3	42.3	2.4	9.1	-3.8

Sources: National Survey of Volunteer Activity; National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating

Saskatchewan, and among university students and non-students. For mature youths, increases were also notable among residents of Ontario, and among youths attending a community college or a

CEGEP. Increases were relatively small for both teens and mature youths (8 percentage points or less) in New Brunswick and British Columbia, and among the "very religious."

Which organizations attract young volunteers?

A third perspective on the growth in youth volunteering is provided by a comparison of the organizations chosen by youths in 1987 and 1997. Multipurpose and service club organizations saw large gains in their share of youth volunteer jobs,³ as did social service, care and support organizations (Table 2). The heaviest losses were in education and youth development organizations, followed by leisure, recreation and sport groups, and religious organizations.

Of the volunteer jobs held by youths in 1997 most were in multipurpose organizations and service clubs (22%), which gained 16 percentage points since 1987. The growth was much higher for full-time students (18 points) than for other youths (8 points). These organizations include multipurpose women's groups, native and ethnic organizations, and bodies such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army and YM/YWCA.

The gain in the share of youth volunteer jobs was much more modest in social services, care and support organizations (5 points). In 1987, these groups had the second lowest share of youth jobs; in 1997, they stood fourth lowest, with 10% of youth volunteer jobs.

Education and youth development organizations experienced the greatest drop in youth volunteer jobs (15 percentage points), mainly because of a 22-point drop in the share of full-time student volunteers. Girl Guides, school sport and artistic programs, literacy and language programs, and student organizations fall into this category, which attracted the highest percent-

Table 2: Youth and older volunteers by organization, 1997

	All ages	Age 25+	Age 15-24		
			Total	Full-time students	Other youths
	%				
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Multipurpose; service clubs	15.0	13.7	21.6	24.6	13.8
Leisure, recreation and sport	15.6	16.0	13.4	12.0	17.1
Health	13.7	14.2	11.5	11.6	11.3
Education and youth development	9.1	8.6	11.4	12.2	9.1
Religion	14.2	14.9	10.8	11.5	9.2
Social services, care and support	9.2	8.9	10.2	9.1	13.3
Environment; justice; foreign; other*	7.1	6.9	8.1	7.3	10.3
Economic interests; arts and culture**	9.0	9.4	7.3	6.4	9.7
Society, or public benefit	7.1	7.4	5.6	5.4	6.1
	Change in percentage points, 1987-1997				
Multipurpose; service clubs	5.9	4.2	15.7	18.4	8.4
Leisure, recreation and sport	-1.1	-0.3	-6.1	-4.2	-7.1
Health	3.2	3.3	2.8	3.5	1.7
Education and youth development	-5.7	-4.6	-14.5	-22.4	-4.3
Religion	-3.6	-3.3	-4.7	-4.3	-6.0
Social services, care and support	-0.2	-0.9	4.5	3.9	6.6
Environment; justice; foreign; other*	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.4	4.5
Economic interests; arts and culture**	-0.7	-0.7	0.1	1.1	-0.3
Society, or public benefit	-0.8	-0.7	-0.8	1.4	-3.7

Sources: National Survey of Volunteer Activity; National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating
 * Environment and wildlife; law and justice; international and foreign; and all other organizations.
 ** Employment and economic interests; arts, culture and humanities organizations.

age of youth volunteers in 1987 (26%), and the fourth highest in 1997 (11%).

Leisure, recreation and sport organizations also recorded a loss in share, from 20% of youth volunteers in 1987 to 13% in 1997. This was mainly because of a 7-point drop in the share of part-time or non-student volunteers. That of full-time students fell by 4 points. Despite the loss, this sector retained its second-place ranking in 1997. Religious organizations lost share because of part-time or non-student youths (6 points) and full-time students (4 points). Health organizations gained 3 points, and

the environment/justice/foreign/other group (combined because of low sample sizes), 3 points. Youth volunteering in employment/culture/humanities organizations changed little over the decade.

How did the labour market affect volunteering?

Is it possible that a worsening labour market (relative to that for other workers) prompted some young people to turn to volunteer work for experience or job contacts? Their labour market situation did indeed deteriorate between 1987 and 1997, at least in one

Table 3: Reasons for volunteering

Reason		Cited reason	Additional reasons						
			Belief	Skills	Strengths	Jobs	Affected	Friends	Religion
			%						
Belief in cause	Full-time students	91	...	83	70	60	58	34	21
	Other youths	94	...	82	65	42	70	29	23
Use skills and experience	Full-time students	83	91	...	78	67	58	34	21
	Other youths	82	94	...	74	50	72	31	23
Explore own strengths	Full-time students	70	92	93	...	70	58	35	21
	Other youths	64	96	96	...	53	70	30	26
Improve job opportunities	Full-time students	59	92	93	82	...	55	38	18
	Other youths	43	92	95	78	...	73	29	23
Personally affected by cause	Full-time students	55	97	88	74	59	...	37	28
	Other youths	68	97	87	66	45	...	26	28
Friends volunteer	Full-time students	35	90	80	71	65	58	...	24
	Other youths	30	89	86	64	42	60	...	14
Religious obligations or beliefs	Full-time students	20	96	89	76	55	77	42	...
	Other youths	22	98	86	77	45	87	19	...

Source: National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 1997

Note: Volunteers were asked to give as many reasons as applicable.

important respect: youth unemployment rose by 3.1 percentage points, compared with 0.2 points for the labour force aged 25 and over (Sunter and Bowlby, 1998). The rise was much greater for teens (6.7%)—the group whose volunteerism increased significantly—than for mature youths (0.9%).

The changing situation for youths with jobs may have influenced their decision to volunteer as well. Some youths work part time even though they would prefer to work full time. The percentage of employed youths working “involuntarily” in part-time employment rose over the decade from 7.4% to 11.2%, or 3.8 percentage points. In contrast, the percentage for workers 25 or older rose by only 1.9 points, from 3.2% to 5.1%. Both the absolute and relative rise of involuntary part-time work among young people may have encouraged them to volunteer in order to increase their full-time employment prospects.

The rise in both unemployment and involuntary part-time employment among young people hints at a possible labour market motive for the surge in volun-

teering. Unfortunately, the change in the reasons underlying volunteering over the decade cannot be tracked because these motivations were not asked in the survey of 1987. Answers in 1997 at least allow for the possibility that changes in labour market conditions contributed to the increase in youth volunteering.

What motivates youths to volunteer?

Some 91% of full-time student volunteers and 94% of other youths said they volunteered because they believed in the cause (Table 3). This finding is similar to that for all volunteers (Hall et al., 1998) and seniors (Jones, 1999).

Full-time students seem more likely than other youths to volunteer for job-related reasons: 59% did so, compared with 43% of other young people. Some 70%, compared with 64% of other youths, volunteered to explore their own strengths. Another job-related reason, however—to use skills and experience—was about equally important for both groups.

For young people no longer in school full time, the development of job-related skills was still important. Some 82% volunteered to use their skills and experience, and 64% did so to explore their own strengths. Having been personally affected by the cause was also a commonly mentioned reason for volunteering among these youths (68%). Only 55% of full-time students gave that reason for giving their time.

Both full-time students and other youth volunteers reported an average of four reasons for volunteering. If pairs of motivations are considered, the presumed connection between job-related reasons and full-time studies is even stronger than it is when reasons are examined in isolation. For example, among youths volunteering to use their skills and experience, the students were much more likely than other young people to volunteer in order to improve job opportunities as well (67% versus 50%) (Table 3). Likewise, among youths volunteering to explore their own strengths, full-time students were much more likely than others to volunteer in order to improve job opportunities (70% versus 53%). Even among those volunteering for reasons unrelated to jobs, the students were more likely

than other youths to cite jobs as an additional consideration. Of young people volunteering because friends did so, for example, 65% of full-time students also mentioned job opportunities, while 42% of other youths did.

This study also examined popular three-way combinations of reasons for youth volunteering (not shown). Certain combinations had a wider appeal than others. Some 60% of full-time students listed the following three motives: belief in the cause supported by the volunteer organization, use of their skills and experience, and a desire to explore their own strengths. Just over half added to the first two reasons a wish to improve job opportunities. Other youths also gave these first two reasons, in combination with the desire to use their own strengths (58%) or being personally affected by the cause supported by the organization (or knowing someone who was affected) (57%). For both full-time students and other youths, both altruism and self-interest, especially if job-related, seem to figure in their decision to donate time to a volunteer organization.

Table 4: Benefits of volunteering

Benefit		Cited benefits	Additional benefits						
			Interpersonal	Communication	Knowledge	Organization	Fundraising	Office skills	Other skills
%									
Interpersonal skills	Full-time students	82	...	90	76	72	52	41	17
	Other youths	86	...	83	71	67	40	30	12
Communication skills	Full-time students	79	94	...	79	73	54	42	17
	Other youths	74	96	...	72	72	46	34	14
Increased knowledge	Full-time students	69	91	90	...	74	52	45	18
	Other youths	66	92	81	...	71	43	33	14
Organizational and managerial skills	Full-time students	64	92	90	80	...	56	51	17
	Other youths	61	95	87	77	...	46	39	14
Fundraising skills	Full-time students	49	87	87	74	73	...	46	16
	Other youths	38	92	91	75	75	...	40	--
Technical or office skills	Full-time students	37	91	89	84	88	60	...	18
	Other youths	28	92	89	78	85	53	...	--
Other skills or knowledge	Full-time students	15	95	88	85	74	51	45	...
	Other youths	12	86	83	74	68	--	--	...

Source: National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 1997
Note: Volunteers were asked to give as many benefits as applicable.

Does volunteering benefit youths?

Both full-time students and other youths said the greatest benefit gained by volunteering was an improvement in interpersonal skills, followed by communication skills, knowledge, organizational and managerial skills, fundraising skills, technical or office skills, and other skills or knowledge (Table 4). These findings mirror those for all volunteers (Hall et al., 1998).

Large percentages of both full-time students and other youths—from 66% to 86%—reported improvements in interpersonal and communication skills, and increased knowledge. Organizational or managerial skill benefits were reported by 64% of students and 61% of other youths. The students were more likely than other youths to acquire all the listed benefits except interpersonal skills.

On average, full-time students reported 3.9 benefits, while other youths noted 3.7. Of the youths reporting gains in interpersonal skills, the students were more likely than others to cite gains in communication skills as well (by a margin of 7 percentage points), or in fundraising skills (12 points) or technical or office skills (11 points). Of those who said they had gained knowledge, students were also more inclined than other youths to report improvements in communication skills (by a margin of 9 points), fundraising skills (9 points), or technical or office skills (12 points).

Volunteer organizations may be interested in learning which combined benefits are attractive to young people. For both full-time students and other youths, only two groups of three benefits were

reported by over 50% of volunteers: interpersonal skills, communication skills, and either increased knowledge, or organizational and managerial skills. The students were more likely to report the first combination (59%) than the second (55%). These combinations were reported by an equal percentage of other youths: 52%.

Summary

In contrast to the slower growth in the volunteer participation rate of other age groups, the rate among youths almost doubled between 1987 and 1997, increasing from 18% to 33%. The youth share of all volunteer jobs also grew.

The largest component of the growth among young volunteers was that attributable to a growing inclination of full-time students to volunteer their time. This alone accounted for over half of the rise in the youth volunteer rate. The second most important component, the rise in the likelihood of other youths to volunteer, accounted for another 35% of the growth. The increasing proportion of full-time students in this age group accounted for the remaining 14%.

The study also examined the volunteer rate for various sub-populations of youths. Increases were relatively large in Ontario and Saskatchewan, and relatively small in New Brunswick and British Columbia. The teen rate in Canada grew by 17 percentage points to reach 37%, while the rate for mature youths increased by 13 points, to reach 29%.

The youth share of multipurpose groups and service club organizations grew from 6% to 22% of all youth volunteer jobs.

Social service, care and support volunteer organizations registered an increase of 5 percentage points, to 10% of youth jobs. Education and youth development organizations experienced the greatest loss.

The rise in the youth unemployment rate relative to that of older workers may have encouraged some young people, especially teens, to volunteer. Young people's involuntary part-time employment rate also rose faster than that for the older employed population over the period. This rise may have prompted some youths to volunteer in order to improve their full-time job prospects.

Full-time students were more inclined than other youths to volunteer for job-related motives. This was especially true of those volunteering to improve job opportunities, and to explore their strengths. Volunteering to improve job-related skills was also an important motive for other youths.

In 1997, both groups were most likely to note increased interpersonal skills as a benefit of volunteer activity, followed by communication skills, increased knowledge, and organizational and managerial skills. Other youths were more inclined than full-time students to mention interpersonal skills.

Perspectives

■ Notes

1 The evidence supports this view. Of youths aged 20 to 24, for example, those who were volunteers were more likely than non-volunteers to vote in the last national election (69% versus 55%), provincial elections (62% versus 49%) and local elections (38% versus 34%).

2 In September 1999, Ontario became the first province to require community service of its high school students, offering a credit for 40 hours of service. One study found that receiving credit hours was positively associated with volunteer work two years after college graduation (Fitzsimmons, 1986).

3 Youth volunteer *jobs*, rather than volunteers, are referred to in this section, because any one person may be volunteering in two or more organizations.

■ References

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Appendix

How the increase in the youth volunteer rate was decomposed (shift-share technique)

The overall youth volunteer rate is the volunteer rate of full-time students added to the volunteer rate of other youths, each weighted by their share of the youth population. That is,

$$VR_{youths} = VR_{full-time\ students} \cdot P_{full-time\ students} + VR_{other\ youths} \cdot P_{other\ youths}$$

Shift-share analysis was used to decompose the change in this rate over time. In the first part of the equation, the volunteer rate for full-time students between 1987 and 1997 is varied, while the average of the full-time student share of the population in both periods is held constant.

Effect of change in full-time student youth volunteer rate =

$$(VR_{full-time\ students\ 1987} - VR_{full-time\ students\ 1997}) \cdot \bar{P}_{full-time\ students}$$

This quantifies the effect of the changing full-time student volunteer rate. Similarly, the full-time student share of the population is varied, while the average of the full-time student volunteer rate is held constant.

Effect of change in the proportion of youths who are attending school full time =

$$(P_{full-time\ students\ 1987} - P_{full-time\ students\ 1997}) \cdot \bar{VR}_{full-time\ students}$$

This method is then applied to the second part of the equation to determine the effect of a change in the "other" youth volunteer rate and the effect of a change in the proportion of youths who are not attending school full time. Because they cannot change independent of one another, the effects of changes in the proportions attending school full time and not attending school full time are added together. This gives the effect of increased full-time school attendance on the overall volunteer rate.

Note: These formulae have been adapted from Bowlby and Jennings (1999).