

## LSAY Research Report Number 32

### ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND THE SECONDARY SCHOOL EXPERIENCE: COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION RATES OF AUSTRALIAN YOUTH

Kevin Brown (*Deakin University*)  
Carla Lipsig-Mumme (*Deakin University*)  
Grazyna Zajdow (*Deakin University*)

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The central issue this project seeks to address is the relationship between volunteering, active citizenship and community participation for young Australians. We have focused on this because we believe that volunteering is an essential element in active citizenship. Of long term significance is the fact that international research indicates that those who begin volunteering young are most likely to continue volunteering through later stages of life: volunteering is a habit learned early. But surprisingly, there are few studies, in Australia or elsewhere, which look at the volunteering patterns of youth younger than 18 years old. The literature that does exist strongly suggests that the habit of volunteering develops at an early age.

Our study used three surveys from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) project. LSAY contains several cohorts of Australian school students that are followed through school and into post-secondary education and the labour market. Our main aim was to identify factors that contribute to volunteering activities for two LSAY groups: the 1995 Year 9 cohort, and the 1998 Year 9 cohort.

Three different forms of analysis were undertaken, univariate, bivariate and multivariate. This was necessary because of the different cohort groups and different sets of questionnaires. Longitudinal, multivariate analysis was undertaken on the 1995 Year 9 cohort group over the years 1999 and 2000. A younger cohort (1998 Year 9 group) was also analysed but a multivariate analysis was unable to be used. Even with these limitations, our data produced viable comparisons between various ages.

#### **Is volunteering important?**

The project aims to clarify those aspects of the relationship between students' demographic and school background variables, and active citizenship (defined by volunteering), which were conducive to greater participation. The authors considered a number of variables including gender, ethnicity, reading and writing achievement, socioeconomic status and place of residence. These were administered as part of the initial data collection and not gathered in the follow-up questionnaires. We found that all of these variables impacted on the propensity to volunteer and the amount of time spent in volunteering. A secondary concern of the project was to devise a '**Public Knowledge**' Scale to identify types of activities which contribute to the public awareness of young people, such as participation in cultural activities and access to the media, and relate these to the other variables and volunteering activities.

The study found that four variables significantly contributed to volunteering activity: gender, socioeconomic status, home language and size of home community. **More than 50 per cent of cases were correctly predicted using these four variables for the cohorts.**

**Gender emerges as a powerful predictive variable.** Girls spent more time volunteering than boys. In addition, girls volunteered more often if they were optimistic about their future prospects, while boys volunteered more often if they were pessimistic about the

future. Girls were also more likely to volunteer if their mothers worked outside the home. This difference did not hold for boys. Girls and boys varied again on the relation between their public knowledge and their propensity to volunteer: the greater the access to public knowledge, the more girls volunteered, and spent more time in volunteering. This was not the case for boys. Finally, girls who volunteered increased the amount of time they spent volunteering after they left secondary school, whether they went on to further study or not. Boys, in contrast, decreased their volunteering after their secondary studies.

In addition to gender, **the social engagement and location of young people and their families** impacted on volunteering. For both genders, propensity to volunteer increased if the father was employed. Boys and girls from non-metropolitan communities volunteered more (more frequently and more hours) than youth from metropolitan communities, replicating an Australian pattern for all age groups.

**How important is public knowledge?** If active citizenship is dependent on young people's ability and desire to access public knowledge, then there are some structural variables which affect these outcomes. We found accessing public knowledge to be both an important component of volunteering, and a reflection of students' social location. The higher the socioeconomic level, the higher the score on accessing print media, a crucial component of access to public knowledge. The higher the SES, the more frequently respondents access public knowledge through cultural activities. Finally, the country of birth of the respondent's mother affected the frequency with which respondents access public knowledge through the print media. Those with English-speaking mothers born overseas had a higher print media score than those whose mothers were born in Australia, who in turn had a higher score than those with mothers born overseas from non-English speaking countries.

Do schools matter? Those who remained in school did more volunteering than those who left school, those planning to do Year 12 did more volunteering than those not planning to do it. But as well, students at government schools did less volunteering (in frequency and hours) than students in either Catholic or independent schools. Finally, those who had finished high school and had gone on to study full-time volunteered more than those who were studying part-time.

Is the choice to volunteer instrumental, in the sense of a choice made to further other personal or career goals? Boys were more likely to volunteer if they were pessimistic about their future prospects, while girls were more likely to volunteer if they were optimistic about theirs.

**And finally:** Four variables predicted who would begin to volunteer: gender, socioeconomic status, language and size of home community. Gender mattered - being a girl predicted the amount of volunteering, once the decision to volunteer was made. The Public Knowledge Scale was also highly gendered, and indicated that girls accessed public knowledge through both print media and cultural knowledge more than boys.

The study raised as many questions as it answered. A limitation of our data was that it did not make it possible to answer the 'why' of our questions. The study outlined the characteristics of young volunteers, but there was no question in the surveys which specifically asked them why they began, and why they carried on. Previous volunteering clearly predicted current volunteering, but we did not discover the genesis of volunteering behaviour. Another question that merits further exploration is the impact of the rising number of hours in paid employment by young people, on the propensity to volunteer. These are clearly questions for future research.