Long-term consequences of youth volunteering: Voluntary versus involuntary service

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A B S T R A C T

Despite the renewed interest in youth volunteering in recent years, there remain major gaps in our knowledge of its consequences. Drawing data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, we examine the long-term effects of youth volunteering on the civic and personal aspects of volunteers’ lives. Our results suggest that youth volunteering has a positive return on adult volunteering only when it is voluntary, and that net of contextual factors neither voluntary nor involuntary youth service has a significant effect on adult voting. Regarding personal outcomes, our findings indicate that the psychological benefits of youth volunteering accrue only to voluntary participants, whereas both voluntary and involuntary youth service are positively associated with educational attainment and earnings in young adulthood. Taken together, these results lend support to the case for youth volunteer programs, though the civic benefits of these programs appear to be less dramatic than generally suggested.

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1. Introduction

When he visited the United States nearly two centuries ago, Alexis de Tocqueville (2006[1840]) observed that the habit of forming voluntary associations to pursue shared goals was a defining characteristic of Americans. Since then, countless analysts have joined Tocqueville in describing the United States as “a nation of joiners” with a strong civic tradition. Over the past two decades, however, an increasing number of scholars have voiced concerns about declining levels of social capital and civic engagement in America, particularly among younger cohorts (e.g., Jennings and Stoker, 2004; McPherson et al., 2006; Putnam, 1995, 2000). Additionally, considerable research has provided evidence of a widening civic divide based on class, race, and educational attainment (e.g., Sander and Putnam, 2009; Spring et al., 2007; Syvertsen et al., 2011). Coupled with the widespread media portrayal of youth as apolitical and self-absorbed, these findings have added fuel to a growing sense of crisis that has pervaded the public discourse on democracy and citizenship since the late 1980s.

One response to this situation has been a renewed interest in youth volunteering as a potential source of civic renewal. Hence, the last two-and-half decades have seen an intensification of the efforts to involve adolescents in volunteer service activities, especially through school-based programs (Keith, 1994; Niemi et al., 2000; Raskoff and Sundeen, 1999). A key

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Volunteering is defined as a distinct type of prosocial behavior in which individuals offer their time and services willingly, deliberately, and without material compensation to help others (Snyder and Maki, 2015; Snyder and Omoto, 2008; Wilson, 2000). Although mandatory service programs do not fully satisfy this definition, we use the term youth volunteering broadly to refer to both voluntary and required service activities performed by adolescents.
indicator of this trend is the proliferation of policies at the federal, state, and local levels that either encourage or mandate community service in public schools. Thanks to these policies, today the vast majority of public middle and high schools in the United States offer community service opportunities for their students, although the percentage of schools that have service-learning programs has gradually decreased during the first decade of the twenty-first century (Spring et al., 2008).

As the popularity of youth volunteer and community service programs has dramatically increased among policymakers, civil society actors, and educators, it is imperative to examine the consequences of youth volunteering. Past research has shown that participation in volunteer and community service activities can raise social and political awareness among adolescents, foster their commitment to moral principles, cultivate their civic skills, improve their sense of political efficacy, and inculcate in them a durable disposition to serve their communities and engage in political processes (Astin et al., 1999; Janoski et al., 1998; Johnson et al., 1998; McFarland and Thomas, 2006; Niemi et al., 2000; Yates and Youniss, 1996, 1998; Youniss et al., 1997; Youniss et al., 1999). Besides these societal benefits, youth volunteering has also been associated with personal gains in self-esteem (Conrad and Hedin, 1982; Johnson et al., 1998; Yoge and Ronen, 1982), social skills (e.g., communication, leadership, and problem solving) (Celio et al., 2011; Conrad and Hedin, 1982), social capital (Flanagan et al., 2015), and academic motivation and performance (Celio et al., 2011; Conway et al., 2009). Moreover, some exceptions notwithstanding (Helms, 2013; Stukas et al., 1999; Warburton and Smith, 2003), researchers have reported that required service can yield similar benefits as voluntary service, especially if it is sustained and of high quality (Flanagan et al., 2015; Hart et al., 2007; Henderson et al., 2007; Henderson et al., 2012; Metz and Youniss, 2003, 2005).

Often, these findings are construed as evidence that youth volunteering, whether voluntary or required, has important long-term benefits for both society and individual volunteers. There are, however, three shortcomings in the existing literature that urge us to remain cautious about this interpretation. First, given the scarcity of nationally representative panel data that monitor the civic attitudes and behaviors of adolescents well into early adulthood, it is not clear whether youth volunteering, particularly when it is mandated, has a positive and long-term return on civic engagement. Second, research on the personal consequences of youth volunteering is limited, with most studies investigating short-term changes in attitudes toward self and academic indicators. In particular, little is known about how youth volunteering is associated with fundamental later life outcomes such as psychological well-being, educational attainment, and occupational achievement. Finally, the results of a growing body of research on the contextual determinants of youth civic engagement suggest that the association between youth volunteering and many early adulthood outcomes may be confounded by unobserved heterogeneity at the family, neighborhood, and school levels. Therefore, estimates from conventional OLS models are likely to be biased.

In this study, we draw data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) to investigate the long-term consequences of youth volunteering in both civic and personal domains of life. Our goal is to examine whether regular participation in volunteer and community service activities during adolescence leads to: (i) increased civic engagement, (ii) improved psychological well-being, and (iii) better educational and labor market outcomes in young adulthood. In addition, we distinguish between voluntary and involuntary service to examine if the expected benefits of youth volunteering accrue only to voluntary participants. To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate all these outcomes simultaneously, thereby allowing a comparative assessment of the effects of youth volunteering on key aspects of social and personal life. Also, unlike previous studies on this subject, we use family and high-school-of-origin fixed effects models to control for unobservable contextual factors that might be correlated with both youth volunteering and our outcome variables.

2. Background

2.1. Youth volunteering and civic benefits

Scholars have argued that youth volunteering can foster adult civic engagement by getting young people to reflect on issues of public concern, strengthening their commitment to social justice, and cultivating their civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Mounting evidence suggests that volunteering during adolescence is associated with increased community involvement in adulthood. For example, in a case study of black urban adolescents who participated in a year-long service-learning program, Yates and Youniss (1998) found that community service instilled a sense of civic responsibility in students and predicted the probability of volunteering after graduation. Similarly, using the first four waves of the Youth Development Study (1988–1991), Johnson et al. (1998) found that volunteering heightened the anticipated importance of community involvement among ninth-grade students in the St. Paul Public School District in Minnesota. Two panel studies with longer timeframes and greater generalizability reported comparable findings. First, drawing data from a nationally representative study of high school seniors, Janoski et al. (1998) found that volunteer work undertaken in high school years enhanced students’ pro-social attitudes and increased their likelihood of volunteering in adulthood. Second, Astin et al. 2

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2 Service-learning programs incorporate community service into the curriculum, combining service experiences with academic instruction and classroom discussion.

3 Borrowing from Adler and Goggin (2005, p.241), we conceptualize civic engagement as involvement “in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future.” This definition includes a wide range of activities from volunteering and community service to participation in protests, boycotts, and the formal political system. Following Hart et al. (2007), we focus on two components of this complex concept: volunteering and voting. While these two indicators do not capture all aspects of civic engagement, they reflect its two major dimensions: community involvement and formal political participation.